

Title: Whose Wakanda is it anyway? A reception analysis of *Black Panther* among young black urban Africans

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by

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Chapter One: Introduction

As a writer and as an academic, I have long been interested in young black Africans¹. As a demographic group, we are heralded as the future of Africa and a vital resource, but not much is known about us, what we think, and how we make sense of things. As an African youth myself, I know that we are a diverse group with different backgrounds, perspectives and beliefs. I am interested in exploring our identities, how we express ourselves and how we make sense of ourselves, each other, the continent and the world. I want to learn more about how we see the world, and what we think of how media narratives and messages represent us. This research project is an extension of this personal curiosity. It focuses on *Black Panther*, a film that received particularly strong responses from young black Africans. I want to explore why *this* film in particular prompted such a strong reaction, and what the imagining of an uncolonised, technologically advanced African nation that *Black Panther* offers means for the young black Africans born after the official end of apartheid and colonisation.

My interest in responses to *Black Panther* started when official trailers for the film first aired in 2017. As a comic book fan, the teasers and tit bits sparked my curiosity about the film, but it was the social media frenzy about it that shifted my passing curiosity into a keen interest. I saw tweet after tweet analysing the trailers, looking for clues about the film's plot and characters. The first images of Wakanda, the fictional African nation that *Black Panther* is located in, set Twitter into a frenzy. The reaction took me by surprise. I knew how significant the film would be: a superhero film set in Africa and with largely African characters was a rarity. However, I did not expect people, specifically fellow young black Africans, to be so excited to see the film. The hype about the film grew as the premiere date got closer and closer. When it finally opened in South African and Zimbabwean cinemas in February 2018, #BlackPanther and #WakandaForever trended on Twitter for a long period of time. Every other tweet on my timeline was about the film. My social media feeds lit up with strong, positive responses to the film, its plot, and its characters. People went to the cinema in groups, adorned in traditional clothes usually reserved for celebrations and festivities (Matangira 2018, Newsday 2018). Film-goers took photos of themselves when they went to watch the film, and posted them on social media platforms with #WakandaForever. The Wakanda salute – a pose in the film that symbolises the kingdom's strength – was particularly

¹I use the term 'black Africans' to refer to black African youth, to the exclusion of youth from other races who identify as Africans.

popular. Furthermore, people who watched the film wrote Twitter threads (a series of successive tweets from a user) to share their opinions of the film, analyse its themes and of particular interest to me, its handling of black and African identity (Weaver 2018).

I have been on Twitter since 2012 and Instagram since 2017, but had not previously seen such a strong reaction to a film. As a Zimbabwean currently studying in South Africa, I saw the film trending on Twitter for both countries. *Black Panther* is by no means the first superhero film or film with a black lead to be screened in these countries, but I had never seen such a strong reaction from young black Africans to a Hollywood production, and I wanted to find out what was so attractive about the film. I watched it myself in March 2018 at a cinema in Port Elizabeth (South Africa) with two friends. All three of us are young black African women, two South Africans and one Zimbabwean. As we watched *Black Panther* we bopped our heads to the music (it featured South African artist Babes Wodumo) and ululated during the coronation scene. I stepped out of the cinema feeling inspired and empowered by the positive black representation, and we all agreed that the film was visually beautiful and striking. I also left the cinema with the same questions and curiosities. I still did not quite understand why *Black Panther*, of all films, had captured the imaginations of this particular audience. Why did such a specific demographic react so positively to the film? What was it about *Black Panther* that ignited such passion and fervour in young black Africans? Why was there such a strong reaction to *Black Panther* compared to other films set in Africa, including locally made productions? When I watched the film again in June 2018 with my sister at a cinema in Harare, Zimbabwe (my sister had not watched the film and did not want to watch it alone), the questions came back again. On the drive home from the cinema, we engaged in a discussion about the film when I said that there were elements of the film that puzzled me. My sister thoroughly enjoyed *Black Panther* and had no complaints, saying that people who were critical of the film were just being “haters.” Watching it after the fervour had died down, I started to look at the film from a critical perspective. The difference in responses between my sister and me made me want to explore why it was that two people of similar cultural backgrounds, age group and education could have two different interpretations of a film. I decided it was time to satisfy my curiosity.

Initially, my research began a textual analysis of *Black Panther*. I believed that the answers to my questions lay with the film itself. However, after a period of introspection when my research stalled, I realised that this approach was not the best way to answer my questions. The film, though important, was not what I needed to analyse. In order to understand why *Black Panther* had sparked such a strong response, I would need to shift my focus to the people who had seen the film. I am

interested in understanding what it is about the film that struck such a chord, what their interpretations are, and if there are any who interpreted the film against its preferred reading. The best way to conduct my research and satisfy that initial curiosity would be to focus on audience responses to the film, in the context of their daily lives and experiences. And so I did, changing my research from a textual analysis to a reception analysis.

Although my focus is on audience responses to the film, a background to the film is necessary in order to give context to these responses and to understand the film's general plot and main characters. *Black Panther* is a film adaptation of the *Black Panther* comics title. Created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby and published by Marvel Comics, *Black Panther* focuses on the fictional African kingdom of Wakanda and its ruler, known as the Black Panther (a title that refers to the black panther goddess, Bast). The film adaptation also takes place in Wakanda, with the protagonist T'Challa as king and titular Black Panther. *Black Panther* is the 18th film in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), an American media franchise and shared film universe, populated by the characters and superheroes from the Marvel Comics stable (Marvel 2019). The film's plot follows T'Challa as he ascends to the throne after the death of his father, only to be challenged for power by his estranged American cousin, Eric Killmonger. Not only does Killmonger want to be the Black Panther, he also wants to start an armed global black uprising, and he wants Wakanda to lead it. Other important characters include M'Baku, the leader of a breakaway tribe in Wakanda; Shuri, T'Challa's sister and princess of Wakanda; Okoye, the head of the royal army (called the Dora Milaje); Ulysseus Klauw, a South African mercenary and enemy of Wakanda, and Evan Ross, an American intelligence agent. Its cast includes South African actor John Kani in the role of T'Chaka, T'Challa's father, and first and second generation diasporan Africans including Danai Gurira (Zimbabwean-American), Lupita Nyong'o (Kenyan-American) and Daniel Kaluuya (Ugandan-British). A sequel has been scheduled for release in 2022.

The film was a box office hit worldwide, earning over \$3.5 billion as the second highest grossing film of 2018 (The Numbers 2019). It is the first Marvel film to be nominated for an Oscar for Best Picture, and the first Marvel movie to win three Oscars for Best Costume Design, Production Design and Original Score at the 2018 Oscars. The film also received critical acclaim. Writing for the *New Yorker*, Jelani Cobb connects *Black Panther*'s success to the complex and historical relationship between Africa and its American diaspora. Cobb argues that *Black Panther* is ultimately "a film about African redemption" (Cobb 2018), a departure from previous representations of black and African culture and history. A review closer to home, written by

Mahlatse Magau for *City Press*², gives the film a four star review for imagining what Africa could have become without colonisation. “In a nutshell, the movie boldly states that Africa is not poor, but poorly managed,” argues Magau, emphasising that *Black Panther’s* representation of blackness and African identity is a welcome break from the tradition of black representation in Hollywood cinema (Magau 2018). More than just a comic book adaptation, the film is “a cinematic apology for the hardships the black community has suffered on an international level” (Magau 2018).

This research focuses on the responses of young, black urban Africans to the themes of *Black Panther*, and their different interpretations of the film. The purpose of this study is to analyse how this group reacted to the representation of African identity in an American Hollywood production. This study also seeks to explore whether this group affirm or reject the ideas of black African identity represented in the film, and how past experiences and media consumption influenced their interpretation of the film. Lastly, the research focuses on how these ideas and values shape the performance and affirmation of identity and belonging for a group often accused of being ‘inauthentically African’ and ‘not African enough’.

As my focus is on reactions to, and interpretations of the film, a qualitative reception study is the best approach for my research. The research design has three components. The first is a qualitative content analysis of the film itself to identify themes and scenes of interest. This leads to the second component, which is data collection. I undertook four focus group interviews and four individual interviews. Participants in both processes were selected from Rhodes University’s student body, cutting across different disciplines and levels of study. Each focus group consists of three students, and participants for the individual interviews are those who gave particularly interesting responses or insights in the focus group discussions. Each focus group discussion and individual interview was audio recorded and transcribed. Any quotes referenced in the data analysis chapter come from these recordings and transcriptions. The third component is the analysis of the interview data in relation to the theoretical frameworks used to make sense of the themes identified in the film.

A single set of questions was used as a guide for all four focus groups, and a separate set of questions as a guide for the individual interviews. Follow-up questions were developed as appropriate for the responses. For the focus groups, the questions are on *Black Panther’s* themes, initial responses to the film, the experience of watching the film, a discussion of the relationship with the two main characters (the protagonist T’Challa and the antagonist Eric Killmonger) and

2 *City Press* is a South African news organisation. It runs a weekly print edition newspaper and an online platform.

lastly, the film's representation of Africa and its imagining of an uncolonised identity. The last question specifically refers to the world of Wakanda and its representation as a proudly, 'authentically' urban African city and country. Using a single set of questions for each focus group discussion enables me to compare and contrast responses in data analysis. I have followed the same model for the individual interviews. I used a set of questions for all three interviews. However, the type of questions and their focus are different from the ones used during the focus group discussions. The individual interview questions cover the participants' journey in identity creation in relation to the urban environment they grew up in, why they wanted to see *Black Panther* and their opinion on the film's representation of blackness and Africanity. My primary research question with the focus groups and individual interviews is why *Black Panther* struck such a chord, and how it relates to their experiences of being a young, black African.

There are previous studies that focused on the relationship between African youth and media. Assefa's study focused on a cinema in Addis Ababa, and the street children who frequented it to watch Hollywood action movies (Assefa 2006). Strelitz's study of black Rhodes University students watching South African television programmes also explored how youth use media to affirm identity and find belonging (Strelitz 2002). Garman and Malila's study explored South Africa's 'born free' generation in the Eastern Cape and their disillusionment with the country's media landscape (Malila and Garman 2016). My research project focuses on youth reception of *Black Panther*. What makes it unique is first, its focus on black, urban middle-class youth born in the post-Independence era (Zimbabwe) and post-apartheid era (South Africa), and how their life experiences may have shaped their reactions to, and interpretations of, the film. Second, I analyse the connection between identity, media consumption and media reception. The subject group that I chose has a unique relationship with media, specifically Western, Hollywood-style media. They grew up during a time when it was easier to access Western media texts on television, print media, radio and the Internet than ever before. I focus on this media relationship and how it factored into the identity formation of my participants, which in turn influenced how they reacted to *Black Panther*. By exploring their socio-economic background to understand their responses to *Black Panther*, and exploring the connection between these youth, American popular culture texts (specifically African-American texts) and identity formation, my research contributes to a knowledge gap on urban, middle class African youth and identity formation in relation to media consumption.

In order to analyse and make sense of the responses from participants, I have reviewed the literature

covering four conceptual areas: modernity/coloniality, representation, identity and Africanity. Each area speaks to the connection between *Black Panther* and the research participants, and were chosen to provide useful theoretical perspectives for analysing the questions I ask in this research. Modernity/coloniality considers the history of colonisation, and its effects on indigenous structures, philosophy and daily life. Outliving colonialism, coloniality is the underside of modernity (Maldonado-Torres 2007: 243, Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013: 334). Presented as a golden path of progress and development that is universally desired and enforced, modernity is visible where coloniality (the continued exploitation, violence and second-rate status of former colonised people) is invisible. These dual concepts illuminate the lived experiences of my participants and help me make sense of their responses in relation to a continued state of black de-legitimisation. Representation focuses on how producers of media texts, specifically popular culture texts such as Hollywood films and music, have presented their ideas of what black and African identity is or should be. It covers the history of African stereotypes in Hollywood cinema, and different theories on the process of representation and its position in reception studies.

The section on identity covers theories of belonging and place on an individual and collective level, as well as the process of forming an identity and having several identities at once. To be young, black, African and an urbanite are identities that my participants inhabit. It is necessary to explore identity as a complex, multi-faceted concept and its influence in interpretations of *Black Panther*. Lastly, Africanity probes the question of what it means to be African. With two different theories on what Africanity means and their ensuing implications, the question of what it means to be African connects to the representation of African identity in *Black Panther*, as well as the experiences of the participants growing up and living in multicultural, multinational spaces.

Two assumptions underpin my study. The first is that all of the participants answered truthfully. The second assumption is that all the participants did indeed watch *Black Panther*, and so are able to speak at length about the film and engage with other people in critical discussion. The conversations between the participants and their opinions of the film assume that they all watched the film at least once. Twelve students participated in the study. I also had individual interviews with one participant from each group. All of the participants were Rhodes University students. Eight of these participants are studying Journalism and Media Studies at different levels. Two participants are studying Sociology, one is studying Computer Science and one participant is studying Commerce. Four of the 12 participants are postgraduate students. The youngest participant is 21, and the oldest participant is 27.

Chapter Outline:

This introductory chapter sets out the foundation of my study. It explains what sparked my research interest, why I chose *Black Panther* as the focus of my study, how I decided to do a reception analysis and where this research stands in relation to other studies on African youth and media. The ensuing chapters will detail the theoretical framework, methodology, data analysis and findings. The next chapter, Chapter Two is a review of the literature pertinent to my study and sets out the theoretical frameworks that will be used to make sense of my interview data. In doing so, Chapter Two connects my research interests, media theories and participant responses to *Black Panther*.

Chapter Three outlines the qualitative approach to my research, and how it informs the interpretivist philosophical position of my research. It details the methods used for data collection, including the use of focus groups and individual interviews and the criteria for participant selection, the process of transcription, tools for data analysis, and potential limitations and validity of my research. Chapters Four and Five discuss the analysis of the research findings. The analysed data are transcriptions from the focus groups and individual interviews. Using the conceptual framework established in Chapter Two and the data analysis tools presented in Chapter Three, Chapters Four and Five focus on three categories that emerged from the responses from participants. These categories are language, representation, and the black African state of being, with each category covering sub-themes such as the influence of hype, gender and Eurocentrism. The final chapter, Chapter Six, is a conclusion. It reiterates the purpose of the study, and summarises the research findings.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

My research interests, outlined in the previous chapter, are on how young black urban Africans responded to *Black Panther* and why the film elicited such strong reactions. This particular demographic, the ‘born frees’, have a unique position in society, being the first generations born after independence in Zimbabwe and the end of apartheid in South Africa. In order to make sense of the views and responses of this generation, this chapter engages with the literature and debates that focus on four key fields: modernity/coloniality, identity, representation and Africanity. Together these fields facilitate an understanding of the historical construction of blackness, the continued influence of imperial Eurocentrism, the process of negotiating and creating identity, and the question of what it means to be African. Though connected, each thematic area connects to the lived experiences of my research participants and the themes of the film in its own way, and is a lens for understanding and contextualising participant responses.

Coloniality/Modernity

The first thematic area of analysis is modernity/coloniality. This duality is intentional: it is not possible to discuss the two concepts separately from each other because they are inextricably linked (Maldonado-Torres 2004: 244). They are in essence two sides of the same coin: modernity as visible, acceptable and desirable, and coloniality being its dark underbelly, hidden away and invisible (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013: 334). Modernity/coloniality is the primary position of my research. The perspective of modernity/coloniality best explains the realities of young black Africans in post-Independence Africa. Although the colonial era officially came to an end, African youth still struggle against the economic, social and cultural institutions and inequalities established by colonial administrations. As products and legacies of European imperialism, modernity and coloniality are manifestations and extensions of Eurocentrism, with Maldonado-Torres (2007: 243) defining coloniality as “long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administration.”

The period of European colonisation began in 1492, with the arrival of Christopher Columbus in what is now North America. The Conquistadores were sceptical about whether the peoples they encountered had Christian souls or not, and whether they were ‘true men’. This was the way in which the Catholic missionaries framed their encounters with the peoples of the ‘New World’.

Catholic priest Las Casas argued that they did, but his fellow priest, Sepulveda, believed they did not. The argument was that if indigenous people did not have souls, then they could not be considered as fully human (Maldonado-Torres 2007: 245), and consequently could be enslaved and maltreated in any way necessary to get them to do the bidding of their colonial masters. Colonial Europe exported this ‘Manichean misanthropic skepticism’ about the humanity of the peoples of the ‘New World’ across the globe until it became a normalised perception beyond African and European borders (Quijano 2000: 536, Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013b: 80, Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2012: 425, Maldonado-Torres 2007: 245). Blackness was thus defined as a constant ‘lack’ from the perspective of Eurocentrism: a lack of humanity, a lack of rationality, a lack of history and a lack of dignity and liberation (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013: 337, Maldonado-Torres 2007: 255, Memmi 1974: 146-147).

It is from this instance, duplicated across the globe through European expansionism, that the two main elements of a new hegemony were created: the codification of race, and a new system of labour, economic structures and resource management (Quijano 2000: 533). Of particular interest to my research is the codification of race. First used by the Spanish conquistadors, then adopted by Western Europe (namely England, France and Germany), race was used as a form of justification for conquering, enslaving and colonising areas outside of Europe. It was a means of classification, created to justify a different code of conduct for the treatment of non-Europeans. The codification of race created a new range of racial identities and hierarchies (Quijano 2000: 534, Stoler and Cooper 1997: 11). What were once geographic identities (European, African) were transformed into first and foremost racial identities: ‘European’ meant white and ‘African’ meant black (Quijano 2000: 534, Mazrui 2005: 71). The result was a homogenisation of blackness. It was black people – both Africa and its diaspora through the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, that were at the bottom of the racial hierarchy, scarcely regarded as human (Quijano 2000: 534,535). An individual’s position on the racial ladder was determined by how close he/she was to being ‘white’.

Colonial Europe, with the power to conquer and occupy territories, also had the power to rationalise its actions based on the idea of racial difference it created. (Memmi 1974: 124). As Memmi (1974: 123) explains: “Nothing could better justify the colonizer’s privileged position than his industry, and nothing could better justify the colonized’s destitution than his indolence.” This perception of inferiority was influenced by Manichean misanthropic scepticism. This constant state of lack and position on a racialised hierarchy are important frameworks in understanding the responses to *Black Panther*’s construction of blackness and black power. My research participants, born and raised in African countries with a colonial history of racial segregation and discrimination, still live with the

realities of coloniality. Although free from colonial rule, they are not free from racialised power structures and a mentality that regards blackness as inferior. This black experience is a lens through which they watched *Black Panther*, a film whose representation of blackness is arguably not tied to lack or racial inferiority.

This racialised inferiority justified the treatment that black Africans were subject to during colonialism. As they were not on equal footing with Europe, it was justifiable to use a separate code of conduct and ethics for the colonised and enslaved (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013: 338-339). This led to violence being an acceptable and almost expected way of treating black people in Africa and its diaspora. This violence did not end after colonial conquest. Violence was used in conquest, in establishing colonial administrations, in forced labour, and in maintaining Eurocentric ideals in colonies (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013b: 80). Maldonado-Torres refers to this context of violence, to which subsequent generations of black people were subjected as the ‘norm, as the “naturalisation of the non-ethics of war (2007: 247).” Violence is inescapable for the colonised: they are subject to physical violence in the form of murder and rape, their indigenous knowledge systems and social structures are disrupted, they are removed from their land and they are forced to endure hard labour with little pay (Memmi 1974: 126, Quijano 2007: 169, Maldonado-Torres 2007: 247). The process of colonisation after the 1884 Berlin Conference was the beginning of this prolonged violence and dislocation. Coloniality is a continuation of this cycle that did not end after African countries gained independence, and slavery was abolished in the Caribbean and Americas.

Coloniality and European modernity both arose from the first European imperial experience in 1492. Eurocentrism is a form of ethnocentrism that privileges European philosophy, social and economic structures. It places Europe (specifically Western Europe) at the centre of global affairs (Dussel 1993: 65). This hegemony defined the universal standard for modernity. This Eurocentric modernity is conceived of as “a strong, rational core that can be read as a ‘way out’ for humanity from a state of regional and provincial immaturity.” (Dussel 2000: 472). European modernity is seen as a path of ‘development’ and ‘progress’, but one set by European knowledge, practices and ethics. Dussel (1993: 67) calls this the “fallacy of developmentalism.” As the superior and ‘modern’ people, it was up to Europe to ‘develop’ and ‘modernise’ those regarded as barbarians and primitive, bringing them into the uni-versal order established through European expansion and colonialism (Dussel 2000: 472, Quijano 2000: 545). This was another justification for the prolonged use of violence against colonised groups: in order to bring them into the light of European modernity, force would be necessary against resistance to this Eurocentric uni-verse (Memmi 1974:

126, Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2012: 425). This European project of modernity was self-serving for colonial Europe: colonial conquest and slavery created the racialised labour and economic structures still currently in place (Quijano 2000: 537-538, Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2012: 422).

Modernity and coloniality are thus inseparable concepts. They are two sides of the same coin, and both are necessary frameworks for making sense of *Black Panther*'s themes and the responses to the film. My research participants live in this Eurocentric uni-verse, and have experiences of their blackness being treated as a sign of their inferiority. As such, they arguably have personal knowledge of living with coloniality of power, being and knowledge. In analysing their responses to the film, it is important to take these lived experiences into consideration. In watching *Black Panther*, they encountered a fictional world where blackness was not inferior. Given the construction of Wakanda as a kingdom that was never colonised, *Black Panther* is an encounter with a blackness that, in theory, does not have to contend with the global racial ladder. The reactions and interpretations of my research participants to this black society, so different from their own lived experiences, provide new insights when understood from the perspective of modernity as a European construct, and coloniality as its shadow. Using these two concepts in analysing their responses provides a necessary context for their reactions, and how these reactions connect to their own upbringing and background.

This background begins not with them, but with the birth of anti-colonial movement across Africa. The liberation struggle era in Africa (from the independence of Ghana in 1956 to the end of apartheid in 1994) marked the beginning of the process of decolonisation. The belief was that with the end of colonial administrations former systems of exploitation associated with colonisation would also end. But this was not the case. Newly independent African countries still existed in the global colonial power matrix that privileged Eurocentrism (Quijano 2000: 540). African countries also had to contend with the global political and economic structures that continued to enforce and normalise the racial hierarchy that relegates them to the bottom (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013b: 81). As Nkrumah asserts in *Africa Must Unite*, "even though independent in name, these countries continued the classical relationship of a colonial economy to its metropolitan patron" (1963: 175-176). In addition, neo-colonialism established itself as a new form of imperial dominance in post-Independence Africa. Newly independent countries became "client states" to former colonial powers (Nkrumah 1963: 174), being economically dependant on the latter for aid and economic funds. The 'modernisation' project that started from the first moment of colonisation continues today, albeit in a different form of racialised economic exploitation, segregation, and limited agency

(Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013b: 86). The spatial segregation from the colonial era continues, with a stark divide between the metropolitan suburbs and the townships (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2012: 424). In order to navigate this global coloniality, the formerly colonised still need to learn the language, history and ideology of former colonial powers (Memmi 1974: 148-149). ‘Post-colonial’ generations exist in a state of “colonial bilingualism” (Memmi 1974: 150). Going beyond language, these generations must live in two worlds: that of their indigenous language, culture and social systems, and that of the dominant education, social, economic and cultural systems. They must learn to exist in and reconcile two worlds that are inherently opposed to one another. In both worlds (which can be symbolised by the dualities of metropolis versus the rural, or the suburb versus the township), the post-independence generation or the ‘born free’ generation is subject to violence. This violence takes different forms: it is physical, racial, gendered and epistemic (Dussel 2000: 472-473, Maldonado-Torres 2007: 247). The project of modernity that began in 1492 and continues in the 21st century is therefore a project of continued violence towards non-Europeans. It is this world of violence that generations after 1980 (Zimbabwe) and 1995 (South Africa) were born into, and navigate as urban black youth.

Urban Coconuts and SALADs

My subject participants are black, urban Africans between the ages of 18 and 26. They are currently Rhodes University students who grew up in Harare or Johannesburg. This urban background is important for my reception analysis because this group of young, urban middle-class Africans occupy a unique position in each city and each country’s respective histories and social dynamics. Born after Independence and the end of apartheid, this generation is referred to as ‘born frees’ by older generations who had lived under apartheid and white minority rule. (Mattes 2012: 139). In Zimbabwe, this is a derogatory term, used by older generations who fought in the liberation war (called the Second Chimurenga) to describe youth they see as privileged and entitled (Mate 2012: 109). Furthermore, my participants are middle-class born frees, so their class position adds another layer to an already complex existence. They are black, living in post-independence countries and urban areas that still bear the scars and memories of racial segregation and colonial administrations (Njoh 2009: 304). These include statues, street names, architecture and city layout – all designed by colonial administrations who adhered to Eurocentric aesthetics to benefit a white minority. With the end of apartheid, formerly white-only schools opened their doors to students of other races. These schools were referred to as ‘Model C’ schools in South Africa, and the black students who attended these schools were called ‘Model C kids’ (Nuttall 2008: 97). These children, who came from

largely black areas such as townships (South Africa) and high density suburbs (Zimbabwe), were introduced into educational spaces and a curriculum that was still Eurocentric and privileged whiteness, seen for example with the dominance of English (Mlambo 2009: 21, McKinney 2007: 10). Other areas included dress code, manner of speech and hairstyle regulations (McKinney 2007: 14). In these predominantly white, middle-class spaces, black students had to ‘perform’ their blackness but at the same time, they were judged for it (Phiri 2013: 167). For example, they had to prove that they identified as black in the way they talked and in their tastes in music, especially amongst their black peers. However, students could be black but not too black. Aspiring to whiteness was the ultimate goal, meaning that their blackness had to conform (Phiri 2013: 166). In order to survive in this world and find a space of belonging, these students adapted to the rules, behaviour, and mentality of school administrations. There is a ‘disconnect’ in experience for these black youth: although living in a post-colonial country, they live, learn and socialise in spaces where their blackness is frowned upon (Phiri 2013: 167). In order to survive in this world, they have to adopt the behaviours, speech, interests and mentality of their white counterparts and Eurocentric schools.

It is from this process of adopting whiteness that the labels of ‘coconut’ (South Africa) and *musalala* (Zimbabwe) were born. Both are derogatory terms used to refer to a young, urban African who, in the eyes of society, has been ‘Westernised’ and is out of touch with their traditional African roots (Veit-Wild 2009: 687, McKinney 2007: 17). ‘Musalala’ has two meanings: the first is an acronym SALAD, standing for Stupid African Learning American Dressing; and the second refers to the dietary choices of the new black middle class, who were believed to shun traditional foods and opt for Western cuisine such as salads. Both definitions envision middle-class, urban black youth who happily embrace Western culture and look down on their indigenous ways of being (Chari 2009: 177). It is a term popularised by Enoch Munenga’s (whose stage name is Ex-Q) song ‘Musalala’, which mocked middle-class black youth as ignorant and spoilt (Munenga 2000). The song entrenched the idea of these youth as being out-of-touch with their traditional roots, preferring a white Western ‘modern’ standard of living. In South Africa, ‘coconut’ is a label given to black middle and upper class youth who have adopted a white, Eurocentric diet, accent and lifestyle (McKinney 2007: 17). In essence, they are seen as being black only in terms of skin colour, with their ‘insides’, their mentality, language, and behaviour being white (McKinney 2007: 17). As Phiri (2013: 166) explains: “The exotic coconut fruit, with its brown shell and milky white flesh connotes a physically, visually dark (black) person who is metaphysically white.” With both the coconut and the *musalala*, there’s an element of racial duplicity: they are seen as acting white, but are not white;

they have black skin, but they are not fully black (Phiri 2013: 166). The idea of the ‘coconut’ is present in Fanon’s *Black Skin White Masks*, where he describes a “dislocation, a separation” between a black person who seemingly rejects their indigenous way of being and adopts a European lifestyle (1967: 14, 50-51, 148-149). The coconut and the *musalala* exist in a space of tension. They can never be fully white, and they can never be fully black (Chevalier 2015: 124). Mlambo (2009: 22) calls them “affluent but affected.” Their middle class surroundings and Eurocentric educational background afford them a level of privilege and socioeconomic power, but these have come at the expense of knowledge of their indigenous cultures, languages and history. Most importantly, they still live under the racial hierarchy and structures established through colonialism.

They are still subject to the same state of constant lack (coloniality of being), except this time, they are seen as lacking blackness and African identity (Phiri 2013: 168). Although privileged, the born-free coconut and *musalala* still suffer from the same racialised violence, albeit a different form of violence from the one inflicted on the poor and working class. These urban black youth growing up in Harare and Johannesburg live in cities that stand as physical markers of colonial conquest and upheaval (Njoh 2009: 304). They suffer the same loss of collective memory, social institutions, culture and language that colonised people endure (Memmi 1974: 146-147). They become both invisible and hyper-visible. This group is ‘African lite’, especially in the eyes of older generations and peers outside their social class. The post-1980 and post-1994 generations in Zimbabwe and South Africa grew up on a media-rich diet of Western movies, music, soap operas and magazines, with a sprinkle of African media texts (Chari 2009: 174). This ‘inauthentic’ African identity is heightened by the mainly urban life that this group has experienced. There is a generally negative perception of urban areas in the eyes of traditionalists, especially urban youth. They are regarded as ‘rootless’ people without culture (Sommers 2010: 318), living in places where they do not have an ancestral connection. Stories of young people moving to Johannesburg or Harare and abandoning their traditions can be found in many popular texts. Songs such as Oliver Mtukudzi’s ‘Ndakuvara’ (2006) tells the story of a promising young musician who leaves his traditional homestead for Harare, only to end up a poor drug addict. In AKA’s ‘Run Jozi’, rapper K.O (Mdluli 2014) refers to Johannesburg as a “city where having no morality is totally fabulous.” The immoral, rootless and ‘modern’ cities stand in contrast to the rural areas. There is a divide between urban and rural life: the former is the symbol of Eurocentrism and modernity (Simone 2008: 72, Mbembe & Nuttall 2008: 5), the latter representing ‘authentic’ indigenous identity and culture.

Urban life is important in understanding how Black Panther’s representation of an urban African

experience was received by my subjects. “The city is already an object of nostalgia, the site of the imaginary, of visual, literary and intellectual aesthetization. Here the world is doubled and dislocated” (Chambers 1986: 197). The African city is caught in two worlds and as a result so are its residents: caught between the standards of Western life and modernity, and the traditions of indigenous life (Wright 1997: 322). Different from the first encounters between coloniser and colonised, the city was where administrations experimented on creating the model colony through policy, architecture and zoning (Wright 1997: 323, Barker 2018: 77-78). The results of this experimentation is the ‘modern’ African metropolis, one in which its residents live in a space that is both African and not African, a place that has a distinct personality and features, but also with a history of colonialism. These ‘modern’ urban spaces, full of media texts and cultural forms, are media-rich environments. This is especially true for my research participants, who grew up with state and private television and radio, Nollywood and Hollywood cinema, smart phones and Internet cafes (Barber 2018: 138, 147). I argue that through growing up in African cities, my participants learnt how to ‘read’ and engage with media texts from childhood. Having access to a wide variety of media, the colonial history and current spatial and socio-economic inequalities, and the creation of an urban culture, all influence and shape how my research participants make sense of *Black Panther*. In this way, urban Africa serves as a lens with which to contextualise the responses of participants.

Africanity

The state of being caught between two worlds is particularly relevant to the question of what it means to be African. It is a condition that my research participants have had to navigate in their own journey of belonging. There are several philosophical concepts on African identity and its expression. There is Négritude, coined by Aimé Césaire and popularised by Léopold Senghor (Lamola 2016: 58-59). Described as a both an ideology and philosophy, Négritude is a cultural nationalism that arose in response to efforts of assimilation by French colonial authorities (Irele 1965:321). Pan-Africanism was the philosophy used by African anti-colonialists and politicians, most notably Kwame Nkrumah and Nnamdi Azikiwe (Azikiwe 1961, Kanu 2013: 113, Nkrumah 1963: 133). In the African context, Pan-Africanism is a political movement, used to fight for the political, economic and cultural development and autonomy of Africa through continental cooperation (Azikiwe 1961, Legum 1965: 34). Africanity shares similarities with Pan-Africanism and Négritude. These ideologies take the position that “Africa remains culturally in a state of coloniality” (Maquet 1972: 7, Lamola 2016: 63); that there is a need for an African cultural

renaissance and full liberation from colonial power and influence (Mafeje 2011: 39, Maquet 1972: 8); and that black Africa and its diaspora are connected (Sundiata 1996: 14). However, Africanity is unique for two reasons. Firstly, both Pan-Africanism and Négritude have their origins in the African diaspora, notably North America and the Caribbean (Legum 1965: 18, Irele 1965: 325). Africanity positions itself less as a political and social movement, and more as an ontology and way of being (Mafeje 2011: 34, Diagne 2001: 22). It is an emotive concept that focuses both on the individual African and the continent as a whole. This aspect makes Africanity an appropriate concept for considering the views of my participants, and even the positions enunciated in the film.

Several African academics have theorised Africanity. Maquet (1972: 10) describes it as “a conceptual tool that enables us to grasp what the various African civilizations have in common.” In this definition, Africanity is like a golden thread that runs through Africa, connecting different people and civilisations. This golden thread – based on shared experiences of cultural norms and adapting to the natural environment – spread through migrations such as the Bantu expansion into Southern Africa (Eggert 2016: 82, Li, Schlebusch and Jakbosson 2014: 8), and through interactions between different societies and civilisations (Adepoju 1995: 89-90). It is a defining feature of African life and an African way of being. This definition suggests that black Africa is one of interconnected people, who share similar social systems, agricultural processes and perceptions of reality.

Just like the coconut and the *musalala*, Africanity has been shaped by its environment, and in turn shapes its environment (Maquet 1972: 21, Cabral 1974: 15). From this perspective, North Africa (Morocco, Libya, Tunisia and Algeria), disconnected from the rest of the continent because of the Sahara desert, does not fully share this Africanity (Maquet 1972: 15). Furthermore, North Africa was regarded as being more aligned with Europe, due to the historical connections between the latter and ancient North African civilisations (Mazrui 2005: 70). Blocked by the desert, the northern region did not fully participate in the history of continental migrations and movements, which is an integral component of the golden thread. Africanity then refers more to black Africa, and it is this perspective that will be used in this research. ‘Black Africa’ refers to the countries and cultures that do not include North African Arab cultures (Egypt, Morocco, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria). It was through intercontinental migrations, such as the series of Bantu migrations from West and Central Africa to Southern and Eastern regions of the continent, that cultural norms, farming techniques, languages, ideologies and social structures spread (Maquet 1972: 25, Adepoju 1995: 90). Travels between empires and civilisations also fostered inter-cultural relations and encouraged cultural

borrowing. This cultural borrowing did not lead to a single African culture. Instead it created connections that grew into similarities and recognisable traits (Maquet 1972: 13, Cabral 1974: 14), with the societies and civilisations still distinguishable from each other.

The idea of Africanity as a golden thread connects with Lamola's analysis and definition. Lamola (2016: 54) describes Africanity as a shared consciousness that stands in contrast to colonial perspectives on African societies and ways of life. It cannot be shared or transformed like Maquet's idea of Africanity, and does not rely on a history of migrations and contact between civilisations. Africanity here is more of a collective mind and mentality developed and shared only by Africans. Lamola presents Africanity as a shared but intangible concept which on face value seems to differ from Maquet's. However, the two are not in contradiction with each other. Africanity can be a mental, emotional and psychological consciousness built on shared experiences, serving as a foundation for African cultural unity and heritage. As such, it is more than a way of life or a series of shared experiences that serve as the base for cultural unity. This is similar to Diagne's argument that Africanity is a "substance" and affirmation of African selfhood and identity (Diagne 2001: 19-20). As this process of affirmation and cultural unity is ongoing, Africanity is both a state of being and a state of becoming.

This state of being and becoming is expressed through language. This is an integral component of Africanity: the method and medium of expression is a determining factor in whether or not a cultural text or form is part of the golden thread. However, the expression and performance of Africanity is a site of contestation. With these shared experiences, consciousness and cultural unity being expressed, the question then is whose language is used as the means of expression? Most importantly for my reception analysis, does using non-African methods of expression make a person and a cultural text less worthy of Africanity? Mafeje (2011: 37) writes that "Africanity is an assertion of an identity that has been denied", but when that assertion is expressed through European languages (namely English and French), it calls into question whether that assertion is 'authentically' African (Owomoyela 1996: 6). 'Authenticity' refers to an untouched or pristine condition (Handler 1986: 2). An 'authentic' culture would be one untouched by outside influences and forces. In the context of Africanity, 'authenticity' means the search for an African identity that has not been changed or influenced by Eurocentrism and colonisation. However, it is arguable that this 'authentic' African identity is not possible given the ways in which contact with cultures outside Africa's borders have influenced its societies. Mazrui highlights the role the Islamic world played in North, West and East Africa. He argues that "Africa is a product of a dialogue of three

civilizations: Africanity, Islam, and the impact of the West” (2005: 71). The golden thread was not destroyed by this dialogue, but it was affected by the other two civilisations. This is supported by the argument that Eurocentrism and Islam created and imposed a collective black, continental identity onto Africa (Mazrui 2005: 70). This means that, in terms of cultural norms and social structures, the search for an ‘authentic’ culture is the pursuit of an ideal rather than a reclamation of a lost pristine culture. For my research participants, this argument presents the idea that they are not less African than their peers or elders, as African identity and culture has a history of contact and influence with non-African civilisations.

There is a strong link between language and culture: language is the vehicle through which culture is expressed, shared and received (Owomoyela 1996: 5). ‘Language’ here is not restricted to verbal and written language. It includes clothing, music and body movements. This language connects to the argument that young, black urban middle-class African youth have had to ‘perform’ their blackness. They use these different languages to express their ‘authentic’ blackness and African identity. However, this Africanity and its expression through language comes up against coloniality. The tension between the desire for a pristine African identity and unity and the continued legacy of colonialism, triggers what I call a crisis of modern Africanity. Maquet distinguishes between two Africanities. The first is pre-colonial, where the shared experiences were established and spread without external interference or influence (Maquet 1972: 33). Although there was contact between Africa and the world in the pre-colonial period, European and Asian influence did not ‘penetrate’ the whole continent. Contact with non-Africans before colonisation and the slave trade (both Trans-Atlantic and Trans-Sahara) did not significantly alter or shift African cultures, economies and social structures, the exception being Islam in parts of West and East Africa (Mazrui 2005: 71).

Without external pressures, Africanity expressed itself through African languages, and its basis was a history of positive shared experiences and connections. The second, the ‘modern’ Africanity, was a consequence of colonial expansion and penetration (Maquet 1972: 33, Appiah 1993: 9-10). The colonial experience was shared across the continent, and although it manifested in different forms, the common denominators were the oppression of the black majority, the industrialisation of African societies, the drawing up of colonial borders, destruction of empires and systems of rule, the de-legitimisation of indigenous knowledge, and white colonial administration. Black Africa shared a history of oppression and violence. Modern Africanity is based on these negative shared experiences. Colonialism privileged European languages, and black Africans had no choice but to learn them (Appiah 1993: 3-4). However, as with the coconut and the *musalala*, this adoption of

European norms comes at a cost. Africans who use European languages to express their Africanity are seen as ‘corrupting’ the pure African substance and essence (Owomoyela 1996: 6). Ngugi Wa Thiong’o (1992: 287) best describes the issue of language in narrating his transition into a colonial education system: “the language of my education was no longer the language of my culture.”

With the widespread use of English in Harare and Johannesburg, it is arguable that the enunciation and performance of this shared African consciousness and ontology is now mainly through a colonial language. This includes media, educational texts, casual conversation and formal employment. The continued privileging of colonial language is arguably a continuation of linguistic and epistemic violence (Owomoyela 1996: 5). This is the crisis of modern Africanity: navigating how to express a uniquely African consciousness and cultural unity, whilst living with the daily realities of structural racism, inequality, and epistemic discrimination. Cabral believes that for the oppressed, culture is the site of resistance and the continuation of history (1974: 13). The assertion and affirmation of a unique cultural personality defies colonial attempts to destroy and erase it. In this sense, Africanity is a tool of resistance to the project of modernity, which regards African cultures and histories as inferior and contrary to the path of Eurocentric development. “If imperialist domination necessarily practices cultural oppression, national liberation is necessarily an act of culture,” argues Cabral (1974: 13). Taking Cabral’s argument, it is arguable that the enunciation of this culture with colonial languages does this resistance a disservice. In short, it is inauthentic. However, the very notion of authenticity challenges this argument. Firstly, ‘authenticity’ is a Western European construction, born during the medieval period (Handler 1986: 3). It was used to separate groups, cultures and nations, at a time when Europe sought to distinguish itself from civilisations outside its borders. Using this concept of authenticity when discussing the expression of Africanity does not take into consideration the history of contact with non-African societies, as well as the inter-connectedness of African cultures and societies. Even when expressed in a non-African language, this cultural unity is not illegitimate or ‘inauthentic’ than when expressed in an African language.

Raised in an environment that privileged whiteness, subject to a Eurocentric education curriculum instructed in English, my participants can potentially feel separated from this cultural unity and shared consciousness. Performing and affirming their African identity has either been frowned upon in their social circles and institutions of learning, or mocked and ridiculed by other black Africans outside their socio-economic context. Once again, this is an example of ‘lack’, but in this case, a lack of Africanity, and a space where they can affirm and perform their Africanity without

judgement or ridicule. This is why their responses to *Black Panther* sparked my interest. When the film opened in cinemas, these young adults went to the cinema in groups. They wore traditional African attire to watch the film. They ululated and danced to its soundtrack. They cheered when they heard the actors speaking isiXhosa and whistled as Babes Wodumo played in the background of certain scenes. After the film's opening, #WakandaForever and Black Panther trended on Twitter, with photos of people doing the Wakanda salute floating around on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. Watching *Black Panther* was arguably more than just 'going to the movies'. It was a moment where they saw the affirmation and celebration of blackness and Africanity that they had not quite experienced before, and it was also a vehicle through which they could celebrate and express their African identity and cultural unity.

Identity and Representation

Identity is one of the major themes of *Black Panther* and my research question. It features in modernity/coloniality, Africanity, belonging and blackness. However, it is important to analyse and understand identity as its own theoretical field. Combining it with one of the above mentioned areas of my conceptual framework would not fully cover how and why identity is an important factor to consider in my research. I have chosen to combine identity with representation because the two are linked: representations are the media through which audiences identify with images and issues, make sense of and express their identities, and how they perceive the identities of others (Spencer 2004: 11,30). At the same time, identity formation and positioning plays a crucial role in the creation and interpretation of media texts (Spencer 2014: 17, Hall 1997:4, Hall 1989: 68). Therefore, addressing identity and representation together enables me to understand how both processes work together in how my research participants interpreted *Black Panther*.

Identity is a complex concept. Hall argues that identity is always in production and is never a complete, once-off process (1989: 68). It is a process of positioning and re-positioning, both for individual and group identities (Hall 1989: 74). Louis (2009: 566) describes identity as both "unreal and real, a necessary fiction." A social construct, identity formation has real-life consequences and status (Louis 1989: 566). There are different definitions for social and cultural identity. Tajfel (1978: 63) defines social identity as "that part of an individual's self-concept that derives from knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership." Using this definition, identity and a sense of belonging rely on membership of a group or community, that an individual either chooses or one is 'born'

into. The latter is especially true for racial and ethnic identity, where an individual is ‘born into’ a race or ethnicity. This is described as an ascribed identity (Huddy 2001: 137, Louis 2009: 562). On the other hand, an acquired identity is one that an individual can choose, negotiate and become (Huddy 2001: 137). Considering the heterogeneity of blackness, it is possible that for ‘race’ and ethnicity, one is born into a particular group identity but can also choose whether or not to identify with it. Individuals can challenge societal standards of what it means to be black and African by choosing to create their own black African identity while still belonging to the larger group identity. This is especially true for my research participants: blackness and Africanity are identities that they were ‘born’ into, but also ones that they have negotiated, chosen and created for themselves.

In the process of constructing a social identity, individuals join groups and prioritise their in-group identity/ies over ‘outside’ group identities (Brown and Capozza 2006: 3). There is a desire to belong to a group with positive attributes, one that its members find pride in identifying with and performing (Brown and Capozza 2006: 3, Hogg 2006: 35). The desire is for self-esteem on a group and individual level: positive in-group attributes mean a more respectable social identity and positioning for its members (Brown and Capozza 2006: 4, Huddy 2001: 134). This is in line with Louis’ analysis of black identity. The work of black artists, activists and thinkers is a movement to reclaim and restore self-esteem and pride in black identity that was ascribed negative attributes and character by European imperialism (Louis 2009: 563, Brown and Capozza 2006: 5). Huddy (2001: 130) notes that strong racial and ethnic identities increase the collective need for a group identity and for group solidarity. This is especially true for minority racial and ethnic groups, as their racial and ethnic markers are more salient (Huddy 2001: 133). However, wanting to identify with a particular group is also connected to certainty/uncertainty. Certainty can best be described as comfort in one’s skin, and having a sense of control and ownership of one’s self and place in the world (Brown and Capozza 2006: 5, Hogg 2006: 36). The more ‘uncertain’ an individual is, the more likely they are to join or want to join a group with positive attributes and social position (Hogg 2006: 37). For my research participants, attending previously all-white schools may have caused uncertainty, especially with the salience of their race. In order to reduce their uncertainty, they adopted the positive attributes of their environment’s Eurocentric standards.

Before the construction of this group identity is possible, the individual must first choose to identify with that group (Huddy 2001: 131). The matter of choice is important in identity formation for three reasons. First, there is a human need to belong to a group and live and work in a collective, but there is also a desire for individuality (Brown and Capozza 2006: 6). Brown and Capozza (2006: 6)

state that “individuals also need to perceive themselves as distinctive: distinctiveness allows comparative evaluation and self-definition.” There are thus two processes at play: the formation of a group identity, and also the formation of an individual identity. Secondly, the meaning of this group identity is subjective, potentially varying from individual to individual (Huddy 2001: 130). The participants in my focus group may each have different definitions and understandings of what it means to be black and to be African, and this subjectivity is an important aspect to consider when analysing different responses to *Black Panther*. As Louis explains, blackness is externally ascribed but internally acquired (Louis 2009: 562). Black is an identity that my participants were given, and also an identity that they became. The internal acquisition of this black identity is subjective and differs from person to person, and is also influenced by social processes. It occurs in relation to others and their acquisition of identity.

Lastly there is the prototype theory. This states that in a social category or group, there is a ‘prototype’, a collation of a set of attributes or markers that best define that group and differentiate it from others (Hogg 2006: 36, Huddy 2001: 134). A prototype does not refer to a real person, but rather a mental model of what a stereotypical member of that group would be (Hogg 2006: 36). Group belonging is established according to how similar or how different a person is from this prototype. This idea of a prototype is similar to Kwame Nkrumah’s idea of an African personality (1963: 132), which is an element of Africanity. The African personality can serve as a ‘prototype’ for how an independent, empowered black African should behave and conduct themselves as well as a demonstration of black African political and cultural unity (Nkrumah 1963: 193). This concept, created to promote continental unity, presents a prototype for group and individual belonging and identity formation: it is the core ideal around which African identity should be constructed. However, it is an ideal that does not allow for the diversity of black experiences and opinions on what it means to be African. The prototype encourages and normalises certain characteristics over others. In the case of my participants and their interpretations of *Black Panther*, the prototype theory is particularly interesting. My participants have social, linguistic and cultural differences that distinguish them from the prototype of the African personality. The relationship between similarity and difference in identity construction and group belonging is important in analysing participant responses. The former is especially relevant to cultural identity.

Hall (1989: 69-70) presents two ways of conceptualising cultural identity. The first regards identity (specifically cultural identity) as a shared and collective culture and collective self. Bound together by a common history and ancestry, this understanding sees this collective culture and self as stable,

unchanged by forced migrations such as the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and events such as colonisation (Hall 1989: 69, Grossberg 1996: 89). As Hall explains: “Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as ‘one people’, with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions (1989: 69).” This element makes this definition of identity especially relevant for Africa and its diaspora, and is connected to Lamola’s definition of Africanity as a shared consciousness (2016: 54). This collective self manifests in political and cultural movements such as Pan-Africanism and Négritude. With Africa being the single, shared origin, it is also the source of this collective self. Culture here can be understood as a shared “conceptual and linguistic universe” (Hall 1997: 8), a definition that supports the idea of a shared self, a shared consciousness. As Hall (1989: 69) further explains: “our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as ‘one people’, with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning.” It is the quest for this shared self that arguably drove Pan-African solidarity and Négritude, and continues with efforts to ‘reclaim’ and restore African identity and pride (Hall 1989: 69, Huddy 2001: 134).

Hall’s second conceptualisation of identity focuses on differences rather than a collective true self. However, it is not necessarily opposed to the first definition. This second definition acknowledges a collective historical origin (Africa in this case), but it emphasises that identity is based just as much on difference as a shared past (Goldberg 1996: 89). Identity is constructed and produced out of difference rather than similarity (Goldberg 1996: 93). The case of Africa and its diaspora best supports this claim. With territories in Africa having different experiences and encounters with colonisation and European imperialism, identities, cultures and positionings were transformed and altered. Identity here then serves as points of difference and what makes groups and individuals unique (Hall 1989: 70). This is similar to Louis’ (2009: 563) analysis of identity formation. “Identities are comparative and relational and the formation of the ‘self’ draws on a contrasting ‘Other’ (Louis 2009: 563).” Therefore, unlike the stable and unchanging quality of the collective true self, this definition sees these transformed identities not as a state of being, but of becoming (Hall 1989: 70). Identities are in a constant state of production (Louis 2009: 565). As Grossberg says, “identities are always relational and incomplete, in process (1996: 89).”

I mainly rely on this second definition in my research, but I do not completely discard the first. That my participants connected with *Black Panther*’s themes and characters potentially supports the idea of a shared consciousness. However, the identities of my participants are still being produced.

Although they resonated with the film's themes and storyline, their experiences and histories are different from the film's characters and different from each other. Considering both definitions of identity provides me with a comprehensive framework for understanding my participants' responses, and how they interpreted the film's representation of blackness and African identity. Furthermore, using the two conceptions of cultural identities connects with Maquet's (1972: 10,33) argument for two connected but different Africanities. The first, traditional Africanity connects with the idea of a shared consciousness. Although this identity was not homogenous, there were similar experiences, shared cultural norms and systems of rule. These created connections and points of similarity whilst still distinguishing different societies from each other. The 'modern' Africanity, a consequence of European imperialism, is connected to the construction of identity through difference. Although former colonised groups in Africa all experienced colonialism and live with the continued effects of colonality, they experienced colonialism in different ways and thus constructed their own, unique identities. Both definitions of cultural identity are thus useful in analysing my participants' responses.

It is through the process of consuming media texts that audiences gain information used in the process of identity construction (Spencer 2014: 30, Berger 1972: 7). Spencer (2014: 30) argues that "consumption, and the choices we make within in, is central to the ways in which our identity is constructed." 'Choices' here refers to the ways consumers of media texts choose to react to what and/or who is being represented in the text. The system of representation creates subjects (whom the text is created for) and objects (who the text is about) through the system of representation (Nichols 1981: 34,38). This is how representation and identity are linked, with both influencing the other. Hall defines representation as "the production of meaning through language." (1997: 2). It is part of the process of producing media texts, and serves as the link or medium between the text's producer/s and its reader/s (Lacey 2009: 146, Mitchell 1994: 422). Representation is a way for audiences to gain information (Strelitz 2000: 41), but it is also a medium for producers of media texts to communicate their perspectives in a way that affirms their ideology/ies and gain allies from the audience (Nichols 1981:26). There are three main theories of representation and its function. The first, the mimetic/reflectional approach, regards representation as a simple reflection of the physical world, with no influence or input from the producer (Hall 1997:10). The second theory, the intentional approach, argues that producers intentionally construct and impose their meanings on the world through representation (Hall 1997: 11). I use the third approach in my research. The constructionist theory states that representation is a system of meanings created or 'constructed' by the people involved in the system of representation who create meaning through language (Hall

1997: 11). This theory works best for a reception analysis, as the creation of meaning lies with the producer and the audience. The producer creates a text, encoding their ideology and perspective. It is a construction of how they see the world and the ideologies to which they subscribe (Berger 1972: 10, Spencer 2014: 18). However, this encoded meaning is not absorbed as is: it can be decoded in various ways (Hall 1973: 13). The audience can infer their own meaning from a text (Nichols 1981: 24), a process influenced by social contexts. The latter is particularly important for my research, because I am interested in how particular individuals, shaped by the social forces that produced them, responded to the film.

There are two systems necessary in order for this process of sharing and interpreting of meaning in representation to occur (Hall 1997: 3). The first is the shared conceptual map of culture. People who share the same conceptual map have similar ways of interpreting codes and signs in media texts (Hall 1997: 4), and if the producer and recipient of the text share the same conceptual map, there is a likelihood that the recipient will adopt the preferred reading of the text. A preferred reading is one that affirms the producer's perspective and ideology (Nichols 1981: 36, Spencer 2014: 18, Hall 1997: 19). The second system is that of language, which functions as the bridge between mental concepts and ideas with tangible signs and codes (Hall 1997: 4). Combined, the systems of language and conceptual maps create a system of representation. These function as 'keys' to unlock the interpretation and decoding. However, there is another factor at play: power. There is power in deciding who gets to be the object and subject of representation (Nichols 1981: 38). Mitchell (1994: 420) explains that representation involves a process of interpellation, and in that process, there is an exchange of power and value between producer and audience. The producer has the power to decide who their preferred reader will be and tailor their work accordingly, and the reader has the power and choice to either accept or reject the preferred reading (Berger 1972: 8, Spencer 2014: 31).

The issue of power is particularly relevant with regards to the representation of blackness. Taking the Marxist theory of media, media representations affirm and strengthen the ideological position, identity and interests of the ruling class (Spencer 2014: 11, Nichols 1981: 34). The representation of blackness (specifically African identity) has a negative history in popular imaginings and Hollywood productions (Appadurai and Breckenridge 2008: 352, Spencer 2014: 26). Hall refers to these as "regimes of representation" (1989: 71): colonial administrations forced colonised groups to see themselves portrayed as an Other. These representations were created to benefit and enforce the racialised hierarchies and labour structures created and imposed by colonialism, producing and representing an essentialist image of blackness and Africa. Africa, a diverse continent with many

cultures, histories and societies, was reduced to a one-dimensional, homogeneous continent. As Goldberg states: “the act of power comes not in creating something from nothing, but in reducing something to nothing (1996: 96).” Although this negative perception of Africa and blackness was not created by the media, the media disseminates and normalises these representations (Lacey 2009: 153, 155).

The representation of an African character as a superhero, and of a powerful African country that is not a poor, corrupt, underdeveloped nation at war, stand out from previous representations of Africa, representations that are heavily influenced by colonial perceptions of Africa (Steinbock-Pratt 2009: 215). Notable examples are in *Independence Day* (which represents Africa as a single village waving their spears to the sky after the defeat of the aliens), *Blood Diamonds* (which portrays Sierra Leone in the middle of a civil war), and *Last King of Scotland* (a portrayal of Idi Amin’s presidency in Uganda). There is no nuance in these representations, and they flatten out African identity into a generic, oversimplified existence. These cinematic representations of the black African experience have similar connotations: black Africa is underdeveloped, incapable of stability and is cursed with tyrannical, megalomaniac rulers (Steinbock-Pratt 2009: 220-222). Given the cultural influence and impact of Hollywood productions, this one-dimensional representation becomes the *only* representation of black Africa (Miller 2005: 78). Black Panther represents a stable, technologically advanced African country with a wise, benevolent ruler. The fictional representation of an Africa ‘that could have been’ were it not for colonisation arguably presents audiences with a different cinematic experience of Africa. My participants had a strong reaction to this representation of Africanity and blackness. As a theory, representation is a tool for analysing not only how blackness is represented in the film, but also how my participants responded to these representations and why. Representation and identity go hand-in-hand because identity serves as the context for how people choose to represent themselves, and how they respond to representations of their identities. They both serve as concepts to provide context for my participants and the factors that influence the interpretation of the film, and are part of data analysis for my participant responses.

These four thematic areas – modernity/coloniality, urban life, Africanity, representation and identity – provide the overall conceptual framework for my study. This framework covers different aspects of my participants, their responses, their different backgrounds, and how these factors shape their reception of *Black Panther*. The following chapter outlines the methodology of this research project. It covers the research’s philosophical underpinning and methodological approach, and

outlines the process of data collection.

Chapter Three: Methodology

The previous chapter presented the conceptual framework of this research, grounding it in theoretical concepts and arguments necessary for data analysis. This chapter focuses on the methodology of this research, which is a reception study that focuses on the responses and interpretations of the audience of *Black Panther*. This field of analysis regards reception as a social activity (Jensen 1991: 137). It foregrounds the lived experiences of the audience and their integral position in the production of meaning (Holub 2003: 58). Because of different lived experiences and social contexts, meaning is subjective, and media texts can be read and understood in different ways (Gunter 2000: 19). I have designed a research strategy underpinned by a methodological philosophy and informed by the research approach I chose. This chapter examines my approach in the following way: the research strategy and approach, philosophical positioning, data collection and analysis, and considerations of the validity of my research. Combined, these five elements make up my research design and shape the methodological processes I will employ in answering my research question and engaging with my research participants.

Research design approach

Quantitative and qualitative research are the two basic choices for the research design of a study. A quantitative research design, often associated with the positivist tradition, uses research methods such as surveys and questionnaires (Gunter 2000: 4, Bryman 1984: 77). It is based on a large data sample to make general claims that relate to a large population and to test a hypothesis (Bryman 1988: 11, Creswell 2003: 7). Although useful in collecting data on *Black Panther*'s box office performance and tracking its mentions on social media, a quantitative approach is not suitable as the primary research method for a reception study. A qualitative approach is better suited to the task. Qualitative research opposes the idea of distant observation. Instead, its methods focus on an 'inside' view of social phenomena and their actors (Bryman 1984: 78). Getting close to research subjects is important in understanding how social experiences and background influence consumption and interpretation of media. A qualitative approach to reception explores the audience's production of meaning. It perceives the audience as having the power and agency to 'read' media texts in a way that counters a preferred reading (Devereux 2014: 232). Countering the 'hypodermic needle' argument that placed the power to create meaning squarely in the hands of the text's producers (Gunter 2000: 11), qualitative research's ethnographic approach focuses on the relationship between media texts, audiences, and daily life (Devereux 2014: 227). In order for me to

answer my research question, I must use an approach that best matches my goals (Silverman 2010:10, Bryman 1984: 83).

Qualitative research's ethnographic emphasis best matches my research interests and provides me with the methods necessary to best answer my research question. As Devereux notes: "The qualitative paradigm examines the reception of media texts in a wider social context than its quantitative counterpart (2014: 225)." But while a qualitative approach is what primarily makes up my research design, I am not completely overlooking quantitative research. Indeed, some scholars argue that it is not possible to have a completely qualitative or quantitative research approach (Creswell 2003: 4, Bryman 1984: 80). Both research approaches can work together and complement each other in a research design, with the option of a mixed-methods approach (Bryman 1984: 85). Although I am not using a mixed-methods approach to my research design, I will use quantitative methods to assess *Black Panther's* box office performance, as well as analysing the responses of my subject participants.

Qualitative research is usually described as exploratory, in which the goal is to explore the research question and not verify a hypothesis (Bryman 1984: 84, Macnaghten and Myers 2004: 65). In addition to this exploratory, ethnographic approach, my research design also has descriptive elements. A qualitative descriptive research design includes a descriptive account of an event or experience from the perspective of the people that experienced it (Magilvy and Thomas 2009: 299). A combination of both exploratory and descriptive research is especially useful when researching the affective responses to media. Affective media research explores the relationship between a media text and its fans, specifically how and why the text elicits a strong emotional response and influences areas such as identity formation and subculture affiliation (Devereux 2014: 242, Gunter 2000: 155). In order to answer my research question in a satisfactory manner, I must use both an exploratory and descriptive lens in data collection and analysis. An exploratory design will engage with my research participants' responses to *Black Panther's* themes and storyline in relation to their social contexts. A descriptive design deepens my understanding of the participants' process of understanding the film and its significance for them, using their own language (Magilvy and Thomas 2009: 300).

My choice of a qualitative research approach influences my philosophical position. Several philosophies underpin and influence research design. The two main philosophies are positivism and interpretivism (Bryman 1984: 77). These two philosophies are not necessarily opposed to one

another, but have different areas of focus. In the area of reception studies, positivism and interpretivism have different conceptions of what constitutes ‘evidence’ (Denzin 2009: 139). A positivist perspective focuses on research that is objective and observable (Bryman 1984: 77). ‘Objective’ here means being detached from research subjects and observing them from afar (Gunter 2000: 5). Observability refers to what the researcher can observe with their senses from their research subjects (Gunter 2000: 5). As Gunter (2000: 4) explains: “the focus is placed upon what can be observed. The main goal of positivist social science is to explain causal relations between these observable phenomena.” A positivist reception analysis is frequently used in market and consumer research: its focus is data in the form of ratings and box office numbers (Gunter 2000: 4, Devereux 2014: 225). This focus on statistics and counting in data collection makes positivism unsuitable for my philosophical underpinning. A qualitative methodology’s approach to research is underpinned by interpretivism. This is the philosophical stance taken by this research project.

Interpretivism focuses on hidden meanings (Gunter 2000: 5). Shifting away from a focus on observability and replicability, interpretivist inquiry takes an ethnographic approach (Bryman 1984: 77, Devereux 2014: 232). ‘Ethnographic’ here means that the interpretivist’s interests are in social connections and cultural processes, and how these two phenomena influence perspectives and understandings on an individual and communal level. Interpretivism (sometimes called constructivism) assumes the position that meaning is subjective. Rather than being a fixed entity, meaning is socially negotiated and constructed (Creswell 2003: 8). As such, interpretivism is concerned with investigating the connection between social processes and experiences and the construction of meaning (Creswell 2008: 8, Jankowski and Wester 1991: 52). The focus is on the internal processes and factors that influence individual and group perspectives (Gunter 2000: 5). With regard to reception analysis, “the constructionist version of audience reception is more concerned with the broader social and discursive context in which reception takes place” (Devereux 2014: 228).” Positivism and interpretivism both have useful elements and valid assertions on what constitutes ‘truth’ and evidence in research. I have chosen interpretivism as the philosophical position for my research for three reasons. First, my research focuses on the lived experiences and social processes of my research participants, and how these have influenced their consumption and interpretation of media texts. This is in line with interpretivism’s interest in understanding a social phenomenon beyond distant observation (Bryman 1984: 78). Secondly, my choice for a qualitative approach informs my philosophical position. The research strategies and methods used in a qualitative approach are in line with interpretivism’s focus on hidden meanings and social

processes. Lastly, my research question is social in nature. I want to explore and analyse responses to *Black Panther* by a particular audience, and how this audience's social context and upbringing influenced their readings of the film. Choosing a philosophical underpinning that speaks to this social aspect of discovery is the most appropriate decision for a successful research project.

In a reception analysis, it is also important to consider Cultural Studies and its concept. In the field of media studies, Cultural Studies emerged in the 1950s, challenging contemporary perspectives on what qualified as 'culture' and what did not (Hall 1980: 57-58, Murdoch 1993: 81). Goldberg explains that "most work in cultural studies is concerned with investigating and challenging the construction of subaltern, marginalized or dominated identities (1996: 90)." Cultural Studies seeks to understand the processes behind the production and reception of cultural texts. These processes are best encapsulated in the 'circuit of culture', which examines the different elements of cultural production (Johnson 1987: 46, Strelitz 2000: 38). It (and Cultural Studies as a whole) is a useful theoretical framework for an interpretivist research approach because of its desire to understand the specific conditions and contexts of the production and consumption of texts (Johnson 1987: 47). Comprising four different 'moments' of cultural production – conditions of productions, the form of the cultural text, reception and interpretation of the text, and the lived cultures of the text's audience – "each moment or aspect depends upon the others and is indispensable to the whole. Each, however, is distinct and involves characteristic changes of form" (Johnson 1987: 46)." It is possible to locate a research project in one moment of the circuit of culture without missing 'the big picture' or having to include analysis in another moment. As my research is a reception analysis, it falls squarely in the moments of audience reception and lived cultures. Adding the moment of lived cultures in my research design is important because audiences receive and interpret media texts in specific social and cultural environments. This specific context influences the readings of a text and the meanings derived from it (Johnson 1987: 62, Spencer 2014: 18).

There are different research methods when using a qualitative approach, such as field observation and discourse analysis (Devereux 2014: 225, Jensen 1991: 139). The two research methods I use for data collection are focus groups and individual interviews. Focus group discussions are a useful method for an audience reception study. Characteristics of focus groups include: a discussion or series of discussions between several individuals; moderation of the discussion by a facilitator who is often the researcher; and discussions on several connected topics (Gunter 2000: 42). They replicate the social settings where participants would have discussed *Black Panther* and shared different meanings and interpretations (Byrne 2004: 181, Gunter 2000: 46, Kitzinger 1990: 104).

Focus groups are a way to collect group data and data on collective processes of interpretation and creation of meaning (Gunter 2000: 44). A focus group “can provide prompts to talk, correcting or responding to others, and a plausible audience for that talk that is not just the researcher” (Macnaghten and Myers 2004: 65). I decided to use focus groups because of this social aspect, which is especially important considering the social nature of the cinematic experience. When *Black Panther* opened in cinemas in Johannesburg and South Africa, people went to watch it in groups in packed cinemas. Watching the film was a social experience and it was an experience influenced by the presence, reactions and interpretations of the other people in the cinema. As Chambers explains, “cinema is a social institution, a meaning machine that without an audience remains inactive (1986: 79).” Focus groups are thus an appropriate research method for exploring this collective, social experience and for replicating the processes that my research participants went through as they watched *Black Panther* for the first time.

I conducted four separate focus groups. Each comprises of three people, a size big enough to generate discussion and different points of view, while still being a manageable size for moderation and facilitation. Smaller groups would also make participants more comfortable and open to sharing, with everyone having an opportunity to contribute. Because my research focused on a very specific part of the population, I could run four focus groups to get an in-depth inquiry into their views and still satisfy conditions of reliability for the study (Kitzinger 1994: 105). Qualifying criteria for participants were: i) they were currently enrolled at Rhodes University; ii) they were between the ages of 18 and 27; iii) they came from a middle-class, urban background; iv) they grew up, live or attended school in a city in Zimbabwe or South Africa and v) that they were black Africans. I identified participants who fit this criteria by contacting people in my social circles who were part of this group and/or who knew people who were. I found participants within the same social networks, thereby providing knowledge on the dynamics and power relations of social networks and processes (Noy 2008: 330). Upon contacting them, I enquired if they identified with the criteria. Some people did not (they did not identify as middle-class or they did not grow up or live in an urban setting). The people that did identify with the criteria and agreed to be part of the focus group discussions became participants.

Having participants who are Rhodes University students made it easier to conduct focus groups, as I am a student myself. I used purposive sampling, because I wanted to engage with the responses from a particular demographic group who met the criteria I had set in order to address my research questions. The age criterion covered a range of experience. I wanted to include different

perspectives, from first year students to students in their final year or enrolled in a postgraduate degree. To narrow down the participant pool, a final criterion was that participants came from or lived in Harare, Johannesburg or Cape Town. I have chosen these cities because of their shared history as centres of colonial power, their hyper-visibility in their countries' media representation, and because of their urban development and socio-economic relations. Having spent time in those cities, I could draw parallels and differences between them, in a way that I cannot with participants from other African cities. Although the participants would have had similar experiences, backgrounds and patterns of media consumption, I wanted to explore the differences between them and whether these differences influenced their readings of the film.

I used a series of open-ended questions as a loose guide for the discussions. Using a set of rigid, closed questions would not generate discussion, and participants would not have the space to express their opinions fully and engage with the research question (Gunter 2000: 42, Merton 1956: 43). Participants guided the discussion, with the questions acting as signposts. In addition, I used follow-up questions for interesting responses and interactions. Furthermore, I decided to use the same set of questions for each focus group instead of creating a unique set for each discussion. Using the same set of questions enabled me to compare the responses of the groups, recognising potential patterns and contrasts in responses (Gunter 2000: 43, Merton 1956: 43). The questions also acted as a form of 'control' for the data generated from these discussions, necessary to meet requirements for the validity of the research. This was useful when it came to selecting participants for individual interviews.

I chose purposive sampling for the focus groups to select participants who best fit the participant criteria (Byrne 2004: 186). As I was looking for very specific people, my research participants were not be a representative population. Instead, the participants served as a theoretical sample to increase the depth of understanding in relation to my particular area of study and conceptual framework (Macnaghten and Myers 2004: 68). A combination of purposive and snowball sampling is thus a way to gain access to a very particular population to enhance my understanding of my research area, and using the social networks in this population to further understand how they influence their constructions of meaning.

In addition to focus group discussions, I conducted individual interviews with some of the participants from the focus groups. I can get in-depth observations from participants who had interesting responses during focus group discussions, or did not feel comfortable enough to discuss

their experiences with in the group. Individual interviews are a way to collect rich, personal data on participants and their perspectives (Qu and Dumay 2011: 239). I chose one person from each focus group discussion with whom to conduct an interview, choosing participants who gave responses that sharply contradicted observations from other participants, or suggested a strong link between personal experiences and interpretation of the film. The backgrounds of these participants had a particularly strong influence on their interpretation of *Black Panther*. Two interviews were with participants from South Africa, and two with participants from Zimbabwe. As with the focus groups, the individual interviews had an informal structure. I created a different set of open-ended questions for the individual interviews, altering the questions slightly so that they were tailored to the participant in question.

I used two methods of data collection for the focus group discussions and individual interviews. The main method of data collection is audio recordings of each focus group and interview. In all cases, I used an audio recorder to capture the responses and interactions accurately (Caudle 2004: 419). I made notes and wrote down observations in a small notebook during the discussions, but this was not enough to record every response. This note-taking is be the second method of data collection. I will note responses that I find particularly interesting, as well as aspects of the discussion that can't be captured on audio recordings, such as body language and physical reactions to different comments and questions (Caudle 2004: 418). The audio recordings of each session, in conjunction with the notes taken during the discussion, form the data for analysis. In order to analyse the responses captured in the audio recordings, I transcribed each recording of the discussion. Detailed transcriptions facilitate the use of quotations and excerpts from a discussion or interview in my written data analysis. I hired an experienced transcriber to ensure the quality of each transcription. Where necessary, I also included observations that I write down in my notes when providing evidence for a claim made during data analysis.

In the process of creating a research design, I have also considered the question validity. As a concept, validity is essential. It influences the quality of the collected data and research findings. As Wolfson notes, "if data are inadequate, there is always the danger that the theory and conclusions drawn from them could be unreliable and misleading (1986: 689)." Although there is no single notion of validity (Ratcliffe 1983: 158, 160), the qualitative nature of this research means there are some processes that can be used as guarantors of validity. The first process is a critical enquiry of the ethics of the research project. This enquiry covers questions on who the research's guiding purpose, potential benefits and consequences of the research and who will careful examination of

the data for variables (Wolfson 1986: 691). Variables in social background, personal experiences and potentially the field of study for participants factor into responses. Examining data for variables acknowledges that “human behaviour is not neat (Wolfson 1986: 691)”, and takes into consideration the complexity and nuances that underlie participants’ interaction. These processes were conducted throughout this research to ensure the validity of the collected data, and informed the process of data analysis.

Data analysis covers the tools and techniques used in sorting and organising data (Mauthner and Doucet 2003: 414, Caudle 2004: 417). I used the conceptual framework presented in the second chapter. This framework helps me analyse the responses of my participants and their context/s (Caudle 2004: 420). With this framework in mind, I first summarised and coded the data. This involves categorising the data into clusters and themes in order to establish patterns in responses (Caudle 2004: 421). I grouped similar responses into categories. The second analytical process involves identifying themes in the responses, and from this step I embarked on an in-depth analysis of the patterns and themes that emerged from participant responses. In this analysis I used the conceptual framework outlined in the previous chapter to make sense of the responses and to identify the connotations and implications of the different positions and perspectives presented in the responses. I quoted excerpts from the transcriptions where necessary to provide evidence for my claims, using the exact words of the participant/s.

Taking place over a period of six weeks, I began data collection on 19 September 2019, with my final focus group discussion on 18 October 2019. I divided my analysis into three stages. The first is data collection and documentation of the data collection process. The second process is categorisation and clustering responses into themes. The third process is analysing the responses based on this categorisation. I took audio recordings of the individual interviews and focus group discussions, and the transcriptions of these audio recordings serve as the primary texts of analysis. Furthermore, I took notes and made observations during each session. I used grounded theory coding in my analysis. This approach expands on the text for analysis as it “describes, analyses and explains the meaning of the original text” (Flick 2013: 11). Grounded theory coding provides a richer, more detailed analysis and interpretation, and it is similar to interpretivism in its phenomenological approach to research (Flick 2013: 11). The text in question are the transcriptions from each focus group discussion and individual interview, as well as the notes I took during each interview and discussion. The process of analysing the data began after my first individual interview. My focus group discussions and individual interviews consisted of participants who grew

up in Zimbabwe or South Africa, living in Harare, Johannesburg or Cape Town. One participant is a Lesotho national (who grew up and lives in Johannesburg), and another participant is of Kenyan and Nigerian heritage (who was born in Durban and grew up in Johannesburg). The age range is 18 to 27, a range large enough to have different experiences and perspectives. The experiences of an 18 year-old in their first year of university is potentially different from those of a 25 year-old who finished high school seven years before. There were three male participants, and nine female participants. This was not deliberate: I found more female participants who fitted the selection criteria and were interested and available to be part of the focus group discussions. Two focus groups consisted of only South African participants. The other two focus groups had a mix of Zimbabwean, Mosotho and South African participants. The participants came from a range of cultural backgrounds: one participant was Tswana, three participants were Shona, five participants were Xhosa, one participant was Pedi, one participant was Sotho, and one participant was a South African of Nigerian and Kenyan heritage. After each interview, I compared and contrasted the responses, themes and categories that participants contributed in their responses.

I have taken great care to consider potential issues concerning the validity and limitations of my research, the selection criteria of my research participants, and the theoretical discussions of the major themes connecting these participants to the film. My research question focuses on how a particular part of the larger black African population reacted to and made sense of *Black Panther*. My research interest is on how young, black, middle class urban Africans consume and interpret the media around them, and how this process of receiving and decoding media messages influences their perspectives and identity formation. In Harare, Johannesburg and Cape Town, it can be argued that this group is a minority in the larger population. As such, my research does not include the experiences of black, young urban Africans who come from a poor, working class background. A qualitative research study is by nature very specific and exploratory. The subject population in such a research design is too small and specific to be representative of a larger population, and too small to make general claims about a particular phenomenon. Therefore, the limitation of my research project is characteristic of the nature of qualitative research. I chose to conduct small focus groups in order to ensure that each participant had enough time to speak. However, I do acknowledge that the size of the focus groups is a potential limitation, because fewer participants means there may be fewer talking points. I had to have a mix of both men and women. Instead of drawing participants from one city, I chose both Johannesburg and Harare, providing different experiences and perspectives based on the city and country of origin for participants.

The research design to be used in the collection, analysis and presentation of data is one I have carefully considered. An interpretivist philosophical approach works best for a reception study, as its emphasis is on the study of hidden meanings. A qualitative research design is also most suitable for this same reason. Its focus on ethnography and the influence of social contexts are important criteria in selecting a research design. My chosen research methods (focus group discussions and individual interviews) reflect this ethnographic approach by putting the spotlight on audience responses and the social processes they experience in the interpretation of media texts and the construction of meaning, both on a collective and individual level. Focus groups best replicate the social dynamics at play, and individual interviews are a space to get in-depth responses from participants. Having conducted the necessary data following the processes of this methodology, the next two chapters shift to the presentation of research findings based on a thorough analysis of the transcriptions and notes.

Chapter Four: Findings

The previous chapter established the research methodology and data collection process. This chapter presents my research findings after analysing the collected data. These processes are guided by the thematic areas outlined in the literature review and the research design in the methodology chapter. The conceptual framework outlined in Chapter Two is the theoretical base and lens for making sense of this data, and the qualitative, interpretivist approach informs the approach to data analysis. It focuses on the discussions in both the focus groups and individual interviews, and how participant responses are connected to the four conceptual areas of modernity/coloniality, identity and representation, Africanity and urban life.

I organised my findings based on a review of the transcriptions, notes and observations from the focus groups and individual interviews. I noticed certain topics emerging across the board. I categorised these topics into broader themes and sub-categories. The themes stand as overarching umbrella topics, with sub-categories being more specific elements and points of discussion. The three themes that emerged are language, black African state of being, and representation. The sub-categories for language are: pop culture, personal understandings of blackness and African traditions versus urban experiences. The sub-categories for representation are: the influence of hype, the relationship between black Africa and black America, specifically black American understandings of African identity, identity, gender and Eurocentrism. The sub-categories for black African state of being are encounters with whiteness and Eurocentrism, Wakanda as a utopia, modernity and the colonial project and black African independence and power. Though unique and separated from each other, the themes are interconnected and related to each other in a way that presents a “meaningful whole (Rantala and Hellstrom 2001: 89).” The findings of the research study are based on the three themes and how together, they present a comprehensive understanding of the participant responses and how these responses connect to media and social theories and concepts. This chapter focuses on two themes, language and representation. Chapter Five focuses exclusively on black African state of being.

In analysing the responses of participants, I noted their perspective on the film. *Black Panther* is centred around an African superhero in a fictional African kingdom, but its intended audience was not African. As a film produced, filmed and directed in America, it is arguable that its primary audience was Americans – as are most Hollywood blockbusters. This is something that my participants were aware of and it influenced their reception of the film. Even in instances where

there was a positive response, the participants could not fully embrace the film and its themes: *Black Panther* tried to ‘look’ and ‘sound’ African, but because it was not a film made with Africans in mind, it is not a film they could fully claim. Using the concept of Africanity and the two definitions of cultural identity, although there are similarities and shared cultural experiences between the participants and the producers, director and actors in the film (due to a shared history of racial oppression and discrimination), there is not enough contact and cross-cultural sharing for there to be a golden thread or shared consciousness. My participants felt this sense of ‘lack’, that something was missing, when watching the film.

Theme One: Language

A prominent theme in the discussions is the issue of language. The discussion centred on the language and accents in *Black Panther*, but also touched on language and blackness. All of the participants spoke English and at least one indigenous African language. Seven of the participants were South African, and five of these participants are isiXhosa mother tongue speakers, the other two being Tswana mother tongue speakers. Three participants were Zimbabwean and have Shona as their mother tongue, one participant was a Lesotho national and has Sotho as a mother tongue. One participant did not claim an African language as their mother tongue, but said they were sufficiently skilled in isiXhosa and Kikuyu to hold a conversation. Two South African participants spoke more than one Nguni language. There was a mix of different languages and linguistic backgrounds in each focus group.

Black Panther uses isiXhosa as the indigenous language of Wakanda, and this choice elicited a strong reaction from participants during the discussions. The issue of language was two-fold. The first was the use of isiXhosa itself. There were two different reactions to this in the discussions. The first reaction was that of appreciation. The isiXhosa participants enjoyed the fact that *Black Panther* chose isiXhosa, because they could understand. They enjoyed being able to understand the conversations in isiXhosa and appreciated the effort made to include an actual African language. Their knowledge of and close relationship to the language could explain why they had such a positive response to its use in the film. The use of isiXhosa immersed them in the world of Wakanda because it was something they could relate to in their own lives. One participant stated that “a part of me really was happy, like when I was able to identify some of the languages that they spoke. There were some things I understood without subtitles, and I admit it gave me a warm fuzzy feeling.” Another also said she enjoyed the inside isiXhosa jokes and hearing her language in a

blockbuster film – something that she had not experienced before. It created an air of familiarity and made a fictional, futuristic kingdom closer to home. Using the aspect of invisibility from the concept of coloniality, the isiXhosa in the film made an African language visible on a global stage. Its use in the film made an important aspect of the participants' lives and cultures visible, reflecting Mafeje's definition of Africanity as "an assertion of an identity that has been denied (2011: 37)."

Another discussion on language took issue with the film's use of English. Although isiXhosa was used in *Black Panther*, the film was predominantly in English. The issue was the position and significance of the language in a film about an African kingdom that was never colonised. As one participant explained: "if this (Wakanda) is supposed to be an African country that was never colonized and all that, I felt that the first inconsistency was just that it was so Westernised." I probed this issue when I asked the participants how they would have responded if *Black Panther* had next to no English, and some participants said they would have loved it had the film gone that route. They argued that French and German films use subtitles so audiences can understand, and that the producers of the film could have created a language unique to the *Black Panther* world, as seen with franchises such as *Star Trek* (which created Klingon) and *Lord of the Rings* (which created Elvish). Another participant stated that the use of English: "was anti-climatic": "based on how people were hyping it because they brought it so close to home that when I watched it I expected that every other person would be speaking an African language. But it was like oh okay, it's still an American production." There was agreement that the use of English confirms that *Black Panther* was primarily intended for an English-speaking audience: "With certain movies that are essentially in another country or whatever, or meant to represent a different culture, they have to stick to English essentially so that they actually capture the entire audience." These responses indicate that the film's use of English is a kind of intrusion into what was meant to be a black African experience. English here stands as a symbol of Western hegemony, and for the participants, it did not make sense for an African kingdom that had never lived or suffered under Western hegemony and the Eurocentric gaze used a Western language so frequently. In the same way that *Black Panther's* use of isiXhosa made the participants feel seen and created a sense of familiarity between them and the film, the use of English pulled them out of that sense of familiarity. It served as a reminder of the Eurocentric gaze and prioritisation of English that they live with. Their negative reaction to the film's use of English indicates a sense of frustration. Participants repeatedly said that they wanted the film "to do more." *Black Panther* was not as radical or 'African' as they had hoped it would be.

What is interesting to note about this discussion on language was that the participants spoke at length about their experiences with language in an urban setting. At some time in their lives, the participants experienced a sense of shame and inferiority when it came to language. The politics of language were different for young black Africans who grew up in urban environments that were multi-lingual but still dominated by one or two languages. For the participants from Johannesburg, not being able to speak Zulu led to instances when they felt ostracised and judged as 'less black'. A participant gave the example of taxi ranks in Johannesburg: "If the person is Tswana, even in a taxi rank, if you ask a Zulu taxi driver like, '*Ea kae taxi e?*' They're like "What are you saying?" Some said they have been shamed for speaking English in public spaces such as malls, labelled as 'coconuts' because they chose English over an indigenous language, and another participant stated that she felt ostracised from other black students in high school because she could not speak isiZulu. As she explained: "So it wasn't that I wasn't black enough. I suppose I just wasn't the right kind of black that they wanted. For the fact that I just couldn't speak Zulu to them, I was immediately ostracised." This sense of shame and inferiority is linked to Ndlovu-Gatsheni's concept of 'lack'. For these participants, language is an identity marker and a medium for creating social connections and belonging. It connects them to their peers, wider society, and the media they consume. Not being able to speak a particular language, or choosing to speak English, separated them from other black Africans. As one participant explained, "language is used as such a measure for blackness." The insinuation then is that these participants are seen as, and have felt, less than black. They 'lacked' an element of blackness to make them feel like they truly belonged.

The larger discussion on language takes on a new dimension in light of this sense of 'lack'. Although the participants felt a sense of 'lack' because of their relationship with English and indigenous languages, they respond to *Black Panther's* use of language in the same way that other black Africans responded to them in interactions. An explanation for this could be found using Hall's concept of similarity and difference in cultural identity (1989: 69-70), as well the question of authenticity in Africanity. Hall's argument that difference is just as significant as a shared historical experience can explain the participants' negative reaction to *Black Panther's* use of English. Although the participants experienced being different within their black African cultural identity, they are still black Africans. This means that though they have been judged by other black Africans for their use of English (and some indigenous languages in certain contexts), that does not make their response to the film's use of English contradictory.

Having grown up in social and educational spaces that encouraged or demanded the use of English,

they are sensitive to the language's presence and power at the expense of indigenous languages. A participant gave an example of how his primary school banned the speaking of Shona outside of Shona language classes. "As a kid, my whole world was English. We (the Shona students) were getting punished for being who we are." For another, moving from primary school in Cape Town to high school in Port Elizabeth was challenging because she could not speak or read isiXhosa. "From primary school to high school, English is all I've ever learnt. It was a weird experience, identifying as black when you can't read isiXhosa, you can't speak isiXhosa and you're trying to convince people that 'I am Xhosa'." Furthermore, taking Mafeje's argument that Africanity is a way to express an African identity silenced by Eurocentrism and European imperial expansion into Africa, then how that identity is expressed is important. For the participants, having that identity expressed in English made the film feel less 'authentic'. Although there is the counter-argument that an untouched, pristine African identity is not realistic (Mazrui 2005: 71), this does not hold weight in the context of Wakanda. The participants, having grown up in environments created as a result of colonial conquest are different from the inhabitants of Wakanda. Wakanda, never colonised, never came under the control of Eurocentrism. It was out of place to hear so much English in a place which has supposedly never been influenced by it.

What was particularly interesting to me was an idea put forward in a discussion that the film create its own 'Wakanda' language. The insinuation is that Wakanda, a fictional African country, should not use a real African language because that language does not 'belong' in that identity. The language already has its own speakers, heritage and culture that Wakanda cannot replicate or stand in place of. A further insinuation is that the use of English in *Black Panther* implies that there is a continued Western gaze and Western audience in mind for the film. This means that the world of Wakanda was created with a non-African audience mind, and English was used to make it easier for a primarily Western audience. The participants felt that not enough effort had been made to build the world of Wakanda and make it as 'authentic' and unique as possible. It boiled down to a question of effort: "*Marvel* has the power, has the influence, has the brand to do that. It has so much support." The prominent use of English, even in scenes exclusively set in Wakanda and dialogue between Wakandans, made the participants feel that the dominance and prioritisation of English – a reality they live with on a daily basis – continued in a film meant to subvert that domination.

A separate discussion on language focused on the accents in the film. There was dissatisfaction with how the actors spoke both isiXhosa and English. One participant explained:

It was the way they spoke isiXhosa that bothered me, mainly because actors and actresses

do practise speaking languages. They are very good at doing accents other than those of African countries, and I feel like because they were black actors and actresses, expectations were high and they could have met those expectations, especially because a lot of them go on about being from the motherland. So you'd expect someone to put in more effort.

Another participant stated that she felt the actors could have spent more time on improving their accents. "I'm not Xhosa but like woah, some of it (pronunciation) was offside." She compared the accents of the black actors in the film, and that of Andy Serkis who portrayed Ulysses Klaauw, an antagonist in the film and one of the film's two white characters. "That white guy, his accent was better. Way before in the beginning of the film when he spoke, I said 'ah, is this guy from South Africa?' and I got that accent really quickly, whereas a lot of the accents that the black actors were using were kind of stereotypical black accents." Participants also failed to distinguish any regional or linguistic differences in the accents, something that they can do when speaking to other black Africans. The accent in *Black Panther* was a homogenous accent, one that didn't 'belong' to any African country or community. It was a stand-in for a general African accent: "I can literally tell if I can hear a South African person speaking and they have a deep vernac (vernacular) accent. I can tell 'this is a Zulu person', 'this is a Nigerian person', but we couldn't differentiate (the accents in *Black Panther*). It was just a stereotypical black, well African accent." Another participant added that he could tell where people in Zimbabwe grew up based on their accents. "From the first word that we (Zimbabweans) say to each other, we can literally tell each other apart, that we grew up completely different. It's now accents, the way we speak." None of the participants felt they spoke in that accent, neither did they know anyone who did. One participant said: "their African accents were just off. I think we speak normally, like everyone else really." 'Normally' here includes the pronunciation of certain words and pace of speaking that participants could not identify with. The stereotypical African accent then is a product of Hollywood and Western perspectives of Africa that don't match the lived realities of my participants. The assumptions of the stereotypical African accent are that Africans across the continent all speak English in the same manner regardless of education, class, and contact with English, and secondly that a single African accent in itself exists.

A potential explanation for this reaction to the accents in the film is through their urban experience and upbringing. Their urban upbringing meant that they grew up hearing a range of accents and languages. In addition, their educational background and media consumption influenced their own accents. The participants have what is referred to as a 'white' accent (in a derogatory way), one associated with the black urban middle-class. The participants all had experiences of being called a

‘coconut’ or ‘less black’ because of their accents (Mckinney 2007: 17). Outside of this urban middle-class context, they were not ‘black enough’ because of their accents. One participant said that the way he speaks Shona outside his immediate family and circle of friends often marks him out as middle-class. He was called a *musalala* and treated as ‘less than’ black because he could not speak Shona to their standards, and spoke it in a ‘white accent’. Some participants said that their accent was policed in a different way. For one, moving from government to private school in Harare, the way he spoke was different from his classmates who had been in the private school system. He had to learn to speak using a particular accent in order to fit in, but that would put him at odds with his friends from his former government school. “I was definitely teased about it. ‘You’re now at a private school you know, it’s not a government school’.” For another participant, her accent was influenced by her love for Disney Channel shows, and she was labelled as a ‘coconut’ by her classmates because of what they perceived to be an Americanised accent. “When I was trying to, you know, to have a social life, that was literally impossible because every time I would try to interact with people – even when I’d speak Xhosa, they’d be like ‘something is wrong with this one’.”

Having these experiences of being labelled as ‘less than black’ because of the way they spoke, the participants are sensitive to the role of accents in creating an identity. They grew up in urban environments home to a range of different accents and languages, and had more access to different kinds of media, both locally produced and Hollywood imports. Their discussion of the accents in *Black Panther* is informed by these experiences. English was the primary language of the media they consumed, specifically television and film. It was American media products that they consumed in their childhoods and adolescents. Examples include the Disney Channel, *High School Musical*, *That’s so Raven*, *Totally Spies*, *Dragonball Z* and MTV, “everything I couldn’t relate to.” Other participants supported this sentiment: “Even on the cartoons, it’s white people.” Having had such an English-centric media experience, the discussion on language points to an expectation that *Black Panther* would be different. It would be different because of its framing as a black African superhero film, a departure from Eurocentric standards in popular culture texts. The film’s use of English, and its use of a particular stereotypical African accent, garnered negative responses during the discussions because they reinforced a Western perspective and status quo instead of subverting it. *Black Panther’s* use of isiXhosa, although appreciated, did not go far enough to centre the language and therefore promote the narrative of black pride and liberation.

Furthermore, the participants’ experiences of feeling ‘less than black’ influenced their reading of

the film, coupled with their previous media consumption. Given that they had experienced an alienation from other black people because they did not fit a particular mould of blackness (due to their accents and their proficiency in an African language), they did not expect to feel a sense of difference when watching *Black Panther*. The use of English reminded them of their own English-centred lives and experiences. The never-colonised Wakanda was meant to be an escape from this reality. Instead, it perpetuated it and when there were instances of the film making effort to ‘call in’ the participants through the use of isiXhosa, the efforts were hampered by a stereotypical manner of speaking that did not reflect the participants’ way of speaking. A world meant to be free from Eurocentric and colonial ideals still had these ideals filtering through it.

Representation

A second theme that came up in the discussions is representation. The discussions on representation focused on the Hollywood tradition of Africa and Africans, which elicited a range of responses from participants. The main discussion was on the film’s cast itself. For these participants, the majority black cast motivated them to watch *Black Panther*. By having a largely black cast, the participants felt that blackness was central to the film, and not just an afterthought. Having grown up watching media that featured largely white casts with a handful of black characters, *Black Panther* was different. One participant stated that it was “refreshing to see black representation” and that he felt a sense of pride when watching the film. For another, *Black Panther* was the first superhero movie she could relate to because of the largely black cast: “There was just this sense of like, this film was made for a black kid who wants to be a superhero. And so you felt you weren’t just an afterthought as an audience, you were the core audience, and that almost never happens.” Another, who is not a fan of superhero or comic book films, was drawn in by the casting and marketing of *Black Panther*. This discussion on the film’s black cast focuses on the fantasy/superhero element of the film. Not only did participants get to watch a film with a largely black cast, they watched a film that put this black cast in a superhero, Afrofuturistic world. The representation of blackness in *Black Panther* created space for imagining a different kind of black experience, presenting a ‘what if’ question that drew in the participants. This is supported by the participants who are not fans of superhero films. It was the positioning of a largely black cast in a superhero world, and having the black characters as the superheroes themselves, that attracted the participants whether they were fans of superhero films or not.

A second discussion focused on the film’s depiction of interactions between the characters. The

participants could relate to the characters in the film because their actions and interactions mirrored their experiences and cultural contexts. One participant stated that “it was small things and again, it goes back to being able to feel represented and have a sense of recognition. So like, just small things like seeing a grandma who looks like your grandma.” She also spoke about how the characters reacted to T’Challa’s apparent death in his fight with Killmonger, and how the reactions from Shuri and Ramonda reminded her of how black Africans grieve and express sorrow. Another participant also stated that she liked the incorporation of ancestry in scenes between T’Challa and his deceased father, T’Chaka, adding an element of African spirituality and ancestral connections. This suggests a level of intimacy and closeness between the film and these participants. Using Hall’s definition of representation as a “production of meaning through language (1997: 2)”, seeing elements of their daily lives, experiences and homes represented made the film feel closer to home. Despite *Black Panther* taking place in a fictional African kingdom, Wakanda is still a place that the participants could belong to, identify with, and be proud of.

The discussion also included the film’s visual elements and aesthetics. The participants enjoyed the inclusion of elements from African cultures, and *Black Panther*’s visuals were reminiscent of African geographic locations even though the film was not shot in Africa itself. These elements made *Black Panther* feel more ‘authentic’ and closer to home. One participant spoke about her reaction to seeing Sotho culture in the film: “I’ve never seen my culture represented on the screen that way, in such a positive light. I saw characters wearing a traditional Sotho blanket. I was so excited by that. So it was really nice to see that positivity portrayed.” Another commented on the importance of the incorporation of African clothing and attire: “it (the clothes) just really signalled, ‘this is us. This is our culture’. So for me, that was the biggest dream.” Another participant also enjoyed the clothing in the film, stating that “the choice of style was so, quite quintessentially African and I think that, for me, was really compelling.” In short, there was agreement that it was nice to see a range of different cultures and attires incorporated in the film: “it was good to not see New York City, to not see Los Angeles, to not see whatever.” Some participants were drawn in by familiar geographies: for example, a scene in the film where T’Challa and Killmonger fought by a waterfall was reminiscent of the landscape in Lesotho, specifically the mountains and waterfalls.

This discussion on the film’s representation of African culture and African landscapes could be analysed using the concept of Africanity. The discussion of this representation focused on how participants found visual aspects of the film ‘authentic’, and in line with their own African lives and experiences. The golden thread connects the participants and the film, with the fashion, geography

and different cultures represented in the film symbolising the shared experiences that form the basis for a shared consciousness (Lamola 2016: 54). Representation thus acts as a medium for the concept of Africanity, and an expression of this shared consciousness. This is what drew the participants in and explains their positive reaction to the film's aesthetics. *Black Panther* appealed to them because the film's visuals and scenery, black cast, and its setting in Africa were an expression and affirmation of a common heritage and consciousness that had not previously been seen on the 'big screen'. The elements of style, sound and tradition are important because they brought the world of *Black Panther* to life. Their inclusion indicated an attention to detail: the participants felt that there was a genuine attempt to make Wakanda look and feel like a real African country and society.

This is especially relevant given the media consumption history of the participants. All the participants stated that the television programmes and films they watched growing up had little to no representation of blackness and Africans. They did not feel represented in these media, and with the exception of South African soap operas and Nollywood films, they did not see any of their experiences as young black Africans represented on the screen. As one explained, "It's so crazy how those things (the media they watched), all those shows only had one black kid ever." Another participant described the media he watched as a child: "Most of the entertainment we were getting was DSTV, which was supposed to be African, right, but it was broadcasting things produced outside of Africa." Yet another stated that she "didn't really see much of how black people are, should be living, anything of that nature I don't think there was anything that I took from that." Using Nichols' concept of identity subjects and identity objects in representation (1981: 34,38), the media participants grew up watching was created neither for them nor about them. The participants' reacted positively to *Black Panther's* representation of daily black life because they were both subject and object of representation.

The black representation was a big part of the film's marketing, and it drove the hype surrounding the film's release. According to Vasterman, hype is as a form of promotional publicity that sparks a craze and intense fascination in a specific area (2005: 511). The participants saw the conversations about the film on social media platforms, specifically Instagram and Twitter. They saw pictures of people who went to watch the film in the cinemas, wearing traditional African attire and fabrics. For these participants, this would not have happened were it not for the black representation in the film. One participant stated that *Black Panther* "seemed like a celebration beyond the cinema experience. To be able to go there, dressed up in your finest African threads, I personally feel like I missed out on that era." The hype about *Black Panther* on Twitter and Facebook increased the desire of some

to watch the film: “I saw all these people going to the cinema all dressed up. I was like, okay! This is everywhere!”

The hype surrounding the film, created by the marketing, inspired viewers to perform their identity by wearing clothes associated with African identity, such as dashikis, African print and *shweshwe*³ fabric. One participant stated that “I don’t think they (the producers) got the people that they got watching it, from their marketing. I think it was us, the public. You see people dressed up for the viewings. And that, for me, was very indicative of how special that moment was, and why I wanted to see it.” Seeing these cinema-goers’ experiences on social media in turn made the participants want to watch the film even more. As one participant said: “I just needed to understand exactly, was it that great?”

Seeing the photos of other black people wearing their traditional attire and posing in front of the film’s poster influenced the participants’ desire to watch the film, and it also created an air of expectation about how *Black Panther* would represent black Africans. Just as the producers of *Black Panther* communicated their interpretations of blackness through the film, so did the audience members who shared their cinematic experience on social media communicate their interpretation of and response to the film. It can then be argued that the film’s representation of African blackness and its prominence in the film’s marketing before and after its release influenced the desire to watch the film and experience what that black representation would be like. This desire to watch the film can then be seen as a group activity tied to the dynamics of group identities. Using the prototype theory (Hogg 2006: 36), belonging to a group is judged by an individual’s similarity or difference from a prototype identity. In the case of *Black Panther*, the hype around the film carried an expectation for young black Africans: “the perception that it had was just, you are a failure as a black person if you don’t go watch this. That’s just how extreme the hype was.” The desire to watch the film was partly fuelled by a desire to belong to a group and be involved in a group activity. Having gone through a period when they felt ‘less than’ black, they felt an uncertainty about their black identity. They wanted to belong to a collective black identity that was being reclaimed and celebrated in public cultural texts such as *Black Panther*. By watching it they could have a connection to the group identity and be part of a larger celebration of this identity.

Another discussion was the film’s representation of black women. There was a largely positive

3 Shweshwe is a dyed cotton fabric used for traditional clothing in South Africa. It is worn by newly married Xhosa women.

response to the portrayal of women in the film, particularly from the female participants. One noted that “it was cool that women had such a strong role in the society.” Another said she loved the character of Okoye, the leader of the all-female royal bodyguards. Yet another stated that Shuri was her favourite character because she represents the ideal of young, black modern female. “She was very African and rooted in her culture, but she’s also very modern. She had energy in her, she wanted some sort of change. She wasn’t afraid to go make it happen. In her essence, she’s an ordinary, everyday black girl.” Other participants agreed, describing Shuri as “effortlessly cool.” The different ways she styled her hair and the *gqom*⁴ music she listened to as she worked in her lab were aspects of her character that they could relate to and felt were an accurate way of representing what a young black urban woman living in a post-Independence African city could listen to and wear: “these are all things that we could relate to.” But her use of ‘modern’ to describe Shuri requires further examination, especially considering the duality of modernity/coloniality. There are two possible interpretations of this description. The first is that ‘modern’ is synonymous with urban, contemporary living, a lifestyle and way of being different from that of previous African generations. By describing Shuri as ‘modern’, Shuri is placed in relation to herself and her experiences in a post-apartheid South Africa. As a young, mobile and urban African woman growing up and living in post-apartheid Johannesburg, one participant sees aspects of this identity represented in Shuri. She noted that “she (Shuri) was me, and I was her.” In this interpretation, Shuri represented a post-Independence young black feminine identity.

The second interpretation is that ‘modern’ refers to Shuri’s expertise in science and technology. Shuri has her own laboratory and is responsible for creating and upgrading T’Challa’s Black Panther suit. She also created or maintained the technological advancements of Wakanda, including the weapons and transportation system. Shuri is the only character in the film that is strongly connected to science and technology. Her intelligence and technological know-how makes her ‘modern’, an argument further supported by participants only referring to Shuri as ‘modern’. The third interpretation is based on how Shuri relates to the other characters in *Black Panther*. As with the first interpretation, Shuri represents a particular kind of urban femininity in the way she engages with other characters, specifically T’Challa, her mother, and the CIA Agent Evan Ross. Instead of being a stereotypical, traditional ideal of black African womanhood that is passive and subservient, Shuri demonstrates agency, confidence and stubbornness. In her interactions with T’Challa, Shuri is sarcastic and doesn’t cede her power to her brother the king. She gives him the middle finger and openly mocks him. Shuri calls Evan Ross a “coloniser”, in one of the most memorable and popular

⁴gqom is a genre of South African music popular with black South African youth.

quotes from the film. She isn't nervous and doesn't feel inferior when she comes face-to-face with a symbol of Eurocentrism. Lastly, Shuri actively gets involved in the fight against Killmonger. The description of Shuri as 'modern' could then mean that she represents an independent, strong-willed and self-assured young woman, an ideal that is a departure from previous representations of African women as passive characters who don't contribute to a story's plot.

However, the discussion on the representation in *Black Panther* was not all positive. It also included a discussion on a perceived homogenisation of African culture. *Black Panther's* mixing of different cultures and traditions was deemed not a real reflection of African cultural diversity. Cultures and languages that would not have interactions existed side-by-side in Wakanda, and this made the participants feel that there was not enough attention to detail in the cultural representation. One participant expressed frustration at the way the film mixed together different languages, clothes and attire. "I thought it was weird that they were speaking, they spoke like a bit of Xhosa sometimes, a bit of Swahili or something else but it was a very, in a very inconsistent way that almost seemed lazy to me." Another participant also noted the inconsistency in the representation of African cultures. The film was trying to represent all of Africa in a single (fictional) kingdom, which leads to homogenisation. "I looked at the traditional wear they wore several times. So they would mix Sotho, like blankets with like, attires from other cultures. And then it just didn't mix, it just didn't really mix. I was just like, 'you (the *film's* producers and director) really watered down a lot of cultures into one big – as if Africa is one big country and then we were just supposed to be grateful'." In the film, one of the Wakanda tribes whose attire was modelled after Sotho culture practices scarification, a practice that baSotho do not follow. "So sometimes it's that essentialisation of Africa, where it's like 'anything will do. Slap some beads on them. Put a blanket on them. Put some shit on their face'."

At first, this discussion on representation of African cultures and identity presents two different interpretations. However, that is not entirely accurate. An explanation can be that for the participants who took issue with the film's representation, the question is perspective and intention. They had an initial positive response to the elements of African cultures included in the film because it was exciting and unexpected. These were small touches that they could relate to in a way that brought the film and its plot closer to home, and they appreciated that because it signalled effort on the part of the producers and directors. Using the model of representation outlined in Chapter Two, the film's representation acted as a medium to connect the producers to the participants (Nichols 1981: 26). In the moments when the participants had a positive response to the

representation of African cultures, they agreed with and affirmed the perspective that the producers presented in the film. However, this agreement and affirmation was only for parts of the film's representation, not its entirety. What was also interesting to note is that the critical interpretation of *Black Panther*'s handling of African cultures came only some time after the participants watched the film. After having time to reflect on the film, the participants commented that they started to interpret the representation differently. The focus shifted from small moments that they enjoyed to patterns and inconsistencies. They began to have a different, oppositional reading of the film, challenging its ideological position. The participants interpreted Wakanda as a potential stand-in for Africa, a single country meant to represent a whole continent. Instead of being culturally and regionally specific, *Black Panther* mixed different cultures and elements in ways that were not 'true' or believable for the participants. They could not relate to those aspects.

A potential explanation for why these participants had such a critical interpretation of these aspects is linked to the film's marketing and online hype. *Black Panther*'s marketing campaign focused on the film's black cast and Wakanda's setting as an African country that was never colonised. *Black Panther* was not just marketed as the first black Marvel superhero film, it was billed as the first superhero film with a black, African superhero and the first superhero film set in an African country, albeit fictional. That audiences went to the film dressed in African traditional clothing only enhanced the film's connection to Africa and as a result, the participants went into watching the film with certain expectations as to how *Black Panther* would represent black African culture. Furthermore, because the film was directed by a black American man, Ryan Coogler, there was also an expectation that the film would do a better job at this representation than a film on the same subject directed by a white director. This expectation is connected to the Hollywood representation of Africans, a representation that had been created and perpetuated by white, non-African directors (Spencer 2014: 26, Steinbock-Pratt 2009: 214). A black director would present an unbiased portrayal of Africa because as part of the African diaspora, they would have a better understanding of how to represent the nuances of black identity. The participants expected *Black Panther* to break away from a particular "regime of representation" (Hall 1989: 71). However, these assumptions and expectations were not met. When the participants saw different cultures mixed together in an inconsistent manner, they saw a lack of effort. They were disappointed because the promise of African representation in *Black Panther* did not match the reality of what they saw on the screen.

Language and representation are two of three categories and themes that were prominent in the focus group discussions and individual interviews. Though connected, these categories are separate

in terms of the responses from participants, the theory used to analyse the responses and the connection to the film itself. The different responses and interpretations of these categories by the participants present an interesting set of data and open up different explanations and conclusions. Though there are a range of both positive and negative responses from participants, they do not necessarily contradict each other. In fact, these different responses highlight that interpretations of media texts is a process influenced and informed by sociocultural background, media consumption habits and personal experiences (Creswell 2008: 8, Noy 2008: 330). The participants, their readings indicate both an affirmation and critique of *Black Panther*. This shows that similar socio-economic backgrounds and education does not lead to group consensus, even when similar themes and topics were raised in the discussions (Brown and Capozza 2006: 6).

Chapter Five: Findings

The previous chapter analysed the data and presented findings from two of the three categories that emerged, language and representation. This chapter continues the presentation of findings, focusing on the third category, the black African experience and state of being. This category was the most prominent in the focus group discussions and individual interviews and covers sub-categories including gender encounters with whiteness and Eurocentrism, Wakanda as a utopia, modernity and the colonial project and black African independence and power and the relationship between black Africa and black America.

Black African state of being

The discussion on black African pride and heritage focused mainly on the participants' experiences with their own black African identity. When it came to their experiences of being black and their personal navigation of their black identity, there was a range of responses. These responses reflected the concept of certainty and uncertainty when it comes to individual identity (Brown and Capozza 2006: 5, Hogg 2006: 36). The more 'certain' a participant was, the more comfortable they felt with their blackness and in their relations with other black Africans. In the same vein, the more 'uncertain' a participant was, the more they struggled with their black African identity and had more difficulty connecting to other young black Africans. This certainty/uncertainty influenced the discussion points that arose. For participants with certainty, having knowledge of customs and traditional rites connects them to the collective African identity. They feel part of the group because they know and understand the group's knowledge systems. Not only that, they contribute by participating in these practices. One participant stated that he had never really thought about his blackness because he had not struggled with it: "I've always thought of myself as black black, I'm very comfortable with being black. I think my identity is really informed by me being like, Shona and black." Another participant also stated that she was comfortable with her blackness, and was especially comfortable with her African identity. She has a lot of knowledge and information about her family and Xhosa cultural practices: "When it comes to things that need to be done I know what my role is as the first born (of her family) who's a daughter." Another one said that she was "very comfortable" in her blackness, and was raised by "very strong black people who were very much rooted in their culture." On a personal level, this knowledge affirms the participants' position in their families, ethnic group and country. They can 'claim' an African identity because they have access to an indigenous knowledge system and actively participate in its production and

reproduction.

For participants with less certainty, the discussion was on how a lack of this knowledge system isolated them from other black Africans, and in turn they struggled to identify with being black and African. One participant stated that “growing up we (his family, his social circles) weren’t really big on culture, a lot of cultural things. I can’t really say I know exactly what the Shona wear for particular events and stuff.” Another questioned identifying as Tswana and as African when she did not know much about her culture or heritage. “I don’t know much about ancestors or like, you know, just all of those other things. In fact, I wish I knew more about it (her culture). So in a way I feel weird about claiming an African identity because I’m not entirely sure what that is.” A participant from a blended family (made up of children from a previous marriage from one or both spouses) can consequently speak multiple languages. However, this multilingualism did not translate into in-depth knowledge about the different cultures. “I know some things, but I don’t know everything. Now, I am happy where I am. It’s been a turbulent experience but yeah, we’re here.” These responses contradict the confidence and security that others expressed about their African identity. The participants who expressed ‘uncertainty’ regarding their identity connect to Ndlovu-Gatsheni’s concept of ‘lack’ in blackness. Because these participants do not possess certain cultural knowledge and information, they feel they ‘lack’ the necessary requirements to fully belong to, and affirm, the group identity. Referring to the prototype theory of group identity (Hogg 2006: 36) and Nkrumah’s idea of an African personality (1963: 193), the participants with less certainty feel too different from the ideal black African to confidently claim that identity. They struggle or have struggled with a sense of belonging.

A sense of belonging to a group and access to its knowledge systems are important in *Black Panther* because the world of Wakanda has significant scenes centred around cultural practices and ritual. One particular scene is the crowning of T’Challa as the new Black Panther near a large waterfall. The different tribes of Wakanda witnessed and participated in the event, which included a fight as a challenge for the throne of Wakanda. This scene, in particular, sparked a major discussion, with the participants having different responses. For some, the scene was a portrayal of the power of African tradition and importance of customs in daily life and special gatherings. As one participant explained: “That fight by the waterfall, that was badass. The presentation and even before the fight and how there were clans coming, that was I feel like a proper African battle.” Another stated that he enjoyed that scene, and felt it was an accurate portrayal of an African custom. The positive responses to the scene was appreciated for the *Black Panther*’s producers’

effort to capture and represent the procedures and structures in African cultural practices. It was in these moments that Wakanda truly felt like a black African kingdom and not just a fictional black kingdom that happens to be in Africa.

However, not all the participants agreed with the addition of these cultural practices in *Black Panther*. Some took issue with the coronation scene by the waterfall, particularly the fight between T'Challa and Mbaku: "Every time we have African identity, or movies that have to deal with African people, there's always an aspect of violence, there's always an aspect of war." From this perspective, there was no need for a physical fight to determine who would be the ruler of Wakanda. Since Mbaku's challenge to the throne and ensuing fight were framed as part of the ritual of succession in Wakanda, one participant interpreted the scene as a perception of African culture as violent or having violent aspects. This position is similar to the interpretation of the fight between Killmonger and T'Challa in one of the last scenes of the film, where T'Challa kills Killmonger. "Killmonger didn't even need to die because at the end of it, T'Challa still went with what he said and agreed anyway. So they could've both just agreed while he was living." The discussion that ensued between participants probed why the disagreement between Killmonger and T'Challa had to become a civil war. They did not understand why the film could not have reached a non-violent resolution instead. For these participants, the violence was unnecessary and did not serve the overall story. In fact, it took away from the theme of black pride and power because that power was only displayed through violence. These responses indicate that the film potentially continues a tradition of cinematic representation that portrays Africa and African life as violent (Appadurai and Breckenridge 2008: 352).

From the perspective of modernity/coloniality, *Black Panther* continues a cycle of associating Africa with violence and irrationality (Maldonado-Torres 2007: 247). *Black Panther* perpetuates an idea that Africans are incapable of sharing power or reaching amicable understandings, especially since after killing Killmonger, T'Challa decided to open Wakanda's borders and engage on the international stage – something that Killmonger had been lobbying for, albeit through a global black armed revolt. This contributes to the narrative of Africa being inherently violent, down to how the continent solves conflict and disagreements.

The two different interpretations of the coronation scene and the fight between T'Challa and Killmonger branched off to another discussion on what a realistic portrayal of black African existence should actually look like. There was a split between those who believed that *Black*

Panther misrepresented African culture in terms of violence, and the participants who argued that violence is a reality of black African life and cannot be ignored. Despite *Black Panther* being marketed as a challenge to dominant stereotypes and representation of blackness in Hollywood cinema, some thought it did not break free from a one-dimensional perspective of black African existence as being violence. “That’s the only way you can depict Africa, is if you depict the war aspect, the material, you know? There’s so much more to ‘African-ness’ and our history than it is that we had to fight to be African.” For others, the film did not need to challenge the violence in black African existence because that would not have been an accurate representation. Its inclusion in *Black Panther* made the film and the struggles the characters faced more realistic. It was argued that the fight scenes and power struggles portrayed in the film are not far off from African history. “As a continent, as Black people, all we really know is colonisation, wars and fighting for our resources, fighting to keep our culture.” Another participant took a different tack, arguing that the violence and fighting were necessary because *Black Panther* is an action film. He also stated that other films in the Marvel Cinematic Universe also had fight scenes, and that ultimately the intention is “they (the characters in the film) had an ideology that they wanted to maintain and they were fighting to maintain that ideology.” The fight between T’Challa and M’Baku (as well as the fight between T’Challa and Killmonger by that same waterfall in a later scene) can be interpreted as a larger ideological contest. T’Challa is fighting to maintain his family’s royal position and honour his dead father’s legacy, whereas M’Baku is fighting to disrupt the power balance in Wakanda’s ruling tribes and assert his clan’s supremacy.

It was through presenting these different perspectives that the participants engaged with the film and with each other. They tried to persuade each other to change their perspectives, and in doing so had to assert and unpack the conclusions they reached about the film. In the discussion the participants agreed that violence is a significant aspect of black African identity and existence. They also agreed that creating an identity that exists outside of this violence is difficult. The different views on the position of violence in *Black Panther* highlights the complexity of the system of representation. Meanings of the text were constructed by the viewers, they are not simply passed from producer to audience (Nichols 1981: 24). Even when all the participants share the same conceptual map and language system necessary to make sense of a text (Hall 1997: 4), they each still have the agency and power to make their own meanings from it.

The fight between T’Challa and Killmonger fits into the larger discussion about the film’s characters. The participants felt very strongly about the two main characters (T’Challa and

Killmonger), as well as the female characters in *Black Panther*. The biggest discussion focused on Killmonger, the antagonist and villain of the film. For the participants who responded positively to Killmonger, he was their favourite character in the film. The participants who liked Killmonger spoke about his philosophy and background, and how they could relate to his position as the outsider. His back story of growing up as an orphan in a violent and poor neighbourhood, and working to move out of that area and get to Wakanda, made him a complex and compelling character. The participants felt that Killmonger's pain and personal fight were more legitimate and valid compared than some of the other characters. As one participant noted: "he (Killmonger) represents a lot of what most African kids are trying to achieve. To literally just have a better life I suppose." Another found Killmonger to be "more rounded" and a "real person," a sentiment that others shared. But some did not agree with Killmonger's methods despite agreeing with his philosophy and perspective. Killmonger's story related to a common experience of coming up against cultural gatekeepers, people in the family and community who had power and did not want to share control over decision-making processes. This was interesting as one participant noted that T'Challa himself is a gatekeeper: "if we had to ask him (T'Challa), 'Why do you not want to expand?' It's not because he – it's all about "Because that's what we have. We can't allow them to come in."

From the perspective of modernity/coloniality, the response to Killmonger was interesting. Even though Killmonger is American, participants felt that his character related more to the struggles they face. As a black man living and growing up in a tough, violent neighbourhood and a country with a colonial past and racist system, Killmonger would have experienced living with coloniality, racial power structures and the cycle of violence, dislocation, and the invisibility of coloniality of being. This is why for the participants, Killmonger feels "real": his experiences and his anger reflect a black African state of being that the participants know on an intimate level. Born after Independence and the end of apartheid, the participants live with the legacy of the project of modernisation: the structures, systems and hierarchies of coloniality of being (Maldonado-Torres (2007: 243). Coloniality of being is what connects these participants to Killmonger.

But the discussion about Killmonger was not all positive. Some participants reacted negatively to his character and his actions in Wakanda. They questioned why Killmonger, a black American, felt the right to claim and rule a country he had never been to and did not know. This perceived arrogance, coupled with his aggressive behaviour, only highlighted Killmonger's lack of belonging in Wakanda. His entry into Wakanda represented a disruption of black African life by someone who

did not understand or appreciate the nuances and power relations, and did not care to learn. For one participant, Killmonger represented a negative, disruptive force to Wakanda's autonomy and history. He was ready to expose Wakanda to the world in the name of global black revolution without considering how that could affect Wakanda, its people and its cultures. "He's just like 'no we need to make sure that the world sees us' and I'm just like 'we'?" Another participant stated that she hated Killmonger. "I just felt like he was America coming to ruin everything. He didn't have to kill people. I'm like, you could have been an advisor. But you come in the first scene and you're like, I want to be the king!" For this participant, because Killmonger did not have any lived experiences of being a black African and living in Wakanda, that was not an identity that he could claim and as a result, he had no right to challenge T'Challa for the throne. "Yes he's studied it (Wakanda's history) and yes he has all these markings on his body, but he's never interacted with the culture, and he doesn't understand the motivations for why the country wanted to do that (stay hidden). He essentially comes from a Western epistemology."

This response to Killmonger as an external force distinguishes the black American from the black African. Although both groups have a shared history and common origin, they are also distinct from each other. Similar to Hall's (1989: 70) and Goldberg's (1996: 93) argument that cultural identity is created just as much out of difference as similarity, Killmonger has a shared history with Wakanda but that does not make him a Wakandan. Referring to the concept of Africanity, Killmonger is not part of the shared consciousness that connects black Africa. Being a black man and having lived under the global racial power structures of coloniality is not sufficient for Killmonger to claim a Wakandan identity. This suggests that blackness and a shared historical connection to Africa does not make one part of the African group identity. The African diaspora does have a connection to the continent (Palmer 2000: 57), and it shares with continental Africa a history of being subjected to *présence européenne*, where European imperialism represented the aspect of difference as negative and a sign of inferiority (Hall 2008: 242). However, the African diaspora, itself a diverse community, has developed its own group identity and identity markers that continental Africans do not share. A shared racial oppression and historical connection to Africa are not enough to make the African diaspora and continental Africans belong to the same group.

The discussion on T'Challa had a more unanimous interpretation, and as with their responses to Killmonger, their interpretation of the main character is based on their experiences and what T'Challa as a character symbolises. Although the participants are middle-class, they are not completely removed from other social classes. On the other hand, they felt that T'Challa lived in a

bubble of the royal family. One participant referred to T'Challa as "a spoilt brat" and completely rejected him as a representation of an African: "He didn't have a complete world view of everything. So I would say that T'Challa didn't represent African identity." Another described T'Challa as "not that stand out, the man in charge of the whole – like, I could imagine M'Baku taking over the Black Panther role." Yet another stated that "Black Panther didn't have that thing" in contrast to Killmonger. "That thing" can be interpreted as a commanding presence and assertiveness. This negative reaction to T'Challa was surprising because not only is he the main character, he is intended to be a symbol of black African pride and strength. As the Black Panther, T'Challa defends and protects his people from those who want to harm or exploit Wakanda. The participants' interpretation of T'Challa should be understood in the context of their interpretation of Killmonger. If they liked Killmonger's character because his experiences and philosophies were realistic and resembled their own, then they didn't like T'Challa because his experiences, philosophies and actions felt far removed from their realities. One participant referred to T'Challa and the other characters from Wakanda as "pampered palace kids." The insinuation is that because T'Challa grew up in Wakanda, a kingdom that had never suffered colonialism and did not have to navigate its aftermath, he would not have the same life and experiences as the participants. These participants could not connect with T'Challa because they did not have anything in common. T'Challa's backstory was too far removed from the lived experiences of the participants for there to be a real sense of identification. T'Challa is meant to represent an African identity but he has been sheltered from the struggles that black Africans face.

The discussion on these two characters reflects disagreements on power and change when it comes to black African liberation. T'Challa and Killmonger symbolise two opposing views on black liberation and Wakanda's role. This is evidenced by his hesitance in the beginning of the film to open Wakanda's borders. Killmonger's frustration at Wakanda's secrecy and desire to open Wakanda's borders, specifically in aid of black people across the world, struck a chord with one of the participants because it mirrored her own frustrations with traditionalists in her family and community. This frustration is similar to another participant's interactions with older generations. For her, being a born-free is a significant factor in these interactions: "I've realised that especially in South Africa even just with all the problems that we have I feel like, like politically, economically, all that stuff, it truly just boils down to this very thick line that separates the older generation from the younger generation." This "thick line" can be interpreted as opinions and beliefs based on experiences and social position, a line mirrored in Killmonger and T'Challa. Killmonger the outsider is the radical agitating for change, and T'Challa as a member of the elite is

the guardian of tradition.

However, not everyone was against Wakanda's isolationist position. For some, Wakanda was exercising its political autonomy and in that sense, were claiming their own liberation from an unequal global, political, and economic structure. Agreement with Wakanda's position and dislike of Killmonger can be interpreted through the realities of coloniality, specifically coloniality of knowledge and power. Indigenous knowledge systems were classified as inferior and primitive by colonial administrations, and black Africans were forced to the bottom of the ladder in the global capitalist system (Quijano 2000: 535, Memmi 1974: 123). Wakanda has one thing that these black Africans could not have: Wakanda has the power of choice. Although Wakanda could have come to the aid of black people in Africa and the diaspora, it chose to preserve and protect its cultures, technologies and riches first. Those who disagreed with Killmonger's actions and philosophies, did so because they negated Wakanda's choice. Killmonger's position as an outsider to Wakanda, who had connections to the kingdom but no lived experiences or first-hand knowledge of Wakandan life, further problematises his actions. Not only is Killmonger intent on forcing Wakanda to publicise itself to the world, he is using its technology and army to advance a personal agenda that Wakanda did not express interest in spearheading. This further demonstrates a separation between black Africa and black Americans. Some participants did not respond well to a black American imposing his perspective of blackness onto black Africans and expecting them (Wakandans) to agree.

The discussion of the film's characters and their interactions also focused on the women of *Black Panther*. The participants had a mostly positive response to the female characters, specifically mentioning Okoye, Nakia and Shuri. The film subverted the narrative of black African women as passive or secondary to men. One participant noted that "it was cool that women had such a strong role in the society." Another liked Okoye's strength and her position as the head of the all-female army. Some other comments regarding the women characters were: "I liked her [Okoye's] strength. That's one thing I was like, "Ooh, that's me. There we are." "The outstanding thing was more black female empowerment. The strongest person was not the main character. The smartest person was not the main character. Shuri, she's the one inventing everything. Okoye, she's the one who's the lead protector." *Black Panther* is a departure from a standard in superhero and action films that centre the main character/s as the most intelligent, most powerful and the driver of the story.

At first, one participant noted her enjoyment of the representation of women in the film and saw it as an example of woman empowerment. Upon reflection, she changed her mind. Instead of

subverting a narrative, she felt *Black Panther* reinforced an idea of African women always being strong and invulnerable: “So you get, they are there, they are part of the community. They are warriors. But, then you also get the fact that when he (T’Challa) was gone, there’s that whole *bekezela* (to be patient and strong, to endure), women have to be strong, women have to stand now, make their mark.” The lives of the women in Wakanda still existed in relation to men. They did not have identities or motivations removed from T’Challa, Killmonger or M’Baku. Although some liked the portrayal of Okoye, others also took issue with the positioning of women in *Black Panther*: “They had the opportunity to have women with different stories who were at the forefront of the movie, but the roles that the women played were really disappointing for me.” This interpretation speaks again to the racial and social hierarchies of coloniality. Although blackness is at the bottom of the ladder, black women especially are subject to a particular level of violence and invisibility. This is the “killability and rapeability” described by Maldonado-Torres (2007: 255). The women of Wakanda are first presented as strong and existing outside this specific matrix of violence against black women, but this is compromised for the sake of the male characters. As one participant explained, “they got their asses kicked anyway, as soon as the actual fighting started. A man, one man, destroyed the entire army.” This interpretation sees *Black Panther* challenging the gendered social relations only to an extent.

The final discussion on the film’s characters was on the inclusion and significance of its white characters. *Black Panther* had a majority black cast with two white characters in the principal cast. The first, Ulyseus Klauw, was a secondary antagonist who worked with Killmonger. The second white character, Evan Ross, was the main focus of discussion. Ulyseus Klauw was a mercenary, and he did not contribute significantly to the larger fight between T’Challa and Killmonger. On the other hand, Evan Ross was an American intelligence agent who played a pivotal role in *Black Panther*’s climatic fight scene. His significance to the film’s plot made some participants uncomfortable. They questioned the necessity of a white intelligence agent playing a pivotal role in Wakandan (and black) affairs. “Having this white person coming into Wakanda and helping them fight the enemy as well. Like, *hai*, I also didn’t like it.” Another participant agreed: “I found it slightly annoying how in the end, we also needed that White Saviour Complex. They (the film’s producers) could actually have made that character black. In fact, that character should have also be black. And then it would’ve been fine, good.” Others agreed, adding that for them having a white character play a pivotal role in the film was “annoying” and “unrealistic.” “I don’t think in any world the USA would just let a CIA agent who has got high security clearance just go off to another country to be kept there. And he (Ross) sees all of that happen and all of these amazing

technological advancements in the country and there's no explanation as to what happens afterwards, because we would then expect the US to come and invade and want to take vibranium."

This discussion on Evan Ross is in the context of the participants' experiences with whiteness and a history of white, Eurocentric presence in African affairs. Having a white character involved in the fight against Killmonger contradicts *Black Panther's* theme of black independence, symbolised in Wakanda itself. Ross' character also reminded the participants of the pervasiveness of whiteness in Africa. His presence was especially jarring because the history of whiteness in Africa is rooted in European imperial enterprise and the codification of race (Quijano 2000: 534). As one participant explained, "there's so much power given to white people as an identity and as white culture." The participants had negative experiences of growing up in Eurocentric-dominated spaces, and these experiences influenced their reaction to a white character in Wakanda. They noted that they had experienced a "white environment" from primary school to his current university programme. Another said she felt an expectation to conform to a certain standard of behaviour to be accepted by white peers, classmates and teachers. "I was often faced with a lot of like, exceptionalism, because we're still under this white gaze, you don't want people to think you're 'that kind of Black'. You want to be a '702 Black' or whatever, you know what I mean?" A participant who had attended a German school that she described as "obviously Caucasian", said that speaking indigenous languages outside of language classes was prohibited. Whiteness was also dominant in the media they consumed during childhood and adolescence. Another spoke about her first cinematic experience: "the one thing I remember from the first movie I watched in the cinema, it was all white people. That's literally all I remember." The experience was confirmed by another who described the television shows and films he watched as "white centric." The participants have repeatedly encountered and had to live with whiteness and Eurocentrism and their dominance over black African state of being, knowledge systems and social structures. When they watched *Black Panther*, they did not expect the presence and intrusion of whiteness and Eurocentrism, especially considering that Wakanda had never been colonised. Having a white American character play a significant role in the film didn't make sense. If anything, Evan Ross' presence and contribution in *Black Panther* made the film feel less revolutionary and pro-black than how it had been marketed and spoken about on social media. In fact, the participants read his inclusion as a subtle continuation of the narrative that black Africans need white, Western intervention and need to be 'saved'.

The final discussion for analysis is on the idea of Wakanda as a black African utopia. There are

different concepts of utopia based on ideological position and social traditions (Sargent 1994: 2). Levitas defines utopia as “the construction of imaginary worlds, free from the difficulties that beset us in reality (2010: 1).” Beyond a dream or imaginary world, a utopia is an ideal society to be pursued and a vision to be realised (Sargent 1994: 3, Portolano 2012: 114). A utopian ideal can arise from a sense of frustration and dissatisfaction with contemporary society, and this wish for a ‘perfect’ society can become a conviction to achieve it (Sargent 1994: 4, Levitas 2010: 1). As a kingdom that was never colonised and is highly technologically advanced thanks to vibranium, Wakanda is represented as the Africa that ‘could have been’ were it not for the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and ensuing European expansion. It is an imaginary of a ‘perfect’ Africa free from the trauma of colonisation and slavery, and thus prospered and flourished. The participants had mixed responses to this utopian ideal. Some participants took issue with the emphasis on technology as a marker of civilisation and development. For them, it was a Western perspective of what a developed Africa would look like: “I think if we (black Africans) had imagined it, it would’ve turned out differently.” Their main critique was a veneer of a utopia without any focus on social structures, the relationship between the royal family and Wakanda as a whole, and the relations between the clans. One participant saw cracks in Wakanda’s utopian ideal, especially with the other clans. “As perfect as Wakanda seems, there are still problems within the country.” Another added that an African portrayal of Wakanda “wouldn’t have been so Eurocentric.” They interpreted the world of Wakanda as a Eurocentric project of a developed and advanced Africa. In line with the concept of modernity/coloniality, Wakanda is presented as advanced and technologically superior because it followed a linear path of development and progress, focused on the importance of technology. This was a shared sentiment: “the picture of what it meant to be a ‘super country’, was this kind of white, tech, capitalist. And the kind of underlying message there, for me, is that when Africa succeeds, it will just be another one of those countries.” For the participants, this is a continuation of Eurocentric standards of modernity. The technology used in Wakanda – the flying cars, magnetic trains and hoverboards – was reminiscent of Western imaginaries of future technologies. Participants interpreted the importance of these technologies to Wakandan identity as a message that for an African country to be advanced and modern, it has to rely on Western technological inventions.

The discussion also addressed how *Black Panther* chose to represent Wakanda to the rest of the world. Although rich in vibranium and technologically advanced, Wakanda chooses to shield itself using cloaking technology. It presents itself on the international stage as a small, impoverished African country with nothing significant to contribute to global affairs or the global economy. Several participants took issue with this decision: “how it (Wakanda) was actually portrayed to the

rest of the world was as this poverty-stricken, ashy little thing. And it was just like, so that's still the perception of Africa, according to this movie, as well. It's just Wakanda that's kind of lit." That Wakanda would choose to represent itself as an 'empty', undeveloped space is a "worrying logic." She expanded: "it just shows there's a huge admission there that there's huge swathes of Africa that just, nobody gives a shit about. And that you can be a completely invisible society here, because no one is going to bother to look for you." These responses indicate that for the participants, the portrayal of Wakanda as a black African utopia comes at the expense of other African countries. Wakanda's portrayal buys into and perpetuates a stereotypical representation of Africa as a whole continent being poor and inconsequential on the global stage. For the participants, it was possible for the film to portray Wakanda as a strong, advanced nation without playing to that negative perception of Africa. Instead of subverting this perception, the film reinforced it. As black Africans, the participants have had prior experiences with being the subject of this colonial gaze, and so would be able to recognise it in the film. *Black Panther* looks at black Africa from a Western gaze, informed by Western perspectives of Africa, development and what it means to be 'modern'. As with the category of language, the blackness of the cast and the film's themes of black liberation stand in contrast with its portrayal of black African life and being. *Black Panther* falls into the trap of perpetuating a colonial, Eurocentric tradition of viewing Africa as an inferior, invisible Other.

Not every participant had a critical interpretation of Wakanda. Some enjoyed *Black Panther's* setting in a fictional African city as opposed New York, which has been featured in several films in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Another noted that "the whole veiling, even around Wakanda, gives that whole idea of possibilities of what they could create." This suggests that these participants responded positively to the Wakandan utopian ideal because it was a space to imagine and construct an alternate black African reality. This response is interesting because it is informed by the same tradition of African representation in Hollywood cinema and television as the participants who had a negative interpretation of Wakanda. Both responses confirmed that there is a history of negative, one-dimensional representation of blackness and Africans, which is informed by the media these participants grew up watching. The difference lies in how *Black Panther* stands in comparison to this history. The negative interpretation sees *Black Panther* being part of this tradition, or at the very least echoing some of its aspects. In contrast, the positive response sees *Black Panther* as being a step away from this history. These two different interpretations highlight that meaning is a negotiated process, in which individuals can reach different conclusions about the text. They also indicate that group identity and belonging does not mean that all the individuals in the group will read a media text the same way. These participants have both a group and individual

identity, and it can be argued that these two identities interact in the different interpretations of Wakanda. The group identity is evident in the participants' belief in a history of negative African representation in Hollywood cinema and popular culture. Individual identities factor in the different perspectives on whether *Black Panther* is part of this negative representation or is a step away from it.

An observation from the focus groups is that all the participants stated that the discussions changed their perception of the film, albeit in different ways. Some noted that when they began the discussion, they were somewhat indifferent about the film. By the end of the discussion, they had all switched to being very critical of *Black Panther* and said that watching it had been a waste of time. Others had a similar response. At the beginning of the discussion they had a positive reaction to the film, but by the end their opinion had changed. They said that although they understood the cultural significance of *Black Panther*, discussing it at length made them realise there were many aspects of the film that they did not enjoy. Others could not reach an agreement on their position on the film's portrayal of blackness and African identity. None of them changed their position during the discussion. In fact, their positions got stronger as the discussion progressed. Although they listened to each other's interpretations and perspectives, no one was convinced enough to join the other side. For some, their opinion of the film changed for the better. They stated that engaging with the film in a critical way introduced new interpretations and nuances that they had not previously considered. The discussion enabled them to appreciate the complexities of the film, its themes and its various interpretations.

These changes in perspective support the argument that the construction of meaning is an individual and social process. The participants either changed or doubled down on their interpretations of the film when they engaged with the interpretations of other participants. The dynamics between the participants, common experiences, socio-economic backgrounds and personal relationships factored into this process of negotiation. Even in instances where participants disagreed in their responses to *Black Panther*, they could understand the logic behind the other person's interpretation. This understanding stems from similar backgrounds. As young black urban Africans living in post-Independence Zimbabwe and post-apartheid South Africa, the participants would have had similar experiences in terms of navigating blackness, African identity and media consumption.

This chapter presented the findings from the category of black African state of being. These findings are based on the analysis of participant responses, using the conceptual framework created

in the literature review section.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

This research has been a reception analysis of *Black Panther*, a superhero film in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. A qualitative study, its purpose was to make sense of the responses of young, black urban Africans to the film. Having seen a strong response to the film from this group, I wanted to understand how young, black urban Africans interpreted *Black Panther*, what influenced their interpretations, and their responses to the film's representations of black African identity. Taking an interpretivist approach, focus group discussions and individual interviews were the methods of data collection. The transcriptions from these discussions and interviews were used for data analysis, as well notes I made during each session.

My research contributes to the study and analysis of the media consumption habits of African youth. It specifically analyses how previous media consumption habits may influence the interpretation of a text. My research further contributes to the knowledge of media consumption of African youth, by focusing on the interpersonal, social and cultural dynamics of post-Independence Africa, and how growing up as a born-free can be another influence when reading a text. This focus argues that the historical, socio-economic and cultural background of my subject group shaped their reactions to *Black Panther*. Belonging to a generation with more access to a wider range of media, attending multi-racial, predominantly white or former Model C primary and secondary schools and growing up in urban areas arguably are all factors in how my subject group responds to and makes sense of the media they consume, specifically popular culture texts.

Findings

There are five key findings from this research. The first is that the media that individuals consume, specifically popular culture texts such as films and television shows, influence their personal navigation of identity. Having grown up in urban areas, my participants grew up watching, reading and listening to different media available on multiple platforms. The media they chose to consume influenced how they saw themselves and how they saw others. This is particularly relevant to their black identity, on an individual level and for belonging to a group identity. By growing up and living in media-rich environments, the participants learnt how to 'read' media. Their interpretations of the texts influenced how they identified with and performed blackness, and how they connected to other black people of their particular demographic. In this instance engaging with particular media is a way to connect with other people within a group and to enhance certainty in an

individual's sense of comfort and security in their identity and belonging.

The second finding is the importance of these connections with other people in how individuals react to and make sense of media. The social media hype surrounding *Black Panther*, and conversations with other people, influenced either i) the participants' decision to watch the film or ii) their reaction to the film. The social media hype around the release of *Black Panther* made the participants want to be part of the experience. They wanted to relate to and understand the conversations about the film and post their opinions on social media. There was a pressure on some participants to watch the film because doing so would affirm their blackness. This means that in group identities, there may be expectations on what media to consume and enjoy in order for an individual to feel connected to the larger collective. So while media consumption is an activity that connects people, these connections in turn influence individual choices of what media to watch. In addition, these connections influence interpretation of media texts. For the participants, the conversations they had with others who had watched the film influenced their initial reaction to the film. Being surrounded by other young black Africans who had glowing reviews of the film influenced their initial reaction. Not wanting to be the outlier or go against a perceived group position, the participants said that at first they enjoyed the film, and only began to look at it from a critical perspective after some time alone. The influence of these connections in interpretation of media texts was also evident in focus group discussions. The more the participants spoke and engaged with each other, the more their perceptions of *Black Panther* changed. This supports the theory that meaning is a socially constructed process, but this research finds that this social process is strongest when it comes from people within an individual's particular demographic. It was other young, black urban Africans who influenced the participants.

The third finding, however, illustrates that even in particular social groups there are different interpretations and reactions to media. Common past experiences and socio-economic background do not guarantee that everyone in that group will have the same responses and ideas. With the 12 participants, there was some general agreement on areas such as representation of blackness and *Black Panther's* use of isiXhosa, but there were also different opinions on the film's representation of women, their reactions to the protagonist/antagonist and the portrayal of Wakanda. Even within highly specific subject groups there can be different interpretations of media texts. This shows that even though there is an important social element to reading media texts, there is also an undeniable individual component to the process. Shared experiences and similar backgrounds influence the reading of media texts, but they do not dictate it. Individuals still have control over how they make

sense of media. Even during focus group discussions, although the participants engaged with each other and presented their arguments when there was disagreement about an aspect of the film, they were unable to change each other's minds. At the end of the day, the individual has to decide for themselves what a particular piece of media means for them.

The fourth finding focuses on black and African representation in popular culture texts. Based on participant responses, this research finds that black identity and African identity are not always synonymous. Difference is just as important as similarity when it comes to blackness and Africanity. The participants had different responses to the representation of blackness, and African identity. When it comes to representation, it is possible for a text to be black without being African: black representation is not a stand-in for African representation. For black Africans, this can lead to dual readings of a text at the same time, a positive and negative reaction to representation. The participants anticipated a black African representation that would show the range of blacknesses and not perpetuate a single representation of black African identity. They read *Black Panther's* handling of African identity as stereotypical and negative, but enjoyed the black representation.

The fifth and final finding is on the notion of authenticity in relation to Africanity and representation. For a group that has faced accusations of not being 'African enough' but lives with the reality of coloniality of being, authenticity is important in how African life is represented in Hollywood productions. The inclusion of elements such as language, music, clothing and cultural practices are important, but what is even more important is that they are included in a consistent, well executed manner in order to be representative of African life and cultures. However, these aesthetics and visual elements will not do the work of authentic representation without a move away from a Western, Eurocentric gaze on African life and society. The use of African aesthetics without interrogating and rejecting Eurocentric modernity is insufficient. Although undeniably black, *Black Panther* was African only on this aesthetic level, and even then was not consistent.

Conclusion:

I wanted to find out from young, middle class, urban, educated black Africans how they made sense of a Hollywood production that was billed as a ground breaking, pro-black film. This study created a conceptual framework for doing so through a review of the literature of four key conceptual areas: modernity/coloniality, representation, identity and Africanity. In doing so, this conceptual framework was a tool of analysis for the data collected through focus group discussions and

individual interviews. This data was categorised into three recurring themes in these discussions and interviews: language, representation and black African state of being. Analysis of these themes (and their sub-categories) produced five key findings of this research project.

This research has demonstrated the different influences and processes that audiences go through when reading and making sense of a media text. Interpretation of a text is a dynamic, active process, one that continues after that begins from the moment of first encounter. This can be through a teaser of the text, professional reviews and conversations with people who have already watched it. For young black urban Africans growing up and living in urban areas and navigating through a post-Independence Africa, their historical context, socio-economic background and challenges of individual and group identity all influence what media they choose to consume, how they consume it and what they make of it. With *Black Panther*, across all the discussions and engagements, one thing was clear: the film was visually striking and the representation of blackness was exciting, but Wakanda was not of them and it was not for them.

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