

## Chapter 8

# If S/He Be Worthy: Redditors' Reception to Female Thor

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This study examined Redditors' reactions to the announcement that Natalie Portman will play female Thor in Thor: Love and Thunder. The discussions on Reddit allowed fans to voice support, trepidation, and condemnation of the announcement. The authors analysed over 4000 Reddit comments using thematic analysis, which resulted in seven themes regarding women's voice and agency. They found that many Redditors engaged in bullying, misogyny, and hate speech while others supported the pro-feminist implications. Further, they found that Marvel's attempts at "going woke" drew condemnation from fans espousing male dominance and dividing those that voiced feminist rhetoric.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

As Danesi (2015, p. 4) puts it, popular culture products are "cathartic and empowering", in the sense that they are pleasurable but also aid audiences in "making sense of the world" (O'Shaughnessy 1990, p. 92). One such text that has stimulated meaning-making is the recently promoted "Thor Love and Thunder." In 2019, Marvel announced that Natalie Portman will portray "female Thor" in the upcoming comic adaption.

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The announcement was met with both positive and negative reactions with many taking to the social media platform Reddit, to voice their support, and discontent that a woman was to share the moniker “Thor” with a man. Our objective was to analyze 4092 Reddit comments from five posts to explore the reactions of audiences to the emergence of another female superhero (albeit one of only a few in recent years to grace the big screen). The discussions on Reddit allowed men and women to voice their support, trepidation, and condemnation producing attitudes of sexism for some, and empowerment for others.

Since Marvel announced that Portman was to be anointed the next Thor, discussions have been taking place all over social media, many of them based in feminist rhetoric or masculine dominance. Jane Foster’s character was first included in the comics in 1962 (Lieber & Lee, 1962) and later becomes Thor in 2014 fourth volume of the Thor comics series (Aaron, 2014), so the character’s progression to the big screen was certainly permissible. Jason Aaron, who wrote the fourth volume of Thor, made it clear that Jane Foster becoming Thor was an act of pro-feminism (Curtis & Cardo, 2018). Given the decision to incorporate another superheroine into the Marvel cinematic universe (MCU), and the feminist undertones of the source material, we became interested in discussions about this new character. Specifically, this study explored how introducing female Thor afforded audiences, acting out their agency in the meaning-making that is taking place (McNay, 2002), an opportunity to voice their opinions on what her character means for women and women’s issues in film.

## **BACKGROUND TO REDDIT**

Social media permits the expressing of personal views on perceived significant opportunities or issues because it is easily accessible, it is in principle democratic (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001), although political economy scholars believe this assertion to be highly contentious (Wimann, Weiss-Blatt, Mengitsu, Tvergerman & Oven, 2014), and potentially encourages a plurality of voices. For example, in November 2017, Reddit had over 430 million active and diverse members “sharing the things they care about most” (Redditinc.com, n.d.). Such sharing is permissible because social media sites can maintain individuals’ anonymity making people less inclined to feel embarrassment or isolated in an online exchange (McDevitt, et al., 2003). However, it can also prove problematic by facilitating the development of echo chambers where individuals select media content that supports their views rather than looking for alternative perspectives (Garrett, 2009; Flaxman, Goel & Rao, 2016). The threat of negative responses to comments can also impact the willingness of people to voice their perspectives (Liu & Fahmy, 2011). Although the latter issues of social media could skew our data, our interest lies in reviewing

the opinions of people looking to assert their agency and voice on the decision to incorporate female Thor into the MCU.

Reddit was chosen as the social networking site for analysis because it is in amongst the top five most visited websites in the United States (Redditinc.com, n.d.), it describes itself as “the front page of the internet” and content that is posted on the site has been found to go viral, appearing on other social networking sites within days of initial publication (Anderson, 2015; Singer, Flöck, Meinhart, Zeitfogel & Strohmaier, 2014). It is conducive to community discussion with conversations taking place about topics ranging from breaking news to fan theories (reddit.com). Individuals can post text, links, photos, and videos, and other contributors can upvote or downvote content that they like or dislike (Anderson, 2015). It is popular amongst young audiences, with 15% of male internet users between the ages of 18-25 using the site. The site is more popular among men than women, with only 5% of female internet users choosing to contribute to Reddit (Duggan & Smith, 2013). The value of Reddit is that it is user-generated content and those contributing are using the site to “set the news agenda, cultural trends, and popular narrative of the day” (Weninger, Zhu & Han, 2013, p. 1). Therefore, although the demographics of users appear to favor young males, Reddit is a worthwhile platform for analysis because communities mediate the content of others (Anderson, 2015) and the website encourages “authentic” human communication (Redditinc.com, n.d.)

Furthermore, we opted to analyze the comments on the social networking site Reddit, because as Rheingold (2008) has argued, digital media affords people the means to express themselves and to voice their concerns and opinions on matters of civic importance. Although the views of individuals on the move to incorporate Natalie Portman as female Thor is not necessarily an issue of civic importance, the point is that new media, and especially social media, let people keep up-to-date with what is happening in society and provides a means for expressing personal identity understandings. For example, Quan-Hasse and Young (2010) found that social media users would engage with the likes of Facebook for sharing problems (discussing concerns), sociability (meet people), and social information (being aware of what was happening to others). Accordingly, social media has become a means for people to use their voices to support or condemn beliefs and actions that are considered personally relevant (Wang, Hmielowski, Hutchens & Beam, 2017). Such expression of their attitudes on issues, such as Portman as female Thor, is an act of agency. Generally speaking, agency is “the capacity for purposive action, the ability to make decisions and pursue goals free from violence, retribution, and fear, but it also includes a cognitive dimension” (Gammage, Kabeer & van der Meulen Rodgers, 2016, p. 6) and therefore means that those enacting their agency can make choices or voice opinions that reflect their personal preferences and needs. Agency, in the case of women, means being able to speak out, particularly against

patriarchal oppression, in an act of empowerment and assertion of control (Parpart, 2013). Therefore, the comments expressed on Reddit are acts of agency that offer a glimpse into how genders frame the debate around female Thor.

By providing a platform to negotiate and voice opinions, social media embodies Habermas' (2010) notion of a public sphere: where citizens can debate the merits of ideas in a neutral and dialogic way forging the development of public opinion. In an ideal public sphere free from external influences, voice or "the capacity to express one's opinions and thoughts and to make them count in the course of public discussion" (Bonvin & Thelen, 2003, p. 1 as cited in Bifulco, 2013) is encouraged. In so doing, active audiences on the likes of Reddit are enacting their right to be free, visible, and share their aspirations (Bifulco, 2013). Therefore, the platform allows people to have agency as they "debate, contest, inquire, and participate critically" (Appadurai, 2004, p. 79) and can lead to feelings of belonging and validation (Pfeffer & Fong, 2005; Swann, Miltzer & Polzer, 2000) should their views be supported and upvoted by other members of Reddit.

## **Literature REVIEW**

Inequality exists among different genders. As a socially constructed phenomenon, ideas about what it is to be male, female, transgender, non-binary, to name a few, are collaboratively determined (Marecek, Crawford & Popp, 2005) and communicated through language (Butler, 2006). What constitutes gender is not fixed, nor is it universal (Butler, 2006), but it has, nonetheless, become a means of ordering the world (Butler, 2006; Marecek, et al., 2005) and prescribes characteristics, behaviors, and expectations "considered appropriate to males and females" (Unger, 1979, p. 1085). Such prescribed ways of being have produced structural inequalities that see some genders have less power and prestige and can lead to economic disadvantage (Lorber, 1994). As Connell (1995) argues, women have become subordinate to men because the legitimizing of patriarchy has embedded hegemonic masculinity within society. Therefore, women are seen as weak, dependent and in need of control (Eckert, 2014; Schippers, 2007), establishing unequal power relationships and making inequality the status quo, despite efforts of feminists to advocate for gender equality (Casimir, Chukwuelobe & Ugwu, 2014).

Such inequality between men and women is evident in the film industry. Behind the scenes, women hold roles that pay less and have fewer opportunities for promotion. Their roles do not offer much autonomy and are often lower in the organizational hierarchy. For example, women are heavily represented in the costume and makeup department, but few have roles in lighting, directing, and visual effects (Banks & Milestone, 2010). According to Beauvoir (1949/2011, p. 196), inevitably the lack

of female perspectives means that ideas represented in, for example, the media are “the work of men” and produce ideological messages that privilege the male point of view as “absolute truth.” The fact that men’s voices dominate the media industry is cause for concern, because as Goodall (2012) and Pennell and Behm-Morawitz (2015) have found, individuals are influenced by the media they consume, and much of that media projects what Bullen (2009, p. 150) refers to as “harmful gender role stereotypes”. Young women, in particular, are inclined to be “bombarded with images of women as powerless, passive victims noted primarily for their bodies and sex rather than their minds and capabilities” (p. 149). In comparing themselves to the media representations, consumers ultimately experience dissatisfaction with their own identities (Coy, 2009), which can lead to feelings of demoralization (Hatoum & Belle, 2004). Such gender constructions, then, prove particularly problematic when used as a source for individual identity development (Dallacqua & Low, in press).

On the screen, women have often been portrayed as auxiliary to men, young, beautiful, family-oriented, and in occupational roles that lack prestige. Generally, they are underrepresented in comparison to men (Lauzen & Dozier, 2005), but when they appear, they are more often than not characterized as emotional, vulnerable, and sexualized (Taber, Woloshyn, Munn & Lane, 2014). According to Barner (1999), women can be summed up as being dependent and nurturing, while their male counterparts are presented as dominant, aggressive, and autonomous. Women’s subordination and supporting role is all the more present in the superhero genre of movies. With a few exceptions (e.g. Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel), the superhero genre has been dominated by male leads because, for the most part, “boys” are less likely to view films with female leads (Thompson & Zerbinos, 1997). Generally speaking, superheroes are described as those that possess superhuman gifts or abilities (Fawaz, 2016), such as “super strength, flight, telepathy, telekinesis, super speed, super intelligence...and they fight against the oppression and wrongdoing of their arch-nemesis” (Demarest, 2010, p. 1). The stories of superheroes are often categorized as a part of the action genre, making them stereotypically more attractive to males, and for that reason, the central male characters are usually hyper-masculine and embody characteristics that exaggerate ideals considered valuable for genders within society (Dallacqua & Low, in press; Demarest, 2010). Popular characters such as Superman and Batman are depicted as tall, muscular, clean-shaven, and physically fit, enforcing the perception that they are strong and healthy (Demarest, 2010). Furthermore, unlike female superheroes, male superheroes often have autonomy, agency (Joffe, 2019; O’Reilly, 2005; Taylor, 2007), inborn superhuman traits (Demarest, 2010; Stabile, 2009), and a perchance for using physical violence to solve problems (Ingalls, 2012).

Much like elsewhere, women in superhero films are seen as “compassionate, nurturing, and understanding” (Ingalls, 2012; Miller, Rauch & Kaplan, 2016, p. 2),

and have to prove their worth in a man's world, before being considered acceptable superheroes. For example, writing on the character of Wonder Woman, O' Reilly (2005) points out that it was not until Diana successfully navigated a series of physical challenges, that Wonder Woman was validated by her peers. It has led O'Reilly and others (Joffe, 2019; Taber, et al., 2014) to argue that superheroines lack control over their lives and have to defer to authority rather than acting on their own decisions and desires. For example, in discussing the character of Mystique from the X-men franchise, Joffe (2019) argues that by embracing her powers, fulfilling her beliefs and engaging in physical aggression, the character was conceptualized as 'unnatural' until she changed her attitude and behavior at the behest of a man (Professor X). In essence, female superheroines are tempered by their male counterparts because to embrace a pure masculine identity would be to undermine the place of women in society and would devalue "feminine traits such as love, tenderness, and a desire for peace" (Ingalls, 2012, p. 210). It is perhaps why female superheroes continue to be highly sexualized as they engage in acts of aggression (Curtis & Cardo, 2018; Neumann & Parks, 2015; Taylor & Setters, 2011).

Femininity and aggression have been conceptualized in society as mutually exclusive, so to overcome superheroines as oxymorons, these women are regularly depicted in hyper-sexualized attire, or engaging in the use of their feminine wiles (Curtis & Cardo, 2018; Pennell & Behm-Morawitz, 2015; Taylor & Setters, 2011). These superheroines are expected to be attractive, young, have big breasts, skin-tight clothes, and run around in impractical footwear such as heels and boots (Demarest, 2010). It has led scholars to argue that female superheroines have inevitably become window-dressing and lack complex storylines (Murphy, 2016; Pennell & Behm-Morawitz, 2015). Furthermore, the fact that they are included for their sexuality, makes female superheroines more likely to be forgotten, killed off or marginalized (Neumann & Parks, 2015) and with superficial storylines, are pushed into traditional female roles that undermine their superhero capabilities (Miller, et al., 2016). It has led scholars to argue that superhero texts can encourage female viewers to self-objectify (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Pennell & Behm-Morawitz, 2015), with research finding that watching hyper-sexualized, strong superheroines can actually lower women's body self-esteem. Seeing women victimized in superhero films can also produce attitudes that are less egalitarian with women adhering to beliefs of their lower social status (Pennell & Behm-Morawitz, 2015).

Arguments have been made that the sexuality of the superheroines coupled with their physical strength, athleticism, intelligence, and confidence can be considered empowering for audiences and reflective of third-wave feminism (Brown, 2015; Curtis & Cardo, 2018; Taylor & Setters, 2011). That is, female superheroes are depicted as choosing to dress provocatively as a sign of agency and personal power. However, Karlyn (2011) and others (Brown, 2015; Joffe, 2019) believe that the genre

is reframing cultural sexism as a choice made by women, and the sexual exploitation of these women is reinforced when considered in conjunction with the primary audience for action films being men. Therefore, personal agency is lost in accounting for the male gaze and such a perspective is confirmed when, for example, feminist director Joss Whedon included numerous close-up shots of Black Widow's butt (a female assassin in the MCU and one of the first introduced to the franchise) in the *Avengers* films in an attempt to invoke visual pleasure. It has also been found that audiences are also less inclined to consider hyper-sexual superheroines or villains as empowering (Joffe, 2019). In discussing Catwoman, a focus group found her oversexualized depiction and tendency towards manipulating other characters, such as Batman, as bothersome and projecting negative perceptions about the female sex (Taber, et al., 2014).

Whether depicted as hyper-sexual or otherwise, women in superhero films are also typecast as the love interest, victim, or in need of protection. According to Stabile (2009), the United States culture is one that perpetuates the ideology that people need protection, and the groups consistently singled out as victims are women, children, and the elderly. Media reinforce the perspective that men are considered protectors and leaders, and even when women are constructed as superheroes, the male characters rally around to protect the females and possess stronger capabilities, to reinforce women's' weakness. For example, the character of Claire Bennett in the television show *Heroes* was depicted as weaker because her power was regenerative capabilities as opposed to flying, manipulating time or subsuming the powers of others, and the men in her life were required to save her to save the world (Stabile, 2009). Similarly, Scarlett Witch, who is considered one of the strongest *Avengers* in *Age of Ultron* with her ability to engage in telekinesis and mental manipulation, is often infantilized in the films and needs to be 'saved' from herself and others by her male colleagues. Such depictions of women and female superheroines subordinate women in the hierarchy of heroes and act in feminine ways that undermine their agency by being disinclined towards the use of physical violence in pursuit of their protection (Joffe, 2019).

Additionally, female superheroes are often portrayed as needing to be a part of a team, rather than sufficiently capable of working alone. For example, in their analysis of "Black Widow", Gerard and Poepsel (2018) found that Widow lacked agency and individualism because she was portrayed as developing romantic relationships with other superheroes and because she was constructed as a team member. Marvel has only recently announced that the Black Widow character will receive her film, but that is ten years after her initial introduction in the second *Iron Man* film. Brown (2015) has also argued that women working on male-dominated teams become restricted and pigeon-holed as the sex object, reducing the likelihood of them being considered equals by their male peers. The argument is that action heroines, such

as Black Widow, with their ability to “shoot, fight and blow things up” need to be seen primarily as “beautiful and seductive,” to reduce the perception that they pose a threat to the masculinity of their male teammates (Brown, 2015, p. 61). A gender disparity continues to exist in modern Hollywood with superheroines and action women reduced in their capacity to embody masculine ideals.

## **METHOD**

This study utilized data gathered from the website *remmovedit.com*, a clone of *reddit.com* that includes Reddit comments that have been removed by the comment’s user or by a moderator for violating Reddit’s rules. The need to access a third-party backup was necessary as there were many comments that both Reddit users and moderators had removed. All the data collected was available in the public domain and therefore required no ethical approval. In total, 4092 comments (including 317 that had been deleted or removed) were scraped for analysis constituting five individual Reddit posts. The posts were selected based on their temporal proximity, within a day, to Marvel’s announcement of Natalie Portman as “Female Thor”.

Given the large volume of comments, thematic analysis was selected to analyze the content of the posts as it provides a means to summarise large bodies of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is a flexible and simple approach for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within some sort of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis of the data was conducted using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six stages of thematic analysis: 1) familiarising yourself with the data; 2) generating the initial codes; 3) searching for themes; 4) reviewing the themes; 5) defining and naming the themes; and 6) producing a report.

Familiarisation occurred in this study as the raw data was prepared by first reading the Reddit posts and comments, then converting each post’s comments into a tabular format. The tabularized data was then inputted into NVivo 12. The second stage began parallel to the first, as initial codes were noted as familiarisation occurred. NVivo’s auto-code feature was used to further develop the initial codes. Codes identify a feature of the data that may be of interest to the analyst (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A sample of comments was then hand-coded to test the initial codes, resulting in refinements to the code set. All the comments were then coded resulting in 676 statements in the original 4092 comments being of relevance to this study. Potential themes were then identified from the coded data to form the third stage of this study. This is where an analyst begins to consider how different codes form overarching themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and involved searching for groupings in the codes along with any significant comments. For the fourth stage, the potential themes were then reviewed and refined – ensuring each theme was clear and distinct



from the rest, and the data within each theme cohered meaningfully. These themes were then defined in the fifth stage by identifying the essence of each theme and determining what aspect of the data each theme captures. A final review of the themes then occurred, and each theme was named. These are reported in the following section and consist of the following; *issues of representation, perceived greed, name or title?, physicality, taking a man's place, Waititi's catch-22, profitability.*

Further to the themes identified, an overarching consideration is that the source material (Jason Aaron's Fourth volume of the Thor comics) for the movie was named during the announcement of Thor: Love and Thunder. Therefore, while the announcement of Portman's return to the MCU as female Thor was new information to movie fans, the idea of female Thor was not to comic fans and has been debated hotly five years before the movie announcement. These old arguments spilled into every one of the identified themes. Further, as the MCU enjoys a much larger audience than the comics, the content of the comics source material was unknown to many fans. This resulted in arguments where movie and comic fans' comments would misunderstand or talk past each other as concepts from the comic were applied to the MCU and vice versa. These misunderstandings created heated debate and opportunities for trolling which influenced the online debate and thus the themes.

## **THEMES**

### **Issues of Representation**

Redditors' reception of Portman's character "Jane Foster" in the first two Thor films was overwhelmingly negative, criticizing the character as boring. One prototypical comment stated, "I found her performance as Jane Foster so lackluster and forgettable." However, Redditors' opinions on why the character was boring were divided. Some claimed Portman to be a poor actress who ruined the role, while others criticized the role she was cast in as a poor one-dimensional love interest that no actor could save.

Comments claiming that Portman was a poor actress drew rebuttal that she is an academy award winner with a long and successful acting career and turned the argument to issues of women's representation. Thus, an overarching theme in this debate was the need for "better roles" for women in comic-based movies. Commenters argued that Portman's role was written as boring comic troupes, namely, as a love interest, as a damsel in distress, and as a mouthpiece to explain or advance certain parts of the plot. This line of commentary on representation fits with what was understood by commenters to be Portman's reasons for leaving the MCU franchise. Redditors speculated that Portman had signed on to Thor 2 largely due to the involvement of Patty Jenkins, as it gave her a sense of pride to help open

the door for women directors in the genre. However, Marvel decided to drop Patty Jenkins leaving Portman upset but contractually obliged to act in Thor 2. It came as no surprise to fans when Portman announced in a 2016 interview that “as far as I know, I’m done” with the MCU.

Just as commenters speculated Portman’s exit was due to issues of representation, so too did they speculate this was the reason for her return. Thor 3 was credited by Redditors for reinvigorating the franchise. Not only was it well-received by fans as an entertaining piece of comic cinema, but it also was well-received due to its handling of the character Valkyrie – a fierce, female, black, bi-sexual, warrior capable of capturing Thor. Redditors noted that it was “awesome” to see a female hero “little girls” could look up too. Comments expressed expletive joy in the idea that Portman would get another chance to reprise Jane under the same direction that spawned Valykerie’s character. For example, one commenter said, “this gives Marvel a chance to write their wrongs with her, and Jane Foster can be made a character who’s not as boring as brown bread.” And another “she’s one of my favorite actors and now instead of a lame ass love interest, she’s going to be a badass Norse goddess”.

A line of argumentation regarding “chemistry” also highlighted issues of representation. Some Redditors perceived Portman’s return as problematic for reasons of chemistry between her and Hemsworth. For example, one Redditor commented “her and Hemsworth are like a pair of dead fish. Their chemistry is atrocious.” The term “zero chemistry” was also used by multiple Redditors. Such comments framed Portman’s role in the film as only having value by proxy of the male lead. As a love interest of Thor, this also framed her as a sexual object. Essentially Portman was perceived as having little sexual value to the male lead and therefore rejected by fans. This narrative of value to the male lead was reinforced by fans arguing Tessa Thompson’s character, Valkyrie, had better chemistry with Hemsworth on screen and is, therefore, a better choice for inheriting Thor’s power.

### **Perceived Greed (Money)**

As noted in the preceding theme, Redditors believed Portman had quit the MCU. Portman’s exit and implications that she was upset with the franchise have left many fans skeptical regarding her motivations to return. A prevailing voice in this skepticism was that Portman was only returning to the MCU after leaving for reasons of needing or desiring money. Any discussion of money was pure speculation as no details at the time of the announcement had been made on Portman’s remuneration for her upcoming role in Thor: Love and Thunder. Regardless, many commentators speculated that she must be returning for the sole purpose of receiving a “dump truck full of money”. Comments regarding money were often used to argue a contra position to comments speculating that Portman was returning to the MCU for positive

reasons. The subtext of these comments is that Portman's decision to return to the MCU was motivated by greed.

The notion of exchange of money and a women's services drew conclusions from some commentators that Portman is a whore. Commentators appeared to enjoy inventing portmanteaus based on "whore" and "Thor", such as "Twhore", "Whor", "Thot", and more crass names included bodily fluids and sexual organs. While other cast members were sexually objectified, such as Hemsworth being described as eye candy, comments that were hateful in their objectification were reserved solely for Portman.

A few of the negative comments also expressed antisemitic sentiments, relating Portman's Jewish heritage to greed. Racist Jewish stereotypes were used on several occasions to frame Portman as motivated solely by money. While not all misogynistic comments were bigoted, nearly all bigoted comments were also misogynistic. Many of the instances of outright trolling, inflammatory remarks, or hate-speech was called out by peers and later removed by moderators. Such comments were identified by other Redditors as tied to accounts of members of incel (involuntary celibates), and white supremacist communities.

## **Name or Title?**

A heated debate occurred regarding Thor's moniker/name/title, which essentially boiled down to arguing if "Thor" should be a name or a title. Many fans were angry that the moniker, "Thor", would be passed on to another person, and further enraged that this person would be a woman. To on elaborate the issue, one Redditor explained that many comic heroes have a superhero name and given name, such as "Ironman" to "Tony Stark". Thor, however, does not. Thor is the titular character's given name and hero name which was perceived as problematic for many fans who felt that the titular character would have to give up his name and by extension identity. As one fan argued, "1st name does not equal job title". Opposing arguments highlighted that Augustus was both a title and a name and worked just fine for the Romans. Other Redditors were surprised by the volume of name related comments and associated outrage; "The vast majority of the complaints I'm already seeing is all about the name Thor [...]. People acting like it's a big deal but it's such a superficial detail".

Staunch fans argued that Thor should keep his name/title and "female Thor" should be given an alternative, such as "Thora", "Lady Thor", or "Goddess of Thunder". These comments expressed a desire for some clear distinction between the male and female roles and were often expressed alongside the negative comments regarding a woman taking a man's place (reported in a following theme). Contra views argued that feminized monikers were inherently diminutive, casting female heroes as supplementary or sidekicks and are therefore problematic and "toxic".

A minority of comments tried to astraddle the argument, both expressing a desire for better woman's representation while admonishing the handling of the role of "female Thor". Such comments voiced a desire for new female heroes to serve as role models, rather than "gender-bending" or rehashing traditionally male characters. These Redditors co-opted feminist rhetoric to advance the matter further, claiming that a woman having to use an established male character undermined women's agency. These Redditor expressed a desire for Marvel to use traditionally female comic characters or create new characters to be female leads in new movie series within the MCU.

Fans who were "incredibly passionate about Norse mythology" argued cultural appropriation, criticizing Marvel for being insensitive of Norse Mythology and a form of neopaganism called Forn Sidr (translates to "the old way"). Specifically, comments highlighted that Thor is a masculine symbol as the god of thunder and fertility, and having a woman play "Thor" was offensive. While appropriation of religious figures is offensive and warrants sensitivity, this line of argumentation was revealed spurious by several Redditors as the only cultural offense noted was the fact the name "Thor" may be used by a woman. A Redditor noted that if cultural appropriation was truly an issue, the offense would lay with the greater franchise which has taken liberties with and deviated from authentic Nordic views, rather than specifically a woman playing "Thor". This Redditor then gave an exhaustive list of inaccuracies and questioned whether these were also an issue but was not answered.

## **Physicality**

In the MCU, Thor is a warrior god who bashes things with a giant hammer. Comments described Hemsworth, the current actor portraying Thor, as suitable for the role because he is "swole" (very muscular). Many fans argued that a female Thor should also be just as muscular and that Portman does not fit the role, for example, "If there's going to be a female Thor, she should be tall and strong. It's not asking for much, Portman is a tiny twig" or "are they going to CGI [Portman] to adult size? Or is she going to be mini Thor?" Criticisms included Portman's height, muscle mass, upper body strength, "noodle-arms", and fragile looks.

Many comments that spoke of Portman's physicality, or lack thereof, that included a statement along the lines of, "*X actress* would be a better fit for the role." Actresses included Tessa Thompson (who played Valkyrie in Thor 3), Gwendoline Christie, or an unnamed "female MMA fighter". The desire for Thompson to inherit Thor's powers was the most frequent comment concerning Portman's physicality. This was surprising as much of the criticism was aimed at Portman's height. As a Redditor noted, as Thompson and Portman have similar builds and are only separated by 2cm in height – a fact that can be seen when the two actresses hug on stage during

the announcement of Thor 4. Still, many Redditors believed Thompson had a more appropriate build to fit the role of Thor. The desire for an MMA fighter or Gwendoline Christie (who played a female knight in Game of Thrones) highlighted fans' perception that the heroine needs to appear physically strong, or as one commenter phrased it "someone with some meat on her bones".

The debate on Thor and the physicality of the actress to play her was perceived by some Redditors as an opportunity to discuss Portman's attractiveness. Such comments came in two flavors. The first was written to defend Portman's role, claiming that she would be a good fit as she is "hot as fuck". The second was a satire of the first, with comments such as "she's swole in the chest area". Both lines of argumentation shared a common facet that sought to reduce Portman to a sexual object – either she was worthy of the role for no other reason than her beauty, or that she was nothing more than her attractive features. Comments regarding beauty also tended to discuss Portman's breasts. One Redditor noted this last facet as an unfortunate hang up of female comic book stereotypes, where "there's not a lot of build diversity other than cup size".

## **Taking a Man's Place**

Most of the negative sentiment expressed in Reddit comments related to the fact a woman would be taking a man's place. This was interesting as although little detail was given at the announcement of "Thor: Love and Thunder", Chris Hemsworth who has played Thor in the MCU was still introduced as the lead. Still, many Redditors feared the challenge to patriarchy that Thor: Love and Thunder issued. This challenge and the resulting push back manifested in Redditors' comments in interesting ways. Notably, fans argued comic book logic technicalities relating to how Thor's powers work. Thor's powers are sharable or transferable by wielding Thor's battle hammer "Mjolnir". However, there is a caveat inscribed on Mjolnir which reads "Whosoever holds this hammer, if he be worthy, shall possess the power of Thor" (Lieber & Lee, 1962). The discussion of who is worthy is often a question raised in the comics and a popular topic of debate among fans. Reddit commenters continued this tradition by debating whether Jane Foster (and Portman by extension) was worthy. The debate highlighted that Mjolnir's inscription reads "if **he** be worthy" – prompting dialogue around if a woman was worthy of taking a man's place. Some fans pointed out that the comics *Waititi* will be adapting Thor Love and Thunder from dealt with this technicality already, with an "s" appearing before "he" to alter the inscription to read "if **she** be worthy". The amendment to the inscription was widely ignored as many fans rejected the feminist tones presented in the female Thor comics.

The notion of “he who is worthy” was the plotline of the first Thor movie, with Thor becoming unworthy of Mjolnir and having to prove his worth. Further, Thor in endgame becomes an overweight alcoholic following his failure to stop a villain again raising issues of worth. Some Redditors perceived this recurring theme, not as a key facet of Thor and how his powers work, but as some hidden agenda to degrade men for woman’s advancement. For example, one comment read “why do we have to tell our children stories about men being so weak that women have to take on their role? That’s a horrible message.” This perception of degrading men to justify their replacement fuelled heated comments in the discussion and drew admonishments of feminism or the “liberal agenda”.

There were those arguing for better representation, but surprisingly not of women or minorities, but of men. For example, one commenter stated “Great, but [by] 2020 all the little boys out there will have zero role models in movies. Fuck feminism”. At the heart of this comment is a fear of men being replaced and becoming underrepresented. These fears are unwarranted - at the time of Marvel’s announcement, the MCU consisted of 23 films and only one (Captain Marvel) had a female lead. The lack of self-awareness expressed in these comments was fascinating and noted by other Redditors. The very issue of little boys not having lead superhero role models has been the reality for little girls who have not experienced a female lead in the MCU until Captain Marvel’s release in 2019 – some 21 movies deep in the franchise. Some commenters feared that by empowering women in film, this will somehow take away from men’s standing in society. One Redditor went further to claim that women and minorities have been treated poorly, and the push back of men’s rights appearing in the discussion was driven by a fear that men may end up as poorly represented as women.

Another narrative was that fans wanted appearances from the characters Beta-Ray Bill or Throg. Beta Ray Bill is an alien that wields Mjolnir and becomes an alien version of Thor. Throg, a portmanteau of “frog” and “Thor”, is a frog version of Thor. While many versions of Thor have appeared in the comics, these two were repeatedly mentioned throughout the posts. Beta-Ray Bill was used by many to argue a better alternative to female Thor. These Redditors voiced that an alien version of Thor was more palatable and plausible than a female Thor or Jane Foster as Thor. Throg was invoked mostly as a joke, however, some used the character to undermine Jane Foster as Thor by drawing comparisons between the two as equals.

## **Waititi’s Catch-22**

Taika Waititi was a topic of frequent discussion in the comments. Comments were overwhelmingly positive regarding Waititi’s return for the fourth installment of Thor. Waititi had directed the third installment of Thor, which is a fan favorite in

the franchise. Waititi was celebrated in the comments for breathing life back into the Thor franchise, which was struggling due to poor fan reception after Thor 2. His comedic acting roles, such as playing “Korg” in Thor 3, have also endeared him to many fans. Waititi is of Jewish Polynesian descent and is an advocate fighting hate and intolerance. Examples include his spokesperson work for the New Zealand Human Rights Commission and most recently in his anti-hate satire film “Jojo Rabbit”. Waititi has also used his celebrity to support women such as Jacinda Arden - New Zealand’s current prime minister.

Waititi is of relevance to this study as often his name was invoked as a rebuttal to negative sentiments expressed regarding Portman’s role in the film. Waititi’s influence sometimes became a catch-22; fans perceived Waititi’s sensitivity a boon for Portman, her character, and woman’s representation in film, however, this came at the expense of Portman’s own voice and agency. To elaborate, rather than fans argue Portman’s agency, such as having a long and successful acting career or winning an Oscar (as other commenters did), they argued that Waititi would save the film from her involvement, protect her from sexist troupes, “do right” by her. Further, what is not said is also interesting – Portman is a known feminist who uses her celebrity to promote feminism, but this was not raised in the comments except as a slander. In this way, fans used a Waititi’s agency and voice to defend or justify Portman’s role in the film and thus undermine her agency and voice. It should be noted that not all comments read this way, Waititi is the director and as such has some authority of the project which was clear to many fans. The problematic comments that shaped this theme ironically cast Portman as a damsel in distress, and Waititi the hero to save her or save her from poor representation.

## **Profitability**

The profitability of the approach to Thor: Love and thunder was questioned by many fans. Topics relating to profitability were repeatedly mentioned, with a protracted discussion that also called to attention Marvel’s strategic history with comic and toy sales. Discussion included debates on; why women don’t buy tickets to superhero movies, the poor comic sales of the fourth volume of Thor (from which Waititi announced he would be adapting Thor: Love and Thunder), how Marvels focus on toy sales in the 1990s has shaped the MCU, and “selling woke”. These lines of argumentation were used to justify how profitability has dictated how women have been represented in the MCU.

Fans postulated that comics and toy sales have a long-standing relationship. Redditors pointed out that Isaac Perlmutter owner of Toy Biz (later Marvel Toys) was largely responsible for re-establishing Marvel after it went bankrupt in 1996. They believe this led to a focus on merchandising Marvel’s intellectual property as

toys to generate profit. Redditors noted that toys are gendered, even more so in the 90s, and this has largely shaped a Marvel culture that had focused on selling toys to boys. Further, commenters speculated that the consequence of this is that women are poorly represented in the Marvel universe simply because it was historically not a profitable business strategy. The profitability of heroine figures in today's market was discussed, with some saying they are still not profitable, and others saying that female figurines outsell male figurines. Further, Redditors commented that the lack of heroine toys for girls based on the MCU is "demoralizing".

Comic sales were hotly debated, with Redditors researching to retrieve comic sales figures and trends to bring to the discussion. The consensus was that comic sales of Thor are down, and the debate focused on the cause of this. Many Redditors used the introduction of female Thor in the comic run of Mighty Thor five years ago as a point of reference to note that comic sales had dropped since the heroine's introduction. Such comments blamed the new direction of the Thor comics "ham-fisted" attempts at feminist dialogue and storylines. Redditors believed the quality or essence had somehow been compromised and this was affecting sales figures by driving fans away. Other Redditors highlighted that sales of all comics were down, and that Thor sold comparatively well to other comics of the same year. One Redditor believed this was more to do with the demise of print media, with sales of not only comics but magazines and newspapers dropping also.

## **DISCUSSION**

The announcement of Natalie Portman moving into the role of female Thor was accompanied by significant social media chatter. Having thematically analyzed over 4000 comments across five Reddit posts, it was noticeable that much of the audience response was critical of Portman, the decision, and somewhat surprisingly, women in films. The MCU was accused of submitting to a liberal agenda by "pandering" to "social justice warriors" and choosing to be politically correct. Regardless of Marvel's motivations, the politicization of the announcement generated heated discussion, the removal of some comments by moderators, and set the tone for a lively debate that led to commenters voicing their opinions and enacting agency. Such comment sharing produced a public sphere where generally speaking, the decision to pursue the female Thor storyline was condemned. Given the negativity that accompanied the release of the comic-book, it was not entirely unexpected that there would be those detractors that also objected to the film for urbanizing or mainstreaming comic culture. Our interest, however, was in those comments that centered on women, voice, and agency and which ultimately led to the development of our themes. The



following discussion revisits our themes and considers why those voicing their opinions on female Thor were predominantly negative.

Although different themes, *Name or title*, and *Taking a man's place* are grouped here because the comments that spawned them have the same root cause: men were threatened by women taking their roles. Much of the commentary incorporated the rhetoric associated with hegemonic masculinity, where men are seen as the dominant sex in society and women are therefore subordinated, consequently losing agency and voice (Connell, 1995; Kimmel, 1997; Schippers, 2007). According to Freud, the masculine sense of self is "achieved through superego formation and disparagement of women" (Chodorow, 1978, p. 165), accounting for why Portman was deemed unworthy of the role. By renouncing the feminine and by extension, subordinating Portman, those commenting on her worth and gender perhaps sought to maintain the asymmetrical power relationships that have existed between men and women across time (Glick, Diebold, Baily-Werner & Zhu, 1997).

At the very least, the Redditors condemning the decision to introduce a female Thor were exhibiting what Allen and Wilder (1975), and Billig and Tajfel (1973) refer to as in-group favoritism. Dutton and Dukerich (1991) argue that when people strongly identify with an in-group, such as the male gender, they will look to defend that in-group to maintain feelings of self-worth and self-esteem. Any threats to their in-group are viewed as personal attacks and to re-establish identity congruency, individuals will deploy prejudiced responses (Hall, 1998), such as those geared towards undermining Portman's legitimacy in the role. The us versus them dualism (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hammer, Bennett & Wiseman, 2003; Hogg & Terry, 2000; Tajfel, 1982) (or in this case, men versus women) sees some of the Redditors commenting, voicing misogynistic viewpoints and acting as gender trolls. As Mantilla (2013) argues, gender trolling includes numerous people sharing in gender-based insults, vicious language, credible threats, and prolonged attacks that victimize women. In fact, Banet-Weiser and Miltner (2015, p. 171) believe that new media has heralded in "alarming amounts of vitriol and violence directed towards women in online spaces," in part because people can remain anonymous and readily connect with those who share their viewpoints on male fragility. Such activity inevitably invalidates women's identities and undermines the actions of feminists attempting to establish gender equality, while reinforcing Mondal, Silva and Benevenuto's (2017, p. 85) belief that social media communication breeds "bullying, offensive content and hate speech."

Regarding hate speech, some of the comments made under the themes *Name or title* and *Taking a man's place* are in keeping with white supremacist rhetoric. Whether intentional or otherwise, those objecting to the cultural appropriation of Norse Mythology and attacking Portman because of her Jewish background are taking an ethnocentric perspective (Bennett, 1986), pushing their agenda in ways

that undermine Portman's agency as a human being. An increasing number of white supremacist groups, particularly Neo-Nazis, defer to Norse Mythology to justify white superiority (Burriss, Smith & Straham, 2000; Meddaugh & Kay, 2009; Weber, 2018), perhaps accounting for their strong opposition to a Jewish woman taking on the role of a 'male God.' At the very least, the discussion of Portman as female Thor provided these groups with the opportunity to engage in overt hate speech that Daniels (2008, p. 146) posits, allows "white racists to retreat from civic engagement and into a whites-only fantasy of superiority or victimhood." It is further evidence also, of Goodwin's Law, an aphorism which suggests that the longer an online discussion takes place, the more likely comparisons to Nazis will be drawn regardless of the original topic ("Godwin's Law", n.d.). The voices of those opposed to Portman and the appropriation of Norse mythology, then, are spread across the Reddit threads and can establish another us versus them dualism online that disadvantages others to preserve feelings of in-group superiority (Perry & Olsson, 2009).

Across the three themes, *Issues of representation, Waititi's catch-22, and Physicality*, it was clear that, although some people were pleased to see another female superhero introduced into the MCU, others were not happy with the franchise and Portman's portrayal in the upcoming film. For example, people were dissatisfied that there were not better roles for women, believing that the lack of female directors and writers led to poor storylines for female actors. Additionally, others felt that Portman's Thor would be auxiliary to Hemsworth's character in the upcoming film, given the latter was introduced as the lead actor in the film. Others were disheartened that it was a man bringing the film to screen in Waititi, while others were generally frustrated with the gender disparities embedded in the film industry.

These comments were not unexpected. Much has been written about the inequalities that exist between men and women in the film industry, with few roles of power possessed by women, particularly in behind the scenes roles (Banks & Milestone, 2010; Gill, 2014). Furthermore, the fact that the industry is dominated by men, advancing male stories, for male audiences (Beauvoir, 1949/2011), especially in the superhero genre (Thompson & Zerbinos, 1997), means that women are relegated to supplementary roles in storylines or opposed as lead characters, removing their agency in favor of continued subordination. With fewer women being commended for their acting, writing, and directing (Gill, 2014; Jones & Pringle, 2015), for these Redditors, it would appear that the status quo of male domination of the film industry will continue to be perpetuated and perhaps challenged by men, but would ultimately disadvantage and leave women voiceless.

Although some vocally opposed the inclusion of Portman as Thor because of her stature and physical prowess, others chose to sexualize Portman to justify her inclusion in the next installment. Either position, nevertheless, continues to objectify Portman and her body and enforces what Papadopoulos (2010) considers the heteronormative

standards of beauty. The comments on Reddit position Portman as “available and objectified” (Coy, 2009, p. 373), and although acts of personal agency, undermine Portman in favor of narrowing the focus to what Gill (2009, p. 143) refers to as an “idealized and eroticized” aesthetic. In essence, Portman’s appointment as female Thor has not moved the conversation beyond the attractive, young, big-breasted portrayal of female superheroes that have been commonplace and delineated them as window dressing in films. In fact, the discussion not only suggests it is acceptable to assess women on their bodies, but those hyper-sexual superheroes are expected to be the norm in such films. Such attitudes suggest that the media are reinforcing harmful depictions of women that can be consumed and internalized by audiences (Dallacqua & Low, in press; Goodall, 2012). Accordingly, empowerment and agency are not advanced, but instead, visual pleasure for the predominantly male audience (Murphy, 2016; Pennell & Behm-Morawitz, 2015).

Finally, the themes of *Perceived Greed* and *Profitability* reflected the frustrations of audiences with what they believed to be the commercial agendas of both Portman and Marvel. Portman was deemed greedy and underserving of the role of female Thor, while Marvel was accused of gender bias by opting to make products that appealed exclusively to young boys. Commenters were so opposed to Portman returning to the franchise for financial reasons, that they engaged in slut-shaming and anti-semitic comments to undermine her integrity as an actress, woman, and Jew. The fact that women generally make less money than their male counterparts across industries (Blau & Khan, 2000, 2007), but particularly in the film industry (Atkinson & Randle, 2014; Bielby & Bielby, 1996; Jones & Pringle, 2015; Wing-Fai, Gil & Randle 2015), was not even considered and instead, commenters chose to begrudge Portman any sort of payment or prestige that might accompany the role. Again, the comments are misogynistic, but they also indicate a belief that men deserve to be rewarded and perhaps even paid more for the work they do in the film industry. According to Blau and Khan (2000, 2007), Jones and Pringle (2015), Wing-Fai, Gil, and Randle (2015), women are increasingly subject to assessments of their abilities in comparison to men, which can lead them disadvantaged regarding financial incentives and employment. In the film industry, women may be good at their jobs, but that is not conducive to the same benefits and rewards as men. Therefore, the voice of these commenters further undermines Portman’s financial legitimacy and personal agency, continuing the perception that women are not the financial equal of men.

In the case of Marvel, commenters were frustrated with the company’s approach to making money, suggesting that their standardized model of toy manufacture was gender-biased and ignored the needs of women. In the creative industries, to which Marvel belongs, the production of creative goods is considered problematic because of what Cave’s (2000) refers to as the nobody knows principle of creative goods. That

means, producers of creative goods are unaware of how they will be experienced until they are consumed by audiences, and so processes have been standardized to remove some of the commercial risks. Accordingly, just as the films are targeted at men, so too is much of the merchandise which can foster feelings of sexism like those observed in the data. However, many fans criticized Marvel for turning issues of women's representation and empowerment into a marketing strategy. Fans were offended that the "only" reason female characters were appearing as equals to males was for no other reason than to profit. Fans argued that the strategy was not progressive or leftist, but rather co-opted the movements as a means of generating profit. Further commenters speculated that the inclusion of female Thor was an intentionally inflammatory strategy devised by Marvel to generate discussion and thus free marketing. Therefore, Marvel was "damned if they do and damned if they don't."

## **CONCLUSION**

The announcement of Natalie Portman's character, Jane Foster, receiving the moniker of Thor in the titular character's next MCU installment drew widespread condemnation from Redditors, much of which manifested as overt sexism. Many Redditors sought to undermine women's voice and agency by engaging in online bullying, misogyny, and hate speech directed at both Portman and women in film. Discussions further attempted to undermine the "woke" stance Marvel appears to be adopting. The negative sentiments expressed can be attributed to a desire to maintain asymmetrical power relationships between men and women or a patriarchal desire to preserve feelings of in-group superiority. Positive sentiment suggests that there is support and excitement for Portman's return which can be considered a boon for women's voice and agency. However, some felt that gender-bending a character rather than creating new heroine as role models undermined women's agency by standing on the shoulders of traditionally male characters. At the root of this problem is the notion that comic monikers possess notoriety built over years of popularisation that can be equated to profitability, combined with the lack of popularised heroine leads in comics has left the comic film industry in an awkward and confusing position in its attempts to promote women's voice and agency. How this position may be overcome is still not clear, however, perhaps the production of *Thor: Love and Thunder* may go some way to addressing this.

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## KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

**Agency:** The ability for a person to freely act on their own behalf.

**Female Thor:** An adaption of Thor from the fourth volume of *The Mighty Thor* comics by Jason Aaron, in which the character Jane Foster becomes Thor.

**Goodwin's Law:** An adage that claims that the probability of a comparison to Hitler or Nazis approaches 1 the longer an internet discussion continues.

**MCU:** An acronym for Marvel Cinematic Universe, which refers to a shared universe focused on comic superhero movie adaptations created by Marvel as part of their media franchise.

**Reddit:** A social media website used for the aggregation and discussion of web content. Users may submit content as a "post", which other users may then vote on and/or discuss through "comments."

**Redditor:** A user of the social media website "Reddit."

**Thor:** A comic superhero who is part of Marvel's franchise based on the Norse god of thunder of the same name.

**Voice:** The ability to actively and meaningfully participate in discussions, discourses, and decisions.