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### Analysis of Gender Tropes in “Black Panther”

Hegemonic gender roles have existed in society for centuries, but the media has helped perpetuate their stereotypes and misrepresentations of what femininity and masculinity mean. Specifically within certain film genres, like superhero movies, we see a lot of gender tropes being displayed in the characters. For male characters, we often see characters where arrogance, dominance, aggressiveness, and anger help them succeed in ultimately defeating the villain. Almost every male Marvel superhero wins his glory and title of fame for physically defeating his enemies and proving his worth through physical strength and verbal aggression. Female gender tropes in superhero movies often are displayed through a physically and mentally strong woman, but the filmmakers do not allow her any emotion. This gives off the impression that if a woman is to be strong like her male counterparts, she must be emotionless and cold-hearted. We see this in Marvel’s Black Widow character. She is powerful, but is allowed almost no room for emotion. This leaves us a female character who is portrayed in a more stereotypically manly way to appeal to a predominantly white male audience. This audience typically associates aggression with a method of asserting dominance and gaining others’ respect. Obviously within the superhero genre, it is expected that there will be many scenes showing fights and aggression to win a battle, but this is what makes the genre so interesting to dissect through a lens of critical gender analysis.

With these factors in mind, I performed a content analysis on two recent Marvel films: *Thor: Ragnarok*, released in November of 2017, and “*Black Panther*,” released in January of

2018. I specifically counted how many times female or male stereotypes were either upheld or broken within the films' characters. This gave me direct insight into whether the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) is moving past character tropes in their newer movies to show more female representation and less toxic masculinity.

### Findings

I divided my questions into four categories per gender to make eight total categories studied. The biggest category fulfilled for women in both films was the category that said, "A woman uses her strength and mental abilities instead of being sexualized in order to be respected." *Thor: Ragnarok* received eight points in this classification while *Black Panther* received 15 points.

#### "Black Panther"

	Two female characters have a discussion about something other than a man (Bechdel Test).	A woman uses her strength and mental abilities instead of being sexualized in order to be respected.	A man is shown crying or using emotional intelligence to grow -- he respects his emotions.	A man dominates a situation and is respected through verbal or physical aggression or violence.
<b>Yes (# of times)</b>		(xxxxx)(xxxxx)(xxxxx)	(xxxxx)(xxxxx)x	(xxxxx)(xxxxx)x
<b>No</b>	x			

	A woman receives praise for her accomplishments in battle or dominates a situation.	A woman is listened to over a man in a group decision.	A man receives praise for his accomplishments in battle.	A man is listened to over a woman in a group decision.
<b>Yes (# of times)</b>	xxx	xx		xx
<b>No</b>			x	

“Thor: Ragnarok”

	Two female characters have a discussion about something other than a man (Bechdel Test).	A woman uses her strength and intelligence instead of being sexualized in order to be respected.	A man is shown crying or using his emotions to grow -- he respects what he feels.	A man dominates a situation and is respected through physical or verbal aggression or violence.
<b>Yes (# of times)</b>		(xxxxx) xxx	xxx	(xxxxx) xxx
<b>No</b>	x			

	A woman receives praise for her accomplishments in battle or dominates a situation.	A woman is listened to over a man in a group decision.	A man receives praise for his accomplishments in battle.	A man is listened to over a woman in a group decision.
<b>Yes (# of times)</b>	xx	xx	xx	x
<b>No</b>				

The highest scoring male category for *Thor: Ragnarok* said, “A man dominates a situation and is respected through physical or verbal aggression or violence,” coming it at eight total points for the entire movie. *Black Panther* tied on its highest scoring male category for a total of eleven in the categories reading, “A man dominates a situation and is respected through physical or verbal aggression or violence,” and “A man is shown crying or using emotional intelligence to grow -- he respects his emotions.” With these top scoring categories, it is shown that these newer MCU films are indeed featuring women as strong, prominent figures based on true skill rather than attractiveness in the male gaze. However, the films are also largely upholding and normalizing the idea that male superheroes show their dominance through violence. Despite all this, neither film passed the Bechdel Test where two women have a conversation about something other than a man.

### Male Characters

Within my content analysis, there were multiple scenes in both films where the male characters portrayed themes of toxic masculinity like priding themselves on their physical strength and showing arrogance. Thor's movie opens up with a scene of him tied up and caught by the film's main villain, Ragnarok, who is interrogating him. Ragnarok asks Thor why he would even try fighting him when he is inevitably going to destroy Thor's home of Asgard in the end, and Thor says, "Because that's what heroes do." Later on in the movie, Thor repeats this statement in reference to the idea that because he is a hero, he will not run away from the battle or his problems. While this a noble action to take, it helps continue the representation of a white male hero who is going to physically fight for what he wants. This film also features an event called "The Contest of Champions" on the planet Thor gets stuck on for most of the movie, Sakaar. In this competition, the leader of the planet gets to put two warriors in a gladiator-style arena and force them to fight one another until forfeit or death. Fighting like gladiators with an entire audience watching is a clear demonstration of a hegemonically masculine idea that violence means respect.

Despite this film giving multiple scenes and quotes that mock or illustrate themes of toxic masculinity, the film is not completely unaware of the harmfulness behind these masculine stereotypes. In a [scholarly article by Demi Flowers-Blevins](#), the author argues Thor is actually characterizing a force pushing against these tropes. Thor is aware that personally, he does not enjoy ruling his kingdom through constant acts of violence, and we see him learning this throughout *Thor: Ragnarok*. As his father dies, Thor is reminded that a good king must know when to not fight and to instead lead responsibly and through civil means. Flowers-Blevins says, "Thor in and of himself physically is the epitome of masculinity. He's all muscles, blond hair,

and blue eyes and throws around a hammer to defeat his foes.” However, she then argues that this Thor movie actually shows Thor overcoming his toxic masculinity and learning to understand his emotions as a way to guide his decisions rather than reacting out of anger. This is true in the way that the film’s director, Taika Waititi, ropes in blatantly obvious jokes whenever hegemonically masculine tropes are introduced in the storyline. Thor himself is ironically aware of these tropes within himself. “The characters within the movie and those watching it are very obviously aware that Thor is awkwardly trying his best to perform a role he believes he’s meant to play: the role of the typical macho man that knows everything, which defines toxic masculinity,” says Flowers-Blevins.

In *Black Panther*, we see even more emotional and mental strength being portrayed in the male characters. We see emotional intelligence driving males’ decisions in the film 11 times in comparison to the mere three in *Thor: Ragnarok*. Since our main male protagonist, T’Challa, is grieving his father’s death and learning to rule Wakanda as the new king, the director, Ryan Coogler, roped in a lot of emotional moments for T’Challa’s character. We see specific scenes where T’Challa is granted access to the spirit realm to visit his father to heed advice from him and learn what he wants to do differently during his time as king. His character is also unashamed and fully willing to ask his female counterparts what they think he should do as a leader and how he can better Wakanda’s future. Even the film’s villain, Killmonger, is given his own narrative that embraces the hard emotional trauma he went through as a child. These male figures are meant to be understood through a deeper lens than what hegemonic masculinity suggests. That is not to say the film is completely void of the violent side of masculinity. One of the highest scoring categories for male representation in the film was the aggression category. For example, we see that Wakanda strongly upholds its ritual ceremony to become king where

two men have to physically battle one another for the respect of holding the power of the throne. It is not made clear whether a woman can partake in the challenge, but the movie only shows men physically battling. Another instance where we see toxically masculine traits is when Killmonger takes over the throne and inserts his own violent ways into the way he rules Wakanda. He demands Wakanda opens up to share their valuable resource, vibranium, with the rest of the world so defenseless people can use the metal as a tool for weapons to fight back with. Killmonger does this knowing Wakanda has not shared vibranium with the world out of a fear of exploitation and giving too much power to those who will abuse it. However, he knows as king he has the final say, and he uses his aggression and anger to fuel his decisions. We later see Killmonger burn the entire garden where Wakanda grows the heart-shaped herb that gives the Black Panther his strength. This results in him wiping out an entire part of the country's culture and traditions.

### **Female Characters**

Just as these two films both attempt to move beyond toxic masculinity in their male characters but seem to still stick to some stereotypes, so too do the female characters seem to be taking strides forward while being pulled back. As seen in my content analysis, neither movie passed the Bechdel Test. *Thor: Ragnarok* only has two main female characters, and these women are on completely different sides of the storyline and never actually have a chance to converse. However, on their own both women show immense physical strength and intellectual power in contrast to the men who come across as a bit more aloof at times. It is also important to note that neither woman is hypersexualized or given respect because of her beauty; rather, the women are respected by the men because they are truly intelligent and capable. My content analysis revealed that "a woman was listened to over a man in a group decision" more times than a man was in the

film. This is important to note because it shows Marvel is portraying female characters in an equal way to the male characters. In a [scholarly article by Diane Ponterotto](#), the topic of female bodily subjugation and emphasis in the media is analyzed. Ponterotto makes the point that media portrayals of female beauty standards show audiences women who are unrealistic in every way. These stereotypes of beauty in the media are made specifically to please the heterosexual male gaze as they sexualize and invalidate women as respected beings. In contrast to these portrayals being seen in past Marvel movie characters, like Black Widow, *Thor: Ragnarok* does not sexualize its female characters. It also allows them the space to be their own persons and make their own decisions that do not solely revolve around their relationships with a male.

*Black Panther* also shows us women in powerful positions without hypersexualizing their bodies. The most fulfilled category in either film for my content analysis was in *Black Panther* for “a woman uses her strength and mental abilities instead of being sexualized in order to be respected.” We essentially have three prominent female characters showcased in the movie: Nakia, Shuri, and Okoye. Nakia is a wardog who leads missions outside of Wakanda’s borders to help other African countries and people fleeing their homes for safety. She is T’Challa’s love interest, and within their relationship, T’Challa respects her aspirations and personal goals rather than forcing her to do what he wants her to do. Nakia is also knowledgeable in other cultures, as we see her take Okoye and T’Challa to South Korea in one scene, and she speaks fluent Korean and appears to know locals there. Shuri is T’Challa’s younger sister, and she is a brilliant inventor for Wakanda’s technological advancements. Along with building her brother’s panther suit, she also invents things like a VR car to help her brother drive while he is away in South Korea and is able to scientifically heal a bullet wound later in the film on an injured man. Shuri portrays a female character who is intellectually smarter than any man in the film and knows

how to improve Wakanda in the future with her technology. T'Challa also turns to her for advice and puts his trust in her repeatedly, a testament to his respect he feels for her.

Okoye is our primary representation of the Dora Milaje, an all- female tribe sworn to protect Wakanda and the throne. They are extremely physically strong and have been trained in ritual combat with huge spears and bright red uniforms. Okoye defies stereotypical Western beauty standards in numerous ways: her head is shaved, she is typically in her battle gear rather than more feminine clothes, and she is not helpless or in need of a man. T'Challa and the royal family respect her for her impressive battle skills. However, the Dora Milaje can also be viewed under a more critical lens. In a [scholarly article by Rachel Alicia Griffin and Jonathan P. Rossing](#), the point is made that the Dora Milaje are quite literally a group of women serving the male Black Panther. The authors say, “Not only do the Dora Milaje offer Black Panther’s strongest display of militariza- tion, but they do so under the—albeit subtle—surveillance of the male gaze.” This is true considering the way there still seems to be a gendered hierarchy of sorts in Wakanda’s royalty system. However, it does appear that men cannot serve on the Dora Milaje which perhaps adds another dimension to the discussion of gender construction in the film. In the end battle scene of the film, Okoye is ultimately faced with a difficult decision: fight against her husband, W’Kabi, to serve Wakanda or pity her husband and switch the side of the fight she is on. She tells W’Kabi that between him or Wakanda, she would kill him “without question.” Although this moment plays into the stereotype of strong female characters being shown as heartless, we can see Okoye struggling to make this decision. It is also apparent throughout the film that Okoye cares deeply about the people she loves, so this decision did not come easily for her. Okoye is an example of a female character who breaks typical character tropes while using her femininity as an asset.



## Conclusion

The new era of Marvel films is perhaps giving us a glance into the future of a more equal future for gender representation. Both *Black Panther* and *Thor: Ragnarok* show us powerful women who are not sexualized by camera angles and unnecessarily low-cut necklines, but rather these women are respected and acknowledged as having valuable assets to offer on a team. These films also show us men who are physically buff, muscular, and forceful on the surface but are actually soft and gentle with the people they love and their emotions. A more hegemonic gender trope would say women are only valuable for their sex appeal and beauty and men should be protectors who are stoic in emotions, so Marvel taking steps away from these stereotypes is a positive enforcement. We do still see certain characters upholding some of these toxic traits, like Killmonger and “The Contest of Champions,” but through my content analysis, it is clear that the more progressive categories received more marks than those upholding stereotypes. It is important to portray characters who are not viewed through a hegemonically masculine lens or created for a white, male audience. By showing women in powerful positions and men in vulnerable ones, we flip these tropes in the mainstream media and send new messages to the public audience. Stereotypes arise when we repeat them through characters in the media, so breaking them has to start with the media, too. Despite the MCU being based on original comic book heroes, it appears the filmmakers and directors are drifting away from the stereotypes in the comics and creating characters for our current moment instead.

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