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Performing Masculinity Through Sound: A Critical Analysis of Gender Performativity in the *Top Gun* Franchise

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Abstract

Modern cinema represents a wide range of gender through its form, and one of the relatively unexplored areas is gendered soundscapes and the performance of masculinity in films. To examine these representations, this study focuses on the popular movie franchise *Top Gun* (1986) and *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022) to understand the complexities of sonic dominance and vulnerable masculinities. The study investigates gendered sound and examines performativity through the lens of diegetic and non-diegetic sound elements. Using qualitative content analysis, the research identifies recurring themes and performative elements that shape the portrayal of masculinity, revealing how power dynamics, male encounters, and gendered sounds reinforce and challenge conventional masculine norms. Drawing on Michel Foucault's theory of power and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, the study concludes that masculinity is performed and negotiated through cinematic soundscapes, reflecting broader transformations in gender identities and cultural expectations.

Keywords: masculinity studies; gender performativity; gendered soundscapes; feminist film analysis; *Top Gun*; power dynamics; cinema studies

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1. Introduction

Gender is not merely a biological category but a social and cultural construct that is continuously shaped through societal norms, practices, and performances. As Kimmel and Aronson argue, "a man is not born, he is made," emphasizing that masculinity is produced through social expectations rather than being an innate quality(Kimmel & Aronson, 2004). Popularly, masculinity has been associated with strength, courage, competitiveness, emotional restraint, and authority – qualities that societies have historically valorised as markers of ideal manhood. Contemporary scholarship, however, increasingly views masculinity as fluid, performative, and culturally contingent rather than fixed and universal (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Cinema serves as an important cultural site where gender identities are produced, distributed and contested. Contemporary films present myriad representations of gender than former cinematic traditions, that depended on rigid gender binaries and stereotypical characterisations. While action films have historically celebrated hyper-masculine heroes, recent cinematic narratives have increasingly challenged traditional gender normative through the inclusion of diverse masculinities and stronger female characters. Films such as *Wonder Woman* (2017) and *Atomic Blonde* (2017) have shown how action genres can move beyond conventional representations of gender (Khadilkar et al., 2022). At the same time, scholars have argued that audience interpretations play a crucial role in shaping the acceptance and significance of these changing gender performances.

The depicted cinematic landscape in the two films *Top Gun* (1986) and its sequel, *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022) offers an engaging prism to examine the complex relationship between patriarchy, feminism, masculinity, homosociality, heteronormativity, power dynamics and the notion of gendered sound. Feminist analysis of these movies reveal complex representations of masculinity and emphasizes the enduring impact of patriarchal systems. In the 1986 film *Top Gun*, Pete "Maverick" Mitchell, the main character, personifies a hyper-masculine mentality that dominates the story. The movie reinforces the concept of the heroic man aviator by showcasing traditional gender norms and relegating female characters— like Charlotte "Charlie" Blackwood—to supporting roles. This hierarchical system upholds patriarchal standards, which justify male dominance and limit women's freedom of choice. Similarly, while looking at the fast-forward sequel of the above movie, Top Gun: Maverick, released in 2023, we can see a clear change in how masculinity as a subject or a notion is being portrayed. In the movie, the study can see a drastic change, as the sequel now comprises female aviators in the scene, who are now a part of the Top Gun mission. The movie seems ready to take on and possibly even question conventional gender roles. An indication of a change from the male-centric story of the original film is the presence of a female pilot, portrayed by Jennifer Connelly. This change shows that the traditionally male-dominated military aviation context needs more varied and strong female characters (Stone, 2016).

Contemporary studies on masculinity has highlighted that societal expectations often position men as assertive leaders while discouraging emotional vulnerability and alternative forms of self-expression (Farahbakhsh & Ebrahimi, 2021). Scholars have further noted that male bonding, competition, and homosocial relationships have historically played a central role in the construction of masculine identities (Kachel et al., 2016; Kiesling, 2005). At the same time, emerging studies have challenged the assumption that masculinity must be defined through dominance, emotional detachment, and aggression. Contemporary cultural texts increasingly depict men expressing vulnerability, emotional intimacy, and self-reflection, thereby expanding the range of acceptable masculine performances (Kimmel & Aronson, 2004).

Despite this growing body of scholarship, relatively little attention has been paid to the role of sound in the construction and performance of masculinity. Film soundtracks, dialogue, vocal delivery, ambient sound, and sound effects are not neutral aesthetic elements; they contribute significantly to the communication of gendered meanings and power relations. Popular music, cinematic soundscapes, and vocal performances often reinforce assumptions about masculinity and femininity, while also possessing the potential to challenge established gender norms (Bull, 2020; Kassabian, 2000). The auditory dimensions of masculinity therefore deserve greater scholarly attention,

particularly within action cinema where sound frequently functions as a marker of authority, power, and emotional expression.

The present study addresses this gap by examining masculinity through the lens of gendered soundscapes in *Top Gun* (1986) and *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022). The study draws upon Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, which conceptualises gender as a repeated social performance rather than a fixed identity (Butler, 1990), and Michel Foucault's understanding of power as embedded within social practices and discourses (Foucault, 1982). Together, these perspectives provide a framework for analysing how masculine identities are performed, negotiated, reinforced, and challenged through cinematic sound and narrative structures.

The study aims to explore how performative acts, dialogues, and gendered sounds contribute to the construction of masculinity in the *Top Gun* franchise. It examines how sonic elements reveal shifting power relations, changing masculine ideals, and evolving gender expectations across the two films. The findings suggest that while *Top Gun* (1986) largely reinforces hegemonic and competitive forms of masculinity, *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022) introduces more inclusive and emotionally expressive masculinities, reflecting broader transformations in contemporary understandings of gender, power, and identity.

2. Research Methods

The study uses a qualitative content analysis approach to examine the representation of masculinity, power relations, and gendered soundscapes in the films *Top Gun* (1986) and *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022). Qualitative content analysis allows reading of films as texts involving and identifying recurring themes, patterns, and meanings embedded within narratives, dialogues, visual elements, and sound design. This method is particularly suitable for this study to explore how masculinity is performed, negotiated, and transformed through cinematic representations.

The study selected *Top Gun* (1986) and *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022) as case studies because both films belong to the same franchise while representing different socio-cultural moments. The selection was made on the basis of their popularity, critical recognition, and cultural influence, as reflected in their high audience ratings (IMDb) and popular reception. The analysis of these two films also allowed for broader examination of the evolving changes in the representation of masculinity across a period of more than three decades.

The units of analysis included dialogues, character interactions, sound effects, background music, vocal performances, and key narrative sequences aided in the construction of masculine identities. Specific attention was paid to both diegetic sounds, such as speech, aircraft engines, and environmental sounds, and non-diegetic sounds, including musical scores and background soundtracks. A close textual analysis and interpretation helped to identify thematic categories relating to masculinity, power, vulnerability, authority, competition, mentorship, and gender relations.

The analysis rests on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, which conceptualises gender as a socially produced and repeatedly enacted performance, and Michel Foucault's theory of power, which examines how power operates through social practices, institutions, and discourses. These theoretical perspectives provide a

framework for understanding how masculine identities are constructed and maintained through cinematic soundscapes and performative practices.

The study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: How do performative acts, gestures, and gendered sounds influence the portrayal and interpretation of masculinity in *Top Gun* (1986) and *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022)?

RQ2: How do these masculine performances intersect with broader societal norms of power and gender?

3. Results

3.1. Masculinity as Performance in the Top Gun Franchise

The analysis depicts that masculinity in both *Top Gun* (1986) and *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022) is presented as a social performance enacted through repeated behaviours, gestures, dialogues, and interactions. This aligns with Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, that talks about gender identities as a continuous production of repetitive performances and not as fixed categories.

In *Top Gun* (1986), masculinity is strongly associated with competitiveness, physical courage, risk-taking, and individual achievement. The protagonist, Pete "Maverick" Mitchell, consistently enacts hegemonic masculinity through actions that emphasise confidence, rebellion, and a willingness to challenge authority. His interactions with superior officers and fellow pilots demonstrate a desire to prove his competence and establish dominance within the military hierarchy. The rivalry between Maverick and Iceman serves as a central example of masculine performance. Their relationship is characterised by competition, verbal confrontation, and a constant struggle for recognition as the best pilot. Through these interactions, masculinity becomes linked to achievement, superiority, and public validation.

Visual elements further strengthens these masculine performances. Visual tropes and costume aid include military uniforms, aviator sunglasses, fighter jets, and training exercises function as symbolic markers of masculine authority and competence. The repeated depiction of physical endurance, aerial skill, and professional excellence contributes to the construction of a heroic masculine ideal. Within this framework, vulnerability and emotional expression are often marginalised, while confidence and self-control are celebrated as desirable masculine traits.

The sequel, *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022), retains many of these traditional characteristics but simultaneously expands the meaning of masculinity. Maverick continues to embody courage and professional expertise; however, his role shifts from that of a rebellious individual to that of a mentor responsible for guiding younger pilots. Rather than seeking personal glory, he becomes concerned with the development, safety, and success of others. This transformation reflects a broader cultural shift in which masculinity is increasingly associated with responsibility, leadership, and emotional maturity.

The relationship between Maverick and Bradley "Rooster" Bradshaw illustrates this shift particularly well. Unlike the rivalry that defines many relationships in the original film, their interactions are shaped by mentorship, unresolved emotional tensions, and mutual growth. Maverick's willingness to acknowledge mistakes, confront past trauma, and

prioritise collective success over individual achievement demonstrates a more nuanced form of masculinity. The film therefore presents masculine identity as capable of incorporating emotional vulnerability without sacrificing competence or strength.

The reading of the film further suggest that masculine performances in both films are shaped by the institutional context of the military. Military culture rewards discipline, courage, and technical expertise, encouraging specific performances of masculinity. However, while *Top Gun* (1986) largely celebrates hegemonic masculinity through dominance and competitiveness, *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022) introduces alternative masculine qualities such as cooperation, empathy, mentorship, and self-reflection. Both these films depict masculinity as a dynamic and evolving concept. The original film privileges a traditional model of masculinity centred on power and competition, whereas the sequel broadens this representation by incorporating emotional intelligence and interpersonal responsibility. This evolution reflects changing societal understandings of what it means to be masculine in contemporary culture.

3.2. Negotiating Power and Gender Relations

The film text further reveals that power operates as a central organising principle within the *Top Gun* franchise. While masculinity is performed through individual actions and behaviours, these performances are continuously regulated by institutional structures, military hierarchies, and gendered relations of authority. The films therefore provide insight into how power is exercised, challenged, and negotiated within a highly structured military environment.

In *Top Gun* (1986), authority is primarily represented through rank, institutional discipline, and professional status. The military setting establishes a rigid chain of command in which obedience is expected and deviation is often punished. Maverick's persistent conflicts with instructors and superior officers reflect tensions between individual agency and institutional control. His resistance to authority contributes to his identity as an exceptional pilot; however, it simultaneously demonstrates how power functions through surveillance, evaluation, and disciplinary mechanisms. The institution continually assesses pilots, ranks their performances, and determines who is worthy of recognition.

The competitive structure of the training programme further reinforces unequal power relations. Success is measured through comparison, ranking, and achievement, creating an environment in which individuals must constantly prove their value. Professional legitimacy becomes closely connected to institutional approval. Consequently, power is not exercised solely through direct commands but also through systems of evaluation that regulate behaviour and shape individual conduct.

Gender relations in the original film similarly reflect broader patriarchal assumptions. Although Charlie Blackwood occupies a position of technical expertise and intellectual authority, her professional knowledge is frequently overshadowed by the narrative's emphasis on male achievement. Her role often becomes secondary to Maverick's personal and professional journey. The film therefore reproduces a structure in which women possess expertise but remain peripheral to the primary centres of power. Female authority exists, yet it is rarely presented as equal to the authority exercised by male military personnel.

The sequel introduces significant modifications to these gendered power structures. *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022) represents a military environment in which women participate explicitly in operational and leadership roles. Female characters are integrated into professional spaces that were previously dominated by men, indicating a broader institutional acceptance of gender diversity. Rather than being positioned primarily as romantic interests or supporting figures, women are represented as skilled professionals whose contributions are essential to mission success.

The presence of female authority figures further reflects this transformation. Women are no longer restricted to symbolic or supportive positions but are shown occupying roles associated with decision-making, leadership, and responsibility. This development suggests an evolving understanding of competence that is less dependent on gender and more closely connected to expertise and performance.

Despite these shifts, the analysis also demonstrates that military institutions continue to operate through hierarchical systems that privilege authority, discipline, and command. Although women gain greater visibility, the broader organisational structure remains fundamentally hierarchical. As a result, the sequel does not entirely dismantle traditional power relations but instead illustrates how gender roles are gradually renegotiated within existing institutional frameworks.

The entire *Top Gun* franchise reflects changing dynamics of power and gender. The original film largely reproduces patriarchal and hierarchical structures, whereas the sequel presents a more inclusive model of authority that acknowledges women's participation within professional and leadership spaces. These developments reveal how cultural understandings of gender and power have evolved across the time period separating the two films.

3.3. From Hyper-Masculinity to Emotional Vulnerability

A significant transformation identified in the analysis concerns the emotional dimensions of masculine identity. While the original film privileges emotional control and psychological toughness, the sequel expands the emotional range available to its male characters. This shift represents one of the most substantial changes in the franchise's portrayal of masculinity. In *Top Gun* (1986), emotional restraint functions as an important marker of masculine credibility. Male characters are expected to remain composed under pressure, suppress personal difficulties, and prioritise professional responsibilities above emotional concerns. Expressions of fear, uncertainty, or grief are generally minimised within the highly demanding military environment. Emotional discipline becomes closely associated with competence and reliability.

However, moments of emotional disruption occasionally challenge this expectation. The death of Goose represents a critical turning point in the narrative. Rather than functioning as an isolated plot device, this event exposes the emotional turmoil of military life and personal loss. Maverick's struggle to cope with grief reveals that emotional vulnerability exists beneath the surface of the heroic masculine ideal. His temporary loss of confidence and uncertainty about returning to flight demonstrate that masculinity cannot be reduced to strength alone. The film therefore introduces emotional complexity, even while largely maintaining conventional masculine norms.

The sequel develops this complexity much further. Emotional experience becomes a central component of character development rather than a temporary interruption to

action. Maverick is portrayed as an ageing pilot confronting unresolved memories, personal regrets, and the significance of past decisions. Instead of suppressing these experiences, the narrative encourages reflection and emotional engagement.

Particularly significant is Maverick's relationship with Rooster, the son of his deceased friend Goose. Their interactions are shaped by guilt, responsibility, disappointment, and eventual reconciliation. The emotional tension between the two characters drives much of the narrative and demonstrates that masculine identity can be shaped through care, accountability, and interpersonal connection. Unlike the confrontational relationships that dominate the original film, this relationship emphasises understanding and emotional growth. The sequel also reframes leadership through emotional awareness. Effective guidance is no longer defined exclusively by technical expertise or personal bravery. Instead, leadership involves recognising the needs of others, responding to emotional challenges, and supporting collective development. Masculinity therefore becomes associated with relational responsibility rather than emotional detachment.

Another crucial aspect concerns the representation of ageing masculinity. Whereas the original film celebrates youthful confidence and ambition, the sequel explores maturity, self-evaluation, and personal reflection. Maverick's experiences illustrate how masculine identities evolve across the life course. Wisdom, patience, and accountability emerge as valued qualities that complement rather than replace courage and competence.

The film text suggest that the franchise moves beyond the narrow emotional framework commonly associated with action heroes of the 1980s. Emotional openness is not portrayed as weakness but as an essential component of personal growth and meaningful relationships. Through this transformation, *Top Gun: Maverick* presents a broader and more inclusive understanding of masculine identity, one that accommodates vulnerability, empathy, and emotional self-awareness alongside traditional attributes of strength and resilience.

3.4. Gendered Soundscapes and the Construction of Masculinity

The analysis demonstrates that sound functions as an important device through which masculinity is communicated, reinforced, and transformed within the *Top Gun* franchise. While visual imagery often receives greater scholarly attention in studies of gender representation, the films reveal that auditory elements play an equally important role in shaping audience perceptions of masculine identity. Through the strategic use of music, dialogue, vocal performances, ambient sounds, mechanical noises, and silence, both films construct distinct acoustic environments that contribute to the production of gendered meanings.

One of the most prominent sonic features of *Top Gun* (1986) is the dominance of mechanical sound. Throughout the film, the roar of fighter jet engines, aircraft launches, aerial manoeuvres, and technological machinery occupies a central position within the soundtrack. These sounds are frequently amplified and foregrounded, creating an auditory environment characterised by intensity, speed, and force. Rather than serving merely as background effects, the sounds of military aviation become symbolic expressions of hegemonic masculine identity. The repeated association between male pilots and powerful aircraft establishes an acoustic connection between masculinity, technological mastery, and physical control.

The film's musical score further contributes to this construction. High-energy rock music accompanies many of the training and flight sequences, creating an atmosphere of excitement and anticipation. The soundtrack emphasises movement, action, and physical performance, encouraging audiences to associate masculine identity with dynamism and adventure. Music therefore operates not simply as entertainment but as a narrative device that shapes how characters are perceived. The recurring use of energetic rhythms and amplified instrumentation produces an auditory framework in which masculine presence is associated with visibility, strength, and confidence.

Dialogue delivery represents another significant component of the film's gendered soundscape. Male characters in both the films often communicate through assertive speech patterns, direct commands, and competitive exchanges. Vocal performances are characterised by certainty, authority, and confidence. The manner in which lines are delivered consequently becomes as important as the words themselves. Lower vocal registers, controlled speech, and forceful delivery contribute to the perception of masculine competence and command. Through these vocal qualities, authority is communicated acoustically before it is established narratively.

In contrast, female vocal presence occupies a comparatively limited acoustic space within the original film. Although female characters participate in important conversations, their voices are less frequently associated with the high-intensity sonic environments that dominate the narrative. The distinction between male and female vocal representation contributes to an acoustic hierarchy in which masculine voices occupy the centre of the soundscape while female voices remain comparatively peripheral. This hierarchy mirrors broader patterns of representation within the film and demonstrates how sound participates in the organisation of gendered visibility.

The sequel, *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022), retains many of the sonic characteristics associated with military aviation but introduces notable modifications in how sound is employed. The film continues to utilise powerful aircraft sounds and large-scale action sequences; however, these sounds are integrated into a more varied auditory structure. Rather than relying exclusively on intensity and volume, the sequel incorporates moments of restraint, reflection, and sonic contrast. This diversification of the soundscape expands the range of meanings that can be communicated through sound.

A particularly important development concerns the use of dialogue. Conversations in the sequel frequently contain pauses, hesitations, and moments of reflection that are largely absent from the original film. These acoustic features create space for contemplation and interpersonal engagement. The significance of dialogue is therefore not limited to verbal content but extends to rhythm, pacing, and delivery. The inclusion of quieter conversational moments allows audiences to engage with characters in ways that extend beyond action-oriented performance.

The treatment of voice also undergoes a subtle transformation. Whereas the original film often privileges vocal certainty and directness, the sequel incorporates a wider range of vocal expressions. Changes in tone, pacing, and vocal intensity contribute to more layered character portrayals. The voice becomes a medium through which memory, experience, and personal history are communicated. As a result, masculinity is no longer represented solely through acoustic dominance but through a broader spectrum of vocal expression.

Another notable finding concerns the role of silence. In conventional action cinema, silence is often regarded as the absence of meaningful sound. However, the analysis indicates that silence functions as an important communicative resource within *Top Gun: Maverick*. Strategic pauses and reduced sonic activity create moments of reflection that encourage audiences to focus on character experience rather than spectacle. Silence therefore acquires narrative significance and contributes to the film's more complex treatment of masculine identity.

The relationship between diegetic and non-diegetic sound also reveals important differences between the two films. In *Top Gun* (1986), the integration of music and action frequently produces a seamless experience in which sound intensifies visual excitement. In the sequel, sound is more frequently used to create contrast and variation. Musical cues do not simply amplify action but also guide emotional interpretation, shape narrative pacing, and establish transitions between different forms of experience. This broader sonic range contributes to a more multifaceted representation of character identity.

The films text further indicate that sound participates in the construction of social relationships within the films. Shared conversations, collective communication during missions, and coordinated exchanges between pilots demonstrate how sound facilitates interaction and cooperation. Communication technologies, radio transmissions, and cockpit dialogue become important auditory spaces through which relationships are negotiated. Sound therefore functions not only as a marker of individual identity but also as a medium of social connection.

An additional dimension concerns the temporal qualities of sound. The original film employs sound primarily to generate immediacy and momentum, reinforcing the urgency of action and competition. The sequel, however, frequently uses sound to evoke continuity between past and present. Familiar musical motifs, recurring auditory references, and recognisable acoustic patterns establish connections across time, linking earlier experiences to contemporary events. Through these sonic continuities, the film creates a sense of historical development that mirrors broader changes in the representation of masculinity.

The texts reveal that gendered soundscapes constitute a central component of masculine representation within the *Top Gun* franchise. Mechanical sounds, musical scores, dialogue delivery, vocal performance, and silence collectively shape how masculinity is perceived and interpreted by audiences. While the original film relies heavily on sonic intensity, acoustic dominance, and technological power, the sequel expands the possibilities of masculine representation through a more diverse and layered soundscape. These findings highlight the importance of sound as an active participant in the construction of gendered identities and demonstrate that cinematic masculinity is produced not only through what audiences see but also through what they hear.

3.5. Summary of Findings

The analysis reveals four major findings. First, masculinity within the *Top Gun* franchise is constructed through repeated performances embedded in military practices, bodily conduct, and professional identity. Second, representations of authority and gender relations demonstrate a gradual shift from predominantly patriarchal structures towards more inclusive forms of professional participation. Third, the portrayal of masculine identity evolves from an emphasis on emotional restraint to a greater acceptance of

emotional expression, responsibility, and interpersonal connection. Fourth, gendered soundscapes emerge as a central mechanism through which masculine identities are communicated, negotiated, and transformed across both films.

Taken together, these findings indicate that the franchise reflects broader cultural changes in understandings of gender and masculinity. While *Top Gun* (1986) largely reproduces dominant masculine ideals associated with the late twentieth century, *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022) presents a more diversified representation that incorporates multiple forms of masculine expression. The following discussion section interprets these findings in relation to gender performativity, power relations, and contemporary debates within masculinity studies.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study contribute to ongoing debates concerning the social construction of masculinity, gender performativity, and the role of audiovisual media in shaping gendered identities. By examining *Top Gun* (1986) and *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022) through the combined perspectives of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and Michel Foucault's conception of power, the study demonstrates that cinematic masculinity is neither natural nor fixed but is continuously produced through cultural practices, institutional structures, and representational strategies. The comparative analysis of the two films reveals how changing social attitudes toward gender are reflected in popular cinema and how these shifts influence and shape the ways masculine identities are imagined and represented.

One of the most significant contributions of this study lies in its usage of Butler's theory of gender performativity to military action cinema. Butler (1990) argues that gender is constituted through repeated acts rather than originating from any essential or biological foundation. The findings support this proposition by showing that masculine identity in the *Top Gun* franchise is repeatedly enacted through military rituals, professional conduct, bodily discipline, and social expectations. Rather than presenting masculinity as a stable characteristic possessed by male characters, the films depict it as something that must be continually demonstrated and reaffirmed. This interpretation challenges essentialist understandings of gender and supports contemporary scholarship that views masculinity as historically and culturally contingent (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

The study also expands existing discussions of hegemonic masculinity. Previous research has frequently identified aggression, dominance, competitiveness, and authority as defining features of traditional masculine ideals (Beynon, 2002; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). While these characteristics remain visible within the *Top Gun* franchise, the comparative analysis indicates that their cultural significance has shifted over time. The sequel does not simply reject earlier masculine ideals but reconfigures them by incorporating alternative qualities that have become increasingly valued within contemporary social discourse. This transformation suggests that hegemonic masculinity is not a static framework but a flexible and adaptive cultural formation that responds to changing social expectations.

The findings further contribute to scholarship on power by illustrating the relevance of Foucault's theoretical perspective to cinematic representation. Foucault conceptualised power not merely as possession or domination but as a network of relations operating through institutions, practices, and discourses (Foucault, 1982). The military environment depicted in both films exemplifies this understanding. Rather than

functioning solely through direct command, power operates through systems of evaluation, discipline, surveillance, and professional regulation. The films demonstrate how institutional expectations shape acceptable forms of masculine conduct and how individuals internalise these expectations in order to achieve recognition and legitimacy. This finding reinforces the idea that gender identities are inseparable from broader structures of social power.

A particularly important contribution of the study concerns the relationship between gender and sound. Although film scholars have extensively examined visual representations of masculinity, comparatively limited attention has been given to the role of sound in constructing gendered identities. Drawing upon sound studies scholarship (Bull, 2020; Kassabian, 2000), this study argues that sound functions as an active agent in the production of masculine meaning. The findings demonstrate that music, dialogue, vocal performance, mechanical sound, and silence collectively participate in the communication of gendered identities. Masculinity is therefore experienced not only through visual representation but also through auditory perception.

This contribution is especially significant because it broadens the analytical scope of masculinity studies beyond visual performance. The findings suggest that sound can reinforce social expectations associated with gender while simultaneously creating opportunities for alternative forms of representation. The transition from acoustically dominant soundscapes in *Top Gun* (1986) to more layered and varied auditory environments in *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022) reflects broader cultural transformations in the understanding of masculine identity. Consequently, the study demonstrates that sound should be regarded as a central analytical category within gender and media research rather than a supplementary cinematic element.

The study additionally contributes to feminist media scholarship by highlighting gradual changes in the representation of women within military narratives. Earlier scholarship has frequently criticised action cinema for marginalising female characters and reinforcing patriarchal assumptions about authority and competence (Khadilkar et al., 2022). The findings indicate that the sequel partially responds to these criticisms by presenting women in more visible professional roles. However, the analysis also suggests that institutional structures remain largely unchanged, indicating that increased representation does not necessarily eliminate deeper power inequalities. This observation aligns with broader feminist arguments that symbolic inclusion alone is insufficient for achieving substantive gender equality.

The comparative nature of the study further demonstrates the value of analysing film franchises across historical periods. The thirty-six-year gap between the two films provides insight into changing cultural understandings of gender, authority, and identity. Rather than reflecting a complete rupture with earlier representations, the sequel illustrates a process of adaptation in which traditional masculine ideals are selectively retained while new expectations are incorporated. This process reveals how popular culture functions as a site where social change is negotiated rather than simply reflected.

Several limitations should also be acknowledged. The study focuses exclusively on two films from a single franchise and therefore does not claim to represent all cinematic portrayals of masculinity. In addition, the analysis concentrates on textual and audiovisual representations rather than audience reception. Consequently, the findings reveal how masculinity is represented but do not address how different audiences

interpret or respond to these representations. Future studies may therefore benefit from incorporating audience-based methodologies such as interviews, focus groups, or reception analysis.

Future research could extend this work in several directions. Comparative studies involving other military and action film franchises could provide broader insights into changing representations of masculinity across genres and cultural contexts. Researchers may also examine how gendered soundscapes operate in films centred on female protagonists or non-binary identities in order to explore whether similar auditory patterns emerge. Cross-cultural studies could investigate how cinematic sound contributes to the construction of masculinity in different national film industries. Finally, audience reception research could explore how viewers interpret and respond to gendered soundscapes, thereby deepening our understanding of the relationship between media representation and social perception.

Overall, the study demonstrates that masculinity within the *Top Gun* franchise is best understood as a performative, historically situated, and culturally negotiated phenomenon. By integrating insights from gender studies, sound studies, feminist media scholarship, and theories of power, the research highlights the complex ways in which cinematic texts construct, maintain, and transform masculine identities. The findings underscore the importance of examining both visual and auditory dimensions of representation and contribute to a growing body of scholarship that recognises gender as a dynamic and evolving social practice.

5. Conclusions

This study examined the construction of masculinity in Top Gun (1986) and Top Gun: Maverick (2022) through the lens of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and R.W. Connell's concept of masculinities, with particular attention to gendered soundscapes, dialogues, and performative acts. The findings demonstrate that masculinity in both films is not represented as a fixed or natural identity but as a socially produced and repeatedly performed construct shaped by institutional power, cultural expectations, and cinematic conventions.

The analysis reveals that Top Gun (1986) reinforces a hegemonic model of masculinity through sonic dominance, competitiveness, emotional restraint, and patriarchal authority. In contrast, Top Gun: Maverick (2022) presents a more nuanced portrayal of masculinity characterized by mentorship, emotional vulnerability, teamwork, and a greater recognition of female authority. The shift in sound design, narrative emphasis, and character interactions reflects broader transformations in contemporary understandings of gender and power.

The study further establishes that gendered sounds—including dialogue delivery, musical scores, aircraft sound effects, and moments of silence—function as important cinematic devices in shaping audience perceptions of masculine identity. These auditory elements work alongside visual and narrative structures to reinforce, negotiate, and occasionally challenge dominant gender norms.

Overall, the Top Gun franchise illustrates the evolution of cinematic masculinity from a model centered on individual heroism and dominance to one that increasingly accommodates emotional intelligence, collaboration, and relational forms of power. The findings contribute to scholarship on gender studies, film studies, and sound studies by demonstrating how sound operates as a critical site for the performance and transformation of masculinity in popular cinema.

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Appendix A

Appendix A. Coding Framework for Qualitative Content Analysis

Table A1. Analytical Categories Used in the Study

Table A1.

Category	Description	Indicators
Masculine Performance	Representation of masculinity through actions and behaviour	Competitiveness, risk-taking, leadership, aggression
Gender Performativity	Repeated acts constructing gender identity	Dialogue, gestures, body language, interpersonal interactions
Power Relations	Manifestations of authority and hierarchy	Military rank, command structures, mentorship, discipline
Gendered Soundscapes	Auditory elements associated with masculinity and femininity	Background score, vocal tone, aircraft sounds, silence
Emotional Expression	Display of vulnerability and emotional openness	Grief, mentorship, empathy, interpersonal bonding
Female Authority	Representation of women in positions of power	Professional expertise, command roles, decision-making authority

Appendix B

Appendix B. Film Corpus

The study analysed the following films:

- *Top Gun* (1986), directed by Tony Scott, Paramount Pictures.
- *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022), directed by Joseph Kosinski, Paramount Pictures.

Key analytical units included dialogue delivery, background music, sound effects, character interactions, representations of authority, emotional expression, and gendered performances within military settings.

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