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Research Paper

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Representation of Female Superheroes

Super hero films come around again and again; they are always made a remade to fit the time and incorporate the latest technology. While the films originated from comic books, they have become a much larger industry. Ten super hero movies are rumored to come out between 2014 and 2015 including a much anticipated sequel to *The Avengers* (2012). I myself have become a fan of the films. Viewers do not have to be comic book readers and lovers to enjoy or understand the films, and there is often a character to identify with and rally behind. *The Avengers* (2012) has more box office records than any other movie with 28 total, the second place finisher is *Avatar* (2009) with nine (“All Time Box Office Records.”).

With just one of many films setting so many box office records, it is hard to question the permanence of super hero films in today's culture. Considering this I felt it was important to determine what representations of women are presented in these films. As a frequent film goer I find that most of the viewers are preteens to young adults. At this stage in life kids are often looking for a role model, and why not pick a favorite super hero? Unfortunately for young women, the pickings for female heroes to identify with is pretty slim.

Upon taking a notice in how little women heroes were presented in films, I felt it was important to see how the few female heroes were actually portrayed. Female heroes in films are already underrepresented, but I felt it was important to discover if these women were being exploited or

stereotypically portrayed. Young women deserve to see empowered female heroes just as often as men see empowered male heroes. I wanted to conduct my research to see if these young women would have a female hero to look up to, or would they have to select a male counterpart.

I looked at several pieces of literature to help develop my research project. One of the first pieces was an article by Jeffery Brown, "Comic Book Masculinity and the New Black Superhero." The article addressed a fair bit about race and emphasized African American heroes, a minority I did not look at during my research. The article also provided a contextual understanding of masculine heroes, and what makes them masculine. The article outlined the complete juxtaposition of masculinity and femininity, topics I would be researching through emotional vulnerability.

Michael Chaney's article, "Superheroes," emphasized the lack of diverse heroes from different backgrounds, genders, and ethnicities by giving specific examples. This was something that was emphasized in my research. I found the same lack in gender diversity. The article supported the research I conducted, and helped me realize the lack of diversity and representation was unfair, not that the numbers could not speak for themselves later in my research.

Michael R. Lavin's "Women In Comic Books," talks about the feminist movement's effect on comics and their characters. One of the most useful portions of the article came from Lavin's mention of a contradiction.

"Another core contradiction is that between women as role models and as sex objects. Powerful super-heroines like DC's Wonder Woman or Marvel's She-Hulk may easily overcome the most overwhelming threats and obstacles, but they are invariably depicted as alluring objects of desire, wearing the scantiest of costumes."

The contradiction made me pay closer attention to the way the female characters were dressed.

The article also specifically mentions that while there may be one or two positive portrayals of female characters, there always several more negative portrayals that negate the positives.

Trina Robbins's article "Feminism," was a great help in deciphering what was belittling to a woman. For example the article discusses Marvel's use of the term 'girl' in the title of most female heroes, making them appear less significant or strong as male heroes. This especially stood out to me when I analyzed *Fantastic Four* (2005), as the female hero is Invisible Girl, though she is a fully grown woman.

Aaron Taylor's article, "He's Gotta Be Strong, And He's Gotta Be Fast, And He's Gotta Be Larger Than Life": Investigating The Engendered Superhero Body," discussed the idealized bodies of both male and female characters, and the segmentation of bodies due to the panels that they are drawn in in comic books. I thought the article was interesting because it would also be very easy to segment parts of the human body in film shots as well. A film shot would act just like a comic book panel. Sure enough, throughout my research watching the films there were instances where the shot was used as a panel and segmented the body.

The last piece of literature I analyzed was an article from *Entertainment Weekly* by Adam Carlson, Samantha Highfill, and Grady Smith. The article is titled, "Behind Every Superhero, There's A Woman Without Much To Do." The article helped me establish a sample of questions for my research. The article examined the love interests of heroes but provided a series of questions I found pertinent and useful to my own research. While I expected female heroes and love interests to act differently, the foundational statistics also provided the knowledge that this is something the public is interested in addressing. It also helped me further develop the gender stereotypes I would be investigating.

For my research I bought and borrowed several DVDs of super heroes with ensemble casts. I

watched seven DVDs, and saw one movie in the cinema. The DVDs I watched for my research are, *X-Men* (2000), *Fantastic Four* (2005), *X-Men: The Last Stand* (2006), *Fantastic 4: Rise of the Silver Surfer* (2007), *Watchmen* (2009), *X-Men: First Class* (2011), and *Marvel's Avengers* (2012). I watched *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* in cinemas when it was released on April 4, 2014. I felt that superhero films have been released much more frequently in recent years. I wanted to keep the films I selected as close to modern day times as possible, so none of the films date back before 2000, and the most recent is dating to 2014. This time span allowed me to see the progression of female characters over a nearly 15 year span, if things changed at all. The time span also provided me a number of different films, some were within a series so I could see how individual character portrayals changed while comparing them to a whole group. Some of the female characters I watched included: Susan Storm, Mystique, Storm, and Black Widow.

Each of the films had one female character among males considered to be a hero. While seven of the films were based off of the Marvel comic book universe, only one was representative of DC comics. While I originally had intended to compare the portrayals of each universe to one another, I found that DC comics did not produce many movies with ensemble casts, and when they did women were often not included. DC did feature two female leads, *Supergirl* (1984), and *Catwomen* (2004), but the first film was outside the date range I had chosen, and the character Catwomen is more of an antihero, not a hero. While DC is beating Marvel in the solo women lead, they are lacking in women placed in a male dominated ensemble. I think it is also important to note that while DC is leading in solo women leads, they have not yet produced a movie of Wonder Woman, a member of the justice league and a very famous female hero in the comic book world.

During my research I totaled 25 questions to ask and consider while watching each film. The

questions regarded emotional outbursts, costuming, heroic acts, and power. I wanted to be sure to cover a broad range of topics from sexuality, to femininity, and also leadership and power. Superheroes are designed to be powerful leaders. With group ensembles I felt it was harder to see one superhero as a leader, but I hypothesized that if a clear leader emerges from the group, they will not be the woman. Unfortunately, I was correct.

Studying the portrayal of women superheroes was not what I had anticipated it would be. I faced several hurdles just to begin my study. I first found that finding movies with female heroes was not easy, and decided to focus on female heroes that were part of an ensemble of heroes. While watching the films, I felt the female heroes were not equally represented (which I will discuss later), I noticed that the female villains and anti-heroes were stereotyped and poorly portrayed in a way that was worse than the original female heroes I had intended to study. While my research did not turn out as I anticipated, I am glad I analyzed the films, as I now hold a bit more hope for the equal portrayal of female heroes.

I watched around 17 hours of film, and in those 17 hours the female heroes collectively screamed 21 times, meaning more than once per hour. In those 17 hours of film the male heroes screamed 5 times. Not only did the females scream more, but there were 13 women heroes versus 28 male heroes. The male screams came off more like roars than screams, usually occurring after a death or when the male was seriously emotionally distressed. The females shrieked and squealed, usually when they were in danger. For example most of Mystique's screams were counted in one scene in *X-Men: First Class* (2011) where the compound she was staying in was being attacked by the villain. While the count was lower than I anticipated, especially when looking per film instead of collectively, the women screams portrayed them as weaker and more timid, while the male 'roars' appeared to be a

battle cry, like they now had renewed reason to fight.

Battle scenes are a large part of superhero movies, and something I paid particularly close attention to. The 13 female heroes were saved by male heroes 14 times, while the 28 male heroes were saved by the female heroes 7 times. This number is unfairly disproportional. There are twice as many males as females, but the females are saved twice as often than the males by their fellow heroes. The female heroes saved themselves 8 times. While this seems to be an improvement, 4 of the 8 times were from one movie, *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014). For the most part, while in battle the women are treated as equal fighters, though they are not calling the shots and creating battle plans.

As superheroes, it is a job obligation to save the world, but heroes often have moments of humanity where they save an innocent civilian. The 13 female heroes were shown saving innocent civilians 3 times. In *The Avengers* (2012) alone I can think of three instances where the male heroes were shown saving civilians. Hawkeye and Captain America both saved civilians from a bus, and later in the battle scene Captain America helped save a large group of civilians in a train station, which is later recognized as brave and heroic by one of the civilians on the news. Also, in *Fantastic Four* (2005) Mr. Fantastic, The Thing, and The Human Torch are all seen saving at least one civilian all in one scene, while the female hero Invisible Girl (later changed to Invisible Woman) is shown creating a forcefield to block an explosion; it seems like a minor action compared to the brave men who saved individual lives.

In all 7 films, the female does not come up with the cunning plot that 'saves the day.' The male heroes always come up with the plot, and they are usually portrayed at the leader of the ensemble of heroes. The women usually do not hold power in their jobs either. Of the females, only two have prominent jobs. Storm in *X-Men: The Last Stand* (2006) takes over an academy for 'gifted youngsters,'

or a training camp for future superheroes, after her superior dies. Sue Storm from *Fantastic Four* (2005) is the Director of Genetic Research at a large company, which boasts her intelligence and power. Unfortunately in the sequel, *Fantastic 4: Rise of the Silver Surfer* (2007) Sue spends the entire movie preoccupied over her wedding to the lead male, Mr. Fantastic. The responsibility of the wedding falls completely on Sue, even when her fiancé promises to help out he spends time working on a project for the government, which he lies to her about. The wedding is emphasized through most of the film, at one point Sue's brother, Johnny-The Human Torch, calls it “the most important day of my sister's life.”

The costumes all the female characters wore were very similar (except for Laurie in *Watchman* (2009), but we will get there). All of the women wore skin-tight catsuits, admittedly some were lower cut than others. All the women wore suits that emphasized their breasts and their butts. With all three movies in the *X-Men* series, men and women heroes wore the same uniform suits, although there were variations where the stripes were different colors. One female hero, Kitty Pryde, had pink stripes, though this did not make her counterparts treat her any differently it does play into gender stereotypes. In *X-Men: First Class* (2011) although all the heroes wore the same suits, Mystique's was unzipped a fair bit so that her breasts stood out more. While Invisible Woman from *Fantastic 4: Rise of the Silver Surfer* (2007) wore a costume that matched the team's when she was not in costume she looked more like a sexy secretary and assistant to Mr. Fantastic than a brilliant scientist and researcher. The worst suit was Laurie Jupiter's in *Watchmen* (2009). Her suit was neon yellow with black stripes, barely covered her butt, and had thigh high black boots that were literally strapped to her belt. Even worse than the suits was the unrealistic portrayal of women fighting crime. The women almost always had their hair down, and were wearing tall black boots with a heel on them. Most women would put their hair back to keep it from getting in the way, or wear flat shoes to make running much easier.

There were several different builds to the male heroes. Though most of the male heroes were tall and very muscular there were a few variations. Mr. Fantastic from *Fantastic Four* (2005) was more scrawny than muscular, but definitely lean and fit. Nite Owl in *Watchman* (2009) only appeared to look muscled while in costume, and he's superhero friend Rorschach broke the superhero mold too. Rorschach was much shorter than the usual hero, and not overly muscular. While there was a bit of variation among the male heroes, all the female heroes had the same exact body type. All the female heroes were of average height, maybe a bit taller in costume with their heels, thin, lean, not very muscular, with nicely shaped breasts and butts. Not only is it inaccurate that the women are so well endowed when they should be constantly training and fighting, but it only presents one female body image, when there are many.

This would not be so bad if there was not such a heavy emphasis on the female body. For most of *X-Men: First Class* (2011) Mystique is commenting on her own body, and having others comment on it as well. She even goes as far as asking her best friend, practically her brother, if he would date her if she always looked like a blue mutant. A good portion of the movie her love interest looks for a cure so that she can look like a traditional human instead of the blue mutant that she is. Only one character, Magneto, tells Mystique she should be comfortable in her own skin, that she is beautiful, and he turns out to be a villain. Unfortunately this is not the only time the female body is emphasized. In both *Fantastic Four* (2005) and *Fantastic 4: Rise of the Silver Surfer* (2007) Invisible Woman is made a spectacle of when she becomes naked in public to use her powers. She is made to look foolish and dumb. Laurie Jupiter in *Watchmen* (2009) has sexual relations with two of the male heroes, and it seemed like those three scenes were the longest three scenes in the movie, one of which she was fully nude in. Between the costumes and a hyper-intense awareness of the female body, it undermines the

power and control of these super women. There were several moments where the female hero's butt was displayed while we watched her talking with someone else. I specifically remember a scene from *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014) where I am looking at both Black Widow's butt and Nick Fury's face as they have a conversation.

The hardest thing to count in each film was the deaths. Although I did not necessarily need to keep a count, I did try for the first two films. I found that deaths happened so quickly and in mass groups. It was also unclear whether or not characters may have been dead, or just knocked out or severely injured. I found that both male and female heroes killed, though it appeared that men did so much more frequently than women, even in the large battle scenes. Women appeared to be more of a defense, for example in *The Avengers* (2012) Black Widow closed the portal while all the other male heroes continued to slaughter aliens. While none of the women showed powers with particularly 'feminine' qualities, there was a stark difference between the abilities of the male and female heroes. The male heroes usually had powers that accompanied more brute force and strength such as The Hulk and The Thing. Women had more defensive abilities like Kitty Pryde who could walk through walls, or Invisible Woman who created forcefields and became invisible. This did allow for the women to have more unique abilities and a wider variety of abilities, though not by much.

While the women heroes were lusted after, it was fairly infrequent in the grand scheme of the plot, and usually was attached to a male character whom they fell in love with or had a previous relationship with. The female characters over the course of the films only cried 16 times, usually when facing moments of despair when another hero dies – though Invisible Women did cry when her wedding was ruined, which emphasized the “most important day of her life” aspect her brother pointed out. The male heroes only cried 3 times, usually facing the same despair as the female heroes.

Surprisingly the female heroes also didn't have their emotional state mentioned. The only reference I found, and it was quite direct, occurred in *Fantastic Four* (2005) between Mr. Fantastic and Invisible Woman, and it appeared to be a shot at their failed relationship.

Though it was not initially intended to be a part of my research, I feel it is worth pointing out several things about the female villains. It appears the female villains are in the same situation as the female heroes, clearly outnumbered by men, just the 'token woman' in an ensemble. I noticed that the female villains often wore even less, or more revealing, clothing than the female heroes. In *X-Men: First Class* (2011) Angel wore a miniskirt, a halter top, and those same high, black leather boots, while Mystique wore a full body suit. In the same film a different female villain is dressed almost identically to Angel, but in white and sometimes in a bra instead of the halter top. The female villains also are not seen as equally as the heroes are to their comrades. In *X-Men: The Last Stand* (2006) Mystique is an anti-hero and is treated horribly. First she is given a mutant cure, and while she is left on a floor, naked, fully human again, the lead male villain, Magneto walks away saying, "What a shame, she was such a beautiful mutant." Though in the context of the movies he had known her for many years and considered her a friend, once she was no longer of use for him he wanted nothing to do with her, and no longer cared about her or her safety. Mystique then decided to spoil his plans and give his location to the government and the officials comment, "there's nothing like a woman scorned." As a villain she was looked down on. In *X-Men: First Class* (2011) both female heroes become villains by the end of the film, without any real explanation why, and it appears they are only exploited after they leave "the good guys," as clear by Magneto's treatment of Mystique once she is no longer a mutant. Magneto in *X-Men: The Last Stand* (2006) also exploits Jean Grey for her powers, so he can achieve whatever he likes, but at the end of the film he leaves her for dead as well.

Although it was not a component of my study, while I was watching the films I realized that race and ethnicity were also issues. Almost every single hero was white. While there was a bit of diversity, Black Widow was Russian, Magneto was Jewish, Storm was African American, there certainly was not enough. If women are being underrepresented than other races and ethnicities certainly are as well. If I had to do this project over again I would certainly take a second look at this and see how race and ethnicity plays into the role of the hero, regardless of gender.

I found that the data I collected, while important, was not as shocking as the actual evidence displayed throughout the eight films. While costuming may still need a bit of work, the female heroes were not treated all that unequally. They are still not considered the leader of the groups, and they certainly do not hatch the master plan that saves the day, but they are not devalued either. I think that the representation has a fair way to go, but it was not as stereotyped or distressing as I had originally predicted.

While the study did not all turn out as expected, I still believe that something can be learned from the data that I have collected. I also feel that women are still getting unequal and unfair portrayals in movies, regardless of whether they are considered to be the hero or the villain. I think the next step would probably be further analysis of the female villain, as it seems her portrayal is even more of an uphill battle than the female hero's. Ultimately, there should not only be female heroes prominent in ensemble groups, they should have their own movies the same way Thor, Iron Man, and Captain America, as well as other heroes, do.

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