Rethinking female representation in superhero(ine) media through audiences' digital engagement

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in
Media Studies

At Massey University, Manawatū,
New Zealand.

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2024

Abstract

In recent years, debates about gender and feminism have become more easily accessible due to digital platforms such as social media. These debates often intertwine with films and television series that attempt to present characters and stories in consonance with claims for better representation. Superhero(ine) live action films and television are one example of this, with the representation of gender in this media becoming a topic of online discussion. But how are audiences engaging with these representations and this online discussion? In this study I undertook qualitative research with two groups of fans of the superhero genre from Brazil and New Zealand, using a combination of methods: digital diaries, interviews, and focus groups. Through this research, I sought to understand more about their experiences with such texts, and how they interpret them.

I argue that the participants' engagement with superhero(ine) media and related online discussion leads to questioning, critiquing, and learning about gender representation and feminism. This starts with superhero(ine) media, but exceeds it, reaching participants' own life experiences. In this sense, the online culture surrounding superhero(ine) media acts as a form of digital feminism, providing a platform for consciousness-raising. This digital feminism has a transnational dimension, whilst also being inflected slightly differently by the national contexts in which the participants are situated, including their experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Simultaneously, any consciousness-raising comes with the caveat that the participants cannot completely escape the neoliberal logics and postfeminist sensibility underpinning the production and promotion of superhero(ine) media.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisors Dr Ian Huffer, Dr Kyra Clarke, and Dr Gwyn Easterbrook-Smith for all their guidance and encouragement. I would like to thank them and all the Massey University team for their support. There were many challenges I had to overcome as an International Student, and I wouldn't have done it without them.

To all participants who accepted the challenge of participating in this research, who offered their time and, most importantly, shared their thoughts and opinions that guided these discussions, I am deeply indebted to you. We had a great time talking about superhero(ine)s and debating why they still bring so much joy to you all.

To my parents, who have supported despite the distance between Brazil and New Zealand, I am deeply grateful. They have offered me words of encouragement and always believed in me.

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Please note: To maintain participants' anonymity, some information has been modified.

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Introduction

When I first began to think about undertaking this research, my aims seemed simple and straightforward: I was curious about how people were learning, questioning, or even criticising issues of gender through superhero movies. This was partially because I learned about gender and feminism through my own online engagement with pop culture. Around that time, movies like *Wonder Woman* (Jenkins, 2017) and *Captain Marvel* (Boden & Fleck, 2019) had been released, prompting numerous discussions on social media, in which these movies were either praised or criticised for several reasons, particularly for how they portrayed female characters. Instead of being interested in presenting my own perception of those characters and stories, I was more intrigued by what others were thinking about them. I was intrigued by the ways in which viewers were engaging with those texts and with paratexts – particularly online – and how such engagement could lead to further discussions and reflections about gender and feminism. With the goal of investigating these aspects in more depth, I originally outlined a research project that included participants from both Brazil and New Zealand. Undertaking a qualitative approach, I planned to complete a comparative study between participants from both countries, contributing to research about gender studies, media, digital activism, and feminism, through a transnational perspective.

Although much of the study has followed its original goal, there were some changes along the way. Some of these changes resulted from what participants chose to share with me. The questions and debates I address in the following chapters often emerged from data and are responsive to what participants shared in interviews. In this sense, I undertook a thematic analysis in this thesis (to which I will return in the Methodology chapter). More specifically, this approach led to a reflexive thematic analysis, in which the themes are created "at the intersection of data, analytic process and subjectivity" (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 594).

Some of the changes are consequences of the moment when this research was undertaken, which was during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, this research was undertaken when Brazil's socio-political scenario was unstable because of the country's president at the time, Jair Bolsonaro. It created a contrasting scenario with the context in New Zealand at the time, mainly because the pandemic affected people from these countries in widely different ways.

These elements have affected both how this study was conducted, and some of its findings, and this thesis is the result. Before delving into the debates, more context is necessary to understand what this thesis encompasses and what underpins it.

Research Scope

Superhero stories have contributed to discussions surrounding gender and representation for a long time. However, with the development of digital technologies and social media, such debates have acquired more visibility. Feminism has arguably become more popular and accessible. Social movements have acquired more strength while circulating online. There have been shifts regarding diversity and representation in various spheres, including in pop culture. These shifts are inscribed onto more complex dynamics, which often leads to contradictory reception and backlash.

Within this landscape, this study is set at the intersection between perceiving and critiquing representation of female characters in superhero(ine) films and television, and audiences' engagement with such debates. Such characters, films and television shows are constructed and circulate within specific logics of neoliberalism and postfeminism.

Neoliberalism is characterised as "a set of social, cultural, and political-economic forces that puts competition at the center of social life" (Wilson, 2017, p. 2). It is a mode of governance. It is a political and economic rationality characterised by an economic system

that facilitates deregulation, privatisation, and corporate profits (Gill & Scharff, 2011; Rottenberg, 2014). According to the neoliberal rationality, its focus is on everything that relates to market rationality, such as competition, entrepreneurialism, and individualism (Wilson, 2017). In this sense, as will be discussed, blockbuster superhero films and television shows fall within such logics of production and circulation. More importantly, this means that the ideas and images these texts carry also work within such rationality.

Postfeminism has a range of different meanings (Gill & Scharff, 2011; Genz & Brabon, 2018; Riley, 2023), but the way it is used is commonly associated with the works of Rosalind Gill (2007) and Angela McRobbie (2009) (Riley, 2023). McRobbie (2008) considers postfeminism a double entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas, whilst Gill writes about the postfeminist sensibility, a set of ideas that characterise women's representation in the media (Gill, 2007b; Riley, 2023). Broadly speaking, postfeminism is associated with the "discursive production of contemporary women's subjectivity through popular culture" (Henderson & Taylor, 2020, p. 1), although it was originally more associated with the Anglo-American context (Henderson & Taylor, 2020). In this thesis, I work with the idea of postfeminist sensibility for addressing the contradictory responses to representation in superhero(ine) media.

Superhero(ine) texts circulate across the globe as a form of mainstream media, consumed by people from various locations. In this sense, these global texts, and paratexts that surround them, introduce or reinforce specific values and ideas about gender and feminism. Such ideas are bound to postfeminism, neoliberalism and woke culture. In this research, I address how participants interpret some of these ideas and how they articulate responses to them. In particular, I look at how such responses are based on the texts they consume. This research looks at responses and reflections across borders, finding similarities in the ways participants engage with and respond to global texts. In this sense, it takes into

account transnational feminism, as it particularly considers the global flow of these texts, as they reach women and girls whose local contexts and particular experiences affect their readings of the texts.

This is also a study about digital feminisms, and how participants negotiate such ideas and values through their online experiences. It has been shown that digital participation plays an important role in the formation of women's identities, via their production and consumption of content (Dobson, 2015). To some extent this is a study about online feminist consciousness-raising, whether this happens directly or indirectly.

The elements above exemplify the novelty of this research, for it addresses such discussions during a specific time, contributing to new insights about reception, digital engagement, and gender representation in a cross-cultural study.

This study is guided by the following questions:

1. How does social media mediate female audiences' perception of women's representation in superhero(ine)[1] media?
2. How might the lives of the participants be shaped through this intersection of superhero(ine) media and digital participation?

Starting with these questions, I seek to understand, for example, what participants think when they see a specific meme which refers to gender. What about other images posted on social media? What about discussions with other people? I also interrogate what participants think about the ways characters are portrayed in superhero blockbuster films and in television shows. Do they think those narratives are likely to build discussions about feminism and

[1] Most films and television shows are described as 'superhero' media, having male protagonists. This research considers female characters from a diverse range of films and television shows, including ones featuring male protagonists, as well as those featuring female protagonists. In this sense, I chose to use 'superhero(ine)' here to emphasise this focus on female characters in the wider genre and in films where they are the protagonists. However, notably, in this thesis the term 'superhero' is also used to refer to the genre in a wider sense and the term 'superheroine' is used to refer to media in which women are the protagonists.

gender? Beyond that, do these stories or engagement have some kind of effect on participants' lives?

To address these and other questions, I have chosen a qualitative approach combining digital diaries, focus groups and interviews with participants from both Brazil and New Zealand. The research is also limited to characters, films and television shows from Marvel and DC, as their mainstream blockbuster media allows for a range of compelling discussions. Before delving into these discussions, in the following pages I briefly highlight some of the context behind this research.

Superheroes, Diversity and Woke Culture

Although this thesis is not concerned with comics or comic book audiences, it is important to acknowledge where the shifts in representation in superhero media started.[2] Changes in superhero comics began around the beginning of the 2010s (Curtis & Cardo, 2018; Brown, 2021) with the introduction of new and more diverse characters and a range of approaches highlighting a "push" for diversity (Curtis, 2020). This shift included the introduction of characters of different ethnicities or races, more space for women and for LGBTQIA+ characters, among others, and a push to not only to "show" these characters, but also to give them some sort of narrative prominence. Examples include the introduction of a new Spider-Man (Miles Morales, a Black-Hispanic man) and of Miss Marvel (Kamala Khan, who is Muslin Pakistani-American). During this time, there were also adaptations where women assume the roles of traditionally male superheroes, such as the introduction of a female Thor. Later they reached other forms of media, including blockbuster movies.

[2] Whilst comics are the genesis of these superheroines, it was decided with my supervision team to focus on audiences' engagement with their representation in films and television given the bounds of a PhD thesis.

When considering the reasons behind such shifts, the primary one seems to be capitalism: changing stories and characters to communicate with (new) audiences, with the goal of making profit.[3] To be able to sell these stories (whether as comics, movies or any other form of media), it is necessary to adapt to whatever audiences want to see, as well as to the wider context in which these products are circulating: a context marked by social movements acquiring more visibility and power because of social media. Roberts (2020) refers, for example, to the way in which Disney "works to avoid appearing out of touch" (p. 14), in the sense that the studio is constantly adjusting its own image and position to remain an important cultural force that "mirrors the current times" (p. 14). In other words, the studio is always trying to retain its relevance. This approach extends beyond Disney to other companies, forming part of a wider wave of wokeism or woke culture, which is a commitment to increasing diversity and inclusion and showing awareness and support for social causes (Roberts, 2020).

The term woke originated in Black activism, starting in 2011 (Madrid Gil, 2023), and, by 2017, becoming widely used in the USA and worldwide (Rhodes, 2022). Its significance, however, has changed. Now it not only encompasses antiracism, but it also encompasses feminist, liberal, and anti-capitalist discourses (Sobande et al., 2022). In the mid-2010s, the term woke started being used to refer to corporations "who publicly supported socially progressive causes" (Rhodes, 2022, p. 8). In a context of woke capitalism, corporations and industries are supposedly committed to increasing diversity and inclusion, showing that they are aware of, and support, social causes (Roberts, 2020).

[3] In this thesis, the term diversity often refers to cultural diversity, which is present in many recent films. Such diversity includes casting actors from various ethnicities or countries to demonstrate that film studios have "commitment to social equality and to profit from larger audiences which are increasingly culturally diverse" (Artz, 2022 p.7). Even so, it is worth noting that studios often appropriate from cultural diversity in exchange for profit (Artz, 2022).

The texts participants engage with are consequently inserted into contexts of "pushing" diversity and of wokeism. Women are not only protagonists of some blockbusters, but there is more prominence of women in general, and of female characters of different ethnicities or races. Understanding this wider context of circulation and consumption not only allows for better understanding of participants' engagement, but also contributes to understanding the overall context behind this research. I specifically discuss diversity shifts in more detail in Chapter Five, although this context encompasses all discussions in the study.

The Context of Digital Feminism

I approach digital feminism in more detail in the Literature Review, and in Chapter One, commenting on female content creators. I also approach the increasing visibility that feminism has acquired online, with emphasis on so-called popular feminism (Banet-Weider, 2018). For this Introduction, it is important to acknowledge that social media has made feminism more accessible to people globally. As Mendes et. al. (2018) suggest, research since 2014 illustrates how feminists are using digital technologies as well as social media "to dialogue, network and organize against contemporary sexism, misogyny and rape culture" (p. 238). In this sense, the connection between feminism and digital platforms is clear.

However, the issue is that feminism, as well as discussions of gender in general, are inserted into what Brown (2021) calls a "volatile cultural environment" (p. 3), marked by split ideological and political points of view. Although Brown refers to the context of North America, marked by a clear division between progressive and conservative groups, such political division has been seen in various other countries in past years, with an ascension of conservative groups and values, as is the case in Brazil. Divided ideologies lead, among other things, to the increase of misogynistic discourses online, which contrasts with using social media to promote feminism and gender equality in a more positive way.

Examples of these ideological tensions include the #MeToo movement and Gamergate. #MeToo is a hashtag for activism that popular on Twitter[4] in 2017. It started when actress Alyssa Milano used it to talk about the allegations of sexual assault by Harvey Weinstein, a Hollywood producer. Following the actress using the hashtag, others were encouraged to talk about sexual violence, with the hashtag being used 12 million times in 24 hours (Mendes et. al, 2018). Gamergate was also a 2017 movement on Twitter. At the time, game designer Zoë Quinn was accused by her ex-boyfriend of having sex with a game journalist in exchange for a positive review of her game. Although the accusation was later proven to be false, "gamers" on Twitter harassed Quinn to the extent that she feared for her safety. Gamergate was, then, a movement of misogyny and of online harassment of female game developers and their supporters (Cote, 2020).

During this period, *Wonder Woman* (2017) and *Captain Marvel* (2019) were released. *Captain Marvel* received "hostile attention" (Curtis, 2020). *Wonder Woman* (2017) was released a decade after studios started investing in franchises based on comic books and in cinematic world building, with the prior decade dominated by male heroes (Donoghue, 2022). *Wonder Woman* was released at a time when "Hollywood studios were increasingly criticized for the lack of inclusive hiring practices" (Donoghue, 2022, p. 485). The film introduced a famous superheroine as a solo protagonist, and was directed by a female director, Patty Jenkins. Its time of production intersects with a period of digital feminism and demands for inclusion, misogynistic backlash against such developments, and a backdrop of woke capitalism.

[4] Since July 2023, Twitter has been known as "X" https://www.bbc.com/news/business-66284304.

Brazil and New Zealand

I undertook this research when Brazil's President was Jair Bolsonaro and New Zealand's Prime Minister was Jacinda Ardern. Each country was living a different "political moment", which has influenced, among other things, socio-political ideologies, and even how each country dealt with the COVID-19 pandemic. The following overview of these socio-political scenarios contextualises the environment of this study's participants.

The recent political context of Brazil during the 2010s and the beginning of the 2020s is problematic. With the three presidents who governed before Bolsonaro, the Brazilian population experienced a slight improvement in terms of life quality. However, what followed was an economic recession, during which many lost their power of consumption. This time was marked by an increase in conservatism and misogynistic discourses. It is within this political and social context that Bolsonaro appeared. Although his discourses were full of hatred, misogyny, and prejudice, he manipulated the nonconformity of the people, promising solutions to Brazil's problems (de Farias & Torres, 2021). Bolsonaro won the elections, becoming the President from 2019 to 2023. His mandate was marked by his polemic declarations involving Brazil's dictatorship, torture, LGBTQIA+ causes, racism, misogyny and attacks against Human Rights and social movements, among others (Miguel, Marx & Arndt, 2020; de Farias & Torres, 2021). It was also marked by the excessive use of fake news (Miguel et al., 2020) and by irresponsible management of the pandemic.

Brazil's digital feminist activism has confronted this conservative agenda for some time. Brazilian feminists, for example, work against the discourse of "ideologia de gênero" (gender ideology), a political-ideological agenda espousing that addressing topics such as sexuality and gender in schools and in other environments is a threat to children and to their (traditional) families (Miguel et al., 2020). This movement has gained increasing support in

Brazil. One specific example of digital feminist activism in Brazil happened when Bolsonaro was still running for president. The #EleNão movement started online, but it also took women to the streets to protest. #EleNão translates as #NotHim. Both online and offline, women from Brazil and from other countries spoke against Bolsonaro. Arguably the largest demonstration of women in Brazil's history, more than a hundred thousand people took to the streets to protest (Miguel et al., 2020).

As for the pandemic, Bolsonaro, among other things, spoke against the World Health Organization, refused to employ lockdowns as a means of controlling widespread infection, spread many fake news, and also dismissed two Health Ministers in less than one month (Cioccari et al, 2022). Bolsonaro declared lockdowns "the path to failure". Commenting on the number of deaths in Brazil, he asked, "So what? I'm sorry. What do you want me to do?" (Cioccari et al., 2022). The COVID-19 death toll in Brazil, up until August 2022, is reported as more than 680,000[5].

Although half of the population supported Bolsonaro, the other half was against him, with numbers increasing after the pandemic. Brazilians were trying to raise their voices in favour of a range of social causes, among other things. They were using social media to attempt to do so, trying to talk about gender equality, diversity, feminism, and other movements which were seemingly a threat to Brazil's conservative groups. In addition, as a consequence of the pandemic, some people saw online spaces as an opportunity to speak against these conservative groups, trying to raise consciousness and to educate people in general about themes such as feminism and equality, showing why they are necessary. Chapter One discusses the use of social media by online content creators to raise consciousness.

[5] Data provided by the Brazilian government through their official website about the pandemic. Available on: https://infoms.saude.gov.br/extensions/covid-19_html/covid-19_html.html

The New Zealand approach to the pandemic starkly contrasts that of Brazil and other countries. The way the pandemic was managed in New Zealand was considered a success (McGuire et al., 2020; Craig, 2021; Vowles, 2022). Crisis management included closing the country's borders to almost everyone who was not a citizen or resident, along with compulsory quarantine for those returning to the country. It also included lockdowns in cities and towns, including in Auckland. The government was also being advised by health professionals (Vowles, 2022). Updates were given daily to the population, along with other strategies for infection prevention. In this context, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's leadership was considered successful in a time of crisis (Craig, 2021).

Ardern was also characterised by her feminist values, in stark contrast with Bolsonaro's misogyny. Facing sexism during press interviews or during political meetings, Ardern continued to work towards actions that were positive for girls and women, such as the decriminalisation of abortion in New Zealand, as well as announcing that the government would provide free menstruation products in schools (Hampson, 2023).

Two things can be inferred from the information above: the first is the impact of the pandemic on each country. The second is that during the time I conducted this research, a considerable part of Brazil's population was furious or unhappy with their President. This is not to say that the political scenario in New Zealand was free from discord. However, New Zealand contrasted favourably when compared with Brazil. The pandemic has affected both countries and how I undertook this research, due to travel restrictions and limitations at the time. In addition, the pandemic has also affected the production, distribution and consumption of media in general, including some examples included in this study.

Thesis Structure

This thesis is divided into five chapters. The main theme (or themes) for each were decided based on participants' answers: they are themes participants demonstrated more interest in and wished to discuss. Thematic analysis is central to this thesis as it is used to highlight what is shared among participants, what unites them and how they differ. Through thematic analysis, it is possible to identify the underlying ideas or meanings that emerge between related, or seemingly unrelated, topics (Braun & Clarke, 2023). The structure of each chapter is based on participants' arguments and opinions, and all discussions and analysis that emerged. In the Methodology chapter I discuss this in more detail.

Chapter One offers a general overview of the ways in which participants engage online, and the informal learning found in these spaces.[6] Participants' uses of social media as a tool of interaction (with texts, characters, films, and debates) are central to the thesis, and understanding such uses from the beginning is crucial for understanding other chapters. Chapter One considers how participants' engagement contributes to their understandings about themes such as representation, gender and feminism. In the chapter, I divide participants into two groups based on their type of engagement: one with participants who create content in a more professional way, considering themselves content creators; and one with participants who participate and create in a non-professional way, or who don't communicate with wider audiences. In this initial chapter, I address several questions. For example, in which ways are participants engaging in discussions? Are there any differences or similarities between these two groups? Did the COVID-19 pandemic affect them somehow?

[6] By informal learning, I refer to learning that occurs outside traditional learning institutions such as schools or universities, whether they are physical places or online environments.

In seeking answers to these questions, and to other debates, I work on understanding how participants in this research are engaging with learning, or even teaching, about gender and representation.

Key to participants' discussions was an emphasis on the appearance and costuming of characters, and such discussions are at the core of Chapter Two: what do participants have to say about how characters are dressed or about how they are framed? How is this informed by, and how might it inform, their understanding of debates surrounding gender representation?

Chapter Two is guided by a level of dissatisfaction among the participants concerning how some characters are portrayed in terms of costuming, which can be connected with sexism. Simultaneously, the chapter explores how, according to participants, characters' wardrobes and portrayals are changing. In this sense, this chapter locates discussions about appearance and costuming as contradictory and arguably complex, intersecting such discussions with postfeminist sensibilities. In the chapter, I approach discussions about body, clothing, and even hairstyles to illustrate such complexities. Such discussions originate both from participants' engagement with original texts, and also from their engagement with texts and paratexts online. The chapter approaches what types of online content contribute to participants' understandings, whilst developing such debates.

Chapter Three responds to the large number of participants who mentioned Scarlett Johansson (Black Widow). During the period of gathering data for this study, Johansson's name was consistently circulating via social media because of the *Black Widow* (Shortland, 2021) film, and Johansson's involvement in a lawsuit process against Disney, resulting in significant discussion and many memes. At the same time, Johansson – because of her character Black Widow – has significance inside the Marvel Cinematic Universe. After being introduced in *Iron Man* 2 (Favreau, 2010), Black Widow remained as the only superheroine in a group of men for a number of years. In considering the relevance of Johansson, in Chapter

Three I explore participants' online engagement with three topics which revolve around her. Firstly, participants' responses to the sexism Johansson faces in press release interviews for films. Secondly, participants' reception of the lawsuit against Disney. The third and final topic of discussion addresses accusations of Johansson's racism/whitewashing roles. Each one of these topics is mediated online to participants. Do they receive and accept such topics in a similar way? What is their perception of Johansson? Through YouTube videos and memes, Chapter Three explores how participants can access debates about sexism, gender inequality and racism through a celebrity who plays a superheroine.

Chapter Four examines participants' reception of two characters living through a similar situation: Wonder Woman and Scarlet Witch/Wanda Maximoff, both powerful characters who have lost their romantic partners, and whose stories are explored in *Wonder Woman: 1984* (Jenkins, 2020) and in *WandaVision* (Feige et al., 2021), respectively. Participants felt that Wanda Maximoff, who went through a process of grief and mourning, offered opportunities for identification and for reflecting about loss. At the same time, Wonder Woman's relationship and consequent grief in *Wonder Woman: 1984* was highly criticised by participants. Why was one criticised and the other not? How does social media engagement intersect with such discussions? How does it connect with the COVID-19 pandemic? These are some of the questions I address in Chapter Four.

In Chapter Five, I explore participants' interpretations of wokeism. Rather than focusing on what they think of wokeism in a theoretical way, the chapter discusses how they perceive attempts at improving the participation of women in superhero live action films and television shows, which arguably intersect with woke culture. I approach this theme by examining participants' reactions to one specific scene from *Avengers: Endgame* (Russo & Russo, 2019) where a group of superheroines fight. The scene resulted in participants questioning if it was a successful depiction of feminism. In addition to it, this scene also

allows inquiry about participants' perceptions of the context in which the film was produced. I investigate compare reactions to this scene to reactions to the No Man's Land scene from *Wonder Woman* (2017), in which Wonder Woman crosses a battlefield. The duality of feelings and readings that both scenes generate is worth investigating. The second part of Chapter Five discusses participants' thoughts and opinions about how diversity is being included in recent superhero media. This is explored through their performances of (intersectional) digital feminism. However, what is central here – and to the chapter in general – is how, despite the material available online, participants depend upon official texts to interact with certain debates.

Although this study addresses important debates surrounding gender and feminism, while listening to participants I realised that characters and narratives are also meaningful to them. Participants often have some kind of emotional connection with, or appreciation for, the characters. However, even when this is the case, it does not prevent them from being critical whenever necessary, and from engaging with debates, whether in a complex way or not. In this sense, I argue that engaging with texts and paratexts is an important way of learning about and interacting with such discussions. Through this thesis I investigate the relevance of the digital dimension to optimise such learning and interaction. I also argue that, in combination with learning, participants can critique and/or question some situations. Overall, through a combination of their readings of texts and paratexts, participants engage with and articulate ideas about a range of themes such as representation, gender inequality or diversity, gaining and sharing understanding about how issues presented in superhero(ine) stories can be found in our daily lives and, consequently, prompt critical thought.

Literature Review

Feminist Media Studies

The debates I address in this thesis are part of the broad field of feminist media studies. This field is complex, incorporating a range of subfields, and with diverse meanings throughout history and in different societies (Harvey, 2019). Gallagher suggests that early research (around the 1970s and 1980s) had a focus on two main themes: women's subordination to structures of power; as well as theorising on politics of representation and production of knowledge where women were seen as objects rather than active subjects (2003). Later, research started to include a range of discussions such as sexuality, pornography, male violence, beauty, fashion, women's genres, among others (Gallagher, 2003).

Problematically, although earlier feminist media studies looked at the oppression women suffered, research failed to consider differences in terms of class, age, sexuality, race, nation, and others, being of an evident "exclusionary nature" (Gallagher, 2003, p. 21). These themes, however, were later taken into consideration, addressed, for example, through an intersectional perspective (Crenshaw, 1991, 1993). Focusing on representational intersectionality, for example, Crenshaw (1993) refers to the ways images that circulate create specific narratives about women of colour. In this case, gender and race intersect.

In contemporary research, one of the main characteristics is that studies embrace a more transnational (McLaughin & Carter, 2014) and transdisciplinary (Gallagher, 2003) approach, in which these differences are considered and embraced encompassing the claims for multiple perspectives on feminisms. Arguably, today's feminist media studies is particularly characterised by "the crossing of intellectual and disciplinary boundaries" (Gallagher, 2003, p. 20) and a more intersectional approach (Harvey, 2019) to all its subfields.

Taking this into consideration, my contribution to the broad field of feminist media studies consists of addressing several themes related to feminist media studies: postfeminism, intersectional and transnational feminism, media representation, and digital feminist activism and participation. In the following pages, I highlight some texts about these and other themes, as they are key to the debates in the following chapters.

Postfeminism

Postfeminism is a crucial lens for understanding how participants in my study perceive and interpret superheroines. It is especially useful in helping to explain the contradictory nature of some of the participants' answers in relation to how characters are represented. Postfeminism is a complex concept, understood differently throughout the literature (Gill, 2007a; Gill & Scharff, 2011). McRobbie's argues that postfeminism can be explored through a double entanglement, in which conservative elements (gender, sexuality, family) co-exist with more liberal elements (domestic, sexual and kinship relations). This viewing also considers that feminism has become common sense, and yet is repudiated at the same time (McRobbie, 2004, 2008).

Gill (2007b) mentions that the term "has been overloaded with different meanings" (p. 147) and proposes a further model of conceptualisation in which postfeminism is understood "neither as an epistemological perspective nor as an historical shift, nor (simply) as a backlash in which its meanings are pre-specified. Rather, postfeminism should be conceived as a sensibility" (2007b, p. 148). The notion of postfeminism as a sensibility guides my analysis. However, before delving into this postfeminist sensibility, it is important to differentiate it from other ways of understanding postfeminism.

Before the 'sensibility' model, there were three other dominant conceptualisations, each with its own challenges (Gill, 2007b). Some of the critiques raised against them

described them as “insufficient conceptualizations” (Butler, 2013, p. 43), noting that they emphasised the “oversimplified linear narrative of feminism to postfeminism” (Riley et al., 2017, p. 2). Simultaneously, they were viewed as failing “to account for the developing complexity of media content” (Riley et al., 2017, p. 2).

The first way of understanding postfeminism is as “an epistemological break with second-wave feminism” (Gill, 2007a, p. 250). This definition refers to the intersection of feminism with other anti-foundationalist movements such as post-modernism, post-colonialism, or post structuralism. Here, the ‘post’ means engaging more critically with other forms of feminisms, and it represents “a challenge to the ‘hegemonic’ Anglo-American feminism” (Gill, 2007a, p. 250). According to Gill, from the perspective of cultural and media analysis, “its value is in stressing the manner in which gender is connected to other forms of marginalization and other axes of power” (2007a, p. 250). Instead of a focus on equality, its focus shifts to “debates about differences” (p. 250).

The second way some authors understand postfeminism is as historical transformation, “a move into a new period after feminism” (Gill, 2007a, p. 249). More specifically, postfeminism is viewed as the period after second-wave feminism, and is often used simultaneously with third-wave feminism. The ‘post’ does not mean after feminism completely, but “after a particular moment of feminist activity and a particular set of feminist concerns” (Gill, 2007a, p. 251).

The third conceptualisation of postfeminism reflects “a political or normative position that is antithetical to feminism – in the sense that the ‘post’ suggests a reaction against feminism” (Gill, 2007a, p. 249). It may be seen as “somewhat hostile to feminism” (Gill, 2007a, p. 253), as it incorporates discourses of backlash against feminist achievements. Such discourses can vary from “attributing all women’s unhappiness to feminism” (p. 253) to “you can’t have it all – something has to give” (p. 253).

Instead of viewing postfeminism through one of these three ways, Gill (2007a) suggests that it "should be conceived of as a sensibility, and postfeminist media culture should be our critical object" (p. 254). In that sense, this interpretation of postfeminism allows for analysis of contemporary media products (Gill, 2007b) whilst also emphasising "the contradictory nature of postfeminist discourses and the entanglement of both feminist and anti-feminist themes within them" (2007b, p. 149). Perceiving the concept as a 'sensibility' arguably "moves us away from thinking about a fixed ideology and towards a more fluid, less coherent, affective set of ideas about femininity. These ideas produce notions of ideal femininity that circulate within a postfeminist media culture" (Riley et al., 2017, p. 3).

According to Gill, the way gender is represented in media – particularly in the early twenty first century – is characterised by a set of stable themes or constructions. Examples include emphasis on self-surveillance; focus on ideas of individualism, choice and empowerment; sexualisation of culture; and emphasis on consumerism (2007a). In addition, such themes coexist with, and are structured by, inequalities and exclusions of race, gender, ethnicity, class, age, sexuality, and disabilities (Gill, 2007b). It is important to mention that these elements were not necessarily coherent, as contradiction is one of the characteristics of postfeminist sensibility (Riley et al., 2017). Although Gill and other authors comment in detail about each of these themes, I focus my discussion on those that better intersect with my research.

One of the themes is femininity as a bodily property, which is related to the "obsessive preoccupation with the body" (Gill, 2007b, p. 147). In this scenario, femininity is associated with having a beautiful, sexy body and, since the body is the source of femininity and of women's power, it must be controlled, disciplined and re-modelled. It must be under constant surveillance (Gill, 2007b). Through working on (improving and disciplining) their bodies, women "could make and understand themselves as feminine" (Riley et al., 2023, p. 2) and,

consequently, regimes of beautification are understood as acts of empowerment (Jackson & Vares, 2015). One example of the necessity of regulating and changing the body is approached by Lazar (2009) in a study about postfeminist discourses and beauty advertisements. After analysing a series of beauty ads, Lazar comments that all beauty practices and ideals were not sold or interpreted as coercive (2009): instead, they were naturalised as desired by feminine subjects themselves.

Such a theme is closely related to the sexualisation of contemporary culture. Sexualisation, as Gill suggests, refers both to the increased proliferation of discourses about sexuality and sex across media products, and to a more frequent erotic representation of bodies from women, girls, and men (although this last one was less frequent). Gill suggests that women who were previously seen as passive, and consequently objectified, were now presented as making choices related to how they presented themselves: the women chose to present themselves in an objectified way. This represents a shift in power, and it can be a "deeper form of exploitation than objectification – one in which the objectifying male gaze is internalized to form a new disciplinary regime" (2007b, p. 152). In contrast to Gill's argument, Riley et al. (2016) suggest that, rather than understanding it as an internalised male gaze, one way of thinking about this disciplinary regime is as a postfeminist gaze. This gaze is characterised by women as the viewers of other women, however, "their looking is structured within heteronormative sense making" (p. 108). In this sense, at the same time that women choose to present themselves in a certain way, there is also the judgemental look of other women.

Gill also suggests that self-monitoring or self-discipline is current in postfeminist media culture. Such themes are not new. They have been present in many cultures across history, regarding how women should behave or how they should dress. Yet, there is an element of 'retraditionalisation' of femininity (Riley et al., 2023). Elements originally

associated with the feminine and also perceived as oppressive, are “rebranded as sites of pleasure and empowerment for women” (p. 3), and women must be “naturally inclined to find pleasure in them” (p. 3). This relates, for example, to beauty and fashion. In this sense, although there is a regulation regarding how women should dress, at the same time, fashion is rebranded as an element of female empowerment and pleasure.

Another aspect of the postfeminist sensibility is the resurgence of discourses of natural sexual differences across the media. The differences between men and women were emphasised, and often characterised as elements that would continue to exist, with or without feminism. More importantly, as Gill suggests, such discourses could (re)eroticise power relations. Although in some cases such differences could be interpreted as sexy, in other cases “discourses of natural gender difference can be used to freeze in place existing inequalities” (2007b, p. 159), as they are both inevitable and pleasurable.

Another characteristic of the postfeminist sensibility seen in western media is its focus on individualism, choice, and empowerment (Gill, 2007b). Such ideas are associated with the power of consumption that women possess (Gill, 2007b; Negra & Tasker, 2007; Brice & Andrews, 2019; Evans & Riley, 2023). Postfeminist discourse depicts women’s practices and choices as freely made, which creates the idea of women as “autonomous agents no longer constrained by inequalities or power imbalances whatsoever” (Gill, 2007b, p. 153). In this sense, postfeminist discourse “celebrates female agency and women’s powers of consumption” (Negra & Tasker, 2007, p. 4), consequently commodifying feminism “via the figure of women as empowered consumer” (Negra & Tasker, 2007, p. 2). In this context, to be the subject of postfeminism equates to being “able and willing to consume” (Negra & Tasker, 2007, p. 8). Yet, at the same time, the subject of postfeminism must also juggle between qualities which are said to be traditionally feminine (which vary from nurturing to sexual attractiveness) and the traditionally masculine ones (such as autonomy, or economic and

emotional independence) (Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008). Essentially, women have to "unproblematically inhabit both a masculine, rational, productive, worker self, and a (hetero)sexualized feminine, (appropriately) reproductive identity that both consumes itself into being and is the object of consumption" (Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008, p. 31).

Viewing women as responsible for themselves intersects with logics of neoliberalism. Although commonly associated with economic policies and systems where privatisation and corporate profits are privileged, according to Rottenberg (2014, 2020), neoliberalism is also "a dominant political rationality that moves to and from the management of the state to the inner workings of the subject, normatively constructing and interpellating individuals as entrepreneurial actors" (2014, p. 420). In a neoliberal environment, people's political imagination is set aside, while market metrics are prioritised. As Rottenberg argues, all aspects of people's lives become capital, and market logic infiltrates all spheres of life. Neoliberal feminism emerges within this context, and one of its main characteristics is a lack of critique regarding neoliberalism (Rottenberg, 2014).

The neoliberal subject is "rational, calculating and self-regulating" (Gill, 2007b, p. 163), and they must take care of themselves. The neoliberal logic emphasises that women's empowerment and autonomy come from individualised consumerism (Riley et al., 2023), resulting in a feminism that is "empty in its content" (Baeta & Simões, 2023, p. 242). According to Butler (2013), "the consumer-based logic of postfeminism conflates feminism and femininity, individualism and liberation, and consumption and activism" (p. 46). With a strong focus on individualism, with each woman responsible for their own success and empowerment, it seems there is no need for women helping each other. There is no room for the collective or for feminisms that prioritise the collective over the individual. As Rottenberg (2014) argues, in a context of neoliberal feminism, issues of gender inequality are converted

into individual affairs, rather than issues intrinsically connected with larger structural problems.

Criticisms of Postfeminism

Ten years after having written about the postfeminist sensibility, Gill (2017) revisits the original text, reflecting upon what has changed since. One of the most fundamental changes has been the strengthening of neoliberalism, as well as shifts in social politics, which increased racism, misogyny, homophobia, and other forms of bigotry and prejudice. Within this context, postfeminism "has tightened its hold in contemporary culture and has made itself virtually hegemonic. It is harder today to see postfeminism's 'edges' or borders" (p. 609). As Gill suggests, postfeminism "has become the new normal, a taken-for-granted common sense that operates as a kind of gendered neoliberalism" (p. 609). In considering the term itself within academia, or as a critical term, Gill considers how it has been "refined and developed" (p. 610) by other researchers. According to Riley et al. (2017) the postfeminist sensibility has both become an object of study, and also a lens "for recognising and analysing that object of study" (p. 2).

Most importantly, Gill highlights the growing visibility of feminism as another characteristic of current times: feminism is seen as popular or cool. Such visibility or popularisation, however, does not diminish misogyny. Beyond that, the heightened visibility of (some kinds of) feminism raises more questions regarding how postfeminism can be defined in relation to feminism. Gill suggests interpreting postfeminism as a "distinctive kind of gendered neoliberalism" (p. 611), a perspective that contributes towards understanding how postfeminism intersects with neoliberalism, and how it can be observed in contemporary contexts. As Evans and Riley describe, postfeminism and neoliberalism are "co-existing

rationalities that reproduce themselves at various sites across the globe by adapting to local contexts, with their attendant histories, cultures and political specificities" (2023, p. 4).

Another point of discussion that Gill visits in 2017 is about postfeminism and its connection (or disconnection) with intersectionality, one that is particularly relevant for my own research. The author comments on how postfeminism was explored by theorists outside Europe or North America, increasing transnational studies about this subject. Riley et al. (2017) also comment that despite critiques about the focus on an Anglo-American media content, research has been undertaken in other places, "documenting the transnational movement of postfeminist sensibility across a range of media" (p. 8), such as in Chinese and Russian media.

Importantly, one of the main criticisms against postfeminism is how it is white, with its subject being white women who belong to the middle class (Negra & Tasker, 2007; Dosekun, 2015). The result of this narrowed focus is that postfeminist discourse of gender equality is limited, excluding anyone not within these two categories, and failing in its attempts to represent more diverse groups. According to Negra and Tasker (2007), "postfeminism is in many ways antithetical to the notion of an open society in which all members are valued in accordance with their distinct identities" (p. 3). According to Butler (2013), scholars who have investigated postfeminism conclude "almost uniformly, that postfeminism works to exclude women of color and reproduce racial inequality by reinstituting (Western) whiteness as a dominant cultural norm" (p. 47).

However, although it is said by some scholars that postfeminist discourse excludes women who are not white, Butler (2013) argues that this argument is "overly simplistic and empirically unfounded" (p. 48). Instead, Butler argues that, instead of a simple exclusion, postfeminism "primarily represents affirmation of a white heterosexual object" (p. 49).

Drawing from Projansky (2001), Butler builds the following argument about the exclusion of women of colour or queer women by postfeminism:

> Instead of assuming, for instance, that women of color are somehow unaffected by postfeminist discourses, it seems that a more productive route is to rethink postfeminism in terms of 'cultural ownership,' or what kinds of claims and boundaries are constructed by different social groups across a variety of social contexts. Such an approach allows us to interrogate the ways in which postfeminism provides space for others within its discursive boundaries and explore how nonwhite and/or nonheterosexual women adopt, internalize, negotiate, and challenge hegemonic postfeminist conceptions of race, gender, and sexuality (2013, p. 49).

Consequently, Butler suggests that such an approach would allow for interrogating "the ways in which postfeminism provides spaces for others within its discursive boundaries" (p. 49). As the author writes, there is space for women of colour: however, their form of participation is strictly regulated.

Evidently, there are contrasting ways that scholars perceive how postfeminist discourses consider women of colour and queer women. While some argue that postfeminist discourse excludes women, others suggest questioning such boundaries and participation. Even so, postfeminism is criticised for how it fails to encompass intersectionality and other differences. As Lawrence and Ringrose (2018) point out, recent scholarship argues that postfeminism may not be as useful an analytical lens as it once was. Based on Driscoll (2016) and Butler (2013), they write that postfeminism remains Eurocentric, and fails to engage "with an intersectional view of media culture and power relations" (p. 211). Reflecting on how a postfeminist sensibility manifests itself in more recent contexts, Riley et al. (2023) comment that, while postfeminism considers ideal femininity, it also addresses people "whose identities intersect with femininity in one way or another, with the potential to interpellate

those with gender identifications of woman, trans-woman, femme, non-binary, queer, gender-fluid, gender-nonconforming and nonbinary" (p. 4). The authors consider that postfeminism also addresses LGBTQI+ audiences. Although postfeminism reaches all these intersections, "it also acts as a force of normativity by centring the young, white, middle-class/affluent, able-bodied, heterosexual, cis-woman" (2022, p. 4). It appears that, even though postfeminist sensibilities can address more identities, they may still mark the cis, white, middle-class woman as normative.

Transnational Postfeminism

Despite criticism regarding how postfeminism centres itself primarily around Western media cultures and subjects that are white, middle-class, heterosexual and able-bodied women (Butler, 2013; Dosekun, 2015; Morris & Dobson, 2023), in recent years, postfeminist research has been addressing these limitations. As argued previously, Butler (2013) suggests that postfeminism *does not* exclude women that are nonwhite, non-middle-class, or non-heterosexual. Going further, Dosekun (2021) comments that research on postfeminism emerged in other locations of the globe, and "from such work, further critical understandings of the culture, and of its variously globalised and local sources and sense, boundaries and contestations, and subjects and styles, have continued to emerge" (p. 1379). Iskra (2023) suggests that the application of postfeminism as a sensibility has contributed to the expansion of postfeminism beyond Western media cultures and beyond its original subject, with new applications emphasising both intersectional and transnational aspects: the postfeminist sensibility "suffuses diverse sociocultural environments" (p. 662). In this sense, the postfeminist sensibility has allowed scholars to "imagine it as a travelling transnationality between the global (middle class) elites" (p. 662), leading to "circulations of postfeminist sensibility" (p. 663) in other countries.

Contemporary research on postfeminism – including studies focused on postfeminist sensibility and global media – is being produced and shared in various countries (Riley et al., 2023; Iskra, 2023), addressing the experiences of women in various contexts. Such visibility, which goes beyond national borders, "contributes to their transnational legibility" (Loxham, 2023, p. 1706). At the same time, such research highlights how postfeminist popular culture "can simultaneously be a productive site of transcultural mediations" (Imre et al., 2009, p. 388). Taking on this perspective, a transnational approach towards research on postfeminism contributes to understanding women's experiences and where they intersect with popular culture. For this reason, it is helpful to briefly consider transnational feminist studies, before connecting this work to postfeminism or other subjects.

Swarr and Nagar (2010) argue that transnational feminist discourses usually have "a commitment to address the asymmetries of the globalization process" (p. 3). Similarly, Dosekun comments that "transnational implies and follows for asymmetries and incompleteness, flows not fixity, and cross-cutting rather than unidirectional linkages" (2020, p. 14). Drawing from Kaplan and Grewal (1994), Dosekun suggests that transnationality articulates links between subjects of unequal and uneven relations. Kaplan and Grewal (1994) argue that such linkage "does not require reciprocity or sameness or commonality. It can and must acknowledge differentials of power and participation in cultural production" (pp. 440-441). It also can also trace "connections between seemingly disparate elements" (p. 441). Alexander and Mohanty (2010) argue that transnationality is "a way of thinking about women in similar contexts across the world" (p. 24). Discussing female sports fandom, Toffoletti (2017) depicts transnational feminism as helping us to understand how narrative discourses and representational framings can produce "particular meanings" (p. 24) in "local, national, regional and transnational contexts" (p. 24).

We can conclude that a transnational approach looks at women in various locations, considers their experiences, similarities and asymmetries, and articulates linkages among them. Furthermore, given that transnational postfeminism is a "highly mediated, commodified, and consumerist entanglement of meanings, representations, sensibilities, practices, and goods and services" (Dosekun, 2020, p. 15), examination of women's engagement with media should be central to such an approach.

The interpretation above sets the starting point for my research. Undertaking a transnational approach, it is possible to search for similarities or differences between women from Brazil and New Zealand, or even between women who live in the same country. A transnational approach considers, among other things, the uneven socio-historical context for each of them, particularly regarding the period of time when this research takes place. It is possible to investigate the influences of transnational feminism. As suggested by Dosekun (2020), postfeminism is mediated and commodified. It crosses borders in the form of a range of products and services, being potentialised by digital connection. In particular, it allows for specific forms of representation to reach various corners of the globe. This happens, for example, through blockbuster superhero movies. Women from different parts of the world access and consume these texts, which expose them to certain ways of representing women, ways which are intrinsically connected with logics of postfeminism and neoliberalism.

Understanding that postfeminist discourses are spread via mainstream texts of popular culture and consumed by women in different parts of the globe, one more aspect comes into play: the recent popularisation of feminism via social media and its growing visibility, which also affects how women read and interpret such texts.

Popular Feminism

Expanding the discussion beyond postfeminism, popular feminism is another concept that underpins themes I address in later chapters. Popular feminism is a more recent notion, dating back to approximately the 2010s, and it encompasses positive depictions of feminism being shown in the media. Female artists argued in favour of it, embodying what Hamad and Taylor (2015) call celebrity feminism (Keller & Ryan, 2018). According to the literature, popular feminism is entangled with postfeminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Dosekun, 2021; Evans & Riley, 2023). Banet-Weiser argues that both share structural similarities, and they are "entangled together in contemporary media visibility" (2018, p. 20). Dosekun (2021) argues that feminism has attained a higher profile in recent years and that, although literature on neoliberal and popular feminisms is growing, the literature is still in dialogue with postfeminism. Writing about postfeminism, Evans and Riley (2023) suggest that the final development in contemporary research of postfeminism is "the complex relationship between a postfeminist sensibility and a resurgence of feminist activism, which itself often takes digital forms" (p. 9). As Banet-Weiser (2018) and Evans & Riley (2023) argue, feminism's visibility has increased in recent years, particularly due to digital technologies This increased visibility, Evans & Riley (2023) authors claim, "not only contains optimism, but also raises questions about what kinds of activisms, bodies and subjectivities are made visible" (p. 9).

Banet-Weiser writes about popular feminism (2018, 2020), arguing that its popularisation walks side by side with social media and with a more neoliberal capitalist scenario (2018). According to Banet-Weiser (2020), popular feminism refers to "practices and conditions that are accessible to a broad public, from organising marches to hashtag activism to commodities" (p. 9). Three elements provide the perfect context for its popularisation: networked media platforms, the fact that feminism has been made likeable, and that it remains

a terrain of power struggles. To be made likeable means that feminism is presented positively by media or the marketing industry, appearing as ‘good’ and ‘accessible’ for women and girls. This happens, for example, through media-friendly expressions of feminism, such as celebrity feminism.

Popular feminism works in a context of economies of visibility (Banet-Weiser, 2020). Often, making a topic visible and saleable is more important than considering the structures through which that topic is constructed. Purchasing and wearing a T-shirt that says “Feminist” is enough for one to be considered a feminist, instead of understanding the background of feminism, including the ideological and historical context. In terms of struggles of race and class, it is seemingly more important to see these struggles and to identify as someone who sees them, rather than trying to understand and fight against historical structural inequalities that led to the situation. Considering such ideas, Banet-Weiser suggests that “seeing and hearing a safely affirmative feminism in spectacularly visible ways often eclipses a feminist critique of structure” (2020, p. 9). More specifically, she argues that “the visibility of popular feminism, where examples appear on television, in film, on social media, and on bodies, is important but it often stops there, as if seeing or purchasing feminism is the same thing as changing patriarchal structures” (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 4).

In addition to the media’s positive depictions, the plurality of media platforms and networked conditions provide the perfect environment for the popularisation of feminism. As Banet-Weiser (2018) notes, the addition of social media and the internet to older forms of media such as television, cinema, streaming services and video, creates conditions for voices to be heard and allows users to further engage with feminism. According to Banet-Weiser (2018), the digital context “authorises expressions and practices of popular feminism to an audience that has a wider reach than ever before” (p. 19). It is through such visible forms of

feminism, Evans and Riley (2023) argue, that "we witness the continuation of postfeminist sensibility, adapted and rearticulated to fit alongside contemporary feminist activism" (p. 23).

Such visibility and changes, however, also lead to backlash. As such debates operate inside an economy of visibility, "the heightened visibility feminism has received has rendered it vulnerable to organised and collective misogyny" (Trott, 2022, p. 3). At the same time that debates about feminism are taking place, misogyny is also becoming more popular due to similar reasons: it easily spreads through networked media platforms, which allows people who think alike to meet each other online (Banet-Weiser, 2018). According to Keller and Ryan (2018):

> While misogynistic sentiment and behaviour are not new, the web animates misogyny in new and more visible ways (see Jane, 2014), and points to the ambivalence embedded within digital culture as offering opportunities for both progressive politics and the re-entrenchment of conservative values. (p. 13)

In agreement with Banet-Weiser (2018), Keller and Ryan (2018) consider the "visibility of popular misogyny" (p.13), which manifests, for example, in the form of hate speech on social media. Misogyny, backlash or any form of negative reaction towards increased debates or depictions of feminism, gender and diversity are increasingly popular.

Another issue with popular feminism is that, as Banet-Weiser (2018) writes, the form of feminism which is most accessible and visible is the "white, middle-class, cis-gendered, heterosexual feminism" (p.13). This situation is similar to that of postfeminism, where the original subjects of its discourse are also "white, middle-class, heterosexual young women" (Gill, 2017, p. 612), which has led to critique concerning the lack of a more intersectional perspective (Dosekun, 2015). It is the feminism of this specific group which is made likeable and popular. This popular feminism Banet-Weiser (2018) refers to is moved by dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, because it excludes or refuses intersectionality, pushing to one side

women of colour or women from the working class. Evans and Riley (2023) raise a similar point, identifying that such a hyper-visible form of feminism, although celebrated as positive, "often fails to challenge oppressive social structures" (p. 11), and also obfuscates other forms of feminism when they speak back to patriarchy. Popular feminism can be critiqued for its emphasis on a "positive feminism" which ends up belonging to white, middle-class, cis-woman, and often remains at a superficial level, instead of promoting deep, structural changes.

Popular feminism permeates the entire thesis. Taking into consideration that one of the main goals of this study is to examine participants' digital engagement with characters and with discussions about female representation, these debates are acquiring visibility because of popular feminism. Hence the importance of observing how participants make articulations, and where these topics intersect with superhero(ine) media.

In discussing such articulations, it is essential to understand the term 'articulation' itself. Articulation is central to Hall's work (Clarke, 2015). According to Hall (2019), articulation is "the form of the connection that can make unity of two different elements, under certain conditions" (p. 235). In Hall's (2019) view, articulation is:

> The non-necessary link, between a social force which is making itself, and the ideology or conceptions of the world which makes intelligible the process they are going through, which begins to bring onto the historical stage a new social position and political position, a new set of social and political subjects. (p.238).

Thinking of articulation as linkage, articulation is "a way of understanding how ideological elements come, under certain conditions, to cohere together within a discourse, a way of asking how they do or do not become articulated, at specific conjunctures, to certain political subjects" (p. 235). Clarke (2015) argues that Hall considered the analysis of aspects of articulations important, and that this meant "paying attention to both the conditions of their

existence and the political-cultural work (practice) that went into making and sustaining specific articulations" (p. 277). In this sense, Hall (2019) invites us to ask "under what circumstances can a connection be forged or made?" (p. 235). To understand how participants are making articulations, it is necessary to consider all contexts and circumstances involved. This includes, for example, the context of celebrity feminism, which intersects with popular feminism.

Celebrity Feminism

In this thesis, discussions about fictional characters play a crucial role in revealing more details about participants' engagement with gender questions. However, it would be a mistake to ignore how actors who play these characters may also have a significance and a role within such discussions. One way through which the connection between actors and questions of gender can be observed, is through discussing celebrity feminism. I address these discussions in more detail in Chapter Three, which centres on actress Scarlett Johansson (who plays Marvel's Black Widow) and on participants' engagement with her. However, a brief comment on celebrity feminism is helpful context.

Before commenting on celebrity feminism, it is valid to first consider studies of stardom and celebrities[7]. Among the literature, Dyer's work *Stars* (1979) is considered a seminal study (Holmes, 2005; Marshall, 2014; Taylor, 2017). In *Stars*, Dyer writes about stars[8] and stardom through analysing classical Hollywood cinema, and those that are considered stars in this environment. Dyer writes about stars as social phenomenon, as images, and as signs. Regarding stars as social phenomenon, Dyer asks why they exist and

[7] I approach such studies in Chapter Three.

[8] The term 'stars', Marshall (2014) suggests, refers to those that have "transcended the films" (p.12), and it was often more used than 'celebrity'.

what their relationship is with other aspects of social structure. Regarding stars as images, Dyer discusses the meanings and effects of images of stars. Regarding stars as signs, Dyer focuses on film texts and elements such as performance. In this sense, Dyer approaches various dimensions of what a star is. As suggested by Taylor (2017), such studies indicate that stars "enable us to ask questions around personhood or selfhood" (p. 26).

In considering the vast scholarship about celebrities, Marshall (2014) argues that there are three levels of film studies that lead to the modern viewing of a celebrity. The first is in relation to the culture industry; the second, in relation to the film experience regarding spectatorial pleasure and identification; and the third, in relation to the meaning of a celebrity, in which the film star "has been studied as a sociological phenomenon that exits the film roles and plays an active symbolic role in the lives of audiences" (p. 12). Additionally, Marshall argues that, in more recent years, shifts in technology have affected the relationship between celebrities and audiences, as well as studies about celebrities. In contemporary research, there are more resources to study celebrities, and celebrity culture has been analysed with greater depth (Marshall, 2014). At the same time, digital technology has "accelerated our access to celebrity culture" (p. xi) because, among other things, people can now follow each other online, including celebrities. Essentially, celebrities become "overexposed individuals of contemporary life" (p. xii).

Marshall (2014) associates the concept of celebrity with being a system "for valorizing meaning and communication" (p. xlviii), which operates in various domains of contemporary culture, such as in politics, in business, or in artistic fields. Being a celebrity, Marshall argues, "confers on the person a certain discursive power" (p. xlviii). The voice of a celebrity is above others, and is "channeled into the media systems as being legitimately significant" (p. xlviii). Drawing from authors such as Dyer (1979) and Marshall (1997), Taylor (2017) adds that celebrities are "fundamentally bound up in questions of authority and thereby power" (p. 26).

In essence, celebrities hold discursive power, meaning that what they say is often considered valid and potentially influential. As Hobson suggests, "celebrities' hypervisibility and amplified voices afford them cultural capital and validation" (2017, p. 1000).

Celebrity feminism exists within this context of hypervisibility and validation. Celebrity feminism is one form of feminism prompted by celebrities, which coexists in dialogue with other feminist discourses (Hobson, 2017). It is understood that celebrities can mediate feminism to larger audiences (Casey & Watson, 2017; Jackson, 2021), and that they also "can help shape how audiences respond to feminism itself" (Taylor, 2016, p. 273). Simultaneously, it must be acknowledged that celebrity feminism also operates within the context of neoliberalism (Chidgey, 2021). Instead of promoting criticism of neoliberalism, celebrity feminism contributes to its normalisation and likelihood of acceptance (Chidgey, 2021). This happens because the celebrity sign can turn anything related to it into a commodity (Chidgey, 2021), including, for example, activism. As such, drawing from Roxane Gray (2014), Chidgey argues that celebrity feminism is a "gateway to political consciousness" (p. 1056). However, even though celebrity feminism seems to facilitate access to feminism and questions of gender, there is a need for caution: although celebrity feminism has achieved hypervisibility and become a well-known form of feminism, its legitimacy and authenticity are questionable and often criticised (Taylor, 2016; Tennent & Jackson, 2019; Chidgey, 2021; Jackson, 2021).

In Chapter Three, I return to these discussions of celebrity feminism in more detail, arguing that through Scarlett Johansson, participants have more access to a range of questions related to gender and feminism. The chapter shows celebrity feminism as both a way of accessing certain debates, but also highlighting the limitations of this form of feminism.

Postfeminism and Digital Feminism

During the past decades, manifestations of feminisms have been explored on the blogosphere, on websites, and with activist campaigns trending on social media (Keller & Ryan, 2018). Digital feminism has increased the visibility of activism in relation to several causes (Evans & Riley, 2023), including the visibility and spread of emergent feminisms (Keller & Ryan, 2018). Importantly, however, that although they are considered 'emergent', it does not mean that feminism is "only emerging *now* within popular cultures" (Keller & Ryan, 2018, p. 2). In fact, Keller and Ryan (2018) dispute the existence of a "unified, singular popular feminism that has usurped a media culture once dominated by postfeminist sensibilities" (p. 2). Different concepts and constructions of feminism are in dialogue with each other. Additionally, in considering that many forms of feminism are acquiring more visibility, it is worth questioning which ones are being made visible (Evans & Riley, 2023). Following this question, Keller and Ryan (2018) argue that, instead of viewing digital culture as producing visible feminist politics, the authors prefer to address "the ways in which digital culture has made feminism legible and accessible to many people unfamiliar with feminist politics" (p.12). This affirmation aligns with the approach in this thesis, in which I look at the ways digital engagement contributes towards participants' access to and understanding of feminism and gender-related interpretations and discussions.

Regarding postfeminism and digital culture, while some authors have used postfeminism as a framework to explore girls and women's practices, others have problematised the term in relation to its online applicability (Keller & Ryan, 2018*).* Digital feminist media opens space for "collective solidarities in order to challenge sexism" (p. 13), which places it in contrast to the individualism characteristic of postfeminism. In addition, the digital environment has emphasised intersectionality. There are, for instance, feminist blogs

addressing discussions such as racism or violence against queer and trans people, while others emphasise the voices of women of colour (Keller & Ryan, 2018).

Instead of accepting or denying the efficacy of a postfeminist sensibility to interpret the current contemporary moment, Keller and Ryan (2018) suggest "resituating postfeminism within our current moment marked by emergent feminisms" (p. 3). In this way, emergent feminisms can be interpreted as "the unique ways in which feminisms are responding to the specificity of our current cultural moment" (p. 2). Keller and Ryan (2018) suggest expanding the theoretical lens to examine media culture, particularly considering how it has recently changed. In order to do that, it is valid to explore some of what has been written about postfeminism and the digital realm, such as the works of Ringrose (2013), Dobson (2015), and Evans and Riley (2023).

Ringrose (2013) investigates the intersection between postfeminist discourses and education, focusing on teen girls in the UK. Ringrose (2013) argues that, that the presumption that gender equality has been achieved it in fact obscures on-going issues such as sexual difference and sexism that girls have experienced. Beyond this argument, Ringrose (2013) also examines the use of digital technologies, showing that, although technologies have been widely used by girls, which offers them new opportunities, they can also become victims of online abuse. Dobson (2015) also studies young girls, exploring how girls and young women are performing femininity within contemporary digital landscapes, with a focus on practices that are considered wrong or controversial. Among the author's findings and discussions, Dobson explores how some logics that shape the way young women represent themselves online can be understood in a postfeminist context. He reveals typical postfeminist values such as the independent, highly confident women; and the idea of 'girl power' (2015, p. 164).

In mapping postfeminist sensibility within digital culture, Evans and Riley (2023) suggest that recent discussions of postfeminist sensibility have focused on three key issues.

The first is “the shaping of postfeminist sensibility in digital flows and through online culture” (p. 4); the second, “a new attention to the role of emotion and affect in the way postfeminist sensibility saturates contemporary culture” (p. 4); and the third is the “resurgence of feminist activity” (p. 4). This last option differentiates between popular feminism or neoliberal feminism, each of which complicates the postfeminist sensibility.

One characteristic Evans and Riley (2023) emphasise is how more recent research has been focusing on “emotional and affective elements of a postfeminist sensibility” (p. 7), particularly online. The reason for such focus appears to be the creation of online spaces that are more gentle, or safer for women. However, Evans & Riley (2023) suggest caution in assuming that only positive changes are happening, citing this approach as optimistic. I consider this finding of Evans and Riley interesting, for it reinforces online spaces as safe spaces which allow for a myriad of discussions. Expanding on that, it highlights the potential of online spaces as sites for learning about feminisms, gender representation, and other discussions that might unfold from these, as well as spaces for engagement and meaning making.

Digital Activism and Learning

I begin with the premise that “digital activism” is a very broad term with more than one definition, and is studied across a range of disciplines such as sociology, communication and political sciences (Kaun & Uldam, 2018). For the purposes of this research, one of the ways digital activism can be understood is through the use of digital media for political and social causes (Kaun & Uldam, 2018). By accepting such a broad definition, it is possible to consider other types of activism, such as fan activism or feminist activism. Fan activism, for example, has been studied by authors such as Jenkins et al. (2016). Meanwhile, feminist activism is addressed by authors such as Trott (2022), who suggests that:

> By focusing on feminist activism, we can see how a range of stakeholders (including digital and platform companies, governments, users, advertisers and others) come together to negotiate and contest competing and sometimes conflicting social and political values within the digital sphere and that have extensive effects in the material world. (p. 9)

These negotiations Trott (2022) refers to are not limited to feminist activism. They also happen in any form of digital activism, or even through forms of engagement not directly linked to political activism or participation. Even so, as suggested, examining feminist activism informs how various groups negotiate social and political values, and much of this interaction happens in the digital sphere. In this sense, the visibility of feminist activism is arguably increasing, due to digital connections and political movements (Fotopoulou, 2016; Banet-Weiser, 2018; Mendes et al., 2019; Trott, 2022). Lawrence and Ringrose (2018), for example, comment on how social media gives visibility to marginalised voices "either through amplifying the stories of others or through drawing attention to their own experiences, which has opened up significant spaces for resistance to hegemonic femininities" (p. 213). Nevertheless, as suggested by Evans and Riley (2023), digital feminist activism "has been accompanied by, and sometimes indistinguishable from" (p.11) popular feminism or neoliberal feminism.

Overall, the role of digital media in allowing for girls and women to have contact with contemporary feminisms and to perform feminist activism is acknowledged (Harris, 2008; Baer, 2016; Jackson, 2018; Banerjee & Kankaria, 2022; Trott, 2022; Coffey & Kanai, 2023). Coffey and Kanai (2023) argue that "digital spaces can be understood as educational environments" (p. 638), and they suggest that in order to understand the possibilities of digital feminism and how it intersects with everyday lives, it is valid to explore "how feminist learning is practically enacted" (p. 639). This emphasis on the practical enactment of

feminism is the focus of this thesis, which examines participants' engagement with superhero media in online spaces. I demonstrate that participants are in contact with contemporary discussions of gender and feminism, and are learning about such subjects whilst performing feminist digital activism.

Having established the significance of social media, both for engagement with forms of feminisms, and for amplifying the voices of the marginalised, I now draw from Freire (1987) and other authors to briefly discuss Freire's pedagogy of resistance as a form of feminist pedagogy. Although some of Freire's work have been criticised by authors such as bell hooks because of the sexist language Freire used (Furlan Brighente, 2020; Macedo, 2021; Mariz, 2021), dialogues between Freire's pedagogy and feminist pedagogies can be constructed (Furlan Brighente, 2020; Macedo, 2021), particularly when using the Freirean concept of the pedagogy of the oppressed (1987).

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968), Freire discusses oppression, arguing that education is the way for oppressed people to take one step ahead and acquire their freedom. It is through understanding, and reflecting on, their own oppression and the roots of it, that they will form a foundation to fight for their liberation (Freire, 1987). Such pedagogy, Freire (2005) argues, must be "forged *with*, not for, the oppressed" (p. 48). Essentially, what Freire proposes is that one way of fighting against oppression and surpassing it – acquiring freedom – is through learning about the conditions of oppression. Pedagogy enlightens one about what is happening. Such pedagogy, however, must not be created by the oppressor. Similarly, in connecting this understanding with feminism, it is possible to understand how education and learning can intersect with feminism as a way of promoting reflection and raising self-consciousness about it.

Various studies have addressed the connection between Freirean pedagogy and feminist pedagogy. Ochoa and Pershing (2013), for instance, examined feminist pedagogy

practices with undergraduate students in the USA, identifying a "pedagogy of resistance" (p. 23), which draws from Freire and hooks. Ochoa and Pershing (2013) contend that feminist pedagogy "has as its goal the liberation of learners via the development of critical thought" (p. 23). It "encourages awareness" (p. 23) about oppression, racism and sexism.

Speaking of encouraging awareness about oppression and other themes, it is possible to associate such discussions with feminist consciousness-raising. Dating back to the 1960s, feminist consciousness-raising was made popular by American feminists (Zufferey, 2018). Feminist consciousness-raising consists of small groups of women who talk and listen to each other, sharing their individual experiences and offering support to each other, recognising and discussing oppression and gender injustices and creating strategies and taking action in relation to them (Michals, 2001; Western, 2013; Sowards & Renegar, 2014; Zufferey, 2018). According to Sowards and Renegar (2014), who have analysed consciousness-raising in relation to third wave feminism, it is a way of "creating critical awareness of our culture" (p. 535). This argument underpins this thesis, as it highlights how the process of women sharing their opinions and experiences in relation to specific media texts is a way of understanding a wider contemporary culture. However, although creating awareness is important, political action is also fundamental. As Vachhani (2024) argues, because of the nature of the online environment, such action includes "communicative practices and connecting differently to build alliances across geographical spaces and over time" (, p. 1032). Vachhani (2024) identifies a growth in "global spaces of feminist intervention" (p. 1032), which are marked by their transnational and intergenerational aspects. These groups of women that gather to strategise and take action are now marked by transnationality.

Of most importance for this thesis is how some authors are addressing feminist consciousness-raising in relation to online participation and social media. Gleeson and Turner (2019), for example, comment that, according to some contemporary feminist researchers,

feminist activism and discussions in online spaces can be understood as a form of consciousness-raising. However, they also notice that other researchers problematise this practice by arguing that men are present in online spaces as well, which can become an obstruction. Even so, Gleeson and Turner (2019) suggest that "feminist activism and discussion in social media spaces are a valid and worthwhile form of contemporary consciousness-raising" (p. 54). They also contend that some of the value and relevance of online feminist consciousness-raising lies exactly in the fact that, in online spaces, women can engage with others who do not claim the label "woman".

Adding to this debate, Brunner and Partlow-Lefevre (2020) have analysed consciousness-raising online in relation to the #MeToo movement. The authors suggest that, at least in relation to the #MeToo movement, online feminist consciousness-raising had specific characteristics. First, there was no engagement with practices that focused on individual rhetors, or with sexualised bodies, or even with sensationalised media. This first characteristic, I argue, in fact connects more with the #MeToo movement, being difficult to consider it as a characteristic of other forms of online consciousness-raising. However, the other two characteristics of online feminist consciousness-raising identified by Brunner and Partlow-Lefevre (2020) are more general. They note, for example, the complications involved in defining a single rhetor, and collectively authored texts, due to the collective nature of networks. Because of its collective and online aspect, it can reach more general audiences, including those who can be against the movement. The third characteristic is the possibility of aligning "various feminisms in a collective effort to shift power dynamics and challenge social practices" (Brunner & Partlow-Lefevre, 2020, p. 170). Therefore, online feminist consciousness-raising can be viewed as collective (in that it reaches many people, who may or may not be sympathetic towards the cause), and as having the capacity to encompass various feminisms.

Returning to Freirean and feminist pedagogy, Sánchez-Pardo (2017) comments on feminist education inside classrooms, drawing from hooks (1994) and hooks' connection to Freirean pedagogy. A critical pedagogy is emphasised here, with a focus on inviting students to critically question the pedagogy used. This critical pedagogy, Sánchez-Pardo (2017) states, "produces the classroom as a dialogic and negotiated scene of knowledge production" (p. 72).

Martin et al. (2017) address how feminism and women's studies are being integrated into education both inside classrooms and in communities. They argue that teaching critical, intersectional feminism to young people not only has the potential to improve their lives, but also to mitigate oppression. Through learning, girls and women are challenged to confront the status quo of oppressive institutions and traditions around them. Macedo (2021) writes about Freire and the works of feminist theorists who have, to a greater or lesser extent, proximity with Freire's discussions, such as bell hooks, Iris Young, Marjike de Koning, and Kathleen Weiler. Macedo (2021) writes that, under Freire's interpretation, education can be a liberating political act that has the potential for promoting awareness about disrupting power imbalances between men and women in a way that it is real, transitive, and critical. Consequently, education allows for women to deconstruct oppressive structures and develop strategies for liberating themselves of such oppression (Macedo, 2021).

Brighente (2020) builds a dialogue between socialist feminism and a pedagogy of oppressed women, drawing this last one from Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed. Both socialist feminism and a pedagogy of oppressed women, Brighente argues, prompt transformation of the contemporary capitalist and neoliberal system. However, this is only possible through education that is not traditional, but rather an "awareness-raising, liberating, feminist, socialist and popular education, created collectively in a horizontal, dialogical and democratic relationship" (Brighente, 2020, p. 3). Brighente (2020) suggests that a pedagogy of oppressed women corresponds to those women being aware of issues such as patriarchy,

race, class or ethnicity, and how they affect and constrain them. Oppressed women must learn, reflect and, consequently, engage in the fight against the oppressive system, which they can do through a liberating form of education that Brighente describes as “popular, feminist and socialist education, that must be constructed dialogically with women” (2020, p.7). Such education must focus, Brighente contends, on “a collective agenda” (p. 9), distanced from the characteristics of individualism and competitiveness found in neoliberal systems and education. Brighente claims that, “it is by sharing dissatisfactions they have in their private and public lives, and through attentively listening to others in their groups that women become critically aware” (p. 9).

In considering such arguments, what can be drawn from the pedagogy of the oppressed in relation to feminism is the necessity of learning, reflecting, and raising awareness about the circumstances of gender oppression and power imbalances, and the importance of collective, rather than individual, action.

Representations in the Media

In recent years, the issue of representation in the media has been discussed and re-evaluated, both within academic spaces and by general audiences through their use of social media and the internet. Speaking in a broader context about representation, Couldry (2012) explains how media institutions are responsible for “making” representations. Having considered representations as “a material site for the exercise of, and struggle over, power” (p. 48), the Couldry argues that media “re-present” worlds. By making truth claims, through its gaps and its repetitions of messages, images and meanings, the media is capable of distorting people’s sense of what they (people) see. This materiality of representation can be associated with systems of power circulating. Media institutions have a significant amount of symbolic power, or “the power to tell and circulate stories about the world” (Couldry, 2020, p. 159). In

considering that these stories can promote specific representational norms, these norms, Harvey (2019) claims, "should be understood as indicators of the perspectives of dominant ideologies" (p. 60). In the context of this research, the dominant ideologies are those concerning the representation of women.

Undoubtedly, there has been a shift in how female characters are portrayed in the media (Harvey, 2019). In *Feminist Media Studies*, Harvey (2019) discusses the concept of an "intersectional" grammar of gender. According to Harvey (2019), this grammar of gender includes three main topics through which it is possible to approach the issue of gender and representation in the media: the male gaze, politics of beauty, and the framing of women and girls.

The concept of the male gaze originates from Laura Mulvey, being addressed on Mulvey's essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, in 1975 (Mulvey, 1992). Mulvey drew on psychoanalysis (Lacan & Freud) to describe "ways of seeing and being seen" (Paasonen et al., 2020, p. 19) for women on screen. Mulvey (1992) addresses three different forms of looking in classical Hollywood cinema: "that of the camera as it records the profilmic event, that of the audience as it watches the final product, and that of the characters at each other within the screen illusion" (p. 33). Mulvey (1992) argues, however, that "the conventions of narrative film deny the first two and subordinate them to the third (p. 33). Mulvey (1992) draws on Freud's term, scopophilia, which is the "pleasure in looking at another person as an erotic object" (p. 32). In a movie, characters are framed as objects of pleasure for the audience. Consequently, the audience views those characters in a particular way, exercising the gaze (Krijnen & Van Bowel, 2021). In relation to women in particular, Mulvey argues (1992) that cinema "builds the way she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself" (p. 32), typically presenting women as passive, and to be looked at.

According to Paasonen et al. (2020), Mulvey politicised "the gendered relations of looking through critical analysis of the pleasures of mainstream, narrative cinema and their fantasy of man as active, desiring subject and woman as passively desired" (p. 21). Researchers critiqued Mulvey's earlier writings, claiming they adopt problematic binary categories of male and female, structured by dynamics of male heterosexual desire (Paasonen et al., 2020). Paasonen et al. (2020), for example, argue that the psychoanalytic basis of Mulvey's work resulted in her findings being "highly specific and limited" (p. 22). The work's strict gender binary, the female audience's position, and the heteronormative viewpoints were points of criticism (Krijnen & Van Bawel, 2022). Critics pointed to the problematic implications of Mulvey's work, where women could not be active, and men could not be passive. Female audiences had no way of enjoying movies, because they would always be watching themselves being objectified. Later, Mulvey revised her theoretical concept, attempting to make it less monolithic (Paasonen et al., 2020). Notably, during the classical Hollywood cinema period which Mulvey's work focused on, women were portrayed as characters existing for the visual pleasure of men, reinforcing gender inequality, binary pairings, and power imbalances (Paasenon et al., 2020). For the purpose of this research, Mulvey's work informs this study's examination of the increasing presence of the male gaze in popular discourse, and its discussion of surrounding critiques concerning the representation of women. Paasonen et al. (2020) explain that the concept of the male gaze "has migrated from describing specific conditions of film representation and spectatorship to become part of a popular debate around the representation of women's bodies across media" (p. 21). This point is part of a larger debate that I will return to in Chapter Two.

Returning to Harvey, the second author mentioned in Harvey's work is Naomi Wolf (1990). The concept of the politics of feminine beauty refers to the pressure women suffer to meet the expectations of beauty 'norms', and how the media has contributed to this pressure

through advertisements, magazines, models, and other unrealistic standards. Consequently, women fall into a disciplinary regime of beautification. According to Harvey (2019), the issues surrounding participation in these regimes resonates with postfeminist media culture and with the disciplinary power of the media. Women are led to believe that they are *choosing* to participate because, rather than these expectations being imposed on, and marketed to them. Participation and activities involving attempting to achieve impossible beauty goals are framed as not only pleasurable, but also as an expression of freedom.

Lastly, Harvey (2019) discusses a third topic, referred to as girls and women 'on top'. Acknowledging a more progressive depiction of women and girls in the media, Harvey (2019) notes research focused on these changes, including work from authors Tasker and Negra (2005), Gill (2009), Douglas (2010), Banet-Weiser (2011), Dobson (2011), and Gomez and McFarlane (2017).

The three threads above indicate how women perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others, and how such perceptions are intrinsically shaped by media. Pilcher and Whelehan (2017) suggest that these images have "reinforced dominant ideologies of gender difference and the qualities of ideal-type femininity; that they perpetuated such differences and entrenched them in the consciousness of subsequent generations" (p. 133). However, the authors also argue that the spectator's passivity was exaggerated in early feminist criticism. Recent critics have demonstrated that female viewers "can appropriate images to their own ends; that there is a plurality of meanings to be yielded and which are grasped by women" (p. 135). I approach some of these interpretations in the following chapters, by showing how participants engage with such meanings.

In relation to more recent depictions of women and girls in the media, although there are seemingly some improvements, Harvey (2019) highlights that it is fundamental "to read these texts in their broader contexts and reflect on trends in media culture and socio-political

realities in which they circulate" (p. 72). As I examine how women are depicted in superhero(ine) movies, and the global circulation of these texts, it is crucial to consider the contexts of media culture and socio-political realities.

Although media depictions of women have changed in recent times, they are still lacking in many. Harvey (2019) considers that there are two reasons behind the poor representation of women: one is that the media industry is male dominated, particularly by white men. The other one is that the film industry has, since the 1970s, primarily targeted an audience of men and boys who it assumes will not watch films featuring women, unless they are depicted in sexualised ways.

The lack of on-screen representation results in the absence of characters that the audience may identify with in terms of a more diverse range of demographics such as women, viewers of colour, or minorities (Hall, 2022). It can also lead to the absence of female role models (Stuller, 2010), particularly considering the uneven inclusion of women in film production being awarded leadership positions such as directors (Donoghue, 2022).

This process of identification is not only about presence or visibility (Harvey, 2019) of someone physically similar to media consumers. Instead, as Harvey (2019) articulates, this process of identification:

> Also concerns the range (or lack) of stories, dialogue, and lives that marginalized and oppressed groups are assigned in the media. Media portrayals reflect social norms and play a key role in circulating and perpetuating values about identities, communities, and cultures. (p. 55)

We can infer that representation is more than just giving visibility to groups in the sense of being physically present: it is also about telling stories which encompass narratives of minorities, valuing identities, and cultures, both on the screen and behind it. In considering

the connection between media and representation I ask: in which ways do studies about superheroines and representation connect?

Representation of Superheroines

One of the ways through which the representation of superheroines has been addressed in research is by investigating the sexualisation of action heroines in early 1980s and 1990s movies (Brown, 2011), although these writings are broader in considering action heroines, and not only characters from live-action superhero films. Particularly in relation to scholarship about superheroes, it is suggested by Stuller (2010), Brown (2011), Cocca (2016) and other authors that it has changed. Scholarship about superheroes moved from often condemning the ways women were portrayed in superhero stories, to seeking to explore positive aspects of representation. However, even when this was the case, scholarship was still exploring and criticising problematics often associated with women, such as domestic violence, motherhood, sexuality, and women's bodies (Goodrum et al., 2018).

Further, it is also argued that the representation of gender in superhero narratives has accompanied the development of women's rights movements (Goodrum et al., 2018). The character of Wonder Woman, for example, has existed since 1941, the year in which the comic was first published. Due to her longevity, it is possible to see how Wonder Woman was written to embody what was valued in various decades. In considering the most recent *Wonder Woman* films (2017 and 2020), Zitzer-Comfort and Rodríguez (2019), for example, discuss how Wonder Woman's 2017 film navigates between the third and fourth waves of feminism. Informed by Foss and Griffin's (1995) invitational rhetoric, the authors declare that the movie "encourages viewers to understand and identify with an innovative angle of telling that promotes progressive social change in the body politics by subverting hegemonic narratives about gender" (p. 186).

In considering how popular feminism and positive viewings intersect with superhero media, Frankel's points (2019) offer some insights. The author mentions that during the 2000s, there were challenges in portraying superheroes in movies (and media in general). Movies featuring female protagonists were financially unsuccessful – *Catwoman* (Pitof, 2004) and *Elektra* (Bowman, 2005) – and in others women were delegated to the role of love interest and/or damsel in distress, such as in *Batman Begins* (Nolan, 2005) or in the first *Spider-Man* trilogy (Raimi, 2002, 2004, 2007). However, events at the beginning of the 2010s, such as the Gamergate movement, all gaining attention because of the internet and social media, have brought these struggles into public debate, increasing public awareness and inclusivity. In a context in which toxic masculinity and rape were being debated in social media, shifts were starting to happen: from gender swaps in movies towards featuring more women as protagonists and changes in narratives. As Frankel (2019) contends, women can be Jedis, Stormtroopers or Ghostbusters.

However, despite women becoming more prominent on screen, and assuming more relevant, empowered roles, it remains important to interpret such shifts within the logics of capitalism and of neoliberalism: under these logics, this female empowerment is a product to be sold. After all, as Artz (2022) explains, the media industry that produces and circulates such narratives is part of a global culture industry, one that seeks profits in different ways. As Artz (2022) argues, within neoliberalism, the media plays a core role in terms of politics and the economy, because it helps "in constructing consent for dominant social relations, practices, and explanations" (p. 21). Within this logic, Artz (2022) argues that media is made transnational so that it can be sold. In order to be sold, strategies are used such as having more movie franchises with sequels and prequels, more spectacle, and elements such as more cultural diversity. Diversity, for example, is used "whenever and wherever possible to maximize audiences and profits" (Artz, 2022, p. 220). Consequently, such diversity is often

"artificial, constructed in service to the media owners, their shareholders, and capitalist investors" (Artz, 2022, p. 221). In a way, this also resonates with woke culture and popular feminism.

Taking all of these considerations into account, and particularly considering the transnational reach of these texts, it is important to look at the reception of these movies across borders, examining audience engagement, and how audiences interpret and articulate all meanings and messages.

Superheroines

Over recent years superhero media has become more inclusive, and characters have become more diverse. Such shifts, which started in comics (Cocca, 2016; Curtis & Cardo, 2018), also reached live action adaptations, with female characters becoming, for example, less hypersexualised, and more complex in their character development (Cocca, 2016). Among other things, these changes are accompanying feminist movements – particularly the third and fourth wave (Curtis & Cardo, 2018) – and other social movements, which have acquired more visibility because of social media and digital environments. Recent superhero studies scholarship attempts to make sense of the contexts in which these media products are created and distributed worldwide, always taking into consideration the multilayers of this claimed "new" era of diversity (Prescott et al., 2018; Curtis, 2020; Brown, 2021; Kent, 2021). Within this context, superhero media is seen as "symptomatic of broader cultural issues around gender equality" (Kent, 2021, p. 5), and exploring this media brings light to such issues.

Examples of scholarship that looks at gender within superhero media include writings by Goodrum et al. (2018), who call attention to power when questioning gender in superhero narratives (2018). Similarly, Kent (2021) addresses questions of power, feminist and

postfeminist politics, and representation in Marvel films. Kent (2021) argues that "the cultural moment in which superhero narratives have taken hold can be characterised as postfeminist, evoking a complex set of discourses concerning mainstreamed feminine subjectivities" (p. 3). In Marvel movies, for example, women occupy a range of roles: they can be the victimised superhero girlfriend (arguably, a role that has been changing to move characters beyond victims in need of saving), they can be white, thin and heterosexual superheroines, or they can be women of colour associated with post-racial media culture. Kent's (2021) findings suggest that, although there are heterogeneous representations of women in Marvel stories, all of them are still linked to a "unifying approach to womanhood" (p. 261) that erases individual experiences. Although Kent's (2021) approach does not include audience reception of these texts, it is possible to draw from Kent's work when considering the intersection of postfeminism and superheroines. However, I do that by examining audiences' responses to this intersection.

Carnes and Goren (2023) compiled articles that explore politics in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), arguing that, since they reach worldwide audiences, MCU films can promote reflections and understandings about real-world politics. One of these articles looks at characters such as Black Widow and Captain Marvel to explore how ideas of feminine power inside MCU films changed from solely being attached to women's sexuality, "to intersectional explorations of gender and race, girl-power superheroines, and recapitulation of feminine agency" (Beail, 2023, p. 195).

The examples of scholarship mentioned in the paragraphs above look at themes such as gender, feminism, postfeminism, and intersectionality. In addition, there are specific writings that examine the connection between superhero narratives and audiences, which are closely related to my own analysis. Pennel and Behm-Morowitz (2015), for example, conducted research among undergraduate American females to examine the effects of

exposure to gendered depictions of women in superhero films. In this research, participants watched video montages of female characters from both *Spider-Man* (Raimi, 2002, 2004, 2007) and *X-Men* (Singer, 2000, 2003; Ratner, 2006) films, and were asked to answer a questionnaire about the characterisation, and if they had enjoyed how characters were depicted. In concluding the research, the authors confirmed a dichotomy on how these films can influence their participants, with results varying between positively encouraging female audiences regarding their bodies, or affecting them negatively, in relation to lower self-esteem about their bodies for not achieving the body ideals depicted onscreen.

A more recent investigation was conducted by Hall (2022), where participants took part in an online survey that questioned if there were characters they could identify with from four blockbuster films: *Thor: Ragnarok* (Waititi, 2017), *Justice League* (Snyder, 2017), *Black Panther* (Coogler, 2018), or *Star Wars: Episode VIII – The Last Jedi* (Johnson, 2017). Although this study did not focus solely on female audiences, it measured identification with diverse characters, of different genders and races. According to Hall (2022), these films "offer the opportunity to investigate the implications of greater diversity in media representations for audiences' responses" (p. 145) and "allow a wider range of audience members to see prominent characters that are similar to themselves in terms of these demographic characteristics" (p. 145). An interesting result from this study is that both men and women were drawn to female characters "who were not highly objectified or presented in a sexualized way" (p. 423) which, according to Hall (2022), challenges producers' assumptions that men and boys did not want to watch films with women as protagonists, or women who were not the romantic or sexual interest. In fact, it proved that films with non-sexualised female leads "can be financially successful" (p. 423).

Studies such as the ones from Griffin (2022) and Paris and Uyheng (2023) add a social media dimension to their investigations, specifically Twitter discourses. Griffin (2022)

examined how audiences reacted to a specific moment in *Avengers: Endgame* (Russo & Russo, 2019) by analysing tweets about this moment. The scene in question presented a group of superheroines, but reactions to it were contradictory as to whether it was an effective depiction of female empowerment. In Chapter Five I elaborate on this debate. Paris and Uyheng (2023) looked at audiences' discourses on Twitter about *Birds of Prey* (Yan, 2020), examining how "online publics perform postfeminist audiencing in relation to women-centric superhero films" (p. 2029). In this research, the authors did not distinguish gender among participants when collecting tweets.

Shuai (2023) also analysed intersections between feminism, superheroines, and female audiences. Specifically, the study attempts to evaluate if the *Wonder Woman* film (and other superhero texts) can be read as feminist texts, and whether these texts are read and interpret differently by participants from different cultures. To do so, an online questionnaire was used with female participants that were British or Chinese. Shuai found that "many feminist readings of female-centric superhero films tend to be associated with the cultural specificity of the participant" (p. 15). British participants saw in *Wonder Woman* positive images of women, and identified feminist thinking common of Western feminism. In contrast, Chinese participants did not identify feminist representation. The author claims that "unpacking the ideological message of a film should always be evaluated through the paradigms of cultural and social specificity" (p. 15).

In sum, among the examples above, some investigated elements such as representation and responses to diversity, while others investigated feminist-related themes. Some looked specifically at female audiences, while others did not. Some looked at discourses in social media (Twitter). While each one of these approaches investigated a particular topic or aspect, my study contributes to this literature as I build a dialogue that takes all of these aspects into consideration. I delve, for example, into discussions about both *Wonder Woman* films (2017

and 2020) in Chapters 4 and 5, elaborating on how the character continues to promote gender-related discussions. In Chapter Four, participants critique a sexist depiction of Wonder Woman in relation to her romantic partner, Steve Trevor. In contrast, in Chapter Five, Wonder Woman is praised instead of criticised, perceived as a genuine rather than tokenistic example of female representation.

In a broader sense, such issues and debates regarding representation and how participants engage with these representations are integral to this thesis, particularly in Chapters 2 and 5. In Chapter Two, I explore the visual representation of female characters in superhero films and television shows, and how participants engage with them. In this chapter, one of the topics I approach is how participants perceive and critique the male gaze, a common way to frame women in superhero live action films, perpetuating sexism. I also discuss costuming, focusing on changes in costuming, which have become less sexualised and more fitting for superheroines' needs.

In Chapter Five, I discuss changes in diversity. Contemporary superhero blockbusters for example, include more actresses of colour and actresses with disabilities, with more important roles. There are also more women directing and producing these films. Chapter Five considers these changes as intertwined with woke capitalism. The core of the debate in Chapter Five is to observe how participants are perceiving these shifts within the context of woke culture, and how they articulate representational gains and the dynamics of woke capitalism.

Underpinning these discussions is participation. Participants are inserted into participatory culture, and their engagement with characters comes from consuming and circulating texts and paratexts, hence the need to highlight these two concepts in the following segments.

Paratexts

In media, paratext is the term used by Gray (2010; Brookey & Gray, 2017) to identify everything that is not the main text, but that is significant for an individual to make sense of a media object. In an interview for Jenkins' blog (2010), Gray uses the example of a film trailer: even though the audience has not yet watched the film, the trailer allows them to create expectations and to engage with characters and with the general idea of the narrative.

Gray (2018) explains paratexts in relation to the work of Genette (1997), who wrote about paratexts in relation to books. According to Gray (2010), paratexts have "considerable power to amplify, reduce, erase, or to add meaning" (p. 46) to any text. Consequently, the author argues that when someone interprets certain content, much of their interpretation comes from paratexts. Therefore, studying paratexts allows us to understand "how meaning is created" (Gray, 2010, p. 26) not only for consumers of those texts, but also "in popular culture and society more generally" (p. 26). To further define a text within the context of paratexts, Gray draws from Barthes. For Barthes, there is a difference between a text and a work. A work is what can be held in hands, such as a tape or a book. A text "is held in language, only exists in the movement of a discourse" (Barthes, as cited in Gray, 2010, p. 30). Texts are experienced in acts of consumption, which Barthes considers acts of production. When someone reads (or consumes) a text, they are not exempt from their background history and their life experiences. When a text is read, it is interpreted based on an individual's previous experiences and understandings. This process explains why each consumer can interpret texts in different ways. Our past textual experiences and knowledge allow us to give meaning to and understand texts (Gray, 2010).

Gray (2010) argues that there are various types of paratexts. There are, for example, "entryway paratexts", which work as an entry gate for a text; and paratexts to fill in gaps in

texts. For the moment, I am not interested in classifying them. Instead, a more relevant discussion is the viewing and creation of paratexts by audiences.

Gray (2010) contends that, although audiences create paratexts, they usually lack capital or infrastructure to do so as uniformly as official producers (Hollywood). Although this is true, it would be wrong to ignore how the creation and circulation of content (particularly paratexts) has changed since this claim (2010), due to digital technologies. A viral video or meme, for example, can quickly reach a greater number of viewers than was possible fourteen years ago. Concerning these changes over time, Brookey and Gray (2017) later reflect on the association between paratexts and social media. In relation to paratexts, Gray argues, digital media functions as "organization systems that arrange how we interact with texts" (Brookey & Gray, 2017, p. 104). Digital media also allows for "the proliferation of paratextuality" (Brookey & Gray, 2017, p. 104) because, through clicks and online navigation, people can reach many more paratexts than is possible in a physical space.

In considering what a paratext is, Gray (2010) argues that even a discussion between two people about a film or television show can be a form of paratextuality. Similarly, paratexts range from criticism and review, to fanfiction, fanart, memes, videos, and others. Because almost anything can be a paratext, Brookey and Gray (2017) call for "greater attention to their roles in creating mediaculture, meaning, and power" (p. 101). For the purposes of study and research, as it is the case for this thesis, Gray (2010) considers paratexts "pre-constituted audience research, providing evidence of how viewers make sense of texts" (p. 146). Additionally, paratexts can reveal "ways in which communities of audiences interact with and thereby create texts, not just ways in which individuals fashion them" (p. 146). Paratexts "aim to direct our reading, viewing, and listening in particular ways" (Gray, 2018, p. 213), therefore, Gray suggests a few pertinent questions to employ when studying paratexts. Some of these questions – and the ones I consider particularly relevant when

looking at paratexts present in this research – involve questioning how the paratext frames the text, and what hopes or expectations it establishes. Gray (2018) also suggests questioning who it invites as an audience (or it could be for various types of audiences). Most importantly, "what basic themes and deeper meanings does it propose?" (2018, p. 213) and "what kind of politics – if any – does it propose?" (2018, pp. 213-214). In relation to the audience, Gray suggests asking who is likely to encounter a specific paratext. Such questions help us to understand the meaning of and the importance of paratexts in constructing audiences' engagement and comprehension in relation to texts.

Participatory Culture

With advances in digital technologies such as social media platforms, apps, or other tools of production, those with access and inclination to produce media content can do so and publish it online, reconfiguring "relationships between producers and consumers in the digital economy" (Wang, 2020, p. 48). Therefore, "consumers of media are now able to participate in the production of content" (Keltie, 2017, p. 1). Participatory culture characteristics are defined byJenkins (2009) and include the following cultural practices: low barriers to artistic expression, civic engagement, support for creating and sharing creations, informal mentorship, belief among members that their contributions matter, and a sense of social connection with each other inside a community. For Jenkins (2009), participation and practices such as fanfics can be seen as acts of resistance. Such fan practices seem to indicate "the empowerment of fans, challenging the authority of professional media producers" (Wang, 2020). One form of resistance is through paratexts because "the products of fan creativity can challenge a text's industry-preferred meanings by posing their own alternate readings and interpretive strategies" (Gray, 2010, p. 144).

However, although audience participation is often celebrated as a form of empowerment and resistance, it is not free from tensions or critiques. Bird (2011) critiques the tendency to understood active audiences as 'produsers', expressing three types of concern. The first is that we must consider that the majority of people are not produsers. It would be misleading to perceive all audience members as active participants, who are creating and producing content. The second concern is that "the focus on fan produsage and local agency downplays the power of media producers, who while they certainly respond to fan demands, have also learned quickly to co-opt fan activities and viral media" (p. 507). Bird (2011) argues that online produsage still falls into elements of surveillance and discipline because "media industries are becoming very adept at disciplining produsage" (p. 507). Lastly, Bird (2011) argues that viewing audiences in this way "may lead to neglect of the larger questions of media influence on audiences" (p. 508), referring to the power that media has "to inscribe privileged representations of the world" (p. 508). Focusing too much on positive aspects of active audiences may result in neglecting the fact that media industries still have power to impose their own viewings and representations.

Keltie (2017) is also critical of the discourse of participatory culture because it "creates a false view of freedoms made possible by the cultural uses of convergent media technology" (p. 136): there is a risk when we only see participatory culture as empowering its users, because it sets aside how corporations might be exploring such practices. Keltie (2017) explains that, "although participatory culture is associated with "a more democratic and open media space" (p. 134), what can happen "is a culture industry that instead allows for media participation to occur in certain ways" (p. 134). While Jenkins (2009) sees participatory culture as empowering consumers and being used as forms of resistance, Keltie (2017) suggests that the industry can be exploiting such practices and finding ways to benefit

themselves.

One way the media industry exploits its audiences is through the unpaid work of participants (Terranova, 2013; Wang, 2020). Terranova defines this phenomenon through the concept of 'free labour' (Wang, 2020). Drawing from the economy and later applying it to the digital environment, Terranova (2013) writes that free labour "is the moment where this knowledgeable consumption of culture is translated into excess productive activities that are pleasurably embraced and at the same time often shamelessly exploited" (p. 37). Such work online is "simultaneously voluntarily given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited" (p. 33). Wang (2020) notes that fans' practices can be considered free labour, "which is prone to be exploited by media industry in the digital context, since most of the practices are beneficial for media producers but rarely being compensated" (p. 48).

Expanding on forms of exploiting participative audiences, Wang (2020) describes three other ways that this exploitation happens: as part of a marketing strategy, through exploiting privacy data, and through monetising fan-generated content. While the second and third are forms of making profit through selling audiences' private data to advertisers or corporations, or through effectively making profit from audiences' works and creativity, the first form of exploitation manipulates audiences' belief that their opinions and argument play a meaningful role in changing products. When audiences give feedback on something they agree or disagree with, media producers are likely to make changes in order to meet such demands. This leads fans to believe that their opinions are valorised and meaningful, and that they are indeed empowered audiences. However, to media producers, this feedback is a form of inexpensive market research. As Wang (2020) identifies, "the feeling of participation makes fans believe that they have played an active and creative role in producing the media products, which can increase their participation-based loyalty" (p. 48). It is not to say that

their feedback or online comments do not influence on media production, "but rather that such processes of influence may be more powerless than assumption" (p.48).

While there are discussions that celebrate the empowerment and participation of digital audiences, there are also limitations, tensions and problems that should also be considered when studying audiences. However, participatory culture still has the potential to disrupt stabilised fields of power, and such disruptions happen when new agents enter the field due to their access to new technologies. Although various works (Jenkins, 2009; Delwiche & Henderson, 2013; Keltie, 2017) explore participatory culture in more depth, particularly looking at how agents use technology and how they might be disrupting fields of power, this thesis demonstrates how participants use technology, not to necessarily disrupt fields of power, but to access discussions and reflections surrounding questions of gender.

I consider a range of forms of online participation. Chapter One shows how some participants are openly creating content, such as writing on websites or creating videos and doing livestreams. Chapter Two contains posts from Instagram and Facebook through which participants engaged in discussions about visual representation. In Chapter Three, I address the use of memes and their contribution to a specific debate about gender inequality. Chapter Four includes some Instagram posts which contributed to participants' reflection about grief.

Crucially, all of these forms of online participation are enabled by, and complement, the interests of film studios and social media platforms. In considering, for example, woke culture and the advantages it brings to the media industry, it would be naïve to argue that the industry gains nothing from audiences' online engagement. In Chapter Five, I discuss some of the ways in which these dynamics happen; the ways through which participants use official paratexts, elaborating on how there is a dependency in relation to official content. In this sense, the interests of film studios can prevail. It is also important to examine the extent to

which participants' participation may exceed and/or exist in tension with the interests of studios and media platforms.

At the same time, these tensions and forms of participation might also be taken into account when analysing the particular conditions that shape participants' articulations of postfeminism and popular feminism. Such conditions involve global film brands and platforms, but they also connect to local political and media dynamics. This thesis investigates the ways that local contexts and experiences could influence participants' engagement with, or use of, specific texts. In Chapter One and in Chapter Four, I explore some of these issues, addressing how the COVID-19 pandemic shaped both audience's reception of a narrative, as well as their lives.

In the next section, I describe the methodology for this thesis. I detail my methods, the process of data collection, and the analysis of data.

Methodology

This study consists of a qualitative approach. The methodology I have applied for data collection consists of a hybrid set of techniques combining digital diaries, in-depth semi-structured interviews and focus groups. For data analysis, I used thematic analysis and textual analysis, underpinned by literature from feminist studies, superhero studies and celebrity studies, among others.

This work contributes towards understanding of the current dynamics between audiences of the superhero live action genre and their perception of gender representation, which they access through official and non-official texts and paratexts. Despite a wealth of previous studies dedicated to audiences of the superhero live action genre (Pennel & Behm-Morowitz, 2015; Hall, 2022; Griffin, 2022; Paris & Uyheng, 2023; Shuai, 2023), the speed at which change occur in the media industry opens room for new investigations. Due to technological changes, the production, circulation and consumption of these texts has been changing. My intention is to build a discussion that encompasses at least a little of what is happening at a specific period of time.

Previous research regarding superhero film audiences uses a variety of methods to question participants about the characters: questionnaires (Pennel & Behm-Morowitz, 2015), surveys (Hall, 2022), online surveys (Shuai, 2023), and analysis of Tweets (Griffing, 2022; Paris & Uyheng, 2023). In contrast, not only does my discussion touch on a range of topics, but also the combination of methods and approach in this work gave participants opportunity to express their opinions, arguments, critiques, and fears more freely.

Importantly, as a Brazilian/Latina researcher, I was concerned by the discrepancy in the amount of research focused mainly on North America and Europe about superheroes and/or superhero audiences. Although some research about these subjects does exist in

relation to other countries, the centrality of superheroes research appears to be concentrated in specific regions, particularly North America.

Prior to starting this research, having observed the Brazilian scenario in relation to women who consume and/or produce superhero-related content, I saw dynamics that I was intrigued by, and that I believed deserved more attention. As a result, I centred my research on Brazilian and New Zealand participants, with the goal of paying attention to the Global South, and of executing a more transnational study which, according to Harvey (2019), can contribute to explorations of power, agency, choice, and empowerment. I chose these two countries as their populations are ethnically diverse, which could contribute positively to the research, as I hoped to capture diverse voices. New Zealand's population is described as "superdiverse" and the country itself is ethnically diverse (Webb, 2019). Brazil is also diverse in terms of race and ethnicity, due to its history (Silva & Paixão, 2021).

At the beginning of this project, it was established that the objects of study would be stories and characters from Marvel and DC, with participants aware of that from the moment they were invited to participate in the project. The main reason behind these choices lies in how popular their blockbusters and other media products are worldwide. Dominating media circulation, they have more visibility and are easily accessed by participants. Due to their prevalence in mainstream media, it is easy for people to create a connection with or at least to know characters from these worlds. Opting for these two media companies limits the object of study since it does not include characters from other publishers or companies. This limitation, however, can provide a deeper analysis. In the following pages, I outline each step of my research process.

Methods

According to Altheide and Schneider (2013), the methods chosen for a research project ought to be influenced by a combination of the nature of what is being investigated, along with the questions that are being asked. I have chosen a hybrid methodology that consists of digital diaries, interviews and focus groups. I believe that combining these methods is the optimal way to understand participants' engagement and their meaning-making process, and to obtain a glimpse of their experiences with the narratives and characters. First, using digital methods such as digital diaries and online interviews fitted well with the nature of this study, in which online participation has an important role. Second, I started this research during pandemic times. Due to the limitations imposed by the pandemic in terms of researching, I have opted for methods which seemed to be able to encompass all that I wanted to investigate, which were safe and accessible for me and for participants.

Social media's pervasiveness in people's lives is acknowledged, specifically as platforms for socialisation (Altheide & Schneider, 2013; Sloan & Quan-Haase, 2016; Harvey, 2019). Interactions on these platforms are often linked with events that happen outside of them. These engagements are "produced within a specific historical, social, political and economic context" (Sloan & Quan-Haase, 2016, p. 3). In parallel, cultural materials such as films or television series are also produced under certain political and economic conditions. Researching cultural products enables us to better understand a society at a particular historical place and time (Brennen, 2017). Furthermore, from the 2000s to the present day, two significant shifts occurred: the mediatisation of social life with new technologies, and the awareness about the importance of this mediatisation (Altheide & Schneider, 2013). As stated by Williams et al. (2017), despite the challenges for social media research, it is accepted that

interactions on these platforms "constitute a socio-technical assemblage that creates a new public sphere where key aspects of civil society are played out" (p. 1151).

The qualitative approach I adopted here requires using language and communication to engage with participants' experiences. Brennen (2017), building upon Kvale (1996), considers qualitative studies as interdisciplinary, interpretive, political and theoretical, declaring they help us to make sense of human relationships. Meanwhile, Jensen (2020) considers three characteristics of qualitative research. The first is its focus on meaning, as it looks at how people interpret the world around them. Consequently, the researcher "interpret[s] the interpretation that individuals and groups have of themselves" (p. 287). The second characteristic is the assumption that the communication event should be examined "in its naturalistic contexts" (p. 287). In other words, the context in which a communicative phenomenon happens is important. The third characteristic is understanding that researchers are "interpretive subjects" (p. 287). While quantitative analysis can, to an extent, use computerised procedures to help with the investigation, qualitative analysis often employs human researchers throughout all stages of the research. Consequently, there is the "pervasive nature of interpretation throughout the research process" (pp. 287-288).

In relation to thematic analysis, Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that it is "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (p. 79), allowing for interpretations of various aspects present in the research topic. These authors consider that a theme "captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (p. 82). In addition, Braun and Clarke (2006) describe thematic analysis as being "a flexible and useful research tool" (p. 78): its flexibility is said to be one of its benefits. Following this logic, through using thematic analysis, I was able to identify a set of themes of discussion in relation to a wider research topic. I return to this in more detail later in this chapter.

Data Collection

Data collection took place between August 2021 and January 2022. As noted, three methods were used to collect data. The first was asking participants to complete a digital diary. As stated by Volpe (2019), digital diaries can capture "the everyday" (p. 364), or what is significant. Digital diaries have proved useful to register the meaning people attach to events (Bartlett & Milligan, 2015). The use of the diary method for this research is considered appropriate because it provides "a more in-depth understanding of people's interpretation of their worlds" (Bartlett & Milligan, 2015, p. 15). Diaries not only can be combined with other methods, but they can also take different forms, such as being written, spoken, visual, with photos, collages (Lupton, 2021) – depending on the necessity of the research, and of what is available for the participant to use or to do.

Lupton (2021) registered diaries/journaling as a technique that was used during COVID-19 pandemic times, emphasising that diaries, when used in combination with other techniques, can act as a prompt for further conversation. Similarly, in my study, diaries have provided prompts for further conversation. Diaries were used in conjunction with follow-up interviews. Participants were asked to complete a digital diary over a period of two weeks, with the beginning of it depending on when they had agreed to participate in the research. They were asked to register on Google Docs or Microsoft Word their impressions, opinions, and whatever circulated through their social media pages which captured their attention about any film or television shows from Marvel or DC. They could include images, memes, comments, tweets, messages, posts, links, news, fanart, videos – any sort of digital material/content. If they considered it interesting, they could take a screenshot of it and share it in their diaries.

Although they were invited to write as well, the majority of the diaries consisted of images (various screenshots). This method provided an initial contact with participants' experiences and interests. By themselves, participants curated a collection of what was appealing to them, based on what they saw on their own social media feeds. Consequently, much of what was registered followed what was circulating on social media during that specific time. Notably, participants were not asked to focus their content exclusively on superheroines: they had the freedom to include whatever they chose, so long as it was about superhero movies and television shows. This opening could provide a wider context for their engagement with superhero(ine) texts. I was interested in learning if participants spontaneously selected content related to superhero(ine)s. I was also concerned with discovering which topics participants were interested in, within the universe of superheroes, and which portion of these topics connected to my research goals. Since this was the first step, based on what they had selected, I was able to narrow this down to superhero(ine) related content.

Ultimately, participants included memes, posters, fanart, and other images, mainly from Twitter, Facebook or Instagram. Using diaries, participants recorded what was relevant to them, such as impressions and feelings (Alaszewski, 2005). The focus was not on the researcher's impressions about the topic, but rather, participants' voices and perceptions were captured.

In completion of their diaries, participants were invited to take part in an interview. These interviews took place online, via Zoom, with the exception of two that were written interviews, as these participants were uncomfortable with a face-to-face spoken interview. All of them were in-depth, semi-structured interviews, and they took approximately one hour. Interviews, when used as a qualitative method, work as "a vehicle for bringing forward the media-induced meanings of the informant's lifeworld" (Schroder, 2013, p. 143).

These interviews were in-depth because they were individual interviews. According to Lichtman, the one-to-one situation opens space for more detailed questions. The author adds that "the individual interview may thus be the best choice for a researcher who wishes to illuminate a sensitive issue, located beyond the discursive range of the socially acceptable" (2013, p. 153). Individual interviews facilitated discussion, helping the majority of participants feel at ease, especially in addressing sensitive themes such as gender or misogyny. However, whilst some participants felt safer and secure this way, others felt more comfortable in a group because they benefited from a supportive peer environment.

The interviews were also semi-structured: a prepared written set of questions was used with all participants. Depending on how the conversation progressed, more questions were added, following the lead of participants (if they were interested in a specific topic, character, or movie, for example). Digital diaries also functioned as guides/prompts for the interviews, with some questions being developed based on what a person shared. Consequently, some questions depended on each participant's individual diary. One participant, for instance, included photos/posters of Harley Quinn in her diary. During our interview, I acknowledged this inclusion, asking for her view of the character, based on the films Harley Quinn features in. This prompted the participant to discuss how Harley was portrayed in an abusive relationship in *Suicide Squad* (Ayer, 2016), and how she found more autonomy in the following two movies. The participant also elaborated on a connection between Harley Quinn's dependence/abusive relationship and her costume.

Similarly, another participant shared a photograph of the warriors from Wakanda (Dora Milaje – *Black Panther*, 2018). This participant not only praised their costuming, but when I questioned her about this specific image, she elaborated on the sexualisation of the character, and the importance of adequate clothing for warrior characters. She also commented that, as a teacher, she sees how her students watch and engage with these

characters, observing how they interpret what they watch, including their understanding about the clothing they see characters wearing.

The interviews were recorded (audio and video) with the participants' authorisation, and then transcribed. Interviews with Brazilian participants were conducted in Brazilian Portuguese. I translated them into English after having transcribed them. Importantly, I endeavoured to maintain the original meaning the participants' contributions. I tried to make the interview situation as informal as possible, always keeping in mind that they were academic interviews, which had to follow some procedures. The informal aspect was to make participants comfortable, enabling them to speak freely. To create this environment, I began with the question, "Who is your favourite superheroine?" Sometimes the participant would say something immediately, and their answer led to other questions such as "What do you like about them?" In contrast, the prepared questions asked of every participant were broader or more general. Examples include "Have you noticed any changes regarding superheroine representation in recent years?" and "Which social media do you generally use?" Leading with simple questions, I discovered more complex ones, whether they were previously scripted or if they had emerged during the interview, based on what the participant was saying. The complete set of questions can be found in Appendix A. All participants that completed digital diaries were invited to participate in interviews, and all of them agreed – a total of fourteen participants.

The third method utilised was focus groups. Once participants were invited to participate in the study, they were given the opportunity to choose between doing a digital diary/interview, or participating in a focus group, or both. As reported by Guest et al. (2013), focus groups use elements of human conversation such as opinions and perceptions. In these focus groups, participants were guided by a few questions to prompt conversation. They were then able to talk freely about their impressions and opinions about movies and television

shows. Again, having prepared questions assisted in encouraging participants to be comfortable with each other and to share their own experiences and perspectives.

Notably, focus groups as a research method "produce data that would be less accessible without that interaction" (Morgan, 2019, p. 5). When participants interact with each other, they generate specific information that originates exclusively from that interaction. In my research, for example, participants from one of the focus groups found that they were all content creators, and this connection prompted them to share common struggles. In another group, participants were commonly annoyed by *Wonder Woman 1984*, specifically regarding how romance was portrayed.

Focus groups usually ran for approximately 90 minutes, finishing with a "game". I showed participants images (usually posters or promotional images) of some characters and asked them to say the first thing that came to mind about each character. This game worked well because important topics emerged from this discussion, in a seemingly natural flow of conversation. I showed the group a promotional image of Captain Marvel (*Captain Marvel*, 2019), for example, which ignited a debate about footwear. Although Captain Marvel's boots were not visible, participants started comparing her footwear to Wonder Woman's, arguing that flat boots are a better option than footwear with heels. Participants even started searching for other photos or more information about which type of footwear characters such as Captain Marvel, Wonder Woman (*Wonder Woman*, 2017) or Gamora (*Guardians of the Galaxy*, Gunn, 2014, 2017) wear. Interestingly, the act of being together in a group in conversation turned this topic into something more comfortable to them. They searched online and shared information with each other while the focus group was happening, showing that even during that time they used their online engagement to learn and to interact with information about superheroines.

According to Morgan (2019), focus groups may have limitations. For example, what a participant will say may be influenced by their interaction with other participants. However, it is precisely because of the interaction among participants that conversations in focus groups may generate new, interesting information (Morgan, 2019).

In total, I conducted three focus groups: two with Brazilian participants and one with New Zealanders. The original plan was to conduct two focus groups, one for each country. However, because more participants commented that they wanted to participate in focus groups, I added a third one. All three took place online, via Zoom. Conducting them online was the best (and only) option available, considering the COVID-19 pandemic context and the fact that participants live far from each other across both countries.

At a certain moment, the research reached a point of saturation, at which point I was not obtaining any new information. With the data that I had gathered, I started noticing patterns and themes that could be disentangled into a constructive discussion.

Who Have I listened To?

Demographics for this study consist of Brazilians and New Zealanders. Participants were invited to record their ethnicities when completing the consent form, but this information was not compulsory. Many did not complete this section. Among those that did, there were participants who identified as Fijian-Indian, Māori, Southeast-Asian, and Jewish Mauritanian-Indian. All these participants were from New Zealand.

Participants had to:

1 – Identify as women (cis or trans) or non-binary and be older than 18 years old.

2 – Be a social media user (any sort of social media).

3 – To some extent, consume superhero content.

In total, there were 12 Brazilian participants and 7 New Zealanders. Among them, one participant identified as non-binary. The tables below show information about participants, which consists of their pseudonyms (to preserve their anonymity), if they participated in digital diaries, interviews, or focus groups (marked in grey), if they are only consumers or also content creators[9] (indicated by the term 'producer'), their gender identification and ethnicity. Recording their ethnicity was optional.

Table 1

New Zealand Participants

Name	**Diary and Interview**	**Focus group**	**Consumer or Producer**	**Gender**	**Ethnicity**
Jessica			Consumer	Female	Not provided
Sarah			Consumer	Female	Not provided
Evan			Consumer	Non Binary	Māori
Andie			Consumer	Female	European/Pākehā
Rachel			Consumer	Female	Fijian-Indian
Anna			Consumer	Female	Southeast Asian
Olivia			Consumer	Female	NZ, Jewish, Mauritanian/Indian

Table 2

Brazilian Participants

[9] For further discussion about content creators, see Chapter One.

Name	Diary and Interview	Focus group	Consumer or Producer	Gender	Ethnicity
Julia	■	■	Consumer	Female	Black
Amanda	■	■	Consumer	Female	Not provided
Camila	■		Consumer	Female	White
Fernanda	■		Consumer	Female	White
Carolina	■		Consumer	Female	Not provided
Beatriz	■		Consumer	Female	Not provided
Mariana	■		Consumer	Female	Not provided
Luana		■	Producer	Female	Not provided
Isabela		■	Producer	Female	Not provided
Larissa		■	Producer	Female	Not provided
Vitoria		■	Producer	Female	Not provided
Gabriela		■	Producer	Female	White

When I wrote my confirmation report in the first half of 2021, the original idea was to visit universities, geek stores, cinemas, or any other public space where I would be able to talk to people who enjoy pop culture and invite them to participate in this research. The invitation would be via a printed poster, distributed around the city of Auckland in New Zealand. Although finding participants can be challenging, I was not discouraged. Unfortunately, approximately three days after I had started walking around with my posters, Auckland entered a pandemic-related lockdown which lasted from August 2021 to November 2021. This presented more significant challenges in attracting participants and conducting interviews.

Generally, there was significant interest in the study, however not many people replied when I first contacted them to talk about the research. My attempts at gathering participants from New Zealand consisted of my own contacts (friends) in Art Schools from Auckland, reaching universities outside Auckland with the help of my supervisors, joining Facebook groups with similar themes (for example: Massey Movie Albany, NZ cosplay communities, Geek communities, LGBTQ communities). Later, due to a limited number of responses, I started searching for participants on Twitter and Instagram by looking at followers of the Armageddon[10] account, cosplayers living in New Zealand, followers of Disney+ NZ, etcetera. Ultimately, I gathered together enough participants to continue.

Finding Brazilian participants was less difficult. I searched for participants on Facebook and Instagram. Although I was looking at geek accounts, I concentrated my efforts on Geek Page B[11] Facebook group and Instagram. Geek Page B is a website for discussions of gender and feminism in pop culture, and their social media pages have thousands of followers. Those that accepted also invited their friends.

For both countries, I approached people explaining that I was a researcher from Massey University who was undertaking research to understand their engagement with superhero content. It was a challenging task. The most effective way I found was doing the "manual" work of finding those that had commented on or reacted to posts connected with my research focus. I attempted, for example, to speak with commenters/reactors on a post about a superhero movie posted on Geek Page B's account, and a cosplayer photograph from Armageddon's account. One of the limitations of this approach was the lack of responses to my messages. The other was that not everyone accepted the invitation.

[10] Armageddon is New Zealand's primary Science Fiction and Fantasy Fair. Their social media accounts are followed by those who enjoy these topics. Instagram: https://www.Instagram.com/armageddonexponz/
[11] Geek Page B is a pseudonym to protect the name of the site, which is further discussed in Chapter One.

Among participants, at least three were invited by friends (all three participating in focus groups). The majority (around ten or more from the total) found out about the research from groups on Facebook, whether by seeing my post inviting them to participate, or accepting the invitation after I sent private messages personally inviting them. I have opted for private messages because I saw that some groups – for example, the Geek Page B group – had thousands of participants, but few saw my post or other people's. It is likely that these users had turned off notifications: a direct approach via private message briefly explaining what I was doing had a higher response rate.

Ethics

Ethical considerations are a key part of the entire research process. According to Israel, a consideration of ethics helps in protecting "individuals, communities and environments, and offers the potential to increase the sum of good in the word" (2015, p. 2). It is crucial to maintain ethical behaviour from the beginning to the end of the study, including in relation to posterior use of findings. Together with my supervisors, I considered ethical questions related to this research, including data collection and participant anonymity. In addition, sensitive content was also considered. The Low-Risk Ethics application[12] was approved prior to data collection.

What is particularly challenging about my research – and what consequently demands extra care – is that part of the data was collected from social media. Whilst there are some clear frameworks for offline research, social media constitutes relatively new forms of data that "do not fit neatly into established practice" (Halford, 2017, p. 20). In considering such challenges, Whiteman (2011) suggests that frameworks must encompass the use of data, the

[12] Ethics Notification Number: 4000024013

responsibility to research participants, and the extent to which existing ethical procedures should be applied to online research. According to Williams et al. (2017), research that involves or is conducted using social media platforms demands the same ethical care as offline research, and perhaps even more.

Because of rapid changes in the online environment, researchers have attempted to adapt ethical frameworks so that they can function within a medium that is "characterized by a blurring of the public and private" (Williams et al., 2017, p. 28). Various societies and groups of researchers have been working on this, developing specific ethical principles for research in digital environments, such as the British Psychological Society (BPS), the British Educational Research Association (BERA), the European Society for Opinion and Market Research (ESOMAR), and the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) (Williams et al., 2017). In this research, I draw from the AoIR guidelines (2012, 2019), as well as from other authors.

According to the AoIR guidelines (2012), internet research encompasses, among other things, research that utilises the internet to collect data, studies how people use the internet (for example, social media participation), or even methods of analysis such as visual, textual or content analysis when they refer to the web or when they are media forms facilitated by the internet. Arguably, because of the uniqueness of each research situation, it is impossible to have and to apply a standard model of research ethics. Instead, each ethical framework depends on the specific context and situation for that research. Therefore, I had to consider the context of my research when thinking about the ethical approach. Although a standard ethical framework is not possible, there are some basic common principles, including "obtaining informed consent, maintaining confidentiality and anonymity, and minimizing risk of harm to participants and researchers" (Williams et al., 2017, p. 32).

Informed consent is an early part of the research process. Before anything, participants (or, in this case, possible participants) must be aware of the purpose of the research, of what participation involves, and how data will be used. Their involvement is about comprehending what the research entails and agreeing to participate in it (Israel, 2015). In my research, I worked with an information sheet and consent form. The information sheet detailed the research: what the study was about, who could participate in it and how to do so, among other information. In the consent form, participants could choose the way they would participate (digital diary and interview, focus group, or both). Additionally, in the consent form, participants could choose to fill in information about any topics they were uncomfortable discussing in the focus group, along with details such as their ethnicity or country: these details were not mandatory. Throughout the process, participants had autonomy regarding what kind of information they wanted to share.

Due to the limitations on meeting participants in person[13], they read and signed the consent form online. Because I was working with participants from different countries, both the consent form and the information sheet had a version in English and a version in Brazilian Portuguese, so that each participant could read them in their own language. Overall, all communication with participants – whether to inform about the research or during data collection – were held either in English or in Portuguese. The data in Portuguese was translated into English afterwards.

In relation to confidentiality and anonymity, Williams et al. (2017) suggest that there are three challenges. The first is the safety of data collection and storage. The second is the possibility that among participants there may be a few that want to be credited for the information they share with the researcher. The third is the risk of breaking confidentiality. It

[13] Not only the research included participants from two countries, but it was undertaken during the pandemic.

is acknowledged that within existing ethical guidelines, to preserve anonymity is crucial. Supposedly, the researcher must ensure "no one knows who has said what in a report" (Williams et al., 2017, p. 33). However, in the context of research involving social media and the internet in general, the researcher has less control over the data they are handling.

Because of the nature of the digital environment, arguably participants' contributions can be tracked back to the original source: as Williams et al. (2017) state, "anonymity cannot be protected" (p. 33). Similarly, according to the AoIR guidelines (2012), because there is a possibility for identification even with anonymised data, extra care is necessary to protect participants. According to Israel (2015), "administrative, physical and technical safeguards" (p. 107) can help protect participants. These include removing names or anything that can identify the participant, as early as possible. Israel also suggests masking data, which can be achieved in a variety of ways, such as eliminating obvious identifiers, or even limiting geographic details. Overall, the literature has proven that maintaining complete anonymity after publishing is challenging (Israel, 2015).

In considering the nature of my research, preserving participants' anonymity was both crucial and challenging. Although I hid information that could reveal participants' identities (such as names, and details from social media accounts), it is almost impossible to ensure that no one else would be able to find the relevant posts. It was necessary to retain some information, such as the participants' countries, because this was part of the research. Furthermore, I kept certain information such as post titles because this was important for contextualising the post in question. In addition, specific information about the participants – particularly the information that some of them were content creators – was also maintained for better contextualising their experiences in relation to the research. As for collection and storage, digital diaries were registered with the support of Google Docs or any other doc/file

that participants were comfortable with. Focus groups and interviews were recorded in video/audio, and the files stored in a password-protected computer.

Lastly, in considering the possibility of harm, there is an "obligation to avoid causing physical, emotional, or psychological harm to participants" (Williams et al., 2017, p. 34). The entire research must be conducted in a way that minimises any type of harm. Participants' needs must be considered, with adequate support available when necessary. In addition, discussion of certain topics that may trigger participants must be addressed with care. To respect this principle, I adopted two approaches: I assured participants that if there were triggering topics of discussion, they could say what they were, and the conversation would exclude these topics. Participants had the opportunity to inform me about sensitive topics when signing the consent form and later, at the beginning of the focus groups when general instructions were given to them, including a reminder about triggering topics. I also accommodated the needs of participants that were uncomfortable with being recorded on camera. In these cases, I questioned the participant about the best way to procced with data collection, in order to make them feel comfortable and safe. At least two participants opted for a written interview. Such approaches towards participants also intersect with the AoIR guidelines: among the principles of ethics in internet research, there must be "respect for persons, justice, and beneficence" (2012, p. 4).

The AoIR guidelines (2019) also claim that internet research must encompass ethical pluralism and cross-cultural awareness. These guidelines include a particular approach towards ethics on feminist research, in which an overall intersectional feminist perspective is desirable. According to Franzke, a feminist ethics of care "demands attention to human meaning-making, context-specificity, inter/dependencies, temptations, as well as benefits and harm" (2020, p. 70). Informed by these guidelines and suggestions, I aimed to be as inclusive as possible when selecting and recruiting participants, as well as respectful to them during

data collection. Those who identify as cis woman, trans woman, non-binary, or gender diverse[14] could take part in the research. There was no requirement or limitation regarding their background, race, ethnicity, social class or religion. Instead, diversity within these elements was beneficial for the research, for it could provide more diverse experiences and opinions on discussion topics. In addition, as argued above, participants had the opportunity to opt for adaptations in the method of data collection if they wished (such as substituting the video interview for a written one). Another example includes the focus groups[15] in which they participated together with friends, as they felt safer in a supportive environment, and more secure in sharing their experiences. Such approaches demonstrate respect for each participant's needs.

Data Analysis

Inviting participants and collecting data took place between September 2021 and January 2022. Once all data was gathered, the process of organising it and analysing it began. As I have argued elsewhere in this Methodology chapter, I undertook a thematic analysis, in particular, a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) with contributions from textual and film analysis whenever necessary. The entire analysis was underpinned by literature related to the topics I was building.

For the thematic analysis, I drew from Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019, 2023), who suggest that thematic analysis shares similarities with other qualitative methods of research, whilst working well for identifying, analysing and reporting themes. Braun and Clarke (2019)

[14] Those that identify as men/male could not participate in the research.

[15] Participants who elected to take part in focus groups were informed that there were limits to what extent their identities and participation could be kept anonymous, because other focus group participants would know their identity. This point was raised when they were initially given information about the focus groups, and reiterated at the beginning of the focus groups.

define themes as “patterns of shared meaning underpinned or united by a core concept” (p. 593). Suggesting a step-by-step process for conducting thematic analysis, Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest six phases:

1. Familiarising yourself with your data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report

I followed this process with the data I had collected, which resulted in the five chapters that compose this thesis. However, it is necessary to delve into these six phases in more detail, to explain how they were applied to this study.

The first phase consists of immersing yourself in the data. As Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest, it usually involves “repeated reading” (p. 87) of the data whilst also reading it “in an active way” (p. 87). While doing so, the researcher starts looking for meanings of patterns. This first phase includes, among other things, the transcription of verbal data, and the process of transcription is already a moment of familiarising oneself with the information. Since I worked with interviews and focus groups, I transcribed them all. In addition, I also translated the ones in Portuguese to English, which added to my own familiarity with the data, because translating requires a deeper and more active engagement with the data to ensure that the intended meaning is being captured. During this initial step, I read all the data I had more than once, and started noticing some patterns such as repeated topics during participants’ arguments. After completing the initial reading, I identified themes that were interesting to me because I saw the potential they had in relation to my wider research questions.

The next phase is generating the initial codes. Codes "identify a feature of the data (semantic content or latent) that appears interesting to the analyst" (Braun & Clarke, p. 88). This process was conducted manually, using colour coding and note-taking. I coded the data based on aspects such as the topics participants discussed. Many, for example, talked about characters' clothing, and their interest in discussing clothing became interesting to me. Others discussed a range of topics such as armour, footwear, hair and comfort. I also coded based on characters: for example, what did they say about Wonder Woman, or Harley Quinn?

The third phase consists of "sorting the different codes into potential themes" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 89). It is the starting point of analysing the codes and of considering "how different codes may combine to form an overarching theme" (p. 89). To better visualise and organise the information, I used Microsoft Excel. Braun and Clarke (2006) comment that this is the moment when "you start thinking about the relationship between codes, between themes, and between different levels of themes" (p. 89). Interestingly, some themes emerged as a happy surprise: the theme of online engagement and online informal learning, for example, as discussed in Chapter One. Although I originally expected to discuss online engagement, discovering that some participants were content creators provided the necessary data for a category about 'content creation' related to pop culture. Inside this major category, I was able to approach, for example, how the pandemic prompted some content creators to dedicate themselves more to their pages (or to start something new). Another example was participants' interest in the duality of trying to reach audiences interested in what they have to say, while dealing with those that are not. There is also a discussion about the necessity of adapting content to each type of social media, understanding the affordances of each platform, and which types of audiences they will find in each of them.

The next phase consists of refining the themes. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that this phase involves two levels of reviewing themes. The first consists of reviewing each

theme, reading the extracts associated with them, and understanding if there are coherence among them. The second level is similar to the first, except that the researcher reviews the entire data set. This process includes, for example, understanding that some themes collapse with each other, while others do not have enough data to support them. Within the data I had, for example, I realised that two themes – Wonder Woman's love interest and Wanda Maximoff's process of grief and mourning – could work well together because they shared similarities. In a way, the plot for both characters referred to losing a loved one, although the participants' reception of them differed. Such discussion became Chapter Four.

The fifth phase consists of further refining of the themes. Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that, during this phase the research must identify the essence of each theme. Although I had already 'named' the themes I had (such as "clothing" or "love interest" or "actress Scarlet Johansson"), this phase is actually about understanding the core of each theme. What are the main questions that each theme is raising? When participants discuss clothing and customisation, for example, what is the core aspect of their discussion? Based on the data I had, I noticed that there was a contradiction between criticising and praising women's agency. Similarly, the essence of the theme "actress Scarlett Johansson" was celebrity feminism. Another example of it refers to the theme of digital participation, the essence of which appeared to be feminist digital activism.

Lastly, the final phase consists of completing the analysis and writing the report. However, it is a mistake to say that the process of writing up only occurs during this phase. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), writing is "an integral part of the analysis" (p. 86). Consequently, it begins during the first phase and continues throughout the entire process of coding/analysing. During this final phase, I began to develop my analysis, underpinned by relevant literature. Having understood the essence of each theme, I was able to refer to authors who could strength my arguments. The body of literature I used for the analysis included,

among other things, studies on postfeminism, popular feminism, feminist digital activism, celebrity feminism, transnational postfeminism, intersectionality, and woke culture.

At the beginning of this segment I argued that I undertook a reflexive thematic analysis. This term is used by Braun and Clarke (2019) to refer to their own approach towards thematic analysis in comparison to others. It also acknowledges the plurality of the thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2023). Central to the reflexive thematic analysis is that the researcher must understand their role within it, and be "aware of the need to make decisions around analysis" (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 594). The researcher is aware of, and embraces, their own subjectivity, and how it affects the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2023). Coding is "an inherently interpretive practice" (2023, p. 2), and all themes that emerge from reflexive thematic analysis are "created by the research at the intersection of data, analytic process and subjectivity" (p. 594).

As informed by the authors, themes are not passively waiting within the data. Instead, they are "creative and interpretive stories about the data, produced at the intersection of the researcher's theoretical assumptions, their analytic resources and skill, and the data themselves" (p. 594). According to Braun and Clarke (2019), to undertake an effective thematic analysis is not necessarily about following all steps and procedures. Instead, the most important aspect is "the researcher's reflective and thoughtful engagement with their data and their reflexive and thoughtful engagement with the analytic process" (p. 549). Following such logic, during the entire process of data analysis, it was crucial to understand that my own subjectivity and choices influenced my analysis.

To a minor extent, I also undertook some textual analysis of the films and television shows. Such analysis was informed by participants' comments and by relevant literature. In relation to the textual analysis, I draw from Brennen (2017), who argues that in qualitative research, texts are "material documentary evidence" (p. 204) that can be used to understand

how people make sense of their lives. This means that texts can be not only books or written material, but also photography, films, websites, games, videos, advertisements, among others. According to Brennen (2017), texts "provide traces of a socially constructed reality" (p. 204). Consequently, during textual analysis "we evaluate the many meanings found in texts and try to understand how written, visual and spoken language helps us to create our social realities" (p. 204). Brennen (2017) also argues that each textual analysis will be different, because interpretations are individual and varied.

Although there are many different types of textual analysis, in qualitative research, the form often depends on the researcher's theatrical perspectives (Brennen, 2017). One possible framework, for instance, could be social feminism, which looks at how women are represented in a certain media. In this research, I use a similar framework, drawing from postfeminist literature, whilst not limited to it, to observe the texts and participants' responses to them. By texts, I refer not only to the films, but also images chosen by participants.

According to Brennen (2017), it is crucial to understand the context of the interpretation process when undertaking textual analysis. There are various possibilities for understanding context. One refers to the context when the text is created, the author's original intention. Another is how a text refers to other texts, through intertextuality. Further, we may consider how the audience encounters and consumes texts. I consider this last consideration the most crucial in this thesis, as it encompasses how participants encounter the superhero(ine) texts through their online engagement. Notably, although texts have original meanings when they are produced, and such meanings make sense within a specific place and time, texts' meanings may change depending on who reads them, or on other contextual conditions. This changeability of meaning highlights the need for listening carefully to participants, because each one of them may interpret a text in a different way, depending on local socio-political contexts. In considering that the particular contexts influence one's

reading of a text, Brennen (2017) comments that, when doing textual analysis, "researchers draw on the relevant social, historical, political and/or economic context as well as their own knowledge of the texts' place within the broader culture in order to understand the most likely sense-making strategies" (p. 218). In this thesis, examples include, among other things, analysis of memes in Chapter Three. It is necessary to understand the wider context of production and circulation of the memes in order to understand how participants are making sense of them. Similarly, in relation to the textual analysis of films in particular, Bateman and Wildfeuer (2017) draw from Dyer (2016) to argue that, although such analysis often starts with "looking and listening" (p. 1) to the film itself, it may also expand beyond an analysis of content or cinematography, encompassing other contexts, such as the ones of production, consumption, and cultural knowledge necessary when engaging with these texts.

Bordwell et al. (2016) comment on form and style in films. Form encompasses "the overall set of relationships among a film's parts" (p. 52) and it "offers a way to grasp the film as a whole" (p. 111). Style encompasses the "pattern of technical choices" (p. 111), related to the "look and feel" of a film (p. 111). Within each of these, Bordwell et al. (2016) comment on a specific element or concept. Among these concepts, narrative and mise-en-scene are particularly relevant to my analysis. Narrative is "a chain of events linked by cause and effect and occurring in time and space" (p. 73). To engage with the narrative, the audience must understand its events and connect them. In Chapters 4 and 5 discussions revolve around the narrative, and how female characters are developed within the story. Mise-en-scene includes setting, lighting, costumes/makeup, and staging. In Chapter Two, much of the discussion surrounds costuming. However, crucially, an analysis of film form and style is not the core of this research, as this study is not about superhero films themselves: instead, it is a study about audiences' engagement with feminism via these films and the online discussion that surrounds them.

Although this thesis approaches a range of debates (digital engagement, gender, feminism, among others) through a combination of methods, the most important aspect of it is truly giving voice to participants, so that we can make sense of how these participants are articulating such ideas. How are they noticing such ideas? How are they interpreting them? Does online interaction help them to learn about such discussions? Or can they notice them only through watching films and television shows? After gathering and analysing all data, coding it, and finding literature to underpin the arguments of each chapter, chapters were written, with participants' arguments as central to these discussions. Such opinions guide thematic discussions that I develop in the following pages. As online engagement is a central part of this study, Chapter One begins with this topic.

Chapter One - Dynamics of Online Learning

> What is interesting to observe – and I don't know if the reason for that is because we have more superheroines now – is that there are more female content creators now. We always talk about it: almost all of us have decided to start doing something during the Pandemic. (…) We have more women creating and producing content in a place which had always been predominantly male. (Larissa, Focus group 2, Brazil)[16]

While inviting participants for this research, the necessary requirements were that they must be consumers of the superhero genre and users of any kind of social media. Surprisingly – because it was not a requirement to participate in the research – some participants identified themselves as content creators. In the contemporary scenario, defining a content creator is a challenging question because anyone can create content to some extent, even at an amateur level. It would be a mistake to assume that these two groups do not share similarities between them, or even to say that they belong to two different universes. On the contrary: their boundaries often intermingle, making it vital to discuss levels of digital participation. In the case of this thesis, participants who refer to themselves as content creators are consciously creating more professional content with the goal of speaking to broader audiences. However, it is important to acknowledge that forms of participation that include some sort of content creation are situated under the broader umbrella of prosumers (Pybus, 2013; Wolf et al., 2020), those who participate in crafting or producing the goods they consume (Wolf et al., 2020).

[16] Throughout the thesis, participants will be identified by the following codes: "*Focus group*", if they participated in a focus group. "*D/I*", meaning "Diaries and Interviews", if they participated in the diary and interview process. I also identify their country.

This first chapter explores different levels of engagement between participants, superhero(ine) content, and social media participation. I consider how content creators make use of the digital affordances for teaching about feminism and gender, and I seek to illustrate the potential that online discussions and pages about pop culture have for learning and for promoting reflection and understanding about social issues such as gender representation.

Creating Content in a Post-Pandemic Era

As the quotation that opens this chapter highlights, Larissa characterises the COVID-19 pandemic as the turning point that led female creators to start their pages online; or, at least, lockdown encouraged them to start something "more official". Larissa felt that, at least in the Brazilian context, increasing numbers of women are creating content about pop culture in an environment which had always been, according to her, predominantly male.

Larissa and Vitoria (Focus group 2, Brazil) are content creators of pop culture. Vitoria runs an Instagram page with two friends, which became official in July 2021. Vitoria's page is Geek Page A.[17] They create individually, but they also collaborate with other women, exemplifying how women who create pop culture online are supporting each other in Brazil.

> We had been creating content in blogs or forums for a while. However, we have decided to do something more concrete, so we've started our own page on Instagram. We talk about pop culture in general. Movies, television shows, books. Each one of us identifies with one aspect of pop culture. I'm into books. Larissa enjoys movies. The other one likes books and literature. We talk about what we like. (Vitoria, Focus group 2, Brazil)

[17] The names and information related to these two pages created/administrated by participants have been anonymised for the purposes of protection and respect: Geek Page A and Geek Page B.

Vitoria makes it clear that she and her friends see their Instagram page as an opportunity to talk about what they enjoy.

An example of a collaboration among these female creators was a project in which each one of them – from different pages – created a post about one powerful woman they admire from pop culture. The project, entitled “Superheroines and villainess we love”, included characters from animations, movies and television shows. From Marvel and DC, it included characters such as She-Hulk and Catwoman. Figure 1 shows an example of this collaborative project. The post was about She-Hulk and included a wealth of information about the character.

Figure 1

Instagram Post About She-Hulk

Gabriela (Focus group 2, Brazil) also uses social media to share what she enjoys and understands. Gabriela is a psychologist who uses Instagram to talk about the connection between the geek universe and psychology. Gabriela mentioned, for example, that she analysed grief in *WandaVision*[18] (2021). There is also Julia (D/I and Focus group 1, Brazil), who shares on Instagram her thoughts about interior design in movies and television shows. Meanwhile, from a project that started among friends more than three years ago, Isabela (Focus group 2, Brazil) now uses Instagram, YouTube and podcasts to create content about Marvel, DC and graphic novels. In addition to the fact that they try to support each other, Isabela, Larissa and Vitoria are friends. These examples demonstrate that female content creators are using social media affordances to share their insights about pop culture.

What differentiates them from other participants is the dimension of their engagement and production. They are consciously creating, aiming to reach audiences, exemplifying how social media offers the possibility to amplify voices, "voices with the means for cultural assertion as much as commercial media production" (Cunnigham & Craig, 2021, p. 8). In addition, I consider that these content creators differ from other participants – although they also create and share content – because they do not do so casually: they create and share regularly.

Cunningham and Craig (2021) define content creators as "native social media users who generate and circulate original content in close interaction and engagement with their communities" (p. 1). According to the authors, this engagement happens on social media platforms, but can also happen offline. In addition, they use social media in a professional and commercial way, moving away from any amateur status that content creators may have held in the past. There are different types of content creators, which can be defined by the platform

[18] Chapter Four discusses *WandaVision* and grief in more detail.

and the type of content they produce. Examples include bloggers, vloggers, influencers, game players and livestreamers (Cunningham & Craig, 2021), and those that combine these modes of delivery of their content. Interestingly, some content creators have "greater cultural influence than mainstream celebrities" (Cunningham & Craig, 2021, p. 2), holding significant social capital and influence. As for the participants in this study that self-identify as content creators, it is difficult to categorise them based on the platform they use because they often use multiple platforms, such as Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, and TikTok.

As argued in the beginning of this chapter, Larissa has observed that many of the female content creators she knows started creating online content during the pandemic. It was not possible, in this study, to measure and to verify this claim, however, all the changes that have occurred to our societies due to the COVID-19 pandemic have indeed reframed the context we live in, as our lives have become more virtual, whether for working, for studying, or for entertainment. Cunningham and Craig (2021) write that, as a consequence of our quarantined lives, social practices also became more virtualised. Consequently, "the SME [social media entertainment] industry has been boosted as audiences crowd online" (p. 16). This shift underpins Larissa's claim. She has seen more women beginning to create content during the COVID-19 pandemic, because the pandemic both reframed how the entertainment industry operates (with circulation and distribution), and also enhanced our social practices.

In considering such arguments, we ask: what is the role of these content creators; what connections can we make between them and the topics this research intends to approach? In short, one of the many characteristics that these content creators and their pages have is their potential for informal learning, a characteristic that will unfold in the next section.

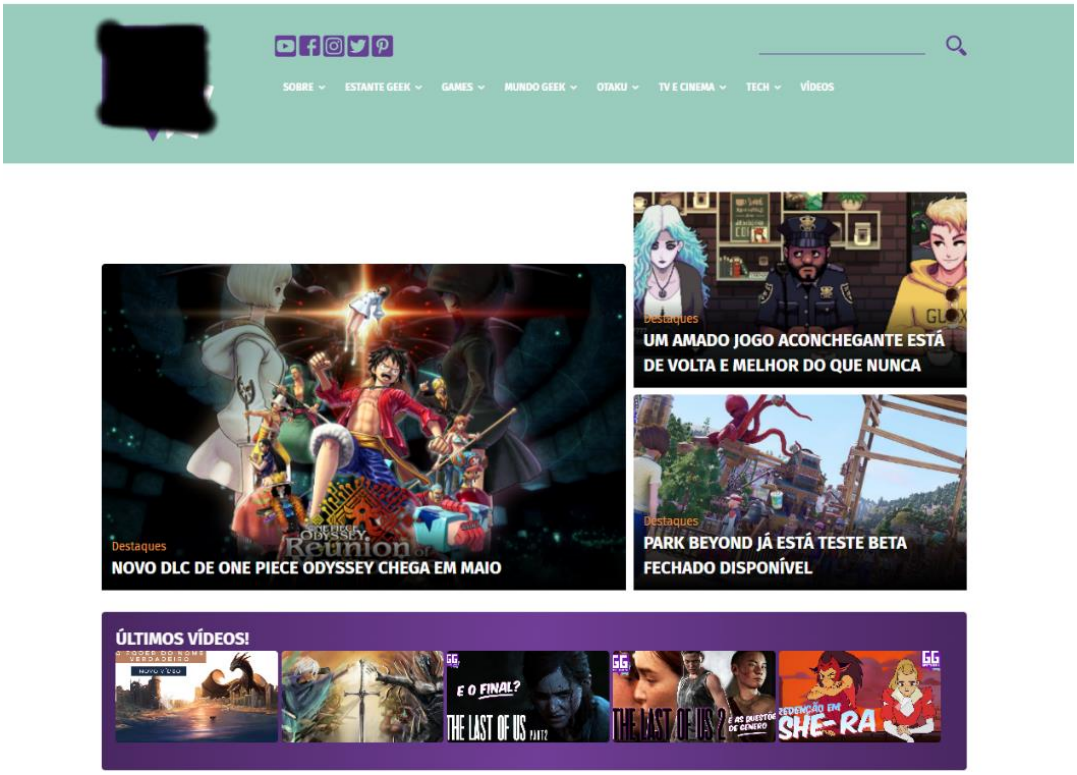
Content Creators, Online Spaces, and Informal Learning

> You must know how to generate debate. How to do so in a methodical way.
>
> (Luana, Focus group 1, Brazil)

Luana is a content creator who writes for Geek Page B (Figures 2 & 3).[19] Created in 2010, the website was a pioneer as a female-only team writing about pop culture. The site owners claim that in the site they approach pop culture content such as movies, television shows, music, fashion, and others, through feminist lenses. The owners also claim that the site is a space that facilitates debates about gender equity, with inclusion and diversity.

Figure 2

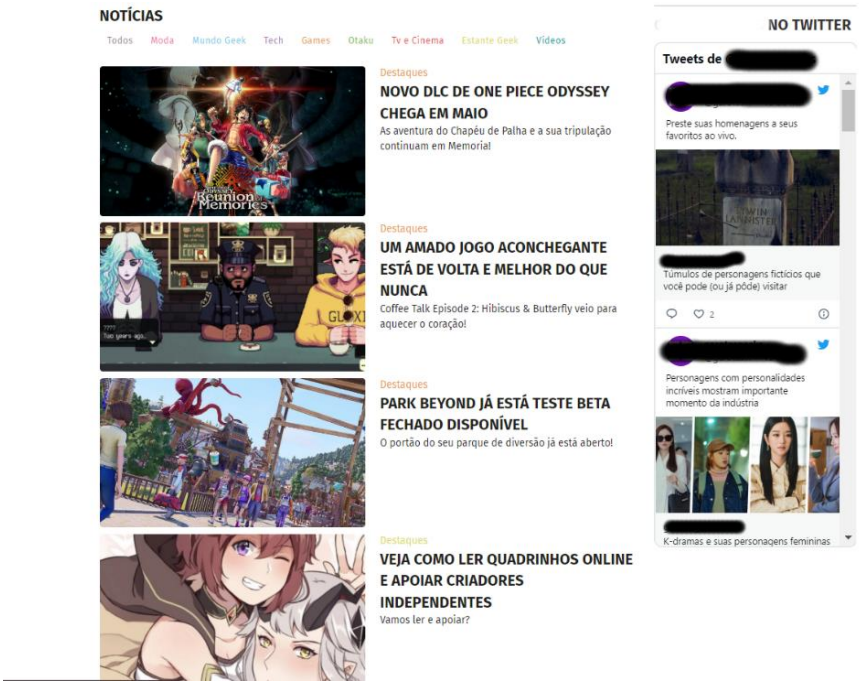
Geek Page B Homepage



[19] For privacy reasons and for preserving participants, more details or references about Geek Page B were omitted.

Figure 3

Geek Page B Homepage (2)



Figures 2 and 3 are screenshots of Geek Page B's homepage that I took. It is possible to view content about anime, independent comic creators, games, Korean dramas, and cartoons. On its "about" page, the site owners offer the following description about their website:

> Whenever necessary, we talk seriously about gender debates. We are constantly bringing up debates about female equity in media representation, about inclusion and diversity. We question controversies, we confront injustices, we affront prejudice. We want more people to feel embraced, comforted, and supported (Geek Page B, 'About' page).

Indeed, Geek Page B has become a reference in Brazil in terms of content creation about the geek universe. With accounts in different platforms, such as YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest, TikTok and Instagram, Luana claims that they try to be active on all of them, even

though their audiences are more active on some of these platforms. There is also the need for adapting the content created for each platform, because different platforms mean not only different types of audiences, but also different formats of content creation and distribution.

The project started by Larissa (Focus group 2, Brazil) and her friends is described in a similar way. They say that they have been creating content online for more than 15 years, having started with forums and blogging. Their project's goal is to show their own view on entertainment through "a feminist point of view, and always focusing on representativeness", as their website notes. Both Geek Page A and Geek Page B have female-only teams. Taking into consideration the intention of looking at pop culture through feminist lenses, I will elaborate on how these webpages are teaching this approach in an informal way. I will then reflect on how content creation has a pedagogical potential to teach and to generate debate about social issues.

Digital platforms are viewed as spaces with the potential for feminist activism (Harris, 2008; Baer, 2016; Jackson, 2018; Banerjee & Kankaria, 2022; Trott, 2022). Harris (2008) and Jackson (2018) have examined the ways in which young women use digital technologies to engage in politics (Harris, 2008) and with feminism (Jackson, 2018). In this context, the dissemination of feminism through digital platforms is a "significant resource" (Jackson, 2018, p. 33) for young women to engage with and to understand feminism. Jackson (2018) also considers that said dissemination happens via mainstream paths and/or through digital media, and that it is a consequence of how feminism has become "cool" (p. 33). Similarly, referring to "popular feminism", Banet-Weiser (2018, 2020) explains that feminism has become increasingly popular and accessible, characteristics that have contributed towards its online dissemination.

What Banet-Weiser (2020) describes as popular feminism is, according to the author, a set of social "practices and conditions that are accessible to a broad public" (p. 9), that make

feminism more spectacularly visible. Popular feminism exists “along a continuum, where spectacular, media-friendly expressions such as celebrity feminism and corporate feminism achieve more visibility, and expressions that critique patriarchal structure and systems of racism and violence are obscured” (2020, p. 9): feminism that circulates in an economy of visibility (Banet-Weiser, 2018, 2020). When celebrities demonstrate that they side with feminism, or when a movie expresses this allegiance somehow, or even T-shirts depict, for example, ‘I am a feminist’ –the visibility of feminism increases, turning feminism into something impressive.

The information above explains how social media has become a space where feminist activism manifests itself. Among other characteristics, it gives women visibility where their voices are heard. Vitoria’s collaboration with other women to give visibility to their creations/content can be situated within this context. As Larissa noted, “Now that I know more girls who are creating content, I usually follow them”. Social media, in this sense, supports the building of a network of support and sorority. “There are more female content creators now”, Larissa declared. “Of course, men are still the majority. But we, with our small pages and profiles, are getting there! And with quality!”, she continued. Larissa reinforces what another creator articulated during the focus group she was participating in, that now there are more women creating and producing content in a space which has always been predominantly male.

The Value of Online Debates and Learning

Participants who do not self-identify as content creators argued in favour of online debates as valuable ways of learning about feminism and gender. Beatriz (D/I, Brazil), for instance, considered online debates valid if they are about a problem that has always been there, but people pretended not to see it: “It is through debate that we evolve. So, if superhero

movies allow us to talk about representativeness, diversity, health, illness, grief – then these debates are valid". Similarly, when Amanda (D/I, Brazil) was asked if any online content has ever made her reflect about any sort of representational issue, she noted that when a Black actress was cast to play Ariel in Disney's live-action adaptation of *The Little Mermaid* (Marshall, 2023), there was a great deal of discussion online. She recounts:

> People went crazy!! 'They've changed the character!' And then I think: does it really affect your life that much to the point that you don't accept that a fictional character had its ethnicity changed? When we read about it, we acquire more knowledge to talk about it, even when we are not in the position of speaking about a certain topic. (Amanda, D/I, Brazil)

Amanda argued that she is in favour of online discussions because they can turn us into better people. When she talked about Ariel and said that "we are not in the position of speaking" about that, she referred to herself and to me during the interview, because we are both white women. Her comment emphasises that we can read and learn more about racial representation, however, since we are not Black women, we cannot speak from the same point of view or with the same experience as Black women. Amanda considered debates relevant, but, more importantly, she argued that people should read and learn about topics.

During the interview, Amanda commented that she "grew up inside a bubble", which meant that all information and knowledge she had about the world around her was limited. She did not have access to external information, or differing perspectives or views. Only a few years later, when Amanda started engaging more online, she was able to learn from different points of view and experiences, understanding that there was more to the world other than what she saw inside her bubble. Amanda (Focus Group 1, Brazil) said that online debates:

> Can teach people. You can evolve and learn. That was due to social media. I'm not going to say that it was a film that I've watched that has made me learn. Never. I learn through debates and through online discussions. However, you must be willing to listen.

Once again, the participant argued that digital interaction allowed her to engage with representational issues. Interestingly, Amanda emphasises that she did not learn just because she watched a movie. It was not just the film itself that was helpful. Instead, digital participation and debates beyond watching the film granted her access to more information and to discussions, which unfolded content from movies on a deeper level.

To exemplify learning about feminism online, participant Julia (D/I, Brazil) shared her experience. Julia explained that social media has contributed significantly to her understanding of feminism. Julia recounted that she grew up in a misogynistic environment. She reflected on how she used to watch movies together with her father, but he always complained when the story had a woman as the protagonist (e.g. *Kill Bill*, Tarantino, 2003). Because of the way she was raised, she was influenced to think like her father. Characters like Mary Jane Watson from *Spider-Man* (2002), for example, were not considered worthy or important. However, the online environment had a strong impact on changing her opinions and expanding how she views feminism and, consequently, characters in superhero movies.

> I saw and learned a lot about feminism online. You see wrong behaviours. Then you start to think 'I used to be like that. I used to think like that!' A long time ago I used to say 'I'm not a feminist'. Nowadays I think 'How is it possible for a woman to not be a feminist?? We must be feminists.' If you are not feminist, you must understand what feminism is. People believe feminism is something extreme, you know? Which is absurd! If you were raised in a misogynist environment, that's how you see things, you know? (Julia, D/I, Brazil)

Julia had contact with and learned about feminism online. She revisited her misconceptions and altered her way of thinking. As she argued, it is not an obligation that everyone turns themselves into feminists, but it is important to understand what feminism is. The digital environment allowed her to see and to experience other possibilities beyond her own bubble, expanding her knowledge about feminist experiences and proving that, to her, social media sites are learning tools (Jackson, 2018, p. 42).

The paragraphs above provide examples of how "cyberspace can promote everyday practices of feminist pedagogy" (Paris & Uyheng, 2023, p. 4). Communities researched by scholars such as Jackson, are closed groups of young feminists (teenagers), in which the main focus is feminism itself and what it means to be a feminist. In contrast, although places such as Geek Page B or Geek Page A openly state they are feminist spaces, and that they talk through feminist points of view, they are not places in which feminism per se is the main, exclusive topic. Rather, the focus is on how feminism emerges within pop culture and the entertainment industry.

Dynamics of Content Creation

Bearing in mind that online environments can promote debates and learning about feminism, gender representation and diversity, I move one step forward, attempting to investigate the role content creators have within these dynamics. I argue that one essential role they hold is to make these topics more accessible and more comprehensible. Instead of only looking at how these topics are embedded within pop culture, I elaborate on how, for the small number of content creators interviewed for this study, they are using the digital space both as an arena for debate and as a classroom.

Although online environments have long been considered places to learn about social themes, I argue that their current structure is a consequence of three major contexts: gender visibility, social media affordances, and changes in the entertainment/digital context.

Gender visibility can be perceived in many ways. In a broader context, we can talk of gender visibility in the sense that gender has become more visible or more popular, such as what has happened to feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018). The superhero genre has given more visibility to gender and to diversity as well. According to Ndalianis (2020), one of the reasons is that the entertainment industry is under pressure due to systematic changes, prompting a review of their original focus on superheroes. In the 1970s, superheroines were "created by and directed to a male audience" (Ndalianis, 2020, p. 310). However, in recent years, shifts have happened in terms of narratives, industries, and fans, resulting in the emergence of superheroines created by and for women. The debates leading to these changes originate from factors such as more visibility given to questions of gender equality, as well as demands for improving diversity.

Digital/social media affordances offer tools and a place for generating and circulating such debates. In this specific case, it refers to how these content creators are navigating the variety of digital possibilities, aiming to find which platforms work better for the messages they want to convey. The extract below comes from Focus group 1, Brazil:.

> *Julia*: People were not engaging with my content on Instagram, so I moved to TikTok. I've posted only a few videos, but I was able to see the difference on engagement. If you pay, it works. If you don't…. TikTok is working better.
>
> *Amanda*: Is TikTok more organic?
>
> *Julia*: Yes! So much more!
>
> *Luana*: TikTok is the best place to engage with people nowadays.

Amanda: I have no idea why I am so afraid of TikTok.

Luana: It's possible to make videos with more than one minute. There is lots of cool content there!

Julia: It's totally worth it!

Luana: Yeah, but you have to find what you enjoy watching. I also don't like information when it is way too fast.

Amanda: But I think nowadays it is sort of difficult to have people who like reading content on blogs, isn't it?

Luana: No, not that much. People are going back to reading blogs. I see people commenting online: 'I'm so tired of fast information! I want to read blogs and watch one-hour videos on YouTube!'

The segment above illustrates two dynamics. First, the participants attempt to figure out which social media platform works better for promoting engagement and for communicating with audiences. There is an element of trial and error. Since social media platforms change at a very fast pace, content creators are trying to learn which one works best for their purposes. When I undertook this focus group, TikTok was the most appealing form of social media. However, even then there were participants who were hesitant to try it.

The second dynamic is the debate between those who favour fast, short information, and those that prefer slow, longer texts/videos: some people are still interested in, or going back to, consuming slow information. The participants continued their discussion of this:

Luana: It also depends on the "when". There are moments in which people want fast content. Or slow content.

Julia: I used to write on Instagram. I used to create posts on Instagram. But then I realized that people were not reading them! I did not like it. So, when I started using

> TikTok, I reduced what I was writing or saying. If it was one full page, I would reduce it to five lines. Now people are actually engaging with it!
>
> *Luana*: It's all about trying, you know? There are times when we post gigantic texts on Instagram, and we get more views than with fast, short information. It is a matter of whether the content is relevant to that period of time in particular. If it is relevant to lots of people as well. We prefer to avoid long texts. If we have a text on our blog and we are going to post it on Instagram as well, for example, it will be an image and extracts of the main text. (Focus group 1, Brazil)

Again, their conversation emphasises how they are navigating the possibilities available to them. To find out how to make the best use of social media affordances is an important step in conveying their message and reaching audiences. Sometimes it is a matter of reducing the content, but it also depends on where they are sharing it. It all depends on that the tools platforms offer and the uses they make of them. We can assume that there is no answer for which social media works the best, but rather that content must be suitably adapted, not only to the platform, but also to meet the expectations about what people want to read and how they want to do so.

The third contextual change refers to shifts in the entertainment industry/digital environments. This change connects directly with the pandemic and how it has affected production and consumption. This study does not measure if or how the pandemic has affected the numbers of female content creators or any change regarding gender and content creation. However, we cannot say that the context has not affected people and their relationship with the digital. Studying, working, leisure activities, many aspects of people's daily lives have been influenced by what happened.

These are only a few elements which underpinned the current dynamics of learning about feminism, gender, and similar issues online. They stood out during our conversations,

and they are significant characteristics to understanding the nuances of how informal learning happens online. Informal learning online does not limit itself to these characteristics. However, to this specific group at this specific period, the three changes mentioned above are directly influencing how participants are producing and sharing content online, for they have to respond to whatever their audience is interested in, and how that audience currently consumes content.

Informal Online Learning

Two aspects were clearly meaningful in relation to online learning. The first is that content creator participants understood their roles as "teaching". The second is that both content creator and non-content creator participants reinforced the importance of listening to meaningful voices within online debates.

> Time has taught me to understand when it is time to engage in discussions, and when is my role to teach. What we defend in Geek Page B is that there must be someone who talks about pop culture from a didactical perspective.[20] So that people will understand it. (Luana, Focus group 1, Brazil)

Luana also said that it is a matter of knowing how to generate debate, and how to do it in a didactical way. Even the word Luana choose – didactical – exemplifies how Luana perceives her own role. More than just talking about something she enjoys, Luana has embraced the idea of informal teaching, of creating content about pop culture that teaches something to others.

Jackson (2018) writes about learning about feminism online, and considers how the access that girls have on social media not only enables agency, but also makes them feel more

[20] In Portuguese, Luana said *didática*, which means *didactical*, meaning "with intention to instruct". In English, perhaps *pedagogical* could work better, but I chose to maintain the original.

empowered through a feminist pedagogy (the act of "gathering and passing on knowledge" (2018, p. 47)). Jackson (2018), quoting Keller (2015) and Schuster (2013), when talking about young feminists, summarises that these two authors they have "identified information sharing, education and building community as important platforms of their online feminism and activism" (p. 35).

Similarly, Keller (2016) analysed girls' feminist activism through blogging, concluding that girls' activism includes three main practices: education, community-building, and the production of feminist visibility. Education is written as the practice of educating others about feminism, being understood by the bloggers themselves as "necessary for feminist social change" (2016, p. 61). However, the act of educating is not unidirectional. Instead, it is "characterized by the 'participatory' nature of the web" (Keller, 2016, p. 62). Likewise, Mendes et al. (2019), following Retallack et al. (2016) and Trifonas (2012), reflect on how Twitter is being used to favour of feminist practices They consider this platform pedagogical, claiming it enacts as "a type of 'digital public pedagogy' and mediate connective learning" (Mendes et al., 2019, p. 108). I expand on this reflection, arguing that not only Twitter, but also other forms of social media including TikTok and Instagram, are being used as digital public pedagogy.

Going one step further, based on the experiences of the creators I have spoken with, it is possible to validate and amplify this notion of digital public pedagogy as reaching beyond women exclusively. Geek Page A and Geek Page B are accessible for everyone, regardless of gender.

> Despite our audience being female, there are lots of men who follow us. Men who want to debate and to learn. It is different when there is someone who only wants to fight, and when there is someone who wants to have a conversation. Someone who is willing to listen and to learn. (Luana, Focus group 1, Brazil)

These pages are not exclusive in terms of who might access them. Rather than being framed as female-only closed spaces, all genders can access their content and join debates. In this case, the content creators use pop culture to teach whoever wants to have a respectful conversation.

Although these pages are open to anyone who wants to engage in debates, Luana also acknowledges the importance of identifying who wants to listen, rather than wasting energy on those that do not:

> It is all about creating and engaging in debates, but it is also about speaking with people who want to listen to you. Otherwise, we will be torn apart. Or it comes to a point at which you have to say 'I'm only going to speak to women'. For example, when *Captain Marvel* was released, we wrote an article entitled '*Captain Marvel* is not for men'. The amount of criticism and complaints? The article was written by a collaborator who is a psychologist. Her texts explained in detail how the film was written to have women as its major audience, even though everyone can watch it. That's why women were enjoying it so much more than men! It's about talking to those who want to listen to you, and to have a community, pages, people you follow. (Luana, Focus group 1, Brazil)

Luana acknowledges her role in sharing information and educating, and claims that their content is available to anyone who wants to have access to that information. But she also argues that it is a matter of knowing with whom to speak. The borders of these communities are, then, flexible in terms of who can engage with them. Although they are open to anyone, they are also semi-selective in terms of where they will invest their effort: to them, it is not worth to try talking with those who do not want to listen.

There is also an emphasis on whose voices should be listened to. Larissa, for example, noted the importance of following people that have things to say, which is why Larissa follows people with different backgrounds.

> What I think about something is completely different from the person who is in its 'place of speech'.[21] We want to know what these people are thinking. It doesn't matter if we say 'I like how this was represented'. There is someone else who really understands that. Someone who says 'Wait! There is this problem that you didn't see…'. We always think that something was done right, but there are those people who say 'Hey, wait! The way it was portrayed is problematic'. (Larissa, Focus group 2, Brazil)

Larissa argues that listening to those that are being represented is the best way of learning more about representation. To discuss Black representation, engage with content from Black people. To debate how disability is being portrayed, listen to someone who has a disability. It does not mean that anyone who belongs to these groups or other groups will be correct on their observations, or that their experiences will reflect a universal opinion or perspective from within that group, but that the voices of some of them inside those groups are worth listening to.

An acknowledgement of intersectionality also permeated these conversations. Conceived by Crenshaw in the late 1980s (Carastathis, 2016; Kanai, 2021), intersectionality, as Donley and Johnson (2021) point out, "moves the margin to center by including the perspectives of multiply-marginalized people" (p. 2). When Larissa said that she follows people from diverse backgrounds because they might know more than her about a specific

[21] I used a free translation of 'lugar de fala', an expression which became known in Brazil because of Ribeiro (2017). 'Lugar de fala' can be understood as the position one holds in a society and their life experiences as relevant to what they know or can say about a topic. Ribeiro investigated it in relation to Black women in Brazil. The term is popular among the population, even outside academia.

issue, and because she values what they have to say about it, she acknowledges intersectional perspectives. Larissa claimed, “The most important thing and also the coolest thing the internet allows us to have is the possibility of different people creating and talking! We must listen to those whose voices really matter”.

Gender and representation are experiencing more visibility, and the digital realm has a role in amplifying the voices of those who can approach these topics with more experience. Among them, some content creators are creating and sharing content about pop culture that is pedagogical on some level. With the shifts in visibility and representation that the superhero genre has been through in past years, these creators have more content to work with.

An example of what is being discussed is represented by the image below (Figure 4) shared in Beatriz’ diary. The image is a screenshot of Geek Page B Instagram.[22] It shows a photograph of Okoye, a character from *Black Panther* (2018), comparing her movie version to the comic version. The text translates as: “When a woman is behind the design vs. when a man is”. The short text translates as: “It is always nice to see representation being done with responsibility, instead of emptiness, right? Even better when there is a talented woman behind, fulfilling a character’s concept with nuance and depth. Do you know the Dora Milaje story?” There are also hashtags such as #misogyny, #sexualisation, and #objectification.

Figure 4

Instagram Post About Dora Milaje

[22] NB: Beatriz was unaware that I also spoke with creators from Geek Page B. The content creator from Geek Page B also was not aware that I spoke with their readers. Beatriz finished her diary before the focus group with the creators. This shows that Geek Page B is considered by Brazilian participants as a source of information.

Beatriz chose this image as an example of something that has captured her attention, and also of something she has learned about online. The post invites the reader to find out more about the design behind the Dora Milaje armour. Dora Milaje is an elite team of woman-only warriors who serve and protect the king of Wakanda (*Black Panther*, 2018). In this specific panel of the comics, as the image shows, their clothes are more sexualised. The topic of sexualisation will be explored in more depth in Chapter Two, including a discussion about this image. For now, I will focus on the idea of learning happening in online spaces. The image (with hashtags and information) teaches viewers about costume design, and how it reflects gender. Even the choice of hashtags adds to the idea of teaching/learning about these themes online, as they call attention to the topics explored in the post. Overall, when Beatriz encountered this post, she saw differences between the armour drawn in this specific comic and the armour designed for the movie. The post's author compares the two figures and their clothing, suggesting that the comic book version was more highly sexualised than that of the film. However, the lack of clothing can also be interpreted as a lack of physical protection for

the warriors. The post illustrates how clothes can lead to the sexualisation of the body, arguing that the design made by men sexualised the characters. In Chapter Two I return to this debate in more depth.

To continue with this analysis, I will now approach those participants whose level of online engagement is different from content creators, those that do not necessarily speak to a wider audience, but whose engagement still places them in an important place within these dynamics of learning online.

Listeners

Even though a few participants considered themselves to be content creators, most participants declared that their online activity does not go beyond reading content, watching it, liking posts, and occasional sharing with friends. They said that they observe but limit their interactions. Andie (D/I, New Zealand), for example, retweets what she considers funny, sharing memes with friends, but admits that she does not comment:

> And I guess I retweet stuff that I find really funny, and that resonates with me in some way. Usually, I just send it to my friend, so that both of us can laugh at it. That was our favourite thing to do with all Marvel shows that came out this year. We would watch them together, and then we would go to Twitter, and go through and like all of our favourite reactions to that week's episode. I don't usually comment. I don't know why. But I don't usually do that. It is usually seeing something funny, liking it, and moving on.

Marianna (D/I, Brazil) said she reads comments, but does not reply to them:

> I use YouTube a lot. I always look for something more specific on YouTube. It is the best source. On other social media, it is more casual. Something pops up, and I share it (Twitter and Tumblr. I do not have Facebook). I follow fan pages on Instagram as

> well. When something comes up on my feed, I like it. If it is a trailer, I share it in stories, because I have friends who also enjoy it. I have never argued online, or anything like that. I just observe people. I read comments, I watch videos and memes.

Initially, these participants may be viewed as having different forms of digital participation in relation to participants who are content creators. We could argue that they seem to be more passive users because they do not leave behind many traces of who they are, apart from engagement within their own bubble. To consider them as passive users, however, would be a mistake. Based on what Andie and Marianna say, they interact on different social media, like and share content, often actively looking for information. Seeking to explore this behaviour, in the following paragraphs I discuss scholarship concerning lurkers and listeners. I will then consider the reasons why many of these participants have chosen to abstain from more active online interaction.

The argument that digital and social media are spaces where more people can express themselves is not new. Scholarship positions digital media platforms as spaces to amplify the voices of minorities, especially if we look at, for example, participatory culture (Molina, 2017). As Crawford (2009) states, online participation has often been associated with the idea of having a voice (p. 526), with the idea of speaking up in online spaces and being heard. In a way, the internet is a medium that facilitates the public sphere (Molina, 2017). Concepts associated with participation are often linked to "lower barriers for artistic expression and civic engagement" (Molina, 2017, p. 111). The internet and social media are understood as places that allow users to have a voice and to express themselves. However, many, for whatever reason, do not express themselves in that way.

Initial research on 'listeners' in the 1990s considered them of less value in online interactions (Crawford, 2009). Crawford (2009) argues that their contribution is of "little

value to online communities, if not acting as an active drain on their growth" (p. 527). Their contribution towards their communities and online debates was "neither agreeing nor disagreeing, but listening" (Crawford, 2009, p. 527). The word 'lurkers' was used to refer to those who remain at "the margins of debates" (Crawford, 2009, p. 527). Lurkers composed the majority of online communities, characterised by light online activity. The term 'lurking', however, is inadequate because, as Crawford (2009) articulates, it does not consider these users as public. The word 'listening' is more appropriate, because it "invokes the more dynamic process of online attention, and suggests that it is an embedded part of networked engagement – a necessary corollary to having a 'voice'" (Crawford, 2009, p. 527). Listening is, together with speaking, necessary for communication, and a form of participation. It is a metaphor for paying attention online (Crawford, 2009) and it is also "productive behaviour" (Wise et. al., 2013, p. 326). Therefore, participants who are said to be involved in only light activity within the community and/or in social media, can be referred to as listeners.

Since I argue in favour of an online public pedagogy in which some teach, there are also those who learn. On many occasions, through their act of 'listening', participants suggested they also learned. Marianna (D/I, Brazil), for instance, said she had a low level of online engagement. However, she also claimed that she learned about Amazons' costuming from online posts that compared the costuming worn by characters in *Justice League* (2017) and in *Wonder Woman* (2017). At the time Marianna saw such posts, online discussion was circulating, arguing that the Amazon warriors in *Justice League* were being sexualised via their clothing.

One fundamental characteristic of online listening is its asynchrony (Molina, 2017), as participants in online conversations can re-read a text that they find interesting or confusing (Wise et al., 2013; Molina, 2017), offering time for reflection. According to Molina:

> There is opportunity for more careful listening, an advantage that this form of communication has in relation to face-to-face interactions and that can be fundamental for citizens that are reflecting about social and political issues to form an opinion and make decisions. (2017, p. 114)

Online listening proves to be an important tool or form of engagement because it facilitates reflection about what has been viewed. For both participants who are more listeners than content creators, and those who engage in a more active way, their online activity as listeners offers opportunities for them to reflect and to understand what they see online, even if they do not have loud online voices.

Having elaborated on two different levels of online engagement, we will now consider the validity and legitimacy of each.

Online Debates and Participation

At some point, participants were questioned if they had already actively participated on online discussions. In terms of numbers, most of them said that they had not. Some declared that they would like to join in online debates, but they do not think it is worth it, or do not have the patience to do so. Online discussions seem to demand an effort that not many participants were willing to make. Although participants acknowledge the importance of online debates, the group was divided as to whether to participate in them. As it will be shown, even participants who admitted they have participated in online arguments stated that this is an exhausting activity. Overall, it appears that participants carefully select which debates they want to be involved with. In most cases, they end up not joining online discussions at all.

For the purposes of this discussion, “to join in online debates” refers to participation beyond reacting to or sharing content. The term describes interactions with others online,

having a ‘heated’ conversation or argument, which usually happens through comments or private messages. These interactions sometimes occur among people who do not know each other online.

> Many participants, for instance, said that it is not worth joining online disagreements:
>
> I don’t fight back… I mean, I do fight because of politics. More than pop culture. I don’t think it is worth it. (Gabriela, Focus group 2, Brazil).
>
> I don’t do it. It is not worth it. (Isabela, Focus group 2, Brazil)
>
> I don’t say anything. I don’t have the patience to discuss online. Do I want to do it? Yes. But I don’t. (Camila, D/I, Brazil)

These participants indicate that they do not have the patience or desire to respond because their arguments are not going to be listened to or accepted. The choice of the word “worth” illustrates that attempting to join in these debates would demand from them more energy than they are willing to waste on something that they have already identified as a ‘lost cause’.

One of the reasons behind their points of view being considered invalid is the fact that they are women. After all, even though the voices of minorities have been amplified, “as a market segment, fangirls, fans of colour, and queer fans are still considered outliers rather than central to popular conceptions of ‘fan’ demographics” (Scott, 2020, p.3). Within the pop culture universe, the voices of anyone who fits into these categories – women, queer, fans of colour – are less valued. These groups have been positioned at the margins (Scott, 2020) for a long period of time.

Scott (2020) argues that, although fandoms have been characterised as a “feminine and potentially feminist space” (p .4), there are “androcentric conceptions of fan culture” (p. 4) still exist. Superhero fandoms, for example, were historically considered male spaces, especially by the market. Scott (2020) writes:

> The mainstreaming of fan culture has been marked by a backlash from (predominantly white, cishet) male fans, reflecting the growing cultural influence of the alt-right and Men's Rights movements, and refracting the media industry's gendered messaging about which 'fans' they value within convergence culture. (p. 4)

In simple terms, it is understood that those who have value within the fan culture market are male fans (predominantly white and cisgender). Male fans also understand that their arguments and opinions are correct and have more value, in contrast to the incorrect and undervalued arguments and opinions of others. It may be simplistic to argue that the reason participants avoid joining online debates is exclusively because of gender. However, gender-based prejudice and behaviours do play an important role in the avoidance of online debates by women. As Scott (2020) argues, "longstanding gender biases within digital geek culture have cultivated an understanding of fan culture as a masculine sphere in which women are already 'interlopers' (p. 76).

I argue that fans avoiding, resisting or refusing engagement in online discussions is an outcome of noticing how pointless some debates have become. Julia, for instance, noted that although she enjoys taking part in online discussions and considers them relevant, she avoids them unless they are about an issue that makes her extremely angry.

> I've closed myself in a bubble in which discussions are made by women. If I look outside this bubble, there are conservative people who do not like new stuff, people who are always criticizing. Those who are always complaining and making irrelevant comments about women. Misogynists. This is the downside. (D/I and Focus group 1, Brazil)

For Julia, remaining in a safe space (her bubble) consuming content made by women is more advantageous. Outside her bubble there are conservative/misogynist people who do not want

to develop a healthy debate. Instead, they prefer to criticise or to make hateful comments whenever there is a change on characterisation. Amanda shares a similar way of thinking:

> I don't engage with it anymore. I prefer to read a blog, or to consume content which is produced or written by people who I trust. (...) Opinion from people who I know, who have a way of thinking similar to mine. Is it bad? Am I living in a bubble? Yes. But my mental health will thank me later. If you try to talk with people on Facebook, with specific types of profiles… You won't go anywhere. (D/I and Focus group 1, Brazil)

Amanda acknowledges the potentially problematic aspects of existing in a bubble in which all the content she consumes is produced by people whose opinion and point of view Amanda trusts. However, she judges what is going to be most beneficial for her. By doing so, Amanda does not exhaust herself. For both Julia and Amanda, having online discussions was mentally exhausting, to the point that they both chose to remain inside their own bubbles.

Another comment emphasised that the voices of minorities are still perceived as 'wrong'. Beatriz stated that she does not fight online, even though there are days that she would like to do so.

> But I don't do that. We who are minorities – black people, LGBTQ+ –... There are those days in which we cannot stand it anymore. I do not fight online, but I follow the comments if I see that it is something polemic. When they started putting more clothes on women, the guys went mad! In the *Titans* (Berlanti, 2018) television show, for example, with the actress who plays Starfire. 'Is she black? How can a black woman play this character?' (D/I, Brazil)

Beatriz' comment refers to how some people were angry because a Black actress was portraying a superheroine from DC. In this specific case – which highlights that prejudice is

still a recurring issue. We cannot affirm that only men complained about the casting choice; however, Beatriz' comment emphasises how the voices and participation of minorities are concerning subjects.

> Another example which is also aligned with this point of view is Evan's:
>
> Some people need to shut the hell up. Just stop. Especially when it does not bring anything to the discussion. It is usually these male dudes who are like 'this is not gay. Why are they trying to make it gay?' Sometimes you can kind of try to change them. But other times you go like 'no, you're just annoying. Your opinion is dumb!' Can you please stop? We want to hear from women of colour now, and LGBTQ people, please! (...) We need more of the unheard voices. Having online discussion is fine. But the dude bros are doing nothing. (D/I, New Zealand)

What seems to bother Evan is the fact that minority groups who want to speak out, and any sort of diversity presented in superhero narratives is seen as 'wrong' by a specific conservative group. Once again there is the idea that it would be possible to try to argue and change their minds, but it seems to be inefficient. To Evan, their opinions are just "dumb".

Analysing the comments, we can infer three things. The first is that participants prefer to listen to more diverse voices, to the point that they opt for staying in their own bubbles in order to hear from those whose point of view they trust. The second is that they agree that attempting to have these debates may be an exhausting and inefficient task because they will not be listened to, depending on who they are arguing with. Their arguments – or whatever arguments are being used – are perceived as inaccurate. The third is that voices from non-dominant groups are still points of tension.

Still on this topic and arguing that gender plays a role in creating barriers, there are also situations that are more extreme than an online disagreement. Luana shared and example

relating to someone that writes for Geek Page B: “Someone from our team was threatened. Her family too. We had to contact the police”. Marianna spoke about a similar situation: “As content creators, we always know about that one guy who sends messages to girls. How they are harassing them. Or mansplaining”. Being visible online has outcomes such as hate and harassment (Duff & Hund, 2019), which may be one of the reasons why women are taking a step back and avoiding comment. They attempt to avoid not only hatred and misogyny, but also situations that may have more violent outcomes.

Gender-hate online has increased. Ging and Siapera (2019) explain how the intensity of anti-feminist sentiment online has escalated in digital spaces, reaching dimensions that go beyond those who consider themselves feminist, but are now reaching any woman expressing an opinion or having some sort of influence there. Within diverse spheres of geek culture, there seem to be boundaries that women or minorities cannot surpass. Condis (2018) describes this phenomenon in terms of gaming culture. Meanwhile Scott (2020) talks about fandom and fangirls, arguing that “convergence culture industry’s androcentric construction of the fan is internalized and manifests in gendered boundary policing practices within fan culture” (p. 76).

In other words, some aspects of geek culture in general have been historically built as a (typically white, straight, cis) men’s sphere. The foundation of geek culture supports men in considering themselves as powerful and dominant, and qualified to make ‘discourses of truth’ that will circulate in those spaces. Participants said that they prefer to stay inside their bubbles because interacting is exhausting and not worth the effort and risk, and when they shared more dangerous cases of harassment or where the police had been involved. This stance links back to gender boundaries that still exist in the geek universe. In fact, Scott (2020) claims that such gatekeeping practices within fan culture are associated with toxic technocultures and with industries privileging white, straight, cisgendered male fans.

Writing about fake fans in game culture, Condis begins with the notion of a fake nerd girl, someone who "isn't actually into gaming but is practicing a deception to get something (money, time, attention) out of a gamer guy" (2018, p. 46). The "fake geek girl" has started as a meme (Condis, 2018). Within the gamer community, girls who play (especially competitively) must prove that they know what they are doing and that they know how to play. Otherwise, they are perceived as playing to get something else in return (Condis, 2018). Scott (2020) works with this concept within the geek culture community: women must prove that they are authentic fans of a media product, and they often prove that by demonstrating an extensive knowledge about the media product in question. If they cannot show evidence of their knowledge and, consequently, that they are 'authentic fans', their arguments may not be valued or considered worthy in geek spheres. A woman wearing a Wonder Woman T-shirt, for example, may be viewed as evidence that she is a fake fan.

The implication is that women have no right to talk about, to know, or to engage with geek culture, because they know 'less'. Luana, for instance, said "those people who say stuff like 'I have authority to talk about it because I know more than you'. We block them, delete their comments. It is not worth it. Especially with men who have a misogynist point of view". In short, participants struggle with having to prove themselves, their knowledge and their capacity to debate such themes. They prefer to avoid confrontation, preserving their energies and safety, and being selective in who they speak with and listen to.

Exemplifying Online Learning

Until now the chapter has offered a broader overview of the dynamics behind participants' engagement with online texts. Before moving on to the next chapter, I will introduce a practical example of how some of the informal learning happens. When participant Julia (D/I, Brazil) explained why she enjoyed watching *WandaVision* (2021) I

commented that, prior to the show, online rumours debated whether Wanda would be a villain or, at least, a mad woman. Julia demonstrated that she was familiar with the concept of the "mad woman", a fictional trope in which a powerful woman cannot control her powers and goes 'mad'. In the case of superheroines it is similar: they are unable to control their superpowers (Freeman & Taylor-Ashfield, 2020) and become insane. Julia said that she learned about this trope through her online engagement, mainly by watching videos about it. In particular, she had previously heard it from Mikannn.[23] In addition, Julia had shared the following images in her diary (Figures 5 and 6):

Figure 5

Screenshot 1 of Mikannn's Comment

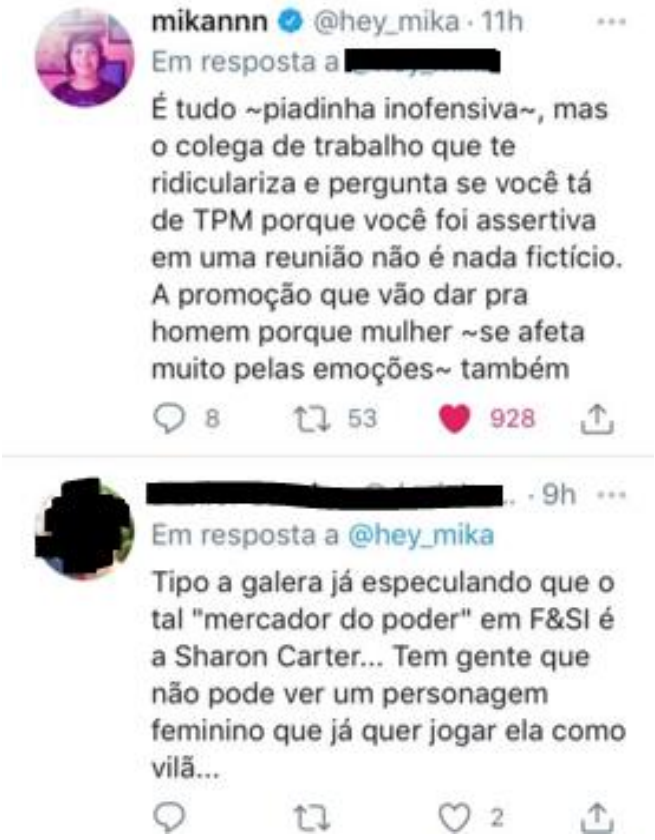
[23] Mikannn is a Brazilian YouTuber whose channel includes videos about pop culture with analysis, reviews, and informative material: https://www.YouTube.com/channel/UCpkZ7Z_J8RJvRtYc3JQdh0g

Translation Figure 5:

@user: Hahahaha! Girls on her periods! So uncontrolled, so unbalanced!
Mikannn (quoting @user): The reason why the fictitious powerful woman whose emotional instability is a threat to the world (Jean, Wanda, Vanya) does not exist in the vacuum:

Figure 6

Screenshot 2 of Mikannn's Comment



Translation Figure 6:

Mikannn: They're all harmless jokes, but the co-worker who makes fun of you, and asks if you are on your period because you were assertive during a meeting is not fictitious at all. The job promotion goes to the man because the woman is affected by her emotions.
@user2: People are already speculating the "power merchant" on Falcon and the Winter Soldier is Sharon Carter. There are people who cannot see a female character and are already considering her as the villainess.

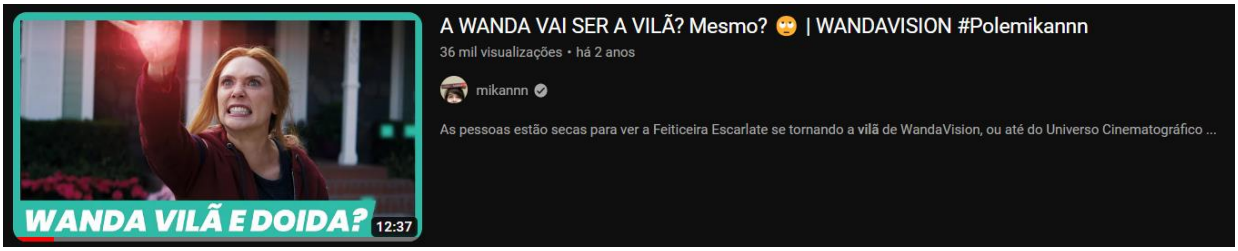
The images above belong to the Twitter account of Mikannn, a Brazilian content creator. In the screenshots (Figures 5 & 6), "emotionally unstable" female characters are seen as a joke by some people. Mikannn, however, notes that in real life people use the excuse of a "lack of emotional stability" for promoting gender inequality. In the example in Figure 6, it is the man who is given a job promotion instead of the woman. In these prints, a female fictional

character's emotional instability is used to reflect on real life: how women's emotions and subjectivities can be interpreted as weak points, a disadvantage in relation to men, and an example of misogyny. This is one example of how Julia learns through her online engagement, and of how Julia engages with a sexist-related discussion. Although the example is about fictional superheroines, engaging with the discussion promoted understanding about a real-life issue, where women also lose opportunities because of sexism.

Mikannn's videos about the mad woman trope are centred on Daenerys Targaryen (*Game of Thrones*, Bennioff et al., 2011), Jean Grey (*X-Men*) and Wanda Maximoff. In a video from February 2021 entitled "A Wanda vai ser a vilã? Mesmo?" or "Will Wanda be the villainess? Really?" (Figure 7)[24] Mikannn argues that there is a problem with representing cliches and tropes on television, due the lack of representativeness for women or other minority groups. If there is less representation, it means that the audience will centre their attention on the problems and the negative side, because there is no space for positive aspects to be shown. The thumbnail reads "Wanda villainess and crazy?"

Figure 7

Screenshot of Mikannn's Video (2021)



When Julia watched any of these videos (which are paratexts), she engaged with content about how the concept of a mad woman trope is used in pop culture. Julia learned

[24] The screenshot was taken by me to illustrate one of the videos mentioned by participant Julia.

about the trope and understood why it is problematic. This is an example of engagement and learning, and of learning through content creation made by women.

Conclusion

This initial chapter offered a general overview of participants' experiences in relation to feminist digital activism. Participants shared commentary about the various ways they participate online. They shared positive experiences, and challenges and difficulties such as misogyny in online environments. Whilst this chapter does not focus specifically on superhero(ine) texts, it works as an introduction for the following chapters, indicating that participants' engagement comes from scrolling through memes, liking and sharing content with close friends, or even creating pages to disseminate their ideas. Even so, some participants noted how films and characters allowed them to connect with feminism, and how their participation online also contributed to their understanding of questions and issues related to feminism.

In particular, this chapter addressed the experiences of a few Brazilian participants who are content creators. These participants shared three things. The first was how the pandemic prompted them to work on their pages in a more official way. The second was how social media offers conditions for the discourses of minorities to be heard, through terms which can be perceived as intersectional digital feminism. The third was how they see themselves as responsible for teaching other people about feminism and related issues. Arguably, through creating these pages and content, participants are contributing to and creating spaces for consciousness-raising about feminism. They use pop culture – particularly superhero(ine) texts – to make feminism, gender and other issues more understandable and therefore accessible, promoting further reflection and discussion in relation to the daily

challenges women face, and possibly contributing to the development of strategies to respond to these challenges.

In the following chapter, I focus more on superhero(ine) texts circulating online. In particular, the chapter approaches visual representation and costuming in relation to postfeminism and other discussions.

Chapter Two - Visual Representation

Towards the end of each focus group, I invited participants to play a game where I showed images of female characters from superhero movies (usually posters or official promotional images), and asked participants to say the first thing they thought about when they saw them. This activity introduced topics to our conversations which had not arisen earlier. In the New Zealand focus group, for example, when participants saw an image of Wonder Woman, they commented on footwear and hairstyles. They started asking questions such as: Are the costumes practical? Can you fight wearing high heels or with hair falling on your face? Why are their bodies not covered or protected even though they are warriors?

The talk about hairstyles led to recollection of a scene from *Birds of Prey* (2020), in which Harley Quinn[25] lends Black Canary a hair tie, so that she can tie back her hair in the middle of a fight. This instigated a conversation comparing how Harley Quinn was portrayed in *Suicide Squad* (2016) and in *Birds of Prey* (2020), and the differences the character went through in terms of costume design, production and script writing. This moment illustrates participants' impressions of changes in characterisation that have been occurring over the past decades. Participants exemplified these changes in terms of costuming: characters are portrayed in less sexist ways, wearing clothing that is more appropriate and functional given their superhero activities, leading, for example, towards less objectification. This chapter explores participants' understandings of these shifts. To do so, it is necessary to understand the concept of sexism.

In *Objectification* (2020) Paasonen et al. revisit feminist scholarship to argue that objectification is commonly associated with sexual representation and with sexual

[25] Harley Quinn is a character from DC. Originally a villainess from Batman comics, she is now more of an anti-heroine. In the DCU (DC Cinematic Universe), Harley featured in three movies: *Suicide Squad* (2016), *Birds of Prey* (2020) and *The Suicide Squad* (2021). This second Suicide Squad is said to be a reboot of the first version. However, it features some characters from the first movie.

objectification – to the point that they are used synonymously. This form of objectification is not the only type that exists: slavery and trafficked farm labour are mentioned as examples of objectification not necessarily associated with sexuality. They argue that the constant conflation between objectification and sexual representation blurs and complicates their meaning and can make it seem that performing sexiness is wrong, which is not the case.

Instead, Paasonen et al. (2020) argue that what is necessary is a critique of sexism, "namely discrimination or bias based on someone's perceived gender, while simultaneously insisting on the importance of sexual agency and the value of sexual representation" (p. 3). Or, as they argue, "distinguishing between critiques of sex in the media and those addressing sexism as a social practice" (p. 3), considering themselves as "against the equation of sexual representation with sexism" (p. 9). While unfolding the layers of objectification, the authors mark a clear distinction between these ideas, reinforcing that:

> People can be and perform sexiness and contribute to sexual representations without losing their agency – or, at least, we argue this to be the case. Sexism, we further argue, is a different concern from both sexual depiction and sexiness, despite the ease with which these notions are routinely conflated. Sexism is an operation of power that crafts out, and supports unequal social relations by allocating bodies coded as feminine – independent of whether these bodies are cis – or transgender, considered genetically or anatomically female or not – with particular forms of agency, vulnerability and assumed sexual availability. (2020, p. 8)

They explore this difference throughout their book, and it is argued by Paasonen et al. that nowadays there are more sexual depictions in the media, but less sexist representations, because these last ones are less acceptable.

These arguments prioritising the critique of sexism, rather than sexual agency and performance, reflect participants' comments. Some participants made this distinction,

identifying and critiquing sexist representations, without necessarily realising they did so. They were also bothered by such representations. However, due to the popular conflation of sexual agency and sexualisation, participants primarily described 'sexualisation' as the issue. Their argument, based on their own experiences, previous knowledge, and due to what they see and learn from social media and general digital engagement, was that the main issue is sexualisation.

To approach participants' readings and interpretations, I start by introducing examples that illustrate their thoughts about Harley Quinn's characterisation. According to participants, one of the ways that they identify sexism is through framing or gaze. Underpinned by postfeminist sensibility, I then share examples of how participants are simultaneously criticising sexism and emphasising women's agency. Finally, I explore the participants' argument that what seems to reduce sexist depictions, or to change character representation, is the increasing number of women participating in production. The conversation that opens this chapter – about a hair tie – suggests that more women participating in the film industry equals improved representation onscreen. It is not my position to argue if this is an accurate claim and that more women working behind cameras *always* equates to better representation, as proving this is beyond the scope of this research. However, my intention here is to examine what this sample of participants said and what their impressions were, based on what they see and on how they interact with such media products, underpinned by their interactions on social media.

Dressing Harley Quinn

Because the character Harley Quinn appeared in three different superhero films, many participants mentioned her, pointing to the changes the character underwent across the three films.

In these examples, participants criticised this character's sexualisation, arguing that her clothes are too sexualised. "Sexualized" is, according to Paasonen et al. (2020), now understood as negative, and as a synonym for objectified. However, in its origins in sociological research in the 1970s, sexual socialisation was related to develop a gender identity and to acquire sexual knowledge and values. Sexualisation was "a neutral term – understood as a necessary part of the healthy human sexual development" (2020, p. 93). Later, however, it acquired its negative connotation: Paasonen et al. (2020) note that the term is often used to "express… concern about girls 'growing up too quickly', visibility of sex and the accessibility of sexual representations amounting to a 'sexualization of culture'" (pp. 93-94). This conflation of terms means that sexualised clothes seem to be the origin of the problem, when what should be criticised is, as Paasonen et al. (2020) suggest, the sexist depiction of the character. I am not saying that participants are wrong in not identifying or directly referring to sexism as the centre of the problem, or with being uncomfortable with sexualised clothes. My intention is to introduce how some participants see this issue.

Marianna (D/I, Brazil) pointed out that clothing worn by female pop culture characters tends to be, on many occasions, "extremely alluring. It objectifies them. It is extremely misogynistic." Marianna also said:

> To have adequate clothing is important because it makes you see the character on a deeper level. It is not only about her clothes. For example, Harley Quinn's shorts on *Suicide Squad*! You humanize the character instead of objectifying her. It is crucial to have that if you want to respect them. (D/I, Brazil)

Figure 8, a screenshot taken by me from the movie *Suicide Squad* (2016), helps to visualise this costuming. Harley Quinn wears these clothes for almost the entire *Suicide Squad* movie. It is possible to see that she wears a shirt that exposes her belly, and that the bottom part of the costuming is extremely short, exhibiting her legs. She also wears a red leather jacket.

Figure 8

Harley Quinn in Suicide Squad *(2016)*

Paasonen et al. (2020) consider that although there are numerous ways in which someone can be objectified, not all forms of objectification are related to sexual representation. According to the authors, feminist critique considers that objectification reduces women "to their physical attributes and heterosexual attractiveness in ways that mitigate their individuality and agency" (2020, p. 7). Under this argument, considering Harley Quinn above, objectification is used in opposition to humanisation. As Marianna argued, "adequate clothing" helps Harley to be seen as a person, adding layers to her personality. Marianna argued in favour of a portrayal that allows us to look at the character on a deeper level, rather than just what we see at the surface. In this case, the image is a less sexist representation.

Significantly, while there is little change in the length of her clothes, for participants watching *Birds of Prey* and *Suicide Squad* Harley was perceived differently. Carolina (D/I,

Brazil), for example, described Harley as "cheerful and comfortable" in *Birds of Prey*, where this relates to a less sexist character portrayal. Carolina (D/I, Brazil) contrasted this with how Harley Quinn was portrayed in *Suicide Squad* (2016):

> [It] bothered me a lot. On promotional photos that had all heroes together, all the guys wore badass clothes – overalls, jackets – and she was wearing a top and panties. It annoyed me because they didn't even try to pretend that 'to be sexy' was her function there.

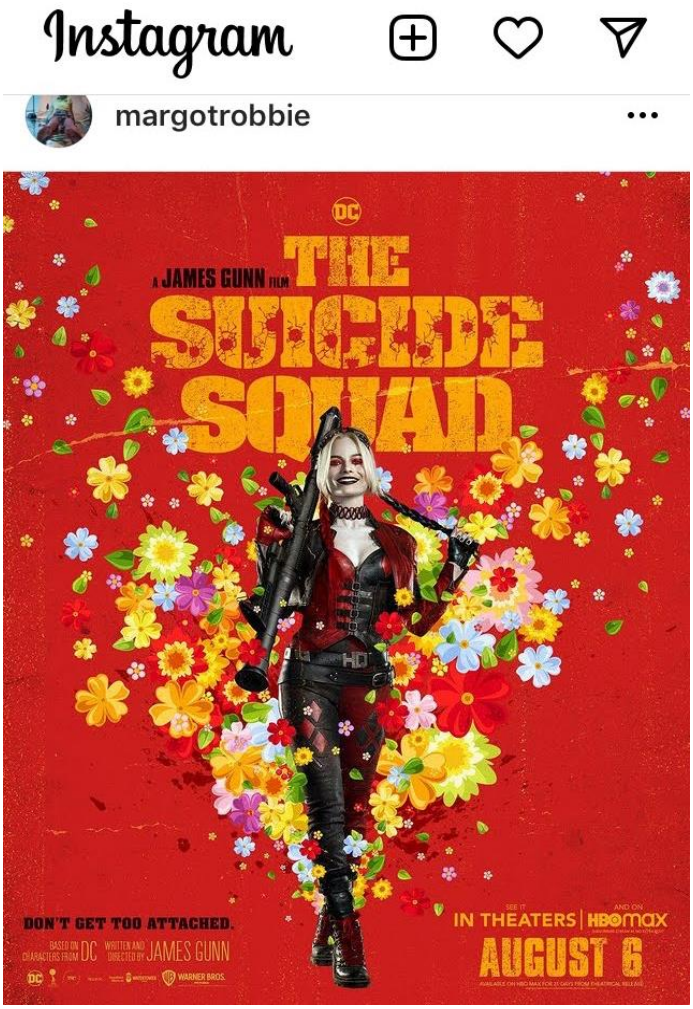
This comment exemplifies Carolina's perception of Harley as an object, her role is to be sexy. In this case, Carolina contrasted Harley Quinn and other male characters. In pointing to the differences between Harley and the other men, Carolina pointed to sexism, which as Paasonen et al. (2020) point out, "support[s] unequal social relations" (p. 8).

Marianna and Carolina are examples of participants who criticised the sexualisation of Harley Quinn in *Suicide Squad* (2016) because of her clothes, but their comments also suggest that she was portrayed in a sexist way through the narrative. According to Paasonen et al. (2020), "as one axis of social power, sexism casts women as beings of less stature and agency with the aim of cutting down the ability of female-identified bodies to act out in the world" (p. 136). In that sense, as Carolina suggests, Harley's costuming in the promotional materials positions her as less than her male comrades with her clothes just one part of a larger problem.

In contrast, discussing Harley Quinn's representation in *The Suicide Squad* (Gunn, 2021), Julia pointed to Harley Quinn's costuming in a promotional poster (Figure 9). Julia saw it on Instagram and said she enjoyed it because of the clothes Harley Quinn wears, particularly noting that in this movie and in *Birds of Prey* (2020) Harley Quinn was not wearing clothes "just to please men".

Figure 9

Harley Quinn in The Suicide Squad *(2021)*



Comparing what Harley wore in *The Suicide Squad* (Gunn, 2021) and *Birds of Prey* (2020) with her costuming from *Suicide Squad* (2016), Julia said: “She always wore short clothes. Always. However, it was more like ‘close up on her butt’. Things that, when you stop to think about, they don’t make sense.” Julia emphasises that the issue in *Suicide Squad* (2016) goes beyond Harley’s short clothes, extending to the framing, camera angles and close

up on certain parts of her body. Julia's choice of words indicate an awareness of the male gaze, even though the participant did not use this term. Indeed, framing or gaze was often reinforced as one of the ways through which characters are depicted in a sexist way.

Framing Characters

The male gaze concept originated from Laura Mulvey, being referred to in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975) (Mulvey, 1992; Paasonen et al., 2020; Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2021). Since its origin, the term has been adopted in broader, daily usage, describing framing women as an object for the pleasure of the male viewer. It is associated with "ways of seeing and being seen" (Paasonen et al., 2020, p. 19). Mulvey considers the ways female characters are depicted as objects of pleasure. The audience will see the character through a particular frame, exercising the gaze (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2021). Essentially, the concept identified that men must look and women must be passive and looked at. Critics of Mulvey's male gaze point to the strict gender binary, the female audience's position, and heteronormative viewpoints (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2021). Within Mulvey's theory women could not be active, and men could not be passive. Female audiences had no way of enjoying movies, because they would always be watching themselves being objectified. In addition, Mulvey's ideas followed heterosexual points of view (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2021). Years later (1981) Mulvey revisited these concepts, arguing that female viewers are not stuck into fixed coded viewing positions. However, the male gaze is associated with "looking at" as a form of power, and it is usually "an expression of power over women" (Paasonen et al., 2020, p. 27).

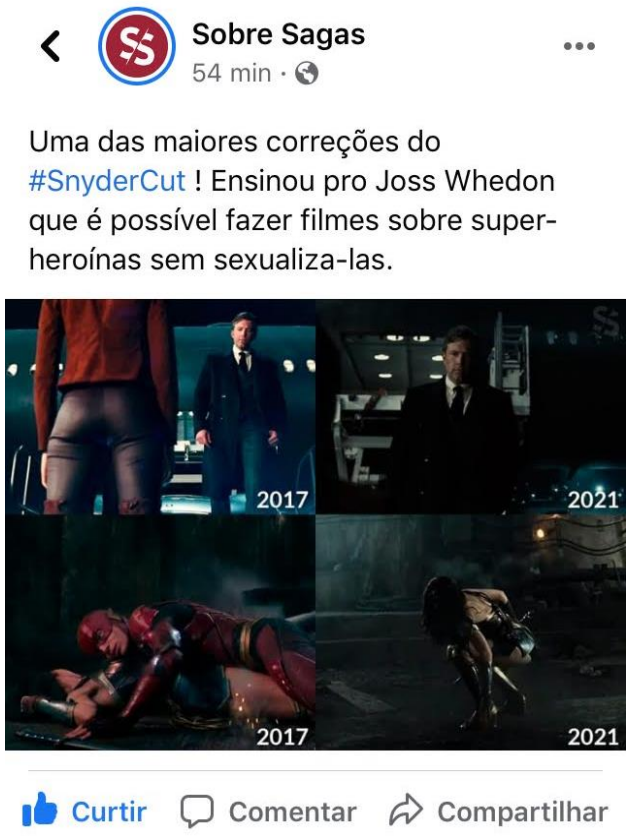
More significant to my study is that the male gaze concept has survived through all these years and, instead of remaining an academic concern, it has been popularised, expanding to daily life debates. Paasonen et al. (2020) explain that the male gaze "has

migrated from describing specific conditions of film representation and spectatorship to become part of a popular debate around the representation of women's bodies across media" (2020, p. 21). Examples of the male gaze can be found in many media products such as movies, advertisements, games, and paratexts on social media.

In this research, one example came from Julia (D/I, Brazil). Julia chose a post from Facebook (Figure 10), which compares framing in both versions of *Justice League* (2017 and 2021). In its initial release in 2017, *Justice League* there were issues during production of the movie and director Zack Snyder was replaced by Joss Whedon. When Zack Snyder's version (the Snyder Cut), 2021), was released, comparisons of the two versions circulated online. Julia's diary entry compared how Wonder Woman is framed in two different scenes, stating, "One of the biggest corrections of #SnyderCut! It taught Joss Whedon that it is possible to make a superheroine movie without sexualizing them."

Figure 10

Comparison of Scenes in Justice League



The images on the top compare a scene with Bruce Wayne/Batman. The 2017 version frames Wonder Woman's posterior, while the 2021 version does not. The 2017 version also included a scene in which Flash falls on top of Wonder Woman, with his head against her breasts, which was considered humorous. This image, which circulated online,[26] shows how sexualisation can be a consequence of framing. In addition to seeing this post on Facebook, Julia said that she also watched a video comparing different versions[27] of the movie/character. "I did not like the way she was depicted", Julia said about the Wonder Woman in the 2017 *Justice League* movie. Julia argued that the video helped her to see the differences, critiquing "There is another scene that shows her butt. I have no idea why they've

[26] *Sobre sagas* is a Brazilian website about pop culture, movies, TV showTV shows. It has more than 80 thousand followers on Instagram and more one million "likes" on Facebook.
[27] Julia has not made it clear if the video was only about Wonder Woman or about the *Justice League* in general.

shown her butt. I think it depends on the director." Adding a gendered dimension to this, in our interview, Julia commented that she prefers Patty Jenkins's version of Wonder Woman.

This is an example of how Julia engaged with the male gaze and with sexualisation through social media. Paratexts such as posts on Facebook and watching videos have contributed to her learning, allowing Julia to understand how framing may affect the way a character is portrayed.

Amanda (D/I, Brazil) also discussed both sexualisation and framing, commenting on Harley's costuming in *Suicide Squad* (2016):

> Is her costuming sexualized? Yes, it is. But a lot of it is due to camera angles, how you chose to show it. Is it a costuming she would wear? Yes, it is. She is a character who wants to wear those clothes. And that's okay. What we must be careful with is how it is shown, which camera angles are chosen.

Amanda acknowledges that Quinn's visuals are sexualised, but wearing these clothes is fine because it is the character's choice[28]. The core of the problem is how Harley is framed, with camera angles consciously chosen to frame the character from the perspective of a male gaze. From who's point of view? To whom? It is interesting to notice Amanda's word choice: "we must be careful with…". She advices us to be aware of how characters are framed, using 'we' to include herself, meaning that viewers in general are held responsible for paying attention to framing. Being aware of how problematic such framing is, is important to Amanda. Amanda's comment highlights that it is the production's responsibility to choose wisely but, at the same time, from the term Amanda chose – we – it gives emphasis to raising audience's awareness about it.

[28] Although these are fictional characters whose "choices" are made by the production team, participants did refer to these characters as if they were the ones making choices. This does not imply that participants do not acknowledge that there are real people behind the choices.

Although Amanda does not use the term ‘male gaze’, she demonstrated understanding of what the term represents. Both examples (Amanda and Julia) illustrate how the term – or, at least, a general comprehension of what it means – has become popular and a key phrase used in debates about representation. It has become more than an analytical concept. Amanda noted that there is nothing wrong with being sexy, differentiating sexual representation from a sexist depiction through framing. I approach this debate next, showing how some participants engage with such tensions and make distinctions.

She Can Dress Anyway She Wants To

The argument I raised at the beginning of this chapter is that although, as in popular discourse, participants conflate terms such as sexual representation, sexualisation, objectification and sexism, some participants criticise sexism instead of, for example, blaming the problem on costuming choices. They set apart sexism and sexual representation, navigating the tensions that coexist within such discussions.

To reiterate, costuming alone does not sexualise someone, and wearing sexy clothes or behaving sexily is also not an excuse for sexualisation. In fact, Paasonen et al. (2020) clearly state that sexy is not the same thing as sexism: “Acting sexy does not therefore automatically make someone an object” (p. 99). The authors argue that:

> People can be represented as sexually attractive or as engaged in sexual activities, and they can represent themselves as sexually attractive and as engaged in sexual activities without becoming someone else’s tools lacking in agency, becoming interchangeable, or being owned. Such depictions are not reducible to any single set of meanings, nor are they simply similar to one another. (2020, p.8)

If we consider, for example, comments from participants in the sections above, it is possible to infer that their opinions align with this view. When they say that Harley can dress any way

that she wants to, they reinforce Paasonen et al.'s (2020) claim. We must be attentive to the limits between sexual representation and sexism.

To investigate this topic in depth, I consider postfeminist sensibilities relevant, as they make it possible to engage with "the contradictory nature of postfeminist discourses and the entanglement of both feminist and anti-feminist themes within them" (Gill, 2007b, p. 149). When listing features of the postfeminist sensibility in 2007, Gill particularly identified the preoccupation with the body, seen as women's source of power and in need of constant surveillance and discipline "in order to conform to ever-narrow judgments of female attractiveness" (Gill, 2007b, p. 149). Other topics were the sexualisation of contemporary culture, women as desiring sexual subjects, and women as subjects with capacity for choice and empowerment, among others (Gill, 2007b). Ten years later, Gill (2017) highlights the body and body surveillance as the main features of postfeminism as over that ten years neoliberalism became stronger in the cultural landscape, reinforcing ideas of choice, competition, meritocracy, and entrepreneurialism. Within this context, neoliberal feminism has emerged, with its claims that each woman is to be held responsible for her own wellbeing, and for achieving work-family balance (Rottenberg, 2020).

The importance of thinking about postfeminist sensibilities lies, according to Gill (2017), "in its ordinariness and everydayness, its ability to speak to sense and meaning-making about gender that has become as taken-for-granted as neoliberal ideas" (p. 609). Postfeminist sensibilities provide a relevant approach to the topics discussed in this chapter. They help us to understand contradictions in terms of representation, because of its emphasis on the female body, with characteristics such as surveillance, discipline, and beauty norms. Postfeminist sensibilities not only helps us to understand contrasting viewings, but also enable them to happen.

A postfeminist sensibility also communicates the sexualisation of contemporary cultures. In line with this discourse, when participants mentioned sexualisation, they usually associated it with a specific style of clothing, characterised by being tight, form-fitting, short, showing cleavage or skin, and by being non-functional for the activities the character does. These costumes are, supposedly, one of the reasons why women are objectified as things.

The relevance of postfeminist sensibilities lies in the possibility of looking at contradictions involving clothing and the body. Such contradictions mainly refer to autonomy to choose any style of clothing and freedom to wear it, contrasted with the obligation to conform to, and fit within, society's beauty norms and constraints, which tend to regulate the body.

The discourse of women making autonomous choices is structural to postfeminism. In terms of wardrobe choices, for example, Gill (2007) points out is the common conception that, if women are not dressing to please men, they are dressing to please themselves and exercise their free choice. In this sense, it seems as if there are only two possible options: dressing to please men, as submissive subjects; or dressing to please themselves. However, choices made via this second option are similar to the ones from the first option. This way of thinking, Gill (2007b) argues, "avoids all the interesting and important questions about the relationship between representations and subjectivity, the difficult but crucial questions about how socially-constructed, mass mediated ideals of beauty are internalized and made our own" (p.154). Claiming that are only two extreme options diminishes all that there is in between, including agency and influences from media and society.

Some of these tensions can be observed in participants' discussions. Amanda (D/I, Brazil), for example, suggested that the idea of dressing to please yourself is inferred. Emphasising that Harley Quinn's costuming was sexualised, also declared that it is still costuming Harley would wear, because it is her style and there is nothing wrong with that.

Amanda defends Harley's decision to dress as she wishes; however, she also questions: "do women want to see this sexualization? I might say 'I would not dress like that'. But there are women who could dress like that. Women who enjoy it". For Amanda, women can represent themselves based on their own choices. Looking through the lenses of a postfeminist sensibility, Amanda emphasised Harley's agency in choosing her costuming and feeling good wearing it.

It is important to reflect on the tensions between dressing up to please yourself, and how much of this choice is influenced by media and society. Anna's (D/I, New Zealand) comments, for example show evidence of these blurred lines and tensions. Simultaneously, Anna talked about women's agency to represent themselves, but also considers the external influences that weigh on these choices:

> For American shows/movies, clothes are always so tight, form-fitting. Again, playing it to the sexualization of the female body. I'm not against characters who wear tight, form-fitting revealing clothing. Women can wear whatever they want. It's just a tendency, commonality for women to be dressed in that way, which encourages the sexualization of the female body.

At the same time that Anna acknowledged that women are free to choose what they want to wear, she also argued that there is tendency towards one clothing style (tight, form-fitting), and that this happens due to its predominance in films and in television shows, in the sense that the choices seem to be illusory. Anna recognised that although there seems to be choice in relation to how real women can dress, there are still beauty standards which are mediated to us. Media still plays a significant role in how people dress and how they rule their bodies. In this case, wearing tight, form-fitting clothes is influenced by media.

Amanda and Anna's comments consequently reveal the extent to which "contradictory understandings of female (un)clothing" can be viewed as feminist struggles

which depend on the context (Gozdecka, 2019, p. 38). We can see further evidence of such postfeminist contradictions in the way that participants discussed the hair of superheroines. More specifically, the participants highlighted the use of hair as a site of agency that complicates the conflation of sexualisation with objectification. The quotation that opens this chapter regarding Harley Quinn and the hair tie emerged in a discussion where participants discussed hair. This discussion included points such as why characters have to fight with hair falling on their faces and why all characters have flawless hair, although it seems to be unrealistic in terms of what they are doing onscreen. Different characters were mentioned. Olivia (Focus group, New Zealand) compared Harley Quinn's hairstyles, saying that one was curlier, while the other was "short, sharp and fun". Olivia responded that Quinn's hairstyles "can be similar, but they are quite different in execution". Another comment was made in the same focus group in relation to Scarlet Witch, a Marvel character. When I showed participants Scarlet Witch's image (Figure 11), the costuming she wears at the end of *WandaVision* (2021) and in *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (Raimi, 2022) was praised.[29] Wanda's costume includes a hairband, which Olivia mentioned usefully keeps her hair out of her face.

Figure 11

Wanda in Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness

[29] Figure 11 was selected by me prior to showing it to participants during the focus group. Source: IMDB. Available on: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt9419884/mediaviewer/rm989732097/?ref_=ttmi_mi_all_12

Comments such as these, which prioritise the practicality of certain hairstyles that keep hair out of characters' faces, raise questions about the standard beauty norms characters often meet. On one hand, loose hair is impractical in a physical fight. On the other hand, flawless hair is an accepted symbol of beauty and of femininity, and so it must be maintained and seen in the media. As Gill (2007b) writes, one characteristic of postfeminist media culture is its preoccupation with the body, to the point that "femininity is defined as a bodily property rather than a social, structural or psychological one" (p. 149). For this reason, surveillance and monitoring of the female body is essential, and the bodies exhibited in the media must be perfect according to specific beauty patterns.

Some superheroine characters increase these tensions between practical hairstyles versus beauty and femininity, as is seen in Andie's (D/I, New Zealand) example. In her diary, Andie shared a Twitter discussion thread about Nebula's hair on Marvel's *What If?* (Bradley et al., 2021*). What If?* is an animated series released on Disney+, showing other narrative possibilities for Marvel characters, introducing its audiences to a multiverse of possibilities. Nebula is a cyborg character introduced into the MCU in *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014) as one of the daughters of Thanos, and sister to Gamora. Nebula is not from Earth and her body

has suffered numerous modifications: she has blue skin, a shaved head, and almost all parts of her body were substituted by robotic parts. In *What If?*, however, she appears with beautiful, long blonde hair.

The thread shared by Andie shows an explanation of Nebula's blonde bombshell hair and its significance in pop culture (Figures 12 and 13).

Figure 12

Twitter Thread 1 Explaining Nebula's Hair in What If ?

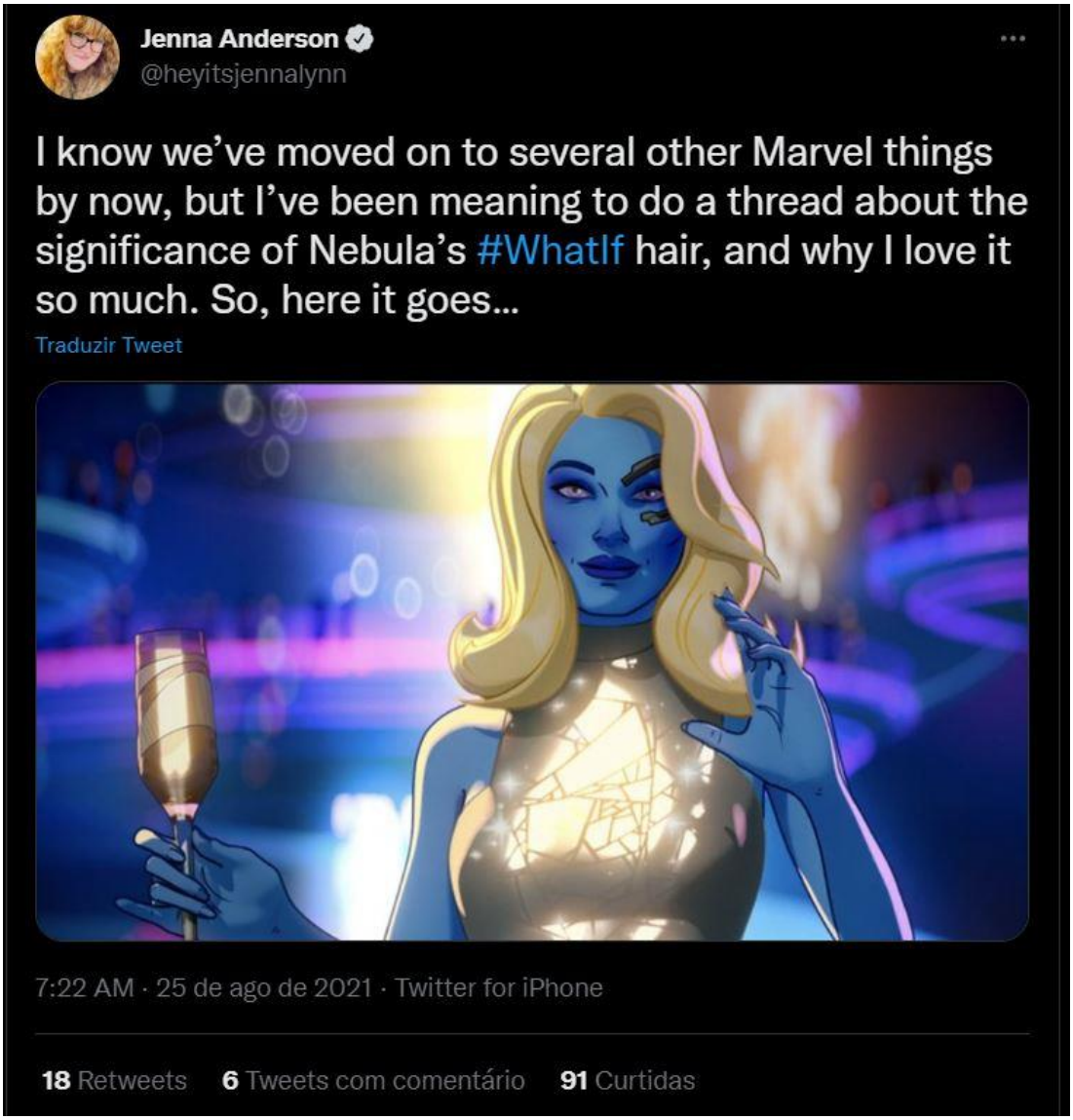


Figure 13

Twitter Thread 2 Explaining Nebula's Hair in What If ? *(2)*

The thread author explains how the blonde bombshell hairstyle became popularised – with the hair swooping across the eye – because of actress Veronika Lake in the 1940s, when

she starred in a military drama.[30] This movie and some of her following films portrayed Lake as a femme fatale, with the hairstyle called 'peek-a-boo hair'. The thread's author explains that this choice of hair works for Nebula and, despite hiding her cybernetic eye, the hair is "unabashedly impractical and feminine". According to Farrimond (2018), the femme fatale helps us to understand contemporary popular culture "because of the way in which her complex relationship with patriarchal and feminist understandings of female power forces to the surface broader, frequently unspoken concerns about cinematic representation of women" (p. 12). In the case of Nebula, a character who had her agency and femininity removed because of men (mainly Thanos), this depiction of her is a different Nebula to the one the audience is familiar with in *Guardians of the Galaxy* movies. Her femininity is emphasised by her hair. At same time, this hair and femininity can be interpreted as a symbol of power for her, because the original version of Nebula had the feminine removed.

Looking at how postfeminist media cultures consider women's bodies as their sources of power and of femininity, giving Nebula this hairstyle highlights this version of Nebula as someone whose life is not dominated by men, portraying her with more power and agency. The original Nebula had no agency or freedom because of the men in her life – mainly her father, Thanos, who had no respect for her body or for who she was, removing and substituting her body parts for robotic ones (likely without her consent), and making Nebula work for him.

Even though the flawless hairstyle might yet be a symbol of excessive femininity, to give Nebula this hair plays with the image constructed of the original Nebula in *Guardians of the Galaxy*, putting together contradictions in a provocative way, portraying her as less submissive and less of a victim. Notably, in this case, rather than questioning if this hairstyle

[30] In the thread, the author refers specifically to the movie *I Wanted Wings* (Mitchell Leisen, 1941).

is practical, or if she must meet a specific beauty norm, or how she will "fight wearing that or maintaining the flawless hair", with this version of Nebula the opposite is prioritised: here, having bombshell hair is a symbol of power and autonomy that reflects postfeminist sensibilities about the body.

This entry is an example of how Andie engaged with and learnt about gender politics on social media. This thread, while discussing hair, beauty and femininity, shows how hairstyles can operate in terms of a politics of beauty. Such examples illustrate the limitations of only critiquing such representations in terms of sexualisation and objectification, as it is clear that – for audiences – they can have more complex/nuanced meanings.

Women Warriors: What Contributes to Characterisation?

If, on one hand, participants complained about the excessive sexualisation of characters because of their costuming, on the other hand, they also perceived changes. What I heard from almost everyone I spoke with was: 'It is improving, but…' In the following discussion, I seek to engage with what constitutes change for these participants. I infer that this change, particularly in relation to appearance and costuming, refers to characterisation that moves away from sexism, focusing on functionality and comfort. In this sense, the characterisation works better both for the actresses (who wear more comfortable clothes) and for the characters (who wear clothes that better suit their needs within the story).

Most participants have suggested that these changes are happening due to women becoming more present and involved in the media industry. They pointed out that the increasing participation of women in film production and female input (including here input from actresses) is what leads to 'better characterisation. However, these arguments can be contradictory. Although there is a perception that female representation has been changing

because there are more women involved in production, this interpretation is slightly contradictory because this concept seems to undermine all the work that women have done in the movie industry in the past, including in departments that are historically gendered female, such as costume design (Hill, 2016).

What seems to be happening is that participants' arguments connect better with the fact that there are more women occupying roles of leadership/management in blockbuster superhero films, particularly as directors. Having women supervising and directing films may be conflated with the idea that there are more women working in the film industry. It is not necessarily that there are 'more women', but that female directors have more opportunities to direct superhero films, and it is also about the visibility that these women are now receiving because of popular feminism and social media discussions. As directors, women are now responsible for overviewing all sectors of film production, and for making final and important decisions about, for example, a character's wardrobe.

In discussing how women have participated in the film industry, Hill (2016) comments that they have been there since the beginning, but often not as cinematographers or occupying leadership roles. In the 1910s or 1920s, for example, women were employed in the movie industry, where many departments were "populated almost exclusively by women and often managed by men" (Hill, 2016, p. 4): examples included the costume department, or women working with inking and painting in animation studies (such as Disney). Around 1930 and 1940, they had administrative jobs, often taking care of the personal lives of executives and of the creative team. Hill (2016) also mentions that there were women working as editors, but as soon as the editor job acquired more importance and prestige, male workers "staked their claim in editing departments" (p. 192).

By the 1970s and 1980s, women were trying to get jobs such as production coordinators, editors, or casting directors. However, as Hill (2016) writes, "because women in

the professional sphere were still understood primarily in terms of their gender and only secondarily in terms of their individual talents, skills, and competencies" (p. 5), the "low pay and gender stigma associated with their former sectors followed them into these new fields" (p. 5). According to the author, women were never absent from the industry, "they often simply weren't documented as part of it because they did 'women's work'" (p. 5). Later, women obtained jobs such as script writing, but their gender was still their "chief handicap in accessing more visible financial or managerial leadership roles, such as producing and directing" (p. 167). It is true that, for a long time, women have been underrepresented in these positions, which justifies participants' perceptions. However, the issue was not a lack of women working in the movie industry, but rather that they were far from leadership roles, especially within the superhero genre.

Women's exclusion from leadership roles such as directing blockbuster superhero movies is also approached by other authors (Donoghue, 2022; Paris & Uyheng, 2023). They argue that this prejudicial treatment is reinforced by 'industry lore' which "circulates ideas of women's lack of either experience or interest in leading films, thus rationalizing their historical exclusion from high-level production work" (Paris & Uyheng, 2023, p. 2032). Cyclically, women are seen as incapable of directing superhero movies due to lack of experience; however, they cannot gain experience, if prevented from working in these roles.

Now more than ever, these women are experiencing visibility, especially those assuming roles as directors in superhero movies. This visibility originates not only from women having more opportunities, but also from discussions on social media. Recent superhero movies directed by women include *Wonder Woman* (2017, Patty Jenkins), *Birds of Prey* (2020, Cathy Yan), *Black Widow* (Cate Shortland), and *Eternals* (2021, Chloé Zhao).

Despite increasing numbers of female directors, participants particularly focused on the role of female costume designers. As discussed, female costume designers have a long

history in Hollywood. Importantly, their role is under the overall creative vision of the director. The costume critiqued most by participants (that of Harley Quinn in *Suicide Squad*) was designed by a woman under the direction of David Ayer. However, it would appear that the popular feminist discourse surrounding the value of female directors has been conflated, shaping discussions in ways which can seem selective and oversimplify a more complex environment.

In considering the above, the example below (Figure 14) emphasises costume design by women, contrasting it with that of men.

Figure 14

Instagram post about the Dora Milaje (2)

Beatriz chose an Instagram post[31] that shows that *Black Panther* (2018) had a female costume designer, and highlights the impact of this on costume choices in the movie, especially with the costuming worn by the Dora Milaje, an elite group of female warriors who serve Wakanda. When questioned about why she chose this image, Beatriz said that their visual representation is atypical, and that, at the same time, they are empowered and strong, giving us an impactful image. The title of the post is "When a woman is behind the design vs. when a man is". The design by women is the image on the left (movie), while the man's is on the right (comics).[32] The difference is evident: on the right, the character exposes significantly more skin, and has little protection on her body, with her abdomen exposed, despite the need for warriors to be protected against attacks, and to have ease of movement for action. The overarching text, referring to the difference between the two images, translates as: "It is always good to see representation done with responsibility, and not in an empty way, right? It is even better when there is a talented woman behind it, fulfilling characters with depth and nuances. Do you know Dora Milaje's background history?" In addition to this image, Beatriz (D/I, Brazil) wrote her own comment in her diary:

> Female combat clothing was always something that bothered me. I remember that Wakandian warrior's visuals were something that captured my attention because they were non-standard. To be aware that the concept for these costumes came from a woman makes sense. I'm looking forward to seeing more female points of view!

We can infer that Beatriz became aware of women behind the costume design through the post she saw on Instagram, which exemplifies some of the pedagogical aspects of social media, allowing Beatriz to know more about the importance of having better representation,

[31] Beatriz (D/I, Brazil) shared an image (Figure 14) that encompasses the perception about warrior outfits. I have used this image in Chapter One as an example of people using social media to learn about a gender related subject. Figure 14 is originally from Geek Page B, which I referred to in the last chapter.
[32] The comic panel appears in *Fantastic Four* #547, written by Dwayne McDuffie and illustrated by Paul Pelletier (2007).

and how to do it in a 'correct' way. In her comment, Beatriz emphasised that she was annoyed by costuming worn by women in other movies or television shows, while the Dora Milaje appeared as an outstanding example of more appropriate combat clothing. When Beatriz said that this clothing is nonstandard, she may be referring solely to the clothes which, as seen in the Instagram post, expose less skin as compared to the costuming in the comics. Alternatively, she may be referring to the overall visual aspect, all Black warrior women with shaved heads. Until the time *Black Panther* was released, there were not many examples like them in the media, particularly not in superhero blockbuster mainstream media.

Beatriz informed us that she became aware that a woman was responsible for *Black Panther*'s costume design, and that it made sense to her. But even though Beatriz easily associated 'better costume design for warriors' with a woman costume designer, this example and this argument oversimplifies a much more complex context. In the case of Beatriz, her argument is based on her perception, rather than in relation to the complexities of the production of the film. *Black Panther*, for example, was directed by a man (Ryan Coogler), a fact that undermines the claim that costuming for women onscreen is changing because there are more women directing. This is not the case for *Black Panther*. In considering this, women as directors are not the only way of guaranteeing 'better' representation and, as this example shows, locating power in costume design is thus challenging and much more complex.

Although the example above is more connected to costume design, the contribution of female directors to the overall portrayal of warriors was also acknowledged by participants. One example of this was in the case of the Amazon Warriors in *Wonder Woman* (2017) and in *Justice League* (2017), where the Amazon Warriors' armour was often criticised as not covering/protecting the body. Examples where participants commented about this incongruity reinforce that, although there is an association between women as directors and an 'improvement' in representation/costumes, not all participants agree that this association leads

to improvement. These contrasting opinions strengthen the argument that, although having women directing does help, it does not guarantee development in female representation.

Marianna (D/I, Brazil) talked about a controversy she followed on social media a few years ago. The 2017 version of *Justice League* sexualised Amazon Warriors, which fans criticised. The Amazon Warriors' costuming exposed much of their bodies and, above all, did not protect them. When *Wonder Woman* (2017) was produced, people compared Amazons from both movies. Marianna said that people were complaining online: "I remember people said that the Amazons' clothing was not 'revealing' because it was a female director. I saw the photos and I agreed with it". This adds to the argument that female directors better portray, or create less sexist portrayals of characters, at least according to some participants.

However, not all participants agreed that having a woman directing solves all problems. Amanda (D/I, Brazil) discussed the costuming of Amazonian warriors in *Wonder Woman*: "No one, no Amazon Warrior, would wear that. Even if it is a film directed by a woman… It was a cool film. I liked it. However, who fights wearing that?" Acknowledging that warriors would not wear the costuming she saw them wearing in *Wonder Woman*, Amanda criticised their characterisation in a movie directed by a woman, a point of view which contrasts with what other participants stated. Sarah (D/I, New Zealand) also criticised Wonder Woman's armour: "Wonder Woman, for example. What the fuck? That always annoys the crap out of me! When they are like 'Oh, I'm gonna have an armour', but it is just until here". Sarah gesticulated to indicate short armour, underneath the breasts. "What about the rest of it? It doesn't make sense!! According to Sarah, Wonder Woman does not wear enough body protection. This example reinforced the idea that a woman as a director does not mean improvement on how characters are portrayed, as even Wonder Woman's armour in *Wonder Woman* (directed by Patty Jenkins) was criticised for not offering enough protection, and the same is valid for the Amazon Warriors in this film, and in *Justice League*.

While lack of body protection/coverage was one of the characteristics participants criticised, the other was how costuming was not functional or practical. Most participants questioned how it was possible for warriors to do certain activities wearing costuming that was not perceived to be functional. Vitoria (D/I, Brazil), for example, said: "Costuming is better than it used to be. However, some of them still wear tight clothes or have cleavage. Even high heels. Who fights wearing high heels?!" To Vitoria other participants, functionality is important. Action characters need to wear clothes that allow them to move freely. Running, jumping, fighting and protecting oneself is extremely difficult when wearing high heels or restrictive clothing.

> Sarah (D/I, New Zealand) also wondered about the functionality of costuming: Characters like Gamora and Captain Marvel, they are getting better at covering everything, but it is still completely tight. (…) I don't think, in terms of functionality, that it is always functional. Does it always have to be skin-tight? I know they did it with men as well such as Thor. I just feel that with women it is always extra tight.

The functionality of the costuming is contrasted with the fact that it is tight, meaning that it will obstruct movement. Notably, Sarah seems to wish for clothes that do not constrict movements, and are therefore better for physical activity. Sarah even highlights that male characters also wear skin-tight costuming, but for women the use of inappropriate clothing is more intensified.

This critique about the lack of functionality and warriors' costuming can also be observed in a comic shared by Fernanda (D/I, Brazil). It is a cartoon drawn by Brazilian artist Helô D'Angelo (Figures 15 and 16) that Fernanda found on Facebook and enjoyed. It shows Wonder Woman talking with other superheroes. She wears comfortable pants and sneakers instead of her classic costuming. Wonder Woman says: "What, guys? I'm tired of saving the world wearing only a swimsuit!"

Figure 15

Fanart of Wonder Woman

Interestingly, the cartoon was shared on HBO Max Brazil's official Twitter account, which is the HBO MAX streaming service in Brazil (Figure 16). Shared by an official account, more people had access to this cartoon and its message. The text on the official Twitter account reads, "She's not wrong! I love you, Diana!" Fernanda included a screenshot of the original artist asking "who fights wearing a strapless swimsuit?"

Figure 16

Fanart of Wonder Woman (2)

Drawing on the fictional character of Wonder Woman, the cartoon jokes that it is difficult to fight wearing a swimsuit. One of the ways this can be interpreted is as a critique towards sexist depictions of Wonder Woman, in which a swimsuit would expose her in a way that could sexualise the character. Although I have discussed above that exposing the body and sexual representation is not the same as sexism, since these terms are often conflated, the swimsuit could be perceived as contributing to a sexist portrayal.

The second way the comic can be interpreted is because of the lack of comfort and practicality that a swimsuit offers. The author of the comic is questioning if wearing a strapless swimsuit would be useful and how difficult it would be to fight wearing clothes that might fall down. In this way, the post can be connected to the worry about exposing the body through sexist lenses, and also to the issue of comfort and functionality.

It is noticeable how visual representation is also attached to clothing practicality. When reviewing the origins and influences of superhero costuming in comics, Brownie & Graydon (2016) argued that audiences understood these the activewear style of costuming as practical, rather than fantastical. Drawing on Karaminas (2009), they argue that clothes inspired by activewear/sportswear are better for high-level action, and for any activity demanding strength or agility. There is, however, a difference. In the cartoon, when Wonder Woman complains about wearing a swimsuit, she is not talking about 'sportswear', but rather her new costuming is sportswear. 'Swimsuit' refers to the fact that her outfit exposes much of her body, offering little comfort or protection. With her new costuming, Wonder Woman can fight more comfortably.

The examples above illustrate a common critique among participants: costuming worn by superheroines and warriors must be practical, functional, and comfortable. It also should cover and protect the body and, at the same time, not be so tight to the point that it constricts movement. Participants believed that of the changes to superheroines' costuming happens as a result of female input during film production. Expanding on that and going beyond costume design, participants viewed increasing participation of women in many aspects of production as positive. However, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, this study does not prove that having more women behind cameras results in positive costuming shifts but, to the sample of participants in this research, it is indeed a significant change.

Input from Actresses

Expanding the argument from the segment above, participants' interpretation that more women behind cameras results in better representation does not limit itself to directors, producers, or costume designers. Within this universe of input and visibility, participants also

suggested that actresses have a lot of input in choosing what their characters are going to wear. This was often acknowledged as something positive.

Actress Scarlett Johansson was often cited as someone who opened the doors for alternative dress, with other actresses following her example. Larissa (Focus group 2, Brazil) spoke to other group participants about Johansson: **"**She did not have much of a choice, you know? In terms of costuming, for example. For us to have Brie Larson, Scarlett had to do it first", said During this conversation, Vitoria said that Black Widow started as slightly problematic in terms of sexualisation, while Larissa called attention to the fact that Johansson was pivotal in giving other actresses an opportunity to have more input into how they portrayed their characters. Olivia (Focus group, New Zealand) said Johansson's costuming had:

> Evolved through each movie. And how much of it is also the actress having input on what she wears. The more you play a character, the more you can choose what you want to wear, because it's going to be difficult to replace you.

Other actresses such as Margot Robbie and Elizabeth Olsen were mentioned as having a similar role. Andie (Focus group, New Zealand) said she thinks Olsen had a lot of input on what she wanted to wear in *WandaVision*. There are notable wardrobe modifications in movies and television shows in which Scarlet Witch features. Andie said: "She was like 'I don't want my tits to be out!' They covered it up. It is the same in *Eternals*, you know? Half of the cast is female, and they wear full uniforms. I think that when you're fighting, you don't have to think that you're going to have a boob out!"

Another example was brought up by Carolina (D/I, Brazil). Carolina said Harley Quinn's costuming changed because Margot Robbie was involved in the production of *Birds of Prey*. "The actress joined the production team and said 'I'm not going to accept anymore that the character I play is portrayed this way!' It has changed!" said Carolina.

Participants suggested that when actresses can choose, they seem to make choices that help to protect their bodies, making them more covered and less exposed. They also seem to opt for less sexist depictions of their characters. This perspective of choice highlights what Gill (2005) considers as one of the features of postfeminist sensibilities, in this case, "emphasis upon choice and autonomy" (p. 5). Gill (2007b) considers that "the notion that all our practices are freely chosen is central to postfeminist discourses, which present women as autonomous agents no longer constrained by inequalities or power imbalances whatsoever" (p. 153). Participants see actresses being able to choose their costuming and having more autonomy on set as empowering, as having control over their own bodies and how they are represented. Participants consider actresses responsible for that, and praise them, looking up to their choices and participation as a way of overtaking inequalities in representation.

Dressing Black Widow

Above, I have discussed and exemplified some ideas raised by participants: they have suggested that women being in charge leads to better female characterisation, with clothing being more functional, comfortable, less tight, and offering more protection. At least, these characteristics are important to them. Aiming to deepen this discussion and to observe how all of it works together, I examine these dynamics through Black Widow, as she embodies many of the discourses about characterisation and representation.

As I have mentioned above, Johansson (who portrays Black Widow) was often used as a reference. Participants have been experiencing and observing changes in this character since Black Widow's introduction in *Iron Man* 2 (2010). It took more than ten years for the character to have her own solo movie, *Black Widow* (2021), directed by Cate Shortland. According to participants, through Black Widow and Yelena (Black Widow's sister), we can see an evolution to a less sexist portrayal, more comfortable and functional costuming, and

costumes that have narrative relevance, giving personality and depth to characters. Not to mention the contribution of female authorship.

About this shift, participant Andie (Focus Group, New Zealand) argued:

> I don't know what the hell that was in *Iron Man 2*. The suit kind of progressed. The Black Widow suit that she has in the movie is probably the best one. You can tell the difference between hers and Yelena's. Because Yelena's suit is a little loose. A bit more… I don't want to say 'comfortable'. But Yelena's suit looks more fitting for her fights. That's the difference between the two. It is not just sexy and skin-tight costumes.

Andie mentioned the evolution of Black Widow's clothes since *Iron Man 2*, reiterating that the costuming she wears in *Black Widow* (2021) is the best one. Andie also contrasts Black Widow's costuming with her sister's, comparing how the clothes Yelena wears seemed to be looser and fitting, and more appropriate for action scenes. This comment shows that what Andie interprets as progress is having more functional costuming, that is looser and, in theory, better to fight in.

An important element from Black Widow's wardrobe is the green vest, used in *Avengers: Infinity War* (Russo & Russo, 2018) and *Black Widow* (2021). In the former, the vest is worn by Black Widow, while in the latter it is worn by her sister, Yelena. The vest is not only a functional article of clothing (as it has many pockets), but it also reinforces the idea of female authorship (a woman behind this idea) and of being relevant in the narrative.

Discussing this vest, Olivia said: "In *Infinity War* Black Widow wore the vest. Which you find out is Yelena's vest. And it has a different meaning. Which is an extra character, rather than just adding to the 'sexy'." It means Natasha does not wear it to be sexier. Instead, the vest is a symbol of sisterhood, a token from her sister".

Participants from the New Zealand Focus Group pointed out that the vest is a symbol of choice, a gift from Yelena, purchased after being released from the mind-control she was under in the Red Room, a place they use to train girls like them to become spies and assassins. To Yelena, the vest made her happy because it had many pockets, so it was very useful. Considering *Infinity War* was released before Black Widow, we do not understand the meaning of the garment until we have watched *Black Widow*.

In a 2021 interview, Jane Temime, *Black Widow* (2021) costume designer, said that the green vest is functional, utilitarian, and practical. At the same time, it creates an emotional link between the sisters, which can be seen throughout both *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) and *Black Widow* (2021). This argument aligns with a popular discussion about the movie. Olivia, for example, noticed this detail and recognised the vest as a connection between the sisters, without necessarily having read this interview.

The green vest, then, embodies meaning. When looking at it as a functional, utilitarian piece of clothing, I consider Bennett's writing about utilitarian style, postfeminism, and television shows (2023). Bennett considers how telefantasy heroines from the 1990s are viewed by critics as symptomatic of the postfeminist cultural context in which they were created. In agreement with McRobbie (2009), Gill (2007), and Moseley (2002), Bennett confirms that these television shows were reproducing, for example, the spectacle of excessive femininity (McRobbie, 2009), or consumption as conforming to judgements of female attractiveness (Gill, 2007b). Those heroines were not only physically powerful, but they were also "conventionally attractive and meticulously groomed" (Bennet, 2023, p. 3), conforming with the postfeminist conjecture of female power following common modes of femininity.

At the end of the 1990s, a trend appeared, characterised by a utilitarian style, in which the main wardrobe pieces were "combat trousers or jeans, leather jackets, simple vest-

tops or T-shirts and boots, all usually in various shades of black, grey, khaki or other muted colours, with little decoration" (Bennett, 2023, p.140). According to Bennett (2023), female characters wear utilitarian style as a form of fortifying the show's "progressive, feminist credentials" (p. 143). Bennett's point of view is understandable if we see utilitarian style as opposed to excessive femininity or excessive sexualisation. We can say that, to some degree, utilitarian style was introduced as a solution to problematic sexualisation. However, it would be rather simplistic to affirm that a media product that portrays characters wearing utilitarian clothes suddenly resolves all contradictions and issues regarding beauty and fashion aspects, including sexualisation. Bennett (2023) agrees that when the heroine is dressed in a utilitarian style, another character will wear "more traditional, 'feminine', or sexualized female attire but in such a way that it is endowed with negative connotations" (p. 144), and that they are usually female antagonists.

The vest is a utilitarian piece because it fits these characteristics: its colours, style and practicality fit into the utilitarian style and. At the same time, the piece seems to diminish the sexualisation of the character, as Olivia said. In this sense, the green vest reduces the sexist representation of Black Widow. Indeed, Black Widow provides a meaningful example through which to examine the separation of sexism and sexual representation, as she seems to embody both aspects. When participants are attentive to this, they acknowledge that Black Widow has been problematically represented because, although she is a sexy woman, this trait is always entangled within a sexist portrayal, removing her subjectivity and freedom to represent herself as sexy.

The second meaning the vest embodies is the sense of female authorship. More than just practical, it works in a similar way to the hair tie in *Birds of Prey*. The hair tie helps keep the hair off of the face, and the vest is useful to carry many things. The idea of female authorship is then linked to a sensibility of worrying about characterisation details that not

only are useful to characters, but the audience can also identify with it. In real life, there are also people who care about how to carry their things (so pockets are useful) and about their long hair when doing diverse activities such as sports (so the importance of a hair tie). In this sense, women in charge, and more female input, show a level of sensibility in choosing this piece.

The third meaning, as acknowledged by participants, is the emotional bond between sisters. The green vest is more than an accessory, it is a device that adds to the plot and to a character's development, contributing to the narrative. After learning how Black Widow acquired that vest – knowing that it belonged to Yelena first – the audience makes connections between the movies, understanding the deeper meaning it had to Black Widow.

To Andie and Olivia, Black Widow's characterisation does not change drastically, rather it is an evolution found in small details such as the vest, which is not only practical, but holds a meaningful role within the narrative and helps to reduce the sexist way Black Widow is often depicted. Going one step further, this discussion includes actress Johansson, who is a relevant object of study once we consider that she embodies many of the controversies that are symptomatic of the progress (both backwards and forwards) that we have. I will expand on Johansson in Chapter Three, demonstrating how participants see her as representative of changes and controversies.

What can be inferred based on the above arguments is that, beyond considering wardrobe changes happening with Black Widow, the way the vest is used as a meaningful part of the sister's story is what arguably matters the most. As it was argued, the vest emphasises Black Widow's body and reinforces her as a sexy character, but also has significance within the story, reinforcing the sisterly bond.

It is Changing, But…

Postfeminist sensibilities help to understand many of the debates mentioned in this chapter. Looking back at the comments and opinions expressed throughout the chapter, clearly there are no correct answers about what to wear, but that we are looking at controversial dynamics that reflect the period we are living in, with many possibilities regarding how we present ourselves.

However, although participants are noticing what they perceive to be improvements in the costuming of superheroines, they also understand that it is not as simple as it seems, for questions of representation are still embedded in more complex dynamics and debates. They consider, for example, that there is still a beauty standard that must be followed in the media, including in superhero movies. Vitoria (Focus group 2, Brazil) said: "Superheroines always must fit into the beauty standard, you know? They are not fat women, or Black women. If she is powerful and a protagonist, she is white, thin, and beautiful." Despite having more inclusion and diversity, as mentioned by Vitoria, the persistence of the beauty standard of a white, thin, and beautiful protagonist/superheroine emphasises that there is still a norm, and it is not easy to move away from it.

Another argument reinforcing this idea is Rachel's (D/I, New Zealand). Although Rachel acknowledged that characters such as Black Widow are becoming much less sexualised, she also highlighted that "there is still a standard of what women should look like, and how they should look in costumes. That it should be tight or flattering in the right places in order to make it more desirable". Again there are contradictions between the perceived progress and the existence of a beauty pattern that must be followed for people to look more beautiful or desirable.

Both comments confirm that Vitoria and Rachel see the persistence of a beauty pattern that dictates how a superheroine should look, or dress. Gill (2017) argues that "appearance pressures have both intensified and extensified" (p. 616), which means that beauty norms and beauty pressure regarding how one should look like are still strong in our societies. This only adds to the complexity of these discussions. Even though numerous discussions have taken place online and are being incorporated into media productions, it does not mean that we are free from the tensions encompassed in such discussions.

Conclusion

Looking back at what was discussed in this chapter, it is noticeable that there is some level of criticism expressed by participants. This is not necessarily criticism against the clothes characters wear, but against how characters are shown while wearing them. This may often lead to the sexualisation of the character. In addition, participants also question and critique costuming in relation to how useful or effective it is for the activities superheroines undertake. At the same time, participants are favourable towards women's agency regarding how they dress, including women presenting themselves as more or less sexy.

Notably, although these are fictional characters, there was an overlap between fictional characters and real women in terms of agency and choice. Participants often referred to the characters as if they were the ones making choices. However, participants were also aware of the team behind the scenes who are responsible for the mise-en-scene for each movie. In fact, some of them commented that shifts in costuming are happening because of the real women in production, such as actresses having more input into what they wear onscreen.

Taking all of this into account, what I consider to be the most interesting element of this chapter is how it relates to the postfeminist sensibility. Values of the postfeminist

sensibility reach participants in a discreet way, taking the form of entertainment texts and of characters who inspire them. This means that such values are more easily accepted and embraced, with less questioning or criticism. Participants did, of course, criticise aspects such as excessive sexualisation or lack of agency, but they also displayed positive reception of characteristic elements of postfeminist discourse, especially women's agency, autonomy and choice (Gill, 2017).

In this sense, this chapter has illustrated how some ideas and values of the postfeminist sensibility are mediated to participants. Such ideas and values are built into pop culture texts – in this case, superhero(ine) texts. Through watching movies or through engaging with these texts online, participants access such ideas and values, commonly perceiving, embracing and accepting them as significant and necessary for women.

Chapter Three - Mediating Scarlett Johansson

> But Scarlett was a bridge, you know? The first one. If it was not her… Scarlett walked so that other women could fly. She did not have much of a choice, you know? In terms of costuming, for example. For us to have Brie Larson, Scarlett had to do it first. (Larissa, Focus group 2, Brazil)

> I think the reference is Scarlett Johansson because she's at a level of fame in which she can point it out and continue to work and do stuff. (Olivia, Focus group A, New Zealand)

The extracts above illustrate how Scarlett Johansson, the actor behind Black Widow, is perceived by some participants as embodying change. As a main character who has appeared in films across a context of shifts in how women – specifically in the superhero genre – are depicted, Larissa and Olivia's comments illustrate that Black Widow and Johansson have been key to this journey. Having participated in nine Marvel films from 2010 to 2021, in this moment of her life and career, Johansson has achieved some level of power concerning how she behaves as an actress and public figure, and what she chooses to show to the audience.

Indeed, participants were asked who their favourite superheroine was, or to name someone that is remarkable within the genre, they often mentioned Black Widow/Natasha Romanoff. Introduced as a mysterious Russian spy, and styled as a femme fatale, Black Widow first appeared in *Iron Man 2* (2010) as a secret agent working for S.H.I.E.L.D., who later became an Avenger. Considering the sets of movies that started what is called Phase 1[33]

[33] MCU movies are divided into "phases". Each one has a group of movies. Phase 1, for example, starts with *Iron Man* (2008) and finishes with *The Avengers* (2012). Marvel is currently on Phase 5 (until 2024). However, the year that start the next phase may change depending on the release date of the movies). There are already movies and TV shows set to Phase 6 and beyond.

of the MCU, Romanoff was the first woman to become an Avenger and, for some time, the only superheroine taking part in action in a male-only group. However, in 2021, more than ten years after *Iron Man 2*, Black Widow featured in her own solo movie. To fully understand the role of Johansson within the superhero genre, this chapter focuses on participants' perceptions of the actress in specific situations: namely press-release interviews, her lawsuit against Disney, and critiques of her when she was cast in whitewashing roles.

In the movies, Romanoff and Johansson are perceived to "continually adapt… her identity to operate in a male-dominated space and fulfil the roles required of her profession" (Davies, 2019, p. 91). Such adaptation of character and actor can be understood through social media engagement with Black Widow and Johansson. As Loreck et al. (2019) point out, studying Johansson:

> Provides a fertile ground to interrogate not only what contemporary stardom, and female stardom particularly, looks like, but also to see how an examination of the work of a single actor might foster new critical approaches to explorations of gender, genre and stardom in the twenty-first century. (p. 3)

Considering this affirmation, Johansson enables us to examine contemporary tensions and contradictions in a range of subjects. Importantly, much of what I approach in this chapter does not originate solely from Johansson, but from a combination of her actions and discourses, and how they are mediated online by third parties, finally reaching participants. In other words, part of what Johansson means to participants does not originate only from the actress, but also comes from the way she is mediated and how her image is built, especially in relation to gender and stardom. Within this mediation, participants have identified some tensions, which I explore in this chapter. But first I briefly introduce Johansson, and offer a few relevant points about stardom.

Who is Scarlett Johansson?

Scarlett Johansson is an American celebrity whose career has spanned than two decades. Having started as a child-actor in the 1990s, Johansson is well-known for her participation in a diverse range of movies and her work as a model. According to Loreck et al. (2019), much of Johansson's celebrity status comes from her "hyperfeminine beauty and global glamour" (p. 2), which contributes to making her popularity and celebrity-status around the world. Johansson modelling and work as a spokesperson for several brands, which has shored up her "image, building on her sexualized persona and place within the popular imagining of contemporary Hollywood stardom" (Loreck et al., 2019, p. 2). The fact that participants reference Johansson reiterates this argument. She holds a strong position in people's minds, whether due to superhero movies, or her other work.

As an actress, Johansson has starred as characters that portray "femininity in transition" (Loreck et al., 2019, p. 3), whether as an alien, a cyborg, or a femme fatale. For Loreck et al. (2019), Johansson is "emblematic of unstable personhood and feminine identity crisis" (p. 4). They claim this is intriguing because "she is the contemporary go-to actress for Hollywood's own feminine archetype" (p. 4): white, blonde-haired, and green-eyed. Johansson is both an archetype *and* represents transition and change, a position that is clearly illustrated in participants situating her as a "bridge" (Larissa) and "reference" (Olivia). Importantly, however, these participants were not talking about the entirety of Johansson's career, but specifically her place in the superhero genre. In the next section I draw from stardom studies to understand the ways participants may engage with Johansson as a celebrity.

Considerations about Stardom

Stardom studies have been, for a long time, underpinned by three major areas (Geraghty, 2007). The first associates celebrities and stardom with semiotics, seeing stars as signs. The second investigates the ideological aspect of stars, positioning them in a place of contradiction and resistance. The third is based in psychoanalytic work on gender. Geraghty (2007), however, argues for reformulating the way that stars are analysed in order to follow the changes that are happening in cinema. To do so, Geraghty (2007) proposes that we look at "the different ways meaning is made through a star" (p. 187), categorising them into celebrities, professionals, and performers, depending on how they appear in the media. In the category of stars-as-celebrities, their lives, what they do when they are not acting or performing, is as important as their acting career, and perhaps even *more* important. The audience finds pleasure in searching and knowing about the star's life. The concept of stars-as-professionals usually associates the image of the star with a specific genre, or a specific work. The star becomes a symbol of that, and repetition brings pleasure to the audience. The most important aspect of meaning making with audience reception of stars-as-performers is the performance itself, the acting.

Looking at Johansson, we can place her in one of these categories. It would be controversial to place her into star-as-performance, even though she is "an actor capable of change" (Loreck et al., 2019, p. 3). Despite being known for her work, in this research, participants did not necessarily praise Johansson because of her acting skills. Johansson also does not stay in the category of stars-as-professionals: although she became well-known as Black Widow, she acts in genres beyond superheroes with roles in science-fiction and drama. While elements of each of these categories apply, the last category, stars-as-celebrities seems to be where the actress can be placed when we look at how participants are engaging with and

perceiving her. Although access to her private life is restricted, Johansson's publicity appearances and public statements provide an opportunity for the audience to make connections with debates surrounding women's bodies, gender, agency, and objectification. In this way, Johansson as a celebrity is a conduit of meaning.

Discussing her star image, Loreck et al. (2019) say that "for Johansson, this aspect of her stardom highlights contradictions in the way she has been constructed" (p. 11). Contradictions are, as argued by Dyer (1998), one of the elements of the star image. There are different types of star image with numerous (yet limited) meanings that are generated and circulated through certain types of texts. These texts, such as promotions, news, or even movies themselves construct these star images and the meanings audiences associate with them. These meanings depend on the context we live in. Since there are numerous meanings, Dyer considers it a structured polysemy. Celebrities are "an intertextual sign informed by multiple sources in multiple ways" (Meyers, 2009, p. 892). Dyer (1998) considers that meanings that are in opposition to each other or in contrast are also valid to construct a star image. In this case, the ability to manage tensions is significant. That is why considering Johansson's contradictions is relevant to comprehend her types of star image, and how the audience interacts and perceives them. As this chapter aims to show, Johansson can be a contradictory figure in the eyes of participants: she seems to promote both positive and negative forms of representation.

Palmer and Warren (2019) write about star personas, considering how these figures have previously been referred to as "multi-textual constructions that bring together celebrities, industries and audiences in shared fantasies" (p. 129). However, the authors comment on Ellcessor's idea of "star text of connection", which "describe[s] the particular shifts that networked social media have enabled" (Palmer & Warren, 2019, p. 129). According to Ellcessor (2012), in considering that a star image presented to the public is "made up of

diverse representations of that individual" (p.48), the star text "is never equal to the 'real' person behind the image, but is, rather, an intentionally crafted narrative blend of consumerism, success, and ordinariness" (p. 48). Such considerations surrounding star personas originate from authors such as Dyer (1991), Gamson (1994) and Turner (2004), who observe how stars can be seen as convergent, as they "pull audiences from one site to another" (Ellcessor, 2012, p. 48), and the "transmedia story of the star is formed through repeated connections between these discursive sites" (p. 48). These sites can be a celebrity's performance, interviews, photography, or any type of promotional appearance. What Ellcessor (2012) argues, however, is that the star persona:

> In the age of social networking, is also an *agent* of media convergence that functions through *connection*. By performing textual, industrial and personal connections through the use of online social media, the star text itself can be used to shape or reinforce a star's multimodal image, to promote creative labors, and to smooth the convergences of aesthetics, audiences, and industries that complicate the contemporary media landscape. (p.48)

These shifts are evident when the star is an active user of social media (Palmer & Warren, 2019). Johansson, however, is not (publicly) active on social media. Palmer and Warren (2019) call attention, though, to how Johansson "is highly visible across social media" (p. 128) through memes "where she is subject to the waxing and waning of public approval and the controversies that inevitably beset anyone working in the public eye" (p. 128). Palmer and Warren (2019) consider that "online star personas are created not just through the sanctioned voices of the star's publicity machine, but they are also articulated with increasing ease through content created by diverse external voices of audiences and fans" (p.128). For Palmer and Warren (2019), memes about Johansson are one way her star persona is created.

In the next section, I consider the ways that Johansson's star image is constructed and mediated by two types of paratexts: interviews (videos) and memes. The readings participants make of Johansson and her star persona come from a combination of herself (her acting, performances, discourses) and how she is mediated, whether by official or unofficial media.

Why Does She Get the Rabbit Food Question?

Johansson was often praised by participants for her answers in various interviews, including pre-release interviews for MCU films. According to Dyer (1998), press-release interviews are one way of constructing a star-image and its meanings. Interviews are part of the life of a celebrity, especially the ones in which they promote their movies. Actors are questioned about the plot, their characters, behind the scenes, and even about challenges they faced while filming. However, while other actors were questioned about these topics, participants pointed out that that Johansson was commonly be faced with questions about her body and image. Larissa (Focus group 2, Brazil) said that questions for Scarlett were "about her diet or her underwear". Similarly, Beatriz (D/I, Brazil) commented, "There are tons of interviews in which you can see that she is pissed off because of the questions people used to ask, which were about her diet, fitness". Participants pointed out that these questions not only had a misogynistic nature, but were clearly different from the ones her co-stars had to answer. Marianna (D/I, Brazil) also highlighted this point: "Johansson was asked if she was on a diet to fit in her suit while actors were asked about their characters. This type of question is always controversial".

Identifying that Johansson had responded with dissatisfaction to such questions, participants sided with Johansson and queried these questions. Their concerns illustrate how participants negotiated their understandings of beauty and body constraints through a

celebrity, while watching or reading interviews (paratexts) online. In this case, Johansson's image is built in relation to the gendered questions directed to her, and how she positions herself in relation to these questions.

Since Johansson is a woman, it is *expected* that she will be more concerned about her own physical appearance, and that she *understands* and treats her body as her main source of power. In a postfeminist context, women's bodies are perceived as their main source of power (Gill, 2007b), undermining other types of power they can have. This is one of the reasons that participants criticise the situation. This focus undermines her other capabilities. The core of the problem, however, and the reason for criticism is the explicit sexism happening there: Johansson is treated differently to men.

The issue here is not only that Johansson is asked these questions, but how she responds to them. Instead of accepting them or giving a passive answer, the actress often replies with sarcasm, or in a way that makes it clear that there is something wrong with the question, positioning herself as challenging this type of mistreatment. Participants compliment this behaviour, impressed that Johansson explicitly shows that she is bothered by those questions, and how, through her answers, she shows that it is permissible to defend yourself. These dynamics allow participants to engage with a specific type of feminism: celebrity feminism.

Celebrity feminism has become more popular since the 2010s. In simple terms, celebrity feminism "can make feminism more appealing" (Tennent & Jackson, 2019, p. 234). The issue with celebrity feminism is that it has acquired visibility because of media-friendly expressions in which famous people side by a type of feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018, 2020). Famous people such as singer Beyoncé or actress Emma Watson are associated with manifestations of feminism and, as famous and influential figures, their messages reach lots of

people. These messages, which show feminism as something good and that our societies need, circulate through mediums such as social media platforms.

Scholarship on celebrity feminism has explored, questioned, and criticised this subject (Taylor, 2016; Tennent & Jackson, 2019; Chidgey, 2021; Jackson, 2021). Tennent and Jackson (2019) see celebrity feminism as "a flashpoint that ignites strenuous and often polarising debates about contemporary feminisms, their relationship with media culture, and the issues of visibility and authenticity this raises" (p. 233). Chidgey (2021), for example, writes that celebrity feminism is a "complex, internally variated assemblage of representations and political claims" (p. 1057). Celebrity feminism enables feminism to be accessible (Casey & Watson, 2017) however, at the same time, we must consider the privileged position celebrities speak from (Hobson, 2017; Tennent & Jackson, 2019).

Celebrity feminism belongs to a category of forms of feminism which receive more visibility in contemporary media culture because they "pose less challenge to the neoliberal logic of postfeminism" (Tennent & Jackson, 2019, p. 227). Their visibility is associated with the fact that they are "uncritical of capitalism and reject collective action for social change" (Tennent & Jackson, 2019, p. 227). It is questioned whether celebrity feminism is authentic, and if it has positive implications towards feminism.

In situating Johansson as a celebrity feminist, it is not my intention to investigate whether she enables valid feminism. Instead, I listen to what participants say about Johansson, how they negotiate meanings and messages she expresses, and how they use social media to engage with such discussions. I argue that understanding celebrity feminism is necessary to understand the dimensions of Johansson's influence.

While listening to participants, I was able to grasp their own levels of entanglement with feminism and gender issues through Johansson. To them, Johansson is a point of reference, and an important sign for meaning making. Johansson is an example of what Casey

and Watson (2017) call “key conduits through which feminism is mediated to larger audiences” (p. 2). Further, Jackson (2021) argues that “if we understand celebrities as such conduits, then it becomes significant and important to investigate meanings that audiences make of celebrity feminism” (p. 1076). In this case, Johansson is in a significant position because she gives visibility to certain issues, such as sexism and gender inequalities.

Another way of reflecting on Johansson’s potential for enabling debates about subjects such as feminism, gender and diversity is through Simões (2019), who writes that celebrities can be critical interactive devices. Simões considers Braga’s (2006, 2011, 2018) previous conceptualisations of interactive devices, in which is argued that a critical interactive device is equal to a system of relations that enables interpretations and analysis of subjects and events. Simões (2019) writes about a celebrity’s potential to be a critical interactive device, reflecting on how a celebrity enables critique of the society in which they are inscribed. In this sense, to think about celebrities’ potential to be critical interactive devices means “thinking about the social and political place they occupy within the contemporary scenario and on their capacity to encourage discussions about different themes in society” (Simões, 2019, p. 23). This conceptualisation adds to the relevance of examining people’s perception of Johansson, reinforcing the idea that through her it is possible to reach and to expand on relevant themes in our contemporary society. In this specific case, engaging with the mediation of Johansson encourages discussions about sexism.

However, although celebrities are key conduits to feminism or an interactive device that prompts discussions about a variety of contemporary subjects, the image participants have of Johansson – the one they are responding to here – is mediated. The first topic I approached above was Johansson promoting films she participated in. However, discussions with participants indicated that they were not simply watching these interviews as originally presented. Instead, they often watched videos that included a selection of interviews, focusing

particularly on the problematic/sexist questions women have to answer. In other words, participants are indeed seeing Johansson's answer and responding to it, but this discourse is already being mediated in a specific way.

Andie (Focus group, New Zealand), for instance, noted that she watches compilations of interviews with celebrities on YouTube, in which women are asked uncomfortable misogynistic questions. Andie argued that by watching them, she becomes aware of how common these questions and behaviours are: "You realize how often these women are asked this type of question, right? 'A few people have been asked that'. And then you watch the whole thing together! 'Oh it happens all the time!!' By watching these interviews, she noticed that it is not an unusual event, but something that is quite common for women. In this case, watching the interviews allowed Andie to engage with the topic and to understand more about a pattern: women being asked questions about their bodies as if they need to regulate their own bodies to fit in specific beauty patterns.

Having selected data for this chapter, I wanted to understand more about these interviews Andie and other participants talked about. A quick search on YouTube revealed many video compilations of moments from other interviews. In these videos, Johansson "shuts down sexist comments", as the title of one states. To give more context, I chose three examples from different interviews for Marvel movies. In each, Johansson was involved in press-release interviews with other actors. Whether participants are accessing Johansson's answers through these compilations (as Andie does) or if they have watched complete press-release interviews, it is important to consider that participants' understandings of Johansson as a celebrity feminist come from videos. Participants' engagement with and understanding of Johansson's celebrity feminism is, then, produced by fans. These compilations of videos work as paratexts and are part of a broader culture of online feminism.

In the first example of the compilation I watched, Johansson is asked the question: "To get into the shape of Black Widow, did you have anything special to do in terms of diet? Like, you have to eat some specific food or that sort of thing?" Johansson comments to Robert Downey Jr (Tony Stark/Iron Man) by her side: "How come you get like the really interesting existential questions, and I get like the rabbit food question?"

In the second example of the compilation, a journalist makes the following comment: "Scarlett, obviously your character could have easily just been written off as the sexy one of the team. How important is that-". The journalist is interrupted by Johansson. "Really? Have you seen Chris Hemsworth?"

In the third example, the person starts to ask Johansson about fashion elements in *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018). Johansson replies "What? The fashion elements?! I got the fashion question?!" Everyone starts laughing at her answer. She continues: "I really don't know how to answer this question. I wear a leather unitard for most of this film. And I have been for the last ten years. So, if you think of any fashion elements that you would like to include, please let us know."

These three examples show Johansson's answers to questions about her diet, being the sexy character, and fashion. They also demonstrate the type of content participants discuss. Postfeminist sensibilities help us to understand how participants perceive these situations, or why a woman is receiving this type of sexist question. There is an association between woman, body, and the constant need of monitoring it and regulating it (Gill, 2007b, 2017). It is demanded from the actress not only that she has an answer to these questions, but that she, being a woman, will be worried about diet, about how to keep her body in shape, or about fashion. Participants are critical of this approach, and it is essential to examine what they think of Johansson's answers.

In its totality, participants support Johansson's behaviour and answers in the interviews. As Vitoria (Focus group 2, Brazil) says, for example, "she was never quiet during interviews. She mentioned how some interviews had misogynistic questions." Vitoria emphasises that Johansson's voicing of the problem helps to clarify the misogynistic traits of it. When Johansson gives emphasis to these misogynistic traits, she calls attention to the problem, acknowledging that it exists, and allowing viewers to both identify with the situation and/or to see how it happens. Furthermore, Johansson's responses display the possibility of effectively answering sexist questions, instead of just listening to them and being passive. Johansson is praised *because* she is not quiet in these interviews.

Olivia (Focus group, New Zealand) also contributed to this discussion: "It's kind of good to see it being called out. When the press asks stuff about underwear. And she goes like "Why? Why do you ask this?" Olivia appreciates the fact that Johansson replies instead of just listening to these questions or giving a passive answer. To Olivia, it is satisfying to see the actress querying why she is being asked this type of question.

Similarly, Beatriz (D/I, Brazil) also appreciated that Johansson talks back, seeing this as a form of representation that is valid and necessary:

> 'Is it difficult to wear your clothes?' I remember she answered 'Why? Do you want to wear it?' In my opinion, this type of representation – actresses who are asked something like that and give this sort of answer – is also valid. It is a type of representation which says 'I am here, but I am not selling my body. I am a character as well. I am not there just to be pretty. I am not an ornament'.

The type of representation that Beatriz agrees with is one where the person inquires as to the reason why she must answer these questions. Beatriz considers it a valid representation because it elucidates that the actress does not exist (in the movie or doing the press conference) solely to be an object. Beatriz' use of the word "ornament" and the expression

"just to be pretty" can be understood as Johansson refusing to be seen as an object, giving emphasis to how these questions can objectify someone in a sexist way. In this case, Johansson being asked questions like these while her male companions are asked about their characters instead of their bodies, is an example of a common scenario where gender defines how actors are treated.

Olivia and Beatriz agree that not being passive is a valid form of positioning oneself against these questions. When there is silence or passivity, people may think that these sorts of behaviours (the questions that are asked) should be confronted with more silence. Instead, when a celebrity figure talks back as Johansson does, she might inspire and influence other people to do the same, by working as an example that people can do more than just accepting being treated like that.

To summarise, through these situations with public figures, people can engage with, and understand, how this type of sexism happens. As I have written, much of participants' readings of the star persona of Johansson in relation to these topics is the product of how it is mediated to them. In this case, their readings are the result of online mediation culture, mainly through YouTube videos. These paratexts facilitate their engagement with these topics, and they help participants to understand that challenging these gender-biased behaviours is valid and important. However, talking back and critiquing such positioning is not simple. Although many can identify with the situation and praise Johansson for doing responding as she has, not everyone can do what Johansson does.

Johansson can challenge this behaviour because she does so from a position of privilege as a powerful influential figure. Not only do celebrities talk about feminism from their own point of view (Tennent & Jackson, 2019), they often do so in a specific context that rarely considers intersectional aspects, and often ignores their privileged position. The celebrity holds certain power and privilege, which leads people to wonder if what they say is

valid and/or can be applied to everyone else. They are, after all, "unable to speak to the struggles and lived experiences of others" (Tennent & Jackson, 2019, p. 232). Johansson can inspire and motivate people, but, as participants acknowledged, not everyone has the power and privilege to do the same.

Olivia (Focus group, New Zealand) claimed that Johansson can talk back "because she's at a level of fame in which she can point it out and continue to work and do stuff". Being a celebrity and a public figure, Johansson has the power to shut down misogynistic questions without severe consequences such as losing her job, in contrast to what could happen with people who are not celebrities in a similar situation. Not all women can relate to being able to speak out in this way. Olivia, for example, acknowledges Johansson's privilege to talk about the issue, but she does not consider if it is right or wrong. Johansson being able to talk without being afraid of consequences aligns with the perspective of Taylor (2016, quoting Marshall, 1997), who argues that celebrity status allows celebrities to have discursive power. Their voices are above others.

In the next segment, I unfold more of this discussion about gender and celebrity privilege, with the example of Johansson's lawsuit against the giant corporation that is Disney.

Johansson versus Disney

Figure 17

Johansson vs Disney Meme 1: Star Wars

The meme above (Figure 17) depicts a scene from *Star Wars: Episode IX – The Rise of Skywalker* (Abrams, 2019). The meme was shared by participant Andie (D/I, New Zealand). It shows General Hux, a General from the First Order, the villains of the most recent trilogy of the *Star Wars* movie franchise. The character in question is revealed to be a spy. Motivated by his ambition, he does not care if he is betraying his own side, or who wins. As it happens with memes, this one makes sense or is funnier if people are aware of both contexts: the *Star Wars* one, and the Scarlett Johansson versus Disney context.

Shifman (2014) defines internet memes as "(a) group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users" (p. 41). In the case of memes about the lawsuit, images such as the General

Hux/*Star Wars* meme were already circulating, and were transformed by users to refer to Johansson's lawsuit. In addition, since Johansson was the central figure in the dispute, many memes originate from movies Johansson had worked on. As stated by Palmer and Warren (2019), memes "rely heavily on assumed knowledge, which is often culturally and temporally specific" (p. 135). This leads us to consider the context in which the meme was shared on social media.

The Scarlett Johansson and Walt Disney Company legal battle began when the actress filed a suit against Disney in July 2021. Disney is the owner of Marvel Studios, the company responsible for the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Johansson had worked for them since 2008, portraying Black Widow. With the COVID-19 pandemic, lockdowns and resulting consequences to the movie industry, companies had to change their distribution strategies: movies intended for release in cinemas were now accessed through streaming services to avoid losing money. The first company to trial this was Warner Bros, which had movies released both in cinemas and on HBO Max on the same day. Although this release strategy sparked controversy among the filmmaking community, Disney tried to do the same, starting in 2020 with *Mulan* (2020), followed by other movies, including *Black Widow*.

According to Johansson, the simultaneous release of *Black Widow* in cinemas and on Disney+ (Disney's streaming service) was unfair, as box office revenue was sacrificed in favour of more profits generated through Disney's streaming service (Masters & Siegel, 2021). She filed a suit against Disney. Johansson's original contract had a guarantee of an exclusive theatrical release for *Black Widow* in at least 1,500 movie theatres, and that it would take at least 90 days for it to be released on Disney+. Meanwhile, Disney argued that she was not showing consideration regarding the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (Lang & Maddaus, 2021). This legal dispute also revolved around Johansson's salary. Because the box

office revenue from an exclusive theatrical release would have been more profitable than a hybrid release, Johansson alleged that she had lost part of the salary she was owed.

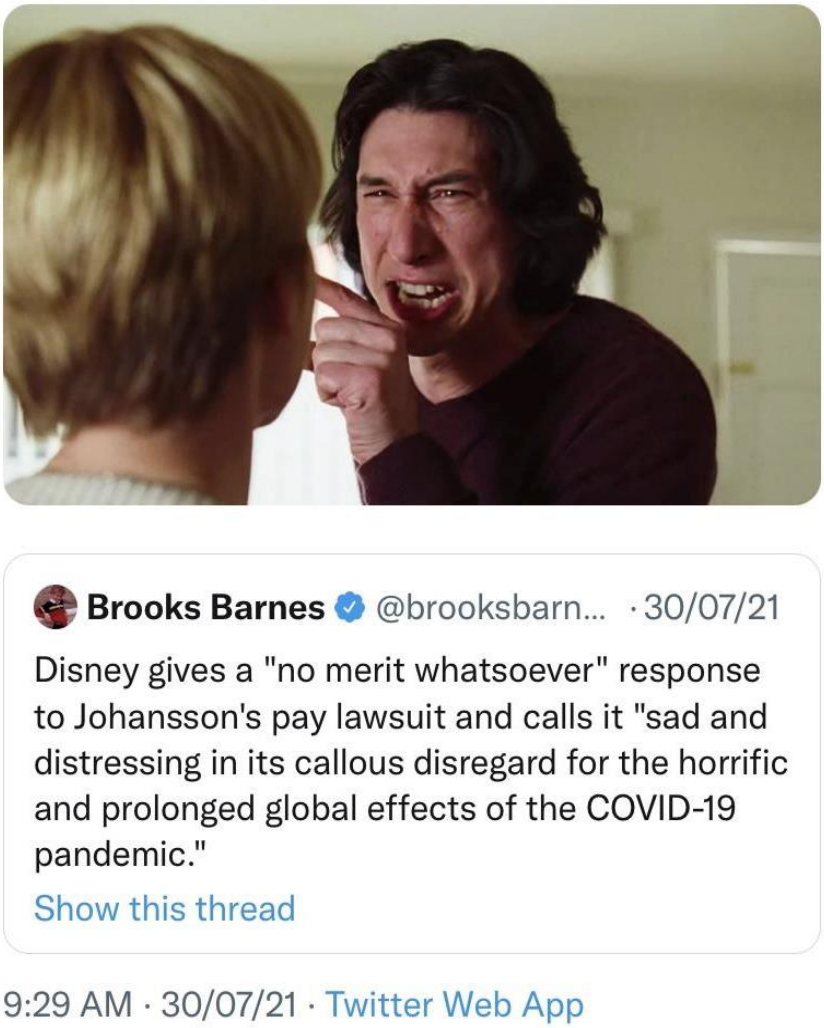
In the following weeks the legal dispute dominated social media, with people interested in the outcome. As an example of Geraghty's star-as-celebrity (2007) category, Johansson's life as a public person, and the outcome of the legal battle became more interesting for the audience. Much of the engagement with this episode happened through the consumption and sharing of online material related to it, such as the meme that opens this section (Figure 17).

As this lawsuit coincided with the time when participants were completing their diaries, participants shared a few memes about the lawsuit. That participants chose these memes exemplifies how they engage with events from contemporary society. According to Palmer and Warren (2019), memes are able to "reveal a number of underlying logics of contemporary digital culture" (p. 129).Through memes, it is possible to examine dynamics behind contemporary digital culture, whether analysing the content of the meme or how it is mediated online. Quoting Shifman (2014), Palmer and Warren (2019) argue that major public events always start the production and circulation of memes. Johansson's lawsuit provides a useful example through which to consider the relevance of memes in this context, and the problematic nature of salary discrepancies concerning gender.

Participant Andie (D/I, New Zealand) shared the meme below (Figure 18), from Twitter. It has information about the lawsuit (in this case, Disney's answer to Johansson) retweeted, together with a scene from the movie *Marriage Story* (Baumbach, 2019), featuring Johansson and actor Adam Driver. The movie tells a story about a marriage break-up, and this image became a meme by the time the movie had been released. The person that Adam Driver's character is speaking to is Johansson's character.

Figure 18

Johansson vs Disney Meme 2: Marriage Story



When it became a meme, this sequence was used with many mundane topics. In this case, Adam Driver's character embodies Disney responding to Johansson, an answer the text says was "sad and distressing" considering the pandemic context. In terms of the visual elements in the scene, Driver's character seems to be very angry, pointing his finger towards Johansson's character. The meme equates Disney to Driver's angry character, who we see from (almost) the perspective of Johansson's character. This arguably generates some level of empathy for Johansson, who is here seem as the victim of a furious someone – Disney.

Andie, who shared this meme, commented that she found out about the lawsuit first on Twitter. Although Andie made it clear that she did not remember exactly what she saw or read, she said that it was something about Patty Jenkins, *Wonder Woman*'s director. At the time, Jenkins had complained about the hybrid distribution of movies. This led Andie to wonder if it is a fair scenario, for she understands that people were losing money because of the hybrid distribution. Although people were making funny memes and laughing at the situation, Andie (D/I, New Zealand) understands the situation as more complex, reaching the engines of pop culture production.

> I don't want to say that I thought it was funny because I get it. It seemed super sketchy. They did not want to pay her the money that she deserved, just because it was online. Now they are not making any more Disney+ releases until… I don't know. Who knows? That was their last experiment. Disney is a bit of a beast. What I thought was funny about the situation was the amount of people who were like 'Scarlett Johansson is not a perfect person, but I'm going for her just because I want Disney to lose something, that monopoly of power that they have on pop culture'. Just give her the money!! It is about this much of their percentage of earnings!

Andie's comment makes sense considering, for example, the *Star Wars* meme (Figure 17). It is a clear example that what mattered was not if Johansson would win. All that this portion of the audience wanted was for Disney to lose, mainly due to its monopoly over the pop culture industry. This common perception shared by the portion of the audience described by Andie reiterates the idea of how memes can generate a type of perception "of a shared understanding and online communities of like-minded participants" (Palmer & Warren, 2019, p. 135), whether this perception is real or not.

Another example of how memes work within a specific temporality and place is shown below (Figure 19), in a meme shared by participant Andie (D/I, New Zealand).

Figure 19

Johansson vs Disney Meme 3: Black Widow

The image above works because *Black Widow* viewers understand that it depicts the final scene of the movie, showing Black Widow leaving to meet with the other Avengers before *Avengers: Infinity War*. The humorous part of the meme relies on the fact that it is

Black Widow, herself as an Avenger, exemplifying the power that both the character and the actress hold. The "Avengers theme intensifies" also makes sense for those familiar with the soundtrack of the movie, a theme song that introduces the Avengers movies, and that is also used for action and key scenes in the story. It is a theme song for action and battle that can be linked to the lawsuit situation.

Another aspect to unpack is how the multiplicity of narratives mediated through different media platforms generates a feeling of familiarity with the character (Koh, 2014). Superheroes are "signifiers of extraordinariness" (Koh, 2014, p. 490). They are easily recognisable in many media texts (Koh, 2014), having become what Rojek (2004) calls celeactors: fictional characters who attend the public necessity in a specific moment of time, becoming an "institutional feature of popular culture" (p. 23, as cited by Koh, 2014, p. 491). In franchises such as superhero ones, the audience must connect with the celeactor. There have been three different *Spider-Man* trilogies, for instance, each with a different actor portraying Spider-Man/Peter Parker. It is most important that the audience creates connections with the superhero Spider-Man rather than with the actors portraying him, as it is Spider-Man who will be in different media texts and/or selling products such as games, toys, clothes, and others. Koh (2014) argues that this is one of the reasons why the MCU tends to cast lesser-known actors to play their main characters in their origin movies: they want the audience to create a connection with the character, not with the actor. However, in some cases, this was not what happened.

Returning to Black Widow, if we think of Johansson as a celeactor or, at least, as a signifier of the contemporary popular imagining, there are blurred lines between the character Black Widow and the actress. Instead of separating the superheroine and the actress, the meme conflates them, with both character and actress perceived as the same. This conflation is in opposition to what was arguably originally desired by the MCU (Koh, 2014). While this

aspect of Johansson's personal life (the lawsuit) became interesting to the public, it is Black Widow who is taking action, accepting the task of fighting against the corporation (Disney). In this case, the meme reinforces feminist traits of the character. Black Widow embodies fighting against gender inequality when, in reality, this dispute was between Johansson and Disney. Johansson's image is blurred: although her celebrity-as-star characteristic makes Johansson herself a prominent figure, she is strongly associated with the character. And, in this case, the character is a symbol of a struggle of our contemporary lives: gender inequality.

Even though these memes (Figures 17, 18 & 19) are characterised by humour, the humorous part of the meme is one layer among others. It is the entry point for deeper layers, which are almost always "representative of an ideological practice" (Wiggins, 2019, p. 11). Although such memes make fun of the lawsuit, a deeper look can lead us to reflect on the consequences of the pandemic in the movie industry, the power of big companies such as Disney and its monopoly over the media, and about gender differences in term of salaries. Looking at Figure 19, Black Widow and Johansson are entangled together. Although it is possible to differentiate between the character and the celebrity, much of the problem's origin (lawsuit) is linked to the fact that is a gendered issue. Black Widow is, again, a conduit, symbolising gendered inequality, which I discuss next.

It is important to reinforce that Black Widow was the second movie from the MCU with a woman as solo protagonist,[34] and the first one with Romanoff (Black Widow) as a solo lead, despite the fact that she had been part of the MCU for more than ten years. While other men from the original group of Avengers had two or three solo movies, until that moment she had not had one. Prior to *Wonder Woman* (2017), the logic behind the success or failure of a female-driven movie was that if the film was profitable, it was an exception to the rule

[34] The first one was *Captain Marvel* (2019).

(Donoghue, 2022) which led to few films being made. Two participants drew attention to this idea. Camila (D/I, Brazil) said that the decision about whether a movie about a superheroine would be produced is made by men: “They still base their decisions on the male part of the audience. It took a long time to make a Black Widow movie.” Meanwhile, Andie (D/I, New Zealand) said that a Black Widow movie was begun once it was decided that it would make enough money:

> I hate that that is what drives decisions on films and television shows like that. It is not like ‘what are the stories that we want to tell’, but like ‘which ones will make the most money?’ What is gonna make us the most money is usually guys blowing shit up. And I love that, but I also want other people to see themselves on the screen, right? It’s evolving, but it is still not great!

There is an industry lore that considers that superheroines not as profitable as superheroes – which bothers participants – and this is positioned beside a judicial battle in which Disney could have just won more money. In terms of industry lore, it is said that male-driven movies do not fall into the same logic of economic risk (Donoghue, 2022). Following this idea, Beatriz (D/I, Brazil) argued that it has happened like this because it is a woman:

> I ask myself: if it was a man would Disney have reacted like that? If Chris Hemsworth had said ‘If you don’t fix my contract, I’m out’. If it was Robert Downey Jr – whose character is dead – would Disney do that? Because Black Widow is dead. If it was the other Chris – Captain America – would Disney do this scandal?

Andie and Beatriz see the lawsuit situation as a gendered issue. First, Andie considers that a Black Widow movie was not produced earlier because it supposedly would not make money. Then Beatriz said that she thinks that the lawsuit outcome would have been different if it was one of the male MCU actors. To both participants, the financial element is attached to gender. Beatriz’ argument infers that the lawsuit issue is more than a financial gender discrepancy: the

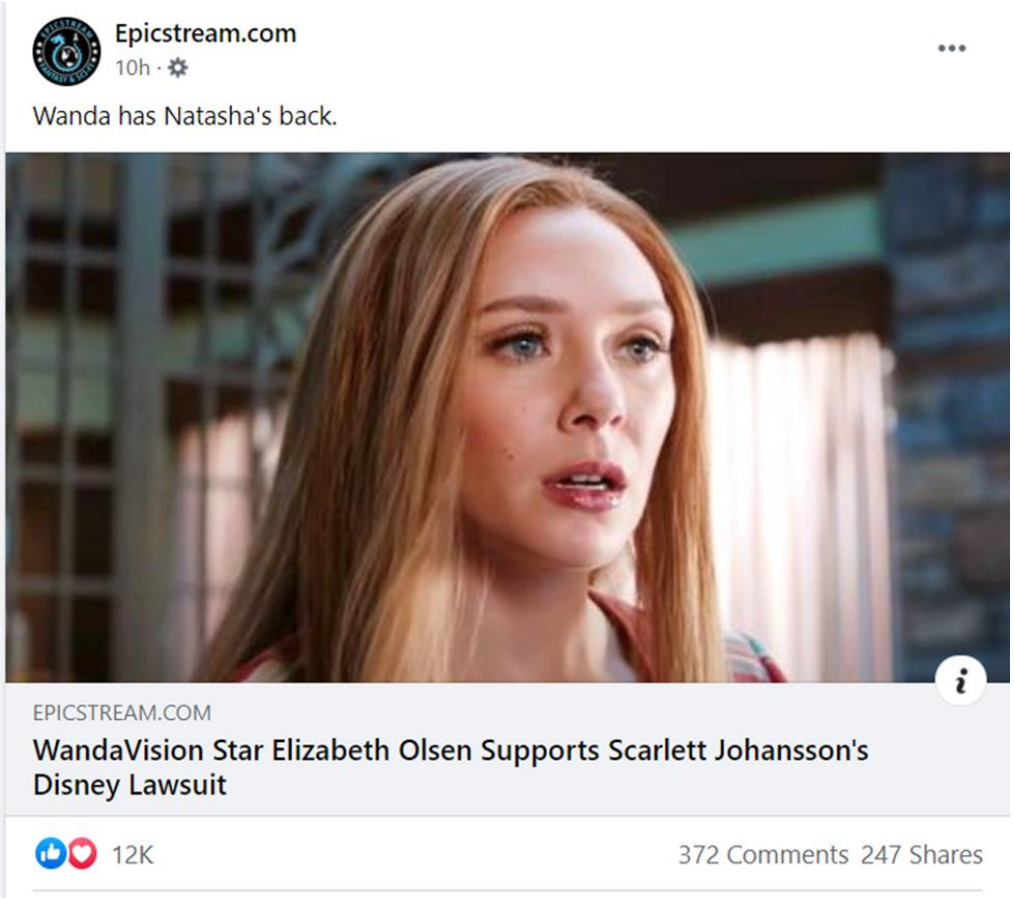
gender itself is an influential factor in how the entire situation unveils itself. Beatriz perceives MCU actors as having more power and influence inside the company, while Johansson is treated differently because she is a woman. This scenario demonstrates another instance of sexism in the movie industry. To enter a judicial dispute with a man would have consequences that Disney would not want to face.

> Beatriz (D/I, BR) also talked about how Johansson is already a rich person:
>
> People said 'but she is already rich'. But it goes beyond that. In her case, it is a scenario in which she is paid less than them. So it has gained new layers. It has really caught my eye. It makes all the difference, you know?

The participant acknowledged that the actress is financially privileged. However, being more or less rich is not perceived as a negative factor. Johansson is paid less than her male companions. Whether it is consumed as a meme with a humorous aspect, whether people acknowledge Johansson is already someone with power and influence – they are all layers of a bigger problem: gender inequality. The memes are examples of intertextuality people have engaged with. The following image (Figure 20) shared by Beatriz is how she has engaged with this situation.

Figure 20

Elizabeth Olsen Shows Spport for Johansson



Beatriz (D/I, Brazil) said that Elizabeth Olsen has offered subtle support towards Johansson, stating that:

> Scarlett has created a trend. She has evidenced a situation which we know is real, that actresses are paid less than actors. This has taken bigger proportions. Olsen's support has made all the difference both for Scarlett, as a support, and as a question of trying to get their rights. It is an unfair situation. They are friends.

In this case, Beatriz became interested in the sisterhood aspect of the situation, with Olsen showing support towards Johansson as a woman supporting another woman. In the interview, Beatriz commented on an Instagram post she saw with tips on how to get a job. According to the participant, there was a woman saying that she did not like hiring women because women get pregnant and ask for maternity leave. Beatriz said: "A woman saying something like

that… That's why we need this type of representation! It hurts more when a woman says things like that. That's why I like how Olsen has shown support for Scarlett." In that sense, Beatriz praises the female support Johansson has received, seeing it as a positive example. The lawsuit episode resulted in both neutral and positive responses from participants towards Johansson. There were those who did not care about who would win, and also examples of support towards Johansson, especially considering that she was being disrespected for being a woman. Much of this situation was mediated to participants through information circulating on social media and through memes, which give a humorous aspect to the situation but, once its layers are investigated, can also communicate a more critical side of this event.

Until now, Johansson has been seen as a symbol of positive representation. Although her image is mediated through paratexts created and reproduced by someone else, in general, participants have expressed approval of her in these situations, accessing topics such as sexism and gender inequality through these mediations. However, Johansson is not exempt from controversies. On the contrary, she is at the centre of whitewashing/racism situations.

Johansson's Whiteness

As demonstrated above, Johansson's status as a celebrity helps to expose gender inequality and sexism in ways that participants identified with. However, Johansson has been in the centre of some controversies because she has been chosen to play Asian characters. Anna (D/I, New Zealand) shared the following image in her diary (Figure 21).

Figure 21

MCU's Asian Characters and Johansson

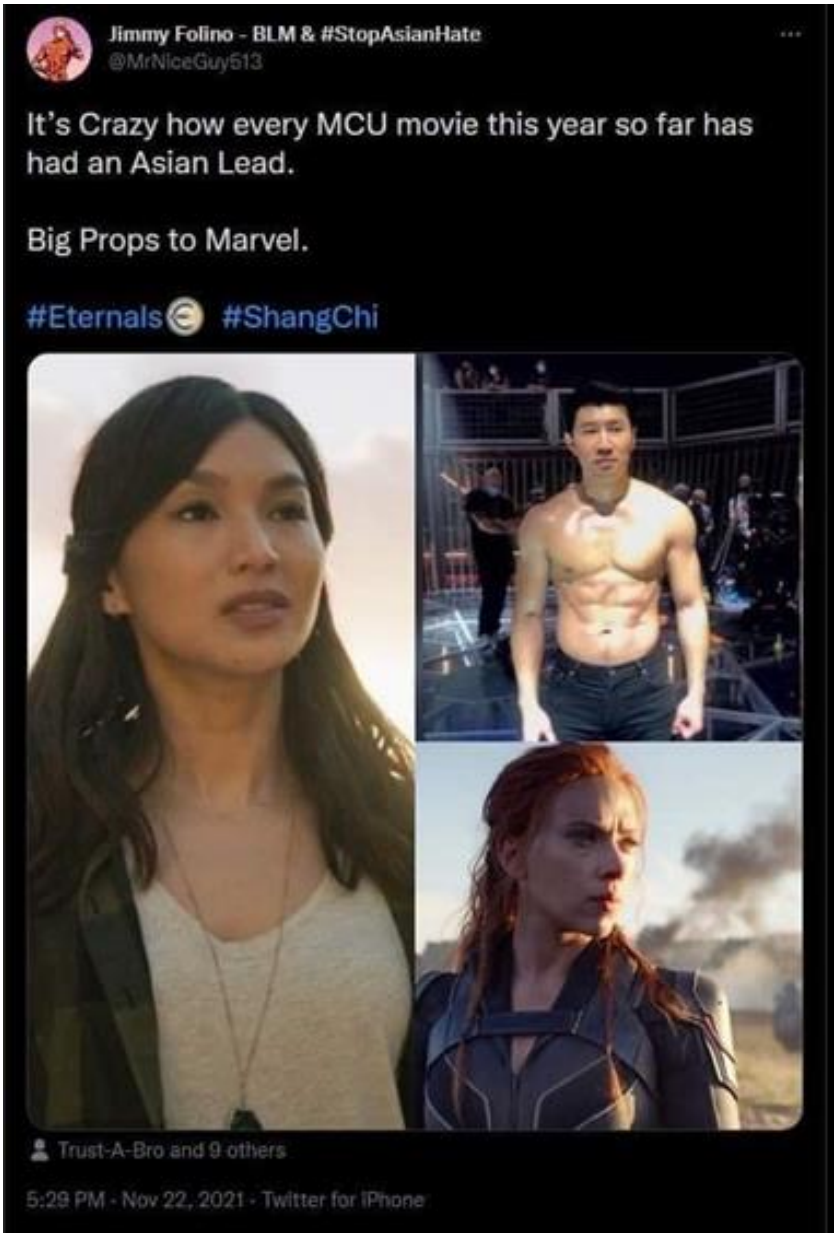


Figure 21 shows three protagonists from three MCU movies released in 2021. Simu Liu plays Shang Chi in *Shang-Chi* (Cretton, 2021), whose character's origin and background are of Chinese ethnicity; Gemma Chan, a British-Chinese actress played Sersi in *Eternals*; and Johansson, who is ironically included because Scarlett became known for playing the role of Asian characters, especially after the *Ghost in the Shell* controversy. The text is also sarcastic, praising Marvel for its "Asian" leads in 2021. Anna (D/I, New Zealand) commented

on her choice of image, mentioning Johansson controversially playing Motoko Kusanagi in *Ghost in the Shell* (Sanders, 2017).

Ghost in the Shell is a Japanese manga adapted into a movie. It is set in a future version of Japan, full of technology. Johansson plays a human-machine hybrid working investigating crimes. She discovers that her she is Motoko Kusanagi instead of Mira Killian (Brown & Fleming, 2019). The controversy was that even though this is a cyborg /non-human character, arguments were made that the character should have been a played by an Asian actor/actress as the brain of a Japanese character is placed inside a robotic body (Brown & Fleming, 2019, Palmer & Warren, 2019). Johansson's casting ignited accusations of whitewashing (Daliot-Bul, 2019; Palmer & Warren, 2019; Rendell, 2021).

According to Anna, "making white is the default". Anna recalled that the same thing happened with Tilda Swinton, who plays the Ancient One in *Doctor Strange* (Derrickson, 2016). The Ancient One is an Asian male in the comics. Tilda Swinton is a queer actor,[35] and the gender of the Ancient One in the movie was changed from a man to a woman. Even though there has been a shift of gender, it does not erase the fact that Swinton is a white person. Discussing Figure 21, Anna (D/I, New Zealand) said:

> It's a good joke. An overused one at that. But it serves as a reminder that whitewashing is so prevalent. I personally didn't know much about the controversies until I had to do research into it. But upon learning about it, it's incredibly stifling and off-putting to realise that a white person was chosen as the default option to playing a character. It comes with the notion that Westerns are very tangled with themselves and place them as the centre/ dominant group/ position. They may ask why there aren't popular Asian characters. There are. Plenty of them. They're simply

[35] In 2021, Swinton declared that she identifies as queer (Stone, 2021). Available at: https://abcnews.go.com/GMA/Culture/actress-tilda-swinton-reveals-identifies-queer/story?id=75248933)

> not looking in the right place, and at the same time refuse to look elsewhere with the notion of if they're not popular in America, they won't be popular elsewhere. It's very narcissistic. I do wish that whitewashing would stop, and make way for other actors of different ethnicities to be brought to the big screen.

When *Ghost in the Shell* was released, part of the marketing strategy was allowing the audience to create their own memes to answer the question "What makes you unique?" However, this resulted in people using this option to create images that criticised the movie for its whitewashing (Palmer & Warren, 2019, Rendell, 2021). Rendell (2021) argued that this audience behaviour "highlighted her [Johansson's] privileged position and her perceived inability to recognise it" (p. 185). This argument aligns commentary from Dyer (1997) and Oh (2021) about whiteness and whitewashing.

Drawing on McIntosh (1988), Dyer (1997) writes about the racial imagery of white people, arguing, amongst other claims, that white people in Western society are privileged, but that they do not seem to recognise this privilege. Dyer (1997) notes that it is almost as if "whiteness is nothing in particular" (p. 9), when in truth "the equation of being white with being human secures a position of power" (p. 9). As Rendell (2021) argues, in taking these roles Johansson was unable to recognise her whiteness as an aspect that grants her privilege. Meanwhile, Oh (2021) states that, when represented in movies, whiteness is constructed not only as superior, but also through sympathy, where "white people are worthy of sympathy and identification" (p. 15). Oh continues, "white characters on screen can play any identity and fit into any cultural space" (p. 11). Clearly, this observation applies to Johansson and some of the roles that she has played.

In work underpinned by the writings of authors such as Dyer (1988, 1997) and Nakayama and Krizek (1995), Oh (2021) examines whitewashing in movies. Oh (2021) writes that, in contemporary times, whiteness has become more visible, with critiques of

whitewashing arising in social media via online activists (p. 2): an example is the hashtag #OscarsSoWhite, a response to the lack of nominees of colour in 2016. Oh (2021) conceptualises whitewashing as "be(com)ing the Asian Other through erasing Asian/American subjectivity and claiming it to advantage White subjectivity" (p. 17). Whitewashing can happen in three ways, Oh (2021) claims: yellowface (where a white actor plays the role of a non-white character); replacing Asian characters with white ones (e.g., when Tilda Swinton played the Ancient One in *Doctor Strange*); and centring white subjectivity in Asian worlds, (with *Ghost in the Shell* falling, according to Oh, into this last category).

Whitewashing is not uncommon in Hollywood's anime. Fans of live action adaptations often reject whitewashed productions (Oh, 2021). In the case of movies like *Ghost in the Shell* and whitewashing, Oh (2021) says that:

> Whitewashing, then, argues that White people are not only a part of Asian worlds but that their presence is normal, necessary, relatable, and most sympathetic. As a strategic representational practice, whitewashing animates and extends the boundaries of Whiteness by claiming any and all racial difference. (p. 14)

In a way, Johansson's presence in that Asian fantasy world is normalised. Being white, she is seen as having no specific race and, because of that, she can portray any character. This, together with her inability to perceive her privilege, is what bothers participants. In other words, participants criticised the racism embedded in this situation.

Figure 21, then, is a joke that treats Johansson's white privilege with irony. For Rendell (2021) a "moral economy" is "created around Johansson, one that undermines her feminist position, as she and her race are seen as stealing roles from Asian women, echoing neo-colonial discourse" (p. 185). In other words, it is emphasised that even though the actress is perceived as a conduit of feminism by some and in specific contexts, at the same time, there

are situations in which this feminist position is set aside because her whiteness – her race – is a stronger element. This affirmation returns us to the question of whether her feminism is valid, when she speaks from the privileged position of a rich white person.

Mattis (2016) and Nygaard (2018) examine and criticise whiteness and feminism through the American comedian Amy Schumer. Nygaard (2018) argues that Schumer performs a "satirical mode of feminist discourse" (p. 52), while Mattis (2016) claims that the case of Schumer fails to acknowledge "the agency white women have held in Hollywood" (p. 402). Meanwhile, Nygaard (2018) contends, it also "highlights the need to interrogate who is able to participate in these increasingly visible emergent feminisms and who remains marginalized" (p. 69). Similar considerations can be applied to Johansson. Her whiteness/race is always an element that circumscribes and leads her feminism, gender, and star persona.

Participant Anna introduced another problem: "This comes with the notion that Americans are very tangled with themselves and place them as the centre/ dominant group/ position". Anna positions Western countries and Westerners as perceiving themselves as central and dominant. The participant argued that because the producers wanted the movie to be successful, they (the producers) believed that only a well-known Western actress could help them into achieving success. Again, Johansson's body positions her as a symbol of success. Redmond (2019) considers it "a hegemonic tactic for ensuring that whiteness maintains its racial superiority" (p. 216), which aligns with Anna's understanding. In relation to Johansson, Redmond (2019) argues that:

> When a star image and idealised whiteness are combined, or brought together, in a symbiotic union they construct a powerful narrative about privilege and belonging in the world, one that places or situates white identity at the apex of civilised and successful life. (p. 203)

This underpins Anna's comment about the centrality of Western people and the problematic concept of whitewashing that Johansson exemplifies in *Ghost in the Shell.* While Johansson's feminism (resulting from her own discourses and of their mediation) sometimes inspires participants and allows them to engage and to criticise certain situations (such as sexism), the actress is also at the core of what are perceived to be, and criticised as, racist representations. Her own whiteness does not allow her to play any identity (Oh, 2021), and although it does not seem problematic to her, the fact that she is taking specific roles does not go unnoticed. Participants perceived it, resulting in comments such as Evan's, who said Johansson should "calm down from taking Asian character roles". For the purpose of this research, what matters most is how participants perceive her privileges – as a White celebrity – and criticise acts of racism and whitewashing.

Conclusion

Through interviews, memes and news circulating online, participants were able to engage and to learn more about specific subjects relating to gender, celebrity and feminism: misogyny/sexism Johansson has experienced during press-release interviews; gender inequality with the Disney versus Johansson lawsuit; and racism and whitewashing. Although the first two situations were positive for Johansson's celebrity persona, the third was not, in that it placed Johansson at the centre of controversies concerning her role in instances of whitewashing. Through these examples, participants learn about Johansson, and these engagements are vital in constructing participants' understanding of Johansson, whilst also establishing wider communities through this process.

In the first situation, participants praised and sided with Johansson when she was in the position of a woman being questioned about her body in a sexist context. In the second, although some sided with Johansson because it was an event that highlighted gender

inequality, some sided with her only because they wanted Disney to lose. In the third situation, however, her race/whiteness adds to her privilege, making us question other positive manifestations of her. These three events position Johansson in a controversial place. Such positive and negative readings do not undermine participants' capacity to negotiate meaning and engage with such topics through her. Furthermore, participants are shown to be critically reflective when talking about Johansson, conscious of who she is and the power she holds.

Interestingly, much of this engagement is the result of Johansson's image and discourses being mediated to participants by others rather than Johansson herself, as she is not officially publicly active on social media. Many of these forms of mediation originate from the work of fans who are, for example, selecting specific moments from interviews to create a video, or creating a meme giving a humorous tone to a more serious situation. Some are created with a clear intention, framing and representing Johansson in a specific way. Arguably, in the situations explored in this chapter, part of Johansson's celebrity feminism is constructed by third parties.

Mediated in specific ways, Johansson's feminism is presented to participants from both countries through specific lenses. She connects them to political discourses, whether controversial or not. However, participants' identification with, and admiration of, her feminism is limited by their understanding that they live different realities to Johansson. In this case, participants are considering the specific contexts of their lives before anything, and understanding that her feminism, or the way that she positions herself, is not equivalent to their own realities.

Chapter Four - Going Beyond Romance with Wonder Woman and Scarlet Witch

In the Introduction of this thesis, I discussed a pilot study I conducted for this research. I argued that the content participants selected and shared with me, there were examples from the television show *WandaVision* (2021) that led to an interesting conversation concerning *WandaVision* and grief. Participant Julia (D/I, Brazil), for example, said she watched the episodes, but also followed discussions about the television show on Twitter and in other social media. The image below (Figure 22), that was shared by Julia, prompted conversation about her experience watching the television show.

Figure 22

Instagram post about WandaVision *and Grief (1)*

Translation:

Vision: Because I have never had a loved one to lose. But what is grief, if not love persevering?
@user: When I watched *WandaVision,* I thought this scene was beautiful. It makes even more sense to me now. Grief is the love that stays alive inside us.

Julia's image choice, which refers to grief, connects with the overall discussion in this chapter. This chapter examines participants' responses to Wonder Woman and Scarlet Witch/Wanda Maximoff in *Wonder Woman 1984* (2020) and *WandaVision* (2021), respectively. Both characters are inserted into narratives of grief and mourning for lost loves, which affects their roles in their stories. Participants' reactions to them, however, differed, offering opportunities to discuss why participants are reacting differently to characters inserted into similar contexts. Participants seem to be dissatisfied with *Wonder Woman 1984,* yet they praise *WandaVision*.

As an initial impression, participants' critiques of *Wonder Woman 1984* may suggest dissatisfaction with such narratives of romance. I argue, however, that participants are critical of romance when themes are underdeveloped, or developed in a sexist way, with women's roles diminished. This is the case for Wonder Woman, whose inability to let go of her partner diminishes her agency, and almost places her as a secondary character in her own movie. With Wanda Maximoff, however, the process of grief and the romantic plot become a platform for more thoughtful reflection on the nature of grief and loss. In particular, this storyline resonated with participants during the COVID-19 pandemic, and their online interactions with paratexts about *WandaVision* enabled further reflection and understanding.

Reflecting on Sexism through Wonder Woman

Participant Sarah (D/I, New Zealand) shared her thoughts about both *Wonder Woman* films:

> I absolutely love seeing the depiction of the island with all the women. Strong warriors. I also love the fact that they had actual athletes in it. The thing was the guy. I was like 'Really?? Do you need to do that?? You don't need a man to carry the story!!' That's what I got from them. From the first one and from the second one. It was just very male driven. The film is awesome in terms of representation, there are these really strong women, but 'Oh yeah, we need this man'.

The extract above summarises Sarah's dissatisfaction with the films, suggesting Steve Trevor carries the story, resulting in a male-driven narrative. Although the movie effectively represents women, according to Sarah, it fails to do so when presenting the female character in relation to the man.

Wonder Woman (2017) takes place during World War I. US pilot Captain Steve Trevor's plane crashes on Themyscira, a paradisiacal island where only Amazon women live. Through Trevor, Diana Prince/Wonder Woman finds out about the war happening on the outside world. She believes the Greek god Ares is behind it and decides to fight the god. To do so, she starts a journey to "the real world", accompanying Trevor. She gathers allies, fights, has adventures, and eventually becomes romantically involved with Trevor. At the end of the movie, however, Trevor hijacks a plane that carries poison, and sacrifices himself to save everyone.

The second movie, *Wonder Woman 1984* (2020) is set in 1984. In the intervening years, Diana has worked at a museum while secretly continuing her superheroine activities as Wonder Woman. The plot introduces an artefact that can grant its holder one wish. In the

story, Diana's wish is granted, which is to be with Trevor. He is resurrected in another man's body, and interacts with Diana throughout the rest of the movie.

Although opinions about both films vary, the majority of participants found Wonder Woman's dependence upon Trevor dissatisfying. Luana, for example, sarcastically complained in her focus group about how Wonder Woman's actions and the plot are connected with Trevor: "Steve is alive. Steve is dead. We must keep Steve alive…" Camila (D/I, Brazil) shared a similar opinion: "I don't think the man was necessary. She didn't need him**.** It bothered me a lot. And then they brought him back in the second movie! Why?!" Camila's complaint about Trevor's participation in both films points to him being unnecessary to the plot.

Considering these comments, I propose reflecting on participants' responses through four inter-connected contexts. These are: sexism related to gender roles in superhero stories, expectations in relation to Wonder Woman, the obligation of love, and Wonder Woman's incapacity to move forward due to her ongoing grief.

The first context is significant given that the sexist depiction of women in romantic relationships in superhero stories. Expanding beyond the romance aspect, women are often given limited roles in superhero live action movies in comparison to her male companions, whether there was a romantic relationship or not. Participants criticise sexist approaches related to romantic plots when these narratives undermine the female character's development and favour male characters as more importance and/or making women dependent on them for some reason. This can be observed in comments such as Sarah's "You don't need a man to carry the story!!'" or "very male driven". Sentiments such as these suggest dissatisfaction with Wonder Woman's role being diminished because of Trevor's presence. In a story where Wonder Woman should be the main and most important character, participants view her as secondary.

To better understand this critique, it is helpful to examine how women have been written in relation to romance in cinema and in the superhero genre. Tasker (1993) reflects on the heroine in Hollywood action cinema,[36] whose role in films was to be the romantic interest for the hero. According to Tasker (1993), the heroine has "a key narrative function. She both offers a point of differentiation from the hero and deflects attention from the homoeroticism surrounding male buddy relationships" (p. 16). Mainstream audiences for these movies tended to be homophobic, so the hero – whether man or woman – had to have their heterosexuality confirmed. In the case of women, this heterosexuality was established by giving them a male love interest or any connection with maternal instincts (Brown, 2011). Any suggestion of queerness was a problem "solved" by a romantic interest, leaving no space for doubting heterosexuality as the favoured norm.

The woman existed in the film to propel the hero into action, giving him motivation. This motivation could originate due to some sort of violence the woman had previously suffered. The woman as love interest was "in many senses an unwelcome figure. A hysterical figure who needs to be rescued or protected, the heroine is often played for comedy" (Tasker, 1993, p. 16). In that sense, the love interest offered problems, with the obligation to be saved.

Viewing women's victimisation as men's motivation to act, has been explored, particularly in relation to comic books. Drawing on DC's *Green Lantern* series, in which Green Lantern's girlfriend was murdered by the villain, and her body hidden inside a refrigerator, Simone (1999) coined the term "women-in-refrigerator" to describe the female victim character. The girlfriend's death worked as a plot device for the male hero (Kent, 2021). Since then, the term has been used whenever female characters are victims of any tragedy or violence to give the male hero motivation. Expanding on this writing about the

[36] Tasker (2015) includes the superhero genre within the action genre, alongside war films, urban crime thrillers, and espionage.

superhero-girlfriend, Kent (2021) argues that in superhero narratives women "are often pushed aside, with films privileging the stories of the central male heroes" (p. 30). Overall, numerous authors have commented that female characters have been presented almost as peripheral in superhero cinema, and secondary in narratives (Benhamou, 2023).

Women involved in romantic plots in superhero films have historically been treated as victims in need of saving, as peripheral, and as plot devices to give the male hero motivation. Considering the large number of stories of superheroes inexistence, especially within comics, it would be a mistake to argue that this is the only way women have been portrayed, especially in more recent years. And yet, in blockbuster superhero films and in television shows, for a long time this formula repeated itself, with male protagonists such as Iron Man or Spider-Man having girlfriends who needed to be saved or who were not as central to the story as the male heroes.

Although romantic love with a heterosexual partner is not crucial to recent blockbusters such as *Captain Marvel* (2019) and *Black Widow* (2021), overall romance is relatively common in superhero stories. This happens because romance crosses other genres – including, for instance, action cinema – and this "juxtaposition is particularly important for action and adventure" (Tasker, 2015, p. 20).

Writing about Disney, genre, and gender, Benhamou (2023) expands on this topic, analysing these themes from two broader categories: romance and action adventure. The author, drawing on Tasker (2015), argues that they can be found in many other genres and subgenres. Benhamou claims that romance "is 'necessarily… intertwined' with a variety of narratives: the presence of mutual desire 'as a central concern' is also pervasive throughout many films and genres" (Thomas, 2020, as cited in Benhamou, 2023, p. 10).

In the case of participants, the constant presence of romance often associated with female misrepresentation results in dissatisfaction. They make this association because this is

what has been presented to them before, on many occasions. Repetitions of sexist representations affect their viewing of the narrative and of the character.

The second context is the familiarity participants have with Wonder Woman, which is also a result of repetitions conveyed by a genre. Brown (2016) talks about how genre works with the sense of familiarity audiences have with the formula of a story. Brown (2016) argues that the superhero live action genre:

> Bring[s] the characters to a much larger audience with varying degrees of familiarity with the overall genre. The current live action form of the genre introduces and solidifies a dominant conception of what the superheroes look like, their personalities, and their abilities. (p. 3)

Although there are varying degrees of familiarity from audiences, all of the participants I spoke with knew who Wonder Woman is – knowledge they may have acquired from watching the first film or from other sources.[37] A well-known character, participants know what Wonder Woman is capable of, and this leads participants to have expectations about how she will act.

This can be observed in a comment made by Larissa (Focus group 2, Brazil). The group was complaining that Wonder Woman spent decades waiting for Trevor. Larissa said: "She *is Wonder Woman*, but she kept waiting for that guy??!!" Larissa emphasised that they were talking about *the* Wonder Woman. Clearly, there is expectation connected to the superheroine that influences participants' critiques of *Wonder Woman 1984*: they know – or at least think they know – what Wonder Woman is capable of, how she should behave in

[37] Although I refer here to DCU Wonder Woman, participants' previous knowledge about her results from them having watched previous DCU films – such as *Batman vs. Superman*, *Justice League*, and *Wonder Woman* – together with knowledge acquired from other media and other versions of Wonder Woman (comics, cartoons).

specific situations, and what to expect from her. The storyline of *Wonder Woman 1984* challenges this view.

Expectations about Wonder Woman can be understood when examining the symbolism she has as a superheroine. In relation to Wonder Woman's significance, Cocca (2016), for example, writes that Wonder Woman tends to be the first superheroine people think of: "Her very name has become synonymous with a woman who does it all, and does it all well. She is often referred to as an icon, representing female power, and by implication, female equality with male" (p. 1). Coogan (2018), writing about comic book versions of Wonder Woman, argues That this character "initiated an evolution of the superhero genre with the superheroine subgenre" (p. 571). Clearly, the symbolism and meaning people associate with Wonder Woman, leads to expectations about her.

In fan discourses Wonder Woman is a goddess, even if sarcastically so. An image shared by Julia (D/I, Brazil) highlights this (Figure 23).

Figure 23

Wonder Woman Meme

Figure 23 shows a scene from *Justice League* (2017), when Wonder Woman saves a group of people, including a group of students. In the original scene Wonder Woman answers "You can be anything you want to be". The meme, however, changed her answer to "No, I am a god". It plays with the idea that there is a difference between Wonder Woman and ordinary people, a superiority connected to the fact that she is a goddess because of her origins. This adds to the imagery participants have of her, which leads to specific expectations that are broken in *Wonder Woman 1984*: considering all the symbolism she holds, the power she has, and previous knowledge participants have of her, even though the film can include novelty, they expect Wonder Woman to act in a certain way, and this means not needing the male companion and/or capability for moving forward without him.

The third context is about the obligation of having a man and a romantic relationship with him. This expands beyond Wonder Woman or the superhero genre. I consider, for example, Camila's (D/I, Brazil) comment: "I don't think the man was necessary. She didn't need him." Camila's argument can be understood under the two frames previously discussed, andcan also be interpreted regarding how stories and romance are usually written.

In this case, perhaps the participants' discomfort lies, not in the romance itself, but in how female characters and romance have been written in the past. Manter and Francis (2017) investigated whether romance and elements of queerness are not present in The *Hunger Games* (2012, Ross), focusing on protagonist Katniss Everdeen. They suggest that, in relation to young adult dystopian narratives[38], on many occasions what causes dissatisfaction is not the romance itself, but how it is read. The way this type of narrative is built means the element of romance is associated with a conservative genre that reinforces heterosexual couples. Manter and Francis (2017) propose that the need for romance does "not always have this conservative valence" (p. 287). Similarly, perhaps what causes discomfort for participants is how romantic narratives have conservative connotations, in which romantic love is the dominant aspect in the life of the protagonist, removing her agency and generating other issues.

Examining the dynamics between romance movies and postfeminism, Schreiber (2014) considers that although there have been social and political developments about how we think about gender and women's lives, "romance itself remains the dominant concern of the contemporary woman in American cinematic narratives" (p. 2). Although the primary goal of the superhero film is not romance, romance is directly or indirectly attached to films with women as protagonists. This is not to say that plots with male superheroes do not include

[38] Although dystopian narratives are a different genre in relation to the superhero one, there is similar dissatisfaction in relation to the action protagonist and romance.

romance or that the ones that have superheroines as protagonists always add romance, but the excessive association between romance and women's lives – as if the first is crucial to the second – and the way this is explored, cause dissatisfaction.

To approach the dissatisfaction participants voiced about the romantic plot in *Wonder Woman 1984*, I also refer to Hendrey (2022), who offers an overview of what is beyond romantic plots in diverse forms of media such as literature or cinema. Hendry (2022) argues that there are more forms of human connection than the ones most commonly depicted (such as heteronormative binaries and romantic relationships). Hendrey (2022) refers to an "overvaluation of love", which explains "how romance is heavily influenced by heteronormative, and at times unrealistic, portrayals of relationships" (p. 19). Speaking of movies, for instance, the author compares the beginning of the MCU – in which female characters had the role of being the romantic counterpart of the male hero – with more recent movies. The character Valkyrie from *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017) is chosen as an example of a character who has a connection with Thor, without this revolving around a romantic relationship.

Movements such as #MeToo have also impacted romantic plots. Hendrey (2022) notes that "the over-arching romantic plot seems to be shifting because of important movements" (p. 24) that called for more inclusion, leading to changes in mainstream media products and brands. In the Marvel franchise, for instance, there is "more space for characters to grow beyond the insertion of a receptive romantic partner in a film" (p. 24). It is possible to infer the same about Wonder Woman and the overall dissatisfaction participants express concerning her 'need' for a male romantic partner.

Another comment in which this dissatisfaction can be observed is Jessica's (D/I, New Zealand). Jessica said that "There was always a man. It is a movie thing as well. It does not seem to be a necessity with male heroes. It often shows up, but it is not a requirement for

them. But she's a woman! So *there must a be man*!" Jessica's argument is that within the superhero genre, a female character automatically demands a man and/or a heterosexual romantic relationship. If the character is a woman, then her narrative must connect her to a man. This exemplifies how participants are critical of the obligation of adding romance in a story, especially when it is a story about a woman.

For the fourth context, I consider the discomfort with Wonder Woman's continuing grief, a theme raised in one of the focus groups (Focus group, New Zealand) when participants were talking about Wonder Woman:

> *Larissa:* The thing I am most mad about is *Wonder Woman 84*. She is Wonder Woman, but she kept waiting for that guy??!! She suffered through all those years?? Really?!
>
> *Isabela:* I understand her mourning. But to have another guy identical to him, that was egotistic of her! The only good thing about that movie is the scene with the Amazon Warriors.
>
> *Larissa:* "The thing I miss the most is him…" No!! One hundred years cleaning statues because she was sad because of a guy?!
>
> *Isabela:* We were lucky it wasn't a statue of him…

In this conversation, Larissa complained that Wonder Woman waited decades and felt sad during all those years because of Trevor. She criticises Wonder Woman's inability to let go or move forward after Steve's death. Larissa also considers that after all those years Wonder Woman has lived – and all experiences she would have had – the thing she misses is Trevor. On the other hand, Isabela understands her mourning, but criticises how the return of Trevor was executed in the film, with his soul returning via another man's body. It was egotistic

because Wonder Woman ignored the life of the other man, just to be with Trevor. There is dissatisfaction with Wonder Woman's continuing grief.

Wonder Woman's processing of grief is not explored in DCU movies. We do not see what happened to her after the death of Trevor, or how she copes with her grief. Instead, her story jumps straight ahead to the 1980s, and later to more recent times in *Batman vs Superman: Dawn of Justice* (Terrio & Gover, 2016) and in *Justice League* (2017). Both films have contributed to creating a specific image of this version of Wonder Woman as a strong, independent woman, which also may have contributed to participants' expectations about the character. At the same time, her continuing grief is approached in these two films through brief mentions (Malone, 2020). These two films, however, were not mentioned by participants.

In sum, there was an overall feeling of dissatisfaction with *Wonder Woman 1984* among participants, especially concerning Wonder Woman's dependence upon Trevor. I have considered four contexts which may assist in understanding the participants' critiques. I infer that they believe Wonder Woman to be a superheroine who should be central in her own story, capable of moving on. They are also displeased with the obligation of romance (the "necessity" of having it, not romance itself), but are even more critical of the obligation of having a man to whom Wonder Woman is so attached. Her loss and grief felt unacceptable, but perhaps it was just not explored in a way that participants were able to identify with or to understand.

This leads us to the second character in this chapter, Wanda Maximoff, whose story also includes a narrative of loss and grief, enabling some further reflection about these subjects.

Reflecting on Grief through Scarlet Witch/Wanda Maximoff

WandaVision shares similarities with *Wonder Woman 1984,* in that a powerful woman loses someone dear to her (her romantic partner) and this partner comes back to life. However, while reactions to Wonder Woman and her relationship in *Wonder Woman 1984* were contradictory and criticised by some participants, there were no critiques from participants about this theme in *WandaVision*. Indeed, content shared about the character and conversations with participants suggests that *WandaVision* offered opportunities to reflect on grief with more sensitivity. Despite the core of the narrative being Maximoff trying to live her illusory life, there was more acceptance and identification with her situation.

Here I consider two elements that I believe have contributed towards this response: a narrative which better approached these themes because it showed how the character coped with them, and the timing of the television show's release, during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. This timing meant that global audiences watching the show were aware of the complex scenario, and were likely also experiencing difficult times. In this context, I reinforce the relevance of digital connection during the COVID-19 pandemic, where social media offered numerous opportunities for people to remain connected.

To better understand responses to, and engagement with Maximoff, it is important to understand her MCU history. Wanda Maximoff/Scarlet Witch is a recurring character who has participated in some movies and is the protagonist of her own television show, *WandaVision* (2021). Introduced into the MCU in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Whedon, 2015) and with a brief post-credit participation in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (Russo & Russo, 2014), Maximoff and her twin brother Pietro were survivors of the Sokovia bombing. In the comics and in the MCU, Maximoff is an extremely powerful character, who possesses latent Chaos Magic power. Her powers allow her to do almost everything, including creating

illusions and manipulating reality. Her story, however, is marked by tragedy. She lost her parents when she was young and her brother years later. She was also a victim of experiences to acquire powers and to enhance them. Used to defeat the Avengers, Maximoff later joins them as a member. Her narrative shows her growth as a character as her powers become increasingly stronger. She develops close connections with many characters such as Captain America and is involved in a romantic relationship with Vision, who is a synthezoid made from vibranium, a character who became alive because of the power of the Mind Stone, one of the five Infinity Stones.

Maximoff has taken part in many fights, including against Thanos. When the Avengers try to stop Thanos from getting the Mind Stone, Vision is killed. His death and all Maximoff had suffered throughout her life propels her into deep grief and trauma. However, the next time the audience sees Maximoff, she is living a happy life together with Vision in a small town. This is the setting for *WandaVision* (2021), the first MCU television show produced and released on Disney+.

In *WandaVision*, we follow Wanda's daily life with Vision and, later, with their two sons. The first episode is black and white and takes place in the 1960s. With the decades passing by in each episode, little by little we find out that there is something wrong with Maximoff's perfect life. We realise that Maximoff has manipulated/created that town and a happy life with an imagined family as a way to cope with her grief and trauma. Maximoff used her powers to build her own fantasy out of a perfect suburban life, manipulating a real town to achieve her goals.

WandaVision offers opportunities to reflect on themes such as grief, loss, and love. To return to the example shared in the opening of the chapter, that image presents dialogue about grief. In the image chosen by Julia (D/I, Brazil), Vision tells Maximoff about love and loss. This image is not from *WandaVision*, but from a previous movie, and the comment made

by the user (not Julia) is that the scene has more meaning now, after having watched *WandaVision*, a television show about grief and mourning.

Figure 24

Instagram Post about WandaVision *and Grief (2)*

Translation:

Vision: Because I have never had a loved one to lose. But what is grief, if not love persevering?

@user: When I watched *WandaVision*, I thought this scene was beautiful. It makes even more sense to me now. Grief is the love that stays alive inside us.

When asked about why she shared this image and her thoughts about *WandaVision*, Julia said the show felt like "a mini therapy". Julia continued, "To me, it was about escapism. The situation is really heavy right now. I've enjoyed it because, in the end, it is a television show about mourning".

In Brazil, the implications of the pandemic were chaotic and thousands of lives were lost. Having a television show in which the main themes are processing grief and mourning at a time when people were dealing with loss on a large scale, was impactful. A television show functioning as an escape platform has already been studied by authors such as Dyer (2002), who considers 'escape' as one of the descriptions of entertainment. Entertainment, Dyer (2002) writes "offers the image of 'something better' to escape into, or something we want deeply that our day-to-day lives don't provide" (p. 20). By "escapism" Julia means that watching the show was a way to escape the harsh reality during that time. By "mini-therapy", we can interpret that since the show had a character coping with her trauma, it was possible for people like Julia to watch the television show as if it was indeed therapy, for they could understand and identify with what was happening to Wanda.

WandaVision is interpreted as being a television show about the five stages of grief (Barnette, 2022; Webster, Leaver & Sandry, 2022). The five stages of grief theory originated with Elizabeth Kübler-Ross (Maciejewski et al., 2007), and consists of disbelief, yearning, anger, depression, and acceptance (Maciejewski et al., 2007).[39] In *WandaVision*, Maximoff is viewed as experiencing each of these stages of grief, so those watching could identify with this process. Barnette (2022) argues that "the appeal of the show was aligned to our collective

[39] Although it remains relevant in popular discourse, scholarship has discredited this model. Konigsberg (2011), for example, argues that the model has misled people into believing that grief is a series of steps.

and individual grief" (p. 43), but limits the argument to the USA context only. Although *WandaVision* is an American production, my conversations with participants suggest that this feeling of identification with the character's collective and individual grief can be expanded beyond the US, as people around the world were dealing with the same situation.

Discussing grieving and cinema, Izod and Dovalis (2015) reflect on how fictional characters respond to the suffering represented. They argue that learning to grieve is necessary for everyone. The issue is that many cultures – especially Western movie audiences – do not teach people the importance of this process. The authors talk about identifying with characters going through the process of grief, claiming that cinema is an "important agent" for personal growth related to this moment (p. 2). In that sense, the process of grief depicted in *WandaVision* is a narrative people could connect with. The atmosphere of the series contributes to it, allowing for "the engagement of the audience with her trauma and even creates a space for self-identification and self-insertion" (Zackor, 2021, para. 8). This is noticeable in Julia's argument when she talks about therapy: there is the process of self-identification, which results from both watching the television show, and engaging with it online.

In addition to the connection between grief and cinema and self-identification, I also consider how digital technologies can be used in this sense. Gilbert (2017) examines this association between new communication technologies and processes of grieving and mourning, discussing how social media can work as a series of online supportive networks, and also how groups such as adolescents use social media in creative ways to cope with their losses. Gilbert's (2017) analysis focuses on social engagement as "part of the grieving process" (p. 295), as it helps in building a "healing narrative" (p. 295). Social media, Gilbert (2017) argues, can provide community support which helps people during this period, "possibly including those who have had a similar loss, and provide opportunity for the

bereaved to share emotions more freely with others who might understand the pain" (p. 297). Social media engagement offers opportunity for reflection and healing in many ways because people can find support for what they are feeling. One of the ways this happened in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic and *WandaVision* is through paratexts promoting messages of love and of enjoying time with loved ones.

Participants did not share if they had experienced personal losses during the pandemic, but they shared that they learned more about grief through *WandaVision*. When questioned about the topic of grief and mourning, for example, Julia suggested that she learned much about it through her online engagement, reading about *WandaVision* on social media. Through diverse paratexts, the show assisted Julia in dealing with difficult times during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, Luana (Focus group 1, Brazil) emphasised the importance of online discussions by commenting about a blog article she read. Luana said the article's title was something like "How I've mapped my trauma through *WandaVision*" or "How I perceive my grief through Wanda's grief". Luana continued, "these things are being portrayed more carefully. They are being depicted with more depth", referring to how the theme of grief was being portrayed on the television show, but also praising how the story offered opportunities for people to understand something about themselves, and how they were using online spaces to express how they were able to identify it.

More of these discussions about grief and emotions can be observed below, in an image shared by Andie (D/I, New Zealand) (Figure 25). The image shows scenes from the first episode and a later one, in which Maximoff cries for what she has lost. The screenshot on the bottom, containing a heart, is a map of the town, showing the place where Maximoff and Vision were planning to have a house and start a family.

Figure 25

Tweet about Wanda's Grief

We see Maximoff crying because of what she has lost. This is another example of a participant's interaction with the theme of the television show.

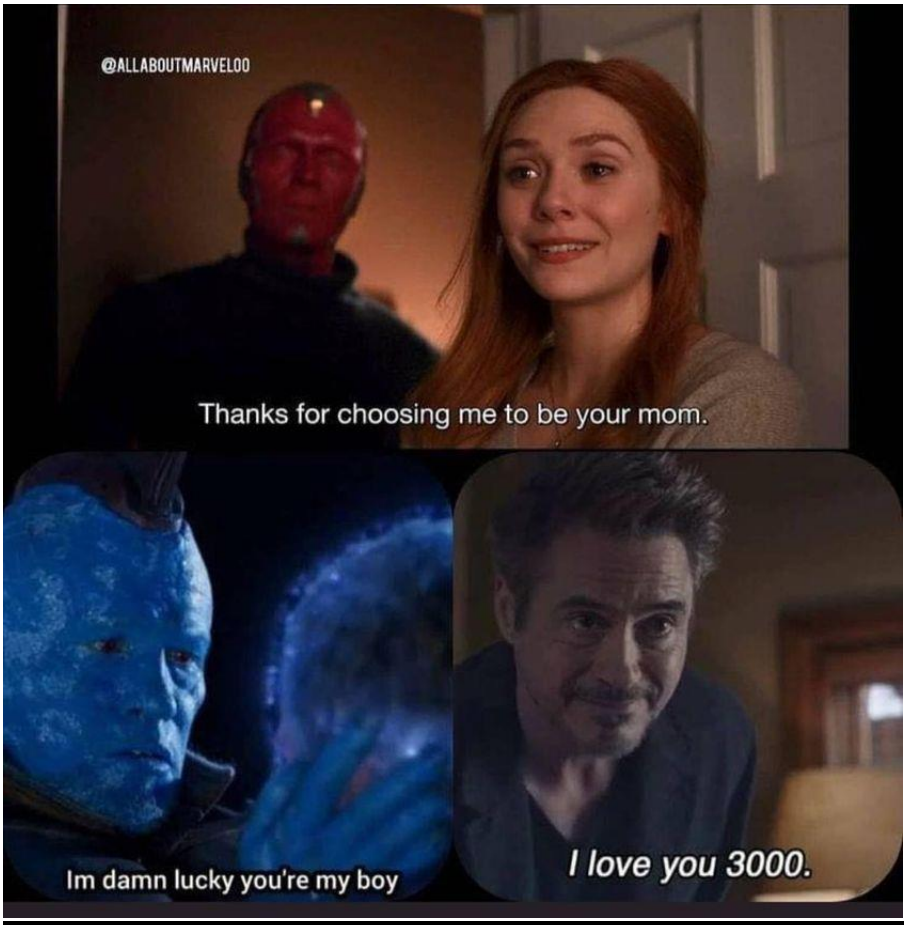
Interesting, Maximoff's expression of grief is less criticised than Wonder Woman's grief. Notably, in her narrative in the MCU, Maximoff's role is not diminished by her romance. Her relationship with Vision is developed during a few movies, but her role and powers are not limited because of him. In this way, she complicates the discussion of

romantic plots, because although love (loss of love in this case) was one of the factors that motivated her to create a false reality, the romantic plot does not limit her development. In contrast, participants' opinions about *Wonder Woman 1984*, suggesting that Wonder Woman's role was constrained by how she was positioned in her romantic relationship.

In a way, *WandaVision*'s narrative expands beyond romance as a genre, creating a story about love, loss, trauma, and resilience. Love can manifest itself in more relationships than just romantic ones. In *WandaVision*, Maximoff has two imagined sons. The story depicts her as a dedicated mother, showing love between parents and children. This form of love can be noticed in an image shared by Anna (D/I, New Zealand) (Figure 26). It shows not only Maximoff during a scene from *WandaVision* in which she talks with her (illusory) sons, but also Iron Man/Tony Stark, and Yondu and Peter Quill (*Guardians of the Galaxy*).

Figure 26

A parent's Love



All these characters are saying they love their children. Anna's image not only emphasises the idea of Wanda creating an illusory life to help herself cope with her trauma, but it shows the potential of the show to enable reflection about love and loving those who we (may) lose. All characters in Figure 26 were separated from their children somehow, including Maximoff. Again, this example exhibits how participants engaged with narratives about love and loss, and highlights the potential for developing stories where love is not limited to romantic love.

In addition, the image demonstrates the potential to move beyond exploring women's emotions as weakness, as has been common for the superhero genre. In discussing this topic and characters from the MCU, Jones (2022) argues that, since women are socially constructed as more emotional than men, and that being emotional makes controlling her feelings, actions

and even powers more difficult than it would be for a man, historically, female characters fell into supporting roles or positions of victimhood. This phenomenon, however, has changed with recent MCU characters. Maximoff, Jones (2022) argues, "leans into the power of feminine emotion meant to benefit only the central character", and she does that "through a relentless focus on the process of grieving" (p. 198). The television show "takes this grief and shows us that this is not weakness, but rather raw, unbridled, intensely powerful strength" (p. 198). In other words, instead of showing Wanda's emotions and her grief as a weakness, it re-defines such emotions as strength, showing a process that other people can identify with, where her emotions and trauma are acceptable instead of diminishing her.

According to Jones (2022), the way *WandaVision* portrayed Maximoff is "remarkably different from any other portrayal of feminine emotion in the MCU" (p. 199) because "her exploration of and mastery over the depths of her grief enable her to rise above efforts to gaslight her as a monster who stole her partner's corpse, rejecting a villainous portrayal of her character and reasserting her status as heroic" (p. 199). Maximoff was able to show her emotions in a way that her pain and anger did not paint her as a monster.

The examples above demonstrate how *WandaVision* and online engagement with its paratexts functioned as platforms for people to learn and to reflect on grief-related topics. Although I started from the premise of exploring responses to Maximoff's romantic plot, participants' chosen paratexts expand the discussion beyond that: paratexts about *WandaVision* were often messages about love and about enjoying time with loved ones. To have such discussions readily accessible online during the pandemic may have contributed not only to people's understanding of these topics, but also to their own healing.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored participants' engagement with characters whose stories revolve around romance and grief. I argue that it is not the presence of a romantic plot that is problematic, but how these narratives are built, and how female characters are inserted into them. When characters are portrayed in sexist ways, participants often criticise these depictions, as they did with *Wonder Woman 1984*. Such critiques surround the character's dependence on male characters, and male-driven narratives. In contrast, there are situations where romantic plots offer opportunities for character development, and for exploring more complex themes, such as grief, which is the case for *WandaVision*.

The digital engagement aspect was stronger in the discussion of *WandaVision*. This resonates with the time *WandaVision* was released, during the COVID-19 pandemic, with people more dependent on digital connection, and going through difficult times. For participants, digital engagement with *WandaVision* contributed to learning and understanding about grief-related topics (Barnette, 2022; Jones, 2022). In this context, participants' engagement with *WandaVision* texts and paratexts went beyond enabling debates about gender related themes, instead promoting discussions about mental and emotional health which are not constrained by gender.

In contrast, participants were often critical of *Wonder Woman 1984*, where Wonder Woman was viewed as almost secondary. I considered four contexts of interpretation to approach participants' dissatisfaction: sexism connected to gender roles in superhero stories, expectations about Wonder Woman, the obligation of love, and dissatisfaction with the character's continuing grief. Overall, I consider that much relates to the symbolism Wonder Woman holds as an iconic superheroine, who is interpreted as a powerful and independent woman. However, as Cocca (2016) writes, Wonder Woman's iconography "has not matched

up with her actual portrayals in the comics or on television" (p. 52), and this conflict is reflected in what people expect from Wonder Woman.

I have shown that sexist depictions continue to be identified and criticised by participants, and that what is problematic is not necessarily how narratives still adhere to romantic plots, but how they (do not) develop characters within such narratives. I have also given more examples of how participants are learning and reflecting on certain topics through their online engagement. However, I also acknowledge the potential of romantic/love plots to enable discussions about gender questions and beyond, whilst also acknowledging their limitations.

In the next chapter, I continue to explore participants' perceptions of representation and diversity, asking how participants' perception of superheroines may be impacted by debates surrounding the superficiality of woke capitalism.

Chapter Five - Negotiating Representation in a Context of Woke Capitalism

For Larissa[40] (Focus group 2, Brazil) who does livestreams to talk about pop culture, there have been significant shifts in the representation of diversity in pop culture. However, Larissa does not see these changes as wholly positive; rather, she questions the reasoning behind them. Larissa asked if corporations and the production teams behind them see this as something they must do "otherwise, we are going to be cancelled",[41] or if they truly want these changes to happen. "We want to include these characters. We want to give them visibility", said Larissa, wondering how legitimate the inclusion of diversity in pop culture media is, or if it is only done to avoid backlash.

The scenario above exemplifies participants' consciousness about the duality of why these shifts might be happening. It also shows how Larissa, as a content creator, raises awareness about this issue, enabling more people to understand the context, contributing to their informal online learning. Such awareness can be encapsulated in the term 'woke', which is not only key to this chapter, but also underpins many of the debates in this thesis.

Recent scholarship has analysed the term woke, trying to understand how it is embedded in contemporary contexts, especially in marketing and in the media. Analysing the intersection between wokeness and advertising, Kanai & Gill (2020) describe the concept as "the corporate extraction of value from the struggles for recognition led by historically oppressed populations" (p. 11). It includes a range of layers, linked to concepts of activism, feminism, liberalism, anti-capitalism, and antiracism (Sobande et al., 2022). The effects of this turn have also been found in contemporary adaptations of fictional works such as Isaac

[40] As mentioned, Larissa is a content creator for Geek Page A.

[41] To be' cancelled' online refers to 'cancel culture', which du Quenoy (2021), is a phenomenon in which an idea, object, creative work, or person is eliminated. In other words, it refers to "the removal of an undesirable person from one's social ambit" (du Quenoy, 2021, p. 5). In the context expressed by the participant, it is similar to backlash against the corporation or brand.

Asimov's *Foundation* (2021) and *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power* (2022), where Pop (2022) argues that contemporaneous representations are necessary for contemporary viewers. *The Rings of Power*, for instance, introduced a more racially diverse cast.[42] Meanwhile, in a study about teen cinema, Monaghan (2022) claims that there have been changes in this genre, and that "tensions and contradictions of contemporary mediatised feminism and social justice politics are figured and reconfigured for new generations of young viewers" (p. 3270). Both authors mention how these media works are embedded in a context of wokeness and result from the current production context.

Sobande et al. (2022) propose four frames for understanding wokeness. From these four, two best encapsulate the ideas in this chapter. The first "becomes visible as aspirational corporate culture aligning itself with social justice values; 'woke' is a desirable brand identity packaging socially progressive affects in consumer form" (p. 1579). The other frame takes into consideration the "everyday response to the personalized calls to 'make change' within an unequal economy of visibility" (p. 1579). The concept of wokeness I explore here associates media corporations with positive brand identity, presenting themselves as supporting social causes and listening to audiences' voices.

However, the authors call attention to the need for a broader perspective on the issue, particularly when examining shifts in culture, going beyond the binary struggles which may emerge from these frames. Considering Banet-Weiser's (2018) idea of how visibility is an important aspect for doing politics on social media, Sobande et al. (2022) suggest that woke:

> Is a response to both the increasing but uneven pressures and rewards of *being recognized* as 'woke', heightened by the rhythms and infrastructures of social media. This requires making the self visible in particular ways to audiences, and to be

[42] The cast of *The Rings of Power* includes actors who are not white (such as black or brown skinned actors).

> attributed with enlightened progressive values as a personal and/or brand identity. (p. 1583)

What is inferred is that the media corporations behind the movies and television shows discussed here must frame themselves as positively supporting social causes. There are rewards for that: Sobande et al. (2022) draw on Erving (2021) who notes that wokeness can even be "a badge of honour for brands" (p. 1582). Wokeness happens within a context of economies of visibility: the lenses through which these brands are viewed are significant to them, and that generates demand for them to be seen as involved in, and responsible towards, social causes. Or, at least, to show that they have social responsibility.

Additionally, Monaghan (2022) argues that even though more visibility is given to the historically marginalised, there is no intention to dismantle oppression. Similarly, Pop (2022) comments on how woke capitalism can support causes such as toxic masculinity or #metoo, as long as deep social structures remain unaltered. Indeed, Kanai and Gill (2020) write:

> Woke capitalism exploits the historical politicisation of identity, re-affirming the centrality of capital and re-incorporating movements of resistance, without dismantling the hierarchies to which they refer. It mobilises identity politics for generation of profit. (p. 24)

In the context of woke capitalism, although corporations can be perceived as contributing to social causes and as challenging oppression, as Kanai and Gill (2020), Monaghan (2022), and Pop (2022) have written, there is no intention to make real structural changes to assist these causes. In superhero media, for instance, media corporations include more superheroes of colour or try to highlight superheroines. However, this ostensibly improved diversity does not mean that they are fighting against racism or misogyny: there are no deeper structural changes.

Returning to Larissa's comment about how pop culture has increased the representation of diversity of gender and race, we can see how she engages with ideas about media corporations showing superficial support towards social causes. According to Larissa, it is difficult to distinguish if superhero movies are becoming more diverse because companies fear being cancelled online. Larissa also questions if there is any authenticity or good will in it. The fear of being cancelled is attached to a politics of visibility with the brand, seen mainly through social media. It is almost impossible to answer Larissa's question, and it is not the goal of this project. Nonetheless, it is also difficult to observe these situations – more inclusive media products – outside of a terrain of struggles, politics, and visibility.

Instead of saying if it is right or wrong, or exploring the 'woke' concept from a more academic perspective, I seek to understand how these notions are accessed by participants. I consider how they engage with and perceive wokeness. Participants demonstrated awareness about these production contexts, arguing that these changes are not happening solely because media corporations care about representation and diversity, but also because corporations have other (primarily financial) motivations. These discussions coalesced around two topics. The first was a specific scene from *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) – the All Women Together scene – where a group of superheroines appears fighting together. Whilst supposedly an example of female empowerment, this scene also generated negative reactions, where its authenticity regarding representation was questioned. This scene is contrasted with a scene from *Wonder Woman* (2017), in which Wonder Woman crosses a battlefield – the No Man's Land scene. The second topic approaches participants' responses to more recent examples of changes in representation. This includes reflections about participants' understanding of diversity, their engagement with intersectionality, and how all of this is intertwined with their engagement with official material. Through both discussions, I investigate how participants

navigate the topic of media corporations and blockbusters that attempt to portray diversity, inclusion, and gender representation.

"She's got help": The Outcomes of Attempting to Show Female Power

Avengers: Infinity War (2018) and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) are the conclusion of a main narrative arc from the MCU. In *Infinity War* the villain is Thanos, an alien from the planet Titan. Thanos has a plan to rebalance universes, which he believes to be overpopulated. By using the five Infinity Stones, Thanos aims to eliminate half of the life across the universe to achieve his goal. While *Infinity War* shows how Thanos managed to acquire all of the Infinity Stones and finishes with the character snapping his fingers and disintegrating half of all living beings, *Endgame* starts five years later, with the story following the surviving characters attempting to find a way to reverse Thanos' actions and bring everyone back.

In focus groups, participants particularly pointed to the significance of a moment in *Endgame* when Spider-Man gives Captain Marvel Thanos' Infinity Gauntlet, encrusted with the Infinity stones. The characters are in the middle of a crucial battle against Thanos' army. With a difficult fight ahead, Spider-Man wonders if Captain Marvel will be able to cross the enemy's army alone with the gauntlet. At this moment, the answer comes from Scarlet Witch and Okoye saying that Captain Marvel will be alright because she has help. The camera, which originally is at a low angle framing Captain Marvel from Spider-Man's point of view, now frames all women appearing one by one: Scarlet Witch, Valkyrie, Okoye, Pepper Potts fully armoured with Tony Stark's armour, Mantis, Shuri, Gamora and Nebula. Their appearance emphasises how powerful these characters are as they march towards the enemy's army. In the following scenes, Captain Marvel crosses through the battle field with the help of the other women. It is a remarkable scene with women together helping each other in action.

However, although it seems that the original purpose of this scene is to show female empowerment and female representation with “all women together”, responses to the scene were different depending on the participant. To some, it was meaningful; for others, instead of a positive display of female representation, the scene felt ‘wrong’.

Participants that claimed the scene was meaningful shared that it made them emotional. Rachel (D/I, New Zealand) argued that she felt happy because the scene was proof that superhero films are evolving in terms of female representation, something that was uncommon when she was growing up: “I remember how much that scene shocked me and made me so happy”, said Rachel. “I felt really happy and proud, seeing all these badass women team up, especially since the crossover is so epic”. Rachel’s response is understandable because no other superhero blockbuster had done something like that up to that day – having many women together, fighting, helping each other, showing that they were there for each other. Quoting Kohnen (2015), Griffin (2022) claims that, to an extent, even though these articulations of diversity are embedded in corporate strategies and are ambivalent in their value, “they still have the potential to be meaningful due to the role they play in identity formation” (p. 5).

According to other participants, however, the moment was more controversial than positive. Sarah (D/I, New Zealand) chose this scene when questioned if there was a scene she remembered as being impactful, whether positive or negative.

> In terms of positive impact I think that it is really cool that all women have come together. But it is negative in terms of the director’s choice: ‘Let’s put all women together!’ you know? At the same time, it is ‘women are stronger together’. The underlying message was pretty cool.

Sarah enjoyed the message of ‘women are stronger together’ and the scene overall. However, she also acknowledges that it was not executed well, critiquing it as a poor director’s choice.

Olivia (Focus group, New Zealand) said that the scene had a negative impact: “all female heroes are together in this shot. ‘Oooh, it is nice to see all of them together!’ But it also feels like ‘look at them all together. Look at them all together and how strong they are!’” Olivia made it sound as if the directors were forcing all those women together to show that they care about female representation.

Participants’ interpretation of the scene connects to their online engagement, as interpretation can be influenced by knowledge acquired through paratexts. Andie (D/I, New Zealand) gave an example of this, commenting on how her perception of the scene changed when she first watched it in cinema and later, after having read about it online.

> I was like ‘I guess that’s kind of cool’. Afterwards there were a lot of negative reactions to that scene. That it was there just because they wanted to pretend that they were being representative rather than actually doing something substantial.

Andie hadn't thought about the deeper implications when she watched the movie for the first time. She just thought it was a nice way to show all women. Then, when Andie scrolled through social media, she saw negative reactions and, reading them, Andie learned why people were complaining. Andie chose this scene as an example of something that she has learned more about on social media/paratexts. “And I was like ‘Oh! I get that’. At the moment it was like ‘Oh it’s fun!’ But then, thinking about it after, I was like ‘That’s not the best way to do it’.” This shows how engaging online contributed to Andie reflecting on what she had watched. By doing that, Andie understood that the way it was executed was problematic.

Analysing a series of Twitter threads about this scene, Griffin (2022) suggests that people do not think the scene is bad because diversity itself is bad, “but because the scene is a shallow form of diversity” (p. 12). This supports some of my participants’ opinions. Olivia and Sarah argued that the choice of having all women together was just an obligation. Drawing on the works of Warner and Hills, Griffin (2022) comments that these authors say

that “audiences are sometimes tricked into celebrating whatever paltry empowerment the culture industries offer” (p. 12). This explains why such a short scene made people happy to the point that they cried. Until this movie, there were not many examples of positive female empowerment like that within the superhero genre, at least not showing many women together. In general, superhero teams almost always have a large number of male characters. The initial Avengers team had seven men and one woman. Justice League also followed with uneven numbers. The X-Men team had more women, but the characters were not well developed in the movies: characters such as Jean Grey or Storm were reduced in importance to allow for male characters such as Wolverine to have more screen time and relevance.

Female characters are often underdeveloped, and stories are still led by male characters. According to participants, it looked like the scene was there to emphasise that there were powerful female characters acting together. However, many of these characters did not have any complex development or more space in the narrative. MCU movies have tended to prioritise male protagonists from the beginning. Characters such as Iron Man, Captain America and Thor were central in all of the Avengers movies, and also had at least three solo movies before *Infinity War* was released. Meanwhile, as discussed in Chapter Three, it took almost ten years for Black Widow to have her own solo movie.

Even though more female characters have been introduced throughout the years, we cannot deny that male characters lead the narrative in many MCU movies, including *Infinity War* and *Endgame*. Their actions and choices propel the narrative, creating causes and effects. The narrative ultimately develops around the male characters’ actions and reactions. Consequently, the way they react and engage contributes to our engagement with the movie (Bordwell et al., 2016). The audience creates more connection with male characters who lead the movie, rather than with the ones who appeared in that specific scene – women.

In *Endgame*, the story starts with Scott Lang (Ant-Man), who has escaped from the Quantum Realm. The movie follows with Tony Stark (Iron Man), Nebula, Bruce Banner (Hulk), Steve Rogers (Captain America), Thor, Natasha Romanoff (Black Widow), James Rhodes (War Machine) and Rocket as they create a plan to defeat Thanos and to reverse his actions. Although each of them has a role in obtaining one Infinity Stone, of the majority of the narrative is led by male characters. Stark, Banner and Rocket, for instance, rebuild the gauntlet and, in terms of action and fight scenes, Stark, Thor and Captain America wielding Mjolnir (Thor's hammer) create impactful action moments.

Although each of the characters is sad because of what they have lost, the emotions of Stark and Thor receive more emphasis. Thor, for instance, was unable to kill Thanos at the beginning of the movie, resulting in the God of Thunder feeling depressed and incapable: Thor experiences more development than any of the female characters in the film, as he no longer believes in himself. Meanwhile, Captain America tries to find the strength to keep leading and resolve the situation. The emotions and hero journeys of these characters are slightly better approached. They make the narrative flow. And the unbalanced way the narrative introduces us to the scene with women together – when we compare it to the totality of the narrative – shows that the scene has flaws.

Overall, participants' enjoyment of this scene was ambiguous. Acknowledging the problem does not mean that participants did not like the moment. Despite their acknowledgment of the problematic execution of this scene, some participants' enjoyment of it can be explained: Hollywood texts are often ambiguous, providing multiple entry points that allow different audiences "to have 'access' to the film emotionally and intellectually, in the form of identification and (self) recognition" (Elsaesser, 2011, p. 248). There are ways of accessing and enjoying the story that exceed the narrative itself. These entries could vary from

being a fan of the actor to buying and/or collecting toys and movie merchandise (Klinger, as cited by Maltby, 2003, p. 465).

The all-women scene seems to evoke pleasure, not for what it adds to the narrative of *Endgame*, but because it enables enjoyment originating from elements or circumstances beyond the narrative itself. According to some participants there is a feeling of pleasure which comes from noticing progress in representation and increased diversity, and of seeing characters they like so much in action together. Rachel's (D/I, New Zealand) enjoyment of this scene, in was linked to her statement that there was limited female representation in films when she was growing up. Rachel continued, "seeing all powerful females of the MCU work together really made me think 'wow! Films are evolving, and females can be super too!'" For Rachel and other participants, the point of entry for enjoyment comes from not having had that while growing up, and seeing the possibility of change. It touches participants on an emotional level, as well as through identification which balances the absence of a deeper narrative with those characters – which was a recurring complaint. In that sense, according to Maltby (2003):

> Narration is therefore crucial to the organization of the audience's pleasure, but this is far from saying that story-telling in itself is the primary source of that pleasure, or the main instrument by which it is provided. (p. 468)

Participants' pleasure in watching *Endgame* may originate from being a fan of an actor in the movie, or, in this case, the feeling of satisfaction or achievement that the scene provokes.

Having multiple ways to access a movie enables multiple types of pleasure that make sense to different audiences. However, this multifaceted access also originates from/places control in the hands of the director, production team or corporation behind the movie. It is an 'access for all' strategy that includes not only opening up, but also assures "control over the spectrum of the reception" (Elsaesser, 2011, p. 248).

Arguably, corporations such as Disney produce a blockbuster with a certain degree of ambiguity in order to pursue a range of audiences, as this will be more profitable than focusing on one specific sphere of audience. Disney aims towards audiences who are comic book fans and also towards those who have never read Marvel comics. They also aim towards those – children or adults – who are going to buy toys and collectibles. Or towards those who are fans of films in general, not limited to MCU films. They try to reach as many groups of audiences as possible, because this is how the corporation acquires profits.

In this specific case, being familiar with the visibility and diversity agenda prompted by social media discussions, Disney ensures that the company sides with this agenda by showing a couple of seconds of a group of superheroines together. It is a short scene, but it is positive for their brand identity, as they will be remembered for a movie with a scene that had female representation and, consequently, as a corporation that cares about and sides with social causes.

The scene was circulated and was commented about online after the movie. The scene is meaningful and exceeds the narrative because the narrative itself does not make justice when presenting those characters. And it also adds to the wokeism present in the blockbuster industry. Following Griffin (2022), we cannot ignore the blockbuster as a cultural product intended to be profitable, but "we should not ignore the gratifications such moments provide to some viewers" (p. 14). It is possible to understand that participants can enjoy watching the scene and, at the same time, be able to recognise its faults and criticise it. Further, discussions external to the movie – paratexts and online engagement – can help people to understand why the scene is not as perfect as it seems.

To continue this analysis, I discuss participants' comparison of the 'All Women Together' scene with one from *Wonder Woman* (2017).

'No Man's Land' versus 'All Women Together'

In *Wonder Woman* (2017), Diana Prince/Wonder Woman accompanies Steve Trevor into the world of men, leaving Themyscera (a magical island where only Amazon women live) for the first time. Her goal is to find Ares, the god of war, who she believes to be the culprit behind the Great War. In a specific moment of their journey, set during the First World War, Wonder Woman, Steve Trevor and their companions reach a trench, in which civilians from a nearby village and soldiers are having a difficult time due to the enemy's army on the other side of the field. Wonder Woman chooses to help the people who are there suffering, despite Trevor's claims that there is nothing they can do. According to Trevor, this is not a place that Prince can cross, because no man can do that and therefore it is impossible.

Instead of listening and accepting that it is impossible, Prince climbs out of the trench and starts crossing the field alone, removing her coat and showing her superheroine costuming for the first time. She crosses the dangerous field while blocking all bullets shot against her. She defends herself and with her help, the disadvantaged soldiers can fight back, leading to their victory.

When talking about the scene in *Avengers*, participants in the New Zealand focus group compared it with the *Wonder Woman* scene:

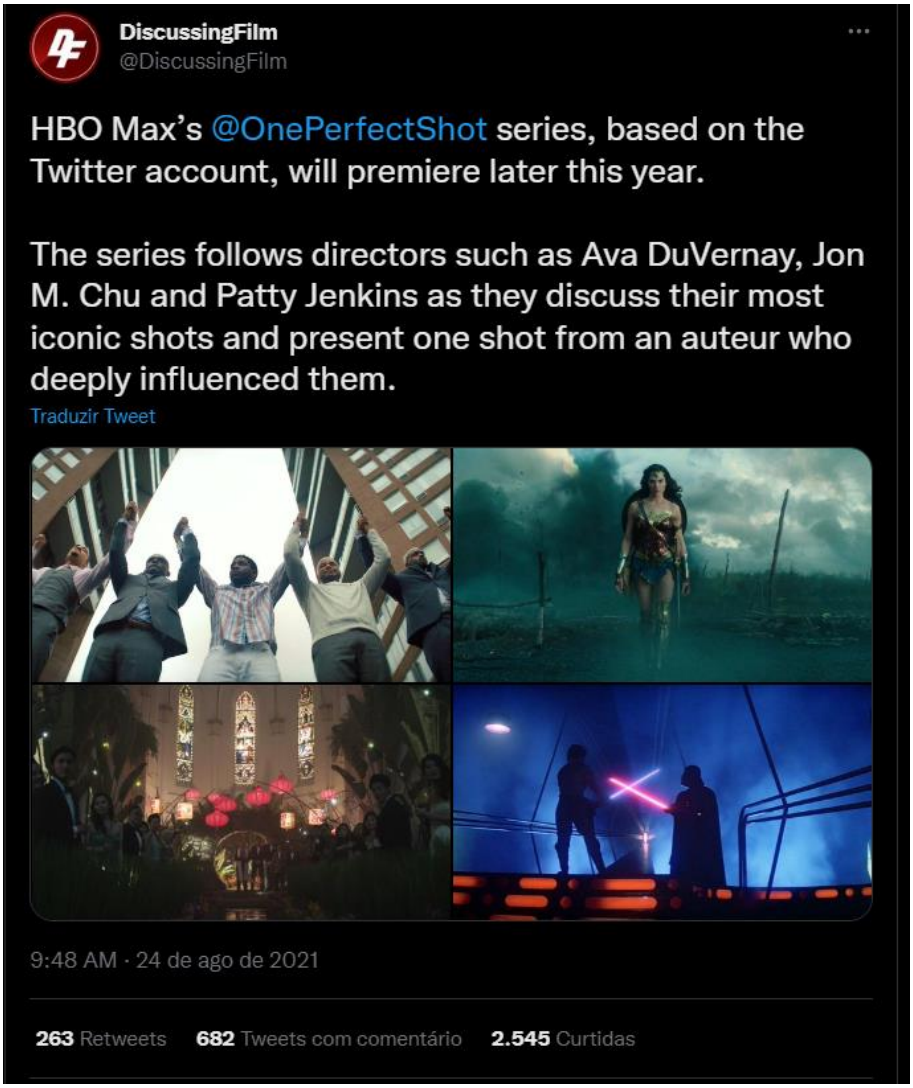
> *Andie***:** I guess there was a lot of backlash to that. I agree. It is cool to see them all. But it is not a genuine moment like Diana crossing No Man's land. That is a genuine moment that you have a connection to.
>
> *Olivia:* Yeah. It was cool. Slightly cringe. But it was still cool. It was a cool moment, but not for telling the story. It was like "look at them, everyone!"
>
> *Andie:* "Look at all the ladies together!!"

They characterise the moment in *Endgame* as “cool”, “sightly cringe” and “not genuine”. These words was align with the content discussed above. Although the All Women Together scene was cool to watch, the idea that it was not genuine shows that they also see it as a shallow choice made by the producers. I call attention, however, to Andie’s argument that the No Man’s Land scene from *Wonder Woman* is genuine, while the All Women Together Scene from *Endgame* is not.

Beyond saying the scene was more genuine than the *Endgame* one, Andie also shared a photo from content HBO Max released on Twitter (Figure 27). The idea was to talk with directors about one iconic shot of them. In the image, we can see the No Man’s Land scene from *Wonder Woman* (2017), chosen as an iconic shot and an important scene.

Figure 27

HBO’s #OnePerfectShot Series



Earlier in this chapter I argued that one of the characteristics that diminishes the relevance of the No Man's Land and of those women in *Endgame* is that the narrative is primarily guided by male characters. Although the majority of the women in the scene appeared in previous MCU films, *Endgame* still has a focus on characters such as Iron Man, Captain America or Thor. In contrast, in Wonder Woman is the central character in her story. The audience creates a connection with Wonder Woman by getting to know her story, understanding her feelings, fears and goals. This is the opposite of what happens in *Endgame*:

the audience does not create deeper connections with superheroines solely by watching that film.

By allowing audiences the opportunity to connect with Wonder Woman's motivations and story, the 'No Man's Land' scene becomes one of the most important moments in the narrative, because it is the first time the audience has a glimpse of her power and abilities.

Comparing the scenes, both happen in battlefields. Since *Wonder Woman* is set during World War I, Prince crosses a field located between trenches. She crosses alone, after being told not to because it was dangerous, and no one had done it before. Until then, the audience and other characters had not yet become fully aware of her power. In previous scenes, she had been shown to be strong and agile, protecting Trevor from bullets and fighting villains, however, 'No Man's Land' sequence is the moment where the audience openly sees how powerful she is, as she can cross such a dangerous field, fighting against the other army. Prince's actions open the path to everyone else. The characters notice that together with her, they may win that battle. The story before that and after that is linked to Wonder Woman.

In contrast, although the sequence in *Endgame* also happens on a battlefield, as previously explained, the characters in that sequence are peripheral to the narrative. The women act together, fighting and helping each other, which conveys a different type of message, more related to 'women are stronger together'. In contrasting these scenes, 'No Man's Land' is more about individual achievement, while *Endgame* is about the collective. Individualism is, according to Gill (2017), one of the features that characterise postfeminist sensibility. Each scene tries to convey messages of female empowerment, but does so through an opposing lens. The one that focuses on the woman achieving her goals by herself is perceived as more genuine than the one that focuses on the collective, with women helping each other. This difference is a consequence of the latter scene's execution.

In relation to the lack of development of women in *Endgame*, arguably there was no need for developmemt because their stories had already been told in previous MCU films. *Captain Marvel*, for example, was released one month before *Endgame*, so the audience was familiar with the character. Meanwhile, characters such as Gamora and Nebula had their own character arc and development in the various *Guardians of the Galaxy* movies. However, it is incorrect to infer that all audiences are familiar will all MCU films. Even if this was the case, the development given to female characters is unbalanced when compared to male ones.

Analysing *Endgame* by itself (or together with *Infinity War*), considerate is important to acknowledge the impossibility of developing all of the characters in both movies. *Infinity War* and *Endgame*'s proposal was to put together as many characters of the MCU as possible, as one big crossover movie. In this sense, it is difficult to compare it to *Wonder Woman*, as the latter portrays just one superheroine, while the *Avengers* narrative accommodated so many characters. Even so, there is a discrepancy in how female and male characters lead the narrative in *Endgame*. Even Black Widow, a well-known character and an Avenger member since the first movie is killed off, sacrificing herself so that her allies can obtain one Infinity Stone.

Reflecting on why 'No Man's Land' is considered more genuine than the 'All Women Together' scene, I conclude that there are two primary reasons. 'No Man's Land' associates its genuine aspect (genuine representation) with a narrative development that privileges the woman, making her more relevant. Audiences can connect more with her, and she leads the narrative, in opposition to *Endgame*, where male characters are responsible for the narrative flow. The second reason connects the genuine trait to a broader context, to the possibility of an honest desire to change gender representation in media. Although there were bittersweet feelings towards the *Avengers* scene, it still holds importance in promoting reflections about current specificities of female representation.

This debate is a small example of how participants are engaging with discussions and attempts at improved representation in superhero media. It highlights how they respond to themes directly connected to woke capitalism, noticing, questioning and criticising it. In the next section, I expand on this debate, discussing participants' expectations for the future of superhero media. Interestingly, participants still rely on official texts and publicity to share and to praise shifts they consider new, significant, and necessary.

Towards More Change

In the previous chapters, I have discussed how participants engaged with a range of topics related to gender and feminism. During these discussions, participants also shared paratexts such as memes, fanart, blog entries and tweets, which were not necessarily official content. However, it was significant that official publicity material, whether posted by official accounts or reposted, was also included in participants' diaries.

As this chapter focuses on the entanglement between media corporations, woke culture and participants' negotiations, the option for and dependence upon official publicity material to engage within certain discussions emphasises the dynamics of woke capitalism. Engaging with official content for learning and developing further discussions about, for example, gender, may contribute 'positively' to the brand's identity. Media corporations are giving visibility to these topics, and participants are aware of this visibility and engaging with these topics through the content mediated by media corporations.

Aiming to explore these boundaries, in this section I discuss what participants considered to be the most up to date and meaningful changes in representation. They also commented on their expectations for the future of women's representation in superhero media, expressing some hope about it. The shifts they praised encompassed inclusion and diversity and, consequently, their engagement with these debates offers opportunity for

reflecting not only on their performances of online popular feminism, but also of online intersectional feminism. To an extent, in considering all these articulations, we can unveil the inextricable link between online popular feminism and the mechanics of woke capitalism.

One example that approaches how superhero live action films and television shows are becoming more inclusive is a Twitter post shared by Evan (Figure 28). Originally posted by Marvel Studios' official account, it is an advertisement announcing the release of an episode of the television show *Hawkeye* (2021) on Disney+. In the advertisement, Native American actress Alaqua Cox appears, using sign language to inform people about the episode, as she is deaf. Cox plays Maya Lopez/Echo in the MCU.[43]

Figure 28

Hawkeye Advertisement on Disney+ *with Alaqua Cox*

[43] Echo is the protagonist of the TV show *Echo* (2024, a spin-off of the TV show *Hawkeye* (2021).

This example communicates not only the option for sharing official publicity material, but also an engagement with discourses of inclusion through it. Inclusion and diversity have been at the core of debates about superhero media for some time. When questioned about their thoughts on recent female representation, Evan (D/I, New Zealand) said:

> *Black Panther* was a good example of a lot of good strong female characters with development. Shuri, Nakia, and Okoye. Oh, and the queen! Don't forget the queen! There was this king character who was surrounded by all these strong women. Also, dark skin black women! Because there's so much colourism in movies! (…) *Captain Marvel*. *Eternals*. Women of colour. A disabled woman. Deaf. Also, in *Hawkeye* there's another indigenous person. So it is getting better. They are kind of listening.

Evan not only praises how films and television shows are becoming more diverse in relation to gender, but also adds to the idea that media corporations are listening to audiences' demands on social media. In addition, advertising *Echo* on Disney+ and circulating it on social media not only gives visibility to the subject itself, but it also to Disney. Evan opted for official publicity material to discuss and praise inclusiveness, demonstrating Evan's dependence on it to do so. However, the sharing of this content – directly or indirectly – promotes the brand.

As diversity is at the core of these discourses, more can be added about diversity in relation to superhero media. In their discussion concerning discussing diversity in publishing, Saha and van Lente (2022) acknowledge a recent "ascendency of diversity discourse" (p. 217) that permeates creative and cultural industries, based upon the recognition that these industries "are unrepresentative of the population" (p. 217), and that racialised groups "have been historically excluded" (p. 217). They argue that questions of diversity and visibility "are

under constant dissection and interrogation especially on social media" (p. 217). As a result, "such an emphasis on diversity is affecting the media we consume" (p. 219). This particularly resonates with woke capitalism culture.

Arguably, over the past few years, many industries and corporations have engaged with an agenda of inclusion and diversity. Among them, famous media companies have argued that they are part of this agenda, compromising by creating more diverse and inclusive stories (Bickham & Roberts, 2020), including having more diverse production teams. In 2010, for example, Marvel comics began a shift towards including more women, people of colour, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, and other marginalised communities in their comics, and inside their teams (Curtis, 2020). These changes are direct or indirect consequences of related social movements, in which social media works as a tool of integration and communication, allowing for more visibility regarding issues such as misrepresentation. Hollywood and other companies were forced to answer to these movements and the shifts that were required in order to remain relevant (Roberts, 2020).

Social media and digital technologies reach people faster, prompting them to acquire consciousness and understand more about these issues. As a result, Roberts (2020) argues, "brands are prompted to consider digital discourse of social movements with the understanding that its ability to meet and reach its customers, in part, is stipulated by how consumers perceive and view its brands" (p. 14). Companies/brands were forced to listen to what was being discussed online and adapt their content and products if they wanted to keep reaching larger audiences. Participant Evan echoed this argument: "social media has grown to be a place where people can be heard. Ideas can be thrown out. If enough people talk about it, someone is going to listen".

Within this context, Kent (2021) reminds us that the inclusion of Khamala Kan as Miss Marvel and other changes regarding gender, race, and sexuality of characters in Marvel

comics are still “absorbed into a network of commercial representation and ‘economies of visibility’” (Banet-Weiser 2018, as cited by Kent, 2021, p.3). Banet-Weiser (2018, 2020) talks about economies of visibility in the context of popular feminism. Whilst the heightened (online and offline) visibility makes popular feminism more easily accessible to larger audiences, in a context of economies of visibility there is no preoccupation with making deeper, structural changes regarding inequalities of gender and race. Banet-Weiser (2018) contends that the visibility “becomes the end rather than means to an end” (p. 23). Changes in superhero media that give visibility to gender and racial questions are still inextricably linked to commercial motivations.

It is challenging to think about these changes outside the context of financial gains, or to discern how much of the change is due to an honest consideration of, or commitment to, improvements in representation in movies. As Cocca (2016) writes:

> In this arena, the companies are being told, directly and repeatedly, that they will get more dollars from certain organized and vocal fans if they create, highlight, or strengthen characters that are more demographically representative, preferably through hiring a wider variety of creators. The fans are being told that they are being heard, and that changes are coming. (p. 218)

Speaking of Disney, for example, Roberts (2020) writes that Disney “works to avoid appearing out of touch. The studio is constantly adjusting its position as a cultural force; one that mirrors current times, providing entertainment and memories that feel authentic to the customers it wishes to serve” (p. 14). Disney tries to keep its works and its own image/brand up to date, doing whatever is necessary to demonstrate their relevancy to audiences.

Disney has publicly aligned with the diversity and inclusion agenda, a commitment reinforced by many Disney executives up to this date, including those responsible for superhero productions (Bickham & Roberts, 2020). In 2018, for instance, Kevin Feige,

president of Marvel Studios at the time, spoke about the importance of *Black Panther* to Black representation. Prior to this, other executives commented on how diversity and inclusion are central to the company (Bickham & Roberts, 2020), such as Lucasfilm's president Kathleen Kennedy, who spoke about female inclusion.

The topic of women's (lack of) inclusion and representation in Hollywood industries is also at the core of debates (Donoghue, 2022; Kent, 2021). Donoghue (2022) reflects on gender inequity in terms of women producing movies (including creative and business decision-making teams), supposedly due to either a lack of interest or a lack of experience in these roles (2022). Kent (2021) considers how issues of representation and exploitation have resurfaced, reaching a peak in 2017 with the #MeToo movement on social media.

Further, the increasing participation of women in the film industry has also been noticed and praised as one layer of change. Vitoria (Focus group 2, Brazil), for example, noted:

> It is important to us as women. A while ago all we had were men blogging, writing and producing films. Now we have women producing, starring in superhero films. This change reflects on our society. Even though it is underestimated by some people because it is pop culture.

Vitoria acknowledged the traditional gender gap in film production, but commented on how it has been changing recently, mirroring changes in society.

Vitoria also praised *Eternals* (2021), stating, "A film such as *Eternals* which is full of representation is amazing!". *Eternals* tells the story of immortal alien beings, who have been living on Earth, and must protect it from a threat. Its main cast is a miscellaneous group of men and women, introducing the audience to a more balanced cast in terms of diversity and gender. Participants spoke about this film because its release date was during the period of

data collection and there was a wealth of content about it circulating online. Larissa (Focus group 2, Brazil), the content creator who taught her audience to question media corporations' support of social causes, said that it was during a livestream she did about *Eternals* that debates about diversity arose.

Reflections about diversity in *Eternals* also unfolded via an image shared by Andie (D/I, New Zealand) (Figure 29). The image is of the *Eternals*' official trailer – originally posted on Marvel's official Twitter account – with a comment from a user. Before its release, people were already commenting on how the blockbuster was more diverse, based on the trailer's content. Again, a participant chose content that includes official material, which reinforces how participants depended on it to engage with and to praise these changes.

Figure 29

Tweet about Eternals' Balanced Team

Andie (D/I, New Zealand) shared her opinion about this tweet:

But I think that where we are going in terms of representation, that's the reality of the world. It is not 90% of men and 10% of women. We have both. The cast of that film in particular is great. It is what we should aim for more in the future. It's really cool.

It's great! It makes me happy that that type of thing is going to be seen as normal. This is the team. And this is what the team looks like.

Andie is clearly pleased with the balance of the team. The MCU went from having Black Widow and seven men towards a more equal team in terms of gender. As Andie said, it is unnecessary to enforce media portrayals that represent a fifty-fifty split between men and women.

As for Figure 29, the Tweet is slightly ironic, suggesting that, because there is more diversity, part of the audience will claim disinterest. Supposedly, when a movie embraces a more diverse cast or narrative, the conservative part of the audience is displeased. Further, arguably in pop culture in general – in which I emphasise comics, movies, and television shows – male fans who are mostly cisgendered, heterosexual and white have a negative view regarding more inclusive stories (Scott, 2020). This indicates a broader and more complex discussion, which is beyond the scope of this research.

In terms of representation, *Eternals* also employed a deaf actress as part of its main cast, an inclusion praised by participants Evan (D/I, New Zealand) and Vitoria (Focus group 2, Brazil). Lauren Ridloff, who plays Makkari, is a deaf American actress. Born deaf from parents of Mexican-American and African-American descendance, Ridloff's presence in *Eternals* grants increased visibility to people with deafness. Importantly, an actor without a disability was not chosen to play a character with a disability. Vitoria said that she saw online that the number of people wanting to learn sign language has increased: "People took an interest in it and decided to learn. It has happened because of a movie", which adds to how the movie gives visibility to deafness and the deaf world.

The comments and content shared above promote thinking about participants' performances of intersectional feminism online. As Hill & Bilge (2016) articulate, intersectionality considers how social inequality, people's lives and power in a society, "are

better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other" (p. 11). Kanai (2020) argues that we are living "a moment of intersectional visibility" (p. 29), claiming intersectionality to be "mobile" (p. 519), as it circulates in various spheres and debates. Within the context of feminism having become widely visible and popular in the West (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Kanai, 2021), intersectionality as a framework has gained attention due to the ways in which it focuses on differences and oppression (Kanai, 2021). In daily practices, intersectionality may have become distinct from Crenshaw's (1991) original theory. The concept was used to approach "racialised and gendered exclusions of US anti-discrimination frameworks" (Kanai, 2021, p. 519). Kanai (2021) claims that intersectionality has been re-theorised and "translated in its circulation and use" (p. 519). He suggests "that media and digital culture provides a means of understanding the everyday interpretations and rituals through which feminism is practiced and through which theories like intersectionality are reconstituted and put to use" (p. 523).

In consonance with the above argument that participants are engaging online with such discussions, a further example reinforces the importance of Ridloff playing the character of Makkari. In this example, Evan (D/I, New Zealand) shared an image of the actress (Figure 30) and later commented on the significance of having chosen it.

Figure 30

Lauren Ridloff/Makkari

> Discussing Makkari, Evan (D/I, New Zealand) commented:
>
> The Makkari thing was like… This is what we want to see. Hire deaf actresses to play deaf characters. It is so much better than someone faking sign language. You get a more natural performance. You are giving roles to actors who probably wouldn't get the role. Or would be pushed aside because they want big names.

Considering that intersectionality encompasses a range of inequalities that include disabilities (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Evans, 2019), Evan's argument that casting Ridoff gives opportunities for actors who probably would not get a role as a main character in a blockbuster film, resonates in an intersectional feminism context. At the same time, it is noteworthy that the opposite still happens: white and non-disabled actors get the roles of non-white and/or disabled characters (e.g. Johansson playing non-white characters, as discussed in Chapter Three).

In discussing the importance of casting Ridloff in this role, Rachel (D/I, New Zealand) also shared an image (Figure 31) of an interview that Rachel saw on TikTok (Figure 31).

Figure 31

Interview with Lauren Ridloff (on TikTok)

Figure 31 shows a video still from *Good Morning America (GMA)*, an American television news program. The subtitles say that Ridloff "hopes many people will feel seen while watching the film". The example Rachel shared furthers the claim that while the film gives visibility to the topic of disability, promotion – in this case, the actress being interviewed on a popular television program, and mediated on social media – also contributes

to people's exposure to, and learning about disability. Additionally, through her engagement with and selection of this content, Rachel informally learns about and performs some level of intersectional feminism.

In considering the examples above, I have demonstrated how participants consider diversity in superhero live action adaptations essential. I also exemplified how they perform online intersectional feminism –in an informal and low-level way – by engaging with texts and paratexts that give visibility to, in this case, a Black/Latina disabled actress. Lastly, in observing how they depend on, engage with, and further promote official publicity (a television advertisement, trailer and posts from official accounts) surrounding the representational gains of these films, it was possible to verify how dynamics of woke capitalism are attached to performances of online feminism. Although participants can be critical of and inquire about the role of media corporations in presenting such representational shifts and gains, participants remain attached to these media corporation's mediations (texts and paratexts) to further question, criticise, and engage with discourses concerning representational changes and gains.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I addressed some of the articulations participants made in relation to woke capitalism via observing their responses to three situations. First, a scene in which superheroines fight together, the All Women Together scene in *Avengers: Endgame*. Second, the scene in which Wonder Woman crosses No Man's Land in *Wonder Woman*. Third, the cast from *Eternals,* along with other shifts regarding representation. Notably, the answers participants had for these situations reflect how complex the wider context is. In considering this, I have a few observations to make.

To begin, it is necessary to acknowledge that at least some participants are aware of woke capitalism and have some understanding of how it works. Although they did not use the word ‘woke’, there was an understanding that certain shifts in representation are happening because the corporation or brand fears appearing “out of touch” (Roberts, 2020, p. 14), or being cancelled online, or any other negative outcome. Corporations want to be seen as socially conscious (Bickham & Roberts, 2020). Disney, for example, works at different levels with different social projects online and offline, and has “developed its own model for family-friendly, socially ‘woke’ and conscious branding that offends few, positions its company as modern and reflective of its global consumers, and that ultimately entertains (Bickham & Roberts, 2020, p. 36). Their films are produced and circulate following such logics. In considering this, participants may question how sincere the commitment to such representation is.

Secondly, the chapter reinforces how their digital participation helps them to understand such issues. This was exemplified by a participant who watched *Avengers: Endgame*, and only after reading discussion online understood that, although it was an enjoyable scene to her, audiences viewed it as problematically representing female empowerment.

Speaking of enjoyment, my third observation is that audiences can both appreciate and enjoy something whilst understanding that it can be somewhat problematic, further criticising it. It would be wrong to assume that participants cannot enjoy a text solely because this text is part of the wider machinations of capitalism or neoliberalism, and that their consumption of those texts should be limited to criticism or to demanding changes. At the same time, it would also be wrong to argue that they are merely spectators of the films and television shows, who enjoy the stories, devoid of any criticism.

The fourth observation considers participants' dependency on official texts. Although they have commented positively about the representational gains in superhero films, it was shown that, to some extent, they still rely on official publicity material to engage and to comment on them, which interlocks their online performances with dynamics of woke capitalism. They are not only speaking somewhat positively about the changes, but they are also using official publicity to do so. This reinforces the economic and cultural power of the corporations, because their texts keep being engaged with and circulating.

Lastly, participants did praise some changes, are happy with them, and commented that they have hope about what is to come in future films and television shows. However, although they appreciate and acknowledge these shifts, they still question their conditions of existence and are critical of them. I address this ambivalent position that participants hold in more detail in the following pages, in the Conclusion.

Conclusion

When I started this study, I was curious about the dynamics involving audiences' online engagement with superhero(ine) media, and how it shaped their understanding of female representation. I also questioned if such engagement and understanding had some sort of influence on other aspects of their lives. Now that I have completed this research, I found answers that address these questions whilst also expanding debates on feminism, representation, feminist digital activism, transnational neoliberal postfeminism, and feminist consciousness-raising.

Although each chapter has a different focus, they also have a shared characteristic, which is central to understanding this thesis. Overall, the texts approached in this project are produced and circulated within logics of neoliberalism. These texts are turned into commodities, as is the case for other media products (Artz, 2022). Following such logics, the main goal is to obtain profit from these movies. In order to make stories that sell, there is a need to make them into something that large audiences can easily enjoy and identify with. As this thesis has shown, participants often praised how these texts incorporate elements such as diversity (Chapter Five), or how they give more depth and relevance to female characters (Chapter Four). In this sense, representations that are more diverse, inclusive, and 'feminist' are commodified. This also highlights the intersection of neoliberalism and postfeminism, given the commodification of feminism in the latter (Negra & Tasker, 2007).

Throughout this thesis, I addressed a range of discussions revolving around the representation of women under the logics of postfeminist sensibility. In Chapter Two, for instance, I commented on aspects related to beauty and characterisation in participants' discussions about how women should be free to choose how they present themselves in terms of appearance. Such 'freedom', however, is attached to postfeminism, where women are led

to believe that they are making their own choices, or that they are the only ones responsible for taking care of themselves. The idea of an independent woman, who can fight all by herself against issues such as misogyny is found in the form of Wonder Woman crossing No Man's Land, as discussed in Chapter Five. Another example is in the discussion in Chapter Three regarding celebrity feminism, which is inserted into the neoliberal context. Participants praised actress Scarlett Johansson for how she spoke and acted during sexist situations, whilst also acknowledging that they would not be able to speak or act like the actress, due to their own relative lack of power and influence. This led participants to think about the authenticity and limitations of celebrity feminism. These examples show how values and images that are characteristic of postfeminism reach them, taking the form of stories and of characters that participants enjoy and identify with. Through these movies, values, ideologies, and images of the neoliberal postfeminist sensibility cross borders, reaching audiences on distant corners of the planet. In this sense, it is possible to comment on the transnational aspects that permeate this study. There are two intersecting concepts that work here: transnational media and transnational (post)feminism. Transnational media can be understood as media that is turned transnational "for survival" (Artz, 2022, p. 52), fulfilling capitalist goals through adopting a series of strategies to make it more accessible for audiences across the globe (for example, less dialogue and more action, or more diversity). This transnational media can in turn popularise images, representations, and ideologies that "become part of a global sense for how the world is and how it should be" (Artz, 2015, p. 170).

There is also the transnational connected with feminism, such as transnational feminism (Swarr & Nagar, 2010) or transnational postfeminism (Dosekun, 2020), which is relevant for addressing the experiences of women beyond borders, giving them visibility. In fact, as suggested by Riley et al. (2017), when commenting on research that addresses the transnational movement of postfeminist sensibility across media, it is said that it is "linked to

the flows of global capital and geo-politics, particularly in relation to neoliberalism" (p .8). Yet, at the same time, such research can link elements of a postfeminist sensibility to "local values and practices" (p. 8). In other words, this transnational is the one related to transnational feminist research, which has the potential to criss-cross, among other things, global texts and local particularities in relation to wider, global flows.

These two strands of transnationalism come together in this study. First, there are superhero(ine) texts that are made into transnational media for profit and that popularise particular images, representations and ideologies globally. Then, this research is, to some extent, a work on transnational feminism, for it addresses the experiences of participants from Brazil and New Zealand, bringing forward their responses while showing how they perceive and engage with the superhero(ine) texts.

Findings

In this study, I addressed the ways through which participants consume and engage with superhero(ine) texts, focusing on digital platforms. The participants engaged with representation in superhero films and television shows through different platforms and through different forms of content. Participants used Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, YouTube, Tumblr, websites, or blogs. Texts, videos (long or short), images (official ones, fanart, memes), podcasts – many forms of content were mentioned and attracted participants' attention. This finding is underpinned by examples provided through the chapters, whether from diaries or from comments. In Chapter Two, for instance, participants shared images (film posters) from Instagram. In this same chapter, they also included Twitter threads about Nebula's hair. In Chapter Three participants shared that they used YouTube to watch videos with compilations of interviews with Johansson. Chapter Five contains examples from *TikTok* and from Twitter. There was not a specific social media platform that was used more than

others, and this variety shows how participants' engagement often originates from accessing whatever social media best attends to their preferences.

The ways through which these participants engaged with this social media also varied. Some of them are professional content creators who see their goal as pedagogically contributing to social debates. Some of them just share fun content with close friends. The content creators commented on how they started to manage their social media pages in a more professional way, particularly during the pandemic, a topic I explored in Chapter One. Although for many of them creating online content is not necessarily a source of income or their main activity, they do so in a professional way. They see their pages not only as a fun activity, but also as a job, or as something 'official'. In this sense, they manage these pages in a way that reflects the importance they place on them. Their investments in content creation open more opportunities for women to be listened to in spaces that were predominantly male. They also support other women through collaborations, assuring more visibility to lesser known content creators.

Overall, the content creators in this research demonstrated awareness about the potential of their pages for teaching people, as well as their own responsibility in doing so. They also highlighted a range of challenges, such as trying to figure out which social media platforms better work with their audiences, or which forms best convey the message they want to deliver. They often question whether people want concise and fast information, or deeper analysis, or a combination. They argue that they are trying to create content in a more pedagogical way, one that could reach more diverse audience groups. Most importantly, a central discussion here is the question of who can speak, and about what. Participants argue that now there are more opportunities for nonstandard voices to be heard, particularly the voices of women, people of colour, and members of the LGBTQIA+ community.

Through this online engagement participants developed a deeper understanding of issues such as excessive sexualisation (Chapter Two), or what they considered failed attempts to show authentic feminism (Chapter Five). They also complained about relying unnecessarily on a romantic interest for the protagonist, if such a plot does not help in developing the character (Chapter Four). In Chapter Five, participants commented on the inauthenticity of the scene with the women together in the *Avengers: Endgame* movie, a criticism they became aware of when reading about it online. Along with this example, there are others that can be traced among the chapters, such as the case of an Instagram post about the Dora Milaje armour (Chapter Two). The original author of this post, and those that wrote about the problem with the scene from *Avengers: Endgame*, shared an intention to educate their audience. At the same time, participants also praised elements that they perceived as progressive, such as having more diverse casts (Chapter Five), or a scene such as Wonder Woman crossing No Man's Land (Chapter Five) which is interpreted as a valid representation of feminism, or how *WandaVision* approached love, mourning and grief in a way that people could connect with (Chapter Four).

Clearly, the online environment creates opportunities for learning, for awareness, for reflecting, and for acting in support of feminism, resulting in an effective platform for consciousness-raising (Gleeson & Turner, 2019). This in turn forms some points of connection with a Freirean pedagogy of resistance, contributing to liberation "via the development of critical thought" (Ochoa & Pershing, 2013, p. 23). All the discussions in this thesis are examples of participants' development of critical thoughts, via digital activism and via the digital promotion of specific texts. However, this consciousness-raising comes with the caveat that the participants cannot completely escape from the neoliberal logics of production and circulation of these texts. This becomes clear when noticing that participants still rely on original texts and on paratexts created by the original media producers to either

praise or criticise something. Participants do use paratexts created by other audience members, such as in memes (the Johansson ones, in Chapter Three) or fanart (the one about Wonder Woman's costuming, in Chapter Two). However, they are still consuming and circulating posters, trailers, and other official material not only to criticise something, but also for praising certain choices. This was addressed in Chapter Five, in which participants used official paratexts to praise diversity in movies, such as was the case for *Eternals* (2021). It can also be seen with the Wonder Woman fanart in Chapter Two; although this last example is fan content, it was posted and shared by an official HBO account. The use of official texts to praise such shifts is positive for the media industry, as it reinforces the message that the media industry cares and that they are making the changes that everyone wants to see. However, these changes should not be naively accepted without due reflection and criticism.

It can also be argued that participants cannot completely escape from the logics of the postfeminist sensibility, as it reaches them through the representations present in these texts. This can be observed when participants praise women's agency in terms of characterisation (Chapter Two). Although women's agency is valued by participants, female agency is intrinsic to the postfeminist sensibility, for it contributes to commodifying the body and commodifying feminism. In essence, certain themes of the postfeminist sensibility, which work side by side with neoliberal logics, are slightly more accepted by participants as positive. This is the case for freedom in relation to how to present the body, how to dress, to be more or less sexy, and other elements. Since it is perceived in this way – in which it is positive because it can be associated with women's independence, agency, and self-responsibility – it is easier for these ideas to be accepted and incorporated into women's lives. Consequently, the mechanisms of neoliberalism continue to work.

Still, I also argue that alongside noticing how the postfeminist sensibility reaches participants, the discussion about agency on what to wear connects well with one of my

original research questions, in which I seek to understand connections with participants' lives. Participants understand and criticise the agency or autonomy characters have or lack, but this extends beyond these texts and into their personal lives. This means that participants' engagement with such discussions is a double entanglement. It could be something that they learned from an external source or experience, and then applied it to their reading of specific representations in superhero(ine) media. Or it could be the opposite, and through consuming those texts, they learned something they could apply to their lives. The discussion surrounding women's autonomy for dressing in a sexy way provides an example. During our conversations, when participants showed support towards fictional characters dressing in a sexy way, it was often an argument that was external to the text, in the sense that if real women can do so, so can these characters. How though might the external context of the participants' national location inform this relationship between superhero films and digital feminism?

Brazil and New Zealand

In comparing the overall answers for both countries, I found more similarities than differences regarding how they engage with the texts, as well as how they respond to them. For both Brazil and New Zealand, there is balanced dynamic that consists of enjoying and criticising, showing some level of awareness about the wider circumstances of production, and about the ways women are represented. It appeared that participants were not seeking large scale shifts in representation, as they were not criticising everything they saw. Instead, participants noticed small possibilities for change, such as increasing diversity in casts (Chapter Five), or expanding women's roles by giving them more depth and more development, rather than limiting them to a love interest or damsel in distress stereotype (Chapter Four).

As for differences, the main one I found was that Brazilian participants were more direct in arguing in favour of using social media to raise the voices of minorities, and in reinforcing how pop culture can be used to teach about gender and feminism. Some Brazilian participants were more direct in elaborating how they see online platforms as enabling communication, and as spaces for educating and learning about a range of social topics not limited to feminism, but also about race, ethnicity, class, and others, highlighting both the intersectional aspect of their activism, and how they are acting in terms of consciousness-raising.

This is not to say that this is not true in New Zealand Although the same consciousness-raising role may exist in New Zealand, because of the limited numbers of participants, I did not find clear evidence of it when speaking with New Zealanders. This difference arguably reflects the political moment during which I conducted this research. At the time, Brazil had a misogynistic president whose performance and political decisions ignited the anger of half of the Brazilian population. In contrast, although I would not dare to say that Ardern was loved by all New Zealanders, she became, as Chapman (2020) argues, "a global icon of empathetic leadership" (p. 186), in part for her "ability to speak on behalf of those without a voice" (p. 186).

In comparing the political moment of both countries, Brazil had a more emergent hatred spreading among its population. In addition, there was also the pandemic, which was dealt with in completely different ways by each country. These factors led Brazilians to use social media more to speak against conservatism, against the misogyny that was quickly spreading among the population, to raise consciousness about feminism, and to act, such as going to the streets to march against Bolsonaro. Within this context, pop culture texts functioned as a starting point for prompting discussions. I do believe, however, that if this

research was more directly focused on the specificities of local politics and digital engagement, the answers from New Zealand participants could have been different.

Similarly, although one of my initial research questions revolved around addressing the intersection between engaging with superhero(ine) texts and the lives of participants, they did not share enough for allowing further reflection. When asked questions about their personal experiences, their answers did not bring new information, other than sharing that they used to go to the cinema when they were children, or how they used to watch cartoons featuring superheroines. Although answers more focused on specific elements of their lives would certainly contribute to addressing their experiences, strengthening the transnational element of this research, participants themselves chose not to share significant amounts of information, and I respected their choices. In this sense, for building my own analysis, I chose to work with the information they were comfortable sharing, which I believe was enough to understand some of their perspectives, along with the wider dynamics at play.

Spheres of Significance

In consonance with all that was addressed in these previous pages, I consider four intersecting thematic spheres. Each plays a relevant role for the thesis as whole, connecting with discussions developed in each chapter.

The first is the sphere of wokeism. The production of blockbuster films and television shows has been influenced directly or indirectly by societal claims for improving diversity, gender representation, and other social issues. Nonetheless, such woke culture is intrinsically attached to neoliberalism. As discussed in previous chapters, woke culture revolves around media companies showing that they side with and are working on improving representation (Roberts, 2020; Sobande, Kanai & Zeng, 2022). In return, this

generates profit for them, along with creating a positive image for the brand. It shows how the media industry can take advantage of diversity for their own purposes.

The second sphere is transnational neoliberal postfeminist sensibility. This refers to how images, messages and meanings of the postfeminist sensibility reach participants in different countries, via transnational media. In other words, digital promotion and engagement with mainstream superhero(ine) texts functions as a platform that facilitates such messages and images to reach and to circulate among girls and women in distant corners of the world, contributing to shaping their understanding of feminism, femininity and gender. The form of feminism that reaches them through these texts, however, tends to be one specific form of feminism – the postfeminist one that works well alongside neoliberalism. At the same time, it is important to recognise the way in which understandings of feminism are shaped by geographic location and intersecting identity groups.

In addition, I also highlight the role of popular feminism. It does facilitate the access to feminism, spreading the message that feminism is available for everyone. However, one specific type of feminism is being made popular, one that works within neoliberal logics. In this sense, it is crucial to question whose feminism is being popularised and more easily accessed, and why other feminisms are not being represented in the same way. Even so, although a mainstream form of feminism is being popularised online, there is also space for promoting other forms of feminisms, and this is what some participants are trying to do, by sharing other's experiences and discourses online.

The third sphere is digital activism, including intersectional feminist digital activism and popular feminism. Increasingly, people use social media for amplifying their voices and for creating networks. In this case, I refer specifically to feminist digital activism, in which forms of feminism are accessible through digital participation. When interacting online,

people can learn about feminist struggles, engaging in debates and educating themselves, and acting in support of feminisms and/or against misogyny or sexism. This shows the potential of digital participation for consciousness-raising about feminism.

The fourth sphere is the context of production in the post-pandemic world, which is relevant characteristic of when I conducted my research. The COVID-19 pandemic has created challenges, affecting film production and consumption at different levels. There was the increase of streaming services and changes such as films being released on said streaming services, and the increase in production of superhero television shows. Adding to this, the pandemic context modified people's lives. At home, people sought to find new hobbies or activities to do, whether for fun, as a distraction, or because they need an income: as participants said in Chapter One, the pandemic motivated them "to do something".

Although these spheres can be interpreted individually, they are interconnected and affect one another. In addition, they are fundamental in understanding participants' experiences with superhero(ine) stories, as well as their digital engagement. Although they do not influence participants equally, this study has demonstrated their centrality to contemporary understandings of gender.

Limitations

Invariably, any research has limitations. For this study, the first limitation is that I worked with a small number of participants. My participants consisted of a group of seven New Zealanders and twelve Brazilians. All of them identified as women or as nonbinary and were over 18 years old. Although including the ethnicity was optional, among those who chose to do so, there were participants who identified as European/Pākehā, Southeast Asian, and Māori, among others. Participants also identified themselves as white or as black women. There was no information about their socioeconomic class or other similar information. This

was not initially requested, and they also did not share this detail. These nineteen people, however, do not speak for everyone. Research with more participants could offer different contributions and insights. Nonetheless, the main reason behind this limitation in numbers was the difficulty in finding participants and collecting data during the pandemic when Auckland was under constant lockdowns.

The second limitation is that I have not measured participants' enjoyment, which originates from affective connection with the stories. My thesis has focused on the meanings that participants attach to the representation of superheroines. However, further research could explore the affective dimension of their engagement in more depth. While this concept was not central to the thesis, it has permeated some of the relations between participants and characters/stories.

Although female representation has ostensibly improved in superhero live action films and in television shows during the last few years, these stories are still circulating in controversial contextual spheres. Meanwhile, social media continues to be a space for engaging in a range of debates about themes such as feminisms, gender diversity, gender inequality, sexism and others. In this research, I have tried to understand more about the intersections between these topics, participants' engagement, and how these intersections impact their lives. I started by observing digital platforms as effective spaces for teaching and learning about the aforementioned themes, and I concluded by showing how participants engage with productions in the context of woke capitalism, understanding representational gains as part of this context.

Further Research

In considering the findings and limitations I have addressed in the previous pages, this segment introduces topics for further research. Although I was unable to approach these

topics in more depth, each could certainly lead to interesting discoveries, strengthening debates surrounding the themes I explored in this thesis.

First, various films and television shows featuring female characters were released during the time I was writing this thesis (after data collection) or after having completed writing it Examples include *Ms. Marvel* (Feige et al., 2022), *She-Hulk* (Feige et al., 2022), *Black Panther – Wakanda Forever* (Coogler, 2022) and *The Marvels* (DaCosta, 2023). While talking to participants, they were excited to see these new stories and were optimistic regarding how they would incorporate diversity. In that sense, my first suggestion for further research would be to approach engagement with these other stories, whether through digital engagement or not. In particular, there would be benefits to doing further research that is not centred on the USA or European countries, bringing light to more transnational research from Latin-America and/or from different continents and countries, especially from the Southern Hemisphere. By listening to these voices, this could offer new insights about the connections between representation in pop culture and many other forms of feminisms and gender research. It could lead to deeper understanding about the consumption of these texts and about the forms of representation they incorporate, contrasting with local realities and experiences.

Second, there is a need for further research that gives more emphasis to women who are content creators of pop culture. As I have argued elsewhere, the fact that a number of participants were content creators was surprising, as this was not a requirement to participate in this research. Interesting discussions emerged from my conversation with these content creators: discussions associated with feminist digital activism, with the role that content creators have in educating about feminism, gender, and other themes, and with how social media and digital platforms are contributing to allowing those whose voices are nonstandard to be heard. What I found particularly interesting was that the content creators I

spoke with were not only excited about what they were doing, but also about their sense of responsibility in relation to what they are doing, creating spaces and opportunities for discussions. In this sense, as mentioned in Chapter One, the content creators I spoke with shared that they are always trying to figure out the best way to convey their messages, in a format that is accessible to others.

Although I have approached some of these questions in relation to pop culture and superheroines, this field is vast. I would not be able to pursue all that it has to offer in terms of discussion just in one thesis. The study I have provided functions as a starting point, a basis for further investigations. In fact, a more detailed approach to female content creators with a focus on intersectional feminist digital activism could lead to new insights and interesting discourses, as it would bring more focus to women of colour, different ethnicities, and/or queerness, for their voices must echo louder. There is so much more to be explored surrounding the topics I have addressed in these pages, and I am intrigued to see the ways that these topics can be expanded.

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Appendix A

Interview questions

Questions about superheroines

1 – Who is your favourite superheroine? And why do you like this character?

2 – Which characteristics of her/them you enjoy? Which ones you don't like? Why is that you like/dislike such characteristics?

3 – How did you become interested in the superhero genre? When did it start?

4 – Is there any female character that you don't like? What about her that you don't like?

5 – Is there any scene or film that has made an impact on you?

6 – What does that scene make you feel? Why do you like this scene?

7 – What do you think about how female characters are currently being depicted in films and in tv shows? Particularly if we talk about representation.

8 – If we compare the films that we have nowadays with older ones (from early 2000s, 2010s), have you noticed any changes in the narratives? What about changes in characters?

9 – What is our opinion regarding costuming/clothing/uniforms? What do you think about the clothes female characters wear?

10 – What do you think about the way superhero films are portraying families/relationships/or relations between female characters?

Questions about social media

1 – In terms of superheroes and social media, which type of social media do you use? What type of content do you see and follow? How do you interact with it?

2 – Has any post/comment/content that you saw on social media ever changed your opinion about something, or has made you reflect about a social theme, such as representation?

3 – What do you think about people going online to debate about topics related with gender politics? What about those who argue online?

Examples of specific questions

These questions were formulated based on each participant's digital diary. Note that they are not for the same participant. Instead, I selected examples from various interviews.

1 – I saw that you shared an image that had a photo of Gemma Chan, Simu Liu, and Scarlett Johansson. You mentioned that Johansson was involved in a controversy. What do you think about this situation? Why did you choose that image? How does such casting choices make you feel? (This question refers to Figure 21, Chapter Three).

2 – You shared photos of characters Makkari and Kate Bishop. What do you think about them? (This question refers to Chapter Five)

3 – You said that *WandaVision* is one of your favourite TV shows, right? Why do you like it? What do you think about the way Wanda was portrayed? (This question refers to Chapter Four)

4 – You shared an image of Scarlett Johansson, which is about her lawsuit against Disney. How did you become aware about the lawsuit? What do you think about this situation? (This question refers to Chapter Three)

5 – You shared an image of Harley Quinn. What are your thoughts about it? Why did you choose that image? (This question refers to Figure 9, Chapter Two).

Appendix B

Ethics

Ethics Notification Number: 4000024013

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 in this document are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research.

If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you want to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact Professor Craig Johnson, Director (Research Ethics), email humanethics@massey.ac.nz.

Appendix C

Consent form

All participants were required to sign in a consent form. The consent form was written either in English or in Brazilian Portuguese, depending on the participant. All consent forms had non-compulsory questions about the participants.

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES
AND SOCIAL SCIENCES
TE KURA PŪKENGA TANGATA

Fight like a girl:
rethinking female representation in superheroine media through digital audience's practices and resistances.

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

I have read, or have had read to me in my first language, and I understand the Information Sheet attached as Appendix 1. 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 and that I may withdraw from the study at any time.

I consent to participate in:

- A digital diary
- A digital diary and interview
- A focus group

1. I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.
2. I agree to the interview/focus group being sound and image recorded.
3. 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.

For focus groups

4. I understand that I have an obligation to respect the privacy of any other people who are present during the focus group by not disclosing any personal information that they share during our discussion.

   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 a focus group. There are risks in taking part in focus group research and taking part assumes that you are willing to assume those risks.

Declaration by Participant:

I _____ [print full name] hereby consent to take part in this study.

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa

School of English and Media Studies
Private Bag 11222 (PN241), Palmerston North 4442, New Zealand T +64 6 356 9099 extn 84421 or +64 6 951 7421 ems.massey.ac.nz

Questions (You are not obliged to fill this in, but it would be helpful)

If you agree on participating (interviews or focus groups) is there any topic that would make you uncomfortable to talk about?

_____
_____
_____

Do you identify in any particular way? (Gender identity)_____

In which country do you live? (New Zealand or Brazil) _____

Do you identify with any ethnical group? Which one? _____

Appendix D

Information Sheet

All participants were required to sign in a consent form. The consent form was written either in English or in Brazilian Portuguese, depending on the participant.

Information sheet

Researcher Introduction

My name is Bruna de Meneses. I am a PhD student at Massey University. For years, pop culture has been an appealing subject to me. Throughout my undergraduate degree and into postgrad I have researched fandom. At the same time, I have participated in fandoms myself with a wide range of passions. In this project, I'm interested in hearing what people who identify as female think about the portrayal of female characters in Marvel and DC Films. I am inviting you to participate in this study. Your participation will be greatly appreciated.

What is this project about and why are we doing it?

The purpose of this research is to investigate how women who are users of social media and who consider themselves fans of pop culture engage with Marvel and DC films and television shows online.

Social media is increasingly central to discussions of pop culture, and this research aims to understand how these films, narratives, and characters are being perceived and interpreted within this online environment.

The study will contribute to knowledge regarding media and gender studies inside the Academy. It also has the potential to offer new insights about digital audiences, gender representation and modes of consumption within the Global South. The study will be published as a PhD dissertation. Major research findings may be published and shared in academic journal articles, books, and at conferences.

How were you chosen for this invitation?

You can participate in this study if you identify as female or non-binary, are over 18 years old, and fit within the categories below:

1 – You identify as woman or non-binary, and you like to watch superhero films and television shows featuring female characters.

2 – You are a user of social media and

3 – Among the content, pages, groups or users that you follow, you consume any type of content regarding the superhero genre.

Participants will be sought from both Brazil and New Zealand.

If you would like to participate, how do you volunteer?

If you would like to volunteer, contact me through the email Bruna.DeMeneses.1@uni.massey.ac.nz or through the contact form you find in this

website. I will send you more information about the study, the consent form, instructions, and we can chat about any aspects of the study.

If you participate, what will you need to do?

Participants will be asked to take part in compiling digital diaries and/or participating in interviews and/or focus groups.

Digital Diary: You will be invited to record in a digital diary (using Google docs or similar) your impressions, opinions, and what circulates through social media pages that catches your attention about any film or television show from Marvel or DC released over a designated 2 week period. They can include:

1. Images, memes, comments, Tweets, messages, posts, links, news, fanart, news, messages, discussions, videos – any sort of digital material/content related to the film or tv show that you come across while using social media pages. If you see something you consider interesting, you should screenshot it and include a link if possible.
2. Your thoughts, opinions, reactions and impressions of Marvel and/or DC films and television shows.

You are invited to include as much as you like and whatever you like, with the minimum being 3 entries over the 2 week period.

Interviews: You will be invited to participate in an individual interview in which we will discuss your digital diary along with specific questions about the films and television shows.

Focus groups: Across the course of the study, you will be invited to participate in at least one focus group. 3-6 participants will be brought together online and asked a series of questions. These focus groups will be recorded. During the focus group we will talk about participant's opinions and perceptions of the characters and the narratives of Marvel and DC films and television shows.

There will be a set of questions and visual stimuli to guide the discussion and these will respond to information/interests collated in participants' digital diaries.

If you participate, what are the benefits?

You would be able to contribute to understandings about digital audiences and female representation in superhero media. As I seek to consider issues of representation and identity in relation to the superhero genre, listening to you and observing your impressions about these topics will add to studies about digital audiences, and how women are depicted in films.

If you participate, what are the risks?

There are two major concerns: the possibility of being identified online and sensitive topics.

As a major aspect of this study is participation online, you may fear that sharing online content or the use of digital data can make you easily identifiable. You may also inquire what am I going to do with your data, your impressions and the collected material. Your names, social media pages or anything that can be linked back to you will be anonymised. If anything registered in the digital diaries has usernames or any form of identification, it will be erased or anonymised as well. Every effort will be taken to ensure that you cannot be identified through your contributions to this study.

The study considers gender and topics regarding representation. This may raise sensitive topics along with, uncomfortable texts or messages online. Please only engage with material that you are comfortable with. If there is any material you find upsetting or triggering, please let me know prior to the focus groups/interviews.

Data will be stored in a personal computer protected by password and in a personal external drive also protected.

Participant's rights

You have no obligation to accept this invitation. If you do, you will have the following rights:

- You may decline to answer any question.
- You may withdraw from the study at any time, as long as I am informed within two weeks after each period of data collection. Send me an email (Bruna.DeMeneses.1@uni.massey.ac.nz).
- You can choose not to take part in the focus groups if you do not feel comfortable sharing your views with others.
- You may ask any question about the study.
- All information about participants and the material they share that can identify them or any other person will be erased.
- If you are Brazilian/Portuguese speaker, you can use content in Portuguese. I will translate everything to English and make any necessary adaptations.

Who should you contact about further information, questions or concerns about the research?

You can contact me (Bruna de Meneses). My email is Bruna.DeMeneses.1@uni.massey.ac.nz.

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 in this document are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research.
If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you want to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact Professor Craig Johnson, Director (Research Ethics), email humanethics@massey.ac.nz.