

Superheroes: Force for Good or Relic of the Past?

Is the prevalence of superheroes in media problematic from a social and psychological perspective?

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Over the past decade, American superhero adaptations in various media platforms have gained immense success and become a worldwide sensation. Last year saw the much-anticipated release of *Endgame*, the culmination of the 22-film Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), for example. As superhero adaptations continue their dominance in popular culture, analysis of their impact on collective mentality is warranted. Subsequently, stakeholders have been debating the social and psychological consequences of the prevalence of superheroes in media on audiences and society.

Some entertainment industry insiders criticise the genre for its artistic and cultural inferiority whilst others hold the view that superhero adaptations reinforce negative stereotypes of women and promote aggressive behaviour, undermining the collective mentality as a result (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2009; Solis, 2017). Nonetheless, studies have confirmed the effectiveness of superhero films in promoting certain ethical behaviour (Rosenberg et al., 2013). Existing multimedia content and examples further debunk the validity and relevance of most arguments opposed to the prevalence of superheroes. While much criticism has been justifiably levelled at the genre, this paper holds that, ultimately, the superheroes are as much a force for good in real life as they are on the screen.

Abundant evidence suggests that the embedded positive moral messages in comics are beneficial to individual and collective morality. Positioned as heroic figures in the fictional world, these characters represent hope and the best of humanity. Selfless acts for the common good and prosocial themes are hence frequently incorporated into superhero graphic novels (Rubin, 2013). To exemplify this, the character Steve Rogers, aka Captain America, is an embodiment of patriotism and moral exemplar, while Clark Kent of Superman fame represents the values of righteousness and empathy (White, 2014). Rosenberg et al. (2013) suggest that superhero fiction encourages prosocial and altruistic conducts among viewers. As popular culture is known to alter the mass worldview and philosophy of the general public, the benevolent virtues narrated in superheroes fiction exert a positive influence on moral judgement. In addition, Robinson (2014) notes the effectiveness of superheroes in teaching young readers to tackle moral dilemmas and subsequently make ethical choices in complex scenarios. These

findings thus support using superhero fiction as an instrumental method to facilitate the moral progress of both children and adults.

However, the prevalence of superhero films has come under fire recently by commentators for their lack of artistic and cultural significance. Visionary filmmaker Martin Scorsese, for instance, has famously rejected superhero films as a part of high-culture cinema. The composition of superhero films has also been asserted to be formulaic and lacklustre, degenerating society's appreciation and taste for intellectual art (Bowen, 2018; Scorsese, 2019).

Yet contrary to this argument, a considerable amount of literature points out the beauty and cultural importance of superhero films. Bongco (2000), for example, contends that the modern mythology of superheroes can be used as a powerful storytelling device owing to its appeal to different generations and parallels with reality. The 2019 MCU blockbuster *Black Panther* subtly referenced contemporary political issues, while its successor *Infinity War* addressed extremism and overpopulation (Harrison et al., 2019; Russo, 2019). These two mainstream, "popcorn" films have since been universally lauded for their originality, aesthetics, and convincing justifications of the antagonists' motivations, marking a breakthrough in cinematic history. Similarly, superhero novels have received acclaim. The 1980s superhero series, *Watchmen*, is critically celebrated and featured in *Time's List of the 100 Best Novels* (Grossman & Lacayo, 2005). As superhero stories can have varying intellectual weight, quality, and target audiences, their overall artistic value should therefore not be estimated by generalisation.

While Scorsese's complaint against superhero blockbusters may have some validity, the above evidence shows that literary devices and metaphors can be used to reflect present-day problems and tell captivating stories that appeal to different classes. As Johnson (2014) explains, the superhero mythology has been the manifestation of American beliefs, social norms, and subculture ever since its debut in the aftermath of the Great Depression. Regardless of whether the genre belongs to high culture or not, it holds artistic, historic, and cultural significance.

Some also criticise the art form for its problematic characterisation of women in literal or artistic terms. While male characters are usually depicted to be multidimensional and engaging, female characters in comics are generally "portrayed as love interests, sidekicks, and damsels in distress", conveying outdated stereotypical views of femininity (Kilbourne, 2017, p. 6). Moreover, women in comics are typically designed as sexualised, alluring characters with unrealistic physical proportions and over-revealing costumes (Fretheim, 2017). Solis (2017)

speculates that sexually suggestive imagery and narrative relegation of women could undermine women's self-esteem. The degradation of femininity may thus promote male chauvinism and misogyny to the predominantly male readership.

However, a study conducted by Pennell and Behm-Morawitz (2015) determined that sexualisation in superhero literature could enhance women's awareness of physical well-being rather than self-objectification. Although the stereotypical representations of women in comics are found to convey patriarchal views of traditional gender roles, the growing media coverage of egalitarian values and liberalism politics can help mitigate such detriments to the mentality of general audiences. *Dark Phoenix Saga*, an iconic story in comic mythos, is such an example. This 1980 storyline challenges traditional gender roles and revamps the nurturing figure Jean Grey to an omnipotent superheroine with a complicated backstory (Darowski, 2014). Coincidentally, feminine traits become less apparent in live-action character designs of *Black Widow* (Gerard & Poepsel, 2019). The absence of sexualisation in the 2019 blockbuster *Captain Marvel* also represents a milestone for the industry (Feige et al., 2019). The issue of sexualisation in comics, therefore, is likely to be counterbalanced by the female empowerment that has been prioritised by most media corporations in recent years.

A further and more powerful argument against the genre is that its constant portrayal of violence might rationalise and promote it. While these releases are generally targeted at a more mature demographic, the recent popularity of superheroes in media unavoidably allows underage viewers easier access to explicit depictions of weaponry and physical combat. In fact, Bauer et al. (2017) contend that these inappropriate sequences represent a dominating component in recent cinematic releases of the genre. The American Academy of Pediatrics (2009) warns that excessive exposure of such unhealthy content could adversely affect the mentality of juvenile audiences, resulting in unpleasant emotions, antisocial beliefs, and aggressive behaviour.

Researchers have also discovered a similar connection between consumption of fictional violence and agonistic acts among older age groups (Johnson et al., 2002). The findings imply that the exposure to superheroes can undermine audience's mental health regardless of their age. In addition, commenters emphasise that most fictional superheroes are not authorised law enforcers and often utilise retributive violence as a tool of law enforcement (Phillips & Strobl, 2013; Reyns & Henson, 2010). Thus, it could be argued that the incorrect interpretation of vigilante justice glorifies physical brutality and promotes misconceptions of vigilantism.

Whereas it is acknowledged that the popularity of superhero content offers wider access to problematic presentations of crime, violence, and femininity, this essay maintains the view that the aforementioned detriments have been mediated within the entertainment industry due to increasing social awareness. Superhero narratives have proven, furthermore, to be beneficial in progressing the moral standard of society, and indeed to have profound cultural significance. In particular, superhero literature serves as a storytelling tool to represent traditionally oppressed social groups and metaphorise real-world issues.

Whilst superhero fiction does showcase much of the good in humanity, viewers should be cautious of the inauthentic portrayals of violence and extrajudicial punishments in the comic world. In order to eliminate the potential dangers of unhealthy content, it behoves the industry to collaborate with government officials and academia in improving the current rating system. Proper viewing habits and parental guidance should also be encouraged through educational campaigns. As the Golden Age of Superhero Films remains unchallenged, further research is needed to identify the best measures in mitigating the unresolved harmful impact of superhero adaptations. But in the meantime, let the silver screens abound with pumped fists and whistling capes.

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