

Template for research proposal: Critical Report

This guide allows you to provide an outline of research motivations and objectives identifying key research to support a discussion on a specific research topic.

Note: you should apply the Harvard referencing conventions in all sections.

1. Research Objective and Question

A title's primary function is to define precisely and concisely the topic. A legitimate secondary function is to stimulate the reader's interest. Two-part titles are common: a main title to stimulate interest and somehow imaginatively 'encapsulate' the topic, and a subsidiary title to specify or focus the topic.

Power, Beauty, and the Marvel Gaze. How does Marvel's mise-en-scène reinforce patriarchal beauty standards and shape younger audiences' perception of femininity, sexuality, and power?

2. Project Rationale

Consider and explain why you wish to research the subject? A short introduction to the topic, why it is of interest, and why the research is worthwhile. Clarify the central question you are addressing, what will your argument, (your hypothesis) be? (Max 200 words)

It is undeniable that Marvel Studios, with the Marvel Cinematic Universe being the highest-grossing film franchise of all time (*The Numbers*, nd.), has become one of the most popular cultural producers for children and younger audiences. Those spectators' beliefs and value systems are easily influenced by media, as they often lack the ability to decipher reality from on-screen worlds. Hence, I find it concerning that Marvel's digital aesthetics and mise-en-scène continue to construct hyper-sexualized heroines, and reinforce patriarchal beauty standards instead of challenging them. I am interested in this topic as I find it important to analyze the impact of tools and techniques used by filmmakers and VFX artists on wider cultural narratives.

In my Critical Report, I will argue that Marvel restricts female representation and feminine heroism to what remains desirable under patriarchal forms, and that these visual conventions shape younger audiences' understanding of femininity as something tied to physical attractiveness or sexual availability. I will analyze the mise-en-scène in those films, including costume design, lighting, framing, props or digital augmentation. I believe that this research is worthwhile, because, as an emerging VFX artist, I aim to challenge harmful conventions and contribute to more inclusive and deliberate cinematography.

3. Keywords and keyword phrases used for research

Experiment with connecting key words and phrases relevant to your topic and research objectives on academic sites. You can optimise key words/phrase searching by reading around your topic.

Keywords and key phrases: **female superheroes, mise-en-scène, Marvel Cinematic Universe, hyper-sexualization, cinematic representation, young audiences, postfeminism, Marvel heroines**

4. Situate your proposal in relation to key texts, issues and debates.

Produce a draft review establishing and explaining the views of relevant authors and how they can support the presentation of your argument to answer the research question. Use Harvard referencing (Max 300 words)

In her book **Visual and Other Pleasures**, Laura Mulvey argues that mainstream cinema is shaped around the male gaze, positioning women as objects of visual pleasure (Mulvey, 1989). This puts female characters in an exhibitionist role and depicts them as visual spectacles for male pleasure, which is a framework clearly applicable to characters such as Marvel's Black Widow or Gamora. Their bodies are emphasized through tight, leather, shiny costumes, as well as camera framing and digital enhancement.

Carolyn Cocca, in **Superwomen: Gender, Power, and Representation**, analyzes the portrayal of female superheroes, providing insight into the continuously growing connection between empowerment and sexualization in postfeminist media. She notes that even the construction of the most powerful female superheroes conforms to patriarchal, heteronormative expectations instead of challenging them (Cocca, 2016).

Research on audience impact suggests that the unrealistic portrayals of women impact younger viewers' understanding on femininity, power, and sexuality. In their research paper **The Impact of Films On Teenagers: Influence On Behavior, Attitudes, And Development**, Agrawal and Mandal (2025) argue that film have a significant influence on youth, their value systems and perception of the world. In **Media, Gender, and Identity**, Gauntlett states that repeated exposure to hyper sexualized, stylized female characters informs socialisation processes, encouraging association of femininity with appearance, emotional labour, and sexual availability (Gauntlett, 2008).

5. Bibliography

List recognised academic books, journals and articles, that you may use to support the research you wish to undertake. This list should be referenced. Harvard Style – For guidance on how to reference correctly (using your UAL login) See appropriate examples on <https://www.citethemrightonline.com/>

Books:

- **Visual and Other Pleasures** by Laura Mulvey [Mulvey, L. (1989) *Visual and Other Pleasures*. 2nd edn. Palgrave Macmillan.]
- **Feminism** by Laura Mulvey and Anna Backman Rogers [Backman Rogers, A., Mulvey, L. (2015) *Feminism*. Amsterdam University Press.]
- **Superwomen: Gender, Power, and Representation** by Carolyn Cocca [Cocca, C. (2016) *Superwomen: Gender, Power, and Representation*. New York: Bloomsbury.]

Articles / Journals:

- **Black Widow: Underestimating and Hypersexualizing Women in the Marvel Universe** [Thomas, P. (2021) 'Black Widow: Underestimating and Hypersexualizing Women in the Marvel Universe' *Medium*, 11 September. Available at: <https://plthomasedd.medium.com/black-widow-underestimating-and-hypersexualizing-women-in-the-marvel-universe-156cd7a49892> (Accessed: 15 November 2025).
- **Hot, Black Leather, Whip: The (De)evolution of Female Protagonists in Action Cinema, 1960-2014** [Heldman, C., Frankel, L. L., and Holmes, J. (2016) 'Hot, Black Leather, Whip: The (De)evolution of Female Protagonists in Action Cinema, 1960-2014.' *Sexualization, Media, & Society*, 2(2).]
- **Brrr! It's Cold in the Fridge: The Treatment of Women in the Marvel Cinematic Universe** [Green, M. (2023) 'Brrr! It's Cold in the Fridge: The Treatment of Women in the Marvel Cinematic Universe', Honors Program Theses, 209.]
- **The Feminine Hero Ideal: Marvel's Harmful Portrayals of Female Superheroes** [Insua, S. (2023) *The Feminine Hero Ideal: Marvel's Harmful Portrayals of Female Superheroes*. Available at: <https://medium.com/@sophiainsua/the-feminine-hero-ideal-marvels-harmful-portrayals-of-female-superheroes-605ade32f4fd> (Accessed: 15 November 2025).]
- **Impact of Films: Changes in Young People's Attitudes after Watching a Movie** [Kubrak, T. (2020) *Impact of Films: Changes in Young People's Attitudes after Watching a Movie* 'Behavioral Sciences', 10(5). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs10050086>.]
- **The Effect Cinema on the Youth** [Thompson, P.D. (2021) 'The Effect Cinema on the Youth' *IDOSR Journal of Computer and Applied Sciences*, 6(1), pp.44-53.]
- **Empowerment and Objectification: Dual Perspectives on Female Superheroes in Contemporary Cinema.** [Gransden, E.M., (2024) 'Empowerment and Objectification: Dual Perspectives on Female Superheroes in Contemporary Cinema' *Journal of Research in Social Science and Humanities*, 3(12), pp. 16-22. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.56397/JRSSH.2024.12.03>]
- **Watching Gender: How Stereotypes in Movies and on TV Impact Kids' Development** [Aubrey, J.S., Ward, L. M. (2017). *Watching Gender: How Stereotypes in Movies and on TV Impact Kids' Development*. San Francisco, CA: Common Sense.]

6. Identify any materials or data that will be examined

Include names of material examples to be examined such as films, artworks, games, events, directors and artists, or any other relevant media. sources that might provide pertinent data or statistics to support research objectives. All material should be referenced using the Harvard Style

Films:

- **Black Widow** [*Black Widow* (2021) Directed by Cate Shortland [Film]. USA: Marvel Studios.]
- **Iron Man 2** [Iron Man 2 (2010) Directed by Jon Favreau [Film]. USA: Marvel Studios.]
- **The Avengers** [The Avengers (2012) Directed by Joss Whedon [Film]. USA: Marvel Studios.]
- **Guardians of the Galaxy** [Guardians of the Galaxy (2014) Directed by James Gunn [Film]. USA: Marvel Studios.]

Video Talks:

- **TEDxRainier - Dimitri Christakis - Media and Children** [TEDxTalks (2011) *TEDxRainier - Dimitri Christakis - Media and Children*. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BoT7qH_uVNo (Accessed: 15 November 2025).

Other:

- Data from **Geena Davis Institute** on Gender in Media [Geena Davis institute (2025) *An annual report on the state of representation in children's television*. Available at: <https://geenadavisinstitute.org/research/gdis-2025-childrens-tv-report-record-number-of-female-leads-in-new-shows/> (Accessed: 15 November 2025).]