The Effects of Superhero Sagas on Our Gendered Selves

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Female superheroes are powerful women yet they are also sexualized and thus in a sense disempowered. Though all superhero bodies tend to be unrealistic and idealized, male superheroes are not sexualized in an analogous way to female superheroes. Do the gendered roles and bodies of superheroes affect us? As you'll see in this essay by Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz and Hillary Pennell, the answer is "yes." This duo of authors is well prepared to tackle the complexities of representations of gender in superhero stories based on their research questions about the effects of gender and stereotypes in various media, including video games.
—Robin S. Rosenberg

Since the emergence of *Superman* in the 1930s, superheroes have dominated comic book narratives, successfully crossing over into other forms of media. Although the popularity of comic book superheroes and their stories have been in flux over the years, recently their adoration has been reinvigorated through big-budget cinema blockbusters like *X-Men* (2000), *Spider-Man* (2002), *Batman Begins* (2005), *Superman Returns* (2006), *Iron-Man* (2008), and *The Incredible Hulk* (2008), to name a few. Superheroes and their fantastical lives draw the youthful moviegoing demographic, appeal to the nostalgic older audiences, and present well-established characters and story lines with which audiences connect. But what is it about superheroes that appeals to our gendered selves—our lives experienced as boys, girls, men, and women? This chapter argues that superhero texts do not merely entertain; they may

have real-world implications for how we construct gender-related identities, attitudes, and beliefs. We examine the psychological appeal of superheroes as well as the potential effects of identification with these extraordinary characters on our gendered selves.

THE APPEAL OF SUPER(GENDERED)HEROES

At the most basic level, superhero sagas impact our lives by fulfilling an entertainment need. Fans of the superhero genre are typically fans because they *enjoy* superhero narratives, characters, and/or art. Entertainment media, in general, serve an important purpose by appealing to some of our most basic emotions.[1] Fans' enjoyment of superhero sagas results in feelings of joy and happiness, helps to manage their mood state, and peaks their interest. Psychology research[2] suggests that *novel stimuli*—like the extraordinary superheroes, superheroines, their nemeses, and their stories—interest us because of their distinctive newness.[3] Though many forms of entertainment media present novel stimuli, it stands to reason that superhero sagas have unique appeal in that they offer up an escape into fantastical worlds. Unlike many other genres, superhero stories appeal to the desire to inhabit a fantasy world rich with novel and fantastical beings, places, and events. The superhuman elements of superhero sagas present audiences with stories that are centered on stimuli unique from real life.

At the same time, these superhero stories are appealing because they provide us with *familiar narratives*,[4] which increase our enjoyment with characters and plot elements we understand. The often-formulaic superhero story may provide novel stimuli, but in a somewhat predictable pattern that is inviting and comfortable. For example, themes of war, love, morality, and personal identity struggles, which have basis in our experienced realities, permeate superhero sagas.

One very familiar narrative element is the hypergendering (or supergendering) of characters in superhero sagas. Scholars and media critics alike have analyzed gender in superhero texts and agree that these beloved stories most often depict characters who typify conventional gender norms. Male characters are typically hypermasculine and female characters are most often hyperfeminine and/or hypersexualized in the superhero world.[5] In particular, male superhero characters fill stereotypical gender roles that epitomize idealizations of masculinity. Male superheroes are constructed in ways that emphasize strength and power to a heightened, superhuman degree that speaks to Western ideas about masculinity and manhood. These superheroes have bodies that are muscled and sculpted; they perform feats of strength and heroism that exemplify the masculine role of the protector and fearless leader.

Additionally, the construction of female characters in superhero sagas underscores these messages about masculinity. When women are included in superhero stories, they tend to be love interests and/or victims in need of rescue by male superheroes. Their abilities are stripped from them, whereas their bodies are the primary focus. The largest recurring role for these damsels in distress (e.g., Mary Jane in *Spider-Man* and Betty Ross in *Incredible Hulk*) is that of a victim in need of saving by her male rescuer. These images of women fit with stereotypical conventions of femininity and serve to support normative messages of masculinity, positioning men to be largely in control and capable. However, superhero stories take a familiar gender narrative and transform it into a supergendered narrative, with hypermuscular male heroes and hypersexualized female victims, glorifying traditional gender roles.

A notable exception to this portrayal of females in superhero texts is the relatively infrequent but powerful representation of the female superhero, which both resists and conforms to familiar

gender conventions. On the one hand, female superheroes (e.g., Wonder Woman and Storm) offer up a much more empowered and strong picture of a woman in comparison to the typical female depiction in superhero stories. On the other hand, these characters conform to gendered stereotypes by being presented in a hyper-sexualized manner. The focus on their bodies and sexuality may position them primarily as objects of desire in ways that are not as typical of male superheroes. The media have a long history of focusing on the youth, beauty, and sexuality of female characters more so than male characters. Thus, the sexualization of female superheroes fits within this familiar gendered media narrative, while the more masculine characterizations of these heroines push the boundaries of normative gender representations.

Female fans in particular may find female superheroes to be appealing because they offer up a rare image of the mediated female—a woman with superhuman strength who is power-ful and capable of doing the rescuing—instead of *being* rescued. Simultaneously, these heroines appeal to us in the way that they do not deviate so far from traditional gender norms, that is, by maintaining a focus on their body and sexuality. Indeed, research suggests that the female superhero is most appealing to audiences when her masculine traits are balanced with familiar feminine values, such as compassion.[6] This combination of the masculine and hyperfeminine creates a female superhero who is indeed novel, because of her demonstration of masculine strength, yet who also reflects the familiar practice of the sexualization of women in the media.

In sum, audiences may enjoy the narrative familiarity of the supergendering of men and women in superhero sagas. Yet these gendered messages are made special by exaggerating masculine and feminine traits of characters in superhero narratives. This provides fans with the ideal entertainment offering—a story that is both familiar and novel. Most of us are socialized into accept-ing, to some degree—or at the very least recognizing—culturally dominant gender norms. Superhero sagas make sense to us and appeal to the socially constructed view of our gendered selves.

MORE THAN JUST ENTERTAINMENT

As we've explored in our analysis, it is certainly true that super-hero stories are entertaining as they target and trigger positive emotional experiences for fans and appeal to the imagination in a way that can be understood in terms of real (gendered) human experiences. But superhero sagas also affect our lives in less obvious ways beyond simple entertainment.

Before we examine each of these types of media effects in turn in relation to superhero texts and audiences, let's understand how these legendary characters may help to fulfill relationship and identity needs for fans. The research on *media identification* and *parasocial interaction*[7] (i.e., relationships that media users form with media characters) helps to explain how fans form meaning-ful connections with superheroes. Though the parasocial relation-ships people develop with superheroes are one-sided, they feel quite real. This, as well as fans' identification or ability to relate to superhero characters, provides a foundation for understanding how superheroes may affect how people perceive themselves as well as others.

Media Identification and Interaction with Superheroes

One well-established area of media research explores the pro-cesses of how, and to what degree, people identify with and come to relate to media characters. Generally, people may form a bond

with media characters they like and desire to become more like these media personas (i.e., "wishful identification").[8] A fan may form a *parasocial* (one-sided) relationship[9] with a media figure and treat it as if it were a real relationship. These experiences are correlated. The more someone identifies with a superhero character, the more likely he or she is to form a parasocial relationship, and vice versa.

Given that the media industry is dominated by male writers, artists, producers, directors, and critics, it is not surprising that most superhero characters are male. And despite the increased visibility of female superhero fans,[10] the target audience of the superhero genre is still boys and men. To appeal to this male audience, superhero stories centering on male superheroes are most prevalent. The industry assertions that boys and men prefer male rather than female characters—thereby explaining why most characters are male—may not be far off the mark. Past research[11] demonstrates that boys are most likely to identify with male superheroes, whereas girls may identify with either female or male superheroes. However, this should not be taken to mean that boys and men do not respond well to female superheroes. It would not be uncommon for boys and men to develop parasocial relationships with female superheroes, even though they likely more closely identify with the male characters.

Whether one identifies and/or forms a parasocial relationship with a male or female superhero character, this process is not all that different from the formation of real-life social interactions.[12] The psychology of the appeal of superheroes can partly be explained by the phenomenon of fans getting to know superhero characters in ways that are similar to how they form attachments to friends, neighbors, and loved ones. In turn, as fans get to know superheroes, they can develop feelings of similarity, empathy, idolization, and loyalty to these media characters—in a fashion similar

to the feelings they develop with actual social others. We see this most obviously evidenced at fan conventions and online, where fans express their deep attachments to superhero characters. These characters are more than fictional creations; they are perceived as being real confidants, friends, and/or potential lovers.

At one time, parasocial interaction with superheroes would have been considered psychopathological, but today, scholars of communication and psychology view these relationships with mediated persons as perfectly normal. These parasocial relationships provide real emotional and social experiences that fulfill entertainment, network, and affective needs for fans.

Though male fans have many more opportunities to identify with gender-similar superheroes than do female fans, we would like to consider the special case of the potential identification and parasocial interaction of female fans with the female superhero (or the superheroine).

The Empowering Superheroine?

Looking past entertainment, media and psychology research suggests that superheroes may influence the ways we think about ourselves and others. It is known that people learn about gender norms and expectations from exposure to media. More specifically, gendered media portrayals influence individuals' self-concept,[13] beliefs about traditional gender roles,[14] gender stereotyping,[15] body esteem and eating disordered behaviors,[16] and self-objectification (i.e., the view of one's body as an object for others' enjoyment).[17]

It can be argued that many of the superheroines like DC's Wonder Woman and Catwoman[18] and Marvel's Storm and Elektra[19] are empowering characters. These characters are physically strong, athletic, capable, authoritative, and intelligent.

They are tough and beautiful. Although their sex appeal may be seen as objectification of the female body, it may also be constructed as empowering by showing distain for traditional feminine modesty.

These characters also showcase powerful abilities and engage in aggressive behaviors that are not typically associated with women. For example, Catwoman has a deadly whip, a makeup compact and perfume that can render her opponents unconscious, claw gloves for maximum damage when in combat mode, and of course the ability to cat-apult and propel herself over great distances while gently landing on her feet.[20] Wonder Woman has a tiara that can be used as a boomerang, bracelets that can deflect bullets, a golden lasso that can extract the truth and erase memories, and sandals for dimensional travel, not to mention super-strength and immortality.[21] The women of *X-Men* all display great powers. Storm showcases great fighting aptitude as well the ability to manipulate the weather. Rogue has the ability to absorb others' strength, memories, and abilities, potentially killing them simply through her touch. Mystique is an agile fighter and expert in martial arts with the ability to alter her shape and mimic the physical form of any human being or mutant. Susan Storm Richards, a member of The Fantastic Four and also known as the Invisible Woman, has the power of invisibility; she is also able to project powerful force fields of energy that she can use for offense or defense. All of these superheroines physically dominate and excel in activities that are normally associated with masculinity.

As such, female fans may develop wishful identification with superheroines, resulting in a desire to be more like them. Girls and women may feel empowered through the identification and parasocial interaction experienced with these phenomenal female characters. At fan conventions, a woman may dress as a beloved superheroine and feel pride and ownership over this

media character. In a gendered franchise that largely sidelines women and girls in superhero stories, superheroines may provide a unique opportunity for female fans to feel empowered rather than disempowered when participating in the superhero genre.

It is true that these superheroines have broken down gender barriers; however, the potential for superheroines to be empowering for women and girls may be limited by these heroines' objectification in superhero texts and their subordination to male characters. Although at times female superheroes have powers seemingly equal to their male counterparts, the male superheroes are often more likely to be in greater positions of authority, like that of a mentor. Superhero stories may construct a superheroine as dependent on a male character by having her rely on a man to guide or train her to develop her skills. For example, Marvel's Elektra is drugged and kidnapped in order to be reeducated about the misguided choices she has made in her past. It is a man, Jeremy Locke, who teaches Elektra how to use her powers for good. In the DC comic *Batgirl*, Batman plays the part of Batgirl's mentor, telling her what missions to go on, evaluating her performance, and giving her advice.

Although superheroines' powers are not always weaker than superheroes, they often are depicted as having less control over them, needing help of the male heroes/mentors to guide them and their abilities. While outwardly Dr. Jean Grey of the *X-Men* film series possesses more powerful abilities than her male counterparts—telepathic and telekinetic powers that can be used at a subatomic level—making her the most powerful and most dangerous mutant, she cannot control them. Eventually, she turns against her fellow teammates, even killing her beloved mentor Professor Charles Xavier when she loses control of her abilities.

This dichotomous representation of superheroines as being extraordinary women yet sexualized and less super than their

male counterparts muddies the potential for these characters to be empowering media figures. No doubt, women and girls do feel empowered by these characters, at times; however they have also objected to the gendered treatment of female characters in superhero sagas. Specifically, female fans have openly expressed their disappointment and anger at the sexualization and victimization of women in superhero narratives. Blogs, such as "Women in Refrigerators," are written by female fans who express a love for comic books but a disdain for the stereotypical and gendered violent treatment (e.g., rape) of women in these superhero stories.

Gender Stereotyping and Fan Resistance

A gender stereotype is generally defined as "a set of beliefs about what it means to be female or male. Gender stereotypes include information about physical appearance, attitudes and interests, psychological traits, social relations, and occupations.[22] The media serve as one source of learning about gender roles, and research[23] suggests that exposure to stereotypical gender portrayals, such as those found in superhero sagas, is linked to gender stereotyping by fans in the real world.

In addition to media identification and parasocial interaction, the effects of gender representation in superhero texts may be understood through the lens of media stereotyping. Scholars have systematically examined the effects of exposure to gender stereotypes (and counterstereotypes) in entertainment media on people's real-world judgments of women and men.

Of particular interest here are the effects of exposure to sexual and body-related stereotypes of women and girls in the media. Monique Ward and Kimberly Friedman experimentally

examined the effects on adolescents of exposure to portrayals of women as sex objects; teens were more likely to report stereotypical gender role beliefs and to condone such treatment of women.[24] This has clear implications for female superhero fans, since women in the superhero genre are most often objectified, using sexuality as the focus of their characters, and are not typically offered as much complexity in the story line as are male characters.[25]

You may notice an apparent contradiction. On the one hand, earlier we proposed that female superheroes may be empowering via the power and strength they exhibit; on the other hand, female superheroes—at least as they are now portrayed—may be disempowering due to the objectification of these characters. But research suggests the mere sexualization of powerful female characters may negate the potential positive effects of such characters. For example, research[26] examined the effects of playing a highly sexualized versus less sexualized version of Lara Croft in *Tomb Raider: Legend* and found that playing the sexualized Croft resulted in college students' judging women more negatively in the real world. Thus, even though Croft is a strong, intelligent, and powerful character, when sexualized, she is not so empowering. She may trigger gender stereotypical thoughts about women. This particular investigation looked at the short-term effects of superheroine video game play in a lab, but research suggests that the impact of sexualized superheroines might be even greater for heavy consumers of the genre. In other words, avid fans may be more likely to develop attitudes and beliefs about women that are in line with gender stereotypes in superhero stories than a person who, say, watches the occasional superhero Blockbuster film.

When considering how male superhero characters are depicted, it stands to reason that the hypermasculine representations may likewise result in greater adherence to traditional notions of what it means to be a man. Specifically, superhero fans may adopt more

gender traditional attitudes and beliefs, expecting men to act as protectors, heroes, enforcers, athletes, and intellectuals. Certainly, media narratives and characters typically play only a small role in how our gender-related attitudes and beliefs develop, but it is a measurable one and has been demonstrated to have at least short-term effects on real-world gender role beliefs. Thus, scholars and fans should not dismiss the potential for superhero sagas to impart gender stereotypes to audiences.

However, not all portrayals of gender in superhero texts are gender typical in nature. Although less frequent, superhero sagas sometimes portray men and women in roles that do not conform to traditional gender role stereotypes. This is potentially positive, because stereotypes are limiting and can constrain personal and social identity. Thus, when superhero stories depict the physically dominant female and the sensitive male, we should remember that media research[27] suggests such portrayals may help to counter stereotypical notions about how women and men should act. This in turn offers superhero audiences more space to develop their own sense of gender as well as break down gender stereotypes that may be used to negatively judge others who do not embody them.

Superhero texts may do more than simply entertain: they may influence gender-related beliefs and attitudes that impact on how we view men and women. Though this phenomenon is not unique to the superhero genre—in fact, it relates to all media offerings—there is a reason why superhero stories may be considered a special case. Not only do superhero stories present some alternative gender models (i.e., superheroines), but the fan community makes the genre unique. The intensely loyal, invested, and active community of superhero fans[28] has a long history of reenacting the gender roles communicated through superhero stories through fan activities such as role-playing and fan fiction. This replaying and negotiating of the gendered messages in superhero

texts offers a more complex picture of the relationship between media exposure and gender stereotyping. Indeed, cultural studies research[29] demonstrates that fans do not necessarily internalize mediated gender stereotypes, and may routinely engage in practices to resist them. Thus, we conclude that the relationship between superhero stories and gender stereotyping is not a simple one—superheroes have the potential to both reinforce and subvert gender stereotypes.

Self-Concept: How Super Am I?

Beyond influencing how we think about others, superhero texts may influence how we think about ourselves. Superhero stories may have a psychological effect on the self-concept. More specifically, self-esteem (i.e., evaluation of self-worth or importance) and self-efficacy (i.e., belief in one's abilities to accomplish things) may be affected by superhero stories. From the framework of social comparison theory,[30] engagement in upward social comparison with superhero figures may result in the view of the self as inadequate in comparison to these extraordinary beings.[31] Superheroes are gifted (see Rosenberg and Winner's chapter in this volume), powerful superhumans, and when we compare ourselves to these media models, research suggests that this may have a negative impact on self-esteem and self-efficacy when we find that we do not measure up.

Further, media research suggests that the female self-concept, in particular, may be negatively impacted by exposure to superhero sagas. This largely stems from the portrayal of female characters in superhero stories as sexualized, victimized, and objectified, as discussed earlier. In fact, as women internalize the communicated standards of the female body in the media, they generally have lower self-esteem and self-efficacy.[32]

Similarly, this process may also lower self-efficacy in female fans, despite the physical and intellectual power of the characters. Researchers[33] found that playing Tomb Raider's *sexualized* Lara Croft lowered self-efficacy in young adult female players. So although superheroines demonstrate superior strength and intelligence, their objectification may negate positive effects on self-concept and lessen girls' and women's confidence in their own abilities to succeed.

Conversely, there is potential for superheroes to engender positive feelings of the self. This is likely to occur when audiences find superheroes to be inspiring figures with whom they can relate and wish to emulate. The heroic nature of male and female superheroes and fans' connection to these characters through identification and parasocial interaction may inspire confidence in one's own ability to help others and to persevere in life. In one study, Leif Nelson and Michael Norton[34] asked a group of college students to think about and describe the characteristics of a superhero. The researchers then compared these participants' intention to help others with another group of college students who did not engage in the superhero description activity. The results of the experiment showed that the students who were asked to think about superheroes reported higher intention to help those in need than did the students who were not asked to think about a superhero. Three months later, the effect still held, suggesting that superhero stories may have lasting influence on positive behavior and our beliefs in our own abilities to act heroically.

Superbodies: Effects on Body-Related Beliefs and Behaviors

Women in superhero stories generally conform to what is called the *curvaceously thin* female body ideal, and male superheroes

are portrayed with the ideal *V-shape* (broad, muscular chest and shoulders with a trim waist) that is so prevalent in mainstream US media. However, as we argued earlier, these are exaggerated versions of the ideal male and female bodies that are not found in many other media and this "anatomical exaggeration" (p. 354) of male and female bodies—superbodies—in superhero texts reinforces the dichotomy between the masculine and feminine body.[35]

DC's Batman, for example, has very visible muscle definition on the stomach, arm, and thigh regions. Batman's body is disproportionate, with his waist and head being much smaller than would realistically appear in combination with his rippled muscular body. In fact, the extremely large size of Batman's (and most male superheroes') muscles are only matched in the real world by the most extreme male body builders who work hard to manufacture a body that most men could not achieve.

For female superheroes, a thin body (with no visible body fat) and large breasts make up the ideal body, typically only attainable in the real world through surgical enhancement.[36] Perhaps it is not surprising that superheroines—who are, after all, *extraordinary* by nature—embody this nearly impossible standard of beauty. This trend began as far back as the 1940s with the superheroine Wonder Woman, who in the comic book wore the unforgettable red bustier, accentuating her large breasts and small waist, and blue shorts with white stars emphasizing her buttocks and long legs. More recently, Tomb Raider's popular animated video game heroine Lara Croft was given such large breasts and small frame that if she were a real person with those same anatomical dimensions, she would literally tip over from being too top heavy. Though this body type is largely unattainable for women and girls, this female superbody is still used to judge women's bodies in the real world.

Social scientific research[37] has demonstrated that exposure to such idealized media images of female bodies may lower girls' and women's satisfaction with their own bodies and increase disordered eating behaviors. Such effects have been found for both children and adults. Media images of the female body may have negative effects on body esteem beginning even at a young age and continue throughout much of a women's life. For boys and men, idealized imagery of the male body in the media has been linked to being dissatisfied with one's own muscles, problematic exercising, and the intention to use steroids.[38]

One of the most potentially damaging outcomes of consuming these idealized images in superhero stories is self-objectification. Whereas body esteem is about satisfaction with your own appearance, self-objectification refers to the tendency for a person to place great importance on the appearance of her body and to view the body from a third-person perspective—being most concerned about how the body appears to others.[39] A person with a high level of self-objectification would view her worth as intrinsically tied to how well her physical appearance conforms to others' ideals of beauty. In self-objectification, the body is viewed as an object that exists for the pleasure of others. In superhero films, this is purposefully developed through various camera techniques. Although the objectification of women's bodies is not new to film, this is especially prevalent in superhero films. The camera pans up a woman's body or focuses on certain parts, usually the chest and legs, and the audience is positioned to her body voyeuristically. Showing a woman's body fragmented into parts communicates to the audience that she is not a person, but rather an object to be viewed. In the film *Spider-Man* (2002), for example, Mary Jane's body was objectified by using angling and panning techniques like shooting from the waist up, cutting off her lower body to emphasize her

torso and large chest, as well as using angled shots to peer down her open shirt or up her short skirt.

Indeed, it is not only the female body that is objectified in visual representations of superheroes. The male superhero is also subject to the audience's gaze, though the male body is costumed and positioned to exemplify masculine strength, whereas the female body is depicted to emphasize femininity and sexuality. Though most of the published research focuses on female media consumers, male fans are not immune to the negative effects of superhero imagery on how they feel about their bodies. Male superhero fans may have higher levels of self-objectification for two reasons. First, the hypermasculinity that is characteristic of most superhero characters can trigger men to think about themselves in terms of the muscularity and virility of their own bodies. Second, the highly attractive and sexualized women that pepper superhero stories may cause heterosexual men to think about their own appearances, evaluating their own bodies in terms of what kind of masculine appearance might successfully attract such sexually appealing women in the real world.

CONCLUSION

Taken together, the research examining media effects on body image, self-concept, and gender stereotyping demonstrates that even very brief exposure (i.e., 15 minutes or less) to stereotypical images of women in superhero stories can have negative real-world effects on perceptions of the self and on gender stereotyping. Thus, research has consistently demonstrated that entertainment media—even media offerings as fantastical as superhero sagas—are more than "just" entertainment and do impact how we view ourselves and others.

What is particularly interesting about the superhero genre is the potential for both positive and negative effects on gender-related factors. Superhero characters may be empowering, positive influences as well as disempowering, negative influences on gender identity and gender-related beliefs. On the one hand, superheroes may be inspiring and a positive role model for fans. On the other hand, superheroes may promote a narrow view of gender that is problematic when applied to gender-based judgments in the real world.

Media scholars believe it is important that people develop *media literacy* skills as both media consumers and producers. Media literacy skills allow people to understand the constructions of media as well as its potential effects (see the Center for Media Literacy's website for more information on media literacy).[40] Critical awareness of the gender representations present in the stories we love, like superhero sagas, may help us to more meaningfully make sense of these portrayals and understand the workings of the media industry. Further, in the digital age, fans increasingly produce their own superhero stories—in the form of fan fiction, comics, or other art. Media literacy skills can help future superhero writers and producers avoid falling into the trap of producing superhero worlds that narrowly define what it means to be a man or a woman.

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