

Unbelievable Bodies:
Audience Readings of Action Heroines as a Post-Feminist Visual Metaphor

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Abstract

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In this paper, I employ a feminist approach to audience research and examine the individual interviews of 11 undergraduate women who regularly watch and enjoy action heroine films. Participants in the study articulate action heroines as visual metaphors for career and academic success and take pleasure in seeing women succeed against adversity. However, they are reluctant to believe that the female bodies onscreen are physically capable of the action they perform when compared with male counterparts—a belief based on post-feminist assumptions of the limits of female physical abilities and the persistent representations of thin action heroines in film. I argue that post-feminist ideology encourages women to imagine action heroines as successful in intellectual arenas; yet, the ideology simultaneously disciplines action heroine bodies to render them unbelievable as physically powerful women. By analyzing participant interpretations of action heroines as a visual metaphor, I articulate how post-feminism hides persistent disciplining of women's bodies behind a façade of career and academic success.

Keywords: action heroines, post-feminism, feminist audience research, visual metaphor

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The 2012 Hollywood action heroine roster included a sword-wielding princess in *Snow White and Huntsman* (2012), a Disney heroine bent on finding her way in life without a romantic counterpart in *Brave* (2012), and an intelligent and physically skilled female protagonist in the first installment of the *Hunger Games* (2012) trilogy. Women made up 61 percent of the audience during the *Hunger Games*' opening weekend and half of the moviegoers were under the age of 25 (Young, 2012).¹ The *Hunger Games* was the third highest grossing domestic film in 2012 while *Brave* was the highest earning animated feature of the same year (Box Office Mojo, n/d). These strong, independent heroines offer audiences electrifying action performances and audiences of women seem to respond to representations of powerful action heroines.

The phenomenon of the action heroine provides a compelling avenue for examining how women understand feminine power in the current era of post-feminism. Post-feminist ideology asserts that women have achieved equality within U.S. society and that barriers to women's achievements no longer exist. However, feminist authors critique the ideology because it obscures persistent inequalities behind successes that have already been achieved (Tasker and Negra, 2007; McRobbie, 2006; Gill, 2007; Joseph, 2009). Several authors discuss representations of powerful action heroines in popular media as a product of post-feminist culture (Coulthard, 2007; McRobbie, 2007; Brown, 2011). For instance, McRobbie (2007) and Brown (2011) argue that post-feminist discourse superficially glorifies action heroines as girl power symbols who are emblematic of the notion that a woman can achieve success in any realm. Yet, these authors postulate that post-feminism simultaneously disparages action heroines by hypersexualizing their bodies and ignoring structural inequities.

Despite these noteworthy interventions, the shortage of research on audiences of action

heroines opens the opportunity to examine how women interpret images of physically assertive women (Vares, 2002). Press (2011) argues that, “the current proliferation of textual analyses in media studies leads to a preponderance of information generated from our own scholarly perspectives, but an unfortunate lack of knowledge regarding the actual experiences of those most affected by the issues we are discussing” (p. 110). Press articulates the necessity of studying audiences to understand how they navigate post-feminist ideology embedded within media texts. Consequently, I propose that the questions arising from a turn to the audience's understandings of action heroines include: how do audiences of women interpret images of physically assertive heroines amidst the ideology that feminism is no longer relevant? How do the discourses of post-feminism shape the audiences' response to action heroines?

In this article, I analyze interviews I conducted with women in their twenties who self-identified as fans² of films that feature action heroines as central or supporting characters. Participants in this study reveal a complex negotiation of action heroine texts and draw from conflicting post-feminist assertions about limits and possibilities for women in society. Post-feminism accepts and promotes women's achievements in intellectual realms while concurrently disparages women's bodies as a means of discipline and control. On one hand, the women interviewed express satisfaction in watching intelligent and driven women overcome obstacles, an attitude that serves as a post-feminist nod to the progress of the women's movement. On the other, participants often find an action heroine's physicality “unbelievable” or “unrealistic,” which highlights notions of sexed and gendered limits for women's bodies. The interviews reveal that some participants underestimate the physical abilities of women categorically, while others believe that slender actresses misrepresent physically strong and skillful characters.

I believe that participants in my study choose to read action heroines as visual metaphors

for career and academic success because post-feminist ideology limits their ability to imagine these women as having literal physical prowess. Visual metaphors join two objects that are physical impossibilities: two objects without a material relationship that form metaphorical meaning (Forceville, 1996; Carroll 1996; El Refaie, 2003). In this way, participants read a heroine's body and her ability to perform action sequences as incongruous because of perceived body limitations; thus, her body's action must symbolize something else. Such displacement of assumed female strength from the body to the mind illustrates the post-feminist trend of privileging women's intellectual opportunities while disciplining female bodies. Post-feminism obscures persistent patriarchal domination of women's active bodies under the guise of professional and academic achievement.

Theorizing the Post-feminist Visual Metaphor

Post-feminism presents contradictions when representing women's achievements and reveals "an only partial incorporation of feminist gains" (Press, 2011, p. 109). The discourses of post-feminism celebrate women's professional empowerment and regularly represent women with prosperous careers, professional ambition, and independent lifestyles, yet persistently regulates the feminine body (Tasker and Negra, 2007; Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2007). Post-feminist body discipline has particular consequences for action heroines. Genre expectations implore the action body to perform daring acrobatics and complex fight sequences; however, these stunts can become dubious for audiences when performed by bodies that observe post-feminist standards of feminine attractiveness. Post-feminism renders action heroines physically unbelievable via two disciplinary discourses.

First, the post-feminist framing of action heroines as unbelievable is attributable to what Gill (2007) calls "the reassertion of sexual difference" in post-feminist discourse (p. 158). Gill

argues that beginning in the 1990s, “a key feature of the post-feminist sensibility has been the resurgence of ideas of natural sexual difference across all media from newspapers to advertising, talk shows and popular fiction” (p. 158). However, the emphasis on what is “natural” for male and female bodies has led to fixed categorizations that “freeze in place existing inequalities by representing them as inevitable” (Gill, 2007, p. 159). A focus on fixed sexual difference purports that women are naturally less aggressive than men and women’s bodies are naturally weaker than men’s as a consequence of biological factors, such as testosterone levels and body mass (Grosz, 1994). As a result, post-feminism disciplines action heroines via assertions of “natural” bodies limits—limits that are tied to essentialized understandings of the physical differences between male and female bodies.

Second, post-feminism disciplines action heroine bodies by stressing a thin body ideal. Several scholars have outlined how body dissatisfaction, eating disorders, and punishing exercise and diet are a consequence of post-feminist punishment of the feminine body that is endemic in the media and popular culture (Gill, 2007; Press, 2011; Fox-Kales, 2011; Joseph, 2009; Bordo, 2003). Negra (2009) describes a rise in services provided by the personal grooming industry since the late ‘90s that includes salons, spas, gyms, personal trainers, nutritionists, and plastic surgeons—services that aim to perfect (i.e. discipline) the flawed female body. She claims that one of the hallmarks of the post-feminist era is the prevalence of the “underfed, overexercised female body” (p. 119). The size 0 actress has become a mainstay in television and film while post-feminist celebrity media reinforces the skinny ideal in fashion magazines and entertainment news outlets, and action stars are no exception. For Hollywood action actresses, the thin ideal requires the same monitoring and surveilling as a condition of an actress’ success in the industry.

Post-feminism conceals these disciplinary discourses by overemphasizing feminist gains in professional spheres; as a result, participants must develop a way to understand action heroines because their unbelievable bodies present contradictions. An action heroine's disciplined body and the cinematic action she performs combine to create a perceived physical impossibility; thus, interpreting an action heroine as a visual metaphor that signifies success in intellectual realms makes her believable again. Visual metaphors provide an avenue to make sense of cinematic imagery that joins physically impossible elements together. For example, consider Verov's use of visual metaphor in *Man with a Movie Camera* as described by Carroll (1996). Verov's film superimposes an extreme close up of an eye over a camera lens. In a film without dialogue, the eye combines with the lens to create a visual metaphor without the use of language. Carroll demonstrates that metaphors are not simply a linguistic device, but a way of thinking and making sense of the world that can be expressed in multiple ways. He notes that while verbal metaphors often tie two distinct objects together metaphorically, film metaphors take two objects that cannot be joined in the physical world and link them via cinematic technology. Likewise, reading an action heroine as a visual metaphor allows an "unbelievable" body to perform physical action as a metaphor. The visual metaphor offers participants a way to negotiate the contradictions embedded in post-feminist discourses of action heroine bodies.

On Audiences, Participants, and Subjectivities

To center audience voices and critically engage representations of action heroines in popular culture, I employ a feminist approach to audience research. Audience research in feminist studies assumes that audiences are active, as opposed to passive receptors of ideology, and that audiences have the capacity to critically engage ideology in the process of interpreting films (Radway, 1984; Stokes, 2003). This approach highlights ideology reproduced within texts

and seeks to establish nuanced understandings of the varied ways individuals can interpret texts. Consequently, texts are polysemic and individuals negotiate textual meaning through the lenses of culture and personal experience. Press and Livingstone (2006) offer that “audience members sometimes used media, and interpreted media, in diverse, unexpected, and creative ways that belied the hegemonic media influence that textual analysis so often hypothesized” (p. 177). With these understandings of audiences in mind, I recognize that individual participants read action heroine texts through their particular perspectives.

My goal for this study was not to make generalizations applicable to all women; rather, I sought to have a dialogue with women who were fans of action heroines to determine what drew them to the genre. I recruited 11 participants through my existing networks, such as courses I had taught at a large campus in the Pacific Northwest. As such, the majority of women were my students in classes that examined media from critical and feminist perspectives. I did not seek a demographically representative sample; yet, the group’s characteristics were generally proportional to the university’s population. Five participants identified as Asian or Korean, five others indicated they were of European descent, and one participant indicated she was of Asian and European descent. The majority of the women identified as heterosexual and their median age was 22. Since my participants were predominantly undergraduate junior and seniors, their attention to professional and collegiate success is not entirely surprising. They are focused on finding internships, making good grades, and choosing a fulfilling career path; thus, translating action heroines as visual metaphors for these types of accomplishments is consistent with their priorities and concerns at the moment.

I began the hour-long individual interviews by asking participants to brainstorm a list of action heroines.³ I then asked a series of open-ended questions relating to the brainstormed list

such as “what are the characteristics of action heroines?” I also encouraged participants to describe the experience of viewing these particular representations of women. I hoped to understand what the experience of viewing these films was like. I asked the participants questions that prompted them to describe how their personal viewpoints might impact what they like and dislike in these heroines. These final questions aimed to clarify the way participants perceive their vantage points impacting their readings of action heroines. After completing the interviews, I organized interview responses thematically to gain a sense of participants’ collective voices. Only after grouping their responses did I begin to theorize participant reflections on action heroines as manifestations of post-feminist imaginings of the limits and possibilities for women.

Feminist audience research requires the scholar to examine her own subjectivities and make her stake in knowledge production transparent. My interests in media, audiences and women’s bodies stem from personal experiences learning and teaching martial arts and viewing action films as a fan. Prior to training in martial arts, I had low perceptions of my physical abilities as a woman and I attribute those beliefs, in part, to cultural programming. As my views of my body have evolved through physical practice, I remain critical of representations of women’s bodies in popular culture. I also acknowledge that my perspectives originate in my experiences and are influenced by my own subjectivities. Growing up as a white, middle-class female, I received certain messages about women’s bodies that were based on the notion that privileged white girls were frail. White patriarchy constructed these messages for my particular subjectivities; as such, my experiences may differ from that of working-class girls of color, for example. Women experience sexism, racism, homophobia, classism, and ableism in diverse ways and negotiate their bodies within these constructs. Just as participants read films through their

own subjectivities, my particular lenses and experiences also influence the ways I read participant voices.

The Visual Metaphor in Action

As literal images, action heroines offer audiences riveting spectacles of the human body. Lara Croft (Angelina Jolie in *Tomb Raider*, 2001, 2003) precariously leaps from boulder to boulder to reach the archeological relic she seeks. Cataleya (Zoe Saldana in *Colombiana*, 2012) arms herself with semiautomatic weapons to single-handedly overtake the drug cartel who killed her family. Slim (Jennifer Lopez in *Enough*, 2002) wraps her hands with brass knuckles and knocks out the abusive husband that threatens to kill her and take her daughter. Storm (Halle Berry in *X-Men*, 2000, 2003, 2006) draws upon her mutant abilities to control the weather and overpower those who would destroy the world. Although each of these films represents a different subset of the action genre (i.e. action adventure, assassin/revenge, thriller, and superhero respectively), each narrative places its protagonist in life threatening situations that require bravado and physical prowess to triumph despite adversity. As such, the heroine's courageous fight to overcome challenges has the capacity to excite and inspire audiences through breathtaking physical action (Bean, 2001; Tasker, 2004).

Although visual elements of action films employ the physical body to create suspense around dangers the heroine must surmount, the women interviewed in this study find a heroine's ability to overcome obstacles through her intelligence, determination, and use of strategy as more appealing aspects of these films. They identify a range of action heroine films to form this interpretation, including *The Hunger Games* (2012), *The Avengers* (2012), *Colombiana* (2012), *Kill Bill I & II* (2003; 2004), and *Charlie's Angels* (2000; 2003). In describing these films, participants highlight the intellectual prowess that heroines use to overcoming life-threatening

obstacles. The participants describe how Katniss Everdeen (Jennifer Lawrence in *The Hunger Games*, 2012) strategizes methods to defeat the other contestants in a grueling death match or how Mallory Kane (Gina Carano in *Haywire*, 2011) outsmarts an international consortium of intelligence agents bent on framing her. The women interviewed concede that a heroine's ability to succeed is tied to physical training, such as Katniss' hunting skills or Mallory's jujitsu techniques, but underscore an action heroine's ability to think strategically and mentally overcome her enemy's plots against her. Participants highlight mental and emotional traits of heroines, using adjectives like "intelligent," "independent," "determined," "driven," "strategic," "brave," and "resilient" to describe many of the characters.

Eight of the 11 women interviewed emphasize intelligence as an appealing characteristic of action heroines. Kelly⁴ compares the representation of an action heroine's intelligence to other genres:

I like how filmmakers portray the action heroine as intelligent because a lot of the time women characters are dumbed down. In scary movies, for example, a woman is the person who dies, always messes things up, and always needs somebody else to solve the puzzle for them. It's nice when the female lead is smart, solves problems, and is not portrayed as a stupid object.

Kelly points to representations of an intelligent heroine as one of the key reasons she enjoys the genre. Liz elaborates that action heroines often find themselves in dire situations that require intelligence to overcome obstacles. She says, "Action heroes find themselves in difficult situations. That's why strategy is important. The situation is dire and the odds are not in their favor." She surmises that approaching extreme situations with a strategic mind is essential to the heroine's success.

Participants not only emphasize intelligence as a key characteristic of action heroines, they take literal images of women kicking, punching, shooting, and leaping onscreen, and

preferentially translate those images as standing for something else. For example, after describing the experience of watching *the Hunger Games* as an inspiring adrenaline rush, Melanie explains that action heroine films motivate her to achieve her goals:

Even though it's completely unrelated to the action you see in the movies, I relate [these movies] to the fact that I'm graduating and about to get a job. I'm really driven and I want to be successful. I'm not power hungry, but I want a position that allows me to be successful and proud of myself. That's the message I get from a lot of action heroes...when action heroines come out on top, I think that I can come out on top.

From her personal vantage point, Melanie connects a heroine's determination to achieve success as similar to her own drive to meet career aims. She notes that her goals are not literally related to "the action you see" in films, but she still finds that action heroines bare some figurative resemblance to her own ability to achieve. Melanie later clarifies it is not the violent acts that she identifies with, but the heroine figuratively besting a man who is supposed to be superior. She relishes the idea that a woman can intellectually succeed against a male competitor at work. Thus, Melanie translates a literal image, a heroine physically overcoming a life-threatening situation, into a tangible and personally relatable metaphor, i.e. her personal career achievements.

Seven of the women interviewed believe that action heroines overcoming obstacles onscreen metaphorically represent the progress of the women's movement. Anna argues that empowered action heroines signify the progress women have made in U.S. society. She says,

Currently, women are doing better as far as entrance and retention rates in college. The number of women CEOs is growing and we see more women in politics. We now have a group of women that want to occupy the space that was normally the man's. For lack of a better way to explain it, we are seeing ourselves in empowered worlds.

Here, Anna highlights two specific areas where women have made strides — in the college classroom and the executive boardroom—and directly associates action heroines as symbols of that success. Kerry concurs that the reasons representations of action heroines are possible is

because “More and more women are going into the workforce” and audiences want to see women in the spotlight in films. Many of the participants anticipate a continual increase in the number of action heroines in popular film as a direct result of women’s advancements in political and professional arenas.

Participant interpretations of action heroines as success metaphors give pause to consider the potential benefits of reading action heroines metaphorically. The women interviewed assert that representations of action heroines ultimately promote positive and empowered visions of women. For them, action heroines symbolize women entering and succeeding in spheres that have been historically dominated by men. After all, heroes and heroines in fairy tales, mythology, literature, and film are protagonists designed to motivate and inspire beyond the literal narrative. Having positive metaphorical associations with action heroines may yield psychological benefits for women. Rosenberg and Canzoneri (2008) argue that the attraction to heroism is embedded in the ability to “see elements of our own foibles and struggles, and hope for our triumph” in the trials and victories of the heroes and heroines we read and watch (p. 2). Participants note a greater tendency to identify with action heroines than action heroes because seeing female characters best adversity allows them to imagine themselves thriving.

These metaphorical readings of action heroines might also quell concerns that violent action heroines are regressive images for women or that viewing film violence produces tendencies towards violent behavior. If participants in this study read violence as metaphoric, then perhaps these images are not as damaging to society as cultural critics or media effects scholars sometimes imagine. If a movie punch is not interpreted as literal and instead is translated to mean something innocuous and even constructive, then cinematic violence could present other meanings and usages for audiences. Participant interpretations of action heroines as

smart and driven women might open the possibility that viewers resist violence by reading action heroines in this manner.

Nevertheless, a scholarly plunge below the surface of the post-feminist visual metaphor reveals problematic consequences of narrow focus on action heroines as symbolic of professional and scholastic success. One of the hallmarks of post-feminist ideology is the tendency to promote selective advancements of women while ignoring perpetual inequalities (McRobbie, 2007; Tasker and Negra, 2007; Gill, 2009). Recent Pew Research Center polling indicates that the number of women enrolled in college has more than doubled since the 1970s and women now comprise 53% of the number of currently enrolled university students (Wang and Parker, 2011). On average, the American public believes women are more capable of academic pursuits and prosperous careers than ever before (Pew Research Center, 2008).⁵ These trends might stand as post-feminist evidence that women's intellectual equality is solidified in society and that the accomplishments of the women's movement render feminism as no longer necessary. However, even though women outnumber men at college, one in four college women will be raped by men during their college careers (Fisher, Cullen, and Turner, 2000)—a fact that drastically highlights that women's bodies are not sovereign in the same way action heroine bodies are depicted. Women's sport teams only receive 38% of the operating budgets for college sports (Women's Sports Foundation, n/d)—a statistic that illuminates the undervaluing of the athletic abilities of women's bodies compared to men's. Post-feminist ideology allows society to emphasize the discourse that women are capable of anything men are, while ignoring the fact that women's bodies are systematically undervalued. The metaphorical detachment of the action heroine's accomplishments from her physical performance suggests that participants privilege an intellectually-focused understanding of the capabilities of action heroines while ignoring the

physical prowess she has the potential to represent. If the women interviewed interpret an action heroine's physical ability to defend herself as a collegiate woman defending her viewpoints in the classroom, what happens to the body in this interpretation? In this metaphorical reading of the action heroine's significance, the physical body and its abilities are unrecognized, which is consistent with broader structural inequalities that devalue the agency and sovereignty of women's bodies.

Post-feminism, Believability, and the "Natural Limits" of Female Bodies

Although participants discuss a range of action sub-genres that include women in roles as detectives, spies and assassins, magicians, and superheroes, eight⁶ women were dubious of the action heroine's physical prowess regardless of the degree of fantasy the sub-genre creates. For example, participants might question Black Widow's (Scarlett Johansson in the *Avengers*) physical abilities in the superhero sub-genre in the same way they would question Alex's (Lucy Liu in *Charlie's Angels*) capacity to fend off attackers in the crime-fighting sub-genre. Regardless of the level of believability the film creates as a whole, the participants regard female action bodies as outlaws in these fantasy worlds. At the same time, they more freely suspend the laws of physical possibility for male heroes. Participants report male characters as more believable in the action they perform. In a genre known for fantasies of the human body, why are a woman's physical limits essential to an action heroine's believability while male bodies remain comparatively unrestricted?

Tom Cruise's title character in *Jack Reacher* (2012) aptly demonstrates the fantasy element typically attached with action films starring male protagonists as well as the freedom action hero bodies are granted compared to action heroines. In one scene of the film, five menacing men surround Reacher as he proclaims, "It's your last chance to walk away." He

proceeds to explain that even though it appears the odds are against him, he is confident that after besting the first three opponents the final two men will run because the last two “always run.” He then incapacitates the leader of the group in two swift movements. The other men attack all at once and Reacher manages to deliver a few swift bone-breaking blows to each before the final two men run away as predicted. Reacher’s singular ability to fight off five attackers goes unquestioned within the worlds that action films create. Male protagonists win the day against impossible odds and provide exhilarating action in the process. Audiences are willing to suspend disbelief that a singular male body is capable of such a feat in order to enjoy the hero’s triumphs on the silver screen; yet, some participants in this study restrict action heroines through perceived bodily limits.

In discussing the “one hero versus many opponent scenario” often found in action films, six participants argue that that male characters, such as Cruise’s Jack Reacher, are much more “believable” or “realistic” than female characters due to simple biology. These women are comfortable suspending disbelief that a single man can physically incapacitate a group of five attackers at once; however, female characters are not given the same credit in similar scenes of equally imaginative fight sequences. Several participants argue that action films that show women physically fighting feel “fake” and “unrealistic.” Comparing heroines to male action heroes, Sylvia says, “It doesn’t seem as real to me as seeing a man fight. I think filmmakers try to show women as strong, but it’s not a realistic strong.” Sylvia goes on to argue that even though the action films in general depict unrealistic action, she is more willing to suspend disbelief when seeing men fight onscreen than women. She asserts that a woman fighting “doesn’t fit with reality.” Sabrina concurs with Sylvia that even though action films tend to

show a single male hero who can physically fight off multiple men, she is less willing to believe an action heroine is capable of the same:

I think it's less realistic when it's a woman in the [action] role. Maybe that's just me thinking that women are weaker? That's just ingrained in me? If I saw a male action hero getting beat up or shot in the arm, I would think, "of course he'd be okay." He isn't going to back down. He is a guy and he'll keep going because of his pride. It's just a little less realistic with a woman. Even if she wants to get up and fight, if she went through in real life what she went through in the movies, she wouldn't be as resilient.

Sabrina indicates that female bodies are less able to withstand injury than male counterparts, but she questions the biological determinism that promotes these restrictions on women's bodies. In the end, she decides that action heroes are not realistic either, but that she is more likely to suspend disbelief and accept male physicality. Sylvia says that she has never "seen real men fight," so she cannot speak to the plausibility of the action she sees on screen; however, she reiterates that seeing women fight in action films is implausible because of the limitations of women's bodies. Even though Sylvia admits she does not know the biological limitations of men's bodies, she perceives firm limitations when it comes to women's bodies. For both Sylvia and Sabrina, an action heroine's believability in action sequences seems to be tied to limiting beliefs surrounding what women's bodies are and are not capable of performing.

The insistence that "natural" biological limits should regulate action heroine bodies for heroines to be "believable" presents a quandary for action heroines in a post-feminist era. Patriarchal narratives about the impacts of biology on women's bodies seem to channel women into a singular category: "weaker than men." These notions disregard the broad range of bodies that make up the category of "female" as well as the range that makes up "male." In order to fit within the confines of what is believable for women's bodies in post-feminism, participants suggest that action heroines should perform less fantastical action and demonstrate less physical prowess to be deemed believable. This presents a particular formulation of body discipline for

heroines. Perceptions of natural “limits” police believability even in a genre famous for fantastically and unrealistically displaying the human body. Participants suspend their disbelief as Bruce Banner (Mark Ruffalo in the *Avengers*) transforms his body into a giant green monster when he becomes angry, but equally believe that biological limits prevent the Bride (Uma Thurman in *Kill Bill vol. I & II*) from deftly wielding a katana against a group of trained assassins. In order to be believable within post-feminist ideology, action heroines must perform action sequences that are necessarily confined by notions of biological limitations.

Participants' reflections on action heroines suggest that post-feminism disciplines action heroine bodies as unbelievable through a narrative of the biological limits of female bodies. Even women who enjoy the genre may not always accept these representations of female power as credible when comparing them to male heroes. As a result of the resurgence of sexual difference in post-feminism, action hero bodies are granted the status of “natural,” while heroine bodies are disciplined as “unnatural” or “unbelievable” due to the binary divisions of sexed bodies. The notion that all men are naturally stronger, faster, and generally more physically adept than all women restricts an action heroine’s believability compared to male counterparts. Participants articulate a post-feminist sensibility that uniformly creates all female bodies as disciplined within genetic limits and all male bodies as benefactors of genetic destiny. This deterministic view of sexed bodies holds that “male” and “female” have uniform traits intrinsically tied to genes that will regulate the body throughout its life. In this paradigm, characteristics of individual bodies are a result of inborn gender characteristics that neatly divide into male and female categories; thereby counting those that fall outside those boundaries as exceptions or worse, unnatural. This view purports that women are naturally less aggressive than men and women’s bodies are naturally weaker than men’s as a result of biological factors, such as testosterone levels and body

mass. Even though action heroes and heroines are often depicted in fantastical narratives where normal rules of a body's capabilities do not apply, male heroes are granted more latitude in their physical performances than heroines.

On the Post-feminist “Limits” of the Skinny Hollywood Actress

While post-feminist discourses of biological limits may impact how half of the participants determine a heroine's believability, others acknowledge that Hollywood perpetuates narrow representations of bodies that discredit an actress' physical prowess in action roles. These participants voice possibilities for women's bodies; however, they find that the bodies of thin Hollywood actresses are less credible in the performance of action scenes. Thus, participants reveal that the pressure for a Hollywood actress to be slender creates a catch-22 for Hollywood action actresses: an actress must slim down for her role in an action film to meet Hollywood beauty standards, but her small body causes participants to question her ability to physically perform action sequences. Put another way, the criteria for access in their profession is the very criteria that also discredits actresses when evaluating their performances as action heroines. Participants judge thin action heroines particularly harshly when comparing them with action heroes. Consequently, the action heroine as visual metaphor remains the more plausible and preferred reading of these types of texts.

The women interviewed find Hollywood representations of women in action roles as “unrealistic” portrayals of an active woman's body. They use words like “really thin” and “too skinny” to describe heroines physically. Liz registers a general aversion to Hollywood's portrayal of women, but notes that skinny actresses have a particular impact on believability in action films. She says,

These women are really skinny, but they take out characters or monsters that are so much bigger than them. I don't think their bodies are meant for that kind of wear and tear.

That's the body they model in. We all know that they are dieting.

While Liz does not tie all women's bodies to a biologically determined inferiority, she critiques the persistence of thin, frail representations of women. Moreover, she finds many action heroines unbelievable because their small bodies lack muscularity. Kelly agrees that "a more realistic heroine would be more muscular and not a size two. I would imagine them to have more bulk." Thus, Liz and Kelly offer their own critiques of post-feminist discourse that disparages women's bodies. They argue that more "muscular," "stout," and "athletic" bodies would make for more realistic action heroines; therefore, the average slender actress is discredited by her physicality when performing action sequences. Participants highlight the porousness of post-feminist ideology through their ability to challenge the discourses at some moments while accepting it at others. Drawing from Stuart Hall, Joseph (2009) reminds us that the nature of ideological power is that it is always adjusting in order to "meet the changing forces of hegemony" (p. 248). Participants recognize thin bodies as narrow expectations of feminine beauty; yet, they forgo the next step of acknowledging how these expectations limit what is possible for women's bodies.

Participants contend that the slender actress is an unrealistic heroine because her small body seems incapable of performing fight sequences with larger (male) opponents. Jarrah argues that body size has a positive impact on a male hero's credibility. She says, "Male action heroes are really jacked up and look really muscular and big. They might not be super strong, but their physical appearance makes you believe that they are." Sabrina observes that while action heroes are "big, buff, masculine" guys, action heroines are relatively a lot smaller, which affects her ability to believe the heroine is capable of the same action as the hero. She says that when she watches action heroines fight larger opponents, she asks, "How is she still standing? How is she

still fighting back?” The women interviewed mark a noticeable difference between representations of heroes and heroines in popular action films. Heroes are typically portrayed as larger than life, while heroines are proportionally much smaller than their counterparts. Participants directly associate the differences between male and female body types portrayed in action films as a reason to discredit an action heroine’s physical capabilities.

Body discipline is a hallmark of post-feminist media culture (Gill, 2007) and the participants confirmed that action heroines, in particular, are subject to a disciplining gaze that regulates their physical size while simultaneously deeming that size an unbelievable action body. The pressure on action stars to be physically fit is evident for both male and female actors; however, the definition of “fit” differs according to gendered body expectations. Action heroines are expected to be “thin” and “fit” while action heroes are expected to be “muscular” and to “bulk up.” For example, in an interview with *Men’s Health Magazine*, Chris Hemsworth discusses his physical preparation for his role as *Thor* in the Marvel film of the same name. The actor added “twenty pounds of muscle to his 6’3” frame” (Rosenbaum, n.d.) by lifting weights and eating copious amounts of food to fuel his muscle growth. Conversely, after a tabloid reported that Scarlett Johansson lost 14 pounds for her role in *Iron Man 2*, Johansson wrote an editorial in the Huffington Post in which she clarifies:

If I were to lose 14 pounds, I'd have to part with both arms. And a foot. I'm frustrated with the irresponsibility of tabloid media who sell the public ideas about what we should look like and how we should get there (Johansson, 2009).

Johansson’s arguments against the irresponsibility of the tabloids failed to quell continued body scrutiny. During a press conference for *The Avengers*, a reporter asked Johansson about her diet to prepare for the role. Johansson famously rolled her eyes and quipped to Robert Downey Jr., “How is it that you get the really interesting existential question and I get the rabbit food

question?” (The Avengers UK Press in Full, 2012)? The comparison between the media treatment of Johansson and Hemsworth expose pressures for male actors to increase size and female actors to decrease size for action roles. When comparing the efforts to bulk up that actors engage in, it is clear that the visual size difference between male and female actors exacerbates any “natural” differences present.

If an actress were to significantly increase her muscle mass for a role, what sort of backlash might she receive for failing to maintain a thin standard? Demi Moore drastically altered her body for her role in *G.I. Jane* (1997); however, few actresses have followed suit in the years since. Additionally, the cultural memories of twenty-something year old participants only extend to the late ‘90s or early 2000s; thus, the muscular bodies of Linda Hamilton and Sigourney Weaver are not reference points for these women. Several participants saw Jennifer Lawrence’s portrayal of Katniss in *The Hunger Games* as a more realistic heroine due to her athleticism and body size; they found her character more believable for the same reasons. Yet, Lawrence’s body was a far cry from Moore’s muscular physique performing one-arm pushups. Lawrence’s body was also scrutinized in the media for its failure to conform to the skinny norm. Manohla Dargis of the *New York Times* argued that Lawrence was not skinny enough to play the starving heroine and that “her seductive, womanly figure makes a bad fit for a dystopian fantasy about a people starved into submission” (Dargis, 2012). Todd McCarthy of the *Hollywood Reporter* commented on Lawrence’s “lingering baby fat” in reviewing her performance in the film (McCarthy, 2012). While Lawrence garnered acclaim in her role as Katniss, the subsequent scrutinizing of her body in the media illuminates entrenched body regulation.

The women interviewed bring to light troubling aspects of body discipline to add to the laundry list of self-surveillance that post-feminism promotes. While the perpetual quest for

bodily improvement whittles women away, action heroines, in particular, are simultaneously judged as no longer capable of physical prowess because of their now slenderized bodies. Their bodies are held to different standards than male counterparts and ensure the perpetuation of weak representations of feminine physicality. A slender actress gains access to action roles, but participants indicate she is no longer believable as a physical force. Action heroines remain in a regulated space of representation predicated on disenfranchising body standards that negatively affect their ability to perform what audiences consider as believable action for their bodies.

The Limits of the Post-feminist Imagination

The participants' preference for reading action heroines as visual metaphors for success illuminates post-feminist disciplining of women's bodies that extends beyond the pressure to be thin or to subscribe to conventional standards of femininity. Action heroines certainly portray narrow representations of women that support pressures on women to conform to unattainable beauty standards. Nevertheless, post-feminist discourses of the biological limits of feminine bodies and the limits of skinny action heroines also confine women's imaginations to narrow possibilities for the feminine body. The post-feminist visual metaphor overshadows and disparages an action heroine's bodily agency, which contradicts the characteristics and imaginative pleasures that might otherwise be derived from viewing action films.

The ways participants read action heroine texts contradict some of the proposed benefits of the action genre for spectators. One of the hallmarks of action cinema is the protagonist's ability to surmount adversity through determination, grit, and impressive feats of the body (Tasker, 2004). As such, the action genre offers audiences the pleasure of identifying with the protagonist and imagining themselves overcoming life-threatening situations. Viewing the action heroine's body fight against evildoers or stand up against a bully allows the viewer to imagine

how she might navigate physical threats or master her own fear. Lavin (2010) argues that women's action onscreen offer women viewers "new survival and behavioral habits concerning their own force" (p. 238). She points to possible psychological benefits of imagining oneself in a situation that demands courage and the will to physically fight against those that would cause harm. Thus, they suggest that action heroines have the potential to validate the idea women are not victims and can physically save themselves.

Despite the potential embedded in action heroine texts, this study reveals that post-feminist discourse shifts women's power away from the body in favor of metaphorical interpretations of action heroine texts. The participants' preference for reading action heroines as visual metaphors for success illuminates post-feminist disciplining of women's bodies that extends beyond the pressure to be thin or to subscribe to conventional standards of femininity. Action heroines certainly portray narrow representations of women that support pressures for women to conform to mostly unattainable bodily standards. Nevertheless, post-feminist discourses of the biological limits of feminine bodies and the limits of skinny action heroines also confine women's imaginations to narrow possibilities for the feminine action body. The post-feminist visual metaphor overshadows and disparages an action heroine's bodily agency, which contradicts the characteristics and imaginative pleasures that might otherwise be derived from viewing action films. This reveals the limits of the post-feminist imagination: women may succeed in intellectual realms but their bodies are regulated by artificial sexed and gendered limits.

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- ¹ Women currently in their twenties are accustomed to viewing physically assertive heroines. These women were preteens and teenagers during the heyday of “girl power,” a media phenomenon of the late 1990s and early 2000s that promoted seemingly empowered and independent images of girls and young women. The women of the girl power generation have grown up with a Disney princess turned samurai warrior in *Mulan* (1998), a
- ² I use the term “fan” generically here. I recruited women who enjoyed watching action heroine films because I did not want participants to opt out if they did not label themselves as fans. I sought average instead of avid viewers to understand the general appeal of the genre.
- ³ Participants brainstormed the following heroines: Catwoman (*Dark Knight Rises*), Katniss (*The Hunger Games*), Selene (the *Underworld* films) Trinity (the *Matrix* films), The Bride / Beatrix Kiddo (*Kill Bill I & II*), Rose (*Silent Hill*), Hermione, (the *Harry Potter* films), Cataleya (*Colombiana*), Hit Girl (*Kick Ass*), Laura Croft (the *Tomb Raider* films), Storm (the *X-Men* films), Mallory Kane (*Haywire*), and Natalie, Dylan, and Alex (the *Charlie’s Angels* films).
- ⁴ Each participant was assigned a pseudonym.
- ⁵ Despite the perceived intellectual possibilities for women in society, a woman still earns 77 cents on a man’s dollar (Institute for Women's Policy Research, n/d) and women only hold 18% of the 535 seats in the U.S. Congress (Women in the U.S. Congress, 2013).
- ⁶ Kelly, Melanie, Sylvia, Jarrah, Rebecca, Liz, Sabrina and Farrah all discussed factors that made action heroines unrealistic or unbelievable. Kelly, Rebecca, Sabrina, and Sylvia attributed unbelievably to both women’s biological “limits” and thin representations of women. Melanie and Jarrah only discussed biological limits while Liz and Farrah only described representational limits.