The perception of Marvel Cinematic Universe’s female characters within its fandom on Reddit

A netnographic and content analysis approach

Monika Kostadinova

One-year Master’s thesis
Media and Communication Studies: Culture, Collaborative Media, and Creative Industries
K3 | School of Arts and Communication
15 ECTS
2021-2022 | Semester 2 | 23.05.2022
Supervisor: Fredrik Norén
Word count: 15,791
Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to understand the way the fan community of Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) perceives Marvel’s female characters. This study was focused on Marvel’s fandom on Reddit, which is a social media platform hosting millions of users. The research was conducted by using two methods – netnography and content analysis. Netnography helped for tracing Marvel fans’ behavior and engagement with other fans in an online environment, which were caused by their shared interests on discussing Marvel movies and their characters. Their comments on two key movies – ‘Black Widow’ and ‘Avengers: Endgame’ were analyzed, because these productions host female characters with major roles. Fans’ discussions on six key female figures were considered and content analysis was used for analyzing the comments of the fans. In order to understand the results, two theories were applied – affective disposition theory and feminist media (film) theory. The first one explains the way fans can form affiliations towards the movie characters, therefore it was used to understand the way they perceive the characters. The second one explains the stereotyped image of the woman in media and the way the audience perceives it. The research paradigm of interpretivism was considered for the outcome of the research, which leads to generalizations of the results. The results of this study show that there is no universal perception of the female character in Marvel, but many controversies arise. In the end, this paper discusses the limitations of this research and describes the recommendations for further research.

Keywords: Marvel fans, Marvel movies, Reddit, gender representation, Marvel characters, characters perception, Marvel female characters
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1. Introduction to Marvel and its fandom

The fandom of Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) is one of the biggest in the world – over 3.7 million people are keen on Marvel's productions by 2021 (Milakovic, 2021), where 51 countries mark Marvel as their favorite franchise (Game, 2021). The brand debuted its fandom towards the end of the 1990s by introducing the geek culture and mainstreaming it later (Milakovic, 2021).

MCU fandom is an interesting phenomenon to study because “in the Marvel universe, everything has happened” (Proctor, 2021): this new world of superheroes started with the comic books back in 1939, expanded to the movie industry but, in the meantime, is separating both settings from each other (DeForest, n.d.). It continued to the vast merchandize, and to now launching non-fungible tokens (NFTs) (Sparks, 2021) as the new digital craze over the last two years. These aspects highlight the changes that occurred within the industry, the brand, and the fandom. Such a strong media convergence and the diversity of characters that Marvel offers are a sign of possible research points. My thesis is therefore concerning the perception of Marvel characters and their shaped stereotypes. This paper studies these aspects within an online setting, where Reddit fan forums (called ‘discussions’ within the platform) on Marvel are the core of my research. Therefore, this thesis is raising the following research questions:

- **How do Marvel movie fans perceive the images of the female characters?** – main research question
- **What are the characteristics of Marvel’s female characters that fans discuss?** – sub-research question
- **What controversies do Marvel female characters bring among the fandom?** – sub-research question

So far, it is evident that MCU fandom has changed and will continue to change. Especially when new productions are constantly surprising the fans, the expectations of the audience become higher and their perceptions of the movies and the characters change. The audience’s activity also changes, as Kaila Hale-Stern (2019) takes us on a trip down memory lane since the first ‘Avengers’ movie has launched. Writers and readers would hang out on platforms like LiveJournal or Dreamwidth, Deviantart was a place for artists, and video makers would create
content on YouTube or Vimeo (Hale-Stern, 2019). Tumblr had its peak as “a place to post about fandom” because it served as a convergence of own content and ‘reblogged’ content by other Tumblr users (Hale-Stern, 2019). People could be easily dragged to a new fandom when they see different types of content on their feed and they easily engage with others via the Ask feature and topic tags (Hale-Stern, 2019). Regardless of the platform later on, people would see how others write stories and create any type of content (videos, memes, gifs, photo edits), so they would go and do the same, and in that way this turned ‘The Avengers’ into a dominant fandom overnight (Hale-Stern, 2019). Now, the variety of platforms might make marketers more aware of the fans’ needs and can serve to meet those needs, thus the movie production can change based on the audiences’ needs and wants.

As Marvel is a “wholly-owned subsidiary of The Walt Disney Company” (Marvel Entertainment, 2022), the President of Marketing at Walt Disney Studios Asad Ayaz (Wasserman, 2021) emphasizes how much the fans' input drives the brand’s marketing strategies for various productions. Christine Roederer (2019, p. 80) found that the director of ‘Iron Man’ said that prior to the movie, Marvel “would ignore core fans in order to appeal to the mainstream audience”. This was back in 2006, but now the trends are different. Wasserman (2021) explains that, in regards to last year’s ‘The Falcon and the Winter Soldier’, “fans were demanding [an extended hour-long episode] and the hashtags were trending”, so the production team “gave the fans the footage they were looking for, which is not traditional marketing and advertising, but it was a sensation” that went viral. Marvel also directs challenges towards their fandom, particularly on Twitter, to reach a higher engagement, for instance with the hashtags ‘TeamCap’ and ‘TeamIronMan’; this would identify the fan base of both Captain America and Iron Man and cast members would often reply to the fans with videos (Turner, 2020). In addition, songs and even new emojis emerge thanks to fans’ needs and wants. Tracing these changes and upcoming technological (and all other) trends determines the changes within Marvel’s fandom as well.

In this matter, a study on superheroes and stereotypes within the comics industry mentions that the appearance of women is “well made and [...] noticed by fans” (Cruz, 2018, p. 20). The audience has certain expectations of how the female
bodies should look like – i.e. aesthetically pleasing and overly eroticized (Cruz, 2018). The paper also shows that the “heterosexual male gaze” historically influenced the industry (Cruz, 2018, p. 21). Gard Ruben Fauske (2020, p. 15) traced the portrayal of the female and supports that the iconography of the heroines was evident in comics – hourglass-shaped bodies with little and/or tight clothing, which was “highly influenced by socioculturally loaded depictions of the female form”. The author also argues that this portrayal has continued in movies.

Complementary to the discussion above, Marvel operates as a “large media powerhouse” and its characters are “idealized by a plethora of fans” (Ray, 2020, p. 3). The brand successfully creates more loyal fans and the portrayal of a diversity of characters only adds to their “vast fan base” (Ray, 2020, p. 6). Nevertheless, women in Marvel’s productions have a minimal presence. Especially the fact that there is a retelling of the stories of the superheroes from a long ago, this was a time with fewer women that were part of the “public sphere” (Ray, 2020, p. 5). Therefore, even when they do have their presence, they are “relegated to girlfriend/wife/mother roles [...] and are shown not to be leaders” (Ray, 2020, p. 5-6). Yet, “positive change for feminism is on the horizon for Marvel Cinematic Universe”, but there still is a long way to go, Jess Ameter claims (2019, p. 3). We can only assume and predict whether the gender stereotypes are what fans need to see, considering the fact that Marvel continues its productions and performs so well. Nevertheless, this thesis aims to understand how the fans of Marvel movies perceive and make sense of the female movie characters, by studying this perception from the perspective of gender representation and stereotypes.

1.1. Relevance of the topic
The way the field of media and communication relates to the topic of this thesis is how it inspects and discusses human behavior in different cultural and technological settings in relation to Marvel movies. Fan studies are no longer a separate field; instead, fans are viewed as audiences and are part of cultural studies as well (Busse & Gray, 2011). Going back to the last century and John Fiske, he noted that “fandom is associated with the cultural tastes of people” and how “fans resisted their negative characterization” with their ownership and engagement with the media, which
transformed their participation (Sullivan, 2019, p. 193). Despite being questioned by scholars at one point, fans brought two essential aspects to theorists – social and interpretive. The first one speaks of fans engaging in informally structured groups to share their mutual interests with one another (Sullivan, 2019). The second one looks at the way fans interpret, produce, and engage with media content, which differentiates them from the more passive audience (e.g. one that only views movies and is considered a ‘casual’ audience) (Sullivan, 2019). The way fans integrate content into their own lives is what lies at the core of media and communication studies from the point of view of audience behavior. As a researcher within this field, I had the opportunity to follow fans’ activity in an online environment, therefore to study their interpretations and perceptions.

As Sullivan (2019, p. 210) states, “it is clear that the Internet and newer forms of technology are rapidly altering the landscape for media audiences by expanding their ability to interact” both with one another and with media content. Gray et al. (2017, p. 15) argue that the migration of communities to the Internet and the change in communication technologies “contribute to and reflect the increasing […] fan consumption”. This factor gives me the opportunity to observe fans’ behavior as a researcher and to understand their reaction and perception of what they are keen on and excited to watch in the movie theater.

In addition, it is important to understand other humane aspects within the field of media and communication studies such as gender representation and its perception, which this thesis aims to unfold. It is important to consider that the interpretations and perceptions of gender in movies differ among the audiences. These are based on the diversity of “backgrounds and life experiences” (Friesem, 2016, p. 373), which fans have. This thesis views explicitly the way female characters are perceived by the fans of the movies, where these characters participate, and whether any controversies or stereotypes are being formed. Friesem (2016, p. 374) continues, “using stereotypes in narratives is inevitable because this is how people understand the world”. The intersection between media studies and gender studies is crucial to understanding the intersection between Marvel fans and Marvel female characters.
2. Background

This thesis aims at understanding the perception of the female characters of the Marvel Cinematic Universe within its fandom on Reddit. Therefore, it is essential for the reader to make sense of a few concepts. The notions of fans as an audience, Reddit as a platform hosting Marvel fans, and the role transmedia (explained in section 2.3) play in the cinematic world of Marvel offer an essential background to this thesis.

2.1. Fans as an audience

To begin with, it is necessary to understand the concept of fans and fandom, and their importance for scholars. We can agree that most probably every person is a fan to some extent (Gray et al., 2017), but fandom nowadays has become a more complex experience, which we have the opportunity to explore. The work of Kristina Busse and Jonathan Gray in Virginia Nightingale’s book ‘The Handbook of Media Audiences’ (2011, p. 425) describes how fans are often seen and stereotyped as “socially awkward, maladjusted losers living in a fantasy world”. Nowadays, scholars and fans themselves try to break this stereotype. Seen as a specific type of audience, which often remains “invisible in public”, fans for scholars are “ever present” and exciting subjects to study (Busse & Gray, 2011, p. 426). The authors of this book chapter see them as one of “the most interesting subjects to study”, as they are “proactive, self-theorizing, and invested in their texts in ways that few other audiences are” (Busse & Gray, 2011, p. 426). Such an active audience shows the way in which they “make sense of texts in creative, personally, and communally meaningful ways” (Busse & Gray, 2011, p. 427).

Speaking of active audiences, Matthew Hills references to Henry Jenkins and argues that fans should be seen as “building their own culture out of media products and selectively “poaching” meanings and interpretations from favored media texts”. He continues (2007, p. 1) that fans “develop extensive knowledge about their shows” and eventually shape some form of ownership “over their object of fandom”. Especially this latter point is a factor for this thesis. Eventually, I observed such ‘hardcore’ fans, who heavily discussed Marvel’s movies and it seemed that they were following the movies’ plotlines for a very long time. Hills concludes that “their fan identity becomes a meaningful aspect of cultural and self-identity” (2007, p. 1).
When studying fandom, it is important to consider the extent to which people identify themselves as fans. There are different types of fan involvement and different levels of fandom participation. Busse & Gray (2011, 431) point out two types of fandom, which fans humorously distinguish and explain themselves – “Fandom-Is-a-Way-of-Life” and “Fandom-Is-Just-a-Goddamned-Hobby”. Nevertheless, researchers found that such levels of engagement are often different and change over time (Busse & Gray, 2011). This thesis does not aim to distinguish the variety of fan identification and fandom engagement. Instead, it looks at those who are purposefully engaging with others who share the same passion as them.

In conclusion, the focus of this thesis is centered on the fandom within an online social media platform (Reddit), which is further explained below. The paper of Busse & Gray (2011, p. 430) points out the importance of the Internet and how its rise “has led to a revolution in how individuals can access the fan community”. Inevitably, the fans of Marvel are part of this so-called ‘convergence culture’, which “facilitates being a fan with new technologies making it easier to access media, engage with others, and create one’s own content” (Busse & Gray, 2011, p. 430).

2.2. What is Reddit?

Since my research is based on the online Marvel movie fandom and I chose Reddit for my netnographic approach, I was interested in looking at its functionality as a social media platform with a significant presence of this fandom. A paper by Proferes et al. (2021, p. 1) shows that Reddit is now “one of the most prominent platforms [...] with 52 million daily active users”. It is considered a “data source” for many researchers (Proferes et al., 2021, p. 1), including myself. For instance, Reddit covers most of the functionalities of Twitter and offers additional ones and researchers can collect both qualitative and quantitative “expansive” data (Proferes et al., 2021). The platform also seem engaging among fans, and such like Nick Compitello would often keep up with the fan theories there (Singh, 2021).

It is essential to consider the way Reddit functions and is structured. A key reason for choosing this platform as my case study is that “Reddit communities attract users with different interests and discussions of different nature” (Horne et
al., 2017). Reddit and its functionality offers both users and non-users to easily search for a variety of topics they are interested in. Particularly, the topic of my thesis premises gaining insights on the Marvel female movie characters’ perception of fans, which can be well examined within an online platform like Reddit, as it hosts millions of users and communities. In addition to the Internet hospitality of such fan communities, I considered the freedom of speech and the ability to share and engage with others. As my thesis premises using the lens of the feminist media theory, the results of my research, which I discuss later, exemplify this freedom and give understanding of the old and new movements in the movie industry by looking at fans’ discussions on Reddit. The conversations on this platform may not mimic those that happen in other media, which is beneficial for this research – users see them sorted by popularity or type of content, which is more likely to be responded to (Proferes et al., 2021), so researchers can find it easy to trace the content of their study. I found Reddit convenient to follow fans’ discussions on specific movies, which I were to consider for my thesis, in comparison to other social media; nevertheless, following specific hashtags on other platforms, for instance, opens possibilities for further research.

Proferes et al. continue (2021) that information about the participants on Reddit, in terms of identity and demographics, can be limited, if a researcher needs such information. Their paper, however, has an overall statistic that a bit more than half the users are male and between 18 and 34 (Proferes et al., 2021). Some studies, therefore, might need to “consider generalizability and representativeness of models built using Reddit data” (Proferes et al., 2021, p. 10).

In conclusion, Reddit is an open platform with access to every discussion. From an ethical point of view, my thesis does not cover sensitive information shared by users. However, it is important to consider the studied discussions since each one can have different rules that apply (Proferes et al., 2021). By looking at the paper of Proferes et al., I can conclude that using Reddit both as a user and as a researcher is practical.

It is essential for the fan community to feel good and relatively safe in the online environment in which they participate. The biggest part of my research relies on this presence of fans within the social media platforms and their desire to communicate
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with one another and share the same passion and experience together. I encountered such a demonstration in one of the discussions that I considered for my study:

“Ok I want to go somewhere I can discuss the film so here I am. I genuinely would like to discuss and not argue! If anyone has counter points or things they’d like to add I’d love to hear them.”

Hi everyone, this is my first comment on anything Marvel related, I’ve had a week to stew this one over and where better than Reddit, right?

Such comments show that an online platform like Reddit is considered an ideal place for fan engagement in times when fans not only want to share their opinion on (in this aspect) Marvel movies, but also to communicate with other members of the fandom. They resonate with one of the reasons why online audiences cannot be considered as passive.

2.3. Marvel’s transmedia world

The way Marvel comic book characters are adapted to the movies plays a vital role in fans’ discussions on the movies. Such crossovers speak of the notion of ‘continuity’, which Bart Beaty explains (2016) and it heavily engages fans in their discussions. Back in 1962, Marvel’s ‘Fantastic Four’ was an early example of a “shared storytelling space” with the announcement of “The Hulk Is Coming!” at the bottom of the comics’ pages (Beaty, 2016, p. 320). Marvel continued developing in the same way over the years, which speaks of a high level of continuity. Beaty argues (2016, p. 320) that such a continuity level “generates a more affectively engaged audience”, because fans will have to dive into the narrative from the beginning. As I mentioned earlier and will explain it in more detail in the upcoming sections, the target audience of my thesis is specifically such highly engaged ‘hardcore’ fans, so it is essential to understand the importance of transmedia in Marvel’s franchise.

The way Marvel performs, as the large franchise it is nowadays, places importance on its fandom and its products. As already mentioned, Marvel is way beyond just its cinematic productions. The comic books’ characters that appear in the franchise’s
movies are the clearest example of transmedia storytelling. The importance of transmedia in Marvel’s world gives a solid background of the role that the characters play in the fandom and the way the audience perceives them.

As explained by Henry Jenkins (2007), transmedia storytelling is a process of integral elements of fiction being “dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience”. Scholars have to consider the way these “transmedia story worlds go beyond individual media and create their own imaginary systems” (Lamerichs, 2022, p. 6). In addition, the way this new world of characters is created requires new approaches to understanding transmedia character building (Lamerichs, 2022). This transmedia landscape “plays with the borders between real and artificial, between player and character, and between human and non-human” (Lamerichs, 2022, p. 9).

Another way of looking at this transmedia narrative of Marvel is the multiverse that it embraces. This concept allows “multiple iterations, versions and reinterpretations” of the character populations to co-exist within a principle of shared commonalities (Proctor, 2017, p. 1). In fact, the paper points out that the Marvel Cinematic Universe is an example of such a multiverse where several comic books are “welded onto the narrative architecture of TV series and movies” (Proctor, 2017, p. 26). The crossover of the characters is what keeps fans willing to follow the storylines and the “What if?” concept of Marvel offers new scenarios and perspectives, which fans can play with (Proctor, 2021). Not only does this show the engagement level of Marvel fans, but also the way transmedia storytelling is used as such a powerful tool to keep the multiverse alive.

3. Literature review
In order to understand this thesis and its future results better, it is important to look at previous research, which concerns the topic of the thesis, and research, which offers background and introduction to the topic. There is less work on online observations of fan communities and the understanding of their perception of characters, so I considered a few concepts as essential for this section to understand
my thesis better. They cover the fandom of Marvel itself, the characters’ diversity and inclusion in media, the fans’ engagement with characters, the general gender representation in movies, the representation of female characters in the Marvel Cinematic Universe movies, the reception of characters, and fans studied within an online environment (namely forum). The studies on these concepts helped me lay down a solid understanding of the perception of Marvel female characters later on. Even though there was not much previous research tightly connected my thesis topic, it allowed me to contribute with my own work.

3.1. Marvel fandom

The paper of Havard et al. (2020) on rivalry in sports and comics highlights some aspects, which equally refer to Marvel’s online movie fandom. The authors identify these similarities in several ways. To begin with, “fandom in comics and other popular culture genres is typically on display online via discussion and debate surrounding favorite characters’ storylines” (Havard et al., 2020, p. 1076). As a highly successful franchise, Marvel strongly relies on its fandom and any fan-made content displays “high level of identification and commitment” to the company (Havard et al., 2020, p. 1077). Marvel Cinematic Universe, also called ‘moviesverse’ in this paper, introduced many fans to the comic world of the company, and for some it was a remade universe, depending on the level of fans’ consumption of movies or books (Havard et al., 2020).

Havard’s research lacks further investigation of Marvel fans in an online environment, so it opens a possibility for a further contribution on the topic from my side.

3.2. Characters diversity and inclusion in media

A relatable study by Jeffrey S. Podoshen et al. is centered on Marvel comic books and their fan community by using netnography, content analysis, and interviews in addition. The paper is essential for this thesis to ground an understanding on the characters diversity and inclusion in Marvel and the way fans view this ideology.

Needless to say that revenue for such big franchises in highly essential for their market performance and fans engagement. The work of Podoshen et al. (2021,
p. 131) argues that the increase in Marvel’s revenue happened due to the “inclusion of more diverse characters”. The authors performed a content analysis on online conversations with a passive netnographic approach and found that “many [fans] applauded more characters of color”, but others went on social media to complain (Podoshen et al., 2021, p. 132). Despite having a focus on characters of different races, the paper discusses gender portrayal in Marvel as well and it helps to understand the inability to offer accurate diversity and inclusion.

The approach of Podoshen et al. was towards Marvel’s diversity initiative and fans’ reactions. Their results show that some fans were satisfied with the lead characters’ diversity, but others were in dismay of Marvel’s abrupt changes regarding gender, race, and sexual orientation (Podoshen et al., 2021). Moreover, some fans would believe that Marvel had a quota they wanted to fill, if they were to make another female character (Podoshen et al., 2021). These changes were clearly seen as acts driven by profit more than by social justice, the authors found (2021). Other authors within this work (Russell et al.) suggest that media creators should develop prosocial narratives and realistic character portrayals “that consumers can relate to and engage with” (Podoshen et al., 2021, p. 133). The importance of fans’ engagement with the characters is developed further in my thesis.

The results also unveil that a character like Mary Sue is “in the story simply because she is a woman” (Podoshen et al., 2021, p. 137) and many fans consider Captain Marvel as her equivalent (with lack of dimension). The findings of Podoshen et al. overall highlight “how diversity and inclusion strategy may affect consumer reactions and ultimately sales performance” (Podoshen et al., 2021, p. 132), therefore understanding Marvel’s practices and fans’ reactions towards these is important for unfolding my thesis.

### 3.3. Fan engagement and parasocial relationships with the characters

Complementary to the abovementioned, it is also essential to understand the engagement of fans with the characters. A paper by Alice E. Hall (2019) explains that audiences can develop different feelings of connection with the movie characters, which previous research has shown. Factors of this development include the familiarity of the audience with the characters, the extent to which the characters
are portrayed as good or bad, and the level of empathy and loneliness of the audience (Hall, 2019). Such parasocial relationships can build over time and previous exposure of the character to the audience is a factor in facilitating a more robust relationship (Hall, 2019). The case study within the paper of Alice Hall is on ‘Star Wars: The Force Awakens’, which was released in 2015. The author (2019) mentions that, nevertheless, other examples of parasocial relationships include Harry Potter and the Marvel Cinematic Universe, which allows this thesis to be further developed and analyzed through the consideration of these types of relationships.

The work of Anneke de Graaf et al. (2012) explains that identification with characters emerges from the way fans will adopt the perspective of the character. This contributes to the notions of engagement and parasocial relationships, which Hall covers. The scale of emotional engagement with a character seems to depend on the experiences and the empathy level with the character (de Graaf et al., 2012). De Graaf et al. also argue (2012, p. 804), if fans “hold similar attitudes as the character”, this can cause them to identify with this character. This is the same when the character’s attitude is inconsistent with the fans’ – it can attenuate fans’ current attitudes and identification with the character may occur (de Graaf et al., 2012). Such engagements and identifications with characters are important factors for this study.

In addition to this thesis, the paper of Hall shows that gender is a dimension, which determines audience-character similarity and relationship – “audiences tend to [...] favor characters of their own gender over characters of a different gender” (Hall, 2019, p. 91). This is an important indicator, which should be considered for the results of this thesis. Despite having no information on the demographics of the sample on Reddit, it can be assumed later on that the perception of these certain characters, whether positive or negative, results due to the fans’ gender and their sympathy towards the character of the same gender as theirs. The example of Hall is from a case study by Oatley in 1999, where students had to read stories with a male and female protagonist, and the male students reported a wide range of emotions towards the male protagonist in comparison with the female protagonist (2019). Nevertheless, this was not the case with the female students; there was no
difference in the range of emotions, Hall explains (2019). The author concludes that such parasocial relationships are important in research, because they are “associated with more global evaluations of the media consumption experience, including enjoyment” (2019, p. 92).

The works of Hall and de Graaf et al. give an understanding of the fact that fans shape certain relationships with the characters within the movies they are seeing, which can be an indicator of their opinion and perception of the characters studied within this thesis.

### 3.4. Gender representation in movies

Before understanding how audiences perceive movie protagonists and the possible stereotypes they have shaped over time, it is crucial to ground the essence of the way these characters are represented. So far, research shows that females remain underrepresented compared to males and the importance that the media places on male roles can result in the lack of importance on the role of women in society (Aley & Hahn, 2020). The authors continue (2020, p. 501), simply by looking at the number of male and female characters, it was evident that male characters are dominant “across a range of media”. In addition, complementary to people’s assumptions and shaped stereotypes, female characters are displayed as “passive” and “needing the help of males” (Aley & Hahn, 2020, p. 501). On the contrary, male characters are shown as dominant, unemotional, and aggressive (Aley & Hahn, 2020), which again aligns with the stereotypes our society has shaped. Such character portrayals in movies affect the way the audience perceives their image.

Another study by Jang et al. (2019) confirms that gender representation affects the audience’s stereotypes of the social roles of males and females. The paper continues by mentioning relevant previous works on women’s representation in movies, which are essential for contributing to this thesis. Statistics show that “only 34% of the top 100 films in 2016 had leading or co-starring female characters” (Jang et al., 2019, p. 4). In addition to society’s assumptions and own observations, female characters are sexually objectified by the media and are “more likely to be described as sexy, naked, or physically attractive than men at all ages” (Jang et al., 2019, p. 4).
As Jang et al. found (2019), only 1.4% of filmmakers between 2007 and 2015 are women. The authors (2019) explain that the gender distribution in the movie production affects the gender distribution of the characters within the movies, thus the majority of movie producers – whether male or female, shapes the image of the characters. Of course, researchers and readers have to consider the fact that culture influences these gender perceptions and representations as well; however, it is proven that there is a universal pattern, which exists in stereotyping gender roles (Jang et al., 2019).

3.5. Representation of Marvel movie characters

The problem of gender inequality and misrepresentation of the female occurs in many different scenarios not only in real life, but inclusively in the cinematic world of fantasy, which Marvel is a huge part of. A study by Olufidipe & Echezabal (2021, p. 1) outlines that female characters are “sexualized by directors, costume designers, and their male co-stars”, which speaks of Marvel lacking female inclusivity. The paper notes the distinction between the four different waves of feminism, where the latter wave is used to look at and analyze the issue with the Marvel female characters' representation. Feminist theory was used to ground the explanation of the gender differences and how they construct meanings in movies (Olufidipe & Echezabal, 2021), which is relevant for my thesis as well. Unfortunately, it was not unfolded, so I aimed to develop my analysis with this theory later in this thesis.

Olufidipe & Echezabal’s work analyzed six key female figures of Marvel, which are essential to be discussed here to understand the background of the problem within this thesis. My thesis discusses some of these figures later on as well. Pepper Potts plays the role of the secretary of Tony Stark, but the viewer sees her as a submissive caretaker, lacking “leadership and management qualities” (Olufidipe & Echezabal, 2021, p. 4). In addition, the image of Black Widow does not even have superpowers, meaning that the aim is to show that women do not fit in the superheroine model (Olufidipe & Echezabal, 2021). As the authors add (2021), she is represented as a flirtatious woman who uses her looks to her advantage, and she sacrifices herself and dies, leaving the final fight scene of the movie being overly masculine. Scarlet Witch is the one treated like a child and the others “undermine
her superpowers of telekinesis and mind control” (Olufidipe & Echezabal, 2021, p. 7). The looks that Marvel gave to Gamora made her an oversexualized character in the cinematic universe. She even underwent a costume change, which states that “females in movies are dressed to appeal to the desires of a male’s wandering eyes” (Olufidipe & Echezabal, 2021, p. 8). As a sister of Gamora, Nebula was represented as the weaker sibling, who is also submissive to their father (Olufidipe & Echezabal, 2021). Lastly, the discussion on the stereotypical portrayal of women ends with Captain Marvel. The authors of the paper explain the way she was teased for being too emotional and her powers were under a male character's control (2021).

This academic work underlines the ongoing issues with the female representation in the universe of Marvel. The feminist approach and its theoretical lenses, despite being briefly discussed, show the importance of understanding the dichotomy between men and women and the role of women in movies (Olufidipe & Echezabal, 2021). These phenomena seems to have not developed much yet and the audience can still see the inequalities and misrepresentation of the female in cinema. Unfolding these issues then results in a better understanding of the way the audience perceives the characters.

A study by Robyn Joffe on the presentation and treatment of female superheroes in Marvel movies (2019) touches upon the deconstruction of these characters. The paper outlines explicitly that everyone has a “set of unconscious beliefs and assumptions”, which ideology can make us have a “limited perception of reality” and therefore nothing can be truly objective (Joffe, 2019, p. 6). I reckon that resting on this conception is essential for my current work as well.

Joffe’s case studies on Black Widow and Scarlet Witch successfully illustrate how Marvel had come a long way from adapting the comics to the movies. These female characters show how they are sexualized on screen and how they relate to postfeminism, which is defined as embracing feminism while at the same time viewing this movement as being outdated, so it becomes oppressive (Joffe, 2019). Postfeminism exemplifies that women made the choice to have a sexualized image and that it was not chosen for them, yet the so-called 'male gaze' still occurs and it was shaped by Hollywood so that movies can appeal to audiences because of the industry's skilled manipulation of the visual pleasure (Joffe, 2019). The author
(2019) also shows the contrast between Marvel’s male and female characters. The males, who are partnering with Black Widow, are illustrated as strong, caring, and smart (Captain America beating a punching bag in the gym, Hulk helping the sick, and Iron Man finalizing an installation); but she is tied to a chair in a warehouse (Joffe, 2019). As briefly mentioned above, the paper of Joffe explains how Hollywood movies appeal to audiences with a theory on the male gaze, because of the movies’ “skilled and satisfying manipulation of visual pleasure” (2019, p. 9). Therefore, it can be of no surprise that men are once again the more active participants and that the female characters are put on display to fulfil their function as erotic objects (Joffe, 2019).

3.6. Responses to and receptions of characters

Another study by Alice Hall (2020) explains the connection between the representation of characters and their reception by the audience in more detail. The paper shows that Hollywood productions particularly tend to under- or misrepresent women and even members of different racial and ethnic minority groups (Hall, 2020). Nevertheless, the author suggests that the representation of movie characters implies that it can shape “real-world expectations and behaviors” (Hall, 2020, p. 3) and the viewers can develop “a sense of virtual connection to demographically similar characters” (Hall, 2020, p. 5). One of the very few examples of a prominent female character is the representation of Black Widow, which is considered as an example and a case study in this thesis as well. However, the production of movies that include such characters offers the opportunity to call for and understand the “greater diversity in media representations for audience responses” (Hall, 2020, p. 5). Alice Hall continues explaining that despite being fictional, the “visible attributes of the actors playing these roles” can shape specific perceptions of the characters (2020, p. 11). To conclude, as Nicolle Lamerichs says (2018, p. 34), “reception is more than just making sense of a text; fictional characters are felt, imagined, and believed in”.

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3.7. Fans’ engagement in forums/fans from a netnographic point of view

Finally, a very particular study on fans’ engagement in forums based its grounds on analyzing the audience response to ‘Black Panther’ in fan forums on the website SuperHeroHype helped me to understand the field of my study better.

To begin with, previous research within the master thesis of Jatin Vichare (2019) highlights the importance of transmedia, which was discussed above as well, because it shows that the media environment is evolving. In addition, it is an example of how new opportunities for audiences to be active and to “play a meaningful role online” emerge (Vichare, 2019, p. 7). Other previous studies within this paper point out that the adaptation of comic characters to movies, when speaking of transmedia, signs not only as an attraction of new audiences and, in fact, new experiences of the narrative, but also as a “restoration to completeness” of the narrative (Vichare, 2019, p. 14). Despite touching upon a movie about a racial representation, this study is helpful to understand the perception of such a different character than what we are used to see in Marvel productions, particularly in an online environment as forums are.

Vichare mentions that the film adaptation of ‘Black Panther’ “provided a new glimpse into black culture empowerment because social media and forums were all busy writing and discussing the film” (2019, p. 10). Such an online discussion is an excellent opportunity to analyze the fans’ responses, as the Internet is a free and open space to express an opinion. Crucial to my thesis as well, which I also mention in the methodology and briefly touched upon above, is that it is difficult to identify the demographic characteristics of users, because they use specific nicknames (Vichare, 2019) and this slightly anonymizes (and perhaps limits) the research. Nevertheless, as Vichare indicates (2019), the forum still allows for an analysis of the perceptions of black culture and identity in this particular case.

Blockbuster movies, which hit at the box office, are considered interesting to analyze audience engagement with the movies, and ‘Black Panther’ is one of those successful Marvel movies. The study emphasizes that there can be a few factors for the audience behavior and engagement with a movie. One of them is the willingness to watch movies that are remakes or that have a large fandom, for the sake of being part of the conversation around this movie (Vichare, 2019). Furthermore, the author...
mentions that since this movie represented the first black superhero, social media platforms hosted many audience discussions, some of which were even controversial (2019). The way this paper addressed fans’ engagement with the movie was by using a textual analysis approach on the SuperHeroHype website’s comments, which were related to the particular abovementioned movie (organized by positive and negative reactions), Vichare shows (2019). The results show fans’ reactions towards famous people’s comments on the movie, the hype of fans towards the music in the movie and the characters’ costumes, the narrative, the race and gender of the characters, and the CGI.

4. Theoretical framework

In order to explain and understand the results of this research, a specific theoretical framework should be applied. It is considered as the lens through which this thesis is brought to a meaningful outcome. Inkeles (Blaikie, 2010, p. 124) describes theory as the “heuristic device for organizing what we know, or think we know about [...] a question or issue”. Despite having premises that it is challenging to choose the right theory and to find its purpose, Blaikie explicitly mentions that theories still help explain patterns or regularities in social life (2010).

There are a few useful theories, which I considered suitable for the topic of this paper. As Nick Couldry says (Hills, 2002, p. 44), “the language and theoretical framework with which we analyze others should always be consistent with the...language and theoretical framework with which we analyze ourselves”. Matt Hills (p.56) explains that the “shuttling between experience and theory illustrates how well theory can sometimes fit with our experiences, making a new form of sense”. Nevertheless, theory may fail to fit with experiences and it is important to consider it (Hills, 2002), even if it appears as a limitation in research. Especially in fan studies, Hills (p. 56-57) points out that it is challenging to “theorize the cultural activities of the fans who [...] refuse to take part in stereotypical fan activities”, but it is not impossible.

I apply the theory to my research and explain the link between the two frameworks and the empirical material in section 8. The theories are helpful to answer my research questions:
• *How do Marvel movie fans perceive the images of the female characters?* – main research question

• *What are the characteristics of Marvel's female characters that fans discuss?* – sub-research question

• *What controversies do Marvel female characters bring among the fandom?* – sub-research question

#### 4.1. Affective disposition theory

I imply that the research I am conducting on the perception of Marvel female characters relies on the levels of entertainment with the movies. This factor also speaks of the fact that fans can form affiliations towards the characters, based on the extent to which they enjoy the movie, so these will be either positive or negative. The research methods that I used (netnography in combination with a content analysis of the fans’ comments on Reddit) would give me a perspective on this aspect and the affective disposition theory is one of the frameworks to be considered within this analysis. This theory is the foremost step in understanding the perception of Marvel female characters. I explain the theory with the papers of two authors.

Before explaining the theory, Raney et al. (2009) explain how audiences sympathize with morally standardized characters and dislike those whose actions are blameworthy. An attitude in disposition manifests in both favorable and unfavorable judgements towards objects or people, but primarily based on their behavior and less on their emotions (Mühlhoff, 2019). On a side note, often the lines between sympathy and empathy are blurred. However, it is important to understand the differences and similarities for applying the theory. The first denotes “an affective response to another’s emotional state” and the latter refers to the “subject’s awareness [...] of the emotions of another person” (Wispe, 1986), but, as mentioned, both concepts often intertwine. Despite having the need of more profound research in relation to my topic in the future, affective disposition theory can be used as a starting point for this research. It states that “enjoyment is a function of the affective dispositions that viewers form towards characters in interaction with the storyline” (Raney et al., 2019, p. 4). The authors argue (2009),
what the audience does is to form affective dispositions in result of judging the actions and motivations of the characters. In addition, this leads to fans holding more intense affiliations (positive or negative) with the characters, as opposed to other characters and other fans (Raney et al., 2009). These dispositions, the authors continue (2009), have direct consequences on the experience of movie enjoyment.

Even though Marvel productions are entirely fictional, it does not mean we cannot look at its characters as humane and moral. The protagonists have their specific behavior and characteristics, which, despite having superpowers, still derive from the reality of human behavior and emotions. Fans have their own favorites and those whom they fully dislike, regardless of the movie genre. As Raney et al. suggest (2009, p. 5), “moral standards held by an individual can moderate their moral judgement of media characters and their behaviors”, which is one of the indicators of fans’ preferences. In relation to the female characters of Marvel, which I am using as a case study for this thesis, judgements on these characters can be based on the moral standards of the fans. The paper of Raney et al. (2009) confirms that we are able to empathize and identify with the characters once we like them. Such empathy is also an indicator of the enjoyable experience of a movie and the theory helps explain “how these feelings […] are important for enjoyment” (Raney et al., 2009, p. 5). Respectively, fans tend to dislike certain characters, which is a result of the fans’ moral judgement, Raney et al. explain (2009). This process signifies the extent to which fans are unable to empathize and identify with the characters, thus the experience of the movie can result in being negative. The theory emphasizes on the positive movie experience, which is explained with enjoyment, but the results of this research (developed in 7.2 and 8) also show signals of unpleasant experiences. The latter particularly is explained by Raney et al. as a process of moral disengagement (2009). The authors moreover turn to literature on the identification with media characters, which I also use to explain the phenomenon that I have discussed so far.

Measuring the fans’ responses towards the female characters, in relation to identifying their empathy level, is beyond the scope of this thesis. This will require additional research methods for a deeper understanding of their responses. Nevertheless, affective disposition theory suggests a solid ground for the results of
this research and premises what is believed when it comes to character affiliations. Another paper by Jonathan Cohen (2001) links the theory with the fans’ identification with movie/television characters, which also lies within the empathy level of fans towards the characters, thus shaping their perception of the protagonists as a final step.

The study of Cohen implies an explanation of the reactions towards fictional characters, in which Cynthia Hoffner specializes. The identification of audiences with parents or friends is in complete contrast with the identification with characters (Cohen, 2001). The author (2001, p. 251) explains that “directors and writers create characters with whom audiences are meant to interact to enjoy books, films, or television programs”, which plays importance in the way these characters will be represented, so that the movie in general is enjoyable for the audience. This representation is therefore vital for understanding the way fans perceive the characters. In addition, the quoted statement aligns with a briefly mentioned point of view in the introduction – the placement of fans in the center of media production.

**4.2. Feminist media (film) theory**

The thesis deals with the perception of female characters, based on the way they are represented in Marvel movies. Therefore, it is important to look at feminism theories, in order to understand the position of such a representation, the stereotypes of females, and the inequalities between men and women, which cause feminist movements. Elizaveta Friesem (2016) argues that both media and gender studies together provide a theoretical framework, which is essential for the scope of this thesis.

According to Steiner (2014), feminist media theory follows the patterns of representation across different platforms and reception of the female figure. Considering the notion of gender in movies, I found feminist film theory to be the most applicable to my thesis. It states that “cinema is more than just a reflection of social relations” and that movies construct meanings, derived from the differences between both genders (Smelik, 2016, p. 1). In addition, Smelik (2016) underlines that this theory has two purposes: it criticizes the stereotyped representation of
women in movies and, at the same time, offers a subjective representation of the female figure. The paper of Steiner (2014, p. 359) supports the fact that the changes within the representation of women in media “have provoked fierce debates”.

The field of feminist media studies started dating in 1963 with Betty Friedan, where a couple of years later scholars began collecting data about the unrealistic roles of women in television and film, or even their absence from this type of media (Steiner, 2014). A report by the US Commission on Civil Rights “documented the stereotyping and under-representation of women and people of color in prime-time television dramas and news” (Steiner, 2014, p. 360). The report emphasized on the television and the arguments, which are based on the female representation on screen, are considered for this thesis.

The demands of women back then were for a better female representation inside the media and an increased visibility of female figures, which could lead to greater equity and power (Steiner, 2014). Theorists focused on the way in which structures were gendered. This showed how they guided the cinema spectatorship and constructed women as ‘the other’, and Hollywood shaped the so-called ‘male gaze’ (Steiner, 2014).

The previous works in the literature review on the way female characters in Marvel movies are represented and perceived only confirm the issue with the lack of promising a more realistic and positive portrayal of female figures. We can say that these issues begin with defining what is ideal and right, especially if we claim that the media can mirror reality and accurately reflect women (Steiner, 2014). In particular, the so-called second-wave feminist media theory lies within the three Rs: the “depictions of women result from, reflect, and reproduce dominant ideologies” (Steiner, 2014, p. 361). Postmodern feminism movements clearly explain also that the way in which women are conceptualized in society is reliant both upon cultural assumptions and women’s gender performance (Wolff, 2007). Moreover, the paper of Steiner (2014) continues discussing that the female portrayal prescribes roles limited by race, gender, and class. This portrayal made feminists concerned that women would internalize a constrained sense of their options and possibilities in life.
Yet, Linda Steiner (2014, p. 376) argues that more work is needed to develop theories and concepts, which can help people to understand the media content produced by scholars and activists and to “minimize unfair discriminations”.

Tonny Krijnen (2017) explains the feminist theory within the media in more detail. He discusses that the image of the female within movies comes from two important concepts in cinema: scopophilia and narcissism, where the first implies “the pleasure derived from looking at another person as an erotic object” and the second implies the films presenting us ideal egos and the pleasure of identification (Krijnen, 2017, p. 7). Back in 1975, Mulvey argued that these were available only to the male audience, which turns them into the more active audience and women, on the contrary, serve just as objects of desire for both the male audience and the male characters in the movies (Krijnen, 2017). Here appears the term ‘male gaze’, which another paper by Lucrezia Motti (2018, p. 6) describes as a cinematic perspective on “women as fundamental in movies, but only as passive subjects and as a source of visual pleasure”.

Moreover, Krijnen touches upon the importance of social psychology, which focuses on the “processes that affect the interactions of individuals” and the way our memories and perceptions influence us (2017, p. 4). He continues (2017) that social psychology is an empirical tradition, which requires observations and experiments for its theories. In addition, it is important to consider the fact that “people construct their own reality and that social influence is pervasive” (Krijnen, 2017, p. 5). The results of how fans of Marvel movies perceive the female characters depend on these factors, so the observations and analysis of the results can lead to assumptions and generalizations based on these factors. Nevertheless, Katherine Freeman (2018) points out that even though our perception of the female image is deeply rooted in our individual experiences, it cannot be fully credited only to these experiences.

Krijnen suggests a way of analyzing research observations by using the encoding/decoding model, which Stuart Hall developed. It explains the way producers develop a message, distribute it to audiences, and they deconstruct the message in turn.
In relevance to media messages and their encoding/decoding, a case study of Janice Radway within the paper of Krijnen (2017, p. 9) explored the way “readers actively engaged with and interpreted the stories presented by romance novels”. The model can be applied to television and movies as well, in order to understand the way audiences perceive the transmitted messages. In connection with this thesis, it can also be used simply to understand the meaning that the comments on Reddit transmit by the process of encoding/decoding. Yet, this model can be limiting in terms of objectivity, as understanding the process of sense-making relies on the identity and subjectivity of the audiences (Krijnen, 2017). Therefore, this model can be considered for further research and contribution to this thesis, which will require an additional methodology for obtaining the most effective results.

In conclusion, affective disposition theory and feminist media (film) theory intertwine, which Anneke Smelik clarifies with her paper. Movies normally “stimulate visual pleasure” (Smelik, 2016, p. 2), which shape the abovementioned gaze and narcissistic behavior towards women. This works with the viewer’s ability to identify with the image on the screen, Smelik confirms (2016), but it can also result in lack of identification with the characters if the viewer dislikes their personality and/or behavior. The changes in cinema throughout the years “asked for a new focus on experience, body, and affect”, which allowed viewing movies as tools for shaping different experiences for the audiences (Smelik, 2016, p. 4). Considering the fact that “our understandings and conceptions of sex, gender, and identity are social constructions” (Wolff, 2007, p. 2), both representation and perception of the female figure differ. The way fans perceive Marvel’s female characters (identify with or dislike) is clearly influenced by the cinematic female portrayal, which this thesis traced on Reddit’s discussions (see section 8 for more clarification).

5. Research methodology and paradigm

My thesis focuses on the fans of Marvel movies and the way they perceive the female characters in an online environment, which led me into choosing a research approach, focusing on audiences. Primarily, fans’ comments on these characters
were the essence of my study. In order to answer my research questions, which address the fans’ perceptions, I took a netnographic and content analysis methodological approach, which are explained below. The operationalization of the methodology is covered in the empirical material and discussion later.

5.1. Netnography and content analysis

I intended to use qualitative research methods and since my focus is on the online fan community of Marvel, netnography was my first choice. According to Costello et al. (2017, p. 2), it is “often being explicitly described and understood as online ethnography”. Kozinets describes it as a “more human-centered, participative, personally, socially and emotionally engaged vector” (Costello et al., 2017, p. 2). This method does not require any offline interactions, as the pure ethnographic approach implies.

The benefit of using such a method is that ethnography combines different methods in one (Kozinets, 2010). Besides the observations of fans’ activity on Reddit, which concerns the way they discuss Marvel female characters and the way they perceive them, content analysis is also applicable for this project (see section 5.2). In this aspect, it is essential not only to observe, but also to make sense of the comments in the respective online environment that was picked for this study. The combination of netnographic observations and content analysis was useful in giving me thoughts, conclusions, and even assumptions, which can boost the research in the future. Even though they might appear as limiting, I could lay the groundwork of fans’ perceptions on the Marvel female characters. Kozinets’ model of simplified flow (Kozinets, 2010, p. 61) is used to explain in detail the methodology’s application to this thesis in section 7.1.

Other benefits of netnography include the fact that data collection is far less time-consuming than doing it offline (Addeo et al., 2019). In addition to what Kozinets argues (Addeo et al., 2019), netnography offers the “ability to get in contact and study in-depth an online group and its members: for this reason, interesting and useful conclusions might be drawn from a relatively small number of messages, if these messages contain rich and detailed data”.

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Like any other methodology, netnography has its downsides as well. For instance, “what is observable on the screen can be misleading, or at least provide a partial image” (Addeo et al., 2019). In addition, what Jessica Grumstrup describes (n.d.), “not everything on the Internet can be trusted and therefore can make drawing conclusions of market research using netnography very difficult”. Researchers also need to be careful with the way they treat the subjects, capture the details, interpret the data, and represent the subjects’ lives without being too subjective or objective (Hoey, 2014).

This thesis is being developed due to the Internet’s possibilities nowadays. Steven E. Stemler (2015) argues that since technology has changed the way people communicate, we are exposed to ‘big data’, which can be analyzed, especially for research purposes. The way analysts transform and translate this data, in order to make sense to the audience, is by using content analysis, which is another type of qualitative research. It is a method that can be used for visual, textual, and audio data, but most often, it is used for written text (Stemler, 2015). Most importantly, for the benefit of this thesis, it is a highly flexible technique, which can be driven both theoretically and empirically, according to Stemler (2015).

The purpose of this method is primarily to transform and analyze “observational field notes in order to identify the main themes from the [...] notes” (Kumar, 2014, p. 397). Even though some researchers criticize it for being unreliable and unscientific, and it can be intensive and time-consuming (Macnamara, 2005), content analysis still has its beneficial characteristics and applications. Supportive of the theoretical approach within this thesis, Macnamara argued that “feminist researchers and others who adopt more critical and interpretative approaches” are in favor of this method (2005, p. 5). The author continues (2005), the qualitative content analysis heavily relies on the researcher’s interpretations of media texts and much of it includes small samples of content. It can nevertheless produce reliable findings and it is essential for understanding audiences’ interpretations (Macnamara, 2005). This is why it is important to go beyond using only netnography and audience observations. Understanding the fans’ comments on the female characters of Marvel within an online environment like Reddit can create
meaningful conclusions and assumptions to be further investigated on the way they perceive these characters.

In spite of the few abovementioned critics on content analysis, it can be performed in various ways, one of them resulting in categories or themes (Lindgren et al., 2020). A similar application of the method was used for this thesis, which is shown by the full table with the empirical material in the appendix. In conclusion to the chosen research methods, the authors (2020, p. 3) argue that “no method is absolutely weak or strong, just more or less useful in relation to a certain aim”.

5.2. Sampling
Choosing the right sample size for research is essential for the outcome of the results. There are different types of sampling in quantitative research, but in qualitative research, there are differences. However, the non-probability sampling designs that are used in quantitative research are considered suitable in qualitative research as well. Merely, there are two factors to take into account for the latter – according to Kumar (2014), when doing qualitative research, there is no sampling size to be considered, but data is being collected until reaching a saturation point. Moreover, researchers are guided by their initial judgement on who can provide the best information for the research (Kumar, 2014). Yet, there still are sampling methods suitable for qualitative research, and those that I picked are mentioned below.

The author (2014, p. 313) points out that the non-probability sampling designs are used “when either the number of elements in a population is unknown or the elements cannot be individually identified”. Out of the six types of this sampling, judgmental/purposive sampling fits best for this thesis. According to Kumar (2014), the researcher connects with the audience who seems likely to provide the best information for the objectives of the study. It is a type of sampling that is used in qualitative research the most. As I argued above, Reddit is a platform, which hosts 52 million daily active users and is a valuable data source for researchers. The way it is built allows me to find the most suitable Reddit users for my research and to filter what information I need. My sampling group consists of users who are members of the Reddit community called ‘r/marvelstudios’. I explain
it and the reasons behind choosing it in more detail in section 7.1. This community is rich in data, as there are discussions on mostly any Marvel movie, so in relation to users, it was heavily engaging.

The platform particularly fits with the research method, paradigm, and sampling of this thesis, because it does not offer any demographic details of the users and inclines towards generalizations, which are developed by applying these research tools.

Convenience sampling is also suitable for the research purposes of my thesis, since it is guided by the researcher's convenience for finding the right participants – accessibility, location, known contacts, or being part of the sampling group (Kumar, 2014). Again, this statement aligns with the opportunities that Reddit offers me to conduct my research by its easily built structure and the way I can quickly find the information I need.

Section 7 explains in more detail what my sampling is and how I have chosen the empirical material for my research.

### 5.3. Research paradigm

Last but not least, choosing the right research paradigm is essential for any research and its reasoning. Norman Blaikie (2010) argues that research paradigms are a source for theoretical ideas and provide methodological contexts “within which research is conducted” (2010, p. 9). The author (2010) continues that they are ground for epistemological and ontological assumptions. The qualitative research that I conducted was looking for inductive reasoning for the methods and paradigms that could be applied. As Kumar underlines (2014), such research typically employs inductive reasoning. It is explained as a process, which involves making generalizations and predictions based on existing knowledge (Hayes et al., 2010). Its pervasive nature made this reasoning commonly used and important for cognitive scholars (Hayes et al., 2010).

I consider ‘interpretivism’ as a suitable research paradigm for this thesis and its research, although it might not be ideal. Blaikie (2010, p. 99) explains it as a “world that is interpreted by the meanings participants produce and reproduce”. The netnographic observations within this research, hand in hand with the content
analysis premise some sort of interpretations of these meanings. According to Blaikie (2010, p 99), “Interpretivists considered that it is necessary to work at a higher level of generality”, where this paradigm allows to establish objective points of view on the findings.

6. Ethical approach

When doing any research, which involves people and their data, we have to be careful with processing their information. Netnography deals with publicly available data, so the relevant concerns and solutions to these issues, which apply to this thesis, are explained below. I aimed to have the thesis results in correspondence with these ethical considerations.

According to Kumar (2014), regardless of the type of research, once it involves people, the information should be anonymized. The author (2014) continues arguing that it is considered unethical not to do so and that neglecting the confidentiality, with which the information should be gathered, is wrong. Taking a netnographic research approach, and particularly for this thesis, can be considered less trustworthy. Kozinets (Sandlin, 2007) acknowledges that trustworthiness in netnography is important, but the key to ensuring this is to make the communication (within the platform) the unit of analysis, instead of analyzing the individuals. Deller (2018, p. 16) confirms that sometimes “researchers run the risk of reproducing negative representations of fandom” when they treat fan communication as public and ‘fair game’. The issues with netnography can occur in the misrepresentation of users, yet the aim of this thesis is to understand the discussions on Marvel female characters rather than generating conclusions on the users’ personalities.

In relation to the last point, Lehner-Mear (2020, p. 128) states that individual user accounts can be identified with online search and forum users can “perceive this a violation of their privacy or dislike the public representation of their community”. Nevertheless, for the sake of anonymity, the data collection of this thesis allows not to display the users’ names. Even though most users tend to use specific nicknames instead of their real names, which will make their identification more difficult, these are not displayed either. In general, however, users should be
aware that once they agree to use an online platform, their opinion is no longer private. This thesis avoids finding personal information about the users or exposing their interests, beliefs, or any other sensitive type of information.

In addition, some companies, especially those who host forums, assume that the researcher can cause harm by lurking “(reading posts without interacting, which maintains researcher invisibility)” (Lehner-Mear, 2020, p. 128). On the contrary, others assume that making the participants aware of the researchers’ presence can influence their behavior (Deller, 2018). This is known as the ‘hawthorne effect’ (Jones, 1992) and to this day, it is debatable whether it is efficient to let your audience know they are part of your study or it is better to stay ‘covert’, Deller argues (2018). Yet, the observations for my thesis intend to give clear voice to fans’ viewpoints on the female characters within MCU. The anonymization of my data avoids creating reputational or emotional damage to the users, I treat their viewpoints with respect, and I do not create assumptions about their own identities that can cause any harm.

### 7. Empirical material

In order to understand the reasoning behind choosing my empirical material, I relied on Kozinets’ model of simplified flow in netnography (see figure 1). The sections below explain in detail my sample, choice of data collection and observations, and the further data analysis, following this model step by step. Later, I continue explaining my findings and I visualize the characters, which I considered for my study. I present a summary of my findings below, but the discussion of these is in section 8.

#### 7.1. Application of Kozinets’ simplified flow for the empirical material

With the help of Kozinets’ work on netnography, I considered his model of simplified flow (see figure 1) suitable for my thesis.
The perception of Marvel Cinematic Universe's female characters within its fandom on Reddit

Starting from the top of this model, I defined my research questions in the introduction of this paper:

- **How do Marvel movie fans perceive the images of the female characters?** – main research question
- **What are the characteristics of Marvel's female characters that fans discuss?** – sub-research question
- **What controversies do Marvel female characters bring among the fandom?** – sub-research question

In addition, I offered some background information on the research in order to explain the reasoning for the questions. Before identifying the community that I wanted to investigate, I researched which Marvel movies consist of female characters (either as main protagonists or as secondary ones). This helped me search for the movie titles on Reddit, which would then help me identify my target better. I focused on the Marvel female characters, who had major roles in the movies with the highest revenue. As of October 2021, the top three movies are ‘Captain Marvel’, ‘Wonder Woman’, and ‘Black Widow’ (Navarro, 2021). The first and the last one are the main subjects of my study. ‘Avengers: Endgame’ was the other focus of this study. The female protagonists have crossovers in different Marvel movies, so
some of the results show the same names multiple times due to these crossovers, just like they happen to appear in 'Avengers: Endgame'.

A publication by Chris Longridge (2019) shows the amount of time Marvel’s female characters were given on screen in the movies, which helped me to additionally navigate myself through the discussions on Reddit as to which character fans were talking about and in which movie she participates. I researched each one of them in order to understand what the screen role they are playing is. I displayed these names and their explanations in the column “comments” of the table, which I created for my results (see appendix). Some were not the main movie protagonists, but I included their fans’ perceptions since this will create a bigger picture of the female figure in Marvel movies.

Once I dived into the discussions of these communities, I looked at whether keywords such as ‘feminism’, ‘female’, ‘girl/girls’, ‘she’, and the names of the female characters would appear. As mentioned in the sampling section, the results are an outcome of looking primarily at Reddit’s discussions that are part of the community called ‘r/marvelstudios’. It is a subreddit “dedicated to the Marvel Cinematic Universe” (r/marvelstudios, 2012). Finding a discussion on the movies premises not disrupting the data that I collect with noise (i.e. gaining information on characters outside the movies, or information, which primarily focuses on Marvel events, games, merchandise etc.). Later in this thesis, the results are not presented in any specific order and do not consider the rankings of the movies.

Additionally, I looked for the phrase ‘marvel female characters’ within Reddit’s database, so the platform can show me any comments that contain these words. By examining them carefully, I could find comments that were relevant for my study.

I encountered comments on fans’ personal preferences of the Marvel movies and characters (likes and dislikes) without any reasoning behind them, so such content is not included in my study, nor would it have brought any meaning to my research

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1 “A specific online community, and the posts associated with it, on the social media website Reddit. Subreddits are dedicated to a particular topic that people write about, and they are denoted by /r/, followed by the subreddit’s name” (Dictionary, 2018).
The perception of Marvel Cinematic Universe's female characters within its fandom on Reddit

questions. When finding a discussion about Marvel on Reddit, I looked at the other comments as well, in order to get a better idea on the discussion. I read the majority of the discussions, because not every comment consists of these keywords. I quickly realized that the content of the female characters’ discussions was less than the one of the male characters, as the latter are more common to be part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. This conclusion is even confirmed by a few comments that I encountered:

*I don’t think much of Marvel female characters because there’s so few, but to be honest I also don’t think much of Marvel characters.*

*...male leads in stories are way more popular.*

Therefore, I did not limit myself to looking at a single movie or discussion for my research, because I would be able to obtain richer data by the observations and content analysis on multiple movies' discussions. I also did not set a preliminary number of comments, which I should find and include; as explained above, the sampling method in my qualitative research collects data until reaching a saturation point. Eventually, the comments I present as results are 62 and I looked at over a thousand comments within Reddit’s Marvel discussions. Some additional comments, which clearly explain some of the theory, are visualized in the discussion section (8).

As mentioned above, I created a table for my results. It is a ‘coding scheme’, which displays the relevant comments and the topics they bring. The entire table can be found in the appendix and some key comments can be found in section 7.2, which I summarized. Since I keep the usernames anonymized, the table does not indicate that. The key to analyzing and discussing the results is to link them to the relevant theories and literature. Eventually, conclusions and assumptions are drawn from these results and I explain my limitations and the further contributions for my research, which other researchers can consider in the future (see sections 8-10).
Each Marvel movie is connected to the others and this is why they are considered as a multiverse. My observations concluded that the comments on Reddit I considered for my study are of fans who have seen if not all, then most of the Marvel movies. They are certainly not average fans, who were there to just discuss what they like and what they do not. Nor are they the ‘passive‘ type of audience, which can exist and I mentioned earlier. Instead, they had a strong perception of the characters and the plot. This is why the discussions were so broad, especially when each movie’s duration is around two and a half hours.

On a side note, in the discussion section, sometimes fans are still addressed as ‘users’, because I am analyzing comments from an online forum where the audience is called ‘users’.

### 7.2. Key findings

Before discussing my results, I aim to visualize the female characters that I considered in my study (see figure 2). This helps the reader get a sense of the way they are represented, which is essential for understanding the fans’ responses. The characters in the image are the ones who were mostly discussed within the subreddit discussions.

**Figure 2.** From left to right - Natasha Romanoff (Black Widow), Scarlet Witch (Wanda), Yelena Belova (adoptive sister of Natasha Romanoff), Carol Danvers (Captain Marvel), Taskmaster (a female antihero), and Nebula.²

I considered seven subreddit discussions – two on ‘Black Widow’ as a single movie and five on ‘Avengers’. The eighth source was the general search of ‘marvel female characters’ within Reddit, which were part of other subreddit discussions. The reason behind including the latter source is that Marvel female protagonists happened to appear in these discussions, even though most comments were connected to general Marvel content and female characters in cinema. The comments that directly addressed Marvel characters within the discussions were towards the characters from the image above.

I created two categories under which I displayed the comments (see appendix). The first one is focused more on the negative perceptions, some controversies with the male protagonists, and some shaped stereotypes. The second one includes some stereotypes as well, but it shows the positive comments on these characters. Few comments can be categorized under both the positive and the negative thoughts.

Below (see table 1) I point out some major highlights from the appendix and I discuss and analyze them in detail in section 8, relating them to the theoretical framework and previous research.

The perception of Marvel Cinematic Universe’s female characters within its fandom on Reddit

Table 1. Key points from the empirical material

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>findings’ themes</th>
<th>Black Widow</th>
<th>Avengers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>female characters’ essence (+)</td>
<td>- the kindest and most caring (main) character; - killed off unnecessarily; - fully-realized female characters who inspire the youth similarly to the males.</td>
<td>- the girl shot spoke empowerment, pro-feminism, and was epic; - girls deserve role models; - Nebula was pragmatic and compassionate - Scarlet Witch needs more recognition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>female characters’ essence (-)</td>
<td>- no function or place in the current MCU; - unrealistic and nonsense way of fighting; - lacking character development; - girl power was deflated.</td>
<td>- the girl shot did not need the “woman power moment”; - underwritten and generic; - hope for richer character development; - all have the same personality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>female stereotypes</td>
<td>- sexualized; - brainwashed killers, as if they do not choose to be evil on their own.</td>
<td>- how Stan Lee said he likes the way Marvel female characters are portrayed – long legs and big breasts; - stereotype of the female power of love and protection and a special treatment towards the female characters; - flaw of the “strong independent women”.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Looking at this table, in general the most striking comments were about the fact that some female characters were boring and unimportant for the whole movie. Moreover, fans discussed that Marvel tries to integrate diversity and women empowerment, which is sometimes seen as too forced. It is also apparent that female figures in Marvel do not get the same recognition and respect as the male, and the perception of male and female characters is uneven.

Yet, I could find that Marvel’s female characters happened to be appreciated by their fandom, even though such discussions would cause controversies with other fans who do not see the female image as empowering and striking. Some fans appreciated the girl scene in ‘Avengers: Endgame’ (see figure 3), which for them spoke of women power and feminism. Others were empathic towards some of the female characters, because they did not get enough recognition and appreciation, and they did not deserve their screen death either. There were some humane characteristics of the female protagonists in Marvel, which fans found and
presumably led them to this empathy. The theoretical framework described in this thesis explains these perceptions in the next section.

Figure 3. Girl power scene in 'Avengers: Endgame'³

8. Analysis and discussion

By applying the framework of affective disposition theory first, I had the opportunity to analyze the outcome of the Reddit comments that I collected. Yet, theories sometimes lack explaining research to its full extent, so I acknowledge that the results of this study might not be expanded to their full potential.

To begin with, as Raney et al. (2009) discuss in their paper, it is important to consider the way fans experience the movie and the level of enjoyment they form. These shape their affective disposition towards the characters in the movie. Moreover, the audience judges the characters' actions, which creates more intense affiliations, which then affect the fans' experience, the authors argue (2009).

As mentioned earlier, I had to consider additional comments within the Reddit discussions, in order to grasp a more extensive meaning of fans' perceptions and experiences. This means that there are comments, which do not depict the categories in the table, yet they are essential for understanding fans' perception and they stood out. I aimed to link them to the theoretical framework as well.

The results of my research show that these Reddit users had different experiences and levels of enjoyment towards the movies, as they touched upon that as well. Not only were the discussions long and rich with comments, but they also displayed a variety of opinions on the movies and the characters. Drawing from the table in the appendix, some comments show that, for instance, the 'girl power' shot did not influence the movie experience for the fan. Others like the idea of seeing different scenarios taking place on screen, but they consider such a scene as forced by the screenwriters and that it ruins the story. On the contrary, there are fans who like the 'girl power' scene as it depicts feminism and empowerment, and it gave them goosebumps. Unfortunately, most of the comments were towards the male protagonists, but those that I managed to collect still showed significant results on the female characters' perception and experience of the movies. Supportive to the previous research that was discussed in the literature review, as Aley & Hahn point out (2020), the male characters seem to be dominant.

Supportive to what I mentioned from the work of Raney et al. above, some users claim that 'Black Widow', for instance, was "not a very enjoyable watch" and that
they felt disappointed after seeing it. Others were annoyed with the villains in the story or felt empty after watching the movie. I encountered comments on the way Marvel wants to attract more people to the theater by placing such an emphasis on a character like Taskmaster (who is not even the main protagonist and was considered unnecessary). Some users seemed to be excited about seeing Natasha [Romanoff] again and presumed they will enjoy the movie no matter what. As I indicated earlier, fans have their favorites, which can be based on fans' moral standards, which can explain why some fans have presumptions about the movies beforehand or will claim they liked the characters no matter what. The comments, which show some form of empathy towards the characters (that Black Widow was one of the kindest and most caring and fans could not get over her sacrifice), speak of such moral standards that fans have. Such results are supportive also to what Mühlhoff explains (2019) – fans form favorable and unfavorable judgements towards the characters. This thesis will nevertheless require further investigation in fans’ personalities, beliefs, and preferences for future research. Now it can assume and generalize that their preferences and opinions are shaped by such factors as moral standards or simply by the influence of other fans within the community (discussed below).

An example of a personal affiliation towards a character is the following comment:

* I wouldn’t be too disheartened. The fact that she’s one of your favourites means you’ll probably enjoy the movie more than a bunch of people that are luke warm on the character to begin with. All of this is subjective, don’t let it ruin your excitement!

A response to this comment says:

* This.

* Most of what I’ve read suggests the biggest problems with the film have to do with it feeling like a dead-end due to Black Widow’s death in Endgame. [...] But if you love her, this sounds like a decent MCU movie.*
(Also, always important to not let people decide for you. You don’t have to agree with a particular group of reviewers, or even the fan-community hivemind that often loves to shit down the necks of anyone who disagrees with them.)

The responsive comment also speaks of the way others influence our decisions and opinions, which Cohen explains with audiences’ identification with parents or friends (2001). People’s ability to empathize and identify with characters is also a factor, which I consider in this analysis. I can assume that some comments from the table in the appendix are based on such identification, thus trying to understand the way their opinion on the characters is shaped. An additional comment, which I considered, illustrates affiliations and confirms the conception of affective disposition theory:

People tend to prefer the characters they spend the most time with; i.e. those who have their own movies.

As mentioned earlier, Alice Hall (2020) explains that the visible attributes of the actors can shape such affiliations, thus the whole image of the character shapes the overall fans’ perception.

On the contrary, some comments can be an indicator of fans not associating themselves with the characters. For instance, some users find it overwhelming that female characters are represented as the ones whom the main characters need to save or protect. It indicates disapproval of the female figure and a desire for a more accurate portrayal, thus, in this way, the affiliation towards the characters can change. Affective disposition theory earlier explained that such unfavorable judgements towards the characters can occur as well (Mühlhoff, 2019). The fans’ need of a more accurate representation on Marvel’s female characters speaks of the fact that there still is a long way to go to reach a positive change for feminism in cinema (Ameter, 2019), which is discussed in more detail below.

I had the opportunity to understand my results by applying the currently available and developed resources of the feminist media theory as well. Even though it is a bit
more of a specific type of theory, which also aims to explain other interpretations of
the female image in movies, I could develop some analyses and draw conclusions
from my results.

What Krijnen (2017) explains is the image of the female in movies, which
comes from scopophilia and narcissism. The other term that is mentioned in the
paper is ‘male gaze’, which shows the way men see women in movies – fundamental,
but passive subjects as a source of visual pleasure. As the first two concepts
premised that only men experience them, a comment I encountered proves that this
premise is truly outdated:

"Acting like women don't sexualize men though is absolutely f****g ridiculous."

Despite having no information on the gender of the Reddit users within this study,
some of the comments from the table in the appendix show that such objectification
of the female exists. The fact that some users cannot accept a female character
having so much power premises portraying this character in a more stereotyped
way, possibly assigning her basic roles. The paper of Ameter (2019, p. 3) on the
gender portrayal in MCU exemplifies the portrayal of Captain Marvel, for instance,
which shows a “completely different type of female strength, one that some men
may find more threatening". Winning in battles with galactic villains, where on the
contrary, the female protagonists are regular old humanoids, was also seen as an
unrealistic role within the comments. In addition, it seemed that the approach
towards the female characters in ‘Avengers: Endgame’ was compared to the one of
‘Harry Potter’ – showing the woman’s sense of protection, which was considered a
true stereotype. All of these aspects might speak of the need to present women more
as in real life, where they are considered to be weaker than men. The study of
Olufidipe & Echezabal supports these points and, based on the analysis within their
paper, suggests that “males and females cannot be equally capable in the same
universe” (2021, p. 12).
The perception of Marvel Cinematic Universe’s female characters within its fandom on Reddit

The ‘girl power’ scene would not have been so noticeable if male characters were picked for it instead of females, therefore there would have been fewer discussions on it. Having this scene fully with females then raises the questions on the need to show such feministic movements in fiction movies. As female characters are perceived as ‘feminists’, there are no or fewer labels for the male characters, on the contrary.

Moreover, the comment on Stan Lee for presenting Marvel female characters with long legs and big breasts depicts the fact that male figures are a factor in representing women. This statement most probably speaks of the fans’ needs and wants towards these characters, but it also explains the ongoing ‘male gaze’, shaped by the industry’s manipulation of visual pleasure (Joffe, 2019). As mentioned above, this portrayal of the female that Stan Lee talks about once again shows the long way Marvel still has to go to reach the positive change for feminism in cinema (Ameter, 2019). One other comment within the table shows that some fans think Marvel women are poorly written, each having the exact same personality. The paper of Joffe (2019) also points out the way Black Widow was portrayed – tied to a chair in a warehouse, whereas her male screen partners are shown as strong and caring. Aley & Hahn’s work (2020) supports this example with arguing that female characters happen to be shown as needing the help of men. In addition, the way Jang et al. (2019) discuss that society has shaped their own assumptions on the female figure exemplifies how stereotypically their images are then developed for the screen.

Some users consider specifically ‘Black Widow’ as a desexualized movie, so contrasting opinions exist and I remain objective on both. There are also users who would not perceive the characters as ‘flawed’ because they are female, but because they happen to be female, so gender will not play a huge role in some fans’ character perceptions. In addition, Krijnen (2017) emphasizes that we need to consider the fact that people construct their own reality, so the extent to which this factor influences my results cannot be fully determined.

By applying the three Rs from the second-wave feminist media theory, described within Steiner’s paper (2014), I can conclude that Marvel female characters:
- result from the way audiences want to see them and the way male producers want to portray them;
- reflect the stereotyped and objectified role they have, but also reflect an unrealistic role;
- and reproduce feminist ideologies for the way they are represented and perceived.

Considering the theory and paradigm, and applying the relevant research methodology, I could answer my research questions:

- **How do Marvel movie fans perceive the images of the female characters?** – main research question
- **What are the characteristics of Marvel’s female characters that fans discuss?** – sub-research question
- **What controversies do Marvel female characters bring among the fandom?** – sub-research question

With the premise of encountering different opinions and perceptions, I can conclude that fans indicate levels of empathy towards Marvel female characters and they happen to support their feministic portrayal. Yet, some fans perceive them as the typical woman stereotype – sexualized, generic, and having the same personality as the other female characters.

By looking at what fans discuss in relation to these protagonists’ characteristics, I could find that some characters lack development and are often seen as unrealistic, especially in the fighting scenes. Nevertheless, Marvel’s female characters still show some humane feelings and aspects of their personality, making the characters interesting and complex for fans.

The controversies that led to having more than one answer to the main research question revolve around the fact that every fan has different perceptions and experiences with the movies. This is why some would say the female figure in Marvel is shallow and underwritten, but others would see it as an inspiration and a possibility to be shown as interesting as the male figure.
As mentioned before, the generalizability of the results, which the research paradigm premises, has to be considered. Further research offers the possibility of expanding the outcomes and confirming or rejecting these results.

I dare to conclude this analysis with an objective comment, which I also included in the results table:

*There are no bounds on how Marvel writes its female and male characters as long as they stay true to the character.*

### 9. Limitations and further steps

As I pointed out earlier, there were fewer discussions on Marvel’s female characters compared to the discussions on the male ones. They are the major part of Marvel’s franchise, therefore are more often under the discussions’ spotlight. However, also based on my overall observations on the subreddits, there tends to be less controversy on their representation in the cinematic universe if I were to consider that for my thesis. The way women in media are perceived sparks bigger debates, which led me to researching this specific topic. Still, a future paper with a broader scope can include the male characters’ perceptions and representations, and to compare them to the female ones and understand their differences.

Another aspect, which can be considered a limitation, is the lack of demographic details of the users. Having such information could lead to broader conclusions and assumptions, but the research would also have to consider additional ethical approaches. Nevertheless, future research with a broader scope can unfold this thesis by looking at other platforms that host Marvel fan communities and have easily identifiable demographic details about its users. Additional methodological practices, such as interviews with representatives of this fandom, are another way to understand the topic of this thesis in future research, which will gain more personal perspectives and richer data of possibly surprising results.
The Reddit comments that seemed to be edited can be considered as another limitation of this research. In general, as mentioned earlier, online research methods hide such risks, as everything on the internet can be changed at any time.

One of the users’ comments I encountered touched upon the Bechdel test, which can also be used in future research to unfold this thesis topic. During my research, I found some previous works, which explained this test and the way it was used for similar studies to mine. The Bechdel test measures “how active the presence of a woman is in a movie”, in order to indicate this gender bias (Jang et al., 2019, p. 2). The study of Jang et al. (2019) confirms that gender representation affects the audience’s stereotypes towards the social roles of males and females and that there are additional tests, which assess the amount of gender representation bias in movies. Nevertheless, the most effective one is particularly the Bechdel test. As any other method, it can have its limitations, but can be a premise of a future research tool.

As I also mentioned earlier, interviews with Marvel fans can be conducted to understand their emotional engagement with the characters in depth. Touching upon the affective disposition theory and beyond, the demographic details of the fans of Marvel, their previous experiences with the movies, and their behavior in the fan communities can better explain the perception of the female characters. The research can be continued by using the lenses of feminism movements as well, in order to trace the current trends and predict the upcoming ones in the industry and in Marvel itself. Reddit is a valuable starting point for this research, but other platforms can be used as a case study in the future as well. In addition, male characters and their fans’ perceptions can be studied for comparing both in future papers. Considering the abovementioned, richer results can be obtained, which will contribute to this study.

10. Conclusion

This thesis aimed to study Marvel’s fandom on Reddit and their perception of the movies’ female characters. Despite lacking previous research, which was tightly related to this topic, I had the opportunity to contribute to what is currently
available and to open possibilities for expanding this research. The focus now was on two highly successful Marvel movies – ‘Black Widow’ and ‘Avengers: Endgame’, where six female characters had their key roles. Yet, this research can be further expanded by focusing on more movies with female presence as a first step.

Using the two research methods (netnography and content analysis) helped me understand this particular community and their online engagement in the discussions on Reddit. Even though I saw richer conversations on the male protagonists of Marvel, I could still get an understanding of the way fans think of the females. The results showed that there are many controversies around the portrayal of Marvel female characters, therefore different perceptions were generated.

Both frameworks (affective disposition and feminist media/film theories) were helpful for analyzing the results of this research. It was essential to understand that the way fans perceive these characters is affected by the way they experience the movie when they watch it. Therefore, they can develop affiliations towards the characters, which the results showed by analyzing the comments on Reddit. The controversies occurred, because some fans would see Marvel’s female figures as empowering and felt empathic towards the characters, but on the contrary, others would find them underwritten and lacking an accurate portrayal. Nevertheless, fans themselves confirmed that “people tend to prefer the characters they spend the most time with”. The second theory confirmed the issues with women’s representation in media and the results showed that women in movies could be objectified. Fans’ discussions confirmed that the image of the female is often stereotyped and then adapted to the screen, and that these characters happen to be sexualized. Especially with the multiple connections drawn to the comic books, it was clear that the female portrayal remained unchanged in the movies either.

The results were more generalized and objective considering the research paradigm of interpretivism and both theories. I acknowledged the fact that they can sometimes lack an explanation of the study to its full extent, therefore I suggest further research and different methods for generating richer and broader results.
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# The perception of Marvel Cinematic Universe’s female characters within its fandom on Reddit

## Appendix

### Coding scheme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discussion name</th>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Negative thoughts ☹️, controversies with the male protagonists, stereotypes</th>
<th>Positive thoughts ☺️, stereotypes</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Official BLACK WIDOW International Release Discussion Thread</td>
<td>Black Widow (1)</td>
<td>Thought it was a pretty terrible send off. The fact they retcon’d her to be a remote controlled brainwashed brainless killer is so lame. She was a Soviet assassin who defected and turned to the hero she becomes. Now it’s like no she’s just misunderstood and did everything against her will. That is so f*****g lame!</td>
<td>The Good: Yelena Belova (2) stole the movie. She was sassy and hilarious, and I can’t wait to see what’s coming next.</td>
<td>This movie passes the Bechdel test with flying colors (actually, as par for the course for the MCU the film is entirely desexualized with the exception of some hysterical dialogue between Haiford and Weiss’s characters). Yelena was good, she will be a good addition to the MCU.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Valentino, you disgust me. Blowing your nose in an exaggerated fashion at someone’s grave tells me that you really don’t care but feel like you should at least appear like you do. I would expect better from a Contessa</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>It felt rushed, character development was lacking for most characters</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The accents were atrocious to the point where I get distracted by it.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Yelena was cool, she will be a good addition to the MCU.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Black Widow (1)</td>
<td>Unfortunately, with so many side actors doing such stellar work Johansson’s (3) limitations as an actress become really, really apparent.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Considering Natasha really has no function or place in the current MCU, which has most decidedly steered towards a God Wars tone, perhaps you don’t want to crossover too much with the greater Marvel universe.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I question the decision to turn the Widows, and Natasha in particular, into Inhumans. Charles Angels. […] What woman never and choose to be evil, they have to be brainwashed into it?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>It kinda deflates the whole “girl power” aspect of the movie when Daddy (4) is the one who ends up kicking the most a**.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I can’t help but think how much of it is in senile and seeing a female have a such a beating is “unrealistic”.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Taskmaster (5) was a thoroughly boring character. Was it a robot? No, it was a girl. But it might as well have been a robot. It really made me think of the first Deadpool - the bad one.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The action scenes are on point but they should have showed how they treated girls aka Widows and transformed them into controlled assassins. We don’t get to see the Natasha transformation much.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The Official AVENGERS: ENDGAME Release Megathread Vol. 12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Captain Marvel</td>
<td>Also it took away from that whole girl power scene. They’re all like “she has protection” but five seconds later she leaves them all in the dust and flies like 2 billion miles an hour.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I’m all for diversity but that girl power scene is the most forced, pandering, embarrassing joke woke, heavy-handed bulls**t. I still maintain that if it had been a line-up of men, people wouldn’t have even noticed, it would’ve just been seen as a bunch of friends lining up.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Personally I find captain marvel as a character boring as hell she lacks any personality and her movie was just average she was just the perfect storm of issues that allowed many people to easily hate her some justified others not at all. I personally feel both sides undermine the genuine points for liking and disliking her since it’s always taken as a political statement now.</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>In general the female characters Up until this point we had seen a lot of the women fighting like bad a***es, we didn’t need an “in your face woman power” moment. They were doing just fine the subtle way.</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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### The perception of Marvel Cinematic Universe's female characters within its fandom on Reddit

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Black Widow</strong></td>
<td>Captain Marvel was the hero least needing help, but they did that <em>women assemble</em> shot and I felt it was a little overdone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nebula</strong></td>
<td>I feel Nebula is the MVP of the film. It's like this is what they are fighting for: The right for people to change and grow for the better.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Scarlet Witch</strong></td>
<td>Scarlet Witch needs some more recognition. She was absolutely wrecking Thanos before he was able to give the order to &quot;rain fire&quot;.</td>
</tr>
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<td><strong>Captain Marvel</strong></td>
<td>Can we appreciate how sad and still awesome Black Widow was in this part? [...] I think she was one of the kindest and most caring characters in this part.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Carol Danvers</strong></td>
<td>Carol Danvers is so utterly ignored and disrespected by the fanbase it's kinda gross. In almost every single audience reaction to infinity war, she was the only one that got snapped and didn't get any sort of reaction.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

#### In general - the female characters

- **Black Widow:** I thought it was creepy and very artificial. It was like look we are feminine too. Not wrong with female superheros though. All the female superheros appearing on screen was epic, but the first female hero never get to be part of it.
- **Nebula:** I guess Marvel doesn’t like giving happy endings to female characters, only male ones.
- **Scarlet Witch:** Why no funeral for Natasha? She sacrificed herself within hours of Tony. Wanda [6] was bada**, so cool to see her use her powers to its fullest extent.
- **Captain Marvel:** Not superiority but special treatment. Put up on a pillar, for no [...] reason. [...] If you wanted to make it happen with a reason grounded in the story, you might not have included all females at that given moment [...] and you might have left some males in there.

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The perception of Marvel Cinematic Universe's female characters within its fandom on Reddit

I am very concerned that Captain Marvel is 'too powerful' which means they need to have more powerful villains moving forward.

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<th>Search results of 'marvel female characters' in Reddit's database</th>
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<td>Asked by a journalist why all of Marvel's female characters have long legs and big breasts, Stan Lee spun around and said: &quot;Because that's what I like!&quot;</td>
<td>Captain Marvel. Marvel's female characters are usually not great but Taika Waititi did an amazing job</td>
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<td>This would be more exciting if Marvel's female characters weren't so underwritten. Because as of now, I mostly don't care about them, so I'm not exactly at the edge of my seat waiting for their team-up.</td>
<td>Valkyrie. Marvel's female characters are usually not great.</td>
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<td>My headscratcher is mostly about perceiving [Wanda] as a flawed character because she's a woman, rather than a flawed character because she is a woman.</td>
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<td>The big issue with the Disney Star Wars (and even Marvel) female characters is that their ideas of strength are that the character is the protagonist and they can/want to solve all of their problems by themselves. The problem is that this is typically viewed as a character flaw, not a strength, hence why &quot;friendship is the key&quot; is such a popular theme in film and literature. So when Disney gives us these characters like Rey who are &quot;strong, independent women who don't need anyone else,&quot; they come across as shallow, dimensional characters that never learn anything.</td>
<td>The Marvel female characters outside Scarlett Witch and Black Widow, tend to be pretty generic. Generic genius. Generic badass. Generic mastermind. I hope that they start to work on this and really develop rich characters.</td>
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<td>There are no bounds on how Marvel writes its female and male characters as long as they stay true to the character.</td>
<td>Um, have people even seen Marvel movies? What about Scarlet Witch when she got Injured after accidentally killing a ton of innocent people by throwing poison gas?</td>
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