Spring 2018

#RepresentationMatters: A Study of Masculinity in the Avengers Movies

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Recommended Citation

#RepresentationMatters:
A Study of Masculinity in the Avengers Movies

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2018

Acknowledgments

This project would not have been possible without the teachings from the Human Rights, Experimental Humanities, and Film Departments. Thank you so much for giving me room to make my education my own. Also, much thanks to the Center for Experimental Humanities and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation-- without your support this project would not have been feasible. I cannot thank you enough for seeing potential in this research and choosing to assist it.

To Thomas, Natalie and Effie-- thank you for devoting your office hours to talk about superheroes with me.

To Susan Merriam-- taking Rights and the Image was the best decision of my college career. Without it, I would have not gained you as an adviser or found the Experimental Humanities department. Thank you for being my biggest cheerleader and advocate these past four years.

To Ruthie-- You were always on my side when I felt like I had no one in my corner and pushed me when I thought I couldn't go any further. Thank you.

To my family-- You supported me at every twist and turn, regardless if you understood what was happening. That amount of love astonishes me every day and I cannot put into words how grateful I am. Also, thank you for reminding me to be excited about every accomplishment.

To my friends-- from listening to my late night ramblings to checking in with me every step of the way, you are my superheroes.

To my participants-- Without your input, this project would not have been possible. Thank you so much for your drawings and thoughts about superheroes.

This project is dedicated to those who do not see themselves onscreen. I see you.

Table of Contents

"Oh, we can be heroes just for one day"
- David Bowie, "Heroes"

Preface

Originally, this thesis was intended to solely focus on those unseen onscreen. Following a

semester abroad at Bard College Berlin, this changed. Through the courses I took at this

institution, my idea expanded to include how identity is impacted through what is seen onscreen.

My topic also shifted due to the history that surrounded me in Berlin. During a visit to the

Topography of Terror, it became very clear to me that we need to talk about men and the

pressure they face. Specifically, I was inspired by this quotation seen in one of the exhibits:

> Some of the perpetrators initially had scruples about committing these crimes. They
> found the act of killing unpleasant, but they did not question the mass murder as such.
> Overcoming one's inhibitions about shooting helpless people was seen as a sign of
> toughness and strong willpower. Anyone who refused to participate was considered to be
> unmanly and weak.

After reading this, my initial response was "what would happen if we deconstructed what it

means to man? Eliminated the pressure of masculinity?"

When I began to research masculinity, I was surprised about the various components and

complexity. This knowledge made me realize masculinity at its core is not the issue, but the

issues are 1) who is allowed to exercise masculinity and 2) what society stresses as the standard

way to be a man. The recent influx of think pieces depicting masculinity as solely evil disregards

the complexity of masculinity and the underlying problems in this system. By solely focusing on

the obvious problems, masculinity is not being analyzed and deconstructed to the same degree as

other identity characteristics. This lack of analysis can also be due to the smaller portion of

academic concentrating on this topic. Considering all of this, it became clear to me that the issue

of masculinity, its representation onscreen, and how this effects audiences is conversation that

needs to occur. The goal of this thesis is to start that conversation.

Introduction

Representation has been a constant dilemma in the motion picture industry since its conception. Taking from practices in other branches of the entertainment industry, movies (and eventually television) have relied on tactics such as blackface, whitewashing and eventually miscasting since its establishment. These practices aimed to exclude non-white actors from taking part in this industry by hiring white actors as non-white characters or erasing non-white characters completely. Despite many of these practices now being regarded as taboo, this lack of inclusion has been recently spotlighted in the Twitter trending topic, #OscarsSoWhite.[1] While specifically shedding a light on race in the motion picture industry, this hashtag prompted discussion about various demographic gaps in other areas of identity such as gender, sexuality, ethnicity, ability, etc. This discussion promoted various initiatives for more inclusive and diverse media, bringing the idea that representation matters to the forefront of the motion picture industry.

The impact of inclusive and diverse representation has been a frequent subject on social media seen in the popular hashtag turned social media campaign, #representationmatters. This trending topic has become a symbol of praise for movies that are inclusive and diverse. It has also inspired multiple studies of demographics onscreen and numerous think pieces detailing the

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[1] Created by April Reign as a response to the all-white nominees in the lead and supporting acting categories at the 2015 Academy Awards (Ryan).

emotional impact of seeing one's identity onscreen. While both these studies and think pieces are a crucial base line to understanding the infrequency of different identities seen on screen and the impact when one's identity is represented on screen, they need to be expanded. These studies mainly highlight race and gender inequality, but they do not see if these statistics are internalized by audiences through their reactions. Contradictorily, the think pieces only look at individuals' reactions to seeing their identities onscreen and not the effect representation of inclusion and diversity has on all audience members. By not combining these two efforts, there is still the question if inclusive and diverse representation truly does impact audiences.

To fully analyze if representation onscreen does matter, one must evaluate multiple components. In looking at demographics onscreen, what is seen and how it is seen must be examined. From there, the connection to the audience is evaluated through what is internalized and how it is internalized. Only then is it possible to articulate the effect inclusive and diverse representation onscreen has on its audiences. In an effort to see if representation does in fact matter, I analyzed masculinity in the Marvel superhero movies to see if it affects what identities are perceived as superheroes.

Framing this Study

<u>Masculinity</u>

In an era of diversity initiatives focusing on ignored and oppressed groups in media, education, etc., why do we need to talk about masculinity? This trait is generally linked to men, arguably one of the most privileged groups in the United States, thus it is commonly thought to have already been focused on. In actuality, masculinity has not really been discussed and analyzed like

other characteristics that define us, such as race, womanhood, class, sexuality, ability, etc. For example, there are college programs across the country that focus on women's studies and queer studies because they have been ignored in academia up until recently. Only in times of crisis does it seem that masculinity gains mainstream attention. These moments are typically when men are at the center of some horrific current event and "toxic masculinity" becomes a hot topic again resulting in numerous think pieces. The most recent case in this trend has centered on mass shootings, particularly the one in Parkland, Florida. This mass shooting resulted in the death of seventeen people, and was conducted by a nineteen year old man. The gender of the assailant is not a surprise to people who have been looking at the perpetrators of these crimes, with Harper's Bazaar reporting that "of all the mass shootings since 1982, only three have been committed by women" (J Wright). The most recent count of mass shooters[2] is 154, meaning 151 of these mass shooters are men (Berkowitz). This statistic has propelled more thinking about masculinity and the pressure it puts on people.

Activist and actor Michael Ian Black published an op-ed with the New York Times a week after the Parkland shooting titled: "The Boys Are Not All Right." In this moving piece, Black recounts details about the shooting and proclaims "America's boys are broken. And it's killing us" (M. Black). Without much background in masculinity theory, Black loosely describes concepts of masculinity that are pressuring people, particularly men. Black states:

> Too many boys are trapped in the same suffocating, outdated model of masculinity, where manhood is measured in strength, where there is no way to be vulnerable without being emasculated, where manliness is about having power over others. (M. Black)

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[2] This data dates back to 1966.

This "outdated model of masculinity" refers to the pressure of masculinity and the unreachable standard it sets. The issue is: how is this standard being taught? How do people learn of masculinity? Is it through their interactions with their peers and family? History? Books? Movies? Truthfully, it is probably all of these factors. And we need to look at what is being taught and implemented culturally thus defining and setting the standard for masculinity.

Movies versus TV & Other Media

Since there are a variety of ways that one can learn various traits and characteristics, it is unrealistic to say one concrete thing teaches masculinity. Social interactions (through family and friends), history, and culture tend to be the first things that come to mind. While they seem like separate entities in theory, in practice they interact with one another. History, and the knowledge of that history, sets the basis of how people interact with one another, with these interacts being captured in culture through art, books and viewable digital content (movies, television, videos, etc.). This creates a cyclic routine where culture then influences history which further influences social interactions and thus culture. All these approaches interact and build off of one another,
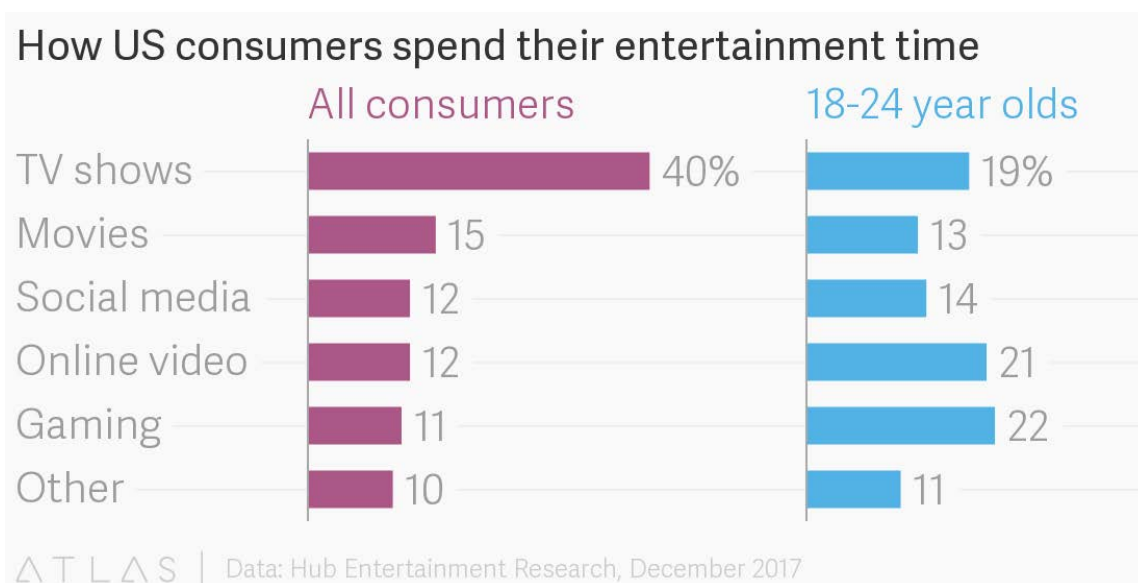

Figure 1: How US Consumers spend their entertainment time (Rodriquez)

and can all be said to be teachers of masculinity, but the most popular is viewable content.

Presently when any size screen can be used to watch movies, television and various other video

based content; there is seemingly no limit to accessibility to viewable content.

In this graph (fig. 1), one can see the breakdown of consumerism of TV shows, movies, social

media, online video, gaming, and other. Specifically in this graph, streaming services which have

a mixture of television and movies (such as Netflix, Hulu and Amazon Prime) have had their

consumer data broken up between the two media forms. For all consumers, television and

movies hold the first and second spots, respectively, but with respect to the 18-24 year-olds,

television and movies rank only third and fifth place, respectively. This is a seemingly

substantial downgrade of ranking for both television and movies, but movies only lowers by two

percent while television lowers by a significant twenty-one percent. This data demonstrates that

regardless of age, movies are still being steadily consumed by all ages (Rodriguez). The numbers

of consumers for movies do not vary greatly even when challenged with online and social media

content and a generation that favors it. This means that movies are more of a consistent influence

with a majority of entertainment consumers and are not a mode of entertainment that varies with

shifting ages. Accessibility to movies may be limited due to different socioeconomic

circumstances, but that presumed lack of financial accessibility is easily combated with

numerous streaming platforms which host movies.

The favoring of movies as a form of entertainment leads movies to be considered as one of the

main modes of culture education. As previously mentioned, various media can teach and expose

an audience to different characteristics, traits, people and worlds that they have not experienced

in reality. In regards to masculinity, what do movies teach? First, one most look at what is centered on masculinity. Masculinity is already frequently linked to men, and with Black's article he also highlights masculinity's focus on strength. While masculinity is multifaceted and encompasses more than this, these traits and qualities are the dominant assumptions to what masculinity entails. Kenneth MacKinnon acknowledges this in his book, *Representing Men*, stating "The movie industry has, for much of the last century, been a key source for images of dominant masculinity" (MacKinnon 37). This stress on strength and masculinity can be seen in the multitude of men-centric genres such as action, western, war, and sports movies. Specifically within the action genre, superhero movies are a noticeable component.

Why Superheroes?

About two years ago, Tricia Mirchandani wrote about her perception of her children's influences for *The Washington Post*. In this article, Mirchandani specifically recognized princesses and superheroes as role models for her daughter and son, respectively. While she is troubled by her daughter's interest with princesses instead of "'strong [women] role models,'" she notes her hypocrisy in not analyzing her son's fascination with superheroes in the same manner (Mirchandani). She questions her criticism of one and not the other stating:

> ...it's not hard to see that superheroes speak just as loudly as princesses and that their messages can be just as damaging. I don't want my son to think that he needs to be intimidating, stoic, or domineering any more than I want my daughter to think she has to be submissive, sparkly, or saved. I want him, too, to know that he can do anything, be anything, and try everything, even if those things don't require muscles or superhuman powers. (Mirchandani)

With these lines, she acknowledges the message superheroes show, especially those linked with masculinity. Noting the abundance of muscles, power, and intimidating attitudes with a judgmental tone, these traditionally masculine characteristics go from being an ideal to a

potentially damaging force. Like princesses, superheroes highlight only a portion of one's identity. By only highlighting a fraction of what one can be, this influence restricts what one believes they can be. This is heavily concerning is being discussed frequently seen in the recent upticks in discussion about representation of women, strong women characters and the princess problem. But while these images are heavily scrutinized, superheroes are rarely being analyzed.

Abundance of Superheroes

Superheroes and superheroes movies have been around since World War II, but the production of them resurged in the early 2000s.[3] The two studios most famous for their production of superhero movies is Marvel Studios and Warner Brothers, associated with Marvel Comics and DC Comics respectively. While both comic publishers began in the mid to late 1930s, their cinematic universes vary enough in age for it to impact the expansion of their cinematic universes. At the time of this writing, Marvel Studios prevails with eighteen movies over the course of ten years in comparison to Warner Brothers' five movies over five years. Seeing this difference, Marvel is clearly the more dominating force in the superhero genre and thus more impactful for showcasing masculinity to audiences throughout the world.

The present concept of the Marvel Cinematic Universe began in 2008 with the release of the first *Iron Man* movie. Currently now celebrating its 10-year anniversary, Marvel Studios has produced eighteen movies in the past decade earning "over $13.5 billion worldwide" in box office sales (Chuba).[4] These movies include *Iron Man*, *The Incredible Hulk*, *Thor*, *Captain*

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[3] Various sources suggest that these movies were sparked by major crises, chiefly the World Trade Center attacks in 2001 (Hsiao) and the economic crash of 2008 (New).
[4] As of March 2018.

America: The First Avenger, *The Avengers*, *Guardians of the Galaxy*, *Ant-Man*, *Dr. Strange*, *Spider- Man: Homecoming* and *Black Panther* as well as multiple sequels. Despite the multitude of these movies, this only encompasses three out of the four phases of movies produced by Marvel Studios. Starting with *Avengers: Infinity War*[5], Marvel Studios will enter phase four of its proposed plans. This phase consists of six movies to be produced in the next two years. Seeing the amount of movies and their current earnings at the box office, it is clear that Marvel Studios is a mass-producing blockbuster operation. In just 2018 alone, there will be three movies released: *Black Panther*, *Avengers: Infinity War*, and *Ant-Man and the Wasp*. With this amount of content being produced steadily, one cannot help but wonder what messages it conveys to its vast array of fans.

Disclaimers

Men's Rights vs Masculinities (Men's) Studies vs Male Studies

A common misconception when looking at masculinity is that this is an area of academia that is engulfed in men's rights advocates. Sometimes labeled as hate groups, men's rights groups tend to be ignored or pushed aside when they come into the public sphere. The men's right movement believes that "the primary victims of gender-based discrimination are men" (Blake). While some of its initial issues such as "bias in family courts or sexual abuse suffered by men" are credible issues, the movement has propelled into misogyny and anti-feminist rhetoric over the years on social media platforms (Blake). Essentially, what could have potentially been a fruitful area of masculinity advocacy has descended into a movement predominantly seen as a backlash to women's empowerment and feminism movements.

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[5] This film was released on April 27, 2018.

Despite the men's rights movement using men in their label, they are more so focused on those assigned male at birth. This inclusion of sex terms instead of gender terms demonstrates they have a limited idea of who can be men or possess masculinity. The academic branch of men's rights continues this trend be being called male studies. Dr. Edward M. Stephens, the chairman for the Foundation for Male Studies, argues that masculinity studies is "waging war against what I say is real men" (Bennett). With this organization's focus on "male[s]" instead of men, it is established that Dr. Stephens's theories are linked to biological sex and not gender. This specification clarifies Stephen's previous statement mention "real men." Given his focus on those assigned male at birth, it is clear that they are the "real men" he is referencing. By focusing on this group, male studies ignores the multitude of people who identify as men but are assigned female at birth (AFAB) or simply evoke masculine traits. The study of masculinities is more inclusive, acknowledging that not all men are AMAB and that all people can evoke masculinity regardless of gender.

Another difference between male studies and masculinities is the use of feminist theory. The Male Studies Foundation rejects the use of feminist theory in the study of men with members, such as Tim Patten, claiming that " the feminist-inspired men's studies programs are having an unintended and harmful effect" feminism gets in the way of the study of men" (Patten). This program has also been known to have a "combative tone toward feminism and women's studies programs," which is not surprising seeing men's rights activists' reputation of misogyny (Epstein). Masculinities studies has a polar opposite reaction, accepting the basis for masculinity theory stemming from feminist theory and their analysis of gender (Epstein). The president of the American Men's Studies Association, Mark Justad, has even stated, "'we want to unpack the

myth that all men are a certain way, just as the women's movement has tried to do for women'"

(Moore). This reference to the women's movement praises its accomplishments, and looks at

using the framework from that movement for men in a more collaborative way. The professor of

"The Philosophy of Becoming a Man" at California Lutheran University, Mike De Martini,

defends the existence of his course, as well as masculinities studies programs, by stating "'My

goal is the same as every woman's goal — that you end negative male behavior'" (Moore).

Gender versus Sex

Gender and sex are closely related but they are not interchangeable. Sex is determined by

biological factors while gender is a constructed through an array of experiences internally and

externally (What). Given this text's focus on masculinity, a gender category, the remainder of

this writing will be primarily using gender terms[6] instead of sex terms[7]. Therefore when sex

terms are deemed interchangeable with gender terms, quotes will be adapted to include gender

terms. In moments where the distinction of sex is necessary, the phrases "assigned male at birth"

or "assigned female at birth" will be substituted when appropriate. When neither of these options

are feasible, sex terms will be used.

Participants' Identities

To protect the privacy of both study and survey participants, alternate identifiers have been

provided. The study participants were given numbers, while the survey participants were given

pseudonyms. In Appendix 1 and 2, the demographic breakdowns are available with the

corresponding identifiers for further contextualization of the information collected.

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[6] Man, men, woman, or women
[7] Male(s) and female(s)

Chapter 1

Masculinity Theory 101

The idea of masculinity is a vague one. Google defines the term as the "possession of the

qualities traditionally associated with men." This seemingly loose definition allows for different

interpretations of what being a man means. Leo Braudy acknowledges this possible multiplicity

of the definition of masculinity in the beginning of *From Chivalry to Terrorism,* stating:

> What is masculinity when it is much easier for the computer nerd to get a job and support
> a family than it is for a brawny factor worker? Who is the ideal man? Who is the common
> man? Is he muscular and physically powerful, or is he wily and able to map grand
> strategies? Does he wear a bulletproof vest or jogging clothes? Does he love women or
> other men or only himself? Is he a friend or solitary hero? (Braudy xiii)

The way Braudy proposes these ideas and characteristics is in a manner in which the reader has

to choose one or the other, filing them under categories of common and ideal masculinity. In

reality, the choice is less clear. Different contexts stress different values thus producing different

reiterations of masculinities. And even with the fluidity of masculinity through place and time, it

also changes from person to person. Presently, the masculinity that is focused on is one based

strength and aggressiveness. This violence centered strain of masculinity is popularly referred to

as "toxic masculinity." The label of toxic is highlighting the "traditionally male attributes that

many have come to see as harmful not only to women, but also to men and the fabric of society"

(Hess). And this has become a hot topic among academics looking at it in relation to mass

shootings, sexual assault, feminism or men's rights groups. There is a rarity in looking at

masculinity as a whole and with all of its complexities.

Boyhood to Manhood

A common belief throughout most, if not all, cultures regarding masculinity is that manhood and masculinity is a trait which is earned. One's masculinity is not something that is inherent to their biological sex or identified gender. John Kang writes in *Masculinities and the Law: A Multidimensional Approach* there is a paradox between being assigned male at birth and being manly[8]:

> You may be born male, but that doesn't make you manly. Maleness is the random result of biology, but manliness is the work product of vigorous self-fashioning: nature makes you male; to become manly, you must strive. (Kang 136)

Kang's claim that manliness is a product of "vigorous self-fashioning" that one must strive for suggests that masculinity is something to be continuously earned until one can make a claim that they are "manly". Later on in his writing, Kang connects masculinity to bravery stating, "Either act bravely as your gender requires of you or suffer the consequences of being unmanned" (Kang 137). This bravery seems to be embedded in the idea that men protect others, primarily women. While this idea is essentially as old as time itself, some academics argue that there is no clear explanation for this assumption. Kang comments on this stating "there is no explanation for why a man is a woman's protector and defender only that he 'is, or should be'" (Kang 137-138). This statement references a concurring opinion Justice Bradley made in 1872 and uses it to highlight the different expectations of men and women. While this was said in regards to a Supreme Court case that denied women the right to practice law, it bars women from protecting or defending others because that is a man's duty. Thus part of manliness is proving oneself to be brave enough to protect and defend, especially in times of danger. This sense of manliness is further stressed through various rituals and process where one "becomes" a man.

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[8] Manly is regarded as a synonym of masculinity.

Sometimes labelled as "a restricted status," becoming a man, or even just possessing masculine traits, is only granted after proving one's masculinity (Gilmore 17). This proof of being masculine and possessing masculinity can be seen in a variety of coming of age rituals present in most cultures around the world. The idea of proving oneself through ritual may seem a dated or even foreign concept, it is not a culture or time specific:

> This recurrent notion that manhood is problematic, a critical threshold that boys must pass through testing, is found at all levels of sociocultural development regardless of what other alternative roles are recognized. It is found among the simplest hunters and fishermen, among peasants and sophisticated urbanized peoples; it is found in all continents and environments. It is found among both warrior peoples and those who have never killed in anger. (Gilmore 11)

Typically violent in nature, many of these tests and rituals have men prove they are protectors and can be successful, independent men. For example, in New Guinea and Ethiopia boys go through extensive whipping rituals to prove their manhood (Gilmore 13-14). Many other cultures have similar defining moments of the transition from boyhood to manhood, but some cultures go about it in more subtle ways. In modern England, boys are sent to boarding school with the goal of "a passage to a 'social state of manhood'" (Gilmore 17). By enrolling their sons in boarding schools far from home, aristocrats thought they were educating future royalty to be self-reliant and have the "fortitude needed to run the British Empire" (Gilmore 17). While not as violent as the other rites of passage, it still looks to harden boys to become men but more so through emotional and physical separation from their families. This can also be seen at a lesser degree within the practices of the Boy Scouts of America. The Boy Scouts do not shy away from their mission, advertising on pamphlets and manuals that their goal was to "'make big men of little boys' by fostering 'an independent manhood'" (Gilmore 18). Again, this transition is not expected to naturally happen, but is forced through various cultural practices. It is clear that at a certain point, boyhood needs to be rejected in favor of becoming a man. And this manhood is

defined by strength, perseverance, independence, self-reliance and detachment, both physically and emotionally.

Regardless of how masculinity is initially proven, various cultures expect it to be continuously shown through various means. Like many other cultures around the world, "the urban Mexican [...] most also perform adequately in sex and father many children" (Gilmore 16). This idea of tangible virility is stressed in Balkan culture as well with a real man being thought of as someone "who drinks heavily, spends money freely, fight bravely, and raises a large family" (Gilmore 16). After this defining transition from boyhood to manhood, men are typically expected to prove their masculinity through producing multiple children and continue emphasizing their physical strength through protecting themselves, their family, and their honor. Even within the fictitious world, manhood and masculinity are depicted as a title to be earned.

Masculinit*ies*

To further complicate the idea of masculinity, most academics refer to the study of masculinity by the plural, masculinities. The pluralization of the word acknowledges the various ways one can be a man, or possess masculine traits. Leo Braudy stresses in the introduction to *From Chivalry to Terrorism* that "Each society has had its own specific definitions of manhood and what cultural values masculinity symbolizes" (Braudy xiv). Different cultural values put different demands on masculinity and what it means to be a man. Braudy slightly touches upon this variance in the earlier quotation asking, "What is masculinity when it is much easier for the computer nerd to get a job and support a family than it is for a brawny factor worker?" (Braudy xiii) This question looks at what is valued more in a man: being a provider or strength and there

is no definite answer to this question. In a rural community where technologically is limited and strength is stressed, the factory worker would be the better man. But if one is in a city with more technology oriented jobs and no factories, the computer nerd would prevail. While this comparison is simple, it highlights the different display of masculinity in different spaces. For example, how masculinity and being a man in Ethiopia does not necessarily align with what it means in England. Both settings have different cultures and contexts that stress different values, which produce different versions of the ideal and common man. As mentioned prior, masculinity in Ethiopia is demonstrated through a whipping ritual called Buhe. This ritual is utilized to stress "never backing down when threatened" (Gilmore 13). This is radically different from the ritual in England, which is commonly sending one's son off to boarding school. While there are still instances of hazing through violent older students, being sent to boarding school primarily fosters a sense of independence. Both of these rituals create stoic men in a sense, but Ethiopian culture stresses physical strength and perseverance while English society looks for physical and emotional independence.

Braudy goes on to question what happens when other characteristics intersect with masculinity, specifically referencing sexuality (Braudy xiii). This idea of intersectionality is not a stranger to gender studies, mostly being used to make sure feminism is an inclusive practice (i.e. intersectional feminism). Feminist theorist Kimberle Crenshaw is credited as the first person to label this concept in 1989 (Dastagir). Through her paper, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," Crenshaw acknowledges that there are members of groups and movements (in this case she was specifically focusing on feminism) that are "multiply-burdened" by other

characteristics such as, but not limited to; race, ethnicity, sexuality, ability, class, etc. (Crenshaw

140). When these characteristics are paired with masculinity, different portions of masculinity

have to be sacrificed to adhere to the burden and disadvantages that other characteristics may

hold. For example, people of color (especially black men) are stereotyped to be hyperphysical or

have a surplus of masculinity. In cases of racial profiling, black people are instructed to "'tone

down'" their masculinity (Carbado 65). During the early twenty-first century, the American Civil

Liberties Union (ACLU) published a campaign against racial profiling focusing on suppressing

masculinity and "relied on images of men with gender normative masculinity, men whose

masculinity were not in 'excess'" (Carbado 65). Also, in *Race Trap: Smart Strategies for*

Effective Racial Communication in Business and in Life, Dr. Robert L. Johnson and Dr. Steven

Simring provide strategies for people who have been racially profiled:

- Don't display anger—even if justified. Most police officers resent challenges to their authority, and may overreact to any real or perceived affront.
- Don't argue the Fourth Amendment. . . . [A]t the point you are stopped, it is important to maintain control of your emotions and your behavior.
- Don't be sarcastic or condescending to the officer. Always be cooperative and polite.
- Don't lose sight of your goal. The objective in most racial profiling scenarios is to end the encounter as quickly as possible with a minimum risk of potential trauma. Getting stopped for no good reason is inconvenient. But being jacked up against your car and searched is an experience that can stay with you for years. Getting handcuffed and taken into custody escalates the nightmare. (Johnson and Simring 2000, 121–22) (Carbado 69)

These steps instruct the subject to remain calm, not challenge what is happening to them, and

control their emotions. This goes against what coming of age rituals teach about being

masculine. These traditions stress the need to protect (oneself and others), and the failure to do so

causes one to be emasculated; "either act bravely as your gender requires of you or suffer the

consequences of being unmanned" (Kang 137). In this moment, racially profiled people are

expected to rid themselves of their masculine identity to not disturb the peace. Through this

campaign and strategies of how to deal with racial profiling, it is apparent that to survive these moments black people are expected to sacrifice their masculinity to survive. That is not something a white masculine person has to confront in their daily life because of the privilege that comes with their race. While this is only one characteristic intersecting with masculinity, it establishes that different identities and characteristics created different modes of expressing masculinity resulting in its plurality: masculinit*ies*.

Hegemonic Masculinity

Regardless of the plurality of masculinity, in each culture there is the concept of a standard of masculinity. This standard is regularly regarded as the concept of hegemonic masculinity. Typically seen as a combination of the ideals of a culture, hegemonic masculinity is essentially the standard man (Schippers 93).

> Hegemonic masculinity was not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact it. But it was certainly normative. It embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men. (Connell 832)

This concept was first addressed in a field study about social inequality in Australian high schools when it became evident that there were "multiple hierarchies---in gender as well as in class terms---interwoven with active projects of gender construction" (Connell 830). As mentioned prior in regards to the multiplicity of masculinity, there is a hierarchy among masculinity and what other characteristics it intersects with. Hegemonic masculinity, or the standard/dominant masculinity, is a privileged status, a tier that only few people can reach and it still varies from culture to culture. Specifically in the United States, it has come increasing apparent that the standard for masculinity is the most privileged which would be white men.

Michael Kimmel specifically states that "'the masculinity that defines white, middle class, early middle-aged heterosexual men is the masculinity that sets the standards for other men' (Kimmel 2005, 30)" (Carbado 70). Devon Carbado expands on this specific standard of masculinity by stating:

> And white men are "natural" men. That is to say, the normative man is not only appropriately masculine, he is also white. He is the norm. Our reference. We are all defined with him in mind. We are all the same as or different from him. The intersectional identity of white normatively masculine men defines what it means to be a man. (Carbado 53)

Both theorists highlight the race of the ideal man, which appropriately highlights the United States' race problem, but only Kimmel goes so far as to specify other characteristics. These characteristics varying in significance compare to race, but also convey the ideals of the United States society. A characteristic that should be added to modernize these specifications is gender identity. Considering the increase in out transgender and genderqueer people, it is evident that the standard of masculinity is in men that are assigned male at birth. Essentially what this standard and list of traits does is specify who is allowed to have masculinity. Since the standard is white men, masculinity in others is viewed as a problematic thing.

Black Masculinity (in America)

As discussed prior, the masculinity in people of color is being policed in the United States. This can be seen by just the existence of a list of steps on how to deal with being racially profiled but also in the multitude of deaths of unarmed black people, especially young boys such as Trayvon Martin. This form of racism affects all people of color at different magnitudes, but black men particularly live in the shadows of stereotypes of hypermasculinity. In the list constructed by Dr. Johnson and Dr. Simring, they instruct those who are racially profiled to most importantly not

display anger because "most police resent challenges to their authority" (Carbado 69). Assuming

the subject being racially profiled is a man of color, this would mean they have to subdue a part

of their masculinity to maintain the superiority of the police officer. By doing so, this man

recognizes his masculinity is defined by the masculinity of the police officer and thus

subordinate to the standard.

This idea of black masculinity being subordinate is not a new concept, but one older than the

United States itself. Clyde W. Franklin II states that:

> Black masculinities in the United States began their development as 'the boat'
> inched closer to Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619, with twenty male slaves chained
> below deck in wretchedly filthy conditions----the first of millions of Black
> Americans to follow. (Franklin 4)

Slavery established a racial hierarchy in the United States that is still present in society. For

black people, their first experiences in the United States were being subordinate to white people

through the system of slavery. In this system, they were not regard as people but objects owned

by white people. This differentiation is one of the defining moments of blackness in the United

States. For black men this "undermined [their] efforts to become a 'man.' As long as the Black

[man] was a slave, property, a thing, he had no claims to being a man" (Franklin 5). So while a

white person could access all aspects of being, including masculinity, black people were

prevented. This established them as a subordinate race with the dominant, and thus, ideal race

being white. This hierarchy is still present in how black people are treated currently with their

race being regarded as less than and a thing needing to be controlled.

> Black men have never enjoyed the privileges and prerogatives white men have enjoyed,
> and they have often been chided for not being competitive enough, for not being
> aggressive enough, for not being stoic enough. Surely, they will see this as an effort to
> once again *trick them.* (Franklin 10)

In this statement, Franklin looks at how black men specifically are still upheld to the standard of white masculinity and are expected to showcase this masculinity through competition, aggression and strength. Despite being held to this standard, black men live in a paradox where they cannot act on it. This can be seen in how they are told to handle being racial profiled: "maintain control of your emotions and behavior" (Carbado 69). Franklin acknowledges this paradox as a way of "[tricking] them" (Franklin 10). If black men do not exercise hegemonic masculinity they are mocked, but if they do they are in danger of extreme racism. Due to this, this idea of hegemonic masculinity is rejected to better suit these men creating another masculinity: black masculinity.

Masculinity in Women

There are many more characteristics that intersect with masculinity, but another major issue is when masculinity is present in genders other than men. Since masculinity is linked to the gender of men, there is a misconception that only men can be masculine. It may be easier for men to showcase masculinity, but that does not limit masculinity to this population. Specifically, traits commonly associated with masculinity such as dominance, strength, aggressiveness, etc. are constantly being enacted by women. But isn't masculinity supposed to be for men and femininity for women? Not necessarily. Sigmund Freud deconstructed this idea as early as the 1900s in stating, "'pure masculinity or femininity is not to be found either in a psychological or a biological sense. Every individual on the contrary displays a mixture'" (Gilmore 22). Freud establishes that masculinity is not limited to gender and is present to different degrees in different people regardless of gender identity. Despite this notion, there is still an attitude that femininity is only for women and masculinity is only for men presently. This stance can be most recently be seen in the argument to give teachers guns in the wake of multiple school shootings.

Already a hotly debated topic, Harry Shiver (a state representative from Alabama) relied on the concept of femininity and gender roles to advocate against giving teachers guns. After Shiver constantly stating that most women are teachers and do not know how to shoot guns, he went on the say that women "'are scared of guns'" (Andone). With this assumption, Shiver further perpetuates that idea that women are not the protectors but are meant to be protected. Again, this is a very archaic concept rooted in a rigid idea of gender roles and the differences of biological sex. It is seen throughout history from the role of men in the Stone Age to the establishment of the United States and its concentration on rights for men. Thus when a woman defies this expectation of being the protected it causes confusion and backlash.

As women enact more traits commonly associated with masculinity such as authority or a public sexuality, they are not seen as masculine but as problems. In "Recovering the Feminine Other: Masculinity, Femininity, and Gender Hegemony," Mimi Schippers states; "When a woman is authoritative, she is not masculine; she is a bitch - both feminine and undesirable. The slut is decidedly feminine" (Schippers 95-96). Men in charge are respected while women are regarded as bossy and a bitch when exercising authority regardless of their status as the superior in the situation. This double standard continues in how women's sexuality is discussed. Men are revered for having children, regardless of how many mothers there are, because it showcases their virility. When the roles are reversed women are called sluts and whores, terms connected to women specifically. The closest term to these to describe men is the slang term "man-whore." The use of this term is rare and does not even have a published definition because it is repurposing a decidedly feminine word. These cases convey that there is an issue when masculinity is enacted by women, introducing the concept of the pariah woman. This concept

addresses the issue of when masculinity is translated into womanhood, it is deemed problematic and disruptive (Schippers 95). Judith Halberstam states that when these masculine traits are seen in women they "are framed as the rejected scraps of dominant masculinity" (Halberstam 1). By establishing this rejected status for women masculinities, it is again conveyed that the dominant or hegemonic masculinity is for men only.

Masculinity is rarely a concept in the academic setting, so how are these theories taught? Presumably, it is taught culturally through hierarchies seen socially (via racism and sexism), literatures, movies, television, art, etc. Seeing the accessibility and popularity of movies, movies can be a major tool to learn about the world. And in movies there are an abundance of genres that focus on masculinity through featuring characters such as athletes, warriors, cowboys, and superheroes. Given the popularity of superheroes and the current abundance of these movies, particularly those produced by Marvel Studios, this population provides a basis for how masculinity is understood and taught.

Chapter 2

The Hegemonic Superhero

The most basic message that the Marvel Cinematic Universe conveys is the demographics it is representing, specifically looking at the Avengers team. The Avengers team includes the first four Marvel Cinematic Universe superheroes: Captain America (Steve Rogers), the Hulk (Bruce Banner), Iron Man (Tony Stark) and Thor[9]. These characters were introduced within the first phase of Marvel Studios production, culminating in the first Avengers movie in 2012. Following 2014, Marvel started to expand its cinematic universe but the focus remained on the original four characters with each character having their own individual trilogy (excluding the Hulk which only has a singular stand-alone movies). These characters are very different in regards to their skills, personalities and backgrounds; but they all have a few main things common: being white men. Seeing that this a team of people that stresses strength and masculine traits, it is not surprising that it emulates the concept of hegemonic masculinity.[10] Due to this fictional universe already emulating the structures of masculinity previously discussed, what does it teach not just about society but what it means to be a superhero?

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[9] At the time of publishing (May 2, 2018), the third installment of the Avengers series, Avengers: Infinity War had been recently released on April 27, 2018. With this release being less than a week prior to publishing and this new movie adding approximately ten superheroes to the Avengers team, this movie and the additional characters and their movies will not be included in the current version of this project. The Avengers analyzed will be those included in the Avengers team established in *The Avengers* and *Avengers: the Age of Ultron*.

[10] This that does not mean that these movies are not diverse. There are a multitude of characters that are women and people of color, but in regards to the Avengers they hold supporting roles.

The Avengers: A Breakdown

Superhero	Captain America	The Hulk	Iron Man	Thor
Name	Steve Rogers	Bruce Banner	Tony Stark	Thor, Son of Odin (God of Thunder)
Physical Transformation	Super Soldier Serum	Gamma radiation	Iron Man super suit	God
Abilities	"Physical perfection; able to lift twice his own body weight; expert military strategist; Olympic-level martial artist and gymnast; resistant to disease and fatigue" (Dougall 70)	"Unlimited physical strength...can leap several miles in a single bound. His body heals almost instantly…" (Dougall 172).	"Superhuman strength and durability, jet-boot powered flight, repulsor beams in gauntlets, and chest-mounted uni-beam" (Dougall 190).	"Enhanced strength, near-invulnerability, longevity, and vast magical abilities provided by the Odinforce" (Dougall 368).

Becoming a Superhero

None of the Avengers are born superheroes, they become them. This is not an unfamiliar

concept, seeing the idea that manhood (masculinity) is earned and not predetermined because of

one's identity. Since the Avengers are already deemed men, this step to superhero status

produces another level of masculinity that differentiates them from regular men. This

masculinity comes with the expectation that superheroes are there for the sole purpose of helping

and defending others, one of the many reasons they are looked up to and considered role models.

But this test and transformation are not done without careful thought. Specifically the Avengers

takes four men who are deficient in some way and lessens their weaknesses to create ideal men:

superheroes. Their depicted weakness showcase what society deems deficient and the "solutions" to these weaknesses conveys what society values.

Physically, Steve Rogers (Captain America) and Bruce Banner (the Hulk) are considered weak men. In *Captain America: the First Avenger* (Johnston), the audience first meets Steve Rogers as he attempts to enlist in the U.S. army during the height of World War II. At five feet four inches and ninety pounds, Rogers is significantly shorter and frailer than his peers (fig. 2). Thus it is not

Figure 2: Steve Rogers attempts to enlist in the U.S. Army (Johnston)

a surprise when Rogers is given the classification of 4-F and rejected with the enlistment officer stating he is "saving [Roger's] life" (Johnston). During World War II, the 4-F classification meant the person applying had been, "Rejected for military service; physical, mental, or moral reasons" (Selective). Through this scene, it is clear that Rogers's deficiency is not mental or moral, but due to his physical stature. Not as robust as the other men in the room, Rogers's frailty it highlighted deeming him not fit to serve. His physical strength, something which is frequently associated with masculinity, is being judged and determined by another: the U.S. government. Despite this being wartime and soldiers being only men in this era, Rogers's gender

is not enough to be considered for the army. Essentially, he is not "man enough" lacking the

physical ability and strength to carry out this very masculine duty. In *The Incredible Hulk*

(Leterrier), the audience is not shown much of Bruce Banner's life prior to the existence of his

superhero alter ego, the Hulk. All that is really known is that he worked as a scientist in a lab and

that his Bruce Banner form is still physically the same. Banner is also physically smaller than the

"ideal man" with a height of five feet nine and a half inches and weighing one hundred twenty-

eight pounds. While he is not as a frail as Steve Rogers was, Banner is still not as physically fit

as the other Avengers. Also, his job as a scientist makes him more isolated and less sociable than

his counterparts. The disapproval of this "meek" personality can be seen in General Ross's

disdain for Banner. And seeing General Ross's position in the army, this friction causes a brain

versus brawn conflict in *The Incredible Hulk* (Leterrier). This competition goes back to the

debate Leo Braudy presents: "Who is the ideal man?" (Braudy xiii). And despite the power

Banner possesses intellectually, he does not become a worthy man until he amasses physical

strength.

For the physically fit (and in Stark's case armored), Tony Stark (Iron Man) and Thor, the

transformation of their maturity is the true focus. When the audience first sees Stark in *Iron Man*

(Favreau), he is depicted as a flaky, immature playboy. In one of the first scenes where Tony

Stark is being celebrated for his achievements in the tech and war industry, he is absent to

receive his award. It is then discovered that he is a floor below in the hotel gambling with an

array of women. This moment looks at his immaturity as his leading character flaw, creating a

debate during the entire movie if he should be the one to take over his father's company. Once

his assistant, Pepper Potts, is introduced, it is clear that she is his guiding force making sure he

knows everything he needs to know to manage his day to day life as well as Stark Industries.

And even though he does have some character growth in *Iron Man* (Favreau) and *Iron Man 2*

(Favreau), Stark is only asked to be a consultant on the Avengers team initially with Nick Fury

claiming he is "too impulsive" to be fully included in the superhero team (*Iron Man 2*). Stark has

the strength and smarts to be considered a superhero, but his immaturity proves to be a problem

with him not initially being granted a spot on the Avenger team despite him being the first

superhero introduced in the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

Figure 3: Thor after a failed attempt to pick up Mjolnir (Branagh)

Thor also possess an arrogant immaturity similar to Stark's. Introduced as the Son of Odin, Thor

is both a god and a prince whom is preparing to ascend to the position of king soon. It is made

clear in the first few scenes of *Thor* (Branagh) that he is also impulsive like Stark. Going against

the King's orders, Thor travels to another realm to confront Asgard's. Initially anticipating

control of the situation, Thor's actions ignite a battle between the two realms. His father catches

wind of his son's actions and is able to resolve the situation, saving Thor and his friends. But

further damage between these two realms has been done and Thor is to blame. His father

condemns Thor and his friends stating, "These are the actions of boys" (Branagh). By calling

them "boys," Odin is stripping them of their status of men and diminishing their masculinity. This symbolization is made tangible when Odin dissolves the connection between Thor and his hammer, Mjolnir. Without access to Mjolnir, Thor loses the portion of his strength connected to his status of a god (fig. 3). Odin makes it so "only those worthy of the hammer can possess the power of Thor" (Branagh). This lack of masculinity causes Odin to question Thor's readiness to succeed him stating that he was a "fool for thinking [Thor] was ready" (Branagh). Not only has Thor been stripped of his manhood, but also of his royal status. He is considered not worthy enough to rule because of this deficiency seen in his impulsiveness and thus immaturity. This sequence eventually ends in Thor being disowned and exiled to Earth, which becomes the catalyst for his transformation to super manhood.

Physically, these men do not have natural transformations to super manhood seeing the gain of super powers. Firstly, Thor possesses his super strength because he is a mythical god. Presently, he is the only Avenger that is not human.[11] The power accessible through his hammer Mjolnir is something that is crucial to his identity, but does not weaken him to the point of defeat. He is still able to be a savior without this strength, but with it he is able to access supernatural abilities such as ascending back to his home realm. Tony Stark has some physical transformation, but it is not a biological force that transforms him. Stark's strength as Iron Man derives from the Iron Man suit. In one scene Steve Rogers brings this to the audience's attention yelling at Stark: "What would you be without the suit?" (*The Avengers*). Without this technology Stark created, he is not Iron Man. This means Stark does not have the physical capabilities to fight alongside the others on his own. Essentially, the strength and power that makes him a superhero can be easily

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[11] There is an argument to be made that none of these men are fully human, but Thor is the only one that was not born on Earth and thus cannot be considered human even in the slightest.

removed from his person. This also allows him to maintain two identities: Tony and Iron Man, or

"private man and the public king" respectively (Weltzein 245). A quick costume (or in this case,

suit) change allows a transformation between the two identities with Friedrich Weltzein stating:

> This change transforms the whole personality and is connected with
>
> specific abilities; the new person has a different name, different friends
>
> and enemies, different jobs to do, a completely different mode of
>
> behavior... (Weltzein 233)

The difference in abilities and responsibilities is clear when Stark cannot physically aide the

Avengers when he does not have his suit. While the rest of Weltzein's words hold true for the

first two Iron Man movies, after Stark's incorporation into the Avengers these two identities try

Figure 4: Tony Stark (right) with an empty Iron Man suit (left) (S. Black)

to live alongside one another (fig. 4). Eventually it is realized that this may not be entirely

healthy for Stark, so much so that he creates a suit which can operate without him. With this

physical separation between him and the suit, Stark is able to shed is superhero identity and thus

super masculinity when he does not want it. He eventually leaves some of his superhero duties

behind to more operate as a manager of the Avengers, creating new technology and establishing a headquarters for the team.

Steve Rogers and Bruce Banner both have similar transformations with both being experiments orchestrated by the U.S. government in attempt to create super soldiers. The experiment conducted on Rogers's came at the height of World War II after numerous failed attempts to enlist in the army. His physicality is his flaw, preventing him from enlisting despite a deep passion and sense of obligation to the army. This sense of obligation is seen in Rogers's interactions with recruiting posters during a scene at the World Fair. Firstly, there is a moment where Rogers stares at an Uncle Sam poster that appears to be pointing directly at him. This

Figure 5: Steve Rogers looking at his reflection in a recruitment advertisement (Johnston)

poster holds the famous slogan "I Want YOU For the U.S. Army". This image compels Rogers to attempt to enlist again, but then he is reminded of his physical limitations when he sees reflection among images of soldiers. His stature is a fraction of these men in uniform with his face not being able to fill in the empty mirror staring back at him (fig. 5). This highlights his physical ineptness preventing him from enlisting. Despite this, Rogers enlists again. This

determination does not go unnoticed by Dr. Abraham Erskine, one of the doctors present at the

recruiting station. Dr. Erskine is struck by Rogers's perseverance and dedication to his country.

He goes on to finally admit Steve Rogers into the army. During his boot camp training, Rogers's

physical ability does not rival any of his peers, but his determination, passion and maturity

allows him to be selected for the Super Soldier Program. Erskine applauds Rogers's traits in

stating, ".... [A] strong man who has known power all his life will lose respect for that power, but

the weak man knows the value of strength and knows compassion…" (Johnston). With this

comment Rogers is both commended for his maturity and it is acknowledged that physically he

is weak. To make him into the ideal man, and thus ideal soldier, Dr. Erskine chooses Rogers to

implement his Super Soldier Serum. This serum, injected into the muscles, induces a growth

spurt having him change from a five foot four inch, "ninety pound asthmatic" (Johnston) to a

physically pristine six foot two inch, two hundred forty-pound man (Dougall). Once this

experiment is completed, he is then seen as the ideal man being physically attractive enough for

the women around him to ogle him. This is demonstrated when Agent Peggy Carter goes as far

as to awkwardly reach out to touch his muscular chest (fig. 6). For the U.S. government, boot

Figure 6: Agent Carter (right) reaches out to touch Steve Rogers (left) while a nurse (middle) looks on (Johnston)

camp was a ritual to test Steve Rogers's internal masculinity while this transformation allows for

his internal fortitude to be matched with tangible masculinity: strength. Again, this is also an

artificial and almost supernatural version of masculinity making Steve Rogers transform into

Captain America and become a superhero.

Figure 7: The Hulk (Leterrier)

Although the experiment on Steve Rogers was conducted in the 1940s, the idea of biologically

modified super soldiers is carried on in the Marvel Cinematic Universe with Bruce Banner's

transformation into the Hulk. About six decades after the experiment that created Captain

America, various U.S. government branches and scientist were attempting to create an

experiment to recreate the destroyed Super Serum's effects. Under the instruction of General

Ross, Dr. Bruce Banner is researching how to make "soldiers more resistant to radiation"

(Bruce). Trusting his own experiment, Banner decides to test it on himself. Unfortunately,

General Ross has an ulterior motive: to perfectly recreate the super soldier serum. Unbeknownst

to Banner, the new serum he created has been further modified by General Ross. Once tested

with gamma radiation, the serum and radiation combined accidentally creates the Hulk. The

Hulk surpasses the weight and height of Captain America rising up to eight feet and weighing in at fourteen hundred pounds. This transformation is permanent but the Hulk is not Banner's new form; it merely lives within him. Coming out intermittently during fits of rage, Banner morphs into the Hulk maintaining his hair and facial features but gaining muscles and a green hue to his skin (fig. 7). Despite a super soldier (thus super strength) being Ross's goal, the Hulk is deemed to be too powerful and regarded as a monster. This label is eventually repurposed by Tony Stark who nicknames Banner the "rage monster" (*The Avengers*). But in this moment, the Hulk's status as a monster causes Ross to order for "it" to be hunted down. Luckily, Bruce Banner is able to transform back into his average human form and flees. Unfortunately, he now lives with possibly transforming into a monster at any moment. Unlike Steve Rogers, Banner did not want this strength and views it with shame. He isolates himself while constantly practicing calming practices such as yoga and monitoring his heartbeat. The lengths he takes to prevent transformation into the Hulk is also coupled with self-hatred. During an argument with the team, Banner admits he has attempted suicide in which he discovered that he "cannot die" (*The Avengers*). His self-hatred due to his "condition" continues in the *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, where he regularly regards himself a threat instead of a superhero stating, "Where am I not a threat?" In some cases Bruce Banner is revered for the strength and power the Hulk possesses, but he sees it as a curse. This experiment was not something he was fully informed about and would not have wanted given his reaction to his life afterwards. For Banner, this ascension to super-masculinity came at a cost: his own personhood.

For Tony Stark and Thor, their true transformation is that of maturing. As previously mentioned, Thor is stripped of his supernatural power (Mjolnir) and is banished to Earth. On Earth, Thor

bonds with a crew of scientists and attempts to aid them in their research. The bond he has

created with this group causes him to sacrifice himself when the antagonist, Loki, comes to

Earth. Pleading with Loki to not harm his new friends, Thor presumably dies. This moment of

self-sacrifice conveys that Thor cares more about others than himself, displaying a new sense of

maturity. It allows him to earn back access to his supernatural powers with Mjolnir racing

towards Thor's hand and allowing him to fight off his brother. This maturity also comes with a

sense of humility. When Thor and his father reunite, Thor admits that he will not be a wiser king

or a better father because he has "much to learn" (Branagh). Even though Thor has essentially

gone through his superhero transformation with the testing of his maturity through self-sacrifice

and leadership, he does admit that he is not perfect. There are still some things he needs to be

taught, and he has the willingness and humility to learn.

Figure 8: Tony Stark after surviving being strapped to a missile (The Avengers)

Tony Stark also must mature to fully be accepted as a superhero. A nefarious playboy and flake,

Stark throws outrages parties while DJ-ing in his Iron Man suit and making claims that his

invention of Iron Man has privatized world peace (*Iron Man 2*). Despite still saving people and

being considered a superhero, Nick Fury[12] does not ask him to be a member of the team but only a consultant. Again, it is not until a moment of self-sacrifice where Stark latches himself on a missile during the battle in NYC during *The Avengers* where he is seen to mature (fig. 8). After this, he begins to construct the Avengers headquarters presumably becoming a full member of the team.

Regardless of their initial physical or mental fortitude, all these men had to prove their strength, power and leadership to become superheroes. These transformations and rituals utilized to amass masculinity show what values and expectations different types of people have for those that possess masculinity. In the case of these men, they had to go beyond basic masculinity and excel into a form of super-masculinity to be regarded as superheroes. For Steve Rogers, he has perseverance and determination but lacked physical strength and agility. Bruce Banner is kind and intelligent, and is forced into a life of immeasurable physical strength and power. On the other hand, Tony Stark is intelligent, physically fit, and possesses super abilities through technology in his Iron Man suit, but was not deemed mature enough to handle the leadership superheroes provide. This was also seen in Thor with him being a god and physically capable having supernatural abilities, which are then stripped away until he learns humility and self-sacrifice. This transformations strengthens the idea that to be a superhero one must be physically cable of great things while also being a true leader. Within the Avengers it appears that this can only be achieved by white men.

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[12] The director of the U.S. government agency overseeing the Avengers (SHIELD)

Chapter 3

A Super-Paradigm Shift

At the time of this writing, the Avengers team has not expanded outside the demographic of these white men. This does not mean that there are no other races and genders present in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, but white men are very much the focus. By just looking at the plethora of movies produced by Marvel Studios over the past decade, there is a clear absence of other races and genders, especially when looking at the individual superhero movies. Of the currently released movies, only one has focused on a superhero who is outside this hegemonic superhero group Marvel has created. This superhero would be T'Challa (Black Panther), a black man from the fictional African country, Wakanda. T'Challa had been introduced prior in *Captain America: Civil War* in a supporting role, but in February of 2018 his first movie was released: *Black Panther*. This movie is the first Marvel Studios movie that solely focuses on a black superhero. There has also been a clear gender disparity in the movies Marvel has released thus far, seeing the lack of woman superheroes leading movies.[13] It took ten years for Marvel Studios to introduce a black superhero with his own movie and will take even longer to introduce a woman superhero stand-alone movie. Considering the theory about masculinity being possessed by those who are outside the hegemony, it could have been a purposeful move to wait to diversify until the world was more accepting. But is the world prepared for this venture?

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[13] This is set to change in 2019 with the release of *Captain Marvel,* the first Marvel Cinematic Universe movie to be dedicated to a woman superhero.

Black Panther (Black Masculinity)

First seen in *Captain America: Civil War*, T'Challa (Black Panther) and his storyline are more used as a catalyst for the plot of this movie. Minutes after the audience is introduced to T'Challa as the Prince of Wakanda, his father (the King of Wakanda and current Black Panther) is killed by an explosion. This incident seemingly allows for the ascension of T'Challa to the throne and role of Black Panther. With the release of *Black Panther*, it is discovered that this is not a simple transition. In Wakanda, to become king and the Black Panther, one must prove oneself through ritual battle. The concept of proving oneself through events requiring strength and leadership is seen in masculinity theory as the transition from boyhood to manhood. In this case, this ritual allows one to prove their strength and masculinity thus proving their ability to lead Wakanda. Only once a winner is determined, they are anointed as the new Black Panther and king of Wakanda. The winner has proved their superior masculinity by overcoming their opponent, and only then are the awarded more strength (thus more masculinity) through the supernatural powers of the Black Panther. This society is looking for protection and fortitude from their leader, primarily demonstrated through physical strength. In *Black Panther*, there is not one but two battles for the title of Black Panther and King of Wakanda. These two battles demonstrate how masculinity is evoked differently within different people.

During the initial ritual battle, T'Challa is challenged by M'Baku, the leader of the Jabari tribe. In this battle, M'Baku approaches T'Challa with aggression initially proclaiming that T'Challa should not be allowed to become king since he was unable to save his father, the previous Black Panther and King of Wakanda. With M'Baku's words, there is an obvious distrust and doubt in T'Challa's ability to lead his country. If he was unable to save one man, the most important man

in this country, how is he to be expected to protect an entire country? In an effort to prove that he

should be king, M'Baku displays his physical strength by fighting T'Challa (fig. 9). T'Challa

does not approach their battle in the same way, opting for a more empathic approach. Trying to

Figure 9: M'Baku (left) challenges T'Challa (right) at Warrior Falls (Coogler)

reason with M'Baku, T'Challa is more defensive in his actions and ultimately gains the upper

hand. Holding M'Baku in a chokehold over the waterfall, T'Challa gives him an opportunity to

surrender refusing to send M'Baku to his death. M'Baku finally concedes and slinks back with

his warriors to Gorilla City. By evoking empathy in conjunction with physical strength, T'Challa

shows he can physically defend himself but not without losing reason, a trait crucial to

leadership. His resistance to extreme violence and focus on empathy is what allows for T'Challa

to win this battle and ascend to the throne and role as Black Panther. This suppression of

aggression and strength in favor of empathy mirrors the "toning down" of masculinity people of

color are advised to take when racially profiled by police. T'Challa's actions are very much in

line with Dr. Robert L. Johnson and Dr. Steven Simring's advising steps, specifically "don't

display anger--even if justified" and "don't lose sight of your goal" (Carbado 69). T'Challa is

able to work within these parameters and thus succeeds, M'Baku does not and is struck down. In

this case T'Challa possesses the ideal masculinity: a combination of physical strength and empathy. M'Baku is deemed problematic because he is seen as too violent and aggressive, thus too masculine. Despite these two characters being two black men, M'Baku's masculinity is seen as too aggressive mirroring the United States' dilemma with masculinity present in black people. Due to Wakanda being exclusively populated by black people, masculinity is not racialized like it is in racially diverse regions such as the United States. There is no variance in race in Wakanda due to the homogenous community, thus masculinity in this context predominantly varies based on tribal status. M'Baku's tribe is very much regarded as recluses living on the outskirts of Wakanda, while T'Challa is royalty at the center of this nation. T'Challa has the support of the rest of Wakanda while M'Baku only has the support of his own tribe. This causes T'Challa to be the standard of masculinity while those challenging him are deemed problematic.

Masculinity in Wakanda is not racialized until the character Erik Killmonger arrives. Killmonger was born and raised far removed from Wakanda in Oakland, California, and returns to his father's homeland to claim the throne and position of Black Panther. Arriving shortly after T'Challa is appointed Black Panther and King, Killmonger challenges T'Challa's position as king and Black Panther. This challenge leads to another ritual battle for the title of king and Black Panther. At Warrior Falls, Killmonger asserts his dominance and masculinity through numerous statements and physical actions. Prior to their physical altercation Killmonger states, "I took life from my own brothers and sisters right here on this continent and all this death just so I could kill you" (Coogler). His anger and potential aggression is heard through this statement

and is seen by Killmonger stating this while he is pointing his weapons directly at T'Challa's
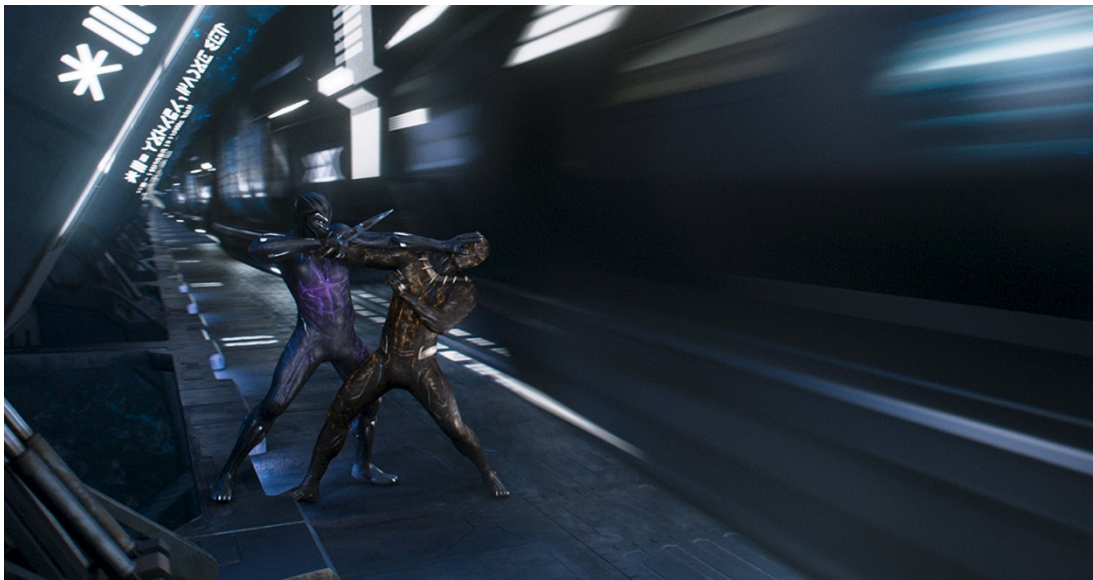

Figure 10: Killmonger (left) and T'Challa (right) battle at Warrior Falls (Coogler)

face. This statement and actions showcase Killmonger's intent, to kill T'Challa and take over

Wakanda. Also, he goes against the customs of this ritual battle by employing two weapons.

T'Challa maintains tradition using a weapon and a shield (fig. 10). These weapon choices are

clear visual indicators to the level of masculinity these characters possess. While T'Challa takes

the traditional route with both protection and aggression, Killmonger goes into this battle with

two modes of aggression and no protection. This surplus of aggression is easily seen as a surplus

of masculinity, considering this weapon provides a physical advantage in ritual battle designed to

test the strength and leadership (aka masculinity) of the contenders. This surplus of masculinity

aligns with the stereotypes of black masculinity as being too aggressive. Killmonger steps into

this stereotype, being depicted as a rogue black man looking to avenge his father's death and the

racial oppression he had to face outside of Wakanda. With these motivating forces, Killmonger

exercises his "surplus" masculinity over T'Challa's more repressed standard masculinity. During

their battle while T'Challa is struggling at the base of the waterfall, Killmonger questions their

audience demanding to know "Is this your king?" (Coogler). He repeats this question as T'Challa

continues to fails to rise to defend himself, and adds the lines "The Black Panther? The one who

is supposed to lead you into the future?" (Coogler). This repetitive statements undermine

T'Challa's masculinity through questioning his physical strength and leadership, both which he

is lacking to display in this battle. Again, he questions T'Challa's leadership stating, "Him? He is

supposed to protect you? Nah, I'm your king" (Coogler). Prior to Black Panther's ultimate

defeat, Killmonger taunts their audience claiming the throne while their king is withering on the

ground. In a final attempt to attack Killmonger, T'Challa is thrown by Killmonger off the

waterfall and to his death. With many horrified looks from the battle audience, including those

from T'Challa's mother and sister, Killmonger claims his right to the throne and position of

Black Panther due to the defeat of T'Challa.

Figure 11: T'Challa (left) and Killmonger (right) battle for the title of Black Panther (Coogler)

This battle of the masculinities does not end here, but continues once T'Challa is resurrected. In

this final battle, both characters are regarded as Black Panther so both are outfitted in a Black

Panther suit. T'Challa has opted for a silver version that is more covert than Killmonger's

flashier gold version (fig. 11). These suits become symbols of these two men's differing

masculinities. T'Challa is seen as more reserved in his masculinity reflected in the subtlety of the silver suit while Killmonger relies heavily on aggression, thus being more ostentatious with the donning of the gold suit. Battling in the underground train system, there are some moments when these men do not have the defense of their high-tech suits. In one of these moments, Killmonger yells at T'Challa "I don't need a suit to kill you" (Coogler). Killmonger's statement suggests that he does not need the technological power of Black Panther to kill T'Challa, his biological strength and masculinity is already enough. This statement proves to be untrue with T'Challa being the victor in this portion of the battle due to Killmonger becoming hurt enough to surrender. T'Challa offers to heal Killmonger, Killmonger refuses instructing him to "bury me in the ocean where my ancestors jumped from ships because they knew death was better than bondage" (Coogler). This surrender becomes an ultimate surrender, leading to Killmonger's death.

In both sets of ritual battles, T'Challa is depicted as the more favorable opponent with his empathy and lack of aggression. This tone down version of masculinity is favored, with the aggression conveyed through M'Baku and Killmonger depicted as an opposing force. Regardless of their similarities, M'Baku and Killmonger are not demonized in the same manner. M'Baku is depicted as a slight nuisance and is spared death. Killmonger is regarded as a threat and enemy to Wakanda, eventually being killed. The difference between these two characters is seen in the difference in their ethnicity and racialization as black men. M'Baku is from Wakanda, an African nation untouched by colonization thus white people. Since this nation is homogenous racially and ethnically, there is structure of hierarchy racially or ethnically. This homogeny ends with Killmonger, an African American man who grew up to understand his race through racism in the

United States. Killmonger comes in to Wakanda as an ethnic and racial outsider, born in California to a Wakandian and an American woman. Growing up in Oakland, California; Killmonger is made very aware of his race and the oppression black people around the world face. This is what drives him to go to Wakanda to claim the throne, specifically to provide aid to the African diaspora. Despite this being a valiant effort, Killmonger is still demonized due to his differing ethnicity and racial identity. Even in a movie centered on black superheroes and power, black masculinity is still conveyed as problematic through the one outsider, Killmonger, being the main villain. The demonization and subsequent death of Killmonger demonstrates a rejection of his masculinity. By rejecting this form of masculinity, this movie deems the African-American man too aggressive and problematic once again.

Wonder Woman (Masculinity in Women)[14]

Released in 2017, *Wonder Woman* is the first feature length movie centered on a woman superhero. A character from DC Comics (Marvel's main rival), Wonder Woman exists in the same universe as Batman and Superman. At the time of this writing, Marvel Studios had just announced the start of production for *Captain Marvel*, its first movie centered on a woman superhero. Seeing that both Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel are both the first women superheroes in their cinematic universes, it seems pertinent to analyze how Wonder Woman is received to predict how Captain Marvel may be received. Specifically looking at the social media site Twitter, posts (tweets) regarding *Wonder Woman* and *Thor: the Dark World* were gathered and compared.[15] Both sets of tweets are limited to including two weeks' worth of posts,

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[14] Due to Captain Marvel (Boden) not being released until next year, Wonder Woman will be substituted in to examine women superheroes.

[15] This sequel to Thor was chosen because Thor is also a god like Wonder Woman and the usage of Twitter as promotion for Marvel movies did not dominate until following the first Avengers movie (2012).

the week prior to and after the premiere of each movie. Created with a preliminary list of accounts which focus on superheroes and pop culture, this list expanded to include accounts that were following one another. Tweets are included if they mention a character's name or an actor's names.[16][17] Other terms included are those that are determined to be frequent in the discussion of Wonder Woman: hot and sexy. The analyzation of this data is set to compare how audiences talk women superheroes versus men superheroes. Given the criticism of women having masculine traits in masculinity theory, it was thought that this critique would also be present in these tweets. This could be seen in the lack of tweets about Wonder Woman, mix reaction to her masculine traits (strength, power, strong, leadership, etc.), and focus on her femininity (seen through objectification or mention of her romantic plotline).

Despite *Wonder Woman* being a highly anticipated release, within these parameters *Thor: The Dark World* is discussed more on Twitter. Wonder Woman amassed 1,163 tweets while Thor had an additional 345 posts amassing 1,508 tweets. Given the rising popularity between the release of these two movies (2017 and 2013, respectively), it was anticipated that with Wonder Woman would be discussed more given it is the more recent movies. Regardless of this and its highly anticipated release, this sequel to Thor was discussed more online prior to and following its release. This difference in tweets conveys a higher interest in Thor than Wonder Woman, at least in discussions online. Despite more discussion around Thor, "hero" was mentioned more in the tweets referring to Wonder Woman at a rate of four times as much. Wonder Woman had a

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[16] The characters focused on were Wonder Woman (Diana Prince) and Thor along with their significant others Steve Trevor and Jane Foster, respectively. The actors included were those of each of these characters, Gal Gadot, Chris Hemsworth, Chris Pine and Natalie Portman.

[17] Given the controversy surrounding Gadot's involvement in the Israel Defense Forces, both Israel and IDF were excluded.

greater percentage of tweets with the word "hero" included with about five percent (5.1%) while "hero" was mentioned among the Thor tweets at just over one percent (1.2%). While Thor was being discussed more, Wonder Woman was being received as a hero more frequently. This complexity of reactions is further seen in the numerous joint searches conducted in this data collection.

To examine the reaction to Wonder Woman's masculinity, some key masculinity traits (and their variants) were searched in both sets of tweets. Considering the negative reception of women with masculine traits in masculinity theory, it was assumed that terms such as leader, strength, strong, muscle, and power would yield lower percentages in Wonder Woman's tweet collection. Neither leader nor strength were terms mentioned in both sets of tweets. A variant of strength, "strong" was also featured in this search. Thor had a higher rate of this term being mentioned at a rate 0.6%. This is about six times as more frequent than for Wonder Woman, with "strong" being mentioned at a rate of 0.1%. Thor's strength was further stressed with his character having the singular post including the term "muscle." Despite this focus on physical strength with Thor, Wonder Woman surpassed Thor with the mention of "power." "Power" was mentioned at a rate of 0.5% in the Wonder Woman tweets, a little more than double the percentage of "power" being mentioned in regard to Thor (0.2%). Other mentions of power through other words, such as powerful and empowerment, refer to Wonder Woman (1.4%) about five times more frequently than Thor (0.3%). These comparisons show that typically masculine terms (specifically "strong" and "muscle") are still heavily linked to men through their abundance in the Thor twitter data set. Regardless, power is more frequently paired with Wonder Woman. This is not only through the world power alone, but also empowerment and powerful. Of the terms evaluated, power has its

ties to masculinity but it is not as concrete as strength, muscles, and other physical descriptors of strength. Given the perception of women with masculine traits, it is unsurprising that if masculine traits were to be used to describe a woman superhero it would be one only loosely linked to masculinity. Regardless, the use of the term power on its own or in other words such as powerful and empower highlight the immense emotional reaction to *Wonder Woman* (Jenkins 2017). Considering the mixed reaction to Wonder Woman's masculinity, these tweets were also analyzed to examine the reaction to her appearance. This was looked at in regards to objectification, highlighting the terms "sexy" and "hot." Seeing how women are more often objectified in various media outlets, it was assumed this would be reflected in reactions to one of the few woman superheroes. Remarkably, Wonder Woman and Thor had the same percentages for both terms. "Hot" was mentioned at a rate of 0.3% and "sexy" was referred to at a rate of 0.1%. Both superheroes, regardless of their genders, are objectified at the same rate. Despite this Wonder Woman's looks were more so focused on than her abilities. These objectifying terms (hot and sexy) combined (0.4%) are mentioned more so than strong and muscles (0.1%) in the tweets for Wonder Woman. This is the opposite for the Thor tweets with the discussion more so focused on strong and muscles (0.7%) and not on his looks (0.4%). This difference in the discussion of appearance and ability demonstrates that despite a woman superhero having the same powers as a man superhero, there is more attention focused on her physical appearance. And while the man superhero's looks might be discussed at a similar rate, his strength is a more popular discussion point.

This lack of focus on abilities for less important topic is also seen in the discussion of certain minor plotlines. When comparing Wonder Woman and Thor, it became clear that there is a

difference in how often romantic plotlines are discussed. Both superheroes have love interest of the opposite gender, Steve Trevor (Wonder Woman) and Jane Foster (Thor). In both movies these characters have significant roles, Steve Trevor acts as a sidekick while Jane Foster is both a sidekick and a victim. Following the release of *Wonder Woman*, there were a few critiques about how much attention Steve Trevor was allotted. To further analyze that hot topic, the tweets mentioning "romance," the superheroes' significant others and their pairings were evaluated. Romance was mentioned more in tweets concerning Wonder Woman at a rate of 0.3%, where this term was not mentioned at all in the twitter data set for Thor. In spite of the similar setup these superheroes have with their love interests, romance is still of more concern when it is a woman protagonist and man love interest. The pairings of Wonder Woman & Steve (Trevor) and Thor & Jane (Foster) were discussed at about the same rate, 0.8% and 0.9% respectively. This mention of the romantic couples at a similar rate oddly contradicts the high level of the term "romance" being in the Wonder Woman tweets.

To further inspect the discussion of romance and significant other's in these storylines, the tweets were also searched to see how frequently each significant other, Steve (Trevor) and Jane (Foster) are mentioned. Despite the pairs being mentioned almost equally, Steve Trevor is mentioned more frequently than Jane Foster. Trevor is mentioned at a rate of 1.8% while Foster is mentioned at a rate of 1.2%. This establishes that Wonder Woman's love interest has peaked interest 1.5 times more than Thor's love interest. Although the couples are mentioned almost equally, the discussion of love interests and romance is more concentrated when it is a woman superhero at the helm. Out of the twenty five tweets mentioning Steve Trevor, only sixteen also mention Wonder Woman. This means 44% of the tweets discussing Steve Trevor were solely

discussing him, with no mention of Wonder Woman. This was remarkably different than the results for Jane Foster, with her being featured in twenty-eight tweets and twenty-two mentioning Thor as well. The percentage of tweets only mentioning Foster are 21%, a little less than half that solely mentioned Steve Trevor. Steve Trevor is not only Wonder Woman's love interest, but also a man. Thus with him being mentioned more, Steve Trevor dominates the discussion surrounding Wonder Woman more so than Jane Foster does for Thor. This establishes a man as a major discussion point in a woman led movie, and the same amount of attention is not allotted for a woman love interest in a man led movie. This is a concern seeing the multiple opposite gender couples in the superhero universe, and the increase in woman superheroes. Assuming these new woman superheroes are also in opposite-gender relationships, how much focus will be paid to their romantic life and love interest versus their abilities and accomplishments?

These reactions raise some concerns regarding how *Captain Marvel,* Marvel's first woman superhero with her own movie*,* will be received. Wonder Woman is "the first [woman] superhero to get her own movie in either of the two shared universes from rivals DC and Marvel" (Spiegel). Also, this movie was released in 2017, four years after *Thor: The Dark World*'s release. Due to social media's rise in popularity during this time and the monumental-ness of the movie, it was to be expected there would be more tweets for Wonder Woman through discussion and advertising. This was not the case, and it is worrisome there will be a lack of discussion about *Captain Marvel*. The focus of this discussion is also cause for concern seeing the disregard of Wonder Woman's masculine-esque abilities in favor of discussing her love life and love interest. This rejection of masculinity in women is not new, frequently seen in the negative terms

surrounding women evoking masculine attributes ("pariah [woman]," bitch, slut, etc.) The lack of discussion is replaced by a hyper focus on romantic plotline and man love interest. Despite woman love interests contributing as much to these superhero plot lines, when the love interest is a man and the superhero is woman there appears to be more attention on this relationship. This ignorance of the abilities of a woman superhero while discussing their love lives more frequently demonstrates there is a problem with how women superheroes are seen. Their masculinity is toned down through this lack of discussion, and their existence as the object of a man's affection is more discussed. In doing so, these discussions convey that audiences do not treat women superheroes the same as men superheroes. This establishes a problematic model for discussions of *Captain Marvel* to follow. The only challenges to this model are the frequency in which power and hero are being used when discussing woman superhero movies. This higher rate of both terms shows there are many that recognize the importance of woman superheroes, and acknowledge their power and role. Ideally following the release of *Captain Marvel,* conversations about Marvel's first woman superhero will have progressed towards acknowledging the masculinity in women positively and giving women their focus. All that is known at the moment is women superheroes' power, heroism and impact does and will not go unnoticed.

Burden of Representation

Despite representing different communities (with some overlap), *Black Panther* and *Wonder Woman* are regularly paired together in recent discussions of representation in media and its significance. Both movies stray from the norm of white men in superhero movies in both their actors and crew. *Black Panther* is directed by a black man, Ryan Coogler, while *Wonder Woman*

is directed by a white woman, Patty Jenkins. These director choices also signify milestones in the film industry with Jenkins being the first woman director of a major studio superhero movie in America and Coogler being one of the few directors of color in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (Strauss). As these movies receive significant financial success, the identity of these directors are highlighted along with these movies' accomplishments. *Wonder Woman* currently holds the title of the highest grossing live-action movie directed by a woman.[18] The amount of money gross by Wonder Woman also made it the highest earning superhero origin movie until Black Panther was released in February 2018. With the release of *Black Panther*, the movie broke numerous box office records grossing 665.4 million dollars domestically and surpassing 1 billion globally (Pallotta).[19] These earnings have secured *Black Panther* the titles of highest grossing superhero movie (Rubin) and third highest grossing movie in North America (Pallotta). It is also set to become "the highest-grossing film made by an African American" with Ryan Coogler at the helm (Turner-Lee). Between their overall earnings and records shattered, these movies have shattered disproved the age-old myth that movies focused on "niche" populations, i.e. women and people of color, do not do well. This myth was addressed by actress Cate Blanchett in her Oscar's acceptance speech in 2014, stating:

> 'And thank you to ... those of us in the industry who are still foolishly clinging to the idea that [women] movies, with women at the center, are niche experiences. They are not — audiences want to see them and, in fact, they earn money. The world is round, people.' (Wilkinson)

These earnings from Wonder Woman and Black Panther prove that the idea of a "niche population" is fallible. The sheer magnitude of these movies' earnings display that audiences want to see other identities onscreen and are coming out in droves.

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[18] This achievement was reported on June 25, 2017, twenty-three days after the movie was released in which it had already grossed 635 million dollars worldwide (Stefansky).

[19] As reported on April 8th, 2018

This success is not only seen financially but through praise regarding the representation these movies create for marginalized communities. This praise is commonly seen from movie-goers and frequently showcased on social media. Following the release of *Wonder Woman*, numerous interactions involving young children and the movie became viral sensations. A few days after the release of Wonder Woman, Patty Jenkins posted a list to Twitter from her producer. This list
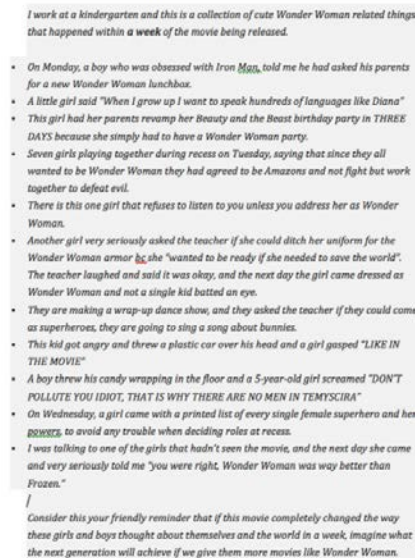

Figure 12: The list

(fig. 12) detailed a kindergarten teacher's observations in their classroom in the wake of Wonder Woman (Vagianos). It showcases the influence of *Wonder Woman* on not only the girls in this classroom, but all the students. At the end of this list the teacher states:

> Consider this your friendly reminder that if this movie completely changed the way these girls and boys thought about themselves and the world in a week, imagine what the next generation will achieve if we give them more movies like Wonder Woman. (@pattyjenks)

This addresses the need for inclusion in movies, specifically those with superheroes which young children admire.

Figure 13: A young girl (left) being comforted by Gal Gadot (right) (Variety)

The admiration for Wonder Woman does not cease there. Following the release of *Wonder Woman*, a young girl dressed as Wonder Woman is seen in a viral video being comforted by Gal Gadot, the actress who portrays Wonder Woman (fig.13). This young girl is so overcome by meeting the actress of Wonder Woman, her emotions become tangible seen in her tears. Gal Gadot, as well as her co-star Ezra Miller from the upcoming *Justice League* movie, comfort this girl with reassuring statements. Ezra Miller even states, "You're a warrior. Your ability to cry is what makes you such a warrior. Come join the Justice League whenever you get ready" (Variety). This moment demonstrates how much of an emotional impact actors have through roles such as Wonder Woman, demonstrating their representation and symbolize for those typically underrepresented.

This significance is also seen in *Black Panther* with its inclusion of people of color at the center of a superhero narrative. Predominantly set in a fictional African country, Ryan Coogler intricately included numerous homages to various real African countries and cultures. Firstly, a percentage of the dialogue is in another language: Xhosa. This language is one of the official

languages of South Africa, with its usage being one of the modes of resistance to white English speaking colonizers during the apartheid movement (Eligon). The inclusion of African culture did not stop there, being very present in the attire of the Wakandaian tribes. Through these costumes, the movie was able to draw from numerous apparel choices throughout the continent to represent Wakandaian culture. Drawing from the Zulu tribe to the Lesotho tribe for inspiration, items such as the queen's headpiece and characters' blankets have great cultural significance in African culture that are now showcased cinematically in Wakandian culture. Colors also have important significance among the tribes, with the Pan African flag being presented via costumes centered on black, green and red. These colors represent the protagonists while blue is seen in the antagonists' costumes, with the director stating that this "[represents] the police and authority" (Ryzik).[20] Seeing the use of blue as a symbol for the antagonists, this provides commentary on police brutality in the United States and its effects on black people. The acknowledgement of this form of racism recognizes a struggle of black people residing outside the continent of Africa.

This acknowledgement of black culture outside of Africa continues in the name Black Panther. The Black Panther Party was established a few months after the character of Black Panther was introduced into the Marvel comics. Very much a product of the politics of its time, Black Panther was introduced into pop culture during the height of the Black Power movement in the United States in "which 'black' became a defining adjective to express the political and cultural shift in the civil rights movement" (Nama 42). With all events taking place in 1966, the Lowndes

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[20] In the United States, the color blue has become synonymous with police following the creation of the "Blue Lives Matter" movement, which focus on the lives of police officers in the aftermath of the "Black Lives Matter" movement.

County Freedom Organization adopted imagery of the black panther first in April and by July the

character of Black Panther had been introduced in an issue of the popular Marvel comic,

Fantastic Four. The establishment of the Black Panther Party was not until October of this year,

taking on the imagery from the Lowndes County Freedom Organization. Despite this overlap,

there are no direct ties between this organization and the superhero. Regardless, this movie does

honor the perceived ties and has become a symbol for black power. Ryan Coogler directly

acknowledges this by including the poem "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" by Gil Scott-

Heron in the trailer. This Black Power slogan turned poem becomes the soundtrack to Black

Panther racing to save the day, with these specific lyrics being heard:

> You will not be able to stay home, brother
> You will not be able to plug in, turn on and drop out
> Because the revolution will not be televised

Specifically representing black culture from African tribal wear to the American Black Power

movement, it is no surprise *Black Panther* has become an iconic movie for black culture. From

Nairobi, Kenya (fig. 14) to Oakland, California (fig. 15), theaters are filling up to see this movie

with black children outfitted in Black Panther costumes in the front row.

Figure 14: Movie goers in Nairobi watching Black Panther (Chiba)

Figure 15: A father and son prior to the premiere of Black Panther in Oakland (Trinca)

The significance of Black Panther has not gone unnoticed, especially seen in recent social media trending topics such as #WhatBlackPantherMeanstoMe, which was started by the creator of the organization Black Girl Nerds (McNeal). This trend, hosted on the social media site Twitter, began prior to the release of the movie. Capturing unfiltered thoughts and emotions, these posts demonstrate the sheer emotional significance of seeing a black superhero on the big screen.

Twitter user @djbenhameen posted:

> Can you imagine being a little brown child and seeing Black Panther, only to find out that the creators look like you? That the director has the thickest Oakland accent ever? That the production was filled with black people? #WhatBlackPantherMeansToMe (@djbenhameen)

This sentiment is widely seen throughout this trending topic, with many also highlighting the significance of STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) and women in the movie. These posts quickly turned to a call for action directed at Marvel Studios to send some of the profits from *Black Panther* back into black communities. This campaign, #BreakBreadMarvel, called for a quarter of the profits made from *Black Panther* to be invested in black communities (Sign). As of March, Marvel Studios' parent company, Disney, pledged one million dollars to the Boys & Girls Clubs of America. This organization announced they would be using this funding to establish STEM centers in "12 cities including Atlanta, Baltimore, Chicago, Los Angeles, the District of Columbia, Memphis, and Oakland" (Iasevoli). Not only does this movie provide positive representation onscreen, but some of its profits will be used to provide services to the communities it represents.

Despite these movies providing ground-breaking representation in the world of superhero movies, it has not been without criticism. A majority of this criticism stems from racism and sexism, but others claim that there is not enough representation. *Wonder Woman* has been

particularly criticized for not being intersectional, focusing predominantly on white women.
There are women of color present but the roles they hold are typically subservient to the white
women. Specifically, one of the black women characters is Wonder Woman's childhood
caretaker and her only lines include repeatedly calling "Diana!" Outside of this, there are only
three others spoken by women of color before they disappear from the movie as a whole
(Griffiths). Once Wonder Woman leaves her home, there are barely any women to be seen
besides Steve Trevor's secretary, Etta Candy, and the main villain, Dr. Maru. This sets up
Wonder Woman to be surrounded by men throughout the remainder of the movie. This focus on
only one type of women also became a critique from the queer community. In the comics,
Wonder Woman is known to be bisexual but in this movie the only love interest is Steve Trevor.
There is some allusion to queerness mentioned in a passing comment, but it is never addressed
directly. By suppressing this part of her identity, the movie essentially ignores this community,
similarly to how women of color are ignored.

> Sadly, all of these opportunities were missed, and instead we got a movie that was
> as white and heteronormative as every other superhero movie we've seen. So yes,
> *Wonder Woman* is a great victory for women. Yes, it's a historic landmark that a
> superhero movie starring a woman and directed by a woman blew up at the box
> office the way we all knew movies like this could. And yes, I hope that *Wonder
> Woman* opens the door for more women-led movies with [women] directors at the
> helm. But no, Wonder Woman wasn't a great victory for *all* women. And we're
> doing all women a disservice by pretending that it was. (Griffiths)

Another disservice to women is the villainy of one of the only other women in the movie, Dr.
Maru. A highly skilled chemist, Maru is one of the main villains of this movie. Her main
character trait outside of being evil is her use of partial face mask to cover a facial disfigurement.
Dr. Maru's mask and isolation in her lab is very much the focus of her character, outside of her
disfigurement. In interviews with the cast and crew, it becomes apparent that this disfigurement
is the direct cause of Dr. Maru's evil nature: her poisonous gas. After testing it on herself, her

face is permanently disturbed (T. Robinson). With her evil creation creating this disfigurement, Dr. Maru literally has evil seeped into her body. Thus Dr. Maru is not only a villain, but symbolizes the evil she creates through this physical attribute. By portraying this deformity as being synonymous with evil, this movie relies on the tired trope that disfigured people are inherently evil due to their visual deformities. In an article written by a woman with a facial disfigurement, she critiques the movie's representation stating:

> As someone with a facial difference, I know many people with facial disfigurements and scarring, and not one of them is, or has become evil, because of the appearance of their face. The only evil most of us have experienced has been at the hands of a society that refuses to accept us. (Henley)

Again, Wonder Woman has missed an opportunity to better represent society as a whole in a groundbreaking movie.

This type of criticism is also seen in reactions to *Black Panther*. Although there was considerable care that went into this movie, the queer community groups still felt unrepresented. In the most recent set of Black Panther comics, the minor character Ayo "is a woman who has a romantic relationship with another woman" (Broadnax). Despite this storyline, there is no representation of that onscreen. This character, Ayo, is seen infrequently and when she is there is no inclination of a romantic partner. Following the release of the movie, there is speculation that there was a scene suggesting her attraction to women, but it did not make it into the final version of the movie. There is an argument that there was too much to fit in the first Black Panther movie, and it may be included in the sequel. Nonetheless, the queer community has voiced their concerns about being excluded from the world of Wakanda.

These reactions to *Wonder Woman* and *Black Panther* demonstrates that these movies are held to a high standard commercially and representationally. While Captain America, Thor, Iron Man and the Hulk were scheduled to have multiple movies by Marvel Studios; Black Panther and Wonder Woman had to earn their sequels through their box office gross. This is seen in the predetermination of the Avengers sequels, while Black Panther and Wonder Woman's sequels were not announced until following their box office success. Due to this there is no room for them to be rated poorly or flounder at the box office because then there will not be another. This pressure is not put on the Avengers seeing they have already been allotted their sequels. Prior to their releases, there are already plans for sequels regardless of performance in reviews, at the box office or nominations for awards. By making this process more difficult on the movies focused on marginalized superheroes, the studios make it clear that white men superhero movies are more highly values regardless of performance. This emulates the hierarchy of masculinity, but this time reflected in who is deemed to be a worthwhile superhero.

Also like masculinity theory, those outside of the white man identity are more harshly criticized. This is demonstrated in the better representation and inclusivity expected from movies with underrepresented identities at the lead. While most of these criticisms also applaud these movies strides for diversity in superhero movies, they call for these movies and filmmakers to take it a step further with other identities and intersectionality. How frequently is that seen for other superhero movies? Can one say they have seen a criticism of the *Thor* movies for excluding people of color? Or *Iron Man* for its gender disparities? Not conclusively. Typically the critiques on superheroes focus on the comics and/or the violence present. These critiques are then explained away considering the historical context of some of the plotlines and use of superheroes

to popularize war efforts (B. Wright 44). When these movies are criticized it is more so for the presence of violence, seen in the categorization of *The Avengers* as a war movie by writer Ensley F. Guffey and the movie's own director, Joss Whedon (Guffey). Not much is to be said about the lack of people of color and women in superheroes, especially in these movies. They are not held to the standards of woman or people of color superhero movies. With hegemonic masculinity infiltrating into the fictional world, and why isn't that questioned? Considering the critiques of these movies that do break barriers and show other identities onscreen, why are these movies that severely lack inclusion and diversity not also analyzed and critiqued? Why is better representation demanded from movies that do represent marginalized groups but not from movies which solely focus on white men?

Chapter 4

The Superhero Effect

Superheroes are regularly regarded as role models, an ideal that all should aspire to be. But who encapsulates these ideals? As demonstrated in the previous chapters, white men tend to take up the majority of superhero movies. They are a central focus in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, seen in the current demographics of the movies as a whole and the Avengers team specifically. Presently this team consists of four white men; Tony Stark (Iron Man), Steve Rogers (Captain America), Bruce Banner (the Hulk) and Thor. Much like the theory of masculinities, people of color and non-men are left on the outskirts in this realm. This exclusion is seen in the decade long wait for this studio to produce movies not focused on white men, *Black Panther* and *Captain Marvel*. Through this exclusion, the hierarchy of masculinities is clearly demonstrated in the fictional world of superheroes. With this hierarchy entering the fictional world, it allows for reality to influence media, specifically superheroes. This world emulates the world the audience currently lives in, focusing on the ideals already present. This mirroring shows a distinct relationship between reality and fiction and their influences on one another. But which came first? Does reality mirror fiction, fiction mirror reality, or both? Fiction and reality are clearly working together to spread a certain message, but does it come through? And most importantly, does it affect audiences?

Theories

The concern over the impact of media has been a consistent theme throughout history. Typically thought of as a modern issue, concern over media's influence pre-dates the motion picture industry (television and movies) by being referenced in ancient times. One of the first incidents of worry is seen in ancient Greece with Plato "[proposing] to ban the dramatic poets from his ideal republic on the grounds of their negative influence on impressionable young minds" (Buckingham 26). While Plato's motion to ban dramatic poets can be considered an act of censorship, the initiative shows that there is a distinction between victim and harming force. In this case, media (via dramatic poetry) is the assailant being a "negative influence" and "young minds," children, are those that must be protected. This desire to protect "young minds" from certain media is still being acted upon centuries later.

Presently, academics are still advocating for "young minds" in the realm of media. This can be seen in the work of Dafna Lemish, a researcher in gender identity construction in media, devoting their work to study this relationship. In her book, *Screening Gender on Children's Television*, Lemish notes that media is how most children begin to "define [...] what is "normal" and accepted in society" (Lemish 1). As mentioned prior, media consistently relies on the structures present in reality to build fictional spaces. Thus with Lemish's claim, media also reflects back into society by defining and teaching what is normal and accepted. This creates a cycle with societal ideals being conveyed through media representation that is then shown to audiences to demonstrate how society should be. There are some instances of progressive content challenging this cycle, but a majority of media consumed is still heavily influenced by structures already present in society. By showing what is widely accepted and normalized by society, this

kind of content "[seeks] -- consciously or unconsciously -- to preserve the existing social order,

and hence the media become a mechanism of social control" (Lemish 7). This social control is

very much seen in what is represented in media and how often it is consumed. This social control

is subtle, seen in "[misrepresenting] human complexity and [offering] simplistic but

compellingly constructed storylines" (Newton 197).

Visually, complexity is ignored in lack of diversity onscreen, primarily in race and gender. In a

study focused on "gender prevalence and portrayal of G-rated (general viewing) movies in the

US (those deemed appropriate for children)" reported that only twenty eight percent of speaking

parts were allocated to women characters. And women characters in "television created for

children in the US" make up a third of this population, with men characters being seen twice as

much (Lemish 2). Race is also crucial with another study reporting that Caucasian characters

heavily populated children's television globally at a significant seventy-two percent (Lemish 3).

This majority of characters that are white and men creates an inaccurate world onscreen, and in

doing so represents what society idolizes. Lemish supports this by writing:

> ….the constant presentation of values and role models may serve as a significant
> contribution to reinforcement and internalization as well as normalization and
> legitimation of the current social structure and its underlying patriarchal ideology.
> (Lemish 15)

As mentioned prior, media can be used as a mode of social control by showcasing restrictive

roles onscreen. Lemish further expands that idea but looking at media as a tool of reinforcement

of certain cultural ideals and social structure; one which is rooted in racism, sexism and other

modes of oppression. This is seen through constant bombardment of stereotypical characters,

tropes and storylines rooted in these modes of oppression. In the case of media, those in control

would be the directors, writers, and producers. The images these content makers produce are

representative of their concept of society and through showcasing these ideas, however good or

bad, there is a continued learning of the way society is or should be.

The idea of media as social control has allowed it to become a scapegoat for a multitude of

issues. David Buckingham, a lecturer in Media Education at London University, states:

> [Media] is routinely blamed, not merely for violence and delinquency, but also for the
> decline of the family and of organized religion, for the propagation of racism, sexism,
> militarism, consumerism, and just about any other objectionable ideology one might care
> to name. (Buckingham 25)

In this quotation media is directly linked to multiple issues, seemingly to be credited as the

reason for each one. This blame is extreme, depicting media as having a villainous role in

society. Buckingham goes on to argue the exact opposite. He challenges Lemish and Plato's

instinct to shield young minds from the media. To do this, Buckingham deconstructs the idea that

children are "mere passive victims" in this scenario (Buckingham 26).

> To see children's relationship with television solely in terms of its 'effects', however, is
> to assume that it carries the same meaning for all who watch it--that meaning is simply
> produced as an automatic 'response' to a fixed and straightforward 'stimulus.'
> (Buckingham 26)

Since no child is the same, there is no distinct way a child reacts to media. There is resistance

seen, internally and contextually, in how diverse and ambiguous these reactions can be. This also

implies some level of critical thinking by children, processing and analyzing what one takes

away from media's messages. Media's influence is not an automatic process and at times

"massively overstated" (Buckingham 26). While Lemish and Plato have very cut and dry

arguments that media influences young people, Buckingham is not as easily convinced.

Essentially, he disagrees with media having massive influence and with its messages actually

being internalized. This disagreement poses two questions: 1) is media actually internalized by young audiences? And 2) if so, are there clear messages present and are they absorbed as well?

To address these two questions, I conducted a study and survey with two populations: elementary school students and undergraduate college students.[21] Employing the theories of Lemish, Plato and Buckingham, this study and survey focused on the messages conveyed through the masculinity hierarchy present in the movies previously analyzed and who is considered a superhero. Seeing the abundance of superhero media (primarily through movies and TV shows) and lack of diversity in superheroes, it was anticipated that the elementary students would mainly draw already established characters with a focus on white men. The college students were assumed to have a similar reaction, listing many superhero movies previously seen and acknowledging a lack of diversity and representation in the movies. Also, it was predicted that they would show a preference for these movies being more inclusive and diverse.

Study

At the elementary school, the study was conducted with four classrooms at four different grade levels: kindergarten, first, third, and fourth grade. Consent forms were distributed to parents where they were able to provide permission for their child to participate as well as disclose their age and race.[22] Gender was determined by roster identification provided by their teacher. These

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[21] Both populations are at institutions in upstate New York. The elementary school is a public institution while the college is a private Catholic-affiliated institution.

[22] In the style of the U.S. census, parents and participants were also asked to identify if the participant is Spanish/Hispanic/Latino. With people of Latino descent being included in the people of color (a person who is not white or of European parentage) community, there was interest to see if answers varied based on this attribute. Despite Spanish/Hispanic/Latino being grouped together, they do not mean the same thing. Spanish means the person is of Spanish descent, Hispanic means this person speaks Spanish, and Latino means the person is of Latin American descent. While similar, these identity markers are not interchangeable. Since the categorization of Spanish

participants were instructed to draw what they believe a superhero looks like. Those who

participated produced multiple drawings and labels were provided for each superhero drawn. All

drawings were completed on standard white copy paper with crayons, markers and colored

pencils provided as well as available in the classroom. This task was purposely ambiguous to see

if there is inclination to draw already established superheroes, oneself, or construct a new

superhero. This study was conducted to see if onscreen representation is recognized through

participants drawing images widely known or resisted through the creation of new superheroes.

Then considering the demographics present in superhero movies, these drawings were also

analyze to determine how this representation is internalized. Considering the lack of inclusion

and diversity in the superheroes analyzed, there is an assumption that when one draws a

superhero participants will draw a white man regardless of their identity. By crossing of racial or

gender lines or establishing a new superhero, the assumption is that a participant recognized that

this representation is limited and resisted it.

Out of the twenty-six participants, twenty-two (84.6%) drew superheroes they had previously

seen onscreen during this exercise. The other four drawings featured the participants' own

creation, with three (11.5%) depicting themselves as superheroes. As stated previously, the tasks

was purposely left vague to see what participants would gravitate towards drawing. Considering

their age and the rating of most superhero movies and shows (PG-13 or TV-14), there was a

possibility they had not seen these movies. This substantial majority demonstrates the opposite,

showing that these participants are aware of these characters and either watch them or see them

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and Hispanic is linked to Spain and the Spanish language, respectively, it would be ill-advised to group those who more so identify as such within the people of color community without further analysis. Thus as the data has been currently analyzed, there were not conclusive patterns given this attribute. Therefore this identity marker will not be factored into the data set.

in other forms (toys, costumes, books, etc.). Since these images were absorbed and conveyed

through their drawings, these young participants appear to be the impressionable young minds

most theorists are worried about. Instructed to draw any kind of superhero known or created, the

participants instinctively drew characters widely known with only four creating their own. This

demonstrates little resistance to the images seen onscreen, allowing for worry about what

resistance there will be to the demographics seen in superheroes.

Figure 16: (left to right) Antman, Black Panther, Spider Man, Hulk, Captain America, Falcon, and Iron Man. Drawn by #4 (Boy, 5, mult-Racial)
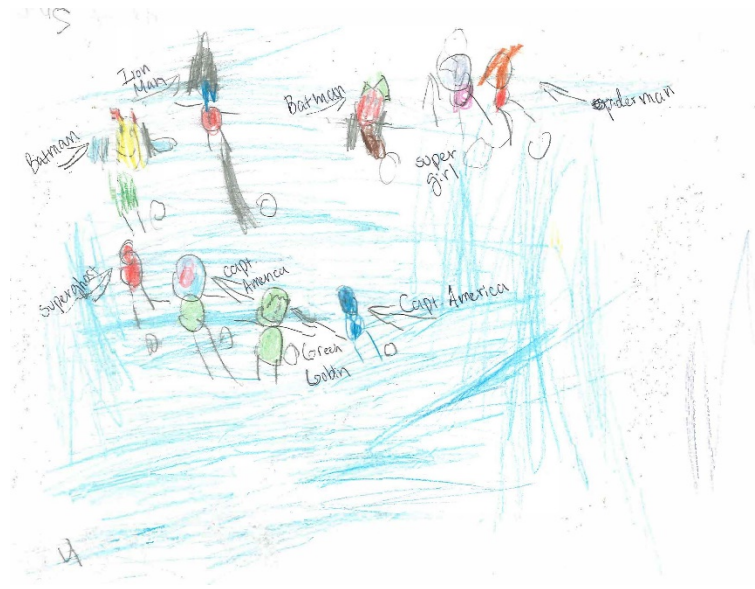
Figure 17: (clockwise from top left corner) Batman, Iron Man, Batman, Super Girl, Spiderman, Captain America, Green Goblin, Captain America, and Superghost. Drawn by #9 (Boy, 5, white)

Looking at gender of the superheroes drawn, there was an even breakdown between men and

women depicted as superheroes. Both genders were featured on twelve drawings each,

amounting to 46.2% individually. The remaining two drawings (7.7%) depicted both men and

women. Despite there being an equal number of women being drawn as men, these results still

demonstrated that men are more likely to be drawn instead of women. While the drawings had an

even gender breakdown, the participant population did not. Out of twenty-six participants,

fourteen (53.8%) are girls and twelve (46.2%) are boys. This difference in demographics between the actual population and the drawing population demonstrates a preference for drawing men superheroes. Specifically, some girl participants would have had to cross gender lines for men to be depicted equally to women. This crossing of gender lines can be for numerous reasons, but with these drawings the plethora of men superheroes becomes clear. This is demonstrated in the variety of men superheroes drawn (Captain America, Thor, Iron Man, Hulk, Spider Man, Superman, Black Panther, The Flash, Antman, Falcon, Kid Danger, Green Lantern, etc.) (fig. 16 & fig. 17).When women are drawn there is fewer variety with Wonder Woman (fig. 18 & fig. 19), Harley Quinn, Supergirl (fig. 20) and Catwoman being the only known women characters featured.

Figure 18: Wonder Woman. Drawn by #23 (Girl, 8, white):

Figure 19: Wonder Woman. Drawn by #22 (Girl, 8, white)

Figure 20: Super Girl. Drawn by #7 (Girl, 5, white)

This lack of variety of women superheroes can make drawing men superheroes more appealing, leading to an increase in these drawings. Also, those participants who did draw their own heroes (either themselves or own creation) were mainly girls. Out of these four drawings, three were

drawn by girls showing more of initiative in the underrepresented group to think outside of the images seen. By drawing their own identities instead of known superheroes, this small portion of participants demonstrated some resistance to images seen screen as well as the lack of women superheroes depicted women superheroes in their own creations (fig. 21 & 22).

Figure 21: Flame Starter. Drawn by #25 (Girl, 9, African American/African/Black/Caribbean)

Figure 22: Self-portrait. Drawn by #22 (Girl, 6, Multi-racial)

The resistance to the domination of images of white men also came through to some degree in depiction of race in the drawings collected.[23] Very much like the gender analysis, the demographic present in the colorings did not match up with the demographics participating. The participants were racially diverse, with eleven identifying as white, eight as black, four as multiracial and one as Native American. The majority of participants were people of color with thirteen people (54.2%) identifying as either being African American/African/Black/Caribbean, Native American or multiracial. This left a minority of white identifying participants with a total of eleven (45.8%). Out of these twenty-four drawings, fifteen (62.5%) did not include race in

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[23] Since race was self-reported, only the twenty four participants who disclosed their race will have their drawings analyzed.

their drawings, using the default color of the white copy paper provided. Seeing as this does not explicitly convey any race but more so a mere lack of consideration of skin color, only the nine (37.5%) racialized images will be examined. Of these nine images, one (4.2%) includes both a default and racialized image. Within these nine drawings, five (55.6%) represent whiteness given their peach/light pink toned coloring, three (33.3%) varied in brown-ness depicting various potential races, and one (11.1%) was a silver/gray colored skin tone being placed in the undetermined category. Since this majority and minority of participants' race are reversed in the drawing results, it demonstrates that despite one's identity there is still a desire to draw white characters. This is most likely influenced by the array of white superheroes and the lack of superheroes of color, with Black Panther and few other superheroes of color only recently being included in this genre. Much like the depiction of gender in these drawings, the lack of drawings of superheroes of color appears to be from the lack of superheroes of color in pop culture, particularly onscreen. There are some resistors seen in the crossing of racial lines with known superheroes with the depictions of Superman, Green Lantern (fig. 23) and Wonder Woman as having brown skin and thus being people of color. Unlike the gender analysis, only one

Figure 23: Bob the Builder and Green Lantern. Drawn by #8 (Boy, 5, multi-racial:

Figure 24: Kid Danger. Drawn by #20 (Boy, 6, white)

participant created their own superhero that challenged the norm. In this drawing the superhero is considered a non-white superhero due to its silver/gray complexion (fig. 23). These participants primarily drew what they know, and white superheroes are more widely known.

Despite people of color and women being the majority in race and gender respectively, this is not reflected in the demographics drawn. While girls made up the majority of participants, women superheroes shared an equal number of drawings with men superheroes. This lack of reflection of identity of the participants in the drawings is also seen in the depiction of race. People of color were the dominant group in the participants demographic, but the images which depicted people of color was lower than those that depicted whiteness. This lack of reflection of the participants' diversity in their drawings demonstrates that regardless of race, ethnicity or gender, participants still gravitated to drawing white men. And these images of white men are rarely their own creation, with a majority of their drawings copying the superheroes they see onscreen. Therefore it can be suggested that most young children are watching these movies and are absorbing messages about who can be a superhero through racial and gender identities present in these movies. So far, the consensus is that white men are the superheroes.

Survey

The electronic survey operated similarly to an interview with the undergraduate college students. Distributed via email to four classes, these students were asked to voluntarily complete the survey on Google forms. On this form, they specify their age, gender and race.[24] Then they were asked a series of questions focused on what superhero movies they had seen, diversity in these

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[24] Like the study, participants were also asked to disclose if they are Spanish/Hispanic/Latino. This identifier will not be included.

movies and reaction to women superheroes. Very much like the study with the elementary school, this survey was set to examine the consumption of superhero related media and what messages were/are internalized. Give the age range increase of about ten years, it was predicted that these participants would have seen most superhero movies and have a more critical attitude to the diversity in them. There were twenty six participants, ranging from eighteen to twenty-two years old. In regards to gender specification, women still had the majority with seventeen participants (65.4%), meaning there were only nine men participants (34.6%). Racially, white participants were the majority with eighteen (69.2%) identifying as such. This determines people of color to be the minority, with eight participants (30.8%) identifying as non-white. Specifically, seven participants (26.9%) identified as African American/African/Black/Caribbean and one (3.8%) identified as Native American.

Regarding consumption of superhero movies, only two participants admitted to not heavily watching these movies while growing up. Mark (man, 19, African American/African/Black Caribbean) states that this was due to "[never having] a TV or ever [going] to the movies" as a child. Tyler (man, 20, white) also admits to not watching many superhero movies as a child but the ones that he did see, specifically The Incredible Hulk and the Dark Knight Trilogy "have stuck with [him]." The other participants listed multiple movies, with most including the Avengers and other Marvel Cinematic Universe movies. Considering the tenure of Marvel Studios, most of these participants were about the age the elementary school participants were when the Marvel Cinematic Universe began. And while these numerous movies were released progressively as this population grew up, most were watched regardless of age. The appeal of

superhero movies to all age groups implies that one does not row out of enjoying this type of media.

Most of the participants admitted they learned something from these movies, with only seven stating they had learned nothing. Carl (man, 18, African American/African/Black Caribbean) specifically credits these movies for teaching him 'confidence, the power of networking, the power of a team, family ideals, and many more values." The mention of values almost parallels the idea of social control mentioned by Dafna Lemish, demonstrating that the values represented in media become a teaching tool.

Other things learned were heroism, unity, leadership, "intelligence is powerful", persistence, responsibility, right vs wrong, helpfulness, strength, generosity, humility, teamwork, etc. The mention of leadership, power and strength is reminiscent of the centering traits of masculinity. By stating that these traits are taught by superhero movies, part of what audiences learn from superhero movies is linked to masculinity (or at least components of it). This theme of masculinity is continued in the discussion of who can be a superhero. While mostly all state that anyone can be a superhero, many referred to specific attributes superheroes must have. These traits are as follows: protector, integrity, compassion, positivity, maturity (growth), power, strength, confidence and bravery. Again, power and strength are mentioned, alluding to masculinity. This is not ignored by Alexis (woman, 20, white) who states "I believe anyone can be, but I have been raised that men are supposed to be." While she is accepting of superheroes not being men, she recognizes that men are who she has mainly seen as superheroes growing up. This is understandable considering *Wonder Woman* is the only woman superhero feature length

movies currently. Currently in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, there are few women superheroes and those that are included are only seen in group settings (Black Widow and Scarlet Witch). The recognition of gender imbalance in Marvel superhero movies continues when analyzing the society it represents. Harry (man, 21, African American/African/Black Caribbean) states "I do not feel [the Avengers] represent society accurately. I feel like they portray society as [dominated by men]." This sentiment is echoed with the women participants highlighting the domination of men as protectors of the community and more impactful characters. Julia (a white woman) furthers this sentiment saying, "They basically portray men being the stronger gender." This assumption goes along with masculinity theory, specifically that men are the only gender allowed to exercise masculinity. With masculinity being based on strength, leadership and power, there is a distrust and reluctance to see these traits in other genders.

This critique of representation continues in regards to the diversity among the Avengers. While two participants had no response, eleven stated that the movies are not diverse, six thought they are becoming more diverse, and seven responded that they are diverse. Among those who thought these movies are diverse, only one is a person of color and there is a similar gender breakdown (four women, three men). Their reasoning for stating these movies are diverse is they are appealing to all ages and that there are characters of different races in the movies, including the background actors. These seven responses which state "yes" are easily outnumbered by the seventeen responses that either directly challenged the lack of diversity or questioned it. Gender is still addressed in these responses, but there is a shift in focus to racial diversity. Many highlight the recent release of *Black Panther* as a step towards diversity for Marvel Studios and the Avengers. The desire for women superheroes is also advocated for within the Marvel

Cinematic Universe, with all but one applauding the release of Wonder Woman. Many called for more woman superhero centric movies, highlighting the empowerment young girls feel when seeing superheroes like them onscreen. The only person not in favor was Harry, whom had previously spoken out about Marvel's lack of inclusion of women. Despite his previous statement, he acknowledges that "[he is] not as intrigued about [women] superheroes as [he is] [man] superheroes." Regardless, these participants campaigned for diversity and better representation in these movies in their responses. The desire for inclusion is appropriately highlighted by Emily (woman, 19, white) who states, "I don't believe they're fully diverse because most of the superheroes are white men."

Efforts towards Inclusion & Diversity

These results demonstrate that there is a clear need and want for inclusivity in these superhero movies. Steps towards diversity can be seen in Marvel Studios's release of *Black Panther* and production of *Captain Marvel*, but for some fans waiting for these releases proved too frustrating. This slow (but gradual) progress towards diversity in superhero movies and the culture surrounding it has led to many fan led initiatives through individuals, organizations and eventually conventions.

The superhero phenomenon has been of high interest in popular culture beginning with their comic book predecessors. This can be seen in numerous conventions centered on the characters featured in both these comics and movies. While there are many facets of fan culture, one of the most interactive components is cosplaying. Cosplaying is the act of dressing up in one's favorite character for a special event (such as movie premieres or conventions) or simply for fun. Due to

the character demographics onscreen, cosplay has been an "overwhelmingly white" subsection of

fan culture (Thompson-Hernandez). And when people of color do get involved in this aspect of

fan culture, they feel restricted to the characters that match their skin tones whom tend to be the

villains or sidekicks. Despite this obstacle, it has not prevented people of color from cosplaying.

This is seen in social media lead initiatives, primarily through the Facebook group The

Extraordinary Journey of a Black Nerd and Kiera Please, one of the most popular cosplayers on

Figure 25: Kiera Please as Poison Ivy (Kiera)
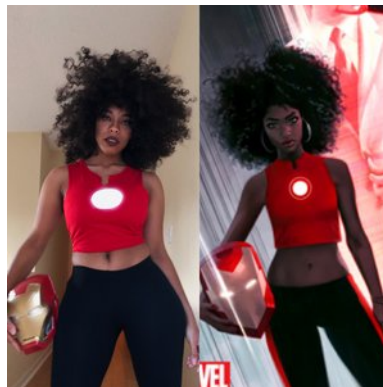
Figure 26: Kiera Please as Riri Williams (new reiteration of Iron Man) (Kiera)

Figure 27: Kiera Please as Storm (Kiera)

Instagram. Kiera, a woman of color, does not let the race of characters restrict whom she can

transform into. Taking from numerous media outlets (movies, television, anime, etc.), Kiera

makes each character she portrays adapt to her differing features (fig. 25). Regardless, a majority

of her cosplay outfits pay homage to women of color in pop culture (fig. 26 & fig. 27). This

desire to represent someone with a shared identity to the cosplayer is seen in the recent influx of

black cosplayers in the wake of *Black Panther* (Coogler 2018). This recent inclusion of black

people in mainstream cosplay has helped start a conversation of inclusion in the movies they are

emulating.

> The goal [...] is to disrupt popular ideas of what cosplay can and should look like and to
> help create a more racially tolerant environment through cosplay, both in Black Panther
> costumes and outside of them. (Thompson-Hernandez)

While visually increasing the awareness of the lack of diversity in pop culture, people of color who cosplay also highlight the racial exclusion in fan culture. This has not gone unnoticed, prompting many organizations to form around the idea of inclusivity in pop culture and fan culture.

One of the most prominent groups challenging the lack of inclusiveness in pop and fan culture is Black Girl Nerds. Established in early 2012, Black Girl Nerds is a website and online community devoted to "women of color with various eccentricities to express themselves freely and embrace who they are" (*Black Girl Nerds*). These expressions have found their form on the site as think pieces about pop culture, movie reviews, book reviews, podcast spotlights and technology highlights. The pieces look at different aspects of pop culture highlighting diversity efforts with the mindset that representation matters. These critiques and diversity efforts do not only exist on the site, but also through Black Girl Nerds's active social media accounts and the online community it fosters. As mentioned prior, one of the founders of this organization spearheaded the Twitter trend, #WhatBlackPantherMeanstoMe. This prompted a lot of buzz on social media for the movie, even prior to the release date. This effort to spotlight marginalized people in fan culture as well as increase diversity and representation in the media it is centered around has not gone unnoticed. Since the creation of Black Girl Nerds in 2012, there has been an influx of other similar organizations. These organizations include Women in Comics Collective International, Black Heroes Matter, Geeks of Color, and Nerds of Color. All these organizations preach inclusivity within fan culture and critically look at the diversity within the media they are centered around.

This analysis of pop culture and its lack of inclusivity has sparked other more mainstream groups to be interested, such as ComicCon and New York Comic Con. These prominent conventions have started to include panels, events and speakers that look at diversity in pop and fan culture. During last year's ComicCon, there were events such as Code Switch: Diversity Behind the Scenes, The Future is Female: Women in Animation, Be Your Own Superhero: Intersectional Feminism in Comics, etc. (*Comic-Con*). New York Comic Con hosted similar events such as Representation Matters! How to Respectfully Write and Draw POC and LGBTQIA Characters, Books As Flint: Using Graphic Novels to Spark Political Activism, Super Asian America, #BlackComicsMonth: Diversity in Comics (View). While Comic Con did not state the exact number of panels devoted to diversity in its convention, New York Comic Con had thirty-five in the "diversity" category out of three hundred and ninety seven events, or 8.8% of the convention.

This is still not enough seeing the establishment of another pop culture convention, Universal FanCon. Advertised on a majority of the inclusivity organizations' websites mentioned prior, this convention is solely focused on the inclusivity and diversity of pop and fan culture. Universal FanCon credits itself as being "the first large-scale, inclusive event that celebrates the diversity of fandom and the diversity of fans" (*Universal FanCon*). It seemingly covers the gamut of pop culture from hosting a class on lightsaber fighting to a series dedicated to Rhythm of Wakanda (African Drumming & Dance). This fun is counterbalanced with events aimed at social justice issues in fan culture such as a Black Heroes Matter panel, Violence Against Women in Anime, Blind Gamers Unite: How do Blind people get into gaming, etc. While the two Comic Cons mainly focused on sexuality, race and gender; Universal FanCon essentially looks at everything, from race to gender to queerness to disability. Featuring many marginalized groups as its focus,

this convention truly lives up to the idea of making pop and fan culture universal. Initiatives like this, and the others mentioned, have put diversity and inclusion at the forefront of pop culture. By doing so it has put pressure on the studios creating the majority of superhero content to start their own initiatives of inclusion and diversity.

Studio Initiatives

In the case of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, not much is being done in the main movie series besides the inclusion of Black Panther and Captain Marvel. There are some other diversity efforts present in the Marvel Cinematic Universe through multiple Netflix series (*Luke Cage, Jessica Jones, Daredevil, Iron Fist, The Defenders* and *The Punisher*) and a few broadcast television series (*Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* and Agent *Carter*). Within these multiple series, only the Netflix series focus on superheroes and among them only Luke Cage and Jessica Jones center on non-white men in the Marvel Cinematic Universe.[25] This inclusion has not gone unnoticed with many fans praising Marvel for creating a "bulletproof black man" (Bucksbaum). Despite this progression in inclusion in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, it appears to only have its place slightly removed from the main movies. By creating these efforts in another platform, there is distance between these characters within the Marvel Cinematic with many not realizing that these storylines are meant to interact. This distance is further seen in Marvel's creation of two new movies set to be released at the end of this year.

One of the most recently advertised projects is another re-iteration of Spider Man titled *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-verse*. In this Sony Pictures Entertainment distributed movie, Spider Man

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[25] Daredevil is a white man but offers a different perspective by being a disabled (blind) superhero. This provides another layer of representation, one that unfortunately will not be addressed at this time.

takes on multiple new forms with Peter Parker not being the only human with Spider-Man powers. This animated feature specifically follows Miles Morales, a young Afro-Latino man from Brooklyn (Truitt). By introducing Morales, the Spider Man character (there have been three reiterations from three different production companies) deviates from its pattern of featuring white men in the suit. Morales challenges the racial norm for Spider Man, seemingly aiding in propelling superhero movies towards diversity. Another recent effort of Marvel's has been through the introduction of *Marvel Rising: Secret Warriors*. Currently comprised of multiple short videos, *Marvel Rising: Secret Warriors* will be released as a movie in late 2018. This animated series is part of an effort to showcase new superheroes for a new generation. Featuring a very diverse team of superheroes, Marvel's Senior Vice President of Animation & Family Entertainment, Cort Lane states:

> ...I'm very excited that our Marvel Rising team of heroes is so inclusive, reflecting characters with different backgrounds, particularly a set of strong [women] leads that our young audience can connect with. (Dinh)

Lane's statement acknowledges that there is a need for audiences to connect with these characters, and to provide that connection there must be inclusivity and diversity. This diversity can be seen in the team's inclusion of multiple races and genders. This inclusion is highlighted in a few firsts for Marvel including its first queer Latina superhero (America Chavez/Miss America) and its first Muslim superhero (Kamala Khan/Ms. Marvel) (Cheng). There are also a plethora of woman superheroes in this team, outnumbering the men.

Even with this immense inclusivity in the superheroes present in *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-verse* and *Marvel Rising*, these movies both have their shortcomings. Specifically, both movies

are not produced by Marvel Studios. Marvel Studios specifically produces all the content

considered to be a part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. With these movies not being produced

by Marvel Studios but by Marvel Entertainment (*Spider-Man: Into the Spider-verse*) and Marvel

Animation (*Marvel Rising*), they are excluded from this main universe. This exclusion sets these

two movies in a parallel universe where they are not included in the main storyline. This means

that the inclusive and diverse initiatives seen in these storylines and characters will not migrate

into the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Animation also provides as barrier for exclusion due to the

Marvel Cinematic Universe being live-action content. With these new movies being animated,

there is no ease for crossover even if there was a shared production company. This could be due

to numerous reasons such as financing and story rights. By not including these movies that don't

use live-action and are not produced by Marvel Studios, inclusionary and diverse stories are

excluded from the main Marvel Cinematic Universe narrative. This diversity seen in both movies

as well as the television series challenges the homogenous nature of the Marvel Cinematic

Universe by featuring superheroes outside of the white man identity. These cases of inclusivity

are leading the superhero genre to a more diverse future, but their simultaneous exclusion

question is if they are doing enough.

Conclusion

If there is already content being created with inclusivity and diversity, what more efforts need to be made for representation in movies? Seeing the small amount of diverse movies, limited identities represented, mindfulness in this representation and exclusion from the main narrative, there is a lot more progress to make.

First, diversity and inclusion in movies need to become the norm. Seen in the drawings and response to representation in these movies, diversity and inclusion is something that is both needed and wanted. So far efforts to be inclusive have been minimal in the Marvel Cinematic Universe's movies with only one non-white man centric movie being released in the decade long production of Marvel Cinematic Universe movies. Even with the introduction of *Black Panther*, this universe has not seen a woman superhero taking a leading role yet with *Captain Marvel* premiering next year. Regardless, by next year Marvel Studios will have only produced two non-white men centered superhero movies. When efforts to normalize inclusivity are made, it is outside of this main storyline. In separating these inclusive storylines from the main series, these storylines are treat as niche interests in being reserved for separate populations than the mainstream audience. These incredibly diverse and representational pieces thus become isolated anomalies outside of the status quo. To fully become inclusive and diverse, these initiatives

needed to be constructed in the mainstream so they are normalized to the point that diversity and inclusion is considered the basis for these movies and not a special effort.

Going with the idea of more inclusive content, the identities represented onscreen also have to become more inclusive. This analysis has predominately looked at the inclusion of black people and women in those represented onscreen, but does not even begin to cover the scope of characteristics underrepresented. There are more races, genders, ethnicities, sexualities, ability levels, etc. to explore onscreen. As mentioned in the critiques of *Wonder Woman* and *Black Panther*, there is a desire to see women of color, queer people, and other underrepresented groups to take on the role of superheroes. To do so, more characters of various identities need to be created or adapted into this content. But this cannot be carelessly delving into the trope of tokenism.[26] These characters need to be written well and with care like other protagonists are, regardless of their identities.

Care is crucial in developing any kind of characters, but considering the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of marginalized communities for so long this care must be diligent. This care can be seen in inclusive filmmaking teams, more research into the identities represented and general mindfulness. In the case of *Black Panther*, this movie was applauded for its diversity behind the scenes. This can be seen in the abundance of women and people of color on the film crew in roles of director, writer, production designer, director of photography, cinematographer, producer, and costume designer (Anderson). The inclusivity seen in this crew has been credited

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[26] Google defines tokenism as "the practice of making only a perfunctory or symbolic effort to do a particular thing, especially by recruiting a small number of people from underrepresented groups in order to give the appearance of sexual or racial equality within a workforce."

as having a part in the movie's success. While this does not erase the accomplishments of those outside these groups, it demonstrates that there is an impact of who is crafting what is seen onscreen. This crew also researched and implemented so many aspects of African and black culture to create a rich narrative that acknowledged the importance of the story's cultural impact. For instance, the inclusion of the language Xhosa after an actor suggested it. Despite the difficulty of learning this language, the cast persisted and dialect coaches were provided (Eligion). The filmmakers stressed the importance of including an actual African language in this movie, and this recognition caused them not to eliminate it despite the additional effort to include it. This process was guided through much mindfulness of how audiences will react to things seen onscreen.

This mindfulness can already be seen in *Spider-Man Into the Spiderverse* and *Marvel Rising*. With these movies being animated, actors are not seen onscreen thus leading to miscasting behind the scenes. This may seem insignificant seeing there is still visual diversity, but this type of miscasting happens frequently and can easily fall into the trap of stereotyping (ex. Hank Azaria (a white man) voices Apu (an Indian man) on *The Simpsons*). Fortunately, both *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-verse* and *Marvel Rising* were mindful concerning this and cast voice actors who mostly match the identity of their characters. For example, the voice for America Chavez/Miss America is provided by Cierra Ramirez, an actress of "of Colombian and Mexican heritage" (Lopez). This mindfulness in casting is exemplary considering it is unseen and therefore could be abused, but is it enough? Obviously not, because this mindfulness in casting does not translate to live-action as often seen in recent mishaps of miscasting/whitewashing. In 2016, the Marvel Cinematic Universe had its own incident when white actress, Tilda Swinton,

was cast in *Dr. Strange* as a character written to be a Tibetan monk. Swinton responded by

claiming "she wasn't selected for the role of an Asian character" with Marvel Studios clarifying

that the role in this movie was adapted to be a person of Celtic descent (Sage). This role is

thought to have changed due to the problematic Asian stereotype depicted in the original

iteration of the character. Instead choosing to correct this depiction, the filmmakers chose to

eliminate it as a whole. And this is something that happened in the past two years, not decades

ago. While some characters established long ago may rely on stereotypes and tropes in their

development, they should not be erased or replaced by the creation of more overrepresented

identities. This problematic representation should be carefully reworked to correct its

problematic history and still represent underrepresented people. Erasing these characters is not a

solution, and only creates more lack of representation.

Finally, these efforts towards diversity and inclusion need to be done without mind to those in

opposition. Despite the impact of these initiatives, there are a few groups responding with

accusations that this is being done due to pressure of political correctness. Specifically in regards

to superheroes, these attacks are seen in the #ComicGate movement. This movement of

harassing those looking for inclusion and diversity in comics seemingly started with a tweet

attacking a group of Marvel comic book writers, who all happen to be women. The tweet sparked

a frenzy of comments dubbing these women as "'fake geek girls'" and "'social justice warriors'"

(Elbein). These comments did not end here and became common reactions to those looking to

increase representation in comic books for **"women, different races, and the LGBT community"**

(Krishna). Typically coming from anonymous accounts on various social media platforms, these

"trolls" argue that "diversity weakens the quality of comics" (Krishna). This attitude has put

pressure on comic book staples such as Marvel and DC to stop pushing for diversity in their content. Despite #ComicsGate being a recent phenomenon on social media, the idea is not new seeing the initial rejection of Miles Morales as a new Spider Man. Following Morales introduction into Marvel Comics, there was backlash from comic readers claiming that this character was introduced for "shock value" and pressure of political correctness (B. Robinson). With this negative reaction, it is not surprising that this comic did not really enter the mainstream. And when it did through the upcoming animated movie, *Spider-Man: Into the Spiderverse,* this story is not included in the main Marvel Cinematic Universe plotline. By not mainstreaming narratives like this due to pressure from opposing opinions, it is allowing a small fraction of audience members dictate who is and isn't represented in these movies. The diversity and inclusion are still there, but *Spider-Man: Into the Spiderverse* is not treated the same as the other movies being isolated by its medium and parallel plot line. This isolation only further conveys that diverse stories are a niche genre and not the standard all movies should aspire to.

In short, filmmaking needs to change to be a more mindful practice. Seeing that representation does matter in how different identities are viewed, movie have a great impact and thus responsibility to shape these outdated narratives. To do so, more movies must be inclusive conveying diversity as the standard for all media. More inclusion must be seen in the representation of various identities, and mindfully so. Diversity behind the scenes and research is necessary to create these new identities and characters. And when obstacles emerge through poorly crafted characters or conservative opposition, one must overcome it because representation does, in fact, matter and people need to see their identities reflected onscreen.

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Participant	Age	Gender	Race	Are you Spanish/Hispanic/Latino?	Drawing Race	Drawing Gender	Superhero
1	5	Girl	African American/African/Black/ Caribbean		Default	Man	Known
2	5	Girl	African American/African/Black/ Caribbean	Yes	Default	Man & Woman	Known
3	5	Boy	Mutli-racial	Yes	Default (but included black superheroes)	Man	Known
4	5	Boy	Mutli-racial	No	Default (but included black superheroes)	Man	Known
5	5	Boy	African American/African/Black/ Caribbean	No	Default	Man	Known
6	5	Boy	White	Yes	Default	Man	Known
7	5	Girl	White	No	White	Woman	Known
8	5	Boy	Mutli-racial	Yes	Black	Man	Known
9	5	Boy	White	No	Default	Man & Woman	Known
10	5	Boy	White	No	Default	Woman	Known
11	6	Boy	White	Yes	White	Man	Own (self)
12	6	Girl	White	Yes	Default	Woman	Known
13	6	Boy	White	Yes	Default	Man	Known
14	6	Girl	African American/African/Black/ Caribbean	Yes	Black (potentially bi-racial)	Woman	Known

Participant	Age	Gender	Race	Are you Spanish/Hispanic/Latino?	Drawing Race	Drawing Gender	Superhero
15	6	Boy	White	Yes	Default	Man	Known
16	6	Girl	African American/African/Black/Caribbean	Yes	Default	Man	Known
17	6	Girl			Default	Woman	Known
18	6	Girl	African American/African/Black/Caribbean	Yes	Default	Woman	Known
19	6	Girl			Default	Woman	Own (self)
20	6	Boy	White	Yes	White	Man	Known
21	6	Boy	African American/African/Black/Caribbean		Black & Default	Man	Known
22	6	Girl	Mutli-racial	Yes	Other	Woman	Own (self)
23	8	Girl	White	Yes	White	Woman	Known
24	8	Girl	White		White (caucasian)	Woman	Known
25	9	Girl	African American/African/Black/Caribbean	Yes	Default	Woman	Own
26	9	Girl	Native American	Yes	Default	Woman	Known

Pseudonym	Age	Specify Gender	Are you Spanish/Hispanic/Latino?	Race
Rose	20	Woman	No, not Spanish/Hispanic/Latino	White
Carl	18	Man	Yes, Spanish/Hispanic/Latino	African American/African/Black/Caribbean
Madison	20	Woman	Yes, Spanish/Hispanic/Latino	African American/African/Black/Caribbean
Emily	19	Woman	No, not Spanish/Hispanic/Latino	White
Cameron	18	Woman	Yes, Spanish/Hispanic/Latino	White
Maria	18	Woman	No, not Spanish/Hispanic/Latino	White
Bianca	18	Woman	No, not Spanish/Hispanic/Latino	White
Madeline	20	Woman	No, not Spanish/Hispanic/Latino	White
Monica	18	Woman	No, not Spanish/Hispanic/Latino	White
Kyle	19	Man	No, not Spanish/Hispanic/Latino	African American/African/Black/Caribbean
Mark	18	Man	No, not Spanish/Hispanic/Latino	African American/African/Black/Caribbean
Alexis	20	Woman	No, not Spanish/Hispanic/Latino	White
Julia	18	Woman	No, not Spanish/Hispanic/Latino	White
Sophia	22	Woman	No, not Spanish/Hispanic/Latino	White
Harry	21	Man	No, not Spanish/Hispanic/Latino	African American/African/Black/Caribbean
Chloe	19	Woman	Yes, Spanish/Hispanic/Latino	Native American
Ava	19	Woman	Yes, Spanish/Hispanic/Latino	African American/African/Black/Caribbean
Nicholas	18	Man	Yes, Spanish/Hispanic/Latino	White

Pseudonym	Age	Specify Gender	Are you Spanish/Hispanic/Latino?	Race
Tyler	20	Man	No, not Spanish/Hispanic/Latino	White
Kayla	18	Woman	No, not Spanish/Hispanic/Latino	White
Cece	19	Woman	No, not Spanish/Hispanic/Latino	White
Blair	21	Woman	No, not Spanish/Hispanic/Latino	African American/African/Black/Caribbean
Tara	19	Woman	No, not Spanish/Hispanic/Latino	White
Jordan	20	Man	No, not Spanish/Hispanic/Latino	White
Peter	20	Man	No, not Spanish/Hispanic/Latino	White
Jacob	18	Man	No, not Spanish/Hispanic/Latino	White

Study task:

Participants were instructed to draw a superhero.

Survey Questions:

1. What superhero movies did you watch when you were younger?

2. Did these superheroes teach you anything? If yes, what?

3. Who can be a superhero? Why?

4. What do you think the Avengers movies say about society as a whole? Do they represent society accurately?

5. Do you believe the Avenger movies are diverse (i.e. race, gender, socioeconomic background, age)?

6. How do you feel about women superheroes?