

Marvel's Gender Problem: "I'm not going to watch another five dudes band together to form Avengers 2.0"

In spite of growing Omicron rates, fans flocked to the cinema in December to see *Spider-Man: No Way Home*, the latest instalment within the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). The movie made \$121 million on its release day in the US, the second highest opening day [in the history of the domestic box office](#). But like many other MCU movies, it's not breaking any records when it comes to female character representation.

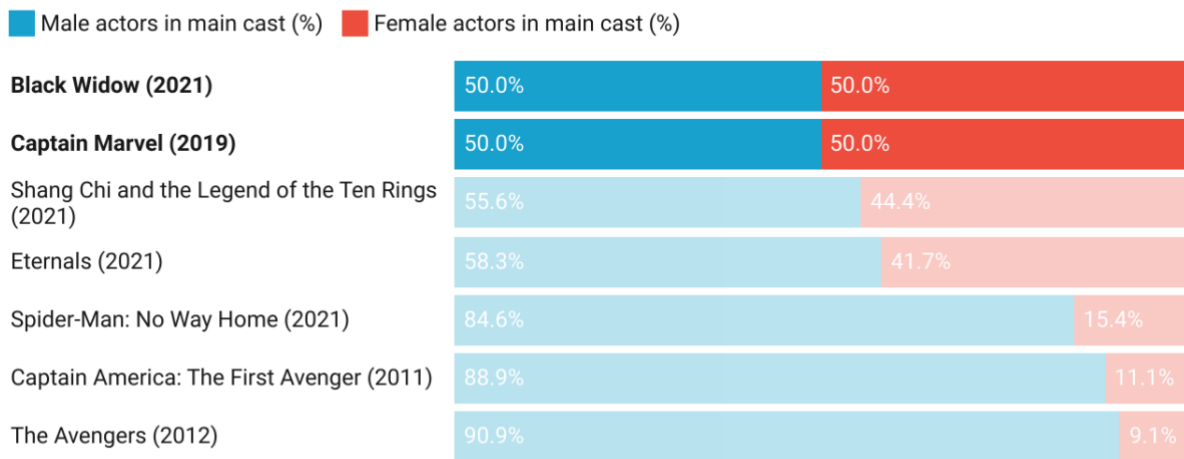
Marvel Studios, a production company subsidiary of Disney, produces the MCU films. It's one of the largest film franchises ever with its 27 films [grossing over](#) \$25 billion. Despite these impressive numbers, the stories lack female representation and diversity. "The first 18 movies were all basically about white men – white straight men – and anybody who wasn't that, was relegated to the side-lines, almost by definition," explained Dr. Dan Hassler-Forest, a professor of Film, Media, and Gender studies at the University of Utrecht.

Now that the famous franchise has entered its so-called 'Phase 4', fans are starting to notice a careful shift towards diverse casts and inclusive storytelling. "They're changing now and it's great," said Tamara Evdokimova, a fan of the MCU since 2012. "I'm not going to watch five more dudes band together to form Avengers 2.0... We've done that, they were great, but we've had enough."

More than half of the MCU movies have a nearly all-male cast. Only the two female-led movies in the franchise have a cast with an equal number of men and women. These don't make any less at the box office than the male-led instalments. In fact, *Captain Marvel* (2019), the first ever female-led MCU movie, made the sixth-biggest debut of all time, [at the time](#). *Black Widow* (2021), due to its simultaneous release on the streaming platform *Disney+*, did less well. But at the US box office, it still grossed \$15 million more in its first week than *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) did at the time. The latter has the second-lowest percentage (11%) of female cast members of all Marvel movies.

Only female-led MCU movies have a cast with an equal number of men and women.

The number of male and female actors relative to the total main cast* (%). Below are the four MCU movies with the highest percentage of female actors and the three MCU movies with the lowest percentage of female actors.



* Main cast as listed by IMDb.

Chart: Meike Eijsberg • Source: IMDb (2021) • Created with Datawrapper

In its 13 years, the inclusion of women in the MCU has, slowly, improved. And box office rates seem to have increased as a result. “There’s clearly a correlation,” Dr. Hassler-Forest said. “There have been studies that show that female-led action movies, in recent years, made more money than male-led action movies.”

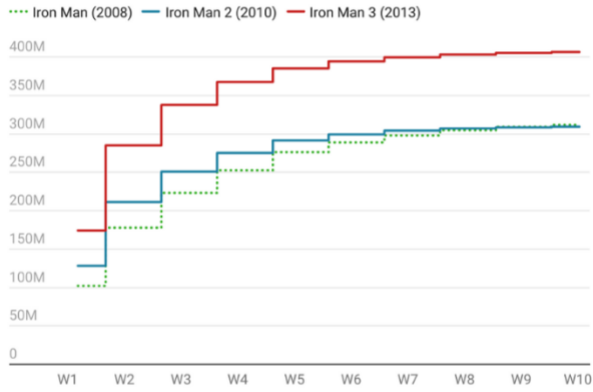
Having more than one female character in a story, also means there is more potential for passing the Bechdel test, a test that Hollywood often fails. It’s a measure of the representation of women in fiction and requires that 1) there must be two female characters; 2) they must be named; and 3) they must talk to each other about something other than a man. “As a person who’s seen the MCU movies endless amounts of times, I cannot think of a single instance of woman-to-woman dialogue,” said Evdokimova.

Yet, 16 out of 27 movies in the franchise pass the test (although some only barely). What’s notable, is that every consecutive instalment of a male-led trilogy (or a trilogy on its way to completion), passes the test, and makes more at the US box office.

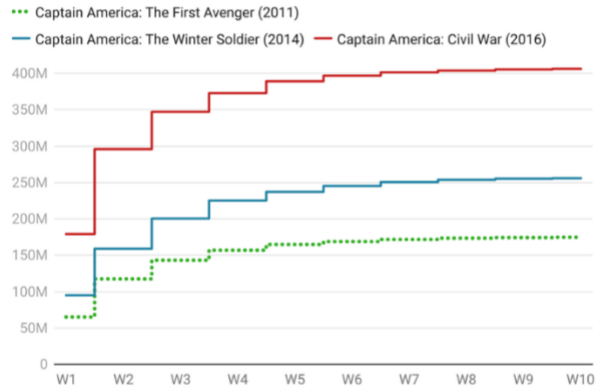
Cumulative US Box Office Rates for series within the MCU

A solid line means the movie passed the Bechdel test. Rates in \$.

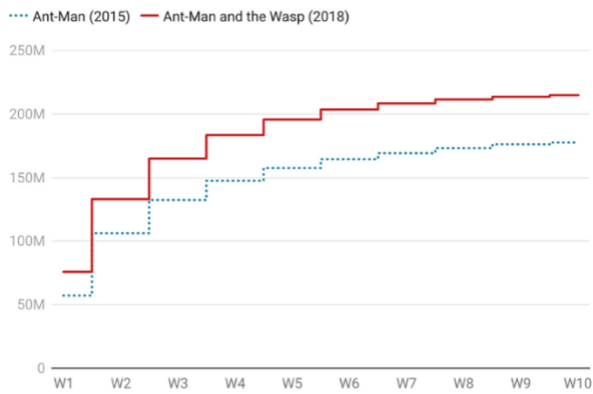
Iron Man



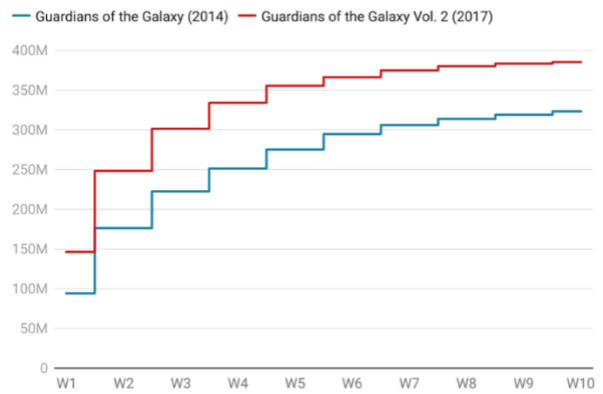
Captain America



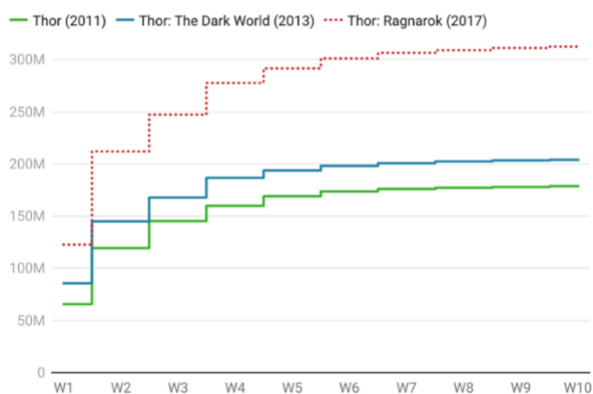
Ant-Man



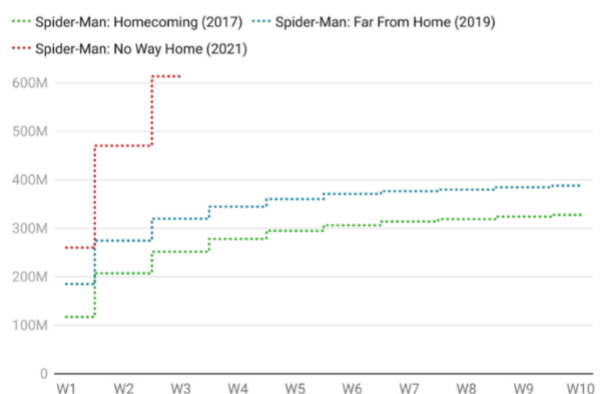
Guardians of the Galaxy



Thor



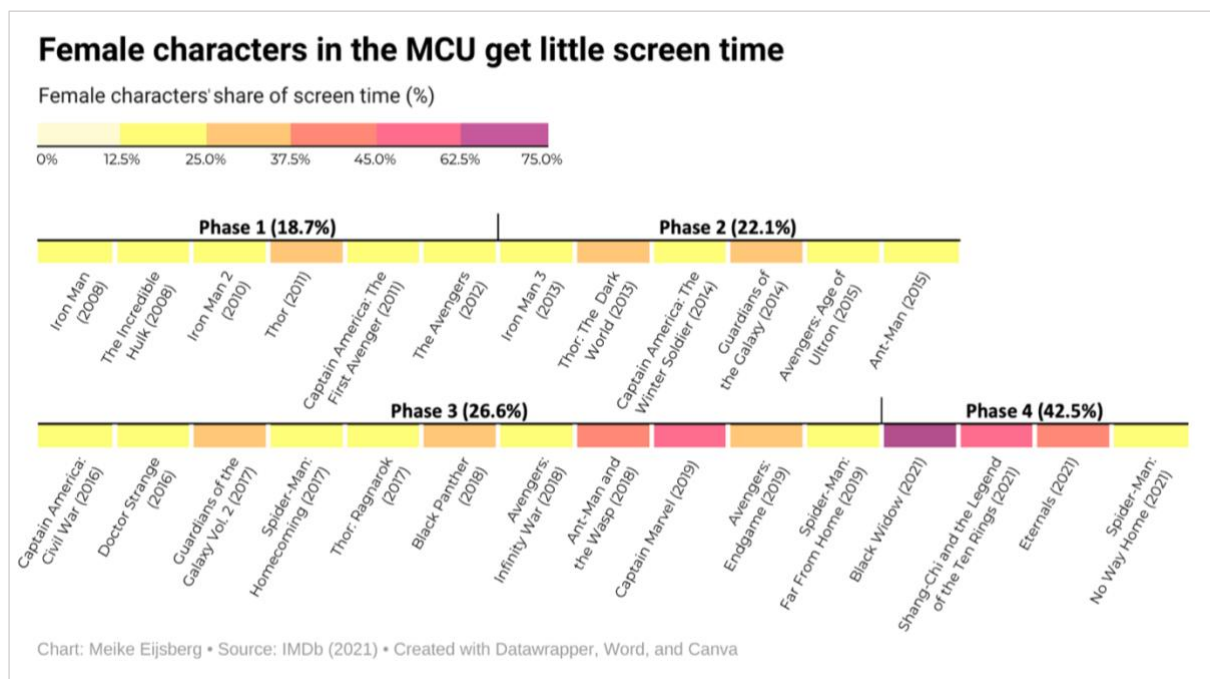
Spider-Man



The odd ones out are *Thor* and *Spider-Man*. But according to Dr. Hassler-Forest, this is because “people really love those actors in those roles. They really love Chris Hemsworth doing the goofy god thing. The same goes for Tom Holland, who’s young and therefore appealing.”

He also points out the type of female representation in those movies: “The new MJ [played by Zendaya] is definitely a different kind of MJ than Kirsten Dunst was, she’s not a Damsel in Distress.” Evdokimova says the same about ‘Valkyrie’ in *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017), “Valkyrie was a new type of woman to represent. She was an alcoholic with mental health problems. That was refreshing to see.”

MJ and Valkyrie may be challenging stereotypes, but they don’t get nearly as much screen time as their male counterparts. In fact, only the Phase 4 movies come close to an equal ratio: the female characters, on average, make up 42.5% of screen time. If you leave out *Spider-Man: No Way Home*, that number would be 52.3%.



Phase 4 is set to become Marvel’s most diverse phase yet, but it might struggle keeping older fans invested. Evdokimova explained: “They do a really good job at making you emotionally attached to characters, so you want to know what happens to them.” Because of that, she’s “a bit pickier” and not watching all the Phase 4 movies since they no longer feature her favourites.

She’s not the only one. “The phenomenal success of the recent *Spider-Man* movie really just confirms that people come to see familiar, returning characters,” Dr. Hassler-Forest explained. *Eternals* failed in that aspect, as it “tried to do too much too quickly.”

It’s likely that the MCU will evolve. But, says Dr. Hassler-Forest, “they will take some time to regain their footing and to find out what (female) characters have the same kind of consistency and appeal as the initial Avengers ended up building.”