

With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility: A Content Analysis of Masculinity Themes in Superhero Movies

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This content analysis examined the frequency of messages regarding masculinity in a sample of 30 worldwide top-grossing superhero films and explored whether superheroes and villains significantly differed by type or frequency of masculinity messages they exhibited. Results demonstrated a high number of masculinity themes present in the overall sample. The most common masculinity themes reported for the superheroes were *physically strong*, *violence*, and *athletic*, while the most common masculinity themes reported for the villain characters were *violence* and *physically strong*. Superheroes were significantly more likely to be depicted as *strong*, *athletic*, *asserting* and *preserving masculinity*, *discussing appearance*, and *risk-taking* compared to villains. No significant differences in *violence*, *objectifying women*, or *playboy* behavior between the superhero and villain characters were found. Findings warrant additional scrutiny and consideration by researchers and interested stakeholders.

Public Significance Statement

This content analysis found that superhero films, which serve as important communicators of masculinity ideals, portray superheroes as engaging in risk-taking behavior, discussing their appearance, and asserting and preserving masculinity more so than villains. Additionally, our findings that there were no significant differences in the frequency of superheroes versus villains engaging in violence, objectifying women, or being a playboy are concerning. Superhero films serve as gender socializing agents; therefore, we recommend continued exploration of the messages regarding masculinity and the impacts of such messages in these films.

Keywords: masculinity, movies, superheroes, villains, media

The role of media in the communication of gender roles and masculinities has been consistently demonstrated (for a review of the literature, see Greenwood & Lippman, 2010). Although various forms of media have been studied, superhero movies have been hypothesized to be among the most salient communicators of masculinities (Coyne et al., 2014), as superheroes are powerful and attractive role models for young boys and adult men alike (Baker & Raney, 2007; Roberts et al., 2021). Superheroes are viewed as altruistic and likable (Fradkin et al., 2016); however, they also display toxic masculinity traits such as aggression, violence, and threatening behavior (Baker & Raney, 2007; Burch & Johnsen, 2020; Muller et al., 2020; Murnen et al., 2003). Past researchers have postulated that the presence of mixed messaging, particularly in a protagonist, could legitimize negative behaviors such as aggression or violence to viewers (Harriger et al., 2021). Indeed, it has been reported that superheroes are unlikely to be held accountable or to experience consequences of their negative behaviors (Bauer et al., 2017). The

villains in superhero films have been far less studied, and when they are it is typically related to deviant or criminal behavior (e.g., Kort-Butler, 2012). Yet, villains are also important to the storyline as they often add to a viewer's developing belief regarding what it means to be "good" versus "bad." Additionally, many past studies on superhero films have focused on a limited subset of masculinity traits (e.g., violence) or on the superhero only. We argue that it is important to examine whether there are significant differences in a comprehensive list of masculine traits and behaviors in both the superheroes and villains, as these films provide a strong basis for viewers' understanding of masculinities. The purpose of the current analysis was to more comprehensively examine messages regarding masculinities in superhero movies. Additionally, as the majority of past research has focused on superhero characters only, this analysis sought to determine whether superheroes and villains significantly differed in the rates or types of masculinity messages they exhibit.

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Traditional and Toxic Masculinities

It is hypothesized that exposure to traditional gender-role portrayals via the media shapes an observer's view of gender-appropriate behaviors and appearance (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Tsao, 2008), as well as understanding of acceptable gender identities (Steyer, 2014). Indeed, increased media consumption is associated with strong gendered beliefs regarding personality, occupation, and status (Coyne et al., 2014). Male characters in the media typically reflect societal expectations regarding masculinity and are portrayed as more dominant, aggressive, violent, tough, and unemotional than female characters (Collins, 2011; Scharrer & Blackburn, 2018; Zeglin, 2016). These characteristics seem to be a combination of both traditional and toxic masculinity traits.

Masculinity is culturally defined by social norms, beliefs, and expectations (Ingram et al., 2019). In the United States, there are several distinguishing characteristics of traditional masculinity such as aggressiveness, self-reliance, risk-taking, and competitiveness (Salgado et al., 2019). Toxic masculinity is described as a harmful form of traditional masculinity (Ingram et al., 2019) characterized by the drive to dominate and compete aggressively with others, particularly women and minority groups (Jewkes et al., 2015; Kupers, 2005), and misogynistic and homophobic attitudes (Parent et al., 2019). Detrimental effects on overall health and well-being such as substance use, reduced help-seeking, poor mental health, and suicide risk have been associated with strict adherence to traditional masculine norms (Iwamoto et al., 2018; King et al., 2018; Salgado et al., 2019). Additionally, characteristics of toxic masculinity, such as decreased vulnerability and reduced emotional expression, may increase resistance to mental health treatment and psychotherapy (Kupers, 2005). Adherence to toxic masculinity norms, such as dominance over women, has also been linked to increased sexual aggression toward intimate partners (Smith et al., 2015). Therefore, understanding how specific masculine norms are established and maintained is imperative. While masculinities should not be viewed as intrinsically harmful, it is important to determine how specific masculine norms are established and maintained. As the media reflects and reinforces cultural expectations of gender roles (Leaper, 2000) and exposure to gender roles via the media is positively associated with viewer advocacy for traditional gender roles (Gerbner et al., 2002; Scharrer & Blackburn, 2018), examination of the role of media in the development and maintenance of masculine gender roles is warranted.

Masculinities in the Media

In media targeting adults, male characters reflect societal expectations regarding masculinities and are more often portrayed as unemotional, violent, tough, dominant, and aggressive compared to women (Collins, 2011; Scharrer & Blackburn, 2018; Zeglin, 2016). Similarly, animated television (e.g., Keys, 2016; Leaper et al., 2002; Thompson & Zerbino, 1995) and movies (e.g., England et al., 2011; León Gonzalez et al., 2020; Towbin et al., 2004) targeting children also promote gender-stereotyped messages regarding masculinities. For example, male characters are often portrayed as strong or performing climactic rescues (England et al., 2011), muscular (Harriger et al., 2018), and powerful (Aley & Hahn, 2020). Only one study, to our knowledge, has specifically assessed toxic masculinity traits (Harriger et al., 2021). Researchers reported that two of the

most common themes in children's animated movies were *violence* and *inspires fear* and argued that these themes are consistent with the conceptualization of toxic masculinity. Other toxic masculinity traits such as *objectification of women*, *playboy behavior*, *power over women*, and *heterosexual self-presentation* were rarely found in children's animated films (Harriger et al., 2021).

Masculinities in Superhero Films

Superheroes of both sexes are typically portrayed as assertive, aggressive, powerful, and hypermuscular (Baker & Raney, 2007; Burch & Johnsen, 2020; Murnen et al., 2003). Content analyses have found male superheroes to be less emotional, angrier, and more threatening than female superheroes (Baker & Raney, 2007), and male characters to be more independent, powerful, violent, and more likely to use weapons compared to female characters (Miller et al., 2016). Another study examining positive and negative attributes of superhero characters reported that superheroes displayed significantly more negative (or toxic masculinity) attributes (e.g., violence/fighting, use of weapons, and bullying/intimidation/torture) compared to positive attributes (e.g., assisting others/protecting the public, positive relationships with family or friends, teamwork/collaboration; Bauer et al., 2017). Finally, a study examining the bodies of humanoid characters from over 3,000 Marvel comic books found that comic book male superheroes, who are often portrayed as stereotypically masculine, have unrealistic body types (Burch & Johnsen, 2020). Specifically, male superheroes in comic books are almost as wide at the shoulders as they are tall and have shoulder-waist ratio and upper body muscularity almost twice that of normal college men (Burch & Johnsen, 2020). We are not aware of any content analyses that have examined toxic masculinity traits in superheroes (other than violence); therefore, the current analysis will seek to include these masculinity traits in our analysis of superhero films. Our analysis will also seek to include a more comprehensive list of masculine traits than past studies by selecting additional themes from research examining gendered messaging in the media (England et al., 2011; Harriger et al., 2018, 2021).

Exposure to superhero programming is linked to higher levels of gender-stereotyped play in boys and higher levels of weapon play in both boys and girls (Coyne et al., 2014). Additionally, endorsement of traditional masculine norms in emerging adult men is associated with childhood superhero identification (Roberts et al., 2021). Whereas, past research documents the prevalence of messages regarding masculinities in superhero programming (Baker & Raney, 2007; Burch & Johnsen, 2020; Miller et al., 2016), this research focuses primarily on the male superhero, who is altruistic and likable (Muller et al., 2020). Superheroes may promote resilience (Fradkin et al., 2016) or prosocial behaviors (Rosenberg et al., 2013), and it is often believed that superhero violence is acceptable or justified in order to achieve the greater good (Kort-Butler, 2012). The antagonists or villains are often overlooked in this research, and when they are studied, the focus is on deviant behaviors and crime (Phillips & Strobl, 2006; Vollum & Adkinson, 2003). To our knowledge, only one study has examined whether differences existed between superhero and villain characters and found that superheroes were more likely to engage in violence compared to villains (Muller et al., 2020). This study was not without limitations, as the sample included only 10 movies released between 2015 and 2016 and did not assess for other characteristics related to masculinity. Regardless of

these limitations, the researchers did conclude that the high number of violent acts demonstrated by superheroes was concerning as viewers, particularly children, may view the characters as role models. They state that it is possible that viewers find the violent acts such as murder exhibited by superheroes as acceptable given they are fighting for the greater good (Muller et al., 2020). Therefore, it is important to further explore whether other types of messaging in superhero films differ between superheroes and villains as this may have implications for the development of viewers' gendered beliefs and behaviors.

The present analysis draws from past content analyses and research on masculinity themes to extensively examine messaging regarding masculinity in superhero movies and the extent to which male superheroes and villains exhibit adherence to masculine norms. We selected masculinity themes from past content analyses that examined masculinity or gendered themes in film (England et al., 2011; Harriger et al., 2018, 2021) in an attempt to examine a broader range of masculine characteristics and behaviors compared to past research on superhero films. We also sought to determine whether differences exist between the superheroes' and villains' depictions of masculinities, as this may have important implications for viewer's internalization of masculine norms. Our research questions are as follows:

R1: What is the frequency of masculinity themes in the current sample of the 30 worldwide top-grossing superhero moves?

R2: In an effort to further understand the portrayal of protagonists (superheroes) and antagonists (villains) in superhero movies, we also sought to explore whether differences in the frequencies or types of masculinity themes exist between the superheroes and the villains in the current sample of the 30 worldwide top-grossing superhero films.

Method

Sample

A coded content analysis approach, which has been successfully utilized in past research (Harriger et al., 2018; Klein et al., 2000), enabled coders to identify the presence of masculinity themes in popular superhero movies, as well as the frequency of themes demonstrated by superheroes and villains. The list of movies was obtained from Box Office Mojo's list of the top worldwide grossing superhero films and can be viewed in Table 1. The top 30 movies from the list were selected, excluding any movie that had a female superhero or villain (*Incredibles 2*, *Captain Marvel*, *Thor: Ragnarok*, *Wonder Woman*, *Ant-Man and the Wasp*), a child protagonist (*Big Hero 6*), did not have a clear or traditional villain or superhero (*Captain America: Civil War*, *Joker*, *Batman vs. Superman: Dawn of Justice*, *Venom*, *Suicide Squad*, *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, *Hancock*), or was a science fiction film rather than a superhero movie (*The Matrix Reloaded*). If a movie was removed from the list, we selected the next movie until we reached a sample size of 30 movies.

Coding Strategy

The coding schema was informed by earlier research examining gender and appearance-related messages in animated movies (England et al., 2011; Harriger et al., 2018, 2021). First, we included the themes *winning*, *power over women*, *heterosexual self-presentation*, *emotional control*, *playboy*, *violence*, *self-reliance*, *risk-taking*, and *primacy of work*. These themes were created for the purpose of another study measuring masculinity themes in movies (Harriger et al., 2021)

Table 1

Total Instances of Masculinity Themes for Superheroes and Villains in Each Superhero Movie

Superhero movies	Masculinity theme frequency		
	Superheroes	Villains	Total
Aquaman (2018)	118	84	202
Avengers: Age of Ultron (2015)	251	53	304
Avengers: Endgame (2019)	178	46	224
Avengers: Infinity War (2018)	204	93	297
Black Panther (2018)	57	47	104
Deadpool (2016)	111	24	135
Deadpool 2 (2018)	148	63	211
Doctor Strange (2016)	45	30	75
Guardians of the Galaxy (2014)	87	25	112
Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2 (2016)	52	23	75
Iron Man (2008)	72	41	113
Iron Man 2 (2010)	62	40	102
Iron Man 3 (2013)	62	46	108
Justice League (2017)	114	39	153
Logan (2017)	77	17	94
Man of Steel (2013)	71	45	116
Spider-Man (2002)	86	45	131
Spider-Man 2 (2004)	72	75	147
Spider-Man 3 (2007)	47	70	117
Spider-Man: Far From Home (2019)	59	22	81
Spider-Man: Homecoming (2017)	85	23	108
The Amazing Spider-Man (2012)	106	70	176
The Amazing Spider-Man 2 (2014)	57	29	86
The Avengers (2012)	158	44	202
The Dark Knight (2008)	68	59	127
The Dark Knight Rises (2012)	54	62	116
The Incredibles (2004)	89	13	102
Thor: The Dark World (2013)	59	24	83
X-Men: Apocalypse (2016)	79	54	133
X-Men: Days of Future Past (2014)	55	30	85

which utilized questions from the Conformity to Masculine Norms Inventory-46 (Parent & Moradi, 2009), a popular measure that assesses adherence to masculine norms. Additionally, we added themes that were assessed in earlier studies of gender roles in media (*physically strong*, *assertive*, *athletic*, *inspires fear*, *brave*, *leader*, *assertion and preservation of masculinity*, *engagement in traditionally masculine activities*, *objectification of women*, *confidence*, *engagement of activities to build strength*, *engagement in activities to enhance appearance*, *talks about strength*, *talks about appearance*, England et al., 2011; Harriger et al., 2021). These themes were selected by a group of research assistants who read extensive literature on masculinities and media as well as superhero films. The list of themes was then provided to an expert in the field for feedback and final approval. The list of themes, definitions, and examples of each theme can be found in Table 2.

Procedure

Two undergraduate students participated in extensive training prior to coding the 30 movies. First, the coders received detailed information regarding each theme, read relevant research, and watched clips of movies not included in the present study. This allowed the coders to practice coding, to discuss any questions or inconsistencies that arose, and to further develop the coding scheme. The coders were then instructed to independently code the first 20 min of five movies

Table 2
Masculinity-Relevant Themes

Theme	Definition	Example
Winning	Extreme importance placed on winning, rather than losing, or focus on achieving goals	In <i>Black Panther</i> , there is a ceremonial battle for kingship and Thanos is willing to destroy all of the population rather than just half of it to accomplish his goal of becoming king.
Power over women	Belief that men are superior to women	In <i>Spider-Man 3</i> , Venom Peter bosses a female character around to make cookies.
Physically strong	Having a strong physical effect on a person or object	In <i>The Avengers</i> , Hulk throws Loki into the ground repeatedly, causing the floor to break with the Hulk's force.
Athletic	Running, jumping, or kicking in such a way that athleticism is required	In <i>X-Men: Apocalypse</i> , Quicksilver runs and jumps throughout the school in order to save students from an explosion.
Assertive	Strong insistence upon a position, idea, right, or claim, or proving a point	In <i>Deadpool 2</i> , Deadpool says to Weasel "I'm not going to abandon this kid. He's never had anyone, ever. I need to be selfless," illustrating that this was something Deadpool was insistent on doing.
Brave	Being a courageous leader or rescuing others in the face of danger	In <i>Avengers: Endgame</i> , the characters risk their lives to go back in time in order to try to make things right.
Confidence	Feeling of self-assurance arising from appreciation of one's own abilities	In <i>Thor: The Dark World</i> , Thor believes he can fly the ship even though he does not know how.
Leader	Character directs other people or gives them orders; this was only coded if the character was leading a group of people, not animals	In <i>Man of Steel</i> , General Zod leads a rebellion against the Kryptonians at the beginning of the movie where he instructs his soldiers and they follow his commands for attack.
Inspires fear	Character causes others to respond with uneasiness due to a sense of impending danger or threatens other characters	In <i>Avengers: Age of Ultron</i> , Iron Man and Hulk fight each other in the city and marketplace, causing civilians to scream and run away out of fear.
Assertion and preservation of masculinity	Banter or sarcasm by male character with other males to assert they are the more dominant male and to put others down	In <i>Avengers: Age of Ultron</i> , Thor and Iron Man debate whose girlfriend is better
Engagement in traditionally masculine activities	Character engages in stereotypically masculine activities such as drinking beer, watching sports, etc.	In <i>Avengers: Age of Ultron</i> , Captain America and Iron Man chop wood at Hawkeye's house
Objectification of women	Character views women as objects	In <i>Iron Man 2</i> , Tony looks up Black Widow on his electronic device and multiple pictures of her pop up but he chooses to open the picture of her modeling in her underwear.
Engagement in activities to build strength	Character engages in activities designed to build physical strength or to strengthen their power, even if not physical	In <i>The Dark Knight Rises</i> , Bruce works out so he is able to climb the wall and escape from jail.
Engagement in activities to enhance appearance	Character engages in activities designed to enhance or improve appearance	In <i>The Incredibles</i> , Mr. Incredible exercises not to just stronger but to lose weight, as indicated by him measuring himself.
Emotional control	Refusal or reluctance to share feelings with others	In <i>Guardians of the Galaxy</i> , StarLord does not want to talk about his mother's death to Gamora.
Playboy	Actual or desired sexual promiscuity	Iron Man does not remember the woman he had sex with and calls a woman by the wrong name in <i>Iron Man</i> .
Violence	Acceptance and justification of violence	In <i>The Dark Knight</i> , the Joker incites violence by having his henchmen kill one another until he kills the last one himself.
Self-reliance	Refusal or reluctance to ask others for help	In <i>The Incredibles</i> , Mr. Incredible runs into Buddy on his way to stop the Bomb Voyage and tells Buddy, "Fly home, Buddy. I work alone."
Risk-taking	Seeking out or enjoyment of risky situations	Spiderman in <i>Spider-Man</i> , jumps off a building for the first time and swings into the side of the building with his eyes closed.
Primacy of work	Belief that work should be the most important aspect of one's life	In <i>Avengers: Age of Ultron</i> , the main character leaves their family to fight Ultron.

(table continues)

Table 2 (continued)

Theme	Definition	Example
Discussion of strength	Character talks about own strength or someone talks about character's strength	In <i>The Amazing Spider-Man</i> , the newscaster refers to the Lizard climbing up the building as "very strong".
Discussion of appearance	Character talks about own appearance or someone talks about character's appearance	Spiderman looks at himself in the mirror, feels his muscles, and says, "big change" in <i>Spider-Man</i> .

included in the current analysis. Interrater agreement during the training sessions was 91%. After the training sessions were complete, the coders independently watched each of the 30 movies in their entirety and recorded the total number of instances each theme appeared in each movie for the superhero(es) and the villain(s).

Coders were provided a coding sheet that included all themes, descriptions of the themes, and additional notes from the training session. They were instructed to assign a code each time a male superhero or villain primary character exhibited one of the listed characteristics or was mentioned by other characters as exhibiting the characteristic. A primary character is defined as a movie character who was a regular member of the cast and advanced the plot of the film (Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995). Each time a new behavior was exhibited by a superhero or villain it was included. Additionally, each time a scene change took place, the behavior was coded again, even if the same behavior had taken place in a previous scene (e.g., if a character was engaged in a fight that moved from an indoor setting to an outdoor setting, a new code was assigned when the character moved outside). This is consistent with previous content analytic methods for assessing masculinity messages in the media (e.g., England et al., 2011).

To determine interrater reliability after all coding had taken place, Krippendorff's α was calculated (K_α ; Krippendorff, 2004) using the KALPHA macro for SPSS (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007). We required a minimum α value of .667 to be included in inferential analyses for present content analysis, as this would indicate acceptable agreement between raters. Krippendorff (2004) states that while $a \geq .80$ is customary, $a \geq .667$ is appropriate when tentative conclusions are acceptable. For descriptive statistics, we required a minimum interrater agreement of 90% when K_α was less than .667. Consequently, the following themes were excluded from inferential analyses but included in descriptive analyses: *power over women* (superhero a unable to be calculated, interrater agreement = 100%), *engagement in traditionally masculine activities* (villain a unable to be calculated, interrater agreement = 100%), *engagement in activities to enhance appearance* (villain a unable to be calculated, interrater agreement = 100%), *emotional control* (villain a = .00, interrater agreement = 96.7%), *self-reliance* (villain a = .00, interrater agreement = 96.7%), and *primacy of work* (villain a = -.02, interrater agreement = 93.3%). The following themes were excluded from both descriptive and inferential analyses: *winning* (villain a = .49, interrater agreement = 66.7%), *power over women*, *assertive* (superhero a = .53, interrater agreement = 20%; villain a = .48, interrater agreement = 26.7%), *brave* (superhero a = .60, interrater agreement = 23.3%), *confidence* (superhero a = .64, interrater agreement = 40%; villain a = .64, interrater agreement = 63.3%), *inspires fear* (superhero a = .64, interrater agreement = 40%; villain a = .66, interrater agreement = 23.3%), *engagement in activities to build strength* (villain a = .66, interrater agreement = 86.7%), and

discussion of strength (superhero a = .65, interrater agreement = 73.3%; villain a = .63, interrater agreement = 80%). K_α values for the remaining themes ranged from .70 to 1.00 (see Table 3). The coders took extensive notes while viewing each film and provided written explanations for each code, and any disagreements in the coding were resolved via discussion between the coders (led by the first author). After discussions, K_α was excellent (1.00) for all variables.

Result

In order to address our research question regarding the frequency of masculinity themes in our sample of the 30 worldwide top-grossing superhero films, we calculated the total number of masculinity messages in each film as well as the number of instances of superheroes and villains displaying masculinity themes in the films. These results can be found in Table 1. The movies with the most instances of superheroes displaying masculinity themes were *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (n = 251), *Avengers: Infinity War* (n = 204), *Avengers: Endgame* (n = 178), and *Avengers* (n = 158). The movies with the fewest instances of superheroes displaying masculinity themes were *Doctor Strange* (n = 45), *Spider-Man 3* (n = 47), *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* (n = 52), and *The Dark Knight Rises* (n = 54). The average number of masculinity themes displayed by superheroes across all movies was 92.77 (SD = 49.76).

The movies with the most instances of villains displaying masculinity themes included *Infinity War* (n = 93), *Aquaman* (n = 84), *Spider-Man 2* (n = 75), and *The Amazing Spider-Man* (n = 70). The movies with the fewest instances of villains displaying masculinity themes were *The Incredibles* (n = 13), *Logan* (n = 17), *Spider-Man: Far From Home* (n = 22), and *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* (n = 23). The average number of masculinity themes displayed by villains across all movies was 44.53 (SD = 20.59).

Table 3 includes a complete list of the means and standard deviations (SD s) for each specific masculinity theme for both superheroes and villains across all movies. Briefly, superheroes were most likely to be coded as displaying *physical strength* (M = 27.66, SD = 17.91), *violence* (M = 21.77, SD = 17.74), and *athleticism* (M = 15.00, SD = 10.30). Masculinity themes most likely to be coded for villain characters included *violence* (M = 16.67, SD = 7.74) and *physical strength* (M = 12.47, SD = 9.04). No superhero character was coded as displaying *power over women*, and no villains were coded as *engaging in traditionally masculine activities* or *engaging in activities to enhance appearance*.

Differences Between Superhero and Villain Characters

In order to address our research question regarding whether significant differences existed between the superheroes and the

Table 3*Interrater Agreement and Average Frequencies of Masculinity-Relevant Themes in Animated Movies*

Variable	Superhero Krippendorff's α	Superhero mean (SD)	Villain Krippendorff's α	Villain mean (SD)
1. Winning	.71	.33 (.71)	.49	—
2. Power over women	N/A ^a	0 (0)	1.00	.03 (.18)
3. Physically strong	.95	27.66 (17.91)	.96	12.47 (9.04)
4. Athletic	.91	15.00 (10.30)	.82	2.40 (2.97)
5. Assertive	.53	—	.48	—
6. Brave	.60	—	.89	.33 (.71)
7. Confidence	.64	—	.64	—
8. Leader	.79	1.47 (1.83)	.76	1.53 (1.66)
9. Inspires fear	.64	—	.66	—
10. Assertion and preservation of masculinity	.92	1.10 (1.49)	.70	.20 (.48)
11. Engagement in traditionally masculine activities	.80	.73 (1.02)	N/A ^a	0 (0)
12. Objectification of women	.75	.27 (.58)	.84	.20 (.61)
13. Engagement in activities to build strength	.85	.67 (1.12)	.66	—
14. Engagement in activities to enhance appearance	1.00	.17 (.75)	N/A ^a	0 (0)
15. Emotional control	.82	.37 (.62)	.00 ^a	.03 (.18)
16. Playboy	.88	.30 (.75)	.79	.10 (.31)
17. Violence	.96	21.77 (17.74)	.92	16.67 (7.74)
18. Self-reliance	.78	.57 (.90)	.00 ^a	.03 (.18)
19. Risk-taking	.70	5.10 (2.48)	.86	.73 (.83)
20. Primacy of work	.91	.50 (.82)	-.02 ^a	.07 (.25)
21. Discussion of strength	.65 ^a	.67 (.76)	.63	—
22. Discussion of appearance	.76	.53 (.82)	.76	.10 (.31)

Note. Interrater agreement for variables with a superscript letter was at least 90%, indicating low Krippendorff's α was produced as a result of low variability in coding, rather than low interrater agreement (Feinstein & Cicchetti, 1990; Viera & Garrett, 2005). Thus, descriptive statistics were conducted on these variables but not inferential statistics (e.g., *t* tests).

villains, a series of paired samples *t* tests were conducted to determine differences between superhero characters and villain characters for frequencies of masculinity-relevant themes. Results indicated that superheroes were more likely than villains to be coded as *physically strong*, $t(29) = 5.17, p < .001, d = .92$; *athletic*, $t(29) = 6.73, p < .001, d = 1.20$; *asserting and preserving masculinity*, $t(29) = 3.41, p = .002, d = .62$; *discussing appearance*, $t(29) = 2.77, p = .01, d = .51$; and *taking risks* $t(29) = 9.47, p < .001, d = 1.73$. There were no significant differences in how often villains and superheroes were coded as being focused on being *leaders*, $t(29) = -.16, p = .87, d = -.03$; *objectifying women*, $t(29) = .63, p = .54, d = .11$; being a *playboy*, $t(29) = 1.44, p = .16, d = .26$; or being *violent*, $t(29) = 1.77, p = .09, d = .32$.

Discussion

The present study sought to examine messages regarding masculinities in popular superhero movies by including an extensive list of masculine traits and expanding upon past research that focused solely on the superhero characters (Baker & Raney, 2007; Burch & Johnsen, 2020; Miller et al., 2016). We first sought to examine the frequency of masculinity themes in the current sample of the 30 worldwide top-grossing superhero films. Overall, our results suggest that high levels of masculinity messaging was present for both superhero and villain characters in superhero movies. The total number of instances of masculinity themes in each film ranged from 75 (*Dr. Strange and Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2*) to 304 (*Avengers: Age of Ultron*).

The most common masculinity themes reported for the superheroes in the current sample were *physically strong*, *violence*, and *athletic*, and the most common masculinity themes reported for the villain

characters were *physically strong* and *violence*. These findings parallel those from past research that has reported that superheroes are portrayed as fast, strong, and powerful (Baker & Raney, 2007; Murnen et al., 2003) and that high levels of violence are portrayed by both superheroes and villains in superhero films (Bauer et al., 2017; Muller et al., 2020). Our results extend past research by demonstrating that villains are also portrayed as strong in superhero films.

Interestingly, the movies that portrayed the highest number of masculinity themes overall for the superhero characters were all part of the *Avengers* series (*Avengers: Age of Ultron*, *Avengers: Infinity War*, *Avengers: Endgame*, and *The Avengers*). While it is possible that the storylines in these movies led to an increase in themes regarding masculinity, it is also important to note that these movies included several superheroes in comparison to other movies with only one superhero character. Additionally, coders anecdotally noted that the amount of screen time for superheroes seemed to far exceed that for the villains. The current analysis did not control for the number of characters included in the coding or the amount of screen time, and we recommend that future researchers take these variables into account for future studies.

The second aim of the study was to examine whether there were significant differences in the rates or types of masculinity messaging between the superheroes and the villains. Our results indicated that superheroes were significantly more likely to be depicted as *strong*, *athletic*, *discussing appearance*, *risk-taking*, and *asserting and preserving masculinity* compared to villains. It was not surprising that superheroes were more likely to be depicted as athletic and strong, as this parallels previous research demonstrating the portrayal of superheroes as strong, fast, muscular, and powerful (Baker & Raney, 2007; Murnen et al., 2003). What may warrant

future examination, however, is the fact that superheroes discussed their appearance more often than villains. If the focus on these films is also on the appearance of the body rather than the functionality of the body, this may pose a risk for viewers, as research demonstrates that media exposure to the muscular ideal, or society's expectations of male attractiveness, is associated with increased disordered eating (Griffiths et al., 2013) and body image concerns (Arbour & Ginis, 2006) in adolescent and young adult men. While it is unknown if the same effect exists for younger boys viewing superhero films, it can be hypothesized that they may be negatively affected by frequent exposure to the muscular ideal. This may be particularly true when superhero characters repeatedly highlight their appearance, as research has shown young children lack nuance when evaluating media messages (Harriger, 2012; Li et al., 2015).

The finding that *risk-taking behavior* was higher in superheroes compared to villains is also concerning. Past research has reported that participation in risky behavior may be used to prove one's masculinity (Sanders, 2011), and adherence to traditional masculinity norms is associated with various risk-taking behaviors such as substance use (for review, see Bogdan et al., 2016) and aggressive driving (Sanders, 2011). While we are unaware of studies examining the role of exposure to superheroes in risk-taking behavior, research has demonstrated that video game use is related to risk behavior (e.g., Fischer et al., 2009). As superhero characters are viewed as role models for both boys and adult men (Baker & Raney, 2007; Roberts et al., 2021), it is pertinent to examine whether exposure to superhero films is related to later risk-taking behavior as well.

The findings regarding *asserting and preserving masculinity* are less easily interpreted without examining the effects of such messaging on viewers; however, there are some critical factors to consider. First, instances of *asserting and preserving masculinity* often involved sarcastic banter between characters. Research indicates that men are more likely to engage in sarcasm than women (Rockwell & Theriot, 2001), and the use of irony and sarcasm is associated with masculinity (Korobov, 2005), particularly in individualistic cultures (Blasko et al., 2021). Male characters in movies may use sarcasm for collaborative purposes (Bachtar & Hardjanto, 2018), and this was certainly the case in our sample. However, we know little regarding the effects of exposure to such behavior in the media. It is possible that boys and men may learn that sarcasm and banter is a component of masculine behavior through viewing superheroes in these films.

No significant differences were found between the superheroes and villains in how often they engaged in *objectification of women*, *playboy behavior*, or *violence*. Our finding that superheroes and villains did not significantly differ in the rates of *violence* portrayed is particularly troubling, given that *violence* was one of the most common themes reported for both the superheroes and villains. These results parallel previous research reporting high levels of violence by male superheroes (e.g., Baker & Raney, 2007; Bauer et al., 2017) but contradict a study that found higher instances of violence in superheroes compared to villains (Muller et al., 2020). While our current analysis did not measure the effects of viewing the films, past research has found that exposure to superhero programming is associated with higher levels of weapon play in children (Coyne et al., 2014) and the American Academy of Pediatrics has issued a warning regarding exposure to violent media (Council on Communications and Media, 2009). Therefore, the rates of violence in the current sample of films warrant additional scrutiny by researchers and interested stakeholders. Additionally, violence may be more acceptable or justified by an

audience when portrayed by a superhero (Kort-Butler, 2012). Thus, it is important for future work to examine potential differences in the effects of exposure to violence by superheroes or villains. It is possible that violence by a superhero may have more far-reaching negative consequences for viewers.

Although the themes *objectifying women* and *playboy behavior* were reported far less frequently overall, the fact that they did not significantly differ between the superhero and villains also warrants additional attention, as these themes have been linked to toxic masculinity (Harriger et al., 2021). Toxic masculinity has been associated with a number of detrimental outcomes such as increased sexual aggression (Smith et al., 2015). Therefore, even low instances of these themes are concerning, particularly when demonstrated by the superhero character.

Limitations and Future Directions

The present study has many strengths, such as the examination of a wide range of masculinity traits and its inclusion of villains. However, it is not without limitations. First, although raters did participate in several training sessions and interrater reliability was generally high, the ratings were subjective in that raters' own cultural biases and understandings of masculinity may have influenced how they coded certain variables. Furthermore, raters were instructed to code only the number of times each theme emerged for the superheroes and villains in the movies, rather than the specific instances in which it occurred. It is possible that even if each rater recorded the same number of times a theme emerged in a given movie they may have identified different instances of the theme. Future content analyses could examine the specific instances in which a coder indicated that a theme was present. Additionally, this study utilized a deductive method, and it is possible that an inductive method may have provided additional insight regarding messaging in superhero films.

Additionally, although the sample included the top worldwide grossing films, the films predominantly portrayed Western ideals regarding masculinity. We recommend that future researchers consider an examination of more diverse films from different cultural viewpoints in order to determine whether messaging differs. The current analysis was also limited to male characters only. It may be helpful for future studies to examine female superheroes and villains as well as to determine whether themes such as violence and physical strength are more frequently displayed by male or female characters. It would also be important to control for the number of superheroes or villains in the movies as well as the amount of screen time each character received, as this could have affected the overall results of the current analysis.

Finally, as this study was a content analysis, we were unable to measure the effects of exposure to masculinity messaging in superhero films or whether the effects differ when the behavior is portrayed by a superhero or a villain. We recommend that future researchers include an experimental component to determine whether exposure to such films is related to internalization of gendered messaging.

Conclusion

It has been previously reported that superheroes are more likely to be depicted as altruistic, likable, and prosocial (Muller et al., 2020; Rosenberg et al., 2013) and serve as influential and appealing role models for both boys and men (Baker & Raney, 2007;

Roberts et al., 2021). Our findings that superhero characters were more likely than villains to be portrayed as engaging in risk-taking behavior, discussing their appearance, and asserting and preserving masculinity warrants future attention. Additionally, our findings that there were no significant differences in the frequency of superheroes versus villains engaging in violence, objectifying women, or being a playboy are concerning. We challenge producers, writers, and directors to consider the implications of our findings and to consider creating superhero films that promote more positive messaging. We also recommend that caregivers monitor the types of films their children view and engage in active mediation, as this has been shown to be an effective strategy to mitigate the effects of exposure to gender stereotypes in the media (e.g., Nathanson et al., 2002). Superhero movies serve as potential gender socializing agents, and early identification with superheroes is associated with adherence to traditional masculinity norms later in life (Roberts et al., 2021). We therefore recommend continued examination of the prevalence and effects of gendered messaging in superhero movies.

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