



Performative Diversity Or Meaningful Inclusion? Examining Tokenism, “Wokeism” And The Erosion Of Legacy In Marvel’s Post-2020 Cinematic Universe

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Abstract: The increasing emphasis on diversity and inclusion in Hollywood, particularly post-2020, has sparked extensive debate surrounding the authenticity and effectiveness of representation. With major franchises like Marvel embracing a more 'woke' agenda, the industry appears to be responding to long-standing demands for inclusivity. However, these efforts are frequently criticized for devolving into tokenism—where minority characters are inserted superficially rather than integrated meaningfully. This paper investigates the distinction between genuine representation and performative inclusion in major Hollywood productions, focusing on Marvel films and Disney+ shows released after 2020. Through detailed textual analysis and examination of critical and audience reception, the research highlights the implications of forced representation, diminishing box office returns, and alienation of core fanbases. The study argues that while the intent behind diverse casting is commendable, its execution often undermines narrative integrity and alienates viewers, ultimately threatening the cultural and commercial sustainability of iconic franchises.

Keywords: Representation, Tokenism, Wokeism, Marvel, Diversity, Inclusion, Hollywood, Identity Politics, Pop Culture, Box Office

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the global resurgence of social justice movements in 2020—sparked by events like the Black Lives Matter protests—Hollywood has been under intensified scrutiny regarding its approach to race, gender, and identity. Studios have responded with a seemingly progressive wave of representation. However, critics argue that many of these efforts are not rooted in authentic storytelling but are instead performative responses to social pressures. This has given rise to the term "wokeism"—a politicized buzzword that simultaneously celebrates and critiques the infusion of progressive values into mainstream entertainment.

The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), a cultural juggernaut in global cinema, offers a unique case study to explore this dichotomy. The post-2020 era has seen a significant shift in Marvel's casting and narratives, introducing characters of diverse backgrounds, sexualities, and identities. Yet, the reception has been polarized. While some hail it as a much-needed corrective to decades of exclusion, others criticize the lack of depth, accusing the studio of prioritizing representation over storytelling.

This paper aims to dissect this debate by analyzing key Marvel films released after 2020, examining both their content and the broader cultural reception. The research probes the line between representation and tokenism, investigating how and why certain portrayals succeed or fail, and the consequences these portrayals have on fan engagement and financial returns.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) has long been hailed as a cultural and commercial powerhouse, reshaping Hollywood's approach to blockbuster filmmaking and franchise storytelling. Since the debut of Iron Man in 2008, the MCU has expanded into a sprawling interconnected narrative universe spanning films, television series, and streaming platforms. Under the guidance of Kevin Feige, the MCU not only redefined audience expectations of continuity and character development but also established itself as a central pillar of global pop culture, with films like *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) breaking box office records and setting new industry standards.

Scholarly and critical literature surrounding the MCU has increasingly focused on its sociopolitical dimensions. Early academic analyses (Burke, 2015; Johnson, 2018) praised the franchise for its myth-making qualities and modern hero archetypes, while later studies began to interrogate its handling of race, gender, and national identity. Warner (2021) argues that the MCU reflects shifting American ideologies, often acting as a mirror to contemporary cultural anxieties and aspirations. Similarly, Phillips (2020) discusses how superhero narratives post-2016 have become more overtly politicized, attempting to address themes such as systemic inequality, empowerment, and social justice.

However, a growing body of literature has also critiqued what has been termed as “performative progressivism” in Hollywood. Ahmed (2021) warns that increasing diversity in casting does not always translate to authentic representation, particularly when minority characters are underwritten or reduced to symbolic placeholders. This aligns with Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality (1989), which emphasizes that representation must go beyond visual presence to encompass narrative agency and complexity.

Recent media scholarship (Lee, 2022; Thomas & Gupta, 2023) has specifically focused on the MCU's post-2020 shift toward inclusivity. These studies note a discernible increase in characters representing marginalized identities but highlight issues of tokenism and narrative shallowness. For instance, characters like America Chavez (*Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness*) and Riri Williams (*Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*) have been critiqued in fan and academic circles for being hastily introduced without sufficient character development or organic integration into the storyline.

Fan studies also play a critical role in understanding reception. Jenkins (2006) highlights the importance of participatory culture in shaping media narratives, and in the case of Marvel, fan backlash—particularly over perceived “forced representation”—has become a dominant aspect of discourse on platforms like Reddit, YouTube, and Twitter. These reactions underscore a key point: as franchises like the MCU shift to meet social expectations, they must navigate the delicate balance between inclusivity and narrative integrity.

In this context, the present study contributes to the existing literature by focusing specifically on the distinction between representation and tokenism in post-2020 MCU productions. By analyzing audience responses, critical reviews, and box office data, the research aims to interrogate whether Marvel's attempts at progressive storytelling succeed in meaningful inclusion or fall into the trap of superficial “wokeism.”

III. UNDERSTANDING REPRESENTATION, TOKENISM AND “WOKEISM”

Representation, tokenism, and wokeism have become central concepts in the discourse surrounding diversity and inclusion in popular media, particularly in the post-2020 entertainment landscape.

Representation refers to the conscious and intentional inclusion of characters from various social, cultural, racial, gender, and sexual backgrounds in media narratives. True representation goes beyond mere visibility; it involves providing characters with depth, complexity, and a meaningful role in the storyline that reflects their unique identity and experience. When executed thoughtfully, representation fosters empathy, broadens perspectives, and allows underrepresented audiences to see themselves in positions of power, heroism, or emotional complexity. It involves the portrayal of different groups in media, ideally reflecting the diversity of

the real world. Genuine representation is holistic—it not only casts diverse actors but also gives them meaningful roles, complex character arcs, and cultural authenticity.

In contrast, tokenism is the superficial or symbolic inclusion of minority characters—added to a story primarily to give the appearance of diversity, often without substantial character development, agency, or narrative importance. It is the superficial inclusion of marginalized characters, often without depth or narrative significance, used to signal progressiveness rather than embody it. Token characters frequently exist in isolation from the story's core themes and are sometimes introduced abruptly, serving more as tools for marketing or public relations than as integral parts of the plot. This practice not only fails to advance authentic inclusion but can also reinforce stereotypes, marginalize the represented group further, and diminish the audience's connection to the story.

Wokeism, in this context, refers to a heightened sensitivity to social inequalities and an active effort to address them—especially within media. While this can result in positive visibility for underrepresented groups, it can also manifest as checkbox diversity: an over-corrective attempt to include everyone without developing meaningful, coherent narratives. The concept of wokeism, originally derived from the African American vernacular expression "stay woke" (meaning to remain aware of social injustices), has evolved in mainstream discourse—often pejoratively—to refer to overtly progressive or politically correct content in media. While rooted in a legitimate call for social awareness, the term is now frequently used to critique what some perceive as forced ideological agendas in entertainment. In this context, wokeism is seen not as a genuine commitment to justice or equality, but as a form of virtue signaling, where inclusion is performative and employed to shield media products from criticism.

Together, these concepts form a complex matrix for evaluating the quality and intent behind diversity efforts in film and television. Representation, when rooted in good storytelling, can uplift and transform. Tokenism, by contrast, risks trivializing important identities, while wokeism—when reduced to corporate strategy—can provoke backlash and foster cynicism. Thus, it is critical for content creators to distinguish between meaningful representation and hollow gestures, recognizing that authenticity, narrative cohesion, and respect for the audience's intelligence are essential for successful and impactful storytelling.

This distinction is crucial. When studios prioritize representation as a marketing tool rather than a storytelling goal, they risk alienating audiences and trivializing the very identities they aim to uplift.

IV. MARVEL POST-2020: AN OVERVIEW OF KEY FILMS AND DISNEY+ SHOWS

Several Marvel productions released after 2020 have drawn both praise and criticism for their approaches to diversity. Notable examples include:

Eternals (2021): Introduced the MCU's first gay superhero (Phastos), its first deaf superhero (Makkari), and a racially diverse ensemble. However, critics and audiences alike pointed out the lack of chemistry, weak character development, and overstuffed narrative.

The Falcon and the Winter Soldier (2021): One of Marvel's first post-Endgame series to tackle pressing social and political themes head-on. The show centered on Sam Wilson (Falcon) grappling with the legacy of Captain America and eventually accepting the mantle as a Black superhero in a racially divided America. While the series was lauded for its ambition in addressing issues like race, nationalism, and systemic injustice, it also received criticism for its heavy-handed execution and inconsistent pacing. Critics noted that while the themes were timely and important, they often overshadowed character development and plot coherence.

Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness (2022): Introduced America Chavez, a Latina lesbian character. Despite her significance in the comics, she was given minimal development and largely served as a plot device.

Thor: Love and Thunder (2022): Featured Valkyrie's queer identity in a more explicit way, but her role was secondary and underdeveloped. Critics and audiences found the film tonally jarring and emotionally shallow, suggesting that diversity was emphasized without a solid narrative foundation.

Black Panther: Wakanda Forever (2022): Introduced Riri Williams (Ironheart), a young Black genius who creates an advanced Iron Man-like suit. Her sudden and underdeveloped inclusion was widely criticized. Many fans argued she felt like a politically motivated replacement for Iron Man. Given that Ironheart was a

commercial failure in comics, her leap to cinematic prominence seemed forced. Some contended that a more organic successor—such as Tony Stark’s daughter, introduced in *Avengers: Endgame*—would have provided stronger narrative continuity and audience connection.

She-Hulk: Attorney at Law (2022): A Disney+ series celebrated for breaking the fourth wall and feminist messaging, but often criticized for being preachy and tonally inconsistent. Critics pointed out that it leaned more on mocking established fan culture and gender stereotypes than offering rich character arcs.

Ms. Marvel (2022): Centered on a Pakistani-American teen and incorporated cultural specificity, but struggled with pacing and audience engagement.

The Marvels (2023): Touted as a female-led superhero ensemble but received a tepid box office response and mixed reviews, suggesting franchise fatigue or disconnect.

Secret Invasion (2023): *Secret Invasion* was a highly anticipated Marvel series that promised to deliver a thrilling espionage saga rooted in one of the comics’ most iconic storylines. It centers around a covert infiltration of Earth by shape-shifting Skrulls, creating an atmosphere of paranoia and mistrust among heroes and humans alike. The show aimed to explore themes of identity, loyalty, and deception on a grand scale within the MCU. However, despite these ambitions, the series faced significant criticism for its execution and narrative choices. It was widely criticized for its mishandling of one of Marvel’s most compelling storylines.

Each of these entries reveals the tension between intent and impact. Despite Marvel’s commendable efforts to diversify its universe, many of these characters were introduced with little depth, serving more as symbols than fully realized individuals. The perception of “forced representation”—where characters are included inorganically—has led to criticism that fan-favorite properties are being reshaped in ways that alienate core audiences.

V. EXPANDED ANALYSIS

5.1 Eternals

Eternals was a significant departure from Marvel’s typical formula, both in tone and representation. Directed by Oscar-winner Chloé Zhao, the film introduced one of the MCU’s most diverse ensembles, including characters of varied races, sexual orientations, abilities, and body types. Phastos, portrayed by Brian Tyree Henry, was Marvel’s first openly gay superhero, and the film featured a same-sex kiss—an unprecedented moment for the franchise. Even though a historic moment for the MCU, it felt more like a token gesture rather than an organic part of the narrative. Critics and audiences argued that Phastos’ storyline felt underdeveloped and rushed, with his family life inserted more as a symbolic gesture than as an emotionally resonant arc. Similar concerns were raised for other characters such as Makkari, the first deaf superhero in the MCU, and Gilgamesh and Kingo, whose cultural backgrounds were barely explored beyond surface-level traits. The film was also criticized for attempting to introduce ten new characters at once, leading to minimal development and weak emotional connections. As a result, the ensemble felt fragmented, with critics calling the narrative overambitious and emotionally flat. The inclusion of such diverse characters, while groundbreaking on paper, was seen by many as performative because they lacked the character depth or narrative centrality needed to make their stories meaningful. This perception contributed to the film’s poor box office performance and one of the lowest audience scores in MCU history, illustrating how undercooked representation can result in both critical and commercial disappointment. The film’s 47% audience score on Rotten Tomatoes and poor box office returns underline the disconnect. The promotional materials for *Eternals* heavily emphasized its diversity, with Marvel framing the film as a milestone for representation. However, this emphasis on representation was not reflected in the depth or centrality of these characters. Many felt that the marketing leaned on diversity as a selling point rather than allowing it to meaningfully shape the narrative. By attempting to represent a wide range of identities in a single film, *Eternals* diluted the impact of each. The ensemble cast was too large for meaningful exploration of individual characters, leading to shallow portrayals that felt tokenistic rather than authentic.

5.2 The Falcon and The Winter Soldier

One of the most debated aspects of *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* was the sudden emphasis on racial discrimination faced by Sam Wilson, despite his long-standing heroism within the MCU. In previous films, Falcon was portrayed as a respected Avenger, trusted by key figures like Steve Rogers and the broader superhero community. However, the series introduced scenes that depicted Sam being racially profiled, denied loans, and questioned by police in his own neighborhood—without any prior narrative buildup. While these moments aimed to reflect real-world racial injustices and ground the story in contemporary social discourse, critics argued that the shift felt jarring and inconsistent with how the character had been treated up to that point. This abrupt transition led to perceptions that the show was retrofitting social issues onto a character for thematic effect, rather than weaving them organically into the storyline. As a result, while the intention to address systemic racism was valid and necessary, its execution was seen by some as forced and symptomatic of the broader trend of “woke” messaging taking precedence over narrative consistency in Marvel’s post-2020 phase. The decision to make Sam Wilson the new Captain America was widely interpreted as a politically motivated move by Marvel, aimed at aligning with contemporary social narratives surrounding race and representation. While the intention to diversify iconic superhero legacies is commendable, critics argue that the execution felt overly engineered to satisfy a particular ideological agenda rather than arising organically from the character’s development. In *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*, Sam’s reluctance to accept the shield, his confrontation with systemic racism, and his eventual acceptance of the mantle were framed heavily around sociopolitical messaging. However, some audiences felt that the transition lacked the emotional and narrative weight necessary to justify such a monumental shift in the franchise. The overt political framing overshadowed character depth, reducing what could have been a powerful personal journey into a symbolic gesture. This perception was further compounded by the fact that Sam was immediately framed as morally infallible, while characters like John Walker, who were intended as antagonists, ended up resonating more with audiences due to their layered flaws and inner conflict. As a result, Sam’s ascension to Captain America, though significant in representation terms, was viewed by some fans as a forced narrative choice driven more by external social expectations than by compelling storytelling.

5.3 Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness

Despite its promise of exploring infinite universes, *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* did little to expand the narrative stakes. In fact, the possibilities of Multiverse were barely explored in the film, disappointing much of the fans. Characters were introduced and discarded quickly (e.g., the Illuminati), which left audiences feeling that these additions were fan-service or superficial inclusion without long-term relevance. Character of America Chavez had immense potential. In the comics, she is a multidimensional hero. In the film, she was reduced to a mere tool for the plot to move forward. Critics noted the underutilization of her character and the lack of emotional stakes in her arc. This exemplifies tokenism—an important identity is featured, but not meaningfully developed. America Chavez is briefly shown remembering her two mothers, who are depicted in a short flashback before being tragically lost during an accident caused by her powers. While the scene was intended to establish her background and identity, it lacked narrative depth and emotional resonance. Many critics and viewers pointed out that this moment felt more like a symbolic nod to LGBTQ+ representation rather than a meaningful portrayal. The mothers are shown only fleetingly, without any dialogue or development, making them emblems of inclusivity rather than characters in their own right. Furthermore, their disappearance serves primarily as a trigger for Chavez’s trauma, a trope that arguably undermines the intent of positive representation. This example reinforces a key argument in the representation vs. tokenism debate: that inclusion, when done superficially, can reduce complex identities to mere visual checkboxes. Without emotional investment, backstory development, or narrative consequences, such portrayals risk being perceived as performative rather than progressive. In the movie Wong is accompanied by a new assistant named Sara, portrayed by Sheila Atim. She is a Master of the Mystic Arts and is depicted as brave and loyal, helping Wong defend Kamar-Taj during Wanda's attack. However, her character is killed off relatively quickly when she sacrifices herself to destroy the Darkhold. This brief appearance and abrupt death drew criticism for falling into what’s often called the “disposable diverse character” trope—where minority characters are introduced seemingly to signal inclusivity but are not given meaningful development or lasting impact on the story. This further fed into wider discussions around tokenism and performative diversity in recent MCU phases. There is a wedding scene in *Doctor Strange 2* in which people from different religion are featured too obviously in order to signify how inclusive the new MCU is. The particular shot

stood out like a sore thumb for many viewers and critics. Another prominent criticism of Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness was the marginalization of its titular character in favor of newer, more diverse additions to the MCU. While the film ostensibly centers around Stephen Strange, critics and fans alike noted that much of the narrative focus was diverted to America Chavez. Instead of being given a compelling arc, Chavez was primarily used as a plot device to drive the multiverse storyline forward. This shift in focus led many to argue that Doctor Strange, played by Benedict Cumberbatch, lacked significant growth or agency throughout the film, relegated to a reactive rather than proactive role. The decision to downplay the central character in favor of showcasing a broader message of representation was viewed by some as a missed opportunity to deepen Strange's complex persona. As a result, the film faced criticism not only for sidelining its protagonist but also for offering shallow characterization of the new lead, thus weakening both its narrative coherence and audience engagement.

5.4 Thor: Love and Thunder

Thor: Love and Thunder was marketed as a quirky, colorful adventure that would push the franchise forward. While it aimed to normalize queer relationships through Valkyrie's orientation, her arc was largely sidelined. Critics and audiences found the film tonally jarring, oscillating between slapstick humor and tragic themes. The attempt at progressive messaging, while visible, was lost in inconsistent narrative priorities and shallow development. The film leaned heavily into absurdist comedy, often at the expense of character arcs and dramatic moments. The movie attempted to highlight diversity by exploring Valkyrie's queer identity and reintroducing Jane Foster as the Mighty Thor, a storyline drawn from the comics, which was again an attempt at inclusion and diversifying characters. However, Valkyrie's role was largely reduced to comic relief, and her identity was acknowledged but not meaningfully explored. Similarly, Jane Foster's arc—centered on her battle with cancer and her transformation into a hero—was criticized for being rushed and emotionally hollow, lacking the screen time and depth needed to resonate with audiences. Valkyrie, portrayed by Tessa Thompson, was heavily marketed as Marvel's first openly bisexual superhero. Yet, despite this positioning, her queerness was barely explored onscreen beyond vague hints and a few lines of dialogue. Audiences and critics pointed out that Valkyrie, who had been a strong and layered character in Thor: Ragnarok, was reduced to a background figure with minimal impact on the plot. Similarly, Natalie Portman's return as Jane Foster, now wielding Mjolnir as the Mighty Thor, was meant to be a groundbreaking shift. However, her arc was criticized for being rushed and emotionally underdeveloped, with her terminal illness subplot treated inconsistently amid the film's slapstick tone. Many viewers felt that both characters were included more for symbolic value than narrative necessity, with their emotional and thematic potential overshadowed by tonal inconsistency and underwhelming writing. As a result, what could have been powerful moments of representation became examples of tokenism, undermining the film's intended progressive message. Christian Bale's Gorr the God Butcher, though praised for a strong performance, was seen as a wasted opportunity, with his tragic backstory and motivations barely explored. Many longtime Marvel fans felt the film represented a shift in the MCU toward superficial storytelling and "woke" box-checking, where inclusion was treated more as a marketing feature than a narrative strength. Ultimately, Thor: Love and Thunder alienated both critics and audiences, reinforcing concerns that Marvel's post-2020 output increasingly prioritizes identity politics over meaningful, well-crafted storytelling.

5.5 Black Panther: Wakanda Forever

Black Panther: Wakanda Forever was positioned as a heartfelt tribute to the late Chadwick Boseman while expanding the legacy of Wakanda. While the film was praised for its emotional gravitas and visual design, it also faced considerable criticism for its narrative structure and character choices. One of the most contested aspects was the introduction of Riri Williams, also known as Ironheart—a teenage genius who builds an Iron Man-style suit and becomes entangled in Wakanda's political conflict. Her character was seen by many as a forced inclusion, lacking the organic buildup or emotional weight necessary for audiences to invest in her role. Critics and fans alike noted that Ironheart was a commercial failure in the comics, making her sudden prominence in the MCU feel politically motivated rather than narratively justified. Many viewers argued that a more meaningful continuation of Iron Man's legacy could have been achieved through the development of Tony Stark's daughter, Morgan, introduced in Avengers: Endgame. Additionally, some felt that Shuri's arc, while emotionally charged, was rushed and lacked the regal authority associated with her predecessor. The

film's pacing was criticized for being uneven, with too many subplots and characters vying for attention. As a result, *Wakanda Forever* was perceived as trying to juggle tribute, transition, and tokenism all at once—ultimately diluting the impact of its core message.

5.6 She-Hulk: Attorney at Law

She-Hulk: Attorney at Law sought to redefine superhero television through a feminist lens and fourth-wall-breaking humor. However, many viewers criticized its tone, which veered into satire that some found dismissive of long-established MCU lore. Rather than empowering viewers through a complex female lead, the show often resorted to caricatures of men and superficial conflicts. The inclusion of gender politics felt forced and disconnected from cohesive character growth. In fact, it was one of Marvel's most polarizing Disney+ series, drawing criticism for its inconsistent tone, shallow writing, and overtly politicized messaging. Marketed as a legal comedy with feminist undertones, the show attempted to subvert superhero tropes and engage directly with toxic fan culture by breaking the fourth wall and satirizing internet trolls. However, many critics and audiences felt that its commentary on gender issues was heavy-handed and lacked nuance. Instead of offering a complex, empowered protagonist, Jennifer Walters' character arc often felt underdeveloped and reactive, with her superpowers treated more like a narrative inconvenience than a meaningful transformation. The show's legal plots were seen as superficial, with courtroom scenes lacking the procedural depth viewers expected. Additionally, established characters like Daredevil were used primarily for comedic or romantic purposes, drawing backlash from fans who felt their portrayals were inconsistent with earlier, more serious iterations. The finale, in particular, was widely criticized for abandoning traditional storytelling in favor of a meta-narrative that literally rewrote the ending, leaving many viewers feeling unsatisfied and disconnected from the character's journey. While the series sought to empower and entertain, its tendency to mock long-standing MCU elements and its own audience was perceived by many as dismissive rather than transformative. The show's reliance on cultural critique over character depth led some to label it as a prime example of "performative feminism," where ideological messaging took precedence over engaging, coherent storytelling. Another major point of contention in *She-Hulk: Attorney at Law* was its treatment of established MCU heroes, particularly male characters, which many fans perceived as dismissive or reductive. The series frequently used satire to critique toxic masculinity and fan entitlement, but in doing so, it often undermined legacy characters. For example, Bruce Banner, a.k.a. the Hulk, is portrayed as a mellowed, almost comically passive mentor figure, far removed from his earlier, more complex incarnations. His interactions with Jennifer Walters were seen by some as an attempt to downplay his significance in order to elevate the new female lead. Additionally, the surprise inclusion of Daredevil—reimagined with a more humorous and flirtatious tone—divided fans. While some appreciated the light-hearted take, others criticized it as a betrayal of the gritty, grounded version introduced in the Netflix series. The show's finale even broke the fourth wall to criticize Marvel's own formula and male-dominated narratives, but this self-awareness came off as alienating rather than clever to portions of the fanbase. Critics argued that rather than building upon the MCU's legacy with thoughtful innovation, *She-Hulk* often relied on parodying or diminishing beloved characters, further reinforcing accusations of tokenism and ideological overreach in Marvel's post-2020 storytelling.

5.7 Ms. Marvel

Ms. Marvel attempted to break new ground by portraying the life of a Muslim-American teenager. The show received both praise and criticism for its representation and storytelling. While initially celebrated for its vibrant visual style and cultural authenticity, the series suffered from inconsistent tone and pacing as it shifted abruptly between teen drama, superhero action, and historical commentary. Critics highlighted the shallow development of villains like the Clandestines and the Department of Damage Control, whose motivations remained unclear, thereby weakening the show's central conflict. Though the series aimed to showcase South Asian and Muslim identity, many viewers felt the cultural elements were overcrowded and superficially integrated rather than meaningfully explored. Themes such as Partition, generational trauma, and religious identity were introduced but lacked narrative depth. Aside from Kamala Khan, other characters were minimally developed, and Kamala's superhero evolution appeared rushed and unearned. Despite significant marketing efforts, *Ms. Marvel* recorded one of the lowest viewership numbers among Disney+ MCU series, pointing to a disconnect between Marvel's intentions and audience reception. Some fans and critics viewed

the show as emblematic of a broader post-2020 MCU trend of “box-checking” diversity, where representation is emphasized over strong, coherent storytelling.

5.8 The Marvels

The Marvels, marketed as a progressive, feminist team-up, flopped at the box office. Its performance was the worst in MCU history. Critics and fans alike pointed out a lack of compelling character development and over-reliance on diversity as a hook, rather than substance. The failure wasn't due to the presence of women or people of color—it was due to weak writing, poor pacing, and lack of audience investment. The Marvels was marketed as a progressive and inclusive superhero ensemble featuring three female leads—Captain Marvel (Carol Danvers), Monica Rambeau, and Kamala Khan (Ms. Marvel). Despite this, the film became one of the MCU's biggest box office disappointments, earning the lowest opening weekend of any Marvel Studios release. Critics and fans cited several reasons for its failure. Firstly, the characters lacked individual depth and emotional arcs, making their team dynamic feel superficial and rushed. Many viewers felt that Captain Marvel, previously criticized for her detached demeanor, remained underdeveloped and unrelatable. Monica Rambeau, introduced in WandaVision, had her own potential, but was not given enough narrative space to evolve. Kamala Khan, while charismatic, was inserted primarily for comedic relief, often undercutting the gravity of key scenes. Furthermore, the plot was described as incoherent and overly reliant on fast-paced spectacle, with little attention to world-building or stakes. Critics argued that the film leaned too heavily on identity politics and “girl power” messaging without sufficient narrative support. As a result, The Marvels was seen not as a celebration of female empowerment, but as an example of the MCU's growing reliance on performative diversity over substantive storytelling—further alienating fans seeking cohesive, character-driven narratives.

5.9 Secret Invasion

Marvel's Secret Invasion, a Disney+ series adapted from one of Marvel Comics' most revered storylines, was met with sharp criticism and disappointment from both fans and critics. The original comic arc, known for its suspenseful paranoia and shocking revelations about superhero impostors, was significantly diluted in the series. One of the most contentious issues was the perceived character assassination of Nick Fury. Once a formidable strategist and central figure in the MCU, Fury was depicted as weakened, emotionally compromised, and reactive, undermining his legacy. Another glaring problem was the unexplained logical loophole regarding James “Rhodey” Rhodes being revealed as a Skrull. The show never clarified when the real Rhodey was replaced, raising serious continuity issues that retroactively affected previous films without resolution or clarity. Additionally, the show's finale drew widespread ridicule for the absurd escalation of G'iah's character. After receiving a blend of nearly every Avenger's powers—including Captain Marvel, Thor, and Hulk—she became arguably the most powerful being in the MCU overnight, without any earned development or training. This not only broke narrative balance but also diminished stakes, making future conflicts less compelling. Viewers described this moment as laughable and emblematic of the show's flawed approach to power scaling and character progression. The show's heavy-handed social commentary on refugee crises and identity politics, while well-intentioned, felt out of place and poorly integrated, leading many to see it as another example of forced messaging overshadowing coherent storytelling. Ultimately, Secret Invasion failed to capture the intrigue of its source material, instead offering a fragmented, poorly paced narrative riddled with inconsistencies and controversial creative choices—further contributing to the MCU's post-2020 identity crisis.

VI. POOR BOX OFFICE PERFORMANCE AND CRITICAL RECEPTION

The financial performance of Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) films post-2020 has demonstrated a clear departure from the franchise's previously unbroken streak of blockbuster success. While earlier MCU entries regularly set new box office records worldwide, recent films have struggled to meet even conservative projections, signaling both franchise fatigue and growing audience dissatisfaction.

For example, *Eternals* had high expectations as Marvel's first overtly diverse ensemble cast film, featuring groundbreaking representation. Despite these historic inclusions and a star-studded cast, *Eternals* grossed approximately \$402 million globally. While not an outright failure, this figure fell short of Marvel's typical \$700 million+ standard for tentpole releases and reflected mixed audience reactions. Analysts attributed this underperformance to the film's complicated narrative, lack of familiar MCU connections, and perceived overemphasis on representation at the expense of character depth. Similarly, *Thor: Love and Thunder* (2022) opened to strong initial numbers but experienced a sharp decline in box office momentum. Its worldwide gross of roughly \$760 million paled in comparison to *Thor: Ragnarok*'s \$854 million and *Avengers: Endgame*'s record-breaking \$2.8 billion. The most glaring example of commercial disappointment came with *The Marvels* (2023), which registered the lowest opening weekend box office for an MCU film to date. Despite extensive marketing and the promise of a female-led superhero team, the film failed to attract significant audiences, with earnings well below studio forecasts.

Critical reception of Marvel Cinematic Universe films and series post-2020 has revealed a growing divide between the franchise's creative ambitions and the expectations of both critics and audiences. While Marvel's earlier installments were largely lauded for their innovative blend of action, humor, and character-driven storytelling, the recent wave of productions has encountered increasingly mixed to negative reviews, with critics highlighting narrative weaknesses, tonal inconsistencies, and an overreliance on social messaging.

Eternals received mixed reviews from critics who praised the film's bold attempt at diversifying the MCU but lamented its sprawling, episodic storytelling and lack of emotional engagement. The *New York Times* criticized it for feeling "disjointed" and "overambitious," while The Guardian noted that the film's characters were "underwritten" despite their cultural significance. *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* was similarly met with divided opinions. While praised for its visual effects and horror elements under Sam Raimi's direction, critics faulted the sidelining of the titular character, Doctor Strange, whose narrative was overshadowed by new characters like America Chavez. Critics from *Variety* and The Hollywood Reporter expressed disappointment that America Chavez, an important LGBTQ+ character in Marvel lore, was relegated to a narrative device rather than a fully realized protagonist. *Thor: Love and Thunder* faced particular scrutiny for its tonal shifts and underwhelming character development. Critics from *Rolling Stone* described the film as "a jarring mix of slapstick comedy and emotional drama," while IGN remarked that Valkyrie's queer identity, though significant, was "tacked on" rather than meaningfully explored.

Black Panther: Wakanda Forever, intended as a tribute to the late Chadwick Boseman, also faced critical scrutiny. The Guardian commented that the film "struggles to balance homage with franchise expansion," reflecting the broader challenges Marvel faces in integrating new Disney+ series such as *She-Hulk: Attorney at Law* and *Ms. Marvel* also drew criticism despite initial excitement. *She-Hulk* was often described as "too meta" and "preachy," with critics from The Atlantic and The Verge pointing out that its fourth-wall-breaking humor frequently came at the expense of character depth and narrative cohesion. The series' feminist messaging, while applauded in principle, was seen by some reviewers as heavy-handed and alienating to long-time MCU fans. Similarly, *Ms. Marvel* was praised for its cultural specificity and fresh perspective but criticized for inconsistent pacing and an overabundance of exposition, which diluted its overall impact. *The Marvels*, despite the hype surrounding its all-female lead ensemble, was widely panned for its weak script and lackluster character chemistry. Critics from The Independent and Empire Magazine described it as "a missed opportunity" and "an overstuffed attempt at progressive representation," highlighting a recurring critique that inclusivity was prioritized over narrative depth.

VII. FAN REACTIONS, SOCIAL MEDIA BACKLASH, AND POOR DISNEY+ VIEWERSHIP

The most striking response emerged from the fan community, particularly on social media platforms such as Twitter, Reddit, and fan forums. Longtime MCU enthusiasts expressed frustration and disappointment, accusing Marvel of “forced diversity” and “checkbox representation.” Many felt that characters were introduced primarily to fulfill social justice mandates rather than to serve the story organically. This perception was intensified by portrayals perceived as shallow, preachy, or disconnected from established MCU lore.

Moreover, this fan dissatisfaction translated into declining engagement with Marvel’s Disney+ streaming content. Series such as *She-Hulk: Attorney at Law* and *Ms. Marvel*, despite initial curiosity, saw significant drops in viewership as episodes progressed. This underperformance highlights the challenges Marvel faces in maintaining interest on streaming platforms, where binge-watching and subscriber retention depend heavily on sustained narrative quality. Lower-than-expected Disney+ ratings further underscore the disconnect between Marvel’s creative direction and fan expectations.

Fan criticism also centered on narrative choices that seemed to alienate rather than engage core audiences. For example, the sidelining of iconic characters, abrupt changes in tone, and inclusion of overt political messaging were cited as factors contributing to audience disengagement. Hashtags and discussion threads frequently debated the balance between representation and storytelling quality, reflecting a polarized fan base.

Additionally, many fans have pointed out that the emphasis on diversity is sometimes used as a shield against legitimate criticism. When audience express dissatisfaction with a film’s writing, pacing, or character development, they are often dismissed or labeled as toxic, bigoted, or misogynistic—even if their critiques are grounded in the actual content. This deflection tactic has made it harder for genuine discourse to take place, as studios and media outlets appear to conflate criticism of storytelling with attacks on diversity itself. This not only stifles constructive feedback but also deepens the divide between creators and audiences.

VIII. ALIENATION OF THE CORE FANBASE

The combined effect of these factors has been a growing alienation of the MCU’s core fanbase—viewers who have followed the franchise for over a decade. This group often feels sidelined by the franchise’s newer direction, perceiving it as prioritizing social agendas over entertainment value. The loss of fan goodwill is particularly significant given Marvel’s previous reputation for fan-centric storytelling and community engagement. On social media and fan forums, many viewers have expressed fatigue over what they perceive as “forced diversity” or “checkbox representation,” where new characters are introduced with the primary purpose of filling identity quotas rather than enhancing the story. This approach has led to a growing sense of disillusionment among loyal fans who feel that the essence of their favorite franchises is being compromised.

A recurring sentiment is that “you can’t just force down representation and go on to ruin people’s favorite thing”—a criticism that underscores the emotional investment fans have in these stories. Rather than fostering inclusivity, this mismanagement may inadvertently fuel skepticism or backlash against the very concept of representation. Shows like *She-Hulk: Attorney at Law* and *Ms. Marvel*, though initially praised for their novelty, suffered significant viewership drop-offs, with audiences citing unengaging plots, shallow character arcs, and overt political messaging as key flaws. When representation is executed poorly or appears performative, it risks doing more harm than good, reinforcing the misconception that diversity is inherently incompatible with quality storytelling.

IX. CONCLUSION

The post-2020 wave of representation in Hollywood, particularly within the Marvel Cinematic Universe, has been a double-edged sword. While it has opened doors for more diverse casting and inclusive storytelling, it has also exposed the pitfalls of performative activism. Forced representation—when executed without narrative integration—risks reducing complex identities to superficial checkboxes. As seen in the diminishing box office returns and growing disillusionment of core fanbases, Hollywood must evolve beyond token gestures. Marvel’s recent productions exemplify how prioritizing identity politics over storytelling can alienate loyal audiences. Characters introduced as symbolic representations of race, gender, or sexuality often lack the narrative development and emotional weight necessary for audience investment. The result is a form of diversity that appears disingenuous and commercially ineffective. True inclusivity demands authenticity.

Characters must be rooted in compelling stories, and their identities should inform their arcs—not replace them. Representation should not come at the cost of coherence or creativity. For long-term success, Hollywood must strike a balance between social responsibility and artistic integrity, ensuring that inclusion is meaningful rather than mechanical. Otherwise, if inclusion cannot be executed with the necessary care, nuance, and authenticity, it is arguably more respectful to refrain from it altogether and focus instead on telling compelling, coherent stories that honor the legacy of beloved characters and franchises.

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