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Feminazis and social justice warriors: gender and rhetoric is Superhero Film fan culture

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Feminazis and Social Justice Warriors:
Gender and Rhetoric in Superhero Film Fan Culture

by

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I. Introduction

"Oh my god." I couldn't believe my eyes. Holding the dust-coated treasure up closer to the light, I exclaimed again, louder, "Oh. My. God!"

Footsteps thundered up the stairs from the ground floor of the house. "What's going on?" my stepfather asked, concerned. "Are you all right?"

I thrust the magazine out for him to see. "Don't you know what you have? This is *Marvel Premiere #11,* featuring the second canonical appearance of Star-Lord!" My stepfather did not seem to understand my enthusiasm. I waved the magazine at him again for emphasis. "Star-Lord! You know, Peter Quill – from *Guardians of the Galaxy*, the movie we watched last night!"

My dad blinked a few times, muttered, "Oh. From the way you were yelling, I thought something was on fire."

I was thirty years old when this exchange occurred. Freshly bereaved after the unexpected loss of my military career, I'd rediscovered my love of the escapist thrills in superhero stories. In the years that followed, these stories gave me new common ground with my stepfather and helped us to rebuild our relationship around our shared love of pop culture.

My relationship with these stories and their characters took on a deeper meaning as I grappled with depression and a fruitless search for identity outside of the uniform that I'd worn for twelve years. Unresolved anxiety and post-traumatic stress paired with a minor traumatic brain injury at times rendered me literally speechless. This was a brutal

indignity; after all, I had mastered five languages other than my mother tongue during my military career and now I struggled to form basic sentences in English.

I became fascinated with the 2014 iteration of *Captain Marvel*, written by fierce feminist author Kelly Sue DeConnick. Carol Danvers was smart, strong, snarky, a colonel in the Air Force, and a Star Wars fan who loved to resolve problems by punching them. I could relate. In the pinnacle of one of her more poignant story arcs, she was diagnosed with a brain tumor – and of course, she had to make the choice of saving others or saving herself. In the end, she risked death to save Earth and lost her memories of her identity in the process. I knew that I would have done the same.

That was when I realized the power of comic books. I have built some of my closest friendships through shared love of the medium. On the other hand, I have also seen real damage done by those behind the Comicsgate movement, an online community of comic book creators and fans who believe that the field is giving unfair advantage to women and minorities. These individuals have lashed out against minority creators, retailers, and fans with slander, libel, harassment, and death threats, causing irreparable harm to their targets' livelihood and mental health. Even though Comicsgate has faded from social media, there has been open backlash against superhero movies featuring lead characters other than white men. I am examining one of these phenomena because there is always a deeper reason for such pointed reactions.

Though the 2019 film release of *Captain Marvel* is not the first movie to arouse virulent online hatred about women, I have chosen it as a focus for this study due to the magnitude of the reactions which it has provoked in the online fan community. Using a rubric based on a legal definition of hate speech, I performed rhetorical analysis of

Twitter posts pertaining to the film with the intent of determining how negative Tweets about *Captain Marvel* relate to gender disparity and discrimination in comic book culture. My analysis revealed the following themes:

1. Fannish outrage derives from self-identification with the genre – namely, male audiences seeing themselves in the depiction of male superheroes – and the proliferation of non-male protagonists is seen as a threat to this self-identification.
2. Social media reactions are an expression of the perceived diminishment of societally defined archetypal masculinity.

These themes may not be surprising to an objective observer. However, I would contend that the mundane nature of these findings shows how disappointingly established of a fixture misogyny is in online forums. Furthermore, it does not take a significant event to provoke expressions of outrage. All it takes is a change to what a Twitter user views as normal and comfortable.

II. Historical Context

When faced with significant change to a favored character, comic book "purists" often cite the character's original state as the correct version and insist that the character stay the way that they were created (Hunt). This argument resurfaced and intensified when Marvel Studios announced the 2019 *Captain Marvel* film and subsequently revealed that the film would not focus on the first superhero to bear the name. With this in mind, one may quickly deduce the fallibility of the purist argument with a brief review of the history of the character of Captain Marvel.

Contrary to the seemingly obvious connection visible in the name, Captain Marvel was neither created nor originally owned by Marvel Comics. The character was first created by Fawcett Comics (Benton), but was then acquired after a copyright infringement lawsuit in 1951 by National Comics Publications, later DC Comics (Fawcett vs. National). Then, after another copyright infringement lawsuit, the character passed to Marvel Comics in 1972.

Mar-Vell, a soldier of the alien Kree race sent to Earth to learn of its potential, was created for Marvel Comics by Stan Lee and Gene Colan in 1967. The character was killed off in 1982 by writer Jim Starlin in Marvel Comics' first graphic novel, *The Death of Captain Marvel*, after developing inoperable cancer while fighting the supervillain Nitro. However, the mantle of Captain Marvel would not remain dormant for long. The character went through three more iterations before evolving into the character that we know today, two of them female – one being Marvel's first Black female superhero Monica Rambeau, and the other being Mar-Vell's genetically-engineered lesbian daughter Phyla-Vell.

However, neither of these fictitious women raised as much protest among male comic book fans as did the third version of Captain Marvel, Carol Danvers. Initially appearing in 1968, Carol became a key part of the Avengers as Mar-Vell's sidekick, Ms. Marvel. This lasted until 2012 when she took on the title of Captain Marvel as an homage to its original bearer in a revitalization of the franchise led by comic book and television writer Kelly Sue DeConnick, who also served as a consultant on the 2019 Marvel Studios film. Though it did raise eyebrows among traditionalists, DeConnick's work in

transforming Carol Danvers from a black leotard-wearing sidekick to a fierce feminist fighter pilot was not the sole cause for outrage by comic book media consumers.

Actress Brie Larson, cast in the titular role of *Captain Marvel*, provoked anger among online fan communities with her blunt remarks about her desires for increased diversity in movies and in the press corps, as well as by speaking about how she did not care for reviews from critics who are not in a film's intended audience (Buckley). Her commentary provoked a planned boycott among the reactionary male demographic of the comic book community, a fusillade of attack videos on YouTube, and a targeted attempt to sabotage the film's score on Rotten Tomatoes before the movie had even debuted to a wider audience (Argyle). None of these tactics were successful, though, as *Captain Marvel* grossed over $1 billion USD during its global run in theaters.

Looking back over the history of the Captain Marvel comic book franchise, one can see that change is nothing new to the character. For that matter, the character being female is not new either. In light of Captain Marvel's previous female iterations – one being Marvel's first Black female superhero, and the other being an openly gay alien – returning to the character of Carol Danvers could be perceived as a socially acceptable, possibly even regressive move by Marvel Studios. Why, then, would a relatively "safe" adaptation of the character cause such vitriol amongst viewers?

III. Literature Review

Much ink has been devoted to the effects of media consumption on the expression of gender roles. However, in light of negative reactions in the fan community to Marvel's first female-led superhero movie, this theme bears revisiting. What larger societal messaging could lead to virulent outpourings of negativity in fan-curated digital spaces?

Lafky, Duffy, Steinmaus, and Berkowitz (1996) assert that gender role definition and reinforcement occurs at an early age, influenced heavily by an individual's family, culture, and level of education. These factors are further ossified in first-world countries by the omnipresence of advertising. Murnen, Smolak, Mills, and Good (2003) take this consideration to a deeper level by studying the reactions of children in grades 1 through 5 to objectified images of adults. Many of the children found the images of slender women and muscular men to be appealing and expressed desire to look like the presented image of their gender upon adulthood. It is potentially disquieting to note that the children's ages played no significant statistical difference in their responses, and that a large number of the children were aware of gender stereotypes.

Research suggests that while stereotypes of aggressive women do exist (Behm-Morawitz and Mastro), gender performance that falls outside of expectations for women is seen as transgressive and upsetting (Argyle; Lafky *et al.*; Child; Futrelle; Payne; Pochin; Wynn). Some scholars question the positive benefits of expressing anger in feminist practices (Bardsley). However, others assert that women's anger is both powerful (Frohnapfel) and an appropriate response to the current sociopolitical environment (Chemaly).

Performative gender messaging in media strongly affects women and men alike. Superhero media products – both print and digital – reinforce ideals of masculine virtue through strength and muscularity with female superheroes as supporting characters, love interests, and prizes to be won (Behm-Morawitz & Pennell). However, despite these reductive portrayals, fans positively identify with these characters from childhood

(Hoffner & Buchanan) and find personal empowerment in this self-identification (Behm-Morawitz & Pennell).

From such toxic soil springs the bitter fruit of masculine entitlement – that, regardless of an individual's ability to uphold so-called "male" standards, women are not allowed to take on masculine virtues and must remain silent and compliant or face brutal consequences (Manne, 2018). *Captain Marvel* is not the first movie to raise protests over a female character's masculine attributes (Child; Coyle; Payne). That said, it holds the dubious honor of being the catalyst for changes in how audience reactions are gauged on movie review aggregator websites (Argyle; Buckley). Other themes among fan complaints range from emasculation of male characters (Futrelle; Pochin), conspiracies about artificially inflated box office profits (Futrelle), and targeted hatred against actress Brie Larson for her attempts to encourage inclusivity in media events and press releases (Coyle). However, the vociferousness of toxic commentators has had no noticeable effect on the film's profits (Child; Coyle).

The anonymous nature of the Internet makes it difficult to assign precise intent to speech acts by individuals. Rhetorical analysis of online speech, particularly on social media platforms such as Twitter, is useful in that it provides multiple philosophical frameworks through which to parse language which might otherwise be unclear. One approach is to assume that everything said by an individual means exactly what it says, with no shades or nuances of interpretation that could possibly change its meaning. This mindset can be traced back to Emmanuel Kant's post-enlightenment works on individual thought in which he asserted that human reason, in order to be valid, must exist free of exterior influence (Rohlf). However, assuming that the thoughts and expressions of an

individual are neutral and mean what they say at face value does not allow room for the all-too-real influence of the ulterior motive.

In keeping with the idea that violent phenomena rarely appear without provocation, it is worth examining the influences upon authors of negative social media commentary against female superhero media properties. German philosopher Moritz Schlick provided a second approach to rhetorical analysis with his assertion that no individual acts free of influence, and these influences shape the filters through which that individual perceives and interacts with the world around them (Oberdan). These influences, otherwise known as metacontexts, provide potent clues as to why a person might react in a certain way to exterior stimuli.

Schlick's concept of metacontexts is mirrored in the critical discourse analysis theories espoused by linguistic scholar James Paul Gee, particularly his theory of situated meaning. Gee postulates that a word or phrase is inert of meaning when perceived on its own. How the word is used, by whom it is used, and by whom it is heard or read that determines its meaning (Gee). That said, the content and medium of a message are just as important as the intent behind it. Ludwig Wittgenstein's theory of language games adds these additional details by considering how an individual or individuals express themselves in a given dialogic scenario based on their internalized perception of how that scenario should unfold (Biletzki and Matar).

By synthesizing the assertions of Schlick, Gee, and Wittgenstein, one may theorize that embodied rhetoric – namely, messages of societally acceptable standards that are reinforced by the media that we consume – in turn affects our attitudes and speech. Therefore, even in a digital medium as nebulous as Twitter, there are concrete

contextual cues in user posts that illuminate the user's motives and intent behind their speech.

IV. Content Analysis

Methodology

Though reactions to *Captain Marvel* proliferated across multiple platforms and media, I limited my data gathering and analysis to Twitter due to its unique composition limitations. Twitter limits users to 280 characters per post, leading to concentrated bursts of rhetoric in easily traceable groupings. As the data analyzed in this study came from human behavior, IRB approval was sought and obtained before commencing research. I used the search term #CaptainMarvel in Twitter's search engine as its broadness would increase the availability of potentially useful data.

Method 1: Likert Scale for Assessing Twitter Hate Speech

In the initial stages of my research, I attempted to collect and evaluate every negative Tweet in #CaptainMarvel over six months. However, this initial approach yielded 66 Tweets in the first three days of this six-month span. In anticipation of a large volume of data and as a concession to my limited time and resources, I changed my sampling method.

I chose the random calendar date generator on Random.org because of its ready accessibility and lack of monetary cost. I input the date range of May 28, 2019 to November 28, 2019 with a requested output of 22 values, the maximum allowed by the date generator. Then, using the list of dates provided by the date generator, I selected Twitter posts in the #CaptainMarvel hashtag occurring on the provided dates that

expressed negative sentiment towards the film. The language in the posts was then assigned a relative value on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5.

Value	Expression	Definition
1	General Disinterest	"I have no interest in seeing this" or similar verbiage. No occurrences of pejorative or vulgar language.
2	Mild Disgust	Derogatory comments (i.e. "This is so stupid"), but no occurrences of pejorative or vulgar language.
3	Active Antipathy	Derogatory comments with 1-3 instances of pejorative or vulgar language, including slurs, profanity, sexual references, or non-respectful labels for groups with which one disagrees (i.e. SJW, or "social justice warrior").
4	Generalized Hate	More than 3 instances of pejorative or vulgar language.
5	Targeted Hate Speech	Personal attacks on actors, writers, production staff, reviewers, or individual filmgoers.

Figure 1: Likert Scale for Assessing Twitter Hate Speech

This Likert scale is an indirect emulation of the Message Invectives Scale first proposed by Anna K. Turnage in 2008. The Message Invectives Scale assesses textual properties including, but not limited to, perceived hostility, insults, offensive language, and tonal aspects in emails, and assigns a final hostility assessment based on a numerical value of intensity assigned to each factor. By the Message Invectives metric, the higher the cumulative score, the more likely the message is to be hostile in nature. The Likert scale used in this study assesses these factors as well but eschews the calculation of a

cumulative score in favor of benchmarks such as the appearance and frequency of hostile language and hate speech.

To show how the Likert scale works in application, I will provide the text of two Tweets. The first reads as follows: “God no. Nope. Never. Not even to save a life, lol.” The tone is derogatory, but no profanity is used – therefore it would rate as a 2 on the scale, or Mild Disgust. Compare this to the following: “Alita isn't Captain Marvel. Therefore anyone supporting it is against Captain Marvel. & anyone who is against Captain Marvel must be a Nazi. Credit: SJW/NPC far-right, inflammatory, divisionist propoganda[sic]-peddlers. Their relentless attempts to dismantle societal unity continue.” SJW and NPC are both derogatory references used to refer to individuals with whom the speaker disagrees – the first meaning “social justice warrior,” and the second being a gaming term for a non-player character, or a character whose actions have no actual bearing on unfolding events. In this context, “propoganda-peddlers” is assessed as having pejorative meaning. Altogether, this Tweet would rate as a 4, or Generalized Hate.

The first two numerical values on the Likert Scale fall under the umbrella of non-malicious speech. There is nothing in their content that a reader would find offensive or provocative, such as profanity or derogatory slang terms. Level 3 marks the least-intense presence of hate speech, and Level 5 specifies offensive language or threats of harm against specific individuals.

While these definitions might seem overly vague at first glance, one must consider the highly subjective nature of language. What is considered insulting to one person may not be so to another. Pejorative terms are also highly dependent on context and interpersonal relationships. For instance, calling someone a bitch, a slut, or a cunt

may be acceptable if the speaker and the addressee are socially intimate. However, usage outside of the bounds of social intimacy risks, at the least, an equally sharp vocal retort – if not a violent retaliatory response. How, then, can one more concretely define hate speech?

Since Twitter, the source of my research data, is an American corporation, I turned to United States legal precedent for guidance in establishing research parameters that account for the dynamic nature of speech acts. Using legal precedent to establish my working definitions decreased the likelihood that my interpretations of the data would be slanted by my personal biases. I found that there is no single precise legal definition of hate speech existing in the United States judicial system. However, a close examination of Constitutional case law (Fisch) provides useful criteria for establishing a research definition for hate speech:

- Speech that defames or damages another's reputation ("group libel")
- Speech that directly threatens unlawful harm to others
- Speech that constitutes unlawful discrimination ("hostile environment" in the workplace)

While the first two criteria require little explanation, the third criteria may be interpreted as negative commentary against an individual based on gender, sexual orientation, race, physical ability, and/or religion.

Using the above criteria, I identified 82 negative Tweets in the #CaptainMarvel hashtag over 187 days using two data sets (see Appendix A). I attempted to get as close to *Captain Marvel*'s release date as possible, but Twitter's policy of deleting Tweets

more than a year old limited my ability to do so. The first data set ranged from May 28, 2019 to November 28, 2019 and yielded 34 Tweets that fit my established criteria for hate speech – an average of 0.18 negative Tweets per day. This number seemed low in comparison to my initial assessment of 66 negative Tweets over a span of three days – an average of 22 negative Tweets per day – so I then collected a second data set ranging from June 1st, 2019 to December 1st, 2019 to verify that this low number was representative of available data in this timeframe and not due to the randomizer coincidentally selecting dates with low activity. This shift in dates is due to Twitter's policy of deleting Tweets older than one year. The second data set yielded 48 negative Tweets, or an average of .26 negative Tweets per day. The relatively insignificant difference in value between the two data sets led me to believe that my sample was representative of available data.

In addition to verifying the representative nature of the first set, the second data set provided more material for critical discourse analysis. As each negative Tweet was identified, I copied its text into a Word document along with a six-digit calendar date identifier in the MMDDYY format. I highlighted the portions of each Tweet that could be quantified as a negative expression, then assigned a numerical value to the Tweet based on the Likert scale provided above.

It should also be noted that my search results contained commentary about an adult film parody, *Captain Marvel XXX.* I did not assess these Tweets as they were not germane to my research – not due to the genre, lest I be mistakenly accused of prudery in my scholarship, but because my research focuses solely on the 2019 Marvel Studios film.

Method 2: Scatterplot

I analyzed the dates when Tweets are posted in each category established in Method 1 and then compared them to significant dates in the production and release timeline of the 2019 *Captain Marvel* film. This method establishes potential correlations between significant dates in the production and release time and expressions of negative speech on Twitter.

Analysis

Over a date range of 187 days, from May 28th to December 1st, 2019, 82 Twitter posts were found to have negative content that met the established research criteria. 38 of the evaluated Tweets fell under Category 2: Mild Disgust, followed by Category 3: Active Antipathy. Out of the selected date range, Categories 4 and 5 – the most extreme on the scale – only contained one Tweet each. That said, I also observed a significant number of Tweets that had been removed by the platform because their creators had violated community standards in one way or another. If I had been able to view those

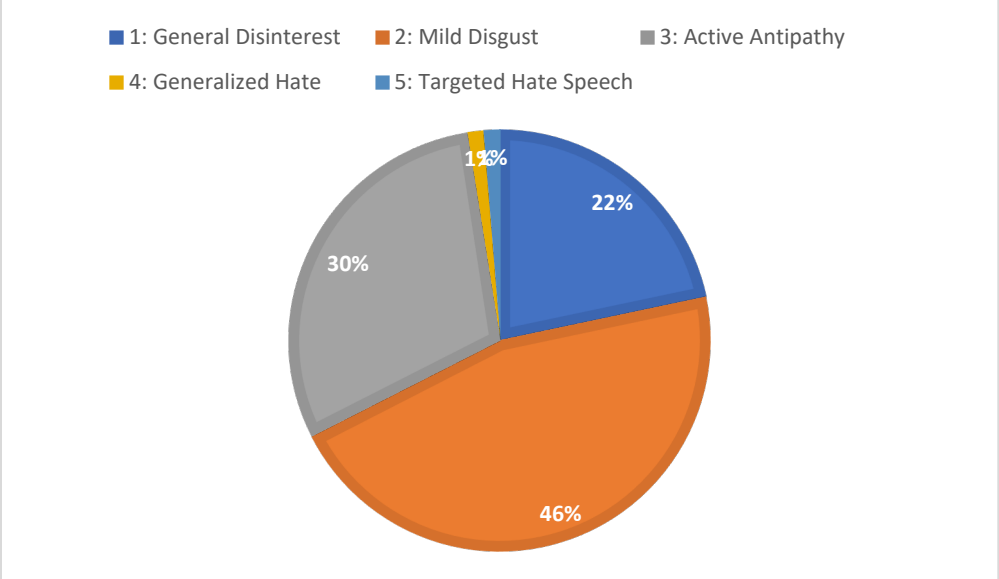

Figure 2: Negative Tweets in #CaptainMarvel by Severity

particular posts, I have no doubt that my initial evaluation would have looked much different than it does now.

With 38 Tweets counted, the highest concentration of negative language was found in Category 2, or Mild Disgust. While these speech participants expressed specific distaste for *Captain Marvel,* they did so without using profanity or pejoratives. Category 3, Active Antipathy, came in second with 25 Tweets. The only Tweet to fall under Category 5: Targeted Hate was directed against *Captain Marvel* star Brie Larson. It included multiple negative slurs against her as well as multiple instances of the word "fuck." Overall, this leads me to believe that while antipathy on Twitter towards *Captain Marvel* was widespread, it was not as virulent as one might think.

Analysis of negative activity within the specified date range (see Figure 2) identifies three dates with more than ten negative Tweets: June 13th, July 9th, and October 30th. A search on Google using the search criteria of "Captain Marvel" and "news" followed by the specific date has suggested these possible correlations:

- June 12th: Amy Poehler received the Entrepreneur in Entertainment Award at the 2019 Women in Film Awards in Los Angeles. In her speech, she included *Captain Marvel* in a list of media projects made by or centered around women.
- July 9th: Comic book and television writer Kelly Sue DeConnick appeared on *The Today Show*. DeConnick's revival of *Captain Marvel* as a comic book series served as a key inspiration for the 2019 film adaptation.
- October 30th: Disney submits *Avengers: Endgame* for Academy Award consideration, but not *Captain Marvel*. In a preview of that week's comic book

releases, Marvel reveals that the character of Captain Marvel is responsible for starting a zombie apocalypse.

None of these events seem plausible as provocations for hate speech from an objective standpoint, and it is unlikely that they actually were. This is not to say that events in *Captain Marvel*'s production and release timeline did not elicit negative sentiment from Twitter users. However, those events did not occur during the timespan evaluated by this study.

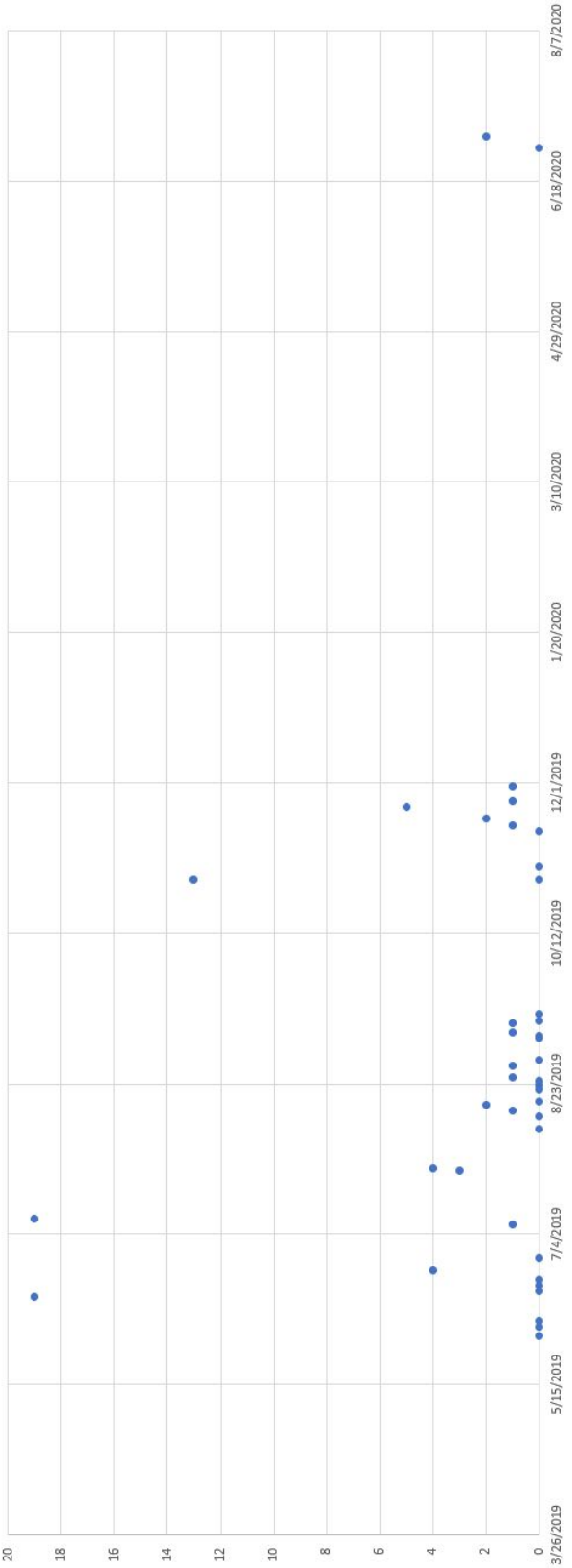

Figure 3: Negative Activity in #CaptainMarvel over 187 Days

V. Findings

The purpose of this study was to determine whether or not internalized concepts of gender as reinforced by popular media play a role in consumers' negative reactions to a fictional character and, specifically, that character's gender presentation.

While the language used in 80 out of 82 sampled Tweets would not be considered excessively provocative, 21 out of 82 specifically referenced women in a negative context. This works out to approximately 26 percent of the total collected Tweets, and while this does not count as a statistical majority, the fact that a significant number of speakers used these as indices of *Captain Marvel*'s lack of quality indicates that gender most likely plays a negative role in consumers' perception of this film. These Tweets most frequently make negative references to the female title character's display of personality traits and behavioral tropes that are traditionally coded as masculine. The film attempted to deviate from established societal power structures by allowing its main character, a woman, to present masculine traits of stoicism and physical strength, and the language used in the sampled Tweets reflects this. Consider the following:

- "I've seen more personality in a cactus."
- "Then Marvel goes and turns her into this butch radfem…"
- "A gaze blank and pitiless as a butthole."

Of the three examples, the most offensive word used – "butthole" – is not considered profanity in contemporary American English vernacular. "Butch" refers to a subset of the lesbian community, and "radfem," or radical feminist, refers to an individual espousing an erroneous definition of feminism that prioritizes white, heterosexual, cisgender women above all other identities. While none of these could be considered

extremely vulgar, their context points to a societal demographic that views masculine-coded traits as threatening when presented by a feminine-coded character. This seems baffling at first, but further examination of the concept offers two possibilities as to why feminine presentation of masculine-coded attributes may be considered a threat.

In an interview about the roots of Comicsgate, media analyst Liana Kerzner states that volatile response to relatively innocuous cultural phenomena may be due to intense self-identification with a character or series (Jancelewicz):

> "Comic books are a relatively small industry, so readers personalize things to a degree that's difficult for consumers of mainstream media to understand. Everyone who is a fan of comics has read a book that they felt was written just *for them*, and it's like a drug."

This self-identification phenomenon on the side of male fans is a manifestation of the hypermasculinity embodied by most adult male superheroes (Behm-Morawitz and Pennell, The Effects of Superhero Sagas on Our Gendered Selves) – if not for the aspirational physical attributes, then for attributes such as dominance, strength, courage, and leadership. On the other side of the gender binary, female superheroes are physically desirable, strong, capable, and subordinate. Even when children play superhero games as part of school recreation, the female students take on the role of a helper instead of a warrior, and they tend to defer to male authority.

Despite their superhuman characters, these narratives perpetuate existing societal messaging that men are leaders and that women are objects to be pursued, won, and metaphorically consumed – reinforcing the concept of male dominance and dismissal of

female autonomy (Murnen, Smolak and Mills). While fans may identify with characters on a personal level, they are told on a subconscious level by many so-called classic superhero stories that this is how society is and should remain.

In this manner, self-identification serves as a metacontext through which comic book fans of all genders and preferences can interpret their world. Superhero stories that conform to established societal power dynamics provide comfort to those who benefit in their lives from those same dynamics, and any change from that place of comfort evokes a feeling that the core of one's identity is being threatened. Traditionalists like the following Twitter user, quoted verbatim including punctuation, might cloak their observations in disdain disguised as nostalgia: "I Feel Bad For Those Kids That Grew Up Actual Mar-Vell Fans Reading His Story And Buying Comics Only To Be Shitted On In A Movie Like Captain Marvel." Others might attempt to respond to this perceived threat to the status quo by telling women and minority fans to create their own heroes and content that better reflect their identities, and that the existing media landscape isn't "racist or sexist. It's just the way it is" (Hunt).

The issue with this mindset, though, is that it fails to consider that women, LGBTQ+ individuals, persons of color, and disabled individuals often do not have the same influence in the comic book industry as do white cisgender men. According to *Comics Beat*, women and nonbinary individuals were involved in less than eighteen percent of the total creative output in 2018 at either Marvel or DC Comics (Hanley). Ten minutes of research through publicly accessible Internet archives reveals that Marvel, DC, and most major independent publishers are helmed by men. Archie Comics is the only independent label with significant media presence that is currently led by a woman.

The phenomena of self-identification depends on the maintenance and idealization of strict gender roles and stereotypical qualities, all of which support a societal power structure that does not reflect the actual capabilities and qualities of its individual members. Creative media, such as comic books and movies, are not so much an expression of societal reality as they are an expression and reinforcement of this power structure. When a piece of media echoes current societal power dynamics and gender tropes, it is accepted with little to no reaction. However, when creators subvert power dynamics and gender tropes, consumers who benefit from the existing societal power structure are prone to protest because they feel that their authority is being stolen or destroyed.

One example can be found in a deleted scene from *Captain Marvel.* Newly arrived on Earth, the lead character is challenged by a man on a motorcycle who asks her to smile. He refuses to leave her alone, and in return she offers a handshake and breaks his fingers. When this scene was released to the Internet in late May 2019, many male viewers were outraged at Carol Danvers' use of force against an innocent man. One commenter even remarked, "Just imagine if a man treated a woman like this in our society" (Pochin). One of the users whose Tweets were analyzed in this study referenced this scene when stating their refusal to purchase a copy for home viewing, commenting that they would "would rather try to breathe in pure vacuum from space [than own] a movie that promotes violence against undeserving parties." However, viewers who are familiar with the action movie genre recognize that this scene was written as an homage to an iconic moment in 1991 film release *Terminator 2* when a naked Arnold Schwarzenegger fights and defeats multiple armed biker gang members in a dive bar

before riding off triumphantly – and fully clothed – on a stolen Harley-Davidson. Comments on YouTube clips of this scene praise his manliness and combat prowess.

The fury generated by the *Captain Marvel* deleted scene relates back to the prior discussion of self-identification, albeit in a more specific way. When so much of gender is performative, visible transgression of expected gender norms even in fiction may be cause for extreme discomfort on the part of those who feel that their gender aspect is being appropriated, especially if there is a power imbalance in favor of the one whose traits are being imitated. In other words, it's allowable for a tall, muscular Austrian actor in his role as a nude killer robot to dispose of a bar full of thugs because aggression is an accepted performative masculine trait. However, if an American actress playing a fully-suited superheroine does the same to one man, it becomes fodder for digital unrest because aggression is seen as generally undesirable among the stereotypical female-presenting individual.

A parallel can be found between the reaction to Carol's aggression and portions of the critical response to the character of Imperator Furiosa in *Mad Max: Fury Road.* Furiosa is rhetorically transgressive against established societal metacontext in the way that she subverts the social standard of constructing meaning (Payne). By accepting leadership roles, being aggressive, and refusing to submit to the actions demanded of them, both Furiosa and Carol Danvers forcibly appropriate performative masculine traits – and both accordingly incur the wrath of male viewers.

David Futrelle, administrator and chief contributor of the anti-men's rights activist blog *We Hunted the Mammoth,* lends a grimly humorous bent to the numerous acts of offensive gender transgression of which *Captain Marvel* is accused of

perpetrating. One of the primary offenders that Futrelle cites is a minor scene in the film in which a government agent named Nick Fury is washing dishes – which was seen as transgressive by the original reviewer due to their perception that housework is performatively feminine. According to this line of thought, just as masculinity is something that is not to be taken away, femininity is not something to be performed by those who did not originally practice it.

Vaguely satirical blog posts aside, evidence suggests that media products such as advertising carry heavy weight in reinforcing gender roles (Lafky *et al.*). Considering the media-saturated environment in which we live, where almost everything is an advertisement in some way, it makes sense that the passive, nurturing, domestic roles would be seen as the default, and to depart from that – especially when adopting masculine traits along the way – would be seen as unacceptable.

Another aspect of gender rhetoric worth remarking upon in the context of this study is that language does not have to be overtly profane or offensive in order to be impactful. This study did not show a significant correlation between dates in *Captain Marvel'*s production and release timeline and the frequency of misogynistic language. That said, human nature shows that an individual does not need an occasion or a reason to use oppressive language, only a desire to dominate another human or group of humans. KhosraviNik and Esposito assert that the purpose of misogynistic speech in digital spaces is to control, intimidate, or silence women. Sue Ann Barratt suggests that the "symbolic violence" of misogynistic hate speech serves as a means of enforcing patriarchal respectability politics. It may seem inoffensive – even amusing – on the surface to refer to a woman emulating masculine-coded traits as "dry cardboard," a "plank of wood," or

"Iron Man with tits," as Twitter users did, but these turns of speech mask microaggressions that assess a collective toll over time to the feminine psyche on an individual and on a collective level. An insult, no matter how cutely worded, is still an insult.

VIII. Conclusion

Even though gender is not viewed as a barrier to enjoyment of comics in my personal sphere of family and friends, even a brief dive into Twitter commentary such as I performed into the reactions to *Captain Marvel* shows that that attitude is not universal. Negative commentary is a common occurrence. While the majority of the Tweets assessed in this study do not fall under the category of hate speech, many of them adopt a microagressive posture by using non-profane derogatory language to refer to women and feminism. This language reflects users' discomfort with a feminine-coded character displaying attributes and behaviors that are traditionally ascribed to men, such as emotional stoicism and physical strength.

While social media is promising in that it shows authentic human reactions to a moment of cultural significance in real time, limitations exist which hamper a truly accurate behavioral study. Twitter is a volatile medium in that posts may be created, deleted, or rendered private at the will of their creator. Twitter also will not keep posts over a year old, and I noted a significant number of suspended or deleted accounts during the course of my evaluation. Due to this volatility, the data sample collected over the course of my research is not truly representative of the social reaction that appeared after the announcement of Captain Marvel, that developed over the course of its production, and which exploded following its release. In order to develop a more complete picture of

gender rhetoric and its potential correlations with the superhero genre, it would be prudent to monitor and document reactions to future film projects as they are released. It may also be worthwhile to perform a similar longitudinal study of television and streaming platform properties, as they tend to release material at a steadier, more frequent pace and thus would provide more opportunities for data sampling and assessment.

Above all, it should be noted that American gender roles and stereotypes were discussed in this study. It may yield fascinating results to replicate this kind of study in a broader, international context, as perceptions of "acceptable" gender presentation differ from culture to culture. The stories that we tell, how we tell them, and how an audience responds all provide powerful insights into cultural signifiers and tropes that we may not otherwise openly discuss, and as more of these stories migrate into the digital realm, there will be plenty of ground to cover.

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Appendix A: Charts and Data - Negative Activity in #Captain Marvel over 190 Days

Data Sets

	Cat 1	Cat 2	Cat 3	Cat 4	Cat 5	Total
Set 1 - 05/28/2019-11/28/2019						
5/28/2019						0
5/31/2019						0
6/3/2019						0
6/5/2019						0
6/17/2019						0
6/19/2019						0
6/22/2019		1	2			3
6/26/2019						0
7/7/2019		1				1
7/9/2019	4	5	9	1		19
7/25/2019			3			3
7/26/2019		4				4
8/16/2019		1	1			2
8/17/2019	1					0
8/21/2019						0
8/23/2019						0
8/24/2019						0
8/29/2019						0
9/7/2019						0
9/8/2019						0
9/9/2019		1				1
9/12/2019		1				1
9/15/2019						0
Total	5	14	15	1	0	34

Set 2 - 06/01/19-12/01/19	Cat 1	Cat 2	Cat 3	Cat 4	Cat 5	Total
06/13/19	8	6	5			19
6/15/2019						0
6/22/2019		1				1
6/26/2019						0
6/29/2019						0
7/3/2019	2					2
8/8/2019						0
8/12/2019						0
8/14/2019		1				1
8/17/2019						0
8/22/2019						0
8/25/2019		1				1
8/29/2019					1	1
8/31/2019						0
9/13/2019						0
10/13/2019						0
10/30/2019		10	3			13
11/3/2019						0
11/15/2019						0
11/17/2019		1				1
11/19/2019	1	1				2
11/23/2019	1	2	2			5
11/25/2019		1				1
11/30/2019	1					1
Total	13	24	10	0	1	48

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