Food Presentation and Psychological Healing in 3D Animated Films: A Case Study of Pixar Animation

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Abstract. This study uses classic 3D animated films by Pixar as its case example, focusing on the sensory presentation of food elements in animated storytelling and their psychological healing functions. First, from the perspectives of audiovisual design and scene-editing techniques, it analyzes how food textures, colors, lighting, and sound effects activate viewers' physiological arousal and emotional resonance through multiple senses. Next, it explores how culinary narratives—with their character portrayals and cultural symbols—build viewers' cultural identification and psychological projection. Finally, combining a questionnaire survey of 140 university students, the study verifies the therapeutic effects of food animation in alleviating anxiety, enhancing well-being, and deepening immersive experience. The findings reveal that intricate 3D food modeling and rhythmically edited soundsca pes not only elevate the viewing experience but also offer viewers unconscious emotional release and self-acceptance, underscoring the potential of culinary animation in the field of mental health.

Keywords: 3D animation; food elements; psychological healing; Pixar; cultural communication

1 Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Data Analysis

Food is not only a fulfillment of physiological needs but also a symbol of cultural identity and a medium for psychological healing. In everyday life, culinary experiences have always been closely tied to familial bonds, memories, and a sense of belonging. "Food memories" often serve as a vital means for people to soothe their emotions and seek security—much like how children can immediately recognize the taste of home. Sensory impressions of certain dishes become deeply engraved in our minds, and each time they are recalled, we experience a moment of self-healing.

As a universal emotional language, food culture functions both as a carrier of cultural identity and as a source of sensory pleasure. In film and television, works such as Midnight Diner (first aired 2009; dir. Matsuoka Tsukasa, Yamashita Atsuhiro, Oikawa Takurō), A Bite of China (first aired 2012; dir. Chen Xiaoqing), and Chef's

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Table (first aired 2015; dir. David Gelb) have demonstrated food's psychological healing value. However, in the realm of 3D animation, systematic exploration of how culinary culture can carry a healing function remains limited, with most attention focused on the visual spectacle of food.

With the rapid rise of 3D animation—driven by advances in digital technology and now a mainstream format—its immersive experiences, fantastical environments, and multi-sensory interactions reveal unique potentials for psychological intervention. Compared to 2D animation, 3D offers stronger visual expressiveness and a more pronounced sense of presence. As an art form with powerful visual and narrative capabilities, it holds considerable promise as a vehicle for psychological healing.

First, 3D animation can activate viewers' needs for belonging through cross-sensory synesthetic effects. In Ratatouille (2007; dir. Brad Bird), Pixar uses three-dimensional spatial storytelling to transform gustatory experiences into cross-sensory healing. The zinc-gray roofs of Paris and the gleam of copper cookware in the kitchen, rendered through a global illumination system, create an interwoven warm-and-cool psychological temperature. The simulation of rising steam from the stew carries with it the olfactory memory of Provencal cuisine, making viewers feel as though they can "smell" a taste of home.

Second, 3D animation transcends the limitations of 2D representation by constructing a three-dimensional resonance chamber for emotional empathy. In Inside Out (2015; dirs. Pete Docter & Ronnie Del Carmen), the 3D camera navigates the archive labyrinth of long-term memory, and the spherical light sources dynamically reflected on memory orbs not only suggest how emotional experiences can reshape cognitive landscapes via optical-physical effects but also leverage spatial depth and material reflections to create a palpable field of emotional resonance. The film's personified characters—"Joy," "Sadness," and others—guide viewers to understand and accept the value of negative emotions.

Nevertheless, there remains a lack of systematic academic research on "how culinary content in 3D animation carries psychological healing value." Therefore, this study aims to address the following three questions: 1. How do Pixar's 3D animations employ technical means to present food sensorially, and through what mechanisms do these presentations arouse viewers' emotions? 2. How do culinary narratives achieve psychological healing through cultural identification and character development? 3. Based on online surveys and case analyses, what is the potential for 3D food animation to be applied in the field of mental health?

Before beginning my study, I conducted an online survey of more than 140 current university students. The purpose of this questionnaire was to investigate the relationship between food culture in 3D animated films and their psychological healing functions, exploring viewers' habits of watching animation—especially food-themed animation—their emotional experiences, and the impact on mental health. The survey ran for approximately one week, during which we received 146 responses via Questionnaire Star. After screening, 6 invalid responses were removed, yielding 140 valid questionnaires. This questionnaire strictly adhered to privacy protection principles: it did not collect any personally identifiable information, and all data were used solely for statistical analysis and academic writing in this study, with no other uses.

The survey data show that among participants, those majoring in animation or film and television accounted for the largest proportion, 44.29% of the total (Figure 1), suggesting that this study has particular relevance for industry practitioners and related academic research. 48.57% of respondents reported that they occasionally watch food-themed animation, while 38.57% said they watch animation frequently (Figure 2), indicating that although not all viewers are dedicated fans of food animation, its influence remains broad. Approximately 80% of participants had watched Ratatouille (Figure 3), far exceeding other works. This reflects the high recognition of Ratatouille, and that its high-quality storytelling and detailed presentation of food are key factors attracting audiences.

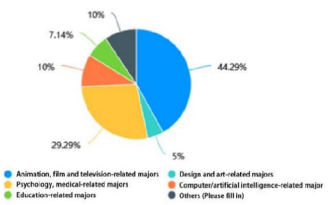

Fig. 1. Major distribution

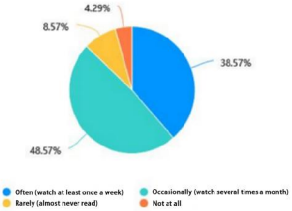

Fig. 2. Viewing frequency

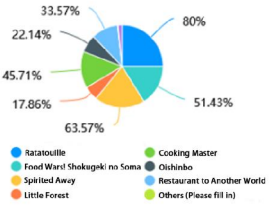

Fig. 3. Ratatouille viewership proportion

Approximately 73.57 % of respondents gave "relaxation and pleasure" as their motivation for watching food-themed animation (Figure 4), demonstrating its strong potential for stress relief. About 80 % reported that they turn to food animation when feeling down or under pressure (Figure 5), suggesting a possible psychological healing effect. Some 67.14 % believed that food animation offers greater relaxation and therapeutic benefit than other genres such as sci-fi, action, or adventure (Figure 6).

Furthermore, 85.71 % said they feel relaxed and comfortable while watching food animation, and 79.29 % said it stimulates their appetite and excitement—highlighting the close link between visual stimuli and emotion (Figure 7). A striking 85 % felt that characters' joy and enjoyment of food enhance the healing effect, and 84.29 % agreed that heartwarming storylines provide emotional consolation, underlining the crucial role of narrative in the therapeutic power of food animation (Figure 8).

In terms of visual style, 44.29 % of respondents preferred a look that lies between realistic and exaggerated, while pure realism and pure exaggeration were less popular (Figure 9). Meanwhile, 42.86 % favored seeing real-world foods (e.g., sushi, steak) in animation, indicating that the closer the on-screen food is to reality, the stronger viewers' sense of immersion (Figure 10). About 85.71 % believed that dynamic food effects—such as stretching cheese or flowing chocolate—most enhance their viewing experience, showing the powerful appeal of fluid culinary motion in 3D animation (Figure 10). Finally, 82.14 % expressed interest in even more immersive food experiences (Figure 11), such as VR or interactive formats, suggesting both high audience acceptance and market potential for immersive food animation.

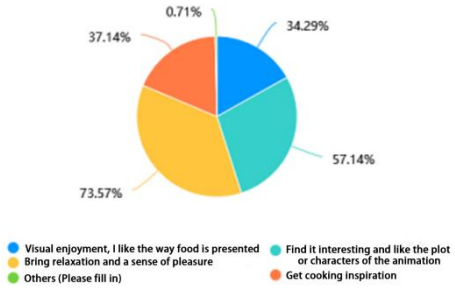

Fig. 4. Viewing motivations

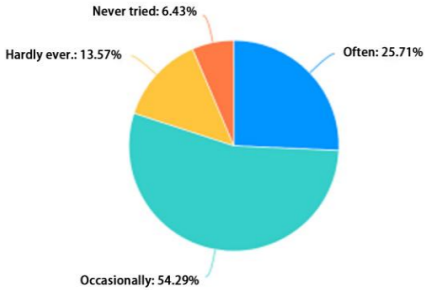

Fig. 5. Use for mood regulation

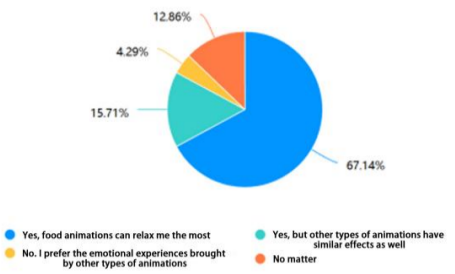

Fig. 6. Relaxation effect comparison

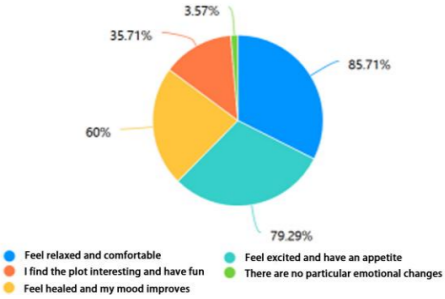

Fig. 7. Reported relaxation rate

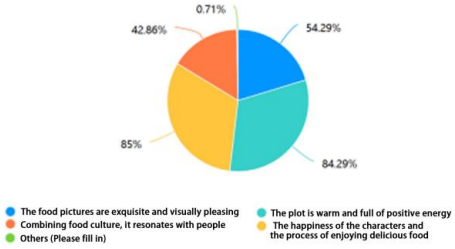

Fig. 8. Character enjoyment vs. healing

Analysis of the survey data reveals notable promise for food animation in mental-health applications. Some 81.15 % of participants reported that watching food animation relieves stress or anxiety (Figure 12), a statistically significant majority that points to real therapeutic value. While 50 % explicitly recognize the potential of food animation as a form of psychological therapy, 37.14 % remain cautious, indicating a need for further systematic research to build a more rigorous theoretical framework (Figure 13).

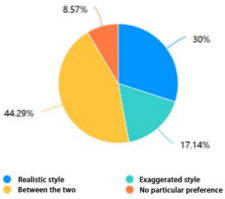

Fig. 9. Style preference

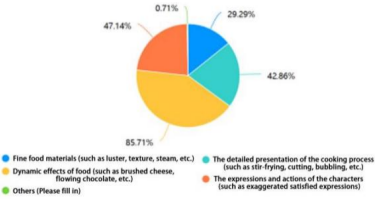

Fig. 10. Food realism & effects preference

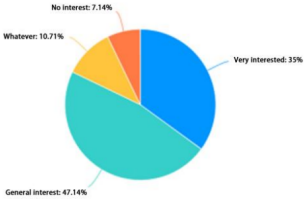

Fig. 11. Interest in immersive experiences

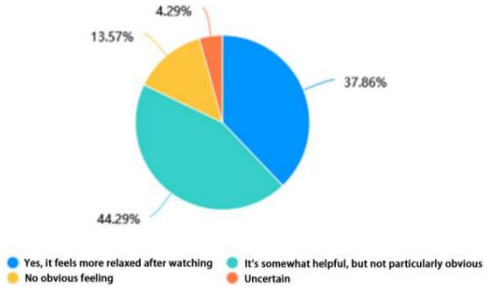

Fig. 12. Reported stress relief

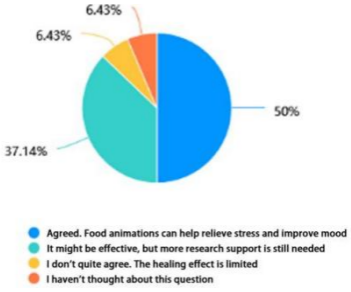

Fig. 13. Recognition of therapeutic potential

Food-focused animated films can greatly uplift mood, enhance psychological comfort, and alleviate anxiety, providing viewers with emotional support. Audiences value both the visual appeal and the stress-relief benefits of these films; their warm narratives and characters' enjoyment of food deliver powerful healing effects. By highlighting food textures and lively details, creators deepen immersion—and as AR, VR, and similar technologies advance, food animation's ability to engage viewers emotionally will grow stronger.

1.2 Innovations and Significance of the Study

This research, grounded in the art of animation and informed by insights from psychology and sociology, employs 3D animated film as both medium and bridge to explore how culinary culture can carry a function of psychological healing within visual storytelling. Unlike prior studies that have focused on food's cultural symbolism or its visual spectacle—or that have examined therapeutic effects in other film or picture-book genres—this study undertakes a systematic, multi-perspective analysis encompassing sensory experience, emotional projection, and psychological relief. It centers on the soothing impact of 3D food animation on viewers' emotions, and seeks to construct an integrated framework combining audiovisual design, psychological therapy, and culinary culture. We further validate the model's ability to enhance

viewers' psychological comfort through an online questionnaire administered via the Questionnaire Star platform.

Existing analyses of animated film stop at the level of food's visual wonder or cultural signifiers. By contrast, our study probes how food-themed 3D animated works function as emotional mediators, highlighting the unique advantages of 3D form. Through case studies of Pixar classics such as Ratatouille, Coco, and Luca, we distill the ways in which food elements in animation trigger viewers' emotional resonance.

First, this research foregrounds the role of 3D food animation in emotional soothing, aiming to offer fresh perspectives at the intersection of animation narrative and psychological healing. While earlier work has largely examined food as cultural symbol or visual motif, it has seldom addressed how food animation influences viewers' emotions and bolsters psychological comfort. Here, we begin from a therapeutic framework, investigating how animated food—through story structure, character interaction, and visual effect—stimulates viewers' sense of happiness and empathy. Food animation, beyond its entertainment value, can function as an emotional regulator: psychology tells us that healing often relies on emotional resonance and comfort, and food—an element naturally tied to memory—can, via details of texture, color, and lighting in animation, effectively evoke those emotional responses and offer consolation.

Second, 3D animation's designed food models help viewers alleviate anxiety and find emotional solace during viewing. Looking forward, such creations could be extended into clinical psychological interventions or digital art therapy, serving as a visually engaging, interactive complement to mental-health services.

A further emphasis of this study is its framing of psychological healing as the entry point for examining culinary culture's dual potential in 3D animation: cultural transmission and emotional connection. Food not only embodies regional cultural memory but also transcends linguistic and cultural barriers. In a globalized context, 3D animation employs food elements to subtly bridge cultural divides among diverse audiences, evoking empathy and attracting viewers worldwide to forge deep emotional bonds. Food-centered narratives can especially drive cross-cultural exchange and understanding—introducing global audiences to Chinese culinary traditions while amplifying their dissemination. Moreover, 3D food animation's direct visual language overcomes linguistic obstacles, conveys core messages, and builds emotional resonance, making it a highly engaging vehicle for intercultural communication. Future research might further explore the integration of culinary culture and psychological healing in 3D animation by developing dedicated "food-therapy" animated works. Coupling these with virtual reality could enable audiences to experience food preparation and tasting processes more immersively, thereby enhancing the healing effect.

2 Sensory Presentation of Food: From Physiological Arousal to Spiritual Resonance

Under the meticulous crafting of material, color, and light–shadow, 3D animated cuisine not only recreates the texture and flavor of food but, through the interplay of

sight and sound, also awakens viewers' imaginations of taste and emotional resonance. This chapter begins with visual modeling, color psychology, and lighting rendering, combined with sound design and musical scoring, to reveal how animation employs multisensory synesthesia to draw the audience into a virtual culinary world that feels both real and warm. It then explores how camera language, special-effects simulation, and editing rhythm stimulate physiological responses and touch memories at the soul level—completing a narrative journey from sensory awakening to emotional transcendence.

2.1 Audiovisual Modeling: From the Beauty of Food to the Reality of Sensation

In terms of visual presentation, material, color, and light–shadow effects together create a food-themed world. Detailed rendering of food textures makes each dish appear vividly appetizing, as if one can smell its overflowing aroma, while skillful use of color directly touches viewers' emotions and appetite.

First, the fine sculpting of materials plays an important role in 3D animation. Take Ratatouille as an example: every dish in the film is presented with realistic textures and sheen, which not only allows viewers to perceive freshness and flavor visually but also evokes a longing for food. When Remy prepares the Provençal stew, the tenderness of the vegetables, the gloss of the fat, and the rising steam are all depicted through 3D technology, making viewers in front of the screen almost "taste" the food's warmth and aroma.

Second, color expression and psychological guidance in food animation are especially critical. Color psychology research shows that red is the most appetite-stimulating hue, capable of arousing hunger and enthusiasm for tasting[1], while warm tones like yellow and orange create a warm, joyful atmosphere and enhance the food's appeal[2]. Pixar deeply understands color psychology. In Coco (2017, dir. Lee Unkrich), traditional offerings on the Day of the Dead ofrenda—such as tamales and pan de muerto—are often rendered in orange-yellow and deep red, not only creating a festive, celebratory atmosphere but also stimulating appetite and emotional resonance. Red triggers viewers' taste associations, while golden yellow brings warmth and joy; together, they make the food scenes a visual feast.

Next, lighting effects in food animation, through clever arrangement of light in each shot, enhance the scene's three-dimensionality and emotional expression. Soft lighting makes the food appear even warmer, while shadows reveal its layers, guiding viewers to psychological relaxation through visual experience. In Ratatouille, the lighting design in cooking scenes uses contrasts of light and shadow and an overall warm tone to convey the happiness and satisfaction brought by food. In Coco, the ofrenda's offerings shimmer under candlelight and golden marigold petals, reinforcing the emotional theme of "flavors of memory" and making food a sensory bridge between the living and the dead.

Beyond visual synesthesia, Pixar also emphasizes auditory detail, further materializing "taste imagination" through precise sound effects and musical scoring. In Ratatouille, every chop, stir, or drizzle is accompanied by sound effects like "chop," "siz-

zle," or "plop," recreating the real sounds of cooking. These authentic kitchen noises tightly synchronize with the 3D visuals, triggering viewers' taste associations—when they hear the "sizzle" of hot oil, they almost "smell" the spices evaporating. In Coco, the background includes not only gentle festive music but also the crackle of the stove, the thud of dough being cut, and distant laughter from the village, layering a soundscape that turns food from a static image into a lively, flowing scene.

The integration of audiovisual modeling enables Pixar's 3D animation to transcend the limitations of 2D planes and narration, allowing viewers to experience a multisensory synesthesia of visual, auditory, and imagined taste—thereby achieving psychological healing from physiological arousal to spiritual resonance.

2.2 Scenes and Editing: Synesthesia Effects and Emotional Resonance

In Pixar's 3D culinary scenes, visual effects and post-production editing not only convey the visual impact of food but also, through rhythm and transitions, tightly weave together emotional tension and the sensation of deliciousness—further reinforcing the journey from physiological arousal to spiritual resonance.

In Ratatouille, when Remy sautés the Provençal stew, the swirling steam in the pot, the splattering fat, and the tiny bubbles in the seasoning sauce are all rendered via high-precision fluid and particle simulations. As the camera slowly pushes in above the cauldron, the steam rises like diaphanous veils, each wisp carrying the aroma of the ingredients—making viewers feel as though they can "touch" that warmth. In Coco, on the Day of the Dead ofrenda in the Land of the Dead, the surfaces of tamales and pan de muerto are surrounded by subtle halos and particulate effects, which enhance the food's sacredness and ritual significance. The glow effects not only accentuate the three-dimensional texture of the dishes but also make them appear to emanate a comforting warmth. At pivotal moments of culinary completion in Ratatouille, the film combines slow push-ins with extreme close-ups in slow motion. When Remy places the final slice of eggplant on the plate's rim, the shot freezes on the steaming surface, then slowly advances the camera to lock viewers' focus on the changing hues and texture details—delivering an intense sense of visual immersion.

In the "Family Ofrenda" sequence of Coco, the film uses cross-cutting: first sweeping with a long shot over the abundant festive foods, then cutting to close-ups of Miguel tasting them with his ancestors. The edit seamlessly matches "hand picking up pan de muerto → memory flashback → hand holding pan de muerto," underscoring food's dual role as both cultural artifact and mnemonic conduit. Pixar's animations typically synchronize cooking sound effects with editing rhythms. In Ratatouille, the sounds of the knife slicing, spices falling, and spatula turning align precisely with each cut or camera move—creating a rhythm of "sound, image, and taste" that ingeniously unites visual deliciousness with auditory anticipation.

3 Culinary Narratives: From Cultural Identity to Psychological Healing

Through the interconnection of characters, cuisine, and culture, Pixar animation organically blends regional fare, festive traditions, and personal memories in its culinary narratives, crafting character journeys rich in cultural identity. Audiences, entwined in "taste" and "emotion," rediscover and embrace those dishes that carry their own cultural memories.

3.1 Role Characterization and Culinary Cultural Identification

In Pixar's narrative framework, food is not merely an element satisfying characters' physiological needs but also a storytelling medium that deeply shapes personality and conveys cultural sentiment. Through careful depiction of food textures, color, and environmental atmosphere, cuisine mirrors characters' inner worlds—embodying holiday traditions, regional memories, and personal emotions—evoking strong emotional resonance beyond mere visual pleasure[3]. Here, food ceases to be a background prop and becomes a vital emotional link, opening the door to characters' spiritual depths and infusing the story with warmth and nuance.

Protagonists in culinary animations are often passionate cooks who not only master culinary skills but also regard food as an emotional bridge, demonstrating reverence and craftsmanship in their cooking. In Ratatouille, Remy—a rat blessed with extraordinary taste—transforms a simple home-style stew into an exemplar of "refinement in the ordinary," fulfilling his chef's dream through love and perseverance. When the critic tastes Remy's stew, a clever edit transports us to his childhood family table—tying his personal memory to regional cuisine and showcasing food's function as a "vessel of cultural memory." His story illustrates culinary creativity and conveys the idea that "good food knows no boundaries." In Luca (2021, dir. Enrico Casarosa), although "food" is not the central theme, scenes of characters sharing pasta and gelato in an Italian seaside village communicate that "food equals belonging," allowing viewers to feel warmth of friendship amid simple fare.

In culinary animations, characters' living environments not only build unique worlds but also reflect local food cultures and individual traits through their interactions with food. In Ratatouille, Remy moves confidently in a high-end restaurant's kitchen—its pristine workstations, exquisite tableware, and elegant plating motions evoking French cuisine's rigor and artistry. Yet on a Paris street stall, the abundance of home-style specialties, the vendor's hearty welcome, and the chatter of passersby inject warmth and humanity into the food—mirroring Remy's longing for freedom and authentic living. Coco uses the Day of the Dead backdrop to present offerings as carriers of ancestral memory, making food an emotional link across time. Miguel shares hometown dishes with his great-grandmother in the Land of the Dead, underscoring food's role as a "container of cultural memory." His navigation between the living world and the Land of the Dead—his reverence for traditional Mexican fare like tamales and pan de muerto—embodies both a taste for festive foods and a quest

for familial roots. As Miguel places each offering by candlelight, accompanied by ancestral songs, food becomes a bridge of dialogue between generations, bearing remembrance for the departed and love for "home."

These diverse culinary portrayals in Pixar's films—supported by 3D technology—enhance immersive experience and amplify food's function as both emotional medium and cultural symbol, enabling audiences of different backgrounds to experience cultural identity, belonging, and emotional resonance through characters' interactions with cuisine.

3.2 Food Elements as Drivers and Psychological Healing

Food elements not only drive narrative development as storytelling clues but also, as cultural symbols, serve an emotional healing function. In the plot, characters achieve emotional release and self-healing by cooking or tasting food, while viewers resonate and gain psychological solace through the cultural symbolism and emotional atmosphere carried by that food.

In Ratatouille, when Remy works alone in the kitchen—stir-frying, chopping, seasoning—his obsessive pursuit of perfection is more than a quest for culinary skill; it is an affirmation of his self-worth. In a slow-motion close-up late at night, the interwoven details and rhythm of cooking symbolize his mental focus and stress relief, granting him inner peace and self-acceptance. Similarly, the evolution of the food and dining scenes for the family of Linguini in Ratatouille not only mirrors their journey from ordinary to extraordinary but also sows seeds of courage and confidence in the audience. Food becomes both the outlet for characters' emotional outbursts and a medium through which viewers draw strength for life.

When the story reaches the moment Remy presents a humble vegetable stew (ratatouille) to the formidable critic Anton Ego, the dish becomes the key to both plot twist and emotional climax. The scene opens with a medium shot of Remy preparing and sautéing in the kitchen, accompanied by the rhythmic sounds of the stove. The atmosphere grows heavy as the camera cuts to Ego. As he tastes the first spoonful, his expression shifts from skepticism to surprise, then he closes his eyes, fully immersed—a childhood memory of home slowly surfaces in his mind. Through the stew's texture, aroma, and color, the scene resonates with Ego's deepest ancestral nostalgia, transforming his critical guard into vulnerability and emotion. Here, food ceases to be a static symbol; it becomes both the embodiment of Remy's creativity and the catalyst for Ego's emotional breakthrough, driving the narrative to its peak and allowing viewers to experience "food as an emotional bridge" through combined visual and auditory resonance.

In Luca, food elements play an equally pivotal role in advancing narrative and elevating the film's themes. The open-air table laden with steaming handmade pasta and seafood snacks handed over by Grandma not only establishes a specific cultural setting but also conveys the gentle support underlying a boy's coming of age. Though food appears merely as garnish in the story, the island's homemade pasta and gelato are not just the town's everyday "flavors"; they become markers of Luca and Alberto's friendship. Sitting side by side at a vine-covered outdoor table for the first time,

golden sunlight filters through grape leaves, the pasta glistens with olive oil, and gelato melts on their tongues with soft "glurp" sounds—they exchange a knowing smile. From that moment, they share more than a treat; they forge a bond of unspoken understanding and belonging. Viewers outside the screen can almost smell that plate of pasta and seafood snacks on the seaside table, transported by the summer breeze and memories of family gatherings. Sunlight dapples through leaves, pasta gleams with oil, gelato softly melts, and worries seem to wash away with the sound of waves.

Psychological healing—a key concept in psychology and art therapy—helps individuals restore equilibrium, relieve stress, and improve mood through perception, experience, and emotional expression. In 3D animated food narratives, this process relies on three mechanisms. First, psychodynamic transference[4] enables viewers to project unexpressed emotions onto characters' cooking or tasting experiences, achieving catharsis and relief. Second, cognitive-behavioral theory suggests that positive visual impact and characters' growth arcs—overcoming obstacles through cooking or sharing meals—can reshape viewers' perceptions of events, offering hope and reinforcing perseverance. Third, humanistic concepts of unconditional positive regard and empathy[5], conveyed through relatable character portrayals, make viewers feel accepted and supported, fostering emotional comfort and self-acceptance. Together, these mechanisms ensure that food elements not only drive the animation's plot but also facilitate viewers' journey from sensory arousal to emotional healing through their engagement with the characters and cuisine.

4 Conclusion

This study reveals the unique narrative and emotional power of culinary elements in Pixar's 3D animations. Meticulous food modeling, rhythmic audiovisual design, and nuanced character expressions during tasting not only enhance immersion but also create channels for emotional catharsis and psychological restoration. Food transcends mere visual spectacle, acting as a cultural symbol that evokes deep-seated memories and fosters cross-cultural resonance—exemplified by the ancestral offerings in Coco or the friendship-affirming gelato in Luca. These elements collectively enable viewers to experience subconscious healing through sensory engagement and cultural identification, as evidenced by survey data showing significant anxiety reduction and emotional comfort among audiences.

Looking ahead, advances in real-time rendering, ray tracing, and VR promise to amplify food animation's therapeutic impact. Physically accurate simulations (e.g., fluid dynamics for steaming dishes) could enable immersive "virtual cooking" experiences for clinical interventions or digital art therapy. Beyond its artistic merits, culinary animation holds vast commercial and cultural potential: Iconic food scenes (Coco's ofrenda feasts, Luca's pasta) can anchor cross-media IP strategies—spanning short videos, AR recipe unlocks, themed restaurants, and tourism tie-ins. By balancing authentic regional flavors with universal emotional themes, such initiatives transform animated cuisine into bridges for cultural exchange while pioneering dual breakthroughs in mental health innovation and creative industry growth.

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