

Black Widow: Female Representation in the Marvel Cinematic Universe

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Introduction

Since 2008, the Marvel Cinematic Universe has grossed more than \$12 billion in worldwide ticket sales, and its highest-grossing film, *The Avengers*, earned over \$623 million and shattered other records in the Hollywood box office (“Franchises: Marvel Cinematic Universe,” n.d.). In 2008, Marvel Entertainment introduced its first film in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, *Iron Man*. The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) is a collection of superhero films produced by Marvel Studios, owned by The Walt Disney Company. In 2009, the media conglomerate purchased Marvel and its associated comic assets for \$4 billion, gaining rights to its characters for future feature films (Ingram, 2015). Though films were released by Marvel Entertainment prior to 2008, these films pale in comparison to the studio’s direction and cohesion established after 2008. Thus, the pre-2008 films are not considered part of the “canon” of the new MCU. The MCU has revitalized, skyrocketed, and further expanded the existing careers of numerous actors. Unfortunately, there is a vast underrepresentation of main female characters within the Marvel Cinematic Universe. This can be analyzed and understood through a critical feminist theoretical framework. Few female characters have emerged as leading, powerful characters in the MCU, one of the most far-reaching collections of entertainment media products in the world. Black Widow is the only female character among the original Avengers crew. She is sterile. She engages in romantic relationships with more than one of the other Avengers, and she is portrayed at different times as a heartless assassin, trusted gal pal, and object of sexual desire.

Shortly after *Iron Man* hit the screen in May 2008, *The Incredible Hulk* opened in theaters in June 2008. A sequel to *Iron Man*, *Iron Man 2*, was released in 2010, followed by *Thor* and *Captain America: The First Avenger* in 2011. In May 2012, the first film to combine the main characters within the first phase of the Marvel Cinematic Universe hit theaters around the world.

Prior to *Iron Man 2*, no female characters aside from Tony Stark's faithful assistant-turned love interest Pepper Potts (portrayed by Gwyneth Paltrow), or Bruce Banner's love interest Betty Ross (portrayed by Liv Tyler) was featured in the MCU. In 2010, *Iron Man 2* introduced the mysterious and attractive Natalie Rushman as Tony Stark's new assistant. Rushman was revealed to be Natasha Romanoff, a.k.a. Black Widow. Portrayed by Scarlett Johansson, Romanoff is a member of the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement, and Logistics Division, or S.H.I.E.L.D., the extra-governmental, counter-terrorism intelligence agency led by Nick Fury (Samuel L. Jackson). She is meant to recruit Stark to the Avengers Initiative (Favreau, 2010).

In subsequent films in the MCU, the Romanoff character stood strong as a founding member of The Avengers, a cooperative team of Marvel superheroes who joined together for the crossover film with the same name during the summer of 2012. Since *The Avengers*, Romanoff has also appeared in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, and *Captain America: Civil War*. Throughout these films, more and more of her backstory has been uncovered, allowing for further analysis of her characterization, motivations, and relationships. Unfortunately, the MCU struggles to represent women through its female characters on screen as individuals with much agency. In particular, Natasha Romanoff is introduced in *Iron Man 2* as a sexy, attractive assistant who then reveals herself to be a secret agent for the mysterious S.H.I.E.L.D. Later, Romanoff becomes one of the founding members of the Avengers, placing her in a powerful leadership position. That position is diminished in *The Winter Soldier* when she kisses Steve Rogers, also known as Captain America, and becomes a romantic interest. Romanoff becomes a romantic interest for a different Avenger in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, as a relationship blooms between Bruce Banner, the Hulk, and her.

It is necessary to examine the representation of female characters in the MCU because of the reach of this franchise. In this paper, we argue that the women in the Marvel Cinematic Universe are generally represented as being inferior to their male counterparts. In the case of Romanoff, Black Widow, even as she gains a position of power as a founding member of the Avengers, her agency is diminished through engagement in romantic relationships with male characters. By understanding the representational issues at play, specifically by looking at the characterization of Romanoff, we examine from the feminist critical theoretical perspective what might be changed to give women characters real agency in the MCU for billions of people around the world to consider.

Evolution of Feminism

At its roots, feminism is defined as “the theory of political, economic, and social equality of the sexes and the organized activity on behalf of women’s rights and interests” (“Feminism,” n.d.). Throughout our history, feminist thought has been influenced by social movements. Mary Wollstonecraft, mother of Mary Shelley of *Frankenstein* fame, released a book-length essay on women’s rights and education. The essay, “A Vindication of the Rights of Woman” was published in 1792 and became one of the earliest works in feminist philosophical thought (Plain & Sellers, 2007). The work challenged norms of sensibility, modesty, “softness and sweet attractive grace that is made to gratify the senses of men” (Wollstonecraft, 1792). A radical work at the time, the author focused her literary critique to define women not for their representative features and social standing but rather as “creative, thinking and aspirant beings” (Wollstonecraft, 1792). Explicitly, the essay argues that women are not inferior to men, but that the lack of educational opportunities robs women of agency and opportunity (Wollstonecraft, 1792).

In the United States, women fought for equal rights, including the right to vote for parts of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. Elizabeth Cady Stanton presented the Declaration of Sentiments at the Seneca Falls Women’s Rights Convention in 1848 (Dow, 2009). The proclamation fueled the discussion of women’s right to vote, ownership laws, education, and joining “avenues to wealth and distinction” through theological, medical and judicial employment opportunities (Schneir, 1992). African-American abolitionist and women’s rights leader Sojourner Truth advocated for equal rights for all women, with a focus on the oppression of African-American women forced into slavery. Her speech, “Ain’t I a Woman,” given at the Ohio Women’s Rights Convention in 1851, explained that the male perception of women is flawed leading to the construction and perpetuation of a social system of oppression (Truth, 1851: Reference the Marius Robinson transcription). Truth also argued that women of color are capable of performing tasks that were at the time limited to men (Painter, 1994). After slavery was abolished, she fought diligently for freed slaves’ right own land and to vote. Although the 15th Amendment granted African-American men the right to vote in 1870, women did not officially gain the right to vote until the 19th Amendment was ratified in 1920, seventy years after Stanton’s monumental Declaration of Sentiments.

Feminist Critical Scholarship

Critical feminist scholars in the United States have a long history of analyzing and deconstructing products of popular culture. Some concepts were derived from James Carey's ideologies of ritualistic communication procedures. Carey believed that communication is about the act of sharing and representing beliefs and culture, rather than a way of transmitting information (Carey, 1989). This frame of thought enables critical feminist scholars to observe the ways society ritualistically shares beliefs and culture through media. More than anything, critical feminist scholars are concerned with systematic sexism and the upholding of repressive social structures. Noreene Janus in particular called for critical feminist research focusing on the larger social and economic structures in play that had been systematically oppressing females throughout history (Janus, 1977).

American cultural studies scholar Janice Radway dove into the world of romance novels when tackling popular culture and how women are often represented. Radway uncovers the complicated system involved with the creation, editing, printing, marketing, and release of these novels (Radway, 1983). Radway also notes that readers are an important member of this ritualistic and systemic industry. The feminist ideology of Radway's work is uncovered when she interviews readers of romance novels and discusses the conventions that romance novels promote. In many of these books, a down-on-her-luck heroine is frequently placed in "a state of weakness in a patriarchal society" (Radway, 1983). Instead of using these novels to imagine ways for women to assert their own love stories or their agency, Radway finds that these novels repeat structures of oppression for the benefit of readers coping with their own limited agentic position in society (Radway, 1983).

Approaches to Feminist Critical Scholarship

Aside from Carey's ritualistic perspective, another line of scholarship appears in foundational feminist scholarship that is derived from Freud's psychoanalytic theoretical framework. Psychoanalytic theory proposes that human action and thought is driven by our inner psychological and emotional factors which are formed and informed by deeply emotionally affective external experiences (Freud, 1953). Applying this framework to film, critical cultural theorists such as Laura Mulvey explain how movies can contribute to consumers' innermost desires, compulsions, and drives. Mulvey explains:

The fascination of film is reinforced by pre-existing patterns of fascination already at work within the individual subject and social formations that have molded him. It takes as starting point the way film reflects, reveals and even plays on the straight, socially established interpretation of sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of looking, and spectacle . . . Psychoanalytic theory is thus appropriate here as a political weapon, demonstrating the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form. (Mulvey, 1999)

Mulvey explains that men and women in cinema are presented quite differently, both on-screen and in the industry. Women are often considered as “objects” whereas male characters drive the film’s narrative action (Mulvey, 1999).

This method of objectification further perpetuates a concept she helped pioneer, that of the “male gaze.” The male gaze, Mulvey says, is the lens through which women are portrayed in film, and across other mass media products. These images are created for and by men and systemically capture how male society would prefer women look, especially on screen. By viewing films that show women through this gaze, this concept is systemically reinforced (Mulvey, 2001).

Rakow defines four distinct approaches to feminist scholarship: images and representations, recovery and reappraisal, reception and experience, and cultural theoretical approaches (Rakow, 1986). The image and representation approach asks: “What images of women exist in the mass media?” and “How do they relate to women’s position in culture” (Rakow, 1986). The recovery and reappraisal approach asks how women express themselves in cultures dominated by men. It asks why female creativity and female stories are often overlooked, and it examines how men and women’s creative approaches differ (Rakow, 1986). The reception and experience approach is concerned with female consumers’ experiences when they buy popular products and if they believe this is a means to speak for themselves (Rakow, 1986). Finally, the cultural theoretical approach focuses on how culture is produced. It critiques social and economic structures and observes how they influence women’s experiences with both cultural norms and social structures (Rakow, 1986).

Focus on Reputation

For the purpose of this research, we focus on the first approach, the images and representations approach. Certain issues arise when we focus on images and

representations of women in our media, particularly in film. For example, a content analysis of 2,300 characters in the 100 top-grossing domestic films in 2014 revealed that female characters comprised 12 percent of on-screen protagonists (Lauzen, 2015). Gender stereotypes, such as portraying young women as romantically paired with their male counterparts relatively often, as though it were a requirement for the character to be in the film, and portraying males much more often in work-related roles persist (Lauzen, 2015). Issues of race representation also exist in these films; 74 percent of female characters were white while only 11 percent were black; 4 percent were Latina; 4 percent were Asian, and 3 percent were labeled "worldly" with another 4 percent categorized as "other" (Lauzen, 2015). Although demographic analysis is a clear-cut way to examine systemic underrepresentation of women in cinema, it is important to recognize that there are other representational issues on the table.

Perpetuated by the concept of the "male gaze," women are often oversexualized on-screen. Oversexualized representations of female characters can occur through female characters' actions, costume design, and other factors. Another issue in female representation in film is the social relationships female characters and male characters in film have. It is often difficult to see a male and female character in a scene sharing platonic dialog. Often, a woman's role in a film may exist only to further the plot or character arc of the leading male protagonist. Often, female characters become romantic objects instead of existing as independent beings. This ideology is further discussed in Mulvey's follow-up to "Visual Pleasures," which also mentions early feminist scholars' emphasis on the Freudian perspective (Mulvey, 2001). Mulvey also states that capitalist, patriarchal economic structures play a role in producing works that can oversaturate content meant for female audiences with "the generic presence of melodramas," which reinforces notions that women are strictly emotional beings (Mulvey, 2001).

Representation Within the Marvel Cinematic Universe

With the images and representation approach (Rakow, 1986) still in mind, it is important to look at how Natasha Romanoff is characterized in the films of the Marvel Cinematic Universe in order to relate her on-screen portrayal to current norms for women in our culture. This study examines how Romanoff's character is transformed throughout her journey in the MCU. We observe and describe both textual and visual portrayals by analyzing MCU films and the scripts on which they are based. We describe who Romanoff, a.k.a. Black Widow, interacts

with, the content and context of those interactions, and if they exist to serve a larger goal for her character or merely to further the story of another Avenger, who is always male. In our manuscript, we argue that Romanoff's character is transformed from a strong, standalone superheroine who is not motivated by romantic interests, to a romantic object of interest. Her sexuality often comes to supersede her superhero nature. That is, her superhuman abilities, those that allowed her rise to a position of power in S.H.I.E.L.D. and to become a founding member of The Avengers are portrayed as though they are of less importance in the MCU than her romantic appeal.

Representations of strong, female characters in films can serve society by creating positive role models for young women, but when these female characters are diminished through romantic relationships with other leading male characters, it serves to confirm preexisting notions that women primarily exist to be mothers, loyal friends, or objects of romantic interest, further perpetuating the concepts of early feminist researchers and critical discourse scholars (Foucault, 1982; Mulvey, 1999; Radway, 1983; Rakow, 1986).

Our research objective with this manuscript is to see how Avenger Natasha Romanoff, *Black Widow*, is represented in the films of the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

Method

In the 1930s, early media researchers were interested in seeing how certain stereotypes, styles, and values translated through newspaper articles, then through wartime propaganda in the 1940s (Krippendorff, 2004). American political scientist and communication theorist Harold Lasswell introduced a concise way of systematically analyzing media content formed upon his model of communication, which says, "who says what, through which channel, to whom, with what effect" (Lasswell, 1948). Since its inception, content analysis has been a popular research method in both sociological and mass communications research for its text-centered nature and its ability to produce both qualitative and quantitative results. When asking questions and intending to find probable answers through a content analysis, it is crucial to formulate a research question using inductive reasoning. Robert Merton (1945) showed that, when developing some sociological research questions, your ideologies must be founded by theory and intend not to "prove" or demonstrate observed predictions. When this occurs, it creates a logical fallacy. Instead of this deductive approach, a more inductive

approach to content analysis will allow for providing strong evidence for the possible truths that occur in our society, rather than proving the hypothesis entirely true or false.

For this manuscript, we conducted a textual analysis, also referred to as a qualitative media analysis, as outlined by Altheide and Schneider (2012). In particular, we conducted a critical analysis of film content, which takes the form of a textual analysis with an emphasis on social relationships and semiotics (Macnamara, 2006; Skalski, Neuendorf, & Cajigas, 2017). Understanding these social relationships leads to a question of the power relationships at play. Foucault's work in critical discourse analysis, which focuses on how language and behavior can exhibit certain power relationships, also informs our analysis and helps us to understand some of the powers at play. From this position, Foucault said, one can identify discourse, and exactly how language is affected by various sources of power (Foucault, 1982).

Content analysis has been a trusted method of many feminist scholars to support theoretical claims, compare media to real-life social events, and detect certain media effects (Rudy, Popova, & Linz, 2010). However, critical theorists have also reached far beyond the media to understand related phenomena at play in our society. The underrepresentation of women in certain professional roles has been studied across disciplines (Chou, 2013; Hill, Corbett, & St Rose, 2010).

Feminist film theory has allowed for the discussion of female representation in movies (Smelik, 2016). Feminist film theory not only reads the meaning of the film text, but like other critical theories, seeks to find how that meaning is systemically constructed. Feminist film theorists argue not only that media is a reflection of social relations, but film also affirms the meanings of gender roles and differences toward the masses (Smelik, 2016). Decades since its inception, Laura Mulvey's concept of the "male gaze" still dominates the lens through which film is shot to this day and has held up as one of the most commonly used theoretical frameworks in feminist film criticism (Mulvey, 2001). The images and representation approach to feminist scholarship (Rakow, 1986) also provides further support for this type of analysis. Representational methodologies such as the Bechdel test have also been applied to films (Bechdel, 1985). This "test" is described by the method of asking whether or not a film has two or more women in it, who communicate with one another about something other than a male character.

Some of the best use of content analysis in feminist film theory, though it is quantitative rather than qualitative, comes from Neuendorf, Gore, Dalessandro,

Janstova, and Snyder-Suhy's 2010 work, "Shaken and Stirred: A Content Analysis of Women's Portrayals in James Bond Films." The researchers examined codes such as sexual activity, the actresses' attractiveness, race, role size, and weapon-use to identify the link between sexuality and violent behaviors in film (Neuendorf et al., 2010). Interdisciplinary researchers like Ramakrishna, Malandrakis, Staruk, et al. (2015) have also used their expertise in computer science and electrical engineering to create content analysis algorithms to quantitatively identify gender differences in films.

Qualitative content analysis methods for analyzing films are not rare and have also been used across disciplines to understand human behavior, especially in the fields of anthropology and psychology. At the root of this method, explained by Altheide and Schneider (2012), qualitative content analysis involves establishing texts to conduct the analysis. Next, the researcher would dive deeply into those texts, establish a coding strategy consistent with their research inquiry, identify concepts and keywords, and lastly write summaries for each category (Altheide & Schneider, 2012). A great example of qualitative content analyses in film exists within an interesting research query about portrayals of smoking by female leads in films. This work, "Women and Smoking in Hollywood Movies: A Content Analysis," divided films into different intervals and recorded when the lead female actresses smoked (Escamilla, Cradock, & Kawachi, 2000).

Design

For this manuscript, we dove into the Marvel Cinematic Universe film catalog from 2008-2017, including 16 films: *Iron Man*, *The Incredible Hulk*, *Iron Man 2*, *Thor*, *Captain America: The First Avenger*, *The Avengers*, *Iron Man 3*, *Thor: The Dark World*, *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, *Guardians of the Galaxy*, *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, *Ant-Man*, *Captain America: Civil War*, *Doctor Strange*, *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2*, and *Spider-Man: Homecoming*. From that collection of films, we identified the films in which Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow is featured. Those five films include: *Iron Man 2*, *The Avengers*, *Captain America: Winter Soldier*, *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, and *Captain America: Civil War*. Then, we established and gathered pre-transcribed scripts from open-source internet sites like the *Internet Movie Script Database* or the transcripts portal of the Marvel Cinematic Universe "fandom" wiki. To ensure the content is correct, we watched all five films and made any necessary corrections. We analyzed each script and identified when Natasha Romanoff was being referred to or spoken to

directly, and established five main codes, which were derived from theories developed by preceding feminist film critics and theorists in tandem with reflexive study of the films themselves (Mayne, 1985; Mulvey, 2001; Plain & Sellers, 2007; Radway, 1983; Smelik, 2016).

We devised these five codes: Sexy Assistant, Deadly Assassin, Loyal Friend, The Avenger, and Romantic Interest. We watched the films looking for ways Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow was often portrayed. We then compared a list of character tropes to the feminist literature and narrowed down the categorization to the five listed above after returning to the literature. Following Mayne's reading of feminist film theory (1985), we sought to avoid simple masculine/feminine binaries in our analysis. Mayne states, "If dualism and sexual difference are obsessive concerns in psychoanalysis as they are in the cinema, the task for feminists is to engage with the dualisms, while insisting on the possibilities of other approaches" (94). Thus, we sought to describe the full characterization of Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow with more than a simple binary. And yet we needed to narrow the number of categories so that they would be significant enough to warrant discussion.

Mulvey encourages us to look for evidence of the male gaze. Under this guise, we see the "Sexy Assistant" category emerge. In this mode, Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow is cast in a familiar literary, comic book, and film trope as a sexually desirable woman with less power than a direct male counterpart (i.e., her boss). As the films focused more and more on Black Widow as an assassin, we made the connection between her characterization and the political ramifications of how women are portrayed in literature and other works, which follows Plain & Sellers (2007). Assassins are political actors and have the potential to claim agency in the context of global affairs, but this is often lacking or muted in female characters. They can carry out acts of global significance and be reduced in the same works to supporting roles. It is important for us in this study to note this essential element of the character of Black Widow and to see how it *balances* with other aspects of how she is characterized. Where common gender roles are reaffirmed, we reference Smelik (2016), and this is most evident in the Loyal Friend and Romantic Interest code categories. The Romantic Interest category also references Radway (1983), who suggests that a female character developed as a romantic interest might be expected to be oppressed as a result of that relationship or those relationships. This characterization occurs in several films with Black Widow being paired with different interests. In question is to what extent those relationships limit her agency in favor of making her a means to

develop other characters. All superheroes experience weakness, but we examine to what extent Black Widow’s weaknesses are peculiarly tied to her gender as represented. Finally, there is the category of The Avenger, the archetypal superhero. Black Widow is one among them, but to what extent is she fully heroic? To what extent is this the essence of her character as it develops? Do these films affirm new gender roles? Smelik (2016) does not tell us what to expect as much as suggest that this is an important aspect of the characterization to analyze.

Analysis

The following table indicates the five codes we identified for ways Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow is portrayed and places them in the context of the five films analyzed in depth.

Black Widow’s Representation in the Marvel Cinematic Universe

	Sexy Assistant	Deadly Assassin	Loyal Friend	The Avenger	Love Interest
<i>Iron Man 2</i> (2010)	X	X			
<i>The Avengers</i> (2012)		X	X	X	
<i>Captain America: The Winter Soldier</i> (2014)		X	X		X
<i>Avengers: Age of Ultron</i> (2015)		X	X	X	X
<i>Captain America: Civil War</i> (2016)		X	X	X	

Sexy Assistant

The “Sexy Assistant” character trope is commonly used in a variety of media, including comic books, anime, film, literature, theater, and video games. These characters are identified by their good looks and often revealing and yet still business-formal attire. Often, these characters are mischaracterized as dim-witted or less educated than their male counterparts. For these reasons, they are

frequently underestimated, and the insight and advice offered to other characters is often tossed aside.

In *Iron Man 2* in her very first appearance in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, Natasha Romanoff was introduced in disguise as Natalie Rushman, a legal secretary from Tony Stark's multibillion-dollar Stark Industries. After Stark promoted his personal assistant and partner Pepper Potts to CEO of Stark Industries, Natalie Rushman was brought in to manage official paperwork. When she is first introduced, Natalie wears a low-cut white blouse, high-waisted black slacks, and heels. While boxing with Happy in a boxing ring in his office, Stark invites Rushman into the ring, paired with a close-up shot of her slouched over, entering the ring, with eyes gazing toward Tony. He stares for a moment and asks Happy to "give her a lesson" in boxing while he convinces Pepper to allow him to hire Natasha as his new personal assistant. In this instance, viewers are encouraged to adopt the male gaze and to frame Natalie Rushman/Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow from the outset as a sexual object in relation to the womanizing Tony Stark. Stark then "Googles" Natalie and finds that she was a lingerie model in Tokyo. He goes on to say, "I need her. She's got everything I need," When Natalie Rushman/Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow exits the scene, Tony Stark states to Pepper Potts that he "wants one" (Favreau, 2010). Here, Natalie Rushman/Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow is explicitly objectified and it relates directly to her professional role as a secretary, a classic role in literature and film that demands corporate competency without granting social agency.

Pepper Potts, suspicious of Rushman, confronts her at Tony's birthday party while he and his longtime friend Rhodey fight in Iron Man suits. Jealous and upset at Tony's reckless behavior, she tells Rushman she is "on to her." Natalie's "Sexy Assistant" persona is held up even after she reveals her identity as Agent Natasha Romanoff. In order to keep up appearances for Stark Industries, she continues to play the assistant for the outside world.

A moment of true hypersexualization in the characterization of Natalie Rushman leads to the climax of *Iron Man 2*. Justin Hammer's war machine suits are hacked by Ivan Vanko, and Natalie rushes to Hammer Industries to put a stop to the chaos occurring at the Stark Expo. She forces Happy to drive her to the facility while she changes into her S.H.I.E.L.D. uniform. She undresses in the backseat, and Happy is captivated with his half-naked passenger. Natalie sternly warns Happy to "watch the road" while she changes (Favreau, 2010). Thus, she is subject to the male gaze through the eyes of the audience via the character Happy as she transforms into her role as an Avenger. In later films (*The Avengers*, *Captain*

America: The Winter Soldier, Avengers: Age of Ultron, and Captain America: Civil War) the “Sexy Assistant” mode of representation is eliminated as Natalie Rushman/Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow no longer plays that role. Nevertheless, this is the male-gaze-oriented frame through which the first woman Avenger is introduced.

Deadly Assassin

In the “Deadly Assassin” mode of representation, Black Widow has the ability to take down any opponent that stands in her way, regardless of which “side” the character is on. This common character trope is used in many films including *Léon: The Professional, Mr. and Mrs. Smith, Hitman, Road to Perdition, and Boondock Saints*, as well as the *James Bond* film franchise. It provides an opportunity for agency that allows Black Widow to transcend the geopolitical aims and ethical norms of the other Avengers even before the disagreement over politics and their roles as superheroes leads to a “Civil War.”

In *Iron Man 2*, the concept that “Natalie Rushman” isn’t simply a civilian worker within Stark Industries is apparent in her first scene in the film. When instructed by Tony to hop into the ring with Happy for a boxing lesson, Happy asks Natalie Rushman/Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow if she had ever boxed before, or tried “Tae Bo, Booty Booty Bootcamp,” or other fad workouts (Favreau, 2010). Annoyed with this lame attempt at flirting, Black Widow cannot resist but to show off some of her skills by flipping Happy upside down hard onto the mat. As a fighter, eventually a killer, Black Widow can have agency.

Soon after Tony’s birthday debacle with Rhodey (referenced previously in which they fight one another in Iron Man suits), a beaten up and hungover Tony Stark is found by S.H.I.E.L.D. agent Nick Fury at Los Angeles’ Randy’s Donut Shop. During their conversation inside, another S.H.I.E.L.D. agent notifies Fury that the location is secure. Looking up, Tony realizes that the agent is his assistant, Natalie. Fury then introduces Natalie as Agent Romanoff, a shadow agent who was tasked with recruiting Tony Stark to the Avengers Initiative. Her cover as Tony’s assistant continues until she arrives at Hammer Industries with Happy. She enters the facility and tells Happy to stay in the car. While inside, Natalie takes on several security guards and fights them hand-to-hand and by using her high-tech S.H.I.E.L.D. weaponry. Meanwhile, Happy fights only one security guard. After completing his fight, he looks around and sees that Black Widow has

handled the rest of the guards. As a fighter, she proves herself more valuable than Tony Stark's trusted friend.

In her first scene in *The Avengers*, Natasha Romanoff is found taking a brutal beating from a Russian general and his thugs. A seasoned spy, she does not waiver despite their efforts to break her. Before the general has the chance to begin ripping out her teeth to torture her, a thug's cell phone rings, and S.H.I.E.L.D. agent Phil Coulson is on the other line. The general is made aware that his plan to torture Natasha has been foiled. Natasha breaks out of her ropes and beats her captor, and his thugs. Agent Colson tells Natasha her next task is to track down Bruce Banner, otherwise known as the Hulk, and recruit him to the Avengers Initiative. Here we can starkly see in clear juxtaposition Black Widow's roles as assassin and friend-who-recruits-Avengers.

When she first arrives in the Indian shanty town where Banner has been hiding out, he asks if she has come to kill him. Black Widow's assassin reputation precedes her. Natasha argues with Banner and threatens him with a gun, again indicating that her agency derives from her willingness to kill. Natasha's skills as a deadly assassin are used throughout the fight sequences in *The Avengers*, especially her knack for acrobatic hand-to-hand fighting. Though she is human and not enhanced by radioactive or otherworldly powers as are several of her peers, Black Widow consistently holds her own in battle.

In *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, Natasha maintains her assassin identity working with S.H.I.E.L.D.'s S.T.R.I.K.E. team to take down threats to the organization; however, when it is discovered that HYDRA, an authoritarian terrorist-criminal-paramilitary organization, has infiltrated S.T.R.I.K.E., Black Widow and Steve Rogers/Captain America go on the run, gaining help from veteran Sam Wilson/Falcon. Natasha undergoes a brief mental conflict and reveals part of her history to Steve: She joined S.H.I.E.L.D. as part of moral decision to use her skills, gained through involvement with the KGB (Russo & Russo, 2014). Now that HYDRA has infiltrated S.H.I.E.L.D, she suggests she may have been fighting for the wrong side the entire time. As an assassin, she has the ability and agency to choose sides based on her own moral compass rather than group ethics or national allegiance.

In *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, Black Widow's skills as an assassin continue to be utilized; however, viewers gain more insight into her past via the power of Wanda Maximoff/Scarlet Witch. During a battle with the artificially intelligent villain Ultron, and his then-henchmen Wanda Maximoff/Scarlet Witch and Pietro Maximoff/Quicksilver, Scarlet Witch uses her powers on Steve Rogers and

Natasha. In our first look into Natasha's past outside of brief bits of dialogue, it is revealed that Natasha was recruited by the KGB and endured relentless training, brainwashing, and assassination education in a place called The Red Room.

As a student, Natasha became concerned for her own safety as well as that of the other women being trained. She worries that "they will be broken" (Whedon, 2015). At one point in her training, her teacher, Madame B., tells her she is unbreakable, and that an impending ceremony solidifying her role as an assassin for the Soviet State is "necessary for her to take her place in the world" (Whedon, 2015). Natasha replies, "We have no place in the world," and her teacher replies with a confirming, stern "exactly" (Whedon, 2015). Later in her conversations with Bruce Banner, Natasha reveals that after she had successfully passed the mental and physical tests in the Red Room, she was forcibly sterilized during the "ceremony." The reason for this sterilization, Natasha says, is to make the graduates better killers free from distractions. As the assassin side of Black Widow's character is developed it is suggested that her agency is borne out of torture and tragedy. Part of her femininity was taken away in order to provide for this level of and type of power.

In *Captain America: Civil War*, Natasha's assassin skills are put to the test in the opening act when she, Sam Wilson, Steve Rogers, and Wanda Maximoff are on a mission in Lagos to stop an international terrorist attempting to unleash chemical agents. Black Widow tactfully uses her skills in battle to evade several terrorist agents. After encountering Bucky Barnes/the Winter Soldier, Steve Rogers' childhood friend-turned-HYDRA weapon, who nearly strangles her to death, Black Widow is saved by T'Challa, the prince of Wakanda/Black Panther. We do not read this as inherently weak in the context of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. The Avengers are always coming to each other's aid, but it is noteworthy that Black Widow is not invincible as other Avengers seem to be.

Throughout these films, it is important to note, Black Widow most often acts as an assassin who injures her opponents and enemies but does not kill. In working for S.H.I.E.L.D. as an Avenger, she agrees to withhold some of her agency or power in order to work as part of the team. For this and other reasons, Black Widow, the assassin, questions the "sides" she takes in these global conflicts even before most of the other Avengers are forced to do the same. In this role, she demonstrates power and self-control and exerts influence over other Avengers. She has agency, but it is largely borne out of her ability and potential as a killer.

This is the one aspect of the character present in all of the films analyzed for this study. Black Widow's role as an assassin is central to the character. It is

her "true" role as an Avenger, and yet, she wears black leather or black patent leather in most of her scenes. She often begins or ends a battle in a sexually suggestive pose. Male viewers are allowed to gaze upon her as an object even when she is at her most powerful, as a deadly assassin capable of deciding her path amidst global post-Cold War chaos.

Loyal Friend

At its roots, the *Avengers* film is based on bringing together a rag-tag group of super-human or god-like individuals to fight off Loki's army of aliens. Essentially, the point of the film is to showcase how this assortment of egos, abilities, insecurities, and faults can unite and fight in friendship. Two moments in this film epitomize how Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow is portrayed as a loyal friend to the other Avengers. When Black Widow learns that her friend Clint Barton/Hawkeye, was brainwashed by Loki, she connects with him and helps ground him by recounting part of their shared history. She tells Clint that he was, at one time, sent to assassinate her, but he made the decision not to kill her. They are both assassins who overcame some manner of intensive training and/or brainwashing previously. The two worked closely with one another for S.H.I.E.L.D. ever since. In this mode, Black Widow shows she is more than an assassin. It is explicit in the text of the film *The Avengers* that she identifies both as an assassin capable of murder and as a platonic companion to an Avenger facing a similar path. This relationship is important because through the eyes of Hawkeye, Black Widow is not seen through the typical male gaze. She is an equal, not a victim of a similar fate but a caring comrade, in the deeper sense.

In *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, while working for S.H.I.E.L.D. Natasha and Steve Rogers become close friends. Frequently, Natasha encourages her friend to get back into the dating world, suggesting several feasible options in one-liners throughout the film. Following Nick Fury's suspicious death at the hands of HYDRA, Natasha finds herself in a point of distrust with her fellow Avenger, Steve Rogers. Thinking that she may have had something to do with his death, Steve confronts Natasha. She offers a small amount of information about The Winter Soldier, a highly-skilled assassin who tried to kill her several months prior to the Avengers' formation. While on the run from S.T.R.I.K.E. and HYDRA agents, she convinces Steve to trust her again, and the duo works to understand what HYDRA has done with the Winter Soldier. In the role of friend, Black

Widow does more than shoot, stab, and jab her way to success. She is shown as more of an equal to her counterparts.

In *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, the breadth of Natasha and Clint Barton's/Hawkeye's friendship is made clear when the team goes into hiding at Clint's homestead. There, it is revealed to the rest of the Avengers that Clint has a wife and two children, along with one on the way. Natasha is quite close to his family, and his children even call her "Auntie Nat." At no point prior to this point has Natasha revealed Clint's private family affairs. This is a testament to the character's loyalty as a friend. It adds another dimension to her personal ethics and to her standing in the group that she can be trusted in this way with such personal information.

In *Captain America: Civil War*, Natasha's friendships are tested when Steve Rogers and Clint Barton refuse to sign the Sokovia Accords, which Black Widow was forced to sign as a member Avenger. Clint tells his longtime friend that he has retired and will not fight under the direction of the United Nations, nor against the other Avengers, indicating those who refuse to sign the accords, which require them to "out" themselves as superheroes. In this case, Natasha is trusted with more of Clint's most personal business. In other scenes in the same film, Natasha warns Steve Rogers that he should stop pursuing Bucky Barnes, who is suspected of bombing international meetings in Lagos. Natasha is watching out for her friends, and they consider her counsel, even if her fellow Avengers do not always heed the advice.

During the film's giant fight scene between Team Stark and Team Cap, Natasha is shown fighting hand-to-hand with Clint, who was eventually recruited by Steve to fight with those who refused to sign the Sokovia Accords. Natasha is on the side of those who signed and as she and Clint clash, she asks him whether they are still friends. She notes that Clint is "pulling his punches," as Wanda Maximoff/Scarlet Witch stuns Natasha. After coming around, Natasha lets Steve and Bucky escape the fight safely. Ultimately, Natasha is able to remain friends with Avengers on both sides of the "Civil War," which speaks much more to her ability to be a loyal friend than it does to her status as an assassin with fickle loyalties. In this mode, Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow is depicted as a multifaceted character. As difficult as it may be to delve into deep character development in a superhero film with dozens of characters, *Captain America: Civil War* manages to show a more complex Black Widow.

The Avenger

In this facet of our analysis of how Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow is characterized across five films, we find she is held on par with characters with super-human, even demigod abilities, although she is a mere mortal. What makes Black Widow a superhero is the combination of her skills as an assassin and her service to S.H.I.E.L.D. In other words, she accepts the institutional power of S.H.I.E.L.D. and comes to represent it as a recruiter of other Avengers. She forges some of the most important social bonds in the group as both a friend and a love interest. Black Widow is stealthy, strong, conniving, and convincing, but she is also arguably more caring than several of her counterparts. She is portrayed as completely human and heroic when framed as a member of the Avengers. As a fighter, she is sometimes portrayed in a hypersexualized manner, as has been discussed previously, but as a recruiter, friend, and comrade fighting in sometimes brutal hand-to-hand combat scenarios she is portrayed as truly heroic, a superhero that happens to be a woman with an intriguing past.

Directed by S.H.I.E.L.D. Agents Nick Fury and Phil Coulson, Natasha Romanoff is arguably in charge of the Avengers Initiative recruitment. Not only is she the only female founding member, she is integral in the formation of the group. In the MCU, the Avengers would not work without Tony Stark/Iron Man or Bruce Banner/the Hulk, and it is Natasha/Black Widow who brings them in, so to speak. Natasha's motives are largely personal and psychological. She wants to right her wrongs and to serve the morally right cause in growing global battles. She is torn between the two factions in *Captain America: Civil War*. Though her role is somewhat diminished by the end of the film as attention focuses on Bucky, Cap, Tony Stark and T'Chala, she will always be known as key to bringing and *keeping* the Avengers together, to the extent that is possible as the MCU grinds on.

In *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, Natasha Romanoff has the cultural background, skill and compassion to bring necessary new members into the fold. In other words, prior to the events of *Captain America: Civil War*, Romanoff has already helped to make and remake the Avengers. *Age of Ultron* begins with the Avengers, including Natasha, assembled following S.H.I.E.L.D.'s collapse after HYDRA's successful infiltration. The team uses Stark's resources to destroy HYDRA terrorists. Then, the team must begin to battle Ultron, a Stark-made artificially intelligent being that joins HYDRA in a base in the imaginary Eastern European nation of Sokovia. Ultron is creating his own army of robotic drones. The Avengers manage to merge Tony Stark's AI personal assistant J.A.R.V.I.S., the

Mind Stone from Loki's staff, and a vibranium body which becomes Vision. They also welcome new allies Wanda and Pietro Maximoff in order to ultimately defeat Ultron.

Natasha can relate to the Maximoff twins, who were born in Sokovia. They too once worked for an authoritarian power, HYDRA, before joining the Avengers of the global West. The small nation of Sokovia is all but destroyed in the wake of the battle with Ultron. Natasha's role then becomes that of a leader and trainer in the Avengers. By the end of *Age of Ultron*, she and Steve Rogers work to sharpen the skills of the new Avengers, Rhodes as War Machine, Sam Wilson as Falcon, and Wanda Maximoff as Scarlet Witch, in an updated uniform. From recruiter to fighter to trainer, Black Widow holds roles that would be of great importance in any military organization. In this capacity, she is depicted with agency, professionalism, and a sense of the greater social importance of her work and her relationships.

Romantic Interest

Black Widow is also depicted as a romantic interest in several films, and she is paired with different members of the team. This alone should not be taken as an indication of weakness or as an indictment of the character. Various members of the Avengers form relationships as the MCU grows. The critique of these films in how they depict Black Widow comes not from the fact that she pairs up with different Avengers but in the way that she is sometimes used practically as a catalyst for other characters to grow and develop as they come in contact with her. One might argue that remaining steadfast as a character is a good thing, that Natasha is a rock who has herself more "figured out" than other Avengers, as it were. There is some truth to this sentiment, but on the other hand, Natasha has issues of her own to work out, and they take a back seat. Iron Man, Captain America, and the Hulk (Including *Thor: Ragnarok*) all get their own films to grow, change, and develop while Black Widow is relegated, often, to being a role player. It is an important role, but Black Widow's aspirations, struggles and growth are often pushed to the background until she needs to offer calming words or kick butt in tight pants.

In *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* Natasha and Steve find themselves getting close to one another in several ways. In one part of the film, the two are seen disguised in plain clothes in an Apple Store viewing classified maps and documents. When the resident Apple Genius asks if the duo needs anything,

Natasha states that she and her fiancé are planning their honeymoon. Steve plays along with the cover and continues examining the documents. While exiting the store, Natasha and Steve identify hostile agents. Quickly, Natasha commands Steve to kiss her. Confused, Steve asks why and Natasha replies that "public displays of affection make people very uncomfortable" (Russo & Russo, 2014). After escaping the mall, Natasha asks Steve if that was his "first kiss since 1945" and that she's "wondered how much practice he's had" (Russo & Russo, 2014). Here, her sexuality is used as a distraction in a way that says more about Rogers than Romanoff.

Several films in the MCU dedicate time to the relationship that develops between Natasha Romanoff and Bruce Banner/the Hulk. Early on in the film *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, while the team works to take down remaining HYDRA forces, Banner transforms into the Hulk and battles alongside the Avengers. When the battle ends, it is revealed that team members, particularly Natasha, have been working on a way to subdue Hulk and allow him to turn back into his human form. This process, called the lullaby, involves Natasha approaching Hulk in a calm, soothing demeanor and saying, "The sun's getting real low" (Whedon, 2015). Although it is subtle, this lullaby verges on the romantic. She kneels in front of the massive Hulk and puts out her hand. Hulk reaches out carefully to touch her hand, and she strokes his hand slowly until he calms down, stumbles away, and changes back into Bruce Banner. This shows us Natasha's capacity for compassion, but once again, as a romantic interest, Natasha does more to tell us about the Hulk's state of being than her own.

Eventually, Wanda Maximoff perceives that Bruce and Natasha have a romance. Wanda has a romantic vision of Bruce and Natasha that they are forced to view while they hide out in Hawkeye's home. Natasha has the vision while waiting for Bruce to get out of the shower. She then comments that she "wished she would have joined him" but it "wasn't the right time" (Whedon, 2015). Bruce replies that they probably "missed their window" (Whedon, 2015). The two continue to talk about what happened in their battle with Ultron, and that Bruce has to go back into hiding. Natasha then reveals that she's willing to "run with it," and if that means running away with Bruce, then she would be willing to do so. Bruce tells her that he's too much of a risk to be around and that there is no possibility of a future with him because he can't have a physical relationship or have children. Natasha reveals that she was forcibly sterilized, and that this was supposed to make "things easier, even killing," (Whedon, 2015). She states that she feels like a monster. At this point, Bruce begins to consider what might

happen if they disappear, but before they continue, the conversation is ended and the scene ends. This is poignant and shows that Natasha hopes for a romantic relationship with Bruce Banner. We get a glimpse of what personal self-actualization might be like for her and for Bruce, but the plot line is left to linger. Natasha Romanoff's character is more fully developed than that of the run-of-the-mill femme fatale, but in five films, this is as much as viewers are given. In contrast, Tony Stark's relationship with Pepper Potts goes through multiple iterations. He is able to grow, learn, fail, and change in great detail while the woman who recruited him into the Avengers is left mostly as we found her in terms of her personal emotional development.

It is interesting to briefly note that Natasha's relationship with Clint Barton/Hawkeye is not romantic in a way that is significant to this section of analysis. The fact that the character is capable of having platonic relationships with men shows that she is not always in the femme fatale assassin mode. She is able to stop being Black Widow and to befriend a married man and his family in a way that shows a depth of character if not some great level of growth. As the MCU continues to develop and as Bruce Banner continues to pine for Natasha Romanoff, we may see further development of either character or even mutual development, but the MCU has broader stories to tell as it moves on with Thanos, Captain Marvel, Black Panther, further films with the Guardians of the Galaxy and an ever-expanding Universe.

Discussion and Conclusion

Throughout the five Marvel Cinematic Universe films released between 2008 and 2017 in which Natasha Romanoff is featured, she is visually, textually, and systemically sexualized. She is often depicted through the male gaze, and although there are many instances of character development and at times portrayals of great character depth, what fans of the MCU may remember most about Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow is as likely to be her clothing as it is to be her capacity to recruit, train, fight, and befriend. Employing the male gaze, per Mulvey (1999) upholds a patriarchal structure of male dominance and control over women's bodies. Demonstrating to more than a billion film viewers that it is appropriate to view the sole founding female Avenger as a sex object not only through the eyes of Tony Stark but through the lens in place of the viewer's eye reinforces social psychosexual norms objectifying women in the workplace and elsewhere.

Natasha's physical appearance is exploited in low-cut, revealing uniforms and disguises in each of these films, and it also plays a major role in how she is depicting in promotional materials. Throughout the films, Natasha's character is consistently depicted through this lens (Mulvey 1999 & 2001). In fight scenes and promotional posters, her body is contorted into sexy poses. She is often depicted in photographs from the top of her red or blonde hairdo down to her thighs as she looks over her shoulder such that her buttocks in tight leather can be the focus of the image. Scarlett Johansson's curves are often emphasized and sometimes enhanced by photo editing software. The dominant image of Black Widow is not all that far removed from that of other comic book "babes" despite the fact that she is an original Avenger and plays a significant role in forming, reforming, and holding together the group without which there would be no broad ensemble films.

Employing the male gaze as a norm in these blockbuster superhero films suggests to massive global audiences that professional women at work, be they administrative assistants or adroit assassins, are fair game for ogling and it may suggest to the average male filmgoer that he should expect to be in a place of power and control even over the most exceptional women. Thus, viewers may conclude by looking at how Black Widow is framed by the male gaze that all women ought to be objectified.

This perpetuates social norms that have real and consistent consequences for women seeking position of power and seeking to be free from harassment in the workplace as well as in social interactions in general. If it is allowable and encouraged to view women as sex objects in film and in film promotions, it can be difficult to see them as leaders or to take their reports of harassment seriously. This follows Mulvey's theory in the context of social psychology. The Sexy Assistant characterization appears in only one of the five films we analyzed, but the Deadly Assassin trope appears in all five of them, and the uniform remains, more or less, the same.

Natasha as a "Loyal Friend" and as an Avenger is shown to be professionally essential to the group. She is strong and quick and holds her own on a team with gods and enhanced human characters. She survives countless encounters with Nazi-like thugs, aliens, and all manner of global terrorists. She recruits some of the first Avengers, helps rebuild the team, and shows compassion for both sides of the group's internal "Civil War." She does not fall into a gender binary in that there are other facets to the character besides the sexually objectified one. She is incredibly powerful and influential, although she has not

yet been the central character in her own MCU film. Natasha Romanoff /Black Widow employs her sexuality and her fists and other weapons at various times throughout the five films. Women, girls, and gender non-binary viewers can see in Black Widow a woman who uses her sexuality and her mind and leadership skills. She is a complex character.

Mayne (1985) reminds us about “classical cinema's obsession with sexual hierarchy” (p. 86). One way of interpreting the characterization of Black Widow on the whole is that she is placed into a subservient female position only to break out of it and show her true power and agency as a true leader among Avengers. The problem with this way of viewing the characterization of Natasha Romanoff is that it allows male filmmakers off the hook for oversexualizing the character. Male filmmakers and viewers can have their proverbial cake and eat it too if they continue to portray women as vixens who sooner or later break the mold to some extent. They can claim to support a liberated woman character while still watching her run around in tight leather pants with a low-cut, form fitting top occasionally hopping on motorcycles or men suggestively. To reinforce sexual hierarchy only to bend it a bit in later scenes or later films it to continue to support the patriarchy.

As a romantic interest, Natasha is characterized as an equal to her male counterparts. She is an object of interest for playboy Tony Stark, but she shows no real interest in him. She flirts with Steve Rogers but only in a ruse, and ultimately she falls for Bruce Banner, who has had similar life experiences. They share the physical trait of being incapable of reproduction, but this only matters in the context of heteronormative, “traditional” family procreation structures. That either of them care about not being able to have their own children may itself indicate a patriarchal hierarchical normative point of view. On the other hand, it may simply be a plot device to give two Avengers with very little else in common some shared struggles over which to bond. The problem with the latter way of reading their relationship is that there are any number of other psychological, familial, and social issues that Natasha Romanoff and Bruce Banner might have shared. Their inability to have their own children because of sterilization suggests they are both broken in the same way, a way that goes against traditional sexual hierarchy. This is depicted with a sense of pity rather than liberation. In fact, to the feminist filmgoer the fact that Natasha Romanoff is sterile need not suggest she is “broken;” however, the fact that she is forcibly sterilized takes away her own reproductive control. This is not a major theme in her characterization throughout the films. It is not possible to read Black Widow as a feminist icon.

Rather, she is a somewhat nuanced character still working within patriarchal superhero and regular social structures.

Film viewers are encouraged to lust after Black Widow, to be in awe of her power and capabilities as a fighter and leader, and to pity her. Across the five films we analyzed and the five key points of characterization we discussed, Natasha Romanoff /Black Widow is ultimately not liberated. She is characterized in ways that uphold male dominant social structures. She does not get her own MCU film; however, she does pave the way for the women of *Black Panther* and for *Captain Marvel*. Also, it is important to mention that there were no female people of color featured in the MCU prior to 2017. Tessa Thompson's portrayal Valkyrie in *Thor Ragnarok* broke that longstanding trend, and in 2018, *Black Panther* featured the studios' first African-American lead, and also features a strong cast of black women characters. Striving toward a more intersectional approach to feminism, this film is not only a step in the right direction but might be one of the most culturally forward productions Marvel Studios and Walt Disney Studios have ever undertaken. If liberation in the MCU is to come, Natasha Romanoff will be there, we hope, to witness it. As far as her characterization goes across several films and so many battles, her true liberation has yet to come.

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