

The Gender Differences in Subjectivity among Superbeing Characters in the Comic Book Film
Genre

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ABSTRACT (Academic)

This study intends to evaluate the extent to which gender inequality permeates representation in the media. By drawing on the literature of feminist phenomenology I define *subjectivity* as the tendency of characters to interact with the world around them rather than merely have that world act upon them. I use the themes of sexual spectacle, motivation, and violence and protection to evaluate the gender differences among superbeing characters from the DC and Marvel franchises. Through the use of a qualitative content analysis this study has shown that the dichotomous gender hierarchy actively subordinates female superbeing characters through their diminished subjectivity. A character's ability to act upon the world through act-break motivations, direct capacity for violence, and the protection of others defines them as *subjects*. Conversely, a character's inability to do those actions as well as their instances of sexual spectacle and unmotivated sexual displays in costuming and gender performance relegates them to the role of *object*. The subjectivity score is used to more clearly show a definitive ranking of these characters. Female superbeing characters often hold negative scores. This means that their total deductions from categories that diminish their subjectivity, such as instances of sexual spectacle or revealing costumes, outweigh any points they earn from categories that award them more subjectivity, such as protection/rescuing others. The male characters hold double or triple the scores of their female counterparts, which perfectly highlights the gendered division of the attributes that inform subjectivity. By allowing superbeing characters to transcend gender dichotomy and engage with the full human spectrum of emotion and wellbeing, we could celebrate people as fully human and disrupt the gender normativity that maintains inequality.

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ABSTRACT (Public)

Marvel and DC Comics are two of the most popular comic book companies in the US. They are responsible for the creation of well-known characters such as Superman and Iron Man. Within the last few decades the comics became popular film franchises. Both companies release several films every year from their respective cinematic universes. These are highly grossing movies and popular enough to have character costumes produced for purchase. Popular cultural phenomenon such as these film franchises provides an opportunity to study social topics such as gender inequality and heteronormativity. This study focuses on the on-screen depictions of these superbeing characters in order to establish a connection between gender and subjectivity in these super-human bodies. Subjectivity, defined by Iris Marion Young's conceptualization of a feminist phenomenology uses the themes of motivated action, violence and protection, and sexual spectacle to determine if there is a gendered difference in the ways these characters are able to be super and how that impacts their overall subjectivity level. The data supports the theory that male superbeing characters are allowed to be full subjects who are able to act upon the world while female superbeing characters are still relegated to the sphere of objectification.

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Introduction

Heteronormativity and the gender dichotomy are the dominant ways of addressing the categorizations of sex and sexuality. In a white supremacist patriarchy, they are connected by their underlying foundation of straight (white) men dominating and holding the most power. This is visible and researched across countless aspects of society with this media project only being one entry. The gender dichotomy is more than a yin-yang relationship; it very clearly structures a hierarchy in relation to sex, gender, or gender identity. That hierarchy places men at the top with women beneath them. The placement directs power, resources, and subjectivity toward the top. I draw the concept of subjectivity from feminist phenomenology (Young 2005, Ahmed 2007) and define it for the purpose of this research in terms of motivated action in narrative cinema (Thompson 1999), visual pleasure in narrative cinema, and positions of authority in kinship and protection rackets (Rubin 1975, Dolan 1988, Mulvey 1975).

I define *subjectivity* as the tendency of characters to interact with the world around them rather than merely have that world act upon them. That is, characters act with motivation: they choose to act rather than merely find themselves caught up in events; they observe the world and respond rather than serve as the scenery or objects toward which other, motivated, characters gaze and respond; and they protect and rescue dependents in need rather than merely depend upon others to act on their behalves. To assess the gender distribution of subjectivity and thus the extent to which male and female superbeings appear distinct, I analyze this subjectivity through the variables of *motivation*, especially motivation to do violence; *sexual spectacle* as both presentation as sexual spectacles and gazes upon such spectacles; and *protection*, including how it relates to protection rackets. Cross-tabulating these characteristics, I can assess the extent to which subjectivity is gendered in two superhero cycles of popular storytelling.

The superhero genre of movies has become a staple in popular culture. Both DC Comics and Marvel have produced roughly 20 movies within the last 8 years alone. The purpose of this project is to evaluate the differences between male and female superhuman characters in these mainstream comic-book films, to determine the extent to which producers of these popular stories have distinguished superbeings by gender and thus provided a gender-dichotomous and unequal view of the world. While more female characters appear in these films and have an active role, the characters' gender performances appear to remain distinct and hierarchical. My research question asks, "To what extent is there a gendered distinction among superbeing characters"? Specifically, to what extent does that gendered distinction organize acts of violence? To what extent does the gendered distinction affect subjectivity?

I begin with a review of scholarly literatures on gendered presentations in comic-hero fantasy and narrative film, and conclude that discussion with hypotheses warranted by those literatures. In my methods section and in my codebook I outline relevant behaviors visible onscreen and specify codes for them. Cross tabulations of such characteristics will allow for a comparison of gendered characters. I expect that the male superbeings will have more subjectivity than their female counterparts, placing them at the top of the gender hierarchy.

I focus this analysis on characters appearing in two 21st century film cycles, the superhero stories drawn from Marvel and DC Comics. I study films from these two companies because they are the most popular and have elevated their films to popular culture icons. This is important because a large audience engages with their depictions of these superbeings and may base views of dichotomous sex partly upon the stories that they consume and retell. Dowler, Fleming and Muzzatti (2006) argue that audience members base ideas about gender and crime on what they view through news and entertainment media, such that lines between those types of

storytelling blur (837). They focus on women in crime narrative as victims, and further focus on questions of their ‘innocence’ suggests the endurance of patriarchal views of gender (841). Davidson (2015) likewise argues, on the basis of her review of a scholarly literature on depictions of crime fighting, that the widespread availability of media give them the power to influence norms regarding crime fighting (1015). In a study evaluating the effect of superhero media viewing on children the authors state, “this study provides the first evidence that viewing superhero programs in the media is related to greater adherence to gender stereotypes for boys in terms of play and activities...exposure to such media was also associated with increased weapon play for both boys and girls” (Coyne et al. 2004:427). These ideas can be used to address the connection between audience members of the superhero film genre and the interpretation of the world through its displays of violence as well as the characters’ levels of subjectivity. Dour and Theran (2011) measured the link between superhero media and unhealthy eating habits in girls, arguing that, “maladaptive perfectionism moderated the relation between endorsement of the superhero ideal and unhealthy eating attitudes for girls only, such that endorsement of the superhero ideal was significantly associated with unhealthy eating attitudes only for adolescents with high levels of maladaptive perfectionism”(93).

The way these two comic-superhero companies depict either negative or positive gender differences has the potential power to shape audience’s views of the gendered world. By allowing superbeing characters to transcend gender dichotomy and engage with the full human spectrum of emotion and wellbeing, we could celebrate people as fully human and disrupt the gender normativity that maintains inequality

Literature Review

Scholars have observed many gendered patterns among superheroes. Women in crime fiction are underrepresented, unlikely to have professional jobs, are objects of sexist portrayals, have their attractiveness emphasized, and are more likely to be victims than perpetrators (Davidson 2015:1016). Female crime fighters are more likely to have feminized roles and more sexualized appearances. In the studies done on *Female Forces* and *Police Women of Broward County* “doing (the feminine) gender as a female crime fighter meant, aside from fighting crime, being caretakers and nurturers, being concerned with appearance, and displaying empathy” (1018).

Even in modern comic series, “the superhero continues to affirm the fantasy of a masculine universe” (Chaney 2007:1439). Superman, for instance, reinforces “masculine values of individualism, moral superiority, mastery over his environment, and a resistance to domestic demands”; and, as the first major superhero, he created a model for others to follow, based in “a gender ideology popularized in the 19th century in which men were permitted to inhabit opposing realms, both the private and the public spheres, whereas women were relegated only to the private” (1439). Superman is able to operate in both spheres while Lois Lane can only operate in a single sphere, which suggests a distinct difference between the characters’ levels of subjectivity.

Though this project focuses on films from 2008-present, comic books and their characters have been around since the early 20th century. A brief history of these two comic book companies and the development of their characters will ground this project in the evolution of comics.

In 1938, during the Golden Age of comic books, Superman was acquired from amateur writers by the company that would grow to become DC comics (Bongco 2000: 96). He was the first superhero and was popular among military personnel (97). Then, the creation of Wonder

Wonder Woman in 1942 further extended patriotic notions in these comics. Superman and Wonder Woman embody their respective gender roles; Superman is hypermasculine, both in appearance and in personality/morals, while Wonder Woman is hyperfeminine, visualized in her costume and her feminine approach to crime fighting. Both superheroes wear the color of the American flag and uphold the rhetoric of the American way of life, complete with morality lessons and attitudes.

The Comics Code was developed due to the link between juvenile delinquency and comics and demanded changes in the genre's story and presentation (98). This led to the Silver Age of comics. The changes included law enforcement being portrayed in a good light. The Silver Age also brought with it some revamped characters with a focus on a background centered on justice (99). When Spider-Man was created in 1971, the Comics Code was modified to allow for the insertion of anti-drug messages as well as violations of law (99). This became known as the Marvel Age, where the concept and qualifications of a superhero was questioned; Spider-Man himself grappled with his identity as a superhero. In the 1980s, comics began using the label "mature content" while bypassing the Comics Code regulations and allow for the increase in violence and sexuality. This allowed for the creation of such comics as *Watchmen*, which had a higher content of violence than previous comics (100).

Women in comics serve a supporting role to the male characters. The girlfriends and other female characters fall into peril, giving the hero masculine behaviors to perform (Bongco 2000:106). While the women must be characterized as well-behaved, alert, and intelligent to be considered "good enough" for the hero, they remain vulnerable to harm and unable to help themselves. Likewise, female villains are almost always victims of circumstance. Many do evil

under the duress of kidnapping, brainwashing, and bribery. They inspire less fear and hatred in heroes than male villains do.

Female Heroes

Wonder Woman, published by DC, became known as the first female superhero. While not being the first masked female hero, she was the first to have her own line of comics and her own story not merely spun off from a subplot in the story of a male superhero. William Marston, the creator of the Wonder Woman comic, idealized matriarchal societies and built them into the storyline (Lepore 2014). Wonder Woman grows up and lives on an island of women thereby solidifying her virgin status by heteronormative standards. She leaves her haven to help a pilot and then decides to stay in the US to help him fight communism and other evils of his world. She pursues his affection both as Wonder Woman and as civilian Diana Prince, her secret alter ego. In this way, she adheres to heterosexual notions of femininity as her character is tied to a male love interest. While she performs as a superhero, she also submits to her feelings for him and therefore places herself in a less powerful position in the relationship.

The character of Wonder Woman is “strong agile, intelligent, and brave. Wonder Woman challenged gender stereotypes, demonstrating that women, too, can rescue people from imminent danger and fight for justice” (Ray 2013:413). The original Wonder Woman did much to battle the gendered ideas of what masculinity is while also defending femininity. For instance, her character often attempted to reform the villains she fought rather than pursue vengeance or destroy them. Ray argues that female superheroes must maintain their femininity while they also take on more masculine characteristics to perform their superhero duties.

Looking at violent female action characters in films from 1991 through 2005, Gilpatric (2010) found that these women were masculine in their orientation to violence (738). She argues that, although contemporary female action characters are violent and capable, they are usually in

romantic relationships with heroes (743). This is because not only are the characters of the genre plot-driven they must also be able to draw large audiences that will pay to see heteronormative relationships and women who are just aggressive enough without betraying the masculinity of their male counterparts (743). Not only are women less likely to commit acts of violence, they use different violent actions, and for different reasons, than their male counterparts use. She argues that masculine violence for a hero is the use of force and aggression combined with the intent to protect the innocent, or conversely for villains to wreak large-scale havoc and destruction. Feminine violence is focused on protecting loved ones (738).

Sherrie Innes (1999) found an inherent contradiction between the toughness of screen women and their femininity. She names several factors of toughness: muscle, presentation, attire, setting, and attitude (13). A tough woman, she claims, “can endure tremendous physical and emotional suffering and still emerge the victor” (13). Toughness has connections to success and strength; traditionally masculine jobs are thought of as tough as well as being privileged over women’s work (20). While the men are considered tough, Innes argues that some women can fall into a category of semi-tough, capable yet still not as capable as their male counterparts (1999:32). Their femininity and sexuality are constantly a focal point of character development and the plot; female investigators go undercover in traditional, sexualized, female roles such as a nurse and a prostitute.

In addition to the evaluation of their toughness, Innes finds that the woman’s ability to kill upholds several archetypes including “killer woman as sex kitten”, “killer woman as insane harpy”, or “tough, but not as tough as the boys” (Inness 1999). The “killer woman as insane” seems to be telling a story that women who are truly tough and have forsaken feminine standards of submission, are certifiably insane. These women are so irrational and unhinged that they

represent a threat to society as a whole and not just the male protagonist. She states, “a hierarchy is established in which women inevitably rank second. This is a common tactic used by the popular media to deemphasize the threat posed by tough women” (151). The gender hierarchy is made more visible through these tactics. Even when the women are tough, or capable of serious violence such as killing, they are subcategorized so as not to encroach on the male territory of violence. That is to say the thought becomes a woman is so strong and can kill any man that crosses her but she will either squeeze them to death with her thighs or she is so completely deranged that anyone could be her target. These are distinctly gendered thoughts attached to feminine violence; there is no evidence that the same holds true for male characters. The archetype of “killer woman as sex kitten” more firmly embodies the necessary contradictory sexuality that all women must hold- the virgin/whore dichotomy. This means that women have to flirt with the line between being sexual and being chaste. So when films portray overly sexualized, powerful women the trait comes with the caveat that the women are then violent and dangerous. Viper in *Wolverine* embodies this “sex kitten” archetype through her literally deadly kiss.

The realm of superheroes opposes masculine strength to feminine beauty. The male superheroes embody traditional masculinity through their visual representation and their abilities. These characters are therefore doing gender by either performing masculinity or performing femininity. The men are depicted with massive muscles over their entire bodies and they have active powers such as super strength or destructive weapons, which are typically built into the character’s identity and therefore prevents any separation. Female superheroes perform femininity through their slim waists and pronounced breasts while their powers are typically less

active than those of their male counterparts. For example, the Invisible Woman has the power of invisibility, which means she literally disappears from our screen throughout the film.

To theorize such patterns of female superhero toughness and femininity, I draw upon a feminist theory of subjectivity, applying it to fictional characters on screen.

Subjectivity

Drawing upon Iris Marion Young's feminist phenomenology, we can define a character's *subjectivity* as the extent to which they are subjects acting upon the world. Such characterization contrasts to mere romantic partnership with protagonists. Subjective characters respond to objects upon which they gaze rather than remaining mere unmotivated spectacle; and they do rather than merely benefit from protective violence. After outlining these aspects of subjectivity, I will show how we can observe them on screen and evaluate the extent to which the female characters in this genre are distinct from the male characters, and the extent to which they appear as less than full subjects in comparison to their male counterparts.

Young (2005) combines Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and de Beauvoir's feminist theory of the situated woman to create a feminist phenomenology, a theory which refocuses the intentionality of the body to reflect female embodiment, where they had previously been socialized objects rather than conscious subjects. She describes the ways that thinking as objects rather than subjects physically alters female bodies, and argues that women's role as "other" or *immanent* limits the ways they move, interact with others, and understand the spaces around themselves. Young says, "woman is thereby both culturally and socially denied the subjectivity, autonomy, and creativity that are definitive of being human and that in patriarchal society are accorded to men" (31).

Young also considers the role that fear plays in motility. Women, she argues, lack the confidence in their body's capability to accomplish a task as well as a fear of being hurt, leading

to a reduced or different motility (34). Therefore, I posit that women are depicted as fearful thereby needing protection to eliminate their fears of being hurt, which would allow for the motivated actions of male characters towards that protection. The fear that the female characters possess is a gendered performance that upholds masculine protection of women.

Subjectivity is further theorized to include motivated action and objectification literatures as additional avenues for analysis. Through the analysis of motivated action this project is able to operationalize capability and autonomy. The literature on objectification and the male gaze allows for the analysis of external gendering rather than an internalized gender performance.

Subjectivity as Motivated Action

Kristin Thompson (1999) outlines the process by which motivation and plot are framed in narrative cinema. She describes the four parts of a standard Hollywood feature, which include *setups* that established initial motives of protagonist and their antagonists, *complicating actions* that revise those goals, *developments* that depict unsuccessful struggles to meet those goals, and finally *climaxes* that consist of extended struggles that resolve those goals.

In the first act, or setup, “often the protagonist conceives one or more goals during this section, though in some cases the setup sticks to introducing the circumstances that will later lead to the formulation of the goals” (Thompson 1999: 28). In the complicating action, the protagonist encounters an additional obstacle or goal that requires a change in action, altering the motivation but still focusing on the protagonist(s). Third acts, or developments, are largely made up of the protagonists’ struggles to achieve their goals, “often involving incidents that create action, suspense, and delay” (28). Third acts tend to end with new threats, often grave, setting up the battles to come. In a fourth act or climax, “action shifts into a straightforward progress toward the final resolution, typically building steadily toward a concentrated sequence of high action”

(28). The consistent use of this four-act structure in Hollywood allows for direct observation of the motivations that drive plots, the actions, revisions, and accomplishments that establish much of the subjectivity of protagonists and their antagonists.

Taking into account these aspects of activity/subjectivity in narrative cinema, we can define a *subjective* character as driving a film's four-act plot with her own motivations, acting beyond mere adjunct and attachment to a protagonist/antagonist, thus having her own goals, perhaps even in conflict with a romantic partner. Thompson's act-breaks mark those actions that occur at the end of the acts, to move plots into their next phases.

Objectification

The use of women as objects in narrative film echoes the use of them in kinship. Gayle Rubin's kinship theory (1975) hypothesizes that men use the buying, selling, and trading of women (and such subordinated groups as marginal men, children, and nonhuman animals) to establish stronger relationships with each other. Women in that economy are valued for their use in establishing those relationships. Rubin argues that women serve as a commodity through which men can build social ties with one another via their relationships with women.

Mulvey (1975) draws a related distinction between the active/male and the passive/female, which we can connect to Thompson's focus on motivation and thus address sexual objectification. In Mulvey's theory of the pleasure of narrative film, the active/passive split between characters divides protagonists from the spectacles upon which they gaze, to which protagonists respond with clearly motivated action. The motivated actor is active, the one to move the plot into the next act, often in a struggle to possess or control the more passive spectacle upon which he has gazed, be that a beautiful woman or some other object of desire. In conventionally gendered films, the active man drives the narrative with his struggle to master his

world, while the passive woman provides his (and the viewer's) visual stimulation via her spectacular beauty. The women of narrative cinema maintain a "to-be-looked-at-ness" (p.11) as a complement to the male gaze shared by viewers and protagonists. The actions that comprise the sexual spectacle are *unmotivated*, in that they provide sexual display and thus visual pleasure for onlookers without moving the spectacular character toward any goal.

The male gaze, as Mulvey theorized it, has become a cornerstone of feminist theory of objectification of women. Dolan (1988) notes that feminist critics have come to a consensus "that film offers visual pleasure by objectifying the women in the narrative for the active male protagonist, with whom the male spectator is meant to identify" (48).

Dolan's discussion of Richard Foreman's work connects kinship theory to the male gaze in cinema. Foreman's work in *Sophia* uses naked and nearly naked women as objects in his plays to attract the attention of the male gaze. Dolan discusses the ways in which Foreman situates their bodies as commodities, to be bought and sold, while not allowing his male spectators to buy them. He is simultaneously saying they are for sale and cannot be sold. She says, "They are his property, and while he displays them to male spectators in a game of hide and seek, he frustrates the system of male exchange in which women are commodities who are assigned value only through their purchase on the visual economy" (Dolan 1988:53). In this way, we can think about how the female characters in the superbeing film genre, and their connection to the male characters, makes them commodities in Gayle Rubin's kinship theory as well as working towards establishing the male gaze of the audience. Foreman's use of women frustrates the male gaze while simultaneously upholding the concept of women as commodities for male exchange. Dolan's concept of the male gaze is similar to Mulvey's description of the sexual spectacle by establishing characters as commodities to be viewed for other character's pleasure.

Mulvey's active/passive split is useful to determine if the character is relegated to passive or unmotivated sexual spectacle (because she is a woman), rather than the active role of the male characters, which may happen also to include sexual spectacle as they move toward their goals. Another element Thompson points to is the New Hollywood movies' use of romance as a secondary goal for the protagonist. She argues it makes for a more dynamic plotline, with the character's main goal driving the plot and the secondary goal providing character development and instances of comedic relief. The two goals are separate but eventually converge, usually in the third act, where accomplishing one helps to accomplish the other (Thompson 1999:9-10).

Protective Violence

Like sexual display, violence in the real world is gendered. Paula Ruth Gilbert (2002) argues that women and men perform violence differently and are therefore treated differently in the justice system, through prison sentencing and the dialogue surrounding their capacity for violent behaviors. This is made visual in the comic film genre through the characters' direct/indirect powers and their ability to perform violence against other characters. One method of this gendered violence is enacted through a protection racket.

Feminist theory of male protection rackets builds upon sociological theory of the state as protection racket to explain that gendering of violence. Iris Marion Young's (2003) conceptualization of the protection racket focuses upon the contemporary security regime of the state. The protection racket is a combination of the masculine violence of the protector and the subordinated role of the protected. Post-9/11, the state intensified its racket, making all US citizens increasingly subordinated to its protection.

The protection racket is made up of "good" men, "good" women, "bad" men, and "bad" women. A declared state of emergency combined with heightened patriotism is the foundation of

the protection racket and is upheld in order to protect those designated as innocent. “Good” men protect the women and children from “bad” men. “Good” women accept the protection and, as Young states, “happily defer to his judgment in return for the promise of security he offers” (2003:224), while “bad” women refuse his protection altogether. Those women threaten the protection racket.

The gender hierarchy is further theorized through Stiehm’s (1982) discussion of the role of domination opposed to the role of benign. Masculine protection can sexually and physically dominate women, or the role of benign, which desires to shield women from the threats of the world and other dominating men. The dominating man represents the “bad” men wanting to hurt women; and the benign protector represents the “good” man wanting to protect women (Stiehm 1982). Dominating men enter into the domains of benign protectors, seeking to steal and capture the women protected there. Typically, these bad men sexually threaten the women of the good men. On both sides, in conflict with each other, men wield violence in a way that maintains their collective control of women. In her account of the story of the rape of the Levite’s concubine that Rousseau used to theorize the social contract, Horeck argues that “rape is much more than a weapon of war, it is the founding cause of war; just as even more curiously, it is eventually the means by which the war is concluded, the community restored and the social contract initiated” (2004:42). Women in harm’s way must establish that they are good if they are to enjoy men’s protection; and they do this by submitting to the force, including rape, wielded by their protectors.

In the context of this gendered protection racket, feminine violence tends to differ both in its intent and its performance. It is characterized by the protection of “good” people based on traits such as maternal instinct. It is performed based on actions such as self-sacrifice (Stiehm

1982). Stabile (2009) applies this theory to superhero movies: “The superhero is first and foremost a man, because only men are understood to be protectors in US culture and only men have the balls to lead” (87). The characters’ masculine presentation is also tied to their need to protect, through *direct* means to harm. These direct ways of doing violence manifest in hand-to-hand combat or through the use of a directly harmful superpowers. *Direct* powers can be used immediately to harm or perform violence while indirect powers can only create situations in which harm might occur. Direct powers include the extreme heat emanating from Superman’s eyes, where his indirect powers to harm include his ability to fly. Flight may provide a condition for violence but is not sufficient by itself.

Employing this framework, I define *feminine violence* as direct violence linked to womanhood. This can be through seduction or the use of ‘feminine wiles’. It could also include distinctly feminine forms of violence such as scratching with long nails or biting (much like Catwoman), as these are not normative masculine traits or methods. Additionally, feminine violence is for protection, escape, or deflection, rather than an initiation of attack on an opponent. While male characters do have indirect powers, those would either be supplementary to their active ones, not considered their main powers, or aligned with reduced status into a more secondary/supportive role.

Due to the PG and PG-13 ratings of the majority of these movies, the theme of sexual violence is absent from the protection rackets. However, threats against the life of the women of the good men, the protective violence used by those good men, and the persistent demand that women submit to those men to earn that protection, combine to form a system of control, a way to subdue all women to the control of all men, however much those men may pursue conflict with each other. Thus, characters able to perform protective violence have more subjectivity

than the objects of their protection do. A character's status as victim in a fight that she did not choose to enter, which another character must protect, decreases her subjectivity. I use protective violence as a category because it is the focus of the work these characters perform. I will measure the extent to which plot-driving motivation, unmotivated sexual spectacle, and protective violence distinguish male from female characters and thus maintain a dichotomous sex hierarchy in these movies.

Gender is a dichotomous hierarchy that subordinates women. The hierarchy is perpetuated by the gender work of individuals that places them in either a dominant or subordinate position. The literature has illuminated the myriad of ways this gender work is accomplished. In regards to this project and the focus on gendered performances of violence and protection the literature is establishing the heteronormative masculine characters as maintain a dominant position in the hierarchy. Traits that are commonly associated with masculinity, such as strength and planning, are preferred for superbeing characters. Other feminine characteristics such as beauty and submission would not be preferred in superbeing characters. If the main function of these characters in their roles is to be able to diagnose a problem, create a plan of action, and solve the problem then masculine.

Each section of the literature review informs the research questions that the hypothesis intends to answer. The literature on sexual spectacle outlines the ways in which women in film are often used as commodities in order to establish relationships or resolve conflicts between male characters. This theorization informs the research questions: Who is being placed in the subordinated objectified role? What purpose does it serve and how does it inform the gender hierarchy? Displays of sexual spectacle would be unmotivated towards the character's plot-

turning actions. The use of such displays would impact their subjectivity by placing them as mere objects in the world.

Additionally, the literature for protection is based off the gender dichotomy that stipulates one character must need protection from another character. This section informs the following research questions: Which characters are able to offer protection? Which character's are in need of protection? A character's superpower and capacity to harm is inseparable from their identity of as a superbeing. If those powers have a basis in the gender hierarchy then there is an arbitrary distinction between them.

For Mulvey's theorization of plot-turning actions the power lays within a character's ability to move the plot forward and thereby impacts their overall subjectivity. This literature informs the research question, "Are male and female superbeing character equally important to the forward movement of the plot of the film?"

My review of this literature justifies four hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: There is a correlation between superbeings' unmotivated displays of sexual spectacle and sex category.

Hypothesis 2: There are positive relationships between superbeings' ability to protect and sex category as well as sexual spectacle. As a corollary, I expect positive correlations between status as nonvoluntary object of protection, womanhood, and sexual objectification.

Hypothesis 3: There is a correlation between a character's superpowers' direct capacities for violence and harm and their subjectivity.

Hypothesis 4: There are a positive correlations between the proportion of plot turns that hinge on their changes in motivations, sex category, sexual gazing at others, provision of protection to others, and exercises of direct capacities to harm.

Methods

Data Collection

I test these hypotheses with a qualitative content analysis of the most popular superbeing movies in contemporary cinema. This methodology allows the project to focus on the visual representation of the gender work performed by the superbeing characters. By starting with data collection from the films this project can inform future studies as this genre continues to expand. While future projects would more greatly benefit from the data collected through interviews, that is not the purpose of this project.

A summative qualitative content analysis allows this project to study the images and actions from the films through a method of counting and comparisons. The codes are deductive in that they are derived from previous research on this topic. The latent concepts can then be interpreted through these codes in order to draw conclusions about complex social topics such as gender inequality and subjectivity (Fang and Shannon 2005). It allows me to focus more on how the superbeing characters are portrayed and made into visual representations of those topics. Each section of codes addresses the research questions and hypothesis that correspond to the themes of gender inequality found in the literature. Each section addresses a specific category and the actions and images that correspond. The data is collected through a combination of yes/no questions, Likert scales (0 not at all-4 extreme), and counting (“How many times.”). This methodology is appropriate for using the data collected from these codes in order to draw

conclusions on the larger themes of gender inequality and subjectivity. The initial coding was created in combination with codes from previous research and discussed with another coder. The two coders watched three films and completed the codesheet, discussing any variance in answers to determine a more clear phrasing for the code. The finalized codesheet was written to eliminate personal bias. Intercoder reliability was established to have a Holsti's coefficient of .90, which is significantly reliable.

DC Comics and Marvel are the two largest and most well known comic companies in the US. Their big-budget, heavily marketed feature films are largely rooted in the expansive history of the original (and revamped) comic books. Due to project-size constraints as well as wide recognition given these characters and storylines, I limit my sampling frame to films from these two companies without unfairly biasing a study of popular cinema.

I draw my list of films from both the DC Comics and Marvel official websites, as both companies provide a complete list of their movies. I select appropriate films from both of these sites. The timeframe stretches from 2000-2016, based on the release dates of the films and their availability, yielding approximately 30 movies. They are live-action films, available for viewing via DVD rental/purchase or online databases such as Netflix. For example, *The Avengers* was released to cinemas in 2012, is a live-action movie, and is available to rent from Netflix or for purchase. A list of movies is located in the Appendix.

The code sheet is split into sections that correspond with each section of the literature review, aside from the initial section used to collect the character's background information such as demographics, movie title, and status. The next section focuses on Sexual Spectacle as unmotivated displays of sexuality and uses either a Likert scale from 0-4 to analyze the character or a simple count method of instances. For example, for measuring how revealing overall a

character's costume a Likert scale from 0-4 is used. For measuring how many times a character flirts to achieve a goal a simple counting method is used. The next sections on Motivation and Violence and Protection also use a simple counting methods as well as a few yes/no questions. Each character begins at a baseline of zero and is either awarded or deducted points based on these codes. This type of collection allowed for the Overall Subjectivity Score to be represented as a numbered scale. Additionally these codes eliminate deviations in intercoder reliability.

The research questions and hypotheses are focused on the dichotomy in the gender hierarchy. Each hypothesis is written with the examination of gender as the focal point. The crosstab statistics will be able to show each code based on gender. The tables will more easily show how each code has a gender distinction and will allow the analysis section to scrutinize that distinction.

This section will describe the measures of gender-dichotomous performance, allowing me to assess the degree to which these films make genders distinct. I use a code sheet to record depictions of motivation, sexual objectification, and instances of violence and protection. A copy of my code sheet is located in the Appendix. I analyze these data by cross-tabulating characteristics. Each character starts at zero and either accumulates points or loses points on each of the three scales of subjectivity from there. Each code has a value of one meaning the character gains a point for variables that positively relate to subjectivity as well as lose a point for those variables that negatively impact subjectivity. This allows for the data to show the spectrum of subjectivity rather than upholding a dichotomous status as either subjective or objective.

This code sheet is a combination of codes from similar studies (Gilpatric 2010; Innes 1999; Rauch 2012; Neuendorf 2009) and additional codes added to address my specific hypotheses and new theoretical framework. Some codes have also been altered to better fit with the analysis of

this project. The objective of this research is to evaluate and measure the levels of subjectivity, as defined by this project, held by the male and female supercharacters and to measure the correlations between sex, subjectivity, protective violence, role in sexual display, and exercise of capacities to harm. This allows me to assess the degree to which these films maintain the gender dichotomy or the ways they challenge gender relations by breaking down the hierarchy.

Sexual Spectacle

I evaluate attractiveness through the characters' presentations as unmotivated sexual spectacles for other characters or audiences to enjoy. I define flirtation or seduction as any obvious displays of sexuality with the intent to influence another character. Examples of this could be kissing, being coy, going on a date, or comments alluding toward sexual activity. For example, when characters wear costumes that reveal skin, especially erogenous zones, but which make combat or other pursuits of goals difficult, then such characters provide unmotivated sexual spectacles, objects of a male gaze that Mulvey theorized in Hollywood cinema.

Other examples include: the number of times superbeings use flirtation and the promise of sex to achieve goals (such as extracting information), fighting with their hair loose around their face, fighting in high heels, and having clothing removed/destroyed during fights. Innes' evaluation of femininity helped to inform several codes for background information that focus on highlighting masculine/feminine behaviors that uphold the gender dichotomy. For example, codes relating to beauty standards such as long, loose hair on women, allow for a test of the hypothesis that to the movies distinguish women from their male counterparts in a clear visual manner. These measures correspond to Hypothesis 1 listed in my Methods section. For the category of *sexual spectacle*, I subtract a point for each scene when the character provides an unmotivated sexual spectacle (i.e., one provided out of the line of protective duty or in a way that

compromises protective violence, such as wearing clothes that make combat difficult) for others, be they filmgoers or characters.

Motivation

This section is rooted in the literature based on motivated action from Thompson and Mulvey as discussed in more detail in the literature review. This subcategory of codes works to create a link between a character's motivation and their level of subjectivity. A character's change of goal that occurs near the act-break provides the motivation that drives the plot and progression of the four-act film. For the category of *motivation*, I count the number of act-breaks at which each superbeing moves the plot forward: between 0 (none) and 3 (one for each act-break). For the purposes of the overall subjectivity score, I use the average number of instances from each movie in which the character has a role.

In addition to act-break formations of goals, a set of codes will be used to measure how many times a character must be rescued from a fight they did choose to enter and a fight they did not choose to enter. This particular code is connected to subjectivity based on the part of the definition that requires a subjective being to act upon the world rather than having the world act upon them. This means that characters that need to be rescued from fights they did choose would have more subjectivity than those who must be rescued from fights they did not choose.

Violence and Protection

The protection racket is operationalized in this project as a clear structure in which a heroic character provides protection by way of violence against threats and demands in return the right to do violence even when it also threatens those under his protection. The head promises protection from outside threats in exchange for loyalty and license to practice violence. While

the intention of this project is not to remark on the nuanced versions of protection rackets, only those rackets that are clearly verbalized by characters will be evaluated. An example of this is found in *X-Men: The Last Stand*, when the antagonist Magneto clearly addresses a large group of mutants to ask for their loyalty in his cause and their bodies in his army in exchange for a position in his “New World” where mutants rule over humans. He promises them protection and power in the new world if they fight alongside him. I will count the number of times or the degree to which each superbeing plays a role within a protection racket: threat, protector, victim, object of protection. This can include establishing and running a protection racket for the state or within a family, falling victim to a protection racket, or fighting against a protection racket. As part of this, I will count instances of violence committed by superbeings, and list their powers/abilities/gadgets, to determine whether they have direct or indirect powers to harm. For example, Thor’s hammer can be used directly as a weapon while the Invisible Woman’s power to vanish is only indirectly useful as a weapon.

As a subcategory of protection, I count how often superbeings protect innocents within families, among fellow combatants, or in a larger civilian population. For the category of *rescue/protection*, add a point each instance within a scene a superbeing rescues or protects a character or a crowd from imminent harm. I subtract a point for each time one must be rescued from danger not entered into by choice. I add a protective-violence point for possession of powers of direct harm, such as killing force or bladed weapons built into a body.

Data Analysis

Descriptive Statistics

The gender split between characters coded for this project is 40% female, 57% male and 2% unknown. The gap between these two numbers can be explained by the fact that this genre focuses on a male audience, likely leading to a higher number of male protagonists and antagonists with female characters in smaller numbers and supportive roles. Of the superbeing characters coded, 62% were protagonists while only 30% were antagonists. Superbeings working or fighting alongside groups were more likely to be protagonists than antagonists.

For the category defining the characters' power, 54.4% of characters had direct powers to harm and 26.7% had both direct and indirect, while 18.9% had indirect powers only. In addition to this 81.1% of all characters did not flirt or use seduction to achieve a goal with only 18.9% using their sexuality for that purpose. For the category of sexual spectacle 55.6% of superbeings had zero instances and a combined 62.2% for more than one instance. In regards to protection rackets, 77.8% of characters do not run a racket and 53.3% do not fight against an established racket. For the subcategory of failing to protect their self, 67.8% of superbeings had at least one instance of *failure*, which includes being defeated in a fight, outsmarted by an opposing combatant, or being killed. These frequencies help to illuminate a divisive split between the categories and provide a foundation for the data analysis that will be continued with my crosstab statistics.

Table 1.

		Gender			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	F	36	40.0	40.0	40.0
	M	52	57.8	57.8	97.8
	Unknown	2	2.2	2.2	100.0
	Total	90	100.0	100.0	

Table 2.

Position					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Antagonist	27	30.0	30.0	30.0
	Double Agent	1	1.1	1.1	31.1
	Protagonist	56	62.2	62.2	93.3
	Switch Sides	6	6.7	6.7	100.0
	Total	90	100.0	100.0	

Table 3.

Power					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Direct	49	54.4	54.4	54.4
	Direct & Indirect	24	26.7	26.7	81.1
	Indirect	17	18.9	18.9	100.0
	Total	90	100.0	100.0	

Table 4.

Flirt					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	No	73	81.1	81.1	81.1
	Yes	17	18.9	18.9	100.0
	Total	90	100.0	100.0	

Table 5.

Sexual Spectacle					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	0	50	55.6	55.6	55.6
	1	18	20.0	20.0	75.6
	2	8	8.9	8.9	84.4

	3	9	10.0	10.0	94.4
	4	3	3.3	3.3	97.8
	6	1	1.1	1.1	98.9
	10	1	1.1	1.1	100.0
	Total	90	100.0	100.0	

Table 6.

Fight Against Protection Racket					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	No	48	53.3	53.3	53.3
	Yes	42	46.7	46.7	100.0
	Total	90	100.0	100.0	

Table 7.

Run Protection Racket					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	No	70	77.8	77.8	77.8
	Yes	20	22.2	22.2	100.0
	Total	90	100.0	100.0	

Table 8.

Fail to Protect Self					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	No	29	32.2	32.2	32.2
	Yes	61	67.8	67.8	100.0
	Total	90	100.0	100.0	

Crosstabs

For Hypothesis 1, which states, there is a correlation between superbeings' unmotivated displays of sexual spectacle and sex category, I ran the cross tabs evaluating how revealing overall a costume is (Table 9 and 10) and number of instances of flirting by a character (Table 11 and 12).

Table 9.

REVEALING COSTUME BY GENDER					
Count					
		GENDER			Total
		F	M	Unknown	
Revealing Overall	0	4	27	0	31 (34%)
	1	8	4	0	12 (14%)
	2	5	2	0	7 (8%)
	3	8	4	0	12 (13%)
	4	1	0	0	1
	N/A (no costume)	10	15	2	27 (30%)
Total		36	52	2	90

Table 10.

Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	26.040 ^a	10	.004
Likelihood Ratio	27.571	10	.002
N of Valid Cases	90		

Out of the twenty-six female superbeings that wear a costume, nine of them were coded as having a costume that was quite a bit revealing or extremely revealing. Of the thirty-seven male superbeings that wore a costume, only four were coded as quite a bit revealing and no one with an extremely revealing costume. Of those thirty-seven male superbeings, twenty-seven were coded as having a costume that was not revealing at all. The degree to which a costume reveals skin strongly distinguishes characters by sex. A revealing costume does more to establish and

reaffirm normative masculine and feminine gender work than it does to aid in the work done by a superbeing.

Table 11.

FLIRTING BY GENDER					
Count					
		GENDER			Total
		F	M	Unknown	
Flirt	No	20	51	2	73 (81%)
	Yes	16	1	0	17 (19%)
Total		36	52	2	90

Table 12.

Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	25.581 ^a	2	.000
Likelihood Ratio	27.885	2	.000
N of Valid Cases	90		

The table shows that fifty-one of the male characters never use flirtation to achieve a goal. Twenty of the women do not use flirtation while sixteen of them do. This use of flirtation is rooted in feminine displays of violence.

For Hypothesis 2, which states, there are positive relationships between superbeings' ability to protect and sex category as well as sexual spectacle. As a corollary, I expect positive correlations between status as nonvoluntary object of protection, womanhood, and sexual objectification; the code sheet offers two separate coding instances for character's need of rescue or protection. The first is a need for rescue/protection from a fight for which the character volunteered. Eleven women had no instances of needing rescue or protection while the remaining twenty-five had at least one. Twenty-four men had no instances of needing rescue or protection while the remaining twenty-eight had at least one.

The second subcategory is the need of rescue/protection in a fight for which they did not volunteer. This scenario could be an ambush or forced participation. Twenty-four women had no instances of needing rescue or protection while the remaining twelve had at least one. Thirty-nine men had no instance of needing rescue/protection, while the remaining thirteen had at least one instance. This crosstab shows that gender does not have a strong correlation to a character needing rescue or protection from both fights for which the volunteer and for those which they do not volunteer. This lack of needing rescue increases the characters overall subjectivity score.

Gender does not have a strong correlation to being a victim of a protection racket, fighting against a protection racket, and establishing or running a protection racket. Only six out of the total thirty-six female characters were coded as a victim and only three out of the total fifty-two men were coded as a victim.

Table 13.

FIGHT AGAINST RACKET BY GENDER					
Count					
		GENDER			Total
		F	M	Unknown	
Fight Against	No	22	25	1	48 (54%)
	Yes	14	27	1	42 (46%)
Total		36	52	2	90

For Hypothesis 3, which states, there is a correlation between a character's superpowers' direct capacities for violence and harm and their subjectivity, I ran the crosstabs fighting against a protection racket (Table 13) and harming a hero (Table 14 and 15).

Twenty-two women do not fight against one, and fourteen do. Twenty-five men do not fight against one, and twenty-seven do. This shows a fairly even split between each group fighting or not fighting against an established protection racket. The subcategory of running a protection racket shows that only a total nineteen male and female characters run a protection

racket (out of a total ninety male and female characters). This means approximate 79% of all characters do not run a protection racket. This could account for the data in the other subcategories- if there isn't a protection racket then characters cannot be a victim of them or fight against them. Male and female characters complete protection of civilians, loved ones, combatants, and their selves in nearly equal proportions. The subcategory that counts failure to protect one's self shows that male and female superbeings fail to protect themselves. Twenty-five women have at least one instance of failure to protect their self and thirty-four men fail to protect their selves.

Table 14.

HARM HERO BY GENDER					
Count					
		GENDER			Total
		F	M	Unknown	
Harm Hero	0	19	22	1	42 (47%)
	1	8	13	0	21(23%)
	2	6	7	0	13 (14%)
	3	1	7	0	8 (9%)
	4	2	0	1	3 (4%)
	5	0	2	0	2 (2%)
	9	0	1	0	1(1%)
Total		36	52	2	90

Table 15.

Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	21.938 ^a	12	.038
Likelihood Ratio	16.478	12	.170
N of Valid Cases	90		

As with the matter of protection, *harm* is divided into the subcategories of harm against civilians, loved ones, heroes, and villains. Seventeen women and thirty men had at least one instance of harm against them.

Twenty-seven of the superbeings coded in this project are antagonists, which is the character type most likely to harm a hero. If we add characters coded as either switching sides or serving as double agents to this total, then thirty-four out of the ninety characters are not protagonists and are enacting harm against heroes. Considering that the majority of characters are protagonists (62.2%) then we can understand why forty male superbeings and twenty-five female superbeings enact harm on a villain. The finding is significant when we use it to understand which characters are enacting harm and for what reason, which we infer based on the position of the character.

Subjectivity Score

These codes are used to establish the subjectivity score as discussed in the above section on Data Collection. This score is rooted in a feminist subjectivity theoretical framework. The score is based on the categories of violence/protection, motivation, and sexual spectacle. The lowest score is a negative sixteen for Harley Quinn while the highest score is an eighteen for Captain America. It is important to note that some of these characters appear in multiple films so they may have more opportunity to gain or lose points for this scale. The “unknown” option for gender was only coded in three cases. The first two were for Vision and Ultron in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* and the third was for Groot in *Guardians of the Galaxy*. All of these characters are neither human nor animal- Vision and Ultron are the human personified bodies of an AI system created by Tony Stark and Groot is a human personified extraterrestrial tree-creature. While these characters could not possess the appropriate anatomy for a male/female distinction and

therefore the bases of the gender dichotomy they are all referred to using he/him pronouns.

Vision even has a romantic storyline with a female superbeing character. This will be discussed further in the Discussion section.

Table 16.

Name	Gender	Sexual Spectacle Score	Violence and Protection Score	Motivation Average	Total Subjectivity Score
Harley Quinn	F	-18	2	0	-16
Psylocke	F	-15	4	0	-11
Enchantress	F	-14	3	2	-9
Susan Storm	F	-13	2	1	-10
Wonder Woman	F	-14	4	3	-7
Lady Deathstrike	F	-11	3	0	-9
Rogue	F	-8	1	0	-7
Catwoman 2	F	-10	8	1	-1
Elektra	F	-8	10	0	2
Nebula	F	-8	3	0	-5
Jean Grey	F	-11	6	2	-3
Storm 2	F	-8	3	1	-4
Catwoman 1	F	-6	8	3	5
Katana	F	-8	4	0	-4
Gamora	F	-11	7	2	-2
Human Torch	M	-6	2	1	-3
Quicksilver Xmen 1	M	-5	0	1	-4
Wasp	F	-6	3	0	-3
Mr. Fantastic	M	-5	1	2	-2
Sif	F	-5	3	0	-2
Abigail Whistler	F	-8	6	0	-2
Viper	F	-11	9	1	-1
Magneto 1	M	-5	2	2	-1
War Machine	M	-4	2	0	-2
Angel	M	-6	3	0	-3
Jane Foster	F	-2	1	0	-1

Kitty Pryde	F	-7	5	0	-2
Falcon	M	-5	4	0	-1
Mystique 1	F	-6	6	2	2
Black Widow	F	-7	14	2	9
Antman	M	-4	4	3	3
Loki 1	M	-5	5	2	2
Miranda	F	-2	3	0	1
Typhoid Mary	F	-3	4	0	1
Negasonic Teenage Warhead	F	-5	6	0	1
Faora	F	-4	5	0	1
Storm 1	F	-7	8	1	2
Malakeith	M	-3	4	1	2
Nightcrawler 2	M	-4	4	0	0
Rohan	M	-3	4	2	3
Ivan Vanko	M	-5	6	2	3
Yukio	F	-2	4	0	2
Nightcrawler 1	M	-4	5	0	1
Quicksilver Xmen	M	-4	5	0	1
Kingpin	M	0	2	0	2
Drax	M	-4	6	2	4
Blink	F	-2	4	0	2
Angel Dust	F	-3	6	0	3
Danica Talos	F	-2	5	0	3
Scarlet Witch	F	-9	12	2	5
Magneto 2	M	-4	6	2	4
Magneto 3	M	-5	7	2	4
Ajax	M	-2	5	2	5
Colossus	M	-2	5	0	3
Deadshot	M	-1	4	3	6
Von Doom	M	-1	4	2	5
Laurel Hedare	F	-2	6	2	6
Nyssa	F	0	4	0	4
Boomerang	M	0	4	0	4
Lex Luther	M	0	4	2	6
Croc	M	0	4	0	4
Deadpool	M	-5	9	3	7

Loki 2	M	-4	8	2	6
Hannibal King	M	-2	6	2	6
Bane	M	-5	9	2	6
Vision	Unknown	-1	5	2	6
Winter Soldier	M	-3	8	1	6
Diablo	M	0	5	0	5
Apocalypse	M	-3	8	2	7
Hulk	M	-5	10	1	6
Mystique 2	F	-10	16	1	7
Professor X	M	0	5	3	8
Daredevil	M	-5	10	2	7
Dracula	M	0	6	2	8
Hawkeye	M	-3	9	2	8
Ben/The Thing	M	-3	9	1	7
Groot	Unknown	0	7	1	8
General Zod	M	0	8	2	10
Thor	M	-8	17	3	12
Batman	M	-6	15	3	12
Bullseye	M	0	9	0	9
Quicksilver Marvel 1	M	0	9	1	10
Superman	M	-8	19	3	14
Rocket	M	0	12	3	15
Ultron	Unknown	0	12	2	14
Star-Lord	M	-1	14	3	16
Iron Man	M	-6	20	3	17
Blade	M	-2	16	3	17
Wolverine	M	-7	21	3	17
Captain America	M	-6	21	3	18

Discussion

This project evaluates the extent to which these movies challenge gender inequality by relaxing gender distinction among superbeing characters. I do this with tests of four hypotheses, which were informed by the research questions. Hypothesis 1 states: There is a negative

correlation between superbeings' unmotivated displays of sexual spectacle and other aspects of subjectivity. This hypothesis seeks to answer the research question of "*Is there a difference between male and female superbeings' levels of sexuality?*" It is evaluated through the codes on sexual spectacle and flirtation. These codes draw on the theorization of bodies as commodities and the use of those commodities in narrative film. Innes' (1999) categorization of tough women characters provided the basis for this discussion of sexuality. Her category Killer Women as Sex Kitten explored the theme of sexuality in otherwise aggressive women. As discussed above, female characters are more likely than male characters to use flirtation or seduction to achieve a goal. Analysis of the data supports this hypothesis with the crosstab of gender and flirtation. Only one male character was coded as using flirtation to achieve a goal. In *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* the character Captain America kisses Black Widow, at her command, in order to avoid being caught by the Hydra agents that are searching for them. Of the thirty-six female characters twenty of them do not use flirtation while sixteen of them do. Black Widow has multiple instances of flirtation, which she uses to spy and maintain the larger protection racket that she and her fellow Avenger protagonists maintain. In *The Avengers*, her first scene depicts her extracting information from the arms dealer she has lured with a "date." She manipulates him into thinking she is his captive. The sole instance of male flirtation is instigated by a character that frequently uses her sexuality. This affects the subjectivity score, through a subtraction of one point from the character's total. This means that female characters are losing points more than male characters due to this gendered action.

Hypothesis 2 states that there is a positive relationship between superbeings' ability to protect and other aspects of their subjectivity. As a corollary, I expect a negative correlation between status as nonvoluntary object of protection and other aspects of subjectivity. This

hypothesis seeks to answer the research question “*Is there a gender difference in superbeings ability to protect?*” This hypothesis is evaluated through the codes on rescue/protection from voluntary fights and involuntary fights; protection of civilians, loved ones, combatants, and their self; and failure of protection. The hypothesis and codes are based in the literature on protection and the ways protection is gendered (Stiehm 1982 Young 2003 Stabile 2009). These authors evaluate the ways that the gender hierarchy subordinates women through violence and protection from violence. As posed in the data above, there isn’t a gendered connection to a characters need of rescue or protection. Both male and female superbeings require protection and give protection at approximately equal rates. This could be explained by the inclusion of the coding on being part of a group. The description of this code shows that the majority of characters operate as part of a group or alongside other characters. We can assume that this group dynamic would affect the willingness of characters to protect each other. The survival and success of the team would be dependent on maintaining the active status of all the group members. Additionally, I noticed that as for the villains, their group status was often defined by their henchmen or lackies rather than equal partners, which is more common for hero characters. For example, in the *X-Men* movie the protagonists form a group called the X-Men, who work together to defeat the antagonist Magneto. His character is coded as working with a group, though the members never appear outside the group, and have no authority over planning or execution. This affects the subjectivity of each of these characters through their failure to protect their self without having a group to lend help. Although Magneto is part of a group, he ultimately fails to protect himself from the X-Men and is repeatedly defeated throughout the franchise. His villain status affects the strength of his group, which then in turn leaves him with less protection and lowers his overall subjectivity score.

Hypothesis 3 states that there is a positive relationship between characters' superpowers' direct capacities for violence and their subjectivity. This hypothesis seeks to answer the research question of "*Is violence a gendered act for superbeings?*" The purpose of this hypothesis is to use a code of direct/indirect powers to speak toward their overall subjectivity, specifically drawing on Chaney's (2007) concept of the masculine universe. The logic of the superhero universe shows that the powers with a direct capacity for violence are the desired powers due to the link between violence and the ability to defeat an enemy. If the scenario to be evaluated is a fight between two characters then the most likely winner would have the direct power. For example, if the fight was between Kitty Pryde, who has the power to run through walls, and Wolverine, who has metal claws in his hands, the logical thought would be Wolverine would defeat Kitty. This is influenced by his ability to directly harm or incapacitate her. While Kitty may be able to dodge or avoid Wolverine her power will not directly be able to defeat him. She would then have to rely on a different method to ultimately defeat him. The subjectivity score table shown above highlights the difference between these two characters. Kitty Pryde has a score of negative two and Wolverine has a score of seventeen. Her subjectivity was negatively impacted by her indirect power.

The ways in which violence is performed is gendered. While men typically have normative masculine traits and powers, women's powers are more likely to be wrapped up in their sexuality. The character Viper in *Wolverine* embodies the qualities of the snake. She is literally poisonous; her nails, kiss, and saliva kill or maim her victims, who are men. This feminized and heterosexual form of violence combines the sexuality of her character with her capacity to kill. This is significant because her sexuality is her weapon; she merely has to seduce or kiss a man to kill him. For protective powers, they are often feminized and relegated for

feminine characters. Either those characters are women who act as secondary to the male protagonist or antagonist (Kitty Pryde, Susan Storm, Faora, Blink, etc.) or they are male characters with an indirect power as their dominant power (Nightcrawler). These men are then defined by their indirect power, which decreased their masculinity. They do not represent the hypermasculine superbeings such as Superman or Star-Lord, rather they are relegated to the second tier with other female superbeings.

Hypothesis 4 states that there is a positive relationship between the number of plot turns that hinge on their changes in motivations, and other aspects of superbeings' subjectivity. This hypothesis seeks to answer the research question "*Is there a gender difference in a superbeing's ability to move the plot forward?*" This hypothesis combines Thompson's theory of act-break motivations and the dichotomous gender hierarchy. The data collected from the code sheets supported the hypotheses that the characters' ability to move the plot forward is linked to their sex. If we use the table above of the overall subjectivity score of each character we can see how the characters are split based on their position. The highest scores are held not only by men, but men with direct powers who move the plots forward with their changes of goals. Captain American is present in four films, therefore has twelve chances of moving the plot forward. It is important to note that male characters are more likely to have their own film franchise and therefore have more opportunities to raise their subjectivity score through plot motivation. Due to this I use an average to adjust the character's score.

Subjectivity, theorized by Young (2005) and Ahmed (2007) connects each section of the data to the overlying concept of gender inequality. A character's ability to act upon the world through act-break motivations, direct capacity for violence, and the protection of others defines them as *subjects*. Conversely, a character's inability to do those actions as well as their instances

of sexual spectacle and unmotivated sexual displays in costuming and gender performance relegates them to the role of *object*. The subjectivity score is used to more clearly show a definitive ranking of these characters. Female superbeing characters often hold negative scores. This means that their total deductions from categories that diminish their subjectivity, such as instances of sexual spectacle or revealing costumes, outweigh any points they earn from categories that award them more subjectivity, such as protection/rescuing others. The male characters hold double or triple the scores of their female counterparts, which perfectly highlights the gendered division of the attributes that inform subjectivity.

While feminist theory works closely with queer theory on issues of gender and sexuality, this project uncovered no obvious signs of queer, trans, or nonbinary existence aside from three unsexed characters: Vision, Ultron, and Groot. Both Marvel and DC Comics began by catering to a young and heterosexual male audience, largely excluding non-heterosexual discourses and identities from their character pool. Vision and Ultron are humanoid AI beings and Vision has a romantic storyline. Groot is an extraterrestrial tree-like being. Vision's appearance can be likened to that of a Ken doll, visually presented as male with all the appropriate male-like features (male voice, masculine face and body) but with genitals absent. The romance with the female Scarlet Witch maintains heteronormativity. A strong female character like Scarlet Witch winds up intimately linked to another strong(er) male character. In *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, Scarlet Witch is always with and working alongside her brother. After his death, her character becomes linked with Vision in the only way our gender dichotomy focused on heteronormativity will allow, a romantic partnership. Vision is ostensibly incapable of human emotion or sexual attraction, and yet he has managed to achieve both, as well as an understanding of what they are and how they would affect others. Voiced by hypermasculine, gravel-voiced actor Vin Diesel,

Groot also manages to come off as male, tied to a largely male group of heroes (the Guardians of the Galaxy) that includes a single female character, who predictably provides the male human hero an object for his heterosexual impulses. In these ways, these movies maintain a nearly exclusive focus on gender-dichotomous heterosexuality. Outside of these characters, there is no clear presence of gender-nonconforming, queer, or other non-heterosexual characters. Further research can be done to explore the gender-nonconforming characters (or lack therefore) with a critical queer theory lens.

Further research on superbeing characters can be completed within the coming years as the Marvel and DC Comic universes continually expand their movie franchises. Marvel's film release timeline includes 10 new movie releases after this project's data collection through to the year 2019. With the release of new movies the data will change and evolve to add new characters and change the overall score of current characters. This feminist project would applaud the inclusion of superbeings of color, gender-nonconforming characters, and nonheterosexual or queer storylines in the new movies to come.

Conclusion

The purpose of this project is to evaluate the extent to which subjectivity is gendered. I ask: Do female characters have the same level of subjectivity as male characters? Are these characters equally capable of being super? Feminist subjectivity theory is used to incorporate the ways in which gender impacts a human's ability to act upon the world rather than merely have the world act upon them. The one instance in which my data deviated from the literature led me to expect was through analysis of the protection racket. Instances of a presence of a protection racket were limited; and therefore all the corresponding codes were affected. This can be

addressed through a redefinition of protection rackets to be more conducive to a feminist project within this new genre. Through the reevaluation of “protection” and the exchange necessary for a protection racket, a feminist approach would lead away from the masculine protection rackets outlined in this literature and move toward a definition that includes the myriad of ways power can be distributed and wielded. Through the use of superbeing characters in these films the gender gap has become quite apparent and the data definitively supports the four hypotheses established to estimate subjectivity levels. Ultimately, my findings are consistent with previous studies and with the literature: female characters have less subjectivity than male characters. There is a gender gap in the ability of these characters to be super. Even for instances when a male character’s subjectivity is diminished in one area it is exponentially increased in another area, thereby increasing his overall subjectivity. Tony Stark may need to be rescued on occasion by one of his fellow teammates but his costume is not revealing at all and he enacts more harm on villain combatants making his subjectivity score a seventeen. Black Widow is an aggressive and competent female superbeing with direct powers of harm and yet her subjectivity score is lowered to a nine due to her revealing costume and her instances of being a sexual spectacle. Those gendered traits decrease her ability to act upon the world. She is often relegated to an inactive position for the male gaze, which is further emphasized with her fellow female characters’ low subjectivity scores.

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Appendixes

Film List

Batman Forever (1995)
Batman & Robin (1997)
X-Men (2000)
Blade II (2002)
Daredevil (2003)
X2: X-Men United (2003)
Blade: Trinity (2004)
Catwoman (2004)
Elektra (2005)
Fantastic Four (2005)
X3: The Last Stand (2006)
Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer
(2007)
X-Men Origins: Wolverine (2009)
Iron Man 2 (2010)
Thor (2011)
X-Men: First Class (2011)
The Dark Knight Rises (2012)
Marvel's The Avengers (2012)
Iron Man 3 (2013)
Man of Steel (2013)
Thor: The Dark World (2013)
The Wolverine (2013)
X-Men Days of Future Past (2014)
Captain America: The Winter Soldier (2014)
Guardians of the Galaxy (2014)
Ant-Man (2015)
Avengers: Age of Ultron (2015)
Captain America: Civil War (2016)
Deadpool (2016)
Doctor Strange (2016)
X-Men: Apocalypse (2016)
Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice
(2016)
Suicide Squad (2016)

Codesheet: Content analysis of superhero movies

Identify and describe characters:

Basic Information

Movie Title and Release Date: _____

Name of Superbeing: _____

Position: Protagonist _____ Antagonist _____ Switches sides/ Double agent _____

Gender: ___ Male ___ Female ___ Unknown/other

Race/Ethnicity: ___ White ___ Latino/a ___ Asian ___ Black ___

___ Unknown/other Nonhuman/alien ___ Other

Direct or **indirect** power to harm _____

Superpowers result from:

Highly advanced technology _____

Highly specialized training _____

Birth _____

Coercion/Trauma _____

Gender, Performance and Sexuality

Does the character wear a costume? ___ yes ___ no

Use the scale: **0= not at all; 1= only a little; 2= moderate amount; 3= quite a bit; 4= extreme**

How revealing is the costume *overall*? 0 - 1 - 2 - 3 - 4

How revealing are the sexualized body parts? (Breasts, butt, groin) 0 - 1 - 2 - 3 - 4

How tight is the costume overall? 0 - 1 - 2 - 3 - 4

How many times does the character use flirtation and/or the promise of sex to achieve a goal?

_____ (Motivated)

How many instances of unmotivated sexual spectacle? _____

Use the scale: **0= not at all; 1= only a little; 2= moderate amount; 3= quite a bit; 4= extreme**

How many fights with long hair down? _____

How many fights in heels? _____

How many removals of clothing during fights? _____

relationship status at beginning of the movie _____

change in relationship status _____

status of any romantic partner (antagonist, noncombatant, etc.) _____

Does the change in relationship help the character achieve an act-break goal? ___ yes ___ no

Does the change in relationship status prevent the character from achieve an act-break goal (or need to revise the goal)? ___ yes ___ no

Motivation

goal revised near end of:

setup	complicating action	development
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opposition to other superbeings _____

Violence and Protection

needs of protective violence:	voluntary peril	involuntary peril

victim of a conflict as part of a state or at least organizational protection racket? ___yes ___no

fight against an organizational protection racket? ___yes ___no

establish or run the organizational protection racket? ___yes ___no

mentally unstable? _____ yes _____ no

working/fighting alongside a group? Yes _____ no _____

protective violence	Direct	Indirect	Other
Civilian			
Loved One			
Combatant			

How many times does the character fail to protect self? _____

Acts of Harm	Direct	Indirect	Other
Civilian			
Loved One			
Hero Combatant			
Villain Combatant			