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Research article

Optimism Dimensions in Interstellar Movie by Christopher Nolan

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KEYWORDS

Optimism dimensions;
 Content analysis;
 Movie

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to analyze the optimism dimensions and impacts of optimism found in the main characters in *Interstellar*, a movie by Christopher Nolan released in 2014. A descriptive qualitative method with a content analysis method was employed in this study. The data were collected using a literary study technique from the movie conversation. The data were analyzed using the optimism theory suggested by Seligman (2006). The results revealed that the optimistic dimensions found in this movie consist of permanence or immortality, pervasiveness, and personalization. These values are viewed as having impacts on the other movie characters, which reduces the attitude of pessimism and prejudice as well as leads experience to an optimistic stance. The findings imply that optimism values influence people to act, or even change their perspectives. A much deeper investigation of another crucial value in this movie is recommended as a reflection of the current literary works.

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INTRODUCTION

Literature is created to be enjoyed, appreciated, understood, and presented to society. Literature can be interpreted as depicting social reality through art for readers or audiences (Ali, 2017). Literary works can entertain, increase knowledge, and enrich insight. They deliver the aesthetic side of the unreal world, contrary to natural science (Peels, 2020). It is no wonder that the message conveyed to the reader or audience looks beautiful without boundaries.

Literature is not limited to written works; it can also exist in the shape of movies, records, and other items. A movie is a genre of literary work in the form of prose, in which implied messages are transferred from visual and audio elements. These two elements are combined into a medium

for delivering entertainment and social and commercial information (Ahuja, 2022).

Good movies deliver a variety of benefits. They have the capacity to capture an assortment of meanings: entertaining, engaging, and empowering. (Niemic, 2020). They do not only entertain but also provide education and information and can even touch the emotions of the audience (Rosita & Prathisara, 2021). All of this is a professional collaboration between the director and actors in creating a work that attracts the interest of the audience. Artists and film workers use films as a medium of artistic expression to express thoughts and story ideas.

Over the years, movies have undergone various developments (Nofhananda, 2023). One of the movies developed in the last ten years is *Interstellar*, produced by Christopher Nolan in 2014. The main character in this film

is Cooper, a professional pilot who will continue NASA's mission to find the planet considered habitable. As the main character in *Interstellar*, Cooper represents a man with an optimistic character.

Seligman (2006) theoretically constructs optimism dimensions as a part of explanatory styles in positive psychology. He proposed the idea that responses to life events might be different, either in optimistic or pessimistic ways. He listed many aspects of this optimism dimension, such as permanence, pervasiveness, and personalization. Borrowing from the ideas of Sameer (2018), optimism produces a favorable stance about future possibilities and opportunities for accomplishment.

Being optimistic helps one confront life's challenges with a positive attitude and helps one identify their goals and make personal changes that enable them to address problems with ease. Optimism psychologically affects many dimensions of life. Dohmen et al. (2023) mentioned that optimists take greater risks because they tend to recall more and focus more on positive outcomes. Optimism is also believed to lead people to find meaning in life through different thinking processes (Diener et al., 2018). Positively, optimism makes people emotionally stable and have more motivation to face and solve challenges they encounter in life (Lei & Lei, 2022). Additionally, optimism impacts individuals in terms of strength and enthusiasm to achieve what they want (Septianingrum & Supraba, 2021). The positive impact is the strength and enthusiasm of each individual to do something that they want to achieve. Briefly, optimism has beneficial impacts on many aspects of human life.

However, the dimensions of optimism in the *Interstellar* movie have not been portrayed by researchers. Many studies have researched and discussed many dimensions of the *Interstellar* movie, but not the optimistic dimension. For example, the study of Sari (2021) has focused on the awe side of *Interstellar* specifically on the vastness and necessity for accommodation, in addition to the depiction of greatness. Another study analyzing this movie was conducted by Akbar (2023), discovering that *Interstellar* has an indelible cinematic experience in which the narrative and visual dimensions work in harmony. This movie reflects a portrayal of primary metaphors (Ulinuha, 2021). The theme was also regarded as excellent due to the combination of science fiction and language exposure (Mizan et al., 2023). Varieties of moral values such as courage, devotion, affection, admiration, and compassion (Yassinta et al., 2022) also strengthened the good side of the movie.

Based on the description above, this study will focus on exploring the optimistic dimensions contained in the *Interstellar* movie and then on analyzing the impacts of

optimism on lives in the movie. The researchers then formulate the following research questions:

- (1) What are the dimensions of optimism found in the *Interstellar* movie?
- (2) What are the impacts of the main character's optimism dimensions on other characters?

The two questions will be answered using the framework of optimism dimensions by Seligman (2006). The answers to both questions are expected to reflect the optimistic attitude of those who enjoy watching movies. It is further projected that this study will direct people to act with optimism for whatever challenges they face in their lives.

METHOD

This study aims to depict and analyze the characteristics of optimism contained in the *Interstellar* movie and then focuses on analyzing the impacts of optimism on other characters in the movie. To address the objectives, a descriptive qualitative was employed, i.e., content analysis. This research is suitable to answer questions about describing characters in literary works as it depicts meaning in context or a phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The data was mainly collected using note-taking in the *Interstellar* movie dialog, directed by Christopher Nolan (2014). To support the main source of data, reading relevant journal articles, books, and internet sources was conducted.

Interstellar is a captivating slalom through Christopher Nolan's immense creativity that is both a science-geek fantasy dream and a serious exploration of what it means to be human (Foundas, 2014). The duration of *Interstellar* is 2 hours, and 49 minutes. It has surpassed the \$300 million mark to reach the world box office after playing in its first two weeks. This film tells the story of Cooper and other team members from NASA who carry out a secret mission to look for a new planet because the earth is no longer habitable. Their adventures bring together mysteries in the universe, loss, and sacrifice. There are lots of phenomena that do not make sense but can be explained theoretically. Even though it seems impossible, these phenomena are considered to have a conceptual basis that is quite accurate in science. Watching *Interstellar* creates an impression of a mysterious universe that is worth continuing to explore.

The unique thing about this film is that Christopher Nolan collaborated with the scientist who won the 2017 Nobel Prize in Physics, Professor Kip Thorne. *Interstellar* is an adventure film whose main character is played by Matthew McCaughey, who plays Cooper. The film *Interstellar* carries the theme of a space adventure in search of a new

planet that humans can inhabit because the earth in 2064 is experiencing a food crisis.

When watching the movie, the researchers watched the movie carefully and took notes on some pieces of dialog containing optimistic dimensions to answer the research questions. As underlined by Zhang and Wildemuth (2005), data for qualitative content analysis are purposefully extracted from selected texts that can inform the research questions under exploration. The dialog of characters to be analyzed in this research is Cooper, Murphy, Professor John Brand, Dr. Amelia Brand, and Robot Tars.

The analysis was carried out in reference to the optimism categorization proposed by Seligman (2006). The procedures administered covered the following steps: 1) careful watching of the Interstellar film; 2) identifying minutes of scenes to be analyzed; 3) transcribing the scenes; 4) analyzing the values found in each scene; 5) presenting the findings in the form of narration and 6) interpreting the findings to existing literature and relevant previous research. The data collected were validated using data source triangulation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Dimensions of Optimism

a. Permanence

The dimension of permanence was found in the minutes 00:29:06–00:29:07, 00:39:10–00:41:11, and 01:05:09–01:06:30. The description is presented below.

In minutes 00:29:06–00:29:07, Cooper met Professor Brand and told him about the increasingly critical condition of the Earth's food. Their conversation takes place in the scene visualized in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Cooper trying to give Prof. Brand hope.

The following dialog proves the permanence dimension in the movie.

Prof. Brand: Now we only have corn, and we need it more than ever. Yes, just like potatoes in Ireland, corn will also soon become extinct.

Cooper : We'll find a way, Professor. We'll find it.

Prof. Brand: Do we believe that the earth is ours?

Cooper : The earth is not just ours. No, it's our home.

(minutes: 00:29:06–00:29:07)

From the conversation, it is evident that Cooper tries to convince Professor Brand to find a way to maintain the existence of corn. He also reassures the professor that the Earth is their homeland. The sentence “We’ll find a way...” and “The earth is not just ours. No, it’s our home,” signify how Cooper senses optimism about the food and the earth. Professor Brand appears to feel helpless, but Cooper expresses his positive belief about the endurance of the two things.

The findings suggest that Cooper still has encouragement and believes that their home will survive. This corresponds to what is demonstrated by Carver and Scheier (2014) that individuals with optimism will keep trying to achieve goals and have the belief that they will always get the best in life until they achieve success. It is also clear that Cooper does not feel anxious or stressed about the condition. Gibbons (2023) found out in his research that optimistic people tend to have lower anxiety and depression. Theoretically, referring to Seligman (2006), Cooper views their current condition will soon be resolved, as people with optimism see challenges as something temporary, or will find their end.

In minutes 00:39:10 – 00:41:11, Murphy, Cooper’s daughter, wanted him to stay. She insisted he stay several times. Yet he motivated her to remain optimistic that he would be back. Their scene is displayed in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Cooper calming his daughter, Murphy

The following dialogue exemplifies the permanence of their conversation.

Cooper : Murphy, they chose me you saw. It was you who led me to them.

Murphy : That's why you can't leave. I know. What the message means, one word and you know what it means? "Stay" means "stay", Dad.

Cooper : Murphy!

Murphy : You don't believe me! In these Books, it means "stay"! Why aren't you listening? It means "stay"!

Cooper : I'll be back.

Murphy : When?

(Minute 00:39:10 – 00:41:11)

The conversation denotes that Murphy has little hope about the situation. She looks desperate, thinking a little chance of her father going home safe and sound. However, Cooper tries his best to raise her hope. He sees that the hard situation they face will be resolved, and Cooper will be back home as expected.

The situation shows an optimistic attitude of permanence, in which Cooper attempts to increase the positive feelings of his daughter. This is in line with what highlighted by Seligman (2006), that optimism enhances human positive emotions. On the contrary, Murphy shows a less optimistic attitude due to the hard situation. This is something intuitive, as a bad situation makes people feel more negative feelings (Chopik et al., 2020).

In minutes 01:05:09 –01:06:30, Cooper argues with Robot Tars about the opportunities for humans to survive on earth which Cooper feels obliged to find a solution for it, while Tars does not agree. Figure 3 shows how Cooper thinks about their current situation.



Figure 3. Cooper and Tars trying to cooperate in thinking about the situation

The dialog below indicates how they confront each other.

Cooper : We have an image that humans in this world will die. Think!

Robot Tars: Cooper, they didn't bring us here to change the past

Cooper : Say it again.

Robot Tars: They didn't bring us here to change the past.

Cooper : They didn't bring us here at all. We carry ourselves.

Minute 01:05:09 –01:06:30)

Cooper believes that they will find the solution to save humans on Earth. However, Tars reckons that there is nothing they can do to handle the situation if they are not meant to change their fate. Cooper seems to resent that pessimistic idea, so he says, "Say it again." And finally, he makes a reinforcement or affirmation to Tars that they come to the place by themselves to change their fate.

It is visible that Tars represents pessimistic people when mentioning how they get into the situation. According to Seligman (2006), this is the tendency of pessimistic people to describe their stress by referring to unpleasant situations.

Nevertheless, again, Cooper shows his optimistic side in this difficult situation. He assures Tars that they decide to get into the situation, not because of being pushed by other people. Although the decision might risk themselves, Cooper perceives the situation as positive, not showing his regret. Instead of feeling regret for the situation, Cooper judges the situation as a risk they need to accept.. This corresponds to what was reported by Dohmen et al. (2023), that someone's focus on risk outcomes will affect their initiatives to face the risk.

b. Pervasiveness

The second optimistic element identified is pervasiveness. The pervasiveness element of the optimistic tranquilizer was identified in minutes 00:20:56–00:22:11, and in minutes 00:22:25–00:24:03, the researchers noticed the logical thinking element.

Optimistic Tranquillizer

In minutes 00:20:56–00:22:11, Murphy stated to Cooper that his bookshelf was ghosted; his books were always neatly arranged, but they suddenly often fell by themselves. Murphy's statement was denied by Cooper; he said it was not a ghost but because of gravity. Their dialog occurred in the following scene, reflected in Figure 4.

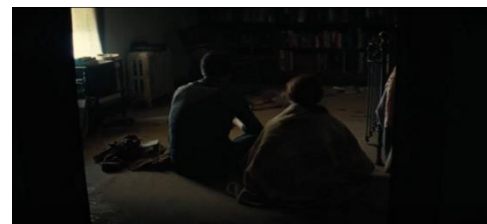


Figure 4. Murphy thinking ghosts bothering them

The conversation below represents their talk.

Murphy : That's a ghost.

Cooper : Take your pillow and sleep with Tom. It's not a ghost, it's gravity.

(Minute 00:20:56 - 00:22:11)

Cooper convinces his daughter that no ghost is around. It is just gravity that causes the book to fall. Cooper demonstrates his optimistic side to calm down her daughter. She might be afraid of such a thing, but the fact of gravity might be acceptable. In the view of Seligman (2006), less optimistic people have a tendency to judge something universally. Murphy shows her universal or common thought when a book falls without visible factors, ghosts are the only cause. Conversely, Cooper, with his optimistic mind indicates his specific argument that it was due to gravity. In this case, Cooper provides such reinforcement to Murphy, because, psychologically, she seems to feel high worries about ghosts that increase her

negative feelings. As reported by Newman et al. (2022), worry has to do with increased negative emotion.

Logical Thinking

During minutes 00:22:25–00:24:03, Cooper asked Murphy to discuss something scientific by first asking her whether or not she is afraid of ghosts and challenging her to think scientifically, then he guided her on how to do something scientifically. The scene is reflected in Figure 5.



Figure 5. Cooper telling Murphy to think logically

Their conversation is detailed below.

Cooper : Okay, Murphy. You want to talk about something scientific? Don't tell me that you're afraid of ghosts. No, you have to investigate it. You have to write everything, analyze it, find out the cause, and make your own conclusion. Got it?

Murphy : Got it!

(Minute 00:22:25 – 00:24:03)

Here, Cooper challenges Murphy to think about the way scientists work. He details how to investigate something logically: write things in a complete manner, analyze them, examine the causes, and conclude the findings. Cooper demonstrates an explanatory style, which Seligman (2006) mentions as a way to find out why things occur and it will lead to reducing or even stopping helplessness.

Cooper seems to expect that Murphy will not have a solely personal interpretation of something without logically investigating it. Interpretation, whether objective or subjective, is also claimed to have an impact on helplessness construction (Ziegler et al., 2021). Moreover, the level of reasoning skills is connected to the level of optimism (Karhu et al., 2022).

c. Personalization

In the personalization dimension, self-confidence, taking risks, and motivation are noticed. The results and discussion are presented below.

Self-confidence

In minutes 00:52:50–00:54:13, in their journey to find a new home for humanity, Amelia said that the crew on the journey are the best-chosen people who are worthy of making a new great history. Cooper replied, confirming

that he was one of the chosen ones. Their conversation takes place in the following scene, displayed in Figure 6.



Figure 1. Cooper talking with Brand

Their conversation is indicated in this excerpt.

Amelia : This crew represents the best of humanity.

Cooper : Including me? Yeah.

Amelia : You know. I totally agree 90%

Cooper : That's it.

(Minute 00:52:50 - 00:54:13)

During the conversation, it is noticed that Cooper refers to himself as one of the best team. Amelia validates what Cooper stated. It is evident that Cooper is doubtless about his position and contribution. In other words, he feels confident as he knows what he has accomplished so far. Seligman (2006) acknowledges this as feeling ourselves. When a person senses his optimism, he lives with confidence. This is consistent with a study demonstrating that optimism had a considerable effect on self-confidence and self-esteem (Rawat & Mahapatra, 2020).

Taking risk

In minutes 02:08:21 -02:10:13, Dr. Mann takes over the Endurance Spaceship and destroys it. Cooper and the crew had tried their best to save the spaceship by deciding to catch it when the ship might have crashed. The scene is represented by Figure 7.



Figure 2. Cooper taking-risk action

Their effort is pictured in the following dialog.

Brand : Cooper, what are you doing?

Cooper : Docking.

Robot Tars: It's not possible.

Cooper : No, it's necessary.

(Minute 02:08:21 -02:10:13)

Here, Cooper is certain about his action by saying “necessary” instead of answering with “possible.” It is

apparent that he is brave enough to take risks for his actions. It is implied by Seligman (2006) that people with high optimism tend to risk themselves for challenging opportunities. Conversely, less optimistic people do not like to risk themselves. Therefore, it is proven that optimism might influence risk-taking (Dohmen et al., 2023).

Motivation

In minutes 00:22:07–00:23:24, Cooper found out that gravity would take him to the coordinates he wanted to go to. Cooper, who was assisted by Murphy, decided to open the map on Murphy's bookshelf. When Cooper and Murphy opened the map, both finally found the coordinates, and after that, Cooper decided to leave and find it. Before leaving, he told Murphy that he didn't want to miss it, and he said that he would be back in a few hours. The moment when he finally left is shown in Figure 8.



Figure 8. Cooper leaving to find out the gravity

Their conversation is recorded in the following lines.

Cooper: *It's not Morse, Murphy, it's binary. Thick is 1 thin is 0. Coordinates. I don't want to miss it, grandpa will be back in a few hours, Murphy.*

Murphy: *But you won't know what to find.*

Cooper: *And that's why I'm not taking you.*

(Minute 00:22:07 – 00:23:24)

Cooper feels very motivated to find gravity. He shows his eager persistence, although he has almost no clue what he is looking for. He insists on going, although his daughter has warned him that he might be baffled during his search. However, as proposed by Seligman (2006), desire will indeed predict success. Cooper, as mentioned in the previous part, is a person who likes to take risks optimistically. This is not surprising, as people with optimism are projected to have the motivation to engage themselves in challenging cases (Lu et al., 2022).

2. Impacts of Optimism

The optimistic character played by Cooper has been found to have an impact on other characters in the Interstellar movie. His character has reduced the pessimistic attitude and prejudice, as well as promoting experience. The results, along with the discussion, are presented as follows.

a. Pessimistic Attitude

In minute 01:09:50–01-11-23, Cooper, Amelia, and Doyle were facing a huge wave. Cooper requested that they get back on the plane, but they refused. They debated as Amelia insisted on getting the data. Amelia was about to give up, but Cooper told her that she would make it. The scene is reflected in Figure 9.



Figure 9: Cooper encouraging Amelia to save herself

Their conversation of the situation is displayed below.

Amelia : *The debris*

Cooper : *Where are the others?*

Amelia : *It's near the mountain.*

Cooper : *That's not a mountain, that's a wave*

Amelia : *What? Oh shit*

Doyle : *The wave is moving away from us.*

Amelia : *We need the footage.*

Cooper : *Amelia, Doyle, get back on the plane now!*

Amelia : *I'm not leaving without data.*

Cooper : *Get over here! We don't have time.*

Amelia : *I got the data!*

Cooper : *Get back on the plane, now! Get back here!*

Amelia : *No, Cooper, go away! Cooper, go away! I'm not going to make it!*

Doyle : *Go save her!*

Amelia : *Go!*

Cooper : *Wake up, wake up, Amelia!*

Doyle : *Hurry up, hurry up, hurry up!*

Amelia : *I'm not going to make it!*

Cooper : *Yes, you will.*

(minute 01:09:50 – 01-11-23)

Cooper tries to persuade Amelia that she will reach her goals. Although the predicament they face is not easy to conquer, Cooper's attempts to reduce Amelia's pessimistic attitude are worth noting. Referring to Seligman (2006), people with pessimistic attitudes commonly think about how far they can control the situation, but on the contrary, optimists consider they have more power to control especially when they are in a state of helplessness. Amelia,

in this case, sees herself as almost having no control or power by saying she will not be able to get the data. But Cooper believes what he says will have an impact on Amelia's mind. This is reported by Chopik et al. (2020) that optimism might determine someone's changing particular events. In this case, changing the pessimistic attitude to an optimistic one.

b. Prejudice

In minutes 02:08:21–02:09:24, Cooper showed the feasibility of the aircraft landing even though Tars showed an endurance rotation of 67.68 RPM. He kept telling the crew that he would run the aircraft. The scene is portrayed in Figure 10.



Figure 10. Cooper is stubborn to run the aircraft

The dialog describing their situation is presented below.

Tars Robot: Cooper has no point in using fuel to chase after him

Cooper : Endurance turn around analysis.

Amelia : Cooper, what are you doing?

Cooper : Trying to land

Tars Robot: Endurance turnover 67.68 RPM

Cooper : Good, ready to adjust our Turnover with retro thrusters.

Tars Robot: That's impossible.

Cooper : No, but it's worth doing

(Minute: 02:08:21 - 02:09:24)

Amelia and Tars's sentences signal prejudice that what Cooper does will not work. However, Cooper insists on going, although warnings have been issued and the possibility of landing is low. He exhibits his high determination, saying that adjusting the turnover would be a helping hand. Amelia's prejudice might emerge from the situation that she has not experienced yet; she even does not have any certainty in Cooper's action, while Tars's assumption is very technical regarding the fact that it is a robot, which cannot predict other possibilities except what has been programmed in its system.

In this case, Cooper's optimism directs the crew's prejudice to agree with his action. Following Seligman (2006), prejudice arises when people ignore factuality or know little about a matter. In other words, less experience is a contributor to prejudice (Sanders et al., 2023).

c. Experience

In minutes 01:04:40–01:05:00, Cooper explained his plan to the crew based on his experience and knowledge. He also explained the possibilities if they execute the plans. He then finally set a reminder not to waste time at their current place. The scene appears in Figure 11.



Figure 11. Cooper explains his plans

Their conversation is recorded in the following lines.

Cooper : Romany.

Romany : Yes.

Cooper : How far away is the Planet? Time shift?

Romany : Stay at its highest point.

Cooper : It is here, outside of Planet Miller. This is Gargantua. We will bring Endurance into orbit around the miller planet to save fuel but we lose a lot of time. What if we take it into a wide orbit around Gargantua? Then we drop the ranger plane and go to Miller planet, we take samples and come back we analyze, and then we report quickly. We lose a little fuel.

Amelia : That should work.

Romany : Good.

Cooper : We can't waste any time down there.

(Minute 01:04:40 – 01:05:00)

The way Cooper delivers his plans characterizes how his experience leads him to analyze the situation and generate the analysis into practical plans. By delivering this, he indirectly conveys his optimism about handling their situation at that time. His explanation has received positive acceptance from Amelia and Romany.

According to Seligman (2006), experience in the past might help people predict what they will experience in the future, either success or failure. What Cooper plans for their next action, is based on his careful consideration, expecting the best results to handle their emergency. As implied by de Meza and Dawson (2020), plans designed based on accurate consideration will probably yield good results. In a nutshell, it is the experience that determines the optimism dimension for future life events, not vice versa.

In brief, Cooper's position as the main character in *Interstellar* is pivotal, as he determines the development of the storyline and is always present as a subject in events and conflicts that influence the development of the storyline (Nurgiyantoro, 2018). As the center of the story in a literary work, and often shown in various events in a story, the main character's position is very dominant (Fazalani, 2021). To emphasize, the role of the main characters is very crucial due to its influence on the overall storyline. The primary character plays a significant role in explaining and strengthening the author's portrayal of his or her emotions while conveying the imagination.

CONCLUSION

Movies, as literary works, can impart essential meanings and values to audiences. Both views may serve as inspiration and enlightenment for viewers as they respond to a variety of circumstances in their lives, either good or bad. By carefully watching movies with good life lessons, people are expected to change their lives or have better standpoints.

The *Interstellar* movie has provided its viewers with positive values through the presentation of various optimism dimensions. Permanence, pervasiveness, and personalization have been conveyed by Cooper as the main character, illuminating *Interstellar* viewers to stay positive about the future and any possibilities within it. Optimism is also linked to a pessimistic, prejudiced, and experience-oriented attitude, in which optimism may mitigate pessimism and prejudice while experience has the potential to strengthen optimism.

The findings of this study imply that optimism should be the basis for people's progress in their lives. Each individual must have a confident attitude and believe in their abilities. For studies in the future, many other dimensions of *Interstellar* as literary works are exceedingly worth researching, for example, the dimension of existentialism.

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