



## The portrayal of the main character's self-actualization in *The Karate Kid* (2010)

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### ABSTRACT

The study aims to analyze how the main character in *The Karate Kid* (2010) achieves self-actualization needs in an intercultural setting. Employing close-reading to analyze the text, the study uses Maslow's (2013) hierarchy of needs and Rogers' (1967) five characteristics of a fully functioning person as the theoretical frameworks. It also uses Bordwell, Thompson and Smith's film form (2017) as a tool to analyze the cinematic aspects of the film. The current study finds that Dre Parker, the main character in the film, successfully achieves self-actualization after fulfilling the four preceding needs, which are physiological, safety and security, love and belongingness, and self-esteem. It is also found that he expresses self-actualization through the five characteristics of a fully functioning person: openness to experience, existential living, trust feelings, creativity, and fulfilled life. Furthermore, the study concludes that the main character's young age and cultural background do not hinder him from reaching self-actualization. In fact, self-actualization contributes to unite disparate cultures to a certain extent.

**Keywords:** Film; fully functioning person; hierarchy of needs; self-actualization; *The Karate Kid*

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### INTRODUCTION

Every human being has several important needs to be fulfilled. Maslow (2013), who developed a hierarchy of needs, believed there are five most basic needs for humans: physiological, safety and security, love and belongingness, self-esteem, and lastly, self-actualization. In psychological settings, self-actualization is widely known as the realization of one's potential and self-fulfilment. It is also perceived as a person's potential, capacity, and ability that is fully used to actualize oneself, as argued by Bernard (2013). For some people, self-actualization can be achieved by doing a creative activity, sport, spiritual journey, and even academic project. One important thing to note, self-actualization is a continuous process of becoming rather than a perfect state of oneself (Hoffman, 1999).

Another psychologist, Carl Rogers (1967), also has a similar understanding of the concept of self-actualization. According to Rogers, the person who actively explores his/her potentials and abilities is called a fully functioning person. He further stated there are five characteristics of a fully functioning person: openness to experience, existential living, trust feeling, creativity, and fulfilled life (Rogers, 1967). These characteristics cannot be separated from

one's identity and her/his environment. Jones (2017) suggested that behaviours and intrapsychic circumstances play a role in activating, developing, and ultimately advancing one's process of self-actualization. In addition, Tyler (1924, as cited in Jones, 2017) found that human beings have learned to survive in their communities, whether the environment was sensibly familiar or unusually foreign. Consequently, if living in a familiar environment already has its own challenges for a person to achieve self-actualization, then living in a foreign environment becomes an extra challenge for those who strive for it.

One example of this phenomenon can be found in *The Karate Kid* (2010), a film by Harald Zwart, which presents the story of an African-American boy who migrates to China along with his mother. Dre Parker, the main character in the film, faces some challenges during his processes to achieve self-actualization in his new community in Beijing. With the help from his Kung Fu coach, Mister Han, Dre manages to overcome his fears and challenges in his new environment. The film has become a good example of developing self-actualization in an intercultural setting.

*The Karate Kid* (2010) itself has been an interesting subject for several studies. As the film presents a compelling story in an intercultural setting, one can find many cultural issues portrayed in it. Consequently, most of the studies on this film focus on the social and cultural issues, such as the stereotypical image of Chinese people in the film (Sunardi, 2021), the culture shock faced by Dre Parker as the main character (Dewi, 2021), and the politeness strategies used by the Chinese and Western characters (Wahyuni, Ratnadewi, & Wijaya, 2014). Although many studies about *The Karate Kid* (2010) have been conducted, there are only a few studies that analyze the film from the cultural psychology view, particularly on self-actualization issues.

Self-actualization itself is not a very new issue raised in studies of literary works. In fact, it has been widely acknowledged by many researchers. For example, a recent study about self-actualization in a film was conducted by Hidayat (2019), who examined the process of fulfilling self-actualization needs on the main character of *Water for Elephants* (2011). He found that the main character succeeds in satisfying his self-actualization needs after fulfilling the four preceding needs in Maslow's theory. Furthermore, a self-actualization study is also applied to novels. Jin, Winardi, and Linuwih (2022), for example, analyzed self-actualization expressed by the main character of *Jane Eyre* (1847). They studied how feminist traits in the main character lead her to achieve self-actualization. From the analysis, it is found that the main character possesses the five characteristics of a self-actualized person according to Maslow's theory, namely perceiving reality, being problem-centrist, accepting self and others, being independent, resisting, and criticizing existing social culture.

Although many researchers have analyzed the portrayal of self-actualization in various literary works, the issue of self-actualization in an intercultural setting has not been sufficiently acknowledged. Thus, the current study aims to fill in the gap, by analyzing the self-actualization process in an intercultural setting, especially using the perspective of a character from an ethnic-minority group named Dre Parker in *The Karate Kid* (2010). Moreover, it becomes necessary to examine how a foreign environment along with the cultural differences could affect one's process of realizing her/his true potential. Using the five-stage model of human needs theory by Abraham Maslow (2013) and the five characteristics of a fully functioning person theory by Carl Rogers (1967) as the theoretical frameworks, the current study focuses to analyze how Dre Parker actualizes his true potential. In addition, it also uses the film's theory by Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith (2017) as an analytical tool, to discover the meanings from the cinematic aspects.

## **METHOD**

This qualitative study is primarily focused to examine the process of achieving self-actualization in *The Karate Kid* (2010). According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding a social or human phenomenon. Thus, the current study belongs to qualitative research, as it analyzes a human phenomenon in a film, particularly a self-actualization issue portrayed by the main character. Dre Parker is a twelve-year-old African-American boy who moves to China due to his mother's job. The adjustment is somehow difficult and challenging for him, especially with the cultural differences. Therefore, the current study aims to examine the process of Dre Parker overcoming his struggles to eventually reach self-actualization, through the narrative and cinematographic aspects of the film.

The primary data used for this study were collected through a close reading. Close reading was done by watching the film repeatedly to select multiple relevant scenes. The collected data were then interpreted and analyzed using the five-models of Maslow's hierarchy of needs (2013) and Rogers' five characteristics of a fully-functioning person (1967).

In categorizing the scenes into Maslow's hierarchy of needs, several relevant occurrences and utterances in the film were classified into five needs: physiological needs, security needs, love needs, self-esteem needs, and lastly, self-actualization needs. This category was analyzed to uncover the efforts done by Dre Parker to eventually be able to actualize himself. As for the second category, the scenes were examined thoroughly within the five characteristics of a fully functioning person, namely openness to experiences, existential life, trust feelings, creativity, and fulfilled life. This category was identified to find out how Dre Parker expresses self-actualization.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Based on the analysis, it is found that Dre Parker eventually reaches self-actualization after fulfilling the first four needs in Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The findings show that Dre Parker's efforts to meet self-actualization needs are done by satisfying the four preceding needs: (1) physiological, (2) safety and security, (3) love and belongingness, and (4) self-esteem. The process of achieving self-actualization is also expressed through the five characteristics of a fully functioning person: (1) openness to experience, (2) existential living, (3) trust feelings, (4) creativity, and (5) fulfilled life. The following findings present the stages that Dre Parker went through to achieve self-actualization in *The Karate Kid* (2010).

### Dre Parker's five-models needs

#### *Physiological needs*

The foremost needs that Dre Parker satisfies when he first moves to Beijing is the physiological needs. As McLeod (2018) suggests, physiological needs refer to biological requirements for human survival, which are food, water, shelter, clothing, rest, and reproduction. Based on the analysis, it is found that Dre Parker manages to meet most of these needs, which are food, water, shelter, clothing, and rest.

In the opening scene [00:07:16], for example, Dre and his mother arrive at their new apartment in Beijing. The *mise-en-scene*, particularly the setting, is set in a medium-sized apartment unit, which provides more than sufficient space for two persons. The apartment has two bedrooms, a bathroom, and a kitchen. The setting and the properties presented in this scene indicate that Dre not only has met the needs of shelter, but also food, water, and rest. Thus, it can be concluded that Dre successfully fulfils the physiological needs.

#### *Safety and security needs*

After the first basic needs are met, the second one arises. The analysis reveals that Dre went through two phases in meeting his security needs. First, upon the early phase of moving to Beijing, Dre's attempt to keep himself safe and secure is based only on his past experiences and abilities. It is shown in the scene where Dre fights back Cheng during their first battle in the park. However, compared to Cheng's skilled Kung Fu, Dre eventually loses his battle with him [00:17:53-00:19:08]. In this part, the camera angle uses a high angle shot to depict Dre's condition after the fight.

**Figure 1**

*high angle shot of Dre's state*



The high angle shot in Figure 1 marks the vulnerable state of Dre Parker in that moment. In addition, it gives a view of several children standing around him, which adds a sense of the crowd's indifference to Dre's condition. This particular scene shows that Dre Parker fails to attain his safety and security needs in the early phase of moving.

Although Dre is considered failed to attain the safety needs in the early phase, he gradually shows a progressive effort in fulfilling it. It is significantly shown when Dre wins the Kung Fu match against Cheng and his teammates [01:56:13 & 02:12:16]. By winning the tournament, he will no longer feel

threatened by Cheng and friends. In addition, he also gains an outstanding Kung Fu skill which can be used for his self-defence mechanism. Therefore, Dre's victory in the tournament signifies his successful effort to meet safety and security needs.

#### *Love and belongingness needs*

After physiological and safety needs are met, the third level of needs is love and a sense of belonging. According to McLeod (2018), these needs mainly refer to interpersonal relationships, such as family, friendship, and romantic relationships. Based on the analysis, Dre Parker manages to meet this third level of needs, in spite of the cultural challenges he faces in the early phase of moving to Beijing. Initially, Dre could not fit in his new social environment. For example, in the scene [00:24:26] where Dre's food tray is slammed by Cheng in the canteen, he shouts "I hate this place!". The utterance signifies that he has not found the sense of belonging yet in the new place.

Despite the struggles, Dre gradually develops friendships and finds his sense of belonging. In terms of friendships, Dre befriends Harry and Mei Ying. His friendship with Harry, the British boy in the new neighbourhood, marks how their similar cultural background makes it easier for them to be friends. However, Dre is also notably willing to develop a friendship with someone outside his cultural background, which is Mei Ying. Despite the contrasting cultural backgrounds, they both are successful in developing a good friendship. It even strengthens their friendship as they can learn new things from each other's cultures. Thus, it can be concluded that Dre Parker successfully attains the love and belongingness needs.

#### *Self-esteem needs*

As Maslow argued, there are two categories of self-esteem needs. The first is esteem for oneself, encompasses achievement, mastery, and dignity. The second one is reputation and respect from others, such as in status and prestige (Maslow, 1967; as cited in McLeod, 2018). Ever since Dre moved to China, he experiences numerous things that make his self-esteem go up-and-down. For example, in the beginning scene where Dre plays in the park, he catches a Ping Pong ball from the floor. Seeing two old men pause their game and smile at him, he utters: Dre: "You want me to play?"

Dre: "Back where I come from, they call me Ping Pong Dre, all right?"

The *mise-en-scene*, particularly the dialogue above, shows the combination of two categories of esteem found in Dre; his mastery in Ping Pong and his demand for acknowledgement or respect from the men. It further illustrates Dre's confidence even as a newcomer in Beijing.

Furthermore, there is also a scene where Dre maintains his dignity by covering the bruise on his cheek with a concealer. When he is asked by his mother, he lies and says it was because of running into a pole instead of admitting to being hit by Cheng [00:20:35]. Dre's behaviour in this particular scene indicates more likely his effort to keep his dignity. It is because he probably does not want his mother to think of him as a weak boy, who cannot stand for himself. As a result, he lies and covers up his bruise. In a sense of fulfilling self-esteem needs, Dre's behaviour in this particular scene successfully meets the purpose of self-esteem needs.

### ***Dre's self-actualization***

Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers used the concept of self-actualization in their theories of personal growth (Schultz & Schultz, 2020). According to Maslow (1962), self-actualized people are those who have satisfied their basic needs to a reasonable degree, so they can focus on growth, wholeness, and integration (As cited in Kaufman, 2018). Thus, based on the four analyses above, it can be concluded that Dre Parker has fulfilled the requirements to reach self-actualization. Dre's process to meet self-actualization needs also cannot be separated from the five distinctive characteristics that reflect the fully-functioning person introduced by Rogers (1967).

The first trait of a fully-functioning person is openness to experience. In the film, Dre is portrayed as an African-American who moves to a non-English speaking country. Certainly, there are numerous challenges for him, mostly in terms of language and disparate culture. For example, in 00:51:54, where Dre and Mr. Han visit Cheng's Kung Fu training ground, he is partly forced to participate in the Kung Fu tournament by Cheng's coach. Despite his initial reluctance, he finally agrees as long as Mr. Han teaches him "real" Kung Fu. The lighting helps to set the tone of this scene.

### **Figure 2**

*Dre and Mr. Han inside the training room*



### **Figure 3**

*Dre outside the training room*



In those two reverse shots, it is noticed that the lighting used in those scenes are clearly contrasting. In the first shot, the lighting used is relatively dark, with only back lighting appearing behind Cheng's coach. The dark lighting somehow indicates a sense of danger when Mr. Han and Dre enter the training room to speak with the coach. Furthermore, it also delivers the tension and pressures felt by Dre in that moment. However, after Dre and Mr. Han exit the room, the lighting turns into a brighter tone (See Figure 5), indicating they are out of tension and possible danger. The bright tone also more likely indicates Dre's relief because Mr. Han is willing to teach him Kung Fu. It is also supported by the following dialogue.

*Mr. Han: "Good news, I will teach you real Kung Fu."*

*Dre: "Yes!"*

The bright tone of lighting and the dialogue above demonstrate Dre's willingness to experience something risky, despite his lack of knowledge and skills in Kung Fu. Therefore, these two pieces of evidence show that Dre strongly portrays the second trait of a fully functioning person, that is openness to experience.

The second trait of a fully-functioning person is existential living. According to McLeod (2014), the term simply refers to living in the moment. In the film, Dre has portrayed several behaviours related to this trait. For example, in 01:27:22, Dre is dragging Mei Ying to play in the park, after seeing Mei's concern for her audition on the next day. The scene is also supported by the following utterance:

*Dre: "Too much of a good stuff is bad stuff."*

Both the behaviour and the utterance above are closely related to the existential living trait. It specifically shows Dre's attempt to urge Mei to live in the moment. Furthermore, it also indicates Dre's tendency to not worry excessively about the future, and do the best for the current moment instead. Thus, these become the evidence of Dre expressing the existential living trait.

The next trait that is attached to a fully-functioning person is trust feelings. The person who possesses this trait has the tendency to make decisions based on their trusted feelings. Dre, for example, expresses the trust feelings trait in a particular scene, where he lays in the medical room

after having leg injury during the match [02:03:35]. He tells Mr. Han his reason for wanting to continue participating in the match, despite the injury.

Dre: "Because I'm still scared. No matter what happens, tonight, when I leave, I don't want to be scared anymore."

Dre's decision to continue the match is primarily based on his feelings, which is fear. Dre is motivated to dispose of the feeling, which in this case by continuing the match. Although Mr. Han encourages him to do otherwise, Dre is strongly determined to follow his intuition. Eventually, Dre's decision resulted positively. He surprisingly wins the tournament, which makes him successfully dispose of his own fear and hesitations towards himself.

Furthermore, creativity becomes the fourth trait to describe a fully-functioning person. The trait is found on Dre's character, as shown in several scenes. The first example of it is when Dre tries to find Mr. Han by asking several workers. Due to the lack of Chinese vocabulary knowledge, he speaks English to them. However, when they do not understand, Dre finally tries to make a shivering gesture, while saying "No hot aqua". This particular behaviour implies Dre's creativity in solving the language gap. Realizing that he cannot speak Chinese, he uses gestures instead to communicate his intention. It is noticed that the shivering gesture is intended to illustrate the cold shower problem.

Lastly, a fulfilled life marks the fifth trait of a fully functioning person. The trait is expressed by Dre through his consistency in learning Kung Fu. Starting from the jacket method [00:58:06], learning Chi in a Kung Fu village [01:15:37], and lastly by winning the Kung Fu tournament despite his leg injury [01:23:35]. Dre's behaviour in these scenes expresses a fulfilled life trait, because it shows that he is always looking for challenges and experiences. He is not easily satisfied after learning one Kung Fu technique, so he strives for more. With the help from Mr. Han, Dre successfully attains a fulfilled life.

The overall analysis above reveals that Dre Parker's ethnicity does not hinder him from reaching his full potential in a new social environment. Although several cultural challenges arise, he eventually manages to overcome them. Moreover, the findings show that his young age does not hinder him from meeting his self-actualization needs. This particular finding is conforming to Kaufman's study (2018), which notably found that self-actualization is not significantly correlated with age, education, race, ethnicity, or childhood income. Dre Parker is still capable of successfully actualizing himself by fulfilling the first four needs in Maslow's theory. Moreover, the portrayal of five characteristics of a fully-functioning person in Dre Parker proves that he is indeed an actualizing person. Hence, the term 'fully functioning person' itself is used to describe

individuals who are beginning to or have achieved self-actualization (Rogers, 1967).

The current study contributes to the field of literary research regarding self-actualization issues in films. It discovers that the issue of self-actualization is not only found in people in the real world, but it can also be represented by fictional characters in literary works such as film. Most studies regarding self-actualization in films rarely include the cinematic aspects in their analysis. For example, Hidayat's (2019) study, which also examines the issue of self-actualization in a film, does not explore the cinematic aspects of the film. Although it is not required to add cinematic aspects in the analysis, it can greatly help to enrich the findings.

In conclusion, *The Karate Kid* (2010) becomes one good example of a film that presents the issue of self-actualization achieved by a young-adult like Dre Parker. The plot that is presented in an intercultural setting adds a new aspect to analyze regarding self-actualization issues. Moreover, the result of the analysis is in line with Guynn's (2021) statement, that it is possible that the concept of self-actualization may be used to unite disparate cultures and ideas in understanding human fulfilment.

## CONCLUSION

*The Karate Kid* (2010) is one of the films that demonstrates how self-actualization is achieved by a young-adult. The current study found that Dre Parker, the main character in the film, successfully reaches self-actualization after fulfilling the four prior needs in Maslow's hierarchy of needs (2013): physiological needs, safety and security needs, love and belongingness needs, and self-esteem needs. Furthermore, these findings are supported by the narrative and cinematic aspects of the film. The *mise-en-scene* such as camera shot angles, settings, properties, and dialogues greatly help to enrich the analysis of self-actualization achieved by Dre Parker.

Based on the findings, the study concludes that Dre Parker's cultural background as an African-American does not significantly hinder him from reaching self-actualization in his new social environment, Beijing. On the contrary, the cultural differences gradually help him to gain and learn new abilities and knowledge, particularly about Kung Fu. Moreover, the study also found that Dre Parker's capability to meet self-actualization needs is not necessarily affected by his young age. As previously mentioned above, this particular finding is in line with Kaufman's quantitative study (2018), which suggested that self-actualization is not significantly correlated with age, education, race, ethnicity, or childhood income. In conclusion, *The Karate Kid* (2010) has depicted the possibility of a young-adult to reach self-actualization, even in an intercultural setting.

The current study found that the achievement of self-actualization by Dre Parker is filled with many transformations related to views of life, habits, attitudes, and behaviors. However, this raises a new issue, whether Dre Parker is able to maintain his strong identity as an African-American or not. Therefore, it is recommended for further research to explore how Dre Parker maintains his original identity while also moving forward to actualize himself in an intercultural setting.

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