

COOPERATIVE HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY IN DISNEY'S *MOANA*: NEOLIBERAL GENDER POLITICS AND THE RECONFIGURATION OF PATRIARCHAL AUTHORITY

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Abstract

This study examines the representation of hegemonic masculinity in Disney's animated film *Moana* (2016). Drawing on Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity, this research employs a qualitative constructionist approach to examine how male authority operates within a seemingly progressive narrative. The analysis focuses on the characters of Moana and Maui, whose dominance, confidence, and technical competence embody traditional masculine ideals. Although the film promotes themes of collaboration and empowerment, Maui's mentorship continues to shape Moana's growth, subtly reaffirming male centrality. His transformation from an authoritative figure to a supportive mentor reflects the adaptive nature of hegemonic masculinity, which redefines itself as emotionally intelligent and cooperative rather than overtly dominant. The findings reveal that while *Moana* advances female empowerment, it simultaneously preserves patriarchal values through subtle mechanisms of validation and guidance. By embedding male authority within a cooperative framework, the film perpetuates traditional gender hierarchies in a modernized and socially acceptable form. This study contributes to media and gender studies by extending Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity into the realm of contemporary animated cinema, showing how masculine dominance is recalibrated into culturally acceptable forms of guidance, partnership, and emotional vulnerability without relinquishing structural authority.

Keywords: *gender representation; hegemonic masculinity; masculine influence; Moana; patriarchy*

1. Introduction

Disney, as a global company, has a profound presence, with theme parks, films, and merchandise that have become integral to popular culture worldwide. In Australia, Disney has intertwined with the Australian popular culture and reflects technological development and global events (Groves, 2025). Hong Kong Disneyland highlights the impact of glocalization, where Western entertainment meets local cultural expectations (Bafagih & Wise, 2023). In the film *Moana*, Disney collaborated with Pacific Islanders to create a narrative that integrates Polynesian oral tradition (Tamaira & Fonoti, 2018). Moreover,

Disney films have exhibited characters and themes that incorporate gender ideology to appeal to diverse global audiences (Globan & Vukovic, 2022; Hubbard & Morrissey, 2024) and shape public understanding of masculinity and femininity.

Animated films often revolve around traditional gender stereotypes. They employ character arcs that reflect traditional gender roles. For instance, male characters are frequently depicted as strong, assertive, and emotionally restrained, reinforcing hegemonic masculinity (Harriger et al., 2021). In contrast, female characters may be portrayed as nurturing or passive (Al-Jbouri & Pomerantz, 2020; McCallum, 2013; Shawcroft et al., 2022). These designs play a crucial role in conveying gender identity. Male characters are often depicted with strong, angular features, while female characters may have softer, more rounded designs. This visual representation reinforces societal stereotypes about gender (Aley & Hahn, 2020). Disney animated films are no exception to these characteristics. Early portrayals often depicted female characters in traditional, patriarchal roles, emphasizing obedience and marriage as their primary goals.

While many animated films continue to reinforce traditional gender stereotypes, there is a growing trend toward subversion. Both Pixar and Disney animated films offer audiences new nuances of masculinity and femininity. Films such as *Toy Story*, *Coco*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Mulan* represent new man (Al-Jbouri & Pomerantz, 2020, p. 45; McCallum, 2013, p. 116). A significant shift occurs in the portrayal of female characters. Disney's heroines who were traditionally portrayed with "beauty-long, flowing hair, doe-eyes, dazzling smile, hourglass figure" are now replaced with "more realistic representation of woman" (Karmakar & Bhadra, 2023, p. 5), such as Merida in *Brave* and Moana in *Moana*.

Disney has a diverse and flourishing portfolio of female characters, whose appearances and depictions have changed substantially throughout the studio's history. The female characters in the first Disney animations were regularly depicted as passive figures seeking salvation. They were perceived as helpless and in need of protection (Zipes, 2012). Over the years, many Disney characters have undergone significant transformations. In this case, Disney features several generations of female characters that exemplify its evolution from passive, stereotypical depictions to more empowering and nuanced portrayals. The first generation, the Eurocentric female characters were conventionally beautiful, passive, and completely dependent on male saviors. They were portrayed as lacking independence, and their value was determined solely by their youthful beauty. Whereas the second generation saw a change. In this generation, Disney female characters were depicted as highly passionate and free to embark on adventures. Despite having stronger desires and personalities, they ultimately sacrificed themselves irrationally to men. Later in the third generation, Disney sought to incorporate the theme of diversity, as evidenced by its female characters from different ethnicities and regions. Yet, these efforts were frequently trapped in awkward exoticization and caricature, where these characters were burdened with representing their entire race or ethnicity rather than being individuals with their own stories, thereby feeling like a corny 'apology' for Disney's Eurocentric history (Bell et al., 1995; Scarangella, 2010).

Subsequently, the fourth generation emerged, differing from previous generations. The fourth generation is perceived as the most promising stage of evolution. In this case, the female characters that appear are depicted as independent, empowered, and fully self-reliant, strong-brave girls. They do not need to be saved by men; rather, they save themselves and others. This generation also brings an outspoken critique of gender

stereotypes and traditional fairy-tale conventions. While, according to Cohen (2013), they continue to be criticized for their unrealistic beauty standards, the fourth generation has made real progress in creating complex, strong Disney female characters that embody more modern and equal values.

In its fourth generation, the audience knew them as the Disney renaissance and its aftermath featured more decisive and independent female protagonists, whom some scholars even deemed feminist heroines (Zsubori, 2024). This development is associated with the growing number of female writers, producers, and executives at the studio (Shawcroft et al., 2022). In contemporary academic discourse, many of Disney's female characters are now understood as interpretations of postfeminist and neoliberal media (Leader, 2018; Seybold, 2021; Stover, 2013; Wilde, 2014). They embody what is known as dual entanglement, which concurrently embraces and negates feminist values (McRobbie, 2004). These characters also operate within an economy of visibility, in which their bodies are commodified as the epicenter of their identity construction (Banet-Weiser, 2015). Thus, the supposedly progressive depictions of female Disney characters still speak within a much broader cultural context that solidifies gender power relations. It leaves open the issue of how the empowerment of females in popular culture is still confined within the persistent norms of patriarchy and capitalist logic.

Hegemony of masculinity is a conception that was conceptualized to address how masculine power persists in society despite the presence of diverse forms of masculinity (Carrigan et al., 1985; Connell, 1987). This concept perceives gender as something volatile and relational, and power is sustained not principally through direct coercion, but through consensus or cultural consent that renders the dominance of one group of masculinity over the other natural and legitimate (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Donaldson, 1993). Hegemony of masculinity functions not as the most commonly enacted form of masculinity, but as a normative standard that is culturally valorized and positioned as aspirational, shaping how both men and women understand and negotiate gendered identities (Enloe, 1983; Hockey, 2014). This hegemonic ideal defends its power through the subordination of other forms of masculinity and femininity. Although its form can be altered and evolved through the adoption of new practices, these changes are frequently a strategy for maintaining power and establishing new hierarchies based on race, class, or sexuality, instead of encouraging substantive equality (Khalili, 2011; Whitworth, 2004).

In Disney's *Moana* (Musker & Clements, 2016), there is an attempt to displace the traditional hero princess narrative through the representation of a self-reliant, physically strong, and loveless heroine. Moana is depicted as a courageous and resilient Disney character who is designated as a leader for her people. In this case, Moana appears to defy the passive gender stereotype of the previous princess era (Rebollo, 2019). Yet this framing of Moana's femininity occurs alongside a notable disempowerment of the alternative masculinity embodied by Maui.

Moana was released in 2016, when public discourse on gender representation and female empowerment in children's media had become more critical. The attempt to deconstruct the traditional heroine is evident in Moana's characterization as a character who has no interest in romance and is fully focused on her mission to save her people and find her true identity. Yet Moana also points out how female empowerment is framed within hegemonic masculinity. Thus, Moana's strength and independence are praised, but both are

contrasted with Maui's fall from heroic status. Therefore, it solidifies a hierarchy in which female emancipation can be achieved only by weakening non-hegemonic male figures. This displacement exemplifies Connell's argument that hegemonic masculinity adapts and rearranges itself, which is accelerating towards certain feminist values while preserving its primary dominance.

Due to its gender dynamics, *Moana* has gathered significant academic attention. The main female character is portrayed as a strong, independent leader, whose main concern is not romance but environmental issues (Hernawati, 2021). Ramadhan (2019) identified Moana's character as having both masculine and feminine traits, where the masculine traits are more dominant than the feminine ones. Meanwhile, Hollowell (2021) focuses on the male character, Chief Tui, who initially exhibits misogynistic behavior but later comes to support Moana's leadership, representing a shift toward a more progressive view of masculinity. Maui, the demigod, is described as having physical strength and relying on his magical fishhook; however, he challenges traditional notions of masculinity by being insecure and struggling with identity (Streiff & Dundes, 2017). Streiff and Dundes also found that, despite the appeal of a new, seemingly contemporary Disney princess, *Moana* reinforces stereotypes. The existing scholarship on *Moana* has predominantly focused on Moana's characterization as a strong, independent feminist heroine and the shifts in masculine representation through secondary male figures. While these analyses offer valuable insights into gender representation, they largely treat masculinity either as fragmented character traits or as a backdrop to female empowerment. Crucially, however, prior studies isolate individual attributes – such as Maui's insecurity or Chief Tui's initial resistance – without situating these traits within the broader structures of power that produce and sustain them. Examining masculinity as a collection of discrete characteristics risks obscuring how dominance is not simply embodied by individuals, but negotiated, contested, and reproduced through social and narrative relationships.

What remains underexplored is how hegemonic masculinity functions in relation to others: how its meanings and hierarchies are actively constructed through interactions between characters rather than existing within any single figure. Hegemonic masculinity cannot be fully understood in isolation; it gains its ideological strength precisely through the way it positions itself against femininity, subordinate masculinities, and alternative gender performances within a given narrative framework. Existing analyses have yet to consider how the dynamic between Moana and Maui serves as the primary site where hegemonic norms are both challenged and, at times, reaffirmed. This study, therefore, addresses a structural-theoretical gap in the film. Instead of listing gender traits at the character level, it examines how Connell's framework of hegemonic masculinity functions as a relational and structural force within the film's narrative, using the Moana-Maui dynamic as its central lens.

Thus, this study identifies the specific traits of hegemonic masculinity embodied in the interaction between Moana and Maui, with particular attention to how Maui's characterization and narrative arc function within the film's gender politics. Rather than reading Maui's loss of heroic authority as a simple subversion of masculine dominance, the analysis critically examines the mechanisms through which hegemonic masculinity is reconfigured as cooperative guidance, mentorship, and emotional support – forms that appear progressive while continuing to secure masculine centrality within the narrative. By foregrounding this dynamic, the study demonstrates how Moana's empowerment is framed

in relation to, and partially mediated by, a rearticulated masculine presence that adapts to feminist discourse without relinquishing its structural privilege. In doing so, the research contributes to media studies by offering a nuanced account of Disney's neoliberal negotiation of gender norms in contemporary cultural texts, revealing how apparent inclusivity and gender progressivism coexist with the subtle preservation of patriarchal power under the guise of partnership, balance, and mutual growth.

2. Literature Review

Connell describes masculinity as "simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture" (2005, p. 71). The idea has three components: social position, the behavior of men and women, and the individual and cultural consequences of the behavior. She argues that masculinity is not an individual experience but a social practice observable across organizations, communities, and cultures over time and in different places. Connell's notion of hegemonic masculinity (2005, p. 77) accounts for the method in which gendered practices contribute to the reinforcement of patriarchy, thus maintaining male dominance and female subjugation.

Hegemony is a term introduced by Antonio Gramsci in his work on class relations. It is the cultural means by which a group achieves and maintains its dominating position in society. Connell (2005, p. 76) describes a hierarchy of masculinity which consists of four tiers: the complicit, marginalized, subordinate, and hegemonic. Hierarchy shows the dominance of masculinity, particularly towards less dominant men and women (Sholichah, 2020). The four tiers differ in their definitions and in the characteristics owners may exhibit. Hegemonic masculinity is the most prominent type of masculinity. It is defined as "ideal" masculinity in which men with hegemonic characteristics are dominant. They assert their authority over women, whereas other genders are seen as feminine. Dominance is not only established through violence, but can be secured by cultural norms, institutional structures, and persuasive means. Therefore, hegemonic masculinity is formed in certain settings and by its historical context.

Hegemonic masculinity is historically contingent, and experiences changes in response to cultural and economic conditions. This adaptability is especially visible when viewed through the lens of neoliberalism, the dominant ideological paradigm of late capitalism, which prioritizes individualism, self-improvement, and performance by market parameters (Dean, 2017). In neoliberal contexts, hegemonic masculinity does not disappear; it is reconfigured. It is no longer communicated through overt patriarchal rule but through stories of individual accomplishment, competitive independence, and economic productivity.

Hollywood's historical record demonstrates this evolution. The changing portrayal of hegemonic masculinity is documented in Hollywood's mainstream films. In post-war America in the 1940s, Hollywood films portrayed males characterized by "toughness, competitiveness, and open and dominant heterosexuality" (Howson & Yecies, 2016, p. 62), thereby reinforcing the ideal masculine traits that were sought by the U.S. Occupation authorities. In the 1980s, muscular masculinity became the hegemonic form in the action-hero genre. Films such as *Rambo* and *Terminator* focused on traditional ideas of male supremacy (Edwards, 2013, p. 42). The 1990s civil rights, feminist, and homosexual

movements challenged the validity of conventional masculinity. Films of this period, such as *Point Break*, depicted a crisis in hegemonic masculinity (Bowen, 2022). In the early 21st century, Hollywood represented masculinity through the traumatized troops of the Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan war, as well as secret agent archetypes like James Bond and Jason Bourne who suffer from emotional and psychological instability. The characters embodied a modern masculinity that was "troubled, ill at ease with their own aspirations and pleasures, uncomfortable with the systems of privilege and power that differently enable individual men economically, socially, and culturally" (Baker, 2015, p. 245). The historical record suggests that hegemonic masculinity is not undone by critical scrutiny, but instead demonstrates its potential for adaptation, thereby maintaining its cultural hegemony through the absorption of critique and the redeployment of its legitimacy within new ideological formations.

Disney is especially powerful in a neoliberal cultural landscape. Disney is a global media company that both reflects and plays a key role in shaping and spreading existing gender stereotypes. The company uses stories that reflect gender issues in the contexts of personal empowerment, consumer choice, and identity development (Giroux, 1999). Disney stories often present a neoliberal perspective in which self-improvement is the primary means of enacting social change. This technique always moves the attention to personal development, not social problems. In this setting, Disney functions as a neoliberal cultural entity, reproducing hegemonic masculine qualities and strategically updating change. Harriger et al. (2021) point out that, although Disney films have shifted away from traditional depictions of masculinity to more varied representations, the themes of violence and risk-taking remain, signifying that the ideological foundation of hegemonic masculinity remains intact beneath its changed facade.

Postfeminism works with neoliberalism to reconfigure this relationship by re-envisioning the ways in which masculine dominance is articulated and resisted. Tasker and Negra (2007, p. 21) propose that postfeminism glorifies female strength and individual empowerment, and simultaneously redefines masculinity, often portraying male characters as "somewhat hapless, bumbling 'victims' or 'losers' in the 'sex wars'" (Gill, 2014, p. 191). This reveals the shortcomings in the articulation of masculinity, especially in the spheres of work and family (Tasker & Negra, 2007, p. 4). This perceived decline of male power should not be confused with a real collapse of hegemonic masculinity. Postfeminism reinterprets masculine authority, shifting it from an overt domination to a more subtle one. The male character who admits frailty, gives way to female competence, and ironically enjoys personal development becomes a rejuvenated source of ideological validity. In neoliberal postfeminist media, rather than rejecting masculine authority, it is reformed to fit a cultural climate that promotes progress but largely maintains core power relations.

This study applies the analytical framework of Connell's structural account of hegemonic masculinity, the neoliberal recodification of gender through individual achievement, the function of Disney as an ideological industry, and postfeminism's dual empowerment of women and rehabilitation of masculinity. This notion highlights that the gender representations are not separate features but relationally constructed and institutionally controlled and ideologically sustained inside the narrative of the film, especially with the hegemonic masculinity.

3. Research Method

This study is based on two interrelated theoretical frameworks: Raewyn Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity and postfeminist theory. These frameworks provide conceptual tools to investigate gender politics in *Moana* (2016). Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as the culturally prevalent form of masculine activity in a given social order, which validates patriarchal power and is replicated through major institutions such as popular media. Crucially, hegemonic masculinity is not a static or monolithic construct. It is historically contingent and renegotiated in response to changing gender relations, frequently by incorporating progressive or egalitarian discourses to retain its cultural authority in more palatable forms (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, pp. 832–833). This dynamic nature is especially significant to contemporary Disney narratives, which often depict seemingly modern gender arrangements even as they continue to promote male agency. For the research, hegemonic masculinity is defined as the discursive and representational strategies through which the demigod Maui's masculine identity is produced, performed, and legitimized throughout the film's narrative.

This analysis is further influenced by the postfeminist sensibility proposed by Gill (2007) and McRobbie (2004), which defines a cultural logic in whereby feminist advances are both recognized and disavowed. Postfeminism is not the negation of feminism but its incorporation into dominant discourse: it produces gender representations that appear progressive – men who co-operate, show emotion, or defer to female protagonists – but that ultimately reestablish masculine normativity through narrative closure (Gill, 2014, p. 185). Tasker and Negra note that postfeminist media culture is defined by a selective interaction with feminist ideas, making critique structurally problematic (Gill, 2007, p. 1). The analysis utilizes postfeminism alongside neoliberal models of individualism and self-improvement through which masculinity is reconfigured as a personal project of development and reform rather than a source of structural dominance. Together, these theoretical coordinates show how *Moana* frames hegemonic masculinity as cooperative and benevolent – and hence unproblematic.

This study is based on systematic critical textual analysis as a qualitative research paradigm. Qualitative research is concerned with understanding the meanings that people attach to social occurrences. It is based on textual and image data and uses specific methods for data collection, analysis, and validity (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Systemic textual analysis, as opposed to impressionistic close reading, employs specific and replicable techniques to select, code, and analyze a defined data corpus (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 18).

For three reasons, textual analysis is the methodologically acceptable choice for this analysis. First, animated films are ideological texts that embed cultural notions about gender, ethnicity, and power through the intersection of narrative, dialogue, visual composition, and character design. Second, the verbal and visual modes of animated film work at the same time and in interdependence, requiring a multi-modal analytical approach that can understand image and language together (Jewitt & Oyama, 2004, p. 138). Third, the focus of this study is on representational ideology, on how masculinity is formed and naturalized, rather than on how it is received by audiences. Therefore, a text-centered method is more appropriate than approaches focusing on audience reception or production context. The media texts are seen as sites of reproduction and contestation of social

relations of power (Fairclough, 1995, p. 47) and discursive analysis is needed in order to expose the ideological activity of the film.

The primary data source is Disney's animated feature film *Moana* (2016), directed by John Musker and Ron Clements. The film focuses on the Polynesian character Moana and the demigod Maui, offering a rich basis for the examination of masculinity in a contemporary Disney narrative that is expressly positioned as progressive and culturally sensitive. Thematic selection of scenes was purposeful and driven by their direct relation to the creation, negotiation, or performance of masculinity, according to the criteria of theoretical sampling in qualitative inquiry (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 147).

Data were drawn from four iterative rounds of systemic viewing, each with a different analytical focus, based on the multi-pass technique suggested for multi-modal textual analysis (Bateman & Schmidt, 2012, pp. 8–10):

- a. Transcription and timecoding. All selected scenes were watched, and dialogue transcribed verbatim. Each transcript was marked with time codes so it could be linked to visual data.
- b. Visual coding. The scenes were shown without sound so that only visual information could be attended to. Camera angle (low-angle shots creating dominance; high-angle shots indexing vulnerability), spatial composition (the positioning of Maui in relation to Moana and other characters), and bodily performance (expansive versus contracted postures, aggressive versus deferential gestures) were coded.
- c. Multimodal integration. Verbal and visual data were studied together for moments of alignment, tension, or contradiction between what characters say and how they are depicted spatially and cinematically. This pass addresses the discursive activities that follow the film's ideological work.
- d. Focused and theoretical coding. Initial open codes generated inductively were examined and clustered into focused topic categories by frequent comparison. The codes were then mapped into the theoretical frameworks of Connell and Gill to have the final analytical categories.

The coding process produced three main analytical categories, which are all based on the study's theoretical framework. The hegemonic masculine performance category describes moments in which Maui performs the characteristics of Connell's hegemonic masculinity: the exclusion of female competence and the assertion of authority through spatial and vocal command. The postfeminist category is reflected when the film seems to soften and reform traditional masculinity through the film's ending. This category interrogates, following Gill, the way that progressive surface representations work to recoup, rather than demolish, dominant norms, so the character becomes sympathetic and emotionally accessible without redistributing narrative or symbolic power. Cooperative masculinity as an ideological category explores sequences in which Maui's masculinity is reframed as benevolent, supporting, and collaborative – corresponding to neoliberal concepts of reformed yet still-dominant masculinity (Messner, 2016). This category looks at how the film frames cooperation as a question of ideological concepts of postfeminism and individual self-improvement, rather than as a structural restructuring of masculine power.

4. Results and Discussion

The reconstruction of masculinity in the film *Moana* is evident in the portrayal of two significant characters, Maui and Moana. Maui is depicted as a deity who has lost his powers and assists Moana in saving the island where her tribe lives. The film presents Moana as a non-stereotypical female protagonist and Maui as a male supporting character of diminished strength. However, their interactions ultimately reveal a relationship that reinforces traditional masculine values.

4.1 Moana: Narrative Positioning and the Regulation of Female Agency

The film's narrative places Moana between resistance and restriction. Although she is initially portrayed as a brave woman with an adventurous spirit, her actions are constantly limited by ideological structures that govern women's autonomy. Moana's narrative construction reflects how women are often granted limited space while remaining trapped within the structure of patriarchal authority. Her identity is continuously shaped through her relationship with the authority of her father, Chief Tui, and the community's expectations regarding her future role as chief. She frequently finds herself in moments of conflict between her desires and social obligations, family responsibilities, and masculine authority. The film gives Moana space to resist, yet her resistance is continually undermined through institutional corrections and emotional discipline. Consequently, the film gives the impression of female empowerment while restricting it within hegemonic boundaries.

The struggle between personal desire and social obligation is set out in the musical scene from [00:07:58] to [00:10:12]. The lyrics underscore the themes of leadership, tradition and communal responsibility, emphasizing the need for Moana to follow in the footsteps of her father as chief. However, visually, the frame is always directed toward the ocean, where one might find freedom, movement, and self-determination. The song and the visual elements generate a tension between the institutional role and the individual aspiration. Moana's obsession with the ocean is thus a metaphor of defiance of societal restrictions. Yet the film also depicts this yearning as dangerous and disruptive, restricting the validity of her disobedience. In this scene, the film presents Moana's goal as emotionally compelling yet socially destructive, thereby confirming hegemonic notions that privilege communal stability over female self-determination.

This ideological positioning is reinforced through cinematographic composition in Image 1.

Image 1.

Moana's deep connection with the ocean



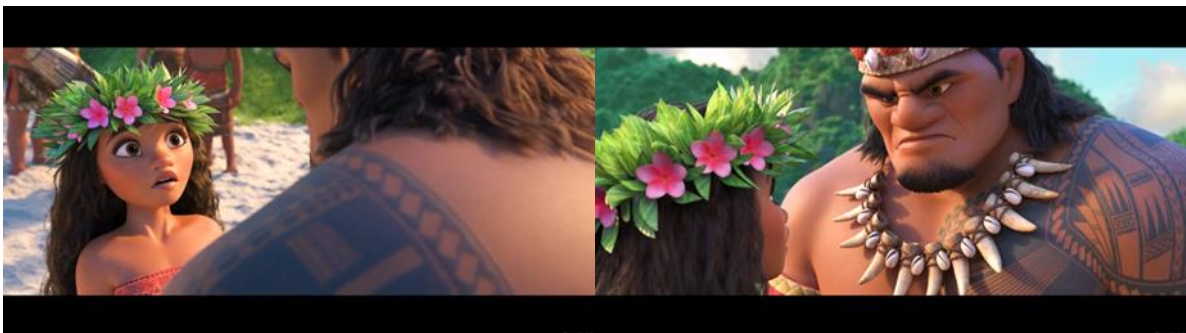
The use of the rule of thirds puts Moana on the border of the frame while the ocean fills the visual space, establishing a visual hierarchy that pushes the protagonist to the outside of her own environment. Instead of only showing emotional longing, this framing casts Moana as a symbolic figure on the margins of institutional authority. The panning shot does this by directing the audience's gaze to the water, highlighting her separation from the societal framework that bounds her desires. The cinematic framing is ideological because visual positioning influences how spectators perceive power relations in the image (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2025, p. 673). Spatial marginalization often entails less authority, whereas central positioning confers dominance and legitimacy. Therefore, Moana's spatial marginalization serves to normalize her inaccessibility to autonomy and leadership and to place her in limbo between two irreconcilable identities: a submissive future chief and an autonomous explorer. The ocean stands for emancipation and possibilities, but also for the risks of overstepping patriarchal norms, given its enormous scope. This cinematic configuration reproduces the hegemonic ideology, in which female ambition is constructed as tentative and unstable rather than entirely authoritative.

The figure of Chief Tui makes the patriarchal system that governs Moana's life more evident. He is a parent and political leader, the embodiment of institutional power. The film invariably depicts his choices as reasonable, protective, and morally defensible. Chief Tui's choice to keep Moana in the reef is not depicted as an act of repression but a rational decision to protect the community. However, Moana's desire to explore the sea is portrayed in emotional terms, as impetuous and irresponsible. This binary reproduces the traditional gender discourse in which male power is justified via reason and moral necessity, while female agency is equated with emotional instability. The patriarchal leadership is maintained in *Moana* by frequent emphasis on obedience, protection, and paternal guidance. Crucially, the disagreement is not depicted as a balanced argument; rather, the narration focuses on Chief Tui's perspective, tying his authority to the community's survival. In this framework, patriarchal control is read as necessary and kind, not constraining. As a result, patriarchal ideology is accepted through emotional framing, not direct compulsion.

The cinematography further naturalizes this patriarchal hierarchy through the uses of high-angle and low-angle shots in Image 2.

Image 2.

Moana's Father



The low-angle shot of Chief Tui emphasizes his authority by positioning viewers below him, visually aligning the audience with Moana's subordinate perspective. This viewpoint justifies power as it visibly amplifies the authority of the subject observed (Reid & Sanders, 2021, p. 120). Conversely, the high-angle shot of Moana de-empowers her, making

her visually weak and subordinate. The camera does not simply represent conflict neutrally but deliberately constructs a hierarchy in which masculine leadership is stable, reasonable, and authoritative, while female resistance is emotionally reactive and insecure. The cinematography, rather than serving as a mere aesthetic device, visually normalizes the patriarchal hierarchy as a societal order. Such visual methods discreetly influence viewers to consider masculine domination as normal and female resistance as unstable.

Another instance of the discipline of female liberty is when Moana fails to cross the reef at [00:20:29]. After confronting her father, she tries to sail on her own but quickly fails when the ocean overturns her boat and injures her. This scene plays as a corrective method where transgressive feminine action is met with punishment and humiliation. Her acknowledgement that “He was right” briefly reestablishes the patriarchal legitimacy and confirms the ideological tie between masculine authority and safety. This mechanism is observed in Moana’s momentary acceptance of her father’s authority following failure. The film does not treat her reluctance as a weakness, but rather as a product of internalized patriarchal values. The scene depicts how control is maintained in the patriarchal system, not just by direct constraint, but also by emotional internalization, where the dominant authority is seen as correct and necessary. The film links autonomy with failure and obedience with safety and therefore perpetuates hegemonic ideology in the guise of character development.

Although Moana’s subsequent change into a leader seems to defy patriarchal restraints, her story is nevertheless structured by masculine mediation. Maui, the demigod, serves as both her mentor, gatekeeper, and narrative threshold character, controlling Moana’s access to navigation, survival skills, and technical proficiency. He teaches her the skills of navigation, survival, and leadership, and tests her resolve again and again. Moana does succeed on her own, but her development operates within a structure of masculine teaching and validation. Maui becomes the vehicle through which Moana gets “qualified” for leadership. Her empowerment is consequently conditional, not entirely her own. Though progressive in featuring a female heroine, the film maintains dominant gender structures by making masculine authority the origin of knowledge, legitimacy, and capacity.

4.2 Maui: A Rebranded Masculine Authority

In the beginning, Maui represents Connell’s paradigm of hegemonic masculinity by his physical dominance, technical ability, and discursive authority (Connell, 2005, p. 77). His introduction stresses masculine superiority not just by physical strength and divine power but by conversational control. In his first meeting with Moana [00:37:11 – 00:37:51], Maui continuously interrupts her speech, steers the topic to his accomplishments, and calls himself “hero of men.” Such interruptions are ideologically important because they create discursive dominance, restricting Moana’s ability to articulate her own authority in the discussion. Hegemonic readings imply that the prevalence of conversation is representative of larger patriarchal institutions (Montoro, 2014, p. 349) where masculine voices are the interpretative and authorial positions. Maui’s language of self-mythologizing makes manhood a show, authorizing himself through performance, exaggeration, and recognition. Therefore, this scene does not simply describe Maui as arrogant; it reproduces hegemonic masculinity by constructing masculine identity as naturally dominating, conspicuous, and culturally praised.

Maui's physical portrayal vividly supports this dominant positioning. His large body, magical fishhook, and ability to influence his environment exemplify masculinity through physical strength and technical skill. Hegemonic masculinity often associates a man's legitimacy with muscular power, competence, and mastery over space (Hopkins & Giazitzoglu, 2025, p. 90). In *Moana*, Maui's body serves as a metaphor for patriarchal authority, with his physical abilities consistently outperforming Moana's. Even when Moana is the story's focus, masculine competence is emphasized through action scenes where Maui acts as a protector, strategist, and fighter. The film predominantly limits physical confrontations and tactical expertise to Maui during battles with the Kakamora and Te Ka, while Moana's role is portrayed more through emotional resilience and moral resolve. This separation reinforces traditional genre hierarchies linking masculinity with action and skill, and femininity with emotional endurance and ethical leadership. Thus, masculinity remains central to the story, even one led by a girl.

Maui's masculinity gradually shifts from displays of brute strength to emotional vulnerability and collaboration. This change should not be seen as the rejection of hegemonic masculinity but as its intentional evolution within neoliberal cultural discourse. Modern neoliberal masculinity no longer relies on aggressiveness and emotional suppression. Instead, it emphasizes emotional intelligence, vulnerability, and self-awareness (Lashayas et al., 2023, p. 49), while still projecting masculine power behind progressive facades. Masculinity thus becomes an adaptation rather than an avoidance of emotional expression. Maui's development reflects this shift, as his authority is balanced by empathy and cooperation without losing strength. The storyline rebrands masculinity into a more emotionally accessible form that aligns with contemporary ideals of inclusive and emotionally intelligent masculine leadership.

This intentional adaptation is especially clear in Maui's confession about being abandoned by his human parents [01:08:88]. This scene seems to undermine his earlier hypermasculine image by showing emotional vulnerability and childhood rejection. However, conceptually, this revelation doesn't reject hegemonic masculinity; rather, it revises its emotional aspect. His vulnerability creates empathy and boosts his credibility without undermining his authority, technical skills, or heroic status. Neoliberal masculinity suggests that modern media often turn vulnerability into a way to enhance masculine appeal, as emotional honesty is now seen as a sign of authenticity, psychological depth, and moral complexity, not weakness (Radzi et al., 2021, p. 170). Maui exemplifies this process: his confession humanizes him while maintaining his roles as protector, mentor, and hero. Vulnerability, therefore, is a deliberate strategy that allows patriarchal masculinity to remain culturally dominant while seeming more emotionally progressive. The film doesn't dismantle masculine power but reconfigures it into something softer and more emotionally engaging.

Maui's exploration of emotional intelligence takes place within and against the framework of neoliberal masculinity. Throughout the story, he becomes increasingly compliant, sympathetic, and caring toward Moana. However, these features do not remove hierarchy; they mask it in the language of participation and support. Neoliberal culture often transforms structural inequalities into personalized, emotionally charged forms that seem egalitarian but still uphold existing power relations (Laruffa, 2024, p. 591). Maui's emotional sensitivity typifies this process, as his supportive actions reinforce his role as the emotionally mature masculine figure who mentors and stabilizes the heroine. His encouraging role made him the source of emotional validation and motivational authority. Consequently, emotional

intelligence acts as a tool of hegemonic masculinity, allowing adaptation to societal progress while retaining structural dominance. The film depicts Maui as emotionally engaged, yet his emotional skills reinforce, rather than challenge, his authority.

This dynamic is especially apparent in Maui's mentorship of Moana. While their relationship seems to be collaborative, it remains fundamentally hierarchical, with Maui controlling key knowledge like navigation, survival tactics, and strategic thinking. The mentor role presents Maui as the gatekeeper of legitimacy, while Moana's leadership development is viewed through a masculine perspective. In film, female subjectivity is often shaped by male-centered narratives that limit women's agency (de Lauretis, 1984, p. 15). Moana exemplifies this, as Maui consistently assesses her readiness, imparts technical skills, and judges whether she is prepared to proceed. Mentorship doesn't equate to equality – it reflects a form of dominance. Authority shifts from direct orders or coercion to offering advice, training, and emotional support. While this makes masculine control appear collaborative and kind, it still upholds unequal power relations.

The ideological significance of mentorship is most evident in the intense scene with Te Ka [01:25:27 – 01:28:05]. Moana does return Te Fiti's heart in the end, but Maui acts as her defender and sacrificial warrior, taking the physical danger away from her. His words, "I got your back, Chosen One. Go save the world" sound encouraging, yet at the same time, it continues masculine authorization of female agency. Masculine endorsement and protection continue to be a narrative validation of Moana's leadership. The scene also maintains traditional gender divides, associating masculine heroism with conflict, sacrifice, and strategic defense, and feminine heroism with restoration, healing, and reconciliation. Even within a progressive story of female emancipation, physical confrontation and tactical leadership are still left to the male character. Thus, mentorship and emotional support work as methods for modernizing, not dismantling, hegemonic masculinity.

4.3 Cooperative Hegemonic Masculinity: A Conceptual Adaptation

Moana, being a modern animated picture, does not utilize overt masculine domination. Masculine authority is being reconstructed instead on cooperation, emotional intelligence, mentorship and supportive leadership. This form of cooperative hegemonic masculinity therefore describes a form of hegemonic masculinity that sustains the centrality of masculinity not through overt coercion, but through emotionally adaptive and collaborative practices that appear egalitarian while perpetuating the patriarchal hierarchy underneath.

The idea is closely related to Connell's theory but extends it by applying hegemonic masculinity to the cultural landscape of neoliberalism. Connell's focus is mainly on explicit forms of masculine dominance, such as violence, authority, and control. In contrast, neoliberal media culture gradually reinterprets masculinity through emotional openness, empathy, and relational cooperation, without fundamentally dismantling patriarchal power. Neoliberal discourse often shifts structural inequalities to individual, emotionally intelligent, and seemingly progressive positions that still sustain existing hierarchies (Smith, 2012). Building on this, the concept of cooperative hegemonic masculinity describes how masculine power adapts to feminist and postfeminist demands. Cooperative hegemonic masculinity strategically supports and mentors women instead of overtly restricting female agency, while still positioning men as sources of legitimacy, competence, and guidance. The

theoretical goal of this idea is to understand how patriarchy persists not despite but through progressive discourse.

Throughout *Moana*, Maui is an example of this adaptive kind of hegemonic masculinity. He strongly fits Connell's classic hegemonic model through physical domination, verbal authority, violence and technical expertise at first. His many interruptions of Moana's speech [00:37:11 – 00:37:51], his insistence that Moana serve as bait [00:59:28], and his emotional outburst when his fishhook is damaged [01:15:25] all reiterate his entitlement to authority, competence, and control. These moments are a mirror of what Connell calls the culturally exalted masculine ideal, where leadership and legitimacy are linked to male domination (Connell, 2005, p. 23). But the narrative progressively steers Maui away from outright tyranny toward emotional cooperation and sympathetic guidance. This transition does not demolish hegemonic masculinity; it renews and hides it. Maui's authority is less confrontational, but structurally crucial to the plot.

The most notable novelty in cooperative hegemonic masculinity is in the interplay between mentorship and power. Masculine authority in patriarchal stories is usually exercised as direct command and control (Connell, 2005, p. 23). In *Moana*, however, authority is reconstituted through mentorship, emotional affirmation and cooperative guiding. Maui teaches Moana navigation, sailing and survival skills and sets himself up as the gatekeeper of technical ability and legitimacy. This is evident in *Moana* since Moana's empowerment is always mediated through masculine direction. Even when Maui appears to be supportive and non-controlling, he remains the expert, instructor and validator. Mentorship is thus ideologically a rebranding of dominance; power does not work by force but through instruction that appears benevolent and helpful. The hierarchy is subtle, but still present.

The emotional fragility of Maui is more evidence of the adaptive quality of cooperative hegemonic masculinity. His admission that he was abandoned by his parents seems to run counter to the hypermasculinity by revealing emotional weakness and trauma. But in the end, this weakness serves to reinforce, rather than diminish, his influence. Contemporary media often humanize masculine heroes by focusing on their emotional wounds, making patriarchal masculinity more psychologically complicated and emotionally accessible without losing heroic status (Kac-Vergne, 2018, p. 162). Maui's openness to emotional weakness fosters the audience's sympathy and emotional connection without compromising his narrative force, technical competency of heroic stature. Vulnerability is thus a deliberate adaptation that allows hegemonic masculinity to remain culturally dominant within current ideals of emotional openness. Authority of masculinity is maintained by seeming emotionally mature, not authoritarian.

This adaptation is strongly related to neoliberal masculinity, where emotional intelligence becomes a vehicle of masculine legitimacy. Maui's display of empathy, cooperation, and emotional support, while concealing his structural prominence in the story, gives the image of egalitarian masculinity. This is a form of hybrid masculinity, as described by Bridges and Pascoe (2014, p.147), where dominant male traits are selectively combined with softer or marginalized qualities to gain cultural acceptance while preserving structural dominance. An example of this hybridization is Maui, whose power is not diminished by emotional intelligence, but rather modernized. He becomes more cooperative, but still provides the competence, emotional stability, and strategic direction. It therefore functions conceptually as a neoliberal masculine method, hiding hierarchy behind empathy and

collaboration. Culturally, masculinity is becoming more flexible, yet patriarchal dominance is maintained.

Thus, the conceptual contribution of cooperative hegemonic masculinity is to account for the ways in which contemporary media texts support patriarchal institutions via progressive portrayal rather than blatant hostility to feminism. Unlike traditional hegemonic masculinity, cooperative hegemonic masculinity rests on emotional adaptation, collaborative leadership, and authority based on mentorship rather than evident domination. It sustains masculine centrality by looking supportive rather than oppressive. In *Moana*, female empowerment is promoted but nevertheless mediated by masculine validation, education, and emotional guidance. The film then shows how neoliberal culture converts patriarchy into softer, more culturally acceptable forms without destroying its structural basis. Cooperative hegemonic masculinity offers a paradigm for the analysis of this change by highlighting how emotional intelligence, vulnerability, and cooperation can serve not as alternatives to hegemonic masculinity, but as its modern methods of survival and adaptation.

5. Conclusion

Produced by Walt Disney Animation Studios and released by Walt Disney Pictures, *Moana* appears to be promoting female empowerment and cultural affirmation through the representation of an independent female protagonist. However, the film is also a complex neoliberal cultural construct reconfigures rather than challenges hegemonic masculinity. Its focus on individual agency, resilience, and self-discovery reflects neoliberal views that frames empowerment as a personal path of self-improvement rather than a focus on changing power structures.

Moana's growth both a feminist victory and a post-feminist negotiation of gender roles. Post-feminism often uses feminist terminology—such as confidence, leadership, and independence—while subtly reinforcing traditional hierarchies. Although Moana becomes a leader and restores ecological balance, her empowerment is rooted on a story that validates male mentorship as an important part of growth. Maui's transformation from an authoritarian demigod to an emotionally-available partner illustrates how hegemonic masculinity shows flexibility: authority shifts from explicit dominance to guidance, vulnerability, and collaboration. Masculine power is not annihilated, but renewed.

In this way, *Moana* exemplifies what scholars call neoliberal feminism—a discourse that praises female potential but maintains patriarchal and hierarchical systems. The story resolves conflict through personal growth and reconciliation rather than criticizing the system. Moana's success highlights personal perseverance and self-confidence, implicitly linking empowerment to self-discipline and emotional awareness—traits vital to neoliberal identity. Masculine values are maintained, however, by indispensability, not dominance.

This study, therefore, posits that *Moana* is a sign of a modernized version of hegemonic masculinity conceptualized as cooperative hegemonic masculinity, a neoliberal form of masculine authority that maintains patriarchal centrality through emotional intelligence, collaboration, and supportive mentorship rather than direct aggression. It conceals hierarchy behind narratives of partnership, empathy, and empowerment, allowing masculine dominance to appear progressive and emotionally evolved. The film's ideological

complexity lies in this contradiction. It promotes female leadership while simultaneously structuring that leadership through masculine mediation and validation.

As one of Disney's globally circulated cultural products, *Moana* carries broader implications for media pedagogy and cultural discourse. Since Disney films function as influential pedagogical texts consumed by global audiences, their representations of gender contribute significantly to how leadership, authority, and empowerment are culturally understood and normalized. The film's seemingly progressive portrayal of gender equality may shape audiences to perceive emotionally adaptive patriarchal authority as inherently egalitarian. This highlights the importance of critically examining not only overt sexism, but also subtler neoliberal forms through which gender hierarchy is reproduced in contemporary popular culture.

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