

**“The Only Power I Have is That I Believe We Can Do Better”:**

**Changing Men, Changing Masculinities in Marvel Studios’**

***Captain America: The First Avenger (2011) and The Falcon and***

***The Winter Soldier (2021)***



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## Abstract

The superhero genre is one of the most loved genres in contemporary popular culture all over the world. Marvel Studios' The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) is one of the highest-grossing media franchise centred on superheroes with a constantly growing audience, and thus, the franchise resonates with contemporary cultural ideas and norms and has a significant part in producing them as well. Though acclaimed, the images of superheroes have been under scrutiny for the gender messages they propagate. Previous studies on gender messaging in the superhero genre have shown that superhero films reproduce gender stereotypes. Additionally, the male protagonists are seemingly representations of monotonous, stereotypical White masculinity, who exemplify hegemonic masculinity.

Focusing on the Captain America franchise in the MCU, this thesis seeks to examine whether the masculinities represented in the franchise continue to adhere to hegemony, or whether they indicate challenges to the hegemony and have become more diverse in terms of their construction. At first glance, Marvel seems to attempt to respond to the contemporary sensibilities: for instance, the new Captain America (Sam Wilson) in *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier* (2021), is a Black man. However, an extensive understanding of the masculinity messages and their possible evolvement in the context of the MCU requires addressing the construction of masculinities more profoundly. This thesis discusses the masculinities in the film *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) and in the latest continuation of the franchise, the TV series *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier* (2021). The thesis begins by contextualising superhero films in contemporary Western culture. Next, essentialist, constructivist, and intersectional approaches to gender are adopted in the analysis to understand how the masculinities are constructed in the materials and whether the most valued aspects of masculinity have stayed the same or changed.

The findings of this thesis suggest that the dominant messages and values about masculinity have not undergone any significant changes in the Captain America franchise. Beyond a superficial shift, the hegemonic values are similar in the 2021 series and the 2011 film. The values promoted in the construction of masculinities in both materials include the military body as the ideal male body, heterosexuality, emotional withdrawal, and treating femininity in a male body as undesirable. In turn, the shifts into a more diverse approach include the representations of female masculinity, paternal masculinity, challenges to the hegemony of White masculinity, and lastly, the discussion of emotionality in men.

## Tiivistelmä

Supersankari-genre on maailman yksi tämän hetken suosituimmista populaarikulttuurin genreistä. Marvel Studiosin luoma The Marvel Cinematic Universe on yksi aikamme suurimpia ja suosituimpia supersankareihin keskittyviä mediasarjoja. Siksi voidaan olettaa, että The Marvel Cinematic Universe resonoi nykyajan kulttuuristen ideoiden ja normien kanssa. Mediasarja lisäksi vaikuttaa merkittävästi kyseisiin ideoihin ja normeihin. Vaikka elokuvat ja supersankarihahmot ovat saaneet ylistystä, elokuvien levittämät viestit sukupuolesta ja sukupuolten representaatioista ovat olleet kritiikin kohteena. Aiemmat tutkimukset aiheesta ovat osoittaneet, että elokuvat tuottavat sukupuolten stereotypioita. Erityisesti miespäähenkilöitä on pidetty yksipuolisina ja stereotyyppisinä, valkoisen hegemonisen maskuliinisuuden esikuvina.

Tämä pro gradu- tutkielma tarkastelee Marvel-universumiin sijoittuvassa Kapteeni Amerikka- sarjassa esitettä maskuliinisuuksia ja niiden rakentumista. Tutkielman tarkoituksena on selvittää, ovatko maskuliinisuuden representaatiot edelleen hegemonisen ihanteen mukaisia, vai haastavatko ne hegemoniaa, rakentuen monipuolisimmiksi maskuliinisuuden kuvauksiksi. Marvel-universumi vaikuttaa ensisilmäyksellä omaksuneen tietoisemman lähestymistavan representaatioihinsa: esimerkiksi vuonna 2021 ilmestyneessä TV-sarjassa *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier* esitelty uusi Kapteeni Amerikka, Sam Wilson, on musta. Selvittääkseni mahdollista muutosta, tarkoitukseni on keskittyä maskuliinisuuksien ilmentymiin Kapteeni Amerikka- elokuvasarjassa, tarkemmin vuoden 2011 elokuvassa *Captain America: The First Avenger* sekä vuoden 2021 TV-sarjassa *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*. Tutkielman alussa asetan supersankarielokuvat länsimaisen nykykulttuurin kontekstiin. Sen jälkeen tutkielma keskittyy maskuliinisuuksien rakentumisen sekä niihin liittyvien mahdollisten muutosten analyysiin, jossa hyödynnetään essentialistista, konstruktivistista sekä intersektionaalista lähestymistapaa.

Tutkielman löydökset osoittavat, että pintapuolisesta muutoksesta huolimatta hallitsevat maskuliinisuuden viestit ja hegemonisen maskuliinisuuden arvot ovat pysyneet samankaltaisina elokuvan ja TV-sarjan välillä. Molempien materiaalien kohdalla maskuliinisuudessa arvostettiin asevoimien muokkaamaa vartaloa, heteroseksuaalisuutta, tunteettomuutta, sekä feminiinisyyden kaihtamista. Muutoksiin puolestaan lukeutuivat naisten maskuliinisuuden representaatiot, maskuliinisuus ja vanhemmuus, valkoisen hegemonisen maskuliinisuuden kyseenalaistaminen sekä miesten tunteiden käsittely.

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## 1. Introduction

“How does it feel?”

“Like it’s someone else’s.”

“It isn’t.”

“...Thank you. I’ll do my best.”

(*Avengers: Endgame*)

In 2019, Marvel Studios ended its third phase of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) with *Avengers: Endgame*. *Endgame* was a spectacular final, in which all the heroes from the MCU were gathered together to save the universe, and many of the original avengers like Iron Man, Black Widow, and Captain America, were bid farewell. Alongside the wistful emptiness of an era ending, the global audience got glimpses of promising views for the future of the Marvel universe. Steve Rogers – who had the chance to travel back in time and live with the love of his life, Peggy Carter - gave Captain America’s shield forward to Sam Wilson, ‘The Falcon’. The dialogue above is an excerpt from the discussion between the two men at the end of *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), as Wilson tries the shield on for the first time. This dialogue also sets the premise for Marvel’s 2021 TV series *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, which follows the aftermath of Wilson taking the shield and the challenges that come with being a Black man representing America in stars and stripes.

The Marvel Cinematic Universe has been a significant part of popular culture for 15 years, and in 2023, it is one of the highest-grossing media franchises with a constantly growing audience. Despite basing its stories on comics that began in the 1940s, Marvel’s themes resonate with recent day culture and ideals, which draws viewers to the productions. As the interest in the franchise is ever-expanding, so is its power: Gray and Kaklamanidou (2011), among others, emphasize that the narratives produced in popular culture and Hollywood films “contain and spread ideological and political messages to a wide audience” (p. 5). Moreover, these ideologies represented on-screen are accepted as self-evident in our society, normalized to the point that they go undetected. As Anthony Easthope (1992) has suggested, “as a social force popular culture cannot be escaped”, and thus it is crucial to pay attention to the representations appearing in films or television to better comprehend how our beliefs are affected by them (p. 2). The Marvel franchise both imitates and reproduces the culturally accepted ideas about gender, especially in the binary of men and women, and masculinity and

femininity. Studies on masculinities in the superhero genre often show that superhero films promote stereotypical gender representations, which consequently influence the viewers' understanding of gender; some studies have found that especially children are heavily influenced by gender messages in the superhero genre (Coyne et al., 2014, p. 418). This finding was supported by Harriger et al. (2022), who studied the gender messaging in superhero movies and addressed the represented masculinity traits that can be harmful to young audiences. The Marvel franchise reaches an audience with a wide age-range, and the gender messages can go unquestioned with older people as well. As Jeffrey A. Brown (2016) has argued, "the main appeal of most films is the identification with heroes", which can ultimately lead to adopting some of the films' beliefs about masculinity (p. 135). The male protagonists in superhero films have specifically been under scrutiny for their seemingly monotonous and stereotypical representations of (White) masculinity (Harriger et al., 2022; Brown, 2016). Additionally, Brown has suggested that the male superheroes embody, more than ever before, the hegemonic form of masculinity (p. 131). Hegemonic masculinity, as termed by R.W. Connell (2005), is the currently most valued and dominant form of masculinity (p. 77). In many of the Marvel materials, hegemonic masculinity has been in lines with contemporary Western gender ideals, as have the dominant ideologies about masculinity and femininity.

While the earlier MCU films have included other forms of masculinities alongside the hegemonic representations, often the 'underhanded' masculinities have been side-lined as sidekicks or villains. In recent years, Marvel has introduced protagonists that appear to challenge this hegemony, women and people of colour being in dominant leading roles both in films and TV series. For instance, in Marvel's *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier* (2021), Sam Wilson moves to the centre of focus from the side-lines, and discussions of race and race-masculinity are brought upfront in the representations masculinities. Thus, it seems that Marvel Studios attempts to respond to the contemporary sensibilities of the wider society, offering, at first glance, a broader approach to gender. The productions might follow "historical trends of change", building more diversified identities and approaches to gender (Milestone & Meyer, 2012, p. 85). Rogers, the blond haired, blue-eyed, White man hands his shield and the mantle of Captain America to Wilson, a Black man, and expects him to represent America. This, among other changes, would suggest a glimpse into a future where representations of gender evolve beyond the Western hegemonic view and shape the discourses about gender into a new direction. According to Milestone & Meyer (2012),

gender hierarchies and inequalities are maintained by meanings and belief systems, which are represented through images and discourses (p. 8). Representation is an active process of creating meaning (Milestone & Meyer, 2012, p. 7): thus, the representations of gender in mainstream media require deeper examination to understand the meanings given to gender. Reeser (2010) discusses representations of masculinity as “having a double nature”: they reveal a form of masculinity that already exists in culture, while simultaneously they construct (or help construct) the masculinity that is depicted in culture (p. 25). Understanding the representations of gender in the context of the MCU requires addressing the construction of masculinities. Additionally, this inspection gives insight into whether these representations create new meanings and discourses or simply recreate the hegemony they have been accused of.

Looking at the 2011 Marvel Studios’ film *Captain America: The First Avenger*, and the 2021 series *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, the aim of this thesis is to examine which aspects of masculinity are valued over others, and if those have changed in ten years in the Captain America franchise. Additionally, the thesis aims to understand the kind of ideology about men and masculinity the Marvel materials promote, and whether some aspects have evolved or stayed the same. The communication of these attitudes towards gender is also of interest to this study. This thesis builds from my bachelor’s thesis (Aikioniemi, 2021), in which I examined the construction of Steve Rogers’ masculinity in the 2011 Marvel film *Captain America: The First Avenger*. The findings of that study suggested that despite being a representation of hegemonic hypermasculinity, the construction of Rogers’ masculinity was not self-evidently hegemonic: rather, it was teemed with ambivalences and negotiations between hegemony and subordination to maintain said hypermasculinity. Continuing the study by looking at the 2021 TV series *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier* offers fertile ground for building analyses around the possible changes and similarities in the representations and performances of masculinities, as ten years have passed between the two productions. The series focuses on Steve Rogers’ two closest friends, Sam Wilson and Bucky Barnes, who have both been important characters throughout both the Captain America and Avengers franchises in the MCU.

This thesis begins by contextualizing the superhero genre in contemporary popular culture, as well as both *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) and *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier* (2021) in the Marvel Universe. Next, the concepts of ideology, hegemony and discourse are defined in the context of media and gender, followed by definitions of

Connell's (2005) hegemonic masculinity and Reeser's (2010) theory of masculinity as ideology. Masculinity is understood as something unstable, performed and often associated with the male gender. These definitions are significant in understanding the communication of masculinity in the Marvel materials. First, the analysis will begin with a focus on the essentialist approach to gender and how it is displayed in both the film and the TV series. Next, the analysis will move on to the constructivist approach to gender, looking at how the constructivist views are present in the representations of masculinities in the Marvel materials. These sections seek to offer insight into the social processes that affect gender performances and are not tied to biology. Lastly, to understand the gender representations more comprehensively, the analysis will adopt an intersectional approach to capture the ways of being masculine that are valued and promoted in the Captain America franchise, whether they challenge the hegemony or not. These last sections will focus on the aspects that are dominant and valued in the gender performances and look at how the undesirable traits are treated in the Marvel universe. Masculinity does not exist independently, and thus relationality to other masculinities and femininities is considered in the analysis of the performances and constructions of gender.



## 2. Marvel From Comics to Films and TV Series, and The Re-Birth of Superheroes in Popular Culture

The Marvel Cinematic Universe is a shared universe which consists of 31 films and 8 series by Marvel Studios. The universe has been built around the superheroes from Marvel Comics' publications, which first began around 1940s with the introduction of Captain America among other characters. Marvel Studios' first film belonging to the MCU, *Iron Man*, was released in 2008. Following *Iron Man* (2008), Marvel Studios brought adaptations of Thor and Captain America to the big screens. While *Iron Man* and *Thor* were set in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) was set in the time of the Second World War, thus chronologically being the first superhero of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. By 2023, Marvel Studios have released over 30 films and several series focusing on different superheroes from the original Marvel Comics. New Marvel Studios series began launching in the Disney+ streaming service in 2021. The first three series, *WandaVision* (2021), *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier* (2021), and *Loki* (2021), focus on characters previously introduced in the Marvel Cinematic Universe films, and continue building the storylines laid out for the characters. Like the original Marvel comics, the Marvel films and series have reoccurring themes of juxtaposing good and evil, and representing gender stereotypes. The target audience includes both children and adults, and accordingly, darker and more mature themes have been incorporated into the storylines, and in some cases the binary opposition of good and evil have been blurred (Gray & Kaklamanidou, 2011, p. 6). Though most of the comics' characters and their cultural environments have been updated to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the films and series still reproduce the central themes of the comics. The productions resonate with Western beliefs, cultural ideals, and discourses around gender, and due to their popularity, Marvel Studios' productions have a key role in creating and perpetuating said discourses.

Terence McSweeney (2014) has argued that superheroes "endorse prevailing social values and behaviours in texts that both reflect and influence the cultures in which they are produced" (p. 112) Thus, the renewed popularity of the superhero genre and the rise in production of films about characters with superpowers has been explained as a response to real-life cultural events that have affected the Western world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For instance, as Gray and Kaklamanidou (2011) have written, the 9/11 attack as well as the War on Terror made people realize their mortality in the face of disaster and thus needed to find ways to cope with this truth as well as feel safe again (p. 2). The solace was brought by Hollywood,

which started factoring “superhero fantasies” to both provide escapism and create symbols of hope for the American population, though ultimately the films became a global phenomenon (Gray & Kaklamanidou, 2011, p. 3). McSweeney (2014), however, contradicts the claim of simple escapism, suggesting that superhero films are “deeply immersed in” real life horrors and events (p. 115). Both of these are most likely to be true, as Gray and Kaklamanidou (2011) continue that the films and their messages have become “source of renewal for patriotism” (p. 3). Though today’s dilemmas differ from the socio-political issues of the past, even superhero figures created decades ago – such as Marvel’s Captain America – provide solutions to contemporary concerns (Gray and Kaklamanidou, 2011, p. 3). The superhero characters represent hope, perseverance, and above all, protection as a response to the contemporary socio-political issues like terrorism and war.

Gray and Kaklamanidou have also remarked that Hollywood superhero productions disseminate American ideals and political messages to a global audience (p. 4). Marvel Studios’ productions are created from an American point of view, thus resonating with American values and cultural ideas. In this thesis, the focus is on the Captain America franchise, namely the 2011 film *Captain America: The First Avenger* and the 2021 series *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*. The title ‘Captain America’ itself insinuates that the standpoint is American, encompassed with Western ideals. As mentioned, the 2011 film *The First Avenger* is set in the 1940s America, the time of the Second World War. Both the context of war and the focus on U.S. military allow for patriotic values to be on display in the film, and additionally, the representations of gender are more in line with what are considered traditional ways of being a man or a woman. The time and the place in the film enable these values and ideals about gender to appear self-evident, despite the film having been released in 2011. *Captain America: The First Avenger* is response to both the cultural conflicts of the 2000s’ as well as the gender messages the Western world wants to see. As I will argue, military masculinities are a significant part of *Captain America: The First Avenger*, and though a 2011 production, the film’s representation of military masculinities resonates with the cultural environment, still laden with war and other conflicts.

Similarly, the 2021 series *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier* is a superhero product that resonates with current socio-political events. Though modified to fit the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the global refugee crisis has become part of the context, and one of the focal points in the series is the conflict with a group which attempts to create a more equal world for refugees through violent attacks towards the world governments. Consequently, the

distinction between good and evil has blurred more, and there is no one distinguishable villain in the story: only (super-powered) individuals with conflicting interests and means to achieve them, as well as the enemy inside oneself. Additionally, the police brutality and other racially motivated acts of violence familiar in the U.S in recent years have bled into the Marvel series. So have representations of race-masculinity, and discussions on race and racial discrimination are central themes in *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*. Thus, the materials reflect contemporary issues and discourses, while simultaneously presenting specific views on gender. The next sections will give a more detailed premise on both materials looked at in this thesis, before moving on to the analysis.

## **2.1. *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) and Beyond**

*Captain America: The First Avenger* is set, mostly, in the time of World War II, and follows Steve Rogers (played by Chris Evans) and his transformation from a chronically ill and physically weak man into the superhero Captain America. At the time of World War II, Rogers attempts to enlist in the military and join the Allies. It is implied that he has, illegally, tried this several times before; however, due to his health issues he has been rejected every time. When Rogers is at a science fair, a scientist named Abraham Erskine overhears Rogers' having a vehement discussion with his best friend James "Bucky" Barnes and recognises Rogers' potential and willingness to be a soldier. Consequently, Doctor Erskine allows Rogers to enlist, and offers him a chance to be part of a special super-soldier experiment in the Strategic Scientific Reserve, which Rogers immediately accepts. At the army base he is supervised by Doctor Erskine, Agent Peggy Carter, and Colonel Chester Phillips, who does not believe in Rogers' suitability to become a super-soldier because of his poor health and physical weakness. Ultimately, after proving his bravery and willingness to sacrifice himself for others, Rogers is chosen for the procedure, undergoing it with success. However, despite Rogers' new superhuman strength and abilities that could be utilized in the war, Colonel Phillips does not immediately allow him onto the battlefield; instead, Rogers is sent to tour the nation to promote war bonds in extravagant shows as "Captain America", which ultimately sets him as a subject for ridicule among soldiers and officers.

While on tour, Rogers hears that Barnes has gone missing in action alongside his unit in a battle in Italy. When Colonel Phillips decides that rescuing the unit is not worth risking more soldiers, Rogers leaves on a solitary rescue mission with the help of Agent Carter and

engineer Howard Stark. On the mission, Rogers infiltrates a fortress of Hydra, a Nazi division led by officer Johann Schmidt, who had also injected himself with the super-soldier serum in the past. However, unlike Rogers, the procedure altered his complexion, leaving him with a red skull, over which he wears a mask. The serum also amplified his evil side and conquering the world as the leader of Hydra has become his goal. Schmidt manages to escape amidst the battle at the fortress, but Rogers returns to the army base with the freed soldiers, including his best friend Barnes. Soon after, Rogers, now as Captain America, is allowed to assemble a team of soldiers, with whom he successfully sabotages several Hydra bases and operations. However, one of those missions results in Barnes falling to his death. Despite his grief, Rogers prepares his team to attack the last Hydra base, which they are able to locate with the information provided by a captured Doctor Zola. Rogers confronts Schmidt on his aircraft, and ultimately emerges victorious. However, the badly damaged aircraft carries weapons of mass destruction targeted at the United States; to stop the attack, the only option is for Rogers to crash the aircraft into the Arctic. Nothing more is heard from him, and despite Agent Carter and Stark's intense searching, Rogers and the aircraft are not found until nearly 70 years later, in the 2010s. The film ends with Rogers waking up in a hospital room, confused and distressed. He escapes and finds himself standing in the middle of present-day Times Square, as hordes of agents surround him.

After this film, Captain America's appearances take place in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. He appears next in Marvel's *The Avengers* (2012), which ensembles all the superheroes introduced to the MCU by that time. The First Avenger is followed later by *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014), in which Wilson is introduced and both Rogers and the audience learns that Barnes did not die during the Second World War. In 2016, the trilogy comes to an end with *Captain America: Civil War*, which focuses on Rogers trying to protect Barnes from being imprisoned. The film ends in Rogers, Barnes and Wilson all becoming fugitives of the law. After this trilogy, Rogers has a significant role in Marvel Studios' *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019). His journey as Captain America ends at the end of *Endgame*, as he travels back in time, appearing as an old man to pass his shield on to Wilson, wanting him to become Captain America.

## **2.2. *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier* (2021)**

The events of Marvel Studios' *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier* take place shortly after the ending of *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) when Rogers gave his shield to Wilson (played by Anthony Mackie), wanting him to take up the mantle of Captain America. The mini-series consists of six episodes set in 2024, following Sam Wilson/The Falcon and Bucky Barnes/The Winter Soldier who team up to face the Flag Smashers, an anti-nationalist group, while simultaneously tackling their turbulent friendship after Rogers' death. Alongside Wilson and Barnes, the series includes familiar characters from the Marvel Cinematic Universe and the Captain America-trilogy: Sharon Carter, Helmut Zemo, and the Dora Milaje. The series also introduces various new characters, and this study will also focus on the masculinity of John Walker, the Captain America chosen by the U.S. government.

Episode one, "New World Order" begins with Wilson working as The Falcon on a hijacking and hostage mission in Tunisia. Though Rogers gave Wilson the shield and the mantle, Wilson continues as The Falcon, not feeling comfortable with the idea of being Captain America. Thus, he relinquishes the shield to the U.S. government to be displayed in a museum and returns to his hometown in Louisiana, where his sister and nephews live. Barnes, who lives a secluded life and tries to reconcile with his past as the assassin Winter Soldier, does not react kindly to Wilson giving up the shield. Their conflict about the shield continues throughout the series, and Barnes tries to convince Wilson to become Captain America, as per to Rogers' wishes. In contrast, Wilson initially does not believe the world is ready for a Black Captain America. In hopes of Wilson changing his mind, Barnes introduces Wilson to Isaiah Bradley, a Black super soldier, who was punished and tortured due to his race. Bradley does not believe the world has changed and is ready for a Black Captain America, which hinders Wilson further and brings racism as an issue to the forefront.

While Barnes and Wilson attempt to manage their issues, they must face the Flag Smashers. Some of the members are super soldiers, and their agenda is to create an equal world for refugees. However, they use violent attacks to get what they want: especially the leader, a young woman named Karli Morgenthau, does not hesitate in her means of achieving a world without borders or patriotism. Additionally, after Wilson relinquishes the shield, the U.S. government reveals a new Captain America, John Walker. Walker is introduced properly in the second episode, "The Star-Spangled Man", and the case around the Flag Smashers intensifies. From the start, Wilson and Barnes do not want Walker and his partner Lemar Hoskins' involvement in the Flag Smashers case, and the dislike towards Walker continues throughout the series. To stop the Flag Smashers, Wilson and Barnes recruit the help of an

imprisoned Helmut Zemo, who has a profound hate for super soldiers and was the villain in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016). The trio encounter Sharon Carter, a former S.H.I.E.L.D and CIA agent who became a fugitive alongside Rogers, Wilson and Barnes in *Civil War* (2016). She has been creating a business as a black-market art dealer in Madripoor and become independent and cold towards others. While the men manage to find leads on Morgenthau and the Flag Smashers, the Wakandan warrior group Dora Milaje come looking for Zemo to imprison him, as he murdered their king in *Civil War* (2016). The Dora Milaje give Barnes eight hours, only due to Barnes' long stay in Wakanda and acquaintance with the warriors. The men get hold of Morgenthau, but while Wilson tries to peacefully negotiate with her, Walker intervenes. A fight ensues, and the relationship between Walker and the other men becomes more strained. Additionally, Walker's desire for the super soldier serum increases, and he manages to steal a vial of the serum. Walker injects himself with the serum, and after one encounter with the Flag Smashers ends with Hoskins' death, Walker uses his superhuman powers to brutally murder one of the members.

Walker is discharged from service after this incident. However, though Wilson and Barnes take the shield back from Walker, Wilson refuses to become Captain America and returns home to Louisiana. Ultimately, after a deeper discussion with his family, Barnes, and Bradley respectively, Wilson takes the shield and starts training. As the Flag Smashers plan for their biggest attack in New York City, Wilson arrives in a new Captain America suit which is donned with his Falcon's wings. Walker returns delusional, still sure of deserving the Captain America- mantle. Morgenthau is killed by Carter, who is revealed to be the Power Broker who runs the criminal underworld of Madripoor. She is also the one who ordered the new super soldier serum to be made. Wilson accepts the role of Captain America, and arranges a memorial dedicated to Bradley in a museum exhibit. Barnes continues making amends to those he hurt while being Hydra's assassin.

### 3. Approaching Gender in the Marvel Materials

This section will focus on the approaches to gender in the Marvel materials, with specific attention paid to an essentialist approach to masculinities. First, the the concepts significant to the study of masculinities in the Marvel materials are defined: namely ideology, hegemony, discourse, and hegemonic masculinity. Second, this section will theorise and define two approaches important to the analysis: essentialism and constructivism. Lastly, the analysis of the materials will begin with a focus on the ways in which essentialist thinking of gender is represented in both *Captain America: The First Avenger* and *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*.

#### 3.1. Defining ‘Masculinities’: Ideology, Hegemony, and The Role of Discourse

While most of the discussion in this thesis focuses on determining what constitutes ‘masculinity’ in Marvel’s *Captain America: The First Avenger* and *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, this chapter begins with an overview of how masculinity is communicated in the materials. To understand the means used in this communication, three key concepts need to be defined: ideology, hegemony, and discourse. The concepts are intertwined and the concepts of masculinity and hegemony have been theorized as ideologies themselves. Additionally, the concept of hegemonic masculinity is clarified as well in this section to analyse the gender ideologies perpetuated by discourses in popular media.

‘Ideology’ is defined as a “series of beliefs” that a group of people accept and believe in, and they also influence how the people “go about their lives”, whether they are aware of it or not (Reeser, 2010, p. 20; Çoban, 2018, p. 90). The concept of ideology grew out of the work of Marxist scholars such as Louis Althusser and Antonio Gramsci, and so is rooted in the study of class and politics, often associated with bourgeois values and capitalism. However, the belief systems reflect mundane matters alongside more formally defined ones, which helps those belief systems appear natural and go unquestioned. Consequently, these belief systems are represented as the norm in a given everyday culture, and repetition through media, for instance, gives credibility to said ideologies. Ideologies are linked to power and aligned with those in power, and a prevailing ideology is usually discussed in terms of “dominant ideology” (Reeser, 2010, p. 20). Though various ideologies can exist simultaneously, and no single group of people is responsible for creating and maintaining an ideology, groups in

positions of power can be significant forces in its propagation and articulation (Reeser, 2010, pp. 20-21). In addition, ideologies are often culturally specific, but the propagation instigated by those in power assists in making the belief systems normalised on a global scale.

Like ideology, the concept of hegemony has its roots in issues of power and its acquisition. 'Hegemony' developed from early Marxist writings as Antonio Gramsci adopted and expanded the concept. It is discussed in Gramsci's works as a political issue, and a class issue: hegemony is the acquisition of power by the dominant class, "the ruling class getting the power with the consent of subordinates" (Çoban, 2018, p. 102). According to Gramscian thought, the dominant class stays in power and promotes bourgeois values by approval of the submissive classes, though Horrocks (1995) has noted that hegemony "has to be fought for and won" (p. 27). Though Gramscian definitions of hegemony and Çoban's (2018) discussion of the concept have revolved specifically around politics and capitalism, the connection between power and the concept of hegemony cannot be ignored: those who wield the power are more likely to influence the social status quo as well as ideologies. According to Çoban, hegemony is a "cultural and ideological method", and he suggests that the concepts of hegemony and ideology are so intertwined that they cannot be separated from each other (p. 90). Çoban elaborates by arguing that hegemony is "a process which operates through the transfer of dominant ideology" (p. 98). This further suggests that ideology is a broader concept which includes the concept of hegemony. Both ideologies and hegemonies are always in flux and prone to shifts – as Çoban claims, "hegemony has the flexibility to bend and twist when needed" to ensure continuity (p. 98). However, while Çoban suggests that the shifts are controlled and somewhat voluntary, ideologies and hegemonies can also be challenged from the outside by those who are in subordinate positions.

Çoban (2018) argues further that hegemonic ideologies try "to produce consciousness / consent in the direction of itself by cultivating sovereign values with mass consciousness" (p. 98). That is, he proposes that hegemony attempts to ensure its continuity by making its values appear as the truth. These processes of producing sovereign values need mediums through which they are communicated, and in Gramscian thought, language and linguistics have a significant role in influencing and constructing hegemony; hegemony can be communicated especially through language (Çoban, 2018, p. 91). Consequently, as hegemony is constructed through linguistics, so are ideologies. According to Çoban, reflections on ideologies are presented and shaped in mass media (p. 90). These ideologies are communicated through various social forms, including images and discourse: discourse, especially as language and a



way of communicating, is an important aspect to consider in analysing popular culture. Reeser (2010) argues that language “defines the reality that we experience” and “we cannot experience reality without language”, signifying that the role of language in the dominant belief systems is not to be ignored (p. 29). The discourse and ideologies perpetuated are influenced by those in power, namely capital owners, according to Çoban (p. 105). They sovereignly rule the mass media and consequently, affect the cultural discourses on various issues. In this sense, Marvel Studios – a multi-billion-dollar production company - is in a position of power in terms of popular media. Thus, it is a significant player in constructing and perpetuating discourses of hegemonic ideologies. Those discourses contain ideologies on gender, for instance.

### **3.1.1. Hegemonic Masculinity and Masculinity as Ideology**

Hegemony is also intertwined with gender, as evidenced by R.W. Connell’s (2005) theory on masculinities; like the dominant class, “one form of masculinity rather than others is culturally exalted” at any given time (Connell, 2005, p. 77). Connell introduced the concept of hegemonic masculinity which derived from Gramsci’s concept of hegemony as a “cultural dynamic” in which a ruling group holds a dominant position in a given society (p. 77). Hegemonic masculinity is defined as the “currently most honored way of being a man”, a pattern of practice that distinguishes it from other forms of masculinities and guarantees the dominant position of men (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2006, p. 832; Connell, 2005). Thus, hegemonic masculinity is tied to power, which allows it a claim to authority over women as well as other men. However, hegemonic masculinity is not a stable character type, as Connell (2005) explains, but rather a masculinity in a hegemonic position “in a given pattern of gender relations” and always contestable (p. 76). In other words, hegemonic masculinity is affected by the times and places in which it exists, and the surrounding culture significantly defines what is valued in masculinity. Additionally, despite the wishes to make it appear stable and impermeable, hegemonic masculinity and its principles can be contested, negotiated, and altered by others.

Connell’s (2005) theory on masculinities includes complicit, subordinate, and marginalized forms of masculinities, which are constructed in relation to hegemony and are in a less powerful position in comparison. Though few men can enact hegemonic masculinity

rigorously, many benefit from patterns of hegemony: the “patriarchal dividend” and subordination of women give most masculinities certain advantages and power in society (Connell, 2005, p. 79). However, though there is a strong connection between masculinity and power, Connell & Messerschmidt (2006) acknowledge that accounts of hegemonic masculinity do not constitute of entirely negative and dominant actions: they argue that “positive” actions like fathering and bringing home a wage make the concept of hegemony relevant (p. 840). Characteristics such as violence and aggression “may mean domination but hardly would constitute hegemony” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2006, p. 841). However, despite the positive aspects, hegemony is a practice that legitimates unequal gender relations and advocates for subordination of some men and women.

Reeser (2010) parallels ideology with masculinity, arguing that masculinity can be considered an ideology as well: masculinity is often tied to power, certain forms prevail in given contexts, and the origins of its construction are ambiguous (p. 20). Like ideology, the concept of masculinity appears natural, and it is taken for granted due to the constant repetition of specific images of masculinity throughout culture (Reeser, 2010, pp. 20-21). Reeser continues that these dominant images and discourses, which are communicated through various social forms, relay messages about how certain masculinities are valued, and more valid than others. Subsequently, such widespread images can become mythological and universal, creating a specific narrative about ideal masculinity through images that are taken for granted. Reeser gives specifically American male myths, cowboys, and superheroes as an example: these figures have appealed to American boys and men for decades; he suggests that due to the appealing nature of these masculinities, the image of masculinity they represent has become “universal and foundational to US masculinity” (p. 23). Though there are a variety of images and myths about men, some of them are propagated more than others. These masculinity myths become more powerful than others and may morph into widely accepted belief systems.

As mentioned above, language and discourse are powerful tools in communicating how gender is culturally understood and constructing masculinity as ideology. Like Çoban’s (2018) emphasis on connection between language and hegemony, Reeser (2010) argues that “language can never be separated from what we think masculinity is”: through language people both create and communicate ideas, thoughts, and presuppositions about gender (p. 29). The things said – or left unsaid – can be both implicit and explicit, but ultimately, they influence what people imagine masculinity to be. Moreover, discourses and language about

masculinity are affected by cultural norms, and they cannot thus be regarded as universal. Reeser further argues that one of the purposes of discourse is to “normalize human beings” and thus “make them conform to the power that institutions want to exert over people” (p. 31). However, though the discourses about masculinity are strongly affected by dominant ideologies created and maintained by institutions and those who hold power, Horrocks (1995) claims that these discourses are not always monolithic and simply reflective of hegemonic ideology about gender: he argues that there are some cracks in the monolith, rife with contradictory meanings and representations of masculinity (p. 27-28). Reeser (2010) agrees, suggesting that discourses of masculinity vary and even contradict each other, but continues that some discourses are more dominant than others, perpetuated and powered by cultural representation (p. 31-32).

The discourses about masculinity are time-specific and culturally bound, and in this thesis the focus is on Western discourses around masculinity. In addition, though detailed linguistic aspects and semiotics are important to the articulation of masculinity, the more significant definition for this thesis is discourse as a way of communicating. The aim is to examine masculinity in the Marvel materials as a hegemonic discourse that spreads the ideology of a certain type of masculinity. It is a discourse on masculinity that Marvel specifically wants the audience to witness, and due to Marvel’s global recognition, a discourse that is more dominant than others. Brown (2016) has described hegemony’s efficacy in its ability to “adapt, to give and take, and to convince people that certain beliefs or conditions are natural facts” (p. 132). Thus, Marvel’s superhero films may produce various discourses, some of which initially appear to criticize hegemonic masculinity while ultimately confirming it as the most desirable state. In the changing sensibilities of the broader society, Marvel should consider the processes of disempowerment. This study investigates how these materials respond to those sensibilities.

### **3.2. Theorising Gender: Essentialism and Constructivism**

As noted above, masculinity has been theorized as an unstable, ever-changing, and rather fluid concept with multiple forms of masculinities coexisting simultaneously. A masculine position can shift and be open to negotiations and challenges, and Connell (2005) has defined masculinities as relational: masculinity cannot exist or be constructed independently, and it needs femininity and other forms of masculinities in these processes. However, though

theorizing on masculinities within gender studies often follows these constructivist premises, an ideological belief about masculinity as innately tied to men is still prevalent in many cultural materials with popular resonance. The essentialist view of gender strictly separates masculinity and femininity, and ties gender to biology: masculinity belongs to the male sex, which in turn dictates masculine action. This idea of “true masculinity” is supported by the sex-role theory, which suggests that biological sex differences lead to male and female sex roles and drives men and women to act in masculine and feminine ways (Connell, 2005, p. 45). In other words, in the essentialist view of gender, biology is destiny, while a constructivist view acknowledges the influence of culture and environment on gender – nurture over nature.

The following sections will focus on how both the essentialist and constructivist approaches to gender are visible in *Captain America: The First Avenger* and *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*. The first section examines how essentialist view of gender is manifested in the materials, highlighting how masculinity and femininity are positioned as being in contrast, as though no overlaps exist. The second section then moves on to discuss how the constructivist view of gender is represented, looking at the ways gender and its performances are displayed as more than strictly masculine or strictly feminine. The aim is to determine the kind of views Marvel wants to communicate about masculinity. Since popular culture becomes popular precisely because it resonates to ongoing perceptions of the world, the popularity of the Marvel Franchise indicates that the views it expresses are appreciated by a large section of the population. Additionally, Marvel may respond to the views and ideologies already appreciated by the population, thus intertwine in the creation and re-creation of the contemporary discourse about masculinity.

### **3.3. Essentialist Approach to Gender in the Marvel Materials**

The ideological view of men and masculinity often revolves around essentialist view of gender, and the impact of biology on gender representation. Though Westernized gender theories acknowledge this ideological view of men and masculinities before questioning its efficacy and debunking it, essentialist beliefs about masculinity continue to be upheld by popular culture and media in the Western world. In the essentialist context, the relationality

of gender is explained in terms of setting masculinity in opposition to femininity: as though it were a dichotomy of opposite forces. For instance, in his study of masculinity and gender identity Michael S. Kimmel (1994) has suggested that manhood is defined “in opposition to a set of ‘others’”, a set which includes minorities – sexual and racial – and as Kimmel emphasizes, “above all, women” (p. 120). In this sense, masculinity and femininity form a dichotomy, which becomes relevant, as ideally, the male body shies away from anything effeminising. Kimmel has further suggested that this dichotomy between genders is upheld through the binary opposition of masculinity with femininity, and the avoidance of femininity and the effeminising is regarded as “the flight from the feminine” (p. 126). Reeser (2010) has also discussed this opposition of masculinity and femininity, highlighting how language itself sets these two as directly oppositional: the opposing term for ‘masculinity’ is ‘femininity’ (p. 36). Additionally, such binary opposition through language gives masculinity an assumed core, an essence: this linguistic stability, in turn, implies a “stability of the thing represented” (Reeser, 2010, p. 36).

The essentialist approach thus focuses on viewing masculinity and femininity constructed as opposites of each other. They cannot live without the other, but they are irrevocably separated and avoid bleeding into each other. Thus, the borders are rigid and set non-negotiable limitations to gender representation. For instance, the characteristics attributed to masculinity belong to men only: “toughness, stoicism [and] courage” among others (Horrocks, 1995, p. 18). Similarly, feminine attributes belong to women and the realm of the feminine. The essentialist view of gender sees manhood and masculinity being tied to a biologically male body which has no room for assuming feminine traits: this would break the strict boundaries built around masculinity and the male body. As Horrocks (1995) has acknowledged, a significant part of the essentialist view of masculinity is the distinguishing of masculine traits “from a ‘soft’ femininity that belongs to women”, and keeping these gender representations separate (p. 18). Especially in *Captain America: The First Avenger*, the essentialist view of gender is represented through the excess of masculinity: the mentality seems to be ‘the more the better’. That is, the more masculine traits, the better. Feminine traits need to be held separate, functioning more as a foil allowing the idealized masculinity to become visible. This brings us to realize that within the essentialist view of gender, there is only one acceptable way of being a man, which is the hegemonic way, reflecting the masculine traits most valued in given cultures and times. Hegemonic masculinities, though diverse, “each in

their unique way legitimate unequal gender relations between men and women, between masculinity and femininity, and among masculinities” (Messerschmidt 90).

As mentioned above, with the essentialist approach in mind, both masculinity and femininity can be perceived to have clear borders that allow them to be seen as only belonging to manhood or womanhood, respectively. Understanding the male body and corporality works similarly, as the ideal male body is separated from the female body. Constructed through culturally accepted ideas, the male body is often determined by its muscles and hard lines that define manhood and evoke images of any form of power. In both *Captain America: The First Avenger* and *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, the desirable, hegemonic male body is the military body. However, according to Reeser (2010), masculinity could be separated from the body and corporality altogether; the corporeal realm is reserved for women, who are bound to their bodies, whereas the masculinity is better associated with the mind (p. 102). ‘A man of reason’, the well-known expression, is appropriate here to demonstrate the cultural idea of separating masculinity from the body. However, as the corporal body and masculinity cannot be escaped, representations of the male body and masculinity suggests that its corporality is best hidden, and if that fails, the male body should be presented as delineated with established, impenetrable borders (Reeser, 2010, pp. 106-108). The “physical sense of maleness” in the essentialist view is communicated through certain postures and sexual possibilities, avoiding feminine attributes that are not compatible with the ideal male body (Connell, 2005, pp. 52-53). Notwithstanding areas like sports or military, the male body should not be discussed. The male body, then, should be hegemonically constructed as opposite of the female body, but to maintain that hegemony, it should also remain inconspicuous. However, as Josep M. Armengol (2013) notes, the male body is often “used as a political tool which reflects or contests different ideologies in different cultural and historical moments”, which indicates that the male body has a significant role in various cultural contexts which rely on the corporality of masculinity (p. 4).

In *Captain America: The First Avenger* especially, the desirable, hegemonic male body is the military body, although military bodies are significant in *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier* as well. If we are to look at the materials’ titles, they already suggest that the male body and masculinity as shaped by the military is a relevant aspect: ‘Captain’ and ‘Soldier’ are both directly connected to the military. According to David H. J. Morgan (1994), especially in times or societies where the military is currently relevant and pervasive, the “militaristic

forms of masculinity” are, or become, hegemonic and form the dominant images of ideal masculinities (p. 169-170). *Captain America: The First Avenger* takes place during the Second World War, and thus the cultural and historical environments dictate that the most respected and idealized form of masculinity is that of a soldier, who exhibits the power to serve and protect his country. Though currently, the military is not such a segregated institution in terms of gender, and many women join the armed services, in *The First Avenger* segregation during the Second World War is emphasized, and the discourse in the film mostly indicates that men serve the country with their bodies while women stay at home. According to Morgan (1994), the soldier is “a key symbol of masculinity” especially in times of war, and in the film, being in the army is the most honourable way of being a man and performing masculinity (p. 166). The war and military tasks separate men and women, and only women, children, and the elderly stay at home; while the men serve their country on the battlefield, the women and children serve by collecting scrap metal or doing factory work.

As evidenced from the beginning of *The First Avenger* Rogers’ body is not an adequate realization of the ideal military male body and masculinity, which is the reason for many of his struggles. Before the effects of the super-serum, his body is not seen as the embodiment of hegemonic masculinity due to its small size and the considerable number of ailments it harbours, which renders him too weak to function as a man in a military context. Rogers is shown, for the first time in the film, during the process of trying to enlist in the military. At the enrolment facility, several men are sitting on benches and waiting for their turn to the health examination. All of them appear to be of average build and height, with very little variation between their appearances: in other words, they seem to exemplify the ideal male body that is healthy and useful in the war. One man is reading a newspaper that discusses the high death rates of the war. Next to him, Rogers, tiny as he is, stands out clearly among the other recruits. He stands up as his name is called for the examination, looking as tall as he can make himself. However, his petite body clearly evokes sceptical stares in the other men around the room. Furthermore, despite Rogers’ determined pleadings for a chance to join the army, the doctor declares him ineligible due to the long list of Rogers’ health issues. As Rogers asks the doctor if there was anything he could do for Rogers, the doctor replies with “I’m doing it. I’m saving your life” (*Captain America: The First Avenger*). This scene establishes how Rogers’ body stands out among other, more valued, male bodies. Unlike the other male bodies that go unnoticed, Rogers’ body garners unwanted attention, which makes his corporeality visible in a way that is effeminising.

The military discourse provides the male body very little possibilities for variation in terms of appearance and its practices. Reeser (2010) suggest that this limiting gives both the male body and masculinity a stable meaning (p. 93). Value is placed on athleticism and tough bodily performances that can lead to triumph, and consequently on those who are able to perform accordingly. As only certain kinds of bodies can perform the practices required in these environments, those who cannot certainly stand out among the group as ones that somehow have failed to obtain access to what Kimmel (1994) has dubbed “the realm of manhood” (p. 128). Ideally, the male body shies away from anything effeminising, such as passivity and powerlessness: rather, it should exert power and direct (masculine) action (Kimmel, 1994). Instead of affiliating Rogers with a group of males practicing military masculinity, his body is placed outside the realm of manhood, as it is deemed suitable only for performing tasks with women and children instead of enlisting. This is exhibited in the scene in which Rogers is having a heated discussion with his friend Barnes about Rogers’ attempts at enlisting in the army the day before Barnes is being shipped out. It is revealed that, due to Rogers’ lack of physical health and prowess, his only possible roles in the war at present are to collect scrap metal alongside children and women. Though important for the war effort, these tasks are deemed effeminising and a threat to Rogers’ masculinity. Rogers’ male peers are “able-bodied [young men]” who serve their country, whereas Rogers’ role is to serve the soldiers (*Captain America: The First Avenger*). He is removed from directly serving America.

James “Bucky” Barnes, Rogers’ best friend, on the other hand, is presented in *The First Avenger* as the epitome of a great soldier – and thus a great *man*. When introduced to the viewers for the first time, Barnes is wearing his military uniform and a proud smirk, which leave no room to question where he stands. After saving Rogers from a man who tries to beat him up (which further emphasizes Rogers’ remoteness from the ideal man), Barnes declares he has become a Sergeant. Barnes, in his fresh uniform, thus exemplifies the most honoured form of masculinity and male body during the Second World War. At this stage, before Barnes leaves for the battlefield, the military body is clean-cut and invincible. The effects of war only become fully visible in the Winter Soldier. Despite the obvious danger, it is an honour to serve America, and being able to do it indicates that the individual is part of the collective manhood. The men and women both stay in their own lanes, which is presented as the natural order at the time. Rogers, who in his sickly and weak state is outcast from the men’s duties, does not fit into the essentialist view of masculinity until he receives the super



soldier serum. When Rogers is chosen for the procedure despite his shortcomings in the eyes of his superiors, the serum he receives transforms his body into a representation of hypermasculinity. This transformation, quoting Brown (2016), represents “a ritualized presentation of masculinization”, as the less-than-average man turns into an extraordinary one in terms of his body and masculinity (p. 134). Additionally, this transformation shifts the gaze on Rogers’ body in a new way. His body stands out as “spectacularly different” as hypermasculine, which takes Rogers away from femininity (Brown, 2016, p. 142). Whereas Rogers’ masculinity is enforced, and he looks more powerful as the film progresses, Barnes’ clean look starts to crumble: the war and being held a hostage leave their marks on Barnes, and the change to an outwardly disheveled and dirty man reflects the change happening inside. No specific attention is yet paid to the change in Barnes’ demeanor, as the focus is more on Rogers.

Though ten years have passed between *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) and *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier* (2021), and the milieu of the Marvel universe has shifted from the Second World War to the 2020s, military masculinities and the military male body are still prominent. Wilson, Barnes, and Walker all have strong military backgrounds: Wilson worked in the Air Force as a pararescue airman before retiring, Barnes was a Sergeant during the Second World War, and Walker is a Captain of the United States Army – though in episode five “Truth”, he is stripped of his mantle after dishonorable actions as the new Captain America. Though war is no longer the current threat in the series, America is now threatened by terrorism. Terrorism and ‘the enemy within’ are modern day threats, different from world wars but still requiring defense and patriotism. Thus, having a military background is still a crucial aspect for the men of the series and further, for the new Captain America, who will represent the country and its abilities to attack and defend itself if necessary. One way to approach masculinities, as Reeser (2010) suggests, is to assume a historical difference; in other words, masculinities lack a transhistorical form and thus aspects previously coded as masculine might not be understood as such in a modern context (p. 218). However, military masculinity is one of the forms that transcends time as dominant repeatedly, a claim supported by Morgan (1994) as he addresses military masculinity as timeless (p. 166).

The men’s military backgrounds are evident and inscribed to their bodies as well as their actions. In *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, Wilson, Barnes, and Walker each has the muscular and agile body of a soldier, an aspect represented as somewhat self-evident due to

their backgrounds in the military as well as their other occupations (namely Wilson as an Avenger and Barnes as an assassin and later an Avenger). The men's bodies are shown off in several scenes, both dressed and undressed, drawing the viewer's attention to the corporality of masculinity. For instance, the series begins with Wilson showing off his battle skills as the Falcon, displaying feats with the propulsion wingsuit that he used as a paratrooper. The precision and strength with which he handles the rescue mission appears natural and unquestionable, though no ordinary body could handle it. Similar displays of the body, that are simultaneously *not* displays of the body, are present when Barnes and Walker, respectively, are seen for the first time in the series. Barnes wakes up from a nightmare, shirtless in his makeshift bed, and this scene shows he has a strong body – the body of a killer, as Barnes just had a nightmare about his times as an assassin. Lastly, Walker is shown for the first time donned in the Captain America suit, which itself already symbolizes strength (among courage and patriotism) and the notion that no ordinary citizen is wearing the suit is further established as Walker is properly introduced to the audience in an interview in episode two “The Star-Spangled Man”. The introductions leave no question about them displaying hegemonically masculine characteristics, fortifying the connection between masculinity, the military, and patriotism.

However, even though Wilson, Barnes, and Walker seemingly live in ideal male bodies, after the first glance the struggles around corporality and the body become obvious, though the issue is no longer the lack of strength or being too petite. The corporality of the body becomes once again complicated when the ideology surrounding the ideal male body requires it to have certain aspects, like race or build, and not everyone can adhere to those standards.

In her essay “The complete body of modernity”, Requena-Pelegri focuses on the male body of the 1920s. She presents the most valued masculinity and male body of the 1920s as “whole, white and virile”, but a hundred years later, similar aspects are still valued in terms of hegemonic masculinity in the Marvel universe (p. 25). The men in *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier* certainly seem to measure themselves against these standards. Wilson is not White, and Barnes is not whole as his arm has been replaced by metal. Even Walker, though seemingly adhering to this image of the hegemonic man, struggles with the prevalent ideology about masculinity and how he is supposed to position himself in it. Only Rogers succeeds, but this requires a super serum and leads to the highest form of patriotism: self-sacrifice. The deeper examination of the male characters supports Connell's (2005) notion of hegemonic masculinities: though some men may appear to enact it perfectly, very few are

truly able to live up to hegemonic standards rigorously. However, though the male bodies are not perfectly ideal, the bodies are still significant, and they are displayed in the series. However, the bodies are not objectified and designed to cater to the gaze filled with desire, but more to reaffirm “a hard masculinity” (Reeser, 2010, p. 111). For instance, both Barnes and Wilson’s shirtless bodies are displayed in the series, showing muscular build. Moreover, Wilson’s body is displayed in a training montage in episode five. This scene reaffirms that male body can be displayed if it is not erotically coded: the body remains hidden since the others do not react to these bodies as bodies, unlike in *The First Avenger*. Rather, the body is a visualisation of idealised masculinity, messaging the audience of the way superhero bodies look – in this case, it can be a Black male body as well.

The essentialist approach to gender views the male and female bodies as complete opposites. Thus, they are displayed as distinctly different and distinguishable from each other. This is the approach especially in *The First Avenger*, as the – rather sparse – female bodies are clearly distinguishable in the military environment full of male bodies. Agent Carter and a briefly appearing Private Lorraine both have long hair and wear make-up, and their female figure is highlighted by the skirts and heels that are part of their uniforms. After Rogers’ transformation into a hypermasculine body, the two women are highly contrasted against his broad shoulders and tall build; even the other men look small compared to him, which further highlights Rogers’ spectacularise. In contrast, *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier* downplays the essentialist differences between men and women, which resonates in the 21<sup>st</sup> century environment. However, there are still instances in which the superiority of masculinity over femininity is implicit: when Barnes is defeated by a small girl, Wilson uses this as an opportunity to ridicule Barnes. This highlights the assumption that a male body should adhere to hegemonic standards and be stronger and more durable. The distinction between men and women in both materials is further emphasized in the characters’ heteronormativity, which is a part of the essentialist view of gender: any homosexual desire must be denied or excluded, and only heterosexual expressions support hegemony. Thus, the heterosexual affirmations are significant to the construction of masculinities not only as signifiers of hegemonic masculinity, but as a way of avoiding any implicit homosocial desire of men among men.

These previous sections have shown that in the representations of men and masculinities, Marvel employs various essentialist means to communicate ideas about gender that mostly adhere to hegemonic standards. Separating itself entirely from femininity, masculinity appears as fixed, bound to biology and the male sex. As evidenced, the male characters in

both *The First Avenger* and *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier* certainly do embody much of the ideal male body. However, looking at the men and masculinities only through the essentialist lens poses the characters as flat and one-dimensional. The notion of a fixed masculinity does not include all the traits that the men exhibit, nor leave space for the other characters that exhibit both masculine and feminine characteristics. Additionally, existing only in opposition to women does not explain why much of the men's actions are dictated by their relationality to other men and masculinities.

#### **4. Constructivist Approach to Gender in the Marvel Materials**

As discussed in the previous chapter, the essentialist view of gender, though a strong and prevalent one, appears reductive in many places. The idea that masculinity and femininity are tied to the biological sex and body cannot explain the variances in gender expression and representation. As noted above, however, both the Marvel film and the series rely on the essentialist view of gender in places like sexuality and the gendered body, despite the general expectations that cultural works should adapt to societal changes and keep representations diverse. In addition to the omnipresence of essentialist views of gender, the film and the series also express other ways of being male than simply as a biologically determined, hegemonic masculinity. The essentialist view, as mentioned, has been the focus of theoretical debunking, and the scholars have argued that instead of thinking gender as destined by biological sex, gender should be viewed as a construction which is “built up through ideology, domination, practice, language, and other related elements” (Reeser, 2010, p. 51).

Whereas the essentialist view fails to see the dialogic relation of gender, society, culture, and time, constructivist approach acknowledges that masculinity and femininity are not inherently tied to men and women, respectively; rather, gender is a performance affected by outside forces that have very little to do with biology. The constructivist perspective sees masculinity and femininity as “that which is socially constructed as being appropriate, natural or desirable for each gender”, according to Everitt-Penhale and Ratele (2015) (p. 7). Similarly, Connell’s theory of gender as social relations suggests that “the body and its biological underpinnings are not rejected out of hand but neither are they privileged with primacy and upheld as the essential determinant” (Howson, 2006, p. 57). Masculinity and femininity do not exist independently, but they are constructed in relational practices that involve each other. As evidenced above, the essentialist view, in which masculinity relates only to femininity in opposition, creates some blind spots, ignores the multifaceted nature of gender, and simplifies gender relations. Men and masculinities require an expansion of the concept of relationality between masculinity and femininity to consider the multiple forms of masculinities. Relationality between different men is a central element in understanding these constructions of masculinity: the relational practices between different men construct masculinity for all parties involved. Hegemonic masculinity sets the standard in relation to which all men and masculinities position themselves, be it in compliance or in defiance of it. Marvel appears to

have moved beyond expressing solely hegemonic and essentialist views of gender, but there are still certain limitations to how masculinity is allowed to be performed in the materials.

The constructivist approach to gender can be visualized through a continuum or a hierarchy. Continuum sets extreme masculinity at one end and emphasized femininity at the other. There are no set borders like in the essentialist view of masculinity, but rather there is a grey area between masculinity and femininity. The two are thus interconnected in a way that in the grey area noticeable differences are less salient than at the ends of the continuum. In this visualization, individuals are placed somewhere along the continuum, and they can “oscillate from moment to moment between the two poles on that continuum” (Reeser, 2010, p. 45). However, though masculinity and femininity are connected, the assumption is that the individual represents one gender more than the other. Visualised through a hierarchy, gender is presented in a pyramid, with hegemonic masculinity at the top: with the most power, favoured and privileged over the others. The other, less powerful forms of masculinity and femininity are in subordinate positions, ranked in terms of their relation to hegemonic masculinity. Connell and Messerschmidt (2006) have noted that ‘masculinity’ does not represent a certain type of man, but rather “a way that men position themselves through discursive practices” (p. 841). In other words, the position of masculinity can shift both voluntarily and involuntarily in the continuum of gender and the hierarchy of masculinities. Masculinity is always expressed in a relation to a specific context, as suggested by Connell’s (2005) theorisation of multiple masculinities existing simultaneously in given times and spaces. The fixed nature of masculinity is thus questionable, and positioning masculinity as something fixed is redundant in the context of gender as a social construct.

In the following sections, the focus is on analysing the various ways masculinity is expressed in the Marvel materials with the constructivist approach in mind. These sections will focus on the ways of being masculine that challenge the hegemonic view, as well as the relational practices that are tied to constructions of masculinity. The analysis begins with examining masculine women in both *The First Avenger* and *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*. Then, the focus will move on to femininity in men and how characteristics associated with femininity are expressed in male bodies in both materials. Additionally, the concept of homosociality will be introduced as a significant element in the relationality of gender. This section on the constructivist approach to gender will end with an analysis on race in the materials, looking how race as a social construct affects the construction of masculinities.

#### 4.1. Waiting for the Right Partner: Masculine Women in *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011)

One way of being male that challenges the hegemonic view of masculinity is female masculinity, which can be defined as ‘masculine’ characteristics and actions embodied by a woman. Female masculinity is significant in *Captain America: The First Avenger* alongside the multiple male masculinities. Female masculinity is often more noticeable simply because it is less common, which is why its existence in the Marvel materials deserves attention as well. Female masculinity is both a significant part of the constructions of masculinities and it proves that women can perform gender in a masculine way and exist as such. In *The First Avenger*, Agent Carter, played by the British actress Hailey Atwell, is the embodiment of female masculinity. Though some aspects of essentialism are decipherable in her character, Carter also offsets the idea of essentialism because she is not *only* feminine (or *only* masculine), but a woman housing both visibly feminine and masculine traits. Reeser (2010) has suggested that when masculinity exists “outside the confines of a given type of body”, such as in a distinctly female body, it becomes a disembodied phenomenon (p. 131). Thus, as Reeser further argued, traits usually coded as masculine can be considered in a new light, in multiple types of bodies, which consequently further destabilizes the assumed natural connection between biological sex and gender (pp. 131-132).

In the film, Carter is an agent of the Strategic Scientific Reserve (SSR) and a supervisor for the super soldier project at the military training base to which Rogers is sent. As shown throughout the film, Carter displays traits from both ends of the imagined continuum of masculinity-femininity. In terms of appearance, she is traditionally feminine, with pristine makeup, red nail polish, and carefully coiffed hair. Carter often wears a green uniform like the superior officers in the army, though instead of trousers and boots which the men wear, she has a skirt and high heels. The outfit not only distinguishes her from the enlisted men, but as distinctly female in the otherwise male-dominated organization, displaying the existence of power – coded as masculine – in a female body. However, the outfit is impractical for the job, though this is not mentioned in the film. Instead, working in such clothes and keeping her appearance traditionally feminine despite the surroundings is made look natural. Corporality and caring about appearance is, essentially thinking, associated with femininity:

this in turn suggests that femininity is self-evident for a woman even in an environment which leaves male bodies rugged, dirty, and wounded.

However, Carter's feminine appearance is contrasted with her actions, which can be coded as decidedly masculine. She is familiar with the protocols of the army and adopts certain masculine traits to ascertain her position in the circle where her place due to femininity is often questioned. In the scene where she first appears in the film, her presence is immediately questioned by one of the recruits, Gilmore Hodge; he questions her place not only as a woman, but as a British woman, calling her Queen Victoria and noting that he signed up for the U.S. Army (*Captain America: The First Avenger*). Additionally, after Carter calls Hodge forward, he brings sexual connotations into this confrontation, asking Carter if they are going to "wrastle" and telling her he's got moves she might like, a connotation that would seldom occur in confrontations between two men due to the fear of homosexuality (*Captain America: The First Avenger*). Agent Carter responds to this by punching him in the face, ascertaining that she is not to be disrespected despite her appearance. Agent Carter's goal is not to pass as a man or reach masculinity, but to mimic it, as Reeser (2010) puts it (p. 139).

Discussing non-male masculinities, Reeser (2010) argues that despite sharing many similarities, female masculinity is not simply male masculinity transposed onto a female body (p. 134). Rather, it is constructed differently from male masculinity, and like the various forms of masculinities can distance themselves from hegemonic masculinity or adopt its traits as they find benefiting, similarly can female masculinity adopt traits from both masculinity and femininity. In the film, Agent Carter appears to do this; where she acknowledges that traits coded as masculine can profit her in the military environment, she adopts them. Equally, when she sees advantages in presenting herself as feminine, she does so. Like the other soldiers, she must prove her masculinity, exaggerating the masculine traits in her body in the military environment where neither the soldiers nor her superiors seem to take her seriously. As Carter tells Rogers in one of the scenes: "I know a little of what that's like. To have every door shut in your face." (*Captain America: The First Avenger*). She acknowledges the predicament she as a woman is in, an outcast in the military environment that is dominated by hegemonic masculinities. Simultaneously, she addresses Rogers' subordinate masculinity by paralleling their experiences, alluding to the hierarchical positioning of different masculinities.



Thus, Carter needs to construct her masculinity alongside femininity to create space for herself in the surroundings that seem to rely on the essentialist view of gender which favours masculinity over femininity. She still acts in ways that can be identified as ‘masculine’ because the hegemony is still in place. Without hegemony, Carter’s juxtapositions would not draw attention. In many scenes, Carter is shown as powerful and headstrong, facing enemies seemingly without fear – for instance, she stands in direct line of a Hydra agent’s car, trying to shoot the driver. The car misses her by a hair’s breadth, as Rogers jumps in to get her out of the way. Moreover, to some extent Carter faces every conflict in a similar manner: by shooting anyone who insults her. After she finds out that Rogers kissed another woman, she shoots at Rogers – who, granted, is holding up a new shield and asking for Carter’s opinion, but the message that comes across is clear: she is upset with him and his traitorous actions. The reactions to the masculinity housed in her female body are mixed, but at times it garners respect, which in turn discloses that masculinity is often favoured over femininity. The desire, or necessity, to acquire masculinity as a woman supports the view that “there is something desirable about [masculinity]” (Reeser, 2010, p. 137). Further, this kind of assumption supports the visualization of gender through a hierarchy, as Reeser has women’s desire to obtain masculinity is a “move up”, whereas moving from masculinity to femininity is considered a “move down” (Reeser, 2010, p. 137). Carter manages to find a balance between masculine and feminine representation, using her traditionally feminine looks combined with masculine-coded actions to her advantage.

However, no matter how many hegemonic aspects of masculinity a female body houses, it does not erase the fact female masculinities exist in a *female* body. This raises anxieties due to the underlying essentialist assumptions about gender which deems masculinity existing in bodies other than male bodies unnatural, as it destabilizes the notion of gender as binary (Reeser, 2010, p. 133). Anxieties about female masculinity are present in the characterization of Carter, and to assuage these anxieties, potential masculinity is offset by more feminine traits. As mentioned above, her appearance is always carefully considered: she wears makeup, her hair is done, and her uniform is feminine. Even in the more action-packed scenes she looks relatively clean, with no sweat or smeared makeup, which contrasts with the male characters’ dishevelled appearances during the fights and confrontations. This offers a very contradictory view into the representation of a masculine woman. The image is meant to reassure the viewer that Carter is not merely an object of the male gaze, while simultaneously Carter maintains the appearance that is meant to appeal to the male gaze. For instance, in one

scene Carter appears in a red dress, very different from her daily uniforms, reminding the viewer that she is not consumed by the potential masculinity displayed in almost every other scene. The soldiers and officers at a bar enjoying a night of drinks and music, until the otherwise loud crowd falls silent as Carter enters the room in the red dress. The silence is palpable, as every man acknowledges her as a woman in their midst; however, the underlying note seems to be more positively surprised than in the training circumstances, as her appearance counters the threat of too much masculinity.

Furthermore, the scene offers alleviation to the anxiety about female masculinity in terms of highlighting the romantic tension between Carter and Rogers (who at this point is an embodiment of hegemonic masculinity). Before, Carter compared herself with Rogers, setting the two below hegemony; however, Carter was more accepted as a masculine woman than Rogers ever was as a feminine man. To quote Reeser (2010), a masculine woman can be “collapsed into the category of the lesbian”—one interpretation is that a powerful woman with masculine traits cannot remain a woman, thus adopting even the heterosexual desire that masculine men (assumedly) exhibit towards women (p. 136). Thus, to avoid any homosexual interpretations of Carter, she is displayed as traditionally feminine and exhibiting desire towards Rogers. The only function of this scene seems to be the reassurance of heterosexuality on both Carter and Rogers’ account: Carter appears in the red dress and matching heels to a bar and tells Rogers about the following day’s schedule. Barnes attempts to ask Carter to dance, but Carter tells him she’s waiting for the right partner while gazing at Rogers, implying he’s the only choice. The scene assuages the viewer of Carter’s feminine aspects and simultaneously exposes her function as a love interest to Rogers. This reinforces Rogers’ hegemonically masculine identity and suggests that primarily, Carter’s role is to uphold heteronormativity in the film. Before Rogers’ transformation into the super soldier Carter and him could not begin any romantic relationship due to Rogers being too feminine and Carter too masculine, but now that Rogers embodies hegemonic masculinity and Carter displays her more feminine side, the relationship appears ‘natural’. As the film continues, Carter shows jealousy as her relationship with Rogers is threatened by another woman, and she also consoles Rogers when he loses his best friend Barnes. These are human responses, but also traits and roles traditionally associated with femininity: jealousy in intimate relationships, and the role of caregiver.

In conclusion, Carter is a masculine woman in the film, displaying traditionally masculine traits such as power and independence while simultaneously reproducing the image of a

traditionally feminine woman. To some extent, Carter's masculinity is a challenge to hegemony and functions to destabilize the notion of gender binary and essentialism. However, the need to ease the anxieties about female masculinity suggests that the offered destabilization is secondary to maintaining hegemony in the film. *The First Avenger* has created space for Carter's masculinity and the challenges to hegemony, but only to an extent that it does not unsettle the male characters' masculine positions. As shown above, one of Carter's primary functions is being Rogers' love interest and thus to maintain heteronormative ideas about gender. Moreover, though female masculinity could open new possibilities for gender reconstruction and representation, as Reeser (2010) has suggested, there is no indication that male femininity is accepted in the film. Rogers, who constantly struggles with effeminacy in the small body, is an outcast. Only after the transformation into a figure of hypermasculinity do the other characters' attitudes towards him shift, suggesting that hegemonic masculinity is desirable for *male* bodies. The next section will look at masculine women in *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier* to see whether these same processes of representing female masculinities have carried on to the 2020s.

#### **4.2. "Wow. She's Kind of Awful Now": Masculine Women in *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier* (2021)**

This section will discuss the female characters of the series, the focal point being Sharon Carter, who exhibits strongly masculine-coded traits. Though there are various other female characters to examine in the series, like the Flag-Smashers leader Karli Morgenthau, and the Wakandan Dora Milaje-warriors, Carter has been chosen for a deeper analysis because she has been a part of the Captain America franchise from the second film, *The Winter Soldier* (2014). In addition, she is Agent Carter's great-niece. Initially, in the 2014 Captain America film *The Winter Soldier*, Sharon Carter was an undercover S.H.I.E.L.D agent who was tasked with monitoring Rogers. She moved to build a career in CIA, but after she assisted Rogers, Wilson and Barnes in their escape from the government as fugitives in the third Captain America film *Civil War* (2016), she was branded an enemy of the state. Carter fled to Madripoor, where she established herself as a black-market art dealer, working in the criminal underworld as the Power Broker. Wilson, Barnes, and Helmut Zemo meet her in the 2021 series, as she saves them from bounty hunters.

Sharon Carter's demeanour has shifted from patriotism to a more nihilistic direction, as she has been running from the US government. Unlike Wilson, who had Avengers on his side, she had to cease contact with all her relatives. As a result, Carter seems to have abandoned her faith in the government and superheroes, as she states to Wilson that the whole "hero thing" is a hypocrisy (*The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, "Power Broker"). In her previous appearances in the Marvel Cinematic Universe and Captain America films, Carter did embody female masculinity as a government agent who was capable of handling weapons and government affairs. However, her purpose seemed to be to support Rogers' hegemonic masculinity by fulfilling the expectations of heterosexuality. In the series, this function has vanished, and there are no romantic attachments in her storyline. Instead, she has acquired considerable wealth and fame in the black market by herself, selling stolen art to wealthy clients. Carter's success is evident in the lavish lifestyle she leads, and she has also established connections with powerful people all over the world. All these aspects, and the moniker 'Power Broker' itself, evidence that she is a powerful woman, exhibiting a calculating side which can be coded as masculine, as the connection of masculinity with the realm of the mind is reinforced. Carter's wealth and possessions can also be interpreted as ways to prove her masculinity: a metaphorical phallus which signifies the acquisition of masculinity to survive in an otherwise male-dominated environment (Reeser, 2010, p. 136).

Carter's masculinity appears to contradict Reeser's (2010) claim that female masculinity is not simply male masculinity transposed onto a female body and is constructed differently (p. 132). In the series, male masculinity has a key role in the representation of Carter's female masculinity, which is signified by the wealth she has amassed, the consequent powerful position she is in, as well as her changed attitude. This change in demeanour is highlighted as Carter calls Barnes a "pet psychopath", and Barnes, shocked by this, calls her "kind of awful now" (*The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, "Power Broker"). Carter's masculinity is constructed in line with hegemonic ideals, which again suggests that masculinity is desirable and acquiring it is a "move up", as was the case in *The First Avenger*.

Another notable factor in constructing female masculinity is the moniker "Power Broker": throughout the series the identity of the Power Broker is concealed, and it is only revealed to the viewer at the end of episode six that it is Carter. The name 'Power Broker' itself is a powerful one morphologically and meant to be fear-inducing: though no one knows who is behind the name, everyone seems to agree that *he* should not be aggravated. When discussing the Power Broker, all the characters talk about a 'him', assuming that it is a man. This

assumption is in line with the idea that traits are gendered, and power and aggression belong to the realm of the masculine, not the feminine. Carter, however, takes advantage of this assumption to remain hidden and talks about the Power Broker using he/him pronouns as well, thus deflecting attention from herself. Carter plays the other characters, feeding into their assumptions about a powerful, aggressive man behind the moniker: she talks to Wilson about how the Power Broker “went apeshit” after Zemo killed one of his important scientists who was recreating the original super-soldier serum for the Power Broker (*The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, “Power Broker”) In this case, the series does acknowledge that assuming masculine bodies being always tied to powerful positions is redundant and can be used by the ‘underdogs’ to their advantage to negotiate the places in the hierarchy. However, Marvel does not question the assumption of masculinity as preferred over femininity as much as they only acknowledge the existence of such ideology. Masculinity is still held in higher regard and preferred over femininity, as only by adopting masculine traits Carter is able to build a successful way of life in exile.

In addition to the displays of financial power and authority in the criminal world, the series shows female masculinity represented in fights and action sequences. Carter is shown as more than adequate in face-to-face combat, and in one of the scenes she takes down several armed men by herself. However, these physical altercations leave her appearance dishevelled, and at one point, she has blood and dirt on her face after the confrontations with several bounty hunters. Additionally, in contrast to Agent Carter’s distinctly feminine and clean appearance in *The First Avenger*, Sharon Carter’s clothing is, at times, masculine and gender-neutral at others; she wears dark colours and in the scene at her house, she is wearing bulky suit trousers and a black shirt. These types of clothes are not distinctly masculine in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but the gender-neutrality of the pieces does suggest that clothing, at least, is not used to assuage the viewer of the character’s innate femininity. Carter wears makeup, but very little: there is no distinct colour like lipstick on her face. Makeup is interpreted as a feminine trait, but it is not used in the series to highlight Sharon Carter’s femininity. Like the makeup, her hair is rather unassuming as well, and there are no clear signs of having done it for the sake of appearances. The lack of such aspects, which are usually coded feminine and were used to emphasize Peggy Carter’s femininity in *The First Avenger*, implies that though there may be some anxieties about female masculinity, easing them is not deemed as significant. There are no specific attempts to appeal to the male gaze regarding Sharon Carter’s character, and heterosexual affirmations are not present in Carter’s life in the series. However, the lack

of assuaging anxieties about too much masculinity might be explained by the storyline in previous Captain America films; Marvel might rely on the romantic relationship that sparked between Sharon Carter and Rogers in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016). Though there are no remnants of the brief relationship, it did establish Carter's heterosexual tendencies.

The necessity to ease anxieties about female masculinity seems to have lessened in the decade since *The First Avenger*, but Carter's increased masculinity garners reactions from the other characters: Wilson and Barnes notice the difference in Carter and are both concerned and shocked by her straightforward demeanour. This is in line with Reeser's (2010) claim that the less frequently occurring female masculinity is more often noticed, and it evokes stronger reactions than male masculinity due to the assumption that masculinity is tied to the male body, and anything else is unnatural (p. 135). Moreover, Carter's acquired masculinity and consequent reactions to it display Carter almost "more of a man than many men", as her masculinity is comparable to hegemonic masculinity (Reeser, 2010, p. 133). The masculinity seems to culminate in Carter dressing up as a man to disguise herself and return to the United States unnoticed. She uses technological facial veil and men's clothes to pass as a man. This type of disguise further draws attention to her masculine aspects and how she uses the general assumption of the gender binary to her advantage, adopting traits from the masculine end of the continuum to her means. However, the feminine end of the continuum appears to offer no advantages to her, which leads to her presenting as mostly masculine and thus evoking reactions in the other characters that might not otherwise be evoked. As mentioned, Carter's acquired masculinity seems to be a response to her flight from the United States, and it poses the situation as such: in order to survive without a supporting network, a woman has to abandon effeminacy and adopt traits from the masculine.

Connell and Messerschmidt (2006) have noted that "men can adopt hegemonic masculinity when it is desirable; but the same men can distance themselves strategically from hegemonic masculinity at other moments" (p. 841). This is not only true for men, but as the analysis of masculine women has shown, women also negotiate their position between hegemonic masculinity and other forms of gender expression. Women practicing hegemonic masculinity seems to debunk the argument of essentialism, but on the other hand, "women being given traditionally male attributes" simply reproduces the hegemony and the privilege of masculinity (Goodrum, et al., 2018, p. 4). In other words, it does not much challenge the hegemonic values and the masculine narrative fraught with power and violence. Additionally, as the discussion above indicates, those Marvel women who express masculine traits are

questioned, and a lack of emphasized femininity in Sharon Carter's case draws attention. The next section will look at how the materials respond to men embodying feminine traits.

### **4.3. Feminine Men and Homosociality in The Marvel Materials**

Since Freudian psychoanalysis, theory on men and masculinities has acknowledged the femininity within men (Connell, 2005, pp. 10-12). The essentialist view on gender suggests that this femininity is something that men should remove from themselves. In the constructivist approach to gender, men and women can adopt traits from both the feminine and masculine ends of the continuum. However, when discussing femininity in a biologically male body, the traits traditionally associated with femininity is called 'effeminacy' and not feminine masculinity. While Reeser (2010) has argued that "being like a woman (effeminacy) and being unlike a man (emasculatation) are not necessarily equivalent", men with traits coded as feminine in the Marvel universe are seen as effeminate, which has negative connotations (p. 120). This wording highlights the patterns of hegemony and the assumption that masculinity is more desirable than femininity in a male body even though men can distance themselves from hegemony if they wish. Adopting traits and practices from the masculine end of the continuum is preferable to not be labeled 'effeminate' by others – most importantly other men. Kimmel (1994) declared masculinity to be a "lifelong quest to demonstrate its achievements" and the need to show that a man does not have his mother's traits; this demonstration is solely for other men, to gain their recognition and respect, and be accepted as a man (p. 127). He further explained this as the homosocial enactment of masculinity: "it is other men that evaluate the performance" and grant the individual acceptance into manhood (Kimmel, 1994, p. 128). The required recognition from other men in order to gain access to manhood indicates that masculinity is constructed through interaction with others, as the practices and performances are given meaning, coherence, and even credibility in repetition and interpretation.

Masculinity as homosocial enactment exposes the underlying power relations related to gender: masculinities in a more powerful position can define the experiences for other masculinities. Homosociality of masculinity is compulsory in the army, which is a significant milieu in both *The First Avenger* and *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*. The following

analysis will focus on femininity in men and the rigorous homosociality of military masculinities.

#### **4.4. A War Won By The Best... Men: Femininity, Men, and Homosociality in *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011)**

As shown in the previous section, the Marvel materials created space for female masculinities, showing alternative ways of being male, and specifically of decidedly female presenting bodies behaving in ways that are deemed masculine. The underlying reason for this, as discussed, would be the assumption that masculinity and the associated benefits are something desirable for everyone. Moreover, the attempted acquisition of masculinity is a tribute to maleness. Thus, even if alternative ways of being male are represented in the Marvel materials, they rely on the supposition that masculinity is preferable to femininity, and any femininity in a male body should be eliminated to acquire and maintain masculinity. If a man is unable or unwilling to desist femininity in himself, in the hierarchy of masculinities, he is in a subordinate position when compared to the dominating, hegemonic one. In the Marvel materials, the dominant masculinity is the military masculinity. Often effeminacy and the consequent subordination is associated with same-gender attraction, as the desire of men is thought of as a feminine trait. However, Connell (2005) has argued that some heterosexual masculinities with enough qualities assimilated with femininity can, too, be “expelled from the circle of legitimacy” of hegemonic masculinity (p. 79). In *The First Avenger*, Rogers endures this fate, even though presenting as a heterosexual man: the hegemonic military masculinities do not grant him access to manhood before Rogers performs convincing “manhood acts” (Shrock & Schwalbe, 2009). Shrock & Schwalbe (2009) have defined these manhood acts as a set of conventional practices which establish and uphold the identity of ‘man’ and masculine self; consequently, those who establish the possession of the masculine self enjoy the privileges that come with membership of the “dominant gender group” (pp. 279-280).

Although Rogers models the existence of femininity in a male body in *The First Avenger*, the condemnation of such a body is evident throughout the film. This can be perceived in the reactions Rogers’ feminine body evokes in others, as well as in Rogers’ ongoing quest to prove his masculinity. For the first part of the film, due to Rogers’ small body which is not able to perform masculine action and enlist in the army, he represents a feminine masculinity.



The military environment is the most honorable ways of being a man, but Rogers is constantly compared to the other male characters and found lacking – just as femininity is often found lacking when compared to masculinity. Thus, in the hierarchy of masculinities, Rogers is at the very bottom as a subordinate masculinity. Rogers’ masculinity is expelled altogether, facing oppression, and not enjoying the benefits of hegemony before his transformation. In *The First Avenger*, Rogers is often contrasted with women and feminine traits, embodying aspects from the feminine end of the continuum more than the masculine and thus being labeled as ‘effeminate’. This wording highlights the negative connotations of feminine traits and supports the idea that hegemonic masculinity attempts to defend itself from any femininity; according to Reeser (2010), the fear of effeminacy is often “part of masculine self-definition” (p. 120). Rogers exhibits this fear, though he is unable to remove the effeminacy by himself. For instance, one of the early scenes shows him lamenting the fact that due to his illnesses and small size, he collects scrap-metal alongside women and children while Rogers’ male peers, the “able-bodied [young men]” are effectively serving their country in the front lines, “laying down their lives” (*Captain America: The First Avenger*). Rogers’ struggles as an effeminate man discloses that the film represents the distinctly male body as a “symbolic asset” to manhood, while a feminine body is a “liability”, which in turn reproduces gender inequality in the Marvel universe (Shrock & Schwalbe, 2009, p. 281).

Rogers’ subordinate position is further highlighted by Barnes having just announced that he got his orders and is shipping out the following day. The scene sets the two men in a binary opposition in which Barnes represents masculinity and Rogers represents femininity; Rogers talks about collecting scrap metal in a “little red wagon” while uniformed Barnes agrees that that’s exactly what Rogers should do instead of enlisting and getting himself killed (*Captain America: The First Avenger*). Thus, Rogers himself acknowledges his passive role that is both childlike and feminine associations that are not desirable for masculinity. The situation is worsened when Barnes leaves to the warzone while he forbids Rogers to do the same. Barnes wants to protect Rogers’ life, but this dynamic also emphasizes Barnes’ hegemonic masculinity which patronizes over Rogers and makes him appear effeminate.

In addition, Rogers’ femininity is also highlighted when he is juxtaposed with Agent Carter’s masculinity. Before he undergoes the transformation, Carter’s female masculinity overpowers Rogers’ masculinity. As shown in the previous section, Carter embodies various traditionally masculine traits, and compared to her, Rogers is in a subordinate position. In the scene where Rogers is taken to the super-soldier procedure, Carter compares Rogers and herself as alike,

after they discuss Rogers' willingness to stand up to bullies even though he loses every time. Additionally, Carter is a part of the SSR and ranking higher than Rogers, whose military career has had a rocky start. She embodies more of those aspects that are in line in the dominant military masculinity than Rogers and is thus in a higher position in the hierarchy of masculinities. In relational terms, Rogers' role is passive and thus more feminine, whereas Carter's role is active, and she exhibits masculine traits more. Moreover, when Rogers and Carter are beside each other, Rogers is much smaller than Carter, further highlighting his petite build. Though neither Rogers nor Carter seem preoccupied with this difference, the way Rogers is otherwise treated by both his male and female peers suggests that his subordinate position in relation to Carter is not a flattering in terms of masculinity – rather, it is effeminizing. Carter's more masculine performance thus emphasizes Rogers' subordination.

Rogers' femininity draws attention because it is constantly compared to other forms of masculinities and found lacking. Consequently, Rogers is treated as inferior, comparable to women and lesser forms of masculinities by those who embody hegemonic features. This not only highlights the negative assessment of femininity, but also supports Kimmel's (1994) argument that masculinity is a homosocial enactment. Kimmel defines masculinity as homosocial enactment as a male-male relation, in which men evaluate each other's masculine performances to decide whether they can be deemed as masculine and granted access to manhood (p. 128). According to Kimmel, the heroic feats, enormous risks, and tests that men participate in are all rooted in the desire to get other men's approval (p. 129). Thus, the homosocial enactment exposes the underlying power relations related to masculinity: the subordination and exclusion of women, as well as the dominance of some masculinities over others. In the Marvel materials, military masculinity is the most desirable and respected form of masculinity, and every individual form of masculinity is compared to this hegemonic one. As shown in *The First Avenger*, every masculine performance is constantly evaluated by other men, whose approval is deemed as the most important (Kimmel, 1994, p. 128). However, Rogers is one of the few who are found inferior for their masculinity, others only including Agent Carter and Doctor Erskine; in the context of American military masculinities as the hegemonic standard, female masculinity and Jewish masculinity are in a subordinate position in comparison.

In the military environment, the officers and other soldiers are the ones who grant acceptance into the circle of manhood, and not, for instance, the women who reject Rogers' romantic

advances. Rogers constantly attempts to gain recognition and respect from the other men in the male-dominated environment through various (in)actions. However, as Rogers embodies more traditionally feminine traits like physical weakness, access to the “realm of manhood” remains unattainable for him (Kimmel, 1994, p. 128). The other soldiers cast dubious glances as Rogers attempts to prove himself before and during the military training, seeing him only as a small, weak man despite his efforts. For instance, when Rogers appears for the first time in the film, trying to enlist, his petite form stands out in a room full of men who appear to be of average build and height, with very little variation between their appearances. In other words, the other men seem to exemplify the ideal male body that is healthy and useful in the war, whereas Rogers does not: this opposition defines the masculinity of both Rogers and the other men, and Rogers’ subordinate position has an effeminising effect on him.

In terms of this link between the body and masculinity, Connell (2005) has stated that “the physical sense of maleness” is imperative in its interpretation; some movements, postures and actions are associated with the male gender specifically, whereas others are attributed to femininity, and therefore are not compatible with ideas of the male body (pp. 52-53). In terms of the film, the physical sense of maleness is defined by the ability to serve in the war as a soldier, which suggests that those who cannot exhibit more feminine actions. Moreover, as demonstrated in the film, deviation from the normative male physicality is very seldom valued in the homosocial enactment that is masculinity in the Marvel Universe.

In the film’s homosocial enactment, those who adhere to the hegemonic standards are given more power for evaluation than the others, and Colonel Phillips is the one who both assesses Rogers in the army and denies him access to the circle of manhood – in this case, defined as access to frontline missions. From the moment Rogers arrives at the SSR training camp, Colonel Phillips treats him as unworthy of his time or respect. Meeting the trainees, Colonel Phillips gives a speech to the men: as he talks about how America is going to win the war because the war is won by men and they “have the best men”, his voice trails off on the “best men” as he sees Rogers in the line (*Captain America: The First Avenger*). Additionally, Phillips vehemently disagrees with Doctor Erskine who says that Rogers is the clear choice for the super-soldier program. Instead of giving Rogers credit for his efforts during training, Phillips tells Erskine that he allowed Rogers to the army base only because he thought Rogers would be useful to Erskine as a science experiment, “like a gerbil” (*Captain America: The First Avenger*). Phillips tries to advocate for recruit Hodge to be chosen for the super-soldier procedure, saying “he’s big, he’s fast, he obeys orders. He’s a soldier”, thereby implying that

Rogers is none of these things (*Captain America: The First Avenger*). This scene further establishes that Rogers' masculinity is defined in opposition to other men and found subordinate to them.

However, even after the transformation into a super-soldier, a body that appears to be a textbook representation of the ideal male physicality is not enough for Colonel Phillips and other soldiers to give Rogers access to manhood; rather, the quest of having to prove himself continues after Rogers' transformation into the super-soldier Captain America. Despite showcasing durability, strength, and bravery immediately after the super-soldier procedure, Rogers' feminine attributes are not forgotten. When a Hydra agent sets off a bomb in the procedure room and steals the rest of the super-soldier serum and Rogers runs after him and manages to catch the agent. Though his heroic chase makes the newspapers which celebrate Rogers' actions, Colonel Phillips disregards Rogers as an "experiment" and "not enough" to join the forces on any mission (*Captain America: The First Avenger*). When the war bond selling tour, in which Rogers performs as Captain America, arrives at a military base, the soldiers call him effeminizing nicknames like "sweetheart", despite Rogers' hypermasculine build. It is only after Rogers disregards Colonel Phillips' orders by leaving for a solitary mission to save hundreds of men from behind enemy lines and coming back victorious, that the Colonel and the other soldiers recognize Rogers as a fellow military man and allow him to ascend in the hierarchy of masculinities. This can be explained in terms of completely rejecting any femininity in the body, which in this case means the obedience and docility associated with military masculinity. Alongside the sense of power associated with military masculinity, a certain powerlessness is also present in the performance, as the constitution requires of its soldiers subordination, the ability to recognise and subjugate to authorities, and occasionally even the "mortification of the body" (Morgan, 1994, p. 167). This results in masculinity being located in between empowerment and docility, and docility is often, in terms of gendered features, in accordance with femininity rather than masculinity. Only by abandoning this femininity of the military male body by disobeying direct orders of his superior, Rogers gains respect of his male peers, who then allow him access to the circle of manhood. Rogers' hypermasculine performance suggests that the elimination of femininity in oneself leads to being accepted as a man, further representing masculinity as desirable and femininity as an enemy that needs to be removed from within.

Rogers' relationships with other men are significant in the homosocial enactment, but these relationships are limited by rules of intimacy. Alongside the physical traits and actions

attributed to femininity, masculinity is marked subordinate by homosexuality, as it is seen as an effeminising trait. Fear of homosexuality and homoeroticism is often deeply rooted in the construction of hegemonic masculinity, and the desire towards other men must be extinguished. In Easthope's (1992) words, "the dominant version of masculinity treats masculinity as undivided, and so must find means to deny, exclude and contain male femininity" (p. 111). Not only is Rogers initially portrayed as feminine in comparison to other masculinities, but his tight bond with Barnes is also something that risks homoerotic interpretation. This would further add to the effeminacy and subordination to both men and their masculinities. Rogers and Barnes masculinities are thus constructed in relational practices with women to confirm their heterosexuality and to downplay the possibility of male-male desire. Kaufman (1994) has noted that in everyday life, men seldom share "complete trust and intimacy" in their relationships with other men, as the masculine norm demands emotional and physical distance; this experience is associated with the friendships between women (p. 150). The nature of war requires men to be unified in ways that override these expectations, allowing and even requiring deep connections to form between men, and circumstances in the battlefield can expose the unconditional devotion between brothers-in-arms.

The risk of homoeroticism in this "extreme male bonding" allowed by the military context is addressed and then eliminated by encouraging and boasting about heterosexuality, according to Segal (120). Despite the contradictions about masculinity created in the environment of the military, dominant military masculinities rarely display features that might imply homosexuality. Expressions of heterosexual desire function as a rejection of the feminine subjectivity in the individual, abolishing the possibility of desire towards other males; there is no space for deviance. Thus, to avoid interpretations of a non-platonic relationship and their masculinities being marginalized, Barnes and Rogers' heterosexuality is affirmed throughout the film in various scenes. Initially, Rogers is hardly a ladies' man: his date at the science fair ignores him and her expression even shows slight disgust when Rogers tries to offer her a snack. This emasculation is contrasted by Barnes, whose sexual prowess and attraction to women is firmly established: his date is hanging on his arm or otherwise in physical contact, and Rogers' date seems to be more interested in Barnes than in Rogers. Rogers' lack of success with women is further underscored by the conversation he has with Agent Carter as they are on their way to the procedure: he stumbles over his words and calls Agent Carter a "dame" (*Captain America: The First Avenger*). This exchange invites Agent Carter to claim

that Rogers has clearly no idea how to talk to a woman, with which Rogers openly agrees. He even says that asking a woman to dance is a “terrifying” concept, which implies that instead of dominating women, he fears them, further giving away his masculine power (*Captain America: The First Avenger*). After the procedure, as Rogers turns into a super-soldier and is accepted as someone who represents hegemonic masculinity, there are more openings for him to affirm his heterosexuality with Agent Carter, and thus disprove any idea of homoeroticism in his intimacy with Barnes.

While the heteronormativity in the film affirms the men’s desire towards women, Rogers and Barnes’ affection and intimacy requires an ultimate elimination. Though the connection between the two is portrayed as valued and within the limits of ideal masculinity, the ultimate elimination of male-male desire happens by Barnes supposedly dying during a mission. Devastated that he could not save his best friend or even find the body, Rogers ends up mourning empty-handed. The end of their bond is swift, and subsequent cancellation of the possibility of nonplatonic relationship allows for hegemonic masculinity persist in its homophobia. In an essay of masculinity and homoeroticism in war films, Mark Simpson (1994) suggested that in male bonds, the death of one man often “protects one from the problem or suspicion of sexual interaction” (as cited in Eberwein, 2007, p. 149). As Barnes supposedly dies in *The First Avenger*, Rogers’ acquired hegemonic masculinity remains untouched by deviation associated with homoeroticism and thus, femininity. Masculinity comes into being through contrast, as shown by the discussion above – it is only understood and defined relationally.

#### **4.5. “The Only Thing You’re Runnin’ in Here Is Your Mouth”’: Femininity, Men and Homosociality in *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier* (2021)**

In *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, feminine masculinity is present in different ways than in *The First Avenger*. The male characters’ bodies are neither distinctly petite nor feminine, as they all have ideal, hegemonic bodies that are in accordance with the dominant military masculinity. The traditionally feminine aspects are perceivable in actions and inactions of the characters, as well as in the realm of emotions. The homosocial nature of masculinity is as persistent in the series as it was in the film, the fear of being seen as effeminate and the

desperation for other men's approval driving factors to some of the actions and inactions the men take.

Femininity in a distinctly male body is still, at times, treated as laughable and unnatural in *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*. As the men exist in hegemonically coded bodies, they seem invincible. However, the scenes with the Flag Smashers' leader Karli Morgenthau and the Dora Milaje show that effeminacy in the male bodies is treated as laughable, and something that evokes shame and the desire to eliminate it. When Barnes and Wilson first meet Karli Morgenthau, Barnes is fooled by her appearance and treats her as a hostage of the Flag Smashers. Then, Morgenthau shows her super-soldier powers and attacks Barnes so vigorously that he flies out of the vehicle they have boarded. This is followed by Wilson's laughter and the remark that the "little girl kicked [Barnes'] ass" (*The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, "The Star-Spangled Man"). While Barnes is somewhat unphased by the comment, it does suggest that it inspires ridicule in Wilson that a man as large as Barnes is should lose to a smaller, young woman. The amusement evoked by the scene is based on the strike to Barnes' masculinity, which suggests that even ten years later in the Marvel universe, the effeminacy of men is not represented in a flattering light.

The shame of being weaker than a woman and the desire to eliminate the effeminacy caused by this is more visible in Walker's case in episode four, "The Whole World Is Watching". In the scene, Walker and his partner Hoskins have a heated discussion with Wilson and Barnes over a failed mission regarding the Flag Smashers. The Dora Milaje arrives to retrieve Zemo from Wilson and Barnes and bring him back to a prison in Wakanda. Walker has never met the Dora Milaje before, and he assumes that his position as Captain America requires the women's respect as well. Walker implies that unlike him, the Dora Milaje have no jurisdiction in Latvia, where the scene takes place: however, instead of ceding, the leader of the Dora Milaje tells Walker that they have jurisdiction "wherever the Dora Milaje find themselves to be" (*The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, "The Whole World Is Watching"). When Walker does not receive the respect he expected, his pride leads him to confront and threaten the Dora Milaje. While Wilson and Barnes acknowledge the Dora Milaje's military prowess and remind Walker to keep his cool, Walker remains disrespectful, which ends in a fight between the men and the Dora Milaje. Despite being professional in combat, the women overpower Walker and Hoskins, as well as Wilson and Barnes who ultimately try to help the two other men. One of the Dora Milaje pins Walker and his shield to a table with her spear, leaving him defenseless. As Walker slides to the floor, defeated, the same warrior picks up

Walker's shield and wields it like it belongs to her. As she stands above the slumped Walker, holding his shield, the setting is clear: both Walker's national pride and masculinity are defeated by a female masculinity.

The subordination of Walker's masculine position and the consequent effeminacy happen not only on an individual level, but on a national one as well. According to Reeser (2010) there are numerous cultural references between masculinity and the nation, and Captain America himself is a symbolization of the United States (p. 172). Thus, Walker's Captain America represents America as masculine, and nation and masculinity alike are thought of as bordered and impermeable (Reeser, 2010, p. 176). This impermeability is evidenced, for instance, in the disrespect Walker showed to the Dora Milaje, while simultaneously expecting them to respect him. However, when the Dora Milaje overpower Walker and threaten to pierce him with their spears, symbolically America and its masculinity is brought to its knees in front of Wakanda. Thus, the de-masculinization is more substantial to Walker, as Captain America being on his knees in front of foreign female masculinities would affect the whole nation. The warrior drops the shield on the floor in front of Walker as their group retreats, a last strike to Walker's wounded pride and manhood, showing him mercy but thus leaving Walker with the memory of defeat. After the Dora Milaje retreat, Walker laments that the women were not even super-soldiers, drawing attention to the fact that ordinary warriors, *female* warriors, were able to overpower him with ease. Though the gendered interpretation is only implicit, the circumstances have an impact on his masculinity, effeminizing him in front of several male and female masculinities.

In addition to the effeminizing impact, this interaction brings attention to the homosocial nature of masculinity. Kimmel's (1994) idea of Western masculinity as a "relentless test", a never-ending attempt to prove to other men, to women, and to oneself, that he is masculine and worthy of respect is especially pertinent in discussions about Walker's masculine position (p. 138). Walker, like Rogers in *The First Avenger*, relentlessly endeavours to prove himself to other masculinities, demonstrating his manhood for approval. Walker's position in the hierarchy is defined by the other masculinities, and those who decide on his part in the realm of manhood include Wilson, Barnes, and in the abovementioned scene, the Dora Milaje. Wilson tells Walker that "shield or no shield, the only thing you're runnin' in here is your mouth", which is a clear sign that Walker is not accepted by the others or granted access to the respected realm of manhood (*The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, "The Whole World Is Watching"). Further, as Walker is humiliated by the female masculinities, he realizes his



position in the hierarchy of masculinities has shifted, no longer a dominant one and above others. The realization is a striking one, as the contrast between Walker's expectations and the reality becomes obvious: the glamorous and flamboyant reception he received from the U.S. citizens in the interview in episode two, brimming with applause and praise, is not how everyone will receive him. This is demonstrated in the encounters with Wilson, Barnes, the Dora Milaje, and the Flag Smashers. Walker becomes enthralled by the idea of becoming a super-soldier, thinking that hypermasculinity and the associated power would lead to him being accepted and respected by the other masculinities. His merely human body has an effeminate effect on Walker. Even though neither the Dora Milaje nor Wilson have any superpowers, they seem to have eliminated the limitations that femininity would pose. Walker's limitations result in an "unmasking" of his vulnerabilities and thus, femininity (Kimmel, 1994, p. 132). According to Kimmel (1994), fear of this unmasking, of any femininity showing through the "manly front cover," is present in men who wish to embody hegemonic masculinity (p. 132). He continues that even an insignificant thing can "activate [the] haunting terror" of being seen as effeminate, and the terror of effeminacy in Walker is palpable especially after the defeat by the Dora Milaje (p. 132).

As the series progress, Walker becomes increasingly maddened by the lack of respect from Wilson, Barnes, the Dora Milaje, and other masculinities that Walker sees as subordinate to him and his mantle of Captain America. Kimmel (1994) has stated that "the fear of being seen as a sissy dominates the cultural definitions of manhood" (p. 131); this statement holds true in this case as well, Walker's defeat making him feel inadequate compared to the other masculinities surrounding him. Walker's actions suggest that rising in the hierarchy of masculinities is not enough, and the only way to gain respect is through dominance over other masculinities. The lack of respect from other masculinities and the idea that Walker needs to eliminate the femininity within leads him to inject himself with the super-soldier serum, becoming an embodiment of hypermasculinity, like Rogers in *The First Avenger*. In essence, Walker is not only evaluated by the masculinities present in the series, but he is also contrasted with the man he tries to emulate. The purpose of Walker's interview in episode two, "The Star-Spangled Man", is to contrast him with Rogers and show that Walker's performance is evaluated by the standards Rogers set. However, though the serum does give Walker the superhuman strength and speed he craved, the serum also amplifies other aspects. These aspects include Walker's affinity to violence, which becomes uncontrollable and leads him to kill one of the Flag Smashers with the shield, shaming himself and the nation. The

serum, as Dr. Erskine told Rogers in *The First Avenger*, makes good qualities great and bad qualities worse. Thus, elimination of the good qualities – aspects like physical weakness and “compassion”, as Dr. Erskine described – can be read as elimination of femininity, because the qualities Dr. Erskine most valued in Rogers are often associated with femininity (*Captain America: The First Avenger*). In contrast, the amplification of the masculine traits Walker embodies in *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier* has destructive outcomes as he is stripped of the title of Captain America and receives an other than honorable discharge in episode five, “Truth”. The affinity to violence, valued in terms of hegemonic (superhero) masculinity, becomes unwanted: Walker’s character development implies that an excess of masculinity can be as undesirable as an excess of femininity; however, an excess of masculine traits still appears preferred. There are no examples of male characters exhibiting feminine traits in excess in the series, and in *The First Avenger*, an excess of femininity was eliminated by the super-soldier program.

Walker is not the only character who is affected by the homosocial nature of masculinity. The realm of manhood and its accessibility is an important concept in the discussion of Wilson and Barnes’ masculinities as well. The homosocial nature of masculinity can be perceived in the power struggles between the two men. Additionally, the most significant outside force that has an influence on their understanding of their own masculinities is Rogers. Though a (presumably) dead man, his relationships with both Wilson and Barnes affect both men; despite representations of military masculinity and thus embodying various hegemonic traits, their masculinities are still contrasted with Rogers and his expectations of both Wilson and Barnes. Rogers continues to exemplify the standard “against which other forms of manhood are measured and evaluated” (Kimmel, 1994, p. 124). Barnes is occupied with Rogers’ legacy and what Rogers expected from both Barnes and Wilson. Thus, Wilson relinquishing the shield aggravates Barnes. When Barnes sees on the TV that Walker has been named the new Captain America, Barnes finds Wilson to scold him. Barnes tells Wilson that “this isn’t what Steve wanted”, referring to someone else becoming the new Captain America when it should have been Wilson (*The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, “The Star-Spangled Man”). Barnes values Rogers’ opinion more than anything else and juxtaposes Wilson against the standard Rogers set. Barnes’ desire to respect Rogers’ opinion and legacy are further emphasized in the therapy session in episode two. The doctor asks Barnes to explain why he is aggravated, and Barnes states that he is angry that Wilson gave Rogers’ shield away. To Barnes, this action meant that Rogers was wrong about Wilson being trustworthy. Consequently, Barnes

thinks that Rogers must have been wrong about Barnes and his ability to make amends, too. Wilson, in turn, says he did what he thought was right (*The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, “The Star-Spangled Man”). Barnes and Wilson both experience powerlessness as they are contrasted with Rogers, struggling with the expectations homosociality of masculinity causes. This is in line with the suggestion that enacting hegemonic masculinity completely is impossible. Though Wilson, Barnes, and Walker all exhibit hegemonically masculine traits in their masculine performances, they evaluate each other and themselves, especially Barnes and Walker basing their standards on Rogers. While Wilson does not agree with what Rogers wanted, he is still troubled by Rogers and Barnes’ expectations.

Alongside the wishes to be accepted in relational practices, the men’s masculinities are constructed with heterosexual affirmations to eliminate the possibility of homoeroticism in the close relationships the men share. Brown (2016) has noted about heteronormativity in the superhero genre that “the romantic desirability of the hero is crucial to the overall fantasy” (147). The desire between two men would be regarded as “proof of physical or emotional ‘inadequacy’”, and therefore indicate failure of manliness (Segal 120). Thus, to avoid effeminacy, the relationships between the men in the series consist of practices that reinforce their platonic nature. For instance, to uphold manliness and desirable masculinity, the relationship between Wilson and Barnes is relatively distant both emotionally and physically, despite their long acquaintance. Though they manage to resolve their conflicts by the end of the series, their journey is filled with constant bickering that has been demonstrated in the sections above. Their acquaintance, which began in the 2014 film *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, has been filled with distrust and banter from the start, and the series relies on that relationship dynamic. As demonstrated by their difficulties in being honest with each other, the two men still struggle with trust issues though they need to work together. Though Wilson and Barnes ultimately do discuss their disagreements openly and come to a mutual understanding of both their own and Rogers’ expectations, they preserve the emotional and physical distance. Instead of defining their relationship as friends, or even partners, they mutually agree on “co-workers” and “a couple of guys” (*The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, “Truth”). This exchange is in line with Kaufman’s (1994) discussion of male friendships defined by isolation and lacking empathy or compassion, which have become masculine norms (p. 150). Despite the situation which requires Barnes and Wilson to work as a team to stop the terrorist attacks and protect America, their relationship exists in an environment which does not require such unified, devoted bonds as war does. Wilson and Barnes do not

share an “extreme male [bond]” that existed between Rogers and Barnes in the film, and thus it does not require more substantial addressing and elimination (Segal 120). Rather, the environment in which the men live is mundane, and thus the men uphold the masculine norm of emotional and physical distance.

However, despite affirming heterosexuality, attempts to conform to those hegemonic standards are not always successful. Barnes, for one, must adapt to new ways of courting and fumble his way through the dating world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Formerly a ladies’ man, as evidenced in the film, Barnes’ suave words and gestures around women have disappeared. This is exhibited in the restaurant scene in episode one, when Barnes and his friend Yori Nakajima are eating lunch. When Nakajima notices Barnes looking at the waitress, he arranges a date for Barnes. As the waitress accepts this invitation, Barnes chastises Nakajima for outright asking the woman out for him, saying that “it’s a dance to these things”, reminding both Nakajima and the viewer that he hasn’t “danced since 1943” (*The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, “New World Order”). This brings to attention how Barnes is no longer quite capable of going through the motions of dating. Like Rogers, dubbed a man out of time as he lived in the modern world, Barnes endures a similar fate. Still, Barnes’ heterosexuality needs reinforcing, and he goes on the date. However, this date only brings the dissonance of being a man out of time to the forefront: Barnes brings his date flowers, who calls this old fashioned, and the interaction continues awkwardly throughout the scene. The two seem to have very little to talk about, and while the woman tries to make conversation, it seems that every word triggers some unpleasant memories in Barnes. The terms of courting have changed significantly over time, which complicates Barnes’ heterosexual performance, thus affecting the way his masculinity presents itself. However, while the importance of showing Barnes’ attraction to women (and women’s attraction to him) is clear, this scene invites the viewer to pay attention to Barnes’ inner experience rather than only the heterosexual performance of masculinity. This scene establishes masculinity as relational and contextualised: the way masculinity is performed is constantly changing, and the ways of performing gender are not similar to how they were during the Second World War in *The First Avenger*. The standards are unattainable for Barnes both due to his past and his age, but flirting with women is still needed to establish his character as conforming to heteronormativity.

Walker, in turn, shares a devoted bond of “complete trust and intimacy”, associated with male bonds in the military, with his partner Lemar Hoskins (Kaufman, 1994, p. 150). Their

relationship requires more drastic measures to ensure the perseverance of hegemony, and thus the “flight from intimacy with other men” (Kimmel, 1994, p. 130). The men’s partnership is quite like the one Rogers and Barnes had in *The First Avenger*: Walker and Hoskins were childhood friends, served together in the U.S. army for years, and after Walker became Captain America, Hoskins was by his side as ‘Battlestar’. The two are first seen together before Walker’s interview in episode two, Hoskins assuring Walker before he takes the stage. However, he also advises Walker to not “punch his way out of problems”, showcasing the intimate knowledge years of friendship has brought them (*The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, “The Star-Spangled Man”). Hoskins is always by Walker’s side on missions, and he assuages the doubts Walker has about his own abilities to be Captain America. Though they exchange affectionate gestures like slaps on the shoulder, the physical aspects are at minimum, despite being friends for years. This suggests that the physical realm and its experiences are interpreted as feminine and would be too easily interpreted as non-platonic. Moreover, as Hoskins meets with Walker before the interview as Captain America to encourage him, the scene of the two men talking is secondary to the discussion Walker had with his wife moments before. The presence of Walker’s wife, Olivia, reinforces Walker’s heterosexuality and eliminates the interpretation that Hoskins is the only close relationship or family Walker has, or that the relationship is non-platonic. Walker and Hoskins’ relationship seems to exist within the limits of hegemonic masculinity, but to exist, it requires relationships with women to denote the idea of desire between men.

The men’s bond, however, and any suspicion of homoeroticism are swiftly ended by Hoskins’ accidental death at the hands of Morgenthau, the Flag Smashers leader. In a confrontation with the terrorist group, Morgenthau punches Hoskins so forcefully he flies into a column, dying upon the impact. The fight is forgotten as Walker runs to Hoskins, but despite his desperate attempts, Walker is unable to get a response from Hoskins. After he realizes this, Walker chases the escaping Flag Smashers. He becomes enraged by the loss, the feeling amplified by the serum in his veins, and there is nothing to hold him from acting on that rage as Hoskins is now gone Morgenthau has fled, but Walker catches one of the men, blaming him for Hoskins’ death. Despite the man’s innocence, Walker kills him. The death of Hoskins can be read as protection from the suspicion of sexual interaction between him and Walker. Death is the ultimate termination of those suspicions, and alongside Walker’s confirmed heterosexuality, the relationship between Walker and Hoskins remains platonic, the actualization of the love between them unfulfilled. In other words, the bond remains

purified of the homoerotic, “feminine desire” (Kimmel, 1994, p. 130). Though Walker’s rageful reaction and its consequences are the focal point, the similarities to the elimination of Rogers and Barnes’ possible desire in *The First Avenger* suggests that removing the prospect of male-male desire is still required. In other words, the processes of what Eberwein (2007) has described as “defending masculinity and male sexuality through disavowal” are still in place a decade later (p. 64). This allows hegemonic masculinity to persist in its homophobia.

As demonstrated, the men in both *The First Avenger* and *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier* exhibit both masculine and feminine traits and their masculinities only exist relationally: their masculinities come into view through contrast. The masculinities in the materials support the constructivist approach to gender, as they adopt traits with both masculine and feminine meanings. Thus, masculinity as a seamless entity without traces of femininity is made redundant. However, this existing femininity is something Easthope (1992) has dubbed “the enemy within”, something that men need to defend themselves from to uphold the idea of masculinity as impenetrable (p. 104). Processes of eliminating these feminine aspects are visible in the constructions of masculinities in both Marvel materials, suggesting that femininity is not appreciated in male bodies. However, as the next sections will show, some feminine traits and practices still exist in the characters that are distinctly male. Thus, a more intersectional approach is needed beside the constructivist one to understand masculinity and femininity co-existing in the Marvel characters and their representations of gender. First, the focus will be on paternal masculinity, followed by discussions of race-masculinity.

#### **4.6. Always to the Rescue: Masculinities, Fatherhood and Nurturing**

The previous section discussed the femininity in the male body in terms of effeminacy in sexual and physical aspects. However, there are behaviours and emotions that the men in *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier* exhibit that are more ambiguous rather than strictly feminine or masculine. Family is a significant element in *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, especially for Wilson. He returns to his hometown in Louisiana, where his sister and two nephews live, trying to make ends meet and running the decaying family fishing business. The neighbourhood comprises a strong community where everybody helps each other, as most of the people live in poor conditions and struggle financially. In *The First Avenger*, family life was not a part of the men’s lives due to their young ages, and the film focused on

dating and flirting. In the TV series, the characters are older and have established families, and thus blood ties and close family are brought on display. Masculinity and family have often been associated, in superhero films, with loss and the consequent revenge: an active fathering role has only recently been brought to representations of masculinity in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. The intersection of masculinity and a parental role is in line with the Western cultural consensus of the ‘new man’ and reminiscent of superheroes becoming more relatable. In *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, Wilson is portrayed as dedicated to his relatives, a role which has previously been absent in the Captain America franchise.

Wilson’s sister, Sarah, is a single mother with two young boys, AJ and Cass. The father of the boys has passed away, but the family appears to be content as they are. The traditional nuclear family is absent, as are the rigid notions of traditional, gender-appropriate behaviours in domestic settings. Sarah is oriented both to the “public” and “private” spheres, attending both the family business and the life at home, also feeding the other children in their community (Adams & Coltrane, 2005; Haywood & Mac an Ghail, 2003). When Wilson is shown in their childhood home with the whole family, he adopts a nurturing role, cooking for his sister and his nephews. Additionally, he participates in taking care of their daily tasks as well as their play; thus, despite having no biologically paternal connections, Wilson can be interpreted as a nurturing and caring father figure to the boys. However, this nurturing is not depicted as effeminising, and Wilson is proud to tend to the family as well as the surrounding community. According to Haywood and Mac an Ghail (2003) men’s participation in family life has relied on traditional and nuclear families, in which stereotypical images of fathering rely on emotional absence, violence, or breadwinning (pp. 46-47). The series’ representation of the family supports Haywood and Mac an Ghail’s claim that the understanding of ‘family’ has shifted, and the concept is prone to modifications (p. 47).

However, despite the traditional associations of the domestic with women, Wilson’s role is not emasculating due to his nurturing role also being fraught with traditionally masculine concerns. For instance, while attending to his sister and his nephews, Wilson remains emotionally distant in terms of parenting, and is more often shown to be involved in construction work or the boys’ play rather than other domestic activities. Distance and absence have been associated with the role of the father in traditional family constructions. Additionally, Wilson adopts the role of ‘the man of the family’ as he attempts to assume control of the family business and its future, stepping into what has previously been Sarah’s domain. For instance, when Sarah tells Wilson she wants to sell the family fishing boat,

Wilson adamantly refuses. He takes an active role in arranging the family life and insists on fixing the family boat. Wilson bypasses Sarah's opinion, though she has had an active role in the family business for longer than Wilson. This suggests that the traditional images of active man/passive woman have not completely been eradicated from the Marvel Universe. Sarah ultimately gives in but sardonically points out how Wilson suddenly comes to the rescue after being absent for years. Wilson arranges a meeting with the bank to get a loan to fix the boat, confident in their ability to get the bank to agree. However, their loan is not approved, as Sarah expected: this leads her to express her frustrations with Wilson, noting how – after many years of absence – he expects everything to be done according to his wishes. Sarah is disappointed and frustrated about being left to care for the family's fishing business alone after Wilson joined the army and then the Avengers. She struggles, and though she appreciates Wilson's work as a superhero, she also says that Wilson does not get to go back and “try to right [his] wrongs just because [he] couldn't deal with what was going on” at home (*The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, “New World Order”). In this scene, Wilson appears both as an absent brother and uncle, a role which Haywood and Mac an Ghail (2003) discussed as one of the traditional images of paternal masculinity (p. 45).

The masculine form of parenting can be thought of in essentialist terms as well. As discussed by Marsiglio & Pleck (2005), in cultural contexts the masculine form of parenting is sometimes seen as ‘essentially’ different from mothering (p. 251). The discourse around these essential roles relies on biological basis and the sex role theory, suggesting that gender differences affect parenting. Fatherhood can be a part of hegemonic masculinity, but it is not assumed as inherent and natural like it is for women and motherhood. Fathering comes in many forms, but the essentialist approach considers the corporeal aspect of parenting tied to the mother especially in Western cultures. Such a connection is explained in terms of biology and the ways a mother is expected to feed her children from the body. In contrast, for fathers and paternal figures protection of children comes from outside of the body. In the TV series, Wilson offers his family and community such protection. Marsiglio and Pleck (2005) also discussed the cultural concerns that absence of father has a unique effect on children, especially boys due to lack of father figure and role model (p. 252). In *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, Wilson acts as a father figure, a role model for his nephews. His presence throughout the series intervenes in the matriarchal mother-son relationship, showing the nephews a male identity separate from their mother. Wilson acting as a male role model is implied specifically in the scene where he starts to train to become Captain America, as he



watches as his nephews play with the shield, pretending to be heroes. The scene suggests that one of the reasons Wilson takes up the mantle is the desire to be a good role model for the boys, a figure they can aspire to. However, this needs to be examined intersectionally as well; Wilson wants to be a role model, a Black hero, to show his nephews that Captain America does not need to be White.

Overall, Wilson performs paternal masculinity in ways that conform to various ideals of hegemonic masculinity. In his actions, Wilson exhibits the “masculine ideal of independence over connection” (Adams & Coltrane, 2005, p. 232). As Sarah notes a few times in the series, Wilson has been absent for a long time from the family life. According to Kaufman (1994), part of (hegemonic) masculinities is the price men have to pay for acquisition of manhood and power: suppression of a “range of emotions”, like nurturing, empathy, receptivity, and compassion (p. 148). They are inconsistent with the power of manhood, and thus dampened to reject associations with femininity (Kaufman, 1994, p. 148). Wilson has also paid this price, becoming somewhat estranged both from his community as well as his vulnerability. This theorization implies that a certain level of suppression of emotions is present in fatherhood as well, as nurturing is a significant part of parenthood. In other words, men have to “tough it out, provide, and achieve” (Kaufman, 1994, p. 148). According to Horrocks (1994) women run the family “emotionally”, like Sarah does in the series, though she also provides for the family financially (p. 27). Wilson’s paternal masculinity is a new aspect to the masculinities in the Captain America- franchise. However, the role simultaneously reaffirms the discourse about paternal masculinity being synonymous with emotional absence and involvement with just play. Additionally, these representations bring attention to the emotional load of mothers.

#### **4.7. “If You Ain’t Bitter, You’re Blind”: Race in the Construction of Masculinities**

As demonstrated, masculinities in both Marvel materials comprise of aspects that do not adhere to simply one way of being a man. However, the analysis has also shown the masculinities represented embody various traits of the hegemonic standards; the men are powerful, brave, have strong military backgrounds, and exhibit heterosexuality, aspects which place them in a high position in the hierarchy of masculinities. However, hegemonic masculinity is often synonymous with White, Western masculinity, and its definition requires

opposite ‘others’, which include racialized masculinities (Reeser, 2010, p. 154). The representation of White people in White Western culture is so naturalized that it is easily taken for granted. Despite being a construct, Whiteness is often treated as ‘normal’, and everything else abnormal by way of contrast. Additionally, as Richard Dyer (1997) has noted, White people have more control in constructing and defining themselves and others than those “others” ever would have (p. xiii). Race is always pointed out and highlighted, unless it is White (Dyer, 1997, p. 2). In other words, non-Whiteness is marked and emphasized, whereas Whiteness remains unmarked in culture. Due to its hegemonic cultural position, Whiteness is treated as unmarked as masculinity is, as they are held as the ‘norm’ to which others are constructed relationally because they hold the power to define others in relation to themselves – White people and men are “just human”, not raced or gendered (Dyer, 1997, p. 2). Thus, the power accorded to humans is synonymous with power accorded to White people, and consequently, the dominant stories and discourses are White-centred. Black people and people of colour The processes of being represented in visual culture are currencies “of communication and power” (Dyer, 1997, p. 45). Thus, being marked or unmarked produces power relations and grants superiority – often to White subjects.

Though Dyer (1997) has noted that the others have gained space and voices in Western popular culture, the representations are still predominantly White, due to the hegemony of Whiteness in the Western culture. The superhero genre in popular culture is no different, and the films and TV series still reproduce racial power relations while they simultaneously attempt to take steps towards inclusivity. The first Marvel Studios’ film with a protagonist of African descent was the 2016 film *Black Panther*. Before 2016, Black people and other people of colour were mainly sidekicks or villains in the Marvel films, “function[s] of the white subject” (Dyer, 1997, p. 13). Brown (2016), in turn, has claimed that “superheroes have always represented the pinnacle of American cultural ideas about masculinity” (p. 131). This, in other words, has meant White, able-bodied men representing the American dream of masculinity. The representations of masculinities in Marvel Cinematic Universe and the Captain America franchise mostly support this claim, as the hero is a hypermasculine White man while racial diversity is not as conspicuous or significant. Dyer’s argument of non-White subjects functioning only as part of the construction of White identity holds true especially for *The First Avenger* (p. 13). In the film, the realities of racial diversity and race issues are smoothed over. Whiteness remains natural, unquestioned. There are other ways of being masculine than being White, but as *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier* demonstrates, these

experiences of masculinity are laden with racialized tensions. The power relations between White and Black subjects are also discussed more in the TV series.

Racial diversity and diverse ethnicities have a part in *The First Avenger* to some extent as well, though the diversity is represented as a positive, unambiguous part of masculinities in the war. Rogers' special combat unit, the Howling Commandos, consists of men with a variety of cultural backgrounds; most of them are American, but some of the men have roots in France and England. One of the men is Japanese American, and the film bypasses discussions of the reality of internment camps of the war period. In other words, diversity, and the realities that come with it, are ignored in the film: colour is made invisible, synonymous with the invisibility of Whiteness (Dyer, 1997, p. 44). Despite the unusual range of cultural backgrounds in the context of American troops in World War II, all the men represent hegemonic war-winning masculinity. They are brave, intellectual, and have an affinity for violence, which is required for triumph in the war. Their deviance from the stereotypical White American man is not commented on explicitly, but the men are stereotypically coded as racialized by their strong accents and non-white bodies. Instead of highlighting the discourse on race and diversity, the Howling Commandos' function is to support the construction of Rogers' masculinity as hegemonic, and White identity, through relational practices. The men accept Rogers not only as an equal, but as a leader of the group. Additionally, down the line it is shown that the Howling Commandos' teamwork is seamless because of trust between the men and a brothers-in-arms mentality. Such a relationship between men is essential for triumph in the war, and according to Easthope (1992), the moments and images of comradeship are a crucial part of the structure of war, and further, masculinity in the war (p. 63). Even though appearance, in terms of skin colour or hair colour, is not discussed as important in the process of choosing who is to become the super-soldier, it is important to note that only White American masculinities are considered for the super-soldier program: Rogers and Hodge, who are both White men, the only outward difference between them the size of their bodies. Ultimately Rogers is chosen for the program, and after receiving the serum, Rogers turns out to be the exact embodiment of who is wanted to represent America: Blond hair, blue eyes, massive, muscular body. The film thus reproduces stereotyping as what Dyer (1997) sees as characterizing the "representation of subordinated social groups" to keep them in their place (p. 12). In contrast, White people are given the illusion of "infinite variety" (Dyer, 1997, p. 12).

In *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, Helmut Zemo notes how “the desire to become a superhuman cannot be separated from supremacist ideals”, meaning that Captain America cannot be separated from the connotations of supremacy and comments on the previously ignored naturalization of White superheroes (*The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, “The Whole World Is Watching”). In other words, while *The First Avenger* bypassed the discussion of othering and oppression regarding race and ethnicity, the TV series comments on the existence of these practices both in the past and the present. Additionally, *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier* highlights the intersection of race and masculinity. The construction of Wilson’s masculinity is affected by the interplay of gender and race: though Wilson represents hegemonic masculinity as a superhero and military man and enjoys most of the benefits of that form of masculinity, being Black marginalizes his position in the hierarchy of masculinities. Additionally, the power that is strongly associated with masculinity eludes marginalized masculinities. Thus, even though Wilson is American, he experiences power differently from White hegemonic men like Rogers, Barnes, or Walker, even though Rogers and Barnes ignore this when they expect Wilson to accept the shield. From the first episode onwards, the role of Captain America and its legacy troubles Wilson: he is hesitant to represent America, where racial oppression, segregation and violence towards non-White people have existed for centuries. Additionally, he ponders what it would mean for a Black man to carry the shield, in terms of reception not only from White people who have contributed to othering, but from the Black community as well.

This contemplation of the complicated legacy of the shield intensifies when Barnes takes Wilson to see a man named Isaiah Bradley. Bradley had unwillingly received the super soldier serum as a part of a secret governmental project, in which variants of the serum were tested on African American soldiers. While most of the men died due to the side effects, Bradley survived and tried to save his fellow soldiers. Bradley’s story closely resembles Rogers’: Bradley disobeyed the authorities’ orders and went behind enemy lines to save his brothers-in-arms. However, with tears in his eyes, Bradley tells Wilson that instead of being celebrated as a hero, he suffered decades of imprisonment and torture for his troubles, just because he is a Black man whereas Rogers was White, with blond hair and blue eyes. He lifts his shirt to show the evidence to Wilson: revealed are the large scars he received from torture and experiments done to him. After Bradley managed to escape his prisoners after a kindly nurse took pity on him, he has been living as a dead man, hiding in Baltimore. When Bradley is telling his story, Wilson appears confused, then ashamed, and so does Barnes, who has

known about Bradley for years and has carried the shame and regret of the secret. When Barnes tells Bradley that they are visiting him to tell him that there are others like “them”, super soldiers, out there, Bradley laughs bitterly: the attempt to talk about Bradley and Barnes as the same is outrageous. The two men are not the same: as Rogers’ past has shown, a White man would not have been put through the same torture and humiliation as Bradley, a Black man. Bradley, though an embodiment of superhuman masculinity, was powerless in the hands of scientists and other authorities. Bradley’s story is in line with Segal’s discussion on Western images and discourses on Black men and masculinities: in them, Black men have been often “divested of [their] masculinity” though simultaneously they have been perceived as animalistic (152). Segal’s discussion covers a history of images and discourses that both constructed and propagated violence and oppression towards Black men specifically in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. Bradley’s experiences reflect those discourses, and when he was stripped of his humanity and power during his imprisonment, he was symbolically stripped of his masculinity. Treated like an animal as a test subject, Bradley was reduced to a racist stereotype of Black masculinity, only a “‘bestial’ side of manliness” left to him which indicated his inferiority in the face of the authorities that imprisoned and experimented on him (Segal 152).

Remembering the wrongs done to him, Bradley is angry and hurt, and shouts at Wilson and Barnes to get out of his house. After the men leave Bradley, Wilson is agitated and confused. The fact that a Black super soldier has existed simultaneously with Rogers but with tremendously different outcomes displays the oppression and violence based on skin colour, which did not exist in *The First Avenger*: the film “naturalized” the White ideal. In *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, the naturalization of Whiteness is debunked by acknowledging how non-Whiteness is marked and treated as abnormal. In episode five, Wilson goes to see Bradley again, bringing the shield with him. Wilson wants to see to Bradley’s state, but also to consult with him about the shield and what Wilson should do with it. Bradley does not even want to see the shield due to what it represents, and the men’s different views are put on display: while Wilson is relatively optimistic now about becoming a role model by being Captain America and thinks Bradley’s story should be told to the world, Bradley vehemently disagrees. He sees Wilson’s optimism as him turning a blind eye to the centuries of oppression towards Black people: “if you’re not bitter, you’re blind” (*The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, “Truth”). When Wilson tries to convince Bradley that the world is different now, Bradley tells him that he would be killed the second people learned

about him. According to Bradley, White people continue to erase Black history, and thus would never let a Black man be Captain America; he finishes the sentence by claiming that “no self-respecting Black man would ever wanna be” Captain America (*The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, “Truth”). Bradley thus suggests that a White hypermasculine man with blond hair and blue eyes in stars and stripes has been a representation of a nationalist America that marks Black people as others and continues to abuse them. Bradley sees that a Black man should not participate in such representation.

Alongside Segal’s discussion on Western discourses and images on racialized gender constructs, Reeser’s (2010) analogical constructs on race and masculinity are discernible in the series. Recurrent associations between Black men as criminals or Black men reduced to animals exemplify how racial masculinities are imagined, and how these constructs accord power to those who imagine, in this case dominantly White institutions (Reeser, 2010, p. 148). In the series, Bradley believes that even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, he would be treated as a criminal if his existence was revealed to the world. Additionally, while Wilson appears to think the world is different now, he is subject to racialized assumptions as well. When they first leave Bradley’s house with Barnes in the second episode, Wilson is agitated by the violence done to Bradley because of his race and yells at Barnes because Barnes knew about Bradley. Just then, a police car drives by, and two policemen intervene, assuming that Wilson is a threat to Barnes because he is yelling. The policemen, both White, represent and reproduce the racist structures that still exist in America, criminalizing Wilson and assuming that he is violent because he is Black. Barnes tries to defend Wilson, and when the policemen realize that they almost arrested an Avenger, they apologize, telling Wilson they just did not recognize him. These scenes mirror the racialized othering happening in the real world and presents the Black characters “as projections of white imaginings” (Dyer, 1997, p. 14). When Wilson becomes Captain America, he addresses the racialized projections people will have of him. Wilson tells the government officials that he can feel that people hate him for being Black *and* Captain America, and he still picks up the shield. He exemplifies the hegemonic values of bravery and determination, but he also challenges the hegemonic model by simply being Black, which in turn exposes the omnipotence of race as non-White.

While *The First Avenger* contributed to reproducing stereotypes based on race, *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier* comments on and criticizes the racism in society in both past and the present. However, alongside exposing the processes of othering and Whiteness as ‘strange’ and not *just human*, the TV series also reproduces racial power relations and superiority of

Whiteness with having Hoskins as Walker's sidekick. The Marvel universe treats race as something visual, which is connected to Dyer's (1997) theory that race is made visible especially when it is non-White, and that only non-White bodies can be reduced to their race and skin colour (14). However, demonstrations of race as more than skin colour, as a social construct, are present in *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*. In relation to the construction of masculinities, the effect of race and the relational processes connected to it have been considered more in the 2021 series than in the 2011 film. A focus on Wilson as a Black male protagonist who addresses issues of race challenges the idea of hegemonic masculinity as White.

## 5. Towards Intersectionality: Masculinities and Emotions in the Marvel Materials

The hegemonic values of masculinity have been challenged in the Marvel materials to some extent. As the analyses above displayed, the factors that affect the constructions of masculinities are interconnected, but power sticks to some factors in the construction of masculinities more saliently than to others. The construction of masculinities in the Marvel materials is affected by the social processes of race and gender which cannot be considered separate factors if the masculinities are to be looked at comprehensively. The analyses above have already somewhat adopted an intersectional approach to the constructions of masculinities in the materials, and it will continue to be relevant in this section. The term intersectionality is important as “a notion that subjectivity is constituted by mutually reinforcing vectors of race, gender, class, and sexuality” (Nash, 2008, p. 2).

Intersectionality was first articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, when she critiqued the antidiscrimination doctrine and feminist theory, noting how these systems ignored the multidimensionality of Black women’s experiences. The intersections of race, sex, class, age, religion, and other factors create different identities and experiences, some of which are more privileged than others. Power sticks to the more privileged, while simultaneously, the experiences of the less privileged are obscured, ignored, and subordinated. In her essay, Crenshaw (1989) highlighted how the boundaries of Black women’s experiences of race and sex discrimination were defined by the experiences of the more privileged White women and Black men (p. 143). In other words, White women’s experiences represented all women’s experiences, and Black men’s experiences represented all Black people’s experiences. Crenshaw called for the reconsideration and reworking of such a single-axis framework and categorization which excluded the experiences of some subjectivities and allowed for their subordination.

In the context of masculinities in the Marvel materials, the intersectional approach focuses on how the men and masculinities are *not* constitutions of mutually exclusive categories, but multidimensional subjectivities. Christensen & Jensen (2014) have noted that masculinity can intersect with categories that either strengthens masculinity’s legitimacy or challenge and subvert male privilege (p. 69). The following three sections of the thesis address the intersection of emotions and masculinity in the Marvel materials. Emotions are often treated as feminine and thus, in the context of masculinities, emotionality is not consistent with hegemony. In other words, hiding certain emotions instead of expressing them is preferred to



maintain a hegemonic position in the hierarchy. The masculinities of the Marvel men seem to mirror this ideal of emotional stuntedness, but the men do experience a range of emotions that affect their masculinity and masculine identities. As the following analysis will show, the world of men hiding their emotions seems to be a world of pain, and it becomes most visible in the relational practices between men. Though emotionality and vulnerabilities are treated as undesirable in the Marvel universe, the complex processes regarding these emotions are defining factors in the men's masculinities. The analysis begins with expressing emotions deemed as effeminate, followed by looking at anger as non-emotion. Lastly, the focus will be on the vulnerabilities caused by the processes of seeing and being seen.

### **5.1. Paying the Price: Expressions of Effeminate Emotions**

Traditionally, masculinity is associated with reason and the mind; the more “important things”, while emotions and the body are left for the feminine (Armengol, 2013, p. 1). According to Armengol (2013), this notion has been in effort to secure the “superiority of masculinity” (p. 2). Placing value on masculinity as the voice of reason leaves no space for the whole scale of human emotions, thus offering a very narrow, limited frame for expressions of masculinity. While positive emotions such as joy and pride are not scrutinized, one of the only acceptable negative or vulnerable emotions to express is anger. Anger is not recognized as an emotion in the context of masculinity. Expressing emotions other than anger and rage is, often, uncomfortable, and other people's responses to those emotions make expressing them difficult. There is no denying, however, that those feelings exist within male subjects. The dissonance between suppressing emotionality and the inevitable existence of said emotions is, in the Marvel materials, a source of pain for the men.

In *The First Avenger*, grief is acceptable as an emotion due to the context of war and the expected loss and death associated with it. However, to maintain an idea of hegemonic masculinity and not to lose its power, grief is expressed very briefly and handled with alcohol and revenge. Additionally, in the final moments of the film when Rogers saves America by diving the aircraft into the ice, he talks with Peggy Carter through the comms: Carter cries openly, while Rogers apologizes and tells her that it's his choice. The man sacrifices his body, maintaining hegemony without any physical signs of grief, while the woman cries at

the loss of a loved one. Vulnerability and effeminate emotions are treated as belonging to the realm of the feminine.

*The Falcon and The Winter Soldier* in turn has more room to display a range of emotions, and emotions such as shame, guilt, embarrassment, and gratefulness are all present in the male character's lives. Moreover, they are addressed, as demonstrated, in the scenes with Barnes' therapist, Doctor Raynor. Barnes is in government-mandated therapy in exchange for a pardon for his crimes as the Winter Soldier, Hydra's brainwashed assassin. Therapy is the one place safe for emotions and emotionality, but it requires vulnerability, and Barnes still resists being vulnerable. Before the therapy scene, the episode shows Barnes having a flashback nightmare of him killing an innocent bystander as the Winter Soldier. When Doctor Raynor asks him about them in therapy, however, he denies having had any nightmares. Despite being in a safe space, the idea of being laid bare through expressing one's fears and regrets is intimidating. Barnes even relies on being the voice of reason and shifts the blame and shame of emotional vulnerability on someone else, as his denials make the doctor have a slight outburst and she raises her voice at him: he calmly asks if she usually yells at her other clients, showing no signs of distress himself and emphasising her emotionality (*The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, "New World Order"). Only when the doctor takes out a notebook and begins silently writing, is Barnes forced to drop his sarcastic and closed-off demeanour and reveal that he did have a nightmare. He also doesn't have any close contacts and has been ignoring the calls from Wilson, behaviours which he tries to defend by saying that after nearly 90 years of fighting, he just wants peace - a chosen solitude. The perpetuation of his pain is, in Barnes' mind, somehow an acceptable consequence of the shame and regret he feels. The perpetuation of pain appears as a better option than being truly seen, in accordance with the emotional price Kaufman (1994) suggests men have to pay in order to feel less powerless: emotions dampened and held in check to assume control over oneself (p. 148). While being actively in therapy dealing with difficult experiences is new to the Captain America franchise, men revealing vulnerable emotions is perceived as undesirable.

The one place where Barnes was able to truly be vulnerable was Wakanda, where he spent several years healing before coming back to the United States. The Wakandans helped him break free of Hydra's Winter Soldier programming. Episode four shows a flashback to Wakanda, where woman named Ayo, a Dora Milaje soldier, works with Barnes. After having worked on his healing for a while, Ayo wishes to try the code words that activated the Winter Soldier. Barnes is sceptical and fears that they have not managed to break the programming,

but though the words awaken memories, they do not activate the soldier anymore. After realising this, Barnes starts crying, clearly relieved. In Wakanda, he was able to show his fears, his shame, as well as tears of relief and gratefulness. In contrast, back home in the U.S. these feelings are concealed, which implies that the atmosphere is not open to expressions of emotions that are considered feminine as they are emasculating. Additionally, this supports the claim that masculinity is culturally and contextually: back in the United States, Barnes sticks to the hegemonic standards and adheres to the Western idea of masculinity. He is non-emotional and independent, avoiding the display of vulnerable emotions that might have a negative effect on his masculinity.

Moreover, Rogers' expectations and hopes for Barnes create tension for him. Although Barnes was a ruthless assassin, Rogers always believed in him and thought the best of him – and ultimately this led Barnes to Wakanda, where he received help. However, these expectations of being good and doing the right thing feed the feelings of shame and guilt, especially at times Barnes is not able to do what he perceives as right. This leads into a spiral of shame and self-blame, which affects the actions- or inactions. For example, during the time Barnes is making amends and attempting to correct his past mistakes as the Winter Soldier, he has befriended an old man named Yori Nakajima, who lost his son in mysterious circumstances years ago. The Winter Soldier was the one who killed him, despite Nakajima's son being an innocent man, and the jumble of guilt, shame, grief, and regret stop Barnes from telling Nakajima the truth. Even though the truth is plaguing Barnes, and he knows telling Nakajima about the past would be the right thing to do, he decides to avoid accountability: putting his past mistakes on display would be too much to bear.

Shame, according to Probyn (2005), comes with a sense of fragility, makes one re-evaluate their own existence (p. 64). Such fragility is treated as undesirable and not allowed within hegemonic male identities, which Barnes mostly embodies. Additionally, the heavy expectations that weigh on Barnes' shoulders spill out to his relationship with Wilson: as he sees that Wilson gave Rogers' shield away to the government, Barnes is disappointed and almost furious. After Walker is announced as the new Captain America, Barnes goes to Wilson, saying he had no right to give up the shield (*The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, "The Star-Spangled Man"). Barnes wants Wilson to respect Rogers' will and expectations as he does, and that expectation was for Wilson to carry Rogers' shield and take up his mantle.

Barnes is not the only one who deals with difficult emotions and the responses they evoke, as Wilson also struggles with guilt: guilt about the expectations both Rogers and the world have of him, as well as his duty to his family. In the first episode of *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, Wilson is looking at the shield Rogers left for him, expecting him to follow as the next Captain America. The scene shows Wilson packing up the shield and reminiscing about how he said to Rogers that the shield feels like “it belongs to someone else” (*The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, “New World Order”). Despite Rogers’ wish, Wilson means to take the shield to the government. In this scene, Wilson says nothing, so the depiction of his emotions is left to the viewer to interpret from his body, like in various scenes where the characters do not speak. The flashback to the conversation with Rogers, however, implies that some guilt and regret surround Wilson regarding giving up the shield. In terms of the struggles and guilt about his family, Wilson experiences these emotions as he returns to his family in Louisiana. As mentioned above, he participates in his sister and nephew’s life, even taking on a paternal role, but the relationships at home are strained as well. Sarah is frustrated with Wilson and shows it: his sister’s frustration with him and his failure to be there for his family in times of need cause Wilson feelings of guilt and embarrassment. The expectations of Wilson’s closest family are in dissonance with what Rogers and Barnes expect of him, which creates tension in Wilson.

Like the men’s respective struggles in their personal lives, their time together evokes various emotions in them both, as demonstrated above. Both Wilson and Barnes have Rogers’ expectations of them on their shoulders, their respective relationships with Rogers create tension between them, and they seldom agree on anything: least of all on what is the right thing to do. Whether they want it or not, they experience difficult emotions together, and they use humour and banter, and are hostile towards each other in order to avoid the underlying issues and feelings of vulnerability. Despite the banter that the two men exchange in many of the episodes, their conversation is also filled with jabs at each other that are meant to hurt, not only carrying the purpose of humour. For instance, in the scene where Wilson and Barnes first follow and encounter the Flag Smashers in episode one, their dialogue is filled with snapping at each other: when Barnes says they should advance on the Flag Smashers to see what cargo group is smuggling, Wilson stops Barnes and tells him the two “are not assassins” (*The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, “The Star-Spangled Man”). Barnes’ expression turns sour, but Wilson laughs it off, telling him he’s joking. Wilson laughs at Barnes’ expense other ways as well. Barnes, having lived his youth in the 1940s, feels uncomfortable in the

modern environment with all the gadgets, technology, and overall changes – notwithstanding the fact that his left arm is made of vibranium, the strongest metal on earth, with advanced technology. Wilson, in turn, has his fair share of experience with technology and his Falcon suit is built with advanced gadgets which he knows how to utilize and handle. Wilson uses this to his advantage and makes fun of Barnes’ old-school ways of approaching precarious situations, for instance in the scene where they encounter the Flag Smashers for the first time. Wilson laughs at Barnes for sneaking around and being “all stealthy” approaching the Flag Smashers, while his own technology can detect all the members in the room easily, without getting close to them (*The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, “The Star-Spangled Man”). Barnes’ embarrassment is amplified later in the scene when they realize that the Flag Smashers are enhanced, although they look like regular people. When Barnes is beaten by Morgenthau, who at first sight looked like an innocent young woman who had been kidnapped by the Flag Smashers, Wilson laughs at him. Not only does Barnes get beaten, but he also receives the beating from a small, young woman, which seems to add to the embarrassment. Both Wilson and Barnes seem to find this more laughable than getting beaten by the other super soldiers, since the comment and the consequent laughter is emphasized despite the reality of Barnes and Wilson fighting male super soldiers in the scene as well. Embarrassment is disguised with humour to cover the vulnerability this emotion exposes, although due to the humour and laughter it appears that embarrassment – at least at each other’s expense- is the easiest emotion to manoeuvre.

Though still perceived as a masculine man, the type of masculinity Barnes now represents is rough, even wounded, especially compared to how he was presented in *The First Avenger*. Barnes still demonstrates hegemonic traits in his masculine performance, but some things have shifted. In *The First Avenger*, he is, initially at least, the epitome of ideal masculinity: a sergeant, courageous, and desired by women. In the first scenes where Barnes is involved in the film, he appears put-together in his uniform. A smile or a smirk plays on his face most of the time, and the overall air is of a man confident in himself and his graces. As demonstrated above however, this clean look starts to crumble as the film progresses: the war and being held a hostage leave their marks on Barnes, and the change to an outwardly disheveled and dirty man reflects the change happening inside. No specific attention is yet paid to the change in Barnes’ demeanor, as the focus is on Rogers and his masculinity. The fall to his presumed death, becoming Hydra’s deadly assassin the Winter Soldier, to finally breaking free of this programming has had a significant effect on Barnes, and he is merely a ghost of his former

self – though the shift began already in the first Captain America film, and the breaking of the Winter Soldier programming happened before the series, the series shows that dealing with the aftermath of past events affects Barnes both physically and emotionally.

Barnes' traumatic ordeals are conveyed in the first episode, "New World Order", when Barnes has a flashback nightmare of one of his missions as the Winter Soldier. The first look the viewer gets of Barnes is of him waking up sweating and distressed from the floor of his bleak apartment. Shirtless and thus muscles on display and his metal arm gleaming in the grim light, he appears strong. Barnes' body still adheres to the desired physique of a superhero, but as the following scene with his therapist demonstrates, his mind is a more complex matter, strained and hurting. The easy grins evident when he first appeared in *The First Avenger* have been replaced by glares and expressions of unease. However, though he has a therapist to whom he could talk to, he is stoic and sarcastic in their meetings and refuses to talk about his true sentiments. This, at least, is in line with the way masculinity is still expected to be performed; the idea of avoiding expressing emotions like grief and shame persists. However, the professional response to male vulnerability and honesty is also lacking empathy, which supports Kaufman's (1994) claim that men are expected to "learn to beat back [their] feelings" to align with expectations of dominant masculinity (p. 148). This expectation is evidenced by the therapist's reaction to Barnes' claim that he wants peace: the therapist calls this "bullshit" and reminds Barnes how he has good things in life that he simply does not pay enough attention to (*The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, "New World Order"). This reaction reinforces the discourse that men need to "beat back [their] feelings" and tough it out (Kaufman, 1997, p. 148).

Thus, expressing 'effeminate' emotions, such as vulnerability, embarrassment, shame, and grief, is presented as difficult and undesirable in *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*. Being truly observed and met in their emotional state is not acceptable, and thus the men suppress their feelings. This supports the idea that emotional withdrawal is privileged over expressions of vulnerable emotions. The suppression of emotions, needs, and connection in the context of masculinity is explained by Kaufman (1994) as alienation from others (p. 150). The acquisition of masculinity – and power- requires detachment and distance, both from other people as from the men themselves. In *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, the men pay the price: to maintain an ideal masculinity, they stifle their emotionality, or it is stifled by others. However, the emotions still exist, but the men have to find other outlets for expressing them.

## 5.2. Anger as Non-Emotion in The Context of Masculinities

As demonstrated above, the suppression of vulnerable emotions in the name of upholding a hegemonically masculine status-quo causes distress and tension in the male characters. Hiding or denying emotions does not stop the men from experiencing them, causing various reactions both inside and outside the body, from shame to anger. Repressing emotions is in line with the idea of hegemonic masculinity as rational and avoiding emotionality, and according to Frost & Averill (1982), stereotypically women have been regarded more emotional than men (p. 281) However, in the case of anger, the opposite is true: anger is one of the few emotions that men express more openly than women. It is one of the few emotions that is acceptable to display in the context of masculinities, but instead of regarding it as an emotion, anger appears as a natural part of masculinity and its construction. Especially in the Marvel materials, this argument seems to hold true, as the emotion that most goes unquestioned or appears natural is the male characters' anger and aggression in both *The First Avenger* and *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*. Multiple scenes in *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier* show the men displaying their anger instead of expressing a range of other emotions: frustrations, vulnerability, pain, and feelings of powerlessness, to name a few. Additionally, the men's anger is only "satisfied" in company, not in isolation; the male characters pick their bones with each other constantly, letting their anger show (Tomkins 209). For instance, the first time Barnes and Wilson see each other in episode one, their conversation is heated from the start: after Barnes saw Walker on television as Captain America, he barges in on Wilson, agitated about Wilson giving up the shield. Wilson comments that Barnes' "outrage is gonna have to wait", though ultimately, his anger arises as well (*The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, "New World Order"). When Barnes tells Wilson he had "no right to give up the shield", Wilson turns to Barnes' face with his finger raised and tells Barnes he should not talk about Wilson's rights (*The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, "New World Order"). Wilson refers to their racial differences and the oppression Black people still face, though the two men do not discuss it. The exchange is thus ripe with accumulated emotions that are masked with anger. However, they move forward quickly, soon bantering about another topic. Thus, the anger seems natural, and an emotion that needs no clarification. The anger about racial oppression is justified, and it is a theme that continues throughout the series, causing anger and distress especially for Wilson. However, the

suppression of emotions continues as well, and frustration, shame, and pain are channelled through yelling or shutting down instead of discussing them.

The men's uncomfortable emotions evoke anger in the men both when they feel those emotions themselves and when others express difficult emotions. Often, they unleash this anger on each other. Wilson, for instance, often calls Barnes by a range of degrading names such as "Freaky Magoo", referring to Barnes' brainwashing and the consequent need for psychiatric help. At times, Barnes seems to aggravate Wilson simply by existing, and instead of empathy, Wilson lashes out in anger. The contrast to Wilson's previous demeanour is discernible: in the 2014 film *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, Wilson was working with veterans who suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder, who he encountered with empathy and supported them through difficult times. Even when discussing the Flag Smashers leader Karli Morgenthau, Wilson appears to have hope and empathy: he wants to negotiate with her, thinking of her as "just a kid" instead of a terrorist, despite her having killed multiple people in terrorist attacks (*The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, "The Whole World is Watching"). In contrast, no traces of this empathy seem to remain in neither his exchanges with Barnes nor regarding his own emotional state.

As the scenes above demonstrate, not all anger that the men feel and express is aggressive in the physical sense. However, though anger does not automatically mean a physical reaction, it can be displayed through violence. Sometimes aggressive reactions seem to prove the only acceptable outlets for built-up emotions in terms of masculinity. As Lynne Segal suggests, in discussing male violence and aggression, "physical violence and aggression are still predominantly seen as masculine and acted out by men" (Segal 221). Segal continues that men are more likely than women to engage in aggressive displays and "enjoy greater social tolerance for many forms of aggressiveness" (223). In other words, anger is unquestioned when it comes to masculinity, whereas if we think of aggression and femininity, the discourse easily turns to the concept of "female hysteria". Especially in the Marvel universe, the male character's aggression is often regarded as essential: almost all the storylines involve a battle between good and evil, and thus aggression and violence are significant aspects of the characters' constructions. For instance, in *The First Avenger*, multiple scenes involve Rogers beating down Hydra soldiers and destroying their bases, and the events are represented as a victorious journey. However, not all of Rogers' aggression in the film is rooted in the altruistic will to protect his country: when Rogers sees Barnes fall to his death, Rogers copes with losing him by claiming revenge on Hydra. For Rogers, the only outlet for his emotions is



aggression and violence targeted at the enemy. In the scene, Carter finds him isolated and trying to get intoxicated with alcohol; though Carter tries to soothe Rogers, her attempts are futile. Ultimately, in his most emotional state, Rogers states that he is not going to stop “till all of Hydra is dead or captured”, whereas in one of the previous scenes he told Doctor Erskine that he does not *want* to kill anybody, despite enlisting in the army (*Captain America: The First Avenger*). Instead of discussing his grief and the consequent anger, Rogers relies on alcohol, revenge, and violence to avoid addressing his emotions. His whole demeanour seems to change after Barnes’ death, a change which is driven by emotions rather than rationality; however, due to anger being regarded as inherently masculine, the emotionality is justified. In addition, Rogers’ anger and violence are unquestioned and presented as acceptable because they are directed at the enemy, whose injuries and death are justified.

In contrast, Walker’s similar reaction to losing Hoskins in *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier* has serious consequences, and Walker receives an other-than-honourable discharge. Walker’s prolonged feelings of subordination, anguish, and aggression unleash in a violent emotional outburst which lacks logical thinking when Hoskins is killed by Morgenthau. Though Rogers and Walker’s reaction to grief is similar, Walker’s aggression is presented as a cautionary tale: Walker’s short temper is implicated in various scenes throughout the series, and it escalates as the series continues. For instance, Hoskins warned Walker about his hot-headedness the first time the men were shown in the series, and whereas Wilson wants to negotiate with Morgenthau in episode four, Walker is impatient and intervenes because he cannot control his aggression. These instances show Walker’s tendency to violence, and the serum exacerbates this tendency. While Hoskins believed that Walker would not be changed for the worse by the serum, Hoskins’ death proves this wrong: the serum, together with Walker’s unstable emotional state, contribute to his mindless violence. Walker’s reaction is an expression of ultimate anger and aggression, as he kills a Flag Smasher with the shield in broad daylight, with dozens of outsiders watching and filming. Thus, the conspicuous bloodbath while Walker is wearing the stars and stripes cannot go unpunished by the government. Additionally, despite the Flag Smasher being a terrorist, the modern context does not give credibility to violence as the context of war did in *The First Avenger*. Walker’s violent reaction and his escalating anger is not morally acceptable since it was not regarded as an act of killing the enemy.

Averill (1982) began his book on anger and aggression by claiming “that anger is an emotion no one would deny” (p. 3). However, in the context of masculinities anger is treated as a non-emotion, as the previous examples of the Marvel materials suggest. Rather, anger is regarded as a part of masculinity, especially since the men are heroes that have to embody an acceptable amount of aggression to protect the people around them. Anger is thus an invisible reaction in the sense that it does not garner reactions like the other emotions the men express. It is presented as ordinary in the men’s lives, though it is usually a result of hidden and suppressed emotions that have no other means of being expressed. Only the absence of anger discloses the essentialist assumption between anger and masculinity and how it has been present in most of the interactions between the men in the TV series. In episode five, Wilson and Barnes acknowledge each other’s feelings, and Barnes apologizes for not realizing what it would mean for a Black man to take the shield and become Captain America. This conversation without the presence of humour, anger, or aggression stands out, since it has not been the norm in previous interactions between the men.

Anger is a hegemonic masculine expression that is valued in the Marvel Universe, and it can be regarded as a powerful force, unlike the effeminate emotions previously discussed. The fear of powerlessness caused by these emotional reactions dictates the character’s actions. Although anger and aggression often go hand in hand, these examples demonstrate that they have very different consequences depending on their contexts. An excess of anger and aggression is not acceptable either if it is wrongly targeted. Thus, the expression of anger, though more desirable than other reactions, involves a constant balancing between being ‘angry enough’ and ‘excessively aggressive’. Anger is also a result of the relational practices, a reaction evoked by interactions with other men and masculinities: the processes of being seen by others are uncomfortable, but they affect the construction of the men’s masculinities. This will be discussed in the next section.

### **5.3. “Thanks, Doc, For Making It Weird”: The Vulnerabilities of Being Seen**

One of the key developments in the series is that the new super soldiers look like normal people, without specifically muscular or tall bodies. These people are from all over the world, and both women and men have received the super-soldier serum. This means that one cannot easily identify one’s enemies or one’s heroes, and as a result, the characters have to find other

ways of seeing, as well as being. Additionally, much of the tension arises from the processes of seeing and being seen.

With the exception of being seen in racialized ways, being seen is mostly regarded as positive, and is a key element especially in terms of building John Walker's character. After Wilson gives Captain America's shield to the government in the beginning of *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, Walker is named the new Captain America. In addition to carrying the shield, he dons a very similar suit to the one Rogers wore, and overall, with big muscles, tall body and light complexion, Walker looks like Rogers. While introducing Walker as the new Captain America, a member of the government strongly implies that Walker "embodies America's greatest values" (*The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, "New World Order"). The racialized implications of this statement are clear, and it also refers to the characteristics wanted of the national symbol. These qualities are revealed with a deeper look into Walker's background during a televised interview in front of the whole nation reveals a history as a military captain, missions in counterterrorism and hostage rescue, as well as "off the charts" body endurance and speed (*The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, "The Star-Spangled Man"). On paper, he is most certainly suitable to carry the mantle of Captain America in Rogers' footsteps, though this is not what Rogers wanted: he gave the shield to Wilson for a reason.

Being watched and being seen is inherently tied to being Captain America. Like Rogers, who also received adoration from those who bought war bonds from him in the 1940s, Walker seems to be the nation's favourite man as the new Captain America. However, Rogers did the work of paving the way for the suit and the shield, which initially aroused ridicule in soldiers, his peers that he most wanted to impress. Now, Captain America's suit is a symbol for the whole nation – if not the world – and thus, the first gaze upon Walker should give people a clue about his status and power. Additionally, Walker is aware of what is expected of him: guts, bravery, and kindness, aspects beside bodily endurance and an exceptional resume. When talking with his wife, or his best friend and partner Hoskins, he dares to show the vulnerabilities that shadow him, but these fears and worries of failing are not meant for the whole world to see. The whole world is, however, looking very closely, as implicated by the name of episode four, "The Whole World is Watching". Worried about failing his family and America, Walker initially exhibits only positive, required behaviour, attempting to emulate Rogers the best he can. For instance, in the beginning he is eager to work together with Wilson and Barnes in stopping The Flag Smashers, though the two clearly dismiss him and are rather rude towards him from the start. Walker even bails Barnes out of jail when he was

sent there after he missed his government-mandated therapy session. He seems to be on good terms with everyone and values these connections, knowing they are beneficial to his image.

However, Walker starts showing an undesired, ugly side further along the line, as he encounters more and more people who show him neither the respect nor the recognition he feels he rightfully deserves as Captain America. The third episode begins with Walker and his partner Hoskins' mission in Germany, where they are looking for The Flag Smashers. They confront a German man who accommodated the group for a night, though the man denies these accusations. Walker is wearing his Captain America suit and carrying the shield and clearly assumes that this is sufficient to grant him international recognition, admiration, and consequently, information. However, the German man refuses to give him the information and even less, the admiration he wants; he tells Walker that he does know who Walker is but does not care and finishes this statement with spitting in Walker's face. This enrages Walker, who seems to lack the capacity to see himself as others see him, and his reaction and response to confronting others' opinions of him is anger. Walker's carefully cultivated façade is starting to crack as soon as he finds that his mantle and the Captain America suit alone are not sufficient to grant him recognition and respect.

The assumption that the shield and the suit are enough to assume adoration from others is further challenged in the scene involving Wilson and Barnes, and later the Dora Milaje. The Dora Milaje are Wakanda's special forces, an elite group comprised solely of female warriors. Walker and Hoskins confront Barnes, Wilson, and Zemo, who assisted Barnes and Wilson in their search for The Flag Smashers. Due to Walker's short temper, their mission of reasoning with Morgenthau failed. In the ensuing encounter where Walker tries to get Wilson and Barnes to hand Zemo over to him, Wilson calls Walker out on his arrogance and assumptions. However, once again, Walker does not react to other people's negative observations of him well and he almost attacks Wilson, antagonizing him by asking how Wilson wants the conversation to go, implying Walker will soon use brute force (*The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, "The Whole World Is Watching"). Before this happens, the Dora Milaje interject as they come to retrieve Zemo. As in the scene with the German man, Walker is behaving like a bully and fails – or refuses – to see himself as other people see him. Moreover, he lacks the capacity to recognize the bravery and solidarity exhibited by the German man, Wilson, and the Dora Milaje, as they protect their own and the things they stand for. Instead, he tries to rely on his Captain America mantle yet again, talking very patronizingly to the Dora Milaje, and Wilson warns him that Walker rather takes on Barnes

before facing the warrior group in a fight. (Here a sentence on linking to section on fierce females). Walker tries to touch one of the warriors, at which point they attack. Ultimately all the men in the room join the fight, but they stand no chance, which aggravates Walker the most, as he refuses to see that despite being Captain America, he too, has shortcomings. From this point, the lack of super soldier abilities seems to become the root cause of Walker's problems.

As these scenes demonstrate, Walker represents another side of the American persona: swaggering and wholly unaware of how he comes across to others. Instead of the respect he thought he would receive from the world as Captain America, he receives only disrespect and disgusted looks from Wilson, Barnes, and the Dora Milaje, who by Walker's standards should see him as one of the heroes. While the average citizens still do respect and adore him, Walker wants recognition from other soldiers like him, as did Rogers in *The First Avenger*. The homosociality of masculinity is still intact as Walker desires acceptance from his peers. However, Walker lacks the capacity to recognize how his own behaviours contribute to this response, and simply going against orders like Rogers did is not enough to be respected by the other masculinities. The lack of the super soldier serum in his veins becomes an obsession to Walker, as does being perceived as an equal and respected by the others: he thinks becoming a super soldier will fix the issue.

While Walker is wholly unaware of how he is perceived by others, a scene between Barnes and Wilson reveals how threatening the experience of being perceived can be. The scene takes place during a mandatory therapy session in which Barnes and Wilson work with Doctor Raynor, who wishes to try couple's therapy methods with them. When asked whether they are familiar with the "miracle method", the men answer instantly that they "absolutely" are not, emphasising the unfamiliarity and that they had no need to know of such a method (*The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, "The Star-Spangled Man"). Overall, Wilson implies that while he understands why Barnes is in therapy, he does not see why he should participate in the session. Though Barnes seems to soften slightly when asked to discuss what is bothering him, Wilson remains on edge: ultimately, he scoffs and tells the therapist that he will "squash it" and focus on the more important things, the Flag Smashers (*The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, "The Star-Spangled Man"). Wilson finishes the session with sarcasm, thanking the therapist for "making it weird" (*The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, "The Star-Spangled Man"). The difficulty to be emotional supports the hegemonic ideal and avoiding being seen seems natural to masculinity. The possibility of being vulnerable scares him, and

he takes this stress out on Barnes: the two men only manage to insult each other. Ultimately the doctor makes them do a soul-gazing exercise. In this exercise, they face each other and sit very close to each other, legs intertwined. The bodily proximity is intimidating enough, yet the idea of truly looking at and seeing each other adds to the fear. They turn this exercise into a staring contest, denying the possibility of vulnerability, but ultimately, the disagreements about Rogers' shield as the underlying issue is coaxed out, making the men's vulnerabilities visible for a moment.

Then, to turn the attention away from himself and being seen, he says to the therapist that they don't have time for this, that they have some "serious shit" going on (*The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, "The Star-Spangled Man"). Wilson says that they should just get the job done and then never see each other again. In short, when the men demonstrate that they really see one another, uncomfortable truths are revealed. Barnes's anger and his feeling that Wilson is not living up to the ideals set by Rogers is released, which places Wilson in the uncomfortable position of seeing himself through another's eyes and seeing himself as a failure. The self-doubt Wilson already appears to feel after Rogers bestowed his legacy upon him is fed by Barnes' comments. Being perceived and hearing others' opinions on something Wilson feels vulnerable about, is often worse than being laid bare otherwise. The gaze is often thought of as something penetrating a body, and thus being the object of gazing has been regarded as effeminising to the male body (Reeser, 2010, p. 111). However, the scenes where the men are half-naked, bodies glistening and on display both in *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier* and *The First Avenger*, are not in fact scenes where male vulnerabilities are on display. Rather, they are meant to express the strength and power stored in those bodies, affirming their "hard masculinity" (Reeser, 2010, p. 111). In the Marvel materials, being perceived otherwise, through one's failures or emotions, is more penetrating than a gaze on the corporeal body could be. After these vulnerabilities are exposed in the therapy session, Wilson attempts to pass the responsibility of being seen as flawed to the doctor, as he sarcastically thanks her "for making it weird", and storms out. His response to this exposure is lashing out, covering the embarrassment of vulnerability with anger, which is deemed as an appropriate masculine reaction.

However, ultimately, all three men need to face their vulnerabilities and the possibility of showing them to others. In the culmination of the series, they need to relinquish the pride that has been an essential part of their masculinities. In episode five, when Wilson finally agrees to become Captain America, Barnes acknowledges Wilson's doubts and apologizes to him.

Barnes gives up his pride that had him holding on to Rogers' wish and opinion until then. Wilson reminds Barnes that Rogers is gone, and that it doesn't matter what he thought of Barnes. He also says that Barnes should "do the work" and gives him advice on how to start (*The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, "Truth"). In turn, Wilson acknowledges aloud that he was reluctant to take the shield due to its complicated legacy. In the scene, both men give up their pride which did not allow them to be vulnerable with each other. In addition, Walker goes through a similar process of giving up his pride: in episode six, Walker abandons his mission to murder every Flag Smasher in order to save the lives of innocent people. Instead of chasing a Flag Smasher, Walker attempts to help the Flag Smasher's victims to not fall to their deaths. Additionally, he continues to fight alongside Wilson and Barnes to save the city of New York. Although Walker is a troubled character, by abandoning his pride and putting his vulnerabilities on display he becomes a hero in the eyes of the citizens. In turn, when Wilson finally accepts the shield as his, the rigidity and anxiety about racialized masculinity and its implications do not vanish, but he embraces them. He talks to his sister in episode five, telling her that he understands Bradley's point of view, but "what would be the point of all the pain and sacrifice if I wasn't willing to stand up and keep fightin'" (*The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, "Truth"). Even Wilson's body, its corporality, is made visible: Wilson's body is on display as he trains, the camera focusing on his muscles that are covered with sweat. After saving New York, Wilson gives a speech to reporters and the government officials. He chastises them for calling the Flag Smashers a terrorist group, noting that their politics are acts of terrorism as well.

In *The First Avenger*, the vulnerability, grief, guilt, and shame are reconciled by Rogers flying the plane to the ocean. In contrast, the vulnerability of being seen as a flawed human being is accepted in *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, though the processes to get there are fraught with hegemonic values. The reconciliation is allowing others to see the men as vulnerable beings, though they do maintain hegemonic masculinity otherwise. Thus, this is not an unequivocal shift of representing a completely new or different type of masculinity. The men's experiences are still defined by the privileges of hegemony, and power is tied more saliently to the aspects that adhere to hegemonic standards.

## 6. Conclusion

*“Even now, here, I feel it. The stares, the judgement. And there’s nothing I can do to change it. Yet, I’m still here. No super serum, no blond hair, or blue eyes. The only power I have is that I believe we can do better.”*

*(The Falcon and The Winter Soldier, “One World, One People”)*

In the final episode of *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, Wilson gives his first speech as Captain America. He openly acknowledges that his skin colour will antagonise some people, yet he decided to take up the mantle. Wilson’s speech encapsulates the discourse that has been dominant in discussing masculinities in the superhero film genre, as evidenced in the beginning of this thesis. The expectations of hegemonic values have been produced and reproduced in the superhero genre, year after year. However, Wilson becoming Captain America suggests that those values will be reshaped – eventually.

The aim of this thesis was to examine the masculinities in Marvel Studios’ Captain America-franchise, namely in the 2011 film *Captain America: The First Avenger* and the 2021 series *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*. Utilizing theories on men and masculinities and the concepts of hegemony and ideology, the aim was to gain insight into whether the most valued aspects of masculinity have changed or stayed the same within the Captain America franchise in the Marvel Cinematic Universe over the course of a decade. Additionally, the interest was in the way these messages about gender are communicated. This thesis continued on the topic of my bachelor’s thesis, which focused on the construction of Steve Rogers’ masculinity in *Captain America: The First Avenger*. The premise was that often the assumption about gender representations is that they will become more inclusive and non-normative as time goes on, which would suggest in correlation that the representations of masculinities have changed and developed from *The First Avenger* to *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*. Marvel’s representation of men has been critiqued for adhering to White and Western standards, which at first glance seems to have shifted towards a more inclusive one as the men’s vulnerabilities are displayed in more detail and Wilson, a Black man, becomes Captain America at the end of the 2021 series. However, the analysis of the materials showed that much of the aspects valued in the construction of masculinities have stayed the same, while some have indeed changed and evolved in the course of a decade.



Masculinity was established as an unfixed concept which is always culturally bound and time-specific, and as a result, the contexts of the materials affected the representations of masculinities. *Captain America: The First Avenger* being set in the 1940s during the Second World War allowed for representations of more traditional and essentialist values and images regarding gender. In turn, *The Falcon* and *The Winter Soldier* clearly adapted more modern themes into the series, and thus representations of gender varied from the film. However, in both materials, the most valued form of masculinity was military masculinity. As evidenced by the arguments made by both Çoban (2018) and Reeser (2010), both hegemony and masculinity are concepts that can be interpreted as ideologies – a set of beliefs and ways of living life that are often taken for granted. These ideologies are communicated through discourse, and some become more dominant than others. Thus, Marvel’s dominant ideology revolved around the military form of masculinity as the most valued, to which others were compared.

After defining the concepts of essentialist and constructivist approaches to gender, the analysis of masculinities and its communication in *The First Avenger* and *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier* began with focusing on how the essentialist approach to gender was visible in the materials. The essentialist view sees gender as tied to the biological sex, believing that males embody masculinity while females embody femininity. In the essentialist view, an ideal male body should be impenetrable by traits associated with femininity and exemplify the culturally and currently most valued masculine traits. This was the starting point of the analysis of the Marvel materials and consequently, the root of the issue for Steve Rogers in *The First Avenger*. Due to the context of war in the film, the military male body was the ideal male body, and was able to do masculine acts which further emphasized the biological ‘destiny’ of gender. Rogers was the opposite of this hegemonic ideal in *The First Avenger*, and his body stood out among the ideal military male bodies in a way that effeminized him, making his masculinity subordinate. Before the transformation with the super soldier serum, essentially thinking, he was perceived as a woman, which complicated Rogers’ status as a man. His best friend Barnes, in turn, was a perfect example of the ideal man: a ladies’ man and proudly serving America as a Sergeant. This comparison further highlighted Rogers’ inferiority. After the transformation with the serum, Rogers became physically ideal as well, a hypermasculine man and the exact opposite of what he was before. Rogers’ status became better because of this transformation, which suggested that the more you adhered to hegemonic masculinity, the more beneficial it was. Additionally, his

hegemonic masculinity was reinforced by his heterosexual ‘success’ with women, which was unattainable to him before.

Similar aspects of masculinity seemed to be valued ten years later, in *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*. Barnes, Wilson, and Walker had strong military backgrounds, which shaped their masculinities. Their masculinities were reaffirmed by their ideal bodies, which were displayed as able to perform tasks that required strength and agility. Additionally, their muscularity was highlighted, though they were not as excessive as Rogers’ super soldier body. However, though neither petite nor sickly, a deeper inspection showed that the men’s corporality was a source of anxiety at times, especially for Wilson and Barnes. Wilson’s race, and Barnes’ amputated body as well as his past as an assassin affected the men, as they were not fully able to adhere to the hegemonic standards of White, whole, and virile. Walker was the one who initially best adhered to hegemony, though his demeanour began to shift as the series progressed, which revealed that attempts to follow the standard took its toll on seemingly hegemonic masculinity as well. Heterosexuality was also emphasized in the series, though the aspect of romance was not in the forefront: there was no specific romantic tension as there was between Rogers and Carter in the film. Furthermore, heteronormativity in both materials functioned more as a protection against any assumption of male-male erotic desire, which would have taken away the power of hegemony as heteronormative. Similar to *The First Avenger*, patriotism was still highlighted as one of the markers of hegemonic masculinity in *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, though Bradley’s experiences showed that patriotism was only reserved for certain type of male bodies.

As evidenced, already while examining the essentialist approach to gender in the materials, its efficacy began to crack. Many aspects of the men’s masculinities could not be explained simply with the argument of biology, but rather, there appeared to be more than one way of being masculine. The constructivist approach to gender suggests that masculinity and femininity bleed into each other in a constant movement, constructed socially in relational practices. Examining the constructivist approach in the materials began with looking at feminine masculinities, women that strongly exhibited masculine traits and thus challenged the hegemonic view of masculinity. Both *The First Avenger* and *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier* had female characters who were very masculine. In *The First Avenger*, Peggy Carter’s masculinity was reinforced as more hegemonic than Rogers’ masculinity prior to his transformation. However, to ease anxieties about masculinity in a female body, there were aspects that reminded the viewer of Carter’s femininity. Ultimately, this showed that despite

Peggy Carter's masculine traits, she mostly functioned to reaffirm Rogers' hegemonic masculinity. An excess of masculinity, especially in a biologically female body, was thus avoided to keep the status quo about masculinity. In the series, Sharon Carter's masculine traits assisted her in achieving a position of power in the criminal underworld, which supported the claim that being masculine is desirable and beneficial. Both Peggy and Sharon Carter's stories showed that masculine traits were more valued than feminine ones, though at the same time, women were expected to exhibit more feminine traits than masculine ones. They challenged the hegemonic view of masculinity while simultaneously reinforcing its power, creating a safe balance for the continual movement of gender. Similarly, feminine traits in male characters were regarded as undesirable and something to expel from within themselves. The femininity in a male body was only understood relationally, in comparison to other masculinities. The standard was set by hegemonic masculinity, to which other masculinities were compared to, and which defined effeminacy for those who could not meet the standard. In *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, the Dora Milaje's masculinities were held in higher regard than Walker's, who was defeated by the group of women. This reinforced the idea of gender as a social construct, created in relational processes with other forms of masculinities and femininities.

The greatest shifts in masculinities and their constructions between *The First Avenger* and *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier* were visible in the introduction of parental masculinity, the intersection of race-masculinity, and the emotions and vulnerability of men. Firstly, Wilson's parental role in the series was a representation of a new type of masculinity in the Captain America franchise. However, this representation exhibited many traits associated with traditional and essentialist parental masculinity; while being a 'family man' was new and displayed the more vulnerable side of caring masculinity, Wilson was simultaneously mentally and physically absent and prone to take up the 'masculine' role in the family. Secondly, intersections of race and masculinity were visible in the series as Wilson and Bradley, both Black men, had encountered and continued to encounter racism. Due to their race, their masculinities were marginalized, and the men were treated poorly especially by authorities. Additionally, the other characters' attitudes towards Black masculinities displayed associations of violence and beasts; this supported Dyer's (1997) claim that Blackness is often marked and treated as an abnormality in contrast to Whiteness. Ultimately, Wilson addressed the hate and oppression while simultaneously embracing his new identity as Captain America. The racial stereotyping and the 'naturalization' of Whiteness from *The*

*First Avenger* changed into a discourse that questioned it. Moreover, the TV series showed a Black man becoming a protagonist and a representation of America, instead of being a racially stereotyped sidekick that functions only to support the White masculine identity.

Lastly, the construction of masculinities especially in the series was heavily affected by emotions and expressing vulnerabilities. Though constructivist in the sense that the men's masculinities adorn various aspects of the gender continuum, vulnerable and thus 'feminine' emotions were still treated as undesirable when they existed in a male body. As the material showed, emotions like shame, guilt, and regret, were hidden. To adhere to standards of hegemonic masculinity, the men had to stifle their emotionality or find other, more acceptable outlets for those emotions; for instance, hostility towards other men was seen a more desirable way to express oneself. Showing vulnerability took away the power associated with masculinity and thus suggested that men's vulnerability in the Marvel universe affected masculinity's privilege negatively. This bridged the discussion to how anger was not considered an emotion in the context of masculinity. Instead, anger was treated as an acceptable expression which had consequences only in very extreme cases: Walker's revenge of Hoskins' death resulted in his other-than-honourable discharge. Otherwise, anger was only a driving force in the men's actions in both materials and regarded as a part of masculinity: thus, anger garnered reactions only when it turned into an excessively violent act towards the wrong person.

The analysis ended on examining the processes of being seen by others and the vulnerabilities it may cause. Both Walker and Wilson had to come to terms with the aspect of being perceived and truly seen, both as themselves and as Captain America. These processes were connected to homosociality and wanting acceptance from others. As the analysis showed, especially Walker was wholly unaware of how his own actions contributed to others seeing and treating him, and he expected respect from others solely based on his status as Captain America. In contrast, Wilson and Barnes' therapy session displayed the uncomfortable feelings that rose when they were truly seen, on display for the others to look at. Being seen and being vulnerable caused, again, an aggravated reaction especially in Wilson. However, in the culmination of the series, the men needed to relinquish the pride which had been an essential part of their masculinities, and somewhat in accordance with hegemonic masculinity. Letting go of pride and thus, an aspect of the hegemonic standard, led the men on the path of accepting who they are. While the men come to terms with not being representations of hypermasculinity, this ending also suggests, quite idealistically, that in the

Marvel universe anyone can be a hero without having to sacrifice everything. While Rogers made the ultimate sacrifice of dying for America, undying commitment to patriotism was no longer as relevant to masculinity in the series. After saving New York, the men were allowed to continue their lives and find ways to cope with their experiences. Additionally, Wilson highlighted the possibility of non-White heroes representing America in stars and stripes.

In conclusion, the inspection of both *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) and *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier* (2021) showed that while there have been shifts in representations of masculinities over the decade, many aspects have stayed the same. The construction of masculinities in the materials was nuanced in both cases, and the processes and aspects that have stayed the same between the two materials can be categorised as follows: military body as the ideal male body, masculine action as valued, homosociality and proving one's manhood to others, avoiding effeminacy, heterosexuality, and emotional withdrawal. As evidenced by the analysis, these were regarded in the materials as valuable to the construction of masculinities, though some struggles and ambivalences existed within these categories. In turn, the factors that had changed over the decade included the representation of female masculinities, nurturing roles, race-masculinity, and addressing the male vulnerabilities. *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier* (2021) allowed for a more intersectional understanding of masculinity, considering a person as a sum of their parts which were affected by their socio-political environment, not simply their biology. However, in terms of hegemonic values, the representations of masculinity in the series were not particularly different from the film. Though nuanced and ambivalent, all masculinities in the TV series adhered to hegemonic standards, similar to those in *The First Avenger*.

Thus, while the values and ideologies of the Western world may have developed and an intersectional approach is valued, their effect on the discourse and ideologies propagated in media is superficial as of yet. Though *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier* presents alternative ways of being masculine, the hegemonic discourses about masculinity are thus slow to change. The messages about masculinity did not change significantly during the TV series, and Wilson's speech at the end suggests that reshaping those discourses will take more time.

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