Gender, Assemble:

The Social Construction of Gender, Audience Perception, and the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Sociology at Massey University, Albany, New Zealand.

Peter Walker

2022

Abstract

Film and media have long been a domain in which patriarchal systems of power and control have flourished. This is particularly true in the superhero genre, where exaggerated bodies and fantastical abilities have long enabled men to take charge and save the world, while women have been relegated to being the over-sexualised damsels in distress. In the digital age, mediatisation has introduced a changing landscape to the social construction of gender with more convenient audience access to film and media converging with the rise of the serialised transmedia entity, of which the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) is the largest and most successful. While considerable analysis of MCU content has occurred there has yet to be substantive work examining the audience's views of gender represented in this world, which is surprising given the long and dedicated relationship they develop with it. This research examines audience perception of gender through its representation in the MCU and how this influences individual gender understandings and constructions. I used a novel, multi-method, weekend long 'MCU camp' research design to best reflect the issues and values embedded in social constructionism. Group discussions, video diaries, poster analysis, along with other creative and social activities were used to explore how committed fans make sense of gender representation in this superhero world and how this impacted their own gender constructions. The research reveals that avid MCU fans grapple with a fictional world dominated by male superheroes monopolising the spotlight, while consigning women to supporting roles, and ultimately reinforcing patriarchal power and control. Sustained and committed parasocial relationships are simultaneously at the core of the audience's passion for this universe and a source of tension regarding the way gender is represented. While there is some evidence that the portrayal of gender in the MCU is changing there are opportunities for Marvel to lean into its more progressive existing source material, and further investigation into the influence and role of parasocial relationships is recommended.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the seven enthusiastic and dedicated MCU fans who were so generous and willing to undertake this adventure with me. This study would not have been possible without your commitment, passion, and knowledge of the MCU, nor without your bold choice to spend a weekend engaging in a research camp. I'm sure you will enjoy finding the easter eggs in this thesis as much as I enjoyed finding ways to put them in there!

Throughout this journey I have been particularly fortunate to have brilliant supervisors in Vicky Walters and Trudie Cain. Had it not been for their encouragement I would have selected a considerably duller area of investigation and not pursued my real interests. After many decades of being conditioned into academic conformity, I found their adventurousness, ideas, and backing to take new pathways inspiring. Thank you both for your perseverance, kindness, critique, and support.

King's College, and in particular Greg Eddy, have not only demonstrated their commitment to academic endeavours in so generously providing the location of the research camp, but have always been a wonderful support throughout this process. It is greatly appreciated.

Thank you to my family for all of the love, care, and support during my studies, and for sharing (or perhaps tolerating) my unconventional interests and commitment to their examination. I have been blessed with parents who actively practiced unwavering support and belief in my education, and with my own children who have simultaneously sacrificed for and participated in this work. A special thank you to my sister, Kylie Walker, and my son, Zach Walker, for their specialised editing support.

Lastly, I would like to thank my wife, Sarah Walker, for the encouragement to start, the inspiration to finish, and for proving that not all heroes wear capes.

Table of contents

List of Tables and Figures

Tables

Figures

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The reality of how much my higher education would cost struck me at the end of my first year of university study when, faced with the significant costs of living away from home and uncertainty over my income for the following year, I made the difficult decision to sell my comic book collection. Casually collected throughout my high school years via the local backstreet comic bookstore, it wasn't what might be considered a serious collection but rather one that had more personal meaning, with a few notable items of value. It consisted mostly of Marvel's *X-Men* comics and their offshoots; an interest that was driven by the *X-Men* cartoon series screening on New Zealand television at that time. While I appreciated the art and the visual storytelling of comic books it was the characters and their stories that captivated me, introducing aspects of the lived experience that had previously been foreign to me. However, the general scarcity of superhero media combined with the stereotypical student lack of finances and competing interests brought about the difficult decision to sell my collection.

Many years, one wedding, and three children later, the superhero hole in my life began to be filled by the then emerging Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). Certainly, this hole had been occasionally occupied by various superhero media, most notably Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man* movies, Christopher Nolan's *Dark Knight* trilogy of Batman films, and my teenage comic favourites, the Fox Studios' *X-Men* film series. However, the MCU differed from most other films by embracing the larger world in which its inaugural characters and stories resided, capitalising on the infinite storytelling potential of this universe. For the first time in a superhero film series, I could see and imagine characters, stories, and lived experiences beyond that on the screen, in a manner which only the *Harry Potter* novels and the *Star Wars* franchise had done before.

Perhaps most significant for my interest and relationship with the MCU has been the opportunity to watch my children grow up in a world with such a rich and engaging superhero film franchise and to also share that journey with them. Considerable and regular discussion, debate, and critique regarding previous or upcoming films, not to forget detailed analysis of the latest film's hidden features, developments and character decision making, is a regular feature of our household. Viewing the MCU as a parent has led to many conversations highlighting the morals and values my family supports, while also examining and educating our children on those we don't. Simultaneously, I bear witness to how the MCU has influenced their personal preferences, hobbies, and even aspiring career ambitions. With this in mind, I am particularly appreciative of Lumsden (2019) for highlighting that reflexivity connects the messiness of the social world with the fact that as researchers we are part of it, identifying that we must learn to use this in our intellectual endeavours. In acknowledging my personal connection and bias in conducting this research, I hope to not only recognise my interest in the genre as a feature of this intellectual inquiry but that this work might add to the discourse for those interested in how our constructions, be they fictional or real, are manifested.

Social constructionism is at the heart of this enquiry. Philosophers and sociologists, all the way back to Plato, have considered our reality to be a complex structure of our own construction (Higgins, 2021; Plato, 1943). Couldry and Hepp (2018) assert that "The social world is not just a given. We *make* it, as human beings…" (p. 21). The social construction of reality - the complex process in which social system interactions over time establish roles, conceptions, and knowledge that become embedded in the fabric of our society (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) - has become influenced and intertwined with new forms of digital technology and media (Couldry & Hepp, 2018). As Couldry and Hepp note, the influence of digital media has:

> changed the reference-points of human practice so dramatically, it is now obvious not only that the social world is something constructed by us as humans, but that those processes of construction can only be understood if seen as historically located, with one of the main recent

> historical changes being the increasing social relevance of technologies of mediated communication (p. 16).

Another philosopher articulates social construction somewhat more poetically. “At the root of existence, mind and matter meet. Thoughts shape reality” (Derrickson, 2016, 29:58). This philosopher happens to be the fictional ‘Ancient One’ from the 2016 MCU film *Dr Strange*. However, the intersection between our socially constructed reality and this fictional property is a relevant one. The MCU is not only a significant example of socially relevant media but also a prime illustration of the recent evolution of serialised cinema and media storytelling (Taylor, 2014). The Marvel comics-based fictional superhero universe has transcended traditional audience boundaries and become a central feature of the mainstream film industry, in the process producing several of the highest grossing and rated films of all time (Whitten, 2021). However, this sudden rise in superhero media has produced calls for further consideration of the ideology of the genre and its influence within society (Adamou, 2011).

While social construction is the heart of this investigation gender construction is its focus. Western media produces a multitude of gender representations that are often in conflict with one another (Waling, 2016). The reinforcement of traditional stereotypes has been a common criticism levelled at mainstream film and superhero movies, with depictions of hypermasculine heroes and damsels in distress drawing the ire of feminist scholars (Haskell, 2016; Voelker-Morris & Voelker-Morris, 2014). These depictions have enabled and reinforced hegemonic masculinity, those practices which sustain men’s position of dominance in society while substantiating the subordination of women and other forms of masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). With a strong history of advancing social justice in Marvel comic books, the fan-adored source of these stories, it has been suggested that representations of gender and diversity within superhero media are changing (Goodrum et al., 2018). Others maintain that these super-men and super-women simply ‘superpower’ the reinforcement of heteronormative constructions of gender and traditional patriarchal systems of

power (Voelker-Morris & Voelker-Morris, 2014). This debate presents superhero media as a worthy example of the need to examine these embedded depictions and the associated discourse. In particular, work understanding how these superheroes inform our individual and societal constructions is needed (Waling, 2016).

Dedicated fans can develop parasocial relationships with characters. Parasocial relationships are characterised as connections that are all one way, with neither actors nor the fictional characters they play likely aware of the social bond created with the viewer, despite that these relationships are every bit as meaningful as those with real people (Hall, 2019). How these bonds impact audience gender constructions is an area yet to be explored. The significance of the MCU in modern media and the role it plays in constructing gendered realities is a topic that is ripe for an important and timely investigation. This study aims to investigate how fans perceive gender through the MCU lens. What are the gender representations that dedicated MCU fans see within this media? In what ways does significant consumption of this media property influence their own gender constructions? And what role do relationships between the real and the fictional play in the gender construction of the world?

The reality of the superhero media fan is complex. Deciphering it requires on an understanding of the fictional and real-world universes from which their preferred superheroes derive. As such, to understand how the superhero fan constructs gender, we must seek to understand all aspects of the context, background, and relationships of the realms being examined (Yockey, 2017). In *Gender and the Superhero Narrative* (Goodrum et al., 2018) the authors sought to connect the academic and public debate regarding gender in superhero media, creating an intersection between the scholarship and fan discourse. In much the same manner this research seeks to further connect the academic and public discourse regarding gender and the superhero narrative, with specific reference to gender representations in the MCU and the resultant audience interaction with these. This chapter provides a background not only to superheroes in film and literature but specifically to the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the principal fictional universe at the centre of this investigation. It explores why examining

this fictional world is critically important to recognising the media's influence on developing generations.

1.2 A Brief History of Superhero Films and the Marvel Cinematic Universe

The rise of the superhero comic book was first seen in the 1930s and 40s with the arrival of Marvel and its now long-time rival Detective Comics (DC) (Krensky, 2008). This era introduced us to the now well known and loved DC characters of Superman and Batman, while also introducing the first comic versions of notable MCU characters such as Captain America (Krensky, 2008). As the leading superhero comic publishers since that time, the DC and Marvel comic universes have both been through significant periods of highs and lows, both in terms of comic sales and character popularity (Robb, 2014). What they share is a history of establishing complex and interconnected serialised storytelling within the comic format. Schumacher (2010) suggests that the graphic novel, the modern term for the full length comic, are book-length and sequential works of art, with a scope expanded beyond the typical science fiction and fantasy genre (Schumacher, 2010). The ability for the comic book medium to confront sensitive and challenging stories in a manner that connects with its audience has been considered one of its strengths (Ma, 2020). Its deep and rich storytelling history is a prolific field of content ripe for translation into modern digital environments.

Acclaim for the superhero film has not been common historically. Despite the plethora of science fiction storytelling in film throughout the history of cinema, it could be suggested that the superhero film, prior to the introduction of the MCU, had not been well received. While some attempts were made to bring superheros to the big screen, including various *Batman* and *Captain America* productions, the first superhero movie to capture the attention of the public was Christopher Reeve's *Superman* in 1978 (Robb, 2014). The four films of the *Superman* franchise, along with Tim Burton's *Batman* series that began in 1989, brought these characters to life and have been some of the few to

not just be popular but also critically well received. By comparison, the major Marvel offering and its first true foray into major film, *Howard the Duck*, was widely ridiculed by critics and the public (Robb, 2014). In the aftermath of the *Howard the Duck* debacle Marvel experienced a significant decline. Staving off bankruptcy thanks to the *Blade* (1998) trio of vampire films Marvel also found some success with the Fox produced Marvel *X-Men* trilogy and Sam Raimi's Marvel *Spider-Man* series, laying the groundwork for the introduction of the unprecedented cinematic universe of the MCU to come forth (Robb, 2014).

The MCU is a multimedia franchise and shared universe established by Marvel Studios, a subsidiary of Marvel Comics and part of the Disney Corporation portfolio (Yockey, 2017). In addition to films, the MCU comprises numerous television series, short films, digital series, and literature (Fandino et al., 2018). The franchise's films are based on characters that have appeared in Marvel comic books from as early as 1939 (Howe, 2013). As Marvel has previously accomplished with its comic books, the shared nature of the MCU is created by the crossover of plots, settings, universal features, and notably recurring cast and characters (Brinker, 2017). While there are numerous other film franchises in existence, such as the *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter*, and *James Bond* series, the MCU differs from these in that it is "an unprecedented series of interlinked films that have mirrored the deeply interconnected nature of their comic book predecessors, pushed the boundaries of transmedia, and mined the anxieties present in early 21st century American society and culture to fuel their storylines" (Chambliss et al., 2018, p. 10). Just as the shared nature of the MCU is created by interlinking plots and settings, it if further established by its embrace of transmedia storytelling, where a narrative unfolds across a variety of media platforms (Brinker, 2017).

The MCU began with the release of the film *Iron Man* in 2008. A further 28 films have since been released over 14 years, with Marvel dividing this series of films into four phases. These titles, including those in production but yet to be released, are outlined in Table 1 Movies and Phases of the Marvel Cinematic Universe below. Marvel's sustained release of contributions to the MCU over such

a long period has produced a generation of young people who have grown up with this media as an influence in the lives.

Table 1 Movies and Phases of the Marvel Cinematic Universe

Phase One	Phase Two	Phase Three	Phase Four
Collectively known as "The Infinity Saga"			
Iron Man (2008)	Iron Man 3 (2013)	Captain America: Civil War (2016)	Black Widow (2021)
The Incredible Hulk (2008)	Thor: The Dark World (2013)	Doctor Strange (2016)	Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings (2021)
Iron Man 2 (2010)	Captain America: The Winter Soldier (2014)	Guardians of the Galaxy Vol 2 (2017)	Eternals (2021)
Thor (2011)	Guardians of the Galaxy (2014)	Spider-Man: Homecoming (2017)	Spider-Man: No Way Home (2021)
Captain America: The First Avenger (2011)	Avengers: Age of Ultron (2015)	Thor: Ragnarok (2017)	Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness (2022)
The Avengers (2012)	Ant-Man (2015)	Black Panther (2018)	Thor: Love and Thunder (2022)
		Avengers: Infinity War (2018)	Black Panther: Wakanda Forever (2022)*
		Ant-Man and the Wasp (2018)	The Marvels (2022)*
		Captain Marvel (2019)	Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania (2023)*
		Avengers: Endgame (2019)	Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3 (2023)*
		Spider-Man: Far From Home (2019)	Fantastic Four (TBD)*

The commercial success of the MCU is one indication of its popularity and influence. According to the movie industry data provider The Numbers (2022), the MCU provides 20 of the top 200 lifetime grossing films worldwide, with nine films in the top 25. Two films, *Avengers: Endgame* and *Avengers: Infinity War,* have both grossed more than US$2 billion worldwide, a feat only three other non-MCU films have achieved to date. Notably the success of *Avengers: Endgame* and *Avengers: Infinity War* are examples of the ever-increasing box office takings of MCU films. Released as number 19 and 22 respectively these films indicate that the audience is not, as might be expected, tiring of the franchise or its large library of content. With a total franchise worldwide of more than US$25 billion dollars gross, the 28 films of the MCU have averaged worldwide box office takings of US$950 million each. Among film franchises, the MCU's total worldwide takings ranks it as the

highest grossing franchise worldwide, more than the *Star Wars* (US$10.2 billion) and *Harry Potter* (US$9.18 billion) franchises combined (Whitten, 2021).

These figures do not take into account revenues generated from MCU television shows (i.e. *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*) created and released on the Disney+ streaming service, nor from the other previously affiliated Marvel television series (i.e., *Agents of Shield* and *Daredevil*) released via Netflix and other services. Also unaccounted for are the MCU related revenues generated from merchandising, product placement, and new theme park rides and attractions such as the Avengers Campus at Disneyland (Whitten, 2021). While the exact details of the MCU's worldwide revenue cannot be determined, it is apparent that the franchise has provided a significant return on investment from the US$4 billion dollars the Walt Disney Corporation paid for it in 2009 (Burton, 2021).

The MCU has also been a critical success with film reviewers and movie goers alike. The Tomatometer, which presents the percentage of positive reviews by professional movie critics on the popular website Rotten Tomatoes (2021), bestows on the MCU an average approval rating of 85 percent, with 11 films each rating higher than 90%. Rotten Tomatoes similarly aggregates audience reviews of films, with the MCU averaging an 83% audience score.

The popularity and potential influence of the MCU is a result of multiple factors, including the serialisation and transmedia storytelling involved. Yockey (2017) suggests that its success is a result of a sense of audience participation in the narrative, something he proposes was a feature of the Marvel comics created by Stan Lee in the 1960s. Not only does the audience enjoy the "rapidly expanding, complex narrative universe whose scope already surpasses those of the *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* film franchises" (Brinker, 2017, p. 219), they can discuss, debate and digest what has and might be within this fictional universe. An entire industry of MCU film analysis, most notably on YouTube, has evolved to meet the demand for more information, discourse, and analysis of this universe.

The MCU has been identified as an important transmedia property. As the largest and most prominent fictional universe currently in existence the MCU has received a positive acclaim from critics and the public, as well as considerable financial success. The complexity of the interactions between stakeholders and the numerous media within the MCU is an area yet to be thoroughly explored, and how the MCU influences the generation of young people who have grown up absorbed in its narratives, including their own constructions of gender, is largely unknown. This research aims to examine audience perception of gender through its representation in the MCU and further understand how this influences individual gender understandings and constructions.

1.3 Thesis Outline

This chapter has introduced the MCU and examined how its emergence as a complex and significant transmedia property has been present (since 2008), as a generation of people have journeyed into adulthood. Given the widespread popularity and success of the franchise it is an important area to explore, particularly with regard to how it presents and influences constructions of gender. Chapter two critically reviews the existing literature pertaining to the topics of film and gender. The representation of gender within superhero media is considered and the nature of the MCU as a transmedia entity explored. It is important that we understand how this media influences the construction of our realities and the way in which we come to understand, know, and live gender through those media representations. The parasocial relationships established with media characters are investigated, as is the connection of transmedia storytelling and parasocial relationship to the theoretical foundation of this investigation. Chapter Three outlines the design and content of the study, but also details the methodological framework and innovative qualitative approach taken during a weekend long "MCU Camp" attended by seven committed MCU fans. The investigation of multi-dimensional systems, such as gender construction, and the subsequent need for a complex, creative and multiple methods approach is discussed.

The findings of this exploration into the audience relationship with gender and the MCU are outlined in chapters four and five. Chapter four examines the strong and influential parasocial relationships the audience establishes with the MCU characters and the impact this has on their view of gender within the MCU. This chapter outlines the gendered connections established between audience and characters and explores how these relationships shape an individual's personal gender constructions. How parasocial relationships develop through connection of non-traditional gender representations, but additionally encourage aggressive and anti-social behaviours is outlined. Chapter five considers the broader understanding of gender in the eyes of the participants. This chapter argues that the participants clearly observe a strong patriarchal world and a definitive gender binary in the MCU. The specific portrayal of masculinity and men is explored and demonstrates that the treatment of these characters further reinforces the power and control men establish in the MCU. This chapter also specifically examines the portrayal of women and femininity in the MCU, discussing how women play secondary and supporting roles to the male superheroes. The conclusion of this thesis is presented in chapter six, in which the key findings are summarised and the complicated relationship between the participants parasocial relationships and gender is explored. Suggestions for further research opportunities are also made, recommendations on future pathways for the MCU are suggested, and I conclude with a personal reflection on this journey.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Having established the origin story of this study, both in terms of my own interests and the significant success of the MCU, it is crucial to explore the existing knowledge regarding media, superheroes, and gender. Examination of gender representation within the media, including film, television, books, comics, and graphic novels, has been undertaken with considerable depth for more than 50 years (England et al., 2011; Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2021). This work has strongly established common themes in the way men and women are portrayed on screen that are important markers in understanding our own social construction of gender. In this chapter I review how stereotyped character traits are presented, the disparity in male and female representation, along with the appearance and types of activities these characters undertake are reviewed. Equally important is the exploration of how these media-based representations reflect and reproduce the existing patriarchal power structures in the world. This examination of the existing knowledge establishes a foundation on which to further explore gender in the fictional superhero world.

While some superhero media is especially grounded in the real world, the fantastical nature of the genre provides an opportunity for variations on the known to be presented. As such the superhero world is foundationally different to more reality-based media. In this chapter an understanding of the differences and similarities in gender depictions within superhero media will be determined, along with a review of how this particular media challenges or reaffirms heteronormative constructions of gender. Indications of the potential for a more feminist narrative in superhero media are also discussed.

2.2 Gender and Media

How gender is represented in media has received considerable attention academically over the last five decades (England et al., 2011; Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2021). Lauzen et al. (2008) suggest that "traditional gender stereotypes posit that men represent the ideal or norm against which women are judged" (p. 201). The product of this is that women are assessed and valued in relation to other people, most notably men. The credibility of these representations is established through constant repetition in the media and not only presents these roles as the societal norm but continues to reinforce the existing gender hegemony (Merskin, 2006).

The examination of gender representation in media has varied and evolved over time, with two areas of investigation and analysis established (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2021; Ward & Grower, 2020). The first, which Ward and Grower (2020) term 'recognition', refers to the quantity of representation a particular gender has received. Much of the early investigation examined gender representation in advertising, with recent meta-analysis of this work finding that worldwide women are significantly outnumbered by men on screen (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2021). In television the results are much the same, with numerous studies finding men again significantly outnumber women (Baker & Raney, 2007; Gerding & Signorielli , 2014; Hentges & Case, 2013; Sink & Mastro, 2017; Ward & Grower, 2020). Walsh and Leaper (2020), noting the importance of the preschool years in developing an understanding of gender, found television shows aimed at the preschool audience averaged twice as many male characters than female characters. While they also observed that television shows with female leads had no average difference between male and female characters, they noted that only 20% of preschool television shows were female led. Similarly Sink and Mastro (2017) examined the representation of gender in primetime television. They found that of the 1,254 characters identified in over 89 programmes that 60.4% were male and 39.5% female - a result that Ward and Grower (2020) suggest is typical of research in this area.

Research into gender representation in film mirrors the results found in television and advertising. A content analysis of television shows and commercials, movies, music videos, and teen magazine articles by Signorielli (1997) established similar findings to Sink and Mastro (2017), with only 37% of characters in movies found to be women and 63% men. A more recent analysis of Disney films found the ratio of male to female characters is usually 2.5 to 1 (Padilla-Walker et al., 2013). Equally concerning is the rate at which female characters appear in speaking roles and as major characters in film. Lauzen (2019) observed that male characters dominate the screen with 65% of speaking roles and make up 64% of the major characters in film. Krijnen and Van Bauwel (2021) note that in music videos and video games, both having strong connections to film and television, men overwhelmingly outnumber women and in some cases at a rate of four to one. Onscreen men take centre stage, while women are frequently marginalised and made to remain silent in the background.

The absence of gender representation outside the traditional binary in recognition research is telling. Reporting of non-binary representations appears absent from the mainstream investigations, largely due to the fact there are so few non-binary characters present in film and television. Where non-binary representation in media is discussed tends to be found within reports compiled by relevant interest groups. The GLAAD Media Institute, an American non-governmental group advocating for LGTBQIA+ inclusion and acceptance in media, reported that in 2017-2018 only 17 transgender characters appeared in primetime television programmes (GLAAD, 2018). Of those, only four were non-binary. There are signs, within primetime television at least, that the situation is improving. The 2020-2021 GLAAD report identified there were now 42 transgender characters on primetime television, including eight who were non-binary, with 41 of the characters played by trans actors (GLAAD, 2022b). An additional 17 characters were found to be non-binary and not transgender. Unfortunately, the same progression has not been found within film. The GLAAD Studio Responsibility Index, which maps the quantity, quality and diversity of LGTBQIA+ characters in films produced by the seven major Hollywood studios, has reported the complete absence of

transgender or non-binary representation over the last five years (GLAAD, 2022a). Overall the evidence is clear – non-binary characters are virtually invisible on screen, men dominate the limelight, and women are secondary figures in the background. This focus on cisgender representations emphasises binary oppositions and defines men and women through a compare-and-contrast of converse characteristics (Adamou, 2011).

The issue that women are under-represented in media is compounded by how they are presented on screen. This second area of investigation into gender representation is one considered to be more challenging to grasp given the complexity of the subject (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2021). Ward and Grower (2020) broadly classify this theme as 'respect' and suggest it examines "whether persons of each gender are presented in a way that reflects their complexity and humanity, or whether portrayals are reduced to one-dimensional stereotypes" (p. 179). Krijnen and Van Bauwel (2021) further suggest that this area is the "study of the ideologies of gender" (p. 21) in which the "struggle of cultural meanings" (p. 21) is waged between gender representations and the meanings attributed in society. They additionally note that this complexity has resulted in a wide range of research being conducted across an array of academic disciplines, each with its own cultural language and theories. Increasingly a multi-disciplinary approach to investigating gender representation is occurring with findings tending to be categorised into appearance, personality, and roles or occupations.

The appearance of female characters is more significant in the narrative than male characters. Academic investigation of gender portrayals in media has established that while men and women are habitually defined by their appearance this is especially true for female characters (Ward & Grower, 2020). Research has shown that appearance related commentary in media is significantly higher for women than it is for men (Signorielli, 1997). Hentges and Case's (2013) study of gender representations across the Disney, Cartoon Network, and Nickelodeon channels in the United States found that female characters were more than twice as likely than male characters to be concerned with their appearance. Ward and Grower (2020) note that girls are more often judged for their

appearance and are more likely to be sexualised in film. As such, women, already confined to the background and void of speaking roles, are further subordinated to men through the emphasis placed on their appearance.

A heteronormative construction of gender dominates the appearance of male and female characters in media. Much of the messaging derived from the overwhelming attention to women's appearance in media has long been considered to suggest that women, especially those presenting youthful and attractive characteristics, are "decorative sex objects, sexually available to men" (Lott, 1997, p. 287). The evidence certainly reinforces the approach of theorist, Laura Mulvey, whose 1975 essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* utilised psychoanalytic and feminist film theory to expose how film conveys and expresses the ruling and sexist ideologies, achieved through the male gaze. Mulvey asserts that a key feature of Hollywood films is the use of sexual pleasure by observation, scopophilia, to communicate and ultimately reinforce a patriarchal system of power. By diminishing women through passive roles and as a sexual objects they are placed

> in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning (Mulvey, 1975, p. 7).

The appearance of different genders in media has been found to influence the construction of gender in children. Walsh and Leaper (2020) demonstrate that appearance in gender representations inform and reinforce gender constructions in the preschool population. They found that female characters are not only more likely to be dressed in the stereotypical feminine colours of pink or purple than male characters, but their accessories further establish the differentiation. While male characters were more likely to wear stereotypical masculine and utilitarian accessories like tool belts, female characters were more likely to be found with stereotypical feminine accessories such as jewellery. They found

these representations reinforced the decorative nature and importance of appearance of the female characters for this younger audience. The reinforcement of heteronormative gender constructions established through patriarchal systems of power is clearly present from an early age.

As with appearance gender stereotyping there is an uneven depiction of male and female stereotypes in representations of personality. Signorelli's (1997) examination across multiple forms of media shows women are typically portrayed as being emotional. As such they fulfill passive or submissive roles to the associated and significantly less emotional men in control. Sink and Mastro (2017) similarly found greater levels of verbal and physical aggression among male characters in adult programming, with female characters having bigger orientations towards family. These findings reflect earlier work by Kortenhaus and Demarest (1993) who found women to be portrayed as more nurturing in contrast to men who displayed and wielded more authority. Research by Aubrey and Harrison (2004) found that gender stereotyping of personality traits in a range of children's television showed physically aggressive behaviour was more often found in male characters than in female characters. Male characters were also found to take control and be in charge, while female characters tended to be more fearful, frail, and romantic. Within the media context, these traits in female characters have led some to suggest that in patriarchal society to be a woman is tantamount to being a victim (Maity, 2014).

The 'damsel in distress' has been one side of media's feminine archetype dyad. Maity (2014) capitalises on the simplistic storytelling of Disney films to demonstrate this. The character Snow White is a "virginal, pretty, dutiful woman who is of course 'the fairest of them all', which initially refers to her beauty but also outlines her obedience as a subordinate woman" (p. 29). As all good 'subordinate woman' should, in the eyes of patriarchal society, Snow White devotedly waits for her Prince Charming to save her. If this is what society has traditionally suggested good women should be, Maity suggests, then the Evil Queen represents patriarchal society's view on the way women really behave. A typical woman is diminished to being a "jealous, self-centered, manipulative,

conniving woman" (p. 29) who conceals herself and deceives others in order to inflict harm on the naïve obedient and loyal damsel in need. While these simple but conflicting depictions of female characters have been commonly found within the history of film there are also more complex differences between gender representations in media.

Beyond the medieval fairy tale, the distinctions between genders continue to be reinforced. The activities we do in everyday life, whether they be in personal or professional environments, are often gendered, with women often holding subordinate roles compared with men (Lauzen et al., 2008). Lauzen et al. (2008) suggest that such roles are substantively generated by beliefs that women are more focused on others' well-being while men are more assertive. It was also found that even generalised information regarding employment status resulted in the subjects' changing their judgement on the men and women's qualities. With men positioned in powerful and professional roles, while women are typically represented in caring or home bound roles, there is an abundance of suggestion that men are in charge. As Lauzen et al. (2008) note, this work "suggests that the basic social roles assigned to female and male characters by storytellers are tremendously important contributors to the construction and maintenance of gender stereotypes" (p. 201), and, therefore, examining how this media represents and influences constructions of gender is an area that must be explored further.

Differing social roles are also evident between men and women in the fictional on-screen workplace. Vande Berg and Strekfuss (1992) examined the behaviours that male and female characters performed, finding that female characters were more likely to display relationship-based behaviours, such as counselling or motivating others. Additionally, female characters were less likely to be involved in decision making or workplace operations than male characters. Vande Berg and Streckfuss's research highlights that while male and female characters were both present in the workplace setting the male characters continued to hold leadership and executive roles within the story, reinforcing the domestic or relationship-based roles played by women. Signorielli and

Kahlenberg (2001), investigating prime-time television shows from 1990 to 1998, outlined how male characters were more likely to be employed and participated in a more diverse range of occupations than female characters. This work is further reinforced by Smith et al. (2014), whose analysis of gender roles and occupations in films from 2010 to 2013 found that for every 7.6 men depicted working in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics there was only one woman. Within the fictional on-screen workplace setting male characters are, in line with patriarchal power structures, very much in charge.

While male characters in fictional media dominate the workplace, they do not dominate the home. Signorielli (1982) notes that information regarding the marital status, home life, family, and romantic interests are important in the portrayal of characters and the development of these aspects is likely to be more advanced in female characters. Greater numbers of female characters are focused on home and family – a domain in which woman take a leading role but men are still in charge. Proficiency in domestic and caring duties additionally reinforces the patriarchal view that a woman's place is in the home. Research by Scharrer et al (2006) found men to more often depicted as incompetent at child-care or domestic related activities. Leading examples can be found in the films *Mr. Mom* (Dragoti, 1983) and *Mrs. Doubtfire* (Columbus, 1993) where the hapless father who cannot cook is thrown into the child-rearing deep end. Typically, both also provide examples of men overcoming their initial incompetence to show they are also capable of dominating domestically, restoring the natural order and relationship bliss. Putting the comedy aside, the underlying narrative suggests that men are inherently superior, even when forced to take on traditional female activities, and further reinforces the heteronormative familial ideology that women are best suited to home and not professional life.

The behaviours of male and female characters in media show meaningful differences in their approach to relationships. Ward and Grower (2020) suggest there is "evidence that heteronormativity and a corresponding heterosexual script dominate, dictating that courtship strategies, commitment orientations, and sexual goals differ for women and men" (p. 180). Objectifying women, actively

pursuing them for sex, and then prioritising that sex over any emotion are therefore key features of male character portrayals. In contrast, portrayals of women exhibit them prioritising the use of their bodies and attractiveness to lure men, all while still being passive regarding sexual desires, more interested in the emotions of relationships than sex, and being the gatekeepers who place a limit on the progress of any sexual interaction. The significance of the heterosexual masculine script is reinforced by reviews of the research in this area. An examination of research on the sexual scripts prevalent in television over a 15-year period found that men were portrayed as the sexual aggressor in nearly three-quarters of heterosexual script references (Aubrey et al., 2020). Concerningly it was also found to be the dominant way in which men were portrayed on television. In combination with the prevalent 'good girl' script, in which women are portrayed as sexually virtuous and submissive, it is easy to see how these behaviours would appear to directly reinforce the gender hegemony (Galician & Merskin, 2006).

While there has not been substantive change in the portrayals of gender in media there has been some minor corrections. Ward and Grower (2020) note examples where the quantity of gendered representations and the quality of these portrayals has improved. They highlight that gender-based stereotyping in commercials has reduced. Similarly, an analysis by Lauzen (2019) of youth focused television shows discovered female characters had obtained the majority of screen time. In conjunction, Lauzen found that an increase in speaking roles for women in prime-time television was up to 45% in the 2018-2019 US season. However, these limited changes also produce new areas of concern regarding gender portrayals. An expectation has developed in which female characters are expected to be everything. As Dutt (2014) states "a duality is exhibited in most female characterizations in Hollywood–respect and rebellion, beauty and brains, power and submission, sexuality and timidity, etc. – so all viewers relate to and enjoy something" (p. 9). While modern media has shown some progress from the traditional masculine and feminine trait depictions it has developed

a requirement for female characters to not just be empowered but also be tough, aggressive, beautiful, and sexy (Dutt, 2014).

Popular media's gender duality can be viewed as one representation of "a new form of sexual contract" (McRobbie, 2009, p. 2). Previously the female character was subordinated by patriarchal systems of control; now they seemingly choose these paths themselves under the guise of personal freedom. The once dutiful, delicate, and desirable Snow White has become the Black Widow (see Figure 1) – an intelligent and skilled female MCU character, apparently in control of her destiny who chooses to use her beauty and sex appeal as she wills (Gerard & Poepsel, 2019). McRobbie (2009) suggests this form of 'female individualisation' is a shift away from the feminist interest being focused on central and political power. In a time when many consider traditional feminism has succeeded and equality gained, she suggests this post-feminist period is hostile to such conventional centralised criticism of the patriarchy. Ultimately, she argues that while the media representations of women have changed the feminist cause has not yet succeeded and the established systems of power remain.

Real name	Natalia Alianovna Romanoff
Notable aliases	Natasha Romanoff **Black Widow** Natalie Rushman
Played by	Scarlett Johansson
MCU Movie Appearances	12 including 'Black Widow' (2021)
Affiliations	Red Room (formerly) KGB (formerly) S.H.I.E.L.D. (formerly) Avengers
Keywords	Super-Spy. Trained Assassin. Martial arts expert. Skilled gymnast.

Figure 1 Black Widow Character Bio (Marvel, 2022)

Despite real world advances in many areas of gender equality (Dutt, 2014; Rudman & Glick, 2021) this review of the literature suggests little has changed in gender representations in media over the last three decades. Male characters not only dominate the screen time by outnumbering female characters, but they continue to hold positions of dominance in the fictional workplace and in their relationships with women. The overwhelming portrayal of women as emotional and subordinate to men further aids in the reinforcement of traditional masculine and feminine constructions. Given the

media tendency to reinforce traditional gender constructions it raises the question as to how the increasingly popular superhero genre contributes to this discourse.

2.3 Gender, Superheroes, and the Media

The reinforcement of traditional gender stereotypes has been a common criticism levelled at mainstream film and superhero movies are no exception. Despite a history of feminine-positive trends in the comic books (D'amore, 2012) it does not appear to have significantly influenced the depictions in superhero films. Instead, there has been an increase in masculine characterisation of female superheroes while male characters now present as hypermasculine (Baker & Raney, 2007) and any change in superhero gender representation is superficial at best (Goodrum et al., 2018). Issues surrounding the term 'superhero' begin to highlight the deeper problems that exist regarding gender in these fictional worlds. Historically there have been few female superheroes and their slow introduction and acceptance can be noted in the only recent inclusion of 'superheroine' in the dictionaries of popular word processing software (Goodrum et al., 2018). Goodrum et al. highlight and utilise the terms 'superheroes' and 'superheroines' to establish a point of difference in the gendered characteristics and ideologies of these heroes. In a time where gender-inclusive language is becoming the norm this reinforces the poor treatment 'superheroines' have experienced to date.

The duality in modern media's characterisations of women has been a clear feature of the superheroine. The female superhero possesses not only the physically attractive features of the traditional female media character, but simultaneously wields the physical power and capabilities to achieve their goals through force (Gray II, 2011). While male superheroes are expected to be the picture of masculine perfection, superheroines must be a perfect specimen of sexual appeal, and Gray considers that this scopophilic requirement ensures the role of the female superhero is firmly maintained within patriarchal control. In comics, they are drawn to emphasise "'super-sized' breasts,

strong thighs, and thin waists" (Gray II, 2011, p. 76). Even female superhero powers are influenced, with those powers "linked to traditional notions of female power, including manipulation, sexuality, and masquerade, such as wearing leather jumpsuits, wigs, etc" (Gray II, 2011, p. 83). In addition to being seductively attractive and possessing superpowers the superheroine, to be considered a fully-fledged superhero, must also be willing to impose violence in the same manner as their male counterparts (Goodrum et al., 2018). Marvel's Black Widow, introduced above, epitomises this treatment. This character, a human with no 'super' abilities in the MCU, is introduced in *Iron Man 2* (Favreau, 2010) as an intelligent personal assistant who the male protagonist finds overwhelming attractive. As a double agent, Black Widow later dons her superhero uniform - a sexy, tight, black leather, full bodysuit showing considerable cleavage – before proceeding to violently dispense with an opponent's security forces. As powerful as that image might be Goodrum et al. (2018) propose that to "replace a male character with a female character in a narrative that remains essentially unchanged is to view the feminist project as no more than women being given access to traditionally male attributes" (p. 15).

While most superheroines find themselves encumbered with these characteristics there are some new entrants to the genre who embrace a truer feminist superhero narrative. Marvel Comics' Squirrel Girl is yet to make her live action debut (though an attempt has been made) but the character has been a regular and popular figure in cartoons and comics. She tries to understand her foes, solve problems passively through discussion, and help all affected parties (Goodrum et al., 2018). Commentators have noted that Squirrel Girl, aka Doreen Green, doesn't have the same male-gaze appreciated physical attributes normally found in superheroines, however her self-confidence and appreciation of her own body is celebrated (Cook, 2015). At the same time there is a developing discourse around what constitutes a true feminist superhero narrative. While some characters, for example Squirrel Girl, exhibit characteristics that buck the masculine superhero trend, this is not sufficient to truly embody a feminist approach. Male superheroes having and displaying positive and traditional female

roles, those typically found in the domestic setting such as parenting and cooking, are needed to present a realistic feminist narrative (Goodrum et al., 2018).

Masculinity continues to be the structuring norm in superhero media. Adamou (2011) identifies that the overwhelming number of superhero protagonists being men as the cause of this. Additionally, Adamou notes this to be caused by heterosexual stereotypes being "based on binary oppositions and are thus defined through the exclusion of each other's characteristics and their antithesis" (p. 94). Thus, in the absence of gender diversity and with male superheroes dominating the spotlight the patriarchal agenda maintains a monopoly on defining gender and roles. By being the most in the public eye men are not only able to be seen but they are able to be seen acting.

The theme of control in superhero masculinity construction would appear to apply to almost everything. This includes "the material world (technology, finances), political situations (war, terrorism), other living entities (enemies), and one's personal destiny (autonomy)" (Voelker-Morris & Voelker-Morris, 2014, p. 102). A good example of the patriarchal authority that exists within the world of the superhero can be found in the *X-Men* movies. Gray and Kaklamanidou (2011) argue that the patriarchal structure of Marvel's *X-Men*, "defined by the male, paternal figures Xavier (Patrick Stewart) and Magneto (Ian McKellen), which personify the poles of good and evil, may allow women to assume important positions in their world and the film narratives but only insofar as those heroines (Jean, Storm, Mystique) abide by their rules and answer to them" (p. 19). Not only is masculinity in the superhero narrative presented as being in control, but males are additionally embodied with a strict morality. This is represented as a desire to do good in the world, which is frequently associated with acts of self-sacrifice (Waling, 2016). Such a foundational role firmly places males in the position of being the norm, of being universal, while women are considered different and, subsequently, considered lesser than men and subjected to objectification (Adamou, 2011).

Discussion of the feminist superhero narrative addresses the maintenance of the status quo. Superheroes fight to retain our way of life as we know it – they don't fight to radically change or necessarily even improve society in a way that produces greater equality on any level (Goodrum et al., 2018). This conventional superhero approach not only fails to advance equality but assists in retaining the patriarchal power structures already in place in society. Goodrum et al. (2018) propose that further advancement in this space is needed, with a particular shift from "superhero stories" to "stories that have superheros in them" (p. 17). They advocate for stories that emphasise relationships, characterisation, discussion, and making challenging decisions, rather than those that focus on superhero action, as needed to improve the possibility of progressive gender portrayals.

Within the world of the superhero the traditional 'damsel in distress' archetype appears to have been repurposed. Where once the role of the feminine character was to wait patiently to be saved, these characters are often rising to save the day and become the true hero of the story. Walderzak (2016) notes this is often due to a new mutation or enhancement, rather than a utilisation of their inherent skills. The MCU example of Pepper Potts in *Iron Man 3* is used as an example of the changes in the traditional damsel archetype. Despite being captive and experimented on by the villain for the majority of the story Pepper rises from an apparent death to save the failing male superhero from death (Black, 2013). With a number of similar damsels saving the day through physical transformation the existence of this phenomenon is questioned. Walderzak (2016) contemplates whether it suggests "a woman with too much power, agency, and heroic capabilities must be transformed with supernatural abilities, a powerful suit, a mystically equipped ring—or face death—in order to be palatable or believable to audiences?" (p. 72). The irony of this view regarding heroic damsels lies in the fact that most male characters in superhero media have likewise been transformed, however the dominance of the patriarchy is such that male use of external power is not grounds for judgement.

The new form of heroic damsel also challenges superhero depictions. Walderzak (2016) notes that the superheroine can often display many of the traits commonly found in the traditional damsel. Displays of helplessness and emotion are common features of female superheroes, with their physical skill, power, and violence providing yet another example of masculine traits being superior. In contrast the heroic damsel retains her femininity while also being the saviour. Walderzak views the maintenance of feminine empathy as transgressive in the superhero world. This is a direct challenge to the role of the superheroine, who by comparison fails without the support of her masculinity. The heroic damsel's success, often overcoming the male superhero's failure, can also be considered a contradiction of patriarchal power and dominance.

Physically, the male superhero is presented as the personification of perfection. Broad shoulders and large muscles, a suggested physical flawlessness, that can be used impeccably to complete any act of aerobatics or combat required (Waling, 2016). However, the male superhero physique has often gone beyond what might be considered normal. Adamou (2011) notes that male superheroes tend to have exaggerated muscles, emphasised through the cinematography and character movements, leading to a hyper-masculine and unrealistic representation. The focus on the male superhero's physique produces a voyeuristic element for the audience, differentiated from the sexualised appearance-oriented gaze on female characters and superheroines to be a demonstration of the power and authority they possess.

Masculinity as the structuring norm produces unique examples of the interplay and control of femininity in superheroes. For those with secret identities, such as Spider-Man (see Figure 2), their superhero identities display stronger masculine characteristics than their public, non-super personas (Adamou, 2011). As Peter Parker the character is unsure, awkward, lacking in confidence, obedient and dominated by others, Spider-Man the character demonstrates physical dexterity and prowess, a witty repartee, intelligence, and control in the moment. The character often laments the fact that the masculine Spider-Man can do what the more feminine Peter Parker cannot (Watts, 2017).

Adamou (2011) notes the tendency for male superheroes to grow as a character through the acquisition of feminine characteristics. It is common to see heroes such as Spider-Man and Superman learning to refrain from excessive force and consider the needs of others. The MCU's Spider-Man certainly appears to submit to this trend. In this iterations origin movie, *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (Watts, 2017), the character is forced to defeat the villain by using his physical strength and force of will to win the day. By the third instalment, *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (Watts, 2021), the character takes a more peaceful approach, attempting to rehabilitate and save the multiple villains of the story. While more feminine characteristics display growth in the character the value of those is often undermined (Adamou, 2011). In the case of the Spider-Man example, the brave attempt to save the villains peacefully fails and they must be overcome with strength, skill, and finally self-sacrifice. While the audience is teased with the introduction of more feminine characters, traditional forms of hegemonic masculinity are shown to be superior.

Figure 2 Spider-Man Character Bio (Marvel, 2022)

Super-villains provide another unique contrast with the hypermasculine male superhero. Waling (2016) suggests that there is discourse of masculine power and virtue for the superhero while the male villain has been feminised. The male supervillain often displays traits perceived as feminine, such as a penchant for the theatrical, and a reliance on gadgets and technology to undertake their nefarious plan. Additionally, while the superhero is presented as the epitome of male physical perfection the villain tends to be afflicted with some form of weakness. This is often displayed through mutation or

deformity, or physical proportions that are monstrously unnatural. The result is a physical form that links to beliefs about what constitutes undesirable masculinity. These feminised villains, with their superficially developed storylines, are viewed as morally corrupt. This, of course, is the opposite of our morally superior masculine hero.

Somewhat paradoxically, villains may save the day in the search for evidence of change. Waling (2016) identifies that while traditional stereotypes and a gender binary may be the prevailing norm within the superhero movie genre there is some evidence to suggest that these gender roles are now being explored and redefined. For some villains, Waling's example is Megamind from the 2006 movie *Megamind*, masculinity has been reimagined thanks to the development of new identity labels. The era appropriate term 'metrosexual', in which "masculinity is compounded with a number of new cultural variants, such as engagement with consumption, fashion and technology, sensitivity, and intellectual prowess" (Waling, 2016, p. 15), is thus attributed to the villainous Megamind. For this character his redemptive story arc from villain to hero, which is not in despite of but directly accepting of his blue skin, thin physique, and geeky intelligence, is reflective of the broad social acceptance that engagement in feminine practices contributes to varied representations of masculinity.

Other variations in gender representations within the superhero world are also evident. Despite typically presenting gendered superheroes and superheroines the genre inherently moves beyond a binary narrative of gender. Characters with superpowers have bodies that move beyond standard human biology and exist within a realm of fantasy (Adamou, 2011). This would appear to allow these characters to "move far beyond any cultural stereotypes around sex and gender" (Adamou, 2011, p. 96). As an example, Alexander (2018) highlights the *X-Men* character Mystique, aka Raven Darkholme, as one who has moved beyond a simple binary understanding of gender into a trans space of some complexity and interpretation. Mystique is canonically classed as female however the unique nature of her superpowers, an ability to shapeshift into any form, requires "a queer reading of an entirely different sort" (p. 219) when considering gender. The character's resting state is scaly and

blue with bright red hair and yellow eyes. She changes form regularly and often spends time appearing as male. As Alexander notes "Mystique's criminality, animalism, femininity, homosexuality, and nonwhiteness, combined with a transgressive form of "impossible" sexual identity and morphological fluidity, form a unique intersection of Gothic attitudes and modern conceptions of transsexuality that could be found only in fantasy literature" (p. 239). Alexander adds further that she "cannot simply be read as trans, for she actively projects the potential power of transsexuality to disrupt and eventually destroy oppressive gender-based norms" (p. 240). Thus, we find amongst the strong, traditional, patriarchal gender representations of the superhero world characters like Mystique, and the similar Marvel characters the Skrulls, who challenge these binary notions. Ultimately the construction of gendered mythology is highly complex and contextual superheroes, with their gender redefining biology, provide a unique space in which to study the evolution of these constructions in Western culture (Adamou, 2011).

2.4 Conclusion

Film and television have a long history of gender stereotyping that reinforces patriarchal power and control. Male characters hold the important employment roles, make the important decisions, use their physical advantages to violently achieve their ends, and most essentially wield authority over others. In contrast representations of women emphasis their physical appearance, their dutiful obedience to their male counterparts, their roles in the household, and as being the sex object in need of saving. In the narrative position of antagonist, male representations emphasise feminine characteristics, with the inherent suggestion being these render men evil. Female antagonists, historically the only significant alternative for women to the damsel in distress - are cast as manipulative and self-centered. Despite a record of challenging the heteronormative construction of gender in comic books this progress has seemingly not translated to newer forms of superhero media.

In the exaggerated world of the superhero masculinity continues to be the structuring norm. Physically perfect male specimens steal the screentime, bulging muscles and extreme fantastical powers aiding them in violently maintaining the world's status quo. Even superheroines cannot escape traditional appearance and sex object expectations, yet now they are also supposed to wield extreme physical power and inflict violence. The inherent suggestion being these masculine characteristics render them heroic, but rather this duality can be viewed as a representation of post-feminist individualisation. Male characters in superhero media continue to control the material, political, and social worlds. Female characters continue to be controlled and defined by them. However, in a fictional world where anything is possible, there are glimmers of change.

Challenges to the heteronormative gender binary and patriarchal control in superhero media are sneaking into frame. Characters who can shapeshift and embody different genders are able to contest the fictional and real-world meanings of gender. Increasingly damsels in distress are not only rising up to save themselves but also the failing male lead. Perhaps most promisingly there are characters within the comic book source materials - many slated for their live-action debut - who contest the conventional masculine superhero's approach and embrace a truer feminist superhero narrative. Diversity, collaboration, discussion, and the embracement of change are emerging as new additions to the superhero toolbelt.

Transmedia storytelling has transformed how the audience interacts with the narrative. The Marvel Cinematic Universe represents the pinnacle of this new era of serialised and interconnected stories. Movies no longer stand alone but are accompanied by televisions shows, comic books and short films. The audience is expected to have watched previous editions to the chronicle, to understand the characters and their background. Where there is an information gap, viewers are driven online to discuss and debate fictional universe happenings. Analysis of everything related to these worlds is rife. Leaks and predictions on future instalments fuel the intrigue. Content is consumed and re-consumed at will in any location. The personal investment of the audience is unparalleled.

Academic analysis of media content can identify what is shown on screen regarding representations of gender, but we cannot assume this is the same for the audience. Importantly there is a need to establish how the audience relates to these representations and in what way their own social constructions of gender are influenced. This study contributes to this by examining audience perceptions of gender through its representation in the Marvel Cinematic Universe and how it influences their own understanding and constructions. In the next chapter the design and content of the study, along with the methodological framework and innovative qualitative approach taken are discussed.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

As discussed in chapter one, the aim of this research was to examine the audience perception of gender through its representation in the Marvel Cinematic Universe and consider how this influences individual gender understandings and constructions. I recognised that this broad and exploratory aim contained multiple layers of complexity that would influence the epistemological and ontological framework of this study, as well as significantly guide the research design. In this chapter I explain my overarching approach to the study, as well as detail my research design and analytical strategies.

This chapter is presented in four sections. In the first I discuss the epistemological and ontological framework that structures this investigation, and importantly consider the value of adopting a multi-method and layered approach. Secondly, I present my research design and data collection methods that took place over the course of a specifically designed 2½-day "Marvel Camp", attended by seven MCU fans. In part three I explain the analytical strategies employed for each method. In the fourth section, I examine the ethics and limitations of this methodology, while also further reflecting on my involvement in this work.

3.2 Methodological Framework

The methodological framework for this study is grounded in Deacon's (2006) assertion that "the way we do research should be a reflection of the issues and values embedded in our area of interest" (p. 96). This investigation aims to better understand what people, individually and collectively, take in and perceive of gender within media and the MCU. There has been considerable work analysing and describing the portrayals of gender present here (Baker & Raney, 2007; Coyne et al., 2014; Fandino et al., 2018; Voelker-Morris & Voelker-Morris, 2014). What these narratives are communicating has been analysed academically but we know little of what the MCU audience understands of gender

through this transmedia entity. The aim of this research fundamentally guides the methodological approach.

This study is embedded, from an epistemological and ontological perspective, in an interpretivist and constructivist paradigm. Interpretivism recognises that our social realities are observed and interpreted by individuals (Kara, 2020; O'Leary, 2013). As such, reality is a multi-layered, subjective and complex experience with multiple possible interpretations. Ontologically, the constructivist approach asserts that those subjective interpretations and their meanings are created by individuals through social interaction (O'Leary, 2013). These meanings are in a constant state of revision. In this study, I sought to go beyond simply identifying gendered observations from participants to being able to study gender construction in a more social environment – within the interactions in which they are constructed, reinforced and lived. This necessitated a research design that ensured conditions to produce these interactions but that the participants were highly engaged in the process. Importantly the constructivist viewpoint also recognises that the researcher's account of the world is also a construction, and this is a factor that must be taken into consideration.

The greatest influence upon my research design was the multi-dimensional nature of the context under investigation. In this, there were three primary factors I identified as contributing to the complexity of this topic. Firstly, the social construction of gender is inherently a system multi-dimensional and embedded in relations of power (Couldry & Hepp, 2018). The social world's multitude of values, beliefs, and behaviours are in a constant state of creation and re-creation as people interact with each other in person and through media creations. While hegemonic masculinity has been typically reinforced by these processes the constant state of change requires frequently examination of this state. Secondly, the MCU is a transmedia entity, arguably the largest of its kind, and a potential influencer of gender constructions. The 28 major films, numerous television series, short films and literature involved in this multimedia franchise supplies an estimated 86 hours (and counting) - of content (Rouse, 2022) along with more than 3000 character experiences to the superhero genre (Poe,

2021). Lastly, the final aspect completing the triumvirate guiding this inquiry is the audience themselves. The identification and selection of participants is discussed in more detail in section 3.4.1; however, with the large MCU audience having 10 or more years of MCU viewership and their interactive involvement with this content, there is a large history to accompany the complicated and diverse range of experiences they possess. This not only expands the complexity of the systems under examination but highlights the importance of this work in understanding gender construction in such a large section of our society.

Investigating multi-dimensional systems, those dynamic and living social organisms, requires the adoption of more multi-dimensional methods (Deacon, 2006; Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017). The transmedia experience that is the MCU, this dynamic and living system contributing to similarly dynamic and living social constructions of gender, arguably requires a creative and multiple methods approach. The MCU develops layers of meaning and depth to the characters and its storylines over countless interactions with the audience and we can explore those layers by spending time examining, discussing, and replicating the path to their development.

The argument for a multiple methods approach is well supported. Deacon (2006) promotes the idea that those investigating social systems, with their congenital dynamics and complexities, benefit from adopting a range of methods. While traditional research methods have typically and singularly concentrated on interviews these alone do not “capture the various dimensions of description and change” (p. 96) found in groups or communities. A multi-methods approach can also improve the credibility of research findings (Deacon, 2006). The capacity to capture data across a range of collection methods provides multiple avenues through which to analyse and test the veracity of conclusions.

Deacon (2006) suggests the addition of more creative methods of data collection can be more suited for those examining multi-dimensional systems. These methods - examples of which include

sculpting, designing, and drawing - have been found to produce greater partnership between the researcher and participants through a reduction of the hierarchy that traditionally exists in a research setting. The inclusion of creative methods within a multi-methods approach also allows for the data gathering to be more directed, such as with a structured interview, or naturalistic, as with participant observation. As suggested by Deacon (2006, p. 97):

> The purpose behind many of these methods is to find ways to make living systems actually come alive; not only to hear, but to see the stories behind the participants' perceptions and experiences; not only to observe, but to actually become a part of that which we as researchers are studying.

Ultimately, my approach to this research seeks to bring to life the construction of gender for the MCU audience by being immersed in an environment that engages as much of the social experience possible.

3.3 Media and Social Construction of Gender

How is it that media contributes to the social construction of gender? The focus of this section is to consider the theories that facilitate the construction of gender in media and the relationship of the audience with this media. The social constructionist framework serves as the foundation of this examination, whilst the transmedia nature of the MCU and the concept of parasocial relationships are explored.

Socialisation is the process through which people learn the particular values, beliefs, and norms of their society, and through which, gender identities and the acceptability of traditional gender roles are formed (Durkin, 1995; Remafedi, 1990). Berger and Luckmann (1966) proposed that the social world is formed by the values, beliefs and behaviours that are present. They suggest that it is in a constant state of creation and re-creation as individuals interact and they identified this as the social

construction of reality. This approach is concerned with the process of how reality is constructed, focusing on the subjective meaning that individuals create from their interactions.

The social constructivist approach suggests realities are created from interactions between social agents and that reality is not a truth to be revealed through scientific inquiry (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). As Fairhurst and Grant (2010) state: "Material or otherwise, these realities are constructed through social processes in which meanings are negotiated, consensus formed, and contestation is possible" (p. 174). This process aids the establishment of dominant values, attitudes, beliefs, standards and norms that each group or society possesses and through the learning and absorbing of these features people are taught or influenced how to function as part of that social order (Bierhoff, 2002; Hewstone et al., 2008; Hurrelmann & Bauer, 2018). The process of socialisation is considered by numerous theorists to not only instruct people in what is and is not acceptable behaviour in gender roles but to additionally have a role in the creation of individual gender identity (Durkin, 1995; Hurrelmann & Bauer, 2018).

While gender identity refers to an individual's identification with a particular gender, the term gender role is concerned with how the actions, expressions and presentations of an individual signifies their particular gender to other people (Remafedi, 1990). The gender role an individual assumes is heavily influenced from the moment they enter the world by their biological sex and the societal expectations which accompany that (Holtzman & Sharpe, 2014). Expectations regarding how an individual dresses, the activities they take part in, even the career paths they might pursue are directly and indirectly communicated via the variety of agents (family, peers, and media) with whom they are associated. The traditional example demonstrating this has been the attribution of blue for boys and pink for girls, not to forget action figures and dolls, which highlights the socialisation of gender roles from our earliest stages in life (Holtzman & Sharpe, 2014). Film, television, and more recently digital media have been particularly influential in the communication of gender to individuals. How people come to understand gender can be heavily influenced by the values and beliefs that entertainment

media display. Non-stop action and serialisation of story content catches and maintains the audience's attention (Romer, 1981). On a more macro level, Lorber (1994) demonstrates how the construction of gender begins with the classification of sex at birth. People use dress, toys and names to identify their children's gender. That label is identifiable to society's established meanings and constructions around gender, allowing other interactants to treat them accordingly. Males are asked about sports, girls about clothing. Mothers and fathers undertake different and specific roles in child-rearing. These experiences, and the plethora of gendered interactions we encounter throughout our lives, continually reinforce our understanding of gender in the world we live.

3.3.1 Externalisation and the Transmedia entity

Three phases to the social construction of reality process are identified by Berger and Luckmann (1966): externalisation, objectivation and internalisation. As the first phase of social construction of reality, externalisation considers how the social world and the order, beliefs, and values it displays came into being. This phase is the process through which meaning is transmitted and further communicated to the outside world. Importantly, it identifies that people are responsible for creating the social world, with those worlds consisting of a complex and everchanging cultural patterns, largely sustained over time, which establish the beliefs, behaviours, values, structure and institutions of a particular society, community or group.

The digital era has evolved the way social constructions, such as gender, are created. Couldry and Hepp (2018) have progressed Berger and Luckmann's social construction of reality to account for the increasing use and influence of technology in people's lives. Importantly, they ask us to consider what the consequences are for the creation of socially constructed realities if those social processes that construct them are already influenced, developed and formed by the media we consume? In fact, they deem the role and influence of media in the creation of socially constructed realities to be such

that they suggest the terms ‘social’ and ‘media’ cannot be treated as mutually exclusive. Thus, they must be collectively considered when exploring constructions of gender. This consideration must go beyond the traditional academic examination of gender representations in film to include a wider range of social interactions and connections the audience has with this media and between each other.

A significant change has occurred within media-based storytelling. This new form of media – multiple platforms of moving images, sounds, story, and language – captures our attention for significant periods of time. The Marvel Cinematic Universe represents a ground-breaking foray into not only serial storytelling, but a multilinear and transmedial serialisation of stories (Brinker, 2017). This transmedia storytelling, where a narrative unfolds across a variety of media platforms is considered a new phenomenon. Rather than separate but loosely connected stories each instalment contributes a valuable addition to the whole narrative. Brinker (2017) notes the MCU, with an origin in the decades’ old and complex world of comic books, is arranged in such a way that multiple subseries narratives take place within one shared fictional world. The interconnection of the storytelling is extensive, where “events in one film or episode are continuous with others, producing lasting impacts for succeeding instalments, and characters and objects move easily from one subseries to the other” (p. 219). These complex and inter-related narratives form an equally complex and inter-related environment from which the audience receives information about gender.

The audience now interacts with storytelling media in new ways. Historically we have only been able to consume film by visiting a cinema or video store. Now digital streaming services such as Netflix or online rental markets like Google Play, allow us to access this media instantly from the comfort of our own home. Furthermore, our now extensive use and upbringing with computers has produced users who, immersed in a digital world, are conditioned into participating with the media they consume. And while our access to this media has increased, it has also undergone a transformation – from a passive presentation of images to an immersive and interactive experience for the audience (Daly, 2010). As Daly notes “a movie no longer exists as a cohesive, unchanging, art piece but instead

participates in a world of cross-media interaction, and this has enabled new forms of narrative requiring, as part of the enjoyment, interaction in the form of user-participation and interpretation" (p. 82). This audience not only consumes a variety of stories via different forms of media but they additionally analyse this content online, discuss MCU happenings via internet forums, and watch YouTube videos predicting future MCU events.

The power of the audience involvement in the MCU is significant. When the MCU introduced a variation on long-standing comics villain, The Mandarin, in *Iron Man 3,* the fan outcry at the disliked depiction by actor Ben Kingsley produced several changes (Brinker, 2017). Most notably, a short film, known as a Marvel One Shot, titled *All Hail the King* was released in which the 'real' Mandarin sends a cease-and-desist message to the imposter. In the 2021 MCU release *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings,* the imposter Mandarin, again played by Ben Kingsley, issues an in-story apology for his previous portrayal (Cretton, 2021). Audience members no longer simply absorb the content onscreen, they can influence changes to it. This more explicit and effective involvement in the creation of the external social world demonstrates the potential role the audience can play in the MCU's representation of gender.

The MCU's source material has proven to be of unique importance. Brinker (2017) suggests that what makes the MCU distinctive as a transmedia entity is due to the relationship that exists between what is essentially the live-action remake of a pre-existing comic book character or storyline. These characters, who are already so familiar to many, and stories, which have been previously lived by the audience through the comic-book page, are reimagined in a different media format. This transference from drawing to live-action enables the audience to more easily permit the reimagining while the pre-existing connection to characters more easily connects them via a shared history. The influence of the audience and a history of feminine-positive trends within comic books (D'amore, 2012) presents a number of gender construction considerations. That the audience could influence MCU producers into establishing a more feminine-positive trend is a possibility for the future. More salient is the issue

of whether feminine-positive trends in comics influence the audience's perception of these trends, or lack of, in the MCU.

MCU gender constructions are presented to the audience over and over again. Daly (2010) proposes that the tendency in modern cinema is for the narrative to take a backseat in favour of a form where "navigating, intertextual linking, and figuring out the rules of the game provide the primary pleasures" (p. 83). The viewer is required to work to connect the various incongruent parts that exist within the film, or which may be found in other forms of media external to the actual film. An increase in narrative complexity, to the point where the audience may not fully comprehend the story on the first viewing, compels them to explore and work beyond the film to piece together the various story threads and knowledge that is displayed onscreen. Upon watching the film *Avengers: Infinity War* viewers new to the MCU would likely be unaware of the full meaning behind a quip by the character Thanos, the stories' antagonist. He announces "no resurrections this time" immediately after the murder of the character Loki (Russo & Russo, 2018). This comment requires the audience to recall multiple events from several different movies within the MCU – the apparent death of Loki at the end of the movie *Thor* along with various scenes within the movie *The Avengers* in which the history and relationship between Loki and Thanos is alluded to but not shown. For those already aware of these moments, the "multiple references, allusions, and connections to other parts of the Marvel oeuvre" (Brinker, 2017, p. 234) tap into the pre-existing familiarity they hold. For the uninitiated it represents an opportunity for them to further explore the MCU to gain a deeper understanding (Brinker, 2017). As such, the MCU audience is encouraged to repeatedly expose themselves to MCU media and the subsequent gender representations found within.

For the viewers, the pleasure has extended beyond simply watching the moving images but to interacting with the film by searching and connecting the component parts (Daly, 2010). The digital age now allows the previously uninitiated MCU viewer the chance to engage with the media at home, the ability to move backwards and forwards in the universe as if reading a comic book, the opportunity

to explore related media, and importantly, the chance to access the internet (Brinker, 2017). Gender is no longer observed in the MCU, it can be dissected and re-consumed at will. The transmedia environment allows fans to relive moments and events repeatedly, watching role models and interactions unfold. The depth of audience understanding, the connection to the material, and the constant analysis that occurs all delivers a media-based gender narrative unrivalled in fictional storytelling.

3.3.2 Objectivation and the Parasocial

Importantly, the degree of exposure an individual has with mediated communication is a factor in the development of social constructions of gender. Hollander and Gordon's (2006) identification of the importance of language as the vehicle through which externalisation occurs is additionally important for understanding the second phase of social construction - objectivation. As a knowledge, belief, or value is continually repeated it becomes a societal habit, a pattern of meaning that exists beyond the individual subjectiveness of the interactants. Cultivation theory suggests that the more exposure people have to film and television the more likely they are to believe the social world aligns with the realities depicted (Baker & Raney, 2007; Riddle , 2009). Meanwhile social learning theory extends this to suggest that young people reproduce roles and behaviours they witness in the media (Baker & Raney, 2007). As an example, one study found a connection between the viewing of superhero television shows and the gender stereotypes presented in children's play. It contends that, in this instance, gender stereotyping was learned from the viewing of these shows and that play presented them with the opportunity to practice the behaviours they had witnessed (Coyne et al., 2014). Meta-analysis of research into the connection between media and gender beliefs has shown such findings are commonplace, confirming the connection between frequent media viewing and the expression of stereotypical gender beliefs (Ward & Grower, 2020).

Well before digital media, the range of influential figures in a person's life was limited to those people who lived nearby, their relatives, friends, and neighbours (Giles & Maltby, 2004). In the digital age the range of influential figures to whom we are exposed has increased significantly, a particularly important feature for children and young adults who are heavy users of technology during their prime developmental years (Giles & Maltby, 2004). Boon and Lomore (2001) identify that the influence of media figures is significant, with more than 75% of young people indicating a powerful attraction with movie stars and musicians, while also noting that 59% reported that these media figures had positively influenced their attitudes and beliefs in some way. Giles and Maltby (2004) suggest these attachments may also provide an opportunity for social and emotional development, allowing a young person to imagine a romantic or other form of relationship in a safe and distant manner. In these 'parasocial relationships', where the attachment and interaction with the media figure is entirely one way, the relationship can share numerous similarities with real social relationships and, perhaps most importantly, the person may feel as though they know the figure as they would a friend. Parasocial relationships with fictional characters are every bit as meaningful as parasocial relationships with real people. The greater the sense of connection an audience member experiences with a character the greater the effect the story narrative will have. This not only impacts the enjoyment of that particular media but also affects the viewer's likelihood of adopting related beliefs (Hall, 2019).

Gender has been established as a factor in audience connections to characters. In a study of 147 viewers of superhero franchise movies Hall (2020) found people were more likely to establish parasocial connections, associations limited to the time of the media viewing, with characters where the actor playing that role was of the same race or gender as them. In developing parasocial relationships, those associations that continue beyond the viewing, gender was not found to be a determining factor; however stronger parasocial relationships were reported with characters played by female actors for both men and women. There are several additional factors that have been identified as contributing to an audience member's bond with a character. Tal-Or and Cohen (2010)

suggest character attributes indicating how good or moral the character is will help determine audience connection, while the degree to which the viewer's empathise or feel lonely can also play a role (Chory-Assad & Cicchirillo, 2005).

For the MCU a significant potential contributor to the establishment and strength of parasocial relationships is the familiarity an audience member has with a character (Hall, 2019). As Hall suggests, parasocial relationships are constructed progressively over time as people gain more knowledge of a character, making it likely that the audience will have stronger parasocial relationships with characters who have appeared in serialised media for a longer period. The MCU is a notable example of such an environment as the narrative complexity and serialised nature of the fictional universe increases the level of exposure the audience has with the characters within it. Given the source material for the MCU characters and storyline is derived from the comics there is an additional historical connection on which parasocial relationships can be established. How this relationship influences audience constructions of gender is as yet unexplored.

3.3.3 Internalisation

Internalisation, the third phase of the social construction of reality, plays an important part in the socialisation process. It is through internalisation that beliefs and values of a society or group become personal beliefs and values of the individual (Kanagy & Kraybill, 1999). The externalised interactions, now with a common and shared meaning in society through objectivation, are "retrojected into consciousness in the course of socialization" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 61). Berger and Luckmann (1966) distinguish the irony in that while people create the very values and beliefs that make up society, they themselves construct the social world, they are also indoctrinated, potentially unknowingly or under duress, to the values and beliefs of the society or group in which they reside. We create the very depictions of gender to which we are then indoctrinated.

This understanding of the social world highlights its intersubjective nature. It identifies that there are subjective perspectives of the individuals within the world while at the same time there exists a common understanding, the existence of meaning outside of and beyond the individual actors (Couldry & Hepp, 2018). The media, both the mass-consumable media and the various physical or digital media platforms, are a conduit through which this common understanding is created and maintained. Simultaneously, there exists both a shared understanding of gender and individual gender constructions.

There appears to be a considerable shortfall in the investigation of audience internalisation of media-based gender representation. While considerable attention has been paid to understanding how gender has been represented in film and television, as well as the superhero relationship with gender, there is a lack of audience perspective on the matter. This study hopes to further build the bridge between academia and the audience in this regard.

3.4 Research Design

In this section I describe the 2½-day "Marvel Camp" employed in this project, including both traditional and creative methods of data collection that formed the activities of the camp and gave rise to the data generated. The combination of all research elements, and the identification of the most suitable fan demographic (as discussed later in this chapter), was designed to reflect and reproduce an environment in which the process of gender construction in relation to the MCU could be investigated.

3.4.1 Camp Format – An Interactive Social Research Setting

Reflecting and recreating the complex interplay of media and social systems at work in gender construction was a key feature of my research design. To do this, I designed a camp format in which seven participants would stay for two nights and three days. The camp format would appear to be a

unique and rare design if the lack of investigation and literature on the method is any indication. Studies with similar focal aspects - social constructionism, gender, and media – have tended to conduct singular methods with a concentration on either content analysis or non-residential group discussion (Adamou, 2011; Goodrum et al., 2018; Gray II & Kaklamanidou, 2011). The residential nature of the data collection setting provides several unique benefits.

First, the camp format benefits the research by establishing protected time and space (Kornhaber et al., 2016). The camp is a retreat from the competing demands and priorities of everyday life. This format allows both the participants and researcher to fully engage in the process. It provided freedom from many of the requirements of everyday life, such as commuting, employment, or social commitments, which might place additional pressure on research participation. Additionally, the involvement in a research programme legitimised the time participants were spending away from their regular commitments. These factors have been demonstrated to be important within a related endeavour - the academic writing retreat. Retreat participants have identified that this prolonged and uninterrupted time away is essential for the achievement of productive results, with others suggesting retreats are a 'sanctuary', indicating a "safe, supportive, secure and comfortable space" (Kornhaber et al., 2016, p. 8). In designing a camp format, I hoped that the reproduction of these factors would assist the participants' comfort in contributing their experiences to this research.

Second, the residential camp format contributes to the development of shared purpose (Kornhaber et al., 2016). While the research participation requirements ensured the participants were already fans of the MCU (as I discuss later), the commitment required to dedicate three days and two nights guaranteed those taking part were devotees of the highest order. In a residential format this commonality establishes a community of practice, suggesting that participants who have a shared purpose experience a greater sense of connectedness. With writing retreats the collegial support provided is considered to increase motivation and productivity. The Marvel Camp participants

appeared encouraged and suitably safe to share their thoughts and ideas in a constructive environment free of negative feedback.

Third, the social interaction of the residential format is important for building group bonds (Kornhaber et al., 2016). By providing space for participants to interact socially, the development of the group is further progressed. The intention is that this allows members to feel more comfortable sharing thoughts and ideas than they might otherwise be in a traditional group discussion format. Kornhaber et al., (2016) note that the social interaction involved in a camp through meals and recreational activities "promote[d] connectivity, facilitated informal dialogue and feedback and contributed to building rapport with colleagues" (p. 12). I considered that an investigation of the social constructions of gender should replicate a gendered social environment.

The location of the camp was an accommodation block at King's College: a residential college based at the University of Queensland in Brisbane, Australia. As a tertiary student residence, it was well placed to accommodate participants and permitted the camp to be fully self-contained. I was fortunate to have access to the facility as a member of the King's College staff and, as the camp was held outside of the academic semester, the facility was largely empty. The suite for the camp contained 12 individual bedrooms with shared bathroom facilities. A communal lounge, kitchen and adjacent study space within the suite supplied all locations required for the camp activities. In addition, an air-conditioned learning centre, a cardio and weights facility, along with a swimming pool, were available for camp use.

Theming of the camp was a prominent feature. Movie posters of the 23 MCU films released at the time adorned the main wall of the lounge area in chronological release order. Music from the movies was played on arrival and throughout the camp. Film magazines, comics and related MCU books and merchandise were spread through the living space. The study space, which was the location of the group discussions, possessed a bucket of MCU Lego figures with which the participants could

interact. These theme features were important for enhancing the participants' enjoyment of the experience, but also immersed them in an environment that might aid their recall or thinking about the MCU.

Bedroom selection was one of the first introductions to the immersive experience for the participants. On arrival, each participant was given the option to select their own bedroom from the 11 available in the suite (I occupied one for the duration of the camp). The door of each room had been labelled with the image and name of a MCU villain or anti-hero character (see Figure 3). This activity served not just as a fun alternative to the typically straightforward process of choosing a room. In the first instance, it served as an icebreaker and unique welcome, through which the participants could connect to the camp and each other. Without what I assumed would be their favoured heroes present, they were required to engage more thoughtfully in their selection. All were reassured that their selection had no bearing on any further part of the camp, however six of the seven participants spent time considering their choice and for some the process involved consultation with the other participants already present to whom they had only recently been introduced.

Camp meals also contributed to the immersive nature of the camp. Every meal was themed in accordance with food or locations presented in the MCU. At mealtimes participants were set the collective challenge of identifying the MCU references present in the meals. As with the bedroom selection, these meal challenges provided an enjoyable experience through which the participants could further connect, all while remaining engaged in thought and discussion of the MCU. The full camp meal plan, including MCU connections, can be found in Appendix 1. Participant dietary requirements were confirmed during camp registration.

Figure 3 Research Camp Door Images (Marvel, 2022)

3.4.2 Finding the Fandom – Participant Profile and Recruitment

The profile of the participants was important to the research design and success of the camp for two core reasons. It was of primary importance that those participating had a significant connection to the MCU. The casual fan, those who may have only seen a handful of the films, would not possess the strength of connection to clearly demonstrate possible influence or interaction. As such, participants were required to have seen a minimum of 20 MCU films from the 23 released at the time of

recruitment. All who registered, even those who simply inquired, indicated they had viewed all MCU movies to date. I observed that the interest from prospective participants to even consider attending a residential research camp was a compelling indicator of the strength of their MCU connection.

Second, the particulars of the participants' connection to the MCU were also crucial. Scholarship suggests that media is particularly influential during the formative years of a person's development (Walsh & Leaper, 2020). Thus, having participants who had grown up interacting with the MCU during their formative years allows for clearer examination of how this interaction and influence may have contributed and changed over that time. The result was a preferred age range of 18 to 24 years at the time of data collection.

I considered the 10-year history of the MCU combined with the typical PG-13 rating of the films, determining that the minimum age of participants upon release of the first MCU film (*Iron Man* in 2008) was between 8 and 14 years (18 to 24 years at the time of the camp). This range ensured that participants would be old enough to have interacted with the earlier films while also recalling those times.

Limiting participants to this age range ensured that the group would be more likely to relate to each other by being at similar life stages. While the MCU provided a significant common element for participants' social connection it was important there be other points of connection as this could increase the likelihood of greater social engagement and interaction within the camp environment. Participant discussions on university studies, favourite Brisbane locations, YouTube videos, and cinema outside of the MCU all featured strongly throughout the camp.

Recruitment of participants occurred online, predominantly via social media and relevant interest group channels (i.e., fan groups). Prospective participants were required to register their interest in attending the camp via the study website, https://mcuresearchcamp.com/, where the participant

information sheet could also be viewed (see Appendix 2). The camp recruitment poster that potential participants accessed when clicking on this link is provided in Figure 4 below.

From a total of 17 expressions of interest eight people were selected to participate. This number of participants was selected to provide a range of perspectives. Additionally, it was felt that with a smaller number of participants, the requirement to continually engage throughout the camp might be too burdensome. There was an even split of males and females within the group. Participant ages ranged from 18 to 23 years. Within 24 hours of the research camp starting, one female participant withdrew due to work commitments and was unable to be replaced in time.

Figure 4 MCU Research Camp poster

Information on the research camp was sent to participants once their registration was confirmed. This camp information sheet, found in Appendix 3, included information on the location, type of facilities, meal arrangements, and what to bring. The programme of activities was included with this information, so participants were apprised of the weekend's structure. The consent form provided to participants can also be found in Appendix 4.

All participant names have been changed in the results to maintain confidentiality.

3.4.3 Data Collection

A range of data collection methods were utilised throughout the research camp. Each of these methods is introduced and outlined in this section and I reflect on the sometimes unexpected and additional

benefits that these activities not only provided the data collection but to the overall experience for the participants.

As shown in the camp plan (found in Appendix 5) and timeline of events (see Table 2), the activities were structured in a layered manner. As such, the camp started with fun and simple activities, introduced the various gendering process themes (discussed in the following section), before culminating in a direct and overarching discussion regarding gender within the MCU. The goal here was to sequence activities that allowed for the growth in participant connection over the weekend, depth of understanding, and observation of indirect data before finally focusing directly on gender.

Table 2 Research Camp Timeline of Events

Day One - Friday	
4pm	Arrival/checking in/settling in
5pm	Introduction Briefing/paperwork/ice Breaker
6pm	Dinner
7pm	MCU movie – group choice
10pm	MCU Mafia (if the group wants to stay up)
Day Two - Saturday	
8am	Breakfast
9am	Sculptor
10am	Group discussion – Name one of your favourite…
11am	Morning tea break
11:30am	Team rosters
12:30pm	Lunch
1:30pm	Group Discussion – Superpowers/Leadership
3pm	Afternoon tea/break
3.30pm	Character personality profile
4:30pm	Group discussion – Ideology/Family/Relationships
6pm	Dinner
7pm	Thor's Hammer
8pm	MCU movie – group choice
Day Three - Sunday	
8am	Breakfast
9:00am	MCU Poster activity
10:00am	Group discussion – Battles and Costumes
11am	Morning tea
11:30am	Group discussion – Gender and the MCU

12:30pm	Lunch – during discussion
	Final discussion/wrap up
	Departure

Group Discussions

Group discussion formed the foundation of the data collection methods. Such discussions are effective in gathering data from multiple individuals, while also focusing on the shared meanings of the group (Payne & Payne, 2004). As a framework for the development of discussion topics, I drew from Ackers' (1990) theory of gendered organisations, in which she identifies how gender inequality results from gendering processes.

Following Acker's (1990) position that gender in the workplace divided into four parts the areas of exploration for the camp were designed in line with this (see Appendix 6). The first, gendering practices or structures, describes the production of gender divisions through ordinary practices - labour, power, family, the state, allowed behaviours and locations in physical space. For the fictional superhero world, the topics of leadership, superpowers and family were chosen as group discussion topics to explore because they are understood to be embedded in and reflective of gendered relations. The second process, gendering cultures, examines the creation of symbols and images that create and maintain gender divisions - language, ideology, dress, and the media. These aspects explain, express, reinforce, or sometimes oppose, gender divisions. Ideology and superhero costuming were chosen as broad topics to explore this process in group discussion. The third process, gendering interactions, considers gendered interactions between people that involve any form of dominance or submission. Broadly, the topic header of battles was selected to consider the application of superhero powers while the topics of relationships considered both romantic and platonic connections within the MCU. The fourth process advanced by Acker (1990), internal gendering constructions, I linked to individual video diaries which I discuss shortly.

The order of discussion themes was designed to best reflect the expected comfort and engagement of the participants at any given stage of the camp. Thus, the first group discussion, a common superhero fan activity of identifying favourites, enabled the group to continue breaking the ice (after initial introductions and room selection), and find common connections with each other. The final group discussion, gender and the MCU, provided the opportunity for a wide-ranging and participant-led discussion of gender.

The audio of group discussions was recorded via multiple devices to ensure clarity. Video and audio were additionally recorded via a 360-degree camera. In combination with the use of VR goggles this recording allowed for full immersion and repeated viewing of the group discussion during the data analysis phase. This technique was particularly useful for the later examination of the visual elements of social interaction, particularly body language.

While a list of questions and examples was produced for each discussion as a semi-structured guide the participants, in true superhero fan form, required little encouragement to talk about the topic in question. Discussions were prefaced by a short introduction and a broad opening question, such as 'what is important about superpowers?' or 'tell me about the families of the MCU?'. The participants, aware they were participating in research on gender, typically linked their topics or conversations to it. Only occasionally would the conversation need to be brought back to gender or the discussion topic in question, normally through the proposing of an example such as, 'what did you think about the female superhero team up in *Avengers: Endgame*?'. As the discussions progressed largely unstructured the speed of conversation was faster than one might expected of a heavily structured discussion, and as such the ability to keep up with the conversation was aided by the additional capacity not having to direct it created.

Individual video diaries

The final process of Acker's (1990) gendering process considers internal gender constructions, the mental work of individuals as they consciously construct their own gender identities. This process

was explored via individual and private video diaries. Individual diaries are an effective data collection method that can provide additional insight into the beliefs of an individual (Jacelon & Imperio, 2005). Jacelon and Imperio (2005) note that individual diaries invite the participant to reflect on issues determined by the researcher and that these reflections can "provide clues as to the importance of events for the participants and their attitudes about those events" (p. 992).

At three scheduled intervals, typically at the end of sessions leading into a break period or at the end of the day, participants were given more personal questions to answer in their video diaries. These explored personal preferences regarding the MCU and covered areas they may have felt less comfortable answering in front of others. Video diaries were recorded via participants' own devices and uploaded to the confidential file server provided.

At the beginning of each video diary the participants were asked to reflect on the previous camp period. This provided the opportunity for participants to privately disagree with group comments or provide more personal information about topics discussed. The participants typically had much to say on this initial question and it usually consumed the five minutes given as a guide for the diary. Following the reflections, participants were asked to provide more personal information than they might have been prepared to share with the group. Examples include, 'who is your favourite character and what do they mean to you?', 'tell me about an important moment in the MCU and why it is important?', and for the final diary 'what is the future of gender in the MCU?'.

Scene Sculpting

A scene sculpting session on day two provided the opportunity for participants to explore MCU relationships in an alternative form. This method was used to "assess relationships, roles, and functioning" (Deacon, 2006, p. 98). Each participant was given the opportunity to verbally direct all other participants, sculpting them into scenes physically representing MCU identities. Each participants' challenge was to choose a preferred character and design a scene that represented how they perceived their gendered relationships with other characters. Seven scenes were created – one

led by each of the participants. Participants were able to utilise space, closeness, facial expression, props and posture to establish their scene. Once the scene was set, participants were asked to explain the scene's setting and arrangement. Following these explanations, the other participants were given an opportunity to provide their thoughts on how this scene compared to their own understanding of the gendered relationships involved.

This activity proved to be worthwhile beyond the alternative data available for collection. The participants' engagement with non-verbal and stationary physical communication offered them the opportunity to deepen their contributions, most noticeably through the inclusion of physical demonstrations to reinforce comments in other sessions. As one example, a participant portraying the character Pepper Potts was place behind but in close proximity to the character Iron Man, portraying her secondary supporting role to the character.

Designing Team Rosters

A fourth activity was the designing of an ideal superhero team (roster). This activity invited two pairs, and one group of three participants to design their ideal superhero team roster. Characters available for inclusion in the activity were initially limited to those considered canon to the MCU; however, the participants renegotiated this to include those characters in Marvel shows that were considered 'canon uncertain' and this allowed characters they considered important to be included. The activity required participants to consider the various roles that characters play within the superhero team, as well as consider the various attributes, characteristics, strengths and weaknesses of each. Beyond superhero skillsets, the participants considered relationships between characters and overall team leadership in their negotiations. This activity allowed the participants gendered choices to be examined without a specific activity focus on gender being present. Their explanations of their team rosters not only identified the factors they felt were important in a team, but what aspects of individual characters they believed were significant.

As with the scene sculpting exercise, this activity contributed more than just data for collection. Set early in the camp schedule, this activity allowed the participants to further break down social barriers and establish a positive culture of discussion and challenge. The renegotiation of available characters highlights the ownership the participants had assumed of the activities and research process. This was important not only for ensuring the research camp experience was an enjoyable event but for ensuring a productive social environment, in which the processes of gender construction could more easily be discussed.

The data generated from this activity indicated that it encouraged the participants to consider the various attributes of characters outside of the relationships shown onscreen and less restricted by the power structures of the MCU. Villains were a notable addition to team rosters, and female characters were elevated to leadership roles they did not hold within the MCU.

Personality Profile

On day two participants engaged in a personality profile activity. This activity required analyse of a chosen character, one meaningful to the participant, in more detail by completing Littauer's (2006) *Personality Plus* profiling exercise on their character's behalf. The profiling system offered a simple and time efficient activity in which the participants could consider the characteristics of a character in more depth, which later allowed for greater insight of the participants' understanding of that character and could be compared to the more specific gendered data gathered. Each participant was provided a worksheet and was asked to circle one word from a row of four that most often applied to their character. Rows were divided into strengths and weaknesses, with 20 rows in each (see Appendix 7-9 for the recording, scoring, and information sheets). The act of choosing the words that best described their character from a choice of four options invited the participants to put themselves in the shoes of their chosen character and, using some imagination, consider their point of view. Beyond the activity, this provided participants with access to 160 adjectives to aid their descriptions of these characters and gender in the MCU.

The *Personality Plus* profiling activity results in scoring that indicates the dominance of one personality type, or a combination, from a possible four. The concise descriptor of the four profiles provided to participants can be found in Appendix 9. They are labelled as Sanguine (popular), Phlegmatic (peaceful), Choleric (powerful), and Melancholic (perfect). Using a grid format within the room, each participant was then invited to find the physical location on the grid that best represented the result for their character.

All but one of the participants chose a character who was later identified as a parasocial relationship for them (see Table 3). The one variant, Rosie, openly acknowledged their choice was made on the understanding that the character, Bucky Barnes, was psychologically complicated and that they were interested to see what the profiling produced for him. Male participants all chose male characters, while two of the three female participants also chose male characters.

Table 3 Character Selection for Personality Profiling

Male Participants	Character selected for personality profiling
Theo	Spider-Man (male)
Ray	Loki (male)
Alfie	Spider-Man (male)
Toby	Iron Man (male)
Female Participants	Character selected for personality profiling
Rosie	Bucky Barnes (male)
Kate	Nico Minoru (female)
Jill	Thor (male)

MCU Poster Activity

Deacon (2006) notes that visual imagery can be a powerful tool when attempting to fully understand the lives of others. Film posters are a common source of visual imagery within the MCU, capturing and summarising the production's interpretation of the story, characters and their relationships. Given the extent of the content across the 23 films available at the time of the research camp the examination of these posters provided a rich and stimulating visual history in a manageable chunk.

These posters, found in Figure 5, were displayed on the wall of the lounge area during the camp. This area provided a refreshing change of scene and a more relaxed location in which to start the camp's final day. The activity also effectively introduced the more direct consideration of gender in the MCU that the final day addressed. The group was gathered in the lounge room and asked to briefly reflect on the discussions of the previous days. Participants were then asked to identify for the group what they saw in the posters that related to gender. A free form discussion and debate inspired by the visual imagery ensued and provided valuable information on how characteristics of gender had changed over time in the MCU.

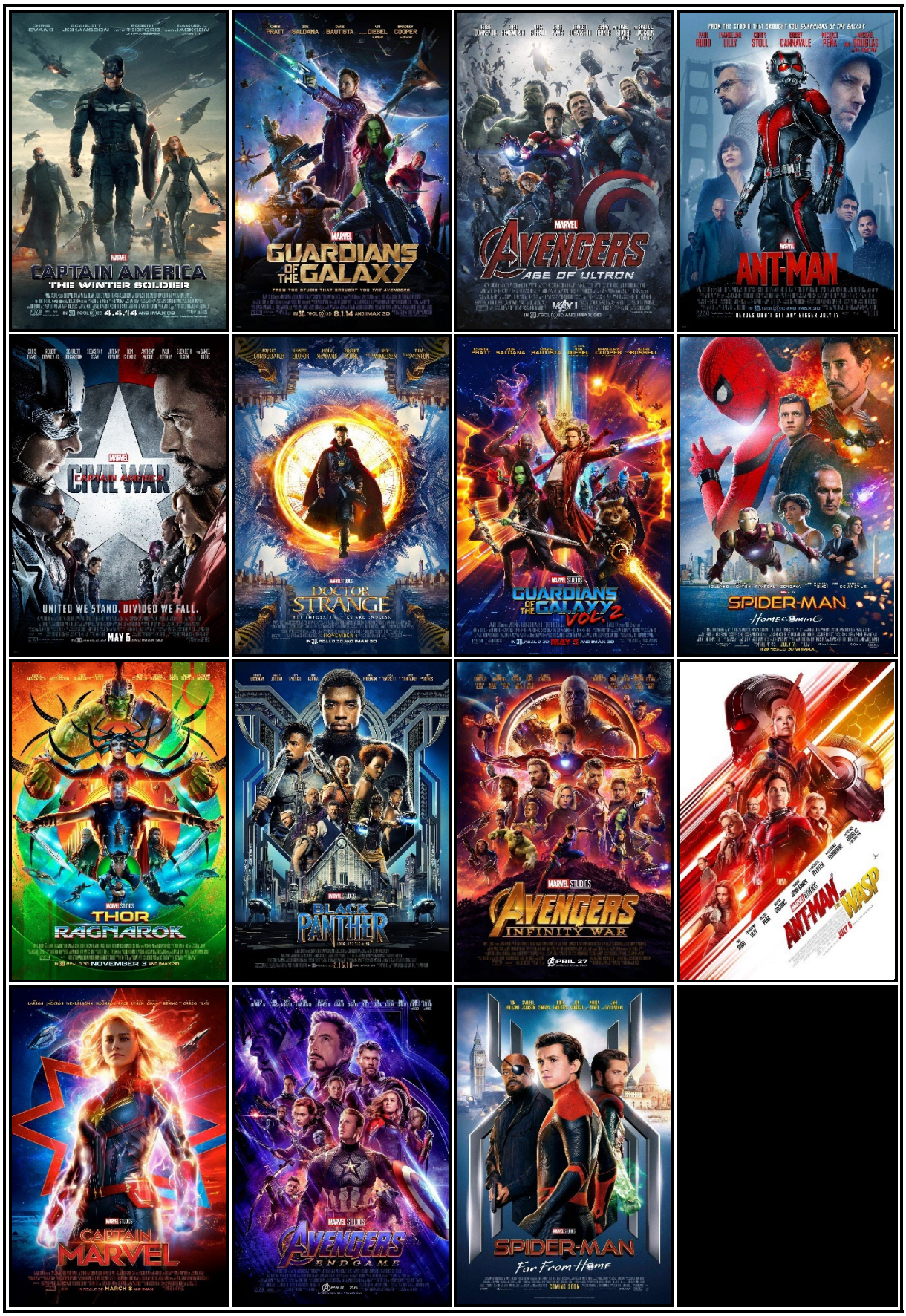


Figure 5 Film Posters of the MCU in Release Order (Marvel, 2022)

The combination of methods not only assisted in the integration of data sets from different modes of collection but allowed for greater certainty in the development of themes through the combing of a range of data (Deacon, 2006; Kara, 2020).

3.5 Data Analysis

The use of multiple methods in data collection, particularly with the involvement of various creative methods, opens the door to a large range of potential data analysis methods from which to choose (Kara, 2020). As a result, I utilised a range of analytical strategies to make sense of the vast array of data the research camp generated. Thematic analysis was selected as the overarching data analysis method. Nowell et al. (2017) describe thematic analysis as a "method for identifying, analysing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes found within a data set" (p. 2). This analytical approach allowed for a higher degree of flexibility, especially across a range of data collection methods, while continuing to provide a detailed and complex reading of the data (Nowell et al., 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2006; King, 2004). Thematic analysis has also been identified as being well suited for exploratory investigations, such as this study, in which little knowledge has previously been generated (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Nowell et al., (2017) highlight that thematic analysis is useful in the examination of research participant perspectives as it emphasises similarities, identifies differences, and can be unexpectedly insightful.

Inductive reasoning was chosen as the approach to discover themes in the dataset. This approach seeks for generalised conclusions to emerge from identified patterns of specific observations (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Inductive reasoning adopts the use of iterative techniques to distinguish categories and ideas (Kara, 2020). For this study I drew inspiration from Hussain (2011) and assumed a cyclical approach to the analysis, working from specific parts of the data to the whole before returning back again. This process included the reading of transcriptions, identification of potential themes, coding of data accordingly, as well as comparing and contrasting specific data themes with those appearing from the whole set.

Information was classified into various forms of data, forming a key feature of my cyclical inductive method. Having identified that a significant range and quantity of data existed I chose to categorise this data in a corresponding manner to its collection. Thus, as group discussions formed one form of data collection in research design and content volume, the transcriptions from these were treated as one group. Data from video diaries, photographs from scene sculpting, video from discussions and activities, personality profile descriptors, along with my own observations, established the second data set. This segregation did not distinguish any difference in importance between datasets, rather it provided a logical and systematic approach to the integration of data and established a technique for the identification of thematic findings.

Becoming more familiar with the data was a necessary step before approaching coding. Braun and Clarke (2006) recommend reading and re-reading the data as the first phase of work in thematic analysis. I began by utilising the online service *Trint* to transcribe the audio recordings. While this automated service did assist in relieving the laboriousness of transcribing two days of audio recordings, significant work correcting and verifying the transcriptions was required. Once the transcription process was completed, I conducted an additional reading of the data for further familiarity and understanding of the flow of information throughout the camp.

The second group of data sources, particularly the recorded video, proved to be instrumental for ensuring the transcriptions were accurate. I regularly viewed these recordings to gain further clarification of unclear audio. The use of 360-degree video recordings also allowed me to relive sessions via virtual reality. This not only assisted with improving the accuracy of transcription but highlighted how important considering all the available information for example, body language and vocal inflections was in gaining a true understanding of the participants' communications. Observing and reviewing their reactions and interactions with other participants allowed me to include non-verbal communications, particularly the ratification or rejection of thoughts and ideas being expressed. The virtual-reality approach let me more easily consider other participants who were not

the initial centre of attention at the time. These observations contributed to an understanding of the relative strength of these concepts and were included in the coding process.

The identification of themes allowed for the exploration of relationships between data, both within the theme and in relation to others identified. Once the theme identification was completed, I conducted a series of cyclical examinations of the themes and their relationships. Within each cycle, new relationships between the themes emerged. This cyclical repetition clarified initial interpretations of the data and challenged others and, as such, was a valuable activity to undertake.

Being the only researcher present did make me acutely aware of my own contributions. In the ethics review prior to the camp (which I discuss below), I had noted my personal interest in the subject material and the need to ensure any contribution I made did not influence the participants. As such, I had determined that I would not actively contribute my views. This proved to be a more difficult task than anticipated and one that may have been easier to counteract with the aid of another facilitator present. My review of the transcriptions identified three occasions in which I did actively contribute. I reviewed each occasion, considering both the potential influence of my contribution and the role of those data points in themes. For the first two occasions, I identified that those data points, albeit broadly and not specifically, did contribute to developing themes. However, I recognised .my contributions on both these occasions as intended to facilitate the discussion rather than influence it. The contributions were simple MCU story-based facts, not specifically related to gender, and a third-party review of the interactions confirmed my classification of these occasions.

3.6 Methodological Reflections

An internal ethics peer review of this project was conducted within the School of People, Environment and Planning. A wide range of ethical considerations were discussed, including ensuring informed consent was achieved, maintaining participant confidentiality, and gaining permission to

record the sessions. Given the research took place in a camp setting the most significant time was spent reviewing how participants would be kept safe throughout the weekend, which included the provision of individual bedrooms, the availability of security personnel, and the presence of the researcher throughout. This review determined that all relevant ethical issues had been considered and mitigated. The study was deemed to be low risk, and as such a low-risk notification form was submitted to the Massey University Human Ethics Committee. Given this, and the uniqueness of some elements of this research design, I will discuss a range of issues which presented as part of this study, rather than simply conveying the standard ethics considered in this section.

A research camp of this nature is an intensive process and requires considerable assistance to co-ordinate. I was very well supported in the design and implementation of the camp by numerous individuals who aided me behind the scenes to ensure that camp functions, particularly location setup and meals, occurred smoothly. Additionally, the camp design involved the participants in much of this work which aided the social development of the group and lessened the organisational load. However, as the only researcher and organiser within the camp there was significant and continual pressure present throughout. I found that when we were not in a scheduled group discussion or event, I was busy arranging a meal or social event. This impacted the number of opportunities for reflection or considered observation, which has been highlighted as important in qualitative research designs (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Hussain, 2011; Kara, 2020). The presence of research assistants at the camp may have alleviated some of this burden and allowed more space for in-collection consideration.

While the extra in-camp assistance may have allowed me to be somewhat unencumbered there was an unexpected benefit. A greater proportion of the camp period was a blur and the ability to relive those times through the 360-degree video of the group discussions and audio from the entire weekend resulted in moments of surprise. I found that these moments were often important data points and as I had failed to cognitively register them at the time, they were subsequently highlighted. This turned out to be a blessing and a curse. The surprise at some data points may have caused a greater focus on

those moments than they deserved and consideration of themes that was unwarranted. Alternatively, many of these moments were significant and have formed part of developing themes. The cyclical nature of the data analysis did resolve many of the red herrings, and this could be considered a natural part of the thematic process. Perhaps most importantly, it introduced an unexpected and fun element into this work, particularly in comparison to the reading of transcriptions.

In relation to this issue was pressure from participants to contribute my own opinion to discussions. I had noted to them in my introduction that I was also a fan of the MCU. On a number of occasions, I was asked for my thoughts on the discussion; however, I refrained from acquiescing to these invitations within the camp. The third contribution I made did result from a request for my opinion, put to me at the very end of the camp as the group were saying their goodbyes. I determined in the moment that providing my opinion at that time would not influence data collected prior to that point. I also considered that giving the participants something they had been requesting throughout the camp at its conclusion allowed it to end on a particularly positive note.

3.7 Conclusion

The MCU represents a new form of transmedia entity in which serialisation and intertextual linking has helped to create a large and dedicated enduring audience. While considerable academic work, as discussed in chapter two, has been completed analysing gender within this content, little investigation of the audience understanding of gender as seen within and through the MCU has been undertaken. The aim of this research was to examine the audience perception of gender through its representation in the MCU, considering how this influences individual gender understandings and constructions. As a broad and exploratory aim it contains multiple layers of complexity that influence the epistemological and ontological framework required. It has also significantly guided the research design, leading to the development of a multiple methods research design and including both creative and residential components into this methodology.

Utilising an interpretivist and constructivist paradigm, recognising that reality is a multi-layered, subjective, and complex experience with multiple possible interpretations. With the multi-dimensional nature of the context under investigation three primary factors were identified as contributing to the complexity of this study - construction of gender is complex social system (Couldry & Hepp, 2018); the MCU is the largest and most successful modern transmedia entity, and the audience themselves. Being guided by Deacon's (2006) assertion that those investigating social systems benefit from adopting a range of methods, the goal of reflecting and recreating the complex interplay of media and social systems at work in gender construction became a key feature of my research design. A research camp format was selected in which the participants would live in residence throughout the data collection period. An extensive range of data was collected and analysed.

The findings of this research have been organised into two major themes, which are presented in the ensuing chapters. While each chapter presents the gender related findings of this study, they both have a distinct focus. Chapter four examines the participants MCU parasocial relationships in relation to gender. Chapter five examines the wider construction of gender within this universe and how the representation of gender creates, represents and reinforces patriarchal systems of power and control. These two aspects of gender in the MCU – parasocial relationships and the overall gendering processes – are not mutually exclusive and present an inherent tension for participants between their character parasocial relationships and the presentation of gender within the remainder of the MCU.

Chapter 4: Parasocial and Gender Connections

This chapter examines the presence, strength, and role of parasocial relationships in relation to gender, a central theme that emerged in this study. For my participants, these relationships began at an early age, notably during developmental periods. These relationships influenced the participants' experience of the MCU, particularly their interpretation of gender within this fictional universe and its subsequent incorporation into their own gender identity. People often develop parasocial relationships with characters who they feel embody a similar gender role to themselves – particularly connecting in occasions where both the character and viewer are subordinated. While these connections are important for reassuring people during developmental years, they are also found to influence aggressive behaviours as individuals look to emulate these role models.

The difference between the meaningful parasocial relationships and the remainder of the MCU for the participants is important in understanding how and why fans can, on one hand, be so committed to this narrative but also fundamentally opposed to some facets of it, a tension that will be discussed, in chapter five.

4.1 Identification of Parasocial Relationships

Parasocial relationships are distinguished as bonds that are all one way, with neither the actor nor the fictional character they play being aware of the social connection created with the viewer (Hall, 2019). Hall (2019) notes these relationships are every bit as meaningful as those with real people. A number of factors aid in identifying the participants' parasocial relationships. Hall (2020) specifically states self-identification, length of connection, and familiarity as important characteristics. The participants' affinity with one or more characters was clearly and consistently articulated, albeit without use of the term parasocial, but particularly through the emotional language used in reference to them. They frequently referred to "resonating" with that character, stating that they "looked up" to them, that they

were “influential” in their lives, and, in reference to a particular characteristic, that they “love that about them”. The use of the word ‘love’ was especially noticeable. A comparative analysis of data relating to parasocial relationships and that of other MCU characters or aspects showed there was an increase in the use of strong emotive words, such as love, by participants in relation to parasocial characters. In conjunction there was a visible change in the participants’ demeanour when discussing characters of importance to them.

The participants of this study were committed MCU fans. They all had a long and dedicated involvement with the films of the MCU, along with varying degrees of participation with the other canon and non-canon MCU TV shows, comics, and other media. There was also a rich involvement with a variety of associated MCU media - a prime example being MCU analysis videos on YouTube - and previous history with Marvel comics, movies, and animated TV series. Familiarity with characters and progressive exposure through serialisation were noted by Hall (2019) as important elements in the establishment of parasocial relationships. This was true for the participants’, who all demonstrated strong and well-established parasocial relationships with MCU characters.

The participants frequently displayed behaviours outlined in the Parasocial Interaction Scale developed by Rubin et al. (1985). This scale measures the strength of parasocial interaction by presenting 20 statements about a chosen media figure for respondents to rank, for example “I usually plan my evenings so I do not miss my favourite performers program”. The substance of these statements was repeatedly displayed directly and indirectly by participants. They recounted memories of their parasocial relationship characters as if they were old friends (“Thor has been my man from way back”), they miss them when they are not on a screen in front of them (“I can’t wait to see Natasha in Black Widow, she so deserves that recognition”), and spoke with confidence about the character’s thoughts

and feelings as if they knew them well. In an example of how well participants knew the characters of their parasocial relationships, Toby clearly outlines his knowledge of the growth that Iron Man (see Figure 6) has taken.

> Well, let's say with Iron Man, he made his armour and it kind of changed his personality a tiny bit because he realised, like, he was making weapons and those weapons were being used for mass destruction. And so, he wanted to destroy those weapons and the people that were using them. And he kind of became a better person from that. But he still had his egotistical kind of Playboy personality. But over the years, until we get to the Battle of New York, which skewered his point of mentality into his PTSD. In Iron Man 3 he suddenly realises that the machines he's created do not make the man that he is and decides to destroy them. (Toby)

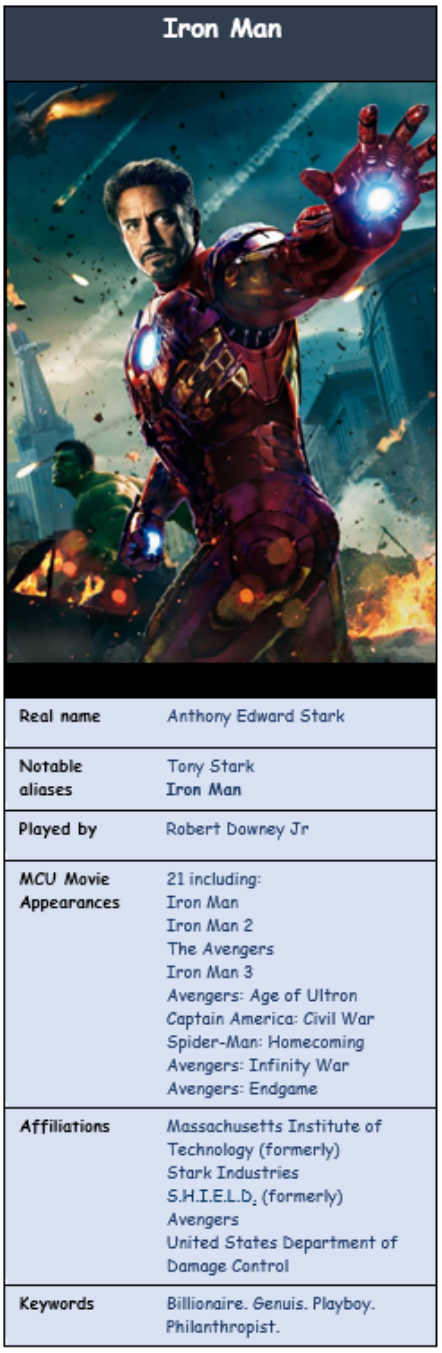


Figure 6 Iron Man Character Bio (Marvel, 2022)

Participants' parasocial connections to characters within the MCU began at an early age. This is important to consider for two reasons. The first is that previous research has shown superhero media has influenced gender stereotyping in children (Coyne et al., (2014), while a meta-analysis of research into the connection between media and gender beliefs has confirmed the link between frequent media viewing and the expression of stereotypical gender beliefs (Ward & Grower, 2020). So the acknowledgment from the participants that their relationships had developed during childhood establishes the potential for those relationships to have influenced

their gender constructions. Within this research the presence, strength and longevity of this influence is not clearly defined and thus provides an avenue of exploration for further studies.

The second is that Hall (2020) notes parasocial relationships are constructed progressively over time with the longer the exposure to a character in serialised media the greater the depth of connection. Having established their parasocial relationships at an early age, the participants of this study have subsequently now had many years of exposure to those characters. They have journeyed with these characters from childhood to their young adult years. As they have grown and developed, their parasocial relationships have been a regular presence in their lives.

4.2 Parasocial Relationships and Participant Gender

Hall (2020) noted that strong connections, those created while viewing media as opposed to longer parasocial relationships, were more likely to be established where the actor playing that character was of the same gender. This was the case for the participants of this study. The male participants identified or gravitated towards male characters in discussions, while female participants showed a preference towards female characters. Male participants more frequently referred to the male characters of Thor, Iron Man, and Captain America, while female participants showed particular passion for Black Widow, Captain Marvel, and the strong female residents of Wakanda in *Black Panther*. At times there was a noticeable reluctance from the male participants to comment on female characters. This was most obvious when the discussion touched on the civil rights of that character, the way in which they had been treated by the story narrative or their appearance on-screen. When male participants did comment on female characters in these discussions they spoke with caution, keeping their comments brief and appearing to choose their words carefully. Female participants did not appear to be inhibited in a similar manner. They typically spoke with freedom and ease on all manner of issues relating to characters of any gender. While these connections are not parasocial

relationships this does demonstrate a degree of preference in the participants which might be considered a precursor to the development of parasocial relationship or more influence on gender construction.

Hall (2020) also noted that strong parasocial relationships were established by men and women with female characters. This was not the case for the participants of this study. As previously mentioned, male participants most strongly identified with male characters and did not demonstrate parasocial connections with female characters. In contrast, the female participants identified parasocial relationships with both male and female characters. That male characters make up the majority of primary characters in the MCU, while female characters are kept in the background fulfilling supporting roles is one potential explanation to why female participants established parasocial relationships with male characters. In addition to this, that men are the structuring norm in the MCU and their characteristics, morals and values are upheld as those of the 'ideal person' by participants may also contribute to this. Both of these matters are discussed further in chapter five. A list of identified participant parasocial relationships can be found in Table 4.

Table 4 Identified Participant Parasocial Relationships

Male Participants	Identified Parasocial Relationships
Theo	Spider-Man (M)
Ray	Ant-Man (M), Thor (M), Loki (M)
Alfie	Spider-Man (M), Captain America (M)
Toby	Iron Man (M)
Female Participants	**Identified Parasocial Relationships**
Rosie	Black Widow (F), Captain America (M), Iron Man (M), Hawkeye (M), Thor (M)
Kate	Nico Minoru (F), Karolina Dean (F), Black Widow (F), Captain America (M)
Jill	Black Widow (F), Captain America (M), Thor (M)

4.3 Parasocial Relationships and Personal Constructions

The establishment of parasocial relationships, and the role they play in personal gender constructions, can occur in complex and trans-universe ways. In some instances, the connection with a character

was established via media that is not considered part of the MCU and the parasocial relationship has continued once the character has later appeared. This transference between media properties provides a distinctive example of the relationship between the audience, the MCU, and the media from which the MCU has been inspired. In one example Alfie noted his connection with the character Spider-Man had developed from the animated series that appeared on television. This series was not part of the MCU and aired prior to its establishment. However, his connection with the character has transcended media properties. Not only is the influential relationship with a fictional character but that character is formed from multiple different versions. While there are fundamental similarities between the characters there are innumerable differences, particularly in the context of narrative. These characters have the same name, but they have differing experiences, make different choices, and treat others in different ways. The recent third instalment of the MCU Spider-Man movies, *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (Watts, 2021), highlighted these differences when it introduced three different versions of Spider-Man to each other. Three actors (Tobey Maguire, Tom Holland, and Andrew Garfield) all played their version of the Spider-Man character from their particular Spider-Man franchise. They openly discuss the differences in the people in their lives. They joke about variations in their superhuman abilities, most notably one version's ability to biologically produce spider webbing. One version has experience working in a team, the others have not. And they all have wildly different experiences in fighting villains – with vastly different stakes at risk. However, while different iterations of Spider-Man might be identified, this character appears to maintain a singular identity with regards to the parasocial relationship. Fundamentally, this suggests that themes common to all iterations of the character motivate the parasocial relationship. There appears to be an ethereal combining of various Spider-Men into a universal character with whom they relate.

For the male participants who established parasocial relationships with Spider-Man there was an attraction to the character because he represented a form of subordinated masculinity. Connell (2020) identifies subordinated masculinities as those which do not correspond to the construction of

hegemonic masculinity and, as a result, are treated as being lower on the gender hierarchy. Alfie, already having commented that from an early age he had aspired to be like Spider-Man, noted the character "hasn't ever been put out to be this big alpha male", while Theo also connected with Spider-Man over the adversity he faced for being "geeky" and "nerdy". They found in Spider-Man someone who reassured them they were okay and whom they could emulate. He is also a character who embraces learning, is awkward and unsure in romantic endeavours, and who does not present the typical big and buff image of hegemonic masculinity shown by most male superheroes. Spider-Man is well known for taking on the responsibility that his power brings and for making sacrifices to do what's right. He cares for his loved ones, looks out for the little guy, and stands up to bullies.

> This is linking way back, just cause people brought up Spider-Man and I'm a big fanboy. I see again, way back, [he's] got morals. For me, I always used to keep a phone wallpaper of Spider-Man. Just because it's, you know, no joke, cause it's like motivation for me. Man, I'm like, I want to aspire to be like you. (Alfie)

Theo reinforces the role these characters have played in his personal development, saying "I grew up without a father figure. Yeah, my mum's a lesbian. And pretty much, I guess that, like, I guess movies were my main source of what masculinity was. And I think I've turned out pretty alright".

While those with a Spider-Man parasocial relationship connected with the character through his representation of subordinated masculinity, a similarly complex but different gender construction bond occurs with the character Captain America. While Spider-Man parasocial relationships were established across multiple iterations of the character this changes in the case of Captain America. Within the comic book superhero genre, there is an established convention of superhero titles being passed on to new characters. A notable MCU example exists in which Captain America, a title initially held by the character Steve Rogers (see Figure 7) is passed onto the character Sam Wilson at the conclusion of *Avengers: Endgame* (Russo & Russo, 2019). The subsequent MCU Disney+ series *Falcon and the Winter Soldier* (Skogland, 2021) tells the story of Sam Wilson earning the title and

being publicly acknowledged as such. However, while both characters have been called Captain America, they appear to still be viewed as separate entities – Sam Wilson Captain America and Steve Rogers Captain America. Those participants with who held Captain America as a parasocial relationship did so with the Steve Roger's version, not the Sam Wilson example.

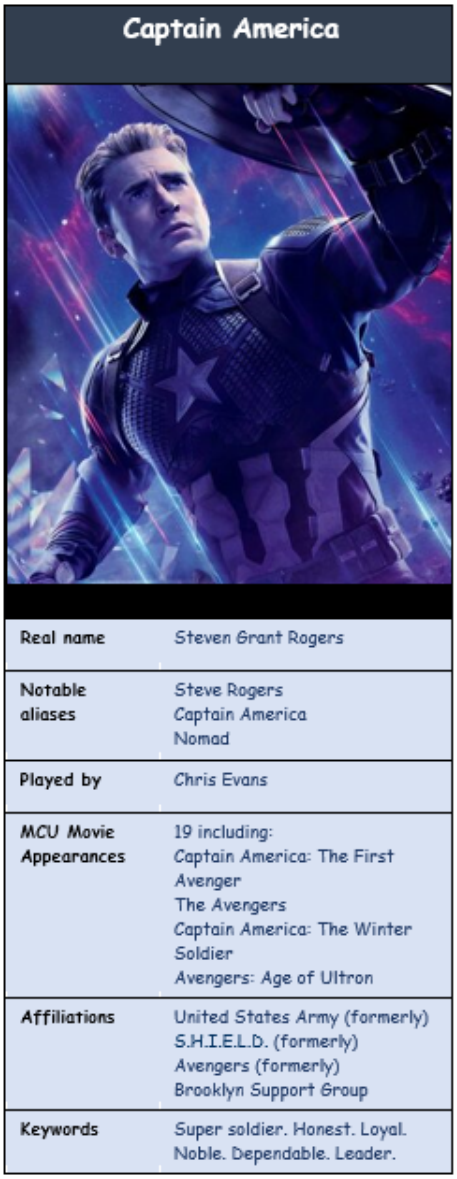


Figure 7 Captain America Character Bio (Marvel, 2022)

A hybrid masculinity construction exists within Steve Rogers' character. While the participants' perceptions of this character in relation to superpowers and authority are discussed further in 5.1.3, two distinct stages of character development were frequently noted. In the first instance, prior to receiving his superpowers, Steve Rogers could easily be considered a representation of subordinate masculinity. He was small, weak, had health issues and was unable to meet the requirements to be a soldier in World War II (Johnston, 2011). However, the participants' noted that this Steve Rogers possessed the kindness, bravery and desire to do what was right for which he is widely known and, by their account, loved. The injection of a serum to give him superpowers provides the character with the traditional traits of hegemonic masculinity – big muscles, strength, and no need to gain permission from others to do what he wants. Thus, for the participants', he simultaneously symbolised subordinate and hegemonic masculinity. Jill even went so far as to suggest his character was the "ideal person". This duality of representation may begin to explain why he was identified as a parasocial relationship for all female participants, but only for one male participant – he represented a subordinated gender that was given the means to take power and control.

Another example of the complicated relationship between parasocial relationship development, the transmedia properties of the MCU and the intersectional nature of personal constructions is found with one participant who established parasocial relationships with characters in the Marvel, but not MCU, television series *The Runaways*. Kate outlined parasocial relationships with two characters from this series – Nico Minoru and Karolina Dean – connecting with them not just as female characters but as diverse role models:

> *The Runaways* is a series [that] was really influential for me growing up. I think it relates to a lot of like angsty teen feelings but also it's the first character I ever saw in comic media that was queer was Karolina Dean. That kind of representation meant a lot to me as a young queer person who didn't have anyone as any role models, especially any young role models. So that was, it was really cool. And Nico especially I think, is a really interesting character because she's not only sort of facing the sense of deep alienation from her parents and everything that she's known but it's also bringing in almost, like, an extra element of otherness in the fact that she isn't white in Western society. Obviously, that appealed to me. (Kate)

While *The Runaways* is a Marvel property it is not officially part of the MCU. Kate's inclusion of these characters and her relationship with them in discussions of the MCU highlights two matters. Similar to the blurred lines of the connection between Spider-Man iterations, for Kate there is an intentional decision to include *The Runaways*, so she can draw on this material and, despite later noting it is not canonical to the MCU, feature it as part of her own MCU canon. This is important as it shows not only that the audience draws from multiple MCU media properties in the development of their relationships, but that those properties, such as with the Spider-Man example above, can exist outside of the MCU. The breadth and fluidity with which the audience draws on related but alternative materials in the construction of their relationships with the MCU hints at the potential for this transmedia entity to have an extraordinary diversity of meaning for each viewer.

In the case of Kate, it has allowed her to develop relationships and find role models in characters that are meaningful to her and which affirm her life circumstances. This connection with positive and diverse role models, albeit fictional ones, further reinforced for Kate her own non-traditional personal style and construction. While these two characters may not have influenced her own personal identity construction, they do appear to have reinforced and comforted her during a developmental period. She says of Nico Minoru:

> I really appreciated her as a character. And I think that [it's] not only that she's [got] really cool powers. She's like a cool goth, which appeals to me and especially as a young person, when I was younger, *The Runaways* are very representative. I think of ideas that a lot of young people have. But for me, it was Nico. (Kate)

Most camp participants referenced their parasocial relationships influencing or reinforcing their development in their early years. For some it was a connection with and an affirmation of aspects of themselves. For others the parasocial relationship was a role model, something to aspire to be like and which influenced their appearance and behaviour.

> Not anymore but definitely as a kid I really looked up to the Avengers in general. Just like how I thought they were powerful. And I felt very powerless as a child. And I really, I looked up to them. I wanted to be exactly like them. And so, I think they definitely influence the way I am. The very, um, like a tough girl act. I think I did the whole the whole emo thing, you know. I had the crazy eyeliner and I put my hair down my face. Rosie

The relationship between parasocial relationships and personal gender constructions is apparent, but equally evident is the complexity that exists and the need for further research into the implications of these relationships.

4.4 Parasocial Relationships and Aggressive Behaviour

Despite the connection with characters who do not conform to traditional masculine stereotypes or who represent a greater diversity the participants consciously draw connections between their parasocial relationships and physically aggressive behaviour. In one example Alfie elaborates on the association between his parasocial relationship with Spider-Man, his entry into fighting sports, and the influence on his attitude to the use of physical force.

> Like when I was growing up, like I said, my father wasn't present for a lot of my childhood. And I grew up watching the Sam Raimi Spider-Man. And I, like, really resonated with that. And to get into that, like kind of take to cope with everything. I got into Taekwondo and MMA [Mixed Martial Arts] and I competed in that. And I used to get into my fair share of scuffles because I would think to myself 'I know how to do X, Y and Z, therefore I'm better than everybody'. And if anyone tries to mess with me, I have the means to take one of them. And then you had this same sort of mindset, right? 'Yeah, I can totally drop you. Let's take this outside right now'. From the age of like 7 to like 15-16, it was horrible. (Alfie)

Parasocial relationships influencing aggression during childhood was also found in female participants. Rosie describes how the influence of her parasocial relationships in her childhood led her to adopt some of their aggressive behaviours.

> And so, I mean, and I looked up to that. And so, I guess that kind of affected me as a child, seeing those people, I looked up to solve things with violence and thinking 'oh, so that's how I make people take me seriously. And that's how I become powerful and not, you know, just say, you know, weak, literally'. Like I can be powerful if I solve problems with violence, which then led to a lot of issues, consequently. But yeah, not as an adult. (Rosie)

As Richard Gray II (2011) notes, aggressive behaviours and the domination of others are typical of the masculine representation in superheroes. This is also a key facet of the widespread patriarchal

control inherent in media. As children the participants connected with and were influenced by fictional role-models who demonstrated that with great physical force comes great power – and these young people tried to follow suit.

4.5 Conclusion

The characters with whom participants form parasocial relationships are of the utmost importance to them. While there are numerous other aspects of the MCU that these fans adore – stunning visuals, amazing feats, and overcoming the odds (to name just a few) – these parasocial relationships, the fan favourites, are the reason they kept returning to the MCU over and over.

Men appear to be drawn to the popular male superheroes – Captain America, Iron Man, Thor, and Spider-Man. Women develop strong relationships with both male and female superheroes; however, their strongest connections do appear to be with women, particularly Black Widow and Captain Marvel. From early childhood, and from a range of sources sometimes outside the MCU, these parasocial relationship characters have been a regular influence in their lives. They look to them for guidance, as role models on how to live life, and as a way of making sense of the world. They connect with characters who do represent subordinated forms of masculinity or who represent a greater diversity. For some this is an uplifting and reaffirming experience – they find fictional beings facing the same struggles and hardships, the awkwardness and uncertainty that they themselves are struggling through. For others this guidance can lead them astray, influencing aggressive attitudes that can be a source of later regret. As young adults they strongly support their parasocial relationship characters. They celebrate their successes. They grieve their losses. And they take guidance from them. They strive to exhibit the strength and the morals these characters represent.

This chapter has specifically examined the establishment and strength of parasocial relationships in the participants as these relationships were found to play a unique and significant role in their

connection with the MCU. Establishing a distinction between the participants' parasocial relationships and their wider viewing of gender in the MCU is important. It recognises that the participants' construction of gender in relation to the MCU is complicated. While participants might be strongly influenced by parasocial relationships they are not wholly influenced by them. Structures and systems, characters and events that exist outside of parasocial relationship characters within the MCU play a role in the construction of gender. Sometimes the participants agree with these features, sometimes they don't. In reading the following chapter it should be remembered that at the heart of it the participants use their parasocial relationship characters as a touchstone – whether something is right or wrong, good or bad, can be dependent on how it influences the characters with whom they most strongly connect.

Chapter 5: Gender in the MCU – An Audience Perspective

The aims of this investigation were to better understand what people, individually and collectively, know of gender, as it relates to the transmedia entity that is the Marvel Cinematic Universe. This stemmed from the realisation that there had been considerable work analysing and describing the portrayals of gender present (Baker & Raney, 2007; Coyne et al., 2014; Fandino et al., 2018; Voelker-Morris & Voelker-Morris, 2014), but there had been little consideration of how the audience made sense of the way gender was represented. In this chapter the participants' understanding of gender in the MCU will be outlined. The results have been distributed into three over-riding themes.

The first theme argues that a patriarchal foundation is established in the MCU through the existence of a fixed gender binary that establishes men as the structuring norm, in possession of the authority inferred by superpowers provides. This section explores the various structures that establish a traditional patriarchal system of power and control within the MCU – as identified by the audience, the participants of this study.

In the second theme the portrayal of masculinity and men is explored. This section explores how displays of male muscle emphasise masculine power and contends that the voyeuristic nature of male objectification is accepted by a male audience and demonstrates the difference between societal roles men and women hold. The social construction of fatherhood is examined and discusses how the tyrannical role these figures play in the lives of the hero reinforces the domination of hegemonic masculinity. Finally, this section examines how the growth of male characters is to assume control over feminine characteristics, further reinforcing men as being in control and the state by which all others are judged.

Finally, in the third theme I consider the portrayal of women and femininity. The secondary and supporting role women have played throughout the MCU is discussed. I argue that the nurturing and

caring roles women fulfill, as exemplified by mothers, serve to ensure they are held in subordinate positions to the men in their lives. Regardless, the participants' perception that more women are assuming leadership roles is explored, and how this feminine advancement is deemed unacceptable when it comes at the expense of men's power. Likewise, the participants' feeling that women are less sexualised than in other media properties is discussed, recognising that higher levels of power reduce objectification. In contrast to male characters feminine character growth, the masculine growth of female characters is found to be yet another process of feminine subordination. Finally, this theme explores how women are dependent on men for any form of progression in their story.

Ultimately, this chapter argues that the participants constructed gender in the MCU in ways that reinforces traditional patriarchal power structures. While there are some differences and evidence that change is occurring, there was a strong over-riding theme that the participants viewed the MCU as a universe in which men held power over women and were in control.

5.1 The Foundation of Patriarchy in the MCU

That men are at the forefront of the MCU's various narratives, that they hold the vast majority of leadership roles, that they control the money, minions, and, ultimately, the women of the MCU, is abundantly clear to the audience. This theme explores how this foundation of patriarchy is constructed for the audience, beginning with the establishment of a strong gender binary.

5.1.1 A Strong Gender Binary Exists in the MCU

The participants challenged the suggestion that the MCU did not conform to a strict gender binary. There was frequent mention of the diversity of characters within the MCU by the participants, particularly with regard to colourful and varied alien races that appear throughout. However, at first mention of the Skrulls (see Figure 8), an alien race with the ability to shapeshift into other forms and appear as other genders, there was an immediate reaction and criticism of their presentation.

> This is one of the things I didn't like about [the] *Captain Marvel* [film]. I felt like there was too much of a focus on gender. And that being a locking point for example, when they're on the beach and one of the Skrull shapeshifts into a bikini lady and the joke is that he looks like a bikini lady but sounds like a deep voice dude. (Kate)

Kate's comment makes reference to a number of important issues for the participants regarding the presentation of gender in the MCU. The first refers to the seemingly overt treatment of gender that was apparent to the participants in the *Captain Marvel* film. This, they establish, is partially due to Captain Marvel being the first MCU film to have a female superhero as the sole and titular lead. In conjunction with this they view the Captain Marvel story as one where the female lead must fight to break free of her male oppressors, so the addition of a gendered joke at the expense of a sexualised 'bikini lady' within the film only served to emphasise the inappropriateness of this style of humour in their eyes and reinforce the over-emphasis on gender they see in the film. This particular scene with the Skrull also serves as an example of the participants experiencing a lack of real-world diversity within the MCU. Jill, with a sassy delivery and raise of her hand indicating the group should stop, best expressed this conflict when she commented: "There is definitely, like a definite gender binary that they're trying to keep within. And it's like, okay guys!".

Skrulls

Notable aliases	Insidious Shapeshifters Lizards Ugly Bastards
Home Planet	Skrullos (formerly)
MCU Movie Appearances	2 including: Captain Marvel Spider-Man: Far From Home The Marvels (unreleased)
Keywords	Technologically advanced race of reptilian humanoids. Shapeshifting abilities

Figure 8 Skrull Character Bio (Marvel, 2022)

The participants were also quick to establish that a male Skrull shapeshifting into a female human did not represent any form of gender fluidity or diversity within the MCU. For them these scenes simply

served to emphasise the strong gender binary and traditional patriarchal social structure that exists within the Skrull society. They noted that it was the male Skrull who were sent off to fight, who sacrificed themselves, and who devalued women through their shapeshifting jokes, while the women and children were sent off to hide and wait to be saved. In the Skrull society, they contend, the men wield all the power and control and the ability to shapeshift is nothing but a façade. According to Kate:

> The thing is, is that even the jealous shapeshifters are gendered in the movies like that. Like, there's a man Skrull and a woman Skrull. So, I guess they're not really presented as people that exist out of the gender binary. And it's more just seen as a costuming when they appropriate the appearance of someone else rather than them changing their true identity. (Kate)

The participants' view of the shapeshifting Skrulls as reinforcing the gender binary contradicts the suggestion by Alexander (2018) that such characters should be viewed as beyond trans and capable of breaking the oppressive gender-based norms that exist. For participants, there was nothing to suggest that traditional gender norms were being contested. In the case of the Skrulls the participants highlighted the binary oppositions that were immediately apparent – there were male and female Skrulls, they conformed to traditional binary gender roles, and sexualised jokes were made at the expense of women. Shapeshifting characters may still provide an avenue for change as Alexander suggests, but they would need to be less saturated with patriarchal norms to achieve this for the audience. The participants' confirmation of a strong gender binary existing within the MCU reinforces that masculinity remains the structuring and controlling norm. As Adamou (2011) declares, masculinity being the structuring norm in the superhero genre is dependent on the presence of binary oppositions and strong heterosexual stereotypes, which serve to define gender characteristics through exclusion and contrast.

5.1.2 Men are the Structuring Norm in the MCU

Adamou (2011) noted that masculinity tends to be the structuring norm within the superhero genre and the overwhelming number of male superheroes was the cause of this. The sheer volume of men in power and stories about men within the MCU noted by the camp participants would suggest this to be true for them also. Captain America, also known as Steve Rogers, provided a frequent example of masculinity for the participants. Roger's moral compass was frequently cited by participants as an example of the positive masculine ideal, as described here by Jill:

> The core values of Steve Roger's character are still there, ignoring the flaws of his character. Like the goods far outweigh the bads, like nine times out of 10. Like, he's still that very wholesome man at heart. He still cares deeply about those who are around him. He's very empathetic. So, I think in that ideal, yes, I think Steve is what the standard should be. (Jill)

Jill's highlighting of her perception that these characteristics form the 'ideal person' represent a direct connection to the male leadership within the MCU being the norm against which all others are judged. As discussed in chapter 4.3, this character represents a hybrid masculinity for the participants, simultaneously demonstrating subordinated masculine characteristics while also reinforcing hegemonic masculinity as the structuring norm. The association and preference towards the honourable, war time, aggressive characteristics of hegemonic masculinity demonstrated by Rogers was also frequently cited by male participants when referring to 'ideal' masculine behaviour. As Alfie explained:

> Only thing is that with Cap[tain America], I would say he had everything down pat. Save the physical side. Given he was speaking up for himself and he was defending the war effort and he wanted to sign up…young boys left, right and centre were trying to get in on it for the glory and for the action. And that was associated with manhood and being a man. (Alfie)

As Alfie reflects, Steve Rogers personality, his morals and values, are a representation of those that should be present in any exemplification of masculinity. This aligns with previous analysis that

highlights how the story of Captain America distinctly establishes Steve Rogers' subordinate masculinity, that he was inherently a strong, moral, and heroic person, in direct contrast to his pre-serum physical capabilities (Yankulova, 2020). However, it is the hegemonic characteristics of aggression and physical power that are associated with 'being a man'. This perception reinforces men as the structuring norm and maintains patriarchal power.

The participants reflected that men being in charge within the MCU reproduced the established power structures and roles of the real world. As Rosie comments, "I feel like the thing with the men being in power and all of this is that it is a traditional male stereotype that men are the leaders". Ray, in referencing the comics, notes how commonplace men being in leadership roles is and what this suggests to the audience.

> My piece first is that in general, males while forming a team are more assertive. That's because males tend to be more assertive when wanting to get something done and I think from what I've observed, seen, tend to be slightly more assertive. That's just what I've seen. Not saying that's actually the truth of it, but that's what I'm saying, that's a lot of what I've seen. (Ray)

Male leaders were more aggressive, not more assertive, the participants determined. Kate initiated this readjustment by linking the media's portrayal of men in power - a key factor in establishing societal beliefs the participants had previously established - with the idea that aggressive behaviour was the behaviour that had won that power: "I think it is a symptomatic response to the culture that we're cultured in that tells us that aggression means authority rather than aggression, actually, meaning that you're a better leader." That men held power as a result of aggressive behaviour was not debated. Throughout the camp participants provided numerous examples of aggressive behaviour by male leaders. They referenced Iron Man in the *Avengers* movie who, when told he doesn't have a plan of attack, comments: "I do have a plan … attack." The power of his delivery and the boldness of this action was admired by the participants. Thor is well known for his arrogance and willingness

to go into battle, causing him to be revered by the participants as a result. His arena fight with Hulk (also known for his extreme anger) in *Thor: Ragnarok* (Waititi, 2017) was highly praised. While the participants viewed men as holding power due to aggressive acts this form of obtaining power was not opposed.

The participants also identified a link between these norms and the role media plays in establishing them. In this respect the MCU was viewed as being just another cog in the media machine that established traditional norms. The participants did not accept these representations of men being more aggressive and therefore better leaders as reality, but that this belief had been perpetuated by the media and, as such, had reinforced the heteropatriarchal structure.

> It's just represented that much in the media that it's kind of come normalised. (Theo)
>
> Unfortunately, that's just how media markets things, like, what I believe Ray was trying to say anyway was that, yeah, men are portrayed in an assertive position. (Alfie)
>
> And they, you know, genuinely teaches people things. And unfortunately, the thing is that in terms of far-reaching consequences, media changing the way people think can also normalise specific attitudes like, oh, leadership is masculine. That genuinely impacts on like, for example, career advancement in women. (Kate)

Kate links the representation of men as being leaders in media to real world consequences – an understanding that these views prevent women from receiving equal treatment in the workplace. In the eyes of the participants, men in the MCU (and in media in general) are the standard by which all others are judged. The following exchange further articulates frustration at the MCU's inference that men make better leaders than women, while also identifying how the patriarchal control is maintained by male leadership dominating the attention:

> So, like the brains are different but it doesn't make any [women] less capable of leading an army than let's say you [pointing to a male participant], I mean sadly. (Rosie)

> Because pretty much these values were created after the Second World War to create the perfect nuclear family and practically the roles that were situated in those spaces. And a lot has changed since then. But some of those values are still unfortunately ingrained in society today. Oh, albeit they are getting more or less normalised. And, but the stuff that, like this stuff [women in leadership roles] that is still viewed as minority, is still a minority. And it's really quite frustrating. (Theo)

> But also, I think that even with leadership in the MCU I think it could do a better job at helping [normalise equitable gender norms]. Media is so good at normalising things. You know what I mean? Like how many people have never met a gay person? And they just consume a lot of media with queer people in it. And [media] genuinely teaches people things. (Kate)

With male superheroes dominating the spotlight and assuming leadership roles within the MCU, they reinforce the patriarchal agenda, a process clearly witnessed by the participants, and maintain a monopoly on defining gender and roles. The lack of female characters in leadership roles within the MCU suggests, despite audience knowledge to the contrary, that men are the gender capable of leadership. As Adamou (2011) notes, by being most in the public eye, the characters with the storylines and majority of screen time, men are not only able to be seen but they are able to be seen acting in the leadership roles. This arrangement works to not only establish men as the structuring norm but to maintain the patriarchal systems of power in the fictional and real worlds.

5.1.3 Superpowers Give You Authority

In the MCU, superpowers give characters the authority to act and take power. The participants felt that the addition of superpowers gave characters the authority to act on their beliefs, where previously they had been incapable. They note that a number of the male characters/superheroes have their origins as subordinately masculine – they are viewed as lacking in power, both physically and

socially. As previously discussed, Steve Rogers, without the physical power that enabled him to become Captain America, was not holistically representative of the participants' understanding of traditional masculinity. Indeed, his absence of masculine physical characteristics, a lack of muscular physicality or 'musculinity' required by the action hero (Tasker, 1995), strengthens the contrast and materially feminises him (Yankulova, 2020). As Kate observes, "So, for example, with Captain America, he's emasculated by everyone around him. He's not only physically not imposing, but his character is, you know, the opposite of what would be considered like archetypal ideal masculinity."

Steve Roger's transition to the superhero Captain America occurs during *Captain America: The First Avenger*, when he is injected with an experimental super soldier serum, designed to enhance the subject's body and mind, ultimately transforming the diminutive Rogers into a taller, impressively muscular being with superior speed, strength, agility, and durability (Johnston, 2011). However, for the participants this demonstration of the masculine ideal reinforces the role masculine characteristics, in this case the strong and muscular appearance, physical strength and dominance over others, in establishing hegemonic power (Fleming, 2015). With particular reference to Captain America as one of the MCU's dominant male figures, Kate notes that prior to him receiving the serum "He doesn't have any agency, any power. And that only comes when he's physically presented as that [super powered]." For the participants the same storytelling design that reinforces the presence of a more masculine character within Rogers prior to receiving the serum also makes them acutely aware that he did not truly wield power within his world until he was imbued with the physical masculine characteristics to do so. Kate elaborates further:

> I wouldn't say it's necessarily affected by their specific superpowers, but I think harkening back to sort of like the beginnings of superpowers, it's about exceptionalism, right. Like there are these people. And because they have the power to exert their authority, they choose to do so. (Kate)

Rogers displayed admirable characteristics – he was heroic and resilient, caring and kind. But without the ability to be physically strong, athletically capable, and wield physical dominance over others that the serum enabled, he was incapable of changing or even remotely influencing the world around him in a meaningful way. He was subordinate to those around him, providing the opportunity for his morals and values to be more clearly demonstrated to and appreciated by the participants. However, what gave Roger's authority and the ability to exert his will was the superpowers he obtained.

The concept of superhero masculinity in the MCU results in two forms of control. Male superheroes in power are often seen as either viewing women as sexual objects for conquest or exerting patriarchal control over those in their presence. The character of Peter Quill, aka Starlord, is highlighted for the former:

> I was actually thinking about it when you're watching Guardians of the Galaxy, actually like Chris Pratt's character, is also very much, like, what a 12-year-old might think, like, you know, being a man is about like especially in the beginning, like he goes around the galaxy doing cool dude stuff and he has sex with a bunch of like random alien girls. To the point that he doesn't even remember that there's one in his ship, right. It's like that sort of like womanising. You know, man about town kind of idea. (Theo)

The character of Tony Stark, aka Iron Man, is also associated with this idea. Both Stark and Rogers are noted as having significant means – one has his own spaceship while the other describes himself as a "genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist" (Whedon, 2012) – and they are depicted as casually sleeping with multiple women and casting them aside afterward. Starlord not only forgets the name of one liaison but fails to remember she is even onboard his spaceship as he performs aerial acrobatics (Gunn, 2014). And the subject of a forgotten, casual one-night-stand for Tony Stark later designs a superpower that is used to attempt a takeover of the United States Government. Ultimately both Stark

and Starlord save the day and their conquests are simply seen as part of the journey. For the participants these behaviours appear to reinforce that men in power can and do exploit women.

Tony Stark is also highlighted as one example of a male superhero who exerts patriarchal control over others. His character epitomises the theme of control in superhero masculinity construction outlined by Voelker-Morris and Voelker-Morris (2014). The camp participants note that Stark is not only a billionaire but runs Stark Enterprises, a company made rich by the production of weapons. He designs and makes his own powered armour, which he then uses without approval from any governing body to resolve conflict issues across the globe. He, arguably, creates the Avengers, funding and housing that super team. And he supplies Spider-Man with his super suit then takes it away again when he doesn't like Spider-Man's actions.

> And especially with like Tony Stark, he expresses it in a way that's ultimately positive. But it is, in my opinion, kind of patriarchal, the way that he kind of assumes a father figure [role] over a lot of people, so does Thanos, like children of Thanos. And in doing so, it's I watched a video about this, actually, it's like the whole father knows best because my morals feel so strong to me. I, as a paternal figure, choose to exert them on everyone. (Kate)

In reflecting that Tony Stark's use of his power allows him to exert control over others, Kate makes two important additional observations. The first is comparing the control he exerts to that of the villain Thanos. The inference is that their behaviours, the way they treat others, are essentially the same – whether you accept that behaviour lies in whether you agree with their end goal. Thanos was trying to wipe out half of all life in the universe, Stark was trying to save it; therefore, it is considered that his behaviour can be accepted (though not necessarily liked) while Thanos' behaviour cannot. The audience view of a character's morals is an important influence in the tolerability of otherwise unacceptable actions. As Waling (2016) notes masculinity is presented as being in control and male

superheroes are embodied with a strict morality, a desire to do good in the world. This firmly places males in the position of being the universal and preferred norm (Adamou, 2011).

Secondly, Kate references watching a video that explained this concept. This illustrates the relationship the audience has with this transmedia entity and, as Daly (2010) suggests, how the intertextual linking and investigation required to comprehend the entire narrative leads them to other information sources. Here, a YouTube video on the MCU, and specifically Tony Stark, is used to examine and understand how his behaviour is patriarchal.

To further emphasise the theme that superpowers give you authority the participants noted that if you move away from those that have superpowers, the representations of women in the MCU deteriorates. The seemingly superpower-free Black Widow and her lack of story arc (discussed further in 5.2.2) was frequently noted. Laura Barton, the wife of Hawkeye (also arguably superpower-free) was kept a secret and hidden in the countryside until she became useful, they suggested. Jane Foster, a gifted scientist and love interest to Thor, was nonchalantly and undeservedly dropped from the MCU narrative they felt. And Pepper Potts was again proffered as the prime example of this negative treatment. The participants noted that Potts, the longest running female character in the series, was 'nerfed' - receiving powers that were immediately taken away - and was then presented as the damsel in distress. They considered that she might have been given the opportunity to save the day and be the hero in Iron Man 3 (Black, 2013) but felt the execution of this narrative was poor and her involvement was not "framed in the same way as if Tony had done it", resulting in Potts' heroism being downplayed as almost a throwaway moment. Walderzak (2016) similarly recognised Potts as an example of the repurposed damsel in distress who seemingly saves themselves. It is difficult to determine whether the participants would agree with Walderzak's assertion that for women in a heroic role to be believable to an audience they had to be changed by superpowers (p. 72), however they certainly demonstrated dissatisfaction at the subsequent removal of Potts' powers. What is clear is

the way to power is through the heteropatriarchal norms - the aggression, physical strength, and superpowers - that men in the MCU possess.

5.1.4 A Gendered Superhero Double Standard

The MCU creates a double standard in its treatment of male and female superheroes. Throughout the camp, participants often identified instances in which characters with similar superpowers or behaviours, but of different gender, were treated differently by the production or thought to be regarded in differing ways by the audience. They note that Wanda Maximoff, aka Scarlet Witch, is vilified by the public within the MCU after she accidentally causes the death of civilians, while undoubtedly saving countless others, during a battle at the beginning of *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Whedon, 2012). In the same movie Iron Man and Hulk create a robot with artificial intelligence, Ultron, who destroys an entire city, causes undisclosed death and destruction, yet they appear to face no consequences for doing so. While the aggression and violence that the male characters unleash falls within the characteristics of traditional hegemonic masculinity, and are therefore acceptable as they are in power, any variation from the typical nurturing and caring roles women are socialised into is not acceptable.

Representations of women that fall outside of the norm are vilified. The character of Black Widow, the only female superhero in the original Avengers squad, was referenced for receiving unfair treatment that would not have been the case had she been a male character in the film. Black Widow had referred to her infertility (forced on her by superiors) as making her a monster. The participants noted there was a public outcry in defence of this character, making the point that this was not only an unfair depiction but that male characters would not be forced to describe themselves in this way. By describing herself as monstrous in relation to her fertility the character infers that, as a woman, she is immoral and a failure, an inference the participants noted. Her failings as a woman are further

reinforced by the character she is conversing with in the scene, the Hulk, who literally is a monster. While the monster in men is accepted and provides them with power, the monster in women makes them inadequate. However, the most significant double standard identified involved the (arguably) most powerful character in the MCU.

At the time of the camp the *Captain Marvel* (Boden & Fleck, 2019) movie had only been released 10 months earlier. It was largely considered to be the first true female superhero lead movie in the MCU. Captain Marvel, real name Carol Danvers, was shown in the movie to be a human female who developed superpowers after exposure to power derived from one of the Infinity Stones. With superhuman strength, speed and endurance, as well as an ability to fly, shoot cosmic energy beams, travel through space, and be practically invulnerable, she was seen by the participants as one of the two most powerful superheroes in the MCU. Captain Marvel (see Figure 9), they felt, was only rivalled in power by the complicated, heroine Scarlet Witch. That two women were the largely undisputed powerhouses of the MCU was a source of pride for the participants, particularly the women in the group. But Captain Marvel, largely thanks to her own movie and an unrealised storyline for the Scarlet Witch at that time, proved to not just be a favourite of the participants but a significant parasocial relationship for some, as Jill describes: "Coming from a personal point of view, I like, I unabashedly love Carol. I love that one of the most powerful characters in the MCU is a woman. I am completely 100% on board with that."

Figure 9 Captain Marvel Character Bio (Marvel, 2022)

Before Carol Danvers receives her powers, she is shown to be a confident, self-assured, and tough person. The participants noted that there was significant criticism of her character, which suggested she was too arrogant and as a result a generally dislikeable person - a charge with which they vehemently disagreed.

> I don't like that there's so many male characters that can be a bit of a jackass like Tony, or they can start off as a brat like Thor. And it's brushed aside and everyone's like 'oh, they grow as a person, it's fine'. Carol grows as a person and realises her own worth and says like 'I don't need to apologize for who I am, how I see myself and what I'm worth'. And then everyone's like 'oh, she's a bitch' or 'oh, I don't like her personality because she's like overconfident and sassy'. (Jill)

> I just think she's appropriately confident. (Kate)

The distinction between the behaviour of male characters, Thor and Iron Man, is raised in comparison. Iron Man was often referred to by the participants as arrogant and brash, self-assured and having little regard for others. At times, it was suggested that these characteristics in Iron Man were to be celebrated. They were certainly not the cause for criticism of this character and were often referenced to demonstrate how he had matured out of these behaviours throughout his wider character arc in the MCU.

> But like all for applauding Tony [for] almost the exact same personality traits. Personally, I love that Carol has like 'I have nothing to prove to anybody else. I'm doing this for myself. I'm proud of myself' and, like to me, that movie felt like, just like, Captain Marvel is a whole person, that feels like something for me. Does that make any sense? It feels like it's not meant to appease a general comic audience. If we're going by general comic audiences as men, it's meant for women, not wholly, but like intended audience wise. (Jill)

As Jill suggests, these female characters who do not fit the traditional roles and characteristics are not meant to appease a male audience. However, the outcry against them, as noticed by the participants, recognises that the male audience does not easily accept women who are strong or fall outside the norm. They are a challenge patriarchal power and the vocal dissent against them is an attempt to maintain the status quo.

5.2 The Portrayal of Masculinity and Men

Given the overwhelming saturation of men and masculinity within the MCU a section dedicated to examining their portrayal might seem excessive. However, numerous themes developed at camp in which the participants strongly presented ideas that further defined their viewing of men and masculinity in the MCU. These factors sit atop the structuring features outlined in the preceding section and help to further establish the role of men and masculinity as above all.

This section explores the emphasis of masculine power, and the voyeuristic nature of male objectification as displays of domination and strength. It examines how the growth of male characters is to assume control over feminine characteristics and fathers, in keeping with hegemonic masculinity from which they derive, are the ogres which must be overcome. Overall, this section demonstrates how the portrayal of men in the MCU reinforces patriarchal power and control over all others.

5.2.1 Muscles Make Masculinity

Waling (2016) suggests that the male superhero is the personification of physical perfection, with broad shoulders and large muscles capable of any feat required. In the eyes of the participants this is certainly the case for men in the MCU (see Figure 10 for such an example). Male superheroes were frequently referenced as being ‘huge’ or ‘ripped’. Traditional perceptions of physical masculinity dominated, with the bigger, stronger male characters being seen as more masculine. In the following

exchange the participants had been discussing Captain America as the epitome of masculinity, though others disagreed:

> That being said, I never felt that he played into traditional machismo much as Thor did to me, like the most masculine quality character. I would say for that I feel like [it's] Captain [America], but mostly Thor. Yeah, like when I think of the manliest man in there, I think of Thor. (Kate)

> Yeah, it's definitely Thor for the burliness. (Jill)

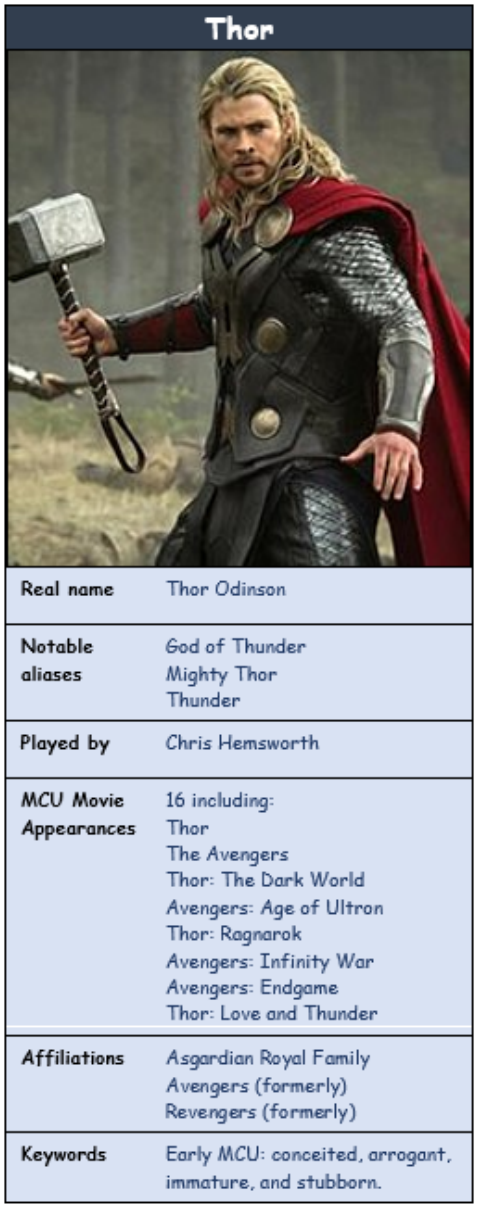


Figure 10 Thor Character Bio (Marvel, 2022)

Captain America and Thor were typically identified as the best examples of masculinity in the MCU. The impact of the presence of muscles on masculinity was commonly referenced in comparison to their absence at some point. In the case of Captain America his muscles were not always present, being developed thanks to the super soldier serum he received as part of his origin story. The impact of the physical contrast between pre- and post-serum Steve Rogers was clear within Alfie's description: "Obviously, you know, he went from being a scrawny, little kid to having like an obscene amount of muscle mass and looking pretty funky fresh. And that was a huge thing" (see Figure 11 below).

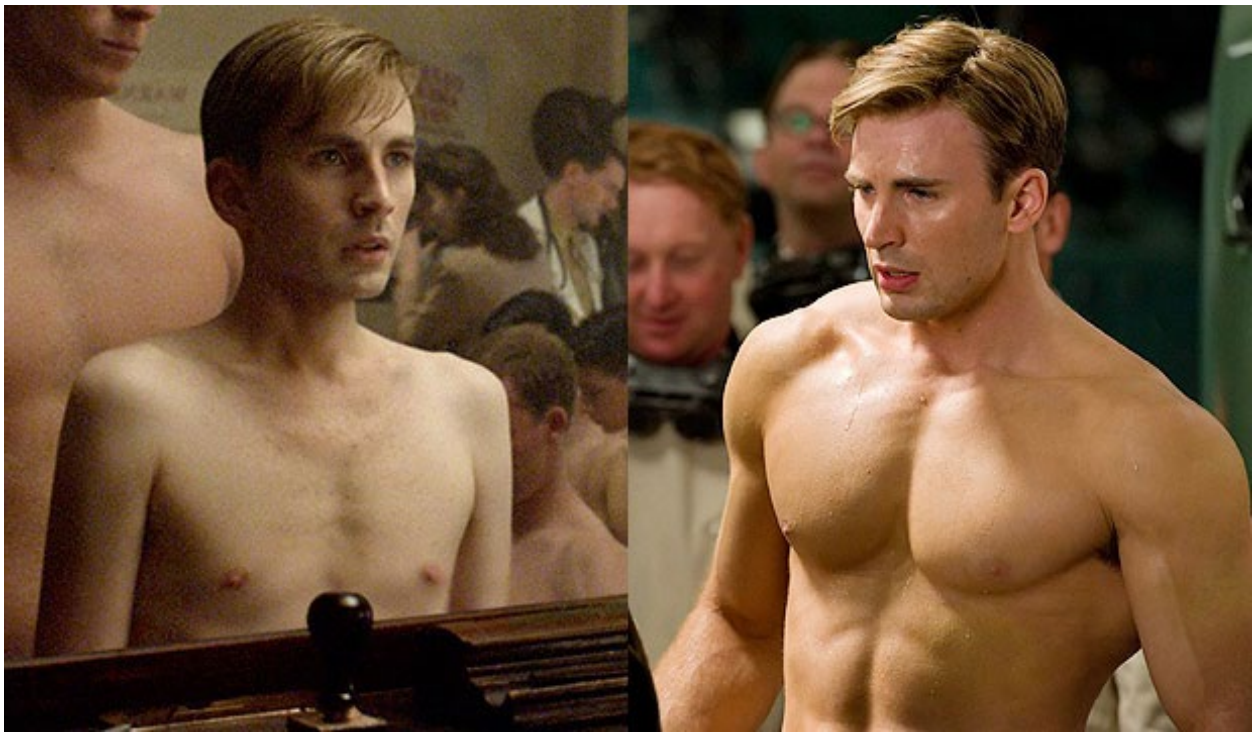


Figure 11 - This image demonstrates the physical differences between pre-super soldier serum Steve Rogers (left) and post-serum Steve Rogers (right) as shown in 'Captain America: The First Avenger' (Johnston, 2011).

The admiration for Rogers 'musculinity' was apparent, both tonally and figuratively, in Alfie's description of him "looking pretty funky fresh". Participants were cognisant of society's ideal male physical form - tall, muscular, athletic, and chiselled are the desired features, and men should actively strive for these characteristics (Ricciardelli et al., 2010). Toby connects this onscreen representation of the masculine ideal with his own personal desires:

> I guess a lot of people aspire to look like Captain America. I know I'd like that physique as well because like you know, yeah, the Dorito shape, [I'd] probably have a bit more game that way. That's what you sort of seem to believe. (Toby)

A particularly interesting contrast that reinforced the relationship between muscles and masculinity was presented when the character of Ant-Man was raised. It was suggested that the character, also known as Scott Lang, was not one of the masculine superheroes, lacking the big, burly muscles of Thor and Captain America. However, one male participant, Theo, immediately jumped to his defence,

noting the chiselled physique of the character still qualified him as masculine – "Well, you've got to remember, Ant-Man is still ripped. He still had a shirtless scene in the first *Ant-Man* to show off." This defence of Lang's masculinity, the argument that small and muscley was still masculine, was countered by the same female participants who had strongly advocated for bigger muscles being more masculine.

> I think Scott's almost someone that, I feel he's almost a character that's a little bit more laissez faire about his gender presentation. For me he, he feels just like 'look, I'm just a dude and I'm doing shit for my daughter. I'm really not trying to…' (Kate)

> He feels more comfortable in the person that he is. Isn't there conversation to be had on why there wasn't originally this shirtless scene? Like what made them decide to not have one in the first place? Or is it that Scott presented as I like quote unquote, manly man in the first place? He's not really a manly man. He doesn't need a shirtless scene because he doesn't present as this peak idea of masculinity. (Jill)

Scott Lang is viewed by the participants as a family man of smaller stature who is, as a result, is perceived as less masculine than those men with bigger muscles. On the one hand, the discussion reinforced the concept that bigger muscles are more masculine. On the other hand, it reinforced the idea that non-traditional, or subordinated, masculinity is also appreciated. As Alfie says: "I like the fact that, you know, not every dude was a manly man. Because you had Scott and you have Spider-Man, and you had Dr. Strange, who was [an] egotistical manly man and then he became a space wizard." The less masculine male superheroes were appreciated by the participants for their willingness to communicate and their care of others, traits typically classified as feminine. They appreciated that they were supportive of female characters, recognising their strengths and following their lead.

> The thing I like Scott about especially is that he doesn't mind taking a back seat to Hope, who is more experienced and stronger than him and knows more about what she's doing. He doesn't mind. And he likes that Hope can kick his arse. (Jill)

> And I really like the fact that, like I said, it reflects really well in his relationship with his ex. Like they have a solid relationship, but also because he's willing to reach across to her and she's willing to communicate with him. (Kate)

> Yeah, like he's, he's not like a fool. He's not supposed to be embarrassed, but everything that happens around him. But I think that he like, as you know, he's just lucky, I guess. Yeah. Happy, carefree. Yeah, you know, a person that doesn't take himself too seriously. I love Scott. I think he's a great character. (Kate)

The key takeaway that the participants were trying to communicate here is that while big muscles represent greater masculinity, greater masculinity does not necessarily make a better man. In this conversation and throughout the camp they frequently praised those men whose morals and behaviours demonstrated equality, kindness, and bravery. Captain America was identified as a prime example; while his lack of physical strength prior to receiving his super abilities feminised him the participants still recognised his morals as good, subsequently labelling him as the 'ideal man'. Traditional hegemonic masculine characteristics might gain men power and control, but it is the more feminine and subordinated characteristics that deem a person or character worthy of recognition as 'ideal'.

5.2.2 Voyeurism and the Male Superhero Physique

Men appreciate voyeuristic displays of the male form, while these demonstrations make women uncomfortable, according to participants. Adamou (2011) noted the exaggerated muscles of male superheroes were emphasised through the cinematography and character movements which in turn produces a voyeuristic element for the audience, one differentiated from the sexualised appearance-

oriented gaze on female characters. This differentiation in gaze, a more voyeuristic rather than sexual viewing, was identified by the participants. They noted it was common for male superhero characters to be given a shirtless scene, demonstrating their physical prowess and strength.

A distinct difference between male and female participants arose in which male participants found the shirtless scenes and related humour, about physicality entertaining, while the females took offence at them.

> So not only do you have like the abundance of male shirtless scenes, which are pretty much like a lot of them work really hard for just those few seconds of shirtlessness. You've also got recently, especially in *Endgame,* like the comments on America's ass and stuff like that. (Rosie)
>
> The America's ass thing? (Ray)
>
> Yeah. (Rosie)
>
> Nah, that's hilarious. (Ray)

The scene referred to is from *Avengers: Endgame* (Russo & Russo, 2019) and finds Iron Man commenting that Captain America's suit does not complement his rear end; Ant Man jumps to the defence of Captain America, commenting "That's America's ass". The joke is revisited when Captain America, having just defeated himself from another time period, glances at his knocked-out doppelganger and states "That really is America's ass". This type of physical-inspired humour was connected to the shirtless male superhero scenes. The difference between the treatment of male and female characters was strongly noted:

> And the thing is like me being, I'm sorry if you didn't know, I'm gay. Hi. So basically, when I'm watching all this sexualised male stuff, I'm like, that's very interesting. Especially the America's ass thing, because Captain America does, Captain America does have a great arse.

But the thing is they're pointing it out whilst with the Black Widow stuff, she's just displaying it but no one's really making a comment on it. That's the funny thing. (Theo)

It's also more normalized. (Kate)

Oh, yeah. (Ray)

Imagine they did make a comment on it, the backlash amount of that, people would get on it. (Alfie)

Yeah. (Kate)

I think all the shirtless scenes are like fan-service, right. Even as one of the people that would be a fan of it, I'm not because I feel uncomfortable. I don't necessarily, I understand that they do it for aesthetics, but I don't necessarily appreciate the over sexualisation of any of these characters. (Rosie)

Yeah. Me, too. (Kate)

Okay. Like you because you mentioned earlier when we're talking about Peter Quill getting hit in the dick so many times. (…) and you guys find it funny and it's humorous. And because I mean, that that would bug me if I was a guy. There's almost like a double standard because stuff bugs us wouldn't bug, does [it] bug you guys that there, that men are kind of sexualized? (Rosie)

The female participants felt that the voyeuristic nature of male characters' shirtless or related scenes sexualised those men in a way that made them feel uncomfortable, as audience members, with the suggestion that they would especially feel uncomfortable if they were a guy. Male participants in the group generally found the scenes acceptable or, with particular reference to the 'America's ass' scene, funny. Kate notes that the sexualisation of female characters is more normalised than for male characters. The female participants did feel strongly about the objectification of female characters,

particularly those with whom they had parasocial relationships. Seeing male characters treated in a somewhat similar manner appears to evoke similar feelings, along with some confusion as to why male participants do not feel the same way. The objectification of female characters reinforces their subordinate position to men. These scenes, with the muscles linked to authority being on display, reinforces the power and control men have within this world and, as such, a male audience is secure in these presentations.

5.2.3 Male Character Growth is Feminised

The participants identified that the character development of male superheroes in the MCU was an adoption of feminine characteristics. This was, they explained, partly a result of the universe largely being a story about men. A common theme throughout the camp was that the MCU was really the story of Iron Man and Captain America, with Thor coming in a close third. These characters were noted as not only dominating the storyline in movies where multiple heroes teamed up, such as *The Avengers* (Whedon, 2012) film, but that for eight of the first 13 MCU movies one of these male superheroes was the title character. As such, the character development of these three was forefront in the participants' minds. They understood their character development greater than any others and all group members could talk with authority of the various arcs they had made. Adamou (2011) also notes the tendency for male superheroes to grow in character through the acquisition of feminine characteristics.

> When you like explained it the beginning, like where Iron Man ended up from where he began, and the same for Cap and Thor, it sounded like a sort of deconstruction of like a masculine idea. They, like, start stoic, you know, and so they begin to explore their emotions a bit more, go through a journey, and they end up as a different person. And there are more receptive to themselves as a consequence, so it's less about maintaining a certain image and more about

> just being the person you are, especially like Thor. Well, as Thor said, he's got to be more about being the person he is rather than what he is supposed to be. (Toby)

This comment is particularly relevant as Toby had a very strong and acknowledged parasocial relationship with Iron Man. He openly acknowledged being inspired by and using the character as a role model in his own life. While he conceded Iron Man's less desirable attributes, for example womanising, were not to be followed, he was inspired by the masculine confidence and self-assuredness the character displays in his early MCU appearances. However, Toby also referenced the development of this character, his journey with PTSD in Iron Man 2, settling down with Pepper Potts, his mentoring of Spider-Man, his dedication to being a father, and Iron Man's ultimate sacrifice in giving his life. These life moments, which move away from masculine roles like womanising and weapons manufacturing towards establishing and caring for family and others, could be considered more feminine emotional development. However, the growth of male superheroes through the acquisition of more feminine characteristics was also linked to the idea that men are in control.

> I think as well, like in terms of values, like those are all the ones that are like, oh being emotionally responsible. Being like, you know, mature in the sense that you're not just like taking control of things, but you're taking control of your own self. I think that traditionally tends to be coded as feminine things. It is kind of, you know, a movement towards less like a purely masculine coded character in my eyes. (Kate)

Having already established that in the MCU men hold the positions of power and that the narrative is all about them it is unsurprising that Kate would reference male superheroes taking control. The inference in her statement suggests that these male characters, already in control of everything else, grow by taking over those characteristics that have traditionally belonged to women. The binary opposition between the masculine and feminine characteristics of growth in these narratives serves to underline the notion that masculinity is the norm and therefore femininity is that which is different

(Adamou, 2011). It further reinforces the patriarchal hegemony, which not only subordinates femininity but subsumes and controls its characteristics.

5.2.4 Fathers – The Man to Overcome

It was once considered that the role-modelling of parents within the family unit provided developing minds with a template on which they could model their own parenthood later in life (Galvin, 2006). But as Galvin (2006) points out, the diversity and influence of the modern family unit has significantly evolved and children are no longer provided with traditional parental imprinting in the way they once were. Just as depictions of gender in media inform individual social construction and identity (Brooks & Hébert, 2006) depictions of parental figures, the culture of mother- and fatherhood, in popular culture additionally inform gendered parental roles for the audience (Tropp & Kelly, 2016).

Tropp and Kelly (2016) outline that the understanding of what makes a good father, and how that is portrayed in popular culture, is changing and has evolved over time from the traditional, breadwinner, authoritarian but absent father figure, through the loving but incompetent stay at home dad phase, to the involved and responsible co-parent.

The role and influence of fathers in the MCU was a frequent point of interest for participants. While many expressed different personal reasons for this focus a common theme regarding their impression of fathers in the MCU was apparent. This shared impression establishes fathers within the MCU as typically harmful towards their offspring, which may occur due to absence, neglect, emotional or psychological hurt, withholding material support, or direct physical injury. Kate expressed this in the following summary of the universe's fathers:

> Especially one of the things that I think is the most common is that [it] isn't the sort of ideal of the father figure, right. Like a lot of characters constantly live in the shadows of their father figures either like, you know, constantly grieving their loss and the displacement that they feel

> when they lose them, but also like being traumatised as a result of this relationship that is supposed be to important, so that when it sours, it's like, you know, it threatens you or your sense of self and their sense of security. (Kate)

Kate recognises that for the MCU characters, the need to overcome the father figure is a frequent occurrence. Dantzler (2018) identifies that Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey - the typical character development or narrative arc that a mythical hero story tends to follow - is an established feature of MCU films. A key feature of this journey is overcoming the tyrannical father figure in order to be able to progress onto confronting the main antagonist that threatening the status quo (Campbell, 2008). As avid consumers of MCU stories, the participants are continually exposed to representations of fathers who treat their children poorly. They highlight numerous prominent examples of father figures who wield immense power and control within the MCU and who represent the worst of the patriarchal father figure, notably the harsh authority and discipline of the traditional fatherhood model (Freeman, 2003) The most often discussed was the Asgardian god Odin (see Figure 12).

Odin	
Real name	Odin Borson
Notable aliases	Allfather Odin Allfather The Most Powerful Being in the Nine Realms King of Asgard Protector of the Nine Realms
Played by	Anthony Hopkins
MCU Movie Appearances	12 including: Thor Captain America: The First Avenger The Avengers (mentioned) Thor: The Dark World Avengers: Age of Ultron Doctor Strange Spider-Man: Homecoming Thor: Ragnarok Avengers: Infinity War Avengers: Endgame (mentioned) Eternals (mentioned) Thor: Love and Thunder
Affiliations	Asgardian Royal Family Council of Godheads
Keywords	Warrior. Father. Nearly all-powerful and all-knowing ruler of Asgard.

Figure 12 Odin Character Bio (Marvel, 2022)

Odin, appearing in the MCU films *Thor* (Branagh, 2011), *Thor: The Dark World* (Taylor A. , 2013), and *Thor: Raganarok* (Waititi, 2017), is referred to as the 'All-father', father to all Norse gods, ruler of Asgard and the nine realms, of which Earth is included. A being of superhuman strength,

stamina, and durability with an estimated lifespan of 10,000 years (Tyler, 2020) he possesses the power of the 'Odin Force', granting him somewhat unexplained but dominant magical abilities, and is considered by his son Thor to be one of the most powerful beings in the universe. In the MCU film *Thor,* the character Loki, one of Odin's two sons, is told by his mother Frigga "there's always a purpose to everything your father does", while Thor, Odin's other son, states at the end of the film that "there will never be a wiser king than you. Or a better father" (Branagh, 2011). However, despite this high praise the participants had a contradictory view of Odin's paternalistic capabilities, as aptly described by Kate:

> And even Odin, I would say Odin is a terrible dad, [he] constantly mismanaged his sons. And he neglects them in ways that their mother never did. You know what I mean? He doesn't give Loki validation for pretty much. You know, in my opinion, most of his life, I don't that think he really strives to understand his children the way that they should be understood. (Kate)

The participants' critique of Odin's parenting highlighted him being guilty of only adopting (it could be considered taking hostage) his son Loki to ensure a truce with the warring Frost Giants (Branagh, 2011), petulantly keeping an incarcerated Loki from having contact with his mother Frigga (Taylor A. , 2013), failing to warn his sons of the impending return of their secret and murderous sister Hela (Waititi, 2017), and at separate times banishing Loki, Thor, and Hela for their failings, despite Odin's parenting being considered a contributing factor in such instances. As Ray surmises: "By Odin, and all aspects of media, he's always been the shit dad". In presenting his view Ray draws not only from the productions of the MCU but includes all media involving Odin. This would not only include the original source material for the MCU characters and their storylines, Marvel comics, but the wider commentary via online and social sources that dissect all aspects of this fictional universe.

Understanding the additional complexities that influence audience construction of reality - in this case their perception of father figures - is important in recognising the depth of influence and meaning this

media has in these constructions. While an analysis of one property within the MCU can highlight the gender representations existing within, it is apparent that the committed fanbase draw from a greater breadth of material and this may alter the manner in which the MCU material speaks to them, as represented in the reinforcement of Odin as a terrible father for Ray by the narratives in the comics. The role of intertextual linking in highlighting the state of fatherhood in the MCU is further provided by Kate:

> Because they have the power to exert their authority, they choose to do so. And especially with like Tony Stark, he expresses it in a way that's ultimately positive. But it is, in my opinion, kind of patriarchal, the way that he kind of assumes [being] a father figure over a lot of people, so does Thanos, like children of Thanos. And in doing so, it's - I watched a video about this, actually - it's like the whole 'father knows best' thing because 'my morals feel so strong to me. I, you know, I, as a paternal figure, choose to exert them on everyone'. (Kate)

This particular example from Kate not only demonstrates intertextual linking to an external source - assumed to be a YouTube clip - but also presents an example of how the communication that leads to social constructions of reality. In this case, Kate's understanding of fathers is additionally mediatised (Couldry & Hepp, 2018). It is clear that a combination of the MCU and an external video breakdown has aided her construction of fathers, and this complex layering of communication in social construction grows as the discussion of this established reality occurs between the participants of the study, furthering their own views of fatherhood.

Within these conversations it is apparent that the overwhelming presentation of the traditional, hero's journey, ogre father figure within the MCU has resulted in confusion for the participants as to what defines being a good father. The message that participants appear to receive is that fathers, such as Odin, are powerful men who cause significant trauma and, as Tropp and Kelly (2016) suggest, the modern construct of positive fatherhood emphasises involvement, developmental, and responsible

men. Such is the strength of the negative fatherhood theme running through the MCU that when the, arguably, only example of positive modern fatherhood is raised his flaws as a father are immediately identified:

> You guys have talked a lot about Scott Lang and what a good dad he was. Yes? (Peter)
>
> Yeah. (Jill)
>
> We're never gonna forget the whole burglary part. (Rosie)
>
> He was trying his best with that situation. (Jill)
>
> Wasn't it to provide for his family? That's why the family split was because of the burglary. (Alfie)
>
> And that was the only thing he could do to actually try and get them back. (Theo)
>
> Yeah. (Alfie)
>
> Yeah. It was a was a necessary evil. (Theo)
>
> Is there such a thing? (Rosie)
>
> There is necessary evil. (Ray)
>
> Separated the crime from his family. That's hard to do. He wasn't like Heisenberg or anything. He was just trying to… (Alfie)
>
> It was just burglary. (Jill)
>
> It was just to get by, to get his family. (Alfie)
>
> Now it's in the movie, but the background is that the company he was working for was doing something dodgy with everyone’s retirement savings and he basically robbed them in order to make sure that everyone got their retirement savings. (Theo)

He's like redistributing, distributing that. (Jill)

I know, but it was impetuous to do that. It was also, I think, a reflection of traditional patriarchal values, where like his wife and her partner were already pretty much doing a good job of providing for that kid, right. But the thing is that because he was like, no, like as her father, I also need to do that. It's like if I, if I don't, then I'm a failure. (Kate)

Yeah, that's fine. (Rosie)

This lengthy exchange reveals contradictory constructions of fatherhood. Scott Lang, also known as Ant-Man (see Figure 13), was frequently praised by the participants and demonstrated numerous qualities within the MCU films that align him with the modern construct of positive fatherhood. He not only clearly articulates a desire to be involved in the life of his daughter, Cassie, but actively fights for the right to do so in the film *Ant-Man* (Reed, 2015), before further validating himself as a role model of positive fatherhood in *Ant-Man and the Wasp* through the use of creative play, attentive discussion, and displays of love (Reed, 2018). Yet despite this, the above interaction between the participants above highlights the confusion that has developed in identifying a good father. As Rosie quickly points out Scott Lang did commit a crime; in fact his first appearance in the film *Ant-Man* (Reed, 2015) presents the end of his sentence in San Quentin State Prison, and for Rosie this act presented the character as yet another negative father figure within the MCU, despite the plethora of evidence

Ant-Man

Real name	Scott Edward Harris Lang
Notable aliases	Ant-Man Giant-Man
Played by	Paul Rudd
MCU Movie Appearances	11 including: Ant-Man Captain America: Civil War Spider-Man: Homecoming Ant-Man and the Wasp Avengers: Endgame Spider-Man: Far From Home
Affiliations	Baskin-Robbins (formerly) X-Con Security Consultants Avengers
Keywords	Former thief. Struggling father. Goof. Electrical engineer. Can talk to ants.

Figure 13 Ant-Man Character Bio (Marvel, 2022)

to suggest otherwise. This suggests that the overabundance of deadbeat dads within the MCU may be overwhelming the balanced construction of fatherhood for some.

The interaction regarding Scott Lang also serves as a further example of the social construction of reality in action. Initially, Rosie was of the firm opinion that Lang was not a good father, however, the presentation of a range of information from trusted and passionate sources within the discussion facilitated a change. While the strength of Rosie's new interpretation of Lang as a father is uncertain, it is clear that there is an acceptance of the widely held belief in the group that he is an example of positive fatherhood, despite the general group construct of positive fatherhood still being heavily influenced by traditional parental imprinting. The participants not only view Lang as an MCU role model of modern, positive fatherhood but also highlight his desire to be a financial provider for his family - particularly noted by Kate who connects Lang's inability to provide with feelings of fatherhood failure. This speaks to the strength of the traditional expectations of fathers among the participants as Lang makes evident that his desire to provide is largely predicated on the requirement to do so in order to have access to his daughter. This is evidenced in *Ant-Man* (Reed, 2015) when Lang arrives uninvited to his daughter's birthday party and is promptly told by Cassie's mother Maggie: "Get an apartment. Get a job, pay child support. And then we will talk about visitation, I promise." Despite Lang embodying the characteristics of the modern and positive father, the aspect participants focused upon, as it was explicitly presented in the film, was the traditional need to be a financial provider as a requirement of appropriate fatherhood.

While Lang best represents modern fatherhood within the MCU this is a construct of some confusion for participants. It could be considered that the frequent use, perhaps overuse, of the hero's journey concept within MCU storytelling has produced an overabundance of negative examples of traditional patriarchal fathers that leave the audience with not only a lack of balance but a significant absence of positive and modern fatherhood role-modeling at a time when general societal constructions regarding the role of fathers are undergoing substantial change (Tropp & Kelly, 2016).

5.3 The Portrayal of Women and Femininity

Strong criticisms were levied at the MCU in its construction and treatment of women and femininity. Both male and female participants shared the opinion that women deserved a more prominent place in the MCU, however they were resigned to the fact these characters and stories were based on media from a bygone era. Thus, they conclude, these early phases of what they hope will be a long-lasting franchise are dominated by men. And despite the criticisms outlined below, their passion and connection to the characters keep the group members returning, despite problematic portrayals of women.

Despite some evidence of positive progression for women in the MCU, the portrayals of women reinforce them as subordinate to men, retrained to supportive and nurturing roles. One of the few signs of change existing within the MCU is discussed - the increasing number of women in leadership roles and the conflict that arises when female advancement interferes with male character development. One of the variances from the literature is then examined - that heavy sexualisation of female characters has not typically occurred, with the one exception in the widely popular Black Widow. In line with the literature, the participants also noted the shift for female character development towards more masculine traits, and how this development and their character arcs revolved around and were reliant on men.

5.3.1 Women Play Supporting Roles

Women in the MCU are typically subordinated to the role of damsel in distress (Walderzak, 2016). This was highlighted by the participants in a review of the MCU film posters. They noted that within the 23 films under review at the time of the camp, 22 presented the primary male character front and centre in some form of a power stance. Female characters were predominantly found hanging off the male character, representative of the damsel in distress, or in an inferior position of nurturing support.

As previously noted, there were few female superheroes in the MCU and only one, Black Widow, who had been a core member of the Avengers team. At the time of the camp the *Captain Marvel* (Boden & Fleck, 2019) movie, the first to definitively have a female superhero as lead - had not long been released. While there had been some notable performances by women in a range of roles, the participants' view was that women tended to fulfill the role of damsel in distress or supporting the male hero to succeed. That the participants focused on the latter is perhaps a sign of their preference between the two.

> Like you look at like every like arguably every male strong MCU leader. There kind of is some woman backing him, and yeah, like basically giving that him support. And like just being his emotional, like packhorse. You've got Pepper, you've got Peggy, you've got Jane Foster, you've got Gamora, you've got Hope. To an extent, you've got all these women who are just being there. Just be like 'I'll support you, honey'. And like, really, who's doing the leadership? Like, there's Maggie, who's allowing these men to be at the top of their game and be like, level-headed when, you know, they're taking on all the crap. (Jill)

Jill features a number of female characters in her account. Their secondary treatment was unanimously decried. The inclusion of Pepper Potts in this category provides a prime example of the strength of this belief. That Potts, a supporting character to Iron Man, seemingly overcomes her subordinate role by becoming a successful chief executive, surviving the unwanted endowment of superpowers, and dons armour to contribute to saving the universe, does nothing to change this view of her in the eyes of the participants. Potts will always be the personal assistant to Iron Man, the woman he saves on multiple occasions, his love interest, mother to his child, and 'nerfed' (made less powerful) by the removal of her superpowers. The MCU narrative most adeptly communicates Potts as being subordinate to Iron Man, reinforcing the understanding that women are subordinate to men.

While women play a secondary and supportive role to men in the MCU there was considerable acknowledgment of the importance of these roles. That women were not always front and centre of the movie poster or in the storyline did not diminish the understanding that their part was important, often equally so to the main hero, and should be celebrated. The most significant example of this for the participants was the female characters of the *Black Panther* movie. While the film's title character possessed the largest image on the poster the participants noted that the majority of the other characters were women – who took centre stage while Black Panther was placed behind. This accurately represented the role these female characters played in the narrative, according to the participants. As Kate elaborated:

> T'Challa would be literally nothing without the women in his life like that. Like they created his leadership, and they give him authority by supporting him. If he was doing all this shit himself, he would be dead in a ditch somewhere. (Kate)

There was also a feeling amongst the female participants that while they were proud of the important roles females were playing in the MCU they would prefer to see greater representation of women amongst the leadership roles. "I think more women would step up to the plate as leaders if they were given the opportunity, instead of constantly being shot down by the men in their fields" said Rosie. Her comment was indicative of the feelings of the female participants, who felt it was common within the MCU, and in the real world for women's progress to be stymied by men in power.

In contrast to fathers, who the participants classified as having positions of prominence, mothers were seen as receiving the same treatment as women overall – relegated to a nurturing and supportive role they were not seen to be given the prominence and status the participants felt they deserved. Even when mothers die in the MCU, it's suggested that their passing is a story requirement, a motivation for the male character to undertake actions against others.

> So, like mother figures I think are interesting in the MCU. I think like in a sense, often times I see them as objectified characters because they serve a narrative purpose, but they're not always entirely realised. And like it's like we were talking about before, so often times they're pigeonholed into like nurturing, kind mother that understands me. And when I lose her and sort of like seeking out her relationship the way the same way I seek out a father figure, it's not what this is. This is a thing that I have to avenge. (Kate)

In a patriarchal society, the social construction of motherhood requires women to be fully committed to raising and caring for their children (Thomas, 2021). Deviation from this role is not typical or widely accepted, as is the case in the MCU. While fathers, as discussed in 5.2.4, are the ogres which the hero must overcome, mothers are the predominant support for their children, revered as such, and subsequently unable to venture elsewhere. This arrangement serves to ensure women are restricted in their options, subordinated by men into remaining at home, safeguarding patriarchal power.

5.3.2 More Women in Leadership Roles

While a lack of women in leadership roles throughout the first two phases of the MCU was noted the participants sensed that a change was occurring. They were quick to identify some of the female characters who held leadership roles. These characters tended to make appearances in more recent MCU films. The film posters highlighted that the first two phases of the MCU treated their female characters as subordinate. Later phases appeared to move away from this, offering a more equitable treatment of the female characters in the movies. Their primary example was the film Black Panther, in which they noted the strong female cast were well represented in not just the poster but throughout the movie.

> I think in terms of female leadership, it definitely improved, especially towards the end of the end. See the latest films and Frigga, I think that she's a really cool character, but at the same time, like even as a queen, I never really felt that she wielded her authority that much. (Kate)

> I feel like Queen Ramonda is a great representation of female leadership. Like obviously like we don't know entirely what T'Chaka's leadership was like but seeing like her reign thus far with her son becoming a prince and the Black Panther and her daughter being a genius and like, she's still like leading this amazing country and she's doing a mostly bang-up job of doing it. (Jill)

> I think going on going off of what you said, though, when they thought T'Challa was dead, it's really cool to see, like how the multiple types of leadership that all of the women in that film did. It wasn't just like a bunch of people feeling like sad sacks because their loved one died. It was like, 'well, he's gone, and it sucks. But you know, we have a whole country to run'. Yeah, like they were heading up the military. You know, strategically planning. And it was and I really like that she took that active mentorship job over T'Challa that usually the father figure takes like Tony to Peter. Right. Like she was the one that was really essential. (Kate)

Highlighted by the group, and particularly supported by the female participants, was the character of Valkyrie. This former member of an elite all female group of Asgardian warriors, made her first MCU appearance in *Thor: Ragnarok* (Waititi, 2017). Valkyrie presents as a strong, self-assured, and fun character who was widely appreciated by the participants. She was also celebrated amongst the group for being one of the few openly gay characters in the MCU. At the conclusion of the *Avengers: Endgame* (Russo & Russo, 2019) movie she succeeded Thor as the 'King' of Asgard. The participants noted her adoption of the traditionally male title, and as Jill commented: "We love that. We love that

for her." The progression of Valkyrie is celebrated as it reconceptualises the role of women in society in a manner more in keeping with the views of the participants.

However, while a female character taking on a significant leadership role within the MCU was praised by the participants the impact of this change on Thor was of greater concern.

> She is the coolest person but, like, was I happy that Thor, pretty much like retconned a lot of his development in becoming a leader to just hand it over? I was a little bit disappointed with that, but I was happy that it was Valkyrie. (Jill).

While the participants were happy for a female character to be given a leadership role, they were dissatisfied that it was at the expense of a male character who they had expected who assume the leadership role. At the time of the camp, Thor had been present in the MCU for eight years, had headlined three of his own movies, along with making multiple other appearances, had a long and significant history within Marvel comics, and was considered one of the most powerful superheroes in the MCU. He had also suffered significant loss onscreen – the death of his father, the murder of his mother by a Dark Elf, having to fight his sister, and having his best friend stabbed through the heart – the character had undergone significant growth. Over a long period of time, they had followed Thor, connected to him through his loss and redemption, watched him spiral in alcohol and food and, ultimately, be as flawed as any human. His decision to abdicate a position of power he held, and making Valkyrie King, was made so he could continue the feminised development of his character and discover more about himself following his depression. However, this renouncement of hegemonic power and control, and adoption of a feminised pathway, was not accepted by the participants:

> It sucked because Thor got all this awesome development that kind of got stuffed around in Infinity War. (Alfie)

> It was like something else that he lost, right? It was just meaningful, and it was like kind of taken away. (Jill)

This disappointment for Thor serves as an example of how ingrained the conditioning that men will hold power is within a patriarchal society. Reasonable and mature transfers of power to women are unacceptable if they are at the expense of men in power.

5.3.3 Sexualisation of Female Superheroes

Female superheroes have typically been expected to be the perfect specimen of sexual appeal (Gray II, 2011). All participants were quick to acknowledge that female characters had been sexualised within the MCU, however there was a general feeling that this treatment had typically been better than in other films. Viewing the MCU as lower on the sexualisation ladder allowed the participants to preserve their appreciation for it.

> I feel like the Marvel Universe actually does a decent job at not making those kinds of jokes too often. I definitely never got too much of that sense from it. And I did like that, especially [in] some of the more ensemble movies, there's less of a focus on sexualised costumes in general. (Kate)

> Wasp's outfit. I just love the wings. I love the helmet. I just love that it’s sleek. It's like a bit more feminine, but it's not like sexualised feminine. (Jill)

The inference is that a lower level of sexualisation of female characters is acceptable, especially if some of the media involved is significantly less sexualised. This exchange also highlights an appreciation for aspects of the traditional female superhero costume, the feminised form fitting suit and wings, but absent the sexualised focus emphasised by Gray II (2011). The degree to which levels of sexualisation or costuming are acceptable is seemingly a fine line. While Wasp’s black and sleek formfitting outfit is acceptable, there are similar costumes that are not. Black Widow was highlighted

by participants as the one female superhero, who happens to wear a black form fitting suit, who had they felt had been oversexualised.

> Like, I think the only one that I think is pretty bad at times is like Black Widows stuff and like, I understand that she needs body suits or whatever to be stealthy and quick and all that stuff, but like when the zipper goes down to your belly button. I have questions. (Rosie)

However, it was noted that progress had been made in more appropriately dressing Black Widow. This was again highlighted in the earlier film posters showing her significant cleavage.

> Mine would have to be Black Widow's, costume in *Endgame*. It was really well thought out and it was done, was one of the first costumes where she didn't have her zipper all the way down to like her tits, like that. (Jill)

> Like everything past *Avengers*, probably *Age of Ultron*, she looks a bit more like an assassin, rather than just as a symbol said, like, you know, bad ass. She actually looks like a woman who is committed to the fight rather than just like, pretty looking tree lady. (Kate)

The changes to Black Widow's costume can be seen in Figure 14 (below). The earlier costume is tighter fitting leather suit designed to emphasise her hourglass figure and maximise the display of cleavage. The appearance of this character fits neatly into Gray II's (2011) description of female superheroes as having "'super-sized' breasts, strong thighs, and thin waists" (p. 76). The character was also prone to traditional notions of feminine power through the utilisation of wigs, manipulation, and sexuality.

With Black Widow's later costume, the participants were not only referencing her vest, which now covers her figure and reduces cleavage exposure, but also the dramatic shift in the way this character operated. The current Black Widow has become the leader of the Avengers team, moving out of the shadows. The positionality and power afforded her in this new role provides the option of not needing to use sexuality as a weapon, she does not need to seduce men to get what she wants.


Figure 14 – These images show the character of Black Widow in her earliest appearance Iron Man 2 (left) and a later appearance in Avengers: Infinity War (right).

5.3.4 Female Superheroes Become More Masculine

Earlier I discussed the way that male superheroes in the MCU reinforce patriarchal control by assuming feminine characteristics. Similarly, the participants note that the growth of female superheroes is made possible by presenting as more masculine.

> I wonder if that also kind of because we were talking yesterday about how male characters change through the movies and sort of like gain of maturity and insight and control. And I wonder, but also like contrasting that with the development of female characters. It's about taking on more masculine traits almost in the sense that like, you know, they begin to be like more assertive or they're more like, I dunno, burly and more like forthright. And, you know, I guess less delicate. (Rosie)

As noted earlier, a clear feature of the female superhero has been the duality in modern media's characterisations of them. As women they're not only expected to be physically attractive but are expected, as men do, to achieve their goals through force (Goodrum et al., 2018; Gray II, 2011).

Rosie's choice of the word burly, a term used heavily by the participants to describe Thor as one of the most masculine characters, represents the degree of masculinity that has been assumed by female superheroes. It could well have been assumed that Black Widow, who was the most prominent of the female superheroes and also had the most well-known character arc, would be the prime example of this masculinised character development. However, the newer female superheroes, introduced througout the third phase of the MCU, were highlighted by the participants as demonstrating these masculine characteristics.

> Black Widow has thankfully come a long way from Iron Man 2. But I think I mentioned it before, how Wanda has a gritty way of fighting, but it's still using her power. I really like that. How, it's not stylised to be like pretty. It's putting everything into it. I think Captain Marvel kind of started doing it [fighting in a masculine way] and then she just didn't really have much [need to fight gritty] beyond her movie [in subsequent films]. (Alfie)

> That battle in *Captain Marvel* to [the song] *Just a Girl*. And the one in the beginning where she's on the ship and she's fighting the Skrulls, that felt very gritty. Just going at it. Yeah. Jill

> That's what I really liked about Captain Marvel. Like there is no delicacy in the way she fights. Like she just throws down. (Rosie)

For the participants, female superheroes who assumed masculine characteristics included the always willing to fight Captain Marvel, the aggressive and ready for action Dora Milaje, the female elite warriors of Wakanda, and Scarlet Witch. The latter, also known as Wanda Maximoff, was shown to have a signficant development in her superpowers and an associated growth in aggressive behaviour. While this aggression, directed at the supervillain who took the life of her partner, could be considered a justifiable response for any person the participants viewed this as the adoption of more masculine characteristics at the expense of the less powerful feminine approaches.

A tension exists for women in the presentation of femininity as subordinate to massculine traits. Jill commented that female superheroes are “constantly having to fit into this archetype of being gritty but also be sexy while still being a badass”, inferring that it was an impossible task to achieve. When the group was asked whether it was possible to be gritty and sexy Kate responded:

> It is and it’s not a wrong thing. But at the same time, when it happens consistently across multiple characters, I think it becomes a trend and not like an exception if that makes sense. Like for some of the characters, like even with Natasha if she is fighting against people she doesn't know then she has been trained to use her sexuality as a weapon. I can see that being defensible in terms of the narrative, meaning this is what I revert to. But there's no reason why other characters whose backgrounds don't have that should really act like that. (Kate)

She further articulates how these masculine traits in female superheroes further serve to install the suggestion that traditional femininity is subordinate to masculinity, when discussing the green, female, alien character Gamora and her relationship with male superhero Starlord:

> And, you know, she got sucked in by his charms and she obviously slept with him. And that seems to be his normal type. That's who he assumes is Gamora when he meets her, right. He tries to put on the charm, and she didn’t respond to it. And I think it's interesting that it kind of gave me, and I love Gamora, but it gave me like an I'm not like other girls kind of vibe. And the thing is, is that I think it's subtle, but it kind of to me frames conventional femininity as like being gullible and not as good as kind of more masculine traits. (Kate)

The character Starlord, viewed by the participants as a womaniser, finally meets his match when he meets Gamora, often referred to as the most feared women in the galaxy. She is a formidable warrior with a tough, masculine nature. That she does not fall for Starlord’s charms suggests the feminine women who had come before were inferior to the more masculine Gamora. This observation demonstrates how the feminine characteristics of women are judged against the masculine

characteristics of men, and as the structuring norm within the MCU determines them to be less subordinate, a message clearly communicated to the audience.

5.3.5 Female Development: Dependant on Men

The character development of women revolves around the men to whom they are subordinate. The participants viewed the Scarlet Witch as the prime example of how female character development within the MCU only occurred in relation to men.

> Coming back to Scarlet Witch, [it] is not great. Like she is arguably my favourite character, but she has been, like, they really fumbled the bag with Scarlet Witch, like, constantly her only character development per se... (Jill)
>
> Is her accent? (Theo)
>
> …is really just her, like, relying on or interacting with the men around her. Like first it's the grief that she experiences from her brother. Then it's the responsibility and consequences she faces for her actions, like reinforced by Cap saying you're doing nothing wrong. Even though you're like she needed to be punished a little bit. Not gonna lie. And then like coming into Infinity War and Endgame, it's just her relationship with Vision. And then after that, her vengeance for 'you killed my boyfriend. Prepare to die' like. There is no independent Wanda Maximoff development that exists outside of her either grieving or feeling bad or being in love or feeling bad again. (Jill)
>
> It's like, how often do male characters have to die or have that entire arc be about supporting a woman? Like its often times women sacrificing their own interests or like putting their efforts towards a man. But when is it the other way around? You know it's like not. Kate

With a strong gender binary in existence and men possessing the power they are the norm by which women are judged. The ease with which participants produce examples of a women's world revolving around the men her life highlights the lack of feminine independence within the MCU. This arrangement is not one that appears to be acceptable to the participants' view of the world and indicates that the MCU has yet to adequately reflect feminism in the real world. Further on in the camp, this topic is revisited. This exchange not only reinforces the criticisms the participants, particularly the women in the group, had about female character development always being in relation to men, but offers a concrete measure by which the participants are assessing the subordination of women within the MCU.

> I would link it to the Mako Mori test, which I think I already mentioned to Jill. But to my knowledge, it's sort of like this test in media, right, where you are supposed to have at least one female character, one main female character, who has their own individual character arc that isn't about supporting a male character. And a lot of women in the MCU don't actually reflect that, like even within more female centred movies or like *Black Panther*. Like that's all about supporting T'Challa. You know, like they also support Wakanda. But because he comes back, it's about making sure that he gets his leadership. That's Pepper Potts. It's like so much of it is just, you know, allowing Tony to do what Tony does and supporting him in that. (Kate)

The Mako Mori test, more popularly known as the Bechdel test, was developed by comic artist Alison Bechdel in 1986 and requires that in order for a movie to provide a minimum level of adequate female representation it must (1) represent two or more female characters, (2) those characters must be named and speak to each other, and (3) their dialogue must be about something other than a man (Morales & Olivo, 2021). Of the 20 films in the MCU at the time of the camp only 12 are considered to pass the Bechdel test and this tends to be a more favourable reading from fan orientated websites (Ambrose, 2021). While analysis of MCU films suggests the situation is improving (Morales & Olivo,

2021) to date the message that women play a secondary and supporting role to men comes through loud and clear.

5.4 Conclusion

Within the MCU the participants of this study identified a strong and thriving patriarchy. For them, this transmedia entity is a story about men, the power they possess, and the authority they brandish. Throughout the first three phases of the MCU these men have been the people who possessed the superpowers that enabled them to obtain this power, but they were also the ones already in control of the money and organisations to realise their goals. The MCU's hegemonic masculinity requires the big muscles, aggression, and will to dominate all others, especially women, which has been a feature of the real world. Men being in charge within the MCU reproduces the established power structures and roles of the real world, and that the addition of superpowers gives those characters the authority to act on their beliefs.

Male superheroes show us that, as a man, it is a display of power to show off your body. Women, fictional and real, desire them for it, while other men aspire to achieve the muscles and the influence of it. Likewise, male superheroes demonstrate their domination over women by conquering feminine characteristics in name of growth. Even while the values and characteristics of men demonstrating subordinate masculinity are cherished, this is not enough to obtain power or complete adoration. To be complete as a person is to obtain the hegemonic masculine domination that comes with physical power and aggression.

The message to women from the MCU is clear – their role is to support and comply to the will of the men in power. Token presentations of feminine progress in the later stages of the MCU have provided the audience with a spark of hope that more significant change might be afoot, however this is still overwhelmed by the sheer volume and range of masculine supremacy in existence. As the dominate class it is acceptable for men to be destructive, to commit violence, cause damage, and be largely free

from consequences for these actions. In fact, more often than not these behaviours are celebrated by the world of the MCU. These freedoms are not afforded to the few women who have the power to commit such acts – they must act with greater care in wielding their abilities for fear of reaping public wrath for acting above their station.

While gender within the MCU was comparable to that previously established in superhero research, there were some variances of note. Shapeshifters did not represent a variation from the gender binary that Alexander (2018) suggested. Women were not sexualised to the degree that Gray II (2011) outlined and there was evidence to suggest this was an area of positive growth in MCU. And the winds of change were afoot as more women in the MCU assumed positions of power as the narrative progressed, hinting that men's tenure as the structuring norm was under threat.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The Marvel Cinematic Universe is an important transmedia property. While Star Wars fans would undoubtedly disagree, the MCU is the largest and most prominent fictional universe currently in existence. The objective of this thesis was to examine audience perceptions of gender through its representation in this universe. This chapter is organised into three parts. The first summarises the findings of this study and explores audience understandings of gender in the MCU. In the second I put forward a recommendation on how the MCU should progress gender equality and better represent the world in which we live. I conclude this chapter with a personal reflection on this journey.

6.1 Summary of findings

Previous research examining gender within the superhero genre, especially that focusing on film and television productions, has identified fictional worlds steeped in patriarchal systems of power. Male superheroes are in control – from their hypermasculine physiques to their extensive superpowers, they have had the ability to take over, and to dominate the world in which they live (Adamou, 2011; Coyne et al., 2014; Waling, 2016). By comparison, women in these worlds have been over sexualised and pushed into the background as men take centre stage (Goodrum et al., 2018; Gray II, 2011). The participants of this study see the same patriarchal representations existing in the MCU.

The participants see male superheroes at the centre of the MCU narrative. For the first three phases of the MCU the focus has been on these male superheroes. They have not only held the spotlight but also maintained control over everything important in establishing power. The participants recognise them having masculinised characteristics that are valorised including the large muscles, as the ones wielding the superpowers, and their willingness to use aggression to get what they want. Male superheroes enormous bank balances and management of the various organisations in the universe gives them the means to create sky-high monuments plastered with their names. They largely treat the women in their lives as disposable support and providers of caregiving. And if exuding masculine

power and control wasn't enough, men in the MCU develop their characters by taking over feminine traits.

In viewing the women of the MCU the participants yearn for them to be given something, anything, beyond being in the background. While the participants feel fortunate to have escaped the excessive sexualisation that typically plagues women in the superhero genre the narratives of female characters continually and repeatedly centres around men. As time has passed in the MCU the treatment of female characters has improved – female superhero costumes are becoming less sexualised, leadership roles are being obtained, and now they hold the most powerful abilities. But these changes represent a miniscule advancement when compared to the almost complete and total domination that men have held in this universe.

Of the findings, perhaps the most perplexing relates to the participants' parasocial relationships with MCU characters. These fans have grown up with the Marvel Cinematic Universe and have a long and dedicated history of being entertained by and engaging with the various narratives weaving throughout it. Strong and personal bonds have been established with many of its characters. These relationships are the primary reason these fans continue to return to MCU media, to explore and investigate all there is to know about this world. From an early age they have looked up to its inhabitants, they have connected with them over life circumstances, and they have held them up to be role models. The findings of this study have highlighted the significant role of parasocial relationships, not just on the audience understanding and construction of gender but on the overall relationship these fans have with the MCU. Further exploration of the role of parasocial relationships in serialised transmedia entities is recommended, with particular attention to the permissiveness that these relationships establish towards normally rejected characteristics of media.

During the camp and subsequent data analysis the strong and knowledgeable criticisms the participants levied at the MCU regarding gender at times made it difficult to understand why they

were still so committed to this universe. When there is so much you find wrong with an environment why continue to engage with it? The answer is always in the characters with whom they have a close and personal relationship. For the participants, Captain America, Thor, Iron Man, Spider-Man, and Black Widow have been in their lives almost as long as their parents or siblings. They are like family, and just like family they don't always agree with the things the other members do or with the circles they keep. These relationships and their impacts are complex and further investigation is required to truly understand their role in this new media environment.

And lastly, the novel approach adopted for this investigation, the research camp, has made a methodological contribution to the field of media studies and gender. In particular, the use of an immersive three-day camp allowed for the development of ideas and deeper exploration of understandings than would be achievable in alternative settings. Not only was the camp a valuable investigative, reflexive and interactive method, but it allowed all stakeholders involved to develop knowledge built on each other's experiences.

6.2 What Next For the MCU?

There is considerable scope for a wide variety of future research that would be interesting and valuable for understanding gender construction in transmedia entities. But this work does not necessarily resolve the issues raised by the participants, nor does it positively impact the direction of gender equality in the MCU. The real super-ability of the superhero and comic book genre has been the capacity to share ideas and stories about the lived experience in a fantastical and entertaining way. It captures the attention of the audience and, almost without them being aware, steps them through new ways of thinking and highlights important values. Given this, and the sheer size of the audience the MCU acquires, those in control of it have enormous power to influence the real world. The responsibility to improve the world does not just accompany this power, it is demanded by an audience heavily conditioned by a history of superheroes challenging injustice in the real world. As

such, they have a responsibility to address the serious and overwhelming patriarchal society they have created onscreen.

Marvel have already begun to implement a raft of changes in this regard. They have introduced a greater diversity of production and development staff, who can more appropriately communicate the experiences of the diverse characters involved. The hiring of director Ryan Coogler, who is African American, to helm the *Black Panther* movie and its sequels is just one example of this. The recent *Moon Night* (Slater, 2022) Disney+ series introduces narratives in which men are vulnerable, while the expected *She-Hulk* series and *The Marvels* movie provide the opportunity for female superheroes to take centre stage. At the time of completing this thesis an MCU television series on the Disney+ streaming service had just aired – a show about a Pakistani American Muslim teenage girl growing up in New Jersey, United States. It is a step in the right direction and a prime example of the effortless recommendation that will progress gender equality and challenge patriarchal power structures - Marvel should continue, and ideally accelerate, the reproduction of its comic book stories in the MCU.

Isn't this what the company has been doing since the inception of the MCU? Yes, it is. However, understanding the history of the comic book narratives is to understand the trajectory of the MCU. Marvel comics have always been a commentary on social justice and a subtle call for change in the world (Fandino et al., 2018). These stories were developed during a different societal time, one when patriarchal systems ran wild. But as the world changed so did the comics, and in more recent times, they have produced narratives such as *Ms Marvel*, described above, and *Squirrel Girl*, who was introduced in the literature review. These new additions to the MCU begin the long journey of change with which readers of the comics would be familiar. These narratives challenge the patriarchal power structures currently in existence and, as these fantasy worlds are prone to doing, can introduce radical realignments in universe changing events. If the first decade of the MCU has reinforced hegemonic masculinity, there is hope that the second will challenge it.

6.3 Personal Reflection

I have been extremely fortunate to have the opportunity to combine the film and superhero media passions that are incorporated into this study. I am fascinated by social construction. I am amazed by the influence of gendering cultures and structures. And I am a long-term fan of comic books and the superhero genre. Most importantly, as I noted at the beginning of this thesis, my interest in the MCU has been propelled by the opportunity to not just watch my family grow up in a world with such a rich and engaging superhero film franchise but to also share that journey with them. In undertaking this study, the regular discussion, debate and critique of MCU media, easter eggs, developments and character decision making we shared has grown to include this work. Identifying gender characteristics, power imbalances, and the over-sexualisation of female characters are regularly noted. I've shared my writing and we've imparted opinions. Prominent gender related scenes are met with heightened enthusiasm. This practice has expanded the intertextual linking and investigation of this serialised transmedia universe we already practiced far beyond my expectations. What was already an exploration of the morals and values within our family has become something considerably more important and nuanced. I will be forever grateful for it.

The MCU started with film Iron Man in 2008. The title character has been at the forefront of its narrative ever since. And while he may have started with some less than desirable characteristics, we witness him grow and develop a caring masculinity, one that better reflects the contemporary constructions of the real world. Ultimately, he becomes a self-sacrificing parent and in reflecting on my experience with the MCU and my family, I feel it's only appropriate to share some of Stark's last words from his final appearance in *Avengers: Endgame*. While he might not have been talking specifically about gender in the MCU, the sentiments are no less relevant for it:

God, what a world. Universe now. If you told me 10 years ago that we weren't alone, let alone you know to this extent... I mean, I wouldn't have been surprised. But come on, you know. The epic forces of darkness and light that have come into play. And for better or worse, that's the reality [our children are] going to find a way to grow up in. (Russo & Russo, 2019)

References

Acker, J. (1990). Hierarchies, jobs, bodies: A theory of gendered organizations. *Gender & Society, 4*(2), 139-158. doi:https://doi-org.ezproxy.massey.ac.nz/10.1177/089124390004002002

Adamou, C. (2011). Evolving Portrayals of Masculinity in Superhero Films. In R. J. Gray II, & B. Kaklamanidou (Eds.), *The 21st Century Superhero: Essays on Gender, Genre and Globalization in Film* (pp. 94-109). McFarland.

Alexander, D. (2018). Face of Abjectivity. In M. Goodrum, T. Prescott, & P. Smith, *Gender and the Superhero Narrative* (pp. 218-248). University Press of Mississippi.

Ambrose, K. (2021, October 15). *14 Marvel Movies That Pass The Bechdel Test*. Retrieved June 14, 2022, from Screen Rant: https://screenrant.com/marvel-movies-pass-bechdel-test-feminist/

Aubrey, J. S., & Harrison, K. (2004). The gender-role content of children's favorite television programs and its links to their gender-related perceptions. *Media psychology, 6*(2), 111-146.

Aubrey, J. S., Yan, K., Terán, L., & Roberts, L. (2020). The heterosexual script on tween, teen, and young-adult television programs: A content analytic update and extension. *The journal of sex research, 57*(9), 1134-1145.

Audience Responses to Diverse Superheroes: The Roles of Gender and Race in Forging Connections With Media Characters in Superhero Franchise Films. (2020). *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*. Retrieved from http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/aca0000363

Baker, K., & Raney, A. (2007). Equally super?: Gender-role stereotyping of superheroes in children's animated programs. *Mass Communication & Society, 10*(1), 25-41.

Bates , T. (2022). Rethinking how we work with Acker's theory of gendered organizations: An abductive approach for feminist empirical research. *Gender, Work & Organization, 29*(4), 1041-1064. doi:10.1111/gwao.12795

Berger , P., & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge.* New York: Doubleday.

Bierhoff, H. W. (2002). *Prosocial behaviour.* Psychology Press.

Black, S. (Director). (2013). *Iron Man 3* [Motion Picture]. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures.

Boden, A., & Fleck, R. (Directors). (2019). *Captain Marvel* [Motion Picture]. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures.

Boon, S. D., & Lomore, C. D. (2001). Admirer-celebrity relationships among young adults: explaining perceptions of celebrity influence on identity. *Human Communication Research, 27*, 432–465.

Branagh, K. (Director). (2011). *Thor* [Motion Picture]. Paramount Pictures.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*, 77-101. doi:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Brinker, F. (2017). Transmedia Storytelling in the “Marvel Cinematic Universe” and the Logics of Convergence-Era Popular Seriality. In M. Yockey (Ed.), *Make Ours Marvel: Media Convergence and A Comics Universe* (pp. 218-244). Austin: University of Texas Press.

Brooks, D. E., & Hébert, L. P. (2006). Gender, race, and media representation. In B. J. Dow, & J. T. Wood, *The Sage handbook of gender and communication* (pp. 297-317). Sage. doi:http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.massey.ac.nz/10.4135/9781412976053

Burton, J. (2021, June 12). *How Much Did Disney Buy Marvel for and When?* Retrieved from Newsweek: https://www.newsweek.com/how-much-did-disney-buy-marvel-when-mcu-1599404

Campbell, J. (2008). *The hero with a thousand faces* (Vol. 17). New World Library.

Chambliss, J. C., Svitavsky, W. L., & Fandino, D. (2018). *Assembling the Marvel Cinematic Universe.* McFarland.

Chory-Assad, R., & Cicchirillo, V. (2005). Empathy and affective orientation as predictors of identification with television characters. *Communication Research Reports, 22*, 151–156.

Columbus, C. (Director). (1993). *Mrs. Doubtfire* [Motion Picture]. 20th Century Studios.

Connell, R. W. (2020). *Masculinities* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.

Connell, R., & Messerschmidt, J. (2005). Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept. *Gender & society, 19*(6), 829-859.

Cook, M. (2015, April 10). *WHY THE ART OF SQUIRREL GIRL MATTERS*. Retrieved from Book Riot: https://bookriot.com/art-squirrel-girl-matters/

Couldry, N., & Hepp, A. (2018). *The mediated construction of reality.* John Wiley & Sons.

Coyne, S., Linder, J. R., Rasmussen, E., & Nelson, D. (2014). It's a Bird! It's a Plane! It's a Gender Stereotype!: Longitudinal Associations Between Superhero Viewing and Gender Stereotyped Play. *Sex Roles, 70*(9-10), 416-430.

Cretton, D. D. (Director). (2021). *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* [Motion Picture]. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures.

Daly, K. (2010). Cinema 3.0: the interactive-image. *Cinema Journal*, 81-98.

D'amore, L. M. (2012). The Accidental Supermom: Superheroines and Maternal Performativity,. *J Pop Cult The Journal of Popular Culture, 45*(6), 1226-1248.

Dantzler, P. (2018). Multiliteracies of the MCU: Continuity Literacy and the Sophisticated Reader (s) of Superheroes Media. In J. C. Chambliss, W. L. Svitavsky, & D. Fandino (Eds.), *Assembling the Marvel Cinematic Universe: Essays on the Social, Cultural, and Geospatial Domains* (pp. 14-31). McFarland.

Deacon, S. A. (2006). Creativity within qualitative research on families. In S. N. Hesse-Biber, & P. Leavy (Eds.), *Emergent methods in social research* (pp. 95-107). Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications.

Derrickson, S. (Director). (2016). *Dr Strange* [Motion Picture]. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures.

Dragoti, S. (Director). (1983). *Mr. Mom* [Motion Picture]. 20th Century Studios.

Durkin, K. (1995). *Developmental Social Pshychology: From Infancy to Old Age.* Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc.

Dutt, R. (2014). *Behind the curtain: women's representations in contemporary Hollywood.* MSC: London School of Economics.

England, D. E., Descartes, L., & Collier-Meek, M. A. (2011). Gender role portrayal and the Disney princesses. *Sex Roles, 64*(7-8), 555-567.

Fairhurst, G. T., & Grant, D. (2010). The Social Construction of Leadership: A Sailing Guide. *Management Communication Quarterly, 24*(2), 171–210.

Fandino, D., Chambliss, J. C., & Svitavsky, W. L. (2018). *Assembling the Marvel Cinematic Universe.* McFarland.

Favreau, J. (Director). (2010). *Iron Man 2* [Motion Picture]. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures.

Fleming, M. J. (2015). The Avengers Disassembled: Deconstructing Gender & Hegemonic Masculinity in Superhero Culture. *Social Justice and Community Engagement, 8*. Retrieved from https://scholars.wlu.ca/brantford_sjce/8

Fraction, M. (2010). *Fear Itself* (Vol. 1). Marvel. Retrieved from https://read.marvel.com/#/book/20378

Freeman, T. (2003). Loving fathers or deadbeat dads: The crisis of fatherhood in popular culture. In S. Earle, & G. Letherby, *Gender, identity and reproduction* (pp. 33-49). London: Palgrave Macmillan. doi:https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230522930

Galician, M.-L., & Merskin, D. L. (2006). *Critical Thinking About Sex, Love, and Romance in the Mass Media.* New York: Routledge.

Galvin, K. (2006). Gender and family interaction: dress rehearsal for an improvisation? In B. J. Dow, & J. T. Wood, *The SAGE handbook of gender and communication* (pp. 41-56). SAGE Publications, Inc. doi:https://www-doi-org.ezproxy.massey.ac.nz/10.4135/9781412976053.n3

Gerard, M., & Poepsel, M. (2019). Black Widow: Female Representation in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. *Polymath: An Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences Journal, 8*(2), 27-53.

Gerding , A., & Signorielli , N. (2014). Gender roles in tween television programming: a content analysis of two genres. *Sex Roles, 70*, 43-56.

Giles, D. C., & Maltby, J. (2004). The role of media figures in adolescent development:. *Personality and Individual Differences, 36*, 813-822.

GLAAD. (2018). *Where We Are on TV '17-'18.* GLAAD. Retrieved from https://glaad.org/files/WWAT/WWAT_GLAAD_2017-2018.pdf

GLAAD. (2022a). *2021 GLAAD Studio Resposibility Index*. Retrieved from GLAAD: https://www.glaad.org/sri/2021/

GLAAD. (2022b). *Where We Are on TV.* GLAAD. Retrieved from https://www.glaad.org/sites/default/files/GLAAD%20202122%20WWATV.pdf

Goodrum, M., Prescott, T., & Smith, P. (Eds.). (2018). *Gender and the Superhero Narrative.* University Press of Mississipi.

Gray II, R. J. (2011). Vivacious Vixens and Scintillating Super Hotties Deconstructing the Superheroine. In R. J. Gray II, & B. Kaklamanidou (Eds.), *The 21st Century Superhero, Essays on Gender, Genre and Globalization in Film* (pp. 75-93). McFarland.

Gray II, R. J., & Kaklamanidou, B. (Eds.). (2011). *The 21st century superhero: Essays on gender, genre and globalization in film.* McFarland.

Gunn, J. (Director). (2014). *Guardians of the Galaxy* [Motion Picture]. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures.

Hall, E. A. (2019). Identification and Parasocial Relationships With Characters From Star Wars: The Force Awakens. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture, 8*(1), 88-98.

Haskell, M. (2016). *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (3rd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hentges, B., & Case, K. (2013). Gender Representations on Disney Channel, Cartoon Network, and Nickelodeon Broadcasts in the United States. *Journal of Children and Media, 3*, 319-333.

Hewstone, M. E., Stroebe, W. E., & Jonas, K. E. (2008). *Introduction to social psychology.* Blackwell Publishing.

Higgins, D. M. (2021). *Reverse Colonization: Science Fiction, Imperial Fantasy, and Alt-victimhood.* University of Iowa Press.

Hollander, J. A., & Gordon, H. R. (2006). The Processes of Social Construction in Talk. *Symbolic Interaction, 29*(2), 183-212.

Holtzman, L., & Sharpe, L. (2014). *Media messages: What film, television, and popular music teach us about race, class, gender, and sexual orientation.* Routledge.

Howe, S. (2013). *Marvel Comics: The Untold Story.* Harper Collins.

Hurrelmann, K., & Bauer, U. (2018). *Socialisation during the life course.* Routledge.

Hussain, S. (2011). Toes that look like toes: Cambodian children's perspectives on prosthetic legs. *Qualiatative Health Research, 21*(10), 1427-40.

Jacelon, C., & Imperio, K. (2005). Participant Diaries as a Source of Data in Research With Older Adults. *Qualitative Health Research, 15*, 991-997. doi:10.1177/1049732305278603

Johnston, J. (Director). (2011). *Captain America: The First Avenger* [Motion Picture]. Los Ange les, CA.

Kanagy, C. L., & Kraybill, D. B. (1999). *The Riddles of Human Society.* Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press.

Kara, H. (2020). *Creative Research Methods* (2nd ed.). Bristol: Bristol University Press.

King, N. (2004). Using templates in the thematic analysis of text. In C. Cassel, & G. Symon (Eds.), *Essential guide to qualitative methods in organizational research* (pp. 257–270). London, UK: Sage.

Kornhaber, R., Cross, M., Betihavas, V., & Bridgman, H. (2016). The benefits and challenges of academic writing retreats: an integrative review. *Higher Education Research & Development*. doi:10.1080/07294360.2016.1144572

Kortenhaus, C. M., & Demarest, J. (1993). Gender role stereotyping in chirldren's literature: An update. *Sex Roles, 28*, 219-232.

Krensky, S. (2008). *Comic Book Century: The History of American Comic Books.* Twenty-First Century Books.

Krijnen, T., & Van Bauwel, S. (2021). *Gender and media: Representing, producing, consuming.* Routledge.

Lauzen, M. M. (2019). *Boxed In 2018–19: Women on Screen and Behind the Scenes in Television.* Retrieved March 20, 2022, from https://womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/2018-19_Boxed_In_Report.pdf

Lauzen, M. M., Dozier, D. M., & Horan, N. (2008). Constructing Gender Stereotypes Through Social Roles in Prime-Time Television. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 52*(2), 200-214.

Littauer, F. (2006). *Personality Plus: How to Understand other by understanding yourself.* Michingan: Amerika Serikat: Fleming H. Revell.

Lorber, J. (1994). The social construction of gender. *Reconstructing gender: A multicultural anthology*, 96-103.

Lott, B. (1997). The Personal and Social Correlates of a Gender Difference. *Journal of Social Issues, 53*, 279-294.

Lumsden, K. (2019). *Reflexivity : theory, method and practice.* Routledge.

Ma, P. (2020, January 17). *A Brief History of Comics and Graphic Novels*. Retrieved October 21, 2021, from Medium: https://medium.com/publiclibrarysg/a-brief-history-of-comics-and-graphic-novels-de096c09b8b3

Maity, N. (2014). Damsels in distress: A textual analysis of gender roles in Disney princess films. *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science, 19*(10), 28-31.

Marvel. (2022, June 22). *Marvel Featured Characters*. Retrieved from Marvel: https://www.marvel.com/comics/characters

McRobbie, A. (2009). *The aftermath of feminism: Gender, culture and social change.* Sage.

Merskin, D. (2006). Jammer girls and the world wide web: Making an about-face. *Global Media Journal, 5*(9). Retrieved from https://www.globalmediajournal.com/open-access/jammer-girls-and-the-world-wide-web-making-an-aboutface.php?aid=35160

Morales, H., & Olivo, D. (2021). Trends in Gender Portrayal in the Avengers Series: A Conventional Content Analysis. *Journal of Student Research, 10*(1). doi:https://doi.org/10.47611/jsrhs.v10i1.1348

Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. *Screen, 16*(3), 6-18.

Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International journal of qualitative methods*. doi:1609406917733847

O'Leary, Z. (2013). *The Essential Guide to Doing Your Research Project.* SAGE.

Padilla-Walker, L. M., Coyne , S. M., Fraser , A. M., & Stockdale , L. A. (2013). Is Disney the nicest place on earth? A content analysis of prosocial behavior in animated Disney films. *Journal of Communication, 63*(2), 393-412.

Payne, G., & Payne, J. (2004). *Key Concepts in Social Research.* SAGE Publications Ltd. doi:https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781849209397

Plato. (1943). *Plato's The Republic.* New York: Books, Inc.

Poe, A. S. (2021, October 27). *How Many Marvel Characters Are There? [Comics & Movies]*. Retrieved from Fiction Horizon: https://fictionhorizon.com/how-many-marvel-characters-are-there/

Reed, P. (Director). (2015). *Ant-Man* [Motion Picture]. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures.

Reed, P. (Director). (2018). *Ant-Man and the Wasp* [Motion Picture]. Walt Disney Motion Pictures.

Remafedi, G. (1990). Study group report on the impact of television portrayals of gender roles on youth. *Journal of Adolescent Health Care*(11), 59-61.

Remafedi, G. (1990). Study group report on the impact of television portrayals of gender roles on youth. *Journal of Adolescent Health Care*.

Ricciardelli, R., Clow, K. A., & White, P. (2010). Investigating hegemonic masculinity: Portrayals of masculinity in men's lifestyle magazines. *Sex Roles, 1-2*, 64-78.

Riddle , K. (2009). Cultivation Theory Revisited: The Impact of Childhood Television Viewing Levels on Social Reality Beliefs and Construct Accessibility in Adulthood. *International Communication Association*, (pp. 1-29).

Robb, B. J. (2014). *A Brief History of Superheroes.* Little, Brown Book Group.

Romer, N. (1981). *The Sex-Role Cycle: Socialization from Infancy to Old.* Old Westbury, NY: The Feminist Press.

Rotten Tomatoes. (2021). *About*. Retrieved 10 11, 2021, from Rotten Tomatoes: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/about

Rouse, L. (2022, February 8). *The Ultimate Marvel Binge: How Long Does It Take To Watch Every Movie and Show?* Retrieved from Lifehacker: https://www.lifehacker.com.au/2022/02/marvel-movies-tv-series-runtime/

Rudman, L. A., & Glick, P. (2021). *The social psychology of gender: How power and intimacy shape gender relations.* Guilford Publications.

Russo, A., & Russo, J. (Directors). (2019). *Avengers: Endgame* [Motion Picture]. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures.

Russo, J., & Russo, A. (Directors). (2018). *Avengers: Infinity War* [Motion Picture]. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures.

Scharrer, E., Kim, D. D., Lin, K. M., & Liu, Z. (2006). Working hard or hardly working? Gender, humor, and the performance of domestic chores in television commercials. *Mass Communication & Society, 9*(2), 215-238.

Schumacher, M. (2010). *Will eisner: A dreamer's life in comics.* New York: Bloomsbury.

Signorielli, N. (1982). Marital status in television drama: A case of reduced options. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 26*(2), 585-597.

Signorielli, N. (1997). *Reflections of Girls in the Media: A Content Analysis. A Study of Television Shows and Commercials, Movies, Music Videos, and Teen Magazine Articles and Ads. An Executive Summary.* Oakland: The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation.

Signorielli, N., & Kahlenberg, S. (2001). Television's world of work in the nineties. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 45*(1), 4-22.

Sink, A., & Mastro, D. (2017). Depictions of gender on primetime television: A quantitative content analysis. *Mass Communication and Society, 20*(1), 3-22.

Skogland, K. (Director). (2021). *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* [Motion Picture]. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures.

Slater, J. (Creator). (2022). *Moon Night* [Motion Picture]. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures.

Smith, S. L., Choueiti, M., & Pieper, K. M. (2014). *Gender bias without borders: an investigation of female characters in popular films across 11 countries.* Los Angeles: Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media.

Tal-Or, N., & Cohen, J. (2010). Understanding audience involvement: Conceptualizing and manipulating identification and transportation. *Poetics, 38*, 402-418.

Tasker, Y. (1995). *Spectacular bodies: Gender, genre and the action cinema.* London & New York: Routledge.

Taylor, A. (Director). (2013). *Thor: The Dark World* [Motion Picture]. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures.

Taylor, A. (2014). Avengers dissemble! Transmedia superhero franchises and cultic management. *Journal of Adaptation in Film & Performance, 7*(2), 181-194.

The Numbers. (2022). *All Time Worldwide Box Office*. Retrieved 4 19, 2022, from The Numbers: https://www.the-numbers.com/box-office-records/worldwide/all-movies/cumulative/all-time

Thomas, S.-M. (2021). Conversations about Motherhood: Uncovering the Tensions Between Parent, Child, and Society. *Stories from Montreal, 15*, 223-255.

Tropp, L., & Kelly, J. (2016). *Deconstructing Dads: Changing Images of Fathers in Popular Culture.* Lexington Books.

Tyler, A. (2020, July 26). *Thor: Ragnarok - How Old Odin Is When He Dies*. Retrieved from Screen Rant: https://screenrant.com/thor-ragnarok-odin-age-death-mcu-how-old/

Vaismoradi, M., Turunen, H., & Bondas, T. (2013). Content analysis and thematic analysis: Implications for conducting a qualitative descriptive study. *Nursing & health sciences, 15*(3), 398-405.

Vande Berg, L. R., & Streckfuss, D. (1992). Profile: Prime-time television's portrayal of women and the world of work: A demographic profile. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 36*(2), 195-208.

Voelker-Morris, R., & Voelker-Morris, J. (2014). Stuck in tights: mainstream superhero comics' habitual limitations on social constructions of male superheroes. *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics, 5*(1), 101-117.

Waititi, T. (Director). (2017). *Thor: Raganarok* [Motion Picture]. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures.

Walderzak, J. (2016). Rebooting the Damsel: The Transformation of the Damsel Archetype in Spider-Man, Superman, and Batman Films from 1978-2014. *Studies in the Fantastic,, 3*(1), 45-75.

Waling, A. (2016). Waling, A. (2016). Deconstructing the super (hero) villain: Megamind and cinematic representations of masculinity. *The Human Journal of Literature and Culture, 6*, 5-21.

Walsh, A., & Leaper, C. (2020). A content analysis of gender representations in preschool children's television. *Mass Communication and Society, 23*(3), 331-355.

Ward, L. M., & Grower, P. (2020). Media and the Development of Gender Role Stereotypes. *Annual Review of Developmental Psychology*, 177-199.

Watts, J. (Director). (2017). *Spider-Man: Homecoming* [Motion Picture]. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures.

Watts, J. (Director). (2021). *Spider-Man: No Way Home* [Motion Picture]. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures.

Whedon, J. (Director). (2012). *The Avengers* [Motion Picture]. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures.

Whitten, S. (2021, April 21). *Avengers Campus will open at Disneyland on June 4*. Retrieved from CNBC: https://www.cnbc.com/2021/04/08/avengers-campus-will-open-at-disneyland-on-june-4th.html

Whitten, S. (2021, January 31). *The 13 highest-grossing film franchises at the box office*. Retrieved October 11, 2021, from CNBC: https://www.cnbc.com/2021/01/31/the-13-highest-grossing-film-franchises-at-the-box-office.html

Yankulova, B. (2020). THE POLITICS OF MASCULINITY: CAPTAIN AMERICA AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF MASCULINITY IN TODAY'S POLITICAL CLIMATE. In S. Taghdisi Rad, S. F. Fröhlich, & K. Vasiljeva (Eds.), *Global Crossroads: Rethinking Dominant Orders in Our Contested World.* Ijopec Publication.

Yockey, M. (2017). *Make Ours Marvel: Media Convergence and a Comics Universe.* University of Texas Press.

Appendix 1: Meal Plan

MCU Camp Meal Plan

Meal	MCU Reference	Prep Notes
Friday Dinner		
Make your own flat sandwich with pickles Breads Meats Pickles Carrot Relish etc	Spider-Man	All supplies purchased during camp shop Breads from Bread Hound on the day?
Friday Supper		
Kettle chips and dip 6 large bags of various flavours ?	Dr Strange	All supplies purchased during camp shop
Saturday Breakfast		
Uncle Toby's Honey Cheerios Kellogg's Corn Flakes Toast Milk and Spreads	Jessica Jones Jessica Jones Nick Fury reference	All supplies purchased during camp shop
Saturday Morning Tea		
Pears (and some other whole fruits) Brownie	Gamora eating fruit in GotG Just cause	All supplies purchased during camp shop Peter to make on Thursday before camp
Saturday Lunch		
Soups Salad Bread	Drax slurping soup GOTG2 promo Groot eats his own leaves	All supplies purchased during camp shop Canned and packet salads. SW - Soup will just need to be heated and salad mixed.
Saturday Afternoon tea		
M&M's Nuts Grapes Biscuits	Iron Fist Zarg nuts (GOTG) Thor Ragnarok	All supplies purchased during camp shop
Saturday Dinner		

Ray's Pizza (Domino's) 3 x meat 1 x vege 1 x vegan Garlic bread Salads – buy in advance Sprite	Iron man Runaways	PW – to order for delivery Have Ray's signs ready to stick on boxes
Saturday Supper		
Pretzels	Spider-Man	All supplies purchased during camp shop
Sunday Breakfast		
Pop-Tarts Uncle Toby's Honey Cheerios Kellogg's Corn Flakes Toast Milk and Spreads	Thor Jessica Jones Jessica Jones Nick Fury reference	All supplies purchased during camp shop
Sunday Morning Tea		
Pears (and some other whole fruits) Brownie	Gamora eating fruit in GotG Just cause	All supplies purchased during camp shop Peter to make Thursday beforehand
Sunday Lunch		
Cheeseburgers (Hungry Jacks/Burger King)	Iron man and others	SW – to collect

Appendix 2: Participant Information Sheet

Gender and the MCU: A Research Camp

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

What is the purpose of this research?

Since 2008 the MCU has released 23 films along with a number of short films, television shows, and comic books. This interconnected fictional universe has a significant worldwide audience with nine films in the top twenty-five worldwide grossing films, including the highest grossing movie 'Avengers: Endgame'. Our consumption of media helps form how we see the world and as such the purpose of this research is to explore the conversation that occurs between the content of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) and its audience with specific regard to gender.

What happens on the MCU Research Camp?

Volunteers will take part in a two day, two night MCU Research Camp of eight participants. The camp is to be held from 5pm Friday 22nd November to 5pm Sunday 24th November. The location of the camp will be King's College in St Lucia, Brisbane.

The range of activities within the camp includes:

- Ice breakers
- Focus group discussions
- Creative group activities
- Individual video or written journals
- Individual design activities
- Games
- Watching MCU films

All participants are housed in separate bedrooms surrounding a shared common area, lounge, study, and kitchen. All food for the camp is provided.

All scheduled activities of the camp will be audio or video recorded.

Who can take part in the research camp?

This study is seeking eight (8) volunteers aged 18-24 years' old who consider themselves fans and who have viewed at least twenty (20) of the MCU films.

Who am I and why am I doing this?

My name is Peter Walker and I am a student at Massey University undertaking a Master of Arts in Sociology. This research camp is in partial fulfillment of this degree. I am supervised by Dr Vicky Walters and Dr Trudie Cain from the School of People, Environment and Planning at Massey University.

What's in it for you?

We will offer you a token of our appreciation (koha) upon completion of the MCU Camp. However, the greatest benefit of participation is likely the act of being involved in camp and activities on a subject of which you are passionate about. And how cool would it be to say you went on an MCU Research Camp this summer.

If you take part what are your rights?

You are under no obligation to accept an invitation to take part. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- decline to answer any particular question or participate in any particular activity;
- withdraw from the study at any time (up to 48 hours before the MCU Camp);
- ask any questions about the study at any time;
- provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher;
- be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded.

So what will I do with the research data?

The data from the camp activities will be transcribed and analysed to identify themes relating to gender in the MCU and the audience.

The data will only be identifiable by the researcher and stored securely before pseudonyms are used for participants. The results will be complied and submitted as part of a Master's thesis and submitted for examination.

Following the completion of the study the transcriptions and any other raw data will be discarded and a summary of the results will be made available to you. During and after this study there will be no way to identify you from the data received.

So what are the risks of being involved?

You may feel concerned about being identified as part of this study. While there will be other participants involved everyone will sign a consent form making clear the understanding they have an obligation to respect the privacy of the other members of the group by not disclosing any personal information that they share during our camp. All the information you provide and the names of all people in the study will be kept confidential by the researcher. There are limits on confidentiality as there are no formal sanctions on other group participants from disclosing your involvement, identity or what you say to others in the camp. There are risks in taking part in group research and taking part assumes that you are willing to assume those risks.

Sounds cool but what if you have questions?

If you have any concerns or would like further information, please contact Peter Walker via the contact details below.

Project Contacts

Peter Walker
[redacted]

Dr Vicky Walters
v.walters@massey.ac.nz
+64 (09) 414 0800 ext. 43696

Dr Trudie Cain
t.cain@massey.ac.nz
+64 (09) 414 0800 ext. 43903

This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named above are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research.

If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you wish to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact Prof Craig Johnson, Director, Research Ethics, telephone 06 356 9099 x 85271, email humanethics@massey.ac.nz

Appendix 3: Camp Information Sheet

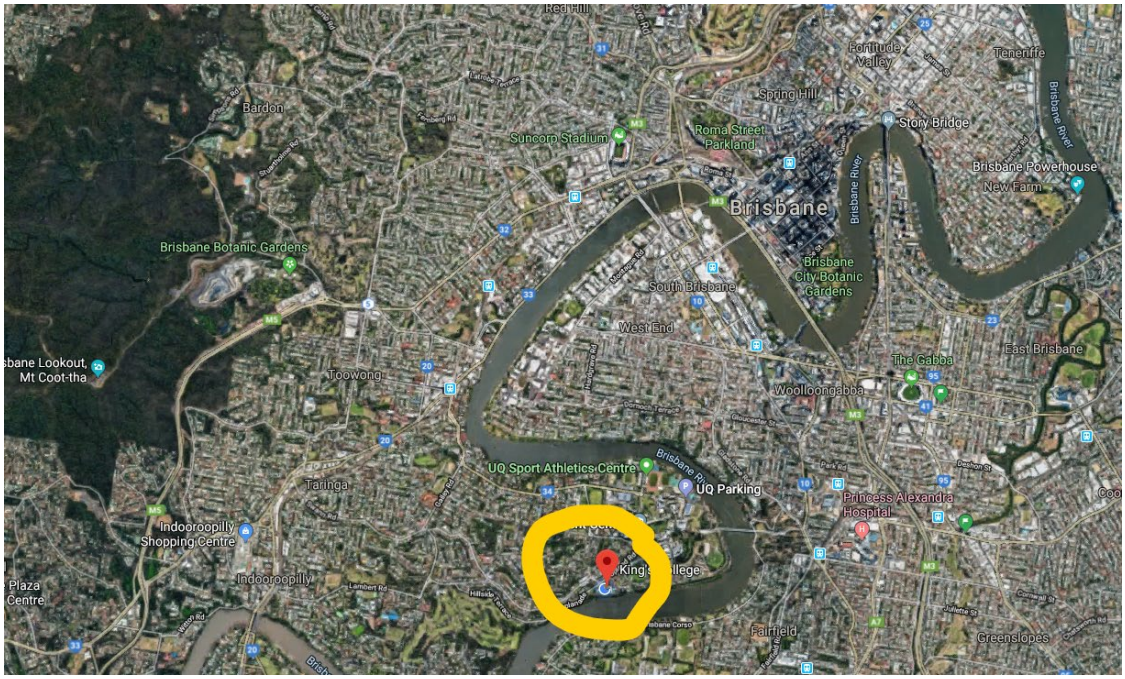
MASSEY UNIVERSITY
TE KUNENGA KI PŪREHUROA
UNIVERSITY OF NEW ZEALAND

Gender and the MCU: A Research Camp

GENERAL CAMP INFORMATION SHEET

Where is the camp being held?

The camp is being held at King's College, 72 Upland Road, St Lucia, Brisbane.



Dates and times?

Check in for the camp is between 4pm and 5pm on Friday 22nd November.

The camp is scheduled to finish just after lunch on Sunday 24th November.

Where do I go on arrival?

When you arrive at King's you have the option of going to reception or directly to Camp HQ.

Camp HQ is located near the front of King's College on the upper floor of the Wensley Building (see the map below). The MCU Research Camp poster and signage will help you find the way.

Parking is available in the visitor car park at the front of King's College – the access code (if the boom gate is down) is 3004

What do I need to bring to camp?

There isn't much you need to bring to camp, but here are some ideas:

- Personal items (clothes, toiletries etc)
- Personal snackage
- Your phone or device
- Water bottle
- Anything MCU related that you want to bring along

Most importantly – bring your love of the Marvel Cinematic Universe!

At this stage it's intended that phones or other personal device will be needed to record video diary entries.

What about food?

MCU themed or linked breakfast, lunch, dinner, and morning/afternoon teas will be provided but you might like to bring along any personal or particular snacks if you have favourites.

If you have not already indicated any particular dietary requirements, please let me know.

Please note that with our meal on the second night a few MCU related alcoholic beverages will be provided. You are welcome to bring along some of your own beverages if you have a particular preference.

What are the facilities like?

Camp HQ is a modern accommodation space with individual bedrooms (pictured), a central common space, bathrooms, and laundries. We will also have access to the rest of the College facilities, including air conditioned common rooms, a gym, and a swimming pool.

Most importantly, guest wifi will be available.

Is there a cost for the camp?

There is no cost for the MCU Research Camp.

So what's the plan for the weekend?

The following schedule is the general outline for the weekend. The times may be subject to change dependant (mostly) on how much we all talk! Some activities directly address gender while others do so in an indirect way. I've tried to ensure that the activities all have aspects that make them fun!

Day One - Friday	
4pm	Arrival/Checking in/Settling in
5pm	Introduction Briefing/Paperwork/Ice Breaker
6pm	Dinner
7pm	MCU Movie – group choice
8pm	
9pm	

10pm	MCU Mafia (if the group wants to stay up)
Day Two - Saturday	
8am	Breakfast
9am	Sculptor
10am	Group Discussion – Name on of your favourite…
11am	Morning tea break
11:30am	Team rosters
12:30pm	Lunch
1:30pm	Group Discussion – Superpowers/Leadership
3pm	Afternoon Tea/Break
3.30pm	Character personality profile
4:30pm	Group discussion – Ideology/Family/Relationships
6pm	Dinner
7pm	Thor's Hammer
8pm	MCU Movie – group choice
9pm	
10pm	
Day Three - Sunday	
8am	Breakfast
9:00am	MCU Poster activity
10:00am	Group Discussion – Battles and Costumes
11am	Morning tea
11:30am	Group Discussion – Gender and the MCU
12:30pm	Lunch – during discussion
	Final discussion/wrap up
	Departure

Appendix 4: Participant Consent Form

School of People, Environment and Planning
Level 3
Social Science Tower
Manawatu Campus
Palmerston North
New Zealand

Gender and the MCU: A Research Camp

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

I have read and I understand the Information Sheet attached as Appendix I. I have had the details of the study explained to me, my questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time. I have been given sufficient time to consider whether to participate in this study and I understand participation is voluntary.

1. I understand that I have an obligation to respect the privacy of the other members of the group by not disclosing any personal information that they share during our discussion.
2. I understand that all the information I provide will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law, and the names of all people in the study will be kept confidential by the researcher.

Note: There are limits on confidentiality as there are no formal sanctions on other group participants from disclosing your involvement, identity or what you say to others in the focus group. There are risks in taking part in focus group research and taking part assumes that you are willing to assume those risks.

3. I agree to participate in the research camp under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet attached as Appendix I.

Declaration by Participant:

I _____ hereby consent to take part in this study.

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Appendix 5: Research Camp Plan

Day One - Friday		Activity Brief
4pm	Arrival/Checking in/Settling in	
5pm	Introduction Briefing/Paperwork/Ice Breaker	Ice breaker – who am I? game
6pm	Dinner	Favourite MCU Quote – explain what it means
7pm 8pm 9pm	MCU Movie – group choice	Group to determine first movie to watch. Comparison to second night movie choice to be made. Does the group change preference after day's events?
10pm	MCU Mafia (if the group wants to stay up)	MCU Assassins – if enough of the group are interested. Variation of the camp fire game assassins.
Day Two - Saturday		
8am	Breakfast	
9am	Sculptor	have the group spilt into two (or not) and have one sculptor position the other participants into a moment from the films.
10am	Group Discussion – Name on of your favourite…	Identify and discuss your favourite – MCU character, couple, moment, power, movie, pose, costume, etc. A quick and fun activity to allow the group to get to know each other a little more, identifies aspects of importance to participants.
11am	Morning tea break	
11:30am	Team rosters	Design the ideal Avengers or other team roster in groups then present/discuss
12:30pm	Lunch	
1:30pm	Group Discussion – Superpowers/Leadership	
3pm	Afternoon Tea/Break	
3.30pm	Character personality profile	
4:30pm	Group discussion – Ideology/Family/Relationships	
6pm	Dinner	
7pm	Thor's Hammer	Draw a character name out of a hat and decide whether or not they can (or should be able to) lift Thor's hammer (are they worthy). Convince the group! Activity should demonstrate participant's opinions and beliefs about characters, what they believe is important and valuable.

		Activity replicates a social scene from Avenger's: Age of Ultron
8pm	MCU Movie – group choice	
Day Three - Sunday		
8am	Breakfast	
9:00am	MCU Poster activity	Review and discussion of gender seen in the MCU movie posters on the camp wall
10:00am	Group Discussion – Battles and Costumes	
11am	Morning tea	
11:30am	Group Discussion – Gender and the MCU	
12:30pm	Lunch – during discussion	
	Final discussion/wrap up	
	Departure	

How is audience understanding of gender **perceived** and **influenced** through its representation in the Marvel Cinematic Universe?					
Gender Process	Aspects to explore	Topics	MCU Relevant Content	Gender concepts	Activities
Gendering practices/structures (the production of gender divisions through ordinary practices - produced by labour, power, family, the state, allowed behaviours and locations in physical space)	Leadership	• Leadership of the teams • Who takes significant leadership. Why. • Who controls the resources.	• Leadership of Avengers, Masters of Mystic Arts, Government organisations, SHIELD, Hydra etc • Significant resources – Stark Industries, Shield, Hydra • Female led Wakandan security forces	Gender roles, traditional masculine control, subordination	Thor's Hammer Group Discussion – Name your favourite MCU Assassins Sculptor
	Superpowers	• Different type of powers and usefulness • Who has the most power and control • Origin of superpowers • Tools/weapons – relevance/importance of these items	• Leadership of Avengers, Masters of Mystic Arts, Government organisations, SHIELD, Hydra etc • Significant resources – Stark Industries, Shield, Hydra • Thors hammer – lifting if worthy • Captain Marvel overcoming Yon Rog	Power and control, incl over ones own body, Male physical perfection	Thor's Hammer Group Discussion – Name your favourite MCU Assassins Sculptor
	Family	• Exploration of the different family arrangements • Traditional vs non-traditional family concepts	• Hawkeye and his wife/kids at home • No female superhero with children • Ant-Man and daughter • Thanos and his 'children'	Domestication, Gender roles	Thor's Hammer Group Discussion – Name your favourite MCU Assassins Sculptor
Gendering cultures (The creation of symbols and images that create and maintain gender divisions - language, ideology, dress and the media, that explain, express and	Dress/Costumes/Appearance	• Importance of costumes • Practicality vs aesthetics • Ability to change appearance	• Captain Marvel fully covered • Male heroes often shirtless/emphasising musculature • Black Widow's suit • Wakandan dress/technology • Skrulls in captain Marvel	Objectification, Sexualisation,	Thor's Hammer Group Discussion – Name your favourite MCU Assassins Sculptor

reinforce, or sometimes oppose, gender divisions)	Ideology	• Who has the big ideas • Most meaningful character arcs • Most relatable character arcs • Ideology that differs from the real world	• Character arcs of Ironman and Captain America • Thanos (utilitarianism) vs Avengers (deontology) • Wakandan arc • Wakandan relationship with technology, role of women in security and development, royal ascendance	Objectification, Power and control, Sexualisation, Toxic masculinity, masculine sacrifice	Thor's Hammer Group Discussion – Name your favourite MCU Assassins Sculptor
Gendering interactions (between people that involve any form of dominance or submission)	Application of powers/Battles	• How important is the power of these characters in determining their usefulness? • Who presents as being on control • Displays of strength and weakness	• Limited involvement of most powerful but female characters in Endgame • Female team up in Endgame • Female fight scene in Infinity War	Power and control, gender roles	Thor's Hammer Group Discussion – Name your favourite MCU Assassins Sculptor
	Relationships	• Relationships that work and those that don't •	• Hulk and Black Widow • Vision and Scarlet Witch • Tony and Pepper • Hope and Ant-Man • Hawkeye and ?? • Captain America and ??	Power and control, gender roles	Thor's Hammer Group Discussion – Name your favourite MCU Assassins Sculptor
Internal gender constructions (The mental work of individuals as they consciously construct their own gender identities)					MCU Shield Individual reflections Video diary entries

Appendix 7: Personality Profile Recording Sheet

Your Personality Profile

Directions: In *each* of the following rows of *four words across*, circle the *one* word that most often applies to you. Continue through all forty lines; be sure each number is marked.

Strengths				
1	Adventurous	Adaptable	Animated	Analytical
2	Persistent	Playful	Persuasive	Peaceful
3	Submissive	Self-sacrificing	Sociable	Strong-willed
4	Considerate	Controlled	Competitive	Convincing
5	Refreshing	Respectful	Reserved	Resourceful
6	Satisfied	Sensitive	Self-reliant	Spirited
7	Planner	Patient	Positive	Promoter
8	Sure	Spontaneous	Scheduled	Shy
9	Orderly	Obliging	Outspoken	Optimistic
10	Friendly	Faithful	Funny	Forceful
11	Daring	Delightful	Diplomatic	Detailed
12	Cheerful	Consistent	Cultured	Confident
13	Idealistic	Independent	Inoffensive	Inspiring
14	Demonstrative	Decisive	Dry Humour	Deep
15	Mediator	Musical	Mover	Mixes easily
16	Thoughtful	Tenacious	Talker	Tolerant
17	Listener	Loyal	Leader	Lively
18	Contented	Chief	Chart maker	Cute
19	Perfectionist	Pleasant	Productive	Popular
20	Bouncy	Bold	Behaved	Balanced

Weaknesses				
21	Blank	Bashful	Brassy	Bossy
22	Undisciplined	Unsympathetic	Unenthusiastic	Unforgiving
23	Reticent	Resentful	Resistant	Repetitious
24	Fussy	Fearful	Forgetful	Frank
25	Impatient	Insecure	Indecisive	Interrupts
26	Unpopular	Uninvolved	Unpredictable	Unaffectionate
27	Headstrong	Haphazard	Hard to please	Hesitant
28	Plain	Pessimistic	Proud	Permissive
29	Angered easily	Aimless	Argumentative	Alienated
30	Naive	Negative attitude	Nervy	Nonchalant
31	Worrier	Withdrawn	Workaholic	Wants credit
32	Too sensitive	Tactless	Timid	Talkative
33	Doubtful	Disorganised	Domineering	Depressed
34	Inconsistent	Introvert	Intolerant	Indifferent
35	Messy	Moody	Mumbles	Manipulative
36	Slow	Stubborn	Show-off	Sceptical
37	Loner	Lord over others	Lazy	Loud
38	Sluggish	Suspicious	Short-tempered	Scatterbrained
39	Revengeful	Restless	Reluctant	Rash
40	Compromising	Critical	Crafty	Changeable

Appendix 8: Personality Profile Scoring Sheet

MCU Personality Scoring Sheet

Now transfer all your words to the corresponding words on the Personality Scoring Sheet and add up your totals. For example, if you checked Animated on the profile, check it on the scoring sheet.

(Note: The words are in a different order on the profile and the scoring sheet.)

Strengths				
	Popular Sanguine	**Powerful Choleric**	**Perfect Melancholy**	**Peaceful Phlegmatic**
1	Animated	Adventurous	Analytical	Adaptable
2	Playful	Persuasive	Persistent	Peaceful
3	Sociable	Self-Strong-willed	Self-sacrificing	Submissive
4	Convincing	Competitive	Considerate	Controlled
5	Refreshing	Resourceful	Respectful	Reserved
6	Spirited	Self-reliant	Sensitive	Satisfied
7	Promoter	Positive	Planner	Patient
8	Spontaneous	Sure	Scheduled	Shy
9	Optimistic	Outspoken	Orderly	Obliging
10	Funny	Forceful	Faithful	Friendly
11	Delightful	Daring	Detailed	Diplomatic
12	Cheerful	Confident	Cultured	Consistent
13	Inspiring	Independent	Idealistic	Inoffensive
14	Demonstrative	Decisive	Deep	Dry Humor
15	Mixes easily	Mover	Musical	Mediator
16	Talker	Tenacious	Thoughtful	Tolerant
17	Lively	Leader	Loyal	Listener
18	Cute	Chief	Chartmaker	Contented
19	Popular	Productive	Perfectionist	Pleasant
20	Bouncy	Bold	Behaved	Balanced
Total				

Weaknesses				
	Popular Sanguine	**Powerful Choleric**	**Perfect Melancholy**	**Peaceful Phlegmatic**
21	Brassy	Bossy	Bashful	Blank
22	Undisciplined	Unsympathetic	Unforgiving	Unenthusiastic
23	Repetitious	Resistant	Resentful	Reticent
24	Forgetful	Frank	Fussy	Fearful
25	Interrupts	Impatient	Insecure	Indecisive
26	Unpredictable	Unaffectionate	Unpopular	Uninvolved
27	Haphazard	Headstrong	Hard to Please	Hesitant
28	Permissive	Proud	Pessimistic	Plain
29	Angered easily	Argumentative	Alienated	Aimless
30	Naive	Nervy	Negative Attitude	Nonchalant
31	Wants credit	Workaholic	Withdrawn	Worrier
32	Talkative	Tactless	Too sensitive	Timid
33	Disorganized	Domineering	Depressed	Doubtful
34	Inconsistent	Intolerant	Introvert	Indifferent
35	Messy	Manipulative	Moody	Mumbles
36	Show-off	Stubborn	Skeptical	Slow
37	Loud	Lord over others	Loner	Lazy
38	Scatterbrained	Short-tempered	Suspicious	Sluggish
39	Restless	Rash	Revengeful	Reluctant
40	Changeable	Crafty	Critical	Compromising
Total				
Combined Total				

Appendix 9: The Four Personalities Handouts

THE FOUR PERSONALITIES

SANGUINE	CHOLERIC
KEYWORD: Popular BEST AT: Making initial contact with people Creating enthusiasm and excitement Encouraging and uplifting others Insuring the group has fun PRESENTS AS: Outgoing and engaging MAJOR NEEDS: Fun and adventure	KEYWORD: Powerful BEST AT: Motivating people to action Giving quick and clear instruction Getting it done Leading PRESENTS AS: Authoritative and convincing MAJOR NEEDS: Action and excitement
PHLEGMATIC	**MELANCHOLY**
KEYWORD: Peaceful BEST AT: Staying calm and functional Not over reacting to a negative situation Effective listener Making sure the group is relaxed and comfortable PRESENTS AS: Believable MAJOR NEEDS: Rest and quiet time	KEYWORD: Perfect BEST AT: Planning and explaining the details Doing it right Sensitive to the needs of others Good with numbers, charts, graphs, etc. PRESENTS AS: Accurate and sincere MAJOR NEEDS: Order and understanding

PERSONALITY STRENGTHS & WEAKNESSES

POPULAR SANGUINE

STRENGTHS	
HOME	Appealing personality Talkative, storyteller Life of the party Good sense of humor Memory for color Physically holds on to listener Emotional and demonstrative Enthusiastic and expressive Cheerful and bubbling over Curious Good on stage Lives in the present Changeable disposition Makes friends easily Loves people Thrives on compliments Seems exciting Envied by others Doesn't hold grudges Prevents dull moments Likes spontaneous activities
WORK	Volunteers for jobs Thinks up new activities Looks great on the surface Creative and colorful Has energy and enthusiasm Starts in a flashy way Inspires others to join Charms others to work

WEAKNESSES	
HOME	Compulsive talker Exaggerates and elaborates Dwells on trivia Can't remember names Scares others off Too happy for some Has restless energy Egotistical Naive, gets taken in Has loud voice and laugh Controlled by circumstances Seems phony to some Hates to be alone Needs to be center stage Wants to be popular Looks for credit Dominates conversations Interrupts and doesn't listen Answers for others Forgetful
WORK	Would rather talk Forgets obligations Doesn't follow through Confidence fades fast Undisciplined Priorities out of order Decides by feelings Easily distracted Wastes time talking

POWERFUL CHOLERIC

STRENGHTS	
HOME	Born leader Dynamic and active Compulsive need for change Must correct wrongs Strong-willed and decisive Not easily discouraged Independent and self-sufficient Exudes confidence Has little need for friends Will work for group activity Will lead and organize Is usually right
WORK	Goal-oriented Sees the whole picture Organizes well Seeks practical solutions Moves quickly to action Delegates work Insists on production Makes the goal Stimulates activity Thrives on opposition

WEAKNESSES	
HOME	Bossy Impatient Quick-tempered Can't relax Too impetuous Enjoys controversy & arguments Won't give up when losing Comes on too strong Inflexible Is not complimentary Dislikes tears and emotions Is unsympathetic Tends to use people Dominates others Decides for others Knows everything Can do everything better Is too independent Possessive of friends and mate Can't say, "I'm sorry" May be right but unpopular
WORK	Little tolerance for mistakes Doesn't analyze details Bored by trivia May make rash decisions May be rude or tactless Manipulates people Demanding of others End justifies the means Work may become his god Demands loyalty in the ranks.

PEACEFUL PHLEGMATIC

STRENGTHS	
HOME	Low-key personality Easygoing and relaxed Calm, cool, and collected Patient, well-balanced Consistent life Quiet, but witty Sympathetic and kind Keeps emotions hidden Happily reconciled to life All-purpose person Easy to get along with Pleasant and enjoyable Inoffensive Good listener Dry sense of humor Enjoys watching people Has many friends Has compassion and concern Unenthusiastic
WORK	Competent and steady Peaceful and agreeable Has administrative ability Mediates problems Avoids conflicts Good under pressure Finds the easy way

WEAKNESSES	
HOME	Fearful and worried Indecisive Avoids responsibility Quiet will of iron Too shy and reticent Too compromising Self-righteous Dampens enthusiasm Stays uninvolved Is not exciting Indifferent to plans Judges others Sarcastic and teasing Resists change
WORK	Not goal-oriented Lacks self-motivation Hard to get moving Resents being pushed Lazy and careless Would rather watch

PERFECT MELANCHOLY

STRENGTHS	
HOME	Deep and thoughtful Analytical Serious and purposeful Genius-prone Talented and creative Artistic or musical Philosophical and poetic Appreciative of beauty Sensitive to others Self-sacrificing Conscientious Idealistic Makes friends cautiously Content to stay in background Avoids causing attention Faithful and devoted Will listen to complaints Can solve other's problems Deep concern for other people Moved to tears with compassion
WORK	Schedule-oriented Perfectionist, high standards Detail-conscious Persistent and thorough Orderly and organized Neat and tidy Economical Sees the problems Finds creative solutions Needs to finish what he starts Likes charts, graphs, figures, lists

WEAKNESSES	
HOME	Remembers the negatives Moody and depressed Off in another world Low self-image Has selective hearing Self-centered Too introspective Guilt feelings Persecution complex Tends to hypochondria Lives through others Insecure socially Withdrawn and remote Critical of others Holds back affection Dislikes those in opposition Suspicious of people Antagonistic and vengeful Full of contradictions
WORK	Not people-oriented Depressed over imperfections Chooses difficult work Hesitant to start projects Spends too much time planning Prefers analysis to work Self-deprecating Hard to please Standards often too high Deep need for approval.