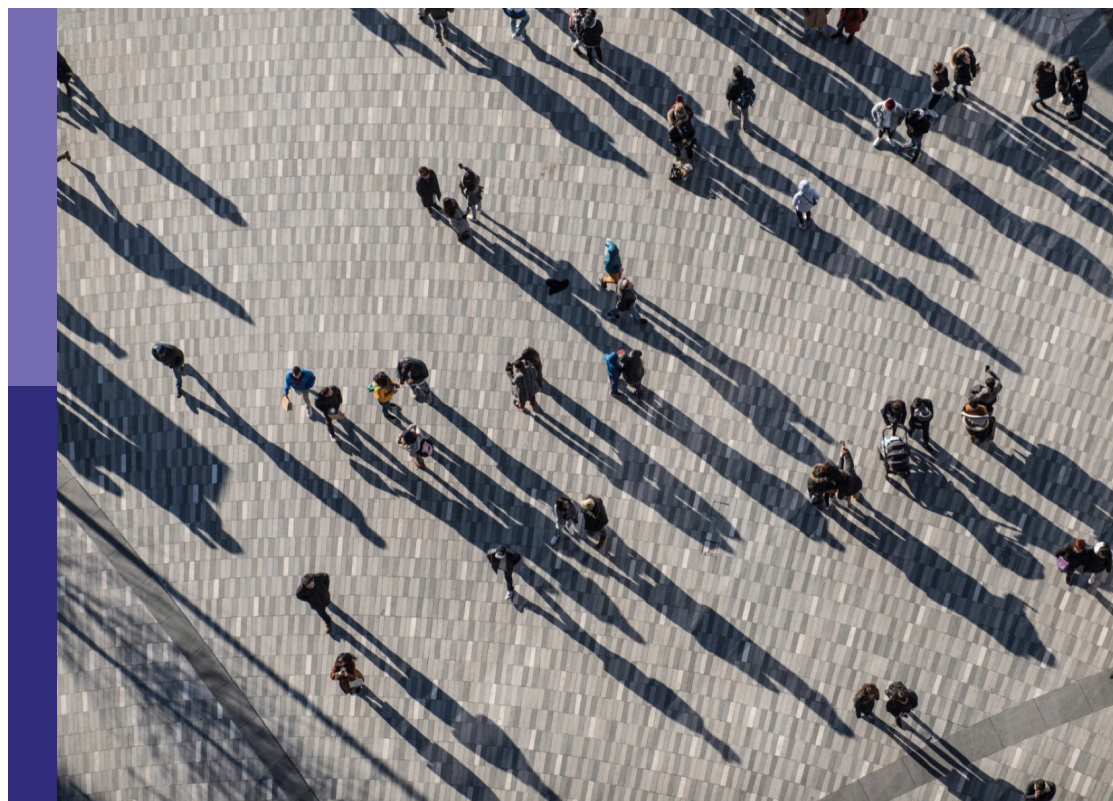# Deconstructing masculinity: Interrogating the role of symbolism in gender performativity

Edited by
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Deconstructing masculinity: Interrogating the role of symbolism in gender performativity

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"Even more than that, men love cars": "Car guy" memes and hegemonic masculinity

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The construction of gender identities occurs through a variety of social forces, including memes widely circulated on social media. Beyond the function of internet memes as entertainment, they also promote gender-based bonding through humor in ways that encourage performative gender roles central to self-image. Decoding memes as a form of contemporary data reveals desires and fears, both conscious and unconscious, that underlie dramaturgical performances supporting hegemonic masculinity. In the case of "car guys," car aficionados whose passion for cars is integral to their identity, memes reflect the group's aspirational presentation of self, including cars, as a symbolic physical embodiment of hegemonic masculinity. This semiotic study of 60 car guy memes shared on social media uncovered recurrent motifs centered around cars' ability to affirm men's position in the metaphorical driver's seat. Flashy cars were often portrayed as more desirable than women, a sentiment encapsulated by the meme, "Men love women, but even more than that, men love cars." This novel analysis of memes explores the ostensible male preference for fantasy cars over emotionally risky relationships. Two salient themes relevant to conceptions of masculinity emerged: (1) car guys' apprehensions about male−female interdependence and (2) frustration with women's discretion in meeting men's emotional and sexual needs. Memes as a cross-sectional, unfiltered data source provide insight into the need to reconcile car culture with gender equality.

KEYWORDS

car guys, cars, masculinity, hegemony, memes, driving, gender

Introduction

While cars possess symbolic and affective meanings that vary by demographic group (Best, 2006; Cross, 2018), car aficionados tend to "emphasize masculine powers and exclude women" (Walker, 1998; Walker et al., 2000, p. 153; Travers, 2008). These so-called "car guys" also known as gearheads, motorheads, and car fanatics, own (or aspire to own) muscle and sports cars. They take great pride in their cars and socialize with others sharing similar traditional values. Central to their identity is taking their putative rightful position in the "driver's seat," a role perpetuated by "ambivalent sexism" and the stereotype that men are superior to women as drivers (Berger, 1986; Gaymard et al., 2022). Ambivalent sexism recognizes nuances of sexism by taking into account both beliefs that women are inferior (hostile sexism) and beliefs that they belong in

traditional roles (benevolent sexism) (Glick and Fiske, 1997). This typology has relevance to a driver's gender in driving scenarios: Skinner et al. (2015) examined the relevance of ambivalent sexism to accident scenarios in which a defendant was depicted as navigating congested traffic. In this scenario, research participants who held hostile sexist attitudes assigned greater culpability to women compared to men. In another scenario that involved icy roads, participants high on benevolent sexism (that is, paternalism) were more likely to deem a woman responsible for the accident than a man facing the same conditions. This study exemplifies the potential empirical importance of understanding how sexism interconnects with conceptions of driving.

Group identity is also fundamental to understanding hegemonic masculinity in car guys. According to social identity theory, attitudes and behaviors are commonly based on group memberships (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). In the car guy subculture, hegemony reinforced by group identity provides a bulwark against identity threats, specifically challenges to masculinity. Even men outside of the car guy subculture tend to view interest in cars as a masculine credential. For example, Fisher (2009) found that when male nurses took care of male patients, that is, when they were being judged by other men, they enacted "culturally dominant masculinity... [talking] about blokey things [like] surfing and cars" including building hot rods (Fisher, 2009; p. 2672). This allowed them to assert their heterosexuality in a field in which they are in the minority. For car guys invested in car culture, however, passing references to cars are insufficient to bolster masculinity; instead, they emulate and identify with other car guys who saliently express their devotion to fast, high-performance cars (Reed et al., 2012). Their presentation of self is broadcast *via* their cars and driving styles as well as social media, providing outsiders with an opportunity to gain insights into their subculture of performative masculinity.

Memes as data

This semiotic analysis involved decoding memes by interpreting salient expressive data of car guys. Memes as a window to social phenomena add to other forms of social media that provide new insights into the psychosocial aspects of groups (Kendall, 2002; Gal et al., 2016; Iloh, 2021). They are a participatory and creative reproduction of intertextual and remixed content, commonly disseminated on social media forums including Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, YouTube, Reddit, and 4chan, among others, and a form of data that is "deeply entwined in the fabric of social life and discourse" (Iloh, 2021, p. 2). Memes provide insight into the values of those creating and consuming the qualitative content that is ripe for semiotic analysis [refer to Cannizzaro (2016) and Mahasneh and Bashayreh (2021) for contemporary applications of semiotics to memes].

Study aims

This study leverages car culture's conspicuousness through memes in order to consider the following questions: (1) What attracts men to car culture? (2) How is a car conflated with a car guy's sense of self? and (3) How are these phenomena relevant to patriarchy? Despite limitations in analyzing car guy memes to suss out answers to these questions, this methodology provides an unobtrusive means to assess the subculture using data purposely shared in the public domain.

Methods

Memes were selected from the yields of search engine queries using the keywords "Car guy memes" + images in November 2021 in the three most popular US search engines: Google, Bing, and Yahoo (Chris, 2021). These images, in turn, had been drawn from a variety of sources such as MemeGenerator (http://memegenerator.net), Quickmeme (www.quickmeme.com), and We Know Memes (http://weknowmemes.com/generator). Other sources yielded in search engine queries were https://awwmemes.com, https://www.memesmonkey.com, https://me.me/, https://ballmemes.com/, https://www.memecenter.com/, https://knowyourmeme.com/, https://carhumor.net/, and Pinterest. One of the most common sources of memes that appeared in search engine results is Car Throttle. Started in 2009 for young, millennial car enthusiasts, it claims to be the world's largest cross-platform automotive publisher, drawing from Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Snapchat with a monthly audience of 400 million people and a core demographic of males aged 18–34 (https://www.carthrottle.com/).

Memes expressing general subcultural values that revealed parameters of masculinity and those pertaining to car guys' view of women and/or dating were selected for analysis as long as the memes appeared in multiple but varied formats, a process that yielded 60 different memes, which are analyzed in this paper. For example, car memes dealing with brand loyalties were largely excluded as were memes related just to spending great sums on cars (if there was no mention of women or families). Similarly, many memes were out of scope as they were simply about how others do not share the same knowledge of or interest in cars, e.g., "Check engine"/Yup, it's still there [guy looks under the hood] or "How it feels when you talk to non-car guys about car specs" [guy in a restaurant booth staring ahead with a table pushed up against a blank wall].

Memes selected for the study were then analyzed for recurring salient themes, specifically themes that emerged from the data rather than pre-existing themes. The selected memes were then interpreted within the context of relevant literature. The following themes that emerged are examined in this paper: vehicles with a masculine persona, cars as a human body, car–human rear end equivalency, car–human rear end sound equivalency, performance as male power, women as symbolically

equivalent to cars, memes in which a woman is valued less than a car, car guys in relationships with women, cars as a substitute for women, and car–women comparisons with cars as an implied sexual substitute.

The memes analyzed in this paper reflect dramaturgical masculinity, offering a contemporary means for "car guys" to succinctly "encode themselves… into the digitally mediated content they create, circulate, and transform" (Phillips and Milner, 2017; p. 195). In addition, using memes as an investigative tool can enhance our understanding of a subculture that has been largely neglected in the academic literature, with treatment that is "scant at best" (Martin, 2019; p. 81).

Car culture described

Car culture revolves around a passion for cars, namely fast cars. Car guys tend to spend extensive time and money on their vehicles as a labor of love. Norms commonly include modifying or customizing cars, keeping them clean and free of scratches and dents, relishing and enhancing various features of their cars (including the engine power and noise), and admiring other standout cars. "Making their vehicle stand out from the rest" (Walker et al., 2000, p. 162) is a key aspiration of car guys. This description jibes with a video describing car guys by a car reviewer and self-professed car guy, Gold Pony (2015), whose YouTube channel videos boast over 60 million views (Gold Pony, 2021). Gold Pony calls reviewing cars an "addiction," not just a hobby, consistent with a subculture known for an obsessive interest in cars (Zatz, 2019).

Car guys gravitate to muscle and sports cars, terms that are sometimes used interchangeably, despite differences between the two types of cars. Muscle cars, e.g., certain Camaros, Challengers, Chargers, Corvettes, Mustangs, and Gran Turismo Omologatos (GTOs) have an engine that is at least a V8, an eight-cylinder piston engine with more "muscle" than cars with four or six cylinders for fuel intake.[1] These American-made two-door sports coupes have powerful engines designed for high-performance driving and are associated with patriotism (Lezotte, 2013). Sports cars, such as particular models of Porsche, Ferrari, Lotus, or Lamborghini cars, tend to have recognizable sleek body styles, with elements reminiscent of race cars. They are smaller and lighter than muscle cars, winning them notice for acceleration, speed, and performance (e.g., excellent handling to maneuver curves) (Wes, 2021).

Admiration of these vehicles builds camaraderie among car guys but also conveys that insider status depends on authenticity, namely values, attitudes, and behavior that are "real" or genuine, as a common meme reflects: "Real car guys respect other car

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1 Some car guys believe the Camaro, Barracuda, Challenger, and Firebird are pony cars, not muscle cars, based on the first Ford Mustang (1964), a classic pony car (Drummond, 2021).

guys" although several variations exist that add an insider–outsider proviso by adding the words, "Except Honda. Nobody likes them".[2]

Car culture in societal context

There are several reasons why car symbolism has greater resonance for men than women. Historically, a woman's place was as a homemaker and a housewife, with driving presumed to pose a temptation to shirk domestic responsibilities (Morgan, 2009). Discouraging women from considering cars to be part of their domain served to inculcate traditional gender roles and encourage their dependence on men (Franz, 2011). In turn, men's governance of car matters became conflated with their sense of autonomy and control that stymied women's physical and metaphorical mobility. The expression "where the rubber meets the road" affirms how driving connotes power, which for male drivers, cements their status as paterfamilias. It would be remiss to omit the obvious aspects of car culture that are associated with masculinity such as the "exhilaration of driving at high speed, the great pleasure in out-accelerating a rival vehicle when the traffic lights turn to green, of overtaking "every vehicle on the road," and of having a beautiful girl sitting alongside in the front passenger seat" (Walker et al., 2000, p. 164). The term "passenger princess" refers to a car guy having an attractive woman in the passenger seat as a type of ornamental accouterment, with her function understood to be to a foil to the driver's dominance.

Gendered aspects of car culture are also notable in motor contests that resemble updated chariot races (Kottler, 2010), events where women drivers threaten the macho image of the sport (Matthews and Pike, 2016). This applies to various male-dominated professional races, such as National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR), with stock cars that are ordinary cars modified for racing, as well as Formula 1, race cars with a single seat.[3]

Women like Janet Guthrie, who in 1976 became the first woman to take part in a NASCAR Winston Cup Superspeedway Race, had trouble finding sponsorship due to exclusion from the old boys' network. About 25 years later, (now-retired)

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2 Various car guy memes emasculate Honda drivers, perhaps because this Japanese brand contrasts with American-made muscle cars. E.g., (1) Chuck Norris can do anything… but make people respect a Honda. 2) [on Condescending [Willy] Wonka template]: VTEC kicked in? Tell me all about your fast and furious lifestyle [VTEC is Honda's technology to make its cars faster]. (3) What size engine is in your Honda? 1.8 liter? My Mountain Dew has 2 l.

3 Stock racing cars cannot be legally driven on streets because they lack required safety features. However, they are more relatable than exorbitant race cars; in 2021, F1 teams acceded to a cap of $145 million (contrasting with $20 million for the IndyCar series cap) (Patel, 2021).

professional racer Danica Patrick gained more traction but was also acclaimed for her pin-up posters and the 2008 *Sports Illustrated* bikini shots in which she "unapologetically used sex appeal to promote herself" (Ross et al., 2009; para 43). Embracing stereotypical femininity included breast implants, "during her second full-time year in the NASCAR Cup Series, at age 32 to "have the whole package,"" (Henderson, 2022; para 4). Thus, Patrick's inability to project hypermasculinity led to her deference to the sport's embodiment of traditional gender roles in which part of "the package" for a woman entails catering to the male gaze.

How vehicles inculcate a masculine persona

Other manifestations of cars' ability to confer masculinity appear in the lucrative *Fast and Furious* film franchise as well as the video game *Grand Theft Auto* (GTA), in which masculinity is defined by both sexual prowess and displays of aggression (Gabbiadini et al., 2016). In the case of the former, the word "fast" is slang for sexual promiscuity while the word "furious" can mean "violent or intense." Similarly, GTA relies on female characters that tend to be sexualized and subordinate to male protagonists, reinforcing traditional gender stereotypes (Gestos et al., 2018). In addition, Hollywood reinforces the nexus between cars and male power by linking being without a car and abstinence in males, e.g., in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* (2005) in which actor Steve Carell plays the title character who commutes on his bicycle (Hiskes, 2010).

In the popular Disney-Pixar *Cars* franchise, with anthropomorphized talking cars, the star is a Corvette-inspired car, Lightning McQueen. McQueen is a nod to Steve McQueen, star of the 1968 film *Bullitt*, who drove a muscle car, a Ford Mustang GT, renowned for its use in a famous car chase scene on the streets of San Francisco.[4] Furthermore, car chases and other types of competitive driving are *de rigueur* in many action-adventure movies (and featured in the popular *Fast and Furious* film series).

This theme also pertains to the iconic, fictional, and animated Speed Racer of the mid-1960s, whose Mach 5's front end is patently phallic, with its prominent rocket-shaped central protuberance. Although Speed Racer's car exists in the fantasy realm of animation, vehicles' sexually suggestive imagery may at times be less symbolic and more overt in terms of their representation of a man's body: "Truck nuts are fake testicles that hang down from the back bumper of a truck, usually from

the hitch... In the mid-to-late 2000s, the product hit a tipping point and truck nuts exploded [in popularity]" (Lamoureux, 2015, para 12).

One of the most blatantly sexual parts of muscle and sports cars is the manual stick shift, "a metaphor for a man's phallus" (Morgan, 2009, p. 53). For example, movie car chase scenes usually include various camera angles that show a man with his hand on the gear shift, indicating the driver's finesse in controlling his stick, without relying on automatic gear shifting that takes control away from the driver.[5] Interestingly, the word "drive" in noun form is an innate, biologically-determined urge to attain a goal or satisfy a need.

The following meme expresses that automatic cars are not "real" cars, presumably because they have lost their masculinity without the power conferred by the stick shift. Refer to Figure 1: Real cars do not shift themselves. This meme is a riff on the well-known book by humorist Bruce Feirstein, *Real Men Don't Eat Quiche* (1982), which satirizes stereotypes of masculinity. Cars without stick shifts could be seen as symbolically castrated since once such a car is in "drive," no manipulation of the gear lever is needed, resulting in a loss of phallic control and a blow to masculinity.

Another meme treats the stick shift not only as increasingly rare but as a living being.

> Endangered species
> [picture of a gear shift grid]

A manual transmission requires the use of a clutch, a pedal used to connect and disconnect a vehicle's engine from its transmission, a word associated with stereotypical masculinity. Being a "clutch player" means to perform well at an important, high-pressure moment, based on the idea that a clutch facilitates control over a situation (Clutch, 2018).

Furthermore, muscle cars are arguably factory-made hot rods (specially modified vehicles designed for extra power and speed). A rod is "a time-honored phallic symbol" (Rashkow, 2000; p. 84; Lee and Johnston, 2015) while the term "hot" is associated with sexual readiness and attractiveness. This meaning was blatantly apparent in the 1971 "Dickmobile" hot rod on the cover of rock band Steppenwolf's "Ladies Only" album. Similarly, revving an engine to warm it up incorporates revving, with a metaphorical meaning to excite a person (Rev, 2022), complete with sound effects. Burnouts (a maneuver in which wheels spin in place with friction creating visible smoke)

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4   The car used in the film is a trophy of sorts, that sold for $3.74 million in 2020. In fact, McQueen, had unsuccessfully tried to buy the car (in 1977, a few years prior to his death) (Garrett, 2020), revealing its symbolic importance.

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5   "Odd Rod" trading cards of the 1970s feature various hot rods and muscle cars with menacing drivers (like Speed Demon, Ram Charger, King Cougar and Big Daddy). One of the few women drivers (on card #31) is Drag-on-Lady, a play on the term dragon lady, a domineering woman. She is portrayed with a phallic, witchlike nose and chin, gripping a ball connected to a stick shift, that is, a castrating old witch appropriating hegemonic power.

FIGURE 1
Real cars. Photo credits for meme: photo by Dicson
@smartdicson, https://unsplash.com/license; https://unsplash.
com/photos/5o9h0mRLI-0.

are arguably a form of "visual special effects" denoting heat that
signifies how a driver is literally and metaphorically "smoking,"
slang for sexually attractive. These associations begin early,
as with the brand "Hot" Wheels, toy cars marketed to boys
(Hourigan, 2021).

More overt symbolism exists related to modifying a hot rod
to boost its torque using a stroker kit (with the word stroke tied
to male masturbation and other slang sexual meanings). Suck,
squeeze, bang, blow is a double entendre referencing the internal
combustion engine cycle completed in four piston strokes (a
suction stroke, a compression stroke, an expansion stroke, and
an exhaust stroke), with symbolic meaning captured in a meme:

> Suck, squeeze, bang, and blow
> [Sudden Clarity Clarence template with guy
> looking confused]
> And it's not a porno movie

Cars as a human body

While cars can connote masculinity due to one part or
in their totality, there is also support for cars as extensions
of humans by virtue of various car parts having equivalents
in the human body, as the term "muscle car" suggests. Cars
as "cathected, humanized machines" (McLeod, 2020, p. 234)

undergo repairs at "body" shops.[6] In this sense, the polysemic
nature of cars means that they may not only connote phallic
power but also may represent a human body, including a
surrogate woman. In other words, the gender-related symbolism
of the car varies according to context (as with the polysemic
flames emoji that signifies either anger or sexual passion).

"Head" lights imply that the front of the car is a head, while
head "lights" function as eyes (as the car's headlights make the
road visible just as the iris and pupil control how much light
enters the human eye). The front-end car grill for ventilation
functions like a mouth (air exchange) just as a grill on a person
can signify teeth ornamentation. In fact, one blogger wryly notes
that "There's an entire corner of the auto accessory industry built
around the realization that the front of a car looks like a face.
People who never quite get beyond that realization seem to do
mainly two things with that information: Buy tickets to every
movie in Pixar's "Cars" franchise and put "carlashes" on their
vehicle" (Notte, 2021).[7] Similarly, a *Fiat Canada* ad makes use
of how car headlights and grills resemble faces (refer to the ad
titled "Drive Friendly" posted on Imgur, a social media site for
hosting and sharing images: https://imgur.com/0riLfcL). This
phenomenon also appears in memes:

> [Conspiracy Keanu template]
> If a dude missing an eye is driving a car,
> Is he considered driving on one-headlight?
> [photo of Vin Diesel, lead actor in *Fast and
> Furious* series]
> She's gotta have those kind of eyes
> [front end of white Mazda Miata]

The hood, called a bonnet (in the UK), also connotes that the
front end of a car is a head. A hood is a head and neck covering
while in Scotland, a bonnet can mean a cap for men or boys
while a (feather) bonnet is a type of military headdress worn in
Scottish Highland infantry regiments. Similarly, consistent with
a car as an ersatz human body, tires, the means for locomotion,
would be symbolic feet, consistent with a "flat tire," slang for
when a person steps on the back of another person's shoes. Big
Foot tires are specialized, oversized tires sold to the military and
civilians alike (with a possible unconscious selling point related
to the (unproven) belief that shoe size correlates with penile

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6 Expressions applied to humans "to run out of gas," "blow a gasket"
or "get a tune up" (e.g., by going to a doctor) (Morgan, 2009) provide
linguistic support for perceptions of cars as pseudo-living beings. The
term "muscle car," also connotes a human body, a term first used in
1966 to refer to "an American-made two-door sports car with a powerful
engine" (Muscle Car, 2021).

7 Car Lashes to decorate a car's headlights with fake lashes make
the car's "eyes" more prominent, a product targeting women: "Since
exploding online in 2010, CarLashes® have gone from a girly trend to
a diva necessity" (https://carlashes.com/).

length). This could also explain why a wheel clamp or wheel lock is commonly called a boot, with cars violating parking rules being "booted".[8]

Car-human rear end equivalency

The rear end of the car has "tail" lights and a "tail" pipe for exhaust gas. Tail is slang for buttocks and one meaning of a trunk is posterior, as in the expression "junk in the trunk," slang for fat in the buttocks (typically referring to a woman) (Idioms, 2021).

Various memes treat a car's rear end as belonging to a human, e.g., in the case of tailgating:

> Oh, you want to ride my ass?
> [template of Gene Wilder as "Condescending [Willy] Wonka"]
> Please tell me how that will make the car in front of me drive faster

Car-human rear end sound equivalency

The desire to make the conspicuous "rumble" of a car's exhaust even louder unconsciously replicates sounds of human bodily functions, specifically with the tail pipe emitting a sound comparable to passing gas. In animals, the tail is located near the rear end, making the fumes from the tail pipe positionally analogous to mimicked human flatulence, an act and sound that is more acceptable among males (Haslam, 2012). Flatulence has also commonly been compared to the power of thunder, from Aristophanes' *Clouds* and Chaucer's *Miller's Tale* to a movie about a boy with uncontrollable flatulence called *Thunderpants* (2002); it may be related to the naming of the Thunderbird muscle car as well.[9]

Passing gas also has latent meaning as a form of anal power, as with bullroarers, an instrument used in a range of different cultures, exclusively by men, to produce the sound of flatulence (Dundes, 1976).[10] Thus, the volume of ersatz

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8 The term boot refers to a trunk in the UK, reflecting polysemic meaning. However if the front end of a car is a head, then the rear end of the car may not always be a rear-end equivalent, but rather symbolize a foot (as in the expression, "from head to toe").

9 President John F. Kennedy "had a 'thing' for cars. Like most red-blooded American males, he appreciated big, *shiny*, powerful automobiles," reflected in his Corinthian white 1961 Ford Thunderbird convertible (Darby, 2013 [emphasis added]). Shininess, like knights in shining armor, is achieved by car waxing that links car's phallic power to sexual readiness (Dundes et al., 2018), a common goal of car "buffs".

10   In Australian band Midnight Oil's 1987 song "Bullroarer," a children's version of a bullroarer was used (a ruler tied to a piece of rope). The band respected the bullroarer as a "sacred instrument" making sounds "only initiated men are supposed to hear" (Lawrence, 2016, pp. 171–172).

flatulence discharged by men in their cars brings welcome attention to car guys, but it is not a sound that women produce or mimic to gain stature.

The role of exhaust in attracting notice is the subject of memes.

> I do not always just sit and listen to my exhaust
> But when I do, so does the whole neighborhood
> [rear end of muscle car]

The rumble is reminiscent of race cars and commonly marketed to men in ads that cater to the "male fantasy of being a race car driver, the ultimate symbol of combustion masculinity" (Redshaw, 2018; p. 91).

Allowing drivers to make their cars louder is a marketing gimmick that plays on conceptions of masculinity: "With the push of a button, the soundtrack is mechanically enhanced to give the car more of a V8 exhaust growl [while] the throaty rumble enhances in sport mode" (Williams, 2019). This concept aligns with a description by an online car-buying service: "Enhancing the sound of your exhaust gives a different, but equally satisfying, sense that the vehicle you are driving is a force to be reckoned with" (CarsDirect, 2012).

While loud cars may have broad appeal to men, they are especially appealing to car guys. Various memes celebrate their pride in making sure they are heard, as well as their willingness to flout noise regulations and even pay fines for the privilege of announcing their presence. In fact, disdaining the authority of their archrival, the police (Walker et al., 2000), is a value-added bonus to gaining notice, as the meme below conveys.

> I know it is loud. Write the ticket
> [template of actor Leonardo DiCaprio throwing money]

Similarly, another car noise, honking a horn, can bolster masculinity. Hitting or blasting the horn conveys aggression, like the horn of an animal that poses a threat. Not coincidentally, the word horny has a sexual meaning, showing that horns conflate sex and aggression.

Performance as male power

Combustion masculinity that entails auditory signaling is closely linked to car "performance" and sexual prowess featured in car ads (Wilson, 2020). This assertion can be confirmed by a simple web search using the words "male performance" that will yield pages of websites related to erectile dysfunction. The emphasis on 0–60 in X seconds can be decoded as the ability of a man to be in a state of readiness in mere seconds, banishing fears of a metaphorical, and public, display of symbolic impotence.

The designation 0–60 is called "pick up," referring to both how fast a car accelerates and starting a conversation with someone with the goal of having sex. Although this

measurement of acceleration is a major selling point, certain 0–60 claims actually require a specially-prepared drag surface or are simply misrepresented.

Car marketing capitalizes on these male performance fears and desires, suggesting how driving certain cars embodies masculine ideals, separating men from boys and men from women in a way that is purposefully exclusive, as Avery (2012) describes:

> His Porsche becomes a magical transport, bringing him back into the game and enabling him to capture the attention of women… [since]…. only "real men" can handle the car (p. 327).

Women as symbolically equivalent to cars

While cars provide a means to exhibit the qualities of a "real man," whether women can fulfill the same need is more complicated: they may either enhance virility or undermine male dominance. Men in romantic relationships must engage in "give and take," a reality of relationships that *ipso facto* gives women power. Thus, a man's reliance on a woman for fulfillment makes him dependent on her, a quality at odds with hegemonic masculinity. However, if cars can substitute for women as needed, then men have a backup plan that protects them in the event that a woman undermines their authority, as suggested by the meme, "Men love women, but even more than that, men love cars."

Better yet, as a pre-emptive strike, car guys may unconsciously promulgate the notion of cars as superior to women on social media and elsewhere, treating sports and muscle cars as an acceptable fallback if a woman threatens their dominance.[11] Support for this interpretation lies in "sports car as girlfriend" memes. In the example below, the equivalency is based on the financial drain imposed by both a girlfriend and a sports car:

> With girlfriend Without girlfriend
> [Picture of an empty wallet] [Picture of an empty wallet]
> +   +
> [Picture of nondescript [Picture of sports car]
> sedan]

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11   This theme is not new, reflected in Queen's song "I'm in Love with my Car" (1975) with lyrics describing how a man told his girl he'd "have to forget her" given his preference for his car that does not "talk back".

A similar meme has the same equivalency theme, but escalates the sexism:

> Having a turbo car is like having an
> Obsessive girlfriend
> [overly attached girlfriend template]
> High maintenance costs
> And always needs attention

In the above meme, women are again compared to cars, but this time referencing their allegedly excessive emotional needs. Furthermore, the meme also implies that women who need a lot of attention are "obsessive" (that is, neurotic). Women's desire for attention may contrast unfavorably with their traditional role as nurturers who meet but do not make demands.

In another car–woman equivalency meme, a man defines a partner's love as passively accepting her status as (only possibly) equal to her partner's prized possession:

> I just want a woman who's nice enough that I actually
> Couldn't choose between her and my car, but who loves
> Me enough to never ask me to

Another meme points out how men and women think differently when it comes to cars:

> Her: He's probably thinking about other girls
> [picture of a couple in bed: a woman looks over at the man with his back to her as he stares ahead pensively]
> Him: Are mechanics just doctors to cars?

The above meme compares women who are inclined to spend time thinking about such matters as relationships, fidelity, and attractiveness to car guys who are preoccupied with their car and its welfare rather than their significant other. Another popular meme has a similar message:

> Girls are like "All guys think about is sex"
> [red sports car]
> Bitch please

Similarly, in the video of Rihanna's *Shut Up and Drive* (winner of the People's Choice R & B category in 2008), Rihanna is virtually ignored by the two men who are concerned only with winning the imminent drag race. Despite her chorus chant to "shut up and drive" combined with suggestive gyrations, her invitation for sexual intimacy is ignored while the two men featured are solely concerned with winning the race, with their hands shown on their stick shifts. In other words, the word "drive" means sex to a woman while for men the word can entail competition with other men, prioritized as a means to establish the pecking order in a hierarchy of masculinity.

Memes in which a woman is valued less than a car

The next memes acknowledge women as desirable, but still as -less- desirable than a flashy car:

> If you had the choice of your dream girl or your dream car
> [red sports car]
> What rims would you put on it?

Women may also be treated as an expendable commodity that is inferior to a car:

> Why no girlfriend?
> [sports car]
> Because he has a bitchin' race car!!!

This meme also includes thinly veiled misogyny, suggesting that a bitchin' (cool) car is better than a bitchin' (complaining) woman, an interpretation based on how the word bitchin' is slang for either remarkably bad -or- good, depending on context (Bitchin', ND).

In the subsequent meme, women's #7 ranking shows their placement as patently subordinate to cars, exacerbated by the expectation that a woman should love cars, in accordance with a car guy's interests.

> 10 things I want in life:
> 1. Cars.
> 2. More cars.
> 3. Car friends who like cars.
> 4. A big garage for all my cars.
> 5. Money for my cars.
> 6. Cars.
> 7. A woman who loves cars.
> 8. A big trailer for my cars.
> 9. A track for my cars.
> 10. Cars.

Other memes overtly communicate how the value of a woman compares to that of a car:

> Roses are red, violets are blue,
> [sports car]
> I love my car, more than you

Similarly-themed memes provide context for this preference, namely the perils of relationships:

> The more I learn about relationships...
> [sports car]
> The more I love cars

While this meme does not specifically articulate that cars are preferable to women, it hints at this eventual conclusion based on problems with relationships. When considered in conjunction with the next meme, it seems likely that fraught power dynamics common in relationships explain the preference for cars, specifically playing on the stereotype of women as mysterious, unpredictable, and hard to manage.

> I love cars more than women
> When a car has a problem, the mechanic sorts it out
> But when a woman has a problem, you wouldn't know until it's too late

The next meme conveys a preference for cars, but instead of blaming relationship difficulties, it implies that driving the car satisfies a man's sexual needs.

> I love my car more than my girlfriend
> [picture of a screw blower]
> It has a big blower

Blower terminology is loaded with sexual innuendo. A screw blower is a supercharger that brings maximal air into the motor to increase combustion output using a screw compression element, comprised of male and female rotors to boost engine power (Humphreys, 2013).

Superchargers (like turbochargers) feed into inflating a driver's stature: "Fast cars and even pretty cars are all about horsepower. One of the best ways to get there is with a supercharger. There's no better way to draw a crowd around your car than with a blower sticking through the hood" (Smith, 1998; para 1). These modified cars, sometimes with a big block engine mounted in the middle, connote a sense that the engine (or its metaphorical phallic counterpart) is too big and powerful to contain.

When car guys do reference their sex life, a lack of emotional commitment to women emerges as a theme. The following meme that references mechanical expertise likens sex to working on cars while at the same time conveys disrespect for sexual partners:

> I screw
> I nut
> I bolt
> It's tough being a mechanic
> [Two kinds of screws and a nut]

Screw is a slang verb for having sex while nut as a verb (as in the meme above) is slang for ejaculation. Anatomically, bolts have a head, and a nut is screwed onto the threads at the bottom, which could explain the expression "nuts and bolts" meaning "essential," that is, if the two items are the symbolic equivalents of a penis and testicles, that would be prized in patriarchy. The line, "It's tough being a mechanic" is sarcasm given how the meme's "hit it and quit it" description of casual sex is blatant sexism that glorifies men's avoidance

of commitment and commodifies women as a means of sexual gratification.[12]

Car guys in relationships with women

The previous memes apply to men who are not in committed relationships. However, car culture memes also reflect concerns of car guys with partners. The memes below reiterate the wish that women could understand car guys' devotion to cars and presumably their preference for spending money on activities such as car customization rather than on a wife or family.

> They said the GTR was not a family car…
> [guy loading groceries into the back of red sports car]
> So I got rid of my family

Interestingly, the next meme acknowledges women's power, as conveyed by the word "let" (i.e., allows):

> Behind every great driver
> Is an even greater wife who lets him buy car parts

However, the man in the above meme is identified as a "great driver" (active) while the wife's "greatness" is not only passive but also defined as deferring to her husband's wishes, consistent with the definition of hegemonic masculinity in which women become inured to "accommodating the interests and desires of men" (Connell, 1987; p. 183). This pseudo-praise of an "even greater wife" is a form of ambivalent sexism (Glick and Fiske, 1997) with its ostensibly positive tone (referring to a wife who is "even greater" than her husband) that in actuality requires a wife to accede power in spending-related decisions (to defer to her husband's hobby).

The following meme also relates to a couple's spending, but involves circumventing spousal input:

> Quick! Gotta make it look dirty
> [guy working on a car engine]
> Before the wife notices it's new!

The term "the wife" (above) depersonalizes a man's spouse and implies her conformity to a traditional role. It also suggests that wives: (1) should be deceived, (2) can be deceived by only a simple ploy, and that (3) they are an obstacle to men enjoying a favorite pastime.

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12 The number of other expressions that treat women as sex objects speaks to the pervasiveness of this mindset: "smash and dash," "F$%* and chuck," "copulate and depopulate," "tap it and gap it," "screw and scram," "pound and bound," "hump/pump and dump," "toot it and boot it," "conceive and leave," "bust a load and hit the road." The last example is particularly relevant to cars' association with freedom from commitment.

Memes can also convey car guys' love of cars, chosen over amorous activity:

> [Woman]: Babe, it's raining out. Let's rent a movie and cuddle
> [Woman lies on a bed in lingerie, holding a remote control]
> Never got the movie
> [Sports car driving through the flooded parking lot, creating a big spray of water in its wake]

The following five memes reflect how car guys' love of cars can escalate into a desire for multiple cars that demarcates men from women:

> I have too many cars
> Said no guy ever

> Just one more car
> I promise

> Bought a new car
> And the wife asks
> [Ray Liotta laughing in *Goodfellas* template of two men laughing uproariously]
> If I'm going to sell the old one

> And then she said
> [Ray Liotta laughing in *Goodfellas* template of two men laughing uproariously]
> Why do you need more than one car??

> OCD
> Obsessive car disorder

An ethnography of car culture revealed that a man with a "car obsession" sometimes justified the resources he expended on excessive cars by "discovering" an appropriate vehicle for his wife's use (Lezotte, 2013, p. 92), co-opting her into his hobby that was at times obsessional. Expenses for some may even include "car condos," car storage units marketed to men "who sometimes struggle to persuade spouses of the wisdom of plunking down $300,000 for a garage" (Green and Zahler, 2014, para 5), a type of "lavish retirement home for their cherished vehicles" (Green and Zahler, 2014, para 9).

Even women that condone or support cars guys' predilections may be reminded of their status relative to their husband's preferred car:

> If he lets you drive his car
> [woman sitting behind the wheel of a car]
> You better feel damn special

Notably, the above meme starts with the word "if," implying that a woman may or may not be permitted to drive a spouse's beloved vehicle. In fact, even "'girl racers" feel compelled to tolerate "compliance with the subordination of women… to accommodate the interests and desires of men" (Lumsden, 2010, section 2.7).

In an extreme display of woman vs. car, women that cannot understand this car fixation are expendable:

> When she says that she doesn't like the car
> [picture of sports car]
> The sad time has come where
> You must part with the girl

The woman is also called a "girl" above, a way to demean a woman who does not support her partner's avid interest in cars.

Cars as a substitute for women

Car guys' love of cars may also be escalated to the point where a car is portrayed as a surrogate romantic interest:

> The rings she wants [2 overlapping wedding bands]
> The rings I want [four round illuminated taillights]

Related memes liken a man's feelings about his car to "popping the question" (getting engaged):

> If you like it, then you need to put a ring on it
> [Picture of a car's o-ring used for gaps in a gland's mating hardware]

Note: a gland is a sleeve used to seal a piston rod or other shaft.

> [Man bent on one knee, facing a red sports car, extending a wheel rim toward the car]
> … She said Yes!

Proposing, whether to a woman or a car, implies possession and ownership that enhance virility (Dundes et al., 2018). Once a car guy ties the knot, his car may still be a priority, as the meme below indicates by the groom using the treasured (and expensive) wedding gown train to clean his tires (possibly symbolic feet):

> Car guy priorities
> [Bride stands next to a car as groom bends down to use her wedding gown train to polish his wheel rims]

Various other memes have a "no explanation necessary" approach to a car substituting for a woman:

> They said I'd be alone on Valentine's Day…
> [A guy leans on the roof of the red sports car, with arm outstretched on top of the car]

> [A dozen roses have been placed on the hood of the car]
> They were wrong

Other memes state the car-woman hierarchy of importance unambiguously:

> There's nothing more powerful than love [couple embraces on the beach with palms at sunset]
>
> Except this GTR. It puts out 2,000 WHP* [muscle car]
>
> *WHP = wheel horsepower

In other words, cars, especially fast cars, confer sufficient masculinity that they may be preferred over a relationship with a woman:

☐ Single
☐ Taken
■ In the garage building a fast car and do not have time for your drama

In another version of the above, the last box reads instead: "In love with my car."

Not only do cars also apparently offer the advantage of escaping women's alleged mood swings and histrionics, but they also allow men to avoid women altogether and still project masculinity, as the next meme implies:

> Guys that drive these
> [An array of muscle cars]
> Never have a girl in the passenger seat

Other memes explain why women are non-essential, if not dispensable: their power to damage the ego of their male prospects or partners.

> I would rather be alone with my car…
> Than be with someone that can't accept me for who I am

> Always remember
> Your car will never wake up one day and tell you it doesn't love you anymore

> We may spend too much money on car parts
> [muscle car]
> But at least our cars won't leave us and say "I don't love you anymore"

FIGURE 2
Trade her for a fair lady. Photo credits for meme: Vic on Flickr: couple arguing: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/; https://www.flickr.com/photos/59632563@N04/6238711264; Crash71100 on Flickr: Nissan 350Z: https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/; https://www.flickr.com/photos/152930510@N02/51247645444/in/photolist-2m5zzxS-UWj2Jb-2n8xZE7-2neWCj6-4QP6pt-MVwYLu-RsN3Y6-2gvNLqF-2nfTboQ-6B2ae9-2naKuY9-6fLtQp-2mVy5qs-2gwqBSm-2jsAaqs-QKm51R-2jcDhWF-Y5bGX5-2jbR1aL-2gK89MA-2mVuiZv-2iH8fSx-2iPb5kP-2iH3QVD-49Gvek-MQ9WR9-2iH6Ekn-2iH8niD-2jbPEVV-2n1xK7Y-2iPb5mA-2j6auEf-2jJVfAZ-7ibKJs-26Wpr4U-cX7t1Y-2iH3QJ1-Ma1v7h-2iH3RbU-4LyYig-2iH3QCj-2mXqBUV-2iH8hDi-2iH6AMa-2iH8fb2-2iH8cg4-2iH3Yss-2iH6AGf-2iH6ADQ-2iH3UDL.

In contrast, the problems cars pose do not jeopardize the man's self-esteem:

> When you love your girl,
> But she has
> [sports car at the gas pump, with the gas nozzle in the tank]
> Drinking problems

When women are not so manageable, cars apparently present a viable option as a replacement, as in the meme above that refers to a fairlady (the name of the Nissan 350 Z, a two-door sports car, manufactured from 2002 to 2009).

Refer to Figure 2: Trade her for a fair lady.

Car–women comparisons with cars as an implied sexual substitute

While significant others in car culture require special handling, memes can also express a "hostile" form of sexism, essentially misogyny, in which women are compared to cars as commodified sex objects (that still cannot necessarily compete with the allure of fast cars).

> Here we see one of the most beautiful things on earth
> [Woman in a leotard and high heels leaning suggestively into the window of a sports car
> Her face, seemingly irrelevant, is not visible]
> The other wears high heels

I like my women the way I
Like my track
[Racecar driver on a racecourse]
Wet and Curvy

Women are like cars
Every time you get one…
A newer and better model comes on the market…
[sports car]

Women are like cars
You pick one with the lowest mileage and the best looking
[sports car]

Women are like cars
They must belong to one owner, otherwise, it's public transport
[sports car]

Not driving your Corvette to keep miles low is like
Not banging your girlfriend to keep it tight for the next guy
[Corvette]

The next meme provides context for the previous memes, explaining why car guys portray women as expendable commodities, useful for sexual gratification:

Only gives you pleasure when she wants
[young woman]

Gives you pleasure when the boost kicks in
[sports car]

The meme above clearly decries women's ability to withhold sex, a right relevant to the #MeToo and Yes Means Yes (affirmative consent) movements. In contrast, cars offer no resistance or threat to male dominance; they only enhance it. This leads to car substitutes as a way to avoid rejection, maintain control, and enhance virility.

While cars can substitute for women in projecting masculinity, women are still necessary for their role in procreation. However, there is some meme evidence that fantasy "conceptions" of cars include wishful thinking in how this reproductive role might become obsolete.

[Mercedes trunk opens and the front of another miniaturized Mercedes emerges from the trunk]

Version 1 caption: Cervix dilated, head is engaged
                    Ruptured membranes, crowning
Version 2 caption: How cars are made
                    Nature is beautiful

This meme that circumvents women's role in birthing arguably guides the interpretation of the next three memes that do not directly reference women, but imply that cars, and not relationships, are essential for happiness, making women optional:

The real key to happiness
[Car key dangling in front of a sports car]

Happiness isn't around the corner
It -is- the corner
[Muscle car going around a sharp bend]

FIGURE 3
Please wishing well… Photo credits for meme: Francesca Minto on unsplash: wishing well: https://unsplash.com/es/fotos/-H38UIFvodo; https://unsplash.com/license. Zachary Staines on unsplash: woman sitting: https://unsplash.com/photos/JMKkm3leBKE; https://unsplash.com/license. Yuvaraj Singh on unsplash: car https://unsplash.com/photos/EqPF4QT60j4; https://unsplash.com/license.

> Whoever said "money can't buy happiness"
> Bought the wrong car

Taking this point a step further, if it is cars and not women that make men happy, and women are difficult, demanding, and fickle individuals who also abuse their power as sexual gatekeepers, then the right kind of car is more desirable. See Figure 3: Please wishing well...

This meme arguably pits the woman against the car, as a competitor of sorts. In addition, the woman is shown as (1) naïve to what men really want and (2) incapable of becoming more alluring than a fast car even with the help of magical powers. The words "impossible to resist" are consistent with an inexorable car obsession in which needs and wants along with aggression and libido have free reign. The car transmogrifies into a mistress of sorts, which car guys may modify to be "pimped out" or "tricked out," perhaps unconscious references to prostitutes who offer sexual gratification without commitment or judgment. This could also relate to the perception that when men marry, they are "settling down," giving up the "high octane" excitement of going into "overdrive" and living life "in the fast lane" to accede to expectations of "the wife" or mundane responsibilities associated with a committed relationship in which they are "spinning their wheels".[13]

Discussion

Despite the advantages of memes as an unfiltered data source, a major limitation is an inability to identify the creators and the consumers of the material. Fortunately, however, prior studies of car culture can provide insight into factors relevant to how the car guy subculture is intertwined with hegemonic masculinity. Walker et al. (2000) found an inverse correlation between boys' interest in cars and school among the working class, suggesting that weak academic performance prompted the youth to seek "power and authority... denied them in most other realms" (Walker et al., 2000, p. 159). Similarly, Hatton (2007) found that car culture was alluring to unemployed or underemployed young men who sought to boost their masculinity in response to feeling otherwise devalued. In addition, there is some evidence that "boy racers" of higher social classes are considered effeminate by their working-class counterparts (Lumsden, 2010). Thus, car culture may confer manhood to compensate for feelings of "exclusion from the labor market and exclusion from the academic curriculum" (Walker et al., 2000, p. 162):

> "[M]otor vehicles provide a cultural medium in which young men, whether or not they are physically small, labeled "dumb" by others, or are from a vilified ethnic or racial group, can demonstrate masculine strength, virility, and prowess: their technical ability to control a 'performance' motor vehicle at high speed and their courage and daring through risk-taking" (Walker et al., 2000, p. 162).

Missing from Walker et al.'s insightful analysis quoted above, however, is the aspect of the corporeality of cars as a surrogate human body. In this regard, research on athletes is relevant. When amateur rugby players' bodies fell short according to a masculinity yardstick, the resulting threat to their identity as team members resulted in embodied remedial identity work, in which various means of using their bodies served to reclaim hegemonic masculinity (Giazitzoglu, 2022). Likewise, in car reviews, masculinity may be equated with a car in its physical form. "Rumble Seat" columnist Dan Neil described his experience test driving a "fantasy automobile," the McLaren 765LT (longtail)[14] retailing for $429,000 and boasting 755 horsepower (far exceeding the typical 180–200 horsepower car). Neil touts its "muscularity... tendons and sinews" commenting, "I felt like handing it a robe," implying that its body reminded him of a muscular naked man that "creates a vortex of attention" (para 2, 15) (Neil, 2021). Similarly, with car guys, the car serves as an extension of the body that both projects masculinity and provides an alternative means to attain status, especially in the absence of other accessible avenues to achieve recognition.

Notes on methods

Memes offer an opportunity to gain insight into the members of a subculture, a method that avoids social desirability bias in which research participants may feign support for politically correct views (Munsch and Gruys, 2018) or alter their behavior when under observation (Hawthorne effect). Furthermore, standard data collection methods cannot avoid major limitations in attempts to tap into inner thoughts (including unconscious beliefs).

It must be emphasized that the 60 memes analyzed in this paper are only a snapshot of data available in November 2021 and are not intended to suggest a monolithic hegemonic archetype of the "car guy" subculture. The variations and progress in addressing hegemonic masculinity emphasize the importance of documenting masculinity in a variety of contexts, longitudinally (Nichols, 2019). Furthermore, the ever-changing cultural context relevant to car culture will inevitably lead to new memes that reflect the changing zeitgeist.

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13   The appeal of a racecar (a palindrome) is apparently so palpable that it arguably serves as a form of "autoeroticism" (pun intended).

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14   The car's tremendous engine power is linked to its initials, LT meaning longtail, a likely nod to tail as sexually suggestive, including one meaning as slang for sexual intercourse.

Despite the limitations of the methodology employed, these memes show how flashy cars may serve as an outlet for men to express repressed fantasies of power, freedom, visibility, respect, and sometimes domination. Thus, car culture permits escapism in the form of socially sanctioned passion for cars in which men conflate their identity with that of a powerful car. The value of a muscle car projects strength that exemplifies corporeal masculinity as a cultural performance, conveying autonomy that minimizes or disparages any power that women have over men. By identifying with their cars and idolizing traits associated with ostentatious vehicles, men circumvent reliance on women for validation while gaining stature in the eyes of other men or at least other car guys.

Conclusion

The body of memes presented in this paper reveals that masculinity can be expressed in material resources wherein a car embodies characteristics of hegemonic masculinity, namely features that car guys seek to emphasize. Cars also may symbolically substitute for women, projecting masculine control and independence, an antidote to women as the proverbial "ball and chain" that is a metaphor for women who constrain men's freedom and control the fulfillment of their libidinous needs. In that sense, showy cars can celebrate single life, nostalgia for single life, and the ability to spend uninterrupted time on pursuits that affirm masculinity. While this desideratum is not novel, its sustained resonance as expressed in memes shows resistance to gender parity and the long road still ahead.

Rather than expend energy and risk rejection by dating, a young man can gain status from cars. This perspective is visible in memes, especially those that belittle women to justify why cars are an attractive substitute for women. These memes ultimately reflect ambivalence about committed relationships and the attendant responsibilities that detract from leisure time, freedom, and independence. By defining their masculinity relative to their cars, car guys ultimately feel a greater sense of control compared to depending on women to validate virility. In the future, car guy memes may become less focused on themes of escaping responsibility and asserting masculinity. Similarly, the genre of "car guys" could evolve to be more gender inclusive, to reflect all individuals who are car aficionados, removing aspects of gender from the insider–outsider appeal of the subculture.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Symbolism of the US battlefield cross: how boots, rifles, and helmets reinforce masculinity

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This paper explores the unconscious symbolism of the battlefield cross memorial, which is comprised of combat boots and a rifle, often with dog tags attached, topped by a helmet. While the memorial's manifest function is to provide solace, build solidarity, and convey respect for patriotic sacrifice in response to grief, the battlefield cross also exalts masculinity at a subliminal level. Because of the latent ways in which the components of the battlefield cross reinforce fallen soldiers' masculinity, the memorial provides an outlet for bereavement according to a masculine script that treats virility as sacrosanct. The resonance of the battlefield cross and its synergism with unrecognized gender coding in broader society illustrate how a powerful symbol intended to honor members of the military also valorizes machismo. This qualitative interpretation could help explain impediments to women achieving parity with men in the military.

KEYWORDS

battlefield cross, hypermasculinity, militarized masculinity, symbolism, boots, helmet, rifle, fallen soldiers

Introduction

The US military is a male-dominated institution with a rising number of women that comprised about 16% of the armed forces in 2020 (GAO, 2020; Robinson and Hanlon, 2020). Although many women soldiers feel supported in the military, the Department of Defense has called for renewed efforts to combat gender harassment that goes largely unreported (Department of Defense, 2020). Likewise, concerns persist about women soldiers' and veterans' feelings of discomfort, isolation, and exclusion (Rosellini et al., 2017; GAO, 2020; Reis and Menezes, 2020).[1] In addition to formal policy remedies that aim to promote gender equality in the military[2], scholars call for the dismantling of a "military culture of

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1 Some women soldiers have described how their gender became their master status as their femininity was ridiculed, with gender-based hazing exacerbated by ill-fitting unisex uniforms designed for men (Goldstein, 2019). They are also subject to resentment over gender-modified "adversative" techniques (e.g., taxing physical activity, mental strain, and exacting behavior directives) traditionally used to instill military discipline (Do and Samuels, 2021; Schaefer et al., 2021).

2 Recognition of gender bias in the military led to the Deborah Sampson Act (2021) to better serve women veterans, including survivors of military sexual trauma (MST). The act is named in honor of one of the first American women to serve with distinction in combat (in 1782-3) who also felt compelled to disguise herself as a man (Stanton, 2022).

hypermasculinity" that exalts men while treating women as outsiders whose complaints justify their marginalization (Holland et al., 2016; Breslin et al., 2019; Richard and Molloy, 2020; Clary et al., 2021; Stanton, 2022, p. 7). Soldiers' internalization of idealized masculinity and anti-femininity can also engender self-doubt (and self-stigma) among those who fall short of these ideals, which in turn discourages them from seeking mental health treatment, including for military sexual trauma (MST) (Ashley et al., 2017; Andresen and Blais, 2019; Neilson et al., 2020). In addition, more subtle aspects of military culture are consistent with militarized masculinity: stereotypically masculine qualities "acquired and proven through military service or action, and combat in particular.... in which societies celebrate soldiers as 'real men,'" to the exclusion of women and marginalized masculinities (Eichler, 2014, pp. 81–82). Despite discussion of the ontological soundness of this concept (e.g., Zalewski, 2017), militarized masculinity is useful in advancing epistemological inquiries into manifest and latent forces that hinder the recruitment and retention of women in the military as well as their higher rates of separation from the military compared to men (GAO, 2020).

This qualitative paper explores in depth one specific example of subliminal coding that privileges militarized masculinity: the erection of a battlefield cross (BC) to honor the sacrifice of soldiers killed in the line of duty and to mourn their loss. While its manifest function is clear—to provide comfort to the living—the BC memorial placed on the battlefield or at the soldier's base camp also exalts masculinity at an unconscious level. The BC memorial is comprised of combat boots and a downward-pointing rifle (often with dog tags attached) that is topped by a helmet (see Figure 1).

This paper presents an interpretation of the BC that suggests its symbolism reinforces masculinity post-mortem, that is, in perpetuity. Like *semper fi*, US marines' Latin motto ("always faithful"), the BC confers a sort of immortality through the consecration of these symbols as a way to resurrect the masculinity of fallen soldiers.[3] With the understanding that the BC is polysemic, with meaning based on an individual's frame of reference, this essay parses the semiotics of the BC, especially boots, but not with the intention of foreclosing disparate or overlapping interpretations of this sacred symbol. The goal is to promote greater understanding of how underlying symbolism could contribute to resistance to military recruits, especially women, who deviate from circumscribed expectations for male gender performativity. In addition, the appeal of the BC and its synergism with unrecognized gender coding in broader society illustrate the degree to which gender hierarchy is entrenched in US culture even as the symbol simultaneously instills pride in the wake of loss.

This interpretation of how the BC helps inculcate the notion that men are best suited to be warriors is not an attempt to deny or dismiss either the practical or sentimental facets of the individual elements of the BC—nor the solace that the monument undoubtedly confers in the entirety of its assembled components. The intent is to illustrate how the BC advantages men by honoring

FIGURE 1
The battlefield cross.
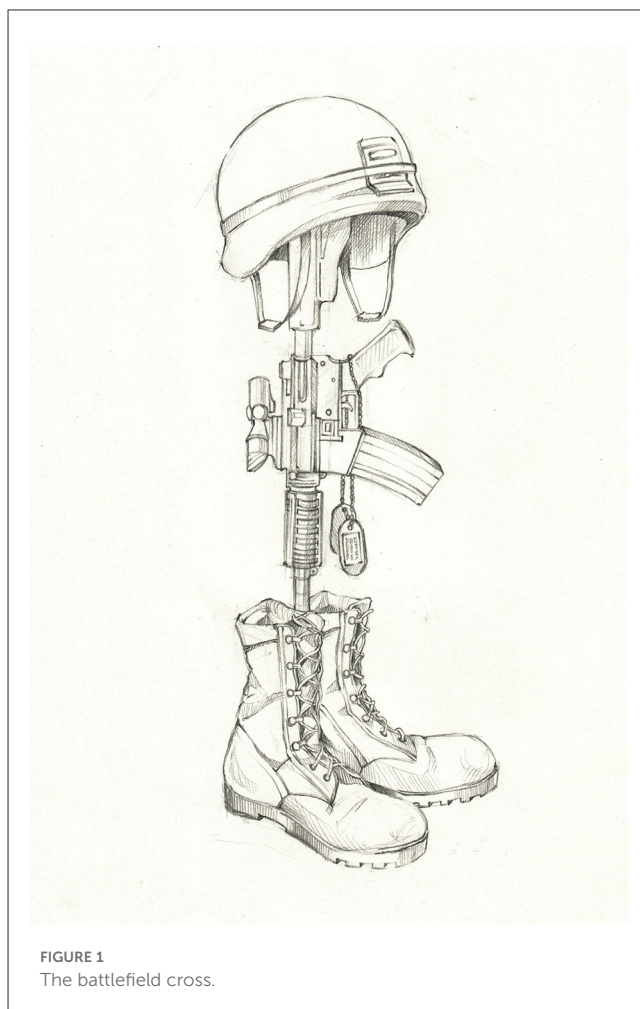
symbols associated with masculinity. In turn, the way in which the symbolism reflects masculinity could increase the alienation that some women experience among those who grapple with "dissonance between being feminine and identifying and serving in a hypermasculine job field [that] is psychologically taxing" (Goldstein, 2019, p. 16).

History of the battlefield cross

According to Kathleen Golden, Associate Curator in the Division of Political and Military History at the National Museum of American History, the Battlefield Cross (BC) for fallen soldiers has evolved over time:

"*Beginning with the Gulf War in 1991, and during Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom, the latest version of the battlefield cross, rifle, helmet, boots, and dog tags, has become the symbol of loss, of mourning and closure for the living.*
Although it is called a cross, the memorial has no overt religious context. It's not hard to interpret the placement of the boots or the presence of the dog tags: the soldier has marched the final march to battle, and he will never be forgotten" (Golden, 2015, para 3–4).

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3   Uses of the BC to honor fallen soldiers ranges from tattoos to farewell rites. See, for example, news coverage of the ceremony at Bagram Airfield in Afghanistan that commemorated US airmen who perished when their C-130J Super Hercules crashed shortly after takeoff from Fratini (2016).

Because the BC is often portrayed alongside the American flag, its link to patriotism confers a pseudo-religious aura (Backhouse, 2020). While the BC may not be overtly religious, the term "cross" sanctifies the elements of the monument, endowing a type of sacrosanct status on the act of dying for one's country.

Although Golden (2015) concludes that the BC provides an eternal memorial for the soldier, its consistency across soldiers reflects group identity and not individual differences. Furthermore, "after a set period of time, the memorial is respectfully dismantled, with the components being returned to the unit for appropriate disposition" (McDonald, 2015, para 5) wherein the symbolic body of the soldier is reincorporated by the organization. By contrast, non-military graveyards tend to have a variety of gravestones with distinct epitaphs. Thus, by promoting esprit de corps over individuality, the BC serves to solidify the master status of the fallen solider as masculine hero. This elegiac recognition of masculinity in fallen warriors, in turn, consoles surviving soldiers and family members, while subconsciously exalting masculinity.

Theoretical approach

This paper employs both social constructionism and Freudian analysis to explore the potential reasons for the resonance of the BC to memorialize fallen soldiers. In particular, elucidating the BC's phallic symbolism provides a novel perspective on militarized masculinity, beyond other analyses that recognize the overt role of war memorials in "reproducing and reinforcing masculinity" (see e.g., McDowell, 2008, p. 340). As a powerful symbol, the BC also solidifies a sense of identity among an in-group, as delineated by the social identity theory (Tajfel et al., 1979). According to this theory, individuals' group membership encourages attitudes and behaviors that reinforce the group's interests. In particular, the warrior mentality, a type of gender performativity, is spurred by contrasts with the out-group (Butler, 2006). For example, Jansen and Delahaij (2020) discuss how group members tend to protect and prioritize perceived prototypical behavior of their particular group. As a result, these authors suggest that military leadership strategy take into account how "individuals accentuate perceived similarities between themselves and other in-group members, while accentuating differences between themselves and out-group members" (p. 669). From this perspective, the BC employs symbolism, likely unconsciously, to differentiate and distinguish soldiers by "supercharging" their masculinity, even when tragedy strikes.

To more fully parse the role of symbolism, semiotic analysis is warranted. According to Peirce's sign theory, modes of thinking are grounded in context-based interpretations of signs or "representamen" (that represent or encode something else), like objects that can stand for something other than themselves. For example, objects may be perceived according to how they are interpreted as signs. Semiotics elucidates the connections between these mental representations of the external world and the internal world of ideas. Of note, Peirce believed that these ways of seeing commonly operate at an unconscious level (Danesi, 2020). Instances in which awareness of symbolic meanings could cause discomfort by challenging manifest meanings are more likely to

stay invisible or unacknowledged despite their "front stage" display in what Erving Goffman called dramaturgical analysis.

How our actions resemble performers on a theater stage applies to the BC (Goffman, 1959). The BC literally is center stage in ceremonies for fallen soldiers, some incorporating it as a type of altar that affirms masculinity. This type of posthumous impression management as a front stage performance is comparable to the riderless horse in high-level memorial services (usually veterans).[4] As the body is taken to the grave site, a riderless horse follows the casket, with a pair of empty boots in the horse's stirrups, facing backwards, as if a rider were still leading troops. In this instance, boots are a stand-in for the departed potentate, exemplifying post-mortem gender performativity. Consistent with the riderless horse ceremony, boots are perhaps the most broadly inculcated of the four symbols that comprise the BC. However, all elements of the BC coalesce to project dominance associated with masculinity. The following analysis begins at the top of the BC, with the helmet.

Military headdresses

Helmets

Atop the battlefield cross configuration sits the helmet, sometimes referred to as a hard hat. Helmets are obviously practical as they function to protect the head. However, the helmet-shape of the glans of the penis (Grantham, 1949; Helmet, 2006) suggests a symbolic equivalency revealed by numerous relevant slang terms for penis like purple helmet /warrior (see e.g., https://www.definition-of.com/ for terms like helmet halva and helmet pelmet). "Helmet" is also slang for condom (Appler, 2017), additional support for helmets as phallic.[5,6] Skeptics of this assertion might consider the appearance of contemporary pith helmets of the Thailand royal guard uniform that provide a more

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obvious exemplification of the shared resemblance [see (Diplomat, 2020) for photo].

Helmets worn in the absence of immediate danger also serve as reminders of the perils (and presumed bravery) involved in predominantly-male professions where their use is standard. Hard hats are linked to toughness and rugged masculinity in contrast to other PPE (personal protective equipment) like respirators and hearing protection that are believed to connote weakness (Rosenberg and Levenstein, 2010). This assertion about hard hats and masculinity aligns with a reader comment on a *New York Times* article on the evolution of hard hats:

> *I'm a woman who frequently visits construction sites and I'm often the only woman there. I actually feel much less conspicuous when I have my hard hat on – it looks just like everyone else's and it feels like an equalizer. However, I know a number of general contractors who keep hot pink loaner hats on site to shame workers who forget their own.* [KJ, Seattle, reader post in (Carpenter, 2019)].

Helmets share symbolism with other military hats that also have phallic qualities. For example, symbolism relevant to this paper appears in the famous late-18th century print by William Heath of the Duke of Wellington, the so-called "invincible general," recognized not only for his military prowess but also as a ladies' man. The duke's face is in profile, topped by an oversized cocked hat, also known in French as a bicorne hat for having two corners or "horns" [with horns as phallic symbols (Horn, 2018)]. The duke's hat is adorned with manifold feathers as well as tassels. Below his face is an oversized boot of his own invention (Delaforce, 2005, p. 4) still sold in his name (with the gum rubber version called wellies in the UK). His incarnation as part-boot "signaled Wellington's patriotic and masculine credentials by embodying his many martial achievements" (McCormack, 2017, p. 478) (also relevant to the discussion of boots beginning in the Boots section below). The abundant symbolism in this print at the British Museum presents Wellington as the epitome of virility, consistent with the general's famous accomplishments: "Wellington inherited Napoleon's mistress '*La Chanteuse de l'Empereur*'... a very satisfactory conquest" after vanquishing him at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815 (Delaforce, 2005, p. 104) (see https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1868-0808-8822 for this satirical print).

Military hats and helmets with panache

The argument that helmets are phallic is consistent with historical ways in which they could be made more masculine by plumage. While feathers are polysemic [and have at times even symbolized cowardice (Gullace, 1997)], they added panache to military helmets, literally and figuratively. Panache means both "confident flair" and "a decorative plume or tuft of feathers, especially on a headdress or helmet" (Panache, 2023), evident in the feathers of war bonnets (headdresses) that symbolized male bravery in Indian nations (Koch, 1990).

To emphasize the wearer's masculinity, plumed helmets and hats were worn by high level officers, complete with tassels and an erect plume, literally embodying the notion of "a feather in

one's hat." In contrast, women's feathered hats seldom included erect feathers and were worn outside of a military milieu. Plumed bicornes followed the tradition of plumed turbans to signal bravery, modeled after the Ottoman tradition of a plume signifying military merit.

The panache dates back to cavalrymen (soldiers or warriors on horseback) beginning around 1500 and was allegedly popularized by King Henry IV of France (1553–1610) and his battle cry: "*Ralliez-vous à mon panache blanc*!": "Follow my white plume!" (Dencher, 2015). The blatant symbolism of these helmets is highlighted in various paintings, such as an officer of France's Grenadiers of the Imperial Guard, honored by officer Napoleon François-Isidore Darquier, who wears an imposing bearskin busby hat, enhanced by both tassels and a conspicuous panache (see Thorne, 2019 for images).[7] In addition, an exhibit *Saints and Heroes* (at the Art Institute of Chicago) displays plumage of armored men in a tournament, with a description of the exhibit noting that the actual feathers in the knights' helmets could extend up to two feet *beyond* the height portrayed in the exhibit (Antonnson, 2017).

Outside of the US, soldiers' bearskin-style busby hats sometimes have plumes (or a related form called hackles) while the elite Bersaglieri of the Italian Army currently wear feathers in their combat helmets. Their plumed helmets signal that they are an "aggressive, battle-hardened military fighting force [in which]... plumes are a badge of honor, attracting new recruits and fostering esprit and solidarity among a proud Corps of soldiers (Traficante, 2017, para 2 and 5), showing how helmets with feathers promote group unity.[8]

Likewise, both men in fiction (e.g., Robin Hood) and in reality (e.g., royalty) commonly wear one or more feathers in their headgear to signal masculinity, often with nuances conveyed by the upright positioning and feather height (see Cartwright, 2018, for striking examples among men in the British royal family). Hat-feather symbolism also exists in the unofficial anthem of the American Continental Army (in a song adopted as the state anthem of Connecticut) (Lemay, 1976): Yankee Doodle "sticks a feather in his hat" and then is exhorted to "keep it up" to be "handy" with the girls.[9]

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7   The winkie soldiers in the *Wizard of Oz* (1939) wear plumed busby hats, carry pikes, and chant in deep voices, masculinity that is undermined when they are under the control of the Wicked Witch of the West until she is destroyed and Dorothy is able to take her broomstick to the impuissant Wizard who presumably wants to re-appropriate the phallic power the broomstick confers.

8   Football-helmet-display-case cabinets and home football flags commonly feature only a helmet and team name that shows a certain reverence for helmets, reflecting the sport's symbolism related to male dominance (Dundes, 1978). Its players risk serious injury in a sport with no female-team counterpart.

9   In Disney's *Dumbo* (1941), the eponymous elephant hero feels empowered to fly because of a feather he carries upright in his trunk. Dumbo wears a phallic cap while his mentor mouse has an erect feather in his cap. After Dumbo proves himself, the mouse signs a contract for Dumbo with an oversized feather quill pen, another symbol of masculinity (see Dundes et al., 2018) for the phallic power of pens and signing.

Guns

Rifles

The next and center component of the BC, the rifle, evokes an armed soldier, prepared to dominate enemies. The notion of an *arm*, as in the right to bear *arms*, or in *army* or *armed* forces (with the word "force" having obvious meaning) incorporates guns (as well as other weapons, often phallic). While an arm is obviously not a phallus, it could be that an arm is upward displacement of the phallus.[10] This assertion is supported by the meaning of a "short arm inspection," Navy slang for when a ship's corpsman inspects a sailor's penis to check for signs of venereal disease (Navy Slang, 2021).

Beyond Freud's assertion that guns (and other weapons) are phallic (Freud, 1920), there is ample evidence of the symbolic equivalence of the penis and guns (see Trnka, 1995). Among the many examples is the risqué phrase, "Is that a gun in your pocket or are you just glad to see me?", (falsely) attributed to film icon Mae West (Curry, 1996). Terms for male masturbation also make the connection between the penis and guns obvious:

> "*Assault on a friendly weapon, buffing the rifle, cleaning your rifle, cocking the magic pistol, cocking the rifle, emptying your sex pistol, firing the love rifle, one-gun salute, shooting enemies, shooting the pump-action porridge gun, skeet shooting, target practice (with white ammo), unloading the gun.*
>
> *Interestingly, the female counterpart, oiling the holster, places women in a receptive and secondary role*" (King, 2007, p. 90).

Other slang terms relate the penis to firearms outside of the context of self-gratification (e.g., porridge gun, love gun, yogurt rifle) (Sex-lexis, ND; Cameron, 2006; King, 2007), an association related to hypermasculinity (Neville-Shepard and Kelly, 2020). The terminology to "cock" a gun, as well as the expression to "bang" a woman (meaning sexual intercourse), also appertain. Interestingly, powder horns from animals that formerly contained gunpowder are consistent with the phallic symbolism. Horn is slang for an erection of the penis, implied in the expression "horny" and the use of the car horn to connote aggression (Horn, 2018), (another example of how sex and violence are conflated as with "bloodlust"), with relevance to shoehorns (related to the discussion of boot symbolism below).

Because guns as phallic symbols have connotations of sexual prowess and aggression, recruits must learn to focus their phallic energy appropriately (for combat). As a result, there may be a distinction between a "gun" for sexual gratification and a "rifle" as an instrument of aggression. In the words of one analyst, to transform from a civilian to a soldier, a man must "turn his affection from his girl to his rifle" (Axelrod, 2011, p. 116) to concentrate mental and physical energy on the latter. A basic internet search reveals a number of memes that are a riff on the rhyme that makes the same point: "This is my rifle, this is my gun [grabbing crotch]; This is for fighting, this is for fun [again grabbing crotch]."

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10   Similarly, maidenhead is upward displacement meaning virginity, and not literally a maiden's head.

This verse was memorialized in popular culture following Stanley Kubrick's famous film *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) about US Marine Corps recruit training [and parodied in an episode of the animated sitcom *Family Guy* (Family Guy, 2000)].

The view of phallic energy in which sexual activity detracts from aggressive activity likely derives from the concept of "limited good" applicable to male sports (e.g., implied in the term "golf widow") but also to battle: "A man has only so much energy and if he uses it in sexual activity, he will have that much less to use in hunting [or] warfare" (Dundes, 1978, p. 77). Despite scientific evidence that refutes this notion (Zavorsky and Newton, 2019; Zavorsky et al., 2019), the belief persists as came to light in 2018 at the Grafenwöhr, Germany-based US army unit where a detailed memo banned sexual gratification with another person (Nestel, 2019).

Guns and politics

The phallic nature of guns is also manifested outside of the military where guns are not simply functional as a means of protection. For example, in cases of precarious manhood, stereotypically masculine behavior may help counteract negative affect and bolster manhood (Berke et al., 2017) wherein a state's level of gender role threat predicts a (compensatory) increase in firearm purchases (Cassino and Besen-Cassino, 2021). Conversely, taking away a man's gun could be the symbolic equivalent of castration, explaining why protecting the 2nd Amendment appears to be more important to men than women (Lizotte, 2019).

In some instances, performative masculinity involving guns and military exploits is blatant. For example, the most prized possession of former-president George W. Bush (who served 2001–2009) was Saddam Hussein's 9-mm Glock 18C, seized when the Iraqi president was captured in Operation Red Dawn in 2003. Bush reportedly enjoyed showing Oval Office visitors the gun and telling them that it was not loaded (James, 2009). It is worth noting the following about this case in point: (1) Saddam Hussein was hunted as part of a military mission with the seized gun becoming a trophy and (2) Taking away his gun was arguably like symbolic castration. This was likely especially satisfying to George W. Bush given his father's history with the Iraqi leader that contributed to descriptions of his father (former-president George H.W. Bush) as "flaccid" and a "wimp" (Taibbi, 2018); (3) Bush emphasized that Hussein's gun was unloaded, emasculating Hussein, implying that any attempt by Hussein to defend himself would have been akin to "shooting blanks," slang for impotence and a lack of virility.

Boots

Boots associated with masculine competition

Boot symbolism remains relatively unrecognized, even though the word "boots" is a metonym for soldiers (as in "boots on the ground"), which is consistent with how "the predominant symbolism of boots has been masculine and militaristic" (Steele, 1999, pp. 129) as well as more broadly symbolic of virility as conveyed by the expression "tough as old boots" (Tough as old boots, n.d.) (see Table 1). For example, a certain type of heavy,

TABLE 1   Ten boot expressions with gender and/or power connotations.

Too big for your boots	Meaning: "cocksure." If boot is downward phallic displacement, cockiness has outstripped the (actual) size of the boot (phallus)
You can bet your boots	To be certain enough to risk everything (i.e., "everything" includes symbolic manhood)
Too stupid to pour piss out of a boot	If a boot is phallic, then it suggests an inability to perform bodily functions, i.e., urination
Tough as an old boot	Having great physical strength, health, or resilience
To die in (one's) boots (vs. shaking in one's boots)	Fighting back with an unwillingness to give up; to depart life with masculinity intact by displaying vim and vigor in contrast to someone "shaking in their boots" whose terror outstrips boots' phallic power
Bossyboots (describes women)	While the term bossy has been criticized for referring to strong women usurping men's authority (Black et al., 2019), bossyboots, like the term ballbuster, treats women's power as deviant[a]
To hang up one's boot	To retire from sports (with sports being a means to demonstrate virility)
Bootlicking	Willing subservience to power, without intimidation or concrete benefits (Healy, 1996; Greig, 2020)[b]
To put the boot in	To kick someone repeatedly, a reflection of the boot as a symbol of physical aggression and dominance
To get the boot, be booted out	An unambiguous dismissal or rough ejection

[a]Similarly, negative feedback in which men are compared to women increases men's sexism, particularly if they strongly identify as masculine (Mansell et al., 2021).
[b]Bootlicking is found within the BDSM community (the acronym used to describe bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, sadism and masochism) (Greig, 2020); a submissive may lick boots as a sign of deference to phallic power (Healy, 1996).

over-the-knee combat boot, the jackboot, is associated with fascism and oppressive military maneuvers, as in the expression "jack-booted thugs." Boots represent not just power, but phallic power because feet and shoes are downward displacement of the phallus (as epitomized by the foot smashing the glass in Jewish weddings to prefigure the bride's imminent loss of virginity) (Dundes et al., 2018). Boots can also symbolize victory in football as with the Bronze Boot, the trophy in the competition between Colorado State University and the University of Wyoming in the "Border War," which is an actual combat boot worn in Vietnam. Notably, this trophy is guarded by the ROTC unit of the most recent winner while the game is played. In another sports competition that also has battle connotations, the Holy War, the winner of the match between competing Utah schools leaves with the Beehive Boot, "the trophy of all trophies" (Niesen, 2018).[11]

Stylistic differences in boots can heighten their phallic symbolism. Unlike basic boots in the BC, boots of higher-ranked officers may include signs of such status. For example, Hessian boots have tassels that hang down from the top center of the boot (Beard, 1999). These tassels, also found on some cocked military

hats (mentioned above in the Helmets section), can connote masculinity. Like plumed helmets, tassels can connote masculinity in both hats and boots in symbolism that extends beyond the military. Turkey beards are also called tassels, with longer tassels found on mature male turkeys sought as hunting trophies (Casada, 2020; Bourjaily, 2021). In popular culture, men with long beards are often powerful, not surprising since facial hair is associated with sexual maturity (characteristic of a more fitting rival to prove masculinity).[12]

In an otherwise unexplained example, male motorcyclists, commonly concerned with machismo, may affix leather tassels (and dog whips) to their handlebars as an unconscious display of masculinity. These tassels ostensibly complement "the biker boot [that] symbolizes a big penis and an ultra-masculine persona" (Steele, 1999, p. 144). The tassel's meaning could relate back to its agricultural role in fertilization, as with the tassel on corn, the male part of the plant that produces pollen that the wind carries to fertilize the female flower (a phenomenon related to storm symbolism; see Dundes et al., 2018).

While for cowboys[13], skinheads, and motorcyclists alike, boots serve to reinforce masculinity that characterizes a "working class (and white) view of masculinity" (Healy, 1996; Steele, 1996; Rahman and Lynes, 2018; Greig, 2020, para 10), the symbolism within a military context is especially pronounced. There are a number of expressions that show the symbolic resonance of boots, two of which directly relate to the military: (1) boots on the ground–with troops (men) reduced to boots [a term some see as dehumanizing (Wright, 2016)]; and (2) boot camp (discussed in depth below).

Boot camps

As with the satirical print of the Duke of Wellington (discussed above in the Helmets section), in which he is reduced to a hat and boots, boot camps traditionally make men into warriors, equating them with boots. Of all the terms that could be used to identify these training camps, it is not an accident that they are called *boot* camps. Similarly, "jocks" are presumed to be male athletes who are reduced to jock straps that protect the genitals. Likewise, the word drill in "drill instructors" who are responsible for instilling military discipline, physical fitness, and weapon readiness, is likely related to its meaning to pierce and perforate (and feminize). Furthermore, "like the tool and action the word originally defines, *drill* is intended to evoke *violent and sexual* aspects of a hard-hitting lifestyle or circumstances" (Drill, 2022, emphasis added; Murphy, 2001). At a symbolic level, a sergeant

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11   This theme is reminiscent of drinking competitions involving a glass shaped like a boot that is marketed as an ideal gift for groomsmen (see e.g., *bierstiefel* on Amazon.com).

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12   In the classic fable of the "Three Little Pigs," the male pigs' bravado is expressed in their response to the big, bad wolf who bellows, "Open the door and let me in!". In answering, "Not by the hairs on my chin-y chin chin" they allude to their non-existent beards, perhaps explaining why the house made of bricks, and not their machismo, saves them.

13   Cowboy boots were modeled after the military footwear of Hessian soldiers who fought in the American Revolutionary War (Beard, 1999), with a sexually suggestive rising toe cap.

who "drills" recruits treats them as subordinate, feminizing them, and modeling how performing masculinity is an antidote to this humiliation.[14]

Boots and their power to feminize men

How boots can be instruments to feminize the enemy is apparent in Toby Keith's famous post-9-11 song *Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue* (*The Angry American*), a tribute to military forces that aptly captured the desire to compensate for the vulnerability of the US on September 11, 2001 (a deadly attack that included the collapse of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center and damage to the Pentagon, the headquarters of the US Department of Defense). The song was an attempt to reassert masculinity and boost morale post 9/11 by referencing patriotism.[15]

The song was a hit with US armed services in Iraq: "Bombs were branded with it. One of the first tanks into Baghdad was, as well" (Leung, 2003). The song's official video also proved popular with its show of strength featuring (mostly) men in the military, dressed in camouflage fatigues, with guns and tanks on display, and a surfeit of American flags. The most enthusiasm for Keith's song results from the line, "You'll be sorry that you messed with the U S of A... [dramatic pause].. We'll put a boot in your ass, it's the American way." This line is followed by enthusiastic approbation of (mostly) young men in military fatigues and t-shirts printed with the word Army. In one audience-reaction scene, two young men give each other a high five, apparently at the thought of a boot in the ass of the enemy.

This imagined act of enemy humiliation through anal penetration and thus feminization is the same reasoning to "have someone's back" and to CYA (cover your ass), i.e., to prevent the dishonor of feminization through rear penetration (Dundes, 1978). The military slang IGYS "I've got your six" (referring to the position of a 6 on a clock) also conveys the same concern about feminization (Dundes, 2020). Similarly, being "under the boot" (or under the gun, for that matter) could make someone vulnerable to penetration. While this song resonated with the military (and members of the American public), the climax of the song is clearly the line about putting a boot in the rear of the aggressor, the ultimate way to shame the enemy—feminizing them, which makes sense if women are considered ill-suited to be warriors.[16]

Boots and "phallic women"

Although feminizing women as a form of humiliation obviously has different connotations, women can appropriate the phallic connotations of boots as "phallic women" (Steele, 1999, p. 27). This exemplifies polysemy in that an object can have many different meanings, especially boots that are not combat boots, but rather are associated with feminine sexuality and power. Tall leather boots with a stiletto heel convey power in two ways: (1) Tall leather (skin-like) boots have a long shaft, making them more phallic than a short boot, with their shiny patent leather that looks wet (Steele, 1996, p. 171); and (2) The stiletto heel is also phallic, with its name—stiletto—connoting a dagger with a tapering blade. The *Kinky Boots* (2012) Broadway musical song, "Sex is in the Heel" connotes this meaning, given that the spiked heel conveys "the power to dominate and even penetrate" (Steele, 1999, p. 27). A kitten heel is a short stiletto heel, a way to feminize the phallic stiletto heel, by making it less phallic. However, although full-size stiletto boots project both the power and sexiness of a "phallic woman," they also inhibit mobility and cater to the male gaze. This complicates the semiotics of women's heeled boots that both project the phallic power of a stiletto that can impale (as with women's acts of impalement in pegging), yet that men could also perceive as worn to please them.[17]

The meaning of your mother wears combat boots

It is significant that the boots in the BC are combat boots that, when associated with women, convey meaning distinct from stiletto-heeled boots. The presumption of combat boots as masculine is evident in the popular insult, "Your mother wears army/combat boots." This refrain can be understood to disparage both young men and their fathers, if the woman in the family "wears the boots" (i.e., has the phallus or balls of the family). Thus, by appropriating phallic power (boots for combat), a woman not only negates her ascribed maternal role, but also feminizes the men in the family; in other words, a woman—and not a man in the household—is the cock of the walk.[18]

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14   In the film *GI Jane* (1997), the special operations recruit, portrayed by Demi Moore, finally wins her peers' respect when she "performs masculinity" by enduring a beating by the Master Chief, "taking it like a man." The scene culminates in her shouting, "Suck my dick," to the cheers of her (male) peers. This supports the notion that women in the military must appropriate and embrace phallic power—as a so-called "phallic woman."

15   Patriotism has the same masculine root as for the word father, *patriota* "fellow countryman" in Latin, and *patrios* "of one's fathers", from *patris* "fatherland" from Greek (Patriotism, 2011). Not coincidentally, the surface-to-air Patriot missile system reflects the fusion of fatherhood, patriotism, and weapons.

16   This also explains why "kicking someone's ass" may have nothing to do with a person's rear end, but rather signifies a target's clear and humiliating defeat that symbolically involves a foot and the target's derrière.

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17   Ambivalence over integration of women into the military and gender equality surfaced in the form of controversy about appropriate shoes for women in the military in 2021 in Ukraine, when women marched in a parade in heels, a sign of their "incapability," which created controversy and backlash that garnered attention internationally (Peltier and Varenikova, 2021).

18   Some women in the military, particularly lesbians, earn the status of "honorary males" (Carreiras, 2008; Ely and Meyerson, 2010). This contrasts with the rejection of gay men whose identities may be "conflated with femininity" (Van Gilder, 2019, p. 11). This thinking applies in Brazil, where footwear symbolism is relevant: *sapatao*, literally "big shoe," is slang for lesbian while the term *coturno* "army boot" emphasizes a woman's manly qualities. In contrast, a "femme" lesbian is called a *sapatilha* (a slipper worn by ballerinas) (Steele, 1996, pp. 104–5).

It is important to point out that a similar comment about a male is far from an insult, but rather confers bragging rights, as the following internet meme reveals:

> My Son wears
> COMBAT **BOOTS** &
> CARRIES A **RIFLE**
>
> What does yours do?
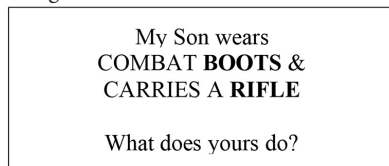
(Bolded words were presented in blue font, consistent with gendered color coding).

Toe extensions as a measure of manhood

Historically, the horizontal length of boots could be patently phallic (which is why witches as castrating women are still commonly depicted with Crakow, extended-toe poulaine-style boots).[19] Long-toed footwear in the Middle Ages allowed men to assert their masculinity: "Young bucks quickly exploited the phallic possibilities and soon the [shoe] extensions became longer and longer" (Rossi, 1993, p. 105). Furthermore, "medieval cordwainers stiffened the extensions to keep them erect" (Grew and de Neergaard, 2004, p. 88). Especially for men of nobility and aristocracy who were permitted longer extensions, the shoe length signaled "approaching readiness of young males to assume sexual and reproductive roles" (Rossi, 1993, p. 108). In fact, because men's shoe length continued to extend over the course of three centuries—finally reaching 24 inches longer than the foot—the shoes became difficult to walk in. This created speculation that the expression "cock of the walk" (someone whose behavior connotes presumed superiority to other group members) originated with the poulaine (Rossi, 1993); this trend perhaps also provides insight into the expression "having big shoes to fill," which could have phallic significance regarding the ability to "measure up." However, during the height of their popularity in England in 1463, King Edward IV denounced them as obscene, limiting their length to two inches beyond the foot, regardless of social status (Boucher, 1988).

Mexican pointy-toed boots are a modern form of poulaines: *botas picudas mexicanas* with *picuado* derived from *picar*, to prick or pierce, slang for "to sexually penetrate" in Mexico (Picar, 2022). The boot's phallic symbolism is overt: "a male peacock's mating call… for the foot" (Satenstein, 2016, para 7). All-male crews wearing pointy boots compete in dance-offs at local nightclubs playing tribal music (Simonett and Dávila, 2015), a trend that has spread beyond Mexico [for pictures see Sun (2012) and Hernandez (2015)], and that offers strong support for boots as phallic.

Boot shining/polishing

Unlike the manifest symbolism of poulaine-style footgear, boot shining has latent meaning that has received limited attention within the military setting. In boot camp, prioritizing the care

of boots is deemed to be part of general discipline, without acknowledgment of its unconscious meaning. For example, boots, as with rods or arrows (formerly called prickshafts) and other phallic symbols, have shafts (as does a penis), meaning the height of the boot rising above the foot. This not only supports the unconscious phallic meaning of a boot, but also serves as another example of how sex and aggression may conflate since the verb shaft is slang both for a man having sexual intercourse *and* treating someone harshly (Shaft, 2012), wherein both sex and violence shape conceptions of masculinity.

Boot shining is traditionally a key part of standards for the appearance of members of the military called "spit and polish." The spit and polish standard also applies to public spheres where even "off-duty service members have a duty to project a 'spit and polish' image to the public, wherever the public may find them" (Jurden, 2005, p. 12). In common parlance, this term denotes "extreme attention to appearance and ceremony often at the expense of operational efficiency" (Spit and polish, ND). The fact that "spit and polish" has come to mean undue or obsessive attention lends credence to special meaning of the boot.

Applying a psychoanalytic lens, boots–and guns–are polished to instill pride that also reflects their phallic symbolism. In the case of guns, sperm oil was the lubricant of choice historically (from the waxy substance found in sperm whales' head, spermaceti, that was originally wrongly identified as whale semen). Interestingly, an inferior form from bottlenose whales was sometimes incorrectly called "Arctic sperm oil." Maintaining the shininess of jackboots, a large leather military knee-height boot, was "something of an obsession" referred to as "jacking" (McCormack, 2017, p. 472). Given the meaning of the slang term "jacking the beanstalk" as well as "jacking off," "jacking" boots to make them shine is arguably metaphorical masturbation.[20]

This historically iconic part of boot camps, polishing or jacking boots, also may be referred to as a bullshine or spit shine (where spit was reportedly originally used as a "lubricant" to maintain high standards for extreme shininess). Bulls are symbols of masculinity (Dundes, 2020) while spitting is the symbolic equivalent of ejaculation which equates saliva to semen, explaining the term spitten (spitting) image, meaning a carbon copy (Dundes, 1991).[21] Notably, "many

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19 A witch costume calls not just for pointy shoes or boots, but also a pointy hat, complemented by a long pointy nose and chin, pointy nails (like talons), and pointy teeth—all of which could be seen as projecting an appropriated phallic penetrative threat.

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20 This slang term is consistent with the phallic nature of the beanstalk in the tale in which Jack defeats the giant—a father substitute—by chopping down the beanstalk (Hardison, 2017). This Oedipal act of symbolic castration results in the giant's death, allowing Jack and his mother to live happily ever after. In popular culture, the third season of the show *Succession* (2021) portrays a father-son rivalry or so-called "Oedipussy" theme in which the patriarch opens the season with the words, "It's war". He later parrots the threat of the fabled giant: "I'll grind your bones to make my bread" to which the son retorts, "Well, then… I'm gonna run up the f***in' beanstalk" (Snow, 2018).

21 In gender reveal parties, the hosts pop a confetti-filled balloon or *cannon* popper or set off a glitter *bomb* to reveal gender-stereotyped pink or blue coloration (reinforcing the gender binary). The possible underlying meaning of the pseudo-ejaculation has parallels with the man determining the baby's sex via his sperm, the front end of the cradle-to-grave celebration of phallic power.

examples of this expression refer to a child's resemblance to the father in particular" (Horn, 2004, p. 46). Thus, it makes sense that polishing boots unconsciously relates to masculinity, including how their shininess could signal phallic readiness.

Outside of the military, those giving and receiving shoeshines were historically male. In rare instances where women engage in the practice, the act is overtly sexual, as with the Star Shine Ladies: "youthful young women [who] polish clients' shoes in tight, revealing attire. It's like Hooters, but fewer wings" (Taylor, 2016, para 6).

Boot polishing and hierarchy

The care of boots and shoes became linked to masculine self-sufficiency, as seen in the 14-year-old shoe shiner or bootblack, Ragged Dick, the subject of Horatio Alger's famous Bildungsroman (later serialized) about rags to respectability reflecting the Protestant work ethic. These novels strengthened the connection of boots to bootstrapping and the notion of independence implied by "pulling oneself up by one's own bootstraps" (Rooks, 2012).[22] In addition, shoe shining as a male-only, hierarchical phenomenon involving boots helps explain how polishing someone else's boot demonstrates subservience, sometimes with sexual overtones, as in the term bootlicking (tied into bootlicking as a fetish involving dominance and submission) (Healy, 1996).[23,24] In fact, in Supreme Court Justice Anton Scalia's scathing opposition to the admission of women to the Virginia Military Institute (VMI), he praises its Gentlemen's Code of Honor that proscribes obsequiousness characterized as "lick[ing] the boots of those above" (Justia, 1996, p. 603), a nod to the power vested in boots (even if bootlicking as a fetish was not consciously evoked).

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22 Horatio Alger has been exposed as a pedophile (Polenberg, 1997; Bateman, 2004).

23 Boot fetishes are relevant to leather events catering to gay men. At these parties, a bootblack may be available to shine the boots of attendees who sit in an elevated chair resembling the set-up of a traditional shoeshine stand. The bootblack is generally also available to perform other services for customers. Such events may be concurrent with the International Mr. Bootblack competition (IMrBB), part of the International Mr. Leather conference that celebrates hypermasculinity in the gay community. The phallic symbolism of boots at this event also applies to role playing interactions in which boots are complemented by a full military uniform to signify dominance (Healy, 1996).

24 Because the military emphasizes strict deference to authority within a pecking order (where "peckers" determine one's social position), military attire appeals to the BDSM community given "how fetishism and militarization concatenate" and how "male dominants are almost always dressed in quasi-military uniforms" (Crane-Seeber, 2016, pp. 3, 9). In the military, "rituals of rank, uniforms, regimented life, privileged sexual and social status, a feeling of superiority to civilians [are] analogous to a quasi-consensual 24/7 BDSM relationship with the state" since "status in the military is earned for being compliant, skilled, and pro-actively obedient" (Crane-Seeber, 2016, pp. 5, 10).

The symbolism of dog tags in the battlefield cross

The remaining element of the BC, dog tags, are often placed under boot laces or draped over the buttstock of the rifle. While dog tags function to provide some sense of individuality to the BC, there is also relevant symbolism related to dogs. Dog tags as a label of sorts link men to dogs, likely related to how dogs are presumed male (Leach, 2000), and thus a way to reinforce male soldiers' masculinity.

Evidence for the connection between dogs and masculinity is varied. For example, in a well-known nursery rhyme, little boys are linked to both puppies and tails: What are little boys made of? Snips, snails, and puppy-dog tails (with 2 fold symbolism given the Latin word pēnis also means "tail"). In another example, hot "dogs," which could be any shape but look nothing like dogs, are called wieners and artificially colored to be pinkish to transform them from gray (to more closely resemble the color of Caucasian skin) (Quinlan and Watson, 2017). In addition, dogs may be called "canines" as well, a word that also means pointed teeth that are often greatly enlarged and project intimidation, a lexical meaning that complements semantic gender markers.

Various expressions also support the presumption of dogs as male, such as a man being "in the doghouse" or a salty dog, nautical slang for an experienced (male) sailor who has spent much of his life aboard a ship at sea. Furthermore, dogfights are a blood sport in which a largely male audience bets on male dogs with hopes of bolstering masculinity (Evans et al., 1998; Kalof, 2014). In contrast, in human terms, a catfight is a scuffle between women vs. a dogfight that means close combat between military aircraft. Overdogs (who are dominant) and watchdogs also carry male connotations. The alternate spelling of dog, dawg, signifies a "man, buddy, dude" while women have more associations with cats (such as cat ladies, cattiness, being subject to catcalling, and the anti-heroine Catwoman). When women act aggressively, they are said to be channeling their inner feline nature, signified by a clawing gesture accompanied by a "meow" vocalization (which implies no significant threat). On the other end of the spectrum, sex kittens are females whose display of sexuality might occur on a catwalk (vs. a runway for men), while the expression "to be weak as a kitten/cat" conveys vulnerability, related to being a scaredy-cat.

In Toby Keith's song (mentioned above in the Boots section), the stanza preceding the "boot in your ass" line likens the US military to a "big dog" that "will fight when you rattle his cage" with martial repercussions for those that "messed with the USA", reminiscent of the World War I battle of Belleau Woods that spawned the Marines' name "Devil Dogs," a prized moniker signifying ferocity in combat.

An additional means of exploring the gendered implications of a dog tag is through analysis of the word bitch. A woman deemed "dominant" might be called a "bitch" (Kleinman et al., 2009, p. 47). This could be because if dogs are seen as males and males are supposed to be dominant, an overbearing woman viewed as upending male power would reverse the presumed male gender of dogs (and their top dog status). Likewise, a male who is subservient to a female is still associated with being a dog (as a male), but if he is not the alpha, it is emasculating and castrating, reassigning him as a female dog (bitch).

Thus, a bitch is either a strong woman (counter to her ascribed role) or a weak male (also counter to his ascribed role), semantic meaning embedded within the anthropomorphic semiotics of dogs presumed to be male. This also helps to explain why women who call each other bitch may find it empowering (an unconscious recognition of upending male-based power) while men are unlikely to feel empowered by calling each other bitches or pussies (who pussy*foot* around and beat around "the bush"), terms that imply weakness.

An interesting exception is the fabled (male) swashbuckler, Puss in Boots. Although a "puss" (a cat) is not inherently masculine, a puss *in boots* has different connotations. That is, when boots are incorporated into the name of the heroic feline, boots' masculine associations telegraph his virility. Furthermore, Puss in Boots also wields a long sword and wears a tricorn hat with a long feather, confirmation of his machismo.

Practical implications

The aforementioned gender-related associations of the elements of the BC imply that masculinity is encoded in a way that complements the BC's overt function of remembering a fallen soldier—especially apropos for soldiers that are men. While the symbolism of the BC conveys appreciation for military sacrifice by emphasizing masculinity, particularly phallic masculinity, women may be less apt to be perceived as consummate soldiers. The possibility of these perceptions persists in contradistinction to Scythian culture, where women referred to as Amazons had parity with men in battle. Analysis of grave-site artifacts and remains found in Scythian *kurgans* (grave mounds) in the southern Ural Steppes near the Kazakhstan border in Russia have corroborated artistic renderings of such equal participation, e.g., battle wounds (arrowheads embedded in bones) and the burial of women with adjacent weapons (Mayor, 2016).

Reports that these women warriors were fictional diminishes their actual participation in battle as archers on horseback, despite evidence from the remains of a woman whose bowlegged condition resulted from extensive riding (Mayor, 2014) (gender parity reminiscent of men and women competing equally, without gender divisions, in Olympic horseback riding). However, treating only men as warriors and excluding or minimizing the role of women in these martial roles increases dependence on men and reinforces their dominant position in society (Mayor, 2014), a portrayal that helps maintain the primacy of masculinity that extends postmortem in the case of the BC.

Conclusion

At the core of the BC is its glorification of masculinity, with latent symbolic meaning attached to each of its components. The BC both reflects and enshrines virility, even as we must recognize that this memorial does not capture the complexities and fluidity of gender scripts relevant to a soldier's death. For example, grieving mothers who are "devoid of symbolic and concrete power" support a hegemonic model of bereavement. In their apolitical memorialization and veneration of their sons as patriots, "they exchange their trauma for moral and symbolic

capital and penetrate the public discourse by carrying the flag of their loss and bereavement [by] acting within the confines of a gendered worldview" (Lebel and Hermoni, 2018, p. 136 and p. 145).

Other important considerations in recent military-related discourse involve the changing nature of combat and the evolving role of women in warfare that undercut the heroic solider myth. In particular, the growing use of drones in warfare raises questions about whether combat confers or upends militarized virility (Millar and Tidy, 2017). Because honor and courage have been associated with the risk of self-harm, drone pilots that employ finesse and mental toughness from a safe, remote office are inadvertently challenging the traditional emphasis on physical strength that has been central to militarized masculinity (de Volo, 2016). Furthermore, drone pilots also may be part of covert operations that can bring accusations of cowardice (de Volo, 2016). Furthermore, the masculinity of both those responsible for remote-controlled strikes as well as the male targets of those drone strikes could be considered superfluous (de Volo, 2016).

Despite the evolution of militarized masculinity, the BC continues to exemplify how a surfeit of powerful symbolism feeds into the notion that male bonding is fundamental to military prowess, camaraderie that confers masculinity reinforced by largely invisible social cues in broader society. The BC, a memorial that exudes symbolic masculinity, is subsumed into the warrior culture paradigm that is credited with making the US a strong country, impenetrable to enemies. As a traditionally homosocial institution, the military continues to promulgate the unambiguous masculinity of soldiers and downplay or ignore the contributions of female soldiers (McDowell, 2008; Pendlebury, 2020; Szitanyi, 2020). This increases pressure on women in the military to assimilate into the male-dominated culture in order to be accepted as "one of the guys" (Meade, 2020, p. 51). These phenomena contribute to the intransigence of militarized masculinity, despite countermeasures such as the Department of Veterans Affairs' revised mission statement in which soldiers are no longer presumed to be men (Kime, 2023).

The values represented in the BC promote a line of thinking that functions as a recruiting technique that (consciously or not) perpetuates hypermasculinity while reinforcing conventional gender roles. The means for soldiers to gain the imprimatur of masculinity also raises questions about women's fitness for active military service:

> "[A military recruit is] probably more than ready to accept the military's gift to him of the image of enhanced [phallic] power. The military, in turn, is more than happy to give its recruits an image of sexual power if they are willing to fight and die for it" (Trnka, 1995, p. 239).

Along the same lines, the phrase "wounded warrior" compensates for wounded men's inability to fight by attaching the tag of warrior (i.e., once a warrior, always a warrior, in accordance with the social identity theory). By conflating hypermasculinity with patriotism and valor, cultural cues like those in the BC function to encourage military service despite the horrors of war.

Symbolism of the BC also suggests that having women in the military conflicts with the BC's embodiment of masculinity, a nexus that could deter women but that also could attract voluntary

warriors seeking not only to "serve their country" but also an imprimatur of masculinity. Performing masculinity does not end with a soldier's death, but rather is re-broadcast by the BC on a frontstage platform. From this perspective, erecting BCs could help assuage doubts that might surface during the course of this perilous commitment. At the same time, the symbolic phallic resonance of the BC also could play a role in solidifying the maleness of the military while minimizing women's comfort and influence in military matters. To expedite substantial progress toward gender parity, we should take into account how symbolism links masculinity to military prowess.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Gender representation in animal-related proverbs: Algerian vs. Jordanian Arabic

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Introduction: This study explores the connotative meanings in animal-related proverbs used to describe the behavior of men and women in Algerian and Jordanian societies.

Methods: A questionnaire with 46 Algerian and 45 Jordanian animal-related proverbs was distributed to 30 native Arabic speakers enrolled at the University of Jordan. The analysis focused on adapted categories with a gender perspective, including inferiority, weakness, stupidity, ill-nature, objectification, ugliness, positivity, and shrewdness.

Results: Both Algerian and Jordanian animal-related proverbs exhibited diverse connotative meanings. Women were predominantly associated with derogatory connotations in both languages, portraying characteristics such as weakness, stupidity, inferiority, cunningness, and trickery. Similar characteristics were present in descriptions of men, but women in Arab cultures were consistently depicted as subordinate and denigrated. Conversely, men were portrayed with authority, control, superiority, and strength over women. Additionally, positive depictions included animals like gazelles, peacocks, partridges, cats, and horses to symbolize the beauty of women. Men's positive characteristics, such as strength, courage, and superiority, were associated with horses, camels, and lions.

Discussion: This study highlights the prevalent connotations in animal-related proverbs used to describe men and women in Algerian and Jordanian societies. It reveals derogatory portrayals of women, reinforcing their subordinate status, while men are depicted with authority and power. However, positive representations emerged, attributing beauty to women and highlighting admirable qualities in men. These findings shed light on the complex dynamics of gender portrayal within cultural proverbs, emphasizing the need for further examination of these linguistic expressions.

1. Introduction

Without language, ideas cannot be conveyed effectively, and even adequate information cannot be provided to others (Chomsky, 1986; Barajas, 2010; Pinker et al., 2019). Proverbs are one of the methods used by different cultures to deliver meaning and opinion through social interactions. Sibarani (2004) proposed that any combination of words or sentences, including proverbs, can indicate the perceptions and traits of the culture under consideration. As a result, the meaning conveyed by proverbs can define the specific nature of any culture, as it is closely associated with the culture of native speakers. Mieder (2004) found that proverbs contained a variety of artistic and metaphoric language that was used to describe and portray something or someone through comparison.

Animals have a significant impact on human life. Therefore, according to Kövecses (2003a), several human behaviors are grasped and traced through the use and embodiment

of animal behaviors (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Kövecses, 2003a). The animal terms found in proverbs serve as an icon representing certain facets of human life. For example, Olateju (2005) found that animal terms have been used metaphorically to describe individuals. According to research in this field, animal metaphors are perceived primarily in terms of culture and context.

This study aims at investigating the connotative meanings of animal-related proverbs used to address and describe the behavior of women and men in Algerian and Jordanian societies, i.e., how men and women are represented in the Algerian and Jordanian animal-related proverbs. This study seeks to unveil both positive and negative meanings associated with both genders.

1.1. Research questions

This study endeavors to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the connotative meanings of animal-related proverbs used in Algerian and Jordanian societies?
2. What animal terms are used to conceptualize men and women negatively and positively in Algerian and Jordanian societies?

2. Literature review

2.1. Proverbs

Several scholars have offered to define the term proverb. Simplistically put, a proverb is a brief conventional assertion used to further some social goal or encapsulate people's experiences (Seitel, 1972; Mieder, 1993; Finnegan, 2012; Norrick, 2014). Animal terms are commonly used in human speech because they help communicate a wide range of emotions (Lawrence, 1993; Kellert, 1997). As a result, the animal world is among the source domains that offer a plethora of metaphorical expressions. The Great Chain of Being (GCB; Lakoff and Turner, 1989) attributes a higher order form to humans as opposed to animals. Hence, several studies show negative connotations attached to animal metaphors. However, it is worth noting that some animal metaphors or proverbs may also express positive connotations, such as "lion" for courage (Rodríguez, 2009). According to Kövecses (2003b), although these conceptual metaphors may be universal cross-culturally, the intended meaning and use of a specific animal term may vary depending on the linguistic and cultural background in question.

2.2. The Great Chain of Being

According to Lakoff and Turner (1989), the Great Chain of Being Metaphor is the best method for interpreting proverbs. This theory is derived from the "Generic is Specific" Metaphor, which allows people to choose a common general-level structure from specific schemas stored in their minds. As a result, the Great Chain of Being Metaphor Theory (GCMT) lays out multiple attributes and behaviors between the categories of various chains to facilitate understanding one domain in terms of another (Fu, 2008). In line with this, Lakoff and Turner (1989) define the GCMT as "an ensemble, something like a string quartet, in which there are four

members with separate entities, but who play together so frequently that their identity as a group is more prominent than their identities as individuals" (p. 172).

2.3. Gender ideologies and possible theories

Many proverbial analyses and studies show how power and ideology are closely related. For instance, researchers such as Martínez Garrido (2001) and van Dijk (2001) have emphasized how power relations are frequently enforced through coercion, particularly regarding gender. The creation and application of proverbs may be a reflection of society's attitudes toward gender and the reinforcement of established power structures.

It is critical to recognize how ideology influences power dynamics in this situation. According to Fairclough (2003), ideologies represent specific features of the outside world and help build and perpetuate power, domination, and exploitative relationships. Thus, a society's dominant ideologies can influence how power is used and upheld, including in the context of gender relations. Studying proverbs can be a useful technique to understand the beliefs and power structures at work in a particular society. For example, proverbs that uphold gender norms might be a sign of patriarchal ideologies that support male supremacy and female subjugation. Similarly, a move toward a more progressive philosophy that aims to overthrow established power structures can also be seen in proverbs that question gender expectations and advocate for equality.

2.4. Review of related studies

"Representations of Women in Moroccan Arabic and Berber Proverbs" by Ennaji (2008) provides insight into the representation of women in traditional Moroccan proverbs. According to Ennaji, these proverbs were based on outdated gender stereotypes that portrayed women as helpless, inferior, and dependent on men. Additionally, Berber proverbs emphasized women's physical attributes and reproductive abilities more than Moroccan Arabic proverbs, frequently limiting women to domestic roles. Ennaji argues that using proverbs helped maintain gender inequality by reinforcing existing patriarchal standards. However, it was also noticed that some proverbs went against conventional gender roles, indicating some variation in how women were portrayed in Moroccan and Berber cultures. The study stresses the importance of examining linguistic and cultural artifacts to comprehend how gender is created and maintained in society.

Al-Harahsheh (2020) examined how Jordanian Spoken Arabic (JSA) used animal names metaphorically and vocatively to address people negatively or positively. A list of 44 animal names was distributed among 100 undergraduate students from Yarmouk University in Jordan as part of a survey. Participants had to complete a variety of tasks, including indicating whether they used animal names to refer to other boys or girls, surmising the implied meanings attached to these names, naming the grammatical structures in which they used these names, and providing instances of when they were used in Jordanian Spoken Arabic (JSA). The study concluded

that Jordanians gave people animal names based on their demeanor, behavior, IQ, and character and that these animal names were primarily used as insults. Therefore, calling people by animal names was a linguistic and cultural phenomenon.

Several other studies have examined animal-related proverbs in different societies and cultures as tools to illustrate gender roles and stereotypes. Kuipers and Verdonk (2018) investigated how gender stereotypes were expressed in Dutch and Moroccan culture through animal-related proverbs. Both cultures had proverbs representing men as courageous, strong, and dominating while portraying women as feeble, sensitive, and submissive. The researchers concluded that in these cultures, the employment of proverbs reinforced conventional gender norms and stereotypes.

Likewise, Oduolowu and Adegoke (2020) examined using animal-related proverbs in Yoruba culture in Nigeria to depict gender stereotypes. According to the study, women were frequently characterized as nurturing, emotional, and subservient in Yoruba proverbs, while men were commonly portrayed as aggressive, strong, and domineering. The researchers concluded that the employment of proverbs promoted traditional gender norms and pushed women more to the margins of Yoruba society.

In South Korean culture, Kim and Park (2017) found that animal-related proverbs were frequently employed to convey gender norms and expectations. For instance, in the proverbs, men were often portrayed as exhibiting traits like power, bravery, and leadership and frequently likened to lions, bulls, and eagles. On the other hand, women in proverbs were often featured as doves, deer, and swans to represent traits like beauty, kindness, and nurturing. Their study also established that animal-related proverbs reinforced gender preconceptions and traditional gender norms in Korean society.

Similar findings were obtained in a study in the United States by Taylor et al. (2018) which analyzed a sample of 200 proverbs. The study found that animal-related proverbs were frequently employed to explain gender differences and expectations. Proverbs related to men often portrayed traits like power, aggression, and dominance and frequently used animals like lions, wolves, and bulls for men. In contrast, proverbs about women often portrayed traits like beauty, passivity, and emotional sensitivity and frequently used butterflies, swans, and doves for women. The study concluded that gender prejudices and inequities in American culture were reflected through these animal-related proverbs.

Khan et al. (2017) investigated the portrayal of men and women in Urdu proverbs through animal terms. Approximately 40 Urdu proverbs with animal metaphors were collected, and their categories of analysis were studied through a gender lens. The selected animal proverbs were analyzed and classified into categories such as inferiority, weakness, stupidity, ill-nature, sex object, ugliness, positive, and shrewd.

In these proverbs, dogs were portrayed as inferior, and men were regarded as superior. Comparing a man to a dog was deemed abusive in Pakistani society; however, in the sample proverb where the dog was linked with man, the connotation was negative. Similarly, the monkey symbolized ugliness and inferiority and was used as an insult. On the other hand, the cat was comparable to the traditional domestic role of women; for instance, "women cannot sedate men, just as a cat cannot teach a lion." Women were also considered difficult to understand and were presented as a riddle in some Urdu proverbs.

The cow and buffalo have frequently been used as metaphors for women. In traditional societies, women were seen as slow, stupid, dumb, and obedient like cows. Conversely, men were influential in a patriarchal society and owned women by force. Men were likened to the camel, which is a symbol of strength. The camel symbolized male dominance in Pakistani society and helped establish societal norms. The hen was used as a metaphor for women and portrayed them as weak and inferior compared to how men were described in the proverbs. Men's voices, rules, and dominant roles were accepted by society. The snake is generally regarded as a dangerous animal because of its poison, and represents evil. It was more frequently associated with men in Pakistani society, emphasizing negative representations of men.

Adopting a feminist critical approach, Aragbuwa and Omotunde (2022) employed linguistic frameworks to investigate conceptual metaphorizations in gender-based Yoruba proverbs. The data set, containing 100 Yoruba proverbs about women, was used for the Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis. The analysis revealed that women were structured in the following four conceptual metaphors in the selected proverbs: women as weaklings, women as evil, women as whores, and women as procreants. While the first three conceptual metaphors explicitly suggested women in a "downward orientation," the fourth metaphor suggested an "upward orientation," though, in reality, it implied a downward orientation. The overall negative image of these four metaphors indicated that the status of women was poor among the Yoruba. Yoruba's ideological gender structure promoted a hierarchical order where women were subordinate to men. As a result, the systematic use of derogatory language to portray women among the Yoruba exposed their (mis)conception of women. The study highlighted how the Yoruba used conceptual metaphors to express their gender relations, and positive characteristics of women that contradicted these conceptual metaphors were masked.

The reviewed literature shows that gender-based analyses of animal-related proverbs have been conducted in different languages. Still, these studies primarily focused on the image of women in different languages. Very few studies have compared the image of men and women in society through these proverbs. Therefore, this study attempts to fill this gap by investigating how the Algerian and Jordanian societies use animal-related proverbs when portraying men and women.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants included 30 graduate students from the University of Jordan, Algerian ($n = 15$) and Jordanian ($n = 15$). It was convenient to locate native speakers of Algerian Arabic among the Algerian graduate students, as the primary researcher is a graduate student at the University of Jordan. Similarly, graduate students speaking Jordanian Arabic were also selected. The respondents were natives of their respective dialects, i.e., Algerian and Jordanian Arabic.

3.2. Instrument for quantitative analysis

To answer the research questions and meet the study's aims, the researchers designed a questionnaire containing 46 Algerian and 45 Jordanian animal-related proverbs. The questionnaire was then distributed to the respondents. It comprised two parts; the first part had ethnographic data relating to the participant's age, gender, and nationality. The second part included animal-related proverbs against which participants had to indicate whether a certain proverb related to men, women, or both and whether they connoted a positive or negative meaning.

3.3. Analytical framework for qualitative analysis

Khan et al.'s (2017) classifications were modified and extended for an in-depth linguistic and gender investigation of the chosen proverbs. In their study, they used categories such as inferiority, weakness, stupidity, ill-nature, sex object, ugliness, positive, and shrewd. To keep the analysis neutral, counter-classifications for the categories listed in their study were created (Khan et al., 2017). The following are the categories adapted from Khan et al. (2017).

3.3.1. Inferiority vs. superiority

In Khan et al.'s (2017) study, the classification of animal terms under this category was motivated by the Urdu culture's view of the animal "dog," in particular, as an inferior animal. In addition, the aspect of power is emphasized to show the dog's dominance over its area. Conversely, the dog is powerless outside its surroundings. Worthlessness, obedience, and ignorance are other traits highlighted under this category. In some examples provided by the authors, women were likened to animals that were inferior in classification compared to those used for men. This was justified by the power and control men had over women. For instance, Khan et al. (2017) provide examples of the cat's inferiority and the lion's superiority by depicting the cat as a domestic, powerless animal that should not aspire to tutor the lion.

3.3.2. Weakness vs. strength

Strength and power are two main characteristics in this category and are mainly linked to male animals. In addition, all aspects of physical strength/weakness, shape, and size are also included under this category. Khan et al. (2017) suggest that the camel is a dangerous animal compared to the dog, based on an Urdu proverb that urges people to be cautious of the grip of a camel and the deception of women. The authors explain that even though the dog is dangerous, it is still not envious like the camel. Regarding body shape and strength, the authors use the buffalo to show that a stick can take such a huge animal.

3.3.3. Stupidity vs. wisdom

Under this category, the authors highlight that the size of an animal is not necessarily a symbol or a sign of intelligence. Further, stupidity was associated mainly with donkeys in this section, as it is a slow, obedient, easily manipulated, and good-natured animal. As a means of exemplification, the dog is compared to the donkey, and the results indicate that the dog is an intelligent creature compared to the donkey.

3.3.4. Ill-nature vs. good nature

Unlike the category of strength and weakness, which focuses on male animals, this category primarily focuses on female animals. This is exemplified by the wasp, a flying insect that can be a source of danger if its hive is disturbed. Other characteristics under this section include bad temper, manipulation, aggressiveness, and evil. The authors portray the snake as an ill-natured animal not just because of its poison but also due to its vile nature. In Islamic belief, the snake is believed to be responsible for the condemnation of Adam and Eve.

3.3.5. Sex object vs. authority

This category associates women's beauty, sensitivity, and delicacy with the feature of sex objects. However, men are associated with the term authority since men are known for their power, strength, and stronger, more rugged bodies. Therefore, the Algerian and Jordanian proverbs discussed under this category reflect either one of these features, i.e., sex object or authority or both. The animals themselves are not presented as sex objects. However, their characteristics are linked to the respective genders.

3.3.6. Ugliness vs. beauty

This category focuses on aesthetic appearance, and women, their youth, and elegance are at the center of this beauty classification. However, in Khan et al.'s (2017) study, ugliness was chiefly linked with men, and they supported this with an example of the animal "monkey." In addition, when horse and donkey are compared, the horse takes the lead over the donkey as it is considered a beautiful animal, unlike its counterpart, which is perceived as a lowly and ugly animal.

3.3.7. Positive vs. negative

The negative feature of this category relates to the idea that if people or animals have bad habits and attitudes, they will, by one means or another, affect others surrounding them. According to Khan et al. (2017), dog and fish connote negative meanings. Almost all female animals are pictured in a negative light. Contrary to this, the hen symbolizes a positive meaning as it is a precious and valuable creature that two roosters cannot share. This applies to women, mainly in the Islamic and Arabic cultures. Being useless and having poor control over a given situation is also considered a negative characteristic.

3.3.8. Shrewd vs. foolish/innocent

According to Khan et al.'s (2017) classification, the term shrewd represents an artful, cunning, and tricky nature. They further suggest that the term "innocent" could be used as an opposite feature to shrewd. In their study, the camel and the cat are shrewd animals

since the camel's sitting direction cannot be predicted, and the cat does cunning acts that cannot be forgiven. These attributes are equally applicable to human beings in the proverbs.

The listed classifications have been used to depict both genders using animal metaphors for positive and negative features. The selected proverbs were categorized and investigated in these categories, and their gender portrayal was examined through animals associated with them.

3.4. Procedures

The current study used a mixed methodology consisting of qualitative and quantitative analyses. The qualitative data came from the connotative meanings of the animal-related proverbs (suggested by the participants and the researchers' native perceptions) and the gender these proverbs were linked with (men or women). In addition, the qualitative data also included characteristics that these proverbs ascribed to a man or a woman (such as physical appearances and behaviors). This was in line with the framework adopted in this study from Khan et al.'s (2017) categories of analysis through a gender perspective, which helped unveil whether these animal-related proverbs were used derogatorily or complimentarily for both genders. The qualitative data also helped determine if men and women were described using the same animal terms or whether there were discrepancies.

The quantitative data helped establish the frequency of each animal term used in this study (if more than one proverb contained the same animal name, then the animal name was counted that many times). Positive and negative occurrences were also counted. In addition, the proportion of animal terms used exclusively to describe women or men was calculated to examine whether the same animals were used for both genders to represent each category or whether some animals were not used to describe men or women. The tables pertaining to the quantitative analysis were separated based on dialect.

After collecting the data, the proverbs were divided into two: Algerian animal-related proverbs and Jordanian animal-related proverbs. The data was then tabulated, translated, transliterated, and a possible explanation for each animal-related proverb was provided based on qualitative data gathered from the participants, the primary researcher's insight into the Algerian data, and the secondary researcher's insight into Jordanian data. In addition, the tables also contained responses from men and women from Algerian and Jordanian society, along with the positive and negative connotations of the proverbs under scrutiny.

4. Results

In this section, the results of the Algerian and Jordanian Arabic proverbs have been presented and discussed. Section 4.1 presents the quantitative results, and Section 4.2 offers the qualitative analysis. Since the focus is on connecting the animal term to the frequency of its use instead of connecting the proverb to such use, each subcategory (animal term) has been indicated with a number in parenthesis which shows the number of instances it appeared in the list of proverbs under investigation. For instance, in Table 1,

the animal term "donkey" was found in six proverbs and has been indicated with a number six against its term. The term had negative connotations in all six proverbs and was never used in a proverb to create a positive connotation. Further, "donkey" was used in three proverbs to describe women and three proverbs to describe men.

4.1. Quantitative analysis

Table 1 displays the frequencies and percentages of each animal term used and the percentage of their intended positive and negative meanings. Of the 23 animal terms employed in 46 Algerian animal-related proverbs, the most used animals were donkeys, horses, dogs, wolves, camels, snakes, sheep, and beetle, followed by cats, ducks, worms, birds, fish, flies, lions, partridges, and peacocks. In some instances, animal terms described only men (i.e., bird, lion, monkey, wolf, fly, and fish), whereas in other cases, it represented only women (cat, duck, bee, snake, and worm).

It was also observed that negative connotations exceeded the positive ones for both genders (Table 1).

Table 2 shows the data obtained from the Jordanian animal-related proverbs, representing 19 animal terms used in 45 proverbs. The table indicates the use of some animal terms that were not used in the Algerian proverbs. For instance, crow, hen, ant, and louse are only found in the Jordanian data. The most used animal terms include sheep, horse, camel, wolf, snake, donkey, and dog, followed by monkey, rat, and lion.

Notably, pejorative connotations were more than positive references and even more than those found in the Algerian data. Some overlap was evident between what certain animals represented regardless of culture; they are universally seen as positive/negative. However, the results also indicated that some animal terms used in describing people might be culture-specific (for instance, crow, hen, ant, and louse in Jordanian Arabic).

4.2. Qualitative analysis

This section analyzes how men and women from Algerian and Jordanian societies are represented in animal-related proverbs. The positive and negative meanings are discussed, along with the classification of the proverbs according to the framework adopted for this study.

4.2.1. Inferiority vs. superiority

The category of inferiority vs. superiority relates to the ranking and positioning of women in society with regard to men; it signifies whether Algerian women are perceived as inferior or superior compared to Algerian men.

From the proverb (1) (اللّي عينو في لعذاب يخالط النسا و لكلاب), "*The one who wants suffering should mingle with the women and the dogs*," it is deduced that women are likened to dogs. Although the dog represents loyalty in almost all Western cultures and the Arab world, it is considered unclean (nadʒis/dirty) among Muslims. In this proverb, by equating women's wailing to dogs barking, women first are derogated and second are portrayed as a source of suffering.

TABLE 1 Percentage of Algerian animal terms.

Animal term	Algerian data							
	Positive		Negative		Men		Women	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Donkey (6)	00	00	6	13.04%	3	50%	3	50%
Dog (6)	00	00	6	13.04%	4	66.67%	2	33.33%
Cow (2)	00	00	2	4.34%	1	50%	1	50%
Horse (4)	3	6.52%	1	2.17%	1	25%	3	75%
Sheep/goat (3)	00	00	3	6.52%	00	00	3	100%
Cock (3)	1	2.17%	2	4.34%	2	66.67%	1	33.33%
Worm (1)	00	00	1	2.17%	00	00	1	100%
Rat (2)	00	00	2	4.34%	1	50%	1	50%
Snake (4)	00	00	4	6.52%	2	50%	2	50%
Bee (1)	00	00	1	2.17%	00	00	1	100%
Wolf (3)	00	00	3	6.52%	2	66.67%	1	33.33%
Duck (1)	00	00	1	2.17%	00	00	1	100%
Cat (1)	1	2.17%	00	00	00	00	1	100%
Beetle (3)	00	00	3	6.52%	1	33.33%	2	66.67%
Gazelle (2)	1	2.17%	1	2.17%	1	50%	1	50%
Camel (4)	1	2.17%	1	2.17%	1	50%	1	50%
Lion (1)	1	2.17%	00	00	1	100%	00	00
Peacock (1)	1	2.17%	00	00	00	00	1	100%
Partridge (1)	1	2.17%	00	00	00	00	1	100%
Bird (2)	1	2.17%	1	2.17%	2	100%	00	00
Monkey (1)	00	00	1	2.17%	1	100%	00	00
Fish (1)	00	00	1	2.17%	1	100%	00	00
Fly (1)	00	00	1	2.17%	1	100%	00	00

It implies that if a man wants to suffer and place himself in trouble, he only needs to get in touch with women and dogs, both loud and noisy. It is also possible that the proverb suggested women embodying moodiness due to their constant wailing.

4.2.2. Physical strength vs. weakness

The second category relates to physical strength vs. weakness in animal terms. Proverbs in this category either compare and contrast women as weak and men as strong or just portray women as weak in animal terms. In proverb (2) (النسا اذا تحزمت والخيل اذا تلجمت), "*Women if they gird and horses when harnessed*" equates women to horses in their strength; once they are ready (saddled), they are ready for battle. Likewise, women encircling their garments around their waist suggests their preparedness to clean the house or cook. This imagery in the Algerian culture reflects the suaveness and sharpness of the Algerian women, who, by doing so, are regarded as good housewives.

4.2.3. Stupidity vs. wisdom

The stupidity vs. wisdom category included examples of how the good nature of some animals was manipulated by others. This characteristic was applied to human beings, where a man or a woman uses someone, mocks them, and takes advantage of their kindness.

Proverb (3) (ما تسمع رأي المرا ما تّبع الحمار من وراء) "*Do not listen to the point of view of the woman and do not follow the donkey from the back*," advises on how a woman's point of view is worthless. The proverb likened women to a donkey, where following it from behind will either result in getting kicked by it or getting dirty by its dung. It suggested that following a woman, with their inability to judge with reason and lack of experience, will result in taking the wrong path or making the wrong decision.

4.2.4. Ill-nature vs. good nature

Animals, like humans, have both good and bad qualities. Ill-nature can be defined as being short-tempered, manipulative, aggressive, or evil.

TABLE 2 Percentages of Jordanian animal terms.

Animal term	Jordanian data							
	Positive		Negative		Men		Women	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Dog (3)	00	00	3	6.67%	3	66.67%	1	33.33%
Sheep/goat (6)	00	00	6	13.33%	4	66.67%	2	33.33%
Louse/louse eggs (2)	00	00	2	4.44%	00	00	2	100%
Cow (1)	00	00	1	2.22%	00	00	1	100%
Hen (1)	00	00	1	2.22%	00	00	1	100%
Horse (4)	4	8.88%	00	00	1	25%	3	75%
Donkey (3)	00	00	3	6.67%	2	66.67%	1	33.33%
Camel (8)	2	4.44%	6	13.33%	4	50%	4	50%
Snake (3)	00	00	3	6.67%	1	33.33%	2	66.67%
Rat (3)	1	2.22%	2	4.44%	1	33.33%	2	66.67%
Bird (1)	00	00	1	2.22%	1	100%	00	00
Wolf (4)	1	2.22%	3	6.67%	4	100%	00	00
Ant (1)	00	00%	1	2.22%	1	100%	00	00
Crow (1)	00	00	1	2.22%	1	100%	00	00
Gazelle (1)	00	00	1	2.22%	1	100%	00	00
Monkey (2)	00	00	2	4.44%	2	100%	00	00
Lion (2)	1	2.22%	1	2.22%	2	100%	00	00
Hyena (1)	1		00	00	1	100%	00	00
Beetle (1)	00	00	1	2.22%	1	100%	00	00

In this category, five proverbs describe women as deceptive, cunning, witty, and malicious. The fourth proverb (تولّي اللّفعة طبيبة) (ملّي تولّى الربيبة حبيبة), "*When the stepdaughter becomes deer, the snake becomes a doctor,*" underscores the relationship between the stepdaughter and the stepmother. It is common in the Algerian community for a man to remarry after his wife's death. If he already had children, they would not always like the stepmother. Therefore, this proverb mocks any possibility of a good relationship between the stepmother and the step-children; it is as remote as the snake becoming a doctor. The snake is poisonous and known for hissing and striking people, which is genetic and innate and cannot be changed. The impossibility of a good relationship between the stepmother and the stepchildren is likened to the character of a snake, which cannot change.

4.2.5. Sex object vs. authority

In the proverbs, women are portrayed as sex objects and personifications of gorgeousness and delicacy. The opposite of this quality is authority, which is a defining feature for men and frequently described as such in proverbs. In the proverb (وظرافة) **(فلانة ظبيّة حنّة، خفّة** "*She is a female antelope; henna, lightness and cuteness,*" women are seen showing off and projecting their beauty. That is especially true when a mother wants to praise her daughters and show that they are beautiful in form and content, then they depict them as a female antelope known for its lightness and beauty.

In addition, women are also seen to represent such beauty as something pure like henna, which is glorified and preserved in bags made of doe leather.

4.2.6. Ugliness vs. beauty

Beauty is usually linked with women, especially their physical appearances. Even among animals, beauty is expressed in physical traits such as the gazelles' eyes or the horse's nobility, youth, and magnanimity. These traits can be likened to human behaviors and physical appearances. However, beauty in this context also describes the criteria for the price and job animals do. In proverb (6), (بطّة) (لمرا لقصيرة ايلا ضعافت قطة وايلا صحاحت) "*The short woman, if she is skinny, she is a cat, and if she is fat, she is a duck*" describes the beauty of a woman as a cat, if she is slim. The woman is likened to the cat's fitness and agility. However, when a woman gains weight, she is described as a duck because of her way of walking and body shape. The duck sways and is puffy; likewise, the woman will automatically sway while walking after gaining weight.

A brief overview of the proverbs indicates that the negative meaning used to describe women are more than the positive ones. Moreover, the derogatory image of women is conceptualized using these animal terms; mule, dog, cow, sheep, cock, worm, donkey, rat, snake, wolf duck, beetle, scorpion, and camel (see Table 3). The positively used animal terms are horse, cat, deer, gazelle, peacock, and partridge. The results reveal that the animal imagery of women

TABLE 3 Algerian animal-related proverbs describing women.

Categories	Women animal-related proverbs along with their translation	Positive meaning	Negative meaning
1. Inferiority vs. superiority	اللّي عينو في لعذاب يخالط النسا و لكلاب ʔilli ʕaynu: fi leʕða:b jxa:latˤ ʔinsa wa lakla:b **Transliteration:** The one who wants suffering should mingle with the women and the dogs. **Possible translation:** Those who want torment shall get in touch with women and dogs. **Meaning:** If you want to have a headache you just need to have women and dogs. Because a woman's wailing is like dogs' barking. In this example, the woman's situation is inferior in nature since it is compared to a lowly classified animal.		-
2. Weakness vs. strength	النسا اذا تحزمت والخيل اذا تلجمت ʔansa ʔiða tħazmet wa lxa:jl ʔiða tledʒmat **Transliteration:** Women if they gird and horses when harnessed. **Possible translation:** The women if they gird are like horses if they are harnessed. **Meaning:** When the woman gets ready for household things, she is like the horse being prepared and decorated by its saddle. This example depicts the power of a woman even if she is a weak and sensitive creature, but when needed she becomes as powerful as a horse.	+	
3. Stupidity vs. wisdom	**ما تسمع رأي المرا ما اتّبع الحمار من وراء** ma tesmaʕ ra:j lemra ma ʔəttabeʕ leħma:r man wra **Transliteration:** Do not listen to the point of view of the woman and do not follow the donkey from the back. **Possible translation:** Do not listen to the woman's point of view nor follow the donkey from the back. **Meaning:** Do not allow a woman to take the lead nor dare you walk behind the donkey because it may kick you. Thus, women and donkeys are not worth taking the lead. This example shows that a man should not be stupid by doing what is denied in the proverb. In addition, based on Khan et al.'s (2017) classification the donkey is a symbol of slowness and stupidity.		-
4. Ill-nature vs. good nature	ملّي تولّي الربيبة حبيبة تولّي اللّعفة طبيبة malli twalli ʔirbi:ba ħbi:ba twalli ʔallafʕa tˤbi:ba **Transliteration:** When the stepdaughter becomes deer, the snake becomes a doctor. **Possible translation:** When the stepdaughter becomes lovely and sweet in the eyes of the stepmother is when the snake will become a doctor. **Meaning:** This proverb is a mockery and shows that having a good relationship between the stepdaughter and the stepmother is something impossible just like when a miracle happens and turns the snake into a doctor. This example shows that the snake is an evil animal and it is impossible for it to let down its characteristics of vile and bad temperedness. Therefore, the stepdaughter cannot be a good person because this is in its nature.		-
5. Sex object vs. authority	**فلانة ظبيّة حنّة، خفّة وظرافة** fla:na ðˤabijja ħanna xaffa wa ðˤra:fa **Transliteration**: She is a female antelope; henna, lightness and cuteness. **Possible translation**: She is like a female antelope, henna, lightness and cuteness. **Meaning**: This proverb depicts what women say to be proud or to glorify their daughters that they are beautiful in form and content, and there is nothing better and purer than preserved henna in bags made of doe leather. This proverb fits the characteristic stated by Khan et al. (2017) in this category; that is, sex object is linked mainly with women's delicacy and softness.		-
6. Ugliness vs. beauty	لمرا لقصيرة ايلا ضعافت قطة وايلا صحاحت بطّة lemra laqsˤi:ra ʔila dˤʕafet qatˤtˤa wʔila sħa: ħet batˤtˤa **Transliteration:** The short woman, if she is skinny she is a cat and if she is fat she is a duck. **Possible translation:** If the short woman loses weight she is like a cat, but if she gains weight she is like a duck. **Meaning:** The woman is likened to the cat's fitness and agility. However, when a woman gains weight she is described as a duck in her way of walking and her body shape. This proverb shows both sides of this category; the first one depicts the positive side and beauty of a woman as having a light body like a cat which allows it to move easily. However, the second part depicts the ugly side of a woman when she is fat; as her body shape will not be as beautiful as when she is skinny.	+	-
7. Positive vs. negative	فلانة كي الحمارة الزّادف ما تصك ما تفك fulana ki leħmar ʔerradef ma tsˤukma tfu:k **Transliteration:** She is like a pregnant donkey; she does not kick nor solve problems. **Possible translation**: She is like the pregnant donkey that can neither kick nor help in resolving a dispute. **Meaning:** The woman that is useless does nothing beneficial for her family nor her society. According to Khan et al.'s (2017) classification, almost all female animals connote a negative meaning and since being lazy is a bad habit, this also can be an aspect affecting others surrounding her.		-

in Algerian society is pejorative in its nature. These results align with Ennaji's (2008) study, where the animal terms such as beetle, sheep, dog, donkey, cow, and snake are negatively used to describe women.

Table 3 lists the Algerian animal-related proverbs describing men. Proverb (8) (**الوقت تقلّب ولحمار ولّى على العود يجلّب**) "*The time turned, and the donkey is jumping over the horse,*" belonging to the first category, describes a situation when time changes and the norms are inverted. In this example, the horse represents someone strong and superior to the donkey, which is perceived as lower than the horse and cannot rival it. The proverb indicates a time when an unfit person assumes a prestigious position in the place of a more deserving good man. This is portrayed as a donkey jumping over a precious horse.

Proverb (9) (الجمل ما يطابس على حمصة) "*The camel does not bow to a chickpea,*" talks of the camel, known for its strength, stamina, patience, and height. The proverb uses this image to describe a man who does not sweat over small things. In other words, a man of good standing is not preoccupied with small things that have no benefit and may lessen his position and merit. From proverbs such as these, it can be deduced that the Algerian society portrays men positively by likening them to strong animals such as the camel.

However, proverb (10), belonging to the third category, does not project men favorably. The proverb (في النهار يبور و في اللّيل يدور الله يجعلك كي بغل الدّرسة) "*May Allah make you like a donkey turning in the day and a bachelor at night,*" provides a derogatory image of man by characterizing him as a mule, which is considered a stupid animal. Through this proverb, Algerian society compares the life of a married man with that of a bachelor. After a tiring day, the married man will return to his warm house, wife, and children. However, the bachelor works very hard during the day (like a mule), but at the end of the day, he has no one to entertain him.

Proverb (11) (حوتة ومطليّة بالزّيت) "*A fish covered in oil*" describes a fish that has become more slippery and hard to catch because it has been sprayed with oil. This proverb is used to express some people characterized by their cunningness and wit. When a person's behavior or act cannot be predicted, this proverb is used to reveal the person's foxy and malicious traits. The proverb warns people to be cautious when dealing with such persons because they are like oiled, slippery fish that cannot be caught.

Proverb (12) (كي غلبوه الديوكة ولّى على موكة) "*When the cocks beat him, he turns back on Mouka (the hen)*" suggests that when roosters attack another rooster, the latter will show off and demonstrate his power and strength on another, weaker bird, mainly the hen, referred to in the proverb as Mouka. The proverb describes a man with no authority among his friends and whose word is worthless. Yet, he will return home and boast his abilities to his wife, who is in a lower position than the man and has no power to challenge him. The proverb also reaffirms the authority men have over women.

On ugliness and beauty, proverb (13) (للكلب الفايح كي يشمها يرد دير الروايح) "*Put the perfumes on the stinky dog, and when it smells it, it denies it*" suggests that despite all benevolence attributed to a dog, at the end of the day, it will still remain a dog, just as a leopard cannot change its spots. This proverb also indicates a crude person who cannot distinguish between valuable and cheap things.

The proverbs referring to the characteristics, behaviors, and physical appearances of Algerian men show almost the exact usage of animal terms found in the proverbs describing women, projecting them favorably or disadvantageously to men in Algerian society. The following animal terms were used to project a positive image of men: horse, camel, lion, bird, and cock. On the other hand, dogs, donkeys, ants, wolves, bulls, fish, snakes, rats, beetles, monkeys, and hyenas were used to portray men negatively. While comparing men and women, the superiority of men reigned supreme. This was evident in the use of the animal pair cock-hen, which was similar to that used in Jayawardena's (2015) study, which investigated how women were portrayed in two cultures—Sinhala and French. The study used the animal pair cock-hen to describe women's obedience toward their husbands and men's authority over women; this behavior was equated to that one exercised by the cock.

Table 5 lists the Jordanian animal-related proverbs describing women in their society. Interestingly, the category positive vs. negative used to describe Algerian women (see Table 4) was missing from the Jordanian proverbs of women; instead, we found proverbs belonging to the shrewd vs. innocent category.

The first category describing the inferiority and superiority of either a man over a woman or the ranking of genders in society can be seen in the proverb (اجت العنزة الثنيّة تعلّم أمها الرّعيّة) "*The young goat came to teach its mother how to graze.*" In this proverb, we can deduce how the scales are inverted, and a low-ranking animal aims to teach a superior one what to do. In the human context, it applies when the daughter surpasses her mother and wants to teach her how to do something. Therefore, the daughter, who is younger and inferior to her mother, attempts to teach her mother, who taught her the basics and the principles of life.

In describing the weakness of women, the Jordanians opt for the proverb (النّاقة ناقة ولو هدّرت), "*The camel is a camel even if it growls*" meaning that even if the female camel growls, it will still not make it a lion but remain a camel and weak. Correspondingly, a woman or a wife will always be perceived as weak and needing protection from her husband. This does not imply that the woman is ranked lower in this context but instead shows her need for a man to protect and support her. Furthermore, the proverb suggests that even when women shout or do anything to show their powers, they will still remain a woman, full of feelings and tenderness.

Proverb (16) (اللّي برضع لبن الحمارة بيصير مخّه حجارة) "*The one who drinks the milk of a donkey, his brain becomes a stone*" depicts that when the burro drinks its mother's milk, it will automatically inherit her stupidity and stubbornness. This applies to humans where a child breastfeeds from a mother who is stupid and stubborn automatically inherits these characteristics because the child assumes its intelligence from the mother. Therefore, being fed and raised by a stubborn mother will not result in an obedient child.

Snakes and scorpions are at the top of the list of animals in the proverbs that refer to the ill-nature inherent in some animals. Likening someone to a scorpion or a snake reveals that person's bad intentions or cunningness. Proverb (17) (حب العمّة للكنّة مثل لسع العقربا) "*The love of the mother-in-law to the daughter-in-law is like the bite of a scorpion*" expresses the dislike that the mother-in-law has for her son's bride. The relationship between a mother-in-law and the bride might appear in accord, but this would not be the case because the mother-in-law's love for her daughter-in-law is like the bite of a scorpion—poisonous and deadly.

The authority of a man over a woman or his wife and depicting women as a sex object is evident in Proverb (18): (مرعاهن لا ترعى فيه)

TABLE 4 Algerian animal-related proverbs describing men.

Categories	Animal-related proverbs along with their translation and meaning	Positive meaning	Negative meaning
8. Inferiority vs. superiority	الوقت تقلّب ولحمار ولّى على العود يجلّب ʔalwa:qt tqallab wleħma:r walla ʕla lʕawd ʔidʒellab **Transliteration:** The time turned and the donkey is jumping over the horse. **Possible translation:** The times have changed and the donkey now wants to surpass the horse. **Meaning:** Someone lower in position wants to overpass a highly ranked one. Since the donkey is perceived as an obedient and easily manipulative animal, then it is lower in position and importance as compared to the horse. The latter, is a noble animal and it is not an easy task to tame it.		-
9. Strength vs. weakness	الجمل ما يطباس على حمصة ledʒmal ma jtʕa:bes ʕla ħu:msʕa **Transliteration:** The camel does not bow to a chickpea. **Possible translation:** The camel does not bow to get a piece of chickpea. **Meaning:** The strength of a camel is likened to a strong, noble and gentle man who does not bother himself with silly things and does not allow for silly people to underestimate him. As in the study of Khan et al. (2017), the camel symbolizes physical strength. The same applies in this example; as to show the greatness of the camel or a powerful person.	+	
10. Stupidity vs. wisdom	الله يجعلك كي بغل الدّرسة في النهار يدور و في اللّيل يبور ʔalla:h jadʒaʕlek ki bɣa:l ʔeddarsa fi nha:r jdu:r w filli:l jbu:r **Transliteration:** May Allah make you like a donkey turning in the day and a bachelor at night. **Possible translation:** May Allah make you like a plowing mule that keeps cultivating all the day and sleeps alone at night. **Meaning:** The donkey has nothing to do, it is a symbol of stupidity and all the day it just keeps turning and cultivating. Therefore, a stupid person will do the same having no purpose or goal to achieve so he will keep turning around and may even not be able to have a family and get established.		-
11. Ill-nature vs. good nature	حوتة ومطليّة بالزّيت ħu:ta wmatʕlijja bezzi:t **Transliteration**: A fish covered in oil. **Possible translation:** Like a fish coated by oil. **Meaning:** The man is so slick and shrewd that he cannot be predictable. The bad and evil person can have the ability to hide his true intents and can find a way out of any trouble or issue.		-
12. Sex object vs. authority	كي غلبوه الديوكة ولّى على موكة ki: ɣalbu:h ʔedju:ka: wella ʕla mu:ka **Transliteration:** When the cocks beat him he turns back on Mouka. **Possible translation:** When the roosters defeated him, he prevailed over Mouka (the hen). **Meaning:** This proverb depicts the male who is defeated in front of his peers and competitors, and then he transgresses against someone who is weaker than him because of his villainy. That is to say, this is an instance of the man's authority over his weak wife.		-
13. Ugliness vs. beauty	**دير الروايح للكلب الفايح كي يشمها يرد** dir ʔerwajaħ leka:lb ʔelfajaħ ki jʃamha jru:d **Transliteration:** Put the perfumes on the stinky dog and when it smells it, it denies it. **Possible translation:** Like perfuming the stinky dog, when it smells the good odor, it will give a cold shoulder to it. **Meaning:** This proverb is said to the person who is rude in nature, who cannot distinguish between antiques and trivial things. Therefore, the person who is used to ugly and stinky nature will not have the sense of tasting beautiful things.		-

"*If you love, love camels but do not graze in their pastures.*" (ان عشقت اعشق نوق لكن) When men in Jordanian society equate a beautiful woman to a camel, they describe her as the most beautiful among others. While urging men to fall in love with pretty women, this proverb cautions them against allowing women to imprint them with their nature. It calls for establishing the power of men over women and not allowing their sexual desires for women to guide their emotions.

Similarly, the proverb (ان عشقت اعشق نوق و ان سرقت اسرق جمل) "*If you love, love she-camels and if you steal, steal a camel*" urges men to marry a beautiful woman amongst other women. In Jordanian culture, when a woman is pretty and beautiful, men flirt with her, referring to her as a camel. Therefore, this proverb elucidates the beauty of a woman by equating it to a camel.

The adjective shrewd refers to someone who is skillful, cunning, or devious in nature, and its antonym is innocent. The proverb, (لا توخذ فار ة و أمها بالحا رة) "*Do not take the mouse when its mother is in the neighborhood,*" is used to defame the reputation of

the mother-in-law, which is not always the case. Based on Khan's classification, shrewdness has to do with artfulness and cunning, and some people believe that a mother-in-law is a bad person who keeps scheming to get her son to divorce his wife. Conversely, it also refers to a mother influencing her daughter to be authoritative and bad with her husband.

Table 5 outlined how animal-related proverbs manifested and characterized women in Jordanian society. It is noticeable that women in Algerian and Jordanian cultures are sketched in a derogatory manner, unlike men, who are represented with power and authority over women. In this study, we found that louse, dog, cow, sheep, hen, donkey, snake, scorpion, and rat were used to describe women in a pejorative manner. For instance, the hen and cow animal terms are used as a metaphor for describing the weakness of women because both are inferior compared to their male counterparts in the proverbs. This is also reflected in the Algerian proverbs. These results are in line with Khan et al.'s (2017)

TABLE 5 Jordanian animal-related proverbs describing women.

Categories	Women animal-related proverbs along with their translation	Positive meaning	Negative meaning
14. Inferiority vs. superiority	اجت العنزة الثنيّة تعلّم أمها الرّعيّة ʔidʒat ʔilʕanza ʔi θanija tʕalim u:mha ʔiraʕija **Transliteration:** The young goat came to teach its mother how to graze. **Possible translation:** The baby goat is now teaching its mother how to graze. **Meaning:** This proverb is said in cases where the little person who has no experience wants to be far above his/her master.		-
15. Weakness vs. strength	النّاقة ناقة ولو هدّرت ʔinna:qa na:qa: walaw haddarat **Transliteration:** The camel is a camel even if it growls. **Possible translation:** The camel remains a camel even if it growls. **Meaning:** That is, the female remains a female, no matter how strong her personality is, she is limited in terms of her creation and composition, and she cannot be endowed with the characteristics of men. Because she was created to be a female, and she has her lofty message in life, and her great value in society.	+	
16. Stupidity vs. wisdom	اللّي برضع لبن الحمارة بيصير مخّه حجارة ʔilli bjirdʕ laban ħma:ra bi:sʕir muxxu ħdʒa:ra **Transliteration:** The one who drinks the milk of a donkey, his brain becomes a stone. **Possible translation:** He/she who is fed by the donkey's milk will become stubborn. **Meaning:** This means that when the burro drinks its mother's milk, it will automatically inherit her stupidity and stubbornness. That is to say, if a person has some features by birth and he grows up in a wrong manner, then it is not possible to change his behaviors. Just like a donkey that is known by its stupidity and obedience, it is not easy or even impossible to get used to being easygoing.		-
17. Ill-nature vs. good nature	حب العمّة للكنّة مثل لسع العقربا ħu:b lʕamma lalkanna miθl lasʕ ʔiʕaqraba **Transliteration:** The love of the mother-in-law to the daughter-in-law is like the bite of a scorpion. **Possible translation:** A mother-in-law's love for a daughter-in-law is like a scorpion's sting. **Meaning:** The boundless hatred between the mother-in-law and her daughter-in-law is like the scorpion's sting which is known by its poison and evil attitudes, therefore when a person is evil in their nature they are likened to a scorpion as to show that it is not possible to get rid of your bad and evil characteristics.		-
18. Sex object vs. authority	ان عشقت اعشق نوق لكن مرعاهن لا ترعى فيه ʔin ʕaʃ ʔiqt ʔiʃ ʔaq nu:q la:kin marʕahen la tirʕa: fi:h **Transliteration:** If you love, love camels but do not graze in their pastures. **Possible translation:** If you want to fall in love, fall in love with a camel, but do not graze in its pastures. **Meaning:** This saying urges men not to allow women to take control of them (do not acquire your wife's traits). This proverb like others belonging to this category depicts the authority of a man that he should show and practice in his first days of marriage; as to avoid his wife to take control over him or the like.	+	
19. Ugliness vs. beauty	**ان عشقت اعشق نوق و ان سرقت اسرق جمل** ʔin ʕaʃiqt ʔiʃ ʔaq nu:q w ʔin ʔisraqt ʔisraq dʒamal **Transliteration:** If you love, love she-camels and if you steal, steal a camel. **Possible translation:** If you should fall in love, then fall in love with a she-camel, but if you want to settle down then take a camel. **Meaning:** This saying urges men to marry a beautiful lady amongst other ladies. In the Jordanian culture, when a woman is so pretty and beautiful then men mainly flirt her by saying she is camel. Therefore, this proverb shows the beauty of a woman by likening it to a camel.	+	
20. Shrewd vs. innocent	لا توخذ فارة و أمها بالحارة la tu:xeθ fa:ra w ʔimha bil ħa:ra **Transliteration**: Do not take the mouse when its mother is in the neighborhood. **Possible translation:** Do not take (as a wife) a rat if her mother is in the neighborhood. **Meaning:** This is mainly used to defame the bad reputation of the mother-in-law, which is not always the case. Following Khan et al.'s (2017) classification, shrewdness has to do with artful and cunning and it is believed by some people that the mother-in-law is a bad person who keeps doing tricks to get her son-in-law to divorce his wife, or the other way around, that is, pushing her daughter to be authoritative with her husband.		-

study that investigated the portrayal of men and women in Urdu proverbs through animals. The horse and camel are the only two animal terms that have been used positively.

Table 6 contains the animal-related proverbs depicting men in Jordanian society. The proverbs in this subset included all the categories designed for this study, unlike the other subsets represented in other tables, which did not contain all eight categories (i.e., one or two categories were missing).

The first proverb in the first category (الكلب كلب ولو لبس جلد أسد), "*The dog is a dog even it wears the skin of a lion.*" reveals the image of a dog, that despite putting on a lion's skin, will still remain a dog. It implies that a lower-ranking animal like a dog can never be comparable to or rise to the status of the lion. When transliterated to human beings, an ordinary man cannot rise to the position of a nobleman even if he adorns himself with ornaments because upbringing is more powerful than cosmetic changes.

TABLE 6 Jordanian animal-related proverbs describing men.

Categories	Men animal-related proverbs along with their translation	Positive meaning	Negative meaning
21. Inferiority vs. superiority	الكلب كلب ولو لبس جلد أسد ʔilka:lb ka:lb wa law libis dʒild ʔasad **Transliteration:** The dog is a dog even it wears the skin of a lion. **Possible translation:** The dog remains a dog even if it puts on a lion's skin. **Meaning:** The vile does not raise his value with his clothes. The dog as an animal is lowly ranked in the Great Chain of Being. Therefore, when it is compared to an animal higher than it, then this is an instance of inferiority and superiority.		-
22. Weakness vs. strength	يوم يبرك الجمل تكثر السكاكين ju:m jubruk ʔildʒamal tukθur ʔissakaki:n **Transliteration:** The day when the camel falls the knives will be too much. **Possible translation:** When the camel falls sick, ready knives become plentiful. **Meaning:** This is said in describing the strong who is weakened and afflicted by calamities from every side.	+	
23. Stupidity vs. wisdom	الفار اللّي شايف حاله بيكون من نصيب البس ʔilfa:r ʔilli ʃaji:f ħalu: biku:n min nasˤib ʔilbis **Transliteration:** The rat that thinks highly of itself is from the share of the cat. **Possible translation:** The arrogant rat is an easy meal for the cat. **Meaning:** This saying describes the mean and stupid person who likes to show off, so his arrogance and haughtiness will be the reason for his elimination.		-
24. Ill-nature vs. good nature	يوكل مع الذّيب ويرعى مع الغنم Ju:kel maʕa ʔiððib wjarʕa maʕa ʔilɣanam **Transliteration:** He eats with the wolf and grazes with the sheep. **Possible translation:** He eats with the wolf and grazes with the sheep. **Meaning:** This proverb is used to describe a hypocritical person who reveals the opposite of what he hides, so his intentions cannot be predicted.		-
25. Sex object vs. authority	**شو وصّى عليك؟ قال: وصاة الذّيب بالغنم** ʃu: wasˤsˤa ʕalik qal wsˤʕat ʔiððib bil ɣanam **Transliteration:** What did he advise for you? The advice of a wolf over the sheep. **Possible translation:** They asked: What did he recommend to look after you? He replied: Like putting the sheep under the surveillance of the wolf. **Meaning:** Handing the power to the strong over the weak. This example shows the authority of the wolf over the sheep, which is a weak, powerless animal.		-
26. Ugliness vs. beauty	يا ماخذ القرد على ماله بيروح المال و بيظل القرد على حاله ja maxiθ ʔilgird ʕala malu: biru:ħ ʔilmal w bidˤʕal ʔilgird ʕala ħalu: **Transliteration:** O you who takes the monkey for its money, the money goes and the monkey stays as it is. **Possible translation:** Whoever marries the monkey for his money, a day will come and he will be poor, and the monkey will remain a monkey. **Meaning:** This proverb serves to denounce marriage that is guided by a materialistic view. That is, marrying an ugly person just because of his wealth will make you regret 1 day after he becomes poor. In the classification suggested in the methodology, the monkey is mainly associated with ugliness.		-
27. Positive vs. negative	كل الجمال اتعاركت الّا جملنا بارك kul lidʒma:l ʔitʕa:rik ʔilla dʒamalna barik **Transliteration:** All the camels fight except for our camel, it sits. **Possible translation:** All the camels fight except for ours that is lying down. **Meaning:** This imagery depicts the laziness of some individuals who have nothing to do in their lives, they are passive. And as it has been said before, if there is a person among other groups with bad habits, he will affect all of them by time whether by his laziness or other characteristics.		-
28. Shrewd vs. innocent	**ذنب الكلب أعوج لو حطّيته بستّين قالب** ðanab ʔilkalb ʔaʕwaj law ħatˤtˤitu bsittin qali:b **Transliteration:** The tail of the dog is crooked even if you put it in 60 models. **Possible translation:** The dog's tail remains curved and cannot be straightened even if it is molded in sixty models. **Meaning:** A leopard cannot change its spots. That is, if someone inherits bad habits, he will never be able to change his traits and vice versa.		-

As highlighted earlier, the camel symbolizes strength in Arabic culture, and its cow symbolizes beauty in Jordanian culture. Proverb (22) (يوم يبرك الجمل تكثر السكاكين) "*The day when the camel falls the knives will be too much,*" laments that when the camel is sick or weak, everyone would be ready to slaughter it. It implies that even the weak may want to challenge him when a strong man or a leader has lost everything and he is no longer powerful or in a powerful position. Subsequently, his enemies will conspire against him to ensure he no longer hinders them.

Some animals can try to be tricky, like the mouse in proverb (23) (نصيب البس الفار اللّي شايف حاله بيكون من) "*The rat that thinks highly of itself is from the share of the cat.*" An arrogant mouse that believes it can outsmart the cat will eventually end up as the cat's dinner. Likewise, for foolish individuals who think they can outsmart others, their overconfidence will cause their downfall.

Proverb (24) (يوكل مع الذّيب ويرعى مع الغنم) "*He eats with the wolf and grazes with the sheep*" warns of someone who will eat the sheep when he is with the wolves and pasture with it when he is with the sheep. It portrays a hypocritical person who hides his inherent sinful, evil, and hateful nature and displays the contrary.

To explain the authority of men over women, particularly the sexual desires men may have for women, the following proverb is used: (شو وصّى عليك؟ قال: وصاة الذّيب بالغنم) "*What did he advise for you? The advice of a wolf over the sheep.*" This proverb cautions against allowing the wolf to protect the sheep as it may lead to the wolf attacking the sheep. Likewise, a man with clear ill intentions should not be put in charge of someone else's security, particularly that of a woman.

In some cases, women overlook the physical appearance and other characteristics of a suitable husband if he has enough money. However, fortunes might change, and the man may lose all his money, and what he will be left with may not be desirable. This is explained in the following proverb (26): (المال و بيظل القرد على حاله) "*O you who takes the monkey for its money, the money goes and the monkey stays as it is.*" Simply put, it means that if one takes the monkey for his money, the money will someday disappear, and what will be left is a monkey. This proverb instructs that if a woman was to accept someone as undesirable as a monkey just because of his wealth, he may no longer remain rich, and the woman would be left with his ugliness, which she endured only because he was rich. Therefore, it calls for focusing not on the material aspects but on the appearance (values) of the person because it plays an essential role. The proverb has also been used to describe a rich but ugly man who gets married to a beautiful woman.

Proverb (27) describes people with either negative or positive features. It criticizes lazy people who have nothing to offer to society; they are passive and even a burden for others, unlike positive people who are characterized by their generosity, help, and the important role they play in society. The proverb (الجمال اتعارك الّا جملنا بارك كل) "*All the camels fight except for our camel, it sits,*" indicates the resentment when particular camels, which are known as strong and fast animals, especially in races, end up being idle. This imagery reflects the laziness of some individuals who do nothing in their lives and remain passive.

As previously discussed, an analysis of the category of shrewdness shows how some characteristics, such as cleverness, skillfulness, and other physical traits, are passed on from the mother or the father to their children. The proverb (أعوج لو حطّيته بستّين قالب ذنب الكلب) "*The tail of the dog is crooked even if you put it in 60 models,*" reflects the behavior and nature of some people who will never change. Just as the leopard cannot change its spots, a dog with a curved tail will never get straightened, even if 60 molds were used to fix it. This proverb is also used to disapprove of shrewd or ill-behaved people whose crookedness cannot be straightened.

5. Discussion

The study's first question was: What are the connotative meanings of animal-related proverbs used in the Algerian and Jordanian societies? The data recognized the wide range of connotative meanings that Algerian and Jordanian proverbs have

relating to animals. In both languages, most of the meanings that characterized women were derogatory. They included traits such as frailty, ignorance, inferiority, cunning, and trickery. Although the proverbs describing men in both languages had the same characteristics, the image of women in Arab cultures was particularly subordinate and had a negative profile. In addition, men continued to be seen as having power, dominance, superiority, and strength over women.

Numerous animal names were employed in both cultures to represent the images of men and women, both negatively and positively, in response to the second research question: What are the animal terms used to conceptualize men and women, both negatively and positively, in the Algerian and Jordanian societies? Within the studied proverbs, the quantity of these using animal names was the first difference between the Arabic used in Algerian and Jordanian communities. In other words, Algerian Arabic proverbs used 23 animal names, while Jordanian Arabic used 19 animal terms. The second difference was that certain animal words were only used in Algerian or Jordanian Arabic. For instance, Algerian Arabic proverbs contained animal terms such as fly, fish, partridge, peacock, cat, deer, duck, bee, and cock. On the other hand, Jordanian Arabic used hyenas, scorpions, ants, and lice. Regarding the positive and negative connotations, pejorative connotations were more prevalent than positive ones; negative connotations were more common than the ones observed in the Algerian proverbs when defining both sexes.

The analysis revealed that in both languages, women had a more unfavorable profile than men. Such findings are consistent with some findings of earlier studies. For instance, the animal pair of cock-hen was comparable to that used in Jayawardena's (2015) study, which evaluated how women were depicted in Sinhala and French cultures and found that male domination prevailed. The cock-hen animal pair represented the wife's loyalty to her husband and his power over her, which was demonstrated by comparing the hen's actions to those of the cock. Similarly, the hen and cow metaphors—both weaker than their male counterparts in proverbs—were used to describe the fragility of women, which was also evident in the Algerian proverbs in our study. These results are in line with Khan et al.'s (2017) study on how men and women are portrayed in Urdu proverbs using various animals. The dog was described negatively in the Jordanian proverbs and was associated with men, consistent with the findings of Khan et al. (2017). The monkey was also symbolized as ugly and found mentioned in both studies. In their study, the snake was used to emphasize the negative representation of men and was more frequently associated with men. However, the Jordanian proverbs did not totally support this conclusion; only one proverb was used to describe men using a snake allegory in Jordanian Arabic, whereas women were seen as cunning, and the snake was more frequently used to indicate a woman with malicious intentions.

The Jordanian proverbs used animal terms like dog, wolf, crow, snake, monkey, burro, and hyena to relate to negative traits like cunningness, ugliness, and the abjection of some men. The camel, lion, bird, gazelle, and horse represented the positive traits associated with Jordanian men, such as beauty and bravery. The cock-hen animal pair utilized in the Algerian proverbs to represent the authority of men over women was replaced by

the wolf-sheep animal pair in Jordanian proverbs to demonstrate this authority.

There are some similarities and differences between the findings of research that have investigated the use of animal names to describe gendered features in languages. In Mandarin Chinese, the dragon represents strength, power, and masculinity, according to Chiang and Knight (2010). No positive animal terms were found to be used to describe men or women in Vyzoviti and Michalopoulou's (2016) study of the Greek language. Similarly, the snake is frequently used to describe women in Mandarin Chinese, stressing their cunning and deceitful nature, according to Chiang and Knight (2010). Likewise, Vyzoviti and Michalopoulou's (2016) study discovered that the snake was employed to describe women's negative characteristics, including sly and cunning behavior. These results are consistent with the Jordanian proverbs that equate women's negative qualities more frequently with the snake than men's.

The conclusions of our study are consistent with those of Bousmah and Ventelou (2016), who looked at the use of animal metaphors in Algerian Arabic. Similar to the Jordanian proverbs, the study found that words like dog and wolf were frequently used to characterize undesirable attributes in men. In contrast, lions and horses were connected with favorable traits. Furthermore, we found that the cock-hen pair was commonly used to describe male authority over women in Algerian Arabic, while the wolf-sheep pair was used in Jordanian Arabic. This finding is in accordance with Bousmah and Ventelou's (2016) study.

Al-Harahsheh's (2020) findings on using various animal terms are remarkably similar to our study. For instance, both Algerian and Jordanian spoken Arabic dialects negatively refer to the animal name "donkey." Al-Harahsheh's findings are in accordance with this; the animal is primarily connected with the masculine gender and is used to denote stupidity, dumbness, dunderheadedness, stubbornness, sluggishness, and vulgarity. In our study, the cow has a similar negative connotation and is typically connected with women. Similarly, Al-Harahsheh's findings are consistent with our study's analysis of the animal term monkey, which refers primarily to men and denotes ugliness. This phrase could occasionally be used to describe someone as being ugly.

The current study suggests that the peacock is appropriate when describing beauty. Al-Harahsheh, however, believes the peacock is used pejoratively when illustrating beauty and conceit. Similarly, according to Al-Harahsheh, the camel describes both sexes equally. However, in our study, how the camel is used to portray women differs from how it is used to show men with strength and physical might. This difference is primarily found in the Jordanian proverbs, though it is also seen in the Algerian proverbs, perhaps to a lesser extent. In our Jordanian data, proverbs with the word camel are used to describe strength and sometimes laziness in men, but in the case of women, such proverbs are used to describe beauty in women.

Both Algerian and Jordanian proverbs mention male and female gazelles. According to Al-Harahsheh, gazelles always imply a good meaning and allude to speed, beauty, gentleness, and agility. The scorpion and the snake are employed in Algerian and Jordanian Arabic to describe undesirable traits and malevolent intentions in women. These results are consistent with those of Al-Harahsheh. According to him, scorpions and snakes are used negatively to characterize someone's behavior; they signify hostility, cunningness, unreliability, and harm. The animal term sheep denoted naivete, benevolence, and frailty in our study. These behaviors were prevalent in Algerian and Jordanian Arabic and were consistent with Al-Harahsheh's findings. According to other experts, this term also describes people who are henpecked, subservient, followers, gullible, nice, and naive.

6. Conclusion

This study sought to uncover the connotative meanings depicted in animal-related proverbs used to describe the behavior of women and men in the Algerian and Jordanian societies. Thirty native speakers of Algerian and Jordanian Arabic who were enrolled at the University of Jordan received a questionnaire that contained 45 animal-related proverbs from Jordan and 46 from Algeria. The gender-based categories of analysis used by Khan et al. (2017) were adapted as a framework to examine the proverbs. The categories were inferiority, weakness, idiocy, bad nature, sex object, ugliness, positivity, and shrewdness. The investigation revealed that animal-related proverbs from Algeria and Jordan had a variety of connotative interpretations but predominately had negative connotations when describing women. This was true in both languages. Women were characterized by weakness, stupidity, inferiority, cunningness, and trickery. Although the proverbs describing men in both languages tended to share the same traits, women in Arab cultures were portrayed as particularly inferior and had a demeaning profile. On the other hand, men were described as possessing power, dominance, superiority, and strength over women. Positive connotations were also found where the proverbs referred to animals like gazelle, peacock, partridge, cat, and horse to describe women's attractiveness. Similarly, men's superior qualities—such as strength, courage, and superiority—were elaborated using animals like horses, camels, and lions. Our results were compared to other relevant studies, and similarities and differences were found both in terms of animals terms used and in terms of what or whom they described. In conclusion, culture and language play a crucial role in using animal metaphors to express gendered features and power relationships. The parallels and discrepancies between research show that animal terminology is culturally distinctive and that effective interpretation requires knowledge of the cultural context.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

Author contributions

Conflict of interest

Publisher's note

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The portrayal of gender in Marvel and Star Wars media targeted towards children

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An abundance of previous research has investigated how gender has been portrayed within feature length films produced by Walt Disney Animation Studios, particularly those within the Disney princess franchise. However, the Disney corporation acquired the Marvel and Star Wars franchises in 2009 and 2012, respectively, which was likely a strategy for the corporation to obtain characters that would capture the imagination of boys and men. The current qualitative study explored how gender is portrayed by leading protagonists in these texts, utilising thematic analysis, which was necessary considering little is currently known in this domain. The researchers analysed series one of Avengers Assemble and series one of Star Wars Rebels. Interpretation of the data led to the development of several themes and subthemes based on the gendered portrayals within each series. Overall, the findings suggest that there was more overt gender stereotyping in Avengers Assemble when compared with Star Wars Rebels, meaning that the former could be particularly problematic for children who may replicate its messages. The current study has facilitated a greater understanding of the gendered messages that may be consumed by children who engage with Marvel and Star Wars media. Future research is needed to assess the relationship between such messages and children's behaviour.

KEYWORDS

Marvel, Star Wars, gender roles, thematic analysis, children's media, masculinity, femininity

1 Introduction

The portrayal of gender in Disney princess animations has been widely examined (Towbin et al., 2004; Giroux and Pollock, 2010; England et al., 2011; Dundes and Streiff, 2016; Streiff and Dundes, 2017a,b; Hine et al., 2018; Primo, 2018). However, little research has investigated the portrayal of gender within the Marvel and Star Wars franchises, which Disney acquired in 2009 and 2012, respectively. This gap is problematic as Disney's acquisition of these franchises was likely motivated by the corporation's desire to own content that captures a male centric audience (Koushik and Reed, 2018; Wu, 2021) as boys reported greater personal interest in superheroes than classic prince characters (Dinella et al., 2017). Therefore, to understand the gendered messages that may be consumed particularly heavily by young boys, expanding analyses of the portrayal of gender to incorporate Disney's newly acquired Marvel and Star Wars franchises is essential.

Although very little research has investigated the portrayal of gender within Marvel and Star Wars media, previous studies have examined the gendered portrayals within superhero media more broadly. Such research finds that the portrayal of both male and female superheroes were largely in line with broader gender role stereotypes (Miller et al., 2016). For

example, male superheroes were highly muscular, powerful, and more violent while female superheroes were more sexualised and helpless (Miller et al., 2016). Female superheroes are also significantly outnumbered by males (Baker and Raney, 2007; Miller et al., 2016). Additionally, violence and aggression tended to be perpetrated more by protagonists than antagonists, and more by male characters than female characters (Muller et al., 2020). This is supported by Miller et al. (2016) who found that males utilised weapons and fighting skills more frequently than females, meaning that they were portrayed as more aggressive and violent overall.

Similarly, Baker and Raney (2007) suggested that although male and female superheroes seemed to display elements of stereotypical masculinity, females were more emotional, more attractive, more worried, and more likely to be excited in a crisis than males (Baker and Raney, 2007). Alternatively, males were more likely to express anger and be portrayed as threatening than females (Baker and Raney, 2007), whereas females were more likely to have a mentor, and more likely to work in a group, suggesting some adherence to gender norms in superhero narratives. Further, Marvel superheroes "when acting in their capacity as a hero… talked about their emotions, accepted physical comfort, and expressed trust significantly less often than when acting in their capacity as self" (Shawcroft and Coyne, 2022, p. 232) suggesting superheroes do not express vulnerability.

Taken together, these findings suggest that stereotypical masculinity is favoured in superhero content. Indeed, it has been said that superhero narratives seem to "indulge in fantasies about the heroes' unlimited ability to protect a silent and largely feminized humanity from that which threatens it" (Stabile, 2009, p. 87). However, further research is needed to investigate whether the portrayal of gender within Marvel content specifically is in line with superhero media more broadly.

Further, it is possible to view the masculinity presented in superhero media as hegemonic. Hegemonic masculinity refers to a masculinity that is dominant over others, making it relational (Donaldson, 1993; Connell, 2005; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2019). It is perhaps the power associated with domination that makes "heroism… so tightly bound into the construct of hegemonic masculinity" (Connell, 2005, p. 234), which means that it may be an important concept in understanding the portrayal of gender in superhero narratives that focus largely on superheroes protecting less powerful characters (Stabile, 2009; Kort-Butler, 2013). Hegemonic masculinity has been associated with traits such as being "unemotional, independent, non-nurturing, aggressive, and dispassionate—which are seen as the causes of criminal behavior" (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 840), as well as some more positive ones, such as financially providing and being sexually active (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Because hegemonic masculinity is a relational concept, femininity can be defined as its inversion (Connell, 2005). Therefore, femininity may be defined as weakness, passivity, being nurturing and having emotional tendencies. Additionally, hegemonic masculinity has been associated with economic and "public" work while femininity has been associated with domestic spaces and largely devalued domestic and "reproductive work" (Kreimer, 2004, p. 22; Connell, 2005; Elgarte, 2008). Because superheroes are likely to be dominant over others, it is possible that such representations of masculinity and femininity will be prevalent in superhero narratives. Conversely, the portrayal of gender within the Star Wars franchise has been even more scarcely studied. However, the

Star Wars story world is largely deemed male dominated and patriarchal, with the utilisation of The Force for example, being reserved for male characters in the original film trilogy (Pianka, 2013; Bruin-Mole, 2017). For Bettis and Sternod (2009), it seems as though a large part of acquiring the power to utilise The Force and become a Jedi is learning to suppress emotion which could be rooted in the expectations of stereotypical masculinity (Parent et al., 2019) and disguised as a source of power. Therefore, the patriarchal culture that the Star Wars galaxy may emulate could represent a depiction of men and women that may be concerning.

However, more recently released Star Wars media has arguably portrayed a more progressive depiction of women with its leading protagonist Rey (Bruin-Mole, 2017). This has led researchers to state that the Star Wars franchise's depiction of women reflects the developments within the women's movement in the US (Bruin-Mole, 2017; Langsdale, 2019; McGucken, 2020). This means that examining the depiction of male and female protagonists within some of the franchise's most recently released animated content is important as this is likely to facilitate an understanding of the messages that are being consumed by children engaging with it.

Further, the relationship between the messages in Marvel and Star Wars media and children's gendered behaviour is largely unknown. Although not directly relating to the Marvel franchise, Coyne et al. (2014) found that superhero media predicts masculine behaviour in pre-school aged boys in the US, but not girls. Further, superhero media engagement was also predictive of higher levels of weapon play for both boys and girls (Coyne et al., 2014). These findings suggest that although girls may not replicate the masculine behaviour of superheroes in the same way that boys do, both boys and girls may be more likely to use toy weapons, or use objects as weapons in their play scenarios, because of such media. This is potentially concerning, as "weapon play" may be associated with levels of aggression displayed by children (Watson and Peng, 1992, as cited by Coyne et al., 2014, p. 426). Further, this adds to the "[n]early 3,000 studies and reviews [which] have found a significant relationship between media violence and real-life aggression" (Strasburger, 2009, p. 655), including in videogames, according to a recent metanalysis (Prescott et al., 2018), suggesting a real-world impact of this messaging.

Moreover, when boys wore Marvel superhero outfits, they were less likely to show feminine-typed toy preferences and prosocial behaviour than when they were in gender-neutral costumes or feminine-typed outfits (Coyne et al., 2021). Additionally, engagement with superhero media in children aged between four and five years old was "associated with endorsement of the muscular [body] ideal and some aspects of hegemonic masculinity five years later" (Coyne et al., 2022, p. 642). For example, engagement with superhero media in a sample of children with the mean age of 4.83 years was related to superhero engagement at wave two of data collection when the mean age of the sample was 10.05 years. The later engagement predicted lower egalitarian attitudes towards men and women. Taken together, these findings suggests that boys associate and emulate the masculine gender stereotyped behaviour associated with Marvel superheroes when they play as these characters (Coyne et al., 2021) and that superhero narratives inform attitudes towards men and women more broadly (Coyne et al., 2022). These findings suggest that there is a relationship between the messages that children are consuming from superhero media and the behaviours they display. However, little is known about the relationship between Star Wars engagement and children's behaviour.

Overall, little is known about the portrayal of gender in Marvel and Star Wars media, despite there being some evidence that there is a relationship between the messages in superhero media and children's gendered behaviour (Coyne et al., 2014, 2021, 2022). Therefore, the current study aimed to qualitatively analyse the representation of male and female leading characters in Marvel and Star Wars media that is targeted towards children. Because this study was a precursor to research that analysed the relationship between children's engagement with Marvel and Star Wars media and their behaviour which utilised a sample of children aged between 4 and 11 years, it was important that the series analysed were suitable for the majority of the sample. As a result, content that was rated as suitable for children aged 6 and above was analysed. This is also the lowest age rating for Star Wars and Marvel media on Disney+ United Kingdom, the streaming service which was utilised for data collection in the current study. The study was guided by two research questions:

> How is gender portrayed within a Marvel animated television series?
>
> How is gender portrayed within a Star Wars animated television series?

2 Method

2.1 Materials

The researchers selected one animated series from the Marvel and Star Wars franchises suitable for viewers aged six and above. Because the Avengers live action films had the highest grossing figures of all the Marvel films, indicative of the characters' popularity, the first series of Avengers Assemble (2012–2019) was analysed as those same characters featured in that series. Series one, which was released in 2012, consisted of twenty-six episodes, each approximately twenty-four minutes long (10.4 h of content). Additionally, series one of Star Wars Rebels (2014–2018) was selected as it was released in 2014 which was closest in time to the release of the first series of Avengers Assemble (2012–2019) than any other Star Wars animated series comparatively. There were fifteen episodes within the first series of Star Wars Rebels (2014–2018,) each being approximately 24 min long, equating to six hours of content. The first series of Avengers Assemble (2012–2019) and Star Wars Rebels (2014–2018) were analysed so that the narratives could be understood by the researcher, as well as considering that if individuals searched either of these series on streaming services (such as Disney+), they would be presented with the episodes in chronological order. Data was collected from leading male and female characters only. This approach enabled an in-depth understanding of the portrayal of female and male characters that were likely to be the most narratively important and influential to the audience. This decision was also important for practical reasons, namely, the time involved in data collection. Disney+, Disney's online streaming service was utilised to access each series.

2.2 Procedure

The procedure of data collection in the current study mirrored that established by Towbin et al. (2004) in which Disney animated

feature length films had been thematically analysed. Each episode was watched once in its entirety before the researcher rewatched the episode and began identifying codable units/segments of data. A unit of data was any content that the researcher deemed to be relevant to the research question. For example, a unit of data could be extracted from a scene in which the male Avengers were sat around a table discussing an attack plan while Black Widow (the only female Avenger) was stood behind them with very little verbal input. This image would suggest that the male Avengers were more active in strategic planning and Widow's input was less valued. Moreover, her physical position would suggest she is on the periphery of the team. If imagery was captured as a data unit, a description would be written, and the description would then be coded. While imagery is important to capture the perhaps more subtle and implicit gendered messages, speech between the characters could also be captured as units of data. If the data unit was speech, it was transcribed exactly, utilising subtitles for accuracy. When all the data from series one of Avengers Assemble (2012–2019) and Star Wars Rebels (2014–2018) was collected, it was then analysed in a "bottom-up" data driven thematic analysis as defined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2013). The data collected from the Marvel and Star Wars franchises were treated as separate data sets. Each unit of data was coded. A code was a brief word or short sentence that captured why the unit of material was interesting and relevant to the research question (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Once provisional themes had been established for each data set, they were discussed with the second author before the final themes were defined and named. Although inter-rater reliability measures were not implemented in the study, a pilot study was conducted in which both authors identified data units and coded part of the first episode of series two of Avengers Assemble (2012–2019). A high rate of agreement was established in coding of the units that were identified, which suggested validity and reliability in the process of data collection before the target material was analysed. The pilot study was also useful as it enabled the primary coder to identify where data units could be split into multiple units to obtain more detail in the gendered portrayals, as the second coder identified more data units in their analysis. However, of the data units that were identified by both authors, the majority (approximately 80%) were coded with similar themes.

3 Results

3.1 Avengers Assemble (2012–2019)

The male Avengers protagonists analysed were Iron Man, Captain America, Thor, Hulk, Hawkeye and Falcon. The female Avenger analysed was Black Widow. The current research aimed to answer the research question: How is gender portrayed within a Marvel animated television series? The main themes established were *stereotypical masculinity/lad culture* and *being flawed and fallible*. Each of the main themes had several subthemes. The themes and subthemes generated from Avengers Assemble (2012–2019) can be found in Table 1.

3.1.1 Main theme: stereotypical masculinity/lad culture

There were many concepts of stereotypical masculinity and "lad culture" (Phipps and Young, 2015) endorsed by the male protagonists

TABLE 1 Themes and sub-themes answering the research question: "How is gender portrayed in a Marvel animated television series?"

Theme	Subtheme	Data unit
Stereotypical masculinity/lad culture	Teamwork	Thor fights Attuma—knocks him with his hammer towards Hulk who punches him, sending him flying up into the sky (E16, unit 14)
	Battles and aggression	Iron Man: 'Looks like we get to smash the cabal ahead of schedule' (E21, unit 32).
	Banter	Hawkeye: 'So, are you guys gonna hug now, or what?' (E13, unit 89)
	Odd one out (Widow)	Falcon: 'This must be Widow's room. No way it's Hulk's. Looks like my mum cleaned it' (E3, unit 46).
	Strength and muscularity	[NA. This is visibly portrayed continuously, not within specific data units]
Being flawed/fallible	Respect is earned	Iron Man: 'That an acceptable plan Mr. Hawkeye?' Hawkeye: 'I'll let you know when it works' (E1, unit 96)
	Anger needs to be controlled	Iron Man: 'Thanks to Mr. Anger-Management, we have an unknown number of unstable particles loose in the tower' (E23, unit 47)
	Vulnerable without 'suits'	They are being dragged into the whirlpool. Iron Man: 'Steve, I'm sorry. My armor, it's not enough' (E13, unit 81)

within Avengers Assemble (2012–2019), and between the Avengers and the male villains that they fought. Additionally, the masculinity that was portrayed in the series aligns with hegemonic masculinity. Interestingly, much of this was also endorsed by Widow, the only female protagonist within the series. This suggests that conforming to stereotypically masculine gender norms is essential to be a valued member of the Avengers team. There are four subthemes within the *stereotypical masculinity/lad culture* main theme that will be explored below.

3.1.1.1 Subtheme: teamwork

There were many incidences of teamwork within each episode of the Avengers Assemble (2012–2019) particularly during battles where the team almost always worked together to overcome an antagonist or enemy. The teamwork presented was similar to the teamwork that is portrayed in sports dominated by men, one that "celebrates and promotes toughness, competitiveness, violence, and confrontation" (Kessler et al., 1982, p. 5 as cited by Yang-Huang et al., 2017, p. 325) and such traits are also considered hegemonic.

For example, in the units below, several members of the team worked together to attack a villain named MODOK who had combined with the Adaptoid, creating a particularly dangerous villain:

> Widow, Falcon and Captain America all jump and land ready.
> Widow jumps and kicks MODOK.
> Falcon lands and stomps on head.
> Captain America hits him with shield.
> Captain America hits him with shield again.
> Widow and Falcon shoot him with their weapons.
> Widow tumbles/ forward rolls to get out the way of MODOK's blast (Episode 8, units 84–90).

The combined aggression displayed by several members of the team throughout these units reflects that stereotypically masculine behaviour was fundamental to the teamwork that was presented in the series. The Avengers' unity was often celebrated for creating a formidable force for fighting evil. For example, a villain stated that:

> 'It is said that the together, the Avengers can face threats that no single hero can' (Episode 13, unit 15),

which provides evidence of their power—a stereotypically masculine concept—being associated with their ability to work together. Further, the power that the Avengers have is both over the villains that they defeat and the society that they work to protect. There are scenes throughout the series where the team are admired by civilians as though they are celebrities which makes this narrative more pronounced. It is perhaps the admiration and power experienced by the team that makes the masculinity represented by the Avengers appear to be tied in with the concepts of stereotypical and hegemonic masculinity (Donaldson, 1993; Connell, 2005; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2019)

3.1.1.2 Subtheme: battles and aggression

A very significant proportion of the series was dedicated to the Avengers fighting villains/antagonists. In these battles the Avengers utilise weapons as well as direct aggression (such as a punch or a kick). Because every episode had a battle, and every battle lasted several minutes (sometimes almost the entire episode) the amount of violence and aggression displayed was vast. The Avengers had a light-hearted approach to their battles and often framed them as a source of entertainment. Therefore, both the prominence of aggression, and the casual way it was presented, could be reasons for concern. For example, when Iron Man articulates a plan to take down Doomstroyer, a villain featured in episode 10, there were the following reactions:

> [Hulk:] 'Stupid plan. Sounds fun' (Episode 10, unit 103).

Battles seemed to be welcomed and celebrated in other episodes:

> [Iron Man:] 'Mind if I crash the party? I'm running a scan on your playmate Thor. One second and I should know exactly how we should deal with…' (E4, unit 7).

Iron Man refers to getting involved in a battle as a party, implying that it is a fun pastime, rather than a potentially life-threatening pursuit.

Additionally, the Avengers would have physical altercations with each other, sometimes solely for fun. For example, in episode two—*The Avengers Protocol Part 2*, Hulk and Thor decide to battle:

> Hulk and Thor go into the training room and reminisce about old battles.

They start to battle for 'old time's sake'.

[Hulk:] 'You kept thinking you could knock me down'.

[Thor:] 'Did more than think, I think'.

[Hulk]: 'Wouldn't want to mess up that pretty hairdo'. [The battle starts]. They both smile (episode 2, units 68–76).

The reminiscent tone in which Hulk and Thor discussed their battles implied they have previously enjoyed, and will miss, their opportunities to fight. Further, the fact that they smile during their battle shows that fighting is a form of entertainment and perhaps, of male bonding.

3.1.1.3 Subtheme: banter

Consistent with the 'lad culture' of the Avengers, banter was the main source of communication between the teammates (Phipps and Young, 2015) as they almost constantly mocked each other. In a typical example of an interaction below, Iron Man wants to update Captain America's armor, providing him with more technology to improve his battle skills:

[Iron Man]: 'Hence, I took your boring old butt-kickers and teched them up a bit'.

[Captain America]: 'More tech does not always equal more better'.

[Falcon]: 'I do not think that's proper grammar'.

[Captain America]: 'I'm dumbing it down for the genius'.

[Iron Man] turns on the boots so Cap starts flying in the air.

[Iron Man] laughs as Cap is being flung around and hitting things….

[Iron Man]: This, my friend is what technology was made for'. (E17, units 4–14).

Throughout these units, there is constant tone of Captain America and Iron Man mocking each other, including being entertained by physically hurting one another.

Additionally, genuine sincerity was rare between Avengers, and it was often followed by mocking, or aggression, as if to balance the less stereotypically masculine form of communication. For example, in episode eighteen *Mojoworld*, Hawkeye accidently breaks one of Hulk's much-loved glass sculptures. Throughout the episode Hawkeye refuses to apologise in a genuine way. They are then forced to work together and at the end of the episode, they have the following interaction:

[Hulk to Hawkeye]: 'Already apologized' [not even looking at him].

[Hawkeye]: I know… just wanted it to be sincere' [Looking at him] [This interaction is shot from behind so you can see the side of Hawkeye and only the back of Hulk]. Hulk: 'We're good' [Elbows him hard so he goes flying].

Hawkeye returns to his room to find several boxes of pickles and believes they are a gift from Hulk. He starts opening the boxes and they are all empty. Hulk has left a note that reads 'I.O.U. 15 boxes of pickles. Got hungry' and HE is angry and screams: 'HULK!' (E18, units 126–128).

Two Avengers are sharing a sincere moment in the units above that becomes overshadowed by their utilisation of banter and mocking of each other. There was also a significant amount of banter between

the Avengers and other secondary characters such as the villains that the team fought.

3.1.1.4 Subtheme: odd one out (Widow)

The subtheme *odd one out (Widow)* speaks to the notion that although Widow emulated *stereotypical masculinity/lad culture,* she was also portrayed as somewhat different to the male Avengers. She was absent for nine episodes out of the twenty-six within the series. Importantly, when she was absent, it was rarely mentioned by other characters suggesting that rather than being a vital part of the team, she was a disposable addition to it.

Episode eight, *Molecule Kid,* is one of the few episodes in which Widow is at the forefront. In the episode, Widow attempts (unsuccessfully) to lead herself and Hawkeye through a mission while keeping it hidden from the other Avengers. In this episode there are several instances of sexism. For example, Hawkeye overtly implies that being a leader is masculine by referring to Widow as sir:

'Permission to fire the champion shot you should've let me fire back in the alley, sir!' (E8, unit 34).

Just a few second later, Hawkeye says:

'Where did you learn to drive, huh, video games?' (E8, unit 38),

drawing upon a well-known sexist stereotype that women are inadequate drivers. Further, the following interaction is another way in which Widow's gender is mocked:

[They end up in honey].

Widow: 'Honey?

Hawkeye: 'Yes, dear?'

Widow: 'No, we are stuck in honey'.

Hawkeye: 'You said the wand does not do organics. So, this is not honey, honey. Hey great mission plan so far by the way. Perfection. Really'. (E8, unit 62).

Hawkeye repeatedly calls Widow honey, a remark/nickname that is often adopted by romantic partners. Therefore, heteronormative jokes are made between men and women, and these were less likely to be utilised in an interaction between two male Avengers.

Overall, there were numerous ways in which Widow was presented to be both a part of the Avengers' 'lad culture', but also as the odd one out.

It is also noteworthy that there are very few secondary female characters present throughout the series. Interestingly, however, in Episode 23, *One Little Thing*, Falcon's mother is present. She is a source of stress from the start of the episode as Falcon believes she is unaware that he is an Avenger and would not approve of his role. Because of this, she is presented as overprotective and nurturing throughout the episode, the latter evidenced by her bringing home-baked cookies for Falcon and his teammates. However, at the end of the episode she reveals she knew that Falcon was an Avenger and has therefore been underestimated by her son. Overall, the representation of her being a nurturing female figure seems significant considering there are so few female characters throughout the series. It may also situate Widow as the *odd one out* more strongly as she presents more traits associated with *stereotypical masculinity/lad culture* than Falcon's mother.

3.1.1.5 Subtheme: strength and muscularity

The male Avengers are all physically muscular. The majority of them wear skin-tight superhero suits through which their muscle definition, particularly of their chest, arms, and shoulders, are clearly visible. Hulk wears ripped trousers, meaning his muscular torso is always on display. In contrast, Iron Man's suit is a hard red shell. However, it is designed in the shape of a muscular body, with particularly defined shoulders, arms, and chest, making his physicality like that of the other male Avengers. The physical representation of the male Avengers matched their physical performance as they displayed extreme strength throughout the series. This could suggest that the skin-tight suits some of the male Avengers wore, which are revealing of their bodies, is justified because their bodies are seen as active (Strong, 2003).

Although Widow also wears a skin-tight suit, her physical representation is noticeably different from the male Avengers. She has no muscle definition whatsoever, with her shoulder width and biceps being noticeably smaller and less defined than those of the male Avengers. In some scenes, she appears to be around half the width of her male counterparts which has implications for power dynamics that are associated with muscular bodies over slimmer ones. Her slim body could be a sign of her being sexualised. It should be acknowledged that she has large breasts which are exaggerated by her small waist. Her slimmer more sexualised frame is more representative of a stereotypically feminine body that is more passive despite her physical performance largely being the opposite, something that is discussed in relation to female body builders who will often pose differently to their male counterparts in competitions (Strong, 2003).

3.1.2 Main theme: being flawed and fallible

The second main theme represents that although the Avengers are an incredibly powerful team and are successful in overthrowing each of the villains they encounter in the series, they must work hard to do so, with it sometimes seeming as though they are close to being defeated (and inevitably, this near defeat motif adds to be drama and appeal of these narratives). Additionally, the masculinity presented by the male protagonists throughout the series is seen to have some considerable drawbacks. The concept of *being flawed and fallible* will be explored within each of its subthemes: *respect is earned, vulnerable without suits* and *anger needs to be controlled.* These subthemes can be related to the concept of "manhood" needing to be proven (Vandello and Bosson, 2013) as well as some of the "undesirable traits" (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 840) associated with hegemonic masculinity which will be explored throughout this section.

3.1.2.1 Subtheme: respect is earned

The concept of *respect is earned* was most frequently portrayed by Falcon, the newest and youngest Avenger. At the start of episode three, Falcon moves into the Avengers tower. Iron Man reveals his room to him, which is full of equipment and hardly usable. However, as the episode unfolds, Falcon then manages to save the Avengers, almost singlehandedly. At the end of the episode Iron Man says:

> 'I'll have the stuff moved out' [of your room].
> [Falcon]: 'After today, you are building me a bigger room. Off the helipad. You can afford it' (E3, unit 131),

implying that he has managed to earn the respect of the leader.

Further, the *respect is earned* subtheme is also represented by Iron Man. He is the leader of the Avengers but is frequently challenged by his teammates. For example, in Episode 21—*The Numbers*, the following interactions happen during a group training session which Iron Man is leading.

> Falcon: 'Is there a point to this?'
> Captain America: 'I'm with Falcon. This is not the best team building exercise you have ever come up with'.
> Hulk [Has a ball in his hand and pops it]: 'What he said'.
> Iron Man: [Describes that he has come up with a new system and algorithms since the Cabal hacked him]. 'The Stark probability engine. It predicts a sure path to victory in any combat situation.'
> Captain America: 'There are no sure things in combat. You're forgetting the human factor'.
> Iron Man: 'The human factor is in there, it's just insignificant. Statistically speaking'.
> Captain America: 'Insignificant? [cracks muscles] Do it again. We've got a little surprise of our own' (E21, units 13 to 19).

The units above provide an example of how Iron Man must continue to earn the respect of his teammates. Several of them firstly express doubts over the efficiency of the training exercise he is leading, and Captain America then questions the logic of his invention. This suggests that respect is not gained easily within the Avengers team.

The concept respect being earned rather than naturally granted is similar to the concept of 'manhood' being a status that must be achieved (Vandello and Bosson, 2013), perhaps because masculinity is tied to social power and the patriarchal gender order (Connell, 2005). Therefore, "manhood" is seen as a social accomplishment that also needs to be maintained as it is possible to lose. The way in which the Avengers do not offer their respect to one another by default, seems to tie into this view of masculinity.

3.1.2.2 Subtheme: vulnerable without suits

Iron Man and other male Avengers appear to be vulnerable underneath the protection of superhero suits, a concept that could represent the notion of males feeling as though they need to keep their vulnerabilities hidden. The first episode of Avengers Assemble (2012–2019) begins with Iron Man reuniting the team because his suit has become damaged and he needs the help of the Avengers to rescue Captain America, who was captured by a villain (Red Skull). Red Skull explicitly states the source of Iron Man's power is his suit:

> 'You're just a fool in a machine, Stark! Without your technology you have nothing.' [There are cracks in his suit and there are sparks coming from it, as if to reassert Red Skull's point. RS goes on]: 'No instinct for battle, no fire to lead. You hide behind armor so you do not have to make sacrifices for victory!' [Jarvis says, 'power is at 20% sir, and you have a new problem teleporting in]' (it's MODOK). (E1, unit 20)

Red Skull is clearly attempting to belittle Iron Man in the unit above, and undermine his skill and power—essentially, emasculating him.

Throughout episode 13, Captain America and Iron Man enter a ship occupied by villains by disguising themselves meaning that

neither of them have their usual suits or the associated weapons. Although this does not seem to trouble Captain America, Iron Man repeatedly asserts that they need their armor back. Iron Man goes on to reveal that he feels insecure and vulnerable without the protection of his suit:

> Captain America: 'Thanks, but…' Iron Man: 'But with my armor gone, all I do is improvise. Steve, even without your shield, you are still Captain America. Without my armor, I'm just…' (E13, unit 58).

This suggests that he feels inadequate, providing more evidence for the suit being a symbol of masculinity for Iron Man to hide his insecurities behind.

3.1.2.3 Subtheme: anger needs to be controlled

The *anger needs to be controlled* subtheme particularly related to Hulk. Hulk is the focus of three episodes in the series, and in two of these his anger is portrayed as a problem. This is also a recurring theme across many other episodes of the series. The following interactions happen at the start of episode nine, where the Avengers are responding to a monster attack:

> [Hulk]: 'Less talking, more smashing' [has damaged the arms of the chair by gripping them].
> [Falcon]: 'Speaking of rampaging monsters…' […]
> [Captain America]: 'Let him out before he breaks down the door again.'
> [Hulk roars and kicks down the door. He jumps out and lands on a gigantic beast, clearly having no fear of it. He punches beast].
> [Iron Man and Thor jump out of plane to follow Hulk.] Iron Man: Don't you just love it when the Hulk goes all rage monster? Like we need another one to deal with.'
> Thor: [Laughs] 'Hopefully, his rage will serve us well in battle this time' Iron Man: 'Famous last words' (E9, units 4–13)

Throughout these units, it is clear that Hulk's anger has been continuously problematic. Both Iron Man and Captain America's comments imply that his anger is detrimental, rather than of use. Later in the episode, Hulk's strength and control of his rage ultimately enables the Avengers to overcome the villain for which he is rewarded:

> Iron Man: 'Hulk got his rage under control and saved the entire city. That's why he's Avenger of the month' (E9, units 149 to 161).

Therefore, within one episode Hulk's anger has gone from being the team's main issue to being the source of the resolution *only when it is controlled and channeled appropriately.*

Anger seems to be portrayed as natural yet problematic when it leads to mindless destruction throughout the series However, controlled anger facilitates the team's success meaning that a difficult balance between utilising anger to help the team, rather than hinder it needs to be maintained.

Figure 1 illustrates the final thematic map that answers the research question, how is gender portrayed in a Marvel animated television series? It intends to show the connections between each of the themes (in ellipses) and subthemes (in boxes). The solid arrows indicate a causal relationship whereas the dotted arrows represent conflicts.

3.2 Star Wars Rebels (2014–2018)

The characters analysed from Star Wars Rebels (2014–2018) were the crew members of the ship, the *Ghost.* Kanan, Ezra and Zeb were male protagonists and crew members, and Hera and Sabine were female protagonists and crew members. Three themes were established to answer the research question: How is gender portrayed in a *Star Wars* animated television series? The themes established were *multifaceted masculinities*, *strong female figures* and *gender(ed) co-operation* (see Table 2).

3.2.1 Main theme: multifaceted masculinities

The main theme *multifaceted masculinities* reflects the portrayal of the male protagonists in the series (namely, Kanan, Ezra and Zeb), with each subtheme capturing a distinct aspect of the masculinity reflected in the series.

3.2.1.1 Subtheme: toxic/stereotypical masculinity

Toxic/stereotypical masculinity was represented most clearly and consistently by Zeb. Zeb was frequently aggressive and seemed to enjoy being aggressive more than his counterparts. He was also unwilling to express emotions outside of anger. For example, in episode two—*Spark of Rebellion Part 2*, Ezra was captured by the enemy and Zeb leaves him on their ship:

> [Zeb] Looks sad/hopeless as he returns to the ship without Ezra. Slumps on to the floor (E2, unit 25).

However, when he had to tell the rest of his crew what happened, he seemed to be unwilling to express the remorse that he displayed when he was alone moments earlier. He had an angry and defensive tone and implied that Ezra had no importance to him or the crew:

> [Zeb]: 'Oh, come on. We were dumping him after the mission anyway! This saves us fuel. They'll go easy on him. He's just a kid' (E2, unit 34).

Similarly, in episode eight—*Empire Day,* Ezra shows signs of being unwilling to express his emotions. In the episode, the crew plan and execute an attack on the Empire and it is clear that Ezra is upset but refuses to discuss it. For example, when he takes the crew to his family home that has since been abandoned (and it is unclear as to whether Ezra's parents are alive), the following interaction ensues:

> [Kanan]: 'You were coming here today. This was your home, wasn't it? Where you grew up?'
> [Ezra]: 'I grew up on the streets, alone.' (E8, units 39 and 40).

The units above provide evidence of Ezra being emotionally guarded and unwilling to be truthful about a potentially traumatic situation with his crewmates.

FIGURE 1
Thematic map: how is gender portrayed in a Marvel animated television series?
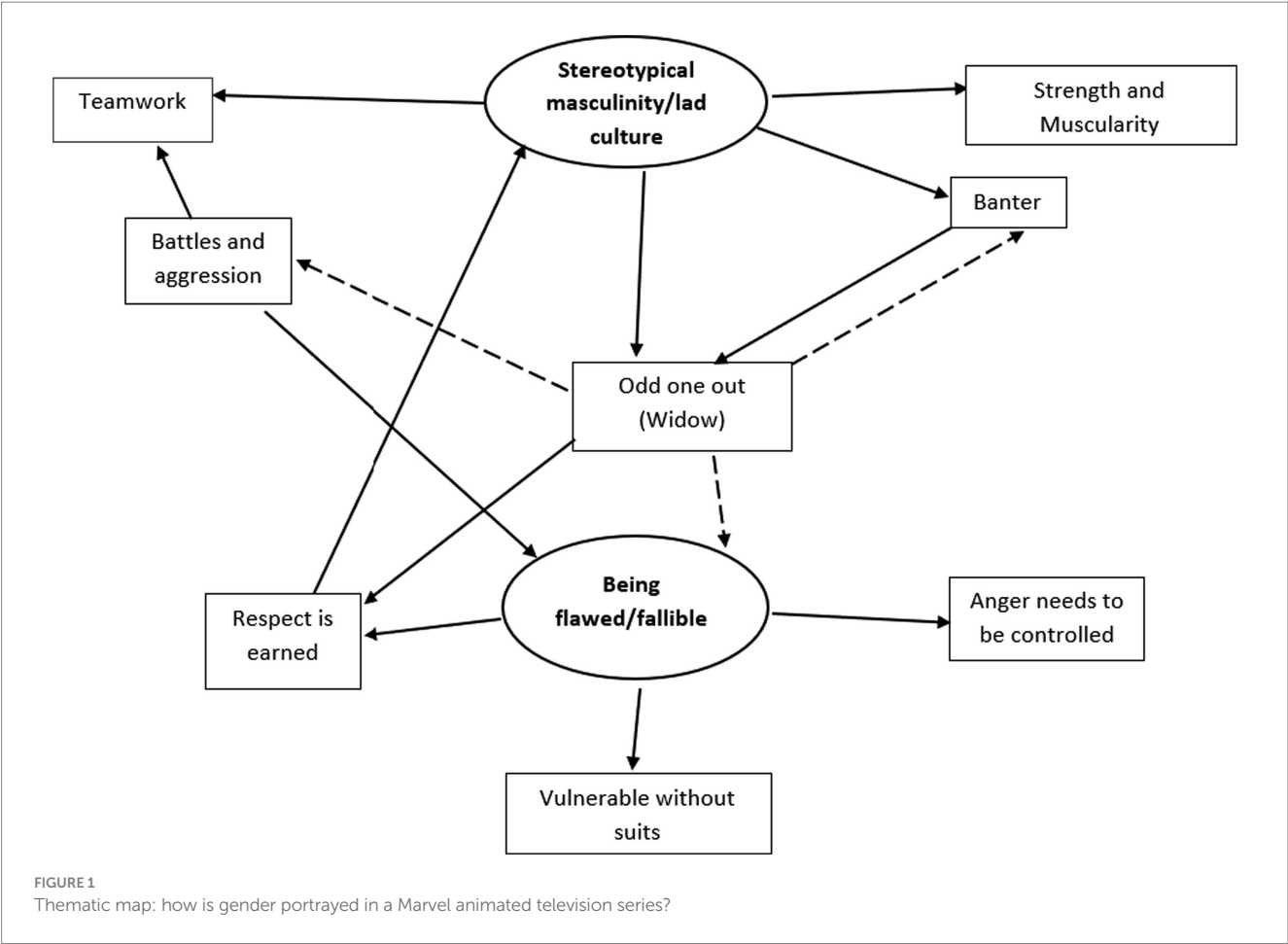
TABLE 2 The themes and subthemes established to answer the research question: 'How is gender portrayed in a Star Wars animated television series?'

Theme	Sub-theme	Unit of data
Multifaceted masculinities	Toxic/stereotypical masculinity	Hera: 'Zeb. The pig! Scare it' Z: 'What? How?' H: Just be *you*.' (E11, unit 53)
	Mentor/leader	Kanan: 'We'll draw them away! Get spectre-2 and Trayvis to the hatch' (E12, unit 78)
	Mentee	Kanan: 'Stunts like that put us all in jeopardy. That is exactly why you need Master Luminara to teach you discipline' (E5, unit 60)
	Emotional vulnerability	Kanan: 'Your emotions clouded the vision. It takes…' (E12, unit 108)
Strong female figures	Leader/mother figure	Hera: 'Positions, everyone. We're going in' (E14, unit 86)
	Action girl	Hera: 'Sabine, man the nose gun!' (E2, unit 21)
Gender(ed) co-operation	Hierarchies	Hera: 'So, how's the Jedi training going with Kanan?' Ezra: 'Jedi training? Never heard of it.' Hera: 'We'll see about that' (E3, unit 51)
	Heteronormative tones	Hera: 'You're welcome, dear' [they hug]' (E15, unit 113).

Overall, Zeb seemed to represent stereotypical and toxic masculinity most strongly, although this was also seen in Ezra.

3.2.1.2 Subtheme: mentor/leader

Kanan, an adult male character, Ezra's Jedi master and is responsible for his training. He is often assertive towards Ezra, giving him orders regularly. This is shown in episode ten—*Path of the Jedi* when Ezra has missed training:

[Ezra]: 'Hey Kanan. Sorry I'm late. I was with Sabine. So, are you gonna invite me in?'

[Kanan]: 'You did not knock, so what makes you think you need an invite?'

[Ezra]: 'I'm sorry.'

[Kanan]: 'Then you should knock first.'

[Ezra]: 'Not for that. For missing training.'

[Kanan]: [angrily] 'It's all the same thing. The fact that you do not see it [sighs]. Ezra when we were on that asteroid you made a

dangerous connection through the Force. Now I have to know if you are ready.'
(E10, unit 3).

Kanan is clearly in a mentoring role where he is attempting to teach Ezra the skills he needs and test him with challenges.

Additionally, Kanan had a role as leader of the crew. He would often direct the crew when they were completing missions on foot (rather than on the ship, where Hera, a female character and pilot, was more in control). Therefore, both Kanan's roles in the crew, as a mentor and a leader, are positions in which he has power as a knowledgeable and experienced male, suggesting this is a fundamental part of his character and masculinity. Interestingly though, his role as the leader of the crew also means that he is vulnerable. Later, in the same episode Kanan is battling with the Inquisitor (a villain within the series) and has no way of escaping:

[Kanan] Pinned against the wall—in the air.
[Kanan]: 'Spectre-2, get out of here'
[Hera]: 'Not an option, Kanan.
[Kanan]: 'No time! Go!'
[Ezra]: 'We cannot!'
[Kanan]: Hera!
[Hera looks sad and presses a button] (E13, unit 93).

Kanan has demanded that Hera leave him to keep the crew safe, sacrificing his own life. In the following episode, he is shown to be captured and tortured by Imperials, and thus, vulnerable rather than powerful (as he is within the crew). However, because Kanan has demanded to be left in one last assertion directed towards Hera, his masculinity could be perceived to remain intact as he is in control and decisive, as well as sacrificial, brave, and protective of the rest of his crew.

3.2.1.3 Subtheme: mentee

Ezra is the focus of much of series one of the series due to his growing skills and utilisation of the Force. He is presented as continuously learning, particularly from Kanan. Because of this, Ezra's role within the crew and team is very much as a mentee.

When Ezra and Kanan must face a battle with the Inquisitor, Ezra has to protect Kanan who is injured:

[Inquisitor]: 'Ah, yes, good. Go on. Unleash your anger [laughs] I will teach you what your master could not'.
[Ezra]: 'You do not have anything to teach me.'
[Inquisitor]: 'The darkness is too strong for you, orphan. It is swallowing you up, even now.' (E9, unit 55).

In the unit above Ezra is deemed to be vulnerable because of his lack of complete training.

In non-battle situations, Ezra is seen to create problems for the crew as he needs to learn key skills. He has gone against orders before the following interaction with Kanan:

[Kanan]: 'Stunts like that put us all in jeopardy. That is exactly why you need Master Luminara to teach you discipline'.
[Ezra]: 'I was just trying to follow your example'
[Kanan]: 'Try following the plan instead' (E5, units 60 to 62).

Overall, although Ezra has a natural ability to access and utilise the Force which is celebrated in much of the series, he is represented as a mentee—a young male in training. It is perhaps no coincidence that the oldest male is the person who is responsible for Ezra's training, suggesting that the skills of the Force are both masculine and age related, arguably representing the notion of 'manhood' being earned (Vandello and Bosson, 2013).

3.2.1.4 Subtheme: emotional vulnerability

A concept that further linked Ezra and Kanan's masculinity was emotional vulnerability. Although Kanan is in control of Ezra's training, he frequently expresses self-doubt. For example, in episode ten—*Path of the Jedi*, Kanan sets Ezra a challenge. However, it transpires that he doubts his own abilities as a mentor.

[Kanan]: 'It's true. I'm not sure of my decision to train Ezra. Not because of him or his abilities, because of me, because of who I am'.
[Kanan]: '…I feel his abilities are growing faster than I can teach him' (E10, units 58 and 59).

Insecurity and emotional vulnerability are therefore shown by a male character who has power over his mentee and the rest of the crew, suggesting his masculinity is multifaceted.

Additionally, during Jedi training, there were some sincere and emotionally charged conversations between Ezra and Kanan such as in the example below:

[Ezra]: 'My parents spoke out and I lost them, and I do not… [angrily grunts] I do not want to lose you guys, okay? Not over this.'
[Kanan]: 'Hey. All of us have lost things. And we will take more losses before this over. But we cannot let that stop us from taking risks. We have to move forward. And when the time comes, we have to be ready to sacrifice for something bigger.'
[Ezra]: 'That sounds good, but it's not so easy.'
[Kanan]: 'It's not easy for me either' (E13, units 45 to 49).

When Kanan and Ezra are alone, Ezra discusses his emotional vulnerabilities, such as his feelings of inadequacy and fear of loss. Therefore, private conversations seem to allow for emotional vulnerability between Ezra and Kanan, perhaps because being emotionally vulnerable is part of their utilisation of the Force, and, more broadly, in their fight as rebels.

3.2.2 Main theme: strong female figures

The second main theme was established based on the representations of the female protagonists, Hera and Sabine, in the series. Similarly to the *multifaceted masculinities* theme, by presenting two leading female characters, it seemed that there were two possible representations of the female gender role, each represented by a subtheme: *leader/mother figure* and *action girl*.

Interestingly, in the final episode of the series, Fulcrum whom Kanan and Hera had been relying on for intel regarding missions they could complete to earn the crew credits (their currency), is revealed to be a female character, named Ahsoka Tano. Throughout the series Kanan and Hera had been secretive about the source of their intel, and when Sabine questioned them, she had assumed Fulcrum was male. Although the representation of Falcrum/ Ashoka Tano was beyond

the scope of this work, it is noteworthy that she was a strong, rebellious female with knowledge and power, suggesting that her representation would fit within the *strong female figures* subtheme.

3.2.2.1 Subtheme: leader/mother figure

Hera is represented as a leader, mainly within the domain of the crew's ship, which she owns and pilots. Her role as a pilot and leader is invaluable and fundamentally important to the crew's pursuits. For example, episode nine opens with the crew in danger and Hera making several demands of them:

> [Hera]: 'Sabine, I need you in the nose gun, now!' (E9, unit 3).
> [Hera]: 'Ezra, Nav-computer is off-line. With Chopper down, I need you to fix it'
> [Ezra]: 'Not exactly my specialty'
> [Hera]: 'Well, make it your specialty and make it fast. Or this ship becomes a real ghost' (E9, unit 10).

Hera is presented as taking control in adversity in the units above. However, Hera's role as a leader is almost exclusively confined to the ship, which is also the crew's home, making it a domestic space. That Hera is in control of the domestic space has implications for the gendered narrative within the series, as such spaces have been historically marked as feminine domains (Connell, 2005). Also in-line with broader gender role stereotypes, she is portrayed to be a mother figure in the series, often handling sibling-like issues that arise between crew members. For example, in episode four, Ezra and Zeb are arguing and Hera shouts:

> [Hera]: 'Enough. This is my ship you are wrecking, and I want you off it. [Gives them a market list]. Do not even think about coming back without at least one meiloorun fruit' (E4, units 21 to 23).

Overall, Hera's role as a leader is fundamentally important to the crew. She is skilled and necessary to the missions However, her role as a leader within the crew had tones of mothering suggesting her role was partially defined by stereotypical gender expectations also.

3.2.2.2 Subtheme: action girl

Sabine's role in the crew is as a tough and action-based girl. Like Ezra, Sabine is in her teens and is important in missions and battles when they happen both in the air (from the ship), as well as on foot. This means that when Hera is flying the *Ghost* during the on-foot missions and battles, Sabine provides female representation. In such scenarios she is confident, skilled (especially with explosives) and aggressive.

For example, episode fifteen—*Fire Across the Galaxy* opens with Sabine attacking stormtroopers:

> [Sabine]: 'Miss me bucketheads?'
> Jumps and climbs a wall.
> They're shooting at her. Sabine: 'Yep, you definitely missed me' [Jumps down from the roof].
> [Ezra and Zeb] Are waiting in the wings.
> [Ezra]: 'Sabine's distraction is working' [jumps, pulls herself up on things].
> (E15, units 1 to 13)

In the units above, Sabine is clearly a natural action girl displaying agility, strength, confidence, and skill.

3.2.3 Main theme: gender(ed) co-operation

The *gender(ed) co-operation* theme represents that the team are successful in most of their missions and battles, and often use teamwork in order to complete them. Each member of the mixed-gender crew had important and valued roles. However, there were some *hierarchies* represented in the team, some of which were gendered and will be explored below. Additionally, there were some *heteronormative tones* within the series. These concepts are represented as sub-themes and will be discussed in turn.

3.2.3.1 Subtheme: hierarchies

While Kanan and Hera are both presented as leaders, there are signs of gendered domains to their leadership. Hera leads on the ship, which is partly a domestic space, and is seen as a motherly figure, while Kanan is a leader in battles, a more masculine environment. Despite this, Hera and Kanan were both presented as more powerful than the rest of the crew when it came to decision-making and survival. The crew needed to complete missions to obtain credits (their currency) for food and supplies. Hera and Kanan often shut down conversations when the other crew members questioned the source of their intel regarding such missions, highlighting their power. This is shown in episode seven—*Out of Darkness*:

> [Kanan]: 'It's Hera's job to find missions that create problems for the Empire and profit for us. If she trusts the contact, I trust the contact. No questions asked' (E7, units 24 and 25).

There was a second hierarchy within the crew. Because Ezra's Jedi training is much of the focus of the series, his development was seen as vitally important while Zeb and Sabine's roles were less focused upon. Ezra was the most important of the (non-leader) crew members which also elevated Kanan's status because he was Ezra's mentor. It also notable that Ezra and Kanan, two male characters, are the only crew members to have the ability to utilise the Force meaning that they battle the most powerful villains in the series (The Inquisitor and Lord Vader). Kanan and Ezra then are arguably shown to be the most important and valued crew members by the villains who wish to maintain the hold of the Empire—both of whom are males, suggesting a gendered representation of skill and power.

3.2.3.2 Subtheme: heteronormative tones

The crew can be seen as a (non-biological) family with Hera and Kanan as the parental figures (McGucken, 2020) which represents a heteronormative dynamic. There were subtle insinuations that Kanan and Hera were in a romantic partnership. Hera, on a few occasions refers to Kanan with romantic terms:

> [Kanan]: 'Can we discuss this later?'
> [Hera]: 'That's fine, love. But we will discuss it' (E3, unit 52).

Her use of the word 'love' seems particularly interesting considering it may be utilised to soften her assertive tone (often associated with masculinity) within the sentence.

Additionally, in the last episode of the series when the crew have successfully rescued Kanan he expresses his gratitude, and she responds:

> 'You're welcome, dear' [they hug]' (E15, unit 113).

Again, it is Hera who utilised a romantic term (and Kanan never reciprocates).

Additionally, heteronormativity is shown through interactions between Ezra and Sabine. In the first episode Sabine takes off her helmet and Ezra sees her for the first time. He looks momentarily amazed and a few seconds later uses a flirtatious tone while he says:

> 'My name's Ezra, what's yours' (E1, unit 78).

Ezra speaks to Sabine in this flirtatious tone in other episodes throughout the series, despite her showing no romantic interest in him.

Overall, this subtheme represents that although the crew consists of males and females who successfully work together as a team, there are heteronormative tones present. This both allows and challenges the reading of a heteronormative family dynamic being portrayed. Perhaps then, Star Wars Rebels (2014–2018) implies that heteronormative romance is inevitable in a mixed-gendered team.

Figure 2 illustrates the final thematic map that answers the research question, how is gender portrayed in a Star Wars animated television series? It intends to show the connections between each of the themes (in ellipses) and subthemes (in boxes). The solid arrows indicate causal relationships whereas the dotted arrows represent conflict.

4 Discussion

This study was the first to investigate the depiction of gender within Marvel and Star Wars content that is rated as age appropriate for children, namely, one series of Avengers Assemble (2012–2019) and one series of Star Wars Rebels (2014–2018). This was important because engagement with superhero media statistically predicted stereotypically masculine behavioural profiles in young boys, and higher rates of weapon play (Coyne et al., 2014). Therefore, understanding the portrayal of gender in two popular and influential franchises that have each been acquired by the Walt Disney corporation was essential if this is likely to be influencing the young children engaging with it. Now that Marvel and Star Wars media are owned by the Disney corporation, it is important to consider the differences and similarities in the gendered portrayals within these franchises.

4.1 Comparing the portrayal of male characters

Firstly, it is important to acknowledge that the current study found stereotypical aspects of masculinity in both Avengers Assemble (2012–2019) and Star Wars Rebels (2014–2018). However, the stereotypical masculinity seemed more exaggerated and narratively dominant in Avengers Assemble (2012–2019) possibly because as a group, the Avengers were powerful and admired, traits that are associated with hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005). The Avengers seemed to be hegemonic in that they had more power over the largely subordinate human society (as suggested by Stabile, 2009), whereas the crew in Star Wars Rebels (2014–2018) were fighting against the dictatorial government body ruling over them (the Empire). As a result, the latter were more subordinate. For example, the crew had to take jobs to gain credits that they could exchange for essential supplies whereas the Avengers (and particularly Iron Man) were extremely wealthy and lived in relative luxury. Therefore, it could be argued then that the larger role of emotional vulnerability in Star Wars Rebels (2014–2018) when compared with Avengers Assemble (2012–2019) could reflect that their masculinity was less defined by associations with hegemonic masculinity.

In Star Wars Rebels (2014–2018) Ezra and Kanan were portrayed to reflect on their fears and vulnerabilities in order to utilise the Force. Therefore, emotional vulnerability was associated with power in the series. Bettis and Sternod (2009) suggested that love is discouraged within the Star Wars films. However, although not necessarily a reflection of love in the romantic sense, it is through Ezra's attachments to his crew members that his skills are able to develop. Indeed, Kanan explicitly tells Ezra that "you have to let your guard down. You have to be willing to attach to others." This suggests that in Star Wars Rebels (2014–2018), perhaps rather than suppress their emotions and minimise their connections to others, males are encouraged to do the opposite, and are rewarded with the power of The Force for doing so. Therefore, the message in Star Wars Rebels (2014–2018) may be teaching young boys that stoicism (Wall and Kristjanson, 2005; Parent et al., 2019), is not the only component of masculinity that leads to success.

In contrast, emotionally charged conversations were rarely displayed by the Avengers, and when they were, the characters were wearing their civilian dress rather that their superhero suits. In this way, superhero suits could be interpreted as a metaphor for masculinity, beneath which individuals are more able to express emotions and vulnerabilities, concepts that are rarely expressed by men who feel pressured to adhere to stereotypical gender norms (Parent et al., 2019). This also supports the work of Shawcroft and Coyne (2022) who found that superheroes were less able to show vulnerabilities as heroes (in their suits) than as humans (without their suits) suggesting that being emotionally vulnerable is simply not 'super'.

Additionally, uncontrolled anger was presented as a significant and consistent issue within Avengers Assemble (2012–2019) which is notable due to a lack of displays of other emotions. Uncontrolled anger often led to unnecessary destruction. However, there were several occasions where being able to control anger was celebrated. The implications for children exposed to the positive response to controlled anger in such media are unclear. The message could be that although uncontrolled anger is an inconvenience, acting on such emotion is 'natural' for men, which could normalise problematic behaviour.

A further difference between the Avengers superheroes and the crew of Star Wars Rebels (2014–2018) was that the Avengers engaged with each other almost exclusively through banter. Banter has been regarded as a feature of 'lad culture' which has been associated with

FIGURE 2
Thematic map: how is gender portrayed in a Star Wars animated televisions series?
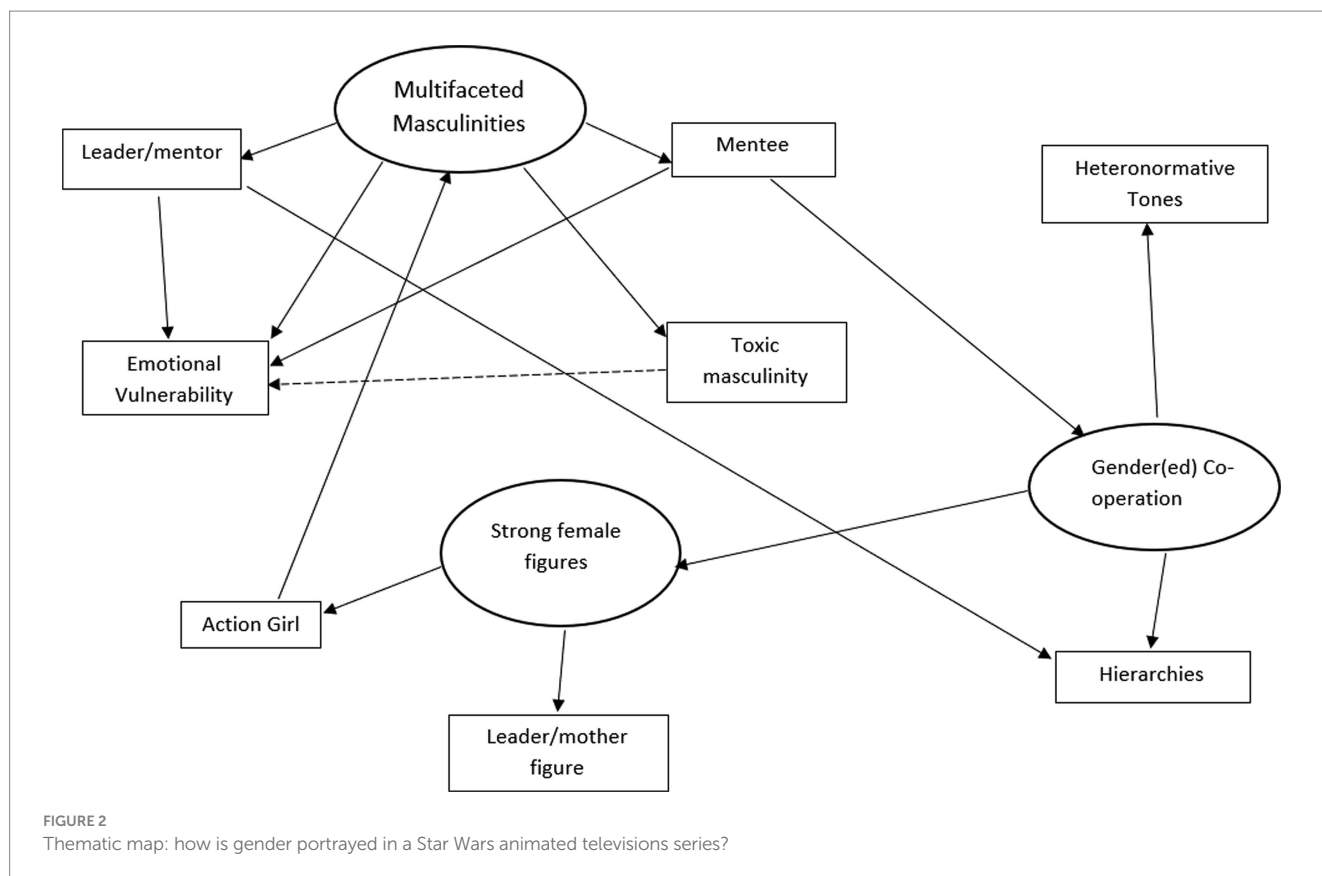
sexual harassment and the mistreatment of women (Phipps and Young, 2015). Although unsurprisingly, sexual harassment was not portrayed in Avengers Assemble (2012–2019) it is possible that young boys being exposed to the concepts of 'lad culture' from a young age may be more likely to normalise and accept it later in life, when it may be related to such issues. In this way, the series could have sexist undertones in line with the (mis)treatment of women associated with 'lad culture' (Phipps and Young, 2015; Nichols, 2018). Although the use of banter may create a sense of problematic "lad culture", it can also be prosocial (Bergin et al., 2003; Huuki et al., 2010) and important in developing relationships. Indeed, there was evidence of this in Avengers Assemble (2012–2019) as even though the characters constantly mocked and belittled each other, it was almost always perceived to be in good jest and facilitated bonding. The use of banter between the characters may also be narratively important—friction between teammates is common in "team films" as it adds interest to the group dynamic (Strong, 2013).

Lastly, Avengers Assemble (2012–2019) seemed to suggest that respect needed to be earned through masculine endeavours such as being skilled in battles, utilising intellect, and proving your worth within the team. This relates to the concept that 'manhood' is earned and proven via social achievements, personality, and behaviours (Vandello and Bosson, 2013). Because "manhood" is achieved, it can also be lost meaning that "men's behaviors (particularly stereotypically masculine behaviors) are often motivated by *an ongoing need to prove manhood status to others*" (Kimmel, 1997, as cited by Vandello and Bosson, 2013, p. 103, emphasis added). This also links to the concept of manhood being earned through public action (Vandello and Bosson, 2013). Further,

"the precariousness of manhood, for example, can explain why men: value status and achievement; display traits such as assertiveness and dominance; engage in risky and aggressive behaviors; avoid femininity in their appearance, personality, and conduct; and experience anxiety and stress when they fail to achieve cultural standards of masculinity" (Vandello and Bosson, 2013, p. 107).

Arguably then, much of the stereotypically masculine behaviours displayed by the male Avengers could be explained by their continuous need to prove and maintain their status as heroes. This is similar to the portrayal of the hierarchy that is present between Ezra and Kanan and a mentee and mentor dynamic—the older male character was more skilled than the younger male.

4.2 Comparing the portrayal of female characters

The key difference in the portrayal of female protagonists between Avengers Assemble (2012–2019) and Star Wars Rebels (2014–2018) found in the current study was that in the latter, the female protagonists seemed to be more genuinely valued. For example, Hera's piloting skills were vital to the team, and she was presented as a leader alongside Kanan. In comparison, Widow, the only female Avenger, seemed to be an add-on to the team and did not seem as genuinely valued. The Avengers worked without her just as successfully for a large proportion of the series even though she portrays stereotypical masculinity. Baker and Raney (2007) also found that female

superheroes seemed to be stereotypically masculine, which seemed to suggest that masculinity was conducive to being super. Despite Widow's performance of masculinity, she was *still largely on the periphery of the team*. This indicates that engaging in masculinity is not enough for female superheroes to fully 'fit in'. Additionally, the lack of female representation in Avengers Assemble (2012–2019) is in line with previous research which finds that male superheroes are much more prevalent than female superheroes (Baker and Raney, 2007; Miller et al., 2016).

There is some subtle stereotyping of female characters in Star Wars Rebels (2014–2018) also. The leader/mother-figure subtheme described Hera's role within the crew—she is portrayed as a leader almost exclusively within a domestic space suggesting that Hera is still somewhat constrained by feminine gender role stereotypes. Historically, the private sphere has been equated with femininity and women, whereas the public sphere has been equated with masculinity and men (Kreimer, 2004; Connell, 2005; Elgarte, 2008). This gendered distinction of the public and private spheres facilitated the subordination of women (Kreimer, 2004; Connell, 2005; Elgarte, 2008), which makes this representation of Hera in Star Wars Rebels (2014–2018) problematic.

Further, Hera's role as a leader within the private sphere is contrasted with Kanan's role in mentoring and passing on practical skills that could be utilised for important public work– namely, the taking down of the Empire. Therefore, a gendered private and public distinction can be identified in Star Wars Rebels (2014–2018), when comparing the roles of Hera and Kanan. Hera was also presented as a mother figure to the younger crew member which associated her with nurturing/reproductive work and the private sphere (Elgarte, 2008) more strongly. This implied that for a female figure to be a leader which is contrary to gender stereotypes, she must also be motherly— supporting gender stereotypes. This is perhaps, as McGucken (2020) suggested, representative of fourth wave feminist sensibilities whereby Hera and Sabine:

> "certainly meet fourth wave criteria, they also reflect traditional female roles and suggest an inherent tension in defining female, femininity, and feminism itself. This reflects divisions and important factors in identifying the fourth wave, which is marked by a multiplicity of definitions and contradictions—and a welcoming of them in order to better understand the next steps within the feminist project" (McGucken, 2020, p. 155).

Additionally, neither of the female crew members could utilise the Force, which was also true in the original Star Wars film trilogy. This is a particularly interesting narrative choice considering the sequel trilogy, which was released just one year after the first series of Star Wars Rebels (2014–2018), had a female Jedi as its leading protagonist which was considered a more empowering representation of women than those in the earlier trilogies (Bruin-Mole, 2017; McGucken, 2020). That the power to utilise the Force was represented to be an exclusively male phenomenon in Star Wars Rebels (2014–2018) was therefore more consistent with the original trilogy. This could suggest that Star Wars was not willing to commit to representing female characters as powerful in this way, perhaps because it was still relatively unclear how its fanbase would respond to such a change.

Overall, this may suggest that Star Wars Rebels (2014–2018) seems to provide children with more examples of how men and women can successfully work together and respect one another than Avengers Assemble (2012–2019).

4.3 Limitations and future directions

The current thematic analysis was conducted on the first series of Avengers Assemble (2012–2019) and Star Wars Rebels (2014–2018). Therefore, it is possible that the portrayal of men and women would have developed throughout subsequent series of these television shows and analysing all available episodes may have led to a greater understanding of the portrayal of gender within them. However, there were four series of Star Wars Rebels (2014–2018), each with a minimum of fifteen episodes, and four series of Avengers Assemble (2012–2019) each with a minimum of twenty-three episodes. Due to time constraints, it was not possible to analyse all episodes. Future research could investigate the portrayal of gender throughout the entirety of an animated series associated with Marvel and Star Wars franchises, to mitigate for this limitation.

Further, because the current research focused on one series of animated content from the Marvel and Star Wars franchises, the themes are not generalisable to those franchises more broadly. For example, there are many other animated series associated with both franchises, such as Star Wars: The Clone Wars (2008–2020) and The Avengers: Earth's mightiest heroes! (2010–2012), as well as many feature length films. Such content should be analysed in future research and the findings compared with those of the current study to develop a more complete understanding of the portrayal of gender within these franchises.

Thirdly, the method adopted in the current study largely followed Towbin et al.'s (2004) whereby media was viewed by the researcher and when a unit of analysis was identified, a description of the content was written. If the unit contained speech, it was copied verbatim utilising the subtitle function of Disney+. Codes, themes, and subthemes were then established based on the written units of analysis for each series, rather than the units as they appeared in the television series directly. This is a potential limitation as the units of analysis may not represent the content as accurately as intended. However, the researcher ensured that important detail was contained within the descriptions of the data units to mitigate for this. Additionally, although there were no reliability checks conducted on the target data, a pilot study was conducted whereby consistency in identifying units was considered and discussed by the authors. Therefore, the pilot study provided evidence that the data units and codes being identified were consistent.

4.4 Implications

The current study could be utilised to discuss the portrayal of gender within the Marvel and Star Wars franchises with parents and teachers of children who are likely to engage with such media. Three main findings could be communicated. Firstly, parents and educators could be made aware of the more 'positive' portrayal of male characters engaging in emotionally charged conversations in Star Wars Rebels (2014–2018) in comparison to the lack of sincere conversations and emotional expression in Avengers Assemble (2012–2019). Based on this, parents could be advised to balance some of the "negative"

representations of male protagonists largely suppressing emotions in Avengers Assemble (2012–2019) with those in Star Wars Rebels (2014–2018) as it is likely that viewing a more balanced portrayal of emotional expression would be beneficial to young viewers.

Secondly, media violence is impactful on children's aggression (Strasburger, 2009; Prescott et al., 2018) therefore, the pervasiveness of violence in Marvel and Star Wars media found in this study should be communicated. Additionally, the relationship between aggression in superhero media and children's use of toy weapons in their play has also been documented (Coyne et al., 2014) arguably making the violence in such narratives a particular cause for concern. Importantly though, further research investigating the relationships between engagement with these particular franchises and children's behaviours is warranted. It is possible that because the Avengers seem to particularly celebrate aggression and are in a position of elevated social status, often linked with hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005), Marvel media will have a larger impact on children's levels of weapon play and aggression than Star Wars media. However, whether this is the case should be investigated to provide additional support and weight to the information that has been gained in the current study when communicating findings to parents, educators, and children themselves.

Thirdly, the subtleties of gendered messaging in children's media should be communicated to parents and educators. The current study suggested that it is possible that the portrayal of women in Star Wars Rebels (2014–2018) could be considered 'positive' and 'progressive'. However, when considering the nuances in those portrayals, it is possible to see some problematic gendered messages. By raising awareness of the subtleties of gendered representations in children's media, parents and educators may be able to make more informed decisions about the media their children consume. It would also be necessary to make caregivers and educators aware that previous research has found that children's engagement with superhero media predicted higher agreement with statements associated with males being superior to females, and a desire for a muscular body (Coyne et al., 2022). Therefore, because the current study has found that the muscular body is prevalent in these narratives, and the masculinity presented particularly within Marvel media can be seen to be hegemonic, such narratives are likely to have a relationship with their children's behaviour and conceptuliastions of gender, according to previous research. Overall, it is important for caregivers to be aware of the sometimes-subtle gendered messages that are portrayed by Marvel and Star Wars media, and the potential impact this may have on their children's behaviour.

5 Conclusion

This study, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, was the first to qualitatively assess how gender is portrayed in Marvel and Star Wars media targeted towards children. This was essential given that the Disney corporation acquired these franchises, presumably, to target a young male audience more successfully. The findings suggested that there was a more overt portrayal of stereotypical masculinity in Avengers Assemble (2012–2019) in comparison to Star Wars Rebels (2014–2018). Additionally, the women in the latter series seemed to be more valued than the one female protagonist in Avengers Assemble (2012–2019) however, the female protagonists were

stereotyped in both series. Overall, the current research suggests that there was more overt gender stereotyping in Avengers Assemble (2012–2019) which could suggest that this media may be particularly problematic for children engaging with it, who may replicate its messages (Bussey and Bandura, 1999; Coyne et al., 2014). Overall, the current study has facilitated a greater understanding of the gendered messages that may be consumed by children who engage with Marvel and Star Wars media. The findings also provide important background for investigating the relationship between children's engagement with the Marvel and Star Wars franchises and their gendered behaviours, which should be investigated in future research.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Read like a man: comparing narratives of masculinity in adolescent literature

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Recent movements like #MeToo and #TimesUp have surfaced and challenged ideas about masculinity in popular conversations. In particular, these ideas have centered around "toxic masculinity"—a version of masculinity that reflects stereotyped, dated, and even dangerous expectations for manhood. This notion of masculinity can be reinforced in a number of ways, especially through pop culture, where it runs the risk of becoming commonly accepted or normalized. This study evaluates the narratives of masculinity in three different novels that are marketed toward high school-aged students in the United States: *Lord of the Flies*; *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces*; and *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*. Using a critical literacy lens, this study considers the symbols, behaviors, expectations, and meanings given to masculinity in and through each novel and considers the implications of this analysis for adolescent readership inside and outside of schooling. The study concludes that the more contemporary novels showcase a range of masculine portrayals, including positive, affirming versions of masculinity, compared to a more singular and pessimistic one found in a novel traditionally used in schools. Thus, the study concludes that formal schooling may be an important way to address and disrupt unhealthy versions of masculinity.

Introduction

The implications and reverberations from the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements have engaged us in critical conversations around the idea of masculinity. From pop culture to politics, these movements forced individuals to examine how men in positions of unchecked power and privilege, throughout Hollywood and other industries, sexually assaulted women without consequence. These movements, though aimed to help survivors—largely women—of sexual violence, have cast a wider net in recent years to identify the systematic causes and ideologies of harassment. Indeed, a quick glance at the headlines on any given day reveals a stark reality: continued stories and instances from #MeToo survivors, political degradation on both sides, instances of police brutality, and references to the rise in adolescent suicide rates attributed to bullying. As such, many have suggested that these issues stem from a larger sociocultural problem of "toxic masculinity," a value system incorporating structures, beliefs, and expectations around gender and power.

Toxic masculinity (Connell, 2005; Clemens, 2017; De Boise, 2019), in brief, captures the traditional cultural and societal stereotypes of masculinity and manhood. The term is not a new one, as it has long signified traits like aggression, violence, status, and a desire for control

and the oppression of others (especially women), and it has even become a popular term in cultural circles. For example, in response to toxic masculinity, the shaving company Gillette launched a campaign, #TheBestMenCanBe, drawing on their tagline of "the best a man can get," to celebrate and help men achieve their personal best. In doing so, their advertisement campaign brought critical attention to the ways in which society and media have contributed to sexual assault crimes. The commercial shows examples of behaviors that contribute to the problem of toxic masculinity: catcalling, demeaning women in professional settings, men happily being publicly promiscuous, and boys fighting and bullying each other. The short film proposes that media artifacts have normalized these behaviors in men without consequences. As a result, it denounces the "boys will be boys" mantra (Clemens, 2017) for excusing these problematic behaviors. The end of the video shows clips of men intervening and stopping these problematic behaviors. It calls men to act better, because they can act better. This ad was one of the first media artifacts to garner attention for specifically showing examples of toxic masculinity and insisting that others acknowledge their role in stopping toxicity in their daily lives.

This conversation in popular media begs another one: outside of popular culture, where, when, and how might toxic masculinity be disrupted for young men and women? As current educators, we argue that if schools are structures of social and cultural reproduction—institutions with curriculum, pedagogy, and community capable of socially *reproducing* toxic masculinity—then they must also be sites capable of critically *disrupting* and actively *engaging* with oppressive ideologies like toxic masculinity. We argue that if we are to engage in the conversation of toxic masculinity, then we must find a place to do so *within* schools. More specifically, we believe that teaching with a lens of toxic masculinity in English Language Arts classrooms might help to dispel and disrupt dangerous notions and ideologies of toxic masculinity.

Critical engagement in schools

In the spirit of this critical engagement, educators have begun to critically engage with established high school canonical texts as curricular sites of social reproduction. They have reconsidered highly esteemed, usually unquestioned novels commonly taught in high school. These educators, using a lens of critical literacy, engage in the more implied narratives written in these texts, aiming "to draw attention to implicit ideologies of texts and textual practices by examining issues of power, normativity, and representation, as well as facilitating opportunities for equity-oriented sociopolitical action" (Borsheim-Black et al., 2014, p. 123). For example, Macaluso's research on the typical high school text *To Kill a Mockingbird*, challenges its traditionally accepted anti-racist themes for its subtle racist underpinnings (Macaluso, 2017). While Atticus is praised for his above-the-law morals for defending Tom Robinson against the social esteem of his peers, we should consider how this continual reading promotes a White-Savior narrative, normalizing that African Americans have little to no agency. This study is done not only to reconsider the unquestioned texts but also to teach students these literacy skills: consume literature, engage with it and the ideologies of the text, and reconsider their sociopolitical implications. Steiss (2020) has done similar work in teaching Homeric canonical texts more critically, instead of completely replacing them. He argues that the Homeric texts

offer students the opportunity to understand and question narratives in a productive way, noting, "After reading each episode and asking questions about whose perspectives are valued and whose are silenced, many students noted an absence of the women's perspectives and much evidence that they were actually the victims in these encounters" (Steiss, 2020, p. 436). His approach of not completely replacing canonical novels but offering the text as an opportunity for critical insight is a balanced approach, one that is necessary given the fact that texts like *The Odyssey* (and *To Kill a Mockingbird*) are already in the social consciousness of American culture. Rather than remove them completely from the classroom, a critical literacy approach allows these texts to be opened up to further questioning and contemporary critique.

Current young adult literature (YA), on the other hand, tends to more explicitly engage in contemporary critical discussions, questioning and disrupting normative values. Additionally, contemporary YA can be culturally representative and, thus, more relevant to student's lived experiences, highlighting cultural knowledge and contemporary struggles. As a result, some educators have made YA more available in their classrooms: as options for independent reading, through small group literature circles, or by pairing it alongside a canonical text for classroom study. Regardless of the method, thematic conversations around the canon and YA could engage students in larger critical thought processes, contextualizing the author's *and* reader's beliefs, values, and identities. Even if students do not read YA as part of classroom study, they may be more likely to pick up YA texts outside of the classroom.

In this article, we take up the contemporary topic of masculinity, particularly toxic masculinity, in reading across two recently published, highly acclaimed YA novels—*Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (*A&D*) by Benjamin Alire Sáenz; *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces* (*Gabi*) by Isabel Quintero—and one more traditional, canonical novel that has long been taught in schools: *Lord of the Flies* (*LOF*) by William Golding. *LOF* has been and continues to be widely taught in middle and high schools in the United States, but not necessarily in *Gabi* and *A&D*. We are not necessarily advocating for the use of *A&D* and *Gabi* in classrooms, as both contain content that teachers may deem too mature or explicit for classroom inclusion, but then again, so does *LOF* in the form of young children brutally murdering other children. That said, teachers must use their discretion and knowledge of their students and context to determine what will work for them. We chose *A&D* and *Gabi* for this study a number of reasons—both have been written recently, feature diverse characters and contexts, have won a number of literary awards, rank highly on user-reviewed book sites like Goodreads.com, and both were named on the "Best Books" list for their respective year from *School Library Journal*, a publication specifically geared toward recommendations and reviews for schools, school librarians, and classroom teachers. During our discussions of these novels, we kept coming back to *LOF*, a text we both read in school, noting that all three texts ground masculinity as one focal point.

Using a critical literacy lens to our content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004), we noted common themes or motifs regarding masculinity across these three books. We first considered the ways in which *LOF* constructs a narrative of masculinity and then compared that narrative to the ways in which the YA texts might critically disrupt those narratives in *LOF*. We highlight the narratives, images, and conclusions these books make on masculinity as both a gender construct and a philosophical claim. The following questions guided our analysis:

How do contemporary narratives about masculinity, as seen in the two YA texts, compare to those in *LOF*, a more traditional text found in classrooms?

What depictions might characterize a toxic or antagonistic male?

Is any version of masculinity, across the three texts, valued and/or valorized?

What are the social implications of these depictions of masculinity as represented in texts assigned to schools?

This study was inspired by our mutual interests in masculinity, recognizing the ways in which behaviors of, about, and for masculinity were reified early in our lives through family, friends, media, religious beliefs, and cultural expectations. We first explored these ideas when Hernandez was a student in Macaluso's undergraduate literature seminar several years ago. Since then, we have continued the conversation through an independent seminar, and now, as a current English teacher and English teacher educator. We agree that books—like movies, songs, TV shows, social media, and other cultural artifacts—can play an important role in affirming and/or challenging stereotyped notions of masculinity.

Canon

Lord of the Flies

Lord of the Flies is one of the most popular books to teach in high school literature classes (Macaluso, 2016). Educators and students will find a plethora of symbolism embedded in multiple layers of the castaway story: pig heads, war paint, glasses, the conch, the beastie, fruits in a garden, and repeated "*sucks to your asmarr*" remark. Additionally, the novel offers the opportunity for students to consider ethical or unethical actions of each character and their affiliation with their own agendas. *Lord of the Flies* is an established canonical text of high school literature because it provides a variety of avenues and interpretations.

The novel explores the concept of masculinity through its characterization and conflict. More specifically, complicating masculine models is integral to understanding conflict between the characters in the novel. If readers do not read *LOF* through a lens of masculinity, they lose the author's original purposes in the conception of the novel itself. Interviews with Golding report that *LOF* was inspired by his personal reflections on the portrayal of masculinity in the British classic written by R.M. Ballantyne *Coral Island*. Samuel Hynes (Baker, 1988) cites an interview where Golding discusses masculinity in the context of the castaway genre in British literature,

> What I'm saying to myself is "don't be such a fool, you remember when you were a boy, a small boy, how you lived on that island with Ralph and Jack and Peterkin." …I said to myself finally, "Now you are grown up, you are adult; it's taken you a long time to become adult, but now you've got there you can see that people are not like that; they would not behave like that if they were God-fearing English gentlemen … There, savagery would not

be found in natives on an island. As like as not they would find savages who were kindly and uncomplicated and that the devil would rise out of the intellectual complications of the three white men on the island itself (Baker, 1988, p. 16).

Golding's comments critique the previously established castaway texts he encountered as a child, and he critiques the portrayal of British men in the setting of a castaway, stating their incorrect premise of what is "savage." Previous canon established British men as gentlemen, heroes, and civilized in these stories, while portraying the non-white, non-British characters as terrors and savages of all that is good, holy, and seemingly. Hynes calls this the "Coral Island attitude" in reference to the castaway tale *Coral Island* (Baker, 1988).

Countering the "Coral Island Attitude," Golding argued that the real "savages" are not the fictional indigenous groups that represent indigenous peoples; rather, the real source of uncivilized actions and moral evil would come from the "three white men" castaway on the island. At the very end, after all of the events have transpired on the island, the naval officer, surprised by Ralph's disheveled looks and the burning island, states ironically,

> "I should have thought that a pack of British boys—you're all British, aren't you?—would have been able to put up a better show than that—I mean—"
>
> "It was like that at first," said Ralph," before things—"
>
> He stopped.
>
> "We were together then—". The officer nodded helpfully.
>
> "I know. Jolly good show. Like the Coral Island."
>
> …Ralph wept for the end of innocence, the darkness of man's heart, and the fall through the air of the true wise friend called Piggy." (Golding, 1962, p. 242)

Characters in the novel, and readers alike, come to the realization that the *Coral Island* depiction of reason and moral goodness is not a conclusive narrative for the British boys. *LOF* critically disrupts the ideology that British masculinity is intrinsically innocent, Christian, and superior. In his new goal for realism, *LOF* creates a new masculinity narrative, one that Golding claims to be more "realistic" and grounded in violence, aggression, and even sexually predatory. In this section, we explore some of these possible narratives.

Piggy: feminized boy?

Piggy stands out from the rest of the boys in the novel in a number of ways. While most of the main characters identify with their fathers, Piggy identifies with his Auntie because his father is notably passed away (p. 19). Furthermore, his asthma and glasses put him in a physical disadvantage compared to the rest of the able-bodied boys, who can use physical strength to command others (p. 19). From the

perspective of the boys on the island, Piggy does not live up to their masculine conception and expectation; therefore, he is generally mistreated, ostracized, and seen as different.

In addition to Piggy's unique characterization in contrast with the boys, Piggy's lack of masculinity invites comparisons to another female on the island, the mother pig. Both share physical and active character traits. For example, "[Piggy] was the only boy on the island whose hair never seemed to grow … [his] hair still lay in wisps over his head as though baldness were his natural state" (p. 81). Piggy's hair resembles that of a domesticated pig, covered in wispy hair and baldness. Additionally, Piggy turns pink when shamed by the boys, sharing in the color of the pink pigs (p. 19), and Piggy is described large and "fat," similar to pigs (p. 81).

In action, Piggy, like the Sow, cares for the young on the island. Just as the Sow cares for her piglets (p. 166), Piggy is the first to look out for the concerns of the little ones and realize that one of them went missing on the first day (p. 59). These actions and concerns contrast with the rest of the boys and their initial concerns for adventure and fun (p. 55). The text also alludes their "outcast" status on the island. For the pig, the text notes, "A little apart from the rest, sunk in deep maternal bliss, lay the largest sow of the lot. She was black and pink; and the great bladder of her belly was fringed with a row of piglets that slept or borrowed and squeaked" (p. 166). These details not only define Piggy and the Sow from the other boys, but they also seem to more intentionally align Piggy with representations of traditional femininity (like nurturing motherhood) as further indicative of his lacking masculinity.

It comes as no surprise, then, that Piggy and the Sow reach similar fates. The boys kill the Sow in a mad chase with no rational thought, "the sow staggered her way ahead of them, bleeding and mad, and the hunters followed, wedded to her in lust, excited by the long chase and the dropped blood" (p. 167). Note the imagery of a sexual conquest in the Sow. Similar to the Sow, Piggy is killed by Roger in a "sense of delirious abandonment" (p. 222). The novel directly compares Piggy's body to that of the Sow: "Piggy's arms and legs twitched a bit, like a pig's after it has been killed" (p. 223). In both cases, masculine control of the feminine, via sexual conquest, is associated with the boys of the island, and subsequently celebrated. This is a dangerous narrative to reify, however implicit, to readers of the text, as it signals assault, power, and violence over others, particularly women.

Jack: masculinity as dominance

Contrasted to Piggy, Jack is characterized by traditionally masculine traits, and is in conflict with him constantly. Jack's identity and actions antagonize both Piggy and the Sow. Jack's quick leadership and actions are imbued with images of destruction and aggression toward the boys, especially Piggy. In an early confrontation, "Jack stood up as he said this, the bloodied knife in his hand. The two boys faced each other. There was the brilliant world of hunting, tactics, fierce exhilaration, skill; and there was the world of longing and baffled common-sense" (p. 89). Jack's self-conception and course of action is completely opposite of Piggy who stands for "common-sense." In this narrative of masculinity, *LOF* establishes a clear relationship of power; Jack is defined by a masculinity that is physically powerful, dominative, and even irrational. His masculinity seeks out to antagonize femininity, as established by his aggression and killing of the Sow and Piggy.

His masculinity is also manifest through domination of the other boys; whether it is iron-fisted control of the choir boys or setting the agenda and rituals for the same boys turned hunters. The masculinized desire for dominance is demonstrated in the younger boys on the beach as time passed on the island, suggesting that Jack's version of masculinity is indeed the more natural version for boys and men as the boys un-civilize themselves.

Island and society: dominance, destruction, and hopelessness?

The motif of masculine dominance is not contained on the island. The culture of civilized society may have stopped some of the boys from committing actions of aggression and dominance, but the culture, as in the world of the novel, cannot save the boys. This is made clear with commentary like, "Roger's arm was conditioned by a civilization that knew nothing of him and was in ruins" (p. 78). The adult-world is in just as much disorder and violence as the boys' island. As such, Golding successfully disrupts the narrative of elitist, innocent British masculinity by depicting an aggressive, dominating masculinity in Jack and the hunters. Golding depicts a new narrative in which he highlights, like contemporary movements in our age, the destructive capacity of a masculinity defined by dominance, sexual conquest, and anti-feminine sentiments.

However, Golding leaves an unsettling answer: can a new, positive, life-affirming masculinity survive realistically? Jack's masculinity is not the only option. Ralph, Samneric, Piggy, and Simon did not function in Jack's masculinity model of aggression and dominance. However, they barely survived or did not survive at all. The world of the novel is exaggerated and fictional, but the fates of Simon and Piggy do not leave much hope for the existence of a positive, productive version of masculinity. Additionally, although Piggy may be a boy on the island, his association with the female Sow may suggest that attributes like caring for those most vulnerable and displaying rational thought are feminine by nature.

From these conclusions and questions, *LOF* attempts a realistic but pessimistic narrative of masculinity. Masculinity and femininity are at odds with each other in agenda and values. For the educator, the *LOF* narrative of the dominating, violent, irrational masculinity in the core of the boys provides no solution to the evil nor the possibility of remediation or good. Masculinity is then strictly defined; a boy, at his natural core, is destined "to ruin." Without deliberate disruption of these ideas, *LOF* runs the risk of reproducing and reaffirming these toxic models of masculinity.

Young adult literature

Gabi, A Girl in Pieces.

Why Gabi?

Gabi: A Girl in Pieces, like *LOF*, is another text filled with images, ideas, and claims about masculinity. Readers follow Gabi, a Mexican-American high schooler, and her coming-of-age story of overcoming academic, cultural, and financial obstacles. She also encounters

various forms, mini-rituals, behaviors, and ideologies of masculinity in her everyday life. Over the course of the novel, she comes to understand how masculinity influences various factors of her everyday life.

In *Gabi*, there are two vehicles that introduce the story of masculinity: (1) Gabi's romantic interests and relationships that are significant to her character arc, and (2) the cultural systems that contextualize her life, relationships, and family. Quintero distinguishes between agreeable masculine models against the machista, toxic masculinity through Gabi's experiences with these two versions. The possibility of *positive masculinity*, as seen in the former, is significant insofar as it adds more productive answers to the masculinity conversation currently discussed.

This section analyzes the construction of masculinity narratives through Gabi's love-interest/relationship arcs. The larger premise of the novel is unbraided: masculinity narratives and cultural narratives are intimately tied together. The end of this section compares the different masculinity narratives that *Gabi* and *LOF* offer.

Gabi and the rules of engagement

Romantic relationships, sex, culture, and self-image are central to the novel. This opening paragraph of the novel sets up these themes and how they intertwine in Gabi's experience of her senior year of high school:

> Every time I go out with a guy, my mom says, "ojos abiertos, piernas cerradas." Eyes open, legs closed. That's as far as the birds and the bees talk has gone. And I don't mind it. I don't necessarily agree with that whole wait-until-you're married crap though. I mean, this is America and the twenty-first century, not Mexico one hundred years ago. But of course, I can't tell my mom that because she'll think I'm bad.
>
> Or worse: trying to be white (Quintero, 2014, p.7).

As stated previously, Gabi's dating experience is the vehicle for how Quintero frames and critiques masculine norms and behaviors. This short passage, again the opening passage of the novel, offers analytic insight into Gabi as a character and the way she identifies herself in relation to her mother and societal norms. On one level, we see a clear distinction or change around sex on a generational level—Gabi is much more open to sexual encounters than her mother would like her to be, and her mother likens sexual activity with "bad" behavior. Gabi attributes her mother's attitude to generational thinking ("this is … the twenty-first century") and cultural and racial differences (Mexico vs. America and white vs. brown). From the start of the novel, Gabi signals that she is not those things, and thus, she does not conform to traditional (or previous generation's) notions of femininity. We also see this non-traditional stance across her dating life and her interest in a number of boys (even at the same time) over the course of the novel. Because she is interested in so many boys—including Joshua, Martin, Eric, and Ian—readers see several examples of expressed masculine sexuality and behavior in the novel.

Martin: positivity through emotional and sexual fulfillment

Out of all the suitors, Martin is Gabi's favorite and most agreeable to readers. While Gabi's other interests present some positive aspects of masculinity, they eventually fall short in some areas. For example, Ian is only interested in Gabi for sex, Eric bullies Gabi's gay best friend, and Joshua stands up Gabi on a scheduled date night. In light of these instances, and despite their positive attributes, we posit that Martin's attitudes and actions provide an antidote to toxic masculinity by firmly upholding Gabi's agency, interests, sexuality, and emotional health. In essence, this is the message of the book—in the face of so much male toxicity (including her own father and another character, German, who is discussed below), there is the possibility for a clear, practical, healthy version of (non-toxic) masculinity that can be expressed through teenage boys via Martin's characterization.

In the context of the book, sexual responsibility is valuable because irresponsibility plagues female characters with long-lasting, negative impacts. Gabi states, "I could be in the same boat as Cindy or Georgina or my mom. And that is not anywhere near where I want to be at this moment in my life. I want to go to college. I want to be free. I want to move out of this one-horse town" (p. 243). All three women she mentions have experienced challenging life-situations because of unplanned pregnancy and abusive partners, causing difficult circumstances that limit their ability to choose and succeed financially and professionally.

Martin upholds Gabi's agency through his responsible sexuality. Martin respects Gabi's decisions and never assumes her decisions, especially her decisions about her body. His responsibility is demonstrated when he asks for consent while kissing (p. 239) and before sexual activity during prom night (p. 247). Gabi ultimately exhibits control of her own agency by purchasing condoms. But Martin's condom purchase is an affirmation of her agency, her desire for freedom and choices in future.

Martin's sexuality is a free and mutual expression of attraction between Gabi and himself. This *mutual* affirmation of each other's agency is significant because it shows that masculinity in the context of romantic relationships, sex can work in congruence with femininity and not just in conflict against it.

German and Joshua: counters to Martin

Martin's sexual responsibility contrasts against German's sexual and egoist predation. German is a character who dates one of Gabi's friends, and early on in the text, Gabi characterizes him as "one of those guys who knows he's super hot and assumes that girls HAVE to like him" (14). Gabi's perception of German's lack of integrity is confirmed later, when it is revealed that he raped Gabi's friend. When he is confronted and exposed about his crime, he replies, "Rape? Pfft. She wanted it. How could she not? All girls want this'" (260). German is a character who violates women and denies their agency, and yet his actions are written off with the familiar mantra "boys will be boys." As a result, Gabi intentionally challenges this mindset as "a load of bullshit" (p. 229).

Joshua is another unideal suitor, as his sexual irresponsibility puts women in situations without decisions. His irresponsibility is demonstrated in Georgina's unplanned pregnancy. Her pregnancy

created an impossible situation; she must either keep her unplanned child while facing abuse from her already abusive father or violate her personal conscience by getting an abortion to avoid the abuse and life-changing consequences of having a child. Joshua left Georgina with little room for choices, nor was he present for emotional support during those decisions.

Through these different boys, Quintero constructs toxic masculinity in different forms. Both of these men violate women's agency: German quite clearly, and Joshua more subtly. German is toxic because of his perverted sexuality and perverted sense of self; he physically and emotionally objectifies women for his pleasure and ego and never acknowledges their agency. Joshua may not be a perverted rapist, but he is sexually promiscuous and indifferent to the consequences. Similarly, indifferent to Georgina's pregnancy dilemma, he places her in physical harm and emotional trauma.

Martin really stands out as an antithesis adolescent boy because his masculinity is characterized in such a way that it disrupts the novel's other characters. Martin supports Gabi in her poetry work (p. 135), listens to her while she grieves her father's death (p. 159), provides positive affirmation about her body image issues and self-deprecation (p. 170), and is sexually responsive. Quintero realistically allows for growth in positive masculinity, learning from femininity and how to support it. Martin is not perfect, but the point is that he learns. Not only does Quintero critique toxic men by giving us examples like German and Joshua, but she also gives a positive example of what masculinity should and can be.

Beyond the models, *Gabi* demonstrates how culture and society construct masculine concepts. This point is significant for its educational value; society and culture inform how men should act, and men's behavior informs expectations in society and culture. This is seen in the excerpt below, a "boys will be boys list," constructed by Gabi, to prove that society creates and expects toxic males:

Instructions for understanding that boys will be boys really means

1 You're wearing that little dress tonight? Remember, boys will be boys, so be careful.
2 If you drink way too much, your body is fair game—for anyone or anyones. Boys will be boys, and you just made it easier….
4 If she is crying, that is definitely a sign that she means no. But since you are an asshole, you will not give it a second thought, so proceed. She was wearing that little dress (remember?), and boys will be boys, after all. That's what our parents say….
8 Remember how your mother warned you that boys only want one thing from you? Well, it is not your straight A's or your excellent drawing skills or your extensive knowledge of action films. It is the thing you have guarded (hit: it is between your legs) your whole life from everyone: your cousin who came to stay for 2 weeks, your strange uncle Tony, that teacher in the 2nd grade—they were all just boys being boys (p. 230).

Gabi identifies that this socially accepted mantra and ideology of "boys will be boys" is an excuse that perpetuates toxic behavior in men.

In addition to this list, Gabi's reflection on Georgina's pregnancy further elaborates the strong impact society has on the attitudes and beliefs that interpret men's actions. Gabi writes,

> Why did Georgina have to make the choices about her baby? And then live with the guilt and the fear of being found out and being

labeled slut and baby killer *while Joshua Moore paraded around like nothing ever happened?* [emphasis added] Like he never had an almost-child? I mean Georgina totally helped him out too—now he does not have a responsibility and is free to go and play football or soccer or wrestle bears or whatever it is he is doing to get college scholarships. And she's the one who's wracked with guilt (p. 204).

The "boys will be boys" mantra intersects with Gabi's family dynamics, not just friend dynamics. Gabi's mother has internalized that men are hypersexual from her personal experiences, but she does not see the possibility of changing the culture. When confronted with the double standards she holds, Gabi's mother states, "It's different. Beto is a boy, and they cannot help it" (p. 236). Gabi's mother clearly identifies the sexual objectification of women by hypersexual men when she states, "ya no sirve uno para nada" [after men have sex with you, men find you worthless] (p. 146). Gabi's mom does not realize that this problematic social norm about men has been internalized in herself without questioning its dangerous implications.

Continuing with the issue of double standards and sexuality, Gabi identifies the demonization of women's sexual desires from the machista culture. Gabi understands the ways in which culture judges and condemns female sexual desires:

> [I'm] not ashamed at that. Well, a little. Because girls shouldn't be boy crazy right? That's what my mom always says. She says that we don't want to be *faciles*—easy, sluts, hoes, or *ofrecidas*. And that being this way was what got Cindy in trouble, and, unless I want to follow in her footsteps, I should think twice about going out with Joshua. She says she knows that I'm young, and I'm probably confused, but that I can't go from one boy to another. "Oh, que te crees? Americana? We don't do things like that (p. 106–7).

The characterization of Gabi as boy crazy (and as a whole) is meant to challenge and unbraid cultural constructs and norms around masculinity.

Quintero does acknowledge the possibility of machista culture's transformation through the work of men and women. Quintero makes Martin's masculinity explicitly counter-cultural and conscious of these larger social beliefs of toxic masculinity because Martin's father is intentionally disrupting "boys will be boys" masculine ideology as well. In talking about his father, Marting says,

> He also said that I have to respect you and not pressure you to do things you don't want to do, and if you say no, it's no … Yeah. He hates all that macho *boys will be boys* bullshit. He says it's an excuse for men to act like animals. And I totally agree with him (p. 255).

Through these lines, Quintero offers a new, female-affirmative, responsible, and caring masculine model.

Gabi against the *Lord of the Flies*

These two books present masculinity in competing ways. In *Gabi*, we see the novel explores the cultural, social, and personal aspects of toxic masculinity and, in the process, identifies specific, contemporary

structures and beliefs that perpetuate it. Additionally, the novel demonstrates the possibility of a non-toxic masculinity. Masculinity is not necessarily toxic, and men are no less "manly" for supporting women's choices and wellbeing. *Lord of the Flies* tells a different story, arguing that regardless of culture and society, all men have the beast inside them as part of their very nature. Those who do not allow the beast to manifest in their actions are perceived as feminine, with their boyhood questioned and ostracized.

This difference between both novels can facilitate discussion between adolescent students and their own lived experiences and ideologies. A full, productive discussion on important gender constructs cannot be had without seeing a diversity of claims and portrayals and problems and solutions. *Gabi* offers a narrative of adolescents engaging critically with the world, drawing on their personal experiences as valuable assets, but also critically engaging with systems and ideologies in a contemporary world. *LOF* engages in critical conversations but leaves students with debate on the extent of men's fated inner beast in his novel, and if this can be extended to Golding's view of real life. Students should have a broader exploration of how these significant ideas of masculinity, femininity, and social responsibility are understood differently. This is ultimately what critical literacy is, evaluating the implied beliefs and authorship of texts, and how the narratives inform the way we live daily.

Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe

Ari and Dante: discovering masculinity

Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe follows 15-year-old male protagonist Aristotle Mendoza in his search for meaning, happiness, and answers in his life filled with loneliness, anger, and sadness. This search for meaning and fulfillment takes readers through a course of building up relationships with an emotionally distant and complicated father, coping with nosy friends, resisting intimidation and rivalry with other boys, and making sense of his new friendship with another Mexican-American teen named Dante—a relationship that eventually develops into a romantic one.

Saenz's dedication in the novel illuminates his authorship and motivation to write the book to speak directly to issues of masculinity and culture. It reads, "To all the boys who have had to learn/to play by different rules" (p. ii). The "different rules" is allusion to the different expressions of masculinity and the challenges men face in their real-life experiences. These lines also recall the moment Dante cries for the death of a bird shot by some boys with a BB gun.

> I wanted to tell him not to cry anymore, tell him that what those boys did to that bird didn't matter. But I knew it did matter. It mattered to Dante. And anyways, it didn't do any good to tell him not to cry because he needed to cry. That's the way he was…. And why was it that some guys had tears in them and some had no tears at all? Different boys lived by different rules (Sáenz, 2012, pp. 54-55).

Saenz enters the conversation of masculinity by exploring and validating the experiences of non-traditional boys and men who struggle against toxic masculinity. The scene and dedication represent and affirm the possibility of boys who grapple with wanting to express

their masculinity one way while the world holds them to a standard they struggle to live by.

The following section lays out how Saenz explores masculinity and vulnerability through Ari's search for fulfillment through his relationships, and then explains how this masculine narrative contrasts with key points made by *LOF*. The section also examines how the desert and stars in *A&D* contrast with the island of *LOF*, symbolizing different fulfilled desires of masculinity.

Ari: a struggle with vulnerability and boyhood

Saenz seems to posit that men, to seek a fulfilling relationship, must allow a significant amount of vulnerability into their lives. This issue of vulnerability is the crux of many characters in the novel. In Ari's mind, the question of friendship and community is a question of manhood and boyhood. The search for connection is integral to the fulfillment of boyhood and manhood. Ari states:

> I was a chair. I felt sadder than I'd ever felt. I knew I wasn't a boy anymore. But I still felt like a boy. Sort of. But there were other things I was starting to feel. Man things, I guess. Man loneliness was much bigger than boy loneliness (p. 81).

Ari interprets his loneliness as an issue intertwined with his maturation, becoming "a man." Ari never felt like he could fit in with boys. In discussing other boys who sexually objectify a female pool guard, he states,

> …but I always kept my distance from the other boys. I never ever felt like I was a part of their world. Boys. I watched them. Studied them. In the end, I didn't find most of the guys that surrounded me very interesting. In fact, I was pretty disgusted (p. 22).

As Ari searches for an antidote to his loneliness, he raises legitimate concerns to call into question the community with other boys in his life. Ari's greatest vulnerability and fear is loneliness, "I wanted to tell her the same thing I wanted to tell Gina Navarro. *Nobody knows me*…. Being on the verge of seventeen could be harsh and painful and confusing" (p. 238).

This struggle for masculine connection is further elaborated in the relationship between Ari and his father, a relationship that is emotionally distant. Both characters are searching for a deeper connection, frustrated by their personal faults and miscommunications. Ari states, "Why could not he just talk? How was I supposed to know him when he did not let me? I hated that" (p. 23). Both Ari and his father had to reveal a emotional trauma to each other before they could begin with the process of healing wounds and seeking connection. Their bad dreams are a common emotional trauma, and once they shared this intimate vulnerability with each other, the relationship became possible. Their dialog about their dreams reveals this deep, intimate yearning for connection:

> "You were looking for me," he said.
>
> I looked at him.

> "In your dream. You were looking for me."

> "I'm always looking for you," I whispered (p. 63).

His father tenderly responds the next day:

> "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry I'm so far away."

> "It's okay," I said.

> "No," he said. "No it's not."

> "I have bad dreams too, Ari."

> All I did was smile at him. He'd told me something about himself. I was happy (p. 66).

The satisfaction of this relationship and this searching between the two begins when they both share this vulnerability with each other. The power of vulnerability is demonstrated again when they both are on a long drive, the two characters reveal current personal and emotional struggles within their relationship and within their self-image:

> "I'm sorry about last night," I said. "It's just that sometimes I have things running around inside me, these feelings. I don't always know what to do with them. That probably doesn't make any sense."

> "It sounds normal, Ari."

> "I don't think I'm so normal."

> "Feeling is normal." (p. 280)

In addition to the conversations Ari with his father about his personal life, the new willingness to speak authentically with trust was enough to begin the process of airing out the silence about Bernardo, Ari's incarcerated brother (p. 283). Additionally, Ari's father finally began healing from his war-time traumas after revealing this wound more to Ari (p. 347). Therefore, this arc constructs a new, fascinating narrative that boys and men should not have to hide their affections for others. Rather, they should speak freely and process emotional wounds with one another.

Ari: love and self-love

Saenz also explores the issues of vulnerability, self-love, and masculinity through Ari's relationship with himself and his relationship with Dante. In Ari's search for connection and happiness, many barriers were broken until he could understand and acknowledge his romantic feelings for Dante. When they are just getting to know each other, Ari feels comfortable with Dante, "Dante. I really liked him. I really, really liked him" (p. 35). While Ari and Dante both find a sense of joy in their friendship and doing activities together, Dante's happiness from his personal self-acceptance challenges Ari's sadness and self-rejection. Ari admires Dante for his

self-love but is also challenged by it since Ari cannot love himself, "Until Dante, being with other people was the hardest thing in the world for me. But Dante made talking, living, and feeling seem like all those things were perfectly natural. Not in my world. They were not" (p. 31).

Ari finally finds fulfillment when he begins to understand himself and learns to self-love. After the accident, his helplessness is difficult to accept. Ari states,

> I hated that my parents were so patient with me. I did. That's the truth. They didn't do anything wrong. They were just trying to help me. But I hated them. And I hated Dante too. And I hated myself for hating them. So there it was, my own vicious cycle. My own private universe of hate (p. 147).

Ari discovers that his self-hate, his fear of acknowledging his wounds is what caused his loneliness. Ari hid, "But I had learned how to hide what I felt. No, that's not true. There was no learning involved. I had been born knowing how to hide what I felt" (p. 242). It is not until Ari opens his wounds to another person that he can love himself. Once he acknowledges his imperfections, his feelings, emotions, and self-worth.

More importantly, Dante's acceptance of his romantic feelings for Dante solves the issue of loneliness. His dad finally begins the conversation by saying,

> "Ari, it's time you stopped running … If you keep running, it will kill you."

> "What, Dad?"

> "You and Dante."

> "Me and Dante?"

> "Ari, the problem isn't just that Dante's in love with you. The real problem—for you, anyway—is that you're in love with him."

> "What am I going to do? I'm so ashamed."

> "Ashamed of what?" my mother said. "Of loving Dante?"

> "I'm a guy. He's a guy. It's not the way things are supposed to be … I hate myself."

> "Don't, *amor. Te adoro.* I've already lost a son. I'm not going to lose another…"

> "How can you love me so much?"

> "How could I not love you? You're the most beautiful boy in the world."

> "I'm not."

> "You are. *You are.*"

> "What am I going to do?"

My father's voice was soft. "Dante didn't run. I keep picturing him taking all those blows. But he didn't run."

"Okay," I said. For once in my life, I understood my father perfectly.

And *he* understood *me* (pp. 347–349).

Through the complex relationships between Ari and Dante, Ari and himself, and Ari and his family, Saenz seems to postulate that masculinity requires a degree of vulnerability. Ari's acceptance of himself and his private feelings was a battle against the traditional cultural norms and expectations around him. His personal struggle was acknowledging his sexuality, which defied traditional conceptions of masculinity. Once he accepted himself through the personal struggle and alongside the loving community that supported him, he felt that freedom he had been searching for in the "secrets of the universe." The secret, finally understood and accepted, is fulfillment and finally feeling happiness. Ari concludes,

All this time. This was what was wrong with me. All this time I had been trying to figure out the secrets of the universe, the secrets of my own body, of my own heart. All of the answers had always been so close and yet I had always fought them without even knowing it. From the minute I'd met Dante, I had fallen in love with him. I just didn't let myself know it, think it, feel it…. As Dante and I lay on our backs in the bed of my pickup and gazed out at the summer stars, I was free. Imagine that. Aristotle Mendoza, a free man. I wasn't afraid anymore (p. 359).

Masculinity and relationship: conquest or vulnerability?

A&D is not the only novel that explores vulnerability and its intersection in masculinity. In *LOF*, masculine relationships are acquired on conquest: boys are only capable of group identification at the expense of individuality, use of violence to solve problems, and conquering each other. The fulfillment of these relationships is solely one-sided, with force and intimidation. The treatment of Piggy by the other boys throughout the book reveals how the boys on the island treat vulnerability. Piggy specifically mentions to Ralph not to call him "Piggy," yet Ralph takes full advantage of this vulnerability by ridiculing Piggy in front of the older boys to gain more friendship and status from them (p. 29).

A symbolic act of the destruction of vulnerability was the use of war paint. When first used, Golding describes, "[Jack] capered toward Bill, and the mask was a thing on its own, behind which Jack hid, liberated from shame and self-consciousness" (p. 80). The paint served as a way to escape his vulnerabilities and shame. The paint allows Jack to take on a new persona, a persona of brute strength and violence. The war paint treats vulnerability not just as an experience of weakness but judges vulnerability as *the masculine weakness*. From then on, Jack's relationships and actions became more brutal and violent. Once he finally sets off from the original party and makes his own, this new level of power is clear. He commands the boys to eat the cooked meat, and commanded them to appreciate his work:

Jack spoke again impatiently.

"Has everybody eaten as much as they want?"

His tone conveyed a warning, given out of the pride of ownership, and the boys ate faster while there was still time…. Evening was come, not with calm beauty but with the threat of violence (p. 184).

Vulnerability gets you killed in *LOF*. Not just physical vulnerability, but emotional vulnerability.

Aristotle and Dante also depicts the consequences of masculinity without vulnerability; violence and ostracization, both at a societal level and also on a personal level. Dante is a victim of violence because of his non-normative gay orientation (p. 304). This attack obviously highlights the real-life fear and violence that non-normative men face. The novel, though, takes it a step further by highlighting the harm that violence does to Ari himself when he chooses violence.

When Ari responds with similar violence and rage against Dante's attackers (p. 314). But the anger and violence did not solve anything for Ari, nor for Dante. Anger and violence drive individuals into their "private wars" full of isolation. Ari's father snaps him out of the violent and angry mindset because of its self-destructive and isolative nature, contrary to the vulnerability and self-love that has led to personal fulfillment. Ar's father states, "Ari, Ari, Ari. You're fighting this war in the worst possible way…. You should ask for help" (p. 319).

Ari finally realizes that violence and anger are isolative by nature, "And [I] loved my father too, for the careful way he spoke. I came to understand that my father was a careful man. To be careful with people and with words was a rare and beautiful thing" (p. 324).

In an interesting convergence, *Aristotle and Dante* and *Lord of the Flies* both critique masculinity as callous and brutal. However, where *LOF* emphasizes the abundance of callousness and brutality, *A&D* provides a clearer arc of change and positive modeling of vulnerability in masculine relationships with each other and with themselves for a fulfilling, meaningful existence.

Conclusion

The interest in and conversations about masculinity will continue to grow, and students will continue to encounter claims and ideologies outside of the classroom. In order to maintain literature instruction relevant to the lived experiences of students, then the classroom must teach students how to critically engage with the culture and the ideologies it carries through its headlines, lyrics, images, and stories (Storey, 2021). When it comes to the topic of masculinity, there are already multiple narratives that contemporary culture reproduces and engages with.

Ari and Dante is an example of the personal effects ideologies can have on youth. Ari struggled through unhappiness, self-deprecation, and loneliness. He struggled with self-anger and self-hate. He began to work out his personal suffering when he realized that the pressures around him were forcing him into a box of inauthenticity. In Ari, we can see the personal fulfillment of letting go of these values. There is a clear value in bringing these conversations into the classroom for the benefit of those students who likewise struggle to fit into traditionally defined categories. The YA stories provide a sense of real optimism and hope—a possibility for social and personal change.

Literature provides another perspective for students to engage in and reflect on their own actions and how they are engaging with the ideologies in their daily choices. As such, incorporating multiple versions of masculinity through literature assigned and taught in schools could prove beneficial in disrupting adolescent expectations, stereotypes, and ideologies. Future research may consider other versions of masculinity and how they are or are not incorporated into classrooms. We see great potential in researching students' opinions and interpretations of these contrasting models. We also recognize that we only read across three novels for this study. There are surely many more literary examples—canon and contemporary—that take on masculinity as a construct.

As educators, we often wonder what masculinity narratives our own lives, actions, and behaviors tell in the classroom. But educators can have an active and dialectic relationship with their students. What kind of expectations might we—and other educators—hold our students to? How might our own expectations, language, interactions, rules, and explanations reproduce one narrative over another? How can we challenge the mantra of "boys will be boys" in a place like a school or classroom, where gendered norms and masculinity one-upmanship are often reified and reproduced? The characters we encounter in fiction are characters encountered in real life. Fictional works can construct real-life models of masculinity, and we are optimistic that, despite the recurrence of toxic masculinity in the news, affirmative and positive representations of masculinity can emerge from the page.

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"He is just Ken:" deconstructing hegemonic masculinity in Barbie (2023 Movie)

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Scholars have consistently explored Barbie in various contexts, often subjecting it to critical analysis. However, the release of the Barbie 2023 Movie has shifted our focus from Barbie to Ken, marking the first occasion when Barbie has provided a platform for exploring representations of masculinity both in the patriarchal society and in popular culture. This article aims to investigate how the 2023 Barbie movie deconstructs symbols of hegemonic and toxic masculinity and its performative aspects within the framework of (post)feminist discourse. It examines how the movie satirically employs symbols of traditional, hegemonic masculinity to challenge normative masculine ideals prevalent in our patriarchal society. The movie -through its popularity- significantly contributes to mainstream postfeminist media culture, creating a platform where discussions on masculinity, its associated crises, and the broader gender wars, along with their existential ramifications, become unavoidable. Exploring the ways masculinities are problematized and contested within postfeminist media culture, I argue that Ken, within this narrative, is positioned as the latest icon of postfeminist masculinity, symbolizing a critical juncture in the ongoing discourse on gender roles and identities.

KEYWORDS

Barbie, Ken, postfeminism, children's media, Barbie 2023 Movie, hegemonic masculinity, gender identity, hypermasculinity

1 Introduction

Scholars have consistently explored Barbie in various contexts, often subjecting it to critical analysis as a domain where ideas are scrutinized. However, the release of the Barbie 2023 Movie has shifted our focus from Barbie to Ken, marking the first occasion when Barbie has provided a platform for dissecting representations of masculinity in the postfeminist media landscape. This shift is evident right from the movie's poster, which boldly proclaims, "Barbie is everything. He is just Ken."

This article aims to investigate how the 2023 "Barbie" movie which is directed and co-written by Greta Gerwig (and Noah Baumbach) employs symbols of hegemonic and toxic masculinity and its performative aspects within the framework of postfeminist discourse (Gerwig and Baumbach, 2023). It examines how the movie satirically employs symbols of hyper and toxic masculinities to challenge normative masculine ideals prevalent in a patriarchal society. This study suggests that the Barbie Movie is intricately connected to the postfeminist media culture, creating a platform for discussions about feminism, patriarchy, and the changing ideas about masculinity. Contemporary manifestations of feminism, often aligned with neoliberal values that prioritize individual empowerment over collective societal change, have become commodified and politically diluted within postfeminist media and celebrity culture (Gill and Scharff, 2011). This commodification is critiqued for transforming feminism into a

fashionable yet superficial concept, devoid of its political commitment and transformative potential. Under this framework, the Barbie 2023 Movie emerges as a significant subject of analysis. The film not only commodifies feminism and the so-called gender wars but also leverages the extensive academic criticism that has historically targeted Barbie. However, my contention is that the movie -through its popularity- significantly contributes to mainstream media culture, creating a platform where discussions on masculinity, its associated crises, and the broader gender wars, along with their existential ramifications, become unavoidable. It sheds light on the ways masculinities are problematized and contested within postfeminist media culture. Therefore, I argue that Ken, within this narrative, is positioned as the latest icon of postfeminist masculinity, symbolizing a critical juncture in the ongoing discourse on gender roles and identities.

In the realm of Kendom, Barbie is perceived as the dominating force that Kens must contend with. In the Real World, while men are at times portrayed as antagonists to confront, the presence of a postfeminist masculinity embodied by Ken prompts us to contemplate how the film actually frames the patriarchal system as the antagonist in all the narratives it presents. Despite Barbies governing Barbieland, which operates as a matriarchal system, it fails to alter the underlying structures of the inherently biased system. When a hierarchical system persists, featuring varying degrees of power, marginalization, and everything in between, the system functions much as it always has. This constitutes a profound critique of the patriarchal system within the movie. The gender of those in power is not the core issue; the fundamental challenge lies in reshaping the system and discerning who the true adversary is. This enduring critique throughout the movie establishes it as a feminist text.

Through the analysis of the film, this article seeks to examine how specific phrases, signs, symbols and narratives are used in the dialogues or visuals as recurring themes and patterns to deconstruct social and cultural norms of masculinity. This approach allows me to not only identify themes such as humor, satire, or the use of specific symbols but also to explore how these elements actively participate in the construction and enactment of gender identities within the film. It enables a deeper understanding of how characters' actions, expressions, and interactions perform masculinity and how these performances challenge or subvert traditional norms. It's important to note that the film's transcriptions are available online as open-source material.

In conversations regarding the film's narrative and overall cinematic creation, I intentionally use the term "the film" without singling out the writer-director Greta Gerwig and co-writer Noah Baumbach. This choice is deliberate and should not be interpreted as an attempt to diminish or disregard the importance of their roles. I aim to emphasize and acknowledge that the existence of this film is also contingent upon the decisions and actions of Mattel and Warner Bros. executives who chose to produce and promote it. This approach serves to recognize the broader popular culture industry and Mattel's responsiveness to, and promotion of, its own critiques, demonstrating a clear intention to engage in this endeavor.

1.1 Barbie's global relevance

Barbie, the iconic doll created by Ruth Handler in 1959, has transcended its role as a toy to become a cultural phenomenon through animated films, TV shows and magazines. She became a symbol of beauty, fashion, and femininity. Across various contexts, Barbie has been a symbol of materialism, cultural adaptation, and globalization. She embodies ideals and values that transcend national boundaries, influencing perceptions of beauty, gender roles, and consumer culture worldwide. Her impact on societal norms and individual identity formation, especially among young girls, is significant, prompting both admiration and criticism. With an expansive array of merchandise that includes decorations, stationery, and clothing, it has become a part of our material culture and daily lives. The Barbie 2023 Movie, directed by Greta Gerwig, has significantly contributed to this legacy, becoming the biggest film of the year with a $1.45 billion in global box office earnings (Statista, 2024). This financial success is a testament to Barbie's enduring appeal and the effective marketing strategies employed by Mattel and its partners (Walfisz, 2023).

The craze for Barbie-themed merchandise around the movie's release further underscores the brand's global reach. The film's success and the associated merchandise boom are expected to boost global sales of Barbie dolls, which had seen a decline from record growth during the pandemic (Reid, 2023). From achieving record-breaking box office earnings to influencing fashion trends and consumer behavior, Barbie's reach is truly global. The 2023 movie and its aftermath not only reinforce Barbie's status as an icon of popular culture but also illustrate the brand's ability to evolve and remain relevant in the changing landscape of media and consumer preferences.

Over the years, Barbie has generated significant academic interest, leading to a multitude of scholarly works exploring its influence on children's development, gender roles, body image, and societal values (McDonough, 1999; Rakow and Rakow, 1999; Toffoletti, 2007) in the same brackets. The evolution of Barbie's critique within academic discourse has been marked by notable shifts, particularly in how academia perceives popular culture, as observed by scholars like Rogers (1999). Over time, Barbie has faced criticism for being portrayed as a symbol of objectified sexuality. This feminist lens positions Barbie as a mechanism that perpetuates and bolsters the male-dominated consumer culture (Steinberg, 1997, 2009; Varney, 2002, p. 155). She has been criticized for promoting impossibly slender and disproportionate body standards of emphasized femininity that are associated with numerous issues among teenage girls and young women (Urla and Swedlund, 1995; Varney, 2002).

On the opposite end of the spectrum, Barbie is seen as a feminist figure, offering liberating potential for young girls. Barbie embodies careers beyond motherhood, encouraging girls to envision diverse future possibilities (Brill, 1995). This perspective serves as the central premise on which Barbie 2023 is initially built, only to undergo a continuous process of deconstruction throughout the film. However, this view has also been challenged, with arguments asserting that playing with Barbie dolls did not necessarily lead little girls to believe that they could be anything (Sherman and Zurbriggen, 2014).

There exists an alternative viewpoint in relation to those who assert that "it is just a doll," indicating that the inherent meaning is not contained within the doll but rather constructed externally by how it is played with (Reid-Walsh and Mitchell, 2000). In fact, it has been observed that girls who play with Barbie can, and often do, engage in games that challenge normative ideals (Brill, 1995; Rand, 1995; Reid-Walsh and Mitchell, 2000).

The producers of Barbie are attuned to critical discourses surrounding the doll and actively position their product in response. For example, responding to the concerns and critiques of Barbie's bodily standards, Mattel initiated innovative product lines: "Barbie Fashionista" and "M2M—Made to Move." These initiatives involved the creation of dolls designed to embrace a diverse range of body images which also appear in the movie. However, studies subsequent to M2M investigated how exaggerated features, such as those seen in Barbie and Ken dolls, can influence expectations and perceptions of weight (Saccone and Chouinard, 2019) or how levels of body appreciation are influenced by Barbie play in comparison to Lego Friends play sets (Webb et al., 2023).

In my other studies, I have contended that Barbie has transitioned into a postfeminine icon and, concurrently, a postfeminist figure. This status is attributed to her unique ability to navigate and harmonize seemingly conflicting historical notions of femininity, bridging the gap between seemingly incongruent feminine and feminist subject positions. This positioning can be seen as occupying an intermediary space. I argued that this postfeminine identity of Barbie is a narrative identity that is dialogically constructed, reflecting the influence of poststructuralist feminist and queer theories (Yakalı-Çamoglu, 2020a,b). However, in this latest movie, her identity is reset once again, and she asserts herself as the ultimate "feminist" subject. She is determined to resist any meanings or ideas imposed on her, aspiring instead to be an "ordinary" Barbie/woman. This new stance allows her to create and construct meanings and ideas, rather than being merely the subject or object of conversation, narrative, or discourse (Yakalı, 2024). With this new movie, on the other hand, Barbie brings masculinity into the spotlight as well. Ken doll who was named after Ruth Handler's son, and made his debut in stores in 1961, had lived in the shadows until this 2023 movie (Carlin, 2023). By highlighting the dialogical construction of Ken's identity and exploring its subversive potential, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the interplay between masculinity, feminism, and postfeminism in the context of Barbie's cultural influence.

1.2 Theoretical framework: postfeminist masculinities

Barbie 2023 Movie positions itself within ongoing theoretical and academic discussions related to gender and identity through a (post)feminist deconstructive stance. It also highlights the performative nature of gender, emphasizing that gender has no intrinsic qualities but is instead constructed through performances (Butler, 1988). The satirical and humorous style it employs in discussions on gender wars, critiques of patriarchy, and the state of gender identities in this postfeminist landscape opens a space for discussing various aspects of gendered lives.

The concept of postfeminism remains highly debated (see, Lotz, 2001, p. 11–113). It may denote a sense of "after" in relation to feminism, but it can also signify resistance or rejection of feminism itself (Genz and Brabon, 2009, p. 3–4). Postfeminism indicates the transformation and infusion of feminist discourse and categories into media and popular culture products (Lotz, 2001; Genz, 2009; Genz and Brabon, 2009). It also represents a cultural sensibility emerging from and reacting to feminism's legacy. According to McRobbie (2004, 2008) and Gill (2007, 2014), postfeminism is not a unified ideology but consists of conflicting discourses on gender roles. This sensibility is characterized by an emphasis on individualism, empowerment, and self-regulation, intertwined with the broader neoliberal context. Postfeminism acknowledges feminist achievements but simultaneously implies their redundancy in the contemporary era, often trivializing ongoing feminist struggles. Negra's (2009) analysis illustrates how postfeminist media celebrates female achievements in male-dominated spheres while subtly undermining feminist politics.

Gill's (2007) approach, which emphasizes the study of postfeminist media culture and necessitates a shift from relying on a fixed, authentic feminism to drawing from postmodern and constructivist perspectives for examining gender articulations, will be relevant for the purposes of this study. According to Gill (2007, p. 254) twenty-first-century media consistently highlights certain themes and structures in the representation of gender, including the embodiment of femininity; a transition from objectification to subjectification; emphasis on self-surveillance, discipline, and control; individualism; the power of choice; a paradigm of reinvention; the interplay and intertwining of feminist and anti-feminist ideas; the sexualization of culture; consumerism; and the commodification of differences. While Gill primarily discusses these themes in the context of femininity, they also offer a crucial framework for examining masculinities in postfeminist contexts. For instance, the portrayal of masculinity through both feminine and homosexual gazes suggests a transition from subjectification to objectification. Consequently, there is an emphasis on self-surveillance, discipline, and control which can be explored in how masculinity is represented and negotiated in media. The power of choice and the paradigm of reinvention may reflect the contemporary man's wavering between traditional and new masculinities, challenging and reshaping the boundaries of what it means to be masculine in a postfeminist era. Therefore, employing Gill's framework to analyze these themes in the representation of masculinities can uncover the ways in which gender is constructed, performed, and contested in postfeminist media culture.

The so-called crisis in masculinity dates to the last century, where male identity is depicted as fractured, vulnerable, and constrained. In a patriarchal society, men are conditioned to be rational and aggressive, neglecting their emotional and experiential life. Many stereotypes lead to the entrapment of men within these very stereotypes, with machismo emerging as self-destructive and masochistic (Horrocks, 1994; Kimmel, 2017). Definitions of manliness have evolved in response to feminism, and the crisis in masculinity has set the stage for the emergence of hypermasculinity and toxic masculinity (Kimmel, 1996). Hypermasculinity refers to an exaggerated or extreme form of traditional masculinity found in a heteronormative patriarchal society which emphasize traits like physical strength, aggression, dominance, emotional

suppression, and the devaluation of characteristics and behaviors perceived as feminine (Vokey et al., 2013). It often suggests a firm belief in male superiority and performances of stereotypical male gender roles associated with power, dominance and control which contribute to issues such as sexism, misogyny, and violence against women (Alonzo and Guerrero, 2009). Incels, or involuntary celibates, also exemplify the resistance to postfeminist culture, often exhibiting extreme forms of toxic masculinity, including misogyny and violence, in reaction to their perceived marginalization in romantic relationships (Stijelja and Mishara, 2022; Bogetić et al., 2023). This resistance underscores a clash between evolving gender norms and deeply rooted patriarchal attitudes.

Gill (2016, 2017) suggests that postfeminism should continue to be used as a critical tool to understand the coexistence of feminist and anti-feminist ideas within media culture. This study positions postfeminism as a critical framework for unpacking the interaction between feminist and anti-feminist narratives in media culture to examine masculinities. The postfeminist media and cultural landscape is characterized by a significant tension between, on one hand, traditional, heteronormative masculinities that valorise physical strength, dominance, and emotional restraint, including its more problematic forms like hypermasculinity and toxic masculinity, and on the other hand, the celebration of alternative masculinities. This phenomenon can also be interpreted as a "double entanglement," applicable to the representations of masculinities in postfeminist media culture. It refers to the simultaneous incorporation and undermining of feminist achievements within the media, thereby creating a complex web of both progressive and regressive narratives surrounding masculinities (McRobbie, 2008). The alternative masculinities advocate for emotional intelligence, empathy, and the dissolution of the binary between strength and vulnerability, encapsulating what Gill (2014) identifies as "unheroic" masculinities.

Postfeminist media culture has significantly reshaped the representation of masculinities. Tasker and Negra (2007, p. 21) introduced the concept of postfeminist masculinity as a discourse that celebrates the strength of women while offering subtle critiques or gentle mockery of stereotypical masculinity. In simpler terms, postfeminist masculinity portrays stereotypical masculinity as foolish or comical, and at times, even portrays it as immature or inadequate, with the intent of emphasizing the capabilities and independence of women (Macaluso, 2018). Recurring depiction of men as somewhat hapless or inept "victims" or "losers" within the context of the "sex wars," all the while presenting feminism as extreme, outdated, and, in some cases, redundant or unnecessary also becomes a part of postfeminism (Gill, 2014, p. 191). Ken's "blonde fragility" in the movie also refers to the concept of the New Man in the 1980's, which presented women with "the possibility of an active female gaze" (Cohan, 2007, p. 182). Gill (2014) exploration of "unheroic masculinity" in popular fiction reveals a departure from traditional portrayals of male characters. Instead of embodying flawless heroism, these characters display vulnerabilities and flaws, reflecting a broader critique of traditional male dominance. This portrayal aligns with Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) expanded concept of hegemonic masculinity, which now includes subordinated masculinities that challenge the dominant forms (Connell, 1995). In postfeminist

narratives, men are often shown as not always strong or in control, a stark contrast to older ideas of manhood, suggesting a redefinition of what it means to be a man in contemporary society.

Another genre within this landscape is lad flick films which often humorously depict the juvenile nature of traditional masculine values and ideals as the product of an anxiety-ridden pursuit of collective male approval (Nixon, 2001). The comedic tension in these films often stems from the male protagonist's struggle to live up to or maintain unrealistic versions of masculinity, as dictated by their male peer group (Gill and Hansen-Miller, 2011, p. 39). The concept that manhood is homosocial—that is, men need to prove themselves to each other rather than to women—becomes the main theme to be deconstructed (Kimmel, 1996). Eventually, the "lad" character is compelled to grow up and overcome their subordination to homosocial values to become a proper adult.

The narratives and character developments within lad flick may reflect elements of "hybrid masculinities." Hybrid masculinities refers to a conceptual framework within the field of gender studies that examines how contemporary masculinities incorporate elements traditionally considered feminine or otherwise not aligned with hegemonic masculinity (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014). This approach suggests that men's identities are increasingly becoming a blend of traditional masculine norms and those characteristics or behaviors that have historically been marginalized or devalued in men.

Mocking hypermasculinity and toxic masculinity in movies serves as a critique within postfeminist media culture. This form of ridicule can subvert and question traditional narratives around masculinity, introducing ambivalence by blending humor with critique, thus reflecting the mixed sentiments of postfeminist media culture. It enhances consumer appeal by making serious critiques more accessible and entertaining, potentially normalizing alternative masculinities by presenting them as preferable to their hypermasculine and toxic counterparts. Ultimately, by engaging with feminist discourse and challenging problematic aspects of traditional masculinity, Barbie 2023 contributes to the ongoing dialogue about gender norms, balancing critique with commercial viability in a neoliberal context. While mocking hyper and toxic masculinity might seem progressive, it can also provoke backlash from those who feel their identities or values are being threatened (Dosser, 2022).

It can be argued that postfeminist media landscape is an arena for the so-called "gender wars" which aptly describes the ongoing conflicts and debates in postfeminist media culture surrounding gender roles and identities. These wars are characterized by a reevaluation of traditional gender roles, a backlash against feminism, and contradictory representations of empowerment. The struggle for gender equality, negotiation of masculinities, and the role of intersectionality in these debates further compound the complexity of these wars (Gill and Donaghue, 2013). Digital and social media have amplified these conflicts, providing platforms for a multitude of voices and perspectives, sometimes leading to polarization (Kolehmainen, 2012). The Barbie Movie becomes the ultimate postfeminist icon of our media landscape by making these gender wars the central theme of a film that has reached a wide and diverse audience. It cleverly turns its critiques into a major theme, generating billions in revenue, and counterattacks by positioning

Barbie as a "feminist" character who will liberate women from their misery.

However, it must be noted that the Barbie 2023 Movie is also a feminist text, as it suggests the real enemy in gender wars is the patriarchal system rather than gender itself, representing a significant and progressive narrative shift within postfeminist media culture. This approach aligns it more closely with feminist critiques of societal structures, moving beyond individual behaviors, identities, or personal choices to address the systemic foundations of inequalities.

1.3 The emplotment of the movie

The movie begins with a scene reminiscent of Stanley Kubrick's "2001: A Space Odyssey" and continues to build upon the scholarly perspective that posited Barbie play as a means for young girls to envision lives beyond the roles of wives and mothers. Then, we go to Barbieland, a matriarchal society inhabited by various Barbie and Ken dolls, along with a group of discontinued dolls who face societal exclusion due to their unconventional traits. Barbie grapples with existential concerns after experiencing physical changes overnight, including bad breath, cellulite, and flat feet. Weird Barbie, an outcast who functions as the mentor character, informs Barbie that she must locate the child playing with her in the real world to cure these afflictions. Ken secretly joins her on this journey.

Their quest leads them to Venice Beach, LA, where Barbie realizes that it is not a matriarchal society and that the goals of feminism have not been attained. She stands up to a man who gropes her, and this results in a brief arrest. When this draws the attention of Mattel's CEO, the firm orders Barbie and Ken's capture. Barbie eventually finds her owner, Sasha, a teen girl who criticizes her for promoting unrealistic beauty standards and creating a backlash of feminism. Barbie's existential crisis mirrors that of Gloria, Sasha's mother, and a Mattel employee, who began playing with Sasha's old Barbie toys, unintentionally setting off Barbie's internal turmoil and existential crises. Mattel tries to put Barbie in a toy box for remanufacturing, but with the help of Gloria and Sasha, she escapes and returns to Barbieland, pursued by Mattel executives.

Ken returns to Barbieland after learning about patriarchy and shares his newfound knowledge with the other Kens. The Kens assume control, relegating the Barbies to submissive roles. Despite Barbie's efforts to revert to the previous order, her attempts fail, leading to her descent into depression. However, Gloria steps in and delivers an empowering speech that addresses the contradictory expectations placed on women in society, restoring Barbie's self-confidence. With the support of Sasha, Weird Barbie, and Allan, Barbie and Gloria rally the Barbies to break free from their subordination. They manipulate Kens into war, preventing them from establishing male dominance in Barbieland.

The Barbies ultimately reclaim their power, having personally experienced systemic oppression, and commit to rectifying the flaws in their previous society. They emphasize the importance of fair treatment for all, marking a significant shift in their approach to governance.

Barbie and Ken reconcile, acknowledging their mistakes. Ken struggles with his sense of purpose without Barbie, but she encourages him to discover an autonomous identity. Barbie, still uncertain about her own identity, encounters the spirit of Ruth Handler. Ruth explains that Barbie's story has no predetermined ending, and her evolving history transcends her origins. After bidding farewell to the Barbies, Kens, and Mattel executives, Barbie decides to become human and return to the real world as an "ordinary" woman.

2 Results

2.1 Structure of feeling and insecurity

Barbie 2023 Movie constructs a postfeminist story universe in Barbieland. Postfeminist masculinity serves as an analytical lens for understanding masculinity in the specific context of this movie, where multiple aspects coexist simultaneously. The film suggests that despite significant progress toward gender equality, achieving some feminist goals, the overarching patriarchal system remains, continuing to adversely affect people of all genders. This perspective prompts a reevaluation of traditional gender roles and also shifts attention toward issues related to men and masculinity.

One aspect of postfeminist masculinity explored in the film is its invitation for us to reflect on the current state of masculinity. A primary question it raises is to what extent does this hybrid masculinity incorporate emotional expression? In line with lad flick genre or unheroic masculinity of the postfeminist media landscape, the film challenges traditional norms that discourage men from openly expressing emotions or vulnerability. Ken who is portrayed as childish and insecure challenges the conceptualization of "heroic" men of the patriarchal narratives. It advocates the idea that men possess feelings and should have the freedom to articulate a full spectrum of emotions.

The initial impression we gather of Ken revolves around his deep-seated insecurity and his desire to make a favorable impression on Barbie. This sense of insecurity within the context of Barbieland is explicitly articulated by the narrator in the very first scene that introduces the stereotypical Ken, as well as the other Kens, on the beach:

> "Barbie has a great day every day, but Ken only has a great day if Barbie looks at him." (00:08:04)

In this scene, Ken injures himself while attempting to impress Barbie by confronting the plastic waves. Shortly after, we observe him engaging in a juvenile competition with the Asian Ken, displaying readiness for a potential fight. However, Ken also remarks that he would "beach him off" if he weren't severely injured, indicating an inclination for aggression. The interaction between Ken and the Asian Ken encapsulates the themes of hypermasculinity. These behaviors highlight the struggle to adhere to exaggerated masculine ideals, fostering insecurity about gender performance within their homosocial group. This scenario resonates with Kimmel's (1996) discussion on the crisis in masculinity, where male identity is depicted as fractured and constrained by patriarchal expectations. Ken also resonates with the

"lad flick" character who feels compelled to showcase his prowess both within his homosocial group and to the Barbies. The Asian Ken, in response, appears to belittle him, questioning why he's displaying such emotion. This interaction serves as a reminder that both the expression of emotions and resorting to physical conflict driven by emotions are viewed critically in our postfeminist society. Consequently, throughout these scenes, we witness the characters grappling with their identities and feeling insecure about their gender performance. This portrayal aligns with the notion of "hybrid masculinities," where traditional and non-traditional masculine behaviors coexist and often conflict (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014).

As they make their way to the hospital van, Ken is overcome with desperation and clings to Barbie:

> "Ken- Barbie, hold my hand!
> Barbie- You're okay.
> "Ken- Stay with me, Barbie!" (00:10:25)

The doctor Barbie examines the X-ray film and confirms that there is no fracture, reassuring Ken that he will be okay. In response, Ken experiences a blend of relief and remorse for his previous actions, and he replies:

> "Shredding waves is much more dangerous than people realize." 00:10:32
> Barbie answers with an unemotional tone:
> "You're very brave, Ken."

Ken's reliance on Barbie's attention for validation and his subsequent expressions of vulnerability and desperation encapsulate the "double entanglement" of postfeminist media culture (McRobbie, 2008). Ken's actions, juxtaposed with Barbie's unemotional responses and insincere praise, critique the traditional gender dynamics perpetuated by patriarchal society. Barbie's treatment of Ken, particularly in praising his "beaching," deconstructs the societal dynamic where women often bolster the egos of men, a dynamic rooted in hegemonic masculinity (Tannen, 1992; Walker, 2020).

2.2 Ken's existential crises

Ken undergoes an existential crisis, reflecting the broader challenges faced by masculinity in the postfeminist era. He experiences two distinct existential crises in the Movie. First, in Barbieland, he grapples with a profound sense of identity loss. In this fantastical world, he lacks agency, power, occupation, and even a place to call home. He often serves as a mere sidekick or helper during beach outings or parties. This mirrors the way women have historically been positioned in a typical patriarchal society, often relegated to secondary roles, or rendered invisible in the male-dominated world. This also aligns with the dynamics of girls' play, where male figures frequently assume secondary roles.

The film's exploration of Ken's identity crisis and Barbie's encouragement for him to find self-definition beyond their relationship directly engages with feminist critiques of traditional gender roles and the concept of individual agency. Barbie's response to Ken's existential dilemma is articulated in the words of Barbie:

> "Maybe it's time to discover who Ken is... you have to figure out who you are without me. You're not your girlfriend. You're not your house, you're not your mink.... You're not even beach. Maybe all the things that you thought made you aren't... really you. Maybe it's Barbie and... it's Ken." (01:35:25)

This echoes feminist calls for autonomy and self-realization that challenge patriarchal structures which often define individuals by their roles in relation to others.

Furthermore, the movie's subversion of traditional gender roles, as demonstrated through Ken's vulnerability and search for identity, aligns with postfeminist media culture's approach to gender representation. Postfeminism, with its contradictory relationship to feminism, both utilizes and critiques feminist gains by highlighting the limitations of traditional gender norms while exploring the complexities of identity in the contemporary era (McRobbie, 2004; Gill, 2007). For example when Ken says: "I just don't know who I am without you." Barbie answers: "You're Ken." He desperately goes on: "But it's 'Barbie and Ken.' There is no just "Ken." That's why I was created. I only exist within the warmth of your gaze." This kind of a subjectivity without agency have been what feminism have challenged. Barbie's encouragement for Ken to redefine himself beyond societal expectations and the "warmth of [her] gaze" resonates with the postfeminist emphasis on individualism and self-regulation, albeit through a feminist lens that advocates for the dismantling of restrictive gender norms.

Thus, the binary points of identification; and the dichotomous ways of defining identities in a heteronormative relationship are challenged. The film suggests that these conventional binaries are being questioned or undermined in the context of gender and identity politics. The postfeminist subjectivities, which are closely connected to neoliberal consumerism under the auspices of choice and empowerment, also call for reconsideration.

Ken's second existential crisis occurs when he enters the Real World. Here, he suddenly becomes aware of the presence of patriarchy and the apparent dominance of men. However, he soon realizes that merely being a man does not automatically grant him a place in this world. To succeed, he needs education, financial resources, experience, and qualifications, much like women do. He also discovers that women hold various occupations, as evident in the doctor scene, and that similar rules apply to both genders. Therefore, in the postfeminist era, being a man in a patriarchal society is not as straightforward as it may seem.

As Ken experiences an overwhelming sense of happiness upon discovering that he has a place as a male in the Real World, he becomes eager to learn more about it. He decides to visit the library at Sasha's school and ends up stealing a few books. This act is a reference to the concept of bibliotherapy and reflects the postfeminist world's obsession with self-improvement through self-help books, courses, and therapies (Cohan, 2007). In a society where everyone is striving to find their place or narrative identity within an ever-evolving context, Ken selects four books. This act serves as a deconstruction of the self-help and makeover paradigm, with Ken choosing the books: "The Origins of the Patriarchy" by Godfrey Hogarth; "Why Men Rule (Literally)" by Richard Merritt and "Men

and Wars" and a last one titled "Horses" by Ryan Bessin, all of which are fictitious books.

Subsequently, we witness his transformation of Barbieland into Kendom, effectively giving it an extreme makeover through the themes of these books. This time the film deconstructs patriarchy through this paradigm and identifies the symbols of hegemonic masculinity and deconstructs them.

2.3 Deconstructing hypermasculinity through symbols

As he is unable to belong in the Real World, Ken returns to Barbieland to enlighten the other Kens about the concept of patriarchy. Ken's transformation and the establishment of Kendom within Barbieland offer an illustration of the makeover paradigm, particularly in the context of gender roles and identities. The makeover paradigm, often associated with postfeminist media culture, typically emphasizes self-reinvention and transformation as a path to empowerment. However, Ken's humorous makeover and the subsequent establishment of Kendom reverse this narrative, showcasing a transformation that reinforces patriarchal and hegemonic norms rather than challenging them. This twist also provides a critical commentary on the limitations and potential repercussions of the makeover paradigm.

Ken establishes Kendom by orchestrating the Barbies into submissive roles mirroring those observed in the Real World. Barbies obediently serve men beverages and food, offer foot massages, and willingly embrace their subordinate positions. Meanwhile, the Kens readily embrace and adopt any symbols and acts associated with hegemonic, hyper or toxic masculinity that Ken had observed in the Real World.

Ken's initial appearance in traditionally "feminine" colors such as pink, white, and turquoise and his later shift to "masculine" colors such as navy blue and black reflect a deeper narrative on the fluidity of gender identity and the performative nature of gender roles, as discussed by Butler (1990). Ken's appearance undergoes a significant transformation in the movie. In the Real World, he comes across a picture of Sylvester Stallone, inspiring his choice of wardrobe. This includes a fur coat, a headband, a revealing six-pack, and leather half-gloves that leave his fingers exposed. Moreover, he wears three wristwatches simultaneously, prompted by an incident where a woman asked him for the time, leading Ken to believe he's finally gaining respect and recognition in the Real World. He even layers two pairs of sunglasses atop each other, thinking it looks cool, though it renders him somewhat absurd. All the other Kens dress in cowboy costumes.

Ken transforms Barbie's dream house into what he calls "Ken's Dojo Mojo Casa House." Parked outside is a robust, masculine van used by the rangers. The space is stocked with sports equipment, including American football gear, boxing gloves, golf equipment, and a mini fridge for storing beer, which they seem to consume incessantly alongside snacks. In every scene set in Kendom, a visible jar of protein powder used by bodybuilders is featured. The display of protein powder as a symbol of the artificial construction of hypermasculinity aligns with Butler's (1990) notion of gender performativity. The emphasis on Ken's six-pack abs as a result

of this artificial enhancement further illustrates the performative aspects of masculinity, challenging the notion of hypermasculinity as a natural or desirable state. This critique aligns with postfeminist media critiques that often expose the labor behind seemingly natural or effortless gender presentations, revealing the societal pressures that dictate strict adherence to gender norms.

The saturation of Kendom with horse symbolism and Ken's revelation about "men extenders" articulate a critique of how traditional symbols of power and masculinity are often leveraged to reinforce male dominance (00:58:33). The movie's exploration of this symbolism, culminating in Ken's realization about the performative basis of patriarchal power, provides a commentary on the mechanisms through which masculinity is asserted and maintained in society.

This portrayal not only satirizes the exaggerated aspects of male stereotypes and masculinities mentioned above but also critically examines the societal norms and expectations that perpetuate these behaviors. By presenting these traits in a hyperbolic and humorous light, the narrative invites the audience to question and reflect upon the underlying issues of gender inequality and performative character of such attitudes. The film explores Ken's development to critique the makeover paradigm and the concept of the "gaze," noting how men, too, are objectified; it delves into gender fluidity and the effects of hegemonic and toxic masculinity.

2.4 Subversion of masculinity traits through uses of micro-power

The movie humorously presents the typical characteristics of masculinity within a patriarchal context, using satire to highlight these norms. When Barbie and Gloria decide to harness men's competitive nature, setting them against each other in their quest for power, they cleverly exploit these common traits and stereotypical characteristics. This strategy not only reveals the often-unspoken rules governing gendered behavior in a patriarchal society but also displays the artificiality and absurdity of such expectations. By doing so, the film deconstructs these established norms and deeply rooted performances of masculinity that have long been prevalent in various forms of representation. The narrative, therefore, becomes a tool for questioning and challenging the status quo, encouraging viewers to reconsider their own perceptions of gender and power dynamics in contemporary society.

Gloria's guidance on manipulating Kens through gendered performances prompts reflection on the tactics women employ to survive in a patriarchal society:

> "Kens cannot resist a damsel in distress. You have to make them believe that you're complacent. That they have the power. And when their guard is down, you take the power back." 01:17:31
>
> "You have to be their mommies but not remind them of their mommy." 01:18:19
>
> "Any power you have must be masked under a giggle." 01:18:22

> "You can tell him that you've never seen The Godfather. And that you'd love them to explain it to you." 01:18:41
>
> "You have to find a way to reject men's advances without damaging their egos. Because if you say yes to them, you're a tramp, but if you say no to them, you're a prude." 01:19:01
>
> "Another one, be confused about money." 01:19:12
>
> "And then there's pretending to be terrible at every sport ever." 01:20:03

Gloria's instructions—acting complacent, masking power with a giggle, pretending to be ignorant in sports or financial matters—highlight how women often perform prescribed gender roles to cope with the patriarchal structures that seek to define and limit their agency. This performance is a survival mechanism within a system that rewards women for conforming to subservient and stereotypically feminine roles while penalizing them for deviation (Yakalı-Çamoglu, 2017). Hence, the film goes beyond merely mocking men and their ego in hypermasculinity; it also deconstructs the conventional interpersonal dynamics between men and women within a patriarchal framework. It reveals how women have wielded micro-power in subtle ways and developed various strategies to control men and their idiosyncrasies within this system (Henley, 1973).

The humorous depiction of the Kens' eagerness to "help" the Barbies with sports serves as a critique of patriarchal courtship rituals and the broader societal expectation that men should assume a position of knowledge and authority. This scene also touches on the concept of "mansplaining," where men feel compelled to explain things to women under the assumption that women lack knowledge or expertise. The movie critiques the constraints of performative gender roles across all genders, spotlighting both the limitations on power and agency, and the ways women resist and reclaim autonomy. This critique extends beyond merely depicting the actions of one particular gender, addressing instead the broader system and order that underpin these gender roles.

2.5 Doing gender, doing love

The portrayal of Ken's interactions with Barbie in Kendom, serves as a critique of toxic masculinity, illustrating how the film deconstructs such behaviors through both narrative and character development. Ken's proposition to Barbie, offering her the option to stay as his "bride wife" or "long-term-low-commitment-distance girlfriend," alongside his later aggressive behaviors, underscores a satirical examination of toxic masculinity. These actions reflect not only a desire for dominance but also an insecurity and entitlement characteristic of toxic masculine norms. This is emblematic of the behavior observed in certain incel or misogynistic subcultures, where unreciprocated affection leads to aggressive and entitled attitudes toward women (Lindner, 2023).

The film utilizes Ken's character arc to highlight the absurdity of such toxic traits. Ken's transition from a character marked by insecurity and a desire for Barbie's approval to one who embodies aggressive dominance and entitlement when he gains power in Kendom mirrors broader societal critiques of how toxic masculinity manifests. His insistence on Barbie serving him and the symbolic

act of discarding her dresses from the house represent psychological aggression and control, further illustrating the toxic dynamics at play.

This narrative strategy aligns with concept of gender performativity, suggesting that gender identities, including toxic masculine behaviors, are enacted performances shaped by societal expectations rather than innate qualities. Moreover, the movie's humorous yet critical portrayal of these dynamics engages with McRobbie's (2008) notion of the "double entanglement" of postfeminism, as it both utilizes and critiques traditional gender norms to explore complex gender relations. Barbie's response to Ken's behavior, marked by a mix of disdain and depression, reflects the emotional toll of living in a society immersed in toxic masculinity.

Another illustrative scene on the topic of gender and love is the satirical depiction of Kens playing guitars to impress Barbies on the beach. The guitar scene where multiple Kens simultaneously play their guitars and sing the same song to Barbies on the beach, creating a circle around a fire transforms the act into a repetitive, predictable, and mundane ritual, thereby serving as a symbol that exposes the performative nature of gender roles within romantic contexts. This also critiques the authenticity of such performances, suggesting they are more about conforming to societal scripts than about genuine expression.

Furthermore, this scene directly engages with the postfeminist critique of romantic narratives propagated by media and culture. Postfeminism often explores the contradictions and complexities within contemporary gender relations. The explicit acknowledgment of the act's performative nature in the dialogue between Barbie and Ken serves as a meta-commentary:

> "Barbie: That's a beautiful song that you're playing. Did you write it?"
>
> Ken- "Yes. You want to sit here and watch me do it, while I stare uncomfortably into your eyes for 4½ min?"
>
> Barbie- "I would love that." (01:24:35)

Inviting the audience to question the authenticity and spontaneity of gendered behaviors in courtship, the film deconstructs traditional romantic rituals by exposing their formulaic and performative aspects, thereby challenging viewers to reconsider the ways gender and love are enacted and expressed in society.

2.6 Men and wars

The film's fight scene, drawing inspiration from the Normandy attacks during World War II, unfolds on a beach—a setting historically associated with the utmost seriousness of warfare, combat, and sacrifice within the realm of men. However, in this movie, the concept of war and fighting is subjected to deconstruction, beginning with its underlying motivations. The Kens engage in combat not due to any external threat but as a result of psychological manipulation masterminded by the Barbies who exploit the masculine egos and competitive performativity and "petty jealousy" of the Kens. Barbies turn Kens against each other to regain power. Consequently, the Kens are portrayed as rather

foolish, their egos are ridiculed, and they are intentionally depicted as comical even within the context of a seemingly serious battle.

The deconstruction of the gravity associated with war and death is exemplified through the choice of weapons. Drawing from previous fighting Barbie narratives, such as in "Barbie and the Three Musketeers," the Kens employ unconventional items like tennis rackets, gymnastic ribbons, beach balls, and toy archers as their weaponry (Sheridan et al., 2009; Yakalı-Çamoglu, 2011). The choice of unconventional weapons and attire, such as tennis rackets and gymnastic ribbons, further diminishes the traditional gravity of war and combat, presenting these elements in a playful and absurd light.

Notably, Ken wears an Action Man attire comprising a black leather vest adorned with tasseled epaulets. Epaulets, typically worn by soldiers to signify their rank in the army, is only enjoyed by stereotypical Ken played by Ryan Gosling. His black leather trousers, along with a "Ken"-emblazoned black belt specially crafted for him and adorned with thunder strike-like figures at the bottom of the letters "K" and "N," in addition to a black and white headband, all serve as reminiscent of Action Man in action. Ken's costume amplifies this satire by drawing on childhood symbols of masculinity.

Through a satirical deconstruction of traditional masculine ideals, especially those tied to war and combat, the film critiques and mocks stereotypical notions of masculinity. By staging a fight scene reminiscent of historical warfare on a beach, then subverting expectations with the characters' motivations and actions, it not only challenges traditional concepts of masculinity but also ties into the broader discourse of gender wars mentioned in our theory chapter. The Kens' engagement in combat, driven not by noble causes or external threats but by the Barbies' psychological manipulation of their egos and competitive nature, serves as a microcosm of the gender wars. These wars are not just literal battles but are fought on the psychological and social fronts, where masculine behaviors such as aggression, competitiveness, and the desire to assert dominance are revealed to be not innate or inherently admirable but easily manipulated and subject to ridicule.

2.7 Depictions of hegemonic masculinity: a critique of neo-liberal capitalist culture

In the movie, Mattel and its board serve as symbolic embodiments of both hegemonic masculinity and the actors of neoliberal capitalism. However, their portrayal is not one of intelligence but rather cunning to the point of absurdity. They are depicted as two-faced individuals who wield power; they are fully aware of the need for political correctness but show little concern for those with less power or for women.

Their headquarters is itself designed with a phallic shape and they humorously acknowledge it. The interior of the building is notably unexciting, exuding an industrial atmosphere characterized by a monotonous gray color scheme and an abundance of dreary cubicles. Within this structure, populated by exclusively male mid-management personnel, the film paints a stark picture of the "reality" of working life in a capitalist society. It becomes evident that this portrayal does not depict a contented patriarchal existence

where every man finds fulfillment. Instead, the representation of the male-dominated corporate environment is dull, emphasizing the entrapment of both bodies and spirits for those who are a part of it.

The employees' monotonous and uninteresting work lives sharply contrast with Barbie's vibrant world and her colorful fashion choices. The staff members are uniformly dressed in plain canvas trousers and serious college sweaters, while the boardroom is populated by men all wearing identical black suits. Their unachieved determination to appoint women to managerial positions appears to be a response to feminist pressures. The film adopts a satirical tone when it portrays the embodiments of hegemonic masculinity during the CEO's speech, particularly when Barbie expresses surprise upon realizing the stark difference between the environment in the Mattel boardroom and her own world in Barbieland.

Barbie asks:

> "Are any women in charge?"
> The CEO answers in a defensive manner
> "Listen, I know exactly where you're going with this, and I have to say I really resent it. We are a company literally made of women. We had a woman CEO in the 90's. And there was another one... at some other time. So that's—that's two right there. Women are the freaking foundation of this very long phallic building. We have gender-neutral bathrooms up the wazoo. Every single one of these men love women. I'm the son of a mother. I'm the mother of a son.... I'm the nephew of a woman aunt. Some of my best friends are Jewish. What I'm trying to say is... Get in the box, you Jezebel!" 00:46:37

This scene serves as a humorous critique of Mattel, shedding light on the scholarly criticisms directed toward the company. Furthermore, it acts as a reflection of the broader culture, revealing that political correctness often serves as a mere facade. In this postfeminist world, the treatment of women's roles is portrayed with a dual nature, akin to the two faces of Janus. Hegemonic masculinity remains firmly entrenched in positions of power, and feminism has only managed to make inroads into discourse, without fundamentally altering the status quo. The movie's underlying critique suggests that those in positions of power are willing to adopt subject positions in the culture if it proves profitable, with little change in their core understanding of femininity or any non-conforming subjectivity. It's crucial to recognize that the inclusion of this scene and the portrayal of Mattel in such a light constitute the core feminist critique of the Barbie Movie, as it targets the broader system rather than focusing on individuals.

3 Discussion

In 2016, Gill observed a transformation of feminism from a marginalized identity to a fashionable and "cool" presence within mainstream youth culture. Yet, this shift often results in an uneven focus on feminist issues in media, at times trivializing significant concerns and rendering feminist activism with limited visibility (Gill, 2016). The emergence of a neoliberal feminism, emphasizing

personal empowerment over collective societal change, calls for a discerning critique. This trend commodifies feminism into a marketable yet politically detached notion in media and celebrity culture, necessitating a critical examination and challenge. Being a part and parcel of this postfeminist cultural landscape, The Barbie 2023 Movie steps into this discourse, sparking mainstream discussions on feminism, patriarchy, and notions of masculinity.

This study posits that the Barbie Movie is deeply embedded within the postfeminist media landscape. On the one hand it is the ultimate postfeminist text but on the other hand it carves out a niche for critical discussions on patriarchy, and evolving concepts of masculinity. I have suggested that the film not only commercializes feminist debates and the so-called gender wars but also leverages the longstanding academic criticism directed at Barbie to engage with these themes. Despite this commodification, the movie contributes to the discourse on masculinity, gender conflicts, and the systemic challenges influencing all genders. It not only highlights the absurdity and malleability of traditional gender performances but also points to the patriarchal structures as the narrative's true antagonist. In the realm of Kendom, Barbie is perceived as the dominating force that Kens must contend with. In the Real World, while men are at times portrayed as antagonists to confront, the presence of a postfeminist masculinity embodied by the executives of Mattell and Ken prompt us to contemplate how the film frames the patriarchal system as the antagonist in all the narratives it presents. By doing so, it underscores that the issue lies not in the gender of those in power but in the patriarchal system itself, advocating for systemic change over superficial fixes.

This analysis reveals the film's layered critique, using satire to comment on men's competitive nature within patriarchy and how women, like Barbie and Gloria, navigate and subtly subvert these norms. Barbie 2023 Movie thus becomes a reflection on postfeminist masculinity and the performative nature of gender, challenging the audience to question the authenticity of societal gender constructs. The film, with its humor and satire, deconstructs the established symbols of masculinity within patriarchy, highlighting the complex and often absurd nature of these constructs. It sheds light on the performative aspect of gender identities, emphasizing how individuals, including men, have an existential crisis within our gendered society. It highlights the notion that many of the "realities" we live by are merely facades, janus-faced socially constructed illusions.

As Ken becomes the ultimate icon of postfeminist masculinity, the film's broader critique extends to capitalism's role in commodifying social movements, including feminism, urging a deeper engagement with gender equality beyond the superficial. It also underscores the potential of popular culture as a site of resistance and critique, offering insights into the ongoing struggle

for gender equality and the reimagining of masculinity in the postfeminist era. As such, the Barbie 2023 Movie is not merely a reflection of current gender discourse in the postfeminist media landscape but also opens a space for its evolution, inviting us to rethink our roles and the potential for transformative change within this landscape.

4 Further research

Audience reaction to the movie's gender-related themes merits further investigation in a reception research. Future studies should include how individuals of diverse gender identities interpret the movie.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

DY: Writing – original draft.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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The gendered behaviors displayed by Disney protagonists

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Previous research suggests that the portrayal of male and female protagonists in Disney animations may be changing over time. The current study examined the portrayal of gendered behaviors displayed within some of Disney's most successful animated feature length films, including those beyond the Disney princess franchise. Extending the scope of the Disney animated films analyzed was important because both young girls and young boys report little personal interest in male characters within the Disney princess animations. This suggests that it is important to look beyond the Disney princess franchise to understand the gendered behaviors displayed by potentially influential male Disney protagonists. The current study also considered a greater number of masculine and feminine behaviors as well as some gender-neutral traits which had yet to be incorporated. A quantitative content analysis of 39 Disney protagonists from films released between 1937 and 2021 was conducted. The results revealed that male and female protagonists were statistically higher in feminine than masculine traits. Female protagonists from the earliest animations were the most feminine. However, there was no statistical difference in the gendered portrayals of females in the animations released in the 1990s and those released from 2009 to 2021 suggesting some continued stereotyping in females' profiles. Alternatively, male characters were more feminine relatively consistently across time-points. This study concludes that Disney is persistently portraying stereotyped female protagonists, and this could have implications on young females' behavioral profiles. However, the extent to which feminine traits are being celebrated when displayed by male protagonists needs to be examined, as well as the potential relationship between such messages and boys' behaviors and children's conceptualizations of gender more broadly.

KEYWORDS

Disney, gender, princess, prince, gender roles, content analysis, children's media

1 Introduction

Several previous studies exploring the behavior of protagonists in Disney animated feature length films have suggested that there are numerous gender stereotypical messages present (Dundes, 2001; Towbin et al., 2004; Giroux and Pollock, 2010; England et al., 2011; Dundes and Streiff, 2016; Streiff and Dundes, 2017a,b; Hine et al., 2018a; Primo, 2018). Problematic messages around race (both independently and in relation to gender) have also been consistently identified in Disney's animated feature films by academics (Towbin et al., 2004; Giroux and Pollock, 2010; England et al., 2011; Streiff and Dundes, 2017a,b; Hine et al., 2018a; Primo, 2018). The proposed impact of such messages is supported by several theoretical perspectives which suggest that problematic gender representations can affect children's understanding of gender, for example, Social Cognitive Theory of Gender Development (Bussey and Bandura, 1999), and Gender Schema Theory (Bem, 1981).

Moreover, the gendered behaviors displayed in Disney animations are likely to be particularly influential because this corporation has been one of the most popular producers of children's animated content for over eight decades, meaning further research in this area is therefore warranted and beneficial. Further, while all animation has a sense of innocence, no other animation studio has situated itself as strongly in this way as Disney (Bell et al., 1995; Giroux, 1995; Wasko, 2001; Wells, 2002; Wynns and Rosenfeld, 2003; Giroux and Pollock, 2010; Sammond, 2019). Disney has transformed often violent or gruesome fairy tales into family-friendly, magical, and heart-warming feature films which is one way that its output has been perceived as "innocent." However, critics argue that presenting idealistic versions of fairy tales and historical events is dangerous (Towbin et al., 2004; Giroux and Pollock, 2010; Heatwole, 2016). Therefore, although Disney animation has largely maintained its innocent reputation in the domestic and familial sphere, its innocence has been questioned in the academic sphere (Bell et al., 1995; Giroux, 1995; Wasko, 2001; Wells, 2002; Wynns and Rosenfeld, 2003; Giroux and Pollock, 2010; Sammond, 2019).

Studies which have sought to quantify the gendered behavior of Disney protagonists, whilst illuminating, have largely utilized the same coding scheme; a framework that may benefit from review due to significant limitations (Padilla-Walker et al., 2013; Hefner et al., 2017). Additionally, many studies have focused on the Disney princess franchise which was created to enable Disney to successfully market (and thus profit from) the oldest and much-loved Disney animations featuring prince and princess characters (such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Cottrell et al., 1937) alongside the more recent princess releases (such as *The Little Mermaid*, Clements and Musker, 1989). Indeed, by bringing the now 13 princess (Disney Princess, 2024) films together in this way, Disney ensured that even the earliest princess releases stayed relevant and continued to be consumed over 50 years after initial release (Heatwole, 2016). However, this focus has meant that there has been little quantitative investigation of the gendered profiles of other influential Disney protagonists (Holcomb et al., 2014; Azmi et al., 2016), despite important calls to consider a wider repertoire of media content from which children receive influential gendered messages (Ward and Grower, 2020). Further, assessing animated films which lie outside of the female targeted Disney princess franchise will also provide insight into the representation of gender displayed by Disney protagonists that may be more likely to appeal to young boys. For example, those within *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (Trousdale and Wise, 1996) and *Tarzan* (Buck and Lima, 1999) which each yielded over $300 million globally (Box Office Mojo, 1996, 1999).

The current study, therefore, aims to extend previous work to consider and overcome some of the limitations identified within the previous quantitative content coding studies conducted by England et al. (2011) and Hine et al. (2018a). A quantitative content analysis of 39 Disney protagonists spanning films released from 1937 to 2021 for their levels of stereotypically masculine, feminine and gender-neutral behavior was thus conducted. This study also applied an expanded coding scheme across a broad range of films and protagonists to assess the gendered behavior displayed and to identify the chronological changes in the representation of men and women in Disney feature length animations.

1.1 Findings from previous quantitative content analyses

The most recent quantitative content coding analyses of the gendered behaviors displayed in Disney animated feature length films (England et al., 2011; Hine et al., 2018a) have focused exclusively on the Disney princess animations. In these publications, the earliest princesses, those in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (Cottrell et al., 1937), *Cinderella* (Geronimi et al., 1950), and *Sleeping Beauty* (Clark et al., 1959), were the most feminine of all the princesses in the franchise. They were identified as being highly submissive (England et al., 2011), passive and victimized (Towbin et al., 2004; Whitley, 2013) and domestic work was central to portrayals of femininity in *Snow White and Seven Dwarves* (Cottrell et al., 1937) and *Cinderella* (Geronimi et al., 1950) especially (Whitley, 2013; Heatwole, 2016). This finding is perhaps unsurprising considering the time the films were released, however, it is important to note that they are still likely to be influential to young audiences who remain vulnerable to the stereotypical messages prevalent within them. Curiously, while the female protagonists in the earliest Disney princess animations were highly gender stereotypical, the prince characters within those films were high in both masculine and feminine behavior (England et al., 2011). It is unclear as to why the female characters were highly stereotyped and the male characters were not, although the prince characters in this era of Disney animations lacked screen time (Davis, 2007) which left little behavior to be considered for analysis (England et al., 2011).

Princess films released between 1989 and 1998 (*The Little Mermaid*, Clements and Musker, 1989; *Beauty and the Beast*, Trousdale and Wise, 1991; *Aladdin*, Clements and Musker, 1992; *Pocahontas*, Gabriel and Goldberg, 1995; and *Mulan*, Bancroft and Cook, 1998) referred to as the "middle" princess animations by England et al. (2011) and Hine et al. (2018a), included princesses who were regarded as more independent in comparison to "earlier" princesses (Davis, 2007). The princesses in this era were statistically more masculine than the "earlier" princesses (England et al., 2011). However, these films have been criticized for still taking place within patriarchal societies (Giroux and Pollock, 2010), that are ruled by the princesses' overpowering (albeit caring) fathers (Holcomb et al., 2014). These animations have also been criticized for displaying princesses who are predominantly focused on romantic relationships that are largely idealistic and unhealthy (Hefner et al., 2017), much like their earlier counterparts. Indeed, almost all the "middle" princess films end with the princess marrying or being romantically involved, highlighting Disney's reliance on romance to provide "happy endings." The prince characters in the "middle" movies were slightly more masculine than the "earliest" princes although this difference was not statistically significant (England et al., 2011). Perhaps most notably, the "middle" princes were much more muscular, and many were leaders (England et al., 2011) suggesting some more stereotypical portrayals of masculinity. The "middle" animations are therefore considered to have mixed gendered messages (England et al., 2011).

It is important to acknowledge that the portrayal of gender in Disney animations and media more broadly is reflected by, and a reflection of, changing attitudes toward men and women in society (Gill, 2007a). The portrayal of the princesses in situations

that they wish to escape, and the influence of dominating father figures are relatively consistent themes in the "middle" princess films. Although the female protagonists tended to be strong willed and seek independence, they ultimately fall in love sometimes at the detriment of their initial dreams or goals (England et al., 2011). The notion that women will be ultimately fulfilled by their romantic unions is, for Faludi, an anti-feminist backlash message intended to refocus women's attention on marriage and the home (Faludi, 1993). Faludi's (1993) work considers the influence of repeated cycles of anti-feminist backlash on the portrayal of men and women in media that surfaces when women make gains in the fight for equality. She finds for example, after women were granted the Equal Rights Amendment in America in 1972, there was an almost instant response in which "New Right" groups argued that feminism had simply gone too far, needed to be rejected or reversed and had caused unhappiness in women, men, and families to encourage women to turn against their own cause (Faludi, 1993; Mendes, 2011). The messages regarding inevitable romance and dominating father figures in the "middle" Disney princess films may reflect the backlash Faludi identifies. Further, the masculinity of the male characters with whom the princesses in this era are romantically involved with is also consistent with backlash politics that relies on reinforcing and exaggerating the difference between men and women to justify their different social roles (Faludi, 1993; Tasker, 1993). That the "middle" Disney princess films seem to be influenced by backlash politics provides evidence for the entanglement with "innocent" Disney animations and problematic gendered messages.

So-called "modern" Disney princess animations (*The Princess and the Frog*, Clements and Musker, 2009; *Tangled*, Greno and Howard, 2010; *Brave*, Andrews et al., 2012; *Frozen*, Buck and Lee, 2013; *Moana*, Clements et al., 2016) have the most androgynous female characters, that is, those high in both feminine and masculine behaviors. These androgynous princesses tend to be highly assertive and athletic (masculine traits) as well as fearful and tentative (feminine traits; Hine et al., 2018a). The authors suggested that this movement from highly stereotypical Disney princesses to those high in both masculine and feminine behavior provides evidence that there is a wide range of female gender profiles shown in the franchise overall, and that depictions of princesses have become more progressive over time (Hine et al., 2018a). Both the "modern" and "early" princes seemed to be less stereotyped, that is, lower in masculine behavior than the "middle" princes, although it should be noted that only borderline significance was found in the change in masculine behavior displayed by princes across the three eras (Hine et al., 2018a). This suggests that the development of male protagonists' gender profiles is less linear and chronological than those of the princesses, as well as less prominent.

Postfeminist messages have been identified in Disney's portrayal of masculinity and femininity and these seem to relate most to the "modern" animations. Post-feminism often has both feminist and antifeminist sentiment as it usually finds that gender equality has largely been achieved (Gill, 2007b; Frasl, 2018). It both celebrates and overstates the accomplishment of the women's movement and assumes that its current pursuit is needless (Butler, 2013 cited by Gorton, 2004; Gill, 2007b; Frasl, 2018). Postfeminist

men are often referred to as being in crisis due to conceptualizations of masculinity expanding to include feminist values (Rumens, 2017). Women, Gill (2007b) discusses, are often simultaneously sexualized in postfeminist media while presented as autonomous, in control, and often sexually liberated rather than passive. The female protagonists may be more active in postfeminist media, but may also "seem compelled to use their empowered postfeminist position to make choices that would be regarded by many feminists as problematic, located as they are in normative notions of femininity" (Gill, 2007b, p. 162). This therefore seems to present women as choosing to be traditionally feminine as autonomous subjects without investigating whether this is in fact a choice (Gill, 2007b).

In "modern" Disney animations, male protagonists are often presented as immature, inept, and the butt of the joke in contrast to their stronger female equivalents (Macaluso, 2018). Female characters in children's films seem to be more intelligent whereas men seem to be stronger and funnier (Smith et al., 2010) and men in postfeminist films are likely to be underachievers in financial trouble (Gill, 2014). These traits are particularly present within *The Princess and the Frog* (Clements and Musker, 2009) as Naveen holds many of these qualities. Other modern princes such as Flynn Rider and Kristoff also fit into this new masculine archetype (Macaluso, 2016, 2018). Although this can lead to the conclusion that Disney films with such a dynamic could be empowering because the female characters are stronger and more competent than the male characters, this is a sign of postfeminist content because:

"There seems to be a message that men must be weak in order for women to thrive. This message is dangerous to both sexes, as it subtly suggests that women and men cannot successfully coexist as strong, independent individuals together" (Macaluso, 2018, p. 8).

The implications of presenting women as strong only against weak, less masculine (Gillam and Wooden, 2008) and largely mocked male characters are unclear.

Further, by representing princesses who need the help of men to achieve their goals and maintaining a focus on female characters' appearances (best exemplified by "Let it Go" in *Frozen*, Buck and Lee, 2013), "one of the strongest features of post-feminism [is endorsed]: a contradictory articulation of progressive and regressive elements of gendered identities and identifications" (Rudloff, 2016, p. 17). Therefore, it seems that contradictory gender messages have been prevalent throughout Disney's history, but the "modern" princess films endorse postfeminist messages by portraying strong(er) female characters alongside "weak or foolish male character[s]" (Macaluso, 2018, p. 7). Highlighting the relation between the gendered messages in Disney films and the women's movement provides evidence that such messages reflect, impact upon, and/or are impacted by, the political climate in which they exist (Giroux and Pollock, 2010).

Overall, it appears that the depiction of the gendered behavior displayed by prince characters has remained largely stable over time (England et al., 2011) albeit with some evidence that the "modern" men were higher in feminine than masculine traits than their earlier counterparts. This trend warrants further research as a borderline significance was found (Hine et al., 2018a), therefore analyzing more male profiles is necessary. Disney princesses, however, seem to enjoy a more pronounced chronological progression from being

highly stereotyped in the "early" animations to more androgynous (high in masculine and feminine traits) over time. Some non-princess and more recently released animations require content coding analysis to provide a more detailed appraisal of these trends. Additionally, a further appraisal of the earliest Disney princess animations is warranted as they are still heavily marketed and widely seen meaning they are likely to still be influential today. It should be noted that although there is nothing inherently wrong with females adhering to femininity (and males adhering to masculinity), and characters in mass media being portrayed to do so, androgyny for Bem and Lewis (1975) "was equated with [gender role] flexibility, and flexibility was related to adaptive and positive mental health" (Bem and Lewis, 1975, as cited by Martin et al., 2017, p. 593). Therefore, less stereotyped gender role profiles in Disney protagonists may be advantageous, especially if this is replicated by the children engaging with such media.

1.2 The impact of gendered messages in media

Gendered messages in mass media, such as the Disney feature length animations that have been described above, are likely to affect children's understanding of the appropriate behavior for men and women, as argued by theories such as Social Cognitive Theory of Gender Development (Bussey and Bandura, 1999) and Gender Schema Theory (Bem, 1981). Social Cognitive Theory describes the ways in which children learn about gender differentiation from their environment. The theory suggests that children observe, attend to, and replicate behavior of same-sex models more frequently because they identify them as like themselves in a process referred to as modeling. Children learn gendered information through models in their direct environment such as their parents, siblings, and peers as well as through the media. A child must be motivated to replicate behavior and motivation is likely to be lower if it is associated with an adverse outcome (for example if it is chastised) and is likely to be higher if there is a potential incentive (for example, they may get praised). Because children are more likely to be praised for behaving in accordance with their gender role stereotype, they are more motivated to replicate stereotyped behavior. Similarly, if a character in a film is shown to be displaying a gender a-typical behavior and is humiliated as a result, the child will not be motivated to display the behavior themselves. During this process, the developing child learns to "regulate their own conduct by the reactions they expected from others, pursuing same-gender activities but shunning activities linked to the other gender" (Bussey and Bandura, 1999, p. 698).

Similarly, Gender Schema theory (Bem, 1981) describes the importance of the environment in children's understanding of gender. The theory describes the process that children learn to associate information they gain into organized schemas regarding what is "for boys" and what is "for girls." Schemas develop in complexity as more information from the environment is assimilated. The theory suggests that children are motivated to acquire knowledge to develop their gender schema when they are able to label their own gender and thus appreciate gender as a significant feature of their identity (Bussey and Bandura,

1999). While the child is assimilating information into their gender schema, they may also use this information to guide their behavior. Children gain gendered information from their environment, including the media they consume. Both Social Cognitive Theory, and Gender Schema Theory therefore suggest that the messages obtained from media will be influential to children's understanding of gender and the behavior they display.

However, although there is theoretical grounding to suggest that the gendered profiles displayed by Disney protagonists may be influential to children, there is less research that examines this phenomenon than the messages within the Disney feature length animations themselves. In a study that importantly examined whether children notice the gendered behavioral profiles of Disney princesses, Hine et al. (2018b) found that children between the ages of 8 and 9 years old rated Aurora (from *Sleeping Beauty*, Clark et al., 1959) as more feminine than Moana. This finding provided evidence that children not only observed differences in the gendered behavior of Disney protagonists, but they attributed the gendered traits to such characters in line with academic research and perspectives (Hine et al., 2018b). The participants also reported that princesses in general were more feminine than masculine (Hine et al., 2018b). This research therefore raises the question as to how children's perception that some princesses are both feminine and masculine (such as Moana), but overall, princesses are more feminine, will impact their gendered behavior.

Research investigating the impact of female Disney protagonists on children's behavior finds that there is an association between exposure to Disney princess characters and children's displays of stereotypically feminine behavior (Coyne et al., 2016; Golden and Jacoby, 2018). For example, Coyne et al. (2016) found that high levels of engagement with Disney princess media was associated with more stereotypically feminine behavior in both boys and girls and that the effect was longitudinal—it predicted the level of feminine behavior displayed after 12 months. Additionally, some researchers have provided children with Disney princess dressing-up outfits and recorded their play activities and behaviors (Golden and Jacoby, 2018) or their performance on certain tasks (Coyne et al., 2021). Although such research does not provide evidence of the association between the content in Disney films themselves and children's gendered behavior, they can provide insight into the behaviors children have learned to associate with characters from such films and thus deem appropriate to replicate when dressed like them. When provided with Disney princess outfits, girls reproduced highly feminine behavior such as focusing on their appearance and displaying highly feminized movements such as twirling (Golden and Jacoby, 2018). They also avidly excluded boys from their play which suggests that the participants marked princess play as appropriate for girls and not boys (Dinella et al., 2017; Golden and Jacoby, 2018). However, girls' toy preferences were not affected by the dressing-up outfits they wore (whether these were Disney princess outfits, superhero outfits, or gender-neutral outfits), which could reflect the more androgynous behavioral profiles of princesses in modern animations, as discussed above (Coyne et al., 2021). Conversely, boys who wore superhero outfits were less likely to show preferences for feminine typed toys than boys who wore gender-neutral outfits. Boys were also more likely to show prosocial behavior when dressed in feminine dressing-up outfits, such as that

of a nurse, than when they were in superhero outfits. These findings suggest that boys were more likely to adhere to gender stereotypes when they were wearing masculine costumes than when they were wearing feminine or neutral costumes. It is interesting to note that it was revealed in pilot testing that boys often refused to wear Disney princess outfits all together, suggesting that Disney princess merchandise is strongly considered "for girls," in line with previous work (Dinella et al., 2017).

Wohlwend (2012) also found evidence of play providing opportunities for children to challenge gender norms. When boys played as female characters in play scenarios with Disney and non-Disney dolls, their female doll characters were continuously mis-gendered. Thus, although the boys were not excluded from doll play as they were in more direct princess play (Golden and Jacoby, 2018), the more inclusionary, less gender segregated play, came with challenges for children. Wohlwend (2012) suggests that

> "[t]he number of corrections in this play episode reveal how gender performances intertwined with doll play and enforced an expectation that boys could animate dolls but should not animate female characters" (Wohlwend, 2012, p. 15).

Taken together, this research suggests that Disney princess narratives are associated with more femininity in the children engaging with them (Wohlwend, 2012; Coyne et al., 2016; Golden and Jacoby, 2018) and this could explain why boys frequently refused to wear Disney princess dressing-up outfits (Coyne et al., 2021). Therefore, despite children's recognition that a more "modern" female protagonist is both feminine and masculine (Hine et al., 2018b), it is children's overall conceptualizations of princesses (Dinella et al., 2017; Hine et al., 2018b) that seem to dominate when it comes to the behavior they reproduce. More broadly, the research also implies that Disney media influences the narratives that children create in their play, as well as the behavioral profiles of both boys and girls (Wohlwend, 2012; Coyne et al., 2016). This highlights the importance of studying gendered messaging within such media. Further, much like content coding research conducted by England et al. (2011) and Hine et al. (2018a), the focus on the impact of the gendered messages within Disney animations has primarily focused on the princess franchise, and the female protagonists within that franchise. Both the impact of the prince characters and the gendered profiles of non-prince male protagonists that exist outside the princess franchise are currently not known.

1.3 The aims of the current study

Much of the research considering the gendered behavior displayed by Disney protagonists focuses on the Disney princess franchise. As a result, some potentially influential protagonists (for example, those from movies grossing over $200 million worldwide but not featuring a Disney princess) have not been examined with the same rigor. Perhaps particularly significantly, the previous focus on the Disney princess franchise means that many male non-prince characters have been excluded from previous research. The male protagonists that do not feature within the Disney

princess animations may be among the most influential to young boys, as boys are less likely to engage with media they associate as being "for girls" (Dinella et al., 2017). Notably, Davis (2013) identified that there was an increase in leading male protagonists in the Disney animations around the 1990s (with films such as *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, Trousdale and Wise, 1996; *Hercules*, Clements and Musker, 1997; *Tarzan*, Buck and Lima, 1999) which could reflect the company aiming to draw in a young male audience. The current study aims to examine the gendered profiles of some of these characters. Further, as new Disney animated films are released, additional content analyses are necessary to provide modernized assessments of gendered portrayals. *Frozen 2* (Buck and Lee, 2019) and *Raya and the Last Dragon* (Hall et al., 2021) were not released when Hine et al. (2018a) conducted their research. *Frozen 2* (Buck and Lee, 2019), which although a sequel, generated more profit than its prequel (McGuire, 2020; Whitten, 2020) making it worthy of research. Raya is a welcome addition to the franchise, given her Southeast Asian identity and the film's move away from the princess-meets-prince narrative (Debruge, 2021; Dzurillay, 2021; Ramella, 2021). A content coding of the leading characters in some of the most recent Disney releases, such as *Frozen 2* (Buck and Lee, 2019) and *Raya and the Last Dragon* (Hall et al., 2021) is needed.

Additionally, the content analyses conducted by England et al. (2011) and Hine et al. (2018a) also had methodological drawbacks particularly in relation to the coding scheme utilized. For example, Hine et al. (2018a) found that the *shows emotion* code was limiting. *Shows emotion* was defined as

> "the expression of both positive and negative representation of feeling. This was only coded for princes because initial piloting of the coding scheme indicated princesses consistently displayed emotion at each opportunity throughout and it was unreasonable to code" (England et al., 2011, p. 599).

Although the code was adequate in coding the early Disney princess films, it was not representative of the broader emotion displayed in the later films (Hine et al., 2018a). This issue could partly reflect that the "modern" Disney men have much more screen-time than the "early" princes meaning that they are generally more developed characters (Davis, 2013). More broadly, it is possible that the progression from hand-drawn animation to the use of computer-generated imagery within the "modern" era of Disney animated feature length films allows for emotion to be expressed by characters more clearly. For example, the level of expression that is shown by the characters within *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (Cottrell et al., 1937) is much less pronounced than that within *Moana* (Clements et al., 2016) because the animation is much more simplistic in the former.

Further, the *shows emotion* code was applied exclusively to the behavior of the princes (and was treated as a feminine trait) which meant that emotional displays of princesses (beyond the extreme case of a princess collapsing while crying), were not coded because princesses showed emotion at high frequencies (England et al., 2011). However, because emotion is displayed at such high frequencies, coding emotion for only male protagonists could have

potentially influenced the results of previous research. Further, the code did not differentiate between the emotions displayed meaning that presumably, an angry outburst could have been attributed this code as well as a scene in which a prince cried, even though the former is arguably a more traditionally masculine emotional display than the latter. The *shows emotion* code was the most frequently displayed by the prince characters in both the original (England et al., 2011) and the modern extension of the work (Hine et al., 2018a) likely reflects the variance of behavior that could fit into the code and highlights the need for specific emotional behaviors to be recorded, and in a more general sense, a review of the coding scheme applied.

In summary, pervious quantitative content analyses have provided substantial insight into the behavior of Disney prince and princess characters. However, there are three important ways to extend this research, including incorporating animations beyond the Disney princess franchise to analyze a more diverse group of protagonists, incorporating recent films not yet analyzed, and applying a revised coding framework that addresses key limitations to earlier versions.

The current study conducted a quantitative content analysis of 39 Disney protagonists spanning films released from 1937 to 2021 for their levels of stereotypically masculine, feminine and gender-neutral behavior. The study built on previous research in three ways, addressing each of the limitations referred to above. Firstly, it examined the gendered behavior displayed by a greater number of influential Disney protagonists than previous content analyses, including characters from non-princess films. Secondly, it analyzed the gendered portrayals within two of the Disney animations released since the prior work (Hine et al., 2018a) was conducted, namely *Frozen 2* (Buck and Lee, 2019) and *Raya and the Last Dragon* (Hall et al., 2021). Thirdly, the current study utilized a more expansive framework of behaviors to overcome some of the drawbacks of the one utilized by England et al. (2011) and Hine et al. (2018a). Although Hine et al. (2018a) utilized the same coding framework so that the gendered behaviors displayed by Disney characters released between 1937 and 2009 could be directly compared to those released between 2009 and 2016, this was not necessary in the current study. Therefore, the framework applied in the current study was revised by adding new behavioral codes and expanding the descriptions of others. This approach aimed to minimize some of the limitations with the previous behavioral codes. The current study was guided by the following research questions and hypotheses:

RQ1: Will both male and female protagonists be higher in feminine than masculine behavior?

H1A: Female protagonists will be higher in feminine than masculine behavior overall.

H1B: Male protagonists will be higher in feminine than masculine behavior overall.

H1C: There will be no significant difference in the masculine, feminine and gender-neutral behavior displayed by male and female protagonists when the two gender groups are compared.

RQ2: Will there be changes in the gendered profiles of male and female protagonists across the three eras analyzed?

H2: Female protagonists' gendered behavior will have changed over time. Specifically, the "modern" female protagonists will display higher levels of masculine behavior when compared to

their "early" and "middle" counterparts. Conversely, the gendered behavior displayed by male protagonists will not have changed significantly over time.

2 Materials and methods

2.1 Protagonist inclusion criteria

Thirty-nine protagonists from feature length films produced by Walt Disney Animation Studios were chosen for quantitative content coding analyses of stereotypically masculine, feminine and gender-neutral behavior (see Table 1). Specifically, the central protagonists were coded from Disney animated feature length films that (a) had a central human, adult male protagonist (b) had grossed over $200 million dollars worldwide and/or (c) were associated with the Disney princess franchise. These criteria aimed to capture the most influential Disney protagonists. It should be noted here that whilst the influence of films cannot simply be measured by box-office results, worldwide grossing is arguably the most practical way of determining reach and popularity. Thus, in line with Hine et al. (2018a), the $200 million benchmark was deemed appropriate. Furthermore, children are most likely to model behavior from people or characters they deem to be like themselves (Bussey and Bandura, 1999). Therefore, Disney animated feature length films that were centered around animal protagonists were excluded, as the gendered behavioral profiles of such characters are less likely to be influential to children and are more difficult to accurately code.

2.2 The coding framework

The coding framework utilized in the current study consisted of 52 codes and England's et al. (2011) previously established framework (later used by Hine et al., 2018a) was evaluated and adapted. The full coding framework is available as Supplementary material. This section will describe and justify the adaptations made to the previous behavioral codes and discuss codes that were added for the current study.

Four behavioral code descriptions (*athletic*, *nurturing*, *collapses crying*, and *ashamed/guilty*) remained the same in the current study as they appeared in the previous study. These code descriptions were clear and seemed applicable to all eras of animation and thus did not require adaptation. Although the description of *ashamed* from previous studies remained unchanged in the current work, the code name was changed from (ashamed to *ashamed/guilty*) to represent the description more accurately.

Six behavioral codes were created by dividing previous code descriptions into more than one behavior in the current framework. Some of these represented nuanced differences in a behavior that could change its meaning. For example, England et al. (2011) stated that although princesses expressed assertiveness frequently, they were rarely assertive to other adult protagonists and this arguably portrayed "a fairly submissive and limited way of being assertive" (England et al., 2011, p. 562). Therefore, separate *assertive toward adults* and *assertive toward children/animals* behavioral codes were incorporated into the current framework, the former as a masculine code and the latter as a feminine one.

TABLE 1 The films and protagonists content coded, the era to which they belong and the Kalpha reliability scores.

Film era	Film name	Male protagonist		Female protagonist	
		Name	Kalpha	Name	Kalpha
"Early"	Snow White and the Seven Dwarves (Cottrell et al., 1937)	The Prince	0.74	Snow White	0.70
	Cinderella (Geronimi et al., 1950)	Prince Charming	0.81	Cinderella	0.78
	Sleeping Beauty (Clark et al., 1959)	Prince Philip	0.79	Aurora	0.70
"Middle"	Little Mermaid (Clements and Musker, 1989)	Eric	0.68	Ariel	0.7
	Beauty and the Beast (Trousdale and Wise, 1991)	The Beast	0.73	Belle	0.73
	Aladdin (Clements and Musker, 1992)	Aladdin	0.73	Jasmine	0.7
	Pocahontas (Gabriel and Goldberg, 1995)	John Smith	0.69	Pocahontas	0.73
	Hunchback of Notre Dame (Trousdale and Wise, 1996)	**Quasimodo**	0.71	**Esmerelda**	0.71
		Phoebus	0.68		
	Hercules (Clements and Musker, 1997)	**Hercules**	0.73	**Meg**	0.74
	Mulan (Bancroft and Cook, 1998)	Li Shang	0.70	Mulan	0.72
	Tarzan (Buck and Lima, 1999)	**Tarzan**	0.70	**Jane**	0.84
"Modern"	The Princess and the Frog (Clements and Musker, 2009)	Naveen	0.74	Tiana	0.73
	Tangled (Greno and Howard, 2010)	Flynn	0.75	Rapunzel	0.73
	Frozen (Buck and Lee, 2013)	Kristoff	0.77	Elsa	0.77
		Hans	0.74	Anna	0.77
	Moana (Clements et al., 2016)	**Maui**	0.77	Moana	0.72
	Frozen 2 (Buck and Lee, 2019)	**Kristoff**	0.73	**Elsa**	0.78
				Anna	0.79
	Raya and the Last Dragon (Hall et al., 2021)	**Father Benja**	0.78	**Raya**	0.8
				Numaari	0.69

Eighteen behavioral codes that featured in England et al. (2011) and Hine et al. (2018a) underwent relatively minor changes, mainly to ensure that the descriptions were more explicit about how a behavior may appear within a target film, and in some cases, to make the behavioral code broader. Also, some adjustments to pre-existing codes reflected the need to ensure that the descriptions did not overlap due to the higher number of codes incorporated into the current framework (52 as opposed to the previous 27). An example of a minor adjustment includes the addition of climbing to the *physically strong* code description. Some behavioral codes underwent more major adjustments for the purpose of the current study with their descriptions being partially or completely re-written. For example, the first author felt that the previous *curious about the princess* code that had the description "exhibiting a studious, concerned expression when looking at the princess. This behavior suggested that the female had a mystique that was captivating and romantically compelling" (England et al., 2011, p. 558–559) could be subjective and felt that it was unclear what

could constitute a "studious, concerned expression." Therefore, the code name was changed to *shows romantic interest* and the description was re-written. The new description included examples such as, a character deliberately engaging in a conversation with the intention of getting to know another character in a way that suggested romantic interest, as well as a character being unable to control themselves around a love interest (appearing glazed over or looking mesmerized by them). These changes were informed by notes that were taken on the gendered messages within Disney animated feature length films before data collection for this study had begun.

Twenty-three codes that did not appear in the previous framework were added to the current framework. The number of new behavioral codes in current study reflects the aim to code as much of the behavior displayed by the protagonists as possible so that it could comment upon more complete gender profiles. The new codes included six emotion-based codes such as *expresses positive emotions (excluding excitement), sad, angry/frustrated*, and

panic, which were added due to the drawback of the *shows emotion* code in the previous framework (Hine et al., 2018a) as discussed in the previous section of this paper. Other new codes included *deceitful*, *honest*, and *charming*. These had not been included in previous work conducted by England et al. (2011) and Hine et al. (2018a) but were identified utilizing a bottom-up approach during which Disney (target and non-target) films were viewed before the study had been designed and behaviors that were exhibited frequently across multiple films were noted. To generate the new codes and create accurate code descriptions, two of the authors had several meetings where behavior that occurred in several Disney animated films but was not captured in the previous coding framework was identified and discussed. During the meetings, scenes in which the behavior that did not fit within the previous coding framework were rewatched to ensure that descriptions and code names generated would represent the behavior as it appeared in the relevant text and that the examples provided would facilitate the application of that behavioral code. When all the changes had been made to the coding framework it was approved by a third author.

Two codes that were present in the previous framework were removed and these decisions were also made via discussions and meetings between the authors, as described above. The *gives advice* code was incorporated into the description of the *helpful* code. One (rather than two) *described as physically attractive* code was included in the current study and was considered a feminine trait. It was not deemed necessary to have separate described as attractive codes for male and female protagonists as the principal of being described as attractive is arguably the same regardless of gender. Further, previous research finds that female Disney characters' appearances are given more value than males' (Towbin et al., 2004). It therefore seemed appropriate to deem being described as physically attractive a feminine trait.

The gendered split of the behaviors in the coding scheme was based on previous research (Thompson and Zerbinos, 1995; Do Rozario, 2004; England et al., 2011). To further our understanding of the behavioral profiles of Disney protagonists, the current study considered the portrayal of gender-neutral behavior in addition to the commonly studied gender typical and atypical behavior. The frequency of gender-neutral behavior has not been explicitly examined. It was important to include such behavior in the current analysis to establish whether most of the behavior displayed by Disney protagonists was indeed gendered.

2.3 The coding procedure

All the films were coded by at least two coders (with the majority, 13 of 17, being coded by three coders). Two lead coders (referred to as the primary and second coders throughout this section) coded all the target protagonists. The lead coders were trained utilizing two films that were excluded from the study but represented similar content for coding (i.e., *Brave*, Andrews et al., 2012 and *Atlantis: The Lost Empire*, Trousdale and Wise, 2001). Three additional coders also coded *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* (Trousdale and Wise, 2001) for training purposes and coded between 8 and 10 target protagonists each. The target films

that were coded by three coders were reviewed in two stages. First, the opening 15 minutes of each of the target films was coded and discrepancies were discussed until Krippendorf's alpha (hereafter, Kalpha) reached 0.67 (Hayes and Krippendorff, 2007). The remainder of the film was then coded, and Kalpha's were calculated for the full behavioral profile of each character, and if necessary, further discussions were had to improve the inter-rater reliability score.

The primary coder acted as the reviewer of the coding in which discrepancies were highlighted. If an agreement between coders could be reached, the coding was amended, but if the coders fundamentally disagreed on the interpretation of a behavior, the coding was left as it was. This approach ensured that reliability was maintained for each protagonist while honoring each coder's interpretation. It is possible that having the primary coder conducting those discussions could have created a bias in that they may have been more likely to perceive their own coding as accurate. However, the discussions were deliberately collaborative. It is also possible that the primary coder leading discussions facilitated more critically aware coding procedures and ensured that the researcher was close to, and engaged with, the methodological approach that was followed at all stages of the research.

The films coded by the two lead coders were coded in their entirety, and the opening 15 minutes of the coding was not reviewed first, due to their attendance of extra training sessions. To monitor the reliability throughout the process of data collection, as more results were added into the analyses, reliability was calculated and reported for each protagonists' behavioral profile (see Table 1 for final Kalpha values).

The coding procedure replicated that previously established by England et al. (2011) and Hine et al. (2018a). A protagonist was attributed a code when they were seen to display a trait/behavior in the framework, or they were mentioned to possess a trait. The same behavior was coded again if the scene changed, and the behavior was still being displayed. However, if the same behavior was displayed more than once within one scene, it was only coded once. Multiple codes could be attributed to a behavior. For example, if a character was angry while vocalizing that they were not interested in another character romantically, both an *angry/frustrated* and an *uninterested in love* code could be recorded to accurately capture the behavior displayed in that moment. Each code was timestamped and tallied meaning that a frequency could be calculated for each behavioral code when the coding of each protagonist was completed.

3 Results

Before any analyses were conducted, the total number of the masculine, feminine, and gender-neutral behaviors counted by each coder for each protagonist were averaged. The averages for these three sets of behaviors were then converted into percentages of each protagonists' total number of behaviors to mitigate for variance in the total frequency of behavioral codes attributed for each protagonist. Such an approach was previously utilized by England et al. (2011) and Hine et al. (2018a) and is particularly important when comparing "early" protagonists to "middle" and

TABLE 2 The percentages of gendered behavior displayed by male and female protagonists.

Film name		Male protagonist's behavior				Female protagonist's behavior		
		Masculine %	Feminine %	Neutral %		Masculine %	Feminine %	Neutral %
Snow White and the Seven Dwarves (Cottrell et al., 1937)	The Prince	47.83	52.17	0	Snow White	16.99	76.74	6.27
Cinderella (Geronimi et al., 1950)	Prince Charming	22.03	72.88	5.09	Cinderella	16.31	72.81	10.87
Sleeping Beauty (Clark et al., 1959)	Prince Philip	44.92	47.46	7.63	Aurora	9.38	79.89	10.72
The Little Mermaid (Clements and Musker, 1989)	Eric	27.56	57.72	14.72	Ariel	19.28	70.58	10.14
Beauty and the Beast (Trousdale and Wise, 1991)	The Beast	44.49	47.27	8.24	Belle	34.46	53.68	11.87
Aladdin (Clements and Musker, 1992)	Aladdin	29.46	56.53	14.01	Jasmine	37.56	48.08	14.36
Pocahontas (Gabriel and Goldberg, 1995)	John Smith	37.61	53.98	8.39	Pocahontas	33.42	56.80	9.78
The Hunchback of Notre Dame (Trousdale and Wise, 1996)	**Quasimodo**	29.07	61.23	9.70	**Esmerelda**	33.04	59.50	7.46
	Phoebus	37.30	53.99	8.71				
Hercules (Clements and Musker, 1997)	**Hercules**	39.36	48.69	11.94	**Meg**	39.61	48.69	11.94
Mulan (Bancroft and Cook, 1998)	Li Shang	58.77	28.83	12.39	Mulan	27.49	56.90	15.60
Tarzan (Buck and Lima, 1999)	**Tarzan**	43.31	48.00	8.69	**Jane**	25.78	66.06	8.17
The Princess and the Frog (Clements and Musker, 2009)	Naveen	28.35	60.78	10.87	Tiana	31.96	54.12	13.91
Tangled (Greno and Howard, 2010)	Flynn	29.77	52.19	18.04	Rapunzel	28.30	60.09	11.61
Frozen (Buck and Lee, 2013)	Kristoff	31.66	56.68	11.66	Anna	27.32	62.42	10.26
	Hans	30.44	51.06	18.50	Elsa	35.71	56.39	7.90
Moana (Clements et al., 2016)	**Maui**	50.93	35.98	13.10	Moana	31.42	51.46	17.13
Frozen 2 (Buck and Lee, 2019)	**Kristoff**	22.57	60.62	16.81	**Anna**	25.77	60.69	12.65
					Elsa	34.47	55.59	12.65
Raya and the last Dragon (Hall et al., 2021)	**Father**	31.76	55.59	12.65	**Raya**	30.85	55.03	14.12
	Benja				**Numaari**	45.89	40.98	13.13

"modern" protagonists who tended to have more codable behavior (due to changes in animation style). The percentages of masculine, feminine, and gender-neutral behaviors were then entered into SPSS, and the percentages of the gendered behavior displayed by each protagonist across each of the coded films can be found in Table 2. The categorization of the films into these eras is consistent with England et al. (2011) and Hine et al. (2018a).

3.1 Comparing the gendered profiles of male and female protagonists

To answer hypotheses 1A and 1B, paired sample t-tests were conducted to reveal whether male and female protagonists were significantly higher in either masculine or feminine behavior within their own character sex. Table 3 shows the mean scores for male and

female protagonists on masculine, feminine, and gender-neutral behavior. Results revealed that both male, $t_{(18)} = 3.80$, $p < 0.01$, and female protagonists, $t_{(19)} = 7.361$, $p < 0.001$, were significantly higher in feminine behavior than masculine behavior overall. According to the means, 36.17% of male protagonists' behavior was masculine and 52.72% was feminine. 29.25% of females' behavior was masculine and 59.38% was feminine. Both Hypothesis 1A and 1B were therefore supported.

In answer to hypothesis 1C an independent t-test comparing the percentage of masculine behavior displayed by male and female protagonists revealed that, contrary to the prediction made, male protagonists were significantly higher in masculine traits (M = 36.17%) than female protagonists (M = 29.25%), $t_{(37)} = 2.306$, $p < 0.05$. A second independent t-test comparing the percentage of feminine behavior displayed by male and female protagonists revealed that there was also a significant difference between male and females, $t_{(37)} = 2.157$, $p < 0.05$ with male protagonists being significantly lower in feminine traits (M = 52.71%) than females (M = 59.38%).

Although no hypotheses were made regarding the percentage of gender-neutral behavior displayed by male and female protagonists because of a lack of research on the topic, analysis was also conducted on these results. Because both male and female characters were shown to be more feminine than masculine, the percentage of gender-neutral behavior was compared to the masculine percentages for both male and female characters. Assessing this would determine whether masculine behavioral portrayals also differed significantly from the portrayal of gender-neutral behavior which, according to the means, were displayed the least by both male and female protagonists. It was revealed that both male $t_{(18)} = 8.887$, $p < 0.001$ and female protagonists $t_{(19)} = 9.431$, $p < 0.001$ showed higher percentages of masculine than gender-neutral behavior, as gender-neutral behavior accounted for 11.11% of male protagonists' gender profiles, and 11.37% of females'. This confirmed that gender-neutral behavior was the least portrayed for both male and female protagonists, providing evidence that most of the behavior displayed by Disney protagonists is indeed gendered. This reaffirms the need for studying the gendered behaviors displayed by such protagonists.

3.2 Changes over time

The current study also aimed to examine whether Disney protagonists' gendered behavior had changed over time. To assess this, One-Way Analysis of Variances (ANOVAs) were conducted. For each, the Disney era was used as the independent variable (with three levels "early," "middle," and "modern"). Dependent variables were the percentage of masculine behavior displayed by the female protagonists in the first ANOVA, the percentage of feminine behavior for the second, and the percentage of neutral behavior displayed by female protagonists in the third. The tests were then conducted in the same way using the percentages of masculine, feminine and neutral behavior for the male protagonists. Table 4 shows the mean percentages of masculine, feminine and gender-neutral behavior displayed by the protagonists in each era. For additional information, Table 5 displays the total number of behaviors coded for each protagonist.

Hypothesis 2 was only partially upheld for female protagonists as the first ANOVA revealed that the percentage of masculine behavior was significantly different across the three eras, $F_{(2,17)} = 10.679$, $p < 0.001$, as predicted. However, Tukey $post$-hoc test revealed that the "middle" (M = 31.33%) and "modern" (M = 32.41%) female protagonists did not significantly differ in their levels of masculine behavior ($p > 0.05$). The "early" female protagonists (M = 14.23%) were however significantly less masculine than the "middle" ($p < 0.01$) and "modern" females ($p < 0.001$).

A second ANOVA revealed that the percentage of feminine behavior displayed by female protagonists also differed across the three eras $F_{(2,17)} = 11.723$, $p < 0.001$. The results of Tukey $post$-hoc tests for feminine behavior across the eras mirrored those reported for the masculine behavior in that the "middle" (M = 57.65%) and "modern" (M = 55.23%) females were not significantly different in their portrayal of feminine behaviors ($p > 0.05$), whereas the "early" females were significantly more feminine (M = 76.48%) than both the "middle" ($p < 0.01$) and "modern" females ($p < 0.001$). Paired t-tests comparing the percentage of masculine and feminine behavior displayed by female protagonists at each time point were conducted to examine whether females were more feminine than masculine at each era studied, as the means suggested. The results showed that the "early" $t_{(2)} = 14.705$, $p < 0.01$, "middle" $t_{(7)} = -5.255$, $p < 0.01$, and "modern" females $t_{(8)} = 5.678$, $p < 0.001$ were all higher in feminine than masculine traits. Although no hypotheses were made

TABLE 3 The mean percentages of gendered behavior displayed by male and female protagonists.

Gendered behavior	Female protagonists	Male protagonists
Masculine	29.25	36.17
Feminine	59.38	52.72
Gender-neutral	11.37	11.11

TABLE 4 The mean percentages of gendered behavior displayed by male and female protagonists in each era.

Era	Female protagonists			Male protagonists		
	Feminine	Masculine	Gender-neutral	Feminine	Masculine	Gender-neutral
Early	76.48	14.23	9.29	57.50	38.26	4.24
Middle	57.65	31.33	11.02	50.69	38.55	10.75
Modern	55.23	32.41	12.36	53.27	32.21	14.52

TABLE 5 The numbers of behaviors coded for each protagonist.

Film name	Male protagonist		Female protagonist	
	Name	Number of behaviors	Name	Number of behaviors
Snow White and the Seven Dwarves (Cottrell et al., 1937)	The Prince	23	Snow White	239
Cinderella (Geronimi et al., 1950)	Prince Charming	39	Cinderella	282
Sleeping Beauty (Clark et al., 1959)	Prince Philip	118	Aurora	124
Little Mermaid (Clements and Musker, 1989)	Eric	231	Ariel	463
Beauty and the Beast (Trousdale and Wise, 1991)	The Beast	324	Belle	553
Aladdin (Clements and Musker, 1992)	Aladdin	693	Jasmine	390
Pocahontas (Gabriel and Goldberg, 1995)	John Smith	358	Pocahontas	385
The Hunchback of Notre Dame (Trousdale and Wise, 1996)	Phoebus	272	**Esmerelda**	384
	Quasimodo:	615		
Hercules (Clements and Musker, 1997)	**Hercules**	943	**Meg**	395
Mulan (Bancroft and Cook, 1998)	Li Shang	272	Mulan	673
Tarzan (Buck and Lima, 1999)	**Tarzan**	633	**Jane**	363
The Princess and the Frog (Clements and Musker, 2009)	Naveen	770	Tiana	793
Tangled (Greno and Howard, 2010)	Flynn	693	Rapunzel	727
Frozen (Buck and Lee, 2013)	Kristoff	498	Anna	912
	Hans	260	Elsa	462
Moana (Clements et al., 2016)	Maui	756	Mona	1222
Frozen 2 (Buck and Lee, 2019)	Kristoff	339	Elsa	707
			Anna	683
Raya and the Last Dragon (Hall et al., 2021)	Father Benja	170	Raya	861
			Numaari	347

for changes in gender-neutral behavior over time, a third ANOVA revealed that there was no significant difference in the percentage of gender-neutral behavior displayed by female protagonists across each era, $F_{(2,17)} = 1.463$, $p > 0.05$.

The first ANOVA conducted for male protagonists revealed that the percentage of masculine behavior they displayed was not significantly different across the three eras, $F_{(2,16)} = 0.852$, $p > 0.05$ despite an inspection of the means suggesting that the "early" (M = 38.26%) and the "middle" (M = 38.55%) male protagonists were more masculine than the "modern" males (M = 32.21%). Similarly, there was no significant difference in the percentage of feminine behavior displayed by male protagonists across the three eras, $F_{(2,16)} = 0.569$, $p > 0.05$. These results taken together support the prediction made in hypothesis 2 regarding male protagonists' gendered behavior remaining stable across the three eras. Again,

although no predictions were made for changes in gender-neutral behavior for male protagonists over time, an ANOVA revealed that the percentage of gender-neutral behavior was significantly different across the three eras, $F_{(2,16)} = 12.547$, $p < 0.001$. Tukey *post-hoc* tests revealed the "early" male protagonists were lower in gender-neutral behavior (M = 4.24%) than the "middle" (M = 10.76%, $p < 0.05$) and "modern" male protagonists (M = 14.51%, $p < 0.001$). The "middle" and "modern" protagonists were not significantly different ($p > 0.05$).

Paired *t*-tests comparing the percentage of masculine and feminine behavior displayed by male Disney protagonists at each time point were also conducted. These revealed that the "early" male protagonists were not significantly different in their displays of masculine and feminine behavior, $t_{(2)} = 1.217$, $p > 0.05$. The "middle" male protagonists were not significantly different in their

displays of masculine and feminine behavior, $t_{(8)} = -1.911$, $p > 0.05$ when the two tailed significance is reported but were significantly more feminine than masculine if their one-tailed significance was to be reported. The "modern" male protagonists were higher in feminine than masculine behaviors $t_{(6)} = 3.272$, $p < 0.05$.

4 Discussion

The current study investigated the gendered behavior displayed by central human adult male and female protagonists in influential Disney animated feature length films. It aimed to address three limitations of previous content analyses conducted by England et al. (2011) and Hine et al. (2018a). Firstly, it analyzed the gendered behavioral profiles of some influential protagonists that had been excluded from the previous studies. Secondly, it included protagonists from some Disney animated films that have since been released. Thirdly, it analyzed the protagonists' behavioral profiles with an updated and expanded framework, which included some gender-neutral behaviors. By including some gender-neutral behaviors in the framework, more complete behavioral profiles were captured. As a result, the current study arguably provides the most complete quantitative content analysis of Disney protagonists to date.

4.1 The portrayal of female Disney protagonists

The results of the current study suggest that female Disney protagonists are consistently portrayed stereotypically. For example, the female protagonists were portrayed as higher in feminine than masculine behavior overall and within each timepoint. However, there was a noticeable shift in the portrayal of female protagonists between the "early" era, where they were very high in feminine behavior, and the "middle" era, where they became less feminine and more masculine, and this has been maintained into the "modern" era. Contrary to Hine et al. (2018a), "modern" female protagonists in the current work were still more feminine than masculine overall suggesting continued stereotyping. Hine et al. (2018a) found evidence for more balanced and androgynous behavioral profiles (i.e., those high in both masculine and feminine behaviors) in female protagonists in their research. This discrepancy likely reflects the updated coding scheme applied in the current research, particularly in relation to the newly added emotion-based codes. Emotion had not been coded by England et al. (2011) or Hine et al. (2018a) for princess characters and this was a significant proportion of the behavior displayed by female protagonists in this work. Many of the emotion codes were deemed feminine, as informed by previous research (Thompson and Zerbinos, 1995; Do Rozario, 2004). This therefore provides evidence for the importance of including such codes for both male and female characters.

Although the "middle" and "modern" female protagonists did not significantly differ from each other in their displays of masculine and feminine traits, there are some noticeable differences in the narratives associated with the latter, when compared to

their earlier counterparts that are not necessarily captured in the results of the current framework. Perhaps most noticeably, two "modern" films have no romantic storylines whatsoever (*Moana* Clements et al., 2016 and *Raya and the Last Dragon* Hall et al., 2021), whereas romance is key to the other films that were included in this study (Martin and Kazyak, 2009). Indeed, this has attracted media attention (such as Ramella, 2021) which suggests this warrants discussion.

Numaari, Raya (both from *Raya and the Last Dragon*, Hall et al., 2021), Moana (from the film with the same name), and Elsa (from *Frozen*, Buck and Lee, 2013 and *Frozen 2* Buck and Lee, 2019) are all "modern" female protagonists that displayed no romantically focused behaviors in the current study (coded as *wants to find romantic love* or *shows romantic interest*). For Ramella (2021), that some of the "modern" princesses are more focused on self-discovery and serving their communities than they are on pursing romantic relationships means that "they represent a more accurate reflection of modern girls and women. These princesses teach young girls to be strong and independent on their own" (Ramella, 2021, p. x). The plot of *Raya and the Last Dragon* (Hall et al., 2021) focuses on complicated female relationships, and ultimately, it is the two leading female protagonists' friendship that enables peace to be restored throughout Kumandra, something that is rarely depicted in Disney animations or in films more broadly (Radulovic, 2021). Additionally, Anna is lower in the romantically focused codes in *Frozen 2* (Buck and Lee, 2019) than she was in *Frozen* (Buck and Lee, 2013) whereas the opposite is true for Kristoff, suggesting that the portrayal of romance has changed from the prequel to the sequel. Much of the romantic plot in the latter is based around Kristoff agonizing about the best way to propose to Anna, as well as him feeling insecure that they are growing apart (as Anna embarks on a mission to release the Northoldra people from the forest in which they are trapped and leaves him behind). The fact that romance seems to be becoming less prominent in "modern" female protagonists' behavioral profiles could be a positive sign, especially for young girls who are likely to be influenced by them (Coyne et al., 2016; Golden and Jacoby, 2018).

However, although some of the "modern" animations seem to be moving away from portraying female protagonists who are motivated by their romantic pursuits, the representation of such characters could still be a reason for concern. For example, *Frozen* (Buck and Lee, 2013) has been criticized for portraying Elsa as both a leader of her people and single romantically (Streiff and Dundes, 2017a). No male character expresses romantic interest in Elsa in either of the Frozen films, which could portray that women are simply unable to occupy powerful leadership positions whilst having successful romantic relationships, which is exemplified in Anna and Kristoff's romantic plot running alongside Elsa's non-romantic one (Streiff and Dundes, 2017a). Similarly, in *Raya and the Last Dragon* (Hall et al., 2021), Numaari is frequently shown as a leader, and Raya is determined to save her people who have been turned to stone, thus the message that Disney women who are powerful and/or shown to pursue adventures cannot also have romantic relationships (Streiff and Dundes, 2017a) seems to be supported in the most recent release analyzed. Although Anna may get close to challenging this norm as she takes over from Elsa as ruler of Arendelle and is engaged to Kristoff at the end of

Frozen 2 (Buck and Lee, 2019), her leadership role given to her by her more powerful sibling which arguably reduces its significance. Therefore, the

> "modern [Disney] heroine still follows certain rules that do not subvert male dominance: that is, her independence from men means that she should not threaten a man's status as the metaphorical person in the driver's seat of a relationship" (Dundes et al., 2018, p. 22).

Arguably, although Disney seem to be moving away from presenting female protagonists whose sole focus is romance, there are some problematic elements to this, as powerful female characters have yet to be portrayed as romantically involved with a partner also, which aligns with postfeminist themes (Streiff and Dundes, 2017a). Therefore, although there was no significant difference in the portrayal of gendered behavior between the "middle" and "modern" female protagonists the depiction of the two groups of female characters has some unique limitations.

It should also be noted that although the current study did not explicitly focus on language use in the Disney animations analyzed, researchers have suggested that there is stereotyping presented in the way that Disney characters converse and the dialect they speak. For example, Lippi-Green (2012) notes that female protagonists who are labeled "lovers and mothers" tend to speak "Standard American English" suggesting that characters with more diverse accents are not associated with the "goodness" necessary to occupy these highly feminized roles. Conversely, there are some (although still a small minority) of male characters who are deemed "potential lovers" that speak with "working-class" accents. It is thus important to acknowledge that the stereotyping of Disney characters is often intersectional and may be even more layered than the current results capture.

4.2 The portrayal of male Disney protagonists

The results of the current study found that male protagonists' behavior was more feminine than masculine overall, contrary to gendered stereotypes. Specifically, the male protagonists from the "modern" and "middle" eras were significantly more feminine than they were masculine (when the one-tailed significance is reported). Further, no significant difference was found in the displays of masculine or feminine behavior across the time points suggesting that the portrayal of Disney men has remained relatively stable. This finding partially supports the results obtained by Hine et al. (2018a), where, although it appeared that the "modern" and "early" princes were lower in masculine behavior than the "middle" princes, only marginal significance was found. Further, England et al. (2011) found no significant difference in the portrayal of gender in male protagonists across the three eras, in line with the results of the current study. Additionally, the "modern" Disney men analyzed in the current study were higher in gender-neutral behavior than the men in the other eras which provides further evidence that such protagonists may be less limited by gender stereotypes. The representation of feminine male protagonists in

Disney animations may be positive as masculinity is related to aggression in children (Fehr and Russ, 2013, as cited in Coyne et al., 2014) and may be associated with poor mental health and higher suicide rates in adult men (Swami et al., 2008).

By portraying male protagonists as more feminine than masculine overall, Disney may be suggesting that men can and should deviate from their prescribed gender roles. Alternatively, it is possible that Disney is only delivering the presentation of feminine traits when male protagonists display more narratively powerful masculine traits to "compensate." Moreover, it is unclear from the current study whether the feminine behaviors that are portrayed are received positively or negatively by other characters (and indeed viewers). If feminine men are mocked and belittled (as suggested by Macaluso, 2018) it is likely that such portrayals are still ultimately encouraging a more stereotyped (i.e., masculine) behavioral profile in young boys (Hine et al., 2018a) through the chastisement of feminine expressions. Finally, it is also unclear how the behavior of male protagonists helps shape female viewers perceptions of men and their accepted behavior, and whether they are influenced (if at all) in their perceptions of acceptable male attributes. It is therefore clear that male protagonists' feminine and masculine behaviors warrant further discussion.

Although not directly studied in this research in a quantitative manner, it is possible to consider the behaviors that may be the most celebrated in Disney men. It seems that particularly in films such as *Hercules* (Clements and Musker, 1997), male protagonists' masculine behavior is the most celebrated. For example, within the film, Hercules is adored by his fans for his physical strength and heroism (masculine traits) that he spends a significant amount of time in the film striving to achieve after being mocked and excluded for being clumsy and unintentionally troublesome (feminine traits). This is highlighted when a large statue and toy figurines are revealed of him and in both, he is presented in a posed position with his biceps flexed, exaggerating his physique, a trait that leads many of his (female) fans within the film to adore him. Further, he is motivated to develop these masculine traits in the hope that he will earn a place among the Gods, a substantial position of power (such powerful positions are also associated with masculinity). However, at the end of the film he sacrifices his opportunity to join the Gods to remain with Meg and thus chooses his romantic relationship over a position of power, which is, arguably, unlike other male Disney protagonists (Primo, 2018). It is possible that the film was less successful than anticipated because by sacrificing his masculine characteristics and goals, Hercules' character was less appealing to audiences (Primo, 2018). It seems then that Hercules' masculine traits are portrayed as the most admirable in the film.

Further, Quasimodo saves Esmerelda at the end of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (Trousdale and Wise, 1996); yet importantly, he must then be saved from falling to his death by the more masculine protagonist, Phoebus, who is also able-bodied). In the final scene of the film Quasimodo is embraced and carried off by the people of Paris as a sign of their acceptance of him which may not have been the case had he not shown masculine attributes such as bravery and physical strength during the scene in which he rescues Esmerelda. Arguably, such narratives suggest that although Disney men may be more feminine than masculine, they are ultimately accepted by their peers, and arguably, the audiences,

only when they prove that they can also conform to the expectations of their gender role. It could also be the case that Disney men are only able to portray feminine traits when they also portray masculine ones, such as bravery and strength.

Conversely, some Disney men seem to be rewarded for their stereotypically feminine behavior. For example, Aladdin believes that by granting the Genie his freedom he is sacrificing being with the woman he loves (which has been his sole motivation throughout the entire film). He is rewarded soon after when his soon-to-be-father-in-law changes the law to make his marriage to Jasmine possible. Thus, unlike Hercules, Aladdin's selfless sacrifice (more aligned with femininity than masculinity) does not prevent him from achieving his dreams. Alternatively, Naveen and Flynn are both initially motivated by money and success, both rather masculine pursuits, however, in both films, these dreams are ridiculed. For example, in *Tangled* (Greno and Howard, 2010) Flynn's dream of making money and living in a castle is overtly scorned in an iconic scene where other physically hypermasculine men share their more effeminate dreams (such as of becoming interior designers and pianists), making the case that men with more feminine pursuits may be celebrated within the film. Both Flynn and Naveen realize throughout their respective films that love is more important than money and by doing so, Flynn marries Rapunzel, ironically becoming a prince and presumably achieving his dream in the process, despite it being previously ridiculed. Naveen, however, is shown to work in Tiana's restaurant at the end of *The Princess and the Frog* (Clements and Musker, 2009), a less glamorous end to his story. Thus, it seems that in Disney films, men shifting their focus from masculine to feminine endeavors is only sometimes rewarded. As a result, it is unclear as to whether young boys identifying with these male protagonists will deem their femininity as worthy of replication. Overall, future and perhaps qualitative research should examine the value given to male Disney protagonists' masculine and feminine behavior so that the significance of them being higher in feminine traits as a group, can be more fully understood.

4.3 Implications

Considering that Disney princess animations are seen to influence the gendered behavior displayed by children (Coyne et al., 2016; Golden and Jacoby, 2018), it is likely that the gendered messages within the films considered in the current study will also be impactful on children. Parents and educators could perhaps be trained in how to utilize Disney media to minimize their negative influence and maximize their potential benefits, and to become more critically aware of the messages within this media. More specifically, although a greater investigation as to whether feminine males are celebrated within Disney films is needed, that the films represent male characters who are feminine (particularly within the "middle" and "modern" animations), means they could be used to facilitate important conversations with children. For example, because some of the most frequently displayed feminine behavior by Quasimodo in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (Trousdale and Wise, 1996) included showing affection, displaying positive emotion, and expressing sadness, there is tentative evidence to suggest that the film could be used as an educational tool to discuss the benefits of boys and men displaying such behaviors with children.

There is also an implication provided by the results in this paper that our discourse on the presentation of gender in Disney movies may in fact constitute some form of "moral panic" (Cohen, 2011). Indeed, whilst statistically different in many cases, overall, the "gaps" in masculine and feminine presentation were not as large as in previous studies on the same movies, due to a more robust coding framework. It could be the case that the interpretation of the results is focused too heavily on difference rather than similarity between characters' behavioral profiles However, it should also be noted that many of these messages are translated to consumers in ways not measured in this study (tone, intonation, etc.) so the potential dismissal of concern should be taken with caution.

4.4 Limitations

The current study had several limitations. Firstly, the inclusion criteria for the current study utilized the benchmark of films that had grossed over $200 million worldwide which mirrored that of Hine et al. (2018a). However, it is important to note that this figure did not account for the popularity of Disney films on streaming services, which is a limitation. Including the number of views Disney films have had on streaming sites may have made the popularity estimates more accurate and reflected more modern viewing habits. However, streaming services have different platforms in different regions. Therefore, it would be a challenge to assess the success of a film using data from streaming services, as the number of views would differ based on the researcher's location. Therefore, although utilizing box-office grossing figures may have been a limitation, it does arguably represent the worldwide success and popularity of a film, rather than its success in one region (for example, on the UK version of Disney+). That being said, future research should perhaps work to create a new inclusion criterion that considers a combination of box-office figures and streaming success.

A discussive approach to reliability was adopted in the current study, which could be perceived as a limitation. However, the discussive approach taken was advised by members of the research team who were experienced in content coding research. Although having a more objective approach to reliability analysis may have been advantageous (Krippendorff, 2018), arguably, when coders undergo training in content analysis research, objectivity is already lost as discussions are had during those sessions (Neuendorf, 2011). Arguably then, true objectivity is not possible in content analysis studies, and a discussive approach can lead to more insightful coding in which nuanced behaviors may be more accurately captured.

Additionally, reliability was calculated for each character rather than for each behavioral code, which could be a limitation as this differed from the approach taken by Hine et al. (2018a). However, it was important for the researcher to monitor the inter-rater reliability as the coding was being conducted. Because the coding was being conducted and reviewed one protagonist at a

time in the current study, the reliability of the individual behavioral codes would change as more protagonists were coded and added to analysis. Therefore, conducting reliability analysis in this way ensured that each protagonist was coded reliably.

The data collected in the current study does not consider whether stereotypical or non-stereotypical behavior displayed by Disney protagonists is presented as socially desirable or appropriate and thus worthy of replication by children who identify with them. The extent to which non-stereotypical vs. stereotypical behaviors are celebrated within Disney animations could provide further insight into Disney's motivation in presenting consistently feminine female *and* male protagonists. Perhaps this could be addressed in future research whereby the framework of behaviors established in this study could be split into "positive" and "negative" traits as well as feminine, masculine and gender-neutral. Alternatively, qualitative research could be conducted to interpret how gendered behavior is presented.

Further, although this study included male and female protagonists that had been excluded in the content analyses conducted by England et al. (2011) and Hine et al. (2018a) there has been no research examining the extent to which such Disney protagonists (i.e., those beyond the princess franchise) influence children's conceptualization of gender, or their gendered behaviors. Therefore, future research investigating the potential relationship between engagement with non-princess Disney animations and children's behavior is warranted. Perhaps a replication of Hine et al. (2018b), examining whether children recognize the feminine traits displayed by male protagonists would be a good place to start.

5 Conclusions

This research suggested that female protagonists throughout each era of Disney films studied are portrayed stereotypically i.e., highest in feminine traits. This finding is arguably troubling, and such results counter the perhaps more optimistic ideology posited by Hine et al. (2018a) that Disney is portraying less limited and stereotyped female characters in their "modern" animations (although they support much qualitative research such as Streiff and Dundes, 2017a,b). Although there is nothing inherently wrong with females adhering to femininity and males adhering to masculinity, it is likely that doing so will limit the behaviors they display. Therefore, as Martin et al. (2017) states,

> "[b]ecause of these role restrictions, from Bem's (1975) perspective, being gender traditional was equated with rigidity; being androgynous (non-traditional) was equated with flexibility, and flexibility was related to adaptive and positive mental health" (Martin et al., 2017, p. 5–93).

Therefore, presenting female protagonists who display stereotypical behavioral profiles could encourage the young girls who are engaging with them to display predominantly feminine behaviors themselves, and indeed, there is evidence to suggest that this is the case (Wohlwend, 2012; Coyne et al., 2016; Golden and Jacoby, 2018). This could have implications for their adaptability and mental health (Bem and Lewis, 1975 as cited by Martin et al., 2017).

The current research has also helped establish that the portrayal of men in Disney animations is not stereotypical, which supports the previous quantitative content analyses (England et al., 2011; Hine et al., 2018a). In line with the argument made above, this may be beneficial to young boys as being presented with less limited male behavioral profiles may encourage them to be less restricted in their own behavior (Martin et al., 2017). Indeed, it seems that exposure to feminine behavioral profiles may be positive for young boys who seem to display more diverse toy preferences and behavioral profiles as a result (Coyne et al., 2021).

The question that remains is *why* the Disney corporation is consistently presenting stereotyped female protagonists, and non-stereotyped male protagonists. Is it that they believe that by presenting feminine behavioral profiles they will more efficiently capture a female audience? Or is it because, as Davis (2013) states:

> "Disney is aware that it cannot be too radical with its depictions and themes: while controversial topics may be fine in some genres, they tend to be problematic in the family and children's film markets. It is not necessarily, as some would have it, that Disney "promotes" conservative ideas; rather, long experience has taught them to be careful with their level of experimentation. Go too far, and they lose the audience, lose money, and have to deal with a film which becomes a drain on the studio's resources" (Davis, 2013, p. 251).

Perhaps then, the long-standing success of films produced by Walt Disney Animation Studios which have historically, according to this work, presented relatively consistent gender profiles, justifies their (re)production of protagonists with similar gendered traits. In this sense, the producers may be restricted by Disney's previous legacy of hugely successful animations which span over 80 years. Arguably, the Walt Disney Animation Studio may wish not to experiment with portraying gendered profiles that are far from those of its previously successful protagonists, because as Davis (2013) states, it may prioritize commercial success over producing animated feature length films with entirely progressive (gender) ideals. Maybe a more complete examination of the company's content is necessary, including its recently acquired Marvel and Star Wars franchises, to more completely understand the company's gendered representations. Perhaps its acquirement of pre-existing franchises is its attempt to provide more progressive gendered representations outside of the formula it has established within its own animated feature length films. Further research will be necessary in order to comment.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/Supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding authors.

Author contributions

LC: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources,

Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. BH: Conceptualization, Methodology, Resources, Visualization, Writing – review & editing. DE: Conceptualization, Methodology, Resources, Writing – review & editing. PF: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Validation, Visualization, Writing – review & editing. RA: Data curation, Investigation, Validation, Writing – review & editing. SJ: Data curation, Investigation, Validation, Writing – review & editing. MG: Data curation, Investigation, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fsoc.2024.1338900/full#supplementary-material

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Homophobic beliefs and attitudes among mid-adolescent boys: exploring the ideas of hybrid masculinities

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Introduction: Homophobia is well-documented as key to social regulation of masculine behavior and practices in Western settings. Yet, empirical data from a number of Western settings has shown a decline in overt homophobic attitudes in the past decade, leading some to suggest that the nature of masculinities is also changing. However, theorizing on the changing nature of masculinities among adolescents has received limited quantitative attention. Research is needed to better understand shifts in adolescent masculinities in contemporary Western settings.

Methods: In this paper, we investigate the application of one newer approach to explore masculinities in context – hybrid masculinities – in a sample of cisgender, heterosexual, mid-adolescent boys in one province in Western Canada (N = 873, mean age (SD) = 14.39 (0.37)). Data were collected from nine cohorts of grade 9 youth over a 10-year period (2013–2022) as part of the baseline survey of an ongoing evaluation of a gender-transformative healthy relationships program.

Results and discussion: We hypothesized that if the ideas of hybrid masculinities held in our sample, we would find that overt homophobic attitudes and adherence to related patriarchal norms (e.g., avoidance of femininity) would decline over this period, but that the use of homophobic name-calling would remain differentiated in terms of to whom it was directed (e.g., a friend, someone they thought was gay). We did find a significant decline in homophobic attitudes and norms related to emotional restriction and avoidance of femininity over the 10-year period, but also found that homophobic name-calling remained differentiated, with significantly higher name-calling toward a friend than toward someone the youth thought was gay. Thus, our hypotheses were supported. We discuss the implications of our findings for future theory and research on understanding adolescent masculinities in context.

KEYWORDS

adolescents, hybrid masculinities, homophobia, male role norms, gender policing

1 Introduction

The concept of hegemonic masculinity has shaped a substantial amount of literature on men and masculinities in the past several decades (Hearn, 2004; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2012). First proposed by Connell (1987), and re-specified by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), this construct proposes that there are hierarchical relationships among various masculinities, that this hierarchy is supported by hegemony (e.g., cultural sanctioning, institutionalization), and that some of the masculinities within this hierarchy (locally, regionally, or globally) are more socially powerful than others. The enactment of hegemonic masculinity thus maintains continued inequality, both between and within genders. Per its hierarchical nature, the hegemonic framework also orders specific relations of dominance and subordination between groups of men, with gay masculinities traditionally being at the bottom of the male gender hierarchy (Connell, 2005).

Maintaining hegemony requires active gender policing of men by men, in addition to the continued exclusion of women and other marginalized genders (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). As defined by Reigeluth and Addis (2015), policing of masculinity consists of "any action that serves to prevent or punish individual or group behavior perceived as insufficiently masculine" (p. 75), and is a process which supports gendered social learning. This policing is often done through homophobic name-calling (Pascoe, 2007; Gough et al., 2021). Indeed, it is through such policing practices that homophobic name-calling has been understood as a tool through which hegemonic masculinity is constituted and maintained (Pascoe, 2007; Bridges and Pascoe, 2016).

Although homophobic name-calling (and homophobia in general) have long been considered central tenets of adolescent masculinity in the West (Pascoe, 2007; Bridges and Pascoe, 2014; Birkett and Espelage, 2015), the past decade has seen societal changes with regard to improving attitudes toward homosexuality broadly (i.e., more overtly accepting; Flores, 2014; Twenge et al., 2016; Pew Research Center, 2019). These shifts seem to challenge understandings of homophobia as a core feature of hegemonic masculinity in the Western context, and the related subordination of gay masculinities (Anderson, 2009, 2013; Anderson and McGuire, 2010; McCormack, 2012; Anderson and McCormack, 2018).

To this end, more recent research in the field has explored the diminishing impact of homophobia on adolescent masculinities, suggesting the theoretical presence of multiple forms of masculinity, potentially *without* hegemonic dominance of any one over the other (Dashper, 2012; McCormack, 2012; Anderson, 2013; McCormack and Anderson, 2014a,b). Contemporary literature identifies different streams of research that account for the apparently changing nature of masculinities among adolescents. Inclusive Masculinity Theory (Anderson, 2013; Anderson and McCormack, 2018) and hybrid masculinities (Bridges, 2014, 2021; Bridges and Pascoe, 2014) are two streams that both suggest changes to masculinities are occurring, although they differ in terms of whether the change is indicative of larger changes in gender and sexuality equality. Our investigation examines the applicability of one of these accounts, hybrid masculinities, by exploring quantitative data collected with 873 adolescent boys from 2013 to 2022 in one Western setting.

Research on men and masculinities has undergone shifts in focus over the past several decades, in response to both changing accounts of and within masculinities over time (Smiler, 2004; Messerschmidt and Messner, 2018). Early work explored masculine gender role stress (Eisler and Skidmore, 1977), gender role conflict (O'Neil, 2008) and gender role strain (Levant, 2011), all representing different conceptualizations of stress and coping arising from performing the male gender role in Western contexts (e.g., emotional suppression). Building on these explorations, more recent work has explored the precarious nature of "manhood" status (Vandello and Bosson, 2013); different norms associated with non-dominant masculinities (e.g., Spencer et al., 2004; Smiler, 2006); and changes to structural arrangements of masculinity in Western contexts (McCormack, 2012; Anderson, 2013; Bridges, 2014; Bridges and Pascoe, 2018). To add to this conversation, in this article, we focus on further exploration of one of these more contemporary accounts: hybrid masculinities.

The concept of hybrid (hegemonic) masculinities acknowledges that while contemporary masculinities may (or may appear to be) changing, existing ideologies and power relations are less challenged than some other theories posit (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014, 2018; Bridges, 2021). Specifically, hybrid masculinities scholarship focuses on the ways in which certain men – typically privileged, young, heterosexual, White men – may selectively incorporate elements of marginalized masculinities and/or femininities into their gendered practices and identities (Bridges, 2014, 2021; Bridges and Pascoe, 2014; Pfaffendorf, 2017; Munsch and Gruys, 2018). As noted by Bridges (2021), "hybrid masculinities refers broadly to a collection of masculine gender projects that incorporate elements of identity socially and culturally associated with 'others'…research and theory on hybrid masculinity seek to understand gender practices that blur social differences while simultaneously considering their relationships with different axes of social *dominance*" (p. 665). Accordingly, privileged young men may espouse politically progressive attitudes while simultaneously fortifying "existing symbolic boundaries that conceal systems of power and inequality in historically new ways" (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014, p. 246).

Research on hybrid masculinities points to several consequences of shifting gender projects and performance that potentially exacerbate, reflect, and conceal inequalities (Bridges and Pascoe, 2018). The first consequence is what Bridges and Pascoe (2014) call "discursive distancing," which refers to participation in practices that allow men to distance themselves from the hegemonic form of masculinity, while simultaneously continuing to perpetuate patriarchal norms and beliefs (hooks, 2004). Bridges (2010) gives the example of Walk A Mile in Her Shoes events, which are designed to bring awareness to domestic and sexual violence through men's active participation. In these walks, men wear high heels to symbolically represent how difficult it is to walk in "her shoes." This event is designed to show men's solidarity with a feminist cause, and while men who participate may learn about women's experiences, participation can also contribute to a reification of gendered norms and practices (e.g., wearing high heels; joking about acting 'like a woman'; Bridges, 2010). In sum, discursive distancing is a particular "hybrid hegemonic tactic that positions men in ways that simultaneously secures and obscures their relationships with enduring systems of gendered and racialized power and control" (Bridges, 2021, p. 675).

The second consequence discussed by Bridges and Pascoe (2014) is "strategic borrowing," which refers to the appropriation of aspects of marginalized masculinities (particularly, gay and racialized masculinities)

by White, heterosexual young men. In other words, heterosexual young men may incorporate aspects of these 'othered' masculinities (e.g., emotional intimacy and sensitivity) into their performance and practices, but without explicitly challenging systems of gender and/or sexual inequality (Eisen and Yamashita, 2019; Christofidou, 2021). For example, some men may adopt practices of emotional sensitivity to be more sexually successful with women. In this case, these men are appropriating aspects of feminized practices of masculinity to enhance their chance of achieving a hegemonic goal, and not because they are working to fundamentally disrupt patriarchal masculinity (hooks, 2004), and thus this is an example of strategic borrowing.

The third consequence discussed by Bridges and Pascoe (2014) is "fortifying boundaries." Specifically, through discursive distancing and strategic borrowing, the boundaries between more and less powerful masculinities become strengthened, because strategic borrowing "obscur[es] the symbolic and social boundaries between groups upon which such practices rely" (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014, p. 254). In other words, because discursive distancing and strategic borrowing only change the appearance of masculinities on the surface – and not the underlying structure of power and privilege – boundaries between dominant and marginalized masculinities remain unchanged, and due to the now more invisible nature of these boundaries, fortified.

1.1 Current study

A hybrid masculinities lens holds promise for our understanding of adolescent masculinities in modern Western context. However, there is little research that has quantitatively explored the application of this concept, particularly with adolescent samples (Connor et al., 2021). As noted by Mittleman (2023), "despite ethnographic evidence…the invisibility of gender expression in most social surveys has made gender policing difficult to document" (p. 6). There have been some studies of adult populations that have found a relationship between masculinity and homophobia when examining attitudes related to same-sex couples and romantic behaviors (Doan et al., 2014; Mize and Manago, 2018). More recently, Mittleman (2023) used population-based data from a geographically diverse adolescent sample to examine bullying as a form of gender policing, finding that gender expression significantly influenced and shaped bullying victimization for cisgender, heterosexual boys. In this paper, we build on this limited body of research by investigating the application of the ideas of hybrid masculinities with a sample of cisgender, heterosexual, mid-adolescent boys in one province in Western Canada. We explore change over time in overt homophobic attitudes and adherence to related patriarchal norms, as well as the directionality of homophobic name-calling, over a ten-year period.

As it pertains to homophobia and its role in constituting powerful masculinities, a hybrid masculinities approach argues that, while on the surface non-homophobic masculinities appear to be proliferating, the continued use of homophobic name-calling, particularly among peers, suggests the relationships between dominant forms of adolescent masculinity and homophobia may still be entrenched (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014, 2018). Per the three theoretical consequences of hybrid masculinities described above, we would expect to see an overall decline in overt homophobic attitudes and related patriarchal norms (e.g., emotional restriction, avoidance of femininity, toughness) over time, as young men engage in discursive distancing (e.g., stating explicit disagreement with fear of gay men) and strategic borrowing (e.g., assimilating aspects of feminized masculinities, like more

emotional intimacy). But, because these changes do not touch the underlying structure of the hegemonic form of masculinity, we also anticipate that boys will continue to use homophobic name-calling, that the overall use of this name-calling will not be strongly associated with reported homophobic attitudes, and that this name-calling will be differentiated (e.g., much more likely to use with a friend than someone they actually perceive to be gay), in their efforts to fortify boundaries between dominant and marginalized masculinities.

As part of the baseline survey of an evaluation of a gender-transformative healthy relationships program for adolescent boys (Exner-Cortens et al., 2019, 2020), we collected data on overt homophobic attitudes and adherence to related patriarchal norms from fall 2013-fall 2022 ($N = 873$), and data on homophobic name-calling from fall 2016-fall 2022 ($n = 562$). These data allow us to quantitatively explore the ideas of hybrid masculinities (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014). Specifically, we hypothesize that, if the ideas of hybrid masculinities apply in our sample, (1) overt homophobic attitudes and adherence to related patriarchal norms will decline over time, but that (2) (a) use of overall homophobic name-calling and name-calling by target (e.g., friend vs. someone they thought was gay) will have small-to-moderate correlations with self-reported homophobic attitudes and (b) since homophobic name-calling is used in a way to fortify boundaries (i.e., identifying outsiders in the group and reproducing social inequalities; Pascoe, 2013; Bridges and Pascoe, 2018), homophobic name-calling will be differentiated by the person it is directed at, with the most common use being toward a friend (Reigeluth and Addis, 2015).

We will explore these hypotheses in the full sample, and in a sub-sample identified as important in previous research and theorizing on adolescent masculinities: Ethnocultural boys. By Ethnocultural boys, we mean "non-White groups in Canada that have a distinct cultural, ethnic and linguistic heritage… This term recognizes and acknowledges that their culture is diverse from what is considered dominant in Canada. While these youth face racialization…and associated barriers, they also show resilience in the face of continued systemic racism" (Exner-Cortens et al., 2022, p. 6). We include this group as the interplay of gender and race in settler-colonial societies like Canada results in marginalized masculinities (Connell, 2005). Marginalized masculinities share some ground with hegemonic forms of masculinity but are ultimately marginalized from the benefits of hegemony (Connell, 2005; Pascoe and Bridges, 2016). For example, because of the systemic racism they face across settings and institutions in Canada, Ethnocultural boys may feel stronger pressure than their White counterparts to adhere to stereotypical expectations of masculinity (Griffith et al., 2012; Exner-Cortens et al., 2022). It is also possible that hybrid gender identities are crafted differently by marginalized and subordinated groups (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014). Thus, it is important to specifically explore whether the ideas of hybrid masculinity also extend to specific a sub-group that has typically experienced marginalized masculinities in Western settings.

2 Methods

2.1 Participants and procedure

Participants for this study were drawn from the baseline (i.e., pre-test) data of an ongoing evaluation study of a gender-transformative healthy relationships program called WiseGuyz. All participants came from schools in and around a large metropolitan

region in one province in Western Canada. WiseGuyz is a gender-transformative healthy relationships program for adolescent boys developed by the Centre for Sexuality that aims to improve mental and sexual health and reduce violence by deconstructing patriarchal gender norms (Exner-Cortens et al., 2019, 2020). From fall 2013-fall 2018, adolescents were eligible to participate in the research project if they were enrolled in the WiseGuyz program within the relevant academic year. From fall 2019-fall 2022, we expanded our evaluation to include grade 9 boys who were and were not in WiseGuyz, and so any grade 9 boy at a school were WiseGuyz was offered in that academic year was eligible to participate. We note that because of the pandemic, we were unable to collect data in fall 2020 (Supplementary Table S1). Thus, we have data from nine cohorts of grade 9 boys over a 10-year period. Sample size across years ranges from 15 to 142 (Supplementary Table S1). Adolescents join WiseGuyz voluntarily, or with the gentle encouragement of an administrator, parent or teacher; however, participation is always voluntary. All WiseGuyz participants (fall 2013-fall 2018)/grade 9 boys at a school were WiseGuyz was offered (fall 2019-fall 2022) are given the option to participate in research. All participants require signed parent/guardian consent per school division rules, and also provide youth assent prior to completing the survey. Baseline surveys are completed prior to the start of program content at a given school. Surveys over the study period took between 20 and 30 min to complete and were offered on paper and/or electronically during the school day. This research was reviewed and approved by a university Research Ethics Board, as well as the participating schools and school divisions.

2.2 Measures

2.2.1 Homophobic attitudes

Were assessed using the Negativity Toward Sexual Minorities (NTSM) scale (Levant et al., 2010). The NTSM was administered on all baseline surveys from 2013 to 2022. This 9-item scale taps overt homophobic attitudes (e.g., "it is disappointing to learn that a famous athlete is gay"; $\alpha = 0.96$). To make items more applicable in a Canadian context, we dropped one item from all surveys ("Gay people should not be allowed to serve in the military"), leaving us with an 8-item scale for analysis. We also changed all references to "homosexual" in the original scale to "gay people" in the version we used on our surveys. Responses were measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). Scores were summed across all eight items to create the total score, with higher scores indicating more homophobic attitudes toward gay men. Psychometric evidence for the NTSM was originally obtained in a sample of undergraduates. However, in our data, NTSM scores correlate with MRNI-A-r scores as anticipated (r range = 0.45–0.69), providing evidence of convergent validity, and internal consistency reliability is strong.

2.2.2 Adherence to patriarchal norms

Was assessed using the Male Role Norms Inventory-Adolescent-revised (MRNI-A-r; Levant et al., 2012). The MRNI-A-r was administered on all baseline surveys from 2013–2022. This 29-item scale taps three domains: Emotionally Detached Dominance (EDD; e.g., "guys should not ever show their feelings"; 16 items, $\alpha = 0.91$); Avoidance of Femininity (AF; e.g., "guys should not carry purses"; 6 items, $\alpha = 0.85$); and Toughness (T; e.g., "it's important for a guy to be able to play it cool"; 7 items, $\alpha = 0.80$). Responses were measured on a 7-point Likert-type

scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). Scores were summed across items within each sub-scale, with higher scores indicating more adherence to patriarchal gender norms. The MRNI-A-r has evidence of reliability and validity with early adolescents (Levant et al., 2012).

2.2.3 Homophobic name-calling

Was assessed using the Homophobic Content Agent Target scale (Poteat and Espelage, 2005). This scale assesses the use of homophobic name-calling (e.g., gay, lesbo, fag) toward others (agent) or that is experienced by the participant (target). In this study, we only administered the 5-item Agent sub-scale (Homophobic Content Agent; HCA), because of our interest in the use of homophobic language by program participants. Agents included on this scale were (1) a friend, (2) someone I did not know, (3) someone I did not like, (4) someone I thought was gay, and (5) someone I did not think was gay. This scale was only added to baseline surveys in 2016, and so data are only available for 2016–2022. Further, in 2016, we were testing multiple bullying scales, and so only a random third of participants were assigned this sub-scale. However, in fall 2017, fall 2019, fall 2021, and fall 2022, all participants completed this measure (Supplementary Table S1). Responses were measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = never to 5 = 7 or more times). Scores were summed to create a Total score, and to create a score for each specific Agent; higher scores indicate more homophobic name-calling overall/toward the particular Agent. Based on response patterns, we also dichotomized responses for each Agent into 1 = any use and 0 = no use for analyses. The HCA has evidence of reliability and validity in a sample of grade 8 students (Poteat and Espelage, 2005).

2.2.4 Demographics

In all years, we assessed age on the pre-test race/ethnicity using Statistics Canada categories [for bivariate and multivariable analyses, collapsed into White and Ethnocultural (African, East Asian, Filipino, Indigenous, Latin American, Middle Eastern/West Asian, South Asian, Southeast Asian, Other, Multi-Ethnic)], dating status (1 = ever dated; 0 = no/not sure), family structure (1 = dual caregiver home; 0 = other family structure arrangement), and gender. Across all years, we also assessed sexual orientation/attraction. For this variable, from fall 2013–2015, participants were asked how they identified (heterosexual, gay, bisexual, not sure, rather not say), while from 2016 to 2022, participants were asked about their sexual attraction using a Kinsey-type scale (from only attracted to females to only attracted to males; participants could also answer that they were not sure or that they were not attracted to anyone). For analyses, we combined these variables into the categories of exclusively heterosexual (i.e., identify as heterosexual or report they were only attracted to females) and not exclusively heterosexual (i.e., identify as gay/bisexual/not sure/rather not say or report they are not exclusively attracted to females/that they were not sure/that they were not attracted to anyone). For clarity, we refer to this composite variable as sexual orientation in this paper.

2.3 Analysis

From 2013 to 2022, we collected data from a total of 1,075 grade 9 boys (Supplementary Table S1). Because the ideas of hybrid masculinities primarily pertain to cisgender, heterosexual men and boys (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014), our analysis specifically includes participants who self-reported that they identified as cisgender, heterosexual boys ($N = 873$).

In terms of the sample, there were two key changes in data collection that we wanted to further explore prior to testing our hypotheses. First, as described above, from fall 2019-fall 2022, we began to collect data from grade 9 boys who both were and were not participating in WiseGuyz. Second, because of a change in grant funding, we expanded the number of school divisions with whom we collected data in fall 2018. Although we were still collecting data in the same metropolitan area, data from fall 2018-fall 2022 were collected from a mix of three urban, suburban, and rural divisions, while data from fall 2013-fall 2017 were collected in one urban school division only. Using independent samples t-tests, we thus explored whether there were differences in NTSM, MRNI-A-r, or HCA (total) scores by (1) WiseGuyz participation or (2) population center type of where the participant attended school (small, medium or large, based on 2021 Canadian Census data).

In the Results, we present demographic characteristics using descriptive statistics. Cross-year differences in demographic variables were analyzed with Chi-square tests. We used Pearson correlations to look at associations between MRNI-A-r (EDD, AF, T), NTSM, and HCA scores. We used multivariable linear regression models to explore the linear trend in MRNI-A-r (EDD, AF, T) and NTSM scores over time. We also explored moderation of this change by Ethnocultural group. Finally, we used multivariable logistic regression models to explore homophobic name-calling by agent at different time points. Diagnostic checks were performed for model validation. Analyses were conducted in SPSS V29 and RStudio 2023.06.0 + 421.

3 Results

3.1 Sample descriptives

Summaries of demographic characteristics overall and by year are presented in Table 1. All participants in this project were in the 9th grade, with a mean age (SD) of 14.39 (0.37) (Table 1). The sample was quite racially/ethnically diverse, with 61.3% of the sample reporting that they were from a White population group only (Table 1). There were some differences in Ethnocultural group across years. Specifically, significantly fewer youth reported a multi-ethnic identity in fall 2013 and fall 2022; significantly more reported a multi-ethnic identity in fall 2016; and significantly fewer reported a racialized identity in fall 2021 [X^2 (16, $N = 855$) = 46.82, $p < 0.001$]. Approximately two-thirds of participants lived in a dual caregiver home, and 57.1% had ever dated (Table 1). There was also a significant difference in dating across years, with participants in fall 2017 significantly more likely to report dating experience than in other years [X^2 (8, $N = 867$) = 26.64, $p < 0.001$].

When exploring if NTSM, MRNI-A-r, or HCA scores differed by (1) WiseGuyz participation status or (2) the type of population center where the participant attended school, we did not find any differences by WiseGuyz participation status (Supplementary Table S2). However, we found that toughness scores (MRNI-A-r: T), homophobic attitudes (NTSM), and total use of homophobic name-calling (HCA) were all higher for participants who attended schools in small/medium population centers, as compared to large population centers (Supplementary Table S2). For NTSM and HCA scores, this difference was driven by participants residing in small population centers specifically (Supplementary Table S2). Thus, in analyses reported below, we controlled for population center type, as well as dating status and Ethnocultural group, as relevant.

3.2 Overt homophobic attitudes and adherence to related patriarchal norms by year

Mean scores by year for overt homophobic attitudes (NTSM) and adherence to related patriarchal norms (MRNI-A-r: EDD, MRNI-A-r: AF, MRNI-A-r: T) are visualized in Figure 1. To explore differences in NTSM and MRNI-A-r scores across time, we used two approaches. First, we examined if there was change over time in any of these scores from 2013 to 2019, using multivariable linear regression models. Results from these models are presented in Tables 2, 3. We found significant declines from 2013–2019 in overt homophobic attitudes (NTSM), as well as in emotionally detached dominance (MRNI-A-r: EDD) and avoidance of femininity (MRNI-A-r: AF) scores. However, we did not find a decline in toughness scores (MRNI-A-r: T) across this period. We also found that boys who attended schools in small/medium populations centers reported higher NTSM, MRNI-A-r: EDD, MRNI-A-r: AF, and MRNI-A-r: T scores, as compared to boys attending school in a large population center, and that boys who had dated reported higher MRNI-A-r: EDD scores as compared to boys who had not dated or were not sure (Tables 2, 3).

As we were unable to collect data in fall 2020 due to COVID-19, we could not explore an uninterrupted linear trend from 2013 to 2022. Instead, to determine if scores in 2021 and 2022 were significantly different than scores in 2013, we used multivariable linear regression models with a year-wise comparison (Tables 4, 5). In these models, we found that NTSM scores were significantly lower in fall 2021 than in fall 2013 (and somewhat lower in fall 2022; Table 4), suggesting the declining linear trend in overt homophobic attitudes may have continued in the post-COVID period. Conversely, MRNI-A-r: EDD and MRNI-A-r: AF scores were not significantly lower in 2021 or 2022 than in fall 2013, suggesting the declining linear trend we found from 2013–2019 may not have continued post-COVID (Table 5). For MRNI-A-r: T scores, we found that these scores were significantly higher in fall 2022 than in fall 2013, suggesting a potential increase in the post-COVID period (Table 5).

For our planned moderation analysis by Ethnocultural group, we did find a main effect of Ethnocultural group on NTSM (Table 2) and MRNI-A-r: EDD (Table 3) scores from 2013–2019, indicating that Ethnocultural youth reported greater overall overt homophobic attitudes and adherence to norms supporting emotional restriction as compared to White boys in our sample. However, we did not find significant moderation between Ethnocultural group and time for either NTSM or MRNI-A-r: EDD, indicating that Ethnocultural youth had significantly higher scores at all time points from 2013–2019 on these two scales.

3.3 Overall use of homophobic name-calling and association with overt homophobic attitudes

When exploring correlations between the HCA total score, indicating the overall amount of homophobic name-calling the participant used (regardless of who this name-calling was aimed at), and NTSM scores, we found that the correlation was significant, but as hypothesized, small in magnitude ($r = 0.33$; Table 6). We also explored this correlation for White and Ethnocultural boys separately (Supplementary Table S3). Although the correlation between HCA

TABLE 1 Sample demographics for cisgender, heterosexual boys from 2013 to 2022.

	Full Sample ($N = 873$)	Fall 2013 ($n = 37$)	Fall 2014 ($n = 117$)	Fall 2015 ($n = 142$)	Fall 2016 ($n = 111$)	Fall 2017 ($n = 128$)	Fall 2018 ($n = 15$)	Fall 2019 ($n = 156$)	Fall 2021 ($n = 78$)	Fall 2022 ($n = 89$)
Age (years), mean (SD)	14.39 (0.37)	14.47 (0.41)	14.33 (0.33)	14.44 (0.44)	14.37 (0.38)	14.35 (0.34)	14.53 (0.33)	14.37 (0.32)	14.48 (0.41)	14.37 (0.35)
Population group, % (n)[a]										
African[b]	2.6 (22)	2.7 (1)	0.9 (1)	4.2 (6)	5.1 (5)	0.8 (1)	6.7 (1)	3.2 (5)	0.0 (0)	2.2 (2)
East Asian[b]	2.9 (25)	8.1 (3)	2.6 (3)	2.8 (4)	1.0 (1)	4.1 (5)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)	6.4 (5)	4.5 (4)
Filipino[b]	0.7 (6)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)	1.0 (1)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)	1.3 (2)	1.3 (1)	2.2 (2)
Indigenous[b]	4.8 (41)	_[c]	_[c]	_[c]	_[c]	_[c]	_[c]	_[c]	_[c]	_[c]
Latin American[b]	2.0 (17)	0.0 (0)	3.4 (4)	2.8 (4)	1.0 (1)	6.7 (1)	6.7 (1)	1.3 (2)	0.0 (0)	3.4 (3)
West Asian[b]	3.4 (29)	0.0 (0)	8.5 (10)	4.9 (7)	3.1 (3)	4.1 (5)	0.0 (0)	1.9 (3)	1.3 (1)	0.0 (0)
South Asian[b]	6.2 (53)	0.0 (0)	9.4 (11)	11.3 (16)	4.1 (4)	7.3 (9)	0.0 (0)	3.2 (5)	1.3 (1)	7.9 (7)
Southeast Asian[b]	1.8 (15)	2.7 (1)	5.1 (6)	2.8 (4)	1.0 (1)	0.8 (1)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)	2.2 (2)
White	61.3 (524)	73.0 (27)	58.1 (68)	50.7 (72)	53.1 (52)	55.3 (68)	60.0 (9)	64.7 (101)	80.8 (63)	71.9 (64)
Other[b]	3.7 (32)	10.8 (4)	2.6 (3)	0.7 (1)	8.2 (8)	4.9 (6)	13.3 (2)	4.5 (7)	0.0 (0)	1.1 (1)
Multi-ethnic[b]	10.6 (91)	0.0 (0)	6.0 (7)	14.1 (20)	17.3 (17)	13.8 (17)	6.7 (1)	12.8 (20)	7.7 (6)	3.4 (3)
Family structure, % (n)										
Dual caregiver	70.4 (601)	64.9 (24)	70.1 (82)	75.4 (107)	66.7 (74)	61.2 (71)	93.3 (14)	71.9 (110)	71.8 (56)	74.1 (63)
Other	29.6 (253)	35.1 (13)	29.9 (35)	24.6 (35)	33.3 (37)	38.8 (45)	6.7 (1)	28.1 (43)	28.2 (22)	25.9 (22)
Ever dated, % (n)[d]										
Yes	57.1 (495)	56.8 (21)	59.8 (70)	53.5 (76)	59.5 (66)	74.6 (94)	60.0 (9)	53.8 (84)	49.3 (37)	43.8 (38)
No	42.9 (372)	43.2 (16)	40.2 (47)	46.5 (66)	40.5 (45)	25.4 (32)	40.0 (6)	46.2 (72)	50.7 (38)	56.2 (50)
WiseGuyz participant, % (n)										
Yes	81.8 (714)	100.0 (37)	100.0 (117)	100.0 (142)	100.0 (111)	100.0 (128)	100.0 (15)	51.9 (81)	50.0 (39)	49.4 (44)
No	18.2 (159)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)	48.1 (75)	50.0 (39)	50.6 (45)
Population center type, % (n)										
Large	64.6 (564)	100.0 (37)	100.0 (117)	100.0 (142)	100.0 (111)	100.0 (128)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)	26.9 (21)	9.0 (8)
Medium[e]	18.6 (162)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)	100.0 (15)	59.0 (92)	37.2 (29)	29.2 (26)
Small[e]	16.8 (147)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)	41.0 (64)	35.9 (28)	61.8 (55)

[a]Significant cross year difference, $p < 0.001$. There were (a) significantly fewer multi-ethnic participants in 2013 and 2022; (b) significantly more multi-ethnic participants in 2016; (c) significantly fewer racialized participants in 2021; and (d) significantly more White participants in 2021 than would be expected by chance. By racialized youth, we mean youth who did not report White or Multi-ethnic as their population group.
[b]Combined into one group (Ethnocultural youth) for multivariable analysis.
[c]Per Canadian ethics guidelines, we do not report per year sample size for Indigenous participants.
[d]Significant cross year difference, $p < 0.001$. There were significantly fewer non-daters in 2017 than would be expected by chance.
[e]Combined into one group (Small/Medium) for multivariable analysis.

(total) and NTSM scores was small and significant for both White and Ethnocultural boys, the magnitude of the correlation was smaller for Ethnocultural boys, indicating a weaker relationship (r, White boys = 0.39; r, Ethnocultural boys = 0.21; Supplementary Table S3).

3.4 Differential use of homophobic name-calling

Like with the HCA total score, we found that correlations between HCA Agent sub-scales and NTSM scores were significant but small in magnitude [r range: 0.21–0.26; Table 6]. The largest correlation with NTSM scores was for the HCA "do not like" sub-scale ($r = 0.26$), and

the smallest was for the HCA "do not know" sub-scale ($r = 0.21$; Table 6). Correlations between HCA sub-scales were generally small in magnitude, as well (r range: 0.19–0.51; Table 6). The largest correlations were between HCA "do not know" sub-scale scores and HCA "do not like" sub-scale scores ($r = 0.51$), and between HCA "not gay" sub-scale scores and HCA "friend" sub-scale scores ($r = 0.48$). The smallest correlation was between HCA "thought gay" sub-scale scores and HCA "friend" sub-scale scores ($r = 0.19$).

Finally, analyzing agents toward which homophobic name-calling was used, we found that participants across all years most commonly used homophobic name-calling toward a friend (54.3%), followed by someone they did not like (24.1%) someone they did not think was gay (21.7%), someone they did not know (9.5%), and someone they
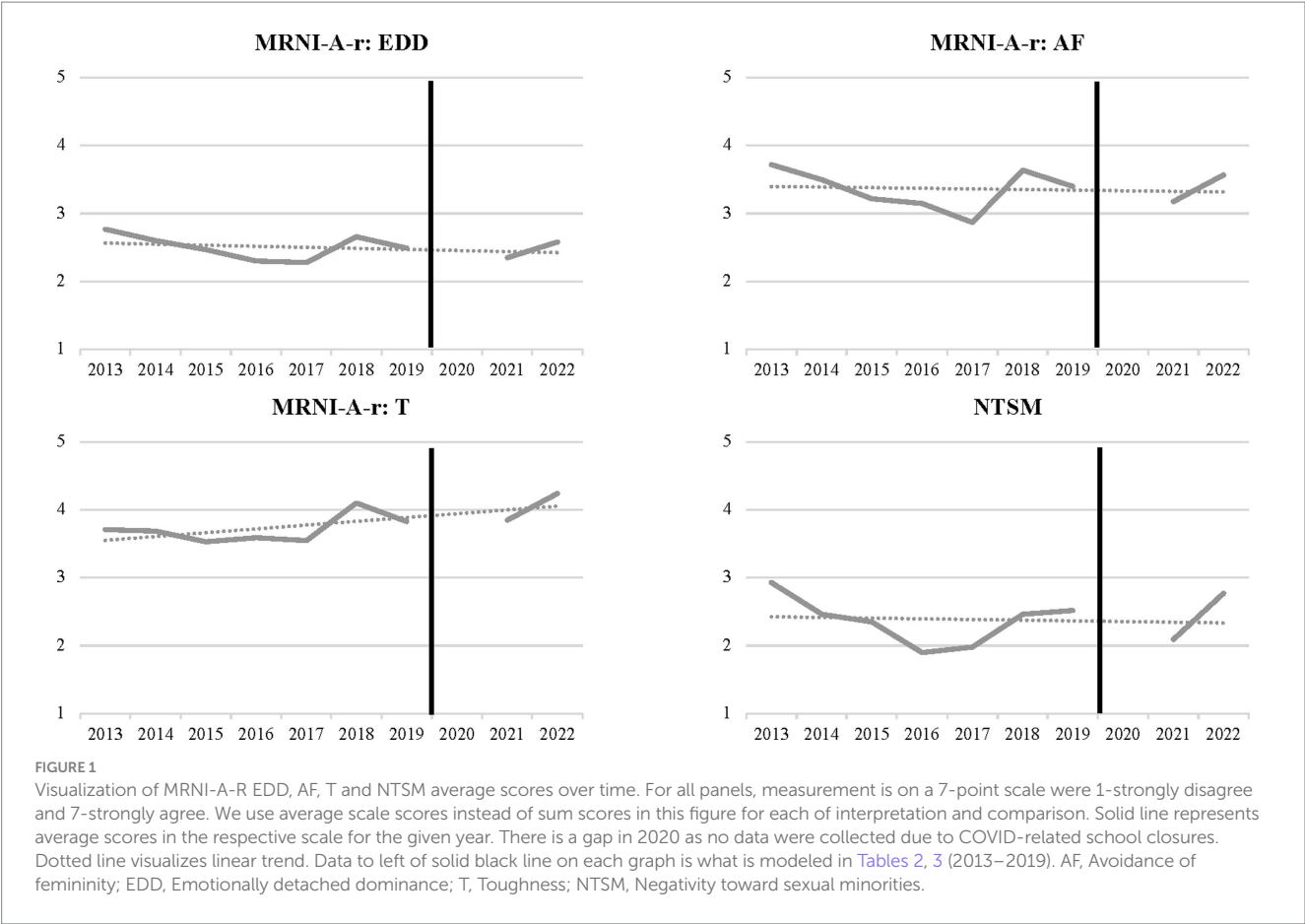
FIGURE 1
Visualization of MRNI-A-R EDD, AF, T and NTSM average scores over time. For all panels, measurement is on a 7-point scale were 1-strongly disagree and 7-strongly agree. We use average scale scores instead of sum scores in this figure for each of interpretation and comparison. Solid line represents average scores in the respective scale for the given year. There is a gap in 2020 as no data were collected due to COVID-related school closures. Dotted line visualizes linear trend. Data to left of solid black line on each graph is what is modeled in Tables 2, 3 (2013–2019). AF, Avoidance of femininity; EDD, Emotionally detached dominance; T, Toughness; NTSM, Negativity toward sexual minorities.

TABLE 2 Multivariable linear regression models exploring NTSM scale scores over time, 2013–2019.

	NTSM		
	b (SE)	95% CI	p-value
Intercept	23.61 (1.51)	20.65, 26.57	<0.001
Time	−1.70 (0.40)	−2.49, −0.91	<0.001
Small/Medium Population Center	8.29 (1.78)	4.79, 11.79	<0.001
Ethnocultural (yes)	2.05 (0.89)	0.31, 3.80	0.021
Dater (yes)	−1.63 (0.90)	−3.40, 0.13	0.069

For population center type, comparison group is Large. For Ethnocultural group, comparison group is White youth.
SE, Standard error; CI, Confidence interval; NTSM, Negativity toward sexual minorities. Bold values indicate statistically significant findings.

thought was gay (9.1%). This suggests that, as expected, homophobic name-calling was used in a differential manner by participants in this sample (Figure 2). In supplementary analyses, we explored whether there were any differences in homophobic name-calling by Ethnocultural group, or the type of population center where the participant attended school. There were no differences in HCA sub-scale scores by Ethnocultural group, and the overall pattern of name-calling was overall the same as for the sample as a whole, with friends being by far the most common target (Supplementary Figure S1). For population center, we found that boys who attended schools in small population centers were more likely to use homophobic

name-calling toward a friend or someone they thought was gay, and that boys who attended schools in large population centers were less likely to use homophobic name-calling toward someone they did not think was gay. However, as for Ethnocultural boys, the overall pattern of name-calling was the same as in the overall sample (Supplementary Figure S2). There were also no cross-year differences in name-calling by Agent, in models controlling for Ethnocultural group, population center size, and dating status (Table 7).

4 Discussion

This study provides a quantitative exploration of the ideas of hybrid masculinities in a North American sample. We hypothesized that if the ideas of hybrid masculinities applied in our sample, we would find that overt homophobic attitudes and adherence to related patriarchal norms would decline over time, but that homophobic name-calling – the actual practice used to regulate masculinities in Western settings – would not be strongly correlated with overt homophobic attitudes, and that because of its role in policing masculinity among peers, would be differentiated in its use (Pascoe, 2013). We also explored how findings differed for a specific sub-group – Ethnocultural boys – to see if there were differences that might be related to perceptions of marginalized masculinities. Our findings generally supported our hypothesis, though we did not find many differences between White and Ethnocultural boys in our sample.

TABLE 3 Multivariable linear regression models exploring MRNI-A-r sub-scale scores over time, 2013–2019.

	EDD			AF			T		
	b (SE)	95% CI	p-value	b (SE)	95% CI	p-value	b (SE)	95% CI	p-value
Intercept	**43.38 (2.02)**	**39.42, 47.34**	**<0.001**	**22.76 (1.11)**	**20.59, 24.93**	**<0.001**	**25.39 (1.08)**	**23.27, 27.51**	**<0.001**
Time	**−2.26 (0.54)**	**−3.31, −1.20**	**<0.001**	**−1.36 (0.29)**	**−1.94, −0.78**	**<0.001**	−0.42 (0.29)	−0.98, 0.15	0.15
Small/Medium Population Center	**9.49 (2.40)**	**4.78, 14.20**	**<0.001**	**6.14 (1.31)**	**3.57, 8.72**	**<0.001**	**3.31 (1.28)**	**0.79, 5.83**	**0.010**
Ethnocultural (yes)	**3.47 (1.19)**	**1.13, 5.81**	**0.0037**	0.73 (0.65)	−0.55, 2.02	0.26	0.90 (0.64)	−0.36, 2.15	0.16
Dater (yes)	**2.35 (1.20)**	**0.084, 4.81**	**0.042**	1.07 (0.66)	−0.23, 2.36	0.11	1.24 (0.65)	−0.029, 2.51	0.056

For population center type, comparison group is Large. For Ethnocultural group, comparison group is White youth.
SE, Standard error; CI, Confidence interval; AF, Avoidance of femininity; EDD, Emotionally detached dominance; T, Toughness. Bold values indicate statistically significant findings.

TABLE 4 Multivariable linear regression model exploring NTSM scale scores at distinct time points (year-wise comparison), 2013–2022.

	NTSM		
	b (SE)	95% CI	p-value
Intercept	**23.40 (1.91)**	**19.64, 27.15**	**<0.001**
Fall 2014	−4.00 (2.12)	−8.16, 0.16	0.059
Fall 2015	**−5.08 (2.08)**	**−9.16, −1.01**	**0.015**
Fall 2016	**−8.58 (2.17)**	**−12.85, −4.31**	**<0.001**
Fall 2017	**−7.90 (2.12)**	**−12.06, −3.74**	**0.00021**
Fall 2018	−7.87 (4.19)	−16.08, 0.35	0.060
Fall 2019	**−7.47 (3.15)**	**−13.66, 1.28**	**0.018**
Fall 2020	–	–	–
Fall 2021	**−9.45 (2.83)**	**−14.99, −3.90**	**0.00087**
Fall 2022	−5.15 (3.09)	−11.22, 0.92	0.096
Small/Medium Pop. Center	3.89 (2.39)	−0.80, 8.58	0.10
Ethnocultural (yes)	**2.07 (0.81)**	**0.47, 3.67**	**0.011**
Dater (yes)	−0.97 (0.80)	−2.54, 0.59	0.22

Comparison year was fall 2013. Data were not collected in fall 2020 due to COVID-19. We include a placeholder for this year in this table to make this gap clear. For population center type, comparison group is Large. For Ethnocultural group, comparison group is White youth. SE, Standard error; CI, Confidence interval; NTSM, Negativity toward sexual minorities. Bold values indicate statistically significant findings.

Our first hypothesis regarding the decline in overt homophobic attitudes and related patriarchal norms was mostly supported. Specifically, we found that overt homophobic attitudes declined significantly from 2013 to 2019, and that this decline appeared to continue in the post-COVID period. This decline also reflects larger trends in North America (Flores, 2014; Pew Research Center, 2019). It is important to note that in our sample, even in 2013, overall levels of overt homophobic attitudes were quite low, with a mean scale score around 'somewhat disagree'. In part, this may be because the NTSM is a very explicit measure, which – because of changing societal attitudes more broadly – may lead to issues with social desirability in responding. Because of this lower overall mean score, we were likely somewhat limited in our ability to detect change. To this end, in future work, we recommend also using more implicit measures of homophobia/sexual prejudice to assess homophobic attitudes among participants (e.g., Poteat et al., 2015). Despite this limitation, we still

saw a significant decline over the 10-year study period, with a mean score closer to 'disagree' by fall 2022.

We also found a linear decline in adherence to norms supporting emotional restriction and avoidance of femininity from 2013–2019. We chose to explore these norms in addition to overt homophobic attitudes since research on masculinities has repeatedly pointed to the interactional relationship between masculinity and homophobia (Phoenix et al., 2003; Pascoe, 2007; Bridges and Pascoe, 2014; Diefendorf and Bridges, 2020). Overall, then, it is not surprising that these scores showed similar declines to homophobic attitudes. However, we did not find a change in adherence in toughness norms from 2013–2019. The 'toughness' sub-scale also consistently had the highest average score of all scales over the study period (average scale score around 'somewhat agree'). In terms of why we did not find a decline in adherence to toughness norms, it is possible this scale does not cover homophobic-adjacent concepts in the same way that the emotional restriction and avoidance of femininity scales do. For example, in the original measure validation study with early adolescents (Levant et al., 2012), five of the seven items on the 'toughness' scale came from items originally designed to tap aggression, self-reliance, and achievement/status, whereas only one came from items designed to tap restrictive emotionality and one from items designed to tap avoidance of femininity. Comparatively, eight of the 16 items on the 'emotionally detached dominance' scale came from items designed to tap restrictive emotionality/avoidance of femininity, and all six items on the 'avoidance of femininity' scale came from items designed to tap avoidance of femininity. It is also possible that the 'toughness' items, which primarily focus on defending oneself, trying to be the best, and gaining respect/admiration, are still more socially acceptable than avoidance of femininity or emotional restriction items, and so were more resistant to change.

Data also suggest some changes in the post-COVID-19 period. Specifically, data from 2021 to 2022 suggest that the linear decline in adherence to emotional restriction and avoidance of femininity norms may not have continued in the post-COVID period, and that there was an increase in adherence to toughness norms. The lack of continued decline might reflect the increasing influence of the manosphere during and post-COVID. As noted by Barker et al. (2021), due to the increased amount of time men and boys spent online during the pandemic, "the politics of online angry manhood and antifeminist sentiment may have increased during COVID-19… social isolation and the deliberate right-wing politicization of some men's increasing economic precarity suggest 2020 was a particularly fertile year for [manosphere] expansion efforts" (p. 171). Research

TABLE 5 Multivariable linear regression model exploring MRNI-A-r sub-scale scores at distinct time points (year-wise comparison), 2013–2022.

	EDD			AF			T		
	b (SE)	95% CI	p-value	b (SE)	95% CI	p-value	b (SE)	95% CI	p-value
Intercept	**41.82 (2.55)**	**36.82, 46.82**	**<0.001**	**21.41 (1.43)**	**18.59, 24.22**	**<0.001**	**24.93 (1.38)**	**22.22, 27.63**	**<0.001**
Fall 2014	−3.27 (2.82)	−8.80, 2.27	0.25	−1.40 (1.59)	−4.52, 1.71	0.38	−0.27 (1.53)	−3.27, 2.72	0.86
Fall 2015	−5.40 (2.77)	−10.83, 0.031	0.051	**−3.06 (1.56)**	**−6.12, −0.007**	**0.049**	−1.37 (1.50)	−4.31, 1.56	0.36
Fall 2016	**−8.02 (2.90)**	**−13.71, −2.32**	**0.0059**	**−3.46 (1.63)**	**−6.67, −0.26**	**0.034**	−0.60 (1.57)	−3.68, 2.48	0.70
Fall 2017	**−9.57 (2.83)**	**−15.12, −4.02**	**0.00075**	**−5.78 (1.59)**	**−8.90, −2.66**	**0.00030**	−1.81 (1.53)	−4.81, 1.19	0.24
Fall 2018	1.18 (5.66)	−9.93, 12.27	0.84	−1.19 (3.18)	−7.44, 5.05	0.71	4.60 (3.01)	−1.84, 7.05	0.14
Fall 2019	−1.20 (4.19)	−9.42, 7.02	0.77	−2.30 (2.35)	−6.92, 2.32	0.33	2.61 (2.26)	−1.84, 7.05	0.26
Fall 2020	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Fall 2021	−3.99 (3.76)	−11.38, 3.39	0.29	−3.40 (2.12)	−7.56, 0.75	0.11	2.57 (2.04)	−1.43, 6.57	0.21
Fall 2022	0.51 (4.11)	−7.55, 8.57	0.90	−1.08 (2.31)	−5.61, 3.45	0.64	**5.48 (2.22)**	**1.12, 9.84**	**0.014**
Small/Medium Pop. Center	−3.70 (3.16)	−9.91, 2.50	0.24	0.25 (1.78)	−3.24, 3.73	0.89	−1.97 (1.71)	−5.33, 1.39	0.25
Ethnocultural (yes)	**3.10 (1.08)**	**0.97, 5.23**	**0.0043**	0.59 (0.61)	−0.61, 1.78	0.33	0.66 (0.59)	−0.50, 1.81	0.26
Dater (yes)	**2.93 (1.07)**	**0.84, 5.03**	**0.0060**	**1.29 (0.60)**	**0.11, 2.46**	**0.032**	**1.53 (0.58)**	**0.40, 2.66**	**0.00081**

Comparison year was fall 2013. Data were not collected in fall 2020 due to COVID-19. We include a placeholder for this year in this table to make this gap clear. For population center type, comparison group is Large. For Ethnocultural group, comparison group is White youth.
SE, Standard Error; CI, Confidence Interval; AF, Avoidance of Femininity; EDD, Emotionally detached dominance; T, Toughness. Bold values indicate statistically significant findings.

TABLE 6 Correlations[a].

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.
1. NTSM	–	**0.52*****	**0.70*****	0.40***	0.33***	0.22***	0.26***	0.23***	0.21***	0.25***
2. MRNI-A-r: EDD	**0.57*****	–	**0.68*****	**0.71*****	0.26***	0.21***	0.21***	0.21***	0.098*	0.11*
3. MRNI-A-r: AF	**0.68*****	**0.72*****	–	**0.64*****	0.33***	0.26***	0.24***	0.29***	0.13**	0.17***
4. MRNI-A-r: T	0.45***	**0.73*****	**0.68*****	–	0.29***	0.26***	0.15***	0.28***	0.078	0.13**
5. HCA total score	0.33***	0.26***	0.33***	0.29***	–	**0.76*****	**0.70*****	**0.74*****	**0.63*****	**0.57*****
6. HCA: Friend	0.22***	0.21***	0.26***	0.26***	**0.76*****	–	0.29***	0.48***	0.25***	0.19***
7. HCA: Do not like	0.26***	0.21***	0.24***	0.15***	**0.70*****	0.29***	–	0.35***	**0.51*****	0.43***
8. HCA: Not gay	0.23***	0.21***	0.29***	0.29***	**0.74*****	0.48***	0.35***	–	0.28***	0.34***
9. HCA: Do not know	0.21***	0.098*	0.13**	0.078	**0.63*****	0.25***	**0.51*****	0.28***	–	0.36***
10. HCA: Thought gay	0.25***	0.11*	0.17***	0.13**	**0.57*****	0.19***	0.43***	0.34***	0.36***	–

***$p < 0.001$; **$p < 0.01$; *$p < 0.05$.
AF, Avoidance of Femininity; EDD, Emotionally detached dominance; T, Toughness; NTSM, Negativity Toward Sexual Minorities; HCA, Homophobic Content Agent. Correlations >0.50 (i.e., a moderate correlation or larger) are bolded in the table to support interpretation.
[a]Below the diagonal: bivariate correlations for full sample. Above the diagonal: bivariate correlations for participants with data from 2016–2022 when HCA data were collected ($n = 563$).

from South Asia also demonstrates a significant increase in the percentage of misogynistic tweets since 2020 (Dehingia et al., 2021). Anecdotally, WiseGuyz program facilitators also have reported on the rise in popularity of figures like Andrew Tate since the pandemic, and a recalcitration of patriarchal attitudes among program participants that seemed to be declining pre-pandemic.

Our second hypothesis, that the correlation between overt homophobic attitudes and homophobic name-calling (overall and by agent) would be small in magnitude, and that homophobic name-calling by agent would be differentiated, was supported. Specifically, although overt homophobic attitudes declined, homophobic name-calling remained differentiated, with significantly higher name-calling toward a friend as compared to

someone youth thought was gay. One limitation of these data is that we cannot know *why* youth engaged in this homophobic name-calling. Currently in the literature, we note two possible interpretations for this use. One possible interpretation is that of Anderson and McCormack (McCormack et al., 2016; Anderson and McCormack, 2018), which posits that some youth may use homosexually-themed language toward friends as a demonstration of friendship closeness and playfulness. Yet, as feminist scholars, we feel that even if used to be 'playful', this type of discourse nonetheless exposes youth (including the agent, target and bystanders) to language that reinforces patriarchal masculine norms and fortifies what are appropriate ways to be (and not be) a boy (Pascoe, 2007; Reigeluth and Addis, 2015; Bridges and Pascoe,
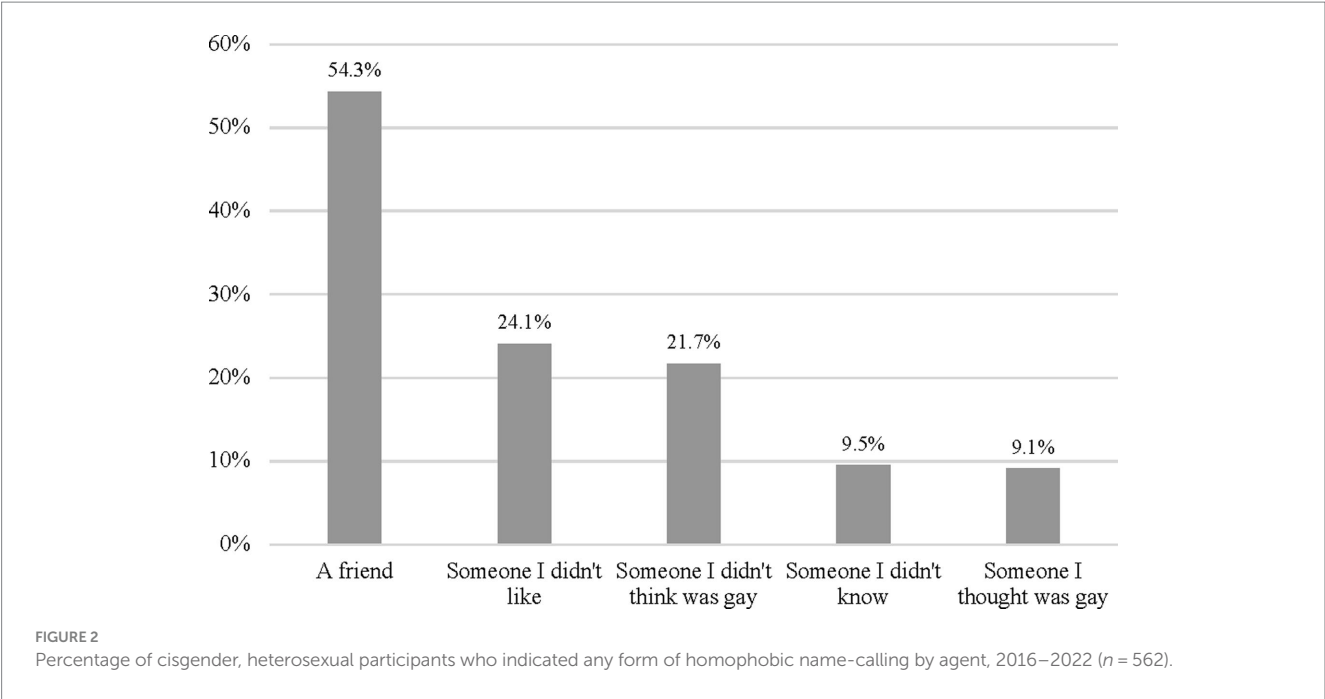
FIGURE 2
Percentage of cisgender, heterosexual participants who indicated any form of homophobic name-calling by agent, 2016–2022 (*n* = 562).

TABLE 7 Multivariable logistic regression model exploring HCA sub-scale scores at distinct time points (year-wise comparison), 2016–2022.

Agent	Friend			Someone I did not like			Someone I did not think was gay		
	aOR	95% CI	*p*-value	aOR	95% CI	*p*-value	aOR	95% CI	*p*-value
Intercept	**0.48**	**0.25, 0.90**	**0.024**	**0.30**	**0.14, 0.60**	**0.00083**	**0.15**	**0.059, 0.32**	**<0.001**
Fall 2017	0.85	0.44, 1.66	0.64	0.57	0.26, 1.24	0.15	0.83	0.34, 2.17	0.69
Fall 2018	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Fall 2019	1.31	0.46, 3.83	0.62	0.72	0.22, 2.34	0.59	1.02	0.28, 3.69	0.97
Fall 2020	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Fall 2021	1.59	0.62, 4.15	0.34	0.88	0.29, 2.52	0.81	2.14	0.66, 6.85	0.20
Fall 2022	2.00	0.70, 5.75	0.20	1.04	0.31, 3.28	0.94	1.22	0.34, 4.35	0.76
S/M Pop. Center	1.37	0.58, 3.12	0.47	1.30	0.52, 3.59	0.60	1.69	0.67, 4.72	0.29
Ethnocultural (yes)	1.21	0.82, 1.80	0.33	1.10	0.70, 1.70	0.68	1.10	0.69, 1.76	0.68
Dater (yes)	**2.08**	**1.42, 3.07**	**0.00020**	1.25	0.81, 1.93	0.32	1.26	0.81, 1.99	0.31
Agent	Someone I did not know			Someone I thought was gay		
	aOR	95% CI	*p*-value	b (SE)	95% CI	*p*-value
Intercept	**0.067**	**0.018, 0.19**	**<0.001**	**0.025**	**0.0038, 0.093**	**<0.001**
Fall 2017	0.74	0.21, 2.96	0.65	1.22	0.27, 8.57	0.81
Fall 2018	–	–	–	–	–	–
Fall 2019	1.05	0.16, 6.16	0.96	0.63	0.026, 7.71	0.72
Fall 2020	–	–	–	–	–	–
Fall 2021	1.20	0.21, 6.12	0.83	0.92	0.041, 10.19	0.95
Fall 2022	2.29	0.38, 12.52	0.34	1.21	0.052, 14.47	0.88
S/M Pop. Center	1.21	0.35, 5.58	0.78	4.87	0.91, 90.55	0.14
Ethnocultural (yes)	1.33	0.69, 2.50	0.38	1.09	0.55, 2.11	0.79
Dater (yes)	1.09	0.59, 2.06	0.78	1.83	0.96, 3.60	0.073

Comparison year was fall 2016. Data were not collected in fall 2020 due to COVID-19. We include a placeholder for this year in this table to make this gap clear. Data on this scale were also not collected on the fall 2018 survey, but we include a placeholder for this year in this table to make this gap clear. For population center type, comparison group is Large. For Ethnocultural group, comparison group is White youth.

S/M, Small/Medium; aOR, Adjusted Odds Ratio; CI, Confidence interval. Bold values indicate statistically significant findings.

2018). The second interpretation (and the one explored in this paper) is from Pascoe (2013) and Bridges and Pascoe (2014, 2016, 2018), and agrees with Anderson and McCormack that homophobic name-calling is not about overt homophobia. However, Bridges and Pascoe differ in their discussion of why this name-calling is used toward a friend, specifically stating that friend-targeted use is a way of using jokes, taunts and imitations to punish those who transgress gender norms, and not the result of innocuous social use (Pascoe, 2013). Thus, in this interpretation, homophobic name-calling has as much to do with failing to appear competent in stereotypical masculine behaviors (e.g., heterosexual prowess) as it does with sexual identity (Pascoe, 2013). Indeed, we feel that a core issue with the idea that homophobic discourse is used for social bonding is that it is still using a less dominant group to 'other' peers.

Based on our data, and congruent with a significant body of research examining the intersections between homophobic harassment and adolescent masculinity (Phoenix et al., 2003; Pascoe, 2007; Carrera-Fernández et al., 2018; Munsch and Gruys, 2018), we contend that homophobic name-calling continues to act as a discursive strategy to police and discipline male gender practices and identities that are countertyped against culturally-valued masculinities (Diefendorf and Bridges, 2020). For example, the smallest correlation between HCA Agent-specific scores in our data was between name-calling toward someone the person thought was gay and name-calling toward a friend, suggesting these are distinct behaviors with different underlying motivations. Further, qualitative data collected from the 2014–2015 offering of WiseGuyz highlights a common realization among participants (post-program) about how the use of this language contributes to the perpetuation of patriarchal masculine norms (Hurlock, 2016). For example, one participant stated "I do not think they mean to be homophobic but 'gay' it's just a word like 'gay' is a slur that everyone uses for some reasons to bring people down. Saying that like makes people that are gay, makes them not wanna come out and tell other people in case they are bullied" (Hurlock, 2016, p. 43).

Finally, exploring a sub-group identified as important in prior theory and research (Ethnocultural youth), we did find that Ethnocultural youth in our sample reported significantly more emotional restriction and overt homophobic attitudes, as compared to their White peers. This increased adherence to emotional restriction and homophobia may reflect an outcome of marginalized masculinities, given previous research pointing to hypermasculinity as a potential coping mechanism for racialized adolescents (e.g., O'Donnell and Sharpe, 2000; Spencer et al., 2004; Griffith et al., 2012). However, there was no difference between Ethnocultural and White youth in terms of homophobic name-calling (either overall or by agent), or in terms of adherence to the patriarchal norms of avoidance of femininity and toughness. There was also no interaction between the decline over time in homophobic attitudes or emotional restriction and Ethnocultural group. Thus, it appears that, although they reported higher average levels of overt homophobic attitudes and emotional restriction, Ethnocultural youth experienced a similar decline in these attitudes over time as White youth in our sample. In addition, both White and Ethnocultural youth in our sample used homophobic name-calling in a differentiated way. However, more research on the potential application of the ideas of hybrid masculinities to racialized youth in non-American contexts is needed to better understand these findings.

4.1 Theoretical implications

Overall, our data lend support to the framework of hybrid masculinities, suggesting that while there are positive shifts in relation to broader homophobic attitudes in this sample, homophobic name-calling among peers is likely still being deployed by some boys to emasculate and regulate other young men (Pascoe, 2013). Our data also support the process of fortifying boundaries, given that after friends, the next most common agent that homophobic name-calling was directed toward was someone the youth did not like. This action suggests that, for some boys, homophobic name-calling remains a way of identifying outsiders in the group, establishing social boundaries, and upholding unequal power relations (Pascoe, 2013; Bridges and Pascoe, 2018). In this way, homophobic name-calling can be used both as a strategy of repudiation and confirmation, rejecting a feminized identity as well as enforcing dominance over less powerful peers (Bridges and Pascoe, 2016). This finding also corresponds to arguments by critical masculinity scholars who point out that while homophobia and homophobic rhetoric is often publicly penalized and generally less socially acceptable than in past decades (at least in many Western contexts), there are still a range of micro-processes and interactions that continue to uphold, and reproduce, heterosexism and homophobia within different settings, such as schools (Eisen and Yamashita, 2019; Christofidou, 2021).

Our data are also the first (to our knowledge) to quantitatively explore the ideas of hybrid masculinities in a mid-adolescent sample. Understanding practices of masculinity at this critical juncture for the development of gender-based identities and behaviors is needed in the literature (Lomas et al., 2013, 2020). For example, a recent systematic review of perceptions and interpretations of contemporary masculinity found that none of the included articles had a sample younger than age 16 (Connor et al., 2021). Our sample of mid-adolescent boys (mean age 14.39) thus provides an important addition to the literature on contemporary practices of masculinity. Future research should continue to explore the ideas of hybrid masculinities with early, mid, and late adolescents, as well as how these ideas might intersect with other theories of contemporary practices (e.g., Inclusive Masculinity Theory; McCormack et al., 2016). This research should also focus on careful consideration of diverse groups of boys and the role their social location may play in their gendered practices, as there are likely a number of important nuances within the broad ideas of discursive distancing, strategic borrowing, and fortifying boundaries across intersections of boys' identities (e.g., for bisexual boys; Winer, 2022).

Finally, we note that these data were not designed to be and are not a conclusive test of the ideas of hybrid masculinities. For example, as described above, in Inclusive Masculinity Theory, Anderson and McCormack state that homosexually-themed language is mostly used as social bonding, and not as masculinity policing (McCormack and Anderson, 2010; McCormack, 2011; McCormack et al., 2016; Anderson and McCormack, 2018). It is certainly possible to read our HCA data as capturing homosexually-themed language, and not targeted name-calling. However, we feel that if Inclusive Masculinity Theory was a better fit for our data, in addition to the overall decline in homophobic attitudes and small correlation between HCA "friend" and HCA "thought gay" scores that we found, we would also have found strong correlations between overt homophobic attitudes and name-calling toward someone the youth thought was gay, which

we did not. Further, all HCA inter-correlations were small, suggesting participants are using this name-calling in different ways with different people. This suggests that, depending on context, the ideas of both hybrid masculinities and Inclusive Masculinity Theory might apply (e.g., some boys may be using this name-calling to regulate masculinity, others to bond, and still others for another purpose). A key empirical question for future research is thus to explore differences in motivation for homophobic name-calling across settings and contexts.

4.2 Limitations

A primary limitation is the nature of our sample. Specifically, although we collected data in the same metropolitan area from 2013 to 2022, we were not at the same schools in each year, and thus school differences could be contributing to the declines we see. In addition, as there was some overlap between the schools were WiseGuyz was offered across cohorts in this study, it is also possible that the continued presence of WiseGuyz in these institutional settings may be linked to some of the decline in homophobic attitudes over time. We also expanded data collection to include small and medium population centers starting in 2018, which could be driving some differences over time. However, to account for this change, we controlled for population center type in all multivariable models. We also only collected data in one fairly conservative province, and thus it is possible findings would be different in more politically liberal settings. In terms of our sample, we included boys who self-reported that they were cisgender and heterosexual, but we acknowledge that despite assurances of anonymity and confidentiality, some boys may have chosen to mask their true sexual and/or gender identity in their survey responses. A second limitation is that we only asked about homophobic name-calling starting in fall 2016, which limited our sample size for these analyses. Due to COVID-related school closures, we were unable to collect data in fall 2020, so could not look at an uninterrupted linear trend from 2013–2022. All data were also self-report, and thus subject to social desirability bias. We were only able to explore effects for Ethnocultural and White youth, as we did not have the power to explore effects by individual Ethnocultural groups in this sample. Thus, it is important to note that our results should not be interpreted as compared to a White 'norm'. Intersectional distinctions are important considerations in relation to inequitable access to forms of hybrid masculinities (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014). Our inability to look at distinct Ethnocultural groups may also be the reason for the limited findings pertaining to this sub-sample. Finally, we looked at the broad ideas of hybrid masculinities, but note that these ideas are not binary, and that there is likely important context and nuance within each of these ideas (e.g., some young men may borrow aspects of feminized masculinities to obtain hegemonic goals like sexual conquest in some settings, and to experience more intimate relationships with people of all genders in others). Understanding this continuum of engagement with hybrid masculinities is an important area for future research.

5 Conclusion

Hegemonic masculinities are relational and discursive, and for these reasons, they are subject to change both within an individual person's life course and over time (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005).

Although there appears to be a widening range of practices and performances of contemporary masculinities, such that on the surface many boys and men seem to be moving away from rigid and stereotypical forms, the ideas of hybrid masculinities would suggest that for many heterosexual, cisgender boys, the underlying hierarches and power relations remain. In this sample of heterosexual, cisgender mid-adolescent boys from one province in Western Canada, we did find that overt homophobic attitudes declined significantly over a 10-year period. Given the relationship between homophobia and masculinity, this decline could be viewed as a manifestation of meaningful shifts in how masculinities are experienced and expressed. However, as stated by Bridges and Pascoe, "privilege works best when it goes unrecognized" (2014, p. 256). Indeed, while overt negative attitudes regarding sexual minorities declined significantly in our sample, acts of homophobic name-calling persisted, and appeared to continue being used by some boys as a gender policing tool, fortifying boundaries and upholding unequal power relations. Hybrid masculinities, and the process of fortifying boundaries, appears well suited to account for these findings of both change and resistance.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because of data confidentiality requirements. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to deinera.exner2@ucalgary.ca.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent for participation in this study was provided by the participants' legal guardians.

Author contributions

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary material for this article can be found online at: https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fsoc.2024.1347568/full#supplementary-material.

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