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"This is the Way": Gender Representation in Disney's *The Mandalorian*

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of
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Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

"This is the Way": Gender Representation in Disney's *The Mandalorian*

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When Disney released *The Mandalorian*, it quickly became the top show on its highly popular streaming platform. As with all media wielding this level of exposure, it is important to closely examine its content for depictions of peoples including females. In accordance with Sandra Bem's gender schema theory, the implicit messaging in this series can influence the formation of people's mental shortcuts about what it means to be female. This study employs content analysis to illuminate the portrayal of physical and non-physical attributes of the women present in the two seasons existing at the time of this study. Results reveal significant diversity in areas such as body type, character role, age, and appearance; especially when compared to the show's predecessors. However, while Disney has publicly pronounced ethnic diversity a priority, one could argue that *The Mandalorian* possesses only a surface appearance of ethnic diversity. This is because many of the actresses are either fully white or mixed with white—the race that has historically dominated our screens. Disney has taken steps in the right direction with *The Mandalorian* but would benefit from a closer content assessment if they seek to retain their consumer's trust long-term.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

Introduction

Star Wars' beloved creator George Lucas made headlines in 2012 when he announced

plans to sell his life's work to Disney for a hefty 4 billion dollars (Krantz et al., 2012). Since

then, Disney has released several *Star Wars* feature films, including three sequels, and side

stories including *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story,* and *Solo: A Star Wars Story*. Though these

films proved lucrative for Disney, the company did not plan to stop with just movies

(starwars.com, 2020). After four years in the making, the media juggernaut released an

"unprecedented" marketing campaign: its own highly successful streaming platform, Disney+

(Min, 2019). *Star Wars: The Mandalorian* was released on the service soon afterwards and

quickly helped amass subscribers. Viewing figures reveal that the popular show attracts five

times more views than any other series, making it the most popular content on the streaming

service at the time of this study (Gillespie, 2020). Even after the closing of the second season, the

show remained at the top, beating out the highly popular Marvel Universe's *Wandavision*

(Siegal, 2021). Evidently, the influential scope of *The Mandalorian* should not be overlooked.

A mere 16 months after launching its streaming platform, Disney+ gathered over 100

million subscribers— a number that took Netflix 10 years to achieve (Duffy, 2021). *The*

Mandalorian had a lot to do with this rapid achievement, as the show has been the platform's

top-viewed content and has been leading in attracting new subscriptions, according to Nielsen

data (Whitten, 2021). The show is also one of the "least controversial" *Star Wars* properties

according to a Forbes article which cited its ratings at 94% for critics, and 93% for audience on

Rotten Tomatoes, highlighting its appeal to a wide range of consumers (Tassi, 2019). At the

close of 2019, the series became the most in-demand show in the world according to Parrot

Analytics, out-ranking popular titles such as *Game of Thrones* and was 31.9 times more in-

demand than any other series (Ewing, 2019). By the end of the second season in late 2020, the title topped the Nielsen Streaming chart, drawing 1.44 billion minutes of viewing time in the week of December 14-20 (Porter, 2021). *The Mandalorian*'s eighth consecutive week in the top 10 also marked another record for the longest run in the rankings (Porter, 2021). Part of the show's success can be attributed to the franchise's embracing of transmedia storytelling in which each media article is interwoven into the massive tapestry of narratives that make up *Star Wars*. Because of this, *Star Wars*, including *The Mandalorian,* permeates pop-culture more than ever before, and its far-reaching influence has undoubtedly impacted the masses.

Out of the many elements that draw viewers to a show, its characters play a major role. Din Djarin, the perpetually armored Mandalorian, drew in many fans despite having his face covered almost the entire screen time; and Baby Yoda was so popular that fans were "bootlegging" Baby Yoda merchandise online before the company could release the character's official products (Parker, 2019). In addition to the aforementioned main characters, a significant number of female characters were both introduced and reintroduced from previous *Star Wars* transmedia installments to fill up the screen, both as aids and foils to the heroes' journey (IMDB, n.d.). Popular media plays a significant role in how we understand ourselves, and seeing that women make up just over half of the world's population (Ritchie, 2019), the relevance of inspecting female representation in the extensively viewed *Star Wars* media universe cannot be underestimated.

Like many popular films from decades past, George Lucas' *Star Wars* has a rather contestable history with its portrayal of women (Brown, 2018). This is concerning for several reasons, considering that wide-spread depictions of women in popular media can influence a peoples' attitudes and actions towards a particular gender, and impact how they act according to

their own gender (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2008). This phenomenon is often associated with gender schema theory, which seeks to explain how individuals foster mental shortcuts for how gender should appear and behave within a culture (Bem, 1981; Wharton, 2005). With the influential scope currently wielded by *The Mandalorian* through its popularity and copious viewership—and with another season on the way—it should be regarded as an important compositional work to appraise (Siegal, 2021). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the different depictions of women present in the widely popular series *The Mandalorian*. In particular, important elements of gender portrayal in media including both physical appearance and non-physical attributes will be examined within a gender schema framework.

Literature Review

First released in 1977, *Star Wars* quickly became one of the world's most beloved media franchises and has remained a part of popular culture for over 40 decades (Smith, 2017). Being this vastly popular, it is important to take a closer look at its components to gauge impact on the public. The present study will focus on how gender representation manifests itself in *The Mandalorian* through the lens of gender schema theory. However, before an effective study can be conducted on this series, one must acknowledge the franchise's extensive history and how it fits into gender representation in popular media. While using the concept of gender schema—a thought process related to organizing people by gender (Ryle, 2011)—this study will obtain and organize data from the highly popular *Star Wars* creation, *The Mandalorian*. The following literature review will cover *Star Wars'* special effects, political themes, character transcendence, Disney *Star Wars* media, women in media, *Star Wars* gender research, and current research on *The Mandalorian*.

Areas of *Star Wars* Research

Pioneering Special Effects

When George Lucas proposed a multi-film picture in an out-of-trend genre, many studios were hesitant to commit to such a risky project. After being turned down by both Universal Studios and Disney, Lucas signed on with 20th Century Fox Studios. After winning that battle, the creator was confronted with a deluge of additional challenges; mainly budget, and the fact that his ambitious sci-fi vision had no special effects studio to work with, as it had just recently been dissolved (Smith, 2017). Not one to be deterred, Lucas created his own studio named Industrial Light & Magic (ILM), to bring his vision to life. This studio would go on to work with films such as *Indiana Jones, Back to the Future, Star Trek, Jurassic Park*, and many others. Despite the copious barriers *Star Wars* initially faced during its birth, the original trilogy would go on to revolutionize media special effects in the industry (Evans, 2021).

The special effects of the first film dazzled critics and movie-goers alike. One critic in 1977 remarked,

> The applause is deserved. Whenever the inanity of the entire enterprise begins to surface, director George Lucas pulls out a striking visual trick. You'll see holographlike figures, a duel with sword blades seemingly made of light[,] and a low-flying bombing mission that outdoes the famous "star gate" sequence in "2001" (Turnock, 2014).

Vincent Canby, a prominent American film critic at the time, also remarked that the "true stars" of *Star Wars* were the people who worked on the film's special effects (Turnock, 2014).

In 2020, *The Mandalorian* won an Emmy for its outstanding visual effects. The show's success in this area is largely attributed to Industrial Light & Magic (ILM)—the same visual effects company founded by George Lucas himself in 1975 when he first began production for *A New Hope* (Chung, 2020). The show's visual effects artists created a connection to its original source by mixing in archived items, tools, and strategies used in the past, while also introducing newer visual techniques to reestablish its legacy in pioneering visual effects. *The Mandalorian* once again reminded the world of *Star Wars'* original magic.

Political Themes

Since its beginning, *Star Wars* has held a space for wide commentary on American politics (Tharoor, 2017). According to a Times article by Beckwith (2017), George Lucas wrote the original trilogy with reflections on the political landscape at the time in mind, wanting to "serve a tidy political lesson along with the popcorn." Lucas told the Chicago Tribune years after the film's initial release that, "It was really about the Vietnam War, and that was the period where Nixon was trying to run for a [second] term, which got me thinking historically about how democracies get turned into dictatorships? Because the democracies aren't overthrown; they're given away" (Caro, 2005).

In *Star Wars: Revenge of the Sith*, Chancellor Palpatine manipulates the masses' fear of war and convinces them to turn the democratic Republic into an Empire ruled exclusively by himself. Padme, a galactic senator and the protagonist's main love interest, watches with growing dread as the crowd ruptures into applause at Palpatine's dooming proposal, uttering arguably one of the trilogy's most iconic lines, "So this is how liberty dies. With thunderous applause" (Lucas, 2005). The frequently maligned prequel trilogy continued to lean into the political themes with each new release and is often seen as a dark allegorical political

tragedy. The era of the prequel trilogy's release was around the time of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 (Tharoor, 2015). In Episode 3, Anakin Skywalker (soon to be Darth Vader) declares, "If you are not with me, then you're my enemy." Many viewers saw this as an echo of the "with us or against us" rhetoric used by the then-president George W. Bush, highlighting the country's politically imperialistic impulses (Tharoor, 2015). The various themes, even down to the dialogue, revealed a remarkable prescience that many were quick to point out (Caro, 2005). To Lucas, the theme's resonance seemed to be attributed more to the ancient myths and stories that informed his epic space opera as opposed to his ability to predict future politics. "No matter who you look at in history, the story is always the same," Lucas had said in an interview for the Chicago Tribune. "That's what's eerie. It was a little eerie that things have developed the way they have" (Caro, 2005).

Although *Star Wars*' creator may have had a particular political message in mind, viewer interpretations didn't always align with his original intent (Beckwith, 2017). Then-president Ronald Reagan famously delivered a 1983 address in which he referenced the struggle between good and evil and the "aggressive impulses of an evil empire," which was later dubbed The Evil Empire speech. Speech writers denied the allusion, but the connection stuck (Beckwith, 2017). From then onward, various references to *Star Wars* characters, quotes, and concepts have been littered throughout the U.S. political landscape, including a reference to "Jedi mind tricks" by President Obama in 2013 (Memmott, 2013), and a comparison of Anakin Skywalker to the alternative minimum tax (AMT) initiative from Senator Max Baucus (Beckwith, 2017).

Transcendence of Characters

There are many reasons why *Star Wars* has captured hearts and maintained the attention of many for so long. The franchise holds its own; from John Williams' iconic musical themes, to

trail-blazing special effects, to its emotional potency. Perhaps most poignant are the characters that add humanity and which have resonated with audiences for generations. Indeed, as George Lucas was conceiving what would be his life's defining work, he drew from the writings of Joseph Campbell, a scholar who devoted his life to identifying "the basic archetypal characters and situations which he felt underpinned all human mythologies" (Smith, 2017). Lucas realized that these archetypal ideas were being manifested intuitively as he planned the story of *Star Wars,* reinforcing to him that these archetypes "dwelled in a collective unconsciousness" (Smith, 2017). Lucas' efforts to align his character building with transcendent archetypes translated well to his audience as individuals collectively connected with the Hero's Journey of the fictional characters they saw on screen and have continued to do so for decades (Goldberg, 2010). Examples include Darth Vader as the main antagonist who manifests as the Shadow archetype, and Luke Skywalker as the Hero archetype, appearing opposite one another in a dysfunctional familial relationship (Goldberg 2010).

The ubiquitous merchandising of the universe's characters is a strong indication of their ongoing popularity (Parker, 2019). Lucas and his company Lucasfilm Ltd. benefited from merchandising revenue as products provided a steady stream of sales (Parker, 2019). Even minor side characters have their own dedicated online wikis, such as the *Boba Fett Fan Club*. Boba Fett, whose armored face only appears on screen for a grand total of six minutes and thirty-two seconds in the original trilogy, is a fantasy film icon with a cult-like following among *Star Wars* fans (bobafettfanclub.com). Such is but a small example of the depth and variety of involvement with *Star Wars* characters across generations.

Disney's *Star Wars* Media

When George Lucas announced his decision in late 2012 to sell his most famous work to Disney for 4 billion, the agreement became Disney's fourth largest deal ever made. Disney's CEO Robert Iger said of the acquisition, "This is one of the great entertainment properties of all time, one of the best branded and one of the most valuable, and it's just fantastic for us to have the opportunity to both buy it, run it and grow it" (Krantz et al., 2012). The purchase has indeed proven to be highly profitable for Disney, as by 2018 the business giant reoccupied its 4 billion investment in grossed box office revenue from four of its then released *Star Wars* films alone (Whitten, 2018).

Since then, the company has begun unfurling a transmedia storytelling strategy to maximize revenue and maintain a permeative presence in popular media (Geraghty, 2019). Transmedia storytelling is a narrative technique that unfolds and develops across multiple media platforms, with each new piece of content adding distinct value contributions to the bigger narrative. Expanding on this, Jenkins (2008) states:

> In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does
>
> best—so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television,
>
> novels, and comics; its world might be explored through game play or
>
> experienced as an amusement park attraction. (p. 95)

As with the Marvel superhero franchise before it, Disney has effectively embraced this model for the *Star Wars* franchise. Countless extensions of the *Star Wars* universe continue to pour in from licensing agreements, theme park add-ons, novels, video games, and an intimidating surfeit of never-ending merchandise (Whitten, 2018). The company recently announced, "a staggering number of new films, series, and surprises that will expand the *Star Wars* galaxy like never

before." This includes at least ten spinoff series that will stream on its Disney+ platform, such as *Rogue Squadron, The Book of Boba Fett, Obi-Wan Kenobi, Rangers of the New Republic, Andor, The Acolyte, Star Wars: The Bad Batch,* along with a few more untitled works (starwars.com, 2020).

Academic research on *Star Wars* media since its acquisition focuses on areas such as the use of nostalgia and political rhetoric. One such article examined the presence of imperialism in *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*, which expands on the theme of imperialism itself and its resulting bridge between the overt political themes of the prequels and the covert political underpinnings of the originals (Montgomery, 2020). Another significant study conducted a character narrative analysis of Luke Skywalker using Robert P. George's philosophical concept of The Good in relation to politics and the concept of human flourishing. The author proposes that Skywalker represents public morality, which rises in opposition to challenge the First Order's ideals and explores concepts of legal idealism to examine themes of liberty, sacrifice, and fear (Gould, 2019).

Star Wars was acquired by Disney amidst the corporation's shift to make diversity and inclusion a core focus of its business strategy (Desta, 2016). Specializing in family films and possessing some of the world's most popular franchises—all with an unfathomable budget to sustain and grow them all—Disney is aware of the influential power it holds in "molding the world in its image" (Desta, 2016). Sean Bailey, Disney's director of motion-picture production once stated in an interview with *The Hollywood Reporter* that, "inclusivity is not only a priority but an imperative for us, and it's top of mind on every single project" (Ford, 2016). This commitment shows through in many of its films released in recent years. In 2016 Disney released the acclaimed film *Queen of Katwe*, which follows the life of an African girl in which

white characters have very little dialogue and was directed by an Indian (Desta, 2016). At a film press conference, Disney's Animation Studios chief John Lasseter stated, "It's very important to us… to have female and ethnic characters" (Setoodeh, 2015). Up until then, *Star Wars* had never been a bastion of diversity, but Disney began to shift this trend when they cast two non-white characters— John Boyega and Oscar Isaac— as two protagonists in the new *Star Wars* sequel trilogy (Desta, 2016). The following film released in the franchise, *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story,* was also highly diversified in its casting. Many viewers were not only delighted to see a Latino (Diego Luna) cast in a leading role, but that the actor was not required by the producers to mask his obviously Mexican accent (Schmidt, 2017). It is also significant to note that both films' main protagonists are women, breaking the franchise's decades-long all-male streak. Such decisions help to bring balance to the entertainment industry, as men have historically outnumbered women in popular films. Amongst top media, women make up less than one third of characters with speaking roles (Neville & Anastasio, 2019).

Women in Media

Despite women's expansion in diversified roles played out in our societies, underrepresentation has remained consistent for over forty years (Collins, 2011). Additionally, both genders are often narrow-casted in Western media, placing men and "strong female leads" in action and adventure themes, and largely non-violent romance formulas for women (Reich, 2021). Studies have also shown that women over the age of 60 are severely underrepresented, while women in their 30s are overrepresented (Neville & Anastasio, 2018). A 1997 study revealed that a meager 8% of female characters were over the age of 35 (Bazzini et al., 1997), and since then women past the age of 40 continue to become increasingly less visible, while men remained on screen throughout their 50s (Lauzen & Dozier, 2005). Fortunately, gender portrayal

in U.S. top grossing films has improved since 2002— though women are still underrepresented, with some statistics indicating that only 32% of all characters are identified female (Neville & Anastasio, 2018). Significant gender differences regarding that of leadership and occupational power were also reaffirmed, with women holding fewer positions of occupational power and rarely shown in leadership roles (Neville & Anastasio, 2018). Content analyses for early Disney princess films highlighted princes as displaying rather balanced gender profiles, while their female counterparts more often aligned with common gender stereotypical behaviors, such as exhibiting mostly female characteristics, rarely participating in rescue behavior, and attaining romantic connections with the prince by the conclusion of the film (England et al., 2011; Hine et al., 2018). In recent years, this has somewhat shifted in Disney films as movies like *Moana* and *Frozen* portray women engaging more frequently in rescue behavior and remaining romantically uninvolved throughout the film (Hine et al., 2018).

Research on Gender in *Star Wars*

Disproportionate representation of women differs according to genre, and the fantasy category in which *Star Wars* holds a significant space was no exception for decades (Gerding & Signorielli, 2014). From 1977 to 2005, the *Star Wars* films have composed space adventure predominantly around boys and men, following most notably melodramatic themes of male redemption (Tasker, 2019). The first six films of the franchise have just two main female characters: Leia Organa (Carrie Fisher) and Padme Amidala (Natalie Portman). Though the two characters start off as strong female leads with great potential, both ultimately devolve into mere plot devices to further the story arc of their male counterparts (Brown, 2018).

The original trilogy depicts its main female protagonist, Princess Leia Organa, in a manner that slowly morphs from a strong-willed rebel defiantly facing the opposing forces of the

galactic Empire, to a bikini-wearing captured slave in need of rescue (Brown, 2018). She is resourceful and independent yet is quite often placed throughout the later films in the stereotypical damsel-in-distress role and who serves as the story's central love interest. Yet despite being written into this role throughout the trilogy, her character shifts from an agentic individual, to more often a plot device and supporting role for her male counterparts (Dominguez, 2007). The fate of Padme's character in the subsequent prequel trilogy follows much the same degrative trajectory; from independent feminist icon thriving in positions of power, to pregnant, passive, and weepy as her husband uses her as a motive to commit genocide (Wood, 2016). One rather overt example of her objectification is when Padme's clothing is conveniently ripped during a battle to expose her midriff, echoing the director's decision to arbitrarily place Leia in a metal bikini years earlier (Lucas, 2002). Philip L. Simpson (2006) reiterates this by positing that the films work,

> To contain and even break down their power, first by coding their exercise of autonomy as frigidity and then placing both women in relationships that demand not just thawing but melting of their icy feminine royalty. These women must suffer sexual abjection to an extent that subverts whatever power they otherwise manifest. (pp. 115–116)

The announcement of the sequel trilogy revealed a woman named Rey (Daisy Ridley) as the main protagonist, with many excitedly proclaiming her as carving out a space in a previously male dominated franchise (Brown, 2018). Despite this however, the release of *The Force Awakens* garnered a particularly resilient complaint about its new protagonist: Rey is a "Mary Sue" (Kain, 2016). The character trope Mary Sue gets her origins from fan-fiction—stories about existing properties written by fans—as a female character that is infallibly perfect in every

conceivable way. Such a character trope is widely detested, regardless of the fanbase or subgenre (Framke, 2015). The character Mary Sue first appeared in a 1974 *Star Trek* fanfiction written by Paula Smith who was perfect and instantly commanded the love, respect, and wonder of every character she interacted with, only to heroically and tragically die in her perfection. As outlined by Kain in a Forbes article in 2016:

> The point of the story was to spoof the worst tendencies of fan-fiction writers: To
>
> insert glorified, idealized versions of themselves into their fan fiction in
>
> unabashed acts of wish-fulfillment.

In just the first installment of the sequel trilogy, Rey is shown to be exceptionally (and arguably instantly) good at an abundance of skills. She can instantly fly the Millennium Falcon, perform Jedi Mind Tricks with no previous experience, hold her own in a lightsaber duel against a trained Jedi, and can speak multiple alien languages (Framke, 2015). While some found this inspiring, others found these traits to be Hallmarks of a Mary Sue (Framke, 2015).

Regardless of this persistent trend however, many still look to Rey as a breakthrough feminist hero in the *Star Wars* franchise—and the fantasy genre for that matter—which has long ached for more strong, well-written women (Wood, 2016). Nicole Sperling, in an editorial for *Entertainment Weekly,* even went as far as to claim that "The hero of *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* doesn't just shatter centuries of sexist stereotypes, she could become the defining character for a generation" (Sperling, 2015).

Other research on gender in *Star Wars* focuses on masculine portrayal. One such study explored the concept of "hegemonic masculinity" in *Star Wars* by examining the character Anakin Skywalker's avoidance of responsibility for his violent and morally questionable decisions. The study posits that the movie's narrative allows for the construction of a "gray

area," which enables unhealthy gender representations particular to masculine traits (Atkinson & Calafell, 2009). Gender depictions in *Star Wars* contain negative messaging on both sides, which often serve to augment gender issues.

Research on *The Mandalorian*

While there is much commentary to be found on politics, merchandising, and exceptional visual effects surrounding *The Mandalorian* (Giardina & Couch, 2020; Jarvey, 2019; Newby, 2020; Parker, 2019), credible commentary about its gender representation is meager. However, the lack of reputable articles perhaps makes a statement about the portrayal of women in and of itself. Much as Nicole Sperling remarked in a 2015 *Entertainment Weekly* Article about the *Star Wars* sequel heroine Rey, "Her femininity isn't a weakness, and it isn't a strength. In fact, it isn't a thing at all. Not only is that remarkable for a female movie character, it's revolutionary" (Sperling, 2015). In an interview with Looper, Katee Sackhoff, the actress who portrays Bo-Katan Kryze, the leader of the Mandalorian warriors in *The Mandalorian,* commented on the final episode of the show in which the main character is accompanied by four female companions in his final shot. She pointed out that the scene worked well *because* gender was never drawn attention to. Rather, the female characters were present because they were the best fit available for the task, as opposed to other common Hollywood reasons such as their visual appeal (Landrum, 2019). Sackhoff went on to comment about female portrayal in the film and television industry:

> I think that what's changed, not only the genre but in our industry, is that we don't
> feel like we have to quantify a female's existence anymore by saying, 'Well, she's
> a woman, she's a 'strong female character.' We don't have to do that anymore.
> Now, it's just like, 'Isn't that awesome to watch? Holy crap, that was amazing.'

That's not to take away from and negate the fact that they're obviously women. I think that's what's changed the most in the industry—we have so many amazing women to watch.

Another aspect of the show to consider regarding gender representation lies in its crew. The film and TV industry has long experienced a paucity of female directors (Hayden, 2020). A 2020 study revealed that from 2007 to 2019, only 4.8% of the 1,300 top-grossing films were directed by women. The study also revealed that Paramount Pictures was shown to have zero female directors from 2015 to 2019 (Hayden, 2020). *Star Wars* has historically been no exception to this criticism in its contribution to this chasmic disparity (Landrum, 2019). In recent years however, Hollywood has seen some progress. According to the Directors Guild of America's Episodic Television Director inclusion report covering the 2018-2019 season, episodes directed by women grew to a record 31%, with Disney being credited as having 40% of their episodes directed by women. *The Mandalorian* contributed to this heartening increase and sparked a new hope for female directors when Disney hired Deborah Chow and Bryce Dallas Howard to direct several of the show's episodes (Landrum, 2019). However, while the numbers look attractive, it is important to note that although the show has welcomed two experienced female directors, the directing crew is still predominantly male— seven to two, in fact—and that only four of the 24 episodes were directed by either Howard or Chow (IMDB, n.d.).

Gender Schema Theory

When investigating gender depictions in media, it is important to consider the concept of gender schemas. Gender schema theory seeks to explain how individuals are molded in relation to gender within culture (Bem, 1981), and is associated with self-identity; thereby dictating which behaviors are acceptable according to one's gender (Bem, 2983; Ryle, 2011). In essence,

gender schemas are "cognitive shortcuts" that aid individuals in understanding gender (Wharton, 2005), providing a way of organizing internal information and consequently influencing world perceptions (Ryle, 2011). These cognitive shortcuts, drawn from complex information networks of accumulated experiences, teach children what behaviors, attitudes, and apparel are appropriately masculine or feminine (Zurbriggen, 2007). To demonstrate this, Zubriggen (2007) conducted a study in which children viewed advertisements depicting ornamental and objectified women. The conclusion was that children are prone to internalize the pervading notion that women exist to simply be looked at.

With this in mind, film and television play a pivotal role in the development and reinforcement of gender schemas on the collective and individual consciousness (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2008). Historically, both males and females have suffered damaging stereotypes upheld in popular media. Common gender stereotypes include women as sexual objects, submissive, emotional, and nurturing, and men as aggressive, powerful, strong, and assertive (Dill & Thill, 2007; England et al., 2011; Gilpatric, 2010; Miller et al., 2016). Studies support that increased popular media exposure is correlated with augmented sexist attitudes, though it is significant to note that those exposed to media with contrasting gender depictions is correlated with less rigorous standards of gender roles (Ward & Caruthers, 2001).

This research study will utilize the gender schema theory in viewing and assessing the way female characters are depicted throughout Disney's *The Mandalorian*. The questions guiding this study are as follows:

RQ1: *How does* The Mandalorian *depict its female characters physically?*

RQ2: *How does* The Mandalorian *depict its female characters non-physically?*

Method

Gender Schema Theory

Sandra Bem's gender schema theory seeks to illustrate how cognitive information processing contributes to gender development, particularly in children (1993). An underlying assumption is that children's understanding of femaleness and maleness is defined by cultural conceptions of gender. Unlike gender stereotypes, which focus on content, gender schema theory pertains to the cognitive processes which help explain how gender stereotypes become so deeply etched into a society (Starr, 2016). Bem (1993) would assert that because American culture has been particularly gender schematic in its discourse and social institutions, children are prone to becoming polarized themselves without even being aware. Additionally, Bem states:

> Gender schematicity, in turn, helps lead children to become conventionally
>
> sex-typed. That is, in imposing a gender-based classification on reality,
>
> children evaluate different ways of behaving in terms of the cultural
>
> definitions of gender appropriateness and reject any way of behaving that
>
> does not match their sex. In contrast to Kohlberg's cognitive-developmental
>
> account of why children become sex-typed, this alternative account situates
>
> the source of the child's motivation for a match between sex and behavior,
>
> not in the mind of the child, but in the gender polarization of the culture. (pp.
>
> 125–126)

This theory poses a sound theoretical foundation from which to orient the present study as it provides a basis for both artifact selection and character coding. The ubiquity of a media phenomenon has an inevitable influence on how we create the mental shortcuts that dictate our behavior according to gender, and gender schema theory illuminates this process. Therefore, the

present study codes for both visual and behavioral attributes that are often highlighted as gender markers.

Artifact Selection

To understand how women are portrayed in Disney's *The Mandalorian,* the researcher conducted a content analysis on both seasons of *The Mandalorian* (from 2019-2020) existing at the time of the study. Each season contains 6 episodes and ranges from 25- 47 minutes per episode (disneyplus.com). Characters coded were those that carried a significant amount of dialogue and/or screen time within the specific episode and were each coded separately for every episode.

Variable Coding

Most essential is to first determine how each character appears and interacts on screen. Therefore, both physical and non-physical characteristics of baseline importance were gathered. The measurement of physical appearance, personality description, and whom characters interacted with was broken down into separate variables largely based on a study by Robinson & Callister (2008), which includes physical description, attractiveness, age, race, personality description, body image, and with whom the character is shown. Specific descriptive wording used for coding these variables has been set and defined by Robinson & Callister's research, and is utilized in this study for comparative accuracy.

A character's primary role is also a significant factor to consider when examining gender portrayal within a prominent media text. A character's primary role refers to the level of significance a character contributes to the plot. This variable was measured based on a study by Grace A. Nicholl (2017), who labeled the category "importance." After viewing the series, the coders determined each character's primary role according to how it was displayed for the

majority of their screen time per episode. The role of the Hero was characterized as "driving the narrative forward through action while working towards the completion of a task bestowed upon them." The Villain was identified as "actively working against the hero to impede their progress through the story." The Victim "required rescuing from the hero," and the Bystander "interacted with the hero in only a superficial capacity" (Nicholl, 2017).

Character motivation focuses on what drives the character to action in a narrative. Motivations in this study were broken down into four categories. "Save the world" indicated that a character's motivation was to save or restore a physical space that was in jeopardy. The motivation of "rescue mission" indicated that a character was driven to save another character who was either lost or being held captive. "Personal gain" refers to a character who was motivated by greed - access to power or money or seeking revenge. Finally, "passive motives" indicate that a character was simply reacting to a situation they were put in, which may include surviving a situation, escaping, or just "doing their job" (Nicholl, 2017).

Coding and Inter-Coder Reliability

The data was obtained using survey-style coding sheets. To ensure reliability, 20% of the episodes were analyzed by an additional coder, a 5th year Ph.D. candidate. Intercoder reliability rates were calculated using Krippendorff's Coefficient. Values range from 0 to 1, where 0 is perfect disagreement and 1 is perfect agreement. Krippendorff suggests: "[I]t is customary to require $\alpha \geq .800$. Where tentative conclusions are still acceptable, $\alpha \geq$." The Krippendorff's alpha for this study calculated to .807.

Results

Physical Depiction of Female Characters

The first research question asks, under the lens of viewership: "How does *The Mandalorian* depict its female characters physically?" Physical attributes studied included visually apparent race, age, body type and fitness, as well as miscellaneous adornment.

The first element examined was that of visually discernible race. The majority of female characters were coded as white (33.3%) or mixed (33.3%) across both seasons. The remaining characters were either Asian (8.3%), indeterminate (8.3%), or non-human (8.3%), with none being coded as black (See Table 1.0).

The second element coded for was age. Most female characters were coded between the ages of 30-40 at 50%—a relatively rare occurrence in mainstream media (Bazzini et al., 1997). Women who were aged between 20-30 presented as the second largest group at 25%. The remaining categories were 60+ (at only 8.3%), and indeterminate (at 16.7%) (See Table 1.1). Some studies have reported only around 8% of female characters to be represented as over the age of 35 (Bazzini et al., 1997).

Race	No	%
White	4	33.3
Black	0	0.0
Hispanic	1	8.3
Asian	1	8.3
Other/Mixed	4	33.3
Non-Human	1	8.3
Indeterminate	1	8.3
Total	12	100.0

Table 1.0

Age (Yrs)	No	%
20-30	3	25.0
40-50	6	50.0
60+	1	8.3
Indeterminate	2	16.7
Total	12	100.0

Table 1.1

For data related to body image, most female characters were coded as thin at 41.7%, followed by average at 25%. Very thin characters were coded merely twice over the entire two seasons, garnering a 16.7%. Characters coded as overweight resulted in the same percentage as very thin at 16.7%. Many females who coded for thin, average, or overweight were also coded as muscular (41%), with one character coded as very muscular. A slight majority were coded as unmuscular at 50% (See Tables 1.20 and 1.21).

Body Type	No	%
Very thin	2	16.7
Thin	5	41.7
Average	3	25.0
Overweight	2	16.7
Obese	0	0.0
Total	12	100.0

Table 1.20

Body Fitness	No	%
Unmuscular	6	50.0
Muscular	5	41.7
Very Muscular	1	8.3
Total	12	100.0

Table 1.21

Several various data points supplementing perceptions of physical appearance were also recorded. Most women wore utilitarian or neutral clothing (66.7%), with half as many wearing flashy clothing (33.3%). No characters were coded as wearing suggestive clothing at any time. Out of the eleven characters, nine out of the twelve wore practical footwear in every episode they appeared in—mainly combat boots with little to no heel (See Tables 1.30 and 1.31). 50% of female character appearances had utilitarian hairstyles, while 33.3% were NA due to elements such as helmets or alien features. 16.7% donned impractical or flashy hairstyles—though it was usually role-appropriate (See Table 1.32). The overwhelming majority of characters carried weapons (66.7%), while the remaining counts were coded as tools (26.7%). Only 6.7% were coded as NA for not possessing any accessories (See Table 1.33).

Clothing	No	%
Utilitarian/Neutral Clothing	8	66.7
Suggestive clothing	0	0.0
Flashy Clothing	4	33.3
Total	12	100.0

Table 1.30

Footwear	No	%
Practical Footwear	10	83.3
Impractical footwear	1	8.3
NA	1	8.3
Total	12	91.7

Table 1.31

Hair	No	%
Impractical/flashy hairstyle	2	16.7
Utilitarian hairstyle	6	50.0
NA	4	33.3
Total	12	100.0

Table 1.32

Accessories	No	%
Weapons	10	66.7
Tools	4	26.7
NA	1	6.7
Total	15	100.0

Table 1.33

Only 16.7% were coded for heavy makeup with the purpose of enhancing appearance, though most did wear light makeup. 25% of characters wore no detectable makeup, while 33.3% were NA due to head gear or helmets obscuring the hair (See Table 1.34). Though ages of females varied, the highest percentage of women coded for no visible wrinkles (41.7%). 16.7% had limited wrinkles, while only 8.3% were coded for as "wrinkled" (See Table 1.35). Only one female, the Armorer, was coded as indeterminate due to her face-covering helmet. The vast majority (66.7%) of women were coded as attractive, while only 16.7% were ugly, and 16.7% were moderate looking (See Table 1.36).

Makeup	No	%
Heavy Makeup	2	16.7
Light Makeup	5	41.7
No Makeup	3	25.0
NA	2	16.7
Total	12	100.0

Table 1.34

Wrinkles	No	%
Wrinkled	1	8.3
Limited Wrinkles	2	16.7
No wrinkles visible	5	41.7
Indeterminate	3	25.0
Total	11	91.7

Table 1.35

Beauty	No	%
"Ugly"	2	16.7
"Moderate Looking"	2	16.7
"Attractive"	8	66.7
Total	12	100.0

Table 1.36

Non-physical description of female characters

The second research question inquires, "*How does The Mandalorian depict its female characters non-physically?"* These non-physical traits include the gender of supporting characters each female character spoke with on screen, as well as the gender of characters fighting alongside each studied female character. Description of personality, the role of each character, and predominant secondary role were also evaluated.

The first element examined was with whom women were shown talking. 57.1% of females were shown talking with men only, 28.6% spoke with both genders, and no women were depicted talking with only other women. When it came to combat, women were shown fighting

alongside men and women 38.5% of the time, solely with men 30.8%, alien and alone both at 15.4%, and with only women 0% of the time. Moreover, female characters were shown fighting mainly against men at 42.9% of the time, Alien and indeterminate 35.7%, and the rest of the categories at only 7.1%, with the exception of both men and women at 0%.

Shown Talking With	No	%
Men only	8	57.1
Women only	0	0.0
Men and Women	4	28.6
Alien/Indeterminate	0	0.0
Alien/Indeterminate, Men and Women	2	14.3
Total	14	100.0

Table 2.0

Shown Fighting Alongside	No	%
Alien/Indeterminate	2	15.4
Men only	4	30.8
Women only	0	0.0
Men and Women	5	38.5
Alone	2	15.4
Alien/Indeterminate, Men, and Women	0	0.0
Total	13	100.0

Table 2.1

Shown Fighting Against	No	%
Alien/Indeterminate	5	35.7
Men only	6	42.9
Women only	1	7.1
Men and Women	0	0.0
Alien/Indeterminate, Men, and Women	1	7.1
NA (not present)	1	7.1
Total	14	100.0

Table 2.2

For personality description, many women possessed similar traits including 13.8% stern/austere/serious, 12.1% confident/sure, 10.3% determined, and 10.3% calm/other. No women during any episode were coded as happy/content or passive.

Personality Description	No	%
Fearful	2	3.4
Angry/Grumpy	4	6.9
Humorous	1	1.7
Sexual/Flirty	1	1.7
Aggressive	5	8.6
Passive	0	0.0
Intelligent/wise	3	5.2
Sad	1	1.7
Maternal	3	5.2
Friendly	5	8.6
Confident/sure	7	12.1
Austere/Stern/Serious	8	13.8
Happy/Content	0	0.0
Determined	6	10.3
Eccentric	1	1.7
Protective	2	3.4
Overconfident/cocky	3	5.2
Other/Calm	6	10.3
Total	58	100.0

Table 2.3

When classifying for primary role, 45% were helpers, 20% villains, 15% and 15% were

hero and victim, 5% were mediators, and none were bystanders. As for secondary roles, 23.3%

were foil/antagonists, 20% follower/team members, 16.7% were leaders with the same

percentage being informant/connection, and only 6.7% each were classified as parent or romantic

connection (see Tables 2.0-2.4).

Primary Role	No	%
Hero	3	15.0
Helper	9	45.0
Villain	4	20.0
Bystander	0	0.0
Victim	3	15.0
Other/Mediator	1	5.0
Total	20	100.0

Table 2.4

Secondary Role	No	%
Romantic Interest	2	6.7
Leader	5	16.7
Indeterminate	0	0.0
Parent	2	6.7
Follower/team member	6	20.0
Informant/connection	5	16.7
Foil/Antagonize	7	23.3
Friend	1	3.3
Other	2	6.7
Total	30	100.0

Table 2.5

Each female across every qualifying episode was examined to determine what drives the character to action. Personal gain was most frequent at 36.8%, which included varying motives such as alleviation of a debt, monetary gain, and political advancement. The next leading motivation was that of rescue mission at 26.3%, usually presenting the desire to save or protect the show's second lead, Baby Yoda. Following that, characters across episodes were driven by the motivation to save the world, or in the context of the show, to save the galaxy or a planet in peril (15.8%). Those characters who were mainly reacting to the situation at hand, were classified as having passive motives, and presented at 10.5%. Characters whose motivations fell outside the specified options (Other) gained the same percentage (See Table 2.5).

Motivation	No	%
Save the world	3	15.8
Passive motives	2	10.5
Rescue Mission	5	26.3
Personal Gain	7	36.8
Other	2	10.5
Total	19	100.0

Table 2.6

Discussion

The purpose of this study sought to substantiate the different depictions of female characters in *The Mandalorian* and examine how women were overall represented in the show up to its current episode release. The reason *The Mandalorian* was chosen among other recent television productions was because of its exceedingly high viewership and presence in mainstream pop culture. Before the second season completed its episode release at the end of 2019, *The Mandalorian* was the most in-demand show in the world (Ewing, 2019).

Because of its strategic placement in the canon of the *Star Wars* universe, the motivation to watch *The Mandalorian* is strong, as viewers and fans alike want to know how it is placed within the greater *Star Wars* story and how it will interact with future *Star Wars* content. These films are statistically the most popular streamed series on Disney+ at their release, and set the precedent of story/character design for continued *Star Wars* Universe based media. The presence of these episodes on Disney+ make accessibility almost effortless, and episodes will be

rewatched as the audience prepare for the release of the next season, or as *Star Wars* fans search for hidden easter eggs, rewatch Luke Skywalker's unprecedented CGI comeback, or recreate memes and videos to spread on the internet.

For these reasons, it is important to pay attention to the subliminal and influential messaging contained within *The Mandalorian*, specifically as to the depiction of women. In accordance with gender schema theory, such a prominent source of media can influence the mental shortcuts individuals create about gender and how women should look and behave, thus impacting how they act according to their own gender and influencing a peoples' attitudes and actions towards a given gender (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2008).

Physical description of female characters

Race

The Mandalorian's female characters are quite racially diverse, especially when compared to its predecessors. Approximately two-thirds of its female cast was coded as non-white. In contrast, the 2020 UCLA Hollywood Diversity Report concluded only 32.7% of all actors used in television that year were considered as a "non-white"—almost half of those represented in *The Mandalorian* (Hunt et al., 2020). However, in the United States (where the Walt Disney Company is based, and where *The Mandolorian* was primarily filmed) the 2020 Census reported percentages of all living people within the nation to be 61.6% white, with only 10.2% multiracial. Asian and other races accounted for 6% and 15.1% respectively, and 12.4% of the population were reported as black (Jones et al., 2021). With this in mind, *The Mandalorian* doesn't align with the actual racial distribution within the United States. One may argue that this is still a step for the better, as Disney reaches a much more diverse worldwide audience. Moreover, future population analysis predicts a slower aging, more ethnically diverse United

States by 2060 (Zurcher & Robinson, 2017). Star Wars is a foreign universe with diverse species and humanoids, and therefore would and should have a different distribution than the United States. Additionally, if we consider Hollywood's problematic history of white washing its casting choices, purposeful diverse race representation can be a powerful step towards offsetting an unbalanced and harmful emphasis on the dominance of white persons in our collective stories.

While the ratio of white to non-white characters is less disparate in *The Mandalorian* than other popular media texts, many characters appeared only vaguely ethnic and were thus coded as mixed race. This is due to the fact that many of the actors are actually non-white mixed with white race (as opposed to mixed with multiple non-white races). This gave the show a form of visual diversity, but perhaps only on the surface, as a preference for whiteness was still apparent. There were no female black characters, with the exception of mixed-race Koska Reeves, played by Sasha Banks. While her features appeared predominantly black, her skin is of a lighter shade. Hollywood has recently come under fire for casting black characters with predominantly lighter skin—a phenomenon known as Colorism. The term was first coined by Pulitzer Prize winner Alice Walker in 1982, when she used the term to describe the "prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color"(Norwood, 2015). We can see this manifested in popular black, but light-skinned actresses who are frequently cast in mainstream black roles, including Zoe Saldana (*Star Trek*, *Avatar*), Zendaya (T*he Greatest Showman, Spiderman*), and Zoe Kravitz (*Batman, Big Little Lies*). Even among other ethnic roles, black characters remain diminished. For example, the 2021 film In the Heights, which takes place in a New York neighborhood known as Little Dominican Republic, the casting leaves out Black-Latinos in its main roles, despite the DR's population being made up of many afro-latinos (Garcia et al., 2021).

The Mandalorian demonstrates a shaky, complicated step forward in the push to diversify Hollywood media. While the production displays a more balanced ratio of white race to other ethnicities, it still adheres to a narrow visually-based racial aesthetic.

Age & Physical Appearance

Ageism is a term used to describe the stereotyping and prejudices against individuals or groups on the basis of age and is a frequent criticism in popular media. For decades, women in Hollywood and the characters they play have been especially subject to ageism. Although *The Mandalorian* conforms to pernicious ageism trends in subtle ways, it persists as an example of progress for representation of women in pop culture overall.

In mainstream media, women show up a lot less than males, despite statistics of the general population showing a more balanced ratio (UCLA, 2020). One study on the portrayal of elderly in Disney animation found an actual inverse of representation of old people by gender when compared to the general population—that is, despite women outnumbering men in the real world, Disney portrays more elderly male characters than female (Zurcher, J., Robinson, T., 2018). When women do show up on screen however, they are overwhelmingly cast in their 20s and 30s (as opposed to 30s and 40s for men). Commenting on her findings in an annual report, Martha Lauzen, executive director of the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film at San Diego State University commented, "The tendency to feature younger female characters in films emphasizes the value of their youth and appearance at the expense of allowing females to age into positions of personal and professional power" (Oliver, 2021).

Surprisingly, *The Mandalorian* stands in line with more recent productions that go against this long-standing norm. A notable 50% of the show's females fall in the 40-50 year old range, and we see these women occupying solid, diverse roles. The second largest group scores

in the 20-30s range, though this would be appropriate considering the genre of the show. In addition, younger female characters in the series frequently occupy a less prominent role as opposed to their older female companions. For example, Koska Reeves, who is younger and subordinate to Bo-Katan Kryze, is less the focus character during their shared screen time, with not as much dialogue and development compared to Kryze. *The Mandalorian* serves to not only help bring middle-aged women out of their long-imposed obscurity, but to give them roles and motivations that subvert the norm on both ends: these female characters are neither subservient sexual objects, nor are they women forced into pseudo masculinity.

The actresses that do get roles at an older age tend to *look* much younger than they really are—as close to their 20s or 30s as possible. These actresses are usually household names and have commonly invested in costly cosmetic surgeries, procedures, and "maintenance programs" to preserve their youth and slow their aging. When famous actress Nicole Kidman (aged 49 at the time) was cast to play actor Jason Momoa's mother in the 2018 film Aquaman, critics were quick to point out the absurd fact that Kidman is only 12 years Momoa's senior. Kidman later brushed off the critique in an interview, saying that her supernatural character simply doesn't age like a normal human (Setoodeh, 2018). Regardless, the implicit messaging about women and their appearance is still the same. Carrie Fisher, the late actress who played *Star Wars*' iconic character Princess Leia, was intimately familiar with these harmful double-standards. She received an unrelenting onslaught of criticism for her looks as years passed, which heightened when she returned in her late 50s to reprise her role as Leia in the Star Wars film sequels. Fisher seemed to predict the downpour, writing in her 2011 memoir Shockaholic, "What I didn't realize, back when I was this twenty-five-year-old pinup for geeks in that me myself and iconic metal bikini, was that I had signed an invisible contract to stay looking the exact same way for

the next thirty to forty years" (Fisher, 2011, p. 27). When established women in Hollywood do allow themselves to age more naturally, they often get typecast into specific roles. Meryl Streep, a three-time Oscar winning actress, reported that she was offered three witch roles within a year of turning 40 (Hewitt, 2015).

Furthermore, closer examination of the data reveals that while much of the female cast is indeed older than the industry norm, most of the actresses had no visible wrinkles. This suggests a covert enduring preference for actresses that look younger than they actually are—a long-standing industry norm in which women are expected to preserve their youthful appearances, while at the same time giving men more slack. Carrie Fisher once retweeted a post from a fan who came to her defense, stating, "men don't age better than women, they're just allowed to age" (Wang, 2015). Even while The Madalorian widely conforms to youthful beauty standards, the show's character Peli Motto serves to contradict this trend. The quirky, frizzy-haired spacecraft mechanic is not conventionally attractive, yet is a recurring character that is soft-hearted, intelligent, and remarkably street smart. However, she also serves as a comedic relief and foil to the austere Din Djarin, and isn't intended to be taken very seriously.

Beauty is by no means a focus in *The Mandalorian*, but there are still apparent signs of youth and beauty bias. Most of the female characters are exceptionally attractive. Even Xi'an, with her yellowed sharp teeth and crazed, purple-rimmed eyes, has a lithe muscular figure that conforms to the predominant beauty ideal. In reality, women fall on all points of the conventional beauty spectrum; but relentless messaging about how women should look would seek to convince us otherwise. A 2004 study in which teen girls were asked to study magazine images of attractive athletic women and then report on their self-concept, uncovered a disturbing trend: these girls viewed the magazine women's polished perfection as "normal." This is a

defeating perspective to have in a society where magazine-level appearances are almost never achieved—even by the magazine models themselves, digitally manipulated as they often are (Thompsen, 2004). The teenage participants in the study had formed a gender schema about appearance in relation to what it means to be a "normal" female.

Beauty schemas also frequently include the notion that deformed, disabled and/or ugly individuals are bad or evil, and young, beautiful individuals are good and virtuous. We see this in the physical appearance contrasts between the protagonists and antagonists in popular movies such as Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *The Little Mermaid*, and *Sleeping Beauty*. In all three films, the heroines are white teenage innocent beauties, while the villains are often shrouded in black, physically unappealing, old, and adorned with tentacles, horns, and sharp angles. What's intriguing in *The Mandalorian* is that the two female characters coded as "unattractive" are distributed evenly on both sides of good and evil. Xi'an is blood-thirsty and treacherous, while Pele Moto is earnest and good.

It's worth considering that perhaps part of the reason we see impossible beauty on screen so much is because we have come to *expect* it via our mental shortcuts; people like and expect to see beautiful people on screen, and it serves as a subtle motivation to watch content that presents visually appealing individuals. Like all major industries, Hollywood is first and foremost driven by financial gain, and will therefore always work to appeal to the masses. Therefore, as women have begun demanding more female diversity, we see companies starting to deliver. Many clothing and beauty stores now fill their advertising images with models of all shapes, ages, colors, and sizes, and will sometimes even leave wrinkles and body folds unedited. This trend is also starting to catch on in the film industry, and *The Mandalorian* is a stand-out example.

Seeing a majority of middle-aged women in leading female roles is a significant step in the right direction.

Non-physical description of female characters

Violence

Data gathered from this study reveals that most female aggression was directed against only men, aliens/ droids, or a combination of the two. The sole exception is the central, plot-driven battle in episode five of the second season between main characters Ahsoka Tano and Morgan Elsbeth. Ashoka Tano is a powerful Jedi warrior who can hold her own against dozens of opponents at a time. Likewise, Morgan Elsbeth is a skilled warrior who occupies a strong leadership role as the tyrannical ruler of a captured city. Their strength and leadership as female characters serve to chip away at pervasive stereotypes placed on women in film. However, if the goal is to present a better balance between gender roles, one must consider the other depictions not being presented; specifically in regards to violence.

In the *Star Wars* universe, Stormtroopers are enemy infantry soldiers of the Galactic Empire that don iconic shiny white and black armor. Their white clunky helmets with black eyes permeate the franchise's merchandising, and are an essential presence in the universe. These characters are also the brunt of countless memes and parodies due to how easily and how often they are killed in the films. Their expendability is so notorious, that guest director Taika Watiti appeals to this popular inside fandom joke by parodying their infamous bad aim throughout an entire episode.

According to Disney's canon of *Star Wars* lore, Stormtroopers during *The Mandalorian*'s era are conditioned recruits, rather than the all-male clones of the prequels. With that in mind, there are no evident signs in the show that any of the imperial troopers were female. Their armor

is distinctly masculine, and their audible shouts, screams, and talking are also evidently male. The lack of female presence in parts that bear the brunt of casual death as a means of entertainment and tension-building suggests that while mainstream content creators are open to depicting gender more equally in fun, flattering ways, it still shies away from increasingly uncomfortable depictions in regards to casual violence.

In film, women are traditionally portrayed as the Damsel in Distress: helpless victims that serve as motivation for the male hero. Additionally, violence towards women is often perpetuated by the villain to illustrate the extent of his evil in that he would dare to hurt "innocents" such as vulnerable women. As more women begin filling the hero space, female protagonists can be shown fighting against a female "foil," often one-on-one. However, the role of disposable henchmen is still not being filled with disposable "henchwomen." This may be because watching women being casually murdered at the rate Stormtroopers are killed in *Star Wars* is still an uncomfortable experience for both viewers and media creators, as it hits a little too close to the reality of casual violence towards women. Although, one could argue that since the majority of true "armies" are made of men who kill other men, the "henchmen" phenomenon is a more accurate depiction in the context of war. Both media viewers and creators might still need to question whether the goal is to change the norm by depicting men and women as equals in every sense, or to reflect our current reality.

Motivation

While personal gain was coded as the most dominant motivation, it is important to first acknowledge the link between the two elements that ranked second and third: rescue mission and save the world. *The Mandalorian'*s driving plot involves the rescue and return of a being whose existence impacts the future of the Galaxy. So, in many episodes the leading objective is to save

this being, and in doing so, save the world. At first glance, one could combine these two motivations, which would increase the percentage to equal 42.1%—outranking the current leading motivator of personal gain by about 5%. However, it is important to note that the rescue missions did have a few exceptions, including the episode in which Xi'an's motivation was to rescue her brother from prison. Regardless, the two elements combined bring it in close competition with personal gain for leading female motivation. What results is a curious juxtaposition depicted between selfish and unselfish female inclinations.

For the history of mankind, the archetype for women has been that of mother and nurturer, inherently selfless by nature's dictations. While society continues to develop new enabling technologies, this archetype persists as women still bear children and take the dominant (if not complete) role of child caretaker. *The Mandalorian* is not completely devoid of maternal manifestations, as we see Omera, the humble widowed mother of one, care for her daughter and encourage Din Djarin to settle down and live a "good life" with his "boy." Notwithstanding, her maternal presence diverges when she takes up a gun and starts defending her beleaguered fishing village, shouting orders and shooting enemies with outstanding precision. The masculine and feminine duality of her actions offsets what viewers might have come to expect to see from a mother character. Regardless of whether the show's women depict traditional maternal traits or not, many of them act from a place of selfless motivation to help preserve the Galaxy and protect Grogu.

In contrast however, we see many of the female characters acting from motivations of personal gain. Cara Dune is first brought into working alongside the protagonist with money as a motivator. Later, Dune is convinced to join him on another mission after he reveals that the target is an "Imperial," a member of the group responsible for annihilating her home planet, thus

motivating her by appealing to her desire for revenge. Bo-Katan Kryze's driving goal throughout the series is to not just redeem her home planet, but to rule it. Morgan Elsbeth's motivation is to retain her mantle of power as queen. The differences form a compelling contrast between selfish and unselfish motivation, particularly to be seen so evenly split, as women are so often understood to lean toward caretaking, rather than self-aggrandizement.

Despite there being many opportunities for selfless femininity to manifest in the female characters' interactions with Grogu, maternal proclivities are brushed aside for the central relationship between Grogu and Din Djarin. At first meeting, the formidable bounty hunter cannot bring himself to complete his original mission of delivering the child into malevolent hands. Instead, Grogu becomes the protagonist's central driving motivation, born out of the strong bond that resonates between them as father and child. The relationship gives *The Mandalorian* a unique edge, considering that paternal motivations aren't often a common highlight in mainstream media, and certainly not a central one. In sum, not only are paternal instincts unusually celebrated in the main male protagonist, but women in *The Mandalorian* are depicted less often as having a nurturing focus to their driving motivations.

Conclusion

As Disney continues to expand its empire and increase its downpour of consumable media, the company's scope of influence also increases. Disney characters appear to be everywhere we turn; their faces gleaming from the fronts of glittering backpacks lining school hallways and their costumes dominating the streets on Halloween night. Even some food items such as noodles or fruit snacks are shaped into these characters that we then literally consume. Disney's never-ending stream of *Marvel* films are akin to a modern day Pandora's Box, and *Star Wars* is beginning to look the same. It would be short-sighted to assume that Disney does not

have a significant measure of influence over our collective psyche, contributing to the cognitive

shortcuts we create about gender in particular.

This media machine holds power not just through amusing the masses, but in perhaps the

most powerful currency of all: trust. In 2021, the annual Edelman Trust Barometer survey

revealed that the only institutions that have retained global trust in recent years are businesses;

being deemed both competent and ethical. People increasingly look to companies such as Disney

for guidance, as opposed to other institutions, including governments.

> When the government is absent, people clearly expect business to step
>
> in and fill the void, and the high expectations of business to address and
>
> solve today's challenges has never been more apparent. The heightened
>
> expectations of business bring CEOs new demands to focus on societal
>
> engagement with the same rigor, thoughtfulness, and energy used to
>
> deliver on profits. (Edelman, 2021)

The pursuit of profit is intimately tied with Disney's ability to retain trust with its

consumers. This includes addressing important social issues such as diversity and inclusion.

When considering diversity in female representation, the present study would suggest that *The

Mandalorian* has positioned Disney in the right direction. Within the show we see an increase of

female diversity in areas such as character role, age, and appearance; especially when compared

to the show's predecessors. In addition, *The Mandalorian* stands out among media titles released

in the same window of time.

However, while the show has taken steps in the right direction, there is still at least one

element that may need to be reassessed. Disney has publicly pronounced ethnic diversity a

priority ("Diversity & Inclusion", 2022), yet one could argue that *The Mandalorian* possesses

only a surface appearance of ethnic diversity. This is because many of the actresses are either fully white or mixed with white—the race that has historically dominated our screens (Hunt et al., 2020). The company may benefit by assessing what they have thus far produced in comparison to what their consumers truly want in regards to diversity on screen if they seek to retain their consumer's trust long-term.

Limitations

The present study codes exclusively for female protagonists who have significant screen time or dialog. Coding for female extras would give a more nuanced analysis of the show's depictions overall, as doing so could uncover more subtle biases towards women and their presentation on screen. While *The Mandalorian* presents intentionally progressive female character development, there remains a possibility that the directors and creators retained cultural biases in the depiction of women not shining on screen. Additionally, this study also lacks coding for males. This leaves a swath of untapped information to compare and contrast female depiction against and limits the comprehensive perception of the series.

Additionally, this study does not take the concept of gender fluidity into account. Gender fluidity contains two tenants; including gender identity (a person's internal sense of gender), and gender expression (how a person expresses their gender identity through appearance, dress, behavior, etc) (Damond, 2020). Gender identity is not explicitly stated or explored for any of the individuals in *The Mandalorian*. Most characters coded for as females demonstrated external attributes of varying degrees of femininity, with the exception of the Comms Officer. This character wore a gender-neutral uniform for the entirety of the show and had androgynous features including short hair and a wide angular face. Nothing in this character's dress or personal grooming suggested femininity. This study is constructed on the precept that gender can

be easily identified and placed into two categories for extensive evaluation. With a burgeoning cultural identification of non-traditional categories of gender, the results of this study pose a narrow and arguably incomplete exploration of gender depiction.

Rewards for violence were determined based on presence and classification. It does not account for the degree of the reward nor the context in which it was delivered. Coding for rewards offers an interesting start but would benefit from an in-depth examination. Some rewards are worth more depending on the context. For example, obtaining the beskar staff–a powerful weapon made from culturally significant and invaluable metal– is a more significant reward compared to receiving a relieved "thanks" from a rescued character. Moreover, rewards are limited to a select number of classifications and would benefit from an increasingly comprehensive, descriptive approach.

Future Research

There are several directions in which this study could be expanded. The first is by gathering more data within *The Mandalorian* series, this time on supporting female characters. Most media studies focus exclusively on main characters without considering the impact of what side and background characters might be implicitly communicating. Additionally, future researchers could further expound by taking an in-depth look at the male characters in the series as a means to compare and contrast to female characters, or to explore separately. Researchers might ask: how are the male characters in *The Mandalorian* depicted, physically and non-physically?

Potential studies may also want to create gender-based data groups that allow for further fluidity in definition of the categories male and female. Moreover, a separate study on audience perception regarding these types of characters could yield interesting insights into a few ideas.

This could include insights on the global audience's current perception on diverse representation of gender fluidity and gender expression, the current range of depictions contained in our most popular media, and how these influence one another.

Further research of *The Mandalorian* could also be expanded to code for accent diversity. Frequently overlooked is the unspoken expectation that actors on screen not only look white, but sound white (Davé, 2020). Coding for accents may reveal a bias towards a specific speech style, including for those who appear non-white. A closer examination may find few outliers such as Boba Fett's New Zealand accent. Research could also include other recent *Star Wars* titles such as *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*, which presents diversified accents originating from countries such as Hong Kong and Mexico. Data gathered from these titles could then be compared with past *Star Wars* content or other current media.

Lastly, future studies could seek to expand the quantity of data collected by including future seasons of *The Mandalorian*, thereby revealing, or supporting any further trends or correlations. In addition, data could be obtained from upcoming series placed in the same universe, such as Disney's *The Book of Boba Fett.* This would expand on the current picture of how women are being depicted in *Star Wars* media, as now being created and directed through Disney.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Coding Sheet

Female Characters in Disney's *The Mandalorian*

Season _____   **Episode** _____

Female Character's name _____

Screen time in minutes _____   **Number of main females present in episode** _____

Race of female character:
____ W   ____ B   ____ H   ____ A   ____ Other   ____ Non-human   ____ Indeterminate

Age: ____ Young (20-30s)   ____ Middle-aged (40-50s)   ____ Senior (60+)
____ Indeterminate

Physical Description:
____ Utilitarian/ Neutral clothing   ____ Suggestive clothing   ____ Flashy clothing/ armor

____ Practical footwear   ____ Impractical footwear   ____ NA

____ Heavy makeup   ____ Light makeup   ____ No makeup   ____ NA

____ Wrinkled   ____ Limited Wrinkles   ____ No wrinkles visible

____ Indeterminate (wrinkles)

____ Ugly   ____ Moderate Looking   ____ Attractive

____ Impractical hairstyle   ____ Utilitarian hairstyle   ____ N/A

____ Weapon(s)_____   ____ Tool(s)_____   ____ N/A

Body Image of the female character: ____ Indeterminate   ____ Muscular
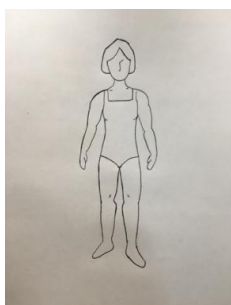

Very thin   **Thin**   **Average**   **Overweight**   **Obese**

If "Muscular" was checked:

Muscular   **Very Muscular**

Motivation

____Save the world   ____ Rescue mission   ____Personal gains

____Passive motives   ____ Other

Primary role

____Hero   ____Villain   ____Victim

____Helper   ____Bystander   ____ Other

Secondary role of the female character (choose one):

____ Romantic interest   ____ Parent   ____ Foil / Antagonize?

____ Leader   ____ Follower/ team member   ____ Friend

____ Indeterminate   ____ Informant/ connection   ____ Other _____

Personality Description:

____ Fearful   ____ Intelligent/Wise   ____ Happy/Content

____ Angry/Grumpy   ____ Sad   ____ Determined

____ Humorous   ____ Maternal   ____ Eccentric

____ Sexual/ Flirty   ____ Friendly   ____ Protective

____ Aggressive   ____ Confident/ sure   ____ Overconfident/ cocky

_____ Passive   _____ Austere/ Stern/ Serious   _____ Other _____

<u>Female character was shown fighting alongside</u>:

_____ Alien/ indeterminate   _____ Men only   _____ Women only

_____ Men and women   _____ Alone   _____Other

<u>Female character was shown fighting against</u>:

_____ Alien/ droid   _____ Men only   _____ Women only

_____ Men and women   _____ Other   _____ NA

<u>Female character was shown talking</u>:

_____ NA   _____ w/ Men only   _____ w/ Women only

_____ w/ Alien/ Droid   _____ w/ Men and women   _____ Other

<u>Rewards for Violence:</u>

_____ No violence present

_____ Reward absent

_____ Reward present

       _____"Self-praise (e.g., after killing a victim, a perpetrator quips, ... 'I'm good')"

       _____"Praise from other (e.g., bystander thanking perpetrator for saving her life)"

       _____"Material praise (e.g., a perpetrator taking the sword of someone she just killed)"

Appendix B: Female Characters Coded

Character Name	Screen Time Over 2 Seasons
Armorer	13.27
Omera	14.5
Xi'an	14.5
Carasynthia "Cara" Dune	92
Fennec Shaad	37.5
Peli Motto	15
Frog Lady	25.5
Bo-Katan Kryze	7.5
Comms Officer	2
Morgan Elsbeth	9.5
Ashoka	27.5
Koska Reeves	7.5
Total	266.27