In Search of a Feminist Hero:

Female Fan Perspectives on Marvel's Leading Women

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I declare that the research contained herein was granted approval by the SPAIS Ethics Working Group.

<u>Dedication</u>

To my dad, for starting my love of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, and always encouraging me to pursue my passions and interests, making this dissertation possible.

To the wonderful friends I've made in Bristol, I couldn't have done this without the support from all of you.

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<u>Abstract</u>

This dissertation investigates whether the female heroes of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) -specifically Black Widow, Scarlet Witch, and Captain Marvel- can be considered "feminist" in the way female fans want them to be. As a long-time MCU fan and self-proclaimed feminist, I observed that while the franchise has increasingly introduced female heroes, many portrayals still feel disconnected from the values and desires of feminist-minded audiences. Drawing on intersectional feminist theory, this project defines a set of expectations for what constitutes a "feminist" hero and compares these theoretical standards to actual fan interpretations gathered from online social media platforms; specifically Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. This study first conducts a theory-based analysis of each hero, focusing on how their narratives, emotional depth, agency, and visual representations align or diverge from intersectional feminist ideals. It then examines fan responses, beginning with two comparative examples -Elle Woods (Legally Blonde) and Buffy Summers (Buffy the Vampire Slayer)- who are widely celebrated by female fans as feminist characters. Fan interpretations of Black Widow, Scarlet Witch, and Captain Marvel are then analysed with particular attention to moments of approval, disappointment, and reimagining. The findings show that although Marvel has made strides in increasing the visibility of female heroes, issues remain around emotional authenticity, narrative agency, and the centering of male perspectives. Fans consistently respond most positively to characters who are complex, vulnerable, and allowed narrative space beyond romantic or militaristic tropes. The dissertation concludes by reflecting on the MCU's more recent attempts to diversify its female heroes and argues that future portrayals would benefit from embracing the characteristics that fans already identify and celebrate in feminist characters. By combining theoretical critique and fan analysis, this research highlights the complex negotiations that occur between popular culture, feminism, and audience expectations.

Word Count: 9716

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List of Images

<u>List of Abbreviations</u>

aka - also known as

MCU - Marvel Cinematic Universe

1. Introduction

Growing up as a fan of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), I was captivated by the scale, action, and interconnected storytelling that made it feel larger than life. But over time, I began to notice that, despite the ever-growing roster of heroes, very few were women, and those who were often felt like side characters rather than leads. Even as Marvel gradually introduced more prominent female heroes, something about their portrayals didn't feel quite right. Instead of celebrating female identity in all its complexity, these characters were frequently written in ways that either rejected femininity altogether or reduced it to a handful of simplistic traits. As a young mixed white-Asian woman and lifelong fan of the MCU, I wanted more, not just more female heroes, but better ones; characters that female fans like myself could admire, relate to, and love.

This dissertation explores that desire through a central research question: Are the female heroes of the Marvel Cinematic Universe "feminist" in the way we (the female fans) want them to be?

This question rests on two important distinctions. First, it separates the idea of a "feminist character", meaning a character who personally champions feminist ideals within the narrative, from a character who is "feminist" in the way feminists or feminist-aligned audiences would approve of. This dissertation focuses on the latter: whether the construction and portrayal of these heroes align with the values and desires of feminist-minded female fans. Second, it acknowledges that feminist ideals are not monolithic. Feminism encompasses a wide range of perspectives, and fan interpretations vary accordingly. Therefore, this study chooses to adopt an intersectional feminist framework to establish a theoretical "standard," which will then be compared with fan interpretations gathered from online spaces.

Three female heroes have been chosen as case studies for this dissertation: Black Widow (aka Natasha Romanoff), Scarlet Witch (aka aWanda Maximoff), and Captain Marvel (aka Carol Danvers). These are the MCU's most high-profile female heroes to date, each with significant screen time and narrative importance across multiple films and/or television shows. Black Widow was introduced in the franchise's third film, *Iron Man 2 (2010)*, and remained central through until her canonical death in *Avengers: Endgame (2019)*. Scarlet Witch gained prominence through several ensemble appearances and her own series, *WandaVision (2021)*. Captain Marvel was introduced more recently in *Captain Marvel (2019)*, but was positioned immediately as one of the most powerful figures in the franchise. Their prominence makes them ideal subjects for analysis, not only of how female heroes are constructed within the MCU, but also of how these constructions have been received by female fans.

At the heart of this project is the belief that fan interpretations matter. Fans are not passive recipients of media; they are active interpreters, critics, and participants in the media they consume. Particularly in digital spaces, female fans have carved out vibrant communities where they celebrate, critique, and reimagine female heroes. Their reactions -whether enthusiastic, disappointed, or somewhere in between- offer crucial insight into how feminist values are negotiated and understood in popular culture. By analysing both feminist theory and fan interpretations, this dissertation aims to create a richer, more nuanced picture of what successful feminist hero construction might look like.

The structure of the dissertation reflects this approach. Following this introduction, the dissertation begins with a review of existing literature, exploring how female heroes have historically been portrayed in film and popular culture, the rise of feminist critiques within fan communities, and the development of intersectional feminist theory as it applies to media representation. From there, it moves into a detailed discussion of the theoretical framework and methodology, defining key concepts such as intersectional feminism, setting out what

constitutes a "feminist" character for the purposes of this study, and explaining the approach taken to gather and analyse fan responses. The first main analysis chapter offers a theory-based evaluation of the three core heroes: Black Widow, Scarlet Witch, and Captain Marvel, and considering how each character aligns with or diverges from feminist theoretical standards. The focus then shifts to fan interpretations, beginning with an exploration of two non-MCU female characters, Elle Woods and Buffy Summers, who are widely celebrated by fans as successful feminist characters. These examples establish a basis against which fan responses to the three Marvel heroes are then analysed. The discussion chapter draws together the findings from both the theoretical analysis and the fan interpretations, highlighting where they align, where they differ, and what these patterns reveal about how feminist ideals are negotiated in popular culture. Finally, the dissertation concludes by summarising the key arguments, reflecting on the broader implications for feminist hero construction in media, and considering how Marvel's recent steps toward greater diversity might better meet the desires of feminist audiences moving forward.

This project reflects both a love for these stories and a frustration with how slowly they've grown to include people like me. Through this multi-layered analysis, this dissertation seeks not only to critique where Marvel has fallen short but also to offer insights into how future female heroes might be constructed in ways that resonate more deeply with feminist audiences.

1.1 Literature Review: Feminist Debates on Female Heroes

The representation of female heroes in popular film, particularly within the superhero genre, has been the subject of extensive scholarly attention. Researchers have long noted that while the number of female characters has increased, their portrayal often remains trapped within restrictive tropes: such as the overly sexualised action heroine, the emotionally unstable woman, or the sidelined love interest (Gerard and Poepsel, 2019: 31; Tavares,

2022: 22). These portrayals not only diminish the narrative importance of female heroes but also undermine efforts toward genuine gender equality on screen. Even when characters are positioned as powerful, the depth of their emotional lives, their autonomy within the story, and their relationships to broader social structures frequently reflect patriarchal norms rather than challenging them.

Much of the early feminist critique of superhero narratives emerged from second-wave feminist theory, which often prioritised the critique of women's objectification and the demand for greater visibility (Cocca, 2020: 3). However, as feminist thought evolved, particularly through the development of intersectionality, scholars began to highlight that visibility alone is insufficient. Kimberlé Crenshaw's (2013: 24) concept of intersectionality has been pivotal in reframing how we analyse female representation in media. Intersectional feminism argues that race, class, sexuality, ability, and other axes of identity fundamentally shape how gender operates, and thus how female heroes are constructed and received. Recent works have argued that without attending to these intersections, media portrayals risk reinforcing exclusions rather than remedying them (Helskens, Dhaenens, and Van Leuven, 2021: 97)

The MCU has been specifically critiqued for offering a narrow vision of female empowerment, one that often aligns with neoliberal and militaristic ideals (Dove-Viebahn, 2024: 1167). Characters like Captain Marvel have been praised for their strength but criticised for embodying a form of empowerment that is accessible primarily to white, cisgender, able-bodied women. Similarly, critiques of Black Widow's character have pointed to her frequent sexualisation and the sidelining of her emotional complexity, particularly in relation to her male teammates (Gerard and Poepsel, 2019: 31). Scarlet Witch's arc has been subjected to anti-feminist critiques focused on her emotional volatility, romantic entanglements, and eventual descent into villainy (Kooba, 2023: 15).

Alongside theoretical critiques, scholars have increasingly turned their attention to how audiences engage with these portrayals. DeFelice and Stanley (2024: 153) demonstrate that fans use digital platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram to critique, reframe, and even resist dominant media narratives. Fan interpretations reveal that audiences are not satisfied with surface-level gestures toward feminism; they seek characters who display emotional complexity, vulnerability, strength, and meaningful narrative agency. Karras (2002: 7) and Lee et al. (2024: 103) further illustrate how fans embrace characters who subvert traditional gender norms while maintaining emotional authenticity and relatability.

This dissertation builds upon this body of scholarship by bridging the gap between feminist theoretical critiques and fan interpretations. Rather than treating them as separate domains, it seeks to understand how feminist ideals are articulated both in academic discourse and in the lived experiences of female fans. By analysing how Black Widow, Scarlet Witch, and Captain Marvel are constructed through an intersectional feminist lens and how they are received by feminist-minded audiences; this project offers a richer, more grounded understanding of what makes a female hero truly feminist in the eyes of the people who care about these portrayals the most.

2. Theoretical Framework and Methodology: Defining Feminist Heroism and Audience Voices

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This dissertation draws on intersectional feminism as its core analytical lens. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (2013: 24), intersectionality addresses how different systems of oppression -such as racism, sexism, and classism- interact to produce overlapping experiences of marginalisation. Crenshaw's original focus was on how Black women are often excluded from both feminist and anti-racist discourses. For this dissertation, intersectionality serves as both a theoretical foundation and a methodological guide for analysing the portrayal and reception of three central female heroes in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU): Black Widow (aka Natasha Romanoff), Scarlet Witch (aka aWanda Maximoff), and Captain Marvel (aka Carol Danvers).

Intersectionality is not just concerned with what identities are represented, but how they are framed, who gets to speak, and how power circulates through these depictions (Dhamoon, 2011: 233). Drawing on Dhamoon's (2011: 233) critical reflections on the use of intersectionality in mainstream institutions, this study avoids reducing intersectionality to a checklist of categories, instead, treating it as a dynamic, structural framework that questions which voices are centred or marginalised in both fictional narratives and real-life fan cultures.

2.1.1 Feminist Definitions and Conceptual Distinctions

A key concern in this dissertation is distinguishing between two related but distinct ideas: the "feminist character" and the character who is "feminist" in the way feminist-aligned female fans want them to be. The first is typically defined in academic literature as a figure who either promotes feminist ideals, challenges gender norms, or possesses agency that resists

patriarchal framing (Cocca, 2020: 2). These characters are often constructed deliberately by writers or studios attempting to convey empowerment or social commentary. The second concept -which forms the core of my research question- asks: What do feminist-aligned fans want? This audience-centred approach prioritises how characters are received, not just how they are written. As discussed by Helskens, Dhaenens, and Van Leuven (2021: 98) popular feminism often operates in tension with academic feminism. Fans may read certain characters as feminist due to their personality, aesthetics, or emotional arc, even when academic definitions would disagree. This gap -between feminist character construction and fan approval- will be explored through chapter 3 (character analysis) and 4 (fan interpretation). In doing so, this dissertation aims to highlight that audiences, particularly female fans, are not passive consumers but active meaning-makers.

2.1.2 Feminist Theory as a Critical Framework

While intersectionality is central to this work, it also builds on broader strands of feminist media criticism. As Cocca (2020: 3) argues, female heroes in mainstream media are frequently constrained by narrow tropes such as the "strong female character," which celebrates physical strength but often strips characters of emotional depth. Similarly, Ferris and Young (2008: 65) critique how "chick flicks" and gendered genres promote the illusion of progressiveness while upholding traditional norms about femininity and romantic fulfilment.

Applying these critiques to superhero cinema allows for an analysis that moves beyond surface-level representation. For example, Black Widow's sexualised framing and delayed solo film reflect long-standing patterns of male-centric narrative prioritisation (Olufidipe and Echezabal, 2021: 8; Smelik, 2017: 203). At the same time, Captain Marvel's militaristic branding has led to criticisms from scholars such as Dove-Viebahn (2024: 1169) stating that she embodies a form of "white feminism" that values toughness and power over community or vulnerability. In addition to academic critiques, Kent (2016: 100) and Owen's (1999: 24)

concepts of postfeminism informs this analysis. Postfeminism suggests that media often incorporates feminist language while simultaneously undermining it; celebrating choice and agency, but only within rigidly acceptable bounds. This framework is especially relevant to characters like Wanda, whose storylines in *WandaVision (2021)* and *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness (2022)* simultaneously centre her emotional trauma while portraying her as a threat once she steps outside maternal or romantic roles.

Together, these theoretical tools form the foundation for analysing both character construction and audience interpretation, providing the necessary "standard" of feminist theory against which fan perspectives will be compared.

2.2 Methodology

This dissertation combines character analysis through intersectional feminist theory, with fan response analysis from selected social media platforms. This approach is rooted in feminist media studies, which value both the construction of texts and the reception of those texts in cultural contexts (DeFelice and Stanley, 2024: 162). By blending intersectional theory with feminist media criticism and qualitative fan research, this section lays the foundation for the rest of the dissertation. It aims to honour both the academic rigour of feminist analysis and the emotional and cultural labour of fans, who engage with media not just passively, but politically.

2.2.1 Character Analysis

The character analysis examines the three chosen MCU heroes across the films and shows in which they have significant roles. Each hero is evaluated in terms of their narrative role (including their centrality to the plot and the extent of their agency), the way they are visually framed (including costuming and how the camera treats their body), the shape of their

character arc (including whether they are allowed emotional growth or complexity), and finally, their alignment with intersectional feminist ideals, such as resistance to patriarchal control, emotional expressiveness, and the navigation of identity beyond white, cisgender, heterosexual femininity. The goal here is not to label characters as simply feminist or not, but to assess how they are positioned within a broader system of gendered storytelling.

2.2.2 Fan Interpretation: Data Collection and Sampling

The second stage of the methodology involves analysing fan responses. Data was drawn from Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. These platforms were chosen because of their visual and interactive nature, which not only supports a diversity of fan expression but also allows for gender identification based on visible presentation and profile pronouns. Fan content was included only if it is publicly available (to maintain ethical research practices) and comes from female-presenting individuals or users who list "she/her" pronouns in their bio. This choice was rooted in the dissertation's central aim: understanding what female fans, in particular, want from feminist representation.

Sampling followed a purposive strategy. Fan content was located using platform-specific tools, including hashtags, captions, and keyword searches such as "MCU feminism" and "Scarlet Witch feminist." Relevance was determined based on the degree to which a post discusses the character's empowerment, feminist qualities, or failures. Posts were then selected from a range of formats, including video essays, memes, commentaries, and short-form reactions. A target sample of 30–50 posts per character provided a large corpus for analysis while still allowing space for close reading and thematic depth.

Fan content was then paraphrased and anonymised to protect users' privacy in the final dissertation. Coding proceeded thematically, focusing on recurring expressions of approval, critique, and disappointment. Common themes include praise for emotional vulnerability,

frustration with romantic subplots, and appreciation for moments of power and agency. These themes are then compared to the academic analyses to explore alignment or disjuncture between feminist theory and fan interpretation.

2.2.3 Positionality

Finally, my own positionality is a key part of this methodology. As a female feminist fan of the MCU, my emotional investment in these characters shaped the very question that drives this research. Like many others, I grew up with these films. I loved them, but also felt frustrated by how the few women on-screen were often side-lined or written through the lens of male desire or convenience. This positionality brings both insight and bias; it allows me to approach the topic with genuine empathy for other fans, but also means I must be critically self-aware of how my personal experiences shape my interpretations.

3. Through the Intersectional Feminist Lens: Analysing Marvel's Leading Women

This chapter provides an intersectional feminist theoretical analysis of three key female heroes from the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU): Black Widow, Scarlet Witch, and Captain Marvel. Each character is explored in terms of how their portrayal aligns -or fails to align- with intersectional feminist principles. The analysis focuses on narrative centrality, emotional complexity, visual framing, character arcs, and their relation to broader feminist critiques of representation. This chapter establishes the feminist theoretical "standard" against which fan interpretations will later be compared.

3.1 Black Widow (aka Natasha Romanoff): Sexualisation, Silence, and Sacrifice

Black Widow, introduced in *Iron Man 2 (2010)*, remains one of the most complex and contentious female heroes within the MCU. Her presence offered early visibility for women in the MCU's male-dominated landscape, however, her character construction often fell into familiar patterns of sexualisation, narrative marginalisation, and constrained agency. An intersectional feminist reading of Black Widow reveals both the progressive potential of her character and the systemic limitations imposed by broader structures of gendered representation.

From her first appearance in *Iron Man 2 (2010)*, Natasha's body is framed through the male gaze. Her role revolves around her sexual appeal to the male lead, Tony Stark, which is reinforced by costuming, camera work, and dialogue (Gerard and Poepsel, 2019: 35). Rather than showcasing her intelligence, physical prowess, or tactical skills from the outset, She is introduced primarily as an object of male desire. This initial framing sets a tone that lingers throughout her appearances: even when she is portrayed as competent and powerful, visual and narrative choices frequently undermine her autonomy by sexualising her presence. Her portrayal improves somewhat in later films, notably in *The Avengers (2012)*

and *Captain America: The Winter Soldier (2014).* In these narratives, her tactical

intelligence, combat skills, and emotional resilience are given more focus. Cavalieri (2024:

63) highlights Natasha's negotiation between traditionally masculine traits (combativeness,

stoicism) and expected feminine qualities (empathy, relationality). Unlike many male heroes,

Natasha's emotional intelligence is central to her effectiveness, offering a more nuanced

representation of heroism. However, even in these portrayals, Natasha's narrative function

revolves around supporting male protagonists rather than pursuing independent goals.

Figure 1: *Iron Man 2 (2010)* promotional image of Black Widow

Figure 2: *Captain America: The Winter Soldier (2014)* promotional image of Black Widow

The trope of "fridging", defined by Green (2023: 15) as the marginalisation of female

characters to motivate male heroes, is another lens through which Natasha's trajectory can

be critically examined. As discussed by Green (2023: 16) and Joffe (2019: 11), although

Natasha does not die solely for a male character's development, her sacrifice in *Avengers:*

Endgame (2019) serves primarily to drive the male-dominated team's mission forward.

Natasha's death also lacks the narrative weight and communal mourning afforded to Tony Stark, suggesting a hierarchy of emotional investment that mirrors broader gendered patterns in storytelling (Arfani, Juhana, and Hastutik, 2023: 220). Moreover, Natasha's visual presentation remains deeply entangled with objectification. Mkabela (2023: 112) critiques how female bodies in superhero media are digitally and physically framed to maximise sexual appeal, even in action sequences. Natasha's costumes -particularly in early films- prioritise tight, revealing outfits that emphasise physical attractiveness over practicality. Camera angles frequently linger on her form, perpetuating a visual dynamic where her body remains a site of aesthetic pleasure.

Figure 3: *Black Widow (2021)* promotional image of Black Widow

The broader narrative positioning of Black Widow further reflects systemic barriers to female heroism in the MCU. Although she appears in 9 MCU films -more than almost every other major character- Natasha only received a solo film, *Black Widow (2021)*, which was released after her character's death canonically. In contrast, Captain America (aka Steve Rogers)

appears in 9 films as well, however, he headlines 3 of those 9, and is a main character in another 4. As Gerard and Poepsel (2019: 42) observe, the delay in giving Black Widow her own film symbolises Marvel's institutional hesitation to centre female narratives which might disrupt the established male-led framework. Additionally, Tavares (2022: 18) notes that while Natasha's story carries thematic weight -exploring found family, trauma, and self-redemption- its placement outside the main timeline limits its impact on the broader narrative. Critiques from Kent (2016: 143) also emphasise that Natasha's character, while celebrated for her strength, is often positioned as "one of the guys" rather than allowing her to explore femininity on her own terms. Her value within the Avengers (team) stems from her ability to assimilate into masculinised forms of heroism -stealth and violence- rather than challenging those paradigms.

Although Natasha's story showcases moments of agency and complexity, an intersectional feminist analysis reveals persistent limitations. As a white, conventionally attractive woman, Natasha benefits from certain privileges of visibility and audience sympathy. However, her character is still constrained by gendered expectations within the MCU's broader structural framework. Her experiences of marginalisation are framed almost exclusively through gender, without exploration of how race, class, or other axes of identity might intersect with her journey. Moreover, her repeated sexualisation and subordinate narrative positioning expose how even ostensibly empowered female heroes remain vulnerable to systemic inequalities in mainstream media. Thus, while Black Widow expanded the space for female heroes within the MCU, her character simultaneously reflects the enduring boundaries placed around women's empowerment in popular culture.

3.2 Scarlet Witch (aka Wanda Maximoff): Power, Motherhood, and Emotional Unravelling

Scarlet Witch, introduced in *Avengers: Age of Ultron (2015),* initially appeared to offer the MCU a female hero whose power and emotional complexity could challenge patriarchal norms. However, her narrative arc ultimately reflects enduring anti-feminist themes: maternal sacrifice, emotional instability, and the association of female power with danger. Analysing Wanda Maximoff through an intersectional feminist lens reveals how her portrayal struggles to escape traditional gendered frameworks, despite early signs of narrative subversion.

From her first appearances, Wanda's powers of mind control, energy manipulation, and reality-bending, position her as uniquely dangerous. However, this framing quickly falls into problematic tropes. As highlighted by Tavares (2022: 29), Wanda's powers are rarely depicted as tools of agency or empowerment. Instead, they are consistently linked to her emotional volatility, reinforcing the stereotype that female strength is inherently unstable and threatening. The visual representation of her abilities -chaotic, unpredictable, and often spiralling out of her control- mirrors the narrative's positioning of Wanda as a woman who cannot manage the scope of her emotions or powers (Wan-Hua, 2024: 390).

Wanda's development in *WandaVision (2021)* initially suggests a more nuanced feminist portrayal. The series explores her profound grief following her partner, Vision's, death in *Avengers: Infinity War (2018)*, offering an emotionally rich depiction of trauma and loss. However, as discussed by Kooba (2023: 19), this narrative ultimately reinscribes traditional ideas about femininity and motherhood. Wanda's grief manifests in her creation of an alternate suburban reality, where she and Vision raise 2 children in a perfect domestic setting. Her powers, rather than being harnessed for personal or collective liberation, are channelled into recreating a nuclear family structure (Gabalski, 2020: 37; Kooba, 2023: 24). This reveals a central tension: even at her most powerful, Wanda's narrative is shaped by longing for conventional domestic fulfilment. *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness (2022)* compounds these issues, presenting Wanda as the film's primary antagonist. Her overwhelming desire to reclaim her children drives her to commit acts of extreme violence.

Blair (2021: 18) and Lambert (2022: 75) critique this narrative shift as a betrayal of Wanda's complexity, reducing her to a monstrous maternal figure consumed by loss. Rather than continuing her trajectory of healing or autonomy, Wanda becomes a warning about the dangers of unrestrained female emotion; a trope deeply embedded in patriarchal storytelling traditions (Kanai, 2020: 29).

Figure 4: Still of Scarlet Witch and Vision in the 1950s from *WandaVision (2021)*

Figure 5: Still of Scarlet Witch covered in blood from *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness (2022)*

Intersectionally, Wanda's whiteness and European origins are superficial characteristics rather than fully developed aspects of her identity. Though Sokovian (a fictional Eastern-

European nation) by birth, her cultural background receives minimal narrative attention, reinforcing the idea that whiteness is the unmarked norm within the MCU's storytelling (Tavares, 2022: 42). Her experiences of marginalisation are personal and emotional, not systemic or social, leaving broader questions of race, class, and nationality untouched. Although Wanda's emotional journey is treated with more care than many previous female heroes, her portrayal ultimately reflects a narrow feminist lens that privileges whiteness and traditional beauty standards. As a result, Scarlet Witch's representation reinforces systemic exclusions within the MCU's model of empowerment, marginalising broader experiences of race, class, and nationality that true intersectionality demands be included.

3.3 Captain Marvel (aka Carol Danvers): Representation and The Limits of Empowerment

Captain Marvel, introduced fully in *Captain Marvel (2019),* was widely heralded as a major milestone for the MCU in its attempts to centre female heroes, with her being the first woman to headline her own solo film within the franchise. From the outset, her character was framed as independent, powerful, and emotionally resilient, offering an image of female heroism that initially seemed to depart from earlier tropes of sexualised or subordinated women. However, closer intersectional feminist analysis reveals that Carol's representation, while progressive in some respects, is also constrained by whiteness, militarism, and a limited vision of feminist empowerment.

Captain Marvel's narrative arc focuses heavily on reclaiming her autonomy (Adams, 2023: 58). Her journey is one of self-rediscovery and resistance against patriarchal control, after being stripped of her memories. Her refusal to fight Yon-Rogg (the film's antagonist) on his terms at the film's climax -refusing to "prove herself" through physical combat- has been praised as a feminist subversion of typical action film tropes (Cocca, 2020: 2). Rather than seeking validation, Carol asserts that her value is inherent, not conditional on male approval.

This moment marks an important symbolic shift, positioning Carol as a hero who reclaims narrative authority over her own identity (Olufidipe and Echezabal, 2021: 12).

However, the broader context of Carol's character complicates this empowerment. As Dove-Viebahn (2024: 1163) notes that Carol's heroism is deeply entangled with militaristic imagery and structures. Her background as a U.S. Air Force pilot and her portrayal as an idealised military figure reinforce traditional associations between strength, nationalism, and institutional power. Dove-Viebahn (2024: 1170) critiques this as an example of "white feminist" representation; where empowerment is framed through individual achievement within existing, exclusionary systems, rather than challenging those systems themselves. Similarly, Taylor and Glitsos (2023: 665) note that while Captain Marvel gestures toward ideas of self-liberation, it simultaneously celebrates military might and discipline as the vehicles of her strength. Carol's success story is not about dismantling oppressive structures but about mastering and outperforming within them (Stump, 2022: 48). This mirrors broader critiques of neoliberal feminism, which prioritises personal empowerment over collective, structural change (Mahrouse, 2016: 236; Moss and Maddrell, 2017: 617). While Carol's rise through the ranks of both the U.S. Air Force and the Kree military reflects admirable resilience, it also suggests that true empowerment is achievable only by emulating traditionally masculine forms of power (Stump, 2022: 54).

Figure 6: Still of Captain Marvel in the U.S. Air Force from *Captain Marvel (2019)*

The visual presentation of Captain Marvel is notably less sexualised than earlier MCU heroines such as Black Widow. Her costume is practical, combat-appropriate, and designed to emphasise strength rather than sex appeal. This represents an important shift in the visual politics of female heroism, aligning with feminist demands for more respectful portrayals of women's bodies in action narratives (Gablaski, 2020: 66). However, even as Carol's physical representation resists objectification, her emotional presentation has drawn critique. Her stoicism and restraint have led some critics and fans to perceive her as cold or unrelatable. This tension highlights the narrow range of acceptable emotional expression available to female heroes; required to be strong, but not so expressive as to seem vulnerable, nor so detached as to seem unsympathetic (Kendal, 2012: 249; Mendes and Carter, 2008: 1710).

Figure 7: *Captain Marvel (2019)* promotional image of Captain Marvel

Intersectionally, Carol's portrayal reveals notable gaps. While her gendered struggles within the military are foregrounded, other axes of identity -such as race, class, and sexuality- are largely absent. Her whiteness, Americanness, and middle-class background are unmarked

and normative, allowing her to access a form of empowerment that remains inaccessible to many women in real-world contexts (Dove-Viebahn, 2024: 1164). By failing to engage with broader systems of oppression, Captain Marvel offers an incomplete vision of feminist empowerment (Adams, 2023: 133; Tavares, 2022: 29). Moreover, the broader MCU's positioning of Carol reflects an institutional hesitation. Although introduced as one of the most powerful heroes in the franchise, her appearance in *Avengers: Endgame (2019)* was brief and carefully managed, suggesting discomfort with allowing a female hero to dominate the narrative space traditionally reserved for male figures. Although she recently headlined a team in *The Marvels (2023)*, the film received minimal promotion -compared to other MCU team-up films- and was financially unsuccessful, as the lowest grossing MCU film to date (Cavalieri, 2024: 9).

Ultimately, Captain Marvel represents a partial but incomplete advancement in the portrayal of female heroes. While Carol's strength, autonomy, and resistance to sexualisation are important feminist gains, her entanglement with militarism and the limited intersectional scope of her narrative reveal the persistent constraints on how female empowerment is imagined within the MCU.

4. Beyond the Screen: How Female Fans Redefine "Feminist" Heroes

Through an analysis of social media posts by female fans across TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, I observed several recurring themes in how audiences responded to female heroes. Although fan discourse was often wide-ranging and deeply personal, clear patterns emerged in what fans celebrated as "feminist" or empowering portrayals. It became evident that fan interpretations of feminist heroes were shaped not only by the characters' actions and traits, but also by how these heroes were framed within their stories: whether they were treated with narrative respect, given emotional depth, and allowed to retain complexity without being undermined by stereotypical tropes.

In order to properly understand the ways fans reacted to the Marvel Cinematic Universe's female heroes, it is important first to establish a benchmark, using female characters outside of the MCU who have been widely embraced by female fans as feminist figures. This section starts with two such characters, Elle Woods from *Legally Blonde (2001)* and Buffy Summers from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer (1997),* who both illustrate the kinds of traits, journeys, and narrative treatments that resonate positively with female audiences. By first understanding what fans respond to when they see feminism done well, it becomes clear how the MCU's representations either align with or diverge from these expectations.

4.1 Fan-Favoured Feminist Icons: Elle Woods and Buffy Summers

Many female fans celebrate Elle Woods as an unconventional feminist figure who embraces traditional femininity without sacrificing intelligence, determination, or personal integrity. Across various social media posts, fans admired how her bright fashion sense, bubbly personality, and emotional openness were not portrayed as weaknesses to be shed, but as integral aspects of her strength. Rather than abandoning her identity to succeed in a male-dominated environment, Elle achieves success precisely by remaining true to herself. This

subversion of the "dumb blonde" stereotype was especially highlighted, with many fans expressing appreciation that she reclaims and redefines femininity as powerful rather than trivial. Fans also frequently pointed to her emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills as key elements of her feminist appeal. Her ability to form supportive relationships, to uplift other women rather than compete with them, and to succeed through collaboration rather than aggression resonated strongly. In particular, fan discussions often praised how Elle's empathy and kindness were treated as strengths, not flaws; a portrayal that remains relatively rare in mainstream depictions of professional women (Dole, 2008: 79). This aligns with scholarship that emphasises Elle's embodiment of "femme knowledge", which is the idea that traditionally feminine traits like intuition, emotional labour, and aesthetic intelligence are valuable forms of expertise (Schwartz, 2024: 1437).

Figure 8: Still of Elle Woods in a courtroom from *Legally Blonde (2001)*

In educational contexts, Elle Woods has even been used as a teaching tool for feminist values. Several fan reflections, particularly those from younger women, noted how Legally Blonde served as an early influence on their understanding of feminism, demonstrating that ambition, intelligence, and femininity are not mutually exclusive (Lee et al., 2024: 102). This

broad reach underscores why Elle Woods continues to be regarded with such affection and admiration by fans who seek empowering, joyful representations of womanhood.

Similarly, Buffy Summers emerged in fan analysis as another touchstone for feminist heroism. Female fans consistently praised Buffy for balancing vulnerability, emotional depth, and physical strength. Unlike most portrayals of women in horror or fantasy genres before her, Buffy was neither a helpless victim nor a cold, emotionless warrior. Instead, she navigated personal struggles -family dynamics, romantic relationships, grief, and self-doubt- while simultaneously battling supernatural threats. This complexity was central to her appeal. Fans frequently highlighted that her strength lay not only in her fighting skills but in her emotional resilience: her ability to confront pain, make difficult choices, and persist even when burdened by isolation and trauma. Buffy's portrayal also resonated because it challenged traditional notions of what a "strong woman" must look like. Across fan posts, there was clear admiration for the fact that Buffy could be powerful and feminine, heroic and flawed, without being reduced to stereotypes. Moreover, her emotional openness was celebrated by fans as a radical form of strength, challenging the idea that stoicism is the only marker of heroism. Broader reflections from longform fan commentary on YouTube revealed that Buffy's long-running narrative arc (spanning 7 seasons) allowed fans to see a young woman grow, change, fail, and still persevere. This narrative depth helped cement her as a feminist icon in the eyes of many fans, offering an enduring model for what empowering female storytelling can look like (Štefulić, 2019: 14).

Figure 9: Still of Buffy Summers in combat from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Season 3 Episode 1 (2000)*

Together, Elle Woods and Buffy Summers exemplify the kinds of female heroes that resonate deeply with female fans, characters who are emotionally complex, who retain their individuality and femininity, and who are portrayed with dignity, agency, and respect. These examples offer a useful standard against which to analyse the reception of Marvel's female heroes in the following sections.

4.2 Black Widow: Strength Without A Voice

Black Widow, despite her long-standing presence in the MCU, has received a highly mixed response from female fans. While many viewers admired her competence and strength, there was a persistent undercurrent of frustration about how she was treated within the

narrative, both in terms of her character development and her visual portrayal. Much of this frustration pointed to a broader pattern; fans wanted to love Black Widow, but often felt that the MCU consistently undermined her potential.

One of the most recurring fan criticisms was how Black Widow was sexualised in her early film appearances, particularly in *Iron Man 2 (2010)* and *The Avengers (2012)*. Many fans expressed disappointment that, despite her clear intelligence and combat ability, the camera often lingered unnecessarily on her body, framing her more as an object of visual pleasure than a fully fleshed-out character. While some fans acknowledged that later films improved in this regard -offering her more agency and emotional depth- the early damage to her character's reception was seen as difficult to undo.

Figure 10: Comparative image of *The Avengers (2012)* promotional image
and fan-made parody drawing

Another consistent point raised by fans was the underdevelopment of Natasha's personal arc across the franchise. Despite appearing in 9 films, many female fans felt that Black Widow was consistently treated as a secondary character, used to support the emotional growth of male heroes like Tony Stark, Steve Rogers, or Bruce Banner. Particularly notable

was the way Natasha's backstory -including the traumas of her training and the loss of her

reproductive agency- was touched upon briefly but never explored with the same depth

afforded to her male counterparts. Fan commentary often emphasised that this limited

exploration left Natasha feeling incomplete compared to other Avengers, despite her

potential for a rich and layered character study.

The controversial romantic subplot between Natasha and her teammate, Bruce Banner, in

Avengers: Age of Ultron (2015) was another frequent source of fan criticism. Many female

viewers interpreted this storyline as forced and unnecessary, diminishing Natasha's

character by tethering her emotional arc to a man she had relatively little narrative

connection with beforehand. In several fan analyses, it was argued that rather than allowing

Natasha's trauma and struggle for belonging to be her own, the MCU redirected her

emotional development into a conventional romance; a move that felt reductive and

frustrating to those who had hoped for a more independent narrative trajectory. The

circumstances surrounding Black Widow's death in *Avengers: Endgame (2019)* were a

particularly emotional moment for female fans. Across platforms, there was widespread

anger and sadness that Natasha's sacrifice was given relatively little narrative weight

compared to a male hero's (Tony Stark) death later in the film. Many posts highlighted how

Natasha's funeral was entirely absent from the film, and how the male characters quickly

moved past her loss without significant mourning. This reinforced a perception that Natasha,

despite her years of service to the team and central role in the MCU, was ultimately

disposable (Green, 2023: 15). For many fans, this lack of narrative care symbolised the

broader systemic issues with how female heroes are treated within the franchise.

Figure 11: Still of Black Widow after sacrificing herself from *Avengers: Endgame (2019)*

Despite these significant criticisms, there were also moments where fans celebrated Natasha's impact. Some female viewers expressed deep appreciation for the way Natasha embodied resilience, loyalty, and emotional intelligence. Posts often reflected that Natasha, even when underserved by the narrative, remained an aspirational figure for many young women growing up with the MCU. Her pragmatic bravery, ability to form genuine connections, and willingness to make sacrifices for the greater good were cited as markers of her enduring appeal. In particular, many fans noted that Natasha's portrayal in films like *Captain America: The Winter Soldier (2014)* allowed her complexity to shine more clearly, offering glimpses of the layered, fully-realised character they wished had been developed more consistently. The release of *Black Widow (2021),* though long awaited, was met with a bittersweet reaction. While fans were pleased that she finally received a solo film, many expressed frustration that it came only after her death -with the film acting as a prequel-, limiting its emotional and narrative impact. Some fans also felt that the film, while offering valuable insights into Natasha's past, ultimately served more as an introduction to her adoptive sister (Yelena Belova) than a true exploration of Natasha herself. This feeling reinforced the perception that Natasha's arc had been an afterthought within the MCU's broader plans (Gerard and Poepsel, 2019: 42).

Fan interpretations of Black Widow reveal a deep ambivalence: she is loved for what she represents -a capable, emotionally complex woman in a male-dominated space- but mourned for the many ways her story was sidelined, sexualised, or left incomplete. Through this lens, it becomes clear that representation alone is not enough; the narrative care given to female heroes must match the promises made by their presence.

4.3 Scarlet Witch: Love, Loss, and the Limits of Agency

Wanda Maximoff quickly proved to be widely loved by fans; there was clear admiration for her power and emotional complexity, but a significant amount of disappointment regarding the way her storylines were ultimately handled. Fans frequently expressed that Wanda had the potential to be one of the MCU's most compelling feminist heroes but was undermined by narrative choices that leaned heavily into damaging tropes about women's emotional instability and motherhood.

Many female fans initially celebrated Scarlet Witch's arc in *WandaVision (2021),* praising the show's exploration of grief, trauma, and resilience. Fan commentary often reflected appreciation for how Wanda's struggles were portrayed with emotional depth, allowing audiences to see a powerful woman navigating loss without being immediately vilified. However, even within these early positive responses, some fans expressed unease with how Wanda's grief was depicted through the lens of domesticity; centring almost entirely around her desire for a husband and children, rather than a broader exploration of her identity outside of traditional feminine roles. This tension became far more pronounced with the release of *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness (2022).* A large number of female fans reacted negatively to Wanda's portrayal in this film, arguing that she was reduced from a complex, sympathetic character into a stereotypical "mad woman" whose maternal longing drove her to mass murder. Many fans saw this shift as a profound betrayal of the

development built in WandaVision, feeling that the MCU chose to simplify Wanda's grief into dangerous hysteria rather than continuing to explore her emotional growth (Blair, 2021: 18). Fan analysis often criticised how Wanda's motivations in *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness (2022)* were framed almost entirely around her children, with little consideration for her own autonomy or desires beyond motherhood. Posts highlighted that while grief over lost loved ones is a valid and relatable emotion, reducing one of the MCU's most powerful characters to a villainous figure defined solely by her maternal instincts felt regressive. Some fans pointed out the contrast between Wanda's treatment and how male characters, such as Tony Stark and Doctor Strange, were allowed to experience grief and failure without being vilified to the same extent.

Figure 12: Still of Scarlet Witch and Vision holding their 2 children from *WandaVision (2021)*

Most female fans continued to express strong emotional connections to Wanda despite these frustrations. Posts often reflected a sense of protectiveness or sadness, arguing that the fault lay not with the character herself but with how the MCU chose to handle her story. Wanda's vulnerability, compassion, and determination still resonated with viewers who saw in her a reflection of real emotional struggles, particularly around loss and identity. Many fans praised actress Elizabeth Olsen's performance for bringing humanity and nuance to a

role that could easily have become one-dimensional, allowing audiences to empathise with Wanda even as the narrative framed her actions as monstrous.
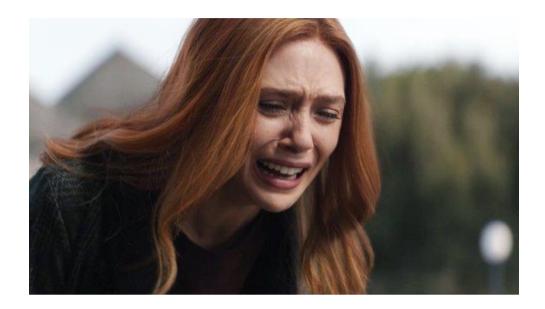

Figure 13: Still of Scarlet Witch crying after the loss of her partner and children from *WandaVision (2021)*

Overall, Scarlet Witch fan interpretations showed a complicated relationship, of intense sadness at how rapidly Wanda's character was sacrificed to support sensationalist story developments, along with appreciation for what she best embodied: strength, emotional sincerity, and perseverance. Through this lens, Wanda's arc exemplifies a recurring issue in mainstream media's portrayal of powerful women; the tendency to celebrate their complexity only up to the point where it becomes inconvenient for traditional heroic narratives. In the eyes of many female fans, Scarlet Witch was never the true villain of her story, she was a woman whose grief and humanity deserved better narrative care.

4.4 Captain Marvel: Feminist Symbol or Feminist Stand-In?

Captain Marvel, while introduced with significant excitement, provoked some of the most divided reactions among MCU audiences. Although many fans celebrated her as a

groundbreaking figure -as the first female hero to lead her own MCU film- others expressed

frustration with how her character was constructed, promoted, and narratively positioned.

Fan interpretations of Captain Marvel thus reveal complex tensions between representation,

narrative depth, and the expectations placed on female heroes.

A recurring positive theme in fan commentary was a recognition of Captain Marvel's

importance as a symbolic figure. Many female fans, particularly younger viewers, celebrated

the fact that Carol was presented as unapologetically powerful from the outset. Posts

highlighted that unlike earlier female characters, she did not have to prove her strength by

comparing herself to men; she simply was strong. For some, this representation was

refreshing and necessary, offering an image of female power that was neither fragile nor

secondary. Fans often cited moments such as Carol's refusal to suppress her emotions or

apologize for her strength as key reasons they found her inspiring. However, despite these

positive acknowledgements, a large proportion of fan discourse focused on critical

engagement with how Carol Danvers was framed within the MCU. Many female fans

expressed that while they wanted to fully embrace Captain Marvel, her characterisation often

felt emotionally distant and one-dimensional. Posts often discussed how Carol's journey was

framed around proving her worth, overcoming gaslighting, and embracing her own power,

but without enough exploration of her vulnerabilities, relationships, or internal struggles. This

emotional flatness made it difficult for some fans to connect with her on a deeper level,

despite agreeing with the importance of her symbolic role.

Figure 14: Still of Captain Marvel after defeating the antagonist from *Captain Marvel (2019)*

Another point frequently raised by fans was the film's heavy reliance on military imagery and rhetoric. Some fans reflected that Captain Marvel's close ties to the U.S. Air Force, while grounded in her comic book origins, made her empowerment narrative feel uncomfortably aligned with militaristic ideals. On social media, fans of colour, in particular, were more likely to express discomfort with the framing of Captain Marvel as a feminist icon whose empowerment seemed to ignore intersectional realities. Moreover, the marketing campaign surrounding *Captain Marvel (2019)* itself became a common point of criticism. Female fans often discussed how the promotional materials framed Carol as the most powerful MCU hero while offering relatively little narrative context or emotional depth. This approach, while intended to generate excitement, mostly backfired by setting up unrealistic expectations for a fully formed feminist hero without providing sufficient narrative groundwork. Some fans noted that this mismatch between marketing hype and on-screen characterisation contributed to disappointment, rather than empowering audiences as intended (DeFelice and Stanley, 2024: 170).

Figure 15: Still of Captain Marvel flying above the Earth from *Captain Marvel (2019)*

Carol's femininity was another common discussion point online. Many fans appreciated that she was not forced into a hyper-feminine mould; her costuming was practical, and her personality was defined by her determination and wit rather than romantic subplots. However, there was also a sense that the film overcorrected in some areas, making Carol so stoic and emotionally guarded that it became difficult to see her personal vulnerabilities. Fans often contrasted Carol with other female heroes like Wonder Woman, noting that emotional complexity and vulnerability were key parts of what made those characters beloved (Cocca, 2021: 2), with most fans expressing a desire to see Carol's humanity explored more fully in future films. Despite the criticisms, many female fans still expressed hope and optimism about Captain Marvel's role in the MCU. Posts discussing *The Marvels (2023)* reflected excitement about the potential for Carol's character to grow through relationships with the other female heroes starring in the film, notably Kamala Khan and Monica Rambeau. Fans suggested that seeing Carol in more collaborative, emotionally rich dynamics could help deepen her character and allow her to resonate more strongly with audiences. The response since *The Marvels (2023)* came out has been mostly positive but limited, most likely due to the small viewership. Additionally, the fan discussion around the film has mostly been surrounding the other 2 female leads, and less-so with Carol.

In sum, fan interpretations of Captain Marvel show the complex dynamics of feminist representation in blockbuster cinema. Carol Danvers was celebrated for breaking new ground in terms of visibility and symbolic power, however many female fans desired a portrayal that offered greater emotional depth, intersectional sensitivity, and narrative care. Captain Marvel's case highlights that simply placing a woman at the centre of the story is not enough; authentic feminist representation requires storytelling that embraces vulnerability, complexity, and community, not just individual strength.

<u>**5. Where Theory and Fandom Collide: Negotiating Feminist Expectations**</u>

5.1 Comparative Overview: Establishing Common Ground

The analysis of the Marvel Cinematic Universe's female heroes through the lens of intersectional feminist theory and fan reception revealed both significant overlaps and crucial divergences. Intersectional feminism tends to emphasise complexity, agency, vulnerability, and resistance to traditional gendered tropes as essential components of positive female hero construction (Crenshaw, 2013: 24; Helskens, Dhaenens, and Van Leuven, 2021: 98). Ideally, a feminist hero should be multi-dimensional -strong yet emotionally open, autonomous yet capable of forming deep connections- and should not exist simply to serve male-driven narratives.

Similarly, fan interpretations placed significant importance on emotional relatability and narrative care. In fan discourse, a "feminist" hero was not just someone who displayed power or independence, but someone whose emotional journey felt authentic and respectful. Fans celebrated characters who were allowed to experience vulnerability without being punished for it, who were given meaningful arcs beyond romantic subplots, and who were framed as fully human rather than as idealised symbols (Karras, 2002: 7; Lee et al., 2024: 105). Importantly, fans tended to prioritise how characters made them feel -whether they were inspirational, flawed, or relatable- over purely ideological concerns.

While both theory and fans valued emotional complexity and narrative respect, the criteria for evaluating those traits sometimes differed. Theory often approached character construction through structural analysis (examining intersections of race, gender, and power), whereas fans were often more interested in affective responses: Did the character feel real? Did her story matter? This divergence of approach lays the foundation for a more nuanced discussion of where theory and fan interpretation align and where they differ.

5.2 Points of Agreement: Shared Frustrations and Feminist Consensus

Across both theoretical frameworks and fan interpretations, several points of agreement emerged regarding the failures and successes of the MCU's female heroes.

Firstly, both perspectives criticised the sexualisation and narrative neglect of Black Widow. Feminist critiques have long argued that she was introduced primarily through a male gaze, particularly in her early appearances (Arfani, Juhana, and Hastutik, 2023: 221; Di Minico, 2024: 223). Fans similarly pointed to the objectifying camera work and lack of meaningful personal storylines as key reasons for their frustration. Her eventual death in *Avengers: Endgame (2019)* was seen as emblematic of this problem: a major female hero disposed of with minimal narrative mourning, reflecting both theoretical critiques of "fridging" women (Green, 2023: 8) and fan disappointment.

Scarlet Witch's arc in *WandaVision (2021)* was loved by fans, this reception aligns with broader feminist readings that identify WandaVision as an attempt to humanise a character often reduced to spectacle in the films (Kooba, 2023: 23; Stump, 2022: 60). However, her character journey in *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness (2022)*, drew criticism from both scholars and fans for reducing a powerful female hero to a cautionary tale about maternal hysteria. Feminist theory emphasises that emotional depth should empower rather than vilify female characters (Stump, 2022: 62), a view echoed by fans who mourned Wanda's fall into villainy as a betrayal of her previous complexity.

Captain Marvel also reflected shared concerns between theory and fans. Academics noted that her empowerment narrative was closely tied to individualistic, militaristic imagery, at odds with more collective visions of feminist empowerment (Dove-Viebahn, 2024: 1166;

Cocca, 2020: 3). Fans often expressed a similar discomfort, feeling that Carol's emotional flatness and symbolic framing left her difficult to connect with on a personal level.

Overall, the key agreement was clear: mere presence of women in powerful positions is not inherently feminist. Without emotional authenticity, narrative complexity, and careful handling of gendered tropes, representation risks becoming hollow.

5.3 Points of Divergence: Emotion vs. Ideology

Despite these areas of agreement, notable divergences emerged between feminist theoretical critiques and popular fan interpretations, revealing deeper tensions within feminist media reception.

One major divergence lay in the nature of critique. Intersectional feminist approaches tended to engage critically with broader systemic structures -such as militarism and nationalism- that shaped character construction (Helskens, Dhaenens, and Van Leuven, 2021: 99; Adams, 2023: 121). This is clearly seen through how academic critiques of Captain Marvel often focused heavily on how her empowerment was tied to American military ideology (Tavares, 2022: 47; Taylor and Glitsos, 2023: 668). However, fan reactions were far more mixed. While some female fans noticed and critiqued these issues, the majority tended to focus instead on Carol's emotional availability, narrative relatability, and personal charisma.

A similar pattern emerged with Scarlet Witch. Academic critiques emphasised the regressive nature of Wanda's villain arc in terms of gendered emotional instability, while many fan discussions remained rooted in personal emotional responses (Mkabela, 2023: 129; Olufidipe and Echezabal, 2021; 13; Stump, 2022: 51). Fans expressed betrayal or sadness at Wanda's fate, but often focused more on how much they related to her grief than on the ideological implications of her descent into villainy.

In the case of Black Widow, feminist scholarship often placed greater emphasis on how her death exemplified the historical pattern of female characters being narratively decentralised for male character development (Lambert, 2022: 74; Sutherland and Feltey, 2017: 625). Fans, while aware of this, tended to focus more on the emotional injustice of Natasha not receiving a proper funeral or narrative closure, reflecting an emphasis on emotional resonance over structural critique.

5.4 Broader Reflections

These points of divergence highlight a crucial dynamic; the relationship between feminist theory and feminist fan reception is not always linear or harmonious. Both audiences and scholars desire better female representation, but their priorities often reflect the different contexts in which they engage media. Feminist theory seeks to reveal and dismantle the systemic structures that limit female agency, while female fans are often looking for characters who speak to their lived emotional experiences.

This divergence should not be seen as a weakness. Rather, it suggests that feminist media analysis must embrace multiple registers: both the structural and the affective. While it is essential to critique how media perpetuates harmful ideologies, it is equally essential to understand how media provides spaces for emotional identification, community building, and inspiration. Emotional resonance can be just as politically significant as ideological purity when it comes to shaping feminist futures. Importantly, both perspectives agree that representation must go beyond surface-level empowerment. Whether through a theoretical critique of neoliberal feminism or a fan's disappointment at emotional flatness, both forms of analysis demand stories that treat female heroes with complexity, respect, and humanity.

Moving forward, character construction in the MCU would benefit from paying attention not just to what makes a character "empowered" in theory, but to what makes her beloved, relatable, and real in practice. Characters like Elle Woods and Buffy Summers demonstrate that vulnerability, emotional richness, and narrative respect are not weaknesses, but strengths that female audiences value. Marvel's next generation of female heroes would do well to embrace these lessons fully.

6. Conclusion: Building Better Feminist Heroes

This dissertation set out to explore whether the female heroes of the Marvel Cinematic Universe -specifically Black Widow, Scarlet Witch, and Captain Marvel- are "feminist" in the way that female fans want them to be. By conducting both a theoretical feminist analysis and an exploration of fan interpretations, it became clear that while Marvel has made important strides in introducing female heroes, the execution often falls short of the complexity, emotional depth, and narrative care that both feminist theory and female fans demand.

The theoretical analysis revealed that while all three heroes have moments of empowerment, they are frequently undermined by reductive storytelling: Black Widow through persistent sexualisation and narrative neglect, Scarlet Witch through a regressive turn toward emotional instability and maternal hysteria, and Captain Marvel through emotional flatness and an uncomfortable entanglement with militaristic imagery. These findings aligned with much of the academic feminist literature, particularly critiques of how surface-level empowerment narratives can mask deeper structural inequalities. Simply placing female characters in visible positions of strength is not enough if the underlying structures continue to relegate them to secondary or stereotypical roles. Fan interpretations reinforced many of these critiques but also introduced a more emotionally grounded perspective. Female fans overwhelmingly valued heroes who felt real, who displayed vulnerability, emotional complexity, and a sense of authenticity that transcended symbolic gestures of power. Where the MCU's female heroes lacked emotional resonance or were narratively sidelined, fans responded with disappointment or frustration. Importantly, even when fans celebrated the presence of powerful women, they often critiqued the way those women were constructed and framed within the broader narrative landscape. For many female fans, empowerment is not simply about strength, but about emotional richness, meaningful relationships, and the right to be imperfect without being narratively punished for it.

The comparative analysis between theory and fan interpretation highlighted that feminist character construction cannot be reduced to strength alone. Emotional richness, narrative respect, and human vulnerability are not weaknesses; they are essential components of a feminist hero. Characters like Elle Woods and Buffy Summers demonstrate that embracing emotional complexity alongside strength can create characters who resonate deeply with female audiences; characters who are aspirational not because they are perfect, but because they are relatable, flawed, and fully realised. The overwhelming fan affection for these characters shows that audiences are willing to embrace characters who challenge traditional norms, provided their stories are handled with respect and care.

Looking ahead, it is important to acknowledge the progress Marvel has made. In recent years, the studio has introduced a more diverse range of female heroes, including America Chavez *(Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness, 2022),* Kamala Khan *(Ms. Marvel, 2022; The Marvels, 2023)*, and Maya Lopez *(Echo, 2024)*. These characters bring greater racial, cultural, and even physical diversity into the MCU's roster of heroes, and their presence marks a significant step forward. However, it must be noted that many of these newer introductions have been confined largely to Marvel's television shows, which, while critically important, reach a smaller audience than theatrical films. Visibility matters, but so does reach, and limiting diverse heroes to less prominent platforms risks diminishing their cultural impact. Moreover, it is crucial to recognise that the introduction of more female heroes, no matter how diverse, does not automatically guarantee meaningful representation. Representation is not a numbers game, it is a question of quality, depth, and respect. As this dissertation has shown, female fans want heroes who are complex, emotionally rich, and narratively central, not tokenistic symbols of empowerment. Without careful, nuanced storytelling, even the most well-intentioned efforts can feel hollow or performative. Fans are not simply asking for more faces on posters; they are asking for richer, more human stories that reflect the true diversity of female experience.

Marvel has the opportunity to build on the lessons from past missteps. By looking to the traits that female fans have consistently celebrated -as exemplified by characters like Elle Woods and Buffy Summers- the studio can create female heroes who are not only powerful but deeply loved. This requires moving beyond surface-level empowerment narratives and embracing characters who are allowed to be vulnerable, complicated, and fully human. It also requires recognising that feminist hero construction is an ongoing, evolving project, one that demands attention to both structural critique and emotional resonance. The future of feminist hero construction in mainstream media will not be shaped solely by who holds the most power on-screen, but by who is allowed to struggle, grow, and triumph on their own terms. Female heroes must be given stories that matter, emotions that are respected, and agency that is meaningful, not ornamental. If the Marvel Cinematic Universe can embrace these lessons, they will not only create better heroes, but also build stronger, more loyal communities of fans who see themselves fully reflected in the stories they love.

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