Gulli, Cristina: The Construction of Hegemonic Masculinity Through Superheroes

Abstract:

A majority of masculinity is learned through the media (this is debatable... wouldn't family/friends be the largest influence? If you want to keep this argument, cite a source). Since the turn of the Millennium, superhero programs have drastically increased in both production and consumption. Scholars such as Brown (1999) have argued that superhero masculinity represents our conventional beliefs as to what it means to be a man (Brown 1999). For this reason, I have chosen to examine the construction of hegemonic masculinity through superheroes and its effects on consumers. Hegemonic masculinity is “the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable” (Connell 2016:139). Whether it be in comic books or cinema, these superheroes represent the ideal man, and therefore emphasize and contribute to conceptions of hegemonic masculinity on a social scale. This presentation will examine superhero masculinity and how it is portrayed through body, dress and behavior.

Superhero masculinity characterizes a model of gender behavior for young readers that has become almost exclusively hyper-masculine (Brown 1999). Superhero masculinity often “embodies the tough, uncompromising masculine virtues of the American nation” (Miettinen 2014). It is often represented through a transition from wimp to warrior, as can be seen in Captain America, when Steve Rogers transforms from a small, scrawny boy, to a tall, muscular man (Captain America: The First Avenger). This metamorphosis also represents the two bodies often present in superhero media, hard and soft bodies. The small scrawny body type is known as soft body, which is representative of femininity. The tall, muscular body is referred to as hard body, which is the masculine ideal of a strong body and mind. This hard body ideal gives consumers the idea that “muscles make real men,” which can cause them to constantly aim for the ideal body type (Brown 1999:32). The wimp to warrior dichotomy is also demonstrated through dress. Dress is a significant resource in gender and masculinity construction. The act of changing from alter ego to super is an integral part of superhero masculinity, as it emphasizes the transition from wimp to warrior. Therefore, the ideal man should be able to change as a situation or circumstance demands. When one loses control over this transformation is when they fail to be masculine (i.e. Green Goblin, the villain in many Spider-Man comics). The duality between superhero and alter ego gives the message to consumers that you can choose to be masculine rather than feminine, to choose to be the ideal man. Finally, the violence that is a part of our society’s hegemonic masculinity is portrayed through superhero media as well. A necessary step on the path to masculinity for many characters is to “[g]o through the process of being...brought to breaking point before being restored through violent brutality” (Roblou 2012:82). Therefore, masculinity is tied to hyperbolic violence as well as a hyper-masculine body. Superhero programs are geared towards young boys, most of whom are in the process of forming their own masculinities. Consequently, the masculinity presented in these programs will likely be internalized in these young. Though the superhero world may seem like an unlikely source to real world constructions of masculinity, superheroes are modeled off of the hegemonic masculinity in the current society and further promote the characteristics of the ideal man.

References.

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Connell, Raewyn

Coyne, Sarah M., Jennifer Ruh Linder, Eric R. Rasmussen, David A. Nelson, and Kevin M. Collier
2014 It’s a Bird! It’s a Plane! It’s a Gender Stereotype!: Longitudinal Associations Between Superhero Viewing and Gender Stereotyped Play. Sex Roles 70(9-10): 416–430.

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Ellis, Anthony

Johnson, Gary

Keith, Thomas

Keith, Thomas

Landon, Richard

Messerschmidt, James W
Appendix A:

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