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Gender Portrayal in Marvel Cinematic Universe Films: Gender Representation,  
Moral Alignment, and Rewards for Violence

Kristen Ray

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

### Gender Portrayal in Marvel Cinematic Universe Films: Gender Representation, Moral Alignment, and Rewards for Violence

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The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) is the most popular film franchise in terms of box-office dollars. This superhero franchise has the power to influence their vast and dedicated audience greatly regarding gender. Social cognitive theory and cultivation theory shows that MCU movies could influence the gender schemas some people have. Previous research has shown that men are often portrayed as evil and as preparators of violence. Women that are violent are considered unnatural and go against gender stereotypes. Evil women are often portrayed as victims of circumstance or good women that are compelled to be evil for a short time. This study is a content analysis of the MCU films in phases one through three, which focuses on gender, moral alignment, and rewards for violence. There is an increase in the percent of female main characters over the course of the phases. There are high percentages of females that are rated “good” and a higher percentage of males that are “evil”. There is no significant relationship between gender and rewards for violence. Although there appears to be progress in portraying men and women similarly, there is still progress to be made.

Keywords: Marvel, gender, violence, morality

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## Introduction

Of the top ten highest grossing film franchises, four of the franchises are superhero series as of 2019 (the-numbers.com, 2019). Since post-9/11, with an increased importance placed on protection in the United States, superhero movies have become progressively more popular and breaking records with *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) accomplishing the highest grossing movie worldwide (Roblou, 2012; Whitten, 2019a). Marvel films are the most popular series of superhero films (Hunt, 2019). Because of Marvel's popularity, they can impact a large audience, which makes them important to study. This popularity may be linked to their spectacular way of telling a story.

Unlike other superhero brands, Marvel has wielded transmedia storytelling in such a revolutionary way that it could be a starting point for a new and more influential form of media (Davies, 2016). Explaining transmedia storytelling, Jenkins (2008) said

A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole. In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best—so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics; its world might be explored through game play or experienced as an amusement park attraction. (p. 95)

Marvel has a vast arsenal of influential power through its transmedia storytelling abilities. Not only does it have comics and movies at its disposal, Marvel has series, video games, books, amusement park rides, and merchandise that expand the story and the influence that Marvel can have on its fans. No other superhero movies have the transmedia abilities this franchise has, and very few film franchises have the transmedia capabilities that can match Marvel's. This has allowed Marvel to create an intense fan culture that can get its hard-core fans to wait through the credits to get another little piece of the extensive story (Bryan, 2018). With transmedia

storytelling, Marvel can influence their audience with repeated messages over long periods of time. The stories and characters that ignite this transmedia powerhouse typically come from the comic books; this makes the messages from these comic books very important.

The influential comic books are critical to Marvel, and the way they present their characters is very crucial to consider. In the comic books, the characters are becoming more diverse. Wilson, one of the creators of Ms. Marvel, said, “The post-Ms. Marvel superhero landscape is completely different from what existed when I was a teenager... There are more women. There is more racial and social diversity” (TEDx Talks, 2016, 12:07). Ms. Marvel’s title character is Kamala Khan, an American Muslim teenager. Despite fears that the comic books would fail, they were very successful, which showed that there is an audience interested in more diverse heroes that stray from the traditional White male superheroes (TEDx Talks, 2016). Many of these new, more diverse characters seem to resonate with people. Another creator of Ms. Marvel, Amanat, said, “Like the first African American and Latino Spider-Man, Miles Morales, Kamala Khan is so much larger than just a pop culture icon. She came together in response to that global subconscious desire for representation” (TEDx Talks, 2014, 13:50). This more diverse representation in comics will continue to influence upcoming Marvel films.

In recent years, superhero film franchises have made history with their female superhero movies. DC’s *Wonder Woman* came out in 2016 and broke records for being the highest grossing origin film for a superhero (Hughes, 2017). Three years later, Marvel’s *Captain Marvel* broke *Wonder Woman*’s other records of highest grossing female directed film and became the highest grossing female superhero movie (Montpeller, 2019; Shepard, 2019). These movies are starting to show people that female superhero movies can do well at the box office (Rubin, 2019). Many of Marvel’s upcoming films and series feature female leads (Dockterman, 2019; Lattanzio, 2019). *Thor: Love and Thunder*, a film coming out in 2021, made news because

Natalie Portman will be taking up the mantle of Thor, a traditionally male superhero portrayed by Chris Hemsworth (Dockterman, 2019). Other Marvel movies and series that will be led by females include *Black Widow*, *WandaVision*, *Ms. Marvel*, and *She Hulk* (Dockterman, 2019; Lattanzio, 2019). Although the increase of female superhero movies is important when looking at gender, the way women are portrayed is just as vital.

Because of the focus on female lead superhero movies, the portrayal of gender in superhero movies is important. When looking at gender portrayals, it is important to understand gender schema. Gender schema is a thought process related to organizing people by gender (Ryle, 2011). These portrayals can influence how people act according to their own gender and how they interact with people according to the other person's gender. Ideas about gender can be influenced by the media.

Because MCU films are a long series of films that are repeatedly seen and are extremely popular, the messages about gender can be influential when considering social cognitive theory and cultivation theory. This content analysis of the 23 films in phases one through three of the MCU allow for better understanding of these messages regarding gender. This study particularly focused on representation, moral alignment, and rewards for violence, all in regard to gender.

### **Literature Review**

When considering this topic, there are many elements to focus on. Marvel, social cognitive theory, cultivation theory, and portrayal of gender in the media will be the core of this section. Marvel is a large media powerhouse with iconic characters that are idealized by a plethora of fans. Social cognitive theory is the idea that people are influenced by symbolic communication (Bandura, 2001). Cultivation theory is the idea that people that are more exposed to messages from the media are more likely to see the world like the media does (Baker,

2004). Males and females have been portrayed differently in various forms of media, in different genres, and over time. These topics give context into the portrayal of gender in the MCU films.

### **Marvel Comics and Films**

In its early years, Marvel Comics was known as Timely Comics and created comic book characters like Captain America (Rosenblatt, 2018). One of the people who helped make Marvel what it is now is Stan Lee (Marvel and Disney, 2018). He was a comic book writer that was a part of creating superhero characters, such as Fantastic Four, Spider-Man, Thor, Iron Man, the Hulk, and the X-Men (Marvel and Disney, 2018). These comic books are the foundation upon which Marvel is built. These comic book characters have sparked a variety of media, including television and video games (Marvel Shop, n.d.). Marvel live-action film series came out in the early 2000s, like X-Men and Spider-Man (Jensen, 2000; Lyman, 2002). The film series known as the MCU began in 2008 with *Iron Man*, and shortly after, Marvel was bought by Disney in 2009 (Tyler, 2019). This film franchise has been successful in creating top-grossing films, making Marvel one of the most successful studios (the-numbers.com, 2019; Tyler, 2019). In fact, the MCU claims seven of the top ten all time highest grossing movies in North America, with three other superhero movies making up the rest of the list; Marvel's top movie made over double the tenth movie, *Wonder Woman*, which is DC Studio's only film in the top ten (Box Office Mojo, 2019).

### ***Marvel vs. DC***

Marvel films are the most popular series of superhero films, and DC is one of their biggest rivals (Hunt, 2019). This rivalry originated in the comic industry and has continued on the big screen and beyond (Hunt, 2019). One reason that may contribute to Marvel's success is that Marvel is often more relatable than DC because Marvel tends to be more grounded in reality (Marvel vs DC, n.d.). Another possible reason that Marvel tends to be more popular is because

the films have a humorous tone, whereas DC is generally more serious (Marvel vs DC, n.d; Diedrick, 2016). Marvel's comics tend to be consecutive and have different comic series overlap occasionally, but DC comics tend to be episodic; the movies seem to be starting to follow this trend with Marvel continuing their intertwined movie strategy and DC's new focus on standalone films (Bainbridge, 2009; Hunt, 2019; McEwan & Longridge, 2019). Because of this, Marvel creates more loyal fans that consume the media to hear more of the overall story of this universe (Beaty, 2016).

### *The Complexity of Marvel*

This successful brand is made up of a complex group of media, allowing messages to be repeatedly sent to fans. Marvel is not just a cinematic universe; it is made up of comics, television shows, merchandise, and much more (Marvel Shop, n.d.). This allows Marvel to send more messages to their audiences, especially with new mediums, such as their streaming services (Lattanzio, 2019). As of 2019, Marvel is the top grossing film franchises and series worldwide (the-numbers.com, 2019). Some of Marvel's most recognizable superheroes that are part of the MCU include Spider-Man, the Hulk, Captain America, Captain Marvel, Iron Man, and Thor (YouGov, 2019). These popular Marvel characters were originally introduced in the comic books.

This comic franchise has many opportunities to present messages to their audience, which makes the content of the messages important. Regarding the messaging of superhero movies, Bogarosh (2013) explained the following:

What we are seeing with these movies is not the creation of new superheroes, but a retelling of the stories of superheroes created in comic books long ago – in a time when women were even less a part of the public sphere than they are now. Is it any wonder then that the women in these films have a minimal presence, are relegated to

girlfriend/wife/mother roles, are presented as damsels-in-distress, and are shown not to be leaders? (p. 109)

Many of Marvel's movies are based off of comics from decades ago, a time when sexism was even more prevalent in the media (Bogarosh, 2013; Candish, 2018). Even when movie storylines are based on more recent comic issues, for most of the comics, the world of the superhero and the characters themselves were created in earlier decades (Candish, 2018; McMillan, 2019).

The content of the message is important, especially because of how large of an audience these franchises have. Marvel's primary audience is males 18-34 years old, although Marvel has a broad audience of viewers (YouGov, 2017b; YouGov, 2017c). Because of their portrayal of more diverse characters, some of Marvel's films have been able to appeal to those not a part of their target audience; Marvel's Black Panther attracted Black viewers (Foursquare, 2018; YouGov, 2017a). This has added to Marvel's already vast fan base.

Like a television series, these films come out and follow characters over long periods of time, and the timeline is considerably longer than a standalone movie or trilogy. The group of Marvel films known as the Marvel Cinematic Universe started in 2008 with *Iron Man*, just a year before Disney bought Marvel (Trumbore, 2020; Whitten, 2019b). There are three phases of these films, with the fourth phase set to begin in 2020 (McEwan & Longridge, 2019). Phase one went from 2008 to 2012; phase two consists of the movies during 2013 through 2015, the movies during 2016 through 2019 are part of phase three (McEwan & Longridge, 2019; Trumbore, 2020). This group of 23 films has the power to greatly influence its sizeable audience. Marvel has a significant ability to influence people, and social cognitive theory helps explain how this is done.

### **Social Cognitive Theory**

Social cognitive theory is a theoretical foundation that gives insight into the media's influence of consumers. This theory "provides an agentic conceptual framework within which to analyze the determinants and psychosocial mechanisms through which symbolic communication influences human thought, affect and action" (Bandura, 2001, p. 265). In order for observational learning to happen, it requires four subfunctions, which include attention, retention, production, and motivation (Bandura, 2001). Attention refers to observing something, and retention is remembering what was observed (Bandura, 2001). Production is having the ability to reproduce the observation; motivation is wanting to recreate the observed behavior (Bandura, 2001). This theory assumes that behavior can be learned "through direct experience or indirectly through the observation of models" (Smith et al., 2002, p. 87). It asserts that behavior is learned from a variety of sources, not just the family (Bussey & Bandura, 1999).

### ***Social Cognitive Theory and the Media***

One of those sources is the media. The media has some advantages for observational learning. It allows for the media consumer to view a variety of experiences, seeing the positive and negative consequences without having to experience these things personally (LaRose & Eastin, 2004). The media has the ability to spread new ideas quickly because it has the power to reach large audiences, which is an advantage if the influence is beneficial for the individual (LaRose & Eastin, 2004). Callister et al. (2011) said, "The media can influence both behavior and attitudes, and yet the choice of engagement with certain types of media is also driven by existing attitudes and behavior" (p. 458). Gender and violence are topics that have been controversial in regard to social cognitive theory and the media.

### *Social Cognitive Theory, Gender, and Violence*

The concepts of gender and violence are intriguing when considering this theory. Bussey and Bandura (1999) said:

Gender development is a fundamental issue because some of the most important aspects of people's lives, such as the talents they cultivate, the conceptions they hold of themselves and others, the sociostructural opportunities and constraints they encounter, and the social life and occupational paths they pursue are heavily prescribed by societal gender-typing. (p. 676)

Gender is such an impactful characteristic, making it important when considering social cognitive theory and violence. Violence in the media is controversial when considering social cognitive theory. Rewarded violence is particularly interesting because rewarded behavior is more likely to be imitated (Bandura, 2009). In addition to learning from the actions of characters, viewers learn from what is said about what people do; by this same principle, if violence is praised, it is more likely to be mimicked (Collins et al. 2004). The intentions behind the violence is crucial because rewarding such things as murder is different from rewarding violence used to protect people; these actions could influence the viewer in contrasting ways (Kunkel et al., 1995). In addition to violent behaviors, social cognitive theory assumes that many gendered behaviors and ideas are the result of observations. Behm-Morawitz and Mastro (2008) explained, "It is argued that individuals adopt gender characteristics in part by monitoring the rewards and consequences associated with others' behavior" (p. 132). People's understanding of gender is built from the intricate combination of experiences in tandem with incentive and control processes to govern gender related behavior over people's lifetime (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). The media can have a big influence of how people think and behave.



### **Cultivation Theory**

Cultivation theory came about in the late 1960s when George Gerbner and his colleagues were studying television and violence (Gerbner, 1969; Signorielli & Morgan, 2010). The theory is the idea that “when compared to light viewers, heavy viewers expressed notions of reality that were closer to television’s depiction of it” (Baker, 2004). Although television has been the main medium of focus in cultivation theory, media has changed greatly because of changes in technology, and it has allowed for a wider range of choices (Signorielli & Morgan, 2010). Cultivation theory focuses on persuasive and repetitive messages that are being sent to the public (Signorielli & Morgan, 2010).

Most cultivation theory research is focused on television because of it is “a system of messages, made up of aggregate and repetitive patterns of images and representations to which entire communities are exposed-and which they absorb-over long periods of time” (Signorielli & Morgan, 2010, p. 106). Since technology is always changing, it seems that it is not fair to only study the cultivation aspects of television. Because Marvel and other transmedia, popular film franchises could be described in a similar fashion to how television is described by Signorielli and Morgan (2010), it seems practical to use cultivation theory to better understand this more recent type of media.

The media can cultivate gender schemas; in fact, “television’s messages about sex-roles are among its most pervasive and stable features” (Morgan, 1987, p. 270). Referring to racial stereotypes, Graves (1999) stated that cultivation theory “concludes that exposure to stereotypes would lead to distortions in the viewers’ sense of the groups portrayed as a result of exposure to different diets of televised racial content” (p. 712). This conclusion could be true for gender stereotypes as well. The media can be used to combat stereotypes; an example of this is *Sesame Street* because it specifically focused its message on being friends with people that are different,

which helped counter ideas children had about other races and promoted inter-racial friendships (Graves, 1999). Television and other forms of media are a resource for social information for people that consume it often (Morgan et al., 2009). Gender roles is an important part of social information, which makes gendered messages from the media important.

### **Gender Portrayal**

The media can influence perceptions of gender. The media can reiterate gender schemas and stereotypes, and with repetitive messaging, this can influence how viewers perceive the world (Signorielli & Morgan, 2010; Wharton, 2005). Women are underrepresented in media, which makes the messages that are presented about women even more significant (Collins, 2011). There are many unflattering portrayals of both males and females.

### **Gender Schema**

When looking at gender portrayal, gender schemas is a concept that should be considered. Gender schemas are cognitive shortcuts that help people understand gender (Wharton, 2005). As children, gender identity, being able to classify oneself and others as male or female, starts to develop (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). A schema is a way of organizing thoughts, and it influences how people perceive the world (Ryle, 2011). Gender schemas are associated with the identity of oneself and what are acceptable behaviors according to one's gender (Bem, 1983; Ryle, 2011). Ryle (2011) explains, "Gender pervades the way we think about the world and crosscuts many other categories...Gender schemas are particularly important, then, because culture creates and enforces that importance" (p. 134).

The media is an important part of culture, and media can influence the gender schemas people have, which impacts how people see themselves and the world (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2008). The media's influence on gender schemas can be more impactful if the schema is in line with a current schema, although portrayals that go against a current schema can be

changed if it is particularly profound or significant (Ward & Caruthers, 2001). Increased exposure to mainstream media is associated with increased sexist attitudes, but exposure to media that contrasts gender stereotypes, is associated with less stringent gender roles (Ward & Caruthers, 2001). Some common stereotypes in the media include women as sexual objects, submissive, emotional, and nurturing, whereas men are stereotyped as aggressive, powerful, strong, and assertive (Dill & Thill, 2007; England et al., 2011; Gilpatric, 2010; Miller et al., 2016). Some female stereotypes in comic books include love interest, nag, and slut (Crawshaw, 2018). In fact, because many superhero comics draw on these stereotypes and gender schemas; Crawshaw (2018) explained, “Lacking a deeper complexity, many superheroes are two-dimensional models of idealized social standards” (p. 91). Gender schemas are influenced by the media, and the ratio of men to women in the media can influence these gender schemas.

### ***Representation***

Women are underrepresented across many different forms of media (Collins, 2011). This has remained true for over forty years, yet it has stayed true in spite of women’s expansion in roles played in society (Collins, 2011). In popular films, men make up over two thirds of characters with speaking roles (Neville & Anastasio, 2019). Between 1990 and 2005, the percentage of women in G rated films stayed the same (Smith et al., 2010). The number of female characters compared to male characters is different according to genre; in tween television shows, males outnumbered females to a larger degree in action-adventure television series compared to teen scene television shows (Gerding & Signorielli, 2014). The ratio of males to females is not proportional in the superhero genre as well.

Females are underrepresented in superhero media. Many women get surprisingly little screen time (Bogarosh, 2013). For example, Rachel Dawes, Batman’s love interest, is only in *The Dark Knight* for 11 minutes (Bogarosh, 2013). There are fewer female characters than male

characters in comic books, even in female led comics (Cocca, 2014). An analysis of 1991 superhero trading cards found that there are fewer female superheroes and that they are less likely to be asked to use their powers for good even though gender is not related to effectiveness (Young, 1993).

Opinions about females in superhero movies varies. About 31% of people think that there should be more female characters in superhero movies (Morning Consult, 2019b). A higher percentage of the younger age groups, which is the target audience of superhero films, believe there should be more female representation in these movies; for 18 to 29 year old people, 41% think that there should be more females in these movies, and 38% of 30 to 44 year old people have this same opinion (Morning Consult, 2019a). Girls do not identify to the same degree with superheroes as boys do, which may be related to the lack of female superheroes (Martin, 2007). In addition to gender representation, morality is another part of the media that should be explored.

### ***Moral and Ethical Alignment***

In the role-playing game, Dungeons and Dragons, players create their characters, choosing a variety of characteristics. Two vital characteristics of these game characters are moral and ethical alignment. For moral alignment, a character can be good, neutral, or evil (Wizards RPG Team, 2014). Ethical alignment refers to whether a character is lawful, neutral, or chaotic (Wizards RPG Team, 2014). In the game, these two alignments are combined to form an alignment matrix, creating categories, such as lawful good or chaotic neutral (Wizards RPG Team, 2014). Since these alignments measure different attributes in a character, it is logical to split the matrix into moral alignment and ethical alignment (Ewell et al., 2016). Additionally, this paper draws on these categories from Dungeons and Dragons to explain moral and ethical alignment within Marvel movies.

Whether a character is good, evil, or somewhere in-between, can influence how the character is received by the viewers. Morality affects impressions even more so than warmth (Goodwin, 2015). Traits that are connected to morality include, “kindness, sincerity, tolerance, and trustworthiness” (Goodwin, 2015, p. 39). This debate between good and evil is a key part of many forms of media and can greatly influence the way characters are viewed (Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012). When viewers compare themselves to good characters and feel that the character is better than them, this can motivate viewers to change; when comparing to morally ambiguous characters, there is less motivation to change (Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2015). Good characters are liked by viewers, unlike evil characters and morally ambiguous characters, who are not liked to the same degree (Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012). Conversely, morally ambiguous characters, like good and evil characters, are just as “transporting, suspenseful, cognitively engaging, and thereby enjoyable as good characters” (Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012, p. 117). Morally ambiguous characters are multi-dimensional characters and have both positive and negative characteristics, whereas the traditional heroes and villains are one-dimensional characters (Eden et al., 2017). Sometimes villains are used to make the hero look better; Batman is a great example of this because he sometimes pushes the limits of what is considered good, but the Joker is so bad that it makes Batman appear far better in comparison (Fretheim, 2017). Just like how heroes and villains are contrasted in their morality, gender is juxtaposed as well.

Men and women are often portrayed differently in the media. In G rated films, it was found that females were more likely to be good than males (Smith et al., 2010). In comic films, 62.2% of characters were portrayed as protagonists, while only 30% were portrayed as antagonists (Topp, 2019). Over twice as many men were coded as superheroes in film compared to women (Miller et al., 2016). Males were more likely to be portrayed as evil in these films (Miller et al., 2016). This idea of “bad guys,” not bad girls, is something that bleeds into various

forms of media including with superheroes. Despite being few and far between, female villains are portrayed in a unique way.

There are many female stereotypes in comic media that are not positive. Female villains are often portrayed as victims of circumstances, and they do things under duress (Topp, 2019). One example of this could be Catwoman. Whether it is explained by insanity or a cat curse, in some film portrayals, Catwoman is shown as being good at first, but an evilness is thrust upon her that she cannot control (Di Novi & Burton, 1992; Di Novi & Piof, 2004). In the 1970s, many comics had a good girl gone bad storyline, which consisted of “previously straight-forward female superheroes becoming ‘bad’, either by possession, hypnotization, black mail or other means of doing the wrong thing while still remaining believably good once the phase ended, such as coming back from being hypnotized” (Fretheim, 2017, p. 57). This insanity is one reason why these women seem to commit violence. Both moral and ethical alignment are helpful in giving insight into the psyche of a character.

Ethical alignment seems to contrast people that desire order and those with a desire for freedom; each of the categories associated with ethical alignment have both positive and negative attributes about them (Alignment, n.d.). The research of Ewell et al. (2016) focused on how people created avatars and found that moral and ethical alignment were correlated, although the correlation was not considered statistically significant. Similarly, they found that gender somewhat predicted ethical alignment when choosing avatars, but it was not statistically significant either (Ewell et al., 2016). Both moral and ethical alignment help give insight into the being of characters.

### ***Violence***

Violence done by males and females is often portrayed in different ways. In the media, men are more often portrayed as violent. A study on video games showed that females are

portrayed as the perpetrators of violence only 21% of the time (Smith et al., 2003). In comic books, 75% of aggressors are White men, and men are more likely to be aggressors than women (Facciani et al., 2015). One reason that males are so often portrayed as violent is because in real life they are statistically more often the perpetrators of violent crimes (Gilpatric, 2010).

Additionally, violence is tied to hegemonic masculinity, which is “a dominant masculinity; one that is exclusive, privileged, strong, and rejecting of anything feminine or otherwise stereotypically ‘unmasculine’ in contemporary North American and Western society” (Fleming, 2015, p. 6). This form of masculinity glorifies the “domination of weaker individuals through power and violence” (Fleming, 2015, p. 52). In fact, characteristics of masculinity are tied to violence regardless of sex (Eschholz & Bufkin, 2001). When being violent, females are sometimes masculinized (Eschholz & Bufkin, 2001).

***Violent Females.*** Over the years, there has been an increase of female action heroes, but often it is rationalized in some way (Gilpatric, 2010). Because female violence is seen as unfeminine and a threat to masculinity, it is often justified using the context of the situation (Topp, 2019). Violent women are not consistent with gender norms (Gilbert, 2002). Female violence is seen as unnatural. Women that are violent “are seen neither as sane nor as women. Society needs to see violent women as different—either as mad or bad—because otherwise, we would need new discourses to understand that both men and women can be violent” (Gilbert, 2002, p. 1282). To justify the actions of violent females to the audience, sometimes these actions are attributed to males (Joffe, 2019). One example of this is in *X-Men: Days of Future Past*, when Mystique says she will kill people, and Charles says, “Those are Erik’s words, not yours” (Singer, 2014, 1:27:31). The violent words are attributed to Erik because that is more socially acceptable for men to kill (Joffe, 2019). Some violent women are portrayed as insane; this

stereotype feeds into the idea that violent women go against feminine standards to the point that they are a threat to society (Topp, 2019).

Male and female violence is seen differently. Campbell (1993) explained, “Both sexes see an intimate connection between aggression and control, but for women aggression is the failure of self-control, while for men it is the imposing of control over others” (p. 1). Instead of using violence for assaulting someone, female violence is often portrayed as being used to get away, deflect, or protection (Topp, 2019). Many female action heroes are portrayed as protectors and are additionally stereotyped as willing to do anything to save their loved ones (Powers, 1991; Tasker, 1998). Another stereotype is that female action characters that are violent tend to be “young, white, highly educated, and unmarried” (Gilpatric, 2010, p. 734). These characters are often romantically involved with the male hero (Gilpatric, 2010). Another stereotype in action media is that women are victims. Topp asserts that there is a protection racket, in which “‘Good’ men protect the women and children from ‘bad’ men. ‘Good’ women accept the protection” (Topp, 2019, p. 14). Even the women with superpowers are often victims (Neumann & Parks, 2015; Simone, n.d.). Simone (n.d.) explained:

In mainstream comics, being a girl superhero meant inevitably being killed, maimed or depowered, it seemed... If there are only 50 major female superheroes, and 40 of them get killed/maimed/depowered, then that's more significant numerically than if 40 male characters get killed, since there are many times more of them total. (paras. 6 & 10).

This theme of female superheroes as victims reinforces that comic books are a male dominated area (Neumann & Parks, 2015). This difference in violence is carried over into superhero films as well.

Female superhero violence is usually different from their male counterparts. It is not acceptable for female superheroes to be seen as merciless like it is for male superheroes (Joffe,



2019). Wonder Woman is an example of this because she is not as violent as many of the male superheroes that she works with (Fretheim, 2017). In the comics, Wonder Woman, who was created in 1941, did not kill anyone until 2005 (Fretheim, 2017). Many female superheroes have powers that are nonviolent, allowing them to be a part of fights from a distance; men have direct powers that more easily allow them to be violent (Fretheim, 2017, Topp, 2019).

***Rewards and Punishments for Violence.*** Violence alone can influence viewers, but the context of the violence is key to this influence. Various contexts that can affect how a viewer perceives violence are the attractiveness of the characters, whether the victim exhibits pain cues, the reason for the violence, the graphicness of the violence, and whether weapons are used (Kunkel et al., 1995). Graphic violence has a higher number of acts of violence in the violent interaction (Potter & Smith, 2000). Video game players do not feel less guilt when the violence is portrayed as justified (Hartmann et al., 2010; Hartmann & Vorderer, 2010). People justify aggression that is motivated by self-protection more than revenge (Hoyt, 1970; Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2013). Sometimes people appreciate violence when justice is restored, so this violence is usually done in response to previous violence (Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2013; Raney, 2002, 2005; Raney & Bryant, 2002). Previous violence can be used to justify the violent actions of superheroes and supervillains (Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2013; Sanders, 2005).

Reward for violence is another important factor of violence.

Whether a character is rewarded for violence committed influences how a viewer perceives violence. Wilson et al. (2002) said, “Rewarded violence increases the likelihood that viewers will learn aggressive attitudes and behaviors from such portrayals” (p. 28). When violence is rewarded, this is the behavior that is “most likely to produce imitation effects or foster attitudes supportive of aggression,” which is supported by social cognitive theory’s concept that there needs to be motivation for an action to be imitated (Bandura, 1965; Wilson et

al., 1990, p. 452). Additionally, if there is not a punishment for the violent actions, this can produce imitation as well; the lack of punishment seems to act as a reward to the violent behavior (Bandura, 1965; Wilson et al., 1990). Violent actions that are rewarded or not punished are more detrimental than violent actions that are clearly punished (Kunkel et al., 1995). When the protagonist is not punished, children think the violence is more acceptable, regardless of the reasons for the violence (Krcmar & Cooke, 2001). Further, viewing unpunished violence is associated with greater learning of aggressive thoughts and behaviors (Anderson et al., 2003; Bandura, 1965).

Whether violence is rewarded and/or punished can make a difference in how it is received. In 10-minute video game segments, characters were rewarded for their violence in 56% of the segments, but they were not punished in 98% of the segments (Smith et al., 2003). In primetime television, most criminals were captured, but only 5% mentioned or showed their punishment (Dominick, 1973). Superhero television shows for children were more likely than many other genres to have rewards of praise or material rewards immediately after violence in a scene (Wilson et al. 2002). Some scholars think that seeing rewarded violence is particularly challenging for children because they may mimic this behavior (Boyatzis, 1997; Huesmann & Miller, 1994; Martin, 2007). Social cognitive theory suggests that people can be influenced to change their thoughts and behaviors based on media viewing. Rewarded actions are associated with greater viewer imitation (Bandura, 2009). Rewards for violence is especially interesting when considering gender, which will be a topic focused on in this study.

Marvel was just a comic book company but has since emerged into a transmedia powerhouse with a vast audience, revenue, and number of movies in the franchise. Through the lens of social cognitive theory, cultivation theory, and gender schema, there is much to be studied about gender in these Marvel superhero films. This study will particularly look more

deeply into the MCU and gender, focusing on representation, moral alignment, and rewards for violence. The research questions that guided the study include the following:

RQ1: Does the percentage of female main characters from the MCU change over the course of the phases?

RQ2: Does the morality of characters from the MCU vary by gender?

RQ3: Does the violence of characters from the MCU get rewarded differently according to gender?

### **Method**

The sample consisted of a universe of the 23 MCU movies until 2019, ending with *Spider-Man: Far From Home*, which is the last movie in the MCU's phase three (McEwan & Longridge, 2019). This study looks at 53 Marvel characters, including 26 heroes, 26 villains, and one character that is considered both a hero and a villain, Winter Soldier (Chitwood, 2019; Stolworthy & Shepherd, 2019). It was determined that these characters would be coded for in a movie if they were a part of multiple conversations in the specific movie. The characters were coded separately for each movie.

### **Variable Coding**

Moral alignment is which category (good, neutral, or evil) of moral alignment a character is a part of. This variable is measured based on a study by Ewell et al. (2016), which is adapted from Wizards RPG Team's (2014) *Dungeons and Dragons*. After watching the films, the coders determined the moral alignment of the character according to the alignment the characters displayed for the majority of the movie. Good was defined as displaying "altruism, respect for life, and a concern for the dignity of sentient beings. Good characters make personal sacrifices to

help others” (Alignment, n.d., para.4). Neutral characters do not have a desire to kill the innocent, but they are not willing to “make sacrifices to protect or help others;” these characters are tied to others through personal relationships (Alignment, n.d., para. 6). Evil characters participate in “hurting, oppressing, and killing others. Some... simply have no compassion for others and kill without qualms if doing so is convenient. Others actively pursue evil, killing for sport or out of duty to some evil deity or master” (Alignment, n.d., para. 5).

Ethical alignment consists of the group (lawful, neutral, or chaotic) of ethical alignment a character is a part of. Like moral alignment, ethical alignment comes from Ewell et al. (2016), which is adapted from Dungeons and Dragons. Being lawful “implies honor, trustworthiness, obedience to authority, and reliability,” but also includes “closed-mindedness, reactionary adherence to tradition, judgmentalness, and a lack of adaptability” (Alignment, n.d., para. 11). Neutral characters have neither a strong desire to follow rules or disobey (Alignment, n.d.). Chaotic individuals believe in “freedom, adaptability, and flexibility,” although they can be associated with “recklessness, resentment toward legitimate authority, arbitrary actions, and irresponsibility” (Alignment, n.d., para. 12).

For both moral and ethical alignment, if there were two versions of a character, such as past and present versions, the version of the character that was in the film the most was coded for. Additionally, for these variables, scenes where a character is not in control of their mind, such as being brainwashed, were not accounted for determining moral alignment; this was done because those scenes do not reflect the morality of the character. The only exception to this is for Bucky Barnes, the Winter Soldier, because it is unclear when he is brainwashed and when he is not in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (Russo & Russo, 2014). His brainwashed self is essentially who he is in this movie.

Rewards for violence is defined as whether there was “any verbal or nonverbal reinforcement that was delivered to the perpetrator for acting violently” (Smith et al., 2003, p. 64). The rewards are based on Smith’s et al. (2003) study, which classifies reward present as “self-praise,” “praise from other,” or “material praise” (Smith et al., 2003, p. 64). Self-praise and praise from others is defined as a verbal expression of approval of violence. Material praise is gaining new material as a result of violence. If none of these rewards were shown, it was coded as reward absent. For both variables, rewards for violence and punishments for violence, violent scenes were only coded if they lasted longer than two minutes and showed violence between enemies or characters with opposing points of view. The scenes had to be in real life, not a dream.

Punishments for violence refers to whether there was “verbal or nonverbal signs of disapproval that were expressed toward a perpetrator for acting violently” (Smith et al., 2003, p. 64). This measure is based on Smith’s et al. (2003) study, which classifies punishments present as “self-condemnation,” “other- condemnation,” “nonviolent action,” or “violent action from someone other than a target” (Smith et al., 2003, p. 64-65). If none of these were present, it was coded as punishment absent.

### **Coding and Inter-Coder Reliability**

The variables were coded by two independent coders. Twenty percent of the films (five films) were coded by both; the remaining films were coded by one of the coders. Intercoder reliability rates were calculated using Cohen’s kappa and ranged from .70 to 1. The Cohen’s kappa was 0.901 for moral alignment and 0.728 for rewards. After the five films were coded, the coders discussed any discrepancies in the variable coding. The variables, ethical alignment and punishments for violence, did not achieve the .70 reliability rate, and they were dropped as variables due to this.

## Results

### Gender Representation

The first research question inquires, “Does the percentage of female main characters from the MCU change over the course of the phases?” Over the course of the MCU films, women are taking on a greater number of top roles. The percentage of women playing top superheroes and villains in these films has increased greatly since the beginning of the MCU. In the first phase of Marvel movies, the average MCU movie had only 6.67% of female characters that were coded, and the only character that was coded during this time was Black Widow (see Table 1). Due to the steady increase in its representation of female superheroes, Marvel has moved beyond having a token female.

*Table 1: Percent of Female Coded Characters per Movie by Phase*

Phase	Average Percent of Female Coded Characters per Movie
1	6.67
2	16.39
3	28.99
Overall	19.88

### Morality

Research question two considers, “Does the morality of characters from the MCU vary by gender?” Moral alignment refers to whether the character is considered to be good, neutral, or evil over the course of the movie. Many of the 53 heroes and villains that fit the qualifications to be coded for in multiple movies; these characters were coded for each movie, so 140 characters or versions of the characters were coded. Females had higher rates of being good or neutral when compared to males. Overall, about 61% of the characters were good. Conversely, neutral and evil characters made up a similar percentage of characters, with neutral at about 19%, and evil at 20% (see Table 2). Good characters were more likely to be in multiple movies. There

was a greater percentage of females that were good and males that were evil, while the percentage of characters that were neutral were similar between the different genders.

*Table 2. Frequency of Character's Gender on Moral Alignment*

<i>Moral Alignment</i>	<i>Male</i>		<i>Female</i>		<i>Overall</i>	
	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Good	63	58.33	22	68.75	85	60.71
Neutral	20	18.52	7	21.88	27	19.29
Evil	25	23.15	3	9.38	28	20.00
	108	100	32	100	140	100

Of the 30 characters that are in multiple movies, only seven (23%) of the characters have their morality alignment change over multiple films. The four females that changed morality over the course of the movies all improved in goodness (i.e. Gamora, Nebula, Scarlet Witch, and Valkyrie); they either went from neutral to good or from evil to neutral. These four changing females all originally came from the list of heroes. The three men that changed all varied in their patterns of moral alignment (i.e. Loki, Winter Soldier, and Star-Lord); additionally, they varied in what list they originally came from (heroes, villains, and both lists). Some characters do not appear in multiple movies, and all of the characters that are only in one movie all happen to be evil; this makes up 23 of the 28 evil characters (82%), and 43% of all characters. Because of this, it was impossible to determine whether the majority of the evil characters progressed. Many of the evil characters are killed or captured in the series, not allowing them to be in a second movie.

When looking at the neutral characters as separate versions according to each movie, this group makes up about 20% of the overall characters. Of the neutral characters, all seven of the females come from the hero list and make up about 26% of neutral characters. The neutral men are more spread out between the hero and villains list. There were 12 men that were heroes and

seven that came from the villains list. There was one man that was considered both a villain and hero, Winter Soldier. Overall, heroes make up about 70% of neutral characters.

### **Reward for Violence**

The third research question asks, “Does the violence of characters from the MCU get rewarded differently according to gender?” Rewards from others include self-praise, praise from others, and material praise. Females and males did not differ in rewards for violence; this implies that male and females are rewarded at similar rates. Males and females individually and overall were rewarded for their violence in 34% of the violent scenes.

Females make up about 21% of violent characters in these scenes; since about 23% of the characters coded for are female, the percentage of violence in females is fairly proportional to the percentage of coded, female characters. For all 23 MCU films, 96 violent scenes were coded for. There was an average of about four scenes per movie that were coded. Of the 140 characters or versions of characters, 132 of them were violent during the film. Each MCU film has an average of about six violent characters that were coded.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to understand the relationship regarding gender portrayal in the MCU with a particular interest in morality and whether violence is rewarded. Although females are underrepresented in MCU movies, they are portrayed similarly to men when it comes to morality and rewards for violence. These movies and their messages about gender have a more significant ability to influence viewers than many other forms of media. Although movies are seen many times in homes, many viewers see these Marvel movies for the first time in theaters. One of the subfunctions of social cognitive theory is attention, and the movie theater allows for more increased attention and fewer distractions. In turn, this allows movies, specifically movies where large groups of people experience them in theaters, to have a greater



chance to influence watchers when compared to many other forms of media. Marvel is successful in theaters, making its messages more impactful on the audience.

Additionally, these films are made to be watched repeatedly. Cultivation theory asserts that repeated exposure helps cultivate these ideas, making the messages in Marvel's repeatedly watched movies very influential (Signorielli & Morgan, 2010). In fact, Marvel is one of the main franchises that make up Disney+, a new streaming platform (Disney, n.d.) Because it is on Disney+, it makes it easier for fans to watch these films over and over again. This shows that these films have the ability to influence people greatly because of the environment they are often consumed in initially and the repeated exposure to them.

### **Gender Representation**

Marvel has been able to increase the representation of female main characters in Marvel through a variety of means, which will allow viewers to better see the importance and capabilities of females. With male focused comics, which are what the movies are primarily based on, the MCU has found a couple of ways to get around the problem. These solutions include gender swapping and writing new comics. Although controversial, gender swapping characters, whose gender is not an integral part of their being, is a way Marvel has increased the number of women in their films. Examples include the Ancient One and Mar-vell. The Ancient One was originally male, but seeing the character as more of a mantle than a character, the role was switched to being played by Tilda Swinton (Why Marvel, 2015). Mar-vell was cast as a female in order to give Carol Danvers a female role model (Barnhardt, 2019). Additionally, writing new comics allows for more diversity of characters, including gender and racial diversity. In 2014, Jane Foster became Thor in the comics. Just seven years later, she will appear as the new Thor, a traditionally male role (Marvel Proudly, 2014). Additionally, Kamala

Khan, a character that was introduced in 2013 will be heading a Ms. Marvel series in the near future (Rivera, 2018; Lattanzio, 2019).

The increase in Marvel female characters can help viewers connect with female heroes, but there is still room for improvement. This is important because some females have had difficulty relating to superheroes in the past, likely owing to the lack of female superheroes; having more female superheroes may allow women to connect more with the characters and learn important moral lessons from them (Martin, 2007). Social cognitive theory looks at how media consumers are influenced by the media they choose to consume (Bandura, 2001). If females see female superheroes as positive role models of powerful, altruistic heroes, just like male superheroes, this could help females to want to mimic these characteristics. Superheroes often stand for a variety of moral principles, so it could be beneficial if women had more superheroes to be an example. Cultivation theory looks at the influence that the media has in influencing thoughts and schemas. When the Marvel movies portray females as major characters in films, many with superpowers, when repetitive, this message could influence the way males and females view women. It could allow viewers to see women as just as important as men and as capable beings. Marvel is predicted to continue its message of females being significant. Kevin Feige, the president of Marvel, said:

I think we're getting to the point soon where we have so many great female characters that those are just our heroes as opposed to when are they all female, all male. It's just the Marvel heroes, more than half of which will be women. (Bacon, 2018, para. 4)

With the female heavy line up of movies and series, phase four of Marvel may become women's time to shine, thus balancing out Marvel's male heavy past. However, increasing the number of females is not enough to change the portrayal of women in the media. Additionally, the way females are portrayed is important as well.

## **Morality**

Because there was a difference between males and females in regard to moral alignment, this could help in building gender schemas that are negative for males and positive for females. In previous literature, males were stereotyped as evil villains, and these movies are reinforcing this gender stereotype; it paints males as people with questionable morals (Miller et al., 2016). Females are shown as having higher morals, being good; this feeds into the idea that men are more malevolent, and women are more benevolent. This could influence the gender schemas of males and females. Referring to power and violence, Friedberg, (2015) explained, "Cultivation theory indicates that consistent exposure to" violence schemas "strengthens the association of violence and strength with masculinity, continuing this traditional gendered stereotype" (p. 42). This theory helps explain that over time, with reoccurring and convincing messages, men and women may see males as more as eviler when compared to women (Signorielli & Morgan, 2010). For men, this could be a way to justify bad behavior. This could also lead to both sexes discriminating against males, seeing them as less benevolent or willing to hurt others when compared to women. There are gender stereotypes that could be harmful as well.

Unlike many comic books, these films may help viewers combat the good girl gone bad stereotype. Previous superhero media has portrayed females as a good girl gone bad, then back to good again (Fretheim, 2017). The results show that this is not a recurring storyline in the MCU. The females that do change are progressing in goodness and do not start off good. In fact, the only character that follows this good, bad, good storyline is Winter Soldier. Bucky, Captain America's best friend, fights for good. When presumed dead, Bucky is captured and turned into Winter Soldier, a brainwashed soldier for the enemy. Captain America tries to get his good friend back, and Winter Soldier struggles to fight his brainwashing but is not the same afterwards. After time away in Wakanda, Winter Soldier seems to have morphed back into his

benevolent self. This storyline of being brainwashed is consistent with this bad girl, forced to become evil plot. Although some of the women have backstories that may align with this storyline, by the time that the audience meets these women, they have either already gone through this or are already in the evil or neutral stage; the audience does not experience the good girl gone bad narrative. Many of the women are just portrayed as good.

Having the characters be predominately good allows for positive messages, such as teamwork and good conquers evil, to be expressed to the audience. The majority of characters were considered morally good characters. When looking at males and females, the results from this study are consistent with previous literature in regard to the percentage of good characters. Topp found that 62.2% of characters were protagonists, and this study found that 60.71% of the characters were good characters (Topp, 2019). One explanation is that superheroes try to envelope moral values, one being teamwork; this requires a team of heroes to display this attribute. Another explanation is that heroes often live, and villains frequently get killed or incarcerated, thus the superheroes make it into the next movie; with this pattern going, the number of heroes grows.

The neutral characters in the MCU can spread the message that people are not just good and evil. Neutral characters make up about as many characters as evil characters. Most of these characters are heroes (70.37%). Characters from the *Guardians of the Galaxy* make of the majority (85%) of the neutral heroes. The Guardians of the Galaxy's morality is summed up best at the end of the first movie when choosing what next to do, they decided to something good and bad; they are criminals that do good things (Gunn, 2014). These neutral heroes often have some of the most deplorable villains to fight, likely out of an effort to make the neutral heroes seem better (Fretheim, 2017). For example, all of the main villains try to kill entire planets of people (Gunn, 2014, 2017). Sometimes neutral characters allow for character growth to be displayed.

Characters that are neutral in the majority of a movie or over the course of multiple movies can change, usually to good. These characters can be interesting because they are more multi-dimensional (Eden et al., 2017). In such film franchise with so many good characters, neutral characters may allow for more variety and make the films more enjoyable. Neutral characters are interesting as villains because they seem to have more depth to them. Villains that neutral are fascinating because there is often good and bad in them. Although not always classified as neutral, some of Marvel's villains that considered the best, such as Loki, Thanos, and Killmonger, are interesting because there seems to be some humanity, some good, left in them (Chitwood, 2019; Dockterman et al., 2019; Wittmer, 2018). Loki is a popular neutral villain, and the actor that plays him, Tom Hiddleston, explains one reason why, saying, "I think that first film really humanizes him and I think makes the rest of the journey interesting. It makes you always think that he could be pulled back, he could be redeemed" (Cotter, 2019). Morally ambiguous characters, like Loki, make the MCU movies more interesting.

### **Reward for Violence**

The rewarded violence in the movies could promote violence from viewers. Men and women are rewarded for violence at the same percentage in the MCU. This consistency between the gender will help people understand that women can protect others and use violence for good, just like men do. This is an important finding because actions that are rewarded are more likely to be mimicked (Bandura, 2009). This means that viewers from both genders may, according to social cognitive theory, imitate this rewarded violence if they are able to do so. One of the parts of social cognitive theory is that in order for the behavior to be mimicked, the viewer must have the motivation to do the action; because the action is rewarded, this provides greater motivation (Bandura, 2001). Another part of social cognitive theory is that the media consumer must have the ability to produce the action (Bandura, 2001). Although there are some actions that cannot

be imitated because the exact violence in the Marvel films requires fictional superpowers or above average fighting skills, most people have the ability to engage in violence of some sort. This makes rewarded violence especially important because viewers may learn to be more violent or desire to mimic the violence they have seen rewarded.

The MCU films seems to reinforce the stereotype of white males as violent villains, helping emphasize this in the minds of its viewers. Previous research found that three out of four aggressors are White males in comic books (Facciani et al., 2015). In this study, 60% of evil characters coded and likely often aggressors, were White males. Although this number is not as high as previous research, it was found that 24% of the characters were male but not human, such as alien or robot; of these non-humans were all played by White males. This continues the stereotype of having White male supervillains. In addition, it does not allow for a more diverse cast of the MCU.

Although men and women are rewarded similarly in these films, there are aspects that need to be examined that could explain this gender equality. One possible contributing factor for the similar percentage of rewards for violence for men and women is that many times there are teams that are co-ed that get rewarded as a team. This could include praise about the violence of the entire team or a material reward that the whole team receives for their violence, which is probably more common. An example of this is when the Avengers fight Ultron and steal his cradle in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Whedon, 2015). Another aspect to consider is that even though violence is rewarded differently according to gender, there are many other aspects that could influence how violence is perceived according to gender. The context of the violence greatly influenced by how it is perceived. An absence of punishment for violence can act as a reward as well (Bandura, 1965). One instance that stands out as a difference between male and female punishment in the MCU is in *Iron Man 3*. Pepper Potts grew outraged after killing

Aldrich Killian and says, “That was really violent” (Black, 2013, 1:53:58). Iron Man fights for 10 minutes, and Pepper Potts fights for less than a minute. Both attempt to kill Killian by blowing him up, but Potts succeeds. Unlike Iron Man, she feels guilty for her violence even though she has just saved Iron Man’s life as well as her own. These are aspects that limit this study and could be addressed in future research.

## **Conclusion**

### **Limitations**

This study only looks at whether violence is rewarded. It does not explain which classification of rewards are given or the degree of award is given. A character being rewarded multiple times and ways in a scene is considered rewarded to the same degree as a hero that receives one line of praise. Furthermore, the classification of a reward is limited to a selected few explicit types of rewards, and it does not allow for other types of rewards or more implicit rewards to be counted as rewards. Moreover, rewards were only counted if they were shown in the movie that had the violent scene, which does not allow for rewards to be counted from other films. Because many of these characters are in multiple movies, the rewards might not be shown until a future film. This and other aspects of this study could be changed in research to come.

One of the limitations was which characters were coded for. The 56 characters that were chosen to be coded for came from a list of heroes and one of villains. Although this list encompassed the major superheroes and villains, it left out some characters that do not play as big of a role as the minor characters. Additionally, there is some subjectivity about who is considered a superhero or villain and who is not. Characters that are not superheroes or villains, such as friends of the superhero or the villain’s minions, were not coded for. Another group that was not coded was agents of SHIELD (The Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement, and Logistics Division), such as Nick Fury and Maria Hill; although some agents were major

characters and participated in many violent scenes, they were not listed as superheroes. Some of these people participated in violent scenes, so this could have added to the reward for violence variable.

Another limitation was that this study only coded violent scenes that were over two minutes long. This does not allow for an overall view of rewards for any form of violence. Short fights scenes and instances of violence are not accounted for. Violence within the team that was not between people with opposing ideologies, often humorous violence, was not accounted as well.

### **Future Research**

There are a variety of future topics that would be interesting to pursue, and this research could contribute to these studies. Ethical alignment and punishment for violence could give deeper insight into how men and women are portrayed in MCU films. Although these variables did not achieve a high enough inter-coder reliability, with a new coding sheet and extensive training, these variables could bring forth valuable data. They would allow for greater insight into the relationships between gender, alignment, and consequences for violence. It would be intriguing to see if these variables do not have a significant correlation with gender like moral alignment and rewards for violence.

Since Marvel is the top grossing film franchise, it would be beneficial to study other top franchises, like the second top film franchise, Star Wars (the-numbers.com, 2019). This would allow for comparisons between the franchises. Looking at the other top series would allow for greater study of popular film franchises and their portrayal of gender. This future study would allow greater insight into the results; it would help clarify if the MCU movies are unique in portraying gender or if most popular film franchises are depicting gender in the same way.



Another beneficial study would be to look at MCU fans' perspectives on gender. A mix-method analysis could help with understand whether there is a difference in gender perspective between light MCU viewers and heavy MCU viewers. This study would give greater insight into the messages about gender in the MCU in regard to cultivation theory. It would give greater insight into the MCU's cultivation effects.

There are many other factors that influence how an audience perceives violence. In future research, the context of the violence could be studied within the MCU. This could include looking at the reason for the violence, how graphic the violence is, the degree of pain inflicted, the number of victims of violence, and if the victim shows pain cues. Although many of the scenes of the MCU movies are shown, the number of people seriously injured or killed can be high. Examples of this include when Thanos eliminated half the people in the universe with the snap of his fingers in *Avengers: Infinity War* or in *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* when Yondu, Rocket, and Groot took out the entire crew of the mutinous Ravagers (Gunn, 2017; Russo & Russo, 2018). This study on gender and the MCU yield some interesting and unexpected results, and it is a great basis for future research.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Coding Sheet

#### *Moral Alignment*

The variables moral alignment come from Ewell et al. (2016). The definitions come from *Alignment* (n.d.).

- 1) Good: “altruism, respect for life, and a concern for the dignity of sentient beings. Good characters make personal sacrifices to help others”
- 2) Neutral: evil have compunctions against killing the innocent but lack the commitment to make sacrifices to protect or help others. Neutral people are committed to others by personal relationships
- 3) Evil: “hurting, oppressing, and killing others.” Evil characters “simply have no compassion for others and kill without qualms if doing so is convenient” or if it can be set up. “Others actively pursue evil, killing for sport or out of duty to some malevolent master”

#### *Rewards*

The rewards variable is adapted from Smith et al. (2003) study. For each fighting segment, the following measures are assessed. Rewards are any verbal or nonverbal reinforcement that was delivered to the perpetrator for acting violently.

- 1) Reward absent
- 2) Reward present
  - a. “self-praise (e.g., after killing a victim, a perpetrator quips,... ‘I’m good’)”



- b. “praise from other (e.g., bystander thanking perpetrator for saving her life)”
- c. “material praise (e.g., a perpetrator taking the sword of someone s/he just killed)”

**Appendix B: Heroes and Villains Coded**

*Heroes*

Iron Man

War Machine

Hulk

Black Widow

Thor

Hawkeye

Captain America

The Winter Soldier

Falcon

Star-Lord

Gamora

Rocket

Groot

Drax

Nebula

Scarlet Witch

Vision

Ant-Man

The Wasp

Spider-Man

Doctor Strange

Mantis

Black Panther

Okoye

Shuri

Valkyrie

Captain Marvel

***Villains***

Obadiah Stane/Iron Monger

General Ross

Emil Blonsky/Abomination

Whiplash

Justin Hammer

Loki

Laufey

Red Skull

The Mandarin/Trevor Slattery

Aldrich Killian

Malekith

The Winter Soldier

Alexander Pierce

Ronan

Thanos

Ultron

Darren Cross/Yellowjacket

Helmut Zemo

Kaecilius

Dormammu

Ego

Adrian Toomes

Hela

Killmonger

Ghost

Yon-Rogg

Mysterio