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From Trauma to Triumph: A Qualitative Content Analysis of Posttraumatic Growth in Children's Animated Films

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Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

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Crystal Victoria Tasker

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2025

Abstract

From Trauma to Triumph: A Qualitative Content Analysis of Posttraumatic Growth

in Children's Animated Films

by

Crystal Victoria Tasker

MS, Capella University, 2021

MA, Bond University, 2015

BA, University of Colorado, 2012

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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February 2026

Abstract

Children's animated films have often been analyzed for problematic depictions of gender and cultural stereotypes, but far less attention has been given to how these narratives may portray psychological adversity and transformation. This study addressed this gap by examining how posttraumatic growth (PTG) is symbolized through the narrative arcs of ten Disney films released between 2013 and 2023. The purpose of this research was to explore how these films illustrate themes of emotional transformation, utilizing a theoretical foundation based on Tedeschi and Calhoun's PTG model, which emphasizes five domains of growth following adversity: appreciation of life, enhanced relationships, personal strength, new possibilities, and spiritual development. The guiding research question asked how PTG is represented in children's animated films through narrative structure, character development, and emotional themes. Using a basic qualitative design, this study employed latent content analysis to identify symbolic markers of adversity and growth across 10 animated feature films, combining theory-driven coding with inductive theme development. Data was gathered through multiple film viewings, transcript reviews, and iterative coding processes to identify recurring motifs and narrative patterns aligned with PTG. Findings from this study have the potential to highlight how children's media can serve as a resource for emotional literacy and positive coping, offering practical insights for educators, parents, and mental health professionals. Ultimately, this research seeks to support positive social change by demonstrating how storytelling in animated films can model resilience, meaning making, and growth in ways that inspire young audiences.

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Dedication

For my wonderful husband and daughter who have taught me more about hope, purpose, and unconditional love than I ever thought possible. This work is for both of you – the two great joys of my life.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to Study

Introduction

Children's films are more than mere entertainment; they are powerful cultural mediums that help shape how young audiences understand themselves and the world around them. Beyond their well-known moral lessons and social messages, these films often tackle complex emotional themes, such as grief, loss, and identity, through stories that resonate across generations. Recent scholarship has begun to explore how animated narratives model prosocial behavior, empathy, and emotional coping, while also critiquing problematic portrayals of race, gender, and beauty standards (de Leeuw & van der Laan, 2018; Graham et al., 2018; Padilla-Walker et al., 2013). However, there remains a critical gap in the literature regarding how these films may symbolize deeper forms of emotional adaptation, such as posttraumatic growth (PTG). PTG extends beyond resilience, focusing on the transformative potential of adversity and the ways individuals emerge with new strengths, perspectives, and meaning (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). By analyzing children's animated films through this lens, this study aimed to uncover how character arcs and narrative journeys reflect growth in the aftermath of challenge, offering young viewers models for understanding and navigating their own complex emotional worlds.

This qualitative study examined how psychological adversity and growth are portrayed in major animated feature films released by Disney between 2013 and 2023. Using a basic qualitative approach grounded in latent content analysis, the study explored how selected films may symbolically represent core PTG domains, including personal

strength, relational growth, new possibilities, spiritual or existential development, and appreciation of life. This chapter introduces the study by presenting the background, identifying the research question, and outlining the research purpose, while also defining key terms and detailing the study's assumptions and scope.

Background

Children's animated films have long served as both entertainment and informal socialization tools, shaping how young audiences understand personal identity, adversity, and emotional development. Among these, Disney and its affiliated studios (e.g., Pixar and Walt Disney Animation Studios) produce some of the most widely consumed and culturally influential media in the world (Wasko, 2020). Given their global reach and multigenerational appeal, Disney films have been the focus of a diverse body of research in both psychology and education, highlighting both their social benefits and, in some cases, potential for harm. Numerous studies have critiqued these films for perpetuating problematic content, including rigid gender norms (Towbin et al., 2004), racial or cultural stereotypes (Lacroix, 2004), and unrealistic romance ideals (Hefner et al., 2017), while others have examined their influence on prosocial behavior, moral development, and empathy in children (de Leeuw & van der Laan, 2018; Padilla-Walker et al., 2013), reinforcing the role these films can play in shaping socioemotional skills and values.

Beyond the moral and behavioral lessons portrayed on screen, recent studies have also explored how Disney narratives engage with psychologically complex topics such as grief, identity formation, trauma, and healing (Graham et al., 2018). As characters in animated films confront loss, displacement, or existential challenges, viewers are

presented with symbolic models of resilience and emotional processing – elements that are central to the construct of PTG. However, while PTG has received significant attention in clinical and adult populations (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Zoellner & Maercker, 2006), there has been little investigation into how its core dimensions – such as personal strength, relational growth, existential awareness, or openness to new possibilities – are depicted in children’s media. A notable exception is Zeman (2025), who used Seligman’s PERMA framework to analyze the representation of well-being in Disney animated films. While that study demonstrated the value of qualitative analysis in exploring positive psychology in media, no existing research has systematically examined how PTG is symbolized in this genre – especially in relation to how children might interpret or identify with such portrayals.

This gap is especially important given research demonstrating that young viewers not only internalize the behaviors and emotional strategies modeled by on-screen characters (Bandura, 2008; Coyne et al., 2014) but also use stories to make meaning of their own experiences. Scholars have increasingly called for more developmental and psychologically informed approaches to media analysis, particularly those that consider how narrative content can foster resilience and thriving in the face of adversity (Ungar & Theron, 2020). By focusing on animated films released between 2013 and 2023 that contain narrative depictions of psychological adversity and growth, the present study sought to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the educational and therapeutic potential of children’s media. A qualitative, theory-guided content analysis of symbolic PTG indicators offered insight into the ways these stories help model adaptive responses

to hardship. This work holds implications for psychologists, educators, parents, and practitioners interested in how stories influence resilience-building in child audiences, and how entertainment media can serve as an accessible, meaningful tool for exploring emotional recovery and personal growth.

Problem Statement

Although PTG has been widely studied in clinical and adult populations, there remains a significant gap in understanding how PTG is symbolically portrayed in children's animated films. Existing research on children's media has largely focused on either harmful content, such as gender stereotypes (Golden & Jacoby, 2018; Streiff & Dundes, 2017) and racial bias (Towbin et al., 2004; Zurcher et al., 2024), or explicitly prosocial messaging, such as moral lessons (Vaidya & Osman, 2024) and the PERMA model of well-being (Zeman, 2025). However, no published studies to date have used Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1996) five-domain model of PTG to analyze how adversity and psychological transformation are represented in animated media designed for children. As animated films continue to serve as an important form of storytelling for child audiences, the absence of research on PTG in this context limits our understanding of how media may influence or reflect important developmental coping frameworks in the aftermath of adverse childhood experiences. This study aimed to address this gap by examining how PTG is portrayed in contemporary children's animated films.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative content analysis was to examine how psychological adversity and PTG are portrayed in a sample of major animated children's

films released between 2014 and 2024. Drawing from Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1996) theory of PTG, the study explored whether and how characters demonstrated key indicators of growth following adversity, such as increased personal strength, new possibilities, improved relationships, greater appreciation of life, and existential or spiritual change. These domains also served as a coding framework for identifying relevant themes within character development, dialogue, and narrative structure.

Research analysis focused on 10 animated films selected based on content relevance, cultural visibility, and appropriateness for child audiences, with particular emphasis on films that portrayed characters facing some form of grief, trauma, loss, or adverse childhood experience. The study employed latent content analysis to capture underlying meanings and psychological nuances that may not be immediately visible at the surface level. Ultimately, this research sought to illuminate how children's media may contribute to viewers' conceptualizations of resilience, healing, and personal growth – concepts that are central to both developmental psychology and trauma-informed educational practice.

Research Question

The following research question guided the scope and direction of the current study:

RQ: How is PTG portrayed in major animated feature films released between 2013 and 2023?

Theoretical Framework for the Study

This study was guided by Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1996) PTG theory, which explores how individuals may experience positive psychological changes as a result of struggling with significant emotional adversity. The five domains of PTG as outlined by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996, 2004) – personal strength, new possibilities, improved relationships with others, greater appreciation of life, and spiritual or existential development – served as the conceptual framework for analyzing the narratives, behaviors, and character arcs presented in the selected films. These domains further guided both the development of the coding system and the interpretation of findings, offering a structured yet flexible lens through which to understand how psychological growth may be embedded in media narratives designed for young audiences.

Nature of the Study

This study employed a basic qualitative research methodology to explore how psychological adversity and growth may be portrayed in children's animated films. Specifically, it utilized latent content analysis, a method that allows for the interpretation of deeper symbolic and emotional meanings embedded in visual and narrative content. This approach was appropriate given the study's focus on identifying complex psychological themes – such as trauma, resilience, and PTG – within character arcs and storylines. Unlike grounded theory, which seeks to generate new theoretical models, this study began with an established theoretical lens that is applied towards interpreting narrative media content. Similarly, a phenomenological design was also not deemed to be appropriate, as the focus here will be on symbolic representations rather than real-life

testimonies or experiences. This made basic qualitative design the best method for this study as it allowed for the systematic examination of fictional narratives without aiming to generalize findings beyond the selected sample. Through repeated viewings and thematic coding of ten animated feature films, the study identified patterns, constructs, and narrative functions related to growth after adversity and offered valuable insight into how such portrayals may shape or reflect broader cultural messages for audiences.

Definitions

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs): ACEs refer to potentially traumatic or highly distressing events that occur before the age of 18 and are found to have lasting impacts on mental, emotional, and physical health (Felitti et al., 1998). The original ACEs framework primarily focused on overt forms of trauma, including physical or sexual abuse, neglect, and forms of household dysfunction such as parental substance abuse, domestic violence, or incarceration. However, contemporary research has expanded this definition to include emotionally distressing experiences like the death of a parent or caregiver, family separation or displacement, exposure to community violence, chronic illness within the family, and significant disruptions to identity or belonging (Bethell et al., 2017; Cronholm et al., 2015). Repeated or cumulative exposure to ACEs increases the likelihood of adverse long-term outcomes, including mental illness, chronic disease, and difficulties with emotional regulation and social functioning (Anda et al., 2006). Furthermore, these events are disruptive to a child's emotional or relational foundation, resulting in complicated grief, loss, or displacement that can hinder

developmental growth and alter how they perceive safety, trust, and self-worth (Shonkoff et al., 2012).

Appreciation of life: A domain of PTG reflecting an increased recognition of life's value and a deeper gratitude for everyday experiences. Individuals experiencing growth in this area may express a heightened awareness of the fragility of life and feel more present in their day-to-day interactions (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996).

Latent content analysis: A qualitative research method used to interpret underlying meanings and symbolic themes in texts or media. Rather than focusing solely on explicit content, latent analysis seeks to uncover deeper emotional, psychological, or cultural subtexts embedded within narratives (Bengtsson, 2016; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

New possibilities: A PTG domain referring to the opening of new life paths, priorities, or goals that had not been considered prior to the traumatic experience. This may include career changes, creative endeavors, or a shift in lifestyle and values (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996).

Personal strength: The perception of having greater internal resilience and confidence in one's ability to cope with future challenges. This dimension of PTG is often expressed through increased self-efficacy, adaptability, or a sense of perseverance developed as a result of enduring adversity (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2014).

Posttraumatic growth (PTG): A positive psychological change that can emerge from the struggle with highly challenging or traumatic life events, resulting in a transformation beyond one's previous level of functioning (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Unlike resilience, which emphasizes the ability to withstand or recover from adversity

and return to baseline functioning, PTG involves a fundamental shift in perspective, values, or priorities, often accompanied by a greater sense of meaning, purpose, or personal strength (Zoellner & Maercker, 2006). Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) identified five core domains of PTG: (a) a deeper appreciation for life, (b) strengthened interpersonal relationships, (c) increased personal strength, (d) recognition of new possibilities, and (e) spiritual or existential development. Importantly, PTG does not suggest that trauma itself is beneficial or that growth is a universal outcome of adversity but rather explains one's cognitive and emotional struggle to make sense of trauma that can, in some cases, foster profound personal growth and a redefined sense of self.

Relating to others: A PTG domain that encompasses improvements in empathy, intimacy, and relational depth following adversity. Survivors may develop stronger social connections, greater compassion, or a renewed prioritization of interpersonal relationships (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

Spiritual or existential change: Growth characterized by deepened spiritual beliefs, altered existential outlooks, or greater clarity around one's purpose in life. These changes may or may not be tied to one's religious faith, instead reflecting broader meaning-making processes following trauma (Shakespeare-Finch & Lurie-Beck, 2014; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

Symbolic modeling: A form of observational learning in which individuals adopt attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors based on the indirect experience of watching characters in media engage with challenges or decisions (Bandura, 2001, 2008). In the context of this

study, symbolic modeling refers to how animated characters may provide viewers with indirect examples of coping and growth.

Assumptions

Several foundational assumptions underpinned the design of this study, beginning with the view that animated films are not merely resigned to mediums of simple entertainment, but also serve as important mirrors of cultural values and emotional narratives for audiences. While these films are not explicitly therapeutic or educational in purpose, it was assumed that they carry implicit messages that can influence how children understand adversity, resilience, and personal growth. Furthermore, the characters, settings, and story arcs presented in these narratives often reflect symbolic struggles that parallel real psychological experiences.

In approaching these films through a qualitative lens, I also assumed that meaning is constructed by both creators and viewers, and that the emotional and symbolic dimensions of a story are open to interpretation based on context. This aligned with a constructivist worldview, where knowledge emerges from how people engage with and make sense of the world around them (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Because of this, I also assumed that PTG can be identified not only in human experiences, but in the narrative journeys of animated characters – particularly when those characters encounter challenges that parallel real-life adversities faced by children, such as grief, loss, familial displacement, and emotional hardship.

This study similarly assumed that the use of latent content analysis will allow for an exploration of deeper, less visible patterns in the films, including themes of

transformation, meaning-making, and emotional resilience (see Bengtsson, 2016; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Unlike manifest content, which focuses on observable behaviors or direct language, the latent analysis of this study attended to the film's tone, subtext, and symbolic meaning. Furthermore, I also assumed that complex psychological themes, such as PTG, can be reflected in fictional narratives without explicit reference to the theory itself, and that this made qualitative interpretation both necessary and appropriate.

As the researcher, I acknowledged that my professional background in trauma and victim services may shape how I engage with these films and the interpretations I draw from them. Rather than approaching the analysis from a position of neutrality, I viewed this positionality as a valuable source of insight, provided that throughout the study I maintain reflexivity, document analytic choices transparently, and follow a consistent process grounded in existing scholarship (see Berger, 2015; Tracy, 2010).

Scope and Delimitations

This study examined 10 English-language animated feature films released between 2013 and 2023 by major production studios owned by or affiliated with Disney, including Disney Animation Studios, Pixar, and Walt Disney Studios. The scope of the film selection was based on a blend of Zeman's (2025) previously analyzed films and newly selected films that include clear depictions of childhood adversity. The final selection was then guided by a set of committee-approved criteria to ensure consistency and relevance. Specifically, films must have been either digitally or traditionally animated, be rated G or PG by the Motion Picture Association, are marketed toward

children ages 6–12, and feature narrative themes involving significant psychological adversity such as grief, loss, displacement, or emotional hardship. The inclusion of these themes was determined through plot summaries and character arcs rather than through box office performance alone.

Unlike prior studies that focused primarily on either media popularity or broad prosocial messaging, this study intentionally centered on adversity and psychological transformation. Consequently, a few films from Zeman’s sample were replaced to ensure alignment with the present study’s emphasis on emotional growth and symbolic representations of posttraumatic development. This allowed for greater conceptual consistency while still maintaining continuity with prior scholarship.

The study applied Tedeschi and Calhoun’s (2004) model of PTG as its theoretical framework. While other models of resilience and well-being – such as Seligman’s (2011) PERMA model or Diener’s (2009) subjective well-being construct – could have also offered valuable perspectives, the PTG framework was selected for this study due to its specific focus on meaning-making and psychological growth following adversity. PTG’s emphasis on five domains, including personal strength, improved relationships, new possibilities, appreciation of life, and spiritual/existential change, provided an interpretive structure uniquely suited to the narrative arcs of characters experiencing hardship and recovery. Although the study’s design drew from Zeman’s (2025) methodological precedent, this research shifted the theoretical lens to focus more narrowly on trauma adaptation and symbolic modeling of growth processes in media intended for children.

The delimitations of this study included the decision to limit the analysis to Disney-affiliated films, thereby excluding animated films produced by other major studios (e.g., DreamWorks, Sony, Illumination). This choice was made to maintain consistency with Zeman's (2025) previous scholarship and to control for brand-specific narrative and visual storytelling conventions. Similarly, films in languages other than English or those not primarily marketed to children were excluded to maintain a focused, developmentally appropriate sample. The study also focused solely on symbolic representations within the films themselves and as such will not include any audience reception or interpretation data. This narrowed scope was appropriate for the exploratory, interpretive goals of the research and provided a foundation for future work that may include empirical audience studies.

Limitations

As with any qualitative inquiry, this study operated within certain methodological and practical constraints that may affect the scope and interpretation of its findings. One of the primary limitations laid in the use of latent content analysis, which – while well-suited for interpreting symbolic and emotional subtext – typically relies on subjective researcher interpretation rather than objective measurement. Although this method enables deeper insight into psychological themes, there is always the risk of introducing bias in identifying and coding latent meanings. To mitigate this, the study implemented a structured coding protocol and maintain an audit trail of analytic decisions, while also acknowledging the limitations inherent in researcher subjectivity (Bengtsson, 2016; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004).

Another limitation of this study is that the sample of 10 animated films, while intentionally selected, cannot fully capture the diversity of children's animated media or every possible portrayal of adversity and growth. Specifically, the films were limited to English-language productions released by Disney-affiliated studios between 2013 and 2023 and featured some form of emotional hardship or adversity. While this selection criteria restricts the generalizability of findings across other cultural or non-Disney contexts, this bounded selection was deliberately chosen to ensure both continuity with Zeman's (2025) methodology and thematic relevance to the study's focus on PTG. Incorporating a blend of Zeman's films alongside additional titles featuring clear narratives of adversity provided a balanced dataset for this study that reflected both methodological precedent and this study's research focus on PTG in children's media.

The study was also limited by its exclusive focus on the content itself, namely, the films' narratives, characters, and visual-emotional cues. Specifically, it did not assess actual audience responses or developmental outcomes, which limited the ability to draw conclusions about how child viewers interpret or are influenced by the films' portrayals. The fictional nature of the characters further limited interpretation, as their expressions of trauma or resilience are constructed through stylized storytelling and may not always mirror real-world psychological processes, which are often complex and non-linear.

Finally, while analyzing symbolic representations of PTG in animated films opens an important area of inquiry, it was noted that the application of a psychological theory designed for lived human experiences to fictional narratives requires interpretive care. The absence of dialogue with real individuals about their lived trauma means that the

study may not always be able to verify whether the films' portrayals adequately resonate with or reflect authentic pathways to growth. Rather, it instead offered a theoretical lens for understanding how such themes are modeled symbolically, therefore highlighting the conceptual possibilities and acknowledging the analytical distance between representation and reality.

Significance

The narratives of children's animated films often tackle complex emotional challenges such as loss, fear, abandonment, and personal transformation that reflect the very real experiences children often must navigate in the real world. As such, they represent a powerful opportunity to explore how media symbolically models the psychological processes associated with adversity and growth in developmentally meaningful ways. This study will contribute to the growing field of positive and developmental psychology by examining how core features of PTG – including personal strength, relational growth, spiritual/existential insight, new possibilities, and a deeper appreciation of life – are depicted in popular animated stories designed for children. While PTG has been widely studied in adult and clinical populations, little is known about how its key themes are communicated to younger audiences through film. By analyzing how PTG is symbolized through animated characters and story arcs, this study has the potential to provide valuable insights for researchers, educators, and clinicians seeking to understand how media may support resilience and meaning making in children. Furthermore, it also serves as a resource for parents, teachers, and mental health

professionals who wish to use films as a catalyst for conversations about adversity, coping, and psychological growth.

In addition to its implications for PTG theory, the study holds significance for media studies and education, as it bridges the gap between symbolic narrative analysis and applied psychological frameworks. In highlighting how animated films portray the emotional and existential challenges of growing up, the findings help inform broader conversations about the social and educational functions of storytelling in child development. Furthermore, the research can support screenwriters, content creators, and developmental psychologists in crafting materials that offer emotionally resonant and psychologically informed representations of recovery, adaptation, and flourishing after hardship.

Finally, by applying Tedeschi and Calhoun's (2004) PTG framework to media narratives, this study offers a valuable methodological contribution by expanding the utility of the theory beyond clinical settings. In doing so, it extends the conversation about psychological well-being into cultural and symbolic domains – demonstrating how media can reflect, reinforce, or challenge the ways audiences make sense of adversity and healing.

Summary

Chapter 1 established the foundation for this study by outlining the relevance of exploring PTG within children's animated films. The problem statement emphasized the lack of available research addressing how media content might reflect symbolic representations of PTG, despite its widespread application in adult and clinical settings.

The purpose of the study was also articulated as a qualitative exploration of how core PTG domains are modeled within emotionally resonant storylines and characters, with Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1996) PTG model informing the analytical lens of this research. Finally, the study's potential significance was discussed in terms of its contribution to media psychology, educational practice, and the broader discourse on emotional resilience in children's development. Chapter 2 reviews the relevant literature surrounding PTG, children's media, symbolic modeling, and the psychological dimensions of animated storytelling.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Animated children's films, particularly those produced by major studios like Disney and Pixar, have long been recognized not only as entertainment but as cultural artifacts that carry significant developmental and psychological weight (Zeman, 2025). These stories, rich with emotional nuance and moral complexity, provide young viewers with symbolic templates for understanding themselves and the world around them. As such, film has emerged as a meaningful space for psychological inquiry, especially in relation to how children learn to navigate social-emotional experiences, cope with adversity, and envision personal growth. Grounded in interdisciplinary scholarship from media psychology, developmental theory, and trauma studies, this chapter reviews the key conceptual frameworks that support the current study's exploration of PTG in children's animated media.

This literature review is organized around four primary areas of focus: the role of social-emotional learning (SEL) in film, the cultural and psychological impact of Disney narratives, portrayals of adversity in animated children's media, and depictions of positive psychological growth through storytelling. These domains overlap in meaningful ways, each illuminating how emotionally charged narratives can model empathy, resilience, coping, and transformation. Together, they offer a broad yet cohesive foundation for examining how children's films may not only entertain audiences, but also inform, support, and shape emotional development in meaningful ways.

Literature Search Strategy

Developing an effective literature search strategy included best practices from Snyder (2019) and Booth (2016) to emphasize transparency, replicability, and a wide scope of available research. Searches were conducted across multiple interdisciplinary databases including PsycINFO, JSTOR, ERIC, ProQuest Psychology Database, and Google Scholar, as well as the Walden University Library, to ensure scholarly rigor and temporal relevance. Search filters were further applied to limit results around peer-reviewed journal articles and publications within the last 5 years (e.g., 2020-2025), as well as foundational texts that provided the theoretical framework for the study. To supplement database searches, cited reference searching was also employed to trace additional sources through the bibliographies of key articles, allowing for a more comprehensive mapping of the literature (Booth, 2016). Standard editing and citation management tools (such as Grammarly and Zotero) were also utilized to support clarity, formatting, and alignment with scholarly rigor.

To capture the study's theoretical framework of PTG, key search terms were developed to include *posttraumatic growth*, *psychological growth after trauma*, *domains of posttraumatic growth*, *resilience after adversity*, and *trauma recovery narratives*. Literature on children's media and emotional development were explored using search strings such as *animated films and trauma*, *resilience in children's movies*, *emotional themes in Disney films*, and *trauma representation in animated storytelling*. Conceptual rationale for analyzing media through a social psychology lens was further supported through key search terms of *symbolic modeling*, *media influence on children*, and *social-*

emotional learning through film. Lastly, Boolean operators (e.g., AND, OR) were employed to refine search parameters and capture relevant intersections between topics. Examples of Boolean operators include searching for “*posttraumatic growth*” AND “*animated film*” or “*social learning*” AND “*resilience*” AND “*media*.”

Theoretical Foundation

PTG Theory: An Overview

Posttraumatic Growth (PTG) refers to the positive psychological change that can occur as a result of experiencing highly challenging life circumstances. Introduced by psychologists Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996), PTG diverges from traditional trauma models by focusing on the potential for transformation in the aftermath of adversity, rather than solely on distress and pathology. The theory was grounded in clinical observation and qualitative research, with Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996, 2004) noting that many individuals reported meaningful personal changes following traumatic events – often involving enhanced relationships, a shift in life priorities, and deeper existential reflection.

The mechanisms theorized to facilitate PTG involve cognitive processing strategies such as deliberate rumination, shifts in worldview, and narrative reconstruction. Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) introduced the PTG Inventory (PTGI), a psychometric tool that assesses five core domains of growth: appreciation of life, personal strength, new possibilities, relating to others, and spiritual or existential change. Their subsequent theoretical work (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004) elaborated on these domains, emphasizing that each represents an area where individuals may report positive transformation, with

the understanding that PTG is deeply individual and shaped by personal contexts, coping styles, and sociocultural factors. Importantly, not all individuals will experience PTG, with recent research demonstrating that coping strategies, access to social support, and engagement in reflective practices can all influence PTG trajectories (Mangelsdorf et al., 2019; Marziliano et al., 2020). As such, PTG theory provides a framework that outlines possible pathways for growth in the aftermath of trauma, rather than assuming universal outcomes.

Importantly, PTG is not framed as a remedy for trauma or a sign of complete emotional resolution. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) emphasized that PTG can arise in tandem with ongoing psychological distress, reflecting the complex duality in which individuals may experience both profound suffering and meaningful growth simultaneously. Research has further demonstrated that PTG and psychological distress can coexist simultaneously, with positive changes often emerging alongside ongoing psychological symptoms (Castiglioni et al., 2023; Delcea et al., 2023). This is emphasized in a longitudinal systematic review by Majdandzic and du Plooy (2025) found that PTG and distress often follow independent yet intersecting trajectories, challenging any simplistic inference of trauma as inherently growth-producing. This nuance is particularly important when situating PTG within scholarly discourse, as the model does not imply that trauma is benign or that individuals should "find the silver lining" in painful experiences. As Castiglioni et al. (2023) argued, PTG emerges not from the traumatic event itself, but from the cognitive and emotional processes that follow – particularly those involving core beliefs and meaning making. In this light, PTG offers a

valuable framework for understanding how individuals may construct a sense of self, meaning, and future direction after disruption, rather than making any claims about the inherent benefits of suffering (Castiglioni et al., 2023; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

For the present study, PTG has not been positioned as a universally experienced outcome, but rather as a heuristic framework to explore how children's media symbolically models emotional transformation. By acknowledging the complexity of trauma recovery and the complex interplay between suffering and transformation, PTG theory provides a compelling, evidence-based lens through which to explore how individuals make meaning of adversity. In narrative media – especially those designed for children – psychological processes such as identity reconstruction, meaning-making, and emotional transformation are frequently conveyed through symbolic mechanisms like character development, metaphor, and thematic progression. These narrative elements often mirror the psychological mechanisms outlined in PTG theory, making it a robust framework for analyzing how animated stories represent resilience, recovery, and personal change in the aftermath of adversity.

Domains of PTG

Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1996) five domains of PTG offer a structured and empirically validated model for understanding how positive psychological changes may manifest following trauma. Specifically, these domains emerged from the development of the PTGI, a psychometric tool designed by Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) to measure perceived positive outcomes after adversity across five distinct, yet interconnected

thematic clusters that included appreciation of life, relating to others, new possibilities, personal strength, and spiritual/existential change.

Appreciation of Life

Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) described appreciation of life as an area of PTG where individuals experience a renewed respect for the “small things” in life, often emerging after individuals confront their own mortality or experience a great loss. This domain often manifests as a fundamental shift in priorities, where individuals begin to see traumatic experiences as a “wake up call” that prompts them to reassess their values and find meaning in small, often overlooked aspects of daily life. As Zoellner and Maercker (2006) argued, this shift is not merely a reordering of priorities but often emerges from the disorientation and existential questioning that trauma often initiates, a phenomenon that subsequently prompts the individual to reevaluate their core beliefs and, in cases of PTG, experience a heightened appreciation for everyday experiences, relationships, and opportunities that may have previously been taken for granted.

Relating to Others

Relating to others refers to a greater sense of community and social bonds, often as a result of recognizing one's own vulnerability in the face of adversity. While some survivors may isolate themselves following trauma, Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) stated that stronger appreciation for social bonds, increased empathy, and a greater willingness to build interpersonal experiences were hallmark behaviors of PTG. Recent meta-analyses continue to affirm this trajectory, with Marziliano et al. (2020) demonstrating that enhanced interpersonal relationships remain consistently among the most common

forms of growth reported in cancer patients and survivors. Wu et al. (2019) further supported these findings in their systematic review and meta-analysis, showing that moderate-to-high PTG frequently includes strengthened social connections across diverse trauma populations. Additionally, Mangelsdorf et al. (2019) found that genuine PTG often manifests through improved relationships and increased empathy following various forms of adversity. Contemporary research on adolescents has also shown that those who face collective trauma continue to report increases in empathy and altruistic behavior, resulting not only in the deepening of existing relationships but also supporting the formation of new, meaningful social connections (McLaughlin et al., 2013; Schubert et al., 2016).

Personal Strength

Personal strength refers to the realization of one's resilience and inner resources in the face of adversity. Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) described this domain as involving the recognition of increased personal strength and capability that emerges from struggling with trauma. This transformation reflects not just the survival of hardship, but an enduring belief in one's psychological fortitude and ability to navigate future stressors. Research by Marziliano et al. (2020) found that cancer survivors frequently cite newfound strength as central to their post-trauma identity, with many participants reporting enhanced confidence in their ability to handle difficulties. Similarly, Mangelsdorf et al. (2019) documented in their systematic review that personal strength represents one of the most robust and commonly reported domains of PTG across diverse trauma populations. Growth in this domain reflects not only resilience, but also an active

recognition of one's capacity for transformation, emphasizing personal agency in the face of adversity.

Recognition of New Possibilities

The new possibilities domain involves recognizing and pursuing previously unconsidered opportunities, often leading to life course changes or reorienting of goals. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) described this dimension as encompassing the development of new interests, activities, and life directions that emerge from the struggle with trauma. These shifts can be external, such as career changes or relocating, or internal, involving the exploration of creative passions or personal interests that were previously unexplored. Recent research further demonstrates that the exploration of new goals and possibilities often marks an important turning point in recovery, with Mangelsdorf et al. (2019) finding in their systematic review that genuine PTG frequently includes the pursuit of novel opportunities and life directions. Similarly, a study by Marziliano et al. (2020) among cancer patients and survivors showed that the recognition of new possibilities represents one of the most reported domains of growth, often emerging as individuals reconstruct their understanding of what is meaningful and achievable following trauma.

Spiritual or Existential Change

This domain of PTG reflects profound shifts in an individual's spiritual beliefs, existential meaning, or life philosophy following traumatic life experiences. Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) originally described this phenomenon as a "better understanding of spiritual matters" and "a stronger religious faith" (p. 460), but later work broadened this to include nonreligious existential reflection, such as developing a deeper sense of

purpose or embracing uncertainty (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2014; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Importantly, this spiritual change can manifest itself as either a struggle or a deepened conviction, with Burke et al. (2014) documenting the concept of "complicated spiritual grief" where some bereaved individuals experience crises of faith while others find spiritual resources that facilitate healing. Research by Zeligman et al. (2018) further confirmed that while some individuals distance themselves from previous religious traditions following chronic illness, others discover renewed spiritual meaning as a crucial source of strength and PTG.

PTG Theory: Research Examples

Over the past decade, empirical research on PTG has expanded substantially across diverse populations, revealing the framework's versatility and applicability beyond clinical contexts. Specifically, PTG has been documented in survivors of natural disasters, chronic illness, interpersonal violence, and collective trauma, offering a nuanced understanding of how a wide range of individuals transform following psychological disruption. These studies not only validate the five-domain model proposed by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996, 2004), but also underscore the importance of cultural, developmental, and contextual factors in shaping how growth manifests after trauma.

Among child and adolescent populations, Bernstein and Pfefferbaum (2018) reviewed evidence of PTG in young survivors of natural disasters. Their findings underscored that even in early developmental stages, children demonstrate profound shifts in worldview after trauma. For instance, youth reported stronger familial bonds,

increased empathy for others, and a sharpened sense of life's fragility. Crucially, the authors found that these changes often occurred alongside — not in the absence of — psychological distress, affirming that PTG and pathology can co-occur simultaneously (Bernstein & Pfefferbaum, 2018).

In the realm of chronic illness, Danhauer et al. (2015) conducted a longitudinal study of women undergoing breast cancer treatment, identifying six distinct trajectories of PTG over 24 months post-diagnosis. The study revealed that PTG frequently unfolds along diverse pathways rather than following a uniform pattern, with three trajectories remaining stable at different levels, two showing modest increases, and one demonstrating substantial growth over time. Consistent with PTG theoretical models, the researchers found that women who experienced greater illness intrusiveness, yet employed active-adaptive coping strategies, were more likely to achieve higher levels of growth. This suggests that the combination of significant life disruption and effective psychological resources creates the conditions necessary for PTG to emerge. Notably, the study found no decreasing PTG trajectories, indicating that once developed, PTG tends to be maintained rather than lost over time (Danhauer et al., 2015). Psychoeducational resources from the American Cancer Society further reinforced PTG findings by documenting how survivors frequently reframe their diagnosis as a turning point toward greater self-awareness and life purpose (American Cancer Society, n.d.).

Research by D'Amore et al. (2018) also utilized PTG theory in their qualitative study of women experiencing intimate partner violence. Their thematic analysis of secondary narrative data revealed three healing processes that closely aligned with PTG

domains: rediscovery of self-worth (personal strength), reconnection with others (relating to others), and reimagining one's future (new possibilities). These findings emphasize the importance of storytelling, agency, and identity reconstruction as central to survivors' recovery, reinforcing PTG as a valuable tool for cognitive integration and meaning making. Likewise, a study by Hartley et al. (2016) found that adult survivors of childhood sexual trauma described growth through making sense of their abuse experiences, developing new ways of relating to themselves, and forming healthier relationships with others. The authors highlighted the importance of reflective processes and meaning making as important drivers of PTG, particularly when mediated through long-term therapeutic engagement (Hartley et al., 2016).

Beyond individual trauma, cross-cultural applications of PTG have also been applied to collective and intergenerational trauma narratives. A study by Ortega-Williams et al. (2021) proposed a hybrid framework model that integrated PTG with historical trauma theory, illustrating how marginalized communities – particularly those impacted by historic forms of systemic oppression – may experience PTG growth through collective identity, cultural rituals, and symbolic reclamation through storytelling. Importantly, these findings illustrate that growth is not solely an individual psychological phenomenon, but can also emerge through collective, symbolic, and representational practices — a key insight for this dissertation's focus on media texts.

Collectively, these interdisciplinary studies confirm that PTG is a dynamic, multidimensional framework that can be applied across various ages, cultures, and trauma types. Importantly, many of the psychological mechanisms associated with PTG

— such as rumination, identity reformation, narrative restructuring, and meaning-making — are mirrored in the symbolic language of storytelling, as are the five domains of PTG identified by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996, 2004). This theoretical and empirical foundation provided a compelling rationale for applying PTG as a framework for exploring how children’s animated films portray emotional development and transformation.

PTG Theory: Relevance to Current Study

Tedeschi and Calhoun’s (1996, 2004) PTG model offered a structured and empirically grounded lens for examining psychological transformation following adversity. Although originally developed around adult populations and clinical research, contemporary research in PTG theory has increasingly been applied to a range of populations, including children and adolescents (Bernstein & Pfefferbaum, 2018), cancer patients (Danhauer et al., 2015), intimate partner violence (D’Amore et al., 2018), and collective trauma in marginalized communities (Ortega-Williams et al., 2021). PTG theory’s emphasis on narrative reconstruction, cognitive processing, and meaning making made it especially relevant for analyzing symbolic content in children’s films, with its five domains providing a solid coding framework and conceptual clarity for analysis.

Research has shown that PTG often emerges not from the trauma itself, but from the individual’s attempts to make sense of it — which make include rumination, social connection, or shifts in one’s identity and worldview (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). These same processes are frequently dramatized or symbolized in animated narratives, which often use metaphor, character arcs, and fantastical settings to externalize inner struggles

and transformation. Thus, the PTG framework offered a robust, trauma informed lens through which to analyze how children's stories reflect — and potentially model — emotional growth and resilience in developmentally accessible ways.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts

Contemporary animated films do more than entertain; they operate as powerful vehicles for psychological, emotional, and moral storytelling. This section of the literature review is organized around four key conceptual domains that guide the current study: (a) the significance of social emotional learning (SEL) in film, (b) the cultural and psychological impact of Disney animated films, (c) depictions of adversity in children's cinematic narratives, and (d) portrayals of positive psychological growth in film. Each of these domains reflects a central pathway through which narrative media may contribute to young viewers' emotional insight, coping skills, and developmental understanding of themselves and others. While overlapping in their contextual underpinnings of children's media, each concept area offers distinct insights into how symbolic characters and story arcs may shape emotional processing and model responses in young viewers.

The Significance of SEL in Film

Research has indicated that exposure to emotionally rich animated narratives supports key SEL constructs – such as empathy, emotional insight, and interpersonal skills – through mechanisms like observational learning and character identification (de Leeuw & van der Laan, 2018; Mares & Woodard, 2005). These SEL competencies are reflected in how children absorb behavioral and emotional cues from animated storytelling, with symbolic narratives often becoming templates through which children

construct understandings of the world, social roles, and personal identity (Bandura, 2008). Albert Bandura's (2008) social learning theory helped to illustrate this phenomenon, by examining how individuals learn behaviors and attitudes through observation and imitation, with fictional characters functioning as symbolic models. This foundational theory highlighted that observational learning influences not only outward behavior, but also internal constructs such as belief systems, emotional responses, and perceived self-efficacy.

One foundational meta-analysis by Mares and Woodard (2005) demonstrated that exposure to prosocial media content significantly increases prosocial behavior, reduces aggression, and enhances empathy across various ages, genders, and cultural backgrounds. These findings provide strong evidence that media content is not merely consumed, but it is internalized and performed by encouraging moral action and emotional understanding. Such mechanisms are particularly important in early childhood and adolescence, when brain development is at a critical stage and one's cognitive, emotional, and moral capacities are more sensitive to the internalization of messages from narrative media (Crone & Konijn, 2018; NICHD, 2023).

Further evidence comes from a study by Kubrak (2020), who explored the influence of media on young people's perceptions of elderly individuals. Kubrak's findings showed that after exposure to a specific film, the attitudes of participants shifted significantly based on age, educational status, and prior contact with older adults. Specifically, the study showed that undergraduate students developed more negative perceptions after viewing the film, while postgraduate students reported more

favorable views. Although these attitude changes were revealed to be short-lived, the study illustrates that narrative films are capable of shaping viewer beliefs, even when the narrative message is implicit or unintentional. This reinforces the notion that narrative structures carry pedagogical weight, especially when the viewer identifies with the character's emotional journey.

This body of research underscores the dual function of children's media as both culturally and developmentally significant. By interpreting film content through a PTG framework, we can explore how media may model adaptive responses to adversity, reinforce social-emotional competencies, or challenge maladaptive schemas. As such, this analytical lens not only advances the availability of research around SEL, but also contributes meaningfully to interdisciplinary conversations in psychology, education, and child development.

The Cultural and Psychological Impact of Disney Films

Disney animated films have become a powerful cultural force that extends far beyond entertainment. Through their narrative structures, character arcs, and emotional themes, these films help shape children's social, emotional, and moral development. Scholars have increasingly turned their attention to the psychological impact of Disney media, investigating how these stories can both reflect and influence the values, beliefs, and behaviors of young audiences. Abate (2024), for instance, analyzed the Disney film *Encanto* through the lens of intergenerational trauma and SEL, noting how the film's plot offered a narrative scaffold for understanding complex familial dynamics and emotional resilience. Her analysis highlighted how Mirabel, the film's central protagonist, embodies

emotional intelligence and perseverance in the face of perceived inadequacy within her magically abundant family. By drawing attention to the tension between individual identity and family expectations, Abate argued that *Encanto* provides a rich context for exploring themes of validation, communication, and healing, making film an impactful form of media in both psychological and pedagogical contexts.

Complementing these insights, de Leeuw and van der Laan (2018) conducted an experimental study to assess whether exposure to helping behavior in Disney clips could influence real-world prosocial behavior in children. Using a controlled experiment of 113 Dutch children aged 8 to 13, the researchers used a randomized controlled design in which participants watched either a scene depicting a character helping others or a neutral clip that did not. de Leeuw and van der Laan found that children who viewed the prosocial Disney content were significantly more likely to help a peer in subsequent tasks, demonstrating a measurable short-term behavioral effect on participants. This study offers empirical support for the argument that Disney films can function as behavioral models for young viewers, reinforcing socially desirable actions like empathy and altruism.

Likewise, a comprehensive content analysis by Padilla-Walker et al. (2013) examined prosocial behavior across 61 animated Disney and Disney/Pixar films produced by 2011, using a robust coding framework to categorize and quantify prosocial actions such as helping, sharing, and comforting. The researchers found that prosocial behaviors occurred with remarkable frequency in Disney films, averaging approximately one prosocial action per minute of screen time. Moreover, the findings revealed that these

behaviors encompassed both physical acts (such as helping and sharing) and verbal acts (such as complimenting and encouraging), with altruistic motivations being the most common. Padilla-Walker et al. concluded that Disney films contain significantly higher levels of prosocial content compared to children's television programming, suggesting their potential value as vehicles for promoting positive social behaviors and moral development in young audiences. The moral dimensions of Disney characters were also the focus of Vaidya and Osman's (2024) discourse analysis of *Coco* and *Encanto*. Their study examined how protagonists and supporting characters communicate moral lessons through culturally specific values such as familial loyalty, community interdependence, and respect for ancestors. Through close textual and visual scene analysis, the authors found that both films embed moral reasoning into character dialogues and plot progression, offering subtle yet impactful guidance for young viewers navigating ethical and relational complexities. Vaidya and Osman's findings suggested that Disney characters often act as moral role models who embody virtues like courage, humility, and forgiveness—traits that align with positive youth development frameworks.

Finally, Zeman's (2025) dissertation offered a comprehensive look at the representation of psychological well-being across Disney animated feature films released between 2013 and 2023. Using Seligman's PERMA model as a guiding framework, Zeman analyzed ten films to assess how characters and storylines exemplify elements such as positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. Her findings revealed that all five dimensions were consistently present across the films, often interwoven into character development and resolution arcs. Zeman argued that Disney

films promote a holistic portrayal of well-being by emphasizing emotional growth, moral decision-making, and relational strength. The dissertation supports the notion that these narratives offer more than escapism; they model resilience and flourishing in ways that can have enduring psychological relevance for viewers, especially children and adolescents.

Taken together, these studies illustrate how Disney animated films may serve as a cultural mirror and moral compass, reflecting and shaping the psychological development and cultural norms of their audiences. Whether through overt portrayals of empathy and cooperation or more nuanced explorations of identity, trauma, and healing, Disney media holds a significant place in the prosocial development of children. Understanding this impact not only enriches academic discourse among researchers, but also offers practical insights for parents, educators, and mental health professionals seeking to use media as a tool for positive growth.

Depictions of Adversity in Children's Films

Children's films have long addressed life's challenges through accessible yet emotionally rich storytelling, with narratives that engage young audiences in meaningful reflections on adversity. Themes of grief, resilience, and coping have become prominent in contemporary animated films, offering young viewers symbolic templates for navigating hardship and modeling emotional regulation, social support, and meaning making in the face of loss. Fradkin et al. (2016) explored this potential through a study that paralleled children's experiences of adversity with those of comic superheroes. The authors underscored the relevance of narrative characters facing loss or hardship as

vehicles for promoting resilience through the concept of “shared adversity,” arguing that superheroes’ backstories – which often involve traumatic losses as part of their origin story – serve as symbolic mirrors to children’s real-life experiences. Drawing on a review of psychological resilience literature and narrative therapy frameworks, Fradkin et al. suggested that these character arcs help normalize struggle, model adaptive behaviors, and create opportunities for emotional identification. These findings further support the therapeutic utility of such narratives, proposing that children who identify with characters who overcome significant challenges may, in turn, develop greater emotional insight and personal strength.

Additional research by de Leeuw and Buijzen (2016) also emphasized that prosocial media content can influence children’s behavioral scripts and self-perceptions, particularly when children identify with characters who display emotional strength or ethical reasoning when confronted with challenges or adversity. Drawing from positive psychology and media studies, the authors introduced the framework of “positive media psychology” to the field of children and adolescents, advocating for a shift away from the traditional focus on harmful media effects. Specifically, de Leeuw and Buijzen argued that children’s media often featured prosocial themes and character strengths that can inspire moral development and emotional flourishing in the face of adversity. Their essay called for more empirical work examining how media portrayals of virtues such as courage, justice, and humanity might model meaningful life practices for young audiences, suggesting that media characters could serve as role models for moral elevation and personal growth.

Expanding on the portrayals of adversity in children's media, Graham et al. (2018) conducted a content analysis of 18 Disney and Pixar films spanning from 1937 to 2016, specifically selecting films that contained death scenes or death-related themes. The study systematically examined how death and grief were presented to audiences in these films, identifying both explicit and implicit portrayals of loss, as well as characters' coping mechanisms. The authors found that the presentation of death varied by era, with earlier films often included sudden or unexplained deaths and more recent films (particularly post-2000) showing a greater emphasis on grief, resilience, and PTG. Importantly, the study highlighted that many protagonists displayed adaptive responses to grief, including emotional expression, seeking social support, and re-engagement with meaningful goals. These findings help establish the relevance of content analysis of psychological concepts in films that may help young viewers build emotional vocabulary around loss and model constructive ways of processing adversity.

Complementing this perspective, Tenzek and Nickels (2019) examined end-of-life themes in 57 Disney and Pixar films, emphasizing their potential as tools for facilitating family conversations about death. Through both quantitative content analysis and qualitative thematic analysis, the authors examined death-related content across films spanning from 1937 to 2015, finding that 84.2% of the films contained at least one death scene. Specifically, the study identified four primary themes in how death was portrayed: (a) unrealistic moments, where characters appeared to die but then returned to life; (b) managing end-of-life, encompassing grief responses and coping mechanisms; (c) intentions to kill, involving explicit death threats and violence; and (d) transformation

and spiritual connection, where characters changed form or communicated beyond death. The authors argued that such portrayals can support children's cognitive and emotional development, providing a valuable platform for addressing difficult topics while noting the importance of distinguishing between realistic and unrealistic depictions to manage children's expectations about death and loss.

Together, these studies demonstrate that children's animated films are increasingly engaging with complex emotional themes in developmentally sensitive ways. By modeling adversity, resilience, and coping in accessible narrative forms, these films offer more than pure entertainment and may serve as powerful cultural texts that reflect and shape children's psychological development for the future.

Portrayals of Positive Psychological Growth in Film

Films have long served as a compelling medium for portraying psychological growth, resilience, and emotional complexity, often reflecting key principles found in positive psychology frameworks like Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1996) PTG theory. Within these frameworks, cinematic stories can often function as reflective spaces where audiences engage with themes of resilience, meaning making, and transformation, making it an exciting area of future research and exploration. Özgen and Kaatsız (2022) examined this potential through their qualitative film analysis of *Breathe*, a biographical drama that portrays the life of Robin Cavendish, a man who becomes paralyzed from the neck down due to polio. Using a systematic framework, the authors analyzed character development and narrative progression, identifying thematic expressions of PTG across the five domains. Their analysis highlighted how Cavendish's journey – marked first by

adversity and then gradual transformation towards acceptance and advocacy – symbolized the PTG process in narrative form. Notably, the authors found that the film only depicted the psychological reconstruction of identity after trauma, but also served to emphasize social support, relational depth, and renewed purpose as key catalysts of growth (Özgen & Kaatsız, 2022). These findings support the view that positive psychological concepts, such as PTG, can be showcased in narrative films as a symbolic and affective process modeled through story development and character evolution.

Similarly, Wijaya and Munjid (2024) explored PTG in the *Demi Lovato: Dancing with the Devil* documentary through a multidisciplinary analysis that incorporated narrative structure, identity theory, and trauma discourse. The authors argued that the documentary not only charts Lovato's recovery journey after a near-fatal overdose but also frames her identity reconstruction as a process deeply informed by PTG elements—particularly spiritual change, personal strength, and new possibilities. Their analysis emphasizes how the media's portrayal of adversity can influence public understanding of psychological resilience, suggesting that viewers may engage in their own reflective meaning-making in response to such narratives. This aligns with PTG's theoretical core: that transformation is not embedded in the trauma itself, but in the ongoing narrative and cognitive processing that follows it.

In addition to PTG, scholars have also used Seligman's (2011) PERMA model to evaluate how cinematic narratives may support emotional well-being and cognitive development (Zeman, 2025). Popa et al. (2021), for instance, investigated how films might enhance intercultural competence and well-being among university students.

Conducted in Brunei and Romania, this experimental study involved 236 students who watched *Eat Pray Love* and *Hotel Transylvania 2*, followed by group discussions. Using pre- and post-intervention assessments with the PERMA-Profiler, researchers found participants showed enhanced openness to other cultures and improvements in well-being indicators like positive emotion and engagement. These findings point to the reflective and relational capacities of film, which resonate with the intrapersonal and social domains highlighted in PTG theory.

Ultimately, cinematic narratives offer rich ground for examining how emotional complexity, interpersonal growth, and resilience are communicated to audiences. While frameworks like PERMA have previously been used to evaluate emotional well-being in educational or intercultural contexts, the studies discussed here illustrate how PTG can also serve as a valuable interpretive tool for analyzing personal transformation through adversity in film. By extending PTG into the domain of children's animated media, this dissertation seeks to build on this interdisciplinary foundation and explore how such narratives might model growth and transformation in ways that are both emotionally resonant and psychologically meaningful to general audiences.

Summary and Conclusions

This chapter has traced the intersection of children's animated media with core psychological and developmental processes, demonstrating how film can function as both mirror and model for young audiences navigating their own emotional lives. The reviewed literature emphasizes that animated films are far more than passive entertainment but also serve as rich narrative environments for fostering empathy,

prosocial behavior, and emotional resilience in audiences. Through mechanisms such as character identification and symbolic storytelling, children are invited to make meaning of difficult experiences and see themselves reflected in stories of struggle, heroism, and transformation.

Central to this exploration was the theoretical framework of PTG theory by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996), which emerged as a compelling lens for interpreting how films may depict positive changes following adversity. Studies reviewed in this chapter suggest that cinematic narratives can model PTG not just through explicit messaging but through emotional tone, character evolution, and moral resolution. At the same time, this chapter situated these findings within broader discussions about media effects, social learning, and child development, creating space for a more nuanced understanding of how children internalize emotional lessons from film. By bridging these interdisciplinary domains, this literature review lays a critical foundation for the present study's focus on how Disney films may symbolically communicate themes of PTG in developmentally meaningful ways.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

Chapter 3 outlines the methodology used to examine how children's animated films portray psychological transformation. This research builds upon the methodological precedent set by Zeman (2025), while also contributing to the growing body of research in PTG and adversity-related experiences. Given the increasing interest in how media can shape children's emotional development, identity formation, and coping behaviors, this chapter explains how a qualitative content analysis was employed to explore symbolic and narrative representations of psychological processes in film. The sections that follow describe the rationale behind the selected research design and detail the sampling strategy used to identify appropriate films. Additionally, this chapter outlines the procedures for data collection and analysis, including the integration of theoretical constructs into the coding process. Issues of trustworthiness, such as credibility, transferability, and confirmability, are addressed to demonstrate the methodological rigor and ethical soundness of the study. By the end of this chapter, readers will have a comprehensive understanding of how the research was conceptualized, implemented, and safeguarded for academic rigor.

Research Design and Rationale

This study employed a basic qualitative research design grounded in latent content analysis to explore how psychological adversity and growth are portrayed in children's animated films. The rationale for selecting a qualitative approach lay in the nature of the research questions, which sought to interpret symbolic, emotional, and

narrative elements within cinematic texts, rather than quantify viewer responses or establish causal relationships. Qualitative content analysis offered a flexible yet systematic method for examining deeper meanings embedded in film narratives – particularly those that speak to themes of resilience, loss, identity, and transformation (Bengtsson, 2016; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

The use of latent content analysis, rather than manifest content analysis, was particularly well suited for this study because the research focuses on interpretive meanings rather than surface-level counts of behaviors or dialogue (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). By applying this method, the study captured the necessary emotional nuance, narrative subtext, and ways in which characters symbolically model coping mechanisms and psychological strengths in the aftermath of adversity. Furthermore, a basic qualitative approach also allowed for an intentional blend of theory-driven coding and inductive reflection, making it effective for studies that seek to explore cultural artifacts – such as film – which serve as both expressive and educational tools (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Unlike grounded theory, which aims to develop new theory from data, this study began with an existing theoretical foundation and uses it to structure and interpret findings. Similarly, while a phenomenological approach prioritizes lived human experiences through interviews or focus groups, the focus here was on mediated experiences and symbolic representations embedded within narrative structures, making a basic qualitative design the most appropriate and methodologically coherent approach.

Finally, this research also built on the methodological precedent set by Zeman (2025), whose doctoral dissertation analyzed portrayals of well-being in Disney films

used a similar qualitative design. While Zeman focused specifically on the PERMA model of well-being, the present study expanded this scope to explore adversity and psychological transformation using PTG theory. This continuity reinforced the reliability of the research approach while offering a novel interpretive contribution to the emerging intersection of psychology, media studies, and childhood development.

Role of the Researcher

As the sole researcher in this qualitative content analysis, I was responsible for the design, film selection, data analysis, and interpretation of findings. While I drew upon existing research, including Zeman's (2025) dissertation on well-being in Disney films, I approached the current study with distinct research questions, a different theoretical framework, and a focus on trauma-informed analysis. My academic and professional background is rooted in trauma and victim services, which shaped the development of this study's focus on how psychological growth in the aftermath of adversity. This lens also informed my interest in narrative media as a space where young viewers may encounter symbolic representations of loss, resilience, healing, and transformation in an emotionally meaningful way.

To ensure reflexivity and minimize bias throughout the research process, I maintained a detailed research journal. This reflexive practice allowed me to document emerging themes, interpretive challenges, and moments where my professional background may influence how I perceived or coded character development and emotional content. I have no personal or professional affiliations with The Walt Disney Company, and all engagement with the selected films were approached through an

academic and analytic lens, with an emphasis on psychological meaning-making rather than personal fandom or entertainment.

Methodology

Sample Selection and Criteria

This study employed a purposive sampling strategy to identify animated films suitable for qualitative content analysis. Building on the methodology established by Zeman (2025), this project focused on films that not only aligned with general family entertainment but also reflected thematic relevance to the research's focus on adversity and psychological growth. The selected sample included both previously analyzed titles from Zeman's dissertation, as well as additional films that introduced significant representations of hardship, emotional struggle, and resilience in child-friendly narratives.

To guide the film selection, the following inclusion criteria was applied: (a) English-language animated format (either traditional or digital), (b) rated G or PG by the Motion Picture Association to ensure age-appropriate content, (c) clearly marketed toward children ages 6–12, as indicated by studio branding, genre categorization, or educational tie-ins, (d) released between 2013 and 2023 to reflect contemporary cultural and cinematic trends, and (e) contain narrative themes involving childhood adverse experiences, including grief, loss, displacement, emotional hardship, or trauma. This curated approach was designed to ensure consistency with Zeman's (2025) analytical precedent while still ensuring that the dataset remained culturally relevant,

developmentally appropriate, and contained the thematic depth required for examining portrayals of psychological adversity.

Data Collection Procedures

Once selected, all films were accessed via commercial streaming platforms, ensuring full visibility for both visual and narrative content. Data collection involved multiple viewings of each film to ensure saturation and familiarity with the film's character arcs, symbolic motifs, and psychological themes. During each viewing, both the audio-visual content and available transcripts were closely analyzed to document narrative events, dialogue, and character development that could be relevant to the study's conceptual framework. Observational notes also served as a primary tool for capturing instances of emotional adversity, coping behaviors, and themes consistent with PTG. These notes were then recorded digitally and securely stored on a password-protected computer and external encrypted backup. Each film was viewed a minimum of two times, though certain sequences required additional viewings to ensure accuracy of coding and thematic interpretation. Notes and emerging patterns were further refined iteratively throughout this stage, with the goal of identifying recurring motifs and conceptual categories across the sample. This process laid the groundwork for the subsequent coding and analysis stages of the study, where data was organized using a thematic codebook derived from Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1996) PTG theory and established recommendations for latent content analysis (see Elo et al., 2014; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Selvi, 2019).

Data Analysis Plan

This study employed latent qualitative content analysis to examine the portrayal of psychological growth and adversity in children's animated films. Latent content analysis was particularly appropriate for uncovering underlying meanings, emotional subtexts, and psychological constructs embedded within visual and narrative content (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The study's analysis was grounded in the theoretical framework of PTG theory as the primary lens through which narrative events, character behaviors, and emotional themes are analyzed. PTG domains – including personal strength, new possibilities, appreciation of life, improved relationships, and spiritual/existential growth – were used to guide coding and theme development (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996).

The analysis began with multiple viewings of each film, during which observational notes are taken regarding character development, significant dialogue, and key narrative arcs. When available, transcripts of the films were also reviewed in parallel to ensure accuracy in capturing thematic content. A codebook was developed through iterative rounds of data examination, where recurring themes and subthemes were logged, defined, and refined. Codes were applied systematically across the dataset using both transcript excerpts and timestamped scene descriptions to document examples of adversity, coping responses, and transformational arcs. In line with the methodological precedent set by Zeman (2025), comparisons were then made across films to identify converging and diverging representations of growth, with particular attention to developmental appropriateness, narrative resolution, and character modeling.

Issues of Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, trustworthiness refers to the rigor and integrity with which the study is conducted, analyzed, and presented. Establishing trustworthiness involves demonstrating that the findings are credible, transferable, dependable, and confirmable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). These criteria are particularly important in research analyzing narrative and symbolic content, where research interpretation plays a central role. Given the interpretive nature of this study in analyzing psychological themes like PTG, it was essential to implement strategies that ensured methodological transparency and minimized bias. To address these concerns, I adopted reflexive practices throughout the data collection and analysis process, used established coding frameworks, and maintained an audit trail to support the integrity of my findings. The following sections outline the specific strategies used to establish trustworthiness in this research.

Credibility

Credibility refers to confidence in the truth and authenticity of the research findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To enhance credibility in this study, prolonged engagement with the film texts was employed, with each film viewed multiple times to identify thematic patterns and subtle narrative cues. I also used a structured codebook grounded in established theoretical frameworks – namely, Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1996) PTG model – which guided the consistency of analysis across films. Peer debriefing was utilized during the analytic process, in which consulted with academic colleagues to discuss emergent codes, challenge interpretations, and minimize individual

bias. I also conducted negative case analysis, specifically examining instances where films deviated from expected psychological patterns or challenged the anticipated expression of PTG dimensions. These strategies helped ensure that the interpretations were data-driven and aligned with the aims of the study.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the extent to which the findings can be applied to other contexts, settings, or populations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). To support this, I provided thick, rich descriptions of each film's context, character arcs, and thematic content. By documenting both the narrative and symbolic elements that emerged in the portrayal of adversity and growth, I aimed to give ample contextual detail to assess the applicability of the findings to other types of media or psychological frameworks. Furthermore, the selection criteria for the films – based previous dissertation work by Zeman (2025) and narrative alignment with identifiable challenges or adversity – ensured that the sample is relevant to broader audiences and representational of mainstream children's animated media. This intentional sampling enhanced the potential for generalization to other analyses of youth media and developmental psychology.

Dependability

Dependability involves the stability and consistency of research findings over time and across researchers (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To establish dependability, I created and maintained a detailed audit trail, which included documented coding decisions, analytic memos, iterative codebook updates, and reflective notes on each film. Each step of the analytic process – from initial film selection to final thematic synthesis – was

recorded and reviewed, ensuring that decisions were transparent and replicable. A systematic coding strategy informed by latent content analysis principles (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), also allowed for stronger alignment between theoretical constructs and narrative findings. This methodological clarity helped make the study accessible for future replication or comparative analysis.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the objectivity of the findings and the extent to which they are shaped by the data rather than researcher bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Given my professional background in trauma services and prior exposure to some of the films, I maintained a reflexive journal throughout the study to document personal reactions, evolving interpretations, and decisions made during the coding process. This reflexivity helped acknowledge and manage potential biases while enhancing the integrity of the analysis. I also triangulated findings with theoretical constructs and existing literature, including works that both support and critique PTG theory, allowing for a balanced examination of the data and ensuring that conclusions are grounded in evidence, rather than any assumption.

Ethical Procedures

Because this study did not involve any human participants, the ethical concerns were minimal and there was no need for informed consent or confidentiality safeguards. The primary data consisted of animated feature films that were accessible through individual purchase or commercial streaming services, such as Disney Plus. All selected films were rated G or PG by the Motion Picture Association, indicating that they were

appropriate for general audiences and that the content aligned with the intended developmental stage of the target audience (e.g., children ages 6 to 12). Additionally, the films were analyzed in a manner that upheld intellectual property guidelines, using them solely for scholarly and educational purposes under the principles of fair use. No audiovisual materials were reproduced or distributed beyond the analytic framework of this dissertation.

While there were no human participants involved, steps were nonetheless still taken to maintain ethical rigor in data management and coordination with Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB Approval #08-25-25-1030948). All coding notes, analytical memos, and drafts were stored on a password-protected device, with backups maintained on an encrypted external drive. Furthermore, data was securely retained for 5 years following publication, in accordance with ethical guidelines outlined by the American Psychological Association (APA, 2017). Ethical considerations also included a commitment to analytical neutrality and transparency; researcher biases and prior exposure to some of the films were addressed through reflexive journaling and regular consultation with dissertation committee members.

Summary

This chapter presented the methodological foundation for a qualitative study aimed at understanding how children's animated films portray psychological adversity and growth. Drawing on established frameworks like Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1996) PTG theory and the methodological precedent set by Zeman (2025), the study used latent content analysis to explore character development, thematic symbolism, and emotional

nuance in narrative film. The choice of methodology, data sources, and coding strategies reflect a commitment to both theoretical alignment and interpretive depth. The following chapter will present the findings of the content analysis, highlighting how psychological resilience and emotional transformation are embedded in the structure and storytelling of the selected films.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore representations of PTG in Disney and Pixar animated feature films released between 2013 and 2021. The guiding research question was as follows: How is PTG portrayed in major animated films released between 2013 and 2021? Although research on adversity and resilience in children's media is growing (Abate, 2024; Fradkin et al., 2016), little is known about how PTG is modeled through storytelling in animated films. Disney's narratives are often lauded for addressing complex emotions and life challenges in developmentally accessible ways (Vaidya & Osman, 2024; Zeman, 2025), making them a rich medium for studying how growth emerges from hardship in fictional contexts.

This chapter presents the core components of the research findings, beginning with a description of the data sources and collection procedures, followed by a detailed explanation of the analytic process. Next, the evidence of trustworthiness is outlined to support the rigor of the methodology and concludes with the results of the study, presented both through individual film analysis and a cross-case synthesis of PTG themes across the 10 films.

Data Collection

Data collection consisted of 10 animated feature films released between 2013 and 2023 that met the inclusion criteria outlined in Chapter 3. Table 1 lists the films included in the final sample, including production details, MPAA rating, key narrative themes of adversity, and screenplay information. These 10 selected films were *Frozen* (Buck &

Lee, 2013), *Big Hero 6* (Hall & Williams, 2014), *Inside Out* (Docter & Del Carmen, 2015), *Zootopia* (Howard et al., 2016), *Finding Dory* (Stanton & MacLane, 2016), *Moana* (Clements et al., 2016), *Coco* (Unkrich & Molina, 2017), *The Lion King* (Favreau, 2019), *Raya and the Last Dragon* (Hall & López Estrada, 2021), and *Encanto* (Bush et al., 2021). Films were selected through purposive sampling methods and based on their thematic relevance to childhood adversity. All films were obtained via commercially available streaming services (e.g., Disney+) to allow for repeated viewing, with supplementary materials – such as screenplays, dialogue transcripts, and closed captioning – used to support additional data extraction and ensure accuracy in scene-level coding.

Table 1*Film Sample of Disney Animated Feature Films 2013–2023*

Title	Release date	Production company	MPA rating	Narrative elements of adversity	Director(s)	Film script, screenplay, or transcript
<i>Frozen</i>	2013	Walt Disney Pictures Walt Disney Animation Studios	PG	Loss of parent(s), grief, isolation	Buck & Lee, 2013	Lee, 2013
<i>Big Hero 6</i>	2014	Walt Disney Pictures Walt Disney Animation Studios	PG	Loss of parent(s), grief, isolation	Hall & Williams, 2014	Roberts, 2014
<i>Inside Out</i>	2015	Walt Disney Pictures Pixar Animation Studios	PG	Displacement, complicated grief	Docter & Del Carmen, 2015	Docter et al., 2015
<i>Zootopia</i>	2016	Walt Disney Pictures Walt Disney Animation Studios	PG	Displacement, prejudice, bullying	Howard et al., 2016	Bush & Johnston, 2016
<i>Finding Dory</i>	2016	Walt Disney Pictures Pixar Animation Studios	PG	Abandonment, displacement	Stanton & MacLane, 2016	Stanton & Strouse, 2016
<i>Moana</i>	2016	Walt Disney Pictures Walt Disney Animation Studios	PG	Intergenerational trauma, grief	Clements et al., 2016	Clements, 2016
<i>Coco</i>	2017	Walt Disney Pictures	PG	Intergenerational trauma, grief	Unkrich & Molina, 2017	Molina & Aldrich, 2017

Title	Release date	Production company	MPA rating	Narrative elements of adversity	Director(s)	Film script, screenplay, or transcript
		Pixar Animation Studios				
<i>The Lion King</i>	2019	Walt Disney Pictures Fairview Entertainment	PG	Loss of parent(s), displacement, grief, isolation	Favreau, 2019	Nathanson, 2019
<i>Raya and the Last Dragon</i>	2021	Walt Disney Pictures Walt Disney Animation Studios	PG	Loss of parent(s), betrayal, loss	Hall & López Estrada, 2021	Nguyen & Lim, 2021
<i>Encanto</i>	2021	Walt Disney Pictures Walt Disney Animation Studios	PG	Intergenerational trauma. grief	Bush et al., 2021	Castro Smith & Bush, 2021

Once selected, each film was watched at least three times. For the first pass, attention was paid to any necessary transcript correction, time stamp confirmation, and structural alignment with the visual narrative. During the second pass, scenes were divided thematically, and musical lyrics were incorporated directly into the script tables, given their narrative and emotional significance. A PTG-based coding framework, aligned with the five domains outlined by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996, 2004) – including personal strength, new possibilities, relating to others, appreciation of life, and spiritual or existential change – was applied during the third and subsequent passes, with codes entered directly into structured data tables. Specifically, these tables included columns for scenes, speakers, adversity cues, PTG categories, and researcher notes to

document analytic decisions and any evolving interpretations. Musical lyrics were also integrated when appropriate, particularly in scenes where songs conveyed psychological transformation or emotional resolution. Saturation was achieved when no new PTG themes or variations emerged across the final set of films. While early coding revealed initial patterns of observation – such as relational repair or inner strength – later viewings served to confirm and reinforce these themes without introducing substantially different codes. As a result, the 10 films provided sufficient depth and variation to meet saturation for the purposes of this study.

Narrative Overview of Film Sample

The selected sample for this study consists of 10 animated feature films released between 2013 and 2023 by Walt Disney Pictures or one of its subsidiaries (e.g., Pixar Animation Studios). Each film was chosen for its inclusion of identifiable themes of childhood adversity – such as grief, loss, displacement, identity disruption, or intergenerational trauma. All films were rated G or PG, marketed primarily to children, and distributed widely in English-speaking contexts. The films are summarized below to provide narrative context and to highlight the types of adverse experiences represented. These narrative overviews also serve as a foundation for the subsequent content analysis and thematic interpretation of PTG representations.

Frozen (2013)

Frozen (Buck & Lee, 2013) follows the story of two sisters, Elsa and Anna, who grow up isolated from one another after Elsa develops magical powers she cannot control. Following the accidental death of their parents, Elsa flees from her royal duties

as Queen of Arendelle – an act that inadvertently triggers an endless winter. To save the kingdom and heal their bond, Anna embarks on a journey to bring her sister home. The central themes include loss of a parent, grief, emotional isolation, and reconnection.

Primary characters include the following:

- Elsa: The older sister of Anna who possesses magical powers and becomes queen of Arendelle.
- Anna: The optimistic and determined younger sister of Elsa.
- Kristoff: A rugged ice harvester who helps Anna on her journey to save the kingdom.
- Olaf: A magical snowman created by Elsa's powers.
- Hans: The film's antagonist, who deceives Anna and attempts to control Arendelle.

Big Hero 6 (2014)

Big Hero 6 (Hall & Williams, 2014) centers on Hiro, a gifted but lost teenager grieving the death of his older brother Tadashi. In the wake of the loss, Hiro bonds with Baymax, a healthcare robot created by Tadashi. Together, they uncover a dangerous plot involving the circumstances of Tadashi's death. Themes of grief, loss, and personal transformation are central to the plot. Key characters include the following:

- Hiro Hamada: The teenage protagonist and gifted inventor.
- Tadashi Hamada: Hiro's older brother, whose death is the catalyst for the events of the story.

- Baymax: A healthcare robot created by Hiro's late brother, offering both physical and emotional support for Hiro.
- Aunt Cass: Aunt and guardian to Hiro and Tadashi.
- Professor Robert Callaghan/Yokai: The film's antagonist who masks his identity to carry out a mission of revenge.

Inside Out (2015)

Inside Out (Docter & del Carmen, 2015) takes place largely inside the mind of an 11-year-old girl named Riley as she adjusts to a cross-country move that uproots her from everything familiar. The story is told through anthropomorphized emotions – including Joy, Sadness, Anger, Fear, and Disgust – each influencing Riley's thoughts and behavior in different ways. The film navigates themes of complicated grief, identity disruption, and the role of sadness in healing. Central characters include the following:

- Riley: An 11-year-old girl navigating displacement and emotional upheaval following a cross-country move.
- Bing Bong: Riley's childhood imaginary friend who sacrifices himself for her well-being.
- Joy: Riley's dominant emotion, trying to maintain positivity.
- Sadness: A misunderstood emotion who proves vital to healing.
- Disgust: A sharp-tongued emotion who protects Riley from social and physical embarrassment.
- Anger: A fiery emotion who reacts strongly to perceived injustices.

- Fear: A skittish and cautious emotion who focuses on Riley's safety and avoiding risk.

Zootopia (2016)

Zootopia (Howard et al., 2016) explores themes of bias, marginalization, and perseverance through the story of Judy Hopps, the first rabbit police officer in a city dominated by predator species. She partners with a fox con artist, Nick Wilde, to solve a case of missing mammals, ultimately exposing systemic injustice. The film presents important themes of bullying, prejudice, and the complexities of identity. Main characters include the following:

- Judy Hopps: An optimistic rabbit determined to prove herself as a police officer.
- Nick Wilde: A cynical fox with a troubled past who becomes Judy's ally.
- Chief Bogo: A water buffalo and Judy's skeptical police chief.
- Dawn Bellwether: The film's antagonist and assistant mayor who orchestrates a fear-based conspiracy.

Finding Dory (2016)

Finding Dory (Stanton & MacLane, 2016) follows Dory, a blue tang fish with short-term memory loss who goes on a quest to reconnect with her long-lost parents. As fragments of lost memories resurface, Dory embarks on a journey of self-discovery, resilience, and friendship. Themes of abandonment, fear, disability, and perseverance are interwoven into the film's central plot. Principal characters include the following:

- Dory: The film's protagonist – a forgetful but determined blue tang fish who searches for her family.
- Marlin: A clownfish and Dory's loyal friend.
- Nemo: Marlin's young son who joins the journey.
- Hank: A grouchy but helpful octopus who is nickname "septopus" after losing a tentacle.
- Destiny: A near-sighted whale shark and childhood friend of Dory.
- Bailey: A beluga whale who is learning to trust his sonar abilities again after a concussion.

Moana (2016)

Moana (Clements et al., 2016) follows a Polynesian teenager chosen by the ocean to restore the heart of Te Fiti, a goddess whose power was stolen by the demigod Maui. Struggling with self-doubt and generational expectations, Moana sets sail alone to save her people. Central themes include intergenerational trauma, identity, and courage in the face of adversity. Key characters include the following:

- Moana: The brave and compassionate protagonist seeking identity and purpose.
- Maui: A demigod who initially resists helping Moana but later becomes a key ally.
- Gramma Tala: Moana's spiritual guide and grandmother.
- Chief Tui: Moana's father, whose fear of the ocean stems from past trauma.

- Te Kā: The volcanic demon antagonist, later revealed to be the goddess Te Fiti who was transformed by loss.
- Tamatoa: A greedy crab who hoards shiny treasures and impedes Moana's quest.

Coco (2017)

Coco (Unkrich, 2017) tells the story of Miguel, a young boy with a passion for music despite his family's generational ban on it. On Día de los Muertos, Miguel finds himself in the Land of the Dead, where he must uncover hidden family truths to return to the living. Themes of generational trauma, reconciliation, and identity are explored throughout the film's plot. Central characters include the following:

- Miguel Rivera: The young protagonist torn between family expectations and personal passion.
- Héctor: A forgotten family member who helps Miguel in the spirit world.
- Ernesto de la Cruz: A revered musician and the story's antagonist, later revealed to be a murderer.
- Mama Coco: Miguel's great-grandmother and link to the past.
- Mama Imelda: Miguel's great-great-grandmother and the family matriarch.

The Lion King (2019)

The Lion King (Favreau, 2019) is a photorealistic remake of the 1994 classic, centered on Simba, a lion cub exiled after the death of his father, Mufasa. Believing himself responsible, Simba flees until he is called to reclaim his rightful place as king. Themes include grief, loss, betrayal, and identity. Key characters include the following:

- Simba: The film's protagonist who flees home after the death of his father.
- Mufasa: Simba's father and mentor, whose death haunts Simba.
- Nala: Simba's childhood friend and later love interest.
- Timon and Pumbaa: Comic relief and adoptive caretakers of Simba.
- Scar: Simba's uncle and the central antagonist who murders Mufasa.

Raya and the Last Dragon (2021)

Raya and the Last Dragon (Hall & López Estrada, 2021) follows Raya, a warrior princess on a quest to reunite the fractured land of Kumandra by locating the last dragon and healing the betrayal that shattered her trust. The film's narrative emphasizes themes of betrayal, loss, and collective healing. Key characters include the following:

- Raya: The determined protagonist seeking to restore her fractured homeland.
- Sisu: The last living dragon, known for her quirky optimism.
- Chief Benja: Raya's father and guardian of the dragon gem, whose trust in unity becomes foundational.
- Namaari: A complex antagonist and Raya's rival, shaped by betrayal and fear.
- Virana: Namaari's mother and the chief of Fang, a pragmatic and calculating leader who prioritizes her tribe's interests.

Encanto (2021)

Encanto (Bush et al., 2021) revolves around Mirabel, the only non-magical member of the Madrigal family, who uncovers cracks in their enchanted home and must confront the family's unspoken emotional wounds. Themes include generational trauma, identity, and familial expectations. Central characters include the following:

- Mirabel Madrigal: The protagonist who feels like an outsider but proves essential to her family's eventual healing.
- Abuela Alma: The family matriarch whose past trauma influences her leadership.
- Bruno: Mirabel's misunderstood uncle whose gift of seeing the future leads to his estrangement from the family.
- Luisa and Isabela: Mirabel's sisters who have the powers of strength and plant growth, respectively.
- Pepa and Félix: Mirabel's weather-controlling aunt and easy-going uncle.
- Dolores, Camilo, and Antonio: Mirabel's younger cousins whose powers include superhuman hearing (Dolores), shapeshifting (Camilo), and communicating with animals (Antonio).

Data Analysis

To explore how PTG is portrayed in animated children's media, directed qualitative content analysis was guided by Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1996) five domains of PTG. Data analysis followed a multistage process, including expanding familiarization of the material through repeated viewings and cross-film synthesis of recurring themes. As mentioned previously, each film was first reviewed in full to establish narrative flow, verify dialogue transcripts, and identify early indicators of adversity and transformation. During these initial passes, analytic notes were taken on character arcs, emotional beats, and key turning points. Subsequent viewings incorporated a deductive coding process, where each scene was assessed in relation to one or more PTG domains using structured

tables that aligned dialogue, character behavior, and contextual details with relevant PTG categories.

Throughout the coding process, careful attention was paid to scenes where meanings evolved over time or overlapped across domains. For example, in *Finding Dory*, Dory's persistence in locating her parents initially seemed to reflect personal strength. However, in later viewings, her capacity to trust others – especially Marlin and Hank – suggested a deeper transformation in how she relates to others, prompting a reclassification of certain moments under that domain. Similarly, in *Moana*, the final confrontation with Te Kā was first coded under “relating to others” due to Moana's compassion. However, further analysis of her dialogue (“They have stolen the heart from inside you, but this does not define you”) and the symbolic return of the heart revealed deeper themes of existential change and recognition of shared humanity.

Nonverbal and symbolic elements were also important to the coding process. For example, in *Coco*, the bridge of glowing marigold petals and the fading of forgotten ancestors visually reinforced the domain of “appreciation of life,” independent of any spoken dialogue. These visual metaphors, often paired with emotional or musical cues, were critical to identifying moments of PTG that extended beyond literal language. Lyrics were another key data source, particularly when musical sequences revealed psychological shifts not immediately apparent through dialogue alone. For instance, in *Encanto*, the song “*What Else Can I Do?*” was initially coded as new possibilities, as Isabela breaks free from the rigid expectations of perfection and begins experimenting with more vibrant, unpredictable forms of life. However, after a closer viewing,

additional layers emerged with lines such as “So much hides behind my smile” and “I’m so sick of pretty, I want something true, don’t you?” – which also aligns with spiritual or existential change. These lines of dialogue, combined with visuals of Isabela discarding her pristine image in favor of “messy” self-expression, demonstrated a deeper transformation in how she viewed herself and her purpose, prompting a shift in the initial coding. This change was documented as an analytic memo with the note: “She’s not just creating new plants – she’s redefining who she’s allowed to be.”

The final stage of analysis involved cross-film synthesis. All coded excerpts were grouped by PTG domain and examined for patterns across the dataset. This allowed me to identify thematic consistencies – such as the frequent link between relational repair and healing – and to explore contrasts, such as the different ways spiritual change was presented in *Moana*, *Coco*, and *Encanto*. These groupings were organized into summary tables and narrative descriptions to support transparent reporting in the Findings section.

This multipass process, incorporating visual, lyrical, and symbolic elements in addition to dialogue, allowed for nuanced interpretation grounded in the PTG framework. By revisiting scenes with evolving insight and applying rigorous deductive coding, the analysis aimed to capture the layered ways that PTG is communicated in animated narratives intended for young audiences.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

In alignment with recognized standards for establishing trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), this study incorporated multiple strategies around credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability throughout the data

collection and analysis process. Where Chapter 3 outlined the methodology of these procedures, the following sections serve to demonstrate how these criteria were applied in practice and how rigor was supported throughout the study.

Credibility

Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with the data. Each film was viewed a minimum of three times, with each viewing dedicated to specific layers of analysis, including general immersion and transcript verification, deductive coding using the PTG framework, and finally synthesis across scenes and domains. These repeated viewings allowed for familiarity with subtle narrative elements – such as character inflection, visual symbolism, or musical cues – that might otherwise have overlooked in a single pass.

To further support credibility, a reflexive journal was maintained to document interpretive decisions, evolving impressions, and analytic doubts. For example, when coding Moana’s compassion toward Te Kā, I had initially labeled it as “relating to others,” but after rewatching and reflecting, I realized the scene reflected a deeper shift in her view of the world that could also be evidence of “spiritual or existential change.” These reflections were further revisited throughout the coding process to ensure interpretations remained consistent and grounded. Lastly, I consulted regularly with fellow researchers and members of Walden’s academic community to cross-check interpretations and receive external input on emerging patterns. This process acted as a form of peer debriefing, adding an additional layer of scrutiny to how meaning was constructed and encouraged transparency in the data collection process.

Transferability

Transferability in this study was supported with thick description and contextual detail in both the analytic process and presentation of findings. Each film write-up included a comprehensive narrative overview along with the emotional, developmental, and interpersonal contexts in which PTG themes emerged. For example, in *Encanto*, the depiction of Mirabel’s struggle for familial acceptance was not only described through plot summary but also situated within specific narrative sequences – such as her musical number “Waiting on a Miracle” – which reflected deeper relational and existential tensions around familial trauma that were central to PTG constructs.

To further support transferability, coding memos included annotations that explained the relevance of specific scenes or character arcs to the broader PTG domains, allowing readers to assess the interpretive fit within and across films. In *Big Hero 6*, for instance, Hiro’s shift from revenge to connection was noted as emblematic of both “relating to others” and “new possibilities,” offering a model of adolescent recovery that may resonate in other youth-centered narratives involving grief and loss. Although this study was delimited to Disney/Pixar content, the analytic framework and decision trail provide a foundation for applying the PTG model to similar media contexts that address childhood adversity in developmentally appropriate ways.

Dependability

Dependability for the study was ensured through a systematic and traceable analytic process that included a digital audit trail for the PTG codebook, transcript matrices with timestamps of specific quotes or scenes, and analytic memos. While the

original structure for coding remained consistent, some adaptations were made during analysis, such as annotating the symbolism of song lyrics in comparison to spoken dialogue. An example of this can be seen with the song “Surface Pressure” from *Encanto*, where lyrics were later annotated to reflect the symbolism of Luisa’s emotional state. These changes were noted in both the memoing process and through margin notes in the codebook.

Confirmability

Confirmability was addressed by implementing strategies to reduce researcher bias and ensure that interpretations remained grounded in the data. Reflexive journaling was used throughout the coding process to document emotional reactions, emerging assumptions, and critical self-reflection. For example, when analyzing *Frozen*, I initially resonated strongly with Anna’s persistence in seeking connection, which led me to code multiple scenes under “relating to others.” Upon revisiting my notes however, I recognized the potential influence of my personal identification as a younger sibling and re-evaluated those codes, ultimately narrowing the selection to scenes where relational transformation was more explicitly demonstrated.

Structured coding matrices also played a key role in supporting confirmability. Each data table included not only the PTG domain applied to a scene but also an accompanying “rationale” column where I justified the coding choice based on specific dialogue, visual cues, or symbolic elements. In *Inside Out*, for example, I noted that Joy’s breakdown while holding the core memory orb represented “existential change” due to her shift in understanding the value of sadness – an interpretation supported by her

dialogue and visuals in the scene. These memos helped to maintain a clear, traceable path from raw data to thematic conclusions, minimizing the risk of interpretive overreach and reinforcing analytic transparency.

Results

To explore how PTG is portrayed in contemporary animated films, the five domains of the PTG framework – including personal strength, new possibilities, relating to others, appreciation of life, and spiritual and existential change – served as the guiding lens for data collection and subsequent analysis. Each film was coded and analyzed using PTG domains to identify narrative elements that reflect growth following adversity. The individual film results are presented first, followed by a cross-case analysis that highlights commonalities and differences in how PTG is represented across the full sample.

Content Analysis of Films Using the PTG Framework

Frozen (2013)

Frozen (Buck & Lee, 2013) explores emotional isolation and familial rupture through the intersecting journeys of sisters Elsa and Anna, whose early childhood trauma leaves lasting scars on their ability to connect. The film's representation of PTG unfolds as both characters confront the fears and patterns that have kept them apart. Elsa's arc reflects the PTG domain of personal strength, particularly in how she gradually reclaims control over her powers by learning to lead not through fear or avoidance, but through emotional integration. Rather than repeating the isolated withdrawal that once defined her, Elsa eventually returns to Arendelle with a renewed sense of purpose and a

willingness to engage with others. Simultaneously, Anna's growth is reflected in the PTG domain of relating to others, especially as she redefines love not as romantic idealism but as courageous presence. In a pivotal moment of emotional vulnerability, Anna tells Elsa, "You don't have to protect me – I'm not afraid! We can head down this mountain together," signaling a shift from unilateral sacrifice to mutual healing. This invitation to face adversity as a team marks a relational turning point for both sisters as their transformation highlights how trauma does not always sever bonds but can instead deepen them when met with empathy and emotional truth.

Big Hero 6 (2014)

Big Hero 6 (Hall & Williams, 2014) explores adolescent grief and emotional resilience through Hiro's evolving relationship with Baymax, the healthcare robot created by his late brother. Rather than presenting healing as a linear process, the film traces Hiro's internal transformation through moments of rupture, resistance, and reconnection. A key example of this occurs during the scene where Hiro attempts to weaponize Baymax out of a desire for revenge. Baymax's refusal to comply – asking instead, "Are you satisfied with your care?" – forces Hiro to confront the moral implications of his pain, marking the beginning of a shift away from vengeance and toward emotional accountability. This interaction reflects the PTG domain of relating to others, as Hiro begins to see Baymax not just as a tool, but as a relational figure who holds space for his grief without judgment. As Hiro gradually reconnects with Tadashi's former classmates, he also opens himself up to the PTG domain of new possibilities not only in how he channels his scientific talents, but in how he redefines family and community. This is

emphasized in the emotional climax of the film when Hiro must let go of Baymax to save another life. His decision, though painful, reflects an emotional maturity rooted in sacrifice, empathy, and trust. Rather than clinging to what he's lost, Hiro begins to carry his brother's legacy forward through compassion and innovation, demonstrating that healing often requires the courage to embrace connection, even when it involves letting go.

Inside Out (2015)

Inside Out (Docter & del Carmen, 2015) externalizes psychological struggle by personifying Riley's emotions as characters navigating the fallout of a family relocation. Rather than focusing on traditional trauma, the film explores the complicated grief that results from a loss of stability and identity in childhood. In the film's climax, Riley's growth unfolds not through heroic action, but through emotional vulnerability when she returns home and finally admits, "I know you don't want me to, but I miss home... I'm sad." This moment of emotional transparency allows her parents to comfort her, initiating a reconnection that reflects the PTG domain of relating to others. It is not just Riley's admission that signals growth, but her parents' response, which models how shared vulnerability can foster deeper relationships in the aftermath of adversity. The film also reflects personal strength, particularly as Riley begins to accept her emotional complexity rather than suppress it. This is mirrored in the internal world, where Joy and Sadness must learn to cooperate and coexist with one another to restore Riley's core memories. Their joint return to headquarters and the realization that memories can be both joyful and sad at the same time, symbolize a more mature internal system. Riley's post-crisis

emotional integration suggests that strength is not the absence of difficult feelings, but the capacity to hold them with honesty and self-compassion. In this way, *Inside Out* offers a nuanced portrayal of PTG through internal alignment and relational repair, even in the absence of extreme trauma.

Zootopia (2016)

Zootopia (Howard et al., 2016) explores PTG not through a single event, but through cumulative adversity in the form of systemic bias, social exclusion, and moral conflict. This narrative arc is particularly evident with the protagonist, Judy Hopps, as she faces discrimination and self-doubt as she attempts to prove her worth. Her eventual partnership with Nick Wilde becomes an important vehicle for growth in the PTG domain of relating to others, evidenced when Judy realizes her own internal biases and offers a heartfelt apology that helps build a foundation of mutual respect. This reconciliation is poignantly affirmed during Judy's public address, where she asserts, "Change starts with you. It starts with me. It starts with all of us." This line not only reflects important personal insights but also embodies the PTG domain of new possibilities through a renewed commitment to inclusion, justice, and social responsibility. By the film's end, Judy and Nick's transformation – from adversaries shaped by marginalization to allies promoting community healing – signals how confronting systemic adversity can spark positive change on both individual and social levels.

Finding Dory (2016)

Finding Dory (Stanton & MacLane, 2016) explores the emotional complexity of living with disability through the lens of Dory's short-term memory loss and her unwavering quest to find her family. Her journey reflects the PTG domain of personal strength, particularly in how she begins to reframe her challenges not as deficits, but as part of a resilient and resourceful identity. This is most clearly seen when, lost and alone, she tells herself, "What would Dory do?" – a moment that reflects a shift toward self-trust and adaptive problem-solving. Rather than relying on perfect memory, Dory begins to lean into her intuition, perseverance, and emotional connection as tools for navigating the unknown. The PTG domain of relating to others is also evident in Dory's evolving relationships with characters like Hank and Marlin. Initially resistant and pragmatic, Hank gradually opens up to Dory's emotional vulnerability and optimism, culminating in a partnership built on mutual care rather than convenience. Marlin, too, grows in his ability to value Dory not just as comic relief or a liability, but as someone whose presence enriches his life. These relationships underscore a shift from dependency to reciprocity, a key indicator of relational growth. By the end of the film, Dory's sense of self is not defined by what she lacks, but by her impact on others and the deep connections she fosters as she says "I lost my family... but I found you."

Moana (2016)

Moana (Clements et al., 2016) centers on a young Polynesian girl chosen by the ocean to restore the heart of Te Fiti and heal a world suffering from ecological decay. The narrative follows Moana as she wrestles with her identity, her obligations to her

family and village, and a larger, mythical calling. After defying her father's rules and setting out alone across the ocean, she endures repeated failures, personal doubt, and disillusionment in her relationship with the demigod Maui, from whom she initially seeks help. The film's representation of PTG is embedded in Moana's inner transformation as she shifts from uncertainty to purpose as she gains confidence not only in her abilities as a navigator but also in her capacity to lead and care for others. Through her spiritual bond with her late grandmother, Moana also reconnects with her ancestry in an emotional turning point that echoes the PTG domains of spiritual change and new possibilities. As the narrative culminates in Moana confronting the volcanic goddess Te Kā – who is ultimately revealed to be the damaged and forgotten Te Fiti – her ultimate act of compassion models profound relating to others, as well as emotional insight into the nature of identity, loss, and restoration. While Moana's actions do involve some level of risk and disobedience, they are framed as necessary steps in a transformative journey towards growth.

Coco (2017)

Coco (Unkrich & Molina, 2017) follows Miguel, a young boy with a secret passion for music, as he defies his family's longstanding generational ban on the art form. When his desire to perform leads him to steal a guitar from the mausoleum of his idol, Ernesto de la Cruz, Miguel is magically transported to the Land of the Dead. There, he meets his deceased relatives and embarks on a journey to uncover the truth about his heritage. The film's central narrative explores themes of ancestral connection, cultural identity, and the emotional weight of family estrangement. Although *Coco* does not

depict trauma in a conventional form, Miguel's emotional conflict reflects a deep sense of disconnection and identity suppression. His personal growth emerges through confrontation with familial legacy, betrayal, and rediscovery of forgotten truths. Notably, the character of Héctor, revealed to be Miguel's true great-great-grandfather, adds emotional weight to the theme of healing and reconciliation. This shift from disillusionment to forgiveness is consistent with the PTG domain of new possibilities, as Miguel begins to reimagine his role within the family and integrate his passion with familial respect. His journey also highlights relating to others – particularly as he rebuilds emotional ties with family members and gains a more empathetic view of their pain. Through Miguel's journey, *Coco* illustrates that growth can occur through healing and the reclaiming of identity, even in the wake of intergenerational trauma and silence.

The Lion King (2019)

The Lion King (Favreau, 2019) follows Simba, a young lion prince who experiences profound trauma after witnessing the death of his father, Mufasa. Manipulated by his uncle, Scar, into believing he is to blame, Simba flees his homeland and suppresses both his grief and his identity. The narrative centers on Simba's journey from grief and shame toward accountability, healing, and self-actualization – offering a rich portrayal of PTG. Specifically, Simba's arc strongly reflects the PTG domains of personal strength and new possibilities, as he learns to confront his past and accept his role as king of the Pride Lands. His transformation is catalyzed by spiritual and symbolic encounters – most notably with Rafiki and the vision of Mufasa – that further speak to the spiritual change dimension of PTG. These moments reawaken a sense of purpose in

Simba and reinforce the idea that growth often emerges from reengaging with painful truths rather than avoiding them.

Raya and the Last Dragon (2021)

Raya and the Last Dragon (Hall & López Estrada, 2021) presents a compelling exploration of PTG in a story that is rooted in betrayal, loss, and the quest for unity. The film follows Raya, a young warrior who witnesses the fragmentation of her once-unified homeland, Kumandra, after a profound act of betrayal that leaves her sense of trust deeply fractured. Her journey to collect the scattered pieces of a magical dragon gem becomes both a literal and emotional quest for restoration. Initially guarded and distrustful, she is forced to confront her fear of vulnerability as she assembles a diverse team of allies from rival lands. In particular, her evolving relationship with Namaari – her former friend and rival – embodies the complex reconciliation required for interpersonal healing. Here, the film reflects the PTG domain of relating to others, illustrating how mutual trust, even in the aftermath of betrayal, can be a powerful vehicle for growth.

The theme of new possibilities is also central in the film, as Raya is repeatedly challenged to redefine her identity beyond that of a solitary warrior. The inclusion of Sisu, the last dragon, introduces a hopeful and emotionally intuitive contrast to Raya's cautious pragmatism. Through Sisu's unwavering belief in humanity, Raya is prompted to envision a world beyond division, which speaks to both spiritual change and personal strength. By the film's conclusion, Raya's ability to extend trust – despite the risks – marks a significant emotional transformation. The collective act of self-sacrifice that restores Kumandra underscores the film's central message that healing is possible, but

only through courage, vulnerability, and faith in others. In this way, *Raya and the Last Dragon* models PTG not only as an individual process, but as a communal and deeply relational journey.

Encanto (2021)

Encanto (Bush et al., 2021) presents a deeply layered depiction of PTG within a multigenerational family shaped by inherited trauma, displacement, and emotional suppression. At the center of the narrative is Mirabel, the only Madrigal without a magical gift, whose sense of exclusion becomes the catalyst for uncovering the family's unspoken struggles. The film explores growth primarily through the PTG domains of relating to others, personal strength, and spiritual change – the latter of which is expressed not through religion, but through a redefined understanding of purpose, connection, and identity. As physical cracks appear in the family's enchanted home, they mirror the emotional fractures within the family system, prompting Mirabel to investigate the underlying causes. Through her journey, Mirabel initiates difficult conversations that allow family members like Luisa and Isabela to express the hidden burdens of their gifts, fostering new emotional intimacy and the PTG domain of relating to others. While Mirabel lacks a supernatural power herself, her emotional insight and persistence position her as the unifying force in the family, illustrating that true strength can emerge through courage and vulnerability, not just ability. By the film's end, *Encanto* frames PTG as a collective and relational process, in which healing and transformation occur through honesty, connection, and the willingness to challenge long-held familial trauma.

Cross-Case Analysis Using the PTG Framework

To explore how PTG is represented across contemporary Disney and Pixar animated films, a cross-case analysis was conducted around the five core domains of PTG: appreciation of life, personal strength, relating to others, new possibilities, and spiritual or existential change (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996, 2004). These domains offer a conceptual framework for identifying and interpreting growth-oriented responses to adversity, even in fictional narratives. While each film in the sample presents a unique story, consistent patterns emerged in how characters processed loss, displacement, or familial pressure and later demonstrated signs of transformation. Rather than focusing solely on moments of resolution, this analysis emphasizes character development, emotional shifts, and symbolic expressions of growth. Each subsection below examines PTG domains across multiple films, using specific examples from dialogue, visual storytelling, and character arcs to illustrate how trauma-related experiences gave rise to meaningful psychological change.

Appreciation of Life

The PTG domain of appreciation of life refers to a heightened sense of gratitude for existence, a renewed focus on the present moment, or a deeper awareness of what truly matters following adversity (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). In the film sample, this domain was often reflected in quiet, emotionally charged moments where characters embraced imperfection, connection, or simply the act of being alive. These scenes often occurred after adversity had been faced and reframed – offering a sense of grounded, present-moment gratitude.

In *Inside Out* (Docter & del Carmen, 2015), Riley's evolving relationship with her emotions is poignantly illustrated as a renewed appreciation of life and coming to terms with turning towards new chapter. Initially distressed by her family's move and the loss of her old life, Riley tries to suppress her sadness – both internally and externally – causing increased confusion and isolation. However, after returning home and expressing the grief she was feeling to her parents, she experiences emotional validation and reconnection. The integration of Sadness into her memory-core marks a turning point in her development, symbolizing a new appreciation for emotional complexity and the meaningfulness of being fully present, even in difficult moments.

Similarly, *Coco* (Unkrich, 2017) demonstrates appreciation of life not only through Miguel's personal journey but also through its visual metaphors of balancing remembrance with living in the present. After venturing into the Land of the Dead, Miguel learns that the living can preserve their loved ones through memory and storytelling. In one scene, Héctor gently sings "Remember Me" to his daughter in a moment that highlights the enduring beauty of life's connections and the importance of cherishing relationships before they fade. When Miguel returns to the living world and sings the same song to his great-grandmother, the intergenerational healing that takes place reflects a revitalized appreciation for his family, their history, and the fragile beauty of life itself.

Encanto (Bush et al., 2021) also demonstrates appreciation of life in its final act, when the family begins rebuilding their home together with the help of the town. While their powers are gone, their unity remains intact, and they begin to see the value in who

they are rather than what they can do. When Mirabel remarks, “I like the new foundation... it isn’t perfect, but neither are we,” the sentiment encapsulates this domain. It reflects a shift from striving for perfection to embracing life’s messiness with joy and gratitude. In the closing scene, Louisa – who had once equated her worth with strength and carrying the weight of everyone’s struggles – is seen lounging in a hammock, suggesting that rest, presence, and contentment are now equally valued. These subtle yet powerful visuals reinforce the message that life itself – even when imperfect and unadorned – is worthy of celebration.

Across these films, appreciation of life is not portrayed as simple optimism, but as a deepened recognition of meaning, beauty, and connection that emerges after hardship. Importantly, these moments often emerged most clearly when characters stopped trying to prove themselves and instead paused to feel, connect, and feel at peace with the world around them.

Relating to Others

The PTG domain of relating to others involves the development of deeper, more meaningful interpersonal relationships following adversity. Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) describe this form of growth as a heightened sense of empathy, increased compassion, and emotional closeness, often brought about by shared hardship or increased appreciation for social connection. Across the selected films, this domain often emerged strongly in character arcs involving reconciliation, newfound trust, and communal healing.

In *Frozen* (Buck & Lee, 2013), the evolving relationship between sisters Anna and Elsa powerfully illustrates the domain of relating to others, particularly as they move from emotional distance to mutual understanding and closeness. Elsa's fear of harming others with her powers leads her to self-isolate, culminating in her retreat to the mountains after accidentally unleashing an eternal winter. Anna's persistent efforts to reach her sister – despite repeated rejection and physical danger – help to unearth a deep bond that ultimately facilitates Elsa's emotional transformation. The turning point comes when Anna sacrifices herself to save Elsa, an act of unconditional love that breaks the curse and teaches Elsa that love – not fear – is the key to controlling her powers. This revelation fosters a new foundation for their relationship, as Elsa learns to embrace her identity and reconnect with others. The reconciliation of Anna and Elsa represents a profound shift in how both sisters understand and relate to one another, underscoring the capacity for growth through vulnerability, sacrifice, and emotional repair.

In *Raya and the Last Dragon* (Hall & López Estrada, 2021), the film centers explicitly on broken trust and the path toward repairing it. After a betrayal fractures the alliance among the kingdoms and leads to her father's petrification, Raya embarks on a quest to reassemble the shattered Dragon Gem. Throughout her journey, Raya must learn to work with former enemies and slowly rebuild trust – especially with Namaari, the very person who betrayed her. In this climactic moment, Raya chooses to trust Namaari by handing over the final gem shard, an act that leads to the defeat of the Druun and restoring the world. This gesture of radical trust illustrates relational growth not only on a personal level but also within a broader cultural and communal context.

In *Zootopia* (Howard et al., 2016), the evolving partnership between Judy Hopps and Nick Wilde further exemplifies the PTG domain of relating to others, particularly as it develops through mutual vulnerability and dismantling of prejudice. Both characters begin with internalized wounds, with Judy feeling underestimated and dismissed due to her species, while Nick feels he has been stereotyped and marginalized for being a fox. These adversities have shaped their worldviews, leading to mistrust and emotional guardedness. Their fraught working relationship initially reflects these barriers, but as the film progresses, key moments of disclosure emerge – such as when Nick reveals the childhood trauma that led him to embrace a sly persona as a defense mechanism – to facilitate a growing empathy between them. Judy, in turn, recognizes her own biases and apologizes, marking a pivotal moment of relational repair between the two characters. This mutual acknowledgment of harm and willingness to reconnect signifies growth through shared adversity and a willingness to be vulnerable. By the film’s conclusion, their partnership is not merely transactional but is instead grounded in trust, demonstrating that openness can lead to deeper, more meaningful connections – both hallmarks of PTG.

Finally, *Encanto* (Bush et al., 2021) explores the domain of relating to others most clearly after the family loses their magical powers and home. Rather than portraying this as a tragic loss, the film reframes this loss as an opportunity to rebuild their familial bonds on a more authentic foundation. During the song “All of You,” the family sings, “We see how bright you burn, how brave you've been—now see yourself in turn, you're the real gift.” This moment marks a profound recognition that their true value lies not in

supernatural abilities but in who they are and how they love each other. The final family photo – a visual representation of the family’s chaotic, joyful, and imperfect state – showcases this newfound appreciation for the messiness and beauty of their family without magical perfection.

Across these films, the PTG domain of relating to others consistently emerges in the wake of vulnerability, loss, or emotional rupture. Rather than depicting relationships as inherently stable or idealized, these narratives emphasize that meaningful connection is often forged through conflict, misunderstanding, and repair. Whether between siblings navigating grief (*Frozen*), unlikely partners overcoming prejudice (*Zootopia*), or families healing from intergenerational trauma (*Encanto*), characters demonstrate that adversity can deepen relational bonds when it is met with empathy, honesty, and mutual growth.

Personal Strength

The PTG domain of personal strength refers to an individual’s recognition of their inner resilience, capacity to endure hardship, or ability to navigate adversity with courage and self-reliance (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). This growth may be reflected in characters who begin their journeys uncertain, disempowered, or emotionally fragile, but who emerge with an increased sense of agency and self-trust. Across the selected films, personal strength was often depicted through characters confronting internal limitations or self-doubt, eventually discovering new reserves of determination, emotional endurance, or moral courage.

In *Moana* (Clements et al., 2016), the protagonist’s arc is anchored in personal strength, particularly as she struggles with self-doubt about her ability to restore the heart

of Te Fiti. When Maui abandons her mid-journey and she considers giving up, a turning point occurs when Moana is visited by a vision of her grandmother's spirit, who helps remind her of what is truly important. This encounter leads into the pivotal song "I Am Moana," in which Moana reflects on her lineage, her journey, and her internal compass as she sings "the call isn't out there at all, it's inside me." These lyrics help signify Moana's newfound understanding of her strength as something innate rather than dependent on external validation. Her renewed resolve to face Te Kā alone, despite overwhelming odds, exemplifies personal strength grounded in self-knowledge, courage, and purpose.

Finding Dory (Stanton & MacLane, 2016) also offers moments where characters grow to appreciate their inner strength despite limitations or obstacles they face. This can be seen with the main character of Dory – whose memory loss is a source of repeated frustration and setbacks throughout the film – who eventually discovers her ability to navigate the world using instinct, hope, and community support. In one quietly powerful scene, Dory recalls, "What would Dory do?"— a self-reflective line that shows how her sense of identity has evolved. Rather than defining herself by what she forgets, Dory begins to value her adaptability and persistence as someone capable of navigating her own path. The joy she expresses upon reuniting with her parents – who created an elaborate system of shells to guide her home – reflects not only great emotional relief, but also a deep appreciation for being loved, remembered, and accepted as she is.

In *Frozen* (Buck & Lee, 2013), both Elsa and Anna undergo transformations that reflect a shift from external to internal locus of control, a psychological shift often associated with the PTG domain of personal strength. Following a shared childhood

trauma, both sisters internalize messages of fear, guilt, and helplessness. Elsa, in particular, grows up believing her powers are dangerous and unmanageable, reinforced by her parents' strict instructions to "conceal, don't feel." This suppression of identity leads Elsa to flee into exile after unintentionally freezing her kingdom. However, her turning point occurs not when she learns to control her powers through force or fear, but when she discovers that love – both for herself and others – is the key to stability. Likewise, Anna's arc involves her initial belief that salvation lies in external sources – most notably in the “true love’s kiss” of Prince Hans. It is only when she chooses to sacrifice herself for Elsa, without expectation of reciprocity, that she experiences a profound realization of her own personal strength. This act not only breaks the curse but also reinforces the film’s deeper message that growth and healing emerge not from external validation, but from self-knowledge, emotional courage, and authentic love. Both sisters’ journeys reflect the kind of internal metamorphosis that aligns with Tedeschi and Calhoun’s (1996) conceptualization of personal strength, wherein individuals emerge from adversity with a stronger sense of agency and capacity to meet life’s challenges.

Together, these films portray personal strength as a gradual unfolding rather than an inherent trait. Whether through self-doubt, grief, fear, or confusion, each protagonist must face internal adversity before they can grow. Importantly, these moments of strength are not depicted as triumphs of perfection but of persistence—choosing to continue, even when the path is uncertain.

New Possibilities

The PTG domain of new possibilities involves a reorientation toward life that includes the pursuit of new paths, roles, or ways of being that were not previously considered before a major life disruption (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). This growth often emerges as a result of changed priorities, expanded worldviews, or a willingness to reimagine one's future. In the selected films, this domain is portrayed through characters who adapt to loss or disillusionment by embracing change, initiating new journeys, or discovering latent capacities in themselves and others.

In *Big Hero 6* (Hall et al., 2014), Hiro's personal loss becomes a catalyst for the creation of a new future. After the death of his brother Tadashi, Hiro is initially overcome with grief and disengagement, retreating from both academics and social connection. However, when he discovers Tadashi's healthcare robot, Baymax, Hiro redirects his pain into purpose. Together with Tadashi's former classmates, he assembles a superhero team that channels their scientific knowledge toward justice and healing. This transformation – from a grieving adolescent into an innovator and team leader – epitomizes new possibilities born out of adversity. Through this character development, the film frames Hiro's growth not as forgetting his loss, but as honoring it through a reimagined identity and purpose.

In *Zootopia* (Howard et al., 2016), the theme of new possibilities emerges through Judy Hopps' pursuit of a career in law enforcement – an unconventional path for a rabbit in the world of Zootopia. Her journey is marked by repeated encounters with systemic bias and personal disillusionment, particularly when she realizes her efforts to fight

injustice have unintentionally contributed to racialized fear. However, these setbacks do not deter her; rather, they prompt her to redefine what justice looks like in the face of adversity. As the film progresses, Judy partners with Nick Wilde – a fox she initially distrusted – whose partnership helps symbolize a new model for what cooperation, reconciliation, and justice can look like in a fractured society as it rebuilds towards a new future.

Raya and the Last Dragon (Hall & López Estrada, 2021) also reflects the new possibilities domain through its reimagining of community after betrayal. After her father's petrification and the shattering of the Dragon Gem, Raya becomes a lone warrior, focused solely on retrieving the shards and restoring her homeland. However, as she travels across the divided land of Kumandra, Raya slowly begins to assemble a diverse group of companions – each from rival tribes once considered enemies. What begins as a solitary mission expands into a collective journey that redefines trust, identity, and community as she embraces new possibilities. The eventual unification of the tribes is not just a return to what once was, but the formation of something new with a shared future built on cooperation and mutual understanding, rather than fear and division.

In *The Lion King* (Favreau, 2019), new possibilities are exemplified through Simba's reluctant but transformative return to Pride Rock after years of avoidance. Initially, Simba adopts a life of passivity and emotional evasion in the wilderness, distancing himself from his responsibilities and his past. However, after reconnecting with Nala and witnessing the devastation caused by Scar's rule, Simba begins to imagine a different path forward – not just as the prodigal son of a king, but as a leader with

agency to change the future. His choice to return and confront his family's legacy represents not only a reclamation of the past, but the forging of a new path defined by accountability, justice, and renewal. In stepping into this role, Simba helps rebuild the ecosystem and community of the Pride Lands, demonstrating that new futures often require revisiting old wounds and imagining beyond inherited narratives.

Across these films, the domain of new possibilities is not portrayed as spontaneous reinvention, but as a gradual unfolding that required humility, reparation, and support from others. These narratives illustrate that following adversity, characters are not simply returning to their former state of being but are embracing a broader, more expansive purpose in the face of adversity. Whether through leadership (*Big Hero 6*), partnership (*Zootopia*), collective healing (*Raya*), or reclamation of identity (*The Lion King*), these stories affirm that disruption, though painful, can also serve as a threshold into possibility.

Spiritual or Existential Change

The PTG domain of spiritual or existential change reflects a transformation in one's beliefs, values, or worldview following adversity. This growth does not always involve religion in a traditional sense but instead speaks to a deeper engagement with questions of meaning, purpose, and identity (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). In the selected films, this domain was often revealed through moments of internal reckoning, philosophical reframing, or an expanded sense of one's place in the world. Often emerging in the aftermath of personal or collective crisis, existential change involves

characters confronting what they believe to be true about themselves or their purpose and choosing to see the world through a new lens.

In *Inside Out* (Docter & Del Carmen, 2015), the existential change unfolds primarily through Joy, the emotion initially committed to maintaining Riley's happiness at all costs. Joy begins the story convinced that negative emotions – particularly Sadness – must be avoided or contained. However, after a series of setbacks and losses, Joy comes to realize that Sadness plays an essential role in Riley's well-being and emotional integration. This shift is not simply practical, but philosophical in that it redefines Joy's purpose from the singular pursuit of positivity to a more complex understanding of emotional truth. The film ends with a newly integrated emotional system – one that accepts the coexistence of conflicting feelings – offering a profound commentary on the human condition, emotional maturity, and the importance of accepting the good with the bad as equally meaningful.

The Lion King (Favreau, 2019) also illustrates existential change through Simba's internal struggle to reconcile guilt, identity, and purpose. After fleeing the Pride Lands and adopting the carefree "Hakuna Matata" philosophy, Simba experiences a form of existential avoidance, which included detaching from his past and the expectations of being king of Pride Rock. However, after an encounter with Rafiki and a vision of his father, Mufasa, Simba is reminded of who he is and what he must become. This moment — "Remember who you are" — is not just a reclaiming of royal duty, but a deeper awakening to Simba's moral responsibility and interconnectedness with the world around him. His return is not simply about restoring order but becomes about embracing a new

worldview in which meaning is found not in escape, but in courageous engagement with the self and others.

In *Coco* (Unkrich & Molina, 2017), the film's existential themes emerge through its exploration of death, remembrance, and ancestral connection. Miguel's journey to the Land of the Dead challenges his beliefs about legacy, identity, and family as he learns that being remembered is not only a cultural tradition but a spiritual bridge between worlds. Throughout his journey, his worldview further shifts to understanding a universal truth that love can transcend physical mortality. This existential change occurs not only in Miguel but in the audience's understanding of life and death as part of a continuous cycle of memory and connection. By the end, Miguel sings "Remember Me" to his great-grandmother, rekindling her memory of her father and healing generations of misunderstanding. The scene affirms the importance of honoring the past to find meaning in the present – suggesting a spiritual worldview in which stories, memory, and love preserve identity across time.

Summary

This chapter explored the presence and representation of PTG across ten Disney and Pixar animated films using the five domains established by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996): appreciation of life, relating to others, personal strength, new possibilities, and spiritual or existential change. Across these 10 films, PTG was portrayed primarily through perseverance, relational repair, and meaning making. Each domain was communicated through symbolic and narrative devices, showing how animated films communicate growth after adversity.

The domain of appreciation of life frequently emerged through moments of quiet reflection, emotional vulnerability, or renewed presence. Rather than grand expressions of triumph, these scenes often depicted characters embracing imperfection, stillness, or emotional complexity – such as Riley’s integration of sadness in *Inside Out* (Docter & Del Carmen, 2015) or Mirabel’s embrace of imperfection in *Encanto* (Bush et al., 2021). These instances illustrate how gratitude for existence often develop not in spite of hardship, but because of it. In the domain of relating to others, films emphasized reconciliation, empathy, and communal healing. Whether through Anna and Elsa’s restored sibling bond in *Frozen* (Buck & Lee, 2013), Judy and Nick’s dismantling of prejudice in *Zootopia* (Howard et al., 2016), or the collective rebuilding in *Encanto* (Bush et al., 2021), PTG was shown to flourish when characters confronted interpersonal wounds with vulnerability and trust. These narratives emphasize that relational growth is rarely born from perfect harmony, but instead from the courage to mend connection after rupture.

The theme of personal strength appeared prominently in narratives where characters faced internal struggle or self-doubt. Characters such as Moana, who reclaimed her sense of agency through ancestral identity, and Dory, who reframed her memory challenges as a source of persistence, exemplified growth through resilience and self-trust. Even Elsa and Anna’s parallel arcs in *Frozen* (Buck & Lee, 2013) highlighted the transition from external validation to internal locus of control, reinforcing PTG as a process of emotional and moral fortitude. In examining new possibilities, several characters demonstrated a willingness to reimagine their futures in response to adversity.

Whether through Hiro's transformation of grief into leadership in *Big Hero 6* (Hall et al., 2014), or Simba's return to rebuild the Pride Lands in *The Lion King* (Favreau, 2019), these films depicted new roles, purposes, and communities arising from disrupted narratives. Notably, growth was not framed in the films as a simple return to normalcy but instead suggested a profound reimagining of one's place in the world.

Lastly, spiritual or existential change was reflected in deeper shifts in meaning-making and worldview. Joy's realization in *Inside Out* (Docter & Del Carmen, 2015) that sadness is essential to emotional wholeness, Simba's spiritual awakening guided by ancestral memory in *The Lion King* (Favreau, 2019), and Miguel's encounter with legacy and remembrance in *Coco* (Unkrich & Molina, 2017) all revealed how existential growth often involves embracing ambiguity, interconnectedness, and the sacredness of ordinary moments. Across these domains, PTG was not portrayed as linear or uniform. Instead, it manifested in varied forms – including through song, silence, conflict, or connection – depending on the character, context, and nature of the adversity faced. While not all films depicted every domain, each contributed meaningfully to the overall tapestry of growth, underscoring the complexity of how animated narratives engage with trauma, healing, and transformation. These patterns lay the groundwork for Chapter 5, which will synthesize these findings in relation to the broader literature and implications for psychological development, media analysis, and applied contexts.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

This qualitative study explored how PTG is represented within 10 Disney and Pixar animated films released between 2013 and 2023. Drawing on Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1996) five domains of PTG – which include appreciation of life, relating to others, personal strength, new possibilities, and spiritual or existential change – this content analysis examined how films portrayed experiences of loss, disruption, and adversity in developmentally accessible ways. The guiding research question asked how Disney and Pixar films depict processes of psychological growth following trauma, and what these portrayals might reveal about resilience and meaning making in contemporary storytelling.

Although Disney films have long been recognized for their emotional depth and moral storytelling, there has been limited exploration around their potential to illustrate psychological growth. Contemporary research in this area has often focused on the genre's negative portrayals of gender, race, and beauty standards (de Leeuw & van der Laan, 2018; Graham et al., 2018; Padilla-Walker et al., 2013), but few have considered how these same narratives may also model positive adaptation after adversity. By shifting the focus away from a nominal critique of the films and towards a prosocial exploration of their potential for transformation, this study highlights how animated storytelling can be a powerful educator for young audiences around grief and loss.

The findings identified in Chapter 4 revealed a remarkably consistent pattern of PTG across the 10 films, with characters coming to see adversity not as a final defeat but

as an entry point into deeper levels of self-discovery and connection. Within the films, PTG often emerged not as a sudden or singular revelation, but rather as a gradual process marked by reflection, relational repair, and moral awakening. Examples of PTG domains included moments of quiet recognition and awareness that signaled appreciation of life, reconciliation with others and gestures of empathy that illustrated relating to others, perseverance in the face of fear which reflected personal strength, moments of curiosity and reinvention that suggested new possibilities, and meaningful encounters with one's ancestry, nature, or spiritual continuity that accurately conveyed the domain of spiritual or existential change. Together, these recurring motifs formed a cohesive narrative of transformation that transcended individual storylines and reflected a broader cultural understanding of what it means to grow through pain and adversity.

Chapter 5 builds upon these insights by interpreting the findings in relation to existing theoretical and empirical literature in PTG. Each PTG domain is examined in depth, followed by an analysis of how the domains function together to create a holistic depiction of growth. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the study's limitations, recommendations for future research, and broader implications for understanding how film narratives may model powerful lessons for SEL.

Interpretation of the Findings

The findings of this study both affirm and extend existing understandings of how PTG can be represented through narrative and visual storytelling. Across the 10 films, the five domains outlined by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) were expressed in complex and nuanced ways that parallel the lived processes of growth observed in psychological

research and clinical observation. These portrayals not only align with the theoretical foundations of PTG but also suggest new possibilities for future research and practice.

Representations of PTG Domains

Appreciation of Life

In Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1996) framework, appreciation of life represents a deepened awareness of existence and a renewed gratitude for the ordinary moments that follow adversity. Importantly, this construct extends beyond the return of happiness; it reflects a mindful reawakening of self through humility, acceptance, and connection. Within the Disney and Pixar films examined, appreciation of life consistently appeared in moments of stillness and quiet reflection, with scenes in which characters reevaluated their priorities or rediscovered value beyond achievement. This portrayal aligns with empirical work suggesting that authentic posttraumatic appreciation often unfolds through subtle cognitive and emotional accommodations rather than overt expressions of joy (Joseph & Linley, 2006; Tedeschi et al., 2018). In *Inside Out* (Docter & del Carmen, 2015), *Coco* (Unkrich & Molina, 2017), and *Encanto* (Bush et al., 2021), this growth emerges as an emotional realignment following disconnection and fear – a process that Janoff-Bulman (1992) describes as the reconstruction of “shattered assumptions” about safety, control, and self-worth.

In *Inside Out* (Docter & del Carmen, 2015), this shift in awareness occurs through Riley's emotional integration of Joy and Sadness. When she allows herself to express sadness and receive comfort from her parents, the film visually and emotionally captures growth through what Joseph and Linley (2006) describe as positive cognitive

accommodation – or the process of revising one's worldview to find new meaning in distressing experiences. The internal reconciliation between Joy and Sadness mirrors Tedeschi and Calhoun's (2004) assertion that growth often involves a transformation of priorities, as Riley's understanding of happiness evolves from avoidance of pain to acceptance of its coexistence with sorrow. This representation aligns with current research showing that appreciation of life is often born from emotional authenticity and relational reconnection rather than mere recovery of positive affect (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2014).

Similarly, *Coco* (Unkrich & Molina, 2017) situates appreciation of life in remembrance and continuity. Miguel's recognition that "to be remembered is to live" embodies Janoff-Bulman's (1998) notion that posttraumatic appreciation emerges through rebuilding existential meaning after loss. The film's recurring motif of marigold petals, for example, acts as a visual metaphor for the psychological bridge between the living and the dead – illustrating how acknowledgment of mortality can deepen gratitude for life itself. This echoes Wong's (2010) concept of tragic optimism in the face of suffering, where the awareness of impermanence enhances one's reverence for existence. The moment Miguel sings "*Remember Me*" to his great-grandmother Coco further encapsulates this intersection of grief and gratitude, representing what Tedeschi et al. (2018) described as the reconstruction of meaning through love and meaning making.

While *Inside Out* and *Coco* highlight individual realizations of appreciation, *Encanto* (Bush et al., 2021) extends this construct towards the communal and intergenerational. The Madrigal family's loss of their magical gifts and home serves as an

allegory for the collapse of assumed worth and control, with their subsequent rebuilding of Casita embodying the process of reintegrated meaning (Park, 2010). When Mirabel remarks, “It isn’t perfect, but neither are we,” she articulates a mature form of gratitude rooted in imperfection, aligning with Tedeschi and Calhoun’s (2004) conceptualization of a worldview that emerges not despite brokenness, but rather because of it.

Taken together, these portrayals suggest that appreciation of life in Disney and Pixar’s narratives mirrors psychological models of PTG, wherein gratitude is reconstructed through vulnerability, relational repair, and acceptance of impermanence. Across *Inside Out*, *Coco*, and *Encanto*, the protagonists’ transformations reflect a shift from seeking control to embracing connection and from denying pain to integrating it as part of what it means to live fully. In this way, the films collectively illustrate that appreciation of life is less about regaining joy and more about redefining it through awareness, humility, and meaning making.

Relating to Others

Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) identify relating to others as one of the most empirically supported domains of PTG, reflecting increased empathy, openness, and interpersonal depth following adversity. Rather than simply emphasizing social connection, this domain captures the transformation that occurs when vulnerability, forgiveness, or trust replaces fear and isolation. Across the films analyzed, relational growth consistently unfolded not through idealized harmony but through conflict, rupture, and subsequent repair – a pattern that mirrors similar findings in trauma research indicating that authentic relational development often arises from shared suffering

(Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2014; Joseph & Linley, 2006). In this way, Disney and Pixar's portrayals of reconciliation serve as metaphors for what Janoff-Bulman (1992) described as the rebuilding of one's assumptive world and a renewed belief that relationships can once again be sources of safety and belonging after rupture.

The domain of relating to others is perhaps most explicitly represented in *Frozen* (Buck & Lee, 2013), where the evolving bond between Anna and Elsa transforms fear into connection. Elsa's prolonged isolation and emotional withdrawal exemplify the posttraumatic defense of avoidance and an effort to control perceived danger by cutting off relational vulnerability. However, it is through Anna's persistent empathy and eventual self-sacrifice that Elsa learns that love, not control, restores balance. This progression parallels Calhoun and Tedeschi's (2004) conceptualization of relational PTG as an expansion of empathy and one's sense of shared humanity. Anna's willingness to risk herself in the film's final battle redefines love as active courage, signaling the restoration of trust both within their relationship and in Elsa's sense of self. The sisters' reunion is not presented as a simple resolution but as a process of mutual recognition and the acknowledgment that love and fear can coexist simultaneously.

Similarly, *Raya and the Last Dragon* (Hall & López Estrada, 2021) offers a distinctly interpersonal portrayal of PTG through the theme of trust after betrayal. Raya's loss of faith in humanity following her friend Namaari's treachery reflects the shattering of interpersonal assumptions that often follows trauma (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Her subsequent journey toward reconciliation reflects the role of enhanced relationships in growth, which Joseph and Linley (2006) identified as an essential element of positive

change following adversity. The film's final scene where Raya extends trust to Namaari – despite the risk of rejection – embodies this willingness to engage vulnerably even when past experiences suggest danger. Similarly, the uneasy partnership between Judy Hopps and Nick Wilde in *Zootopia* (Howard et al., 2016) showed how relational growth can also unfold through the reexamination of one's biases and moral frameworks. Judy's recognition of her own implicit bias and her apology to Nick align with Tedeschi and Calhoun's (2004) assertion that PTG can involve the development of greater compassion and a willingness to forgive. Importantly, their reconciliation extends beyond individual forgiveness to model the reconstruction of communal trust and a broader form of relational healing relevant to contemporary social psychology. Through this partnership, *Zootopia* portrays relational growth as both intrapersonal (acknowledging one's limitations) and systemic (rebuilding collective harmony), illustrating the multilayered nature of "relating to others" within PTG frameworks.

While many Disney narratives emphasize dyadic bonds, *Encanto* (Bush et al., 2021) expands this domain to encompass intergenerational and communal dimensions of relational repair. The Madrigal family's fractures – initially rooted in perfectionism, silence, and inherited trauma – help to illustrate how relational disconnection can become intergenerational. Mirabel's decision to confront, rather than appease, her family represents a shift from relational avoidance to engagement, aligning with Tedeschi and Calhoun's (2004) observation that growth often entails more authentic self-disclosure and emotional openness. The family's collective rebuilding at the film's conclusion reflects Berger & Weiss' (2010) concept of systemic PTG, in which families and/or groups

undergo transformation following shared crisis. As the family reconstructs their home with the help of the community, *Encanto* reframes belonging as something co-created rather than bestowed, underscoring that relational healing is both individual and collective.

Across these films, relational growth is depicted as a process of mutual recognition and an emerging capacity to see oneself and others more fully through the lens of vulnerability and forgiveness. Whether through sisterly reconciliation in *Frozen*, the restoration of trust in *Raya and the Last Dragon*, or the intergenerational healing of *Encanto*, the portrayal of relationships across films aligned closely with empirical literature suggesting that adversity can deepen compassion and social connectedness (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2014; Joseph & Linley, 2006). Together, these narratives present relating to others not as a simple return to prior harmony, but rather as the emergence of new, more resilient forms of connection that are grounded in empathy, accountability, and shared humanity.

Personal Strength

Within Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1996) framework, personal strength represents a perceived ability to withstand or adapt to adversity, often accompanied by an enhanced belief in one's competence and endurance. Contemporary scholarship emphasizes that personal strength in PTG is not synonymous with resilience or a return to normalcy but rather reflects a transformation of self-perception following distress (Elam & Taku, 2022; Tedeschi et al., 2018). While resilience implies the capacity to "bounce back," PTG entails a reconfiguration of internal resources and beliefs – a process in which individuals

come to view themselves as stronger or more capable because of what they have endured (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Across the films analyzed, personal strength often emerged through moments when characters redefined competence and courage not as invulnerability, but as the willingness to act amid uncertainty and loss.

The films consistently portray strength as a developmental process rather than a static trait. In *Frozen* (Buck & Lee, 2013), Elsa's journey exemplifies the movement from defensive control to self-acceptance in a shift that aligns with contemporary PTG theory emphasizing cognitive processing and schema reconstruction as indicators of increased inner strength (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Initially, Elsa's suppression of emotion was guided by fear of her own power and mirrors the maladaptive coping patterns often observed in trauma research. However, when she ultimately learns that "love will thaw," her capacity for self-compassion and relational openness transforms her fear into a renewed sense of personal agency. Anna's parallel arc reinforces this, as her strength manifests not through physical bravery alone but through moral courage and a readiness to act for others despite uncertainty. This relational dimension of personal strength echoes findings that growth often coexists alongside vulnerability, rather than the absence of it (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

A similar reframing occurs in *Finding Dory* (Stanton & MacLane, 2016), where the protagonist's memory impairment functions as both obstacle and catalyst for self-efficacy. Dory's refrain — "What would Dory do?" — reflects a more confident assertion of her ability to handle the challenges ahead and an adaptive strategy consistent with contemporary understandings of PTG (O'Donovan & Burke, 2022). Rather than simply

learning to overcome her limitations, Dory's character arc sees her begin to embrace them as a core part of her identity as she discovers persistence through creativity looking for solutions others may not see. The film's resolution finds Dory taking a leadership role in helping her friends return to the ocean, illustrating her newfound strength and personal growth. This aligns with contemporary research points that strength following trauma emerges from integrating loss into a coherent life narrative (McAdams et al., 2001; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

In *Moana* (Clements et al., 2016), personal strength is portrayed through existential courage and the capacity to maintain purpose amid self-doubt or cultural dissonance. When Moana sings "*I am Moana*," the lyrics serve as a narrative declaration of being the author of her own story. Her transformation from reluctant voyager to confident wayfinder reflects core processes of PTG, including the recognition of new life possibilities and the reconstruction of meaning and purpose following trauma (Park, 2010; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Importantly, Moana's strength is seen as both collective and individual at the same time, evidenced when she carries the voices of her ancestors and community with her, reflecting that posttraumatic empowerment often occurs within relational or cultural systems, not just in isolation (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

Across these films, personal strength consistently manifests as adaptive redefinition of one's capabilities rather than triumphal victory. Specifically, growth is often seen grounded in self-recognition and moral alignment rather than external achievement. This depiction aligns with PTG literature distinguishing personal strength

from resilience, emphasizing that PTG involves transformative changes in self-perception rather than simply bouncing back to previous functioning (Elam & Taku, 2022; Tedeschi et al., 2018). Characters like Elsa, Dory, and Moana embody this evolution by shifting from avoidance and self-doubt towards acceptance, perseverance, and meaning-driven action. These portrayals suggest that animated narratives can serve as culturally accessible metaphors for posttraumatic strength — showing that true resilience is not simply surviving hardship but emerging from it with a renewed sense of capability and courage.

New Possibilities

The new possibilities domain within Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1996, 2004) framework captures the emergence of fresh perspectives, priorities, or directions in life following trauma. While early conceptualizations positioned this domain as a behavioral outcome involving the pursuit of new goals or relationships, contemporary literature reframes it as a process of cognitive reappraisal and meaning reconstruction (Park, 2010). In this view, the domain of new possibilities reflects not merely doing new things with one's life but also thinking differently about what is possible. Across the films analyzed, this domain manifested when characters transformed disruption or grief into innovation, moral renewal, and collective restoration – illustrating that PTG arises not from returning to normalcy, but from reimagining what “normal” can mean.

In *Big Hero 6* (Hall & Williams, 2014), Hiro's evolution exemplifies the transformational essence of this domain. Following the death of his brother, Hiro initially channels grief into avoidance and vengeance, reflecting what Tedeschi and Calhoun

(2004) call “seismic events” that shatter one’s assumptive world. Yet his eventual collaboration with Tadashi’s peers and the creation of a superhero team mark a shift from despair to prosocial innovation. This aligns with viewing the new possibilities domain as a reorganization of purpose through cognitive flexibility and relational engagement, rather than as a simple act of moving on. By integrating Tadashi’s legacy into his own identity, Hiro illustrates that growth occurs through continuity with the past rather than its denial. His journey mirrors research indicating that openness to new goals following loss often coexists with enduring emotional attachment, suggesting that meaning reconstruction involves balancing continuity and change (Park, 2010).

A similar reorientation defines Simba’s arc in *The Lion King* (Favreau, 2019). After the trauma of Mufasa’s death and his self-imposed exile, Simba adopts an escapist lifestyle epitomized by “Hakuna Matata.” This initial avoidance echoes patterns observed in many trauma survivors, who frequently disengage from trauma-related memories and situations in an attempt to manage overwhelming distress (Iacoviello & Charney, 2014). Simba’s eventual return to Pride Rock, however, signifies a decisive cognitive shift wherein he accepts responsibility, reclaims his identity, and transforms guilt into generative purpose. This aligns with Tedeschi and Calhoun’s (2004) conception of new possibilities, where individuals move beyond merely surviving trauma to actively reconstructing their life paths and pursuing new directions. Importantly, Simba’s transformation is not framed as a restoration of the old order but as a moral and ecological renewal, reinforcing the idea that PTG often entails the creation of new pathways for meaning and leadership rather than regression to the pre-trauma self.

In *Raya and the Last Dragon* (Hall & López Estrada, 2021), the narrative expands this domain from the personal to the communal. Raya's world is fractured – both literally and figuratively – by betrayal and mistrust, yet her journey to reassemble the broken Dragon Gem parallels the reconstruction of trust among divided groups. This portrayal reflects the sociocultural dimension of PTG, where new possibilities can emerge through collective healing and cooperation (Berger & Weiss, 2009). By the film's conclusion, Raya's decision to extend trust to Namaari – even at great personal cost – demonstrates an adaptive openness to risk vulnerability for the sake of future growth. Her transformation affirms that new possibilities are not confined to individual pursuits but can catalyze systemic repair, aligning with the expanding recognition that PTG may manifest at community and cultural levels as well.

Across these narratives, the new possibilities domain is portrayed as a bridge between despair and reconstruction, anchored not in a denial of loss but in the transformative reinvention that follows it. Specifically, Hiro's innovation, Simba's return, and Raya's reconciliation show a contrast to many triumphalist depictions of growth common in popular culture, instead framing change as relational, reflective, and iterative. Their protagonists do not erase trauma but instead weave it into the architecture of new purpose, thus affirming how posttraumatic transformation depends on the capacity to envision futures that may have once been unimaginable.

Spiritual or Existential Change

Within the framework of PTG, spiritual and existential change reflects a fundamental reorganization of beliefs, values, or one's understanding of meaning and

purpose following adversity (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996, 2004). Such change often emerges when trauma challenges core assumptions about oneself and the world around them, prompting individuals to engage in what Park (2010) described as meaning making through accommodation – or the reshaping one’s worldview to integrate a painful experience. Across the films analyzed, spiritual and existential growth was depicted not as doctrinal faith, but as a moral and philosophical awakening of purpose within a previously fractured understanding of self or community.

In *Inside Out* (Docter & del Carmen, 2015), existential growth is symbolized through Joy’s realization that sadness is not an emotion to be erased but an essential element of human experience. The film’s emotional architecture — where competing affective states must coexist — visually embodies the process of cognitive and existential integration. Specifically, Joy’s acceptance of Sadness parallels the shift from black-and-white thinking toward a dialectical understanding of emotion as complex and multifaceted. The resulting “mixed” core memories, glowing simultaneously with blue and yellow, serve as metaphors for what Joseph and Linley (2006) described as the co-existence of positive and negative emotions – a hallmark of PTG in which joy and sorrow are no longer oppositional but mutually defining. This theme of existential reconciliation is also evident in *The Lion King* (Favreau, 2019), where Simba’s journey transforms avoidance into moral awakening. His early self-exile represents a kind of spiritual numbing or a defensive withdrawal following moral injury and trauma. Through his encounters with Rafiki and the vision of his father, Simba reconnects with ancestral continuity and the moral order of the “Circle of Life.” This encounter exemplifies the

idea that spiritual growth after trauma may involve an improved sense of connection to something enduring, thus redefining the self within a larger existential frame (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). In the film's climax, Simba's revelation of "Remember who you are" is less about reclaiming a royal title than about reawakening ethical responsibility. This aligns with contemporary understandings of PTG that reflect a fundamental reorientation towards what matters most (Joseph & Linley, 2006).

In *Coco* (Unkrich & Molina, 2017), the existential dimension of PTG expands into the collective and intergenerational realm. The film's portrayal of the Land of the Dead situates meaning within continuity rather than finality, suggesting that identity is sustained through remembrance and relational legacy. This resonates with Park's (2010) framework showing that meaning making after loss involves multiple pathways, including reappraising the relationship with the deceased and integrating the loss into one's life narrative. Miguel's journey from rebellion to reconciliation reflects a shift from self-focused ambition to an appreciation of connection and lineage. By honoring his ancestors through music, the film reframes death not as a finite ending but as an opportunity for relationships extended across time – a shift that embodies the kind of expanded existential horizon that is central to spiritual growth.

Across these films, spiritual and existential change is rendered not through explicit doctrine but through narrative patterns of restoration, coherence, and humility. Whether in Joy's reconciliation of opposites, Simba's reawakening to ancestral duty, or Miguel's recognition of legacy, each story portrays growth as an act of meaning reconstruction following rupture. Moreover, these narratives collectively affirm that

spirituality in the context of growth is less about transcendence above suffering and more about transcendence through it with a grounded, relational awareness that suffering and connection are intertwined. In presenting such transformations through accessible narrative forms, Disney and Pixar films extend contemporary understandings of spiritual change beyond the sacred, offering secular metaphors for how meaning, morality, and purpose can be rebuilt in the aftermath of loss.

PTG Domains Working Together

Across all five domains, PTG emerged not as a set of discrete or isolated categories but as an interwoven tapestry of fundamentally linked concepts. For example, characters rarely experienced domains such as appreciation of life, personal strength, or new possibilities in isolation; rather, these domains unfolded in tandem as each informed and reinforced the others. This aligns with Tedeschi and Calhoun's (2004) characterization of PTG as a dynamic process in which various factors across different domains continuously interact with and influence one another over time. In the films, relational repair frequently acted as the catalyst through which other domains took shape, such as when emotional connection enabled gratitude, vulnerability allowing strength, and shared meaning supporting spiritual change. When characters like Elsa, Moana, or Mirabel reconnected with their communities, they simultaneously experienced renewed appreciation of life and expanded perspectives on purpose and identity. These interdependencies emphasize that the process of rebuilding meaning and connection after adversity is inherently multi-domain, with growth in one area precipitating transformation in another. In this way, the films collectively framed PTG not as recovery

from disruption, but as the reintegration of one's sense of self, relationships, and worldview into a more coherent whole.

Moreover, the interaction among PTG domains across these narratives suggests that growth is not simply additive but transformational. The domains operate together to reshape identity, meaning, and worldview in ways that build upon one another. Research similarly emphasizes that PTG represents an ongoing process rather than a static outcome, characterized by mutual influences across emotional, relational, and existential domains (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). In many films, the spiritual or existential domain served as the unifying thread that gave direction to other forms of growth. For example, the appreciation of life depicted in *Inside Out* and *Coco* is deeply intertwined with characters' evolving sense of purpose, while the personal strength shown in *Moana* or *Big Hero 6* depends on renewed trust and moral clarity. Taken together, the films highlight PTG as a holistic transformation and one that unfolds through the convergence of gratitude, strength, relationship, and existential awareness, rather than through any single domain alone.

Limitations of the Study

The use of directed qualitative content analysis provided a structured framework for exploring representations of PTG in children's animated feature films. Specifically, this approach offered clear advantages for analyzing media content, including the ability to conduct systematic, theory-driven analysis of textual and visual data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Stemler, 2001). Guided by Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1996, 2004) five-domain model of PTG, this method further allowed for systematic identification of

growth-related patterns within visual, lyrical, and narrative elements of the films.

However, several limitations should be acknowledged regarding scope, cultural context, and methodological constraints.

First, the scope of the sample restricts the study's potential for transferability. The study examined 10 animated feature films released between 2013 and 2023, focusing exclusively on Disney and Pixar productions. Although this quantity offers a coherent and culturally influential body of work, it represents a distinctly Western set of values – such as individualism, optimism, and resolution – which may differ significantly from those found in other storytelling traditions. Non-Western animation, such as Japanese anime or Indigenous narratives for example, might depict growth and resilience through more communal, spiritual, or cyclical frameworks rather than what is shown in this film sample. Therefore, while the sample provides thematic consistency for the purposes of this study's goals, it does limit the breadth of interpretation across diverse cultures.

Because the analysis was limited to the films themselves, a second limitation exists in the study not accounting for how viewers interpret or emotionally respond to these depictions of trauma and recovery. This limitation further extends to not being able to gather insight from the filmmakers or screenwriters who might have been able to clarify their intentions behind narrative decisions or dialogue. Including these perspectives in future studies – whether through interviews, surveys, or reception analyses – could help illuminate whether the PTG themes identified in this study align with audience understanding or authorial intent.

A further limitation concerns the theory-driven nature of the analysis. While Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1996, 2004) PTG model provided a useful structure, it also introduced potential confirmation bias. As Hsieh and Shannon (2005) cautioned, directed content analysis risks filtering data through predetermined categories, potentially overlooking themes that fall outside the theoretical framework. Although reflexive memoing and peer debriefing were used to mitigate bias, alternative frameworks might have revealed additional dimensions of healing and adaptation not captured by the PTG lens. Lastly, the focus on cinematic representation rather than lived experience limits the generalizability of the study. This is because the growth processes depicted in the films were stylized and condensed, which are not often equivalent to the complex and often nonlinear experiences of trauma recovery in real life. Therefore, the findings should not be interpreted as evidence of how children may experience PTG directly in their own lives, but rather as an insight into how popular media symbolically frames the concept of growth after adversity.

Despite these constraints, the study's limitations also highlight its strengths. A clearly defined sample, theoretical grounding, and transparent analytic process allowed for in-depth examination of how PTG is conveyed through storytelling accessible to young audiences. While the findings are not broadly generalizable across all cultures and circumstances, they nevertheless offer meaningful interpretive insight into the symbolic portrayal of trauma and recovery, providing an important foundation for future research in PTG and children's media.

Recommendations

This study offered new insight into how PTG is represented in Disney and Pixar animated films, yet several directions remain for future research in the field. While the above findings illuminated how animated storytelling can depict growth, meaning making, and transformation, further inquiry could expand these insights using alternative theoretical frameworks. Although the PTG framework (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996, 2004) provided a clear foundation for identifying growth-oriented patterns, it inevitably shaped how meaning was interpreted. Integrating complementary perspectives – such as meaning-making theory (Park, 2010) or resilience theory (Masten, 2018) – could help capture the dynamic and context-dependent aspects of recovery that may fall outside the PTG model. For example, where PTG emphasizes post-event transformation, resilience frameworks might highlight the ongoing processes that allow characters to adapt, cope, or sustain hope throughout adversity. Combining these perspectives would allow for a richer, multidimensional understanding of how animated narratives may model psychological growth.

Expanding the cultural scope of future studies is also an important next step for subsequent research. This project's exclusive focus on Western, Disney-affiliated films provided a narrow lens shaped by certain cultural values such as individualism, optimism, and resolution. Cross-cultural analyses – that include non-Western or Indigenous animation traditions – could reveal alternative representations of healing that emphasize collective resilience, ancestral continuity, or cyclical renewal. Such comparisons would not only broaden the applicability of PTG theory but also reveal how cultural storytelling

norms shape understandings of adversity and recovery. Examining whether Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1996) five domains are universal or culturally specific would further strengthen the global relevance of PTG research.

In addition, future research should consider audience reception to better understand how viewers interpret and internalize messages of growth and resilience. Because this study focused exclusively on narrative content, it cannot determine how audiences perceived or emotionally processed these depictions. Qualitative methods – such as focus groups or semistructured interviews – could explore how young viewers relate to the struggles and recoveries portrayed, and whether these films contribute to empathy, hope, or self-efficacy in the real world. Likewise, examining parental or educator mediation could further illuminate how animated stories are used to facilitate conversations about grief, identity, or emotional regulation with children. This direction would bridge representation with practical impact and help extend the findings from text to lived experience.

Lastly, longitudinal or comparative work could explore how depictions of trauma and growth evolve over time. Disney and Pixar films span nearly a century of cultural production, reflecting changing social and generational attitudes toward loss, emotional expression, and mental health. Comparing earlier films with contemporary works could reveal how the narrative language of healing has matured alongside broader cultural shifts. In summary, future research can build on this study by diversifying theoretical frameworks, expanding cultural inclusivity, and incorporating audience perspectives to more fully understand how PTG is represented and received. Such extensions would not

only advance trauma scholarship but also highlight how animated storytelling serves as a gentle but powerful educator in resilience, empathy, and hope.

Implications

Although Disney and Pixar films are primarily created by studios for entertainment value, this study demonstrated that they also serve as rich cultural texts that model PTG. Across the 10 films analyzed, trauma was not the end point of each story but often served as a catalyst for transformation, relational healing, and renewed purpose. These portrayals have significant implications for psychology, education, and media studies, as they illustrate how mainstream storytelling can humanize complex psychological processes and contribute to broader understandings of resilience and recovery in young audiences.

Psychological and Theoretical Implications

First and foremost, the findings of this study affirmed the relevance of Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1996, 2004) PTG model, while also suggesting ways the framework might evolve under varying circumstances. The five domains – which include relating to others, new possibilities, personal strength, spiritual or existential change, and appreciation of life – were consistently evident across films, often portrayed as cyclical in nature rather than a linear progression. Characters such as Moana and Elsa revealed that growth occurs through oscillation between feelings of fear and courage, isolation and connection, and doubt and acceptance. This dynamic supports more contemporary perspectives that frame PTG as an ongoing process rather than a final outcome or permanent state of being (Joseph, 2012; Park, 2010).

The films also highlight a useful distinction between resilience and true PTG. While resilience emphasizes endurance and adaptation as the individual seeks a return to normalcy, PTG reflects a deeper shift in one's overall worldview. Characters such as Simba and Mirabel demonstrated that surviving adversity is not synonymous with transformation; it is only when meaning is reconstructed and relationships are repaired that true growth emerges. These portrayals offer a visual and emotional translation of abstract psychological concepts that allow young audiences to grasp what transformation after trauma may look and feel like across varying perspectives.

Educational and Developmental Implications

Because animated films are frequently viewed in homes and classrooms, they have a clear potential for becoming early moral and emotional reference points for children. By portraying characters who experience trauma or adversity – and who later find purpose through empathy and connection – these stories offer informal lessons for children in healthy emotional literacy. Consistent with Bandura's (2001) social learning theory, viewers may internalize these examples of adaptive coping and relational repair, with films like *Frozen* and *Encanto* potentially serving as springboards for dialogue about family conflict, self-worth, and emotional regulation. Such approaches may help normalize emotional struggle and support the development of empathy, self-awareness, and perspective-taking – all skills that are foundational to childhood emotional development.

Applied and Practical Implications

The practical applications of this study's findings also extend to therapy, education, and community programming. For practitioners working with children or families, animated films can provide safe entry points for discussing difficult emotions and reconstructing personal narratives. Characters who overcome fear, guilt, or loss can serve as symbolic mirrors for clients' own experiences, helping them externalize trauma and imagine growth-oriented outcomes. Integrating such narratives into therapeutic settings aligns with approaches that use storytelling to support meaning-making and PTG (Joseph & Linley, 2006; Tedeschi et al., 2018). Similarly, parents and educators can use film discussions to encourage reflection on emotional resilience, moral decision-making, and relational repair. By examining how characters act, change, and forgive, learners can connect narrative insight with real-world behaviors. In this way, animated media becomes not just entertainment but a pedagogical tool that supports social and emotional learning.

Broader Significance

Ultimately, the study's findings position animated storytelling as a vital medium for exploring human resilience. The films examined here transform trauma into a shared emotional language that is not only easily accessible to children, but also still relevant to adults as well. Specifically, they affirm that growth can emerge from pain and that empathy, forgiveness, and meaning making are central to recovery. In this sense, Disney and Pixar narratives act as contemporary myths that translate psychological truth into a powerful visual metaphor for families and young audiences alike. They remind viewers

that healing is not the absence of suffering but the acceptance of it – a message deeply aligned with the principles of PTG. As such, these stories hold enduring value not purely for entertainment, but also for education, mental health, and the cultivation of compassion in a world still learning how to grow through adversity.

Conclusion

This study examined how PTG is represented across ten Disney and Pixar animated feature films released between 2013 and 2023, using the theoretical framework of Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1996, 2004) five domains – appreciation of life, relating to others, personal strength, new possibilities, and spiritual or existential change. While Disney and Pixar films are often celebrated for their storytelling and entertainment value, this study revealed that they also serve as powerful cultural texts that model psychological resilience and the transformative potential of adversity. Within these narratives, growth is not depicted as a simple return to normalcy, but as an ongoing process of emotional integration, self-awareness, and renewed connection to others. Importantly, this study contributes to the growing intersection between media studies and positive psychology by demonstrating how PTG can be visualized through animated storytelling. The characters' journeys – whether through grief, displacement, loss, or familial pressure – illustrate important psychological processes identified in PTG literature, such as cognitive restructuring, meaning-making, and the reconstruction of identity (Tedeschi et al., 2018). Disney and Pixar's visual and musical storytelling serve as accessible metaphors for these internal transformations, allowing audiences to witness resilience and renewal in tangible, emotionally resonant ways. These findings highlight

that animation has the capacity to model complex psychological phenomena in developmentally appropriate and profound forms.

The implications of these findings extend beyond film analysis. By presenting adversity as a catalyst for growth rather than destruction, these films offer educators, parents, and mental health practitioners valuable tools for fostering emotional literacy and resilience in children and adults alike. When young audiences watch characters move through loss and toward transformation, they are exposed to narratives that normalize human struggle while still emphasizing hope, empathy, and renewal. In this way, Disney and Pixar's contemporary storytelling reflects a subtle yet significant shift in cultural discourse around trauma that centers on healing, relational interdependence, and gratitude for life itself. In essence, this research underscores that PTG is not merely a distant or abstract concept but is instead a deeply human process that can be reflected, understood, and even nurtured through the stories we tell. The films analyzed in this study remind us that healing does not mean forgetting pain or erasing difficulty; rather, it means allowing those experiences to transform our understanding of ourselves and others. Through its focus on emotional authenticity and moral imagination, Disney and Pixar's storytelling invites audiences to see growth as both an individual and collective endeavor. By illustrating that adversity can be a source of meaning and renewal, these films powerfully contribute to a broader cultural dialogue about what it means to live through pain and find renewed strength through healing.

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