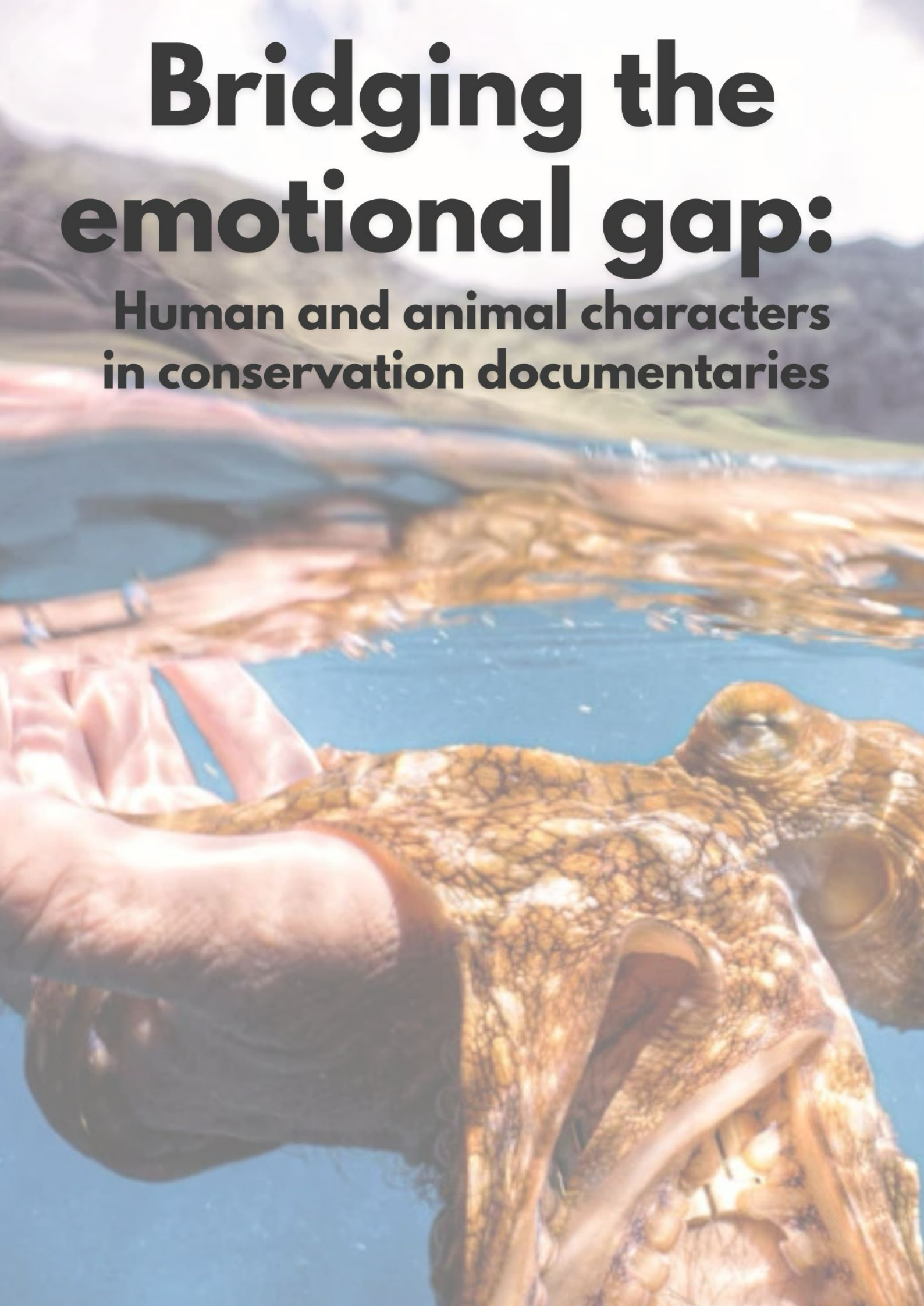


Bridging the emotional gap:

**Human and animal characters
in conservation documentaries**



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Bridging the emotional gap: Human and animal characters in conservation documentaries

A qualitative study on the character identification processes of young adults in conservation documentaries

Abstract

For any living creature, a working ecosystem is what gives it the reassurance of life. Yet, the world is facing an alarming biodiversity crisis. According to the WWF Living Planet Report (2024), global wildlife populations have declined by 73% over the last fifty years (p.7). This rapid loss of species not only disrupts ecosystems but directly impacts our clean water, food supply, and climate resilience. WWF and other organizations call for urgent action from all levels of society, increasingly using documentaries as a key tool in conservation storytelling. This thesis explores one of their most persuasive tools: character identification. While many studies have examined how environmental films influence attitudes, less is known about how viewers experience identification with different types of protagonists. This qualitative research investigates how young adults identify with human versus animal main characters in conservation documentaries. This study draws on Deictic Shift Theory and the Extended Elaboration Likelihood Model (E-ELM), focusing specifically on character identification as a central process within narrative persuasion. Through in-depth interviews with fifteen young adults, participants watched two contrasting documentary fragments: one with an animal protagonist (from *Our Oceans*) and one featuring a human protagonist (from *My Octopus Teacher*). Thematic analysis revealed that identification with the human character was generally more direct and emotionally accessible, particularly when demographic similarities were present. However, the animal character still evoked identification, albeit in more cognitive and imaginative ways, often supported by narrative and cinematic tools like music, voice-over, and anthropomorphism. Identification was measured using five indicators drawn from the theoretical framework: empathy, perspective-taking, homophily, liking, and wishful identification. While empathy and homophily emerged as the strongest indicators, identification was rarely a linear process. Especially in the case of the octopus, identification often required an extra imaginative step. All findings are structured around five key themes: the emotional gap between viewer and animal, the power of narrative and cinematic techniques in bridging this gap, the role of human presence and anthropomorphism, the importance of perceived realism, and subtle shifts in conservation attitudes. This thesis offers practical insights for NGOs, filmmakers, and science communicators who aim to craft emotionally resonant conservation documentaries. In this, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the emotional processes behind storytelling and persuasion in conservation documentaries, and calls for more nuanced character design to engage audiences in the fight to protect biodiversity.

Keywords: Identification, Conservation documentaries, Narrative persuasion, E-ELM, Transportation

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Introduction

For any living creature a working ecosystem is what gives it the reassurance of life. However, as reported by Living Planet Index (LPI), over the last five decades (1970–2020), global wildlife populations have experienced a dramatic 73% decline (WWF, 2024, p.7). While the human population has only been growing. This finding draws from data on nearly 35,000 population trends, covering 5,495 species of amphibians, birds, fish, mammals, and reptiles. This imbalance disrupts ecosystems and directly affects essential resources such as food, clean water, and carbon storage. Among many others, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) is calling for change. According to the WWF, urgent and transformative action is needed to address the biodiversity and climate crises. They emphasize that this responsibility cannot fall on governments and corporations alone; instead, WWF calls on everyone, including individuals, to be part of the solution (Kraan et al., 2022). By making more sustainable lifestyle choices, demanding stronger environmental policies, and supporting conservation efforts, people around the world can collectively help secure a healthier future for the planet. The world urgently needs greater awareness of the importance of wildlife conservation, enabling individuals to act by rewilding species and keeping the wild animals wild.

However, Weber (2006) states that global issues like climate change are difficult to communicate to the public due to their long-term consequences, similarly to the loss of species (p.116). Unlike facts, stories engage audiences through structured narratives that evoke emotions (Beattie et al., 2011, p.112; Chattoo, 2020, p. 102). Research on narrative persuasion shows that documentaries are highly effective in immersing audiences and shaping their beliefs and actions (Chattoo, 2020, p.102). Although wildlife and nature-based documentaries have been popular for a long time, documentaries specifically focused on wildlife conservation are increasingly popular (Freytag & Possler, 2024, p. 131, Hofman & Hughes, 2017, p. 524). The influences of these narratives have been extensively studied (Hamby & Jones, 2021, p.20). Specifically, the persuasive effects of stories on their audiences. The primary purpose of wildlife conservation documentaries is to promote conservation. While engaging with a story, the emotions we feel are personally our own rather than those belonging to the characters. Through the narrative, these emotions can shift, becoming more profound, more clearly understood, or even redirected toward people we might not have previously connected with (Oatley, 2002, p. 3). Even after finishing, its impact can remain with the reader, becoming part of their identity (Oatley, 2002, p.4).

Moyer-Gusé and Nabi (2009) highlight that character identification is a key determinant of persuasion (p. 47). Additionally, identification was linked to deep reflection during film reception and the development of a more complex discourse (Igartua, 2010, p. 368). Tchernev (2022) describes identification as the process of stepping into someone else's shoes, which can lead to gaining a new perspective on an issue (p. 741). Offering audiences alternative perspectives and encouraging them to

relate can open new paths to deeper understanding. Because identification is an immersive process, it is likely to diminish both the desire and ability to counter argue (Igartua & Barrios, 2012).

Additionally, it has been proven by De Graaf et al. (2011) that identification has a positive effect on narrative persuasion and thus that viewers adapt attitudes or reinforce their attitudes based on the character's attitudes (p.817). Taking the perspective of a person or animal strengthens the mental link between self and other, fostering empathy and a sense of closeness that increases the likelihood of helping behavior (Ahn et al., 2016, p. 401). In this paper the experience of character identification will be researched. However, identification is not always a straightforward path to attitude change. Dessart (2018) concluded that advertisements featuring non-human characters may limit effectiveness of character identification (p.301). If this principle applies to conservation documentaries, it suggests that animal characters and human characters generate different experiences of identification and possibly different levels of attitude change. Therefore, the type of character, human or animal, can influence the identification processes and thus the persuasion.

The audience's identification experience will be examined to determine if NGOs and filmmakers should consider the main character's nature in persuasive narratives. The research is aimed at understanding the experience of young adults. Since young people will spend the rest of their lives in a world with missing species, they are a particularly relevant audience for this research (Han & Ahn, 2020, p.1-2). Thus, the RQ for this research will be: **How do young adults experience narrative persuasion differently through identification with human vs. animal main characters in conservation documentaries?**

Societal relevance

This research offers a starting point for exploring how human versus animal main characters influence the process of identification and, by extension, narrative persuasion in conservation documentaries. As storytelling remains one of the most powerful tools for shaping beliefs and behaviors, understanding which character types are more likely to foster emotional connection and identification is essential. The findings of this study may guide NGOs, filmmakers, and environmental communicators in tailoring their storytelling strategies to maximize persuasive impact, particularly at a time when conservation messaging needs to be as effective as possible. This decline threatens the balance of ecosystems that support not only wildlife but also human survival through clean water, food sources, and climate regulation. As such, organizations, and importantly, individuals, must be inspired to take action. A well-crafted conservation documentary can play a pivotal role in catalyzing that action, but only if its narrative resonates with audiences on a personal and emotional level.

Academic relevance

While previous studies have explored the effects of environmental films on attitude change (Beattie et al., 2011) and have documented successful examples of conservation media influencing behavior (Chattoo, 2020; Hofman & Hughes, 2017), there is limited research on the nuances of character identification within this context. Existing literature often draws theoretical conclusions about the power of identification (e.g., McCormack et al., 2021), but rarely does it offer a detailed, comparative analysis of how audiences relate differently to human versus animal protagonists in environmental storytelling. McCormack and colleagues (2021) explicitly called for further research into “the relation between audiences and characters” (p. 1193). By employing a qualitative approach, this thesis provides a more layered and in-depth understanding of the identification process in conservation documentaries. Rather than quantifying emotional engagement, it captures the subtleties of audience perception and emotional resonance, elements crucial to designing persuasive narratives. In doing so, this study addresses a gap in academic literature and offers new insights that can inform both theory and practice in environmental communication. This paper’s conclusions may inform future quantitative research aimed at determining whether the type of character influences behavioral intentions related to conservation.

This thesis explores how young adults experience character identification differently when watching a conservation documentary with either a human or an animal main character. It aims to better understand how emotional connection influences character identification across characters. Central to this is the question of whether human or animal protagonists promote different identification processes and how these differ. With conservation documentaries being an increasingly important tool for awareness and action, it feels relevant to look beyond just facts and into the psychology of storytelling. By unpacking how identification works in conservation storytelling, this research provides practical insights for documentary makers seeking to create emotionally resonant content that drives viewer engagement and conservation awareness. The goal is not only to analyze viewer preferences but also to offer a research-informed strategy for documentary makers compelling conservation narratives that connect more deeply with audiences, especially younger generations who are critical actors in the climate and biodiversity movements.

Thesis outline

The thesis opens with a theoretical deep dive into narrative persuasion, character identification, and the emotional mechanisms that help stories move people but also processes that could be seen as threats. The methodology chapter outlines how semi-structured interviews were conducted with young adult participants, who viewed two fragments of conservation documentaries featuring different characters. In this section the thematic analysis is explained in detail. The results section presents the outcome of the analysis of how viewers related to the different characters,

highlighting emotional nuances and interpretative patterns that shaped their connection with the story and the characters. It also identifies key barriers and enablers of identification in animal versus human portrayals. In the discussion, these findings are connected back to existing theory, offering critical reflections on how character type influences emotional involvement, identification and perceived realism.

Theoretical Framework

To answer the research question: how young adults experience narrative persuasion differently through identification with human versus animal main characters in conservation documentaries, this qualitative study draws on key theoretical frameworks from media and psychology. This section will explore narrative persuasion, the Extended Elaboration Likelihood Model, narrative transportation and the process and indicators of character identification. Narrative persuasion will serve as the overarching storytelling theory, with identification as one of its core components. The Extended Elaboration Likelihood Model will be used to explain the role and significance of identification and narrative transportation within the broader process of narrative persuasion. Finally, the study will take a deeper look into narrative transportation and character identification. Together, these theories and models provide a structured understanding of why and how the process of identification is being examined in this research.

Narrative persuasion

Stories are effective persuasive tools because they are easier to remember than abstract concepts, as their events and characters are linked causally and through personal connections. This structure enables readers or viewers to engage deeply, counter argue less, visualize more vividly, and vicariously experience the characters' journeys (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2013, p. 205). Stories are likely to reduce close-mindedness, creating a pathway to persuading audiences. This process of affecting audiences' attitudes is called narrative persuasion and has been researched by many media academics (De Graaf et al., 2011, p.385).

Storytelling

What sets stories apart from other forms of communication is their structured narrative with a beginning, middle, and an ending, engaging audiences by evoking emotions and portraying character experiences (Beattie et al., 2011, p.112; Chattoo, 2020, p.102). As storytelling is seen not only in the world of entertainment but also in advertising and professional communication, the influences of these narratives have been extensively studied (Hamby & Jones, 2021, p.20). Specifically the persuasive effects of stories on their audiences. Whereas some scholars focused on any written form of communication (Hamby et al., 2016), others focused solely on fiction (Oatley, 1995). Additionally, there is research done specifically on edu-tainment (Slater & Rouner, 2002), health communication (Shen & Li, 2015) and games (Ndulue & Orji, 2022).

Unlike factual information, stories capture audiences by using structured narratives that elicit emotional responses (Beattie et al., 2011, p.112; Chattoo, 2020, p.102). Studies on narrative persuasion suggest that documentaries are particularly powerful in engaging viewers and influencing

their thoughts and behaviors because of its storytelling characteristics (Chattoo, 2020, p.102). Green and Brock (2000) note that narrative worlds are understood through their mode of presentation, and use the term “reader” to refer to anyone engaging with a narrative (p. 702). This definition can be extended to include readers, viewers, listeners, players, or anyone exposed to a narrative. Following their approach, this present study will consider research on narrative persuasion that uses terms such as readers, viewers, and engagers, or similar, as relevant. Consequently, studies examining any form of narrative engagement will be considered and adapted to the context of conservation documentaries and their audiences.

Emotions in narratives persuasion

The loss of a wild animal species is difficult to convey to an audience, as its consequences unfold over a long timeframe, similar to how climate change is communicated in science (Beattie et al., 2011, p. 106). Since the disappearance of wild species is a natural phenomenon grounded in scientific evidence, its communication can also be regarded as a form of science communication. Rather than focusing solely on scientific facts, Beattie et al. (2011) argue for a more emotionally driven approach in studies on science communication (p. 107). Oatley (2002) discusses in his paper how fiction stories make impact through emotions. For him fiction does not mean a story that is not true but rather looks at the coherence and personal truth. Documentaries also incorporate coherence truth (how well the elements fit together narratively) and personal truth (how the story resonates with viewers' experiences), much like fiction does. The present study will adapt Oatley's theory to fit the context of this research, which focuses specifically on documentaries.

Narratives tend to resonate on an emotional level, as individuals mentally construct their own version of the narrative. This emotional engagement is influenced by internal psychological processes such as identification or having personal memories stirred by familiar themes within the narrative (Oatley, 2002, p. 2). While engaging with a story, the emotions we feel are personally our own rather than those belonging to the characters. Through the narrative, these emotions can shift, becoming more profound, more clearly understood, or even redirected toward people we might not have previously connected with (p. 3). Even after finishing, its impact can stay with the reader, becoming part of their identity (p.4). Oatley explains this by giving the example of friendship: how the essence of a friendship can shape us, leaving behind a subtle change even after that person is gone (p.3). Research shows that stories often bring back personal memories and reinforce existing attitudes, as readers recall their own experiences more frequently through stories than through factual texts (p. 16). Additionally, stories can allow emotions to be felt at the right balance, not too distant to be unrelatable and not too overwhelming, creating space to both experience and reflect on emotions (p. 19).

Deictic Shift theory

Hamby and colleagues (2016) explain this process of persuasion through the widely used

Deictic Shift theory by Duchan et al. (1995). It suggests that when readers engage with a narrative, they mentally relocate their deictic center from their real-world perspective to a position within the story to enhance understanding. In everyday life, people are typically aware of their surroundings, including their location, time, environment, motivations, and goals, all of which are experienced with reference to themselves, this reference point is known as a deictic center (p. 114). As the narrative unfolds, readers continue shifting their perspective, moving from character to character and mentally positioning themselves within different times and places described in the story (p. 115). By initially relocating her deictic center and then continuously linking the information the reader develops a complete understanding of the narrative (p. 115). When readers return to their original deictic center after engaging with a story, this deictic return, or so called 'reflexion', facilitates meaning-making, and this act is what ultimately leads to persuasion (p. 119). A deeper shift into a narrative helps readers build a more detailed understanding of the story world, requiring more mental effort to connect it with their real-world perspective, which can make them more open to the story (p. 120). Instead of fully accepting the story's message, reflection allows readers to adjust their viewpoints by blending the story's ideas with their own understanding of the world (p.120).

In research on narrative persuasion, multiple models have been developed to further explain how narrative persuasion leads to attitude change. For example, the transportation-imagery model by Green and Brock (2000) emphasizes the central role of imagery in narrative persuasion, proposing that stories influence beliefs by activating mental images (p.703). A key factor believed to affect this persuasive impact is a person's capacity to create mental images or visualize scenarios, even in the absence of a physical stimulus (De Graaf et al., 2011, p. 386). Accepting its implied beliefs, with greater transportation leading to stronger influence on the reader's beliefs. A different model is The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) created by Petty and Cacioppo in 1986. This model was constructed to organize the processes that make persuasion effective through two distinct routes (p. 125). It will be explained later how the Extended Elaboration Likelihood Model by Slater and Rouner (2002) derived from that, suggesting that identification and absorption into the story, above imagery, leads to a persuasion (p.174). This present study will follow the E-ELM, focusing on identification rather than imagery.

Overcoming resistance through narrative persuasion

The motivation to persuade someone stems from the desire to bring about a change in them; their beliefs, attitudes, or behavior. The influence of narrative messages on a reader's attitudes depends on how deeply they engage themselves in the story and their motivation to counter-argue (Dal Cin et al., 2004, p.181; Slater & Rouner, 2002, p.180). Green and Brock (2000) highlight that when attitude change is sought for in audiences, their relationship with the characters is an important aspect in the process (p.719). However, when individuals feel that they are being persuaded, they experience reactance, and they naturally get a strong motivation to regain their sense of control

(Knowles & Linn, 2004, p.6). Resistance arises when there is pressure for change and acts as a built-in response that can be triggered when needed (p.4)

Dal Cin and colleagues (2004) describe several ways in which scholars have found narratives to reduce resistance and counter-argument to persuasion. One reason is that stories limit the ability and motivation to argue against the message, making counterarguments less effective (p. 177). Unlike direct persuasion, narratives are often seen as entertainment rather than an attempt to change opinions, which makes them more influential (p. 177). It is also harder to disagree with a character's personal experiences because they feel more authentic than hypothetical situations that can be easily dismissed (p. 178). The engaging nature of narratives causes a temporary suspension of disbelief, limiting the mental capacity that would otherwise be used to resist the message (p. 178). Lastly, Dal Cin and colleagues mention that when people identify with a well-liked character, they may develop positive feelings toward certain behaviors or attitudes, making them more open to persuasion (p. 179). The role of character identification will be discussed further in this chapter.

Narrative persuasion in science communication

As this study focuses on documentaries about wildlife conservation, and given that wildlife is scientifically grounded, this topic falls within the domain of science communication. Narrative persuasion has been widely studied across various fields and forms of media (Ndulue & Orji, 2022; Oatley, 2002; Shen & Li, 2015; Slater & Rouner, 2002). However, Moyer-Gusé and colleagues (2019) point out that, despite the extensive research on environmental and science communication, few studies approach these topics through the lens of narrative persuasion (p. 424). Some exceptions do exist: Van Enschot and colleagues (2023) examined the persuasive effects of interactive documentaries on climate change. This research found that higher narrative engagement was associated with stronger persuasive effects, regardless of whether the narrative was interactive or not (p. 154). Similarly, McCormack and colleagues (2021) explored conservation documentaries through narrative persuasion, focusing on audience behavior. They called for further research into “the relation between audiences and characters” (p. 1193). This present study aims to address that call, focusing on the identification of audiences with characters. The concept of character identification as a key component of narrative persuasion will be explained using the Extended Elaboration Likelihood Model.

Extended Elaboration Likelihood Model

As mentioned above, there are multiple models and theories developed to understand the process of narrative persuasion. The present study will use the Extended Elaboration Likelihood Model by Slater & Rouner (2002) based on The Elaboration Likelihood Model by Petty and Cacioppo (1986). This model is particularly relevant for the current research as it highlights character identification as a central element in narrative persuasion. In contrast to models that emphasize

imagery or argument strength, it focuses on the role of the audience's connection with characters and their engagement in the narrative.

ELM

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) was created by Petty and Cacioppo in 1986. They constructed this model to organize the processes that make persuasion effective (p. 125). Effective persuasion is defined here as the change of attitude of a recipient of persuasive communication. The ELM distinguishes two fundamental routes to persuasion (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Firstly, the central-route persuasion: where motivated individuals engage in deep elaboration and attitude change depends on argument strength (p.191). This route is often associated with a persistent and strong attitude change. The second route is called the peripheral-route, where low motivation or ability leads to reliance on superficial cues like speaker attractiveness or emotional appeals. Contrastingly, this route often leads to a less strong and short-term attitude change (p.191). Moreover, the ELM argues that when an issue is personally relevant to a reader, they are more likely to engage in deeper cognitive processing and thus are motivated to critically analyze the arguments presented (p.146). The ELM ultimately identifies which variables affect persuasive outcomes.

E-ELM as a critical note to ELM

However, Slater and Rouner (2002) argue that the ELM has limitations in its scope: while it effectively explains persuasion in overtly persuasive messages, it may not fully account for persuasion that occurs through entertainment (p.174). It is mentioned that while constructing the ELM, the focus lay on classic persuasive messages. However, Slater and Rouner argue that if a persuasive message is too overt it will not work as effectively (p.175). The narrative should be engaging enough that any awareness of persuasion becomes secondary to the experience of the reader. They thus prioritize the emotional engagement of the reader with the narrative. On this basis, Slater and Rouner have constructed a model, based on the ELM, to be applicable to narratives, this is called the Extended Elaboration Likelihood Model (E-ELM). E-ELM is used in research on narratives impacting attitudes (Medero & Hovick, 2023) and Nera and his colleagues (2018) even call it one of the three prominent models of narrative persuasion (p.3).

Differences ELM and E-ELM

The E-ELM does not differentiate between the central and peripheral routes of persuasion, the distinction that was present in the original ELM (Green et al., 2019, p.131). Additionally, the persuasive impact in ELM depends on the recipient's motivation and ability to process arguments, whereas in E-ELM, it is driven by narrative engagement with the story and its characters (p.178). Furthermore, whereas ELM holds significance in the issue-involvement by the reader, E-ELM prioritizes personal engagement with the narrative by the reader (p.176). So, although both models

examine how individuals' attitudes change through interpretation and their responses to persuasive content at different levels, there are significant differences.

To adapt ELM to E-ELM specifically for narrative persuasion, Slater and Rouner (2002) prioritized two predictors of effective persuasion, namely: (a) identification with characters and (b) absorption into the narrative (p. 177). These predictors focus on the reader's emotional engagement with the narrative. Involvement is defined as a state where attention is fully absorbed, and emotional responses naturally align with the experience in the narrative (p.179). This is thus valued through the experience of the reader with the characters and the storyline. Both identification and narrative transportation will be discussed later in this chapter. Since the E-ELM focuses specifically on narrative persuasion, as this research does, the E-ELM will be considered over the ELM. This model will serve as the foundation for exploring the relationship between identification and absorption within the context of narrative persuasion. These insights are essential for comparing the identification processes across different protagonists. To fully understand this relationship, it is necessary to further examine absorption and its potential tension with character identification.

Narrative transportation

The above-mentioned E-ELM focuses not only on identification, but also on absorption as key components of narrative persuasion. This concept has been widely researched and appears under various names. Engagement, absorption, and transportation are different terms used by researchers to refer to the same underlying experience: “each concept is the degree to which a message recipient is cognitively and affectively invested in a narrative” (Slater & Rouner, 2002, p. 179). The more deeply a person engages with a narrative, the more they process and interpret its elements, strengthening their drive to derive meaning from it (Hamby, Brinberg, & Daniloski, 2016, p.14). This research will use the name “narrative transportation” by Green and Brock (2000) to refer to this process from this point on.

The concept of narrative transportation

Being immersed in a narrative can make individuals less likely to question or challenge its message (Green, 2021, p. 90). Moreover, well-structured plots that spark curiosity, especially those that make audiences wonder about causes and outcomes, help sustain engagement and mental effort. Hamby and colleagues (2016) mention character experiences in a way that allows audiences to see and feel the story world from the character’s perspective further enhances the deictic shift and absorption (p. 117). When readers are deeply transported into an entertaining story, they may avoid analyzing its events, claims, or themes too critically, as this could interrupt their enjoyment (Hamby et al., 2016, p. 117). As a result, even when a story’s persuasive intent is clear, the motivation to counter argue may still be reduced (Green, 2021, p. 90). This aligns with the idea by Slater and Rounder (2002) that when a recipient is deeply transported into a narrative, counterarguing is unlikely to take

place, even if the persuasive message conflicts with their preexisting attitudes, beliefs, or values (p. 180).

Transportation can occur regardless of whether a story is based on real events, as in a documentary, or is a product of an author's imagination (Green, 2021, p. 88). Both factual and fictional narratives have the potential to evoke transportation and facilitate persuasion. However, it has been proven that a video format of a narrative was found to elicit higher cognitive and emotional engagement, leading to greater transportation compared to a print version (Walter et al., 2017, p. 167).

Transportation versus identification

Narrative transportation is similar to identification, as they both shape readers' attitudes and beliefs; however, they are not identical. Drawing on existing theory and research, Tal-Or and Cohen (2010) assumed that transportation is associated with suspense, while identification involves forming an emotional bond with the character and aligning perspectives between the character and the viewer (p. 413). Identification occurs when readers view the story through a character's perspective, embracing their goals and motivations, while transportation involves a deeper engagement with the story as a whole (Green, 2021, p. 89).

Transportation refers to immersion in a narrative without specifying engagement with a particular aspect, while identification involves a strong connection with a character, adopting their perspective and goals (Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010, p.406-407). One can be transported by the plot and suspense without necessarily identifying with any character. Additionally, in a meta-analysis by Tukachinsky (2014) found that identification was more effectively influenced by adjusting the emotional content and perspective-taking elements within the narrative, whereas transportation was better achieved through background information, distractions, and perspective-taking instructions (p. 27). She concludes that the fact that different factors shape identification and transportation supports the need to refine media involvement theory, highlighting that while these experiences are closely related, they have distinct antecedents that can be manipulated separately (Tukachinsky, 2014, p.27).

Transportation as a threat

Being deeply immersed in a story can lead to a stronger connection with the characters in the narrative. Thus, transportation can lead to identification (Green & Tesser, 2005, p. 62). However, Dessart (2018) found high transportation can sometimes also weaken character identification. Dessart emphasized the importance of character type in this negative relation (p. 301). He discovered that animal characters are associated with higher transportation and thus make it more challenging for audiences to identify with them. His proposal suggests that higher narrative transportation may be negatively correlated with identification, as immersion in a fictional story encourages escapism and detachment from one's own reality. This should make it more difficult to identify with a character (Dessart, 2018, p.291). If this is true, it could suggest that the "reflection" phase in the deictic shift is

not effectively activated, as it may limit the reader's ability to connect the story back to their own reality. Human protagonists in advertisements were found to avoid these threats to the process of identification, a process essential for effective narrative persuasion (Dessart, 2018, p.301). In the present study, narrative transportation will be conceptually defined as a potential threat to character identification. It serves to justify the comparative nature of this research. However, the focus in the method section will be on operationalizing character identification. That's why it's important to take a closer look at existing research on this concept and which indicators have been used to operationalize this concept before.

Character identification

Identification is a process in which we do not merely sympathize with someone; rather, we momentarily become them (Oatley, 1999, p. 446). As mentioned above, the E-ELM considers character identification one of the two most important indicators of narrative persuasion (Slater & Rouner, 2002, p. 177). The present study will focus on analyzing the process of character identification. However, as a widely recognized concept in media studies, it has been defined in various ways. This chapter will explain character identification, how it is defined in media studies and how the concept is related to this study

The concept of character identification

Early 20th-century research on child development explored identification, with Freud defining it through behavior, motives, and aspirations (Bronfenbrenner, 1960, p.22). He explored how a young boy aspires to embody his father's ideal image by closely observing and replicating his behavior (Zillmann, 1995, p. 34). Freud emphasized that identification goes beyond mere imitation, he argued that the aspiration 'to be like' the figure leads to the internalization of that figure (Zillmann, 1995, p. 34). Later, Wollheim described it as an unconscious merging with another person, emphasizing perspective-taking (Braddock, 2012, p.1). Both Freud and Wollheim include relinquishing one's own sense of identity and viewing the world from another person's perspective in their definitions (Cohen, 2001, p.248). Although Freud's work has been criticized over the years, it has remained influential, as many new theories and studies have drawn from his ideas (Bronfenbrenner, 1960, p. 22).

In 1982, Metz introduced the term 'cinematic identification,' expanding on Freud's concept of identification (Zillmann, 1995, p. 35). Metz suggests that identification in cinema isn't a single process, but one that is layered and constantly shifting (Metz, 1981, p.54). To explain this, he distinguishes between primary and secondary identification. Primary identification refers to the spectator's initial alignment with their own act of looking, shaped by the cinematic structure itself (Metz, 1981, p. 56). Before any connection with characters or actors can take place, the viewer is first positioned by the camera and sound system, which guide visual and auditory perception (Zillmann,

1995, p. 35). Secondary identification only occurs once this foundation is set, involving a projection onto specific characters or narrative elements (Metz, 1981, p. 56). While primary identification secures the spectator's position within the film, secondary identification allows for emotional engagement with what unfolds on screen (Metz, 1981, p. 57). Both levels are crucial to understanding how cinema operates as a symbolic and imaginary system.

In the field of film studies, character identification has been defined and researched in many ways. For example: the similarity of a character, liking of a character or the extent to which one relates to a character (Murphy et al., 2011, p.409). The degree of identification varies based on how much one adopts another's perspective and temporarily loses awareness of their own (Cohen, 2001).

The persuasive power of character identification

Empirical evidence by Igartua (2010) confirmed that identifying with characters enhances the enjoyment of audiovisual narratives (p. 368). Which is important for filmmakers who want to entertain their audiences. But wildlife conservation documentaries want to do more than entertain, they want to persuade action taking. Identification is also an effective persuasive strategy as it helps overcome the instinct to focus solely on one's own viewpoint (Cohen, 2001, p.248). Oatley (1995) discusses engaging with a fictional world can trigger diverse emotions, including empathy, aversion, and connections formed through identifying with characters (p.72). Additionally, identification was linked to deep reflection during film reception and the development of a more complex discourse (Igartua, 2010, p. 368). Alternative perspectives and encouraging others to relate to them can create new opportunities for understanding. Tchernev (2022) explains this as follows: "Identification involves taking the perspective of someone else, and by doing so, perhaps seeing a new viewpoint on an issue" (p. 741).

Because identification is an immersive process, it is likely to diminish both the desire and ability to counter argue (Igartua & Barrios, 2012). Additionally, it has been proven by De Graaf et al. (2011) that identification has a positive effect on narrative persuasion and thus that viewers adapt attitudes or reinforce their attitudes based on the character's attitudes (p.817).

Indicators of character identification

However, there does not seem to be one widely recognized definition, measurement or scale regarding character identification. The present study will, therefore, combine definitions of identification based on studies from multiple scholars to develop a list of 5 indicators of character identification.

1. Empathy

Cohen (2001) found that the level of empathy is one of the biggest indicators of character identification (p. 256). He defines this as the viewer sharing the feelings of the character; if the character is sad, does the viewer feel sad as well? Maccoby and Wilson (1957) have also recognized

this. They mention that the viewer internally mirrors various aspects of the character's behavior, including the emotions they associate with them, experiencing fear when the character is in danger and a sense of relief when they safely escape (p. 76). Not all emotional states shown by characters trigger empathy; in fact, viewers are more likely to respond empathetically to negative emotions, even when they don't share the same experiences (Keen, 2006, p. 214). Zillmann (1995) aligns this emphatic involvement with Humphrey's (1922) theory of empathy (p. 42). Humphrey (1922) highlights in his theory the mechanism why people react emotionally to others' suffering even when they are not directly experiencing it (p. 118).

2. Perspective taking

The second indicator is more of a cognitive nature, perspective-taking is a key cognitive component of character identification, where viewers adopt a character's viewpoint, understand their motives, and align with their goals (Cohen, 2001, p. 248). Maccoby and Wilson (1957, p. 77) suggest that viewers are more likely to engage with protagonists whose actions are socially acceptable. Zillmann also emphasizes moral appraisal, stating that identification depends on how audiences judge a character's behavior (1995, p. 45). Oatley (1994) also argues that fictional narratives function as cognitive simulations, where viewers mentally process a character's goals, extending their emotional and intellectual engagement (p. 71).

3. Homophily

Homophily is recognized when an individual perceives another person, in this case the protagonist, as similar to themselves (Slater & Rouner, 2002, p. 183). Maccoby and Wilson (1957) implemented this in their research as an aspect fostering identification (p.77). Eyal and Rubin (2003) state that higher levels of homophily are associated with greater identification, defining similarity in terms of social status, beliefs, and education (p. 80). The present research will take this a step further by considering similar characteristics such as personality traits, behaviors, and experiences.

4. Liking

Slater and Rouner (2002) show that their factor analyses indicated that perceiving oneself as similar to a character is distinct from having a favorable opinion of the character (p. 184). Among other scholars, Basil (1996) has used 'liking' in his measurement of identification in his research on the identification process in health communication (p. 484). In this they questioned readers if they liked the character. Zillmann (1995) found that the more respondents view protagonists as friends, the greater their emotional involvement, resulting in stronger hopes for desired outcomes, fears of unfavorable ones, and intensified feelings of empathic distress and joy (p. 48).

5. Wishful identification

Scholars have also expressed the need for indicators of long-term identification. Rosengren et al. (1976) measured this by what Hoffner and Buchanan (2005) identify as 'wishful identification' (p.327). That is why this research will add a fifth indicator, namely; that of the desire of the viewer to be like the character. Moyer-Gusé (2008) distinguishes wishful identification from identification as it is often confused for the same (p.409). Therefore, it will not be considered a direct indicator of character identification but rather as a separate concept.

Identification with animal characters

McCormack and his colleagues (2021) propose new research on identification with non-human characters and its impact on attitude change in environmental films (p. 1199). Keen constructed a theory for narrative empathy in which she highlights that a strong pattern indicates that readers' empathy is rooted in character identification, which relies on attributes such as a familiar context and implied emotions, rather than the need for realistic representation or human likeness (Keen, 2006, p. 214). Research on VR experiences promoting a connection to nature found that psychological factors can enhance the feeling of experiencing an animal's perspective. This process, similar to that of character identification, appears to strengthen feelings of connection and engagement with nature (Ahn et al., 2016, p. 413). One might suggest that this also applies to conservation documentaries.

These studies indicate that viewers can identify with characters even if they are animals, this is also seen in research on anthropomorphism. This is the concept of attributing human traits, like emotions, values, and intentionality, to other species and is a frequent feature in environmental films (McCormack et al., 2021, p. 1198). McCormack and colleagues mention that this tendency is arguably unavoidable in storytelling, as it reflects the fundamental way humans make sense of the world (p. 1198). Novák (2023) explains how anthropomorphism is cinematically constructed to stimulate empathy in audiences. Cinematic techniques to do so are adding emotive music and anthropomorphic narration (p.6). McCormack and colleagues go so far to say that a certain level of anthropomorphism might be necessary to foster identification with and empathy toward non-human beings (p. 1201). They call for a greater insight in how anthropomorphism affects audience identification with animal characters (p. 1198).

However, Larsen and her colleagues (2017) found that children are more likely to apply the moral lessons of a story to real-life situations when the story features human characters as they relate more to human characters and are less likely to internalize lessons from animal figures (p.6). Moreover, Dessart (2018) concluded that non-human characters in advertisements lead to high transportation which can hinder character identification (p.301). The findings indicate that animal characters enhance consumers' narrative transportation to an even greater extent but make identification more challenging. When the presence of animals reduces character identification, storytelling negatively affects brand attitude. So if this principle applies to conservation

documentaries, it suggests that animal-focused stories and human-focused stories may not generate the same levels of attitude change because of the levels of narrative transportation.

Summarizing

This comprehensive theoretical framework forms the foundation on which the operationalization of this study is built. It provides the basis for analyzing how narrative persuasion is experienced differently through identification, while also considering the potential interference of narrative transportation. Central to this framework is the Extended Elaboration Likelihood Model (E-ELM), which outlines the process of narrative persuasion and the role of identification within it. A key focus of this study is the possible tension between identification and narrative transportation, particularly when animal protagonists are involved, as transportation may reduce the effectiveness of identification. This theoretical insight serves to highlight the challenges of character identification in conservation documentaries. While transportation is addressed conceptually, it will not be incorporated into the operationalization of the research. Instead, the core theories on narrative persuasion and character identification will be used to inform the operational model.

The theories discussed above informed the development of a topic list based on key indicators of character identification. According to Cohen (2001), viewers are often unaware of the identification process, as it occurs unconsciously (p. 255). This makes it challenging to ask interviewees direct questions such as, 'Do you identify with this character?' Although character identification is a well-researched phenomenon, there is no universally accepted definition, measurement, or scale, particularly one suited to qualitative research. To address this, the present study combines definitions and insights from multiple scholars to construct a topic list for the interviews. This list, grounded in the indicators of identification outlined in this chapter, will guide the exploration of how identification is experienced. These indicators are grouped into five key concepts: empathy, perspective-taking, homophily, liking, and wishful identification. They will be further operationalized in the next chapter.

Methodology

Method

This research takes on a qualitative approach to answer the research question. Van Krieken and her colleagues (2017) mentions how identification is a dynamic process that changes in intensity throughout reading, yet it is often measured through post-reading quantitative questionnaires with self-report items (p.1). Recently, there has been debate about whether these explicit measures accurately capture complex experiences like immersion and identification (Van Krieken et al., 2017, p.2). Since this study examines the process of identification, accessing participants' nuanced insights is crucial, which purely quantitative methods cannot facilitate.

Fifteen semi-structured interviews have been conducted to gain deep insights into their experiences of the character identification process. In-depth interviewing is particularly useful for uncovering hidden aspects of experiences of the self and capturing diverse perspectives on a given activity (Johnson, 2001, p.106). Additionally, given the comparative nature of the research, it is not only important to determine whether identification occurs but also to understand how it is constructed and how it differs across cases. Interviews provide space for subtle observations, allowing for a broader analysis of diverse insights (Johnson, 2001, p.105). As identification occurs unconsciously, multiple questions about participants' experiences are necessary to develop a comprehensive understanding, making in-depth interviews the most relevant method for this study. In conclusion, in-depth interviewing is the most effective approach for exploring implicit knowledge and multiple perspectives, as it uncovers insights that are often difficult to articulate.

Sampling

This research will take Kloep and Arnett's (2010) definition of young adults, namely ranging ages from 18-29 (p.13). The sample thus exists of 15 young adults in that age range. Additionally, it was important that the interviewees did not have strong opinions about or experience in wildlife conservation as that could impact their identification experience. If perhaps they had had a strong interest in wildlife conservation and have participated in similar activities, they could have had a biased look on the protagonist. When sampling the interviewees, a pre-conversation was necessary to determine if they met the requirements.

The sampling method used was a combination between convenience and diversity sampling (Etikan, 2017, p. 216.). As the only requirements were age and whether they have strong existing attitudes, a convenient sampling was the easiest method. However, for the sake of reliability of the research, a diverse sample consisting of different ages and educational levels has been searched for. Deliberate sampling was conducted to ensure as diverse a sample as possible, leading to more varied data. As convenience sampling has been applied all the interviewees hold a Dutch nationality.

The respondents were found through first, second and third social circles. To find a diverse sample as possible, different ages and educational levels were taken into consideration. Through connections phone numbers were shared and the interviewees have been contacted through Whatsapp to find out if they met the requirements and what time would have suited them. The interviewees have been informed about the research, what the interview would entail and how long it would take. Before the interview the respondents were asked to fill in the consent form. In this form it is highlighted how participation is voluntary, and they would have the right to stop when they wanted to. This form also explained what the research is and how it will be used. The form is found back in appendix A. The interviews were conducted either face-to-face or via the video calling platform Microsoft Teams. A semi-structured topic guide, consisting of several themes and corresponding sub-questions, was used to structure the conversation. This topic list is found in the appendix B. While this guide served as a reference throughout the interviews, deviations occasionally occurred to allow for deeper exploration of specific topics. The list of respondents is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Respondent	Gender	Age	Education level
Respondent 1	Male	18	WO-student
Respondent 2	Male	18	MBO-student
Respondent 3	Female	19	VWO-scholar
Respondent 4	Female	19	HBO-student
Respondent 5	Female	20	MBO-student
Respondent 6	Male	21	HBO-student
Respondent 7	Male	21	HBO-student
Respondent 8	Female	21	MBO-student
Respondent 9	Male	23	WO graduate
Respondent 10	Female	24	WO-student
Respondent 11	Female	24	HBO-student
Respondent 12	Male	25	WO graduate

Respondent 13	Female	27	WO graduate
Respondent 14	Female	28	HBO graduate
Respondent 15	Male	28	MBO graduate

Operationalization

This research does not aim to determine how narrative persuasion impacts attitude change, as this has already been extensively studied by many scholars (Dal Cin et al., 2004; De Graaf et al., 2011; Ndulue & Orji, 2022; Shen & Li, 2015; Slater & Rouner, 2002; Van Enschot et al., 2023). Instead, it seeks to explore how narrative persuasion is experienced through character identification. The E-ELM model serves as a foundation to argue that character identification is an indicator of effective persuasion (Slater & Rouner, 2002, p. 177).

Empathy, based on the theory of empathy by Humphrey's (1922) is often seen as a big part of character identification since the beginning of research in this field. Zillmann (1995) explains empathy as a reflexive process that indicates a strong emotional involvement (p. 40). Cohen (2001), Maccoby and Wilson (1957) and Zillmann (1995) among many other scholars recognize the feeling of empathy for a character linked to the identification process through emotional involvement. Maccoby and Wilson (1957) also highlight this process, noting that viewers tend to internally replicate aspects of a character's behavior and emotional state, feeling fear when the character is in danger and relief when they make it out safely (p. 76).

Moreover, adopting the character's perspective is often seen as a key indicator of effective identification. Unlike empathy, it is not primarily driven by instinctive emotional reactions, but rather by a cognitive alignment with the character's goals. Cohen (2001) explains this difference as: "feeling with the character, rather than about the character" (p.251). The moral appraisal of a viewer considering the choices that the character makes is a part of this process (Zillmann, 1995, p. 45). When a viewer adopts a character's goals, not just understanding them, but internalizing the perspective and concerns behind them, they are partaking in a deep emotional and intellectual engagement (Oatley, 1994, p. 71).

Additionally, homophily, or the similarity in characteristics and demographics, between viewer and protagonist has shown to impact the identification process (Maccoby & Wilson, 1957, p. 77). Maccoby & Wilson have proven with their research that viewers that feel more similar to a character, experience greater identification (1957, p.79). Eyal and Rubin (2003) focus merely on social status, beliefs, and education. As the interviewees will have to analyze their homophily with an octopus, this present study will go a bit further than only demographics. A focus will also be placed on examining whether the viewer perceives themselves as sharing any personal characteristics with

the protagonist.

Liking the character has also often been used as an indicator of identification, one that is thought of positively is easier to identify with (Basil, 1996, p. 484). According to Slater and Rouner (2002), their factor analysis revealed that perceiving similarity to a character (homophily) is distinct from simply liking the character (p. 184). While homophily focuses solely on perceived similarities, liking also involves evaluative judgments, whether respondents view the character positively or negatively, and which traits influence that assessment. Zillmann (1995) found that when respondents develop a sense of friendship with protagonists, their emotional engagement deepens, leading to heightened anticipation for positive events and increased concern over negative outcomes (p. 48).

Finally, the concept of wishful identification will be taken into consideration as a part of identification. This has been thought of to be different than identification or merely the liking of a character, yet it is an important part of narrative persuasion (Moyer-Gusé, 2008, p.409). That is why this research has decided to consider this as important to answer the research question. The operationalization of these indicators is expressed in Table 2.

Table 2

Overarching concept	Key concept	Definition	Data example
Character identification	Empathy (Cohen, 2001); (Maccoby and Wilson, 1957); (Zillmann, 1995)	How empathic feelings transfer from the character towards the viewer.	If the character is sad, does the viewer feel sad as well? Why or why not? (emotions such as: sad, happy, hopeful).
	Perspective taking (Cohen, 2001); (Zillmann, 1995); (Oatley, 1994)	How the viewer shares the perspective of the character and thus understands the motives of their behavior.	If the viewer agrees with the behaviour and decisions. And how they can argue the perspective of the character. Additionally, if the viewer felt like their perspective could be influenced.
	Homophily (Maccoby & Wilson, 1957)	Which kind of similarities there are between the viewer	Which characteristics does the viewer see that are similar on global aspects but also characteristics.

		and the character.	Also, why those and why not others.
	Liking (Basil, 1996; (Zillmann, 1995)	How a viewer feels about the character and the affinities they share with them.	To what extent the viewer likes the character and perhaps could see as a friend. Why or why not?
Wishful identification	Wishful identification (Moyer-Gusé, 2008)	How a viewer desires to be like the character.	How the interviewee expresses that they wish to be more like the character in the fragments. Additionally, what kind of aspects.

Data collection

The interviews began with general and demographic questions to help the interviewee feel at ease and to establish a basic profile. After this, a 6-minute segment (18:30–24:10) from the second episode of the Netflix documentary series *Our Planet* was shown. This conservation-focused series subtly promotes environmental awareness. In the selected clip, an octopus attempts to hide from predators using human garbage. Following the viewing, questions based on the topic list developed through the operationalization of character identification were asked.

The series *Our Planet* was intentionally selected for its popularity, critical undertone, and subtle conservation message. Each episode features different animals, and apart from the narrator, no human characters are present. The octopus’s segment was chosen to thematically align with the second clip shown.

Next, participants watched a 6-minute segment (17:13–23:30) from the Oscar-winning documentary *My Octopus Teacher*. This segment follows protagonist Craig Foster during his first physical contact with the octopus. As in the first case, the conservation message is present but subtle, becoming more explicit toward the end. Unlike *Our Planet*, the primary character in this documentary is human, and the octopus plays a more secondary role. After viewing, the same set of identification-based questions was asked.

Finally, interviewees reflected on how the two viewing experiences differed for them. All interviews were recorded using Apple’s Recorder app and transcribed with Whisper. Transcriptions were manually checked against the original audio to ensure accuracy.

Data-analysis

The data has been analyzed through conducting a thematic analysis (TA). It is an effective method for examining experiences and understandings and thus suitable for this research (Herzog et al., 2019, p.2). This method is widely used in qualitative data analysis methods in studies on communication, media, and cultural policy. Additionally, TA is not dependent on pre-existing theories, making it applicable for purely inductive research (Herzog et al., 2019, p.2). Since this qualitative research is guided by questions that emerged from theory rather than predefined hypotheses, this method is therefore appropriate. The process unfolded in three stages: open coding, axial coding, and finally selective coding. This final step involves zooming in on the most relevant codes in relation to the research focus (Boeije, 2010).

As Boeije (2010) describes, qualitative data analysis is about breaking data apart and putting them back together in a meaningful way, to discover themes that help make sense of the data and answer the research question. The goal is to move from raw material to clear findings that directly support the research question. The first phase, open coding, involved working through the transcripts and beginning to interpret the data by tagging pieces of it with early ideas (p. 96). Comparing codes consistently was key during this step. From this, a coding tree emerged, an organized structure of all developed codes, found in Appendix C. Notable quotes were saved throughout this phase to support theme development later on.

Next came axial coding, where the goal was to narrow things down by clustering related codes (p. 108). This phase resulted in an overview of 23 broader code categories and their related sub-codes, forming the foundation for the potential themes (Appendix C). Each category was reworded to reflect its essence clearly. Some codes that proved to be irrelevant were disregarded in this step. The final stage, selective coding, involved choosing which categories would become the core themes and determining their relevance (p.115). These five final themes are what emerged from the full coding process, and most importantly, they form the basis for answering the main research question (Boeije, 2010). These themes and their subthemes will be discussed in the following chapter.

Reliability and validity

Because this research is qualitative, the researcher plays an active role in interpreting the data and making sense of participants' responses. This means that the findings are, to some extent, shaped by the researcher's perspective, background knowledge, and personal involvement in the topic (Johnson, 2001, p.105). To ensure reliability, reflexivity was prioritized throughout the process. This involved being transparent about decisions made, and critically reflecting on how the researcher's own position may have influenced the study (Herzog et al., 2019, p.6). Reflexivity here refers to being aware of how personal views or biases could have shaped the outcomes (Noble & Smith, 2015, p.34). In this case, the researcher's interest in wildlife conservation documentaries, and a personal preference for human protagonists, may have influenced the way some data were interpreted.

However, to support validity, a topic list was created beforehand and used consistently in all interviews.

Key concepts were also clearly defined and operationalized earlier in this section. Reliability was further strengthened by keeping a transparent record of how the data were collected, coded, and analyzed (Noble & Smith, 2015, p.34). This helps make the research process easy to follow, so others could trace the reasoning or even repeat the steps if needed. The detailed description of the analysis above contributes to the overall trustworthiness of this study.

Results

This chapter presents the findings of this research, which explores how young adults experience identification with human versus animal characters in conservation documentaries. As this research focuses on character identification, much of the interview content revolved around this theme, culminating in the final question: With which protagonist do you identify more, and why? As expected, this question often did not lead to a straightforward or clear answer. While many respondents said they could see more of themselves in the human character, several expressed a stronger connection with the octopus. However, almost all respondents noted that identifying with an animal, especially an octopus, felt, in some way, surreal, difficult, or strange compared to the human character. A key reason for this was the emotional gap respondents experienced: it was simply harder to recognize or imagine emotions in an animal, let alone connect to them and feel empathy. Still, that gap wasn't impossible to bridge. With the help of cinematic and narrative tools, respondents were often able to imagine what the octopus might be feeling, allowing for a more cognitive or creative form of identification.

The results are structured around five central themes. The first explores the emotional gap itself, how and why respondents struggled to relate to the animal character, and how this contrasted with their experience of the human protagonist. The second theme shows how that gap could be filled through narrative structure, music, editing, and other cinematic techniques that helped viewers emotionally engage. The third focuses on the role of human presence and anthropomorphism, how either the inclusion of a human character or the humanization of the octopus enabled connection. The fourth theme discusses the importance of perceived realism, showing how identification was shaped by what felt real or believable. Finally, the fifth theme looks at subtle persuasive effects, such as how passion and representation of human action influenced viewers' attitudes toward conservation.

The emotional gap: Identifying with human versus animal characters

This first theme explores the emotional gap that emerged when respondents identified with the octopus character compared to the human character. The results showed that emotions were more easily recognized when respondents watched the human character, compared to watching the octopus. For the animal character, suggestions focused on using a different species, while for the human character, adjustments were mainly related to demographic traits. This theme consists of four subthemes: Lack of recognition of emotions in the octopus, Identification with an octopus as a surreal experience, Emotional connection through the human's perceived emotion and embodiment, and Greater connection when the human character shares similar demographics. These subthemes offer further support for understanding the experience of identification with both the octopus and the human character, as well as the differences found between the two.

Lack of recognition of emotions of the octopus

Many respondents struggled to feel empathy for the octopus. This was not because they disliked the character or did not care about its success, but rather because they found it difficult to recognize any clear emotional expressions in the octopus. Instead, what they were able to identify were personality traits or characteristics. However, one cannot empathize with characteristics alone, empathy typically requires recognition of emotion. As respondent 9 (Male, 23) explained when asked which emotions the octopus displayed:

"Yes, a little... Yes, emotions. I don't know if it was really emotions, but because of the music and the narration, it did feel like he was creative. A bit headstrong. Those are more personality traits, I think. No, real emotions... I don't think I could really pick up on those."

When the majority of the respondents attempted to justify how they identified with the octopus, this was often based on homophily, specifically, perceived similarity in personality traits. However, according to Cohen (2001) levels of empathy is one of the biggest indicators of character identification (p. 256). As often no emotions were recognized, little empathy was felt. Since no demographic similarities could be found, the connection was almost always drawn from traits such as intelligence, creativity, or persistence, qualities respondents saw in themselves. This shows that emotional connection is not needed to get an understanding of a character. The impact of music and narration, as mentioned by respondent 9, will be further discussed later in this chapter.

Identification with an octopus as a surreal experience

All respondents described the experience of identifying with the octopus as somewhat surreal, strange, new, or unfamiliar. As mentioned earlier, most were able to find some form of homophily but very little feelings of empathy. A few respondents noted that it wasn't necessarily difficult to identify with an animal in general, but that the challenge lay specifically in identifying with an octopus. The octopus was often described as feeling "out of reach" or "inaccessible." Reasons for this included the fact that it is not a land animal, not soft or cuddly, or simply not part of everyday human life. Octopuses were simply found unrelatable. According to Larsen and her colleagues (2017) it is specifically the lack of relatability of an animal that hinders identification (p.6). Respondent 7 (Male, 21) described his distant feeling toward the octopus as follows:

"Yes, just because... it feels much more distant to me. I don't deal with it on a daily basis. You do see cats and dogs around. You see them in your environment; that's much more normalized. But an octopus, on the other hand, I've never heard of anyone having an octopus as a pet, for example. So, I

think it's actually just very practical thoughts like: an octopus lives underwater in the sea, it's a wild animal. And because of that, I don't see it as a pet, so I'd be less inclined to connect with it, I think."

This suggests that finding a connection, and possibly identifying, with an animal is easier when the species is more familiar or lives closer to humans. However, this would mean that any species that lives in the wild, separated from humans would be hard to identify with. According to another respondent, even any land animal, such as elephants, would already feel more relatable. So, while identification with animals may feel surreal, it might be possible if the species is carefully chosen.

Emotional connection through the human's perceived emotion and embodiment

Respondents appeared to emotionally connect to the human character more easily. While almost all respondents did not necessarily like the human character or share his perspective, the emotions he displayed helped facilitate a sense of connection for the majority. This was a surprising result as Basil (1996) perceived 'liking of the character' important in the process of identification (p. 484). In the present research liking did not show to be one of the key indicators. Respondent 12 (Male, 25) described his emotional response to the human character:

"Well, I think, because he was talking about making sort of... this connection and reaching the hand to the octopus, and then the octopus sort of coming back to him. And I sort of could share that emotion with him. That was really cool. It was sort of unique to see that you could reach a hand to an octopus and get sort of a hand back. And so, he was sort of amazed by it, right? And I was kind of amazed too that that's possible and to have some sort of connection with a creature down there. "

The emotional connection was not only about perceiving the human's emotions but also recognizing a shared capacity for emotion. Respondent 1 (Male, 18) highlighted this sense of shared experience:

"I think it feels closer to you because it's a human as well. You can understand his emotions more easily, he talks about his experience, which helps you connect with it. And yeah, maybe that just made it feel a bit more exciting or something. And like you said: I'd like to be like him. It makes you curious, and in a way, you reflect yourself more in him."

In this case, the emotion helped to foster both empathy and homophily.

Greater connection when the human character shares similar demographics

As for the octopus, the respondents had ideas of how they would be able to better identify with a different human character, particularly one who shared more demographic similarities with them. Almost all respondents stated that a character closer to their own age or gender would have made it easier to feel connected. This is in line with earlier research, which shows that perceiving a character as similar to oneself can foster identification (Maccoby & Wilson, 1957, p. 77). Respondent 4 (Female, 19) expressed this:

"Also, because you associate it more with him as a lifestyle, I guess. And as a person himself. You always have a certain image of someone, of course. And with an older man, you're less likely to relate to him. Simply because I'm a woman and he's a man, that already creates a kind of gap. And because he's significantly older, of course. I think that makes it harder to put yourself in someone's shoes."

Several other respondents shared this sentiment, adding that if the man had been younger, they might have imagined themselves in the same situation. A few even said they could have seen themselves becoming friends with the character had he been closer to their age. Zillmann (1995) found that the more audiences view protagonists as friends, the greater their emotional involvement (p. 48)

When developing a character, it is therefore important to consider the target audience, ensuring that at least some demographic alignment exists in order to enhance both homophily and liking.

Filling the emotional gap: How narrative and cinematic techniques bridge viewer connection

As explained in the first theme, emotion and the potential for empathy are key components in character identification, which supports the earlier research outlined in the theoretical framework. However, perceiving emotion in the octopus proved to be difficult, which hindered the identification process. This second theme discusses that although respondents often could not clearly see or recognize emotion in the octopus, they were able to imagine what the octopus might be feeling. This imagination was supported by narrative and cinematic techniques, helping to fill the emotional gap between identifying with an animal character versus a human one.

Almost all respondents, even when they could not directly perceive emotion, were able to imagine it through the storyline or cinematic techniques. Only one respondent was not successful in finding, imagining, or recognizing any emotion at all. A portion of respondents, when asked which emotions they recognized in the octopus, immediately responded with emotions they imagined the octopus might be feeling. The others needed a bit more guidance to apply their imagination. This suggests that although it may be more difficult for viewers to feel an emotional connection with the

octopus, it is not impossible. That connection can be cognitively constructed.

This theme consists of three subthemes, each representing a different construct that helped fill the emotional gap: Lack of perceived emotion compensated by imagined emotion, Empathy and connection through narrative, and Cinematic techniques as constructors of empathy and identification.

Lack of perceived emotion compensated by imagined emotion

Respondents often could not perceive any emotional signs in the octopus. This was either because they did not recognize facial expressions or because they believed that octopuses are not capable of feeling and expressing emotions. Nevertheless, almost all respondents were able to imagine how the octopus might feel by projecting their own emotions onto its situation. These imagined emotions included fear, disappointment, surprise, and happiness. Although not all respondents reported feeling empathy, this act of imagining emotions may align with the concept of the deictic shift discussed in the theoretical framework. The deictic shift refers to the process by which viewers continue to shift their perspective and mentally position themselves within the times and places described in a story (Hamby et al., 2016, p. 115). Respondent 11 (Female, 24) illustrated this by imagining how the octopus might feel:

"I don't know if an octopus really has emotions, but I do think he could be frustrated when there's so much trash in the water and he can't hide behind it. Because of all the garbage, he hides behind it, but then it doesn't really work. That could be kind of a disappointment."

Respondent 11 could not perceive direct emotion and was unsure whether octopuses even have emotions, however, she was able to shift her perspective into the octopus's situation. While this emotional connection required more cognitive effort, it still allowed for a form of identification to occur.

Empathy and connection through narrative

The imagination of emotion was often explained as being shaped by the structure of the narrative. Seeing a clear storyline with ups and downs made it easier for respondents to project emotions onto the octopus. The majority of participants noted that the storyline helped them emotionally connect with the character. Because they saw the challenges the octopus had to face, they were better able to empathize. This is what respondent 8 (Female, 21) said when asked which emotions she felt while watching fragment 1:

"Yes, I think mostly pity. That he, yeah, because of those setbacks, I just really hoped he would make it. And of course, you just want those little animals to survive. So I would find it really upsetting if it turned into a scene where he got stuck in a bottle or something like that. Yeah."

A few respondents even mentioned that their identification was stronger with the octopus than with the human character, precisely because of the storyline. This is Respondent 4's answer to the question of which fragment they felt a stronger sense of identification with the character.

"I think the first one. Because that's more of a process, really from beginning to end, searching, uncertainty, to eventually feeling proud. And here (the second fragment) it's almost the other way around, more about moving from a sense of connection to having to step away from it. And I think that in my life right now I'm more focused on working toward that positive outcome, rather than dealing with the feeling of having to let go."

This aligns with the notion by Keen, in which she claims that empathetic responses are more easily elicited by characters experiencing negative emotions (Keen, 2006, p. 214). This suggests that when constructing both animal and human characters, narrative structure and type of emotion is essential for emotional engagement.

Cinematic techniques as constructors of empathy and identification

Novák (2023) describes how empathy in audiences can be evoked through cinematic choices, especially with animal characters (p.6). Results aligned with this, as cinematic techniques such as music, close-up shots, narration, and editing played an important role in how respondents imagined the emotions of the octopus. These elements not only supported the projection of emotion onto the character but also shaped the respondents' own emotional responses, enabling empathy. This is what respondent 9 (Male, 23) shared about the role of cinematic choices in identifying with the octopus:

"Yes, you recognize yourself in it. That makes it real, and that's why you believe it too. And that's also why you start hoping for the octopus. That's why you can identify with it. If you hadn't had that, if you had just seen it the way it happened, without music, without those things, without the narration that explains it. It would have been different."

This demonstrates how cinematic choices can directly affect a viewer's ability to identify with an animal character. In respondent 9's case, he expressed that he was "hoping" for the octopus, a form of perspective taking and emotional engagement that was made possible through the use of music and narration. Other respondents also mentioned that close-up shots helped them feel as if they were physically present in the scene. Cinematic elements in fragment 2 were also described as important for how participants experienced identification, regardless of whether the protagonist was human or animal. However, since respondents generally found it easier to perceive emotion in the human character, these cinematic techniques were especially important for bridging the emotional gap when it came to the octopus.

How human presence and anthropomorphism shape viewer connection

In the third theme it is not only emotion and empathy that were mentioned as part of the identification process. Respondents also emphasized the importance of human representation or human-like traits. In the case of identifying with the octopus, this came in different forms, either by humanizing the octopus themselves or through the humanization of the octopus by the filmmakers. Even the garbage shown in fragment 1 was enough to serve as a human element for some respondents.

Almost all respondents referred to the human body or to a humanized octopus in some form. The human body often acted as a point of reference, grounding, or recognition during their identification with the human in fragment 2. In contrast, for the octopus, some respondents expressed a lack of identification with its physical form. For these respondents, that gap was filled by the humanization of the octopus. This process, referred to as anthropomorphism, was previously defined in the theoretical framework as the attribution of human traits to other species, in this case the octopus (McCormack et al., 2021, p. 1198).

This theme consists of four subthemes: connection with the human body, anthropomorphism as a means of identifying with the animal, use of anthropomorphism through cinematic techniques, and human connection triggered by scenes involving garbage. Each of these subthemes contributed to the experience of identification with either the human or the octopus.

Connection with the human body

For the majority of respondents, it was easier to identify with the main character in fragment 2. One of the main reasons was that he was human, rather than an octopus. Respondents were better able to relate to his situation and emotions. A particularly important aspect of this connection was the recognition of the human body. After watching an octopus whose physical form was so unfamiliar, seeing a human body provided something the respondents could resonate with. Respondent 13 (Female, 27) explained the role of physical recognition in identification:

“Because you literally see him snorkeling. You see him walking into the water. So there are a lot of cues that he’s physically going to perform that action. And you don’t get that in the previous film. There, you’re suddenly underwater, and he went really deep. But now it’s quite clear that the water is actually quite shallow. Yeah.”

The presence of the human body made the experience in fragment 2 feel more tangible and relatable, which had been lacking in fragment 1. This may be linked to a more superficial form of homophily, where the physical resemblance between the viewer and the human character enables identification more readily than with an octopus. This contradicts the belief by Keen that realistic

representation or human likeness is not needed to be able to empathize and identify with a character (Keen, 2006, p. 214).

Anthropomorphism as a means of identifying with the animal

Even though no respondent resonated with the physical appearance of the octopus, the majority of the respondents engaged in humanizing the octopus in order to create a sense of homophily in other ways. This included attributing human-like actions, characteristics, intelligence, and body language to the animal. In these instances, respondents themselves applied anthropomorphism to make the octopus more relatable. This is a natural tendency according to McCormack and colleagues (2021), as is the fundamental way humans make sense of the world (p. 1198). Respondent 11 (Female, 24) described this when asked if she and the octopus resembled each other:

"I've never really thought about it before. Yeah, I did think it was a beautiful animal, and it was good at figuring out what to do next if something didn't work out. It thought in terms of multiple solutions. Kind of like a human, actually. If something doesn't work the first time, you move on to another solution. That's how I think too. Yeah, it's solution-oriented, yeah."

This example shows that homophily, as well as empathy, played a role in identification. The respondent first perceived the octopus as human-like and was then able to reflect herself in it. This indicates that identifying with an animal character may require an additional cognitive step compared to identifying with a human, the step of anthropomorphizing.

Use of anthropomorphism through cinematic techniques

However, it was not always the viewer who made the anthropomorphic leap. Almost all respondents recognized that the filmmakers themselves had employed anthropomorphism in shaping the octopus character. This is a common technique in wildlife conservation films (McCormack et al., 2021, p. 1198). Anthropomorphism is often constructed through cinematic techniques such as emotive music and anthropomorphic narration (Novák, 2023, p. 6). Respondent 13 (Female, 27) described this observation:

"They really humanize her a lot. For example: by saying that she has a gun. But an octopus doesn't have a gun. An octopus doesn't even know what a gun is. But that makes it feel very human. They make her very human. But there's also a balance, it's still clearly about an animal. It's not too much."

Respondent 13 emphasized that anthropomorphism was applied with the right balance. This suggests that excessive anthropomorphism could be perceived negatively. Prior research supports this, indicating that audiences often respond unfavorably when animals are overly humanized in

environmental films (McCormack et al., 2021, p. 1198). However, when anthropomorphism is applied with moderation, and the focus remains on the animal nature of the character, it can lead to a positive outcome. Research by Tam (2014, p. 188) supports this, showing that identification and feelings of relatedness are enhanced when animals in films are humanized to an appropriate degree.

Human connection triggered by scenes involving garbage

The above subthemes show how either the human body or the humanization of animals can foster a sense of connection. However, a few respondents also mentioned feeling a human connection through the presence of garbage in fragment 1. This garbage was explicitly human in origin, and in some cases, it even displayed packaging with human faces. In a fragment where no humans were shown, the garbage served as a substitute for human presence. Respondent 7 (Male, 21) described his reaction:

"Yes, also because it's really a world we don't live in at all. But that also makes it feel very new. And what I liked was that they started right away by showing how the octopus was really using, or wanted to use, the plastic waste that was lying around. And because that's something very human, I immediately became curious about the impact we have on the ocean: what the octopus was going to do with it. Usually, of course, it's always something negative. But in this case, the octopus actually seemed to be rethinking it, maybe even turning it into a home. That really grabbed me from the start. So that human element, that was definitely one of the reasons I got so drawn into it."

For respondent 7, the human connection created through garbage triggered emotion and absorption. This example illustrates not only the importance of human elements in the narrative, but also how they can appear in unexpected ways, beyond direct human representation or anthropomorphism.

What feels real: constructing realism through techniques and presence

When asked whether they felt absorbed or as if they were present in the scene, respondents often responded in terms of realism. This fourth theme came as a new perspective as it has not been included in the theoretical framework, yet has shown to be interesting in the process of identification. Although it was not taken into consideration earlier, it will be discussed in this theme.

On this topic, opinions were quite varied. One respondent believed fragment 1 was entirely staged and fictional, while another found that same fragment more realistic than fragment 2 due to the perceived likelihood of the events happening. Although views differed, many respondents considered realism to be an important factor. They were often more able to identify with the character from the fragment they perceived as more realistic.

While the concept of constructed realism was not explicitly discussed in the theoretical

framework, it turned out to be a relevant factor for absorption. This theme therefore explores which elements contributed to or disrupted the sense of realism in the two fragments. The most frequently mentioned aspects were grouped into the following subthemes: choice of music and cinematic techniques, realism shaped by specific narrative events, and the human body as a marker of reality.

Choice of music and cinematic techniques

As previously discussed, cinematic choices influence levels of emotion and empathy, but they also proved to affect the perception of realism. Respondents mentioned elements such as music, camera angles, and editing styles. This is how respondent 3 (Female, 19) reflected on the realism in fragment 2:

"But it's also really about how it was documented, so with the music. And that also played a big role."

She noted that the combination of music and the presence of a human made the scene feel more real to her. However, the relationship between cinematic techniques and the sense of realism was not always straightforward. Respondent 14 (Female, 28), for example, expressed a more analytical perspective when speaking about fragment 1:

"Yes, in a way, more so. I really felt like, okay, I do feel like the octopus is actually there. And I also had the idea that the footage was manipulated a bit. Like the hand with the little tentacles and the real footage... That was actually well done for evoking emotion. Because you see this close-up of the fingers together with the tentacles, which kind of connects human and animal. And you also literally see all the little suction cups sticking to his hand. So, I thought those shots were really beautiful. I think they do evoke some emotion. But I also tend to look at it more technically, like, these are shots that aren't completely realistic."

Respondent 14 did not find the fragment entirely realistic, but she understood why these cinematic choices were made: to evoke emotion. In her case, this goal was achieved. However, it did not necessarily enhance the realism of the scene. This suggests that although realism can support identification, and although emotion plays a central role in identification, the two do not always go hand in hand. Something can be emotionally powerful without being perceived as realistic.

Realism shaped by specific narrative events

For some respondents, it was not the style or form but the events themselves that shaped their sense of realism. However, whether this realism was associated with fragment 1 or fragment 2 varied. Respondent 1 (Male, 18) explained why he found fragment 1 more realistic:

"Yeah, I think... kind of... The second video, that kind of contact with an octopus doesn't happen very often. And in the first video, I was just watching the routine of sea life. So that plays out constantly. So, I'd say that maybe that happens more often or feels more realistic."

For respondent 1, watching the octopus in its natural, undisturbed behavior felt more believable. In contrast, the human-animal interaction in fragment 2 seemed less likely to occur and was therefore less realistic to him. This shows that for some, the perceived rarity of the interaction reduced its sense of realism. However, this was not the case for all respondents, as shown in the next subtheme.

The human body as a marker of reality

While some respondents, like respondent 1, saw the human presence in fragment 2 as unrealistic, others felt that it was exactly this presence that made the fragment feel more real and immersive. Respondent 5 (Female, 20) explained her experience of feeling present in the moment:

"Yes, maybe it's a bit of a repetition of what I just said, but maybe it's because now it's actually a human in the water, and you see, oh, a human can interact with an animal like that, instead of just watching an animal trying to survive in the ocean or catch prey or something like that. So I think you feel a bit more involved when you actually see a human interacting with animals in the ocean."

For respondent 5, seeing a human body involved in the scene was enough to foster a sense of involvement and realism. Where respondent 1 felt that the human-animal bond was unlikely and thus unrealistic, respondent 5 felt more connected and present because of human interaction. These contrasting views highlight that the construction of realism is not fixed but highly subjective.

Although respondents had differing views on what felt real, realism consistently emerged as an important factor in fostering absorption and identification. Whether constructed through cinematic techniques, narrative events, or the presence of the human body, the perception of realism shaped how viewers connected emotionally and cognitively to the scene.

Driving persuasion through passion and human representation

This research focuses on wildlife conservation documentaries, which are characterized by their persuasive intent to promote conservation values. Although this study did not aim to assess how successful these documentaries are in changing behavior, but rather explored the experience of identification, some persuasive outcomes still emerged from the interviews. None of the respondents reported feeling directly persuaded to take immediate environmental action, but several described more subtle effects. These were primarily related to increased awareness or a sense of empowerment,

the feeling that they could take action if they wanted to.

This fifth theme explores which factors contributed to that attitude shift. The two main subthemes are human representation leads to empowerment and passion as a driver of wishful identification.

Human representation leads to empowerment

As discussed in earlier themes, human elements play a role in generating emotion, realism, and identification. In this case, they also contributed to feelings of empowerment. Although respondents did not describe being persuaded in a direct or instructive way, they did feel inspired by what they saw. Seeing a human take action within the narrative gave them the sense that they could do so as well. In the second fragment, Craig, the protagonist, expresses concern for the octopus's safety, and is shown handling its physical contact with great care to avoid causing any harm. The presence of a relatable human character was especially powerful in fragment 2. This is how respondent 5 (Female, 20) described the impact of the human figure:

"Yes, because I think that now, when you really see the image of 'oh, he's doing this and he's able to achieve that with it,' it becomes much more interesting. And you think to yourself, 'oh, that's actually pretty cool to be able to do.' Instead of just seeing a clip of an octopus with 'waste' and then 'shell.' That's something completely different, then I wouldn't necessarily think, 'oh, I'd go snorkeling to see that.'"

The suggestion here is that seeing someone take meaningful action, especially someone relatable like a human, can evoke a sense of possibility in the viewer. When asked what role the human character plays in this process, respondent 9 (Male, 23) offered a concise answer:

"By simply showing that it's possible."

Although human representation did not lead to direct action it did show that meaningful action is within reach.

Passion as a driver of wishful identification

It was not just the presence of a human character that inspired respondents. The type of human also played a significant role. Moyer-Gusé (2008) clarified that wishful identification is a distinct concept from identification, as the two are often mistakenly seen as interchangeable (p. 409). So, although this is not necessarily a direct indicator of character identification, it has shown to be important in the process of narrative persuasion.

When asked about how the respondent would like to be more like the character, connecting to the concept of wishful identification, many respondents answered similarly. For the octopus this

meant characteristics like intelligence, patience and creativeness. However, for the human character, almost all respondents mention how they would like to be as passionate as he was. They were moved by his enthusiasm for nature, and especially for the octopus. Respondent 15 (Male, 28) described this effect as follows:

“I think the biggest thing is that if you find something that you're very interested in, it's easy to talk about those things and maybe take someone in your enthusiastic behavior, right so it could work in some kind of magnet that what you think about something you can give over to someone else. I think it kind of works like that. So I think yeah that's what I saw.”

Respondent 15 describes the human character's passion as a kind of magnetism that transfers passion to the viewer. In this case, his passion for nature and wildlife became contagious. Many other respondents expressed similar feelings. Rosengren et al. (1976) mention how wishful identification is a part of long-term identification. The character's passionate behavior did not necessarily instruct them to act, but it did cause an attitude change. This demonstrates how wishful identification can support persuasive outcomes by presenting a character whose qualities viewers want to adopt. For documentary makers aiming to promote conservation, this suggests that choosing characters who are visibly and verbally passionate can be a powerful way to inspire viewers.

Summary of results

In sum, the results show that while identifying with an animal like the octopus is possible, it takes more effort and often relies on imagination, narrative tools, and cinematic techniques. Respondents found it easier to connect with the human character, especially when they recognized shared emotion, demographics, or passion. Still, through anthropomorphism and creative storytelling, the octopus also managed to spark connection. The presence of a human, or even subtle traces of human life, proved essential in making the narrative feel relatable. In the next chapter, these insights come together to answer the research question and reflect its wider implications.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research has given rich insight into how young adults experience identification with human and animal characters in conservation documentaries. Identification proved to be complex and layered, especially when the protagonist was an animal like the octopus. A significant reason for this complexity was the emotional gap respondents described; they found it challenging to recognize or imagine emotions in an animal character, which hindered their ability to feel connected. Despite admiring the octopus and appreciating traits such as its intelligence and creativity, respondents often struggled to translate these positive feelings into genuine identification.

Yet, this emotional gap was not insurmountable. Cinematic and narrative tools such as music, editing, and storytelling techniques played a crucial role in bridging the gap. Respondents frequently used imagination, prompted by narrative structure and audiovisual elements, to project emotions onto the octopus. This imaginative connection did not always involve genuine empathy but still allowed for a cognitive understanding and a more abstract form of identification. The research highlights that even subtle cinematic choices significantly shape how viewers perceive characters emotionally and cognitively.

Human presence and anthropomorphism also emerged as vital components facilitating identification. Respondents emphasized that identification became easier with the inclusion of a human character or through human-like traits attributed to the animal. Anthropomorphism, whether applied by the respondents themselves or constructed deliberately through cinematic means, allowed participants to overcome some emotional distance, making the unfamiliar octopus feel more relatable. Even subtle human traces, like garbage in the ocean, could serve as powerful emotional cues, emphasizing the human impact and presence within the narrative.

The concept of realism emerged unexpectedly as an essential factor shaping identification. Viewers' perceptions of realism varied greatly and influenced their emotional engagement. Realism was shaped by cinematic techniques, narrative events, and human presence. Some respondents found the human-animal interaction unrealistic, whereas others considered it compellingly real. Regardless of these differences, realism consistently influenced the depth of viewer absorption and identification.

The results show that while all five indicators were mentioned, empathy and homophily stood out as the most prominent. This could be explained by the fact that identification, as previously noted, is often a subconscious process. Interestingly, even though respondents frequently expressed liking for the octopus, this did not necessarily translate into identification. In fact, while most respondents liked the octopus more, they still found it more difficult to identify with.

Lastly, the subtle persuasive effects of character identification emerged as noteworthy outcomes. Although respondents did not report immediate behavioral changes, they experienced increased awareness and empowerment through human representation and passion demonstrated by the protagonists. Human characters showing genuine enthusiasm for conservation effectively inspired

wishful identification, influencing viewers' attitudes positively toward conservation efforts. The visibility and verbal expression of passion notably heightened emotional involvement and subtly shifted perspectives.

Ultimately, this research demonstrates that while identifying with animal protagonists like the octopus requires additional cognitive and creative efforts, it remains achievable through thoughtful narrative and cinematic strategies.

Theoretical reflection

Although the results of this present research did support most of the expectations constructed through the theoretical framework, there were some differences. Interestingly for example, narrative transportation was not identified as the main obstacle to character identification, differing from Dessart's (2018, p. 301) findings. This research thus does not see transportation as a threat when identifying with animals. A reason for this difference could lie in the different species of animal used in the two researches. Where Dessart's research used animals like puppies, horses and bears which could be defined as 'cute' and 'soft', this current research used an octopus which was considered 'inaccessible'. It is possible that the 'cute' animals elicited a higher degree of narrative transportation than the octopus, which may have negatively impacted identification in a way the octopus did not. Instead, respondents described their main challenge as the difficulty in recognizing or perceiving clear emotions in the octopus, which created an emotional gap. This aligns with Cohen's (2001) claim that empathy, often triggered by the perception of emotion, is one of the strongest indicators of character identification (p. 256). The respondents' experiences support this, as many found it harder to identify with the octopus precisely because of the emotional gap.

However, this gap was not unbridgeable. Respondents frequently used anthropomorphism, either through their own imagination or encouraged by cinematic techniques, to bridge this gap. This aligns closely with claims by McCormack and colleagues (2021, p. 1198), highlighting anthropomorphism as a meaningful way to facilitate connections between viewers and animal characters. Furthermore, the importance of cinematic techniques, such as narration and music, as suggested by Novák (2023, p. 6), was clearly reflected in respondents' experiences. These cinematic elements enhanced anthropomorphic perceptions, making the octopus feel more relatable and easier to identify with. Contrary to Keen's (2006) argument that realistic representation or human likeness is not essential for identification, these findings emphasize the significance respondents placed on realistic human traits or representation to effectively overcome the emotional gap.

The importance of cinematic techniques was highlighted in several themes. While the theoretical framework of this paper did not go into great detail on this, it referenced Metz's theory of primary and secondary cinematic identification. Metz (1981) differentiates between primary

identification, where the viewer aligns with the act of looking shaped by the cinematic techniques, and secondary identification, where an emotional connection forms through projection onto characters within the narrative (pp. 56–57; Zillmann, 1995, p. 35). His theory suggests that primary identification must occur first before secondary, emotional identification can take place. This further supports the idea that cinematic techniques are essential for creating a strong emotional connection with characters.

Additionally, connected to the concept of storytelling, a structured narrative emerged as an important factor in respondents' ability to connect with both animal and human characters. This aligns with earlier research by Chattoo and Beattie and his colleagues, who argue that storytelling builds and evokes characters through a clear beginning, middle, and end (Beattie et al., 2011, p.112; Chattoo, 2020, p.102). Respondents explicitly emphasized that observing a character face challenges, experience setbacks, and eventually overcome difficulties greatly strengthened their sense of connection. Thus, the structured narrative component highlighted by Beattie et al. (2011) proved crucial in facilitating character identification (p.112).

The structured narrative was often described as particularly well executed for the character of the octopus. This was reflected in respondents' answers, where many shared how they gradually shifted their perspective to that of the octopus. This aligns with the deictic shift theory by Duchan et al. (1995), as explained by Hamby et al. (2016) in the context of narrative persuasion. In a deictic shift, viewers mentally reposition themselves within the narrative, moving more to the character and through different times and places described in the story (p. 115). When they return to their original perspective afterward, a process known as the deictic return or 'reflexion', they are able to make meaning from the experience (p. 119). In this study, the structured narrative enabled respondents to momentarily adopt the octopus's perspective and ultimately identify with it through this cognitive shift. This contrasts the potential expectation in the theoretical framework that an animal character would lead to bigger transportation that would disable the reflection phase limiting the reader's ability to connect the story back to their own reality (Dessart, 2018, p.291; Hamby et al., 2016, p. 119). A reason for this could thus be the importance of animal type. These findings suggest that high transportation and reflection are not necessarily opposites, as Dessart's literature implies, but can occur together under certain narrative conditions. Rather than blocking reflection, the non-human perspective, when embedded in a well-structured narrative, may even enhance it by offering enough distance for viewers to re-enter their own frame of reference with a new perspective. The theory could therefore benefit from a more nuanced view on transportation in animal-centred stories, especially by considering how narrative structure and animal type interact to support or limit reflexivity.

The indicators constructed in the operationalization, based on existing theories, proved to be relevant in the process of character identification, although for some more than others. Respondents

often emphasized the importance of demographic similarity, confirming earlier claims by Maccoby and Wilson (1957, p. 77) and Eyal and Rubin (2003, p. 80). However, the indicator of liking appeared to be less influential. Even though many respondents expressed a greater fondness for the octopus, they still identified more strongly with the human character. This contrasts with the theories by Basil (1996, p. 484) and Zillmann (1995, p. 48), which suggest that liking a character, or perceiving them as a friend, enhances identification. A possible explanation might lie in the human protagonist's personality, which was often described as 'blunt' or as adding little to the fragment. Several respondents felt they didn't get to know him well enough to form a strong opinion. This suggests that while the human was not particularly liked, he wasn't actively disliked either. Possibly, with a human character who expressed more personality, the role of liking in the identification process would have been more pronounced. Theories that position liking as a key driver of identification could benefit from accounting more explicitly for narrative context and character development. Research could be done using different fragments with variations of protagonists.

Although wishful identification appeared to play a role in persuasive outcomes, it did not equate to character identification. This supports Moyer-Gusé's (2008) distinction between the two, as they are often mistakenly seen as the same (p. 409). While the passion of the human character made some respondents aspire to be more like him, it did not necessarily lead to a deeper identification with him. However, through this wishful identification, respondents were able to mirror the human character's passion for nature. This aligns with what Tchernev (2022) describes as the persuasive power of character identification: adopting a new viewpoint on an issue (p. 741). This seems to blur the line between identification and wishful identification, challenging the notion that they are entirely separate processes. Similarly, Hoffner and Buchanan (2005) found that wishful identification is an indicator of long-term identification (p.327). Due to the scope of this current research, long-term identification experience and the role that wishful identification plays in that cannot be taken into consideration within the data analyses. However, it would be interesting to explore whether the length of a fragment significantly influences the outcomes of this study. Future quantitative research could build on these findings by examining how the duration of a fragment relates to the experience of identification.

In addition to the main findings, one smaller yet striking outcome emerged. A few respondents mentioned that they expected the fragments to be different and felt they weren't watching a typical documentary. What they meant was that they had anticipated a duller, fact-heavy film, reflecting their connotation of what a documentary is. Instead, they expressed that they enjoyed the fragments, especially the first one, partly because it included humor. This reveals an underlying perception respondents hold about wildlife or conservation documentaries: that they are mainly focused on factual information. Possibly, this stems from how they are used to receiving science

communication. This supports the argument by Beattie et al. (2011) that science communication should take a more emotionally driven approach (p. 107). Similarly, Oatley (2002) explains how fiction impacts people through emotion, often evoking personal memories and reinforcing existing attitudes, as readers connect more easily with stories than with factual texts (p. 16). For these respondents, both fragments exceeded their expectations, precisely because of their unexpected narrative structure.

Finally, a notable theoretical gap emerged in the current framework, specifically concerning the roles of specific cinematic techniques and realism in character identification. While cinematic techniques were only briefly acknowledged, realism was entirely overlooked. Yet, both proved to be relevant in the results and are supported by earlier research. For example, Hoeckner et al. (2011) found that music can significantly influence how much empathy viewers feel and how much they like a character (p. 150), highlighting the persuasive power of audiovisual elements. Similarly, Busselle and Bilandzic (2008) emphasize the importance of perceived narrative realism: when viewers experience the story as logical and believable, it supports engagement and identification. In contrast, a lack of realism can disrupt the viewing experience and hinder emotional connection with the characters (p. 273).

Practical implication

The practical implications of this research are reflected in a set of guidelines for documentary makers producing conservation films with the intent to persuade audiences. Creating a compelling conservation documentary involves more than presenting factual information, it requires the construction of a story that emotionally engages and resonates with viewers. Each layer of the narrative, from character selection to cinematic execution, influences how audiences identify with characters. The following four-part strategy, grounded in the results of this thesis, offers a research-informed framework for narrative design that centers on character identification and emotional impact.

Firstly, careful attention should be given to the type of character chosen, both human and animal. When selecting human protagonists, demographic similarity to the intended audience, such as age or gender, enhances relatability. Furthermore, characters who are emotionally expressive and animated support stronger identification. For animal characters, species that are more familiar, terrestrial, or emotionally legible, such as land animals, are more likely to evoke emotional connection. However, awareness around wildlife conservation should not revolve solely around ‘cute’ or familiar animals. Documentary makers are therefore encouraged to also spotlight lesser-known or emotionally distant species. As this study showed, when the featured animal is perceived as remote or “out of reach,” the presence of a human character can be crucial in fostering identification. And while the approachability and emotional expressiveness of familiar animals may make them appealing as

protagonists, the sense of awe and admiration that more elusive creatures, such as the octopus, can evoke is equally powerful and engaging for audiences when constructed carefully.

Secondly, the presence of human representation in films featuring animal characters promotes connection and interpretability. To bridge the emotional gap between audience and animal, filmmakers are advised to either introduce a relatable human figure or apply anthropomorphic elements. These strategies support a greater sense of realism, foster empathy, and can empower viewers by making the conservation narrative more accessible and emotionally compelling.

Thirdly, a well-structured narrative arc is crucial. Identification is supported when the plot unfolds through a clear beginning, rising tension, obstacles, and resolution. The emotional development of the central character, whether human or animal, should include both challenges and moments of growth. A dynamic character arc allows audiences to follow and emotionally invest in the protagonist's journey, thereby enhancing narrative engagement and identification.

Lastly, the use of cinematic techniques plays a vital role in shaping the viewer's emotional experience. Elements such as music, voiceover, and editing influence how scenes are interpreted and felt. While these tools can be powerful in bridging the emotional distance with animal characters, they must be used with care. Certain techniques, particularly music, may risk undermining the perceived realism if applied too overtly. Therefore, it is recommended that filmmakers employ cinematic tools intentionally and in service of the story's emotional logic.

Scientific implications

The scientific implications of this research lie in its contribution to the understanding of character identification within the context of wildlife conservation documentaries. While identification has been extensively studied in fictional media, this study extends the concept to hybrid forms that involve both human and non-human protagonists in persuasive environmental storytelling. As such, this study offers new insights into how emotional engagement with animal characters is constructed, and calls for a broader theoretical consideration of realism and non-human agency in media psychology and environmental communication. Suggestions to further research will be explained later in this chapter.

Limitations

This present research has provided rich and relevant insight into how young adults experience character identification in conservation documentaries. The chosen methods proved to be a good fit for this study. The semi-structured interviews successfully offered in-depth insight into the participants' experiences, allowing respondents the space to share their own perspectives, some of which the researcher might not have considered beforehand. Additionally, the thematic analysis was a suitable approach for analyzing the data, helping to uncover interesting and sometimes unexpected themes. Still, the study also has some limitations, which will be briefly discussed here.

A limitation is the small scale of the research. Because this study was conducted as part of a master's thesis within a limited timeframe, only fifteen interviews could be carried out. Although these interviews yielded in-depth findings for the analysis, a larger number of respondents could have offered even deeper insights into the experience of character identification. In addition, a bigger sample might have introduced more diversity among respondents. With a larger group, it would have also been possible to explore differences between young adults who are interested in wildlife conservation and those who are not. Due to the limited scope of this research, this distinction could not be made. Such information could help documentary makers tailor their narratives more effectively, based on the interests of their intended audience.

Another limitation lies in the short film fragments shown during the interviews. Due to the scope of the research, only six-minute excerpts were shown instead of the full-length episode or film. Some respondents mentioned that the fragments were too short to truly form a connection with the character. Longer viewing time might have affected the identification process differently. Moreover, some respondents had seen *My Octopus Teacher* before, which could have influenced their experience of identification, making it different than if they had only seen the selected fragment for the first time.

Finally, potential gender differences in emotional engagement were not taken into account in the analysis. Previous research by Hamby and colleagues (2016b, p. 117) has shown that women tend to experience higher levels of emotional engagement than men, which can make it easier for them to connect with a character's emotions. Although the sample was relatively balanced, eight women and seven men, gender was not included as a factor in the analysis due to the limited scope of the study. While this is unlikely to have significantly influenced the results, future research could explore gender more explicitly to better understand how it may shape the experience of identification and emotional connection.

Further Research

In addition to exploring gender differences in character identification, there are several other suggestions for future research. This study specifically focused on young adults with little or no interest in wildlife conservation. Nearly half of the respondents stated they would not typically choose to watch a wildlife documentary. It would be valuable to investigate whether identification with a human character taking action differs among viewers who are already passionate about conservation.

As discussed in the results section, the octopus proved to be a particularly difficult animal to identify with, largely because it felt distant and unfamiliar. Some respondents mentioned that a land animal or a more 'cuddly' species would have been easier to relate to. Future research could explore how identification varies across different types of animals. This could help build a clearer understanding of which characteristics, both emotional and visual, enhance identification. It may even lead to a practical guide for documentary makers on which indicators of identification to emphasize, depending on the species portrayed.

The theoretical foundation of this research was mostly focused on character construction, while cinematic techniques such as editing, music, and camera work became important only later in the analysis. Future studies could place a stronger theoretical emphasis on these techniques, especially in scenes involving animal characters, to better understand how they help bridge the emotional gap.

This study aimed to offer conservation documentary makers insight into how character identification can be used as a tool for narrative persuasion. It would be exciting to see future quantitative research build on these findings to examine the long-term persuasive effects of identification with both human and animal characters. Ultimately, the more we understand how stories connect us emotionally, across species, distances, and worldviews, the better equipped we are to tell stories that truly make a difference.

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Appendices

Appendix A

CONSENT REQUEST FOR PARTICIPATING IN RESEARCH FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, CONTACT:

Julia Korn 559398jk@eur.nl

DESCRIPTION

You are invited to participate in a research about character identification. The purpose of the study is to understand how the process of character identification is constructed in conservation documentaries with animal versus human characters.

Your acceptance to participate in this study means that you accept to participate in this interview. In general terms,⁵

My questions will be related to character identification in conservation documentaries

Unless you prefer that no recordings are made, I will make an audio recording of the interview.

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

RISKS AND BENEFITS

A. As far as I can tell, there are no risks associated with participating in this research. I will not use your name or other identifying information in the study. To participants in the study will only be referred to with pseudonyms, and in terms of general characteristics such as age and gender, etc..

B. I am aware that the possibility of identifying the people who participate in this study may involve risks. For that reason—unless you prefer to be identified fully (first name, last name, occupation, etc.)—I will not keep any information that may lead to the identification of those involved in the study. I will only pseudonyms to identify participants.

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

TIME INVOLVEMENT

Your participation in this study will take about 60 minutes. You may interrupt your participation at any time.

PAYMENTS

There will be no monetary compensation for your participation.

PARTICIPANTS' RIGHTS

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

CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS

If you have questions about your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact –anonymously, if you wish—
559398jk@eur.nl

Do you have a complaint or concerns about your privacy? Please email the 559398jk@eur.nl or visit www.autoriteitpersoonsgegevens.nl. (T: 088 - 1805250)

SIGNING THE CONSENT FORM

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

I give consent to be recorded during this study:

Name Signature Date

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

Name Signature Date

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

Appendix B

Demographics

Wildlife conservation

Interest in films and documentaries

Interest and experience in wildlife conservation

Fragment 1

Empathy

What did you think of the character?

Did you feel anything for the character?

Which emotions do you recognize + why do you feel like that/why not?

Liking

Do you like this protagonist and how he is framed, what is it what you like or dislike?

Homophily

Do you feel like you have similar attributes? How do you feel comparing yourself to an animal?

Perspective taking

Which emotions do you recognize + why do you feel like that/why not

Wishful identification

Do you wish to be more like him? What parts of him would you want?

Fragment 2

Empathy

What did you think of the character?

Did you feel anything for the character?

Which emotions do you recognize + why do you feel like that/why not?

Liking

Do you like this protagonist and how he is framed, what is it what you like or dislike

Homophily

Do you feel like you have similar attributes? How do you feel comparing yourself to an animal?

Perspective taking

Which emotions do you recognize + why do you feel like that/why not

Wishful identification

Do you wish to be more like him? What parts of him would you want?

Comparison

What are big differences you see in the characters?

To which character do you identify better?

Did it make you feel like you were there?

Appendix C

