


# INVESTIGATING THE REPRESENTATION OF MASCULINITY AND FEMININITY IN SHOUNEN ANIME: A FOCUS ON ONE-PIECE AND DEMON SLAYER

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## DECLARATION

I, **Hlayisani Hemilton Kwinika**, hereby declare that this Research Report represents my work. The work presented in this text was written by me, excluding the referenced materials. This document is submitted to the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, as a requirement for the master's degree in Critical Diversity Studies. No prior version of this document has been submitted to this or any other institution for any other qualification, such as a diploma or degree.

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## Table of Contents

# CONTENTS

**DECLARATION**.....ii

**Acknowledgements**.....iii

**Table of Contents** .....iv

**Abstract**.....vi

**CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.** ..... 1

**1.1. Background and Rationale for the Study** ..... 1

**1.2. Research Question** ..... 2

**1.3. Research Aims** ..... 2

**Chapter Two: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework** ..... 3

**2.1. Introduction** ..... 3

**2.2. Literature Review** ..... 3

**2.2.1. Anime Origins: Where does it come from** ..... 3

**2.2.2. Anime and What Makes it Different from Other Cartoons** ..... 4

**2.2.3. Ani-manga Meets the Western World** ..... 5

**2.2.4. Masculinity and Femininity in Anime** ..... 5

**2.2.5. Representation and its Shifting Definition** ..... 8

**2.3. Theoretical Framework** ..... 9

**2.3.1. Feminist Media Theory** ..... 9

**2.3.2. Critical Diversity Literacies (CDL) Framework** ..... 12

**2.4. Conclusion** ..... 13

**CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY** ..... 14

**3.1. Introduction** ..... 14

**3.2. Qualitative Research** ..... 14

**3.3. Data analysis** ..... 15

**3.3.1. Thematic Analysis** ..... 15

**3.4. Data Selection: Sampling Technique** ..... 19

**3.5. Data Collection Process** ..... 20

**3.6. Ethical Considerations** ..... 21

**3.7. Timelines** ..... 23

**3.8. Budget** ..... 24
**3.9. Conclusion** ..... 25
**CHAPTER FOUR: PRESENTATIONS OF FINDINGS** ..... 25
**4.2. The Ideal Man: Performing Masculinity in *One Piece* and *Demon Slayer*** ..... 27
**4.3. The Convergence of Western and Japanese Masculinity in Anime** ..... 31
**4.3.1. Analysis of Zoro** ..... 31
**4.4. Physical Prowess as A sign of Strength and How it Reinforces Symbolic and Material Power** ..... 35
**4.4.1. Analysis of Tanjiro** ..... 36
**4.5.1. Daki vs Tanjiro in Demon Slayer** ..... 39
**4.5.2. An analysis of male and female Characters and their abilities** ..... 43
**4.6. Performing Femininity in One Piece and Demon Slayer** ..... 46
**4.6.1. The Portrayal of Boa Hancock, Amazon Lily in One-Piece** ..... 46
**4.7. Absurd bodies: Fan service and the male Gaze** ..... 52
**4.7.1. Analysis of Stussy** ..... 53
**4.7.2. Analysis of Mitsuri Kanroji** ..... 54
**4.8. Pervert Archetype in anime** ..... 56
**4.8.1. Sanji's Excitement** ..... 57
**4.8.2. Zenitsu** ..... 58
**CHAPTER 5: LIMITATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS** ..... 61
**5.1. Limitations** ..... 61
**5.2. Recommendations** ..... 61
**5.3. Conclusion** ..... 62
**6. Reference List** ..... 64
**6.1. Filmography** ..... 69
**APPENDIX A** ..... 71
**APPENDIX B** ..... 72

## Abstract

Representation in media plays a crucial role in reinforcing hegemonic norms. This study examines the portrayal of femininity and masculinity in shounen anime, with a focus on *One Piece* and *Demon Slayer*. Utilising thematic and visual analysis, the research examines how character development and visual narratives, including clothing, colour schemes, abilities, and dialogue, perpetuate problematic notions of gender performativity. Drawing on feminist media theory and Critical Diversity Literacies, the analysis elucidates how gender hierarchies are reproduced and maintained. Feminist media theory is employed to explore how portrayals in both series reinforce patriarchy, hegemonic masculinity, the objectification of the female body, and hyper-femininity. Meanwhile, Critical Diversity Literacies emphasise the recognition of unequal symbolic and material values, revealing how rigid portrayals of hypermasculinity and

hyper-femininity normalise imbalanced power relations and marginalise non-hegemonic identities. The study offers insights into the broader implications of these representations for contemporary media discourse.

# CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.

## 1.1. Background and Rationale for the Study

Anime is a growing genre globally, and thus, it has a significant influence that can shape perceptions and values regarding gender. Anime has grown into a staggering $48 billion industry and is projected to reach $80 billion by 2030. Moreover, approximately 60% of the world's animated shows originate from Japan (Global Information, 2024). Shonen anime is one of the most popular anime genres in the anime industry and wider society. Shonen is a Japanese anime genre characterised by action-packed plots, primarily targeting adolescent boys. The word Shonen translates to "young boy." Due to the popularity of shonen anime, this study aims to investigate how masculinity and femininity are constructed in this genre. In the genre, manhood is often defined against femininity; the representation is entirely focused on masculinity, while the female body is often presented through the male gaze. Its constant depiction of women hyper-feminine women with large boobs, Dere personality, and skimpy clothing has caused an uproar in its patriarchal depiction of women and their relations to men. There has been a critique of how its representation of men is often through a traditional masculine gaze; they are often depicted as strong, gruff and domineering over their female counterparts.

Elihu Katz (2001) argues that the mass media plays a significant role in shaping our perceptions by reinforcing hegemonic norms, which dictate views on issues like gender, race, and class. Julia Kristeva (1980) expands on this concept by introducing the idea of intertextuality, which posits that all texts, including media representations, are interconnected across time and space. This intertextuality means that even "new" media characters often embody pre-existing stereotypes through assigned roles based on socio-economic identity (such as age, race, gender, class, etc.), thereby reinforcing hegemonic norms.

This means a male or female has already been assigned a role before its creation. The character has undergone a naturalisation process, and social norms are embedded within it. The consensus does not need to be explained because people believe this is how things are. For instance, a girl who aspires to be a nurse or a doctor, rather than a soldier, warrior, or ninja, already has a predetermined role. Media genres such as anime already possess a linguistic register based on the semiotic process of iconography and erasure because it enables audiences

to identify stereotypical images of gender performance in imagined characters. Understanding the impact of these gendered stereotypes in anime requires an exploration of the origins and cultural context of anime and manga, where these conventions have been shaped and perpetuated over time.

## 1.2. Research Question

The prevalence of gender stereotypes in anime can perpetuate harmful gender norms and biases, thus reinforcing unequal power dynamics and limiting opportunities for diverse representations. Moreover, the lack of diverse and nuanced portrayals of both women and men can perpetuate harmful stereotypes and biases. Anime's glorification of hypermasculinity and the marginalised representation of feminine traits can and does discourage boys from expressing vulnerability and empathy. In comparison, girls may feel pressured to conform to submissive and overly sexualised roles. As anime continues to grow, so too does its agenda-setting power (Katz, 2001). Therefore, it is essential to address this representation to foster a more inclusive and equitable media environment. The research seeks to answer the following questions.

A. How does the representation of femininity and masculinity in anime reinforce gender stereotypes?

B. How does toxic masculinity in anime series intersect with the hyper-sexualisation of the feminine body?

## 1.3. Research Aims

This research aims to investigate the representation and construction of femininity and masculinity in shounen anime, focusing on *One Piece* and *Demon Slayer*, and how these representations reinforce or challenge traditional gender roles and power dynamics.

# Chapter Two: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

## 2.1. Introduction

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section presents the literature review, which traces the origins of anime and identifies the stylistic and narrative conventions that distinguish it from other forms of contemporary animation. It examines the historical development of anime, exploring the influence of Western cartoons on its creation and how specific elements from Western animation were adapted to shape anime's unique visual and storytelling techniques. The literature review then examines the representation of masculinity and femininity in Shounen anime, focusing on the recurring character tropes and narrative patterns that shape gender portrayals within the genre. This discussion is situated within broader debates on media representation, considering how evolving definitions of representation have influenced gender portrayals and contributed to the continued reinforcement of gender differences within media narratives. The second section of the chapter outlines the theoretical framework underpinning this study. Drawing on feminist theory, the framework provides the critical tools necessary to examine how shounen anime constructs and reinforces gendered identities, with particular attention to power relations embedded in these representations.

## 2.2. Literature Review

### 2.2.1. Anime Origins: Where does it come from

The term "anime" refers strictly to Japanese cartoons; it is an abbreviation of the term "animation." Anime is derived from the Latin word "Animare", which means to breathe life into something or to give life to something. Anime is closely tied to the rise of Manga. One cannot discuss anime without discussing manga. Manga is a distinct Japanese style of comic books that originated in Japan, referring to a specific type of Japanese comic book (Brennan & Leonardo, 2007). Manga covers a broad range of topics, including ecchi, science fiction, horror, hentai, shounen, seinen, josei, and slice-of-life genres. Anime is serialised from manga; therefore, one cannot discuss the rise of anime without discussing the rise of Manga, because they are interconnected. Much like comic books are interconnected to the popularity of superhero characters and movies, so are manga and anime. There is a great difference between anime and cartoons; this distinction will be expanded upon in the next section.

### 2.2.2. Anime and What Makes it Different from Other Cartoons

The distinction between anime and cartoons is more cultural than technical. Unlike Western animation and comics, Ani-Manga is rooted in Japanese historical art and culture, an influence that remains evident in most shounen anime. The origins of manga and anime can be traced to Japan's early sequential art, notably the creation of scrolls and illustrations by Buddhist monks in the 12th century. A prominent example of this art form is *the Chōjū Giga (Animal Scrolls), attributed to the Buddhist monk Toba*. These scrolls featured expressive and humorous depictions of animals, serving as both a critique and a parody of the religious hierarchy in Japan. Notably, they were read from right to left, a narrative technique that became a defining feature of manga. The scrolls followed a clear sequential structure to tell a story, establishing the foundation for sequential storytelling in Japanese art. While often religious, these scrolls expanded over centuries to encompass a wide range of topics, including ghost stories, cautionary tales, and folklore. A significant shift in Japanese art occurred between the 16th and 17th centuries, giving rise to ukiyo-e, which translates to "pictures of the floating world." This change coincided with Japan's transition from the Sengoku period (Warring States period) to the Tokugawa period, which was characterised by relative peace and stability. Artists began producing art for mass consumption through woodblock printing, developing distinct techniques involving studied layout lines, vibrant colours, and intricate patterns. *Ukiyo-e* documented the lives and activities of the "floating world" centred in Yoshiwara, the entertainment district of Edo. Yoshiwara was the epicentre of nightlife, home to restaurants, traditional theatres, tea houses, and brothels, offering spaces of fantasy and escape. This environment provided rich material for artistic observation and stylised representation. The tradition of capturing life through a stylised lens transformed into a unique aesthetic of beauty that continues to influence manga visuals today. Elements such as caricatures, exaggerated depictions of blood in battle scenes, and erotic art persist in both Shounen and Ero-ani manga (Brenner & Leonardo, 2007). Although anime has evolved into a distinct medium, it has also been significantly influenced by Western artistic styles. The next section will examine how Western cartoons influenced the development of anime as it is known today.

### 2.2.3. Ani-manga Meets the Western World

Osamu Tezuka, credited as the "Godfather of Anime," was first an animator before transitioning to a cartoonist as Japan opened to the Western world. As a result, Tezuka's work was heavily influenced by Western cartoons. By the age of twenty, Tezuka had already produced an animation titled *Shintakarajima*. His work became so popular in Japan that citizens regarded him as the god of the Japanese animation industry (Mauritz, 2021). Tezuka drew inspiration from Western countries, including Germany, France, and the United States. His characters were designed with large, round eyes and heads, often featuring colourful hair and eyes. Their movements, gestures, and emotional responses were highly exaggerated. These elements were inspired by Disney characters and cartoons such as *Betty Boop* and *Mickey Mouse*. This distinctive character design has become a staple of most anime productions, setting anime apart from other forms of animation.

In 1917, Tezuka produced the first example of anime, titled *Namakura Gatana*, which had a runtime of just four minutes (DeGuzman, 2021). Western comics had been utilising comic strips long before the Second World War. After World War II, when Japan was compelled to open its borders, the comic strip industry emerged in the anime scene. Japanese animators began incorporating this strip format into their productions, often focusing on characters embarking on adventures or expeditions. These consisted of multiple strips, each depicting a specific event or scene, requiring the audience to engage with every strip to understand the narrative fully. This storytelling method significantly boosted revenue for the anime industry, as readers needed to purchase subsequent strips to follow the story. The influence of Western animation enabled Japanese creators to structure and communicate their narratives more effectively. The discussion now turns to representations of masculinity and femininity in shounen anime, focusing on how these narratives reinforce and reproduce gender differences.

### 2.2.4. Masculinity and Femininity in Anime

The theme of men being stronger than women is prevalent in shounen anime. This recurring theme encapsulates the type of representation produced within the genre. The underlying idea is that, regardless of a woman's strength or independence, she is often portrayed as seeking a man to protect her. This narrative diminishes the capabilities of female characters, as they are unable to grow beyond their reliance on male protection despite their inherent strength. It

reduces female characters to one-dimensional figures whose strength is ultimately meaningless without male validation or protection.

Another significant issue with representation in shounen anime is the prevalence of fan service (Fabro, 2022). Fan service functions to please the predominantly male audience, whereby a woman performing a mundane task, such as sitting down, bending over, eating, or chewing, is framed as sexual. In this context, the viewer is positioned as a male observer gazing upon the female object (Jenkins & Finneman, 2018). These scenes often depict women in compromising positions, deliberately framed to emphasise their sexuality and reinforce the notion that women exist as objects of male desire (Fabro, 2022)

Shounen anime also has the propensity to feature *Dere* characters; *Dere* translates to "love-sick" or "lovestruck" (e.g., Kamidere, Kuudere, Yandere, Tsundere). In most shounen anime, female characters are often depicted as ere. They are typically depicted as childlike, innocent, pure, cute, and ready for their male counterparts. These portrayals promote a specific idea of what type of woman should be considered desirable. This perpetuates harmful stereotypes, shaping how young audiences or audiences in general view women as objects for male satisfaction rather than as complex, autonomous individuals (Jones et al., 2024).

Moreover, the "pervert" archetype is frequently present and is usually male. This character often serves as comic relief through exaggerated antics and inappropriate behaviour. The pervert is sometimes portrayed as the wise and powerful mentor who plays a crucial role in the protagonist's development or as the protagonist's friend or frenemy (Kincaid, 2012). This archetype is consistently obsessed with breasts, buttocks, swimsuits, panties, underskirts, and feet. These characters are often associated with inappropriate sexual behaviours such as peeping, groping, or making lewd comments directed at female characters (Yallowitz, 2019).

While the pervert trope is intended to be humorous, it reinforces harmful gender stereotypes. The frequent depiction of males as perverts normalises sexual harassment and the objectification of women, contributing to the belief that such behaviour is acceptable or trivial. This plays into the broader societal tendency to downplay sexual harassment or dismiss it as *"boys will be boys"* (Ahmed, 2017). Additionally, this archetype reinforces the notion that men are incapable of controlling their sexual desires, while women exist primarily as objects of male sexual attention (Ahmed, 2017). Furthermore, female characters in these scenarios are often portrayed as passive or tolerant of the pervert's behaviour. This representation reinforces

the belief that women should endure or accept unwanted advances, ultimately undermining the importance of consent in real-life situations (Ahmed, 2017; Fabro, 2020).

In shounen anime, masculinity is often centred on the bodily appearance of men, aggression, physical violence, danger, and, most importantly, emotional control (McVittie et al., 2017). Some shounen anime reproduce the ideals of hegemonic masculinity. The term *"hegemonic masculinity" was influenced by Antonio Gramsci but* further developed by Raewyn Connell as an ideological practice that sustains and legitimises the interests of the powerful in society (McVittie et al., 2017). According to Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), "hegemonic masculinity has come to constitute the most dominant and most socially prized form of masculinity available to men." This status distinguishes it from other forms of masculinity, making it the only "true" form of manhood. In essence, hegemonic masculinity symbolises and enacts power over other forms of masculinity as well as women. Anime, through its reproduction of this form of masculinity, perpetuates harmful agendas and stereotypes (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

The hero often transitions from an emotionally expressive, slim, or skinny figure to a stoic, muscular hero. In summary, strength is linked to physical prowess and the suppression of one's emotions, thereby perpetuating a narrow and harmful stereotype of manhood and what it means to be a man (Clowes, 2013). In the 1980s, hegemonic masculinity was distinguished from other forms of masculinity, particularly those considered less dominant or less ideal in comparison to hegemonic masculinity. It was understood as a pattern of things done, not just an identity or set of expectations. It enables and facilitates men's domination over women in society. Hegemonic masculinity is not assumed to be normal, as statistically, only a fraction of men can embody or enact it; however, it is considered the standard or ideal form of masculinity. It embodies the most honoured form of manhood and requires all men to position themselves toward it. In comparison, hegemonic masculinity does not inherently mean violence, but force may be used to support it. Hegemonic masculinity represents ascendency, achieved through culture, persuasion, and institutions, particularly media institutions (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Furthermore, hegemonic masculinity focuses on heteronormativity. Anime characters often cater to a general heterosexual market, frequently represented in a semiotic reference to desire.

For instance, male characters are depicted as strong both mentally and physically. To highlight a male character's strength and battle experience, they are often portrayed as missing a hand or leg or having scars on their face and body. In contrast, a female character could be a strong fighter, but she will generally maintain her slim figure and beauty without losing limbs or acquiring scars (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). This discussion will now turn to the shifting definition of representation and how these changes have influenced portrayals in media and television

### 2.2.5. Representation and Its Shifting Definition

Originally, the definition of representation referred to making an inanimate object present by introducing or presenting it. This concept was employed by actors and artworks, which represented virtues, ideas, and characters. Over time, with the rise of Euro-Judeo-Christian beliefs, the notion of representation shifted significantly, becoming synonymous with a person acting on behalf of others (Celis, 2008).

The study of gender roles, particularly through the lens of representation, reveals how the roles of women, men, and their relationships have been historically depicted. Linda Smith (1995, p. 45) argues that 'ideas about gender difference can be traced back to the representation of women in Western culture, fragmented artefacts, and to different and differentiated traditions of knowledge.' The desirable and undesirable qualities of womanhood, such as being a wife, a mother, or a daughter, were inscribed into the texts and art of the Romans. Gendered representations were deeply embedded in medieval art forms, including wall paintings, sculptures, and tapestries. Men were often depicted with exaggerated muscles and portrayed as builders or warriors, while women were predominantly shown as mothers, wives, or nurturers. These gendered differences were further reinforced through oral literature and poetry (Celis, 2009).

These historical depictions of gender differences reflect and perpetuate patriarchal values, constraining the roles and identities of women while idealising hypermasculine traits in men. The portrayal of women in limited and subordinate roles highlights the systemic marginalisation of women, a theme that was also reflected in television representations

## 2.3. Theoretical Framework

The section outlines the theoretical framework guiding the study, which primarily draws on feminist media theory and Critical Diversity Literacies (CDL). Given the growing prominence of anime as a cultural medium with a significant global reach, this study aims to explore how femininity and masculinity are constructed within this genre and how gender equality is represented. Feminist media theory provides a valuable lens for deconstructing binary representations of gender, revealing the processes through which gender roles are reinforced and constructed in anime narratives. Critical Diversity Literacies (CDL) complements this framework by addressing the symbolic, unequal, and material power structures that shape representations of identity, with a focus on how these structures influence the portrayal of gender, race, and power dynamics. By applying CDL, the study not only critically examines the intersections of gender and other identities but also highlights how these portrayals reflect and perpetuate social inequalities. Together, these theories facilitate an examination of how gender performance is depicted and perpetuated in anime, providing insights into the cultural and social forces that shape viewer perceptions and broader societal norms.

### 2.3.1. Feminist Media Theory

Feminist media theory is an extension of feminist theory that critically examines how gender is represented in the media. As a grand theory, it encompasses power, visibility, and the reinforcement of patriarchal norms in society, focusing on how the media plays a crucial role in perpetuating these ideals through representation. This framework examines how the media influences societal perceptions of gender, perpetuating inequalities through visual and narrative structures. By applying feminist media theory, this discussion explores how anime constructs and sustains gender binaries, with particular emphasis on masculinity, intersectionality, gender performativity, the male gaze, and hegemonic masculinity.

Feminist media theory critiques patriarchal gender norms and how they enforce rigid binaries. Patriarchy promotes a stringent gender binary, where men and women are assigned distinct social roles, and any deviation from these norms is met with punishment (Butler, 1999). Sara Ahmed (2017), in her book *Living a Feminist Life*, discusses how patriarchy enforces gender fatalism, where boys and girls are forced to fit into predetermined structures to qualify as men and women. Feminism recognises that gender is not innate but is taught through socialisation; children are influenced by their parents, mass media, and society to perform gender. These

various factors place expectations on how boys and girls should behave. A boy, for example, must lead and protect, with chivalry and honour defining masculinity. In contrast, a girl is expected to cook, clean, marry, and become a mother. Gender performance, as theorised by Butler (1999), is not a natural state but a social construct maintained through repeated actions and reinforced by cultural narratives, including those found in anime. The portrayal of masculinity in anime conforms to these patriarchal structures, reinforcing the idea that men must embody strength, rationality, and dominance, while women are framed as passive, nurturing, or dependent.

Hegemonic masculinity, a concept developed by R.W. Connell (1995), is a key analytical tool in feminist media theory, enabling a deeper critique of how anime reinforces dominant masculine ideals. Hegemonic masculinity refers to the dominant form of masculinity that upholds patriarchy by positioning men as powerful, assertive, and emotionally restrained while subordinating alternative masculinities and femininities. Anime frequently constructs hegemonic masculinity through depictions of heroic, battle-ready male protagonists who assert control over their environment and others. This dominance is often contrasted with marginalised masculinities, such as effeminate male characters or those who reject traditional leadership roles. By incorporating hegemonic masculinity into feminist media theory, this analysis critiques the ways anime naturalises gender hierarchies, reinforcing male superiority while delegitimising softer, more fluid expressions of masculinity.

Western ideology historically sought to separate the mind and the body, associating the mind with men and the body with women. The dualism of mind/body, spirit/matter, inferior/superior, and male activity/female passivity are structures that have worked in tandem to solidify gender differences and characterisation (Fabro, 2022; Mulvey, 1975; Bordo, 1993). Within this binary, men have been associated with intellect and reason, while women have been subordinated as physical beings, often viewed as objects of desire. This separation between mind and body in Western ideology has enabled society to deem women inferior, property, objects, and commodities for exchange among men. They have been framed as seductions away from God, knowledge, and reason, reduced to symbols of sexual desire or even death. Women's bodies have been historically subject to objectification through fashion, cosmetic surgery, exercise programmes, and diets. Meanwhile, men in Western media have been largely associated with intellect and knowledge (Bordo, 1993). Feminist media theory critiques this binary and its implications in cultural narratives, including those found in anime. In anime, male characters

are often depicted as intellectual, strategic, or spiritually enlightened, while female characters are framed in terms of their physicality, beauty, or emotional labour (Yoshida, 2008).

By considering the intersectionality of gender with other social identities, we can further explore how anime reflects and reinforces complex power dynamics that shape societal perceptions of masculinity and femininity. Intersectionality, introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, is a critical aspect of feminist media theory, revealing how representations of gender in anime are shaped by overlapping identities such as race, class, and sexuality (Crenshaw, 1994). The intersection of masculine ideals in Japan is particularly relevant in understanding how gender roles have been historically constructed. During the Meiji era, Japan sought to modernise by integrating Western ideals, including concepts of masculinity, into its existing socio-cultural framework. Meiji Japan promoted a form of masculinity that merged with Western ideals of masculinity, reinforcing rigid gender norms. Samurai Bushido traditions emphasised discipline, loyalty, and honour, which blended with the Western model of the rational, dominant male breadwinner. This historical fusion influenced depictions of masculinity in anime, where male characters are often portrayed as stoic, physically strong, and protectors, reflecting both Japanese warrior traditions and Western heroic masculinity (Yoshida, 2008). These representations uphold patriarchal ideals, reinforcing the notion of masculinity as a fixed and dominant identity.

Feminist media theory also critiques the male gaze, a concept introduced by Laura Mulvey (1975), which describes how media is structured to prioritise male pleasure and objectify women. In anime, the male gaze is evident through the hyper-sexualisation of female characters, voyeuristic framing, and narratives that position men as active subjects. At the same time, women are relegated to objects of desire. This gendered visual economy reinforces heteronormative expectations, where female characters primarily exist as love interests, emotional support, or objects of visual pleasure. Concurrently, masculinity in anime is often depicted through a hegemonic lens, with male characters asserting dominance, power, and control, reflecting both traditional Japanese values and Western influences. By reinforcing these visual and narrative structures, anime perpetuates gender hierarchies and marginalises non-conforming identities.

Through the lens of feminist media theory, this framework critiques how anime constructs masculinity, enforces heteronormative gender roles, and perpetuates patriarchal ideals. The intersection of historical influences, gender performativity, hegemonic masculinity, and the

male gaze demonstrates how media functions as a powerful tool in shaping and reinforcing societal understandings of gender. By examining anime through this integrated feminist perspective, the discussion highlights how dominant gender ideologies are normalised while alternative or subversive gender expressions are marginalised or erased. The next section will focus on the Critical Diversity Literacies framework. Through CDL, the symbolic and material forms of power within anime can be critically examined, revealing that these representations are not neutral but actively construct and reinforce broader gendered social dynamics, thereby legitimising heteronormativity.

### 2.3.2. Critical Diversity Literacies (CDL) Framework

Anime's portrayal of gender norms can be meaningfully analysed through Melissa Steyn's (2015) Critical Diversity Literacies (CDL). This framework provides a critical examination of how anime, as a cultural product, both reflects and reinforces societal attitudes towards gender. One key tenet of CDL is recognising the unequal material values of different social locations, which involves acknowledging how hegemonic positionalities marginalise those in non-hegemonic spaces. Through CDL, we can explore how certain portrayals in anime contribute to mainstream ideas about masculinity, femininity, and gender roles, often embedding these representations into the collective consciousness as acceptable or even aspirational ideals. For example, the recurring themes of hyper-masculine male protagonists and submissive or highly sexualised female characters in many shounen and other anime genres shape viewer expectations of gender, subtly reinforcing societal power dynamics by presenting limited, idealised roles for men and women.

Symbolic power in anime operates through repeated, naturalised images of what is considered "normal" for each gender. By continuously reinforcing gender differences, anime conveys messages about gender norms and perpetuates stereotypes that feel both socially and culturally valid. Male characters are frequently depicted as protectors or saviours, embodying traits such as strength, stoicism, and heroism, while female characters are often cast as caregivers or love interests. These portrayals embed specific ideals into the cultural fabric, subtly influencing viewer's perceptions of gender roles and relational dynamics.

In contrast, material power in anime's gender portrayals is evident in the tangible impacts these representations have on audiences and the industry. The persistent depiction of submissive or sexualised female characters reflects and reinforces a market demand for content that appeals

primarily to male audiences. This demand influences material aspects, including market trends, character design choices, and merchandising strategies. Economic incentives tied to these representations lead to the prioritisation of certain character tropes over others, reinforcing gender norms in ways that can limit diversity in character portrayals and potentially restrict the audience's perspectives on gender possibilities (Steyn, 2015).

## 2.4. Conclusion

At its core, this theoretical framework highlights how deeply ingrained patriarchal systems continue to shape the way we see and understand gender. Feminist theory, drawing on thinkers like Abigail Rine (2010) and Rosalinda Gill (2011), reminds us that gender is not something we are born with but something we learn, perform, and are constantly disciplined into. Media plays a huge role in this process, reinforcing rigid binaries where men are expected to be dominant and rational. At the same time, women are often reduced to objects of desire or emotional support. The male gaze further cements these inequalities, dictating who gets to be seen, how they are seen, and for whose benefit.

Critical Diversity Literacies encourages us to go even further by prompting us to examine how power operates through repeated, unquestioned representations. CDL makes it clear that these portrayals are not just reflections of society; they actively shape it, legitimising certain ways of being while pushing others to the margins. Together, feminist theory and CDL offer powerful tools to challenge these narratives, imagine more inclusive possibilities, and work towards a media landscape that reflects the richness and complexity of real human experiences.

# CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

## 3.1. Introduction

In the context of research, *methodology* refers to the practical processes underpinning the conduct of a study. It addresses the "how" of research. The systematic procedures employed to ensure that the study is valid and that its outcomes correspond with its aims and objectives. This chapter outlines the methods adopted for data collection, selection, and analysis, detailing the sources of data and the strategies used to obtain them (Fathallah, 2023). It further considers the ethical principles guiding the research and explains how these enhance the credibility and validity of the findings. Finally, the chapter outlines the timelines and the budget of the study.

## 3.2. Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is an invaluable method for exploring the nuanced themes in anime, particularly those related to gender representation. Unlike quantitative methods, which rely on numerical data, qualitative research offers a deeper examination of social realities and lived experiences shaped by interactions between social actors (Hecker & Kalpokas, 2024; Fitzpatrick, 2013). By focusing on textual and contextual analysis, this approach enables researchers to examine the perspectives, concepts, and experiences associated with gender dynamics in anime. This exploration reveals the embedded power structures and societal norms that shape gender portrayal. Thereby, uncovering how such representations establish hegemony within anime and continue to resonate with audiences. Unlike quantitative methods, which primarily answer questions like "what" or "how many," qualitative research tackles "how," "why," and "when,". It offers insights into the broader cultural and historical contexts that shape gendered representations. This makes it particularly well-suited for analysing anime's depiction of masculinity and femininity and understanding how these portrayals reflect societal ideas of gender difference (Grossoehme, 2014; Pathak et al., 2013). Beyond analytical depth, qualitative research holds critical social significance by challenging and addressing issues such as patriarchy, discrimination, and systemic injustice (Canella & Lincoln, 2021).

By employing an inductive, bottom-up approach, qualitative research allows theories to emerge from direct observations and patterns rather than from preconceived frameworks, offering a flexible methodology responsive to new insights and unexpected discoveries (Sirisilla, 2023). Reflexivity is a core element of qualitative research; it encourages researchers to reflect on their own biases and assumptions. Therefore, ensuring a balanced and ethical approach to

sensitive issues, such as gender representation in anime, is crucial (Austin & Sutton, 2015). Qualitative research focuses on understanding the world we live in; thus, it possesses an adaptable nature. This element within qualitative research further supports its relevance in studying anime's multilayered gender portrayals. This enables researchers to adjust research questions, sampling, or themes in response to evolving ideas and findings. Ultimately, qualitative research provides a comprehensive, context-sensitive lens for critiquing gender norms and power structures within anime. This offers a holistic perspective that challenges and enhances our understanding of societal constructs and cultural narratives within this medium. Data analysis is one of the most crucial aspects of research, as it enables researchers to extract valuable information from a dataset, allowing them to make informed decisions. The next section of the research will focus on the methodology, discussing the various data analysis methods and the data collection and data selection methods that will be employed in the study.

## 3.3. Data analysis

### 3.3.1. Thematic Analysis

The research will employ a thematic analysis method, which is the most suitable approach for this study. Thematic analysis enables the identification and interpretation of various themes, such as masculinity and femininity, within multifaceted narrative and visual themes. Furthermore, this analysis method captures the nuanced representations of how anime reflects and shapes gendered expectations. Thematic Analysis is a method used for systematically identifying, organising, and providing insights into patterns of meaning across a dataset. TA is an active process of reflexivity whereby the researcher's subjective experience is at the core of making sense of the collated data (Villegas, 2022). Through TA, I have analysed the themes present in the portrayal of tropes and archetypes across Shonen anime series by identifying the recurring patterns and deviations. TA is suitable for this research because it enables a researcher to observe and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences. In anime, there are common themes within the medium, such as the propensity of fanservice, Dere characters, and the perverted male archetype. Through this methodology, I uncovered the underlying themes and messages of this form of representation. This method involves identifying common themes within the topic and making sense of these commonalities.

TA enables the researcher to focus on the data collection in numerous ways; with this method, I focused on analysing the meaning across the data. For instance, the objectification of women

and girls in anime through fan service is a latent language within the medium. Through TA, I reported on these obvious and semantic meanings; TA focuses on interrogating these latent meanings and exploring the assumptions and ideas that lie behind what is explicitly stated (Villegas, 2022). It employs an inductive approach in coding data, with analysis following a bottom-up approach driven by the data itself. TA is a flexible approach that offers a pathway to conducting research, which can seem ambiguous, and enables researchers to uncover embedded themes within anime narratives. This can shed light on the ways it contributes to the reinforcement or subversion of gender identities.

Phase 1 of Thematic analysis involves immersing oneself in the data by reading or watching it repeatedly. While doing all this work, I began to think about possible codes within the data (Jason & Glenwick, 2015). While reading and transcribing the data, I sought to identify meanings and patterns. This point requires a researcher to make useful notes on potential coding categories that could be developed in a subsequent analysis. Phase 2 involves generating initial codes. Once familiar with the collated data, I identified an initial list of codes. The codes that emerged inductively from the data set, along with theory-driven codes, were created to answer specific questions that guided the analysis. Codes allow the organisation of data into meaningful units; however, they are not yet themes, as they are broader and may encompass several codes. This stage is critical for the coding process as the researcher must uncover as many themes as possible. As the process progresses, some codes may become more apparent; consequently, more than one code may apply to various portions of the data set. Stage 3 involves searching for themes. Once the data has been coded, various codes will fall under the same umbrella. The search for themes will begin. This stage involves considering how various codes can be integrated into a singular, broader theme. These themes can be organised hierarchically, as visual representations of the various themes identified will be visualised using a table. In this visual representation, a list of potential themes will be presented, along with codes that do not fall under any of these themes (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Stage 4: This involves reviewing themes. In this stage, a set of themes will have been identified. This process involves refining and reviewing these themes; some may not be relevant to the research objectives. Other themes in this stage can also be integrated into broader ideas within the research, or they may be divided into separate themes. Once this stage of the process is reached, the first part is to evaluate whether the coded data that make up a certain theme are in concert with each other. The second part is to consider whether all these themes capture the

entire data set. To ensure this is the case, all data will be re-read to capture any information that aligns with a particular theme but was previously excluded. Stage 5: Focuses on defining and naming the themes in the data set. The task in this stage is to identify the main idea in each theme and provide a name that encapsulates or captures the idea (Villegas, 2022). In the 6th and final stage, the report will be produced. In this stage, the themes and their interrelationships will have been identified, and the research report will be written. The research needs to be written in a trustworthy manner for the reader. Therefore, it must encompass views from various perspectives regarding the topic. For instance, some scenes may not reflect power dynamics in how masculinity and femininity are represented in contrast to one another. By presenting these arguments, the report can be perceived as trustworthy by the reader, as both sides of the argument have been considered and addressed. Although the research must include oppositional views, the claim that anime reproduces gender stereotypes must be evident in the final report (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Visual analysis will be the second method utilised for the research.

**Summary**

Overall, thematic analysis will enable this research to systematically identify recurring patterns and themes related to masculinity and femininity in shonen anime. By coding the data inductively and exploring both the explicit and latent themes, this analysis method provided detailed insights into the data. It also uncovered the underlying messages communicated through character tropes, archetypes, and the narrative of the story. The insights gained from thematic analysis enabled the understanding of how anime reinforces or subverts patriarchal gender norms.

**Visual Analysis**

Visual analysis is essential, as it enables researchers to closely examine imagery and symbolism in visual mediums (Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2010). According to Hall (1994), representation is a system in which language uses signs and symbols to represent ideas, thoughts, feelings, expressions, and emotions. Therefore, a visual analysis approach is well-suited for investigating the representation of masculinity and femininity in anime. Visual analysis involves examining and interpreting visual data to understand its meaning, context, and implications. It identifies and explores the characteristics of material relationships within the contexts in which they are produced and encountered. In visual analysis, it is essential to

recognise that images are often embedded with power, exploitation, abuse, or empowerment (Bennett & Frow, 2008; Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2010a). In summary, visual analysis ardently aims to incorporate effect and ideology; effect and ideology work together by wielding power over audiences when they look upon an image. In this state, images are at their most active; they have a "social life" that can and does impact the people interacting with them. In this regard, visual analysis is an aspect of all things, including people and moments (Bennett & Frow, 2008). In the word "visuality", the aims are already defined. Visual analysis is about answering "what happens when people look and what emerges from the act of looking" (Bennett & Frow, 2008, p. 68).

Visual analysis is suitable for this research project because it possesses the ability to dissect and interpret the multifaceted visual elements within Shonen anime, which are fundamental in conveying gender norms (Ledema, 2004). Visual analysis is primarily a visual medium, where aspects such as character design, animation, and visual symbolism play important roles in communicating themes, emotions, and social constructs (Bennet & Frow, 2008). Shonen (boys' anime) is targeted at adolescent boys and relies on visual cues to depict characters, their roles, and their interactions. Characters in Shounen anime are often depicted with exaggerated features that may emphasise traditional gender stereotypes. Male characters are often depicted with muscular builds, sharp facial features, and commanding postures that depict bravery, dominance, and strength. In contrast, women are often depicted with slender, curvaceous, and delicate features, which can be indicative of traditional femininity and submissiveness (Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2010). By analysing clothing and the physical features of males and females in anime, visual analysis will reveal how these design elements contribute to reinforcing unequal power dynamics (Ledema, 2004).

The use of visual storytelling techniques, such as camera lighting, angles, and colour schemes, plays a significant role in emphasising gender differences and characteristics. Long-angle shots are often used to showcase male characters as large and imposing. Coupled with high-contrast lighting that accentuates their muscular builds, these are common techniques in anime that are used to enhance physical masculinity (Fabro, 2020). Paradoxically, female characters may be portrayed in softer lighting and angles that emphasise their vulnerability and/or attractiveness. An analysis of this technique in the research can reveal the subtle ways in which power dynamics related to gender can be reinforced (Goodwin, 2000).

Symbolism and Iconography are crucial aspects that visual analysis addresses. Shounen anime is embedded with icons and symbols that are repeatedly used to reproduce gender norms (Müller, 2014). Weapons such as swords, guns, and batons are often associated with male characters, thus symbolising their power and combat readiness. Their swords or techniques possess menacing names such as "Demon Ashura," "nine-headed snake," and "Dragon Twister." In contrast, accessories such as jewellery or floral patterns are often associated with female characters, emphasising their beauty and delicacy (Christianna & Salamoon, 2015). Moreover, the names of their techniques are less threatening and are associated with beauty and elegance. Visual analysis also enables the study of behavioural cues, such as how characters move, react, and interact with each other; these cues visually communicate their gender roles (Müller, 2014). Male characters are often depicted as engaging in combat and exhibiting aggressive behaviours, while female characters are frequently portrayed in supportive or nurturing roles, such as nurses or healers. Even within the context of action scenes, despite their strengths, they are depicted in supporting or nurturing roles (Müller, 2014). Furthermore, based on the show's carefully selected images, episodes from *One Piece* and *Demon Slayer* were selected and visually analysed. After analysing and watching the episodes, they were thematically analysed to identify the main themes within the data.

**Summary**

Overall, Visual analysis serves as a critical tool in the study for investigating how masculinity and femininity are visually enacted within One Piece and Demon Slayer. Focusing on elements such as character design, camera angles, colour schemes, and symbolism will enable a multifaceted understanding of how gender hierarchies are maintained in anime. The upcoming section of the Chapter will discuss the most suitable sampling technique for the research.

## 3.4. Data Selection: Sampling Technique

The research employed purposive sampling within a non-probability paradigm, selecting participants or materials based on the researcher's informed judgment. (Praveen & Showkat, 2017). This approach involves selecting research materials based on specific criteria deemed essential for the research's success, ensuring the sample effectively represents the phenomenon under investigation. Unlike random sampling, purposive sampling focuses on obtaining in-depth insights from a particular subset of visual data. As the researcher, I used my judgment to

select visual materials that offered unique perspectives or experiences relevant to the research topic. The deliberate selection of episodes for analysis is particularly significant in fields such as ethnography, visual analysis, case studies, and phenomenological research, where understanding complex issues is crucial (Showkat & Praveen, 2017). The following section outlines the data collection process employed in this study, illustrating the approach used.

## 3.5. Data Collection Process

Data collection is the process of collecting data and measuring information on variables of interest. The data are collected in a systematic manner that enables a researcher to answer the research question; this section outlines the episodes chosen for analysis. This study will focus on *One Piece* and *Demon Slayer (Kimetsu no Yaiba)*, two of the most popular shounen anime of the current generation. Given the extensive number of episodes in both series, purposive sampling will be adopted to enable a focused examination of visually significant episodes. A total of fourteen episodes will be selected, seven from One Piece and seven from Demon Slayer. The selected One-Piece episodes will be Episode 24: (Hawk-Eye Mihawk! The Great Swordsman Zoro Falls at Sea), Episode 409: (Hurry Back to Your Friends! The Maiden Island Adventure). Episode 410: (Everyone Falls in Love! Pirate Empress Hancock). Episode 412: (Heartless Judgment! Margaret is Turned to Stone). Episode 469: (Kuma's Transformation! Ivan-San's Blow of Anger!). Episode 528: (Excitement Blow-Out! Sanji's Life Under Threat!), and Episode 1104: (A Desperate Situation! The Seraphim's All-Out Attack!). For Demon Slayer, the episodes selected for analysis will be Swordsmith Village Arc, Episode 1: (Someone's Dream), Swordsmith Village Arc. Episode 10: (Love Hashira: Mitsuri Kanroji), Hashira Training Arc. Episode 3: (Fully Recovered, Tanjiro Joins the Hashira Training), Hashira Training Arc. Episode 7: (Stone Hashira Gyomei Himejima), Entertainment District Arc. Episode 6: (Layered Memories), Season 1, Episode 11: (Tsuzumi Mansion), and Season 1, Episode 22: (Master of the Mansion).

The episodes will be sourced from streaming platforms such as Crunchyroll and Netflix. Each episode will be viewed multiple times to identify recurring visual motifs, character designs, and movement patterns related to gender. From the selected episodes, screenshots will be captured to analyse specific frames. The focus will be on how gender is portrayed through visual elements, including clothing, body language, abilities, camera angles, and facial expressions. A qualitative research approach will be employed to explore the symbolic

meanings, artistic techniques, and thematic expressions that reveal the gendered representations within the anime characters and designs.

### 3.5.1. Summary

The data collection process involved repeatedly viewing episodes, selecting them, and capturing screenshots. This process enabled the detailed analysis of visual and thematic elements within the anime. By systematically collecting qualitative data, the study ensures that key aspects of gender performance, such as clothing, camera work, and body language, are thoroughly examined. These aspects of data selection provide a solid basis for thematic and visual analysis. The following section of the chapter will highlight the importance of ethical considerations.

## 3.6. Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are crucial in research because they ensure that the study is conducted with integrity, respect, and responsibility. Conducting a visual analysis approach requires a visualisation that considers bias and interpretation. This refers to the ethical responsibility of a researcher conducting visual analysis to perform reflexivity, recognising and mitigating the subjectivity that may impede the understanding of the portrayed media visual. Visual analysis is not an objective medium; researchers bring their own experiences, cultural backgrounds, and ideologies to the interpretation of images (Moya, 2011; Harley & Langdon, 2018; Current & Tillotson, 2018). A researcher engaging in visual analysis should always step outside their comfort zone. Ethical considerations here involve realising these biases to avoid misrepresentation or unfair judgment. Bias in visual analysis can stem from various factors, such as cultural norms, social conditioning, gender, race, class, and personal beliefs. Therefore, due to these factors, a researcher conducting visual analysis may subconsciously project their viewpoint onto an image, thereby interpreting it in a way that aligns with their preconceived notions rather than the realities or intentions behind the image (Palaganas et al., 2017; Gordon, 2018).

Moreover, an analyst should engage in reflexivity to question the power dynamics at play in their interpretation. An analyst should ask themselves, “Whose perspective am I privileging”? Because they might over-emphasise the perspective of a dominant social group while sidelining marginalised voices represented in the visual media. A second question that a researcher should ask themselves is, “How do my background and experiences shape my interpretation?” For

instance, a person from a patriarchal society may unconsciously interpret a depiction of women differently than someone from a feminist perspective (Moya, 2011). The final question that a researcher conducting visual analysis should ask themselves is, “Am I being objective or empathetic enough?” Striking a balance between acknowledging the emotions a visual piece might elicit and maintaining fairness in interpreting its meaning is crucial. These questions are essential because unchecked bias can perpetuate dangerous stereotypes (Current & Tillotson, 2018).

A visual researcher should be cautious about “over-interpretation”, whereby too much meaning is attributed to an image based on their personal beliefs or theoretical frameworks. Images often carry layers of meaning; however, pushing a particular narrative that is not grounded in evidence may distort the truth behind an image (Harley & Langdon, 2018). For instance, the study I am conducting focuses on gender performance; thus, I might be inclined to overemphasise gender dynamics in a visual piece where these dynamics might not be central. It is crucial for a researcher conducting visual analysis to strike a balance by allowing the image to speak for itself rather than imposing meanings that suit one's agenda or theoretical inclinations (Wiles et al., 2008).

Ethical visual analysis should also involve challenging dominant ideologies. Analysts should remain aware of how frameworks such as Western-centric views, colonial perspectives, or capitalist paradigms might impede their interpretations of images that contest these dominant ideologies (Moya, 2011). Whether intentionally or not, these viewpoints may be downplayed or misinterpreted by the analyst who fails to reflect critically on their positionalities of privilege or ideological alignment. Ethical visual analysis involves pushing back against these single ideologies and striving instead for a more equitable and pluralistic understanding of the image (Gordon, 2018).

On the other hand, accountability refers to the researcher's responsibility. They must uphold ethical standards and answer for their research findings and practices (Whitty & Brendan, 2008). A researcher must be accountable for accurately reporting results, acknowledging limitations, and avoiding practices like data manipulation and selective reporting. Failing to recognise these factors can mislead or damage the credibility of the research report. Researchers should always provide clear and accurate information about their work and be accountable for their ethical code of conduct (Kotz et al., 2016).

### 3.6.1. Summary

Overall, ethical considerations guided the research by promoting reflexivity and ensuring accountability in the interpretation of visual and thematic data. By critically reflecting on positionality, cultural background, and theoretical frameworks, the study maintained integrity in its analysis of gender representation. Ethical vigilance ensured that the findings were credible, fair, and considerate of multiple perspectives, strengthening the overall trustworthiness of the research report. To ensure rigorous research practice and accountability, it is essential to establish a detailed timeline and budget, providing a structured plan for resource allocation and time management throughout the project.

## 3.7. Timelines

Timelines are essential for research as they organise tasks, ensuring effective time management and progress tracking. They help researchers stay on schedule and meet critical deadlines while facilitating communication with supervisors and collaborators.

| **Phases** | **Tasks** | **Dates** |
|---|---|---|
| **Topic refinement and research questions** | Defining the research scope and developing the research topic | Feb 2024- April 2024 |
| **Literature Review & Methodology** | Conducted a review of key literature on feminist media theory, CDL and gender in anime | May 2024- 30 July 2024 |
| **Research Chapter and Submission** | Draft the Chapter, including the introduction, literature review, methodology, and expected outcomes, and submit the paper after review by the supervisor. | 20 August 2024- 15 November 2024 |
| **Data gathering** | Select episodes/scenes and capture visuals. Organise the data by themes | 16 November 2024- 20 December 2024 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | (Masculinity/femininity/intersection of femininity and masculinity) | |
| **Write thesis** | Draft the thesis, write up the findings | 21 December 2024-24 March 2025 |
| **Final review and submission** | Revised paper based on feedback; proofread and finalise the paper, and submit the research | 26 March 2025 |

In the final section of the Chapter, the budget for the research will be tabulated. Budgets in research are significant because they ensure that resources are allocated efficiently.

### 3.8.Budget

Budgets enable researchers to prevent overspending, allowing them to track expenses and manage the project more effectively within financial constraints.

| **Expense** | **Description** | **Estimated Cost (ZAR)** |
|---|---|---|
| **Research Material** | Books, articles and online sources (accessible online) | R0 |
| **Internet data** | Utilising home wi-fi data | R200 |
| **Anime access** | Utilising Netflix and Crunchyroll | R260 |
| **Transportation** | No additional travel costs needed | R0 |
| **Miscellaneous** | Not Applicable | R0 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Printing and stationery** | Printing and stationery are readily available at home | R0 |
| **Total Costs** | | R460.00 |

## 3.9. Conclusion

In conclusion, the chapter explored the methodological approaches and ethical considerations essential for studying gender representation in Shonen anime. This chapter underscores the importance of rigorous and ethically sound research practices. By employing the qualitative research methodology, the Chapter discusses in depth how qualitative research can challenge power dynamics. It discussed how qualitative data collection methods, such as visual analysis, will assist in gaining in-depth insights into the representation of masculinity and femininity in Shonen anime. The chapter discusses how the topic is a critical diversity issue by delving into the intricacies of the representation and perpetuation of patriarchy and hegemonic views on masculinity and femininity. The potential findings from this research are anticipated to highlight the pervasive stereotypes and gender roles depicted in Shonen anime, offering a critical perspective on how these media portrayals influence societal views on gender. Ethical considerations such as confidentiality, cultural sensitivity, and reflexivity are fundamental to ensuring the integrity and respectfulness of the research process. The anticipated contributions of this research lie in its ability to foster a more nuanced understanding of gender dynamics in popular media. It also aims to promote discussions about more equitable and diverse representations of gender. By adhering to robust methodological frameworks and maintaining high ethical standards, this study seeks to contribute valuable insights to the ongoing discourse on media influence and gender.

# CHAPTER 4: PRESENTATIONS OF FINDINGS

## 4.1. Introduction

Shounen anime is one of the most influential genres in contemporary media, shaping cultural understandings of gender through its narratives, character designs, and thematic structures. This study examines the representation of femininity and masculinity in One Piece and Demon Slayer, with a focus on how these narratives reproduce and reinforce gendered power dynamics. These dynamics manifest through various mechanisms, including character development, abilities, and relationships, which collectively structure gender roles within the narrative. A key focus of this research is the role of power systems, such as *One Piece's* Devil Fruits and *Demon Slayer's* Breathing Techniques, in reinforcing gender norms. These elements contribute to a broader discourse on masculinity and femininity, particularly in how characters, abilities, strengths, and roles within the narrative either conform to or challenge traditional gender binaries.

This study employs visual and thematic analysis, using scene selection to extract key themes and subthemes. The analysis involves examining fashion, abilities, character design, camera angles, colour schemes, and character development to understand how gender performance is constructed. Additionally, character dialogue is scrutinised to highlight gender dynamics and how they are reinforced through narrative structures. The research questions driving this investigation include: (A) How does the representation of femininity and masculinity in anime reinforce gender stereotypes? (B) How does toxic masculinity in anime series intersect with the hyper-sexualisation of the feminine body?

The findings reveal several recurring themes. Colour schemes play a significant role in gender representation, with darker tones often associated with male characters and lighter tones linked to female characters. The depiction of masculinity is frequently aligned with muscular character designs, themes of self-sacrifice, and hegemonic masculinity. In contrast, female characters often embody hyper-femininity, describing the exaggerated adherence to traditional feminine gender roles, expressions and behaviours. This aspect is emphasised through their character development, abilities, and interactions within the narrative. The contrast between masculinity and femininity in these shounen anime reinforces a rigid binary, framing femininity as subordinate to masculinity.

Feminist theory underpins the study's conceptual framework, providing critical insights into how anime constructs and normalises patriarchal, misogynistic, and heteronormative gender dynamics. By analysing the intersection of masculinity and femininity within the medium, the study reveals how anime narratives contribute to broader cultural discourses on gender

performance. While *One Piece* and *Demon Slayer* offer compelling storytelling, their gender portrayals often mirror dominant societal norms, reinforcing traditional hierarchies and contributing to the broader discourse on gender inequality.

## 4.2. The Ideal Man: Performing Masculinity in *One Piece* and *Demon Slayer*

Judith Butler (1999) argues that gender performance is shaped by one's social reality, meaning that the body and sex are not inherently tied to a specific identity until they engage with societal norms that define them. This theme highlights how, in anime and television more broadly, the connection between gender and social reality is often absent. Characters follow pre-existing gender binaries and conventions, with their identities already assigned by their creators. Unlike real-world individuals, who navigate and negotiate gender through lived experience, anime characters enact roles designed for them within a rigid framework of masculinity and femininity (Butler, 1999). Since an anime character's gender is predetermined by the creator who exists within a broader social reality, the medium becomes a space where hyper-gendered performances are amplified in their purest form. The human body is stylised and exaggerated to serve specific narratives. For instance, hyper-masculine characters are often portrayed as buff, gruff, and emotionally detached, embodying hegemonic masculinity that reinforces rigid ideals of male dominance. As a result, anime constructs a reality where hegemonic masculinity is not only normalised but also intensified, shaping how audiences engage with gender representation (Drummond, 2011).




Figure 1. is an image of Gyomei Himejima the strongest Hashira in the present era of the series along with his fellow Hashira. The image is meant to highlight just by looking at Gyoemi next to the other Hashira he is easily identifiable as the strongest Hashira due to his large muscular build and height that reinforce his strenth. (Ufotable, 2019).

In Season 1, Episode 22, "Master of the Mansion" of *Demon Slayer*, Gyomei Himejima makes his first appearance. Although he does not engage in any fighting at this stage, his muscular build and towering height immediately signal that he is the strongest among the Hashira. Later, in Season 4, Episode 4 (Hashira Training Arc), the audience is introduced to Gyomei's backstory and character in more depth. Known as the Stone Hashira, Gyomei holds one of the highest ranks within the Demon Slayer Corps, an elite group tasked with protecting humanity by confronting threats beyond the abilities of ordinary Demon Slayers. Gyomei's character embodies hyper-masculinity (HM), a form of traditional masculinity characterised by exaggerated beliefs about what it means to be a man (Vokey et al., 2013). According to Vokey et al. (2013), hyper-masculinity consists of four pillars: toughness as emotional self-control, violence as inherently manly, danger as thrilling, and callous attitudes towards women and sex (p. 562). Additionally, hyper-masculinity idealises physical strength, dominance, and the role of protector, especially of women and children, while reinforcing male superiority. A man who fully displays these traits is often viewed as the "ideal man" (Roberts, 2022).

However, aspects of Gyomei's character challenge these traditional ideals. Despite his immense physical strength, he is deeply emotional, often crying and expressing remorse for

killing demons. He views demons as tragic beings trapped in suffering, believing that death offers them release. Physically, Gyomei stands out as the strongest member of the Demon Slayer Corps. His imposing, hyper-masculine build reinforces the notion that physical prowess defines a true warrior. He is twice the size of any other Demon Slayer, and his mere presence conveys immense power and authority. His calm demeanour, large muscular frame, and a prominent scar across his forehead serve as visual markers of his strength and battle experience. In the episode where Tanjiro trains with him, Gyomei is shown hunched over a fire, holding two massive boulders. This moment further reinforces his physical dominance and the hyper-masculine traits embedded in his character design.

The episode presents Gyomei's backstory, which exemplifies "violence as a manly characteristic", one of the core elements of hyper-masculinity. His tragic past is revealed through his role as a protector and father figure to several orphaned children in the temple where he was raised. Despite their poverty, Gyomei recalls that they lived happily together, finding contentment in each other's company. However, tragedy struck when one of the children, disobeying the temple's rules, ventured outside and encountered a demon. In a desperate attempt to save himself, he led the demon back to the orphanage. As a result, most of the children were brutally killed, with only one surviving the attack.

Gyomei reflects on this traumatic experience, which not only shaped his identity but also reinforced his protective instincts:

"*I did all that I could to protect the remaining four, but three of the children did not do as I told them. Rather than rely on me, they fled. Their throats were slashed, and they died. At the time, I had little food to eat. I was thin and timid. I'd never even raised my voice. On top of that, what use could a blind adult be*?" (Ufotable, 2024)

Gyomei explains that only one child, Sayo, obeyed his instructions and hid behind him. The episode portrays his desperate attempts to protect her despite his overwhelming fear and perceived weakness. This moment reinforces the notion that men are expected to assume the role of protectors and demonstrate mental fortitude in the face of adversity (Drummond, 2011). In his bid to protect Sayo, Gyomei clenches his fists, his veins bulging, visually conveying his desperation and determination to safeguard her, even at the cost of his own life. When the demon attacked, Gyomei experienced anger for the first time. This emotional response unlocked a strength he never knew he possessed. Despite being malnourished and timid,

Gyomei unleashed his fury, violently tearing the demon's arms off and relentlessly pummelling it until dawn.

These scenes illustrate how anger became a catalyst for Gyomei's ability to confront the demon, reinforcing the idea that anger serves as a functional and even necessary tool for men in dangerous situations. It supports the notion that anger enables male characters to dominate others and is valorised as a powerful weapon in combat (Roberts, 2022). In that moment, although terrified and fearing for his life, Gyomei was driven by his desire to protect Sayo. Ultimately, it was his anger that propelled him to action and enabled him to defeat the demon. Gyomei reflects on this moment and states:

"*For the first time in my life, I was clenching my fists to throw punches with full force, and my strength was terrifying even to me. Had that demon not attacked me, I would have gone my whole life without knowing how strong I was*" (Gotouge, 2019)

This moment demonstrates Gyomei performing masculinity in its rawest form. Despite his timid nature and lack of combat experience, he rises to the occasion, courageously attempting to protect the children in a heroic display. Gyomei's role as a protector reflects societal expectations that position men as guardians of women and children. Moreover, his actions during the demon attack embody the hyper-masculine notion that violence is inherently manly. His backstory, coupled with his title as the strongest Hashira, appears fitting, given the hardships he has endured and overcome. Gyomei's transformation from a frail, blind man into a powerful warrior who fights for others exemplifies both his humanity and his exceptional strength. His selflessness and unwavering resolve ultimately lead him to join the Demon Slayer Corps, solidifying his role as a protector and a symbol of idealised masculinity (Bell & Milic, 2002). While Gyomei Himejima represents a form of masculinity rooted in noblesse oblige and resilience, Roronoa Zoro from *One Piece* embodies masculinity through a different lens, one shaped by the intersections between Meiji-era (1868–1912) Japanese ideals and Western conceptions of manhood.

Traditionally, Japanese masculinity emphasised self-sacrifice, honour, and bravery. However, during the Meiji era, the government, influenced by its interactions with Western nations, introduced new ideals of manliness that prioritised physical strength and a muscular physique. Over time, these traditional and Western notions of masculinity merged, shaping the representation of male characters such as Zoro (Karlin, 2002).

## Summary

Gyomei Himejima's character encapsulates the complex interplay between strength, emotion, and societal expectations of masculinity. While his physical form and combat abilities reinforce hyper-masculine ideals of power and protection, his compassion and vulnerability subtly challenge the traditional association between manhood and emotional detachment. Through Gyomei, *Demon Slayer* demonstrates how anime both reproduces and reconfigures hegemonic masculinity, presenting male characters who embody physical dominance yet remain capable of empathy. This nuanced portrayal underscores Butler's argument that gender is performative and contextually shaped by social realities, even within fictional worlds where such performances are exaggerated for narrative effect.

## 4.3. The Convergence of Western and Japanese Masculinity in Anime

The Meiji period (1868–1912) in Japan introduced competing ideas of masculinity. The Meiji government, influenced by Western culture, promoted Western tastes and styles; as a result, government officials travelled to the Western world to acquire knowledge and bring it back to Japan (Karlin, 2002). The introduction of Western military practices and the Meiji Restoration government's colonial expansion ambitions led to a re-evaluation of men's roles in Japanese society. The samurai warrior code, known as *Bushido*, began to merge with Western concepts of nation-building and economic competition. As a result, *Bushido* was redefined, incorporating Western ideals of rugged manliness, strength, duty, and bravery in war (Karlin, 2002).

### 4.3.1. Analysis of Zoro




Figure 2: is Roronoa Zoro who has accepted his loss against Dracule Mihawk in their dule, he makes sure to turn so that he can watch Mihawk deliver the final blow (Toei Animation, 2014).

Episode 24 of *One Piece*, "Hawk Eye Mihawk," serves as a compelling representation of the intersection between Japanese culture and Western concepts of masculinity. In this episode, Zoro, who has been on a quest to find Dracule Mihawk (the strongest swordsman in the *One-Piece* world), finally encounters him and immediately challenges him to a duel. The battle between the two swordsmen merges hegemonic masculinity with the *Bushido* warrior code. This confrontation illustrates how *One Piece* seamlessly merges these cultural frameworks, shaping masculinity as both an ideal to aspire to and a dynamic space for conflict and negotiation.

Both Zoro and Mihawk embody hegemonic masculinity and the *Bushido* samurai warrior code, which emphasises honour, discipline, and perseverance (Karlin, 2002). At the same time, they also embody core tenets of hegemonic masculinity. The concept was coined by Raewyn Connell (2005), who expanded upon feminist theories of patriarchy. Hegemonic masculinity serves as the standard for "ideal men" in Western societies; it preaches self-determination, individualism, intermale dominance, an unwillingness to admit weakness, courage, and competition.

Initially, Mihawk dismisses Zoro, viewing him as another weakling. He questions whether Zoro challenges him out of ignorance or courage, to which Zoro replies, "It is my ambition." Zoro

aspires to take Mihawk's spot as the world's greatest swordsman. His ambition to claim the title embodies hegemonic masculine ideals of competitiveness, risk-taking, intermale dominance, and personal achievement. Mihawk initially treats Zoro as a joke, choosing to fight him with a tiny sword resembling a butter knife, which enrages Zoro (Scharrer & Blackburn, 2018). Despite his courage and frustration at being mocked, Zoro suffers a humiliating defeat, unable even to land a single strike on Mihawk. In contrast to Zoro's anger, courage, and determination, Mihawk remains calm and composed, effortlessly toying with him. The duel between Zoro and Mihawk highlights the tension between different expressions of masculinity. While Zoro embodies courage, frustration, and an almost reckless drive for self-improvement, Mihawk represents a more composed and refined form of masculinity. Mihawk remains detached and in control. This contrast reflects the nuances of hegemonic masculinity, with Mihawk as the dominant figure, controlling the battlefield, while Zoro struggles to prove his worth within an established hierarchy of male power (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; McKay, 2008).

Despite his impending defeat, Zoro, driven by the *Bushido* code of honour and the hegemonic ideal of never admitting weakness, refuses to give up (McKay, 2008; Wedgwood et al., 2023). He cannot accept the idea that he and Mihawk are so vastly different in terms of strength and ability. During the battle, Mihawk recognises Zoro's unwavering resolve and begins to admire his determination, marking a turning point where he starts taking Zoro seriously. Meanwhile, Zoro's comrades consider intervening, but Luffy stops them, understanding that Zoro's honour, manhood, and self-respect are at stake. Even in the face of near-certain death, Zoro prioritises his honour over self-preservation, which is consistent with the *Bushido* warrior code, where maintaining honour is prioritised over self-preservation (Karlin, 2020; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Mihawk stabs Zoro, yet Zoro continues to stand his ground. Impressed by Zoro's tenacity, Mihawk asks why he refuses to withdraw, to which Zoro responds that retreating would mean betraying himself and the promises he has made. Moved by Zoro's conviction and courage, Mihawk acknowledges his unwavering resolve and remarks, *"What a strong heart, so he chooses death over defeat."* Mihawk embodies the Bushido warrior's code of honour, bravery, respect, and strength. Recognising Zoro's unyielding spirit, Mihawk realises he cannot trample on his opponent's honour as a swordsman. In response, he chooses to reciprocate Zoro's bravery, integrity, and mental fortitude (Karlin, 2020). As a sign of respect, Mihawk decides to

fight Zoro with his full strength, upholding the Bushido code of honouring a worthy opponent (Nitobe, 2019). Fully acknowledging Zoro's dedication, he asks for his name, then sheathes his small blade and draws his true weapon, the world's strongest black sword. He declares, *"I have not seen anyone like you in a while. As a swordsman's courtesy, I will sink you using the world's strongest black sword."* Zoro, understanding the honour in Mihawk's gesture, accepts his fate with gratitude. Mihawk's recognition of Zoro's honour signifies the highest form of masculine validation within *One Piece*'s framework of masculinity.

Zoro does not last long; Mihawk strikes him down with a devastating slash, and in an inner monologue, Zoro realises he is defeated. In a final act of defiance and courage, he turns to face Mihawk, prompting Mihawk to ask what he is doing. Zoro responds, *"Scars on the back are a swordsman's shame."* His decision to face Mihawk head-on, rather than being struck from behind, embodies the Bushido warrior code; he chooses death with dignity and honour over shame. This moment evokes the tradition of *seppuku*, the samurai practice of ritual suicide, which was considered an honourable death among the feudal Japanese samurai class (Nitobe, 2019). *Seppuku* was more than just an act of taking one's life; it was a means of preserving honour and demonstrating ultimate loyalty to one's code and convictions. By willingly turning to face Mihawk's blade rather than allowing himself to be cut down from behind, Zoro symbolically embraces this ideal, choosing to die with the honour of a true swordsman rather than live with disgrace. His actions reflect a deep commitment to the samurai ethos, reinforcing his unwavering dedication to the path of the sword.

Deeply impressed, Mihawk acknowledges Zoro's worth as a true warrior. As a final act of respect, he delivers one last strike, recognising Zoro's bravery. Following the duel, Mihawk commends Luffy for allowing the fight to unfold without interference. He reassures Luffy that Zoro is not dead and declares that he will await the day when both Zoro and Luffy reach the pinnacle of the pirate world so that Zoro may challenge him again.

In this moment, moved by Mihawk's words and actions, Zoro cries. By embracing vulnerability as a form of strength, he challenges traditional notions of masculinity. His tears, often perceived as a sign of weakness within dominant masculine ideals, instead serve as a testament to his unwavering resolve. Rather than diminishing his masculinity, this emotional display reinforces his commitment to growth, demonstrating that true strength lies not in suppressing emotion but in confronting failure and persevering (Harriger et al., 2022). By reaffirming his dedication to

becoming the world's greatest swordsman, Zoro reconfigures masculinity, rejecting rigid stoicism in favour of resilience and self-improvement.

This episode encapsulates the intersection of Japanese and Western masculinity by blending the Bushido warrior code with Western hegemonic masculinity's ideals of perseverance, self-determination, and ambition (Karlin, 2002). Zoro's duel with Mihawk highlights the tension between honour and survival while also portraying masculinity as both rigid and deeply emotional. Both Zoro and Gyomei embody traditional ideals of masculinity, with Zoro's battle against Mihawk highlighting the intersections of Japanese and Western masculinity.

### 4.3.2. Summary

Zoro's duel with Mihawk captures the fusion of Japanese and Western masculinities, blending Bushido's honour and sacrifice with Western ideals of dominance and ambition. His refusal to retreat reflects the samurai commitment to dignity in defeat, while his tears reveal a redefinition of strength through vulnerability. This emotional complexity challenges the notion that masculinity must exclude sensitivity, positioning resilience and self-improvement as higher masculine virtues. Through Zoro, *One Piece* constructs a nuanced vision of manhood that values courage, honour, and emotional depth in equal measure. Building on this, the next section will examine masculinity and the body, with a focus on Tanjiro. His physicality is emphasised as a testament to his transition into manhood and strength.

## 4.4. Physical Prowess as A sign of Strength and How it Reinforces Symbolic and Material Power

Murray Drummond (2011) argues that men are taught to tolerate and endure pain, thereby reinforcing bodily monitoring and the belief that a muscular physique symbolises true masculinity. This ideology creates hierarchies where certain male bodies are valued over others, reinforcing unequal symbolic and material power. Symbolic power operates through cultural ideals that position muscularity as a marker of masculinity and leadership. Material power manifests itself in how these traits grant men higher status and authority in both fictional narratives and real-world contexts (Steyn, 2015). Hegemonic masculinity, aligned with these symbolic and material values, marginalises those who do not conform to rigid gender norms, positioning them as weaker or less legitimate. For years, masculinity has been constructed through the body, with the muscular male figure serving as both a symbol and proof of

masculinity. This framing dictates how men define themselves and how society perceives them. (Sallinen et al., 2019).

### 4.4.1. Analysis of Tanjiro




Figure 2. Makio, Suma and Hinatsuru comment on Tanjiro's muscular body and tell him he looks manlier since the last time they saw him (Ufotable, 2024).

In anime, these notions are evident in *Demon Slayer*, particularly in Season 4, Episode 3, titled "Recovered Tanjiro" In this episode, Tanjiro has recovered from his battle with a Twelve Kizuki Demon. The opening scene features a group of young slayers engaged in intense training, which closely resembles a military-style boot camp. The sessions are gruelling and physically demanding, reinforcing traditional masculine ideals of strength, resilience, and discipline. (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). However, unlike the other slayers, Tanjiro breezes through the training without a sweat, unlike the others, who find the training tiring and gruelling. Tengen subjects the trainees to relentless drills and beatings and frames it as a sense of caring because he is conditioning the slayers to the brutality of war. This episode emphasises the common anime trope that enduring pain, particularly towards males, leads to greater strength and great power (Harriger et al., 2022).

Later in the episode, Tanjiro interacts with Uzui Tengen's wives, Hinatsuru, Makio, and Suma, who are positioned in supportive roles, thereby reinforcing the unequal and symbolic material power accorded to male and female characters. Their primary function in the episode is to prepare and distribute food for the slayers, subtly reinforcing societally inscribed gender norms, which dictate how men and women are expected to behave. This depiction aligns with common

media narratives associating women with caregiving roles (Jewkes, 2015). Their conversation with Tanjiro further reinforces heteronormative gender performance; they express gratitude for his role in saving Makio and express that they would not be here if it were not for him. Their conversation with Tanjiro further highlights heteronormative gender expectations. The girls thank Tanjiro for saving Makio; they attribute her survival to his physical and mental strength. The girls go on to comment on his newly developed muscular physique and scarred body, stating that he now looks "manly". The moment between him and the girls highlights how symbolic and material power operate. Tanjiro's physical prowess and body scars are represented as a symbol of power and endurance (Steyn, 2015). Tanjiro's body functions as a symbol of strength, authority, endurance, and social recognition. His scars and newly developed muscles signify the physical challenges he has overcome. They simultaneously confer symbolic authority, marking him as a figure of power within the gendered hierarchy of the anime world (Drummond, 2011). Visual compositions, including close-ups and zoom-outs that highlight his enlarged biceps, six-pack abs, and battle scars, further emphasise this transformation. The camera work communicates that Tanjiro's physical growth and visible scars signify his entry into manhood and the attainment of hegemonic masculinity.

Notably, the episode does not feature any female *Demon Slayer*s participating in Hashira training, which further reinforces the idea that strength and resilience are often perceived as primarily male traits. Additionally, the episode highlights Uzui Tengen's material power; despite losing his arm in battle against the demons, he continues to embody strength and authority. This demonstrates that masculinity is not only about having a healthy body but also about the ability to endure hardship and remain powerful despite physical limitations (Harriger et al., 2022).

This analysis of Tanjiro highlights how certain male bodies accrue both social and symbolic validation. Tanjiro's interactions with Uzui's wives illustrate how gendered dynamics shape perceptions of value by assigning dominance to physically strong men while relegating women to supportive roles (Drummond, 2011). This portrayal reflects a broader pattern in anime and popular media, where a man's worth is often tied to his physical prowess and ability to protect others.

### 4.4.2. Summary

Tanjiro's transformation embodies the link between masculinity, the body, and power in *Demon Slayer*. His muscular physique and battle scars symbolise endurance, strength, and authority,

reflecting societal ideals that equate manhood with physical resilience. The episode contrasts male strength with female home life and domesticity. Tengen's wives in the scene/episode are confined to caregiving roles, reinforcing gendered hierarchies of symbolic and material power. The anime's visual emphasis on Tanjiro's body, therefore, constructs masculinity as both a social performance and a marker of worth. Ultimately, his body becomes a visual testament to hegemonic masculinity, where endurance and protection define manhood while marginalising femininity and emotional expression. The next theme of this analysis will examine the interactions between masculinity and femininity, exploring how gendered implications are reinforced in masculinity and how it engages with the hyper-feminine body in shounen anime, particularly in the battle between Daki, Gyutaro, and the Demon Slayers.

## 4.5. *Demon Slayer* and *One Piece*: Hegemonic Masculinity and the Feminine

This theme explores the intersection of hegemonic masculinity and femininity. Feminist scholars such as Judith Butler (1990) and Sara Ahmed (2016) argue that heterosexuality and heteronormativity are linked to societal notions of normalcy due to their binary understanding of gender. By positioning "man" and "woman" as the only legitimate categories, this framework occupies a privileged place in social structures. It functions as a patriarchal system that shapes people's daily lives, reinforcing rigid gender norms. Phallocentrism, a feminist concept rooted in heterosexuality, patriarchy, and hegemonic masculinity, legitimises the subordination of women in society. It posits that gender rests "on the penis as the decider of the future, two sexes as two paths: the sexual binary as fate, as fated, as fatalism" (Ahmed, 2016, p. 25). Both phallocentrism and heterosexuality operate as systems of power that regulate gender dynamics, reinforcing a patriarchal and oppositional understanding of male-female relations. Representation, in turn, reproduces these ideals, sustaining hierarchical gender norms. As a form of language, representation can either distort or reveal societal assumptions about women (Butler, 1994). It often functions along an axis of mind and body, reinforcing notions of domination and submission. Women are commonly associated with the body, while men are linked to the mind, positioning men as the bearers of knowledge and authority. In contrast, women are reduced to objects of control. This idea further entrenches the belief that masculinity is the default subject position (Beauvoir, 1975).

A striking illustration of these dynamics is evident in *Demon Slayer*, particularly in the battle between Gyutaro, Daki, and the Demon Slayer Corps, which consists of Tanjiro, Tengen Uzui (Sound Hashira), Zenitsu, and Inosuke. This confrontation serves as a compelling representation of the intersection between hegemonic masculinity and hyper-femininity. Hyper-femininity refers to the exaggerated adherence to traditional feminine gender roles, expressions, and behaviours (Butler, 1999; Ahmed, 2016). Through this battle, the anime reinforces the power imbalances embedded in gendered representations, highlighting how masculinity and femininity are both constructed and contested within popular media.

### 4.5.1. Daki vs Tanjiro in Demon Slayer

In this episode, Daki is depicted as a femme fatale, an archetype deeply rooted in patriarchal discourse. Historically, the femme fatale was revered as a powerful, sexually autonomous figure associated with creation and mysticism. However, as patriarchal structures solidified, this archetype was distorted and redefined as a symbol of danger and evil (Grossman, 2020). Consequently, the femme fatale became subordinate to the male hero, who came to represent order and control. Through the contrasting portrayals of male and female characters, this battle highlights how strength, dominance, and resilience are coded as masculine traits, while femininity is often depicted through vulnerability, dependency, and hyper-sexualisation. Hyper-sexualisation refers to the tendency to value a person solely for their sexual appeal (ÖzdiNç, 2020). This contrast underscores the gendered construction of power, reinforcing the traditional roles assigned to men and women within the narrative.



Figure 3. Daki and Tanjiro engaged in battle in the entertainment district, the moment represents the turning tide of the battle when Tanjiro gains the upper hand (Ufotable, 2022).

In *Demon Slayer* Season 3 (Entertainment District Arc), Episode 7, Tanjiro is engaged in battle with Daki, a member of the Twelve Kizuki. The Twelve Kizuki are an elite group of powerful demons under the direct control of Kibutsuji Muzan (the Demon King). They are the direct antagonists of the valiant Demon Slayer Corps. Daki is depicted as a femme fatale; she is cruel, confident, vain, and dominant, using her beauty as a tool of control to reinforce her superiority over Tanjiro. Throughout the battle, she hurls insults at him, calling him ugly and repeatedly telling him how beautiful she is, implying that her beauty gives her the power to do whatever she wants. She repeatedly insults him on how weak he is and goes as far as calling him a "Hideous nasty little shit" as she easily overpowers him (Grossman, 2020).

The femme fatale archetype that Daki is depicted through is a patriarchal concept. Thus, the woman is always subordinated to the male hero (ÖzdiNç, 2020). Therefore, despite initially dominating the fight and inflicting a brutal injury on Tanjiro, Daki is fated to lose. Her downfall is foreshadowed by her cruelty, particularly when she mercilessly attacks innocent humans in the Light District. Her actions enrage Tanjiro, pushing him beyond his limits, especially when she refers to humans as "filthy creatures who deserve to die and burn in hell." This moment catalyses Tanjiro's transformation. Fuelled by righteous anger and a sense of justice, Tanjiro attains newfound strength, embodying the ideals of hegemonic masculinity (Connell &

Messerschmidt, 2005; Feasey, 2008; Scharrer & Blackburn, 2018). Despite his injuries, he acts without concern for his well-being, driven solely by the need to avenge the innocent and prevent further bloodshed. His self-sacrificial nature, unwavering determination, and moral duty to protect humanity elevate him as the ultimate male hero (Xue et al., 2024). In the battle, anger becomes a source of power, and Tanjiro's actions are framed as a noble response to injustice.

This scene is pivotal not only for Tanjiro but also for Daki, as it marks the beginning of her character's devolution. Her initial persona as a dominant femme fatale begins to unravel, revealing a deeper dependency that weakens her position in the narrative. Her composed and confident performance of femininity, characterised by seduction, elegance, and dominance, deteriorates into something monstrous, erratic, and desperate. When faced with a challenge, her persona crumbles; her once-soft, smooth, and poised expressions shift to frustration and disbelief. She screams and stomps like a child, and her beauty is no longer emphasised (ÖzdiNç, 2020). Meanwhile, Tanjiro grows more confident, stronger, and fiercer. His portrayal aligns with the ideals of heroism, bravery, kindness, and resilience, while Daki is framed as vain, cruel, and hyper-feminine, reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies (Beauvoir et al., 2012). When Daki is finally overwhelmed by the combined efforts of Tanjiro, Nezuko, and Uzui Tengen (Sound Hashira), her devolution reaches its peak. In Episode 11, *Many More Lives*, Uzui arrives and effortlessly decapitates her within seconds, dismissing her as too weak to be a Twelve Kizuki demon. At this moment, Daki completely breaks down, wailing for her stronger brother to save her. Her face, now charred and swollen with tears, reinforces her emotional vulnerability when the tide of the fight turns against her (Scharrer & Blackburn, 2018). It is then revealed that, despite holding the rank of a Twelve Kizuki, Daki did not attain this position on her own; she only achieved it through the strength of her brother, whose techniques are far more terrifying and deadly.

Daki and Gyutaro are fused in one body, with Gyutaro residing within Daki and only emerging when she needs his help. When her brother appears, his overwhelming strength is immediately evident, not only through his abilities but also through the weapons he wields. He wields two sickles covered in blood, symbolising his power and brutality. These moments in the show diminish Daki's once-confident femme fatale persona, reducing her to a whiny, childlike figure. Gyutaro's abilities, such as "Flying Blood Sickles", "Razor-Thin Blades of Blood", and "Rampant Arc Rampage", are clear indicators of his superior strength and masculinity

(Scharrer & Blackburn, 2018). Compared to Daki, he operates on an entirely different level; his dominance is instantly demonstrated when he effortlessly dodges Tengen's attack despite Tengen having previously decapitated Daki with little resistance. In retaliation, Gyutaro lands a devastating first strike on Uzui Tengen, immediately establishing himself as a formidable opponent. At this moment, Tengen and the younger slayers realise they are up against a strong and smart adversary.

Gyutaro's presence further diminishes Daki's role in the battle moments after Uzui Tengen decapitates her. As he heals his sister's charred face, he simultaneously belittles her, telling her that she does not have much of a brain and should focus on maintaining her beauty, as that is where her true worth lies. This moment invokes the patriarchal mind-body dichotomy, reinforcing the idea that Daki's value is purely aesthetic rather than intellectual or combative (Tiukało, 2018). This notion is further emphasised when Uzui attacks the pair. While Gyutaro quickly reacts to the attack, Daki fails to do the same, leading to her head being severed once again. As a result, Tanjiro and Uzui, being the strongest warriors, take on Gyutaro, while the other slayers focus on Daki. Daki's femininity, once a source of power, is now framed as a plea for protection, reducing her ultimate identity to that of a dependent little sister rather than an independent warrior (Butler, 1999).

### 4.5.2. Summary

In *Demon Slayer: Entertainment District Arc*, Daki is portrayed as a femme fatale—confident, vain, and cruel—whose power is tied to beauty and sexuality. However, her dominance unravels when she faces Tanjiro, whose righteous anger and endurance embody hegemonic masculinity and moral heroism. As the battle progresses, Daki's confidence collapses into emotional instability and dependency, exposing how femininity is coded as weakness within patriarchal narratives. Her brother Gyutaro's emergence reinforces masculine superiority through strength and control, while Daki's value is reduced to her appearance. This contrast reveals the gendered hierarchy of symbolic and material power. The next theme will examine how *One Piece* portrays male and female characters through their abilities, further interrogating how hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity shape their representation.

### 4.5.3. An analysis of male and female Characters and their abilities

In anime, the representation of how hegemonic masculinity intersects with the hyper-feminine body, the term refers to a body that embodies or is perceived as expressing femininity to an extreme or exaggerated manner. The hyper-feminine body is often characterised by traditionally feminine traits, such as a focus on appearance and adherence to feminine beauty standards (Butler, 1999; Gill, 2011). This is often achieved through the abilities or powers that the characters possess. For men, their powers tend to reflect how strong they are; their strength is unbridled, raw power and untamed, and the women, on the other hand, no matter how strong they are, must be visually desirable; there is always a theme of sexuality and desirability tied to their abilities (Scharrer & Blackburn, 2018; Drummond, 2011).

In episodes 1113 and 1114 of *One Piece*, the Navy embarks on a mission to rescue their fellow officer, Captain Coby. The colours, patterns, and names assigned to male and female characters reveal clear gender biases. When the Navy lands, their first soldier, Kujaku, possesses the Whip-Whip Fruit. Her ability allows her to control anything she whips, including both enemies and inanimate objects, compelling them to follow her commands. During the battle, she whips a building, causing it to obey her orders, leaving the enemy forces confused. As they try to understand what is happening, they spot Kujaku in action. She taunts them, asking, “Do you want to get disciplined?” a line laden with dominatrix undertones. Instead of reacting with fear, the enemies appear overjoyed, willingly submitting to her "discipline." In the following scene, they are depicted with heart-shaped eyes and tongues sticking out, seemingly content with their treatment. Kujaku’s attire further reinforces her sexualised portrayal. She wears a short pink skirt, thigh-high boots, and an open-chested design that accentuates her breasts (Dal’Berto, 2023).

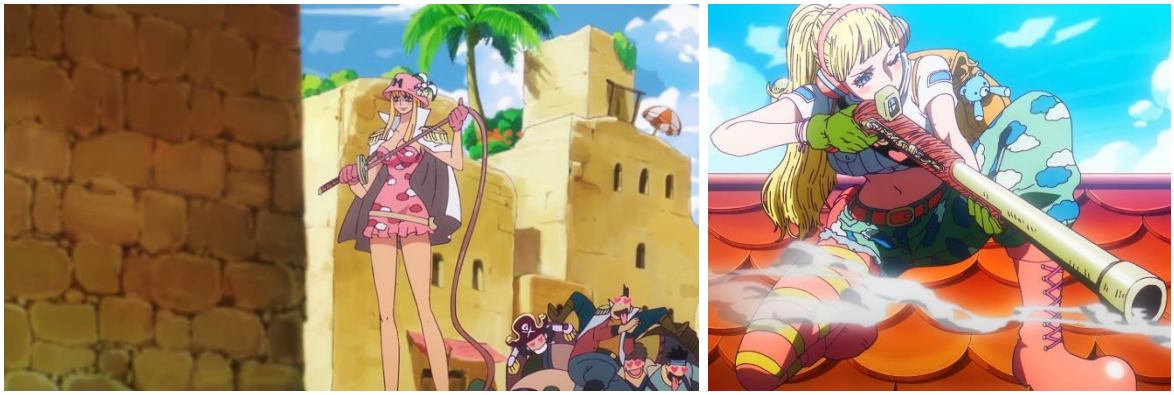


Figure 2.1 Left: Kujaku in her highly sexualised military attire; the scene shows the villains on the left, who are satisfied to have been “disciplined by her.” Figure 2.2. Right: Hibari is in her military attire; her rifle shoots non-lethal flowers that immobilise the enemy (Toei Animation, 2024).

The scene then shifts to Hibari, a Navy HQ commander, who wears a pink jacket with fur trim, a short, pleated skirt, and leggings, blending a cute, casual style with military practicality. Hibari is a sniper, yet astoundingly, her gun does not shoot bullets; it shoots beautiful flowers. Unlike Kujaku, her wardrobe is not overly sexualised; the colour pink in her and Kujaku's attire is used to reinforce traditional notions of femininity. The colours reinforce their soft and youthful personas despite their roles as marines (Koller, 2008). The visual representations align with broader representations in anime, where femininity is linked with aesthetics rather than physical strength or combat effectiveness. In contrast, Grus Prince, a Navy admiral, possesses the Glorp-Glorp fruit and can create powerful soldiers, solid structures, and potent offensive attacks. In the final scene of the episode, Vice Admiral Garp, also known as the "Navy Hero", executes a powerful attack called the "Galaxy Impact," a name that carries strong masculine connotations and reinforces his status as a legendary warrior. This ties into hegemonic masculinity, where male strength is depicted not only as physical but also as world-altering and heroic, thereby cementing men as dominant figures in militarised spaces (Drummond, 2011; Scharrer & Blackburn, 2018).






Figure 2.3. Left and Figure 2.4. The images show "The Navy Hero" Garp threatening the pirates below and jumping from his Navy ship, preparing to devastate the pirates with his Galaxy Impact. (One Piece, 2024)

The punch destroys an entire island, levelling the town and sending shockwaves across the landscape. The overwhelming visual impact of the scene showcases Garp with white eyes, red Haki, and dark patches surrounding him, reinforcing the sheer strength of his attack. These visuals evoke dominant masculine ideals of power and control, aligning with broader societal

representations of male figures in anime. (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005b). This masculine portrayal of Garp's attack as raw power is further legitimised by Garp's position in a hierarchical military structure where strength equates to authority and heroism.

Colours are an essential factor in reinforcing heteronormative gender stereotypes. Colours are often associated with cognitive stereotypes; blue is typically linked to masculinity, and pink is often associated with femininity. Hence the constant theme in shonen anime to overuse warm colours (Pink, purple, etc) when it comes to female characters and the use of darker colours (Black, blue, etc) when male characters are displayed in shows (Xue et al., 2024). The repeated use of these visual cues enables the construction and maintenance of rigid gender roles, aligning female characters with gentleness and aesthetic appeal while associating them with aggression and strength.

This gendered colour coding is evident in both *One Piece* and *Demon Slayer,* where the abilities of female characters often exhibit hyper-feminine aesthetics. Their power and abilities are often linked with beauty and sexual connotations, even when it may not be necessary (Xue et al., 2024; Cortes, 2014). This feminisation of power diminishes female agency as their abilities are linked to desirability. Male power is framed as an unquestioned necessity for survival and leadership in shounen anime (Scharrer & Blackburn, 2018).

### 4.5.4. Summary

The visual representation of power between men and women in One Piece reveals gender hierarchies. They reveal how hegemonic masculinity and hyper-femininity intersect in shounen anime. Male power, as seen in Garp's "Galaxy Impact," is depicted as raw, destructive, and authoritative, symbolising masculine dominance. In contrast, female characters like Kujaku and Hibari display powers tied to beauty, sexuality, and emotional appeal, reinforcing the hyper-feminine ideal. Their abilities and appearances emphasise desirability over strength, limiting female agency. The gendered use of light colours for femininity and dark colours for masculinity further maintains heteronormative binaries. The next section examines how femininity is represented in *One Piece*, particularly through Luffy's interactions with the Amazon Lily warriors and Boa Hancock. It then explores Mitsuri Kanroji's journey to becoming a Demon Slayer, drawing a comparison with Gyomei Himejima.

## 4.6. Performing Femininity in One Piece and Demon Slayer

Femininity in anime is often a carefully curated performance, shaped by cultural expectations and reinforced through character design, behaviour, and narrative roles. In *One Piece* and *Demon Slayer*, Boa Hancock and Mitsuri Kanroji embody distinct yet exaggerated forms of femininity, highlighting how gender is both constructed and performed (Ahmed, 2016; Butler, 1999a). Boa Hancock's evolution to a Dere is a characterisation that reinforces hyperfeminine gender performance. The analysis will explore Boa and Mitsuri and their portrayals reinforce and challenge conventional understandings of femininity, particularly concerning power, desirability, and agency (Butler, 1990; Cortes, 2014).

### 4.6.1. The Portrayal of Boa Hancock, Amazon Lily in One-Piece

In episode 409, Luffy lands on the Amazon Lily Island after being sent there by Bartholomew Kuma. After landing on Amazon Lily, Luffy mistakenly eats a parasite mushroom, causing mushrooms to grow on his body and rendering him unconscious. The island's women, believing him to be a girl, take him in. Once they discover he is a man, which is strictly forbidden on the island, they imprison him. When Luffy wakes up, he is treated as a spectacle, but the situation escalates when he yells at the warriors, prompting them to attack. Despite their use of Haki, a technique that strengthens their attack, they fail to land a single blow on Luffy; he effortlessly escapes despite lacking knowledge on how to use Haki. Although the Amazon Lily is presented as a nation of powerful warriors, their inability to capture a rookie pirate undermines this portrayal. The episode reinforces hegemonic masculinity by legitimising male dominance, as Luffy's effortless superiority diminishes the island's supposed strength (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Episode 410, "Everyone Falls in Love! Pirate Empress Hancock", introduces Boa Hancock, the Pirate Empress, leader of the Kuja Pirates, and ruler of Amazon Lily. She is also one of the Seven Warlords of the Sea, a title that reinforces her portrayal as powerful, feared, and untouchable. When Boa makes her entrance, the camera employs a body scan, a technique commonly used in media through the lens of the male gaze, which promotes the objectification of women on television, first focusing on her legs before zooming in on her chest, with an angle that emphasises her breasts thus positioning her as an object of desire (Mulvey, 1975). She possesses the Love-Love Fruit (*Mero Mero no Mi*), which allows her to make opponents fall

in love with her, either by looking at her or experiencing an intense feeling of arousal. Once captivated, she can petrify them, turning them into stone.

Her interaction with Luffy marks the beginning of her transformation into a *yandere*, a character trope in which a powerful or independent woman becomes obsessively devoted to a male figure. As the story progresses, Boa shifts from a feared and formidable leader to a woman whose identity becomes increasingly centred around Luffy. This transformation aligns her with traditional notions of femininity, such as passivity, cooperativeness, and nurturing (Burke & Stets, 2009). Simone de Beauvoir (1975) argues that in patriarchal systems, women are often reduced to their relationships with men. Boa's character arc follows this trajectory; despite being a powerful pirate, her strength and abilities become increasingly overshadowed by her growing romantic obsession with Luffy (Burke & Stets, 2009; Green, 2013).

Episode 412, One Piece: "Heartless judgment, Margaret is Turned to Stone" is one of the pivotal moments where her character transforms into a "Lovestruck" Character as the show depicts her interaction with Luffy. In the episode, Boa discovers that Luffy is on the Island. After seeing Luffy upon her arrival on the Island, she instructs the Island warriors and the Kuja pirates to capture Luffy. In their third attempt, the warriors finally capture Luffy. Even then, the task was made to seem difficult; when he is finally captured, Boa orders his execution. However, Margaret, who saves Luffy's life and gets to know him, wonders if this is the right thing to do. Margaret decides to speak up for Luffy and tells Boa that Luffy is a good man and would not harm anyone.

Boa appears to appreciate Margaret's honesty, but her cruelty soon comes to full display. She convinces her that everything is fine by claiming she loves honest people. Boa Hancock is depicted as a cruel and deceptive leader; she wields her authority in a manner that lacks integrity and honour. This aspect is highlighted when, instead of showing mercy, after saying she loves honest people, she petrifies Margaret and her friends, turning them into stone. The scene in the episode also illustrates how justice is often portrayed as emanating from the active male hero rather than female agency (Flemming, 2015). The sequence of events reinforces "idealised masculinity that valorise the notion of strong active males collectively risking their wellbeing for the greater good of the wider community" (Higate & Hopton, 2005, p. 434). Luffy embodies these ideals as he springs into action and questions Boa's cruelty when the female warriors in the arena do nothing as their friends face execution (Wedgwood et al., 2023). This oppositional representation of Luffy and Hancock reinforces patriarchal tropes where

women are either victims who require male intervention or oppressive leaders who misuse their power (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005)

In episode 414, "All-Out Special Power Battle. Gum-Gum Vs. Snake-Snake" Luffy is engaged in battle against Boa's powerful sisters, who possess strong Devil Fruit abilities. In the episode, Luffy fights to prevent the execution of Margaret and her friends. The episode simultaneously portrays Luffy as a self-righteous male hero. It reinforces hegemonic masculinity, in which women are perceived as being unable to rival the strength of a male (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005b). In the battle, the sisters are at an advantage against Luffy because they know how to use Haki. However, Luffy still overpowers the experienced sisters and defeats them even though the odds are stacked in their favour. After Luffy wins the battle, Boa offers him a choice: either he claims a ship to return to his friends or prevent the execution of Margaret and her friends. Boa expects Luffy to prioritise his self-interests, and to her surprise, Luffy chooses to save Margaret and her friends. The moment subverts Boa's view of masculine selfishness; however, ultimately, the scene still reinforces hegemonic masculinity. Luffy emerges as the self-sacrificing hero, thereby embodying the idealised male protector tenet of hegemonic masculinity (Jewkes et al., 2015).

In episode 417, "Love is a Hurricane! Love-Love Hancock" Boa falls for Luffy, and she becomes "Lovesick", a condition that can kill her if her love is not reciprocated. Her "Lovesickness" marks the beginning of her descent into a Yandere. This dere (lovesick) archetype is sweet, caring, and innocent, but can switch into violent and psychotic levels of devotion when it comes to her love interest. This transformation into a Yandere makes her male-centred; she loses her autonomy as a powerful leader, with her primary goal becoming marriage to Luffy (Cortes, 2014). In the episode, her coldness is depicted as a coping mechanism stemming from her previous experience as a slave to world nobles, which led to the development of her dominant and cold personality. Her devotion to Luffy softens her, while the narrative simultaneously repositions her agency in relation to the male protagonist. The "lovesickness" condition she develops is revealed to be fatal unless Luffy reciprocates her feelings. This notion reinforces patriarchal narratives in anime, where strong women succumb to emotional dependence on an idealised hero (Scharrer & Blackburn, 2018).

This shift in her personality leads to her distortion of reality, causing her to grossly misinterpret Luffy's kindness as romantic advances and marriage proposals. A key example of her personality shift is in episode 469, "Love is a Hurricane! Love-Love Hancock" At this stage of

One Piece, Luffy is desperately fighting to save his brother Ace from execution by the Navy during the Marine Ford War. Initially, Boa refused to join the war effort despite the consequence of losing her warlord status. If her status were revoked, the Island would be recognised as a pirate Island and no longer a protected state, thereby leaving it vulnerable to Navy attacks. However, when Luffy asks for her help, she immediately agrees without hesitation, thereby solidifying her transformation into a traditionally submissive woman (Burke & Stets, 2009; Green, 2013). Boa's descent into a Yandere is framed as character development; she becomes kinder, yet her kindness seems to be centred around and toward Luffy. The episode highlights her strength as she easily overpowers Smoker, a formidable Navy soldier who has previously overpowered Luffy. She further assists Luffy by helping him acquire the key to Ace's handcuffs. After handing Luffy the key, he hugs Boa, and she begins hallucinating about marriage and "wifely" duties on the battlefield.

Her hallucination of marriage ties into broader ideas about gender conformity, where female agency is framed as choice, even when it comes to serving patriarchal norms (Bell & Milic, 2002; Green, 2013). The episode presents Boa's transformation from a feared leader into a devoted love interest as a positive shift rather than a loss of autonomy. Her shift in personality also reinforces gender performance; instead of remaining a powerful, self-determined woman, her entire arc shifts to reinforcing gender norms, where a strong woman has "everything." However, her ultimate goal or idea of success is marriage, and her character becomes framed around it (Gill, 2016; Green, 2013).

### 4.6.2. Summary

Overall, the chapter focuses on how male characters in *One Piece* are portrayed as individuals with agency and goals (Green, 2013). For instance, Luffy's dream/goal is to find *One Piece* and become "the King of the Pirates", Zoro aims to be the "Greatest swordsman in the world", and Akainu seeks to uphold justice. This depiction plays into the common trope that women are emotionally vulnerable when in love. Once Boa falls in love, she becomes submissive and is desperate for Luffy's love and attention. Her character reinforces a traditional notion that "love" tames powerful women, making them softer and emotionally dependent. Luffy remains oblivious to or unaffected by Boa's advances, reinforcing a stoic-oriented masculine archetype. Luffy's rejection of Boa's advances, contrasted with her overwhelming emotions, subtly reinforces the idea that men should focus on adventure and women should focus on love

(Green, 2013; Scharrer & Blackburn, 2018). This arc underscores patriarchal tropes in One Piece, where female characters are often defined by their relationships with men.

### 4.6.3. Demon Slayer: Analysis of Mitsuri Kanroji



Figure 3: Mitsuri Kanroji engaged in battle with a 12 Kizuki Demon (Demon Slayer, 2023). Images may be subject to copyright infringement

In episode 10 of the Swordsmith Village, season 2 of *Demon Slayer,* the audience is introduced to Mitsuri Kanroji, the love Hashira. Her pink and green hair, heart-themed sword and affectionate personality make her fitting of the love Hashira title. Mitsuri's attire is also revealing; she wears loose *Demon Slayer* attire with a deep neckline and exposed thighs. The story introduces Mitusri's backstory. Unlike the brutal backstory of Gyomei Himejima, hers is not as violent or as bloody as Gyomei's or any of the other male slayers. Her backstory is probably the most hyper-feminine in the entire story. The backstory portrays her as strong from a very young age; however, this strength came at the cost of alienation from her peers and the inability to find a husband, which had a profound impact on her mental well-being. In contrast to the strong and valiant Stone Hashira, her "sad" backstory was that she could not find a husband with whom she could spend the rest of her life. Mitsuri asks her mom:

*"Mother, do you ever think I can be someone's bride…. Women are supposed to get married and be someone's wife, right?"*

The statement highlights the rigid gender performance her character is expected to adhere to (Butler, 1999). Furthermore, Mitsuri's statement highlights clear gender differences and hierarchies. Gyomei's character embodies the role of a protector, while Mitsuri is also a Hashira, which automatically makes one a protector. However, she differs from Gyomei because her primary motivation for joining the *Demon Slayer* Corps is framed around marriage (Knights & Kerfoot, 2004). The narrative primarily presents her as a girl seeking a husband and a fairytale ending; this framing aligns with societal norms where marriage is depicted as the pinnacle of female happiness. This aligns with societal norms where a woman's value and happiness are defined in relation to men (Bilston, 2004).

In the episode, Mitsuri is perplexed and disappointed by her parent's suggestion that she can stay home instead of finding a husband. Mitsuri's disappointment at her parent's suggestion that she could stay with them underlines her internalisation of these gendered expectations. This is further reinforced when her prospective marriage is called off; she falls into a state of depression and attempts to conform to traditional femininity by suppressing her strength, appetite, and distinctive appearance. However, she ultimately rejects this self-monitoring, choosing to join the *Demon Slayer* Corps and eventually becoming a Hashira (Srivastava, 2024).

This portrayal disrupts traditional depictions of womanhood in television. Mitsuri is neither weak nor meek, and the narrative does not undermine her strength. She takes on a 12 Kizuki demon on her own; this demonstrates her power and her worthiness of the Hashira title. However, her abilities, as well as the colours and names associated with them, reveal gender associations (Xue et al., 2024). Mitsuri is powerful, and her abilities are powerful, yet the names of her abilities are hyper-feminine. Gyomei, the stone Hashira, can harden his skin using his stone-breathing technique. He also utilises a ball and axe weapon connected by a chain; his attacks and weapons are fitting of him as a strong man. In contrast, Mitsuri utilises the "breath of love." Her abilities are "Cat-legged wings of love" and "Love pangs," and her heart-themed sword transforms into a whip, further highlighting the hyper-feminine representation of women in shonen anime.

Moreover, her desire for marriage remains central to her character, reinforcing heteronormative gender performance. The episode suggests that marriage defines a woman and is a universal aspiration (Hughes, 2020). Her character is depicted as relative to men, reinforcing the idea that women are the "other" while men are the default (Beauvoir, 1953). In contrast, Gyomei's

backstory focuses solely on his journey without emphasising his gender, whereas Mitsuri's narrative continually prompts the audience to consider her womanhood. Her obsession and aspiration for a heteronormative marriage reinforce gender difference, which denies her human potential and freedom, thereby limiting her possibilities and agency. (Tiukało, 2018). The depiction of Mitsuri and the male characters in Demon Slayer reinforces traditional patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes, as women are portrayed as wives while males are depicted as protectors, strong and dominant (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Scharrer & Blackburn, 2018; Fabro, 2021). Furthermore, Mitsuri's story carries a darker message: She had to leave her hometown to find acceptance elsewhere, which suggests that subverting traditional femininity can lead to isolation and social banishment (Fabro, 2021). Mitsuri does resist complete conformity and gender performance; however, her character arc and abilities still reinforce conventional gender roles, limiting her agency and potential, thereby reinforcing hegemonic heteronormativity (Butler, 1999; Robinson, 2016).

## Summary

In summary, this section examines Mitsuri Kanroji's portrayal in *Demon Slayer*, emphasising her hyper-feminine traits despite her strength as a Hashira. Her backstory and motivations revolve around finding a husband, reflecting societal and heteronormative expectations of women. Mitsuri's abilities and appearance reinforce traditional femininity. In contrast with male Hashira, Gyomei, whose power can be interpreted as gender neutral. While she resists some gender norms by asserting her strength, her character remains defined in relation to men. This exploration of Mitsuri's character highlights the complexities of gender performance in *Demon Slayer*. The next analysis will turn to examine the role of fan service in *One Piece* and *Demon Slayer*, particularly through the characters of Stussy and Mitsuri. By exploring Stussy's betrayal of her CP-0 colleagues in *One Piece* and Mitsuri's portrayal in *Demon Slayer*, this theme will highlight how fan service intertwines with narrative developments and character dynamics in ways that reinforce visual objectification.

## 4.7. Absurd bodies: Fan service and the male Gaze

"Fan service" refers to content created in the media that caters to or satisfies fans. Fan service in shonen anime highlights the relationship between producers and the audience. Fan service in anime epitomises the male gaze, where women and girls are depicted in compromising situations. In a society ruled by sexual imbalances, the pleasure of looking is split between the

active male and the passive female (King, 2020). In feminist theory, the male gaze is a masculine heterosexual view that projects its fantasy onto the female figure, shaping her representation to align with its desires. The women are displayed for erotic impact to signify male desire and allure (Mulvey, 1975).

### 4.7.1. Analysis of Stussy

*One Piece* Episode 1104 “A Desperate Situation! The Seraphim's All-out Attack!” In the episode, Stussy and CP-0 are at egghead to capture Dr Vegapunk, who is viewed as a threat to world peace. Stussy is in her CP-0 attire, which is highly sexualised; she wears a short white dress, fishnet stockings with fluffy rims, and a garter belt. A garter belt can be used to outline vintage aesthetics and sensuality. However, in the case of Stussy, the belt is used to accentuate her sensuality and seductiveness, a common trope in anime. Given Stussy’s design, with her large breasts and short skirt, the use of stockings and garter belts enhances her refined and yet alluring image, thereby reinforcing her femme fatale personality. (Robinson, 2016; ÖzdiNç, 2020) . In contrast to the sexual connotations of Stussy that lean into the male gaze, Kaku and Rob Lucci, the two men she is working with, are dressed in sharp white suits that emphasise their power and intimidation. Stussy’s outfit emphasises her sensuality; the episode encapsulates how masculinity intersects with the hyper-feminine body in anime (Robinson, 2016).

In her betrayal of Rob Lucci and Kaku, Stussy’s intelligence, beauty, and allure are highlighted as she subdues the two strong government officials. The scene frames her actions within a fan service paradigm, focusing on her seduction. After incapacitating Kaku, the camera draws attention to her lips as she licks his blood from her fingers, heightening her seductive image before turning to face Lucci.

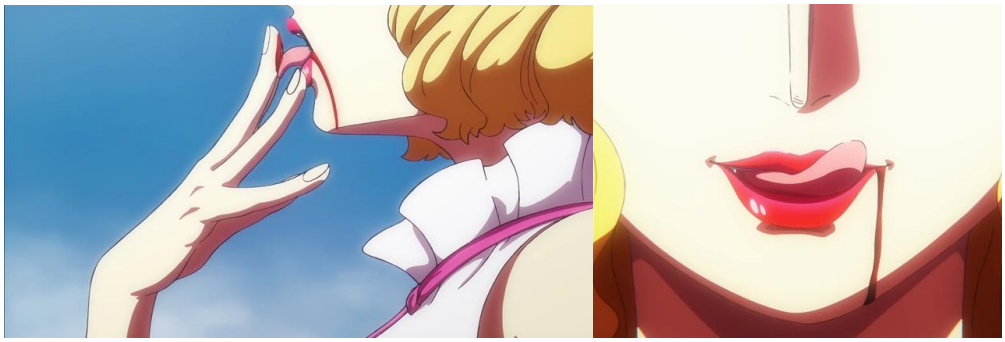


Figure 3.1. Right: features Stussy licking Kaku’s blood of her fingers after subduing him and image Figure 3.2. Left: features Stussy licking her lips as she turns her attention towards Lucci (*One Piece* episode 1104, 2024). Images may be subject to copyright infringement

As Stussy walks towards Lucci, the camera shifts to focus on her lower body, emphasising her thighs and hips. A gust of wind lifts her dress slightly, revealing a glimpse of her buttocks.




Figures 3.3 top left, 3.4 top right, 3.5 bottom left and 3.6 bottom right are a sequence of events of Stussy walking toward Lucci to subdue him (Toei Animation, 2024). Images may be subject to copyright infringement

This scene aligns with typical male gaze framing in fanservice in anime; she is simultaneously depicted as powerful and as an object of desire (Tiukało, 2018). The gentle and dominant way she subdues Lucci emphasises her refined and teasing demeanour that makes her powers as much about her alluring appearance as her brilliant and strategic mind. When Lucci attempts to strike her upon realising her betrayal, she evades Lucci's attack by utilising an afterimage and easily evades the attack. She reappears behind him, puts her arms around Lucci, and presses herself against him, and the camera immediately zooms in on her disproportionately large breasts, which further sexualises the encounter. The scene highlights how ridiculous fan service is because one of Stussy's breasts is as large as her head; she should be barely able to move due to the size of her breasts.

### 4.7.2. Analysis of Mitsuri Kanroji

In Season 3, Episode 1 of *Demon Slayer*, a sequence framed through the male gaze takes place as Mitsuri is depicted in a hot spring. The scene reduces her to a sexual object to be visually consumed by the audience. The scene begins with her seated in the water and her long ponytail

covering her breasts (Mulvey, 1975). It then zooms in on her back, emphasising her curvaceous figure, before panning out to reveal her partially nude form in the hot spring. A body scan shot follows, moving upwards from her hips and focusing on her face, underscoring her sexualisation within the scene (Kimmel, 1994).



Figure 3.7 top and 3.8 bottom are a sequence of events where Mitsuri is taking a bath and stands up when she hear's Tanjiro's loud echoing voice. (Ufotable ,2023).

This cinematic technique is commonly associated with the male gaze, which deliberately directs attention to Mitsuri's body, framing her as an object of visual pleasure rather than an autonomous character (Mulvey, 1975). The prolonged focus on her physique reinforces the hyper-feminisation of her character, aligning with established tropes of sexualised female representation in anime.

In Mitsuri's next appearance, she is once again subjected to fan service. Having finished her bath, she is now dressed in a pink *yukata*, a traditional summer kimono, that is loosely tied, revealing her cleavage.




Figures: 3.9 left and 3.10 right feature Mitsuri running down the stairs tell Tanjiro about the sadness she feels over being ignored when she said hello to him (Ufotable, 2023).

As she runs down the stairs to greet Tanjiro and express her sadness over being ignored by a fellow slayer, the camera zooms in, directly focusing on her large breasts. The exaggerated animation further emphasises their movement, as they jiggle abnormally and excessively, reinforcing her character's sexualisation for the presumed male audience (Kimmel,1994; Mulvey, 1975).

## 4.8. Pervert Archetype in anime

The pervert archetype in anime has been a long-standing presence and has become a staple in shounen anime. The trope suggests that sexual desire and the pursuit of sexual gratification primarily drive men. The archetype often works in tandem with fan service and plays a role in the objectification of women within the genre. This trope reinforces phallocentrism, the view centred on a male experience that reduces women to objects of sexual desire for men (Rine, 2010). "The paradox of phallocentrism in all its manifestations is that it depends on the castrated women to give order and meaning to its world" (Mulvey, 1975, p. 803) For instance, in *One Piece*, the side character Sanji is obsessed with breasts and sometimes attempts to spy on his female crewmates, Nami and Robin, while they bathe. The archetype reserves the act of looking at fragmented female bodies to men, thereby normalising the objectification of women and reinforcing problematic gender dynamics within the genre (Kimmel, 1994). Sanji frequently makes comments about women's bodies, particularly their breasts, and often becomes flustered and distracted by them. Sanji's actions reflect what Laura Mulvey (1975, p. 809) refers to as to-be-looked-at-ness, the notion that refers to how a woman is coded and "displayed for erotic impact" (Kimmel, 1994).

### 4.8.1. Sanji's Excitement

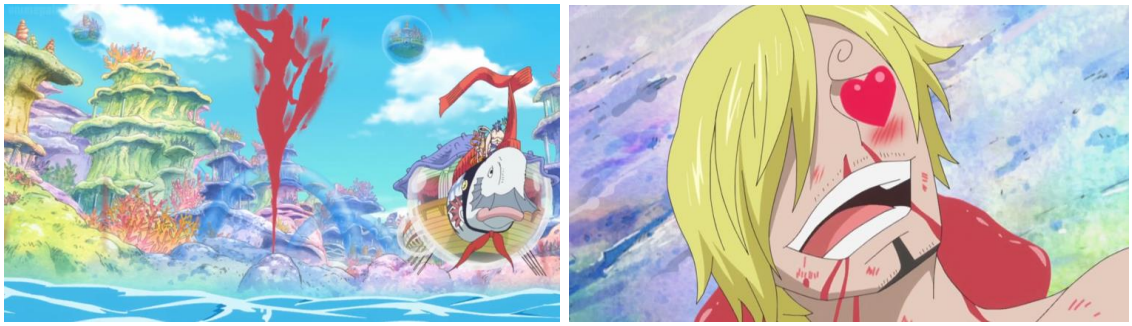
A notable example of this can be seen in *One Piece* episode 528, "Sanji's Excitement Blowout." In the episode, Luffy and his crew/friends arrive at "Fishman Island," and Sanji eagerly anticipates meeting the mermaids who reside on the Island. Upon seeing them, he immediately jumps into the water with heart-shaped eyes, objectifying the mermaids as he views them as objects of satisfaction and desire (Mulvey, 1975). The framing of the moments aligns with Mulvey's male gaze, which reproduces scopophilia where looking is a source of pleasure; the scene positions female characters as passive objects meant to gratify the presumed male audience.

A key scene in the episode is when Sanji finds himself in a compromising situation because his head is pressed against a mermaid's breasts. Initially unaware of his position, he engages in an internal monologue, making remarks about the soft place where he is laying his head. He wonders what soft object he is lying on. Sanji then speculates that he could be lying on a marshmallow and considers this to be impossible. He then states that the soft object has a milky, sweet smell; he does not know what it is, but it makes him feel comfortable. He then wonders if this soft object is a special fruit that only exists on the fish-man Island. He begins sniffing this soft object to find out what it is. The moment exemplifies Abigale Rine's (2010) argument that phallocentrism centres on male experiences and desires, thereby reducing women to instruments of pleasure. In that moment, the mermaid's body does not belong to her; it is an object for Sanji to explore, investigate and derive satisfaction from.

When Sanji finally opens his eyes, he realises he is lying on her breasts; his reaction is exaggerated and overtly sexual. He blushes profusely, his eyes turn heart-shaped, and he yells in excitement. Sanji pushes his head closer to the mermaid's breasts. He starts intensely sniffing her breasts repeatedly and makes sounds which suggest he is overstimulated and/or excited.







The images feature Sanji sniffing the mermaid breasts in Fishman Island and gets a nose bleed due to, too much excitement (Toei Animation, 2014).

With each sniff, he becomes increasingly excited, as evidenced by his heart-shaped eyes, which grow larger after each sniff. This builds to a climax where Sanji experiences a massive nosebleed in the shape of a mermaid. The mermaid in the scene functions as a metaphorical sex object. Sanji's nosebleed can be interpreted as an ejaculation or orgasm, as increasingly suggestive noises and excitement accompany his intense sniffing. This scene reflects what Raewyn Connel (2005) describes as hegemonic masculinity, where male sexuality is framed as uncontrollable, instinctive and even celebrated. Sanji's perversion is depicted as humorous and unproblematic, reinforcing the idea that male sexual desires are something that women must tolerate.

A similar portrayal of male perversion is depicted in Demon Slayer through Zenitsu. The analysis will shift over and examine how Zenitsu is constructed as a perverted character and how his behaviour reinforces problematic gender narratives.

### 4.8.2. Zenitsu

Zenitsu is introduced in the series *Demon Slayer,* season 1, episode 11, when he and Tanjiro are assigned a mission to the Tsuzumi Mansion, where a demon has trapped several children. While Zenitsu fits the pervert archetype common in anime, his portrayal is less extreme than characters like Sanji from *One Piece*. However, his behaviour still reflects a troubling pattern of gendered dynamics in anime (Wittenfelt, 2020; Butler, 1999). When Zenitsu is first introduced, he is clinging to a woman, begging her to marry him because he could die at any moment as a *Demon Slayer*. The woman's visible discomfort contrasts with the scene's comedic framing, which is reinforced by the light-hearted background music. This tone of the scene minimises the woman's distress, reducing her discomfort to a punchline. Zenitsu's

persistence in grabbing onto her, despite her clear rejection, exemplifies how anime often normalises sexual harassment tropes (Cortes, 2014; Wittenfelt, 2020).

To the anime's credit, Tanjiro's reprimand introduces a moment of critique, positioning Zenitsu's behaviour as inappropriate and unwelcome. However, this challenge is minimised and undercut by the story, which quickly shifts to emphasising Zenitsu's loyalty and bravery in protecting Nezuko, Tanjiro's sister, from harm. He later develops an obsession with Nezuko, yet this dynamic is rarely interrogated within the story. Instead, Zenitsu's antics are consistently played for laughs, suggesting that his behaviour is ultimately harmless or even endearing (Cortes, 2014; Wittenfelt, 2020).

The narrative trivialises sexual harassment, thereby reinforcing misogyny that downplays the objectification of women. A significant issue in the episode is the presentation of the issue as normal and comedic, thereby reinforcing power dynamics that men lack self-control over their desires while simultaneously conditioning women to accept the behaviour. This aligns with the arguments of Laura Mulvey (1975) and Michael Kimmel (1994), who examine the power and representation of gender in the media, specifically how the media constructs gender relations by portraying men as active participants in desire and women as passive objects and recipients of desire. Sanji and Zenitsu's characters serve as an example of how shounen anime reproduces gender dynamics, reinforcing both the male gaze and hegemonic masculinity. While the archetype is meant to be comedic, it reinforces broader views on how the media normalises and legitimises the domination of female bodies by men on television. This not only reinforces problematic gender dynamics in anime but also reflects larger societal issues such as power, sexuality, and masculinity. This framing reflects a broader trend in anime, where male characters' harassment and inappropriate behaviour toward women are often trivialised through comedy. The narrative's failure to address the gendered power dynamics at play speaks to how popular media can perpetuate harmful norms, particularly in genres where hyper-masculine and comedic tropes converge (Butler, 1999; Podara, n.d..).

### 4.8.3. Summary

In Summary, this section examines fan service, the male gaze, and the pervert archetype in shonen anime, highlighting how women are sexualised and objectified for male pleasure. Characters like Stussy (*One Piece*) and Mitsuri (*Demon Slayer*) are depicted in revealing outfits and sexualised situations, combining power with hyper-feminine traits to appeal to the presumed male audience. The pervert archetype, exemplified by Sanji and Zenitsu, portrays

male sexual desire as uncontrollable and humorous, normalising harassment and reinforcing hegemonic masculinity. These portrayals position women as passive objects and men as active participants, perpetuating misogyny and patriarchal gender norms. Overall, the media frames female characters through sexuality while legitimising male dominance and desire.

# CHAPTER 5: LIMITATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

## 5.1. Limitations

This study is limited by its reliance on visual analysis, which is inherently subjective. Unlike textual or archival analysis, visual interpretation is influenced by the researcher's educational background, theoretical framework, and personal perspectives. To mitigate this limitation, I applied reflexivity throughout the research process. I critically reflected on my role as a researcher and made a conscious effort to set aside personal biases and assumptions. Furthermore, the study was grounded in feminist theory, providing a consistent framework to identify gendered themes in *One Piece* and *Demon Slayer*.

The use of systematic visual coding strengthened the analysis by focusing on specific elements such as clothing, colour schemes, character design, and interactions. To further support the claims of gendered representation, the analysis also incorporated dialogue, camera angles, and instances of the male or female gaze, highlighting where the medium reinforced gender stereotypes. As argued by Philip Bell and Marko Milic (2002), a semiotic functional approach enables the identification of patterns of gendered representations and an understanding of how visual cues reinforce gender differences.

However, a significant limitation of this study is the exclusion of fan perspectives. Audience interpretations, whether they align with or challenge the identified gendered themes, remain unexplored.

## 5.2. Recommendations

Future research could incorporate fan studies or reception analysis to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how viewers perceive gender representations in these series. Additionally, this research focused exclusively on two shounen anime series, *One Piece* and *Demon Slayer*. As such, the findings cannot be generalised to the entire shounen genre or the broader anime landscape. Different anime may construct masculinity and femininity in unique ways, and viewer interpretations may vary. Nonetheless, *One Piece* and *Demon Slayer* were selected for their significant popularity and relevance in contemporary anime discourse, with *One Piece* airing for over two decades.

Future studies should expand the scope by including a wider range of anime series and integrating audience reception data. This would offer a more nuanced understanding of how gender norms are constructed, reproduced, and contested within shounen anime.

## 5.3. Conclusion

The findings of this research highlight how gender and representation in anime reflect deeply ingrained gender norms. *One Piece* and *Demon Slayer* reinforce mainstream portrayals of masculinity and femininity, aligning with broader trends in the media. Philip Bell and Marco Milic (2002) discuss this pattern in advertisements, magazines, and television, where women are often depicted as meek, weak, and family-oriented, while men appear as strong, muscular, and heroic protectors. Anime often mirrors these conventions, portraying male protagonists as leaders, breadwinners, and protectors while relegating female characters to caretaking, love interests, and motivational roles. This pattern parallels that of mainstream superhero films, which often frame masculinity as a journey of hardship and sacrifice. The MCU, for instance, constructs its male heroes as self-sacrificing figures. Similarly, anime characters like Gyomei, Tanjiro, and Zoro embody these ideals, enduring emotional and physical struggles that reinforce traditional masculinity.

Conversely, female characters such as Boa Hancock and Mitsuri Kanroji, as well as Black Widow in the MCU and Wonder Woman in the DCU, are often confined to hyper-feminine roles. Their beauty and desirability frequently overshadow their strength and agency. Even when powerful, their abilities are often linked to physical appearance or emotional vulnerability, reinforcing rigid gender binaries. This dynamic is particularly evident in the battle between Daki, Gyutaro, and the Slayers, where femininity is portrayed as subordinate to masculinity. Boa Hancock's transformation into a *yandere* exemplifies how anime often reduces female characters to love interests, with their aspirations becoming secondary to their emotional dependence on male protagonists. Meanwhile, male characters are depicted as adventurers, thrill-seekers, and protectors. The sexualisation of female characters through fan service and the male gaze further entrenches their objectification, positioning them as desirable rather than autonomous figures within their narratives. Ultimately, anime both mirrors and influences broader cultural narratives around gender. While it provides space for complex storytelling, its portrayal of gender remains deeply androcentric. The stark contrast between hypermasculinity and hyper-femininity reinforces a rigid dichotomy, limiting the potential for more nuanced and equitable character development.

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## APPENDIX A

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

**HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (NON-MEDICAL)**

Registration number: REC-101114-044

**SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES ETHICS COMMITTEE**

Ethics clearance / waiver number: DIV-2411-20W

DATE 28 November 2024

Re: Hlayisani Kwinika (2324147)

To whom it may concern,

Hlayisani Kwinika (2324147) is currently registered as a Masters student at the School of Social Sciences, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. This letter is to confirm that, at the time of writing, Hlayisani Kwinika does not need ethical clearance for their study Investigating ***The representation of masculinity and Femininity in Anime: A focus on One Piece and Demon Slayer***. This decision has been reached based upon a description of the project supplied by Hlayisani to the School of Social Sciences Ethics Committee, constituted as a subcommittee of the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), which has been evaluated by the subcommittee chair. This decision has then been ratified by the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical). If, however, Hlayisani changes the methods of data collection and analysis for this project, this decision may no longer be valid. If such changes take place, this should be communicated to the School of Social Sciences Ethics Committee.

Please feel free to contact me should you require any further information.

Thank you.

Yours sincerely,

Mr. Thulani Nkomo

## APPENDIX B

**Fair use Disclaimer**

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