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**DEPARTAMENT DE FILOLOGIA ANGLESÀ I DE GERMANÍSTICA**

**“Fight like a man”: Redefining Masculinity in Daniel  
Kwan and Daniel Scheinert’s Sci-Fi Film *Everything  
Everywhere All at Once***

Treball de Fi de Grau/ BA dissertation  
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January 2025

**Statement of Intellectual Honesty**

**Your name:** Adriana Marcela Bravo Bravo

**Title of Assignment:** "Fight like a man": Redefining Masculinity in Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert's Sci-Fi Film *Everything Everywhere All at Once*.

I declare that this is a totally original piece of work, written by me; all secondary sources have been correctly cited. I also understand that plagiarism is an unacceptable practice which will lead to the automatic failing of this assignment.

Signature and date:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Adriana Bravo".

January 27<sup>th</sup>, 2025

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>0. Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>0.1. Masculinity and Hegemony.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>0.2. Plot summary .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>1. Alpha Waymond: Enacting Hegemony .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>2. Waymond Wang: masculine redefinition.....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>3. Conclusions and Further Research.....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Works Cited.....</b>	<b>24</b>

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## Abstract

Traditionally, male characters being portrayed in science-fiction films tend to comply with patriarchal ideals of masculinity. They are shown to be physically strong, lack sensitivity and vulnerability, and overall have domineering personalities. However, in recent years, audiences have witnessed a positive shift in the way in which masculinities are portrayed in film.

In this paper, I aim to show how this shift can be witnessed in the 2022 film *Everything Everywhere All at Once* with character of Waymond Wang. I suggest that he actively subverts the role of the hegemonically masculine hero through his kind, empathetic and supportive nature, not only portraying these traits as acceptable qualities for men but also aiming to redefine traditional roles and even challenge viewer bias.

To achieve my goal, I have based my research on Raewyn Connell's (2005) theorization on hegemonic masculinity and different types of masculinity to support my ideas, as well as examples from other authors who have provided theories on the matter specifically related to media portrayals of men. Additionally, I have divided my arguments into two sections. The first section is devoted to the analysis of the character of "Alpha Waymond" whom, as I argue, portrays patriarchal values and is presented in the film in order to criticize hegemonic masculinity's ideals. Finally, the second section is devoted to the analysis Waymond Wang, who I suggest embodies character traits that purposefully break from these ideals and moves toward a softer representation of masculinity and heroism.

**Keywords:** Masculinity, science-fiction, cinema, *Everything Everywhere all at once*, Daniel Kwan, Daniel Scheinert.

## 0. Introduction

It is undeniable that movies and television form a big part of our culture. Not only do they provide entertainment, but they can also inspire, give representation to those often marginalized and help us see the world around us through a new lens. In recent years, it can be argued that there has been notable change in the way in which male leads are portrayed in film. As gender liberation movements continue to challenge and push the boundaries of traditional gender roles and expectations for women, we are starting to see more and more how the media reflects the shifts there have been for men as well.

However, the representation of diverse male characters and positive male role models in cinema and television has not always been the case. Movies such as *Fight Club* (1999), *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013), and *Whiplash* (2014) portray toxic and limiting forms of masculinity. These movies present leading males whose main drive is usually power and control, and whose traits and actions oftentimes prove them to be violent and unempathetic. While it can be argued that these films use such characters to openly critique these forms of masculinity, they usually fail to provide and promote examples of characters that embody positive models.

Thus, the aim of the present dissertation is to show how the positive change that there has been in the representation of masculinity in film is reflected in the character of Waymond Wang in Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert's 2022 Sci-Fi film *Everything Everywhere All at once* (hereafter *EEAAO*). The film uses the idea of the “multi-verse”, the simultaneous existence of multiple universes, to divide this character into two different versions, and my analysis follows this division in two main sections. First, I will be providing an analysis of the hypermasculine version of this character, known as Alpha-Waymond, to show how hegemonic masculinity is brought up and constructed in the film through the traits of this character who, as I argue, complies with hegemonic ideals for

men. Then, I will dedicate the second section to analyzing and describing the ways in which this hegemonic system is purposefully deconstructed and redefined with the presence of the “normal” version of this character, Waymond Wang, whose mild-mannered behavior constitutes the antithesis of the hegemonic model of Alpha-Waymond and is crucial to the development of the plot and final message of the film.

Since the movie’s 2022 release, there has already been some internet discourse around how the male characters are portrayed in this film. For instance, in a blog post regarding the film, Quoc Tran notes how important the character of Waymond is for the plot development and argues in favor of him as a “good model of a man who knows how to love, and who does not need to satisfy the toxic masculinity standard to be a man” (2023). My objective is to take this analysis further by contextualizing these characters’ traits within the academic study of masculinity.

Furthermore, I believe the subject of this project to be one of high social relevance. While the focus of gender liberation movements has been primarily on women, as argued by Sara Martín “the typical complaint that we have already given men too much attention is misguided, for we have only started looking at men as such a few decades ago” (VIII). Additionally, it has been proven through various studies that the idealization of traditional masculinity models carries real and harmful social consequences for boys and men. Robert J. Zeglin summarizes the scholarship on this topic:

In social context, stronger masculine ideology is associated with smaller social networks, less acceptance of physical assistance, and higher instrumentality in friendships (i.e., friends serve practical purposes; Migliaccio, 2009; Thompson & Whearty, 2004). Mahalik, Pierre, and Wan (2006) found that higher masculinity was correlated with lower self-esteem. In addition, conformity to traditional masculine norms has been associated with increased emotional distress including loneliness, anxiety, depression, and neuroticism (Blazina, Eddins, Burridge, & Settle, 2007; Courtenay, 2000; Harford, Willis, & Deabler, 1967; Stoppard & Paisley, 1987). (44)

Thus, if we continue to dismiss men’s issues, and accept and promote unhealthy enactments of masculinity in film, we are actively presenting them as desirable to men

and boys, many of whom not only enjoy seeing themselves reflected in the media they consume but also learn and take inspiration from the characters themselves. These films, while portraying fictional male models, reflect and represent masculinity and are likely to have real effect on men's psyche and their perception of themselves and others.

## **0.1. Masculinity and Hegemony**

To carry out this project, it is essential to contextualize the terms that will be used, as well as to take into consideration and acknowledge some of the previous research that has been done in the field of masculinity studies. The study of masculinity is not a new topic of discussion. In fact, academic studies on masculinity have been carried out since the late eighties. These studies, while focusing on many different aspects of maleness and attempting to consider men from many points of view, always seem to have a clear objective in their horizon, that of uncovering what it means to "be a man" in society. Nevertheless, masculinity is not a straightforward or static concept. As generations change, more redefinitions are necessary to reflect how and why those prescriptions for male behavior continue to be challenged.

As argued by American sociologist Eric Anderson, it was not until the end of the 20th century that the topic really gained traction. However, the argument could be made that the answer they gave to the meaning and nature of masculinity as well as the issues taken into consideration were still somewhat limited.

Much of the research on men and masculinities in the later twentieth century focused either on what was missing from male lives, compared to women's lives, or the social problems associated with masculinity (Pleck, 1975). David and Brannon (1976), for example, argued that the central tenets of masculinity were: 'no sissy stuff; be a big wheel; be sturdy as an oak; and give 'em hell'. Thus, in order to be thought masculine, boys and men were required to show no fear or weakness and to hide all trace of inadequacy and anxiety. (Anderson 243)

However, once having established that masculinity meant being an ever-unwavering representation of strength and fearlessness, the question of how that model of man is established, and perpetuated, remained. As more studies continued to be carried out on the subject, new concepts began to emerge to describe how patriarchal systems are socially organized, and how they establish a set of strict expectations for men as well as for women.

One of the more influential concepts used to describe the ways in which masculinity is organized, in accordance with patriarchal ideals for the male gender, is that of “hegemonic masculinity”. The term was coined by Australian sociologist Dr. Raewyn Connell, who describes it as follows: “Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (Connell 77). That is to say, hegemonic masculinity is the set of “rules” and expectations that are placed onto men (and women) to prescribe behaviors and legitimize the ideal that men should be the dominant gender. Still, while the ideal of hegemonic masculinity may be widespread and prescribe behaviors for men such as physical strength and lack of emotional vulnerability, it does not mean that most men are capable or willing to enact it. As Connell further asserts: “Normative definitions of masculinity, as I have noted, face the problem that not many men actually meet the normative standards (...) Yet the majority of men gain from its hegemony, since they benefit from the patriarchal dividend, the advantage men in general gain from the overall subordination of women” (79).

Hence, men do not necessarily need to embody hegemonic standards to benefit from them. This is what is denominated as complicit masculinities. These are “[m]asculinities constructed in ways that realize the patriarchal dividend, without the

tensions or risks of being the front-line troops of patriarchy" (Connell 79). Men with complicit masculinities, while not embodying the model, tend to possess some sort of privilege. These can be such as bearing political power or the possession of wealth. Such powers put them in a position in which they do not need to prove their masculinity, while still allowing them to benefit from the subordination and marginalization of other groups such as women and non-privileged men. If there is enough compliance by these men with the powers that uphold a certain model of masculinity (such as culture and government), that hegemonic model remains: "It is the successful claim to authority, more than direct violence, that is the mark of hegemony" (Connell 77).

Finally, we would be left with these powerless "non-hegemonic compliant" men who, along with the women, would then constitute subordinated and marginalized identities. Connell exemplifies these dissident identities by pointing to how in contemporary European and American society there has been a consistent dominance of the heterosexual men over the homosexual, though this is not the only form of marginalization: "Gay masculinity is the most conspicuous, but it is not the only subordinated masculinity. Some heterosexual men and boys too are expelled from the circle of legitimacy" (Connell 79). Thus, it is safe to assume that any man who does not perform hegemonically (and lacks the power to be exempt) is susceptible to being subordinated.

Nevertheless, one of the characteristics of hegemonic systems is their susceptibility to change: "A considerable body of research shows that masculinities are not simply different but also subject to change. Challenges to hegemony are common, and so are adjustments in the face of these challenges" (Connell and Messerschmidt 835). These changes can be brought about by many factors: for instance, by social movements such as feminism, which strives for the social equality of genders. In recent times, and

while the current accepted hegemonic standard of masculinity still prescribes ideals for men such as being physically strong, dominant and unempathetic, it can be argued that there has been a shift in the ways in which boys and men relate with each other. According to Anderson: “Although not a gender utopia, a plethora of research shows that young men are now able to express themselves through a diverse spectrum of behaviours and emotions that are socially coded, traditionally, as feminine and feminizing” (Anderson 244).

However, media portrayals of men still have a long way to go in terms of rendering more positive and diverse representations of masculinity. According to some of the research that has been devoted to the analysis of mediatic depictions of men, it is apparent that there is still a tendency of constructing characters that comply with hegemonic models. Zeglin notes that “[t]here have been several notable attempts to understand the process of masculinity’s social construction through media”, citing Bereska’s 2003 study of young adult novels, which concluded that “masculinity is bounded by three conditions: (a) heterosexuality, (b) embodiment, and (c) no sissy stuff” (44). Additionally, Zeglin asserts that there have been studies linking Hollywood movies (specifically those popular among men) to representations of masculinity that are also consistent with hegemonic traits:

Boyle and Brayton (2012) and Brown (2002) both investigated masculinity within Hollywood movies via an analysis of one movie or one actor. Their results suggest that masculinity is portrayed through labor capacity, physicality and muscularity, heterosexuality, a tough poise, and sadomasochist themes. Brown noted that suffering may be an essential masculine quality” (45).

Nonetheless, in spite of this general pattern in Hollywood film of reinforcing images of hegemonic masculinity, *EEAAO*(2022) challenges them in ways that reflect the broader cultural changes in conceptions of gender and masculinity. Thus, having established some of the most prominent terms and theoretical basis for the project and pointing to the

research that shows that the current patterns of hegemony are starting to be challenged, the next sections shall be concerned with the analytic part of the present dissertation, in which, as was previously stated, the analysis will be directed to showing how *EEAAO* (2022) does an active job of displaying these patterns of hegemony with the goal of showing their subsequent deconstruction.

## 0.2. Plot summary



**Figure 1: Promotional poster for the movie**

The plot of *EEAAO* (2022) follows the story of middle-aged laundromat owner Evelyn Wang. Evelyn and her husband, Waymond, are Chinese immigrants who have been living in the United States for many years, and are parents to a daughter, Joy. The film opens with Evelyn stressing over her upcoming meeting with the IRS due to her business being audited. Additionally, she is trying to put together a party to celebrate the Chinese New Year to promote her laundromat and to impress her estranged father who has come to visit her. As she prepares for all these events, her husband is shown constantly trying to get her attention, but she dismisses him. We later find out it is because he is trying to serve her divorce papers in order to spark a conversation about their marriage. We also

see that Evelyn has a strained relationship with her daughter Joy and still struggles with the idea that her daughter is dating a woman and wants to introduce her to her grandfather (Evelyn's dad).

At the IRS office, Evelyn is accompanied by her husband and her elderly father. Suddenly, her husband's demeanor changes, and he tells her that he is not her husband but rather just temporarily possessing his body. He tells her that he comes from another universe and goes on to give her an explanation on the existence of multiple parallel universes (created each time they make a choice) which he calls "the multi-verse". Finally, he warns her that her life is in danger because there is an evil entity after her which is also trying to destroy all universes.

This alternate version of her husband, who calls himself Alpha-Waymond, teaches her how to acquire skills from other versions of herself (such as martial arts abilities from a universe in which she is a movie star) in order to fight this evil entity. He explains that his late wife (another version of Evelyn), was the one to create the device he uses to jump from one universe to another. He then reveals that when they were teaching their daughter (their version of Joy) to access other universes, something went wrong and now she experiences all of them at the same time and has gone mad. That Joy, who now goes by the name Jobu Tupaki, has built a device called "The Bagel" which, as Alpha-Waymond claims, she plans to use to destroy all universes.

However, when Evelyn realizes that to defeat Jobu she would also have to kill her own universe's daughter, Joy, she refuses to fight. Still, Alpha-Waymond insists that there is no other way to save all universes but to kill all versions of Joy/Jobu because she has become too powerful. As they continue their fight against Jobu and all her allies, Evelyn comes face to face with her. She then decides that the only way to try to understand

Jobu and save her daughter is to also fracture her mind and experience all universes at once in an attempt to understand her.

Jobu then tells Evelyn that she was not searching for her to kill her, but rather to see if she could find an Evelyn who understood what she was going through and might be able to help her or at least share her belief that nothing matters and there is no real point to living. Since Jobu, and now Evelyn too, only get to experience a few seconds in each universe, she argues that there is no point to life. Jobu then reveals that she created The Bagel not to destroy all universes, but herself. She convinces Evelyn to accompany her but as they are about to step onto the device, something catches Evelyn's attention.

In her main universe, the tax auditor has just arrived at her laundromat with the police and is threatening to arrest her because Evelyn mistakenly attacked her earlier. In her desperation, and because she is beginning to believe Jobu's argument that "nothing matters", Evelyn begins breaking her own laundromat's windows and is placed in handcuffs. Then, she sees her husband Waymond talking to the auditor and sees how he manages to convince her to forgive Evelyn and give them one more week to present documents to avoid the closing of their business. As the auditor leaves, Evelyn asks how it is possible that he convinced her. He tells her that he just talked to the auditor, that she understood their situation and chose to show them kindness despite her anger.

In that moment, Evelyn rethinks the idea of jumping into The Bagel. As she looks at her husband quietly sweeping away the glass from the broken windows, she hears a voice from another universe talking to her. In that universe Evelyn is a famous movie star, and she just ran into Waymond, whom she never married. He seems to have become a successful businessman in that universe. However, he tells her that he always wished she had not rejected his marriage proposal. Despite his apparent financial success, that

version of her husband tells her that he would have preferred to have lived a simpler life of just “doing laundry and taxes” if that meant being with her.

This other Waymond, who seems to have a personality much like that of her own husband, tells her about how he sees himself as a fighter too. He just chooses to fight his battles differently, using kindness, positivity, and empathy, rather than violence. Moved by the words of this Waymond, she begins seeing the value in her husband’s kindness. While Alpha Waymond only led her to create more chaos and issues, Waymond had been there all along quietly trying to make things better. Inspired by him, she decides to keep trying to save Jobu and keep her daughter Joy.

Using her multiverse powers not to fight but to help Jobu’s followers find meaning again in their lives, they all decide to stop fighting. Evelyn gets to Jobu on time and manages to convince her not to jump into The Bagel by telling her that, even if they only get to be with each other for a few seconds at a time, it is worth living to be together. Finally, because of their love and the desire to be with one another, they manage to focus on the universe where they are together and ignore all others. In the end, we see them all reunited some time later and see how Evelyn learns to be more present in her own universe and solve her problems by “fighting” like her husband, through kindness and empathy.

### **1. Alpha Waymond: Enacting Hegemony**

When analyzing the characteristics of Alpha Waymond, the argument could be made that he is purposefully portrayed as a superhero from the moment he is first introduced to viewers and consistently throughout. In the film, we can see how he follows many of the same conventions that audiences of Sci-fi and superhero films are accustomed to seeing in these types of characters. A clear example of this argument can be seen in the fact that every time he possesses the original Waymond’s body he removes his glasses, an action

which is reminiscent of the way in which boring journalist Clark Kent takes off his glasses and becomes the incredible Superman. As Jeffrey Brown writes: “The shift from ‘less-than-extraordinary’ to ‘extraordinary’ masculinity is literally and symbolically written onto the hero’s body” (134). This type of portrayal is quite significant to the argument that he portrays traditional hegemonic traits since “[s]uperheroes have always represented the pinnacle of American cultural ideas about masculinity and have served for generations as a key power fantasy for male adolescents” (Brown 131).

Thus, it could be argued that, even though these actions may be perceived as arbitrary or go unnoticed, the intention behind them is to lead the audience to make these associations (consciously or otherwise). Such associations are quite easy to create since these characteristics have been seen in pop-culture depictions of superheroes for decades and are accompanied by a particular set of expectations from the character, such as expecting him to bear physical strength and be “the hero” of the story. As Brown writes:

The foundational core of the superhero film genre is a very rudimentary fantasy of masculine empowerment. Like the comics before them, superhero films revolve around the symbolic transition of the main male character from 98-pound weakling to he-man, from mild mannered Clark Kent to Superman, from timid teenager Peter Parker to the amazing Spider-Man. (133)

Hence, we see this pattern reproduced in the film whenever there is a shift from Waymond Wang to Alpha Waymond. Furthermore, the argument could be made that even the name of the character himself bears the purpose of evoking a sense of domination and power that is consistent with masculine ideals. In recent years, there has been an increase in discourse regarding “Alpha masculinity” or “Being an Alpha male”. In his book, *Alpha Masculinity: Hegemony in language and discourse* (2021), Eric Louis Russell argues that, while little was known of its origin at the time, the term began to gain traction in modern North-American anglophone discourse asserting that “‘Alpha’ is used to describe

military and political leaders, categories of sexualized men, prominent sports figures, and just about any other male who is ascribed with the characteristics of an unquestioned and unquestioning leader” (19). In the film, we see how Alpha Waymond portrays this leadership quality. In his universe, he is the leader of a crew that has survived the devastation the villain, Jobu Tupaki, has wrought. We see him giving orders to his crew very sternly as he travels through the multiverse and how they always comply with his demands and rarely question his decisions.

Arguably, the quality of unquestionability in his leadership is enforced through his domineering and violent personality which remains consistent throughout the film and complies with the characteristics expected from idealized models of hegemonic masculinity. In his study on the portrayal of masculinity in various “Guy movies” (films catered to men), Zeglin finds that violence was enacted by 100% of the sampled characters (50). In *EEAO* (2022) we see how Alpha Waymond engages in violence every time he finds himself in a situation of conflict. For instance, he immediately attacks the security staff at the IRS office when he is not directly confronted with violence and often argues with Evelyn that there is no other way to solve the multi-verse conflict against Jobu Tupaki but to physically defeat her. As Zeglin further concludes in his analysis: “By presenting violence as consistently as the movies in the analysis did, the suggestion is made that it is a masculine responsibility to enforce social order through violence” (50). Furthermore, the notion that masculinity is closely tied to the male body (in terms of strength and physical ability) is an inherently hegemonic one. As Connell writes: “True masculinity is almost always thought to proceed from men's bodies - to be inherent in a male body or to express something about a male body. Either the body drives and directs action (...) or the body sets limits to action” (Connell 45). In one scene, we see Alpha Waymond attempting to break down a door and, upon failing, he states with

exasperation “Damn, what a weak body!”, complaining about the fact that the original Waymond’s body (which he is currently possessing) is not as strong as his original body (a trait that he values because, as previously mentioned, he asserts dominance through his physical strength). As Brown argues: “What Hollywood films offer is a clear example of Western culture’s domina[nt] vision of masculinity as strong, powerful, resourceful, smart and triumphant.” (135).

Another instance to consider is the fact that Alpha Waymond displays these violent and domineering traits with Evelyn as well. Evelyn is first acquainted with Alpha Waymond in a fast-paced scene in which, after possessing the body of Evelyn’s husband, he begins to give her instructions on what she must do with no explanation as to why. In subsequent scenes, we can see how Evelyn seems confused and even refuses to help him in various instances since she is currently concerned about the possible closure of her business. Nevertheless, he continues to argue with her that she must do as he says, he even establishes physical dominance over her at various times by placing his hands over her mouth, usually when she is attempting to protest or ask questions. Additionally, throughout the course of the movie we see how he often forcefully takes her by the arm to lead her wherever he chooses to go.

Ultimately, Alpha Waymond is consistently dismissive of Evelyn’s concerns and opinions and asserts his position of leadership. These actions are consistent with ideology surrounding the social organization of power in hegemonic masculinity models, which typically entails the subordination of women. As Connell argues: “The main axis of power in the contemporary European/ American gender order is the overall subordination of women and dominance of men - the structure Women’s Liberation named ‘patriarchy’” (74).

Nonetheless, the argument could be made that, while fleeting, Alpha Waymond does display some signs of care for Evelyn. For instance, he asserts multiple times that he believes she is capable of harnessing multi-verse powers to defeat Jobu, and we see how Evelyn even begins to trust and like Alpha Waymond. However, at a crucial moment of the plot, Alpha Waymond sees Evelyn struggling to harness multi-verse abilities as one of Jobu's allies is attacking them. In this instance, instead of trying to help or protect her, he tells her that she might not be useful to his mission after all and decides to leave her while she is hurt and in danger. Additionally, he often tells her that he believes in her, even treating her as a romantic interest at times, but then is consistently impatient with her and does not trust her judgement or listen to her ideas or concerns. Thus, we could argue that even when he shows small signs of caring and encouragement, his interest in Evelyn appears to be quite instrumental. Alpha Waymond tells her he believes she is capable of many things but abandons her when she fails to meet his standards. He shows romantic interest in her but constantly argues that she made "nothing of her life" in her universe and that all other multi-verse versions of her were better. This is consistent with Brown's assessment that, "[a]lthough the stories and the superhero characters have been updated for the 21st century, their depiction of gender is very traditional: men are heroic, strong and brave; women are damsels in distress, love interests, and romantic prize" (134).

Another example of Alpha Waymond's patriarchal treatment toward women is seen in the way in which he talks about his own daughter, Joy (who has now become Jobu Tupaki). In a particular scene Evelyn is inquiring about Jobu's motives for wanting to hurt them. In response to her questions Alpha Waymond asserts that Jobu is "An agent of pure chaos with no real motives or desires". However, later in the movie we find out that Jobu does have reasoning behind her actions, and that she just needs help to stop suffering

and find meaning in her life once more. Nonetheless, Alpha Waymond always speaks of her as an aimless villain who is beyond being helped despite her being his own daughter, which suggests that he might have never attempted to speak to her after her mind fractured or offered her help, thus leading Jobu to seek an Evelyn from another universe who could help her since her own mother had passed. These actions are consistent with ideals of hegemony within the family. As Sarah Hunter, Damien W. Riggs and Martha Augoustinos note: “Hegemonic forms of masculinity have traditionally informed understandings of fathers as overly authoritarian, disinterested, absent, and emotionally distant” (3). Thus, in the context of the traditional heterosexual nuclear family, hegemonic ideals of masculinity emotionally alienate fathers from their children and consider it to be the mother’s role to be the primary caregiver and emotional support for their children.

Moreover, a degree of emotional stoicism and lack of vulnerability is an expected trait of the hegemonic male. In the film, there are various instances in which we see how Alpha Waymond actively avoids becoming too emotional or showing vulnerability. An example of this is seen in the way in which viewers find out that his wife (the Evelyn from his universe) has passed away. As Alpha Waymond is trying to find a way to escape from the IRS building without being noticed by Jobu’s allies, Evelyn asks why it is that his own wife (the Evelyn from his universe) cannot help him instead of her. He pauses for a moment and states “My Evelyn is dead”, he then proceeds to continue with his plan without showing any signs of having been affected by the question any further. In *Gender and Emotion* (2000), Jeroen Jansz analyses various accounts of studies that attempted to uncover why men seemed to present difficulty to express their feelings and concludes that “men are generally reluctant to share personal feelings, which can be understood as a way to protect their identity, because expressing tender feelings exposes vulnerability, which

is generally taken as a sign of weakness" (171). Hence, it is not surprising that Alpha Waymond chooses to keep himself from openly displaying vulnerability and emotion.

In sum, throughout the film we can see how Alpha Waymond embodies hegemonic ideals of masculinity through his traits and actions. He asserts authority through aggression, shows dominance over women and is overall presented as a hero. However, he is depicted as such to purposefully be used as an example to critique the figure of the superhero and the hegemonic ideals for which it stands. In the end, it is evident to the viewer that Alpha Waymond's action consistently perpetuate conflict rather than aiding in its resolution.

## **2. Waymond Wang: masculine redefinition**

The character of Waymond Wang presents a heavy contrast with that of Alpha Waymond. For instance, in the previous section, the discussion began by pointing to how Alpha Waymond is intentionally portrayed as a superhero. If we consider how Waymond is depicted from the beginning of the film, we can see that there is also a purposeful portrayal of this character. In *EEAO* (2022), the audience is first acquainted with Waymond as he is trying to start a conversation with Evelyn. We see her frantically organizing receipts from her business expenses to take to the IRS meeting, as well as asking Waymond if he has completed some of the repairs that needed to be done to their apartment. Noticing her stress, and knowing Evelyn's desire to impress her father, Waymond assures her that even if her father cannot appreciate her efforts, that they should still be proud. From this opening scene, we can see a clear break from the gender dynamics of hegemonic masculinity. For instance, traditional gender role expectations for heterosexual nuclear families would expect the father to assume the "breadwinner" or "head of the household" role. In her study of the literature that attempted to legitimize

certain roles for men, Connell asserts that “literature took it for granted that being a breadwinner was a core part of being masculine” (28). However, we see that Waymond is concerned with baking cookies for the tax auditor and helping organize the party while Evelyn is the one who manages their business.

Furthermore, it could be argued that this change constitutes a positive shift in the deconstruction of traditional gender divisions of labor. As Connell further asserted in her study on the politics of masculinity, the division of labor that places men as sole breadwinners, poses disadvantages:

Men predominate in dangerous and highly toxic occupations. Men include a higher proportion of sole earners ('breadwinners') with social compulsion to remain employed. Because of the occupational division of labour, men's skills are subject to rapid obsolescence. Men pay a higher average rate of taxation, with income disproportionately redistributed to women, through the welfare state. (Connell 247)

As the film progresses, we also see how Waymond constantly attempts to engage in a meaningful conversation with Evelyn regarding his feelings of being unappreciated. Additionally, we are presented with various scenes in which he openly displays his vulnerability through crying or openly verbalizing his emotions. This quality of vulnerability is a clear contrast with the prescription for emotional stoicism we see presented in models of hegemonic masculinity (such as Alpha Waymond, in the film). Connell and Messerschmidt note that “any strategy for the maintenance of power is likely to involve a dehumanizing of other groups and a corresponding withering of empathy and emotional relatedness within the self” (852). Thus, since Waymond rejects this model of power assertion, he subverts the hegemonic prescription for emotional detachment. Furthermore, he regularly promotes the use of empathy and dialogue as forms of conflict resolution throughout the movie by attempting to mediate conflict between Evelyn and Joy as well as with the tax auditor. These actions constitute a positive change in the

representation of masculinity, since the repressing of emotions and enactment of rigid forms of hegemonic masculinity has been linked to many issues amongst men such as depression and feelings of loneliness (Zeglin 44).

Furthermore, Waymond is depicted to have a quite lighthearted and playful personality. Throughout the movie we see how he likes to place little toy eyes onto the laundry bags, he whistles, laughs and we even see a scene of him dancing with a male customer at the laundromat. It could be argued that this is a direct reflection of the positive changes that have come from the challenging of hegemonic masculinity in male relations. In terms of the social organization of hegemonic masculinity proposed by Connell, Waymond's behavior would be considered as unacceptable by hegemonic standards for men and would typically place him into a position of subordination (Connell 79). However, his actions reflect the positive change that there has been in portrayals of men which, as argued by Anderson, reflects the decline in the policing of male behavior due to positive social changes such as the decrease of cultural homophobia (244).

In the analysis of Alpha Waymond, we saw how he had tendency to repress his feelings about his late wife (only mentioning her in passing) and how he seemed to have a very distant relationship with his daughter Joy/Jobu (whom he treats as an unfeeling being that must be defeated), traits which were all consistent with hegemonic enactments of power within the familial structure. In turn, Waymond represents the subversion of these values. Throughout the movie, he openly displays his care and love for Evelyn and Joy. In various scenes, we see Waymond attempting to mediate conflicts between Joy and Evelyn, he is also very kind to Joy and is openly accepting of her relationship with her girlfriend. These scenes contrast with hegemonic configurations of male parental

distancing and are consistent with research that suggests that there has been an increase in the involvement of fathers as more active caregivers:

The increase in fathers taking on a primary caregiving role in itself suggests that some fathers are stepping away from the traditional provider role, instead adopting the new and involved model of fathering(...) recent research in Belgium, Australia, Sweden, the UK, and the USA has supported this, suggesting that primary caregiving fathers abandon traditional norms and pressure in order to undertake the role (Merla, 2008; Shirani, Henwood, & Coltart, 2012). (Hunter et al. 4)

Additionally, Waymond deeply cares for his relationship with Evelyn and strives to repair it, even going as far as having divorce papers drafted with the sole intention of persuading her to talk to him. Even when he does not quite understand the multi-verse issues Evelyn is facing, he shows concern for her and tries to gently sway her to see that issues can be better solved through dialogue than violence.

In fact, if we analyze the three main characters (Evelyn, Joy and Waymond), we see how Waymond is the only one who purposefully does not go through a transformation. While we see other characters go through changes, such as Joy/Jobu realizing that there is meaning to life and Evelyn appreciating her universe and learning to deal with issues in an empathetic way, Waymond never changes. Despite helping Evelyn realize that conflicts should not be resolved through violence and dominance, he does not pose himself as “the hero” of the film. Additionally, he never chooses to use force or multi-verse power to enforce his message as we saw Alpha Waymond do. This lack of change actively separates him from the hegemonic ideals posed by the figure of the superhero. In his analysis of the genre of superhero films, Brown argues: “This physical transformation at the core of the films stresses the genre’s alignment with the valorization of traditional masculine ideals such as physical strength, resiliency, power, and heterosexual desirability” (134). Thus, Waymond’s act of refusing to use force to

resolve conflict or change Evelyn's mind through the entirety of the film, both enforces his ideals and actively establishes his separation from the hegemonic masculinity model.

Another key aspect to consider when analyzing the character of Waymond is intersectionality. For instance, besides being a man, Waymond is also Chinese. This consideration is relevant since, as noted by Connell, “[b]ecause gender is a way of structuring social practice in general, not a special type of practice, it is unavoidably involved with other social structures” (75). Hence, due to this involvement, “[i]t is now common to say that gender 'intersects' - better, interacts -with race and class” (Connell 75). Thus, we must also consider Waymond's racial identity, and the fact that he is an immigrant in the US, when analyzing his role in subverting the hegemonic ideals that have been established for Asian men.

Hollywood films have an extensive history of caricaturizing, stereotyping and overall misrepresenting Asian identities, particularly Chinese men. As argued by Zheng Zhu, it is due to the tensions from “the intricate and significant Sino-US political and economic relationship during and after World War II” (404). Thus, citing Ma's 1993 study, Zhu further asserts that “the purpose of this type of representation is to project Asians or Asian-Americans either as sign of threat or piece of laughingstock in an attempt to establish and affirm the ‘permanent and irreconcilable differences that define the Anglos as superior physically, spiritually, and morally’ (p.140)” (404). Therefore, in order to uphold the hegemonic power and position of the white man, there had been a purposeful “othering” depiction of Chinese men that continued to be the norm for decades.

In this respect, we see once more the clear (and positive) change that there has been in the representation of Asian men with the character of Waymond Wang. Far from

being a caricature, Waymond is characterized by his depth in personality. He is a devoted husband and father who is always willing to help his family, but he is also lighthearted, funny, kind and generally a complex character. Additionally, while the focus of his identity goes beyond the fact that he is an immigrant or his race, these traits are never caricaturized, denied or ignored, but rather uplifted and celebrated. In the film, we hear Waymond state how proud he is of the hard work both him and Evelyn put into building their business and creating a family. Additionally, we see him joyfully making arrangements for a party in celebration of the Chinese New Year that will be held at their laundromat, which shows how he openly and proudly celebrates his heritage and identity. Thus, we can conclude that Waymond's character also breaks with this historical pattern of subordination that hegemonic masculinity exerts through the stereotyping and caricaturizing of Asian men in media.

Finally, as we have seen, the character of Waymond diverges heavily from hegemonic representations of men. He not only breaks with harmful and constraining patterns of male behavior. Waymond, arguably, also attempts to redefine some of those glorified attributes for men, particularly the meaning of strength. Strength, in men, has traditionally been associated with hegemonic notions of being the bearer of high physical ability, being dominant, violent and unemotional. However, this is clearly not the case for Waymond. In the beginning, we see Evelyn constantly complaining about her husband and saying that she thinks Waymond is too "silly" and that she is the only one who is actively fighting to keep their business. There is a scene in which Evelyn complains to Joy that their tax auditor is a bad person who wants to take their business away from them and despite that Waymond bakes cookies for her. Nevertheless, in a pivotal scene in the movie, Evelyn has a conversation with another version of her husband who tells her:

“You think I’m weak, don’t you? All of those years ago when we first fell in love, your father would say I was too sweet for my own good. Maybe he was right. You tell me that it’s a cruel world and we’re all just running around in circles. I know that. I’ve been on this earth just as many days as you. When I choose to see the good side of things, I’m not being naive, it is strategic and necessary. It’s how I’ve learned to survive through everything. I know you see yourself as a fighter. Well, I see myself as one too. This is how I fight” (Kwan and Scheinert 2022)

This speech marks the moment in which both the audience and Evelyn come to understand Waymond. Because we experience this story through Evelyn’s eyes, we tend to be just as dismissive as she is because of the language she uses with him. She calls him “silly” multiple times, says that she does not know what he would do without her and overall underestimates his ability to care for his family as would be expected from a more traditional model of man. However, through this speech we come to know Waymond’s philosophy and finally see him. Not only acknowledging the strength that it takes for him to be patient and remain positive in the face of adversity but also redefining our own perception of what constitutes strength.

### **3. Conclusions and Further Research**

Overall, by analyzing the film *EEAAO* (2022), and reviewing the research that has been carried out in the academic study of masculinity, this dissertation has shown how the character of Waymond Wang represents a positive shift in the representation of masculinity in science fiction film. A shift which comes as a direct result of the social deconstruction of harmful models of masculinity.

As we have seen, the “Alpha Waymond” version of the character, provided insight into the currently accepted model of man and the harms behind the enactment of these hegemonic models of masculinity. He was portrayed as overpowering, aggressive and stoic. Such traits, far from being presented as desirable, were then used to openly

critique and reject harmful models of masculinity and power that perpetuate conflict and unequal gender power dynamics.

In turn, we have seen how the character of the “normal” Waymond Wang, portrays a purposeful break from these patterns. From his sweet and funny personality to his open critique of the constraining definition of strength, Waymond embodies a diverging type of masculinity that strives to challenge hegemonic expectations and represent men in a more freeing and positive light.

Still, *EEAAO* (2022) is a complex film which encompasses a large number of topics (such as intergenerational trauma and the struggles of being an immigrant). Thus, there are certainly grounds to warrant further research. For instance, it could be considered how hegemonic power is portrayed in the movie by focusing on the changes that can be observed between the two different generations of fathers and daughters in the film (analyzing Evelyn’s distant relationship with her father opposed to Waymond and Joy’s warm relationship).

Another relevant argument to consider in the study of masculinity in film is intersectionality. Since this paper mainly dealt with the representation of masculinity in film, it only briefly considered how Waymond’s identity as a Chinese immigrant intersected with his model of masculinity. However, intersecting identities, and their relation to masculinity and hegemony undoubtedly require being studied closer as we strive to deconstruct harmful hegemonic ideals and more accurately, diversely and positively represent men in the media.

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### Image Credits

Figure 1. <https://www.primevideo.com/-/es/detail/Everything-Everywhere-All-At-Once/0M4L6A7GLV1EN3QHWM4CGV6O8B> (Access date: 10/11/2024)