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## A MAN IN ROMANCE: THE PORTRAYAL OF THE MALE PROTAGONIST IN NETFLIX'S SERIES “BRIDGERTON” SEASON 1 (2020)

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**Abstract:** Gender research in the media focuses more on the representation of women and neglects that of men (Brooks & Hébert, 2006; Kimmel et al., 2004). Little research has been conducted to examine the representation of men's psychological aspects, such as feelings, affection and personality. This paper analyzes Netflix's series *Bridgerton* Season 1 using a critical discourse analysis approach, to explore how the male protagonist is portrayed visually and linguistically in romance. The findings reveal that while the male protagonist is portrayed as having vulnerabilities and insecurities in love and marriage, he is ultimately depicted with stereotypical masculine traits associated with patriarchal power. Although this depiction of the male protagonist may encourage the audience to embrace the multiplicity of masculinity, it could reinforce male gender norms and raise harmful social expectations on men.

*Keywords:* male portrayal, multimodal CDA, masculinity, romance

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# NGƯỜI ĐÀN ÔNG TRONG TÌNH YÊU: SỰ KHẮC HOẠ NHÂN VẬT NAM CHÍNH TRONG PHIM “BRIDGERTON” MÙA 1 (2020) CỦA NETFLIX

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**Tóm tắt:** Nghiên cứu về giới trong truyền thông thường tập trung nhiều hơn vào việc tái hiện hình ảnh của phụ nữ và ít chú trọng đến nam giới (Brooks & Hébert, 2006; Kimmel và cộng sự, 2004). Hiện nay các nghiên cứu về khía cạnh tâm lý của nam giới, như cảm xúc, tình cảm và tính cách còn hạn chế. Bài báo này thực hiện phân tích bộ phim Bridgerton mùa 1 trên Netflix, bằng cách tiếp cận diễn ngôn phê phán, nhằm tìm hiểu cách khắc họa nhân vật nam chính trong tình yêu cả về mặt hình ảnh lẫn ngôn ngữ. Kết quả cho thấy tuy nam chính được mô tả là có những điểm yếu, tổn thương và bất an trong tình yêu và hôn nhân, anh ấy nhìn chung vẫn được thể hiện nổi bật với những đặc điểm nam tính khuôn mẫu liên quan đến quyền lực gia trưởng. Mặc dù cách khắc họa này có thể khuyến khích nam giới chấp nhận sự đa dạng của tính nam, nó cũng có thể củng cố các chuẩn mực nam tính và tạo ra những kỳ vọng xã hội có hại đối với nam giới.

*Từ khóa:* sự khắc họa nam giới, phân tích diễn ngôn phê phán phương tiện, tính nam, tình yêu

## 1. Introduction

Gender representation in the media has been studied extensively by scholars across different disciplines; however, most of these studies deal with questions related to women (Brooks & Hébert, 2006; Kimmel et al., 2004). Representations of men are also examined, but to a much lesser extent, mostly in action and fiction movie genres (e.g. Baker, 2006; Martín, 2020). So far, men have been depicted in the media with stereotypical features, such as having power, leadership, glittering career paths, effectiveness and discernible goals (Lauzen & Dozier, 2005). There seems to be a notable lack of research with regards to the depiction of men's feelings, personality, and other psychological aspects. Addressing this research gap is crucial as investigating and challenging social male norms and stereotypical media representations can greatly contribute to gender equality.

*Bridgerton Season 1* was by far one of the most popular English TV series on Netflix and soon became a global phenomenon, streamed for more than 625 million hours within only 28 days since its debut (Travers, 2024). Adapted from the novel *The Duke and I* (2000) written by Julia Quinn, the series is about a fictional aristocratic English family named Bridgerton in the 1800s - the Regency Era when girls coming of age tried to entertain suitors to find an eligible husband. The program producers also added some modern gender beliefs and values, offering an interesting combination of both traditional and modern viewpoints about men and their masculinity in love.

This article, therefore, aims to shed light on the portrayal of the male protagonist in his romantic relationship in Netflix's series *Bridgerton Season 1*. The research question is:

*How is the male protagonist of the Netflix series Bridgerton Season 1 portrayed visually and linguistically in his romantic relationship?*

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Gender and Masculinity**

Determining the appropriate definition of “gender” is both essential and complicated. In the past, the terms “sex” and “gender” were used interchangeably by many linguists and researchers, but “sex” would be preferred (Thomas, 2004). However, along with the development of society and sociolinguistic study, sex and gender were defined differently and analytically distinct (Thomas, 2004; Westbrook & Saperstein, 2015). According to Pryzgodna and Chrisler (2000), “sex” refers to a person’s biological aspect of maleness and femaleness, while “gender” refers to “behavioral, social and psychological characteristics” (p. 554). Simply put, sex is biological, something a person is born with, while gender is socially constructed, variable, and accomplished through the interaction with one’s surroundings, including their behaviors, clothing, habits, and speech throughout their life (Thomas, 2004).

Lindqvist et al. (2021) defined gender expression as the extent to which a person measures their femininity and masculinity, and how masculine and feminine they think others see them. They suggest that gender expression and social gender norms are related because both propose a standard for one’s physical appearance and behaviors. Like gender norms, which are changeable over time based on certain contexts and historical periods, gender expression is also fluid.

Though the concept of “masculine” has had a long existence, its definition was still contentious and neglected by feminist movements until the 1970s (Franklin II, 2012). Since then, the understanding of masculinity has undergone various changes. In the early 1970s, masculinity was associated with power, privilege and masochism. Franklin II (2012) recapitulated masculinity as “males spending their time trying to prove what they are not (not feminine, not passive, not weak, not soft, not sensitive and so on)” (p. 4). Moynihan (1998) and Franklin II (2012) pointed out the main stereotypical masculine traits, including: aggressive, dominant, rational, responsible, ambitious, inexpressive and unemotional. However, Weems (1995) refused the idea of the concept “masculine” as only represented by men since women can express more or less masculinity at the same time.

### **2.2. Men in Romantic Relationship**

Romantic relationships have been conceptualized in various ways by different researchers. Furman et al. (2014), Giordano et al. (2006), and Jerves et al. (2013) offered definitions of a romantic relationship as centered around the idea of dating. Giordano et al. (2006) described it simply as “when you like a guy/girl and he/she likes you back” (p. 268), while Jerves et al. (2013) viewed it as a voluntary mutual relationship where two people consent to date. Furman et al. (2014) defined it as the time individuals spend seeing and going out with each other. Jackson (1999) proposed that a romantic relationship only happens between single people, whereas Furman et al. (2002) expanded it to include married couples. This research adopts Furman et al. (2002)’s definition to explore Simon’s romantic experiences.

Individuals’ behaviors in romantic relationships are influenced by their experiences in other relationships, such as friendships and parent-child connections. Furman (1999) and Furman and Wehne (1994) suggested that friendships contribute to mutual reciprocity and intimacy, parent-child relationships play a pivotal role in establishing the foundation for

openness and intimacy with partners. Shaver and Hazan (1988) and Capaldi and Clark (1998) further noted that negative experiences with parents can lead to insecurity, unrealistic expectations, and an increased likelihood of aggression toward partners.

In literature, men are often reported to conform to traditional masculinity in their romantic relationship. They claim that they have a tendency to hide their emotions and find it hard to communicate with their partner on intimate topics (Franklin II, 2012; Moynihan, 1998). They also experience a significantly greater level of communication awkwardness in comparison to their female partners (Giordano et al., 2006). They are expected to be able to handle emotional difficulties on their own and avoid confiding vulnerabilities (Burn & Ward, 2005). Over time, dating norms have changed, offering a relatively equal chance for both men and women to make their first move, yet male partners are still under a high expectation to make initial advances (Giordano et al., 2006). What is more, like their stereotypical traits, men are described as dominant and more powerful in a romantic relationship. They are reported to stress their dominance, feel joyful and excited to be the dominant partner, and are reluctant to support a power balance within their relationship (Giordano et al., 2006). Last but not least, according to Franklin II (2012), once “male as provider” becomes the dominant trait of conventional masculinity, men are associated with absolute financial responsibilities.

On the one hand, conformity to traditional masculinity in a romantic relationship can benefit men by allowing them to avoid being challenged by social norms, judgment and ridicule (Giordano et al., 2006). On the other hand, it can result in negative consequences in their own relationship quality. Burn and Ward (2005), Ickes (1993) and Rochlen and Mahalik (2004) point out that conventional masculinity is adversely correlated with relationship intimacy and satisfaction. Burn and Ward (2005) explained how conformity to traditional masculine traits have negative influences on romantic relationships. Attempting to maintain emotional control, self-reliance, risk-taking, primacy of work, and pursuit of status can lower men’s physical and emotional abilities, which are crucial for relationship intimacy. Furthermore, men’s dominance over women can cause disrespectfulness, relationship conflict and even physical abuse towards women.

### ***2.3. Representation of Men in the Media***

Media can significantly influence audience’s thoughts and perceptions, orientating and contributing to form people’s identities and awareness (Popa & Gavrilu, 2015). Gender representation in media is highly correlated with gender reality and regarded as signifiers of dominant ideologies. Thus, gender representation is changeable, conforming to or contesting social practices and perception depending on cultural context and historicity (Lemish, 2008).

Media representation of masculinity is associated with men’s career path, achievements and social status (Lemish, 2008; Wood, 1994). Typical masculinity traits recognized in the media are men being hard, tough, independent, competitive, rational, and all in control of emotion (Lemish, 2008; Popa & Gavrilu, 2015; Wood, 1994). Recent decades have witnessed some positive changes in the representation of both men and women; however, these changes are still linked to gender stereotypes to some extent. According to Wood (1994) and Lemish (2008), the representation of a “career woman” with emotional strength and occupational success would be acceptable providing that she is either attractive, sexy or being with men. The image of a “sensitive man” is similar; only when he succeeds is his sensitivity acceptable.

The portrayal of men in the cinema is usually associated with power, strength and career. According to Mulvey (2006), the male protagonist is illustrated with a “more perfect, more

complete, more powerful ideal ego” (p. 345). Specifically, the images of male characters are labeled with “making something happen,” “forcing a change in another person,” “a battle of will and strength,” and “victory and defeat” (Mulvey, 2006, p. 349). In addition, Peberdy (2011) asserted that masculinity in film is often associated with an emphasis on honor, male unity and a strong work ethic. Lauzen and Dozier (2005) showed that male characters often have lucrative jobs with high-status professional positions. They also found that boys and men in their teens, 20s, 50s, 60s and older are slightly underrepresented while those in their 30s and 40s tend to be overrepresented.

Movie genre is an important element to evaluate how male characters are depicted. In comedy films, male characters are described as vulgar, brutal, fat and ugly and trying to make fun with rudeness, disgusting behavior and profanity whereas, in romantic films, they are either rich or poor but mandatorily well-built, physically strong, romantic and handsome; and in action films, they generally construct an image of a rational, strong, competitive and protective man (Gürkan & Serttaş, 2022). Gürkan and Ege (2021) and Mulvey (2006) pointed out that whether adhering to social standards or resisting social standards, male heroes in Western cinema are all responsible for marriage and family.

#### **2.4. Contextual Background of Netflix’s Series *Bridgerton Season 1***

The British historical fiction-romance series *Bridgerton season 1* was released on December 25, 2020 on Netflix with eight episodes, adapted from the popular novel *The Duke and I* of the author Julia Quinn published in 2000. No sooner had it debuted than the series became a global phenomenon as one of Netflix's most-watched English-language shows, with 625+ million hours viewed in their first 28 days. Staged in Regency London in the 1800s, *Bridgerton 1* revolves around the children in an aristocratic family, especially focuses on the attempt of Daphne Bridgerton - the very first nubile girl in the family - to find her perfect marriage match. On her journey, she meets Simon Basset and they decide to act as if they are courting each other so that Daphne can attract suitors while Simon can avoid being pestered by ladies. Since then, their relationship grows and soon turns into romance and marriage.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Data Collection**

The data of this study consists of the scenes in *Bridgerton Season 1* in which the main male character Simon Basset is shown in his romantic relationship with Daphne Bridgerton.

#### **3.2. Data Analysis**

This research applied multimodal critical discourse analysis to answer the research question. Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis model (2001) was utilized to analyze linguistic elements. For investigating visual elements, Kress and van Leeuwen’s framework (2006) of visual grammar was employed.

Critical discourse analysis focuses “on discourse and on relations between discourse and other social elements” (Fairclough, 2013, p. 9) such as power relations, ideologies, institutions, social identities. It examines how language is used in a socio-political context with the view that “discourse is a social practice” (Fairclough et al., 2011, p. 357). Critical social analysis is regarded as normative and explanatory critique, not just merely describing existing realities but assessing and explaining them in relation to various values of a society as well.

Following Fairclough’s recommendation, the critical analysis of discourse follows three

stages, namely: description, interpretation and explanation. The first stage, **description of text** concerns a wide range of linguistic features from vocabulary and syntax, to text structures as well as non-linguistic textual features. In the second stage - **interpretation**, researchers would investigate the influence of background assumptions on discourse processes. Discourse in the stage of **explanation** is considered as a part of social process and social practice (Fairclough et. al, 2011). Then, **explanation** of text examines the interactional process of discourse and social structures. On the one hand, discourses have social effects which can modify or prolongate existing social structures. On the other hand, discourse serves as social practice and is shaped by power relations in society.

Fairclough acknowledges the importance of analysing non-linguistic elements such as visual elements especially in written, printed, filmed and televised materials. However, he proposes no framework to examine them. As a result, the study of the portrayal of Simon requires the combination of Kress and van Leeuwen's framework (2006) coupled with Fairclough's CDA model (2001) to analyse both visual and linguistic elements.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006)'s visual grammar analyzes visual communication through three metafunctions: representational metafunction, interactive metafunction and compositional metafunction. The **representational metafunction** allows answering the question of how a sign represents the world. In representational metafunction, visual images are analyzed through narrative structure and conceptual structure to shed light on the way the male protagonist is recognized and represented through his actions, characteristics, background, structure and meaning. The **interactive metafunction** refers to the study of the social relations among represented participants, between represented and interactive participants and among interactive participants. Those relations would be revealed through gaze, social distance and angles. The **compositional metafunction** refers to how participants are represented in the consolidation of internal and external context. In this metafunction, informative value, salience and framing are analyzed.

### 3.3. Sample Analysis

The scene between Simon and Daphne in the garden at Trowbridge party is picked as the prototype for analysis to demonstrate the process of analyzing the data.

#### **Description of texts with the incorporation of Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar:**

The scene captures the conversation between Simon and Daphne before he is leaving for his business and the fact that their false arrangement ended:

Simon: "Miss Bridgerton"

Daphne: "What are you doing here? I thought you were leaving London."

Simon: "I was. I am. I came to say goodbye."

Daphne: "To whom?"

Simon: "To you"

Simon keeps saying sorry to Daphne for what happened between them:

"And I am sorry about that./ I am sorry"

and reacts in emotional silence when Daphne expresses her thoughts.

Their talk soon becomes an argument, resulting in Daphne walk into the garden and Simon chase after and force her to turn back:

“Come back to the party. Stop walking!/ It is not safe out here./ I forbid you to go any further./ Daphne... Will you not listen?”

Visually, the two characters are positioned outside a ballroom. They meet in the hallway then go into a quiet private garden at the height of their argument. Initially, Simon and Daphne stand relatively far from each other, indicating their separation and emotional distance resulting from their misunderstanding. Then, in the confined space of the garden, they are placed close together. Simon makes requests, pulls Daphne’s arms, and ultimately he cannot resist embracing and intimately touching Daphne. Regarding how Simon’s position is depicted against Daphne’s, the shots are eye level, which shows the equality between them. When they enter the garden, Simon is filmed from a lower angle, capturing Daphne’s perspective. Meanwhile, Daphne is shot from a higher angle, reflecting Simon’s viewpoint. The two participants maintain direct eye contact throughout the scene. Simon’s gaze is always focused on Daphne, illustrating the intensity of their relationship, their determination to confess their feelings as well as Simon’s overwhelming affection for Daphne.

### **Interpretation**

The conversation indicates Simon’s inexpressiveness and his simultaneous attempt to assert dominance over his partner. Besides the fact that Simon’s lines are much fewer than Daphne’s, he almost always reacts in silence - five times in total - to Daphne’s words and feelings. Not only does he hesitate to express his true feelings but he also deflects by saying “I am sorry” to avoid further confrontation. Also, in the latter part of the conversation, he is trying to impose his power on Daphne through commanding statements such as “Come back to the party”, “Stop walking!”, along with strong words “forbid” and “stop”. When his dominance is not recognized and accepted by Daphne, he resorts to pulling her towards him. He takes the initiative by embracing her and kissing her deeply in Daphne’s astonishment before apologizing to her.

### **Explanation**

Generally, Simon in this scene is portrayed with stereotypical masculine traits: inexpressiveness, dominance and discomfort intimacy-related discussion. This depiction of the male protagonist reinforces social norms about masculinity.

The two themes of findings are intertwined as they both discuss Simon's power relationship with his partner. Nonetheless, the first finding focuses more on the depiction of his vulnerable moments, while the second finding further elaborates his execution and negotiation of power in his relationship.

## **4. Findings and Discussion**

### ***4.1. A Man's Vulnerabilities in Love and Marriage***

Simon’s vulnerability in love and marriage is represented in both pre- and post-wedding periods. His vulnerability originates from his childhood trauma shaped by his father - the former Duke of Hasting, who rejected him as his son because he had a stuttering problem. Being despised by his own father dented his confidence and made him vulnerable as a target for bullying. Narrative strategy and intervening presentation between the past and present are employed as a way to unfold underlying reasons for Simon’s action in the current state. The toxic masculinity of his father leads to Simon’s oath against marriage and adverse his personality and opinion about romance and marriage. He vows not to engage in courtship and get married though they are signs of manhood and maturity in the Regency era (Fletcher, 1999;

as cited by Kuzio, 2021). On the one hand, this could be considered a vulnerability as being childless could jeopardize his masculinity. On the other hand, this rebellion against social norms signals bravery and risk-taking, which consolidates his manhood.

Simon's vulnerability in his marriage is indicated firstly through his confession of insecurities to his wife. Linguistic evidence can be seen when he discloses his insecurities to Daphne: "**I do not want** to be alone. I know that now. But what **I do not know** is how to be the man you need me to be, the man you truly deserve. **I do not know** how to do this." By depicting a man who admits his inexperience, lack of expertise, and confusion, the series have contributed to the reconfiguration of male gender expressions, in contrast to stereotypical masculine traits (Franklin II, 2012; Moynihan, 1998; Mulvey, 2006; Wood, 1994). Furthermore, Simon is willing to put himself into a lower power relation and promote Daphne's agency by using these expressions: "the man **you need me to be**, the man **you truly deserve**." This has partly challenged the idea that male partner would offer less support for power balance in a relationship (Giordano et al., 2006).

Visually, for example, to illustrate his vulnerable moments after Daphne accused him of deceiving her, the camera focuses on his facial expression with a close-up shot, or presents him being at the centre of a large setting with a medium-long shot. It zooms in Simon's presence gradually to highlight his loneliness. He is depicted as being speechless with despairing eyes, a powerless smile, and heavy sighs. Another example is when Simon refuses to continue sexual intercourse with Daphne. After Daphne suggests: "Should we go into the bedroom and finish what we started?", the camera presents Simon with a close-up shot to fully capture his facial expression. It is taken from Daphne's gaze and top-down angle, implying Simon is in a weaker power relation, passive and susceptible. His feelings can be interpreted as restrained, mistrustful and disappointed after what Daphne did to him. As a result, he says "No" to her suggestion. It is often believed that when the female partner takes the initiative in intimacy, the male partner would be likely to accept the suggestion (Harrison & Shortall, 2011). Nevertheless, Simon's expression in this scene somehow challenges that stereotype as his feelings outweigh his physical desire.

Admittedly, Simon's depiction in the two exemplified scenes above somehow challenges male norms as it reveals his emotional struggles; nonetheless, it reinforces other stereotypical masculine traits. His representation in the former fortifies loneliness as a typical trait of stereotypical masculinity while in the latter, his refusal and his decisions on their marriage outcome can also be a way to assert his dominance over Daphne. His refusal leaves Daphne hanging and places her in a passive position, waiting for his next move, which can be seen through her expression: "What is to become of us? Simon?". Simon replies with his automotive decision featured with a series of future simple tense sentences: "**I shall** stay and do my duty...", "**We shall** remain married in name only", "**You will** be provided for, of course,...". The subject variation in these utterances elucidates Simon's dominance and control over his wife. Therefore, it can be said that while this scene challenges gender norms in the way it shows male emotions and a less powerful visual position, it still ultimately reinforces them in terms of dominating the female partner.



**Figure 1***Simon Being Alone After Being Accused of by Daphne***Figure 2***Simon's Facial Expression to Daphne's Suggestion*

Simon's sensitivity, while subverting conventional masculinity, is conditioned by masculine stereotypical traits. He is portrayed as having a high financial background and distinguished social status. Thanks to the dukedom title, he can prolong his steadfast determination of not getting married and childbearing, which is considered as a sign of his vulnerability, without social criticism. This representation might disadvantage people of male gender. If a man meets the traditional standards for men, like having a high social status and a secured financial background, his vulnerability and weak moments will be socially-acceptable. In other words, to challenge masculine norms, men must perform other conventional masculine traits, resulting in a vicious circle for men to challenge stereotypes.

What is more, Simon is depicted to disguise his vulnerability in social events. This can be seen from his response to the Queen on being asked about childbirth: "We have certainly been devoting our energies to the endeavour, Your Majesty. We should hope to see our queen soon satisfied." He answers so perfectly with no avoidance or confusion, completely in contrast to his representation when discussing with Daphne. This leads to the idea that a man can be insecure and vulnerable, but just in private space. Once participating in social affairs, he should remain strong and confident. It not only reinforces social expectation about masculinity but also can ingrain a false self-perception for men.

Simon's difficulties in intimate conversation can be another evidence of his vulnerabilities. Notably, in almost all conversations about intimate topics, it is Daphne who

raises her voice first while Simon plays a responsive role. Daphne's agency along with Simon's use of incomplete sentences, simple sentences, or silence to respond may indicate his passivity and being dominated by his wife. Once confessing his thoughts and feelings, Simon either walks back and forth, or stands in a loose posture, using strong and negative-meaning words to express his feeling: "...allow you your **liberty**", "...**keep** myself from saying the **wrong** things", "**unable** to talk to you", "spent the last three days in **agony**", "**could not bear** witness the **misery** I have caused you", "you wanted **nothing** with me", "**I do not** want to be **alone**", "**I do not** know...", "...you **need** me to be", "...you **truly deserve**". His word choice seems to contrast with common loving expressions, which are often positive and delightful. Simon's lexical choice can be seen as a sign of self-consciousness and awkwardness in expressing emotional topics. Compared to Daphne, Simon is portrayed to give fewer and shorter statements in one turn with the average ratio of 1:5. In the other part of the conversations, he mostly remains silent and inexpressive. Simon reacts to Daphne's words in silence five times in the scene at Lady Trowbridge's ball. In the reconciliation scene, he is presented to be completely silent, not saying a word throughout two minutes of the conversation, only Daphne expresses herself. Even when Daphne commands: "Aren't you going to say anything?", "Say it, say it", Simon still responds in inexpressiveness. This can be accounted for by the fact that he has no idea of how to express his thoughts and feelings properly, which is revealed through his moving eyes and sigh.

### Figure 3

*Simon Remaining Completely Silent in the Reconciliation Conversation*



Besides silence, Simon's response latency needs taking into account. It usually takes him two to three seconds to respond to Daphne in conversations related to emotional topics. His silence and response latency, on the one hand, may indicate his subordination to his wife in conversation, but on the other hand reinforces the idea that it takes men more time and effort to consider emotional issues than women. As depicted in the film when he grows up, Simon fully overcomes his childhood difficulty in talking and no longer experiences stuttering. Therefore, his response latency in this situation may not be attributed to his childhood difficulty but masculine stereotype.

Visually, Simon is depicted with confusion and passivity in communication as well. At the beginning of the conversations, Simon is often presented at one-third right corner of the frame with a medium or long shot taken from Daphne's side. As the presented participant on the right means drawing particular attention from viewers, the crux of the message (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006), the placement of Simon in the scenes intendedly highlights his unfavorable position. Additionally, the camera captures the contrast between Daphne's and

Simon's movement during the conversations. While Daphne is inclined to step towards her partner as a manner of implying attachment, Simon stands still quite far away, casting his eyes at her and moving his glance along when she moves. Last but not least, in most of their talks, Daphne is usually the one who says the last line then goes away, leaving Simon behind. With a loose close-up shot, his thoughtful facial expression, down-looking eyes and impuissant sigh are fully portrayed.

#### Figure 4

*Simon at One-Third Corner With a Long Shot*



In general, representing Simon as being awkward in intimate conversations may be stereotypical, but it still challenges male norms. The representation of Simon ultimately expressing himself in the last episode of the TV series contributes to dismantling the stereotype that men have difficulty in intimate conversations, and encourages men to be open to their partner for a healthy relationship.

#### 4.2. A Man's Power in Love and Marriage

Despite his apparent taciturnity and the unequal statement ratio in one turn between him and Daphne, Simon's words seem to have more power than Daphne's. For example, Simon can make decisions and silence Daphne with very few words. He is depicted to employ future tense, verbs of allowance and modal verb "must" to express his strong autonomy. "**I will allow** no such thing," "**I will not let** you out of my sight," "**You must know** I am doing this for your own good," and "**You will** be better off without me" are some examples highlighting Simon's assertion of power. Not only does he make decisions for his own actions, but he takes the control of Daphne's choices as well. In such important matters like the wedding night or the future of their marriage, Simon seems to be always in an active role informing his wife rather than discussing with her. Further on, Simon is shown to have the ability to persuade others instead of Daphne. In the scene pleading before the Queen, Daphne is portrayed as an unreliable person by telling lies and being hasty. Simon, in contrast, speaks deliberately, firmly and tells the truth. As a result, he is the one the Queen listens to, indicating his words are more powerful. By depicting the two in this way, *Bridgerton* contributes to reinforcing male stereotypical power. The contrary representation of Daphne and Simon's talkativeness in private and social contexts perpetuates a gender stereotype that public affairs belongs to men's space while personal and familiar places such as home and church are claimed to be women's (Franklin II, 2012). Simon's perception of his dominance over Daphne is also a noteworthy concern. As he believes that he has a higher power status and plays a more proactive role in their relationship, rather

than persuading Daphne to act as he wishes, Simon imposes his immediate request on her by saying “**Come back** to the party,” “**Stop** walking,” and “**I forbid** you to go any further.” The imperative verbs becoming more and more negative, along with his urgent tone of voice imply Simon’s perception that he is in a higher position and entitled to require Daphne’s consent with no resistance.

Meanwhile, Daphne, as a female partner, is portrayed with a contrary conversational style. Her speech is less direct and less assertive than Simon. She is inclined to use lexical hedges such as “I was **thinking** about us doing something different...” or “You **look** angry,” reflecting the uncertainty and lack of confidence in her utterances. Unlike Simon’s declarative statements, Daphne’s utterances sound like she is asking for acceptance and approval with “would you” structure: “**Would you care** to join me?” “**Would you care** to break your fast with me?” and “I can go if **you would like**” indicating her lower power status in their relationship. According to Holmes (2013) and Labotka (2003), hedges and super polite form are considered two types of women’s language, which are associated with their lack of power or powerlessness. Admittedly, Daphne is portrayed in a way that challenges gender norms, as she has her own voice in decision-making and the power to silence Simon sometimes; however, to achieve that, she has to deliver more utterances, negotiate or make arguments. Take the scene where Daphne stops Simon from disagreeing with her decision to move to her own bedchamber as an example. While to give reason for not accepting Daphne to do so, Simon merely needs to say: “Because you are my wife,” Daphne has to use a contemporary custom as an argument for her decision. This elucidates a stereotypical representation that Simon can obtain obedience through his patriarchal power whereas Daphne’s persuading power is based on her reasonable arguments and the number of words she delivers.

Constructing the two characters’ conversation styles as above, the producers, therefore, delineate a male portrayal with a dominant role but a less powerful and confident image of women in a relationship. This subtle difference normalises men’s dominance and navigates women to easily accept their partner’s supremacy. By doing so, people in female gender would possibly behave in a similar way to what has been claimed by Lakoff (1973, p. 48) as “systematically denied access to power, on the grounds that they are not capable of holding it as demonstrated by their linguistic behavior along with other aspects of their behavior”.

Taking the initiative is another kind of personal power that Simon is portrayed with in his romance with Daphne. Linguistically, he suggests addressing each other intimately by their first name and actively confesses his feelings for her in both direct and indirect ways. At the first stage of their relationship, Simon and Daphne address the other with title and last name as: “Your Grace” and “Miss Bridgerton” in a respectful, and formal manner. Meanwhile, addressing with a first name can signify closeness, friendliness and informality. Therefore, when Simon suggests “...that you call me Simon” and “you should call me by my name”, it marks a new chapter filled with closer and more intimate interactions between them. The linguistic features employed in the scene pleading with the Queen for a special marriage license is a prominent evidence of Simon as taking initiative in confessing his love. Clauses of contrast “but,” adverbs of intensity and extreme negative expressions are applied as a lever to emphasize how he has changed after knowing Daphne:

“I have **never** been a man that much **enjoyed** flirting,...  
**but** with Daphne, conversations have **always** been **easy**.”  
 “**Entirely out of the question**”,  
 “**could not stay away** from one another”,

“something **entirely** apart”.

His aspiration to be man and wife with Daphne is repeated three times at the end of his line in the form of a simple sentence to express a strong affirmation. The use of tenses varies from past simple tenses in the first two utterances: “I **did not want** Miss Bridgerton only to be my friend. I **wanted** her to be my wife” to the present simple tense “I **want** her to be my wife” in the third one. It indicates Simon’s expression of his everlasting desire and eternal affection for Daphne since one of the uses of the present simple is to talk about general facts that are thought to be true and permanent at the present time.

### Figure 5

*Simon and Daphne Pleading the Queen for Marriage License*



On the wedding night, Simon directly shares his thoughts and feelings for Daphne, saying that he burns for her (another way of “I love you”). Meanwhile, Daphne waits to hear from Simon first, for which her fear of losing face and uncertainty can be the explanation. As courtship norm in Regency Era considers the man as suitor to a woman and the one who proposes for marriage, the woman stays in passive roles (Kuzio, 2021). Therefore, if a woman confesses first or has a signal of approach to a man, her dignity would be judged and even ruined.

However, that social norm has changed and is no longer true sometimes. The courting role becomes more open and equal to genders, and more female partners begin to take the initiative (Kuzio, 2021). While exploring and challenging perceptions of race, gender and class with embedded modern ideas (Van Dusen, 2020), the portrayals of Simon and Daphne are still associated with stereotypical gender roles and can disadvantage both genders. This representation reinforces social expectation for males, putting them under responsibilities and pressure of being proactive to court and confess love first. For women, it will hinder them from striving for freedom seeking romance on their own. They will hesitate to show affection first, possibly resulting in losing a potential partner and relationship.

Simon’s activeness can be seen from visual data as his first kiss with Daphne and their sexual intercourse as well. Their first kiss in the garden at Lady Trowbridge’s ball is initiated by Simon. As a signal of acceptance, Daphne responds with another kiss. Though Simon is portrayed as if he actively and intrinsically initiates their first romantic act, it is Daphne who drives him to take that action as she once confesses: “Why do you think I went into that garden?”, which means she is well-aware and looks forward to Simon’s action. While males and females hold an equal likelihood to initiate kissing before physical romance attachment (Hughes et al., 2007), it seems that men are expected and intentionally motivated to offer the first kiss. Women, in contrast, would like to give signals to stimulate men’s romance rather than

directly take the initiative. The representation of Simon's initiative kissing may be employed by producers as men's attempt to reconcile (Hughes et al., 2007) as when the scene is taken, Daphne and Simon are in a heated conflict. Furthermore, it can also be considered a means of achieving sexual access to his female partner (Hughes et al., 2007) since after that kiss, a rich exchange of postural cues between the two is captured on the screen.

The action-performing ratio of Simon and Daphne in the beginning phase of their first sexual intercourse is 10:1, remarkably different between the two. Taken from a direct angle, the camera mostly focuses on Simon's acts: kissing his wife, his hand gesture and kneeling down to take off Daphne's dress buttons, highlighting his proactiveness. He performs most of the actions, even getting himself undressed after doing so to Daphne, whereas she passively does nothing but returning kisses and touching his chest. Notably, though Simon takes the leading role, the producers decide not to apply the male gaze in this sexually intimate scene. Most of the time, both characters are presented on the screen at eye-level in order to offer the audience an equal view of their movements. Daphne is not forced to be filmed with top-down angle or be seen from Simon's perspective, avoiding female objectification. What is more, the scene that Simon kneels down to unbutton Daphne's dress, he is shot at a mild top-down angle while Daphne is shot at a bit bottom-up one. This suggests notwithstanding being portrayed as more initiative, Simon is still gentle, well-respected and cherishes his wife who appears to be passive and inexperienced.

### Figure 6

*Simon kneeling down to unbutton Daphne's dress*



### Figure 7

*Simon at a Top-Down Camera Angle*



The power relation changes when their marriage is on the brink of collapse, Daphne, representing women, becomes more proactive in resolving their struggles, instead of Simon. Thanks to her effort, they reconcile. A common belief is that when a couple has an argument, the male partner should have the responsibility for apologizing first. Otherwise, he will be criticized for being intolerant, mean-minded and thus not a good man. The filmmakers bring the opposite idea in this matter. By picturing the change in position of the couple over the period of time, they indicate the balanced power between man and woman in a relationship and challenge that stereotype. Heightening viewers' awareness of the balanced power relation in a romantic relationship, this detail not only helps to mitigate men's pressure of adhering to social norms but confirms equality and recognition for women as well. Women are not always being weak, dependent and passive, they can and are encouraged to seize happiness by themselves.

In shorts, Simon's power in love and marriage is revealed through his dominance and proactivity. At first blush, the depiction of the two characters appears to challenge the norms to some extent. However, it eventually reinforces male privilege and stresses pressure on women.

### **4.3. Discussion**

The findings of the research suggest that the depiction of the male protagonist in *Bridgerton season 1* is dualistic. The man in a romantic relationship is represented as aggressive but gentle, inexpressive but implicative, initiative but passive, and dominant but tolerant with his partner's agency. As Baldwin et al. (2014) mentioned, on the one hand, this dualistic representation may indicate a progressive outlook which raises the public's awareness about diversity of the male identity, and supports men to embrace the multiplicity of masculinity. On the other hand, it can incite identity dissonance, reinforce male gender norms and raise negative social expectations on men.

Simon's portrayal in his romance with Daphne reinforces stereotypical masculine traits. He is portrayed with various conventional masculine stereotypes, including: taking initiatives, experiencing communication difficulty in intimate topics, dominating over his female partner and holding excessive pride. Although the depiction of Simon embeds subversive ideas as an attempt to challenge hegemonic masculinity, it still falls short. On the one hand, the portrayal of Simon with scenes of emotional vulnerability and subordination to his wife could contribute to challenging toxic masculinity (Lemish, 2008; Popa & Gavrilu, 2015; Wood, 1994). On the other hand, it is his highly influential socioeconomic status with "the Duke of Hastings" title and financial means that conditions this reconfiguration (Afras Naseh, 2020). In other words, since Simon is in a privileged and distinguished social position, he can challenge masculine norms without significant social objection.

### **5. Conclusion**

The study was conducted to explore the male portrayal in a romantic relationship by investigating the depiction of the main protagonist in Netflix's *Bridgerton* season 1 (2020). The data was analysed linguistically and visually with Faircough's (2001) model of CDA and Kress and Van Leeuwen's framework (2006). The analysis revealed that the portrayal of the male protagonist shows both traditional and unconventional masculinity. Some subversive ideas are also applied to challenge certain stereotypical masculine traits, but remain insufficient. Approaching traditional masculine traits coupled with subversive perspectives, Netflix's *Bridgerton* season 1 (2020) could pioneer a multi-dimensional male depiction in romance but risks raising harmful social expectations on men as it is conditioned by stereotypical

masculinity.

Notwithstanding significant effort, this study has certain limitations that need to be taken into account. The current study explored male representation through the depiction of one male character, excluding other male characters in the series. An investigation of the portrayal of all male characters in their romantic relationships would guarantee a more comprehensive analysis of male representation in romance. In addition, the series is staged in the Regency Era where gender stereotypes were rarely challenged and gender inequality was the norm, which could render the stereotypical masculinity represented by the male protagonist somehow necessary. Despite these limitations, the study is expected to be useful for other research on gender portrayal and stereotyping, as well as contributing to the reconfiguration of masculinity in today's world.

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