

**Den Wald vor lauter Bäumen sehen:  
A Textual Analysis of Forest Bathing Practices in  
North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW)**

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MASTER THESIS



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16998 words

Date: 15/06/2025

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## **Abstract**

In recent years, forests have become a setting for Shinrin-Yoku, also known as forest bathing, a practice that focuses on mindful immersion in nature. The practice originated in Japan, however, it has gained popularity in Western countries in recent years. Several researchers have investigated the effects of forest bathing on health and mental state, however, little is known regarding the discourse on forest bathing. The present study aimed to fill this gap in the literature by conducting a discourse analysis of 13 websites offering forest bathing in North Rhine-Westphalia (Germany). The central question of this research was to find out how businesses that offer forest bathing in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) construct the practice in their official online discourse. To answer this question, a textual analysis examining the representation of the forest and the self was conducted. The analysis shows that the forest is presented as a safe space and a contrast to modern life. It appears as a space for healing, health, silence, connection and finding meaning. Additionally, it is also depicted as a place to slow down, feel good and as a place that is our home, a natural habitat and a place for childhood. Furthermore, the websites construct the self as stressed, alienated, longing, and overstimulated, who can rediscover its inner balance, mindfulness and identity by reconnecting with nature. Further research could look into the visual representation of forest bathing programmes. In addition, a comparison with other federal states in Germany or international contexts could provide new insights.

## **Keywords**

Forest bathing, Shinrin Yoku, North Rhine-Westphalia, Discourse analysis, Websites

# CONTENT

- INTRODUCTION..... 1**
- LITERATURE REVIEW ..... 3
- METHOD..... 8
- 1. HOW IS THE FOREST DESCRIBED? ..... 12**
- 1.1 AS A PLACE OF SILENCE AND QUIETNESS ..... 12
- 1.2 AS A PLACE TO SLOW DOWN..... 14
- 1.3 AS A PLACE TO FEEL GOOD ..... 16
- 1.4. AS A PLACE FOR HEALTH ..... 17
- 1.5. AS A PLACE FOR HEALING ..... 19
- 1.6. AS A PLACE TO CONNECT TO ONESELF AND NATURE ..... 20
- 1.7. AS OUR NATURAL HABITAT ..... 22
- 1.8. AS A HOME..... 23
- 1.9. AS A SAFE SPACE ..... 25
- 1.10. AS A PLACE OF CHILDHOOD ..... 26
- 1.11. CONCLUSION ..... 28
- 2. HOW IS THE SELF DESCRIBED ON THE WEBSITES? ..... 29**
- 2.1 AS LOST..... 29
- 2.2. AS STRESSED ..... 31
- 2.3. AS OVERSTIMULATED ..... 32
- 2.4. AS LONGING ..... 35
- 2.5. AS (RE) CONNECTED ..... 36
- 2.6. AS PRESENT ..... 39
- 2.7 CONCLUSION ..... 41
- CONCLUSION..... 42**
- BIBLIOGRAPHY ..... 45**

## **Introduction**

Nowadays, stress and a hectic pace are ever-present (Levitin, 2014). Increasing digitalisation, high professional demands and constant availability are blurring the boundaries between work and leisure time, while there is often too little time for relaxation. People encounter various stressors in all parts of life, such as those related to their jobs, families, relationships, finances, society as a whole and health (Ma, 2024). However, modern stimuli do not only flood our external environment but also profoundly affect our internal mental states (Robson, 2016). Multitasking leads to mental exhaustion because our brains are not evolutionarily designed to process many stimuli at the same time (Levitin, 2014). So, while stress has always been a part of life, modern demands have led to a rise in burnout and anxiety disorders, prompting many to seek ways to escape daily pressures (Robson, 2017; Levitin, 2014).

One possibility for such a place of escape is the forest, presumed to be a space of safety, peace, seclusion and natural harmony (Schuh & Immich, 2022). A place where people can speak up, share ideas and take initiative, because they gain trust that they won't be humiliated or rejected (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). A place that offers endless opportunities for outdoor activities such as hiking, biking, horse riding and many more (Schuh & Immich, 2022). Forests are an important tourist resource, valued not only for their natural beauty but also for their health and recreational benefits for visitors. Nature tourism has grown in popularity worldwide over the past decade, with more and more tourists visiting places such as forests, national parks and protected areas (Kim et al., 2015). Hiking tourism, in particular, is growing in popularity worldwide.

More recently, the forest has become a setting for Shinrin-Yoku, also known as forest bathing, a practice focused on mindful immersion in nature. The practice originated in Japan as a method for relaxation, stress reduction, and consciously experiencing nature (Immich, 2018). Unlike traditional outdoor activities, which focus on physical exercise, forest bathing centres on mindful awareness of the natural environment (Schuh & Immich, 2022). While Shinrin-Yoku has been the subject of scientific research and government programmes in Japan since the 1980s, the practice is also becoming increasingly popular in Germany. With the growing awareness of the health benefits of spending time in nature, forest bathing is slowly becoming an integral part of wellness, health and spiritual tourism (Pérez-Calderon et al., 2024; Hansen & Jones, 2020). Given this, it is not surprising that there is an increasing number of programmes that offer forest bathing in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) as well.

### *Forests in Germany*

Forests play a central role in Germany and North Rhine-Westphalia, both for the environment and for society. With a share of 32% of the total area, Germany is one of the most densely forested countries in Europe (Bundesministerium für Ernährung und Landwirtschaft, 2021). Forests are not only ecologically valuable but also an important recreational area for the population. Around 90 % of citizens regard forests as an important place to experience nature, and 70 % of the population actively uses them for recreation at least once a year. This results in around 2.3 billion visits to forests every year, with most people visiting forests close to where they live. The infrastructure is well developed with 512,000 kilometres of roads and 62,000 kilometres of footpaths, bridleways and cycle paths. During the coronavirus pandemic, in particular, there was a significant increase in the recreational use of forests, as many people were looking for nature as a balance to their restricted everyday lives. North Rhine-Westphalia, as the area of focus, has around 950,000 hectares of forest, almost a third of the state's total area (Wald und Holz NRW, n.d.). The large contiguous forest areas are located along the Rhine, in the Eifel, on the Lower Rhine, and in East and South Westphalia and are dominated by deciduous trees. Thus, with its vast and diverse forest landscapes, North Rhine-Westphalia offers an ideal setting for nature-based wellness experiences.

### *Shinrin Yoku*

In this context, Shinrin-yoku, or forest bathing, has emerged as a key component in the field of health and wellness tourism, a growing sector of the tourism industry that is aimed at people who want to improve their well-being through special travel experiences outside their usual environment (Smith, 2021). Unlike traditional tourism, which often focuses on sightseeing, adventure or cultural experiences, forest bathing is part of health and wellness tourism which emphasises physical, mental and spiritual regeneration (Rodtook et al., 2024). Various services are offered, ranging from preventative health measures to therapeutic and regenerative experiences.

Shinrin-yoku is a practice that originated in Japan (Schuh & Immich, 2022; Immich, 2018; FAO, 2020). For the Japanese, forest bathing is particularly “about finding peace, letting oneself drift and consciously perceiving the forest and its special conditions to regain strength for everyday life (Schuh & Immich, 2022). It is a form of mindful experience of nature in which a conscious stay in the forest is used to promote physical and mental well-being and which embodies the concept of slow living by demonstrating alternative approaches to a hectic everyday life (Sari et al., 2017; Simons, 2010; Schuh & Immich, 2022). Mindfulness in this

context means returning to the present moment and consciously experiencing it (Kabat-Zinn, 1994; Childs, 2007).

Unlike sporting activities such as hiking or cycling, forest bathing does not focus on exercise but on immersing yourself in the forest atmosphere with all five senses (FAO, 2020). This means that all sensory organs can be addressed and activated in the forest. This includes, for example: the auditory perception of the sounds of the forest, the visual perception of light and colours, the tactile experience e.g. by touching trees or walking barefoot on the forest floor, the olfactory perception of wood, the stimulation of the sense of taste by eating berries and other forest fruits. This multi-sensory experience illustrates what Merleau-Ponty (1966) understands by bodily perception. The forest is not only observed, but experienced with the whole body, because the body is the medium through which we experience the world at all.

### *Forest bathing in Germany*

In Germany, forest bathing has established itself as a recognised method of health promotion in recent years (Ryll, 2021). Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania was the first federal state to begin initial research in 2012 as part of the project Development of the natural resource forest into a spa and healing forest for use as a therapeutic agent and its marketing. In 2017, the first spa and healing forest was opened in the Baltic seaside resort of Heringsdorf. At a national level, the Bundesverband Waldbaden e.V. is committed to the dissemination and quality assurance of forest bathing and forest therapy in Germany (Bundesverband Waldbaden e.V., n.d.). Moreover, the topic is being scientifically investigated, for example, by Schuh & Immich (2022) at the Chair of Public Health and Health Services Research at the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich (Ryll, 2021).

### **Literature review**

Researchers from various academic fields have examined how forests affect people over the last ten years (Marselle et al., 2020). These have done extensive research on the psychological and physical effects of going to nature and taking part in forest bathing activities (Schuh & Immich, 2022; Pérez-Calderon et. al, 2024; Siah et al., 2023; Tsunetsugu et al., 2010). Scientific research into the health effects of forest visits has its roots in Japan and Korea (Schuh & Immich, 2022) and has shown that forest therapy has several effects on health, body and mind. Previous studies have shown that immersing oneself in a forest environment lowers blood pressure and pulse rate, reduces cortisol levels, suppresses the activity of the sympathetic nervous system and enhances the activity of the parasympathetic nervous system (FAO, 2020).

Furthermore, the calming atmosphere of forests and the opportunities to exercise, but also the ecological function, have been proven to have a positive influence on humans (Konijnendijk, 2008a). Forests filter air pollution, provide shade and regulate the temperature. In addition to that, forest bathing has been found to significantly reduce stress, promote mental clarity and induce a deep sense of relaxation (Rodtook et al., 2024; Schuh & Immich, 2022).

One theory underlining this is the theory of stress reduction developed by Ulrich (1981), which claims that exposure to natural environments has an immediate calming effect on the body and mind. According to the theory, the sight of natural landscapes is said to have a clear stress-reducing effect on people (Schuh & Immich, 2022). In addition, the calming effects of nature can help reduce anxiety, improve mood and even boost immune function as more people recognise the therapeutic benefits of forest therapy, this practice is gaining popularity as a natural and holistic approach to enhancing both physical and mental well-being.

Especially, people who are mentally stressed can use the forest to recover and strengthen their mental resources, according to the Attention Restoration Theory (ART) (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). The theory proposes that mental fatigue and concentration can be enhanced through time spent in nature or by looking at natural scenes. This is because, in general, the brain's ability to concentrate on a particular stimulus or task is restricted, leading to what is known as “directed attention fatigue”. However, according to the ART, being in nature promotes a more effortless brain function, which helps it recover and renew its directed attention capacity. The four properties necessary for that are: “Extent (the extent to which one can feel immersed in the environment)”, “Being away (offering an evasion from routine activities)”, “Soft fascination (elements in the surroundings that draw attention without exertion)” and “Compatibility (individuals need to desire exposure to the environment and value it)” (Ohly et al., 2016). The forest fulfils all these criteria to a particularly high degree.

In addition to short-term psychological restoration, these effects suggest a more fundamental human responsiveness to nature. This enhanced connection to nature is described by the biophilia hypothesis (Wilson, 1984), which was first developed by Erich Fromm and is describes “the innate urge to engage with other life forms in our environment that the human spirit is deeply connected to exploring life within the physical environment” (Hansen & Jones, 2020). Moreover, Konijnendijk (2008a) argues that this deep connection to nature is biologically anchored in humans, as they have spent the majority of their evolutionary history in natural, especially forest-like landscapes. This focus on nature often includes a deeper understanding of the connection between man and nature. Van den Born (2008) distinguishes between four types of human nature relationships: Master over nature (humans dominate

nature), Steward over nature (humans manage and care for nature), Partner with nature (humans and nature are equals who cooperate) and Participants in Nature (humans are a small, embedded part of nature). His research suggests that the model of the participant in nature, which sees humans as part of a larger ecological whole, was particularly widespread among the participants of the study.

### *Forest bathing and holistic well-being*

In this context, forest bathing is increasingly associated with spiritual and holistic well-being (Kaptchuk & Eisenberg, 1998; Hansen & Jones, 2020). Researchers have explored the connections between Shinrin-Yoku and spirituality, emphasising how engagement with nature can foster a sense of transcendence and deeper self-awareness (Hansen & Jones, 2020; Sharpley, 2021). Sharpley (2021) offers a broader discussion of spirituality in the context of tourism, claiming that travel and nature-based experiences frequently promote spiritual enrichment by encouraging reflection, mindfulness, and a connection to something higher than oneself. Furthermore, Hansen & Jones (2020) looked at the relationship between Shinrin-Yoku and spirituality in a larger sense. Their scoping review on this topic combined findings from numerous research and highlighted common features in the literature that show Shinrin-Yoku can be perceived as both a therapeutic and deeply spiritual practice.

As more individuals recognise the therapeutic and spiritual aspects of forest therapy, the practice is gaining popularity as a holistic approach to improving overall well-being (Hansen et al., 2017; Konijnendijk, 2008b). This is because alternative health practices like forest bathing often emphasise “feeling good” (Kaptchuk & Eisenberg, 1998). Personal experiences and subjective feelings are often seen as central to health, rather than relying solely on objective medical measures. Furthermore, Sointu (2011) argues that this emphasis is closely linked to modern ideals of being self-fulfilling, authentic, and self-responsible.

### *Nature, meaning and identity*

However, spiritual renewal and physical relaxation are not the only aspects one can find in the forest. Forest bathing seems to respond to a deeper human desire, namely, the search for meaning, continuity and identity (Hansen et al., 2017). Research by Attoe (2022) shows that this wish for meaning is motivated by psychological mechanisms such as the desire for social connection, interaction with nature, creativity, and meaningful goals. A central element of this desire for meaning is one's self-image, which is to a large extent, shaped by the stories that

people tell about themselves (McAdams & McLean, 2013).

Several different factors can create meaning, however, one aspect that is particularly important in the context of the forest is the feeling of belonging. O’Gorman’s (2022) theory of belonging distinguishes between place-belongingness, a subjective feeling of being at home and accepted in a certain place, and the politics of belonging, i.e. the social and political processes that decide who belongs to a community or a space and who is excluded. In the context of forest bathing, the forest can thus become a space in which individual experiences of security and identity become tangible. However, Altman & Low (1992) argue that people can experience different levels of attachment to a certain place. According to their model this can include several dimensions: the personal dimension, which describes who is attached to the place, the psychological dimension, which includes affective, cognitive and behavioural processes, the spatial dimension, which refers to the type of place and the temporal dimension, which takes into account the duration and continuity of the attachment.

Nevertheless, research shows that meaning can also be created through nostalgia (Sedikides & Wildschut, 2017). Developing a sense of nostalgia can promote social connectedness and self-continuity, as well as psychological balance, which can help individuals discover meaning in their lives. That means when people are reminded of childhood experiences, they’re more likely to re-engage with similar settings. Furthermore, nostalgia also supports motivation by linking the past self with the present and future self, which thus can align activity with a deeper, consistent self-image, so people are more likely to feel that they are who they are and therefore worth doing (Sedikides & Wildschut, 2023).

To conclude, this means that the forest can fully develop its potential as a place where meaning, identity and emotional anchoring can be realised through the interplay of nature experience, belonging and personal connection.

### *Tourism and forest bathing*

Therefore, it is not surprising that forest bathing has increasingly become part of a broader trend of monetising natural experiences (Farkic et al., 2021). Research has shown that forest bathing can be a new tourism activity (Rodtook et al., 2024; Mihardja et al., 2021). Hence, it is unsurprising that in recent years, it has been gaining popularity in other parts of the world. However, research on forest bathing and tourism is still scarce. There are some studies worldwide, such as on the economic importance of forest bathing in Northern Italy (Visintin et al., 2024). This study identifies a growing interest in forest bathing as a touristic activity, which

aligns with rising trends in health and wellness tourism. Many residents expressed a willingness to engage in forest bathing, indicating a potential market for related tourism experiences. This is in line with studies by Rodtook et al. (2024) and Mihardja et al. (2021), who introduce forest bathing as a new tourist attraction. Rodtook et al. (2024) researched forest bathing as a tool for promotion of wellness tourism in Thailand. They emphasise the adaptation of forest bathing practices to fit Thailand's unique cultural and environmental context, suggesting that the diverse ecosystems in Thailand can enhance the appeal and effectiveness of forest bathing activities, contributing to a richer wellness tourism offering. In addition, Mihardja et al. (2021) introduced forest bathing as a new tourist attraction aimed at revitalising Bali's tourism sector, especially in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.

While such initiatives demonstrate the integration of forest bathing into tourism, research on forest bathing as a tourist activity is still limited, as many studies focus on the medical and psychological benefits of forest bathing and nature visit experiences (Schuh & Immich, 2022; Pérez-Calderon et. al, 2024; Siah et al., 2023; Tsunetsugu et al., 2010). It is, therefore, particularly valuable to analyse forest bathing as a tourist activity in more detail, especially in Germany. It would certainly be desirable for future research to also look at the medical and health aspects of forest bathing in Germany and most of the perspectives presented above will certainly intersect with my research and will serve as a reference, however, this research will focus on analysing how institutions and companies in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) construct forest bathing on their websites since it is equally important to examine how this practice is presented to the public and since this has not been studied anywhere so far (Dang, 2023). As representation shapes public perception and influences participation, analysing the discourse around forest bathing can reveal how it is marketed, conceptualised and understood by different actors. By examining websites, narratives, metaphors and rhetorics, strategies used to present forest bathing as a favourable practice can be identified. In addition, this may provide new insights into the positioning of this practice within German wellness and nature tourism.

The research question is thus:

How do businesses that offer forest bathing in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) construct the practice in their official online discourse?

This question leads to the following sub-questions, which will help answer this question and guide the analysis:

1. How is the forest described?
2. How is the self-described?

## Method

For the analysis of the discourse on forest bathing in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), 20 websites for forest bathing in NRW were identified between February and May 2025. These websites have been identified via online search for the terms “Waldbaden” (English: Forest bathing) and “Waldbaden NRW” via the Google search engine and Google Maps. After a selection process, 13 websites remained for analysis. The following table (Table 1) shows an overview of the websites used for analysis.

**Table 1**

### *Forest Bathing Websites in North Rhine-Westphalia*

Name of the Provider & Link to their Website	Region (according to Regionen.NRW (n.d.))	Certification	Gender
Petra Dahmen <a href="https://www.wandern-waldbaden.de/">https://www.wandern-waldbaden.de/</a>	Lower Rhine region (Niederrhein)	certified	female
Ilona Dörr <a href="https://www.ilonadoerr.de/">https://www.ilonadoerr.de/</a>	Lower Rhine region	certified	female
Anna Ferdinand <a href="https://www.anna-ferdinand.de/">https://www.anna-ferdinand.de/</a>	Düsseldorf	certified	female
Karin Wiessmann <a href="https://forest-medicine.de/">https://forest-medicine.de/</a>	Düsseldorf	certified	female
Tanja Weißkamp <a href="https://seinskraft.de/">https://seinskraft.de/</a>	Ruhr region	certified	female
Fritz Herkenrath + Team <a href="https://www.robinwoods.de/">https://www.robinwoods.de/</a>	Cologne-Bonn region	certified	male
Isabelle Steidl + Team <a href="https://waldluftleben.de/">https://waldluftleben.de/</a>	Cologne-Bonn region	partly certified	female
Hermann Schmidt <a href="https://waldbaden-nrw.de/">https://waldbaden-nrw.de/</a>	Cologne-Bonn region	certified	male
Elke Greven <a href="https://www.waldbaden-nordeifel.de/">https://www.waldbaden-nordeifel.de/</a>	Region Aachen	certified	female
Stefan Frangenheim <a href="https://www.waldbaden-eifel-nord.de/">https://www.waldbaden-eifel-nord.de/</a>	Region Aachen	certified	male
Bettina Vormfeld <a href="https://www.waldverbunden.de/">https://www.waldverbunden.de/</a>	East Westphalia-Lippe (Ostwestfalen Lippe)	certified	female
Petra Breker <a href="https://www.meditativ-natur-erleben.de/">https://www.meditativ-natur-erleben.de/</a>	South Westphalia	partly certified	female
Stefan Alberts <a href="https://waldlager-sauerland.de/">https://waldlager-sauerland.de/</a>	South Westphalia	certified	male

*Note.* The table shows the selected forest bathing providers in North Rhine-Westphalia, including their website, region, certification status, and gender of the provider(s)

These websites were selected based on the following criteria: region of North Rhine-Westphalia, the gender of the forest bathing guide, and certification as an official forest bathing guide. These criteria have been selected to ensure comparability and professionalism. Certified forest bathing guides have completed official training at the German Academy for Forest Bathing. Forest bathing guides who have been classified as partially certified did not complete this specific training but have completed similar training, for example, as forest guides or adventure educators. Guides who did not have a certification related to forests, forest bathing and forest education were excluded from the analysis. Individual background, personal motivations and philosophy of the providers were not taken into account. Further, one website had to be excluded from analysis as it could no longer be accessed at the time of analysis.

The websites analysed are from both individuals and teams, both male and female, who offer forest bathing courses as part of a professional service. The providers have relevant certifications and are spread across NRW, from the Lower Rhine to Aachen, Düsseldorf, the Ruhr region, the Cologne-Bonn region, East Westphalia-Lippe and South Westphalia. The selection of forest bathing providers covers all areas of the federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia with at least one provider per region. The diversity of the selected websites enables a differentiated analysis of different textual representations of forest bathing in the digital space. North Rhine-Westphalia was chosen as it is the most populated federal state in Germany, with a great variety of natural and urban spaces. Moreover, the author lives in this region and is particularly familiar with the linguistic and cultural characteristics as a native speaker of German.

Even if personal backgrounds are not the focus of the analysis, I would like to briefly introduce the providers here: Two providers are from the Lower Rhine region. Petra Dahmen is a forest bathing instructor from Kleve who offers forest bathing, mindfulness training and hikes. She is certified by the German Academy for Forest Bathing and Health (DAWG). Ilona Dörr from Geldern combines forest bathing with meditation and is certified by the DAWG. Moreover, she is a trained mediator and NLP practitioner. In Düsseldorf we can find Anna Ferdinand and Karin Wiessmann. Anna Ferdinand is a DAWG-certified guide for forest bathing and regularly offers programmes for adults, children and companies. Furthermore, she has a master's in cultural studies and wrote her master's thesis on forest bathing. Karin Wiessmann from Düsseldorf is also DAWG certified. Further, she offers business coaching for companies. Tanja Weißkamp is the only provider from the Ruhr region. She works in medical microbiology and offers DAWG-certified forest bathing in Essen. Further, she is also trained as a mediator and mindfulness coach. Three providers come from the Cologne-Bonn region. Fritz Herkenrath

from Hennef leads a team that combines forest bathing and climbing, and open-air haircuts. Isabelle Steidl and her team from Cologne combine forest bathing with nature coaching. She leads the company together with Claudia Günther and employs three people trained in wilderness education, yoga and art therapy. Hermann Schmidt from Cologne is a DAWG-certified forest bathing instructor and regularly offers courses in the Siebengebirge. He also works together with the Deutsche Sporthochschule Cologne. In addition, two providers live in the region of Aachen. Elke Greven is a DAWG-certified guide from Hellenthal in the Eifel region. Stefan Frangenheim from Kreuzau offers programmes for individuals and groups. He has a range of qualifications, ranging from pedagogy and social management to meditation, forest bathing and stress management. Bettina Vormfeld from Spenge brings her experience as a personal coach and social pedagogue to her certified forest bathing programmes. She is the only provider from East Westfalia-Lippe. Lastly, there are two providers from South Westfalia. Petra Breker from Schmallenberg is a trained relaxation and health pedagogue and forest health scout who focuses on meditative experiences of nature. Secondly, Stefan Alberts from Hemer offers certified forest bathing in the form of forest camps and nature experience days. Further, he is a trained wilderness educator, hiking guide, nurse, and cultural scientist.

To analyse these websites critical discourse analysis, according to Norman Fairclough (1989), was used. This method views language as a form of social action that is both characterised by cultural and institutional conditions and helps to shape them. Furthermore, it is regarded as a key element for the creation of social structures, norms, and power dynamics.

Discourses create reality (Machin & Mayr, 2012). They shape our understanding of topics such as health, nature, self and society, and thus have an impact on cultural ideas and social practices. Critical discourse analysis has been chosen in this case because it is particularly suitable for revealing the discursive construction and optimisation of forest bathing in public communication and analysing its integration into larger social and economic narratives in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW). In this paper, this method is used to investigate how the phenomenon of forest bathing in NRW is discursively constructed on websites by providers, i.e. how the forest and the self are spoken about, which meanings are generated and which social ideas become visible in them. In this way, the critical discourse analysis not only helps to understand the linguistic and content-related strategies used by forest bathing providers in NRW to advertise their offers but also enables a deeper examination of the question of how ideas of nature, health and personal identity are conveyed, shaped and used economically in today's highly digitalised and fast-paced society. Moreover, it helps to recognise which values and world views are conveyed through the portrayal of forest bathing.

The analysis was based on Fairclough's (1989) three-stage analysis model. At the text level, key terms, metaphors and recurring statements from the websites were collected. The language used to describe the forest, and the self was analysed. Secondly, on the discursive level, the individual differences of the providers, namely gender, team composition, either individual or team and their position as a forest bathing guide were considered. In a third step, the extent to which the linguistic representations reflect larger social discourses was reflected upon. This includes, for example, social discourse with regard to nature as a place of retreat, health as an individual project, or deceleration as a modern need. The providers' statements were therefore not isolated but interpreted in a cultural and social context. For this analysis, I particularly focused on the textual level as well as the level of social practice, as these offered the most insight into how forest bathing discourse is constructed.

# Chapter 1

## How is the forest described?

This chapter of the thesis focuses on the representation and description of the forest on the websites. The research has shown that certain ideas and images are repeated, which highlight the importance attributed to the forest in connection with forest bathing. The following sections take a closer look at the most common descriptions.

### 1.1 As a place of silence and quietness

One aspect in particular repeatedly appears on the forest bathing websites, namely, that of silence and quietness. This is particularly evident on seven of the thirteen websites. The forest is described here as a quiet, calm, and undisturbed environment without noise. This can be a direct reference to it, such as on the website of Ilona Dörr (*Ilona Dörr*), who describes the forest as “a place of silence [...]” on her website. This is aligned with Bettina Vormfeld’s website *Waldverbunden*, on which she argues that “the forest is a place of silence, contemplation [...]”<sup>1</sup>. Fritz Herkenrath also promotes himself and his offers with the slogan “Shinrin yoku, enjoy silence, explore new things”<sup>2</sup> on his website *Robin Woods*, indicating that silence is a central aspect in the forest as well as for the practice of forest bathing. Furthermore, Herman Schmidt, who runs the *Waldbaden NRW* website, even uses silence to define forest bathing, as for him it is “Put simply - a quiet walk through the forest”<sup>3</sup>. In comparison, Elke Greven asks the readers directly on her website, *Waldbaden Nordeifel*: “Do you also sometimes wish to find yourself and have silence and peace around you?”<sup>4</sup>.

Moreover, this special atmosphere is also emphasised linguistically. The silence is understood not only as an acoustic quality but also as a comprehensive atmosphere. On the *Waldbaden NRW* website, for example, it says: “with quiet, almost silent steps they roam through the forest”<sup>5</sup>, while *Waldbaden Nordeifel* emphasises how “the forest welcomes you with its friendly silence [...] as soon as you enter”<sup>6</sup>. Further descriptions of this special forest

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<sup>1</sup> “Für mich ist der Wald ein Ort der Stille und Besinnung [...]” (Vormfeld, n.d.)

<sup>2</sup> “Shinrin yoku, Stille genießen, Neues Entdecken” (Herkenrath, n.d.)

<sup>3</sup> “Vereinfacht gesagt - ein ruhiger Waldspaziergang” (Schmidt, n.d.)

<sup>4</sup> “Wünschen Sie sich auch manchmal [...] zu sich selbst finden und Stille und Ruhe um sich herum zu haben?” (Greven, n.d.)

<sup>5</sup> “mit leisen fast lautlosen Schritten streifen sie durch den Wald” (Schmidt, n.d.)

<sup>6</sup> “Er begrüßt sie schon beim Eintritt mit seiner freundlichen Stille [...], den Düften und der guten Luft” (Greven, n.d.)

atmosphere can be found on the *Waldbaden Eifel Nord* website. Here, visitors are invited to consciously immerse themselves in a sensual experience: to feel the gentle breeze on their skin and hear nothing but the soft chirping of birds<sup>7</sup>, a scenery that conveys peace and security. That means silence and quietness are not only mentioned directly but by indirect atmospheric descriptions that suggest the presence of these aspects. In addition, the image drawn is emphasised by a picture of a deserted path in a forest, with light peaking through the leaves and creating a mystical and calming atmosphere. The image complements the textual description in terms of content and atmosphere. The forest appears dense and green, and the canopy of leaves is secluded enough to let the sunlight through only in soft, diagonal rays. These rays of light create an impression of closure and gentle seclusion. The absence of people or larger animals reinforces the impression of silence and retreat. Aside from the occasional birdsong, the forest appears as an ideal place to experience immense quietness.

This has also been found by a study by Pfeiffer et al. (2023). The study showed that relaxation has been significantly higher in the forest than in a seminar room. Participants of the study reported experiencing less boredom, faster subjective time processing and an overall more positive emotional state. The natural environment of the forest, therefore, appears to be a particularly favourable setting for relaxation and mental well-being. These effects can further be explained in the context of Kaplan & Kaplan's (1989) Attention Restoration Theory (ART). The theory assumes that natural environments reduce cognitive fatigue as they have four central characteristics: "being away" (psychological distance from everyday life), "soft fascination" (gentle, effortless attention), "extent" (spatial and conceptual expanse) and "compatibility" (fit between the environment and the person's needs) (Ohly et al., 2016). The forest fulfils all of these criteria to a particular degree: it allows people to distance themselves from everyday life, offers rich but not overwhelming sensory impressions and creates a sense of coherence and fit. The increased relaxation and positive affect reported in the study are therefore typical indicators of the restorative effects described by ART. Additionally, silence opens up a space of self-awareness and mental clarity (Kundera, 1996), which aligns with the goals of forest bathing practices e.g. to reduce stress and emotional strain (Schuh & Immich, 2022).

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<sup>7</sup> "Stell dir vor du spürst einen leichten Wind um die Nase und hörst nichts außer Vogelgeszwitscher" (Frangenheim, n.d.)

## 1.2 As a place to slow down

Another factor that is mentioned very often is that of the forest as a place to slow down. This is mentioned directly or indirectly by eight of the websites. Slowing down seems to be associated with letting go, deceleration, and rest from hectic routines, as well as doing things without pressure. The forest is also seen as a contrast. Many of the websites describe forest bathing as an escape from the fast, noisy and technical world. Herkenrath advertises on his website *Robin Woods* with the slogan “out of everyday life, into the forest”<sup>8</sup>. This is underlined by the text on the website *Wandern Waldbaden*, as the author Petra Dahmen argues “Everyday life has become so fast and hectic. Together, we will learn to open our senses to arrive in the here and now.”<sup>9</sup>. Tanja Weßkamp-Lenkewitz (*Seinskraft*) highlights that the forest “as a counterbalance to our fast, noisy, high-tech environment, the unintentional stroll through nature slows us down.”<sup>10</sup>. In this way, the forest thus functions not just as a backdrop, but also as a space that invites a pause and allows a different way of being. *Waldbaden Nordeifel's* Greven emphasises this idea, stating, “It invites you to just be”. Instead of following a fixed route or reaching a specific goal, she emphasises: “You stroll aimlessly and without intention through the forest and get to know the effect of pausing – standing still – breathing – lingering”<sup>11</sup>. In another sentence, she further adds: “The forest is there without the pressure of time and expectation”<sup>12</sup>. This statement complements the previously described depiction of the forest as a place to slow down. The forest appears here as an antithesis to the daily routines and a place where neither time pressure nor performance requirements play a role. This experience is illustrated in particularly vivid and sensory language on the website *Meditativ Natur Erleben*: “We stroll slowly along gently rippling streams, up and down narrow forest paths, over pine needles and tree roots, past moss-covered tree trunks and a green forest of leaves... Pause and listen, perceive what is - in the now, around you, within yourself. Walking in silence again and again, you come more and more to peace and finally to yourself”<sup>13</sup>. Furthermore, the *Waldbaden*

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<sup>8</sup> “raus aus dem Alltag, rein in den Wald” (Herkenrath, n.d.)

<sup>9</sup> “Der Alltag ist so schnell und hektisch geworden. Wir werden gemeinsam lernen, unsere Sinne zu öffnen, um im Hier und Jetzt anzukommen” (Dahmen, n.d.)

<sup>10</sup> “Als Ausgleich zu unserer schnellen, lauten, hochtechnisierten Umwelt, wirkt das absichtslose Schlendern durch die Natur entschleunigend” (Weßkamp-Lenkewitz, n.d.)

<sup>11</sup> “Sie schlendern absichts- und ziellos durch den Wald und lernen die Wirkung von Anhalten – Stehenbleiben – Durchatmen – Verweilen kennen” (Greven, n.d.)

<sup>12</sup> “Der Wald ist da ohne Zeit- und Erwartungsdruck” (Greven, n.d.)

<sup>13</sup> “Langsam schlendernd gehen wir an sanft plätschernden Bächen entlang, auf schmalen Waldpfaden auf und ab, über Tannennadeln und Baumwurzeln, vorbei an moosbewachsenen Baumstämmen und grünem Blätterwald... Verweilen Sie und lauschen, nehmen Sie wahr, was ist – im Jetzt, um Sie herum, in Ihnen selbst.

*Eifel Nord* website emphasises the opportunity to experience deceleration not just alone, but together with others. The website states: “Just do nothing with your loved ones: concentrate only on the sounds and smells of the forest”<sup>14</sup>. The forest is described here as a shared experiential space where you can come to rest with familiar people without the pressure of activity.

This calm quality is also taken up on the website *Meditativ Natur Erleben*. The author shows that the forest is understood not only as a place to slow down physically, but also as a space in which mental deceleration can take place. The operator describes her personal desire to accompany people “who find themselves in a restless phase of their lives”<sup>15</sup>. The forest is understood here as a place where people can find peace and quiet and slow down from their usual stress. The mental dimension of slowing down is also emphasised on the *Forest Medicine* website. It talks about “putting everyday life aside with mental slowness”<sup>16</sup>. Hence, the forest appears as a space where the body comes to rest and where thoughts are allowed to slow down. Thus, a place that offers the opportunity to detach oneself internally and gain distance from the mental pressure of everyday life. Additionally, this shows that the forest is overall described on most websites as a holistic feel-good space that has a beneficial effect on both the body and the soul. The field of descriptions ranges from intuitively experienced well-being to mental and emotional regeneration.

Slow living sees itself as a conscious countermovement to hectic everyday life and focuses on mindfulness, quality of life and inner peace (Sari et al., 2017; Simons, 2010). Natural environments such as the forest offer ideal conditions to fulfil this need (Marselle et al., 2020). This emphasis on websites is therefore no coincidence, as the forest as a place of retreat from the demands of everyday life offers a conscious opportunity to sharpen one's senses, calm down and take a break from everyday acceleration (Kim et al., 2015). Furthermore, these positive effects described by spending time in the forest can also be interpreted in terms of the Attention Restoration Theory (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). As already described, this theory assumes that natural environments help to reduce mental fatigue (Ohly et al., 2016). The forest fulfils all of these criteria to a particular degree: it creates an atmosphere of deceleration, gently stimulates

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Immer wieder in der Stille gehend, kommen Sie mehr und mehr zur Ruhe und schließlich zu sich selbst” (Breker, n.d.)

<sup>14</sup> “Einfach mal mit deinen Lieben nichts tun: sich nur auf Geräusche und Gerüche im Wald konzentrieren [...]” Frangenheim, n.d.)

<sup>15</sup> “die sich in einer ruhelosen Phase ihres Lebens befinden“. (Breker, n.d.)

<sup>16</sup> “[...] mit einer gedanklichen Langsamkeit den Alltag beiseitelegen” (Wiessmann, n.d.)

perception through diverse but not overwhelming sensory experiences and creates a sense of coherence. The frequently described experience of inner peace, letting go, and mental relief can therefore be understood as a form of regenerative process as described by the theory.

### 1.3 As a place to feel good

Furthermore, on several of the websites analysed, a total of 11 out of 13, the forest is not only described as a place to slow down, but also as a space where people can feel completely at ease. Several providers emphasise that people feel good in the forest in a natural way. Dahmen (*Wandern Waldbaden*), for example, writes: “It’s probably no secret that we immediately feel good as soon as we stroll through nature and the forest”<sup>17</sup>. Dörr (*Ilona Dörr*) also makes the same point when she writes about “how good the natural space FOREST is”<sup>18</sup>. Forests are a natural environment which holds qualities that promote well-being. This positive effect of the forest is often described as something that can be experienced intuitively and as an immediate reaction to the experience of nature that needs no further explanation. In this context, Elke Greven describes: “We have known intuitively for a long time that spending time in nature is good for us humans”<sup>19</sup>.

In addition to this more general emphasis on a natural sense of well-being, the psychological and mental effects of the forest are addressed. The *Forest Medicine* website, for example, asks: “Would you like to improve your quality of life to feel good physically and mentally?”<sup>20</sup> and mentions increasing well-being as a central goal. Waldverbunden also describes how spending time in the forest can improve general well-being and mental health. Similarly, Anna Ferdinand (*Anna Ferdinand*) refers to an “improved sense of well-being”<sup>21</sup> as a possible consequence of spending time in the forest. On the *Seinskraft* website, this effect is also formulated figuratively: You could “immerse yourself in the soothing greenery”<sup>22</sup> or allow it to “envelop you”<sup>23</sup>. An experience that is also described as “well-being without consumption”<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> “Es ist wohl kein Geheimnis, dass wir uns sofort wohlfühlen, sobald wir durch die Natur und den Wald spazieren“ (Dahmen, n.d.)

<sup>18</sup> “Ich möchte ihnen nahebringen, wie gut der Naturraum WALD tut” (Dörr, n.d.)

<sup>19</sup> “Wir wissen intuitiv schon lange das Aufenthalt in der Natur uns Menschen gut tun”. (Greven, n.d.)

<sup>20</sup> “Sie möchten Ihre Lebensqualität steigern, um sich körperlich und seelisch wohlzufühlen?” (Wiessmann, n.d.)

<sup>21</sup> “Was der Wald kann: verbessertes Wohlbefinden” (Ferdinand, n.d.)

<sup>22</sup> “Eintauchen in das Wohltuende Grün” (Weßkamp-Lenkewitz, n.d.)

<sup>23</sup> “Lass dich von wohltuendem Grün umhüllen” (Weßkamp-Lenkewitz, n.d.)

<sup>24</sup> “Wohlsein ohne Konsum” (Weßkamp-Lenkewitz, n.d.)

In addition, a few providers also emphasise the beneficial effects that nature has. The *Waldbaden NRW* website formulates this very generally with the words: “Everyone who moves in nature is doing something good for themselves”<sup>25</sup>. *Waldbaden Eifel Nord* also emphasises that a visit to the forest can be seen as “a time-out for greater well-being”<sup>26</sup>. Greven (*Waldbaden Nordeifel*) further describes the special atmosphere of the forest with terms such as “soothing air of the coniferous forest” and a “soothingly calm atmosphere”<sup>27</sup>.

These descriptions are in line with the biophilia hypothesis (Wilson, 1984), which assumes that humans have an evolutionary and genetic desire to become more connected to nature and living beings (Schuh & Immich, 2022). This idea of a deeply rooted, pre-rational relationship with nature is described, for example, by *Waldbaden Nordeifel* by saying that we “intuitively know” how good the forest is for us. Nature is presented not only as a place of recreation, but also as an important space for human needs. Moreover, the strong emphasis on well-being on the websites can be explained by looking at social developments. Several researchers show that, today, in times of increasing acceleration, sensory overload and exhaustion, the need for deceleration and relaxation has become central for many people (Schuh & Immich, 2022; Robson, 2017; Levitin, 2014; Simons, 2010). This explains why alternative health practices often emphasise “feeling good”. They prioritise a holistic sense of in alternative medicine, personal experiences and subjective feelings are often seen as central to health, rather than relying solely on objective medical measures (Kaptchuk & Eisenberg, 1998). This becomes visible as they use and underline well-being as a legitimate indicator of health. Furthermore, the emphasis on well-being and feeling good in alternative health practices like forest bathing is linked to modern ideals of being self-fulfilling, authentic, and self-responsible (Sointu, 2011).

#### *1.4. As a place for health*

Next, the most prominent description of the forest is that of a place for health. All websites describe the forest as some kind of place for health, either directly or indirectly. This is underlined for example by the use of scientific findings and the mention of researchers who found that forests and forest bathing have an effect on our health.

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<sup>25</sup> “Jeder der sich in der Natur bewegt, tut etwas Gutes für sich”. (Schmidt, n.d.)

<sup>26</sup> “eine Auszeit für mehr Wohlbefinden” (Frangenheim, n.d.)

<sup>27</sup> “Wohltuende Luft des Nadelwaldes”; [...] “wohltuende ruhige Atmosphäre des Waldes” (Greven, n.d.)

Eleven of the thirteen websites mention the fact that forest bathing or Shinrin Yoku was invented in Japan and is part of the national health care. This can be understood as an attempt to make forest bathing more credible. By linking it to a scientifically recognised health system, it shows possible clients that forest bathing is not just a passing trend, but a serious practice with institutional recognition and a long tradition in healthcare, especially since forest bathing is becoming increasingly popular in Germany (Schuh & Immich, 2022). Two websites, *Waldbaden NRW* and *Meditativ Natur Erleben* note that the forest has health benefits. Two websites, *Seinskraft* and *Waldbaden Eifel Nord*, do not mention health benefits directly. The other 9 websites argue that scientific studies prove the positive health effects of a forest visit. The health benefits are listed. Dörr mentions, for example, “Stress reduction, strengthening the immune system, lowering blood pressure and heart rate, brightening the mood, improving concentration”. Karin Wiessmann (*Forest Medicine*) further emphasises “improved sleep quality, increased production of anti-cancer proteins, reduction of the stress hormone cortisol and an increase in natural killer cells”. Ferdinand additionally adds to this that forests have a positive effect on your mood, well-being, concentration and creativity. In addition, she argues that “studies show that humans find blue and green tones and colour to be the most relaxing”<sup>28</sup>. Thus, while the specific health effects named vary slightly between the providers, they all point in a similar direction: the forest is consistently presented as a space that contributes to both physical and psychological well-being and health.

These descriptions are in line with the findings of several studies on the health benefits of forest bathing, which state that going to the forest and engaging in the activity can, for example, reduce stress, promote mental clarity or lower blood pressure and pulse rate (Rodtook et al., 2024; Schuh & Immich, 2022; Pérez-Calderon et. al, 2024; Siah et al., 2023; Tsunetsugu et al., 2010). This health-related representation of the forest is also supported by Konijnendijk's concept of *The Healthy Forest* (Konijnendijk, 2008a). She emphasises, building on the World Health Organisation's definition of health as holistic well-being, that forests contribute to physical, mental and social health in several ways. Forest are proven to not only have a positive effect through their calming atmosphere or the opportunity to exercise, but also through their ecological function. Forests filter air pollution, provide shade and regulate the temperature. This use of factual information on the websites has been shown to strengthen trust in content (Lucassen & Schraagen, 2011). Hence, even if these facts are not critically questioned by lay

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<sup>28</sup> “Studien belegen, dass Menschen die blau und Grüntöne der Natur am erholsamsten finden” (Ferdinand, n.d.)

people, they act as credibility markers that make information look serious and convincing. This explains why many forest bathing websites use scientific terms and study results to legitimise their offers.

### 1.5. As a place for healing

Additionally, healing is a central theme on many of the websites analysed. A total of eight providers of thirteen place the healing effects of the forest at the centre of their website. For example, the *Waldluftleben* website describes forest bathing as a way to “experience the healing power of the forest”<sup>29</sup>. Vormfeld (*Waldverbunden*) and Greven (*Waldbaden Nordeifel*) also emphasise the holistic effect of nature on people. While Greven writes that “forest bathing utilises the healing power of the forest on body, mind and soul”, Bettina Vormfeld emphasises the versatility of this effect: “Thanks to its various healing powers, the forest always has a holistic effect on body, mind and soul”<sup>30</sup>.

The websites show that it is not just about individual aspects of health, but about a comprehensive experience of healing that touches all levels of human existence. The *Robin Woods* website even describes it as “[...] the healing effect of the forest and nature becomes a multi-sensory experience”<sup>31</sup>. Furthermore, Dörr, for example, argues that the healing is supported by “phytoncides, natural sounds and fresh forest air”<sup>32</sup>.

The websites *Forest Medicine* and *Meditativ Natur Erleben* even go so far as to claim that forests “promote self-healing powers”. This emphasises the idea that the forest is not just a passive place of relaxation but actively stimulates the body's inner regeneration processes. Nature is seen here as a trigger for healing processes, enabling the individual to find their way back to their own health in a protected space. Stefan Alberts, operator of the *Waldlager Sauerland* website, goes one step further in his description of the forest and describes it as a regenerative place. He explains: “For many people, this means regeneration in an environment

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<sup>29</sup> “[...] die heilende Kraft des Waldes zu erleben” (Steidl et al., n.d.)

<sup>30</sup> “Durch seine verschiedenartigen Heilkräfte wirkt der Wald immer ganzheitlich auf Körper, Seele und Geist” (Vormfeld, n.d.)

<sup>31</sup> “[...] wird die heilsame Wirkung des Waldes und der Natur zu einem multisensorischen Erlebnis” (Herkenrath, n.d.)

<sup>32</sup> “Phytonzide wirken beruhigend und gesundheitsfördernd. Natürliche Klänge wie das Rauschen der Blätter oder dem Vogelgesang entspannen das Nervensystem. Frische Waldluft unterstützt eine tiefe Atmung und wirkt belebend” (Dörr, n.d.)

that is not only literally created for us. We are a product of it.”<sup>33</sup>

This addresses the deeper connection between humans and nature by portraying the forest as an environment that not only serves humans as outsiders but also helps to shape our existence. Ferdinand also argues that when we do forest bathing, “we bathe in the forest air and its healing components”<sup>34</sup>. This perspective speaks of a relationship between humans and nature that enables the individual not only to benefit from nature but also to experience their own identity and health in this natural environment.

These findings can be interpreted in the context of spiritual tourism as described by Richard Sharpley. According to Sharpley (2021), spiritual tourism experiences are closely connected to the desire for healing. People consciously seek out places that are perceived as therapeutic to “correct or alleviate” parts of their everyday lives that are perceived as stressful or alienating. Sharpley (2021) further argues that green spaces, especially forests, can evoke these spiritual responses. His argument is based on studies that show that interaction with the natural environment promotes a sense of spiritual connectedness with the landscape. The websites also describe the forest as such a healing space. Sharpley (2021) also highlights how spiritual experiences have transformative power, which often enables new ways of living, such as meditation, mindfulness or yoga. Forest bathing, therefore, can also be understood as a spiritual practice which opens up new approaches to self-perception and healing.

#### *1.6. As a place to connect to oneself and nature*

Another central theme on eight websites is the idea that the forest is not just an external space but also a place to connect to oneself and nature. Dahmen (*Wandern Waldbaden*), for example, describes how forest bathing helps you learn to follow your intuition again to find your “inner roots”. Ilona Dörr further emphasises this aspect when she talks about being able to connect with “inner peace” in the forest.

Ferdinand's website emphasises the opportunity to “immerse yourself”<sup>35</sup> in nature and experience an individual connection to the forest. It emphasises that everyone can experience this relationship in their way. In this context, Wiessmann (*Forest Medicine*) says that spending

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<sup>33</sup> “Für viele Menschen bedeutet dies eine Regeneration in einem Umfeld, das nicht nur buchstäblich für uns geschaffen wurde. Wir sind ein Produkt von ihr.” (Alberts, n.d.)

<sup>34</sup> “[...] baden wir in der Waldluft und ihren heilsamen Bestandteilen” (Ferdinand, n.d.)

<sup>35</sup> “Tauchen Sie ein [...]“ (Ferdinand, n.d.)

time in the forest activates or strengthens the “connection to oneself and to nature”<sup>36</sup>. Intuition, which is often overlooked in everyday life, can also emerge again in a natural way. The *Waldluftleben* team also takes up this connection, both individually and collectively. In one of their courses, they say that you should “reconnect” as a team, both with each other and with the natural environment<sup>37</sup>. They are invited to immerse themselves deeply in the atmosphere of the forest and establish a “special connection to the diverse living world” of the forest. The focus is on conscious sensing: perceiving the forest floor through movement, listening to oneself and thus finding a “deep connection to ourselves”<sup>38</sup>. *Waldbaden Eifel Nord* also emphasises this aspect of reconnection when it says that forest bathing is a perfect way to “switch off” and “reconnect with nature”<sup>39</sup>. On the *Waldverbunden* page, specific impulses such as mindfulness, breathing and movement exercises are mentioned to help you “reconnect with nature and yourself”. Finally, a quote from Qing Li, a Japanese expert for forest bathing, on the Waldlager Sauerland website emphasises the moment of reconnection: “And when we open our senses, we begin to connect with nature”<sup>40</sup>.

This idea of reconnection, both with oneself and with the natural environment, can also be interpreted in terms of Sharpley's (2021) understanding of spiritual tourism. As can be seen on the websites, this reconnection often happens through sensory perception, mindfulness and a rediscovery of intuition. These elements correspond to what Sharpley (2021) describes as spiritual experimentation, in which people try out new ways of living and experiencing. The focus is not only internal. Rather, these experiences reflect a relational understanding of nature, which also plays a central role for van den Born (2008). In his concept of the participant in nature, people are not seen as separate from nature, but as part of a living whole. Forest bathing, in consequence, becomes a practice in which belonging is not thought of, but experienced physically. Hence, the forest appears not only as a healing place but as a kind of active co-creator of connection and meaning.

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<sup>36</sup> “Sie aktivieren oder verstärken die Verbindung zu sich selbst und zur Natur. Das bedeutet auch, dass sich Ihre Intuition, die durch den Alltag und Beruf eventuell überdeckt war, nach einiger Zeit wieder auf natürliche Weise herstellt.” (Wiessmann, n.d.)

<sup>37</sup> “sich neu zu verbinden als Team” (Steidl et al., n.d.)

<sup>38</sup> “in der Bewegung spüren wir den Waldboden, lauschen in uns hinein und finden so eine tiefe Verbindung zu uns selbst”. (Steidl et al., n.d.)

<sup>39</sup> “Ein perfekter Weg: um abzuschalten; sich wieder mit der Natur zu verbinden!” (Frangenheim, n.d.)

<sup>40</sup> “Und wenn wir unsere Sinne öffnen, beginnen wir uns mit der Natur zu verbinden.” (Alberts, n.d.)

### 1.7. *As our natural habitat*

Four of the thirteen websites take up the idea and argue that forests are our natural habitat. On his website, *Robin Woods*, Herkenrath formulates this very directly with the words: “The forest is our natural habitat”<sup>41</sup>. This statement refers to a fundamental relationship between man and nature and to the fact that the forest is not just a place of recreation, but an environment in which we were originally at home. He further adds to that: “Humans and forests are linked by a centuries-old relationship and closeness to nature, which is perceived as particularly “pronounced” in Germany.”<sup>42</sup>. Vormfeld also approaches this idea from a similar perspective on her website *Waldverbunden*. She writes: “Since we come from nature and are a part of it...”<sup>43</sup>, emphasising that there is an original connection between humans and nature that has often been forgotten in this day and age. Both descriptions suggest that spending time in the forest is more than just a leisure activity - rather, it is a return to a place with which we are deeply connected. This is in line with the biophilia hypothesis (Wilson, 1984), which is “the innate urge to engage with other life forms in our environment that the human spirit is deeply connected to exploring life within the physical environment” (Hansen & Jones, 2020). As humans have spent the majority of their evolutionary history in natural, especially forest-like landscapes, this deep connection to nature is biologically anchored in them (Konijnendijk, 2008a).

Additionally, Alberts (*Waldlager Sauerland*) describes the forest as a surrounding “which is not only literally created for us. We are a product of this natural environment”<sup>44</sup>. Ferdinand goes even further and adds on her website, “From an evolutionary point of view, we humans have been surrounded by greenery for the longest time and 99.9 % of our existence. This means that green calms us on an archaic level. Where there is green, there is also a water point. Where there is water, we also find food and can relax”<sup>45</sup>.

All these statements suggest that the forest is our natural habitat and that we humans have a special relationship with it. This is in line with Kaplan & Kaplan (1989), who argue in their book *The experience of nature: A psychological perspective* that people have evolutionary

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<sup>41</sup> “Der Wald ist unser natürliches Habitat” (Herkenrath, n.d.)

<sup>42</sup> “Mensch und Wald verbindet eine jahrtausendealte Beziehung und Naturnähe, die bei uns Deutschen als besonders „ausgeprägt“ empfunden wird.” (Herkenrath, n.d.)

<sup>43</sup> “weil wir aus der Natur kommen und Teil dieser sind“ (Vormfeld, n.d.)

<sup>44</sup> “[...] die nicht nur dem Wortsinn nach für uns geschaffen ist. Wir sind ein Produkt dieser natürlichen Umgebung” (Alberts, n.d.)

<sup>45</sup> “Evolutionär betrachtet waren wir Menschen die längste Zeit von Grünen umgeben Punkt und 99,9 % unserer Existenz. Das heißt, grün beruhigt uns auf archaischer Ebene. Wo grün ist, ist auch Wasser und wo Wasser ist, da finden wir auch Nahrung und können uns entspannen.” (Ferdinand, n.d.)

preferences for natural settings. Their book suggests that humans have an evolutionary inclination toward environments that provide safety, resources, and opportunities for exploration. These include landscapes with water, views, green vegetation and retreats such as the forest. The forest, therefore, fulfils basic psychological needs: It has a calming effect, sparks curiosity and invites for exploration. This explains why open landscapes like forests with greenery, water, and clear sightlines are often preferred by people (Ulrich, 1981; Konijnendijk, 2008a). Moreover, it explains why many people find the forest not only pleasant, but also deeply “fitting” in the sense of a familiar habitat. This deeper connection to nature can also be found in the study by Van den Born (2008), who analysed the views of laypeople on nature. Many of the interviewees described humans as biologically embedded beings in nature, who nevertheless carry a moral responsibility towards this environment through their reason and power. This also reflects why most people in the study see themselves as participants in nature and part of a larger ecological whole, rather than as having power over nature. In this sense, the forest is not only seen as a place of origin, but as a place to which one returns to reconnect with the forgotten, the original.

### *1.8. As a home*

On three of the websites analysed, the forest is described as a place that conveys a sense of home. Greven (*Waldbaden Nordeifel*) describes her connection to the forest in particularly personal terms: “Whether I’m out in the forest on foot, by bike or on horseback - I always have the feeling of being at home”<sup>46</sup>. This can be related to the theory of place attachment. According to the model of Altman & Low (1992), place attachment comprises several dimensions: the personal dimension, which describes who is attached to the place, the psychological dimension, which includes affective, cognitive and behavioural processes, the spatial dimension, which refers to the type of place and the temporal dimension, which takes into account the duration and continuity of the attachment. In the case of Greven, the psychological dimension is particularly pronounced: The forest is not only experienced as a pleasant place to stay, but as a place of emotional arrival (Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001). This feeling of a deep sense of belonging even leads her to the desire to continue designing this “forest home”: “So it was

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<sup>46</sup> “Ob auf Schusters Rappen, mit dem Fahrrad oder mit den Pferden unterwegs im Wald – jedes Mal habe ich das Gefühl, zu Hause zu sein“ (Greven, n.d.)

natural that I developed the desire to continue designing this forest home.”<sup>47</sup>.

In addition, Ferdinand describes the forest as a space that creates a sense of comfort. For her, the “creation of a feeling of home and comfort”<sup>48</sup> is particularly important. Their statement makes it clear that the forest is not only experienced as a natural space, but also as a socially and emotionally significant habitat. Weinbrenner et al. (2021) found that, especially in times of the COVID-19 pandemic, forests have become critically important, especially for city residents, serving functions similar to those of public spaces and even being described as a new "living room" or home-like environment. Thus, people develop a strong sense of place with forests, feeling emotionally connected to them even if they do not live nearby. This connection is shaped by personal, social, and historical experiences, making forests feel like a “home” regardless of physical distance.

Similarly, Dahmen (*Wandern Waldbaden*) explains that the forest is not only a current place of residence, but also an original point of reference for being human: “Over time, we sense that the forest is still a home for us humans and that its roots are our roots.”<sup>49</sup>. The forest is thus described as a place where you can feel a sense of belonging and rootedness and which creates a sense of home, which is aligned with Brown et al. (2012) who argue that most often place attachments develop as individuals inhabit, utilise, and assign meaning to environments like homes. This means that even if the forest is not a traditional living space, its repeated use for personal reflection, healing or retreat can create similar emotional bonds, making it a meaningful, home-like place and creating a strong sense of belonging.

This emotional attachment to the forest can also be understood in the context of O’Gorman's (2022) theory of belonging. She describes that belonging arises when people feel emotionally connected to a place and experience familiarity, acceptance, and a sense of home within it, something she calls place-belongingness. However, belonging can also be a social or political process which decides who belongs to certain communities or spaces. This is known as the politics of belonging. In the examples analysed here, the focus is clearly on the first concept: the personal relationship to the forest is established through repeated physical presence, sensory perception and emotional resonance. The forest functions not only as a

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<sup>47</sup> “So war es natürlich, dass sich der Wunsch in mir entwickelte, dieses Wald-Zuhause weiter auszugestalten.“ (Greven, n.d.)

<sup>48</sup> “Schaffen eines Gefühls des Zuhause- und Geborgenseins im Vordergrund” (Ferdinand, n.d.)

<sup>49</sup> “Wir spüren mit der Zeit, dass der Wald immer noch ein Zuhause für uns Menschen ist und dass seine Wurzeln unsere Wurzeln sind.“ (Dahmen, n.d.)

physical place but also as a meaningful experiential space in which belonging manifests itself through individual and collective experiences.

### 1.9. As a safe space

In addition to the feeling of home, the perception of the forest as a safe place also plays a role on three other websites. Dörr emphasises that the forest offers a space “in which everyone can feel safe”<sup>50</sup> and at the same time calls it a place that can help “make decisions with inner security” („Entscheidungen mit innerer Sicherheit zu treffen“). This security seems to be inherent in the forest and is presented as the basis for inner clarity.

Alberts (*Waldlager Sauerland*) goes one step further and describes the forest as an environment that, unlike many other social spaces, is not unconsciously scanned for dangers. “The forest, on the other hand, is categorised as potentially friendly in our society”<sup>51</sup>. It is precisely under professional guidance that people are able to feel safe there. In such an atmosphere, he writes, it is easier to concentrate on the present and future, make plans and take decisions. The reduced level of stress is also described as conducive to clear thinking. In addition to the feeling of home, the perception of the forest as a safe retreat also plays a role on some websites. The topic of safety is also addressed on the *Waldbaden NRW* website. Schmidt replies to the question “Is forest bathing safe?”, with the clear answer: “Yes, forest bathing is generally safe.” At the same time, he points out that it is important to pay attention to your surroundings and wear suitable clothing and shoes to avoid injury. This also addresses the practical dimension of safety. This description of the forest as a safe space is an interesting finding as forest are usually described as threatening places, for example in fairy tales, and not as Alberts describes them as “potentially friendly”. This can be explained by the rise of modern society as forests became objects that could be measured, analysed and used and were valued primarily for their resources and economic potential (Konijnendijk, 2008b). Over the last few centuries, humans have increasingly distanced themselves from nature. Urbanisation and industrialisation have removed people from direct contact with natural environments, leading to a new perception of nature. Now, in the modern, technology-driven world, we are looking for places that offer us peace and balance from our hectic everyday lives, and the forest and nature have become a place of retreat (Schuh & Immich, 2022).

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<sup>50</sup> “in dem alle sich sicher fühlen können“ (Dörr, n.d.)

<sup>51</sup> “Der Wald hingegen wird in unserer Gesellschaft als potentiell freundlich eingestuft.“ (Alberts, n.d.)

Furthermore, these descriptions of safety might also be explained by the theory of psychological safety, a theory originally introduced by the psychotherapist Carl Rogers in the field of organisational psychology and organisational behaviour (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Usually, psychological safety “describes perceptions of consequences of taking interpersonal risks in a particular context, such as the workplace” (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). It helps explain why people speak up sometimes, share ideas or take initiative and why they often do not. The theory further concludes that if individuals trust that they won’t be humiliated, punished, or rejected, they are more likely to engage in those learning behaviours, such as offering feedback or admitting mistakes. However, even though the theory is grounded in organisational settings, it can also help understand why the forest bathing guides highlight this aspect of safety. Applied to the depiction of the forest, the result is an image of a protected experiential space. Hence, a space which people “do not unconsciously scan for dangers” (*Waldlager Sauerland*) but where they can concentrate entirely on themselves and their world of thoughts. This refers to an essential characteristic of psychological safety, the absence of threat. Even if in Edmondson's model this threat is mostly social, when transferred to the forest, this means that an environment is also created here that is “potentially categorised as friendly” (*Waldlager Sauerland*) and in which the individual feels safe because there are no external stimuli that force a defensive attitude. In this sense, the forest offers a socially neutral space in which people do not have to conform to any social roles or fulfil any expectations. This is precisely what creates the psychological safety that enables people to look inwards, allow thoughts to flow, make clear decisions and in the forest concentrate on themselves and their thoughts.

### *1.10. As a place of childhood*

Another motif that appears on five websites is the memory of childhood and the forest as a place of childhood. The forest is described not only as a current space of experience, but also as a place to reflect on early phases of life. Dahmen writes that a visit to the forest is often also a journey back to childhood, to a time “when our lives were still easy and carefree”<sup>52</sup>. Dörr also picks up on this idea when she invites people to discover nature with “childlike curiosity”<sup>53</sup>. One review of her programmes even says: “I feel transported back to my childhood”<sup>54</sup>. Further,

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<sup>52</sup> “als unser Leben noch leicht und unbeschwert war“ (Dahmen, n.d.)

<sup>53</sup> “Die Natur mit kindlicher Neugier entdecken“ (Dörr, n.d.)

<sup>54</sup> “Ich fühle mich in meine Kindheit zurückversetzt” (Dörr, n.d.)

the *Waldbaden Eifel Nord* website also describes childhood as a formative time: Spending time in the forest, alone or together with family and friends, had been a central part of socialisation “since my childhood and youth”. Contact with plants, animals and nature played a central role here<sup>55</sup>. Additionally, Petra Breker (*Meditativ Natur erleben*) also looks back on her childhood experiences: “Even as a child, on walks with her family, she felt ‘that nature was doing something to me - that I came home differently than when I left’”<sup>56</sup>. Even though it is not explicitly mentioned by the authors, it is possible that the authors deliberately want to evoke a feeling of nostalgia with these statements, both in the readers and in themselves. By referring to childhood memories and early experiences of nature, the forest is emotionally staged as a familiar, identity-forming place, which then becomes a place of retreat and healing. Sedikides & Wildschut (2023), for example, argue that these statements evoke a feeling of nostalgia and are thus associated with positive affect, meaningfulness and a sense of continuity. For the forest bathing websites, that means when people are reminded of childhood experiences, like Frangenheim or Breker describe, they’re more likely to re-engage with similar settings. In addition, according to Sedikides & Wildschut (2023), nostalgia also supports motivation by linking the past self with the present and future self, which thus can align activity with a deeper, consistent self-image so that people are more likely to feel that they are who they are and therefore worth doing.

Furthermore, one could argue that the statements also reflect the temporal dimension of the theory of place attachment mentioned above, as the emotional bond to the forest is built up through repeated experiences in childhood and continues into adulthood (Low & Altman, 1992). However, several dimensions need to be considered here, as the psychological dimension also plays a central role. The statements reflect a strong connection, which is expressed, for example, in feelings of security, curiosity or even the feeling of being transported back to one's own childhood.

Compared to that, Wiessmann (*Forest Medicine*) links the topic of childhood not only with retrospectives, but also with her current programme. She offers forest bathing for children and young people and describes how important it is to her that young people, like herself, develop a relationship with nature from an early age. The forest should become a place where

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<sup>55</sup> “Seit meiner Kindheit und Jugend war und ist der Aufenthalt im Wald, in der Natur - alleine oder gemeinsam mit Freunden und Familie -, der Kontakt mit Pflanzen, Tieren und Natur ein großer Bestandteil meiner Sozialisation” (Frangenheim, n.d.)

<sup>56</sup> “Schon als Kind habe ich bei sonntäglichen Spaziergängen mit der Familie gespürt, dass die Natur etwas mit mir macht - dass ich anders wieder nach Hause gekommen bin, als ich gegangen bin.” (Breker, n.d.)

they can recharge their batteries, especially in a world where time, space and leisure are becoming increasingly scarce resources. This also suggests that children in today's society are already in need of relaxation and balance. According to research, children associate forests with feelings of relaxation, calm, and reflection, providing a restorative space away from the stresses of urban life (Chawla, 2015). Forests and nature are places that also foster imaginative play and social interaction and are thus essential places for development. Furthermore, forests and nature are thus places of childhood because they embody freedom, adventure, and independence, which are elements that are often limited in urban settings.

### *1.11. Conclusion*

Thus, to draw a conclusion, one can say that the forest is described as a space that goes far beyond its physical nature. It is described as a space that stands in contrast to the fast-paced, over-technologized and performance-oriented world of everyday life. Instead, the forest is a therapeutic and transformative space where one can experience mindfulness and meaning. Furthermore, it is a place that serves not only for health but also as a home, a safe space and a natural habitat of people. The websites describe it as a place of silence, to slow down, to feel good, for health, for healing, to (re) connect, as a home, a safe space and a place of childhood. The forest becomes a space for holistic experiences, that serves as a place for silence, healing and reconnection with the self and nature at the same time (Schuh & Immich, 2022; FAO, 2020). Moreover, the forest not only serves as a place for nature experiences and regeneration but also as a space for spiritual experiences (Hansen & Jones, 2020; Sharpley, 2021). And not only that, but the forest bathing providers also even go as far as to describe the place as something that has originally been our natural habitat (Konijnendijk, 2008a). These attributions are linked both to scientific theories, such as the biophilia hypothesis (Wilson, 1984) or Attention Restoration Theory (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989) and to ideas of nature as a place of belonging and spirituality (O'Gorman, 2022; Sharpley, 2021). Overall, it can be said that in the provider's discourse, the forest is not simply constructed as a landscape but as an idealised space of experience that promises a profound effect on body, mind, and soul. In other words, the forest is described by the guides as being maximally attractive for relaxation, healing and the search for meaning (Dang, 2023; Farkic et al., 2021; Schuh & Immich, 2022). This shared perspective was consistent across all providers, regardless of gender, team composition or region. It therefore fits perfectly into the concept of wellness and health tourism (Smith, 2021; Pérez-Calderón, 2024).

## Chapter 2

### How is the self described on the websites?

Just as the forest is described in Chapter 1 as an idealised experiential space, this chapter deals with the self that enters this space. The aim is to find out how the self positions itself in the digital discourse on forest bathing, i.e. to find out which problems, desires or inner states of the self are depicted.

#### 2.1 *As lost*

One way the self is described is as lost. Lost means different things in this context. First, it can mean that we have lost important qualities like inspiration, new ideas and a childlike lightness. This is suggested by two websites. Ferdinand describes this figuratively: “Because when we go forest bathing, we can see the forest between all the trees again”<sup>57</sup>, suggesting that we can regain clarity through new perspectives. Dahmen (*Wandern Waldbaden*) highlights the carefreeness the self has lost: “We not only experience the wonders of nature there, but also often travel back to our childhood, when our lives were still light and carefree”<sup>58</sup>. According to McAdams & McLean (2013), people construct their self-image through the stories they tell about their lives. As these stories fall apart and the link among past, present, and future weakens, the narrative self becomes incoherent, along with a loss of meaning and purpose. In this context, the forest serves not as a site of reunion but as a symbolic reminder of what has been lost: a time when the narrative of the self was simpler, easier, and more cohesive. In addition, Sedikides & Wildschut (2017) argue that nostalgia aids individuals in discovering meaning in their lives, especially through the enhancement of social connectedness and self-continuity, as well as the promotion of psychological balance.

Secondly, the self is described as lost is related to the loss of energy, strength and inner balance. This is used by two websites. Dörr for example, writes: “Due to an additional challenge in my private life, I started to focus on mindfulness and stress reduction a few years ago in order to maintain my inner balance”<sup>59</sup> suggesting that (inner) balance is another thing that the self has lost. Further, she also suggests that the forest can be a source of energy as she states, “My source

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<sup>57</sup> “Denn beim Waldbaden sehen wir den Wald vor lauter Bäumen wieder” (Ferdinand, n.d.)

<sup>58</sup> “Wir erleben dort nicht nur die Wunder der Natur, sondern auch oft eine Reise in die Kindheit, wo unser Leben noch leicht und unbeschwert war“ (Dahmen, n.d.)

<sup>59</sup> “Durch eine zusätzliche Herausforderung im privaten Bereich habe ich vor einigen Jahren angefangen, mich mit Achtsamkeit und Stressreduzierung zu beschäftigen, um meine innere Balance zu erhalten.” (Dörr, n.d.)

of energy has always been the forest”<sup>60</sup>. *Waldluftleben* also describes forest bathing as a way of “rediscovering your own inner balance” in a hectic world. Both websites show how the self in our modern life is susceptible to losing its internal balance due to external stressors. Dörr also draws attention to how “in everyday life, it is sometimes a challenge to stay in your own skin and thus to be there for yourself and your loved ones with full strength and relaxation”<sup>61</sup>. Breker (*Meditativ Natur Erleben*) also points out how forest bathing can help regain the lost energy: “Step by step, I get away from the problems of everyday life and consciously recharge my energy”<sup>62</sup>. These descriptions together suggest that in contemporary life, the self is often at risk of losing its centre and energy due to stress and external pressures. Here, mindfulness and forest bathing are described as methods to regain this lost balance. This is also in line with Attention Restoration Theory by Kaplan & Kaplan (1989). This is also in line with Kaplan & Kaplan's Attention Restoration Theory (1989). Spending time in the forest makes it possible to mentally disconnect from everyday life (“being away”) and offers a gentle, attractive environment (“soft fascination”) that contributes to the regeneration of energy, inner balance and strength.

Lastly, the self as lost can also be understood as an existential loss or a loss of self. This is not just about tiredness or the desire for inspiration, but about a deep sense of alienation from one's own identity. The guides argue that this is caused by technological advancements and the modern way of life. In this context, the longing for a reconnection with one's own self becomes clear, as expressed in the words of *Seinskraft*: “Do you wish you had time for yourself... and just be yourself?”<sup>63</sup>. Greven (*Waldbaden Nordeifel*) also talks about this process when she says: “Finding yourself”<sup>64</sup>. This simple phrase refers to the desire to return to harmony with oneself after the self has been lost. Stefan Alberts (*Waldlager Sauerland*) also points out that many people “take their stressful lives into the forest”<sup>65</sup> and that “the “dress” of professional life is difficult to take of”<sup>66</sup>. Thus, even if we take a stroll in the forest, many continue to carry the burden of their hectic everyday lives with them and do not connect to the forest in any way. Another example can be found in Breker's description (*Meditativ Natur Erleben*): “Ready to

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<sup>60</sup> “Meine Energiequelle ist und war schon immer die Natur“ (Dörr, n.d.)

<sup>61</sup> “Im Alltag ist es manches Mal eine Herausforderung bei sich zu bleiben in seiner eigenen Haut und somit aus voller Kraft und entspannt für sich und seine Lieben da zu sein” (Dörr, n.d.)

<sup>62</sup> “Schritt für Schritt entferne ich mich von den Problemen des Alltags und tanke bewusst neue Kraft.“ (Breker, n.d.)

<sup>63</sup> “Wünschst du dir Zeit für dich... und du einfach nur du selbst bist?“ (Weßkamp-Lenkewitz, n.d.)

<sup>64</sup> “Zu sich selbst finden” (Greven, n.d.)

<sup>65</sup> “Viele Menschen verlagern ihr stressreiches Leben mit in den Wald.“ (Alberts, n.d.)

<sup>66</sup> “Das ‚Kleid‘ des Berufslebens ist nur schwer auszuziehen.” (Alberts, n.d.)

step out of your often challenging and hectic everyday life...?”<sup>67</sup>. This points to the challenge of not losing yourself in the hectic pace of everyday life and consciously taking time out to find yourself again.

This is in line with Erich Fromm's concepts of *Haben und Sein* (1976), in which he distinguishes between two basic attitudes to life. The “to have” orientation focuses on the collection of material possessions and success, which, according to Fromm (1976), leads to alienation from the true self as the individual increasingly defines themselves through possessions and achievement. This contrasts with the “to be” orientation, which focuses on inner growth, authenticity and connection to one's own values. Fromm argues that returning to this “being” orientation, often achieved through mindfulness and self-reflection, is the way to rediscover the lost self and lead a fulfilled life. Thus, the way forest bathing guides describe forest bathing on their websites, this practice could be seen as a way to move away from the “to have” orientation and back to the “to be” orientation. This becomes especially clear as they describe how, through immersion in nature and the practice of mindfulness, they provide a space in which participants can reconnect with their true selves.

## 2.2. *As stressed*

This challenge of not getting lost in the hectic pace of everyday life and consciously taking time for us leads us directly to the next aspect of the self: the self as stressed. Even though these websites do not directly define stress, it is described in the quotes as a state of inner restlessness and self-alienation. It is caused by constant availability, pressure to perform, and being stuck in worries or thoughts, which causes the self to lose its balance and access to its own present. Ten of the websites show that forest bathing can reduce stress. However, only four of the websites indicate in some way that the self is stressed and needs the forest bath as a way to relax. “We are always and everywhere available, which unfortunately means that our bodies can no longer really rest” meaning our self is constantly stressed, writes Petra Dahmen on her website Wandern Waldbaden. This leads to a state in which the self increasingly loses its balance. The forest, on the other hand, is a place where you can learn to “open your senses and arrive in the here and now” and thus find your way back to yourself. The words of *Seinskraft* express how the self is under constant pressure and often alienated from its own needs: “We consume ourselves in complaints about the past and worries about the future instead of devoting

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<sup>67</sup> “Sind Sie bereit, aus Ihrem oft herausfordernden und hektischen Alltag auszusteigen?“ (Breker, n.d.)

ourselves to what we are doing right now.”<sup>68</sup>. This describes the distraction and inner restlessness of the self, which gets lost in daily stress and is no longer rooted in the present. *Waldluftleben* states that the stress of everyday life often overwhelms the self and that spending time in the forest offers a natural balance that allows the self to regenerate. They write: “Forest bathing focuses on relaxation - a welcome counterbalance to our often hectic and performance-orientated everyday lives”<sup>69</sup>. Finally, Greven (*Waldbaden Nordeifel*) also takes up the topic of the stressed self. For example, she asks the reader directly if they want to “Push away stress and deadline pressure?” and “Let go, take a deep breath, have time...”<sup>70</sup>. In doing so, she illustrates in context how this constant tension crushes the self and that the only way to free oneself from this state is to let go of the pressure and focus on the moment. The stressed self is often unable to feel and regenerate itself, which leads to inner overload.

These quotes from the websites suggest that the self is stressed in our modern technological society. Ma (2024) argues that people encounter various stressors in contemporary society in all parts of life, including work, family, relationships, economic issues, socio-cultural factors, and health concerns. Further, these websites argue that the forest is a place where we can all get rid of this stress. This promise can be explained by Roger Ulrich's (1981) stress reduction theory, which states that natural environments such as the forest have been shown to reduce physiological and psychological stress, for example by lowering blood pressure and promoting positive emotions. Moreover, it is likely that the website providers emphasise the fact that the individuals feel stressed because forest bathing, as their practice focuses on improving well-being and mental health. This is also shown by Sointu (2006), who demonstrates this point, arguing that alternative and complementary health practices can create a sense of wellbeing that goes beyond physical health and enable individuals to establish a specific self within social norms.

### 2.3. *As overstimulated*

Overload or overstimulation is another point that is regularly mentioned on the forest bathing websites. Modern life is characterised by an overabundance of stimuli from the electronic media, advertising and the environment, leading to a confusion that distracts attention

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<sup>68</sup> “Wir verzehren uns in Klagen über die Vergangenheit und in Sorgen über die Zukunft, statt uns dem zu widmen, was wir gerade tun.“ (Weßkamp-Lenkewitz, n.d.)

<sup>69</sup> “Beim Waldbaden steht die Erholung im Vordergrund – ein willkommener Ausgleich zu unserem oft hektischen und leistungsorientierten Alltag” (Steidl et al., n.d.)

<sup>70</sup> “Stress und Termindruck wegzuschieben?“, “Loslassen, tief durchatmen, Zeit haben...” (Greven, n.d.)

from meaningful aspects of life (Robson, 2016). Ten websites directly name overstimulation and argue that forest bathing is a good way to calm and relax the overstimulated self and its mind. The first type of overstimulation of the self is constant accessibility and information overload, as described by four websites. We've all been there: "We're on the phone while eating, with music or the TV on in the background." "On the way to somewhere, we quickly type a message, dodge an obstacle with one eye." "We plan while cooking, empty the dishwasher in the meantime, skim an article or a scribbled note while on the phone."<sup>71</sup> These everyday scenes, as described by *Seinskraft*, show how strongly our lives are characterised by permanent sensory overload and multitasking. Instead of consciously staying in the moment, our thoughts and actions are constantly jumping back and forth. The self is constantly overstimulated. On her website, *Wandern Waldbaden*, Dahmen also points out: "We are always and everywhere available, which unfortunately means that our bodies can no longer really rest"<sup>72</sup>. Dörr further describes the forest bath as a way to "switch off your mobile phone" and "minimise distractions [...]"<sup>73</sup> to overcome the overstimulation of the self. The forest is thus apparently a place where the self can finally relax. This is also argued by Alberts on his website, *Waldlager Sauerland*, as he writes that one "steps out of a hectic, high-tech art world into the natural atmosphere of the forest" when engaging in forest bathing<sup>74</sup>. These statements and observations are in line with Robson (2016) who argues that the relentless exposure to an unending stream of stimuli results in an overload of information, making it difficult to focus, reflect, or engage in uninterrupted thinking. Further, this accumulation of stimuli from various sources is not merely additive, it can produce a compounded effect that diminishes overall happiness and mental clarity. Kaplan & Kaplan's Attention Restoration Theory (1989) can also be cited in this context. Although ART is primarily focussed on cognitive regeneration, it can also be interpreted in connection with physical reactions to overstimulation. This is due to the fact that studies, for example by Rodtook et al. (2024) and Farkic et al. (2021), have shown that spending time in natural environments not only increases cognitive performance, but also significantly reduces

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<sup>71</sup> "Wir telefonieren beim Essen, im Hintergrund läuft Musik oder der Fernseher." „Auf dem Weg nach irgendwo tippen wir noch schnell eine Nachricht, weichen mit einem Auge einem Hindernis aus.“ „Wir planen beim Kochen, räumen nebenbei die Spülmaschine aus, überfliegen beim Telefonieren einen Artikel, eine gekritzelte Notiz.“ (Weßkamp-Lenkewitz, n.d.)

<sup>72</sup> "Wir sind immer und überall erreichbar, das führt leider dazu, dass unser Körper gar nicht mehr richtig zur Ruhe kommt." (Dahmen, n.d.)

<sup>73</sup> "Handy ausschalten: Ablenkungen minimieren, um vollkommen in die Waldatmosphäre einzutauchen." (Dörr, n.d.)

<sup>74</sup> "Sie treten aus einer hektischen hochtechnisierten Kunstwelt in die natürliche Atmosphäre des Waldes." (Alberts, n.d.)

physical stress indicators.

Further, the second type of overstimulation of the self would be internal. Robson (2016) also emphasises that modern stimuli do not only flood our external environment but also profoundly affect our internal mental states. Five websites describe it as a thought carousel and inner overload, meaning that we are constantly thinking, planning and can't find rest. Greven (*Waldbaden Nordeifel*) and Weßkamp-Lenkewitz (*Seinskraft*) ask the reader directly, "Do you sometimes wish you could switch off the carousel of thoughts in your head?"<sup>75</sup> and "Do you wish it would go quiet in your head?"<sup>76</sup>. The website *Waldluftleben*, writes in addition: "We have less and less time for encounters with ourselves, even though each of us has 24 hours a day at our disposal. We fill these hours with so much to do that we hardly have any time left to just be"<sup>77</sup>. The paper by Robson (2016) describes exactly this, how the multiplicity of stimuli creates a fragmented mental landscape in which attention bounces back and forth uncontrollably, similar to how clutter accumulates in our cognitive environment without us realising it. This continuous distraction and mental clutter make it difficult to have meaningful thoughts and to engage in interactions, leading to internal overstimulation that further diminishes well-being. This is also confirmed by neuroscientist Daniel Levitin in his book *The Organised Mind* (2014). Levitin (2014) emphasises that our brains are not evolutionarily designed to process so many parallel stimuli. Multitasking, therefore, does not lead to efficiency, but to increased energy consumption in the prefrontal cortex and thus to rapid mental exhaustion. In this context, forest bathing can be seen as a conscious counterbalance.

In consequence, it is argued to be one of the solutions to overcoming this state. The website *Forest Medicine* states for example, that "Forest bathing allows you to slow down your mental carousel through [...] conscious physical and mental slowness"<sup>78</sup> and "[...] focusing your attention on the here and now without thinking about anything else or doing anything else at the same time"<sup>79</sup>. The website *Waldbaden Eifel Nord* further argues that the "change of scenery in the forest makes it easier for you to clear your head"<sup>80</sup>, indicating that the self cannot

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<sup>75</sup> "Wünschen Sie sich auch manchmal, das Denkkarussell im Kopf abzuschalten?" (Greven, n.d.)

<sup>76</sup> "Wünschst du dir das es still in deinem Kopf wird" (Weßkamp-Lenkewitz, n.d.)

<sup>77</sup> "Wir haben immer weniger Zeit für die Begegnungen mit uns selbst, obwohl jedem von uns 24 Stunden am Tag zur Verfügung stehen. Wir füllen diese Stunden mit so viel Tun, dass uns kaum mehr Zeit zum Sein bleibt." (Steidl et al., n.d.)

<sup>78</sup> "Beim Waldbaden können Sie durch [...] eine bewusste körperliche und gedankliche Langsamkeit Ihr Gedankenkarussell entschleunigen." (Wiessmann, n.d.)

<sup>79</sup> "ACHTSAMKEIT. [...] Ihre Aufmerksamkeit ins Hier und Jetzt, ohne an etwas anderes zu denken, oder gleichzeitig etwas anderes zu tun." (Wiessmann, n.d.)

<sup>80</sup> "Der Ortswechsel in den Wald, macht es Dir einfacher, den Kopf freizubekommen" (Frangenheim, n.d.)

get rid of its overstimulation in a different environment. This is emphasized for example by Stefan Alberts (*Waldlager Sauerland*) who writes that “In enclosed spaces, we tend to use only two of our senses, namely our eyes and ears”<sup>81</sup>.

#### 2.4. *As longing*

Another way the self is described is as longing, meaning a situation where the self appears as something that is missing something. The guides emphasise that we long for peace and deceleration. This longing is addressed very directly. *Ferdinand*, for example, asks: „Would you like more peace, time and clarity?”<sup>82</sup>. Weßkamp-Lenkewitz (*Seinskraft*) also formulates the question in a very similar way, inviting the self to encounter itself: “Do you wish for time for yourself, a time when it becomes quiet in your head because your thinking comes to rest and you are simply yourself?”<sup>83</sup>. *Robin Woods* promises “a weekend to really slow down”<sup>84</sup>, an invitation to consciously interrupt everyday life. *Waldbaden Eifel Nord* sums it up simply: “Holiday, relaxation, time out”<sup>85</sup>.

Together, these voices paint a picture of the self as one that longs for relief, inner stillness and healing. This feeling of peace is linked to Ulrich's (1981) stress reduction theory, which shows that spending time in natural environments can have an immediate calming effect on the body and mind. Even just looking at nature has a stress-reducing effect, lowers blood pressure and leads to a calmer emotional state (Schuh & Immich, 2022). Against this perspective, the approach of the providers does not appear to be random, but rather specifically geared towards a modern attitude to life that is characterised by excessive demands, hectic pace and acceleration. In a world in which we are constantly running against the clock, a countermovement inevitably arises: the growing collective desire to slow down, to pause for a moment and return to the important things (Baeriswyl, 2009). Baeriswyl (2009) argues that this constant acceleration not only changes our perception of time but also puts a strain on our mental and physical health. The desire to slow down the pace is therefore not at all surprising. The result is a growing collective longing for deceleration, for moments of pause and a return to what defines us at our core. In this context, the forest becomes the ideal counter-space to the

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<sup>81</sup> “Wir neigen dazu in geschlossenen Räumen nur zwei unserer Sinne zu benutzen, nämlich Augen und Ohren“ (Alberts, n.d.)

<sup>82</sup> “Wünschst du dir mehr Ruhe, Zeit und Klarheit?” (Ferdinand, n.d.)

<sup>83</sup> “Wünschst du dir Zeit für dich, eine Zeit, in der es still in deinem Kopf wird, weil dein Denken zur Ruhe kommt und du einfach nur du selbst bist?” (Weßkamp-Lenkewitz, n.d.)

<sup>84</sup> “ein Wochenende mal richtig entschleunigen“ (Herkenrath, n.d.)

<sup>85</sup> “Urlaub, Entspannung, Auszeit.“ (Frangenheim, n.d.)

accelerated everyday world: a space in which the self can come to rest, feel itself and possibly find itself again.

On the other hand, there is apparently a longing of the self for meaning, depth and inner truth. Dahmen (*Wandern Waldbaden*) describes this as “We carry an unconscious longing in us”<sup>86</sup>. Breker (*Meditativ Natur Erleben*) also cites John Muir, a natural scientist and philosopher. He said, “And off I go into the forest to lose my mind and find my soul”<sup>87</sup>. Additionally, the forest also appears as a place where the self can rediscover a carefree time like in childhood. As Dahmen (*Wandern Waldbaden*) says, walking through the forest takes us on a journey back to a state “where our lives were still light and carefree”<sup>88</sup>. Thus, these quotes make it clear that the forest is not only understood as a place of relaxation, but also as a resonating space for existential questions and spiritual longing of the self. The wish for meaning in life is the deep-seated longing and passionate search of something that can be reasonably considered true or real (Attoe, 2022). The human yearning for depth and purpose is fuelled by internal psychological mechanisms, including cognitive and emotional processes. These involve the desire for social connection, engagement with nature, creativity, and meaningful goals, so elements that enhance well-being when achieved.

### 2.5. As (Re) connected

One aspect of the self that is also often mentioned on the websites is that of connection or reconnection to oneself and to other things. This can be divided into three topics: The (re-) connection with nature, the reconnection with the inner self and your intuition and a kind of sensual connection.

The first aspect is described by six of the websites. The focus here is on nature as part of the self, oneness, participation and a sense of home to represent the connection of the self to nature. Dahmen, for example, describes this very vividly: “There's no Wi-Fi in the forest, but I promise you'll find a better connection there”<sup>89</sup>. This phrase plays with the idea of digital networking in a humorous way and contrasts it with a deeper, non-technological connection, namely the connection to oneself, to nature and to the present moment. She also writes on her

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<sup>86</sup> “Wir tragen eine unbewusste Sehnsucht in uns” (Dahmen, n.d.)

<sup>87</sup> “Und auf in den Wald mache ich mich, um meinen Verstand zu verlieren und meine Seele zu finden” (Breker, n.d.)

<sup>88</sup> “[...] wo unser Leben noch leicht und unbeschwert war” (Dahmen, n.d.)

<sup>89</sup> “Im Wald gibt es kein WLAN, aber ich verspreche Dir, dass Du dort eine bessere Verbindung findest.” (Dahmen, n.d.)

website *Wandern Waldbaden*: “Over time, we sense that the forest is still a home for us humans - that its roots are our roots”<sup>90</sup>. Thus, she describes the forest not only as a place to stay, but as deeply related to the human being, as the origin and resonance space of the self. Greven (*Waldbaden Nordeifel*) also expresses a feeling of coming home: “Every time I go there, I have the feeling of being at home.”<sup>91</sup>. Here, the forest becomes an emotional retreat, an antipole of alienation and a space in which the self rediscovers security and identity. The *Forest Medicine* website expresses the connection to nature in a clear, almost philosophical statement: “We are part of nature and connected to it in many ways”<sup>92</sup>. This statement emphasises the inseparable affiliation of humans to nature, a perspective that exposes separateness as an illusion. Here, the self is understood as embedded in nature. *Waldluftleben* formulates it in a similar way: “I perceive myself as part of nature, and no longer as separate from it”<sup>93</sup>. This statement emphasises how much the self has suffered from the illusion of separation. The return to nature here is synonymous with a return to a complete, non-fragmented self. Ferdinand also refers to a lifelong, personal connection to nature: “Growing up surrounded by the woods [...]” and “[...] they give me strength and grounding”<sup>94</sup>. Here, the forest becomes an emotional and physical anchor point, a place that not only awakens memories but also actively provides stability and energy. Finally, *Waldbaden Eifel Nord* summarises the purpose of forest bathing: “A perfect way to switch off and reconnect with nature!”<sup>95</sup>. Reconnecting with nature here means not only relaxation, but also a return to a self that feels at one with its natural rhythm. This idea can also be theoretically underlined by the work of van den Born (2008), which deals with various images of nature and their significance for the relationship between humans and nature. A central sub-concept is that of the participant in nature. The human being is not seen as an outside observer, but as an active, integrated part of a natural whole. This participatory image of nature is in clear contrast to views that separate humans and nature from one another. The quotes and statements analysed here clearly show how strongly the desire for belonging, integration and a “home in nature” is articulated. The forest is not staged as a mere recreational space, but as an emotional, spiritual and identity-forming resonance space in which the self regains its wholeness and rootedness.

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<sup>90</sup> “Wir spüren mit der Zeit, dass der Wald immer noch ein Zuhause für uns Menschen ist, dass seine Wurzeln unsere Wurzeln sind” (Dahmen, n.d.)

<sup>91</sup> “Aufgewachsen umgeben von den Wäldern [...] sie mir Kraft und Erdung geben.” (Greven, n.d.)

<sup>92</sup> “Wir sind Teil der Natur und auf vielfache Art und Weise mit ihr verbunden.” (Wiessmann, n.d.)

<sup>93</sup> “Ich nehme mich als Teil der Natur wahr, und nicht mehr als getrennt von ihr.” (Steidl et al. , n.d.)

<sup>94</sup> “Aufgewachsen umgeben von den Wäldern [...] sie mir Kraft und Erdung geben” (Ferdinand, n.d.)

<sup>95</sup> “Ein perfekter Weg: um abzuschalten, sich wieder mit der Natur zu verbinden!” (Frangenheim, n.d.)

Secondly, two websites also address another dimension of reconnection: the return to the inner self and one's intuition. Here, nature, especially the forest, is not only understood as an external place of tranquillity, but as a space in which the self can feel, hear and be guided again. The encounter with nature becomes an encounter with one's inner self, a return to an authentic, intuitive self. Here I would like to reiterate the description on the *Wandern Waldbaden* website: “Over time, we sense that the forest is still a home for us humans - that its roots are our roots”<sup>96</sup>, because an interpretation would also be possible in terms of the inner connection of the self. The outer roots of the forest symbolise the inner roots of the human being. The author expresses that the forest is a place that helps the self to regain access to its inner voice. Intuition thus becomes a bridge between the self and its deeper truth. Breker (*Meditativ Natur Erleben*) describes this inner process as follows: “By consciously letting go of stressful thoughts, the soul becomes free and can open up to the power of nature.”<sup>97</sup>. The inner connection is made possible here by letting go of mental weight.

The self is not created again, but rather liberated by letting go of external demands. Only in this state of inner peace can the self connect with the greater whole. This process is closely related to the concept of mindfulness as described by Jon Kabat-Zinn (1994). Mindfulness means turning to the present moment without judgment and thereby gaining access to a deeper inner experience. The forest thus becomes a space in which mindful perception and self-awareness intertwine. The self finds its way back to itself through presence. This idea of reconnection, both with oneself and with the natural environment, can also be interpreted in terms of Sharpley's (2021) understanding of spiritual tourism. He argues that today's tourists are pilgrims searching for meaning: “The quest in tourism is the act of finding the self in and for itself as a spiritual experience [...]” (Sharpely, 2021). Returning to one's intuition and inner voice reflects what Fisher et al. (2000) refer to as the personal domain of spirituality, which involves connectedness with the self and seeks self-awareness, identity and self-worth.

One further central aspect of the self, as presented on several of the websites analysed, is the sensual connection, so the conscious experience of the moment with all the senses. Nature is understood here not just as a setting, but as an active experiential space that brings the self back into the present moment through feeling, smelling, hearing, seeing and tasting. The senses

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<sup>96</sup> “Durch Waldbaden lernen wir wieder unserer Intuition zu folgen, um wieder bei den inneren Wurzeln anzukommen.“ (Dahmen, n.d.)

<sup>97</sup> “Durch das bewusste Loslassen belastender Gedanken wird die Seele frei und kann sich der Kraft der Natur öffnen.” (Breker, n.d.)

act as a way of accessing a deeper self-awareness in which the self not only thinks but also perceives and feels holistically. Robin Woods expresses this very clearly: “Shinrin-Yoku forest bathing: Forest bathing is the art of connecting with nature through all our senses”<sup>98</sup>. The self is thus no longer accessed through thoughts or language, but through perception and direct experience, and our senses enable a connection. *Waldbaden NRW* also emphasises the sensory dimension: “Forest bathing is about consciously spending time in nature and using all your senses to perceive your surroundings”<sup>99</sup>. In other words, forest bathing brings the self back into the present. The senses take the self out of mental abstractions and connect it with the body, with the environment, with the living world and thus also with itself. *Seinskraft* even puts this connection into a poetic wording: “Breathing with the forest: a wondrous symbiosis, because when the forest breathes out, I breathe in and when I breathe out, the forest breathes in!”<sup>100</sup>. This describes a deeply felt reciprocal relationship in which the self harmonises with the world. The sensory experience becomes an expression of a mutual integration in which separation is cancelled out and unity can be experienced. All these statements show that the reconnection of the self does not only occur through thoughts or spiritual beliefs, but also through the body, through feeling, through conscious perception. This described sensual reconnection of the self to nature can be understood in the light of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (1966) as a rediscovery of bodily being in the world. Merleau-Ponty (1966) emphasises the fundamental role of the body as the subject of perception. In this sense, the body is not just one object among others, but the medium through which we experience the world at all. Forest bathing, as described in the quotes, re-establishes precisely this bodily anchoring of the self in the world. Conscious perception with all the senses is an expression of a phenomenological attitude in which the self does not think about the world but experiences itself in it.

## 2.6. As Present

Lastly, the self is described as present. In this mode, the forest becomes a space where the self is not longing, searching or fragmented, but simply anchored in the now. Through

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<sup>98</sup> “Shinrin-Yoku Waldbaden: Waldbaden ist die Kunst, sich durch all unsere Sinne mit der Natur zu verbinden.“ (Herkenrath, n.d.)

<sup>99</sup> “Beim Waldbaden geht es darum, bewusst Zeit in der Natur zu verbringen und alle Sinne einzusetzen, um die Umgebung wahrzunehmen.” (Schmidt, n.d.)

<sup>100</sup> “Mit dem Wald atmen: Eine wundersame Symbiose, denn atmet der Wald aus, atme ich ein und atme ich aus, atmet der Wald ein!” (Weßkamp-Lenkewitz, n.d.)

mindful awareness, immersion in the senses and slowing down, the self is invited to arrive fully in the moment. This is emphasised by four websites. *Seinskraft* writes on her website, “Enjoy the here and now”<sup>101</sup>, because “it takes so little to simply experience the power of being”<sup>102</sup>. This shows the strong focus of the self in the present without any goals or deficits, just being. *Forest medicine* argues that the self is not in the mode of doing but of being, thus, presence arises through unintentionality<sup>103</sup>. Greven (*Waldbaden Nordeifel*) connects this with her assertion “The forest is there without the pressure of time and expectation. [...] invites you to simply be there”<sup>104</sup>. This means that presence arises through deceleration and non-expectation and the self is simply allowed to be. On her website *Meditativ Natur Erleben*, Breker also invites visitors to: “Linger and listen, perceive what is - in the now, around you, within yourself.”<sup>105</sup>. Breker also quotes Jon Kabat-Zinn: “The present moment is the only moment in which we are actually alive.” This quote by Kabat-Zinn encapsulates the core insight of mindfulness practice and Kabat-Zinn's (1994) ideas: that our true lived experience occurs only in the present moment, and that by consciously inhabiting it, we feel alive and authentic. Thus, mindfulness in that sense involves intentionally directing attention to whatever experience is unfolding right now, without judgment or distraction.

Further, Kabat-Zinn (1994) defines presence as “paying attention” and as “being in the present on purpose” (Childs, 2007). Child (2007) described this state of presence as a state of being that is characterised by openness, acceptance, non-judgment and a pause in immediate experience. Presence here means not only being present in time, but also an inner arrival. This means ‘being here’ with oneself and the world.

The repeated emphasis on presence on the websites can thus tie in with mindfulness-based practices, but also with an existential need for deceleration and meaning (Schuh & Immich, 2022; FAO, 2020; Heidegger, 1927). It can be understood as a reaction to social experiences of acceleration, excessive demands and fragmentation (FAO, 2020). In a world characterised by “doing”, planning and optimisation, the forest offers a place where the self does not have to function but can simply be. Presence becomes a counter-model to the everyday structure of time: it promises relief, inner arrival and authenticity (Child, 2007).

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<sup>101</sup>“Genieße das Hier und Jetzt“ (Weßkamp-Lenkewitz, n.d.)

<sup>102</sup> “Es braucht so wenig, um einfach die Kraft des Seins zu erfahren“ (Weßkamp-Lenkewitz, n.d.)

<sup>103</sup> “Forest bathing is about unintentionally engaging with nature” (Wiessmann, n.d.)

<sup>104</sup> “Der Wald ist da ohne Zeit- und Erwartungsdruck. [...] lädt Sie ein, einfach nur DA SEIN ein.“ (Greven, n.d.)

<sup>105</sup> “Verweilen Sie und lauschen, nehmen Sie wahr, was ist – im Jetzt, um Sie herum, in Ihnen selbst.“ (Breker, n.d.)

## *2.7 Conclusion*

To conclude, of particular interest here is the contrast between two states of the self: the self initially appears as overwhelmed, stressed, lost or alienated. This image is scientifically emphasised, for example, by Levitin (2014), who shows how the constant flood of information, multitasking and permanent digital stimuli lead to cognitive overload and chronic stress. In addition, Fromm (1976) also points to a culture that pushes the individual towards consumption, efficiency and external performance. This means that the self suppresses feelings and experiences and ultimately loses access to a deeper self. Through the practice of forest bathing, however, it undergoes a process of transformation: it is depicted as more mindful, more connected, calmer and more present. It is presented as a response to these states of inner fragmentation. This strategy by the forest bathing guides of creating a clear before-and-after narrative is an interesting finding that positions forest bathing as a powerful tool for personal change. The providers here draw on various theoretical concepts, such as Kabat-Zinn's (1994) mindfulness concept. That means, that overall, the self is constructed as vulnerable in the discourse of forest bathing providers as it is portrayed as being out of balance due to external influences. However, they show that the self is capable of healing and transformation through forest bathing.

Moreover, it should be noted that the analysis revealed no difference in the perspective of the providers. There were also no significant differences between individuals and teams, male or female providers or different regions within North Rhine-Westphalia when it comes to the depiction of the self. Whether individually or in a team, both male and female forest bathing guides describe the modern self in a similar way: as stressed, alienated, overstimulated, and searching for meaning, calm, and connection. Rather than positioning themselves as dominant figures, the providers act as empathetic supporters who accompany this process of self-perception. This consistent representation suggests a shared understanding that the self requires healing in times of acceleration.

## Conclusion

This thesis has tried to investigate how businesses offering forest bathing in NRW construct the practice in their official discourse. The focus of the research was on the representation of the forest and the self. To investigate this, I identified a total of 20 websites of websites by forest bathing providers in North Rhine-Westphalia (Germany). After a selection process, 13 websites remained for analysis. Before critically analysing the chosen websites, it was necessary to get an overview of the research on forest bathing practices and other related frameworks to situate the research within a broader academic context. This literature review showed that research on forest bathing has developed significantly in recent years, particularly with regard to health and psychological effects (Pérez-Calderón, 2024; Marselle et al., 2020; Tsunetsugu, 2010). However, discourse on forest bathing and the way it is communicated has largely been ignored. In German-speaking countries in particular, there is a lack of analyses of how providers present forest bathing linguistically and symbolically, which narratives they use and which ideas of nature, health and the self are conveyed. This thesis addressed this research gap by examining the description of the forest and the self on the websites, showing how the forest is staged as a place of rest, healing and reconnection, and how the modern self is portrayed as stressed, alienated and longing at the same time. By executing a critical discourse analysis, it was possible to identify which values, ideals and social needs are addressed and emphasised by the websites.

The analysis of the websites clearly shows that the forest is constructed in many different ways in the online communication of forest bathing providers in North Rhine-Westphalia. Central motifs for the forest are silence, health, healing, connection, safety, childhood and belonging. The forest appears as a protected area in which people can retreat and regenerate. It is often described as a place of silence and tranquillity, free from noise, demands and other stimuli. This silence is not only meant acoustically but is presented as a spiritual state, as an atmosphere in which mindfulness and inner contemplation are possible. This was underlined by Pfeiffer et al. (2023) and Kundera (1996). The forest also acts as a counterpoint to the hectic everyday world. Here, it is a place in which people can slow down, pause and distance themselves from the stress of everyday life (Sari et al., 2017; Simons, 2010). A place where you can increase your well-being, both physically and mentally. And not only that, according to the forest bathing guides, the forest is a health-promoting and healing space, which is highlighted by numerous studies (Konijnendijk, 2008a). Moreover, the forest is also seen as a place of self-discovery and reconnection, a place where you can immerse yourself with all your senses (van

den Born, 2008; Sharpley, 2021). However, the forest is also associated with nostalgia, with some providers describing the forest as a home, a safe place or a place of childhood. In other words, a place that is associated with security, ease and freedom from social expectations (Altman & Low, 1992; Brown et al., 2012; O'Gorman, 2012). Thus, overall, the forest is understood as a place where people can slow down, heal and reconnect. At the same time, it also symbolises a holistic way of life.

In the description of the forest bathing providers, this holistic path is the path that the self should take. The self is initially described as lost, stressed, and overstimulated. However, only until the person finally goes forest bathing. According to the providers, this is a condition that is primarily attributed to our modern, technologised lives. Everyday life is described as overly demanding, with overstimulation or constant availability, for example, leading to exhaustion and alienation from oneself. This is also confirmed by studies by Robson (2016) and Levitin (2014), for example. The self has lost its connection to itself and to nature and is now in search of slowness, meaning and mindfulness. The websites then claim to offer the solution: Forest bathing. They claim that after the forest bath, the self is longing, (re) connected and present. The self thus rediscovers mindfulness, balance and meaning through taking a forest bath. These qualities all relate to practices of mindfulness, spirituality and alternative health practices (Kabat Zinn, 1994; Sointu, 2006). Research has shown alternative health practices often prioritise a holistic sense of in alternative medicine (Sointu, 2011; Kaptchuk & Eisenberg, 1998). It is thus, not surprising that the providers describe forest bathing as a medium for self-healing, reconnection to the own body and feelings. The self is therefore one suffering and seeking meaning in our society. A view that is described by all providers of forest bathing practices.

This is in line with the fact that the analysis showed no significant differences in the presentation of the discourse between the providers. Regardless of gender, region or team constellation, similar linguistic patterns, recurring themes and comparable attributes of meaning were used. This suggests that the discourses surrounding forest bathing in NRW have a relatively uniform structure characterised by a common set of ideas about nature, health and self-perception.

Further research could focus on the visual representation of forest bathing programmes. Looking at images, colours, layouts, and graphic design elements on the websites could open up additional dimensions of meaning and further deepen the image of the forest as a place of healing, deceleration and reconnection. This visual analysis would make it possible to investigate how images and other visual means are specifically used to convey certain emotions,

values and messages and how they compare to the text. It would also make sense to expand future studies to include the reception of the programmes, for example, through interviews with participants or participant observation on site. This would make it possible to check whether and how the advertised effects are experienced. Moreover, a comparison with other federal states in Germany or international contexts, such as Japan as the country of origin of Shinrin-Yoku, could provide new insights.

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