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layout: post

title: "The Unrealistic Representation of Gender in Superheroes"

date: 2021-12-014 16:25:00

categories: final

img: temp.png

author: Alexis Van Dien

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For decades Marvel has dominated the superhero cinema industry, so why is it that we rarely see women playing the main character? There are plenty of female superheroes in the comics. Gender is wildly misrepresented in the film and comic industry and Marvel is one of the biggest perpetrators of excluding non-male main characters. Marvel, however, claims that they are trying to change this. In October of 2019 Disney declared Kevin Feige to be the new president of Marvel Studios as well as its Chief Creative Officer. Since this change in leadership Marvel has noticeably been trying to appeal to a larger demographic by being more inclusive of main characters that aren’t necessarily white males.

The chart below shows the number of Marvel movies centered on Avengers characters that passed, or did not pass, the Bechdel Test. The Bechdel test, essentially, is used to figure out if a movie misrepresents women. To pass this test a film must do three things: feature at least 2 named female characters, have dialogue between just women, and this dialogue must not be about a man. Out of 25 Marvel movies that have been released from 2008 to 2021, 56% of them passed the Bechdel Test. This is a very high percentage considering that most films released in the U.S. since 2008 do not pass the test.

The Bechdel Test, however, is the bare minimum when it comes to representing women in film and does not account for the misrepresentation of other gender identities. Out of all the main characters in the Marvel comic books only 0.3% of them identify as something other than male or female, with about 75% of them identifying as male. Although this is not the focus of the article it is also important to realize that most of the characters are straight and very few of them, if any, correctly represent the LGBTQ+ community. The few characters that could potentially be seen as representing a certain community are often written by people who do not belong to this group themselves and can easily misrepresent something. These percentages are wildly skewed considering the vast amount of Marvel comic books that are in existence.

<iframe title="Marvel Characters" aria-label="Multiple Pies" id="datawrapper-chart-Cbnox" src="https://datawrapper.dwcdn.net/Cbnox/1/" scrolling="no" frameborder="0" style="width: 0; min-width: 100% !important; border: none;" height="467"></iframe><script type="text/javascript">!function(){"use strict";window.addEventListener("message",(function(e){if(void 0!==e.data["datawrapper-height"]){var t=document.querySelectorAll("iframe");for(var a in e.data["datawrapper-height"])for(var r=0;r<t.length;r++){if(t[r].contentWindow===e.source)t[r].style.height=e.data["datawrapper-height"][a]+"px"}}}))}();

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While there is a major lack of characters that identify as something other than male or female there is also a huge bias towards female characters. Marvel was founded as a comic book company in 1939 in New York and the first Avengers comic book was released in September of 1963. During this time period people with gender identities that did not match with male or female were almost unheard of because it was not an acceptable idea in society at the time. Women were looked down upon and were seen as the weaker, dumber, and overall non-important sex. Lauren Giddings, a student at American University and a member of the LGBTQ+ community said, “I think we're at a very interesting time socio-politically. In the past two years alone activism, or the idea of being ‘woke’, has become very important for brands to incorporate. You know, if a brand is problematic, people in the market are willing to ignore them. So, I think until this point a lot of companies didn't have accountability and they could just do whatever they wanted.” So, to an extent, it makes sense why the comic books lacked diverse characters, unfortunately that just wasn’t something that was prioritized or seen as an issue until more recent years, as white men have always been in control.

The first Marvel movie that was released in the U.S. was Iron Man in 2008. Since then 25 other Marvel Cinematic Universe movies have been released, with, as we already know, a whopping 56% of them passing the Bechdel Test, including this first movie. The male to female main character ratio, however, is much more skewed. Out of all the main characters in Marvel movies today (excluding X-Men) only 3% identify as something other than male or female, 28% of them identify as women, and the other 69% of characters are male. While it is somewhat understandable why the comics lacked female character representation considering the time period, it is much harder to think of a logical explanation as to why the movies are so skewed. All of the movies are based off of the comic books, so, while there were a lot more male characters to choose from, there was not a lack of female characters to pick from.

<iframe title="MCU Characters " aria-label="Split Bars" id="datawrapper-chart-HmCsi" src="https://datawrapper.dwcdn.net/HmCsi/2/" scrolling="no" frameborder="0" style="width: 0; min-width: 100% !important; border: none;" height="451"></iframe><script type="text/javascript">!function(){"use strict";window.addEventListener("message",(function(e){if(void 0!==e.data["datawrapper-height"]){var t=document.querySelectorAll("iframe");for(var a in e.data["datawrapper-height"])for(var r=0;r<t.length;r++){if(t[r].contentWindow===e.source)t[r].style.height=e.data["datawrapper-height"][a]+"px"}}}))}();

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The first Marvel movie that featured a female lead was Captain Marvel, which was not released until 2018 as part of their Phase Three plan. Phases one and two of Marvel’s cinematic universe plans did not feature a single female, or non-male, lead character. So, why did it take so long and what changed? The previous president of Marvel entertainment, Dan Buckley, was not so keen on the idea of inclusivity in Marvel movies, as it was a known fact that superheroes would sell, even if they were all white men. Dan Buckley shot down the Black Widow movie, which features a female lead, and the Black Panther movie, which features a black male lead, so we have Kevin Feige to thank for finally bringing these comic book characters to life in Marvel films. The director of Black Widow, Cate Shortland, is one of the only female directors of a Marvel superhero movie. Elizabeth Scott, an American University student and AWOL staff member said, “Yeah, ideally if there was a movie about a non-binary superhero it would be directed, produced, costumed, and/or cast by someone who is non-binary. Or, at the very least, have actual non-binary representation in the writers room.” It is important to have someone that can accurately convey what it is like to identify with a certain identity working on a movie that focuses on a character of this gender. In Black Widow, for example, there were feminine issues that came up in the movie, such as infertility, that would have been hard to portray from the perspective of someone who does not identify as female, because they cannot possibly understand this perspective in total unless they have experienced it themselves. While Marvel is making a stride in the right direction with Kevin Feige, ironically a straight white male, leading the charge it can be argued that they are, in a sense, not moving fast enough. There has been more representation of women in Marvel films, as well as other races, in recent years, however they are still lacking a lot of diversity.

<iframe title="Avengers Movies" aria-label="Grouped Column Chart" id="datawrapper-chart-B6GK5" src="https://datawrapper.dwcdn.net/B6GK5/1/" scrolling="no" frameborder="0" style="width: 0; min-width: 100% !important; border: none;" height="544"></iframe><script type="text/javascript">!function(){"use strict";window.addEventListener("message",(function(e){if(void 0!==e.data["datawrapper-height"]){var t=document.querySelectorAll("iframe");for(var a in e.data["datawrapper-height"])for(var r=0;r<t.length;r++){if(t[r].contentWindow===e.source)t[r].style.height=e.data["datawrapper-height"][a]+"px"}}}))}();

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Marvel only has a few non-white leads cast in their movies and even less women playing these roles. Brian Janay, a student at American University studying business and entertainment said, “I would say Marvel does struggle with making diversity palatable because they want to make everything they have appealing, but in some cases that results in it coming across as trying too hard or that these minority characters were clearly written by white people and you know misunderstandings of culture are prevalent. So, it's not perfect, you know, but they're making efforts, and they weren't before, so I think things are moving in a positive direction.” The focus should still be to produce a good movie, after all, Marvel is an entertainment company, however it is fair to argue that good movies can be made with characters that are representative of other genders, races, and sexualities than what we are used to seeing. More needs to be done to right this wrong and lead to equality in job opportunities in the film industry, but at a minimum other people are starting to hold them accountable for their decisions.

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