

**Understanding Variation in Audience Engagement and Response:
An Application of the Composite Model to Receptions of *Avatar* (2009)**

Abstract

While much research documents variations in viewers' responses to screen media, the basis for divergent receptions remains relatively poorly understood and inadequately conceptualized. One possible theoretical schema is offered in the Composite Multi-dimensional Model (Michelle, 2007), which charts four distinct 'modes' of reception that shape the specific form and content of audience responses in different contexts. In this study, the core distinctions charted in the Composite Model were tested in a Q methodology study of cross-cultural receptions of *Avatar* (2009). 120 respondents from 27 countries modeled their subjective responses to this polysemic text by rank-ordering 32 items and then commenting on their selections. Through factor analysis, four discrete responses toward *Avatar* were identified among our participants, accounting for 74% of all respondents. Each factor clearly reflects key elements of the *transparent*, *referential*, *mediated* and *discursive* modes identified in the Composite Model, indicating that the model reasonably accurately identifies the broad distinctions in the underlying approaches to meaning-making that can be adopted by different viewers. Suggestive associations between viewers' subjective orientations and demographic characteristics, social group memberships, and discursive affiliations were also documented.

Keywords: Audience analysis; Reception studies; Film viewers; Q methodology; Composite Model of Reception

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**Understanding Variation in Audience Engagement and Response:
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Reception scholars from various disciplines have long sought to account for and understand the bases of divergent audience decodings of media texts. Following in the tradition of British Cultural Studies, a plethora of qualitative audience ethnographies have documented the active, creative and “critical” capacities of audiences (for example see Morley, 1980; Liebes & Katz, 1989; Dahlgren, 1988; Johnson, del Rio, & Kemmitt, 2010), while Uses and Gratifications scholars have elucidated the motivations and satisfactions associated with media usage through extensive qualitative and quantitative research (see Blumler, 1979; Levy & Windahl, 1984; Ruggiero, 2000). Those concerned with media effects have focused on understanding the psychological processes governing viewers’ engagement with popular media and on factors that cultivate the potential for narrative persuasion, delineating concepts such as involvement, identification (Cohen, 2001), transportation (Green & Brock, 2002) and narrative engagement (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008).

Since most reception scholars refute the notion that variations in audience response are entirely personal or idiosyncratic, attempts have also been made to conceptualize and categorize broad differences in viewers’ engagements with media texts (e.g. Hall, 1980; Liebes & Katz, 1990; Schrøder, 2000; Staiger, 2000; Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008; Suckfüll & Scharrow, 2009). Yet, when such models are examined and compared, most fall short of offering a comprehensive, multi-dimensional account of the range of possible audience responses to the growing diversity of media genres, as each neglects dimensions of reception that other models, from different disciplinary perspectives, postulate as centrally important. Hence, there presently exists no commonly accepted conceptual schema that adequately charts the complexity and diversity of audience engagement and response while

also enabling identification and analysis of the underlying correspondences between seemingly idiosyncratic responses to ostensibly 'unique' texts.

The absence of an agreed analytical framework for identifying, interpreting and analyzing divergent receptions is the product of, and a key factor in perpetuating, the increasing degree of unproductive fragmentation within the wider cross-disciplinary field of audience reception studies (Barker, 2006; Michelle, 2007), which today includes scholars working in media and communication studies, cultural studies, rhetorical studies, sociology, media psychology, anthropology, cultural geography, and elsewhere. While this fragmentation largely relates to increasing differentiation in our research objects and objectives, it is evident also in the historic qualitative/quantitative divide and perhaps more pertinently, the ongoing ethnographic/experimental divide. (Compare, for example, the very different approaches taken to understanding audience receptions of television and film adopted by Glaser, Garsoffky, & Schwan, 2012, informed by media and cognitive psychology, and the richly ethnographic work of Friedman, 2006, situated within cultural anthropology). Fragmentation in the field is further manifested in the common failure to acknowledge correspondences between findings that pertain to different audience-text encounters, particularly when derived from divergent disciplinary traditions, perhaps because many scholars are somewhat disinclined to engage with studies that are grounded in a radically different disciplinary and epistemological perspective. To date, little work has been done in terms of synthesizing key findings across the wider field in order to develop a more cohesive and holistic understanding of the specific forms of variation in audience engagement and response that have now been consistently documented.

Fragmentation in the field is further compounded by some general tendencies that can also be observed, such as the trend for ethnographic research to be conducted in the

absence of any explicit analytical conceptualization of the different approaches to sense-making that can potentially be adopted by readers/viewers, often because researchers don't wish to 'impose' predetermined categories on their data (see for example Johnson et al., 2010). In such cases, scholars frequently present interesting findings in great detail but also in isolation, as though they bore little or no relationship to the wider body of evidence compiled to date. Some researchers attempt to construct conceptual schemas to help make sense of their voluminous and unwieldy data set, but usually do so with little reference to previous efforts to do the same (see for example Andacht, 2004). The value of such efforts is thus greatly undermined. While fascinating accounts of particular instances of the audience-text encounter are frequently generated, this somewhat *ad hoc* and unsystematic case study approach tends toward descriptive anecdotalism (Morley, 2006; Barker, 2006), and seems a rather ineffective way to derive a deeper understanding of audiences and processes of audience engagement; nor does it necessarily facilitate the development of a more adequate theoretical understanding of the nature of reception *per se*, as Barker (2006) and others have noted.

Seeking to facilitate a reconciliation among scholars interested in the individual, psychological, social, textual and contextual influences and processes that generate variation in audience interpretation and response in a way that might productively contribute to informing a general theory of reception, Michelle (2007) offers a Composite Multi-dimensional Model of Audience Reception that synthesizes, refines, and conceptually 'maps' some of the existing categories and analytical distinctions drawn from a diverse and cross-cultural array of reception studies focused on various genres of television and (less frequently) film and literature. In this study, we used an innovative research procedure, Q methodology, to test the theoretical and conceptual categories charted by the Composite

Model through an analysis of divergent receptions of James Cameron's award-winning feature film, *Avatar* (2009). In this respect, our purpose in conducting this research is somewhat unusual, and worthy of further comment.

To be clear from the outset, our primary purpose here is not to elucidate in great detail all of the complexity and nuances of audience engagements with this *particular* text; indeed, some readers may be troubled by the absence of rich detail that normally accompanies studies of film and television reception published in this journal. Rather, we adopt an approach that reflects the theoretical position that audience receptions of *Avatar* are but one manifestation of a wider set of reception processes that come into play in *every* audience-text encounter, and it is these reception processes that are our primary object of interest. This approach reflects our observation that actual audiences, comprised of real individuals, engage with an increasingly diverse range of screen media during the course of their everyday lives: television, films (occasionally watched at the cinema but more often in their own homes on DVD), various forms of visual advertising, video games, music videos, online streaming content, video-capable smart phones, and more. It is no longer feasible, we contend, to imagine that those individuals reserve entirely unique processes of interpretation and engagement for each of these separate mediums. Reception, while certainly shaped in response to different media texts and technologies, is not defined or determined by them, since it is surely first and foremost a process that pertains to socially-located individuals. Those individuals draw from their own general pool of experiences and understandings, psychological tendencies, discursive allegiances, and cultural competencies as they serially engage with different visual media over the course of each day. While there are certainly some genre- and medium-specific *competencies* that may pertain to particular formats and textual encounters, those competencies are attached to real people and draw

from each person's existing 'pool' of interpretive resources, which contains a wealth of other sense-making materials that will be applied across a wide range of textual encounters.

Hence, our primary focus here is on contributing to our understanding of audience reception in general, rather than in the particular, which we seek to do by establishing the degree to which one proposed analytical model of reception, the Composite Model (Michelle, 2007), is able to both *anticipate and account for* the actual forms of variation in audience engagement and response in this particular case. For this reason, attention to the more idiosyncratic elements of individual receptions of *Avatar* is set aside in favour of exploring the analytical power of the Composite Model, specifically in terms of its ability to accurately identify the core distinctions that characterise and differentiate the underlying subjective frameworks or modes of reception that are most commonly adopted by different viewers among *Avatar's* global English-speaking audience. The value of such an approach lies, we believe, in its potential to contribute to building a theoretical understanding of the reception process, thereby enriching and hopefully progressing audience research in its various cross-disciplinary manifestations.

The Composite Model

As previously outlined in this journal, the Composite Model charts four broad modes of audience engagement and response: *Transparent, referential, mediated, and discursive*. These categories are informed by, synthesize, and refine existing analytical distinctions identified in relevant scholarship, and are supported by extensive reviews of empirical research on audience receptions of screen media texts across various cultural contexts (see Michelle 2007, 2009 for a fuller description and discussion of the Composite Model and its application).

Focusing here on the model's application to fictional texts such as *Avatar*, a *transparent* mode reflects a close subjective relationship between viewer and text whereby viewers temporarily suspend disbelief and critical distance to grant fictional worlds the status of "real life", entering fully into the story to derive the specific forms of pleasure and enjoyment intended by the text's makers. This kind of subjective response to media narrative has been well documented in the existing scholarship, and is alluded to in the concepts of *inferential* reading (Worth & Gross, 1974), *transparency* reading (Richardson & Corner, 1986), and *strong* involvement (Schrøder, 1986). Media effects researchers have gone further in elucidating this mode of engagement in relation to entertainment media, citing as a key aspect the experience of being fully "transported" into a fictional world by the narrative, as described by Green and Brock (2000, 2002) and Green, Brock and Kaufman (2004). Viewers in this mode experience a high degree of cognitive and emotional engagement and full immersion in the text, are 'swept away' by the story, and may experience strong feelings of identification with the central character(s) or textual themes (Cohen, 2001; Liebes & Katz, 1990; Wilson, 1995). Such identification, Wilson suggests, facilitates acceptance of a text's "related prescriptions for action...and persuasion of what is the case" (1995, p. 12). Green, Brock and Kaufman (2004, p. 313) similarly note that narrative transportation can be transformative in the sense of changing social beliefs and perceptions. Michelle (2007) suggests that any such effects are rendered possible because, when reading in a transparent mode, viewers rely on information supplied *within the text itself* as primary resources for its decoding, rather than drawing on extra-textual information. Since textual meanings are therefore read "straight", a dominant/ preferred position in relation to the text's ideological content (Hall, 1980) can be assumed of those reading solely in this mode.

In a *referential* mode, the text is primarily understood in relation to viewers' experiential knowledge(s) and perceptions of the text's relevance (or lack thereof) to an extra-textual reality. The specific quality of this subjective mode can be discerned by consolidating insights offered by other scholars, in particular Schrøder's (1986) notion of *indicative involvement*, the concept of trivial [*sic*]/ random *personal association* (Dahlgren, 1988), and *referential* reading (Liebes & Katz, 1989, 1990). In a referential mode, viewers perceive the text as standing *alongside* the real world, and often make comparisons and analogies between that depicted reality and the world "out there". In so doing, they typically draw from aspects of their own cultural milieu and existing body of experiences, observations, and knowledges to assess the accuracy of textual depictions of people and events and the version of "reality" presented. Friedman (2006, p. 604) richly documents this process in relation to receptions of the film *Twin Bracelets* in China, among audiences who "recognized that they were watching a version of themselves, even as they contested how they were being represented". Similarly, Staiger (2000) notes the significant role that verisimilitude and "real world" expectations can play in shaping some viewers' responses in certain contexts. The fact that referential knowledge may be used to affirm, question, or reject textual realism means that a viewer's position in relation to the text's preferred ideological meaning(s) cannot be predicted on the basis of their adoption of this viewing mode. This may be because, as Busselle and Bilandzic (2008) suggest, negative evaluations of textual realism disrupt viewers' engagement, and hence undermine a text's persuasive power.

What distinguishes a *mediated* mode of reading is its explicit focus on the constructed nature of the text as an aesthetic object and media *production* -- as an elaboration of established media codes and conventions by particular authors/creators. This

subjective orientation is described by the categories of *attributional* reading (Worth & Gross, 1974), *analytic* decoding (Neuman, 1982), *mediation* reading (Corner & Richardson, 1986), *media awareness/ demystification discourse* (Dahlgren, 1988), *syntactic* criticism (Liebes & Katz, 1989, 1990), and *discrimination* (Schrøder, 2000); see also Staiger's (2000) description of *aesthetic order and variation activities*. Synthesizing the key elements of these categories, mediated readings reflect a more distant or separate relationship between text and viewer (although the reverse may be true of "hardcore" fans), in which viewers may praise and/or disparage the quality of production, particular aesthetic or generic features of the text, or the perceived intentions of its authors/producers. In adopting a mediated mode of reception, viewers characteristically draw on (often quite considerable) knowledge of aspects of media production, aesthetic ideals, generic conventions and textual formulae, intertextual references, and the functions and motivations of the film and television industries. This knowledge may interrupt the process of identification and/or militate against viewers' "serious" engagement with the text's narrative or message content. Since such receptions require specific knowledges, discursive competencies, and media literacies, Michelle (2007) suggests some viewers will have greater access and allegiance to this mode of viewing than others.

Finally, receptions framed in a *discursive* mode primarily and overtly address the text's propositional or "message" content -- i.e., its ideological connotations. Other scholars have also noted responses of this kind. Neuman (1982) describes this approach as an *interpretive* decoding, while Richardson and Corner (1986) note some viewers' identification of a text's manipulative intent. Liebes and Katz (1989, 1990) describe this response in terms of *semantic* criticism, while Schrøder (2000) identifies related processes in his dimensions of *comprehension* and *position*. While all receptions clearly have a discursive element,

responses primarily framed in this mode give particular credence to the text's perceived attempt to communicate a particular *message* about the wider social world, and represent the viewer's response to that message. In assessing the connotative meaning of the text in relation to their unique stock of prior beliefs, assumptions, and discursive allegiances, the Composite Model suggests viewers may adopt one of the three positions theorized by Stuart Hall (1980) -- preferred/dominant, negotiated, or oppositional. However, oppositionality is understood in relation to the preferred meanings of the text(s) in question, which cannot be assumed to affirm hegemonic interests at each and every moment (Schrøder, 2000).

While the Composite Model acknowledges that viewers potentially have access to all four modes and may oscillate or "commute" (Schrøder, 1986) between them during any given media encounter (see also Staiger, 2000, p. 21), and while modes of response may also change over time (e.g. as prefigurative influences shape expectations, repeated textual exposure increases textual familiarity, and alternative perspectives are encountered via ongoing social interactions), these four modes remain relatively distinct and, at times, contradictory registers of meaning that utilize unique sets of cultural and discursive competencies at different moments.¹ Much of the variability of audience response, this model suggests, is due to the propensity for different segments of the audience to adopt (and in some cases move between) distinct viewing modes which, working in tandem with the parameters imposed by textual encoding, define and delimit the kinds of readings that are likely to be produced by differently-positioned audience members in particular contexts.

In seeking to test the utility of this analytic framework, we sought a methodology that could independently verify whether these four distinct modes are indeed evident among the viewing audience, and whether they take the specific forms described above. While little known among communication scholars, Q methodology is commonly used in

various academic fields specifically to discern and describe people's shared subjective viewpoints and understandings, as this is considered its greatest strength. Elsewhere, we have argued that Q methodology should take its place among the growing number of 'new' methods that have emerged in media and communication studies in recent years as researchers seek innovative ways to explore audience engagements in an increasingly complex 'convergent' digital media environment spanning a growing array of formats, in which audiences are increasingly not merely consumers but also producers of media content (Davis & Michelle, 2011). While any number of new and established research methods could have been used in a study of *Avatar's* reception, we considered Q methodology to be the most suitable means of empirically verifying the distinct interpretive modes theorized in the Composite Model, since it offered the relatively unique capacity for participants to independently chart a holistic representation of their multi-dimensional response to viewing the film, rather than registering their reaction to discrete issues or topics consecutively as typically occurs with most other methods. Q also acknowledges the inherent sociality of reception, in that even the most seemingly idiosyncratic responses are not formulated in a vacuum, but rather emerge within a wider discursive context that necessarily informs individual understandings of media texts, their content, and production. Further advantages of Q methodology will be discussed below.

Our investigation thus aimed to further elucidate the underlying principles that generate interpretive divergence among, specifically, screen media audiences, using cross-cultural receptions of director James Cameron's internationally successful 3D feature film, *Avatar* (2009), as a case study to test whether the Composite Model's major conceptual and analytical distinctions are sufficiently inclusive and robust to provide a more widely-applicable schema of audience engagement and response. A further aim was to explore the

relationship between shared subjectivity and the complex intersection of respondents' culture, ethnicity, gender, age, socio-economic class, education, religion, and political beliefs, thereby addressing a key area of research and debate within the field of reception studies. We comment only briefly on these findings here, which indicate potentially fruitful areas for future research.

***Avatar* (2009): Divergent Responses to a Highly Polyvalent Text**

Most readers will be aware of the extraordinary level of discussion and debate surrounding the award-winning science fiction fantasy film, *Avatar* (2009). Those unfamiliar with the film can find a brief synopsis at <http://movies.msn.com/movies/movie-synopsis/avatar.2/>. Written and directed by James Cameron, *Avatar* melded narrative with advanced Computer Generated Imagery (CGI) in a 3D format to create what was, for many viewers globally, a highly realistic and compelling screen experience. Various commentators have identified *Avatar's* overt themes of environmental degradation and human(oid) displacement in the service of economic development, (neo)colonial imperialism and Capitalist exploitation, violent military repression, transformation and bodily transcendence, and new-age spirituality. In terms of *Avatar's* intended or preferred meaning, Cameron has explicitly acknowledged his desire to raise public consciousness about environmental issues through the medium of entertainment, and conceived the film as an allegory for humanity's exploitation and destruction of the natural environment in the context of our collective failure to avert the impending global ecological disaster (Cameron, 2010).

Yet, in preparing for this study via an extensive "cultural trawl" (Stenner & Marshall, 1995, p. 626) of online professional and lay film reviews, online fan discussions, Facebook message board comments, and international news coverage and media commentary, it became clear that audience responses to *Avatar* varied greatly, and that differently-located

viewers were making widely diverging readings of the film. *Avatar* is clearly a highly polysemic text, or perhaps more accurately, a *polyvalent* one (Condit, 1989), inviting multiple interpretations through its combination of several different themes and story elements. This makes it a particularly appropriate choice of text for a study aimed at testing a model of interpretative divergence. Further, much like *Dallas* in the 1980s, *Avatar*'s global success² appears to reflect this openness and "universality, or primordiality, of some...themes and formulae", which renders *Avatar* "psychologically accessible" (Liebes & Katz, 1990, p.5). Olson (2004) asserts that the international appeal of U.S. popular culture is linked to its polysemy combined with a high degree of "narrative transparency", or a tendency to "manifest narrative structures that easily blend into other cultures. Those cultures are able to project their own narratives, values, myths, and meanings into the American iconic media" (p. 114). Such texts are no longer experienced as entirely foreign.

Ensuring a high degree of polysemy and narrative transparency was clearly central to *Avatar*'s conceptualization and production. Cameron explicitly acknowledges using familiar archetypes to aid the universal accessibility of the film's environmental messages (Cameron, 2010), but also alludes to various other encoded messages and themes, as will become evident below. It is also significant to note Cameron's choice of genre: Science fiction is described by Lee (2006) as "close to being the quintessential universal movie genre" (p. 274).

As seemingly intended, then, *Avatar* has provided considerable pleasure to a heterogeneous global audience. Comments on fan websites such as *Avatar-forums.com* typically reveal a high degree of emotional engagement, identification with the trials and tribulations of story characters, and full immersion in the fictional world, and describe viewing *Avatar* as a compelling, at times overwhelming, and in some cases transformative experience. But for some, the film evidently caused some discomfort, whether physical in

the form of headaches and nausea related to the film's 3D presentation, or emotional in that many serious fans claim to have experienced some form of post-*Avatar* depression.³

Somewhat differently, other viewers primarily regarded *Avatar* as echoing the environmental destruction occurring within their own communities in the interests of economic development: The film's tall blue humanoids, the Na'vi, have become icons of resistance with global resonance, their plight being compared to that of local populations resisting the efforts of mining and oil companies in Canada (EdmontonJournal.com, 2010), India (Hopkins, 2010; Thottam, 2010), and South Africa (Clarke, 2010). Activists in Indonesia and the Amazon basin have similarly appropriated the symbolic power of the Na'vi as part of protests against deforestation. Cameron (2010) affirms that the film consciously references the economic and military imperialism of the colonial and present periods, a message that has been interpreted as relevant to various contexts, including the ongoing conflict in Palestine (Associated Press, February 12, 2010).

Alongside responses reflecting an appreciation of *Avatar's* allegorical relevance to current environmental and human rights concerns are a range of alternative decodings. Cameron acknowledges that *Avatar* contains deliberate textual references to, and implicit critique of, the U.S. wars in Iraq and Vietnam -- most notably in dialogue drawing on the "shock and awe" terminology coined by the Bush administration -- leading some conservative critics to slate the film as anti-military, anti-American and un-patriotic (Nolte, 2009; Podhoretz, 2009). *Avatar's* spiritual themes have also been subject to criticism, most notably by the Vatican, which decried the film's "pantheism" and worship of the natural world (Associated Press, January 13, 2010). Still others have lambasted the recycling of the paternalistic White Messiah fable in which a White man becomes the savior of a tribe of

noble savages whose appearance, gestures and rituals embody stereotypical visions of Earth's tribal peoples (Brooks, 2010; Gates, 2010; Washington, 2010; Zizek, 2010).

These are just some of the more commonly offered responses to *Avatar* circulating within the wider discursive field. Clearly, some of these interpretations pertain to the denotative level of meaning and evaluate the text in terms of its allegorical relevance to historical, environmental, and political issues here on Earth, while others address the film's connotations in terms of its perceived ideological or message content and possible societal impacts. A distinctly different set of readings, however, primarily relate to *Avatar* as a constructed media entertainment product. *Avatar* has received much praise for its technological advances, effective use of performance capture, CGI, 3D and other special effects (for example Ebert, 2009). Indeed, *Avatar* is regarded by some as a "game-changer" for the film industry given the technological advances it makes in 3D filming processes and exhibition (Acland, 2010). But while many fans saw *Avatar* as a highly enjoyable and technically accomplished Hollywood blockbuster, it has also been critiqued for its "derivative" storyline, weak dialogue, "clichéd" characterizations, and mawkishness (for example Turan, 2009). Such sentiments comprise a significant component of the wider discursive field -- or in Q terms, the *concourse* -- surrounding this film.

In our reception study, we investigated how casual viewers as well as *Avatar* fans and "haters" responded to the film, and in the process sought to test the Composite Model's accuracy and validity as a holistic, generalized schema of the form and content of potential responses to screen media. This study thus reflects the theoretical position that, considered as a whole, the body of existing reception research documents consistently observed patterns in terms of the manner in which different audience members engage with and make sense of texts of multiple genres. While the specific *content* of audience response is to

some degree textually contingent (in that textual encoding determines the subject matter and attempts to define and delimit interpretations), the *mode of engagement* ultimately establishes the parameters for textual decoding at the level of reception. Audience responses to a particular text thus need to be understood in relation to the underlying subjective orientations to the *process* of reception, or modes of engagement, audience members may potentially adopt when encountering *any* such text. Further, since receptions are always situated and contextually specific, simultaneously individual *and* social in nature, they are highly likely to be patterned in discernable ways based on viewers' demographic characteristics, social group memberships and discursive affiliations. Clearly establishing the underlying subjective orientations that govern sense-making is thus an important first step in efforts to more clearly understand how, and under what conditions, shared identities and social locations shape individual receptions, which remains an unresolved question for many reception scholars.

Methodology

Like Livingstone (2003) and others, we are mindful of the dangers and difficulties posed by cross-cultural research, but still wish to acknowledge its importance to the wider project of reception studies as a means of testing the broader applicability of analyses and conceptual understandings. Our research design thus reflects the "meta-theoretical" solution advocated by Swanson (1992, as cited in Livingstone, 2003), in that we have adopted "a common theoretical framework that identifies abstract concepts or dimensions" (p. 490) in relation to which the responses of differently-located viewers can be analyzed -- this being the Composite Multi-dimensional Model of audience reception, outlined above (Michelle, 2007). The Composite Model thus provides the theoretical and analytical framework underpinning the research, with Q methodology being the research procedure

used to objectively and independently identify the range of subjective responses to *Avatar* among the research sample.

Q methodology.

While Q methodology is now relatively frequently utilized in psychology, environmental studies, political science, policy studies, and health research, it remains less familiar to reception scholars and is only occasionally applied in studies of media audiences (see Davis & Michelle, 2011, for a full review of existing Q research in this area). However, the inventor of Q methodology, William Stephenson (1976, 1978, 1995-1996), was clearly interested in its application to advertising, television and film reception. Esrock (2005) suggests that Stephenson's approach serves to remind mass communication scholars that "although media institutions disseminate texts, whether for information or persuasive purposes, ultimately individuals are the consumers of those texts. And ultimately, individual perceptions and interpretations reveal true meaning, no matter what may have been intended" (p. 249). We thus perceived a natural fit between Q methodology's focus on the expressed subjective perspectives of human subjects and an audience-centered approach to the study of media reception and use.

For those unfamiliar with this method, Q is a rigorous qualitative research methodology that utilizes factor analysis to discern and describe people's shared subjective viewpoints and understandings. Guided by a suitable theoretical framework, Q potentially offers a means of examining "the relations between and among the 'reading positions'" (Barker, 2006, p.130), of differently-situated viewers. These positions, as Barker notes, are developed in response to the assessments of others and draw from the existing discourse or *concourse* that circulates around a given text, or set of texts. By asking participants to preferentially rank-order a set of statements carefully chosen to represent (as far as

practically possible) the universe of possible responses, Q allows each individual to “model” his or her subjective viewpoint in a holistic sense, expressing where it “fits” in relation to others viewing the same text. Q is thus self-referential: Individuals rank each statement and determine their placement within the typical array in the manner that best reflects their unique subjective perspective.

Sorts are factor analyzed by person, a procedure that locates sets of like-minded respondents, making it possible to systematically identify and compare the variety of viewpoints shared by individuals within a wider public and their unique components (for further details see Brown, 1980, 1994; McKeown & Thomas, 1988; Watts & Stenner, 2005). As Watts and Stenner (2005) explain, Q is “essentially a *gestalt* procedure...which can show us the particular *combinations* or *configurations* of themes which are preferred” (p. 68) by different segments within a wider sample of individuals. Furthermore, with Q, “subjective input produces *objective structures*” (Ibid., p. 85), or factors that are statistically significant (non-random) patterns in the responses of participants, indicating that they share a similar perspective on a given topic.

While we do not have space to discuss in-depth the advantages that Q methodology offers over more traditional approaches that might have been used in this research, we would note that Q combines many of the strengths of qualitative and quantitative approaches, while mitigating their key limitations (see Davis & Michelle, 2011, for further detail). Others have noted the significant difficulties that qualitative research can pose for audience researchers (see Schrøder, 2000), and while software packages such as NVivo now make it much easier for researchers to classify and organise large qualitative data sets, and can even independently identify commonalities in terms of recurring words and content, they do not offer a way of identifying shared multidimensional subjective *perspectives* or

viewpoints in the more holistic sense that Q does. Conversely, quantitative approaches to attitude measurement such as Semantic Differential Tests are not designed to permit subjects to model their own viewpoints. Instead, subjects' ratings on various validated scales are used as independent variables to predict dependent variables. Such tests lack a qualitative dimension, do not consider the different interpretations that individuals may make of the terms or statements selected for inclusion, and offer no opportunity for participants to articulate their own views, responses, and priorities. Q methodology, on the other hand, explicitly solicits participants' comments in order to gain further insight into their responses and to guide the interpretations that researchers make of the different factors. Of course, this qualitative data can be analysed in its own right, and there is no reason why Q could not be used in conjunction with other qualitative and quantitative research tools. Indeed, many suggest Q methodology can be used to very effectively bridge these different approaches (see Davis & Michelle, 2011, for further discussion).

Since Q methodology is explicitly aimed at revealing the underlying structure and form of people's subjective opinions and beliefs (Brown, 1986), and given that the Composite Model assumes that the form and content of audience reception is shaped by underlying modes or interpretative "orientations", Q was considered highly appropriate for our research on audience receptions of *Avatar*. If the Composite Model's analytical framework is a reasonably accurate and holistic representation of natural variations in audience members' subjective orientations toward making sense of screen media texts, including *Avatar*, then the viewpoints that emerge should broadly map onto the distinct modes of reception identified within the model. However, this does not necessarily mean that only four viewpoints will be identified through factor analysis, since different positions are possible within some modes: A mediated reading may be celebratory *or* critical, while a

referential reading may find the text accurate *or* unrealistic in its rendering. Either way, the viewpoints that emerge should be *recognizable*, and clearly explicable using concepts derived from the model, since they will reflect its different aspects. At the very least, factor analysis reveals significant patterns in the rank ordering of statements, reflecting shared subjective viewpoints, and also identifies which individuals are strongly correlated with each factor.

Research procedure.

A structured Q sample of 32 statements was devised drawing on an extensive cultural trawl of dominant and marginal themes, opinions, intellectual and emotional reactions articulated in the responses of causal viewers, media commentators and film critics, which form part of the wider discourse that quickly emerged around *Avatar* (described above). In conducting this cultural trawl, we made no distinctions between the origin of the different viewpoints that were considered for inclusion, since its primary purpose was to gain a very broad and inclusive impression of the full range of things being said about *Avatar* across the wider public domain, including within 'official' and 'unofficial' sites of discussion, in order that the items selected for inclusion in the Q-sample represent as far as possible the diversity of viewpoints circulating around this film, its production, content, and possible impact. An important methodological principle of Q is that the statements considered for inclusion take the form of subjective opinions rather than facts; as such, those opinions are considered valid irrespective of their origin.

Since the selected statements were chosen to reflect as much as possible the kinds of diverse perspectives on the film expressed among differently-located subjects, we tried to preserve the original expression of authors wherever possible. Initially, around 260 "raw" statements articulating the most frequently recurring ideas, opinions, or reactions from

various different groups were cut and pasted into Excel files. This step in the process aimed to be as inclusive as possible and continued until a significant degree of repetition and redundancy among the statements began to emerge. Since it is not usually practical to include a very large number of statements in a Q survey, it was necessary to make further selections from this initial pool of potential statements. To guide the selection process, the statements were reviewed and loosely categorized in terms of the four modes of response identified in the Composite Model and their various subcategories. A few additional statements were added by the researchers to reflect important aspects of modality which, although implicitly articulated within the wider discourse, were not clearly or adequately expressed in one existing statement.

It is important to note that in Q terms, this kind of structured approach is seen as helpful in ensuring a theoretically justifiable basis for the selection of statements, and in making an explicit link to theory may assist in bridging the gap between quantitative and qualitative research traditions (Kerlinger, 1972). Further, a systematically structured Q sample is not considered to pre-define nor pre-determine participants' responses, due to the huge number of possible combinations of the chosen items and the fact that participants must review, sort and rank their statements independently. While in our case all statements encapsulated a distinct response to a particular aspect of *Avatar* and its reception, individuals could strongly agree or disagree with each statement in turn, feel indifferent, or consider a statement irrelevant or perhaps even laughable; how they chose to respond, sort and rank order the statements was entirely in their hands. The statements remained open to interpretation and could potentially shift in meaning when read in relation to each other on the typical array. Each participant was also free to rearrange their Q-sort before it was finalized and submitted. This means that the statements could be collectively deployed to

holistically convey a general impression of each individual's subjective orientation on a number of dimensions *simultaneously* – emotional, visceral, aesthetic, intellectual, political, and so on – while the ranking process clarified which statements were more immediately salient for those individuals.

Taking care to preserve as much of the original diversity of responses as possible, an initial cull systematically reduced the number of Q statements to 48. In the course of a pilot study conducted with 24 respondents in the city of Hamilton, New Zealand (pop. 131,000), these statements were progressively re-evaluated and revised to ensure each expressed relatively unambiguous ideas or themes and to eliminate redundancy among the statements. Gradually, the statements were whittled down to the final Q sample of 32 statements (Appendix A). Each mode theorized in the Consolidated Model is loosely represented by eight statements reflecting its different aspects. While the final Q sample is not inclusive of all perspectives drawn from the cultural trawl, it does represent our best effort to reflect the predominant ideas, opinions, reactions and concerns expressed by fans as well as critics, while simultaneously operationalizing the categories and subcategories of the Composite Model. Among the themes and issues not represented are those relating to the film's depiction of disability and gender, the physical effects of 3D technology, and the emotional impact of the musical score and dragon flight scenes.

Participants performed their Q-sorts online using the free software application, FlashQ, and almost all also provided details of their gender, age, nationality, ethnicity, education, occupation, and religious and political affiliations. Immediately before carrying out their Q-sort, participants read a set of instructions on screen which stated that the researchers wished to know how they responded to and felt about *Avatar* when they first saw it. As the condition of instruction, they were asked to "Please recall the thoughts and

feelings you had immediately after watching *Avatar* while you rank the following statements.” After first reviewing and sorting all the statements into three piles -- agree, disagree, or neutral -- they were instructed to arrange the 32 statements on a continuum from “most strongly agree” on the right to “most strongly disagree” on the left in a forced normal distribution, with the number of statements under each score shown below:

Most strongly disagree

Most strongly agree

-4	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3	+4
2	3	3	5	6	5	3	3	2

Respondents were also invited to provide a written explanation for why they selected the four statements they placed at each end of the scale. These qualitative comments were crucial in guiding our interpretation of the subjective viewpoints that emerged, and examples of the kinds of statements offered are incorporated into the written analysis of each factor to illustrate and provide richer qualitative insight into participants’ subjective responses.

While we believe the condition of instruction encouraged participants to consider their initial response to the film, there is no way of guaranteeing that this was the basis on which they sorted the statements, nor that their recollection of their initial response was ‘untainted’ by subsequent thought, discussion and reflection on the film and its public reception. There are inherent limitations that arise from treating participants’ responses, in some cases solicited well after the initial moment of viewing, as evidence of an underlying subjective orientation adopted or stimulated during the viewing encounter which shaped viewers’ engagement and response to the film, as the Composite Model assumes. Indeed, those immediate reactions and responses are notoriously difficult to access in their ‘pure’ state, since the very mechanisms used to access them and the context in which such efforts

occur may well alter the reception process itself. Hence, almost all researchers rely to some extent on *articulated* rather than '*natural*' responses to texts viewed during or some time prior to the research encounter. All such articulated responses are constructed accounts produced in a social context, and thus may be influenced to varying degrees by:

- 1) The researcher effect, since participants may attempt to anticipate and respond to what they believe the researcher is seeking and frame their responses accordingly. In this research, researcher effect is minimized because the researcher is physically absent;
- 2) Participants' existing understandings relating to genre, medium, their position on the themes and issues raised by the text, their education, social class, gender, religion and so on, any of which may provide particular cultural competencies that inform their 'talk' about the text;
- 3) The wider concourse surrounding the text in terms of how it is commonly talked about within public and private domains, particularly if it is already subject to some discussion and debate; and
- 4) Impression management, especially in the context of focus group discussions, where individuals may censor or manage their responses according to the expressed views of others, or in an effort to present themselves in a particular manner. Since the *Avatar* Q-sorts were completed independently and anonymously online, impression management was not considered to be a concern in this research.

Hence, while we recognize the limitations inherent in claiming that the typal arrays constructed by individual respondents generally represent their initial subjective response to the film, the same critique can be made of virtually all audience reception research, none of

which is able to access cognitive content in a 'pure', unmediated way. But it would be a mistake to assume on this basis that people's subsequently articulated reflections offer little or no useful insight into their original subjective states, since such a view implies respondents know nothing of their own minds and are unable to reflect on past cognitive and emotional states with any degree of accuracy.

Furthermore, we note that the Consolidated Model is informed by a wide range of studies utilizing a variety of research methods – including ethnographic studies that attempted to solicit immediate, *relatively* unmediated responses to viewed texts, such as that of Liebes and Katz (1990). Importantly, the model reflects consistent patterns in subjective responses *across* temporal dimensions. That is to say, the same modes can be identified at the 'during' and 'after' stages of reception, and there is some basis in the literature on the role of prefiguration in film reception (see Barker & Mathijs, 2008) to argue that anticipatory reactions, which can be established well prior to viewing, similarly reflect some of the core distinctions theorized in the Composite Model, and further, can potentially shift and change during and subsequent to the viewing encounter.⁴

The *Avatar* Q-sort went live online on 18th May 2010, and was open to English-speaking participants with internet access anywhere in the world, being hosted on a server at Ryerson University's Digital Value Lab. Our sample is thus self-selecting rather than representative, and excludes respondents unable to communicate in English as we did not have sufficient resources to enable translation of the research tool and resulting data. Since *Avatar* fans were considered more highly motivated to participate, we actively encouraged participation from a wider range of viewers, including *Avatar*'s critics, posting invitations on the "Avatar Sucks!" Facebook group message board and on general film discussion boards

such as Rotten Tomatoes.com. Special interest groups were also targeted via Facebook groups such as Survival International, Military.com, and the Rainforest Action Network.

Since respondents were primarily recruited through fan networks and online communities, the sample consists of people who are active on the Internet. Recent estimates suggest that this now accounts for 75-90% of people in most Western developed nations (internetworldstats.com, 2009). Nonetheless, the research is likely to over-represent the views of internet savvy “cosmopolitans’: people whose life orientation revolves around global interconnectedness rather than their local communities” (Hannerz, 1990, as cited in Kuipers & Kloet 2009, p. 104), and these are likely to be relatively economically empowered individuals, especially in developing nations. This bias appears to be a significant limitation of online research generally, and is evident in our sample: Half of our respondents were university students, while relatively few others reported earning low incomes or having non-white collar occupations (see Table 2 below). However, the lack of representativeness of our sample is not necessarily problematic, since we make no claims about the distribution of any discovered subjective orientations within the general population.

Results

We analyzed 120 responses received between May and August 2010 from individuals of 41 self-identified nationalities, races, or ethnicities residing in 27 countries. In conformity with Q methodology conventions, a factor analysis solution was sought that accounted for the greatest number of responses defined uniquely (i.e. excluding “confounded” and statistically insignificant sorts) by the smallest number of factors. A four-factor solution best satisfied these requirements. Factor loadings equal to or greater than 0.46 are significant at the 1% level with 32 items (see McKeown & Thomas, 1988, p. 50). We used a commercial

dedicated Q methodology software package, PCQ, to perform the analysis. PCQ employs the centroid method of factor extraction and permits varimax or judgmental factor rotation (we used the former).

This four-factor solution accounts for 89 (74%) of the 120 respondents. 47 out of 120 respondents loaded significantly on Factor 1, 16 on Factor 2, and 13 each on Factors 3 and 4. 26 respondents constructed mixed or “confounded” Q-sorts (i.e. they loaded on more than one factor) and five were not significant. The presence of confounded sorts potentially reflects the tendency (acknowledged in the Composite Model) for some viewers to ‘commute’ between modes, in which case they may load significantly on more than one factor. Two of the factors had a small number of negative or inverted loadings. The typical sort for each factor is shown in Table 1, while the aggregate scores assigned to each statement within all factors are shown in Appendix A. Four consensus statements emerged from the factor analysis (#1, #3, #8, #28), with the strongest consensus emerging for statement 1: “My enjoyment of *Avatar* was marred by its negative portrayal of the U.S. military, which I felt was anti-American”, with which most respondents strongly disagreed (-3).

Table 1 here

Three of the four identified factors strongly correspond with one of the modes identified in the Composite Model, in that five of the eight statements ranked at +2, +3 and +4 levels were originally classified by the researchers as “belonging” to the same mode. In the case of Factor 2, there is an even split between statements initially classified as discursive and mediated, with a slight difference in the ratings in favour of the discursive. However, when the particular statements preferred by these respondents are read in

relation to each other and interpreted holistically, the basis for our interpretation of Factor 2 as a discursive response becomes more clearly evident.

Factor 1: Narrative transportation with emotional resonance (*transparent mode*).

The largest group of 47 subjects (53% of all significant Q-sorts) expressed a high degree of narrative transportation, suspension of disbelief, emotional engagement, and strong agreement with the film's core messages. These characteristics suggest Factor 1 reflects the adoption of a *transparent* mode of reception. This group of respondents felt transported to an amazing new world -- Pandora -- in which they became pleasurably submerged and engrossed (+3 on #30). They were mesmerized by the beauty and realism created through the film's visual effects (+2 on #25), likening it to a moving work of art (+2 on #16), and their overall experience of the film was exhilarating and awe inspiring (+2 on #29). For example, one respondent said "I loved Pandora, the visuals of it, the floating mountains, the stone arches, the bioluminescence, everything! Experiencing Pandora was an entirely new experience for me. I was completely submerged in this beautiful and breathtaking world...." (Irish man, age 17).

For these subjects, the beauty and visual hyperrealism of the film undoubtedly facilitated full immersion in the viewing experience, to the point where Pandora and the Na'vi were temporarily ascribed the status of "real life" and related to *as though* real. Having become drawn into the film in the intended manner, these viewers experienced intense emotional involvement with the characters and scenario depicted, and most strongly agreed with statement 26 (+4), which expresses a sense of caring very deeply for the world of Pandora and its inhabitants: "First I was awestruck by the visuals, but soon became very attached to these characters and cared deeply for their wellbeing. I shed tears a few times

and I don't normally for movies" (Canadian man, age 38). For some respondents, their emotional response was unexpectedly strong and unprecedented:

This film reached me on a deep level, one that I cannot totally explain (American woman, age 17).

At first I was a little skeptical about *Avatar*, but after destruction of the Tree of Voices and then Home tree there were nothing but tears - and then *RAGE* (Russian man, age 20).

I could not stop thinking about this film after viewing it. It became very intense.... I spent a great deal of time learning all I could about the film and even joined a forum, something I have never done. It moved me to see it 11 times in the theatre, no other film has done that (Canadian man, age 38).

Factor 1 respondents were so transported into the world of Pandora that they felt sad at the close of the film, and expressed a desire to become Na'vi (+3 on #32): "My life felt like nothing compared to being a Na'vi on Pandora. I fell into sort of a depression, like a lot (most) of the people on the *Avatar*-forums" (Canadian man, age 18).

Reflecting their adoption of the preferred viewing position, these viewers read "with" the text and expressed strong agreement with the film's core messages. They very strongly agreed with statement 5, "*Avatar* conveys a very important message: Here on Earth we are destroying the natural world that our species relies on, and we need to change our ways," (+4) and also statement 6, "I appreciated *Avatar*'s key message that everything is connected – all human beings to each other, and us to the earth" (+3). Many of these respondents strongly aligned themselves with *Avatar*'s environmental messages, offering evidence of a relationship between transparent receptions and story-consistent attitudes and suggesting *Avatar* may indeed have had the transformative potential Cameron intended:

I admired the fact they would die to protect the forest, everything about the Na'vi took my life by storm forcing me to try and change my ways (Mexican man living in the United States, age 21).

We might not have the “physical” connection to our planet like the Na’vi do, but if we were to look after it like we should, Earth could be just as beautiful. Why destroy it? Rather than looking for other planets in the universe that can sustain life, why not look after the one we have now? (Australian woman, age 21).

Respondents expressing this viewpoint strongly disagreed with statements discounting the film’s value on the grounds of predictability, sentimentality, clichéd and derivative storyline, and commercial orientation (-4 on #11; -3 on #9, and #14). They most strongly rejected the notion that *Avatar* was overhyped (-4 on #12) and instead believed the film fully deserved to be successful, given its overall excellence, with many considering *Avatar* a masterpiece. But more important than technical excellence or aesthetic value for these viewers was the film’s emotional power, ability to transport them (in many cases repeatedly) to a new world, and vitally important environmental message, all consistent with the theorized transparent mode.

Factor 2: Opposition to form/negotiation of message content (*discursive mode*).

Sixteen respondents (20% of the 89 significant sorts) expressed the view that while *Avatar* contained serious messages, it was basically boring commercial hype that recycled material and themes already abundantly exploited by Hollywood. They most strongly agreed with statement 14: “I found *Avatar* to be trite, predictable, two-dimensional, and overly-sentimental” (+4) and also with statement 9: “It’s a shame the storyline was so clichéd and unoriginal; *Avatar* reminded me of other films I’ve seen” (+3). They also expressed agreement at +2 level with statements 11 and 12, suggesting *Avatar* has been greatly overrated and is not worthy of viewers’ time and attention, having primarily been made for commercial purposes. While these findings might suggest a critical mediated mode is being adopted, this viewpoint reveals more immediate concern with the *message* content of this film (statements 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 all register *either* significant agreement or

disagreement – see Appendix A), and respondents are clearly critical of certain aspects of those messages. Overall, this viewpoint appears to reflect a negotiated or even oppositional position in relation to *Avatar*'s message content *and* form, and thus appears consistent with the theorized *discursive* mode of reception.

This paradoxical position can be seen in the high level of agreement (+4) with statement 2: “*Avatar* expresses the White Messiah myth where some White guy becomes the ‘most awesome’ member of a non-White culture, and was quite patronizing.” In the case of Factor 2 respondents, the reiteration of the White Messiah myth is read *discursively* as having overtly racist elements, and not merely as an over-used narrative trope:

It's true - the indigenous people themselves only resist because of the hero, who is white. No coincidence all the Na'vi were played by black actors (Briton living in Singapore, gender unspecified, age 48).

That was the point of the movie. Athletic spectacular White man outshines the indigenous (American woman, age 18).

Yet there is also a significant level of agreement (+3) with statement 5 addressing the need for greater conservation of Earth's natural resources. This viewpoint also rated positively statement 4 (+3) regarding the need to protect indigenous cultures, and statement 6 (+2) regarding the connectedness of all life. Positive ratings of these statements suggest that these respondents are primarily engaged with the film's message content, accepting certain aspects of it while questioning others. On the whole, these respondents express partial, qualified agreement with textual messages and many are quite critical of the film's representations and implied moral order: “Obviously, humans (Americans, capitalists, army, government) were the bad guys in the movie, and the nature-worshipping aborigines who lived in harmony with other creatures were the good guys” (Israeli woman living in USA, age 28).

Part of this more circumspect response to *Avatar* seems to reflect a perception of the film as overly simplistic and inadequate to the task of communicating serious messages effectively, or in a sufficiently sophisticated and thus interesting manner. As one respondent remarked, “It’s a crude mix of Native American history and eco-conscious story presented like an average action movie” (German man, age 42). This viewpoint is also unique in failing to respond to *Avatar*’s technical execution and visual beauty. For these viewers, the film was not at all exhilarating or inspiring (-4 on #29) and they were not moved by the plight of the Na’vi, nor did they want to be like them (-3 on #26; -4 on #32). Further, they strongly rejected the notion that *Avatar* has any personal relevance to them (-3 on #18, -2 on #20). In sum, Factor 2 expresses critical distance and emotional detachment from the film, and is most strongly characterized by discursive engagement with its ideological or message content.

Factor 3: Appreciation of real world relevance (*referential mode*).

Thirteen (15%) of the 89 significantly-loaded Q-sorts expressed positive or negative variants of Factor 3, which in its positive variation shares with Factor 1 the sense that *Avatar* conveys an important message, but focuses on the film’s messages relating to imperialism and environmental destruction here on Earth, not on a Pandoran utopia. *Avatar* was thus interpreted from a perspective framed by recognition and assessments of textual realism, and as an allegory for real world events, consistent with the theorized *referential mode* of reception. This group of subjects agreed most strongly (+4) with statements 17 and 23: “*Avatar*’s scenario of economic development at the expense of people and the environment is very similar to what is happening in my own community today”, and “*Avatar* is a realistic depiction of how Western imperialists have subjugated indigenous peoples around the world”. Factor 3 thus emphasized the realism of *Avatar*’s portrayal of indigenous people on

Earth, and of real world social conflict in the context of Capitalist imperialism, with environmental destruction as a secondary consequence (+3 on #5). These viewers also agreed with statements alluding to *Avatar's* historical and contemporary relevance (+3 on #24) and they expressed strong agreement with *Avatar's* message about “needing to protect indigenous cultures against imperialism, militarism and economic exploitation” (+3 on #4).

Uniquely for these viewers, *Avatar's* scenario of economic development at the expense of people and the environment was perceived as similar to events happening within their own communities (+2 on #18 and #19). Several Factor 3 respondents expressed personal experience of the conflicts portrayed in *Avatar*:

I'm from Mexico, and many of the current problems are due to Mexicans who control in concert with transnational companies the life of Mexico without taking care of people and environment (Mexican man living in Singapore, age 33).

In my community [Pondoland] people have sacrificed their lives, people are still prepared to die for their land. Everything has been done to stop the mining. Lawyers have been organised to represent us. Marches have been done to protest against the decision. Media has been used at all fronts. We have not given up (South African man, age 41).

Like those associated with Factor 1, Factor 3 respondents disagreed with statements critiquing the film's commercialism, triteness, unwarranted hype and over-sentimentality (-4 on #11 and #12; -3 on #9 and #14). However, these viewers did not respond to the film's spectacular and mesmerizing special effects (-1 on #13 and #15; 0 on #16, #25, and #31), nor did they experience the same depths of narrative transportation and emotional engagement that characterized Factor 1 respondents (-1 on #30), again suggesting a more distanced, cognitive rather than emotional response. They disagreed with statements suggesting that *Avatar* expresses mainly mythical themes (-2 on #2 and #3) and they did not feel sad at the end of the film or wish to become Na'vi (-2 on #32). Nonetheless, these viewers clearly considered *Avatar* worthy of praise and attention due to its contemporary “real world”

relevance. Three subjects correlated negatively with this factor, supporting the Composite Model's claim that in a referential mode, viewers can also reject the text as a highly *unrealistic* depiction, drawing on their own contrary understanding of social reality.

Factor 4: Appreciation of technical excellence marred by a weak narrative (*mediated mode*).

Subjects correlated with Factor 4 celebrated *Avatar's* technical prowess and the resulting visual spectacle, while lamenting weaknesses in the storyline and characterization. These characteristics render this factor consistent with a *mediated* mode of reception.

Thirteen respondents (15% of significant Q₁-sorts) expressed this view. They most strongly agreed with statements referencing the film as “a major technical accomplishment” with special effects that were “spectacular and groundbreaking” (+4 on #15) and also believed “*Avatar* was implemented excellently and has opened up the 3D film market, like it was designed to do” (+3 on #13). Such sentiments are reflected here:

The film was a long time in the making with substantial investment in researching and developing enabling technology especially 3D cameras. The whole package came together well and seemed very life-like, natural and smooth, including the action sequences and trip through the jungle (Australian man, age 45).

This group of respondents also expressed strong agreement with statements 10 (+3), 16 (+3), and 31 (+4), which collectively emphasize the film's visual beauty, aesthetic qualities, excitement and power, making *Avatar* “worth the price of admission” (#31). They felt “mesmerized by the amazingly detailed, highly realistic world of Pandora and all the creatures living in it” (+2 on #25) and found the experience of viewing exhilarating and inspiring (+2 on #29). However, these respondents also found the film lacking in certain aspects relating to its narrative execution, as one respondent explained: “*Avatar* is *first and foremost* a technical masterpiece. The story plays second fiddle to mesmerizing computer-

generated characters, effects and scenery” (Singaporean man, age 17; emphasis added).

Thus, this viewpoint regards *Avatar* as having been somewhat let down by Cameron’s clichéd and unoriginal storyline (+2 on #9):

I’d have loved to have seen the world of Pandora act as a setting for a better story - it deserves it. All that work, all that intellectual and artistic effort, only to use some of the most clichéd science fiction tropes ever - seriously, “unobtainium?” That one’s been overplayed even for camp value (American man, age 24).

Avatar is a rehash of *Pocahontas* and *Dances with Wolves*, with an added sci-fi element that doesn’t alter the old “White Messiah” story significantly (Singaporean man, age 17).

Importantly, criticisms of the White Messiah trope expressed by these respondents were primarily expressed in the context of disparaging the film’s narrative quality and uniqueness, and did not appear to reflect concerns about the racist aspects of that depiction. Indeed, for these viewers, serious engagement with the message content of *Avatar* was subordinated to evaluations of *Avatar*’s form and aesthetic quality. Thus, they expressed neutrality or very mild agreement regarding the film’s core messages about protecting indigenous peoples against imperialism and saving the environment (0 on #8; +1 on #4 and #5). Further, these respondents strongly disagreed with claims that *Avatar* constitutes a critique of the War on Terror (-4 on #7) or a negative portrayal of the American military (-3 on #1), perhaps because from their perspective, the film carried few if any serious messages whatsoever. They further disagreed with statements affirming the personal relevance of the film (-2 on #18, #19 and #20). And, while greatly appreciating the film as an impressive visual spectacle and finding it a powerful piece of Hollywood filmmaking, these viewers were not sad when it was over and did not wish to be Na’vi (-4 on #32). They expressed neutrality on the issues of emotional engagement and identification, both with story characters and with the plight of the Na’vi (-1 on #28; 0 on #26, #27). This

muted emotional response appears related to the text's deficient characterization and storyline:

Truth be told, it was hard to muster any emotional involvement in the film. There was never any doubt how the story would end, who would live, who it might be permissible to kill, who would ultimately be defeated . . . Too many clichés prevented me from actually being interested in the ways characters might develop emotionally or change their worldviews (American man, age 24).

Linking Divergent Receptions and Social Location

On its own, Q methodology is not suitable for estimating the distribution of holders of viewpoints throughout a population. We cannot estimate, for example, how many individuals within the wider global audience apprehended *Avatar* in a transparent mode. Q methodology only permits us to claim that in the population who participated in the study, four distinct subjective orientations were revealed that appear to closely resemble the four modes of reception theorized in the Composite Model, and that if our research procedure were repeated with a similar population of respondents, these four modes would likely be uncovered again. We note also that in an independent study of receptions of the animated short-film, *Ryan*, four factors were identified that similarly resemble the theorized modes, despite these researchers having drawn on a radically different conceptual schema -- Holbrook's framework of consumer value -- in selecting their Q-sample statements (see [REDACTED], 2010).

We can, however, gain insight into the social characteristics of the holders of each of the identified viewpoints in the population we examined, and conjecture that these characteristics are germane to the media reception experience communicated to us by each of the respondents. However, since the numbers of respondents who loaded on Factors 2, 3 and 4 are relatively small, it is not possible to make any general observations based on the associations between modes and social characteristics among our participants; further research is clearly needed in this area. One-way ANOVA tests identified only two statistically significant differences among the four factors: The number of respondents viewing the film in 3D, and the number who had purchased or intended to purchase the film in DVD or Blu-ray.

Table 2 here

Selected social characteristics of the 89 significant respondents are presented in Table 2. Those who expressed the transparent mode (Factor 1) were *on average* slightly younger, less highly educated, predominantly men (79%), and were the group most likely to have undertaken military service (49%). Youthfulness combined with lower levels of education potentially means these respondents had less extra-textual knowledge available to inform referential or discursive readings, while military experience and gender may have rendered this group more likely to personally identify with the film's hero, Jake, a young U.S. marine. Remarkably, Factor 1 respondents report having viewed the film an average of 11 times; repeated pleasurable consumption of the same film narrative appears consistent with the high level of narrative transportation reported by this group of viewers. These respondents also reported lower levels of political activity than those associated with Factors 2 and 3.

The discursive mode (Factor 2) was expressed by twice as many women as the other viewpoints (44%). These respondents had the lowest level of declared importance of religion (12.5%), the second lowest reported rate of viewing the film in 3D (69%), and the highest reported level of political activity (62.5%). A relatively high proportion (19%) of these respondents self-identified as ethnic minorities. The latter two characteristics may be related to this group's negotiated position regarding the meanings and messages of the film. Most holders of this viewpoint saw the film only once.

Those associated with Factor 3, the referential mode, were on average older and better educated than those expressing the other viewpoints, and were the second most politically active group at 54%. These respondents had the highest proportion of persons who self-identified as belonging to an ethnic minority (23%) and also the highest proportion of individuals for whom religion was "very important" (38.5%), suggesting that political, religious and ethnic affiliations all provide frames of reference for media response.

Finally, the mediated mode (Factor 4), which emphasized the technical excellence of the film, was the group most strongly dominated by men (85%). This group had the highest rate of viewing in 3D (92%) and the lowest level of political activism (23%) of the four viewpoints, which may help explain the expressed neutrality of this group in relation to core message content. No self-identified ethnic minorities expressed this viewpoint, again suggesting that ethnicity was an important frame of reference for viewers of *Avatar*, encouraging the adoption of discursive and referential modes of reading.

The associations evident here are, however, particular to this sample. Further research is needed to ascertain whether these kinds of links between preferred modes of reception and aspects of identity and social location are consistently evident in the same ways, or, as we suspect is more likely the case, textually and contextually contingent.

Discussion

Our results provide considerable empirical support for the Composite Model (██████████, 2007). Factor analysis revealed four distinct subjective orientations characterized by differing degrees of emotional and cognitive involvement, as well as different foci in terms of the most salient issues and concerns for viewers. These factors in turn exhibit notable similarities with the four modes of reception theorized in the Model. Whereas Factor 1, which we interpret as the *transparent* mode of reception, is marked by suspension of disbelief, feelings of being transported to the amazingly realistic world of Pandora, emotional engagement with the Na'vi's plight, and agreement with preferred messages, Factor 2, the *discursive* mode, exhibits estrangement and emotional detachment, with these viewers rejecting *Avatar* as an over-commercialized Hollywood entertainment product while also engaging critically with the film's ideological or message content. While Factor 3, the *referential* mode, focuses cognitive attention on the film's similarity and relevance to past

and present struggles occurring in the real world against Western imperialism, militarism, and Capitalist exploitation of natural resources, Factor 4, the *mediated* mode, relates primarily to *Avatar* as a constructed entertainment media product which is aesthetically pleasing and technologically remarkable, but has significant shortcomings in terms of script and storyline. Each mode reflects a very different subjective approach to making sense of the same polysemic and polyvalent text, and focuses on different levels of denotative and connotative meaning. The adoption of different modes of reception in turn produces considerable, but still clearly *patterned*, forms of interpretive divergence among different segments of our sample audience, with these patterns and the core distinctions between subjective viewpoints being accurately predicted by the Composite Model.

While this study represents our first attempt at operationalizing the modes and their subcategories in this way, it nonetheless provides empirical support for the Composite Model as an accurate, comprehensive, and potentially widely-applicable schema of audience engagement and response. However, there are some limitations to this research and potential criticisms that could be raised; some of which have been anticipated above. Some may argue that the seemingly close fit between the four theorized modes of reception and the identified factors is a methodological artifact stemming from subjective biases influencing the selection of Q-sample statements, which, having been chosen in part to reflect different aspects of the Model, may have predetermined the outcome of our research -- perhaps by limiting the ability of respondents to express their own unique views. Again, however, we wish to stress that the selection of statements was guided in the first instance by Q's methodological imperative to represent the diversity of ideas and themes already existing within the wider concourse (Brown, 1980). While it was not possible to capture every issue or theme, we believe the statements reflect forms of response to *Avatar*

that were *commonly* articulated, as well as more marginal viewpoints. Further, while respondents may have been prevented from articulating a radically divergent perspective using the statements on offer, the potential for variation was more than sufficient for most individuals to complete a Q-sort that *broadly* reflected their views. Participants were invited to comment on the statements they ranked most highly and lowly to further clarify their perspectives, and to add additional comments at the end of the questionnaire. These comments largely confirmed the salience of the issues and themes selected for inclusion. In the case of this research, only five out of 120 participants constructed Q-sorts that did not load significantly on any of the factors; 26 constructed mixed or 'confounded' sorts that loaded on more than one factor, possibly as a result of their 'commuting' between modes.

It is also important to note that while our focus has been on identifying similarities in the subjective modes of response of participants, Q methodology retains the capacity to analyze respondents' sorts collectively and individually. Hence, it is possible to identify similarities between individuals through factor analysis, while also determining which individuals had truly unique responses. The Q-sorts and comments of those individuals could then be subjected to intensive analysis and perhaps explored further through individual interviews. Indeed, while this has not been our focus in this paper, identifying and analyzing the *truly* divergent response is vitally important in terms of extending and refining our theoretical conceptualization of the reception process. To date, however, largely due to the absence of an accepted analytical schema of predominant modes of reception, it has been virtually impossible to systematically differentiate between what is, and what is not, a truly atypical form of audience engagement and response.

Also, as noted above, regardless of the statements chosen, there remains significant potential for the expression of diverse viewpoints using Q, as each statement can be

interpreted differently and meanings may shift and change when statements are read in relation to each other. The number of possible combinations of 32 statements within the rank ordered distribution is, for all practical purposes, infinite⁵. That 89 different individuals independently ranked the 32 statements in ways that were significantly similar to the rankings of a number of others is thus strong evidence of shared subjectivity, and reveals clear differences in the approach to sense-making among different segments of our population of respondents.

An additional area of possible critique stems from presenting respondents with a wide range of statements expressing ideas and viewpoints that might not have otherwise occurred to them, perhaps leading respondents to reshape their perspective on the film. But such “cross-fertilization” reflects a process that *already* occurs within the wider social context, and in focus groups, where people’s initial views may change in response to hearing the views of others. With Q, there is some safeguard against this revision process in that, within the context of evaluating and charting their response to a large number of Q statements, some or many of which may be highly salient in terms of reflecting respondent’s existing views, it seems unlikely that previously unconsidered ideas would produce a strong enough reaction to feature among the statements ranked at either extreme, and it is these statements that are most significant.

This issue does however raise a problem in terms of testing the Composite Model, since it also implies that respondents’ Q-sorts may not necessarily reflect an objectively-existing psychological “orientation” toward reception as such, but rather, an acquired cognitive perspective derived from encounters with the views and responses of others. In response, as mentioned earlier, the likelihood of multiple individuals independently sorting 32 statements in *significantly similar ways* without there being some kind of underlying

affective and cognitive orientation guiding the ranking process is very remote. It is also improbable to imagine respondents are sorting statements according to their understanding of an already existing, clearly-defined perspective on the film within the public domain, since this paper is very likely the first to chart multi-dimensional viewpoints on *Avatar* in any detail.

Ultimately, by undertaking further studies that utilize the same conceptual and analytical schema provided by the Composite Model, reception researchers may have a sounder basis for identifying variations as well as congruencies in the form and content of audience engagement and response across diverse cultural contexts, and in relation to a variety of texts of different genres and mediums. While some readers may balk at the use of an analytical schema that they perceive as classifying in advance the range of modes of response that audience members are most likely to adopt in any given textual encounter, we believe that reception research has now generated a very significant body of descriptive evidence, but has yet to pay adequate attention to how all of this evidence should be collectively evaluated, synthesized and analyzed (see also Schrøder, 2000; Barker, 2006). Rather than continuing to proliferate descriptive studies of specific audience-text encounters - a potentially endless endeavour, given the overwhelming volume of content production in the current digital media environment, and not ideally suited to the accumulation of knowledge about audience reception *per se* - a different approach is now required, one that seeks to formulate and refine an analytical model that can give some order and coherence to seemingly disparate findings from across the field, without obscuring the specific nuances of each individual case. Indeed, such nuances may be more clearly perceived once the general and typical are identified and analytically delineated. Further, because Q methodology is specifically oriented toward understanding human subjectivity from the unique perspectives of research subjects in an objective, rigorous way, it offers considerable

but still largely unrealized potential for those scholars who are interested in exploring audience-centered approaches to reception studies, but who also seek to utilize some of the benefits of quantitative modes of analysis (see Davis & Michelle, 2011, for further discussion). In that sense, Q may provide one very useful means of reconciling the rather disparate approaches currently taken within the broader cross-disciplinary field of reception studies.

Endnotes

¹ Almost all of the studies cited in this discussion of existing models of reception document clear distinctions in the discursive resources and approaches to sense-making that are utilised by different groups of viewers, and in some cases the same viewer at different moments (see, for example, the exemplary case of a ‘commuting’ viewer, Michael, detailed in Michelle, 2007, pp. 213-215). That these are distinct and, at times, contradictory modes of reception has been noted by Schrøder (1986) and also Andacht (2004), who identifies the commuting process in relation to young people’s receptions of *Big Brother* in Latin America, where

the most noticeable tendency...is a fair split, even an *oscillation* between a firm belief in the genuineness of the format’s index appeal, and the strong suspicion that its most memorable moments are carefully staged by the participants of *Big Brother* in complicity with the producers. (pp. 124-5)

Hill (2005, p. 177) similarly notes that (some) viewers of Reality TV may commute between at least two different modes in the same response: ‘audiences [*sic*] are able to switch from appreciation of these ordinary people and their experiences, to awareness of the staged nature of their experiences created for television’. Clearly, a reading which presumes that a media text faithfully reproduces authentic events or behaviour is predicated on a very different set of assumptions about the text and its production to one that proposes those same events or behaviours have been deliberately engineered or fabricated. That in these examples viewers are described as being *split*, *oscillating*, or *switching* reflects the inherent difficulty of reconciling incompatible positions, such that moving between these modes requires rejecting one set of assumptions and beliefs and adopting another, if only momentarily. See also Barker and Mathijs (2005) and Staiger (2000) for examples of viewer responses which contain inherently contradictory assumptions about the status of the text as viewers shift between different levels or modes of reading.

² As of June 13 2011, *Avatar* has grossed US\$2, 782,275,172 worldwide, making it the highest grossing film of all time (unadjusted for inflation).

³ See for example the four-part discussion on ‘Ways to cope with the depression of the dream of Pandora being intangible’, in the ‘general’ forum on www.avatar-forums.com.

⁴ Incidentally, since prefiguration may shape but does not and cannot *determine* audience response to any given textual encounter, it is not considered necessary to include it in a comprehensive model of audience engagement and response. For a similar reason, the focus of Uses and Gratifications research on motivation, selectivity and gratifications of media use is considered less immediately relevant to an understanding of the reception process, and is not explicitly addressed in the Composite Model. That said, these dimensions are clearly likely to offer considerable insight into why particular modes of reception rather than others are adopted by particular individuals. Presumably, a viewer who is motivated by diversion or escape may be *more likely* to adopt a transparent mode, while one whose motivation is surveillance or value reinforcement may be *more likely* to adopt a referential or discursive mode. Again, however, one’s original motivations for embarking on an encounter with any given media text do not necessarily *determine* the outcome of that encounter. Many readers will have had the experience of spontaneously viewing a randomly-selected movie with the explicit motivation of meeting their needs for social integration – to spend time with friends or family – only to experience completely

unanticipated levels of emotional or cognitive arousal that became far more significant and enduring than the social interaction which provided the reason and context for viewing.

⁵ The number of possible variants of a rank-ordered list of 32 statements is 2.63130837×10 to the 35th power. If the statements were randomly ordered, it would not be possible to identify factors.

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Table 1

Typal Arrays

Factor 1: Narrative Transportation with Emotional Resonance (Transparent Mode)

-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4
11	1	2	17	10	4	16	6	5
12	9	3	18	13	8	25	30	26
	14	7	19	22	15	29	32	
		20	23	27				
		21	24	31				
				28				

Factor 2: Opposition to Form/Negotiation of Message Content (Discursive Mode)

-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4
29	1	3	10	13	7	6	4	2
32	18	20	19	16	8	11	5	14
	26	27	21	22	15	12	9	
			28	24	17			
			31	25	23			
				30				

Factor 3: Appreciation of Real World Relevance (Referential Mode)

-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4
11	1	2	13	10	7	6	4	17
12	9	3	15	16	8	18	5	23
	14	32	27	25	20	19	24	
			29	26	21			
			30	28	22			
				31				

Factor 4: Appreciation of Technical Excellence Marred by a Weak Narrative (Mediated Mode)

-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4
7	1	18	3	2	4	9	10	15
32	11	19	21	8	5	25	13	31
	12	20	22	17	6	29	16	
			23	24	14			
			28	26	30			
				27				

Table 2

Q-Sort Subject Characteristics

	Total (N= 89)	Factor 1 (N=47)	Factor 2 (N=16)	Factor 3 (N=13)	Factor 4 (N=13)	One way ANOVA test of significance ^d
Subject Characteristics						
Average age:	29	27	29.3	33.4	30.8	p = .63
% who are female:	25.9	21.3	43.8	23.1	15.4	p=.50
% who are ethnic minorities:	11.2	8.5	18.7	23.1	0	p = .68
Average number of viewings:	6.7	11.3	1.3	4.3	1.6	p=.46
% viewing <i>Avatar</i> in 3D:	76.4	78.7	68.8	61.5	92.3	p=.005
% who purchased or intend to purchase DVD or Blu-ray:	51.7	83.0	0	30.8	23.1	p=.03
Average number of years in education:	14.5	13.5	15.2	16.4	15	p=.53
% in Managerial, semi-professional or professional occupations: ^a	40.4	36.1	43.7	53.8	38.4	p=.29
% in non-professional occupations: ^b	2.2	4.2	0	0	0	p = .72
% students:	50.6	51.1	56.2	38.5	53.8	p = .12
% on lower incomes: (non-students: N=4) ^c	9.1	13.0	0.0	0.0	16.7	p = .59
% with conservative/Republican political affiliations:	2.2	4.2	0	0	0	p=.72
% who are politically active:	38.2	29.8	62.5	53.8	23.1	p = .34
% for whom religion is very important:	24.7	25.5	12.5	38.5	23.1	p = .44
% with military service:	42.7	48.9	37.5	30.8	38.5	p = .14

^a Occupations included: creative artist or musician, media producer, graphic designer; government official; manager or business executive; professional such as school teacher, nurse, accountant, or public servant; higher professional such as doctor, lawyer, professor, scientist, or engineer.

^b Occupations included: unskilled manual worker; skilled manual worker; tradesperson; small business owner; clerical or administrative worker; sales worker; ICT worker; call centre worker.

^c Defined as lower income/unpaid; or lower-middle income. The other income categories were middle income; higher-middle income; and high income.

^d Calculated on the basis of actual occurrences, not on the basis of percentages.

Appendix A

The Scored Statements

Factor	1	2	3	4
1. My enjoyment of <i>Avatar</i> was marred by its negative portrayal of the US military, which I felt was anti-American.	-3	-3	-3	-3
2. <i>Avatar</i> expresses the White Messiah myth where some White guy becomes the “most awesome” member of a non-White culture, and was quite patronising.	-2	4	-2	0
3. <i>Avatar</i> suggests we should worship nature rather than God, and in this sense is anti-Christian.	-2	-2	-2	-1
4. I liked the message in <i>Avatar</i> about needing to protect indigenous cultures against imperialism, militarism, and economic exploitation.	1	3	3	1
5. <i>Avatar</i> conveys a very important message: here on Earth we are destroying the natural world that our species relies on, and we need to change our ways.	4	3	3	1
6. I appreciated <i>Avatar</i> ’s key message that everything is connected; all human beings to each other, and us to the Earth.	3	2	2	1
7. <i>Avatar</i> critiques the way the US is conducting its War on Terror, and that really appealed to me.	-2	1	1	-4
8. I was very interested in, or concerned about, the messages conveyed by <i>Avatar</i> .	1	1	1	0
9. It’s a shame the storyline was so clichéd and unoriginal; <i>Avatar</i> reminded me of other films I’ve seen.	-3	3	-3	2
10. <i>Avatar</i> is an exciting, visually arresting, and occasionally powerful piece of Hollywood filmmaking.	0	-1	0	3
11. <i>Avatar</i> is a big, dumb movie built to make money, but hardly worthy of my time or attention.	-4	2	-4	-3
12. <i>Avatar</i> has been greatly over-rated and doesn’t live up to the hype. I was disappointed, and didn’t think it was worth the money I paid.	-4	2	-4	-3
13. <i>Avatar</i> was implemented excellently and has opened up the 3D film market, like it was designed to do.	0	0	-1	3
14. I found <i>Avatar</i> to be trite, predictable, two-dimensional, and overly-sentimental.	-3	4	-3	1
15. <i>Avatar</i> is an amazing technical accomplishment. The computer generated imagery, 3D, and other special effects were spectacular and groundbreaking.	1	1	-1	4

16. Avatar is a visual masterpiece. It was like watching a moving work of art.	2	0	0	3
17. Avatar's scenario of economic development at the expense of people and the environment is very similar to what is happening in my own community today.	-1	1	4	0
18. I saw in Avatar a powerful reflection of my own people's resistance to those who wish to destroy our homes and take away our lands.	-1	-3	2	-2
19. Avatar effectively showed many similarities with people and events in my own life.	-1	-1	2	-2
20. I saw similarities between the Na'vi and my own people in terms of our customs, history, spirituality, or way of life.	-1	-2	1	-2
21. Watching Avatar, I discovered symbols that draw from my own religious or spiritual worldview.	-1	-1	1	-1
22. The Na'vi's struggle against powerful forces is mine too, and I felt good for them when they defeated their high-tech enemy.	0	0	1	-1
23. Avatar is a realistic depiction of how Western imperialists have subjugated indigenous peoples around the world.	0	1	4	-1
24. I was particularly struck by Avatar's relevance to historical or contemporary events.	0	0	3	0
25. I was completely mesmerised by the amazingly detailed, highly realistic world of Pandora and all the creatures living in it.	2	0	0	2
26. I felt very emotionally involved in this film and truly cared about what happened to Pandora, and to the Na'vi.	4	-3	0	0
27. I could really relate to the characters, and strongly identified with one of them.	1	-2	-1	0
28. I identified with the Na'vi's plight to the point that it made me think, "what if this happened to me?"	0	-1	0	-1
29. Experiencing Avatar was exhilarating and inspiring, and left me awestruck.	2	-4	-1	2
30. I felt like I was taken to another world, and became submerged in an amazing new reality.	3	0	-1	1
31. Just the breathtaking visual beauty of Pandora was worth the price of admission - the huge trees, the wonderful floating mountains, the soaring waterfalls.	1	-1	0	4
32. I felt sad when it was over, and wished I could become Na'vi.	3	-4	-2	-4