

**X (formerly Twitter) Perspectives on Gender and Cultural Representation in *Mulan* (2020)
and *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* (2021)**

By

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this to my grandpa, who passed away earlier this year before I could share the finished product with him. He immigrated to Canada from China with the goal of providing better opportunities for his children and this project would not have been possible without his bravery and his hope for a better future.

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Abstract

Inequalities in gender and cultural representation are still prevalent throughout much of society and although these issues are becoming more widely recognized, progress in these areas has been largely stagnant. In recent years, Hollywood has been faced with strong public backlash and increased pressure to show a commitment to improving diversity within gender and cultural representation. However, it is not enough to just improve the quantity of representation, the quality has to be improved as well. This study aims to understand how improve the quality of gender and cultural representation by examining public responses on the platform X to two recent movies: *Mulan* (2020) and *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* (2021). Examining the data by applying Critical Discourse Analysis through an intersectional framework revealed important insight into how representation can be improved going forward. The results showed that on-screen representation lacks authenticity if it is not supported with appropriate representation behind the screen as well. Further analysis showed that in order to achieve appropriate representation, the intersectionality of gender and culture must be considered because it is not enough to prioritize one form of representation over the other. These findings demonstrate the complexities of representation and help to address the gap in research on gender and cultural representation in an Asian context.

Keywords: communications, gender, culture, intersectionality, representation, Asian representation, social media, film, Hollywood, *Mulan*, *Shang-Chi*, Critical Discourse Analysis, diversity

Introduction

Hollywood is a dominant force that has a strong influence on media around the world. This influence has numerous implications across many cultures, with Hollywood's dominance being referred to by many scholars as cultural or media imperialism (Miskell, 2016). Given this position, Hollywood should be demonstrating its continued commitment to furthering inclusion and diversity within the industry by actively working to make representation more diverse because the status quo will not be able to maintain success globally. While progress has been made in this area, this has not been consistent and generally minorities are still severely underrepresented. Even in recent years there have been major obstacles to improvement, most notably in 2015 and 2016 when there were no people of colour nominated for major acting awards at the Academy awards (Kim & Brunn-Bevel, 2020). Kim and Brunn-Bevel (2020) suggest that progression in this area has been hindered by the current political economy of Hollywood, which considers financial profits before racial justice and political correctness. As a result, directors may be forced to choose between having access to Hollywood's financial resources or producing minority-centered content.

In particular, Asian representation in the media is still an area that still shows significant room for improvement as progress with this demographic has been slower over the years. This delay can be attributed partly to the lack of an established Asian American film community (Kim & Brunn-Bevel, 2020). Although African American representation is still disproportionate, progress with that demographic has been accelerated by the strong African American film community that was established in response to mainstream film studios unwillingness to invest in black films. This has helped propel black representation forward, but without a similar Asian American community, those filmmakers still struggle to develop support for their films. The

most prominent example of this is *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) which was the first movie with a majority Asian cast to be released by a major film studio in 25 years (Kim & Brunn-Bevel, 2020).

The delay in progress with Asian representation means that there is also a gap in the literature surrounding gender-based analyses of Asian representation in media. The goal of my research is to gain a better understanding of how gender and culture intersect to influence how people perceive these representations in media. Given the lack of intersectional research surrounding Asian and gender representation, I will be comparing the perceptions of representation in *Mulan* (Caro, 2020) and *Shang-Chi* (Cretton, 2021) to begin to narrow the gap in that area.

Literature Review Methodology

My literature review was conducted using my overarching research question to guide the process. The main question I am exploring for my capstone is:

How does the intersectionality of gender and culture affect the X community's perceptions of representation in the films *Mulan* (2020) and *Shang-Chi* (2021)?

Using this as my guiding question, I then broke it down into smaller, more specific questions for the literature review which are as follows:

1. How has the history of gender and cultural representation in film influenced the current state of representation in film today?
2. What is the current state of representation in film today and where are we still lacking?

3. How can the concept of intersectionality drive progress within representation and inform research going forward?

To answer these questions, I relied mainly on the University of Alberta Library catalogues and Google Scholar. Before starting my search, I identified some key terms using Boolean Logic to help guide the research process. For example, “Asian representation and Hollywood”, “Gender representation and media”, and “intersectionality and media studies” were some of the Boolean phrases used to conduct my searches. I also went through the sources of some of the more foundational papers to find any resources that could also be helpful in informing my research.

To narrow down potential sources, they had to fit into certain eligibility criteria. Most importantly, they had to contribute to at least one of the three questions outlined above. Any articles that could contribute to more than one question were highlighted as being a possible foundational piece. From there, any peer-reviewed articles would take priority over other sources. Some grey literature was included as *Mulan* and *Shang-Chi* were released very recently so the research regarding those two movies is very limited.

The initial findings of my literature review can be split into six main sections: history of Asian representation in media, history of gender representation in media, cultural representation in film, gender representation in film, intersectionality, and contextualizing *Mulan* and *Shang-Chi*. These themes were structured around my three research questions with the goal of being able to bring them together at the end to help answer my main capstone research question. The first two sections outline the history of representation in the media to contextualize the rest of the research. The next two sections are an overview of cultural and gender representation in the media to develop an understanding of each of those topics individually before bringing them

together within the fifth section on intersectionality. Finally, the methodology and research design section will inform my research methodology.

Literature Review Findings

History of Asian Representation in Media

Mass media is hugely influential across all aspects of society as it helps to uphold things like social norms, behaviours, and customs (Mok, 1998). Given this strong influence, what is portrayed in mass media has major implications for society. Images portrayed in the media serve to shape how individuals view not only themselves but other groups within society and these images are therefore powerful tools for developing identity (Mok, 1998). Fürsich (2010) states that “The representations are constitutive of culture, meaning, and knowledge about ourselves and the world around us.” (p. 115). This means that while media representations are supposed to depict reality, they also function to create reality by normalizing certain ideologies. As a result, negative representations can have detrimental impacts on political and social decision making which effectively upholds many of the inequalities that are present in society today (Fürsich, 2010).

While there are many different aspects of mass media, the film industry is particularly dominant, with Hollywood being a global leader in movie markets worldwide (Lee, 2008). As such, films are an important agent in identity development which impacts not only cultural identity, but gender identity as well (Besana et al., 2020). Even with Hollywood’s dominance, that does not mean other film industries are not challenging them therefore it would be beneficial for them to be progressive with respect to representation to stay competitive in other markets (Lee, 2009). In the Chinese market, the popularity of Hollywood movies has started to decline as

audiences start looking for more diverse content than what Hollywood is currently providing (Su, 2021).

Regarding Asian representation in the media, there are a few main themes that have prevailed throughout the years. The first is the “Yellow Peril” theme which arose sometime in the 1920s in response to the dominant belief at the time that the Chinese were an economic threat to the white majority in a time when jobs and resources were scarce (Mok, 1998). The persistence of this theme throughout the years results in the continued use of the typical Asian villain such as Fu Manchu (Hillenbrand, 2008). During the World War II period, the sentiment shifted a bit with the Chinese being portrayed in more of a positive light with the Japanese taking on many of the negative stereotypes (Mok, 1998). This switched again after Mao Zedong rose to power in China, making Communist China the new perceived threat to the United States which resulted in a spike in anti-Communist rhetoric being directed at China.

The 1950s saw the start of the *Geisha* which is one of the most well-known depictions of Asian women (Mok, 1998). This occurred around the time when interracial relationships in the United States were starting to become more widely accepted by society and this change was reflected in films as well however the only relationships that were endorsed on screen were those between a White man and an Asian woman. Building off that, in the 1960s and 70s, it was very common for Asian women to be portrayed as property for white men to acquire during war time eras (Mok, 1998). This idea continues to persist in the media as Hillenbrand (2008) states, “[...] single Asian females seeking their white knights are still the major blueprint [...]” (p. 50).

By contrast, Asian men were portrayed as being effeminate and to the point of being almost asexual (Mok, 1998). However, these negative stereotypes were not perpetuated by legitimate Asian representation, but by white men being cast as Asian men. In casting white men

to play Asian men, they were effectively creating an Asian caricature rather than a multi-dimensional human. These are stereotypes that would not be challenged until the 1970s with the rise in popularity of Bruce Lee (Mok, 1998). While Bruce Lee would challenge the idea that Asian men were weak, he still played into the stereotype that Asians were dangerous and exotic.

The early 2000s saw what was at the time called the “Asian Invasion” of Hollywood which was when we started seeing an increase in the movies being released with Asian leads (Pham, 2004). Although as Pham (2004) points out, “Asian actors are not invading Hollywood as much as they are finally being admitted into Hollywood – under very specific conditions and for very specific roles.” (p. 122). Essentially these specific roles are only perpetuating the same harmful stereotypes from years prior.

History of Gender Representation in Media

Feminist communication research has been gaining traction as of late, with feminist and gender studies becoming important areas of study within the field (Mendes & Carter, 2008). One of the key goals of these kinds of studies is to better understand how gender is represented in the media and how audiences make sense of these representations. This approach is based on the idea that hierarchical gender relations not only create but also maintain social inequalities and that while these hierarchies still dominate society, there will always be barriers to equality (Mendes & Carter, 2008). This is particularly helpful when analysing the film industry which is still grappling with gender inequality issues because feminist and gender studies demonstrate how gender affects the opportunities afforded to people and has strong implications on an individual’s chances for success in their careers and personal lives.

Over the years gender representation in films has continually relied on stereotypes regardless of whether they are positive or negative. In analyzing the top twelve box office films

of the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, Nulman (2014) noticed some common themes present in most of the movies across the decades. Across all three decades, one of the most notable themes was that women very rarely occupied a central role and when they did it was in a romantic or motherly role. While these trends generally persisted over the decades, they did evolve.

The biggest difference between the top box office films of the 1980s compared to the 1990s and 2000s was the theme of women needing to be rescued, but also being rescuers (Nulman, 2014). In the 1980s, women in films frequently needed to be rescued, but were rarely the rescuers themselves. This did improve in the 1990s and 2000s and while the women still did need to be rescued, they often did become rescuers themselves by the end. However, even the rescuing in films took on a gendered approach. When the rescuer was a woman, it was often done from a place of love and maternal instinct whereas when the rescuer was a man it came from a place of power and strength (Nulman, 2014). This change however did nothing to address the lack of women in central roles as this is still a major issue within the film industry.

The gap between female and male representation has still been significant over the decades which does not accurately reflect the reality we are currently dealing with (Collins, 2011). Women's roles in daily life have been continually expanding and the current scenario is that men and women occupy almost equal parts of the working world, but the media has failed to keep up with this. Collins (2011) suggests that the media world is closer to the 1950s than it is to the reality of the 2010s. One area where this is particularly apparent is within STEM which encompasses the fields of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math respectively. Gálvez et al. (2019) explore what is called the "brilliance = male" stereotype which reinforces the idea that males are more likely to possess the brilliance needed to succeed in more difficult fields and this belief has had a strong impact on the gender imbalance faced in the STEM fields. Since children

have less exposure to professionals within STEM fields, most of their beliefs therefore come from what is presented to them in mass media. The strong presence of the “brilliance = male” stereotype in media today means that girls typically do not see themselves being represented in these STEM roles (Gálvez et al., 2019). Given that media is more influential if children feel like they can identify with the characters, girls are less likely to see themselves within STEM if they continue to be underrepresented in these roles.

As demonstrated above, gender representation has effects outside of the media itself, however, the same patterns can be seen within media as well. While we often think of the lack of representation in the obvious sense of women having the lead role in films, this disparity in representation extends beyond what the audience sees. Female directors and producers still face significant barriers within the film industry due to the institutionalized belief that they are unable to handle the difficulties of filmmaking (Sheehan, 2021). Karniouchina et al. (2022) assessed the box office performance of 2386 films released in the United States from 1994 to 2016 and found that of those films only 4.95% of them were directed by women. In a separate analysis of 4000 films released over the same period both domestically and internationally, they found that women only directed 4.99% of them. Of all the aspects of the film industry, gender representation in directors has been one of the areas that have not really seen any improvements over the years, but rather over the period of 1994 to 2016 the number of films directed by women decreased (Karniouchina et al., 2022). Only one in ten directors is a woman and this number has stayed stagnant over the years showing that there has not been much progress in this area (Cobb, 2020).

Cultural Representation in Film

When assessing cultural representation in films, Erigha (2015) outlines three different types of representation to consider. The first is called numerical representation which refers to the proportion of an occupation a particular group occupies. The second is the quality of representation which looks at the depth of the roles a group occupies both on and off-screen. The last one is called centrality of representation which looks at how central a group is to the main institutions of an industry. These three factors are important to consider together to fully understand the challenges faced by minorities in the film industry (Erigha, 2015). To get a better understanding of the current state of cultural representation in film, I will break it down with respect to these three categories.

In terms of numerical representation, there has been little improvement over the years. In the same study Karniouchina et al. (2022) found that between 1994 and 2016, BIPOC directors, with BIPOC referring to black, indigenous, and other people of colour, accounted for 10.52% of the 2386 films assessed domestically. Of the 4000 films assessed in total, BIPOC directors accounted for 12.35% of all the movies and 11.8% of the internationally released films. For on-screen roles, as of 2013 Asian Americans comprised of only 4.4% of speaking roles in both film and television (Erigha, 2015). The underrepresentation becomes more apparent when looking at the casting for lead roles in films as demonstrated by the Hollywood Diversity Report 2022 (Hunt & Ramón, 2022). In an analysis of the top 252 English language films released in 2021, they found that only 14 out of the 252 movies featured Asian leads which means Asians only accounted for 5.55% of the lead actors that year. As such, the lack of representation is widespread across all aspects of the film industry.

The quality of representation is also lacking with many Asians being typecast into roles that fall into predetermined stereotypes and are typically presented as foreign, disregarding the

difference between Asians and Asian Americans (Erigha, 2015). Stereotypical portrayals of minorities in the media can have detrimental effects on identity development within these groups (King et al., 2020). Film representations of Asian Americans can have significant impacts on identity by shaping how Asian Americans view themselves as well as how other groups view them (Besana et al., 2020). As Besana et al. (2020) point out, “Many minorities receive many messages from society that are predominantly negative via perpetuation of inaccurate media portrayals or lack of portrayals.” (p. 203). One of the main struggles Asian Americans face with regard to their identity is the perpetual foreigner stereotype considering most films default to foreign-born Asians (Besana et al., 2020). The tendency for films to default to foreign-born Asians not only produces a perpetual foreigner stereotype, but it also portrays Asians as a monolithic group. This is an issue considering there are five different identities among Chinese Americans alone (Han, 2018). Erasing these complexities only adds to the difficulties Asian Americans face in trying to develop their identities.

The other predominant stereotype that affects Asian representation is the model minority myth (Besana et al., 2020). This model minority myth has been imposed on Asian Americans, usually by the more powerful white elites, to portray them as the “ideal” minority (Shih et al., 2019). This stereotype is particularly harmful in several ways. Firstly, it reinforces the idea that racism is no longer a problem in the United States while at the same time implying that there are “good” minorities and “bad” minorities (Shih et al., 2019). Secondly, even though anti-Asian sentiments are still very persistent in the media, these sentiments are often downplayed as people will use the “model minority” image to dismiss the negative consequences (Chou & Feagin, 2015b). Thirdly, the model minority myth generates a racial hierarchy and mass media plays an integral part in perpetuating that believe and normalizing it as part of society (Chou & Feagin,

2015a). Finally, this myth impacts how Asian Americans view themselves in relation to other groups which places a lot of pressure on them to conform to this White-defined identity (Shih et al., 2019).

Minority directors also tend to be confined to specific ethnic genres with limited opportunities to expand elsewhere. Being confined within these genres usually coincides with minorities being less central to core institutions. This also sets them back as more involvement with core institutions comes with more opportunities so the less access they have to these institutions, the more limited their careers in Hollywood become (Erigha, 2015). This lack of representation across all facets of the film industry has strong implications on the Asian American population. Aumer et al (2017) surveyed 228 undergraduate students comprising of various racial identities with 38% identifying as multiracial, 32% as monoracial, and 30% as white. All groups of students presented an anti-Asian bias, even those that identified as Asian preferred a white cast over an Asian cast. They propose that one of the reasons for this may be because of the belief in many Asian cultures that fairness is the ideal form of beauty thus making “whiteness” the beauty standard (Aumer et al., 2017). In looking at cultural representation, it becomes clear that there is a lot more that can be done to improve the current situation.

Gender Representation in Film

The three categories of representation as outlined by Erigha (2015) can also be employed when analyzing gender representation within media. To start with numerical representation, The Celluloid Ceiling is a report that has been tracking women’s employment in the top 250 grossing films since 1998 and the most recent report shows that across all behind the scenes roles the numbers have stayed constant (Lauzen, 2022). Over the last 24 years, from 1998 to 2021, the women employment in behind-the-scenes positions overall went from 17% to 25%. To break it

down into the representation based on individual roles, directors went from 9% to 17%, writers went from 13% to 17%, executive producers went from 18% to 26%, producers went from 24% to 32%, editors went from 20% to 22%, and cinematographers went from 4% to 6% (Lauzen, 2022).

Quality of representation is also an issue here as well with women typically being confined to certain roles as with minorities (Erigha, 2015). Erigha (2015) found that female directors are most commonly employed within the romance genre which aligns with Nulman's (2014) findings that many female leads have a romantic role. In general, women tend to have more opportunities within genres that are generally less profitable than male dominated genres (Erigha, 2015). The common stereotypical portrayals of women also distort what traits society believes are acceptable and desirable in a woman (Wood, 1994). In general, women are only allowed to be portrayed as strong and successful if they do so through femininity and beauty. This limited representation of women is one-dimensional and does not accurately reflect women in real life, so women are therefore lacking quality representation in media.

The centrality of representation of women also shows much room for improvement. Although there are many qualified female candidates for positions in the film industry, they are still significantly underrepresented in these roles (Karniouchina et al., 2022). Since the 1970s, women directors' work has been under intense scrutiny by film studios during the entire filmmaking process due to the dominant beliefs about women and their abilities (Sheehan, 2021). If a film directed by a woman was deemed not successful, this was used to confirm the negative bias against female directors as they were typically held solely responsible for the failure. This erroneous correlation has long been used to deny women from more central positions within the film industry (Karniouchina et al., 2022).

According to Kumari & Joshi (2015)

Films are the most complex way of communicating which may include all aids like visual, sound and drama, it has an advantage over the print media and impressive impact well on illiterate audience, the movies are made on different spheres like family social drama, romance, religious stories and affairs of family and society. (p. 46)

As such, films have considerable influence on how society views gender roles and stereotypes. As objects of popular culture, films have a unique role in upholding sociocultural values through gendered discourses and representations (Barthold et al., 2022). The roles and stereotypes depicted in film strengthen our ideas of what constitutes men and women as well as how they should behave in relation to each other (Popa & Gavrilu, 2015). While over the years women's roles in film have expanded, their representation has failed to adapt accordingly. Modern representation of women has taken the patriarchal representation and turned it into a woman who is educated and independent, but also still needs rescuing (Kumari & Joshi, 2015). The film industry continues to be structured around the male gaze and the dominance of this perspective makes it difficult to challenge since it is so pervasive in all aspects of the industry (Dasgupta, 2018).

One way the industry is combatting this issue is by increasingly showing more aggressive representations of women however they do still fall under the stereotypical ideal of beauty (Taylor & Setters, 2011). While ideals of stereotypical beauty are culturally dependent, typically the Western notion of stereotypical feminine beauty involves light skin, thinness, and youthfulness (Brooks & Hebert, 2006). Taylor and Setters (2011) found that these aggressive representations were perceived as more acceptable if they were also stereotypically attractive. Therefore, these aggressive female leads seemingly have contradictory effects as they reinforce

certain stereotypes, but challenge others. Even with a shift to a more aggressive female lead, the attractiveness of the lead still falls within the male gaze because without conscious effort, the film industry will continue to uphold the status quo (Fung, 2000). Looking at present day gender representation shows how even though some progress has been made, there is still a strong tie to traditional roles.

Intersectionality

To better understand how gender and culture impacts representation, the concept of intersectionality will help to demonstrate how the two are interconnected. Intersectionality was introduced by Kimberle Crenshaw to help explain how gender, race, and class are all interrelated (Crenshaw, 1989; Gouma & Dorer, 2019). At its core, intersectionality is about power relations that arise from social inequalities derived from race, gender, class, and sexuality (Gouma & Dorer, 2019). Intersectionality provides a structural framework that allows us to examine discrimination through multiple forms of oppression (Byerly, 2017). Following this definition Hancock (2007) outlines six foundational assumptions that form the basis of intersectionality as a normative theory:

1. More than one category of difference plays a role in complex societal issues.
2. While all relevant categories of difference should be assessed, the relationship between these categories is an open empirical question that varies situationally.
3. Categories of difference are conceptualized and reinforced at both an individual and institutional level.
4. Within-group diversity is present in each category of difference.
5. Intersectional research must not only consider the individual and institutional levels, but also the interactions between those levels.

6. Intersectionality as a normative and empirical paradigm means the theoretical and empirical aspects must be considered (Hancock, 2007).

Intersectionality as a paradigm operates on two levels: macrosocial and microsocial (Bilge, 2010). Microsocial involves the social categories of difference and macrosocial looks at the structural systems of power. It is important to consider both levels because “no one is a member of just one social group: we are all a combination of experiences and identities, rooted in a variety of socially constructed classifications.” (Lind, 2004, p. 6). These two levels as well as Hancock’s (2007) six assumptions will be important guiding principles going forward.

In films, we can see the concept of intersectionality when we look at how race affects gender representation. Asian men are most seen as threatening foreigners, martial artists, and laborers however they lack many of the traditional dominant masculine traits (Brooks & Hebert, 2006). By contrast, white men are represented as dominant and powerful and as Brooks and Hebert (2006) point out, this is traditionally associated with “presidential” roles. In terms of martial arts or action films, this usually manifests as white men being large and muscular whereas Asian men are determined and skilled (Hiramoto & Teo, 2014). Asian women face a similar issue as women of colour are typically positioned opposite of the dominant white ideals (Dahya & King, 2020). This usually results in the creation of a binary in terms of cultural representation, the dominant white culture and the “other” culture which erases many diverse cultures. Asian women are typically either represented as the cold villain or the mindless love interest (Sharad Rajgopal, 2010). On the other hand, white women are typically the ones in the loving, motherly, romantic roles when you consider that Asian women are very seldomly included in these roles given their severely limited representation (Hunt & Ramón, 2022; Nulman, 2014).

These intersectional power relations are also present in the behind-the-scenes roles as well. Biases against female and minority directors grow stronger when coupled with a female or BIPOC lead (Karniouchina et al., 2022). As such film studios become more reluctant to allow these directors to lead projects that already seem riskier even though these directors bring valuable lived experience to these projects. Trying to provide more opportunities to minority and female directors might improve representation across numerous aspects of film not only from a numerical representation perspective, but also from a quality perspective because being able to bring lived experience to a role brings an aspect of authenticity that would not be present otherwise. Therefore, we see how films, as a form of mass media, are dynamic spaces where we see constant struggle over representation (Spitulnik, 1993).

Contextualizing *Mulan* (2020) and *Shang-Chi* (2021)

Mulan and *Shang-Chi* exemplify a female and male lead within an Asian context. A comparison of the responses to these two movies will allow for an analysis of how the intersectionality between gender and culture is enacted in an Asian context. Both films faced similar challenges in being released during the COVID-19 Pandemic with the added layer of the rise in anti-Asian discrimination being faced by the Asian community. However, *Mulan* faced considerably more scrutiny than *Shang-Chi*. According to Wang (2022) this can be attributed to three different problems: the Disney problem, the gender problem, and the cultural problem. Wang (2022) argues that *Mulan* “[...] is rather a window into the tension-ridden intersectionality of the gender, sexual, racial, cultural, and political issues that shape production and reception of today’s cross-cultural films.” (p. 2).

Disney has such a strong branding that over the years it has essentially become a genre (Wang, 2022). In the case of *Mulan* this did a disservice to the movie because the cartoon was

such a strong representation of the Disney genre whereas the live action was rather a cooperation with the Disney genre. The director of the film, Niki Caro, was restricted in the kinds of changes she could make to the gender and cultural representation because she did have to follow the original framework set out by the animation (Wang, 2022). The film also fell short because Caro tried to fit a Chinese story into a supposedly universal feminist ideology which turned out to hinder the accuracy of the cultural representation. Part of this issue stems from the fact that there were not enough Chinese people on the crew to make sure the cultural aspects were accurate and likely would have benefitted from having a Chinese director (Nighman, 2021). Even though some advancements were made on the live action, it was overall not enough to ensure the success of the movie in either the American or Chinese market.

Comparatively, *Shang-Chi* was already an improvement as both the director, Destin Daniel Cretton, and screenwriter, Dave Callaham, are Asian American (Nguyen, 2022). The soundtrack was also produced by a group called 88rising which is a group comprised of Asians and Asian Americans. This approach immediately made people more receptive to the film. The complicated part would be trying to address the problematic history behind the *Shang-Chi* comic and while they were able to rework the story, there are still some lingering problematic stereotypes (Nguyen, 2022). Despite that, the film was generally received better than *Mulan* was.

Issues with the Research

In looking at the statistics presented in most of the papers, one thing I noted was how the statistics were framed. They were almost always presented in terms of how underrepresented women and minorities are, but never really presented in terms of how overrepresented white men are. This overrepresentation is usually implied, but it is never overtly stated. I did notice the same pattern for how Asian representation was presented as well. The researchers always

characterized the representation, but there were limited comparisons to what the dominant white representations are. This means that white men are not included in the narrative with respect to their overrepresentation which reinforces the idea that they are the default because it frames underrepresentation as the minorities having to fight for their place (Cobb, 2020). The other problem with that is that research on gender representation alone usually defaults to white women however this is not always obvious so there were times where it would have been beneficial for the researcher to clarify that.

Summary

In concluding this literature review, I have demonstrated the need for further research on the intersectionality of gender and cultural representation in different cultural contexts. The most notable limitation I discovered from my literature review is that there is a large gap in the research within an Asian context. Part of this is likely because there are not many films that would be applicable to this kind of study because there are so few films with Asian leads. As long as there is limited representation in the media, there will be a limited amount of research. The goal of this project is to try to close that gap more. This would also be one of the few projects that compares perceptions of an Asian female and male lead and could provide new insights in this area. As such, the findings from this literature review are in line with the goals for my research.

Over the years the literature has continued to demonstrate that there has been limited progress made in terms of representation and call for more action to be taken. If more research is done in this area, this will hopefully drive more progress and lead to more diverse representation. In analyzing why some of these films may not have been as successful as everyone had hoped, we attempt to address some of the issues they faced and improve on them for the future.

Research Design

With this research the aim is to understand audience perspectives on gender and cultural representation which means this project falls under audience study research. Audience studies have become less frequent over the years, but there is some support for bringing them back into more mainstream research. Gray (2017) is a proponent of audience studies as he points out that audience data generated by media companies like Netflix and Facebook are becoming increasingly inaccessible. He does make some helpful suggestions for where this kind of research could be informative. One of the ways he suggests is by broadening the audience to include people who may dislike a particular program and look at more international audiences (Gray, 2017). The goal of this research is to start addressing some of these issues by doing an audience study using critical discourse analysis of X responses to *Mulan* and *Shang-Chi*. Critical discourse analysis is a fitting method for this study as power and gender are variables that are important to consider for interpretation of text and are also relevant to my research (Weiss & Wodak, 2003).

Chen & Mehdizadkhani (2022) conducted a similar study regarding *Mulan* however they were assessing the use of different impoliteness strategies in response to the film using data from X. They collected their data from #Mulan and #DisneyMulan and collected any related posts or comments from the accounts @DisneysMulan and @Disney. After collecting their data, they then looked for the use of certain words in all the posts collected (Chen & Mehdizadkhani, 2022). Since my research was also conducted using X data, a similar design was adopted for my collection and analysis process.

Data for this project was collected from X using the advanced search feature. The search results were narrowed down using #Mulan and #ShangChi to ensure the data pertained to those two movies specifically. General hashtags were used to limit the content, but still allowed me to

collect from various perspectives. The search was restricted to the first three days after their Canadian release dates to ensure I was collecting opinions from immediately after each movie was released. *Mulan* was released on September 4, 2020, so the search was restricted to September 4-7, 2020, and *Shang-Chi* was released on September 3, 2021, so that search was restricted to September 3-6, 2021. Given the abundance of content on X, the parameters had to be fairly narrow due to the limited scope of this project and after adjusting the search settings, I found that three days produced enough content that was still manageable to filter through.

The use of hashtags to gather data does also indicate that the individual was intentionally interacting with the debate on the films (D'heer & Verdegem, 2015). Therefore, using hashtags to filter my data ensured that I was capturing responses from people who were invested in the films. However, D'heer & Verdegem (2015) did highlight two things to be aware of when conducting studies using social media data. They point out the technological bias that is a natural part of these digital tools and that posts on social media are inherently performative. They suggest that the best way to address those two issues is through what is called hyper-coding which combines multiple formats of data like posts on X, interviews, and photos (D'heer & Verdegem, 2015; Vittadini & Pasquali, 2014).

Once the search parameters were set, I sorted through the posts under the top posts tab. The posts that were collected had to relate to gender, culture, or both. Anything that was not relevant to either of those concepts was not included in the data. From the results that came up, I selected the posts themselves and when possible, the replies to those posts. Since Disney has such a wide reach on X, the replies to their promotional posts also provided a good amount of content to pull from.

Chen et al. (2021) also conducted an audience study on *Mulan* however, they were looking at Chinese audiences. One of the samples they used in their study was from a community review website in China called Douban.com. To do this, they pulled all the comments and film reviews pertaining to *Mulan* and then once the data was screened, it was coded for content analysis (Chen et al., 2021). This coding approach as outlined below was utilized during my research as well to identify patterns in the X audience's perceptions.

Firstly, an inductive approach was used while collecting the initial batch of posts. Other than the general categories of gender and culture, I did not use any other categories to influence my data collection, however I did take note of any recurring themes and patterns that came up during my initial search. These themes were more specific and were used to guide my first round of coding. During my coding, the posts for *Mulan* and *Shang-Chi* were both categorized into positive and negative content. From there the themes highlighted from the *Mulan* data were "political", "storyline/folklore", and "lead actress" and the themes highlighted from the *Shang-Chi* data were "language", "real life parallels", and "lead actor". Some of the posts gathered during the initial collection were removed after subsequent analysis using the more specific themes. After my initial data collection, I had 103 posts for *Mulan* and 74 posts for *Shang-Chi*. During the analysis phase ten posts were removed from the *Mulan* data set as they no longer fit within the categories and themes in question so the final data set for *Mulan* was 93 posts and only one post was removed from the *Shang-Chi* data set so there were 73 total posts for *Shang-Chi*.

The final analysis of the posts was conducted using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA is based on the critical theory of language which views language as a form of social

practice and seeks to understand how discourse influences power relations (Janks, 1997).

According to Weiss and Wodak (2003),

Power does not derive from language, but language can be used to challenge power, to subvert it, to alter distributions of power in the short and the long term. Language provides a finely articulated vehicle for differences in power in hierarchical social structures. (p. 15).

Since the goal of CDA is to understand how discourse and power are interrelated, it was the most appropriate method to use given the nature of my research. Using CDA to analyze the contents of the posts allowed me to gain insight into how people make sense of and react to the power imbalances of gender and cultural representation in *Mulan* and *Shang-Chi*.

Ethical Considerations

When pulling data from social media sites like X there are important ethical considerations that must be made based on several factors such as whether the data is public or private, informed consent, anonymity, and risk of harm (Townsend et al., 2018). The privacy expectation is typically laid out within each platform's privacy rules and this is going to be important because each platform is going to have variations in their privacy rules (Moreno et al., 2013). In the case of X, when posts are made to the general public their privacy policy states, "You are directing us to disclose that information as broadly as possible." (X Corp., 2023). Therefore, when using hashtags on X, this can be considered public as this generates an open discussion with the intent of reaching more people interested in the subject (Townsend et al., 2018). In terms of informed consent, this is more difficult to achieve with social media research, but X has given users the option to adjust their privacy settings to choose whether their posted content is available to the public (Moreno et al., 2013). All the posts included in this research

were available publicly, following the assumption that any private profiles would not consent to having their content used publicly. To maintain anonymity, the user IDs will not be included in the research. Finally, there is limited risk of harm as this would not be considered a sensitive topic and as identified by Townsend et al. (2018), the use of hashtags indicates that the user was looking for broad readership.

Townsend et al. (2018) outlines an example of research conducted that mirrors that of this project. In Case Study 6 they discuss a researcher doing a critical discourse analysis of a set of posts retrieved from various hashtags which is the same style of research used for this project. In this case study, they conclude that it is reasonable to assume that the use of hashtags means the user intended the content to reach a broad audience. They also indicate that given the public character of the posts, it would be acceptable to directly quote posts without obtaining informed consent and that it would be ideal to remove the user IDs of those who are not already considered public figures.

It is also important to acknowledge that there was an element of bias with my data collection that I had to be aware of in order to minimize its impact. While developing my methodology I did research various data collection tools that would be able to pull data from X, however many of these tools are costly and they did not provide the functionality that I needed. They could filter for words so I would have been able to set the parameters to collect posts using the words “gender” and “culture”, but I found that many of the posts pertained to gender and culture without specifically mentioning either of those words. That means that many of the posts I found by doing a manual search myself may have been missed had I used an automated data collection tool. Those drawbacks are what led me to conduct a manual search over an automated search even though the manual search comes with an increased risk of bias.

Results

While collecting the initial batch of posts, there were a few common themes that were apparent for each movie. The posts about *Mulan* mostly conveyed negative opinions of the movie with 71 out of the 93 posts being critical of the movie.

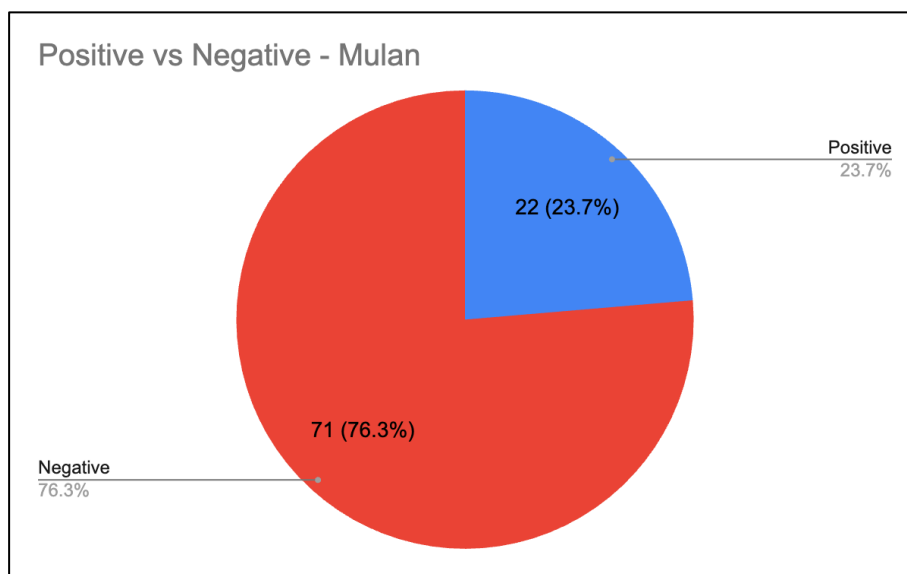


Figure 1.1 – The distribution of positive and negative posts for *Mulan* out of 93 posts in total

A majority of the content was critical of the storyline and of the use of Chinese folklore throughout the movie, but one of the most notable differences between *Mulan* and *Shang-Chi* was the political commentary and the outspoken dislike of the lead actress Liu Yifei. There was significantly less political commentary surrounding *Shang-Chi* and people were far more receptive to the storyline of the movie and much more supportive of the lead actor Simu Liu. In contrast to *Mulan*, the majority of the posts about *Shang-Chi* were positive in nature with 68 out of 73 being positive and the five remaining posts being negative.

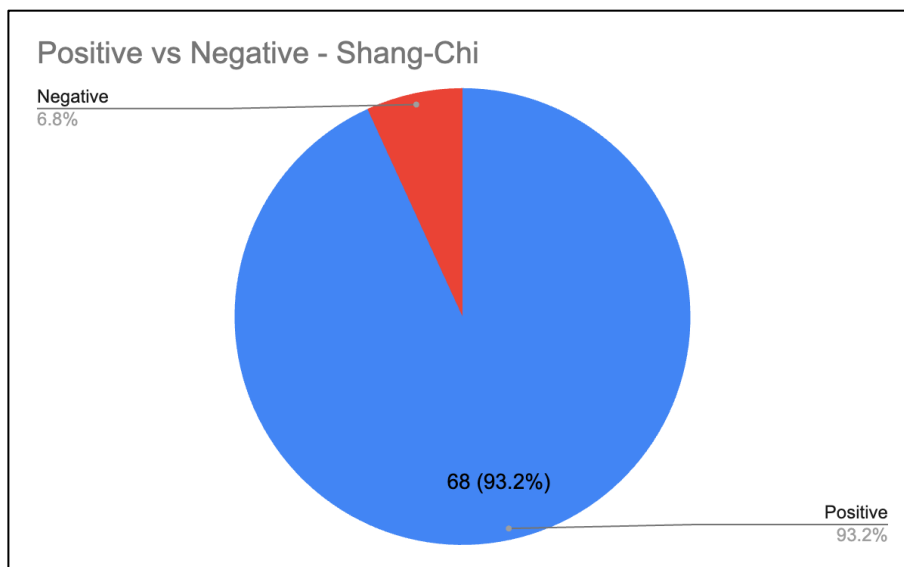


Figure 1.2 – The distribution of positive and negative posts for *Shang-Chi* out of 73 posts in total

Further analysis of the *Mulan* data set showed that the most prevalent complaint people had about the movie was with respect to the storyline and the use of Chinese folklore with 57 out of the 93 posts being critical of this aspect of the movie. Generally, the issues people had with the storyline were cultural in nature as most people felt that Chinese culture was not accurately or adequately represented, and they were less concerned about gender representation in the storyline. There was significant overlap of the storyline and cultural themes so most of the negative posts were about those two. Of the 93 posts, 55 were about the cultural aspects of the film and 27 of them were about the gender aspects of the film so there were twice as many posts about cultural representation.

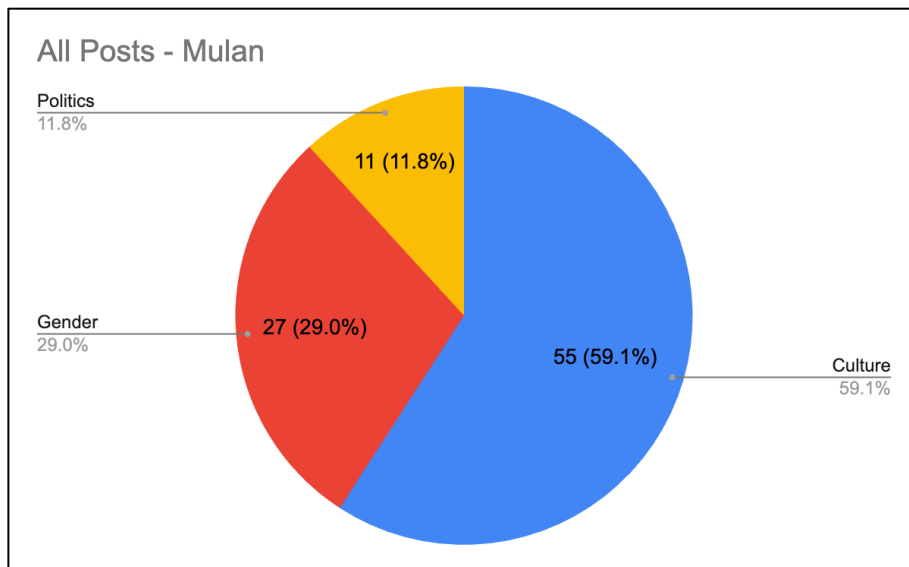


Figure 1.3 – The distribution of all 93 *Mulan* posts by categories of gender, culture, and politics.

Out of the 22 positive posts, 5 of them were about culture in the film, 16 of them were about gender, and 1 was about politics.

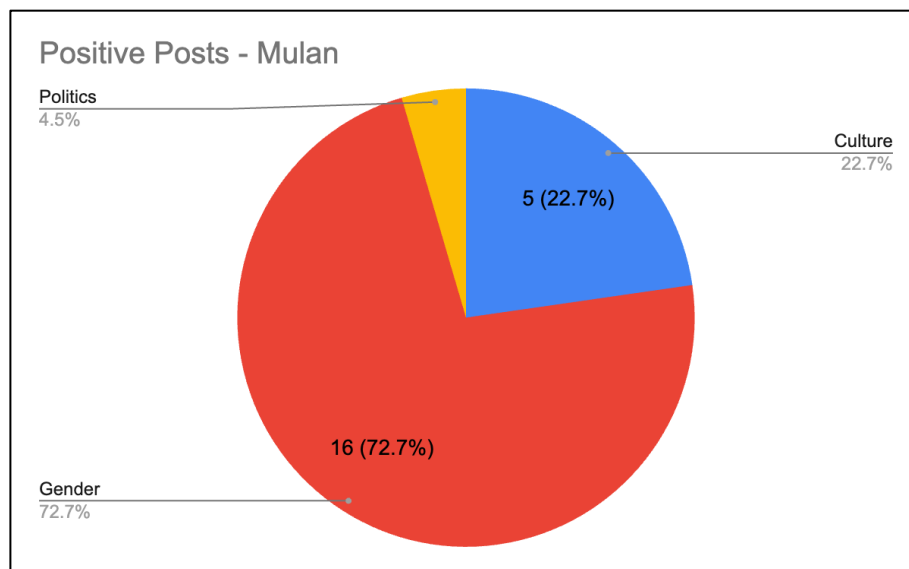


Figure 1.4 – The distribution of the 22 positive *Mulan* posts by categories of gender, culture, and politics.

Of the 71 negative posts, 50 of them were about culture, 11 of them were about gender, and 10 of them were about politics. While the posts about politics do not directly fall under culture or gender representation, they were included because they were critical of the lead actress and her political views.

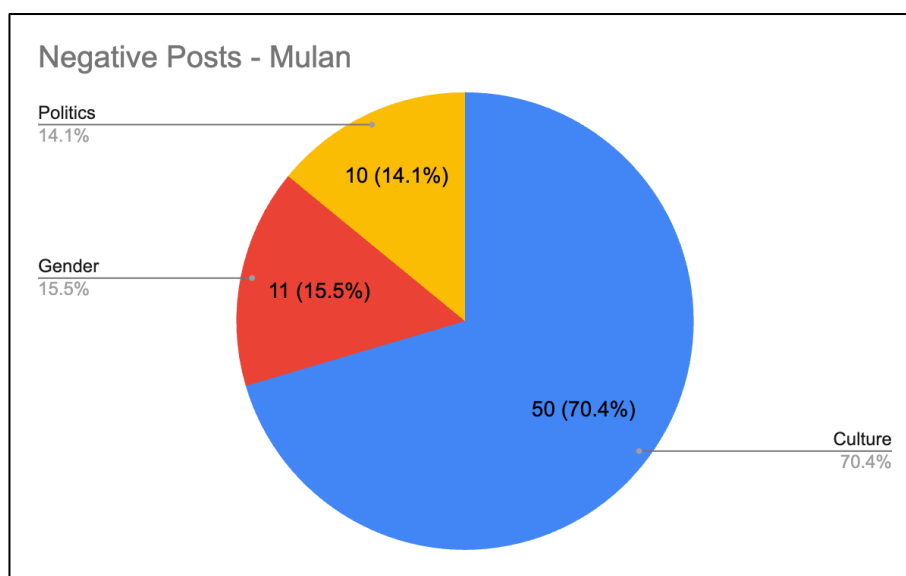


Figure 1.5 – The distribution of the 71 negative *Mulan* posts by categories of gender, culture, and politics.

Analysis of the *Shang-Chi* data set showed that people had the opposite view about that movie with people being overwhelmingly positive about almost all aspects of the movie. Like *Mulan*, the majority of the posts were commenting on the cultural aspects of the film rather than the gendered aspects of the film with 57 out of the 73 posts being cultural in nature. There was some overlap of gender and culture with 4 out of the 73 posts pertaining to both themes. The 8 posts categorized as “other” have been included because while they do not directly reference cultural representation in *Shang-Chi*, they pertain to the impacts *Shang-Chi* and Simu Liu had on cultural representation in Hollywood.

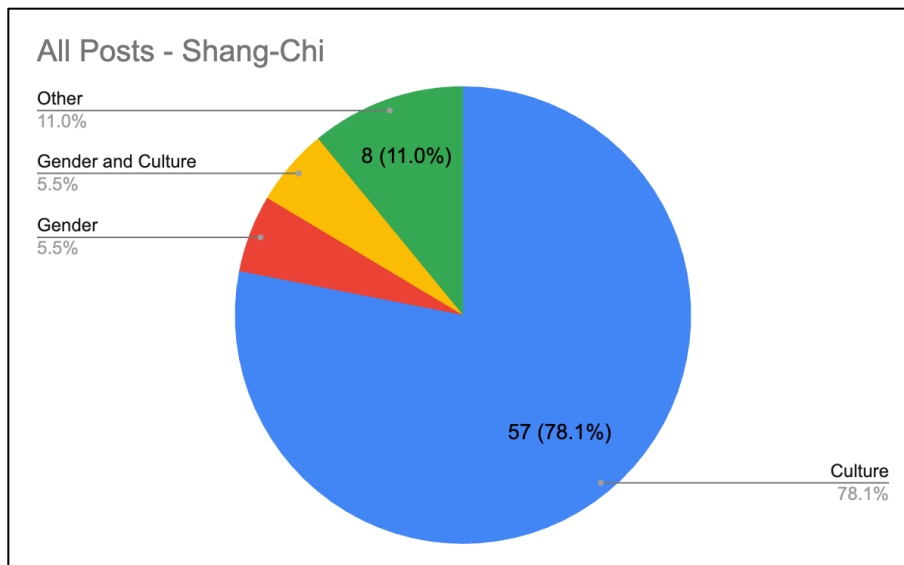


Figure 1.6 – The distribution of all 73 *Shang-Chi* posts by categories of gender, culture, gender and culture, and other.

In contrast to *Mulan*, opinions regarding cultural representation in the film were largely favourable with 52 out of the 68 positive posts pertaining to cultural representation.

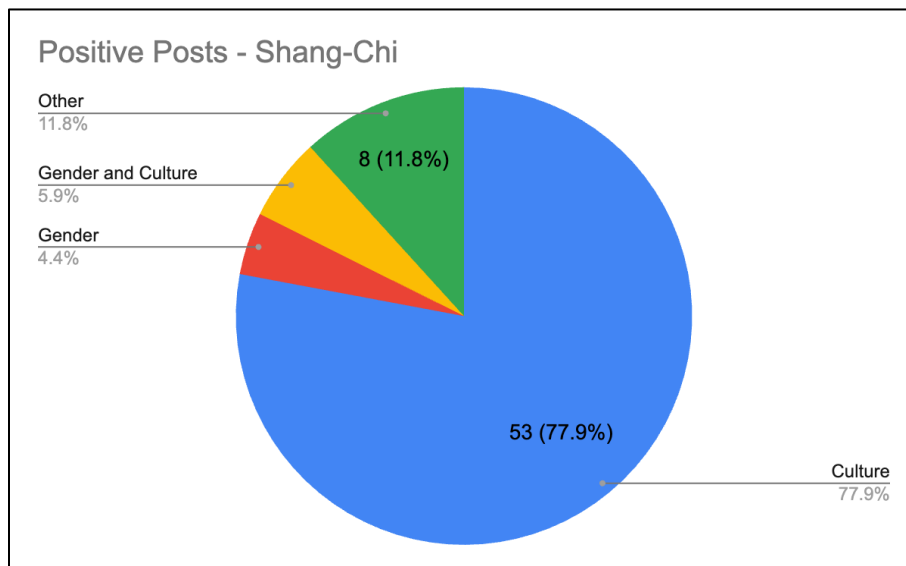


Figure 1.7 – The distribution of the 68 positive posts about *Shang-Chi* by categories of gender, culture, gender and culture, and other.

In general, people appreciated the depictions of Chinese culture throughout *Shang-Chi's* storyline and felt that the representation was more authentic. Although there were considerably fewer negative posts, 4 of the 5 were also about cultural representation with the remaining post pertaining to gender representation.

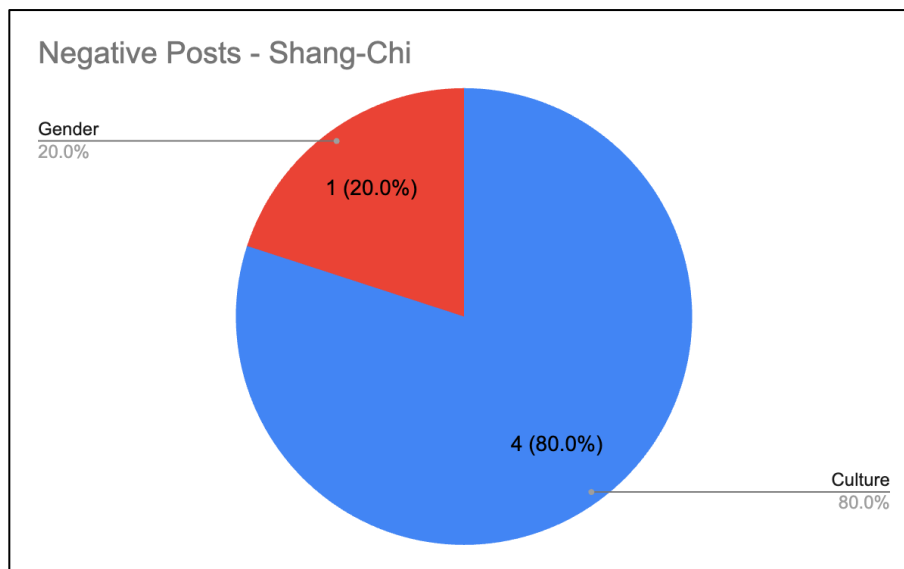


Figure 1.8 – The distribution of the 5 negative posts about *Shang-Chi* by categories of gender and culture.

While there may have been less direct commentary about gender representation in each of the films, it is important to note that being the film with the female lead, *Mulan* received far more criticism than *Shang-Chi*. Although the majority of the criticism was with respect to cultural representation rather than gender representation, the presence of a female versus a male lead is a crucial factor to consider when trying to understand the difference in responses. In my discussion, I will propose a few explanations as to how the intersectionality between gender and culture affected how the public responded to the two movies.

Discussion

Reponses to *Mulan*

The largely negative response to *Mulan* can be attributed to a number of factors. Firstly, one of the recurring issues that came up throughout the posts was the integration of Chinese culture and folklore into the storyline. As many people pointed out, the production staff was predominantly white so most of the cultural representation seemed to fall flat. Having a predominantly Asian cast is a promising step, but without the appropriate representation behind the scenes, stories about minorities will continue to lack authenticity. On the production staff of *Mulan*, the director, screen writers, and costume designer were all white and this had a significant effect on how people perceived the story. Considering that one of the main goals of the live-action remake was to make it more culturally accurate, the lack of Chinese production staff put the film at a disadvantage before it was even released. One X user summed this idea up in their post where they state,

We've already had the same old tired conversation about representation. It's not enough for us to see ourselves on the screen anymore. Let us tell our own stories too. We know how to navigate "Disney culture" and "Chinese culture". We've grown up in both.

Knowing that these prominent members of the production crew were white before the movie was released meant that people were already going into it expecting the representation to be poor. One of the most prominent examples of this was about the use of "Qi" in the storyline. People took issue with this concept from both a gendered and a cultural perspective and the use of qi is generally viewed as one of the main sources of misunderstanding between the production staff and the audience. In the live-action remake of *Mulan* we learn that she possesses a very strong qi which essentially gives her supernatural abilities. In this case it is used as a metaphor

for feminine power and once *Mulan* learns how to harness her qi, she is able to fulfill her true potential as a powerful warrior (Wang, 2022). The issue with the concept of qi being portrayed this way is two-fold as it creates a cultural and a gendered disconnect that people attributed to the fact that a mostly white production crew was responsible for a film about a Chinese folk story. Audiences were very quick to pick up on this with an X user commenting, “So Disney wanted to appeal to the Chinese audience... By having an entirely white writing staff?”.

In Chinese philosophy, Qi is “used to describe all the manifestations and interinfluences of the relationships between mankind and the world” (Chen, 2020, p. 48). For Western scholars, the easiest way to understand Qi was by referring to it as force or energy (Jiajia & Haosheng, 2022). By using Qi as a gendered form of magic, the production team of *Mulan* fundamentally misrepresented Qi since at its roots it is not gender specific and it is not magic (Wang, 2022). Part of the appeal of *Mulan* is that it shows how an ordinary girl is able to persevere and find success against all odds and by using the concept of Qi as magic it instead implies that her success is attributed to her supernatural abilities instead of her hard work to improve her skills. People were quite critical of this as one X user states, “Look the whole point of Mulan is that it’s a story of a girl who rises above societal expectations and standards, by bastardizing and genderizing the concept of Qi to give Mulan powers makes this retelling garbage.”. Another X user shared that same sentiment stating that,

#Mulan is about a ordinary woman trained very hard to become a soldier and that’s why we feel for her. But this remake draws her as a woman with magical power and can fight without much effort. It really defeated the strong Mulan we like.

Some Chinese audiences even referred to the remake as another “Wonder Woman” which is far from the initial message of the story of *Mulan* (Tong, 2022). Therefore, the use of Qi in this way

not only deviates from one of the central messages of *Mulan*, but it also misrepresents what Qi is from both a gendered and cultural perspective.

Furthermore, the cultural significance of *Mulan* meant that people were holding the production staff to a higher standard. *Mulan* has been an important cultural figure in China for thousands of years which means that people are naturally going to be more critical of attempts to produce film adaptations of her story. The story of *Mulan* originates from a narrative folk song called *The Ballad of Mulan* and dates back to the Northern Wei dynasty during the years 386-534 (Tong, 2022). Throughout the years there have been countless reiterations and adaptations of this story which have all solidified *Mulan*'s place in Chinese culture. In fact, she has become such a significant piece of Chinese culture that there are temples built in her honour called Mulanci (Tong, 2022). As one X user commented, "Maybe they should've hired someone Chinese to write, direct, or produce a historical epic about a legendary Chinese folk heroine #Mulan". A figure with that much cultural importance means that people are naturally going to be more critical of any adaptations of her story and any perceived shortcomings in the production are going to be judged more harshly.

The live-action *Mulan* also fell victim to the political climate leading up to the film's release. There was a significant amount of backlash against the lead actress Liu Yifei because she had voiced her support of the Hong Kong police during the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Protests. People raised significant concerns about the police brutality that was occurring in Hong Kong and Liu Yifei's support of the police was received very poorly which prompted a widespread call to boycott *Mulan* (Wang, 2022). Most of the responses to this were very critical with many people echoing the same sentiments as an X user who posted "How do you reconcile about talking about loyal, brave and true while your leading actress supports police

brutality against children, pregnant women, and thousands of pro-democracy protestors in HK? #BoycottMulan and say no to #PoliceBrutality”. However, there were a few posts that expressed a different opinion like one X user asking, “What has an actress's political view have anything to do with her ability to entertain and perform her role?”. From these posts, it was apparent that the vast majority of people took issue with the perceived disconnect between the lead actress and the character she was portraying, but there were a few individuals that questioned why people were so outspoken about the Liu Yifei’s political views.

Responses to *Shang-Chi*

The circumstances surrounding *Shang-Chi* resulted in a much more positive outlook on the movie. One of the biggest differences lies in the origin of the story. *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* is based on the Marvel comics series and while the comics are still culturally significant, they do not have the thousands of years of history that *Mulan* does. Since the story of *Shang-Chi* does not have the same kind of cultural significance therefore any adaptations of the story would be met with much less scrutiny. The *Shang-Chi* comics perpetuate a stereotypical representation of Asians and are based heavily on the idea of “yellow peril” (Nguyen, 2022). Given that the source material is already problematic, that means any attempted improvements made to gender and cultural representation are more likely to be received positively. Even if the changes made did not completely address the problematic aspects of the comics, people were still appreciative to see that improvements were in fact made.

One of the most substantial changes made to the source material was to the main villain of the movie. In the comics, the villain was Dr. Fu Manchu who was a character initially developed by Sax Rohmer in 1910 (Mok, 1998). This character is the classic embodiment of “yellow peril” and reinforced the view that Asians were a threat to Western civilization. Instead

of using this character in the movie, the production team created the character Wenwu to replace Dr. Fu Manchu and people generally responded positively to this change. Although Wenwu was the villain, audiences were able to connect with him due to the depth of his character (Pak et al., 2023). His well-rounded and nuanced character development was seen as a necessary departure from the traditional one-dimensional characters people are used to seeing with regards to Asian characters on screen.

There was also a lot more appreciation for the way Chinese culture and folklore was integrated into the storyline as this was also seen as an improvement from the original source material. This was another area where the movie benefited from being based on a story that was less significant to Chinese culture. The original comics were written with little regard for being an accurate portrayal to Chinese culture and given that the comics already deal with a fantasy element people were less critical of the fantasy elements in the film. An X user expressed their support for this stating, “#shangchi spoilers // when the dragon came up and it was a water dragon like in actual chinese mythology rather than a fire one, i cannot explain how happy i was”. The inclusion of these fantasy elements was considered an improvement even though the use of these mythological creatures was more for aesthetic purposes rather than their proper symbolic purpose (Nguyen, 2022).

The time period the movie was based in also impacted how people responded to representation in the film. Since the film was set in present day, people also appreciated how the movie portrayed the Asian-American experience and the integration of real-life parallels into the storyline. People expressed overwhelmingly positive opinions about how Asian-American family dynamics were depicted. Representing Asian families in a more nuanced way combats a number of stereotypes that have plagued Asian representation in film over the years. One of the major

stereotypes this film addressed was the *perpetual foreigner* myth. By showing the Asian-American experience, it gives Asian audiences a sense of belonging and it demonstrates that their lived experiences are not only valid, but also shared by a whole community of people. This in turn can help Asian-Americans deal with the acculturative stress that many immigrants face when trying to find their place in a new country as they try to reconcile the values of two different cultures (Besana et al., 2020). As one X user posted, “As it breaks stereotype of Chinese as only communist image or Bruce Lee. Because there's American Born Chinese & Chinese living in other cultures as minority, all these are Rep by Shang-Chi & Katy”.

A great example of this from the movie is when *Shang-Chi* talks about how he changed his name upon moving to America from *Shang-Chi* to Shaun to try to fit in better with society. For many Asian Americans, changing their name is a way to try to fit into society better to avoid discrimination (Chou & Feagin, 2015a). Many Asian American parents are very aware of how Asian names would be perceived in society and they make the conscious choice to give their children English names. All the most common names Asian American parents choose for their children now are English in an attempt to shield their children from potentially being ridiculed because of their name. Although it is only mentioned briefly, the fact that *Shang-Chi* acknowledges the reality that many Asian Americans deal with was an important detail for the production team to include.

The film also addressed the model minority myth as well by mentioning how the two main characters Shaun and Katy are highly over-qualified for their valet jobs (Nguyen, 2022). Shaun and Katy are pushed to aim higher since Katy has an honours degree from UC Berkeley and Shaun can speak four languages. This pressure to live up to the idea of being a “model minority” and to be continually striving for excellence puts a lot of stress on Asian Americans

and can lead to significant mental health issues that are often overlooked (Shih et al., 2019). Acknowledging that this stereotype exists is important because this stereotype impacts all minorities, not just Asian-Americans and in order to begin the process of undoing its negative effects we first have to be aware of it.

Audiences were also impressed with how the production team incorporated Mandarin into the film to help demonstrate the nuances of the relationship between language and cultural identity. As one X user states,

Was pleasantly surprised when the film started off in Mandarin. I loved that the Mandarin dialogue reflected a lot of what our parents would say to us, and made it much more impactful. Would be interested in reading more about the details of specific Mandarin dialogue! #shangchi.

Characters in the film also had varying levels of proficiency with Mandarin which was very effective in highlighting the different ways in which people experience and express their cultural identity (Nguyen, 2022). Many of the characters in the movie are quite proficient in Mandarin and they will have conversations entirely in Mandarin, but there are also other characters like Katy that do not speak the language very well. Katy's use of the language is often a mix of Mandarin and English as she's not proficient enough to have full conversations in Mandarin. A lot of people appreciated this inclusion because it represents all the Asian-Americans who struggle with this aspect of their identity. An X user expressed this sentiment in their post, "I loved it too!!! It was a great blend of old style hong kong movies and Asian American culture. And Awkwafina's character not understanding all Mandarin was so awesome to see."

Shang-Chi was much more successful in this area because there was significantly more Asian representation within the production staff. This is apparent in the way Chinese culture and the Asian-American experience is incorporated into even the small details of the film resulting in a more nuanced representation. The movie was directed by Destin Daniel Cretton and was screen written by Dave Callaham who are two Asian Americans (Nguyen, 2022). The music in the movie was also produced by a company called 88rising and they focus on promoting Asian and Asian-American musicians. Audiences were quick to notice this with one X user saying “TYVM @destindaniel & Dave Callaham for writing this captivating story w/ the tiniest details of E.Asian/AsAm culture & IDs explicitly displayed & beautifully crafted in this film. To the actors&actresses, hot damn! We need more of you everywhere! [...]”. Incorporating this level of diversity into the production staff is what allows more authentic representations to be brought on screen and gives audiences more compelling and realistic stories.

Mulan versus Shang-Chi

Mulan and *Shang-Chi* got such different responses and this calls into question why there was such a large discrepancy in how people viewed each movie. The first reason for this is cultural in nature which is the origin of each of the stories. As mentioned in my individual analysis of each of the movies, the two stories differ in their cultural significance. *Mulan* is a story that is ingrained in Chinese culture and has been passed down and retold for hundreds of years whereas *Shang-Chi* is a comic written in the United States and was essentially a caricature of Chinese culture. That meant the two films were going to be held to different standards which should have been taken into consideration during production. *Mulan* was naturally going to be held to a higher standard than *Shang-Chi*, so every choice made during the production of *Mulan*

was going to be much more heavily scrutinized starting with the diversity of the staff for each movie.

Asians and Asian-Americans were far more involved in every aspect of *Shang-Chi* when compared to *Mulan*. Hiring Destin Daniel Cretton to direct the film was crucial in ensuring that the Asian-American experiences incorporated into the story were an accurate reflection of people's lived experiences. His influence on production had a strong impact on the audience's response to the film with people attributing much of the film's success directly to him and the writer Dave Callaham as one X user posted,

It's about giving Asian/American artists the opportunity because the audience is out there. Also significant, both #CrazyRichAsians & #ShangChi had Asian American writers & directors. We need representation behind & in front of the camera. And Michelle Yeoh. Always Michelle Yeoh.

When you hire someone from outside the culture to direct a cultural film, they are going to miss crucial details and nuances that make the representation authentic because they lack the lived experience, so any representation is going to appear very surface-level. Some of this could be mitigated by incorporating someone from that culture into other aspects of production like in screenwriting, costumes, or the soundtrack and this is where *Mulan* fell flat compared to *Shang-Chi*. Niki Caro, the director of *Mulan*, stated in her talk at The Power of Inclusion Summit in New Zealand that she worked with the same team that she previously worked with on a different Disney film called *MacFarland USA* (Caro, 2019). She said that based on the success of *MacFarland USA*, Disney had chosen her to direct *Mulan*, but instead of adapting the team to best suit the story, she kept the same team. To the audiences this meant there was no attempt to ensure that there was adequate representation behind the screen as well. This is one of the

biggest factors that contributed to *Mulan*'s downfall and the area where *Shang-Chi* managed to find more success.

The second reason is because *Shang-Chi* also benefitted from the societal default being male, so it had less to contend with in terms of representation. During production they really only had to consider cultural representation, so they were able to put more resources into that to ensure accuracy both on screen and behind the screen. There were of course gendered considerations they had to make since they did have to combat a number of negative stereotypes that are typical for representations of Asian men, but cultural representation was a much more substantial component of the movie. Considering men typically make up the majority of the production staff in Hollywood in general, they would not have had to put extra effort into making sure men were included (Erigha, 2015). Therefore, they did not suffer from the same dilemma that the *Mulan* team suffered from which was trying to prioritize one aspect over the other. This dilemma is in line with what Karniouchina et al. (2022) found where even though "female directors are closely tied to the gender of the lead actor, the same is not true of minority directors, mainly because so many nonminority directors are selected for projects involving minority stars." (p.11).

Trying to prioritize one form of representation was one of the other main issues that led to *Mulan*'s failure because it meant that Disney approached the movie from a feminist perspective first and the cultural perspective second. Instead of looking at the *Mulan* as a cultural story with a female lead, they looked at it like a female story with a cultural background which may not seem like a huge difference, but it significantly impacted how the film was produced. In her talk at The Power of Inclusion Summit, Caro (2019) mentions several times how many women were involved in the production, but she makes almost no mention of how many Chinese

people were involved with the production. Considering that both gender and culture are important factors to this movie, they should have ensured that both of them were addressed. Caro's (2019) understanding of the story of *Mulan* was that it was "[...] essentially about a young woman who comes to understand and appreciate and respect her own power [...]". While that is the foundational message of the story, the crucial part that they missed was that it is about a young Chinese woman. This fundamental misunderstanding is the root of many of the issues that plagued the movie like the diversity of the production staff.

The third reason can be inferred from the political commentary surrounding *Mulan*. There was little to no political commentary regarding *Shang-Chi*, but people were very vocal about the political situation surrounding *Mulan*. Hong Kong was a British Colony for over a century before it was given back to China in 1997 under the "one country, two systems" unification framework (Wang, 2023). Under this framework Hong Kong was supposed to maintain its autonomy and be able to govern themselves, but the Chinese government is continually trying to undermine this. The Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Protests were in response to the proposed amendments made to an extradition law that would allow Hong Kong fugitives to be surrendered to jurisdictions where they do not have any judicial control therefore restricting Hong Kong's independence (Wang, 2023). During the protests, the police in Hong Kong were getting increasingly violent when responding to protesters and there was strong public outcry regarding the police brutality (Wang, 2022). When Liu Yifei posted on social media expressing support for the Hong Kong police, she faced significant backlash online that led to many calls to boycott *Mulan*.

The problem with this is that even though she publicly expressed these views, we do not know whether she believes them or not because Chinese celebrities are held to a very different

standard than Western celebrities and their activities are very highly regulated by the government (Xu & Yang, 2021). Failing to comply with government expectations can result in something called “fengsha” which essentially bans celebrities from their careers. According to Xu & Yang (2021) “fengsha” is an

[...] extra-legal means to prohibit stars and artists from gaining public attention if they breach legal or ethical obligations or openly express politically incorrect viewpoints in their professional work (e.g. in artistic works or media interviews) or everyday life (e.g. on social media). (p. 205).

For Chinese celebrities, publicly disagreeing with the government can irrevocably ruin their career so speaking up is not the simple task that most people in the West are used to.

It is also important to note that Donnie Yen, the actor who played the Commander Tung in *Mulan*, also posted on social media in support of the Hong Kong police, but none of the posts in my data set ever commented on his political stance. Liu Yifei took the brunt of all the backlash even though she was not the only cast member to express her political views on social media. This then brings up the question of why the negative response was so concentrated on Liu Yifei. Part of the discrepancy can be attributed to the roles each of them were playing. People had a hard time reconciling the values that *Mulan* stands for and the values that Liu Yifei stands for. Commander Tung as a character already had an established role in the army so Donnie Yen expressing support for the Hong Kong police did not seem as far removed from the character, he was portraying therefore people may not have been as quick to notice.

This also calls attention to the double standard that women are held to as public figures. When women make mistakes, they are scrutinized more and any perceived failures are punished more severely (Tinsley & Ely, 2018). Liu Yifei and Donnie Yen both made the same mistake of

indicating support for the Hong Kong police, but only Liu Yifei received harsh public criticism for this. This created a greater problem for *Mulan* because women and minority directors face stronger biases when they are working on a film with a female or minority lead (Karniouchina et al., 2022). Therefore, *Mulan* was at a significant disadvantage given that it had a female minority lead and a female director when compared to *Shang-Chi* which had a male minority lead and a male minority director. Based on this, anything that was viewed as a mistake with regards to the *Mulan* production was going to be judged more harshly given the compounding demographics of the director and the film lead and this is where the intersectionality of gender and culture becomes apparent.

In the case of the movies *Mulan* and *Shang-Chi*, the intersectionality of gender and culture lies in having a female lead with Chinese culture versus a male lead with Chinese culture. With Western society, the default tends to be white males which means any deviation from that results in more obstacles to contend with and as such *Mulan* had to contend with gender and culture whereas *Shang-Chi* only had to contend with culture. Disney choosing to hire Niki Caro as the director of *Mulan* shows how they were unwilling to fully address the intersectionality of gender and culture because of the perceived risks of having a minority director working on a film with a minority lead.

In her talk, Niki Caro (2019) states that during production, they had to consider Chinese culture and Disney culture and that Disney felt that she was equipped to handle both. However, the Marvel movie *Eternals* released in 2021, was directed by Chloé Zhao who is an Asian-American woman (Schaefer, 2020). Choosing Zhao to direct the *Eternals* shows that there were female Asian directors they could have chosen, but since gender was prioritized over culture for *Mulan*, that impacted the choices that were made regarding the production staff. Therefore, these

choices made during production while trying to balance the intersectionality of gender and culture do have implications on the outcomes of the films and how they are received by audiences. Given that gender and culture are societal concepts that are institutionalized through politics, it is important to also consider their intersectionality with politics. This is likely why there was a significant amount of political commentary regarding *Mulan* because gender and culture are highly politicized, and this will be another important consideration going forward.

Reflections

One of the unexpected dilemmas I found while collecting the data for this research was how political the discussion was surrounding *Mulan*. The goal of this research was to understand the intersectionality between gender and cultural representation and while those two aspects are influenced by politics, it was not feasible to include politics within this research project. This was more difficult to do than initially anticipated because of the unexpected number of posts that pertained to both gender and politics, so it was hard to isolate content for gender representation. With many of the posts regarding gender representation in *Mulan*, I had to consider whether it actually had to do with gender representation or whether it was mainly political commentary coming from a gendered perspective. In the end, I did end up keeping several of the more political posts in my data set because although they were political in nature, they did provide commentary on the representation of *Mulan* as the female main character. Since it was difficult to completely separate gender and politics then future research encompassing race, gender, and politics would provide additional insight into the intersectionality between the three. Often barriers to improving gender and cultural representation are institutionalized politically so understanding this factor more would open up more opportunities to address those barriers. This research was also limited in scope due to resource constraints so while it provides a starting point

to be able to address the issue of representation, there is still the need for more research on this topic in the future.

As a woman of Chinese descent, I was initially looking forward to having a live-action adaptation of *Mulan* as the animated version was a very important movie to me growing up. Given the lack of representation for my demographic in Hollywood, it was disappointing to see that the live-action version did not turn out as well as I had hoped, and that the public generally did not receive it well either. When *Shang-Chi* was released a year later, I was looking forward to that as a Marvel fan as well but given that it has a similar premise to *Mulan* in that it was a fairly stereotypical martial arts movie, I was surprised to see the overwhelmingly positive reception. Like many other Chinese Canadians and Chinese Americans, we want to continue to see increased representation across all forms of media, but it is also important to make sure the representation is accurate and respectful otherwise it can do more harm than good. Seeing how greatly the public reception of each of these movies differed provided a good opportunity to understand how factors like gender and culture impact representation on screen and also impact public opinion as well. Further insight into this will hopefully allow representation in Hollywood to continue to progress both on screen and behind the screen so that minorities will have more meaningful opportunities to share their stories.

Conclusion

Based on the responses to both movies there was more discussion regarding cultural representation in the films rather than gender representation. There was hardly any mention of gender representation in *Shang-Chi* and with *Mulan* the limited positive feedback was mostly attributed to gender representation. Even though *Shang-Chi* was a yet another movie with a male lead, people did not express dissatisfaction with this fact because they were happy to see an

improvement in cultural representation. With *Mulan*, the potential impacts of this movie were more multifaceted, so any improvements made to gender representation were overshadowed by the perceived shortcomings of the cultural representation. Given the very limited number of movies that have an Asian female lead, people do want to see a greater quantity of those movies, but they also want greater quality as well.

While I do believe some of the criticism of *Mulan* was due to the presence of a female lead, the poor reception the film received cannot be attributed entirely to the fact that it was a female led movie. There was valid criticism regarding the cultural representation in the film due to the story's cultural significance and lack of cultural diversity on the production team. However, given that there were still some issues with representation in *Shang-Chi*, it is reasonable to say that the criticism *Mulan* received was exacerbated by the fact that both the lead and the director were female.

To avoid this response going forward, it will be essential for movie studios to consider diversity of their production staff from all aspects. In looking at *Mulan* and *Shang-Chi*, it is clear that prioritizing one form of representation is not sufficient because audiences are able to tell and, in this case, it was detrimental for *Mulan*. As demonstrated earlier, other studies have also shown that one of the most effective ways to improve representation is to let minorities tell their own stories. However, it is not enough to just pick and choose which aspect to focus on given that identities like gender and culture intersect to impact how everyone experiences the world. To ensure that representation is perceived the way it is intended, it has to be improved from behind the scenes as well. It is not enough to just include more diversity in leading roles anymore because people also want to see authenticity. The success of *Shang-Chi* showed that people want

to see more stories about minorities told by minorities, and it is time for Hollywood to embrace that if they want to see continued success both domestically and internationally.

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Appendix A: Code Books

Figure 1: *Mulan* Code Book

Positive
Negative
More political
Storyline/folklore
Disliked lead actress
Gender
Culture
Remove

Figure 2: *Shang-Chi* Code Book

Positive
Negative
Language (mandarin)
Storyline - real life parallels
Less commentary on actor
Gender
Culture
Hollywood/box office
Remove

Appendix B: Data Collection Links

Sites used:

X – Mulan:

[https://twitter.com/search?q=\(%23Mulan\)%20until%3A2020-09-07%20since%3A2020-09-04&src=recent_search_click](https://twitter.com/search?q=(%23Mulan)%20until%3A2020-09-07%20since%3A2020-09-04&src=recent_search_click)

X- Shang-Chi:

[https://twitter.com/search?q=\(%23ShangChi\)%20until%3A2021-09-06%20since%3A2021-09-03&src=typed_query](https://twitter.com/search?q=(%23ShangChi)%20until%3A2021-09-06%20since%3A2021-09-03&src=typed_query)

Data Collection Spreadsheet:

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1nPQmifaeVAqaKjwIPdunD6f92ZyUUjONRwjom03MXr4/edit?usp=sharing>