'Don't worry – she's got help'

The representation of female characters in the Avengers film series of the Marvel Cinematic Universe

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Abstract

This thesis looks at the representation of female characters in the four Avenger movies by conducting a visual and critical discourse analysis of these four movies to uncover discourses around the concept of femininity in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). The movies of the MCU have become hugely popular and as popular culture, such as film, reflects the beliefs in society about certain concepts, discourse analysis makes it possible to investigate these movies and uncover beliefs about the concept of femininity in modern day society. To do so, the field of cultural studies, Hall's concept of representation, Foucault's concept of discourse, Mulvey's male gaze and feminist film theory are used as a background, thereby arguing the importance of the representation of women in popular culture, as well as the relevance of looking at discourses in these texts.

The research in this thesis exists out of a critical discourse analysis of the scripts of the four Avenger movies and a visual discourse analysis of the images themselves. The focus is on the central female characters of these movies: Black Widow, Maria Hill, Pepper Potts, Okoye, Shuri, Gamora, Nebula, Valkyrie, the Wasp, Captain Marvel, Wanda Maximoff, and Mantis. The analysis showed that the portrayal of these women can be put into five categories: their depiction on screen, the roles they take on in the movies, their skills and personal traits, their use of emotions, and their absence in key parts of the movies. The female characters are attractive, wear tight costumes, and colours are used to show their personalities and the dichotomy between innocence/purity and passion/power, indicating that women must be attractive, pure, or passionate. The attributes that they use are mostly male attributes such as guns and cars. Moreover, female characters were skilled at male-considered tasks too, such as fighting or operating technology. However, the camera angle and the position of women on screen show that they are, especially in the first movie(s), inferior to men, as they are positioned in the back, behind male characters, or blurred in the frame. The male gaze was evident here too, as the camera and the narrative often followed a male point of view. From the scripts it became evident that female characters were regularly part of a power-relation in which they were not the ones in power. Next to this, a

larger part of their story development relied on their roles as friends, family, or lovers than for the male characters, and they acted more emotional than male characters. Lastly, they were often absent in important scenes or important conversations. Nonetheless, the analysis showed that these discourses changed throughout the four movies, providing hope for the future of female representation in superhero movies.

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Introduction

The year is 2010, the setting a boxing ring, when Tony Stark asks the just introduced character Natalie Rushman to join his assistant Happy for a boxing lesson. While Tony is looking her up online, finding some spicy pictures of her in lingerie and discovering that she used to be a model, Happy asks her if she ever boxed before. When Natalie states that she did, she is met with a disdainful 'Yeah? Tae Bo? Booty Bootcamp?', and only after she takes Happy down in a matter of seconds while using one hand, much to the surprise of both Tony Stark and Happy, she seems to gain some respect from both men.

This scene in the Marvel movie Iron Man 2 is the first scene in which one of the most important central female characters of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) is introduced: Black Widow. Iron Man 2 is the third film in the overarching Marvel media franchise, set in a shared universe that currently exists out of 23 superhero action movies with 11 more planned for release (Fandom.com, n.d.). Important in these movies is the Avenger Initiative, a group of superheroes brought together to defend the earth from 'imminent global threats that are beyond the warfighting capability of conventional military forces' (Fandom.com, n.d.). In the first movies, Black Widow is the only female who takes part in this initiative, leading to her becoming a subject of much debate and research around the representation of women in the MCU (Gerard et al., 2018; Ameter, 2019). In later movies, other female characters are added to the storyline too, and research about the representation of women in the MCU thus needs an update in which these other female characters are incorporated.

This thesis sets out to research how female characters are represented in the MCU. By conducting a critical discourse analysis of the script and a visual discourse analysis of the images of four movies, discourses about femininity within these movies are uncovered. Discourses are 'the sets of rules and practices that allow people to produce meaningful statements in given societies at particular historical moments' (Ahearn, 2012, p. 265). The term is coined by Foucault, and Stuart Hall describes Foucault's notion of discourse as something that 'defines and produces the objects of our knowledge' (Ahearn, 2012, p. 265). Discourses thereby not only influence how certain topics are being talked about, but also what the acceptable ways of talking about a topic are. They influence which and how ideas are put into practice, as discourses rule out certain ways of talking or thinking about a topic (Hall, 2001). Researching discourses allows for the study of social life in context of language

in the broadest meaning of the word, incorporating not only talk but also non-verbal interactions, images, and symbols. It offers a way of investigating the meaning of a text on deeper levels (Shaw et al., 2009), thereby in this case allowing for a thorough investigation of how femininity is talked about, seen as, and referred to by society, which both influences and is influenced by the movies in the MCU.

When it comes to the term femininity, there is no single definition that can be stated to encompass the complexity of the concept. In fact, the term has many meanings and different interpretations (Windsor, 2015). It is performed in many ways, according to many different scripts that are learned early on and reinforced through people's lifetimes. Social institutions, such as the media, play an important role in the learning and reinforcing of these scripts, thereby also reinforcing the dominant ideology around the concept of femininity. Gender, and femininity, are then thus socially constructed, and are things that people 'do', instead of things that people 'are'. As such, femininity is 'done' by demonstrating conventionally feminine characteristics (West & Zimmerman, 1987, as mentioned in Windsor, 2015), such as physical vulnerability, compliance, good looks, and proper mannerism, often with as goal to uphold the hegemonic heterosexual patriarchal society (Windsor, 2015).

The movies that will be analysed to uncover discourses surrounding femininity are the four Avenger movies: The Avengers (2012), Avengers: Age of Ultron (2015), Avengers: Infinity War (2018), and Avengers: Endgame (2019). These four movies form the red line throughout the first three phases of the MCU, with phases being the way in which Marvel groups its films within their Cinematic Universe. In these four movies, all characters of the other films of these phases are brought together. Therefore, focussing on these films allows for the possibility of analysing all female central characters that are present within the films of the first three phases of the MCU. With cultural studies as a framework and feminist film theory, stating that films have the power to shape myths about women and femininity, and Mulvey's male gaze, a framework to analyse the male-centeredness of films (Smelik, 2007), as a background, the following research question will be answered:

What discourses around femininity are present in the depiction of female characters in the Marvel Cinematic Universe?

Based on this research question, several sub-questions are constructed, which structure the thesis. The first sub-question looks at how the female central characters are portrayed on screen. By use of a visual discourse analysis of the images, their clothing, their poses, their background story, their behaviour, and all other aspects that deal with how they are represented on screen are analysed. The first sub-question thus is:

1. What discourses around femininity arise from the ways in which female central characters are depicted on screen?

The second sub-question looks at the relationships between the female central characters and other characters. Here, a critical discourse analysis of the script is used to analyse how female characters relate to each other and to their male counterparts, how they are talked about and described by other characters, and how they are referenced to, in order to answer the second question:

2. What discourses around femininity arise from the ways in which female characters are represented in the script?

Next to investigating the representation of female characters on two levels, the level of what the film communicates to the audience and the level of how the characters interact with each other in the film, it is also very interesting to look at if the representation of female characters in the movies differs timewise, because society changes and so the discourses might change too. As the movies that are used in the research span several years, the third sub-question is:

3. Do the discourses around femininity in the MCU change throughout the four movies?

Relevance

Previous to this thesis, research shows that the movie sector is still very unbalanced in terms of gender equality. Women are often severely underrepresented, underappreciated, and kept away from opportunities to write or direct their own work (Stein, 2019). To illustrate, research conducted by the BBC in light of the Cannes Film Festival (Quick, 2018) shows that of the 243 films covered in 10 major film awards ranging from 1990-2018, women are outnumbered by men in 89% of them. Moreover, of these 243 films, 9 out of 10

have more leading men, 15% have an exclusively male leading line-up, 74% of leading cast and crew roles go to men, and only 12% is directed by a woman (Quick, 2018).

This imbalance in gender equality is also evident in the superhero genre. As McCallister and colleagues (2006, as mentioned in Pennell et al., 2015) state, superhero/comic book films have become increasingly popular since the beginning of the 2000s, making them a very relevant topic for study. The combination of fast action sequences, computer generated images, entertaining storylines and an already established fanbase due to the comics on which these movies are based leads to the fact that these movies are often sure successes for film studios and that they have taken over the box office time and time again (Pennell et al., 2015). Brown (2017) shows that from 2000 up until 2017, at least one superhero movie had a place in the top 10 highest grossing films each year, apart from 2001 as none were released that year. The trailer of Avengers: Endgame got a stunning 289 million views in its first 24 hours of being online, thereby breaking the previous record of most views on a movie trailer, which was owned by the previous Avenger film (Avengers: Infinity War) and stood at 230 million views in the first 24 hours (Parker, 2018). Moreover, superhero movies such as those of the MCU are very popular within female audiences. According to Statista (2018), 38% of women in their research has seen one or more movies from the Avenger series, compared to 45% of the males. Despite this small difference, gender equality in the films is still far from reached and women are not represented correctly on screen, even though representation on screen matters (Elbaba, 2019; Nulman, 2013). Media such as films have effects on our own image of ourselves but also on the image society has of women in general (Nulman, 2013). Superhero movies, in turn, also can 'communicate ideas about a wide range of societal norms and values, including those related to masculinity and femininity' (Miller et al., 2016, p.1), as superheroes are often seen as role models because of their skills and trades, which in turn contribute to the expectations and perceptions that their audience has of gender roles (Jaffe & Berger, 1994, as mentioned in Miller et al., 2016).

Miller, Rauch, and Kaplan (2016) analysed superhero movies and found that there are significant gender differences when it comes to the roles, appearance, and violence of female and male superheroes. Most importantly, female characters are strikingly less represented. Whereas their research analysed only two male superheroes per movie and all female heroes, there still turned out to be twice as many males. Moreover, males were

often portrayed as more powerful and muscular, regularly had more than one special ability and often use more than one weapon. Women, on the other hand, were portrayed as sexy and attractive, wearing revealing clothes either as part of their superhero costume or in 'normal' life, and were also more often depicted as helpless in certain situations (Miller et al., 2016).

Zooming in on the MCU, these findings seem to be quite accurate too. Of the 17 directors that created films in the series, only one is female (IMDB, 2017). Of the 31 central characters of the films, 11 of them are women, and of these 11, only two feature as the main protagonist in one of the films and series right now: Captain Marvel in her movie and Wanda Maximoff in her series, as the theoretical framework will elaborate upon. More films with female leads are planned, such as a movie about Black Widow, delayed due to the COVID-19 epidemic, but the question remains if this is a good step towards a better representation of women in films. Current research by Poepsel and Gerard (2018), for example, investigated the character of Black Widow and constructed five roles that she takes on in the films: sexy assistant, deadly assassin, loyal friend, the Avenger, and love interest. They argue that whereas Black Widow might seem strong and independent, she is in fact systematically, textually, and visually sexualised, a view that is agreed upon by other researchers as they also show the limited representation of female characters in superhero movies. Stoltzfus (2014) mentions that in the first Avenger film, it is only Black Widow who tries to seduce supervillains, something we do not see happening with male heroes. She shows that women in these superhero movies often fall into one of two categories: the one of the innocent damsel who needs rescuing, in line with what Poepsel and Gerard (2018) described as the loyal friend, or the one of the dangerous vixen who has agency due to her feminine wiles, described by Poepsel and Gerard (2018) as the sexy assassin. Moreover, female characters in superhero movies are often used as plot devices, ways for male heroes to find the motivation or courage to help others and become a hero. Black Widow is for example used to persuade Bruce Banner to join the Avenger Initiative, to help Clint Barton reach his full potential, or to assist Captain America in his adventures. Though female characters are thus visible in these movies, they are merely there to help male characters on their way (Stoltzfus, 2014), and simply putting a female character in the lead is thus not necessarily a way of creating a movie that is more inclusive towards women.

The fact that female characters in the MCU are depicted in a limited way, that they are underrepresented and shown as supplemental, helpless, less skilled, and less clothed, might mean that viewers start to believe that these traits apply to all women, thereby perpetuating stereotypes about behavioural norms for both genders (Peak et al., 2011, as quoted in Miller et al., 2016). Proper representation in superhero movies is thus relevant for society but most importantly for women themselves. Statista again shows that of their research in the United States, 54% of the adults aged 18 to 34 have seen one or more of the Avenger movies as of 2018 (Stoll, 2018). This means that superhero movies are immensely popular, especially in the younger age demographics, and it is thus very important to analyse the messages that are conveyed in these movies, as these messages influence the societal ideas that the younger age group grows up with (Miller et al., 2016). There has been research conducted in this field, but not much of this research is applied directly to the MCU. Besides the aforementioned research by Poepsel and Gerard (2018) and Stoltzfus (2014), mostly concerning Black Widow, the other female characters of the MCU are largely unexplored. This thesis looks at all the female characters that are central to the storylines of the movies. Moreover, due to the high speed at which the movies hit the theatres, previous research is quite quickly outdated. Thus, this thesis is both relevant for society, as superhero movies perpetuate stereotypes about women and therefore representation of women in these movies matter, as well as theory around the concepts of representation, feminist film theory, and femininity in the MCU, as it updates and expands previous research by incorporating more characters and more recent movies.

Theoretical framework

The following chapter elaborates upon the theoretical background of this thesis by introducing the concepts of representation, discourse, femininity, feminist cultural studies and feminist film theory. Moreover, this section will expand upon previously noted aspects of femininity in superhero movies and will also elaborate upon Mulvey's notion of the male gaze, which relates to how the male spectator is used as a viewpoint out of which the female characters in the movie are formed and styled (Mulvey, 1975). In doing so, the theoretical framework shows the main theoretical perspective of this thesis, which is the cultural studies perspective. The theoretical foundation is followed by the methodological framework of this thesis.

A brief introduction to cultural studies

Before elaborating upon the multiple concepts that are of importance to this thesis, it is first necessary to expand upon its main theoretical perspective: the tradition of cultural studies. Different from simply studying cultures, the academic discipline of cultural studies focusses on ideas, images, and practices that form our knowledge and ways of talking about certain topics in society (Hall, 1997, as mentioned in Barker, 2003). It is an interdisciplinary field that has as its purpose to look at relations of culture and power and to thereby uncover ways of thinking about power that can be used for social change. It concerns all the institutions in which these power relations are established and in which particular values, beliefs, and forms of conduct are instilled into a population (Barker, 2003). An important belief within this field is that it is necessary to understand the media's role in both the production and reproduction of inequality in society (Brooks et al., 2006), for example when it comes to race or, more relevant to this thesis, gender, as media can influence, form, shape, and manipulate ideas and attitudes that people in a society have about these topics. As Stuart Hall, one of the main theorists in the cultural studies field, states, culture is 'a way in which we make sense of or give meaning to things of one sort or another' (Media Education Foundation, 1997, p. 9). Thereby, culture has a central role within the notion of representation as a meaning-making process. Media, in turn, and then especially Hollywood, have become the biggest exporters of culture in the world (Washington, 2019) and they thus play a crucial role in how their audiences make sense or give meaning to

important aspects of life. Nonetheless, media have lacked the ability (or willingness) to accurately represent diversity, and media biases are very prominent when minority groups, such as females, are represented (Washington, 2019). How audiences view women and femininity, or what they perceive to be the meaning of 'woman' or 'feminine', is thus highly influenced by the biases that media present them with.

Feminist cultural studies, then, is a part of this broader field, and encompasses 'gender studies focussing on culture, be it in the anthropological sense of the concept or in the sense of culture as manifested in texts, historical or contemporary, or other cultural products' (Ambjornsson et al., 2013, p. 1). Along the lines of cultural studies, it thus 'focusses on the production of meaning, both in the practices of everyday life and in texts of different kinds' (Ambjornsson et al., 2013, p.1). To provide a short history, the field of feminist cultural studies arose as a part of the socialist-feminist movement in Britain, in the second half of the 20th century (Balsamo, 1991). An important starting point for this theoretical field was the invisibility of women in the then current field of cultural studies, and the early contributions to the field of feminist cultural studies were mostly reflexive of their own possibilities in an academic institution, as well as their political accountability in the context of the broader social movement (Balsamo, 1991).

Feminist cultural studies are critical of the ways in which concepts such as gender, class, race, or desire are textually constructed. Therefore, one of the aspects of this criticism is aimed at how texts constitute certain aspects of gender and how the modes of femininity that are constructed by these texts can be related to the more expansive network of discourses that exist around the concepts of femininity and gender (Balsamo, 1991). Hence, feminist cultural studies look at how identity and subjectivity are constructed discursively, and how this is done by using cultural products such as film.

Representation and discourse

To look at film from a cultural studies perspective, the concepts of representation and discourse are of relevance. As noted in the introduction, representation on screen is a very important concept for different groups in society. Stuart Hall (1997) shows this importance by stating that representation is 'an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture' (p. 15), leading to the fact that

how groups such as women are represented is crucial to the ideas that society has about women. Within this process, signs, images, and language are used to represent certain concepts. Out of the several approaches that can be taken towards explaining how language is used to represent the world, this thesis uses the constructionist approach, as this is the one that has had the most significant impact on the tradition of cultural studies (Hall, 1997).

The constructionist, or constructivist, approach towards meaning in language states that it is not possible to fix certain meanings into language. With this, it is suggested that things do not mean something, but instead, we construct certain meanings when we use representational systems, in the form of concepts and signs (Hall, 1997). This approach thereby makes a distinction between the material world, in which 'things and people exist' (Hall, 1997, p. 25), and the symbolic world, which are 'the symbolic practices and processes through which representation, meaning and language operate' (Hall, 1997, p. 25). The constructionist approach does not deny the existence of the material world, but states that it is not that world that produces meaning. Instead, it is the language system that represents material concepts and thus produces meaning. Social actors, in turn, use the conceptual, linguistic, or other representational systems to 'create meaning, to make the world meaningful and to communicate about that world meaningfully to others' (Hall, 1997, p. 25).

A central concept to the constructionist approach is the one of discourse, a notion originally coined by Foucault (Adams, 2017) but expanded upon by Hall. Whereas approaches such as the semiotic approach towards representation often look simply at language and how words function as certain signs within a language, the notion of discourse takes representation a step further by placing it in a larger context. In doing so, representation goes from simply a way of creating meaning to a source of producing social knowledge, highly connected to social practices and power relations (Hall, 1997). When it comes to discourse, it is no longer language that is seen as a system of representation, but instead, the notion of practice is added to this linguistic aspect. Discourses, therefore, are 'a group of statements which provide a language for talking about – a way of representing the knowledge about – a particular topic at a particular historical moment. Discourse is about the production of knowledge through language' (Hall, 1992, p. 291, as quoted in Hall, 1997, p. 44). They thus compose, define, and produce the objects of our knowledge, in such ways that we can meaningfully talk and reason about a certain topic. This, in turn, also means

that everything that we know is a part of discourse and that it is not possible for something to have meaning outside of discourse. Or, as Foucault states: 'Since we can only have a knowledge of things if they have a meaning, it is discourse – not the things-in-themselves – which produces knowledge' (as quoted in Hall, 1997, p.45).

Representation in media

Stuart Hall thus discussed the concepts of representation and discourse in general, but also connected these two concepts to media. On the more surface level, representation in the media relates to how certain people or groups are portrayed by the media (Tawil, n.d.). Often, certain groups are under- or misrepresented, leading to for example the practices of tokenism, in which a minority is simply included as a symbolic effort to make a story seem more diverse, or stereotyping, by which assumptions of how a person is supposed to be because of their race, ethnicity, or gender, are communicated (Tawil, n.d.). Not being properly represented is not only harmful to individuals but also restricting for society, and strong and positive representation is necessary to help break down the damaging stereotypes that now exist around certain groups. Positive representation, on the other hand, can lead to more self-confidence in individuals, offers them role models to look up to and be inspired by, allows for society as a whole to learn more about certain groups and opens up new and better opportunities for groups that previously lacked these chances (Tawil, n.d.). Proper representation of people of colour, for example, can lead to the diminishing of racial biases in a society (Yuen, 2019) and the countering of the demoralising that many people of colour feel when not properly represented, a positive effect that the Marvel movie Black Panther greatly shows (Lawson, 2018). This movie, centred around an almost all-black cast in an African setting, is one of the first to allow people of colour to see superheroes and powerful women that look like themselves represented on screen. It thereby finally shows society positive aspects of these minority groups and allows for the possibility of positively changing the ways in which society views these groups, as well as how these groups view themselves (Lawson, 2018).

On a deeper level, it has become clear that Hall's concepts of representation and discourse are difficult and multi-layered and that they mostly relate to how meaning is produced in each society. However, how can these more complex concepts of

representation and discourse be applied to media, and specifically to films such as those of the MCU? When taking Hall's constructionist approach, the answer to this question is as straightforward as it is complex: films and other media have become ways in which meaning is created, social identity is constructed, knowledge is produced, social constructions are forged, and social realities are represented (Brooks et al., 2006). Concepts such as gender are therefore based not on biology but on the culture we live in, in which culture is 'a process through which people circulate and struggle over the meanings of our social experiences, social relations, and therefore, our selves' (Byers & Dell, 1992, p.191, as quoted in Brooks et al., 2006), a notion that is central to the cultural studies tradition. Films thus have the power to construct our ideas, knowledge, and realities about the concept of femininity, a notion that a subfield of the cultural studies tradition, feminist film theory, is concerned with.

Feminist film theory

From the cultural studies perspective and the notion that cultural products such as film can construct identities around gender and femininity, the narrower field of feminist film theory arose in the early 1970s (Smelik, 2016). As cinema is seen as one of the main areas in which the debates around identities and representation of women takes place (Thornham, 1999), the aim of this field is to 'understand cinema as a cultural practice that represents and reproduces myths about women and femininity' (Smelik, 2016, p. 1). This means that its goals are twofold, being both critical of the ways in which classical cinema represents women in stereotypical ways, as well as looking for opportunities to make cinema more inclusive and representative for women (Smelik, 2016; Hollinger, 2012). According to Smelik (2016), feminist film theory analyses the deep structures of how meaning is constructed in film, thereby paying attention to the fact that films do not only reflect the discourses in a society, but also play an important part in actively constructing the discourses that surround femininity and gender in society. Moreover, feminist film theory analyses how film works to instil patriarchal ideas into a society (Hollinger, 2012). Especially in the early years of feminist film theory, much critique and research within this field was aimed at the sexist depictions of women in Hollywood films. Very often, they were portrayed as either a sex object or as something in between a mother or a whore (Smelik, 2016). Being portrayed in

such a way, at such a frequency, leads to wrong images of women and that in turn leads to negative consequences for women in real life. Whereas at first it was thought that merely replacing these negative images by positive ones could be the solution towards the sexist portrayal of women in film, later feminist film theory changed its point of view from this notion towards one in which it became clear that deeper understanding of the ideological discourses behind the portrayal of women in film is necessary.

To uncover the ideologies and discourses behind films, feminist film theory takes on two perspectives: semiotics and psychoanalysis. With a semiotic background, it became possible to properly analyse how cinematic techniques influence the representation of women in film (Smelik, 1998). With a psychoanalytical background, structures of desire and female subjectivity in film can be uncovered. This thesis combines these two perspectives, as this makes it possible to look at how films construct meaning and ideology, thereby also focussing on the power relations that are evident in society and on how cinema is a cultural practice that actively produces meaning around concepts such as femininity (Smelik, 1998).

A very important notion in feminist film theory is the one of the male gaze. Taking psychoanalysis as her foundation, Laura Mulvey constructed the theory of the male gaze in her famous article *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (Mulvey, 1989). In this essay, she states that film 'reflects, reveals and even plays on the straight, socially established interpretation of sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle' (Mulvey, 1989, p. 57), and that psychoanalysis provides us with ways to demonstrate how the patriarchal structure of society has influenced the films we watch. Cinema, she explains, is a form of a very advanced representation system, and as such unconsciously structures our ways of seeing and our pleasure in looking. One of the reasons why Hollywood films are so popular is thus because the producers, creators and writers of these films have become very skilled at manipulating visual pleasure in such a way that 'the erotic is coded into the language of the dominant patriarchal order' (Mulvey, 1989, p. 59). As we live in a world that is characterised by sexual imbalances, Mulvey (1989) theorises that pleasure in looking is also influenced by these imbalances, and therefore often split between the active, or male, gaze, and the passive, or female, gaze.

The male gaze in a cinematic context here thus means that in film, the male character dominates both the narrative and the visual point of view (Smelik, 2016). The camera often films what a man sees and looks at women as if a man is looking at a woman.

Because of this, the viewer of a film is forced by the position of the camera to adopt the position of a heterosexual male. The camera, viewer, and audience thereby work together to create a form of voyeurism, in which the woman is objectified and turned into a passive spectacle. In doing so, (Hollywood) films regularly do offer an ideal image for identification when you are male, as there very often is a presence of an active male hero, but no image for identification when you are female, as female characters are often passive and based on the pleasures of the heterosexual male audience (Smelik, 2016). Next to the cultural studies perspective, this thesis thus also makes use of feminist film theory and the male gaze as a departure point for its research, as these are important and relevant subfields of the cultural studies tradition that are useful for answering the research question.

Femininity in superhero movies and in the MCU

Whereas feminist film theory investigates all sorts of films and how they are influencing and reproducing certain myths about women and femininity, this thesis investigates one genre in particular: the one of the superhero blockbusters, based on comic books. As has become clear from the introduction, due to both the fact that so many people worldwide watch superhero movies and the fact that the superheroes in these movies are often seen as role-models, these movies have the power to produce ideas about many societal norms and values, especially those related to the concept of femininity (Miller et al., 2016). Pennell et al. (2015) agree with this notion and mention that 'cultural messages about gender within popular media can become normative and influence real-life perceptions' (p. 212). This makes it especially relevant to look at women in popular films such as those of the superhero genre, as images of women in these films are limited (Pennell et al., 2015). Because of this limited representation within a genre that reaches so many people, there is much concern about women and their roles in superhero movies. The introduction already touched upon it but in superhero movies, women are often portrayed in limited ways, as non-essential or passive. Moreover, next to the already discussed research by Gerard and Poepsel (2018) and Stolzfus (2014), Miller and Summers (2007, as mentioned in Miller et al., 2016) show that women in media in general are primarily portrayed as sex objects, either in the way they dress or in the way they behave. They are more emotional, more superficial, more often portrayed as helpless or victims, and they are more likely to get overexcited.

Male characters were also portrayed as more skilled, as they regularly had more weapons and more special abilities than the female characters in the movies (Miller et al., 2016). Pennell and Behm-Morawitz (2015) reached similar conclusions, and they state that women in action movies, such as those of the superhero genre, mainly have their sexuality as focus of their character. By using certain clothing and women of certain body types, these films sexualise their female characters, and by making them passive and submissive, these films moreover also victimise their female characters, thereby reflecting traditional societal roles for women (Pennell et al., 2015) that are no longer, or never were, applicable. Female roles in these films often do not add to the storyline but instead, the characters are highly sexualised and only of importance as the love interest of the main character. Furthermore, in superhero movies, the active role of protector is often masculinised, with strength and power as the foundations of masculinity. The role of the one who needs protection, then, is very often feminised, and femininity is thus related to being vulnerable or being weak (Stabile, 2009, as mentioned in Pennell et al., 2015).

These findings paint a grim picture of the role of women in superhero movies, but luckily, some positive things can be said as well. Despite being sexualised, many of the female superheroes present in big blockbuster films are also strong, athletic, confident, skilled, intelligent, and proficient, thereby countering some of the traditional stereotypes for female characters (Behm-Morawitz and Pennell, 2013, Stabile 2009, as mentioned in Pennell et al., 2015). Moreover, there is a positive trend towards increases in the number of female producers, directors, as well as characters in superhero movies, together with the gender-swapping of male comic book characters towards female characters in the movies that are based on these comics (Curtis & Cardo, 2017).

Concerning women in Marvel movies, the first time they included a female character in the title of one of their movies in the MCU was in 2018 in their movie 'Ant Man and the Wasp', with the Wasp being portrayed by Evangeline Lilly (Ramella, 2021). However, the Wasp still is mentioned combined with a male character, Ant Man. It took Marvel another year to produce a movie that was fully centred on a female character, Captain Marvel. In this movie, the title character is constantly told that she needs to control herself, but when she decides that she does not need to listen to anyone telling her to do so, she turns out to be the one of the most powerful superheroes the MCU has. Not once in this movie is there a storyline of her falling in love, which distinguishes her even more from Black Widow, whose

story partly evolves around her semi-romantic relationship with the Hulk and her inability to get pregnant. Nonetheless, Black Widow will hopefully soon get the story she deserves, as her own movie is planned for release later this year.

Next to the release of Captain Marvel, the MCU is slowly taking other steps forward in their representation of women, such as with their much-anticipated series WandaVision. This series continues with the story of Wanda Maximoff, one of the central characters of the Avenger movies, and takes place after Avengers: Endgame. Wanda, being one of the most powerful Avengers so far, was up until this series only portrayed as a side character in the movies. However, this series did not only allow for her highly complex character to evolve, but it also allowed for Marvel to add many more interesting female characters to the storyline. Both the lead character, Wanda, and the antagonist of the story are very powerful female characters. Women are here finally put in the spotlight in the MCU, not only as sidekicks or love interests but as fully developed characters that run the show. Men, in turn, play the supporting roles here, thereby reversing the traditional roles that were present in superhero movies before (Ramella, 2021). Nonetheless, although this series is a very positive step towards representation of female superheroes, there are points of critique that also arise. Why is it that Wanda had to discover her power through emotional trauma, whereas male superheroes almost never do so? In WandaVision, as well as in Captain Marvel, this gendered idea of female strength grounded in emotion persists, while also reinforcing the idea that too much female emotion is dangerous (Phillips, 2021). Moreover, in the series, Wanda must make a choice between her superhero life and the life of being a wife and a mother (Phillips, 2021). This is a choice that is not often present when it comes to the male characters of the MCU. Although other characters, for example Iron Man, Hawkeye, and Ant Man, do also face a choice between a family life and a superhero life, it never is the main topic of the story as it is for Wanda in WandaVision. Even though there thus appear to be positive trends in the representation of female characters in superhero movies in general and in the MCU in specific, there is still quite a way to go.

Summary of the theoretical foundation

To summarise, this thesis takes on the cultural studies framework with the feminist film theory perspective. In these frameworks, representation on screen is a very important

notion both in film theory as well as in real life. While taking on a constructivist approach, Hall (1997) argues that meaning is constructed when representational systems are used, and that through representation, meaning is created and exchanged between the members of a culture. Important within this system of representation is the notion of discourse, which refers to the production of knowledge through language (Hall, 1992). By creating discourses, power relations are built, ideologies are spread, and dominant ideas about society are established. An important medium by which groups are represented and thus discourses and ideologies about these groups are created and spread out is the medium of film. When groups are not properly represented, or even wrongly represented, it can lead to harmful stereotypes and behaviour towards these groups (Tawil, n.d.). Therefore, proper representation is very important, especially when it comes to groups that are often underrepresented, such as women. A research field that is concerned with the representation of women in media is the one of feminist cultural studies, which looks at how identity and subjectivity are created through cultural products. Zooming in on film, the tradition of feminist film theory arose, which concerns itself with how meaning is constructed in film, by uncovering the discourses that are present in these films around the notions of femininity and women. An important concept within feminist film theory is the male gaze, stating that male characters often dominate both the narrative as well as the visual point of view.

In superhero movies, female characters are often under- or misrepresented, even though they form a large part of its audience. They are often passive, non-essential, helpless, or sexualised. Although Marvel is adding female superheroes to its repertoire, it is very important to see if their efforts lead to a more inclusive representation of women, as these movies can have a great impact on how society views the concept of femininity. Therefore, the research in this thesis analyses the discourses that are present surrounding this concept in the MCU. To uncover these discourses, visual and critical discourse analysis is used. Moreover, as one of the main concepts in feminist film theory concerns the male gaze, discourse analysis is also used to uncover the male gaze in the four Avenger films. The following chapter will elaborate upon the use of discourse analysis to uncover ideologies behind the representation of women and the male gaze.

Methodology

This section of the thesis will lay out the methodology used to uncover the discourses that are present in the MCU around the concept of femininity. First, the choice of dataset and the process of data preparation will be elaborated upon. Second, an explanation of multimodal analysis, critical discourse analysis and visual discourse analysis will be provided, as well as how these methods are applied to the data of this thesis and why the choice for these methods is made. After that, the results of the analysis are presented.

Choice of data and data collection

In this research, the focus is on the four Avenger movies. These are part of the Infinity Saga, a saga existing of the first 23 films of the MCU, starting from its first movie Iron Man and ending with the last movie Spiderman: Far From Home (Marvel Cinematic Universe Wiki, n.d.). Within this saga, the films are divided into three phases. The first phase starts with the first Iron Man film and ends with The Avengers. Here, the universe in which the movies are set as well as the main characters are introduced. The second phase, starting with Iron Man 3 and ending with Ant-Man, is mainly concerned with the events that happen after the battle in New York in The Avengers and also introduces new characters. The third phase, starting with Captain America: Civil War and ending with Spider-Man: Far From Home, again allows for the introduction of new characters and brings the saga to an ending. Important to briefly note here is that this means that the previously mentioned series WandaVision as well as the upcoming movie of Black Widow are thus not part of the Infinity Saga.

The red line throughout the Infinity Saga concerns Thanos and his quest to find the so-called Infinity Stones, with which he could gain the power to eradicate half the life in the universe. Although almost all the 23 movies mention the Infinity Stones in one way or another, it is the films in the Avengers-series that are about the Infinity Stones and Thanos the most. Because the Avenger-films form the basis of the Infinity Saga, almost all characters that are central to the other films appear in an Avenger film in one way or another. Therefore, to get a look at how all female central characters are depicted, the best way to do so is to focus on these movies, which are: The Avengers (2012), Avengers: Age of Ultron (2015), Avengers: Infinity War (2018) and Avengers: Endgame (2019).

Secondly, now that it has become clear which movies are chosen for this research and why, it is necessary to specify the female characters that are incorporated. In the final battle in the last movie, all central characters are brought together to defeat Thanos. Thus, to put together a list of female central characters, this battle is analysed, and the decision to focus on the following characters is made: Nebula, Gamora, Okoye, Shuri, Mantis, Valkyrie, Wanda Maximoff (Scarlet Witch), Pepper Potts, Hope van Dyne (the Wasp), and Captain Marvel. However, during the analysis of the movies it quickly became evident that the criterium by which this list was created led to the leaving out of two very important characters: Black Widow and Maria Hill. The analysis of the movies was thus started again and incorporated the ten female characters from the final battle scene together with these two characters.

Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis

As became evident from the research questions, the goal of this thesis is to uncover the discourses around the concept of femininity in the four Marvel movies. To quickly recap, Foucault and Hall explain the notion of discourse as statements that produce our knowledge about a certain topic through language, which they do by composing, defining, and producing the objects of our knowledge (Hall, 1997). Uncovering these discourses makes it possible to analyse both how cinematic techniques influence the representation of women in film, as well as which structures of desire and female subjectivity are present (Smelik, 1998). The analysis in this thesis thereby goes beyond quantitative analysis, which simply explains what is observed, and thematic analysis, which identifies themes and patterns (Maguire et al., 2017). Instead, multimodal critical discourse analysis allows for the investigation of the relationships between the things that are 'social givens' and language, while also looking at how power and knowledge are expressed through language (Kress, 2011), making it a suitable method for answering the research questions and for investigating the discourses that are present in the movies. Multimodal discourse analysis then, in turn, refers to 'an emerging paradigm in discourse studies which extends the study of language per se to the study of language in combination with other resources, such as images, scientific symbolism, gesture, action, music and sound' (O'Halloran, p. 1). Central here is the notion that meaning is not only communicated through language but also

through other semiotic modes, and that looking only at language is therefore not enough to provide a thorough analysis of certain texts (Machin et al., 2012). To make a more encompassing and thorough analysis possible, multimodal critical discourse analysis therefore offers sets of tools to both analyse texts in terms of lexical and grammatical choices, as happens in critical discourse analysis, as well as in terms of visual features, as happens in visual discourse analysis (Machin et al., 2012). It is thus a very appropriate measure to for example both show how the way that female superheroes dress is influenced by the male gaze as well as how the way they are referred to in text might be influenced by certain power relations. The relevance of the choice of methods will also be elaborated upon in the next sections on visual and critical discourse analysis.

Visual Discourse Analysis

The first sub-question of this thesis revolves around the ways in which the female central characters are depicted on screen. Previously mentioned, Miller, Rauch, and Kaplan (2016) for example found that women in superhero movies tend to be portrayed as sexy and attractive and often wore revealing clothes. To analyse aspects like this in the four movies, a visual discourse analysis has been conducted. When it comes to images, two levels of analysis can be distinguished. First, there is the level of denotation, which concerns itself simply with what is being depicted. However, next to simply depicting things, images also connote certain abstract ideas and concepts, meaning that they communicate certain general and abstract ideas and values by what is being represented (Machin et al., 2012). This is the second level of analysis. In their book on multimodal critical discourse analysis, Machin & Mayr (2012) identify three important connotators that are present in images: attributes, settings, and salience. In this research, the relevant scenes are investigated in terms of these three connotators.

The first connotator comes in the shape of the attributes that are present in the visual image. These attributes, or objects, and the way in which they are represented communicate certain discourses to us (Machin et al., 2012). When a visual image is analysed, it is important to look at every object in the image and consider the possible meanings of each of them. Machin and Mayr (2012) used the example of a photograph in the magazine Cosmopolitan and show us that it is necessary to not only look at distinct

objects such as a computer in the background of the picture, but also at objects that are less distinct, such as a scarf around someone's neck or the way in which the hair of the woman is styled. In the Avenger movies, this for example meant that the colours of the clothing communicated certain personality traits to the viewer. Moreover, the attributes that the female characters used, such as guns and cars, also communicate discourses to us.

The second connotator is settings. Here, the assumption is made that settings also communicate certain discourses, ideas, values, and identities (Machin et al., 2012). From aspects such as the background, the totality of the objects that are present, the lightning, and the gaze and the poses of the people depicted, discourses can be derived. The previously mentioned picture in a Cosmopolitan magazine, for example, shows us a setting that only hints at being an office by including a computer, but it signifies concepts such as glamour, optimism, and modernity by the way in which the image is set (Machin et al., 2012). In the movies, female characters were for example often shown in 'male' environments, both in terms of the people around them as well as the traditionally male settings of war, fights, airplanes and bunkers.

The third connotator that Machin and Mayr (2012) mention is the one of salience. This concept has to do with the ways in which certain aspects of the visual image are made to stand out to draw our attention towards those aspects. These features often have the most symbolic importance in the image. Machin and Mayr (2012) provide us with seven ways in which salience can be achieved:

1. Potent cultural symbols. There are certain elements of a picture that carry a lot of cultural symbolism, and it is advised to first scan the image to find out if such elements are present. An example of this is the presence of a stethoscope to signify medical practice. Black Widow, for example, wears a bullet-like sleeve, signifying her competence with a gun.

2. Size. By giving certain objects a different size than others, it is possible to make them more salient in an image. Ranging your items from large to small for example allows the viewer to rank the objects in terms of importance. Male characters in the movies were for example often portrayed taller than the female characters, not only in body length but also in a higher position.

3. Colour. When it comes to the colour of the items in a picture, it is possible to play around with saturation, contrasts, or striking and less striking colours in order to gain attention to some parts of the images. Richer colours can for instance make items more

salient and put emphasis on them. In the movies, colours were mainly used to signify personal aspects of the female characters.

4.   Tone. Here, the simple technique of making some objects brighter than others is used to attract people's attention to these objects. This was not found in the movies.

5.   Focus. By using different levels of focus in an image, attention can be drawn to certain objects over others. When an object in the image is put in focus, whereas other parts of the image are blurred, the attention is immediately drawn to the image that is in focus. Female characters in the scenes were regularly blurry in the background or foreground, indicating that the male character present is of more importance.

6.   Foregrounding. Putting objects in the foreground as opposed to on the background makes them more important and more salient. The objects that are put in the background then immediately become of less importance than the objects in the foreground. This was also very evident in the movies, as female characters for example repeatedly walked behind male characters, showing their lesser importance in the scene.

7.   Overlapping. By making objects overlap, attention is drawn to the object that is in front of others. This object then becomes more salient and by using overlapping techniques, a ranking of importance can be made as well. In the Avenger movies, female characters were regularly overlapped by male characters, again drawing the attention towards the male characters.

In this research, the visuals of the four Avenger movies were analysed in terms of attributes, setting and salience. The movies were watched multiple times, and in relevant scenes, notes were taken by hand about the three connotators. This meant that the movie was paused, the scenes were analysed following the framework of Machin & Mayr (2012), and relevant observations were noted down. Moreover, screenshots were taken to illustrate the observations that seemed most important during the first rounds of analysis. These screenshots can be found in the Appendix. After these rounds, the notes were analysed, and patterns arose. These patterns were noted down as well and compared throughout the four movies, a process that led to the results that will be discussed in the result section.

Critical Discourse Analysis

The second sub-question of this thesis concerns itself with how the female characters in the four Avenger movies are talked about in the movies themselves. Here, discourses around the concept of femininity are uncovered from, among others, the ways in which they talk, the ways in which the male characters talk to them or about them, and the ways in which the female characters talk about or to each other. According to van Dijk (2001, as mentioned in Machin et al., 2012), critical discourse analysis is a way in which implicit meanings in texts can be studied. The aim is to reveal power relations that take place in the text, which is important since these power relations are means of social construction and domination. This is an aspect that is touched upon in the theoretical framework already, as both Smelik (2016) and Hollinger (2012) showed that film theory has as its goal to analyse how films instil patriarchal ideas and power relations into society. Moreover, Mulvey's male gaze concerns itself with these power relations as well. This makes critical discourse analysis again a suitable method to answer the research questions of this thesis. The most common form of CDA is lexical analysis, where the underlying implicit meanings are to be discovered by looking at five aspects of the text (Machin & Mayr, 2012). In this thesis, these five aspects, or lexical choices, are used to analyse the four scripts. The scripts of both Avengers: Age of Ultron as well as Avengers: Infinity War were collected via the Transcripts Wiki (Transcripts Wiki, n.d.). The script of The Avengers was downloaded from Studiobinder (n.d.), and the script of Avengers: Endgame was downloaded from scriptslug.com (2019). To make sure that the scripts are true to the actual movies, all four of them were checked by comparing them to the movies and by correcting any mistakes that were evident in them. The scripts were uploaded into an app called GoodNotes, making it possible to highlight important sections and to add comments and notes to the scripts. All five lexical choices received a different colour highlight, leading to a good overview of the most used lexical choices.

The first lexical choice used for analysis is word connotations. As language is an available set of options, the choice that people make when using certain words over others tells us much about underlying discourses. In this research, an example of this is looking at how women are described by other characters. Black Widow, for example, is often called by her nickname 'Nat', indicating that she is on friendly basis with many of the Avengers.

The second lexical choice is overlexicalisation. This happens when there is an abundance of words and synonyms, which usually shows a point of ideology (Machin & Mayr, 2012). In the scripts, overlexicalisation of the words 'we' and 'team' for example show that in later movies, the Avengers see themselves as a team and that Black Widow is part of this team.

The third lexical choice is suppression, which means that words that are expected to be used are in fact not used, which is also a sign of underlying ideologies and discourses. In the movies, it might be the case that certain terms are used when male characters are addressed and that those same terms are left out when female characters are addressed, providing interesting insights in the underlying ideologies of the script.

Fourthly, the analysis of the script looks at structural oppositions. In texts, structural oppositions are shaped as opposing concepts, and often only one of the opposing concepts is mentioned. Are female characters for example described in certain terms of which their opposites are not mentioned but implied? That is another important indicator of underlying ideologies and discourses.

The last aspect that the analysis of the four scripts looked at is the lexical choices that were made in the text. Looking at the lexical choices allows for the possibility to investigate the levels of authority or co-membership with the audience. Within the research of this thesis, this concept will be looked at on two different levels: both how either authority or co-membership is established with the audience, as well as how language is used to establish co-membership or authority by other characters over female characters, or by female characters over other characters, in the movies themselves. An example of this is Captain Marvel being addressed as 'new girl' by Rhodes, by which Rhodes establishes authority over her.

Reflection on the positionality of the researcher

As England (1994, as mentioned in Bourke, 2014) states, research always comes in the form of a shared space between the researcher and the participants. Even though this study did not involve any participants, it does involve a researcher, and the identity of the researcher can have an impact on the research process and outcomes. Moreover, every researcher has certain biases, which can shape the research. This makes it necessary for us to reflect upon our biases and positionality beforehand to gain insight into how our identities and biases

can potentially influence the research, which is done in a process called reflexivity. According to Bourke (2014), reflexivity involves a continuous process of self-scrutiny and self-analysis by the researcher, considering their background, education, work, and all other aspects of life. Especially when it comes to qualitative methods such as textual analysis, researchers make great use of their own interpretation, the context in which they live and the knowledge of the place of the text in a broader culture (Brennen, 2013). Therefore, reflexivity on the positionality of the researcher is very important, as it might influence the ways in which texts are interpreted greatly.

When it comes to this thesis, it is thus necessary to consider the background of the researcher. As I am white, heterosexual, and west-European, it can cautiously be said that I am part of the target audience of the movies in the MCU, and also see my own culture reflected in these movies. I understand references they make to popular culture, I see my own skin colour and hair colour reflected in the actors that play in these movies, and I recognise some of the real places they go to as I have been there on holidays myself. Whereas these aspects might influence the outcomes of this research when it would consider race or culture, this is not the focus of this thesis. Instead, the research question focusses on the concept of femininity, something that I can highly relate to as I identify as a female myself. What is important to note too, however, is that I have been invested in the MCU from around the time when the second Iron Man movie hit the theatres. I have always thoroughly enjoyed the movies and watched each of them multiple times. Moreover, I always engaged in background research in terms of movie theories, interviews with actors and the likes. Therefore, it was necessary for me to put aside my positive feelings of the MCU when starting this research, to not interpret everything Marvel does as a good thing but to keep a critical eye on the choices that were made concerning the female superheroes of the MCU.

Summary of the methodology

In short, the research that is conducted in this thesis is a multimodal analysis in the form of a critical discourse analysis of the scripts and a visual discourse analysis of the images of four movies from the MCU. The four movies that are analysed are the four Avenger films: The Avengers, Avengers: Age of Ultron, Avengers: Infinity War, and Avengers: Endgame.

These were chosen because they form the red line throughout the first three phases of the MCU and therefore all relevant characters appear in one or more of these movies. To answer the research question, the focus of analysis within these four movies lies on the female central characters: Nebula, Gamora, Okoye, Shuri, Mantis, Valkyrie, Wanda Maximoff (Scarlet Witch), Pepper Potts, Hope van Dyne (the Wasp), Black Widow, Maria Hill and Captain Marvel. When discussing the visual and critical discourse analyses, some examples were already shown, but the following part of the thesis will lay out the results in more detail, showing the discourses that arose from the thorough analysis of the scripts and the visuals of the four movies.

Results

Introduction

After having conducted the visual and critical discourse analysis, several interesting discourses surrounding the concept of femininity came to light. During the analysis, notes were taken on the connotators that Machin and Mayr (2012) proposed. The notes of both the visual and the critical discourse analysis were then separated into several categories. While analysing, these categories emerged slowly until all relevant results could be put into at least one category. Next, some of these categories were combined because they could be grouped together under a common denominator. This process was repeated until every relevant finding had its own place in a category and every category then explained an important discourse surrounding the concept of femininity. The following part of the thesis will discuss these final five categories, which all show different aspects of the ways in which women are depicted. These five categories are: the depiction on screen, the female character's part of the team, their skills and personal traits, the use of emotions, and their absence in key scenes. The result section will be concluded with a summary of the results, followed by the conclusion and discussion of the thesis.

Depiction on screen

The first category that is found is the one that surrounds the discourses present in how the female characters are depicted on screen. In this category, only results from the visual discourse analysis are presented, as here it mostly concerns the first research question, which asks how female central characters are depicted on screen. This category is built up out of three subsections. First, the looks of the women, the use of attributes and the use of colours will be discussed. Second, an elaboration upon the angle of the camera throughout the movies will be provided. Third, the presence of the male gaze will be debated.

Looks, attributes and colour

When conducting a visual discourse analysis, three important connotators of discourse are the attributes that are used, the setting in which the character is placed, and the salience of the scene (Machin et al., 2012). The first finding that emerged from analysing these connotators was that in all the movies, it can be suggested that the female characters are

conventionally attractive. Attractiveness is subjective, but being conventionally attractive means that the characters all fit the ideals of current society about when a person is good-looking (Naija, 2018): healthy, fit, slender, pretty, and their hair almost always looks good even though they just participated in a fight scene. An example of this is the first scene in which Black Widow is present (Appendix A, figure 1). Here, she is being interrogated by Russian criminals, but even tied to a chair and covered in sweat, her hair is curled, and her make-up is relatively intact for the situation she is in. This is even more clear in the final battle scene of the last movie, Avengers: Endgame, when Spider-Man hands the infinity gauntlet to Captain Marvel. After this, the female characters join to bring the gauntlet to Ant-Man's van. Whereas Spider-Man looks very bruised and beaten, the female characters in general look as if they were not in such a heavy fight before. With the exemption of some bruises, they look healthy and fit, and their make-up and costumes are still intact (Appendix A, image 2).

Speaking of costumes, the clothing that the female characters wear communicates discourses to us as well. It is first necessary to say that the clothing is very much based on the roles the characters have in the movies and the activities they perform, which will be discussed in a later part of the result section. However, even though the costumes are highly character-based, some general aspects are similar between them. First, most costumes are tight-fitted and show off the female figure. Secondly, especially in the first two movies, these outfits highlight the female breast area, by either allowing for cleavage to show or by placing emphasis on this area in terms of the lines and colours in the costumes. The costumers thereby make the characters highly feminine in terms of leaving no question that their bodies are female and conventionally attractive as well (Appendix A, figure 3). Nonetheless, it must be noted that the costumes of the female superheroes are very detailed and well-designed too, providing a bit more nuance to the previous notion. Looking closer shows us that all their costumes have colours and details that refer to their backgrounds and back-stories, thereby showing that they are not simply dressed in tight-fitted outfits but that these outfits in fact also communicate their own persona, providing them with more depth. A clear example of this is the outfit that Captain Marvel wears (Appendix A, figure 3). A lot of thought has gone into the use of colour, shapes, and stripes on her outfit. As the designer, Andy Park, states, the colours are meant to represent her boldness, as they are primary colours, the triangles on her suit are meant to show her

strength, as this is the strongest and most balanced shape, and the stripes on her shoulder are meant to denote rank (Ro, 2019). Therefore, it can be stated that although at first sight the costumes might seem tight-fitted and very feminine, the fact that lot of thought has gone into the design and personification of these outfits shows a level of depth to the costumes as well. Moreover, this observation is slightly nuanced too by the fact that male characters such as Captain America and Black Panther also wear tight-fitted costumes that show off their body and muscles.

Next to the design of the superhero costumes, the colours of these costumes and the normal clothes that the female characters wear can communicate discourses too. The use of colours highly relates to the salience connotator, as Machin and Mayr (2012) explain that colours can be used to make certain items more salient. This is used in the movies as well, but more importantly, it can be argued that the colours in the movies are used to communicate personality aspects of the characters to us. In the four films, three types of colours are most prominent: white, red, and dark colours such as black or dark blue. Pepper Potts, for example, is shown wearing white multiple times, giving her a sense of innocence, whereas Black Widow is often dressed in red, giving her a sense of passion and power. Wanda Maximoff is also dressed in red and black, a fact of which it can be argued that it communicates her power. Multiple other characters often wear clothes with dark colours, which might often provide a sense of mystery, power, and elegance (Martins Ferreira, 2019). It could thus be theorised that colours are used to communicate personal aspects of the characters as well, not only when it comes to their costumes but also when they are dressed in normal clothes, and these colours thus potentially show a dichotomy in female characters: they are innocent and pure, passionate and powerful, or mysterious and elegant. This observation is in line with the previously discussed findings of Smelik (2016) and also shows Stolzfus (2014) notion of female characters being either the innocent damsel or the dangerous vixen.

Then, looking at the attributes that the female characters use shows us that most of them use items that can traditionally be considered male. They drive big cars, fly planes and jets, use guns or other weapons, and are very skilled at using technology. As Kimmel et al. (1999) state, activities requiring strength or violence, such as using weapons, and technical products, such as cars or computers, are traditionally masculine, although this view is

changing. This is indeed in line with the female characters of the MCU, as they are both not afraid to use these traditionally male attributes but are also very skilled at using them.

Camera perspective

Investigating the camera perspective plays into both the setting and the salience connotator, as it concerns both how objects are presented as well as aspects like foregrounding and overlapping. In the first movie, it is very relevant to note that the camera angle and perspective often communicate the position of the female characters in the storyline. This led to the fact that Maria Hill, who is Fury's assistant, is regularly placed behind Fury when for example walking down the stairs or when he is talking to another male character, indicating that she is the inferior character in these scenes (Appendix B, figure 1). Black Widow, who is less important to the story than Captain America, as he is one of the leading figures of the Avengers, is portrayed walking behind him (Appendix B, figure 2). Female characters are often positioned in the background, where they are sometimes blurred or overlapped by male characters. This too indicates that in most scenes, male characters are the important characters and female characters are side-kicks, background characters, or assistants. This is for example also evident in the scene in Infinity War where T'Challa and Okoye visit Bucky (Appendix B, figure 3). Moreover, the female characters are often filmed from a higher perspective, leading to the fact that they repeatedly look up to the camera instead of down to it. As Goffman (Bell et al., 2002) shows, positioning women as smaller than men as well as presenting them in inferior positions and poses communicates a sense of subordination, as both the male characters as well as the camera look down on the female characters, which is definitely evident in the first movie.

In the second movie, Avengers: Age of Ultron, this is slightly less evident. Here, in several scenes, Black Widow is filmed in a higher position or a less inferior pose, leading to her looking over the camera instead of up to it, thereby slightly reversing the findings of the analysis of the Avengers and the theory of Goffman. Wanda still looks up at Ultron, but this is explainable because Ultron is a lot taller than she is, instead of positioned higher in the frame. Therefore, the male characters also look up at him. However, the position of the camera and the position of the female characters in some scenes still indicate their less important role in the movie. Hill might no longer be Fury's assistant, but when she for example talks to Captain America, she still walks behind him (Appendix B, figure 4). In the

third movie, female characters are even more positioned similarly to male characters in terms of camera angle, such as when Gamora and Mantis are positioned next to Groot and Drax in the example in Appendix B, figure 5, a trend that also continues in the fourth movie.

In short, the camera and the position of the characters in the frame in all four movies communicate to us who the important and less important characters in the scenes are. Since the female characters are often not the main character in the scene, they are repeatedly positioned in the background or behind male characters. Moreover, they are sometimes blurred when a male character is deemed more important in the scene. Furthermore, especially in the first movie, they regularly look up to male characters or are filmed from above, giving them a sense of subordination and vulnerability. Nonetheless, these findings become less evident in the latter movies, and especially in the last movie, the female characters are not necessarily more often filmed from a higher angle than the male characters and are rarely obviously positioned in the background or blurred.

The male gaze

Next to the general discourses surrounding the concept of femininity, the research has also taken a special look at the presence or absence of the male gaze. As mentioned in the theoretical framework, the male gaze refers to a situation in which the male character dominates both the narrative and the visual point of view (Smelik, 2016). From the movies, several observations have been made that tap into this concept. To start, the concept of the male gaze is applicable to The Avengers. As mentioned previously in the result section, male characters dominate the narrative and the camera regularly follows the male gaze quite explicitly. Female figures, such as breasts or bottoms, are accentuated by the lighting of the scenes (Appendix C, figure 1) and in one scene in particular, the male gaze is strikingly evident. In this scene, Coulson is in Tony's apartment, and after they talk for a while, Tony walks back to his desk, while Pepper follows a moment later. The camera follows Coulson's look, and when Tony walks away from Coulson/the camera, he is turned towards the camera while holding a computer (Appendix C, figure 2). When Pepper walks away, however, this is filmed as if she is walking on a catwalk, and she is swinging her hips while we are following Coulson's point of view. Thereby, her femininity is highly emphasised and the camera takes on the perspective of a heterosexual male.

As with the other findings, this finding too diminishes when the movies progress. Especially in Avengers: Endgame, there even are jokes that show that it is not only the women that are looked at in the film, for example when they talk about Captain America's bottom. Therefore, the camera and narrative no longer only objectify the female characters, but also turn the male characters into a spectacle. It is then relevant to note too that even though the male gaze is evident in some scenes in the movies, it is not nearly as strongly present as could be expected. As Smelik (2016) explains, the male gaze leads to the objectification of women and to them becoming passive spectacles. This leaves little room for female identification but a lot of room for male identification, as the hero of the story is male. This is applicable to some extent, as the camera thus indeed sometimes objectifies women and most of the main characters are indeed male. However, especially in latter movies, this becomes less and less relevant, showing a positive trend towards a more inclusive film.

Part of the team: roles, relationships, and families

The second category that arose from the analysis concerns the role of the female characters in the story as a whole. As briefly mentioned above, clothing, colour, and camera angle do not only communicate the importance of the characters to us, but also the parts they play in the story. This part of the result section will further lay out these findings by combining the results of the visual and critical discourse analysis to show the discourses that surround the female characters concerning their roles, relationships, and family.

The female characters in the four films all have their own role to fulfil and this is communicated not only by their costume, but also by the relationships they have with other characters. In the four films, several different relationships between characters can be identified: friends, love interests, power, and family. First, women are often portrayed as the friend, which is in line with the research by Poepsel and Gerard (2018) about Black Widow and her role as loyal friend. She for example calls the other Avengers by their nicknames where other characters refer to each other by last name, and she calls them 'boys' or 'guys'. In other parts of the movies, she is even explicitly called a friend. The following example shows that whereas Thor calls Clint Barton by his last name, indicating

some distance between them, Black Widow calls Clint Barton by his first name, indicating their friendship:

Natasha Romanoff: 'Clint's hit pretty bad, guys. We're gonna need evac'
Thor (to Captain America): 'I can get Barton to the jet. The sooner we're gone, the better. You and Stark secure the sceptre.'

Other female characters, such as Nebula, are also portrayed as friends of main male characters too, again indicated using nicknames, for example when Rhodes calls her 'Blue' in Avengers: Endgame:

'That's it, right on that line, Blue. Keep dropping it'

Interesting here to note is that, as the first example shows, this use of nicknames in endearing manners does not happen that often between male characters. They mostly call each other by their last name, as for example Tony Stark is rarely referred to as Tony. However, this notion slightly changes when the male characters become friends with each other during the movies. Nonetheless, the friend roles between male characters are then still more male-like, as they show less obvious affection and care for each other, and as is in line with Stolzfus (2014), female friendships are more often used as plot devices for male characters to develop and act than male friendships are.

Next to friends, many of the female characters in the movies also feature as sidekicks or assistants. As previously discussed, Hill is for example a classic image of an assistant, not only visually but also in the script. This becomes very evident in a conversation that Fury and Stark have in Avengers: Age of Ultron, after Fury had been gone for a while and it appeared as if Hill was not working for him anymore, but then it turned out that she was:

Fury: 'I'll drop Banner off at the tower. Do you mind if I borrow Ms. Hill?'
Stark: 'She's all yours, apparently'

Although Hill is a more classic picture of an assistant or sidekick, as became evident from the script as well as the previously discussed position of the camera and salience, other characters in this role are more equal and have less evident power-relations between them. An example of this is Okoye, who is the leader of one of T'Challa's armies and therefore his subordinate. Despite the previously mentioned example of the scene in which she is blurred in the background and therefore less salient, the script shows that she does not act extremely obedient, but is instead quite cheeky and not afraid to talk back to him:

Okoye: 'When you said we were going to open Wakanda to the rest of the world… this is not what I imagined'

T'Challa: 'And what did you imagine?'

Okoye: 'The Olympics. Maybe even a Starbucks'

Thirdly, five of the twelve female characters are a love interest of another character in the movies: Pepper Potts, Natasha Romanoff, Gamora, Wanda Maximoff and Hope van Dyne. Here, Stolzfus (2014) and her finding that female characters are often used as plot devices to give male characters courage and motivation to become heroes is again confirmed. When it comes to Pepper, a main function she has is to act as Tony's conscientiousness. She keeps him stable and grounded, but even though she does not necessarily have a function besides this, her relationship with Tony is one of equals. From the script, it becomes evident that he tells her everything, and that she has a hand in what he does, although this is mostly behind-the-screens:

Pepper: 'Is this about the Avengers? Which I – I know nothing about'

Tony: 'The Avengers initiative was scrapped, I thought. And I didn't even qualify'

Pepper: 'I didn't know that either' (the tone indicates that she did know)

Tony: 'Yeah, apparently I'm volatile, self-obsessed, don't play well with others'

Pepper: 'That I did know'

Natasha Romanoff her story partly features her interest in Banner and the difficulties that this mutual feeling brings. Especially throughout Avengers: Age of Ultron, this storyline is explored, but in the last two movies, it is barely continued. Gamora and her relationship

with Peter Quill is very different from Tony and Pepper. Not only does Gamora have a very significant role in the movies herself, besides being Quill's love interest, Quill's feelings for her lead to him acting very emotional and foolish, instead of being more grounded, as was the case for Tony. Thereby, this is both in line with Stolzfus (2014), as Gamora is used as a plot device, as well as against her findings, as Gamora is not used for Quill to become a hero, but to act counter to this premise. This becomes most evident in the scene in which several of the Avengers almost succeed in taking the Infinity Gauntlet off Thanos's hand, but Quill messes it up when he finds out that Gamora died:

Nebula: 'He took her to Vormir. He came back with the Soul Stone… but she didn't'

Stark: 'Okay Quill, you gotta cool it right now, you understand? Don't, don't engage, we've almost got this off!'

Quill: 'Tell me she's lying! Asshole! Tell me you didn't do it!'

Thanos: 'I… had… to…'

Quill: 'No, you didn't! No, you didn't! No, you didn't!'

The last romantic relationship that is of significance for the story is between Wanda and Vision. Their relationship develops after Avengers: Age of Ultron and is already established at the beginning of Avengers: Infinity War. Different from Gamora and Quill, it is not Vision who acts strongly due to his love for Wanda, but Wanda who acts strongly and emotionally out of her love for Vision. Here, the statement given by Stolzfus (2014) is thus countered, as it is the male character that acts as a catalyst for the female character's actions. He is, for example, willing to sacrifice himself for the greater good, whereas Wanda does not want him to. However, she is ultimately able to set aside her love for him and destroy the stone after all, thereby being able to counter her emotions better than Peter Quill did in the previous example.

Fourthly, family is a very big theme throughout all the movies and almost all the storylines. These families can arise from the previously mentioned love interests, such as Pepper her family with Tony and Morgan. However, many characters also have families outside of these love interests: Thor his family is the reason for many of his actions, Barton his family is present in Avengers: Age of Ultron and plays a central role in his actions in Avengers: Endgame, and Ant-Man his daughter is also shown briefly twice in Avengers:

Endgame. Shuri is T'Challa's sister and Wanda is Pietro's brother, and both brother-sister relationships are established clearly throughout the two movies. For Natasha Romanoff, no family is present in the movies, and the second movie dives deeper into her inability to have children, because they could be the one thing for a spy like her that are more important than a mission. This indicates that family relationships are valued and important for female characters, especially when it comes to children. Nonetheless, even though she does not have children or brothers or sisters herself in these movies, she sees the Avengers as her family and is also a part of Barton's family:

From Avengers: Age of Ultron, when the Avengers are first introduced to Barton's family:

Lila Barton: 'Did you bring Auntie Nat?'

Natasha Romanoff: 'Why don't you hug her and find out?'

From Avengers: Endgame, after Natasha sacrificed herself on Vormir:

Tony: 'Do we know if she had family?'

Steve: 'Yeah. Us.'

The family relationship that is put the most emphasis on in the movies, however, is the one between Gamora, Nebula and Thanos. In multiple moments in the script as well as on screen are Gamora and Nebula very clearly established as daughters of Thanos. They call him father, he calls him daughters or children, and their role as his daughters is of big relevance for the development of the story.

To summarise, the female characters in the four movies are thus either friend, assistant/sidekick, love interest or part of a family, or multiple of these roles combined. This differs from the male characters as they function more often on their own and have these roles as background instead of main function. Tony Stark, for example, is mainly Iron Man, and also has a relationship with Pepper. Steve Rogers is Captain America, and also in love with Peggy Carter, a storyline that is of importance but is not the sole reason for his actions. Fury is mainly the head of S.H.I.E.L.D, and also has Hill as his assistant. Thanos is the main bad guy, and also the father of Gamora and Nebula. However, Pepper is mostly Tony's

partner, Hill is mostly Fury's assistant, and Gamora and Nebula are mainly Thanos's daughters.

Skills and personal traits

Next to their roles, the female central characters each exhibit their own skills and personal traits. Some of them are evident in multiple characters and these skills and traits will be discussed in this section, showing the third category.

First, every single female central character is skilled at fighting. This is a skill that is traditionally seen as masculine (Kimmel, 1999) but it is here also evident in all the female characters. They are well-trained in hand-to-hand combat and in using the masculine attributes such as guns and weapons, as previously mentioned. They never wait on the side for the fight to be over but instead participate and destroy enemies without mercy. In this, they do not differ from the male characters. However, the female characters do often differ in terms of screen time they have during these fights, as the fights are often centred more around the male characters. This will be discussed in more detail in the next category of the results.

Secondly, the female characters also show skill and brains when it comes to for example operating technology. In the first movies, this is only evident when Pepper, Hill, or Natasha operates machines or technology, but in the last movies, more of these moments are present. Here, Nebula is also often portrayed helping to fix for example a spaceship or the time machine, and Shuri matches, or even outsmarts, Banner and Tony at one point:

Shuri: 'Wow, the structure is polymorphic' (referring to Vision)

Banner: 'Right, we had to attach each neuron non-sequentially'

Shuri: 'Why didn't you just reprogram the synapses to work collectively?'

Banner: 'Eh, because we didn't think of it'

Shuri: 'I'm sure you did your best'

Wanda: 'Can you do it?'

Shuri: 'Yes, but there are more than two trillion neurons here. One misalignment could cause a cascade of circuit failures. (To T'Challa) It will take time, brother'

Thirdly, some female characters are not only skilled at fighting but also exhibit enhanced abilities that make them even more powerful. The movies for example only hint at how powerful Wanda Maximoff could be, as she is so close to killing Thanos that he is willing to sacrifice his entire army to destroy her, something that no other Avenger has achieved before. Captain Marvel uses her power to destroy an entire spaceship at once and essentially saves everyone by showing up. Mantis, although her role in the rest of the movie is more that one of a side character that provides comic relief, used her power to become one of the key characters that were almost able to take Thanos his gauntlet in Avengers: Infinity War. However, portrayals of female power are also denigrated by statements made in the movies. Captain Marvel, after singlehandedly bringing Tony and Nebula back from space at the beginning of Avengers: Endgame, is being called 'new girl' by Rhodes. Wanda, after showing her powers by destroying the stone and keeping away Thanos from Vision in Avengers: Infinity War, is called 'child' by Thanos. Moreover, and very interestingly, scenes that are supposedly there to show the power of unified female central characters, in fact have the possibility of reducing their powers as well. In Avengers: Infinity War, Wanda Maximoff is standing in front of an alien enemy, who states that she is all alone. When it looks as if all hope is lost, we hear Black Widow state that 'she is not alone', after which she, Okoye, and Wanda continue to fight the alien enemy together and defeat her. The second scene which is of relevance here takes place in Avengers: Endgame. Captain Marvel just entered the fight and goes to Peter Parker to take the gauntlet from him and help him out. The following conversation ensues:

Peter Parker: 'Uh hey, I'm Peter Parker'

Captain Marvel: 'Hey Peter Parker, you got something for me?'

Peter Parker (after handing her the glove): 'I don't know how you're going to get through all that...' (referring to Thanos's army)

Wanda: 'Don't worry'

Okoye: 'She's got help'

(After this, the women of Marvel gather and start blasting through Thanos his troops)

At first, both these scenes seem great examples of female empowerment. However, investigating the discourses behind these scenes proves that they could be interpreted

otherwise. It is very relevant to note that there is no similar scene with all the male characters. They fight on their own or together, but it is never explicitly mentioned that they help and need each other and that one is not alone. For them, it is simply expected that they work together and win, whereas for the female characters, it appears as if it is such a special event that it must be explicitly mentioned, thereby also showing that they explicitly need each other to win. In doing so, it can be theorised that these scenes implicitly denigrate their powers. In the first scene, Wanda is overwhelmed by one alien, but she just destroyed multiple aliens and five machines in one move. The alien takes her by surprise, but it would have been easy for her to destroy the alien herself. However, before she can, Black Widow and Okoye already come to her rescue. The question thus remains if when a male character would have been in her position, he would have been helped by other male characters as well, or if the story would have led the male character to have his own victory. In the second scene, it is implied that Captain Marvel needs the help of ten other female characters, as if she did not just destroy a massive spaceship that was firing at her from all angles on her own. Therefore, even though both the scenes are impressive in terms of camera work and on the surface show the strong and powerful women of the MCU, critical discourse analysis shows that below this surface, there is the possible notion that women explicitly need each other to attain their goals and defeat their enemies, whereas male characters help each other out in more neutral and less explicit ways and get their own victories more often.

Fourthly, next to their fighting and technological skills, the female characters in the MCU exhibit certain personality traits. Most evident is their sense of duty and their toughness. In the movies, multiple decisions are made by the female characters that show that they think of the greater good and that they are aware of their sense of duty towards everyone else. This is evident in small remarks, such as the following section from Avengers: Infinity War, where the Guardians of the Galaxy respond to a distress signal:

Rocket: 'Why are we doing this again?'

Gamora: 'It's a distress signal, Rocket. Someone could be dying'

Rocket: 'I get that, but why are we doing it?'

Quill: 'Because we're nice. And maybe whoever it is will give us a little cheddar cheese for our help'

Gamora: 'Which isn't the point'

Moreover, it is also shown in actions that are of way more importance, such as Gamora willing to kill her own father to keep him from destroying half the universe and Wanda willing to destroy the stone in Vision's head to keep the stone from Thanos. Of all the Avengers, Natasha is the one who feels the most responsibility towards her mission. This is already evident in Avengers: Age of Ultron, when Banner offers her a chance to run away and she refuses because she is not finished with the mission yet. Out of everyone, she furthermore is the person who feels the most responsible to bring everyone back during the five years between Avengers: Infinity War and Avengers: Endgame. Whereas Tony started a family, Steve joined grief counselling sessions, Thor hid in a remote village playing video games and Banner took the time to combine his two personas, she stayed in the Avenger compound and continued to figure out a way to defeat Thanos. The ultimate portrayal of her sense of duty is when she is willing to jump off the cliff on Vormir to make sure that Barton does not do so:

Natasha: 'For the last five years I have been trying to do one thing – to get to right here. This is all it's been about. Bringing everybody back'
Barton: 'Do not get all decent on me'
Natasha: 'You think I want to do it? I'm trying to save your life, you idiot'

Women are thereby often portrayed as loyal and responsible, and they are often tough as well. In later movies, this is very evident in the fight scenes as well as in how the characters act in other scenes, but interestingly, this is not yet the case in the first two movies. In The Avengers, it is Natasha who is shaken up the most during the fight in the Helicarrier, and Wanda needs a pep talk by Barton in Avengers: Age of Ultron before she can continue fighting, aspects that play into Stolzfus's (2014) notion of the damsel in distress. More elaboration on this will be provided in the following section about the portrayal of emotions. Despite this, and especially in the last two movies, the women are just as tough as the male characters, and often just as brave, as they also do not shy away from fights or difficult situations.

Emotions

Other relevant discourses that were found can be grouped together under the concept of emotion, forming the fourth category. Emotions are traditionally considered feminine and many people believe women to be more emotional than men, although anger is seen as more of a male emotion (Feldman Barett et al., 1998). In the first two movies, this discourse is certainly evident. In these movies, out of all the female central characters, only Pepper, Hill, Natasha, and Wanda are present, and these four characters indeed show more emotion than the male characters, except when it comes to anger. In the first movie, Natasha acts scared a couple of times when in fact she is in full control of the situation. She uses the fact that women are traditionally considered emotional to trick both the Russian criminals as well as Loki in The Avengers, thereby countering the discourse that she is emotional and easy to influence. However, in other parts of the movies, she is considerably more emotional than the male characters. When she for example recruits Banner and he acts as if he gets angry, she is visibly scared. Moreover, when he turns into the Hulk later in the story, she gets beaten up so bad that she is shown crying somewhere before picking herself up again. Male characters in the first two movies are rarely shaken up in this way. In the second movie, as previously mentioned, it is Wanda who needs a pep talk by Barton to be able to continue fighting Ultron. Natasha gets captured by Ultron and suddenly turns into a scared damsel in distress before managing to reach Barton. Therefore, the first two movies portray the female characters as slightly weaker than the male characters and use their emotions to do so.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that this changes in the third and the fourth movie. Here, the female characters still portray a lot of emotion. Gamora cries when she 'kills' her father, Wanda first prevents the destruction of the stone in Vision's head because of her love for him, Okoye her reaction towards T'Challa's disintegration after Thanos snapped his fingers is much stronger than the other reactions. Next to this, a big part of Wanda her powers results from her emotions and she considerably gets stronger the more emotional she is. However, in these two movies, the male characters start acting out of emotion a lot more too. Thor is very upset when Loki dies, Quill ruins the entire plan when he finds out what happened to Gamora, Barton goes on a killer spree to deal with the loss of his family. To top this off, the ultimate character that acts out of emotion is of course Banner, who transforms into the Hulk when he gets angry, which is in turn in line with the

previous statement that anger is considered to be a male emotion (Feldman Barrett et al., 1998). Therefore, it can be theorised that although the women are more emotional in the first two movies, this changes in the last two movies, where there is more room for male emotions and for male characters to act according to these emotions. Women become less sad and fearful, men stay angry but also act out of grief and sadness more often than before.

Absence: fights, conversations, continuation of the story

To make the discourse analysis of the movies as inclusive as possible, it is not only necessary to look at the way women are portrayed on screen and in text, but also at the ways in which they are left out. After all, women can be portrayed positively on screen, but when they are absent in key scenes or discussions and take no part in the continuation of the story, this portrayal is quite symbolic and not as positive as it might seem at first. Several important observations were made here, which together form the fifth category.

First, women seem to take less part in conversations than men do. Especially in The Avengers, Hill and Natasha often make remarks during a conversation to which they get no response at all:

Coulson (about the Tesseract): 'He wasn't testing it, he wasn't even in the room. Spontaneous advancement'

Hill: 'It just turned itself on?'

Fury: 'What are the energy levels now?'

Coulson: 'Climbing. When Selvig couldn't shut it down, we ordered the evac'

In Avengers: Age of Ultron, their part in conversations becomes slightly bigger. Here, Natasha and Hill have more relevant information to add to conversations, but their remarks still do not lead to any action or continuation of the story. Instead, they are used to clarify what is happening or to give other characters a bridge to explain something. In Avengers: Infinity War and Avengers: Endgame, this positive trend is continuing, as here in the conversations, female characters such as Wanda and Natasha actually add relevant

information, by for example showing that they have knowledge that others do not have, something that previously only happened to male characters:

From Avengers: Infinity War

Rhodes: 'So we gotta assume they're coming back, right?'

Wanda: 'And they can clearly find us'

Banner: 'We need all hands on deck. Where's Clint?'

Natasha: 'After the whole Accords situation, he and Scott took a deal. It was too tough on their families, they're on house arrest'

Banner: 'Who's Scott?'

From Avengers: Endgame

(Talking about Dr. Strange) Banner: 'Bleecker'

Stark: 'Sullivan and Bleecker. They're cross streets'

Natasha: 'Wait, he lived in New York? Guys, pick the right year and there were three stones in New York'

Banner (beat): 'Shut the front door…'

Secondly, it is relevant to look at the absence of women in the big fighting scenes. In big parts of the battle scenes, women are less present or even not present at all. This happens for example at the beginning of Avengers: Infinity War, when the alien ship invades New York, and at the final battle of Avengers: Endgame, where only Nebula from 2014 is present when the Hulk snaps his fingers. She is later joined by Gamora from 2014 and Nebula from the present, but it takes up until the scene in which all the other characters join the battle to introduce other female characters to this scene. Even when they are present, they are more often rendered useless in the fight than male characters. In the beginning of The Avengers, for example, Natasha enters the fight between Captain America and Loki in a jet, and she is skilled and prepared to shoot Loki. However, before she gets the chance to do so, the jet is taken over by Iron Man, and there is nothing that she can do anymore except watch.

Conclusion

To conclude, the research question that this thesis answers is: what discourses around femininity are present in the depiction of female characters in the Marvel Cinematic Universe? With the cultural studies tradition and a feminist film theory perspective as a background, visual and critical discourse analysis was conducted in order to investigate these discourses in the four Avenger films. The field of cultural studies concerns itself, among other topics, with the ways in which media plays a part in the production and reproduction of inequality in society (Barker, 2003). Important here is the notion of discourse, which involves the ways in which knowledge about a certain topic is produced through language and in text (Hall, 1997). Feminist film theory adds to this by stating that cinema has the power to represent and reproduce knowledge about femininity (Smelik, 2016), and investigating discourses surrounding this concept thus made it possible to take a deep dive into what knowledge about femininity is present in the MCU and is thereby communicated to a large part of society.

The findings in this research indeed show that investigating discourses is a relevant way of exploring how femininity is depicted in the MCU. In line with feminist film theory, certain knowledge about femininity is communicated to the public in these movies, which enables an answer to the research question. To give a complete answer to this research question, three sub-questions were formed. The first sub-question related to the visual discourse analysis, and in answer to this question, three important discourses were found. First, it turned out that femininity in the MCU is related to attractiveness. This is partly expected due to previous theory, such as Miller and Summers (as mentioned in Miller et al., 2016), who stated that women in movies are often seen as sex objects, and Pennell and Behm-Morawitz (2015), who showed that by using certain clothing and body types, women in movies are often sexualised. Women in the MCU are attractive and stay attractive, which is shown not only in the ways they look but also in how they get less bruised during fights. Their costumes too communicate their attractiveness, as they are tight-fitted and show off the female figure. However, looking closer at some of the costumes shows that they also communicate the backstory of the women by using intricate detailing and personal factors. Therefore, although the costumes are tight and accentuate the female figure, they are not as superficial as might seem at first, providing a little nuance to the theories mentioned.

Secondly, the attributes that the women use in the film show that femininity in the MCU also has a side that is more tough and taps into aspects that can traditionally be considered masculine. Whereas the first movies sometimes portray female characters as damsels in distress, a finding that is in line with Stolzfus (2014), the attributes the characters use and the (fighting) skills that the characters possess show that they are not as passive as might have been expected. Pennell et al. (2015) already mentioned that female superheroes in blockbuster movies are increasingly portrayed as strong, confident, intelligent, and skilled, and this is something that is also evident in the movies of the MCU. Femininity is thus, especially in the latter movies, not necessarily combined to weakness anymore, but to notions of strength, sense of duty, and skill.

Thirdly, the result section pointed out the use of camera angle and position of characters on screen as other communicators of discourse. Here, it becomes evident that female characters are usually positioned in the background, blurry, or overlapped, indicating lesser importance in the story. Moreover, female characters in the first movies are often filmed from above, giving them a sense of subordination. The results also show interesting findings concerning the male gaze in the movies. In The Avengers, the male gaze clearly dominates the point of view of the camera, as well as the narrative. However, this diminishes when the movies progress.

To answer the second sub-question, a critical discourse analysis of the scripts was conducted. From this analysis, four important discourses were discovered. The first one relates to the role of women in terms of power, love, friendship, and family, and shows that femininity is often highly linked to one, or multiple, of these roles. In all the films, women are regularly the friend that keeps people together or helps them develop their storyline. Several of the women are love interests of other characters, leading to them repeatedly being the plot device for male characters, as Stolzfus (2014) already mentioned. However, as the movies progress, this role diminishes or switches. Power relations are evident in the movies, and in these power relations, it is never the woman that is in power. Although this is an interesting finding and relevant to all films, some nuance must be added by stating that in later movies, these power relations become less evident. Lastly, family relations are very important, as almost all the female characters are part of a family. Although some of these roles, especially family, can also be related to male characters, it can be cautiously stated

that for female characters, these roles are of more importance to their storyline than for the male characters.

Secondly, critical discourse analysis shows that female characters exhibit certain skills and personal traits, again confirming the discourse that femininity is not necessarily linked to weakness and the 'damsel in distress' notion, but to strength and skill. However, these powers are sometimes denigrated by statements made in the movies. Female power is demonstrated specifically in two scenes, which show the combined effort of female characters to attain a goal. Although these scenes might at first appear empowering, critical discourse analysis showed that these scenes in fact reduce the female power, as they apparently need each other for tasks that male characters seem to do on their own or together with much less emphasis on the fact that they need each other.

Thirdly, women in the first two movies are considerably more emotional than male characters, thereby linking this to femininity. Emotion is seen as feminine, and this is evident in these movies. However, this discourse changes slightly during the third and the fourth movie, where male characters also start reacting more emotionally to events that are happening.

Lastly, critical discourse analysis considered the absence of women in important scenes and conversations. In conversations, women regularly play less relevant parts than male characters do. Especially in the first movies, female characters are not only smaller parts of the conversation, but also repeatedly get no reaction when they ask or state something. This, combined to the fact that when they talk, they often do not provide relevant input, leads to them not being a big part of the continuation of the storylines. Moreover, in several fighting scenes in the first movies, women are less present or not present at all. Because of this, it can be theorised that femininity, especially in the first movies, might be seen as inferior, and communicates to the public that the masculine figures are more important and relevant, thus revealing important power-relations between men and women.

The third sub-question asked if the discourses change throughout the four movies. From the critical and the visual discourse analysis, it became evident that they in fact did. Whereas several of the negative discourses surrounding femininity were strongly present in the first movie(s), they diminished when the movies progressed. There is a trend visible in which female characters get more powerful, become more important to the plot, and play a

larger part in conversations and fights. Moreover, male characters become more emotional in the last movies, and sometimes even function as plot devices for the development of the story of the female characters instead of the other way around. Though it is based on this research not possible to say if the MCU follows the changes in society or if the MCU affects these changes, it stems hopeful for female representation in their future endeavours.

Strengths and limitations

The research conducted in this thesis has several strengths as well as some limitations that must be addressed. As for the strengths, the research is inclusive and the research method is very suitable for answering the research question, as the methodological framework showed. The choice of the four movies led to a relevant overview of the female characters in the MCU and allowed for the possibility to investigate all of them. Moreover, comprehensive previous knowledge of the MCU and the characters by the researcher beforehand made it possible to provide in-depth analysis in a relatively short time.

However, some limitations were also present. First and foremost, the biggest limitation comes in the form of the high speed by which Marvel produces its movies and series. Whereas this makes the research relevant in comparison to previous theory, it also means that incorporating new content might change the results. Even during the writing process of this thesis, new series were produced and broadcasted, in which existing female characters were explored in more depth or new female characters were added. Secondly, the choice of data was relevant for answering the research question and for the scope of this research, as all female characters could be analysed. However, some of the female characters were present only very briefly. Therefore, the research could be improved by adding other movies to it, in which characters like The Wasp or Valkyrie play bigger parts and can be analysed in more detail.

Suggestions for future research

Based on this research, suggestions for future research can be made. First of all, it is important to note that next to the four Avenger movies, the MCU exists out of several other movies in which female central characters have other or bigger parts to play. Thus, it is suggested to analyse these movies by means of critical and visual discourse analysis as well,

to see if the results hold when applied to more movies. Secondly, it would be very relevant to look at other identity aspects in the movies, in terms of gender but also in terms of race. Whereas this thesis focusses on femininity in general, it would be interesting to for example zoom in on femininity in combination with people of colour, or to focus on masculinity in these movies. Lastly, as briefly touched upon in the thesis already, more movies are soon hitting the theatres or have already been broadcasted. Analysing these movies allows for new insights when it comes to discourses around femininity, as well as an even more comprehensive overview of how these discourses change over time. During the writing process of this thesis, for example, WandaVision aired on Disney+, and it would be very interesting to continue research on femininity in this series. Next to this, the Black Widow movie hopefully finally airs this year, and this provides many chances to expand the previous research on her persona and possibly show the trends on female representation in the MCU even more extensively. Only time will tell how changes in gender presentation impact movie industries such as those of Marvel, and future research will hopefully build on this one to make sure that female characters are represented in ways that are inspiring and true to the female population. In that way, the perpetuating negative stereotypes about women and the patriarchal power-relations in society can hopefully be changed for good, leading to a more equal society for everyone.

Appendices

Appendix A.

Figure 1. Black Widow in her interrogation scene

Figure 2. Female characters during a battle

Figure 3. Costumes

Appendix B.

Figure 1. Hill walking behind male characters

Figure 2. Natasha walking behind Captain America

Figure 3. Okoye standing behind T'Challa

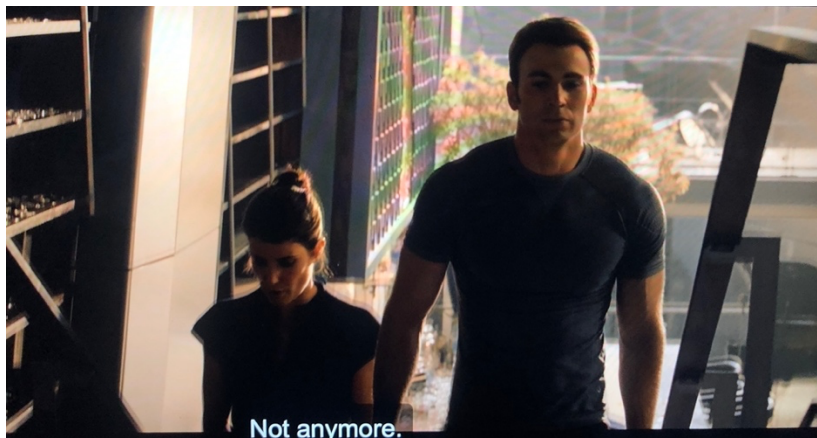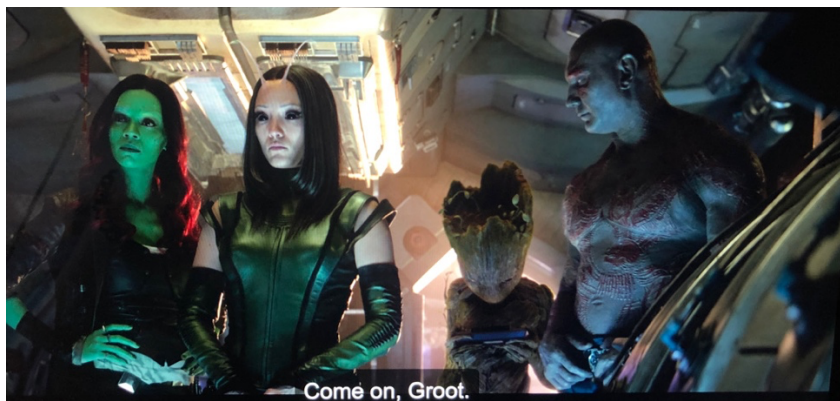Figure 4. Hill walking behind Captain America

Figure 5. The Guardians of the Galaxy

Appendix C.

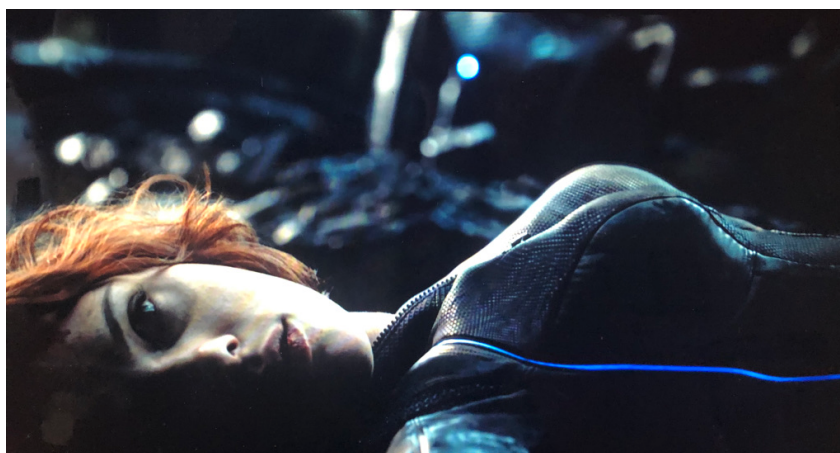Figure 1. Highlighting of the female body

Figure 2. Tony walking away and Pepper walking away

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https://criticallegalthinking.com/2017/11/17/michel-foucault-discourse/

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