

Multiple heroes behind one mask:
Gender, and DID depictions in superhero media

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ABSTRACT

Superhero media is said to have the potential to challenge stereotypes and empower marginalized groups. However it has not shied away from gendered and stigmatizing portrayals, including sensationalized acts of mental illness.

Superhero media started out as comics where women were often put in secondary roles, needing to be saved by male heroes or serving as objectified, fetishized, love interests (Hanley, 2021, p.11). Superhero media later adapted it comics to the big screen. Where Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), famously took the stage in Shyamalan's *Split* (2016), including an alter that depicted a violent superhuman. DID however is a trauma-related disruption of two or more personality states in ones identity to serve as a defense mechanism. Harmful portrayals of this disorder in media therefore spark controversy within the community.

Furthermore, these misrepresentations of mental health disorders and integrated sexism, could influence audience perceptions. Socially conscious generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012) often engages with issues of mental health (disorders), gender equality, and diversity, but has also grown up alongside superhero media. Therefore, this thesis will examine their reactions to two superheroes with DID comic-to-screen adaptations. Marvels *Moon Knight* (Slater, 2022) and DC's *Doom Patrol* (Carver, 2019–2023) were chosen for this. The central question of this thesis is: *How do gendered portrayals of Dissociative Identity Disorder in superhero series shape how Generation Z's audiences view mental illness and gender?*

To answer this question a mixed-method of 3 focus groups with each 4-5 participants, and 8 separate interviews were held. There was an evenly divide between male and female participants of Generation Z (GenZ). Following this a thematic analysis of the (translated) transcripts was conducted which included a selection of keywords/phrases, followed by coding these into relevant segments, and later led to the development of themes.

This revealed the following three theme's: (1) Gender bias in superhero character portrayals, (2) Gendered portrayals of DID, and (3) Misrepresentation of DID in media reinforces stigma. The findings of these themes revealed that male characters like *Moon Knight*'s alters were perceived as controlled, and heroic, while in comparison *Doom Patrol*'s alters were perceived as over-emotional, unstable, and overly sexualized. These interpretations reflected broader gender stereotypes specifically within DID, reinforced through perceived gendered differences of alter relationships, switching behavior, and trauma origin stories. Participants were confused and misinformed about DID, often stemming from their prior media exposure. This was reflected in their use of stigmatizing terms and their association of the disorder with violence and instability. However, many participants demonstrated strong media literacy, actively reflecting on these portrayals, questioning gender norms, and expressing a desire for more accurate and empathetic representation.

In conclusion, this study shows that gendered depictions of DID in superhero media shape how GenZ audiences perceive both mental illness and gender. While problematic stereotypes continue to influence audience perception, the active media literacy of GenZ audiences indicates potential for more conscious and inclusive representations moving forward.

KEYWORDS: *Superheroes, Dissociative Identity Disorder, Gender, Media Representation, GenZ*

Preface

I honestly can't believe I've finished writing my master's thesis... what a journey it has been....superhero movies, eat your heart out! It only feels fitting that a thesis about superheroes includes a few thank you's to my recent ones.

First, to my supervisor, Fraser Robinson, thank you for putting up with my chaotic energy, for your steady support, and for the helpful feedback that actually helped me get all these words on paper.

To minha mãe, mijn vader & my sister: thank you for being there through the crocodile tears, the stress, and the many "what the hell am I even doing" moments. You couldn't write this thesis for me, but your support meant everything.

To my friends, thank you for listening to me rant about sexism and superheroes for months on end. You deserve a mask and cape.

And of course, a huge thank you to all the participants who made this thesis possible. Your time and insights were truly invaluable.

Even though I sometimes feel more like a villain than a hero when it comes to taking charge over my life, I'm really proud of this work. This will probably be the last thesis I ever write, and now, like the rest of my generation, I hope to go out into the world and maybe, just maybe, help change or even save it.

If you've made it this far into this cheesy little message, thank you. I hope this thesis brings you something, whether it's just one insight, a reflection, or even just a new perspective. Because you never know... you might be someone's hero. ☺

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Introduction

"You like to make fun of us, but we are more powerful than you think."
– Dennis, *Split* (Shyamalan, 2016)

This line from *Split* (Shyamalan, 2016) captures one of the sensationalized portrayals of Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) in popular media. This trauma-related disruption of one's identity, is characterized by more than two personality states that act as a defense mechanism (American Psychiatric Association, n.d., *Dissociative Identity Disorder* section). In *Split*, Kevin Wendell Crumb's alter, "the beast", is depicted as a violent/superhuman, which sparked controversy within the DID community (Padilla, 2020, 18:45-21:08; MultiplicityAndMe, 2017).

Split is one of Shyamalan's films that form part of the Unbreakable superhero trilogy (*Unbreakable*, 2000; *Split*, 2016; *Glass*, 2019), a genre often defined by its focus on (super)human beings with extraordinary abilities (Rosenberg & Coogan, 2013, p. 1). While the genre does not shy away from controversial or exaggerated portrayals, there are reasons why filmmakers may gravitate towards these more "expressive" symptoms of mental illness: they are simply more cinematic (Packer, 2017, p. 6). In contrast, conditions marked by inwardness, such as depression or anxiety, are often overlooked, as they rarely provide the kind of visual drama that mainstream cinema thrives on (Packer, 2017, p. 6). *Split* therefore serves as a notable example of how the superhero genre has capitalized on disorders such as DID before, crafting stigmatizing and inaccurate portrayals in the service of compelling storytelling (Brand & Pasko, 2017, p.2).

Apart from the portrayal of mental illnesses, when women take the stage in superhero movies it is often with a lens that can be described as one that contains persuasive sexist portrayals. Leading to the limitation of "who can be a hero and which heroic traits are valued" (Hanley, 2021, p. viii). Women in early superhero comics were often relegated to secondary roles as damsels in distress or love interests, serving to empower male characters (Hanley, 2021, p.8). Even now, many female characters are objectified or written to fulfill fetishistic desires (Hanley, 2021, p.11). Despite these issues, scholars like Cocca (2016) highlight the genre's potential to challenge stereotypes and empower marginalized groups (p.5).

It should be noted that superhero comics were created for boys and girls alike. If the heroes of comics should be defined it is by their extraordinary abilities or "powers", codenames and costumes (Rosenberg & Coogan, 2013, p. 3). With male characters serving predominantly as heroes (Hanley, 2021, p. 7). Nevertheless, males like females do not lack in stereotypes in these portrayals.

Recent superhero media has tried to be more ethnically, racially, and gender-positive (Stabile, 2009, p.87). However, it still merges misrepresentations of mental health disorders and sexism, influencing audience perceptions. Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012), grew up with "a steady dose of the supernatural in popular culture" (Crace, 2022, p. 283). This makes the so called "GenZ" especially relevant to this thesis. As a socially conscious generation, they are engaged with issues of mental health (disorders), gender equality, and diversity, making them an intriguing demographic to explore in the context of superhero media.

Therefore, this thesis will examine their reactions to two superhero comic-to-screen adaptations featuring "hero" characters with DID. One of these heroes is Marvel's Moon Knight, Created by writer Doug Moench and multiple artist, who firstly appeared as a side character in *Werewolf by Night* #32 in August 1975, before receiving its first comic series in 1980 (Comic Vine, n.d.). The *Moon Knight* series premiered on Disney+ on March 30, 2022 (IMDb, n.d.). The second hero is DC's Crazy Jane, who first appeared in the DC comic *Doom Patrol Vol. 2* #19 in February 1989 created by writer Grant Morrison and multiple artists (Comic Vine, n.d.). The *Doom Patrol* series originally aired on DC Universe in 2019 and later moved to HBO Max on June 25, 2020 (IMDb, n.d.).

Moon Knight

Marvel Studios' *Moon Knight* (Slater, 2022), is a short-form series consisting of 6 episodes released on Disney+. It follows Marc Spector, a man with DID caused by a later revealed childhood trauma, as he begins to lose control over his daily life. The audience is first introduced to Steven Grant, a timid and soft-spoken museum gift shop worker living in London, who speaks with a British accent and struggles with blackouts and missing time. Steven also seems to be terrified of falling

asleep, and proceeds to do an elaborate nightly ritual: chaining himself to the bed, sealing his door with tape, and setting up sand around the bed to track any movement. As the story unfolds further, Steven discovers that he shares his body with Marc, an American former mercenary with a violent past who serves as the earthly avatar of the Egyptian god Khonshu. Unbeknownst to both Steven and Marc, a third alter, Jake Lockley, also inhabits their body. Jake, who speaks Spanish, remains hidden from them throughout the series. The audience catches brief glimpses of his presence through unexplained bursts of violence, and see and hear him speak for the first time in the post-credit scene. The central narrative, has Marc and Steven trying to work together to save the world from villain Arthur Harrow, the avatar of the goddess Ammit. While also exploring Marc's shattered romantic relationship with his wife Layla. *Moon Knight* combines themes of trauma, identity, dissociation and mythology within a stylized Marvel superhero framework.

Doom Patrol

By contrast, *Doom Patrol* (Carver, 2019–2023), is a longer-running series from DC, a competitor to Marvel, available to stream on Amazon Prime. *Doom Patrol* presents a different approach to both superhero storytelling and mental health disorder representation. The series centers on a group of marginalized metahumans, "the Doom Patrol", who don't necessarily identify themselves as a superhero group, at least not in the beginning of the series. Their early attempts at helping others and saving the world are often clumsy and chaotic, sometimes causing more problems than that they solve them. All of '*Doom Patrol's*' members grapple not only with their powers, but with deep personal traumas and the challenge of accepting their own identities. Among them is Kay Challis, better known by her primary alter Crazy Jane, who lives with DID as a result of a later revealed severe childhood trauma. From the very start of the show, Jane is portrayed as aware of her diagnosis and maintains the primary control over Kay's body in order to protect her. Unlike Marc, she can willingly go to "the Underground", a psychological space within her mind where all 64 of her alters coexist and frequently interact. Each of these personalities in the underground has their own voice, appearance, and even superpower, complicating both her relationships and her role within the *Doom Patrol* team. Like *Moon Knight*, *Doom Patrol* engages with themes of trauma, identity, and dissociation, as central to Jane's character arc.

Research question

The inspiration for this thesis came from the names of the main heroes discussed. For which Crazy Jane, seems to carry a social stigma, with "Crazy" seemingly implying instability. Whilst Marc's Moon "Knight" seems to connote a meaning of strength and heroism. Stemming from this is the central question of this thesis: *How do gendered portrayals of Dissociative Identity Disorder in superhero series shape how Generation Z's audiences view mental illness and gender?* Which is further broken down into the two following sub-questions:

1. To what extent do participants perceive gendered differences in how DID is depicted in *Moon Knight* (Slater, 2022) and *Doom Patrol* (Carver, 2019–2023)?
2. How do these portrayals influence participants' understanding of DID?

With these questions in mind, this thesis seeks to uncover how superhero media both reflects and potentially shapes cultural narratives around gender and mental illness. By focusing on GenZ viewers and by using a mixed method of focus groups and interviews, this thesis aims to shed light on the interpretive processes through which these audiences make sense of complex psychological representations that we see on screen.

Academic Relevance

This thesis's academic relevance lies in addressing a gap in current research on how audiences interpret gendered portrayals of Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) in superhero media. While mental illness in popular culture has received scholarly attention, there is limited research that directly compares the media representation of male and female characters with the same disorder, across multiple shows, particularly within the superhero genre. By examining the characters of Marc Spector in *Moon Knight* and Crazy Jane in *Doom Patrol*, this study aims to explore how gender influences the narrative framing of DID, and how these portrayals are received, interpreted, and potentially internalized by young viewers. In doing so, it contributes to a deeper understanding of

how media depictions intersect with mental health stigma, gender norms, and generational media literacy.

Social Relevance

This thesis holds social relevance as it highlights how superhero media contributes to shaping public attitudes toward both gender and mental health disorders. Media portrayals of mental disorders, especially when dramatized or distorted based on gender, can significantly influence societal beliefs, often reinforcing harmful stereotypes and misconceptions (Snyder et al., 2024, p.2). When characters with Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) are depicted as dangerous, unstable, or villainous, these representations may contribute to ongoing stigma, potentially affecting real-world understanding and acceptance of the disorder. Understanding how these portrayals shape cultural narratives can inform both media creators and educators working to promote more empathetic and accurate depictions of mental illness and gender in popular media.

Chapter outline

This thesis is structured as follows:

First, the theoretical framework begins with an overview of the superhero genre and its core characteristics. This is followed by an explanation of Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), including its medical definition, to provide a clear foundation for the rest of this thesis. It then explores recurring gender stereotypes and sexism in superhero narratives, with a focus on how male and female characters are differently portrayed. Followed by a section on friendships in superhero media in relation to gender. The chapter also considers broader portrayals of mental health (disorders) in superhero stories, narrowing down to how DID specifically has been represented in both films and series. Finally, it addresses GenZ's relationship with media, emphasizing their awareness of representation and their expectations for inclusivity, before introducing the concepts of media literacy and audience interpretation as key frameworks for analysis.

Secondly the methodological approach is outlined, detailing the use of qualitative thematic analysis and justifying its relevance to the research questions.

Subsequently, the themes stemming from the focus groups and interviews are presented in the result section and analyzed in the discussion, highlighting recurring themes in GenZ audiences' interpretations of *Moon Knight* and *Doom Patrol*.

The thesis concludes with a reflection on the central research question, followed by a discussion of academic and societal implications, study limitations, and recommendations for future research.

Theoretical frameworks

This theoretical framework explores how the superhero genre engages with gender, mental health disorders for which specifically DID, and audience interpretation, with a focus on stereotypes, Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), and GenZ's critical engagement with media.

The superhero genre

The superhero comic genre was made for and read by boys and girls alike (Hanley, 2021, p. vii). However, both the creators and leading hero's starring these comics were predominantly men (Hanley, 2021, p. vii). To better understand the dynamics within and surrounding these narratives, it's helpful to first consider what actually defines a superhero. As Rosenberg and Coogan (2013) explain, the answer lies in the name itself, with the prefix "*super*" referring to extraordinary abilities, whether physical, mental, or both, that set these characters apart from ordinary humans and consistently portray acts of heroism which are aimed at doing "the right thing" (p. 1). Crucially, a superhero's identity is also constructed through a codename and costume, which typically reflect their biography, powers, and origin story (Rosenberg & Coogan, 2013, p. 3).

Since superheroes are traditionally expected to protect rather than harm, it is ironic to note that the "heroic" protagonists in superhero media often engage in more violence and aggression than the villains, who are typically positioned as the "bad" characters (Clarke & Hine, 2024, p. 2). This reversal not only further complicates the moral clarity of superhero narratives but also reinforces the stereotype that strength and violence are inherently linked even in characters meant to serve as role models.

This potentially suggests that the contemporary superhero's portrayed in media might be more violent and emotionally detached than those in earlier comics. Where in earlier comics superheroes were shown to be more morally complex figures, whilst the superheroes of today often "participate in non-stop violence, are aggressive, sarcastic and rarely speak to the virtue of doing good for humanity" (American Psychological Association, 2010, para. 1-2). When these movie superheroes are seen outside their superhero costumes they are often seen exploiting women, "flaunting bling", and conveying their manhood through their high-powered guns as exemplified by Marvel's *Iron Man* (American Psychological Association, 2010, para. 1-2). These modern and violent portrayals risk encouraging harmful versions of masculinity and heroism that may undermine healthy emotional development and relationships in boys and girls alike, especially when vulnerability is framed as weakness (Miller et al., 2021, p.1-2).

Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID)

Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) is often underrecognized in clinical settings (Brand et al., 2016, p.261). In contrast, when it comes to the media and entertainment industry, DID is frequently exaggerated by use of dramatic storytelling (Snyder et al., 2024, p.1). These portrayals come at the expense of individuals with DID, reinforcing stigmatizing and inaccurate representations (Snyder et al., 2024, p.2).

DID, once known as multiple personality disorder, is a complex mental illness that stems from overwhelming repetitive trauma of any form being it physical, emotional or sexual, and may also be influenced by cognitive suggestion (Mitra & Jain, 2023, *Etiology* section). Mostly it is due to severe (sexual) childhood abuse (Cleveland Clinic, 2024, *what are the risk factor for dissociative identity disorder* section). However, this psychiatric disorder is diagnosed in only about 1.5% of the global population (Mitra & Jain, 2023, *Epidemiology* section). Patients can spend up to 12.5 years in treatment before being actually diagnosed with dissociative identity disorder (Mitra & Jain, 2023, *Epidemiology* section). There is no significant sex differences in dissociative identity disorder, but there seems to be a dominance of woman with the disorder (Spitzer & Freyberger, 2008, *Abstract* section). This potentially has something to do with socio-cultural context wherein men with disorders in general do not enter health systems (Spitzer & Freyberger, 2008, *Abstract* section).

This disorder is characterized by the presence of two or more distinct identities or personality states, also known as "alters" or "parts" each with its own set of memories, behaviors, and traits (Cleveland Clinic, 2024, *What is dissociative identity disorder* section). These separate personalities can take control of the individual's actions, with each one having unique cognitive, physiological, and emotional responses (Saxena et al, 2023, p.3). Within DID, the group of alters that share a body is often referred to as a "system," and some individuals prefer terms like "inner family" or

"community" to describe their experience (The Dissociative Initiative, 2020, *Common multiplicity terms* section).

In DID switches between alters function as a core defense mechanism, where dissociation helps the individual psychologically distance themselves from overwhelming emotions or traumatic memories (American Psychiatric Association, n.d., *Dissociative Identity Disorder* section). To clarify, triggers for these switches are sensory cues such as sounds, smells, or words. These triggers cause these sudden shifts in identity, emotional responses, or distressing flashbacks, further complicating daily life (The Dissociative Initiative, 2020, *Common multiplicity terms* section).

Consequently, shifts between identities can involve sudden changes in gender, ethnicity sexuality and preferences, such as food, clothing, or activities, which can be distressing for the person experiencing them (American Psychiatric Association, n.d., *Dissociative Identity Disorder* section). These identity shifts happen involuntarily and can cause significant distress in social, occupational, or daily life (American Psychiatric Association, n.d., *Dissociative Identity Disorder* section).

Switching may happen suddenly or gradually, and different alters may experience varying levels of awareness, from amnesia to "co-consciousness" (The Dissociative Initiative, 2020, *Common multiplicity terms* section). "Co-consciousness," meaning that multiple alters are aware of what is happening (The Dissociative Initiative, 2020, *Common multiplicity terms* section). When systems don't experience "co-consciousness" they often experience ongoing memory gaps, struggling to recall everyday events, personal information, or past trauma (American Psychiatric Association, n.d., *Dissociative Identity Disorder* section).

Despite these challenges, it is important to remember that, as the Sidran Institute explains, these alternate states are not separate people but rather different manifestations of a single, whole individual (American Psychiatric Association, n.d., *Dissociative Identity Disorder* section). Some individuals with DID describe their experiences as feeling "possessed" or "fractured," while others frame their alters as spirits, voices, or aspects of a unified self (The Dissociative Initiative, 2020, *Common multiplicity terms* section).

In most cases, self-injurious behaviors and suicide attempts are frequently reported among individuals with dissociative identity disorder (American Psychiatric Association, n.d., *Risk factors and suicide risk* section). These complexities underscore the importance of accurate and empathetic portrayals in media, which can either perpetuate harmful stereotypes or foster greater understanding of DID.

Superheroes: perceived stereotypes and sexism

There have been previous studies done on gendered portrayals within superhero media, and results often revealed that its portrayal of male and female superheroes were largely in line with broader gender role stereotypes (Clarke & Hine, 2024, p.1). It's also important to note that stereotypical masculinity is often centered in superhero content, where traits like dominance, toughness, and emotional control are highlighted (Clarke & Hine, 2024, p.2). These stories tend to "indulge in fantasies about the heroes unlimited ability to protect a silent and largely feminized humanity from that which threatens it" (Stabile, 2009, p. 87). Even though modern superhero films seem more diverse, closer analysis suggests white male characters still dominate as protectors (Stabile, 2009, p. 89).

This masculine ideal in superhero media can be understood through the concept of hegemonic masculinity, which refers to a form of masculinity that is dominant over others, and thus relational in nature (Clarke & Hine, 2024, p. 2). This concept of hegemonic masculinity is often associated with traits such as emotional detachment, independence, aggression, and control, many of which are also used to explain criminal behavior (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 840). Because hegemonic masculinity is defined relationally, femininity is often positioned as its opposite, linked to emotionality, nurturing behavior, passivity, and domestic roles (Clarke & Hine, 2024, p. 2). Supporting this, studies have found that superhero characters in general displayed significantly more negative traits such as violence, use of weapons, and intimidation, than positive ones, like helping others, building relationships, or practicing teamwork (Harriger et al., 2022, p.354).

If we zoom in further on male superhero stereotypes, they outnumber female superheroes as well as that they are often portrayed as being highly muscular, masculine, rugged, tough, powerful, and more violent (Clarke & Hine, 2024, p.2; Miller et al., 2021, p.4). For example, Iron Man, one of the main Avengers, is generally portrayed with a light-hearted approach to battles, like his teammates, as

they often frame their emotions towards it as a source of entertainment. In one episode, Iron Man even refers to getting involved in a battle as being like a party, suggesting that it is more of a fun pastime than a serious conflict (Clarke & Hine, 2024, p.4). Males are also found to utilize weapons and have more fighting skills than their female counterparts (Clarke & Hine, 2024, p.2). Positive male superhero stereotypes are that they are very, independent, knowledgeable and capable (Miller et al., 2021, p.3). Even though, superheroes overall are expected to suppress vulnerability, this standard is especially strict for its male characters. In general, it is suggested by superhero portrayals that males do not need or wish to consult others and that they won't require any help weakness (Miller et al., 2021, p.3). Notably, male creators have also contributed to the construction of unrealistic male body standards, particularly in superhero comics, where male superheroes are often depicted with exaggerated shoulder-to-waist ratios and upper body muscularity that far exceed those of an average human male (Harriger et al., 2022, p.354).

On the other hand, female superheroes face a different kind of stereotype, one that emphasizes attractiveness, emotional sensitivity, and a supporting role rather than taking leadership. Starting with the fact that, female superheroes have traditionally been confined to secondary roles, emphasizing vulnerability and dependence on male heroes (Hanley, 2021, p.8). As Hanley (2021) further points out, early female characters were often short-lived versions of male heroes in revealing outfits, fading into obscurity after a few issues (p.9). Furthermore, females tend to be portrayed as more emotional, more attractive and more worried and visibly overwhelmed during chaotic or dangerous situations (Clarke & Hine, 2024, p.2). Female superheroes were more often shown with a mentor figure and positioned as part of a team, which suggests that superhero narratives still lean on conventional gender roles that associate women with guidance and collaboration (Clarke & Hine, 2024, p.2).

Many heroines in comics were posed in what is known as "broke back fashion," an exaggerated posture that showcases all their curves at once (Cocca, 2014, p.99). While comic creators claim to depict empowered superheroines, critics argue that their sexuality is crafted primarily for a male audience, making them objects rather than heroes (Hudson, 2011, para. 8). Characters like Wonder Woman embody this paradox, where feminist themes are entangled with fetishization (Hanley, 2021, p.11). The sexual allure of female superheroes in comics was used to justify male characters' submission to their rule (Hudson, 2011, para. 9), as if being "sexy" is the only true power a female heroines can hold.

Even when female characters have powers, they are often tied to destructive alter egos, portrayed as unstable or morally ambiguous (Stabile, 2009, p.89). Male superheroes symbolize strength and independence, whereas female heroes frequently struggle to control their abilities, reinforcing the notion that they need guidance or saving, by a (white) male superhero (Hanley, 2021, p.16). This dynamic continues to present women as either passive victims or as powerful figures whose abilities come at a dangerous cost (McCaughey, 1997, p.36).

Research shows that media influences gender role attitudes (Lanis & Covell, 1995, p. 641), reinforcing ideas that women are fragile and men are invulnerable. Further perpetuating gendered stereotypes that undermine women's agency and promote harmful societal dynamics (Stabile, 2009, p.88). The assumption that women are inherently vulnerable has even been used to justify both state and domestic (sexual) violence (Stabile, 2009, p.89). Even in genres that celebrate the extraordinary, the concept of protection is still gendered: men are imagined as wielding power effortlessly, while women's power is seen as unstable or unreliable.

Friendship in Superhero Media

Friendship is not a neutral or universal concept but a "gendered performance that reflects and reinforces social norms" (Austin et al., 2019, p. 13). In media, and particularly within superhero narratives, friendships are often shaped by stereotypical gender roles, both in their representation and function. Idealized friendship is frequently coded through feminine traits such as trust, intimacy, and emotional support (Nardi, 1992, p.1), thus excluding traditionally masculine expressions of bonding from being considered "true" friendship. Historically, both male and female friendships in superhero media have upheld such gendered assumptions, reinforcing ideas about how men and women are expected to relate to one another and to their peers (Austin et al., 2019, p. 14).

Male friendships in superhero narratives have often focused on action-oriented dynamics rather than emotional disclosure, emphasizing loyalty through physical acts like fighting side by side (Austin et

al., 2019, p. 14). However, the rise of the “bromance” has complicated this narrative by introducing emotionally intense, non-sexual bonds between straight men. These relationships display intimacy and vulnerability while maintaining a heteronormative framework in which emotions are acknowledged but not expressed sexually (Austin et al., 2019, p. 14). As Boyle and Berridge (2014) note, contemporary male friendships in media are often permitted to exist as meaningful connections independent of romantic subplots, they can be “com” without the “rom” (p. 365).

In contrast, female friendships in superhero media remain largely underdeveloped. Costelle (2016) observes that women in early comics rarely confided in one another, and when multiple female characters appeared, their interactions were limited to rivalries or superficial alliances (p. 1). Relationships between women were often depicted as catty, competitive, or centered around male attention, reinforcing regressive tropes rather than authentic emotional connections (Costelle, 2016, p. 8). As Boyle and Berridge (2014) argue, very few contemporary films actually show women becoming friends, especially women not preoccupied with heterosexual romance (p. 365). Even when female friendships are present, they often exist within groups with shared histories, which dilutes the homosocial and emotional intensity (Boyle and Berridge, 2014, p. 365). Yet, as Rind highlights, genuine female friendship, marked by supportive listening and emotional reinforcement, can significantly enhance self-worth and autonomy (Costelle, 2016, p. 1), making its omission from superhero narratives all the more telling.

Mental health disorders in super hero narratives

The superhero genre not only reinforces gendered stereotypes but also often turns mental health into a narrative tool, particularly by linking trauma to the emergence of heroic identities or as the source of the villain's evil. As a result, mental disorders are rarely shown in their daily, mundane forms but are instead portrayed through dramatized portrayals of its symptoms that serve the plot (Packer, 2017, p. 6). Where media has the space and power to create narratives full of emotional complexity, mental illness is still largely depicted in negative or exaggerated ways (Pirkis et al., 2006, p. 536). In which the mental illnesses are frequently reduced to their most visible or narratively convenient aspects (Packer, 2017, p. 307). According to Pirkis et al. (2006, p. 536), such portrayals contribute to long-term public stigma and can discourage people from seeking or supporting mental health care.

Mental disorders are frequently only used as narrative tools for character, with their conditions driving the plot rather than being portrayed with empathy or depth. O'Hara (2009) contends that such portrayals position characters with serious mental disorders as “monstrously ‘other’,” reinforcing fear rather than understanding (p. 44). Violence and danger are often central within these narratives, contributing to a skewed public perception that associates mental illness with threat (Butler & Hyler, 2005, p. 519). Moreover, actors have often gained critical acclaim for portraying characters with mental disorders, a trend that risks flattening the lived experiences of those with such conditions into award-winning performances (Rose, 2017, para. 20). Another critical issue is that when mental health is depicted as the source of a superhero's special abilities, treatment such as medication or therapy, is often framed as something that would weaken or eliminate those powers (Moore et al., 2024, p. 5).

Yet, the potential of mental health portrayals in (superhero) media shouldn't be overlooked. It could serve as a powerful tool for disseminating health information and encouraging mental health care, going beyond harmful stereotypes and avoiding reduction of mental illness to either villainy or plot devices (Moore et al., 2024, p. 5). This is underscored in a TED talk “Capes, cowls and courage: the psychological power of superheroes” by Dr. Andrea Letamendi (2015) who reflects that “antiheroes and adversaries introduce the idea that who we are is shaped by what happens to us” (para. 6). Superhero narratives, then, provide a lens for exploring resilience, post-traumatic growth, and the psychological consequences of loss and adversity (Letamendi, 2015, para. 29).

DID Portrayed in Media

Licensed therapist Jonathan Decker discusses how “so often, dissociative identity disorder, is a trope to scare people or it's a gimmick for storytelling, but it's almost never something that's shown with compassion or any level of clinical accuracy” (Cinema Therapy, 2022, 2:06). Moreover, research indicates that while DID symptoms are generally subtle, media portrayals frequently

exaggerate these symptoms by depicting extreme shifts between alters and overly dramatic behaviors, in some cases even going as far as given some of the alters animal-like behaviors (Diefenbach & West, 2007, p.182; Snyder, 2017, p.4). As Decker further explains, filmmakers inevitably merge reality with cinematic visual language to tell the story they want to tell (Cinema Therapy, 2022, 2:23). However, this often involves taking creative liberties, using stylized actions or symbolic representations, rather than depicting DID as it actually manifests in real life (Cinema Therapy, 2022, 2:23).

Even though some individuals with DID experience more overt presentations of their symptoms, Kluft explains that “up to 95 percent of individuals with DID do not exhibit dramatic switching” as is portrayed in the media (Snyder, 2017, p.2). Often cinema portrays alters having dialog and conversation with each other a lot, and even though this is unheard of this is also not especially common in real life (Cinema Therapy, 2022, 5:09). In the same way, the rapid switching that is shown in media outings, where DID systems, go switching from one personality to another back and forth, opposes from real life where the alters as explained by Decker “get into a gear and they stay there for a couple of days” (Cinema Therapy, 2022, 5:21). In most cases, the portrayed personalities and the alters are often very different, with different speech patterns, different mannerisms, different accents and or dialects. Even though this is seen as common in DID, in real life this is said to be a lot more subtle. This is also a way of protecting the DID system, “So that most people observing the person wouldn't realize that there's another personality” (Cinema Therapy, 2022, 5:44).

Furthermore characters with DID are often portrayed engaging in violent or even criminal behavior (Sampson, 2020, p.80). This is inconsistent with research findings, which indicate that the majority of individuals with DID have low involvement in violent crimes and are more likely to be victims of such crimes (Webermann & Brand, 2017, p.7). It is important to understand that there are multiple stigmatizing terms often used to refer to DID characters including: crazy, creepy, different, freak, idiot, monster, nitwit, nutjob, nuts, problem, psycho, ruined, scumbag, silly, sociopath, unstable, and weird (Smith et al., 2019, p.4).

As a consequence of these harmful portrayals in media, individuals with DID have felt concerns about being feared or disbelieved, and even feel frightened of themselves and experience increased shame and self-loathing (Nester et al., 2022, p.5). This goes as far that even 92.03% percent of individuals with DID cited stigma as a reason for ending their mental health treatment (Nester et al., 2022, p.5). Not only individuals with DID are affected by these portrayals Vogel et al. (2008) found public stigma to be linked to higher television exposure (p.286). This means that unfair portrayals will likely stimulate negative attitudes towards individuals with DID villainizing them not only on screen, but also in real life. Above all, “people with DID have suffered and they deserve compassion, not fear and judgment” (Cinema Therapy, 2022, 0:35).

Generation Z and Uses and Gratifications Theory

Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012) grew up in a digital era, heavily influenced by social media, streaming platforms, and superhero franchises (Crace, 2022, p.197). When discussing the topic of superheroes, it feels almost poetic that these GenZer's, sometimes gets referred to as the "superhero -like generation" (Luttrell & McGrath, 2021, p.17). Since, they are perceived as similar to the superheroes in the narratives that they watch better” (Luttrell & McGrath, 2021, p.23). GenZ audiences even self-identify as potential superheroes “ready to challenge injustice and change the world for the better” (Luttrell & McGrath, 2021, p.23). They have the future and the world in its hands and are greatly affected by technology, education, and events on a global scale (Luttrell & McGrath, 2021, p.17).

Rubin explains that, based on Uses and Gratifications Theory, media use is purposeful and motivated, with individuals taking “initiative in selection these media and are not simply passive targets of media messages.” (Rubin, 2008, *The perspective* section). Furthermore, the theory acknowledges that media effects are socially and psychologically constrained, as they are mediated by individuals’ background characteristics, personal motivations, attitudes, differences, and levels of initiative (Rubin, 2008, *The perspective* section). Within this sphere, GenZ gravitates toward on-demand entertainment and communication platforms, seeking content that reflects their social awareness and desire for inclusive representation” (Dimock, 2019, para. 12). Again it is important to highlight that their media consumption is also shaped by social and psychological factors (Rubin, 2008, *The perspective* section), meaning that personal identity, peer influence, and societal issues

impact the superhero narratives they engage with. They go beyond traditional media and discuss and dissect the content that they see across social media platforms.

It could also be argued that they are the first generation to actually grew up with and experience superhero narratives that attempt to be more inclusive, racially, and gender-positive (Stabile, 2009, p.87), though it also seems still riddled with traditional stereotypes. And as a socially conscious generation, they are engaged with issues of mental health, gender equality, and diversity (Crace, 2022, p.197), making them an intriguing demographic to explore in the context of superhero media. Gen Z, isn't afraid to stand up for their values, and speak out for the same ideals as superheroes stand out for: systematic and transformative social change (Luttrell & McGrath, 2021, p.25).

Media literacy & audience interpretation

Understanding how media literacy and audience interpretation function is especially relevant when considering GenZ, a demographic known for its critical engagement with media. Media literacy refers to the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create messages across various forms of communication (Potter, 2018, p19). While many individuals consider themselves fairly media literate; able to select what they watch, absorb information, and use media for entertainment or self-expression, this skill requires more than passive consumption (Potter, 2018, p.xix). In today's information-saturated culture, people often place their minds on "automatic pilot" to cope with the overwhelming stream of media messages (Potter, 2018, p.2). However, this passive mode of processing can be risky, as it enables the media to subtly shape our thought patterns without our awareness (Potter, 2018, p.2).

Audience interpretation, then, is not passive but influenced by individual experience, cultural background, and shared social knowledge. As Wessels (2023, p. 298) explains, meaning emerges through the interaction between viewer and text; what a film communicates depends greatly on what the viewer brings to it. This meaning-making process doesn't end with viewing, it is often extended through conversations with others, where personal interpretations are refined or reinforced. Closely related to this is the concept of engagement, which describes how viewers are emotionally and intellectually drawn into a narrative, becoming invested in both the present action and what unfolds next (Vincs et al., 2013, p. 135).

When it comes to complex or unfamiliar topics like mental illness, audiences tend to rely on symbolic representations and familiar cultural tropes to make sense of what they see. Television presents a reality that is becoming paramount in our society (Wahl, 1995, p.92). The depictions of mental illnesses that are portrayed in media, are pervasive and consistent in the stereotypes they present. This often leads to the fact that it provides a sense of comfort by reinforcing a perception of normalcy (Wessels, 2023, p. 298). However, such portrayals are not neutral. And these media depictions of mental illnesses may contribute to unfavorable stereotypes. (Wahl, 1995, p.92). Because, when characters with mental health issues are vaguely portrayed, audiences tend to fill in the blanks using ingrained societal assumptions, associating mental illness with danger, unpredictability, or violence. In this way, audiences play an active but potentially problematic role in reinforcing harmful stigmas through the media they consume.

Research design

This thesis employs a qualitative research approach, using a mixed method of focus groups and interviews to explore GenZ's perceptions of gendered portrayals of DID in superhero media. The choice for qualitative research is based on its focus on "attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). Flick (2007) states that "If we want to understand these processes of meaning-making, we should start from reconstructing how people, their worlds or social reality in our research" (p.13). Therefore the perspective of GenZ participants will be sought out during the focus groups and interviews to show how meanings are built up in interactive processes (Flick, 2007, p.13).

Mixing the methods of focus groups and interviews can be valuable for several reasons: (1) practical or logistical considerations (pragmatic reasons), (2) the ability to compare and contrast participants' perspectives (parallel use), and (3) achieving data completeness and/or confirmation (integrated use) (Lambert and Loiselle, 2008, p.230). In the case of this thesis it is because of the seeking for data completeness, assuming that both methods will reveal "different parts of the phenomenon of interest (complementary views) and contributes to a more comprehensive understanding (expanding the breadth and/or depth of the findings)" (Lambert and Loiselle, 2008, p.230).

The decision to employ focus groups and interviews is grounded in the understanding that Gen Z tends to favor media that aligns with their social consciousness and values. As discussed in the theoretical framework, GenZ is an outspoken and socially aware cohort, and a qualitative approach allows for a deeper understanding of how they interpret gender and mental health portrayals within superhero media. By using the same interview guide for both the focus groups and the individual interviews, conducted with participants who will not be part of the focus groups, it is aimed to assess whether similar responses would emerge across the research. This approach will help reduce the influence of group dynamics and minimized the risk of biases being shaped by others' opinions. By exploring multiple interpretations of the same scenes from the same media sources, this approach provides a broader understanding of the ways in which Generation Z perceives these representations.

Thematic analysis is particularly appropriate for examining how gendered portrayals of DID are represented in superhero media, since this method identifies and interprets significant patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.81). This approach will help with systematically categorizing and analyzing the data to uncover the ways in which gender stereotypes, trauma, and mental health are portrayed within these narratives. By identifying underlying patterns, thematic analysis allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how these portrayals shape audience perceptions of mental illness and gender, contributing to the broader discourse on media influence and representation. Furthermore, the researcher's prior experience with thematic analysis reinforces its suitability as the methodological approach for this study.

Sampling and recruitment

The study focuses on *Moon Knight* (one season) (Slater, 2022) and *Doom Patrol* (four seasons) (Carver, 2019–2023). Both series feature main characters with DID, Steven Grant/Marc Spector in *Moon Knight* (Slater, 2022) and Crazy Jane in *Doom Patrol* (Carver, 2019–2023). Despite the difference in the number of seasons, both characters and their alters have sufficient developments for analysis. Selected scenes from both series will highlight the gendered aspects of their DID portrayals, enabling participants to reflect on the impact of these representations on their understanding of gender and mental health.

The selection of scenes was guided by their alignment with key thematic elements relevant to the research question, ensuring that the material would prompt meaningful engagement and interpretation across participants. Thematic coherence across both series was maintained to facilitate comparative sense-making and avoid interpretative disparity (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). Hence after, a few initial viewing of both series, the themes identified for analysis included the introduction of the main characters, the portrayal of different alters, interactions between alters, the depiction of DID symptoms, and the explanation of trauma. Scenes that captured these themes were selected for inclusion in the focus group discussions and interviews. Despite the tonal differences between the two series, a range of emotionally similar scenes were chosen for comparison. Additionally, an official YouTube compilation was utilized to showcase Crazy Jane's 64 personas. To accommodate time constraints during the focus group, some scenes were edited for brevity, but this was done in a way that preserved the intended narrative of the original creators. A complete overview of all selected materials, including scenes, timestamps, and links, can be found in Appendix 6: Analyzed Material. The compilation as shown to all the participants of all selected scenes can be found in the separate data analysis document.

To ensure a diverse and representative range of perspectives on issues such as sexism, gender equality, and mental health, participants identifying as either male or female will be included in the focus groups. The focus will be on participants from GenZ (born between 1997 and 2012), as discussed in the theoretical framework, as they are particularly socially conscious and have grown up in an era where superhero media has seen significant development. While participants need not be avid fans of the genre, a basic level of familiarity with superhero media will be sufficient. Recruitment will primarily occur through social media platforms (Instagram, TikTok, LinkedIn) using convenience sampling, with the goal of including a variety of participants who are somewhat familiar with the superhero genre and open to engaging in discussions about gender and mental health.

The study will involve four focus groups, each with 4-6 participants, with each session lasting approximately 90 minutes. A full breakdown of the participants can be found in *Appendix 1: Focus Group Participants*. Additionally, 8 separate interview will be held, with each session lasting approximately between 1 hour and 1 hour and 30 minutes, a breakdown of these participants be found in *Appendix 2: Interview Participants*.

Operationalization

The central question of this thesis is: How do gendered portrayals of DID in superhero series affect how GenZ audiences view mental illness and gender? This question is broken down into the two following sub-questions:

1. To what extent do participants perceive gendered differences in how DID is depicted in *Moon Knight* (Slater, 2022) and *Doom Patrol* (Carver, 2019–2023)?
2. How do these portrayals influence participants' understanding of DID?

Within this, the study will examine how DID is potentially represented differently in male and female characters in superhero media, focusing on how male characters are often portrayed with more strength or as tragic heroes, while female characters are typically depicted as unstable or morally ambiguous. The operationalization of the key variables will be based on the established theoretical framework and will be directly linked to the focus group guide questions. For the complete focus group and interview guide, see *Appendix 4 focus group and interview guide English* or *Appendix 5 focus group and interview guide Dutch*.

Portrayals of gendered DID and trauma in superhero media:

This concept pertains to how DID is represented differently in male and female characters within superhero media. In the theoretical framework, it was discussed how male and female superhero characters are portrayed differently, with male characters often depicted with more strength or as tragic heroes, while female characters are shown as unstable, sexualized or morally ambiguous (Clarke & Hine, 2024, p.2; Miller et al., 2021, p.4; Harriger et al., 2022, p.354; Hanley, 2021, p.8; Hudson, 2011, para. 8; Stabile, 2009, p.89). This analysis of gendered portrayals will examine how the alter in *Moon Knight* and *Doom Patrol* are represented and whether these portrayals emphasize traditional superhero gender roles (Clarke & Hine, 2024, p.1). Furthermore it will explore how the participants perceive trauma in relation to gender and DID in the two characters.

Focus group & interview Questions:

The focus group & interview questions are designed to explore participants' interpretations of gendered portrayals of characters with DID in *Moon Knight* and *Doom Patrol*. Participants are first asked to describe the characters of Steven Grant and Crazy Jane, which sets the foundation for discussing the other alters, gendered traits and behavioral stereotypes. Follow-up questions prompt reflection on whether the alters' behaviors might differ if the characters were another gender, and how gender influences the dynamics between alters. The guide also includes questions that compare the portrayal of DID in male versus female superheroes, and how trauma is framed differently depending on the character's gender.

Perceptions of mental health (disorders) and DID in superhero media:

This concept addresses how DID is understood by audiences, with a focus on stigma, misrepresentation, and the emotional impact of these portrayals.

. As explored in the theoretical framework, negative or exaggerated portrayals of DID in media contribute to stigma and misunderstanding of the condition, especially when associated with violence or instability (Packer, 2017, p. 6; O'Hara, 2009, p.44; Butler & Hyler, 2005, p. 519; Moore et al., 2024, p.5). This concept will examine whether the portrayals in *Moon Knight* and *Doom Patrol* help or hinder participants' understanding of DID and mental health (disorders).

Focus Group & interview Questions:

This set of questions aims to assess participants' perceptions and understanding of DID as portrayed in the selected superhero series. They begin by exploring the participants' prior knowledge of DID to establish a baseline. From there, participants reflect on how they interpret the disorder's impact on the identity of the characters. Additional questions focus on the perceived realism of alter-switching scenes and how the disorder is introduced within each narrative. Finally, some questions are asked with the intent to evaluate whether media portrayals are viewed as accurate or exaggerated, and how they shape participants' broader understanding of mental health and DID.

Procedure

The procedure of this research is consistent with qualitative research principles, particularly with Denzin and Lincoln's (2005) emphasis on "the attempt to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them." (p.3). Semi-structured interviews and focus groups will be conducted, using the same guideline, and will be taken place in both online as well as in personal settings. In total 3 focus groups will take place with 4-6 participants, and 8 separate interviews with different participants than the ones that were present during the focus groups will be held. The participants will be contacted directly from the contact information owned and gathered by the researcher. All participants will be born between 1997 and 2012, and it is aimed to have a sample of at least 11 male and 11 female participants. All individual interviews and focus groups will be conducted between April, 2025 and May, 2025 and will be aimed to last from 45 minutes up to 1 hours and 30 minutes. Individual interviews and focus groups will not be conducted in a predetermined sequence. It may happen that some interviews will be conducted iteratively with focus groups, and some of the interviews will be conducted after the focus groups. All participants in the study must sign an informed consent before participating in the study.

The focus group and interview questioning will start with a few ice breakers for the participants to get comfortable.

Following this, participants will be shown clips from the superhero series *Moon Knight* (focusing on Marc Spector) (Slater, 2022) and *Doom Patrol* (focusing on Crazy Jane) (Carver, 2019–2023), which depict characters with DID. The clips will be selected to showcase the differences between the two characters' personalities and their struggles with DID.

The following themes will be discussed:

Character perception: Participants will be asked to describe the characters of *Moon Knight* and *Doom Patrol* based on the scenes shown. They will be prompted to identify the key traits of each character, particularly in terms of their personalities and the way they manage their DID.

Comparison of characters: After discussing the individual characters, participants will be asked to compare the characters of *Moon Knight* and *Doom Patrol*, focusing on their gendered portrayals, behaviors, and relationships to their DID. Participants will also be asked about gender stereotypes and what impact this will have on characters if they were gender swapped.

Impact on views of gender (stereotypes) and DID: Participants will then be asked how these characters influence their views on gender (stereotypes), and DID. Specifically, they will be asked about how the media portrayal of these characters shapes their perception of gender roles in the superhero genre, as well as how these portrayals influence their understanding of DID. In addition, participants will reflect on the believability of how DID is portrayed and whether they consider these portrayals to be educationally appropriate or potentially misleading. The responses will be coded to examine participants perceptions of the gendered portrayals of DID in superhero media and their broader implications for views on gender equality, mental health, and the stigma associated with mental disorders.

Data Analysis

Prior to initiating the coding process, all transcripts were read twice to re-familiarize the researcher with the content and ensure a consistent understanding across the data. This was particularly important given the time lapse between some of the sessions. The transcripts were reviewed in a deliberate order: the three focus groups were read first, followed by the eight individual interviews. This sequencing aimed to identify whether themes emerging from group discussions would later be reflected in or contrasted by individual responses.

The subsequent inductive coding process, via the Atlas.ti tool, followed the step-by-step framework outlined by Naeem et al. (2023), which offers a structured and systematic approach to thematic analysis (p. 2–14). The following steps were applied:

The first step was that of familiarizing with the data and the selection of quotations (Naeem et al., 2023, p.2). The familiarization with the data happened during the transcribing process of the collected data. Followed by simply reading them all a few times. Following this, quotations were selected that ‘‘bring the data to life and aptly represent diverse viewpoints and patterns pertinent to the research objectives.’’ (Naeem et al., 2023, p.4). Using Atlas.ti, this process led to the creation of a total of 1,087 in vivo codes, reflecting the breadth and richness of participant responses and ensuring that codes were grounded directly in the participants’ own language and perspectives.

Secondly, the data was downloaded from Atlas.Ti into Excel. In this step the data was examined in greater depth to identify recurring patterns, phrases, and concepts. The selection of keywords was guided by the principle that they should ‘‘encapsulate participants’ experiences and perceptions and are directly derived from the data.’’ (Naeem et al., 2023, p.4). In excel 636 keywords and phrases were identified. During this it was noted that that similar patterns and meanings emerged from both focus groups and individual interviews. This was used as a way of reassurance that the following themes and findings were not skewed by group dynamics or individual biases.

Following this, the codes were organized into 21 segments. With each segment of data reflecting to ‘‘segments capture the data’s core message, significance, or theme (Naeem et al., 2023, p.4). The segments consisted of: First description Moon knight, First description Crazy jane, Familiarity with the disorder, Descriptions & feelings on DID, Male stereotypes, Female stereotypes, Understanding of clips, Description of male alters, Description of female alters, Differences between male & female alters, Gender swapped Moon Knight, Gender swapped Crazy Jane, Male alter relationships, Female alter relationships, Gender & alter relationships, Comparisons with *Split*, (Un)realistic switching, Trauma & alter creation, Trauma & gender, Media & did, Stereotypes in series.

In the final step of this phase, the segments were compared to each other and grouped into three overarching themes. Gender served as the primary comparative lens throughout this process. These themes were designed to ‘‘embody patterned meanings’’ that directly contribute to answering the research questions (Naeem et al., 2023, p. 4). Within the three themes, relevant subthemes were also developed to capture nuanced distinctions in participants’ perspectives. Exceptional or deviant cases were grouped under the themes that best represented them and were highlighted within those themes as analytically significant.

Lastly, the identified themes were analyzed in relation to the theoretical framework on gendered stereotypes, trauma, and mental health stigma in media to assess how gendered portrayals of DID influence perceptions of mental health and gender. This analysis in relation to the theoretical framework can be found in the discussion section.

While thematic coding sought to reflect patterns across the entire dataset, it is important to acknowledge that some participants are quoted more frequently than others. This reflects both the varying levels of contribution across participants and the salience of certain responses in illustrating core themes. Although not every participant is directly quoted, the thematic structure and interpretation were shaped by the full range of perspectives collected during the sessions.

Reliability and Credibility

In qualitative research, ensuring trustworthiness involves reflecting on the reliability, and credibility of the study.

Reliability was strengthened by using a consistent interview guide across all sessions and by selecting stimulus scenes based on clearly defined criteria (gender and DID portrayal). By adhering to the method for thematic analysis by Naeem et al.'s (2023), which developed six clear steps ensured systematic coding and theme construction and therefore helped to reach a high reliability (p.2-14). Furthermore answers of participants were used to formulate results and conclusion to the research question also enhancing reliability.

Credibility was reached by accurately reflecting on what was aimed to be measured (Babbie, 2008, p.160). This thesis tried to uncover how GenZ make sense of gender and did with the help of superhero media, and therefore GenZ was asked about this. The inclusion of both focus groups and interviews enabled a broader and more layered understanding. Focus groups helped surface socially constructed meanings, while interviews offered more personal and emotionally nuanced insights (Lambert and Loiselle, 2008, p.231). The consistency of findings across both methods reduced the likelihood of bias and increased the credibility of the conclusions (Lambert and Loiselle, 2008, p.231).

Throughout the process, reflexivity was maintained, and exceptional or deviant cases were considered as part of the analysis. This ensured that the final themes were not only grounded in the data but also reflective of diverse and sometimes contradictory participant perspectives.

Results

At the start of this thesis, the research question was defined as: *How do gendered portrayals of Dissociative Identity Disorder in superhero series shape how Generation Z's audiences view mental illness and gender?* This was explored through two sub-questions, each supported by its own set of themes:

1. To what extent do participants perceive gendered differences in how DID is depicted in *Moon Knight* (Slater, 2022) and *Doom Patrol* (Carver, 2019–2023)?

For this first sub-question, two themes were uncovered:

1. Gender Bias in superhero character portrayals. Consisting of subthemes: gendered first impressions, gendered understanding of alters and perceived gender stereotypes.
2. Gendered portrayals of DID. Consisting of subthemes: gender shapes inter-alter relationships, gendered switching and gendered trauma narratives.

These two themes show how comparisons of the characters in *Moon Knight* & *Crazy Jane* led to the uncovering of gendered perceptions of superheroes. As well as how gender impacts portrayals of DID in superhero media.

1. Gender bias in superhero character portrayals.

The perceptions that GenZ had of characters in *Moon Knight* and *Doom Patrol* was shaped by gender biases. While the different characters of both series exhibited symptoms of DID, these symptoms seemed to be interpreted differently according to a character's gender. The following three subthemes will delve deeper into this phenomena.

1.1. Gendered first impressions

Participants' initial reactions to the first clips in which they were both introduced to the for them mostly unknown characters of *Moon Knight*'s Steven Grant and *Doom Patrol*'s Crazy Jane showed how they perceived these characters differently from the start.

When participants were asked to describe their first impressions of Steven the participants consistently framed him overall as "confused", "unsure of the situation he found himself in", and even "dumb". With one of the respondents Q2 even stating that Steven's stupidity was his main trait: *"mainly stupid, that background voice, actually kind of describes him. The dumb one is in control. Also kind of shows how he is already known"*. Despite this, participants also perceived Steven as smart. Descriptors like "smart" "a thinker" "calculated", "obsessive reader" and "history expert" were used to come to this conclusion. This contrast suggests a perception of Steven as complex, someone who may appear disoriented and dumb but is ultimately knowledgeable. Overall, this first impression of Steven did not awake many negative feelings about the character. The few descriptors that could be interpreted as negative were that they found the character "chaotic", "crazy", and even "scared and insecure". These descriptors erupted from observations of the group who took notice that the character "hears voices", "is seeing things", and seemed like he was "in a psychosis". Even though these words carry negative connotations, the group never seemed to perceive the character as scary or dangerous. Moreover, this even seemed to be balanced out by the fact that the participants also seemed to have taken a liking in the character by describing him as "charismatic" and "goofy". This added a more neutral or slightly positive dimension to their interpretation of the character's behavior.

In comparison to how Steven was perceived after his introduction, participants perceived Crazy Jane more negatively after seeing the initial clip of the female hero. The first and main impression of this character by participants was that she was like her name suggested "crazy". This perception emerged even before the viewing began, with participants mocking or echoing her name as a cue for what they expected. After watching the clip, these expectations were only reinforced. In comparison to how Steven was perceived, Jane was immediately labeled as "crazy" "creepy" or even "psychotic". Admittedly, participants instantly recognizing the fact that Crazy Jane has multiple personalities, unlike in *Moon Knight* where they did not recognize this, with one of the participants Q13 stating: *"she's already labeled as "crazy," probably because of that personality disorder"*. This quote is

significant, as it shows how closely the character's mental illness is linked to her perceived instability and how her diagnosis alone becomes shorthand for "craziness". This instant recognition of a multiple personality disorder for Jane, in contrast to Steven where only 1 participant mentioned something about him having DID, came with confusion about who exactly they were watching and what had occurred in the scene. Her complexity was not framed with empathy like with Steven but instead translated into volatility and emotional instability. Led by descriptors such as "aggressive" "moody" and "provocative" dominated the responses. In contrast to Steven, Crazy Jane was perceived more negatively with only a few positive traits like "bold" and "confident" mentioned by participants. But these were often overshadowed by discomfort with her perceived unpredictability particularly when she challenged stronger, more masculine characters. With one participant, Q6 when asked about if the levels of perceived craziness of Steven and Jane differed explained: *"Yeah, I think she's crazier.....he was really confused, and with her, she's really kind of... I don't know, it just came across as very creepy, you can really tell she has multiple personalities."* Even though both characters had shown signs of instability in their behavior, in comparison the female character was perceived more negatively than the male.

Altogether, these differences in how Steven and Crazy Jane are initially perceived reflects a broader gender bias in the interpretation of two characters that share the same mental disorder. Where Steven's confusion elicited curiosity or sympathy, Jane's behavior was pathologized and treated as dangerous. This suggests that expressions of psychological instability in female characters are more likely to be interpreted as threatening, while similar behaviors in male characters are more readily humanized or rationalized.

1.2. Gendered understanding of alters

After the introductory clips, participants were shown scenes featuring all the alters of both *Moon Knight* and *Doom Patrol*. Then participants were asked to describe what stood out to them about this characters. Notably, the ways participants made sense of the alters often echoed familiar gender stereotypes they had encountered elsewhere in media.

When participants were asked to describe *Moon Knight*'s, three central alters, Steven Grant, Marc Spector, and Jake Lockley, were each described individually and associated with clear, functional traits. Steven, after already being introduced in the first clip, continued to be seen as vulnerable but harmless, and was often described as the one "needing protection". Marc was perceived as the strong protector, with descriptors like "hero", "masculine", "trustworthy", and "in control". Jake, was associated with more negative traits such as "violent" "criminal" or "psychotic". The overall understanding of the three alters was that they all seemed different and had different roles. With some participants exclaiming that despite the differences all three alters overall kind of seemed aggressive. With one of the participants, Q18 explaining it as: *"Well, they all kind of have something aggressive or something. or maybe that's the environment they're in, so not necessarily the personality itself."* This suggests that their violent tendencies were not necessarily linked to the disorder, but rather interpreted as shaped by external circumstances or rooted in masculine archetypes commonly portrayed in superhero media. In other words, the aggression was seen as a narrative or gendered trait, rather than a symptom of DID.

In contrast, Crazy Jane's system of 64 alters was generally described as highly diverse, with participants emphasizing how distinct and contrasting each personality appeared to be. With one of the participants Q6 saying: *Because suddenly she's like a kind of child, crying, and then she's a bad bitch, and then she's a woman, and then she's, I don't even know what. It's really, uhh, different."* Notably like seen in this quote these differences were often linked to either being "tough" or "very feminine". Unlike the characters in *Moon Knight*, Crazy Jane received significantly more comments regarding her clothing. These remarks were often associated with the alters that participants perceived as more traditionally feminine, drawing parallels to media figures they were familiar with. Descriptors such as 'Barbie doll' and 'Ariana Grande style' were used to characterize these appearances. This reflects the stereotypical tendency in media and audience perception to scrutinize women's clothing and physical presentation more than men's. The three most frequently individually discussed alters were Babydoll, Hammerhead, and Penny Farthing. Babydoll was described as "extremely feminine," "childlike," and "Barbie-like." Hammerhead, on the other hand, was characterized as "angry" and "aggressive," with some participants questioning whether she was males. With one of the respondents explaining why they thought hammerhead was potentially a

male:

Q15: "Is that a man? Or is it supposed to be a man? A female as well, okay. This kind of gave me man vibes. I guess it kind of gave stereotype strong men. it just gave like strong masculine vibes. as in the way they spoke loud, kind of portraying themselves as like a big person."

The opposite of Hammerhead, Penny farthing was mostly described as "insecure", "scared", and "running away". With most participants admitting that she stood out because she was so different and passive in comparisons to all the others. Again the focus on these three alters revealed a gendered binary in audience perception, where female characters were either feminized or aligned with stereotypically masculine toughness, leaving little space for complexity beyond these extremes.

Altogether, the differences between how male and female alters are perceived reflected a broader gender bias. Where male alters were described with clear distinctions by functional roles they were given, the focus for female alters seemed to be on visual traits and clothing especially when an alter was coded by femininity. It even went as far as that when a female alter did not seem to rely on traditional gender norms, such as hammerhead, questions in terms of gender identity were raised. These responses highlight that even within portrayals of the same disorder, gender continues to shape how complexity is either acknowledged or flattened.

1.3. Perceived gender stereotypes

When prompted to reflect on the alters in *Moon Knight* and *Doom Patrol* through the lens of gender stereotypes, participants revealed striking differences in how easily they could apply stereotypical traits to each system.

While Crazy Jane's alters were often quickly associated with recognizable female stereotypes of women being portrayed as "over-emotional" and "hypersexualized". Participants sometimes still seemed uncomfortable describing female stereotypes, often referring that it was something that they noticed, not something they believed to be true. However this did not stop them from noticing many stereotypes such as "not being able to protect themselves", "housewife", "toxic girlfriend", and that it's "always written in that they have a love interest". One participant offered a particularly reflective observation when trying to make sense of one of Jane's alters, grappling in real time with how media representations shape perception:

Q12: "There was the one that I think it was called psychosexual. Also wouldn't really call it a stereotype or saw any in that, but I wouldn't know for what it would be a stereotype. I guess not really for women, maybe for someone who's very, I guess confidence in their sexuality or just very sexual, but I wouldn't. ok, no uhmm actually I could kind of see how that's a stereotype. If we're looking at the way she was talking, the way she was walking, the clothes she was putting on. Yeah. Ok. I could actually kind of see that if there's scenes in movies or films and they are trying to portray. I guess maybe a scene where a, a woman wants, is about to have sex where she's going to the club to find a one night stand, but that's usually, that's often how they look like or how they make the scenes look."

This quote illustrates how participants were not only aware of the gendered codes used in media but were also actively processing their own media literacy in real time. It highlights the ongoing negotiation between internalized cultural scripts and critical reflection, especially when it comes to representations of women.

In contrast participants struggled more to define male stereotypes. With the main perceived stereotype being that masculinity seemed to be linked with aggression. As one participant, Q18 noted: "Yeah, like a guy with a gun in his hand. That's something you see more with men in films than with women or something.". This observation was followed by a comparison in which male anger, as depicted in *Moon Knight*, was seen as powerful and controlled, while female anger, as seen in *Doom Patrol*, was interpreted as unstable or "crazy."

How much the alters were framed by their gender became apparent when participants were asked to imagine how the shows might have changed had the protagonists been of a different gender. Many participants believed that Jane's more overtly emotional and sexualized alters; such as Scarlet Harlot and Babydoll would not have existed in a male version of the show. This often led to interesting conversation within the focus groups:

Q10: Well, if I can say it really bluntly, she just kind of looked like a whore, to put it that way.

Q7: That attracts more easily than a Magic Mike.

Q9: And I don't really think they would've put a male whore in there.

Q7: And there's not really a clear image of what a male whore should even look like.

Generation Z highlighted that even though males could be perceived as having equivalent male archetypes such as "magic mike" and "players", still a sense existed that hypersexuality is more culturally legible, more easily accepted, and even more "attractive" when portrayed by women.

This extended beyond sexualized portrayals to emotional traits as well. Romantic and nurturing alters were often accepted as plausible for Jane, but were considered harder to believe if portrayed by the male characters of *Moon Knight*. Many participants expressed that men are still not expected to be emotionally open, reinforcing the idea that male emotionality is culturally constrained.

Interestingly, even when male characters like Steven from *Moon Knight* did exhibit vulnerability or passivity, they were sometimes perceived as "feminine" by default. One participant Q15 pointed out how weakness was quickly associated with femininity, even if they personally resisted that reading: *"I wouldn't necessarily say that Steven gives off like feminine vibes. Just like weak, which someone could say is like a stereotypical trait of women. But I don't see it that way."* Such associations reveal how emotional traits are still deeply gendered in media perception.

The connection between gender and perceived "toughness" also came through strongly. Alters like Hammerhead were described as "tough girls who can hang with the guys," but participants noted that this toughness would have been considered standard if portrayed by a male alter. An interesting example of this:

Q13: They would come across differently. Hammerhead, for example—if that were a guy, it wouldn't be "the girl who can hang with the guys." It would just be the typical tough guy. the woman in the suit if that were a man, I wouldn't call him a "boss bitch," I'd probably see him more as a diplomatic lawyer or CEO type. So yeah, it would provoke different feelings.

D: Do you think the passion alter-, would she exist if Jane had been a man?

Q13: it would be less believable, in media, that's usually seen more as a feminine trait, I feel. Like, it's often women who do that kind of thing. Because, yeah, it feels like women are more... or more naturally able to manage their emotions, and maybe even influence other people's emotions more easily. men already struggle just to manage their own emotions, let alone someone else's. I think that would feel less believable.

D: Okay, and what about Jake do you think he would exist if the character had been a woman?

Q13: Then I'd see her more as an assassin type—not like a British gangster, more like the cold-blooded assassin-for-hire., Usually, they don't have a cap and a long brown trench coat like the guys do. In movies, if it's a woman, she's usually dressed all in black with a lot of leather, and all these knives hidden all over her outfit. Like that kind of assassin.

This exchange clearly illustrates how perceptions of power, emotional expression, and authority are filtered through gendered expectations. While traits like aggression or confidence were accepted without question in male alters, they were recontextualized by participants when embodied by female characters. Hammerhead's assertiveness became "the girl who can hang with the guys," and Jane's suited alter became a "boss bitch" terms that, while seemingly empowering, still rely on gendered contrast. The participants insightfully noted that the same traits in a male character would be interpreted as standard, respectable, even professional. Abilities like emotional manipulation or passionate outbursts were seen as more believable in female characters, reflecting the stereotype that women are emotionally volatile while men are more emotionally restrained. Furthermore, the suggestion as seen in the quote that Jake's persona would have taken the form of a sleek, seductive assassin if female reveals how media conventions shape not just behavior, but appearance and narrative function. This reflects how gendered media norms constrain the range of "acceptable" expressions of power, vulnerability, or complexity for each gender, even within the context of a shared mental disorder.

Altogether, this subtheme reveals the depth of gender stereotypes in participants' interpretations, both of what they saw on screen and what they imagined in a hypothetical gender-swapped version. Especially the difficulty in articulating male-coded alter traits as well as finding similar male-stereotypes to the female stereotypes, highlights how certain female stereotypes are more culturally visible and available. Especially those tied to sexuality and emotional expression.

2. Gendered portrayals of DID

Theme 1 revealed how the perceptions of participants were shaped by the gender of *Moon Knight* and *Doom Patrol* characters. Further analyses revealed how the gender of a character impacts how DID is portrayed. The following three subthemes will delve deeper into this phenomena.

2.1. Gender shapes inter-alter relationships

When participants reflected on how the alters interacted within the systems of *Moon Knight* and *Doom Patrol*, their responses revealed how by comparison of the portrayals gendered expectations influenced the perception of these inter-alter dynamics.

In *Moon Knight*, many participants emphasized the evolution of the relationship between Marc and Steven, describing their dynamic as a form of "brotherhood." They frequently mentioned how the characters, despite their early conflict, gradually came to accept, protect, and even rely on one another. With one respondent, Q14 saying: *'Its a normal manly relationship, they approach each other and they can voice their emotions in the last scene, but they also keep some sort of a distance. It's like a brotherly sense, so you see a certain amount of distance, but also some showing of affection'*. Their bond was often described like seen in the quote as emotionally distant but dependable, marked by mutual respect rather than emotional intimacy. Furthermore, participants praised the functional complementarity between the alters in *Moon Knight*, suggesting that their personalities balanced each other out.

In contrast, *Doom Patrol*'s portrayal of Crazy Jane's alters were perceived by the participants as filled with tension, competition, and emotional volatility. Indicated by descriptors such as alters "being stuck with each other" rather than cooperating, "fighting," having "drama" and being "catty" to describe their dynamic. Some participants argued that this strained dynamic could be attributed to the sheer number of alters, but others explicitly linked the relational conflict to gendered expectation:

Q12: it didn't really seemed like they liked each other. Media portrays that there's always competition a lot between women and I feel like that maybe played a part in why the different alters for Jane didn't really like each other. Because there was some type of competition going on there, uhmm and you don't really notice that a lot for men.

This reflection underscores how media tropes about female rivalry and emotional instability may shape audience expectations, leading viewers to interpret the tension among Jane's alters as a gendered dynamic rather than a narrative consequence of DID.

When participants were asked to describe whether the inter-alter relationships would be different if the characters were gender-swapped, opinions varied. Some participants believed that if Crazy Jane were a man, the dynamic between the alters would have been more physical, detached, and aggressive, but in a humorous, light-hearted way. As one respondent Q21 explained: *'Yeah, like they'd punch each other, get a black eye, drink a beer, and it's all fine again'*. When imagining what *Moon Knight* might look like with female alters, participants were divided. Some suggested that the relationship would become more emotionally open, describing a potential "sisterly" bond. While others believed that the portrayal might still fall into the stereotype of women being "catty" and not getting along.

Altogether, most responses revealed how gendered assumptions impacted participants' perceptions of the relationships within each dissociative system. These perceptions suggest that gendered portrayals impact not only how individual alters are perceived, but also how emotional closeness, conflict, and hierarchy within a system are understood, often reinforcing binary ideas about emotional behavior and gendered roles.

2.2. Gendered switching

Although both *Moon Knight* and *Doom Patrol* portray switching between alters as central to the narrative, participants consistently perceived that the way these switches were framed differed significantly depending on the character's gender. Given that switching is one of the primary diagnostic features of Dissociative Identity Disorder, these portrayals have an impact on how audiences interpret the condition.

Participants perceived Moon Knight's transitions as 'purposeful', 'cooperative', 'useful', and 'logical'. This framing reflects a more instrumental view of mental illness, where switching is not only normalized but narratively justified through superhero logic. With one of the participants explaining:

Q13: "The first one I could still follow. You still saw kind of a superhero who first sees a guy with a knife and then thinks like, yeah, that's not necessary. So then he switches to the more gentle one. And then he's with his partner or girlfriend and they get attacked, and then he switches again to someone who can fight the others. Then I think like, yeah, that still makes sense in my head, you know? Like it's a logical switch."

By contrast, Jane's switching was framed through a lens of emotional instability. And shaped by descriptors 'chaotic', 'dramatic', and 'emotionally erratic'. These responses mirror long-standing gender stereotypes that associate women with emotional excess. With some participants stating that if Crazy Jane was a man it wouldn't have happened that way. An example of this is:

Q17: Moon Knight went much faster, without any emotion the one in Doom Patrol there's definitely more "craziness" coming through Lots of mood swings, emotional outbursts I wrote down "crazy" but also suddenly sexual, you know? at one point there's that sexual edge, and I'm sure if a male character had done that exact same scene, he wouldn't say it like that, you know? Moon Knight one went too smoothly, too fast too seamlessly all of a sudden. And hers, on the other hand, was like she was on her period or something I mean, that's a terrible way to put it Okay no, that's a bad way to describe it. But I don't know, it's just all driven by feelings and emotion.

This contrast in switching styles not only reinforced gendered perceptions of control versus chaos, but also shaped how viewers *emotionally* responded to the characters and their condition.

Some participants described that the way Crazy Jane's switching was portrayed left them uncomfortable. With audiences feeling like she was made to seem 'crazy' with her switching on purpose whilst the characters in *Moon Knight* made the disorder and switching look cool and useful. This contrast demonstrates how media continues to gender mental illness differently, making female suffering appear irrational or volatile while framing male suffering as something they have under control. One participant noted how even the name "Crazy Jane" primes audiences to view her through a lens of instability:

Q12: "If you hear the name Crazy Jane, then you kind of know what to expect. And well, not you don't really know what to expect. But you know you can expect craziness. And I feel like that people would be quicker to like uhm link craziness with the disorder and I feel like going into Moon Knight. It doesn't really imply that he's a crazy person, the disorder kind of looks. They make it look like it actually is helping and it's helping the plot helping uhm helping him in all his alters. And whereas in Jane and like as crazy Jane it it's not really helping her just feels like it makes it's making her more crazy. So I do feel like that would probably have something to do with him being a male and her being a woman."

Other participants expanded on this, suggesting that *Moon Knight*'s depiction made the disorder appear purposeful and even like a 'superpower', whereas Jane's experience was framed as chaotic and burdensome. Some respondents felt that while Moon Knight's trauma helped build his strength, Jane's trauma seemed to trap her and her alters in collective suffering. The repeated association of female-coded mental illness with emotional excess led participants to question why such gendered

portrayals still persist in contemporary media, asking, for example, why he gets to be ‘‘just a cool hero’’ with the ability to change personalities, while she is simply labeled as ‘‘crazy.’’

These perceived differences even led some participants to question whether the characters shared the same diagnosis. With some participants admitting that they hadn’t realized both characters had DID. Explained by the fact that Jane seemed more aggressive and emotional, while Moon Knight’s condition felt more subtle and controlled. This confusion highlights how gendered portrayals can blur the boundary between emotional expression and mental illness, shaping entirely different audience interpretations of the same disorder.

Altogether, this reveals how, even when depicting the same disorder, gendered dynamics lead to distinctly different representations. Shaping how a core diagnostic feature of DID, such as switching, is portrayed both visually and narratively depending on the character’s gender.

2.3. Gendered trauma narratives

When asked to reflect on the origins of DID in *Moon Knight* and *Doom Patrol*, participants were quick to identify that both characters’ dissociative systems were rooted in early trauma caused by their parents. However, many also emphasized how the nature of this trauma, and the way it was portrayed, was deeply impacted by gendered storytelling.

Marc’s trauma was framed as physical abuse from his mother, whilst Jane’s was depicted as sexual violence at the hands of her father. Many participants agreed that such portrayals mirror cultural expectations, even calling it ‘‘stereotypical’’, where male trauma is more often associated with physical violence and female trauma with sexual abuse. One of the participant reflected on this tendency by saying:

Q19: Nnnyeah, I think it is well, I wouldn’t say a deliberate choice, but it is a stereotype. Like, if you had to come up with a trauma, you’d more quickly say for a man it’s like abuse or hitting or something. And for a woman More quickly rape. Yeah, like for women that’s higher up on the list, if you had to pick something.

This comment shows how ingrained gendered assumptions about trauma remain in both media production and audience interpretation.

Furthermore, participants often linked these portrayals to broader media patterns, suggesting that gender often predicts the form that trauma takes in fictional narratives. While some saw these portrayals as reflecting real-world patterns, others questioned the predictability and implications of such choices. Several pointed out that sexual trauma in male characters remains largely invisible in mainstream media, not because it is implausible, but because it is culturally uncomfortable. With one respondent Q14, stating: ‘‘*They are not going to depict a man being raped.*’’. This absence in media reinforces the cultural discomfort around male vulnerability, perpetuating narrow representations of trauma that align with traditional gender norms.

This gendered scripting extended to how the alters were perceived as coping with trauma. Many participants noted that Marc’s system seemed built around suppression and emotional distance, traits they associated with masculinity. Steven, for instance, was created to ‘‘forget’’ what had happened. In contrast, Jane’s system was seen as emotionally saturated and expressive with each alter visibly marked by the trauma. The emotional tone of each character’s trauma scenes reinforced the notion of women being more emotional than men. Jane’s flashbacks were described as dramatic and tearful, while Marc’s were perceived as emotionally muted.

The number of alters were also interpreted through a gendered lens. While some participants suggested that Jane had more alters because her trauma was ‘‘worse,’’ others felt the scale and intensity of her system reflected expectations that women are more emotionally fractured. With one respondent Q15 stating: *Why does Jane have more than three personalities, and Moon Knight only has three?... I guess you could blame it on the gender thing.* This interpretation suggests that multiplicity itself may be read as an extension of stereotypical female emotional excess. In contrast, the limited number of alters in *Moon Knight* was often framed as streamlined and functional, again reinforcing ideas of male control and narrative clarity.

Altogether, this theme illustrates how gender not only shaped the type of trauma portrayed but also how participants interpreted its emotional consequences. The perceived distinctions reflect how cultural norms about gender continue to impact how trauma, and its psychological aftermath, are

imagined, portrayed, and received in media.

2. How do these portrayals influence participants' understanding of DID?

For this second sub-question, one theme was uncovered:

3. Misrepresentation of DID in media reinforces stigma. Consisting of subthemes: DID “knowledge” through media exposure, DID used as entertainment instead of education, and Media influence on audience perception

This theme and its subthemes illustrate how media portrayals shape GenZ’s understanding of both gender and DID. They reveal how media representations, often dramatized or inaccurate, contribute to stigma and misinformation, influencing how GenZ interpret mental illness and its connection with gender.

3.1. DID knowledge through media exposure

After the first introduction of the characters participants were asked about their general knowledge and understanding of the disorder that the characters were portraying. This question aimed to explore their baseline awareness and the sources that had shaped their perceptions on DID. This resulted in uncovering how earlier media portrayals, and even the ones they saw during the focus group /interview appeared to have impacted the lens through which participants viewed the disorder.

Before revealing that the disorder was DID, participants were asked what disorder was portrayed. Some participants did not come up with a guess, other guessed “multiple personality disorder” by name or either mentioning “like the one in *Split*”. However, some other disorders were also mentioned as too guess what disorder both *Moon Knight* and *Doom Patrol* tried to convey. Some mentions were “Bipolar”, “borderline”, and “Aggressive disorders”. An example of this confusion:

Q16: I think the switching we saw with the man, the racing thoughts and then suddenly that really panicked reaction, and now with her, you really see her in those roles, so I’m thinking maybe a personality disorder. it could also be that it’s more mood-based, ‘cause with the first one it felt more like just calm and then suddenly really intense Bipolar maybe?

This uncertainty highlights how common media representations of mental illness, especially those relying on exaggerated or ambiguous symptoms can blur diagnostic boundaries, leading audiences to conflate distinct disorders based on emotional tone or behavioral shifts.

After revealing that both characters actually had DID, most participants admitted to having limited knowledge of this disorder and were initially unsure how to describe it. Many only recognized DID when its former name, “multiple personality disorder,” was mentioned, indicating that the updated terminology was unfamiliar to them. Their understanding typically stemmed from media exposure rather than formal knowledge, and several participants acknowledged that they even after seeing previous media outings had a hard time describing the disorder. On of the quotes that reflect this confusion:

Q22: identity disorder sounds somewhat more familiar, you can take on different identities? quickly switch between uhhh emotions and uhhh mood swings, I’ve seen it come up once. I think in a series or in a film, you also really feel like a different person.

Despite these uncertainties and misconceptions, participants were generally able to identify some of the key characteristics of the disorder. Their descriptives such as “multiple personalities,” “switching between characters,” identities that “could differ in age and gender,” and the links that were made to “childhood trauma”, were not entirely inaccurate and loosely aligned with professional definitions of

DID.

When participants were asked about which media exposed them to the disorder, the movie *Split* was mentioned the most. When asked what they remembered of the portrayal in *Split* they mainly remembered the violence and aggression of the movie. With a respondent remembering:

Q20: I know it from the movie Split. he also had different personalities. I think one of them was a younger boy, but there was also one very dominant personality. That really brought out the evil in him and actually suppressed the other personalities. He had actually kidnapped 3 girls uhmm and eventually also killed a few. That's about as much as I remember.

Media portrayals like these left participants in disbelief that this disorder is in fact a real disorder. With most participants admitting that they had a negative conception of the disorder because of the previous media portrayals of this they had seen. And even pointed out that they felt like the media always portrayed DID in a violent way. With one respondent Q16 exemplifying this by stating: *'people with this disorder are portrayed as psychos chasing you around, at least in my impression. it's never like the sweet girl in a high school movie that you want to be friends with'.* This comment reflects a broader pattern in which DID is sensationalized in media, reinforcing fear-based stereotypes and distancing the disorder from everyday relatability or empathy.

Altogether, this shows that while participants were familiar with DID as a media trope, their understanding was often impacted by dramatic and stigmatizing portrayals, leaving little room for a nuanced or empathetic perspective of the disorder.

3.2. DID used as entertainment instead of education

At the end of the focus groups and interviews participants were asked if they felt *like Moon Knight* and *Doom Patrol* had educated them more on DID. This resulted in the participants expressing concern that both series prioritized entertainment over education. Which could impact impressionably audiences to reinforcing stigma about DID. However, their views were not only one-dimensional.

Participants' perceived that both series used the disorder for dramatic or aesthetic purposes, instead of providing meaningful insights into the conditions, sensationalizing its complexities for viewer engagement, which again echoed the findings of the theoretical framework. A participant Q3 exemplified this: *'I think it contributes more to the story of the series than to actually showing how it affects someone's real life.'* Furthermore, respondents explained that because of the commercial nature of these series, producers seemed to try to cater more entertainment than accuracy to the disorder. Participants seemed to realize that mental health representation in media led to misinformation. An example of this realization:

Q14: 'Yes, I think what misinforms people is that if people watch a show like that were you Split into a gazillion different personas, each with very distinct different personalities, some also being very strong or some also being a role model. I think that is not the truth I think also that every kind of these traumas would lead to such a disorder, I think also that is not true because some people get a whole different type of disorders or a whole different type of trauma. And I think this also makes it seem cooler than it actually is, especially in the first movie where, like, whoa, this dude is actually pretty cool. You know, he's he's the man. He's masculine, whereas he existed from trauma, of course, which is not a good thing. But the movie depicts it as a cool thing. So no, this this is spreading misinformation I think I think this shouldn't be used for information on the mental disorder for sure. It should not be depicted through commercial movies.'

With some participants especially worrying that viewers with no prior knowledge of the disorder would be misinformed. Especially when one of the focus groups held a conversation on how younger viewers might be educated via superhero media on certain disorders concerns were raised that they

would be vulnerable to these misinterpretations and therefore would further contribute to stigma or misinformation.

Yet, while many participants criticized these portrayals for being unrealistic, others noted that dramatized versions could still serve as a helpful entry point. For some, these portrayals sparked curiosity or introduced them to the concept of DID for the first time. They recognized the limitations of fiction, but appreciated its potential to stimulate interest, with one respondent, Q20 saying: *“Yeah, I think if you just want to get an intro to... yeah, how do you even call it, this illness?... Then it can be a good way, especially if that kind of superhero film or series is your thing.”*. This dual awareness shows how GenZ acknowledges both the limitations of entertainment and its potential as a gateway to further learning. They expressed a critical media literacy that allowed them to enjoy the shows while also questioning their accuracy. Several participants however said they would recommend documentaries or more factual sources to anyone seeking a fuller understanding.

Altogether, GenZ viewers demonstrated a nuanced understanding: they were critical of how DID was used to entertain, aware of the risks of misinformation, and simultaneously open to fiction as a possible starting point for learning. However, the consensus remained that meaningful education about DID requires going beyond commercial media, toward more factual and empathetic resources. Instead of reinforcing stigma via commercial media.

3.3. Media’s impact on audience perceptions

As already suggested in the previous subtheme the impact of the portrayals of DID extends beyond the superhero media that is seen on screen. With the participants of this thesis even exemplifying how it influenced their perception. Their answers demonstrated how these representations in media had shaped their understanding of the disorder during and before the research.

Even though, most participants got their knowledge of DID from media, they expressed skepticism about the realism of how it was portrayed in the showed clips during this research. They reflected on their confusion, disbelief and emotional detachment from what they saw. The main thing that triggered audiences disbelief of DID was the unrealistic nature and quick switches that were depicted. With one of the respondents expressing this confusion:

Q6: “Is that real? Are there really people who have that? That many personalities? are there really people like in those creepy movies, where they’re just talking normally and then suddenly [high-pitched voice] “hiiii” [back to normal] just completely switch like that? Like they suddenly think they’re a kid or something.”

This specific reaction reflects a broader concern voiced by participants, that the dramatic and abrupt portrayal of switching, while compelling on screen, distorts the reality of living with DID and contributes to ongoing skepticism and misunderstanding among the GenZ participants.

While most participants felt alienated by these depictions, a few offered more nuanced takes, suggesting that switching in real life would probably be more subtle, triggered by emotions, or vary widely between individuals as exemplified by Q11: *“There’s just these super extreme emotions and characters in it, while I think in reality, they’re probably much closer to each other.”*. Nonetheless, many admitted that these DID scenes were hard to follow or emotionally connect with, describing them as “mindfucks,” “too fast,” or “confusing.”

Beyond this misinformation in switching narratives, participants also pointed out the clear gender bias in how the same disorder was framed differently for male and female characters. Moon Knight became “the man,” a heroic figure whose trauma was dignified, whilst Jane was shown as “unstable and moody,” reinforcing stereotypical ideas of feminine emotional excess. This also affected their perception of the disorder with comments from participants such as Q12’s: *“If I’m solely looking at what I’ve just seen... I would probably assume that the disorder would be very different for women and for men. When, when that might not even be true in real life.”*. This again highlights how gendered media representations not only shape how viewers interpret individual characters, but also influence broader assumptions about how mental illness manifests across genders.

Whilst some participants still expressed doubts about the realism of what they had seen on screen, at the end of the focus group discussion and interviews, most participants had slightly

refined their understanding of DID. Yet many remained confused or hesitant about the disorder. While some gained new insights, especially about the link between trauma, the formation of alters, and the interactions of alters. With one respondent Q16 explain their knowledge as: *“Now that I know it’s formed through trauma, I get why you’d develop different personalities that sometimes conflict with each other.....That’s my insight now, and it’s mostly thanks to her.”*. *Doom Patrol* with its portrayal of crazy Jane was not only praised for its portrayal of trauma in connection to the personalities but was also praised for the way it visualized the ‘underground’ where alters could communicate. This helped participants grasp some logical about what happened after dissociation with one respondent Q15 saying : *“From Jane I do kind of get it as in like the clip where all the personalities are talking in the same room. That was really interesting to me so that’s how it works except the room is in the brain.”*. These reflections suggest that even in stylized portrayals, media can sometimes spark moments of recognition or understanding.

A few participants after seeing the clips articulated a deeper understanding for the psychological function of DID, describing it as a defense mechanism shaped by past experiences. This however did not take away all the previous established stigma. Since some participants continued to associate the disorder with unpredictability or danger, indicating that their perception was still colored by media stereotypes. With a quote from Q19 that exemplifies this: *I still find it really difficult to deal with, like, that kind of person, because you never really know what you’re going to get, you know?* This lingering discomfort illustrates how deeply entrenched media-driven assumptions can be once they are settled.

Lastly, several participants even admitted that, at the beginning of the focus groups/ interviews, they didn’t initially question what they were seeing in the clips. Because the portrayals aligned so closely with what they had previously encountered in other media, the representations seemed familiar and therefore went unchallenged. As one respondent explained:

Q12: “When I first started watching the fragments or the different scenes, I went in with what I already expect from the media. So a lot of the scenes just made sense... because I’ve seen a lot of even the different alters of Jane. I’ve seen them in different shows as different characters, and it doesn’t surprise me anymore... it doesn’t even feel like, oh, it doesn’t have to be that way.”

This comment highlights how repetition of certain portrayals across media can create a false sense of accuracy, making it harder even for aware GenZ audiences to recognize when a depiction is stereotypical or inaccurate. Furthermore, participants also expressed curiosity about their own perceptions of the characters of *Moon Knight* and *Doom Patrol* if they had watched the shows in full instead of the little clips shown during the focus groups / interviews.

Altogether, this theme revealed how the perception of the participants were influenced by the clips of *Moon Knight* and *Doom Patrol* that they were shown. Whilst remaining skeptical of the dramatized and gendered depictions, many of them reconsidered their previous assumptions, particularly about trauma and the function of alters. But this did not take all the stigma away.

Discussion

The results of the thematic analysis point to a complex interplay between media, gender, and mental health perceptions.

This became apparent from the start of the focus groups and interviews when participants themselves unknowingly started to reproduce gendered assumptions. Participants continuously differentiated Moon Knight and Crazy Jane not only in terms of character or story arcs, but by voicing perceptions that are deeply rooted in broader cultural associations between gender and mental health. Even though it was confirmed to the participants that both *Moon Knight*'s Steven, Marc & Jake and *Doom Patrol*'s Crazy Jane and her fellow alters all had DID, the analysis of participant responses revealed that gender significantly influenced how these portrayals were perceived. The male characters of *Moon Knight* overall were seen by participants as more controlled, rational and even heroic in comparison to the female characters of *Doom Patrol*. In which Crazy Jane and the other alters were perceived as emotional, moody and most of all the 'crazier' of the two shows. Furthermore, participants noticed that some of Jane's characters were 'sexualized', but simultaneously were more likely to describe Jane her looks, echoing Hanley's (2009) argument about female superheroes being framed as objects of desire (p.11). Besides, they made more distinct differences between her feminine and tough personalities than for the characters of *Moon Knight*. In which all the characters were described more distinctively without necessarily linking it to masculinity or femininity. However, the male alters were more likely to be seen as inherently aggressive, echoing Clarke & Hine's (2024) argument that male superheroes are often portrayed as violent and intimidating. Overall, all the previously established arguments mirror long-standing media portrayals where male superheroes frequently embody traits of hegemonic masculinity whilst media portrayals of female superheroes are more emotionally volatile and as objects of desire (Clarke & Hine, 2024, p. 1-2; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 840; Stabile, 2009, p. 87). Yet participants also reflected critically on these portrayals, especially when prompted to imagine gender-swapped versions of the shows. They noted how traits like emotional vulnerability, sexuality, or authority would likely be framed very differently depending on whether they were embodied by a man or a woman. These reflections echo Rubin's (2008) argument that audiences do not merely absorb content, but often reframe it through personal and cultural filters especially when media fails to reflect social complexity.

These binary portrayals were not limited to the characters in and of itself but extended to how key aspects of the disorder such as how the relationship of alters, switching and trauma were portrayed. Both *Moon Knight* and *Doom Patrol* portray systems with multiple alters. The male-alter in *Moon Knight* were perceived as having a respectful brotherly bond shaped by emotionally distant but dependable, which can be linked to Austin et al.'s (2019) heteronormative framework in which male relationships acknowledge emotions (p.14). In contrast, the bond between the female-alter in *Doom Patrol* was perceived like the longstanding cultural stereotype of females not being able to be friends, them being catty, jealous and not getting along as seen in Costelle (2016) study (p.1). When asked to imagine gender-swapped scenarios, participants expected male characters to fight, make up, and move on, while female characters would be more emotionally expressive, but again more prone to conflict. This aligns with the theoretical framework which suggested that male friendships are often coded through action and loyalty, female relationships are either underdeveloped or framed through competition and emotional tension (Costelle, 2016; Boyle & Berridge, 2014). Equally this demonstrates how superhero media does reflect friendships as a 'gendered performance' such as Austin et al.'s (2019, p.13), continuously reinforcing these gendered assumptions not only through individual characters, but also through the types of relationships and emotional dynamics it chooses to portray. Another notable point is how participants interpreted the portrayals of DID as the concept of switching. Participants described the switching in *Moon Knight* as smooth and even useful, whilst in *Doom Patrol* they were viewed as more chaotic marked by emotional unsteadiness. Again, these interpretations mirror broader media tropes in which male hero complexity is celebrated and controlled, whereas female complexity is portrayed as dysfunction and dangerous (Hanley, 2021, p.18, McCaughey, 1997, p.36, Stabile, 2009, p.89). Subsequently, participants were quick to point out how the origin stories of both Marc and Jane seemed to have followed familiar gendered paths: with Marc subjected to physical abuse by his mother and Jane to sexual violence by her father, which they described as "predictable" or "stereotypical.". Furthermore,

participants noticed how the trauma in *Moon Knight* was lacking emotionally, aligning with norms of masculine emotion suppression and stoicism, while Jane's trauma was portrayed as raw, visible, and dramatic. This echoes the theoretical framework, which outlined how media tends to frame male pain as controlled, stoic, and character-building, while women's trauma is often represented as intimate, visible, and emotionally overwhelming (Stabile, 2009, p. 87; Clarke & Hine, 2024, p. 3). Lastly, the fact that participants stated that it would be "less believable" to gender swap these portrayals further illustrates how deeply rooted these gendered expectations are, with trauma not just functioning as a backstory but as a gendered blueprint for emotional legitimacy and character complexity.

This thesis captured how GenZ's understanding of DID remains deeply entangled with media representations. Participants continuously recognized or even reinforced the stigma and misinformation spread by media portrayals of the disorder. Showing how these portrayals significantly impacted their perception of DID. When participants were asked to define the disorder at the start of the focus groups/interviews, participants demonstrated a mix of confusion and associating it with anger disorders, schizophrenia or simply describing it as "a personality disorder". Before learning that the characters were meant to portray DID, several participants described them using terms like "crazy" or "psychotic," revealing how ingrained these media-driven associations were in their initial reactions. This aligns with Snyder's (2017) observation that the media frames DID in a way which often leads to DID characters to be perceived by harmful tropes and stigmatizing labels such as "crazy," "monster," or "psycho" (p. 3–4). Thereafter, participants admitted that their knowledge of DID stemmed from media, in particularly the movie *Split*, which framed the disorder through violent, exaggerated sensationalized tropes. These dramatized representations led many to associate DID with aggression and unpredictability, which made many participants wary of the disorder. Fitting the theoretical framework which underscored that DID, like other mental health disorders, is often used as plot devices, reinforcing negative stereotypes and contributing to long-term public stigma surrounding mental health (Pirkis et al., 2006, p. 536, Snyder, 2017, p.3- 4). Even in *Moon Knight* and *Doom Patrol*, participants felt that the disorder was used more as a narrative or aesthetic device than as a meaningful representation of the disorder, serving the plot rather than offering educational value or reflecting lived experience. This was the case especially when it came to the switching between the alters. While some acknowledged that these fictional portrayals might raise awareness or spark curiosity, most agreed that these series did little to deepen public understanding. This was also reflected in participants' confusion when viewing the clips. Some participants even admitted that they questioned whether DID was even a real disorder. Others noted that the series made it seem as though the disorder would manifest differently depending on a person's gender. In particular participants noticed how gendered representations shaped how DID was received: Marc's trauma made him a hero, while Jane's made her seem unstable. Again aligning with the theoretical framework explaining the difference of how male trauma leads to character building whilst female trauma leads to emotional struggle (Stabile, 2009, p. 87; Clarke & Hine, 2024, p. 3).

Overall, the data revealed GenZ's growing media literacy with participants reflecting curiously on how they viewed *Moon Knight* and *Doom Patrol*, wondering whether their familiarity with such portrayals in media had led them to overlook certain points. Again, illustrating just how powerful and limiting media narratives can be. Moreover, some participants even questioned how their perceptions might differ if they had watched the full series rather than selected clips. Fitting to what is to be expected of their generation, participants expressed a desire for better, more responsible representation, highlighting this key aspect of their generation advocating for more inclusive narratives, especially regarding issues like mental health, gender equality, and diversity like the theoretical framework suggested (Luttrell & McGrath, 2021, p. 17; Rubin, 2008, The perspective section). The participants agreed overall that when people truly want to be educated on the topic of DID documentaries should be used as sources for information. GenZ's critical awareness is promising, yet the pattern remains clear: when entertainment overshadows education, stigma follows. The path to understanding DID, can't rely on popular and superhero media alone, it requires careful, empathetic storytelling that moves beyond spectacle, stigmatization and misunderstanding and into humanity.

These findings suggest that gendered media representations of DID in superhero narratives significantly shape GenZ's perceptions of both mental health and gender, while also triggering active

reflection. The following conclusion will synthesize these insights and reflect on what they mean for media, academia, and the wider cultural understanding of mental health.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to explore the central question: *How do gendered portrayals of Dissociative Identity Disorder in superhero series shape how Generation Z's audiences view mental illness and gender?* Which was divided into the two following sub-questions:

1. To what extent do participants perceive gendered differences in how DID is depicted in *Moon Knight* (Slater, 2022) and *Doom Patrol* (Carver, 2019–2023)?
2. How do these portrayals influence participants' understanding of DID?

Each sub question was supported by its own set of themes.

Through thematic analysis of the focus group and interview data, three core themes emerged: (1) Gender bias in superhero character portrayals, (2) Gendered portrayals of DID, and (3) Misrepresentation of DID in media reinforces stigma. Each theme included three subthemes. The first two themes address the first sub-question, while the third theme answers the second. Together, these findings provide the foundation for answering the main research question.

The findings reveal how *Moon Knight* and *Doom Patrol* reflect gendered media tropes. Participants viewed male characters as controlled and heroic, while Jane's system was seen as emotional, unstable, and more sexualized. These responses align with media patterns where men embody hegemonic masculinity and women are portrayed as emotionally volatile or objectified (Clarke & Hine, 2024, p. 1–2; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 840; Stabile, 2009, p. 87).

Even portrayals of alter relationships, trauma, and switching followed predictable gender lines. Reinforcing the cultural scripts of male relationships in *Moon Knight* being distant but loyal and female relationships in *Doom Patrol* being jealous and catty (Costelle, 2016; Boyle & Berridge, 2014). Male switching was strategically used whilst chaotic for the female alters, framing male complexity as strength and female as dysfunction as seen in the theoretical framework (Hanley, 2021, p. 18; McCaughey, 1997, p. 36; Stabile, 2009, p. 89). Lastly, their traumas also aligned with gender norms: stoic male pain vs. emotional female suffering (Stabile, 2009, p. 87; Clarke & Hine, 2024, p. 3).

While the GenZ participants often questioned why certain traits couldn't be reversed across genders demonstrating their media literacy and active questioning of stereotypes (Luttrell & McGrath, 2021, p. 17; Rubin, 2008, The perspective section; Stabile, 2009, p. 87). Many also admitted they struggled to imagine a gender-swapped version themselves, revealing just how deeply these stereotypes are ingrained, even among these critically aware viewers (Luttrell & McGrath, 2021, p. 17; Stabile, 2009, p. 87).

Beyond gender, this thesis also revealed how deeply media narratives shape perceptions of DID itself. Many participants had limited or inaccurate understandings of the disorder and before learning the characters had DID. Before this participants used stigmatizing terms like "crazy" or "psychotic," reinforcing Snyder's (2017) observation that media often depicts DID through harmful tropes (p. 3–4). This was often shaped by dramatized films like *Split*, associating the disorder with danger, unpredictability, or even violence enforcing the skewed public perception due to these narratives like these as the theoretical framework suggested (Butler & Hyler, 2005, p. 519). While some felt the superhero portrayals of *Moon Knight* and *Doom Patrol* raised awareness, most saw them as plot devices rather than responsible depictions, reinforcing existing stigma (Pirkis et al., 2006, p. 536).

Again, GenZ demonstrated a strong capacity for media literacy and critical reflection. Participants engaged with the material thoughtfully, questioned their own assumptions, and expressed a desire for more accurate, empathetic, and inclusive storytelling, especially around sensitive topics like mental health, gender, and identity (Luttrell & McGrath, 2021, p. 17; Rubin, 2008, The perspective section). Recognizing that entertainment alone cannot build understanding of

disorders like DID but genuine and empathetic storytelling is essential to move beyond spectacle and stigma.

In conclusion, this thesis found that GenZ participants perceive gender as a key factor in how DID is portrayed in *Moon Knight* and *Doom Patrol*. These portrayals often perpetuate gendered and stigmatized narratives in ways that are subtle, internalized, and difficult to unlearn. When it comes to mental health and trauma, particularly in relation to DID, participants were influenced to believe that trauma is inherently gendered, and some even questioned whether DID was a real disorder due to the way it was depicted. Such portrayals reduce DID to a sensationalized plot device, reinforcing harmful stereotypes that GenZ participants sometimes (un)knowingly adopted or reproduced in their own interpretations.

Yet, the findings also reveal that audiences are not passive. When prompted, GenZ viewers critically reflected on these portrayals, questioned gender norms, imagined alternative narratives, and expressed a clear desire for more accurate and responsible media representations. If GenZ is indeed a generation of change, this growing media literacy and demand for inclusivity may signal a crucial shift toward more thoughtful portrayals of mental health in popular media.

The following sections reflect further on the academic and societal implications of these findings, before outlining practical considerations, limitations, and directions for future research.

Academic implications

This thesis contributes to closing a gap in existing research on how audiences interpret and compare gendered portrayals of Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) in superhero media.

The findings of this thesis supported previous research on hegemonic masculinity and media stereotypes in connection to the characterization of females and males with DID. Confirming that male trauma is often framed as controlled and used to become heroic, while female trauma is portrayed as chaotic or emotionally volatile (Stabile, 2009; Clarke & Hine, 2024).

However, this study also challenges traditional cultivation assumptions of passive media consumption. Drawing from media literacy frameworks, the results suggest that Gen Z audiences indeed engage with media more critically, their responses confirming the importance of media literacy (Luttrell & McGrath, 2021). As participants both reproduced and challenged these portrayals, pointing to a growing demand for more accurate and empathetic representations of mental health (Stabile, 2009; Clarke & Hine, 2024).

Finally, this thesis adds to theories of DID stigmatization due to media portrayals. By illustrating how these portrayals, especially in high-profile genres like superhero narratives, often reinforce public misunderstandings and pathologize the condition. Even with increased awareness, participants still struggled to define DID accurately or imagine it outside the framework of spectacle, confirming prior research on the stigmatizing effects of dramatic and decontextualized portrayals (Brand & Pasko, 2017, p.2).

Taken this into account, the findings of this thesis suggest that future media and communication studies should further explore how this genre, gender, and generation intersect in shaping the perceptions of mental health narratives. They also highlight the importance of researching not just the content, but also how an audience's perception is formed, to fully understand how media representations influence cultural understandings of identity and illness.

Societal implications

This study reinforces the urgent need for more accurate and responsible portrayals of mental health, especially DID in popular media. When conditions like DID are reduced to sensationalized plot devices, they not only misinform the public but also deepen stigma, especially when framed through gendered stereotypes. These portrayals contribute to stigma, fear, and misinformation,

leading many individuals with DID to feel ashamed, misunderstood, or even unsafe as found by other researchers (Nester et al., 2022, p.5).

For this reason, film schools, screenwriting programs, and production companies should consider incorporating research like this into their training and decision-making processes. By understanding the real impact of their portrayals, creators can make more informed and socially responsible choices rather than perpetuate harm.

Doing so is not only ethically important but also economically strategic: GenZ and the generations following them are growing increasingly aware of representational harm. They expect nuance, care, and accountability in media, and will reward those who deliver it with loyalty and viewership. In this way, promoting inclusive and accurate mental health narratives is both a cultural and commercial vital.

Failing to implicate these findings risks further stigmatization and stereotyping of both gender and mental health. Especially in the case of DID this has real-world consequences leading to a reduction of empathy for this individuals, misdiagnosis and increases societal exclusion.

Media portrayals of DID are “more powerful than we think”. For which GenZ might continue to be the “superheroes” who help turn these stigmatizing narratives around, shaping a media landscape that is safer and more inclusive for everyone.

Limitations & future research

While this thesis aimed to be thorough and has offered valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge several limitations that may have influenced its findings.

First off all, the interview questions prompted participants to reflect on stereotypes, which may have made these themes more salient than they would have been in a fully unstructured setting.

Secondly, although participants could choose their preferred language, the data collection involved a mix of Dutch and English responses. Some interviews were translated from Dutch to English, while others were conducted in English even if it wasn't the participant's first language. To support clarity, tools like Google Translate and ChatGPT were used in addition to the researcher's translations, especially for expressions and difficult words and sentences, as English isn't the researchers primary language as well. But these AI-based tools and the researchers own translations, are not infallible, and small translation nuances may have been lost.

Finally, the researcher's limited prior experience with mixed-methods research may have shaped the design and data interpretation in subtle ways.

Despite these limitations the findings offered valuable insights which should be explored further. This includes but is not limited to future research on how the demographics of the participants such as gender, age, and cultural background. To exemplify this, comparing male, female, and mixed-gender discussion groups may reveal whether perceptions of characters are influenced by participants' own gender identity. It would also be valuable to examine age differences within GenZ by comparing older and younger members of the cohort, as cultural references and media literacy may vary significantly between them.

Additionally, future studies could take a more experimental approach by showing participants full episodes or entire series, rather than selected scenes, to allow for deeper immersion and more organic interpretations. Another promising direction would be to juxtapose fictional portrayals with real-life depictions of DID for example, from documentaries or interviews with people living with the disorder to examine how audiences process differences in tone, accuracy, and empathy. Finally, future research could experiment with more interactive formats, allowing participants to pause scenes, rewatch segments, or comment in real time whilst watching the clips that are shown. This could offer richer insight into how perceptions form in-the-moment and how media literacy unfolds as viewers engage more actively with content.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Focus group participants

Focus group 1	Age	gender	Level of education	Place of residence	International background
Q1	19	Female	1ste year MBO	Rotterdam	Dutch
Q2	20	Male	High school	Rotterdam	Dutch
Q3	18	Female	High school	Rotterdam	Dutch
Q4	18	Male	High school	Rotterdam	Dutch
Q5	18	Male	High school	Rotterdam	Dutch

Focus group 2	Age	gender	Level of education	Place of residence	International background
Q6	19	Female	High school	Rotterdam	Dutch
Q7	18	Male	High school	Rotterdam	Dutch
Q8	24	Female	University Master	Rotterdam	Dutch
Q9	22	Male	1 st year HBO	Rotterdam	Dutch
Q10	20	Female	Last year MBO	Rotterdam	Dutch

Focus group 3	Age	gender	Level of education	Place of residence	International background
q18	24	Female	University Master	Rotterdam	Dutch
q19	27	Male	Post-graduate	Rotterdam	Dutch
q20	23	Female	Works full-time	Rotterdam	Dutch
q21	26	Male	Works full-time	Rotterdam	Dutch

Appendix 2: Interview participants

Interviewees	Age	gender	Level of education	Place of residence	International background
Q11	21	Male	Last year of Acting school	Rotterdam	Dutch
q12	23	Female	Bachelor	Rotterdam	Dutch
q13	22	Male	Bachelor	Rotterdam	Dutch
q17	26	Female	Full timer	Rotterdam	Dutch
q22	23	Male	Master	Rotterdam	Dutch
q15	23	Female	Bachelor	Rotterdam	Dutch
q16	24	Female	Master	Rotterdam	Dutch
q14	24	Male	Master	Rotterdam	Dutch

Appendix 3 Consent form

CONSENT REQUEST FOR PARTICIPATING IN RESEARCH

FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, CONTACT:

Name: Dulce Pronk

EUR email address: 682205ap@eur.nl

DESCRIPTION

You are invited to participate in a research about Audience reception of two superhero shows.

Your acceptance to participate in this study means that you accept to be part of a Video Elicitation focus group. In general terms,

- My questions will be related to two superhero shows, focusing on both a male and a female superhero, who will be revealed during the discussion. The themes that are up to discussion are that of mental health, gender and trauma.
- This focus group will involve video elicitation. In this aspect, for some of the parts mentioned above, one or two video scenes will be displayed to contextualize and illustrate the topics being discussed. The videos are intended to facilitate a more constructive, active and better flow of discussion.

Unless you prefer that no recordings are made, I will make a video recording of the focus group. I will use the material from the focus group and my observation exclusively for academic work, such as further research, academic meetings and publications. And you may be called upon after the focus group for further questioning of your answers.

RISKS AND OBJECTIONS

The focus group will focus on a mental health disorder coming from severe childhood trauma, if at any moment something would be too overwhelming for you, you may always step out of the discussion by letting the guide, Dulce Pronk know. It is advised not to participate if the topics of childhood trauma are sensitive to you.

UNANIMISED

This study will discuss mental health, gender and trauma. To ensure that the participants may speak freely, all the data will be anonymized. Any information that may lead to the identification of the participants will be destroyed.

TIME INVOLVEMENT

Your participation in this study will take 45-60 minutes (depending on the flow of the discussion). You may interrupt your participation at any time.

PAYMENTS

There will be no monetary compensation for your participation. However, snacks and drinks will be provided.

PARTICIPANTS' RIGHTS

If you have decided to accept to participate in this project, please understand your participation is

voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. Your individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from the study.

CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS

If you have questions about your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact –anonymously, if you wish— Dulce Pronk, via this email - 682205ap@eur.nl

SIGNING THE CONSENT FORM

If you sign this consent form, your signature will be the only documentation of your identity. Thus, you **DO NOT NEED** to sign this form. In order to minimize risks and protect your identity, you may prefer to consent orally. Your oral consent is sufficient.

I give consent to be recorded during this study:

Name:

Signature Date:

This copy of the consent form is for you to keep.

Appendix 4: Focus group and interview guide English
Introduction / ice breakers with the group:

1. Have you seen any recent superhero media why/why not?
2. Who knows about the Disney+ show *Moon Knight*?
3. Who knows about the HBO show *Doom Patrol*?

Meeting the main characters / DID:

(short clip of each of the main characters – Marc Spector/Steven Grant followed by a question then Crazy Jane followed by a question)

4. For anyone who didn't know this character called Marc Spector/Steven Grant can you describe him/ what stood out?
5. The same goes for this character "Crazy" Jane, Can you describe the character you just saw can you describe what stood out about her
6. **Are you familiar with the mental health condition portrayed by the characters?**
 - If yes, please explain what you know.
 - If not, does the term *Dissociative Identity Disorder* (or *DID*) sound familiar to you?

Brief explanation for reference:

Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), formerly known as multiple personality disorder, is a complex trauma-related condition. It involves the presence of two or more distinct identities or "parts," each with its own memories, behaviors, and traits. These identities—often referred to as "alters"—may take turns being in control of the person's behavior. DID typically stems from repeated and overwhelming trauma, especially during childhood. People with DID may experience changes in preferences, mannerisms, gender expression, or even voice, depending on which alter is present. Many individuals with DID refer to themselves as a "system," and may use terms like "inner family" or "community" to describe their internal world.

Meeting the alters + Interacting with alters

(short clip of all the alters of Marc Spector/Steven Grant and "Crazy" Jane)

7. How would you describe the alters of both Marc Spector/ Crazy Jane? Do you notice any stereotypes in the alters their behaviors? How are these stereotypes presented?
8. Do you think the alters of Marc Spector/Steven Grant and "Crazy" Jane would be different if their genders were different? Why or why not?
9. How would you describe the relationships between Marc Spector and Crazy Jane and the other alters?
10. Do you think gender influences how the alters interact with each other? Why or why not?
11. In superhero media, do you think DID is portrayed differently depending on whether the character is male or female? How do these portrayals compare to what you've seen before (if you have)?

(Short clips of Steven Grant/Marc Spector and "Crazy" Jane portraying DID switching personalities.)

12. Do these depictions of switching between alters feel realistic to you? Why or why not?

Traumatic Backstory:

(trigger warning before showing short clip of traumatic experiences of of Marc Spector/Steven Grant and “Crazy” Jane)

13. Both characters have a traumatic past that led to their DID. How do their stories compare? Do you think their trauma is framed differently because of gender?
14. If the roles were reversed— of Marc Spector/Steven Grant had “Crazy” Jane story, and “Crazy” Jane had Marc Spector/Steven Grant — would their characters have changed? Why or why not?
15. Based on how these characters introduce DID throughout the series, how would you describe the disorder?

Closing:

16. Did these shows portray gender biases? And how?
17. Would you recommend these portrayals to someone trying to understand DID? Why or why not?
18. Does anyone have to add anything, or does anyone have a final question?

Appendix 5: Focus group and interview guide Dutch

Introductie / Icebreakers met de groep

1. Heb je onlangs nog een superheldenfilm of -serie gezien? Waarom wel of niet?
2. Wie kent de Disney+ serie *Moon Knight*?
3. Wie kent de HBO-serie *Doom Patrol*?

Kennismaking met de hoofdpersonages / DIS (DID in het Engels)

(Korte clip van elk hoofdpersoonage – eerst Marc Spector/Steven Grant met aansluitende vraag, daarna Crazy Jane met aansluitende vraag)

4. Voor wie deze personages nog niet kende: hoe zou je Marc Spector/Steven Grant omschrijven? Wat viel je op?
5. Hetzelfde geldt voor het personage "Crazy" Jane. Hoe zou je haar omschrijven? Wat viel je op?
6. Ben je bekend met de psychische aandoening die deze personages proberen weer te geven?
 - Zo ja, wat weet je ervan?
 - Zo nee, klinkt de term Dissociatieve Identiteitsstoornis (DIS) je bekend in de oren?

Korte uitleg voor referentie:

Dissociatieve Identiteitsstoornis (DIS), voorheen bekend als meervoudige persoonlijkheidsstoornis, is een complexe aandoening die vaak ontstaat door herhaald trauma, vooral in de kindertijd. Mensen met DIS hebben twee of meer aparte identiteiten – ook wel "alters" genoemd – met eigen herinneringen, gedragingen en eigenschappen. Deze alters nemen op verschillende momenten de controle over iemands gedrag. Iemand met DIS kan veranderingen ervaren in voorkeuren, stem, genderexpressie of gedrag, afhankelijk van welke alter aanwezig is. Veel mensen met DIS verwijzen naar zichzelf als een "systeem", en gebruiken termen als "innerlijke familie" of "gemeenschap" om hun interne wereld te beschrijven.

Moon Knight

Moon Knight (Marvel, 2022) volgt Steven Grant, een Londense museumwinkelmedewerker met black-outs, die ontdekt dat hij zijn lichaam deelt met Marc Spector, een gewelddadige huurling en avatar van een Egyptische god. Terwijl ze samen proberen grip te krijgen op hun gedeelde leven, komt een derde, mysterieuze persoonlijkheid tevoorschijn.

Doom Patrol

Doom Patrol (DC, 2019–2023) draait om een groep buitenstaanders met bovennatuurlijke krachten, die worstelen met hun trauma's en zichzelf liever geen helden noemen. Een van hen is Crazy Jane, die leeft met 64 persoonlijkheden, elk met een eigen superkracht.

Kennismaking met de alters + interactie tussen alters

(Korte clips van de alters van Marc Spector/Steven Grant en van "Crazy" Jane)

7. Hoe zou je de alters van zowel Marc Spector als Crazy Jane omschrijven? Merk je bepaalde stereotypen op in hun gedrag? Hoe worden die gepresenteerd?
8. Denk je dat de alters van Marc Spector/Steven Grant en "Crazy" Jane anders zouden zijn als ze een ander gender hadden? Waarom wel of niet?
9. Hoe zou je de relatie tussen Marc Spector en zijn alters, en Crazy Jane en haar alters omschrijven?

10. Denk je dat gender invloed heeft op hoe de alters met elkaar omgaan? Waarom wel of niet?
11. In superheldenmedia: denk je dat DIS anders wordt afgebeeld afhankelijk van of het personage man of vrouw is? Hoe verhouden deze portretten zich tot wat je eerder hebt gezien (als je daar ervaring mee hebt)?

Persoonlijkheidsswitches op beeld

(Korte clips waarin de personages switchen tussen alters)

12. Vond je deze weergave van het switchen tussen alters realistisch? Waarom wel of niet?

Traumatische achtergrond

(Trigger warning vooraf, gevolgd door korte clip met traumatische gebeurtenissen van beide personages)

13. Beide personages hebben een traumatisch verleden dat leidde tot hun DIS. Hoe vergelijk je hun verhalen? Denk je dat hun trauma anders wordt gepresenteerd vanwege hun gender?
14. Stel dat hun rollen waren omgedraaid – dus Marc Spector/Steven Grant had Jane's verhaal, en Jane dat van Marc – zouden hun personages dan anders zijn geweest? Waarom wel of niet?
15. Op basis van hoe deze series DIS introduceren, hoe zou je de aandoening zelf omschrijven?

Afsluiting

16. Denk je dat deze series genderstereotypen of -vooroordelen laten zien? Hoe dan?
17. Zou je deze series aanraden aan iemand die meer wil begrijpen over DIS? Waarom wel of niet?
- 18. Heeft iemand nog iets toe te voegen, of is er nog een laatste vraag?**

Appendix 6: Analyzed Material

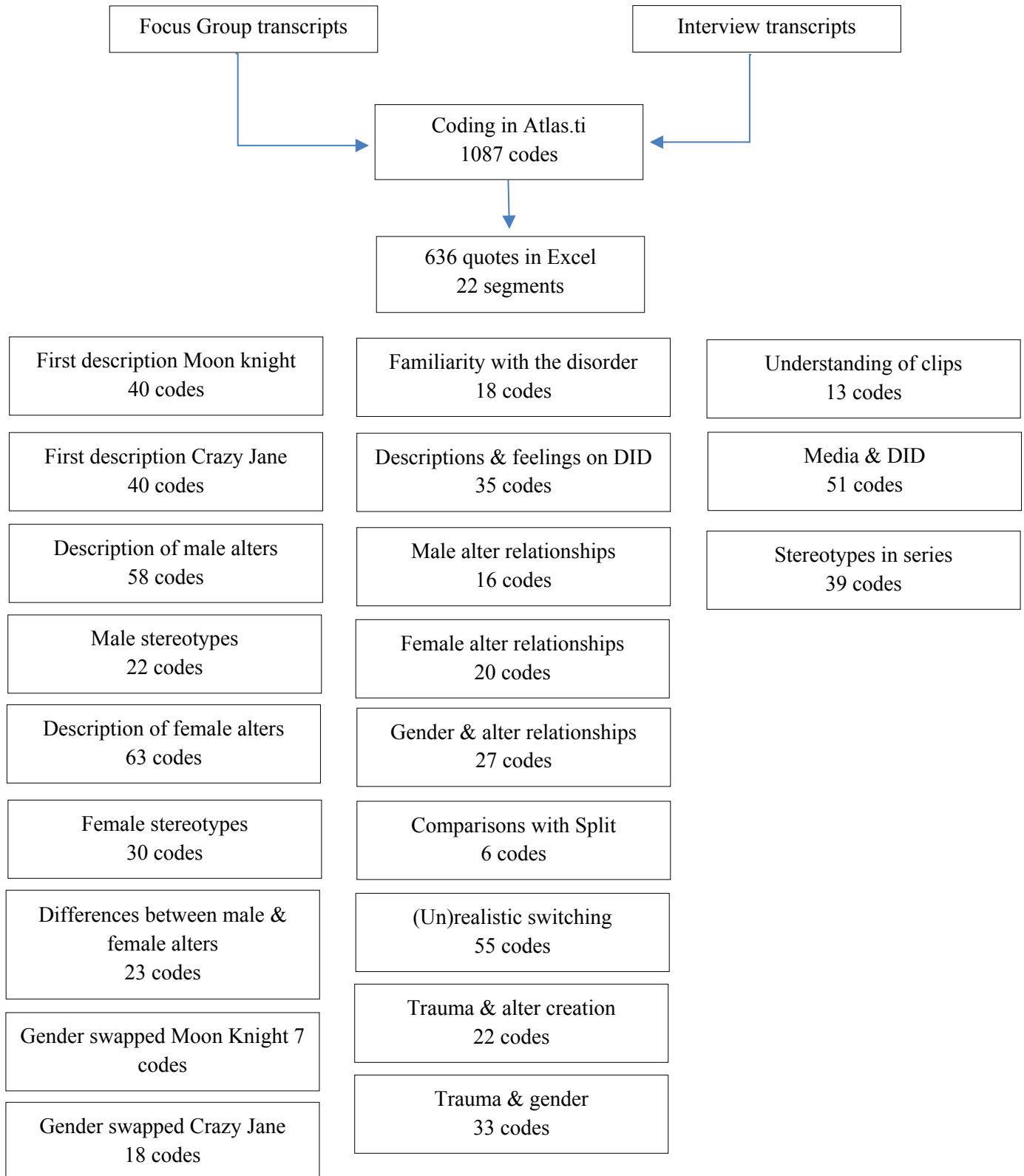
This table shows the material that GenZ had to analyse during the focus group / interviews. The clips are in order of how the scenes appeared to the participants per show.

Table 1: Analyzed Material

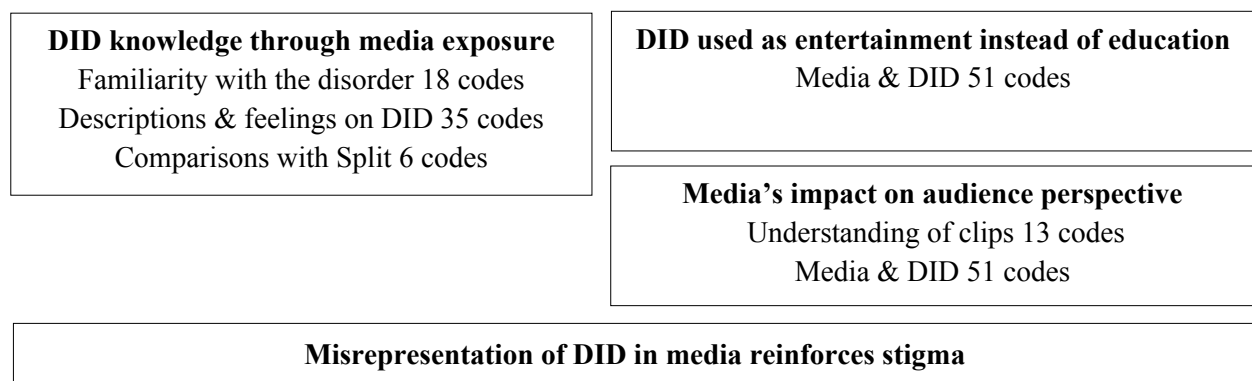
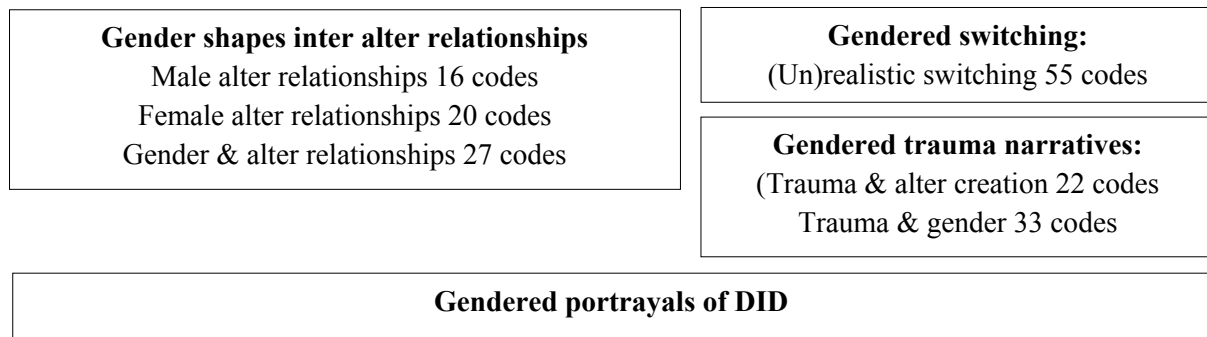
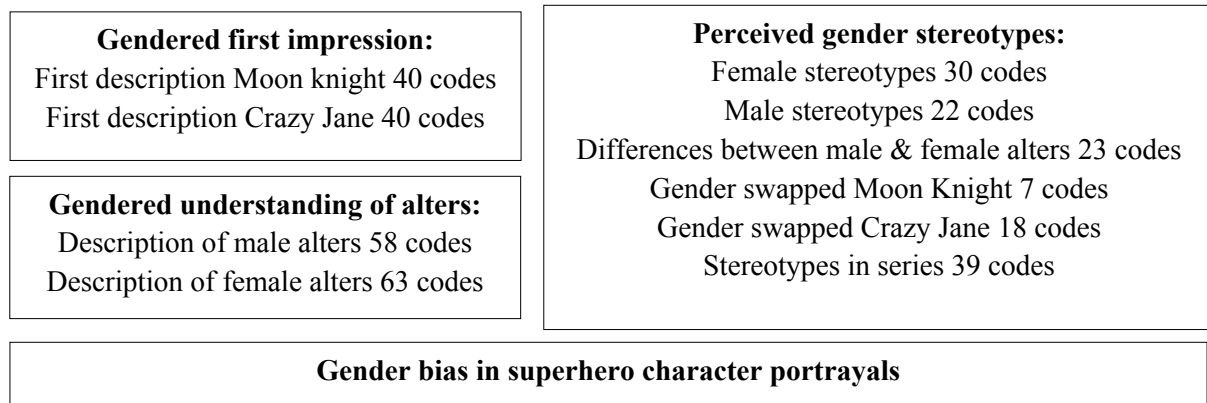
<i>Moon Knight</i>	<i>Doom Patrol</i>
S1. E1. The Goldfish Problem 09.53 – 12.26	S1.E1. Pilot 31.58 – 33.44
S1. E1. The Goldfish Problem 39.37 – 41:09 S1.E6. Gods and Monsters 37.44-39.32 S1.E5 Asylum 29.46-32.24	Doom Patrol Crazy Jane's Most Badass Personalities Max https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vssAOp77s3Q S1.E9 Jane Patrol 04.50 – 06.21
S1.E3. The friendly type 07.09 – 07.23 S1.E6. Gods and Monsters 26.00-26.19 & 26.36 – 27:05	S1.E2. Donkey Patrol 20.55 – 22.22
S1.E6. Gods and Monsters 15.23 – 17.25	S1.E9 Jane Patrol 35.37 – 37.16 S4.E11. Portal Patrol 40.46- 42.41

Appendix 7: Coding tree

Coding process phase 1



Coding process phase 2: Segments to themes



Coding process phase 3: themes

Note: Some participant responses contained multiple descriptive terms, leading to a higher total number of mentions than the number of keywords as displayed before. Additionally, certain quotes were categorized under multiple labels when they reflected more than one relevant theme.

Gendered first impression	<p>First description Moon knight</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Confused (18) - Klutz (1) - Stupid/Dumb (2) - Not brave (1) - Hears voices (3) - Like venom (2) - Crazy (3) - Sees things (3) - Psychosis (1) - On drugs (1) - Smart (6) - DID (1) - Physical description (2) - Scared (3) - Talks to himself (1) - Reader (2) - Quiet (2) - Bored (1) - Clumsy (1) - Childish (2) - Goofy (1) - Charismatic (1) - Chaotic (3) - Busy (1) - Control Freak (1) - Paranoid (1) - Insecure (2) 	<p>First description Crazy Jane</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Irritating (1) - Lot of personalities (5) - Unpredictable (3) - Superior complex (1) - Crazy/Creepy (16) - Curious (1) - Angry/mean/moody (4) - Who is she (3) - Provactive/ threatening (3) - Bold/daring (2) - Like <i>Split</i> (1) - Confident (1) - Dangerous /psychopathic (2) - Villain (1) - Aggressive (1)
<p>Example Quotes:</p> <p><i>Q15: he was very confused he didn't know what was going on</i></p> <p><i>Q6: Yeah, I think she's crazier.....he was really confused, and with her, she's really kind of... I don't know, it just came across as very creepy, you can really tell she has multiple personalities.</i></p> <p><i>Q11: She switches very quickly from emotions... which also gives her that slightly psychopathic thing</i></p> <p><i>Q21: She's definitely crazier... I wouldn't want to talk to someone like that.</i></p> <p><i>Q2: mainly stupid, that background voice, actually kind of describes him. The dumb one is in control. Also kind of shows how he is already known</i></p> <p><i>Q13: she's already labeled as "crazy," probably because of that personality disorder.</i></p>		

Gendered	Description Male alters	Description Female alters
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<p>understanding of alters</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Generally: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o different (roles) (4) o Chaotic in looks (1) o Personalities based on emotions (1) o Same age category (1) o Opposites (1) o Aggressive/violent (2) - Steven: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Scared/panicking (6) o Confused (2) o Insecure (2) o Deep thinker (2) o Lack of control (4) o Needs protection (3) - Marc <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Confident (6) o Protective/heroic (6) o Calm/in control (5) o Masculine/tough (3) o Trustworthy (1) - Jake <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Tough (2) o Villain (2) o Aggression/violence (7) o Criminal association (7) o Confident (5) o Masculine (4) o Decisiveness (4) o Weapon related (2) o Psychotic (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Generally: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Different/distinct (roles, personalities, looks) (9) o Feminine (4) o tough (3) o Age category (2) o Cool (2) o Realistic (1) o Moody (2) o Confident (3) o In control (1) o Grumpy/unfriendly (1) o Heroic (1) o Sweet (1) o Aggressive (2) o “Bad bitch” (1) o Clothing styles (3) o Manipulative (2) o Powers are obvious (1) o A lot of alters (2) - Babydoll <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Very feminin/girly (4) o Childish (2) o Vulnerable (1) o Barbie doll/ stereotypically (1) o Fangirl (1) o High-pitch voice / Ariana Grande Style (1) o Not sweet / tough (2) - Hammerhead <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Agressive /pissed off (4) o Confusion about power (1) o Super strenght o Bold (1) o Rough (1) o Tough (1) o Confusion about gender (1) - Penny <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Scared (2) o Runs away / avoids conflict (3) o Insecure (2) o Quiet (1) o Weak / less aggressive (1) o Stood out for being different (2) o More nervous behavior (1) o No specific power (1)
<p>Example Quotes</p>		

Q18: Well. Well, they all kind of have something aggressive or something. or maybe that's the environment they're in, so not necessarily the personality itself.

Q6: Because suddenly she's like a kind of child, crying, and then she's a bad bitch, and then she's a woman, and then she's, I don't even know what. It's really, uhh, different

Q15: Is that a man? Or is it supposed to be a man? A female as well, okay.....This kind of gave me man vibes.....I guess it kind of gave stereotype strong men.

Q19: But all 3 of them don't really shy away from violence. Like, one of them shoots someone in the head, the other says, "let me do it, 'cause then I can".

Q14: a little bit less feminine in that sense (of actions). But still, she was taking the the female role. She was also dressed in the female way

Perceived gender stereotypes	Gender stereotypes	Gender swapped
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Female stereotypes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Emotional/hysterical/moody/unstable/chaotic (12) o Oversexualized (7) o Boss bitch / bad bitch (3) o Love-obsessed / romantic (4) o Babyish/childlike (e.g. babydoll) (3) o Manipulative (3) o Housewife / caregiver (2) o Jealous / drama-prone (2) o Empowered women shown as "less feminine" (3) o Feminine = graceful / elegant (1) o Female more likely seen as crazy (10) o Positively confident (2) o Angry women = crazy (3) o Women go to therapy (2) o Drama between female alters seen as "bitchy" (2) - Male stereotypes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Alpha male / dominant (6) o Tough guy / confident (6) o Heroic / physical strong (6) o Emotionally closed off (3) o Nerdy / clueless sidekick (2) o Gangster /criminal (2) o Sexy male used rarely (2) o Action-based problem solving (1) o Violence/ aggressive linked to masculinity (7) o Less expressive/ emotional (3) o Leadership/confident (1) o Assertive (4) o DID makes him cool (4) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Crazy jane as man <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Alters would be different (5) o Babydoll would likely not exist (4) o Sexy alters less likely / would be changed (3) o Clothing would differ (2) o Wouldn't be labeled "Crazy" as a man (2) o Passionate/romantic alter seen as more feminine (2) o Fewer hyper-feminine traits (1) o Alters would fight more / be more alpha (1) o Less stylization of alters (1) - Moon knight as woman <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Would be more emotional / less violent (4) o Dressed more feminine (1) o Some changes in behavior (2) o Female version might include more reasoning or flexible solutions instead of aggression (2) o Some believe roles would be similar (4)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Always in control (3) ○ Angry male = tough (3) ○ Male characters seen as coherent (2) 	
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Example Quotes

Q11: maybe they wouldn't have gone for such an oversexualized guy as quickly.

Q7: I think there's more quickly a kind of image of...A female slut than a male, I don't know, a male slut, you know what I mean?

Q13: if that were a guy, it wouldn't be "the girl who can hang with the guys." It would just be the typical tough guy.

Q13: the woman in the suit if that were a man, I wouldn't call him a "boss bitch," I'd probably see him more as a diplomatic lawyer or CEO type. So yeah, it would provoke different feelings.

Q12: There was the one that I think it was called psychosexual. Also wouldn't really call it a stereotype or saw any in that, but I wouldn't know for what it would be a stereotype. I guess not really for women, maybe for someone who's very, I guess confidence in their sexuality or just very sexual, but I wouldn't. ok, no uhmm actually I could kind of see how that's a stereotype. If we're looking at the way she was talking, the way she was walking, the clothes she was putting on. Yeah. Ok. I could actually kind of see that if there's scenes in movies or films and they are trying to portray. I guess maybe a scene where a, a woman wants, is about to have sex where she's going to the club to find a one night stand, but that's usually, that's often how they look like or how they make the scenes look..

Q18 noted: "Yeah, like a guy with a gun in his hand. That's something you see more with men in films than with women or something."

Q10: Well, if I can say it really bluntly, she just kind of looked like a whore, to put it that way.

Q7: That attracts more easily than a Magic Mike.

Q9: And I don't really think they would've put a male whore in there.

Q7: And there's not really a clear image of what a male whore should even look like.

Q15 I wouldn't necessarily say that Steven gives off like feminine vibes. Just like weak, which someone could say is like a stereotypical trait of women. But I don't see it that way.

Q13: They would come across differently. Hammerhead, for example—if that were a guy, it wouldn't be "the girl who can hang with the guys." It would just be the typical tough guy. the woman in the suit if that were a man, I wouldn't call him a "boss bitch," I'd probably see him more as a diplomatic lawyer or CEO type. So yeah, it would provoke different feelings.

D: Do you think the passion alter-, would she exist if Jane had been a man?

Q13: it would be less believable, in media, that's usually seen more as a feminine trait, I feel. Like, it's often women who do that kind of thing. Because, yeah, it feels like women are more... or more naturally able to manage their emotions, and maybe even influence other people's emotions more easily. men already struggle just to manage their own emotions, let alone someone else's. I think that would feel less believable.

D: Okay, and what about Jake do you think he would exist if the character had been a woman?

Q13: Then I'd see her more as an assassin type—not like a British gangster, more like the cold-blooded assassin-for-hire.. Usually, they don't have a cap and a long brown trench coat like the guys do. In movies, if it's a woman, she's usually dressed all in black with a lot of leather, and all these knives hidden all over her outfit. Like that kind of assassin.

Gendered shapes inter alter relationships	- Male alter relationship <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Brotherly relationship / growing mutual respect (7) ○ Strong emotional arc: mistrust → empathy → unity (6) ○ Showcases tough love / but also emotional vulnerability (4) ○ Clear evolution in trust (3) ○ Not a perfect bond, but complementary (2) 	- General observations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Male alters show more cooperation and closer bonds (19) ○ Female alters show more conflict, rivalry, or emotional distance (22) ○ Male relationships display a mix of distance and affection (e.g., tough love, bonding) (5) ○ Female leaders (like Jane) are portrayed as unwilling or resentful (2)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Acceptance builds over time (2) ○ Control is an issue (1) ○ Some early resentment (1) ○ Conflict shown through avoidance or tension, not violence (1) <p>- Female alter relationship</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Alters hate each other / selfish / individualistic (5) ○ Leadership struggles: Jane is reluctant and contested (3) ○ No emotional bond / no appreciation between alters (3) ○ Chaotic and dramatic atmosphere (3) ○ Alters contradict and undermine each other (3) ○ Seen as catfights / emotional competition (3) ○ Portrayed as exhausting / overwhelming (2) ○ Communication = conflict, not resolution (2) ○ Feminine traits linked to disorder severity (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ More alters = more friction, especially among female characters (4) ○ Men resolve conflict more quickly (through bonding or action), while women remain emotionally stuck (5) ○ Men are seen as more trusting and easier to get along with (3) ○ Women are portrayed as more emotional, grudge-holding, or intense (3) ○ Male alter hierarchies are accepted or seen as irrelevant (1) ○ Some believe gender influenced the writing or direction of the shows (4) ○ Others argue that the number of alters matters more than gender (3) ○ If Jane had been a man, conflict would be less emotional and more goal- or action-driven (e.g., businesslike, physical resolution) (7) ○ Female representation is seen as more stereotypical and chaotic (2) ○ Male representation is seen as simpler or more straightforward (1)
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Quotes

Q22: Brotherhood .really close honest with each other, connected with each other Being there for each other. Being willing to make sacrifices for each other.

Q17: They sometimes make compromises not just in decisions but also emotionally... they wish each other well and show empathy.

Q11: They all basically just hate each other.

Q3: Yes, I think men are not easily irritated by little things. With women you're much more likely to see the negative things in each other.

Q15: It looked like typical girls fighting... chaotic, drama, whiny.

Q11: I think it would have been more like just with the guys like a man cave with a couch and they're just gaming in between everything.

Q21: Yeah, like they'd punch each other, get a black eye, drink a beer, and it's all fine again

Q18: Worse. Definitely not better.

Q14 Its a normal manly relationship, they approach each other and they can voice their emotions in the last scene, but they also keep some sort of a distance. It's like a brotherly sense, so you see a certain amount of distance, but also some showing of affection

Q12: it didn't really seemed like they liked each other. Media portrays that there's always competition a lot between women and I feel like that maybe played a part in why the different alters for Jane didn't really like each other.

Because there was some type of competition going on there, uhmm and you don't really notice that a lot for men.

Q21 explained: 'Yeah, like they'd punch each other, get a black eye, drink a beer, and it's all fine again''

Gendered switching	- Switching felt too fast or exaggerated (general sentiment) (21)
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Moon Knight seen as smoother but too "clean" or convenient (8) - Doom Patrol seen as more chaotic or emotionally driven (6) - Neither portrayal felt fully realistic (6) - Jane's switching felt overly emotional or "crazy" (stereotyped) (5) - Jane more realistic due to emotion/stress-based triggers (5) - Moon Knight seen as more logical or situational in switching (4) - Doom Patrol switches felt like breakdowns or lacked narrative purpose (3) - Switching effects (e.g., visual glitches, costume changes) broke realism (4) - Real DID seen as more subtle or gradual in reality (6) - Portrayals affected by genre expectations (action vs. drama) (3) - Moon Knight praised for alter collaboration (vs. chaos in Jane) (2) - Doom Patrol shows more internal chaos / less control (2) - Both portrayals were unrealistic but understandable in context (4)
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Quotes

Q13: "The first one I could still follow. You still saw kind of a superhero who first sees a guy with a knife and then thinks like, yeah, that's not necessary. So then he switches to the more gentle one. And then he's with his partner or girlfriend and they get attacked, and then he switches again to someone who can fight the others. Then I think like, yeah, that still makes sense in my head, you know? Like it's a logical switch."

Q15: With Moon Knight, I'm not really sure how to describe it, but it really looked like they were all just like working together... versus Jane who was like struggling... kind of looked like she was going crazy.

Q15: As a woman, it kind of makes me feel uncomfortable seeing how big of a difference it is, to be honest.

Q15: You can just tell that with Jane, they really were trying to make her look crazy... Like she was having some sort of breakdown.

Q17: Moon Knight went much faster, without any emotion the one in Doom Patrol there's definitely more "craziness" coming through Lots of mood swings, emotional outbursts I wrote down "crazy" but also suddenly sexual, you know? at one point there's that sexual edge, and I'm sure if a male character had done that exact same scene, he wouldn't say it like that, you know? Moon Knight one went too smoothly, too fast too seamlessly all of a sudden. And hers, on the other hand, was like she was on her period or something I mean, that's a terrible way to put it Okay no, that's a bad way to describe it. But I don't know, it's just all driven by feelings and emotion.

Q12: "If you hear the name Crazy Jane, then you kind of know what to expect. And well, not you don't really know what to expect. But you know you can expect craziness. And I feel like that people would be quicker to like uhm link craziness with the disorder and I feel like going into Moon Knight. It doesn't really imply that he's a crazy person, the disorder kind of looks. They make it look like it actually is helping and it's helping the plot helping uhm helping him in all his alters. And whereas in Jane and like as crazy Jane it it's not really helping her just feels like it makes it's making her more crazy. So I do feel like that would probably have something to do with im being a male and her being a woman."

Gendered trauma narratives	<p>Trauma and alter creation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Both characters experienced childhood trauma caused by their parents (10) - Creation of alters served as protection or emotional escape (8) - Severity of trauma linked to number of personalities (5) - Trauma triggered specific emotional or behavioral traits in alters (4) - Jane's alters remember and share trauma more openly than Steven/Marc's (3) - Steven/Marc created alters to forget trauma; Jane's alters embody it (3) - Switching and alter logic influenced by 	<p>Trauma and gender stereotypes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sexual abuse often assigned to women, physical abuse to men in media (10) - Female trauma portrayed as more emotional, dramatic; male trauma as stoic/fear-based (6) - Writers may choose trauma type based on gendered viewer expectations (5) - Depicting male sexual abuse is seen as taboo or commercially risky (4) - Gender influences perceived realism of trauma narratives (3) - Some reject idea that trauma type is gendered (3) - Others think Jane's many alters stem from
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	trauma (e.g. emotion-based vs. function-based) (3) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Some participants unsure if trauma alone explains difference in alter count (2) - Trauma type shapes emotional tone of series (e.g., anger vs. sadness) (2) 	being a woman with heavier trauma (2) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Gender affects how alters process and express trauma (2) - Participants saw portrayals as stereotypical but emotionally impactful (2) - Some found Jane's expression of trauma empowering despite the stereotype (2)
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Quotes

Q14: They are not going to depict a man being raped... if a woman needs to go through a certain type of trauma, it will be sexual assault.

Q19: If you had to come up with a trauma, you'd more quickly say for a man it's like abuse or hitting or something. And for a woman, more quickly rape.

Q14: They will not depict the man who is getting raped because it will not sell their movies well... they'd rather go with the conventional.

Q13: In Crazy Jane, that's not the case. There, all of them experienced it, at least, even though Jane herself initially thinks otherwise.

Q15: Why does Jane have more than three personalities, and Moon Knight only has three?... I guess you could blame it on the gender thing.

Q16: It was pretty stereotypical that a girl gets raped... and the guy gets beaten.

Q17: Jane... it came with more emotion, crying... Moon Knight is more confused and scared. He didn't cry... With Jane, it was more dramatic and emotional.

Q19: Nnnyeah, I think it is well, I wouldn't say a deliberate choice, but it is a stereotype. Like, if you had to come up with a trauma, you'd more quickly say for a man it's like abuse or hitting or something. And for a woman More quickly rape. Yeah, like for women that's higher up on the list, if you had to pick something.

Q13: "I think they could've created the same characters. I just think it would've been less believable from a viewer's perspective."

DID knowledge through media exposure	<p>Familiarity with disorder</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Heard of DID but could not name it correctly or confused it (9) - Referred to it as an abbreviation or described it vaguely as "having multiple personalities" (6) - DID was associated with media portrayals, especially <i>Split</i> (6) - Doubt about the disorder's existence or realism (5) - DID was genetic or mood-based rather than trauma-induced (3) - Protective functions of alters (2) - DID confused with borderline or bipolar disorder (2) - Struggled with understanding the term "dissociative" (2) 	<p>Description & feelings on DID</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - DID was often perceived as scary, unpredictable, or bizarre (6) - Confusion and emotional distance were common reactions (e.g. laughing, joking) (5) - DID as rooted in trauma and resulting in memory gaps (4) - Alters were described as distinct in age, gender, or personality traits (4) - Negative associations were reinforced by media representations of DID as dangerous (e.g. killers, psychos) (4) - Expressed empathy, seeing DID as a difficult condition to live with (3) - childlike behavior (2) <p>Comparison to split</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Split as their main reference for DID (6) - Split was associated with chaos, danger, and alter competition (3) - Jane was frequently compared to the Split character due to her number of alters and unpredictability (3) - Differences were noted: Split's portrayal was more chaotic, while Jane's system seemed more stable (2) - Participants noted Split included gender-swapping and childlike alters, unlike Moon Knight or Doom Patrol (2) - Questioned why female perspectives like Jane's are less commonly shown (1)
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Quotes

Q16: I think the switching we saw with the man, the racing thoughts and then suddenly that really panicked reaction, and now with her, you really see her in those roles, so I'm thinking maybe a personality disorder. it could also be that it's more mood-based, 'cause with the first one it felt more like just calm and then suddenly really intense Bipolar maybe?

Q22: identity disorder sounds somewhat more familiar, you can take on different identities? quickly switch between uhhh emotions and uhhh mood swings, I've seen it come up once. I think in a series or in a film, you also really feel like a different person.

Q20: I know it from the movie Split. he also had different personalities. I think one of them was a younger boy, but there was also one very dominant personality. That really brought out the evil in him and actually suppressed the other personalities. He had actually kidnapped 3 girls uhmm and eventually also killed a few. That's about as much as I remember.

Q16: "people with this disorder are portrayed as psychos chasing you around, at least in my impression. it's never like the sweet girl in a high school movie that you want to be friends with".

Q22: I've seen it come up once. I think in a series or in a film

Q15: I know of it, but I don't know a lot of it. I'm afraid of confusing it with maybe like a multiple personality disorder.

Q16: people with this disorder are portrayed as psychos chasing you around, at least in my impression. it's never

like the sweet girl in a high school movie that you want to be friends with.

DID used as entertainment instead of education

- DID was dramatized to fit genre conventions and appeal to audiences (e.g., superpowers, action, heroes) (6)
- Shows are “fun” or “cool,” even if inaccurate (3)
- Appreciated narrative twists, such as the revelation of the "original" personality (e.g., Marc vs. Steven; Kay vs. Jane) (3)
- Series offer a surface-level or distorted portrayal of DID and emphasized real-life stories or documentaries as better learning tools (19)
- DID was often exaggerated or stylized to the point of glamorization, occasionally making it seem “cool” or heroic, especially in male portrayals (5)
- Media depictions were said to contribute to harmful stereotypes—e.g., associating DID with being “crazy,” dangerous, or unpredictable (6)
- Characters were often perceived as caricatures, reinforcing stigma rather than fostering empathy (4)
- Some scenes (especially in Doom Patrol) helped viewers grasp the internal experience of DID, including metaphorical representations like the “room in the brain” (6)
- Inaccurate shows might still introduce the idea that DID exists and is trauma-related (5)
- Watching shows sometimes leads to more emotional or reflective engagement with trauma and identity (3)
- Moved more by female portrayals (Jane), which offered clearer emotional arcs and trauma acknowledgment (2)
- Stressed the need to separate entertainment from education when portraying mental health (5)
- Feeling misinformed or misled by commercial portrayals of DID (2)
- Others remained skeptical or confused despite watching the series (2)
- Documentaries (e.g., from NPO) and books were preferred as more reliable and educational sources (6)

Quotes

Q3: *“I think it contributes more to the story of the series than to actually showing how it affects someone’s real life.”*

Q14: *“Yes, I think what misinforms people is that if people watch a show like that were you Split into a gazillion different personas, each with very distinct different personalities, some also being very strong or some also being a role model. I think that is not the truth I think also that every kind of these traumas would lead to such a disorder, I think also that is not true because some people get a whole different type of disorders or a whole different type of trauma. And I think this also makes it seem cooler than it actually is, especially in the first movie where, like, whoa, this dude is actually pretty cool. You know, he's he's the man. He's masculine, whereas he existed from trauma, of course, which is not a good thing. But the movie depicts it as a cool thing. So no, this this is spreading misinformation I think I think this shouldn't be used for information on the mental disorder for sure. It should not be depicted through commercial movies.”*

Q20: *“Yeah, I think if you just want to get an intro to... yeah, how do you even call it, this illness?... Then it can be a good way, especially if that kind of superhero film or series is your thing.”*

Q6: *Maybe you shouldn't show it to a kid at all. This doesn't work. That kid is going to think this is how it really is in real life.*

Q2: *I think the basic idea of what it is does come across in both series. But the deeper meaning behind it, what it actually really entails, I don't think either series really conveys that to the audience.*

Q17: *Honestly, I watched the film Split and that gave me a slightly better idea. But then I also once saw a real*

documentary on YouTube through NPO... that was, of course, way calmer and less over-the-top than in these series.

Media's impact on audience perceptions	<p>Media & DID impact</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Series prioritized entertainment over accuracy, often exaggerating DID to fit genre tropes like superpowers or sci-fi action (5) - Confusing, unrealistic, or too chaotic, leaving them uncertain about what DID actually entails (7) - Wouldn't recommend the series for learning about DID, instead suggesting documentaries or books (8) - Shows gave a distorted or superficial image of DID, especially when alters appeared conveniently useful or dramatic (4) - Media depictions glamorized DID or made it seem "cool" or masculine, masking the disorder's traumatic origins (3) - Shows sparked awareness that DID exists and often stems from trauma, even if the portrayal wasn't accurate (3) - Portrayals risk reinforcing stereotypes—such as associating DID with danger, madness, or unpredictability (4) - CHildren or uninformed viewers might internalize inaccurate or stigmatizing portrayals (3) - Emotionally affected by specific scenes, especially when a character acknowledged their trauma (2) - Female portrayals seen as more emotionally insightful or better at showing the trauma-based origin of alters (2) - Media should make clearer distinctions between fiction and educational content when addressing mental health (4) - Felt misinformed, particularly because the dramatization made DID seem more "impressive" or desirable (1) - Shows made them newly curious, but ultimately confused, about how DID works in real life (2) 	<p>Understanding of clips</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Confusion after watching clips, finding the portrayals overwhelming, chaotic, or lacking clarity (e.g., not understanding how many alters existed, or who was "real") (7). - The blend of fantasy/sci-fi with real themes made it difficult to separate fact from fiction, especially in stylized scenes (3). - Before watching a documentary, they couldn't believe DID was real (3).
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	- Documentaries (e.g., from NPO) and scientific content were more trustworthy and informative than dramatized series (5)	
<p>Quotes</p> <p><i>Q2: I don't know anyone or have never met anyone who switches that quickly in real life... it's kind of hard to judge</i></p> <p><i>Q6: 'Is that real? Are there really people who have that? That many personalities? are there really people like in those creepy movies, where they're just talking normally and then suddenly [high-pitched voice] "hiiii" [back to normal] just completely switch like that? Like they suddenly think they're a kid or something.''</i></p> <p><i>Q11: 'There's just these super extreme emotions and characters in it, while I think in reality, they're probably much closer to each other</i></p> <p><i>Q12: "If I'm solely looking at what I've just seen... I would probably assume that the disorder would be very different for women and for men. When, when that might not even be true in real life. ''</i></p> <p><i>Q16: 'Now that I know it's formed through trauma, I get why you'd develop different personalities that sometimes conflict with each other.....That's my insight now, and it's mostly thanks to her. ''</i></p> <p><i>Q15: 'From Jane I do kind of get it as in like the clip where all the personalities are talking in the same room. That was really interesting to me so that's how it works except the room is in the brain.''</i></p> <p><i>Q19: I still find it really difficult to deal with, like, that kind of person, because you never really know what you're going to get, you know?</i></p> <p><i>Q12: "When I first started watching the fragments or the different scenes, I went in with what I already expect from the media. So a lot of the scenes just made sense... because I've seen a lot of even the different alters of Jane. I've seen them in different shows as different characters, and it doesn't surprise me anymore... it doesn't even feel like, oh, it doesn't have to be that way. ''</i></p> <p><i>Q12: All I have to say is I wonder if I would have watched the show. In full, if that would have changed my opinion on the entire show and the differences in between</i></p> <p><i>Q22: Yeah, like if I now rewatched it with that in mind, then maybe I could form a better opinion about it.</i></p>		

Appendix 8: AI declaration

Student Information

Name: Dulce Pronk

Student ID: 682205

Course Name: Master Thesis CM5000

Supervisor Name: F. Robinson

Date: 26-06-2025

Declaration:

Acknowledgment of Generative AI Tools

I acknowledge that I am aware of the existence and functionality of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, which are capable of producing content such as text, images, and other creative works autonomously.

GenAI use would include, but not limited to:

- Generated content (e.g., ChatGPT, Quillbot) limited strictly to content that is not assessed (e.g., thesis title).
- Writing improvements, including grammar and spelling corrections (e.g., Grammarly)
- Language translation (e.g., DeepL), without generative AI alterations/improvements.
- Research task assistance (e.g., finding survey scales, qualitative coding verification, debugging code)
- Using GenAI as a search engine tool to find academic articles or books (e.g.,

☒ I declare that I have used generative AI tools, ChatGPT, in the process of creating parts or components of my thesis. The purpose of using these tools was to aid in generating content or assisting with specific aspects of thesis work.

☐ I declare that I have NOT used any generative AI tools and that the assignment concerned is my original work.

Signature: [digital signature]

Extent of AI Usage

Date of Signature: [Date of Submission]

☒ I confirm that while I utilized generative AI tools to aid in content creation, the majority of the intellectual effort, creative input, and decision-making involved in completing the thesis were undertaken by me. I have enclosed the prompts/logging of the GenAI tool use in an appendix.

Ethical and Academic Integrity

☒ I understand the ethical implications and academic integrity concerns related to the use of AI tools in coursework. I assure that the AI-generated content was used responsibly, and any content derived from these

tools has been appropriately cited and attributed according to the guidelines provided by the instructor and the course. I have taken necessary steps to distinguish between my original work and the AI-generated contributions. Any direct quotations, paraphrased content, or other forms of AI-generated material have been properly referenced in accordance with academic conventions.

By signing this declaration, I affirm that this declaration is accurate and truthful. I take full responsibility for the integrity of my assignment and am prepared to discuss and explain the role of generative AI tools in my creative process if required by the instructor or the Examination Board. I further affirm that I have used generative AI tools in accordance with ethical standards and academic integrity expectations.

Signature:

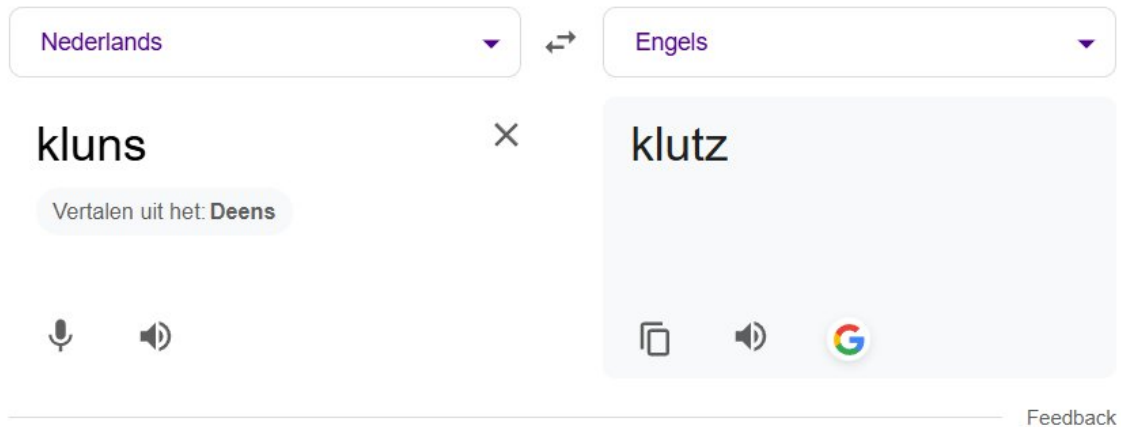
A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a series of loops and a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Date of Signature: 26-06-2025

Appendix 9: AI prompts

Can you help me translate this word/sentence to English?

Example of output:



Hoe vertaal ik van hot naar her?

Example of output:

De uitdrukking "van hot naar her" betekent:

☞ "van de ene plek naar de andere"

☞ "alle kanten op", "hectisch rondrennen", of "druk bezig zijn met van alles"

In het Engels kun je dit vertalen als:

- “from pillar to post” (iets formeler)
- “all over the place”
- “running around like crazy”
- “rushing from one place to another”
- “being pulled in all directions”

Voorbeeld:

Vandaag ben ik van hot naar her gerend!

Today I've been running around all over the place!

Laat me weten als je een vertaling nodig hebt in een specifieke toon (informeel, zakelijk, creatief, enz.).

Did I do this APA correctly? / Is my APA list correctly?

Example of output:

You're very close! The citation is **almost** correct in APA 7th style — it just needs a **clarification of the type of thesis in square brackets**, like this:

✓ **Correct APA 7th citation:**

Costelle, H. R. (2016). *Suffering Sappho! Female friendships in superhero comics, 1940s to 1960s and today* [Honors thesis, Eastern Kentucky University]. Encompass.

https://encompass.eku.edu/honors_theses/368

✎ **Explanation:**

- *Italics* are correct for the title of the thesis.
- Use **square brackets** to describe the type of work: Honorsthesis, University Honors thesis, University.
- Include the **repository name** (Encompass) and a **working link**.

Let me know if you need to cite similar sources!

Screenshot of example Grammarly output:

