



FROM FEAR TO CONFIDENCE: REDEFINING MASCULINITY IN DISNEY PIXAR'S ELIO (2025)

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ABSTRACT

This study critically examines the construction and transformation of masculine identity embodied by the protagonist in Disney Pixar's *Elio* (2025). Employing a qualitative descriptive approach, the analysis draws upon R. W. Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity to investigate Elio's transition from vulnerability and fear toward confidence and emotional agency. Initially, Elio is portrayed as a fearful and emotionally vulnerable boy whose sense of self is shaped by dominant social expectations surrounding masculinity. However, his experiences within the Commiverse gradually enable him to renegotiate these expectations and construct an alternative masculine identity grounded not in dominance or physical power, but in empathy, honesty, emotional openness, and self-awareness. His courage is articulated through communicative and relational practices, particularly dialogue, emotional expression, and reconciliation. From Butler's perspective, these expressions can be interpreted as performative acts that disrupt conventional gender norms and demonstrate the fluid and socially constructed character of masculine identity. The study therefore argues that *Elio* offers a reconstruction of masculinity by reframing emotional openness, vulnerability, and empathy as sources of strength rather than weakness, thereby challenging hegemonic ideals of masculinity and presenting a more inclusive and humane representation of male identity.

Keywords: *Masculinity Transformation, Gender Performativity, Hegemonic Masculinity, Emotional Courage, Pixar Animated film* .

1. INTRODUCTION

Animated films function not only as children's entertainment but also as cultural texts that construct and circulate ideas about identity, gender, emotion, and socially acceptable behavior. Because children encounter these narratives during formative stages, representations of gender may influence their understanding of masculine and feminine identities (Hamilton & Dynes, 2023; Rabani et al., 2024). Masculinity in children's animation has traditionally been associated with physical strength, assertiveness, heroism, and emotional restraint (Aley & Hahn, 2020; Birthisel, 2014; Lee, 2010). However,

contemporary Disney and Pixar productions increasingly complicate these conventions by presenting characters who combine traits traditionally associated with masculinity and femininity (Flew et al., 2024).

This development is particularly visible in Pixar films, where male protagonists frequently undergo transformation through relationships, vulnerability, and emotional development (Gillam & Wooden, 2008). Pixar's representation of gender has also involved complex negotiations between conventional and alternative masculine identities (Ebrahim, 2014; Al-Jbouri & Pomerantz, 2020). Rivera (2023) further

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demonstrates that masculine configurations in *The Incredibles* are shaped by changing social and historical contexts. Nevertheless, seemingly progressive representations may remain connected to patriarchal and heterosexual conventions (Birthisel, 2014; Luisi, 2021). Pixar therefore provides an important cultural space for examining how dominant masculine ideals are reproduced, challenged, and reconstructed.

Connell's theory of masculinity provides a central framework for understanding these negotiations. Masculinity is conceptualized not as a singular biological identity but as socially organized configurations of gender practice shaped by relations of power (Connell, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity represents a culturally privileged configuration against which other masculinities are positioned, although it remains historically dynamic and open to transformation (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Contemporary masculinities have consequently become increasingly differentiated and cannot always be reduced to a rigid hegemonic-subordinate distinction (Buschmeyer & Lengersdorf, 2016; Wedgwood, 2009). Concepts such as inclusive and hybrid masculinities further demonstrate how men may incorporate practices historically associated with femininity or marginalized masculinities without abandoning masculine identification (Anderson, 2009; Bridges, 2014; Bridges & Pascoe, 2014).

Emotion is particularly important within these changing constructions. Conventional masculine norms frequently associate strength with toughness, autonomy, and emotional restraint, while vulnerability may be treated as weakness. However, emotional practices are themselves socially regulated dimensions of masculinity (Cleary, 2012; de Boise & Hearn, 2017). Media representations can also influence

attitudes toward masculine norms and emotional well-being (King et al., 2018), while children's media continues to negotiate the relationship between masculinity, anger, and emotional restriction (Totter, 2019). Alternative perspectives therefore position empathy, care, vulnerability, and relationality as potential components of masculine identity. Elliott (2016) conceptualizes caring masculinities as rejecting domination while emphasizing care and interdependence, whereas Azizan and Mohamad (2022) highlight social empathy as a means of reimagining masculinity. Similar tensions between dominance, vulnerability, and emotional agency have also emerged across contemporary cinema (Brassett & Hamilton, 2020; Dikmen Yakalı, 2024; Martin, 2020; Panayiotou, 2010; Sooraj & Kumar, 2022).

Disney and Pixar's *Elio* (2025) provides a contemporary context for examining these transformations. Elio Solis is portrayed as a young boy experiencing loneliness, insecurity, social disconnection, and a strong desire for belonging. Unlike conventional male heroes whose strength is often demonstrated through dominance, aggression, or physical achievement, Elio initially appears fearful, vulnerable, socially uncertain, and emotionally expressive. His development increasingly occurs through friendship, communication, empathy, honesty, and self-recognition rather than through the replacement of vulnerability with toughness. His fear should therefore not simply be interpreted as masculine inadequacy but as a point from which the meaning of courage can be renegotiated. In this context, confidence emerges through acknowledging vulnerability while maintaining the capacity to communicate, connect, decide, and act (Anderson, 2009; Elliott, 2016; Buschmeyer & Lengersdorf, 2016).

This transformation can also be understood through Butler's theory of gender performativity. Gender is not a stable inner essence but becomes intelligible through repeated actions, language, bodily gestures, behaviors, and social conventions (Butler, 1990, 1993). Contemporary interpretations similarly emphasize gender as embodied, repeated, and socially recognized (Kakoliris, 2025; MacKenzie, 2022). From this perspective, Elio's fear, hesitation, friendship, empathy, emotional disclosure, and eventual confidence constitute performances through which his masculine identity is continually negotiated. This understanding is consistent with the proposition that manhood is socially accomplished through actions rather than simply possessed as an internal quality (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009). Thus, Elio's emotional openness can be interpreted not as a departure from masculinity but as part of its performative reconstruction.

Connell and Butler consequently provide complementary perspectives. Connell explains the structural and relational configurations of masculinity and Elio's position in relation to dominant expectations of toughness, autonomy, and emotional restraint, whereas Butler explains how masculine identity is produced and transformed through repeated actions, language, emotions, and social interactions. Together, these frameworks enable masculinity to be examined as both relational and performative, making them particularly appropriate for understanding Elio's movement from vulnerability toward a confident yet emotionally expressive masculine identity. Previous scholarship has examined gender stereotypes in animation (Aley & Hahn, 2020; Flew et al., 2024; Rabani et al., 2024), hegemonic and alternative masculinities in Disney and Pixar films (Al-Jbouri & Pomerantz, 2020; Lee, 2010; Luisi, 2021), and changing representations of male characters in Pixar narratives (Ebrahim, 2014; Gillam & Wooden, 2008; Rivera, 2023). Other studies have addressed gender performativity and

characters crossing conventional gender boundaries, including research on *Mulan* and *Brave* (Sulistia, 2016; Utami et al., 2023), while hegemonic masculinity has also been examined in *Aladdin* (Ekleisia et al., 2022). These studies establish animated cinema as an important site for examining the reproduction and negotiation of gender norms. Nevertheless, limited attention has been given to how a young male protagonist transforms fear and vulnerability into confidence without relying on emotional suppression or physical dominance. Existing studies have largely addressed broader gender patterns, established Pixar franchises, adult masculine figures, female characters crossing masculine boundaries, or particular forms of hegemonic masculinity (Al-Jbouri & Pomerantz, 2020; Ebrahim, 2014; Gillam & Wooden, 2008). The construction of childhood masculinity through loneliness, vulnerability, empathy, friendship, emotional openness, and developing self-confidence therefore remains comparatively underexplored. The novelty of this study lies in conceptualizing Elio's development as a process of non-hegemonic masculine becoming. Rather than interpreting his transformation as a conventional progression from weakness to toughness, the study examines how confidence develops through vulnerability, relationships, emotional communication, empathy, and self-awareness. This interpretation contributes to discussions of caring, inclusive, differentiated, and hybrid masculinities (Anderson, 2009; Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Buschmeyer & Lengersdorf, 2016; Elliott, 2016), while recognizing that emotional openness does not automatically eliminate hegemonic gender structures. Accordingly, this study examines how Disney Pixar's *Elio* (2025) constructs the transformation of masculine identity from fear and vulnerability toward confidence, emotional agency, and relational self-awareness. Connell's (2005) theory of masculinities and Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity are employed to examine the masculine configurations negotiated throughout Elio's development, while Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity explains how these identities are constructed and challenged through dialogue, actions, emotions, bodily

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performances, and social interactions. The study addresses two research questions: (1) How does *Elio* (2025) represent the transformation of the protagonist's masculine identity from fear and vulnerability toward confidence? and (2) How do *Elio*'s gender performances challenge or renegotiate traditional constructions of hegemonic masculinity? Through these questions, the study explores how contemporary animated cinema may redefine masculine strength through vulnerability, empathy, emotional openness, communication, and relational agency rather than dominance alone.

2. METHODS

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to provide an in-depth understanding of the meanings and contextual dimensions embedded within a social phenomenon (Sofaer, 2002). More specifically, content analysis is utilized to examine the representation and reconstruction of masculinity in Disney Pixar's *Elio* (2025). This methodological approach is particularly appropriate for analyzing cinematic texts because it facilitates a systematic interpretation of narrative structures, visual elements, characterization, and symbolic meanings. Through content analysis, the study investigates how socially constructed notions of masculinity are articulated and negotiated through characters' actions, dialogue, emotional expressions, and interpersonal relationships throughout the film.

The primary data were derived from *Elio* (2025), which was examined through repeated and systematic viewing to identify scenes that meaningfully depict changes in *Elio*'s emotions, behavior, and social interactions. Repeated viewing enabled the researcher to develop a comprehensive understanding of the narrative while identifying sequences directly relevant to the research questions. Based on this process, four key scenes were purposively selected because they most clearly represent four interconnected stages in the transformation of *Elio*'s masculine identity: (1) fear and vulnerability, (2) negotiating masculinity, (3) acceptance and transformation, and (4) the emergence of a new masculinity. Particular attention was given to scenes demonstrating

Elio's progression from fear, insecurity, and self-doubt toward self-acceptance, emotional agency, and confidence. The selected scenes were subsequently documented by examining relevant dialogue, interpersonal interactions, body language, facial expressions, gestures, and other visual cues. These multimodal elements served as units of interpretation for identifying how the film constructs an alternative form of masculinity characterized by emotional openness, empathy, relationality, and resistance to conventional hegemonic expectations.

The data were analyzed through an interpretive thematic process informed by two complementary theoretical frameworks: R. W. Connell's theory of masculinity and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. Connell's framework was employed to examine how *Elio*'s identity is positioned in relation to hegemonic masculine expectations and how alternative configurations of masculinity emerge throughout the narrative. Butler's concept of gender performativity, meanwhile, was used to interpret how masculine identity is continuously produced, negotiated, and transformed through repeated actions, speech, gestures, emotional expressions, and social interactions. The selected scenes were first organized according to the four stages of *Elio*'s transformation and subsequently interpreted through these theoretical perspectives. By integrating Connell and Butler, the analysis moves beyond identifying masculine characteristics to explain how *Elio*'s masculine identity is progressively reconstructed through narrative and performative processes. Accordingly, the study seeks to demonstrate how *Elio* (2025) redefines masculine development from a conventional movement of "fear to strength" into a more nuanced progression from fear and vulnerability toward confidence grounded in empathy, emotional openness, self-acceptance, and relational agency.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To understand how the film *Elio* (2025) represents the transformation of masculine identity, this analysis traces *Elio*'s character change from fear to self confidence. The main focus of the discussion is on how

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this film shows a form of masculinity that is not only determined by physical strength, but also by the ability to accept oneself and express emotions. The analysis is conducted by linking two main theories, namely the concept of hegemonic masculinity from (R.W. Connell, 2005), which explains male social dominance and cultural pressure to conform to the image of the “ideal man”, and the theory of gender performativity from (Butler, 1990), which sees gender as the result of actions and behaviors that are continuously performed and displayed.

These two theories complement each other because R.W. Connell shows the social structures that shape masculinity norms, while Butler explains how individuals practice and negotiate those norms through everyday actions. As far as the film *Elio* (2025) is concerned, it is quite evident how the two are linked: social pressures associated with hegemonic masculinity become the setting in which Elio's construction of his masculine self through gentle, sympathetic, and honest acts occurs.

Fear and Vulnerability, the Beginning of Self Conflict

Fear and vulnerability define the first stage in the life of Elio. Instead of portraying him as a courageous and confident young man, the film depicts him as an individual who has been struggling with loss and isolation. It is from this experience that his inner self conflict develops.



Figure 1. Film *Elio* (2025)

Figure 1 was taken at 00:01:22-00:02:17, The first shot of the film *Elio* (2025) illustrates Elio Solís, the child who grows up under the guidance of his aunt, Major Olga Solís, the military lady. It is through this scene that the notion of always

being tough and composed gets questioned. The vulnerability displayed by Elio is not a sign of weakness but represents an alternative masculinity. With regard to the theory put forward by Connell, this position can illustrate why Elio cannot fit the dominant masculinity. In this shot, we see the difference between the strict world of adults and the fragile world of kids, when Olga attempts to convince Elio to eat.

"Elio, you should be eating! Don't you recall what your mother would always order for you?"

Thus, it is obvious that, losing his parents, Elio not only has lost people whom he loves, but has also lost an emotional guidance that such people can usually give. Visually, Elio curls up under the table holding his knees. The camera shot is taken from the bottom showing how he feels powerless and small. The fact that the camera is shot from a low angle and Elio is positioned with his body closed makes him look small and helpless. This visual representation is significant since it goes against the usual depiction of a boy who should be presented in a strong and self-assured way. Regarding the theory R.W. Connell (2005), such pose reflects initial stages of formation of subordinate masculinity, in which young men are not ready to perform social roles of bravery and assertiveness. Olga, who, despite being a woman, is a hegemonic masculine world herself because she is assertive and rational and does not show her emotions, Olga embodies such values by virtue of her controlled and disciplined approach when handling Elio. Olga's care for Elio is often portrayed by means of rules and decisions instead of emotional expression. Thus, Olga demonstrates the type of social expectation which Elio cannot cope with at the outset of the story. Becomes the symbol of collision of two kinds of masculinities, hegemonic and vulnerable. Losing his parents leads Elio to the crisis of identity. When one of Olga's coworkers says,

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"I heard about your brother and his wife. I'm so sorry," replied Olga flatly, "We're doing alright."

This sentence is an example of the affective aspect of hegemonic masculinity which regards sadness as a mark of weakness. It is consistent with the arguments of Cleary (2012), in which it is stated that since many men belong to cultures in which emotional expression is viewed as masculine inadequacy, they tend to suppress feelings of sadness or fear. On the contrary, Elio is a character of mourning and silence. According to Butler (1990), this type of behavior is a gender act which opposes the hegemonic order. Being a man, it is possible to be a character of mourning and loss. While visiting the space museum,

"The Voyager will never meet those who created it. It will just continue, lonely and solitary,"

Elio gazed into the replica of the Voyager with an intent look. The fixed gaze also shows that Elio's loneliness is presented through a quiet and reflective image rather than through aggressive behavior. These exchanges along with images created an analogy between the lone Voyager traveling through space and Elio living in solitude on earth. He then addressed his aunt, *"Is there life out there, Tía Olga?"*

But more than scientific interest, it was a way of reflecting on his own loneliness and seeking meaning and acceptance. This was one way that Elio exhibited immature masculinity because of his fear of being rejected. But inside the fear of Elio, there were seeds of courage to question, dream and feel. Butler (1990) argues that such instances reflect an unconscious rebellion against gender norms through acts of self honesty. Sam De Boise (2017) further explains that the contemporary understanding of masculinity involves empathy and emotional expression as a positive aspect rather than a negative one for male growth. This is shown through Elio who gradually develops himself

through emotions and reflection and not domination or muscularity. In the realm of animated films, Pixar has managed to create a platform for characters such as Elio who define "strong" without aggression.

The climax of this particular section comes about when Elio gazes into the golden Voyager record under the glow of a golden light shining on his face. Without saying anything, Elio learns that "the opportunity of being lonely" is not a flaw, but an opening for finding oneself. This light turns out to be a symbol of hope and awakening, meaning that the transformation of masculinity that Elio has gone through is just beginning: from fear to courage driven by empathy and curiosity. The warm light changes the visual mood of the scene and supports Elio's movement from loneliness toward hope. As follows from the work of Kakoliris (2025), who explains the theory of Butler, even small things like accepting fear can serve as subversive performativity that will challenge the existing gender constructions. Therefore, it is evident that this part illustrates the way Pixar destroys the classic stereotype "boys must be strong." It proves that sensitivity and fear are not what stands in opposition to courage, but rather what constitutes it.

Negotiating Masculinity: Between Expectation and Expression

The next phase of Elio's journey concerns the conflict between social pressure and personal expression. Elio starts to ask himself who he really is as a boy while meeting new people and getting into new circumstances.



Figure 2. Film *Elio* (2025)

Figure 2 is taken from 00:09:03-00:09:18, Having overcome fear and grief at

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the beginning of the film, the middle part reveals how Elio tries to develop his masculinity under the influence of pressure and expectations of his aunt, his friends, and the outer world. The experience of finding one's way of expression is far from being easy; it involves struggles, failures, and lessons. One of them happens on the beach, where Elio together with his new friend, Bryce, communicates with aliens using a radio. When there is an unusual sound from the radio, a fight happens with another friend,

"Beach fighting, skipping class? Are you going to need me to track you down?" asked his aunt, Olga Solís.

That sentence reveals the social expectations placed on Elio as a boy: he must be obedient, responsible, and "strong" in the traditional sense. Within the framework of hegemonic masculinity, young men are positioned as figures who must not be troublesome or show weakness. Elio finds himself in a situation where he is forced to choose between being the "ideal boy" or remaining true to his own emotional tendencies. Even so, Elio does not choose to suppress his vulnerable side. Instead, he uses the radio as a moment of small resistance when he says,

"This is Elio Solís of the planet Earth... I come in peace and I'm super excited to join you,"

He not only talks about aliens, but also about himself. He chooses a new performance where men are not only silent and scary or dominant, but honest, enthusiastic, and open to relationships. This scene exemplifies the concept of Butler's gender performativity, as Elio embodies his masculinity through being open and communicating peacefully instead of dominating others. His identity is created through the continuous act of being honest, empathic and establishing connections with other people. According to Maryam Azizan (2022), healthy masculinity is born from social empathy and a willingness to

understand others. This view is also seen in Elio's behavior, who prefers peace over conflict. In this way, he begins to negotiate his own form of masculinity, not just to meet expectations, but to express his uniqueness. Elio's interactions with different circumstances start contributing towards the construction of his identity. Based on Totter (2019) research, 21st century children's media has begun to portray a new masculinity that is more open to vulnerability and empathy. Elio represents this shift, showing that courage does not have to mean suppressing feelings, but rather having the courage to show them. Furthermore, when Elio is actually taken to the intergalactic world, his position as a "child forced to be a leader" brings him into even greater contact with performance pressure. the alien universe requires a leader and Elio is supposed to be one. But Elio is still too young to be a "leader based on strength." Rather than showing any form of weapon and aggression, he opts for being sincere by talking about the loneliness he feels with sincerity. This is why the aliens react to his sincerity and vulnerability rather than his assertiveness. What we can see here is that gender performativity, as proposed by Butler, does not mean imitation of masculine attributes, but having the courage to be oneself, that is, to reflect and feel. Elio proves that men can be leaders despite emotions, and not without them. The encounter with Grigon, an antagonist who epitomizes hegemonic masculinity (aggression and hunger for power), marks an important point in this process. Grigon wants to dominate while Elio prefers to talk and be empathic. Grigon is a key character in the film because he serves as an example of the type of masculinity that Elio does not want to emulate. The way Grigon acts is very dominant and aggressive, creating an opposite image of what Elio decides to use when facing the challenge. Instead of getting aggressive, Elio chooses to rely on communication. By scolding Grigon using the following sentences,

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"What's the point of wasting your life trying to reach out to those who just don't understand you?"

The above example does not fit the conventional perception of the male character who must react to aggression with brute force. Elio prefers conversation to violence as a reaction to confrontation, thereby proving that one can cope with the situation without dominating. Thus, the theory by Connell proves to be right. Unlike many men, Elio does not strike back violently, but encourages introspection. Therefore, the new masculinity is not associated with the male being "stronger," but "more understanding." He does not use his physical power for leadership, but his emotional one. Selecting empathy instead of violence is the transformative masculinity which corresponds to the concept that strength is not located in a man's body, but in sensitivity and social intelligence (James Brassett, 2020). From the visual point of view, Pixar uses close up shots, soft lighting and angles which reveal Elio's trembling, uncertain, laughing and then awakening face. It is a sharp contrast to the perspective of usual adventure films where men are expressionless heroes. The negotiation of masculinity is also visible in conflict between Elio and the traditional masculine image which does not fit him. He does not wish to be an "aggressive leader," but a "honest friend." As Panayiotou (2010) states, this is also a denial of "heroic masculinity," when a man should solve everything using dominance and authority.

This journey shows that masculinity is not rigid, but rather a battleground of values, between social expectations and self expression. With this, *Elio* 2025 explores an inclusive and emotional form of masculinity, not just the stereotype of the dominant male. Thus, Elio represents young men who are "training" to become men in a way they choose for themselves, not in a way chosen by society. Comparison of Elio and Grigon makes clear that the film is not about only one model of masculinity. The character of Grigon shows us how masculinity is expressed through dominance and aggression,

whereas Elio creates for himself his own masculinity based on empathy and communication skills. Thus, masculinity can have different models, not one single one. As Martín (2020) asserts, contemporary films are now increasingly daring to break gender stereotypes and introduce male figures who dare to be vulnerable. In line with this, masculinity in Elio is not only about strength, but also about empathy and a willingness to understand oneself and others (Sooraj S.S, 2022).

Acceptance and Transformation, From Fear to Confidence

After struggling with fear and negotiating the expectations placed upon him, Elio reaches a new stage in his journey. The experiences he gains throughout the story help him better understand himself and the people around him. This final stage highlights how acceptance and emotional growth become important parts of his transformation.



Figure 3. Film *Elio* (2025)

Figure 3 was captured in 01:16:40-01:19:22, The final part of the film *Elio* (2025) shows the most significant emotional transformation in Elio. After going through a series of experiences in Communiverse, he is no longer portrayed as a shy child who is afraid to speak or run away from conflict, but as a figure who is able to calm other creatures and mediate interplanetary chaos. The scene where Elio empathetically tells Glordon not to be afraid anymore symbolizes that fear is no longer something that restrains him, but rather a new source of strength. Though not spoken in words, Elio's movements and tone express the same idea, he becomes brave not by hiding his emotions but learning to manage them. This particular

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scene is important for reasons other than the emotional response by Elio. Through the continued use of such behavior as seen here in relation to his responses in various situations, Elio begins to create an identity that is masculine and independent of emotional suppression. Gender performativity, as mentioned by Butler, can therefore be used to describe his masculinity since it arises from his actions.

In the context of Connell (2005) theory, the case of Elio's transformation may be considered an example of transition from subordinate masculinity to non hegemonic masculinity. In this phase of masculine development, courage is not expressed through dominance or physical power but through understanding of emotions and building real connections. As Anna Buschmeyer (2016) claims, such different form of masculinity is a challenge for hegemonic masculinity since it proves that men can define themselves in their own way without dominating someone else. The young man starts showing a different kind of courage, not by fighting but by listening and empathy. It can be clearly observed when Elio meets Grigon and decides to talk rather than start a war. Elio's choice of words instead of violence and fight expresses his emotional maturity and proves that real courage lies in honesty and empathy. Elio does not totally reject or accept hegemonic masculinity. He actually reworks the hegemonic masculinity by holding on to good traits like courage and responsibility while discarding negative ones like domination and emotional repression.

According to Butler (1990), the changes that occur in Elio can be attributed to gender performativity. The masculine gender role is built upon how he acts in various circumstances. Gradually, Elio starts choosing to talk and listens to others, empathize, and feel his emotions, instead of resorting to violence and ignoring his problems. In this way, Elio builds a different type of masculine gender through repeated actions. In the moment when Elio hugs the hurt Glordon and asks him to not leave him by crying out, this act is part of the trend that

has been developing in Elio's progress. All of the previously mentioned choices he made of communication, listening, and choosing empathy over aggression can be seen once again. Instead of concealing his emotions, he chooses to show his compassion. In line with MacKenzie (2022), who explains that emotional and empathetic actions can be read as a form of enactive performativity, where the body and feelings become active mediums in shaping a person's social identity. Thus, Elio shows that being a man also means being able to feel, love, and care without losing strength.

As stated by Luisi (2021), the portrayal of masculinity in modern Disney films is more focused on undermining those stereotypes about men being required to have an image of being strong, rational, and emotionless. Elio's journey is completed when he rejects the chance to become the Ambassador of Earth. This action demonstrates his maturity and self awareness that true identity does not depend on recognition by other people. Elio decides to go back to Earth, not out of fear, but out of understanding what real bravery means: being able to live your life and to relate to others and to yourself. When Olga boasts that Elio has become someone else, both their facial expressions convey reconciliation of two very different worlds: adult and harsh and childlike and sensitive.

The film's closing scene shows Elio finally choosing to return to Earth with Tía Olga. After all his conflicted and emotional experiences in space, Elio realizes that true courage is not about going as far away as possible, but about returning and facing the life he once wanted to leave behind. As he says goodbye to Glordon and the members of Communiverse, soft words echo: "*Okay. Bye. I love you.*" These words, repeated by all the cosmic beings, become a symbol of acceptance, that Elio is now accepted not because of his courage to challenge, but because of his sincerity to understand.

The New Masculinity: Emotional Courage as Strength

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The final part of the film brings together all of Elio's experiences and personal growth. Here, masculinity is no longer connected to power or control, but to emotional courage and self acceptance.



Figure 4. Film *Elio* (2025)

Figure 4 was captured in 01:25:00-01:27:15. Through this hopeful ending, *Elio* (2025) presents masculinity as an ongoing process rather than something static or determined by power. Pixar presents a male character who grows not because of victory over enemies, but because of his ability to understand others and himself. In this way, Elio not only challenges hegemonic masculinity as described by Connell, but also reflects Butler's idea of gender as a performance that can change through experience and social interaction. Elio's transformation from fear to self confidence shows that courage does not mean eliminating fear, but rather transforming it into a source of empathy and moral strength. The reason why this development is crucial is that Elio gains his confidence not through embodying the dominance of aggressiveness or control but rather through his self-knowledge and empathy towards other people.

This change in his character also impacts how Elio sees the concept of manhood. In the start of the story, the expectations of being a man are related to the concepts of courage, bravery, and strength. As Elio faces certain situations, he learns that strength does not mean that he must suppress his feelings of fear. Elio learns to see the concept of strength through empathy, sincerity, communication, and caring about others. In this context, the self-confidence of Elio is not only an individual transformation but also a transformation of how he does and interprets masculinity. The constant efforts

on his side to communicate, listen, show empathy, and refrain from violence have helped him create a new kind of masculinity that contrasts with the hegemonic one, which Connell (2005) speaks about. In this case, the constant efforts help Butler (1990) idea that gender identity is formed based on constant doing and performing take place.

In such a way, the conclusion confirms both Connell's and Butler's concepts as Elio distances himself from the dominant concept of masculinity but constructs his identity through his own experiences and repetitive actions. It turns out that being a man does not necessarily imply the dominance of the individual. Rather, at times being a man implies just being a person brave enough to experience emotions, to love, and to accept oneself. Hence, *Elio* (2025) offers an example of masculinity which is more flexible for modern society. It means that *Elio* (2025) offers a more adapted version of masculinity for the contemporary social situation. Unlike previous Pixar characters such as Luca and Miguel, whose stories were focused on friendship and identity and family and aspirations respectively, the process of transformation of Elio emphasizes self-awareness and bravery, which comes from empathy and communication. It is another example of how Pixar increasingly portrays the phenomenon of masculinity as emotional, thoughtful, and non-hegemonic. The film proves that true masculinity consists in the courage of acknowledging one's fear and growing because of it. Elio's journey reveals the fact that being "masculine" means not repeating the old patterns, but building something new based on the human qualities and empathy.

4. CONCLUSION

The transformation of masculinity in *Elio* (2025) unfolds progressively from fear, vulnerability, and emotional uncertainty toward self-acceptance and confidence. Initially, Elio struggles with insecurity and appears unable to conform to conventional expectations of masculine strength. However, his experiences and relationships gradually

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reshape his understanding of what it means to be strong. Rather than relying on dominance, aggression, or emotional suppression when confronting conflict, Elio increasingly demonstrates courage through communication, empathy, emotional openness, and his willingness to acknowledge vulnerability.

The findings demonstrate that Elio's transformation does not involve abandoning vulnerability in order to become conventionally masculine. Instead, vulnerability becomes an integral part of his developing confidence. His interactions, decisions, emotional expressions, and eventual choice to return to Earth illustrate the emergence of a non-hegemonic masculine identity in which courage and gentleness can coexist. His final expression of affection, "Okay. Bye. I love you," reinforces this transformation by showing his willingness to openly acknowledge emotional attachment rather than conceal it.

Overall, *Elio* reconstructs masculinity as a dynamic process of emotional and relational development rather than a fixed identity defined by superiority, physical strength, or dominance. The film suggests that masculine strength can emerge through self-awareness, empathy, emotional honesty, acceptance of vulnerability, and meaningful relationships with others. Thus, Elio's journey from fear to confidence represents a broader redefinition of masculinity in which becoming strong does not require becoming emotionally detached; instead, strength is achieved through the ability to understand, accept, and authentically express oneself.

Ethical Considerations

This study employed content analysis using Disney Pixar's *Elio* (2025) as the primary source of data and did not involve human participants or the collection of personal or confidential information. Therefore, informed consent and participant-related ethical approval were not applicable. Throughout the research process, the researchers maintained academic integrity by analyzing the film solely for scholarly

purposes, accurately acknowledging relevant theoretical and scholarly sources, and avoiding the manipulation or misrepresentation of the analyzed material.

Statement on the Use of Artificial Intelligence

The authors declare that this article is based on the authors' original research and interpretation of Disney Pixar's *Elio* (2025). Artificial intelligence (AI) tools were not used to generate, fabricate, manipulate, or replace the research data, findings, or interpretations. The authors remain fully responsible for the research design, selection and analysis of film scenes, theoretical interpretation, and final content of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to this study.

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