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REPRESENTATION OF DISCRIMINATION IN THE ANIMATED MOVIE "ZOOTOPIA" (2016): JOHN FISKE'S SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS

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Abstract: This study explores the representation of discrimination in the animated film *Zootopia* through a semiotic analysis based on John Fiske's three levels of codes: reality, representation, and ideology. The research aims to identify how visual and narrative elements convey ideological messages about social inequality, prejudice, and systemic bias. At the reality level, discrimination is depicted through observable details such as clothing, physical appearance, gestures, and speech patterns. These elements highlight the unequal treatment of characters based on species, size, gender, and class—revealing how social roles are visually and culturally constructed. At the representation level, these real-world cues are translated into specific character interactions and storylines, such as Judy Hopps' struggle for acceptance as a rabbit police officer or Mayor Lionheart's domination over Assistant Mayor Bellwether. These scenes expose the mechanisms by which stereotypes and biases are perpetuated in society. At the ideological level, the film critiques hierarchical power structures and the symbolic markers that maintain social divisions—such as clothing, spatial segregation, and occupational roles. The findings reveal that *Zootopia* not only reflects existing societal norms but also challenges viewers to question and resist prejudice and discrimination. Through this layered analysis, the study concludes that *Zootopia* is a powerful medium for raising awareness about discrimination, encouraging audiences to reflect on issues of diversity, privilege, and social justice in both fictional and real-world contexts.
Keywords: *Discrimination, semiotic, representation, Zootopia, John Fiske, animated film*

INTRODUCTION

The film serves as a medium for conveying messages to audiences and consists of two key elements: narrative and cinematic techniques. These elements enable films to perform various functions, such as expressing ideas (film as art), promoting messages or ideologies (film as propaganda), and generating profit through commercial appeal (film as a business) (Syaukat & Imanjaya, 2011). Films are not only a form of entertainment but also powerful vehicles for social commentary, often portraying the realities, challenges, and injustices faced by individuals and groups within society. Among the most frequently explored social issues in film is discrimination, which includes unjust treatment based on gender, race, ethnicity, religion, or social class.

According to Dovidio (2010), discrimination is the unfair treatment of individuals based on their group membership. Unlike prejudice or stereotypes, discrimination involves actual behaviors and can occur at individual, institutional, or cultural levels—often in subtle or indirect ways. Ellis et al. (2010) add that discrimination is frequently associated with divisions across ethnicity, religion, race, gender, and social hierarchy. For instance, gender-based discrimination positions women as weaker or inferior, while racial discrimination remains deeply embedded, especially in societies like the United States, as highlighted by the murder of George Floyd (George et al., 2020). While some films, such as *The Avengers* (Yufandar, 2016), attempt to portray a sense of racial equality, real disparities in social, economic, and intellectual opportunities persist.

In the realm of cinema, particularly animated films, these complex social messages are often conveyed through symbols, metaphors, and character portrayals. *Zootopia*, a 2016 animated film produced by Walt Disney Animation Studios,

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presents a unique and nuanced depiction of discrimination through anthropomorphic animal characters. Set in a modern metropolis where predator and prey animals coexist, the story follows Judy Hopps, a rabbit who becomes the first of her species to join the police force, and Nick Wilde, a fox with a troubled past shaped by societal prejudice. As Judy and Nick work together to solve a missing persons case, the film subtly explores themes of prejudice, racial profiling, gender bias, and institutional discrimination. Through conflicts, character development, and visual symbolism, *Zootopia* presents a rich terrain for analyzing how discrimination is represented and challenged.

The term representation in this study refers to the process by which meaning is constructed and conveyed through media. According to Hall (1997), representation is not a passive reflection of reality but an active process of creating meaning through language, images, signs, and symbols. Representation helps shape public understanding by framing how social groups and issues are depicted in media. In this context, *Zootopia* does not merely reflect discrimination; it constructs and communicates ideas about it through its storytelling choices, character dynamics, and visual cues. Hermayanthi (2021) emphasizes that representation plays a crucial role in how individuals interpret their environment and social interactions. Therefore, analyzing how discrimination is represented in *Zootopia* allows us to explore how the film encourages reflection on real-world social hierarchies and biases.

This study investigates these constructed meanings by employing Fiske's (1985) semiotic theory, which offers a detailed framework for understanding how signs operate in media texts. Fiske categorizes the analysis of media signs into three levels: reality, representation, and ideology. Reality refers to the raw elements drawn from everyday life; representation is how those elements are encoded in media, and ideology pertains to the values and beliefs conveyed. In the case of *Zootopia*, these levels interact through the animal characters, settings, and storylines that symbolize human social structures and discriminatory systems. Semiotics, as defined by Behera (2024), is the study of signs and meaning-making. It is especially useful for analyzing animated films where abstract social themes are communicated through metaphor and symbolism.

Several previous studies have analyzed discrimination in animated films. Devyana and Nugroho (2024), for example, explored the impact of discrimination in Pixar's *Elemental* using the discrimination theory by Dovidio et al. (2010), revealing how minority characters experience exclusion and identity conflict. Another study by Muqoddas and Hasyim (2016) examined anti-discrimination in *Zootopia*, using Roland Barthes' semiotics to show how the characters overcame prejudice. However, these studies either use different theoretical frameworks or do not explore the full potential of Fiske's (1985) layered semiotic analysis. This research addresses that gap by employing Fiske's three levels of semiotics to analyze how *Zootopia* represents discrimination not only through surface-level symbols but also through deeper ideological structures.

Thus, this study seeks to analyze the representation of discrimination in the animated movie *Zootopia* (2016) using Fiske's (1985) semiotic theory. By focusing on how characters and narrative elements construct meaning through signs, this research explores how the film portrays discrimination, power dynamics, and social inequality. This study contributes to the broader discourse on media representation, offering a more nuanced understanding of how animated films like *Zootopia* engage audiences in complex conversations about injustice and societal norms.

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METHOD

This research utilizes a qualitative method with a semiotic approach to examine how discrimination is represented in the animated film *Zootopia* (2016). A qualitative approach is ideal for this type of analysis as it allows for flexible, in-depth interpretation of symbolic meanings in media, particularly in animated films where messages are often conveyed through metaphor and allegory (Waruwu, 2024). The study applies Fiske's (1985) semiotic theory from *Television Culture* (1987), which analyzes signs across three levels—reality, representation, and ideology—to uncover not only the film's surface content but also its deeper ideological structures. Though originally designed for television, this framework is widely used in film studies for its effectiveness in revealing how media texts construct and communicate social meanings.

Fiske's theory is particularly relevant to the analysis of Zootopia because, although the film features anthropomorphic animals instead of humans, the characters and their interactions function as allegories for real-world social structures, power dynamics, and discriminatory practices. As a result, a semiotic approach is well-suited for unpacking how elements within the film—such as character traits, dialogues, conflicts, and visual codes—encode deeper meanings related to race, gender, class, and systemic inequality. Fiske's framework helps bridge the gap between fictional animal representations and the real human ideologies they reflect.

Data Collection

The main object of this research is the animated film *Zootopia*, produced by Walt Disney Animation Studios and released in 2016. The film was selected due to its rich narrative exploring themes of discrimination, stereotypes, social prejudice, and power dynamics through the metaphor of predator-prey interspecies relationships. The analysis focuses on various cinematic elements, including characters, dialogue, storylines, and visual representations that construct the idea of discrimination.

This study supports the analysis by utilizing two types of data: primary and secondary. The primary source is the film *Zootopia* itself. The researcher conducts repeated viewings of the film and applies textual analysis to identify key scenes, dialogues, character interactions, and symbolic visuals that convey themes of discrimination. In contrast, secondary data includes journal articles, academic discussions of discrimination, film criticism, scholarly reviews, and literature related to Fiske's (1985) theory. Secondary data supports the interpretation of primary data by providing contextual background, theoretical depth, and alternative perspectives. For example, scholarly critiques of *Zootopia* or studies on symbolic discrimination in media can help validate or challenge the interpretations drawn from the primary analysis.

Data Analysis

This study employs Fiske's (1985) semiotic theory to analyze how the animated film *Zootopia* represents discrimination. Fiske's model consists of three interconnected levels: reality, representation, and ideology—each offering a lens to understand how meaning is constructed and communicated through media texts.

At the reality level, the analysis focuses on how characters, settings, and actions—though depicted through anthropomorphic animals—mimic real-life social behaviors and norms, allowing the film to reflect everyday experiences of bias and exclusion. The representation level examines how these social behaviors are encoded through cinematic techniques such as narrative structure, dialogue, framing, and editing, revealing how meaning is deliberately shaped within the story. The ideology level then uncovers the broader social values and power dynamics embedded in the film, particularly

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those related to systemic discrimination, racial stereotypes, and institutional inequality.

Fiske's framework has been widely applied in media studies. For instance, Jhally and Lewis (1992) used it to analyze how *The Cosby Show* negotiates racial ideology. More recently, Vega (2024) used a similar semiotic approach in analyzing Disney's *Coco* and *Encanto*, demonstrating how even animated films can communicate complex social themes like generational trauma through visual and narrative signs. The researcher uses note-taking to systematically observe and record key scenes, dialogues, and visuals in *Zootopia*, allowing a structured interpretation of its semiotic elements across Fiske's three levels and a clearer understanding of how the film portrays discrimination.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Zootopia is a 108-minute animated film by Walt Disney Animation Studios set in a fictional world of anthropomorphic animals whose society reflects human-like structures and behaviors. Though the characters are animals, their interactions mirror real-world social issues, particularly discrimination and systemic inequality, as seen in the tensions between predators and prey.

This study employs Fiske's (1985) semiotic approach, analyzing three levels: 1) The level of reality (what is physically shown: expression, gesture, speech), 2) The level of representation (how meaning is constructed through narrative and conflict), 3) The level of ideology (the deeper societal values and systems that underlie the portrayal).

Discrimination Based on Speciesism

Speciesism, as discussed, involves the discrimination or unequal treatment of individuals based on their species, often manifesting in societal and cultural biases that assign differing moral worth and rights to various species (Caviola et al., 2019). This form of discrimination is not only present in human-animal relationships but also subtly ingrained in media, culture, and popular narratives (Grande, 2017). Understanding speciesism helps us uncover the ways in which it shapes perceptions, behaviors, and societal norms.

Turning to media, such as the 2016 animated film *Zootopia*, speciesism is both explicitly and implicitly portrayed not just as an abstract concept but as a deeply embedded theme that is woven into the very fabric of storytelling. In this context, the movie becomes a powerful tool for reflecting societal attitudes toward prejudice and discrimination, offering a rich field for semiotic analysis.

A Case of Institutional Speciesism

In *Zootopia* (Figure 1: Scene 23, 58:05–01:00:00), young Nick Wilde, a fox, enthusiastically attempts to join the Junior Ranger Scouts—a group of herbivorous animals. "*I was gonna be part of a pack,*" he recalls proudly. As he begins the initiation, he raises his paw and says, "*I, Nicholas Wilde, promise to be brave, loyal, helpful, and trustworthy!*" However, the mood shifts when the woodchuck bully interrupts with a pointed question: "*Even though you're a fox?*"

Figure 1. *Scene 23 (58:05 – 01:00:00)*

This question and the subsequent physical assault—pushing Nick down and strapping a muzzle on him—exposes the core issue: Nick is rejected not for his actions but for his species. His terrified protest, "*What did I do wrong?!*" underscores the injustice and emotional toll of such discrimination.

The muzzle, forced onto Nick's face, serves as a powerful symbol. It is not just a

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device to silence or restrain; it represents societal mistrust toward predators, particularly foxes. The bully's mocking remark—"*If you thought we would ever trust a fox without a muzzle, you're even dumber than you look!*"—makes it clear that this mistrust is systemic, not personal.

This moment portrays the harsh reality of how animals, based on their species, are treated differently in society. Despite Nick's youthful enthusiasm and desire to belong, he faces rejection solely because he is a fox. His frightened expression and the scornful mockery of the Woodchuck bully reveal a fundamental truth: Nick's species defines how he is perceived and treated.

The act of the woodchuck bullying Nick and forcibly putting a muzzle on him functions as a powerful symbolic gesture of exclusion. The muzzle is not merely a physical object but a representation of societal bias, depicting the notion that Nick, as a fox—a predator—is inherently dangerous and untrustworthy. The physical dominance exhibited by the Woodchuck and the passive participation of the other scouts underlines how systemic speciesism is ingrained in social structures (Kemmer, 2011), even within seemingly innocent spaces like a youth group. This scene utilizes physical actions—muzzling—to symbolically symbolize how stereotypes are physically and emotionally imposed on individuals based on species.

At a deeper ideological level, this scene reflects the institutionalized nature of speciesism within Zootopia. The absence of authority or intervention from adults and the fact that the social norms are carried out in the presence of the scouts' peers reflects the normalization of such discriminatory practices. This exclusion is not a single, isolated incident; instead, it suggests that society's broader narrative deems foxes—and, by extension, predators—as inherently unreliable and dangerous. The film's ideological message is clear: institutional biases, particularly those surrounding species, are often perpetuated by social norms and are passed down from early childhood. The narrative reinforces that species-based discrimination is embedded within society's structures, highlighting how prejudice is not only seen in overt laws but in the socialized behavior of individuals within communities.

Casual Stereotyping and Prejudice

In *Zootopia* (Figure 2: Scene 7, 15:17–16:37), Judy Hopps arrives at the Zootopia Police Department as the first rabbit officer—an achievement that should be celebrated. Instead, she is met with subtle forms of bias masked as humor and indifference.

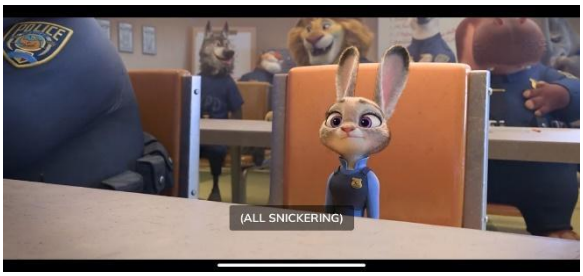

Figure 2. *Scene 7 (15:17 – 16:37)*

Officer Clawhauser, surprised by her presence, exclaims, "*They really did hire a bunny!*" and follows up with, "*You are even cuter than I thought you'd be!*" Though seemingly friendly, this remark is a microaggression that trivializes Judy's role, reducing her to a stereotype of cuteness rather than a trained officer. Judy's polite correction—"*A bunny can call another bunny cute, but when other animals do it, it's a little…*"—is a quiet resistance to this casual species-based stereotyping. Her discomfort is clear, yet she masks it to remain professional. Chief Bogo's treatment is more overtly dismissive. During the morning briefing, he announces, "*There are some new recruits I should introduce, but I'm not going to, because I don't care.*" His refusal to acknowledge Judy not only signals his disregard for her but also sets the tone for how others perceive her role. When he hands out the major assignments—missing predator cases—Judy is instead relegated to "*parking*

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duty." Her confusion and disappointment prompt her to assert herself: "*Sir, I'm not just some token bunny.*" Yet Bogo coldly replies, "*Didn't forget. Just don't care,*" undermining her qualifications and reinforcing her marginal status.

This scene illustrates how institutional environments often project inclusivity while maintaining deep-rooted prejudices. Despite graduating top of her class, Judy is excluded from meaningful tasks because of her species and size. Her struggle to be taken seriously reflects the real-world experience of minorities entering elite or homogenous spaces—where stereotypes overshadow competence, and diversity is treated as symbolic rather than substantive.

The workplace dynamics are further reinforced through body language: Chief Bogo crosses his arms and avoids eye contact; Officer McHorn physically nudges Judy aside as if she's in the way. These visual cues amplify the emotional tone of exclusion and reinforce the dominance-based hierarchy within ZPD.

Ultimately, this scene critiques how meritocratic institutions often fail to live up to their ideals. By sidelining Judy, the ZPD reveals itself as a structure that rewards conformity to traditional power (size, species, masculinity) and resists change from perceived outsiders. Judy's presence challenges these norms, and the system responds by attempting to neutralize her through marginalization—highlighting the gap between token inclusion and real institutional equity.

Speciesism and Social Segregation

In *Zootopia* (Figure 3: Scene 8, 18:39–19:45), Nick Wilde encounters overt species-based discrimination at Jumbeaux's Café, a space dominated by elephants and marked by visual and behavioral exclusion. Although Nick behaves respectfully, he is instantly treated with suspicion. Jerry Jumbeaux Jr., the elephant owner, confronts him: *"I don't know what you're doing skulking around during daylight hours, but I don't want any trouble in here—so hit the road!"* This accusation, made before any wrongdoing, exposes deep-seated prejudice. Nick replies calmly, *"I'm not looking for any trouble either, sir. I simply wanna buy a Jumbo-pop for my little boy."*

Figure 3. *Scene 8 (18:39 – 19:45)*

The situation escalates despite Nick's courteous tone. When his "son," a small fennec fox named Finnick dressed in an elephant costume, points at the cherry-flavored pop, Jerry reacts with condescension: *"What? There aren't any fox ice cream joints in your part of town?"* This remark draws an imaginary boundary, implying foxes don't belong in certain public spaces. The ice cream parlor becomes a symbolic site of segregation, where foxes are seen as outsiders who don't deserve equal access.

Adding to the hostility, Jerry mocks Nick's intelligence, saying, *"You probably can't read, fox,"* before pointing to a sign: *"We reserve the right to refuse service to anyone."* His aggressive stance is reinforced by a customer who physically pushes Nick, exclaiming, *"You're holding up the line!"* These actions show how public complicity strengthens systemic exclusion—Jerry initiates the discrimination, and the other customer supports it.

Even Nick's attempt to soften perceptions through performance—gently patting Finnick on the head and joking, *"This goofy little stinker… he loves all things elephant… Who the heck am I to crush his little dreams, huh?"*—fails to overcome the speciesist bias. His exaggerated friendliness and constructed fatherly identity underscore the social performance marginalized

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individuals often adopt to appear less threatening and more "acceptable."

Judy's presence as a police officer briefly disrupts the dynamic. Her sympathetic look and decision to remain at the counter challenge Jerry's authority. Yet, her power stems not from shared experience but from institutional authority. Without her badge, Nick likely wouldn't be served at all. This detail reflects a broader critique: access to rights and services often depends on intervention from those with privilege or power rather than being guaranteed for all.

This scene is a direct allegory for racial or class segregation in real-world societies. It illustrates how speciesism—like racism or classism—is normalized, publicly reinforced, and structurally upheld. Nick is denied not because of what he does but because of what he is: a fox. The elephant-run shop doesn't merely reflect individual bias but a system that polices belonging and excludes those who don't fit dominant norms. Thus, the scene underscores how prejudice is performed, shared, and institutionalized—echoing patterns of exclusion still prevalent in many human societies.

Speciesism and Social Conditioning

In this pivotal childhood scene, *Judy Hopps* is violently attacked by *Gideon Grey*, a young fox who represents the predator class. Gideon's mocking line—*"What crazy world are you livin' in where you think a bunny could be a cop?"*—illustrates how species-based prejudice is internalized and weaponized at an early age. His words are not only cruel; they are ideologically loaded, reinforcing the belief that prey animals like Judy should "stay in their place."

Figure 4. *Scene 2 (04:36 – 05:24)*

Judy's calm but firm response—*"Kindly return my friend's tickets"*—reflects her early sense of justice and moral courage. However, Gideon responds by shoving her and taunting, *"Scared now?"* before slashing her cheek with his claws. The physical wound he inflicts is mirrored by a psychological one when he declares: *"Remember this moment the next time you think you'll ever be anything more than just a stupid, carrot-farming dumb bunny!"*

Judy's experience is not simply bullying—it is an attempt to enforce a speciesist social hierarchy. Gideon invokes the idea that "killer instinct" is still in predators' *"DNA,"* suggesting that superiority is biological and therefore unchangeable. His attack becomes an effort to condition Judy to accept her inferiority as natural, just as dominant groups in human society often rationalize inequality through pseudoscientific or traditional justifications.

What makes the moment especially powerful is Judy's muted but determined response. Despite being physically hurt and humiliated, she picks up her officer hat, looks forward with resolve, and states: *"Well, he was right about one thing—I don't know when to quit."* This statement marks an ideological rupture. Rather than internalizing the inferiority projected onto her, Judy resists it. Her refusal to surrender to the social expectations tied to her species defies the imposed norm and introduces a counter-narrative rooted in individual agency.

The scene, therefore, highlights how speciesism is conditioned through both rhetoric and violence and how marginalized individuals must develop psychological resilience to survive and push back. Judy's determination symbolizes a refusal to be shaped by the constraints of prejudice—a message that echoes broader social struggles against racism, sexism, and classism in the real world.

Speciesism in Uniform

In scene 28, Officer Judy Hopps stands before the press as the face of the Zootopia

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Police Department, confidently stating: *"We at the ZPD are prepared and here to protect you."* On the surface, her tone is calm and authoritative—seemingly a call for unity and vigilance. However, as the press probes deeper, Judy makes a startling claim: *"All we know is that they are all members of the predator family."* This seemingly factual statement introduces a biological binary—predators versus prey—subtly positioning predators as the implicit threat. When asked why this is happening, she speculates: *"It may have something to do with biology... something in their DNA... they seem to be reverting back to their primitive, savage ways."*

Figure 5. *Scene 28 (01:10:24 – 01 13:40)*

Judy's use of the phrase *"something in their DNA"* echoes centuries of pseudo-scientific rhetoric used to justify discrimination in the real world. Her language essentializes predators, suggesting their violent behavior is not circumstantial but inherent and immutable—a naturalized form of danger.

Although Judy believes she's presenting objective facts, her position as a uniformed officer gives her words institutional weight. Her statement doesn't just reflect a personal view—it becomes an ideological stance, legitimizing public fear. The immediate press response— *"Have you considered a mandatory quarantine on predators?"*—demonstrates how quickly biased narratives can influence systemic action.

The damage of this speciesist framing becomes deeply personal when we shift to Nick Wilde. His face changes as he hears Judy refer to *"primitive instincts."* The camera lingers on his growing unease. When Judy later reaches for her fox repellent during an emotional confrontation, Nick recoils and asks: *"You think I might go savage?"*

This question is both a plea and an accusation—exposing how deeply institutional bias wounds individual dignity. Nick's reaction evokes his earlier trauma—muzzled and marginalized simply for being a fox—and now, those same fears are reinforced by someone he trusts.

In this moment, the film uncovers how speciesism operates both systemically and intimately. Judy, though well-intentioned, becomes a vessel of ideological oppression. By relying on biological determinism, she inadvertently revives ancient fears and validates discriminatory action. Her narrative aligns predators with danger despite the lack of conclusive evidence.

Thus, this scene underscores a critical truth: oppression is not always the result of malice—sometimes, it's born from ignorance, magnified by power, and delivered with a smile behind a podium. Speciesism here is not just personal prejudice—it becomes public policy, social panic, and structural injustice.

Speciesism and the Politics of Fear in Zootopia

As the number of violent incidents rises, the Zootopia News Network (ZNN) reports that *"a caribou is in critical condition, the victim of a mauling by a savage polar bear."* The term *savage* becomes a powerful ideological label, especially when Fabienne Growley adds, *"This, the 27th such attack, comes just one week after ZPD officer Judy Hopps connected the violence to traditionally predatory animals."*

This moment catalyzes a shift in public perception. Species once seen as part of a harmonious society are now viewed with suspicion. At a peace rally, a *Frantic Pig* yells, *"Go back to the forest, predator!"* in response to a nearby leopard holding a sign that reads, *"I'm from the savannah!"* This

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exchange underscores the irrationality of the prejudice—where geographical stereotypes substitute actual understanding. The leopard's sign resists the homogenization of predators, yet her voice is drowned in a rising tide of fear.

Figure 6. *Scene 29 (1:13:40 – 1:15:30)*

In a striking scene that follows, a tiger sits quietly on a train next to a bunny mother and her child. He is entirely non-threatening, absorbed in his phone. Yet the mother clutches her child protectively. Her eyes are wide, and her posture is rigid. The child averts his gaze. This subtle but powerful moment shows how fear has permeated everyday life, even without provocation.

The visual juxtaposition between the docile tiger and the fearful prey underscores the mechanics of social alienation. The tiger's silence speaks volumes—he is not just physically isolated but emotionally marginalized. The scene uses visual storytelling to reflect a society that has begun to draw lines of suspicion purely based on biology.

This moment encapsulates *speciesism*—a constructed social hierarchy based on species identity rather than individual behavior. Predators are now treated as inherently dangerous, regardless of their actions. Judy's earlier implication, though unintended, has helped normalize this binary. Gazelle later pleads, *"We cannot let fear divide us,"* challenging this essentialist view. But her statement also acknowledges how deeply fear has embedded itself into the societal psyche.

The ideology here mirrors real-world structures of racism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia, where individuals are judged by group affiliation rather than personal conduct. The predator-prey dynamic becomes an allegory for the consequences of institutional fear-mongering. The film critiques how systems and language (like calling someone "savage") can be weaponized to sustain social hierarchies and justify exclusion.

Scene 29 powerfully illustrates how fear, once legitimized by authority and media, can fuel species-based prejudice. Zootopia, once a symbol of pluralism, begins to fracture under the weight of speciesism—echoing broader critiques of how stereotypes, when internalized by the public, corrode the very foundation of a diverse society.

Discrimination Based on Social Class

Occupational Discrimination in Institutional Training

In Scene 3, Judy Hopps' time at the Zootopia Police Academy exposes a layer of class-based bias embedded in institutional training. During various drills across the city's climate zones, her instructor, Major Friedkin, repeatedly singles her out—not merely for underperformance but through mocking references to her rural, working-class background.

When Judy struggles through a sandstorm simulation, Friedkin yells: *"You're dead, bunny bumpkin!"*

Later, as Judy slips off icy walls, falls into the mud, and fails to take down a larger opponent, Friedkin cycles through derogatory names: *"Carrot face!"*, *"Farm girl!"*, *"Fluff-butt!"*—each one not just a jab at her abilities but a dismissal of her social identity.

Figure 7. *Scene 3 (06:07 – 06:44)*

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These insults—anchored in Judy's rural origins and her parents' carrot-farming occupation—highlight how language is weaponized to enforce social hierarchies. Friedkin never uses such personalized or class-loaded insults on the other, larger cadets. The repeated framing of Judy as a "bunny" and "farm girl" implies that she doesn't belong—not because of performance, but because of who she is and where she comes from.

At the Level of Reality, this reflects how individuals from rural or lower socioeconomic backgrounds often face institutionalized gatekeeping, where they're judged not on potential but on perceived fit.

At the Level of Representation, Judy's struggle becomes symbolic. Her body and background are used as tools for exclusion—suggesting that policing, and by extension authority, belongs to those from more "serious" or urban origins.

And at the Level of Ideology, the film subtly critiques classism in professional spaces. Judy's journey represents the broader challenge of social mobility: her rural roots mark her as "less-than" in an elite, urban-centric institution. She must work harder not just to succeed but to be taken seriously.

Despite her grit, the message is clear—bias doesn't always wear a sneer; sometimes, it shouts in training drills, cloaked as "tough love," and aims to break rather than build.

Occupational Stereotyping Based on Size

In Scene 9, while Judy observes Nick Wilde and Finnick's popsicle resale scheme, a deeper commentary on labor distribution in Zootopia quietly surfaces—one based on body size.

Figure 8. *Scene 9 (22.45 – 23.12)*

A group of lemmings, all small-bodied, exit the Lemming Brothers Bank, moving in a robotic, synchronized manner. They head straight for Nick's cart, pay for pawpsicles, then dispose of the sticks in perfect unison. Inside the recycle bin, Finnick, a tiny fennec fox, emerges to collect the discarded sticks—performing menial, repetitive labor.

Later, in Little Rodentia, Nick delivers the sticks to a mouse-sized carpenter:

> *Nick Wilde: "Lumber delivery!"*
> *Mouse Foreman: "What's with the color?"*
> *Nick Wilde: "The color? Uh... It's red wood."*

Though played for laughs, these interactions expose a systemic size-based occupational hierarchy. Small animals—lemmings, mice, Finnick—are consistently shown in monotonous, subordinate roles: bankers stuck in paperwork, recyclers, or manual laborers. By contrast, larger animals—rhinos, elephants, buffalos—dominate the city's visible power structures like policing, law enforcement, and crowd control.

At the Level of Reality, this suggests physical traits, not merit, segregate Zootopia's labor economy. Small-bodied creatures are implicitly tracked into routine or disposable work, while size grants access to authority and respect.

At the Level of Representation, the visuals enforce a class system rooted in biology. Small animals are not depicted as incapable, but the structure around them limits their agency—echoing how human societies often channel individuals into roles based on physical appearance or social identity, regardless of talent or aspiration.

And at the Level of Ideology, Zootopia critiques the myth of meritocracy in capitalist societies. Jobs appear preassigned by innate characteristics like size—mirroring real-world systems where race, gender, body type, or class influence one's career trajectory more than effort or potential. Despite its utopian image, the city reveals a hidden bias that

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equates value with physical capability.

Social Class Bias in Law Enforcement Response

In Scene 13, Mrs. Otterton pleads with the Zootopia Police Department to investigate her husband's disappearance. However, Chief Bogo's dismissive reaction illustrates more than personal impatience—it reveals the institutional disregard for those deemed socially insignificant.

Figure 9. *Scene 13 (31:28 – 33:50)*

When Clawhauser announces over the intercom, *"Chief, uh, Mrs. Otterton's here to see you again,"* Bogo snaps back sharply: *"NOT! NOW!"*—his tone angry, his body language aggressive. He glares, punctuates each word, and presses the intercom button forcefully, signaling frustration and indifference. The visual and verbal cues present Bogo not merely as irritable but as an agent of a bureaucratic system that routinely marginalizes voices from the lower strata of society.

As Judy Hopps steps in to assert her competence—*"Sir, I got the bad guy. That's my job!"*—Bogo coldly reminds her: *"Your job is putting tickets on parked cars!"* This exchange reinforces a rigid hierarchy within the department, where only certain roles and concerns are given weight. Judy, much like Mrs. Otterton, is seen as unimportant—too idealistic, too insignificant to warrant serious attention.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Otterton, when she finally enters, is depicted in plain, modest clothing, contrasting starkly with the crisp uniforms of the police. This visual juxtaposition at the Level of Representation emphasizes her lower social standing. She is emotionally distressed, but her appearance and lack of symbolic power render her pleas less credible to Bogo, who only moves on her case after Assistant Mayor Bellwether intervenes.

At the Level of Reality, Bogo's outburst and posture represent institutionalized emotional detachment—a failure to empathize with those who do not command authority or privilege. His behavior is not just about personal annoyance but about what the institution chooses to value.

At the Level of Ideology, this scene critiques classism within public service institutions. Mrs. Otterton's difficulty in receiving help reflects a broader social truth: access to justice is often contingent upon appearance, influence, and social capital. Institutions designed to serve all citizens equally may, in practice, respond more readily to those who appear powerful, wealthy, or connected. The scene reveals how structural bias operates subtly but powerfully, reinforcing a world where the voiceless are routinely ignored—unless someone influential speaks on their behalf.

How Clothing Reflects Class Hierarchy

In this ceremonial scene, Mayor Lionheart publicly congratulates Judy Hopps as the first rabbit officer to graduate from the Zootopia Police Academy. His sharply tailored suit and commanding posture signal power, status, and authority. By contrast, Assistant Mayor Bellwether, dressed plainly and slightly disheveled, is physically and symbolically sidelined.

Figure 10. *Scene 4 (07.18 – 08.10)*

When Bellwether offers a warm but modest congratulation—*"Congratulations, Officer Hopps,"* and then whispers, *"It's a real proud day for us little guys"*—her

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sentiment is immediately overshadowed. Lionheart, with barely concealed impatience, interjects: *"Bellwether, make room, will ya?"* before shoving her aside by the face and posing with Judy. His command—*"Okay, Officer Hopps. Let's see those teeth!"*—emphasizes his control over the space and the people within it.

At the Level of Reality, the characters' attire speaks volumes. Lionheart's luxurious suit and groomed mane contrast sharply with Bellwether's modest cardigan and frazzled look, visually asserting a class divide. His dominant physical gesture reinforces this difference—he doesn't just outrank Bellwether; he literally pushes her out of frame.

At the Level of Representation, clothing, and body language are used as shorthand for social value. Bellwether's meek voice and small stature, coupled with her unceremonious treatment by Lionheart, illustrate how visual and verbal cues reinforce hierarchy. Despite holding a significant title, Bellwether is made to seem unimportant because she lacks the external symbols of power—status symbols like wealth, appearance, and charisma.

At the Level of Ideology, the scene critiques a materialistic and image-driven society, where clothing and presentation function as tools of symbolic capital. Lionheart's polished image becomes a performance of dominance, while Bellwether embodies the systemic marginalization of those who lack visual authority. The message is clear: in institutions like Zootopia's government, status is not only held—it's worn.

Class Inequality Through Geographical Segregation

Scene 5 captures Judy's departure from Bunnyburrow, a rural, agriculturally driven town, as she travels by train toward the sleek, urban metropolis of Zootopia. The visual contrast between these two locations forms the basis of the film's commentary on class-based spatial inequality.

Figure 11. *Scene 5 (10.09 – 12.45)*

Before she boards the train, Judy's parents express a mix of pride and anxiety. *"Zootopia, so far away, such a big city,"* her father, Stu, says with apprehension. Bonnie adds, *"We're just a little excited for you but terrified."* Their concern quickly turns into fear-driven stereotyping: *"Zootopia's full of predators... and foxes are the worst!"* The dialogue is laced with prejudice rooted in isolation—fear of predators (lions, wolves, weasels) becomes a metaphor for fear of the unfamiliar and deeply ingrained class mistrust.

As Judy responds confidently—*"I've been working for this my whole life"*—she represents a break from the limited aspirations of her hometown. Her train journey transitions through climate-specific districts like Tundratown and Rainforest District, culminating in her awe-filled arrival at Savanna Central, a city center filled with towering architecture, advanced infrastructure, and diverse life. This dramatic shift in scenery symbolizes her movement from a lower to a higher socioeconomic environment.

At the Level of Reality, Bunnyburrow is depicted with open farmland, small houses, and limited technology—emblematic of rural, working-class life. Zootopia, by contrast, gleams with modernity, luxury, and opportunity. The visual disparity is stark: one set is stuck in tradition; the other thrives on progress.

At the Level of Representation, the film constructs a residential hierarchy. Zootopia stands as a symbol of economic and social power, while Bunnyburrow reflects marginalization and conservative values. The

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Hopps family's fear of predators parallels real-world xenophobia or class-based stereotypes, showing how geographic and cultural isolation fosters resistance to diversity and change.

At the Level of Ideology, the train ride becomes a metaphor for capitalist spatial inequality. Zootopia, with its glittering districts and segregated zones, mirrors the real world where urban affluence and privilege are geographically concentrated, and access to these spaces depends on economic and social capital. Judy's journey reflects the idea that mobility—both physical and social—requires leaving behind one's class roots but also entails new forms of exclusion and judgment once inside elite spaces.

Ultimately, Judy's movement from Bunnyburrow to Zootopia is not just about travel—it's an ideological migration. She attempts to escape the constraints of her rural class identity. Still, throughout the film, Judy continues to face bias due to her background and skepticism from institutions that perceive her as "just a bunny." These experiences reinforce the film's central theme: in *Zootopia*, as in the real world, one's origins continue to influence how far they are permitted to go.

CONCLUSION

Watching a film is not merely a form of entertainment—it is also an opportunity to engage with the deeper meanings conveyed through narrative and symbolism. *Zootopia*, in particular, offers a rich text for ideological analysis, especially in its portrayal of discrimination.

Using John Fiske's semiotic framework, this study examined three levels of codes—reality, representation, and ideology—to reveal how *Zootopia* constructs and critiques social inequalities. At the level of reality, discrimination is encoded through visible cues such as clothing, body language, speech, and setting, which highlight unequal treatment between species, genders, and classes. For instance, the dismissive attitude toward Mrs. Otterton and Judy's marginalization as a rabbit police officer reveals how outward appearances and background influence institutional responses.

At the level of representation, these realities are translated into character interactions, dialogues, and settings that reflect socially constructed hierarchies. Scenes such as Mayor Lionheart pushing aside Bellwether or Judy's transition from rural Bunnyburrow to urban Zootopia illustrate how visual and narrative structures reinforce themes of dominance, marginalization, and social mobility.

At the ideological level, the film critiques broader systems of classism, prejudice, and institutional bias. It suggests that symbolic capital—such as dress, status, and geography—mediates access to justice and opportunity. Discrimination, as shown in *Zootopia*, is not limited to species differences but intersects with class, occupation, and appearance, mirroring real-world power imbalances.

In conclusion, this study finds that *Zootopia* uses semiotic codes to expose and challenge the subtle mechanisms of discrimination. By decoding these layers, viewers are encouraged to recognize structural inequality, question societal stereotypes, and embrace inclusivity and social justice in both fictional and real contexts.

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