



**'Reading the popular': An analysis of the reception of *Black Panther* by
subaltern Black South African women**

by

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ABSTRACT

In February 2018, *Black Panther* made headlines worldwide as the first Marvel Cinematic movie to feature a black superhero, black director, and predominantly black cast. (Babcock, Beskow & Carley, 2018). South Africa came to a standstill as the *Black Panther* fever hit the nation. Many black South African moviegoers filled movie theatres wearing their beautiful cultural attires and singing traditional songs and praises, signalling the arrival of a 'cultural moment'. *Black Panther* attempts to capture what it means to be Black in both America and Africa through the lenses of Afrofuturism - a 21st-century cultural aesthetic.

The movie is revolutionary and epoch-defining sci-fiction. Some scholars have written about the significance of *Black Panther*, its cultural aesthetic and its thematic engagement with black themes. However, limited research still explores and accounts for the movie's popularity in specific socio-historical consumption contexts. Existing research examining *Black Panther's* popularity has mainly approached audiences as homogenous and used research methods that privilege textual determinism. The study used a cultural studies approach as its conceptual frame and audience reception analysis as its methodology. The cultural studies approach the study of the media views media texts as having more than one meaning.

This study aimed to account for the popularity of *Black Panther* among black South African women, particularly in Soweto township. The study's findings revealed that the popularity of *Black Panther* is attributable to the meanings and pleasures associated with resistance that it suggested among marginalised black South African women in Soweto. The film provided these women with a 'cultural moment' to resist, challenge and subvert global and localised forms of oppression that they encounter in their everyday lives. It also offered them voice and space to symbolically recuperate and claim a futuristic world where they have agency and control over their lives.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction and background to the study

Black Panther is the first Marvel science fiction film to be produced by Hollywood with a black director and a predominantly black cast that locates black people at the centre of a futuristic world (Giles, 2018). The movie has millions of views, including people within South Africa and globally, and has become very popular (Williams, 2018). According to Africa News (2018), *Black Panther* received great reviews from critics and cinema viewers on the African continent. Arguably, it is because it captures what it means to be black in America and Africa using Afrofuturism - a 20th-century cultural aesthetic. As a result of its popularity, influence and innovative use of Afrofuturism, the movie has been widely described as a revolutionary and epoch-defining sci-fiction film (*New York Times*, 2018). One of the reasons why *Black Panther's* is considered significant is its historical portrayal of Africa and powerful, intelligent and passionate black women who defy traditional stereotypes (Williams, 2018).

The film *Black Panther* is informed by Afrofuturism, which is a subgenre of science fiction, a political movement and art form that seeks to connect artists and scholars with a common interest in projecting black futures (Gateward & Jennings, 2015). Afrofuturism is located at the meeting point of the imagination, technology, impending liberation. It is a genre that utilises the Black cultural lens to experiment, imagine possible futures, re-imagine identities and activate freedom through literature, the visual arts and music (Womack, 2013). Premised on Afrofuturism, *Black Panther* portrays an alternative fictional African country of Wakanda with the representation of Black people as powerful, and women occupy powerful, strategic and influential leadership positions. Scholars such as Williams (2018) have argued that the movie's fantasy of an alternative future draws Black people.

The narrative of *Black Panther* begins after the death of T'Challa's father. After his father's death, T'Challa returns to Wakanda to become the new leader. However, he is challenged for the throne by groups within his own country on his return. Wakanda

is the only country in Africa that is not touched and influenced by European colonisation (Strong and Chaplin, 2019). The two warring enemies unite to destroy Wakanda. However, T'Challa, the *Black Panther*, is joined by intelligence agent Everett Ross and members of the Dora Milaje, special forces in Wakanda, to protect his people and prevent Wakanda from being drawn into a protracted world war. In its representation, the movie challenges patriarchy. It has a female-led military (the Dora Milaje) and many other women in power. It is suggestive of specific instances in African history. From a cultural perspective, the kingdom of Wakanda depicts an uncorrupted culture untainted by western values (Van Dyke, 2018).

The movie provides a way of imagining a possible future through a black cultural lens. It also stresses on the changes to patriarchal societies and portrays women as leaders of tribes and revolutionary groups. Afrofuturism is progressive in that it examines the aesthetics and intellectual environment of the post-racial future suggested by white futurists but remains connected to an African humanist past (Womack, 2013). Afrofuturists are interested in identifying past, present, and future histories that deny the black Atlantic experience. They seek to generate counter-histories that reconstruct the connections between past, present, and future through techno-scientific storytelling (Yaszek, 2007). Although Afrofuturism as a scholarly field is interested in presenting a particular tomorrow through a black lens, there is very little research to understand how Afrofuturistic texts are read and negotiated by real audiences using a cultural studies lens.

A survey of extant literature shows minimal research on why *Black Panther* has been so popular, especially among subaltern groups such as Black female viewers. There are no studies known to the researcher that have explored and accounted for the popularity of *Black Panther*, considering the complex interdiscursive context of viewers. Most studies have been largely theoretical, drawing inferences about the movie's popularity from reading the film itself (see Williams, 2018). Audience reception research provides valuable insights that show that the meaning of a media text such as *Black Panther* is polysemic and cannot be read off the text (Livingstone, 2015; Makwambeni & Salawu, 2018). The tradition further contends that the meaning of a media text is not necessarily in the text itself but negotiated and constructed by socially situated audiences in their social-historical contexts of consumption (Makwambeni & Salawu, 2017).

Against this background, this study used a Cultural Studies informed audience reception analysis to explore and account for the popularity of *Black Panther* among subaltern Black South African women in the predominantly Black township of Soweto. The study's objective was investigated by explicitly examining the meanings and pleasures that socially situated subaltern Black South African women in Soweto negotiate from *Black Panther*. As a result, this film projects powerful, strong and passionate women whose lived experiences differ from Black female viewers in the predominantly Black township.

1.2 Statement of the problem

The Afrofuturist film *Black Panther* has attained local and global popularity. The film is significant as it provides a way for black people in the diaspora and on the continent to imagine a possible future and forge alternative identities that transcend their marginal conditions. However, despite its popularity, especially among Black viewers locally and globally, scant academic work has sought to understand and account for the film's popularity among specific audiences located in concrete marginal social-historical contexts of consumption. Moreover, most studies that have sought to account for the film's popularity have arrived at their findings using text-centred approaches to understand meaning that do not consider audiences' socio-historical contexts and social positioning.

1.3 Aim of the study

The study aim is to explore and account for the popularity of Black Panther among subaltern black South African women.

1.4 Research objectives

- To examine the preferred or dominant meanings encoded into *Black Panther*
- To understand the meanings and pleasures that socially situated black South African women in Soweto negotiate from *Black Panther*
- To account for the popularity of *Black Panther* among black South African women in Soweto Township

1.5 Research questions

- What are the preferred or dominant meanings encoded into *Black Panther*?
- What meanings and pleasures do socially situated black South African women in Soweto negotiate from *Black Panther*?
- What accounts for the popularity of *Black Panther* among black South African women in Soweto Township?

1.6 Significance of the study

This study contributes towards critical studies in media and communication research that seek to understand audience consumption of media texts. It achieves this by providing insight into how and why subaltern audiences, female readers in this instance, in specific social, historical contexts characterised by marginality, negotiate meaning from *Black Panther*, an Afrofuturistic text. The study will also contribute to understanding the liberatory potential of Afrofuturistic films like *Black Panther*. It is achieved by exploring the nature of pleasures, identities, and imagined futures that *Black Panther* invites among its subaltern Black audiences in South Africa. Through these efforts, the study assists in recuperating the voice of subaltern Black women in South Africa who have been marginalised during apartheid and in the post-apartheid era.

1.7 Outline of Chapters

The study consists of seven chapters:

Chapter one: Introduction and background to the study

The first chapter provides an introduction and background of the study. Then, it briefly describes the movie *Black Panther* and its linkages with Afrofuturism. The chapter further outlines the statement of the problem, the objectives of the study, the research questions, and the significance of the study. Finally, it provides a chapter outline that captures what the research covers.

Chapter two: Literature review

The second chapter discusses the literature that is relevant to the research topic. It examines the complex relationship between audiences and media texts through the

lenses of audience reception analysis. The chapter also engages with Afrofuturism (as a subgenre of science, a movement and artistic mode) and its application in *Black Panther* before situating audiences (Black South African women) within their macro and micro contexts of consumption (South Africa and Soweto).

Chapter three: a conceptual framework of the study

This chapter presents and discusses the conceptual framework of the study. A Cultural Studies approach to studying the media and audience reception theory informs the research. It outlines how Cultural Studies and reception theory offer a peculiar understanding of audiences and how they make meaning in specific socio-historic consumption contexts.

Chapter four: The social-historical context of *Black Panther's* consumption

Chapter four discusses the social-historical context of *Black Panther's* consumption. It focuses on the macro and micro social-historical context in which Black South African women in Soweto negotiate *Black Panther*. The chapter further discusses the broader historical context of South Africa before engaging with the micro context of consumption.

Chapter five: Research methodology and methods

Chapter five outlines and discusses the research methodology and methods used in the study. It explains and discusses the choice of a qualitative approach. The chapter further outlines the research design, sampling and recruitment of participants, data collection instruments, the data analysis process and the ethical considerations made in the study.

Chapter six: Data presentation, analysis and discussion of findings

Chapter six presents, analyses, and discusses the findings of the study. The results are presented, analysed, and discussed concerning the research questions, literature review, and the study's conceptual framework.

Chapter seven: Conclusion and usable insights

Chapter seven consists of the study's significant conclusions concerning the research objectives and questions. It discusses the study's findings before outlining the valuable insights from the research.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This study resides at the intersection between audience reception research and Afrofuturism. Chapter two discusses the literature on audience reception research. It examines meaning-making as well as the complex relationship that exists between audiences and media texts. This relationship assists the study in understanding how black South African women make sense of the movie. The chapter further examines Afrofuturism as a subgenre of science, a political movement with an emancipatory intent and an artistic mode. It reviews the literature on *Black Panther's* application of Afrofuturism as a lens to understanding the movie's content and how it resonates with situated audiences. The chapter further situates audiences (Black South African women) within their macro and micro consumption contexts (South Africa and Soweto). Audience reception studies posit that audiences can only understand the context of meaning-making within specific socio-historical contexts. The chapter conceptualises black South African women in Soweto Township as the subaltern. Subalternity in this context is narrowly defined to refer to the marginal socio-historical and economic position that black South African women occupy in post-apartheid South Africa.

2.2 Audience reception research: Understanding the relationship between audiences and media texts

Audience reception research is a form of qualitative audience research that combines social scientific and humanistic approaches (Klaus & Rosengren, 1990). It is concerned about the relationship between audiences and texts and grew as a reaction to earlier media effects approaches that assume that media texts have power over audiences. Reception studies reject that meaning can be extracted from media texts using textual analysis (Staiger, 2015). Instead, they are interested in how people actively and creatively make their meanings from media texts (Ang, 1995; Livingstone, 2015). Its objective is not to disclose the purpose of media texts but to explore their meanings and pleasures for historically situated audiences.

It is essential to understand that audience reception studies do not have a single linear path of development but instead consist of shifts and transformations summarised by Newbold et al. (2002:46) below:

These transformations may be summarised as movements away from 'transmission' models of effects towards a study of media within contexts of making of meaning, culture, texts, and literacy in the interaction between media texts and media readers. Those who have asked how people make meaning from texts have had to look at how texts are structured and the readers themselves

More broadly, reception studies are concerned with individual texts and their relationship and the broader cultural processes that influence and make up those relationships. They emphasise the importance of interpretation of media texts by the reader and the creative process that occurs in the act of reading: 'the kinds of meanings texts have, for whom, in what circumstances' (Staiger, 2005:2). Silverstone (1998) further posits that audience reception studies are interested in the interpretative relation between audience and media texts within a broadly ethnographic context.

2.2.1 Early audience research

Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding and decoding model laid the foundation for the first generation of audience reception research. The study is significant because it shifted audience reception research by opening up the differential interpretation or reading of media texts. The encoding and decoding model (1980) moved away from the dominant audience effects studies in the 1970s that assumed that the media directly affected audiences. Instead, audience effects studies studied audiences using quantitative methods such as surveys and experiments and viewed audiences as homogenous, isolated, and passive (Ivala, 2007; Livingstone, 2015). Hall's encoding and decoding model (1980) moved away from viewing media texts as influential and audiences as passive to acknowledging audiences' agency and ability to resist the preferred meanings encoded into them. The model has set up the basic conceptual framework that informs audience reception studies (see Schroder *et al.*, 2003).

Hall's encoding and decoding model (1980) contends that although the media text has the power to suggest particular meanings or readings, audiences are active decoders which will not necessarily accept the preferred readings offered by the texts (Hall, 1980). The model provides three positions that inform audiences' decoding of media discourses: the dominant, negotiated, and oppositional. The dominant reading is the preferred reading of a media text. Hall (1980) argued that audiences or readers of media texts do not automatically adopt the dominant meanings encoded by the producers because their social situations may lead them to assume different stances or positions. The encoding/decoding model (1980) contends that media texts have the power to suggest particular ideological readings and that the audiences are active decoders who do not necessarily accept what the text proposes (Strelitz, 2000). Consequently, the model views audiences as active readers who construct their meanings in the course of their everyday lives.

2.2.2 The second generation of audience reception studies

The second generation of audience reception research is associated with the 1980s, when an interpretive paradigm began (Makwambeni & Salawu, 2013). Second generation audience reception research rejected the notion that differences in television viewing are mere expressions of different needs, uses or readings. Instead, research in this generation began to seek to relate additional readings of media texts to the structural positioning of audiences. Thus, researchers in this generation developed a keen interest in understanding the social dynamics of audience activity and the audience's specific social and cultural complexity as a critical empirical phenomenon (Morley, 1989). Unlike audience effects studies and the first generation of audience reception research, studies in the second generation focused on overcoming the failure of earlier studies to view audiences as located in both the broader social-historical context of consumption as well as the micro contexts of domestic consumption (Silverstone, 1990, 2015; Morley, 1989).

Critical studies that emerged from this generation include Morley's *Family Television Study* (1986), which began to situate audiences historically and socially. Furthermore, the second generation of audience reception studies adopted newer research methods in their quest to study situated audiences. In an attempt to research audience reception of media texts from the audiences' point of view,

second-generation studies adopted qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. These methods gave researchers access to audiences' opinions and the linguistic categories they construct and negotiate their worlds (Morley, 1989).

2.2.3 The third generation of audience reception studies

The third generation of audience reception analysis emerged around the 1990s. It is now commonly referred to as the sociological turn in audience reception studies. Although it does not abandon audience ethnography, the third generation constitutes a shift in audience reception research. It uses audience ethnography as a foundation for examining the media's role in the audience's everyday lives. Audience reception studies in this generation also seek to understand meaning-making by particular groups of people and subcultures (Makwambeni & Salawu, 2018).

The third generation of audience reception studies significantly changes audience reception research. It helps to rethink and reframe audience reception within broader discussions about audiences' situatedness. As a result, researchers in this generation began to investigate audience reception of media texts within the wider social, cultural and economic contexts of media consumption. Furthermore, audience research in the third generation assumed a more sociological approach to rethink audience uses of media messages. As a result, this generation's research topics and problems shifted to addressing prevailing societal concerns such as inequalities.

2.3 Audience reception research and audience pleasures

A literature review shows that research on audience reception and pleasures has predominantly focused on romance, soap operas and current affairs programmes (Livingstone, 1991). A study on audience pleasures shows that different audiences derive other pleasures from the media texts they consume. However, the concept of pleasure is not as simple as it appears to be. Studying media audiences has developed into a multi-faceted social and cultural phenomenon. The interest in researching audience pleasures of fictional genres in cultural studies is associated with two significant strands: First, the concern and interest in examining the

relationship between ideology and pleasure. Second, the feminist strand in audience studies sought to explore women's genres.

The first strand in audience studies focused on the relationship between ideology and pleasure. It is associated with the work of John Fiske (1987), who developed the concept of 'active audiences'. Fiske (1987) argued that instead of accepting the ideological messages of media texts, audiences had agency and were actively engaged in constructing media texts. In this regard, the pleasure of viewing media texts, and more specifically television, is the pleasure of making meaning. Studies within this strand contended that audience pleasures invariably linked to the media genres' textual and intertextual characteristics and possibilities. According to Fiske (1987), media texts were polysemous and could invite a variety of interpretations from active audiences.

Feminist scholars' interest was to understand the pleasures that women derived from television soap operas, women's magazines and romantic fiction in the second strand in audience reception research. Studies in this strand sought to understand the question of whether these seemingly trivial media products were as flawed and conservative as critics claimed them to be. There was also an interest in understanding why many women turned to them. Consequently, the 1980s witnessed many studies identifying a wide range of textual and contextual pleasures associated with women's genres. For example, female viewers' knowledge of a specific genre's rules and narrative style showed genre-specific pleasures. In contrast, content-specific pleasures depended on viewers' familiarity with the soap opera's characters, plot, and location. Thus, pleasures began to be viewed as largely positive, potentially liberating (Nochimson, 1992), resistive (Brown, 1994), and also politically subversive (Fiske, 1990).

2.4 Conceptualising Afrofuturism

A literature survey shows no single and commonly agreed definition of Afrofuturism. Afrofuturism is an art form (literature, visual arts, music, film) located at the meeting point between imagination, technology, the future and liberation (Womack, 2013). Besides being an art form, Afrofuturism is a movement of Black projected art characterised by elements of science fiction, historical fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity

and magic realism with non-western beliefs (Jones, 2018). Afrofuturism seeks to imagine a possible future through a black cultural lens as an artistic approach. It connects artists and scholars whose common interest is to express black futures (Gateward & Jennings, 2015).

Afrofuturism further seeks to re-examine the aesthetics and intellectual environment of the post-racial future that white futurists suggest. It intentionally and unintentionally uses art forms to express the lives of black people concerning their past, present and future, from a static representation of particular forms of identity that are free and politically and artistically engaged (Gateward & Jennings, 2015). Afrofuturism also seeks to redefine the culture and notions of black people for today and the future. These notions go beyond the limitations set by white imagination. Thus, the idea that black people will exist in the future, use technology and science, or travel deep into space, does not underpin Afrofuturism. More importantly, black people will win the future (*New York Times*, 2018).

2.4.1 Afrofuturism, liberation and black feminism

Afrofuturism does not only focus on black culture and imagining possible futures. It is also interested in bringing liberation by critiquing social inequality (van Soldt, 2019). Afrofuturism is politically and artistically engaged (Gateward & Jennings, 2015). It seeks to provide space to explore, imagine and discover blackness and womanhood. In this light, Afrofuturism harnesses science fiction to escape the traditional meanings of what it means to be black and female (Anderson & Jones, 2015). Thus, the different imagined futures provided by Afrofuturistic texts aim to assist and prompt viewers to re-imagine the possibilities of an equal future.

According to Womack (2013), Afrofuturism includes women and feminism. It allows Black women to have free supremacy over their imagination, ideas, and creations, without any Scholars such as Morris (2012) further argue that the transgressive politics of Afrofuturism are in sync with the beliefs of Black feminists thought. As such, they intertwine. Both Afrofuturism and Black feminist thought pay particular attention to the importance of futurist knowledge, the black experience, cultural production, and resistance to oppression.

Afrofuturism strongly emphasises connection and the power of a mutual relationship (Turner & Maschi, 2015). It stresses the equality of the sexes and fights against discrimination against women. It also exposes the ideology of patriarchal society in works of art and searches for the representation of women in literary texts (Wanve, 2012). This phenomenon helps understand women's power in a world defined by the Afrofuturistic texts. This genre expresses itself through film, art, literature or music. It is also a way to connect the past and future and then help to imagine a possible future for people of colour (black people) (Bakare, 2014).

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter reviewed literature that relates to the study. It began by discussing the complex relationship between audiences and media texts. Next, it engaged with the three significant audience generations reception research that informs audience reception research beginning with early effects study and ending with the ethnographic turn in audience reception research. The chapter further examined the literature on Afrofuturism as an art form, movement and scholarly field. Finally, it engages with the literature on the relationship between Afrofuturism and feminism and how Afrofuturism shapes the production and structuring of media texts.

CHAPTER THREE

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

THE STUDY OF THE MEDIA: THE CULTURAL STUDIES APPROACH

3.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the conceptual framework used to examine the meanings and pleasures Black South African women in Soweto township negotiate from *Black Panther*. Although several approaches to understanding the media and audiences exist, the cultural studies approach to studying the media informs this study. The chapter argues that the cultural studies approach to the study of the media offers a nuanced and peculiar approach that embraces the complexity of the relationship between media texts and audiences. In this light, the chapter discusses how the cultural studies approach the study of the media views media texts as polysemic, audiences as active, meaning-making as a site of struggle and context as central to meaning-making.

3.2 The cultural studies approach the analysis of the media

The cultural studies approach to studying the media provides a peculiar understanding of the relationship between media texts and audiences. Unlike early approaches to understanding the relationship between media texts and audiences that viewed media texts as powerful and audiences as passive, the cultural studies approach views audiences as active and media texts as open to multiple interpretations (Silverstone, 1990). Furthermore, it contends that meaning-making is a site of struggle. Audiences are active decoders of meaning which do not necessarily accept the dominant or preferred position suggested by the media text (Livingstone, 2015). Thus, the cultural studies approach to media study provides a complex method for understanding audiences' reception of media texts. It builds on the criticism of early audience research that did not consider audiences' lived circumstances and sub-cultural and socio-economic differences in the study of meaning-making (Morley, 1989).

Audience reception research informed by the cultural studies approach to the media analysis is mainly concerned with two things. First, it is interested in analysing

cultural texts and their audience's interpretation. Second, it seeks to understand how audiences incorporate cultural texts into their worldviews and lifestyles (Murdock, 1989). The semiotic and structuralist turns in cultural studies have shifted audience reception research to questions of audiences' shared meanings, their participation within communities, and mediation between social position, the production of meaning and experience (Grossberg, 1993:41).

3.3 Understanding the text in cultural studies

The cultural studies approach the study of the media views media or cultural texts as having the potential to offer a diversity of readings despite having preferred readings encoded by the producers (McNamara, 2007). In this light, research based on a cultural studies approach does not seek to study the media text in isolation. Instead, it aims to decentre the text as an object of study (Makwambeni & Salawu, 2018). Researchers do not study the text in Cultural Studies for the social effects it produces, but for the subjective forms it makes available (Johnson, 1987:61). It is a means from which other things can be abstracted. Arguably, the object of study in cultural studies informed reception research is not the media text but the social life of subjective forms at each moment of their circulation (Johnson, 1987). Therefore, the cultural studies approach decenters the text as the focus of study by identifying intervening variables that shape the relationship between media texts and audiences (Newbold et al., 2002:41).

Against this background, the text in cultural studies is more extensive than its definition in traditional literary and media studies (Wilson, 2021). The text in cultural studies is not as simple as a book or a material document. It is more complex than a literary document such as a poem or a novel, an artistic document such as a film or movie and a simple photograph. A text can also be a cultural artefact or product such as a hairstyle, political slogan, or event. The text in cultural studies comes from textuality, which emerges from the idea that the world is full of texts created by humans and that cultural texts can also be interpreted in the same way as literary texts (Wilson, 2021).

3.4 The conceptualisation of audiences in the cultural studies approach

The cultural studies approach the study of the media views audiences as active rather than passive (Livingstone, 2015). The approach rejects the notion that

audiences are passive and views them as active decoders of media texts which do not necessarily accept the positions offered by the text (Strelitz, 2000; Makwambeni & Salawu, 2018). The cultural studies approach views audience reception as an essential part of negotiating and resisting media messages. Audiences can negotiate meanings that fall under three dominant categories: The dominant, negotiated and oppositional (Hall, 1). Although, according to the cultural studies approach, audiences do not come into the reading process 'culturally naked', the meanings that they negotiate from media texts are shaped by several mediating subjectivities that include their lived experiences and social-historical contexts of consumption (Makwambeni, 2021).

3.5 The importance of context in cultural studies

In light of the above, the cultural studies approach provides a framework that decentres the text by relating audience reception to reception's socio-historical and political context. It argues that audience reception of media texts cannot be understood outside the context of consumption. The context in the cultural studies approach is the immediate, domestic, and broader social-historical context of consumption (Makwambeni & Salawu, 2018). Consequently, audience reception studies based on the cultural studies approach begin by situating audiences in their contexts because it is in these contexts that meanings are made (Murdock, 1989).

The context in cultural studies is essential as it helps to understand human behaviour accurately. The cultural studies approach views context rather than the individual as central in producing meaning. Context determines the purposes, transformations and importance of particular subjects as much as the textual form itself. The centrality of context in the cultural studies approach to media research means that the meaning of media or cultural texts can only be understood in the context of the entire social formation (Williams, 1965).

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the conceptual framework of the study. Cultural studies approach the study of the media. This approach provides the lens through which the study examines the meanings that Black South African women in Soweto negotiate from *Black Panther*. The chapter argues that the cultural studies approach provides

an unconventional approach that embraces the complexity of the relationship between media texts and audiences. It views audiences as active rather than passive and views media or cultural texts as open to multiple interpretations that conflict with those preferred by the media texts. The chapter further discusses the centrality of context in cultural studies. It argues that audience meanings of media texts can only be understood within the specific social-historical contexts of consumption.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE SOCIAL-HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF *BLACK PANTHER'S* CONSUMPTION

4.1 Introduction

Audience reception studies contend that any attempt to understand the meanings that audiences negotiate from media or cultural texts should begin by situating audiences in their specific social-historical contexts of consumption because it is in these contexts that meanings are made (Murdock, 1989). This chapter discusses the macro and micro social-historical context in which Black South African women in Soweto negotiate *Black Panther*. The cultural studies approach contends that these contexts determine the meanings and transformations in the meaning-making process and the textual form itself. In this light, the chapter discusses the broader historical context of South Africa before engaging with the micro context of consumption. Finally, the researcher positions black South African women broadly within South Africa, particularly in Soweto township, socially, politically and economically.

4.2 The macro context of *Black Panther's* consumption: South Africa

Black South African women who participated in this study occupy marginal positions within post-Apartheid South Africa, infamous for being one of the unequal countries in the world (Segalo, 2015). More than two decades after the advent of democracy, post-apartheid South Africa still battles issues of race, class and gender-based inequalities inherited from apartheid (Kehler, 2001). The legacy of apartheid continues to impact the lives of black people, especially women (Spaull, 2013). Despite adopting a progressive constitutional and legislative dispensation that provides for and protects socio-economic rights and equal access to resources and opportunities in 1994, there is still unequal access in South Africa. Resources, opportunities and wealth are severely limited for black women who are still viewed mainly in their reproductive role (Segalo, 2015).

Black women continue to face the brunt of poverty and inequality in post-apartheid South Africa. They are an exploited labour force and marginalised from the formal economy where they earn less than their male counterparts for doing the same job. Black women in South Africa face high levels of gender-based violence fuelled by

sexism, patriarchal norms, beliefs, attitudes, and culture (OXFAM South Africa, 2020). Beyond experiencing gender-based violence, Black women in South Africa also have limited access to adequate healthcare, education, water and electricity. As a result, they remain perched at the bottom of the chain and constitute the highest number of those living with HIV and Aids (OXFAM South Africa, 2020).

The inequalities experienced by Black women in South Africa today are mainly attributable to the apartheid system introduced by the white minority rulers in 1948. The apartheid system favoured the white minority and disadvantaged the black majority based on race. During Apartheid, black women, mainly those that lived in the capital cities, began forming groups to take over church-linked roles in communities but were not accepted within the African National Congress party as members when it started in 1912. Women got into the party in 1943. It was only because black men realised that they needed to unite with black women politically to fight against white oppression. It, however, made it difficult as there was no place for women to do so within their plans. It also applied to white women as they were not allowed to be part of any political decision-making in any union run by men in the government. White women only gained the vote in 1930.

According to SAHA (2021), black women in South Africa spent most of their time looking after children and working in the fields all day to produce food for their families since there was no supply in the villages. Black women symbolised strength, struggle and endurance. Women were seen as caregivers in the rural areas, while men moved to the cities to work as immigrant labourers in mines. Women spent most of their time fetching water, taking care of the children and working in fields to produce food without support from the men. When food supplies dried up, some women moved to the cities to look for work. However, in cities, women were discriminated against by the white government authorities who did not want black women in cities. The government saw them as threats as women tended to settle in cities permanently.

Black women in South Africa faced discrimination in several ways. They faced oppression from the apartheid government because of their race. Women experienced the same discrimination and severe treatment as men. Black women also endured several oppressive laws that did not allow political, social and economic freedom. The Group Areas Act and the homeland policy of the apartheid state denied

them the opportunity to choose where they wanted to stay. White employers also treated black women harshly. This kind of discrimination led to many women joining the struggle against apartheid (SAHA, 2021). Gender was a significant factor that contributed to discrimination in the country. Despite attaining freedom in 1994, South Africa remains a patriarchal society dominating most parts. Men still hold the majority of managerial positions in society. Although South Africa's constitution provides a legal framework for equality and non-discrimination, women are still discriminated against and marginalised. Majority of black women continue to live under limiting conditions in rural areas and townships. These areas have poor infrastructure and a lack of socio-economic development (Kehler, 2000).

4.3 Gender inequality and discrimination in South Africa

South Africa has a long history of gender discrimination. Society treats women as second-class citizens. It also reflects in the country's pay gap, where the Global World Report of 2018/2019 that women on average earn 28% less than their male counterparts (ILO, 2019). Furthermore, data on employment shows that mainly black and coloured women continue to be under-represented in high skilled and management positions (Espí, Francis & Valodia, 2019). Today, black women remain the poorest group in South Africa and face low-skilled labour. In addition, they are affected by HIV/AIDS infection, burdened with the care of children, the sick, and the elderly, which drives them into poverty and deprives girls of education.

These factors prevent women from thoroughly enjoying their rights and participating as citizens (Coetzee, 2018). Notably, Black South African women's struggles for freedom from oppression and gender equality are not new. South African society has always been patriarchal. Men have always wielded more power and authority, with women mainly assuming a subordinate role. The majority of women have always occupied domestic functions such as taking care of children and the family and nurturing them (SA History Online, 2011).

Black South African women are still not recognised and discriminated against by systemic injustices and social inequalities on multifaceted levels in post-apartheid South Africa (Segalo, 2015). Black women face oppression within their spaces that remain largely non-accommodating (Segalo 2015). Besides being marginalised at a macro level, black women in South Africa are still victims of domestic violence from

their male counterparts (KPMG Human and Social Sciences Report, 2014). Their marginalisation and oppression worsen by hegemonic cultural and social customs and rules that regard women as less valuable members of society (Kehler 2001). According to Pikoli (2020), black women are at the economy's bottom. They earn a quarter of their white counterparts, which positions them at the centre of inequalities caused by race, class, education, gender and unemployment (Pikoli, 2020).

According to Williams (2018), black women in South Africa remain marginalised economically and socially and face a constant threat of violence and abuse. Williams further notes that since 1994, there has been a great representation of women in parliament, in government and in civil society. However, gender representation is still below the 50% mark for positions of influence. Grant Thornton International Business Report (2018) shows that women are still behind men in management roles in the business sector in South Africa. The report further observes that women fill only one-third of senior roles in South Africa, and one in five local businesses do not have women in senior positions. The white minority still accounts for the most prominent management positions (Booyens, 1999). In particular, black people and women's representations are amongst the poor and the unemployed (OXFAM South Africa, 2020).

4.4 The micro context of *Black Panther's* consumption: Soweto township

The women who participated in this study were from the predominantly black township of Soweto. Soweto is the largest township in South Africa, with approximately one million (Wale, 2013). The Apartheid government created the township when the white government intended to separate blacks from whites. They moved Blacks away from Johannesburg to separate them from white suburbs through a sanitary corridor by introducing the Urban Areas Act in 1923. This act determined areas where black people could reside. It had a clause that sought to compel the government to provide alternative housing for black people before relocation. The population of Soweto increased rapidly, probably due to the great depression, which forced removals in the countryside (SA History Online, 2020).

Soweto became the largest township in South Africa, serving as a dormitory town for Johannesburg. The township served as a geographical expression of apartheid's ideology of racial segregation and influx control (Wale, 2013). The apartheid system

wanted to ensure that black African workers would be racially separate from the white working class and remain strictly controlled and under surveillance. It was also an attempt to separate and control the black working class (Wale, 2013). Unlike most townships in South Africa, Soweto is diverse in language, housing, living standards and occupations (Phadi & Ceruti, 2011). The apartheid's Group Areas Act forced white-collar workers and professionals to live alongside the poor in overcrowded and underserviced housing. During apartheid, Soweto was the centre of the urban struggle. Residents of all classes mobilised on rent and municipal service charges (Shubane, 1991). Soweto residents were at the forefront of demands for the development of Black Equality during this era. The township was also the site of the massive Soweto uprising, which protested the government's persistence in the Afrikaans language as the medium of instruction in High Schools (Britannica, 2020).

The advent of Black majority rule in South Africa in 1994 raised the hopes of Soweto residents who expected substantial change in their lives. However, these expectations have not materialised for the majority of the residents (Wale, 2013). The economic, social and spatial separation brought about by apartheid remains intact. More so, the inequalities in the township have deepened, leading to renewed political battles under the umbrella of 'service delivery.'

CHAPTER FIVE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines and discusses the research methodology, design, and methods used to inform the study. It discusses the study's choice of a qualitative approach that formed the basis of the three-stage audience reception analysis. The chapter further engages with the specific techniques used to collect the data used to understand and account for the popularity of *Black Panther* among black South African women in Soweto township. The chapter further outlines and discusses the sampling methods and procedures followed in the study to recruit participants. It also explains how the data collected were analysed and the ethical considerations considered when conducting the research.

5.2 The qualitative methodology

This study employs a qualitative methodology to explore and account for the popularity of *Black Panther* among subaltern black South African women in Soweto Township. The researcher chose a qualitative method because it views the social world as not separate from the meanings that audiences use to account for and constitute their reality. It is interested in human behaviour and why people think and behave in particular ways. A qualitative methodology is most useful at finding out how people feel or think about a specific subject (Kothari, 2000). It enables one to understand a phenomenon by focusing on the whole picture rather than breaking it down (Ary et al., 2010). The methodology is appropriate for this audience reception study that is not interested in numerical data but with a deep understanding of unquantifiable problems (Queiros et al., 2017).

The researcher deemed the qualitative methodology appropriate because it produces rich and descriptive data about audiences' readings of *Black Panther*. It can provide detailed information about audiences' feelings, opinions, beliefs, values, ideas and experiences about the Movie. Rahman (2016) argued that, unlike a quantitative methodology, a qualitative method enables the researcher to interpret meanings of participants' actions or behaviour to achieve deeper insights on the issue under investigation (Rahman, 2016). For these reasons, a qualitative methodology provides

the most appropriate methods for examining audience readings of *Black Panther* in their social-historical contexts of consumption. It provides a nuanced approach that allows the researcher to explore audience readings of the media text and account for those readings.

5.3 Research design

De Vaus (2001) defines a research design as a strategy or a plan that a researcher uses to collect and interpret data coherently to address a research problem. It sets out the process on the required data, the methods applied to collect and analyse the data, and how it will answer the research questions. Similarly, Kumar (2011) views research design as a step-by-step blueprint or detailed plan on how the researcher intends to undertake the study. This study sought to explore and account for the popularity of *Black Panther* among subaltern black South African women in Soweto. The study employed a three-stage audience reception analysis that is interpretive to achieve this objective. The research design stems from the assumption that reality is socially constructed and known through methods that allow the researcher to view the world from the participants' perspective (Nieuwenhuis, 2012:55). Consequently, a three-stage research design consisting of qualitative content analysis, focus group discussions, and in-depth follow-up interviews were employed.

5.4 Data collection methods

5.4.1 Qualitative content analysis

The first stage of the research design consisted of a qualitative content analysis of the film *Black Panther* and documents about the film itself. Barbie & Mouton (2001) describe qualitative content analysis as a process used to analyse qualitative data by searching out underlying themes in materials studied. The qualitative content analysis goes beyond just counting words or extracting content or text to derive meanings, themes and patterns. As a result, researchers can understand social reality more subjectively (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009).

In this study, the researcher used qualitative content analysis to understand the film's narrative, characters and themes (The preferred/encoded text). This stage adopted a critical and interpretive approach that involved exploring the meanings in the representations instead of looking at the frequency of particular themes as a

reflection of specific phenomena usually done in quantitative content analysis (Neuman, 1997). The research at this stage focused on analysing and interpreting recorded data to uncover or understand critical themes. It usually is data retrieved from books, public records, textbooks, films, letters, reports, themes or other types of documents (Ary et al., 2010). The researcher triangulated the qualitative content analysis of the movie with document analysis of the literature produced by the producers of the Film. This analysis prepared the researcher to facilitate the focus group discussions and in-depth follow-up interviews. The researcher also used the key themes identified through qualitative content analysis and document analysis to compare the media text with audience readings at the data analysis stage.

5.4.2 Focus group discussions

The second stage of the audience reception analysis consisted of focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with participants. Focus group discussions are the primary tool used in audience reception analysis to produce data. They are a form of qualitative research that helps the researcher understand the interviewees' experiences, perceptions, and opinions of the underlying issue. Researchers usually employ focus group discussions to collect rich descriptive data about a particular phenomenon (Langford & McDonagh, 2003). They consist of a free and open discussion between group participants and the researcher. They help obtain data from selected participants rather than a statistically representative sample (Nyumba, 2017). Focus group discussions play a significant role in audience reception studies because they simulate the routine and usually inaccessible communicative contexts in which audiences construct meaning through everyday talk (Livingstone, 2015).

The main aim of using focus group discussions in audience reception analysis is to use group interaction and dynamics to produce rich data and insights. They provide the researcher with an opportunity to ask participants detailed questions relating to the aspects investigated. This process allows for rich and complex information generation as the researcher asked participants to elaborate and discuss points that interest the researcher. They further clarify participants' contradictory responses and enable participants to build and contribute to each other's contributions (Strydom & Bezuidenhout, 2014). Participants in focus group discussions can also ask each other questions, thereby lessening the possibility of researcher bias. Group

discussion also helped participants remember issues they might have forgotten when they first watched the movie (Dawson, 2002).

The study consisted of two focus group discussions of between seven and twelve participants each as recommended by Dawson (2002). Participants in the two focus group discussions were selected based on having watched the film, their race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, age, economic position, and level of education, as Langford and McDonagh (2003) suggested. The primary languages of communication in the discussions were English and isiZulu as those were the languages mainly understood by majority of the participants.

The researcher recruited participants using the researcher's pre-existing connections in Soweto Township. Participants then recruited other participants using snowball sampling from their connections. As Dawson (2002) recommended, the focus was to collect rich and unique data on audiences' reception of *Black Panther*. The recruited informants recruited other participants. Finally, the researcher recruited the members, focusing on shared cultural characteristics and symbolic connections to previous viewings of *Black Panther*.

Therefore, the purposive sample drew participants from naturally existing communities in Soweto (see Hansen et al., 1998: 265). The researcher used this method since members of the population were challenging to locate because of poor databases or records (Davis, 2014). Each focus group discussion was an hour and a half long, excluding watching the movie. The researcher conducted the focus group discussions in a quiet room in Protea North. The venue was comfortable and easily accessible to participants. In addition, the venue was away from disturbances such as traffic, loud noises and telephones and doorbells ringing.

The participants first viewed *Black Panther* as they would in normal viewing. It enabled them to refresh their memory of the events and characters in the film. Then, focus group discussions allowed participants to experience and speak freely to the content while also associations with their lived experiences (Schroder et al., 2003). The meetings were both recorded.

5.4.3 In-depth interviews

The researcher complemented the focus group discussions with in-depth interviews with selected participants who had raised interesting views during focus group discussions. According to Taylor, Bogdan & De Vault (2016), in-depth interviews are face-to-face encounters between the researcher and the participants. They share perspectives of their lives, experiences or situations in their own words. In-depth interviews allow the researcher to ask participants to learn more about their views (Strydom & Bezuidenhout, 2014). They are also verbal interchange in which an interviewer tries to elicit another person's information, beliefs, or opinions (Burns, 1997: 329). The strength of in-depth interviews with qualitative researchers is that they ask participants to clarify points and provide a more detailed explanation of their views.

Within qualitative research, interviews can either be structured or unstructured. Structured interviews are more formal, with the researcher asking the participants a predetermined set of questions using the exact wording and order as specified in the interview schedule (Kumar, 2011). Unstructured interviews, on the other hand, are more informal. The researcher is free to ask questions in any order or sequence as they wish. There is freedom in terms of questions asked. Depending on the discussion, the researcher can also formulate questions and raise issues during the interview.

For this study, the researcher conducted unstructured interviews. The interviews were informal and free flowing, making participants feel free to express their views. The researcher asked a list of questions based on some of the essential points raised during the focus group discussions without necessarily following an interview guide. The researcher gave participants refreshments and confectionaries during and after meetings to appreciate their time and efforts. The researcher recorded sessions with the consent of participants.

5.5 Data analysis

The researcher analysed the data collected from the qualitative content analysis, focus group discussions, and in-depth interviews in three stages. First, the data collected using qualitative content analysis coded thematically. Gibbs (2018) defines

thematic coding as a form of qualitative research of identifying texts that are common or linked by a common theme. This analysis focused on determining the critical messages encoded into the movie. The second stage of the study involved comparing the encoded notes/ themes with audience readings. Audience readings were also analysed thematically and grouped into key themes. Finally, the researcher treated the data from focus group discussions and in-depth interviews as finished accounts (Jensen, 1988). Instead, the researcher interpreted audiences' readings of *Black Panther* by relating them to the audiences' socio-historical context of consumption. This process enabled the researcher to develop a comprehensive interpretation of the meanings negotiated from *Black Panther* as recommended in reception analysis. Audience reception analysis does not view audience readings of media texts as finished accounts but more of discursive constructions produced jointly by the researchers and informants' interaction and by the researchers' interpreting audiences' interpretations (Makwambeni & Salawu, 2018).

5.6 Ethical considerations

This study followed a formal ethics procedure prescribed by the Cape Peninsula University of Technology. In addition, the researcher adhered to the following ethical considerations: First, participants involved in this study did so voluntarily. Thus:

- The researcher sought informed consent from each participant before the study commenced.
- Second, the participants were informed about the purpose of the research and their right to withdraw at any point.
- Third, participants signed a consent form.
- Fourth, the researcher sought permission from the participants to record focus group discussions and the one-on-one in-depth interviews.

Second, the participants were informed about the confidentiality of the information collected. In this light, the researcher used pseudo names to maintain the anonymity of the research participants in the study. The researcher also shared the study findings with the participants to check accuracy. Finally, the data collected by the researcher was kept safe and protected in a secure private computer file with a password.

5.7 Conclusion

This chapter outlined and discussed the research methodology, research design and methods used to conduct the reception analysis. It discussed the qualitative method and its suitability regarding the research objectives and questions. The specific methods used in the study were discussed in how they were used. The chapter further outlined and discussed the sampling methods and procedures followed in the study. The use of purposive and snowball sampling methods was discussed. The three-stage data analysis process followed in the study was also explained, and the ethical considerations when conducting the research.

CHAPTER SIX

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents and discusses the study's findings on the meanings and pleasures that Black South African women negotiate from *Black Panther*, an Afrofuturist movie. The chapter presents the producers' media discourse or dominant meanings encoded into *Black Panther*. These meanings are then related to Afrofuturism. The chapter discusses the audience discourses or audience readings that Black South Africans negotiated. The readings negotiated from *Black Panther* are then associated with the social context of consumption: South Africa and Soweto. The chapter simultaneously discusses audience readings and pleasure to understand why the movie became popular among subaltern viewers and in marginal social-historical contexts of consumption such as Soweto.

6.2 *BLACK PANTHER*: THE MEDIA DISCOURSES

The study's findings show that *Black Panther* is a Marvel superhero movie that Afrofuturism informs about its themes and aesthetics. It reflects that the film has a predominantly black cast and a black superhero. It depicts black people as powerful and advanced and draws on Afrofuturism's rich and layered concept. The movie represents black people as heroic and incorporates feminist ideology, mysticism, cosmology, mythology, and metaphysics. Unlike mainstream Hollywood films, *Black Panther* connects African traditions' cultural and aesthetic aspects in its imagination of new with futures (Loughrey, 2018). The movie provides a credible alternative to colonialism by depicting an imagined country, Wakanda, that had never been colonized and oppressed. The fictional nation of Wakanda is the antithesis of African countries. It is a country that determines its future, statehood, allegiance and government at two levels: isolationist economics and an untouched culture" (Van Dyke, 2018).

6.2.1 Centering and re-imagining blackness and black people

Consistent with Afrofuturism, described as an Afrocentric movement of Black projected art, *Black Panther* depicts a possible future through a black cultural lens (Gateward & Jennings, 2015). Unlike most mainstream Hollywood movies, the movie shows Black people as powerful and heroic. The film introduces black perspectives and stories to science fiction to imagine a possible future and reality. *Black Panther* is the first mainstream Marvel superhero movie with a black superhero and a predominantly black cast. The film represents black people as heroic than criminals, drivers or white heroes' servants (Loughrey, 2018). It further connects the cultural aspects of African traditions into the fictional world of Wakanda (Loughrey, 2018).

The analysis of the movie shows that one of the dominant themes encoded into the media text is that of black leadership. The film portrays black people who assume powerful leadership positions (Loughrey, 2018). *Black Panther* does not only represent singular black power or excellence in leadership. Instead, it also depicts the collaborative power of black people through a black cultural lens. The main character in the movie, T'Challa, the *Black Panther*, represents black leadership and excellence. He is the black leader of the nation who represents the strength of black people. The progressive depiction of black people and black futures in *Black Panther* delves on Afrofuturism. Afrofuturism as a movement seeks to re-imagine a thriving future for black people (Chikafa-Chipiro, 2019).

6.2.2 Empowerment and re-imagining black womanhood

The qualitative content analysis and document analysis findings show that *Black Panther* producers sought to challenge dominant depictions of black women in Hollywood. The movie depicts black women who occupy space in fields traditionally male-dominated, such as science and technology and the military (Loughrey, 2018). The film re-imagines black womanhood by empowering women to become tribes and revolutionary groups leaders. According to Chikafa-Chipiro (2019), the representation and re-imagining of black women in the movie seek to recall African women warriors who have lost their power over time but still can re-invent Africa (Chikafa-Chipiro, 2019). In line with Afrofuturism, *Black Panther* engages with gender roles and womanhood in African futures discourse.

Black Panther does not only reflect the brilliance of Black women. It further demonstrates their versatility, power and multi-dimensional nature (Neguse, 2018). The movie depicts versatile and dynamic young black women who are leaders and at the forefront of everything. It allows Black women to be in an imaginary space where they are liberated. It serves as a critique of social inequalities and injustices that black women have to confront in their everyday lives. The movie depicts a powerful woman: Nakia, who plays a critical role in the war by spying on the rest of the world and reporting to Wakanda. She represents women's strength, liberation, power, and courage; Okoye is the leader of the Dora Milaje, Wakanda's most dangerous warriors and protectors of the throne. She is rooted in the traditions of Wakanda and will do anything for the country. Okoye's character challenges patriarchy and is determined to protect the king at any cost regardless of her gender; Ramonda, the *Black Panther's* mother, challenges patriarchy and makes it possible for women to be advisors to men. She serves in advisory (Van Dyke, 2018); Shuri, the *Black Panther's* young sister, also portrays the strength and ability of black women. Shuri is smart and presides over the technological developments in Wakanda and constructs the *Black Panther's* weapons and suits. She thrives in a role that men have historically dominated.

The study's findings show that one of the critical intentions of *Black Panther* is to disrupt dominant Western notions of beauty and redefine beauty (Tsang, 2018). The movie presents black women in their natural hair and wearing clothes and costumes that are not over-sexualised but complement their skin. The film also uses the Dora Milaje army to challenge hegemonic notions of beauty. The Dora Milaje wear their bald hair and African attire with pride. Their beauty does not conform to Western ideas of beauty. The representation of women and the notions of beauty that inform *Black Panther* stems from Afrofuturism. Afrofuturism seeks to project the future of the world through developing art and artistic designs that are rooted in Africa. It aims to locate the futures within alternate cultural imaginaries (Markin, 2019).

6.2.3 Black people and technology

The movie *Black Panther* personifies Africa as a liberal and technologically advanced continent. This representation of Africa and the fictional country of Wakanda is based on Afrofuturism's attempt to draw links between black culture, technology, liberation,

imagination and mysticism (Bakare, 2014). The study's findings reveal that the movie reimagines a history of an African country that has never been colonised, Wakanda. Yet, it is one of the most technologically advanced countries globally. Furthermore, the movie demystifies science fiction, a white-dominated genre, by positioning black people, who have always been perceived as backward, at the centre of futuristic worlds (Giles, 2018).

The representation of Wakanda as a technologically advanced country is in line with one of Afrofuturism's core objectives to give the African continent and black people the power to own advanced technology, which has largely been believed to be the preserve of Europeans. To challenge this notion, *Black Panther* is set in a futuristic fictional African country called Wakanda, whose world consists of monorails, flying cars and medical marvels made possible through the discovery of vibranium, a superpower metal.

6.2.4 African culture and aesthetics

In line with its Afrofuturist foundations, *Black Panther* celebrates African aesthetics and cultures in various ways. The use of African culture, traditions and language in the movie challenges dominant modes of perception about Africa and the black experience shared through mainstream Hollywood movies (Karam & Kirby-Hirst 2019). *Black Panther* erases the pervasive perceptions of African cultures and black experiences in Hollywood films. It also erases the perception that African cultures and languages are inferior to those from the West. Share America states that *Black Panther* should be read as an antidote to years and years of negative and dehumanizing portrayals of African people and their cultures and languages (2018). The movie draws from several existing African cultures and traditions to represent various people across different parts of the continent (Chutel & Kazeem, 2018).

Black Panther shows that African cultures and traditions are still intact and do not reflect backwardness. The movie removes cultural limitations and helps awaken pride and an identity shift within the black community. It discredits the misrepresentation of ethnic minorities in mainstream Hollywood films, intending to project them as necessary and equal to the dominant ones (Yamout, 2018).

6.3 AUDIENCE READINGS OF *BLACK PANTHER*: MEANINGS AND PLEASURES

The findings of this study show that marginalised Black South African women in Soweto negotiate meanings and pleasures associated with resistance from *Black Panther*. The film and its Afrifuturist orientation provide black South African women in Soweto with a cultural moment to resist, challenge and subvert different forms of oppression they encounter in social consumption contexts. Furthermore, the film provides black South African women with a voice to temporarily claim a futuristic world with agency and control over their lives. These findings resonate with the cultural studies approach to the study of the media that posits that the meaning of a media text is not necessarily in the text but negotiated between the text and socially situated audiences in their social-historical contexts of consumption (Murdock, 1989; Makwambeni & Salawu, 2017). The findings further confirm that the meanings that black South African women in Soweto negotiate from *Black Panther* are shaped by their social-historical contexts of consumption, South Africa and Soweto, where black women, in particular, tend to live in the margins of society. Because it is in these contexts that meanings emanate.

6.3.1 Engaging with blackness and Black characters in a *Black Panther*

The study's findings show that Black South African women enjoyed watching *Black Panther* because of its portrayal of black people. In addition, they derived pleasure from engaging with a film that has a predominantly black cast. This reading of *Black Panther*, informed by the subordinate and marginal roles that black characters primarily play in Hollywood as well as the broader socio-political and economic context in South Africa, is captured by Makhadzi and Lelethu, respectively in the focus group discussions 2:

I like that there were a lot of black people in *Black Panther*. You don't get a movie that focuses on just black people. So that, for me, made it more interesting — just the idea of having an almost all-black film focusing on black people.

So what I like about the film is that it was the story of a black superhero, something new. I have never been exposed to a superhero who is black.

Uhm, I also liked that it showed black people's strength and beauty. I love that the cast was a broad spectrum of black shades, and they were all given equal admiration, which made it an even better representation of Africa. Finally, I liked that black people were once portrayed as the good guys for the most part and not shown playing the regular drivers, chauffeurs and drug dealers.

As reflected in the above quotations, Black South African women in Soweto negotiation of *Black Panther* is shaped by their shared subjectivities as black people who have been underrepresented in mainstream Hollywood films. The pleasures that Black South African women in Soweto derive from seeing black characters in *Black Panther* can be viewed as a form of resistance to the representation of black people in the global media and their continued exclusion from leadership positions in the context of their immediate position of consumption, South Africa. How *Black Panther* portrays black people creates resistance in Manichean, South Africa, where race has been the basis of marginalisation for centuries. Spence et al. (1983) have argued that global media cultural industries have always portrayed black people in ways that promote racism. Miller (1998) contends that representations of black people in Hollywood favour the white class and keep black people from positions of power (Miller, 1998).

Black South African women in Soweto found pleasure in the character of the *Black Panther*, the male figure who is a black leader of the nation of Wakanda. The data from the focus group discussions and follow up in-depth interviews shows that audience members are attracted to the idea of seeing a powerful black Black superhero in a Hollywood film. Notably, Black South African women identified with the black characters in the movie such that they began to see themselves through the characters of the film. This is seen in their readings of the movies, where they constantly refer to the characters as “we” instead of “them”. Arguably, black South African women’s reading of ‘blackness’ in the film is articulated to their subaltern position in post-apartheid. Mpumi from focus group 2’s reading below captures audiences’ identification with the *Black Panther* and his determination to free his people:

I think my favourite character was *Black Panther* because uhm...I feel like he was determined and went for what he believed in when he was

defeated the first time. They thought he was dead right after that he could have given up because now he feared for his life because of how dangerous that guy was. But he was so determined to win back uhm, the freedom of his people rather. So I liked watching it because his character gives me life and encourages my determination

Marvel movies usually have white superheroes. The stories are based on white people, people we can't relate to. I liked *Black Panther* because it has a black superhero, something new. I also liked that it showed the strength and beauty of black people. For once, black people are the good guys.

Black Panther is a unique Afrofuturist movie that centres 'blackness in unusual ways to the audiences' social context. As a result, it generates both pleasures and meanings of resistance from Black female audiences in post-apartheid South Africa. Nevertheless, race and gender remain the dominant factors distinguishing between the rich and the poor (Kehler, 2001).

6.3.2 Negotiating *Black Panther's* representation of Africa

The data analysed in the study shows that one of the main reasons *Black Panther* is popular among Black South African women in Soweto is its representation of Africa, which goes against dominant stereotypes in global cultural production. The women who participated in the study derived pleasure from seeing representations of Africa that differ from those in Hollywood films. As a result, *Black Panther* provided black South African women in Soweto with space and voice to reclaim their dignity as Black people by challenging colonial representations of Africa that have consistently shown the continent as war-torn, poverty-stricken, and corrupt (Harth, 2012). Furthermore, black South African women in Soweto derived pleasure from seeing a beautiful, technologically advanced, progressive and modern Africa in *Black Panther*. This reading of the film that is associated with both pleasure and resistance is captured by Asanda below:

I liked that we were not presented naked like they always portray Africa, where people run around with leopard skins. Africa is great, although we

are not portrayed as a good continent. I saw the greatness of Africa, especially in the vibranium.

Asanda's reading of Africa as represented in *Black Panther* shows that the film's popularity can be attributed to the resistance that it evokes associated with the continent's portrayal in Western media. Harth (2021) posits that the West has portrayed Africa as a dangerous place characterised by violence, poverty, crime, helplessness and hopelessness. This biased and one-sided depiction of Africa has its roots in colonialism, where colonial officials often sought to maintain and entrench white domination and supremacy (Harth, 2012). The pleasure that Black South African women derive from seeing a positive portrayal of Africa in the film is a form of resistance to Africa's one-sided story that has been depicted in mainstream global media. This resistance is also shaped by their social context of South Africa consumption, where race and colonialism still define black women's marginal existence in post-apartheid South Africa.

The study's findings show that *Black Panther* popularity in subaltern spaces such as Soweto can be attributed to the cultural moment associated with Pan Africanism that it evokes among Black female audiences. The Afrofuturist film represented an image of Africa that resonates with the black women of Soweto. The movie was able to bring back dignity and pride in the continent's richness that has been largely erased in mainstream Hollywood films. This positive representation of Africa is endorsed below by some of the women who participated in the study:

I think the movie captured the natural side of Africa. It captured the richness of Africa. I enjoyed watching the Africa that I know, the one rich in minerals and the one that is natural and authentic in its form. So I think that was captured well for the world to see and recognize. So, ja, Africa's ability to contribute to the world's development was seen in that space.

I loved how they portrayed it as a prosperous continent. It showed its independence very well. You were also able to see the nature side of it as well, the plantation, livestock and fertile land

The representation of Africa in *Black Panther* runs against dominant narratives of the 'dark continent. The film engenders feelings of hopefulness and positivity among

subaltern readers, as reflected in Lerato's sentiments. This hope is ignited within a social context of consumption, South Africa and Soweto, where black women live at the margins of society:

...they made it seem like Africa can be great, and it reminds me of the movie 2012. I don't know if you guys know it where the apocalypse where everyone dies. Everything is just destroyed. The only land that's left in Africa. Hence, everybody, whoever survived that, had to move to Africa, so Africa was the only thing in this whole world, and for me, it just takes me back to that. You know Africa is great. However, we are not being portrayed as a good continent because of many issues. But, still, we can be great and show it to the world. I saw the greatness of Africa, especially in the vibranium, that it was created in Africa, and it just has so much power, so I liked that.

6.3.3 Engaging with African culture and history in *Black Panther*

One of the critical motives of Afrofuturism is to restore the dignity of African culture, traditions and history. The study's findings reflect that Black South African women in Soweto derive pleasure from seeing their own culture and languages as Africans embraced in a Hollywood film. An analysis of *Black Panther* shows that the producers sought to challenge dominant perceptions about Africa and its cultures through African cultural aesthetics (Karam & Kirby-Hirst, 2019). The reading captured below from one of the participants shows how Black South African women in Soweto derived pleasure from seeing a movie that views the world from an African lens. Audience readings of *Black Panther* challenge Hollywood practices that have erased African culture and the Black experiences from global cultural products. The erasure and distortion of African cultures and languages reflected in Hollywood resonate with their own experiences in South Africa, where African cultures and language have primarily been seen as inferior to are Western cultures and languages:

It's the culture in the movie that made me like it. It is scarce for a film to have so many African cultures in one movie. I loved that they had African costumes and music. It taught me to never view myself through the lens that America views us.

The data analysed in the study shows that *Black Panther* actively engages with Africa's history and experience of oppression and dispossession. This engagement contributes to the film's popularity among Black South African women in Soweto, as illustrated in focus group 1, Lusanda's reading of the film:

The film shows how Africans created solutions using their minerals and resources until they were taken away. This movie portrays that a lot of things were stolen from us. As a result, we could have been very wealthy.

The above readings show that *Black Panther's* engagement with Africa's painful history of dispossession provokes a "cultural moment" among Black South African women in Soweto to confront different forms of dispossession in their social context. The women who participated in the focus groups were able to draw parallels between the vibranium in the film and land dispossession in South Africa, which resulted in the creation of homelands and overcrowded townships like Soweto. Audience readings of *Black Panther* illustrate that audiences do not come into the meaning-making process culturally naked. Their lived experiences and shared subjectivities invariably shape the meanings that they negotiate (Makwambeni & Salawu, 2018). In this case, Black South African women's experiences of marginality in South Africa and Soweto opens up an opportunity for them to challenge dominant narratives about Africa's history and developmental challenges.

The focus group discussions with Black South African women in Soweto revealed their pleasure in engaging with a film that showed an Africa that has not gone through the yoke of colonialism. The participants enjoyed seeing an imaginary world where black people could feel and see a different kind of Africa from the one, they already knew. It shows that Afrofuturist films like *Black Panther* can empower audiences to imagine a possible future through a black cultural lens (Womack, 2013). Mpho's reading of the film is an illustration of those above:

The movie is about what Africa could have been uhm... if it wasn't colonised the way, it was so uhm... So it tries to give an image of the continent's possibilities if it was not for all those influences that are here now. We can see this in the movie because they give us a different Africa that we don't know. It shows a different side of each gender which is unusual to us. Coming back to the whole (pause)...it's not a belief. Still, the whole fact that Africa's the richest continent in the world, that's

basically what they are trying to portray right, with the vibranium. All that so basically the outside world, which is, the European parts of the country and all that, they are now trying to steal that from Africa to make themselves rich because it is something that did happen anyway and is still happening even now so uhm.. yeah I think the movie is about portraying what Africa would have been if we were also able to.. win back all our resources that were stolen, or how it would have been if our resources were never stolen. So ja this is shown in a more fictional and fun way.

Furthermore, Bongi's reading of *Black Panther* shows that the film appealed to the audience's identity as black people and Africans. The audiences find pleasure in being transported to their roots to learn about their 'lost' tradition overtaken by Western culture. Notably, Bongi's reading of *Black Panther* is a form of resistance against cultural imperialism:

The fact that society denies us access to ancestors and it's seen as demons or witchcraft is moving us away from our traditions and connecting with people who have passed. As seen in the movie when the *Black Panther* connects with his father... So I think the film directs us back to our roots to see and check ourselves out because we are losing out on many things, and if this continues, we will be a lost generation. We are slowly losing touch with our African roots and gaining a lot from western cultures, misleading us and separating us from our African teachings.

Audience readings of *Black Panther* also show that the film shows black South African women that they can still move past what they went through in the past and still regain everything they lost using all the advancing and evolving technology. The readings further show that the social context shapes how audiences make meaning of media texts. As shown in the quotation below, audience readings of *Black Panther* are mediated by the politics of South Africa, where land dispossession has become an emotive issue in the post-apartheid era:

... fine Africans were colonised, and everything was right, but it's also portraying that we can still win everything back. Do you understand? So it's not just about how they lived back in the days, it's also about how we can still move forward in the future because I uhmm technology is taking

over as that's seen in the movie where the.. where *Black Panther's* sister was saying that everything is controlled by technology, so I feel like as we are progressing, technology is also uhm... Getting stronger and stronger means that we can still do our utmost best to win back everything that was taken from us, like, what's that? Uhm...Take back the land rather (giggles amongst participants).

6.3.4 Reading 'powerful women' in *Black Panther*

The findings from the reception study show that one of the reasons *Black Panther* is popular among Black South African women in Soweto is because of its historical and progressive representation of black women. In addition, black South African women who participated in this study derived pleasure from watching a Hollywood film that showcases strong, independent, powerful, beautiful and fearless black women. This pleasure is reflected in focus group 2, Olwethu's sentiments:

I enjoyed seeing how the women in the movie are strong and fearless. Seeing women in that position is so exhilarating. I enjoyed seeing men rely on women.

Black South African women in Soweto admire female characters like Nakia, Okoye and Shuri in *Black Panther*. They adore these women because they are independent, powerful and strong. The female characters in the film do not conform to hegemonic representations of black women nor fit into societal notions and expectations of what a woman should do or can be in their social context of consumption (South Africa and Soweto). Subaltern women in Soweto found pleasure in watching *Black Panther* because it presents them with an opportunity to see black women who perform roles reserved mainly for men. They stated that they admire female characters like Shuri, who runs the technology lab, because they managed to forge careers in professions men dominate in their social context.

The pleasure that Black South African women in Soweto derive from watching independent, powerful and fearless female characters in *Black Panther* can be read as an act of resistance to the different forms of oppression and exclusion that black women face in South Africa more generally and Soweto township in particular. *Black Panther* provides the subaltern female readers with a cultural moment to contest

different forms of institutionalised marginalisation in South Africa that are mainly founded on gender and racial lines (Veeran, 2006).

The pleasure that these subaltern black women derive from watching powerful black women in *Black Panther* while living in a community that expects women to be meek and subservient is an act of resistance against the humiliation and marginalisation, they face on their everyday lives. In this light, the popularity of *Black Panther* among subaltern Black South African women in Soweto can be attributed to the film's capacity to provoke situated audiences to symbolically challenge their marginal reality by presenting a futuristic world in which women are in charge and control of key sectors in society and their own lives. This finding resonates with Johnson's (1986) observation that audiences' context and the media form determine the meaning and pleasures they negotiate from media texts.

The study's findings further revealed that most participants enjoyed watching characters such as Nakia, who have determination and persistence. The pleasure associated with reading Nakia's experience is expressed by Lele from focus group 2 below:

...I like her because she stood for what she believed in, and she didn't need validation from anyone. Whether you're a man or a woman, she didn't need anything from anyone. She didn't feel entitled to get anything from anyone. She believed in something and went to go and do it or go and get it. She's the kind of woman I want to be like or I wish I could be like.

Black South African women in Soweto also like powerful and fearless women like Okoye. Focus group 1 found her inspirational and admirable because of her strong character.

I love the bald lady, the general, I don't know her name, but ja she's just so powerful. She's fearless, ja so that's the person I love the most.

Nna I love the general and her team, those women ba di cheesekop (bald heads). (chuckles). Chiskop women are nice because the chiskop ladies are the people who, you know, are fearless?.uhm fearless people bring change... and when they come together, a lot happens here. They could

save themselves and other people from stopping a war and bringing change within the tribe – so chiskop ladies.

My favourite part was also the female soldier...Being a black woman from my community, you can't do or say much. Like you are forced to follow and not lead. I liked how the women in *Black Panther* were in control. You know this is something scarce for us. I think that is why I like the lady soldier more.

It is also significant to note that *Black Panther* challenges male and white domination. The Afrofuturist film challenges patriarchy by depicting women in leadership positions in areas such as the military. The pleasure associated with reading a film where women challenge traditional gender roles is captured by one female participant from one-on-one in-depth interview below:

I liked the fact that uhm... the king, his soldiers were women, I liked that a lot uhm... it just shows us that, you what for the longest of time women were not seen as... how can I say, the protectors or, people who can fight wars and stuff so this movie 'nje' just bringing that part, it made it special for me, it tells me as a woman that I am also able to conquer the world. I can do things without men... So, it encourages us as women that we can do this.

It is significant to note that the pleasure associated with reading *Black Panther* is shaped by the audience's social context of consumption, where black women are largely confined to domestic roles and chores. There is pleasure associated with resistance when subaltern female participants see other women in power, which is unusual in their society. Seeing women leading in the technology field, which is a field that has traditionally been a preserve for men, is fascinating as well as inspiring for subaltern Black South African women in Soweto township. It also prompts them to question their subaltern status in their context of consumption:

... I will call it the technology lab run by a woman. Yeah, because for the longest time, at least now there's like a lot of change in that department but for the longest time it has always been known that men understand technology, so we'll always have to call men to come and fix our TV's, we always have to call men to come and fix our laptops when it stops working and but there are women who understand how to do that. I can

fix my laptop if something happens, I can... re-establish what happened with my TV when something happens. I just wish it was also like that in the real context, as in men have faith in us like that, so I liked that very much.

I loved the sister, *Black Panther's* sister. I love that, as Lali said, she works in a so-called man job, man career, so I liked that about her, and I love the fact that she joked around a lot. She found uhm, something fun in everything and anything, and it comes back to uhm, our history as people, we can make it fun, we can turn it in a fun way, yeah. So ja I liked seeing that kind of domination.

6.3.5 Engaging with Western concepts of beauty

One of the issues that dominate *Black Panther* as a media text relates to the notion of beauty. Audience readings of *Black Panther* show that black South African women in Soweto derive pleasure from challenging dominant meanings of beauty conveyed through mainstream Hollywood film. For example, subaltern women in Soweto described the bald black women in *Black Panther* as beautiful, although they do not meet Western normative categorisations of beauty. Audiences who participated in this study challenged colonialism and patriarchal notions of beauty. Their readings constitute elaborate forms of resistance to attempts by men and the West to define and policewomen's bodies. This resistance reflects focus group 1, Lungelwa's redefinition of beauty:

White men or western cultures should not define beauty. Instead, one needs to define beauty from what one feels inside. They should be comfortable in their skin and hair. That is where beauty is.

Black South African women's reading of *Black Panther* reflected in the above quotations resonates with Ang's (1995) position that audiences of media texts are not passive readers. They can negotiate meanings of resistance from media texts based on their subjectivities and social contexts of consumption. In this case, the pleasures that black women in Soweto derive from consuming *Black Panther* links to their agency and ability to rework the film and fashion meanings that challenge and expose Western and patriarchal meanings of beauty (Marco, 2012). According to

Jere-Malada (2008), perceptions about beauty should not be seen as innocent. They are shaped by some historical, political and social factors. As captured in Lungi sentiments below, one can deduce that black South African women in Soweto's rejection of dominant patriarchal and western definitions of beauty are informed by their shared subjectivities that were developed in a social context in which women are forced to conform to western and patriarchal notions of beauty:

I loved that part where that woman snatched off the wig because it means more than what is portrayed. It means that you don't need anything Western. You don't need make-up, you don't need bras. Its oppression. I loved the part where that lady said the meeting was adjourned because the corsets were hurting her. I will not stand here and be suffocated by all these Western things.

As evidenced in the audience readings, the pleasure of watching *Black Panther* involves the pleasure of resisting Western culture and patriarchy, as explained by Thato from focus group 2 below:

You, in your natural form, can conquer anything. You don't need the make-up, you don't need bras, you don't need all these things, it was a form of, it was a form of oppression. I loved the part where that lady said the meeting must be adjourned because the corsets are hurting them, you understand? It tells us that you, you don't need to succumb to western cultures, you don't need to succumb especially to men, to do certain things, you can do them in your own right as participant c said, no, today I'm not going to wear a bra, today I'm not going to do this or today I'm not going to stand here and be suffocated by all these things that were brought from the west.

6.3.6 Engaging with gender equality in *Black Panther*

As an Afrofuturist movie, *Black Panther* sought to champion women's liberation and critique social inequality (van Soldt, 2019). Therefore, the film is politically and artistically engaged because it challenges what it means to be black and female by creating the possibilities of a freer and more equal world (Anderson). In line with Afrofuturism, *Black Panther* engages with gender roles and womanhood. The data from focus groups conducted in the study shows that most participants who read

Black Panther negotiated it as a movie that sought to promote gender equality between men and women. The film was read as a cultural production aimed at positioning black people, particularly women, at the centre of everything. This reading reflected in focus group 2, Andy's words:

I saw that the movie creates a world where black people control. It shows a world where black people are at the forefront of everything. They are leaders of tribes, which shows black women controlling things. The movie is about closing a gap between the rich and the poor, men and women, young and old. We see equality play a significant role. No one's age, gender, position, or stuff like that impacts how they treat each other. The movie is also about a black superhero, never seen before in Marvel. The film also speaks to black supremacy and leadership.

The movie is about change. I say this because they give us a whole different world. We see something that has never been seen before. We see black women playing leading roles, playing fighters and protectors of men...

Black South African women in Soweto found *Black Panther* as pleasurable because it puts women at the forefront and depicts equality in terms of gender roles. Women, like men, are leaders of groups and as superior as shown when they lead men. The popularity of *Black Panther* among subaltern women in Soweto emanates from the fact that the film depicts a world which they aspire to but is elusive in their social context. As discussed earlier in the study, gender remains a significant factor that defines discrimination in South Africa. Despite attaining freedom in 1994, South Africa remains a largely patriarchal society where men dominate in most parts of society. Men still hold the majority of managerial positions in the country. This inequality and marginalisation of women persist despite the country's constitution providing a legal framework for equality and non-discrimination. The majority of black women continue to live under limiting conditions in rural areas and townships. They live in areas characterised by poor infrastructure and a lack of socio-economic development (Kehler, 2000).

Although Black South African women live in a context where their lived experience is subalternity, they read meanings of hope and resistance to their marginal condition

from *Black Panther*. The movie, and the reality depicted in it, resonate with their fight for equality and empowerment in South Africa. The film allows them to engage with their reality and to also dream about a future where black women have the same opportunities as those presented to men and white people in the movie. These readings captured in focus group 1, Bongji's averments:

With our current South Africa...uhm we have things such as women empowerment groups and all that, fighting and standing at the forefront of everything.

Ja, with Womandla, yes. Womandla is a non-profit organisation that celebrates the power of women in Africa and around the world. So with groups like these that motivate women to have a voice and speak out and also realise their power, more women will come out of their comfort zone and stand against this thing of undermining the power of women.

Arguably, the pleasure of watching *Black Panther* has been associated with the meanings of resistance that subaltern Black South African women negotiate from the movie. However, as reflected in the quotations, subaltern audiences do not come into the reading process empty. Their experiences of fighting against discrimination and inequality in South Africa through civic organisations such as Womandla, in their socio-historical context of consumption, South Africa and Soweto township, shape their *Black Panther* consumption.

6.3.7 Reading *Black Panther* as an act of reclaiming voice and space

The study's findings show that the popularity of *Black Panther* among black South African women in Soweto is associated with its ability to inspire subaltern women to recuperate their voice and take up space to challenge the different forms of domination that they encounter in their social contexts of consumption. Audience readings of the movie generate meanings of resistance where black South African women are inspired to confront the status quo. These meanings of resistance are embodied in focus group 1, Lungji's determination to see the full emancipation of women in South Africa:

I no longer feel like the girl that I was. I now feel like I got some supernatural power telling me to stand up and go, or like a voice telling me that I am so much more than meets the eye. After watching this movie, I now understand what women can do and what they are capable of. At one stage I thought that everything was normal, I don't know if you understand me? But this movie makes me feel different now. It makes me want to challenge the status quo. It makes me yearn for that kind of life where I make decisions and choose how I want things done.

Lelethu's sentiments below further indicate the transformative nature of Afrofuturist cultural products like *Black Panther*:

We don't have voices, but they gave women voices in the movie. If we go back into history, before apartheid, Africa has never been patriarchal. Women have always had a voice. They took away our voice because they saw the power we possess. Then during apartheid, women still had a voice, understand? Women still occupied spaces — your Charlotte Maxeke, Lilian Ngoyi and Mam Winnie. Women took charge. We don't have a voice anymore.

The above quotations show that *Black Panther* opens symbolic space for black women to voice their reality and aspirations in post-apartheid South Africa. They also show that black South African women in Soweto derive pleasure from negotiating meanings associated with resistance from *Black Panther*. As evidenced in the quotations, the movie's cultural moment involves opening up space for subaltern women to challenge their status quo. This resistance occurs in a social context where women are largely silenced in public and domestic spaces.

Gibb (2019) contends that by silencing women in public and domestic spaces, one will dictate hierarchy, wield power, and engage in exploitation. Black power allows black South African women to challenge and question the silencing and systematic erasure of women from South Africa's history, largely constructed along masculine lines (Gibb, 2019). Black South African women's reading of *Black Panther* illustrates that the meanings and pleasure that audiences negotiate from media texts such as *Black Panther* is influenced by the different discourses that audiences inhabit in their social context (Ang, 1985). In the South African context, audience readings and

pleasures are shaped by their social context of consumption where despite participating in the armed struggle, leading popular organisations and movements, and driving passive resistance against the apartheid regime, women have largely been excluded from leading roles in society. As such, the meanings associated with pleasure that subaltern women in Soweto negotiate from *Black Panther* are both a form of critique and an act of resistance whose aim is to reclaim voice and space to address the challenges that confront women in post-apartheid South Africa:

The movie reminds me of Womandla. With groups like these that motivate women to have a voice and speak out and realise their power, more women will come out of their comfort zone and stand against this thing of undermining the power of women.

Audience readings of *Black Panther* reflect the emergence of new femininities in Soweto (Makwambeni & Salawu, 2018). This emergent black woman is critical of the marginalisation of women in post-apartheid South Africa and questions the normalisation of the oppression of women. She questions gender roles in the social context of consumption and seeks to take charge of different aspects of politics and society, as observed by Mavuso (2017). The study's findings align with the cultural studies position that audiences do not make meanings of media texts in a vacuum. Their shared subjectivities and social-historical contexts shape meaning-making (Murdock, 1989). In the case of *Black Panther*, black South African women in Soweto negotiate the film in a social context of consumption in which powerful black women like Naledi Chirwa and Nompandolo Mkhatswa have taken leadership roles and occupied space during the Fees Must Fall student movement. As evidenced in the above quotations, audience readings of *Black Panther* are also shaped by a socio-historical context where women like Lillian Ngoyi and Winnie Mandela occupied key positions in the struggle for democracy in South Africa.

6.4 Conclusion

This chapter has presented and discussed the study's findings. It engaged with the meanings and pleasures Black South Africans in Soweto women derive from watching *Black Panther*. The chapter argues that Black South African women in Soweto derive meanings and pleasures associated with resistance from *Black Panther*. These meanings and pleasures are influenced and shaped by their social-historical context of consumption, where black people and black people, in particular,

have largely been marginalised from the different sectors of the economy. The findings show that audiences do not necessarily accept the meanings offered by the media text. Instead, they have agency and actively negotiate meanings based on their personal experiences and socio-historical background and context (Katyal, 2006).

The chapter argues that the popularity of *Black Panther* among Black South African women in Soweto can be attributed to the Afrofuturistic foundation of the film as well as the symbolic space that the movie opens up for subaltern audiences to challenge and resist different forms of marginalisation in domestic, national and global spaces.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION AND USABLE INSIGHTS

7.1 Introduction

This chapter concludes the study that sought to explore and account for the popularity of *Black Panther* among subaltern black South African women in Soweto township. The chapter begins by summarising the study concerning its objectives and questions. It further outlines the study's significant findings before discussing the usable insights that emerge from the study. Finally, the chapter ends by identifying and discussing areas of further research that other researchers can pursue.

7.2 The study objectives and questions

The study's main objective was to explore and account for the popularity of *Black Panther* among subaltern black South African women in Soweto. The specific questions that the study engaged with were as follows: What are the preferred or dominant meanings encoded into *Black Panther*? What meanings and pleasures do socially situated black South African women in Soweto negotiate from *Black Panther*? What accounts for the popularity of *Black Panther* among black South African women in Soweto Township?

7.3 Major findings of the study

The media text: The findings of the study indicate that *Black Panther* is a Marvel superhero movie that is informed by Afrofuturism in terms of its themes and aesthetics. This is reflected in the fact that the movie has a predominantly black cast and a black superhero. It depicts black people as powerful and advanced and draws on the rich and layered concept of Afrofuturism. The film incorporates feminist ideology, mysticism, cosmology, mythology, and metaphysics in its production. The movie provides a credible alternative to colonialism by depicting an imagined country, Wakanda, that had never been colonized and oppressed. The fictional country of Wakanda that is depicted in the movie is the opposite of previously colonised African

countries. It is a country that determines its own future, statehood, allegiance and government at two levels: isolationist economics and an untouched culture” (Van Dyke, 2018).

Black Panther as a film centres and re-imagines blackness and black people. Unlike most mainstream Hollywood movies, the movie depicts Black people as powerful and heroic. The movie introduces black perspectives and black stories to science fiction in its imagination of a possible future and reality. The film represents black people as heroic than criminals, drivers or white heroes’ servants (Loughrey, 2018). It further connects the cultural aspects of African traditions into the fictional world of Wakanda (Loughrey, 2018). The analysis of the movie shows that one of the dominant themes encoded into the media text is that of black leadership. The film portrays black people who assume powerful leadership positions (Loughrey, 2018). However, *Black Panther* does not only portray singular black power or excellence in leadership. Instead, it also depicts the collaborative power of black people through a black cultural lens.

The study's findings also show that *Black Panther* challenges dominant depictions of black women in Hollywood. The movie depicts black women who occupy space in fields traditionally male-dominated, such as science and technology and the military (Loughrey, 2018). The film re-imagines black womanhood by empowering women to become tribes and revolutionary groups leaders. In line with Afrofuturism, *Black Panther* engages with gender roles and womanhood in African futures discourse. Black demonstrates the versatility, power and multi-dimensional nature of Black women. It serves as a critique of social inequalities and injustices that black women have to confront in their everyday lives.

The study’s findings show that one of the critical intentions of *Black Panther* is to disrupt dominant Western notions of beauty and redefine beauty (Tsang, 2018). The movie presents black women in their natural hair and wearing clothes and costumes that are not over-sexualised but complement their skin. The representation of women and the notions of beauty that inform *Black Panther* are informed by Afrofuturism. The movie presents Africa as a liberal and technologically advanced continent. It draws the links between black culture, technology, liberation, imagination and

mysticism. The film reimagines a history of an African country that has never been colonised, Wakanda, technologically advanced.

In line with its Afrofuturist foundations, *Black Panther* celebrates African aesthetics and cultures in various ways. The use of African culture, traditions and language in the movie is designed to challenge dominant modes of perception about Africa and the black experience shared through mainstream Hollywood movies (Karam & Kirby-Hirst 2019). *Black Panther* erases the pervasive perceptions of African cultures and black experiences in Hollywood films. It also erases the perception that African cultures and languages are inferior to those from the West. Share America states that *Black Panther* should be read as an antidote to years and years of negative and dehumanizing portrayals of African people and their cultures and languages (2018).

The movie draws from some existing African cultures and traditions to represent various people across different parts of the continent (Chutel & Kazeem, 2018). *Black Panther* shows that African cultures and traditions are still intact and do not reflect backwardness. The movie removes cultural limitations and helps awaken pride and an identity shift within the black community.

7.4 The audience text: Audience meanings and pleasures

The study's findings reveal that the popularity of *Black Panther* is attributable to the meanings and pleasures associated with resistance that it suggests among marginalised black South African women in Soweto. The film provides these women with a 'cultural moment' to resist, challenge and subvert global and localised forms of oppression that they encounter in their everyday lives. It also offers them voice and space to symbolically recuperate and claim a futuristic world where they have agency and control over their lives.

Black Panther's themes and cultural aesthetics resonate with the shared subjectivities and discourses of marginalised black South African women in Soweto in ways that invite meanings and pleasures that are liberating, resistive and sometimes politically subversive. The "cultural moment" that *Black Panther* invites among black South African women in Soweto consists of the opening up symbolic space to resist and challenge global and localised forms of oppression. The popularity of *Black Panther* among black South African women in Soweto can be

attributed to the pleasures that the film opens up for audiences to voice and challenge their marginalisation and silencing in both public and domestic spaces. The study's findings further show that *Black Panther* opens up space for black South African women to challenge dominant beliefs about beauty in their social context of consumption. They derive pleasure from subverting notions that serve the interests of the West and patriarchy. The reception study also shows that *Black Panther* allows Black South African women to negotiate meanings and pleasures of resistance to the representation of Black people, black women and Africa in mainstream Hollywood films.

The meanings and pleasures derived by subaltern black South African women in Soweto from watching *Black Panther* are shaped and influenced by their socio-historical contexts of consumption as well as their shared subjectivities. The findings of the study align with the cultural studies approach to the study of the media which contends that audiences do not necessarily accept the meanings that are proposed by the media text. Audiences have agency and are active meaning that they can negotiate meanings that resonate with their own lived experiences. The findings show that although texts have power to propose particular readings, audiences remain active decoders who will not necessarily accept the preferred reading being offered by the texts (Hall, 1980). These meanings may differ depending on the individual's own social context and predetermined knowledge. The unexpected or unanticipated reading of the text by audiences shows that meaning is not found in the text but from the interaction between texts and the social context of the reader.

7.5 Areas for further research

Future studies may want to explore and account for the meanings and pleasures that *Black Panther* invites in other socio-historical contexts of consumption (beyond Soweto township) and also among other gender identities. Future studies may also need to examine how race, class, ethnicity and nationality and other audience subjectivities influence and shape the meanings that audiences negotiate from the Afrofuturist film.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: CONSENT FORM

Consent to take part in research

Research Topic: Accounting for the popularity of *Black Panther* among subaltern Black South African women

- UNATHI NOQWANE voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.
- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.
- I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.
- I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.
- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.
- I agree to my interview being audio-recorded.
- I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.
- I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview which may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about.
- I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in researcher's dissertation, conference presentation, published papers etc.
- I understand that if I inform the researcher that myself or someone else is at risk of harm they may have to report this to the relevant authorities - they will discuss this with me first but may be required to report with or without my permission.
- I understand that signed consent forms and original audio recordings will be retained in a private computer in a file protected through a password.
- I understand that a transcript of my interview is available for me to access at anytime
- I understand that under freedom of information legalisation I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above.
- I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

Signature of participant



.....

Date:29 January 2020.....

Signature of researcher



.....

Date:29/01/2020.....

APPENDIX B: LETTER FROM PROOFREADER

RC: 2020/429060/07

Triedstone Consulting

* Proofreading * Copyediting * Data analysis * Digital marketing

13 December 2021

Andzisani Prunel Sibiya

The Cape Peninsula University of Technology
Cape Town,
South Africa.

Editing Certificate

We certify that the thesis titled: '**Reading the popular**': **An analysis of the reception of *Black Panther* by subaltern Black South African women**' was proofread and edited for grammar, spelling, punctuation and overall style. The editors ensured no alterations to the author's original intended meanings during the review. Furthermore, the editors tracked all recommendations and amendments with the Microsoft Word "Track Changes" feature. Therefore, the author had the option to accept or reject each change.

Thank you for the opportunity.

Sincerely,



Joseph Olusegun Adebayo, PhD.
Executive Director

APPENDIX C: ETHICS APPROVAL LETTER



P.O. Box 652 • Cape Town 8000 South Africa • Tel: +27 21 469 1012 • Fax +27 21 469 1002
80 Roeland Street, Vredehoek, Cape Town 8001

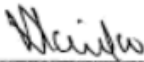
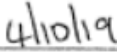
Office of the Research Ethics Committee	Faculty of Informatics and Design
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Ethics approval was granted to Andzisani Sibiya student number 212243055, for research activities related to the MTech: Public Relations Management at the Faculty of Informatics and Design, Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT).

Title of thesis:	Accounting for popularity of Black Panther among subaltern Black South African women: An audience reception analysis
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Comments

Research activities are restricted to those details in the research proposal.

 Signed: Faculty Research Ethics Committee	 Date
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