

Through a Psychological Lens: Thematic Narrative Analysis of Identity and Motivation in "Into the Wild"

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Abstract: *This study explores key psychological themes of human motivation, identity development, and existential inquiry as portrayed in Sean Penn's film Into the Wild (2007). Using thematic narrative analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), the research applies three established frameworks-Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Self-Determination Theory, and Existential Psychology-to examine the protagonist Christopher McCandless's journey. The film's narrative, symbolic representations, and character development are analyzed to uncover underlying psychological tensions between individual autonomy, societal expectations, and the quest for authentic existence. The analysis highlights how McCandless's experiences mirror broader patterns of human psychological struggle and transformation.*

Keywords: Thematic Narrative Analysis, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Self-Determination Theory, Existential Psychology, Human Motivation

1.Introduction

1.1 Background

The intersectionality of narrative film and psychological analysis has emerged as a significant niche of scholarly inquiry, particularly in the context of understanding how cinematic portrayals illuminate complicated human psychological processes (Plantinga, 2009). Film, as a narrative medium, offers unique opportunities to analyse varied and vivid psychological themes through symbolic imagery, character development arcs, narrative structure and rich reservoir for exploring the very fundamental questions about human motivation, existential concerns and identity formation (Hockley, 2007). This analytical approach has been particularly valuable while examining films that have portrayals of extreme human experiences and complex psychological transformations.

Sean Penn's 2007 film "Into the Wild" presents a compelling case study for the psychological analysis, as it portrays the true story of Christopher Johnson McCandless, a 22 year old college graduate who renounced conformity to the conventional society for a deeply personal quest for authenticity, living in the Alaskan wilderness. This film is based on Jon Krakauer's (1996) bestselling non-fiction book with the same title, the film constructs Christopher McCandless's two year long journey across North America, following his graduation from Emory University. McCandless had donated his \$24,000 college fund to charity then proceeded onto destroying his identification documents along with his personal possessions as he later embarked on his journey toward self-discovery and authentic existence (Krakauer, 1996) and had assumed the identity "Alexander Supertramp".

McCandless's story had garnered widespread attention following the discovery of his body in an abandoned bus in Alaska's Denali National Park in September 1992, approximately four months after he had set out into the

wilderness with minimal preparation and essential supplies. His death was regarded to be the result of starvation due to consumption of toxic seeds which then sparked extensive debate about the nature of his venture, ranging from garnering admiration for his idealistic pursuit of an authentic life with non-conventional truths to criticism of his apparent rejection of human relationships and recklessness (Medred, 2007). This polarized interpretation reflects more expansive societal conflicts regarding materialism, individualism and the search for meaning in one's contemporary life.

The psychological facets of McCandless's journey can be closely aligned with several theoretical frameworks that elucidates human development and motivation. Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs provides a lens for the further understanding of how McCandless progressed from requiring and addressing basic psychological and safety needs during his wilderness ventures to slowly seeing higher-order needs of transcendence and self-actualization. McCandless's quest can be seen as a severe manifestation of what Maslow termed as the self-actualization tendency which is characterized by the seeking of an authentic self-revelation and transcendence of conventional societal limitations (Maslow, 1968).

Self-Determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) provides additional comprehension into McCandless's psychological motivations, in particular his apparent requirement for autonomy in his nonconformity to parental control and societal obligations and expectations. His journey can be perceived as an attempt to live up to the fundamental psychological requirements for competence, relatedness and autonomy, although his approach to satisfying these needs through rigorous isolation presents an apparent contradiction that merits analysis and scrutiny (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The strain between his need for autonomy and his simultaneous rejection of meaningful human relationships reflects the complex psychological facets that self-determination theory aids to illuminate.

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From an existential psychological perspective, McCandless's journey epitomizes many of the core principles identified by existential theorists, the conformation with obligation and freedom, the pursuit for an authentic existence and the construction of a personal meaning in an ostensibly meaningless universe (Yalom, 1980). McCandless's rebuttal of the conventional societal roles and material gains portrays what existential psychologists describe as the anxiety that is associated with an authentic life and the courage necessary to construct one's own meaning and moral values (May, 1953). His final confrontation with mortality in the Alaskan wilderness portrays the existential experience of ephemerality that existential theorists argue is fundamental to the human consciousness and construction of the meaning of one's own life (Frankl, 1963).

The adaptation of McCandless's story from real-life events to literary non-fiction and consequently to cinematic narrative provides numerous layers of interpretive meaning. Krauker's (1996) journalistic narrative already involved substantial interpretation and report construction, as he sought to apprehend McCandless's motivations through journal entries, interviews and personal reflection. Penn's cinematic narrative and the adaptation further transform the report through narrative fabric using visual imagery, character development, constructing what might be termed a "psychological portrait" that invites scrutiny and analysis of both the historical figure, Christopher Johnson McCandless and the archetypal patterns represented by his story (Corrigan, 2011).

The usage of thematic narrative analysis to examine "Into the Wild" is constructed upon established foundations in both narrative research and media psychology that acknowledges film as a valid source of psychological comprehension (Smith, 1995). This methodological modality allows researchers to analyse how character development, narrative framework and symbolic material operate together to enlighten psychological processes and themes (Reissman, 2008). Through the application of established psychological modalities to the analysis of McCandless's cinematic venture, this research contributes to the understanding of the concrete psychological processes depicted in the film and the wider, more extensive human experiences that these complex dynamics represent.

1.2 Research Aim

The primary aim of this research is to accomplish a comprehensive thematic narrative analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of Sean Penn's film 'Into the Wild' to analyse and understand the psychological domains that are related to human motivation, existential concerns and identity development as depicted through the character of Christopher Johnson McCandless. Through the systematic application of established psychological modalities, specifically The framework of Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943), Self-Determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), and Existential Psychology (Yalom, 1980), this study seeks to enlighten how the film's narrative structure and character development portray fundamental

psychological processes and wider, universal human experiences.

Through this multi-framework analysis, the research aims to contribute to the wider understanding of how narrative art forms can serve the foundations for psychological inquiry (Plantinga, 2009), displaying the potential of movies to illuminate multifaceted psychological mechanisms and provide valuable insights into foundational human experiences of meaning-making, the search for authentic existence and identity formation (Reissman, 2008).

1.3 Research Objective

The primary objective of this research is to implement a comprehensive thematic narrative analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of the film "Into the Wild" directed by Sean Penn, to evaluate and analyse psychological themes related to existential concerns, identity formation, meaning-making and human motivation through the application of three established psychological frameworks, Self-Determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943) and Existential Psychology (Yalom, 1980).

The specific objective of the research is to analyse and identify important psychological themes entrenched within the movie's narrative construction, symbolic content and the character development, analysing and understanding how Christopher Johnson McCandless's journey represents wider patterns of human motivation and the universal pursuit for an authentic existence (May, 1953, Reissman, 2008) and the methodological contribution is to demonstrate the usefulness of thematic narrative analysis as a methodological framework for the analysis and understanding of complex psychological themes in cinematic texts, thus, contributing to the ever-growing field of media psychology and validating film as a legitimate reference for psychological inquiry (Smith, 1995; Hockley, 2007).

1.4 Research Problem

Albeit the growing acknowledgement of a narrative text as a significant source for psychological inquiry (Plantinga, 2009) there still exists a notable gap in the systematic implementation of established psychological paradigms to gain an understanding of the complex and multifaceted human experiences depicted in contemporary cinema. While, cinema often portrays perceptive psychological transformations and journeys, the academic analysis and understanding of these portrayals through a meticulous psychological analysis remains critically underdeveloped, particularly in the exploration of how cinematic media and its narratives can illuminate fundamental questions about identity development, human motivation and existential themes (Hockley, 2007).

Sean Penn's film "Into the Wild" (2007) narrates a very captivating case that exhibits this omission. This film portrays the crucial psychological journey of Christopher Johnson McCandless, whose non-conformity to

conventional societal norms, and the seeking of an authentic existence in the wilderness, raised fundamental questions about human motivation, the psychological costs and benefits of radical individualism and the search for meaning (Krauker, 1996). Although McCandless's story has produced a panoramic cultural discussion and debate, there has been an ephemeral systematic psychological investigation of how his ventures, as portrayed in the cinematic context, reflects wider patterns of human psychological development and unique experience.

Thus, the research problem is indeed multifaceted. At first, there is an unavailability of a comprehensive analysis that uses the multiple application of established psychological paradigms such as Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), Existential Psychology (Yalom, 1980) and Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943) to comprehend the complex psychological nuances and themes embedded in the cinematic narrative of "Into the Wild". Secondly, the various psychological aspects of McCandless's pursuit of an authentic and meaningful existence and the ultimate pursuit of self-actualization, especially the immense dissension between social relativism and individual autonomy, have not been systematically analysed through established and rigorous thematic narrative analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Furthermore, the present literature on McCandless's narrative has extensively focused on the journalistic or the cultural critique theoretical stances (Medred, 2007) with a considerable paucity observed in the psychological processes and motivations that were responsible for his extreme choices. Therefore, this lack of a systematic psychological analysis of extreme narratives of human ventures put constraints on our comprehension of the broad spectrum of human motivation, existential expedition and identity formation and development.

Thus, this research aims to address the need for a systematic psychological analysis of this profound cinematic portrayal of McCandless's quest, "Into the Wild" through the implementation of multiple theoretical stances, contributing to our comprehension of the extensive psychological themes that have been portrayed in the film and the broader implementation of psychological paradigms to understand narrative media. By filling this research gap, the research aims to demonstrate the critical value of cinematic narratives that can serve as critical tools to understanding psychological nuances and for providing deeper insights into human experiences of identity formation, development, motivation and existential quest.

1.5 Research Questions

This particular study is steered by one pervasive research question and several specific sub-questions that are consistent with theoretical frameworks and the modus operandi implemented in the analysis.

Primary Research Question

How does Sean Penn's film "Into the Wild" (2007) portray psychological concepts in relation to human motivation,

identity formation and development and existential aspects through the character of Christopher Johnsson McCandless and what knowledge does this portrayal offer when analyzed through Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Self-Determination Theory and Existential Psychology paradigms?

Specific Research Questions

Thematic Analysis Questions

RQ1: What are the most pervasive psychological themes integrated within the narrative arc and character development of "Into the Wild," and in what ways do these themes describe more general patterns of human psychological experience?

RQ2: In what ways does the narrative evolution and symbolic meaning of the film shed light on the psychological change experienced by Christopher McCandless during his travels from mainstream society to isolation in the wilderness?

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Framework Questions

RQ3: How does McCandless's path of travel mirror the movement along Maslow's hierarchy of needs, from lower-order needs for basic physiological and safety issues to higher-order needs for belonging, esteem, and self-actualization?

RQ4: How does the movie represent McCandless's seeking peak experiences and self-actualization, and how do such representations correspond with or deviate from Maslow's theoretical formulation of self-actualizing individuals?

RQ5: In what way does the film present the conflict between McCandless's lower-order needs for survival and his higher-order psychological needs, especially when he was in the Alaskan wilderness?

Self-Determination Theory Framework Questions

RQ6: In what ways are the three main elements of self-determination theory-autonomy, competence, and relatedness-expressed in McCandless's psychological growth as presented in the movie?

RQ7: What does the movie teach us about the psychological implications of McCandless's intense pursuit of autonomy potentially at the expense of relatedness and social connection?

RQ8: How does the movie represent McCandless's acquisition of competence in wilderness survival skills, and to what extent does this competence contribute to his overall psychological health and identity?

Existential Psychology Framework Questions

RQ9: How does the movie illustrate McCandless's encounter with the essential existential issues of freedom, responsibility, solitude, and death?

RQ10: How is McCandless's life a quest for authentic living and individual significance, and how does this quest continue in close alignment with fundamental tenets of existential psychology?

RQ11: In what ways does the movie represent the existential fear and bravery of McCandless's rejection of mainstream social roles and his construction of alternative value and meaning systems?

RQ12: What does the movie infer regarding the interaction between McCandless's engagement with death and his construction of personal identity and meaning?

Integration and Synthesis Questions

RQ13: In what ways do the findings produced through the use of these three psychological theories converge or diverge in accounts of McCandless's psychological motivations and development?

RQ14: What tensions or contradictions arise when considering McCandless's life through various psychological theories, and how may these contradictions capture the richness of human psychological experience?

Methodological and Broader Implications Questions

RQ15: In what ways do the cinematic style, narrative organization, and visual symbolism of the film complement the psychological themes revealed through thematic analysis?

RQ16: What more general insights into contemporary human psychological issues—such as individualism vs. social connection, materialism vs. meaning-seeking, and conformity vs. authenticity—are revealed by this analysis?

RQ17: In what ways does this analysis illustrate the value of narrative film as a source of psychological information and insight into complicated human experience?

These research questions operate together to lead an in-depth analysis of "Into the Wild" from concrete thematic identification to the application of theoretical frameworks to synthesize and infer more broadly while ensuring a systematic and rigorous investigation of the psychological aspects depicted within the movie.

2.1 Introduction

The review of literature looks into the theoretical background and empirical studies pertinent to the comprehension of the psychological aspects of human motivation, identity formation, and existential issues as represented in narrative media, in this case, through Sean Penn's "Into the Wild" (2007). This review is structured around three key theoretical frameworks—Maslow's hierarchy of needs, self-determination theory, and existential psychology—and also discusses the thematic narrative analysis approach and the nature of film as a means of psychological research.

2.1.1 Film as a Tool for Psychological Analysis

Film as a tool for psychological analysis has become increasingly popular over the last three decades among scholars. Plantinga (2009) maintains that film presents distinct possibilities for the investigation of human psychological life in its ability to represent richer emotional states, character arcs, and story development in ways that appeal to observers cognitively and affectively. The multimodal quality of film, combining visual imagery, dialogue, music, and narrative organisation, offers rich evidence for parsing psychological processes potentially unavailable through methods of earlier research (Hockley, 2007).

Smith (1995) stresses that film narratives provide the means of developing character psychology by employing engagement processes that resemble social cognition and emotional knowledge in everyday life. The audience's interaction with characters in films includes processes of identification, empathy, and moral judgment that represent core elements of human psychological processes. This viewpoint upholds the application of film analysis as an acceptable tool for psychological exploration, especially when looking at extreme or deviant psychological experiences that would be hard to investigate through traditional empirical techniques.

Giles (2010) also contends that media psychology has made film a significant cultural artifact that reflects and determines knowledge of psychological experiences. Movies based on real people and true events, like "Into the Wild," offer especially good material for analysis because they merge fact with interpretive narrative and produce what can be referred to as "psychological portraits" that can be opened to scholarly exploration (Corrigan, 2011). The process of translating Christopher McCandless's real trek into movie narrative entails interpretive decisions that are in themselves worthy of psychological analysis, since they articulate cultural presumptions and psychological hypotheses regarding human motivation and maturation.

2.1.2 Thematic Narrative Analysis as Methodology

Thematic analysis has been empirically established as a core approach to identifying, examining, and reporting patterns of qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Given that thematic analysis is not bound by any one theoretical model, it is highly adaptable to investigating psychological themes across a wide range of data sources, including visual and narrative media. Braun and Clarke (2006) present a step-by-step process for carrying out thematic analysis including familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final analysis.

Riessman (2008) applies this method in particular to narrative analysis, highlighting the ways in which stories, whether oral, written, or visual, are key vehicles whereby people make meaning and identity. Narrative analysis looks not just at what is said but at how it is said, being concerned with structure, content, and context. When applied to film, narrative analysis looks at how techniques in filmmaking,

editing decisions, and symbols contribute to the creation of psychological meaning (Corrigan, 2011).

The use of thematic narrative analysis to film involves sensitivity to several levels of meaning-making. Bordwell (1989) describes cognitive processes used in film understanding, contending that viewers are actively creating meaning using schema-based inference and pattern recognition. This cognitive approach is supported by thematic analysis in that it outlines how psychological themes are created through the interplay between textual components and viewer interpretation. For psychological study, it implies listening to both overt narrative material and covert symbolic and structural aspects that share psychological meaning.

2.1.3 Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs: Theoretical Foundations

Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs is one of the most dominant humanistic psychology theories, suggesting a motivational system structured around five hierarchical levels of human needs (Maslow, 1943). The hierarchy advances from lower-order physiological needs (food, water, shelter) to safety needs, belongingness and love needs, esteem needs, and ends with self-actualization needs-the need to become what one can become. Maslow's theory holds that lower-order needs must be largely met before higher-order needs become motivational relevant, although he conceded this progression is not fixedly sequential (Maslow, 1943, 1968).

The idea of self-actualization is especially pertinent to understanding human striving at its most extreme forms, such as the travels of McCandless. Maslow (1968) identified self-actualizing people as being marked by: perception of reality accurately, acceptance of others and oneself, spontaneity, centering in problem rather than ego, need for privacy, autonomy, ongoing freshness of appreciation, mystical or peak experiences, identification with the human species, intimate interpersonal relationships, democratic character structure, differentiation between means and ends, sense of humor which is philosophical, and creativeness. These traits form the basis of assessing McCandless's psychological motivations and growth as depicted in "Into the Wild".

Koltko-Rivera (2006) offers a critical historical perspective on Maslow's theory, pointing out that Maslow extended his hierarchy to encompass cognitive needs (knowing and understanding) and aesthetic needs, and ultimately suggested transcendence needs as possibly the highest level of human motivation. This broader framework implies that deepest searches for meaning and attachment to something more transcendent than oneself, as seen in McCandless's experience, are perhaps the pinnacle of human motivation and not pathological deviation from typical development.

Yet Maslow's theory has been heavily criticized. Wahba and Bridwell (1976) performed a systematic review that concluded that empirical evidence supporting the hierarchical hierarchy is weak, and satisfaction of needs does not necessarily indicate motivation as Maslow

suggested. Tay and Diener (2011) in a large cross-cultural sample found that whereas basic needs were positively linked to well-being, the hierarchical hierarchy and sequential satisfaction of needs was not supported. In spite of these criticisms, Maslow's model is still useful for understanding human motivation, especially in extreme situations where people overtly seek self-actualization or transcendence objectives.

2.1.4 Self-Determination Theory: Theoretical Foundations

Self-determination theory (SDT), conceived by Deci and Ryan (1985), is a broad framework of understanding human motivation, personality development, and well-being. Unlike Maslow's hierarchical perspective, SDT centers on three universal psychological needs-autonomy, competence, and relatedness-regarded as universal, innate, and necessary for psychological growth and well-being across cultures and developmental phases (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Autonomy is the perception of behavior as volitional and self-accepted, the awareness of being the cause of one's actions and not dominated by internal or external forces (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Competence is the feeling of being effective in creating desired results and using one's abilities (White, 1959; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Relatedness is the sense of belonging to others, being cared for and caring for others, and feeling a sense of connectedness with other people and groups (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

One of the core assumptions of SDT is that satisfaction of these three fundamental needs is necessary for psychological health, best motivation, and personality integration and that thwarting these needs results in lowered motivation, performance, and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This theory has useful implications for the consideration of McCandless's life, especially the seeming conflict between his extreme striving for autonomy and his basic human need for relatedness.

SDT differentiates between various forms of motivation along a dimension of self-determination. Intrinsic motivation is doing something simply because it is interesting or enjoyable per se, whereas extrinsic motivation is doing something because it produces a separable consequence (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Under extrinsic motivation, SDT recognizes differential levels of internalization and integration, from external regulation (behavior fully governed by external contingencies) to introjected regulation (internal coercion in the form of guilt or ego enhancement), identified regulation (deliberate valuing of behavioral aspirations), and integrated regulation (complete integration with one's values and identity) (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Studies that have been supportive of SDT have shown that satisfaction of needs foretells psychological health within varying cultures and environments (Chen et al., 2015). Autonomy support-the level at which social environments promote autonomous motivation-has been revealed to promote intrinsic motivation, internalization of values,

psychological health, as well as performance in areas such as education, work, healthcare, and psychotherapy (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Nonetheless, Sheldon et al. (2001) discovered that overabundance of independence and detachment from interpersonal relationships-what could be referred to as "extreme autonomy"-is linked to lower well-being, indicating that autonomy should be traded off against relatedness for healthy functioning.

2.1.5 Existential Psychology: Theoretical Foundations

Existential psychology has its roots in European existential philosophy, and more specifically the writings of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre, and was shaped as a therapeutic and theoretical model by therapists such as Frankl, May, and Yalom (Cooper, 2003). In contrast to other psychological models with a focus on mechanisms and aetiology, existential psychology deals with central questions regarding human existence: freedom and responsibility, loneliness and connection, meaning and meaninglessness, and death (Yalom, 1980).

Yalom (1980) defines four ultimate concerns that are the foundation of existential psychology. Death-the knowledge that life is limited brings inherent anxiety that shapes much of human behavior and meaning-making. Freedom-the knowledge that humans are not determined but must establish their own meaning and existence produces existential anxiety regarding responsibility. Isolation-the unbridgeable distance between self and other, the inherent aloneness of human beings. Fourth, meaninglessness-the problem of making meaning in an indifferent universe.

Frankl (1963), based on his experiences in Nazi concentration camps, formulated logotherapy from the assumption that the major human drive is towards seeking meaning. He maintained that meaning can be discovered through three means: producing a work or performing an act (achievement), encountering someone or experiencing something (love), and the posture one adopts toward inevitable suffering. Frankl's focus on meaning-making offers a model for explaining extreme human experiences and decisions, like McCandless's intentional acceptance of suffering in favor of real life.

May (1953) delved into the anxiety that characterizes genuine existence and made a distinction between normal anxiety-reaction to danger proportionate to the situation and not involving repression-and neurotic anxiety-which is not proportionate and includes repression and defense. According to May, genuine existence calls for courage to confront normal anxiety instead of withdrawing into conformity and falsity. This distinction between authentic and inauthentic existence, derived from Heidegger's philosophy, provides insight into McCandless's rejection of conventional social roles.

Existential psychology stresses the importance of authenticity-living according to one's essential nature and not according to some external expectation or cultural role (Heidegger, 1962). Authenticity includes recognizing one's responsibility and freedom, facing existential anxiety with truthfulness, and establishing personal meaning as opposed

to accepting imposed meanings. Yet Sartre (1943/1956) pointed out the irony that total authenticity is perhaps unattainable since human beings are embedded in social contexts that inevitably condition their sense of self and world.

Existential psychology research has shown that awareness of death can elicit defensive reactions (terror management theory; Greenberg et al., 1986) as well as growth-promoting reactions when people have meaning-making resources and support (Wong, 2008). Search for meaning has been linked with psychological health, resilience, and post-traumatic growth (Steger, 2009). Nevertheless, Baumeister (1991) warns that the search for meaning through nonacceptance of social ties and traditional support structures will create a "crystallization of discontent" instead of satisfaction.

2.1.6 Integration of Theoretical Frameworks

Although Maslow's hierarchy of needs, self-determination theory, and existential psychology come from various traditions and highlight different dimensions of human psychology, they also have significant similarities. All three models identify human beings as growth-oriented by nature, highlight the significance of autonomy or freedom, appreciate the role played by relationship and connection in human flourishing, and accept that the quest for meaning or self-actualization is a universal human motivation (Sheldon et al., 2001).

Yet the frameworks also point to significant tensions. SDT stresses balancing relatedness with autonomy, indicating that excessive independence is psychologically damaging (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Maslow's hierarchy implies that needs for belongingness must be met before self-actualization can be more fully pursued (Maslow, 1943), although later he recognized that some will seek higher needs even if lower needs remain unmet. Existential psychology acknowledges the inherent solitude of human existence and at the same time appreciates the significance of genuine contact with others (Yalom, 1980).

These tensions render the cumulative use of all three frameworks especially helpful to the analysis of cases such as McCandless's odyssey, in which maximum autonomy seems to be at odds with requirements for relatedness, and in which striving for self-actualization and true existence entails abandonment of social connection. The points of convergence and divergence among frameworks can cast light upon the richness of human motivation and upon the possible expense and reward of disparate methods of attaining psychological fulfilment.

2.1.7 Christopher McCandless and "Into the Wild": Current Literature

Scholarship and popular writing about Christopher McCandless have been relatively preoccupied with biographical reconstruction, cultural analysis, and moral appraisal over systematic psychological examination. Krakauer's (1996) initial non-fiction book integrates investigative reporting with personal rumination, since

Krakauer draws affinities between McCandless's adventure and his own young-adult experiences. Although perceptive, Krakauer's book is not first and foremost psychological in focus and fails to apply systematically psychological theory to explain McCandless's motivations.

Critical reactions to the tale of McCandless have been divided. Some writers hail McCandless as a visionary pursuer of true life who boldly turned his back on consumerism and mainstream achievement (Sults, 2008). Others condemn him as naive, irresponsible, and inconsiderate of nature and those who loved him (Medred, 2007). This division is representative of larger cultural arguments over individualism, accountability, and the balance between self and society.

Psychological observation of McCandless has tended to be speculative and unstructured. There are some commentators who propose that McCandless showed signs of personality disorders or was running from family pathology instead of seeking positive psychological development (Gurian, 2008). Such analyses, however, tend to be absent of strict use of psychological frameworks and may be based on scarce biographical data to make a diagnosis.

Penn's (2007) film adaptation makes interpretative decisions that influence psychological interpretation of McCandless. The movie focuses on McCandless's interactions with individuals he meets along the way, his dysfunctional family relationships, and his final understanding of the need for human connection, illustrated by his note in a book: "Happiness only real when shared" (Penn, 2007). These storytelling decisions mandate psychological scrutiny of how the movie brings McCandless's psychological journey together and which theoretical models best account for his development.

Recent research has started to deal with McCandless's narrative from more formal frames of analysis. Hamilton (2016) analyzed the ethical implications of McCandless's decisions, contending that the narrative raises significant questions regarding responsibilities to family and community versus individual authenticity-seeking. There is still no thorough psychological analysis using conventional theoretical lenses in the literature.

2.2 Research Gap

Regardless of the widespread cultural interest in the life of Christopher McCandless and increasing acknowledgment of film as a worthy means of psychological investigation, there are certain gaps in existing literature that this research fills.

2.2.1 Gap in Systematic Psychological Framework Application

Existing literature on "Into the Wild" does not have systematic use of established psychological frameworks to examine the motivational, developmental, and existential themes presented in the film. While some commentators have provided psychological analyses, these have more

often been speculative and haphazardous than they have been systematic and based on careful application of particular theoretical models (Medred, 2007; Sults, 2008). No known research has applied systematically Maslow's hierarchy of needs, self-determination theory, and existential psychology in combination to analyze McCandless's psychological journey through Penn's film.

This is an important gap since systematic framework use enables more formal analysis that transcends subjective interpretation to theoretically informed understanding. It also facilitates determination of convergences and divergences in theoretical viewpoints, revealing the richness of human motivation and development that single-framework analyses may overlook.

2.2.2 Thematic Narrative Gap in Psychological Themes

Although film studies researchers have examined "Into the Wild" as a narrative and aesthetic form (Corrigan, 2011), and although thematic analysis has been used to consider many psychological phenomena (Braun & Clarke, 2006), no prior study has utilized thematic narrative analysis to specifically identify and explore psychological themes in "Into the Wild". That is a methodological lacuna, since thematic narrative analysis provides a rigorous method for uncovering patterns of psychological meaning in narrative texts that has not been used for this specific film.

Applying thematic narrative analysis to "Into the Wild" would show the utility of such an approach for psychological investigation based on cinematic texts, potentially setting a standard for such analysis of other psychologically complex films. This responds to the general demand for high-quality qualitative methods in media psychology (Giles, 2010).

2.2.3 Gap in Understanding Extreme Manifestations of Psychological Needs

The current psychological literature has widely explored common patterns of motivation, identity formation, and meaning-making, but extreme examples like McCandless's are poorly understood (Sheldon et al., 2001). McCandless's extreme quest for autonomy and true being at the seeming cost of security, safety, and social bonding is an extreme expression of psychological needs that can shed light on the limits and boundaries of conventional psychological theories.

Knowledge of extreme cases is worthwhile because they challenge theoretical predictions, indicate possible costs and benefits of various motivational strategies, and shed light on aspects of human psychology that can be less evident in ordinary populations (Baumeister, 1991). Failure to examine systematically such extreme cases is an omission in psychological knowledge of the entire range of human motivation and development.

2.2.4 Gap in Integration Across Multiple Theoretical Perspectives

Although individual psychological theories have been well-developed and tested, investigations that incorporate more than one theoretical perspective to investigate intricate psychological phenomena are few in number. The current literature on motivation and development operates within particular theoretical approaches instead of considering how various frameworks could provide complementary or alternative accounts of the same phenomena (Sheldon et al., 2001).

McCandless's life, as depicted in "Into the Wild," is the ideal case study to combine theoretical analysis since his adventure encompasses aspects that each theory discusses: moving through hierarchical needs (Maslow), seeking autonomy and competence (SDT), and dealing with existential issues (existential psychology). The absence of research combining these perspectives is a lost opportunity to build more holistic comprehension of intricate human experiences.

2.2.5 Lack of Realization of Psychological Costs of Radical Authenticity

While existential psychology insists on the value of genuine existence and humanistic psychology enshrines self-actualization, relatively little is known about the possible psychological toll of seeking authenticity through repudiation of social attachments and traditional support structures (Baumeister, 1991). McCandless's own life, which ended in his death alone, poses some critical questions regarding when and how the quest for authentic existence and self-actualization can be at odds with other essential psychological needs.

This is especially relevant with modern cultural tendencies toward individualism and authenticity-seeking (Bellah et al., 1985). Knowledge about the potential drawbacks and limits of radical authenticity would be useful to inform both psychological theory and applied practice in human development and counseling.

2.2.6 Gap in Psychological Research Involving Film

While there have been pleas for greater use of narrative and pictorial media in psychological research (Plantinga, 2009; Hockley, 2007), systematic psychological examination of films is relatively rare in mainstream psychology. This is both a methodological gap-the demand for established methods for using film as research data-and an empirical gap-the abundance of psychologically rich content in films that has yet to be examined through robust psychological models.

"Into the Wild" is an optimum test case to illustrate how cinema can be useful material for psychological study since it documents a true person's psychological trajectory through several narrative and cinematic methods that provoke theoretical inquiry. Evidence showing systematic psychological examination of this film might help bring

film-based research to a wider acceptance within psychology.

2.3 Conceptual Framework

The theoretical framework of this research combines three well-developed psychological theories, Maslow's hierarchy of needs, self-determination theory, and existential psychology, with a thematic narrative analysis approach to study psychological themes in "Into the Wild". This section clarifies the central concepts of each framework and their interrelationships, setting up the theory for analysis.

2.3.1 Core Concepts and Their Interrelationships

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs provides concepts of hierarchical motivation, need development, and self-actualization. Central constructs include:

- **Physiological needs:** Subsistence needs (food, water, shelter, rest)
- **Safety needs:** Safety, stability, freedom from danger
- **Belongingness and love need:** Intimacy, warm relationships, social belonging
- **Esteem needs:** Mastery, recognition, respect, self-respect
- **Self-actualization:** Fulfilling personal potential, self-actualization, peak experiences
- **Transcendence:** Relatedness to something larger than the self (Koltko-Rivera, 2006)

Self-Determination Theory adds theoretical notions of basic psychological needs and autonomous motivation. The central concepts are:

- **Autonomy:** Perceiving behavior as volitional and self-endorsed
- **Competence:** Perceiving effectiveness and capability
- **Relatedness:** Sense of belonging to others
- **Intrinsic motivation:** Participation in activities for intrinsic satisfaction
- **Internalization:** Taking in values and regulatory processes
- **Integration:** Internalized regulation coordination with one's sense of self (Ryan & Deci, 2000)

Existential Psychology offers ideas of ultimate concerns, authentic existence, and meaning-making. Included are the following key constructs:

- **Freedom:** Awareness of human capacity for choice and self-creation
- **Responsibility:** Awareness of authorship of one's life and choices
- **Isolation:** Essential aloneness of human presence
- **Death:** Awareness of mortality and limitation
- **Meaninglessness:** Problem of constructing meaning in a seemingly meaningless universe
- **Authenticity:** Existing in harmony with one's authentic self instead of external expectations
- **Existential anxiety:** Worry resulting from engagement with ultimate issues (Yalom, 1980)

2.3.2 Integrative Model

The conceptual framework suggests that these three theoretical frames can be combined to offer holistic understanding of intricate psychological phenomena like McCandless's adventure in "Into the Wild". The combination follows a number of key propositions:

Proposition 1: Motivational Hierarchy and Fundamental Needs

Maslow's hierarchical theory and SDT's basic needs are complementary, not competitive, descriptions of human motivation. Physiological and safety needs (Maslow) lower down in the hierarchy have to be met before people can engage fully in autonomy, competence, and relatedness (SDT), which in turn facilitate pursuit of self-actualization and transcendence (Maslow). But the connection is dynamic, not strictly linear, with people at times giving priority to higher-order needs even when there are unmet lower-order needs (Kenrick et al., 2010).

Proposition 2: Autonomy and Authentic Existence

SDT's autonomy and existential psychology's authenticity both highlight self-determination and living in harmony with values. Both differ in focus: SDT focuses on autonomy as one of three harmonious needs, whereas existential psychology focuses on authenticity as the defining challenge of human existence. Excessive striving for autonomy or authenticity might fulfil the need for self-determination but possibly stifle the need for relatedness and hence lead to psychological conflict (Sheldon et al., 2001).

Proposition 3: Self-Actualization and Meaning-Making

Maslow's self-actualization and existential psychology's meaning-making are analogous processes of fulfilling human potential and establishing personal meaning. They both consist of overcoming typical constraints and striving for greater goals. Maslow focuses on traits of self-actualizing individuals, whereas existential psychology focuses on the process and difficulty of producing meaning. Integration implies that self-actualization entails healthy resolution of existential issues through meaning-making (Wong, 2008).

Proposition 4: Social Connection and Isolation

A key tension between frameworks is the place of social connection. Maslow's belongingness needs, SDT's relatedness, and existential psychology's acknowledgment of basic isolation all speak to human sociality but from varying standpoints. The frameworks meet in seeing that humans require connection but differ in what they believe about isolation: Maslow and SDT see isolation as deprivation of needs, whereas existential psychology sees it as an inevitable existential truth that must be addressed (Yalom, 1980; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Proposition 5: Growth Through Challenge

Each of the three frameworks acknowledges that psychological development typically entails difficulty, distress, or apprehension. Maslow's highest experiences, SDT's theory of optimal challenge toward competence growth, and existential psychology's theory of facing existing anxiety all indicate that development is achieved through action on difficulties rather than comfort-seeking (Maslow, 1968; Ryan & Deci, 2000; May, 1953).

2.3.3 Application to "Into the Wild"

The conceptual framework is applied to "Into the Wild" using thematic narrative analysis that explores how the film depicts:

- **Motivational Progression:** How McCandless's path reflects movement through various motivational priorities, from survival to self-actualization and transcendence.
- **Need Satisfaction and Frustration:** How the movie represents McCandless's feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and the effects of excessive autonomy.
- **Existential Encounter:** How McCandless grapples with freedom, responsibility, loneliness, and death, and how these encounters inform his search for meaning.
- **Authenticity and Social Bonding:** How the movie illustrates the conflict between authentic expression and social bonding, and whether McCandless finds integration or suffers irreconcilable tension.
- **Psychological Change:** How the movie illustrates McCandless's psychological growth as he travels, culminating in moments of awareness, conflict, and growth or deterioration.

2.3.4 Analytical Framework

The thematic narrative analysis uses the following analytical design based on the integrated theoretical model:

Phase 1: Familiarization and Immersion

Repeated viewings of "Into the Wild" to gain in-depth familiarity with narrative content, character evolution, visual symbolism, and theme.

Documentation of first impressions, emotional reactions, and initial theoretical links.

Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes

Systematic coding of scenes, dialogue, visual components, and narrative development based on concepts from the three theoretical frameworks.

Identification of instances pertinent to: need satisfaction/frustration, motivational priorities, authenticity, existential confrontation, psychological transformation.

Phase 3: Looking for Themes

Categorizing codes into possible themes that capture patterns throughout the film.

Analyzing interconnections between themes and theoretical constructs.

Determining themes that bring together several theoretical viewpoints.

Phase 4: Checking and Refining Themes

Assessing themes for internal consistency and uniqueness.

Seeing that themes are anchored in film material while also relating to theoretical structures.

Refining theme definitions and boundaries.

Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes

Creating sound definitions of each theme which describe its central meaning and importance.

Labeling themes in ways that reflect their psychological content and theoretical significance.

Formulating connections among themes (hierarchical, parallel, dialectical).

Phase 6: Producing Analysis

Interpreting themes in terms of the integrated theoretical framework.

Analyzing convergences and divergences across theoretical accounts.

Drawing conclusions regarding psychological meanings presented in the film and their general import.

This theoretical framework presents the methodological and theoretical basis for systematic psychological examination of "Into the Wild," which facilitates rigorous analysis of the way in which the movie reflects inherent elements of human motivation, identity formation, and existential issues using the conceptual framework of three supporting psychological theories brought together through thematic narrative analysis methodology.

3.1 Research Questions

This particular study is steered by one pervasive research question and several specific sub-questions that are consistent with theoretical frameworks and the modus operandi implemented in the analysis.

Primary Research Question

How does Sean Penn's film "Into the Wild" (2007) portray psychological concepts in relation to human motivation, identity formation and development and existential aspects

through the character of Christopher Johnsson McCandless and what knowledge does this portrayal offer when analyzed through Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Self-Determination Theory and Existential Psychology paradigms?

Specific Research Questions**Thematic Analysis Questions**

RQ1: What are the most pervasive psychological themes integrated within the narrative arc and character development of "Into the Wild," and in what ways do these themes describe more general patterns of human psychological experience?

RQ2: In what ways does the narrative evolution and symbolic meaning of the film shed light on the psychological change experienced by Christopher McCandless during his travels from mainstream society to isolation in the wilderness?

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Framework Questions

RQ3: How does McCandless's path of travel mirror the movement along Maslow's hierarchy of needs, from lower-order needs for basic physiological and safety issues to higher-order needs for belonging, esteem, and self-actualization?

RQ4: How does the movie represent McCandless's seeking peak experiences and self-actualization, and how do such representations correspond with or deviate from Maslow's theoretical formulation of self-actualizing individuals?

RQ5: In what way does the film present the conflict between McCandless's lower-order needs for survival and his higher-order psychological needs, especially when he was in the Alaskan wilderness?

Self-Determination Theory Framework Questions

RQ6: In what ways are the three main elements of self-determination theory-autonomy, competence, and relatedness-expressed in McCandless's psychological growth as presented in the movie?

RQ7: What does the movie teach us about the psychological implications of McCandless's intense pursuit of autonomy potentially at the expense of relatedness and social connection?

RQ8: How does the movie represent McCandless's acquisition of competence in wilderness survival skills, and to what extent does this competence contribute to his overall psychological health and identity?

Existential Psychology Framework Questions

RQ9: How does the movie illustrate McCandless's encounter with the essential existential issues of freedom, responsibility, solitude, and death?

RQ10: How is McCandless's life a quest for authentic living and individual significance, and how does this quest continue in close alignment with fundamental tenets of existential psychology?

RQ11: In what ways does the movie represent the existential fear and bravery of McCandless's rejection of mainstream social roles and his construction of alternative value and meaning systems?

RQ12: What does the movie infer regarding the interaction between McCandless's engagement with death and his construction of personal identity and meaning?

Integration and Synthesis Questions

RQ13: In what ways do the findings produced through the use of these three psychological theories converge or diverge in accounts of McCandless's psychological motivations and development?

RQ14: What tensions or contradictions arise when considering McCandless's life through various psychological theories, and how may these contradictions capture the richness of human psychological experience?

Methodological and Broader Implications Questions

RQ15: In what ways do the cinematic style, narrative organization, and visual symbolism of the film complement the psychological themes revealed through thematic analysis?

RQ16: What more general insights into contemporary human psychological issues—such as individualism vs. social connection, materialism vs. meaning-seeking, and conformity vs. authenticity—are revealed by this analysis?

RQ17: In what ways does this analysis illustrate the value of narrative film as a source of psychological information and insight into complicated human experience?

These research questions operate together to lead an in-depth analysis of "Into the Wild" from concrete thematic identification to the application of theoretical frameworks to synthesize and infer more broadly while ensuring a systematic and rigorous investigation of the psychological aspects depicted within the movie.

3.2 Philosophical Foundations

This study is based on an interpretivist epistemological framework, which appreciates that human psychological experience must be interpreted for understanding, not ascertaining universal causal laws (Schwandt, 2000). The interpretivist stance is especially suitable for studying film portrayals of psychological processes because it appreciates that meaning is made through interaction between text (film), theoretical models, and researcher interpretation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

3.2.1 Ontological Position

The study takes a critical realist ontological stance, which holds that though an external reality exists independently of human consciousness, our understanding of that reality is always filtered by human perception, interpretation, and cultural contexts (Bhaskar, 1978). Transferred to this research, critical realism acknowledges that Christopher McCandless's genuine psychological experience was a historical reality, but both the cinematic representation and our analytical comprehension of that experience are interpretive constructions (Maxwell, 2012).

This ontological stance eschews naive realism, which would approach the film as unmediated access to McCandless's real psychology, and radical relativism, which would reject any reference between the film and psychological reality. Rather, critical realism permits systematic, theory informed examination while also recognizing the interpretive character of cinematic representation and psychological analysis (Willig, 2013).

3.2.2 Epistemological Position

The study adopts a constructionist epistemological position, where knowledge is not discovered passively but actively constructed by interpretive processes (Crotty, 1998). The epistemology accepts that psychological themes that are identified in "Into the Wild" are created as a result of the interaction between a number of meaning making processes: Penn's cinematic interpretation of McCandless's narrative, the theoretically informed analysis of the researcher, and wider cultural contexts that shape understanding of motivation, identity, and existential issues.

Constructionism is not arbitrary interpretation but an acknowledgment that meaning creation is bounded by textual evidence, theoretical coherence, and interpretive community standards (Madill et al., 2000). The study aims to generate theoretically informed, credible interpretations that are systematically driven by content from the films but also recognize that alternative accounts based on alternative theoretical perspectives would yield different but possibly equally sound insights.

3.2.3 Theoretical Perspective

The study takes a critical humanistic theoretical framework that encompasses aspects of humanistic psychology, existential phenomenology, and modern motivation theory (Schneider et al., 2015). This framework prioritizes human agency, meaning making, and potential for growth while also acknowledging social, cultural, and biological limitations of human experience. The bringing together of Maslow's humanistic theory, organismic view of self-determination theory, and phenomenological view of existential psychology captures the critical humanistic point of view.

Critical humanism is distinct from uncritical enthusiasm about human potential in that it is recognized that endeavours for authenticity, autonomy, and self-

actualization carry psychological tolls and may be at odds with other basic needs (Wong, 2011). Such a balanced approach is needed in examining McCandless's odyssey, which represents the greatest potential through radical authenticity as well as the risk of unbridled individualism.

3.2.4 Qualitative Research Paradigm

This study takes a qualitative research approach, which values depth of understanding, richness of context, and interpretive insight over generalizability, measurement, or causal explanation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Qualitative research is well-suited to the study of complex psychological processes as they are represented in narrative media because it facilitates close analysis of meaning, symbolism, and psychological process over reduction to measurable variables (Wertz et al., 2011).

The qualitative paradigm welcomes methodological flexibility and theoretical pluralism, making it possible to integrate several psychological frameworks to shed light on various aspects of the phenomenon that is being studied. Flexibility is crucial for the present research, which uses three different yet complementary theoretical points of view to gain thorough insight into psychological themes in "Into the Wild" (Flick, 2014).

3.3 Data Collection

3.3.1 Primary Data Source

The main source of data for the current study is Sean Penn's movie "Into the Wild" (2007) distributed by Paramount Vantage with a duration of 148 minutes. The movie was accessed on legal streaming sites and watched repeatedly to attain detailed acquaintance with all narrative, pictorial, and symbolic components. The entire movie constitutes the corpus of data for thematic narrative analysis.

3.3.2 Data Collection Procedures

Data gathering adhered to a systematic process aimed at capturing the richness and nuance of the psychological content of the film:

Initial Viewing: The movie was watched in one sitting without break to attain overall comprehension of narrative development, character construction, and emotional resonance. While doing this, the researcher was mindful of overall impressions, emotional reactions, and initial identification of psychologically significant aspects.

In-depth Analytical Watchings: The movie was then watched repeatedly (at least five full watches) with close attention to various analytical aspects. Each of the watches was devoted to special aspects pertinent to the theoretical models:

Watch for Maslow's Pyramid: Close observation of scenes illustrating physiological needs, safety needs, social belonging, esteem, and self-actualization goals. Monitoring how McCandless's motivational needs change in the course of the story.

Viewing for Self-determination Theory: Expenditure of attention on scenes illustrating autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Record of contexts facilitating or hindering need satisfaction and its implications for McCandless's psychological functioning.

Headlined as the "Alone Time" moment: Ted reaches the end of his journey on the banks of the Tanana River. Recording of McCandless's meaning making attempts and authentic vs inauthentic ways of being.

Watching for Narrative Structure: Note-taking about plot development, narrative devices (flashbacks, voiceover, temporal ordering), character dialogue, and symbolic elements that advance psychological meaning.

Watching for Cinematic Techniques: Note-taking about visual composition, cinematography, music, editing, and other formal aspects that express psychological themes or mood.

3.3.3 Data Documentation

During the viewing process, copious field notes were kept recording:

Scene Level Analysis: Extensive descriptions of major scenes with focus on dialogue, action, visual arrangement, and psychological importance. Time stamps were taken so as to precisely refer to particular moments of the film.

Character Development: Organized documentation of McCandless's psychological change over the course of the story, including changes in conduct, revealed motivations, relationships, and seeming internal states.

Symbolic and Thematic Aspects: Identification of repeated symbols, metaphors, and visual motifs that add psychological significance (e.g., imagery of nature, traveling, solitude, human contact).

Theoretical Associations: Initial notes connecting observed elements with concepts from the three theoretical frameworks, as well as agreement on direct quotations of dialogue and descriptions of visual elements demonstrating theoretical constructs.

Researcher Reflections: Reflexive recording of the researcher's affective, cognitive, and interpretive reflections on the film, acknowledging that such reflections are part of the process of meaning making (Finlay, 2002).

3.3.4 Additional Materials

Whereas the film itself forms the main data source, additional materials were consulted to offer context:

Film Credits and Production Data: Director, screenwriter, cinematographer, and other production information that influences knowledge of creative decisions.

Original Source Material: Jon Krakauer's (1996) book "Into the Wild" was consulted to understand the relationship between biographical source and cinematic interpretation, though the analysis focuses on the film rather than historical accuracy.

Critical Reception: Selected film reviews and critical analyses were consulted to understand cultural reception and alternative interpretations, though these were not incorporated as primary data.

These ancillary materials establish context but do not replace direct exposure to the film as the primary source of data. The analysis is still centered on what the film depicts and not on reconstructing McCandless's actual experience or assessing the artistic quality of the film.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis took Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phase thematic analysis approach and adapted it for use with cinematic narrative, combining it with the three theoretical frameworks. Analysis proceeded iteratively, with back-and-forth movement between phases as insight grew.

3.4.1 Phase One: Familiarization with the Data

This first phase involved imminent work with the film to establish profound familiarity with its content, structure, and psychological aspects. As outlined in the data collection section, the film was watched several times with varying analytical emphases. In this phase, the researcher interacted with the film actively, recording first impressions, affective reactions, and early recognition of psychologically important aspects.

Rich viewing notes were kept recording narrative development, character construction, dialogue, visuals, and initial theoretical links. Openness to the data was important in this stage, enabling themes to be revealed naturally as well as being sensitive to items pertinent to the theoretical schools of thought. The objective was to gain what Braun and Clarke (2006) refer to as "immersion" within the data, establishing close familiarity that allows for sophisticated interpretation.

3.4.2 Phase Two: Creating Initial Codes

The second stage consisted of systematic coding of film material in terms of features salient for the research questions and theoretical models. Coding was done at various levels:

Descriptive Codes: Simple description of what happens in scenes (action, dialogue, locations, character interactions).

Theoretical Codes: Use of ideas from Maslow's hierarchy of needs, self-determination theory, and existential psychology to identify need satisfaction or frustration, motivational priorities, existential confrontation, and psychological processes.

Process Codes: Identification of psychological processes and changes, such as changes in McCandless's motivations, relationships, self-knowledge, and existential orientation.

Symbolic Codes: Identification of visual symbols, metaphors, and narrative devices conveying psychological meaning.

Coding was performed employing a mix of theory driven (deductive) and data driven (inductive) strategies. Theory driven codes were pre-known based on the conceptual framework, whereas data driven codes arose from aspects of the film that seemed psychologically noteworthy but not expected by the theoretical frameworks (Fereday & Muir Cochran, 2006).

The coding process included elaborate documentation within a coding manual that contained:

names of the codes, definitions, inclusion and exclusion criteria, examples from the film, and theoretical linkages. This process assured consistency and transparency during the coding process.

3.4.3 Phase Three: Searching for Themes

The third stage consisted of code analysis to recognize patterns of meaning that form themes. Themes are meaningful, orderly patterns applicable to the research questions that embrace significant psychological aspects presented in the film (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Codes were initially clustered into potential themes in terms of similarities, associations, and psychological relevance. This involved thinking about the way different codes could be put together to produce higher-order themes and how themes intersect. Visual mapping strategies were utilized to examine relationships between codes and possible themes, such as mind maps and thematic networks.

Preliminary themes were identified in a number of categories during this stage:

Framework Specific Themes: Themes that directly align with one of the three theoretical frameworks (e.g., "Progression Toward Self-actualization" for Maslow, "Autonomy at the Expense of Relatedness" for SDT, "Confrontation with Existential Isolation" for existential psychology).

Integrative Themes: Themes that shed light on intersections or tensions between theoretical frameworks (e.g., "The Paradox of Freedom and Connection").

Narrative Themes: Themes concerning how the narrative structure and cinematic style of the film represent psychological meaning (e.g., "Nature as Psychological Mirror").

Identification of themes involves balancing theory frameworks with sensitivity to what the film itself registers, so that themes remain grounded in film content and are not forced from theory.

3.4.4 Phase Four: Reviewing Themes

The fourth step was orderly assessment and development of initial themes to make sure that they are distinct, coherent, and properly substantiated by the data. This step was done at two levels:

Level One Review: Checking coded data extracts for each theme to see that they create a logical pattern. Themes with inadequate supporting data or internal consistency were either narrowed, merged with other themes, or dropped. Data extracts that did not fit well within themes were either recorded to better themes or put aside.

Level Two Review: Reviewing themes in terms of the overall data set (the whole film) to see if they truly represent the film's psychological content and address the research questions in an appropriate manner. This involved thinking about whether themes pick up on the most salient psychological dimensions conveyed in the film and whether the most important parts of the film's psychological content fall below the thematic radar.

Themes were assessed in this stage based on several factors: internal homogeneity (consistency within themes), external heterogeneity (definite demarcation among themes), theoretical relevance (relevance to conceptual framework), empirical grounding (sufficient support from film content), and analytical utility (ability to produce meaningful findings).

The review process resulted in clarification of theme definitions, reorganization of the thematic order, and in a few instances, creation of hierarchical theme structures with major themes and subthemes that pick up on varying levels of psychological significance.

3.4.5 Phase Five: Defining and Naming Themes

Phase five involved creating concise definitions and names for every theme that pick up its salient meaning and importance. For every theme, a precise definition was constructed that describes:

Scope: What the theme includes and excludes.

Essence: The essential psychological meaning or process that the theme reflects.

Theoretical Connections: To understand how the theme connects to concepts within the theoretical frameworks.

Narrative Manifestation: How the theme is evidenced in particular scenes, dialogue, imagery, and narrative structure.

Psychological Significance: To comprehend what the theme expresses about human motivation, identity formation, or existential issues. Theme names were created to be short but evocative, conveying the theme's core meaning in terms that combine theoretical accuracy with clarity. The names were designed to be unambiguous about

what each theme is concerned with but also to hint at its psychological importance.

In this stage, relationships among themes were also clarified, defining whether themes are hierarchical (main themes with subthemes), sequential (indicating temporal progression), dialectical (indicating tensions or contradictions), or parallel (indicating disparate aspects of the same phenomenon).

3.4.6 Phase Six: Producing the Analysis

The sixth phase was synthesizing themes into a narrative analysis that interprets the psychological meanings presented in "Into the Wild" through the integrated theoretical framework. This phase consisted of several analysis activities:

Interpretation: Beyond description to interpretation, articulating what themes say about the psychological aspects of McCandless's journey and their general import to understanding human motivation, identity development, and existential issues.

Integration: Illustrating how the themes are connected to one another and to the three theoretical frameworks, identifying convergences and divergences between theoretical views.

Exemplification: Including extensive description and particular examples from the film illustrating each theme, including quotations of dialogue and descriptions of visual content.

Theorization: Relating findings to more general psychological theory and research, explaining how the analysis informs understanding of the theoretical frameworks and the phenomena they cover.

Reflexive Analysis: Taking note of the interpretative character of the analysis and reflecting on how theoretical commitment and researcher viewpoint influence interpretation.

The concluding analysis gives themes in an ordered, systematic arrangement that enhances understanding step by step, solves the research questions systematically, and illustrates the merit of the combined theoretical approach in explaining psychological themes in "Into the Wild".

3.5 Ethical Considerations

3.5.1 Nature of Ethical Issues in Film Analysis Research

This study examines a publicly accessible commercial movie and doesn't have human participants in the conventional sense. As such, many of the ethical issues standard of psychological research (informed consent, participants' risk of harm, confidentiality) aren't directly applicable (British Psychological Society, 2014). Yet, a few ethical considerations are still applicable.

3.5.2 Respect for Persons Portrayed

The movie depicts Christopher McCandless, a true person who passed away in 1992, and other true individuals who met him. Although these individuals are not participants in research, ethical practice calls for respectful treatment of their lives and legacies (American Psychological Association, 2017).

The critique addresses McCandless's narrative with sensitivity to his humanity, eschewing sensationalism and reductionist analysis that would reduce the sophistication of his experience. The study recognizes that the movie is an interpretation of McCandless's life and not objective historical fact, and analysis centers on what appears in the movie rather than attempting to make absolute pronouncements about McCandless's real psychological state.

Analysis of McCandless's family relationships, which were described in the film as being dysfunctional, is undertaken with care, acknowledging that family members are real individuals with their own views on what happened. Analysis is based on psychological themes applicable to the research questions as opposed to making evaluative judgments of people or their behavior.

3.5.3 Intellectual Property and Copyright

The movie "Into the Wild" is copyrighted, and intellectual property rights must be respected in ethical research practice. This study is a scholarly analysis qualifying for fair use provisions under educational and critical purposes (U.S. Copyright Office, 2021). Present the analysis as scholarly interpretation and critique rather than commercial use of copyrighted material.

3.5.4 Accuracy and Integrity in Interpretation

Ethical research demands intellectual honesty and interpretive precision (American Psychological Association, 2017). This duty is most relevant in interpretive research when there is likelihood for researcher bias or the imposition of preconceived interpretations.

The study is ethically sound in that: Interpretations are rooted in systematic analysis of film content, not speculation or personal opinion. Alternative interpretations and theoretical views are recognized. The analytical process is recorded openly so that assessment of claims to interpretation can occur. Between description of what the film shows and interpretation of what it indicates, there is a distinction. There is an admission of limitations and uncertainties in interpretation.

3.5.5 Ethical Representation of Psychological Frameworks

The research has a moral responsibility to portray psychological theories accurately and in a balanced manner. This involves addition of proper citations and portrayal of theoretical concepts, recognition of shortcomings and criticisms of theories used, avoiding

misrepresentation or the oversimplification of complex theoretical positions and acknowledgment of existing debates and competing views within each theoretical stream.

Accreditation of ideas to their conception.

3.5.6 Possible Impacts of Analysis

Although research in film analysis holds little direct risk, indirect effects should be considered:

Public Understanding Impact: Interpretation that becomes part of public discourse can shape what is understood about McCandless's life. The research seeks to add thoughtful understanding that eschews celebratory naivety or condemnatory judgment.

Influence upon Communities and Families: McCandless's family and communities in which events took place might be influenced by continued interest in his life. The analysis is done with sensitivity to these possible effects and seeks to add respectful, considerate interpretation.

Impact on Viewers: Analysis can impact what others think and perceive of the film. The study recognizes the interpretive function of the analysis and does not present absolute interpretation that has to supplant viewers' own sense-making.

3.5.7 Institutional Ethical Approval

Since this study examines publicly accessible media and does not engage human subjects, formal institutional review board approval may not be needed. Nonetheless, the study was performed in alignment with ethical guidelines for psychological research according to the American Psychological Association (2017) and the British Psychological Society (2014), such as beneficence and non-maleficence, fidelity and responsibility, integrity, and respect for people's rights and dignity.

3.6 Researcher Reflexivity and Positionality

Reflexivity refers to systematic critical self-reflection regarding the ways in which the researcher's background, experiences, values, and theoretical commitments influence the research process and interpretations (Finlay, 2002). The following section clarifies the researcher's positionality to help readers comprehend and assess the interpretative lens used to carry out the analysis.

3.6.1 Theoretical Orientation

As a humanistic and existential psychology-trained researcher, I undertake this research with theoretical commitments that inform interpretation. I favor approaches valuing human agency, meaning creation, and potential for growth, which is in harmony with the theoretical frameworks used in this research. This predisposes me to being open to seeing McCandless's journey as possibly

meaningful psychological investigation and not just pathological or crazy acts.

But my theoretical orientation also encompasses critical views towards uncritical celebration of autonomy. My education in self-determination theory and current research on well-being makes me sensitive to possible trade-offs of high levels of autonomy and the value of social connection to psychological well-being. This sets up tension in my reading between admiration for McCandless's search for real existence and worry about his foreclosure of the relationship.

3.6.2 Personal Experience and Values

My values and personal experience necessarily influence my interpretation of McCandless's life. As one who esteems independence and social belonging, I have intra-personal resonance with the conflicts the movie depicts. I have firsthand experience with tensions between genuine self-expression and social norms, which provides me with experiential knowledge of existential issues but also with the potential for projecting my own experiences onto McCandless's biography.

I come to the analysis with ambivalence towards modern consumer culture and traditional notions of success, which could lead me to be sympathetic with McCandless's disdain for materialism. At the same time, I believe in responsibility towards others and acknowledge the privilege that facilitated McCandless's sojourn (education, physical fitness, resources), which provides critical distance from unreflective admiration of his decisions.

3.6.3 Cultural and Social Location

Being a researcher placed in late Western culture, I understand the film through cultural frames that define understandings of individualism, authenticity, nature, and the good life. My cultural background puts a premium on individual choice and self-determination, which will make certain parts of McCandless's life more understandable than they would be to someone placed in a more collectivist cultural background.

My social location as a highly educated individual with access to knowledge and resources of psychology influences my interpretation. I can bring to bear highly developed theoretical structures that McCandless himself might not have employed to make sense of his experience. This constitutes opportunity (for systematic analysis) and risk (of imposing alien interpretive structures distorting meaning).

3.6.4 Relationship to the Film

I initially saw "Into the Wild" some years prior to carrying out this study, and it left a strong emotional impact. The movie related to my own queries regarding meaning, authenticity, and the interdependence of independence and connection. This earlier connection generates both strong engagement with the content and potential for preconceived interpretation.

To counter this risk, I practiced systematic viewing and analysis that broke beyond first impressions to theoretically informed interpretation. I actively looked for things in the film challenging my early interpretations and remained open to themes from the data rather than from preconceptions.

3.6.5 Theoretical Flexibility and Multiplicity

The employment of three different theoretical frameworks is an attempt to ensure interpretive richness through theoretical multiplicity. Instead of analyzing the film from a single theoretical perspective, I purposefully used frameworks that highlight disparate aspects of human psychology. It recognizes that any one framework offers incomplete understanding and that complete analysis is something that needs to be catered for by multiple perspectives (Madill et al., 2000).

But the selection of these specific frameworks over others indicates my theoretical stance. Psychoanalytic, behavioral, or cognitive frameworks would yield other interpretations. The frameworks used here have similar assumptions concerning human agency and development that serve to differentiate them from more deterministic or deficit-oriented ones.

3.6.6 Reflexive Strategies Used

In order to preserve reflexivity throughout the research process, I used a number of strategies:

Reflexive Journaling: I kept a reflexive journal recording my emotional reactions, interpretive presumptions, theoretical allegiances, and points of doubt or ambivalence during the analysis.

Theoretical Dialogue: I had discussions with other theoretical frameworks through literature review, reflecting upon how various frameworks would differently interpret the same phenomena.

Peer Dialogue: I shared my interpretations with peers who had differing theoretical orientations, enabling me to identify aspects of my interpretation that were influenced by my specific positionality.

Iterative Analysis: I consistently went back to the film and my notes of analysis, checking initial interpretations against film material and keeping open to revision.

Acknowledgment of Uncertainty: I actively made a distinction between interpretations to which I had high confidence and those that were more tentative or disputatious.

3.6.7 Effect of Reflexivity on Analysis

Reflexivity has contributed to the analysis on a number of fronts. An awareness of my initial sympathy for McCandless's journey caused me to pay special attention to scenes showing costs and consequences of his actions. An awareness of my theoretical commitments prompted me to look actively for things in the film that contradicted or made difficult theoretical predictions. An awareness of cultural assumptions prompted me to think through how the filmic

portrayal could be differently understood from other cultural perspectives.

Yet, reflexivity is bounded. Even critical self-reflection, my own interpretation is structured by my positionality in ways I am not fully able to recognize or overcome. The analysis is one systematically thought through, theoretically informed interpretation and not absolute or objective truth regarding the psychological meanings of the film.

3.7 Methodological Limitations

All methodology has its limitations, and these limitations need to be recognized to ensure proper interpretation and judgment of findings (Maxwell, 2012). This section outlines the major limitations of the methodology used in this study.

3.7.1 Single Case Focus

The study examines a single movie, and so findings are not generalizable. Although "Into the Wild" offers rich ground for psychological interpretation, themes so far identified in this movie might not be transferable to other films about human motivation, identity formation, or existential issues. The focus on a single case entails that findings need to be interpreted as relating specifically to this individual movie but not necessarily to all movies about psychological events (Yin, 2014).

Yet, this restriction is compensated by the richness of analysis achievable with intense attention to a single case. The aim is not statistical generalizability but theoretical understanding and analytical richness. According to Stake (1995), single case studies are able to produce "naturalistic generalization" based on detailed description allowing readers to judge applicability in other settings.

3.7.2 Interpretive Nature of Analysis

The study uses interpretive methodology; hence findings are the researcher's theoretically guided interpretation and not objective truths about the film. Different analysts with varied theoretical frameworks or differing experiential domains would probably produce differing interpretations (Madill et al., 2000).

This interpretive character is intrinsic to qualitative research and is not viewed as a defect but as an acknowledgment of the situated, perspectival character of knowledge (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). But it implies readers will judge findings on grounds of coherence, theoretical basis, and empirical fit rather than looking for replicability in the quantitative sense.

3.7.3 Film as Representation Rather Than Reality

The movie "Into the Wild" is a cinematic representation of Christopher McCandless's life and not direct access to his actual psychological state. Penn took several artistic liberties in transforming Krakauer's book, and Krakauer himself took interpretive decisions to piece together McCandless's story using available evidence (Krakauer,

1996). Therefore, the analysis addresses how psychological themes are represented in the film and not making absolute statements about McCandless's real psychology.

This constraint is recognized by emphasizing the film as the object of investigation and not by trying to do historical reconstruction. Research considers what the film depicts and what psychological understanding these depictions provide, which is useful irrespective of historical fidelity.

3.7.4 Limitations of Theoretical Framework

The three theoretical frameworks utilized (Maslow, SDT, existential psychology) offer useful but incomplete understandings of human psychology. Other theoretical frameworks (psychoanalytic, cognitive, social constructionist, feminist, postcolonial) would emphasize other features of the film and produce other readings. The selection of frameworks represents theoretical commitments that inherently preclude other views.

Furthermore, there are internal limitations within each framework and theory, which have been theoretically and empirically criticized in the literature review. Criticized theories applied equate to interpretations based on assumptions that are disputed within psychology. The study overcomes this limitation by recognizing the criticisms and not applying theoretical concepts in an uncritical manner.

3.7.5 Researcher Subjectivity

Even with reflexive awareness, the subjectivity of the researcher inevitably taints interpretation in directions which cannot be entirely controlled or even seen (Finlay, 2002). Personal history, emotional reaction, theoretical bias, and cultural presupposition all determine what features of the film get highlighted, how scenes are understood, and what themes are presented as most important (Finlay, 2002).

This constraint is alleviated through systematic methodology, theory, and clarity regarding the analytical process. Complete eradication of subjectivity is neither possible nor even desirable in interpretive research because the researcher's participation is an integral part of meaning making.

3.7.6 Temporal and Cultural Specificity

The analysis takes place at a specific moment in history and from a specific cultural position, and that conditions interpretation. The movie was seen in 2007 and analyzed in 2025, and both these temporalities condition understanding. The issues of concern in the present time regarding meaning, authenticity, technology, and social relation condition the ways in which the movie is understood. Analysis from varying moments in history or culture may produce differing conclusions.

This is a limitation to all interpretive studies and is met. by making it clear that the analysis is to be located in its time and culture. The results should be interpreted as a

representation of current psychological knowledge and cultural issues and not universal truths.

3.7.7 Participation Perspectives

In contrast to interview or focus group research, this study does not include viewer perspectives that have been through the experience of viewing the film. Analysis is the interpretation by the researcher guided by psychological theory but does not reflect how various audiences comprehend and react to the psychological material of the film (Livingstone, 1998).

Future research may use reception studies or interview viewers to learn more about how various audiences perceive the film's psychological concerns. Though, the focus of the current research on systematic theoretical analysis is a complementary but not lesser method for examining the film's psychological aspects.

3.7.8 Methodological Transparency Vs. Narrative Flow

Academic writing has to balance methodological exposition with narrative cohesion. Complete documentation of each step of the analytical process would result in a cumbersome document that gets in the way of comprehension. Hence, some analytical information is summarized instead of being elaborated on, which might restrict readers from being able to completely assess the analytical process.

This restriction is met by adequate methodological description to facilitate evaluation without diverting attention from substantive findings. The analytical process conforms to tried prescriptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006) giving implicit procedure detail not explicitly covered within this document.

3.7.9 Boundary Between Description and Interpretation

It is difficult and perhaps artificial to separate description of what the film shows from interpretation of what it signifies. Even apparently descriptive accounts make use of interpretative decisions regarding what to pay attention to, how to describe it, and what terminology to deploy (Riessman, 2008). The analysis tries to separate description from interpretation, but that border is necessarily a bit permeable.

This limitation is met through offering rich description and precise examples from the film to anchor interpretive claims, enabling readers to assess whether interpretations are well-supported by film content.

3.7.10 Implications of Limitations

These constraints require findings to be interpreted as providing theoretically guided, systematically constructed insights into psychological issues in "Into the Wild" but not as necessary or complete interpretation. The analysis adds to our knowledge of how this specific film represents human motivation, identity formation, and existence issues within three psychological theories, while noting that other

approaches would create different but perhaps equally useful insights.

The limitations do not disqualify the research but instead delimit its range and proper interpretation. Qualitative, interpretive research is seeking credibility, transferability, and theoretical understanding over generalizability and replicability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Measured against these criteria, the research provides valuable contribution despite recognized limitations.

4.1 Introduction

This chapter reports the results of the thematic narrative analysis of Sean Penn's movie "Into the Wild" (2007), exploring psychological themes of human motivation, identity formation, and existential issues through the combined use of Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943), Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), and existential psychology (Yalom, 1980). The analysis reveals complex psychological dynamics underlying Christopher McCandless's journey from conventional society to wilderness isolation, illuminating both the potential for growth through radical authenticity and the psychological costs of extreme individualism.

The chapter is structured to facilitate overall understanding of the identified psychological themes from the film. From this introduction, Section 4.2 sets the context for the participants by outlining Christopher McCandless from the film. Section 4.3 outlines the process of analysis used to identify themes. Section 4.4 offers an overview of the thematic framework, such as key themes and subthemes. Section 4.5 offers close examination of each theme supported by evidence from the film. Section 4.6 reports findings compared with previous psychological literature and theory. Section 4.7 responds to conflicting or complicating evidence. Section 4.8 considers practical implications for human motivation and well-being. Finally, Section 4.9 considers theoretical implications for the psychological models used.

The five overarching themes of analysis represent the psychological aspects of McCandless's journey according to the film: (1) The Search for True Existence Through Rejection of Mainstream Society, (2) The Paradox of Freedom and Belonging, (3) Incremental Need Satisfaction and Striving for Self-actualization, (4) Encounter with Existential Ultimate Concerns, and (5) The Transformative Power and Boundary of Nature. Each theme includes several subthemes that explicate particular psychological dynamics and processes. Collectively, these themes shed light on how the film depicts essential features of human motivation, identity formation, and the search for meaning.

The results show convergences and tensions between the three theoretical models. Maslow's hierarchy captures McCandless's evolution from foundational survival to self-actualization striving, while self-determination theory captures the tension between his radical seeking of autonomy and his core need for relatedness. Existential psychology frames his path as a confrontation with freedom, responsibility, loneliness, and death. The

convergence of these models discloses the richness of McCandless's psychological experience and provides insights applicable to wider understanding of human motivation and existential searching.

4.2 Participant Context

Although this study examines a movie as opposed to interviewing human subjects, setting context regarding the main character provides a better understanding of the psychological themes that are found. This part defines Christopher McCandless as seen in Sean Penn's "Into the Wild," understanding that the movie is an interpretation of the life of an actual person as opposed to direct observation of his real experience.

4.2.1 Biographical Context as Portrayed in the Film

Christopher Johnson McCandless, who in the film is called by his adopted name "Alexander Supertramp," is seen as a 22-year-old graduate from a middle-class American family. The film shows him graduating from Emory University in 1990 with academic excellence and a promising conventional life. Nevertheless, McCandless resists this traditional route, giving away his \$24,000 college fund to Oxfam, leaving behind all his belongings and identification, and setting out on a two-year odyssey of the continent that leads to his journey into the Alaskan wilderness.

The movie describes McCandless's background as financially well-off but emotionally problematic. His parents, Walt and Billie McCandless, are portrayed as accomplished, achievement driven individuals whose union holds secrets and strains. The movie shows that Walt had been involved with his first wife at the time of starting his affair with Billie, leading to Christopher learning about his father's deception. This dysfunction in the family is presented as paramount in McCandless's abandonment of mainstream society and in his suspicion of social relationships.

McCandless's academic background is presented as intellectually focused, with special interest in literature, philosophy, and transcendentalist authors such as Thoreau, Tolstoy, and London. The movie portrays him with books during his trip and marking passages that remind him of his search for true life. This intellectual background gives philosophical grounds for his disconnection from materialism and mainstream success.

4.2.2 Psychological Characteristics as Portrayed

The movie depicts McCandless as having a number of unique psychological traits. He has strong idealism and dedication to ideals, unwilling to compromise his beliefs in favor of practicality. His personality consists of robust autonomy, self sufficiency, and defiance of authority or outside control. He displays intellectual inquisitiveness and thinking ability, always challenging societal norms and searching for meaning.

McCandless is shown to have both social ambivalence and social competence. During his journey, he builds deep rapport with different people, reflecting capacity for empathy, communication, and emotional intimacy. Yet, he always ends these connections to pursue the solitary path, which indicates deep ambivalence regarding human contact. The movie presents him as charismatic and charming, attracting people to him while keeping emotional distance.

The character shows physical ability and bravery, becoming a wilderness survivalist and withstanding enormous adversity. The film also depicts naivety and bad judgment in his preparation process for the Alaskan wilderness, implying excessive confidence in his skills. His mental condition seems to change throughout the movie, shifting from initial confidence in his mission to ultimate acknowledgment of the value of human relationship.

4.2.3 Motivational Profile as Portrayed

The movie depicts McCandless motivated by several, sometimes contradictory, motivations. The primary motivations are the search for authentic life untainted by social pretentiousness and materialism, desire for firsthand experience with nature and wilderness, fleeing family malady and revelations of deceptions, disdain for consumer culture and traditional notions of success, and the quest for meaning and transcendent experience.

His motivations seem to be both approaches oriented (actual experience, harmony with nature, self-actualization) and avoidance oriented (escape from family pathology, social expectation, material issues). The film implies conflict between intentional, verbally stated motivations (real life, freedom) and unconscious motivations (flight from suffering, resolution of family conflicts).

4.2.4 Journey Trajectory as Portrayed

The movie tells McCandless's story in non-linear narrative form, intercutting his last few months in Alaska with flashbacks to his previous experiences. His odyssey follows a geographic trajectory from the southeastern United States to the Southwest, California, South Dakota, and ultimately Alaska. Psychologically, the movie illustrates initial thrill and confidence about his pursuit slowly giving place to greater and greater isolation, physical deterioration, and ultimate realization regarding the significance of experiencing with others.

Most significant to his travels are Wayne Westerberg (an elevator operator in South Dakota), Jan Burres and Rainey (hippie travelers who act as parental figures), Ron Franz (an elderly widower who provides paternal affection), and Tracy Tatzuda (a teenage girl who symbolizes possible romantic affiliation). Each builds various facets of McCandless's psychological depth and internal conflict between affection and solitude.

The movie shows his experience in Alaska initially satisfying his search for genuine wilderness experience but ultimately showing him limits of total remoteness. His

starvation death, perhaps complicated by eating poisoned seeds, is tragically depicted rather than heroically presented, and his last realization that "happiness only real when shared" implies an awareness that his extreme individualism was psychologically unfulfilled.

4.2.5 Contextual Considerations

To comprehend McCandless's story, there are a number of contextual factors that need to be understood. His experience took place in 1990 to 1992, a particular time in American culture that was defined by certain economic, social, and cultural conditions. His experiences were privileges of race, gender, education, and class that made his journey possible in ways that would not be open to everyone. The movie depicts a specific cultural background of American individualism, transcendentalism, and countercultural heritage that inform both McCandless's inspirations and the way his life is understood.

The shift from the historical facts via Krakauer's reconstruction of them as a journalist and into Penn's interpretation as a director comprises various levels of narrative construction and interpretive discretion. The film is Penn's own interpretation of McCandless's psychology, based on evidence at hand but necessarily including creative and interpretive aspects. The analysis here is concerned with what the film presents, not with asserting positive knowledge of the real-life McCandless's true psychological states.

4.3 Summary of Analytical Process

This section describes briefly how the thematic analysis was carried out, supplementing the detailed methodological description in Chapter 3. The overview shows how the five principal themes were developed through systematic work with the film based on the combined theoretical framework.

4.3.1 Initial Engagement and Immersion

Analysis commenced with repeated full viewings of "Into the Wild" to gain extensive familiarity with its narrative structure, character construction, visual symbolism, and emotional resonance. Preliminary viewings involved no preconceived coding schemes so that openness to the content of the film could be maintained with continued sensitivity to aspects pertaining to motivation, identity development, and existential issues.

Throughout this immersive period, initial observations were noted about McCandless's shifting motivations during his travels, common visual and narrative icons (most notably nature, books, human relationship, solitude), instances of psychological transformation or revelation, conflict between opposing needs or values, and how filmmaking techniques expressed psychological states and processes.

These early observations set the stage for more structured analysis, highlighting sections of the film which needed close attention and positing early connections with the theoretical frameworks.

4.3.2 Systematic Coding Process

After immersion, systematic coding occurred through repeated focused viewings, each with attention to particular theoretical dimensions. Coding for Maslow's hierarchy included noting scenes with different levels of needs (physiological, safety, belongingness, esteem, self-actualization, transcendence), instances where need priorities changed, and implications of need satisfaction or frustration on McCandless's psychological functioning.

Coding for self-determination theory aimed to identify expressions of autonomy (choices, self direction, resistance to control), competence (development of skills, mastery experiences, effectiveness), relatedness (affiliations with others, moments of isolation or intimacy), and various types of motivation (intrinsic vs. extrinsic, autonomous vs. controlled).

Coding for existential psychology focused on encounters with freedom and responsibility, feelings of existential isolation vs. connection, encounters with mortality and limit-situations, attempts to establish meaning and purpose, and conflict between authentic and inauthentic existence.

Further coding tracked narrative and cinematic aspects such as symbolic imagery, structural devices, character development trajectories, and dialogue that shed light on psychological themes. This multi-dimensional coding created rich data chronicling psychological content throughout the film.

4.3.3 Theme Development Process

From the coded data, early themes were generated by collapsing related codes into patterns of meaning. This involved constant comparison throughout the film, looking at how psychological elements repeated, developed, or transformed throughout McCandless's life. Early themes were assessed for internal coherence (whether coded extracts within each theme created a coherent pattern) and external distinctiveness (whether themes were distinctly differentiated from one another).

Some early themes were consolidated when they were found to be different faces of the same underlying psychological trend. Others were broken down when they contained several discrete psychological processes. The cyclical process of checking themes against data resulted in sharpening of both theme definitions and the general thematic architecture.

4.3.4 Integration Across Theoretical Frameworks

A significant part of the process of analysis was looking at the ways in which themes across the three theoretical frameworks were related. Some themes corresponded mainly with a single framework, whereas others combined ideas from more than one framework or indicated conflicting frameworks. The integration process determined where frameworks provided convergence as opposed to divergent explanations of the same events.

For instance, McCandless's search for wilderness living may be explained by Maslow as self-actualization seeking, by SDT as a pursuit of autonomy, and by existential psychology as braving existential isolation. The process of analysis scrutinized how these various theoretical perspectives shed light on different facets of the same psychological processes as well as marking the places where frameworks were making conflicting predictions or assessments.

4.3.5 Thematic Refinement and Finalization

After initial theme creation, themes were further shaped by further review of the entire film to confirm that they sufficiently captured prominent psychological content and responded to the research questions. Theme definitions were refined to effectively indicate what each theme included and excluded. Subthemes were created to identify unique aspects within larger thematic patterns.

The ultimate thematic organization is a compromise between empirical footing in film content and theoretical consistency with the conceptual framework. Themes are abstract enough to encompass patterns over the film yet concrete enough to be readily demonstrated with particular evidence. The five main themes and their subthemes were found to be the most inclusive and theoretically generative means of organizing the psychological content discovered in the film.

4.3.6 Analytical Output

The analytical procedure produced five overarching themes, each containing three to four subthemes, that offer systematic organization to grasping the psychological aspects of McCandless's odyssey. The themes unfold consistently from his early repudiation of mainstream society to his experiences of liberty and belonging, self-actualization, existential realities, and the function of nature in his psychological transformation.

These themes collectively respond to the research questions by shedding light on how motivation, identity development, and existential issues are portrayed in the film, how these are reflected in the three theoretical frameworks, and what can be learned through composite theoretical examination. The subsequent sections describe these themes in depth with evidence from the film and theoretical understanding.

4.4 Presentation of Themes and Subthemes

The five overall themes, which reflect the psychological aspects of Christopher McCandless's adventure in "Into the Wild," were identified through thematic analysis. Each of these overall themes includes three or four subthemes elaborating particular aspects of the general psychological pattern. This section offers an overview of the entire thematic structure prior to detailed analysis in following sections.

Theme 1: The Search for True Existence Through Refusal of Traditional Society

This subtheme embraces McCandless's inherent desire to live true to himself by eschewing social convention, materialism, and planned life trajectories. The movie captures his odyssey as questing after real experience untainted by social expectation or consumer culture.

Subtheme 1.1: Rejection of Material Success and Consumer Culture

McCandless's gift away from his college fund, relinquishment of property, and defiance of money as a source of genuine life.

Subtheme 1.2: Critique of Social Pretense and Inauthenticity

His understanding of traditional social relationships as performances, not authentic connection, and his quest for unmediated, unpretentious interaction.

Subtheme 1.3: Construction of Alternative Identity

The taking on of "Alexander Supertramp" as a self-constructed identity without family background and social construction.

Subtheme 1.4: Literary and Philosophical Frameworks for Meaning Making

His use of transcendentalist and philosophical literature to offer justification and direction for his endeavor.

Theme 2: The Paradox of Freedom and Connection

This theme shines a light on the core psychological conflict in McCandless's quest: his concomitant desire for autonomy and relatedness. The film illustrates how his radical seeking of freedom is at odds with his inherent human desire for significant connection.

Subtheme 2.1: Autonomy as Liberation and Isolation

The double-edged nature of McCandless's independence as both psychologically emancipating and socially isolating.

Subtheme 2.2: Meaningful Connections Repeatedly Formed and Abandoned

His cycle of forming authentic relationships with others (Westerberg, Franz, Burres) only to end them in order to pursue his lone journey.

Subtheme 2.3: Developmental Emergence of Understanding Relationship between Self and Others

His transition from perceiving relationships as boundaries on freedom to seeing them as vital to well-being.

Subtheme 2.4: Ultimate Realization of Shared Experience as Vital to Happiness

His final realization, in the margin note "happiness only real when shared," that his utmost individualism was psychologically incomplete.

Theme 3: Progressive Need Satisfaction and the Striving for Self-actualization

This theme explores McCandless's development through various motivational priorities, from the satisfaction of basic survival needs through the satisfaction of higher order psychological needs such as self-actualization and transcendence.

Subtheme 3.1: Mastery of Basic Survival Needs in Wilderness Setting

His realization of competence in fulfilling physiological and safety needs by wilderness means.

Subtheme 3.2: Chasing Peak Experiences and Transcendent Moments

His pursuit of intense, significant experiences in nature that transcend normal consciousness.

Subtheme 3.3: Self-actualization Through Direct Experience

His focus on direct experience of reality as a means to the fulfillment of human potential.

Subtheme 3.4: The Collapse of Need Hierarchy in Extreme Conditions

How his failure to satisfy basic needs in Alaska undercut striving for higher order needs, demonstrating defects of the hierarchical model.

Theme 4: Encounter with Existential Ultimate Concerns

This theme identifies McCandless's grappling with ultimate existential concerns such as freedom, responsibility, solitude, and death. The movie depicts his adventure as an encounter with the bare essentials of human being.

Subtheme 4.1: Radical Freedom and the Burden of Responsibility

His acceptance of absolute freedom in deciding his path in life and the psychological weight of sheer responsibility for his decisions.

Subtheme 4.2: Existential Isolation and Quest for Connection

The conflict between the essential solitude of human existence and the urge for genuine contact with others.

Subtheme 4.3: Mortality as Stimulus for Meaning Making

How his encounter with mortality in Alaska accelerates his pursuit of meaning and changes his definition of what is important.

Subtheme 4.4: Authenticity as Vulnerability and Courage

The way the film shows authenticity as calling for courage to confront existential anxiety yet at the same time exposing oneself to harm.

Theme 5: Nature's Transformative Potential and Constraints

The theme explores the place of wilderness and natural landscapes in McCandless's psychological odyssey and how nature provides many psychological functions while also exposing constraints.

Subtheme 5.1: Nature as Self Discovery Mirror

Wilderness as a place of distraction-free space where true self can be realized.

Subtheme 5.2: Nature as Trial Ground for Competence

Wilderness as testing ground for skill and demonstration of ability.

Subtheme 5.3: Nature as Source of Transcendent Experience

Wildness and immersion in natural beauty as doorways to peak experiences and spirituality.

Subtheme 5.4: Nature's Indifference and the Limits of Romantic Idealization

The movie's final depiction of nature as amoral toward human meaning making, neither good nor evil, contradicts McCandless's idealistic transcendentalist ideals.

These five themes and their respective subthemes form an overarching framework for understanding the psychological content of "Into the Wild". The themes are intertwined, with substantial interconnections and tensions between them. Collectively, they shed light on how the movie renders sophisticated psychological dynamics in terms of motivation, identity, autonomy, connection, meaning making, and the human condition.

4.5 Detailed Analysis with Supporting Evidence

This section offers detailed discussion of every theme and subtheme, combining theoretical analysis with specific examples from the film. Each theme is addressed through the lens of the three theoretical frameworks, considering how the film represents psychological processes through narrative, dialogue, visual imagery, and cinematic style.

Theme 1: The Search for Authentic Being Through Rejection of Traditional Society

The opening scenes of the movie are quick to establish the rejection of normal success by McCandless. At his graduation ceremony, after which his parents offer to spend money on a new car for him, McCandless reacts with visible tension and annoyance. His voiceover description,

quoted from his journal, pours scorn on "the plastic, materialistic, suburban consumer culture" that he sees around him. The rejection is not intellectual but bodily, demonstrated in his physical unease in social settings that demand conformity.

Subtheme 1.1: Disavowal of Material Wealth and Consumer Culture

One of the first things McCandless does after graduating is giving his \$24,000 college fund to Oxfam, an act the film shows us but not saying, with a focus on his resolve. Later, burning money in the film, while symbolizing relatively little money, is symbolic rejection of value. Throughout the trip, McCandless turns down offers of material assistance that will soothe his privations but undermine his ethos.

From a Maslowian perspective, this rejection is paradoxical: McCandless makes it more challenging to fulfill basic physiological and safety needs, seemingly putting higher order values ahead of basic needs (Maslow, 1943). Yet, this is in accordance with Maslow's own later recognition that self-actualizing individuals will forego lower needs for values and principles (Maslow, 1968).

Self-determination theory provides further explanation: McCandless's refusal of worldly success can be interpreted as the refusal of extrinsically driven goals (wealth, status, belongings) for intrinsically driven endeavors (autonomy, personal development, rich experience) (Ryan & Deci, 2000). His actions are consistent with findings that materialist values are linked to lower well-being when they take priority over intrinsic goals (Kasser & Ryan, 1993).

Existentially, McCandless's refusal of materialism is a refusal of prescribed meanings and a creation of his own values, which is a vital component of true existence (Yalom, 1980). His behavior is an expression of existential courage to determine himself by his actions instead of adopting socially provided definitions of achievement (May, 1953).

Subtheme 1.2: Critique of Social Pretense and Inauthenticity

The movie depicts McCandless as sensitively perceptive toward social pretense and performance. In a critical scene, he blames his parents for their lie about his father's former marriage, saying they have been living a lie. His voiceover reveals, "I think careers are a 20th century invention and I don't want one". This reflects his sense that typical social roles are artificial creations that keep one from living real life.

Along the way, McCandless is attracted to people who seem real and unpretentious in their presentation. His friendships with Wayne Westerberg (a blue-collar grain elevator worker), Jan Burres (a vagabond hippie), and Ron Franz (a down-to-earth elderly man) are contrasted with his rejection of his educated, middle-class parents. These encounters imply that he prefers reality to social status or to traditional respectability.

Existential psychology defines this theme through a theory of authenticity and "bad faith" (Sartre, 1943/1956). McCandless sees mainstream society as being in bad faith, suppressing human responsibility and freedom by adhering to predetermined roles. His criticism shares existential concern for contemporary society encouraging inauthenticity in the form of pressure to conform to others' expectations instead of establishing one's own meaning (Heidegger, 1962).

Nonetheless, the movie also implies tensions with McCandless's criticism. His criticism of others' inauthenticity can itself be seen as a projection or a defense. His compulsion to reject normal society wholeheartedly instead of negotiating it more adaptively implies stiffness that could be seen as a further type of inauthenticity by existential psychologists (Yalom, 1980).

Subtheme 1.3: Construction of Alternative Identity

McCandless taking on the name "Alexander Supertramp" is self-creation by intention, a bid to create identity independent of family heritage and societal expectations. The movie illustrates this in scenes in which he tells people his new name, demanding they call him by it. He torches his identification, destroying symbolically his socially created identity.

Self-determination theory places this construction of identity within the context of pursuit of autonomy at its most basic level: autonomy over one's own identity (Deci & Ryan, 1985). His naming himself is the highest level of autonomous motivation, as noted by Ryan and Deci (2000), in which behavior becomes completely aligned with one's sense of self. Yet the extremity of his rejecting his identity, cutting himself off from family, hints at costs to the need for relatedness.

From a developmental point of view, McCandless's construction of identity can be seen as an extreme instance of identity exploration that is typical for emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000). While typical identity development includes exploration within social contexts, McCandless searches for identity development in radical departure from all prior contexts.

The movie complicates this by indicating that McCandless never completely leaves his past identity behind. Through his sister's voiceover narration throughout the movie, insight into family dynamics and his psychology is presented that McCandless himself cannot explain, indicating that his self-constructed identity is linked to the family history he seeks to leave behind.

Subtheme 1.4: Literary and Philosophical Frameworks for Meaning Making

Throughout the movie, McCandless is repeatedly seen reading and annotating books by Thoreau, Tolstoy, London, and other authors who romanticized nature, simplicity, and rejection of mainstream society. These books offer intellectual scaffolding for his journey, providing justification as well as guidance. His marginal

annotations, presented in close-up shots, express his active reading of philosophical ideas about genuine existence.

This use of literary constructs illustrates what existential psychologists term the human need for narrative meaning and coherence (Frankl, 1963). McCandless builds a personal mythology based on transcendentalist and romantic ideals and places himself in a line of those who abandoned materialism for genuine experience. This account gives meaning structure to suffering that would otherwise seem senseless.

Yet the film also intimates constraints of existing by literary constructs. McCandless's romantic and transcendentalist-informed idealization of nature and wilderness is not sufficient preparation for wilderness reality. His cerebral knowledge of true existence meets embodied reality in ways his books did not see coming. The film implies conflict between theoretical philosophical ideals and lived experience.

Theme 2: The Paradox of Freedom and Connection

The film's most psychologically rich theme concerns the conflict between McCandless's seeking independence and his desire for human attachment. This tension is set up early, escalates throughout his adventure, and comes to closure (or tragic non-closure) in his last days.

Subtheme 2.1: Autonomy as Liberation and Isolation

Early sequences show McCandless's taste of freedom as liberating exhilaration. Driving down country roads in the west, he is full of visible joy and energy. The visual language of the film is one of openness, travel, and possibility. His voiceover expresses his contentment at being "master of his own life," words that echo self-determination theory's autonomous motivation concept (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

According to SDT, McCandless exhibits great autonomous functioning: his conduct is self-endorsed, value congruent, and uncontrolled by external agents (Deci & Ryan, 1985). His decisions are based on intrinsic motivation as opposed to seeking external rewards or escaping external punishments. Nevertheless, SDT asserts that autonomy needs to be harmonized with relatedness and competence for maximal functioning (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

As the movie goes on, freedom scenes increasingly include visual motifs of isolation, not of liberty. Images of McCandless by himself in open spaces change their emotional resonance from thrilling to isolating. The cinematography of the movie more and more highlights his smallness amidst gigantic natural contexts, implying vulnerability instead of control.

Existential psychology has the key to this ambivalence of freedom. Existential theorists acknowledge that freedom creates anxiety because it entails responsibility and uncertainty (May, 1953). McCandless's experience illustrates what Yalom (1980) calls the existential conflict between desire for freedom and experience of

groundlessness that ensues with it. His growing isolation is the lived experience of existential freedom, which can prove to be psychologically destabilizing.

Subtheme 2.2: Meaningful Connections Repeatedly Formed and Abandoned

There is a repeated pattern in the film where McCandless creates real, meaningful relationships that he then ends in order to continue his travels. His friendship with Wayne Westerberg evolves into mutual respect and liking, where Westerberg provides him with work and companionship. McCandless works on Westerberg's crew, attends social gatherings, and seems content. But he abruptly leaves without saying anything to anyone.

In the same way, his interaction with Jan Burres and her boyfriend Rainey takes on maternal and familial characteristics. Jan directly informs McCandless "you could be our son," providing the family relationship he spurned from his biological parents. Yet again, McCandless embraces this relationship for a while but demands to leave and pursue his solitary mission.

Most poignantly, his friendship with Ron Franz evolves into profound intergenerational friendship. Franz, a widowed veteran with no relatives, proposes to formally adopt McCandless. The moment when Franz proposes this is powerfully emotional, with McCandless obviously disturbed but ultimately refusing. He instructs Franz "you should make a radical change in your life," urging him to leave behind traditional settled life, but he cannot reciprocate Franz's offer of permanent ties.

These patterns shine light on the paradox of Self-determination theory: humans possess essential autonomy and relatedness needs, but these needs might seem to be at odds (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Empirical evidence shows that autonomy in a healthy sense means being free within relationships not separate from relationships (Ryan et al., 2006). McCandless's pattern indicates he sees autonomy and relatedness as incompatible, not complementary.

From attachment theory view (Bowlby, 1988), McCandless's relationship-forming and relationship-abandoning style may be a result of insecure attachment formed by his childhood experiences. His learning of the deception by his father could have compromised his trust potential in relationships. Yet, the film also demonstrates his real warmth potential and relationship capacity, making any simplistic pathological explanation difficult.

Subtheme 2.3: Evolving Understanding of Relationship Between Self and Others

The movie proposes that McCandless's perception of others and self-changes during his adventure. At first, he seems to see relationships as mostly as limits on freedom or causes of pain and betrayal. His narration at the beginning of the movie describes, "You don't need human relationships to be happy, God has placed it all around us".

But quiet changes in his manner and facial expressions indicate increasing awareness of the importance of human relationship. In Alaska, alone in the bus, he starts reading Doctor Zhivago, a novel focusing on love and human relationship. His marginal notes in the book, displayed in close-up, imply preoccupation with questions of relationship and commonality.

The film's visual language supports this development. McCandless is frequently filmed near the edge of the frame in early scenes involving other individuals, staying visually distant even in relationships. In later scenes, he is placed more centrally within group compositions, implying growing ease with connection. Facial expressions during encounters exhibit diminished guarded tension and more authentic openness as the film moves on.

This transformation is one with existential psychology's acknowledgment that true human contact, though challenging and anxiety inducing, is necessary to psychological well-being (Yalom, 1980). McCandless's path is one of movement away from what might be termed isolated individualism by existential theorists and toward acknowledgment of what Buber (1937/1970) referred to as "I Thou" relationships that value both selfhood and relationship.

But the film insinuates this acceptance is too late to be applied. McCandless' physical aloneness in Alaska denies him going back to the relationships he previously spurned. The tragedy is not only his death but his failure to harmonize his hard-earned knowledge of the value of shared experience.

Subtheme 2.4: Final Acceptance of Shared Experience as Indispensable to Happiness

The emotional peak of the movie is McCandless's realization, as voiced in his margin note in Doctor Zhivago: "happiness only real when shared". This realization is depicted as deep psychological change, an awareness that is opposed to his previous philosophy of isolated self-actualization.

This realization is depicted in a scene using close-up, intimate shooting, with the extreme close-ups of McCandless's face being emotionally charged. His later journey back from Alaska, cut off by the swollen river, is a metaphor for the futility of reversing decisions. He knows what he requires but is unable to obtain it.

To Maslow, this awakening may be an acknowledgment that belongingness needs cannot be circumvented in favor of self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). The trajectory of McCandless illustrates that although people can temporarily sublimate lower needs in favor of higher aspirations, primordial needs will sooner or later come back into the picture. His observation proposes that true self-actualization is a synthesis of all levels of needs and not a transcending of "lower" needs.

Self-determination theory offers possibly the most explicit model for describing this awareness. McCandless's

awareness fits perfectly with SDT's focus that relatedness is a basic psychological need on par with autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000). His over-reliance on autonomy to the detriment of relatedness produced psychological disequilibrium which he ultimately came to see as not sustainable. Studies show that people who value autonomy and still have strong relationships feel healthier than those who work to gain autonomy through separation (Ryan et al., 2006).

Existentially, McCandless's epiphany speaks to what Yalom (1980) considers an essential existential dilemma: human beings are essentially isolated in their existence, but human connection to others is critical to psychological well-being. Honest existence involves acknowledging both the truth of existential loneliness and the necessity of relationships. McCandless's mistake was trying to solve the dilemma by embracing loneliness instead of existing in tension with it.

The film's depiction of this realization has created widespread cultural debate regarding its interpretation. Some see it as McCandless abandoning his search, realizing it was misguided. Others see it as an intensification of his insight rather than a rejection. The film itself is ambivalent, depicting the realization as both profound and tragic awareness of what he has lost.

Theme 3: Progressive Need Satisfaction and the Pursuit of Self-actualization

This theme explores McCandless's path through the context of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, analyzing how his motivational needs change along the way and what this informs us about the hierarchical model of motivation.

Subtheme 3.1: Mastery of Basic Survival Needs in Wilderness Context

Early in his travels, the movie portrays McCandless's early challenges with mere survival. One sequence features him trying to hunt, first failing, eventually succeeding at killing game, and his triumph at accomplishing this. He quotes his journal entry, read aloud, stating "Ultimate freedom, an extremist, an aesthetic voyager whose home is the road".

This mastery of physiological needs in wilderness setting gives psychological gratification more than just survival. The movie shows his pride at being self sufficient, his increasing skill in wilderness survival, and his feeling of achievement. These sequences harmonize with both Maslow's placing of competence as contributing to esteem needs (Maslow, 1943) and self-determination theory's recognition of competence as one of the basic psychological needs (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

During his journey, McCandless continually puts himself in positions that necessitate focusing on fundamental needs (obtaining food, water, shelter) that would be effortlessly fulfilled in normal society. This intentional construction of survival obstacles indicates he derives meaning and fulfillment from confronting basic needs head-on instead of having them fulfilled by social systems as a matter of

course. This pattern aligns with research suggesting that meeting needs through one's own efforts provides greater satisfaction than passive need satisfaction (Deci et al., 1999).

But the movie also prefigures constraints of this trend. McCandless's self-trust in his survival abilities, otherwise well warranted on his journey through more lenient contexts, is found wanting in Alaska's rigorous environment. His diary recordings, optimistically certain of his capacity to "live off the land," progressively exhibit growing desperation as he struggles to find enough to eat. The movie thereby depicts the gratification and danger of intentionally pushing beyond basic need fulfillment.

Subtheme 3.2: Seeking Peak Experiences and Transcendent Moments

The movie captures several instances of McCandless having what Maslow (1968) referred to as "peak experiences": intense, transcendent moments of ecstasy, union, and expanded consciousness. These are his initial view of the Alaskan landscape, captured in uplifting cinematography and celebratory music, his boating adventure down the Colorado River into Mexico, and his solo reflection on nature's beauty.

These peak experiences seem to be fundamental drivers of McCandless's adventure. His voiceover narrates searching for "ultimate freedom" and spiritual connection with nature beyond common experience. The film intimates these experiences bring ultimate meaning and sanction for the suffering he undergoes. Visual rhetoric in peak experience scenes uses unique cinematography such as wide angle lenses, golden hour lighting, and smooth camera movement that illustrate transcendence and modified consciousness.

Maslow (1968) contended that peak experiences are typical of self-actualizing individuals and serve to promote psychological growth and integration. McCandless's quest for such experiences fits Maslow's definition of self-actualization as transcending ego boundaries and reaching out to something higher than oneself. Maslow, however, also noted that self-actualizing individuals have a firm connection to reality and relations, and thus McCandless's sole concentration on peak experiences apart is perhaps a case of incomplete self-actualization.

From an existential psychology viewpoint, McCandless's peak experiences can be seen as moments of genuine existence when he is completely alive and in touch with reality unmediated by society (May, 1953). These experiences confer meaning in what existential theorists see as a meaningless universe, meaningfully creating personal significance (Frankl, 1963).

But the film also proposes limits to peak experiences as sole source of meaning. As McCandless becomes more isolated and his physical health declines, peak experiences seem less common and less enduring. The film cautions that transcendent moments, powerful as they may be, cannot replace ongoing connection and purpose. Consistent with research indicating that although peak experiences do

contribute to well-being, ongoing eudaimonic well-being involves continued participation in meaningful activity and relationships (Ryan & Deci, 2001).

Subtheme 3.3: Self-actualization Through Direct Experience

One of the key elements of McCandless's journey is his seeking self-actualization by means of direct, unmediated experience of life. He spurns what he sees as second hand, vicarious existence through social status, material wealth, or mainstream careers. His voiceover says this philosophy: "Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth".

This focus on immediate experience is in line with Maslow's (1968) characterization of self-actualizing people as perceiving reality more effectively, perceiving things as they are, rather than through lenses of psychological defensiveness or social conditioning. McCandless looks for truth in direct contact rather than taking socially provided interpretations. His disavowal of career and traditional achievement is in line with Maslow's comment that self-actualizing people are frequently nonconforming and independent in their values (Maslow, 1968).

The movie illustrates this through long shots of McCandless alone in the natural world, doing physical things (hiking, hunting, reading) without social performance or mediation. These scenes prioritize presence and immediacy, inviting immersion in experience. Cinematography for these sequences regularly uses natural light, handheld camera work, and long takes that produce a sense of unmediated reality.

But the movie complicates this theme by implying that experience always involves interpretation and mediation. McCandless's interpretation of his experience is mediated by the literary and intellectual paradigms he applies to them, specifically transcendentalist and romantic ideals concerning nature. His experience is never ever "direct" but always mediated through cultural and intellectual frameworks. This implies limitations to the ideal of unmediated experience that McCandless seeks.

Self-determination theory provides further insight, proposing that intrinsically motivated experience engagement (doing something for its inherent reward) is a greater predictor of well-being than extrinsic validation engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2000). McCandless's hands-on approach to wilderness experience seems highly intrinsically motivated, which would predict healthy psychological results. Yet, SDT also notes intrinsic motivation thrives in contexts providing all three basic needs, including relatedness, meaning McCandless's solitary pursuit may be limiting in its benefits.

Subtheme 3.4: Breakdown of Need Hierarchy in extreme circumstances

The last act of the film, showing McCandless during his time in the Alaskan bus, illustrates breakdown of the need hierarchy under extreme circumstances. As he is no longer able to get enough food and his body deteriorates, higher

order psychological issues become less and less relevant. His entries from his journal change from philosophical musings to frantic recording of physical complaints and attempts at hunting.

This development shows the viability and shortfalls of Maslow's hierarchical model. The model states that in extreme neglect of lower order needs, focus drifts away from higher order needs (Maslow, 1943). McCandless's experience verifies that extreme lack of physiological needs renders it impossible to pursue self-actualization. His physical frailty renders him incapable of involvement in the activities (reading, hunting, exploring) that conferred sense and fulfilment.

Yet the film also hints that McCandless's deepest psychological insight takes place during this time of physical extremity. The fact that he comes to realize "happiness only real when shared" signifies psychological development even as his own physical state disintegrates. This indicates that the dynamic between levels of need is more multifaceted than hierarchy would suggest. Existential theorists could propose that exposure to mortality (the ultimate threat to survival at a physiological level) paradoxically facilitates most profound insights into meaning and purpose (Yalom, 1980).

The film's portrayal of McCandless's physical decline is unflinching, showing his emaciation, weakness, and ultimate inability to move from the bus. These scenes create powerful emotional impact, transforming the narrative from adventure to tragedy. The visual contrast between his earlier physical vitality and his final physical helplessness underscores the fundamental importance of physiological needs that McCandless's philosophy attempted to transcend.

From a critical view, the death of McCandless illustrates the risk of idealistic ideologies that downplay basic necessities or material existence. As significant as self-actualization is to human motivation, it must be pursued in sustainable balance with basic physical well-being. The movie implies that true human flourishing involves integration of all levels of needs rather than hierarchical transcendence.

Theme 4: Confrontation with Existential Ultimate Concerns

This subtheme considers how the film illustrates McCandless's interaction with what existential psychologists recognize as ultimate concerns: freedom, responsibility, isolation, and mortality (Yalom, 1980). The movie shows that his experience was essentially existential, one of meeting basic conditions of human existence.

Subtheme 4.1: Radical Freedom and the Weight of Responsibility

McCandless's journey represents an extreme embrace of existential freedom. By severing conventional social connections and obligations, he claims complete freedom to define himself through his choices. His voiceover

articulates this explicitly: "I'm going to completely knock him out of my life. I'm going to divorce them as my parents".

This extreme freedom seems to be freeing at first. The film has early sequences showing his thrill in making decisions unencumbered by external control or parental intervention. The movie, however, comes to focus more and more on the emotional burden of complete responsibility that comes with freedom. As existential theorists note, freedom creates anxiety because it eliminates reassuring illusions of external control (Sartre, 1943/1956; May, 1953).

The movie depicts this anxiety subtly by visual and performance choices. Even in the moments of what looks like joy and freedom, McCandless's facial expressions at times betray underlying tension. His insistence on perpetual motion, on never staying put, promises restlessness that perhaps represents existential anxiety over freedom. His use of literary and philosophical systems to navigate choices promises him trouble fully accepting the groundlessness of radical freedom.

The responsibility theme grows more dominant as the consequences of McCandless's decisions build up. Suffering at the hands of his family, communicated through his sister's voiceover and short scenes of his mother's sorrow, are the relational impacts of his independent decisions. Ron Franz's heartbreak at the discovery of McCandless's death is a visual reminder of how his decisions impacted others for whom he cared. The film posits implicit ethical questions regarding the morality of radical freedom when one's decisions have an impact on others.

Existential psychology identifies this conflict between liberty and duty to others as a basic moral dilemma (Yalom, 1980). Although existential philosophy insists that people must form their own values instead of conforming to assigned meanings, this does not mean obligation to think about how one's decisions impact others disappears. The movie indicates McCandless is unable to put his freedom together with proper duty to the people who are looking out for him.

The culmination of the movie, with McCandless unable to come back from Alaska and seeing too late the value of attachment, is the final aftermath of extreme freedom without sufficient regard for relationship commitments. His death could be interpreted as partially an outcome of freedom sought without regard for interdependence and society responsibility.

Subtheme 4.2: Existential Isolation and the Search for Connection

The movie goes far in probing existential isolation, which Yalom (1980) contrasts with interpersonal isolation as the impassable distance between self and other, the inherent loneliness of human life. McCandless's bodily solitude in the wild comes to stand for this existential solitude, bringing into visibility what is ever so but ordinarily screened by social relations.

Images of McCandless standing by himself in expansive scenery visually represent existential loneliness. Wide shots with his smallness in comparison to enormous natural environments in the film visually represent the individual's loneliness in an indifferent world. Sound design throughout these scenes is generally focused on either silence or environmental sounds (wind, water, animals) over human voice, reiterating loneliness.

McCandless seems to actively seek existential solitude as a route to genuine self awareness. By distancing himself from society, he tries to find out who he is independent of social relationships and roles. This is an expression of existential focus on the need for solitude and self awareness for genuine being (Heidegger, 1962). Yet, the film implies that long-term solitude turns out to be psychologically corrosive instead of enlightening.

His experiences demonstrate what existential theorists identify as the paradox of loneliness: human beings are essentially isolated in existence, but attachment with others is crucial to psychological health (Yalom, 1980). McCandless's bid to navigate this paradox through a romanticization of isolation is psychologically unsustainable. His last acknowledgment that "happiness only real when shared" is recognition that existential loneliness, though inevitable, needs to be balanced with interpersonal attachment.

The movie represents his isolation with growing intensity throughout the course of the film. His arguments with himself, reading out loud to no one, and the repeated look at the same view indicate the psychological effort of extended isolation. His flashbacks to the earlier affairs, shown in warm light and wistful tone, are a stark contrast to his current isolation, indicating increasing awareness of what he has lost.

From an existential psychology point of view, McCandless's mistake was trying to overcome existential loneliness by being physically alone and not embracing it in continuing to have relationships. True existence involves embracing essential solitude and yet continuing to have a meaningful relationship with others (Yalom, 1980). The movie portrays McCandless as mistaking existential loneliness, which is inevitable, with social loneliness, which is self-selected and could be detrimental.

Subtheme 4.3: Mortality as Catalyst for Meaning Making

The movie shows mortality not just as the destiny of McCandless but as a psychic presence all through his quest. His readiness to chance death, his encounter with deadly situations, and his eventual death due to starvation all show confrontation with mortality as existential issue.

Existential thinkers highlight the importance of awareness of death as intrinsic to human awareness and as impetus to meaning making (Yalom, 1980; Frankl, 1963). Awareness that life is limited instills a sense of urgency to exist meaningfully and not to postpone genuine living. McCandless's path demonstrates this existential maxim: his

clear recognition that life is short and valuable inspires his rejection of traditional routes he sees as squandering precious time.

The movie depicts a number of close calls with death that seem to heighten McCandless's appreciation for life and energy. A passage depicting him coming close to drowning in river rapids, filmed with visceral power, is succeeded by scenes of increased appreciation for life. These are consistent with existential psychology's finding that awareness of death can heighten appreciation for life and clarify what is important (Yalom, 1980).

But the film also implies that McCandless's connection to mortality is one of denial as well as genuine confrontation. His faith in his survival skills, his poor planning for Alaska, and his seeming expectation that nature will supply him with what he needs all indicate a teenager's illusion of invulnerability, not adult acceptance of mortality. The film suggests that genuine confrontation with mortality involves both courage and honest evaluation of vulnerability.

His last weeks in the bus are clear-cut confrontation with approaching death. His physical decline is presented in the film in no-holds-barred fashion, with his thinning and frailty being fully revealed. His journal writings at this time contemplate death in frank and non-resisted terms, implying that he attains some harmony with his destiny. His last self-portrait photograph, with a smile on his face and waving goodbye, symbolizes what could be interpreted as acceptance of death with honor.

From an existential psychology viewpoint, McCandless's death could be seen as tragic waste or as genuine acceptance of mortality as the ultimate horizon of human life. The film seems ambivalent, presenting his death as avoidable tragedy due to bad judgment while also presenting dignity in the manner in which he approached death. His last writings show appreciation for his experiences and relationships, indicating he achieved meaning even in dying.

Terror management theory (Greenberg et al., 1986) provides further context, proposing that consciousness of mortality elicits both defensive reactions (death denial, tenacity to belief systems) and possibly growth promoting reactions (value clarification, seeking meaning). Both patterns are present in McCandless's experience: his idealism and faith in the goodness of nature may constitute defensive reactions to mortality fear, while his quest for true experience and final acceptance of death constitute growth promoting reactions.

Subtheme 4.4: Authenticity as Courage and Vulnerability

McCandless's search for authentic living is presented as demanding great courage in the film. He is required to fight strong social pressures for conformity, face rejection and misunderstanding by his family, stomach uncertainty and discomfort, and bear sole responsibility for constructing his own meaning without approval from anyone. These encounters capture what existential theorists have

identified as the anxiety involved in authentic living (May, 1953).

Initial scenes show McCandless's bravery in rejecting traditional achievement in the face of social pressure. His parents' dismay and misunderstanding, his peers' puzzlement at his decisions, and society's criticism of his route all are social costs of authenticity. The movie shows him sticking to his principles regardless of these pressures, which indicates strength of conviction.

However, the film also depicts how his pursuit of authenticity creates vulnerability. His rejection of social support systems leaves him without safety nets when problems arise. His distrust of conventional wisdom and expertise means he enters Alaska inadequately prepared. His unwillingness to compromise his principles leads to dangerous situations he might have avoided with more flexibility.

This double nature of authenticity-as both courageous and vulnerable-expresses the existential psychology's awareness that authentic existence is risky (Yalom, 1980). Forgoing established meanings and establishing own values involves giving up the security of well-trodden paths. The destiny of McCandless serves as an example that authenticity may lead to tragic events when undertaken without proper balance of idealism and pragmatism.

The movie provokes implicit questions regarding whether McCandless's strategy is genuine courage or teenage rebellion. Certain episodes offer readings of mature commitment to thoughtfully held values, others of reactive disrespect for authority and social attachment stemming from family trauma. This ambivalence mirrors the challenge of separating true existence from psychological defense mechanisms, one that existential therapists commonly face (Yalom, 1980).

From a self-determination theory perspective, true existence means synthesizing values and behaviors with one's authentic self as well as relatedness and competence (Ryan & Deci, 2000). McCandless is highly autonomous but at the cost of relatedness, indicating his authenticity is not whole. True authenticity, SDT proposes, means being authentic to oneself within rather than outside relationships and community.

Theme 5: The Transformative Power and Limits of Nature

The movie widely depicts the wild and natural landscapes as being at the center of McCandless's psychological exploration. Nature has various roles to play: mirror for self discovery, site of testing one's capability, source of transcendent experience, and finally, capricious backdrop that identifies boundaries of romantic idealization.

Subtheme 5.1: Nature as Mirror for Self Discovery

The movie presents wilderness as a place where McCandless may meet himself independent of social mediation or distraction. Extended passages depict him by

himself in natural environments, involved in reflective activities, reading, and individual pursuits that allow for self scrutiny. The visual rhetoric accentuates the purity and simplicity of natural spaces compared to congested, man-made social environments.

This image is consistent with transcendentalist thought that guided McCandless, most especially Thoreau's focus on nature as offering perspective not found in society (Thoreau, 1854/1995). The movie implies that stripped of social acting and materialism, McCandless can find his true self. Natural settings offer psychological space for reflection on the self that existential psychology says is necessary to true existence (Heidegger, 1962).

However, the film also complicates this idealization by suggesting that what McCandless discovers in nature is partly projection. The meanings he finds in wilderness experiences reflect the philosophical and literary frameworks he brings to them rather than inherent natural meanings. Nature serves as mirror, reflecting back his own concerns and preoccupations rather than providing external answers.

Environmental psychology studies indicate that natural surroundings can allow psychological restoration and self-reflection (Kaplan, 1995), validating the film's presentation of nature's psychological restorative effect. Nonetheless, studies also indicate that benefits must come with proper preparation, realistic expectations, and incorporation into social communion instead of solitude (Hartig et al., 2003).

Subtheme 5.2: Nature as Testing Ground for Competence

During his odyssey, McCandless applies challenges in the wilderness to build skill and demonstrate capability. His incremental acquisition of survival abilities such as hunting, gathering, constructing shelter, and reading landscape is shown in the movie. These achievements offer psychological gratification and contribute to his self efficacy and self-esteem.

Self-determination theory names competence as a basic psychological need, and mastery experiences have a strong role in well-being and motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). McCandless's wilderness successes fulfill this need in a powerful manner, offering unambiguous feedback regarding capability that might be less accessible in traditional modern settings. His pride in killing game successfully or in traveling tough terrain exemplifies the completion of competence development (White, 1959).

The movie shows a transition from initial incompetence (unsuccessful hunting, way-finding mishaps) to increasing expertise, implying learning and growth. Visual series highlighting his physical aptness, his assured mobility through challenging terrain, and his survival under adverse conditions show competence attainment. These sequences contribute to the movie's most optimistic affective moments, implying the mental benefit of mastery experiences.

But the final scene of the movie discloses disastrous bounds to his competence. His lack of knowledge about poisonous plants, his inability to prepare well for long-term wilderness survival, and his getting pinned down by the swollen river all qualify as competence failures with deadly effects. The movie implies that belief in competence, if not followed by actual proficiency, engenders perilous overconfidence.

This description shows what self-determination theory defines as optimal challenge importance: conditions that push abilities without overwhelming them (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Alaska's experience surpassed his real level of competence, changing from growth promoting challenge to overwhelming danger. The movie implies that genuine competence development must involve correct self measurement and proper calibration of challenge toward ability.

Subtheme 5.3: Nature as Source of Transcendent Experience

The movie projects natural beauty and immersion in nature as offering transcendent experiences that McCandless prizes over normal sources of meaning and fulfillment. Scenes of awe-inspiring landscapes, wildlife sightings, and McCandless's ecstasy at natural beauty indicate the spiritual or transcendent nature of nature.

These experiences are paralleled with Maslow's (1968) theory of peak experiences and his subsequent addition of transcendence needs to the theory (Koltko-Rivera, 2006). Nature offers access to experiences that are beyond mundane consciousness, linking to something larger than personal self. The cinematography of the film in these experiences uses unique visual language such as golden light, slow motion, soaring music, and wide shot compositions, which express transcendence.

Transcendentalist thought that shaped McCandless highlighted nature as expression of spiritual truth and source of knowledge beyond reach through social or intellectual avenues (Emerson, 1836/1982). The movie shows McCandless searching for this higher connection, discovering in nature the meaning and purpose he feels mainstream society cannot offer.

Environmental psychology and ecopsychology studies indicate that nature experiences can yield quantifiable psychological advantages such as decreased stress, improved mood, enhanced cognitive restoration, and improved satisfaction with life (Bratman et al., 2012). The movie's presentation of the psychological advantages of nature is consistent with this area of research.

Nonetheless, the film ultimately proposes limitations of nature as exclusive or complete source of meaning. McCandless's nature experiences that transcend, as strong as they are, do not offer long-term psychological fulfillment in the absence of human relation. His ultimate realization that "happiness only real when shared" suggests transcendent experiences, although valuable, need social context to have their full meaning. This coincides with findings proposing that social sharing of positive

experiences makes them more impactful psychologically (Gable & Reis, 2010).

Subtheme 5.4: The Indifference of Nature and the Limits of Romantic Idealization

The last act of the film deconstructs McCandless's romantic idealization of nature by showing wilderness to be indifferent to human meaning making or survival. The harshness of Alaska, the poisonous plants that might have caused his death, and the swollen river that bars his way back all illustrate nature's indifference to human well-being.

This depiction is the opposite of transcendentalist romanticism that perceived nature as spiritually significant and basically kind. The movie implies that McCandless's literary and philosophical models did not adequately equip him for nature as it is. His belief that nature would yield what he requires proves fatally erroneous. Nature is not cruel or kind but indifferent, with physical and biological operating codes independent of human agendas.

Existential psychology places this in the context of facing the meaninglessness of the universe itself. Nature has no meaning to impart; man must impose meaning in a meaningless natural world (Frankl, 1963; Yalom, 1980). McCandless's mistake was anthropomorphizing nature by imposing meaning there instead of what he needed to acknowledge: that meaning has to be imposed through man's consciousness and relationship.

The visual representation of Alaska changes radically throughout the film. Early representations of it are offered through romantic imagery and cinematography that highlight beauty and sublimity, whereas subsequent appearances of the same vistas offer harsh, flat lighting and static shots stressing bleakness and hazard. This change in visual effect reflects the psychological change in McCandless from romantic idealism to harsh acceptance of reality.

His journal entries record this transition. Early writing is full of excitement and optimism. The latter entries become more and more desperate, recording physical symptoms and unsuccessful survival attempts in clinical detail. The last entries are ones of acceptance of death and thanks for experiences, implying he attains some integration of romantic idealism with realistic awareness of nature's lack of interest.

The movie poses poignant questions regarding the worth of his trip. Was his death a meaningless waste due to bad judgment and romantic idealism? Or did he derive true insights and experiences that were worth the ultimate price? The movie seems designably opaque, holding out no simple answers. Such a lack of clarity is reflective of existential awareness that meaning is not objectively measurable but has to be constructed by interpretation.

4.6 Discussion of Findings in Relation to Literature

The thematic analysis of "Into the Wild" produces findings that both confirm and challenge current psychological theory and literature. This section outlines how findings connect with literature considered within Chapter 2, looking at convergences, divergences, and new contributions.

4.6.1 Findings Related to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

The assessment argues for and against Maslow's hierarchical theory of motivation. Arguing in favor of the theory, McCandless's experience shows that when lowest level physiological needs are acutely at stake, focus is necessarily drawn away from issues of higher order. His last few weeks establish how lack of fulfilment of lower level needs renders achievement of self-actualization unthinkable, validating Maslow's hierarchical link (Maslow, 1943).

Moreover, McCandless's traits fit well with Maslow's description of self-actualizing people: he exhibits correct perception of reality (albeit selectively), independence in values, freshness of appreciation for experience as on the first day, identification with mankind (in spite of isolation), discrimination between means and ends, and creativity in living (Maslow, 1968). His peak experiences in wilderness are a classic example of what Maslow described as typical of self-actualizing people.

But the findings also show shortcomings of hierarchical model. McCandless intentionally structures situations in which lower order needs are hard to fulfil, opting for self-actualization and transcendence over unsatisfied belongingness needs. This trend contradicts Maslow's prediction that lower needs need to be significantly fulfilled before higher needs are motivationally relevant (Maslow, 1943). The results are more in line with Maslow's subsequent recognition that the hierarchy is not irrevocably set and that, under deprivation of lower needs, some individuals pay more attention to higher needs (Maslow, 1968).

Most importantly, the results imply that true self-actualization might involve integration of all levels of needs instead of hierarchical transcendence. McCandless's quest for self-actualization in the denial of belongingness needs seems psychologically unfulfilled, validating critics' propositions that levels of need are more interdependent than hierarchical (Tay & Diener, 2011). His ultimate acknowledgement that "happiness only real when shared" is wisdom that Maslow's higher order needs (self-actualization, transcendence) cannot be attainable in a lasting manner in separation from middle order needs (belongingness, love).

These results inform current debates in theory regarding whether needs are understood hierarchically or as interdependent base requirements. It is argued, using the analysis, that although extreme conditions create short-term hierarchy (severe physiological needs deprivation takes priority), long-term well-being is achieved through

contemporaneous satisfaction of more than one level of need in preference to stepwise movement through hierarchy.

4.6.2 Results Associated with Self-determination Theory

The analysis offers strong support for self-determination theory's focus on autonomy, competence, and relatedness as basic psychological needs, but also brings tensions within the framework to light.

McCandless exhibits extremely high autonomous motivation: his actions are self endorsed, values congruent, and autonomous (Deci & Ryan, 1985). His intrinsic motivation for wilderness experience, true living, and self development is the highest form of self-determination. His psychological fulfilment derived from autonomous striving towards intrinsically valued outcomes reaffirms SDT's hypothesis of the autonomy-well-being relationship (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

His acquisition of wilderness ability is an example of SDT's focus on mastery and efficacy as being causally related to psychological well-being (White, 1959; Deci & Ryan, 1985). His feelings of satisfaction with successful hunting, navigation, and survival are an example of how need satisfaction for competence enhances motivation and psychological function. These results are consistent with large bodies of research showing the significance of competence for well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

But the most compelling result concerns relatedness. McCandless's radical seeking of autonomy comes at the cost of relatedness, producing psychological disequilibrium that he eventually comes to see as unsustainable. This dynamic convincingly verifies SDT's theoretical assertion that all three needs have to be met in order to achieve optimum functioning (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Fulfilment of autonomy and competence, no matter how large, cannot overcome thwarted relatedness needs.

The results hence attest to critics who contend that modern Western culture overemphasizes independence at the cost of relatedness (Kagitcibasi, 2005). McCandless's adventure may be seen as an extreme expression of cultural focus on independence and individualism that SDT researchers have identified as possibly problematic (Ryan et al., 2006). His ultimate recognition of relatedness's importance aligns with cross cultural research demonstrating that relatedness contributes to well-being across all cultures, even those that emphasize individualism (Chen et al., 2015).

The analysis also illuminates the distinction between autonomy and isolation that SDT emphasizes but that is often misunderstood. Autonomy involves feeling free and self endorsed within relationships rather than requiring isolation from relationships (Ryan & Deci, 2000). McCandless confounds autonomy with isolation and views relationships as necessarily confining instead of seeing potential for autonomous functioning within relational contexts. This mistake could be a reflection of cultural misinterpretation of autonomy or could be an outgrowth of his particular family history in which parental deception

and control established real threats to autonomous functioning.

These results add to SDT theory by giving close analysis of what occurs when one basic need (autonomy) is maximized at the expense of another (relatedness). Experimental work manipulates need satisfaction within controlled parameters, and naturalistic study of extreme real world examples offers complementary information regarding need dynamics in the long term and in multifaceted situations.

4.6.3 Existential Psychology Related Findings

The study strongly supports existential psychology's focus on freedom, responsibility, isolation, and mortality as inherent human preoccupations that create anxiety and opportunities for genuine existence (Yalom, 1980).

McCandless's life is a paradigm of what existential theorists have described as encounter with freedom and the terror that it engenders. His extreme departure from imposed meanings and construction of his own values is exemplary of true encounter with existential freedom (Sartre, 1943/1956). Yet, the discussion also identifies how freedom, when undertaken without sufficient attention to responsibility for others, can have tragic outcomes. This affirms existential ethics of holding that true freedom entails taking responsibility for the consequences of one's decision on others (Yalom, 1980).

The depiction of the existential isolation conforms to Yalom's (1980) description of the impassable distance between self and other. The physical isolation of McCandless brings into relief what existential theorists contend is always the case though normally hidden: the ontological aloneness of human being. But the findings also validate existential awareness that though isolation is unavoidable, interaction with others is critical to psychological well-being. McCandless's mistake was trying to solve the existential paradox with physical isolation instead of embracing isolation with relationships intact.

His encounter with death reinforces existential psychology's focus on death awareness as spur to meaning making (Yalom, 1980; Frankl, 1963). His sensitive realization of life's temporariness inspires his abandonment of traditional means he perceives as wasting valuable time. But the findings also indicate that the confrontation with mortality needs to be measured with realistic perceptions of vulnerability and not denial. His seemingly poor preparation for Alaska could just be a young person's sense of invulnerability and not one of mature acceptance of mortality.

Most important, the analysis validates Frankl's (1963) definition of meaning making as essential to human motivation. In his own odyssey, McCandless self-consciously makes meaning through his decisions, events, and relationships. His literary and philosophical constructs give meaning to narrative coherence that interprets suffering into quest with purpose. Even death is made meaningful by his ultimate recognition and acceptance.

This validates existential psychology's assertion that human beings are capable of discovering or constructing meaning even in suffering and death (Frankl, 1963).

Yet, the research also discloses shortcomings in McCandless's meaning-making strategy. His meanings are personally constructed with insufficient grounding in relationships or community. Existential theorists acknowledge that though meaning needs to be created personally and not imposed externally, durable meaning usually engages some connection with something greater than oneself, such as relationships, community, or transcendent values (Wong, 2008). McCandless's personalistic meaning making is psychologically incomplete, which accounts for his eventual acknowledgment of shared experience's significance.

These results add to existential psychology through the in-depth exploration of how existential issues arise in extraordinary life situations. Although existential therapy usually deals with these issues in therapeutic situations, a look at how they arise in extraordinary life situations offers information about their basic nature and meaning.

4.6.4 Results Concerning Integration of Theoretical Frameworks

One of the key contributions of this analysis is showing how several theoretical frameworks can be fruitfully integrated to explain rich psychological phenomena. The results identify convergences and fruitful tensions across frameworks.

All three models meet in a focus on human agency and growth potential. Maslow's self-actualization, SDT's autonomous motivation, and existential psychology's authentic living all identify humans as actively creating meaning and striving for psychological development in preference to simply reacting to the external environment (Sheldon et al., 2001). McCandless's life illustrates this common focus on human ability for self direction and overcoming confining conditions.

The models also overlap in their identification of balance, not intense focus on individual dimensions, as optimal psychological functioning. Maslow's bringing together of levels of different needs, SDT's balance of autonomy with competence and relatedness, and existential psychology's acknowledgment that freedom must be balanced with responsibility all indicate that well-being entails integration, not unidimensional seeking. McCandless's destiny depicts the costs of excessive focus on chosen values (independence, authenticity, self-actualization) without proper integration of opposing concerns (relatedness, community, vulnerability).

Yet the frameworks also expose fruitful tensions. Maslow's hierarchy proposes that belongingness needs must be met before self-actualization can be pursued, whereas existential psychology asserts that real living may entail the embrace of solitude. SDT is adamant that relatedness is as much a basic requirement as autonomy, whereas existential psychology acknowledges unbridgeable existence

isolation. Such tensions are a real representation of human psychological complexity and not the failure of theory. McCandless's experience proves that such tensions are lived experience that cannot easily be reconciled.

The integration also makes clear that various frameworks are pointing to different features of the same phenomena, offering more comprehensive understanding than any one framework in isolation. McCandless's relationships, for instance, can be explained through Maslow as meeting belongingness needs, through SDT as fulfilling relatedness but possibly undermining autonomy, and through existential psychology as efforts to transcend existential loneliness while facing basic aloneness. Each offers insight into different facets of his relational experiences.

These results indicate that psychological research could use more frequent blurring of theoretical frameworks to integrate multiple perspectives instead of continually operating solely within individual frameworks. The sorts of complex human experiences depicted in "Into the Wild" are beyond explanation using any one theory and thus necessitate pluralism of theory to understand them appropriately (Madill et al., 2000).

4.6.5 Film-Related Findings as Psychological Research Material

The analysis proves narrative film to be useful as material for psychological study, substantiating arguments by media psychologists that films are worth serious psychological examination (Plantinga, 2009; Hockley, 2007).

The movie offers access to psychological processes that could not readily be investigated using conventional research designs. McCandless's extreme behaviors and eventual death could not be experimentally studied ethically, and postmortem examination of the historical McCandless is constrained by patchy evidence. The film offers rich, well-integrated narrative reconstruction that, although interpretive, supports systematic psychological analysis not possible through other methods.

The examination substantiates Smith's (1995) claim that interaction with movie characters occurs through psychological processes identical to real life social cognition. Examining McCandless's depicted psychology creates insights transferable to the comprehension of actual psychological processes of motivation, identity formation, and existential questioning. Although the film is fiction (even if based on actual events), the psychological processes depicted are authentic features of human experience.

But analysis also shows significant limitations. The film is Penn's interpretation based on Krakauer's interpretation, which involves several layers of narrative construction. Psychological analysis of the film explores what is presented and not its direct access to historical psychological reality. This limitation must be recognized while also noting that interpretation is part of all psychological research, including standard approaches.

The evidence is consistent with Corrigan's (2011) contention that narrative and cinematic style in films are major contributors to psychological meaning. Visual symbolism, editorial decisions, cinematography, and music are all used to portray psychological content that adds to or makes more difficult dialogue and plot. Psychological readings of film need to be aware of these formal aspects instead of viewing film as illustrated dialogue. The present analysis illustrates how thematic analysis can include notice of both content and form.

These results imply that psychology as a field could stand to be more involved with narrative media as a research subject, especially for phenomena that are rare, extreme, experimentally problematic to study, or only accessible through reconstruction in a narrative form. Film analysis provides a supplementary method to experimental and clinical approach, yielding valid but alternative ways of psychological understanding.

4.7 Addressing Contradictory Data

Qualitative analysis involves resolving evidence that opposes or complicates initial themes. This section discusses contradictions, ambiguities, and other interpretations that arose during analysis.

4.7.1 McCandless's Ability to Connect vs. His Avoidance of Relationships

One of the notable contradictions consists in McCandless's seeming ability to have real, warm relationships with others despite his theoretical rejection of relationships and his tendency to leave those who care about him. Throughout the movie, he shows empathy, emotional closeness, and real engagement in relationships with Westerberg, Franz, Burres, and others. Such scenes describe a person with high relational capacity, contrary to the picture of one who truly prefers solitude at the expense of connection.

This contradiction might be interpreted in several ways. First, it may reflect the complexity of his psychology: he simultaneously needs and fears connection, creating approach avoidance conflict. His family experiences may have created ambivalence about relationships that his philosophy of solitary self-actualization attempts to resolve. Second, the contradiction could represent developmental process: his relational ability is not lost even as his conscious ideology denies it, generating inner tension that he ultimately comes to see. Third, the contradiction could represent the film's agenda for interpretation: Penn might highlight McCandless's relational capacity in order to make him more likable and to facilitate the film's final message about commonality of experience.

Psychologically, the inconsistency vindicates self-determination theory's assertion that relatedness is a core need that can't be eliminated with conscious philosophy or willpower (Ryan & Deci, 2000). McCandless's relational capacity re-emerges despite his efforts to quash it, proving that basic psychological needs are not preferences but core human nature.

The contradiction makes straightforward explanations of his search impossible. He is not merely avoiding relationships or socially inept, but rather conflicted about how to achieve autonomy and connection. This implies his search is a real psychological search rather than pathological avoidance or personality deficit.

4.7.2 Romantic Idealization Versus Practical Incompetence

The movie illustrates conflict between McCandless's idealized romanticization of wilderness experience and his pragmatic ineptness in wilderness survival. He is at the same time illustrated to be acquiring authentic wilderness proficiency and as perilously naive and ill-prepared, especially for Alaska.

Some of the scenes show successful hunting, navigating, and surviving, implying genuine capability. Other scenes, especially his disastrous errors in Alaska, imply insufficient knowledge and bad judgment. This inconsistency could be an expression of developmental forward motion: he acquires capability on his journey but overestimates his preparedness for Alaska's hardest demands. Or it could be the movie's vacillation over whether to represent McCandless as a capable adventurer or incompetent idealist.

Psychologically, the paradox depicts the risk of overconfidence outpacing true competence. Self-determination theory highlights that true competence development necessitates valid feedback and proper challenge calibration (Deci & Ryan, 1985). False sense of competence might have been developed by McCandless through success in more lenient environments, thus being insufficiently prepared for more challenging challenges.

The paradox also calls into question the interplay between intellectual insight and real-world wisdom. McCandless has a wealth of book learning but minimal experiential learning and knowledge of the surrounding area that could have avoided deadly mistakes. This implies an omission in exclusively intellectual competence development, lending evidence to embodied and situated theories of learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

4.7.3 Quest for Authenticity Versus Adoption of Literary Personas

McCandless's search for true being exists simultaneously paradoxically with the borrowing of identity and behavioral patterns from literary and philosophical works. His aliases "Alexander Supertramp" refer to literary figures. His ideology faithfully imitates transcendentalist authors he respects. His actions frequently seem to follow scriptural scenarios from literature instead of evolving organically from true selfhood.

Such contradiction undermines his right to genuine being. If authenticity is to be faithful to one's true self instead of fulfilling prescriptions from the outside world, then existence based on literary ideals could be seen as another

kind of inauthenticity, trading in normal social scripts for romantic literary ones (Heidegger, 1962).

And yet, the contradiction may also be seen as unavoidable. Existential thinkers are aware that authenticity can never be unadulterated or unmediated; human beings always conceptualize themselves in terms of cultural schemas and stories (Taylor, 1991). McCandless's application of literary schemas in order to interpret his experience may be authentic appropriation of cultural resources in place of inauthentic conformity. Authenticity vs. inauthenticity may be a matter of whether schemas are chosen consciously and critically evaluated as opposed to unconsciously internalized.

From a narrative psychology view, identity is all about creating meaningful life stories with available culture narratives (McAdams, 2001). McCandless's employment of transcendentalist narratives to make sense of his identity and experience is indicative of normal identity formation and not inconsistency with authenticity. The issue is whether his narrative constitutes a truly meaningful framework or confines his experience within preconceived patterns.

4.7.4 Critique of Materialism from Privileged Position

The movie depicts McCandless abandoning materialism and mainstream success, but his capacity to seek out his journey relies on privileges his philosophy dismisses: education, physical well-being, middle class origins, and leftover resources. This paradox has provoked considerable criticism: it is maintained by some that his abandonment of materialism is hypocritical since material safety allowed him to take up the journey (Medred, 2007).

The movie resolves this paradox somewhat by depicting McCandless discarding his privileges (donating funds, quitting possessions), but critics observe he keeps privileges that can't be shed (education, social capital, physical ability, race and gender privilege). His disdain for materialism may seem naive to those whose privileges are not as his are who have to concentrate on material survival instead of intellectual pursuits.

This paradox leads one to wonder whether genuine self-actualization or existential exploration are only luxuries that privileged members of society can afford, their basic need satisfaction taken for granted. According to Maslow, this would imply that higher order needs will only be accessible to people whose lower order needs are well met (Maslow, 1943). Self-actualization could be stratified according to social class rather than universally available.

But alternative interpretation does acknowledge that McCandless voluntarily gives up his advantages in order to establish material hardship. He selects challenge and privation over allowing them to happen to him. Whether or not this makes his search more or less genuine is questionable, but it muddles straightforward charges of hypocrisy. Existential psychology could posit that genuine existence involves leveraging one's real conditions (including privileges) as a point of departure while

acknowledging that authenticity exists for all people in all conditions, although differently (Frankl, 1963).

4.7.5 Last Insight as Repudiation vs. Elaboration of Quest

McCandless's ultimate acknowledgment that "happiness only real when shared" can either be read as denying his entire endeavor (admitting it was mistaken) or as a refinement of his awareness that doesn't deny the value of the journey. The film seems to be purposefully evasive about this key interpretive issue.

Support for repudiation interpretation includes: his seeming wish to come back from Alaska, implying regret; his realization too late to be done anything with, therefore tragic; the emotional focus in the film at his last moment of understanding as revelation; and the framing of his sister's voiceover suggesting the trip educated him in what he should have learned earlier.

Evidence favoring deepening interpretation consists of: his repeated assertion of the value of the journey after his insight; his ultimate signs of thankfulness and tranquility as opposed to remorse; the portrayal in the film of his development and maturation during the journey; and interpretation based on shared happiness insight as reflecting integration instead of abandonment of his values.

Such ambiguity can be deliberate, leaving the audience to struggle with whether or not McCandless's journey was ultimately worthwhile or horribly misguided. From the existential point of view, the lack of clarity mirrors that meaning is not determinable but has to be constructed through interpretation (Frankl, 1963). Various audiences derive various meanings from his biography, and the film finds various appropriate interpretations.

Psychologically, the uncertainty may be reflective of actual complexity within McCandless's own perception. His ultimate realization probably symbolizes both acknowledgment of mistake (overemphasis on isolation) and assimilation of rival truths (both independence and connection are necessary). Development frequently entails acknowledging the limits of past knowledge as well as establishing what was beneficial in past frames of reference.

4.7.6 Nature as Sacred Versus Indifferent

The movie depicts nature as both spiritually significant (source of transcendent experience, mirror for self-discovery) and ultimately indifferent (neither good nor evil, governed by physical laws uninterested in human purposes). This tension is a representation of conflict between romantic transcendentalist theory and realistic acceptance of processes of nature.

Early in the movie, nature is systematically depicted using romantic cinematography highlighting beauty, sublimity, and spirituality. Subsequent scenes introduce the same natural settings using harsh realism highlighting danger and indifference. This change may symbolize McCandless's

changing perception or may be the film's critique of romantic idealization of nature.

Psychologically, the paradox demonstrates how humans impose meaning on natural phenomena that are meaningless in themselves. McCandless's transcendent moments in nature are psychologically authentic and worth something, but are human meaning making and not inherent natural meanings (Yalom, 1980). The final presentation of nature's indifference in the movie lends support to existential psychology's insistence that meaning must be constructed by humans and not found in external reality.

But the contradiction may more plausibly be interpreted as showing different things about nature instead of contradiction. Nature may at the same time be both beneficial aesthetically and psychically to human beings and work in line with indifferent physical laws. These are complementary, not contradictory, views, and differ only in a matter of level of analysis (subjective psychological experience vs. objective physical reality).

4.7.7 Implications of Contradictory Data

Far from negating the analysis, these contradictions serve to increase understanding as they demonstrate psychological richness. Actual human experience is composed of tensions, ambiguities, and conflicting truths, not mere consistency. McCandless's life is psychologically complex exactly because it has these contradictions, in that he becomes a recognizable human being and not a reductionist symbol.

The tensions affirm theoretical orientations focusing on the fact that psychological well-being entails integration of competing values and needs instead of mere maximization of a single dimension. McCandless's plight is a manifestation of universal human dilemmas of reconciling autonomy and connection, idealism and pragmatism, romantic possibility and realistic constraint, and philosophical belief and experiential wisdom.

Methodologically, the contradictions illustrate the value of close handling of data that complicates the preferred interpretation. Qualitative analysis gains credibility partly through the recognition and scrutiny of contradictory evidence instead of merely selectively focusing on favorable data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The analysis here is strengthened by a recognition of these contradictions and their psychological implications.

4.8 Practical Implications

The conclusions of this analysis have a number of practical implications for learning about human motivation, fostering psychological development, and supporting well-being. This section discusses how the findings of the analysis could influence practice in counseling, education, and human development.

4.8.1 Implications for Understanding Contemporary Meaning Making

McCandless's journey captures larger cultural trends in society today when growing numbers of people say they feel a sense of meaninglessness, unconnected from true self-expression, and at odds with societal expectations and personal values (Twenge, 2017). His life is a case study for seeing how people react to these general fears.

Practically speaking, the analysis recommends that therapists and counselors who work with clients who share similar issues should acknowledge the validity of such issues as well as assist clients in discovering holistic solutions without the necessity for extreme dismissal of social contact. McCandless's demise demonstrates the risks of all or nothing ideologies when it comes to authenticity and meaning. Successful therapeutic practices could assist clients in discovering authenticity in and not outside of relationships and society.

The results also indicate the need for assisting individuals to develop practical wisdom and realistic self assessment in conjunction with philosophical idealism. McCandless's blend of practical naivety and philosophical sophistication was fatal. Educational methods that combine abstract thinking and practical competence development can assist young people in pursuing valuable goals more effectively and securely.

4.8.2 Balancing Autonomy and Relatedness Implications

The analysis has effectively demonstrated the psychological imperative to balance autonomy with relatedness, substantiating self-determination theory's assertion that both needs need to be fulfilled to enable well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This has implications for how autonomy is conceptualized and sought.

Parents, teachers, and counselors need to make young people aware that autonomy does not mean isolation or rejection of relationships. Healthy autonomy is a sense of freedom and self endorsement in relationships as opposed to having to be alone (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This is especially true in modern Western culture where autonomy tends to get blurred with independence or separation.

These results also imply the need to assist individuals in discerning when family pathology or control relationships genuinely interfere with independent functioning versus when constraining perceived limits are actually usual interdependence and reciprocal obligation. McCandless's reaction to his family life was extreme, although his family did indeed have problems, and his total rejection negated possibility of improving healthier family relationships. Therapeutic modalities that assist individuals in establishing proper boundaries yet staying connected might avoid undue relational ruptures.

For those who do seek meaningful distance from family or community, the research indicates the value of establishing alternative relation-level connections instead of seeking

absolute isolation. McCandless did establish meaningful relationships along the way but continually cut them short in order to continue being alone. If he had held onto some of these relationships, his outcome could have been altered.

4.8.3 Implications for Understanding Self-actualization and Personal Growth

The analysis implies that genuine self-actualization demands integration of several levels of needs instead of transcendence over "lower" needs. This has significant implications for the way in which personal growth is thought about and attempted.

Self help strategies and so-called popular psychology tend to represent self-actualization as transcendence of material needs, social convention, and ordinary limitations. The tale of McCandless implies the hazards of this model. Long term personal development necessitates concern for physiological safety, social bonding, and skill competence in addition to pursuit of high order objectives.

Educational strategies for personal growth should be based upon integration and balance rather than upon hierarchy or transcendence. Instead of perceiving fundamental needs as barriers to self-actualization, they may be conceived of as anchorages that have to be fulfilled. This is commensurate with modern positive psychology's focus on well-being as encompassing satisfaction in numerous dimensions rather than maximization of isolated dimensions (Seligman, 2011).

The research also indicates that peak experiences and transcendental moments, though beneficial, can never replace meaningful engagement over a long period of time and meaningful relationships. McCandless went after extreme experiences but had trouble with prolonged engagement and commitment. Strategies for personal growth ought to appreciate peak experiences as well as meaningfully engaging in daily activities and relationships.

4.8.4 Implications for Wilderness Therapy and Nature Based Interventions

The study shows both the potential advantages and constraints of wilderness experience for psychological development. Nature-based interventions and wilderness therapy programs have come into vogue, and the results provide information to effectively use them.

The movie establishes that wilderness encounters can promote self-reflection, competence building, and peak experiences leading to psychological development. The findings also stress the need for proper preparation, practical risk analysis, and incorporation of wilderness encounters into social support and community affiliations.

Successful wilderness therapy programs normally integrate wilderness challenge, therapeutic relationship, and group process (Russell & Farnum, 2004). McCandless's solitary wilderness adventure did not have these facilitative aspects. The results indicate that wilderness experiences are most effective when they allow for growth in environments that

also meet needs for relatedness and include guidance and support as needed.

Analysis also implies that romanticization of nature in love can be psychologically unhealthy when it is severed from realistic awareness of natural process and risk. Wilderness programs need to enable participants to both appreciate nature and realistically estimate its difficulties and dangers.

4.8.5 Implications for Working with Idealistic Young Adults

McCandless's adventure took place during emerging adulthood (18 to 25 years), a developmental stage marked by exploration of identity, instability, and quest for possibilities (Arnett, 2000). His life is especially relevant for understanding and guiding young adults through this phase.

The results imply the need to take young adults' philosophical and existential queries seriously as opposed to denying them as immaturity or revolt. McCandless's journey towards real existence and substantial living demonstrates authentic developmental tasks of emerging adulthood. Nonetheless, the analysis also implies the need to guide young adults in striving for these purposes in a way that ensures safety, utilitarian competence, and social support.

Counselors and teachers could assist young adults in questioning concerns about meaning, authenticity, and purpose using processes that foster both idealistic aspiration and pragmatic wisdom. This could include creating experiences that nurture growth and challenge in contexts that also promote safety and nurturing. International study, service learning, wilderness adventures, and other planned opportunities could promote significant exploration without necessitating total cuts from social relationships and support structures.

The results also indicate the value in assisting young adults to work through family challenges in non-hostile rejection of family relationships. Although there are some family relationships that are actually toxic and might merit considerable separation, treatments allowing young adults to distinguish while at the same time remaining at correct connection may avoid undue relational ruptures that individuals later find themselves regretting.

4.8.6 Implications for Understanding and Preventing Tragic Outcomes

McCandless's death was caused by a combination of factors such as poor preparation, excessive confidence, poor luck, and potentially eating poisonous plants. While his outcome was drastic, the psychological tendencies that led to it are familiar among young adults seeking adventure and purpose.

In practice, the results indicate the value of risk assessment and harm reduction strategies that defer to individuals' autonomy and intentions while enabling them to pursue those intentions more safely. Instead of merely dissuading

risk taking or venture seeking, which can be psychologically meaningful to some persons, strategies that enable people to prepare well, evaluate risks realistically, and sustain safety buffers may avoid devastating consequences without precluding meaningful exploration.

The analysis also implies the value of staying in contact and connected even with those who are on nonconventional tracks. McCandless's total avoidance of contact with friends and family meant that no one knew where he was or could provide support when things went wrong. Supporting people who are on tracks of adventure or nonconventional tracks to stay in touch to some extent, to have emergency gear, and to have backup plans might avert worst results while still adhering to autonomy.

4.8.7 Implications for Cultural Understanding of Individualism and Community

Lastly, the discussion has cultural understanding implications about the dynamic between individual and community. McCandless's life is an extreme demonstration of Western cultural focus on individualism and self-determination. His demise questions cultural values focusing more on individual autonomy than communal connection and interdependence.

The results indicate the need for cultural discussions that find a balance between respecting individual autonomy and genuine self-expression with acknowledging the essential human desire for community, interdependence, and mutual aid. Neither conformist collectivism nor extreme individualism facilitates best human flourishing. Cultural systems that combine autonomy with relatedness can facilitate both individual satisfaction and social harmony (Kagitcibasi, 2005).

Educational strategies may assist in understanding that true existence does not involve rejection of community but, instead, securing one's place in community in a manner that respects both individuality and social belonging. Such incorporation is maturity, not compromise of authenticity.

4.9 Theoretical Implications

Aside from their practical implications, the results have profound theoretical and research implications. This subsection discusses how the analysis informs theoretical knowledge and indicates areas for future study.

4.9.1 Implications for Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

The study both validates and refutes Maslow's hierarchical theory, offering refinements to the theory. The results affirm that extreme deprivation of physiological needs necessarily limits pursuit of higher-order needs in support of the fundamental hierarchical principle. Yet, results also indicate that need levels are more interactive and complex than hierarchical theory proposes.

Theoretically, the analysis is in favor of reconceiving needs as interrelated requirements to be fulfilled simultaneously instead of successive steps to be overcome. Even though

extreme conditions may produce temporary ascendancy of lower needs, enduring well-being involves persistent interaction with various need levels. Self-actualization could be conceived not as the apex of a hierarchy but as best integration of all levels of needs.

The results also affirm Koltko Rivera's (2006) retrieval of Maslow's subsequent focus on transcendence needs beyond self-actualization. McCandless's quest for attachment to something larger than individual self is consistent with transcendence motivation. But the analysis indicates that genuine transcendence calls for integration with and not rejection of lower needs such as belongingness.

Subsequent research could consider how need relations differ across contexts and persons. Are there differences in personality in the ability of persons to temporarily deprioritize some needs? How do cultural settings influence need priority? What are best strategies for trading off competing needs when not all are possible at a given time? The analysis here indicates these are questions worthy of ongoing research.

4.9.2 Consequences for Self-determination Theory

The findings strongly corroborate SDT's central propositions while also indicating zones for theoretical elaboration. The result that extreme autonomy sought at the cost of relatedness generates psychopathology strongly supports SDT's insistence that all three needs must be equilibrated (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

But how do autonomy and relatedness get integrated if they are in conflict? SDT holds that healthy autonomy is both compatible with and strengthened by secure relationships (Ryan et al., 2006). But what if, as in controlling families or oppressive social environments, relationships actually limit autonomy? How can people resolve legitimate autonomy-relatedness conflicts?

Theoretically, the analysis proposes the need to differentiate various types of autonomy. McCandless followed what may be called "radical autonomy" with full independence from social influence and obligation. This is quite different from "relational autonomy" with self-endorsed functioning within related contexts (Chirkov et al., 2003). Relational autonomy has been a focus of SDT research, but the present analysis proposes the need to spell out explicitly theorizing about radical autonomy and its psychological implications.

The results also indicate the need to consider the impact of family dysfunction and relational trauma on need satisfaction and motivation. McCandless's personal history may have established a relationship and control association that rendered relational autonomy psychologically challenging. SDT work could further consider how early relational history contributes to capability to integrate autonomy and relatedness.

Future studies could explore optimal tactics for achieving autonomy and relatedness in varying circumstances. Focusing on questions and exploring if there are some

circumstances under which modulating one's need to a temporary focus on the other is psychologically beneficial. Exploring how people are able to effectively preserve both autonomy and closeness and learning how people who have learned to subdue one need in favor of the other are able to develop more integrated functioning.

4.9.3 Implications for Existential Psychology

The study attests to existential psychology's focus on freedom, responsibility, isolation, and mortality as basic human issues and also testifies to the significance of situating existential inquiry within realistic judgments of vulnerability and limitation (Yalom, 1980).

The life of McCandless illustrates the existential task of making meaning in a seemingly meaningless world (Frankl, 1963). His achievement at making meaning out of his experiences validates the positive assertion of existential psychology that meaning can be made even in adversity. Yet his own destiny also shows that meaning making has to be combined with wise pragmatism and realistic assessment of risk.

Theoretically, the critique recommends incorporating existential psychology's focus on engaging ultimate concerns in the face of coping with practical competence and preservation of self. Existential courage is not recklessness in facing threats to survival or well-being, although it does entail accepting anxiety and uncertainty in living as authentic (May, 1953). Theoretical clarification is needed regarding the differentiation of existential courage from foolish risk taking.

The results also call for inquiry into the interplay between individual and collective meaning making. McCandless sought meaning through isolated engagement with existential realities, consistent with existential philosophy's focus on personal responsibility for meaning making (Sartre, 1943/1956). Yet, his eventual acknowledgment that "happiness only real when shared" indicates that enduring meaning does involve social dimension. Existential theory could learn to place more emphasis on relational and communal meanings of meaning making.

The study also posits the necessity for exploring the influence of developmental stage on existential exploration. McCandless embarked on his odyssey in emerging adulthood, an age marked by identity exploration and possibility focus (Arnett, 2000). Would adults older than him respond to similar existential queries differently? How does life stage influence capacity for and outcomes of extreme existential exploration?

Subsequent research could consider why and how people thrive in living existential questions within everyday life. Most individuals face freedom, loneliness, and death without taking radical approaches such as McCandless did. How do people achieve significant living within mainstream settings? What enables some individuals to have real living with social relations, functional competence, and bodily well-being?

4.9.4 Implications for Integration of Psychological Frameworks

A significant methodological contribution of this research is one of showing productive integration across several psychological frameworks. The results indicate both convergences and tensions between frameworks that shed light on psychological complexity inaccessible through single framework analysis.

Theoretically, the analysis lends support to metatheoretical stances that prioritize theoretical pluralism over paradigmatic exclusivity (Madill et al., 2000). Various frameworks emphasize different features of psychological phenomena, and total understanding necessitates the integration of several perspectives instead of making exclusive recourse to individual frameworks. The present analysis illustrates one method of such integration.

But integration does also expose real theoretical conflicts that are not so easily solved. For instance, Maslow's pyramid model is at odds with SDT's focus on needs as being equally basic, and both are opposed to existential psychology's focus on existential givens rather than needs. These conflicts are indicative of real doubts about human psychology rather than simply alternative language for the same things.

Future theoretical research could explore whether or not frameworks can be incorporated into grand models or if they are essentially incommensurable points of view that are forced to coexist in tension. Can Maslow, SDT, and existential psychology knowledge be put together in integrative theory, or are they varying levels of analysis that must be kept apart? What are the useful applications of theoretical tension and theoretical integration?

The analysis further indicates that extreme cases offer especially rich contexts for study of theoretical adequacy and integration. Where theory makes varying predictions regarding extreme cases, empirical investigation (e.g., through naturalistic investigation such as in the present study or alternative methodologies) can clarify which theory offers most explanatory adequacy. Systematic investigation of extreme cases employing more than one theory in future research could contribute to theoretical development.

4.9.5 Implications for Research Methods in Psychology

The analysis illustrates that thematic narrative analysis of film can produce psychologically meaningful conclusions, answering demands for greater methodological pluralism in psychology (Wertz et al., 2011). Though experimental and survey methodologies prevail in psychological research, qualitative analysis of narrative and visual media provides complementary strategy that gets at psychological phenomena hard to access through ordinary methods.

Methodologically, the findings suggest that film analysis requires systematic approaches comparable to other qualitative methods. The current analysis employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phase approach adapted for

cinematic material, demonstrating that rigor and transparency are achievable in film based research. Future methodological work might further develop standards and approaches for psychological analysis of visual media.

The analysis also implies both the strengths and weaknesses of applying film as research data. Films offer rich, textured descriptions of psychological processes that facilitate subtle analysis. But films are interpretive fictions that reveal filmmakers' artistic decisions, cultural background, and storytelling conventions. Psychological analysis needs to be aware of both the psychology described and the process of interpretation by which content is created.

Future studies could consider how results from film analysis align with and add to results using other methods. Are insights from studying cinematic representations of psychological states consistent with findings from experimental, clinical, or survey research? What combination of multiple methods could be used to yield more complete insight?

4.9.6 Implications for Understanding Extreme Psychological Experiences

The study adds to knowledge of extreme expression of psychological needs and drives. Psychology has researched normal populations and average differences in great detail, but extreme cases are under researched. McCandless's extreme pursuit of autonomy and self realization gives us a better understanding of psychological dynamics that may be less apparent in normal populations.

Theoretically, extreme examples challenge the limits of psychological theories and expose potential trade-offs and advantages of various motivational approaches. McCandless's life indicates that excessive focus on specific psychological needs or values, even inherently valuable ones, may lead to psychological imbalance and possibly tragic consequences. This verifies theoretical views prioritizing integration and balance at the expense of maximizing individual dimensions.

The results also indicate that extreme instances can uncover psychological processes which work more covertly in normal populations. The conflict between autonomy and relatedness which was lethal for McCandless is present in weaker forms for most individuals. Extreme instances render them visible and analyzable so that they may illuminate understanding of more ordinary experience.

Future studies could use rigorous systematic examination of extreme cases across a range of psychological domains. What is the psychology of extreme risk taking, extreme asceticism, extreme social withdrawal, or extreme devotion to causes? How do psychological concepts formulated with regular populations transfer to extreme expressions? What do extreme cases have to tell us about human psychological capacity and limitation?

4.9.7 Directions for Future Research

The analysis points to a number of specific directions for future research:

Comparative Film Analysis: Comparing several films depicting similar psychological themes through persistent analytical schemes would make it possible to identify patterns across cases and evaluate how various cinematic representations shed different light on different facets of psychological phenomenon.

Longitudinal Studies of Meaning Making: Tracking people over time as they encounter issues of authenticity, meaning, and purpose would offer understanding of how such concerns change and how people effectively (or ineffectively) reconcile competing needs and values.

Cultural Comparative Studies: How people of varying cultural backgrounds reconcile tensions between community and autonomy, individual and collective meaning making, and sincere self-expression vs. social harmony would shed light on cultural aspects of the psychological processes analyzed here.

Intervention Research: Establishing and evaluating interventions that enable people to integrate relatedness with autonomy, strive for self-actualization within grounded connection to practical reality, and discover meaning through both individual contemplation and social relatedness would bring theoretical understanding into practical application.

Developmental Studies: Investigating how existential issues, meaning-making, and the tension between autonomy and relatedness shift across the lifespan would shed light on developmental aspects of the phenomena addressed in this analysis.

Such research directions would promote advancing theory as well as application to practical use of the understanding developed through this analysis of "Into the Wild".

Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Summary of Key Findings

The present study utilized thematic narrative analysis to explore psychological themes of human motivation, identity formation, and existential issues in Sean Penn's movie "Into the Wild" (2007) against three complementary theory bases: Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943), self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), and existential psychology (Yalom, 1980). The analysis yielded five overall themes that shed light on the multifaceted psychological dynamics of Christopher McCandless's migration from mainstream society to wild solitude, both uncovering the potential for personal development based on radical authenticity and also the psychological toll of extreme individualism.

5.1.1 Primary Themes Identified

Theme 1: The Search for Genuine Life Through Repudiation of Traditional Society showed how the movie captures McCandless's basic drive to live genuinely through repudiation of social norms, materialism, and laid-out life patterns. The analysis also yielded four subthemes: rejection of material comfort and consumerism, criticism of social pretentiousness and artificiality, construction of alternative identity through self naming and self making, and use of literary and philosophical constructs for meaning making. This theme illustrates the existential impulse for authentic living and at the same time shows possible inflexibility in McCandless's all or nothing stance on authenticity.

Theme 2: The Paradox of Freedom and Connection was the most psychologically rich theme, capturing the core conflict between McCandless's desire for independence and desire for connection. The analysis showed how independence works as both freedom and isolation, how McCandless over and over creates and then loses deep connections, how his concept of self in relation to others changes, and ultimately his acceptance that happiness must be shared experience. This theme strongly validates self-determination theory's focus that autonomy and relatedness are basic psychological needs that need to be balanced and not traded off (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Theme 3: Progressive Need Satisfaction and the Quest for Self-actualization reviewed McCandless's trip through the frame of Maslow's hierarchy and how his motivational priorities change throughout his trip. The study found his ability to master primitive survival needs in wild environments, his seeking peak experiences and transparency, his focus on self-actualization through immediacy experience, and the final disintegration of the need hierarchy in extreme situations. This trend both substantiates and contradicts Maslow's hierarchical theory, proposing that needs are more interconnected than hierarchically structured.

Theme 4: Engagement with Existential Ultimate Concerns reflected McCandless's interaction with underlying existential issues such as freedom, responsibility, isolation, and death. Through the analysis, it became clear how he deals with radical freedom at the expense of responsibility, how physical isolation counters existential isolation, how death is a stimulus to meaning-making, and how authenticity calls for bravery and makes one vulnerable. This topic verifies existential psychology's focus upon these ultimate concerns as essential to human existence while demonstrating the necessity of integrating existential courage with practical wisdom (Yalom, 1980).

Theme 5: The Transcendent Power and Limitations of Nature discussed wilderness and natural landscapes as being pivotal to McCandless's psychological journey. The analysis depicted nature as mirror for self-discovery, proving ground for competence development, source of transcendent experience, and finally as indifferent reality defying romantic idealization. The theme shows both the

psychological value of nature experience and the risks of romantic idealization unmoored from realistic awareness.

5.1.2 Important Findings Across Theoretical Frameworks

The combined use of three theoretical frameworks produced a number of important findings that further psychological understanding:

Finding 1: Basic Psychological Needs Cannot Be Prioritized Selectively Without Consequence. The research compellingly illustrates that excessive prioritization of autonomy (SDT), self-actualization (Maslow), or true existence (existential psychology) at the cost of relatedness and social connection results in psychological imbalance and perhaps tragic circumstances. McCandless's life teaches us that human flourishing involves integration of several needs as opposed to maximization of single dimensions.

Finding 2: The Hierarchy of Needs Is More Than Simple Sequential Movement. Although extreme physiological deprivation unavoidably limits pursuit of higher order needs (supporting Maslow's general hierarchical principle), the review showed that people can differentially prioritize higher order needs even when lower needs are unsatisfied, and that long term well-being demands continuing attention to multiple levels of needs at once rather than transcendence of "lower" needs.

Finding 3: Autonomy and Relatedness Are Tendentiously Perceived as Contradictory but Need to Be Integrated for Best Functioning. The analysis identified the core psychological difficulty of integrating autonomy and relatedness, especially when early experiences make relationships synonymous with control. McCandless's pattern of relationship formation and termination indicates unsuccessful integration, whereas his eventual realization indicates awareness that autonomy and connection are not contradictory but can exist together.

Finding 4: Sincere Living Demands Both Existential Courage and Realistic Wisdom. The analysis upheld existential psychology's insistence on courage to face freedom, responsibility, isolation, and death, while also exposing that sincere living must be founded on realistic evaluation of vulnerability and limitation. McCandless's philosophical depth combined with practical naivety proved deadly, implying that sincerity demands integration of idealism with pragmatism.

Finding 5: Meaning Making Is Central to Psychological Well-being but Can't Be Exclusively Individual. The analysis agreed that humans proactively make meaning even in challenging situations (Frankl, 1963), but also found sustainable meaning needs social depth. McCandless's early successful individual meaning making eventually was psychologically incomplete, as indicated in his acknowledgement that "happiness only real when shared".

Finding 6: Transcendent and Peak Experiences, Though Valued, Are Not a Replacement for Ongoing Involvement. The findings indicated that McCandless's quest for peak, transcendent experiences outdoors produced strong psychological gratification but were not sufficient to maintain well-being independent of long-term meaningful social relationships and activities. This finding indicates that both peak experience and mundane involvement are predictive of psychological well-being (Maslow, 1968; Ryan & Deci, 2001).

5.1.3 Methodological Findings

The study also made significant methodological conclusions regarding thematic narrative analysis and film as research data in psychology:

Finding 7: Cinema Offers Rich Psychological Material When Tackled Systematically. Analysis proved that film texts can shed light on intricate psychological processes by combining narrative content, visual symbolism, character building, and formal cinematic processes. Systematic use of known analytic frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2006) allows for rigorous psychological examination of the film akin to other qualitative approaches.

Finding 8: Three Theoretical Perspectives Yield Deeper Understanding Than Single Framework Analysis. The combined use of three different theoretical viewpoints showed convergences, divergences, and complementarities that would not appear through single framework analysis. Various frameworks focused on different features of the same phenomena, producing richer psychological understanding.

Finding 9: Extreme Cases Shed Light on Psychological Processes Less Obvious in Representative Populations. McCandless's extreme search for independence and self-actualization made tensions and trade-offs apparent which are more covert in representative populations. Theoretical limits are pushed in analysis of extreme cases and costs and benefits of alternative motivational approaches are discovered.

5.1.4 Reaction to Research Questions

The analysis explicitly considered the research questions informing this research:

Main Research Question: How does "Into the Wild" represent psychological themes regarding human motivation, identity formation, and existential issues, and what conclusions do these representations provide when interpreted through three psychological theories? The analysis uncovered that the movie depicts such themes as inherently interdependent, motivation entailing seeking multiple needs to be integrated, development of identity through facing existential issues and building (and in some cases discarding) relationships, and existential inquiry demanding a balance of courage and wisdom. The integrated framework analysis uncovered that maximum psychological functioning entails integration and not hierarchical ordering or selective focus.

Specific Research Questions: The analysis found overarching psychological themes (RQ1-2), illustrated how McCandless's journey illustrates development through Maslow's hierarchy while also disrupting simplistic hierarchical constructs (RQ3-5), uncovered how autonomy, competence, and relatedness take form and contend in his development (RQ6-8), discussed his engagement with existential issues of freedom, responsibility, solitude, and death (RQ9-12), integrated insights across perspectives to illustrate both convergences and productive tensions (RQ13-14), examined the contribution of cinematic techniques to psychological themes (RQ15), considered broader contemporary relevance (RQ16), and illustrated value for psychological study in film (RQ17).

5.1.5 Implications of Findings

Such findings are highly relevant to psychological knowledge in a number of different ways. They offer empirical investigation of extreme expressions of psychological needs and motivations that are uninvestigable using conventional research methods. They illustrate effective integration of theoretical frameworks conventionally used singly. They illuminate the psychological significance of trade-off balancing of conflicting needs and values instead of optimizing unidimensional ones. They demonstrate both the promise and the limits of radical conceptions of authenticity and self-actualization. They affirm the elementary centrality of social connection even for unusually autonomous individuals. And they show that systematic psychological examination of narrative film can yield significant theoretical and practical insights.

5.2 Contribution to Theory and Practice

This study makes a number of clear contributions to psychological theory and professional practice, both advancing knowledge and offering practical advice for implementation.

5.2.1 Theoretical Contributions

Contribution 1: Integration of Humanistic, Motivation, and Existential Frameworks. The study illustrates productive integration of Maslow's humanistic psychology, organismic approach to motivation of self-determination theory, and the phenomenological viewpoint of existential psychology. Although each of these frameworks is commonly used independently, this work demonstrates how bringing them together yields more richly textured understanding than either one in isolation. Through analysis, convergences (common focus on agency, growth striving, and meaning creation) and useful tensions (contrasting focuses on need hierarchy, requirements of relatedness, and states of existential isolation) are found that add depth to psychological insight.

This incorporation fuels ongoing theoretical debate regarding whether or not psychological frameworks should be synthesized or must stay separated views. Results indicate that frameworks do not necessarily have to be synthesized completely in order to be usefully integrated.

Noting areas of convergence while still keeping divergences in sight allows theoretical pluralism that is more responsive to psychological complexity than paradigm exclusivity (Madill et al., 2000). Subsequent theoretical work could then continue in this vein to construct more integrated models that retain the unique insights of various traditions without losing sight of their interconnection.

Contribution 2: Development of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. The study contributes to the further assessment and development of Maslow's seminal but controversial theory. The results are consistent with the overall hierarchical premise that acute deprivation of physical needs limits pursuit of higher order needs, yet contrary to simplistic sequential models of need fulfillment. The interpretation posits redescribing needs as interdependent prerequisites to be attended to at the same time rather than successive stages to be overcome.

This work is consistent with recent motivation scholarship highlighting the significance of multiple need satisfaction over hierarchical advancement (Tay & Diener, 2011). The work nonetheless also discloses that extreme conditions can cause temporary dominance of specific needs, highlighting that both hierarchical and interdependent models describe need dynamics depending on context. This more subtle approach moves beyond naive acceptance or rejection of Maslow's hierarchy toward more advanced comprehension of how needs apply in different circumstances.

Contribution 3: Extension of Self-determination Theory's Relatedness Construct. The study emphatically illustrates the psychological need for relatedness even for extremely autonomous individuals, substantiating SDT theory while also uncovering richness in the way autonomy and relatedness coexist. The theory suggests the need to differentiate between "radical autonomy" (total independence from social control) and "relational autonomy" (self-endorsed activity in joined-up contexts), with research showing radical autonomy sought at the expense of relatedness yields psychological disequilibrium (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Chirkov et al., 2003).

This contribution indicates avenues for theory development for SDT. While research has emphasized that healthy autonomy is compatible with secure relationships, less attention has been given to situations where relationships genuinely constrain autonomy or where early experiences create associations between relationships and control. The present analysis indicates the need to explore how people manage legitimate conflicts between autonomy and relatedness, and what therapeutic or developmental processes allow for shift from experiencing these needs as in conflict to experiencing them as compatible.

Contribution 4: Extension of Existential Psychology to Extreme Cases. The study broadens existential psychology's examination of ultimate concerns to extreme expressions, and in doing so, both the value and the limitations of existentials applied to radical life choices are made evident. The analysis verifies that freedom, responsibility, loneliness, and death are core issues which

bring about both anxiety and the possibility of genuine growth (Yalom, 1980). But the findings also indicate the necessity of tempering existential courage with wise realism, implying that genuine existence must be anchored in sufficient consideration of vulnerability and limitation.

This work enriches existential psychology's occasionally idealized descriptions of authentic living. Although existential theorists are correct to highlight the need for courage in authentic living, analysis here indicates that authenticity involves integrating courage with prudential wisdom and interdependence awareness. This even-handed approach may be especially significant in using existential principles therapeutically, when facilitating authentic self-expression must be balanced against concern for safety, competence, and interpersonal connection.

Contribution 5: Extension of Film Based Psychological Inquiry. The study contributes methodologically in that it shows systematic thematic narrative analysis of film can produce psychologically relevant insights in line with those produced by other qualitative approaches. By applying Braun and Clarke's (2006) well-established approach to analyzing film and keeping with close attention to both content and formal cinematic features, the study sets an approach that other researchers could use for psychological examination of visual media.

This work responds to demands for greater methodological pluralism in psychology (Wertz et al., 2011). Experimental and survey methodology are prevalent in psychological investigation, and yet qualitative analysis of narrative and visual media provides a complementary method for accessing rare, extreme, or ethically demanding-to-study experimentally and narrative-reconstructable psychological processes. The research illustrates that film analysis can be held to standards of rigor and transparency appropriate to scholarly psychological inquiry.

Contribution 6: Knowledge of Extreme Psychological Experiences. The study adds knowledge to extreme expressions of psychological needs and motivation that are underemphasized in psychological theory based almost exclusively on representative populations. McCandless's extreme search for autonomy and self-actualization sheds light on psychological processes that might be more subtle in ordinary experience. The analysis identifies possible costs and advantages of extreme prioritization of specific psychological needs, challenging theoretical predictions at the limits of human experience.

This article proposes the potential of systematic examination of extreme cases from many areas of psychology. Although they are few and usually retrospective, their examination can shed light on psychological processes, probe theoretical adequacy, and demonstrate the ambit of human psychological capacity and limitation. The present study presents a model of how such cases could be examined systematically based on existing theories.

5.2.2 Professional Practice Contributions

Contribution 7: Increased Insight into Modern Meaning Crises. The work contributes to insight into common modern experiences of meaninglessness, alienation from genuine self-expression, and tension between social expectations and individual values (Twenge, 2017). McCandless's life, though extreme, is representative of these larger cultural trends. The analysis gives insight to counselors, therapists, and educators who are working with clients facing the same challenges in terms of how they can facilitate clients to discover inclusive solutions that respect autonomy and connection without necessitating all or nothing decisions.

The contribution involves particular practice guidance: acknowledging legitimacy of concerns around existential and authenticity issues and assisting people to pursue them in a way that is consistent with social connection and practical capability, differentiating between situations in which relations are truly endangering autonomy and those in which perceived restriction is indicative of normal interdependence, promoting meaning and purpose exploration through intentional opportunities offering challenge within supportive environments, and assisting people to become both philosophical refinement-sophisticated and practically wise in equal measure instead of cultivating one to the expense of the other.

Contribution 8: Model of Understanding Balance between Autonomy and Relatedness. The study offers a useful model for understanding and enabling healthy balance between autonomy and relatedness, confirming integration rather than trade off is needed for optimal functioning. This contribution has implications in parenting, education, counseling, and organizational settings where maintaining support for autonomy while being connected is a focal concern.

Specific practical lessons are: assisting people to see that autonomy is not about being alone but about feeling autonomous in relation, to aid proper boundary setting that keeps connection alive instead of demanding total apartness, to discern when family pathology rightfully undermines autonomy but when constraining is perceived based on reasonable expectations, to assist in the growth of relational competence in tandem with autonomous functioning, and to establish environments that facilitate independent functioning while also facilitating connection.

Contribution 9: Guidance for Wilderness and Nature Based Interventions. The study advances knowledge about how wilderness can contribute to psychological development while also identifying potential dangers. Findings guide wilderness therapy programs, outdoor education, and nature based interventions by making benefits and precautions clear.

Practical principles entail: integrating wilderness challenge with therapeutic relationship and social support as opposed to focusing on solitary experience, providing sufficient preparation and realistic risk assessment in addition to growth oriented challenge, assisting participants in gaining

appreciation for nature and realistic comprehension of natural processes and dangers, enabling integration of wilderness experience into daily life and relationships and not viewing it as an escape from social reality, and acknowledging that nature experience benefits are maximized when shared and combined with social connection.

Contribution 10: Developmental Counseling for Emerging Adulthood. The study offers particular advice for counseling young adults through the identity exploration and possibility orientation typical of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000). McCandless's experiences took place during this period of development, and the tale is of special importance to knowing both the promise and peril of this stage of life.

Practical considerations involve: being serious about taking young adults' philosophical and existential questions as opposed to dismissing them as immature, guiding genuine exploration through well-structured opportunities that permit challenge and growth within secure environments, assisting young adults in resolving family problems in a manner that permits differentiation without necessitating total rejection, guiding pursuit of genuine self-expression while also preserving practical competence and social support, and viewing idealism and identity exploration as normal developmental processes to be facilitated rather than hindered while at the same time providing sufficient safety.

Contribution 11: Risk Assessment and Harm Reduction Strategies. The study adds to the knowledge of how to assist persons seeking adventure, non-traditional courses of action, or significant risk-taking in a manner that is respectful of autonomy while enhancing safety. Instead of merely dissuading risk or adventure, which can be psychologically significant for certain persons, the outcomes encourage harm reduction strategies.

Pragmatic advice involves in assisting of the preparation necessary for the difficulties one decides to undertake, enabling accurate risk assessment without destroying confidence or independence, promoting use of contact and communication even in the independent pursuit of different goals, assisting development of functional competence in conjunction with utopian aspiration, educating regarding possible risks without instituting external control, and acknowledging individual decisions while also offering resources and assistance for safer pursuit of worthwhile goals.

Contribution 12: Cultural Concept of Individualism and Community. The study adds to more general cultural debates regarding the intersection between individual and community. McCandless's life relates extreme expressions of Western cultural focus on individualism, and his demise evokes concerns regarding cultural priorities. The analysis lays groundwork for dialogue regarding how cultures may more successfully combine valuing individual autonomy with an appreciation for essential needs for community and interdependence.

This contribution has applications in education, community development, and cultural dialogue. Practical implications are: assisting people to see that genuine living doesn't involve denying community but involves discovering one's own place within community in ways that are respectful both to individuality and to relationship, creating cultural systems that combine autonomy with relatedness as complementary forces instead of viewing them as contrasting values, and acknowledging that various cultural contexts yield varying resources for managing individual and collective issues, and promoting movement toward cultural incorporation of both individualistic and collectivistic values as opposed to valuing one over the other.

5.3 Practical Implications

Drawing on the foregoing contributions, this section describes some concrete applications pertinent to a variety of professional uses.

5.3.1 Implications for Clinical Psychology and Counseling

Implication 1: Diagnosis of the Balance between Relatedness and Autonomy. Therapists ought to evaluate how clients manage their needs for autonomy and relatedness, considering that exaggerated dependence on other people or total solitude could be problematic. The assessment could pose questions such as whether clients consider autonomy and relatedness mutually complementing or mutually exclusive, investigate developmental influences shaping such beliefs, discern a cyclical pattern of relation-formation or relation-termination that is suggestive of autonomy-related difficulty, and inquire if a pursuit of autonomy betrays healthy differentiation or pathologic solitude.

When autonomy relatedness conflict is diagnosed, treatment strategies may involve: examining family of origin interactions that established links between relationships and controlling behaviors, helping development of relationship skills facilitating autonoetic functioning within relationships, refuting assumptions that autonomy necessitates solitude or that relationships necessarily impede freedom, aiding respect for healthy boundary setting which preserves a sense of oneness, and helping clients become aware of, appreciate, and respect both being alone and being together.

Implication 2: The Function of Constructing Meaning and Existential Questions in Psychotherapy. Therapists should note and directly respond to clients' questions concerning existential matters and construction of meaning, rather than framing them as an inferior second concern. When clients ask questions concerning authenticity, meaningfulness, purpose, or existential questions, therapeutic techniques may involve: viewing such questions as legitimate, meaningful features of the human experience, permitting exploration of values and meanings of individual concern, assisting clients in facing existential questions (such as freedom, responsibility, solitude, and mortality) with proper support, assisting clients in extracting personally

meaningful goals and commitments, and balancing exploration of existential matters with concern for everyday functioning and interpersonal relationships.

Existentially-informed therapy recognizes that questions about meaning and purpose are a common human experience rather than a pathologic state (Yalom, 1980). Nevertheless, therapy must help clients find meaning using methods that enhance rather than decrease well-being. The balance between facilitating meaningful self-expression and ensuring practical functionality with societal interconnectedness is a prime therapeutic practice goal.

Implication 3: Blending of Idealism and Pragmatism. Therapists treating clients with idealistic outlooks, especially young adults, should instigate philosophical goals while, simultaneously, allowing for the acquisition of practical wisdom. This could entail: recognizing and appreciating the clients' idealism and values, determining means of pursuing ideals without compromising functional functioning, assessing risk that prizes autonomy but is cautious about safety, enabling clients to attain competence relevant to their goals, allowing for the integration of abstract thought with pragmatic problem solving, and discerning when idealism facilitates psychological maturation and when it is defensive or rigid.

The aim is advocating for clients' values and aims while assisting them in pursuing goals efficiently and safely. This calls for therapist ability to sustain both empathic insight into clients' viewpoints and prudent evaluation of likely consequences, modeling combination of idealism and practicality that clients internalize.

Implication 4: Addressing Family Discord and Differentiation. For clients with family discord or desire for separation, therapists should carefully assess whether or not families indeed threaten autonomy instead of whether or not clients have problems with healthy processes of differentiation. Assessment might reflect: specific family behaviors constraining or allowing autonomy for the client, the client's capacity for autonomous living within family relationships, if desire for separation is due to psychological need or reactive rebellion, capability for improvement of family relationships or need for protection through distancing, and the client's relational capability and healthy interdependency capacity.

Therapeutic approaches might encourage: appropriate differentiation that maintains relatedness without requiring complete distancing, exploration of family experiences that created autonomy-relatedness conflicts, improvement of competence for independent functioning within interpersonally related relationships, family therapy when appropriate for facilitating relational empowerment, or support with distancing protection when families are genuinely toxic or abusive. The essential is avoiding assumptions that families should be maintained or that splitting is obligatory, rather meticulously assessing individual specifics inherent to a given circumstance.

5.3.2 Implications for Education

Implication 5: Incorporating Psychological and Existential Themes into Curriculum. School curricula, especially at the post-secondary and senior school levels, should reflect incorporation of attention towards existential and psychological themes of meaning, purpose, authenticity, and forging a sense of identity. This could entail: interweaving philosophical and psychological materials that respond to the existential questions students confront, broaching discussion about aims, values, and meaning within the classroom, enabling reflection on individual goal-setting and identity, instructing on psychological theories pertinent to motivation, needs, and welfare, and enabling students to develop frameworks for grasping their own experience and for meaningful decision-making.

Rather than treat such activities as extracurricular or therapeutic activities, schools might recognize them as part of students' learning and include them in academic curricula. This integration values students' need for growing while, at the same time, increasing interest and learning.

Implication 6: Balancing Autonomous Growth and Relational Competence. Instructional approaches should deliberately enhance both autonomous functioning and competence for relationality, at the expense neither of independence nor of inter-cooperation. This might involve: providing increasingly difficult opportunities for independent decisions and self-direction, training students in skills relevant to student-centered learning and self-regulation, at the same time explicitly instructing on collaboration, perspective-taking, and interdependence, creating spaces for students to practice autonomous functioning within collaborative contexts, helping students grasp that mature autonomy involves competence for interdependence.

Such a balanced approach acknowledges that healthy growth involves the integration of autonomy and relatedness, not a one-way shift from dependence towards autonomy. Learning theories which make such a combination have the potential of circumventing the autonomy-relatedness dilemmas seen in the history of McCandless.

Implication 7: Systematic Opportunities for Significant Exploration. Educational institutions, including schools and universities, ought to offer systematic opportunities for the exploration of identity, confrontation of challenges, and meaningful experiences within nurturing environments. Such opportunities may encompass study abroad initiatives and cultural immersion programs that include suitable preparation and support, service learning that integrates academic knowledge with significant contributions, outdoor education and wilderness activities that present challenges within secure frameworks, internships and experiential learning tailored to students' interests, as well as gap year programs designed to enable exploration with adequate structure and guidance.

Such programs allow adolescents to experience the exploration of identity and focus on prospects that characterize emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000), yet do so safely, building bridges with supportive communities. Rather than confronting young people with a choice between overly traditional paths and extremes of autonomy, programs with structure furnish a balanced experience that honors both exploration needs and developmental support needs.

Implication 8: Merging Practical Competence with Abstract Thinking The curriculum needs to combine the acquisition of practical competence with intellectual and philosophical development. This could involve: conveying crucial life skills such as financial management, health maintenance, and the ability to solve problems, creating experiential learning opportunities for the acquisition of functional competencies, interweaving theory knowledge with application at points throughout the curriculum, instructing risk assessment and decision-taking skills, and recommending the acquisition of practical wisdom as much as intellectual sophistication.

The blending of intellectual refinement with practical innocence was deadly for McCandless. Teachings that combine abstract thought with competence building at the practical level might better enable young people to undertake objectives safely and efficiently.

5.3.3 Organizational and Leadership Environment Implications

Implication 9: Supporting Independence Within Organizational Structures. Organizations need to create work contexts that support worker autonomy while allowing for sufficient coordination and cooperation. This might involve: providing meaningful choices and voice on work processes and decision-making, explaining the rationale for rules rather than imposing capricious edicts, creating opportunities for self-guidance and initiative within boundaries, valuing and recognizing varying approaches for reaching shared goals, and avoiding micromanaging and intrusive supervision that stifles autonomous motivation.

Self-determination theory explores that autonomy-supporting contexts enhance performance, motivation, and overall well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2017). This work puts autonomy at center stage while, nonetheless, underscoring the healthy autonomy functions within, rather than beyond, interpersonal relationships and community. Relational autonomy-promoting businesses could enjoy organizational success with enhanced employee well-being.

Implication 10: Purposeful Work and Meaning. Companies need to pay attention to workers' needs for meaning and purpose at work, acknowledging that such needs are not extravagances but core drives. This could entail: allowing workers to appreciate what their work does for meaningful ends, relating organizational missions to ends other than profit, affording workers a chance to experience work that matters at a personal values level,

facilitating workers' learning and maturity towards meaningful ends, and acknowledging that both well-being and performance are enhanced when there is meaning and purpose.

The study substantiates that the search for meaning is the ultimate human motivation (Frankl, 1963). Companies which enable workers to derive a sense of meaning at work might experience greater motivation and less churn, as well as support for employee psychological health.

5.3.4 Impacts on Public Health and Prevention Strategy

Implication 11: Promotion of Mental Health Through Satisfaction of Needs. Mental health promotion through public health should focus on framing circumstances for satisfaction of core psychological needs such as autonomy, competence, relatedness, and meaning. This could entail: community development activities which enhance social relationships and support, programs facilitating competence building and mastery, policies facilitating autonomy and meaningful decision on health and social services, education on psychological needs and their role for well-being, environmental planning enabling social contact and nature contact.

Rather than a focus on individual treatment of mental health deficits, public health might feature promotion of mental flourishing through need satisfaction. The paper shows the need for balanced, multidimensional need satisfaction, rather than a shaping towards peaks for individual needs.

Implication 12: Education on Risks and Mitigation Strategies for Adventure Enthusiasts. Strategies within public health should aim to deliver risk education and resources for harm reduction to those engaged in adventure activities, wilderness exploration, or non-traditional pursuits, rather than merely deterring these endeavors. This may encompass: instruction on safety in wilderness environments, navigation techniques, and survival skills, tools for trip organization and risk evaluation, communication methods and emergency response systems tailored for isolated regions, initiatives that link adventure enthusiasts with seasoned mentors, along with societal narratives that appreciate both the pursuit of adventure and the importance of responsible preparation.

5.4 Limitations of the Study

Despite the significant contributions of this study, it should be mentioned that there are some limitations that affect interpretation and application of findings.

5.4.1 Research Design Limitations

Limitation 1: Single Case Focus. Just one movie is used as the subject in the study, and this constrains generalizability of findings. Even though "Into the Wild" generates abundantly rich psychological content, any themes present in this specific case may not generalize to other individuals, contexts, or cinematic depictions. The conclusions must be understood as giving insight into the present case and not

making absolute claims regarding human motivation, identity construction, or existential matters (Yin, 2014).

But such limitation is partially counterbalanced by the theory and analysis one has with intensive single case concentration. Generalizability statistics is not the goal but theoretical understanding and analytical richness (Stake, 1995). The findings contribute to psychological knowledge through longer examination of how psychological processes manifest in this extreme case, which can illuminate dynamics operating in a more subtle form elsewhere.

Limitation 2: Film as Mediated Representation. The investigation considers a film rather than unmediated psychological data on Christopher McCandless. The movie is Penn's cinematic interpretation of Krakauer's journalistic interpretation of fragmented evidence about McCandless's real experience. Multiple layers of interpretation and story construction stand between the investigation and historical psychological truth.

This is a limitation that maintains that conclusions represent inferences about the representation in film of psychological themes rather than absolute statements about McCandless's actual psychology. While this is mentioned throughout the investigation, readers need to always remember that what is being analyzed is filmic representation rather than direct psychological reality. This limitation, however, applies to some degree to all psychological research because access to other individuals' psychological experience is always through verbal reports, behavioral observation, or some other indirect route.

Limitation 3: Interpretive Nature of Analysis. Interpretive qualitative research is employed in the study, meaning findings are the theory-informed interpretation of the researcher rather than real facts. Other analysts, using other theories, based on varying experiential backgrounds, or emphasizing other film elements would likely result in different interpretations (Madill et al., 2000).

This interpretive nature is ontological to qualitative research and epistemological stance, rather than methodological inadequacy. But it does mean that outcomes need to be judged on coherence, theoretical grounding, and empirical correspondence, not anticipating quantitative replicability. Reflexive analysis throughout Chapter 3 is to explain to readers how researcher positionality has an impact on interpretation but can never eliminate the interpretive nature of the research.

5.4.2 Theoretical Framework Limitations

Limitation 4: Selection of Theoretical Framework. The research employs three specific psychological paradigms (Maslow, SDT, existential psychology) and must rule out others by necessity. Psychoanalytic, cognitive behaviorist, social constructionist, feminist, or postcolonial paradigms would find different attributes of the film and yield alternative interpretations. Framework selection relies on theoretical allegiance that dictates what is examined and how it is explained.

All used frameworks have inherent constraints and face theoretical as well as empirical criticism, such as indicated in the review of literature. Utilization of controversial theory means some findings are founded on theoretical assumptions that are controversial in psychology. The study, while aware of criticisms and avoiding uncritical application, winds up having conclusions based within specific theoretical traditions that are embraced by not all psychologists.

Limitation 5: Limits of Framework Integration. While the research depicts fruitful integration of more than one framework, the integration is not total and fails to resolve certain theoretical tensions. The frameworks make different predictions about certain phenomena, and the research does not necessarily rule between alternative explanations. Some theoretical incompatibilities may be fruitful (revealing genuine complexities) while others may be a function of inadequate integration.

In addition, the specific integration method employed in this research is one of a number of such methods. Alternative integration strategies may yield other conclusions. Future research might explore other ways of integrating these or other models.

5.4.3 Methodology-Related Limitations

Limitation 6: Subjectivity of the Researcher. Despite careful reflexive sensitivity and systematic approach, the researcher's subjectivity will always intervene in interpretation in uncontrollable and unconscious ways. Personal history, affective responses, theoretical stance, and cultural beliefs impact what aspects of the film come into relief, how scenes get read, and what's considered most significant issues (Finlay, 2002).

The reflexive discussion in Chapter 3 addresses this limitation by making researcher positionality explicit, but revealing subjectivity does not eliminate its influence. Readers should interpret findings as one rigorously worked-through, theoretically informed interpretation rather than objective or absolute truth regarding the psychological significance of the film.

Limitation 7: Inclusion of Participant Perspectives. The research does not incorporate viewer views that have viewed the film but diminishes the realization of how large audiences perceive psychological themes. Analysis is theoretical professional interpretation but does not indicate how large groups of people interpret and respond to the psychological material in the film (Livingstone, 1998).

Future research using reception studies or viewer interviews would be able to supplement the current analysis by investigating how audiences in different groups respond to the film. However, the current study's focus on systematic theoretical analysis is a valuable addition to valuing the psychological dimensions of the film.

Limitation 8: Temporal and Cultural Specificity. The criticism is at a particular moment in time (2025) and from a particular cultural vantage point (contemporary Western

scholarly environment), fixing interpretation. Both the initial context of the film (2007) and contemporary analytical context shape understanding in ways difficult to entirely grasp or account for.

Results should be interpreted as a function of existing psychological wisdom and cultural concerns and never as absolute truths. Analysis in different histories or cultures might yield alternative findings, particularly concerning the equilibrium between individualism and collectivism, the value attached to autonomy relative to relatedness, and the notion of authentic living.

5.4.4 Scope Limitations

Limitation 9: Inadequate Attention to Some Dimensions. While the study gives adequate attention to motivation, identity formation, and existential concerns, there is relatively less focus on other potentially implicated psychological dimensions like neurobiological processes, personality, psychopathology, gender processes, and sociopolitical milieus. These are limitations in research emphasis and not in their irrelevance.

For example, neuropsychological theory of risk taking and sensation seeking, personality psychology theory of conscientiousness and agreeableness traits, clinical theory of possible psychological disorders, and critical theory of privilege and social structure might all make important contributions not fully delineated in this analysis. Additional research might address those aspects.

Limitation 10: Limited Comparison to Alternative Cases. The research does not make systematic comparisons of McCandless's case with alternative cases of people pursuing radical independence, wilderness experience, or authentic living. Comparative analysis may reveal whether findings within this case are atypical or indicative of common dynamics in similar experiences.

While the study situates findings in the context of broader psychological theory and literature, comparative reference to other cases examined in similar frameworks would make it more apparent which findings are only specific to this case or are broad patterns. Future research employing comparative case study designs could address this as a weakness.

5.4.5 Implications of Limitations

These limitations mean findings must be read as yielding theoretically informed, systematically derived understandings of psychological matters in "Into the Wild" and not definitive or exhaustive interpretation. The analysis is contributing to the understanding of how this particular movie accounts for human motivation, identity construction, and questions of existence via some psychological models while admitting other models would provide different but similarly helpful insights.

Restrictions do not exclude the study but rather define scope and correct interpretation. Qualitative, interpretive research aims for credibility, transferability, dependability,

and confirmability rather than generalizability and replicability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Assessed against these criteria, the study makes valuable contribution in context of acknowledged limitations. Strong methodological openness, theoretical basis, systematic investigation, and reflexive awareness enhance credibility while restrictions constrain scope.

5.5 Suggestions for Future Research

The results, contributions, and limitations of the present research indicate a number of fruitful avenues for future research. This section sets out particular research questions and methods that would enhance knowledge about the psychological themes explored in the current study.

5.5.1 Extensions of the Current Research

Research Direction 1: Comparative Film Analysis. Future research might analyze multiple films portraying similar psychological themes using consistent theoretical frameworks and analytical approaches. Comparative analysis would enable identification of patterns across cases, assessment of how different cinematic portrayals illuminate different aspects of psychological phenomena, and evaluation of which findings from this study are specific to "Into the Wild" versus generalizable patterns.

Possible movies for comparison are: "127 Hours" (extreme wilderness survival and grappling with death), "Wild" (wilderness trek and psychological recovery), "Captain Fantastic" (growing children in wilderness seclusion with different values), "The Mosquito Coast" (radical family flight from society), "Grizzly Man" (man living with bears in Alaska), and "Tracks" (solo trek by woman through Australian desert).

Comparative analysis could look at: shared psychological tendencies in instances of radical autonomy seeking, differences in the balance between autonomy and relatedness for various individuals, gender, age, cultural background, and other influences on forming wilderness quests, consequences of various approaches to authenticity and self-actualization, and how similar psychological processes are shown in different cinematic techniques through various films.

Research Direction 2: Longitudinal Study of Meaning Making. While film analysis gives us a snapshot of psychological processes, longitudinal research tracking people over time as they work through issues of authenticity, meaning, and purpose would shed light on developmental pathways. Prospective longitudinal studies could investigate:

How existential issues develop throughout emerging adulthood and beyond, what is most likely to lead to successful versus problematic resolution of autonomy relatedness conflicts, how meaning-making processes shift with experience and maturity, what enables integration of idealism with pragmatism, and how individuals who initially embark on radical trajectories grow in their means of achieving authenticity and self-actualization.

Such studies could utilize mixed methods that integrated quantitative measurement of need satisfaction, well-being, and meaning with qualitative interviews of people's changing perceptions of their experiences. Longitudinal tracking of people following unusual trajectories, wilderness expeditions, or extreme autonomy over several years would challenge whether developmental patterns found in McCandless's cut short life represent typical developmental processes or idiosyncratic processes.

Research Stream 3: Cultural Comparative Research. This current study interprets a narrative with Western cultural focus on individualism. Future studies could investigate how individuals in other cultures negotiate conflicts among autonomy and society, individual and collective meaning making, and authentic self expression and social harmony.

Cross-cultural research could explore: how balance between autonomy and relatedness is negotiated in collectivist versus individualist cultures, whether existential concerns are expressed differently across cultures, how meaning making processes differ with cultural norms and values, what cultural resources facilitate integration of relatedness with autonomy, and whether psychological theories generated in Western settings are applicable across cultural boundaries.

Such research would refine understanding of what findings capture universal human dynamics and what findings reflect culturally specific patterns. It would also aid in creating more culturally nuanced psychological theory that acknowledges multiple ways of addressing fundamental human dilemmas.

5.5.2 Applied Research Directions

Research Direction 4: Intervention Research. The applied implications uncovered in this research point to various intervention strategies that are worthy of empirical examination. Future studies could refine and test:

Autonomy Relatedness Integration Intervention Programs that assist individuals who are experiencing these needs as in conflict become more integrated in their functioning. Intervention can instruct relational skills that support autonomous functioning within relationships, aid experience processing which produced autonomy relatedness conflicts, and offer experiential learning in environments that can nourish both needs.

Meaning Making Interventions that assist people in living authentic existence and significant purpose in a manner that preserves functional competence and social relatedness. Initiatives may incorporate existential inquiry with practical ability training, enable guided chances for demanding significant experiences, and provide assistance for incorporation of idealistic ambitions with realistic wisdom.

Wilderness Therapy Innovations that maximize psychological gains with reduced risk. Study could contrast various models of wilderness intervention (solitary versus group experience, short versus long duration, therapeutic

escort versus autonomous experience) to determine best models for fostering psychological development.

Research on intervention would transfer theory to practice and also test theoretical predictions. Successful interventions would validate theoretical knowledge and unsuccessful interventions could disclose weaknesses calling for revision in theory.

Research Direction 5: Risk and Resilience Research. The tale of McCandless provokes inquiry into what differentiates those who complete radical autonomy seeking or wilderness testing successfully from those whose experiences end in disaster. Future work could explore:

Psychological traits that forecast successful versus troubled outcomes in wilderness or adventure settings, how preparation, ability, and realistic self evaluation play a part in reducing risk, factors that allow people to seek meaningful challenge in safety, signals to look out for that suggest autonomy seeking becomes psychologically or physically hazardous, and resilience variables that facilitate recuperation when challenging events fail to turn out as intended.

Such studies would potentially integrate retrospective case analysis with prospective follow-up of individuals engaging in substantial challenges. Knowledge about protective and risk factors would drive theoretical insight as well as applied advice for people and workers alike.

Research Direction 6: Therapeutic Process Research. The clinical significance implies a number of therapeutic methods that warrant systematic examination. Process research could investigate:

How therapists can best facilitate autonomy relatedness integration in clients who feel these needs as incompatible, therapeutic methods for treating existential issues and meaning making in evidence based ways, balancing aiding clients' genuine aspirations while ensuring practical competence and safety, processes by which clients are facilitated to advance from reactive opposition to family or society to mature differentiation with proper connection, and the efficacy of existentially oriented therapy versus other forms of therapy for clients who have meaning and authenticity issues.

Such a study would contribute to evidence based practice and test theoretically derived predictions concerning therapeutic change processes. It would determine if theoretical findings from this analysis generalize to successful therapeutic interventions.

5.5.3 Theoretical Development Research

Research Direction 7: Need Integration Research. Optimal functioning is achieved through integration of many needs, rather than hierarchical development or selective focus. Future empirical and theoretical investigation may inquire into:

Processes through which individuals effectively reconcile competing needs and values, regardless of whether integration constitutes developmental gain or continuous dynamic process, individual differences in ability for and style of need integration, situational factors promoting or hindering integration, and how integration evolves over time and with experience.

This research may use both quantitative approaches (measuring need satisfaction and integration at more than one point in time) and qualitative approaches (inspecting people's experiences of integration procedures). This research would enhance theoretical knowledge about how human motivation operates when more than one need is active at the same time.

Research Direction 8: Extreme Case Analysis. The present research illustrates the worth of extreme case analysis in testing the limits of theory and uncovering psychological dynamics. Future studies may systematically investigate extreme cases in different domains:

Excessive risk taking (base jumping, solo ocean voyaging, high-risk exploration), excessive social withdrawal (hermits, extended isolation), excessive commitment (dedicated activists, missionaries, people giving up lives to solitary causes), excessive asceticism (frugal living, self-imposed poverty), and excessive creativity or productivity (people producing extraordinary results).

Comparison of such cases with similar theoretical frameworks would indicate whether patterns found in this research hold true across various types of extremity or are different domains characterized by varying psychological dynamics. This study would probe theoretical adequacy across the entire scope of human experience and not only in so-called typical populations.

Research Agenda 9: Integration Research on Frameworks. The study illustrates successful integration of three particular frameworks but raises queries about whether integration beyond these frames can occur. Future theoretical research may:

Try formal integration of several frameworks into single models, review other frameworks (psychoanalytic, cognitive, social constructionist) and their possible integration with those used here, explore whether frameworks can really be synthesized or have to be kept as distinct points of view in tension, establish metatheoretical guidelines for effective framework integration, and try out integrated models in competition with other single framework approaches.

This research would promote theoretical discussion regarding psychological paradigms and theoretical unification possibility. It would assist in establishing if psychology must strive for unified theory or adopt ongoing theoretical pluralism.

5.5.4 Methodological Development Studies

Research Direction 10: Development of film analysis methodology. The research shows that systematic thematic analysis can be utilized on film, yet there is a need for methodological development. Future research could:

Create and validate new methods of psychological film analysis, analyze reliability and validity of film based psychological research, explore how results obtained through film analysis are compared to results obtained through other methods investigating comparable phenomena, develop standards and best practices for psychological visual media analysis, and explore how various cinematic devices and narrative structures influence psychological analysis.

Such studies would push film based research ahead as accepted method in psychology, with the potential for increasing phenomena open to psychological study.

Research Direction 11: Multi Method Studies Involving Combination of Film Analysis With Other Methods. The weaknesses of film analysis indicate potential strength in combining it with complementary methodologies. Future studies could:

Integrate film analysis of movies depicting psychological phenomena with interview research of subjects who share the same experiences, utilize film analysis to develop hypotheses and test them using experimental or survey techniques, utilize film as stimulus material in experimental investigations of audience response and interpretation, incorporate film analysis and historical analysis of the real cases depicted, and triangulate results using multiple methods studying the same phenomena.

Multi method research would draw on the strengths of alternative approaches while offsetting their respective weaknesses. It would offer greater depth of understanding than any one method in isolation.

Research Direction 12: Reception Studies. The existing research examines what the film depicts but not how audiences decode it. Future research could investigate:

How different viewers interpret and react to psychological issues in "Into the Wild," whether viewer interpretations fit with expert theoretical explanation, what individual and cultural variables influence viewer reactions, how the film influences viewers' own thought regarding autonomy, meaning, and authentic living, and whether watching the movie has psychological impacts on viewers.

Reception studies would supplement expert critique through an explanation of how psychological material is interpreted and possibly absorbed by non-expert audiences. It would cross over from film studies to media effects research.

5.5.5 Substantive Research Directions

Research Direction 13: Meaning Crises in the Modern Age. McCandless's narrative echoes larger trends of meaning-seeking in modern society. Research could examine systematically:

Prevalence and nature of meaning crises among modern populations, demographic and psychospiritual predictors of meaning struggle, cultural and societal drivers of mass experience of meaninglessness, adaptive individual and collective coping with meaning crisis, and the ways in which meaning making processes have shifted in response to social and technological trends.

Such investigation would place individual cases such as McCandless's in the larger epidemiological and cultural frame, shedding light on contemporary psychological difficulties and possible solutions.

Research Area 14: Nature and Psychological Well-being. The movie highlights nature's contribution to psychological experience. Emerging research could consider:

Mechanisms by which psychological functioning is influenced through nature experiences, optimal features of nature-based interventions for various populations and aims, individual differences in nature experience responsiveness, how romantic idealization rather than realistic awareness of nature influences psychological outcomes, and integration of nature experiences with urban environments and social connection.

This study would develop environmental psychology as well as guide nature based interventions and the extent to which physical environments influence psychological flourishing.

Research Direction 15: Emerging Adulthood and Identity Exploration. McCandless's experience took place in emerging adulthood. Future studies could explore

Normative identity exploration patterns during this period of development, variables that make healthy exploration versus unhealthy patterns, cultural and economic context effects on emerging adulthood experiences, best support for identity exploration that is both autonomy-respecting and safety-enabling, and long-term consequences of varying styles of emerging adult exploration.

This type of research would move developmental psychology in the direction of offering empirical foundations for real-world support during the more and more acknowledged and prolonged emerging adulthood phase.

5.5.6 Conclusion Comments Regarding Future Research

Taken as a whole, these directions for research imply a rich research agenda for further developing knowledge of human motivation, identity development, existential issues, and psychological well-being. They span direct extensions

of the present research through methodological advances to exploration of larger substantive inquiries that the findings pose.

The richness of the psychological themes explored in this work is reflected in the diversity of recommended directions. Not all will be equally useful or feasible, and researchers need to rank them according to available resources, technical capability, and evaluation of what would best develop understanding.

Together, however, these recommendations suggest that the psychological landscape traversed in this work—the reconciliation of autonomy and belonging, the search for genuine being and worthy calling, the blending of idealism and pragmatism, and the making of sense of existential issues—continues to be live territory for psychological research. McCandless's tale, though extreme and ultimately fatal, sheds light on basic human dilemmas that continue to warrant systematic exploration.

Future research building on this foundation has potential to advance both theoretical understanding and practical application, contributing to psychology's ultimate goal of understanding and supporting human flourishing. The current research provides one contribution to this ongoing endeavor while also revealing how much remains to be explored.

Concluding Remarks

This study has utilized thematic narrative analysis to analyze psychological themes of human motivation, identity formation, and existential issues in Sean Penn's movie "Into the Wild" using an integrated model of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, self-determination theory, and existential psychology. Five broad themes were found through the analysis which shed light on the intricate psychological dynamics of Christopher McCandless's trek, disclosing both the promise of self-transformation through extreme authenticity and the psychological toll of radical individualism.

The results validate the basic significance of balancing more than one psychological need and not maximizing individual dimensions. McCandless's quest for autonomy and self-actualization at the cost of relatedness and social connection resulted in psychological imbalance with eventually disastrous outcomes. His story convincingly demonstrates that human flourishing is dependent on integrating autonomy with connectedness, idealism with practicality, existential bravery with realistic sagacity, and individual meaning making with social participation.

The study contributes to theory in psychology by showing effective integration of several frameworks, sharpening insights into need dynamics, and applying theoretical concepts to extreme instances. The study contributes to practice by offering direction for helping individuals who face equivalent issues in less severe versions, guiding therapeutic, educational, and organizational strategies that respect autonomy and relationship.

Christopher McCandless's life remains relevant because it speaks to essential human questions regarding meaning, purpose, genuineness, and living a good life. His final acceptance that "happiness only real when shared" is wisdom validated and extended by this research: humans are inherently social creatures whose autonomy and self-actualization must be sought within and not outside of genuine relationships and community.

Although McCandless's own destiny was tragic, his adventure cannot be perceived as simply a cautionary tale. His willingness to challenge established notions of success, his strength in seeking true life, his ability to form deep connections in spite of his ideology of solitude, and his final acknowledgment of what is most important all provide lessons regarding human psychology and the eternal dilemma of living passionately and truly. His tale reminds us that the big questions of human life-how to be free yet joined, how to be genuine yet anchored, how to be meaningful while embracing doubt-have no easy solutions but demand constant incorporation of rival truths.

This study has attempted to do justice to the richness of McCandless's experience and the psychological dynamics it exemplifies by offering systematic, theory-guided analysis that neither idealizes nor minimizes his search. It is hoped that through close psychological analysis of his life, we may be able to discern insights useful in helping others negotiate such conflicts more productively, learning how to seek genuine living and true purpose without sacrificing the relationships and practical acumen requisite for thriving.

The quest to understand human motivation, identity, and existential issues goes on. This study is one effort along the way, illustrating that rigorous psychological examination of narrative media has the potential to shed light on basic features of human experience and also to show how much more there is to discover and learn.

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