

From Sidekicks to Superheroes: The Evolution of Female Representation in the Marvel Cinematic Universe

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ABSTRACT

From its beginning, the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) has challenged and mirrored social attitudes regarding gender roles. At first, female characters mostly appeared as second bananas: sidekicks, love interests or plot devices to advance male leads' story lines. However as the series advanced, it embraced more complex and layered representations of women as key players with agency and power. The study follows a qualitative thematic analysis of the female portrayals within the MCU and explores progress from an era of tokenism and marginalization to a more equitable spectrum of representation. Through close readings of salient characters, films, and cultural moments, this research unlocks the franchise's potential to propel feminist conversations within possession cinema, in the broader historical context of popular media. The analysis takes into account thematic trends, character evolution and wider forces of the industry, including the effect of feminist movements as #MeToo and Time's Up. Our findings illustrate that where the MCU has made concerted efforts to improve the representation of female characters—through such powerful protagonists as Captain Marvel, Black Widow and Shuri—there are still major obstacles to reaching gender parity. While on-screen diversity has improved, other issues including stalled solo films for female heroes and predominately male-led narratives remain challenges that the industry needs to confront. Ultimately, this study highlights the significance of inclusive storytelling in shaping cultural values and discusses the MCU's role in challenging gender norms in contemporary cinema.

Keywords: Marvel Cinematic Universe, female representation, gender roles, feminist film theory, superhero cinema, cultural narratives

INTRODUCTION

The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) has become one of the most import entertainment franchises since first movie, *Iron Man*, debuted back in 2008. The MCU's interconnected narratives and diverse cast of characters have not only owned box offices but also contributed to shaping cultural conversations around heroism, identity and representation. As a worldwide phenomenon, its depiction of gender carries significant weight in reflecting and shaping societal norms.

Early in the MCU's run, the common Hollywood blockbuster pattern prevailed: Women were too often relegated to supporting roles. They showed up as sidekicks, love interests or women whose struggles helped further the male protagonist's journey. Characters like Pepper Potts (*Iron Man*), Jane Foster (*Thor*) and Natasha Romanoff, a.k.a. Black Widow (*Iron Man 2*), while many credible and intelligent, were generally framed as part of a male narrative. As feminist scholar Laura Mulvey writes in her landmark essay on the male gaze, "Women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance written for strong visual and erotic impact" (Mulvey, 1975) and early female characters in the MCU generally followed this dynamic, functioning as visual complements rather than narrative burners.

As the franchise grew, so did its approach to how to represent women. In the mid-2010s, the MCU started including female characters with multiple dimensions and whose appearances weren't limited to the sidelines. Movies like *Captain Marvel* (2019) and *Black Widow* (2021) put women at the center of their own stories, with themes of empowerment, resiliency, identity. This transition echoes Judith Butler's concept in *Gender Trouble* (1990) about the disassociating formation of traditional gender binaries; no longer is a 'woman' a passive entity, instead, they have become active change makers.

Additionally, the M.C.U.'s development reflects larger societal shifts. The upsurge of movements like #MeToo and Time's Up has shone a brighter light on gender inequality inside Hollywood and beyond. "The stories we tell about women on screen shape how we see them off screen," as the film critic Angelica Jade Bastién has written. "Representation isn't just about visibility—it's about changing the script of who gets to be a hero" (Bastién, 2018).

In this paper, We will analyze the evolution of female representation in the MCU, especially in the way that women have gone from supporting roles to fully fledged main protagonists. Through close readings of key films and characters, and contextualizing these representations within the broader feminist discourse, this work seeks to illuminate the MCU's position with respect to standard gender expectations. This evolution not only reflects a changing entertainment landscape, but also allows for more inclusive storytelling to shape cultural values.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The portrayal of women in media has long been a subject of academic inquiry, with numerous scholars examining how gender norms are perpetuated or challenged through film and television. The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) plays a significant role in this discourse, given its global reach and cultural influence. Understanding the evolution of female representation within the MCU requires situating its narratives within the broader frameworks of feminist film theory, intersectionality, gender representation studies, and cultural shifts in Hollywood. This section examines these perspectives while integrating empirical data, audience reception studies, and comparative analysis with other franchises.

Feminist Film Theory and the Male Gaze

Laura Mulvey's seminal work, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975), provides a foundational critique of how women have traditionally been portrayed in film. She argues that mainstream cinema often positions women as objects of the "male gaze," serving as visual spectacles for male characters and audiences. In early MCU films, such as *Iron Man* (2008) and *Thor* (2011), female characters like Pepper Potts and Jane Foster were depicted primarily in relation to male protagonists, reinforcing this dynamic.

However, feminist film theory has since evolved to examine more nuanced portrayals. Rosalind Gill (2011) describes a "postfeminist media culture" that simultaneously celebrates female empowerment while reinforcing traditional gender norms. The MCU's gradual shift from supporting female characters to female-led superhero narratives reflects this tension. Empirical evidence, such as screen time studies, highlights disparities in early phases: an analysis by Smith et al. (2019) found that in MCU films from 2008-2016, female characters spoke significantly less than their male counterparts, underscoring the male-centric storytelling of that era.

Gender Norms in the Superhero Genre

The superhero genre has historically been male-dominated, with women often relegated to supportive or peripheral roles. As Brown (2011) observes, "Superhero narratives have traditionally positioned male characters as protectors and saviors, while women are cast as victims or moral compasses." This was evident in early MCU films, where *Black Widow's* introduction in *Iron Man 2* (2010) emphasized her physical appeal over character depth, aligning with the femme fatale archetype.

However, recent scholarship highlights a shift. DiPaolo (2018) argues that “the modern superhero film is increasingly incorporating themes of inclusivity and gender equality, reflecting broader societal changes.” The transition is evident in films such as *Captain Marvel* (2019) and *Black Panther* (2018), where female protagonists take center stage. Box office data supports this shift: *Captain Marvel* grossed \$1.13 billion worldwide, demonstrating that female-led superhero films can achieve both commercial and critical success.

Intersectionality in Female Representation

The concept of intersectionality, introduced by Crenshaw (1989), provides a crucial framework for analyzing representation across gender, race, and cultural identity. Historically, white female superheroes dominated the genre, but recent MCU narratives have expanded beyond this limited portrayal.

Characters such as Shuri and Okoye (*Black Panther*, 2018) exemplify intersectional feminism, showcasing women of color in leadership roles, intelligence, and combat expertise. Similarly, Kamala Khan in *Ms. Marvel* (2022) introduces a young Muslim superhero navigating cultural and generational tensions. Ahmed (2012) notes that “representation of marginalized identities in mainstream media serves both as a mirror and a map, reflecting societal values while charting new possibilities for inclusion.” The increasing diversity within the MCU signifies a broader industry commitment to intersectional representation.

Cultural Shifts and Hollywood’s #MeToo Era

The rise of the #MeToo and Time’s Up movements has significantly influenced Hollywood’s approach to gender representation. These movements have called for greater accountability in the industry and have reshaped audience expectations regarding female agency in storytelling.

Banet-Weiser (2018) states that “the feminist cultural moment we are in demands that media representations move beyond surface-level inclusivity to address systemic inequalities.” The MCU’s pivot toward female-led projects, such as *Black Widow* (2021) and *WandaVision* (2021), aligns with this shift. These narratives explore grief, trauma, and resilience in complex ways, breaking away from the traditional one-dimensional “strong female character” trope. For instance, Scarlet Witch’s arc in *WandaVision* is a rare example of a female superhero exploring psychological depth, emotional complexity, and moral ambiguity.

Comparative Analysis: MCU vs. Other Superhero Franchises

To assess whether the MCU’s shift in female representation is part of a broader industry trend or a unique development, it is crucial to compare its approach with other major franchises. DC’s *Wonder Woman* (2017) marked a significant turning point in superhero cinema, preceding *Captain Marvel* and setting a precedent for successful female-led blockbusters. Similarly, franchises such as *The Hunger Games* (2012-2015) and *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (2017) advanced narratives featuring female protagonists in action-oriented roles, reflecting a larger industry movement toward gender diversity in mainstream media. However, scholars argue that while female superheroes have gained greater visibility, they still lack narrative dominance compared to their male counterparts (Smith et al., 2019). This disparity is evident in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), where Black Widow’s sacrifice was criticized for reinforcing the trope of the “expendable woman” (Bastián, 2019), highlighting the ongoing challenges in achieving truly equitable gender representation in the superhero genre.

Critiques and Limitations in MCU Representation

Despite progress, feminist scholars continue to critique the MCU’s portrayal of women. While female characters have gained more visibility, there is still a tendency to sideline their narratives in favor of male protagonists (Smith et al., 2019). Bastián (2019) argues that “true representation requires not just placing women in the frame but giving them full narrative agency.”

Additional critiques focus on over sexualization in costume design, reliance on legacy male characters to introduce female leads (e.g., Hawkeye mentoring Kate Bishop in *Hawkeye*, 2021), and limited screen time in ensemble films. While *Thor: Love and Thunder* (2022) introduced Mighty Thor (Jane Foster) as a superhero,

her arc was cut short, reinforcing concerns about temporary empowerment rather than sustained female leadership.

The Role of Popular Media in Shaping Cultural Values

Scholars emphasize the broader cultural impact of media representation. As Stuart Hall (1997) explains, “Media representations are not merely reflections of reality but actively shape how we understand ourselves and others.” The MCU’s evolving portrayal of female characters thus holds significant cultural implications, influencing how audiences perceive gender roles and possibilities in real life.

The literature on gender representation in film and media provides a rich context for analyzing the MCU’s evolution. From early critiques of the male gaze to contemporary discussions on intersectionality, post feminism, and feminist agency, these frameworks offer valuable insights into how the franchise both reflects and shapes societal attitudes. By situating the MCU within these broader academic conversations and incorporating empirical data, audience reception studies, and comparative analysis, this study aims to provide a comprehensive assessment of the MCU’s role in advancing feminist discourse in popular media.

METHODOLOGY

Adopting a qualitative thematic analysis of the way female representation has developed in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), through extensive exploration across films, character arcs, and critical responses, this research examines gender portrayals in a shifting landscape across various MCU phases. Here is the structure of methodology:

Data Collection and Film Selection:

In order to illustrate the trajectory of female representation throughout the phases (Phase 1 being from 2008-2012 — and Phase 5 extending from 2023 to present), this study will provide an in-depth analysis of key MCU films. Films are chosen for their importance in the introduction and development of female characters, including *Iron Man* (2008), *Thor* (2011), *Avengers* (2012), *Captain Marvel* (2019), *Black Widow* (2021), *Wakanda Forever* (2022), and more. The study analyzes films led by both solo characters and ensembles to determine how the prominence of female characters has evolved over time within the MCU, including considerations of their narrative agency, character depth and thematic value to the larger narrative of the MCU as a whole.

Character Analysis:

This exploration drives into narrative agency, character development third screen time of prominent women of the MCU; notably Black Widow, Wanda Maximoff, Captain Marvel, and Shuri. With particular emphasis on how these characters transition from being sidekick to front man, often underlining their growing place within the franchise. Furthermore, the study analyses the inclusion or exclusion of stereotypical tropes, such as the damsel in distress or the femme fatale, as an assessment of whether or not female representation in the MCU has, in fact, progressed past traditional gender conventions into more nuanced and autonomous depictions.

Thematic Analysis:

This research outlines the re-occurring themes in gender representations in MCU, namely: Male Gaze and Objectification (Mulvey, 1975), Empowerment and Agency, Intersectionality, and Diversity, that studies racial, cultural, and representation aspects beyond white leads. At this point in MCU history, the paper discusses, female characters began arguably shifting from passivity as characters, or visual spectacles, to agents in their own sparkling narratives, their own mega epics. Through an analysis of these thematic evolutions, this article considers the MCU's influence on wider conversations surrounding women's media representation today.

Context — Cultural & Industry:

This study accounts for outside forces that have long shaped how women are represented in the MCU, particularly the effects of feminist movements such as #MeToo and Time's Up, which have sought to spur Hollywood toward increased gender inclusivity and accountability. It also explores changes within the industry, especially how Disney/Marvel have reacted to audience calls for stronger female representation in superhero stories. Importantly, the study also considers the reception from critics and audiences alike, using reviews and box office receipts to determine whether the move in the direction of female-led stories has been as commercially and critically successful as its proponents would like, emphasizing the tension between changes within the culture and storytelling driven by the industry itself.

Comparative Framework:

The research compares the MCU's approach to female representation with other contemporary franchises (e.g., DC's *Wonder Woman*, *Star Wars*, *The Hunger Games*) to determine whether Marvel's progress is part of a broader industry trend or something unique to Marvel.

Through their combined application, this study seeks to provide a holistic analysis of the MCU's changing gender storylines and its influence on the current climate of female representation in superhero cinema.

Findings & Thematic Analysis

Female representation in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) has been an evolving arc that reflects cultural changes in gender roles and media representation. The analysis of a selection of MCU films through Phases 1-5 demonstrates clear trends in the portrayal of female characters from early marginalization to leading roles, exhibiting agency, leadership, and instigating conflict. It provides the results and thematic analysis, while identifying the main themes that emerged through the journey of women in the MCU.

Early Phase: Women in Auxiliary Roles

During the early years of the MCU, for example, female characters were often reduced to subservient roles, such as assistants, love interests or emotional supports to male leads. While some were intelligent and capable, their stories were more about following men around than developing on their own. It is in line with Tuchman's (1978) theory of "symbolic annihilation" in which women's presence in the media is either downplayed or relegated to contacts that bolster traditional gender norms.

Pepper Potts: The Loyal Assistant and Romantic Partner

Among them, a prime example is Pepper Potts from the start out film *Iron Man* (2008), she is an ideal representation of the competent yet subordinate female character trope. And while she ultimately does become the CEO of Stark Industries, her main function remains at the center of Tony Stark's emotional and professional journey. In *Iron Man 3* (2013), although enhanced with short-lived superhuman capacities, her empowerment relies upon her sexual relationship to Stark that continues the argument made by Carter (2014) that women in the MCU are defined by their relationship to men.

Jane Foster: The Underrated, Superhero Scientist

In a similar vein, Jane Foster, a prominent astrophysicist who first appeared in *Thor* (2011), is central to moving the film's narrative along. However, with her romantic involvement with Thor, her scientific background ends up being less relevant, collapsing into the "supportive scientist" trope, wherein the female genius's role is to validate the male hero's own journey. In *Thor: The Dark World* (2013), she becomes a host for the Aether (an Infinity Stone), but her actions are still largely determined by outside powers, constraining her narrative role. This mirrors Shary's (2015) contention that women in STEM positions of blockbuster movies tend to be marginalized in narrative even though their intellectual input is integral.

Black Widow: The Sex Pistol and Team Player

Natasha Romanoff (Black Widow) first appeared on-screen in *Iron Man 2* (2010) as a streamlined and action-adept spy, but her introduction relied on her sizzling physical presence and mysterious demeanor, drawing from the “femme fatale” trope. Her fighting abilities only appeared in stylized, hyper-sexualized action scenes, conforming to Mulvey’s (1975) theory of the male gaze. Though her character became more prominent in *The Avengers* (2012), she was still defined by a past of traumas and relationships with male characters (e.g. Hawkeye, Bruce Banner), exemplifying Tasker’s (1993) observation that some women in action cinema are simultaneously powerful and objectified.

A Feminist Critique of Early MCU Female Roles

This trope has over-relied upon gender stereotypes in how women are depicted, and this has led to controversy for the MCU since its beginning. According to Smith et al. (2018), female narrative in pop-culture blockbusters are sidelined, providing supplementary narratives to the male storyline. This trend can be seen through the lack of stand-alone female led films in the MCUs early phases, which works to bolster. Benshoff and Griffin’s (2009) claim that women in genre films are seldom afforded independent leading roles. Although characters such as Pepper Potts, Jane Foster and Black Widow proved themselves capable, their stories tended to develop as supporting characters more than protagonists.

Transition: Greater prominence and agency

The second phase of the MCU and beyond saw a major step up for female characters with meaty roles. These roles went beyond traditional supporting functions, with women cast as leads in their own right, with their own agency and complex narratives. This shift was even more palpable with the inclusion of characters from *Black Panther* (2018), which featured a landmark representation of complex, powerful women of color.

The Evolution of Black Widow, From Sidekick to an Avenger at the Core

The arc of Natasha Romanoff from a minor character in *Iron Man 2* (2010) to a founding member of the Avengers is an example of the way these stories slowly accrued narrative capital. By the time of *The Avengers* (2012), Black Widow had become an integral member of the team, helping to take down the bad guys with her penchant for combat and strategy. She is also a Goddess of Emotion as her backstory, explored in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), reveals a dark past as a product of the Red Room, making her character multi-dimensional as she wasn't always the hero

However, Black Widow’s storytelling is still contentious and her sacrifice in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) particularly so. Critics say that this moment is emblematic of the ongoing problem of female characters being deployed as narrative stakes for the emotional development of male heroes. “Though noble, her death acts as a surrogate to gallivant the male characters forward, at the cost of a meaningful resolution to her own arc” (Bastién, 2019).

The Scarlet Witch: Power, Grief, and Agency

Wanda Maximoff, introduced in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), develops from grief-stricken vengeance seeker to an all-powerful, complex hero. The character is known for her emotional arc, especially in the Disney+ series *WandaVision* (2021), which deals with themes of loss, love and housing powers that can impact and alter reality (but whether she should or not). These elements ripple through the text, a deep dive into a female superhero overcoming her story when feminine muscle is needed to fend off villains more powerful than herself, and serves as an intentional statement on representation in media.

Yet her transformation into the Scarlet Witch in *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (2022) sparked new debates about how powerful women are sometimes portrayed as a bit loopy or threatening. “The portrayal of Scarlet Witch as a violent and aberrant force taps into long-standing tropes of the ‘hysterical woman’ — a storyline that undermines female agency” (McRobbie, 2021)

The Words of Black Panther: A Women's Redemption

Black Panther (2018) featured some of the most dynamic and influential female characters in the entire MCU, each of whom has a pivotal role in the film's plot and impact. Unlike in any other film, *Black Panther* shows women as leaders, warriors, and innovators as opposed to sidekicks or love interests.

Shuri, played by Letitia Wright, is T'Challa's younger sister and Wakanda's chief technologist. She is a genius inventor, and is responsible for making Wakanda's technology as advanced as it is, including designing the Black Panther suit. Shuri's role as a super genius also subverts traditional gender roles in a genre where the greatest minds tend to be male. As a smart, self-assured young woman, she is a girl-power role model for those younger than her. "For the first time in the MCU, we see a positive representation of women in the STEM field, as Shuri is portrayed as a tech-savvy genius and scientific prodigy" (Smith, 2018). As a character, she shows that intelligence and innovation are just as heroic as physical strength.

As head of the Dora Milaje, Wakanda's elite all-female guard, Okoye embodies strength and loyalty, as well as heft and, occasionally, humor. Played by Danai Gurira, Okoye is devoted to her country and the customs that define it, but she will also challenge authority if she feels it's the right thing to do. Her fighting skills can match any male hero, and she has a central role in the fight sequences of both *Black Panther* and, later, *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) and *Endgame* (2019). Okoye's character breaks the mold of the often stereotypical women as secondary warriors. "She is a new kind of female heroism — an amalgam of physical potency and steadfast moral clarity" (DiPaolo, 2018). Her existence most pointedly signifies the need for women in positions of power and power structures that men build around themselves.

Nakia, played by Lupita Nyong'o, is a spy and a former lover of T'Challa. She tends to be a lone wolf, and sometimes her mission to assist people in subjugated communities trumps personal relationships. Nakia's strength is of a different variety — diplomatic and empathetic, but resolute in her beliefs.

Nakia's unwillingness to play the part of classic queen or a sidekick is what makes her unique. "Her character subverts the idea that female heroes cannot exist without a romantic or domestic storyline, in turn opening space for women as global agents of change" (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

Angela Bassett as Queen Ramonda, who is full of wisdom and grit is the emotional care in the window of the world as the mommy of T'Challa and Shuri, but she's also a main adviser when it comes to the political machinations of Wakanda. Her character reinforces the significance of matronly strength and leadership, weaving into the film's larger theme of togetherness and collective action.

Gamora and Nebula: Sister vs Sister to Sister vs Universe

Guardians of the Galaxy (2014) introduced audiences to Gamora and Nebula, the daughters of the tyrant Thanos. Initially, Gamora serves as a loyal assassin who finds redemption through her participation in the Guardians. Her character embodies strength and independence, challenging the team's masculine biases. Likewise, Nebula's arc — beginning as a bitter rival to her sister, and becoming a potent redemption narrative as she seeks to escape from under Thanos' cycle of abuse.

Nebula's character development is especially salient in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) as she is a crucial character in the Avengers' mission to reverse the destruction Thanos caused. Her transformation from a villainess and adversary seeking revenge to a heroine embodies a broader arc of female empowerment, independence and survival. Nebula's arc subverts the typical narrative of female rivalry, emphasizing reconciliation and mutual growth (Brown 2018).

Hope van Dyne: The First Woman Co-Leads

Ant-Man and The Wasp (2018), which was the first MCU film to have a female character in the title. Having her character used as cliché writing, then pretended to be well-developed in order to be stronger than the male superhero, Scott Lang, (Ant-Man). She also leads from her end which is a sign of the franchise's trend towards more gender balance.

Hope's partnership with Scott Lang is a meaningful departure from the classic superhero mentor-mentee dynamic. The film is instead about working together and respecting each other. "Hope's depiction turns the hierarchical power dynamic of the typical superhero partnerships around, presenting her as an equal to and possibly more powerful than her male counterpart" (DiPaolo, 2018).

The Female Heroes Appear in the Saving Spider-Man Scene in *Avengers: Endgame*

One of the most emotional and meaningful moments in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) is the moment when Spider-Man gets rescued during the climax battle against Thanos. In this sequence, the character of Peter Parker, a.k.a. Spider-Man, portrayed by Tom Holland, courageously attempts to deliver the Infinity Gauntlet against a horde of Thanos' forces. He tries to fight back valiantly, but he is quickly outnumbered. Although his character has shown earnestness, but naivety as well, his vulnerability in this moment highlights the burden of responsibility that's been thrust on the young hero and that repeatedly observed by all of the members of the crew.

As Spider-Man struggles, a game-changing moment arrives with the help of a group of the MCU's top female heroes — Captain Marvel (Brie Larson), Valkyrie (Tessa Thompson), Scarlet Witch (Elizabeth Olsen), Okoye (Danai Gurira), Shuri (Letitia Wright), Hope van Dyne (Evangeline Lilly) and Pepper Potts (Gwyneth Paltrow) in her Rescue armor — who come to his aid. With Captain Marvel particularly stepping up to the plate here, telling Peter that "she's got this," as she takes the gauntlet into battle.

This moment, frequently nicknamed after an all-female superheroic squad from Marvel Comics, the group "A-Force," is a visually arresting and symbolically potent one. It showcases the might and strength of the MCU's female heroes, with each of them working as a cohesive unit and they can change the tide of a conflict.

Symbolism and Impact

The scene is rich with symbolic weight. It stands as a testament to female empowerment and solidarity, showcasing a confederation of heroines glimpsed through the lens of a traditionally male genre. Then again, a group of women fighting together in key battle sequences goes against decades of superhero cinema, one where women were often left on the sidelines of the battle or were used as the comedic foil (DiPaolo, 2018).

But the scene has received mixed reactions as well. While the episode was popular among many viewers for its message and for including the female heroes of the MCU, some criticized it as a performative gesture rather than a fully integrated narrative development. Critics also say that although the sequence is visually stunning, it lacks in narrative depth, since so many of these characters rarely interacted before, making their dramatic teamwork feel forced. According to Bastián (2019), "Representation in blockbuster films needs to go beyond spectacle to provide meaningful narrative arcs that grant female characters agency and autonomy."

Feminist Critique and Cultural Significance

These female-led projects are major strides in presenting women as complex characters whose stories deserve to be told. With the focus on their own narratives, the MCU speaks to breaking with common gender norms and expanding the range of superhero narratives. However, critiques remain. Scholars like Smith et al. (2019) stress that "real feminist progress is not only increased visibility but narrative agency."

Yet amid this new-wave exploration of more complex female characters, there are criticisms that a few of the recent outings themselves fall back on tropes that are now quite familiar- if let's say, not super empowering. For instance, treating Scarlet Witch like a neurotic menace to the fabric of society in *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (2022) sounds a familiar warning that suggests fear of strong women as societal hijackers.

The same can be said for the more recent films and series with female leads in the MCU — they're a clear step away from the very black-and-white gender representation we experienced in earlier films, and toward both pay-off and you know, growth. By drawing on the themes of empowerment, trauma and identity, these

projects present a fuller range of female experience. The power of the Marvel multiverse is on the edge of expertise and forced narratives.

But all of it reminds that some MCU gender representation is not only limited but also limited even further after years of progress. On the one hand, it is a rare moment of heroic camaraderie for a woman that directly addresses critiques, particularly longstanding notes of essays about the lack of female-centered action in blockbuster cinema. It illustrates the former, but also highlights the latter — how much they're relegated to the periphery of the larger narrative. On the other hand characters like Valkyrie and Okoye, rather than getting full fleshed-out arcs in a film they were pivotal to, instead have limited screen time or development.

The situation also mirrors wider cultural shifts driven by movements such as #MeToo and Time's Up, which have advocated for increased visibility and empowerment of women in every industry, Hollywood included. This article can be read as an attempt to explore "interval nature of saturation" with "experiential" dimension that makes both violence induced by oppressive political caricatures and "Moments of visibility are essential to challenging dominant narratives. Raw exposure is only ever part of the story; real progress takes sustained and meaningful inclusion," (Banet-Weiser, 2018) close to all of us.

The saving Spider-Man team-up in *Avengers: Endgame* is an iconic image that celebrates the strength and solidarity of the MCU's female heroes. Though not as seamlessly woven into the narrative as one might hope, its symbolic value is enormous. Superhero films have long prioritized male characters, therefore, this is a leap forward in promoting women as heroes and leaders and protectors in this beloved genre. The MCU must now go forward from that and see how to build more than surface-level or downright shoehorned arcs for its female heroes.

Additionally, *Black Panther* is the film which has intersectional feminism in its DNA. The women of Wakanda are depicted as equals to their male counterparts, each playing a vital role in the nation's success. To the contrary, as Hooks (2015) has pointed out, the authentic "feminist speaking position...emphasizes odes to women in all of our roles, in ways that do justice to complex narratives & stories." *Black Panther* does this by showing women as warriors, scientists, diplomats and leaders.

While this was an important step forward, some have criticized the creativity felt in the romantic subplot between Nakia and T'Challa. For many, the connection between the two lacked the same level of introspective growth. But that should not dim the film's overall success in continuing to push female representation in the MCU forward.

Adventurous female iconography in Marvel (with more multidimensional figures like Shuri, Okoye and Nakia, along with the EVOLUTION of Black Widow and Scarlet Witch)..... began to show a more inclusive and empowered vision of female heroism. These challenges and critiques remain today, but this era helped set the stage for the MCU's continued evolution in representing women as key and complex characters.

Breakout: Female Performed Movies and Sequence

The third phase of the MCU was a big moment in its evolution, with the introduction of female-led films and series. These projects were not just commercially successful, they were also culturally significant, indicating a shift in representation of women in the superhero genre. Additionally, by focusing on female characters and their stories, the MCU started to push back against gender stereotypes, giving viewers richer, multi-faceted depictions of women.

Captain Marvel: Self-Discovery and Empowerment

Brie Larson made her Marvel debut in *Captain Marvel* (2019), Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck's first female-led superhero film in the MCU. The film continues the story of Carol Danvers as she unravels the truth behind her past and embraces her identity as one of the most powerful heroes of the universe. However, Carol rewriting with this new context means for the narrative, which focuses on the themes of resilience, self-discovery, and

breaking free from societal constraints — as Carol rejects the Kree, even once they put their control on her, and learns to harness her powers in full.

One of the film's strongest lines comes when Carol, having been told multiple times to keep her emotions in check, struggles with her past as she defeats her former teacher, defiantly declaring, "I have nothing to prove to you." This scene crystallizes the film's feminist message: Women don't have to meet outside expectations in order to be powerful. As DiPaolo (2018) puts it, the superhero genres move toward "storylines of female empowerment transgresses the older patriarchal order, providing alternative paradigms of heroism."

Family, Trauma, and Redemption in Black Widow

After appearances in 2020's "Black Widow" (which tabbed a double agent Natasha Romanoff) and "Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings," it may be time for Marvel to dare to go to higher ground. Helmed by Cate Shortland in her first superhero feature, the film explores trauma, redemption, and found family, showing Natasha to be both a lethal warrior and a profoundly complicated human.

It is also an insightful look into the systemic abuse of women via the Red Room program, metaphorically making parallels to real life where women are manipulated and controlled. Yelena Belova's quip about the painful forced hysterectomies endured by the *Black Widows* — "It's efficient" — underscores the brutal realities these women faced. In an era where mainstream media sometimes liberally appropriates feminist narratives, Banet-Weiser (2018) points out that "Mainstream media narratives about gender are most effective when they address systemic oppression rather than individual empowerment."

WandaVision: Grief and Power

The Disney+ series *WandaVision* (2021) embraces a polar opposite approach mixing pastiche sitcom aesthetics with a psychological undercurrent. It delves into Wanda Maximoff's grief over losing Vision, as she conjures an alternate world to process her trauma. The series provides a rare glimpse into a female superhero's emotional vulnerabilities while also showcasing her mind-boggling strength as the Scarlet Witch.

Wanda's story in *WandaVision* embodies the duality of strength and vulnerability. According to McRobbie (2021), "Representations of loss and emotional depth in female superheroes push against the traditionally flat renderings of women in superhero stories". The series makes it clear that power is not just physical, it is emotional and psychological, broadening the definition of what it is to be a hero.

The discoveries show a clear progression: from reinforcing female characters with narrow agency to multifaceted heroes controlling their own storylines. Although films like *Black Panther*, *WandaVision* and *Captain Marvel* pushed female representation in visible, grand ways, issues remain. Stereotypical tropes (e.g., the unstable, powerful woman; the sacrificial female hero) remain, reminding us that real progress is not simply the appearance of women in visual space, but rather depth and agency in our narratives.

The MCU has also advanced in using intersectionality, depicting female characters from multiple racial, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds. This reframing acknowledges the intersectionality of the identities that shape the experiences of women.

Black Panther: Shuri and Okoye Intelligence and Leadership

In *Black Panther* (2018), Shuri (Letitia Wright) and Okoye (Danai Gurira) reinvent heroism. Shuri, a technologist, is in charge of Wakanda's advanced technology like the creation of the Black Panther suit. As the leader of the Dora Milaje, Okoye embodies bravery, loyalty, and strength.

These characters subvert not just racial stereotypes but also gendering. Shuri's position as a genius scientist emphasizes the underrepresentation of Black women in STEM, while Okoye's unfaltering leadership proves female heroes can be strong and strategic without the traditionally male contribution. According to Hooks (2015), "A feminist representing must challenge sexist oppression, but they must also agree that systems of

oppression are cross-cutting, and just as we cannot deal with class solely in class terms, we cannot address the gender oppression solely in gender terms.

The Valkyrie: A New Standard of Heroism

Also an introduction in *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017), Valkyrie is a ferocious fighter who rejects traditional femininity. Played by Tessa Thompson, the Valkyrie defies conventional feminine archetypes, relishing her unapologetic autonomy.

Valkyrie's resilience and leadership in the aftermath of her personal loss mirrors more expansive feminist themes of autonomy and self-determination. As Gill (2011) notes, "The strength of media is in its capacity to subvert the status quo by presenting characters who are in deep opposition to the social milieu."

Ms. Marvel: On the Double Self

The Disney Plus series *Ms. Marvel* (2022) is about Kamala Khan, a young Muslim superhero struggling with her powers as well as her culture. As the MCU's first Muslim lead, Kamala offers a different perspective than what fans of superhero genre are used to, tackling topics of generational conflict, community, and self-acceptance.

Kamala's experience resonates for viewers who must navigate competing identities in their everyday lives. Ahmed (2012) points out that "The representation of marginal identities in the mainstream media can be a mirror as well as a map: it reflects the current values of society, and gives possibilities for new spaces of inclusion."

DISCUSSION

A Feminist Critique of the Transition Sequence

Though from the MCU's second phase on it did show a shift toward more visible female characters, their narratives often still felt dictated by male-driven narratives. This era introduced female characters with greater agency and complexity, but their arcs too often served the emotional or heroic journeys of male protagonists.

Women as Emotional Catalysts

The sacrifices of Black Widow in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) and Gamora in *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) illustrates this pattern. Both prove crucial to the Avengers pulling off their ultimate win, though the deaths serve instead as more of an emotional turning point for the male heroes themselves. Black Widow's death brings Hawkeye back to being a hero, but Gamora's murder at Thanos's hands pushes Peter Quill into an emotional rage that threatens to jeopardize the mission.

Those moments have been criticized for reinforcing the "woman in the refrigerator" trope, which describes female characters who are killed or injured so that male heroes can be motivated. As Rosenberg (2018) suggests, "The emotional burden of these sacrifices rests almost exclusively with the male characters, rendering the women's agency and narrative significance nothing more than plot functions". The death of Black Widow in particular provoked major backlash from fans and critics alike, who complained that she had no proper stand-alone arc or narrative closure.

Women of Power and the Pathologization of Strength

Another tired trope is depicting powerful women as character-wise fragile or grey. A prime example is Scarlet Witch's transformation in *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (2022). Following the events of *WandaVision* (2021), which addressed Wanda's grief and trauma in an intelligent and churning fashion, the film turns to present her as a vengeful antagonist, bent on destructive action in her burning determination to be united with her children.

Such a portrayal riffs on longstanding cinematic idioms, wherein women with power usually are framed as threats to the social order. As Tasker (1993) observes, “The image of female power is often accompanied by a narrative of containment, in which the woman’s powers must be nullified or contained in order to restore balance.” Scarlet Witch’s turn to villainy begs the question whether her great power could have been explored in a less stereotypical and more nuanced way.

Similarly, Jane Foster, who temporarily has the power of Thor, faces her mortality in *Thor: Love and Thunder* (2022) when her use of Mjolnir worsens her terminal illness. Though her arc is emotionally effective, some critics say it sends the message that women must suffer when they wield power.

The MCU's Future Is Female — But Not Without Packing The House

The MCU has come a long way in terms of its treatment and representation of female characters, mirroring societal progress towards gender equality and inclusiveness. From supporting characters to stars, female characters have slowly but surely earned agency, complexity, center stage. Although improvements can definitely be made, the trajectory of the MCU provides a promising blueprint for feminist representation in mainstream media going forward.

The Intersectional Lens: Advances and Shortcomings

The introduction of a variety of diverse female characters, most notably, with *Black Panther* (2018) was a huge step forward in this representation. Characters like Shuri, Okoye, and Nakia not only subverted stereotypes, but embodied complex female characters that defied easy categorization. But even in these narratives, there were certain dexterous limitations. “There’s no character who hasn’t been impacted by T’Challa, by their connection through T’Challa,” she added for example, noting that Nakia’s character, so politically and morally motivated, is still ultimately viewed through the lens of her relationship with T’Challa.

The analysis we conducted is best performed through the lens of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), a term coined by Crenshaw (1989). It stresses the importance of thinking about overlapping identities like race and gender in assessing representation. While *Black Panther* soared for portraying Black women as leaders and warriors, those arcs still existed within a male-driven narrative. The mainstreaming of these narratives gesture towards inclusivity in representation (Ahmed, 2012), however, True inclusivity in representation goes beyond visibility (Meyer, 2016) -- it demands a rearticulation of the power dynamics at play within the narrative structure (Ahmed, 2012).

Persistent Gender Stereotypes

While there has been progress, stereotypes continue to exist. While *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017) and *Thor: Love and Thunder* (2022) Gary on Valkyrie as a fearless, independent battle-hardened warrior, her characterization doesn't venture into very profound territory beyond her abilities on the battlefield. Likewise, while *Captain Marvel* (2019) places Carol Danvers among the most powerful heroes in the MCU, her emotional arc is not as well-wrought, and critics argue that the stoicism on which she is based serves to suppress the traditional qualities of femininity (Beck 2019).

Per Gill (2011), “The presentation of female strength in popular media therefore tends to swing between hyper-competence and emotional distance, reducing the types of female heroism that might be considered acceptable.” The critique highlights the problem of a limited expression of femininity that fails to capture the inherent complexities of female identity — characters can be both strong and weak without sacrificing their autonomy in the story.

Women Superheroes — A Feminist Analysis (Marvel & Non-Marvel)

However, up until very recently superhero films were solidly male-dominated — which is something that has changed dramatically over the years as female superheroes have increasingly made their way into the cultural zeitgeist. Ones that are not Marvel, too, and powerful women who defy both stereotypes and individual patriarchal storylines. However their representation has a range of agency, autonomy, intersectionality, and

feminist representation. Drawing upon feminist film theory and theories of gender stereotyping and intersectional feminism, this essay uses case studies of Marvel women superheroes and their non-Marvel counterparts to compare and contrast each type's ability to subvert traditional gender roles and empower women.

Laura Mulvey's influential essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) argues that women in cinema are portrayed not as autonomous characters, but as the object of male desire — a phenomenon she dubbed the "male gaze." It is a phenomenon that is most evident in early superhero films, in which female characters were primarily catered to the male gaze rather than offering real character development.

Marvel's female superheroes have long been objectified, and their early role delivered sex appeal over substance. Black Widow (Natasha Romanoff) first appeared in *Iron Man 2* (2010) in a sequence in which Tony Stark leers at her, and the other male characters eye her up. Her sculpted, skin-tight suits became one of her character's defining visual traits. Scarlet Witch (Wanda Maximoff) made her first appearance in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015) in sexualized costumes, following a standard mode of Hollywood femininity. Though women in later films like *Captain Marvel* (2019) would start to break free from the restrictive chains of sexualization, Marvel will always fight with striking the balance between female empowerment and how traditionally the audience imagines beauty and desirability.

The male gaze seems present in non-Marvel superhero films as well, though some franchises have tried hard to resist it. *Wonder Woman* (2017) was able to move away from the male gaze with a battle-ready, non-sexual look for Diana. But the comic and TV depictions of her before tended toward objectification. Selene (*Underworld*) and Alice (*Resident Evil*) may be badass female leads, but in still skimpy, tight latex and leather outfits, they're each perpetuating the hypersexualized female warrior trope. In her early appearances in the DCEU, Harley Quinn (*Suicide Squad*, 2016 or so) was very heavily objectified, but *Birds of Prey* (2020) turned her narrative round, jettisoning the male gaze in favor of agency.

This is not to deny the male gaze exists in Marvel, and we can see it in non-Marvel films as well, but for example, *Wonder Woman* and *Birds of Prey* have been more determined to resist that gaze and subvert what might be its intent, as opposed to Marvel which still fights ground against eliminating sexualized portrayals of female characters.

A core feminist question is whether female superheroes actually have narrative agency — their own independent choices that propel the plot — or whether they are just extensions of male characters.

Marvel's women were usually brought into supporting roles in male-led teams before getting their own films. *Black Widow* (Natasha Romanoff), from the beginning, was defined by her relationships to the male characters — first as an agent who worked under Nick Fury, then as a love interest for Bruce Banner, and finally sacrificing herself for Hawkeye's family. Wanda Maximoff (a.k.a. Scarlet Witch) was presented as emotionally unhinged, her grief over Vision making her the bad guy in *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (2022). This promotes the stereotype of the hysterical woman whose emotions are out of control. Captain Marvel is among one of Marvel's few female characters that isn't linked to male ones, but she was introduced decades after the franchise male-heavy movies.

Non-Marvel female superheroes are more empowered and narrative independent. *Wonder Woman* (Diana Prince) has her own story, and she's not defined by a male counterpart. Steve Trevor exists in her life, but doesn't define her life. Referencing Alice from *Resident Evil* and Selene from *Underworld*, these women are the main protagonists of their respective franchises, capable of self-reliance and independence from a male narrative. *Furiosa (Mad Max: Fury Road)* subverts male control, leading a feminist uprising in rebellion against the Patriarchy, unmade by men and without men.

Marvel's female superheroes usually occupy male-dominated teams, whereas non-Marvel heroines are more independent narratively, as characters with their own trajectories.

Women in film have long been subjected to criticism from feminist theorists for being reduced to cliché tropes, like the damsel in distress, the femme fatale, or the nurturing mother figure. Historically, superhero films have further cemented these stereotypes, but recent portrayals have started to challenge them.

They pick this stereotype of the strong female character that emphasizes an intention of physical power, but that comes at the cost of developing any kind of emotional background. Take Black Widow, who is trained to kill but is emotionally restrained and sexually objectified. Scarlet Witch's arc in Doctor Strange 2 employs the cliché that women are merely parental beings with no identity outside of that as she becomes a villain as a result of her grief over motherhood lost. Several Marvel women like Wasp, Gamora and Okoye exist amid male-led teams, frequently occupying supporting roles.

Outside of the Marvel machine, there's been more vigorous deconstruction of these archetypes. Wonder Woman subverts the "damsel in distress" trope and she does so time and time again, exhibiting both an emotional and physical prowess. Harley Quinn (*Birds of Prey*) challenges the "femme fatale" trope, escaping from her toxic relationship with the Joker and establishing herself on her own terms. Furiosa (*Mad Max: Fury Road*) subverts gender roles, showing a woman who is wholly independent, strong, and free of hyper-feminacy.

Though Marvel has come a long way, its women continue to fight against conventional gender stereotypes, while non-Marvel films have done more to subvert them and overall to deconstruct them.

The source of most of their controversy in Marvel: Most female leads in Marvel are white, and hardly any women of color are given major roles. Shuri and Okoye were introduced in Black Panther (2018), but still as secondary to male heroes. Doctor Strange 2 had America Chavez, a Latina, so some progress, but America has no character development.

Non-Marvel superhero films have made strides in intersectionality, too, but there's plenty of work for them to do. Wonder Woman herself is played by an Israeli actress (Gal Gadot), but there are no equivalents for darker-skinned women in the film. Rather than lumping everyone with female leads in sci-fi action together, explore both via Alita: Battle Angel and Edge of Tomorrow, which in traditional Western sci-fi action heroines obviously miles apart. We meet working-class heroines — none of whom have a Paleolithic mansion full of riches and nothing but terrible choice of fashion — combating the wealthy elite in Underworld and Resident Evil.

Neither Marvel nor non-Marvel have done intersectional feminism perfectly, but non-Marvel has made more advances in presenting settings and stories outside of a Eurocentric lens.

Female superheroes from both Marvel and non-Marvel comics have been successful in breaking gender stereotypes and empowering women. But Marvel's heroines tend to be created within men's stories, which reinforce indelible gender stereotypes, and even other, female powerhouses of the silver screen tend to have more agency, independent plot lines and twisting, feminist themes in the narrative. But while things have improved, the superhero genre, and the film world in general, still has to work against the legacy of traditional gender codes, "Intersectional" representation and the male gaze.

CONCLUSION

The MCUs second phase and its follow-ups were a major breakthrough in gender representation and progression in pop culture, depicting female characters much more outside of traditional gender roles by exploring their vulnerabilities, ambitions, and complexities. Yet many of the old tropes are still in use. The use of female characters as emotional foils, the tendency to frame powerful women as unstable, and an ongoing reliance on stereotypical story still prevail to some extent elements. These persistent problems showcase the need for further growth in the representation of women in the franchise.

Scholars such as Smith et al. (2019) note that "Real progress means putting women in positions of power, but also giving them the power over their own stories." Even while the MCU has broadened representations of

gendered people onscreen, the next challenge is writing the characters to be fully realized, independent individuals who make choices that exist outside of the (often) male-centered narrative, and, as such, are not relegated to the realm of symbolism or tokenism. For real progress, it is necessary that female characters are not merely exist but rather have central active parts in the story.

Looking ahead to how we can bolster that gender representation both in the MCU and the wider tapestry of superhero cinema, here are some key recommendations. For one, future films need to focus on female stories led by women who don't need men around to justify their relevance and evolution in the franchise. Second, the MCU should broaden its intersectional representation and introduce women of different racial, and cultural backgrounds in multidimensional roles. Third, the studio needs to keep working to help address systemic issues in the industry, like hiring more women directors/writer/producers in the top level jobs to help ensure broader representation in storytelling. Finally, ensure that equal time for women-led projects is given to male and female-led projects, so that female-led projects are promoted as mainstream efforts and not something pandering to niche audiences.

As the MCU grows, it might well reflect and influence the future of superhero cinema but also set the baseline for industry standards around gender representation in more mainstream media. Through its commitment to female agency, intersectional diversity, and inclusive storytelling, the MCU could become a model of progressive, multidimensional female representation, holding a mirror to the complexities of contemporary gender dynamics.

Evaluation, future approach policy recommendation and limitations:

The Progression of Female Characters Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) perceive a substantial shift of superhero narrative reflect mais was an umbrella cultural and industry changes. But the strides in equality have not translated into a new era of gender equity in storytelling, screen representation or power in the industry. This part presents some major policy recommendations to improve female representation in the MCU along with directions for future policies to maintain the momentum of inclusivity in the franchise.

Narrative agency is one of the most pressing issues in the MCU's portrayal of female characters. While more recent films such as *Captain Marvel* (2019), *Black Widow* (2021) and *Wakanda Forever* (2022) have highlighted the work of female characters, they've tended to play supporting roles to male leads in ensemble films. I hope future MCU films tell female-fronted tales that move forward without having to prove themselves through any male characters at all. Female heroes should also star in ensemble projects, not just as supporting characters and sacrificial figures, but in all settings where they help to drive the story instead.

The MCU has largely been successful in introducing female superheroes from different races and cultures but tokenism (in that, representation exists in numbers, but not in term of depth) is still a problem. The franchise just needs to ask what could diversity of gender and sexuality look like outside of white, cisgender female leads or even white women in general Projects like *Black Panther* (2018) as well as *Ms. Marvel* (2022) have shown the astonishing potential for rich, intersectional storytelling to connect with a worldwide audience. Ultimately, the MCU must embrace a holistic narrative approach that better mirrors the very reality of its vast audience.

It classifies so many aspects of the industry behind the scenes, among them the gender imbalance in directing, screenwriting and executive decision-making. Though the box-office success of woman-directed superhero movies like Chloé Zhao's *Eternals*(2021) and Cate Shortland's *Black Widow* (2021) have proved women-led superhero franchises can be bankable, women keep getting the short end of the stick when it comes to access to meaningful creative positions. First and foremost, Marvel Studios and Disney needs to do a recount and create policies that actually support gender equity hiring practices for upcoming television writing, directing, and producing positions for their shows. This change would contribute to more genuine female characters with different shades, as the stories would be informed by a variety of perspectives and real life experiences.

While the emergence of female-led superhero films in the MCU has been seen as a step forward, some critics note that many of these characters still succumb to one-note tropes. Movies such as *Captain Marvel* (2019) and

Black Widow (2021) featured strong, independent female leads, but need to go beyond performative feminism, where women are only portrayed as strong for representation's sake rather than being given complex, character-driven arcs. Future films must illustrate women's struggles, growth and agency in ways that evoke their full humanity, allowing them to show vulnerabilities, moral dilemmas and a range of personality traits, rather than rigid "strong female character" tropes.

Another big issue in gender representation in the MCU is the disparity between male and female led projects when it comes to screen time, marketing, or merchandise support. One recent study found that even in ensemble films, male superheroes get dramatically more screen time and narrative heft than female superheroes. For example, even though *Black Widow* is an integral character to the Marvel Cinematic Universe's story arc, she was not afforded an equal amount of screen time or a more definitive narrative end in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), when the male heroes completely stole the show. Returning audiences can be convinced that female-centric narratives are not niche, and the way to do this is by guaranteeing equal size promotional campaigns and merchandising to further establish them as blockbusters instead of niche projects in future policies.

To maximize female representation in the MCU, we must understand audience expectations, responses based on gender, and overall film expectations conditioned by culture. Just in the way Marvel Studios is trained on data, they can tap into diversity training through audience surveys, social discourse analytics and conversations with cultural consultants. With that said, utilizing audience insights to integrate them into storytelling decisions is a good way to ensure that the MCU's ladies of the realm to resonate across demographic lines, and ensure that they do not reinforce archaic and antiquated gender dynamics. A participatory approach would result in more inclusive, representative, and empowering female superheroes.

Since data was collected up until October 2024, future research should explore the long-term effects of female-driven superhero films on audiences and the industry as a whole, as data is not necessarily informative of developing trends. Longitudinal studies on how female-led superhero films may affect audience perceptions of female representations and gender roles over time, particularly with younger viewers, could be particularly relevant to these feminists' efforts. On top of that, with the growth of streaming services like Disney+, series like *WandaVision* (2021) and *Ms. Marvel* (2022) gave room for long-form narrative, granting space to flesh-out characters. Future work should examine if streaming platforms provide subtler gender representation than theatrical ones. Another significant avenue of research could be comparative studies between the MCU and other universal superhero franchises, including Bollywood, anime-based superhero films, and maybe even European cinema, to analyze how specific cultural contexts influence female superhero narratives. Finally, audience reception studies could investigate how different demographics, broadly defined as age, gender and ethnicity, relate to the MCU's shifting portrayals of women in particular, asking them whether these representations of women actually work to resonate with different audiences or if they could use some work. By aiding in the comprehension of the practices of gender representation in the relevant contemporary media and its implications in broader societal terms, these research directions will go a long way in deepening their understanding.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Regarding the research, writing, and/or publishing of this paper, the authors have declared that there are no probable conflicts of interest that might potentially arise.

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