

ANALYZING MAIN CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT IN TURNING RED THROUGH MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS: A PSYCHOLOGICAL AND EDUCATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract. This research explores the application of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs in analyzing, which is the main character development in the Turning Red movie (2022) and the implications for character education. By analyzing the main character "Meilin Lee's" psychological growth, this research aims to show how Maslow's theory can be applied into educational settings, especially in understanding student motivation, identity formation, and the social interactions. By using a qualitative descriptive method, this study conducts the main character analysis through a close examination of the movie's narrative, dialogues, and character interactions. Every data was collected through repeated observations and thematic analysis, aligning Mei's experiences with Maslow's five levels of needs: physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. The research findings reveal that this movie reflects the gradual fulfillment of these needs, with significant emphasis on self-acceptance, resilience, and social belonging. Her struggles with family expectations and personal identity illustrate key psychological challenges faced by adolescents. Also, this study suggests that Turning Red can serve as an engaging educational tool for teaching psychological concepts and character development in formal and informal learning environments. The collaboration of movies in educational curricula may enhance students' understanding of their self-growth, emotional intelligence, and social adaptation.

Keywords : Hierarchy of Needs, Character Education, Learning through Movie

I. INTRODUCTION

Education is more than just the transmission of knowledge, but it also processes who can change people's thinking, interactions, and feelings. The way students process learning is influenced by a lot of factors, such as their psychological condition, motivation, and sense of belonging in an educational setting. Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) provides a foundational framework for understanding how these psychological elements interact to influence human behavior and development. Maslow's theory, often depicted as a pyramid, suggests that humans must first satisfy basic physiological and safety needs before advancing toward higher-order needs, such as social belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization.

While Maslow's model was originally formulated to explain general human motivation, its relevance in educational psychology has been widely acknowledged. Students' ability to focus, participate, and excel in academic settings is deeply intertwined with their psychological well-being. When students experience insecurity, lack of social support, or low self-esteem, their engagement and academic performance often suffer (Ryan & Deci, 2020). As such, educators and school administrators must recognize the hierarchical nature of student needs and create learning

environments that cater to these fundamental aspects of psychological development.

The role of psychological needs cannot be overstated. Students who enter classrooms without their basic needs met whether due to hunger, sleep deprivation, or emotional distress are at a disadvantage when it comes to cognitive performance and knowledge retention (Basch, 2011). In many cases, these challenges manifest as lack of concentration, increased anxiety, and disengagement from learning activities.

At the next level, safety needs, including emotional security and stability, are equally critical. Schools that fail to provide a safe and supportive environment may inadvertently hinder students from reaching their full academic potential. Research by Collie et al. (2018) suggests that students who feel emotionally safe and supported in their school environment exhibit higher levels of motivation, participation, and resilience in overcoming academic difficulties. In contrast, students who experience bullying, teacher hostility, or an overly competitive environment may struggle with self-confidence and academic engagement.

Beyond safety, love and belonging needs shape students' motivation to learn. A supportive peer group can enhance confidence, foster collaborative learning, and create a sense of purpose within the academic community.

According to Wentzel (2017), students with strong peer relationships demonstrate higher levels of motivation, better academic outcomes, and greater persistence in their studies. Conversely, students who feel socially isolated may develop negative attitudes toward learning, avoidance behaviors, and lower self-esteem.

If the hierarchy gets higher, esteem plays a significant role in shaping student achievement. Recognition, praise, and positive reinforcement from teachers, peers, and parents contribute to a student's sense of competence and self-worth (Ryan & Deci, 2020). When students receive encouragement and constructive feedback, they are more likely to develop intrinsic motivation, a growth mindset, and perseverance in overcoming challenges. However, a lack of validation or excessive criticism can lead to self-doubt, fear of failure, and disengagement from academic tasks.

At the highest level, self-actualization represents the pinnacle of student development. This stage is characterized by a deep sense of purpose, creativity, and fulfillment in learning. Students who reach this stage demonstrate intellectual curiosity, autonomy, and the ability to set and achieve personal academic goals (Zimmerman, 2018). However, achieving self-actualization requires an educational environment that encourages exploration, personal growth, and critical thinking. Schools that prioritize rote memorization and rigid structures may inadvertently stifle students' ability to fully realize their potential.

One of the most effective ways to understand psychological theories in action is through storytelling. Movies, particularly those that focus on adolescent development, provide a rich narrative framework for exploring the complexities of psychological growth. Animated movies, in particular, often capture the challenges faced by young individuals as they navigate identity formation, peer relationships, and societal expectations.

Turning Red movie (2022) is an animated movie by Disney Pixar, it presents the study of an adolescent's journey through self-discovery, social pressures, and academic responsibilities. The main character "Mei Lee", living a dramatic transformation. Both physically and emotionally that shows us the psychological struggles in many students case. This Turning Red movie is related with Maslow's Hierarchy of NNeed which offers valuable insights into how psychological factors influence student motivation, self-perception, and academic engagement.

The Turning Red movie, Mei as the main character fight with many layers of psychological needs, from basic struggles, such as: the exhaustion from meeting her academic and familial expectations to deeper self-actualization conflicts, where she must choose between dealing with social norms or embracing her unique identity as Red Panda. In this movie her friendships play a crucial part in fulfilling her need for social belonging, while her mother's high expectations create anxiety in her esteem and self-actualization journey. With Mei's experiences through Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs framework, we can gain a deeper understanding of how students navigate the challenges of meeting their psychological needs in real life educational settings. This

movie is not just a story, it is not just about transformation, but also about everyone's struggle of balancing the academic, personal identity, and social expectations, a challenge that many students face in their educational journeys. This research aims to explore how Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory shows the psychological development of the main character in the movie Turning Red, and the implications for student learning and motivation. Specifically, this research looking to:

1. Explore how each level of Maslow's hierarchy of Needs theory manifests in the main character development.
2. Analyze the psychological struggles the main character faces and how they applied in real student experiences.
3. Identify strategies teachers or educators can use to highlight psychological needs in the learning environment.

Educational psychology and media analysis is a study which contributes to a broader understanding of how psychological theories can be applied to real life educational challenges. The movies like Turning Red serve as a mirror, reflecting the inner struggles of students and offering valuable lessons on how schools, teachers, and parents can better support adolescent development.

In modern education, understanding students' psychological needs is important as developing their cognitive abilities. Maslow's hierarchy theory provides for analyzing how students are affected with learning based on their emotional, social, and psychological health. Turning Red gives us a new perspective we can explore these themes, making it an important case study for psychological development and education.

This research does not just simply analyze a fictional character in this movie, it aims to get perspectives who can help educators, policymakers, and parents to create environments that empower students to reach their full potential. By understanding the psychological gates that students face, we as an educator can build a more inclusive, supportive, and effective educational system that prioritizes not just academic success but also personal growth and fulfillment.

II. RESEARCH METHODS

To explore how psychological needs impact student motivation and identity development, this study uses a qualitative research approach with document analysis as the primary method. Sugiyono (2015) states document analysis as a systematic process of examining and interpreting texts, movies, or other recorded materials to give meaningful insights. The Movie is a powerful reflection of human experiences, this Turning Red movie (2022) was chosen as an ideal medium to explore Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory in an educational context.

The process of data was collected in detail and deep. The researcher watched the Turning Red movie many times, having close attention to the main character's interactions, emotional expressions, and important moments that show

Maslow's five levels of needs. Every watch session provided new insights of how Mei's as the main character's psychological struggles mirror those of students who show the academic pressure, self-identity, and social belonging.

As the analysis progressed, the researcher Identified 10 key data points in this research, each representing a different psychological aspect in student life and each of these elements was carefully explored not just as entertainment, but as representations of real challenges faced by students in their educational journeys.

Analyzing a movie more than just watching the movie, it needs a critical and layered approach to see deeper meanings. To ensure a comprehensive understanding of Mei's psychological journey, the study employed the following analytical steps:

1. Categorization by each key data point was systematically noted by Maslow's five levels of needs, ensuring that every observed moment had a clear theoretical grounding.
2. Thematic Interpretation, the data were examined for repetitive patterns that align with real life student motivation, emotional health, and academic engagement.
3. Theory Triangulation, in this part the researcher findings were then compared with existing educational psychology theories, to validate interpretations and strengthen the educational significance of the study.

Through this process, the study was able to be a bridge between fictional narratives which are movie and real world educational challenges, offering insights into how psychological needs shape students' experiences inside and outside the classroom.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Data1

Mei wakes up early and immediately prepares food for her family's temple customers

Mei: "Another perfect day as the perfect daughter!"

In this scene, the movie shows us that Mei's as the main character has access to basic needs such as food and shelter. However, as academic pressure and family expectations rise, she begins to sacrifice her physiological aspects, such as lack of sleep and hunger in order to meet these demands.

In educational context, physical health really affects academic achievement. Basch (2011) showed that lack of sleep and poor diet can reduce concentration and learning achievement. Therefore, schools and educators need to ensure that students receive support for their physical health, such as providing a healthy breakfast program and raising awareness of the importance of rest in the learning process by provide education on the importance of sleep patterns and nutrition in the school health curriculum, and facilitate a healthy breakfast program to ensure students have enough energy to learn. And manage school schedules so that students can maintain a balance between learning and rest.

Data 2

Mei hides in the bathroom after transforming into a red panda

Mei: "No, no, no! What's happening to me? This isn't happening!"

Mei experienced extreme anxiety after her physical transformation, which threatened her sense of security. This reflects how students often experience emotional distress due to academic expectations or personal challenges, which can lead to high levels of stress and anxiety.

According to Collie et al. (2018), students who feel emotionally unsafe at school tend to experience decreased academic engagement and increased levels of anxiety. Therefore, it is important for schools to create a psychologically safe environment through anti-bullying programs, emotional support systems, and trust-building strategies between teachers and students. Schools can build an inclusive classroom environment, where students feel comfortable expressing themselves without fear of judgment. Schools also provide counseling and psychological support services for students experiencing anxiety or emotional distress. And training teachers in empathy-based approaches, so they can recognize and support students experiencing emotional difficulties.

Data 3

Mei is afraid that her mother will find out about her physical changes and punish her

Mei: "If she finds out, she will kill me!"

Mei experienced fears of her mother's expectations, reflecting how parents' expectations can shape students' self-perception and emotional health. If these expectations are too high, students can feel anxiety, self-doubt, and academic burnout.

A study by Steinberg (2021) found that adolescents who experience high pressure from parents often develop performance anxiety and decreased intrinsic motivation. Therefore, schools can play a role in educating parents on how to provide healthy academic support, such as through parent-child communication programs and educational psychology training for guardians. Providing a communication program between parents and students, so that parents understand the impact of excessive expectations, schools also can makes teaching self-regulation strategies to students, so that they can manage academic pressure more healthily and involving parents in educational psychology seminars, to raise their awareness of the importance of supporting children without putting too much pressure.

Data 4

Mei's friends (Miriam, Priya, Abby) try to calm her down after finding out she's turned into a red panda*

Miriam: "It's just a little hair! It's fine!"

Priya: "You're our friend. Nothing changes that."

Despite her drastic physical changes, Mei is still accepted by her peers. This highlights the importance of social relationships in student development, where students who feel they do not have a social group can experience academic isolation and low self-esteem.

According to Wentzel (2017), students who have strong social support at school tend to have higher learning motivation and lower levels of academic stress. Therefore, teachers should encourage collaborative learning, peer tutoring programs, and

inclusive classroom activities to strengthen social bonds among students by establishing peer mentoring programs, where students can support each other in the learning process, encouraging collaborative learning methods, so that students get used to working in groups and building healthy social relationships and holding community-based extracurricular activities, which can strengthen social interaction and a sense of togetherness among students.

Data 5

Mei begins to use her red panda powers to get money from her school friends

Mei: "Who wants a picture with the awesome red panda? Only \$5!"

Mei began using her skills as a red panda to make money, which shows how a supportive school environment can build students' self-confidence and independence. When students are given space to experiment and discover their strengths, they tend to be more confident and take the initiative to take on new challenges.

Collie et al. (2018) found that students who felt supported by their teachers and school environment were more willing to take risks in learning, showed higher creativity, and were more active in extracurricular activities. Therefore, schools can create a positive learning climate by providing space for students to explore through creativity-based projects, also encouraging student entrepreneurship through small business programs or innovation competitions. And developing a healthy appreciation system, where the courage to try is appreciated, not just the end result. Students can reward effort, not just results, to motivate students to continue learning. Teachers can also encourage self-reflection practices, so students understand that their value is not solely dependent on external recognition. And training teachers to provide positive and constructive feedback, so students feel valued without excessive pressure.

Data 6

Mei decides to keep her red panda and not delete it like her mother did

Mei: "The panda is a part of me. And I won't get rid of it."

Mei decided to accept her identity as part of herself, showing the peak of self-actualization. In education, this stage is related to students' ability to recognize and develop their full potential.

According to Zimmerman (2018), self-actualization occurs when students have independence in learning, high curiosity, and the ability to set and achieve personal goals. Therefore, schools can help students reach this stage by providing creative projects, self-reflection activities, and career guidance programs that allow them to explore their interests and talents. To help students achieve self-actualization, schools and educators can encourage exploration based learning to provide opportunities for students to explore areas that suit their interests and talents. They can develop project-based curriculum to help students build creative and problem-solving skills through real-life experiences. Schools also provide career guidance and mentorship to help students find a direction that fits their personality and aspirations.

When students are given the freedom to recognize and develop their potential, they are more likely to become confident, independent individuals who are ready to face future challenges.

Data 7

Mei experiences a panic attack when she finds out that her red panda powers can come out if she can't control her emotions

Mei: "No, no, no! I need to stay calm... Stay calm!!!"

Mei experienced a panic attack when she realized that she was losing control of her emotions. This reflects how many students experience academic stress when facing exams, difficult assignments, or pressure from the environment. The inability to manage stress can lead to cognitive impairment, decreased motivation to learn, and even academic burnout.

According to Putwain (2022), academic anxiety can hinder students' concentration and memory, thus affecting their performance in school. Therefore, schools and teachers need to implement stress management strategies such as:

Breathing and mindfulness techniques in the classroom to help students manage stress, emotional support through academic counseling and mentoring or education about coping mechanisms so that students have strategies to deal with stress independently.

Data 8

Mei chooses to follow her friends to the 4 TOWN concert even though her mother forbids her

Mei: "This is important to me, Mom. I want to be with my friends."

Mei eventually chooses to follow her friends to the concert, even though it is against her mother's wishes. This reflects the dilemma that students often experience between obedience to family and the desire to be accepted in a social group. In education, peer pressure can have positive (e.g., motivating each other to study) or negative (e.g., engaging in deviant behavior).

According to Steinberg & Monahan (2021), adolescents are more likely to make decisions based on social pressure than rational considerations, especially in a highly competitive environment. Therefore, schools can help students in making healthy decisions by teaching critical thinking skills so that students can sort out good and bad social influences, providing mentoring programs where senior students guide their juniors in making academic and social decisions and building open communication between teachers and students, so that students feel they have space to discuss their dilemmas.

Data 9

Mei helps her mother who turned into a giant red panda to come to terms with herself

Mei: "It's okay, Mom. You don't have to be perfect."

Mei finally reconciles with her mother, which symbolizes self-acceptance and resolution of intergenerational conflict. In education, the ability to resolve conflict healthily is a very important skill for students. When conflict occurs, whether with peers or within the family, how students deal with it will affect their character development.

According to Erikson (2023), adolescents are in the stage of searching for identity, and social conflict is often part of their growth process. Schools can help students develop these skills by implementing character education that emphasizes empathy, communication, and conflict resolution, encouraging open discussion about social and cultural values in the classroom, and teaching conflict resolution strategies based on healthy communication, so that students can resolve problems without violence or prolonged conflict.

Data 10

Mei and her friends use the red panda to start a small business at school, selling photos and merchandise

Mei: "Let's use this to our advantage. People love pandas!"

After initially feeling embarrassed and afraid of her physical changes, Mei began to see her red panda as something positive. With support from her friends, she took advantage of the situation to make money and get attention at school. From the first when the girl who initially felt insecure, Mei began to show braves and ambition in taking on new challenges.

Like in school, a supportive environment can help students develop self-confidence and the courage to take risks. According to Collie et al. (2018), students who feel accepted and supported by their environment, especially in school, are more likely to explore, show higher creativity, and be active in external activities. Oppositely, students who feel limited in a stressful environment tend to avoid challenges and experience decreased academic motivation.

In this case, the support of her friends and the freedom to express herself allowed her to turn hesitation into opportunity. This movie reflects how a school environment that allows for exploration can help students build confidence and readiness for the real world. To help students develop confidence and initiative, schools can implement strategies such as providing space for students to experiment, for example through creativity projects, where students can make their innovative ideas.

Support student entrepreneurship, by holding small business programs, innovation competitions, or collaborative projects that allow students to hone their practical skills. And developing a healthy reward system, teachers and schools need to reward students' courage in trying new things, rather than just judging their success by the end result. When schools provide a supportive, exploratory, and appreciative environment, students will be more confident in facing academic and social challenges.

This study aims to analyze the educational aspect in the Turning Red movie by using Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory reflected in the main character of the Turning Red movie. By using the documentation analysis method based on Sugiyono (2015) theories. From this study the researcher successfully identified 10 main scenes that show the fulfillment of five levels of human needs in Turning Red movie character Meilin lee. Here hierarchy of Needs in Mei's Character Journey:

Physiological Needs: The Impact of Lack of Sleep and Nutrition on Academic Performance

Mei experiences sleep and eating disorders due to academic pressure and family responsibilities. Basch (2011) found that lack of sleep and poor nutrition can reduce students' concentration and academic performance. Therefore, schools should provide student well-being programs, such as healthy breakfasts and more flexible study schedule management.

Safety Needs: Emotional Safety and Academic Stress Regulation

Mei felt scared and panicked after learning that she had turned into a red panda. This reflects how students who feel emotionally unsafe often experience high anxiety, which impacts their academic engagement. Collie et al. (2018) emphasized that creating a safe school environment can increase student engagement and reduce academic anxiety. Strategies such as counseling guidance and anti-bullying programs need to be implemented to increase students' sense of safety.

Love and Belonging Needs: The Role of Social Support in Learning Motivation

Peer support, such as that Mei received from Miriam, Priya, and Abby, is very influential in increasing her self-confidence. Wentzel (2017) emphasized that students who have strong social relationships tend to be more motivated to learn and experience lower levels of academic stress. Therefore, schools need to hold peer mentoring to build healthier social relationships and develop collaborative learning methods so that students feel more accepted in their potential environment.

Esteem Needs: Validation and Recognition in Increasing Academic Motivation

Mei was initially afraid of her changes, but after seeing how her friends accepted her red panda, she began to seek recognition from her environment. According to Ryan & Deci (2020), intrinsic motivation increases when students receive positive validation. For this reason, schools can implement giving rewards based on effort, not just the end result and help students build self-confidence through potential feedback

Self-Actualization: Achievement of Student Identity and Self-Development

Mei finally chose to accept her red panda as part of herself, which shows the peak of self-actualization. According to Zimmerman (2018), self-actualization in education occurs when students have learning independence and confidence in making decisions about their future. Schools can support this by providing creative projects and exploration-based learning, as well as providing career guidance that helps students discover their potential.

IV. CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of the Turning Red movie, this study reveals that Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory is still relevant in understanding the psychological development of adolescents, especially in the context of education. Mei Lee's journey reflects how each level of human needs physiological, safety, love and belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization influences her character development and decisions in facing life's challenges. At the physiological level, Mei's lack of sleep and diet show how academic pressure can compromise

students' basic needs. In emotional security, Mei's anxiety illustrates how academic stress can hinder students' engagement in learning. Social support from her friends shows how important an inclusive school environment is in increasing self-confidence. On the other hand, the drive for recognition highlights the role of validation in building students' academic motivation. Ultimately, Mei's decision to accept her own identity symbolizes the achievement of self-actualization, which in the world of education is related to the development of students' full potential. The results of this study confirm that understanding students' psychological needs can help create a more supportive learning environment. Therefore, some recommendations that can be applied in the world of education include improving student well-being such as mental health programs, nutritional awareness, and balance between academics and personal life. also creating a safe and supportive school environment and integrating emotional support strategies, anti-bullying, and peer mentoring. In addition, schools can also encourage self-exploration and student actualization such as providing space for creativity, project-based learning, and career guidance. However, this study has limitations because it only focuses on character analysis in movies. Further studies can expand the scope by analyzing more movies, comparing them with real educational contexts, or using other psychological theories such as Self-Determination Theory. Ultimately, education is not only about transferring knowledge, but also about understanding and meeting students' psychological needs so that they can develop academically and personally.

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