

WHAT MAKES HER A HERO?: GENDER IN THE MARVEL CINEMATIC UNIVERSE

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Introduction

Goffman's Gender Displays have been used to analyze how gender is portrayed in advertisements and other visual media since the 1970s. It focuses on the conscious choices that the creators make in displaying people in a poster or ad, and how gender roles are reflected to the viewer from those choices (Goffman, 1979). To this day, it provides key insight into how we perceive gender and how gender portrayals in media reflect real-life power dynamics and social roles.

In addition to Goffman's Displays, the concept of symbolic annihilation also plays a large role in media and gender display Symbolic annihilation is a mass media term that refers to how the lack of representation of a certain group of people creates a sense of inferiority in society (Tucheman, 2000).

There are two important parts to representation in media: quality and quantity (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2021). I chose to apply Goffman's Gender Displays to the Marvel Cinematic Universe posters, in order to see how analyze the quality aspect of gender representation.. Marvel is one of the largest film (and television) franchises in the world, so it has a large audience that can potentially be impacted by who and what is represented on the screen. A poster is the first impression that a film has on potential viewers. Additionally, analyzing posters takes into account people who may not even see the film in its entirety. Marvel's large presence in media has large implications for social expectations of gender, and the studio's content has the potential to contribute to symbolic annihilation if they do not represent their female characters in a diverse, accurately representative way.

Methods

I took the first twenty films within the Marvel Cinematic universe, from the original Iron Man (2008) up to Captain Marvel (2019), and analyzed their theatrical release posters in chronological order. I identified which of Goffman's displays were used within each poster, making special note of the films that implemented modern shift rather and the films that displayed multiple gender displays in the female characters depicted.

Results

Film	Relative Size	Feminine Touch	Modern Shift	Gender Display		The Family	Ritual of Subordination	Licensed Withdrawal
				Function Ranking				
Iron Man	X	X		X			X	
Iron Man 2	X						X	X
Thor				X			X	
Captain America: The First Avenger				*				
The Avengers	X	X					X	X
Iron Man 3	X	X		X				X
Thor: The Dark World	X	X		X				X
Captain America: The Winter Soldier			X				X	X
Guardians of the Galaxy			X					X
Avengers: Age of Ultron	X			X			X	X
Ant-Man	X		X					
Captain America: Civil War	X		X					
Doctor Strange				*				
Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2			X					
Spider-Man: Homecoming	X			X	X			
Thor: Ragnarock			X					
Black Panther			X	X				
Avengers: Infinity War	X		X					X
Ant-Man and The Wasp			X					
Captain Marvel			X					

* Denotes there were no women pictured in film poster



Results (Continued)

The first few years of the MCU are dominated by male superheroes and subordinate female characters, if any women are included at all. Women are objectified in their positioning and costumes in comparison to the male characters in the film. Even when female superheroes are introduced, they are given the same function ranking and relative size as the male characters but subject to licensed withdrawal and ritualization of subordination through the objectification of their outfits and body placement on the poster. For example, Thor: The Dark World (2013) portrays the female characters with smaller relative size and in licensed withdrawal, implying that the women in the film are dependent on the men to protect them.

As time went on and more films were released by Marvel, the less stereotypical gender roles were displayed. Modern Shift becomes more common in the displays found in the poster, and women heroes are given the same function ranking as the men portrayed. Avengers: Infinity War (2018) depicts a multitude of heroes of different genders, all displayed with the same function ranking.

The most recent films that have been released by Marvel mark the current shift that the studio is taking with its filmmaking. Goffman's quality of modern shift is displayed in two very big instances: Ant-Man and The Wasp marks the first Marvel film with a titular female hero, and Captain Marvel marks the first standalone movie for a female superhero. Female heroes are given the same function ranking and establishment of power as the men in the MCU previously have been given.

Discussion

The main takeaway of my project was that Marvel has developed and improved its representations of gender in its films over that past decade or so. As time goes on, there are more and more diverse perspectives given in its content, and an embracement of modern shifts in gender displays.

My analysis of each film poster identified how many men and women were represented, and then analyzed the quality of their representation using Goffmanian analysis. When women are not shown (or only shown in a specific, traditional light) within mass media, viewers are given the message that their existence is not as important as men. When it comes to superhero films, there can be symbolic annihilation in terms of envisioning a woman as capable of being a hero. As we see more and more female heroes being created and displayed in film, more recognition and value is given to women in society as well.

You can include a female character in a film, you can even have a female superhero, but the qualities that you attribute and display your characters as are just as (or even more) important. Viewers of media are influenced by what they see on screen, and the quality of gender representations helps to create different worldviews and open the minds of viewers to possibilities of gender equality in the real world.

Limitations

Limitations to my findings mostly revolve around the fact that I was the sole analyzer for this research. I analyzed the posters using Goffman as a framework, and made inferences based on my own findings and analysis of the people on screen. If multiple people had done this analysis, the results would have had more validity and replicability.

References

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