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GENDER BIAS AND DISPROPORTIONATE ASSESSMENT OF FEMALE PROTAGONISTS IN SUPERHERO FILMS: AN ANALYSIS OF CAPTAIN MARVEL, BLACK WIDOW, AND BLACK PANTHER: WAKANDA FOREVER

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Abstract
This research is a descriptive qualitative study using a content analysis approach. The problems addressed in this research are: 1. What biased judgments and attitudes are portrayed by male characters in the films *Captain Marvel*, *Black Widow*, and *Black Panther 2*? 2. What are the attitudes and feelings of the female superheroes in these films? This study aims to obtain factual information regarding the biased judgments and attitudes portrayed by male characters in the three films and to explore the attitudes and feelings of the female superheroes in these films. The research method used is content analysis. The results of the study indicate that female superheroes still experience biased judgments and male-dominated attitudes over women. The findings reveal that there are still male characters who believe in the ability of female characters to become leaders and to face enemy attacks with physical strength.

Keywords— Black Widow, content analysis, Captain Marvel, Feminism, Shuri.

Introduction

Over the past few decades, superhero films have become an important part of the entertainment industry. Today, these films have evolved, as seen in their growing popularity among the public. The number of films produced has increased within the MCU (Marvel Cinematic Universe), DC, Warner Bros., 20th Century Fox, Universal Pictures, Paramount Pictures, and Lionsgate Films.

MCU, DC, and Warner Bros. are major production houses of various superhero films. Many other film production companies have also started creating superhero films. In addition, the popularity of superhero films has extended to other media such as television series, graphic novels, and video games. Superhero films not only portray the battle between heroes and villains but also depict complex moral conflicts and diverse character traits. This results in very long and highly intricate storylines. Male characters are depicted as important, powerful, and strong individuals. It is not surprising that women are often portrayed merely as sexual objects, valued only for their beauty and lacking intrinsic worth.

A societal structure that prioritizes men over women, as portrayed in films, can influence the public's perspective on an individual's gender. In the United States (Samovar, 2009), male superheroes are characters that represent masculine pride for male viewers. According to conventional patriarchal views in Western society, men are considered the workers, protectors, and providers for the family. In contrast, women are perceived to have the sole duty of caring for children and preparing meals.

The MCU has long been known for focusing on male superheroes. However, in early 2019, a female superhero named Captain Marvel emerged. In line with this, (Harum, 2013) stated in her research that this is intriguing, as women have usually been portrayed only as supporting

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characters for male heroes in films, despite the fact that the number of female superheroes in comic books has increased. The researcher identified three female superhero characters who were given leading roles to carry the storyline of their respective films: Captain Marvel, Black Widow, and Shuri.

Male characters often judge female characters as lacking combat skills and underestimate them when they take leadership roles, believing they are incapable. Additionally, male characters display dismissive behavior when female characters lead or fight villains, sometimes even conspiring with the enemy to defeat them. In response, female characters are shown using their free time to train and improve their fighting abilities. The emotional response of these female heroes when belittled or betrayed by male characters is often disappointment and sadness, as the men refuse to acknowledge or trust their capabilities.

In this study, the researcher aims to explore the depiction of attitudes and values of female superheroes in the films Captain Marvel, Black Widow, and Black Panther 2 (Wakanda Forever). The portrayal of female superheroes in these films needs to be examined because they often receive unfair treatment compared to their male counterparts. Additionally, female superheroes are commonly depicted as gentle and not physically strong, whereas male superheroes are shown as powerful and dominant.

This contrast is not only reflected in character traits but also in their appearances. Female superheroes tend to wear tight-fitting outfits that accentuate their body curves, while male superheroes wear thick, bulky costumes that make them appear strong and heroic. These differences in appearance are intentionally designed to send a message to viewers that female superheroes often do not play a significant role in superhero films, serving instead as complementary figures. The idea that female superheroes lack importance is further reinforced by the storylines created by the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), where many female characters are portrayed as dying in battle. To date, only four MCU films feature female lead characters who survive.

The researcher selected content analysis as the method for this study because it allows the researcher to place the film's text within a broader context and understand how the film interacts with existing social and cultural conditions. This method also enables the researcher to analyze the nature of the characters and their dialogues in the film. Furthermore, it helps the researcher identify the implicit influences conveyed to the wider public through the film's storyline and character portrayals. In this way, content analysis offers deep insight into the film, reflects the culture of the time, and may influence the societal conditions of that era. Finally, this method is also useful in assessing changes in the portrayal of social culture in media over time. Therefore, this method is appropriate for use in this research.

In *Captain Marvel*, the researcher found that not all male characters underestimated Carol Danvers (Captain Marvel), such as Yon Rogg, who spent more time with Carol and felt that he knew her well. The researcher also identified two other male characters who believed that Captain Marvel had abilities superior to those of men: Nick Fury and Talos.

The film *Black Widow* centers on Natasha Romanoff's struggle with her past and her search for identity. The research findings show that although Natasha is portrayed as a strong character, there is still unequal judgment toward her by some of the male characters she interacts with. Natasha is often placed in situations where her strength is questioned or contrasted with male characters. The study also proves that Natasha must constantly prove herself by excessively pursuing her enemies to gain recognition.

The researcher found that there is a male character who views Black Widow as a strong woman capable of defending herself—Alexei. Alexei does not show biased attitudes or unequal judgment toward Black Widow. On the contrary, Alexei relies on her and believes that Natasha can complete her mission to kill Dreykov (Natasha's enemy) with her own hands, despite Alexei once being Dreykov's ally.

Unlike Natasha in *Black Widow*, Shuri—the female superhero in *Black Panther 2*—demonstrates strength and intelligence throughout the film. However, the portrayal still reflects unequal judgment, particularly regarding her emotional capacity. For example, Shuri is often seen as too young and too emotional to make important decisions, as observed in her interactions with Namor and M'Baku. The research finds that such judgment reflects traditional views about the

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ability of young women to handle high-risk situations, which influences how audiences perceive this female character.

Similar to the other two films where certain male characters do not underestimate the female heroes, *Black Panther 2* also features a male character who does not devalue Shuri's leadership—M'Baku. Initially, M'Baku doubts Shuri's emotional stability and considers her too young to lead. However, after Shuri proves herself by defeating Namor (her enemy), M'Baku no longer underestimates her.

Literature Review

The dominant role of men over women has continued to evolve overtime. According to (Nixon, 1997),"A singular concept of masculinity is proposed: one that is effectively viewed as synonymous with male dominance over women" (p. 297). This statement illustrates how deeply rooted historical and cultural perspectives have shaped societal norms, in which masculine roles and traits are often associated with strength and control. For instance, in many traditional cultures, men are expected to serve as the heads of households and the primary decision-makers. This notion of masculinity is also evident in popular media. In the film *Captain Marvel*, for example, a clear manifestation of this concept can be observed when the female protagonist attempts to make a decision, only to have it overridden by a male character.

In earlier periods, society maintained a rigid social class structure, consisting of various strata such as the working class, the middle class, and the aristocracy. Each class had its own specific roles and functions within the social hierarchy. Masculinity was not only constructed in relation to women but also among men across different social classes. As noted by Davidoff and Hall (trans. 1997) (Nixon, 1997), "The emphasis is not only on how the form of middle-class masculinity that suddenly emerged during this period was defined in opposition to working-class and aristocratic masculinities, but also on the intensification of gender differentiation—the attributes and characteristics of men and women" (p. 298). This reflects the social dynamics of the time, in which the middle class sought to distinguish itself from other classes by reinforcing strict gender norms. For instance, middle-class men were often perceived as more civilized and educated compared to working-class men, who were viewed as rough, or aristocratic men, who were seen as extravagant and unproductive.

In earlier times, feminism clearly emphasized that negative portrayals of women in literature and film often reinforced discriminatory views and hindered fair recognition of women. As stated by (Bertens, 2014), "Feminism has very clearly observed that negative assessments of women in literature and film are widespread" (p. 82). Media often reinforces harmful gender stereotypes by portraying men and women in biased and inequitable ways. Such representations tend to overlook individual diversity and perpetuate societal norms that restrict gender roles and potential. For instance, in many television commercials, men are frequently depicted as dominant and authoritative figures—particularly in advertisements for cars or technology—where they are shown as active agents who are in control of the situation. In contrast, women are commonly featured in beauty or household product advertisements, where the focus is placed on their physical appearance and domestic roles. A typical example includes advertisements for cleaning products, in which women are portrayed as attractive and flawless while performing household chores.

Wood (Samovar, 2009) provides a concise summary of how media typically portrays men and women. He notes that "media most often depict boys and men as active, adventurous, powerful, sexually aggressive, and largely uninvolved in human relationships, whereas girls and women are portrayed as young, thin, beautiful, passive, dependent, and often incompetent" (p. 171).

The radical feminist response to the theories, organizational structures, and personal styles of men in the "New Left" demonstrates how gender inequality could persist even within movements that were ostensibly progressive. The experience of women being treated as "second-class" members within these organizations reflects how male dominance constrained the full and authentic participation of women (Donovan, 2012).

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As Donovan notes, "much radical feminist theory was shaped as a reaction to the theories, organizational structures, and personal styles of men in the 'New Left.' Women themselves experienced continual 'second-class' treatment within radical male organizations, and because of the radical machismo style, women were concerned that their own organizations should embody internal democracy and allow for an authentic women's style (or at least permit such a style to emerge)" (p. 184).

For instance, in several radical organizations of the 1960s and 1970s, women were often relegated to more subordinate roles, such as handling logistics or administrative work, while men assumed leadership in debates and political strategy.

Film is a form of literary work similar to a novel, but with a different medium. A film contains elements that are also found in novels. There are two elements in film: intrinsic and extrinsic. According to Warren and Wellek (trans. 1963), "The intrinsic element is the interpretation and analysis of the literary work itself. The extrinsic element consists of those elements that lie outside the literary work, but do not directly affect the structure or system of the literary organism" (p. 139).

Furthermore, subjectively, many readers and critics believe that understanding the life of the author and their social context adds depth and meaning to the interpretation of a work. For example, knowing that Orwell wrote *1984* based on his experiences with totalitarian regimes enhances the reader's comprehension of the pessimism and fear embodied in the novel. Through this subjective approach, literature is understood as being influenced by the author's social, political, and psychological conditions, which ultimately enrich the meaning of the work for readers.

According to Warren and Wellek (trans. 1956), "Ultimately, it is only the works themselves that justify our entire interest in an author's life, their social environment, and the whole literary process. The reasons for placing undue emphasis on the surrounding conditions rather than on the works themselves are not difficult to discover" (p. 139).

Research Method

In this study, the researcher employed a qualitative research design with a content analysis approach. According to (Krippendorff, 2019), "Content analysis is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use" (p. 24). The researcher applies content analysis because the study examines film dialogues that contain biased attitudes and judgments toward women. For instance, the researcher identified biased expressions in a dialogue between two characters of different genders, as illustrated below:

Military Officer: "Surrender! You do not belong here!"
Carol (Captain Marvel/Female Heroine): (remains hanging onto the dangling rope)
Military Officer: "You are not strong enough. You will only kill yourself. They will never let you fly!"

The above conversation reveals the presence of biased attitudes and judgments expressed by the male military officer toward a woman, triggered by Carol's actions. He asserts that Carol is incapable of completing the challenge and urges her to surrender. This indicates that the officer continues to underestimate women's capabilities in terms of strength and resilience.

Thus, the researcher has presented and analyzed dialogues that exhibit biased attitudes and judgments toward women. Since the analysis involves identifying and interpreting such instances, the study is classified as content analysis. Furthermore, the researcher investigated men's attitudes toward women and the unequal judgments expressed during that period. As Krippendorff (trans.

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2019) explains:

> "The term 'text' in the above definition is not meant to limit content analysis to written material. The phrase 'or other meaningful matter' is included in the paragraph to indicate that in content analysis, works of art, images, maps, sounds, signs, symbols, and even numerical records can be incorporated as data—that is, they can be treated as texts—provided they communicate something about phenomena beyond what is directly perceivable or observable" (pp. 24–25).

Therefore, this research is classified as a qualitative study employing content analysis.

Results and Discussion

This chapter presents the findings of a study aimed at analyzing biased attitudes and unequal judgments toward female superheroes in the films *Captain Marvel*, *Black Widow*, and *Black Panther 2*. *Captain Marvel* portrays Carol Danvers as a strong and independent protagonist. However, the findings reveal imbalances in the attitudes and assessments directed toward this character. Although Carol Danvers is depicted as a resilient hero, the evaluations of her are often linked to doubts about her emotional maturity and decisions perceived as impulsive. The study found that, despite the film's portrayal of Carol's strength, there exists an implicit narrative that undermines her abilities through her interactions with male characters, reflecting broader patterns of gender dominance present in society.

In *Captain Marvel*, the study discovered that not all male characters belittle Carol Danvers (Captain Marvel). For instance, Yon-Rogg, who spends significant time with Carol and feels he knows her better, demonstrates a more complex attitude. Furthermore, two other male characters—Nick Fury and Talos—acknowledge that Captain Marvel possesses superior capabilities compared to men.

Black Widow centers on Natasha Romanoff's struggle with her past and her search for identity. The findings indicate that although Natasha is portrayed as a formidable figure, she is subject to unequal judgments through the male characters with whom she interacts. Natasha is frequently placed in situations where her strength is questioned or contrasted against that of male counterparts. The study also demonstrates that Natasha often feels compelled to prove her competence by excessively pursuing her enemies in order to gain recognition.

The researcher further found that Alexei represents an exception to this dynamic. He perceives Black Widow as a strong woman capable of defending herself. Unlike others, Alexei does not display biased attitudes or unequal assessments toward Natasha. On the contrary, he relies on her abilities and expresses confidence that she can defeat Dreykov (her adversary) on her own, even though Alexei was once Dreykov's ally.

In contrast to Natasha in *Black Widow*, Shuri—the heroine of *Black Panther 2*—is portrayed as both powerful and intelligent. Nonetheless, the findings reveal unequal judgments concerning her emotionality. For instance, Shuri is frequently perceived as too young and too emotional to make critical decisions, as illustrated in her interactions with Namor and M'Baku. These judgments reflect traditional perspectives regarding the competence of young women in high-stakes situations, which influences how audiences perceive this heroine.

Consistent with the other two films, *Black Panther 2* also presents a male character who does not undermine or exhibit biased attitudes toward the heroine. Initially, M'Baku doubts Shuri's emotional stability and questions her youth as a qualification for leadership. However, once Shuri proves herself by defeating Namor, M'Baku ceases to underestimate her and no longer views her leadership as inadequate.

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In the three films analyzed, it can be observed that there remains a considerable degree of unequal attitudes and assessments toward women in the media, particularly toward the heroines (Captain Marvel, Black Widow, and Shuri), despite their central and significant roles in the narratives.

In *Captain Marvel*, the imbalance in the assessment of women is evident within a male-dominated professional environment. Men perceive women as incapable of working in demanding fields such as the military. This is supported by (Samovar, 2009), who states that women have long been depicted as a group confined to a single stereotype. The portrayal of women as homemakers has often hindered their progress in professional settings. Serving in the military requires physical strength and resilience, yet women are often considered an obstacle in such environments, as they are stereotypically assigned the role of household caretakers. Furthermore, Yon Rogg, a male character closely associated with Carol, assumes that she cannot be as strong and resilient as he is, believing that her tendency to involve emotions in every matter would lead her to fail in missions. According to (Samovar, 2009): "In our society, men are prepared to be successful, aggressive, sexual, and independent, while women are prepared to be nurturing, sensitive, dependent, and concerned with appearance" (p. 63). Samovar, an American scholar, underscores the notion that men still view women as inferior in courage, resilience, and strength. Even when Carol is given the opportunity to lead, she continues to face challenges in the form of male dominance, as Yon Rogg persistently attempts to undermine or reject her decisions. This reflects the media's frequent portrayal of men as active controllers and women as passive figures.

In *Black Widow*, unequal attitudes and judgments are also apparent, particularly through the character Dreykov, who interacts significantly with Natasha Romanoff (Black Widow). Natasha experiences numerous forms of unequal treatment that reflect gender bias. Referring to Davidoff and Hall (1997), women are often depicted as passive objects, even when they occupy leading roles. Natasha is frequently associated with "nurturing," especially in her role as the protective "sister" to Yelena Belova (her younger sibling) and within the rediscovered family dynamic. Furthermore, (Samovar, 2009) argue that media often portrays women as passive, dependent, and incompetent. Despite Natasha being a highly skilled secret agent, her emotional side and the need to reconcile with her traumatic past are emphasized more than her expertise. This illustrates how female characters are often burdened with narratives of caregiving and suffering, whereas male characters are able to assume active action-oriented roles without the need for such extensive emotional exploration.

In *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*, although Shuri eventually assumes leadership, she encounters numerous challenges that reflect gender discrimination. Initially, her abilities are doubted by male characters such as Namor, which illustrates (Nixon, 1997) theory that masculinity is synonymous with male dominance over women. Namor, as Shuri's adversary, questions her capacity and regards himself as a natural leader, reinforcing the perception that leadership is more inherently associated with men. Moreover, Davidoff and Hall (1997) argue that women are confined to domestic roles. This is demonstrated by the depiction of Wakandan women as primarily focused on their roles as "traditional guardians" rather than as strategic leaders. Characters such as Shuri, Nakia (Shuri's female ally), and Okoye (another female ally) are often portrayed as either complementary to men or as bearing the emotional burdens of their community, even when assigned significant roles.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis and the data presented in this study, it can be concluded that the male characters in the three films are frequently portrayed as dismissive and unsupportive toward the female superheroes. In *Captain Marvel*, Carol Danvers is often confronted with doubt and rejection from male characters, who tend to question her abilities and leadership. In *Black Widow*, Natasha Romanoff encounters portrayals that attempt to undermine her contributions within the group. Meanwhile, in *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*, although there is recognition of female

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characters' capabilities, there are still attitudes that reveal a tendency toward male dominance. These portrayals reflect gender bias that hinders the equal acceptance of female characters as superheroes.

The findings also demonstrate that the three films consistently depict female superheroes facing various forms of discrimination and gender bias. In *Captain Marvel*, Carol Danvers must struggle against unfair judgments that belittle her abilities as a woman. In *Black Widow*, Natasha Romanoff is portrayed as carrying the trauma of past experiences rooted in the exploitation of women. *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* likewise highlights Shuri's struggle as a woman who must prove her worthiness as a leader in a patriarchal context.

The female superheroes in these three films exhibit diverse responses and emotions toward the social pressures they encounter. *Captain Marvel* illustrates how Carol Danvers resists the restrictions imposed by a male-dominated military environment, while Natasha Romanoff in *Black Widow* faces the complexity of her emotions as an agent forced to conform to masculine expectations and values. Shuri in *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* demonstrates courage and creativity in overcoming societal doubts regarding her capability as a leader. Collectively, these characters reveal that, despite facing different forms of social pressure, they maintain their integrity and identity as women.

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