Always Rooting for the Anti-Hero:
A Mixed-Method Social Media Analysis
of Inter-Fandom Discourse in Response
to the Phase 4 Diversity Initiative
in the Marvel Cinematic Universe

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This study investigates the impact of Marvel Studios' Phase 4 diversity initiative on fan interactions and inter-fandom discourse on social media through a mixed-methods textual analysis of Twitter conversations in response to recent films in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). The qualitative analysis revealed three key themes: *Representation as a Reflection of Self-Identity*, Absolutism with Diversity, and *The Myth of Closure*. Subsequently, the sub-themes further identified four types of diversity-related conversations: *Promoting*, *Praising*, *Defending*, and *Criticizing* diversity. The quantitative analysis demonstrates a substantial increase in inter-fandom conflicts, particularly in discussions defending or criticizing diversity, within Phase 4 of the MCU. This research establishes a framework to investigate the challenges of integrating diversity in major franchises while navigating the expectations of existing fans. It underscores the evolving dynamics of fandom in an era where inclusivity is a central aspect of storytelling.

Keywords: *Social Identity, Collective Identity, Marvel, MCU, Film and Television, Textual Analysis, Twitter*

O ver the last 15 years, Marvel Studios has revolutionized the film industry through its innovative franchise model that produces 2-3 movies/year across interconnected phases of serialized storytelling – all while consistently earning box office success and critical acclaim (Harrison et al., 2019). However, this incredible feat was not accomplished without criticism, particularly regarding the franchise's lack of diversity across its first three phases (i.e., the first 22 movies in the franchise). Advocates for progressive representation in blockbuster media note that the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) did not include a project without a white

male lead or co-lead until 2018's Black Panther – the 18th film in the franchise (Brown, 2021). In response to this feedback, Marvel Studios President Kevin Feige has pledged to take extraordinary steps to be more inclusive – resulting in what we refer to as the Phase 4 diversity initiative (Barnes, 2019; Huver, 2019; McMillan, 2016).

While Marvel Studios did make significant strides in gender and racial diversity through recent MCU projects, these changes also created divisions within the fanbase, pitting proponents of these inclusive changes against those who resist them. There is currently little to no empirical understanding of how these changes have affected the inter-fandom discourse across recent MCU projects beyond the loud and polarizing voices that appear to dominate social media. Thus, we adopt a mixed methodological approach, conducting content analysis of social media conversations through the lens of social and collective identity theory, aiming to bridge the research gap and enhance our understanding of diversity and inclusion perceptions within blockbuster movie franchises.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview of Diversity and Inclusion

Academic research on diversity and inclusion typically contains two primary conceptualizations: the color-blind model and the multiculturalism model. The color-blind framework endorses the equal treatment of individuals by ignoring race and ethnicity as a variable entirely (Barret & George, 2005; Ryan et al., 2007). While the model was intended to promote racial equality and end prejudicial treatment of Black Americans in the wake of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, many have noted that the color-blind model incorrectly assumes that everyone is equally capable and willing to ignore race as a factor when traversing their daily lives (T. Ito & Urland, 2003; Norton et al., 2006). In contrast, the multiculturalism model (also known as the color-conscious model) focuses on embracing racial and ethnic diversity by educating people on their differences rather than ignoring them (Barret & George, 2005; Ryan et al., 2007). The multiculturalism model has become the basis for the diversity and inclusion initiatives that have been implemented across many organizations, including Marvel Studios (Brown, 2021)

Although "diversity" generally refers to the balance of all racial, ethnic, and cultural perspectives within an organization, many people recontextualize the term as the conscious inclusion of demographics that deviate from the established cultural norm – which, in the context of American culture, typically pertains to straight white men (Plaut et al., 2011). In discussing the infusion of diversity into the MCU, Feige explicitly refers to creating additional content featuring female and non-white leading characters (Brown, 2021; Donnelly, 2021; Sharf, 2020). Therefore, for the purposes of this article, the term diversity refers to the conscious deviation from projects exclusively led by white men.

Diversity in Film. The last two decades have seen a significant upsurge in diversity and representation standards in movies, television, and other forms of entertainment media. However, despite the steady growth in on-screen representation across all demographics in the last few decades (Aumer et al., 2017; King et al., 2021), recent social movements have brought to light systemic issues that continue to plague the film industry. During the 2015 and 2016 awards seasons, advocates for progressive diversity launched the viral social media campaign #OscarsSoWhite, which drew attention to the striking absence of racial diversity among Academy Award nominees (Anderson, 2016; Chattoo, 2018). This movement catalyzed public awareness of the institutionalized problems that persist within these organizational structures that continue to favor the work of white men.

One persistent obstacle for inclusivity across Hollywood is the long history of whitewashing, which is the process of reappropriating the iconography, culture, and characters of another culture in order to centralize white racial identity in the public eye (Gabriel, 1998). In the filmmaking context, whitewashing typically refers to the casting of a white person in a role better suited for a person of color – a tradition that continues to hinder progressive diversity across blockbuster franchises (Zhang, 2017). In response to public backlash on social media, many major studios are making explicit efforts to combat whitewashing and the overall lack of stories with people of color in leading roles. For example, movie studios often engage in a process known as "race-bending" or "gender-bending," which involves transforming the racial or gender identity of an established character (Brown, 2021; Haner, 2015). In principle, race and gender-bending are the

opposite of whitewashing, aiming to introduce new diversity to a franchise rather than remove it (N'Duka, 2019). However, bending a character's identity can trigger negative reactions from opponents who either (a) oppose any overt diversification attempts or (b) object to the repurposing of established characters to boost diversity.

The resistance to inclusive societal changes that challenge the established norm of traditional social constructs is part of a broader right-wing political movement known as "culture wars" (Hunter, 1991). This movement commonly targets movies that gender-bend franchises originally led by male characters (Brown, 2021). Specific to the context of the MCU, the divisive reaction to the Phase 4 diversity initiative is partly the result of review bombing, which is a common culture war publicity stunt where politically motivated groups spam review aggregation sites with negative reviews in an attempt to lower the audience score artificially (Tassi, 2022). Review bombers use this tactic as a performative political statement to signal their dissatisfaction with a new direction for a popular franchise. In order to understand the origins of cultural war rhetoric against gender and racial inclusivity in the MCU, we must first understand the history of Marvel Comics and its foundational connection to progressive social movements.

Diversity and Social Change in the Superhero Comic Books. Although diversity among leading characters was limited in the early days of Marvel Comics, comic books have long been a medium for political commentary and promoting social change. In 1941, Jewish comic book writers Joe Simon and Jack Kirby created Captain America to protest against Nazi ideology during World War II, establishing the character as a symbol against antisemitism for Jewish Americans (Weinstein, 2011). The diversity standards in the comic book industry underwent a significant shift in 1963 with the introduction of Black Panther as the first mainstream black superhero in comic books (Brown, 2021). Although more diverse characters did exist in the early days of comics, the characters created to represent diverse demographics were either (a) riddled with negative stereotypes or (b) relegated to a "side-kick" rather than a main protagonist (Brown, 2021).

Early comic book stories featuring Asian representation, such as The Hands of Shang-Chi: Master of Kung Fu in 1974, consisted of cultural caricatures where the characters were drawn with stereotypical orange/yellow skin, and the antagonists were

modeled off of Genghis Khan and sumo wrestlers (R. Ito, 2021). In other stories, such as Iron Fist, a white male leading character appropriates the power of another culture and becomes their designated protector – a common trope in entertainment media known as a white savior narrative (Brown, 2021). However, despite their problematic origins, recent MCU adaptations have modernized these characters for today's culturally savvy audience standards – leading to positive feedback from both professional critics and fans (R. Ito, 2021).

In a more recent effort to promote diversity and inclusion, Marvel Comics created new characters to represent other minority groups that were largely ignored during the Golden and Silver Age of Comics (Itzkoff, 2022). However, many of these characters follow a trend of utilizing an established character's iconography to introduce a new, more diverse character to the franchise (Brown, 2021). For example, Miles Morales was created by Marvel Comics in 2011 as an Afro-Latino variant of Spider-Man that would take over the title after the death of Peter Parker (the original Spider-Man). Other characters – such as Sam Wilson (Captain America) and Kamala Khan (Ms. Marvel) – were created under similar contexts in an effort to diversify Marvel Comics – and later the MCU – across a spectrum of gender, ethnic, and cultural perspectives (Brown, 2021). This trend offers a diverse range of fans the opportunity to connect with a popular character in a manner that more accurately mirrors their self-identity; however, others argue that creating original characters allows for more authentic representation than spin-offs that rely on the iconography of an established character or franchise.

An individual's social identity is an essential factor in how they interpret and relate to fictional characters in entertainment media. However, understanding the interaction between the self-identity of an individual and the collective identity of a group provides essential context for how individuals within a fandom are motivated to support or oppose inclusive changes to an established franchise like the MCU. Accordingly, we frame this study through the lens of both social and collective identity theory to better understand this complex phenomenon.

Social Identity, Collective Identity, and Fandom

Social identification is a psychological process that involves organizing one's sense of self into a group that influences decisions, attitudes, and behaviors (Markus, 1977; Winterich et al., 2009). Social identity theory (SIT) explores how people form and process these identities, specifically in terms of in-group and out-group dynamics (Davis et al., 2019; Hogg, 2016; Hogg & Ridgeway, 2003; Turner et al., 1987). In-groups refer to social groups that a person personally identifies with or relates to, whereas out-groups are those with which a person does not identify or relate (Winterich et al., 2009). Common social identity groups (i.e., race, gender, and ideology) are critical predictors of human behavior across various aspects of life. Several studies have shown that individuals are more likely to support social causes related to their in-group identity than an out-group identity (Dovidio, 1984; Flippen et al., 1996; Platow et al., 1999). However, even individuals who share in-group identities can vary greatly in their perceived importance of that identity.

In this context, perceived importance refers to the varying levels of self-prescribed importance of one's social identity to one's sense of self (Forehand et al., 2002). For example, individuals who identify as female may prescribe different levels of importance to their gender identity when developing their attitudes and behavior (Bem, 1981). These differences often result from intersectionality within social groups, where one may place another social identity at a higher level of importance than the shared identity (Kurian, 2011). The intersection of social identities within an in-group sometimes creates a disconnect in attitudes toward out-groups (Brewer, 2001). These intersecting identities also contribute to one's unique sense of self that forms one's collective identity.

Collective identity theory (CIT), a branch of SIT, investigates the interplay of intersecting social identities as it relates to shared activism causes (Brewer, 2001; Polletta & Jasper, 2001). In-group cohesion is emphasized in CIT as it unites individuals behind a social cause that benefits the entire group (Polletta & Jasper, 2001). Although SIT and CIT are closely related, the main difference is that SIT focuses on the individualist motivations of self-identity, while CIT focuses on collectivist motivations (Davis et al., 2019; Polletta & Jasper, 2001). Both individual and collective social identities can influence social behaviors, including the consumption of entertainment media.

Social identities are not just limited to race, gender, or political ideology; they can also be defined by personal interests. The term fandom describes a collective social identity that encompasses an individual's interest in a particular entertainment media franchise or artist (Jenkins, 2018). From the perspective of SIT and CIT, the term fan would refer to an individual who identifies themselves based on their interest in certain media (SIT), whereas fandom would refer to the collective identity (CIT) that unites individual fans under a common goal: the promotion and longevity of the franchise or artist (Jenkins, 2018; Riddick, 2022). However, it is important to note that even within a fandom, there can be sub-fandoms with conflicting ideas about the cultural identity of the franchise – leading to differences in how fans express their ideal vision for the future of the franchise (Forehand et al., 2002; Kurian, 2011).

Fans and sub-fandoms of color have thrived in fandoms devoid of diversity by connecting through social events and movements that promote diversity in the primary franchise through fan-made content (Florini, 2019; Kosnik & Carrington, 2019; Riddick, 2022). These sub-fandoms welcome diversity initiatives in their favorite franchises; however, other sub-fandoms are more interested in preserving the on-screen identity of the movies and characters as they have always existed. This duality leads to inter-fandom conflict due to people's natural inclination to support and defend cultural products that align with their self-identities (Winterich et al., 2009). In order to gain deeper insights into this phenomenon, we conduct a mixed-methods analysis to identify these specific sub-groups within the MCU fandom based on the different ways they engage with the franchise on social media.

Research Question

One significant aspect of our research explores whether the addition of diversity is received differently depending on the context in which it is introduced. Specifically, we examine the differences in fan discussions of diversity when introduced through sequels to existing franchises versus through new franchises. To accomplish this, we produced two exploratory research questions:

> **RQ1:** How did the Phase 4 diversity initiative change how MCU fans interact with these movies on social media?

RQ2: What is the difference between how fans discuss the MCU when discussing added diversity in existing franchises (Phase 4: Sequels) vs. introducing diversity through new franchises (Phase 4: Originals)?

The first part of our study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the relationship between diversity, social identity, and fandom in the context of the MCU by examining these research questions through qualitative analysis.

For the second part of our study, we quantitatively test the research questions outlined above by proposing two testable hypotheses. First, we predict that the introduction of more diverse characters and storylines in Phase 4 of the MCU will lead to an increase in diversity-related conversations and anti-diversity sentiment on social media:

H1: Phase 4 movies (both sequels and originals) will see an increase in (a) the frequency of diversity-related conversations and (b) anti-diversity sentiment surrounding the movies.

We also predict that the introduction of diverse characters through existing sub-franchises (i.e., sequels) will elicit more negative reactions from fans than the introduction of diversity in original sub-franchises (i.e., spin-offs). By comparing the reactions to diversity in sequels and originals, we aim to gain a better understanding of how fans respond to diversity in different contexts within the MCU:

H2: Phase 4: Sequels will feature (a) less frequent diversity conversations yet (b) more negative reactions to diversity than Phase 4: Originals.

METHODS

This study employs a mixed-methodological approach that utilizes critical discourse analysis to examine social media conversations about MCU movies before and after the Phase 4 diversity initiative. We opted to use Twitter[1] data because (a) other social media platforms have more restrictive APIs for academic researchers, making it difficult to ensure that a random sample would be generalizable to the larger population, and (b) Twitter has shown to be a prominent platform for inter-fandom conversations – including MCU discourse (Babcock et al., 2020). Additionally, we gathered data from the opening weekends of MCU films within the United States to specifically target two groups of fans:

(1) dedicated MCU enthusiasts who promptly see the movies upon release and post about them on social media and (2) casual fans who may not catch every movie on its opening weekend but do attend certain openings for special reasons. This approach enables us to encompass the sentiments of both passionate and moderate members of the MCU fandom.

Sample and Procedure

We applied a quasi-experimental structure for the sample selection, with *Phase 3* movies serving as the control/pretest group and *Phase 4* movies serving as the treatment/posttest group. *Phase 4* movies were further divided into *Phase 4: Sequels* and *Phase 4: Originals* in order to assess the difference in response to adding diversity into existing franchises versus creating new franchises. To construct our sample, we selected three movies from each subgroup – nine movies in total. Custom search queries were created for each movie using keywords such as the movie title (e.g., "*Black Panther*"), common hashtags for the specific movie (e.g., "#BlackPanther"), and keywords and hashtags applicable to every movie (e.g., "Marvel Cinematic Universe"). We extracted the tweets using Sprinklr, a social media monitoring tool.

When selecting movies to represent *Phase 3* and *Phase 4: Sequels* in the sample, we selected films that received a sequel during the *Phase 4* MCU diversity initiative. This enhances the comparative power in the analysis because we can measure change between installments in the same series [ex., *Thor: Ragnarok* (*Phase 3*) vs. *Thor: Love and Thunder* (*Phase 4: Sequels*)]. *Phase 4: Originals* were selected based on whether it was a new property in *Phase 4* (i.e., not a sequel). Based on this sampling criteria, we selected the following movies: (*Phase 3*) *Doctor Strange*, *Thor Ragnarok,* and *Black Panther*; (*Phase 4: Sequels*) *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness, Thor: Love and Thunder,* and *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*; and (*Phase 4: Originals*) *Black Widow, Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings,* and *Eternals.*

Subsequently, we extracted a stratified random sample of 200 tweets for each movie (N = 1,800) from the opening weekend of its theatrical release (Friday - Sunday). After manually filtering each tweet based on subject relevance, the usable sample was reduced (N = 1,146). These tweets were coded for dependent variables such as themes, sentiment, diversity reference, and diversity sentiment, along with identifying variables such as film

title, *Phase*, and *Phase Group* (*Sequel/Original*). We only used publicly available Twitter data in this data set. However, in order to further protect the privacy of the users in the sample, we took extra precautions to ensure that all identifying information was redacted from the data set. Furthermore, in order to protect the author's privacy, the examples quoted in the qualitative analysis are not traditionally cited, but they are all available to review in the full data set. Although publicly available Twitter data is cleared for use in academic research, we took these extra precautions because our sample is extracted from regular individuals (i.e., fans) rather than public figures.

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

For the qualitative analysis, we utilized an iterative thematic analysis modified from Braun & Clarke (2006) to manually identify common codes in the data set and categorize similarities into various primary themes and sub-themes. To identify these themes, both researchers followed six sequential steps: (1) familiarize ourselves with the data, (2) generate initial codes, (3) identify themes, (4) review themes, (5) define and name themes, and (6) locate examples (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, we coded each tweet based on whether it was related to diversity/inclusion on any level. Next, we developed initial codes based on the content of the tweets, and we conducted a subsequent review to identify common themes. Then, we compared our findings to generate one unified coding scheme based on both of our observations. We funneled our combined thematic categories and subcategories into a coding scheme and applied it to all tweets in the data set.

Our manual coding revealed that 13.26% of all tweets in the sample were related to diversity/inclusion ($N = 152$). We identified three primary themes in the data: (1) *Representation as a Reflection of Self-Identity*, (2) *Absolutism with Diversity,* and (3) *The Myth of Closure.* Additionally, we identified various sub-themes to further contextualize the theme and its link to inter-fandom conflict. The following section discusses each theme in detail, accompanied by relevant examples from the data set to demonstrate the essence of each sub-theme.

Representation as a Reflection of Self-Identity

The importance of diverse representation can be linked to the concept of self-identity. The way individuals see themselves and identify with certain characteristics or traits can have a significant impact on their sense of self-worth, confidence, and overall well-being. When individuals from marginalized groups see characters that reflect their experiences, struggles, and triumphs, they are more likely to express positive validation from diverse representation:

- "I just got done watching *Black Panther* and y'all. I'm literally crying. We've come so far as a people, and I am so grateful to be living in this era of #BlackExcellence"

- "Love that *Black Panther* [*Wakanda Forever*] really out here repping Indigenous Mexicans like for once in American media do I feel noticed… this is a win for the indigenous community."

- "Yall representation Really does matter. I'm in the theater to watch @Eternals and I have NEVER [seen] so many people of Indian Nationality in the theater, and it's overwhelmingly clear it's because of Kumail Nanjiani's representation as a Superhero! #WellLoveToSeeIt #Eternals"

This validation can lead to increased feelings of self-worth and can help individuals feel more confident in expressing their identity. Therefore, representation in media, including the MCU, can be viewed as a reflection of self-identity and can have a profound impact on how individuals perceive themselves and their place in society. This theme was primarily seen in conversations around MCU films with historically underrepresented groups in leading roles, such as that of *Black Panther*, *Shang-Chi*, and *Eternals*. The films showcased people of color at the forefront of and provided audiences with a sense of connection to types of characters that were previously unavailable or underrepresented in media.

While those who positively identified with diverse characters often expressed *praise* for the MCU's early diversity milestones (*Phase 3*), later milestones (*Phase 4*) led to a noticeable increase in *defensiveness* directed against critics of the diversity efforts. These fans typically invoke relevant social context in an attempt to defend diversity efforts from individuals who seek to derail these progressive developments in the MCU. In some cases,

these fans did not appear to separate legitimate criticism and bad-faith criticism (i.e., criticism with a negative bias):

- "China banning *Black Panther* from release is no surprise. They don't like us. Look at how they tried to put a helmet on Hawkman on the posters. They love Kobe (rip) but us…"

- "Not going to listen to *Black Widow* reviews because people have the innate reaction of tearing down female-led movies for no reason. #BlackWidow"

Although they were a minority of the defensive group, these fans perceive any criticism of characters that they personally identify with as an attack on progressive diversity efforts overall. In the wake of the *Phase 4* diversity initiative, some fans who dislike the new direction of the MCU defended their position by insisting that their opinions are formed by the perceived quality of the movie itself rather than the representation it provides:

- "I can disagree with an opinion on a movie all day. Here, critics giving *Eternals* bad reviews are basically being accused of sexism. That's not an opinion, that's an accusation."

- "Idk but to me the trailer didn't make the movie look good so I just don't think I'm gonna pay to see it in theaters, there's so many things I think about this movie and how it's not appealing to me personally and it has nothing to do with the diversity or filmmakers."

- "The representation aspect is huge and I'm ill-equipped to discuss it, but there's the trust Marvel has built as well."

While we cannot determine if diversity efforts negatively influence this group's perception of quality, we can confirm that diversity and representation does not enhance their connection with the MCU if (a) it does not reflect their self-identity or (b) they identify more with the original status quo of the MCU.

Absolutism with Diversity

The analysis also uncovered that the MCU fanbase tends to construct a collective identity around their engagement with the franchise. The MCU serves as a source of belonging and connection, and for many fans, it represents a significant aspect of their self-identity. As a result, any deviation from the traditional norms and values associated with

the franchise can be perceived as a threat to their identity. We refer to these individuals as absolutists – those who strongly adhere to and defend the traditional elements of the MCU. These absolutists tend to be less open to change and less receptive to the introduction of new characters, storylines, or concepts that challenge their preconceived notions of what the MCU should be. Additionally, these individuals expressed conservative social values consistent with culture wars rhetoric by describing diversity efforts as "woke." They are often vocal in their resistance to such changes, and their actions can lead to tensions and conflicts within the fan community:

- "Is the new *Black Panther* [*Wakanda Forever*] actually good or are yall giving them minority extra credit like the last one?"
- "I am sure they [critics] scored down love and thunder because it wasn't as woke as they wanted it to be."
- "Ion why Marvel wanna integrate the gay s**t in their movies lmao I was very uncomfortable watching those n****s kiss"

The results also suggest that the absolutists are particularly invested in the franchise and often have a strong emotional attachment to its characters and mythology. For these fans, any changes or perceived threats to the core tenets of the franchise are not only a critique of the content itself but also an attack on their sense of identity and belonging within the fan community. Therefore, absolutists are often resistant to any attempts at diversification or broadening of the franchise's appeal. They tend to view any efforts to cater to a wider audience or to introduce more diverse characters and storylines as a dilution of the franchise's core identity:

- "Who the hell at Marvel Studios thought that fans would like THAT Taskmaster? At least Ben Kingsley's 'Mandarin' was funny. That was just depressing and disappointing. Tony Masters deserves a much, much better adaptation."
- "I liked *Black Panther* but they could of kept the black stereotypes and expanded the plot more #JustMyOpinion"

This absolutism can create tension within the fan community and lead to conflicts between those who advocate for more inclusivity and those who prioritize the franchise's traditional elements. This theme was most commonly seen as a reaction to gender diversification.

Female characters introduced in the MCU throughout Phase 3 and Phase 4 were often scrutinized, especially if they were gender-bent versions of male characters from the source material (ex. Taskmaster in *Black Widow*).

The Myth of Closure

The Myth of Closure is characterized by the belief that the replacement of original white male characters with diverse characters, such as women and people of color, jeopardizes the sanctity of the franchise's narrative arc. These fans view the original white male characters as central to the narrative and perceive the introduction of new, diverse characters as a deviation from the established storyline. As a result, these fans often assign blame for perceived narrative flaws to diverse characters or the Phase 4 diversity initiative overall:

- "You shouldn't have deleted Tony [Stark]. Wondering why people curse Taskmaster? Even if the Taskmaster came out as a woman, it wouldn't have gotten so big if it had come out as Tonnie Masters… You just f*****g ruined the character."

- "Once the Scarlet Witch revealed herself (which felt rushed) and told her narrative I was livid … but I had already noted insidious problems with Marvel's 'representation'"

This resistance to change stems from the belief that the inclusion of diverse characters represents a shift in the power dynamic, which poses a threat to their understanding of the MCU's narrative and their own personal identity. They expressed that this change negatively impacts their perceived quality of the franchise's narrative and their own connection to the original characters.

On the other hand, some fans view the inclusion of diverse characters as an opportunity to enrich the MCU's narrative and create new storylines. These fans see diversity as a way to add complexity and nuance to the characters and storylines, as well as reflect the real world's diversity:

- "Now instead of a 'dark world' You now have a bright, fun new corner of the MCU with a great and diverse cast. Especially @TessaThompson_x"

- "@Marvel thanks for rewriting that racist origin story for Shang-chi. Fiction can always be changed."

- "I have to say, Marvel did a MUCH better job than Disney in terms of using Asian mythologies and themes for #ShangChi"

Within the *Myth of Closure* theme, the difference between the pro-diversity and anti-diversity statements suggests that fans who are open to exploring new storylines and themes are more likely to embrace the MCU diversity initiative, while fans who prefer the original identity of the MCU are more likely to associate diversity with negative change to the identity of the franchise.

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

In developing a coding scheme for quantitative analysis, we defined four specific types of diversity-related conversations based on the primary themes and sub-themes identified in the qualitative analysis: (1) *Promoting Diversity* (campaigning for more/better diversity), (2) = *Praising Diversity* (showing approval or gratitude for current diversity efforts), (3) = *Defending Diversity* (combating anti-diversity sentiment), and (4) = *Criticizing Diversity* (showing disapproval or disdain for diversity efforts). We used the type of diversity conversations as our primary dependent variable to provide empirical context to the qualitative analysis and evaluate *RQ1* and *RQ2*. For the quantitative data set, one researcher manually coded the full sample, while the other coded a random subset of the sample ($N = 111$) to conduct a test for intercoder reliability. The results showed 92.2% agreement between coders and a statistically valid Cohen's Kappa, $k = .867$. The results were reviewed by a subset of researchers who had not authored the tweets in the dataset to ensure validity.

Measures

The quantitative analysis uses three primary dependent variables: *frequency of diversity-related conversations* (0 = Not diversity-related, 1 = Yes diversity-related), *diversity conversation sentiment* (1 = Anti-Diversity, 2 = Neutral, 3 = Pro-Diversity), and *type of diversity conversations* (1 = *Promoting Diversity*, 2 = *Praising Diversity*, 3 = *Defending Diversity*, 4 = *Criticizing Diversity*). To categorize the primary sample, the analysis for RQ1 and H1 uses a binary variable to represent *Phase* (0 = *Phase 3*, 1 = *Phase 4*), the analysis for RQ2 uses a trinary variable for *Phase Group* (0 = *Phase 3*, 1 = *Phase 4:*

Sequels, 2 = *Phase 4: Originals*), and the analysis for H2 excludes *Phase 3* from the calculations (1 = *Phase 4: Sequels*, 2 = *Phase 4: Originals*).

Upon further inspection of the data, we noticed that *Black Panther* (*Phase 3*) made up the bulk of the diversity-related conversations in the data set (27%). However, *Black Panther* is an outlier in *Phase 3* of the MCU (in terms of diversity), and its release was a unique cultural moment unlike any the MCU has seen before (Brown, 2021). To address this, we recoded a copy of each IV that excludes *Black Panther* – and its sequel, *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* – and used both versions of the IV for the analysis and reported the differences. This method allows us to analyze the overall change between *Phase 3* and *Phase 4* while also analyzing how diversity-related conversations shifted over time as diverse leading characters were integrated across the entire MCU.

Additionally, for the RQ2 analysis, if we conceptualize the independent variable as ordinal – which would set "*Phase 3*" as the lowest diversity level, "*Phase 4: Sequels*" as the middle diversity level, and "*Phase 4: Originals*" as the highest diversity level – we are able to perform correlation analyses to detect a potential linear relationship. We argue this conceptualization is appropriate in this case because introducing diversity through established sub-franchises is bound by the existing structure of the series, whereas introducing diversity through original projects creates a completely new space that is tailored to proper inclusion. For example, while *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* and *Thor Love and Thunder (Phase 4: Sequels)* both made explicit efforts to expand diversity and inclusion, the diversity can only be added through supporting characters because both of these projects have established white male leads. However, projects such as *Eternals* and *Shang-Chi* are completely original and can integrate diversity on all levels, including lead characters. We conducted both types of analyses (treating the IV as categorical and ordinal) and recorded the difference between the two.

Statistical Analysis

For RQ1, we used *Phase* as the primary IV. Firstly, we used a chi-square analysis to see if *Phase* had any impact on the frequency of diversity-related conversations within the general fan conversations. The initial analysis showed no significant differences in the frequency of diversity-related conversations between phases, $x^2(1, N = 1146) = .708$, $p =$

.400, which does not support H1a. However, when using the *Black Panther* filtered sample (i.e., excluding *Black Panther* and *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*), the analysis yielded a significant result showing that the frequency of diversity-related conversations increased in *Phase 4*, $x^2(1, N = 868) = 11.962$, $p < .001$, supporting H1a. The next analysis tested whether the sentiment of diversity-related conversations changed between phases. The results of a chi-square test showed no significant difference in the sentiment for diversity-related conversations for both the main sample, $x^2(2, N = 152) = 1.909$, $p = .385$, or the *Black Panther* filtered sample, $x^2(2, N = 79) = .611$, $p = .737$, which does not support H1b. Although the overall sentiment of diversity-related conversations did not appear to change, the results of a chi-square test showed a significant difference among the specific types of diversity-related conversations between phases, $x^2(3, N = 112) = 10.396$, $p = .015$. Specifically, there was a significant increase in *Defending Diversity* and *Criticizing Diversity* between *Phase 3* ($\% within_{DD} = 10.5\%$, $\% within_{CD} = 10.5\%$) and *Phase 4* ($\% within_{DD} = 29.7\%$, $\% within_{CD} = 23.0\%$). These results show that inter-fandom conflict (i.e., *Defending/Criticizing Diversity*) significantly increased in response to the Phase 4 diversity initiative (*Phase 3$_{Total}$* $= 21.0\% \rightarrow$ *Phase 4$_{Total}$* $= 52.7\%$).

For RQ2, the primary independent variable was expanded to differentiate the different groups of projects in *Phase 4*. We used a chi-square analysis to test if the different groups had any impact on the frequency of diversity-related conversations within the general fan conversations. Similar to the results for RQ1, there was no significant difference detected in the primary sample, $x^2(2, N = 1146) = .3.986$, $p = .136$; however, there was a significant difference when using the *Black Panther* filtered sample, $x^2(2, N = 868) = 11.962$, $p = .003$. Additionally, there was no significant correlation between group and frequency of diversity-related conversations in the primary sample, $r(1144) = -.005$, $p = .858$; however, there was a significant but weak correlation in the *Black Panther* filtered sample, showing original diversity leads to more diversity-related conversations, $r(866) = .101$, $p = .003$. For diversity sentiment, the results of a chi-square test showed no significant difference in the primary sample, $x^2(4, N = 152) = 6.504$, $p = .165$, and for the *Black Panther* filtered sample, $x^2(4, N = 79) = 4.325$, $p = .364$. However, when conceptualized as ordinal, the results of a correlation test revealed a significant but weak

negative correlation in the primary sample, $r(150) = -.174$, $p = .032$, and no significant correlation in the *Black Panther* filtered sample, $r(77) = -.015$, $p = .898$. For *type of diversity conversations*, a chi-square test showed significance for the primary sample, $x^2(6, N = 112) = 13.247$, $p = .039$, and the *Black Panther* filtered sample, $x^2(6, N = 61) = 13.306$, $p = .038$; however, both did not meet the assumption of expected cell counts of a chi-squared test. To address this issue and test H2, we excluded *Phase 3* from the independent variable to specifically test the relationship between *Phase 4: Sequels* (1) and *Phase 4: Originals* (2). The results of a series of chi-square tests showed no significant difference between *Sequels* and *Originals* when it comes to frequency of diversity conversations, $x^2(1, N = 752) = 3.156$, $p = .076$, diversity sentiment, $x^2(2, N = 104) = 4.319$, $p = .115$, or types of diversity conversations, $x^2(3, N = 74) = 3.064$, $p = .382$. These results do not support H2a or H2b.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

This study sought to understand how individual and collective identities shaped the inter-fandom discourse within the MCU fandom in response to the Phase 4 diversity initiative. The mixed-methods approach allowed us to delve deeper into the nuanced intersection of fandom and diversity and how it is expressed through social media discourse. The results present valuable insights into diversity and representation in media with various scholarly and practical applications. First, the results of our qualitative analysis demonstrated that blockbuster media, such as the MCU, does not just serve as entertainment; progressive representation in major franchises also serves as a reflection of self-identity for many fans. Diverse characters resonate with underrepresented audiences, leading to positive feelings of validation and empowerment. This result is in line with existing scholarship that highlights the profound impact of representation on individuals' self-worth and well-being, emphasizing the real-world significance of diverse media portrayals. After reviewing these findings, we assumed that the Phase 4 diversity initiative would generate more diversity related conversations (H1a) and more anti-diversity sentiment (H1b) across all MCU projects. However, the quantitative analysis disproved

both assumptions and showed that the difference between Phase 3 and Phase 4 conversations was not in *frequency* or *sentiment;* it was in the *type of conversations.*

These results expand the precedent set in the academic literature by showing that fans who positively identify with diverse characters generate three different types of conversations on social media. For Phase 3 movies, these individuals primarily focused their conversations either on advocating for better representation in the MCU (*Promoting Diversity*) or on expressing their happiness and gratitude for the diversity that they were seeing at the time (*Praising Diversity*). However, in response to the Phase 4 diversity initiative, there was a significant shift where these individuals used their platform to combat (*Defending Diversity*) other fans who criticized the progressive initiative (*Criticizing Diversity*). To expand the context of these results, although Phase 3 did feature some progressive diversity through projects like *Black Panther*, the MCU was still primarily centered around white male leading characters. It was only after the Phase 4 diversity initiative implemented inclusion across all MCU projects that these conversations shifted from *Praising Diversity* to *Defending Diversity*. This pattern suggests that the initial introduction of diversity generates positive feedback from the fandom; however, the long-term effort to integrate diversity across a franchise eventually attracts backlash from dissenting sub-groups.

Furthermore, our analysis uncovered distinct groups within the MCU, such as those who value progressive representation and those who perceive any deviation from the original identity of a franchise as an attack on the franchise as a whole. This duality sheds light on the evolving nature of fandom in an era where inclusivity is becoming increasingly central to franchise storytelling. These inter-fandom conflicts will likely become more pronounced and relevant as the MCU and other blockbuster franchises expand to include a broader range of characters and cultural perspectives. Our results offer fertile ground for future research in this area, as well as actionable insights for industry practitioners to implement progressive diversity into franchise films more organically and effectively.

Additionally, the interplay between fans and studios is a two-way relationship. Our study underscores the challenge of implementing diverse characters into the MCU and other major franchises. While representation is vital for many fans, there is a vocal

minority who resist change and value the traditional elements of the franchise. As such, major movie franchises should explore new options that balance the introduction of diversity with the support of existing fans and take a proactive approach to fend off outside influencers with bad faith intentions. Film studios can leverage the insights from this research to inform their creative decisions and strategic communication with the fanbase. Moreover, our findings emphasize the importance of expanding current scholarship about the shift in how online communities operate and how individual fans interact with entertainment media. As entertainment media continues to diversify and reflect an ever-changing cultural standard, understanding how fans interact with these changes on social media will remain an essential area of study. The MCU's success and its fanbase's varied reactions to the Phase 4 diversity initiative serve as a compelling case study for the evolving dynamics of inter-fandom engagement in the digital age.

Limitations and Future Research

Our study serves as a valuable foundation for future research into diversity in entertainment media and its interactions with inter-fandom conflict on social media. However, one limitation of using Twitter data is that we do not have access to demographic data for every participant. Twitter API provides the age and gender only for a small fraction of the participants, with no data indicating race or ethnicity. For future studies, using a different method to collect demographic data would provide essential insights into how different groups react to franchise diversity initiatives based on intersectional variables. Additionally, because our analysis only focuses on fans within the United States, there is significant room for expansion into international fandoms and the intercultural response to Hollywood diversity initiatives.

An inherent limitation of any qualitative analysis is that the data set relies on the subjective interpretations of human coders. Although the dataset was constructed from objective sampling techniques, we interpreted each tweet manually, leaving it vulnerable to subjectivity. We combatted this by strictly following best practices for qualitative textual analysis – including independent coding and cross-checking to ensure that interpretations were consistent. However, qualitative textual analysis of social media posts does not allow participants to elaborate on their tweets, which does not allow us to inquire about their

deeper motivations for participating in inter-fandom discourse. Future research can expand the data sources to include other social media platforms, forums, and interviews with fans for a more comprehensive and objective view. Still, the results of this study serve as a framework for expansion in order to synthesize a more robust understanding of inter-fandom conflicts in academic literature.

NOTES

[1] We use the term *Twitter* because we collected and analyzed the data before its July 2023 rebrand to *X.*

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