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Empowering the Heroine with Violence: A Changing Representation of Female Superheroes in *the Avengers* Film Series

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Abstract

The superhero genre of film as a form of storytelling has become a vehicle to represent powerful women to its audiences. It no longer underrepresents women as characters in the positions of power. A changing portrayal of female superheroes of *The Avengers* film series provides evidence of a shift in the representation and stereotyping of female characters in the global media system. The current study aimed to investigate the representation of heroines in *The Avengers* series, that is, *The Avengers*, *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, *Avengers: Infinity War*, and *Avengers: Endgame*. It focused on female representation through the body image of the female superheroes. This qualitative study used the method of narrative analysis to examine the representations of selective super heroines. It focused on the physical appearance of female characters, their characteristics of violence, violent behaviour, as well as diegetic conversation and gender-based relationships. The study applied the concepts of post-feminism theory and Stuart Hall's concepts of representation and identity in the analysis. It concluded that one of the critical shifts in the representation of women related to power is reflected in a more equitable portrayal of the use of violence.

Keywords: Avenger series, female superhero, feminism on screen, representation of identity, superhero film

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Introduction

In the current study, narrative analysis has been conducted to examine the representation of female superheroes in *The Avengers* film series including *The Avengers*, *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, *Avengers: Infinity War*, and *Avengers: Endgame*. It is a common belief that the stories of male characters (that is, Captain America) are of value and importance. Moreover, it is an understandable and acceptable fact that men are allowed to be complicated, violent, and flawed, yet still categorized as heroic. The narratives of *The Avengers* series may not extend the same empathy to female characters unless they take on a masculine role. The Examination of the representation of female superheroes and *girl power* in these four films helped to identify where they may fit in within a feminist or post-feminist discourse. However, it also identified what space they settle into, as social construction and the framework of the representation theory of film.

Rather than being sidekicks or romantic partners, recent female superheroes in Marvel Studio's *The Avengers* film series form a resistance against conventional female stereotypes and the more typical categorization of female characters in Hollywood mainstream cinema. The perception of a group of people sharing the same characteristics is understood as a *stereotype* and serves a psychological purpose to understand the social world (McGarty et al., [2002](#)). As Schweinitz ([2011](#)) has explained that with the mass production and high cost of film narrative for global audiences, 'stereotypical and conventionalized patterns' (p. xii) have served to standardize the story product. At the same time, this repetition meets audience's needs to bring order and understanding to the imaginary world they experience as spectators. Since the release of *Iron Man* (directed by Jonathan Favreau) in 2007, "the role of Marvel Studio" has emerged as the driving force in the development of the '*superhero film*' in the context of "the contemporary film industry" (Lustyik & Holtmeier, [2017](#)). The acquisition of Marvel Entertainment by Walt Disney Company in 2009 has brought a corporate commitment for diversity in front and at the back of camera (Latif et al., [2016](#)). It can be argued that new standards for the stereotypes of the female superheroes are also being established for the global audience experience.

Notable representations in *Captain Marvel* and *Black Widow* highlighted that the new millennium may bear witness to numerous examples of female super-heroines taking center stage on the screen. The

narratives enable the heroines to work alongside their male partners to prove that there is nothing a woman cannot handle. According to the Marvel Studio's Head, Kevin Feige, "enough female superheroes have since been introduced to the new and existing Marvel franchises to make an all-female box office arrival a distinct possibility" (cited in Robert, [n.d.](#)). These films have gained enough popularity due to a massive fan base created by the comic books themselves. They have been reaching out to wide audiences across the world on a variety of cultural levels. Pennell and Behm-Morawitz (2015) pointed out, "They attract the youthful movie-going demographic, are appealing to the nostalgic older audiences, and offer well-established characters and storylines with sequel potential" (p. 211).

Spider Man, the youngest male member of the Avengers, has a motto, '*with great power comes great responsibility*'. In the world of superheroes, a hero's specific power is a significant part of his/her identity which indicates his/her status in the team and society. For this study, it is understood that the visible representations of power are the use of violence in the story action and the violent behaviour of the superhero characters. Furthermore, the attributes of violence seem to be the most important ones for heroes representing 'power'. Yet, according to Stanko (2003) the term "violence" is 'ambiguous' and 'describes a whole range of events, feelings, and harm. However, meanings of violence are multiple, complex, and often contradictory" (p. 3). Rutherford et al. (2007) explained that a prerequisite to define violence is the intent to cause harm. To conduct the current study an all-encompassing definition from the World Health Organization (WHO) was used. According to this definition,

The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, mal-development or deprivation" is regarded as violence. (p.4)

This definition serves as the basis to identify the representations of violence in this film analysis. Violence may occur as interpersonal violence, collective violence as a group or gang, or be gender-based with an imbalance of power.

The inclusion of *hot* female superheroes has been omnipresent within the realm of Marvel comic books and films since decades. Many of the

leading female superhero characters in *The Avengers* series were nothing more than sexualized objects, vivacious, and scintillating creations of the male imagination. May (2015) described super-heroines being similar to their female victim counterparts. They were described as “often unrealistic, sexualized representations of female figures, with large chests, curvaceous backsides, and unattainable hourglass dimensions.” Furthermore, as Olson (2019) has asserted, although out of 20 Marvel films with leading complex male characters, ‘the few female superheroes on the roster were relegated to background players’ (para. 2). Yet, the film adaptations of these comic books still explicitly present a re-defining representation of *girl power* in the modern era. This motivates the authors to examine an evolving depiction of female superheroes and cinematic representations of what may be identified and understood as *girl power* on the screen.

Girl power is a concept of female agency that “emerged from the popular culture of the 1990s and was widely popularized by the British band *Spice Girls*” (Ivashkevich, 2011). According to the Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.), it refers to the idea that “women and girls should be confident, make decisions, and achieve things independently of men, or the social and political movement that is based on this idea”. However, the discourse in popular culture may also “be ideological and operate as a negotiation between feminism and femininity” (Ivashkevich, 2011). *Feminism* according to Higgins (2016) is multi-dimensional and multi-level, consisting of ideas and actions on behalf of women’s rights and interests, related to the social, economic, and political equality of the sexes. By the 1990s, a new wave of feminism, the third wave, was reassessing feminist identity, especially related to beauty products, and the use of the word *girl*. It could be understood that the term *girl power* represents a ‘widening of the lens’ of feminism. It conceptually allows females to be both assertive and feminine at the same time.

Girl power and *third wave feminism* of the 1990s are also referred to as *post-feminism* (Genz & Brabon, 2009). These terms are also related to the concept of female identity, that is, *femininity*. Femininity is also understood as a cultural construct. According to Richmond et al. (2015) “Feminine ideology refers to an individual’s internalization of cultural belief systems regarding the female role” (p. 265). As Genz (2009) pointed out, quoting Macdonald that, “femininity is not a fixed identity, but a constantly renegotiated set of alliances and identifications” (p. 6). In addition, the term

'girl power' is associated with ideological aspects that construct female identity as a negotiation for inclusion with a neo-liberal consumer economy rather than in opposition to it. A successful and empowered female is allowed to purchase and enjoy her luxury designer goods yet success may come with a price. Koffman and Gill (2013) explained that, "with the expansion of girl power discourse along with the depictions of female empowerment and success, there are also representations of girls as being vulnerable, marking girlhood as both risky and capable" (p. 87). Ivashkevich (2011) has asserted that, "the discourse of girl power thrives on paradoxes and creates compromises and points of tension that wants closer examination" (p. 17). Accordingly, particular representations of girls have been privileged with the acknowledged positive attributes of the term *girl power*. However, it also revealed rather problematic and obvious tensions that exist in their relationships and their own places in the respective worlds.

Although there may exist a vast imagination for female empowerment and agency, it could be "constrained by patriarchal objectification" (Ivashkevich, 2011, p. 26). Consequently, there exists a discursive paradox and tension expressed through girl power representations framed by a male dominated creative industry and popular culture. Furthermore, there could also be a changing representation of gender and violence within this discursive paradox. According to Dittmer (2011), "the superhero genre" accommodates countless characters who are "capable of administering righteous violence" (p. 116). Although, as Bleakley et al. (2012) has pointed out, "Violent portrayals in movies are overwhelmingly by male characters" and this genre has witnessed "the emergence of violent female action characters in more recent films" (p. 73). Thus, the evolving female superhero, no longer serves the story in a secondary role as an overly sexualized object for male gratification. Therefore, the female superhero character becomes empowered and exercises girl power agency through the greater use of violence and violent behaviour, thus emulating the male superhero and male based power. According to Steinmetz (1999), "Cultural values prove helpful to determine differences in the rates of violence among societies in studies conducted by anthropologists" (p. 23).

The current study aimed to examine the discourse and its negotiation of the female superheroes with attributes of girl power, femininity, and violence in *The Avengers* film series. The discourse of gender

representations of both femininity and masculinity may not only inherently be intertwined, but also indicates changing tensions and discords that exist within society. This area of investigation has been very topical during the Trump presidency of the United States and a larger socio-political context. Nichols (2020), questioned this current political climate as, “Why do working-class white men, that is, the most reliable component of Donald Trump’s base supports someone who is, by their own standards, the least masculine man ever to hold the modern presidency? Although it was not the purpose of this study to answer such questions, however, these representations and the superhero genre storytelling reflects a re-imagining of a society that is taking place within a changing political, cultural, and economic context. With its extensive superpower and violence, *The Avengers* film series conveyed the awareness regarding the value of a new wave of feminism in some layers of their constructed discourse world. Nevertheless, the representation of these super heroines is still not completely free from the prior stereotyped depiction and could even be a re-definition of female representation for a new-stereotyped frame. Such a view could be demonstrated by the film *Captain Marvel* (2019), directed by Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck. As Marvel’s first female-led superhero film, it has been the fifth highest-grossing film in North America in 2019, earning \$426,829,839 in the domestic market (Box Office Mojo, 2022). Notably, Anna Boden is the first female director contributing to the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) film making.

Speaking at a film industry event in Hollywood, Kevin Feige proclaimed that “many of the upcoming Marvel films would follow the precedent set by *Captain Marvel*, directed by a woman (McNary, 2018). The four episodes of *The Avengers* film series commonly depict female superheroes. These female superheroes deal both internally and externally with the places to which their girl-ness relegates them, instead of issues that affect the larger population in various settings. These four episodes are: *The Avengers* (directed by Joss Whedon, 2012), *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (directed by Joss Whedon, 2015), *Avengers: Infinity War* (directed by Anthony Russo & Joe Russo, 2018), and *Avengers: Endgame* (directed by Anthony Russo & Joe Russo, 2019). Notably, *Avengers: Endgame*, Marvel’s highest-grossing film, has earned \$2,797,800,564 (Box office Mojo, 2022). However, Gerard and Poepsel (2019) argued that, “few female characters have emerged as leading, powerful characters in the MCU” (p. 27). According to Conaway (2018), when a reporter interviewed Kevin

Feige in 2014 and asked the question if or when there would be female-led hero films, he replied that “it comes down to timing” (p. 2). However, Conaway (2018), considered this answer as “purposefully vague”. (p. 2). By examining the four released films of *The Avengers* series, the authors determined whether the heroine’s violence renders her masculinized, whether her representations are a re-negotiation of girl power identity, and whether a maternal or eroticized image negates her agency. *The Avengers* series offers “a useful attempt to rethink about the weirdness of the definition of femininity in which a woman with agency is automatically read as masculinized” (Tasker, 2005).

Literature Review

In their *Post feminism and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, Gwynne and Muller (2013), have argued that “Given the clear relationship between post feminism and girlhood, it is surprising that cinema within postfeminist culture remains preoccupied with the reconstruction of femininity” (p. 3). Their book fuels debates surrounding the problems and possibilities of ‘empowerment’ of the females. In an era where all the things pertaining to womanhood are being celebrated, women-centric films visualize the process of ‘empowerment’ of females in various dramatic settings. *The Avengers* film series not only depicts a woman as a central and integral character throughout, but may also present a group of women characters showcasing women empowerment. Murphy (2015) argued that, “several definitions of post-feminism have been used to identify the group, however it has been seen as a response to the end of feminism or anti-feminist ideology” (p. 9).

According to Coleman (2009), many post-feminists believe that the women’s movement, in some ways, has “alleviated their institutional oppression and now it is mainly up to women’s personal choices to strengthen those fundamental social changes” (p. 7). Driven by this significant and shifting social trend of thought, the film field drew the attention and became a focus of feminists. These “success narratives” in general, accept cultural shape/modification and representation in media as “instances of typically heterosexual, white, middle-class [female] achievement in male-dominated workplaces. The women’s ability to treat men as sexual objects and the seemingly unfettered freedoms has also been highlighted in the current study along with the freedom that women enjoy with respect to career choice, parenting, and domesticity” (Rumens, 2017).

At the same time, female gender is being redefined in the context of post-feminism where Macaluso (2018), has also pointed out a changing dynamic between post-feminism and masculinity.

The term ‘*seeing-through*’ is helpful to understand that the pictorial surface of an image could enter into our perceptual and communicative experience with a moving picture. However, it does not enter into our experience in the same way a representational painting does. Hall (1989), addressed the cinematic process of interweave identity and representation as a conceptual basis to discuss the film. He proposed a dialogue between identity and cinematic representation, that is, a theoretical framework that assists to understand not only the filmic form, but also cultural forms as a whole. He argued that the ‘representation’ in media practice is complex and not merely the ‘re-presentation’ or something standing in for something else. Rather, representation is an experiential process to create meaning and could be a process of distortion as well. Thus, “filmic representation appears to be functioning in terms of two or more ‘theories about the world’ being placed in correspondence” (Batemen, 2009, p. 157).

Methodology

To accomplish the objective of this qualitative study, a narrative analysis method has been employed with the framework of post-feminism theory and Hall’s conceptualization of cultural representation. The current study focused on the female superheroes depicted in the *Avengers* series. All the heroines were chosen from *The Avengers film* series produced by Marvel Studio from 2012 to 2019. Within this period, *The Avengers* series comprised four episodes, *The Avengers* (2012), *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019). The representation of the females in superhero films appears to be “perfect” and “flawless.” This representation could be understood as corollary with other media messaging and promotional messaging in consumer culture. Baker and Raney (2007), noted that the filmmakers often portray male and female superhero characters in different, gender-role specific stereotypical ways (p. 28). “*Girl power*,” a media phenomenon, originated in the late 1990s and early 2000s, is one of the factors that possibly influence the females’ body image today. “*Girl power*” seemingly developed “empowered” and “independent images” of females, especially the young ones. These images may also “further provide license to female heroes to offer empowered representations of physical performances to audiences. However, these

portrayals of females could still be constrained by the limitations of female appeal, embodied in slim and sexually attractive bodies” (McClearen, [2015](#), p. 1). According to the interpretative paradigm, the focus of the current paper was to understand how female superheroes and girl power could be interpreted.

The primary aim of the narrative analysis is to understand the representation of female superheroes. “Narrative analysis” has been used by feminist scholars to highlight traditionally silenced voices (Rodriguez, [2016](#)). “A dialogic/performance analysis focuses on the questions involving who, what, and why of narratives” (Riessman, [2008](#), p. 105). This type of analysis primarily focuses on the content of narratives. The authors examined the narratives within *The Avengers* film series in order to articulate the structural and dialogic/performance narrative analysis. The common structural aspects which define the primary arguments were then articulated. The analysis process was carried out through the interpretation of meaning with their physical appearances, violent attributes, and personal characteristics related to plot action and story narrative. Due to a great number of female characters in the *Avengers* series, the current study identified the selected female characters based on four interconnected, related aspects. These aspects included (1) identifiable physical, mental, and social characteristics, (2) artefacts created by film narrative requirements (integral to the story and action), (3) communicative signs and symbols with meanings attributed or associated with feminism, and (4) gender aspects indicating socio-cultural context of production. In addition, other characters would also be discussed for examination and interpretation of the subject matters in the current study.

Results and Discussion

It can be argued that the female superheroes in *The Avengers* series showcase and platform *girl power*. Mayer ([2017](#)) has also supported that the girl power in the present era hints at the future representation of women on the screen. For the purpose of this analysis, the representation of these female superhero characters could be identified and explained from two *girl power* perspectives, that is, *super-sexualized* and *super-strong*. These two primary *girl power* characteristics are embodied in the female super heroine. Pennell and Behm-Morawitz ([2015](#)), pointed out the “sexualized-heroine images in these films to “create gender stereotypical expectations” (p. 212). Thus, the heroine with superpower tends to re-shape the

conventions of cinematic representation of “*girl power*”. This section would present the key analytical results for the characteristics of the *super-sexualized* and *super-strong* perspectives. These characteristics include (1) physical appearance, (2) attributes of violence and violent behaviour, and (3) dialogue and action directly related to sexuality and strength.

Physical Appearance: Sexualized-Heroine Image

Black Widow, also known as (aka) Natasha Romanova, was one of the protagonists in the *Avengers* series and the first female to join the Avengers team. Black Widow’s first appearance in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) was in *Iron Man 2* (directed by Jon Favreau). Although, Black Widow has appeared across several Marvel films, the film with her as the main lead character is expected to be released in 2020, much later than other male heroes in the Avengers team. It has also been further delayed because of disruption in global film exhibition during COVID-19 pandemic. Her background story is distributed in different films of the MCU. Before being a member of S.H.I.E.L.D (an organization dedicated to protecting the planet in Marvel films), she was a spy working for the Soviet Committee, identified by its Russian language initials as KGB. Feeling guilt and remorse for the terrifying things she did when she was a KGB spy, she decided to join the Avengers team, as atonement for her past deeds, thus becoming the first female member of the team.

Curtis and Cardo (2017) asserted that female outfits and make up are a deceptive form of patriarchal oppression. In *The Avengers*, *Avengers: Age of Ultron* and *Avengers: Endgame*, Black Widow has short reddish hair and in *Avengers: Infinity War*, she has short grey hair. However, she always has delicate facial features and a curvaceous body portrayed in all of these four films. Apart from being a trained agent and expertise in the use of firearms, Black Widow often uses her appealing slim fit body as a “weapon”. In addition to showing off her powerful abilities, Black Widow’s primary superhero costume, a black and tight combat suit, also effectively accentuates her chest, waist, and hips, leaving no more space for any extra fat. Notably, her matte combat suit in films looks more practical and flexible than the tight bright leather she wears in the comics. Her dress accentuates the curves of the Black Widow’s figure, suggesting a meaning of femininity. She can easily fight with more muscular enemies. In addition, she never shies away from showing off her cleavage. This is also consistent with the point given by Gerard and Poepsel (2019), “Natasha’s physical appearance

is exploited in low-cut, revealing uniforms, and disguises in each of these films” (p. 48), which would serve the male gaze.

Not only does Black Widow wear the battle dress, but so do other female heroes in *The Avengers* series. Meanwhile, these heroines are portrayed to have their own backstory, different superhero attributes, and other characteristics, such as race. According to Curtis and Cardo (2017), this indicates a “kind of solidarity the incorporates difference” (p. 3). However, the diversity of races and racial characteristics, such as skin color are in line with the inclusiveness pursued by postfeminism. In *Avengers: Endgame*, each female character has her own unique combat suit. Their clothes are made of metal, leather or special artificial materials. Even though some heroines represent an alien race, the battle dresses for all heroines have one thing in common, that is, the dresses are tight fit to enhance the female shape and accentuate the lines of the heroines’ bodies. In addition, all female heroes have slender figures with thinner arms. Although they come from different races and planets, they are all depicted within one consistent framing of physical body representation. Pennell and Behm-Morawitz (2015) pointed out that viewing this kind of sexualized image of heroines in films leads audiences to “less egalitarian gender role beliefs” about females in the real world, lower esteem of body, and draw out “higher degrees of self-objectification” (p. 212).

Some female heroes also appear in *The Avengers* film series wearing casual attire. This casualwear other than the combat is typically ultra-feminine. Captain Marvel, aka Carol Danvers, gains her superpower through exposure to alien energy in a flight crash of an experimental prototype aircraft. She is a physically attractive and racially white female character who possesses superhuman strength, endurance, flying ability, immunity to poison, and other powers. As the most influential female hero in the Marvel universe, she is also a feminist icon, and one of the most powerful avengers in the Marvel universe (Dockterman, 2019). During the battle, she wears a costume similar to the Black Widow’s battle dress. In contrast, while joining an Avengers meeting, she wears a tight black singlet which is figure flattering. Similarly, Black Widow wears a silk dress at a party in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*. As discussed earlier, the images of female superheroes in battles are different from the ones in daily life. The clothes for battle appear powerful, as compared to the non-combat everyday clothes, which may be interpreted as a representation of femininity and sexuality. In this way, the combat dress may pave the way for women’s

empowerment, along with the couture evening dress, and figure-flattering singlet effectively emphasizes their femininity, both representing the dichotomy of girl power. Kinnunen (2016) believes that such heroines represent and reinforce an idealization of a certain kind of women's body image.

The Avengers series demonstrate the filmmaker's deliberate effort to break away from stereotypes of female representation that emerge from systemic gender discrimination, prejudice, and exclusion. In action scenes, Black Widow's body is usually set to be sexy at the same time it exhibits surprising and overpowering force and violence, unexpected for a traditional female stereotype. Possibly the scene of the fight between Black Widow and the KGB members in *The Avengers* can demonstrate this point well. In one scene, in order to get some confidential information about the KGB, Black Widow pretends to be subdued by the enemy, thus making the enemy unguarded and revealing the truth to her without realizing it. When she is strapped to a chair and interrogated by the KGB members, she wears a black dress and black silk stockings. A medium shot shows that her hands are tied behind her body with toes on the ground, providing a perfect 45-degree view of her profile covered by her tight dress and translucent stockings. As a result, she fulfils a male gaze at the same time exhibiting characteristics of girl power.

Characteristics of Violence and Violent Behaviour of the Female Superhero

In *The Avengers* film series, violent force provides heroes and heroines with a means to fight evil. It serves to highlight the hero's independence and authority (inviolability), that is, the hero could use violent force to protect himself or herself and others from the enemy. Such force also plays a balancing role within the hero teams (e.g. Avengers). When male and female heroes have the same level of force exercised as violence, they may seem more equal, despite the distinctive and different appearances of gendered body shapes.

Almost all of the female superheroes in the *Avengers* series are portrayed as extremely violent who exhibit extra-ordinary physical aggression. As McClearn (2015) argued, "postfeminist sensibilities promote action heroines as successful women in intellectual arenas, yet, simultaneously discipline action heroines render them unbelievable as

physically powerful women” (p. 833). Although Black Widow does not have any superhuman qualities as the first female avenger, however, she has extraordinary strength and exhibits physical violence among *The Avengers*, as she states, “*I have a very specific skill set*”. According to Marvel HQ (n.d.), this skill set includes combat skills and ‘exceptional agility & athletic ability’.

In the fantasy world of superheroes, the heroes do not exhibit the heroic attributes completely at first, however, they have “a restricted status” until they pass the ‘violence test’ (Cooke, [2018](#)). Violent behaviour by super heroines may be understood as the visual manifestation of female empowerment. Black Widow passes her ‘violence test’ to convince audiences that she is a powerful, independent avenger. In a scene from *The Avengers* where the Black Widow is bound to a chair and interrogated by the KGB members, she receives a phone call from Phil Coulson (an agent from S.H.L.E.D.) that Hawkeye has been compromised. After realizing the urgency of the situation, she replies to Agent Coulson calmly, “*let me put you on hold*”. Her tolerance and attitude changed in an instant. She stopped complaining to Agent Coulson about this unexpected phone call which disturbed her plan, her voice became deeper and her expression more serious. The sudden changes in her body language indicated that she was going into battle mode and was capable to handle it. She smashed the KGB general’s head against an iron railing and hanged him upside down with a chain around his one ankle. In addition to her exceptional fighting skills that use forceful violence, Black Widow also exhibits an intelligence applied to the fighting.

A representational contradiction is the slender physique of a female warrior and hero with their physical force and violent behavior, especially in contrast to a muscular or ‘beefy’ male superhero who has a similar level of force. McClearen ([2015](#)), argues that majority of the audiences “find an action heroine’s physicality ‘unbelievable’ or ‘unrealistic’, reading her body shape and its ability to perform action sequences as incongruous” (p. 834). However, Curtis and Cardo ([2017](#)), asserted that the film “allows super heroines to have flaws and embrace them without diminishing their power” (p.9). Cooke ([2018](#)), pointed out that gender traits “commonly associated with masculinity, such as dominance, strength, aggressiveness, etc. are constantly being enacted by women” (p. 21). In addition to hyper-femininity, almost all the female superheroes from the MCU are constrained

by “a suffocating and out-dated model of masculinity,” where empowerment is measured in strength or mana, and where common sense about biology is often ignored (Cooke, [2018](#)). Furthermore, Macaluso ([2018](#)), defined such masculinity embedded in heroines as a “postfeminist masculinity” which “implicitly reinforces or challenges the male power or do something else entirely” (p. 6).

The physically strong ‘*ladylike*’ body is not easily translated as a representation of a female superhero. From the post-feminist perspective, such ‘translation’ indicates that female strength gets transferred from the body to the mind, while posing constraints to feminine bodies as McClearn would also support ([2015](#)). Women in today’s era seem to be caught up in a storm between the theoretical ideal world and the real world. McClearn ([2015](#)), argued that “body dissatisfaction, eating disorders, and punishing exercises along with dietary regimes are the consequences of post-feminist disciplining of the feminine body that is endemic in the media and popular culture” (p. 834). This dilemma is reflected in the representation of the female superheroes. For Marvel, this paradox appears to be resolved by giving female heroes other types of superpowers that are not physical and could be identified as *magic power*. Super heroines could also temporarily acquire superpowers with the help of external high-tech weapons and armour. For instance, Pepper Potts, the wife of Iron Man, wears armour similar to Iron Man to fight the final battle in the *Avengers: Endgame*.

A superhero is not necessarily an ordinary woman, however, a woman as an extension of the identity of a strong superhero, who exercises violence-based power. Empowering women with this kind of superpower offers emotional appeal and meaning to audiences, especially female members. Even with the strong visual and psychological impact, these representations at the same time, have not contributed to solve the problems or issues related to women’s rights in the society. Moreover, it may even have misled feminism into a more extreme, distorted form of femininity. Pennell and Behm-Morawitz ([2015](#)) asserted that, “Film offers a narrow range of roles for female characters where they are often hyper sexualized with unrealistically small waists, unusually large chests, and unattainable hourglass figures” (p. 212). This assertion aligns with the conceptualization of the “male gaze”. Laura Mulvey ([1975](#)) argued that the pleasure of looking at the screen comes from a heterosexual male perspective. The subject (the

heterosexual male audience) treats others (female representations in film) as objects, keeping them under his own dominance and curious gaze. In the film production which is shaped and dominated by a patriarchal ideology, the image of women plays an important role as a symbol. However, this symbol serves the power needs and communication needs of the male gender rather than reflecting and representing the reality or desires of women's lives. This symbolism can be understood as a means of the transmission of men's desires and fantasies, satisfying the visual pleasure to the heterosexual male audiences. Female representations as fully developed characters, with meaningful communication as symbols for women and their psychological needs are absent from the film.

Representing Sisterhood as Super Heroine Group Identity

It can be understood that the MCU filmic storytelling, through gender stereotyping, signifies a female's individual independence by empowering her with superpower. This could be further understood as a 'logical' approach to empower heroines as a convention of the superhero genre. The MCU offers an emotional appeal by shaping the super heroine independence in the form of a "women's group". *The Avengers* series effectively portrays the selfless support and help among female superheroes. These heroines understand that "*support/sisterhood*" plays an important role in the MCU. As Curtis and Cardo (2017) have identified that, "solidarity is the key to success of this group of women, who have different abilities, biographies, and grievances" (p. 3). This solidarity also addresses and resolves the issue of disparity from the perspective of third-wave feminism accounting for an everyday reality of women. This perception follows that "any understanding of the relationship between feminism and women's lives must work consciously with women's wide-ranging differences" (Curtis & Cardo, 2017, p. 3).

The superhero story could then be understood as an externalization and representation of '*sister support*', articulated with words and/or actions. Screen dialogues are used with strong emotions to heighten the atmosphere of battle with this dimension. In the scene of *Avengers, that is, Age of Ultron* where Scarlet Witch is knocked down by Proxima Midnight (Thano's adoptive daughter and a member of the Black Order). Where after Black Widow and Okoye (a powerful female protector of Wakanda) came to help Scarlet Witch and the following dialogue took place:

Captain America: Somebody get to Vision (a male avenger)!

Scarlet Witch: On my way.

(Scarlet Witch, knocked down by Proxima Midnight)

Proxima Midnight: He'll die alone. As will you.

Black Widow: She's not alone.

In the following scene, Black Widow, Okoye, and Scarlet Witch fought with Proxima Midnight and ultimately won the fight. Based on her words, Proxima Midnight seemed to deliberately emphasize the solitude of Scarlet Witch, as if to presuppose that a female superhero, as an individual is relatively weak, and not so powerful. “*She is not alone*,” Black Widow says coolly and somewhat defiantly, conveying a clear message of female’ combat friendship. Such utterances may also connote the problems faced by women in real society. Hence, as Cocca (2014) argued, feminism substantially is a kind of “collective political action” (p. 99) and this power dynamic is delineated within the plot action of these four films.

Tasker and Negra (2007) stated that in the context of post-feminist masculinity, film constructs a discourse world that “celebrates women’s strength, while lightly critiquing or gently ridiculing straight masculinity” (p. 21). Macaluso (2018) also argued that “postfeminist masculinity could take on other forms, including vulnerable men in crisis, supportive husbands, and/or caring and inclusive male-figures” (p. 2). According to Koffman & Gill (2013), post-feminist masculinity is “personified” with “the repeated depiction of men as somewhat hapless” in the “sex wars”, alongside the presentation of post-feminism as “extreme”, “old-fashioned” and “unnecessary/superfluous” (p. 191). Representations of this postfeminist masculinity emerge when ‘sister support’ is used to highlight the empowerment of women more effectively in the scenes of saving men. In *Avengers: Endgame*, when the young male hero, Spider Man who is trying to bring Ant-Man the Infinite Stones (a powerful glove), gets trapped in the battlefield by the enemy’s heavy fire. Captain Marvel comes to his side and helps him as a “saviour”. When Spider Man asks Captain Marvel how she crossed through the enemy army, Captain Marvel then replies that almost all the female heroes unexpectedly gathered around him and hence, she was able to save him. The scene’s dialogue reveal the sister support as follows:

Captain Marvel: Hey, Peter Parker. You got something for me?

Spider Man: I don't know how you're gonna get it through all of that (enemy army).

(Scarlet Witch and Valkyries appear.)

Scarlet Witch: Don't worry.

Okoye: She's got help.

(More heroines alongside.)

This scene serves to address a specific goal, that is, the value of feminism, depicting the power of female solidarity and communicating the meaningful message that women do not need men's help and women can save men by "sister support". Related to this, Curtis and Cardo (2017) argued that there exists a "metaphor" where females are able to make decisions and have self-determination. These heroines don't have to wait for someone to call the shoots and they do what they want, which includes saving a man (p. 11). More specifically, when Spider Man questions Captain Marvel about his concerns of the enemy army, Captain Marvel, without batting an eye, predicted that her sisters would come to help her without hesitation. The diegesis of such a plot conveys that powerful, smart, independent, and modern female superheroes are more effective and receive a greater sense of valued personal identity from the trouble they handle as a group.

The above-mentioned scenes could be interpreted as "*set*" on purpose with contentious meanings. Specifically, the plot action in which Captain Marvel and other heroines fearlessly arrive to help Spider Man, may be seen as a protest against the audience's habitual cognition of – '*women and children first*'. As Kinnunen (2016) asserted, the plot in which a male character makes a comment, reducing the female character to "nothing more than a single attribute or function" is a situation that has been seen in movies "countless times" (p. 65). The phrase '*women and children first*' represents a code of conduct that emerged in the 1800s as a maritime protocol (patriarchal) generally used in emergencies, such as war, or natural disasters. It has been exemplified with the events on the night of April 15, 1912, in which the ship Titanic hit an iceberg. Captain Smith exercised the rule that '*women and children first*' were to be evacuated to the lifeboats. In addition to the general maritime rules of the day, such an order could be

interpreted as an expression of ‘chivalry’ – a strong ‘knight’ should protect a delicate ‘princess’. This may also be identified as the helpless female, damsel in distress archetype and persistent trope or stereotype of gender representation in art including the cinematic art as well as fairy tales (Wohlwend, [2009](#)).

In essence, such an idea stems from a social “equality” mechanism based on “the weak first”. In a patriarchal society, the female is seen as the “weak” always in need of protection, especially the protection of “gentlemen” (Lewis, [2001](#), p. 134). As a counterbalance there is the ‘empowered damsel’. However, the MCU may provide a narrative space to challenge stereotypes related to females, even though a scenario may be unrealistic. Curtis and Cardo ([2017](#)) argued that it is necessary to acknowledge the social and institutional barriers that still exist within the film industry till date and shape the production of gender representations (p. 2). Spider Man has been portrayed as a male in crisis, while the female heroes saving Spider Man are used to emphasize the ‘chivalry’ of a female version or “postfeminist masculinity” (Macaluso, [2018](#), p. 2). It can also be seen as a way to empower females by ridiculing the depiction of (male) masculinity. Nonetheless, the final battle of *Avengers: Endgame* ends by Iron Man which seems to convey a message that the male hero is the real hero in this battle.

Conclusion

The Avengers film series presents the filmic/on screen image of female heroines as a reshaping and reinterpretation of women in the context of the patriarchal film system. As such, it constructs a discourse world that reflects and demonstrates the value of contemporary feminism. *The Avengers* film series conveys awareness regarding the value of feminism within the layers of their constructed discourse world. However, the development of feminism is not linear, rather a negotiation of representations with a changing reality. The representation of women is still not completely free from the stereotyped depiction; instead, it may be understood as superficial, inherently old-fashioned, yet with a new surface. The broader rise of heroines in the MCU is accompanied by the emergence and crystallization of a new representational approach with the characteristics of an evolutionary stereotype to represent and portray female characters.

At the time of increasing emphasis on the value of (post) feminism, stressing the individual's free choice, sexualisation, and stereotyping of women, it may still be identified in this societal context as a result of "personal will" and "choice". Female heroes are abnormally thin because they choose to be thin. Similarly, female heroes are beautiful simply because they were born beautiful. The filmmakers of the MCU have agency in which they make conscious creative decisions to represent each hero and heroine, albeit this is partly limited by the comics' archetypes. However, scenes involving the "male gaze" are understood to be still embedded in the films and the predominant approach to filmic/on screen storytelling in *The Avengers* film series.

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