



Super Romantic: Examining Gender Differences in Expression of Romantic Ideals and Challenges in Marvel Superhero Movies

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Abstract

Marvel superhero movies have a wide audience. Many of these movies contain romance, and therefore it may be valuable to analyze the content of this romance, given its success and influence. This led to the question: Are there differences in expression of romantic ideals and challenges between men and women in Marvel superhero movies? This study addressed this question by performing a content analysis of 23 Marvel superhero movies from *Iron Man* to *Spider-Man: Far From Home*. Gender differences were assessed on the frequency of romantic ideals expressed and on the frequency of challenges expressed. Statistical analysis showed that men expressed more romantic ideals than women, and that women expressed more challenges than men. There is not a current body of literature that examines gender differences in expression of romantic ideals and challenges between men and women in Marvel superhero movies, and therefore this study can contribute to the current body of work. Implications of the current analysis and suggestions for future investigation are discussed.

Keywords: Marvel movies, superhero movies, romantic ideals, challenges, gender differences

Super Romantic: A Content Analysis of Gender Differences in Expression of Romantic Ideals and Challenges in Marvel Superhero Movies

Marvel superhero movies are a widespread cultural phenomenon, with *Avengers: Endgame*, released in 2019, topping box office world records, surpassing *Avatar* at the time, which held the record since 2009 (Kreps, 2019). While these movies cover a vast array of genres (sci-fi, fantasy, action, and comedy), many of them also feature romantic elements, with almost all the protagonists having a prominent love interest.

This study aimed to answer the question: Are there differences in the frequency of expression of romantic ideals and challenges between men and women in Marvel superhero movies? According to Hefner and Wilson (2013), a romantic ideal is certain expectations for

how a model relationship should form and grow. A challenge was defined by Hefner and Wilson (2013) as any statement that contradicted these certain expectations for a model relationship.

This study sought to measure the romantic ideals and challenges within Marvel movies due to their popularity and influence. Previous research has shown superhero content may affect the behavior of both men and women. For example, young boys who are exposed to superhero content tend to play in a more stereotypical way for their gender over time (Coyne et al., 2014), and certain sexualized depictions of women in superhero movies may have effects on women's beliefs about gender roles (Pennell & Behm-Morawitz, 2015). Additionally, romantic content in and of itself may have some influence over those who view it. For example, participants who watched romantic movies and that had the "love conquers all" ideal reported they were more satisfied in their relationships (Kretz, 2019). Therefore, this study will be an important steppingstone in learning more about the frequency of romantic ideals and challenges expressed in these movies, so that their influence on individuals may later be tested.

The hypothesis for this content analysis was that there would be differences in both romantic ideals and challenges for both men and women. There is no current evidence discussing which gender is more likely to express romantic ideals or romantic challenges in Marvel Cinematic Universe movies, however the data suggests there are differences in the way men and women are portrayed in these Marvel films. A content analysis of Marvel Cinematic Universe movies found women are portrayed more often as morally good and men are portrayed more often as morally bad (Ray, 2020). In the superhero genre in general, men and women are shown to have different roles and portrayals in superhero movies (Miller, Rauch, & Kaplan 2016), which may lead to differences in romantic expressions and challenges. Males were portrayed more often in positions of power, more muscular, and eviler and women were portrayed as attractive and physically thin and were portrayed as more vulnerable and powerless (Miller, Rauch, & Kaplan 2016). *Captain Marvel* was the first Marvel movie with a female protagonist since the franchise began releasing their Marvel Cinematic Universe movies (Paige, 2019), and thus there may be a difference in the expression of romantic ideals and challenges since males will have the role of protagonist more often. Therefore, expression of romantic ideals and challenges between men and women may be affected by the predominant roles they are and the nature of their portrayal. Due to these differences, it was thought to be reasonable to assume this would extend to differences in frequency of expression for both romantic ideals and challenges

to some extent. Specifically, in the genre of romantic movies, Hefner and Wilson (2013) found that romantic ideals were more likely to be expressed by males, and that challenges were more likely to be expressed by females (Hefner & Wilson, 2013). Currently, there is a lack of empirical studies that have conducted quantitative analyses^[OBJ:OBJ]

Additionally, the expected viewership of Marvel superhero movies may contribute to differences in expression of romantic ideals between men and women. One study found men are more likely to choose to watch superhero movies than genres such as romance, which women are more likely to choose (Palomba, 2020). Certain studies have shown men tend to like watching content with violence (Krcmar & Kean, 2005) and have been shown to remember an action movie better than a romance movie (Wühr & Schwarz, 2016). Therefore, there may be greater incentive to spend more time on having the male protagonists of these movies in action, rather than displaying romantic ideals and challenges. This could contribute to differences in frequency of expression between men and women.

Given the current literature, and all the gendered differences found, it is reasonable to assume these gender differences are likely to extend to expression of romantic ideals and expression of challenges. Thus, two specific hypotheses were tested:

H1 -- There would be differences in expression of romantic ideals between men and women in Marvel superhero movies.

H2 -- There would be differences in expression of challenges between men and women in Marvel superhero movies.

Method

Sample

The present study was a content analysis which is a research design that allows a researcher to conduct a systematic analyses of qualitative data and make inferences using statistical analyses (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 18). The sample consisted of every Marvel Cinematic Universe movie (23 in total), from the release of *Iron Man* (Favreu, 2008) to *Spiderman: Far From Home* (Watts, 2019). Three franchises were excluded: *X-Men*, *Deadpool*, and the *Fantastic Four* franchise. These franchises were owned by Fox at the time of their production which might have affected the trend that was unique to Marvel Cinematic Universe movies and therefore they may have different trends in their characters and content. Each movie was coded in its entirety by the author.

Variables and Measures

The coding scheme for romantic ideals and challenges was adapted from Hefner and Wilson (2013). According to the scheme an expression of a romantic ideal was operationally defined as any one of the following types: (1) the idea of having a soulmate or having one “perfect” person for you, (2) romantic idealization of people or partners, (3) the belief that love conquers all, or (4) love at first sight (Hefner & Wilson, 2013). A challenge was any statement that contradicted the previously stated ideals or a statement that conveyed a more realistic view of a romantic relationship (Hefner & Wilson, 2013). The total number of romantic ideals and challenges for all men and women per each film were tallied and used in further analyses.

To check for the reliability of the coding, two independent coders coded 10% of the data. The ICC using one-way random effect model was computed for romantic ideals and anti-romantic ideals. The ICC average measure for romantic ideas was .083 (very low agreement); and the ICC average for anti-romantic ideals (challenges) was .604 (moderate agreement).

Results

Descriptive statistics revealed that both, expressions of romantic ideals and challenges, were uncommon. On average, only two expressions related to either challenges or romantic ideals made by a female or a male character per film. Only 5% of the time, the characters expressed more than 2 romantic ideals per film and about 17% of the time, the characters expressed challenges to romantic ideals more than twice per film. Upon closer examination, it was found that out of 23 films, females expressed romantic ideals three times while male characters expressed them 11 times. On the other hand, males expressed challenges 9 times whereas females expressed them 12 times. In sum, females made the least amount of expressions related to love; and their expressions tended to challenge romantic ideals. On the other hand, male characters made more expressions related to love and they were more likely to reflect an idealized view of romance and love.

Since the data is the entire population of Marvel Cinematic Universe movies, no inferential statistics was necessary.

Discussion

The study was designed to analyze the depiction of female and male characters' expressions of romantic ideals. A persistent stereotype is that women are more likely to care about romance than men and express their love more readily. However, this is not necessarily true, for a variety of reasons. One study found men were more likely to fall in love and say "I love you" first (Harrison & Shortall, 2011). Additionally, gender may not be the strongest indicator of romantic beliefs about love and marriage. For example, Sprecher and Toro-Morn (2002) found that culture rather than gender was a better predictor. Even though evidence suggests otherwise, due to how persistent this stereotype is, it may show up in these movies and affect the portrayal of the characters within them.

Despite this prevalent stereotype, this study found that men express more romantic ideals than women in the Marvel Cinematic Universe films. In *Iron Man 3*, Tony Stark expresses that his love interest, Pepper Potts "... was already perfect." to the main villain's accusations that he made he could have made her more perfect with his strength serum. (Black, 2013). This is similar to the findings of Hefner and Wilson's (2013) study of romantic comedy, where they found that men rather than women expressed more romantic ideals. This could be for a variety of reasons. As stated earlier, only one film studied had a female protagonist so it is possible men had more screen time to express their romantic ideals. Additionally, in the works studied, only one movie, *Captain Marvel*, had a female director (Frank, 2017). Marvel didn't have a credited female writer until 2014, when Nicole Perlman wrote *Guardians of the Galaxy* (Rothman, 2014). Also as stated earlier, men are more likely to fall in love and say I love you first (Harrison & Shortall, 2011), which also may lead to them expressing their romantic ideals more readily. Additionally, this may reflect an attempt to show greater equality between men and women as more men are allowed to openly express romance, which contradicts the stereotype.

On the other hand, there was no significant difference in the expression of challenges between men and women. This is also similar to findings in Hefner and Wilson (2013), where challenges were more likely to be expressed by females. An example of a challenge expressed was in *The Avengers*, when Black Widow stated, "Love is for children." when talking with the main villain Loki about her close friend, Hawkeye (Whedon, 2012). In a study analyzing gender gaps in movies over the last 99 years, they found that there is a rise of centrality in female characters in movies over time (Kagan, Chesney, & Fire, 2020) and in a content analysis

examining the Marvel Cinematic Universe, there was an increase in female main characters over time (Ray, 2020), which may account for more women getting screen time to express these challenges. It's also possible that these women who are put in positions of power in these movies are given the chance to be more realistic or pessimistic about love, thus contradicting the stereotype that women care more about romance than men.

As shown by this study, men express more romantic ideals and women express more challenges, which both go against the stereotype that women are more likely to care about romance than men. Additionally, as stated earlier, women are garnering more central roles in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. The findings of this study may suggest an attempt to subvert stereotypes and a turn towards more equality between men and women in this genre, especially overtime as women are featured more predominantly. With new movies and television shows featuring female characters in the main role, such as *Wandavision* (Shakman, 2021) and *Black Widow* (Cate Shortland, 2021), it seems these trends may change and become even more equal overtime.

Conclusion

The sample excluded three popular franchises, the *Deadpool* franchise, the *X-Men* franchise, and the *Fantastic Four* franchise. Therefore, the scope of the romantic expressions displayed here does not fully encompass all the movies in the Marvel universe. Additionally, the findings may only pertain to superhero films of the Marvel Universe; it remains unknown if similar similarities and differences can be found in the superhero films of other production companies. Thus, future studies should seek to widen the sample size to all superhero movies and franchises.

The reliability data for romantic ideals were low, and therefore this should be considered when making any conclusions. In the future, more comprehensive coding of all the films by multiple coders should be instituted to gather more data on reliability.

This content analysis provides data on the possible trends of romantic ideals and anti-romantic ideals/challenges expressed in the Marvel superhero movies. An important next step is to examine the effect of this genre on the viewers' attitudes and beliefs about love, romance, gender roles and other related attitudes. As stated before, these movies have a large viewership, and studying their influence on those who watch them would give us more information on how these trends may affect the attitudes and beliefs within our society. Additionally, another avenue

for future research would be examining the gender of the director and the writer of the movie and analyzing how this affects expression of romantic ideals and challenges.

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