

**Male Centered Universe: A Critical
Analysis of the Role of an Action Heroine**

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An Senior Honors Communication Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of the

Communication Department

Boston College
Morrissey College of Arts and Sciences

December 9, 2022

Abstract

This paper analyzes the rights and privileges Black Widow and Captain Marvel are afforded in their respective films coupled with audience perception to understand how that might inform the future of the action heroine genre. There is a stark contrast between the reception of *Black Widow* and *Captain Marvel* that is best understood through the release timing of the films along with the character's plotline within the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Regardless, the rights and privileges each character is afforded in both films demonstrate a dimension of the female experience that had not been fully realized in the MCU prior to their release. *Captain Marvel* and *Black Widow* indicate a progression of female representation within the action heroine genre— both in frequency and quality.

Keywords: action heroine, Marvel Cinematic Universe, Black Widow, Captain Marvel, feminist film theory

Acknowledgements

To Professor Wells– thank you for your dedication to this project and to me.

To my parents– thank you for your relentless support and pride in my effort.

To my roommates– thank you for your unwavering encouragement and friendship.

To myself– for creating something I’m so proud of.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) is currently the highest-grossing film franchise of all time, with a profit of \$22.93 billion. It is only followed distantly in ranking by both Star Wars (\$10.32 billion) and Harry Potter (\$9.22 billion) (Statista, 2021). The MCU's success is attributed to the creation of compelling character arcs and simultaneous storytelling of multiple characters' experiences. These strategies interconnect all the Marvel movies produced over thirteen years and drive the MCU forward. Thus, a large and devoted fan base continues to develop. Over 100 million people purchased tickets to the *Avengers: Endgame* premiere alone (Mondello, 2019). This number does not even include the number of individuals that purchased tickets to other movie times or watched *Avengers: Endgame* on streaming platforms. Furthermore, *Avengers: Endgame* represents only one of the thirty Marvel Movies. As the highest-grossing film franchise, the MCU sets a precedent for its competitors and their audience (Olufidipe & Echezabal, 2021). Given the enormity of the MCU's audience and financial reach, its approach to presenting certain identities through character arcs has and will continue to matter.

Despite thirty movies in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, only two movies, *Black Widow* and *Captain Marvel*, possess female leads. Generally, previous research concludes there is a significant lack of female representation in superhero films, restricting females' character potential with unnecessary emotional challenges and diminishing their physical capabilities (Joffe, 2019; Olufidipe & Echezabal, 2021).

With Captain Marvel as the first female-led MCU movie, thorough research has been conducted on her character (Chau et al., 2020; Fimbiati, 2020; Goppinger & Philippo, 2019; Killian, 2019; Langsdale, 2020). However, insufficient research exists regarding the second female-led film, *Black Widow*, released in July 2021, and the capstone of Black Widow's character arc. Additionally, while Captain Marvel begins her character arc with her own film, *Black Widow* ends her character arc with hers. As a result of these differences and gaps in previous literature, I intend to compare the content and perceived success of both *Black Widow* and *Captain Marvel* through the lens of feminist film theory. Feminist film theory primarily critiques negative stereotypical representations of women in film because the narratives films perpetuate actively impact the audience's understandings of and beliefs about gender roles. The theory aims for women to be depicted in narratives that accurately represent the female experience (Smelik, 2016).

The following chapter of this thesis will contextualize this study by reviewing existing literature. This chapter also describes how feminist film theory will inform the interpretation of research findings of the following questions: 1) what are the rights and privileges Black Widow and Captain Marvel are afforded in Marvel Cinematic Universe films? 2) what does the comparison of Captain Marvel and Natasha Romanoff's rights and privileges suggest about the MCU's portrayal of women? 3) what are the differences, if any, between the public opinion of *Black Widow* and the public opinion of *Captain Marvel*?

Chapter Three will detail the data collection methods and analytic procedures for this study as well as the potential benefits. In Chapter Four, moments of

sexualization, violence/ power/ emotion, and narrative development in *Captain Marvel* and *Black Widow* are analyzed and thoroughly discussed to understand what rights and privileges each character is afforded in their respective films. Chapter Five analyzes audience reviews of *Black Widow* and *Captain Marvel* to evaluate the resulting differences between audience's perception through prevalent themes.

Lastly, Chapter Six will conclude with a summary of the study's findings in regard to sexualization, violence/ power, emotion, narrative development, and audience perception of action heroines in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Subsequently, the limitations and implications of this study's findings are addressed. This thesis will culminate with conclusions and directions for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this literature review, I will seek to contextualize the construction of female characters with an overview of the four waves of feminism and feminist film theory. Next, I will discuss the portrayal of the action heroine on screen, specifically focusing on the role of sexualization and violence in their portrayal. Lastly, I will discuss the impact of both the reviews and the content itself on viewers. After reviewing the literature, I will identify gaps in the current research and present my research question.

Feminism

History of Feminism

Feminism can be defined as “the belief in social, economic, and political equality of the sexes” (Burkett & Brunell, 2021, p.1) and is often organized in what are referred to as “four waves.” While each wave works towards the progression of women’s roles in society, each focuses on different issues (Delao, 2021). The first wave of feminism began in the 1830s and lasted until the early 1900s, and mostly focused on political rights. The first step to gender equality was leveling the political playground by securing women’s suffrage (Cavanaugh, 2018). However, this wave focused solely on white women and completely excluded women of color. While white women secured the right to vote in 1920, women of color would not vote until the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (Delao, 2021).

The second wave of feminism ranged from the 1960s to the 1980s and expanded the feminist agenda. After the Second World War ended, women focused on feminism in the workplace, sexuality, and reproductive rights. More specifically, women were still confined to the roles of homemaker and stay-at-home mother (History.com Editors, 2021). While this wave did not completely exclude women of

different races and classes, race and class were treated as secondary issues (Delao, 2021).

The third wave of feminism began in the 1990s and ended in the early 2000s. During this wave, the concept of femininity was largely redefined. Previously, femininity was characterized as passive, virginal, weak, and faithful to men. Third-wave feminism reframed femininity as assertive, powerful, and, most importantly-- in charge of their sexuality (Burkett & Brunell, 2021). Third-wave feminism also acknowledged the intersections of multiple aspects of identity in a single body, a stark difference from previous waves (Delao, 2021). This form of feminism acknowledged the gaps in political, social, and economic power of women of various races, classes, and sexualities and aimed to dismantle the barriers to equality. Lastly, third-wave feminism largely focused on closing the gender pay gap and ensuring the reproductive rights of women (Cavanaugh, 2018).

The fourth wave of feminism is recent and, thus, somewhat undefined. The fourth wave is characterized by the #MeToo movement, sex positivity, and body positivity. It is also the most inclusive of all sexual, racial, gender, and class identities (Deleo, 2021). While third-wave feminism considered the impact of intersectionality on feminism, fourth-wave feminism actively pursues equality for all those who identify as women.

Lastly, postfeminism, or the belief that feminism has achieved all its goals, is an important social perception to note. This concept is largely based on the premise that feminism may no longer be relevant in the current state of society (Tasker et al., 2007). Because of the fluctuating and subjective nature of feminism, there are many

different views on what these accomplished goals are and, thus, what enacted postfeminism looks like (Butler, 2016; Gill, 2007; Tasker et al., 2007). Bell hooks (2000) describes a potential source of these postfeminist views:

Under capitalism, patriarchy is structured so that sexism restricts women's behavior in some realms even as freedom from limitations is allowed in other spheres. The absence of extreme restrictions leads many women to ignore the areas in which they are exploited or discriminated against; it may even lead them to imagine that no women are oppressed. (p. 5)

Overall, the waves of feminism are a positive progression in standards for women in society. While each wave targets different barriers women face, there is a positive progression in the rights and privileges for which women are advocating. For example, the first wave of feminism merely fought for the right to vote, and the fourth wave of feminism fights for sex and body positivity. While the progression of feminism can be understood through the four waves, another way to understand feminism is through representation in film. Feminist film theory provides another critical lens to understand the progression of the movement.

Feminist Film Theory

Feminist film theory at its core critiques stereotypical representations of women in film, because the narratives films perpetuate actively impact societal understandings of sexuality and gender differences. The theory aims for women to be depicted in narratives that accurately represent the female experience (Smelik, 2016). As feminist film theory has developed, many different standards have been developed for what qualifies as a “feminist” film.

Mulvey's article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" serves as an origin point for feminist film theory (Smelik & Cook, 2007). In the 1970s, Mulvey focused on spectatorship, or how an audience looks at and receives images through a binary lens of gender. Specifically, she coined the term "male gaze" in her basic assumption that cis-gender white men are the intended audience (Mulvey, 1975). Essentially, men are supposed to look and women are meant to be looked at in Hollywood cinema. This is evident in the directors' costuming and narrative decisions. Women are used as erotic objects for the other characters in the movie and the spectators in the audience (Mulvey, 1975). Mulvey's psychoanalysis of spectatorship is very similar to McConnick's "sexy lamp test" (Dodds, 2019). Essentially, if you can replace a female character with a sexy lamp, the film failed to give the character any sort of agency, plotline, or purpose (Dodds, 2019). This type of film is the height of objectification and prioritization of sexuality in female characters.

This hypersexualization of female characters impacts not only the physical portrayal of female characters but also their character's narrative. For example, female characters provoke something out of their male counterparts and further their plotline instead of their own. This relationship between male and female characters is all based on the assumption that men are the primary audience and thus, need a character with which to identify. As a result, the men dominate the screen space, the plotline, and the women in the film. Overall, this male gaze perpetuates the stereotype of an active, powerful male and a passive, powerless female (Mulvey, 1975).

While Mulvey's approach is widely accepted and used as the basis of many feminist film studies, it is limited because it does not consider identities other than

gender. Since the 1990s, feminist film theory has progressed from a binary understanding of gender to an understanding that encompasses questions of race, ethnicity, sexuality, and masculinity (Smelik, 2016).

One example of this expansion is Sutherland and Feltey's (2017) study, which furthered scholarly understanding of feminist film theory by adopting an intersectional and sociological approach. In their study, Sutherland and Feltey analyzed over 112 films from 1970 to 2012 to better understand the manifestations of power of female characters. Their findings are categorized into three expressions of power: "power-to," "power-with," and "power-over." "Power-to" describes films in which women individually confront societal norms. White women in the middle and sometimes working class are usually cast in these narratives. In contrast, "power-with" requires women to unite to implement change within society. This depiction of feminine power is rarely portrayed in films. Lastly, "power-over" describes women exhibiting masculinity in their overall presentation and interactions with other characters. White and Black working-class women are typically cast in these roles and are usually confined to rape-revenge, action heroine, or confronting traumatic past narratives (Sutherland & Feltey, 2017).

Interestingly, all of the films Sutherland and Feltey (2017) analyzed are considered feminist, yet female characters are still confined to these narratives. However, there is an evident progression of power represented in female characters. Mulvey's article described women's depictions in Hollywood cinema as passive and powerless (Mulvey, 1975). Sutherland and Feltey (2017) described the different types of power women are afforded in their narratives. While there is still a constriction, the

bindings have loosened. This demonstrates a crucial development of feminist film theory: the separation of sexism and feminism. The two are not mutually exclusive—films can be both sexist and feminist. Thus, when assessing whether a film is feminist, it is necessary to keep this criterion in mind. The presence of sexism does not inherently detract from the progression of feminism (Sutherland and Feltey, 2016).

Another limitation of Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" is that the understanding of spectatorship is limited to the film itself. She considers how women are depicted in the film and what this might suggest to the audience about the role of women in society. However, there is no consideration of how the social and historical context in which the films are viewed might impact female spectatorship. McCabe (2004) notes that later film theorists, such as Stuart Hall and David Morley, focused on the historical and sociocultural context in the films would be received in tandem. This perspective considers how individuals' different identities (class, gender, race, religion, personal experience, etc.) might impact their spectatorship (McCabe, 2004).

Bell hooks (2000) critiques the omission of race and class identity within feminism as it is crucial to the movement. Specifically, she discusses Black women's role in feminism and feminist theory. Black women's social status is "lower than that of any other group. Occupying such a position, [they] bear the brunt of sexist, racist, and classist oppression" (hooks, 2000, p.14). As previously mentioned, this intersection of identities within the feminist movement was, and in some ways continues to be, long overlooked and ignored. However, "the formation of liberatory feminist theory is a collective responsibility, one that must be shared" (hooks, 2000, p.15). Feminist theory

will only continue to evolve with the contribution of all viewpoints and criticism (hooks, 2000).

Feminism in Film

All these theorists leave one final question: what makes a film feminist? Sutherland and Feltey (2017) acknowledge the progressive and subjective nature of what is considered a “feminist film.” First, the Bechdel test was employed. Using this standard, if there are two women characters with names that have a conversation about anything except men, the film is feminist. Many other tests have been proposed to qualify films as feminist. Many have similar bare-minimum standards similar to the “Sexy Lamp” and Bechdel tests (Dodds, 2019; Sutherland & Feltey, 2017). For example, the Mako Mori test requires the film to give a woman her own plot arc. The Tauriel test merely asks that a female character exhibit basic competence (Frankel, 2019).

Some researchers developed tests with higher standards. To pass the Ellen Willis test, the story must make sense when the character’s genders are switched. Hagen’s test mandates half of the crowd in the background consists of women (Frankel, 2019). According to Press and Liebs-Plesner (2004)’s standard, women must be (a) in central roles, (b) seen in a range in age, size, sexuality, race, and appearance, (c) cast in roles with power and status, and (d) depicted in families that are not hetero-normative to be considered feminist. Despite these higher standards, many films still fall short. Overall, no absolute standard allows a film to be “feminist,” and the qualification fluctuates depending on the viewer.

Furthermore, the impact of the feminist waves is evident in the production of movies. Films tend to get more “feminist” as the standards for the portrayal of women

characters increase. While each wave targets different barriers women face, there is a positive progression in the rights and privileges for which women are advocating. For example, the first wave of feminism merely fought for the right to vote and the fourth wave of feminism is fighting for awareness and consequences of rape culture. With each wave, the definition of feminism expands and demands more autonomy for women. Consequently, many of the films produced during each of these historical periods reflect that progression (Curtis & Cardo, 2017; Kilbourne, 2017). Specifically, within the superhero film industry, female characters have evolved with the progression of feminism (Curtis & Cardo, 2017).

Second-wave feminism laid the foundation for a steady increase in female characters since the 1970s. However, there has been a particularly evident increase in female intersectionality in superhero films since the early to late 2000s (Curtis & Cardo, 2017). Curtis and Cardo (2017) suggest that the intersectional and pluralist nature of third-wave feminism drives this progress. This progress also includes increasing female-led titles and switching the gender of traditionally male characters to female. Curtis and Cardo (2017) also note an effective increase in female solidarity and sex positivity within the superhero genre. Another analysis done by Olufidipe & Echezebel (2021) notes an increase in the production of female-centered films, specifically within the Marvel Cinematic Universe, a prominent contender within the superhero genre, in response to fourth-wave feminism (Olufidipe & Echezebal, 2021).

However, there is a trend of female-led superhero plots in the past or “closed moments.” This closed moment of the film permits sexism because it was more common in the past and thus acceptable (Taylor & Glitsos, 2021). This suggests to

viewers that feminism was needed in the past, but sexism is no longer a problem these women have to face. While the quality of female representation is debatable, there is an undeniable increase in representation.

The Action Heroine On Screen

The action heroine in superhero movies is an intriguing and impactful intersection of cultural masculinity and femininity. This intersection is mostly due to a female being cast in a culturally masculine role within a genre that was initially intended for men (Brown, 2015). This interaction between masculinity and femininity could be a catalyst for change in gender portrayal and change within the superhero genre (Brown, 2015). Because of this nexus, the agency women are afforded in these movies is important to analyze. Specifically, this section will look at the impact of sexualization and violence on action heroines on screen.

Violence

There are competing stereotypes concerning women in violence: the damsel in distress and the femme fatale. The damsel in distress is a vulnerable woman who needs to be saved, presumably by a man. On the other hand, the femme fatale is a sexually attractive woman that is dangerous, presumably to men (Brown, 2015). This stereotype is reinforced with phrases used to describe attractive women such as “drop-dead gorgeous,” “on fire,” “killer looks,” and “knock-out” (Brown, 2015). With the femme fatale stereotype being applied to action heroines, the trap of lust and desire are no longer women’s only weapons. Now, females in action movies are equipped with violent skill sets. There has been an increase of women in aggressive roles with the growing popularity of the action heroine (Brown, 2013).

Stabile (2009) argues that in our militarized culture, especially after 9/11, humanity is understood as the vulnerable victim that needs to be saved. In other words, humanity is the damsel in distress, while masculinity is the protection and saving that humanity needs. Violence is sexualized as a form of intimacy between man and woman. The concept of being saved and saving is romanticized and reinforces the binary concept of gender within action movies.

These competing stereotypes of damsel in distress and femme fatale remove agency and power from action heroines. The emergence of the femme fatale combats American culture's perceptions of gender. However, with the increasing popularity of women in aggressive or traditionally masculine roles, one might assume there would be an increase in the respect and agency of women. So far, this has not been the case. There seems to be a double standard for strong women that can inflict violence-- they are "problematic at best and damaging at worst" (Joffe, 2019, p. 2). Whereas when men commit acts of violence, it is rarely questioned.

Black Widow serves as a prime example of a female character restricted by the femme fatale plotline. Bateman's (2015) case study of *The Avengers* notes that though she is highly trained in combat, she is repeatedly sidelined in fight scenes. Instead of being at the center of the action, she spends her time aiding the male Avengers from the aircraft while they fight, calming the rage of The Hulk with a "lullaby," or using her faux vulnerability to gather information deceitfully (Bateman, 2015). Even in the comics, women's roles are commonly relegated to sidekicks (Kilbourne, 2017). It is only in the very last fight scene of *The Avengers*, that Natasha Romanoff is given full reign with her skills and becomes essential to winning the battle (Bateman, 2015).

Another example of a female character falling victim to the restrictions of female fragility and damsel in distress stereotypes is the Scarlet Witch. Scarlet Witch is arguably one of the most powerful characters, and yet, she repeatedly panics mid-battle and needs to be rescued and reassured to continue (Joffe, 2019). She is a slave to her emotions, often crumbles under pressure, or loses control completely and harms innocent people. This lack of control detracts from her power and perpetuates female fragility. In later movies, Scarlet Witch gets more and more competent with her powers but still loses control of her emotions which harms others (Feige et al., 2021).

Sexualization/ Fetishism

No matter what stereotypical narrative female characters are subjected to within superhero movies, they are sexualized (Pennell & Behm-Morawitz, 2015). In fact, action heroines are not just sexualized but oversexualized. As seen in the femme fatale stereotype, in order for women to be deadly and dangerous, they must be sexy. This hyper-sexualization is enacted through costuming, camera angles, designers, and directors (Olufidipe & Echezabal, 2021). An example of this is Black Widow, who is introduced into the Marvel Cinematic Universe as the sexy assistant to Tony Stark, a wealthy white man. He casually harasses and objectifies her in the workplace. In this instance, it is clear that not only can women be objectified regardless of their job, but they ought to be (Gerard & Poepsel, 2019).

This hypersexualization takes precedence over other aspects of female characters. In *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, Black Widow's physical image is rarely compromised after battle. While all the men are thoroughly beaten up, Black Widow's hair remains perfect and she seems relatively unscathed (Isely, 2015). It is unclear whether this is due to her

lack of involvement in battle or simply to maintain her feminine image. Regardless, it is evident that directors refuse to compromise her attractiveness, even in fight scenes.

Regardless of gender, superheroes can be “sexy.” After all, most, if not all, superheroes are conventionally attractive. However, their sexual appeal should not consume their entire character (Joffe, 2019). This marginalizes women in these action heroine roles despite the film being female-focused (Olufidipe & Echezabal, 2021). Overall, women are continually marginalized through stereotypes that uphold the film industry's patriarchal structures (Joffe, 2019). This trend is particularly evident in action heroines.

Heroines

My research topic intends to analyze two Marvel action heroines: Black Widow and Captain Marvel. Currently, there is limited research directly comparing the differences in the portrayal of these characters and what that might suggest about the MCU's portrayal of women.

Black Widow. Black Widow, or Natasha Romanoff, is a prime example of the femme fatale. There has been a plethora of research done on her previous appearances in Marvel movies (Davies, 2019; Gerard & Poepsel, 2019; Olufidipe & Echezabal, 2021; Taylor & Glistos, 2021). Kidnapped from her mother as a child, Natasha Romanoff grew up in a Russian assassin training program called the Red Room (Taylor & Glistos, 2021). This program produced female Russian spies called “widows,” that were not only trained as skilled spies and assassins but also taught to use their sexual allure to their advantage. Notably, each black widow is sterilized in a graduation ceremony, ensuring that they will never have something they might care about more than a mission (Gerard & Poepsel,

2019; Olufidipe & Echezabal, 2021; Taylor & Glistos, 2021). This suggests that Black Widow's lack of fertility detaches her somehow from humanity and thus, makes killing and acts of violence easier to commit. She calls herself a monster after revealing her inability to procreate to Bruce Banner in *The Avengers*. This self-diagnosed title is controversial because it remains unclear whether Romanoff considers herself a monster because her infertility suggests a dissonance from femininity or because of her past life as a merciless assassin. Either way, the script hinting that the promise of motherhood is essential to a woman's identity is enough to reinforce the binary concept of gender.

True to the femme fatale stereotype, Natasha Romanoff is deadly, dangerous, but most importantly-- sexy. The casting choice of Scarlett Johansson to play Black Widow is intentional. Before her career at Marvel, Johansson was featured in *Playboy Magazine* and has a body type comparable to Marilyn Monroe (Taylor & Glistos, 2021). She is renowned as an extraordinarily attractive actress and has been titled 'Babe of the Year,' 'Sexiest Woman Alive' twice, and made the '100 Sexiest Women' list six times (Kidd, 2021; Stevens et al., 2019). Johansson's "typecasting as the desired woman dominates many of her on-screen roles... [and] the continued prominence of her desirability in her critical reception cements her sex symbol status" (Stevens et al., 2019, p. 9). This point does not diminish Johansson's competency and capability as an actor. Still, the camera angles, costuming, character narrative, and now the casting choice all contribute to and perhaps permit the over-sexualization of Black Widow. Stevens et al. (2019) even note that she begins and ends the majority of fight scenes in sexually suggestive poses (Gerard & Poepsel, 2021).

This over-sexualization overshadows Black Widow's physical capability. For instance, Black Widow is unashamedly introduced as the undercover sexy assistant to Tony Stark in *Iron Man 2* with a low-cut shirt, tight skirt, and heels (Gerard & Poepzel, 2019). Upon meeting her for the first time, Tony Stark treats her as a show pony that just walked into the auction ring. He instructs her to get into the boxing ring with Happy who asks if she had ever boxed before or "tried 'Tae Bo, Booty Booty Bootcamp'" (Gerard & Poepzel, p. 39). Much to both the men's surprise and Tony's pleasure, Natasha Romanoff easily flips Happy, a man twice her size, upside down and he ends up with his breath knocked out of him on the mat. After this, Tony Stark uses phrases such as "I need her" and "want one" (Gerard & Poepzel, 2019, p. 38). Throughout the film, Romanoff uses her attractiveness as her disguise and eventually reveals herself as a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent, again reinforcing the femme fatale stereotype.

After that, Black Widow became the only female Avenger and one of the few Avengers without superhuman powers (Bateman, 2015). She was no longer confined to the sexy assistant role, yet still remained barred from utilizing her full skillset. However, Black Widow is still afforded more agency and power over her character's actions. In *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, Black Widow reveals that she chose to come to S.H.I.E.L.D. to use her skills in a morally congruent manner, demonstrating her autonomy in this role (Gerard & Poepzel, 2021). In *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, Scarlet Witch debilitates Black Widow by conjuring her suppressed memories of the Red Room, where she was conditioned into becoming a mindless assassin. As previously stated, to "graduate" from the Red Room, Natasha Romanoff is forcibly

sterilized. This suggests that with this level of power and skill comes a loss of femininity (Gerard & Poepsel, 2021).

Black Widow is also given more depth of character as the films progress. She demonstrates her loyalty as a friend to Hawkeye and her moral rigor in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* and *Captain America: Civil War* (Gerard & Poepsel, 2021). Her morals and values are unwavering in any circumstance and slowly begin to define her character instead of the previous suffocating roles of sidekick and sexy assistant. In *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, it is revealed that she is the only person that knew of Clint Barton's family and is even close enough with his children to be called "Auntie Nat." While their friendship was alluded to in *Avengers*, this demonstrates a much deeper relationship. Interestingly, the relationship is also completely platonic, which is different from previous movies. In several prior films, Natasha Romanoff is loosely used as multiple heroes' love interest (Gerard & Poepsel, 2021). Her role as a loyal friend is also integral in initially recruiting members of the Avengers. Romanoff even brings them together again after they are divided by the decision to sign the Sokovia Accords. Her decision to sign the contract, which would regulate the actions of the Avengers to secure world peace (*Sokovia Accords*, 2021), demonstrates her moral rigor.

One of the main critiques of Black Widow's character goes back to her being used as a love interest for multiple male characters. The criticism is not that she has multiple love interests, but rather that she is used as a catalyst to further their character development, and her narrative is sidelined. This happens with both Bruce Banner and Steve Rogers (Gerard & Poepsel, 2021).

Overall, “[t]hroughout the five Marvel Cinematic Universe films released between 2008 and 2017 in which Natasha Romanoff is featured, she is visually, textually, and systemically sexualized” (Gerard & Poepsel, 2021, p. 47). Black Widow, or Natasha Romanoff, is consistently portrayed as the femme fatale and though her character is progressively developed with the production of MCU films, this does not diminish the initial roles to which she was confined. Multiple sources look towards Black Widow’s liberation from the male gaze and her own film (Bateman, 2015; Fimbianti, 2020; Gerard & Poepsel, 2019). Fimbianti (2020) points out that Black Widow “...never achieved a status above secondary character throughout the ten years between her character introduction and death, in contrast to newer male characters getting solo films, such as Doctor Strange” (Fimbianti, 2020, p. 16). In order to create more equality, Black Widow must become independent and flourish on her own (Bateman, 2015). In July 2021, *Black Widow* was released and, to date, it has not been heavily researched. Currently, the only notable peer-reviewed analysis available is Taylor & Glitsos (2021) which focuses on the role of closed moments in feminism, not the character progression of Black Widow. Taylor and Glitsos’ analysis also focuses on three films (*Captain Marvel*, *Black Widow*, and *Wonder Woman*) and thus, is not the in-depth analysis *Black Widow* merits.

Captain Marvel. There is little research on Captain Marvel’s character in the Marvel Cinematic Universe because she has only appeared in three movies: her own film (*Captain Marvel*), *Shang-Chi and the Legend of Ten Rings*, and *Avengers: Endgame*. However, Captain Marvel is only beginning her narrative in the MCU plotline and will most likely be in many more films. Captain Marvel, is explicitly labeled as a feminist character with a feminist ethos (Goppinger & Philipppo, 2019; Langsdale, 2020). This is

perhaps due to the many milestones the film reaches. *Captain Marvel* was the first female-led solo film within the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the first female-led film to gross over a billion dollars, and the second female-led comic book movie ever (Killian, 2019; Langsdale, 2020). Most importantly, *Captain Marvel* is the first Marvel movie directed by a woman (Langsdale, 2020).

The movie's plot entails Carol Danvers slowly regaining her memory and working with Nick Fury to escape the Kree Starforce (Killian, 2019; Langsdale, 2020). She eventually realizes that the Skrulls she was trained to hunt by the Krees are not the bad guys. Instead, they are the victims of Kree colonization (Langsdale, 2020). Captain Marvel's relentless pursuit of her goal is evident throughout the film. Overall, there has been a lot of debate as to whether this movie is disliked by the general public (evident in online reviews) because it is mediocre and suffers from "origin movie syndrome" (Kilbourne, 2019) or because viewers do not like the character of Captain Marvel (Fimbianti, 2020).

One of the reasons this film is considered "feminist" is because of the important roles women play in Captain Marvel's narrative. Langsdale (2020) notes, "Carol as Captain Marvel manifests overwhelmingly as a result of the mentoring, love, support, and persistence of women" (Langsdale, 2020, p. 302). The characters of Maria Rambeau and her daughter Monica become her family and are crucial to her character development as they help her regain her memory of her life on earth. Another important female relationship in Captain Marvel's life is with her mentor Dr. Wendy Lawson who is later revealed to be Mar-Vell, an undercover Kree scientist. Notably, Mar-Vell was a male in the comics and held a lot more control of Captain Marvel's character. In the

film, Mar-Vell is still an integral relationship that drives the plot forward. Overall, women are consistently used in important roles and relationships in *Captain Marvel*.

While women are in important roles within the film, there is a lack of discussion about the intersectional identity of the character Maria as a Black woman. Though she is a side character, the film is criticized for not acknowledging how being a Black woman would impact her experience within that historical period. Criticism aside, the comradery and support portrayed between women of different races are praised as a prominent step forward for the feminist movement (Langsdale, 2020).

The film is considered feminist because it demonstrates misogyny at individual and systemic levels. Misogyny can be defined as “a property of social environments in which women are liable to encounter hostility due to the enforcement and policing of patriarchal norms and expectations” (Manne, 2018, p. 19). First, Danvers’ immediate superior, Yon-Rogg, serves as a systemic example of misogyny. At the beginning of the movie, he tells her that she must control her anger. This serves as a nod to the stereotype of women having irrational and excessive emotions. However, it is later revealed her powers become significantly greater when she uses her emotions (Fimbiani, 2020). He also consistently reminds her that his blood is coursing through her veins, and thus, she owes him her obedience. He uses this power to control her actions until she finally tells him that she does not owe him anything and frees herself from his control (Langsdale, 2020). Another example of systemic misogyny is demonstrated in her past life on earth. When she is becoming a fighter pilot, she is snarkily asked by a man, ““you know why they call it a cockpit, don’t you?”” (Langsdale, 2020, p. 304). Her past life on earth also demonstrates misogyny on the

individual level. As a child, she is chastised for participating in dangerous “boy” activities like go-kart racing. She faces similar comments and additional challenges throughout her training. In passing, a man on a motorcycle tells her to smile (Langsdale, 2020). The film reveals the various forms misogyny can take, either explicitly or not. However, Carol Danvers’ origin story takes place in the past, the misogyny is portrayed in a closed moment. Because of that, the film furthers the idea that misogyny existed, but is confined to the past (Taylor & Glistos, 2021).

What Happens After the Film?

Reviews. There are a wide range of outside factors that can impact the success of a film (Fimbianti, 2020). The first factor is film critic reviews. There is a strong correlation between the reviews of film critics and the perceived success of a movie as one in three Americans actively rely on film critics’ reviews and say they choose particular films because of good reviews (Basuroy et al., 2003). Film critic reviews tend to predict for which movies consumers will purchase tickets (Fimbianti, 2020). If critics rate a film poorly, then moviegoers will be less likely to purchase a ticket and the opposite is also true. Additionally, film critics and viewers tend to have similar ratings. However, film critics are reviewing the movie’s artistic merit and tend to be more extreme with their ratings than general viewers (Berg & Raddick, 2016). There is a negativity bias, meaning that bad reviews negatively impact the success of a movie much more than positive reviews do. However, the impact of negative reviews is short-lived as the effects on box office sales usually only last the first week a film is released (Basuroy et. al, 2003).

Basuroy, et al. (2003) note that star power and budget tend to moderate the impact of negative reviews, meaning that if there are famous actors or a large budget, the critic reviews tend to be not as negative. These factors are not as impactful in gaining positive reviews. However, their study does not suggest that the movies might simply be better if they have famous actors and larger budgets, which may also be possible. Particular actors might increase the success of a movie within the genres for which they are renowned. For example, Scarlett Johansson is repeatedly cast in roles in which she portrays the posthuman female form. Her career “in Hollywood has mostly involved portraying female characters emergent from the imaginations of mostly male filmmakers.” (Kidd, 2021, p. 60). In contrast, many audience members severely disliked Brie Larson as a person and, thus, the casting choice for Captain Marvel. Fimbianti (2020) notes that most press commenters:

...took issue with Brie Larson’s demeanor during the film’s press tour and those who disliked her performance as the titular heroine. Any semblance of respect for the film was minimal, to say the least. Outside of slight shifts in the direction where the hatred was aimed, Brie Larson and her involvement in the film were always the standout problem and the reason that fans were angered or offended. (p. 12)

This goes back to an intersectional understanding of spectatorship-- people will judge media differently based on their identities and lived experiences (McCabe, 2004). In Fimbianti’s (2020) study, two hundred and fifty IMDb user reviews were analyzed. The majority were male reviewers with a three-to-one ratio. Specifically for *Captain Marvel*, only nineteen percent of the comments were from women. The identity of those

who review movies also serves as a factor. Women reviewers tend to rate movies with a female protagonist higher than men so a “female-led film may not reach its full financial potential if it is not reviewed by other females” (Fimbianti, 2020, p. 3). Brie Larson commented on this before the making of *Captain Marvel*, and during the press tour made an intentional effort to be interviewed by reporters of various identities.

Despite research suggesting that box office grosses, film critic reviews, and audience reviews all tend to share general opinions of the success of a movie-- that was not the case in *Captain Marvel*. By industry measures, *Captain Marvel* was a success-- as it grossed over one billion dollars and had a rotten tomatoes score of 78% (Fimbianti, 2020). However, as mentioned previously, the audience reviews of moviegoers were negative for the most part. For example, *Captain Marvel* got a 45% audience score (*Captain Marvel*, 2019) and *Black Widow* got a 91% audience score (*Black Widow*, 2021). *Captain Marvel* had star power, a large budget, positive film reviews, yet the film was not perceived as a success by the average viewer (Fimbianti, 2020). There has been no research comparing the character arcs between *Black Widow* and *Captain Marvel* and how that might correlate with resulting public opinions of the actresses.

Implications

While an increase in representation does matter, the quality of representation matters as well. The quality of representation matters because it impacts those who view the film, short-term and long-term. Pennell & Behm-Morawitz (2015) focus on the short-term effects of exposure to sexualized female characters. Specifically, the study looked at how superhero films impacted 83 midwestern females' views on gender roles,

body esteem, and self-objectification. After viewing sexualized-victim female characters in superhero films, the females in the study reported more gendered beliefs about women's roles. However, when women were exposed to sexualized-heroine characters, there was no significant change in gender role beliefs. Furthermore, exposure to sexualized-heroine characters was correlated with increased perceived importance of body competence to one's identity (Pennell & Behm-Morawitz, 2015).

Chau et al. (2020) studied the impact of *Captain Marvel* on 98 Malaysian moviegoers to better understand their perception of gender stereotypes. Overall, the subjects responded positively to the feminine power in the movie. Sixty-five percent of the 98 subjects reported *Captain Marvel* as the best female superhero movie, with *Wonder Woman* as a second. Fifty-seven percent of respondents said *Captain Marvel* would be a good example for women to learn how to be strong (Chau et al., 2020).

Films can also have long-term impacts on spectators. Coyne et al. (2014) studied the longitudinal impact of superhero exposure on preschool students. One-hundred and thirty-four mothers of preschool children were asked to self-report their children's exposure to superheroes. Overall, boys viewed superheroes more frequently, which was associated with an increase in male-stereotyped play for boys. However, girls who were exposed to superhero programs did not increase their male-stereotyped play. The authors hypothesize that the reinforcement of feminine behavior from peers or other media counteracts the strong, aggressive, powerful depictions of female superheroes (Coyne et al, 2014). However, as demonstrated through this literature review, the representation of women as superheroes is not always powerful or positive. Though women are in a more aggressive and masculine

setting in superhero films than other types of media, gender still impacts the privileges and rights the action heroines are afforded.

While these three studies have a wide range of subjects, one thing is clear: superhero movies impact beliefs about gender identity and gender roles.

Summary

The history of feminism and feminist film theory provide context for female portrayal on-screen. The four waves of feminism represent a positive progression in standards for women in society. The impact of this evolution of feminism is evident in the production of movies. While no formal classification of feminist film exists, it is clear that films portray female characters with more agency and range as the feminist movement progresses. Since the origination of feminist film theory with Mulvey's theory of spectatorship and the male gaze, scholars have furthered this research to encompass the characteristics of feminist film and female spectatorship. Additionally, Mulvey's research lacked an analysis of the impact of intersectional identities on viewers, prompting further research into this domain. Mulvey did not take into account the impact intersectional identities might have on viewers, so researchers developed this area of research as well.

On-screen, action heroines provide a unique intersection of femininity and masculinity. While they are placed in very masculine roles, the action heroines are often confined to the roles of femme fatale or damsel in distress. Along with the narrative confined to an action heroine, female characters who inflict violence are held to a double standard that ultimately questions their character's moral rigor. Regardless of which trope the character is assigned, the women in superhero films become hypersexualized. While

all superheroes are sexualized as they are intended to depict the ideal human form, the sexuality of superheroines consumes their entire character narrative.

Black Widow and Captain Marvel, two prominent female characters within the Marvel Cinematic Universe, provide an access point for a present-day understanding of femininity as an action heroine. Over the course of nine films in the past eleven years, Black Widow progressed from her role as Stark's sexy secretary to a key Avenger. Despite this growth, she is repeatedly sidelined, sexualized, and used as a love interest for multiple male characters. Many researchers look to Black Widow's own film in hope of her liberation from these narratives. In contrast, Captain Marvel began her character arc in the MCU with her own film, generally labeled as a feminist film. However, the film yields mixed reviews when comparing industry measures of success and public opinion. While film critic's reviews, box office grosses, and public opinion all tend to align—in *Captain Marvel's* case, they do not. Lastly, further studies suggest that these curated images of undervalued women can have detrimental effects, particularly on female spectators.

Research Questions

Employing this literature, I intend to analyze the content and responses to the movies *Black Widow* and *Captain Marvel*.

1. What are the rights and privileges Black Widow and Captain Marvel are afforded in Marvel Cinematic Universe films?
2. What does the comparison of Captain Marvel and Black Widow's rights and privileges suggest about MCU's portrayal of women?

3. What are the differences, if any, between the public opinion of *Black Widow* and the public opinion of *Captain Marvel*?

Chapter 3: Method

The focus of this study is the portrayal of lead female characters within the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). Specifically, *Black Widow* and *Captain Marvel* were chosen to examine the characters of Natasha Romanoff (Black Widow) and Carol Danvers (Captain Marvel) to better understand the rights and privileges women are afforded as action heroines. The purpose of this study is to address the gaps in research concerning action heroines in the MCU. Specifically, I compared the portrayal and public opinion of Natasha Romanoff and Carol Danvers in their respective movies to garner a deeper understanding of female portrayal within the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

Artifact

The artifacts under investigation in this study are *Black Widow* and *Captain Marvel* movies within the Marvel Cinematic Universe. As mentioned in Chapter Two, the MCU is currently the highest-grossing film franchise of all time, only followed in ranking, and not closely, by Star Wars and Harry Potter (Statista, 2021). The MCU's success can be heavily attributed to the compelling individual characters coupled with its unique ability to intertwine multiple characters' stories and development. Because of this intertextuality, all thirty films, made over a span of thirteen years, interconnect and drive each other forward. This has led to a large and devoted fan base that is continuously growing. Because of its massive audience reach, the way the MCU presents certain identities through character arcs has, and will, continue to impact societal perception.

The MCU depicts a wide array of superheroes and superheroines, all of which are intended to embody the height of humanity. Yet, previous research generally concludes that female representation in superhero films is severely lacking, restricting females'

character potential with unnecessary emotional challenges and diminishing their physical capabilities (Joffe, 2019; Olufidipe & Echezabal, 2021). While the quality and impact of female representation in comic books and comic media have been researched, there is a gap among recent films produced by the MCU. There have been few examples of leading, female heroines in Marvel movies. In most MCU films, women are relegated to side plots, never occupying the central role.

Parameters

To date, *Black Widow* and *Captain Marvel* are the only movies in the MCU that are centered around female superheroes and were thus selected for this study. Both characters' similarity in ethnicity, race, and age enables a focused analysis of the differences between character narratives and correlating public opinion.

Data Collection Methods & Analytical Procedures

First, I watched *Black Widow* (2hr 13m) and *Captain Marvel* (2hr 4m) in their entirety. My data collection process was a three-stage, mixed-methods design to fully encompass each character's portrayal and the resulting public opinion. My first step was to acquire scripts for both movies. Similar to Gerard & Poepsel (2019), I obtained these pre-transcribed scripts from Marvel Cinematic Universe "fandom" wiki. During my initial viewing of the individual films, I ensured the pre-transcribed scripts were accurate and took initial notes on important scenes. This first viewing of the films allowed me to make any necessary corrections to the scripts.

For the second viewing of each film, I coupled *a priori* codes with inductive codes (specifically looking at relationships) to fully analyze the rights and privileges each character is afforded. The *a priori* codes were as follows:

Sexualization	Narrative Development	Emotions	Violence
1. Active	1. Active	1. Active	1. Active
2. Passive	2. Passive	2. Passive	2. Passive

Specifically, I looked at scenes that include sexualization, narrative development, emotions, and violence and evaluated whether Natasha Romanoff or Carol Danvers is active (has control, autonomy, and is empowered by the situation) or passive (recipient, acted upon, victim). This is a similar methodology that Sutherland & Feltey (2017) employed. Using *a priori* codes of power-to, power-with, and power-over, Sutherland and Feltey (2019) analyzed power in manifest and latent context. These particular types of actions (sexualization, narrative development, emotions, and violence) were chosen based on previous research. Many studies agree that action heroines' power is detracted in these specific realms (Brown, 2015; Joffe, 2019; Olufidipe & Echezabal, 2021). Focusing on whether or not Natasha Romanoff and Carol Danvers were afforded agency in these aspects enabled a detailed analysis of their character portrayal. To further contextualize the analysis, here is a detailed description of each category:

Sexualization: whether the sexualization of the character is an active choice she makes, or an objectification made by another character. For example, is the character a sexual subject or a sexual object?

Narrative Development: whether the actions of the character are used to develop her own plotline or to further others. This code will particularly look at the relationships the main character develops with others.

Emotions: whether the character is empowered by her emotions or weakened by them.

Violence: whether the character's power and agency in violent scenes are detracted by femme fatale or damsel in distress stereotypes.

Next, I employed inductive coding to find other common themes throughout each movie. Gerard & Poepsel (2019) used similar coding techniques to reveal larger dynamics than could be analyzed with *a priori* coding.

Lastly, I analyzed public opinion to garner a better understanding of how character portrayal influences the audience's perception of female leads. To do this, I randomly selected ten audience member reviews on RottenTomatoes.com for each movie. The first five pages of reviews were numbered and a random number generator (calculator.net) selected which reviews I analyzed. Reviews that were in another language or written by someone who stated they did not watch the movie were removed from the selection process. This filter was applied to avoid mistranslation of the review content and to focus on reviews from audience members that had seen the movie. To analyze the selected reviews, I used inductive coding techniques to reveal common themes. Fimbiati (2020) and Berg & Raddick (2016) employed a similar methodology to examine audience reviews.

Theory

I utilized Feminist Analysis to ground my research. Feminist Analysis focuses on how the biological sexes of males and females are impacted by the imposed cultural expectations of gender (Ott & Mack, 2020). More specifically, feminist scholars focus on how mass media texts "reinforce dominant social understandings of sex and gender" (Ott

& Mack, 2020, p. 193). These limited understandings of sex and gender portrayed through media texts can impact people's opinions about the world and how one should live in it. American media impacts audiences' opinions by strengthening gendered stereotypes about men and women such as active vs. passive, sexual subject vs. sexual object, logical vs. emotional, and public vs. private.

I believe this analysis is appropriate for my artifacts for many reasons. First, Feminist Analysis specifically looks at gendered stereotypes in American media which is the artifact of my study. Next, my research is based on the premise that the rights and privileges Black Widow and Captain Marvel are afforded with their screen time in these films matter because they may shape broader generalizations about women. The MCU film franchise is a male-dominated series that focuses on values such as logic, power, and strength all for the sake of protecting the public. The juxtaposition of women navigating this incredibly masculine space is revealing of the stereotypes of American women in the media.

Benefits

This research will reveal how the portrayal of women has or has not evolved over time in one of the highest-grossing film franchises, specifically through the rights and privileges the characters are afforded. Another potential benefit is the research will provide a greater understanding of how the audience reacts to different personalities and narratives of female characters. Perhaps studying the rights and privileges each character is afforded in their films will bring to light what causes this difference in reactions among a very similar audience base. My findings and analysis with this method will be discussed in the following chapters, beginning with *Black Widow*.

Chapter 4: Text Analysis

This chapter will explain this study's findings beginning with the *a priori* codes (sexualization, narrative development, emotions, violence) set for the *Black Widow* and *Captain Marvel* films. Next, prevailing trends that were noticed will be analyzed to provide further insight into topics stated in the research questions.

Sexualization

Black Widow

The sexualization of Black Widow (typically through costuming, camera angles, and other characters' comments) is continually critiqued in feminist literature (Gerard & Poepsel, 2021; Olufidipe & Echezabal, 2021; Stevens et al., 2019). Though superheroes are expected to be conventionally attractive, this sexualization of action heroines often detracts from the power of the female character (Joffe, 2019; Olufidipe & Echezabal, 2021). This section will examine whether the sexualization was active or passive. If the sexualization was labeled in the "active" category, sexualization is an active choice that empowers the character. If the sexualization is classified as "passive," it is an objectification made by another character that subverts her power.

Overall, the sexualization of Natasha Romanoff in *Black Widow* is significantly less than in other films (Gerard & Poepsel, 2019; Joffe, 2019; Olufidipe & Echezabal, 2021). Active sexualization is present in the costuming and fighting. First, the costuming—Romanoff is dressed in a tight white suit for the second half of the movie. The presence of Yelena (Natasha's sister) provides an interesting contrast; Yelena is dressed in the same white suit, but hers is significantly looser. Furthermore, Natasha's hair is styled down and her lipstick is a bright pink color. Yelena, on the other hand, has

her hair up with no striking makeup. The makeup and costume of Black Widow were characterized as “passive” sexualization.

Next—camera angles. There were two camera shots that were labeled as passive sexualization. In both shots, the camera focuses on Natasha’s behind. The first is as she moves from the front of the helicopter to the back to talk to Alexei. The second is in Dreykov’s office. Both angles were labeled as “passive” sexualization.

Lastly— the fighting poses. Throughout the film, Yelena teases Natasha for how she “poses” during fights (one leg extended, one bent, with one hand on the ground, hair flipped back). They banter about Natasha being a “poser” because her “pose” is apparently not a natural position for an individual in the middle of a fight. However, later in the film Yelena lands in the iconic “pose” and immediately shirks away and says “[t]hat was disgusting” (*Black Widow*, 2021, 1:38:27). Without the banter, the fighting pose could be viewed as passive sexualization. However, their continual jokes remove the sexualizing nature of the pose. The pose becomes a joke between sisters and not a design of the male gaze. Thus, the sexualization is active because though she is not making an active choice to sexualize herself, the conversation between Yelena and Natasha neutralizes the potential sexualization of the fighting poses. Furthermore, the discussion of the fighting poses labeled as “active” does not perpetuate harmful stereotypes of women.

Overall, there was less sexualization of Natasha Romanoff in *Black Widow* than in previous Marvel films (Gerard & Poepsel, 2021; Olufidipe & Echezabal, 2021; Stevens et al., 2019). For example, there were no explicit sexualizing comments from other male characters in *Black Widow* (Gerard & Poepsel, 2019, p. 38). This decrease in the

sexualization of Black Widow in contrast to her prior appearances in the MCU demonstrates significant progress in the rights and privileges the character is afforded.

Captain Marvel

Unlike Black Widow, Captain Marvel was a blank canvas. The character had no prior appearances to provide expectations for the sexualization of the character. Captain Marvel is sexualized only once throughout the movie— camera angles, character comments, costuming, and all. At one point an unidentified male character says “[n]ice scuba suit” followed by “[l]ighten up, honey, huh? Got a smile for me?” Carol, preoccupied by looking at a map, does not provide an ounce of attention to the man. After he fails to elicit a response from her, he spats “Freak” and enters a shop (*Captain Marvel*, 2019, 35:36).

This instance was classified as an active sexualization because Carol did not react to any of the sexualizing comments. The comments seem to demonstrate misogyny at an individual level in the film and do not factor into the current mission. Similar to Natasha’s neutralization of the fighting poses, Carol’s demeanor removed the potential for sexualization in this moment.

Violence/ Power

Action heroines provide a unique intersection of femininity and masculinity. This nexus is best represented in action scenes within superhero movies that usually demonstrate power through violence. Action hero tropes reinforce gender stereotypes with the superhero (predominantly male) needing to protect and save humanity (damsel in distress) (Stabile, 2009). This interaction between the superhero and humanity can be understood through binary stereotypes of gender— masculinity is equated to protection

while femininity is equated to something that must be shielded and saved. Through the repeated depiction of this relationship and theme in action hero movies, violence becomes sexualized as a form of intimacy (Stabile, 2009). Violence, then, takes on a significant meaning when examining the role of an action heroine. How can one be the protector and be feminine? Can you be feminine if you are not being saved?

For this reason, violence and power were examined in *Black Widow* and *Captain Marvel*. Instances of violence or power were coded as either active or passive. “Active” instances of violence or power represented moments when the character’s power and agency were not detracted by femme fatale or damsel in distress stereotypes. If an instance was coded as “passive,” then the character’s power was undermined by relegating the action heroine to one of the aforementioned stereotypes.

However, no examples of the femme fatale or damsel in distress stereotypes were found in either *Captain Marvel* or *Black Widow*. Consequently, “active” and “passive” took on different meanings in relation to violence in these films because no damsel in distress or femme fatale tropes were present. Instead, “active” represents agency and control over the violence employed and “passive” represents a lack of autonomy in the violence. This is a significant progression from other action heroines, particularly Black Widow whose skill set was previously inseparable from such strategies.

Black Widow

The character of Black Widow displays a prominent shift in her agency with respect to violence. As a child, she is forced to become a weapon that is wielded by Dreykov. In this way, she demonstrated passive violence because she lacks autonomy over her actions. She is forced to be violent in ways that are incongruent with her dogma.

While Natasha is a part of the Red Room, her actions are driven by psychological conditioning and thus, not truly of her own volition. The violent acts she commits as a widow are applauded by men throughout the film. Her “father” Alexei tells Yelena and Natasha “[y]ou both have killed so many people. Your ledgers must be dripping, just gushing red. I couldn’t be more proud of you” (*Black Widow*, 2021, 1:07:15). Notably, this is an allusion to the first Avengers movie. In conversation with Loki, Natasha says “I got red in my ledger, I’d like to wipe it out” (*The Avengers*, 2012, 1:05:30). Loki asks:

Can you wipe out that much red? Dreykov’s daughter... your ledger is dripping, it’s gushing red... You pretend to be separate, to have your own code, something that makes up for the horrors. But they are a part of you, and they will never go away! (1:05:35)

It is important to note that Marvel movies have a unique intertextuality to them, meaning the audience needs to watch all of the movies to thoroughly understand one of them (Fimbiati, 2020). This conversation between Loki and Natasha in *Avengers* provides greater context and understanding for character development that must be taken into account, especially for Natasha Romanoff. Specifically, this interaction provides greater meaning and emphasis on the accolade she receives from Alexi. The “ledger” mentioned here references the list of people Natasha has killed. However, this ledger was written *for* her, not *by* her. Despite the lack of autonomy, Natasha had for her actions, the ledger is an ingrained part of her identity that male characters continually comment on. For these reasons, this instance of violence is labeled as “passive.”

Overall, *Black Widow*’s plot represents a massive switch from “passive” to “active” violence. First, the film is the first to thoroughly depict and explain Natasha’s

escape from the Red Room by bombing a building that contained Dreykov (the overseer of the Red Room) and his daughter. This liberation is alluded to in other films, but the specific act is never expanded upon. At this moment, the violence Romanoff commits is to save herself and thus, is classified as “active.” The widows also experience the same liberating shift as Natasha in *Black Widow*. Perhaps even on a greater level. Yelena points out that Natasha experienced psychological conditioning while the current widows, including Yelena, experienced mind control through chemical alteration in their brains so that “you’re fully conscious, but you don’t know which part is you” (*Black Widow*, 2021, 47:30). In this case, the widows and Yelena completely lost autonomy over their bodies. Their state of chemical subjugation is understood as “passive” violence because there is no autonomy in their actions. As they are freed from the mind control, Romanoff tells them to “[g]et as far away from here as possible. You get to make your own choices now,” and thus return their free will (*Black Widow*, 2021, 1:48:27). From that point in the film forward, the actions of the widows are understood as “active.” The driving mission of *Black Widow* is to relieve the women of this oppression and thus, return their power.

Demonstrated through the widows, there is a prevalent theme of “woman as weapon” in *Black Widow*. Dreykov's intention behind the Red Room was to mold girls into mindless killers. Yelena tells Natasha:

He takes more every day. Children who don’t have anyone to protect them. Just like us when we were small. Maybe one in 20 survives the training, becomes a widow. The rest, he kills. To him, we are just things. Weapons with no face that he can just throw away. (*Black Widow*, 2021, 48:17)

The role of an action heroine, in part, is to be a weapon. However, wielding yourself as a “weapon” only covers the “action” criteria. The heroine part of the role requires agency and employing your skill set towards a cause of her choice, typically towards protecting others. In *Black Widow*, Natasha and Yelena discuss providing meaning to their violence. Natasha tells Yelena “I was trying to actually do something good to make up for all the pain and suffering that we caused. Trying to be more than just a trained killer” (*Black Widow*, 2021, 46:27). Yelena immediately retorts:

“Well, then you were fooling yourself because pain and suffering is every day and we are both still a trained killer. Except I’m not the one that’s on the cover of a magazine. I’m not the killer that little girls call their hero.” (*Black Widow*, 2021, 46:59)

This conversation is meaningful when discerning what it truly means to be an action heroine. What actions are role model worthy? What causes are worth fighting for? Posing bigger questions about the implications of an action heroine’s actions provides a meaningful layer to the role of a woman as a weapon. Though this instance in the film is a discussion of violence and not a physical act of violence, it is still labeled as “active” because of the power given to the women through these conversations. Natasha and Yelena are discussing why they commit violence, demonstrating their newfound agency. Furthermore, this conversation does not rely on harmful stereotypes to demonstrate either character’s power.

Notably, in the instances Natasha does commit violence or demonstrate power, it is not through the femme fatale or damsel in distress stereotypes; meaning it is “active.” Even in the scene in which Natasha lets Dreykov hit her, she is not a damsel in distress

because she was not waiting for someone to save her. Instead, she was using feigned weakness to “sever the nerve” and ends up smashing her head into a desk to finish the task herself (*Black Widow*, 2021, 1:43:54). This is a monumental milestone for the character of Black Widow. As previously stated, the character of Black Widow has been the poster child for the femme fatale stereotype. Though she was sexualized slightly through costuming and poses, the power of her character in *Black Widow* was not tied to her ability to wield her sexuality. Because the film does not rely on the femme fatale stereotype, Natasha’s violence in all action scenes is labeled as “active.”

Black Widow further establishes Natasha’s power through her birth mother’s backstory. For all the films Black Widow appears in, it is assumed that her mother abandoned her like most of the widows, and that is how she entered the Red Room. In this film, Melina informs Natasha that she was not abandoned. Instead, she was chosen through a program that evaluated the genetic potential in newborns. Most importantly, Natasha learns that her mother “never stopped looking for you. She was like you in that way. She was relentless” (*Black Widow*, 2021, 1:18:55). This part of the plot attributes much of what makes Natasha’s physical capabilities and determination to her own personality, not the Red Room. Though seemingly minor, this shift of attribution realigns the character’s self-concept of power. Natasha’s autonomy over her skillset is heightened and by doing so, she becomes further removed from her sole identity as a widow. Because the backstory attributes Natasha’s capabilities, in part, to her heritage and not just the training from the Red Room, this is labeled as “active” violence.

Captain Marvel

The theme of “woman as weapon” is prevalent in *Captain Marvel* and is labeled as “passive” violence. The plot of *Captain Marvel* involves her slowly realizing that the Krees integrated her into their force so that they could wield her power to accomplish their mission. At the end of the movie, Captain Marvel realizes that not only did the Krees wipe her memory to obtain ownership over her, but the Krees inhibited her power through a chip in her neck. Furthermore, Captain Marvel underwent psychological conditioning through Kree’s memory alterations and her subsequent training to kill the Skrulls. This psychological altering coupled with the physical restraint of the chip displays the Kree’s perceived ownership of Carol Danvers. Somehow, her inordinate power permits this level of ownership. Carol Danvers is perceived as an object to be manipulated to one’s advantage. In fact, the Kree Force (predominantly exhibited through the character of Yon-Rogg) goes so far as to suggest that the Kree intervention enhanced Carol’s existence. At one point, Yon-Rogg tells Carol that “I made you a better version of yourself. What’s given can be taken away” (*Captain Marvel*, 2019, 1:26:17). This sense of ownership and physical and psychological restraint demonstrates “passive” violence because Captain Marvel lacks autonomy.

When Captain Marvel’s power is hindered through the chip, she often “misuses” it. For example, she uses a photon blast when her emotions are heightened in action scenes. Additionally, when Carol’s hands are locked inside metal restraints, she accidentally blasts a hole in the side of a spaceship. These mishaps of Captain Marvel’s unprecedented, and at the time, unrealized power demonstrate the lack of agency she has in her violence. It is only when she realizes the full potential of her powers that her

implementation of the photon blasts and general strength become purposeful and significantly less accidental. This turning point occurs when Carol realizes that the chip is inhibiting her powers:

I've been fighting with one arm tied behind my back. But what happens... (Carol pulls out the chip attached to her neck, causing the energy from her fists to spread to cover her entire body) ...when I'm finally set free? (1:31:50)

Carol liberates herself from the oppression and her resulting actions of violence and power are aligned with her ethos, ultimately making them more powerful. This liberation demonstrates a shift from “passive” to “active” violence. This switch also results in a new understanding of “woman as weapon.” Ronan gives voice to this at the end of the movie:

Ronan: Return to the jump point. We'll be back for the weapon.

Accuser: The core?

Ronan: The woman. (1:43:14)

“The core,” also known as the Tesseract, is an incredibly powerful item that causes mass destruction in *Avengers* and other Marvel movies. Understanding and labeling Captain Marvel as a weapon, especially one that is more coveted than “the core,” is a significant upgrade of Captain Marvel’s perceived power.

Lastly, it is important to note that violence and power within Captain Marvel is inextricably linked to emotion. The relationship between emotion and power, and messages surrounding femininity will be expanded upon in the next section of the analysis.

Shared Themes of Violence

The sense of ownership, psychological conditioning, and resulting lack of agency are present in *Captain Marvel* and *Black Widow*. Black Widow experiences psychological and physical conditioning in the Red Room where she is trained and wielded as a weapon. Natasha's actions and resulting ledger are completely at the mercy of Dreykov. Similarly, Captain Marvel experiences psychological and physical conditioning by the Kree Force. Though she has perceived autonomy, Carol's actions are restrained and controlled. Both Carol and Natasha liberate themselves from institutional oppression and establish their own agency.

Emotion

This section specifically analyzes the role of emotions of both action heroines in their respective movies. To be classified as "active," the character must be empowered (or perceived to be empowered) by emotions. "Passive" classification indicates that the character is weakened or perceived to be weakened by emotions. This aspect of the analysis is particularly important when examining the role of an action heroine because of the stereotype that women are incapacitated by their emotions (Brescoll, 2016). The perceived lack of control over one's emotions normally deems a woman irrational, but an action heroine—dangerous.

Black Widow

In the Red Room, emotion is perceived as a weakness. Any sort of empathy towards a target or fear of a task jeopardizes a widow's capacity to complete the mission. For this reason, Black Widow is not expected to be an emotional individual. At the beginning of the movie, Natasha appears unphased by the disbandment of the Avengers.

Her “family” is in jail, the organization that provided her escape from Dreykov is now in disarray, and she is a federal fugitive. She is utterly alone and utterly unbothered.

However, Natasha’s emotions manifest through her role as a protector and more specifically, her “heart.”

First, Natasha takes on the role as a protector of her younger sister, Yelena, and of the widows. Though the girls were not biologically sisters, their constructed family fostered an environment in which Natasha took on the “older sister” role. When the Russian soldiers attempt to take Yelena to the Red Room, Natasha jumps into action. She steals a gun from a soldier, shields Yelena from the men, and shouts “[d]on’t touch her, I will kill you all!” (*Black Widow*, 2021, 11:40). Natasha continues to express this love for Yelena by protecting her throughout the movie in whatever capacity she can. For instance, she stops the fight between them because she sees that Yelena is in a losing position and is struggling to breathe. Natasha also tells Yelena to put on her seatbelt during a car chase. Overall, Natasha’s ownership of the “big sister” role reveals an emotional attachment and sense of responsibility towards Yelena. For these reasons, Natasha’s role as a protector of Yelena is labeled as “active” because it strengthens her as an action heroine. Her protective nature is portrayed as a strength and propels the plot forward. For example, Natasha returns to Budapest at the beginning of the movie because Yelena sent her a package. In Budapest, Natasha finds out about the existence of the Red Room and reconnects with Yelena. If Natasha did not have the emotional capacity to protect Yelena, she would have simply thrown out the package or not returned it at all.

Natasha also takes on the role of the protector of the widows. Before this film, Natasha thought she had ended the Red Room by bombing a building that Dreykov and

his daughter were in. The plot of this film involves Yelena and Natasha combining their knowledge and skill sets to once and for all put an end to the monstrosities of the Red Room. Natasha's compassion and empathy for the widows and their complete lack of autonomy are what enable her to complete this mission. In *Black Widow* (2021), she describes this mission as "unfinished business" (1:13:12) and in the first fight scene of the movie, yells out that she is a better shot when she's "pissed off" (27:08). These fleeting comments reveal how Natasha funnels her anger into a calm determination. Her drive to protect Yelena and the other widows expands her capacity as an action heroine. For these reasons, the protector role *Black Widow* adopts is labeled as "active" emotion.

Another example of "active" emotion is Natasha's "heart." At the beginning of the movie, Melina pleads with Natasha to "[n]ever let them take your heart," alluding to her humanity (*Black Widow*, 2021, 11:03). The Red Room is designed to strip women of their individuality and humanity; to mold mindless weapons. Despite the extensive psychological conditioning and physical abuse, Natasha kept her heart. This "heart" extends beyond Yelena and the widows. Her heart is what allowed Natasha to liberate herself from the Red Room and what fuels her missions at S.H.I.E.L.D. and with the Avengers.

At the end of the movie, Natasha demonstrates emotional vulnerability in a conversation with Melina. Despite repeatedly asserting that the constructed family was not "real," Natasha admits to Melina that she wished it was real. After sharing, Natasha prompts reciprocal vulnerability by asking Melina why she is still working for Dreykov despite experiencing abuse at his hands and recognizing the merciless brutality he inflicted upon others. Melina answers Natasha with:

Why does a mouse born in a cage run on that little wheel? Do you know I was cycled through the Red Room four times before you were even born? Those walls are all I know. I was never given a choice... Tell me, how did you keep your heart? (1:20:45)

Natasha's "heart" is recognized as immense, and perhaps miraculous, internal strength. Her capacity to continue to care for others is remarkable and provides a sense of humanity to her actions. Furthermore, her "heart" enables her to be vulnerable with others and thus, allows them to reveal their emotions as well. Natasha's "heart" is labeled as "active" emotion because it enables her to retain her humanity while repeatedly enduring immense hardship.

Other characters repeatedly try to manipulate Natasha's emotions by bringing up the death of Dreykov's daughter, Antonia. These slights are futile attempts to elicit emotions that would undermine her current task or perceived morality. While most of the characters expect her to show remorse or usurp her confidence in the scene, Natasha maintains a neutral expression in response. If Natasha had been successful in killing Antonia and that was the end of Dreykov's daughter's plot, the lack of emotion would be perceived as a strength by the audience. However, at the end of *Black Widow* it is revealed that the Taskmaster, or highly trained and modified weapon of Dreykov, is actually his daughter:

Natasha: You don't feel anything? You feel anything when I killed your daughter?

Dreykov: Is this your haunted past? Really? (LAUGHING) Thank you, Natasha. You gave me my greatest weapon. Say hello. When your bomb exploded, it nearly killed my Antonia. I had to put a chip in the back of her neck. In the back of her

neck. Look at her. You find it difficult to look at her? I do. She... She watches everything and she can do it. She's a perfect mimic. And she fights just like all of your friends.

Natasha: Can she hear me?

Dreykov: What? You want to make her feel better? You want to tell her you're sorry? Well, you should have thought of that before you blew her face off.

(1:34:20)

Dreykov turns his own daughter into the ultimate weapon and specifically tasks Antonia with killing Natasha. Because Antonia is under chemical subjugation, she is forced to pursue a mission until it is complete, no matter the cost. This is evident throughout the movie as the Taskmaster (Antonia) relentlessly pursues Yelena and Natasha. In the final scenes of the movie, the Red Room is crashing towards the earth and Antonia is trapped in a cell. Knowing the risks of freeing Antonia, Natasha does so anyway:

Antonia. No! (PANTING) I'm gonna open the door. You're gonna come after me.

It's okay. It's okay. I know you're still in there. And I'm not gonna leave you.

Okay. (1:52:04)

The furthering of Antonia's plotline as Taskmaster reveals Natasha's high level of mastery over her emotions in two ways. First, she has the strength to remain neutral when others use the death of Dreykov's daughter in an attempt to undermine her confidence or capabilities. Or, she uses her emotional response to the verbal jabs in order to manipulate her opponent (*The Avengers*, 2012). Secondly, she demonstrates vulnerability and heart once she realizes that not only is Antonia alive but has been condemned to the same fate as the widows— to live a life that is not her own. Overall, Natasha's "heart" enables her to

care but does not undermine her greater goal. Natasha's capacity to stifle, wield, or extend emotions when necessary is labeled as "active" emotion.

Furthermore, Natasha repeatedly puts herself at risk to liberate others. She does this because she recognizes that people are more than the situations into which they are forced. When Melina describes herself as a mouse in a cage, Natasha responds "[b]ut you're not a mouse, Melina. You were just born in a cage, but that's not your fault" (*Black Widow*, 2021, 1:20:54). Shortly thereafter, Melina confesses that she alerted the Red Room of her arrival, and they are en route to capture them. Despite the repeated betrayal of Melina, Natasha continues to offer her the benefit of the doubt and works with her to bring down the Red Room. Natasha's emotions motivate her to use her autonomy in service of others and the general greater good. This emotional capacity to repeatedly offer empathy and provide space for redemption to those that have wronged her is labeled as "active" emotion.

Captain Marvel

In *Captain Marvel*, there is a significant link between violence and emotion. When *Captain Marvel* is physically restrained, she is emotionally restrained as well. A primary example of this is Yon-Rogg repeatedly telling Carol to control her emotions while she is training. He tells her to "[c]ontrol your impulses. Stop using this [points to her chest, above her heart] and start using this [gestures towards her head]. I need you to be the best version of yourself" (*Captain Marvel*, 2019, 4:38). This instance bluntly suggests that Carol's emotions inhibit her ability to reach her full potential as a warrior. Yon-Rogg goes so far as to tell Carol that her emotions will prevent her from not only reaching her physical potential as a warrior but from reaching her potential as a person.

She must stifle her emotions to become this “best version” of herself, meaning that the expression of emotions leads to a lesser version of oneself. Yon-Rogg’s repeated orders to control her emotions are labeled as “passive” emotion because it suggests that emotions are a weakness.

This scene is but one example of this occurrence. Throughout the film, Carol is told seven times that either she has a problem controlling or needs to control her emotions. The repeated and consistent chastising emphasizes the double standard for regulating emotions that a woman faces. The combination of being a woman and a warrior heightens this standard. There is also an explicit comment that acknowledges the stereotype of women being incapacitated by emotions. A male student in Carol’s pilot program tells her “[y]ou’re a decent pilot. But you’re too emotional. You do know why they call it a cockpit, don’t you?” (*Captain Marvel*, 2019, 15:45). This instance is labeled as “passive” emotion because it was implied that Carol’s emotions inhibit her from reaching her full potential.

Despite Carol Danvers being repeatedly told she is too “emotional,” these comments do not accurately reflect her demeanor throughout the film. Carol’s demeanor is very controlled, calculated, and matter of fact. The only times she is told she is too “emotional” is when she is frustrated, primarily during fights. The repeated and outsized reactions of Yon-Rogg and the pilot to displays of Captain Marvel’s emotions point to the double standard women face when expressing anger. Though the anger is justified and even strengthens her in combat, it is perceived as irrational and weak.

Ultimately, Captain Marvel has a revelation that her emotions are not a hindrance, but rather an asset. The realization that her emotions can fuel her power is labeled as

“active” emotion. The suspense towards this personal shift builds throughout the movie. For example, Agent Coulson defies orders to help Carol and Fury escape from the NASA USAF Facility. After they fly away, Fury says “I guess he had a feeling, went with his gut against orders. It’s a really hard thing to do. That’s what keeps us human” to which Carol responds “I get in trouble for that. A lot” (*Carol Danvers*, 2019, 55:50). This particular comment not only gives credence and respect towards emotion but aligns emotion with humanity– not only femininity. This “gut feeling” is similar to Natasha’s “heart.” Their “heart” or “gut feelings” are what make them heroines.

The turning point from “passive” to “action” emotion occurs at the very end of the movie. After Carol destroys the drones that were deployed to destroy Earth and the Kree force retreats, she descends to where Yon-Rogg’s jet crashed. Despite being in the inferior position (crashed plane and slightly injured), he greets Carol by saying:

“I’m so proud of you. You’ve come a long way since I found you that day by the lake. But can you keep your emotions in check long enough to take me on? Or will it get the better of you, as always? I always told you... you’ll be ready, the day you can knock me down as yourself. This is that moment. This is that moment, Vers! Turn off the light show, and prove, prove to me, you can beat me without...” (1:44:30)

Carol ends his rant by hitting him with a small blast which knocks Yon-Rogg flat on his back. She walks towards him and tells him “I have nothing to prove to you” while towering over him (*Carol Danvers*, 2019, 1:45:10). This is a prominent character shift for Captain Marvel. Yon-Rogg is the figurehead of the male character that consistently belittles Carol’s power because of her “inability” to contain her emotions. Here, he

challenges her to best him without her emotions which he demeaningly refers to as her “light show.” He suggests that she needs to defeat him herself, as if her emotions and “light show” are tangential to her being. Most importantly, he demands that she “prove” her competency to him. Carol’s immediate disregard for his challenge is labeled as “active” emotion. She asserts her ownership and pride in her emotions. They are not something that she needs to overcome, but rather a strength she can now wield to be the best action heroine she can be.

Continuing the similarities, Captain Marvel also adopts a protector role over the Skrulls as she gains autonomy of her memory, powers, and consequently—her emotions. Throughout the film, Carol regains bits of her memory from her life on Earth. Her recollection progresses along with the ownership of her emotions. Once Talos tells her that the Kree force is hunting Skrulls because they refused to relinquish their planet, Carol’s empathy allows her to switch her entire mission. After the movie concludes, Carol makes it her personal mission to reunite the scattered Skrulls and find them a new home. This instance was labeled as “active” emotion because her capacity to care for vulnerable populations fuels her next mission and purpose as an action heroine.

Narrative Development

Narrative development was chosen as a code to address two chief complaints in research on feminism in film. First, there is a trend of action heroine films existing in closed moments. Because the film happens in the past, the setting can inhibit any significant character development and permit sexism (Taylor & Glitsos, 2021). Particularly, this was a concern for *Black Widow* since her character had already died in the MCU timeline before the movie was released. Second, female characters are often

used to further the plotlines of their male counterparts. Again, this was a prominent complaint for Black Widow's character throughout her past MCU appearances (Gerard & Poepsel, 2021). Consequently, instances in which the actions of Black Widow or Captain Marvel were used to develop their own plot were labeled as "active." Moments in which either character's actions further the plotlines of another character were labeled as "passive."

Black Widow

As previously mentioned, Black Widow occurs within a closed moment in the MCU timeline. The audience knows that Black Widow dies in Avengers: Endgame and that, in of itself, limits the capacity for character development. However, the closed moment does not completely prevent character development. In this section, the narrative development of Natasha Romanoff will be analyzed through the lens of her various relationships in Black Widow.

In Relation To The Avengers. Black Widow takes place chronologically after Captain America: Civil War (released in 2016) and before Avengers: Infinity War (released in 2018). This means that at the beginning of Black Widow, Falcon, Hawkeye (Clint Barton), Scarlet Witch, and Ant-Man are imprisoned. At the beginning of the film, Natasha's contact asks her how she's doing with the Avengers recently being disbanded. She tells him that she's doing fine and better on her own. Yet, throughout the movie, Natasha refers to the Avengers as her family. Both Yelena and Alexei challenge this notion. In *Black Widow* (2021), Yelena tells Natasha that "the Avengers aren't really your family" (45:41) and Alexei asks "[r]eally? Family? Well, where are they now? Where is that family now?" (1:03:16). Natasha is repeatedly forced to justify and reevaluate her

relationship with the Avengers. With that being said, Natasha's last line in *Black Widow* (2021), and in the MCU, is:

It's funny. My whole life, I didn't think I had any family. Turns out I got two, so... One of them's a bit of a mess right now. I'm gonna go break a few of them out of prison see if I can't help patch things up. (2:03:09)

The stark contrast of her first and last comments regarding the Avengers in the film reveal a notable shift in Natasha's mentality towards the Avengers. This mentality shift enables Natasha to make this statement and break them out of prison. The question is—would Natasha have broken the Avengers out of prison without the narrative development in *Black Widow*? Her final statement suggests that she would not have. It is through the reconciliation with her other family (Alexei, Melina, and Yelena) that Natasha decides that she has an intrinsic responsibility to help the *Avengers*.

This narrative development initially appears as “passive” because although Natasha experiences significant character development, it is used to further the plot of the Avengers. The film is bookended by the plot of the Avengers and her personal growth seems to be a convenient justification to extend the plot of other characters. However, the “closed moment” factor surprisingly works in favor of *Black Widow* in this instance.

Black Widow (released in July 2021) occurred far after *Captain America: Civil War* (released in 2016) in which Natasha broke the Avengers out of prison (Rotten Tomatoes, 2022a). To put it simply, Natasha would have done broken the Avengers out of prison anyway. Her personal development is unnecessary for the plot of the Avengers to continue. For these reasons, the narrative development of Natasha in respect to the Avengers is labeled as “active.”

In Relation to Yelena Belova. There is a lot to be said regarding the narrative development between Yelena and Natasha. *Black Widow* introduces Yelena Belova, Natasha's "pretend" sister from a mission in Ohio. Once the mission in Ohio ended, Natasha and Yelena were separated, and both underwent training in the Red Room. The plot of *Black Widow* is equally about Yelena as it is about Natasha. Prior to this movie, it is assumed that Natasha ended the Red Room by killing Dreykov. Yelena reopens the mission by sending Natasha the antidote the widows need to be released from mind control.

The overarching narrative development of Natasha in *Black Widow* is her reconciliation with her family (Yelena, Melina, and Alexi) and the vindication of finally ending the Red Room. Interestingly, Yelena's character plot in *Black Widow* mirrors Natasha's almost exactly. First, the movie follows both Yelena's and Natasha's perspectives of their constructed family in Ohio. There is a clear distinction between the girls' reactions; Natasha is aware of the mission while Yelena is blissfully unaware. Yelena was younger than Natasha, so she believed that Alexei, Natasha, and Melina were her real family. Because of this difference in knowledge, her trauma is portrayed as more significant than Natasha's. For example, when the family finally addresses the implications of the fake family situation, Natasha aggressively asserts "[t]hat wasn't real. Who cares?" and merely wants to focus on the mission at hand (*Black Widow*, 2021, 1:16:31). Yelena retorts:

Don't say that. Please don't say that. It was real. It was real to me. You are my mother. You were my real mother. The closest thing I ever had to one. The best part of my life was fake. And none of you told me. And those agents you

chemically subjugated around the globe? That was me. Mmm. And you, you got out. Dreykov made sure no one could escape. Are you gonna say anything? No.

Don't touch me. (*Black Widow*, 2021, 1:16:35)

After this outburst, Yelena leaves the table crying and Natasha is left sitting with Alexei and Melina. The scene begins to revolve around Yelena's experience in Ohio and her trauma from the Red Room. While Natasha experienced psychological conditioning, Yelena experienced mind control. Natasha knew that the family was fabricated in Ohio; Yelena did not. Moreover, the entire movie revolves around Yelena's liberation from the Red Room and her mission to release the rest of the widows. Her plot mirrors Natasha's that is sprinkled throughout the MCU. Overall, Yelena's presence alone undermines Natasha's trauma and overshadows her narrative development. For this reason, Natasha's character development in relation to Yelena is labeled as "passive." However, it is important to note that though this relationship was labeled as "passive" narrative development, it does not reinforce a gendered stereotype because Natasha's presence is used to further another female character's plotline.

In Relation to Taskmaster & The Widows. Prior to the release of *Black Widow*, it is well known that Natasha joined S.H.I.E.L.D. after she and Clint Barton killed Dreykov and freed the widows from the Red Room. In *Black Widow*, Natasha realizes that she never really accomplished either. In fact, the psychological abuse of the widows has only gotten worse. While Natasha and Yelena are trying to evade the widows sent to kill them, one of the widows falls and breaks her leg. Because of the chemical subjugation and device embedded in each widow, Dreykov can the extent of the widow's injuries from a remote location. After realizing that the widow is injured and cannot

continue the mission, he orders her to kill herself. The widow sobs as she tells Natasha “I don’t want to do this.... He’s making me” before she is remotely forced to end her life.

(*Black Widow*, 2021, 38:14)

Similarly, it is established throughout various MCU films that Dreykov’s daughter was collateral damage in her defection to S.H.I.E.L.D. Through subtext, it is evident that the death of Dreykov’s daughter haunts Natasha. In *Black Widow*, it is revealed that Dreykov turned his daughter into the Taskmaster after she was injured by the bomb Natasha planted. At the end of the movie, Natasha is given the opportunity to save her life.

Overall, the presence of the Red Room and Taskmaster force Natasha to recomplete a mission that haunts her. This process allows Natasha to reconcile with her family and witness the liberation of the widows firsthand. In this way, the widows and the Taskmaster serve as a catalyst for Natasha’s narrative development. Their presence allows Natasha to confront and attain significant personal reconciliation with the loose ends of her past. For this reason, the relationship between Natasha and the widows in *Black Widow* is labeled as “active.”

In Relation to Clint Barton. Though Clint Barton, also known as “Hawkeye,” does not physically appear in the *Black Widow*, his character plays a significant role. First, Black Widow finally gets an opportunity to fully explain how she ended (or attempted to end) the Red Room. Natasha does this through her friendship with Clint Barton.

The significance of Clint and Natasha’s friendship is established throughout other MCU movies, but the origin is only briefly mentioned. *Black Widow* provides the

complete origin story and provides the audience with visual context. For example, Natasha and Yelena hide out from the Taskmaster in the same hiding spot Clint and Natasha hid out in after they set off the bomb. Additionally, Clint furthers Yelena's plot in the post-credit scene. While Yelena is at Natasha's grave, a woman approaches Yelena with an offer to kill the man responsible for her sister's death. The last shot of the movie is a picture of Clint Barton. While the audience is aware that Clint is not responsible for Natasha's death, Yelena is not. This dramatic irony extends the impact of Natasha's death beyond *Black Widow*.

Overall, Clint serves as a catalyst for not only Natasha's personal narrative in *Black Widow* but extends Natasha's relevance in the MCU timeline as well. Consequently, the relationship between Clint Barton and Natasha Romanoff is labeled as "active" narrative development.

In Relation to Dreykov. Prior to *Black Widow*, the audience simply knows that Dreykov was the figurehead for the Red Room and Natasha killed his daughter to shut it down. Generally, the horrific abuse Natasha endured is attributed to Dreykov. *Black Widow* transitions Dreykov from a theoretical figurehead to a physical character. He receives all the blame for the abuse of the widows. Dreykov boasts to Natasha:

These world leaders, these great men, they answer to me and my widows. Look at them. These girls were trash. They are thrown out into the street. I recycle the trash. And I give them purpose. I give them life...It's my network of widows that help me control the scales of power... My widows can start and end wars. They can make and break kings. (*Black Widow*, 2021, 1:40:45)

With this, Dreykov becomes more than a character, more than one man. The character of Dreykov embodies the years of abuse Natasha and every other widow endured.

His physical presence also allows Natasha to fully confront him for the abuse he has inflicted on her and generations of women. Before his demise, Natasha tells him “[y]ou took my childhood. You took my choices and tried to break me. But you’re never gonna do that to anybody ever again” (*Black Widow*, 2021, 1:45:40). Without his embodiment of the organization, Natasha’s words would have less value. Natasha confronts and defeats both the institutional and individual levels of Red Room through her fight with Dreykov. In her first attempt to kill Dreykov, Natasha watched the building crumble from far away. This time she gets to witness his demise in person. His physical manifestation in *Black Widow* grants a sense of finality and personal achievement for Natasha that would be otherwise unattainable. Because of the way his defeat empowers Natasha, the relationship between Natasha and Dreykov is labeled as “active” narrative development.

Captain Marvel

Unlike *Black Widow*, *Captain Marvel* does not exist in a closed moment within the MCU timeline. This innately extends the capacity for narrative development for Captain Marvel since her character is expected to return. In this section, the narrative development of Carol Danvers will be analyzed through the lens of her various relationships in *Captain Marvel*.

In Relation to Maria Rambeau. Maria Rambeau is Carol Danvers’ long-time friend from their service as United States Air Force pilots. In *Captain Marvel*, Carol seeks Maria out to discover information about Lawson’s project. Not only does Carol

receive information concerning the project, but Maria becomes a catalyst for restoring Carol's memory. As Carol slowly begins to remember her past, she begins to gain more ownership over her emotions and her powers.

Furthermore, Maria helps Carol establish her sense of self when she needs it most. As Carol is confronted with Talos' side of the story, she is forced to make a choice—whom does she believe? However, making an important decision without personal identity is nearly impossible. In *Captain Marvel* (2019), Maria's character spurs this decision-making process by informing Carol's identity:

Vers: You don't know me. You have no idea who I am. I don't even know who I am!

Maria: You are Carol Danvers. You are the woman on that black box risking her life to do the right thing. My best friend... who supported me as a mother, and a pilot when no one else did. You're smart and funny, and a huge pain in the ass. And you are the most powerful person I knew, way before you could shoot fire from your fist. You hear me? Do you hear me? (1:13:20)

Notably, after this interaction, the script changes from "Vers" (the name the Kree force gave Carol) to "Carol" when Captain Marvel is speaking. Maria's words ground Carol in herself, her ability, and provide courage in her conviction. Because of this result, Maria's relationship with Carol is labeled as "active" narrative development.

In Relation to Yon-Rogg. Similar to the role Dreykov plays in *Black Widow*, Yon-Rogg's character is a physical manifestation of the greater institutional battles Carol Danvers overcomes with the Kree force. Specifically, Yon-Rogg initially appears to be Carol's friend, mentor, trainer, and confidant. Throughout *Captain Marvel*, Yon-Rogg is

the predominant character that tries to restrain Carol. He does this through deceit and psychological manipulation. His individual character represents the greater Kree force's attempts to harness her power. At the end of *Captain Marvel*, Carol triumphs over Yon-Rogg in the final battle. The consolidation of these greater forces in one character provides a symbolic defeat for Carol. Yon-Rogg's presence in *Captain Marvel* serves to further Carol's plot and thus, is labeled as "active" narrative development.

In Relation to Nicholas Fury. The character of Nicholas Fury has appeared in eleven MCU movies (Marvel Movies Fandom, 2022a). He is a well-established and well-respected character among the Marvel Fanbase. However, he is never really introduced. Prior to *Captain Marvel*, Fury is just known as the Director of S.H.I.E.L.D. *Captain Marvel* provides the backstory for not only Fury but for the formation of the Avengers.

The last scene of the movie is Fury's revelation that S.H.I.E.L.D. alone cannot protect Earth. He decides that he needs to find more heroes like Carol. After looking through Carol's file, he discovers that the plane she flew was named "Avenger" and promptly renames the project "The Avengers Initiative." Carol Danvers is the blueprint for the Avengers and thus, for most of the MCU films. Fury's deference to Carol grants the character a significant amount of respect.

Fury also is used to connect Carol's plotline to *Avengers: Infinity War*. At the end of *Captain Marvel* (2019), Carol gives Fury a communicator to use "for emergencies only" (1:48:43). The post-credit scene depicts Captain America, Black Widow, Rhodey, and the Hulk all trying to get the communicator to work. Once the remaining Avengers begin to question why they are trying to get it to work, Black Widow tells them "Fury

did. Just do it, please. You tell me the second you get a signal. I want to know who's on the other end of that thing” (*Captain Marvel*, 2019, 1:55:50). Immediately after she says this, Carol appears, and the last line of the film is “Where’s Fury?” (*Captain Marvel*, 2019, 1:55:54). Fury’s presence throughout *Captain Marvel* is used to further Carol’s plotline and thus, their relationship is labeled as “active” narrative development.

In Relation to Wendy Lawson. Eventually revealed to be “Mar-Vell,” Wendy Lawson is Carol’s mentor. Importantly, Carol’s discovery of Wendy Lawson through a file at the Joint NASA USAF Facility is the first piece of information that Carol attains on her own. Her determination to find the truth about Lawson drives the entire plot of the movie. Carol learns that Lawson, or “Mar-Vell,” was a member of the Kree force that was trying to discover a power source that would power a ship that could transport the Skrulls to a safe place. This discovery is the turning point of the film:

Talos: Yon-Rogg killed Mar-Vell. He killed her. Because she found out that she was on the wrong side of an unjust war.

Vers: No. Your people are terrorists... that kill innocents. I saw the ruins on Torfa.

Talos: Ruins that the Accusers are responsible for. My people lived as refugees on Torfa. Homeless, ever since we resisted Kree rule and they destroyed our planet.

Now the handful of us that are left, will be slaughtered next...unless you will help me finish what Mar-Vell started. The coordinates you found, would've powered a lightspeed ship capable of carrying us to safety. A new home, where the Kree can't reach us. (*Captain Marvel*, 2019, 1:11:47)

Furthermore, Vers’ past with Lawson explains how she received her powers. Carol joined Lawson on her mission to find the “core” and the Kree force intervened and killed

Lawson in the process. Before the Krees could attain the power source in the ship Lawson engineered with a part of the “core,” Carol attempts to destroy it and instead absorbs its power. Lawson’s overarching mission exists in service of providing Captain Marvel’s origin story. Consequently, the relationship between Lawson and Carol is labeled as “active.”

Chapter 5: Audience Review Analysis

While a movie can be considered successful or “feminist” by film critics, it is important to consider audience perception. For instance, *Black Widow* and *Captain Marvel* share the same film critic score of 79%, the audience reviews differ significantly (Rotten Tomatoes, 2022c; Rotten Tomatoes 2022e). *Captain Marvel* received an audience review score of 45% while *Black Widow* received an audience review score of 91% (Rotten Tomatoes, 2022c; Rotten Tomatoes 2022e). Both film critic and audience review percentages are representations of the average ratings by their respective groups. The audience provides unique and honest insight as to how each character is perceived at face value. There has been no previous research analyzing the content of audience reviews for *Captain Marvel* and *Black Widow*. In order to analyze the difference between the public opinion of *Black Widow* and *Captain Marvel*, ten audience reviews for each movie were randomly selected. Individual reviews were labeled as generally positive or negative. From there, prominent themes were identified and analyzed based on intensity and frequency.

Black Widow Reviews

Of the ten randomly selected audience reviews for *Black Widow* on RottenTomatoes.com, two were negative and eight were positive (Rotten Tomatoes, 2022b). One of the negative reviews complained that the character of “Taskmaster” was butchered, and the movie was not memorable. In the comics, Taskmaster was a mercenary named Anthony that was hired by various criminal organizations to train their members. Anthony, just like Antonia in *Black Widow*, *had* the ability to mimic others’ fighting styles (Marvel Movies Fandom, 2022b). Though the adaptation of Taskmaster in

Black Widow did not follow the comics, it did allow Black Widow to reconcile her past with Antonia. The other negative review only states “not for me, I am not a simp” (Bill N). According to the Urban Dictionary, a “simp” usually refers to a male that is “overly submissive to a female and gains nothing from it” (Sinful, 2020). With this definition, to not be a “simp” implies that you are not doing something just because of a woman’s existence. Thus, this review implies that the audience member did not like the female lead (Natasha Romanoff) and did not like the film as a result. Because the review does not elaborate, it is impossible to distinguish what specifically they did not like about the female-led film. Generally, both the negative reviews were short and provided little insight into the content of *Black Widow*.

On the other hand, the eight positive reviews commented on multiple aspects of *Black Widow*. The first prevailing theme is a trend of being pleasantly surprised. One reviewer said he was “not a fan of the all-female-action-movie-genre” but this one “proved to [him] that all-female action movies can be done right and made in such a way that even men can watch them and not cringe” (Derrek D). Other reviewers said though *Black Widow* exceeded their expectations and was generally good, it was not “up to par” with many other MCU movies (Zack A). From this trend, it is evident that female-led superhero movies, particularly within the MCU, have low expectations among audience members. These low expectations reveal a notion of second-class success. The content of the selected reviews indicates that Marvel audience members perceive female action movies almost as a separate genre from general action movies. This mental separation demonstrates the second-class nature of action heroines. Furthermore, the trend of

audience members being pleasantly surprised reveals the additional hoops that exist due to the “cringiness” of women.

Another trend among the positive reviews was a general enjoyment of the main characters: Natasha and Yelena. One audience member stated that:

The chemistry between the characters is outstanding, especially between Scarlett and Florence. Scarlett gives the expected engaging performance, but it's Florence Pugh who elevates this movie. She alone is worth watching this. (Peter P)

Another reviewer praises the role of Black Widow for being “perfect again” (MattheoHans). Generally, the audience members seem to enjoy the personality and relationship between the sisters in *Black Widow*. Reviewers also liked that the movie explained the backstory of Natasha’s character and it provided a good filler between the Avengers movies (Rz_). Two reviews commend the quality of the action scenes and even call the fight between Yelena and Natasha the “highlight of the film” (Derrek D; Peter P).

The third prevailing theme is the release date of *Black Widow*. Even among the positive reviews, two audience members complain about the timing of the *Black Widow*’s release. One reviewer writes that the movie was less meaningful because there was nothing at stake. The audience knew when and how *Black Widow* died so there was no real danger to her character at any point. This reviewer suggests that Black Widow’s death would have been even more emotional for the audience if *Black Widow* was released prior to *Avengers: Endgame*. Another reviewer argues that “out of every female film or show Marvel dropped *Black Widow* [italics added] should've been the first to have come out” because “[s]he's an OG” (W H). These comments from audience members align with this study’s prior findings about the impact of closed moments on narrative

development. No matter how well done the movie is, the character development of Natasha is inherently stunted.

Most of the reviews had positive things to say about the plot and characters despite their low expectations. While there were two negative reviews, neither of the reviews mentioned the character of Black Widow directly. The primary complaint among the reviewers was the release timing which aligns with critiques in previous literature. Overall, these audience reviews indicate just how cherished Black Widow is among the MCU community.

Captain Marvel Reviews

For *Captain Marvel*, seven of the ten randomly selected reviews from Rottentomatoes.com were labeled as “negative” and three were labeled as “positive” (Rotten Tomatoes, 2022d). Of the seven negative reviews, three describe Captain Marvel as the “worst” or “one of the worst” Marvel films they have seen (Brad A; grwgrwrt r; Stefan B). One of these reviews claimed they were “forced... to take a hiatus” from Marvel films in general and another review states that Captain Marvel was “a setback for female superheroes who could be written and performed so much better than this” (Conrad C).

One of the themes among the negative reviews is the personality of Captain Marvel and Brie Larson as an actor. She is described as, “wooden,” “stiff,” “lacks any personality,” “rigid,” “poorly written,” and generally “unlikeable” (Conrad C, Brad A, Adrian D). One audience member elaborates: “There's nothing personable about the character that makes you want to care about her or anything happening in the movie” (Brad A).

The three positive reviews mention nothing about the character or actor for Captain Marvel. Instead, they praise the “female power fantasy” and the overarching narrative of shedding limits forced upon you by others (Marion D). While they found the plot similar to Steve Rogers (Captain America), Carol Danvers’ story was necessary because there are “different exp[ectations] and different voices” for men and women (Marion D). One reviewer wrote:

A totally awesome MCU entry, clever, hilarious, surprising, with some great origin stories of important characters and it makes you look at yourself and question your assumptions and default biases. I don’t understand the low scores, sounds like something besides the movie/plot is driving them. See this movie, it’s incredible. (DLLHell)

The female empowerment aspect of *Captain Marvel* appears to be very schismatic. While some reviews label it as a “setback,” others view it as a step forward (Conrad C).

Shared Themes: Personality and Plot

There is a stark contrast between the audience’s opinion of Black Widow’s and Captain Marvel’s personalities. While audience members found the character of Natasha to be “perfect again,” there were multiple extensive comments that indicated a hatred for Carol. After analyzing various aspects of the movie, Carol Danvers’ personality can be described as confident, assertive, and clever. Many other MCU characters share these personality traits. Her communication style is direct and unapologetic. Take for example her first encounter with Nicholas Fury:

Vers: Vers. Kree Star Force. We don't carry identification on metal cards.

Fury: Vers. Star Force. How long are you planning on being in town?

Vers: Oh, I'll be out of your hair as soon as I track down the Skrulls that are infiltrating your planet.

Fury: Skrulls?

Vers: Shape-shifters. They can transform into any lifeform down to the DNA. Oh boy, you guys don't have any clue do you?

Fury: Oh, oh, oh, oh. Hold on. How do we know that you're not one of those... shapeshifters?

Vers: Congratulations Agent Fury. You have finally asked a relevant question.

(*Captain Marvel*, 2019, 28:28)

This scene is a potential example that could prompt audience members to label Captain Marvel as “wooden” or “unlikeable.” She is blunt about her mission and slightly condescending towards Fury. However, this sort of initial bullishness is common within MCU movies. For example, at the beginning of *Black Widow* (2021), Natasha has a similar conversation with Agent Ross:

Natasha: Don't do this.

Thaddeus Ross: What?

Natasha: Come after me. I mean, you're embarrassing yourself. It looks desperate.

Thaddeus Ross: (ON PHONE) Thought maybe you'd be calling me to cut a deal. Cause from my vantage point, it's the federal fugitive who's desperate.

Natasha: From my vantage point, you look like you could use some bed rest.

What is this, your second triple bypass? (17:15)

In both conversations, Natasha and Carol are confident, perhaps even a little cocky. A prominent difference between the characters is that this is Carol Danvers' first impression

on the MCU audience. Natasha had been in eight Marvel films prior to *Black Widow*. She begins as Stark's sexy secretary and slowly is allotted more screen time and more agency as the movies progress. By the time *Black Widow* is released, Natasha has in a way "earned" the ability to be cocky.

In contrast, this is Carol's first appearance in the MCU and she comes out swinging. There is no "soft launch" of her character—Captain Marvel immediately demands the respect of the audience. Whether or not an individual likes someone's personality is very subjective. However, there is very little evidence within the movie to suggest that Carol Danvers does not have a personality or has one that varies drastically from other MCU characters. In fact, one could even describe her personality as strong and similar to Tony Stark. For example, take a look at a conversation between Tony Stark and Nick Fury in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015):

Fury: Artificial intelligence. You never even hesitated.

Tony: Look, it's been a really long day, like, Eugene O'Neill long, so how's about we skip to the part where you're useful?

Fury: Look me in the eye and tell me you're going to shut him down.

Tony: You're not the director of me. (1:10:14)

In this conversation with Fury, Tony is confident, brash, and equally assertive as Carol in *Captain Marvel*. In Carol's conversations throughout the movie, she is confident in her capabilities and assertive in her mission. The hefty number of negative reviews could indicate a gender bias toward Captain Marvel, which future research could explore more thoroughly.

Analysis Summary

This analysis was grounded in feminist film theory which critiques films that perpetuate harmful stereotypical representations of women. The hope of feminist film scholars is for films to portray accurate representations of the female experience because mass media texts can impact the audience's opinions of the world, specifically expectations of gender. This theory grounded the analysis of sexualization, violence/power, emotion, narrative development, and audience reviews in *Captain Marvel* and *Black Widow*.

First, this research analyzed the sexualization of Black Widow and Captain Marvel within their respective films. While Black Widow was passively sexualized through her costuming and makeup, it was significantly less than in previous MCU appearances (Gerard & Poepsel, 2019; Joffe, 2019; Olufidipe & Echezabal, 2021). Though the passive sexualization of Black Widow slightly perpetuates stereotypical expectations for female beauty, the character of Yelena demonstrates more “realistic” representations of the female experience as she experiences no passive sexualization. In fact, the character of Yelena seems to embody the kind of autonomy previous research hoped for Natasha (Bateman, 2015; Gerard & Poepsel, 2019; Olufidipe & Echezabal, 2021). Furthermore, there is no real “active” sexualization in *Black Widow* because there were no scenes in which characters were put in a sexual context. In *Captain Marvel*, there was no “passive” sexualization and only one instance of “active” sexualization. Carol's reaction to the sexualization effectively neutralizes the situation and she is not diminished as a result. In fact, this moment of “active” sexualization depicts an accurate portrayal of women's experience navigating everyday life. While it may appear as an unnecessary

addition in the film that contributes to a “feminist agenda,” it represents the nature of catcalling instances for women—unnecessary and slightly irritating.

Next, the role of violence was examined for each character. Because there were no examples in which the characters were relegated to the femme fatale or damsel in distress stereotypes, the labels of “active” and “passive” took on new definitions. In the analysis, instances labeled as “active” violence demonstrated agency over actions while “passive” violence revealed a lack of autonomy. The plots of both *Black Widow* and *Captain Marvel* demonstrated a shift from “passive” to “active” violence as they overcame oppression and abuse inflicted by men. First, Natasha experiences “passive” violence when she is controlled by Dreykov. However, after she is liberated from the Red Room, all of her actions can be understood as “active” violence. Mirrored shifts occurred for Yelena, the widows, and Antonia. Natasha's birth mother's backstory was also labeled as “active” violence/ power because it attributes much of Natasha's determination and skill set to her, not the Red Room's training. In *Captain Marvel*, Carol also experiences a prominent shift from “passive” to “active” violence. At the beginning of the movie, Carol experiences “passive” violence because she lacks autonomy under the control of the Kree force. As she regains her memory and identity, she is afforded agency and thus, shifts to “active” violence. Both films demonstrate the resulting lack of agency women experience because of perceived ownership. Ultimately, both characters liberate themselves to reach their full potential as action heroines.

The role of emotion was also analyzed in *Black Widow* and *Captain Marvel*. Only active emotion was present in *Black Widow* through Natasha's protector role and ability to retain her “heart.” Natasha's protective feelings towards Yelena and the widows drive

her mission to end the Red Room. Furthermore, Natasha's ability to retain her "heart" despite the horrendous abuse is also portrayed as a remarkable strength. Her vulnerability with Melina and empathy towards Antonia enable her to free both women from Dreykov's control. Generally, Natasha's "heart" and protective roles in *Black Widow* empowered her role as an action heroine. In *Captain Marvel*, Carol experiences a shift from "passive" to "active" emotion that mirrors the shift from "passive" to "active" violence. Under the control of the Kree force, Carol is repeatedly instructed to control her emotions because they make her weak in battle. Once Carol regains her sense of identity, she realizes that her emotions fuel her power and her mission as an action heroine.

Narrative development was examined through relationships with other characters in the film. In *Captain Marvel*, other characters' presences were strictly used to further Carol's plot. Both Maria Rambeau and Wendy Lawson's presences serve as catalysts for Carol regaining her memory and establishing her identity. The character of Yon-Rogg serves as a figurehead for institutional restraints and exists to demonstrate Carol's character development as she liberates herself. Lastly, Nick Fury establishes Captain Marvel as the inspiration for the Avengers and connects her plotline to *Avengers: Infinity War*.

In *Black Widow*, the Avengers, Taskmaster, the widows, Clint Barton, and Dreykov were all used to further Natasha's plot. The presence of Dreykov and Taskmaster allowed Natasha to revisit and reconcile with a mission that has haunted her. The presence of Clint Barton extended the influence of Natasha within the MCU timeline beyond her death in *Avengers: Endgame*. The Avengers bookend the film and conveniently provide a space for Natasha's personal development. The character of

Natasha in *Black Widow* is utilized to further the narrative development of Yelena. Though this was labeled as “passive” narrative development, it does not reinforce a gendered stereotype because Natasha is used to further another female character’s plotline.

Lastly, audience member reviews were analyzed. The majority of reviews for *Black Widow* were positive. The audience members tended to be pleasantly surprised and liked the characters and the overarching plot. In contrast, the majority of reviews for *Captain Marvel* were overwhelmingly negative. Audience members disliked both the character of Captain Marvel and the plot of the movie. Overall, the difference in reception of the *Black Widow* and *Captain Marvel* demonstrates the schism between realistic presentations of the female experience and the current cultural expectations for women.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Framework of Study

The MCU is the highest-grossing film franchise with an incredible audience reach. Consequently, the MCU sets a precedent for its competitors and audience with its portrayals of female characters (Joffe, 2019; Olufidipe & Echezabal, 2021). While thirty movies have been released by the MCU, only two have possessed female leads. Generally, the superhero and superheroine genre lacks female representation. The representation that does make the cut often diminishes the capabilities of female characters through unnecessary emotional challenges, femme fatale and damsel in distress stereotypes, and relegating them as side characters (Joffe, 2019; Olufidipe & Echezabal, 2021).

The two current female-led MCU films are *Black Widow* and *Captain Marvel*. *Captain Marvel* became the first female-led MCU movie after its release in 2019. There has been substantial research done on *Captain Marvel* as it surpassed many standards: the first female-led film to gross over a billion dollars, the second female-led comic book movie ever, and the first Marvel movie directed by a woman (Chau et al., 2020; Fimbiati, 2020; Goppinger & Philippo, 2019; Killian, 2019; Langsdale, 2020). The movie is considered “feminist” in part because of these milestones but also because of the important roles women play in the film as well as the demonstrations of misogyny and individual and institutional levels. In contrast, there is little research that exists on *Black Widow* after its release in 2021, and after Black Widow’s death in *Avengers: Endgame*. Consequently, *Black Widow* serves as the capstone of Natasha’s MCU narrative while *Captain Marvel* is merely the outset of Carol’s. Historically, the character of Black

Widow has been repeatedly oversexualized, sidelined, and utilized as a catalyst for male characters' narrative development. The release of *Black Widow* was a long-awaited opportunity for complete agency and narrative development for Natasha alone. For this reason, each character's history, or lack thereof, and the release timing of the films in the MCU provided a unique opportunity to analyze the content and audience perception of different action heroines.

This research addressed gaps in research regarding the portrayal of action heroines and more narrowly, female representation within the Marvel Cinematic Universe through the lens of feminist film theory. Because the narratives portrayed in films directly impact societal conceptions of gender, feminist film theory aims for women to be portrayed in narratives that correctly depict the female experience. Thus, feminist film scholars critique harmful, stereotypical representations of women in film (Smelik, 2016). As the feminist movement has progressed, there has been a progression of autonomy for women in film and thus, feminist film theorists' standard for a "feminist" film continues to be raised. The unique nexus of masculinity and femininity in the role of an action heroine affords great capacity for impact among audiences. For this reason, the agency Black Widow and Captain Marvel are afforded in their respective films are important to study. This thesis addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the rights and privileges Black Widow and Captain Marvel are afforded in MCU films?
2. What does the comparison of Captain Marvel and Natasha Romanoff's rights and privileges suggest about MCU's portrayal of women?

3. What are the differences, if any, between the public opinion of *Black Widow* and the public opinion of *Captain Marvel*?

Summary of Findings

Employing a multipronged, mixed-methods design, this thesis analyzed the content of *Black Widow* and *Captain Marvel* as well as audience perception. First, the rights and privileges of Black Widow and Captain Marvel in their respective films were studied in moments of sexualization, violence/power, emotion, and narrative development. Second, the audience perception of each film was analyzed through ten randomly selected audience reviews collected at RottenTomatoes.com.

Sexualization

To the audience's shock and feminist film theorists' delight—Natasha was minimally sexualized in *Black Widow*. Natasha's costuming, makeup, and two camera angles were labeled as "passive" sexualization. However, the presence of Yelena provided an interesting contrast between the portrayal of each action heroine. In the same scenes where Natasha was passively sexualized, Yelena was not sexualized at all. Both action heroines wore the same suit but while Natasha's was tight, Yelena's was loose. In the same scene, Natasha wears bright pink lipstick and Yelena is wearing no makeup at all or very natural-looking makeup. Though Yelena's costuming and makeup somewhat counterbalances the passive sexualization, Natasha's costuming, makeup, and subsequent camera angles perpetuate stereotypical expectations of female beauty. While there were no instances of "active" sexualization in *Black Widow*, one scene was labeled as "active" sexualization in *Captain Marvel*. In the scene, a man makes suggestive comments toward Carol while

she completely disregards his comments as they are not relevant to her current mission. Her lack of a response removes any sort of sexualization from the situation. This specific moment of sexualization seems to exist primarily to demonstrate misogyny at an individual level. Carol's response, or lack thereof, maintains the character's power in the situation and accurately portrays the reality women face on a daily basis. Generally, instances of sexualization in both *Captain Marvel* and *Black Widow* were few and far between. This contributes to feminist film theory by heightening the standard for action heroines.

Violence/Power

Initially, the *a priori* codes of "active" and "passive" were intended to represent whether the action heroine was relegated to damsel in distress or femme fatale roles as those are predominate stereotypes for action heroines (Brown, 2015; Stabile, 2009). Shockingly, neither *Black Widow* nor *Captain Marvel* contained instances of either damsel in distress or femme fatale stereotypes and thus, the labels of "active" and "passive" adopted new criteria. Instances of violence/power that were labeled as "active" demonstrated autonomy over actions while "passive" revealed a lack of agency.

The plot of both *Captain Marvel* and *Black Widow* shared a shift from "passive" to "active" violence as they liberated themselves from oppressive and controlling situations. Both *Black Widow* and *Captain Marvel* share similar character arcs in that they were originally weaponized at an institutional level for morally incongruent purposes. As they free themselves from their circumstances, they shift to "active" violence and liberate those around them. The label of "passive" violence reveals the complete lack of agency both action heroines experience from men perceiving ownership

over their actions. In both films, there is a moment of triumph over their oppressors. This moment and consequent liberation is imperative when evaluating how these narratives inform the audience's understanding of female heroines. Their triumph over institutional and individual levels of oppression (both represented by male characters in their respective films) to reach their full potential as action heroines not only portrays additional barriers women face, but also symbolically demonstrates what an unrestrained action heroine can become.

Emotion

The role of emotion was studied in *Black Widow* and *Captain Marvel* due to the negative stereotype of women being overly emotional or weakened by their emotions (Brescoll, 2016). Moments that portrayed emotions as a strength were labeled as “active” while portrayals of emotions as a weakness were labeled as “passive.” In both *Captain Marvel* and *Black Widow*, emotions were portrayed as a strength. Specifically, Natasha’s role as a protector and her “heart” were characterized as acts of incredible resilience recognized by multiple characters in *Black Widow*. Emotion in *Captain Marvel* was directly linked to Carol’s transition from “passive” to “active” violence. The film directly addressed the emotion stereotype for women through the character of Yon-Rogg. As Carol gains agency in her actions, she simultaneously learns that her emotions are the key to unleashing her full potential.

Narrative Development

The narrative development of *Black Widow* and *Captain Marvel* was analyzed through the character’s relationship with other characters in the film. Relationships labeled as “active” were used to further the plot of *Black Widow* or *Captain Marvel*. In

contrast, “passive” relationships used Natasha or Carol to further their own plot. In *Captain Marvel*, the relationships between Carol and Yon-Rogg, Maria Rambeau, Wendy Lawson, and Nick Fury were all labeled as “active” as they all were strategically implemented to further the plotline of Carol.

In *Black Widow*, the relationships between Natasha and the Avengers, Taskmaster, the widows, Clint Barton, and Dreykov were also all labeled as “active” because their sole purpose was to further Natasha’s plotline. This is significant because the character of Black Widow has been repeatedly used as a catalyst for other characters’ narrative development in the MCU. The only “passive” relationship in both *Captain Marvel* and *Black Widow* was Natasha’s relationship with Yelena. Their relationship is labeled as passive because though Natasha’s reconciliation with Yelena furthers Natasha’s narrative development, Yelena’s plot extends beyond *Black Widow* as she is given a task in the post-credit scene. Here, it is important to remind the audience that *Black Widow* occurred in a closed moment so it would have been impossible to extend Natasha’s narrative development beyond the film. The most narrative development that could have occurred is Natasha’s reconciliation with her past which she attains in *Black Widow*. Despite the “passive” nature of their relationship, the extension of Yelena’s plot does, in a way, further the presence of Natasha in the MCU. Thus, action heroines in the MCU finally became the main character in their own stories.

Furthermore, the relationships in each of these movies provide a dimension to the female experience that is sorely missing from the action heroine genre through their relationships with other female characters. First, *Captain Marvel* portrays not only the individual and institutional levels of oppression women face, but the individual and

institutional levels of support needed for women to succeed. Feminist film theory aims for accurate portrayals of the female experience because these narratives have an impact on the audience. Because of this objective, representations of resilience through female relationships on individual and institutional levels are a necessary contribution to the genre. Secondly, *Black Widow* adds dimension to the female experience by providing more than a strictly positive or virtuous depiction of an action heroine. Natasha's reconciliation with her past creates a dynamic character with which the audience can resonate. *Black Widow* is permitted to transcend the stereotypical hero/heroine narrative by acknowledging, but not apologizing, and addressing her actions towards Yelena, the widows, and Antonia. Even by acknowledging the not great parts of her past, she retains her identity as an honorable, forceful, and respected action heroine. This representation of the female experience broadens the rights and privileges action heroines can be afforded.

Reviews

There were stark differences in audiences' perceptions of and reactions to *Black Widow* and *Captain Marvel* as female-led films. The reviews for *Black Widow* were predominantly positive. The character of Natasha Romanoff was well-liked, and reviewers liked the overarching plot and fight scenes. In contrast, the reviews for *Captain Marvel* were primarily negative. Reviewers' chief complaints centered around Carol Danvers' lack of personality and a disappointing plot. While audience members were pleasantly surprised by *Black Widow*, they were predictably disappointed by *Captain Marvel*.

Discussion

In both *Captain Marvel* and *Black Widow*, the action heroines were granted similar rights and privileges, which were significantly greater than those given to action heroines in the past (Brown, 2013; Brown, 2015, Stabile, 2009). Both Carol and Natasha were spared from the fate of female stereotypes in their films; the characters were minimally sexualized, empowered through their liberation from their oppressor without being relegated to damsel in distress or femme fatale stereotypes, demonstrated strength in emotional expression, and furthered their individual plotline through side characters.

Despite the similar rights and privileges each character is afforded, the films were received differently by what is most likely the same audience. Furthermore, larger budgets and well-known stars typically mitigate the potential for and impact of negative reviews (Basuroy et al., 2003). *Black Widow* and *Captain Marvel* both have the star power and budget and still, there is a stark contrast in the audience likeability of each film. While *Black Widow* and *Captain Marvel* share the same average film critic score of 79%, the audience reviews are polar opposites (Rotten Tomatoes, 2022c; Rotten Tomatoes 2022e). *Black Widow* received an average audience review score of 91% while *Captain Marvel* received an average audience review score of 45% (Rotten Tomatoes, 2022c; Rotten Tomatoes 2022e).

These findings beg the question: why the strong negative response to *Captain Marvel*? Both films granted similar rights and privileges for each female action heroine, similar star power and budget, were presumably viewed by similar audiences, and still were received so differently. *Black Widow* is praised for the personality of Natasha and its overarching plot while *Captain Marvel* is condemned for the same. The one clear

difference is the release timeline of each film. The character of Natasha Romanoff has appeared in several MCU movies prior to her final farewell in *Black Widow*. Therein she plays many roles– the sexy secretary, damsel in distress, love interest to three different male characters, femme fatale– and is repeatedly sidelined in the process. While male characters of similar presence and power in the Avengers are given their own movie, *Black Widow* is only given her debut after her death in the MCU timeline. In this way, Natasha Romanoff “earned” the rights and privileges she is afforded in *Black Widow*. The fruition of her character is acceptable to the audience because of her duration in the MCU.

Black Widow is Natasha Romanoff’s finale while *Captain Marvel* is Carol Danvers’ debut. Captain Marvel, like many other male Avengers, begins her MCU narrative with her own movie. Natasha “earned” her rights and privileges while Captain Marvel demands them from the start. The difference in release timelines and familiarity with each character could be a potential explanation for the vast contrast in reception towards each action heroine.

Limitations and Directions for Future Study

The first limitation of this study is that both of the action heroines analyzed are white women. Because of their specific gender and racial identity, this study only analyzes one perspective of the female experience and cannot fully speak to the barriers action heroines of other races might encounter in the representation of their experiences.

The second limitation is that this study only looked at ten randomly selected audience reviews for each film. Due to the small sample size, limited textual analysis

occurred. To understand more thoroughly the rationale behind audience reception, more audience reviews should be analyzed.

The third limitation of this study is that it did not analyze the appearances of Black Widow or Captain Marvel in other MCU films to inform the conclusions. Instead, it relied on existing literature on previous appearances.

Future research should look into the gender bias towards *Captain Marvel* and whether that continues in her subsequent appearances in the MCU. Yelena's subsequent appearances and the rights and privileges she is afforded should also be analyzed.

Conclusions

While representation matters, so does the quality. Though the audience reception of different films can reveal a discord between realistic portrayals of the female experience and the current cultural expectations, it is not the only indication of success. Both *Black Widow* and *Captain Marvel* demonstrated great strides in the rights and privileges action heroines are afforded. Their emotions are strengths, their actions—autonomous, their relationships—supportive, and their sexuality—their own. Overall, the action heroines of *Black Widow* and *Captain Marvel* reveal a dimension in the female experience that previously had not been fully realized in the MCU. The furthering of Yelena's and Carol's plotlines indicates hope for continued progression of female representation within the action heroine—both in quality and frequency.

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