

School of Media, Creative Arts and Social Inquiry

**What can the X-Men comics tell us about the challenges of
adapting female superheroes to film?**

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Declaration

To the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgment has been made. This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

Signature: Tegan Hooper **Date:** July 12, 2021.

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Abstract

Previous research has indicated that the adaptation of superheroes from comic books to film has been motivated by a desire to maximise potential revenue, yet these profit-driven concerns have been subject to little critical examination when considering why so few female-led superhero films have been made. This research seeks to investigate how gendered traits associated with superhero protagonists may impact the ability of film adaptations to generate revenue. Interviews conducted by entertainment journalists with those involved in film production, along with sales data, are reviewed in this thesis to identify common concerns that guided decision making regarding the production of superhero film adaptations. These concerns are then compared to stereotypical gender differences that existed from 1963, when the *X-Men* characters were created, through to modern day adaptations. This comparison establishes a number of hypothetical factors which support the favouring of male protagonists. These hypotheses are then discussed in the context of case studies of the adaptation of superhero comics to film and, to a lesser extent, to television. While a range of case studies are discussed, the *X-Men* franchise is the central case study of the thesis as a range of female heroes were featured in the comics, yet few made it to the big screen, making it evident that the process of film adaptation introduced a preference for male protagonists over their female counterparts. Analysis of these case studies supported the hypothesis that male protagonists of superhero comics more often possessed qualities associated with producing commercially successful superhero films. While the extent to which the portrayal of characters has been predetermined by gender has changed over time, the *X-Men* comics under investigation in this thesis were produced between 1963 and 1991, an era in which gender stereotypes were more prevalent.

1 Introduction

1.1 Context of the study

Superheroes are heroic characters who possess superpowers that are either innate to them, are gained through advanced science, or are due to “highly developed physical, mental, or mystical skills” (Coogan 2013, 3). They typically have a dual identity and don “a codename and iconic costume” when performing their heroic deeds in order to conceal their ordinary appearance (Coogan 2013, 3). This archetype became common after the success of Superman, a character who first appeared in 1938 (Reynolds 1992, 10; Lopes 2009, 19–21). The popularity of Superman and his successors has led superheroes to proliferate not only across the comic book medium in which they first gained fame, but also across adaptations to radio, film, television, and other entertainment mediums.

Throughout this expansion, female superheroes have been a consistent part of the genre. Early female superheroes included Wonder Woman, the Phantom Lady and the Black Cat (shown in Figure 1), who were all introduced in 1941, and the Blonde Phantom, who first appeared in 1946 (Benton 1992). In addition to their leading roles, female superheroes were also regular presences in superhero and supervillain teams, such as in comics like *The Fantastic Four* (1961), *The X-Men* (1963) and *The Avengers* (1963) (shown in Figure 2). While female superheroes have always been outnumbered by their male counterparts (Coogan 2018, 566), they have been more common than has often been recognised. In examining the gender distribution of characters by Marvel comics, Settoducato (2015) found that 637 of the 3301 (19.30%) characters who existed as of 2012 were female; she also found that most of these female characters were characterised as superheroes (Settoducato 2015). Carolyn Cocca’s analysis of female characters in a set of ensemble comics featuring the *Avengers* and *Justice League* published between 2011 and 2012 found that female characters represented a greater portion, some 23.88% of characters (Cocca 2014, 416).

Image has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 1: The Black Cat was a superhero who appeared in publications by Harvey Comics (Hamey and Gabriele 1946). She was a contemporary of Captain America who was created in the same year.

While female superheroes have always been present in comics as the heroes of stories, their adaptation to comparably heroic roles within film adaptation took longer however, and remains more infrequent than the adaptation of male superheroes to film. The first time a superhero story was adapted to film was in 1941, with *The Adventures of Captain Marvel*, a 12-part film serial about the character Captain Marvel, which was followed by 15-part serials about *The Batman* and *The Phantom* in 1943, and *Captain America* in 1944. These were followed in 1948, 1949 and 1950 with the 15-part serials *Superman*, *New Adventures of Batman and Robin*, *the Boy Wonder*, and *Atom Man vs. Superman*. Following the successes of these serials, filmmakers then began adapting superhero stories to feature length films. The first of these was the 1951 film, *Superman and the Mole Men*, but it was not followed by any other films about superheroes for quite some time, as superhero comics fell out of popularity (Gabilliet 2010). The next superhero film would be *Batman* in 1966 which was produced as an extension of the *Batman* television series that aired from 1966 until 1969. Again, there would be a long time before any other superhero movies would be made; the next superhero film adaptation was *Superman* in 1978. Sequels followed *Superman* in 1980, 1983 and 1987, with the first female-led superhero film *Supergirl* in 1984. *Batman* would

1 Not the Carol Danvers Captain Marvel adapted to film in 2019; this is the entirely unrelated character also known as Billy Batson, whose story has more recently been adapted to film under the title *Shazam!* also in 2019.

likewise be adapted to film and followed by sequels in 1989 though, like the films in the *Superman* series, the

Batman films would have a diminishing appeal to audiences, making film studios reluctant to continue financing the production of superhero film adaptations (Burke 2015).

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Since the release of *X-Men* in 2000, however, superhero film adaptations have enjoyed relatively consistent commercial success from ticket and merchandising sales, leading to what Michael E. Uslam, who was executive producer for the 1989 *Batman* film adaptation, described as “The Golden Age of Comic Book Filmmaking” (Burke 2015, 23). Others have likewise asserted that “*X-Men* ushered in

Figure 2: As with many other superhero teams, the original Avengers lineup was a predominantly male team of superheroes, with a solitary female superhero Wasp, shown here perched on Ant-Man's head (Lee and Ayers 1964b).

the current boxoffice dominating wave of superhero movies in 2000” (Brown 2017, 126; Couch 2017b). It was considered a “truly

pioneering film” according to Tom Rothman, then chairman of Fox Filmed Entertainment, because “It was the first major Marvel adaptation to reach mainstream audiences” (Siegal 2020), with an audience estimated at more than 29 million movie-goers² seeing the film in cinemas.

The success of *X-Men* led to a surge in blockbuster films about superheroes, such as the films in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, launched in 2008, the success of

² In 2000, when the first *X-Men* film was released, the average movie ticket sold in the domestic market was US\$5.39 (The Numbers m.d.-a), meaning that *X-Men*'s ticket sales of US\$157,299,717 were generated by an audience of more than 29 million moviegoers (The Numbers m.d.-b).

which would convince more studios like Warner Bros. to invest in adapting superhero stories to film (Greenberger 2012, 23). Lauren Schuler-Donner, who bought the rights and produced *X-Men*, said that because they had succeeded with the first *X-Men* film adaptation, it allowed Marvel to realise that “yes, there is an audience out there” and to push to pursue more adaptations for films based on their comics (Mortimer 2014). This led to a vast increase in the number of superhero films released, and the profits they generated. In the 10 years leading up to the release of *X-Men*, there had been an average of 2.2 films about superheroes released per year, earning a combined average of US\$289 million. Following on from *X-Men*, production increased to 5.4 superhero films per year for the next 10 years, totalling an average of US\$1.3 billion per year (Kidman 2019, 184). The earliest successes to follow on from *X-Men* included the *Spider-Man* film series beginning in 2002, followed by *Daredevil* and *Hulk* in 2004, *Catwoman* and *The Punisher* in 2004, *Batman Begins* and *Fantastic Four* in 2005, and *Ghost Rider* in 2007. These films achieved commercial success to varying degrees, but their earnings paled in comparison to the sustained success that would follow on from the release of *Iron Man* in 2008, the first film in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, launching a series of films within a shared universe of Marvel characters adapted to screen by producer Kevin Feige.

Throughout all these superhero film series, however, male characters would continue to be selected by comic book publishers as the characters they pursued adaptation for, and by film studios as the primary heroes in the film projects they funded. Within the *X-Men* franchise, while female superheroes had led a number of the bestselling comic book stories (Cocca 2016b, 127), a female character did not occupy a protagonist cinematic role until the release of the twelfth *X-Men* film, *Dark Phoenix*, in 2019. In the movies of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, which followed on from the success of the *X-Men* franchise, female characters primarily occupied supporting roles, while the franchise, much like the *X-Men* films, instead focused on a single male character, Iron Man, who had not occupied anywhere near as large a role in the comic book source material (Zaidan 2018, 90). When questioned in 2015 about why, after 12 films had already been produced by that point about male protagonists, there had not yet been any films made with female protagonists within the Marvel Cinematic Universe, producer Kevin Feige acknowledged that there had “been strong, powerful, intelligent women in the comics for decades” (de Souza 2015). Yet, while some powerful, intelligent women would be featured in supporting roles within the films, the Marvel Cinematic Universe would still see 20 films

released with male protagonists before a female protagonist would appear in *Captain Marvel* in 2019. Their consistent preference for selecting male protagonists in superhero adaptations also extended outside of *X-Men* and the Marvel Cinematic Universe to encompass the adaptation of superhero stories based on DC Comics. The decision to adapt characters such as Superman and Batman to film was unsurprising, given their respective popularity as comic book characters, but questions ensued when films were made about male superheroes like Swamp Thing, Constantine and Green Lantern before adapting Wonder Woman, a far more popular female character, to film (Lepore 2014, xxi).

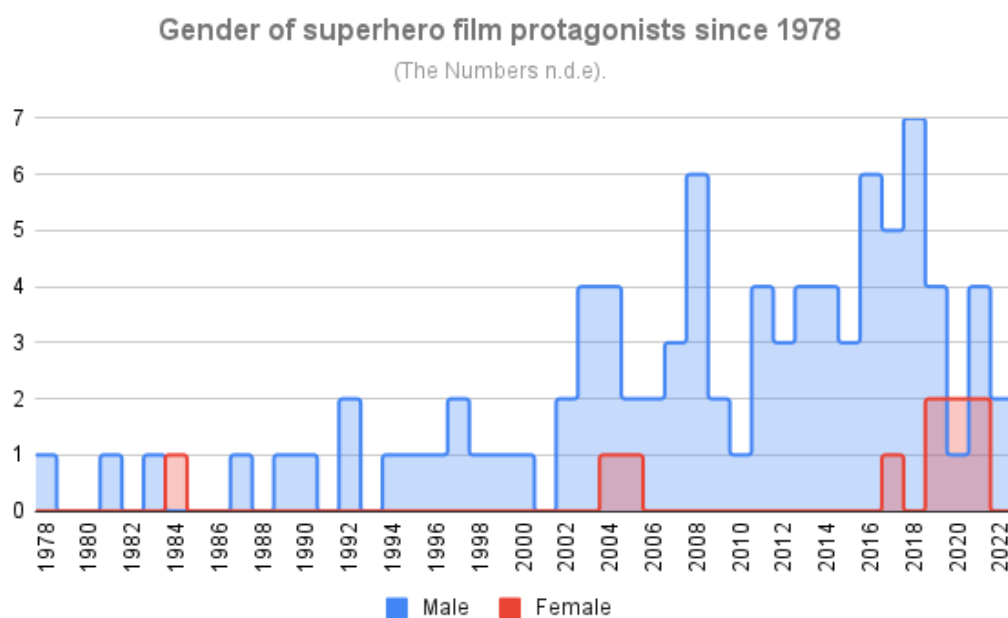


Figure 3: A chronology of comic-book film adaptations since 1978, categorised according to the gender of the protagonist.

As production of superhero films has continued to increase, films about female superheroes have also increased. As shown in Figure 3, when analysing the live action film adaptations of comic book superheroes, it is apparent that the adaptation of female superheroes has trailed behind males as primary subjects. While the number of films led by female protagonists has increased in recent years, when considering the longer term trend of protagonist gender within the genre, the number of female protagonists in superhero films seems not to have increased as a proportion of overall releases. While the period from 2017 to 2021 features a tighter cluster of female led films, the size of this cluster proportional to films about male superheroes differs little from the cluster which featured *Catwoman* and *Elektra* in

2004 and 2005 respectively, or from the *Supergirl* film of 1984, which was released soon after the first successful superhero film. Aside from recent female led films having shown only minor relative growth within the genre, investigation has identified differences in the presentation of female heroes in these films. In analysing female led superhero films released between 2017 and 2021³, Jessica Taylor and Laura Glitsos noted that the majority of these films including *Wonder Woman* (2017), *Captain Marvel* (2019), *Dark Phoenix* (2019), *Wonder Woman 1984* (2020), and *Black Widow* (2021) were set in the past, while only a single film *Birds of Prey: And the Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn* (2020) was set in the present. Their analysis attributed this to a paradoxical need within the genre to acknowledge the heroic potential of these female characters, while seeking to distance their struggles against gender stereotyping within “a closed historical moment,” which presents this struggle as a problem which “has now been resolved, and therefore, should be put to rest in the past” (Taylor and Glitsos 2021, 2). This research highlights the extent to which social ideas of gender continue to affect how superheroes are represented in film.

1.2 Statement of the problem

Comic book audiences have always enjoyed stories about female superheroes. In the *X-Men* comic, female characters such as Jean Grey and Kitty Pryde were the heroes of a number of bestselling stories (Cocca 2016b, 127) like “The Dark Phoenix Saga” (Claremont and Byrne 1977–1980), “Days of Future Past,” (Claremont and Byrne 1981), and the graphic novel, *X-Men: God Loves, Man Kills* (Claremont and Anderson 1982). However, despite these female superheroes’ evident popularity with comic book audiences, when it has come to these stories being adapted to film, the prominence of these female characters has been greatly reduced with male characters instead being selected as the characters whose heroism is emphasised within these films. Previous research has not yet explored how the commercial interests which have led to superheroes being adapted to film have intersected with the representation of gender within the comics on which these films are based. Stereotypical views on gender led to male and female characters being portrayed differently in terms of their occupations, emotional reactions, and interests, and this research will explore how these differences led to disparities in the potential for male and female superheroes to maximise the revenue film

³With the exception of *The New Mutants* (2020) which fell outside of the scope of their investigation as while the cast of characters featured a predominately female ensemble, their analysis focused on films led by a single female hero.

adaptations based on superhero comics could generate. By identifying what challenges have existed in creating superhero film adaptations led by female superheroes, it will be possible to better understand why the female superheroes whom audiences have enjoyed in the comics have not been as available for film audiences to enjoy.

1.3 Aim and scope

This research analyses the source material upon which superhero films have been based, in order to determine whether differences between the presentation of male and female superheroes affects the ease with which these characters are adapted to commercially successful films. In order to be able to explore this question in requisite depth, this study investigates the full range of sources which influenced the *X-Men* film adaptations. At the time the first *X-Men* film was released in 2000, 37 years had passed since the first *X-Men* comic was published, and in the intervening time between the original comics and films, other adaptations had occurred which, together with the original comics, also influenced the subsequent film adaptations. The *X-Men* comics published between 1963 and 1991 were adapted to television for *X-Men: The Animated Series* which aired from 1992 until 1995 on Fox Kids. The success of this adaptation in appealing to a much larger audience than that of the comics motivated Fox to adapt *X-Men* to film, and the film adaptation was heavily inspired by *The Animated Series*, as it had already “done the heavy lifting” or translating the stories from comic book pages, into an audio-visual medium (Lewald 2017, 235). Through the popularity of this television series, the *X-Men* characters were also adapted as action figures, and the commercial success of the *X-Men* figurines was also influential over how the characters and stories originally written in the *X-Men* comics, were ultimately translated to film as executives sought to also promote the sale of action figures through film adaptation (Raviv 2002, 56–57, 257). Each of these iterations of the *X-Men* in comics, television, action figures, and film, was produced at a particular time in history, to suit a particular medium, and particular audience, with particular marketing considerations, and for this reason, each edition has introduced its own distinct effects on how characters were presented, and which characters were subsequently selected for protagonist roles in the film adaptation. The *X-Men* franchise has been selected as the focal case study because it has featured more female superheroes as the heroes of its stories than other comic books of the time (Via, O’Connell and Groth 1979), allowing it to offer more opportunities to examine gender-based differences in the characterisation of superheroes. Despite having a greater number of female characters, the *X-Men*

franchise still shares a great many similarities with other superhero stories because both the characters and adaptations of the *X-Men* franchise were created by people who were closely involved in the creation and adaptation of many other superhero characters, allowing the findings made by studying *X-Men* to be relevant when considering the challenges of adapting other superhero stories to film.

1.4 Significance of the study

While the relative reduction of the roles of female superheroes has been roundly criticised (Cocca 2016b; Ken 2016; Gray and Kaklamanidou 2011) there has been relatively little attention paid to how the smaller role of female superheroes within such adaptations has intersected with commercial considerations such as maximising potential revenue that can be generated by film adaptations. This oversight is important to address because, when considering why superhero adaptations are produced, the most influential factor by far is the incentive to generate profit (Meehan 1991). The findings of this study will be of benefit to those looking to create comic books that can be more easily marketed for film adaptations, as well as to support the production of commercially successful superhero film adaptations. Producing superhero film adaptations is an expensive undertaking that typically leads to project investment in excess of US\$100 million, once marketing expenses are included. This means that losses from unsuccessful superhero movies can be significant. Identifying the greater challenges to the successful adaptation of female-led superhero films will likewise be of benefit to those who have expressed concerns that the relative scarcity of female superheroes in film could promote stereotypes that re-enforce social inequality (GLAAD 2014, 10).

1.5 Overview of the study

This study will be comprised of seven parts, including this introduction. For many studies of this magnitude, it is common for one chapter to be entirely focused on reviewing the existing literature to substantially investigate the research question; however, a different approach will be applied in this study. Through use of the case study research method, a number of factors have been identified that can make female superheroes more challenging to adapt to film than their male counterparts. While each of these factors ultimately relate to the intersection of gender stereotypes, and the commercial concerns of producing superhero film adaptations, the specific factors differ enough that previous research into this phenomenon has not yet tied them together. As such, discussions of past research relating to this

phenomenon will be integrated throughout this study, and assessed against the nominated case study.

The first chapter to follow this introduction is a background chapter, titled *Adapting superheroes*, to discuss what findings past research has made regarding which commercial considerations have motivated decisions to adapt superhero stories to film, as well as specific challenges associated with maximising the potential revenue that these adaptations will generate. This review also reflects on how previous research investigations have not considered whether such commercial concerns may specifically affect the adaptation of female superheroes as film protagonists.

Next, an explanation will be provided of this research's methodology, designed to uncover challenges in adapting female superheroes to film hero roles that have previously not been identified. That research method will be to review the concerns those involved in producing these works have identified as affecting the adaptation of superhero stories to film, and to identify if any of those concerns disproportionately create challenges for adapting female superheroes to film protagonist roles. This will be achieved by using the adaptation of the *X-Men* to film as a case study, and performing a comparative analysis on the presentation of male and female characters within the source material, cataloguing differences in the characterisation of male and female characters that explain why female superheroes have been considered to offer fewer opportunities to maximise revenue when selected as protagonists in film adaptations.

The first of these challenges, to be discussed in the third chapter, *Suspending disbelief*, is that the early superhero comics were written primarily for an audience of children. Children's media often involves more fantasy elements than stories intended for older audiences (Smith et al. 2010), and superheroes are no exception, possessing superhuman abilities. Due to the cost of producing superhero film adaptations, however, producers need to make films that will appeal not only to children but also adults in order to earn enough revenue to recover the substantial costs of producing the film while still generating a profit. This means that it is important to select characters whose stories appear to be realistic to cater to the more sceptical adult audience for these films, as adults generally need to perceive stories as realistic in order to be enjoyable (Green 2004, 247–263). While this may not seem an issue that would be inherently gendered, there are some differences apparent in superhero comics that mean the characters most capable of supporting the suspension of disbelief are more often male. For example, it is common that

superhero film adaptations will attempt to ground superpowers within scientific explanations. In the time that the comics were written, science was considered masculine, while magic was considered feminine. This means that many male superheroes were created as scientific experts, and have already had their incredible abilities grounded in sufficiently scientific sounding explanations to satisfy sceptical audiences. By contrast, female superheroes are more likely to have abilities based on magic. These magical abilities are harder to render realistic enough that audiences can overcome their disbelief and enjoy the film. This can explain why some female superheroes were more challenging to adapt to film protagonist roles. When it comes to selecting superhero film protagonists who can help an adult audience suspend their disbelief, the association of males with positions of scientific expertise is also closely related to the tendency to openly express scepticism as being a stereotypically masculine behaviour.

Given that adults do possess a natural scepticism towards anything that seems unrealistic, when a protagonist reacts with the exact sense of scepticism an adult viewer would express in the same situation upon encountering elements that might otherwise be unbelievable, the realism of the protagonist's reaction can increase their sense of realism and solidify the viewer's immersion in the narrative. This has supported the selection of a number of male superheroes as film protagonists, such as Wolverine and Tony Stark, because they express scepticism in a way that can offer comic relief and support the suspension of disbelief of audiences to be reinforced when encountering narrative elements that challenge believability. In contrast, female characters have typically been presented as being less likely to express the kind of sarcastic and possibly derisive scepticism due not only to females being less likely to be presented as scientific experts, but also because femininity is traditionally associated with being less aggressive and more concerned with avoiding potentially causing offence (Richardson 2005, 239; Huey and Berndt 2008).

These differences between how males and females are typically characterised as expressing their thoughts leads to another issue to be examined in the fourth chapter, *Quiet drama*. Dramatic conflict is key to the enjoyment of stories, but the way in which conflict is presented to the audience differs between comics and films, which can create challenges when adapting characters from superhero comics to film. This is an issue which has more often affected the adaptation of female characters than male, as this chapter's examination will demonstrate. One major

difference between the narrative mediums of film and comics is that comic books allow an audience, through narration boxes and thought bubbles, to understand characters' inner thoughts in ways that are harder to achieve in film. Heroes are made more interesting to audiences when they have clear inner conflicts with which they are struggling, as this adds a layer to suspense for the reader, not knowing which choices the hero will make. Conversely, within film, it is generally necessary for the inner conflict of characters be externally manifested through interactions between a protagonist and other characters. This can mean that male characters are easier to adapt to film than female characters, as, in keeping with the stereotypical social mores of femininity, female characters can be more likely to conceal their negative emotions beneath a friendly mask, as in the case of the character Storm, who felt deep inner conflict, but whose conflict was only conveyed through thought bubbles, rather than being externally expressed in the manner of male characters such as Wolverine and Magneto. So, while it has always been possible within comics to include concealed feelings through the aforementioned thought bubbles and narration boxes, this is much less possible within film. This means that some comic book characters are more difficult to adapt for film because, unless they already habitually express their feelings openly to other characters in a way that can be easily translated to film, greater changes must be overcome to transform these characters into successful film protagonists. This encourages filmmakers to select protagonists whose inner feelings are already apparent through their interactions with other characters, without reliance on narration boxes or thought bubbles.

The challenges caused by further differences in how males and females are traditionally presented as expressing feelings will be discussed in the fifth chapter, *Certain victory*. Superhero stories involve many scenes of action that can make for engaging conflict for audiences, but the violence and danger presented by these action scenes create challenges to marketing these films to an audience including children. Comics and films differ in the verisimilitude with which violence is able to be presented, and some comics have also differed from their films in the amount of suspense their stories contained, particularly with regards to how dangerous circumstances would be resolved. When audiences are left uncertain about how dramatic conflict will be resolved, this can increase narrative engagement, but many parents have expressed concern about children becoming upset by stories that involve suspense about what the outcome of dangerous situations will be. While superhero comics were originally developed for an audience of children, in the

1970s the way comics were marketed changed to be more directly marketed through speciality stores, because the comic books had declined as a mainstream narrative medium due to the increased competition for entertainment options (Gabilliet 2010). An older, more adult audience became the dominant market for comics, and with the audience of children reading superhero stories declining, so did the censorship oversight that had once restricted the content of these stories to only what was considered appropriate for an audience comprised primarily of children. With this new readership of superhero stories, comic book creators were able to use storytelling tactics aimed at increasing the state of suspense, and found that increasing suspense about whether characters might die resulted in more narrative engagement, and better sales (Riesman 2014).

Presenting doubt about whether well-liked characters would survive the challenges they were confronted by, became a commonly employed tactic for creating suspense within the *X-Men* comics. This was achieved by increasingly showing that such characters could be killed (Sanderson 1982a 122, Sanderson 1982b), thereby increasing the real threat these characters faced, as well as increasing the perceived threat by introducing characters into protagonist roles whose survival was not assured for the audience. As the protagonist is the avatar through which the audience experiences the story, the way in which a protagonist reacts to apparent danger will affect how dangerous the audience perceives a situation to be. If a protagonist appears unworried by any apparent danger, the audience will be made to feel secure by the apparent confidence of the protagonist. By contrast, where a character appears afraid, this will make the audience more inclined to doubt that there will be a happy outcome. Open expressions of fear are more common in female characters, but rare in male characters, as the construction of masculinity encourages males to mask fear beneath machismo (Osherson and Krugman 1990).

This frequently constructed difference between male and female characters becomes significant when adapting these stories to film, because superhero films must be appropriate for children in order to reach a large enough audience to recover production costs. When films are produced for an audience of children, it is considered important that children are not frightened by the film's content. As female characters are traditionally more likely to be shown expressing fear, this can disadvantage female characters from selection as protagonists for a mass audience because their open fear may lead the audience to feel a greater sense of unease at the potential for a tragic ending, which in turn will lead to the film being considered

too disturbing to be marketed to children. The expense of producing superhero film adaptations already necessitates that these stories be rendered appropriate for a younger audience in order to maximise the potential audience and generate sufficient revenue to cover production costs. As such, the need to appeal to an audience including children makes it better for commercial outcomes to select characters who are confident in the face of danger, a trait more likely to be found in male characters.

This need to maximise audience size is not the only benefit to be found in making the danger shown in superhero films reassuring enough for an audience of children to enjoy. It is also important for superhero films to appeal to children due to the potentially lucrative links with merchandising deals. The issues that arise from this need to maximise merchandising revenue will be discussed in the sixth chapter, *Cross-selling*. Characters who appeal to children often have toys created in their likeness to maximise the revenue earned from creating good stories. Those producing adaptations of superhero stories typically enter into agreements to obtain at least a portion of the revenue from merchandising based on the characters featured in the adaptations. While in recent years categories of merchandise such as licensed apparel have become an increasingly popular form of merchandise, the merchandising category which has historically represented the largest potential for revenue has been toys (Marvel Entertainment 2009, 19), and in particular action figures. Action figures are poseable toys that are created in the likeness of popular characters. Action figures exist to be marketed to boys (Inness 2004, 77), however, because toys marketing is sharply divided by gender, toys produced for boys tend to be interactive in ways that allow them to be used in action-packed play, whereas toys marketed towards girls tend to be dolls related to “a somewhat passive focus on appearance” (Murnen 2018, 190). This division conforms to an established gender stereotype associating action with masculinity and a passive focus on appearance with femininity (Berger 1972, 47). The gender differences in the marketing of toys to targeted groups of children mean that action figures have primarily been made of male characters, and accordingly, the established popularity of male characters as action figures meant that these characters offered film studios the ability to also maximise their potential merchandising revenue.

While this study by and large focuses on how the comics and prior television adaptations have functioned as the source material for superhero films, the sixth chapter presents the argument that, given how extensively a desire to generate

sales based on merchandise has influenced these film adaptations, action figures themselves represent a source material that must be considered. Further, this chapter details how the masculine association with action and feminine association with appearance that favours male protagonists also introduces a disadvantage for females with film protagonist roles. The association between femininity and a focus on appearance leads to another product line to be marketed predominantly to a female audience – cosmetics. The film industry has been integral to promoting cosmetics to this female audience, using film stars to promote these products. This encourages media coverage of actresses to focus on scrutinising their appearance, reinforcing biases against actresses who show signs of ageing, which are generally absent from the coverage of male actors, because the market for cosmetics aimed to conceal ageing is far smaller for men. The greater focus on the appearance and ageing of actresses in turn tends to shorten their careers relative to their male counterparts, which results in fewer actresses having long enough careers to develop a reputation as being reliably able to appeal to audiences.

As this research will demonstrate, there are some differences in how female and male superheroes were originally presented in the source material for superhero film adaptations. These differences have intersected with the economic considerations of producing commercially successful superhero film adaptations in ways that have tended to disproportionately disadvantage female superhero characters. These disproportionate challenges have not been identified by past research, as previous examinations have not identified the influence of the differences between the characterisation of male and female superheroes within the comics, upon the commercial outcomes for film adaptations.

The concluding chapter will reflect upon the objective of this study and the contribution this research makes to better understanding the challenges of creating commercially successful superhero film adaptations led by female characters. Consideration will be given to the benefits and limitations offered by the selected research method to offer guidance to other researchers on how to continue to explore questions relating to this research.

2 Adapting superheroes

2.1 Introduction

Movies about superheroes have been offering consistent entertainment to audiences since the successful adaptation of *X-Men* to film in 2000. With tens of millions of fans, these films generate billions in revenue from the purchase of ticket sales, licensed merchandise, and other products featuring their favourite superheroes. However, while many superheroes have appealed to film audiences in this fashion, very few of those superheroes have been female. The scarcity of films about female superheroes is surprising considering that a number of the bestselling stories of the *X-Men* comics including “The Dark Phoenix Saga” (Claremont and Byrne 1977–1980), “Days of Future Past,” (Claremont and Byrne 1981), and the graphic novel, *X-Men: God Loves, Man Kills* (Claremont and Anderson 1982) had been led by female protagonists. While these stories directly inspired *X-Men* film adaptations such as *X2: X-Men United* (2003), *X-Men: The Last Stand* (2006), *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (2014), and *X-Men: Dark Phoenix* (2019), these film adaptations have instead primarily focused on male protagonists, and in particular on a superhero known as Wolverine.

Previous research has not yet evaluated either what characterisations of superhero characters best lend themselves to film adaptation, or the intersection of those characteristics with gender. Nonetheless, it can offer some insight to the commercial concerns which have underpinned decisions to adapt superheroes to film, even if it does not offer much as to why particular characters have been the subject of commercially successful adaptations. Earlier investigations have revealed that the recent popularity of superhero film adaptations has occurred because both comic book publishers and film studios have increasingly sought to broaden the range of products used to generate their revenue. This has encouraged comic book publishers and studios to pursue adapting superheroes to film in order to expand the opportunities for both parties to make money. For both companies to maximise the benefits of these partnerships, however, the way in which superheroes are characterised in both the comics and films has needed to be as consistent as possible so that audiences who enjoyed the portrayal of a superhero within one medium would be more likely to invest in other products, including entertainment, merchandise, and a range of consumer products, that feature that character. However, aside from noting the commercial need for characters to be presented consistently across mediums, as past examination has noted how little investigation

has occurred into what character traits make certain superheroes more suitable for film adaptation (Graves 2017, 245).

This chapter will begin with reviewing how increased competition for consumers led both the comic book and film industries to be interested in collaborating together to on licensing agreements to adapt superheroes to film. After establishing the commercial motivations that instigated this trend of film adaptations, the discussion that follows will reflect on how the characterisation of superheroes within each medium has been affected by a desire to support audiences crossing over and between these mediums. After assessing this background, observations will be drawn regarding the lack of existing research to have investigated what characterisations are associated with superheroes most suited for selection as superhero film protagonists. Analysis into the qualities associated with commercially successful film adaptations offers an opportunity to better understand why so few films about superheroes have been produced. To investigate such a question of course necessitates first establishing the broad differences in characterisation commonly linked to male and female characters. With this overview having been provided into how commercial incentives have underpinned the adaptation of superheroes to film, how this has affected how superheroes have been characterised across mediums, and how differences have tended to exist between male and female superheroes, these critical assessments will address the identified knowledge gap, and offer understandings into whether differences in characterisation have made female superheroes more challenging to adapt to commercially successful films.

2.2 Superheroes and incentives for adaptation

Superheroes have been popular with audiences for almost a century. Comic books had begun booming in popularity after the introduction of *Superman* in 1938 (Lopes 2009, 19–21). During this time, superhero comics appealed to a large and profitable audience, with stories about popular superheroes averaging up to a million issues per month in sales (Lopes 2009, 19–21). However, as other forms of entertainment like film and television grew in popularity, they would begin to lure away audiences (Parsons 1991, 72–77), and adaptations of superheroes became less common. By the 1970s, comic books in America stopped being sold to a mass audience (Clarke 2011). Marvel, one of the two publishers who represented the majority of comic book sales, “reported losing up to thirty percent of its readership per year through the late 1970s and early 1980s” (Parsons 1991, 76). The dwindling audience for

comic books, and correspondingly diminishing profits from them, motivated Marvel, and other comic book publishers, to pursue adapting their characters to the mediums audiences were more interested in such as film and television (D. Johnson 2013, 105). The film industry was undergoing similar challenges. As Dan Hee Kim noted, much like the comic book industry, the film industry similarly began to increasingly favour a brand extension strategy as theatrical audiences declined (Hee Kim 2019, 161). Brand extension is a strategy which “builds on audience interest in particular content to bring them into contact again and again with an associated brand” (Jenkins 2006, 82), with the brands, in this case, being Marvel’s characters. Brand extension occurs when an established brand is extended from its original product category in order to be applied to a new category of product (Aaker and Keller 1990, 27). Brand extension can increase the efficiency of product promotion (Aaker and Keller 1990, 27). Due to this ability of brand extensions to encourage audiences to cross over from enjoying the product of a brand in one category to another product of the brand within a different product category, brand extensions are “a way to exploit perhaps the most important asset owned by a business” (Aaker and Keller 1990, 27). Just as comic book publishers focused on an increasingly wide range of products to diversify in response to a declining audience, “decisions about movies are increasingly focused on the potential profitability of a wide range of products” (Meehan 1991, 49). Though the interests of the film and comics industries aligned, it would be some time before these industries learned to work together to their mutual benefit.

Marvel’s efforts to expand into new products were led by Stan Lee, who had been jointly responsible for creating many of Marvel’s popular superhero characters and who had moved from chief editor to publisher in 1972 (Howe 2012, 122). Marvel Comics Group president Jim Galton joined the company in 1975 and, as he would later recall, as comic books lost their market, he also looked to diversify the business and move Marvel from being a “one product company.” Galton “decided to take the core business and build from that, which allowed us to really focus on two areas — to exploit and spread out, yet still retain our original character, to entertain kids” (Variety 1986, 92). Galton used Marvel’s “classic characters” to generate merchandise licensing, animation productions, and expansions to their publication products such as colouring books (Variety 1986, 81–92). This shift caused frustration to those producing comic books, with Patrick Parsons recounting that in 1979 “artists at Marvel publicly expressed unhappiness with the direction of the publications, complaining that licensing of the comic characters, now becoming

more lucrative than actual comic sales, was the primary focus of management” (Parsons 1991, 76). Parsons noted, however, that this led to more efforts to adapt superheroes to other mediums. However, the focus on licensing was not simply a replacement for comic books, but was an effort to also extend it, as “licensing is both a form of promotion and a source of income” (Meehan 1991, 57).

The comic book and film industries’ efforts to extend the popularity of their protagonists to other markets fits within a trend of media companies “learning how to accelerate the flow of media content across delivery channels to expand revenue opportunities, broaden markets, and reinforce viewer commitments” (Jenkins 2006, 31), and expand their customer base (Jenkins 2006, 255). While once companies functioned in a manner largely independent of each others’ interests, following changes to regulations affecting media ownership occurring between 1992 and 1996, it has become increasingly common for media companies to instead be transformed into divisions of larger companies, who own interests in film, television, and other entertainment mediums (Cooper 2007, 339). When these related interests work together, they can share the costs of marketing expenditure, and maximise the potential benefits to be gained when a product appeals to audiences, by creating opportunities to leverage that brand recognition into the promotion of a wider range of products. While once “each medium had its own distinctive functions and markets” within contemporary media production, corporate conglomerates have been “breaking down the walls separating these different media” (Jenkins 2006, 23–24). This is because the strategy of media synergy “relies on content that can move across any number of platforms” (Burke 2015, 220). Therefore “the reorganization of characters into brands has erased and rebuilt the boundaries among and between comic book and comic book derived texts” (D. Johnson 2007), as the potential to adapt characters to other mediums became increasingly important.

Marvel’s early efforts to extend their superhero brands were met by some success when several Marvel characters were licensed for television. The Hulk, a superhero who Lee and Jack Kirby had created, was licensed to Universal Television, and *The Incredible Hulk* was subsequently adapted to a popular television series in 1977. The series ran for five seasons and a number of follow-up made for television film adaptations. The success of the series led to a surge not only of comics (Variety 1986, 92), but also merchandising revenue from Marvel, including bubble gum cards, Hulk-themed apparel, inflatable muscles, and a range of toys including a bestselling action figure (Jankiewicz 2013, 256–257). Spider-Man, another

character who Lee had created with Steve Ditko, had been licensed to CBS, and began airing the same year, but was cancelled after its second season.

After *The Incredible Hulk* and *Spider-Man* left the airwaves, Marvel continued attempts to diversify, with Galton noting that expanding the range of products their characters appeared in created benefits of cross-promotion as “each area we’re in feeds off the other” (Variety 1986, 92). Marvel’s attempts to diversify included film, television, and popular music, with Galton commenting that such efforts were “all part of an important ongoing process, and that is to keep Marvel characters in the forefront of the American consciousness” (Variety 1986, 92). A superhero known as Dazzler was introduced to the comics in 1980 to try and further expand on the popularity of their bestselling comic *X-Men* as part of a marketing partnership between Marvel and Casablanca Records “as part of a planned cross-promotion with a recording artist” (Peppard 2017, 123). However, though Dazzler was popular enough as a character to sustain her own 42-part series, Marvel’s attempt to interest music fans via its characters was unsuccessful, as Casablanca Records left the partnership due to financial concerns (Dallas et al. 2013, 25).

Efforts to expand to live action film adaptations began in 1979 with Marvel Vice President Alice Donenfield-Vernoux tasked with pursuing film adaptations based on Marvel characters. The goal of this strategy was for Marvel to profit from increased merchandising and book sales from the boost of popularity their characters would gain by appearing in a popular film (Radulovic 2019). While the initial characters she focused on soliciting adaptations of were *Spider-Man* and the *Incredible Hulk*, after none of the major film studios were interested, Marvel eventually succeeded in signing a deal to adapt *X-Men*, their highest selling comic to film with the independent studio Nelvana in 1982 (Sanderson 1982b, 124). This deal would never come to fruition however, with producers failing to find a way to adapt the comics into a movie that could appeal to a mass audience, before the financial collapse of the studio (Radulovic 2019). While concerns about creating adaptations that could reach wide enough audiences would continue to hinder Marvel’s attempts at expansion, they would not be sufficient to deter Marvel from continuing to pursue the advantages of adaptation.

Lee and Galton, on behalf of Marvel, created Marvel Productions, a television and film subsidiary, in 1980, which was primarily focused on creating animated television series based on Marvel characters (Variety 1986, 84). Hanna-Barbera had launched an animated adaptation of *The Incredible Hulk* in 1982, but it was

unsuccessful. It was followed by *Spider-Man and His Amazing Friends* on NBC, which aired from 1981 until 1983 but was also largely unsuccessful. After these failures, there was little interest from television networks in producing further shows based on Marvel characters. Margaret Loesch, who had become president of Marvel Productions in 1984 (Lewald 2017), would later recall that while she believed in the ability of Marvel characters to appeal to audiences, every pitch she and Lee put together to promote Marvel's characters to television networks was rejected. The string of failures meant that she found that she "couldn't give away a Marvel show" (Lewald 2017, 6).

The Marvel superheroes Loesch was most interested in adapting to television were the X-Men. Lee and Kirby had initially created the X-Men in 1963 and, after learning about them through Lee, Loesch "read a couple of the *X-Men* comic books and became instantly smitten." Loesch thought the X-Men would have great potential as an animated television series because the X-Men were a team of superheroes whose powers were gained by mutations that made them outsiders from ordinary human society. The characters were "discriminated against because they're different" and Loesch figured that "all teenagers feel different, so why wouldn't this be a hit with kids?" (Lewald 2017, 6). Television networks did not believe in the appeal, however, and, eventually, Loesch left Marvel Productions without having successfully adapted any Marvel characters to television. She would ultimately do so, however, once she became the head of the new Network Fox Kids in 1990.

As the head of this new television network, Loesch began to adapt the Marvel comics she thought had the most potential to succeed as cartoons. The first of these was *X-Men: The Animated Series* which ran from 1992 until 1997. The characters featured in the series were selected in conjunction with Marvel so as to align the television series with their intentions for the comic books for the next year (Lewald 2017, 2). This meant that a young superhero known as Jubilee needed to be included in *X-Men: The Animated Series* instead of Kitty Pryde, another X-Men member who had already been popular with comic book audiences (Lewald 2017, 25). Marvel wanted to promote Jubilee instead because she had been introduced to the comic more recently in 1989. *X-Men: The Animated Series* was a resounding success, generating revenue for Marvel after increased interest in the characters from the television series led to a large interest in merchandise such as action figures (Lewald 2017), as well as greater interest in related comic books. Cocca noted anecdotal evidence from letters from fans published within the *X-Men*

comics of the nineties indicated that new readers had begun buying the comics after enjoying the *X-Men* cartoon (Cocca 2016b, 143). Likewise, as Johnson discussed, analysts attributed a surge in demand for Marvel Comics between 1992 and 1993 to “the mass market exposure of the X-Men” that followed the 1992 release of *X-Men: The Animated Series* (D. Johnson 2013, 98).

The most successful character to emerge from the animated adaptation was a superhero known as Wolverine. Marvel Comics chief editor noted that because Wolverine had sold the most merchandise of any member of the animated *X-Men* team, he had been one of the characters Marvel prioritised in promoting for film adaptation. This is because merchandising represented the bulk of the revenue Marvel earned from the series and, with the audience for comic books having declined, the revenue they earned from merchandise licensing had become central to their success (Flanagan, McKenny and Livingstone 2016, 23–24). Wolverine’s success at driving merchandise demand led him to be one of “the characters that are prime movers in our licensing programs and on our movie slate” (Maslon and Kantor 2013, 286) as Marvel looked “to get into movie production to revive interest in the characters” after the *X-Men* cartoon had finished (Garrahan 2009). Marvel Entertainment’s new CEO Scott Sassa began to focus on getting an *X-Men* film developed to generate merchandising revenue for Marvel, hoping that the range of toys based on Marvel characters, along with other merchandise such as licensed apparel and comic books, “would get the benefit of [US]\$40 million in free advertising” from the marketing campaign associated with the *X-Men* film (Raviv 2002, 56–57, 257). The same pressure of an increasingly competitive entertainment market also created an incentive for film studios “to proactively address an increasingly challenging marketplace” by selecting source material for film adaptations that would offer the possibility of creating “rich and extensive fictional worlds that can be leveraged across open-ended franchises and diverse media flows” (Purse 2019, 69). As *X-Men: The Animated Series* had been successfully adapted to television by the Fox Kids television network, Fox understood that the adaptation of *X-Men* by their television division had renewed interest in *X-Men* action figures (Lewald 2017, 274; Mallory 2011, 10). With Fox having seen financial losses from Fox Kids due to decreasing revenue from advertisers (Schneider 2001), a film adaptation of *X-Men* could offer the opportunity to continue to profit from this market without reliance on external advertising interests, while also earning income from ticket sales.

These interests aligned in a deal between Marvel, producer Lauren Schuler-Donner and 20th Century Fox, to adapt the *X-Men* comics to film in which the studio would be responsible for the cost of distribution and producing films, while Marvel would retain merchandising rights. Fox would pay Marvel a licensing fee, and receive a share of the merchandising revenue based on those properties (The Walt Disney Company 2017). This meant both Marvel and Fox could leverage the increased popularity of the *X-Men* characters following the release of the film to earn merchandising revenue. This merchandising revenue would offset the sales lost from increasing competition to their core businesses of comic book and film production (Raviv 2002). Since the early planning stages of adapting the *X-Men* to film, Wolverine was the chosen to be the central hero of the film (Couch 2017b). Wolverine had not, as a writer for the film series would admit, been “the protagonist of the comics” (Plumb 2014) but, because of his success in generating licensing revenue, his importance as an *X-Men* character had increased.

Peter Cuneo, who was hired in 1999 to be Marvel’s chief executive, created the Marvel Characters Group to be in charge of “running the superheroes as brands.” Cuneo used the adaptation of *X-Men* as an example of how the group would manage the extension of the characters as brands existing across mediums. The committee was comprised of “television producers, comic book talent, and marketers all pooling their expertise” in order “to impose creative coordination across film productions, thus ensuring that each served the needs of all the markets under Marvel’s brand umbrella” (D. Johnson 2012). According to Cuneo, a member of the Marvel Characters Group, acting as an agent for the *X-Men* characters, might say, “I have an *X-Men* movie coming out in July. What special things are we going to be doing in the publishing division? What integrated promotions are we planning?” (Howe 2012, 283). Marvel understood it would be necessary to make comics that aligned with the films, and planned to create an *Ultimate X-Men* title in order to make a comic that would tie in with the film. This initiative failed, however, when Fox moved the release date of the film ahead by 6 months and when *Ultimate X-Men* was delayed after the first script was rejected, leaving Marvel’s comics unprepared to benefit from increased interest in the characters (Howe 2012, 285–286). In contrast, Johnson noted that analysts found that after the release of film adaptations such as *X-Men* in 2000, overall sales of Marvel comic books increased (D. Johnson 2007), and the success of the *X-Men* films created demand for toy sales, which Marvel shared with Fox (Kidman 2019, 217).

In order to maximise the benefits of these film adaptations, just as with the television adaptations, it would be necessary to ensure alignment across mediums. This increased the effectiveness of cross-promotion to ensure that when audiences found a character appealing when exposed to them in one context, their interest in the character could then lead them to support other appearances of the same character across both entertainment and merchandising products. Johnson asserted that it was necessary for Marvel's strategy of branding their characters across different narrative mediums so that they "maintain a consistency of meaning and message over time in order to succeed as a cohesive identity" across its product range (D. Johnson 2007). This argument was consistent with that of Uricchio and Pearson who observed that DC Comics had likewise needed to ensure consistency of characterisation surrounding the release of the 1989 *Batman* film (Uricchio and Pearson 1991, 191). Johnson further expounded on this, arguing that "to profit most readily from the licensed synergies within its stable of over 4,700 characters and transform them into more viable brands, Marvel found it necessary to eliminate the inconsistencies and contradictions between incarnations of its characters" (D. Johnson 2007).

Johnson noted that for children, arguably the most profitable marketing demographic for consuming superhero products across mediums, disparities in how characters were presented across these mediums caused confusion. Johnson cited Dan Buckley, the head of Marvel's print, animation and digital divisions, as saying that children supposedly faced greater difficulty "in parsing multiple interpretations of a single superhero across different comic titles, films, and television series" (D. Johnson 2017). Buckley reported that focus group testing found that where the appearance of individual superheroes differed across mediums, it left children wondering "which Spider-Man is the real one?" (Montgomery 2013). Johnson similarly argued that to effectively promote superheroes across mediums, their characterisation needed to be consistent across adaptations. At the time, as Johnson had documented, Marvel's editor in chief Joe Quesada had said that "when it comes to your commercial icons like Spider-Man, Wolverine, and Hulk, you need consistency" (D. Johnson 2007). As Johnson explained, "the Spider-Man character had toys, comics, and television shows all based upon it, but if each synergistic aspect of the character presented Peter Parker/Spider-Man in a different way, there was no way for 'Spider-Man' as a brand to cohere into any one single identity" (D. Johnson 2007). Marvel publisher Bill Jemas stressed how important it was that characters were consistently presented across mediums to achieve optimal

“synergy” and media “convergence.” In an example he gave to Marvel employees, Jemas said:

Let’s talk about the Spider-Man brand. Whether Spider-Man is on a T-Shirt or in a TV show, he’s Spider-Man. He’s our way of communicating a particular set of characteristics and a spirit and a liveliness. There’s an ethos, an emotion, and a *brand* captured in Spider-Man. That’s what Spider-Man is. And I don’t get lost in questions like ‘Is that a t-shirt? Is it a license? Is it a fast-food tie-in?’ It’s Spider-Man!’ (Raviv 2002, 267).

Marvel continued to work on standardising how characters appeared across different mediums, with Marvel executive Bill Jemas “hammering away in meetings at the importance of stripping each character to its ‘central metaphor’” (Howe 2012, 285–286).

Derek Johnson conducted a study analysing the synergistic strategies involved in adapting the *X-Men* character Wolverine across comic books, films and video games between 2000 and 2004. Johnson noted that while Wolverine was prolifically adapted across comic books, television, film and video games, initially, there had been some superficial differences between his appearance across these disparate mediums. While in his original comic book appearances Wolverine had been depicted since his 1974 introduction as a short man with body hair befitting his animalistic attitude, wearing a blue and yellow uniform to mask his appearance, Johnson observed that his subsequent adaptation to film had altered his appearance somewhat to make him more appealing to a mass audience, by putting him in a more realistic choice of costume. Johnson noted that subsequent appearances of Wolverine in the comics and in adaptations to other mediums would align themselves with the appearance of Wolverine within the film adaptation in order to maximise consistency “to strengthen the character’s potential as a brand.” When it came to differences between the version of Wolverine existing within the comics and film adaptations, “the differences between the two characters were minimized and the similarities emphasized so that both could be thought of as subbrands of the same overarching brand identity.” In summary, Marvel was working to consolidate the various designs for Wolverine “into a single one to appease licensees” (D. Johnson 2007). Johnson’s findings aligned with those of subsequent research conducted by Liam Burke. Burke interviewed Marvel comics senior vice president of publishing Tom Brevoort about how Marvel characters were

represented across different narrative mediums. Brevoort used the character of Wolverine as an example of their adaptation strategy and said to Burke that:

I think there is a desire to keep consistency, but not absolute conformity, which is to say that Wolverine basically needs to be Wolverine no matter what medium he is in. If you see Wolverine in the comics, they essentially need to be the same individual—the same guy (Burke 2015, 21).

As Derek Johnson noted, this meant that “the adaptation of comic books into other media first required the elimination of difference between the comic and audiovisual versions of its character properties” (D. Johnson 2007). Jenkins also noted how the increasing focus on adapting stories to other mediums to maximise audience impact has necessitated moving away “from medium-specific content to toward content that flows across multiple media channels” (Jenkins 2006, 255). Adapting stories about superheroes across mediums comes with difficulties however, because stories engaging to audiences in one medium may be unengaging on conversion to other mediums. Johnson credited this shift as beginning with the adaptation of *X-Men* to film in 2000, but this is incorrect. The work of adapting *X-Men* to an audiovisual medium had already been performed in the adaptation of *X-Men* to television in 1992, and the *X-Men* film adaptation built upon this. Eric Lewald, who had been the showrunner for *X-Men: The Animated Series*, said that he had spoken to David Hayter, the screenwriter for the first film, who said that most of those involved in adapting the *X-Men* to film never “picked up a comic book” but instead used *X-Men: The Animated Series* as their source material. As Lewald said, “they studied our show because we had translated it into something audiovisual. We’d done the heavy lifting of changing how it worked from the comic book page, which is a different craft” (Lewald 2017, 235). Mark Edens, the head writer for *X-Men: The Animated Series*, had similar recollections of the necessity of reshaping the X-Men stories for television. Edens said that they had “wanted to be true to the books as much as we could, given the difference between the two media of comic books and television adaptation. After thirty years, there was so much material to draw on that doing the series was mainly a question of deciding what would translate best to screen” (Lewald 2017, 321).

Likewise, Len Wein, who created the character of Wolverine, was a writer experienced with the constraints of writing for comic books and a range of other mediums, to which the character of Wolverine would subsequently prove adaptable. In an interview with Eric Lewald, the showrunner for *X-Men: The Animated Series*,

where they were discussing the challenges of making a televised adaptation of the *X-Men* comics, which Wein also wrote several episodes for, Wein said that:

I've written live-action TV, I've written screenplays, I've written comic books, I've written novels, I've written video games, I've written table games: In all these universes, every one of them has different requirements. One of the things I say when I teach classes is be aware of the medium you're working in. Write for that medium. Don't tell a great comic-book story if you're writing a video game (Lewald 2017, 71).

The concept of medium specificity describes how narrative mediums can differ in how effectively they convey different aspects of storytelling, such. This is believed to have first emerged in the Enlightenment era when German writer Gotthold Lessing argued that:

...painting and poetry, in virtue of the media from which they are composed, have very different capacities for representation: the former is best suited for representing how things appear in a single moment of time, while the latter is best suited for representing events unfolding through time (Pratt 2014, 148–149).

The concept was further advanced by contemporary media scholar Noël Carroll who argued that different artistic mediums were best suited to express or explore different kinds of ideas because of the material components of the medium (Carroll 1985). Sidney Iwanter, the Fox Kids Executive who oversaw *X-Men: The Animated Series* and who was closely involved in producing it, noted that it had been necessary to adjust the X-Men characters to the television medium to ensure they would be engaging to audiences. Iwanter said that “there are serious differences between comic-book writing and the world of broadcast TV. We had to adjust, otherwise we would've had some very TV-unfriendly characters” (Lewald 2017, 399). However, while the differences between the mediums of comic books and film have affected how superheroic characters have been adapted to film, these differences have not previously been investigated as a factor in influencing the adaptation of superheroes to film.

As Michael Graves observed in analysing Marvel film adaptations, “despite the increasing prevalence of transmedia storytelling franchises, there is surprisingly little consensus regarding the qualities of a story that effectively spans media platforms” (Graves 2017, 245). This is especially important when considering why the female heroes of the *X-Men* comics have so far occupied far less prominent roles within the

film adaptation. While female characters were “amongst the most powerful” and popular characters in the comic (Irving 2006, 7), leading many of the comic’s bestselling issues, the roles of male characters increased relative to the roles of female superheroes as the characters were adapted to film (Cocca 2016b, 144). There have been relatively few studies to consider issues of female characters’ representations, or the “critical intersections” of representation with the audience to which these works are being marketed (Kirkpatrick and Scott 2015, 120–121). Johnson briefly mentioned that in some cases the brand extension of characters across mediums in some cases appeared to be “tied to the reproduction but also reiteration of age and gender norms” (D. Johnson 2013, 251). Overall, however, complications of gender have generally not been considered in the context of whether there are greater challenges to adapting female characters with consistency across mediums.

To investigate this issue, it is necessary to examine both the superhero comics these films are based on, and the commercial considerations that have been involved in selecting characters for protagonist roles in superhero film adaptations. Outside of the aforementioned explorations that have identified the commercial necessity for adaptation, and for characters to be presented uniformly across the mediums, the question of whether it is easier to successfully adapt male superheroes in this manner has not yet been considered. That such an examination has not previously occurred is an understandable consequence of far fewer people having been interested in reading the comics these films are based on than watching the movies made from them (Morton 2017). Investigation into the source material that has inspired these films has therefore been limited (Kent 2016; Settoducato 2015) and, as a result, there has been very little research that has considered how the characterisation of female superheroes in the source material could create additional difficulty in adapting female superheroes to popular film. In seeking to learn whether different economic outcomes would likely be associated with the selection of a male or female superhero as a film protagonist, it is necessary to consider not only how the female characters were presented within the comics, but also how their presentation differed by contrast to the male characters.

Fictional characters in comics, film and television often exhibit stereotypical gender traits corresponding to their biological sex, with male characters acting in stereotypically masculine and female characters acting in stereotypically feminine manners (Eschholz and Bufkin 2001, 667; Smith et al. 2010; Smith 2007). To

understand why these differences exist between male and female characters in film, it is necessary to closely examine issues of gender which “refers to the complex and diverse ways that people are treated (or choose to behave) based on their biological sex” (Benshoff 2016, 148). Gender is constructed as a binary, in which masculinity and femininity are constructed as opposing identities, incorporating disparate qualities. Gender stereotypes are expectations that are projected onto males and females “about physical appearance, attitudes and interests, psychological traits, social relations, and occupations” (Behm-Morowitz and Pennell 82, 2013). These stereotypes about gender pervade across both superhero stories and society at large.

Noting that the superhero films that have dominated the cinemas are all based upon comic books published generations ago, researcher Miriam Kent, although only reviewing how female Marvel characters were presented in film adaptations, nevertheless drew attention to how little research on how female characters in superhero films have accounted “for the historical discourses at work in these representations which carry with them what might be characterized as the ‘textual baggage’ of comics” (Kent 2016, 26). Kent argued that “the role of comic books in shaping the representations of women found on film must be considered” (Kent 2016, 22), and the argument for the importance of considering the historical context in which these characters were created aligns with concerns about how representations of female characters “likely stem from acculturated attitudes about women” (Tompkins et al. 2020, 237). Similarly, Carolyn Cocca noted that in the earliest issues of *X-Men* written by Lee and Kirby, the only female member of the *X-Men* at the time, Jean Grey, “conformed to traditional stereotypes of women” (Cocca 2016b, 122). This was typical of the representation of female characters within the 1960s, because it was “a time of emphasis on binary gender roles” (Cocca 2016b, 122). She noted that even female *X-Men* characters who were added to the series over subsequent decades would continue to be “somewhat bound by stereotypes of gender” (Cocca 2016b, 125), though her analysis on how female *X-Men* were adapted first to television and then to film did not consider how these stereotyped portrayals intersected with the commercial concerns of media production. Given that representations of female characters are changing over time (Hine, Ivanovic and England 2018), as stereotypes relating to gender likewise evolve (Eagly et al. 2019; Gauntlett 2002), there are issues worth considering about how the presentation of male and female characters within superhero comics may affect the ease with which they can be adapted to film protagonist roles.

2.3 Conclusion

The X-Men comic featured more female protagonists than other superhero comics, but when it came to adapting the comic books to film, the heroism of the series' female superheroes was largely absent, in favour of focusing on male characters such as Wolverine. As previous research has observed, it has been important that the comic book and film versions of superheroes be unvarying in order to ensure that audiences who enjoy these superheroes will maximise their engagement with the characters across the wide range of products in which they are featured. This focus on creating characters who span a range of mediums has been something both comic book publishers and film studios have increasingly invested in, as both industries have sought to cross-promote and expand their product ranges in response to increased competition for audiences due to the increased availability of entertainment options. This need to focus on creating content that can be extended across mediums while still presenting the characters as consistently as possible has been challenging to achieve, however, because differences exist between the mediums of comic books and film. Those involved in translating superheroes from comic books to film protagonists have noted that it has been necessary to make changes when translating these stories between mediums in order to ensure that the characters are still engaging to audiences. While this has been established as influencing the changes made when superhero comics are adapted to film, it has not previously been investigated whether such issues have contributed to the female characters of the *X-Men* comics being supplanted by the character of Wolverine when selecting protagonists for adaptation to film. Such investigation can help explain why female protagonists, in general, have been less commonly selected to lead superhero film adaptations.

3 Research method

3.1 Introduction

While female superheroes have existed since superhero comics first became a popular genre, amidst an abundance of superhero film adaptations made in recent years, female protagonists have been even more rarefied than within the original comics on which these films have been based. This has been an enigma for many, because in the decades since the original comics were written, women have come to occupy more leading roles in society on the whole. It would therefore be expected that the number of female superheroes leading film adaptations would be at least as common as in the source material, but this has not been the case. For the most part, prior research into the commercial considerations of adapting superheroes to film has not considered whether there might be trends on how female superheroes were characterised within the original comics that may have made it more difficult to adapt them to heroic roles in commercially successful film adaptations.

The adaptation of the *X-Men* comics to film provides an opportunity to compare how differences in how male and female superheroes were characterised within the original comics. Analysis of this franchise reveals how the presentations of superhero characters are influenced by stereotypical qualities of masculinity and femininity. Understanding what differences exist in the traits exhibited by male and female superheroes makes it possible to determine whether female superheroes, in general, were characterised in manner that meant they could not be adapted with consistent characterisation to film, while still maximising the potential revenue a film adaptation could earn. This thesis reviews the concerns that filmmakers need to address when selecting a superhero film protagonist in order to explore how selecting protagonists with the greatest earning potential intersects with stereotypical gender representation of superheroes. Throughout the thesis a number of publicly available interviews and commentaries of writers, editors, producers and directors are analysed. Through these interviews the people involved in the production of the films offer their own perspective on developing these stories, how challenges of each storytelling medium affected the stories they told, and what audiences they had felt their stories needed to appeal to in order to deliver a satisfactory return on investment for the companies that published, broadcast and exhibited them.

This chapter begins by describing the case study as a method, its advantages and limitations, and how it is used in this thesis. After that, the decision to select the *X-Men* as the case study for explaining this phenomenon is explained. Following that explanation, the research approaches that have previously investigated the adaptation of the *X-Men* comics to film and television will be identified. The limitations of those previous investigations will also be identified, as well as how this research will address those limitations through analysing an assortment of evidence not limited to the *X-Men* texts but also encompassing the commercial considerations of producing successful film adaptations.

3.2 The case study as a research method

This research will use the adaptation of the *X-Men* stories from comics to film as a case study to understand if differences between how male and female characters were presented in superhero comics can explain whether there are greater challenges to adapting female superheroes to film protagonist roles. This is an investigation that has not been previously performed, and so it has been necessary to select a research method that would support a great depth of analysis. The case study method was selected because it makes it possible to rapidly unearth multiple issues, making case studies particularly effective for investigating issues that are at present little understood (Hartley 1994). The case study method can achieve this because it allows for highly detailed observations to be made that allow “many different aspects” to be explored and examined “in relation to each other” (Gummesson 2000, 76), at great depth (Meyer 2001).

This research will provide a greater understanding of the difficulties in producing commercially successful films about female superheroes by examining the source material of superhero comics and economic concerns expressed by filmmakers. This has been accomplished through using the *X-Men* franchise as a case study, with connections made to other superhero films to demonstrate the potential broader implications and impacts of these findings. The adaptation of the *X-Men* series to film was selected as the central case study for three main reasons. Firstly, the *X-Men* comics were originally authored by writers and artists who also created many other comic book series and creators, so the source material adapted to film shares a number of similarities with other superhero film adaptations. This allows the findings made by studying issues affecting female *X-Men* characters on adaptation to film to be more generally relevant to answering the question of whether female superheroes are economically disadvantaged on adaptation to film.

Secondly, the adaptation of the *X-Men* to film likewise involved producers, writers and directors who were closely influenced by, and who in turn closely influenced, a large number of other superhero film adaptations. This likewise supports the ability of the *X-Men* as a case study to speak to general reasons why female superheroes can be regarded as less economically viable protagonist choices. The third reason for why *X-Men* makes for an optimal case study selection is in its most unique characteristic; unlike many other superhero comics, the *X-Men* comics had a relatively equitable number of female and male protagonists. A number of the comics' best-selling issues featured female protagonists (Sanderson 1982a, 106), and this novel quality allows for a study of the characters within the *X-Men* franchise to engage in comparative analysis, and to identify differences between male and female characters that influenced their economic prospects as film protagonists.

3.2.1 Limitations of the case study method

Although this thesis presents a case study approach, there are some limitations. While the choice to focus upon a specific case study would ordinarily limit the ability of the results to be generalised (Eisenhardt 1989), with multiple studies being associated with more generalisable findings (Baxter and Jack 2008), in the case of looking at issues of gender affecting superhero characters, however, selecting *X-Men* as the case study allows findings of this research to be relevant to a large portion of superhero film adaptations. This is because while there are a number of popular superhero characters, the people involved with creating stories about these characters were, with some exceptions, a small group of people who worked on creating and supporting stories about many characters. As a result, the attitudes affecting the development of characters and stories within *X-Men* share many similarities with the attitudes towards gender evident in other superhero characters. Writer Stan Lee and artist Jack Kirby were highly influential within Marvel for decades. Aside from their direct involvement in the creation of many other superheroes aside from the X-Men, they occupied influential positions within Marvel, with Lee as the editor in chief, and Kirby as the publisher's "powerhouse cartoonist, character designer" and artistic mentor, working together with other creators as the primary influences in setting "the foundation for the Marvel Universe" of characters (Hatfield 2012, 28). Most of these superheroes were male, though Lee was also involved in creating a smaller number of female superheroes. Many of male superheroes created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby have been adapted to leading roles in film, however the female superheroes they created have primarily been restricted to supporting roles within these films.

The earliest X-Men characters introduced by Lee and Kirby in 1963 were two teams of opposing characters, each possessing marvellous mutant abilities. The titular heroes, the X-Men, were led by the telepathic Professor X, with the team including Cyclops, a man who beamed blasts of energy from his eyes, Iceman, who was able to turn himself and his surroundings into ice, Beast, who had superhuman strength and agility, Angel, who was born with wings, and the sole female on the team, Jean Grey, a mutant able to move things with her mind, who was later revealed to have limited mind-reading abilities. The X-Men were opposed by The Brotherhood of Evil Mutants, led by Magneto, a villain whose magnetism allowed him to manipulate anything metallic, and included Toad, a man able to leap with frog-like agility, Mastermind, who was able to manipulate others using illusions, Quicksilver, a man able to think and run at supernatural speeds, and his twin sister Scarlet Witch, who had the ability to hex her surroundings in order to cause havoc that could be used to her favour.

In addition to creating the X-Men comic and its original lineup, in the same year that the X-Men comic launched, Lee and Kirby together created Iron Man, who was introduced in 1963 and adapted to film in 2008, Thor, who debuted in 1962 and starred in a film adaptation in 2011, the Hulk, who was first featured in a comic in 1962 and adapted to film in 2003, the Fantastic Four who were introduced in 1961 and adapted to film in 2005, Ant-Man, who first appeared in the comics in 1962 and was adapted to film in 2015, Black Panther who emerged in 1966 and was adapted to film in 2018, and the Wasp who was introduced to the comics in 1963 and into the Ant-Man film in 2015. Outside of his collaborative creations with Kirby, Lee's creations included Spider-Man whose first comic appearance was in 1962 and who was adapted to film in 2003, Daredevil who was introduced in 1964 and adapted to film in 2003, Doctor Strange, who first appeared in 1963 and became the subject of a film adaptation in 2016, and the Black Widow, who first appeared within the comics in 1964 and was introduced to film audiences within the second *Iron Man* film in 2010. Away from his work with Lee, Kirby, who has been credited as "generating many if not most of the concepts that Marvel would exploit" in their superhero stories (Hatfield 2012, 28), was partially responsible for creating the character Captain America who was introduced to the comics in 1941 and adapted to film in 2011. A number of the characters created by Lee and Kirby will be discussed, with particular attention paid to the Invisible Woman from the Fantastic Four, the Hulk and Iron Man within the chapters *Suspending disbelief*, *Quiet drama* and *Cross-selling* as examples of how findings produced by studying the adaptation

of *X-Men* stories are consistent with the other works by Lee and Kirby. Other superhero characters such as Superman and Batman are discussed in the chapter *Suspending disbelief* to provide additional points of comparison, because the adaptation of Superman and Batman provided a template for commercial success that *X-Men* and subsequent superhero film adaptations have followed.

3.2.2 Previous approaches to investigating the adaptation of *X-Men*

While the *X-Men* films have made comic book superhero film adaptations a mainstay of Hollywood cinema for the past 20 years, analysis of how and why the roles for female protagonists were reduced upon adaptation to film has been an under-explored area. Greater scrutiny of such films is justified by their cultural impact over a mass audience, and the normalising effect these films have in reinforcing a perception that heroism is primarily a male trait. Only a small number of works have been published which have examined the presentation of female characters within the *X-Men* comic books and the film adaptations that followed it. The most extensive of the works investigating the representation of gender in such films are a chapter in the 2016 book *Superwomen: Gender, Power, and Representation* by Carolyn Cocca, and the 2014 doctoral thesis *Keeping the 'He' in 'Heroes': A Feminist Political Economic Look at DC and Marvel Superhero Film Adaptations* by Laura Stoltzfus. While these works have raised questions about the representation of female characters in film, they do not question whether elements of film production might make lead male protagonists more likely to generate greater revenue for the film than a female protagonist. In her 2014 thesis *Keeping the 'He' in 'Heroes'*, Stoltzfus argued that the underrepresentation of female protagonists in film was entirely caused by the studios responsible for producing the films. The underrepresentation of female protagonists in DC and Marvel films, she claimed, occurs because the “powerful and wealthy corporations” responsible for producing mass media “are able to dictate the ideologies that get sold” (Stoltzfus 2014, 32–33). However, this line of enquiry lacks an appreciation for the conditions under which media executives work, and the commercial relationship between those who develop films and the audiences that watch them.

Even where past research into the adaptation of *X-Men* to film has made commercial considerations, unrecognised limitations of the research method have led to unreliable analysis. Nur Saktiningrum set out to study the social and economic challenges of adapting some of the *X-Men* stories from comics to film. While her 2020 article was relatively brief, Saktiningrum drew attention to the

importance of considering the “historical, social, economic, and cultural” between comic books, and their film adaptations. Saktiningrum’s analysis focused on analysing a series of eight comics published in 2006 as the primary source material for the 2011 film, *X-Men: First Class*. This meant that her research was ultimately focused on a narrower range of historical differences than exist between other instances of adapting the *X-Men* comics to film, as the comic books and characters were first published in 1963. This narrower range of focus meant that the analysis unfortunately made some egregiously erroneous assumptions, assessed below. In addition, while the comics Saktiningrum investigated share the same name with the film *X-Men: First Class*, outside of this resemblance, they offered no inspiration to the film.

By not studying the *X-Men* comics from their earliest issues, Saktiningrum was not equipped to recognise that the *First Class* comics were a contemporary retelling of the story of the first X-Men team who had been the subject of the first issue of the comic published in 1963. The fact that the story of the X-Men team in the *First Class* comic is similar is evident when comparing its cover to that of the first *X-Men* issue, released 43 years earlier. That Saktiningrum’s research was published in a peer-reviewed literary journal is an indication of how research into superhero film adaptations has suffered from such few researchers having read and gained a wide understanding of the comics upon which these films are based. The *First Class* comic was written and set in the 2000s; however the *First Class* film was set in the 1960s, because it was based on the original *X-Men* comics which had begun in 1963. While Saktiningrum acknowledged that the *X-Men* comics had begun in the 1960s, and that the *First Class* comic was set in a different era to the film, neither she nor her reviewers recognised that the reason for the difference was because the *First Class* comic was not actually the source material for the film adaptation of the same name. The *First Class* comic was a contemporary retelling of the early *X-Men* comics about the earliest members of the X-Men team, and it was those early comics that were more influential over the film adaptation in terms of both the characters included in the story, as well as the conflict which was an amalgamation of stories from the *X-Men* comics published largely between 1963 and 1991.

The glaring omission of Saktiningrum in not recognising that the *First Class* comic was not actually the source material for the film of the same name also explains why Saktiningrum was left wondering why, “for some reason”, the female character known as Banshee in the *First Class* comics was replaced with a male character

named Banshee in the *First Class* film (Saktiningrum 2020, 10). This change is explained by the fact that within the early X-Men comics, the character Banshee was the man known as Sean Cassidy who appears in the *First Class* film. The character who appears in the *First Class* comic as Banshee in the 2000s is his daughter, Theresa Cassidy. Saktiningrum's research is just another example that makes it clear that studying the adaptation from comics to film is challenging because it necessitates a detailed focus on a large volume of source material that has a publication history spanning decades.

3.2.3 Content analysis for pattern identification

The case study approach in this thesis begins with an analysis of the key texts – the *X-Men* comics, *X-Men: The Animated Series* and the *X-Men* film adaptations – in order to identify the prominence of male and female characters in both the original comics and subsequent adaptations. The male and female characters whose roles changed the most between adaptations are then studied in greater scrutiny to understand how the different characteristics they possessed may have affected their likelihood for successful adaptation to film. These differences are then compared to stereotypes relating to gender, as identified by prior research conducted by gender scholars. It was found that gender was a factor which explained some of the reasons why these characters' roles had shifted in response to the constraints of different narrative mediums and the need to appeal to different audiences. The trends identified in how gender stereotypical qualities of *X-Men* characters affected their adaptation to film are then compared to other popular film adaptations of comic book superhero characters, and found to also partially explain the dominance of male characters in superhero films.

3.3 Research sources

Hundreds of *X-Men* comics have been published, but the key texts to be examined are those published in the era spanning from the first issue by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby published in 1963, through to the end of Chris Claremont's run as writer in 1991. This is because these were the comics that inspired the adaptation of *X-Men* to television (Lewald 2017) and, through the success of that televised adaptation, led to the subsequent adaptation of *X-Men* to film. Likewise, because of its influence on subsequent adaptations, the initial television adaptation *X-Men: The Animated Series* which aired from 1992 to 1997 is relevant to this examination. Bryan Singer, director of the first *X-Men* film adaptation released in 2000, said that *X-Men: The Animated Series* had influenced his film adaptations "tremendously" (Singer and

Peck 2000). He said that the characters he chose to focus on had been the characters who were the “most popular” in *The Animated Series*, and that he used their characterisation in that series as his template for directing the film (Chitwood 2015). David Hayter, who worked as the screenwriter for the first *X-Men* film, said that Bryan Singer had “never picked up a comic book” and that, rather than reading the comics, Singer had “learned the *X-Men* universe by watching all 76 episodes of *X-MEN:TAS*” (Lewald 2017, 443). Similarly, *Entertainment Weekly* writer Tim Stack also noted that the “Saturday morning cartoon... played in director Bryan Singer’s house while his co-screen-writers toiled on the script for *X-Men: Apocalypse*” and that the animated series had served as inspiration for actor Oscar Isaac “when he was creating his movie version of the character” *Apocalypse* in the 2016 film *X-Men: Apocalypse* (Stack 2015, 36).

On considering the issues involved in producing superhero films, it has been argued that it is important to remember that “one of the first things one must consider is the economic factor” (Grey and Kaklamanidou 2011, 3). This is because “the film industry does not spend hundreds of millions of dollars unless it will make a profit” (Grey and Kaklamanidou 2011, 3); ultimately, profit “drives show business” (Meehan 1991, 48). However, despite the importance of profit-making in driving decisions of film production, prior research into the rarity of female superhero film protagonists has not evaluated whether female superhero characters may have greater challenges in leading commercially successful film adaptations. This research will focus on examining whether differences between how male and female characters were presented in the source material have led female superheroes to be more difficult to adapt as the subjects of commercially successful films.

In order to gain this understanding of the concerns in producing commercially successful superhero films, interviews and commentaries of writers, editors, producers and directors were studied in order to learn, from their own perspective in developing these stories, what the greatest challenges in adapting them to film and television was. This perspective has been gained through studying publicly available interviews and commentaries rather than directly interviewing film producers, directors and others in the film industry about the challenges of adapting female superheroes to film. This approach was selected because comments by film industry professionals expressing doubt on the financial merits of such films have been heavily criticised when leaked to the public. The professionals and the companies they represent have been decried for holding opinions that run counter

to a zeitgeist that has been increasingly concerned with seeing more women occupying such roles. Given the industry's dedication to carefully managing public perceptions of their film projects to offer them the greatest chance of appealing to audiences (Stoltzfus 2014), experts from within the industry appear hesitant to openly discuss the challenges of adapting female superheroes to film. Therefore reviewing existing interviews allows for the commercial concerns of producing successful superhero films to be interpreted from existing research sources. The interviews reviewed for this analysis span from the introduction of the *X-Men* comics in 1963 through to the 2020 film *The New Mutants* which would be the final instalment of the X-Men films, released 20 years after the first *X-Men* film launched the "Golden Age of Comic Book Filmmaking" (Burke 2015, 23). Broadly speaking, the greatest challenge has been the amount of revenue these films must generate. Any differences that may exist between the commercial potential of male and female superheroes could have a significant influence on the selection of film protagonists because of how much money will be risked when investing in the production of superhero film adaptations.

Superhero films are more expensive than many other types of film to produce because of the need to invest in significant efforts to replicate how "superhero narratives had been dramatized on the page" with convincing photorealism (Purse 2019, 64-67). While it is commonly believed that the proliferation of "special effects" in cinema has led films to venture "far away from realistic characters, situations, and locations," such effects often function in more subtle "nonspectacular ways," (Prince 2011, 1) to make improbable aspects of films seem more realistic to audiences (Prince 2012). Audience research on superhero films has revealed that moviegoers feel that "both a good movie and reality were achieved when a filmmaker handled the effects well and made superpowers seem believable" (Rae and Gray 2007).

The first blockbuster superhero movie, *Superman*, was, at the time of its production, the most expensive film ever made, and remained so for 10 years (Neale 2002, 22) with the special effects to convince audiences of Superman's ability to fly proving costly (Shone 2004, 98). The technique of travelling mattes used to convey Superman's flight in the 1978 film was "greatly facilitated" in becoming more common thereafter by advancements in digital effects (Prince 2011, 61-62), and "the increasing sophistication of digital visual effects," (Purse 2019, 55) was responsible for the increasing popularity of superhero film adaptations from 2000 onwards. Superhero films typically require extensive use of digitally created effects

in order to make the characters “appear realistic even as they fly and shoot laser beams from their eyes and ice from their fingertips” (Brown 2017, 25). Such effects became increasingly popular after the success of the 1993 film *Jurassic Park*, because “the credibility of the film’s effects ... made possible an expansion of screen time devoted to fantastical elements” (Prince 2011, 6) by making improbable aspects of films seem more realistic to audiences (Prince 2012, 57). While previously, such fantastical elements could only be briefly be shown on screen, “lest viewers have a chance to study them at length and in ways that revealed the seams” digital effects had become seamlessly blended with the real action of films (Prince 2011, 6). This breakthrough in film technology happened at just the right time to make an adaptation of *X-Men* to film seem both possible, and like a good idea. The year before the dinosaurs from *Jurassic Park* came roaring into cinemas, the first episode of *X-Men: The Animated Series* had premiered to shocking popularity (Lewald 2017, 18), and a month after *Jurassic Park*’s effects impressed audiences, the deal to adapt *X-Men* to film was made (*Twentieth Century Fox Film Corp. v. Marvel Enterprises* 2001). This expensive investment in computer graphics necessary to adapt superhero comics to film delayed the production of many projects, including *X-Men* (2000), *Hulk* (2003) and *The Fantastic Four* (2005) due to concerns that these films would not appeal to a large enough audience to recover their production costs (Petrikin 1998). Fox was so nervous about the risk of producing *X-Men* that investment in the expensive special effects was left until the studio was able to review initial filming of scenes without special effects first before committing to investing in the special effects for the film, which cost an estimated “[US]\$1 million per minute” to produce (Graser 1999). Such expense necessitates that superhero films must be constructed to both appeal to a large audience, and maximise the potential return on investment through merchandising revenue, and these concerns steer the selection of superhero film protagonists.

Discussing the production of *X-Men*, producer Ralph Winter said that changes had needed to be made to the stories so that they would appeal to a wider audience of movie-goers so that the “[US]\$75 million budget” it would take to produce the film would be justified (Katz 2020). In adapting the *X-Men* to film, Fox needed to appeal to a much broader audience than had originally read the comics. At peak circulation, when *X-Men* was Marvel’s top selling title in the mid 1980s (Burke 2016), the *X-Men* comic had been read by an audience of 300,000 (Lewald 2017, 411)⁴, so the adaptation had little need to try and “be too inclusive” of the interests of comic fans

4 All estimates refer to the US domestic market.

when choosing “which stories to tell, which to admit or ignore, which to change, and which to conflate” (Dantzler 2018, 24) as the audience who had enjoyed the original comics were such a narrow proportion of the audience to which the film adaptations aimed to appeal. Even with a conservative budget of US\$75 million (McLean 2009, 42), the *X-Men* stories needed to be altered from their comic origins so they would appeal to a broader audience. As producer Ralph Winter recalled, this meant changing things about the comics that many fans loved, like the classic yellow spandex uniforms because, as he said, they needed “to make a movie that reaches a wide audience to justify the budget” (Cairns 2020). This is consistent with research that indicates that where costs to produce stories become higher, this leads to the development of programming designed to appeal to broader audience bases (Collins, Garnham and Locksley 1988) and, by aiming to appeal to the broadest audience, the diversity of films produced is reduced (Rohn and Ibrus 2019, 412–413).

This research reviewed a number of *X-Men* films released between 2000 and 2020 as listed in Figure 4.

| Year | Title |
|------|-----------------------------------|
| 2000 | <i>X-Men</i> |
| 2003 | <i>X2: X-Men United</i> |
| 2006 | <i>X-Men: The Last Stand</i> |
| 2009 | <i>X-Men Origins: Wolverine</i> |
| 2011 | <i>X-Men: First Class</i> |
| 2013 | <i>The Wolverine</i> |
| 2014 | <i>X-Men: Days of Future Past</i> |
| 2016 | <i>X-Men: Apocalypse</i> |
| 2017 | <i>Logan</i> |
| 2019 | <i>Dark Phoenix</i> |

Figure 4: *X-Men* films selected for analysis.

This sample includes ten films which will be discussed in varying levels of depth according to the extent to which each film has diverged from the source material with respect to the prominence of male and female characters. The films *Deadpool* (2016), and *The New Mutants* (2020) will only be discussed briefly regarding what

insights the production of these films can offer as additional points of reference to the challenges of adapting superhero comics to film. The brevity of focus upon these films is due to the fact that while the *Deadpool* and *New Mutants* films were based on characters relating to the *X-Men*, those were not characters who were part of the main *X-Men* comics or the preceding television adaptation.

After this sample of texts was selected, analysis was performed to first identify the relationships between these films and the original source material, from the comics through to *The Animated Series*. This comparison between the original comics and television and film adaptations allowed for recognition of how the prominence of different characters changed from the source material to film version. The changes that were observed were then compared to factors identified as impacting the commercial potential of protagonists. These factors all relate to the need to maximise the potential revenue a film adaptation would be able to generate. That included ensuring the film would be realistic and exciting enough to be engaging to adults, while not being too scary for children, with a level of conflict film audiences could appreciate, and yet still be able to generate revenue through merchandise related to the film. Each of these concerns were then compared to stereotypes about gender evident in the original comics in order to determine if female characters were more likely to be challenging to adapt to commercially successful films.

While efforts have been made to reduce the limitations of this research through the selection of the case study subject and through incorporating research on commercial concerns, some limitations do still remain. This research is only investigating whether differences in how male and female superheroes were portrayed in the source material impacted their commercial potential as film protagonists. This investigation has ultimately been performed in order to support a better understanding of why female superheroes are so much less common as film protagonists. This research is not considering any potential benefits offered by selecting female superheroes as film protagonists. What that means in terms of the limitations of this research will be addressed within the conclusion.

3.4 Conclusion

The question of whether female characters are more challenging to adapt to commercially successful film adaptations has not been explored by previous research. This question is important to consider within the larger context of female-

led superhero films being so much less common than the numerous superhero movies led by male protagonists. In order to uncover whether female superheroes possess qualities that make them more challenging to adapt to commercially successful films, this research has chosen to use the adaptation of the *X-Men* comics to film as a case study. The adaptation of *X-Men* has been selected because it is representative of many other superhero stories that have been adapted to film, and this means that findings gained by studying the *X-Men* can be more generalised to other superhero film adaptations. Additionally, as the *X-Men* comics contain a large cast of characters, it is possible to compare and contrast the representation of a range of male and female characters throughout the discussion within this research of the factors associated with producing superhero movies that maximise potential revenue.

4 Suspending disbelief

4.1 Introduction

When investigating why few female characters are protagonists in superhero film adaptations, in spite of their popularity within the comics, existing research has rarely considered what the source material of these films contributes to this phenomenon. This is largely because while films about superheroes have been enjoyed by a broad audience, the comics these films have been based on have been read by a much smaller audience. This research aims to study the differences in how male and female superheroes were presented within the original source material, and examine how these differences intersect with the challenges of creating commercially successful superhero film adaptations. Given that it is evident that female protagonists are more common in other film genres (Lauzen 2020, 2), it is worthwhile to consider what qualities specific to superhero stories could create greater challenges to producing successful films based on female characters. One difficulty specific to adapting superheroes to film is that these characters typically possess superhuman abilities that can seem unbelievable to a sceptical adult audience. This has already been identified as an issue which has hindered the adaptation of some superhero characters to film.

While younger sidekicks are a common accompaniment in superhero comics, they have been rarely adapted with equivalent prominence in film adaptations. This is because, while young sidekicks appealed to the audience who read comics, their heroic roles within these stories were not plausible enough for older audiences to enjoy. The popular trend of superhero sidekicks began when the character of Robin was introduced in a supporting role to Batman in 1940. Since children were the primary audience for the comics, Robin was introduced as a way “to enable younger readers to identify more closely with the Caped Crusader’s adventures” (Boichel 1991, 8). The strategy worked, helping to make the comic more relatable to its primary audience of children and, keen to achieve similar success, other superhero comics also introduced prepubescent partners. Bucky Barnes was introduced as the child sidekick to Captain America within the first issue in 1941 (Simon and Kirby 1941), Speedy was introduced as the Green Lantern’s sidekick (Weisinger and Papp 1941), and the Sandman gained a sidekick called Sandy the Golden Boy (Weisinger and Norris 1941), all in the same year. More followed, and “the junior sidekick emerged as one of the most important terms in the superhero lexicon” (Boichel 1991, 8). However, while many superhero stories have included sidekicks

to the superhero protagonists who are of an age that the children reading comics could relate to (Lee and Kirby 2009), these sidekicks have been largely absent from superhero film adaptations. In particular, Martin Zeller-Jacques noted that female sidekicks were relatively absent from superhero film adaptations. His argument acknowledged however that this was not specific to female sidekicks but rather was “part of a cycle-wide drive toward real-world verisimilitude, which has seen many of the outlandish elements of superhero comics sidelined in the attempt to seek mainstream audiences” (Zeller-Jacques 2016, 196). The importance of presenting superhero characters as believable on film was argued to have held back the adaptation of female characters on the basis of physical appearance, however. Rikke Schubart argued that the beauty standards associated with femininity made it less likely for female superheroes to be portrayed in a plausible manner. Her research attested that gender stereotypes that disparage muscular women have served as a “glass ceiling” preventing female superheroes from being portrayed in ways that are believable to mainstream film audiences (Schubart 2019, 169).

Outside of the concerns raised by Schubart’s research, the need to render superhero characters believable for mainstream audiences also causes greater challenges for female superheroes because it is far more common for superpowers possessed by male characters to have already been explained by science, whereas female characters more frequently had their abilities explained by magic. These differences are because in the time these characters were created, science was considered to be masculine (Milam and Nye 2015, 2; Al-Gailani 2009, 378; Douglas 1994, 255), and magic feminine (Herzig 2010; Bever 2002; Bailey 2002). Such differences have affected the market female characters have been adapted to film for, because while younger audiences are inclined to believe most things are possible (Gilbert 1991, 109), older audiences tend to only enjoy stories that have more basis in what they know to be real (Green 2004, 247-263).

Aside from male characters being easier to adapt because of their abilities being grounded in science, they can also be easier to adapt because male characters more often express scepticism. Audiences will also be inclined to perceive a narrative as realistic enough to enjoy if, when the fantastic does occur within the film, the audience is able to relate to the reaction of the hero to this scenario. For this reason, it is common to have characters in superhero films, particularly since the release of *X-Men* (2000), to react with overt scepticism when encountering the more unbelievable aspects of superhero stories. While few would argue today that

science and scepticism are expressly male traits, in the time in which the most popular superheroic characters were created, science, and the tendency to think sceptically and overtly express it, were far more likely to be associated with male characters. So, when filmmakers have tried to create superhero films that allow audiences that suspend their disbelief, it has been easier to find these traits already existing in the male comic book characters. This has created one way in which it can be easier to create a commercially successful superhero film with a male protagonist.

Analysis of how the need to support the suspension of disbelief will begin with a review of supporting evidence that indicates the importance of stories being perceived as realistic in order for them to be enjoyable. Accompanying that analysis will be a reflection on how the nature of superhero comics as a children's medium necessitated changes upon adaptation to film to make their stories enjoyable to older audiences. This will be followed by discussion of the strategies that have been used in the production of superhero films in order to facilitate this. The first strategy to be discussed is how science has been used to create a believable internal logic for superhero stories, and to allow these stories to thereby be made sufficiently realistic for adult audiences to also enjoy them. Following that overview, retrospective analysis will explain how stereotypes about science being masculine, and magic being feminine, led to the characters with the most scientifically explicable powers being more likely to be male, which therefore gave these characters advantages in being adapted to leading roles in film.

After the masculinisation of science has been established, this will then lead into the discussion on the second strategy used to support the suspension of disbelief, the use of scepticism on the part of characters to maintain the audience's sense that the stories are realistic. Scepticism reflects a "disposition to incredulity either in general or toward a particular object" (Merriam-Webster n.d.) and is central to scientific inquiry, which "advances through legitimate scepticism" (Bybee 2006, 4). Given the relationship of scepticism to scientific enquiry, the greater occurrence of these sceptical characteristics are unsurprisingly more often found in male superhero characters, though it is worthwhile to examine this issue separately from the gendering of science and magic, as the tendency to openly express such scepticism separately relates to differences in socialisation which can mean that expressing potentially controversial opinions is considered to be a masculine trait. This will conclude the explanation of why, more so than other types of movies, it is

necessary for superhero film adaptations to work to maintain the suspension of disbelief, and why this need has made it more likely for male characters to be the subjects of such films.

4.2 The need for realism: making adults believe a man can fly

Concerns have always existed about whether stories about superheroes would appeal to an adult readership. Comic writer Stan Lee, who co-created many of Marvel's most popular superheroes, including a number of the *X-Men*, said that when it came to writing superheroes, they were attempting "to reach an older, more sophisticated" audience with their stories, but Lee felt their attempts were perhaps in vain (Thomas 2019, 138). In their early history, superhero comics primarily were marketed to children, with 93% of children aged 6–11 and 84% of children aged 12–17 reading superhero comics (Gabilliet 2010, 198). Stan Lee recalled that, when he had been writing and creating superheroes during the 1960s, the audience was primarily considered to be a "bubble-gum brigade" of children aged from toddlers to kids of 13 or 14 years of age, with only occasional interest from adults who "here and there might dip into a comic book on occasion" (Lee and Kirby 2009).

As a genre developed primarily for children, superhero comics struggled to appeal to a larger adult audience because their fantastical tales were too unbelievable for most adults to enjoy. In comparison to adults, "children are especially credulous, especially gullible, especially prone toward acceptance and belief" (Gilbert 1991, 109). Children have a less advanced comprehension of the distinction between fantasy and reality (Taylor and Howell 1973; Dorr 1983; Beasich, Leinoff and Swan 1992; Sharon and Woolley 2004). As the ability to distinguish between fantasy and reality develops with age, elements of outright fantasy are less commonly enjoyed by an adult audience as they "require some measure of imagination on the part of the viewer" (Ferri 2007, 46) in order to overcome the unrealistic elements of the story. Lee said his goal was "that someday an intelligent adult would not be embarrassed to walk down the street with a comic magazine" though he was unsure this could ever be achieved (Thomas 2019, 177). Lee had long worked as a writer and editor on publications that used science fiction to ground the fantastic aspects of their story with enough realism for adult readers to enjoy, including the publication *Amazing Adult Fantasy* that branded itself as being "the magazine that respects your intelligence" (Thomas 2019, 133). Much as Lee and his compatriots strived to make superhero stories appeal to older audiences however, when the publication introduced the character Spider-Man in 1962, they

doubted that an adult audience would be interested in a story about what Stan Lee referred to as a “long underwear character” who went by a name like Spider-Man (Thomas 2019, 133). For this reason, the magazine was rebranded as *Amazing Fantasy*, removing the word “adult” from its title, and marketing it instead to an audience primarily comprised of children, with adults only being an incidental part of the audience (Thomas 2019, 133). This is not to say that there were not adults who enjoyed superhero comics, but the adult audience for superhero comics was much smaller and more casual than the children who made up the majority of the audience, with adult readership in the 1950s estimated at a 25–27.3% of the adult population in 1950 (Gabilliet 2010, 197). The audience for superhero comics changed from the 1970s onwards however, due to a combination of increasing price and the disappearance of comics from mainstream retail locations (Wright 2001, 258). Instead of children being the primary consumers of comic books, the audience grew older, with an average age of 26 by 1997 (Gabilliet 2010, 208). Superhero comics struggled to appeal to as many adults as they had to children however, and with the shift towards older consumers, the size of the comic book market had also contracted, with both regular and infrequent readers estimated at 1,250,000 consumers (Gabilliet 2010, 208). This market represented less than half of one percent of the U.S. population (United States Census Bureau 1997, 8)⁵.

Stories need to be perceived as realistic in order to be enjoyable to adult audiences (Green 2004, 247–263), and the adults who did read comics were those for whom reality “was seen to already exist” within the stories (Rae and Gray 2007). By contrast, audiences who did not ordinarily read comic books regarded superhero comics as being unrealistic (Rae and Gray 2007). Given that stories about superheroes would need to appeal to a much larger, more sceptical audience in order for a film adaptation to be successful, changes have often been made to ground the characters and stories in reality when adapting these comics to film.

As Derek Johnson noted in his own research, such “blockbuster films need to sell tens of millions of tickets to turn a profit, meaning that Marvel fans could constitute only a small part of the potential audience for Marvel films and could not be Hollywood’s sole target market” (D. Johnson 2012). For these stories to appeal beyond their small audience, and to expand sales to a larger audience of adults, it was necessary to add greater realism in order to expand the appeal of these stories to a broader audience in order to achieve commercial success. Films involving

⁵ Based on the population of 265,557,000 recorded in the 1996 census.

fantasy are more likely to appeal to children than adults (Walters 2011, 85), with a much greater proportion of successful fantasy films being produced for children than adults (The Numbers n.d.a)⁶. The implications of the amount of fantasy elements within a film, on the audience it can be successfully marketed to, are evident when evaluating the distribution of successful fantasy films, by comparison to successful science fiction films. In order to make this comparison, four sample groups of films were selected based on domestic ticket sales data compiled by The Numbers, a database that tracks financial information relating to the production and theatrical performance of films. The first group is of the films with the highest theatrical gross in the domestic market, with no distinction made as to the genre of the film. This serves as the control group. The second sample represents the highest grossing films categorised as fantasy, the third the highest grossing science fiction films, and the fourth category is films within the superhero genre. For each film, the rating assigned to it by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) was recorded, to identify which film genres were more likely to be successful when marketed to children, or to adults. Each film was assigned one of four ratings: G, which advises that a film is suitable for general audiences, PG, which indicates that parental guidance is advised, as parents may consider some material unsuitable for children, PG-13, which indicates that parental guidance is advised for children younger than 13, as parents may consider some material unsuitable for younger children, and R, which restricts admission to children under the age of 17, unless accompanied by an older guardian (Motion Picture Association of America n.d.).

This analysis found that by comparison to other genres, fantasy films are typically produced for younger children, with the PG rating being the most common (Figure 5). By contrast, science fiction films are more likely to be developed for the PG-13 rating than either fantasy films, or even the control group of the highest grossing films of any genre.

⁶ Based on assessment of the highest grossing fantasy films for the domestic market, by comparison to the highest grossing films from any genre. This analysis of 100 fantasy films revealed that 6 films were developed for the G rating, and 49 for the PG rating, which was significantly more skewed towards an audience of children than the 100 highest grossing films irrespective of genre (The Numbers n.d.b), in which only 4 films were rated G and 26 were PG.

Rating distributions for successful science fiction and fantasy films

(The Numbers n.d.a, The Numbers n.d.b, The Numbers n.d.c, The Numbers n.d.d).

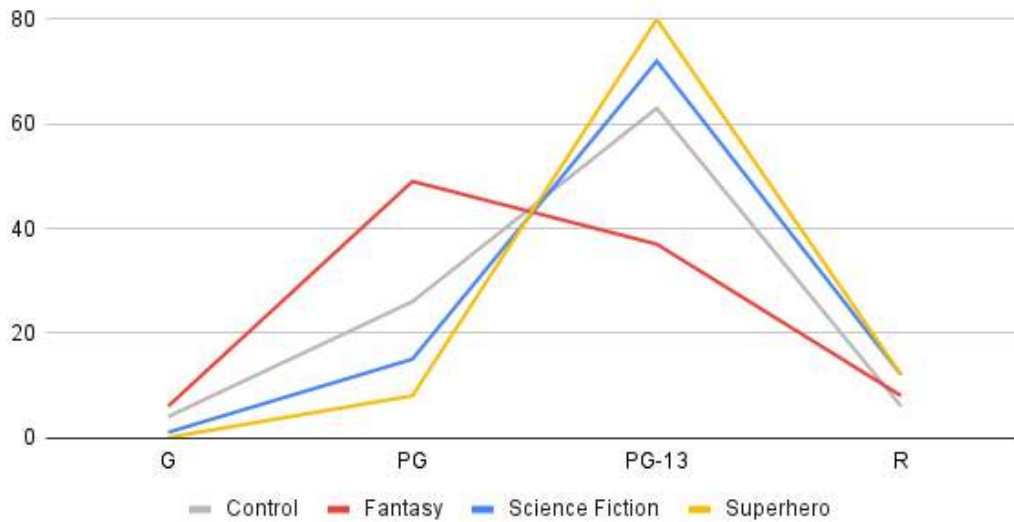


Figure 5: Fantasy films are most commonly developed for a G rating, whereas science fiction films are more likely than either fantasy films or the control group to be developed for older audiences. Superhero films are more likely than films of any other category to be developed for the PG-13 rating and have the lowest likelihood of being produced for the G and PG ratings, likely because as other have noted “their fantastical setups and all-ages reputation” have led them more frequently being marketed to children than films with equivalent violence (Burke 2015, 56).

While fantasy elements tend to restrict the appeal of stories to younger audiences, it is possible for fantastic stories to offer an equal appeal to older audiences. *X-Men* was adapted to film with the intention of being marketed with the of being appealing “to a PG-13 audience” according to producer Lauren Schuler-Donner (Worley 2003). The PG-13 film rating has been described as the “blockbuster sweet spot” by CEO of the National Association of Theatre Owners, John Fithian (Goodale 2013) because it allows content to contain enough serious themes to interest adult audiences, while simultaneously indicating child-friendly content. Superhero films are typically developed for the PG-13 rating (Figure 5), to maximise the potential to earn back their investment costs by targetting the broadest possible audience. When the rating was introduced in 1984, head of the Motion Picture Association of America, Jack Valenti, said that the age delineation was selected as, to the film industry, 13 represented the age at which children can distinguish the difference between fantasy and reality (Breznican 2004). The PG-13 rating, because it targets a diverse audience of children and adults alike, also is the rating in which science fiction is most likely to present within films. This is because films aimed at a broad audience often incorporate fictitious extrapolations of science to explain fantastic aspects of their narratives (Shone 2004, 28).

The application of science fiction is effective at grounding fantasy within greater plausibility for sceptical audiences, because when consuming epic stories, audiences can engage in a “willing suspension of disbelief” about exciting but impossible feats so long as there was a sufficient “semblance of truth” (Coleridge 1817). Superhero films have often been considered as “a variant of the science-fiction film” (Bukatman 2009, 115) because they make use of “comic book science” to explain “things like yellow sun radiation allowing a man to fly, or alternate dimensions created by a mad doctor’s time-travel machine” (Mozzocco 2013). This use of science is important because tying the fantastic abilities of these heroes to what the audience knows to be true allows them to more readily make the leap to finding the superhuman abilities of these heroes logical enough to be accepted as believable within the story. Science fiction allows audiences to readily enjoy escapist elements through easing “the ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ on the part of its readers by utilizing an atmosphere of scientific credibility for its imaginative speculations” (Moskowitz 1963). Grounding elements of fantasy within science fiction is effective at supporting the suspension of disbelief because where an understandable explanation is provided for a scenario, it will typically be perceived as realistic (Gilbert 1991, 114). This is because it is “only after additional cognitive effort is expended” that audiences can make evaluations as to whether a scenario occurring within a story is realistic (Bradley and Shapiro 2004, 308). Given the audience can only engage in so much cognitive processing at once, since “the vast majority of perceived sensory inputs are indeed real”, human perception of the reality of information within stories will typically assume information is realistic by default (Bradley and Shapiro 2004, 308). Audiences will only begin to question the plausibility of a scenario if they align with the audience’s understanding of reality, or if the audience believes the events of a given scenario seem improbable to them (Shapiro and Weisbein 2001). Likewise, stories will seem plausible to audiences if the events within a story fit within a “horizon of expectations” that the audience has already accepted as realistic, at least in relative terms (Jauss 1982, 21–22). So, if a seemingly plausible explanation is provided for events within a story, then they will be perceived as realistic, as the existence of a seemingly plausible explanation can avert the need to engage in that additional step of evaluating veracity.

Given how science fiction can expand the potential audience that fantastic stories appeal to, adaptations of superhero comics to film and television typically work to ensure the fantastic characters and events within these stories can be sufficiently explained with scientific principles so that even sceptical adults can find the stories

enjoyable. The first successful adaptation of a Marvel comic to a mass audience was the 1977 live action series adapted by producer Kenneth Johnson who, fresh off the success of producing science fiction television series such as *The Six Million Dollar Man* (1973–1978) and *The Bionic Woman* (1976–1978), took a similar approach of emphasising the comic book science for *The Incredible Hulk* (1977–1982). The adaptation of *The Incredible Hulk* to television focused on “grounding the character in reality” (Blumberg 2016, 130), and only rarely incorporated “fantasy elements” outside of those of the titular hero, whose abilities were explained by exposure to gamma radiation (Blumberg 2016, 130). For the film adaptation, *The Incredible Hulk* producer changed the characters’ costumes because he found the “spandex” and “primary colors” of superhero characters made them hard to relate to (Jankiewicz 2013). Indeed, Johnson worked to reduce the amount of fantastic elements in the story in order to maintain the audience’s suspension of disbelief. As he told *Hulk* writer Stan Lee when Lee attempted to interject a robot bear into the series as an opponent for the Hulk:

...an audience will only give you so many buys. They will only ‘buy’ so much. We are asking them to make a really big buy – that Bill Bixby metamorphoses into a big green Lou Ferrigno. That’s a huge fucking buy! I have pushed the audience a major step. You add a robot bear to it and you’ve gone over the top; adults will walk away, saying, ‘Sorry, I just don’t buy it.’ (Jankiewicz 2013).

Lee remained convinced a robotic bear could work, because Johnson’s prior show, *The Six Million Dollar Man*, had featured a bionic bigfoot in one episode. However, for Johnson, the issue was that, while the audience could be expected to accept one fantastic premise, they could not be expected to accept another. Bionic bigfoots worked within the known limits of reality that the audience of *The Six Million Dollar Man* had accepted. “On the show,” Johnson recalled, “you’re living in a world of bionics. To create a robot character there wasn’t really a stretch, because they weren’t too different from our bionic people” (Jankiewicz 2013, 115). In the reality accepted by the audience of *The Incredible Hulk*, on the other hand, where only gamma radiation existed to explain how a fantastical creature like the Hulk came to be, “a robot bear would be one buy too many” for the adults in the audience to accept (Jankiewicz 2013, 115). Limiting the extent to which the audience would need to suspend their disbelief was effective enough that *The Incredible Hulk* was able to be marketed to adults more so than children, and it was able to succeed while airing in the adult-skewing timeslot of Friday nights at 9 (Jankiewicz 2013).

Shortly after the release of *The Incredible Hulk*, the 1978 adaptation of *Superman* to film followed a similar strategy of grounding its story within reality. In doing so, it was the first comic book movie to develop a successful strategy for overcoming the challenge of presenting a superhero as a character believable enough for an audience of adults to enjoy. Indeed, it was the first superhero film which set out “to play a hero relatively straight for a general audience” (Svitavsky 2018, 77) by making efforts to address any elements of the story that might seem preposterous to a general audience by using scientific and other rational explanations. While the *Superman* comics had been able to achieve commercial success by appealing to an audience predominantly of children, the superhuman feats of the hero, so easily illustrated within a comic book, would be so much more costly to visualise in film that it would need to appeal to an audience of adults and children alike in order to cover the costs of special effects. Grounding fantastical events within real world science, and establishing a believable internal logic allows audiences to embrace fantastical elements because audiences typically perceive the events and characters in a narrative as realistic when, within the context of the story, the events and characters make logical sense (Weber and Wirth 2014, 128). This is why *Superman* director Richard Donner felt it necessary when adapting *Superman* to film to strive for “verisimilitude” (Greenberg 2019, 5).

Unlike some other superheroes, Superman’s extraordinary abilities had always been justified by so-called “comic book science”, with his a sufficiently plausible explanation for his abilities being offered through internally consistent logic which drew upon scientific principles. He had been created by science fiction fans as “a science fictional superman”, a man who had “come to Earth from another planet” (White 1970, 17). His powers, initially restricted to super-strength, were explained in the first issue of the *Superman* comic (Figure 6), in which Superman’s super-strength was made to seem less ‘incredible’ to audiences by relating it to real world examples of insects like ants and grasshoppers who also had far greater proportional strength than humans.

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Figure 6: Using scientific explanation to make the fantastic seem more realistic *Action Comics* #1 (Siegel and Shuster 1938).

Later, after audiences had embraced this concept, Superman would come to possess additional abilities, and further scientific explanations would follow. In issue #53 (Finger and Boring 1948), it was explained that Superman was “metabolically adapted for a greater gravity and far harsher environmental pressures than ours.” It was logical to audiences that “here on Earth, the superhero would find his powers vastly multiplied” because a human on the moon would likewise be at an advantage over the relative difference in gravity (White 1970,17). In issue #262 (Binder and Mooney 1960), it was revealed that Earth’s yellow sun contributed to Superman’s abilities, though these powers had come to include skills that would require a greater suspension of disbelief from audiences, like flight, invulnerability, superior vision, including being able to see with-ray vision, super-hearing, as well as an ability to fire laser beams from his eyes and to exhale frost breath. While the abilities Superman possessed would exceed what might be rationally explained even by science fiction, the scientific grounding that had been provided to audiences gave them enough grounding in reality to let the story take them further into suspending their disbelief.

This “science fictional approach” established in the comics was followed in the film adaptation of *Superman* which emphasised “Superman’s extraterrestrial origin and Lex Luthor’s science” (Svitavsky 2018,77). Producer Ilya Salkind, who’d grown up earnestly enjoying the *Superman* comics, believed that bolstering the internal logic

of the story would allow the story to be more easily enjoyed by a mass audience (Eury 2018, 7). This drove his decision to hire Donner, as he felt “that within its own reality, it was extremely important that the characters in the story believed themselves” and he “strove to bring that sense of reality” to the film (Greenberg 2019, 5). Through this approach, the Superman filmmakers were able to support the necessary suspension of disbelief required “to convince the audience a man could fly” (Greenberg 2019, 5), along with the other flights of fancy by which they would need to be convinced.

As an example, Donner’s need to explain realistically the more implausible elements of the film was responsible for changing the meaning of the *Superman* symbol. Screenwriter Tom Mankiewicz recalled that “one of the great riddles” they had tried to solve when producing the film “was why Superman has an ‘S’ on his chest.” As Mankiewicz noted, “it obviously stands for ‘Superman’”; however, given he wasn’t called Superman until after he had donned the costume, “Why does he have an ‘S’ on his chest?” While in the *Superman* comics there had never been a need to address the issue of why the character would have an ‘S’ emblazoned on his chest to represent his superhero name, for an adult audience a plausible explanation would be required. To create a realistic explanation for Superman’s logo, Mankiewicz and Donner introduced a new element to the *Superman* lore, creating the story that the symbol was not an ‘S’, but rather a symbol that, on his Kryptonian planet, had represented his family house, and that the similarity between the symbol and the letter ‘S’ had inspired the camp-sounding Superman moniker (Eury 2018).

Details like this, and the overall effect of their attempt to create a realistic-seeming superhero film, meant that *Superman* achieved unprecedented blockbuster success, breaking records with its ticket sales (Shone 2004); it allowed audiences to suspend their disbelief enough so that, as the promotional posters had promised (Figure 7), they were able to “believe a man can fly.”

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Figure 7: The promotional poster for the film made a bold claim to audiences that they would believe a man would fly, as perceived realism is necessary for adult audiences to enjoy superhero films.

The successful adaptation of the *Superman* to film in 1978 did not convince the larger film industry that other film adaptations of comic book superheroes could appeal to an audience of anyone but children, however. Alice Domemfeld-Vermoux, who was tasked with soliciting adaptations for Marvel film characters in 1979 recalled how her attempts to pitch the *Incredible Hulk* and *Spider-Man* had all

received the same dubious response from the major film studios. She recalled that “Every one of them would say to me, ‘We’re not going to make a movie of any of your dumb superheroes. The theaters are going to be dark at night. We can’t play kids movies after 6 o’clock at night. It’s not worth the money,” (Radulovic 2019). Such concerns meant that even after the success of *Superman*, studios were reluctant to try to follow its success with more superheroes, out of a worry that they would not appeal to enough adults to be profitable. Eventually however, a successor to *Superman* would appear, with the 1989 adaptation of fellow DC Comics hero Batman to film by director Tim Burton.

With concerns remaining about the ability of superheroes to appeal to older audiences, Batman may have been selected for adaptation because of how much easier it was to market his story to an older audience. As Travis Langley described in his analysis of what made Batman relatable to audiences, “he’s the one who works by night, needs a car to get into town, and is the most mortal. He’s the superhero with no superpowers, the one we can most easily believe might inhabit our world” (Langley 2012). Furthermore, Batman did not require a scientific explanation to justify his abilities, as Batman “is an ordinary human being: he has no super powers” (White 1970, 33). However, some parts of his story would still need to be managed to better appeal to sceptical adults. That is, while his decision to emerge from a hidden lair dressed as a bat and ready to fight crime was nevertheless far enough removed from the everyday reality of audiences, it was still necessary to support the suspension of disbelief because many of the villains Batman was confronted by were equally enthused to dress up in silly costumes to fight crime, as Batman was to stop it. Anton First, the production designer for the 1989 *Batman* film, characterised its overall style as one of “believable unreality” which kept the more fanciful elements of the film based in enough familiar elements of reality that audiences could believe them (Warner Bros. 1989, 9). While clowns are often considered frightening and potentially villainous because of their false cheer (Radford 2016), a supervillain who dressed up as a moth (Finger and Sprang 1951) would be less realistically frightening, so the film focused on a villain known as the Joker, rather than on one of Batman’s sillier supervillains like Killer Moth. The first draft of the *Batman* screenplay was written by Superman screenwriter Tom Mankiewicz who had surprised Warner Bros. with his insistence that, for a Batman film adaptation to succeed a mass audience in tone and fact, for an audience to find the character plausible, it would need to be dark because “he’s a guy dressed in a silly suit. This has got to take place at night. It’s gotta be dark” (Rossen 2008, 111).

While Mankiewicz's script was not produced, the subsequent film would retain the nocturnal setting that he had determined was necessary to support this required suspension of disbelief.

The subsequent *Batman* film, like *Superman*, was a success, having "an initial tight premise of well equipped vigilantism and a relatively plausible villain" (Svitavsky 2018, 77), and was a great success with audiences. As the *Batman* films progressed, however, the threats faced by the heroes became "more fantastic", including "mind control and freeze rays" (Svitavsky 2018, 77). With this divergence came elements that seemed increasingly unrealistic to audiences, such as in the 1995 film *Batman Forever* in which nipples were added as decorative detailing to the suit worn by Batman. Audiences could believe, based on the premise set up in the first film, that a man would fight crime dressed as a bat, but were unable to conceive of any reason a crime fighting vigilante would choose to design their bat suit to bring to mind their naked forms (Couch 2017a). This, along with other elements that violated audiences' ability to believe in the internal logic of the story, led audiences to consider the film ridiculous.

This decline of Batman into non-comedic absurdity meant that when it came to producing the *X-Men* film adaptations, many doubts needed to be allayed about whether the film would appeal to an adult audience (Katz 2020). Those doubts were reinforced with further concerns that, when the previous animated *X-Men* adaptation had been aired in a later time slot, it had not attracted a large enough adult audience for the studio to be comfortable that a film adaptation would appeal to a broad enough audience to be successful (Lewald 2017). As such, while the animated adaptation of *X-Men: The Animated Series* (1992–1997) had led to the franchise being "better positioned to target a broader demographic", for its eventual film adaptation (Burke 2016), further narrative changes were made when adapting the *X-Men* comics to film in order "to make the films more appealing to a mass audience" (Wucher 2016, 262).

While the audience for *X-Men: The Animated Series* had been comprised of more children than adults, the overall success of the series had interested producer Lauren Schuler-Donner who began working to adapt *X-Men* to film (Leatherman 2014). The adaptation of *X-Men* to film followed an approach strongly inspired by how the *Superman* film had grounded itself in enough realism to appeal to an adult audience. *Superman* director Richard Donner himself was involved in adapting the first *X-Men* film (Greenberg 2019, 9) because *X-Men* producer Lauren Schuler-

Donner had been married to Richard Donner since 1985, and her and Richard Donner's shared production company was the conduit through which every instalment of 20th Century Fox's *X-Men* franchise has been developed. Discussing her working relationship with the *Superman* director, Schuler-Donner said they worked closely together, "we bounce things off each other" and "read each other's scripts" when producing films (Plume 2000).

Director Bryan Singer was selected to adapt the X-Men characters to film and has said that the 1978 *Superman* film "was my day-to-day inspiration in shaping the X-Men universe for the screen" (Alls 2004); this included ensuring any absurd-seeming elements of the comics would be addressed in such a way as to make them believable to audiences. Schuler-Donner recalled that "some of the comic book movies that came prior to us treated the characters as though they were comic book characters"; however, she felt that "if we grounded the characters enough, and you could identify with them, and root for them, then you're more accepting when they, you know, shoot lasers out of their eyes" (Katz 2020). Schuler-Donner said she thought director Bryan Singer would be an appropriate choice to adapt the X-Men to film "because he shared the same philosophy I had, which was to make this a reality-based comic book movie" (Hodari 2000, 69). Schuler-Donner would later comment that, from the opening of the *X-Men* film, Singer established to audiences that the film was "grounded in the realistic" (Boucher 2010). According to a 2000 *Entertainment Weekly* interview, this was accomplished because when it came to directing the film, Singer sought "to make the fantasy as plausible as possible" and "was flummoxed by superhero conventions" which led him to alter or address them (Jensen 2000, 29).

For example, just as *The Incredible Hulk* and *Superman* had needed to present its hero in a costume that was realistically explicable, the garishly "yellow spandex" uniforms worn by the X-Men in the comics as shown in Figure 8 were changed to black leather bodysuits in the film adaptation; Singer thought "that no one would ever wear skintight Spandex to a fight" (Jensen 2000, 29). In order to ensure they were making decisions that would be relatable to the audience, he redressed the X-Men in more serious looking, "ready-to-rumble black leather" (Jensen 2000, 29). While it might appear that these changes to costuming were a specific response to the film medium, as these changes frequently occurred as part of film adaptations and some have attributed the need as being because "superhero outfits can come across as cheesy on screen" (Barnes 2011), these changes to superhero costumes

relate more to making the stories engaging to older audiences. In a retrospective of the costumes of various comic book incarnations of the X-Men team, Will Meugniot, the designer of *X-Men: The Animated Series* noted that the costumes worn by the X-Men team in comics from the '90s “reflect more realistic” fashion as part of a trend of “clothing-like costumes” that had begun in the 1970s (Lewald and Lewald 2020, 19). This shift towards more realistic costuming within the comics, like the changes made to film, coincided with audience research across this period indicating that the audience for comics was trending towards an older readership (Gabilliet 2010, 204–211). Even with the film advancing upon more realistic fashions, however, protagonist Wolverine scoffed at the decision of the X-Men to wear matching uniforms, when it came to having to don one himself in preparation for the final confrontation. This led Cyclops to quip back, jokingly asking Wolverine if he'd prefer to be wearing yellow spandex.

The technique of having characters insult the idea of wearing a superhero costume as a way to make them more relatable to older audiences has also been employed in some Marvel comics. As Roy Thomas, who worked on the *X-Men* comics noted, in the third issue of the *Fantastic Four*, when Stan Lee gave in from pressure from some in their audience to put the team in costumes, “the Thing delighted many a more sophisticated a reader by insisting ‘I ain’t gonna wear this fool outfit!’” and deriding it as a “monkey suit” (Thomas 2019, 138–139). Such humour carefully balances the need to incorporate enough knowledge from the comics to ensure that the film is enjoyable to audiences who enjoyed the comics, as well as ensuring the much broader audience that the film was aimed to appeal to would also be able to enjoy getting immersed in the story rather than being alienated by it. Ralph Winter, who joined Lauren Schuler-Donner in producing the film, recalled that they “made a joke about yellow spandex suits because we knew what the fans wanted”; however, in order “to justify a [US]\$75 million budget, we had to widen it out so that we could explain and lay the foundation for a wider base of comic book fans and movie-goers in general” (Katz 2020). Similar doubts had stymied a 1979 deal to adapt the *X-Men* to film failing to go into production after producers felt that a faithful adaptation of the *X-Men* to film would fail to appeal beyond the niche audience (Radulovic 2019), but Schuler-Donner and Winter felt they had a strategy for overcoming this.

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Figure 8: The X-Men's yellow uniforms on the cover of issue #1 of *The X-Men* (Lee and Kirby 1963) were changed to more believable costume choices for the older audiences of the film adaptations.

As with *The Incredible Hulk* and *Superman*, the *X-Men* film adaptation carefully grounded itself in enough science to make it more plausible to a broad audience. The film “and its sequels stuck tightly to the central premise of super-powered mutants, avoiding the aliens, robots, magic, and other wide-ranging superhero trappings that featured significantly into the X-Men’s comic book adventures” (Svitavsky 2018, 77). This was facilitated by selecting characters who could help support the suspension of disbelief. Many of the superhero characters adapted to film, including the X-Men, were created wholly or partially by Stan Lee. Jim Shooter, as editor in chief of Marvel comics, said that Stan Lee had felt it important to “tell stories that made sense” and “gave the stories an internal logic” (Variety 1986, 82), and it has been noted that Stan Lee “used science to ground and lend a sense of validity to characters” that made them more appealing to sceptical audiences. This desire from Lee to ground characters within a certain amount of reality meant that, of the characters he created, “many heroes gained their powers through scientific, naturalistic (if not wholly realistic) processes” (Radford 2007, 35–36). For example, within the *X-Men* comics, Professor X was the teacher and benefactor of the X-Men team members, who guided their actions but was rarely directly involved with their conflicts. While he was principally characterised in the comics as an expert in human genetics, having served as an expert in a range of sciences since the beginning of the comic, and also demonstrating expertise in engineering as shown in Figure 9, Professor X retained this role within the adaptation to television in *X-Men: The Animated Series*. However, in the film adaptations, his role was increased, in part because of his scientific expertise giving opportunities to provide plausible explanations for the existence of superpowers. This grounding was present since the very beginning of the first *X-Men* film which began with Professor X providing an explanation for how mutation could lead humans to gain fantastic abilities.

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Figure 9: In addition to being an expert in genetics, Professor X's scientific expertise also extended to engineering devices to extend his powers of telepathy and mind control (Lee and Kirby 1964a).

Professor X was not the only character appearing in Lee and Kirby's original *X-Men* line-up whose expertise in science had underwritten some of the more fantastic feats within the comic books. As shown in Figure 10, another *X-Men* character, Beast, was shown to be a genius inventor. When it came to adapting the *X-Men* stories to film, Beast, like Professor X, was selected to provide believable explanations for the unique abilities of the protagonist Wolverine. After meeting the other *X-Men*, Professor X and Jean Grey performed medical testing to learn more about how Wolverine's abilities worked, explaining to the audience, through a briefing provided to the other *X-Men*, how a fantastical metal known as adamantium had been surgically grafted to Wolverine's entire skeleton, and how Wolverine was able to heal rapidly because he had "uncharted regenerative ability", while presenting very believable looking medical imaging of his skeleton as supporting evidence, shown in Figure 11.

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Figure 10: Beast demonstrating his engineering expertise (Lee and Kirby 1964c).

Despite wanting to include Beast, according to screenwriter David Hayter the character had to be replaced because, given the film's relatively conservative blockbuster budget, Beast was too expensive to render on screen, let alone in fight scenes. This was because while in his early appearances Beast had displayed few overt signs of mutation, the character has most often been presented in the comics and preceding television adaptations with a bestial visage covered in blue skin and fur. This transformation was the accidental result of Beast's experimentation in manipulating mutations. Due to the limitations of budget and special effects makeup required to convincingly render Beast in that form, the character would not occupy a prominent role within the film adaptations until the 2011 film *X-Men: First Class*. Therefore, while the comics on which this film was based had primarily shown scientific expertise as primarily possessed by male characters, in the first *X-Men* film, the character of Jean Grey was rewritten as a medical doctor to provide the scientific grounding Beast would have supplied (McLem 2009).

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Figure 11: The X-Men, and the audience, are briefed on Wolverine's superhuman abilities in a manner which grounds them in reality.

This strategy of grounding superpowers within scientific explanations, and working to increase the plausibility of elements within superhero stories, continued to be applied in the films that followed *X-Men*. The Marvel Cinematic Universe was produced by Kevin Feige, whose first experience at producing a superhero film adaptation had been on the set of *X-Men* where he worked as an assistant producer. Feige would later credit Donner's work on *Superman* as not only making him "believe a man could fly" but also making him "believe that comic book characters could be brought to life on the big screen" with "verisimilitude" (Feige 2020). Feige said he owed his career to both Donner and Schuler-Donner, as they had been "mentors" throughout his early career, and had been "key supporters throughout the birth of the MCU" (Feige 2020). Feige intentionally built his film series to first introduce characters whose superhero abilities could easily be explained to audiences so that they would be exposed early on to the easiest premises to relate to before the franchise introduced characters and stories that would require greater belief on the part of audiences. This was a highly ambitious strategy, as the Marvel Cinematic Universe required viewers "to accept not just one fantastic premise, but rather a number of seemingly unconnected premises that range from military hardware fantasies to Norse myths" (Svitavsky 2018, 76). However, by starting out with the sceptical and sarcastic protagonist Tony Stark in the film *Iron Man*, that was "entirely about tech" (Weintraub 2010), meant that subsequent films could be based firmly enough within the horizon of science fiction expectations with which audiences were already familiar.

The initial *Iron Man* film was directed by Jon Favreau who "had a sign over his office that said 'plausibility'" and strove "to bring a lot of reality to" the story of the *Iron Man* film (Paramount Pictures and Marvel Entertainment 2008, 45–48). The next film, 2008's *The Incredible Hulk* would open up audiences to accepting another slightly more fantastical idea, introducing the audience to "the idea of biological enhancement." The third film was *Thor* in 2011, which then exposed audiences to "the cosmic and other worlds" (Weintraub 2010). Similarly, when it came to adapting *Thor*, the "potentially ridiculous tale of a pseudoviking with a magic hammer who can travel by rainbow" (Barnes 2011) meant that scientific explanation based in astrophysics was introduced to lend realism, following the old Arthur C. Clarke adage which Feige himself paraphrased as "Technology significantly advanced would be indistinguishable from magic" (Weintraub 2010). *Thor*, the protagonist, would paraphrase this in the film in a line addressed to the astrophysicist Jane Foster – "Your ancestors called it magic, and you call it science. Well, I come from a

place where they're one and the same thing." This use of Foster's cutting-edge scientific research served to render Thor's magical ability to travel between worlds less unrealistic to audiences by playing on similar science fiction stories about wormholes, which already occupied the horizon of expectations of audiences, as evidenced by the success of science fiction franchises like the *Stargate* (1994) film and its subsequent television adaptations and the television series *Farscape* (1999–2003). This gradual expansion of audiences' horizons of expectation meant that when the Guardians of the Galaxy were introduced in a self-titled film in 2014, audiences were comfortable with being pushed further into off-world adventures involving aliens and a talking raccoon.

By expanding the horizons of audiences' expectations, "the Marvel Studios movies... changed expectations of what superhero audiences would accept" (Svitavsky 2018, 77) and because of this, comic book film adaptations were able to begin incorporating more and more fantastic elements. In the 2015 film *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, the Marvel Cinematic Universe was able to introduce the *X-Men* character Scarlet Witch and her brother Quicksilver. Scarlet Witch was one of two recurring female characters in the early issues of the *X-Men* by Lee and Kirby. Whereas Jean Grey fought on the side of the X-Men, Scarlet Witch was part of the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants. Scarlet Witch, like many other female characters, faced challenges that barred her onscreen representation within the *X-Men* films that didn't prevent her brother, Quicksilver, from appearing on screen; however, while female characters have experienced similar difficulties in achieving film representation, the reason for Scarlet Witch's absence from the *X-Men* films was not related to her gender but rather the problem of translating comic book narratives to audiences unfamiliar with the source material.

4.3 Science as masculine, magic as feminine

Gender stereotypes are typically constructed as a binary (Eagly 1987, 16), so where a trait is considered masculine, an opposing trait will be considered feminine (Deaux and LaFrance, 1998; Worell 2001; Renfrow and Howard 2013). Science and magic are seen as opposing systems for understanding the world, and both were associated with the stereotypes of the gender binary. In the past, when most popular superhero characters were created, "science, technology, and medicine" were considered masculine (Milam and Nye 2015, 2). Technology and laboratory science were considered to be occupations restricted to men (Douglas 1994, 255); in the 1930s growing up playing with toys that "idealized technology and worlds of

innovation and mechanical progress” was a pastime marketed for boys (Lederer 2017, 123) and, in the 1950s, it was believed that “an interest in science was an inherently masculine trait” and scientific and technological experimentation were considered to be the domain of males (Al-Gailami 2009:78). Even in the present, there is evidence that “math and science are perceived as male domains” (Makarova, Aeschlimann and Herzog 2019; Francis et al. 2017), with technology also still being regarded as masculine (O’Brian et al. 2015). Accordingly, this tendency to ground characters in scientific reality however has tended to be limited to male characters, with such scientific plausibility less often being offered as explanations for the powers of female superheroes. Indeed, both science fiction and superhero films show a preference for selecting male protagonists, with analysis of films released from 2009 until 2018 revealing that only 14% of films featured singular female protagonists compared with 55% of films being led by solo male heroes (Women’s Media Centre 2019a).

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Figure 12: From the time of his first appearance in *Tales to Astonish*, Ant-Man’s abilities were entrenched in his identity as a scientist (Lee, Lieber and Kirby 1962).

Many popular male superheroes are men of science and technology. In the *X-Men* comics, Professor X is a geneticist whose expertise explains why mutants exist and Beast, also known as Dr Hank McCoy, is an engineer and inventor, as is Iron Man. Both the Hulk and the Atom’s alter egos are physicists, Thor’s alter ego in the comics was physician Dr. Donald Blake, as was Doctor Fate, Ant-Man was scientist and inventor Dr Hank Pym (Figure 12), while Spider-Man, Sandman and Hourman were chemists and inventors, Starman was an astronomer and inventor, Doctor Strange was a surgeon, as is Dr. Mid-Nite, the Flash is a scientist who works for the police, and Mr. Fantastic is a genius scientist and engineer.

These associations led to popular male characters in superhero comics more often having fantastic abilities which could be explained with science. The extent to which science has been stereotyped as a masculine occupation has however been changing since these characters were created. The number of women pursuing occupations in science and engineering, while still low, has increased significantly since the mid 1960s, when most Marvel superheroes were created (National Research Council 1994, 6). Consistent with this trend, supporting female characters in superhero stories have increasingly come to occupy scientific roles within adaptations to film and television.

Betty Ross, the love interest of the Hulk, was adapted as a scientist in the 1982 animated series *The Incredible Hulk* and has appeared as a scientist in all the film adaptations that followed. In the 2003 film *Hulk*, it is Betty Ross, as “a scientist in her own right,” who “is as smart as Banner,” who “is the first one to piece together the link between Bruce’s anger ... his exposure to a combination of nanomed (sub molecular machines) and gamma radiation, and the resulting transformation into the Hulk” and it is through Betty’s scientific explanation of these circumstances that Banner’s phenomenal transformation into a green giant can be believably explained to the audience (Universal Pictures 2003, 16-17). Further showing how gender stereotypes are changing, in the 2011 film *Thor*, the character of Jane Foster was changed from being a nurse who assisted Thor, to instead being an astrophysicist. Her role within the comics had conformed to gender stereotypes existing at the time, as throughout the 1930s and 1950s, when being a nurse was a stereotypically female profession (Lederer 2017, 123), a stereotype still prominent throughout the 1990s (Barner 1999, 553). In the film however, Foster was presented as an astrophysicist, showing her as an expert in a stereotypically masculine profession (Simis et al. 2015). As with Jean Grey, Jane Foster’s change to occupying the expert position of an astrophysicist functioned to introduce the kind of comic book science that offered internally consistent logic that made Thor’s existence and fantastical abilities seem less implausible. The character Shuri in the 2018 *Black Panther* film, the younger sister of was characterised as a genius technological inventor and functioned to explain the highly advanced science of Wakanda to the audience (Pearson 2018). Similarly, within the *Fantastic Four* film adaptation released in 2015, while the Invisible Woman Sue Storm had been created as the romantic partner of the genius scientist Mr. Fantastic, she was changed within the film adaptation to be a scientist herself.

While stereotypes are gradually changing, these greater associations of mechanical expertise with masculinity, and magic and mysticism with femininity, remain in the present (Conrad and von Scheve 2017, 230). There is a “special association” between women and witchcraft that was “both ancient and widespread” (Bever 2002). The “pronounced association of witchcraft with women rather than with men” has existed since the 15th century (Bailey 2002; Herzig 2010). In the time in which superhero characters were created, magical abilities were more commonly used by female characters (Saito 2014, 148; Sternglanz and Serbin 1974) and, in keeping with this stereotype, many female characters in superhero stories have superpowers relating to magic. While supporting characters have often been altered significantly for film adaptations, the incentives to keep characterisation consistent across adaptation in order to maximise sales through cross promotion (Burke 2015, 21; Howe 2012, 285–286; D. Johnson 2007; Raviv 2002, 267) would be compromised by substantially changing female protagonists. For this reason, the prominence of female protagonists with predominately magical powers, such as Scarlet Witch has been reduced due to the challenges associated with trying to ground magical abilities within scientific plausibility, while the character of Storm has been altered to focus on her ordinary mutant abilities and ignoring her aptitude for magic.

Scarlet Witch, the alter ego of Wanda Maximoff, was the original female antagonist of the X-Men, and later underwent a heroic transformation to become a member of superhero team the Avengers. Scarlet Witch could cause havoc with her “hex powers” by pointing at any object of her choosing and using it to attack those she opposed (Figure 13). The abilities of Scarlet Witch are hard for audiences to rationalise because “Her abilities are extremely versatile and—although she struggles with them at times—there have been no hard limits established regarding what she can do.” (Joffe 2018, 10). According to Marvel Cinematic Universe producer Kevin Feige, “no character seems to be as powerful as Wanda Maximoff. And no character has a power-set that is as ill-defined and unexplored as Wanda Maximoff” (Hewitt 2021, 75).

Images have been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 13: Scarlet Witch enchants barrels and boxes to attack pursuers (Lee and Kirby 1964b). Figure 14: Jean Grey displayed abilities that appeared magical (Lee and Kirby 1964b).

As such, her abilities, unlike those of many male superheroes, cannot be grounded within comic book science. It has even been argued that Jean Grey was “explicitly coded as a witch” because of the nature of her abilities and how she uses them (Kemt 2016,156) (Figure 14). In the film adaptation, however, this portrayal was ameliorated by the scientific information she espoused, such as the medical explanations she provided for Wolverine’s abilities. Even Storm, a member of the X-Men most famous for her ability to manipulate weather, was also presented as possessing magical abilities in keeping with the gendered trend of female superheroes being more likely to be aligned with magic rather than science (Figure 15). Storm was a character created by Len Wein and Dave Cockrum, first introduced in 1975. While Claremont may have introduced more female characters who were scientific experts, such as Dr. Moira MacTaggart, his writing and the female characters he and Kirby created continued to be more likely than males to have abilities that verged on the magical. Storm was called by names referencing magic like “witch” “weather-witch” or “wind-witch” frequently in the *X-Men* comics, and she was said to have “sorcery” in her heritage. This was explored in a story in which the *X-Men* were drawn into a magical demonic realm of limbo where a version of Storm learned to develop her magical powers, enabling her to rescue the *X-Men*.

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Figure 15: An older Storm from the demon realm rescues the X-Men with her magical abilities (Claremont and Anderson 1982).

As an example of how female roles were perceived differently, Scarlet Witch's twin brother Quicksilver possessed the skill of superspeed, which was more explicable to audiences than comparatively unfathomable magical abilities of Scarlet Witch. While Quicksilver was introduced into the *X-Men* film franchise in the 2014 film *X-Men: Days of Future Past*, Scarlet Witch was left out of the adaptation of the comics for the entire *X-Men* film series. Scarlet Witch would eventually make an appearance within the Marvel Cinematic Universe, however, coming to occupy her position as a member of the Avengers. She was introduced to the Marvel Cinematic Universe in the 2015 film *Avengers: Age of Ultron*. By the point at which *Age of Ultron* was released, audiences had become acclimated to the idea of technology indistinguishable from magic existing within the narrative continuity of the Marvel Cinematic Universe and the films had "changed expectations of what superhero audiences would accept" (Svitavsky 2018,77). Even so, changes were made to support the introduction of Scarlet Witch and Quicksilver into the audience's accepted reality. The idea of spectacular genetic mutations hadn't been established as existing within the narrative universe, so instead of stretching the audience's suspension of disbelief further, the twins' origin stories were changed to better fit into the accepted narrative reality. They were represented as having acquired their fantastical abilities through human experimentation performed using a sceptre with

mysterious powers that had previously been wielded by the Asgardian invader Loki in the 2012 film *The Avengers*, which had then been established as technology sufficiently advanced as to be indistinguishable from magic. Building on from the magical technology introduced in the preceding Marvel Cinematic Universe films including *Captain America: The First Avenger* and *Thor*. *X-Men: The Animated Series*, care had also been taken to build up the tolerance of audiences before introducing Scarlet Witch in the previous television adaptation. It was not until the 62nd episode of *X-Men: The Animated Series* in 1996 that she appeared, supported because progressive exposure to fantastic conceits of similar film had increased the tolerance audiences had for suspending their disbelief (Böcking 2008).

While this progression did facilitate the adaptation of more superheroes to film, there was controversy over which characters were being adapted to film. There was criticism that Wonder Woman had still not been the subject of a film adaptation, while the Marvel Cinematic Universe was preparing to release *Guardians of the Galaxy*, a film about a group of superheroes who had been far less popular as comic book characters than Wonder Woman (Howell 2015, 143). A popular meme criticising the issue summed up DC Comics and Warner Bros.' hesitation as believing that "Wonder Woman's too confusing for a movie", despite the fact that concurrently in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, executives were "all like 'Here's a raccoon with a machine gun'" (Howell 2015, 147–148). Presumptions were made that Warner Bros., who held the rights to the DC Comics character, had been slower to adapt Wonder Woman to film because it was "letting sexism limit its imagination and business acumen" (Howell 2015, 147). The argument that the longer time taken to adapt Wonder Woman to film was solely attributable to sexism, ironically, is predicated on reducing Wonder Woman to nothing more than her gender and ignoring the other aspects of her character, including how much more fantastic her story was than that of her male counterparts. An origin story involving Greek mythology, Wonder Woman's status as a demi-god with divine abilities, with a magic lasso that could compel those it tied up to tell the truth, and an invisible jet, meant that her story required greater suspension of disbelief than even Rocket Raccoon, whose presence in *Guardians of the Galaxy* was explained as the result of experiments in genetic mutation.

Likewise, some questioned why Hollywood was willing to take a chance at adapting superheroes like Ant-Man to film, while Wonder Woman, a far more popular character in comic books, had still not led a film adaptation (Brown 2017, 55). Unlike

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Wonder Woman though, Ant-Man's powers had always been rooted within comic book science, as had his partner, the Wasp (Figure 16). While Wonder Woman might have been more popular with comic book audiences than either Ant-Man or the Wasp, their abilities, grounded in science, led to both characters being adapted to film more readily, in the film *Ant-Man* (2015) which

Figure 16: Ant-Man explains to Janet van Dyne the scientific process by which he will make her the Wasp with the visual aid of a microscopic view of the cells he's synthesised (Lee, Humtley, and Kirby 1963) preceded Wonder Woman's debut in *Batman vs. Superman* in 2016 and her leading role in 2017.

Numerous other female magic users have appeared within other superhero comics, including recurring *Thor* villain The Enchantress (Figure 17), another character of the DC Comics also known as The Enchantress, who appeared in the 2016 *Suicide Squad* film, the DC Comics character Zatanna, the Marvel character Karmilla, and Abigail Arcane from the Swamp Thing comics. Likewise, Wonder Woman, and Wonder Girl, Ororo, and Raven from the Teen Titans, as well as Medusa, the only female member of *The Inhumans* team, were also characterised as possessing mythical abilities, and Snowbird from the X-Men adjacent Alpha Flight team is a demi-god. Yet only a small number of these characters have appeared in film adaptations, and the proportion of these 'magic' users remains much smaller than the proportion of scientist superhero characters featured in film adaptations about superhero stories. The stereotypical association of science with masculinity has not only resulted in male characters more often possessing abilities that can be easily explained to film audiences, but also extends to male characters being more likely to express attitudes that audiences can readily relate to when encountering more unbelievable elements of superhero film adaptations.

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Figure 17: The Enchantress warned Thor that her abilities in spell-casting were unlimited (Lee and Kirby 1964d). Such largely undefined powers are harder to explain using an internal logic that adults find believable.

4.4 Scepticism: maintaining a sense of realism

While the approach of adapting the *X-Men* comics to film had been heavily inspired by the *Superman* film in endeavouring to plausibly explain the existence of its extraordinary hero, the *X-Men* films also introduced a new strategy for supporting the audience to encourage acceptance and engagement with the less realistic elements of comic book stories. Singer felt that the character Wolverine would be particularly relatable to audiences because, as he recalled thinking, “I can make this universe really cool, and I can see it through Wolverine’s eyes because he kind of doesn’t buy it... Through him I can make this movie...” (Chitwood 2015). Singer had been “confused by some of the characters’ code names” and so to try and make the world of the *X-Men* more plausible to audiences, “he believed the movie should provide explanations for all of them” (Jemsem 2009). Using Wolverine as the audience’s sceptical stand-in, Singer would make a movie based on the *X-Men*

comics that would be relatable to a broad audience not necessarily familiar with the source material. This would be possible because when audiences strongly identify with a character, they tend to become more emotionally invested in the story and experience it from the perspective of the concerns the protagonist is experiencing (Cohen 2001, 251); they find stories more compelling and engaging when they “identify with or understand a character” (Green 2004, 247–263). As audiences might feel incredulous about elements of the story, by selecting a sceptical protagonist, rather than the audience being pulled out of the narrative by their own scepticism, their engagement would instead be maintained and encouraged as Wolverine provided cynical commentary which the audience would relate to. Throughout the film Wolverine scoffed at all the aspects of the *X-Men* franchise which might otherwise seem silly to audiences. When Professor X introduces Wolverine to the X-Men and explains who had recently attacked Wolverine and Rogue, Wolverine, like Singer, scoffs at the names of these characters – “Sabretooth? Storm. What do they call you — Wheels? This is the stupidest thing I ever heard.” A penchant for mocking commentary and casual insults had been a core part of Wolverine’s character in both the comics and preceding television adaptation, where Wolverine was often verbally combative with allies and adversaries alike.

The same trope is used in the films of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, which were heavily influenced by the *X-Men* films, according to both their producer Kevin Feige (Feige 2021), who credited “adjustments for realism” to address “an inherent silliness to these narratives” followed directly from how such techniques had been used in *X-Men* (Flanagan, McKenny and Livingstone 2016, 86). Where audiences might feel sceptical when encountering more seemingly implausible elements of the narrative such as in *The Avengers* (2012), Tony Stark, the central protagonist of the Marvel Cinematic Universe ridiculed Thor’s costume “for his ‘Shakespeare in the Park’ appearance and for wearing his ‘mother’s drapes’ as battle attire” (Flanagan, McKenny and Livingstone 2016, 86). Indeed, Feige had learned first-hand how positing Wolverine as the protagonist of *X-Men* had helped a mass audience engage suspend their disbelief and accept and accept the existence of superheroes, because he’d worked as an assistant for *X-Men* producer Lauren Schuler-Donner on the set of that film. When he later launched the Marvel Cinematic Universe with the 2008 film *Iron Man*, the central protagonist Tony Stark possessed the same sceptical tendency Wolverine had exhibited of scoffing derisively at any part of a story that might seem ridiculous to the average person.

Like Wolverine, Stark has been presented as the central figure of the Marvel film series because Stark's commentary on the stranger elements of the comic book narrative has been a useful tool for supporting the audience's continued suspension of disbelief.

The exchange between Tony Stark and Thor in *The Avengers* has been identified as being strongly associated with the gender of these superheroes, however, as interactions that feature "competition and conflict" are characteristically masculine (Favara 2016). Sarcasm is a trait more commonly associated with males (Taylor 2017, 7) as males tend to be more adversarial and inclined to engage in "verbal sparring" (Coates 2016, 133–136), showing a greater "propensity to use verbal challenges" and "put-downs" (Boxer and Cortés-Conde 1996, 290). It has been argued that males "tend to impose their value judgments on everyone" (Lakoff 2004, 56), and that males feel greater comfort in expressing controversial opinions than females (Park et al. 2016, 19). As a result, "men joke at the cost of others more often than women do" (Knyazyan 2015, 31). These traits persist in fictional representations of males. Male characters have long been portrayed as more aggressive than their female counterparts (Sternglanz and Serbin 1974), and this greater trend towards male characters acting with hostility extends to insulting others more frequently as well (Thompson and Zerbinos 1995). Hence the trait of Wolverine mocking the other X-Men for the names they go by, or how Tony Stark's mocked other Avengers characters such as Rocket Raccoon – "Honestly until this exact moment, I thought you were a build-a-bear" – are traits more commonly associated with masculinity, and which therefore are seen to best benefit the selection of male characters as protagonists.

The use of a sarcastic tone when presenting sceptical observations offers greater benefits for maintaining the audience's immersion in the narrative by furthering the empathetic bond the audience feels towards the protagonist. Sarcastic banter can increase solidarity within a group (Bousfield 2008, 136–137) because put-downs can show a communal inclusiveness "by making it clear to all... that they were a group by virtue of their shared humor and mutual exchanges" (Lennox Terrion and Ashforth 2002, 70). It has even been argued that hearing sarcastic banter can promote audiences to create emotional bonds between with the subjects of this banter. The empathetic bonding that sarcastic banter can facilitate is believed to occur because the speaker of such mocking impoliteness, "as well as those who hear" it, are bonded by the knowledge "that the speaker's speech is not serious"

(Degens 2020, 18). Laughing at a put-down creates a sense of unity for the audience which bonds them both together, and with the utterer and recipient of the comment (Lennox Terrion and Ashforth 2002, 72). So therefore, in the example of Wolverine sarcastically mocking the monikers of the other X-Men, it is theorised that the audience would not only relate more to Wolverine because his scepticism matched their own, but also that this sarcastic interaction would also bond the audience more closely with the other X-Men.

This use of comedic scepticism to adapt superhero stories to an adult audience is a distorted reflection of the approach taken by the 1966 *Batman* television series. Rather than grounding the characters and situations within greater realism, it instead played into “the juvenile absurdity of comic books” (Brown 2017, 138) by emphasising its absurdity to the point of comedy. As producer William Dozier recalled, his idea for how to adapt *Batman* had been to make a joke of how seriously the actors were taking the work, while acknowledging that the stories themselves were absurd. Dozier had told *Batman* actor Adam West that the role of *Batman* needed to be approached with all the seriousness of dropping a bomb. This meant that the conduct of the actors in the show comedically contrasted with the absurd villains and situations. While children watching the show could read the characters as entirely earnest, for adults, enjoyment of the show was fostered by the treatment of the material being a joke. Similarly, when characters such as Wolverine and Tony Stark direct sarcastic banter towards other characters, adults can both appreciate the joke, while also being bonded through sarcasm to those characters involved in the joke, thereby retaining their narrative immersion.

However, while such sarcastically sceptical utterances have benefited male superheroes in being selected for protagonist roles, this has been at the disadvantage of female superheroes. Female characters have been less likely to have exhibited such behaviours within the source material due to gender stereotypes. Even if changes were to have been made on adaptation, to show female characters sarcastically expressing scepticism, this may not have the positive effect of bonding the audience with a female protagonist. Unlike the more overt social aggression displayed by males, it has been argued that females “tend to speak with reference to the rules of politeness” and restrain their comments to avoid any negative implications (Lakoff 2004, 57), and some evidence has indicated females are more likely to avoid making remarks that might cause others to lose face (Coates 2016, 107). Where women speak in a manner more typically

associated with male speech patterns, rather than the more socially considerate manner associated with females, they are perceived as considerably less likeable by audiences (Bray, González and Jonckheere 2020, 5142). This echoes previous arguments that because greater expectations of politeness are put upon females, “women who talk like men are judged differently—and harshly” (Tannen 1990, 19). Research indicates that when females engage in displays of sarcasm they tend to be interpreted more negatively than if they had come from a male; they can be perceived of as “bitchy” (Taylor 2017, 34). Mothers have even been shown to be less negative in their response to disruptive behaviour by their sons than their daughters (Mesman and Groeneveld 2017, 23).

4.5 Conclusion

Producing any commercially successful film is challenging, but there are some specific difficulties in creating films based upon superhero comics that have been overlooked when considering why there seem to be greater challenges to female characters occupying protagonist roles. Examining the source material on which these films were based can illustrate why certain challenges disproportionately affect female characters. In particular, the fact that the superhero comics were originally created with a target audience of children in mind can explain why fewer female superheroes are successfully adapted to film roles. The fantastic worlds in which superheroes exist were invented largely to appeal to the imaginations of children, so when these stories are adapted to film, where high production costs necessitate the facilitation of broader audience appeal, it becomes necessary to redress these more fantastical aspects to be more believable to sceptical adults. The most common method for making these stories more palatable for adults is to use scientific principles to relate the supernatural phenomena within these stories back to what the audience can recognise as either inherently logical, or where the selected protagonist addresses unavoidably fantastical elements with scepticism the audience can relate to.

The need to select superheroes whose existence can be explained by science rather than fantasy has favoured the selection of male superheroes such as Wolverine and Iron Man over female superheroes like the Scarlet Witch and Wonder Woman. This is because science has been considered a stereotypically masculine pursuit, whereas there has been a greater association of females with magic. These perceptions have meant that while many male superheroes already had their abilities grounded in science at least to some degree within the source

material, fewer female superheroes have had their abilities based in science. Similarly, scepticism is closely tied with the same perception of males being more capable of scientific inquiry. Male characters are more likely than females to have been characterised as sceptical, and this has likewise benefited their selection as film protagonists, as sceptical protagonists are more relatable for an adult audience. Male characters have been more likely to be effective central protagonists of superhero films due to their being more likely to be depicted as possessing attitudinal traits that support more sustained suspension of disbelief from audiences when encountering unbelievable elements such as super-powered mutants and talking raccoons. That is not the only respect in which such behavioural differences evident in male characters have benefited their selection as protagonists in these film adaptations however, as will be discussed in the next chapter. The greater tendency of females to internalise their negative opinions of others, while it was able to be accommodated in comic books, would add to the difficulties of putting female characters into central roles in superhero films.

5 Quiet drama

5.1 Introduction

Differences exist between comics and film that necessitate changes being made when these stories are adapted to film. These differences have necessitated that stories about superheroes were changed to better appeal to film audiences. Such changes have been necessary not only because of the broader audience these films have needed to appeal to, but also because of differences in how conflict is communicated to audiences in comic books in comparison to film and television. Comic books have thought bubbles, a narrative device that allows for readers to understand directly the inner conflict a character is experiencing. Thought bubbles were used extensively in the *X-Men* comics and especially served to support having female characters in protagonist roles, because female characters are often not portrayed as externalising their conflicts to audiences. This tendency for females to not be characterised as externally expressing their conflict is commonly due to conflict involving competition between desires which can include impulses stereotyped as inappropriate for females to express. By contrast to comics, it is necessary in television and film for conflict to be externalised in a manner that the audience can easily comprehend. As males, and male characters, are more likely than female characters to be depicted as engaging in outwardly confrontational behaviours, male characters tend to display conflict in a manner more readily suited to film.

This chapter will review existing research on how differences between storytelling mediums can affect the ways in which stories can be told across different narrative forms, with a primary focus on how the inner conflict of characters is expressed. Following this review, discussion will assess why it is important to present internally-conflicted characters in order for stories to be more engaging for audiences. After establishing the importance of protagonists appearing to be internally conflicted, analysis will then address how differences between film, television and comics affect how inner conflict is presented to the audience in these mediums. After detailing how differences between film mediums and comics mean that changes must be made to ensure that inner conflict must be more externally expressed in film, scrutiny will then turn to how stereotypical constructs of and expectations around masculinity and femininity can create more difficulties in presenting female superheroes as internally conflicted characters within the film medium.

5.2 Medium differences in the expression of conflict

Conflict, together with suspense, is central to creating dramatic engagement in stories (Freytag 1863; Smiley 1971). The most popular writer of the *X-Men* comics, Chris Claremont, felt that it was critical to dramatic conflict for heroes to “not just to surmount external adversity, but internal adversity too” (Sanderson 1982a, 112). Arguably “the divided self” was one of the strongest themes of Claremont’s bestselling run on *X-Men* which saw heroes conflicted between wanting to satisfy competing desires – “primal, socially irresponsible desires and serving the greater good” (Booy 2018, 12–14). For a hero to be interesting he felt it necessary that their inner conflict must be between their higher ideals and instinctual reactions because if any character expressed only good qualities they would “be boring” (Cushman and Osborn 2013, 169). This belief that morally conflicted characters are more interesting to audiences is supported by research showing that it is most common for characters in works of fiction to be presented as morally ambivalent (Daalmans, Hijmans and Wester 2017). Where narratives present audiences with characters with conflicting moral impulses, research has indicated that this moral conflict encourages audiences to become more engaged within the story and gain more enjoyment from it (Lewis, Tamborini and Weber 2014) (Figure 18).

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Figure 18: Comics have been considered difficult to adapt to film because much of the dramatic conflict is conveyed through the thoughts of the characters in ways that are difficult to translate to film. The common use of thought bubbles to reveal dramatic conflict is apparent in the above panel from the superhero comic *The Fantastic Four* (Lee and Kirby 1962a). This panel shows how Sue Storm of the Fantastic Four externally expressed to Doctor Doom that she would be compliant and agree to be his hostage, while it is revealed to the audience, through a thought bubble, that she was secretly plotting his death.

The tendency of comics to have more interior narration in the form of narration boxes and thought bubbles meant that this feature, until the successful adaptation of the *X-Men* comics to *The Animated Series*, led comics to be regarded as unsuitable for adaptation to other mediums such as television for years, even after some of the most well-known comic characters, Batman, Wonder Woman and Superman, had already been the subject of successful adaptations to television and film. Margaret Loesch noted, in an interview with Eric Lewald, the showrunner for *The Animated Series*, that one of the difficulties she faced in getting Marvel's comic book series such as *The Avengers*, *Fantastic Four*, *Spider-Man* and the *X-Men* adapted to television was the common belief of all of Hollywood in the 1980s that the stories of comic books were not "suitable for television. They're too insular, too introspective." and that the success of past adaptations such as Superman and Batman which had been adapted to both television and film alike was anomalous:

I remember making the speech to one network executive in front of a room full of people saying, 'Good stories are good stories. These are well-developed characters! They have extreme points of difference, unique, and yet you can empathize with them because they have our emotions.' They just laughed at me and said, 'Margaret. *These books will never translate to television. Comic books, action comic books are too 'inside.' It's too much quiet drama.'* I'll never forget that. 'Quiet drama,' meaning so much is thought and not said (Lewald 2017, 6).

Lewald clarified that this quiet drama was contained in "interior monologues in thought bubbles" (Lewald 2017, 6–7). Such quiet drama is apparent when examining the mutually unrequited romance between Cyclops and Jean Grey, shown in Figure 19. Their romantic feelings were a source of drama in the comic for about a decade, with readers aware that both characters were in love with each other but unaware of the other's feelings.

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Figure 19: When the X-Men team disbanded following the apparent death of Professor X, Cyclops and Jean Grey parted also, despite their mutual love, because both thought their romantic feelings were unrequited (Friedrich et al. 1968). This drama, while engaging to audiences, would be difficult to adapt to film and television because such conflict was not openly expressed.

While studies on the relative rarity of female protagonists in superhero films have acknowledged that “No medium is identical to others, and something is always changed in the process” (Stoltzfus 2014, 43–44), and that “no film need be totally bound by its source material” (Cocca 2016a, 81), the impact of differences between these storytelling mediums, and the different audiences they target on the preference for male protagonists in blockbuster films, have not yet been explored. Producer Lauren Schuler-Dommer said, of making the first *X-Men* film adaptation, that “we tried to be true yet make it a film” but that changes had to be made when it was adapted to film “because it wasn’t a comic and it wasn’t a Saturday morning cartoon, it was another medium” (Plume 2000). Similar challenges were experienced by those involved in adapting the *X-Men* stories to television, because comics and television “are different media” (Lewald and Lewald 2020, 70). A large portion of the changes made when the *X-Men* stories were adapted to film and television were to select characters whose conflict could be more easily expressed within the constraints of these mediums’ abilities to communicate the inner conflict of characters. One of the greatest differences across mediums is their relative capacity to either *show* or *tell* a narrative, and this greatly influenced the characters chosen for the *X-Men* films.

This conflict has been difficult to convey in adaptations, however, because the medium of comics supports showing internalised character drama in ways which are impossible to execute in either television or film. Comics are able to achieve

introspection into the mindsets of characters similar to literature through their employed combination of thought bubbles and narration boxes to provide exposition. This means comics “allow for a degree of narrative omniscience that is common in literature but nearly impossible using pictures alone” (Pratt 2009, 109). Thought bubbles serve to make the inner thoughts of characters in comics “transparent to readers” (Carrier 2000, 73). This use of “words allows the reader to gain efficiently a much more determinate knowledge of a character’s mental state” (Pratt 2009, 109) than in other narrative mediums.

While not directly referring to comics, French philosopher Paul Ricoeur presents a similar argument about written narration, elucidating the inner conflict of the protagonist. In his study of narratives, Ricoeur argues that no form of storytelling “has gone as far in the representation of thought, feelings, and discourse as has the novel” (Ricoeur 1984, 132). Similarly, in *Narrative Structure in Comics*, Barbara Postema argues that written language is a medium feature which, in general, better supported “looking into the psyche of the characters” which led to such types of introspective narratives – quiet drama as it might be considered – being more common in the lengthier written passages of novels (Postema 2013, 109). Whereas comics can involve the audience in directly understanding the inner conflict of heroes through the internal monologue of the hero as shared by narration boxes and thought bubbles, in narrative mediums such as television and film, it is necessary for this conflict to be externally expressed, such as through interactions with other characters. Within filmed mediums, stories are “not told but *dramatized*” (Marion 1938). This means any internal conflict the hero is experiencing must engage in “the act of showing” its narrative (Ryan 2004, 13), being made visible to audiences, most commonly through external interactions between the hero and other characters.

While comics have been able to communicate the inner conflict of a character by directly conveying their thoughts in writing, within film such direct description of a character’s thoughts is typically avoided. A distinguishing feature of film is that “a narrative film represents story events through the vision of an invisible or imaginary witness” (Bordwell 1985). Accordingly, it is the norm in films to work to “sustain the separation between the fictional world and the world of the viewer” because of the risk that any statements directed to audiences can pose in pulling audiences out of immersion with a narrative (Brown 2013, 170).

Regardless of these concerns, voice-over narration has been a central feature of a number of female-led films such as *Mean Girls* (2004), *Easy A* (2010), and one of the few female-led superhero films, the 2020 film *Birds Of Prey: And the Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn*. Voice-over narration can provide the audience with “information which is not provided visually” (Allrath, Gymnich and Surkamp 2005, 14), and can also be an effective method for revealing the depth of hidden inner conflict of female characters by allowing the audience to see “inside the character’s hearts and minds to understand their actions and behaviors” (Lauzen and Deiss Jr. 2008, 379).

In *Birds of Prey*, voice-over narration is used to reveal negative emotions and impulses the female protagonist Harley Quinn was either concealing from the audience, or from the outside world. Early in the film, as Harley narrates her life story to that point, she tells the audience when it came to the ending of her relationship with the supervillain known as the Joker, that the two had broken up. While she calmly claims in the voiceover that she had “handled it real mature” the audience can see the negative emotions she had actually experienced at the time, in stark contrast to what and how she is verbalising, as a flashback shows her crying and banging on a window trying to get the Joker to take her back. Such contradictions between Quinn’s outer narrative and her real experiences are threaded throughout the film, serving to articulate to the audience the inner conflict she is pressured not to express because the constraints of femininity place on expression of negative emotion. Communicating the thoughts of film protagonists directly to the audience through voice over narration is regarded as risky, because it can break the audience out of their immersion in the narrative, and this has meant that instances of female protagonists being afforded the opportunity to present their inner conflict directly to the audience in this way have remained rare.

In order to overcome the challenges associated with conservative gender expectations limiting the exterior expression of emotions considered less appropriate for females, alternate methods for presenting such emotions have been employed within comics. Methods for directly communicating the less stereotypically appropriate thoughts of female characters have often been used in comics rather than those thoughts being expressed through interactions with other characters in this medium. While the greater tendency for negative emotions of stereotypically feminine characters to be communicated only through techniques such as thought

bubbles has been overlooked in the consideration of comics about superheroes, the phenomenon has been observed and assessed in more detail within other comics.

Jaqueline Berndt surveyed narration techniques used in Asian comics, and noted that *Naruto*, a popular Japanese comic about super-powered ninjas, characters predominately behave in manners stereotypically associated with their biological sex (Fujimoto 2013). Berndt observed that this stereotypical portrayal also showed a tendency to present female characters as concealing outward expressions of negative emotions. Instead, such conflicts were principally presented through similar techniques such as thought bubbles. Berndt noted that within some comic panels two versions of the same female character would be presented to show this dichotomy between the calm external public visage of the character and the conflicted inner self. The technique was most often applied to the *Naruto* comics' most prominent female character, Sakura, who by using this technique, was revealed to the reader to be "showing a smile to the outside world while actually being grim-faced inside." Berndt argued that because "such 'out-of-body shots' are reserved solely for female characters", "they help confirm the gender conservative bias of 'Naruto' in terms of its representational approach" (Berndt 2015, 378). In the English translation of the comic, the inner id of Sakura is labelled "inner Sakura" during the appearances in which she is revealed to give insight to the character's inner thoughts, as seen in Figure 20.

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Figure 20: While the character of Sakura in the Japanese comic *Naruto* is outwardly only expressing the more-comfortable emotions of exhaustion and embarrassment, her inner self is revealed to be both angry and impatient (Kishimoto 2000) which are emotions stereotyped as inappropriate to express within the constraints of femininity.

The aforementioned perceived risk of breaking the audience out of their narrative immersion by using voice-over narration has made film executives more hesitant to allocate the kind of high production budget required of superhero films to protagonists who directly articulate their thoughts to the audience. While this may more regularly disadvantage adaptation of female characters, this also creates issues in adapting male superheroes to film. For example, concerns about the use of voice-over narration created a barrier when it came to adapting the comic book superhero *Deadpool* to film because, much like many of the female *X-Men* characters, *Deadpool's* characterisation in the comic book source material had relied on his inner conflict being revealed through direct narration, albeit *Deadpool's*

conflicting thoughts expressed through voices in his head were shared in boxes, rather than bubbles, as shown in Figure 21.

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Figure 21: Like many female characters, Deadpool's inner conflict was revealed through inner narration in the comic books (Kelly 1997).

According to Simon Kimberg, who served as a writer and later a producer and director for the *X-Men* franchise, the *X-Men* spin-off film *Deadpool* (2016) was perceived as a risky project that the studio had balked at funding in part because the film featured the protagonist directly addressing the audience to explain his thoughts (Goldsmith 2016). Executives were hesitant to make such extensive use of character voice-overs, even when the intention is to break the fourth wall, because of the risk of accidentally breaking audiences out of their immersion in the narrative.

Hesitation to incorporate voiceover narration can adversely affect the inclusion of female characters in protagonist roles in film because female characters are less likely to be presented as externalising their emotions, meaning that voiceover narration in film can make the motivations for their actions more understandable to audiences. Instead, within film, characters' inner conflict must be externally expressed, typically through the protagonist's interactions with other characters. This difference between film and television in how inner conflict must be articulated, while not previously considered as a factor in affecting the adaptation of female superheroes to film, is important to consider because superheroes commonly display stereotypical traits relating to gender (Baker and Ramey 2007). Those gendered traits can have implications for how easily male and female superheroes can be adapted from comics to film because of differences between the emotions

that are considered acceptable to express within the constraints of masculinity and femininity.

5.3 Gender differences in the expression of conflict

Masculinity and femininity place limitations on what emotions are considered appropriate for males and females to externally express. Significant differences between the presentation of “anger, contempt, and disgust” have been found to persist between males and females (Matsumoto et al. 1998, 162). Much research has supported “the assumption that female socialization was designed to inhibit aggression and reinforce nonaggressive behavior” (Richardson 2005, 239; Huey and Berndt 2008). One way in which this inhibition of aggression manifests is that greater pressure is put on females to be kind, polite and compliant towards others regardless of circumstances (Brown and Gilligan 1992; Davis 1995, 665), and these pressures lead females to feel pressure to limit their external expression of emotions “stereotyped as inappropriate for them to express” (Brody and Hall 2010, 432–433; Joshi and Maclean 1994). These pressures can also explain why females have also been found to smile more often than men (Briton and Hall 1995; Halberstadt, Hayes and Pike 1988; LaFrance, Hecht and Levy Paluck 2003). It is believed that females smile more often in order to comply with pressures to appear non-confrontational in adherence to expectations of feminine behaviour (Bugental, Love and Gianetto 1971; Schmid Mast and Hall 2004; Frieze and Ramsey 1976).

In contrast to femininity, masculinity is associated with both greater aggression as well as greater protectiveness towards females, who are presented as more vulnerable (Gutierrez et al. 2020). These stereotypes mean that male characters are “significantly more verbally aggressive, physically aggressive, more likely to bully than women, and more dominant in interactions” (Sink and Mastro 2017; Barner 1999, 559). Male characters in television are more often portrayed as verbally and physically aggressive, as well as behaving more threateningly and insultingly towards others than their female counterparts (Sternglanz and Serbin 1974; Thompson and Zerbinos 1995; Aubrey and Harrison 2004; Baker and Raney 2004), and this trend extends to the behaviour of male superheroes (Baker and Raney 2007). Male superheroes are often portrayed as engaging in more threatening and aggressive behaviours, and being more likely to show anger than their female equivalents (Baker and Raney 2007).

The existence of these differences between male and female superheroes is perhaps no more obvious than when considering the differences between how anger is displayed by the Hulk and his female equivalent, She-Hulk. She-Hulk was introduced in 1979 as Bruce Banner's cousin, Jennifer Walters. After Walters was attacked over her work as a criminal defence lawyer, her cousin Banner saved her life with a blood transfusion, but this transfusion resulted in Walters becoming infected with Banner's affliction. This meant that, like her cousin, she would be transformed into a more hulking version of herself when angry but, unlike her cousin the Hulk, the She-Hulk is less lost in anger than her male counterpart. As shown in Figure 22, the Hulk is so blinded by his fury that he has hurt people he cares about. By contrast, however, the She-Hulk is less overwhelmed by her anger, retaining sufficient control over her rage that she is able to perform an interrogation on a criminal, as shown in Figure 23.

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Figure 22: When Bruce Banner transforms into the Hulk (Lee and Kirby 1962b), his anger as the Hulk is so overwhelming that he is often presented as barely capable of thought, and liable to injure even those that he would consider friends as he engages in mindless violence and destruction of anything that might be considered a ~~tab~~

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Figure 23: By contrast to her cousin Bruce Banner, when Jennifer Walters transforms into the She-Hulk, she is shown to be in control enough of her anger to focus on executing complex objectives such as interrogating criminals, without posing a threat to bystanders (Lee and Buscema 1980).

While such differences in behaviour across male and female superheroes within the comics has been largely ignored in scholarly analysis of female superheroes, Elizabeth Settoducato worked to fill some of the gap in the preceding literature with an article providing comparative analysis between representations of gender within the Hulk and She-Hulk comics in an effort “to raise meaningful questions regarding the implications of these differences on representation” (Settoducato 2015). While her analysis only examined the comics, rather than film, and as such did not consider how these differences could create greater challenges for adapting female superheroes to other media forms, her research established some of the ways in which these two otherwise similar characters differed according to gender stereotypes. According to writer Lem Weim, who wrote for the *Hulk* comic, the Hulk has “got the IQ of a five-year-old” (Lewald 2017, 346), while Settoducato noted She-Hulk has been presented as having much greater composure than her male counterpart being “fully capable of thought, feeling and proper speech.”

Similar observations of stark gender differences between the Hulk and She-Hulk were observed by Amme Peppard in her own brief examination of how the presentation of these characters differed according to gender. While Peppard’s research focused on physical rather than behavioural differences, like Settoducato, she nonetheless noted that adhering to femininity seemed to be a key concern that led to She-Hulk being presented much differently to her male cousin. Peppard observed that while the Hulk transformed “into a muscle-bound version of Universal Studios’ Frankenstein’s monster, Jennifer Walters’s transformation includes

exaggerated feminine features such as long hair and much larger breasts” (Peppard 2017, 131).

Such differences in the outward expression of anger between male and female superheroes have implications for the ease at which these characters would be able to be adapted to narrative mediums such as television and film, especially when it comes to gender differences in the external expression of anger. One of the reasons the character of the Hulk was credited as being interesting for audiences when he was adapted to television in 1977 was because of the character’s conflicted nature. As a superhero, the Hulk was a big brainless berserker, but his ordinary identity was “a weak, civilized scientist” (Jankiewicz 2013). This made his character “interesting” to audiences because “it highlighted the differences between him and the monster he became” (Jankiewicz 2013). Producer Gale Anne Hurd had likewise been drawn to adapting the Hulk to film because of “the character’s internal conflict” (Universal Pictures 2003, 12). The Hulk was a big, stomping articulation of the inner conflict of his alter ego Bruce Banner because, while Banner appeared calm, his hidden rage would be unambiguously revealed upon transforming into the Hulk. By contrast, as Settoducato observed, because She-Hulk does not express the same kind of anger as her male cousin, she also appears to have less emotional conflict than him that could be readily expressed within either television or film.

5.3.1 Gender differences in the expression of conflict in *X-Men*

The differences observed by Settoducato and Berndt between the emotions and thoughts externally expressed by male and female characters also existed in the *X-Men* comics. Within the *X-Men* comics, as in the cases of the *Hulk*, *She-Hulk*, and *Naruto* comics, female characters were less likely than their male counterparts to outwardly express aggression. While masculine characters externally express both negative emotions such as aggression and positive emotions such as protectiveness, female characters tend to conceal any external expression of negative emotions. In keeping with feminine stereotypes, female X-Men characters were more likely to conceal expressions of anger. As expected from masculine stereotypes, male X-Men characters have been more likely to express their anger, such as in the below interaction between Cyclops and Wolverine in which verbal conflict led to a physical altercation that had to be dissipated by female X-Men member Storm (Figure 24).

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Figure 24: In this series of panels, a disagreement between male characters Wolverine and Cyclops quickly led to a fight which was broken up by Storm, one of their female team members, shown placing her hand on Wolverine's shoulder to interrupt him in the right-most panel. Such interactions are characteristic of *X-Men* and other superhero comics, in which male characters more regularly externalise aggression while female characters work towards more peaceful resolutions of conflict (Claremont and Cockrum 1976c).

Differences between these external expressions of anger have meant that female characters in *X-Men* were less likely to be presented as having confrontational relationships with other characters, while male characters were more likely to demonstrate emotional extremes, ranging from aggressiveness to protectiveness in their interactions. These polarising instincts, demonstrated by characters such as Wolverine and Magneto, made them easier to adapt to film because it meant that their inner conflicts were already projected onto their interactions with other characters. In fact, Wolverine was considered one of the best examples of an internally conflicted character in *X-Men* (Samdersom 1982a, 112) because of how obviously he struggled with his emotions. According to Claremont, what made Wolverine interesting as a character was that:

... he is a man forever in primal conflict. There is a part of him that, if you cross him, he will kill you and not even blink. But there's another part of him that is a man. And his entire life is dedicated to overcoming the monster with the man. And he can't. But because he's a man, he's got to keep trying (Maslow and Kantor 2013, 255).

Lem Weim, who had created Wolverine before Claremont's time on *X-Men*, agreed that Wolverine was interesting because he "has to fight to control himself." His heroic qualities, Weim said, came from the fact "that he would be able to overcome his natural instincts to slit your throat" (Samdersom 1982:46).

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Wolverine's easily apparent internal conflict therefore made him a favoured choice with those interested in adapting the *X-Men* to television and film. According to Bob Skir, a writer on the *X-Men* television adaptation, Margaret Loesch, who had been the person behind the *X-Men* television adaptation produced, "was most intrigued by Wolverine, because of his internal conflict" (Lewald 2017, 355). (Figure 25). This internal conflict was made most apparent within the subsequent adaptations to television and

Figure 25: Within the comics, Wolverine was famously willing to express anger, even towards friends (Claremont and Cockrum 1975). This aptitude towards openly expressing anger meant that Wolverine more often outwardly expressed his conflicting emotions. Wolverine's complexity as a character because he showed both anger and affection in his interactions with other characters was experiencing.

Wolverine was most prominently featured in a love triangle in the 1982 *Wolverine* mini-series by Claremont and Frank Miller. The importance of conflict in comics needing to be externalised in film adaptation is made even more apparent when considering why the work of Frank Miller, one of Claremont's comic writing contemporaries, has been subjected to more faithful film adaptation than many other superhero film adaptations. The approach by Miller in producing comic narratives favours a more cinematic approach, rather than one reliant on interior thoughts, with the result that the comics he created have been particularly popular as a source material for film adaptation in comparison to other comic writers.

Adaptations of Miller's work include *Daredevil* (2003), *Elektra* (2005), the *Sin City* (2005, 2014) and *300* (2006, 2014) film franchises, *The Spirit* (2008), as well as elements of his *Batman* stories being more loosely adapted as part of *The Dark Knight* trilogy. In chronicling the comics published by Marvel in the 1980s, Pierre Comtois argued that, compared to many other comic authors, Frank Miller was "Luckier than most" because his work on comics such as his run on *Daredevil*, *Sin City* and *300* had been "been more or less faithfully translated to film" (Comtois 2014, 50):

Miller's... characters simply acted on their feelings... Miller eschewed thought balloons and captions explaining the character's thoughts. Miller... mused at conventions that thought bubbles and captions might soon become redundant in the medium, the evolution he envisaged seemed to be one where Claremont's foremost writing tools had been abolished (Booy 2018, 89–90).

Miller, more so than others who wrote superhero comics, tended to use the hero's relationship with other characters to externalise the hero's inner conflict, having had great success with this during his run on the *Daredevil* comic; Daredevil's central conflict as a character was "that his allegiance to the legal system cannot be reconciled with his impulse to vigilantism" (Young 2016, 215). Even if a character doesn't plainly express their negative emotions, their internal conflict can be externalised to film audiences through other methods of externalisation, such as their conflict being externalised through their romantic interactions with other characters, which may be more accessible to female characters.

Use of romantic relationships to externalise conflict has been a common feature of the comic books which have been most faithfully adapted to film, as well as being a utilised as a technique to adapt comic storylines to film, in order to better externalise narrative conflict to audiences. For example, by introducing the character Elektra as a love interest for Daredevil, Miller was able to communicate easily to audiences "the central paradox" of Daredevil as a hero, in the same manner in which Hollywood film director Budd Boetticher had used a love interest to better articulate the story of the hero in *The Bullfighter and the Lady* (1951) (Young 2016, 111). Such use of female characters in film has been criticised because, with male protagonists being more common in film, female characters are often reduced to roles supporting the stories of men in Hollywood films (Mulvey 1975, 11); however, the use of other characters to externalise the inner conflict of characters is used for both male and female characters. Love triangles have served to articulate the inner

conflict of female heroes in some of the most commercially successful female-led film adaptations such as *The Hunger Games* trilogy (Broad 2013, 119) and *The Twilight Saga* (McPherson 2012).

In the *Wolverine* series by Claremont and Miller, it was revealed that Wolverine had previously lived in Japan. He had remained in contact with a woman he'd long loved, named Mariko but, after the letters he'd been sending her were returned unopened, he travelled back to Japan to reunite with her. This trip revealed events which emphasised Wolverine's inner conflict to the audience by revealing that he had once studied in Japan in order to try and learn to overcome his tempestuous nature, and instead mould himself within the honour code of the samurai. He ultimately failed to attain this status, and these warring desires of his nature remain central throughout the series. While Wolverine was drawn to Japan because of his love for Mariko, who represents the qualities of the higher ideals he strives for, upon arriving in Japan he was also drawn to a wild assassin named Yukio (Figure 26), emblematic of his more savage instincts.

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Figure 26: In contrast to Mariko, Yukio, the other part of the love triangle within *The Wolverine*, served to externalise Wolverine's aggressive nature (Claremont and Miller 1982).

These two women's distinctive contrasts were unambiguously expressed through their visual appearances. Yukio had short and spiky hair, and wore a skin-tight leather catsuit, in contrast to Mariko's conservative Japanese robes and long hair, elegantly bound in a traditional style. In *Marvel's Mutants: The X-Men Comics of Chris Claremont*, author Miles Booy argues that this love triangle served to communicate to the audience the conflict between Wolverine's binary conflict between his animalistic id, and his loftier ideals (Booy 2018, 2). It was also a conflict between his masculine role of aggressor and protector because, while Yukio is an accomplished fighter possessing similar aggression to Wolverine, Wolverine discovers Mariko is being beaten by her abusive husband (Figure 27), making the

central conflict of the story ultimately about contrasting Wolverine's aggressiveness against his protectiveness. This story would be adapted to film in the 2013 film *The Wolverine*.

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Figure 27: Mariko was a character whose presentation served to externalise Wolverine's protectiveness (Claremont and Miller 1982).

As the *X-Men* series was adapted, first to television and then to film, Wolverine would continue to be positioned within love triangles in order to express his inner conflict. Within *The Animated Series*, "the core romantic triangle" of Wolverine, Jean Grey and Cyclops was introduced in the fifth episode of the cartoon, and "would persist throughout the series" (Lewald 2017, 355–356). This love triangle had first been presented within comic's *The Dark Phoenix Saga* in 1976, though until the *X-Men* stories needed to be adapted out of the comic book medium, Wolverine's romantic feelings for Jean Grey had only been briefly indicated within the comics. After seeing Jean Grey nearly die, despite her being in a relationship with Cyclops at the time, Wolverine bought her flowers and went to confess his feelings for her at the hospital. His intentions were abandoned, however, upon seeing her and Cyclops together as a couple (Figure 28). While Wolverine's feelings for Jean Grey had been hinted at by comics writer Chris Claremont, according to cartoon writer Bob Skir, neither Claremont nor anyone else on the comic "ever did anything with

it" until Skir incorporated this plotline into an early screenplay for the television series, establishing "the love triangle being a central aspect of their relationship in the future comics and movies" (Lewald 2017, 355–356). As Lewald noted of the

episode in which the love triangle was introduced, “the real core story” of the episode which introduced the love triangle concerned Wolverine and his conflict between selfish and idealistic motivations, which the love triangle helped present to audiences. In the episode Cyclops’s life is endangered, and Wolverine “is confronted with a fateful decision” to either let Cyclops die, thus removing one obstacle for Jean Grey’s affection, or save the life of his romantic rival, and having to sublimate his selfish desires for Jean Grey. In recalling how the love triangle was used to express the conflict of Wolverine “in true heroic fashion”, Lewald himself compared this scenario to the conflict of cinematic classic *Casablanca* (1942) in which the hero Rick saves the life of the husband of his long-lost love (Lewald 2017, 134–135).

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Figure 28: Jean Grey’s near-death experience at the beginning of *The Dark Phoenix Saga* prompted Wolverine to recognise his romantic feelings for her. These feelings for Grey were closely tied with Wolverine’s protective instincts towards her, with the same panel revealing his feelings towards her also referring to her as being “frail” in contrast to his own resilience. While some of his inner thoughts were communicated via thought bubbles, these thoughts were paired with the action of buying flowers that also externally indicated his feelings (Claremont and Cockrum, 1976b).

When it came to adapting the *X-Men* to film, Producer Lauren Schuler-Donner was drawn to selecting Wolverine as the central protagonist in part because of his unrequited love for Jean Grey (Elder 2014) in the comic version as it had also been expressed within the prior television adaptation. As such, this love triangle was established within the first *X-Men* film and, as in the comics, would continue to be developed over subsequent films, in service of articulating Wolverine’s inner conflict. Screenwriter David Hayter, who worked on the first two films, noted in an interview

with *The Hollywood Reporter* with journalist Aaron Couch that the first film had “a double love triangle between Wolverine, Jean and Cyclops; and Wolverine, Rogue and Bobby” (Couch 2017b). In the second film, the number of love triangles increased, with Mystique’s sexual advances on Wolverine forming a new love triangle between Wolverine, Mystique and Jean Grey. This reliance on love triangles to externalise tension meant that, over the course of the films, all three of the mature age significant female characters who Wolverine interacted with, including the teenaged Rogue, were featured as romantic interests for him. In the third film, the love triangle Wolverine is involved in is altered again, with Wolverine now at the apex of a new love triangle involving Jean Grey and Storm. Wolverine’s attraction to Rogue, and Mystique, not previously established in the comics, served to further highlight Wolverine’s dualistic conflict. The attraction Wolverine shared with Mystique highlighted his savage lustful instincts, intentionally contrasted to the idealised love he was shown to possess for Rogue.

One scenes in these films which best highlights the extent to which externalising the inner conflict to audiences in film is important to achieve through tools such as love triangles occurs in the second film of the franchise. In this particular scene, the X-Men have encamped for the night with erstwhile antagonists, Magneto and his Brotherhood of Evil Mutants. Following an aborted romantic encounter between Wolverine and Jean Grey, Wolverine had retired alone for the night to his tent, when his sojourn was interrupted by an unexpected visitation by Jean Grey. The two began to act upon the attraction Grey had earlier denied, but this realisation of Wolverine’s desires for the perfect ideal Grey represented to him is disturbed when his wandering hands discovered scars upon her abdomen that matched the injury he’d left upon Mystique in an earlier fight with the shapeshifter. Realising he had fallen for Mystique’s manipulation, Wolverine pulled away, while Mystique, realising she had been caught out, continued her flirtation in her own image. When her overtures were rebuffed however, she offered to continue their romantic encounter in the guise of one of the other women she thinks Wolverine might be drawn to, shifting her form to Storm, and then to Rogue, an offer Wolverine rejected in disgust. Director Bryan Singer said the purpose of this scene within the film was “about what Wolverine’s real desires are at that moment” (Singer, Ottoman and Sigel 2003).

These techniques further demonstrate Wolverine’s inner conflict through his interactions with other characters orchestrated in order to make the character more

interesting to audiences. While these efforts were made to render Wolverine's inner conflict easier for interpretation by film audiences, one factor that had supported Wolverine's selection as the films' protagonist, as well as a part of the X-Men team in the television adaptation, was that he had already had well-established inner conflict expressed through his interactions with other characters within the comics. While Wolverine was shown to be quite short-tempered and in frequent conflict with other characters, he was also occasionally revealed to feel compassion and affection for other characters. This complexity within Wolverine's character was supported by masculine stereotypes of males as both aggressors and protectors which allows male characters to outwardly express an emotional range showing inner conflict.

Wolverine is not the only character whose selection was supported by the duality of conflict created by being presented as both aggressor and protector. This quality also resulted in the villain Magneto being converted to a protagonist role in *X-Men: First Class* (2011) and the films that followed it. Lewald noted that "the unbridgeable conflict" between Magneto and Professor X was something they had worked to establish early within the animated adaptation, and "would persist throughout our series and many of the following motion pictures" (Lewald 2016, 133). Tom DeSanto, one of the producers who worked on the early *X-Men* film adaptations, recalled that Bryan Singer, who directed the first film *X-Men*, as well as *X2*, *X-Men: Days of Future Past* and *X-Men Apocalypse* had not been interested in working on adapting *X-Men* to film until he learned of the conflict between Professor X and Magneto. In an interview, DeSanto recounted that "the turning point" in convincing Singer to take on the project was when he had "started getting into the philosophical angles of it—these two men, Xavier and Magneto, and their battle for the future" (Hockensmith 2000, 42). Singer himself said that he loved "the relationship between Magneto and Xavier" because the two had "diametrically opposite points of view but still manage to be friends—to a point." That tension between Magneto and Professor X would not only be central to the film *X-Men: First Class*, which focused on the split between the two characters (Boucher 2010), but also spanned across the length of the franchise.

While Wolverine was the primary protagonist of the *X-Men* film franchise for the films beginning in 2000, in 2011 the film series began exploring an earlier time in the *X-Men* story. This early timeline of *X-Men* began with the film *X-Men: First Class* but, while it told the story of how the *X-Men* was first founded, this story differed

significantly from the origins of the team within the comics. In the comics and earlier films, Magneto had been the villain of the story, yet in the film *First Class* he was instead selected as the protagonist, in part because he had internal conflict that could be easily presented to film audiences. In the original comics, while Magneto had originally been introduced as the founder of the indelicately named Brotherhood of Evil Mutants, after Claremont took over the comic he began to present Magneto as a more sympathetic character to make him more interesting to audiences.

While Magneto had always been presented as a character perfectly capable of expressing his aggression, he did not appear to be a conflicted character until his more gentle emotions were revealed by Claremont (Wucher 2016). In the story *X-Men vs. Magneto* (Claremont and Cockrum 1981), when his base was attacked by the X-Men, Magneto nearly killed Kitty Pryde. Magneto subsequently felt so overcome with guilt at what he'd done that it prompted him to reflect upon his actions, and reveal that he had been imprisoned within Auschwitz as a child where he had witnessed his family be killed by uncaring guards whose behaviour he now saw as no different from his own. Mark Powers, an editor at Marvel, said that such contrasts between the evil actions Magneto did to further his cause and his own personal history made Magneto a complex character, noting in an interview that "it's hard to say he's an evil man because of what he's been through" (Tunbridge 2000, 27). As shown in Figure 29, even as a the villain of the comic, Magneto was revealed to have inner conflict when he was shown to feel regret at seeing himself become a person who would harm a child, divulged via a monologue to his unconscious victim.

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Figure 29: The villainous Magneto's conflicting moral impulse to protect was revealed through his interactions with Kitty Pryde (Claremont and Cockrum 1981).

When it came to adapting Magneto to film, different methods needed to be used in order to articulate this inner conflict to audiences. ~~The~~ *X-Men* film began by showing a young Magneto as a prisoner at Auschwitz and the violence done to him by the guards there. Within the film, Magneto is presented as a villain, but this introduction makes it obvious that, while Magneto is clearly engaged in a plan which opposes the X-Men's efforts to ensure peace, his willingness to exterminate ordinary humans is not done out of simple malice. Rather, this aggression is in conflict with his empathetic desire to keep mutants safe from the dominant human population. Such conflict is externalised by showing the tattoo marking him as a concentration camp survivor in the midst of a disagreement with Professor X over why Magneto thought it necessary to fight humanity. By using the scene of Magneto's own experiences and the visual motif of his tattoo, Magneto's inner conflict was changed from an internal struggle as it had existed in the comics, to external articulation accessible

within the film medium (Wucher 2016). Therefore, when Magneto almost killed Rogue in pursuit of his plan, the film audience can understand that he is sincere and internally conflicted about his actions. His actions towards Rogue in the film mirror his actions towards Pryde in the comics, stroking Rogue's hair in the similar gentle instinct with which he had embraced Pryde's unconscious form.

After how successfully the inner conflict of Magneto, or Erik Lensherr as he was also known, was externalised within the early *X-Men* films, his role further changed to being the protagonist of later films. According to producer Simon Kinberg, *X-Men: First Class* "was about Eric becoming empowered. That's the origin story of a man's power" (Plumb 2014). The film expanded upon the background presented to audiences of the first *X-Men* film, and chronicled how Magneto had gone from being a victim of the concentration camp to instead becoming an aggressor towards humanity. Kinberg noted that Magneto had been selected as another protagonist for the franchise because, while he would ultimately transform into a villain, he was a "complicated character" and would appeal to audiences because of this (Warner 2012).

Within the film *First Class*, further changes had been made to emphasise Magneto's inner conflict to the film audience. Magneto and Professor X had always been shown within the films to be friends, and this friendship was a central focus of *First Class*. Professor X was presented as a paraplegic throughout most of his characterisation in the *X-Men* series across all media but while in the original comics, he had been paralysed by an alien whose plans for invasion he had thwarted (Thomas and Roth 1966), for the film *First Class*, the origins of Professor X's disability were altered. Now Xavier instead would be accidentally paralysed by his friend Magneto when he tried to stop Magneto from using the powers he'd helped hone to annihilate humans who were attacking them. This caused great grief for Magneto and halted his aggression towards the human antagonists because his conflicting concern for his friend stayed him from further aggression⁷.

⁷ Professor X's conflict was also increased by changes made in how his disability was presented, beginning with *The Animated Series* and with the film adaptations following. The television adaptation first introduced the idea that if Professor X lost his mutation he would regain the ability to walk. This gave him greater ability to have inner conflict which was externally expressed for the television and film adaptations, as he struggled with the temptation to regain his ability to walk at the cost of losing his ability to find and help other mutants using his telepathic abilities (Lewald 2017, 149).

Following the departure of Magneto from the X-Men team at the end of *First Class*, he next appeared in a supporting role within *X-Men: Days of Future Past* in 2014. While his role within this film was less prominent, his conflict was still apparent because the film featured time travel, with Magneto shown in contrasting roles as a villain of the X-Men in the past but an ally of the X-Men in the future. Magneto was once again occupying a more central role in *X-Men: Apocalypse* in 2016. At the beginning of the film, Magneto was shown to have retired from villainy and attained a peaceful existence by concealing his status as a mutant, allowing him to live amongst ordinary humans and have a family. This time of peace came to an end, however, when he intervened in an accident to save the life of a fellow worker by using his superpower of electromagnetism. As a result of Magneto's powers being revealed by his decision to protect his co-worker, Magneto was then hunted down, and this confrontation led to the death of his daughter. Following that death, Magneto became a villain again, unleashing his aggression not only at those who had harmed his family, but at others too, when he was manipulated into almost causing the apocalypse by manipulating the Earth's magnetic field. In the midst of this destruction, Magneto was reunited with Professor X, and ultimately Professor X was able to reach out to Magneto and work together to save the world.

This representation of Magneto's inner conflict was altered from the comics to escalate his struggle between his protectiveness and aggression. In the comics, Magneto had originally become a villain after his daughter Anya was trapped in a burning house, and his powers, which first manifested at that time, led to him being blocked and prevented from saving his daughter. Shown in Figure 30, the inner conflict between Magneto's aggression and protectiveness was articulated through his interaction with the mother of his daughter. The adaptation to film further externalised Magneto's inner conflict by adding in the precipitating event of Magneto's protectiveness leading to him saving the life of a fellow worker, thereby revealing the mutant abilities that led to him being hunted, triggering another situation in which Magneto was then to be shown to be conflicted between his protectiveness for his daughter and his aggression.

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Figure 30: After the death of their daughter, Magneto's partner Magda confronted him about killing the people who prevented him from trying to save this daughter, while Magneto tried to explain that their deaths had only occurred because he had been prevented from saving his daughter (Claremont and Cockrum 1977). Such conflict, occurring as it did in conversation between two characters, was easier to adapt to film.

Notably, however, while Magneto and Wolverine's inner conflict had been made evident through their interactions with other characters in the comics, the inner conflict of female characters such as Storm was primarily expressed through methods such as thought bubbles. In his 2018 analysis, *Marvel's Mutants: The X-Men Comics of Chris Claremont*, Miles Booy noted that "thought bubbles and captions" were "Claremont's foremost writing tools" (Booy 2018:90) which allowed him to show characters such as Storm experiencing inner conflict that was not expressed through interactions with other characters. While Storm has had a prominent role within the comics, and served as the leader of the X-Men for a time, she has been generally characterised as serene and, like other feminine characters, shows less of a tendency to externally express negative emotions. So, while she does have an inner conflict between her desire to avoid causing harm to others and her role as a member of the *X-Men*, as a protector unlike similar conflict of Magneto and Wolverine, is not externally expressed.

This has meant that Storm's inner conflict has been more difficult to adapt to television and film while still retaining the complexity of her characterisation. It has been observed that when the *X-Men* comics were first adapted to television for *X-Men: The Animated Series* (Cocca 2016b, 140) Storm's prominence within the narrative was decreased relative to other X-Men characters in general, as well as in comparison to other female characters such as Rogue and Jean Grey. Similarly, when Storm was adapted to film, criticisms were made that her role lacked "nuance" or any significant character development (Cocca 2016b:131-149), with analysis

identifying that “over the entirety of the trilogy, Storm does not significantly develop as a character and her identity remains overly simplistic and static” (Zingsheim 2011, 235). A similar sentiment was expressed by Adilifu Nama when he briefly compared the portrayal of Storm between comics and film as part of an examination evaluating cultural trends in the presentation of black superheroes. While he was not examining gender stereotypes as part of his analysis, the issues Nama raised with how her portrayal changed on adaptation can also be explained by how her feminine characterisation of not externally expressing anger became more difficult to convey within the film medium. Nama offered the following criticism of the portrayal of Storm’s character in the films *X-Men*, *X2: X-Men United*, and *X-Men: The Last Stand*:

The driving motivations, layered personalities, intertwined personal relationships, and intriguing contradictions that have been developed over decades in the comic book versions of black superheroes are what makes them interesting in the first place. By disregarding their unique comic book narratives, the film versions of black superheroes become unconvincing characters in underwhelming plots (Nama 2011, 145–146).

While Nama did not go into greater specifics, one unique comic book narrative that gave a layered and contradictory personality was Storm’s inner conflict between temptation to kill those who posed a threat to the *X-Men* and the people they defended, and her moral resolve not to kill. As this conflict had only been presented as an inner struggle, rather than an external one, it was more difficult to adapt to film than the more open conflict expressed by her male counterparts, ultimately erasing the compelling conflict that had existed in her comic book characterisation. While critics have defined this as a difference in the character’s representation across mediums, the roles of the inherent differences between the mediums and perceptions of gendered behaviours were not recognised as factors influencing these disparities.

While Storm’s conflicting impulses towards aggressiveness and protectiveness have mirrored those of characters such as Wolverine and Magneto, in keeping with the stereotypes of femininity, Storm’s negative emotions are only shown as thoughts, rather than interactions with other characters that could more easily be adapted to film. The greater incidence of female superheroes being portrayed as not expressing emotions such as aggression results in female superheroes often being considered more difficult to adapt to film. Within film, it is necessary for the moral

conflict of characters to be expressed externally, often through their interactions with other characters. That is, where a character has not already had their inner conflict expressed externally, they are more difficult to adapt to protagonist roles within film (Figures 31 & 32).

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Figure 31: Storm was characterised within the *X-Men* comics as having deep moral conflict because she had at one point in her life had to kill a man who attacked her (Claremont and Cockrum 1976a). Haunted by her guilt at having had to kill another human, she vowed to never kill again, but in the *X-Men* comics she often found this resolve placed her within moral conflict because of her heroic responsibility to defend others. As this struggle was not externally expressed, however, it would require more changes to be made in order to convey this conflict within the medium of film.

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Figure 32: Even where female superheroes have been presented as internally conflicted, with violent desires warring against peaceful resolve, this struggle was more likely to only be revealed only through thought bubbles, such as in this instance where Storm silently contemplates killing a sleeping Magneto (Claremont and Cockrum 1977).

Discussing the portrayal of Storm in a 1981 interview, Chris Claremont noted that the common Storm faced in managing her vow not to kill had been central to a number of issues in the *X-Men* comic (Samdersom 1982a,115). He noted that it made no sense to him for her “to say ‘I will not kill’ unless she knows within herself she [has] the capacity to do it.” Claremont recalled that a fan had once asked whether Storm would kill a person if it meant saving the lives of 4,000 people, and Claremont said that, while he thought it might destroy her to do so, she might find herself having to do that as the leader of the X-Men, a role she took over from Cyclops when he left the X-Men after the death of Jean Grey. While Claremont thought this kind of “internal adversity” was key to making characters interesting to audiences (Samdersom 1982a,112), the way in which this inner conflict was expressed for female characters such as Storm has differed from how similar conflict was expressed by male characters (Figure33).

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Figure 33: While Storm expressed aggressive thoughts within the comic, like considering it a pleasure to destroy a great evil (Claremont and Cockrum 1975), this aggression, stereotyped as inappropriate for females to express, was communicated through thought bubbles rather than in an outward manner that would be easier to adapt to film.

Female superheroes have been more challenging to adapt to film because their inner conflicts were less likely to have been externally expressed within the original comics. In keeping with stereotypically feminine behaviours, they have been less likely to have been presented as externally expressing emotions such as aggression because aggression is stereotyped as inappropriate for females to express (Brody and Hall 2010, 432–433; Joshi and Maclean 1994). Therefore, the inner conflict of female superheroes such as Storm have been more challenging to adapt to television and film. Other female X-Men characters, however, have had inner conflict which has been easier to adapt to these media. Where female X-Men characters had already been shown to externally express their inner conflict within the comics, this inner conflict instead related more to their superpowers, as in the case of Rogue and Jean Grey. While these female characters had their roles increased when X-Men was first adapted to television (Cocca 2016b, 140–141), prior research has not identified that the main reason for this decision is the fact that inner conflicts could be presented more easily than other characters within the film medium.

Unfortunately, for business reasons unrelated to their gender, the narrative focus on Rogue and Jean Grey needed to be reduced. Rogue had been a popular character in *X-Men: The Animated Series*, and was known as the strongest member of the *X-Men* team (*X-Men The Animated Series*, “Red Dawn”). However, within the film adaptation, Rogue was presented as a much less powerful character. Kent criticised the *X-Men* films for “playing down the power that characters such as Rogue might possess” (Kent 2016, 120) noting that in the comics Rogue had wielded “the Superman-like powers” that she had absorbed from the female superhero Ms. Marvel (Kent 2016, 115), who would later be renamed Captain Marvel. Likewise, Davis and Westerfelhaus argued that Rogue and Captain Marvel were each “an exception to the rule of relatively weak female superheroes” and they asserted that these greater abilities were “stolen” from Rogue in the film adaptation in order to promote a greater focus on the “masculine prowess” of superheroes within the films (Davis and Westerfelhaus 2016, 112). While both of these researchers at least ensured their analysis of these films was informed by the source material, they overlooked is that the reason Rogue came to possess the then Ms. Marvel’s powers is because she was introduced in *Avengers Annual #10* (Claremont and Golden 1981) as an antagonist who attacked Marvel and stole her powers.

While this may seem trivial, in terms of her adaptation to film, the specific title in which Rogue acquired these powers, and who she acquired them from, had a significant impact on her portrayal in the *X-Men* films. According to details revealed in a 2001 lawsuit, the 1933 agreement for Fox to adapt *X-Men* to film only covered characters who had been “a regular featured character” within the *X-Men* comic books existing at the time the deal was made (*Twentieth Century Fox Film Corp. v. Marvel Enterprises* 2001). As the character of Carol Danvers had never been a part of the regular character roster for an *X-Men* series as either a hero or a villain, her appearances within the comics were too occasional for Fox to have the rights to use her as a character, their agreement only covered storylines from *X-Men* comics (*Twentieth Century Fox Film Corp. v. Marvel Enterprises* 2001), which also prevented them from explaining how Rogue stole Marvel’s powers, as that was an *Avengers* storyline. This meant that Fox was unable to offer any explanation for how Rogue would have come into possession of such extraordinary powers. Eric Lewald, the showrunner for *X-Men: The Animated Series* recalled that such complicated licensing arrangements created challenges in adapting *X-Men* stories to television, even before the success of their show had seen Marvel subsequently

enter into even more adaptation arrangements. He recalled that there were “so many Marvel rules about, ‘One studio owns this, and the other studio owns that’” (Lewald 2017, 111). For example, rights to Ms. Marvel had been sold to Universal in 1977 (Jankiewicz 2013, 57). Given the difficulty presented by this series of transactions, this would seem a compelling reason why, unrelated to her gender, Rogue did not possess the same range of powers within her adaptation to film as she had in her prior appearance in *X-Men: The Animated Series* which had been allowed to include the Ms. Marvel story through which Rogue gained these powers (Lewald 2017) as in the original comics.

This aligns with what Liam Burke has observed was a general challenge in adapting comics published by Marvel to film. Burke noted that while DC Comics had been owned by the Warner Bros. production company since 1971, meaning that the rights to adapting their characters to film had remained intact, since Marvel had initially been reliant on their films being adapted by different studios, it made stories like *X-Men* more challenging to adapt to film because “the rights became increasingly diluted and complicated” (Burke 2015, 58).

Despite the challenges that this presented for her adaptation to film, Rogue was included in the *X-Men* films because of the easily externalised inner conflict caused by her abilities. Rogue’s superpower is that, whenever she touches someone, she leeches both their life force as well as any superpowers they possess. This ability creates issues because she does not have the ability to “turn this power on and off” (Lewald and Lewald 2020, 29). Since Rogue’s powers left her not just the abilities of other mutants but also their psyche through skin contact, in addition to having gained the powers of Ms. Marvel, she was haunted by aspects of the other woman’s personality. In order to externally express this conflict within the television adaptation, the writers had Rogue touch Mystique so that she would temporarily gain her shapeshifting abilities (Lewald 2017, 366). This meant that Rogue’s conflict with the residual personality of Ms. Marvel could then be externalised to television audiences by showing Rogue shapeshifting back between her own form and that of Ms. Marvel outwardly showing the struggle within Rogue’s identity.

As a result of Rogue’s superpowers, “to her great sadness, she cannot touch other people, lest she steal them away” (Lewald and Lewald 2020, 29). This creates an inner conflict between her selfish desire to be intimate with others and her selfless desire to protect other people from her own abilities. One instance of this as shown in Figure 34 in which Rogue was tempted to touch the character Gambit, whom she

felt romantically drawn to, but could not risk touching. Previous research has noted that, on adaptation to television, Rogue's role was increased (Cocca 2016: 140–141), but what hasn't been noted by prior research is that the reason Rogue was selected for the television and film adaptations is that she has inner conflict that can clearly be expressed through her interactions with other characters, making her more interesting for television and film. Mark Edems, the head writer of *X-Men: The Animated Series*, said of the relationship between Rogue and Gambit that "the romantic tension between them was great, since Rogue's mutant power gave an insurmountable reason why they could never be together" that made the characters engaging to audiences (Lewald 2017: 322–323).

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Figure 34: Rogue is conflicted between her selfish romantic desires towards X-Men teammate Gambit and her desire to protect him from the harm that would come to him if they touched (Claremont and Lee 1991).

Indeed, Rogue's conflict has often been shown through her interactions with others. As mentioned above, in the comics and television series, Rogue was romantically linked to the mutant Gambit. Within the film adaptation, however, as Gambit was not included in the cast, she was instead shown to have romantic feelings for fellow X-Men team member Iceman. The romantic relationship between Rogue and

IceMan was criticised from some who felt that it reinforced a belief that women needed to be romantically entangled with men in order to be complete (Cocca 2016b, 147), and that Rogue's romantic relationships with male characters were used as a tool to present her as an internally conflicted character. While it is correct that females are often represented in terms of their relationships to and with men, to conflate this with Rogue's desire for intimacy denies that a desire for human touch is a basic human need. The importance of physical affection has been established as crucial to human wellbeing, so the universal relatability of Rogue's unmet desires for physical affection should not be underestimated.

Rogue has often been characterised as conflicted between her desire to be "cured" by having her powers removed, and the fact that losing these powers would lead to her also losing her heroic abilities. Notably, however, while the inner conflict between Rogue's desire for intimacy and powers existed within the original comics, this conflict was only further externalised to show Rogue as wanting a cure when the *X-Men* stories were adapted to television to film. The first story to feature Rogue wanting a cure occurred in 1993 in an episode of *X-Men: The Animated Series* called *The Cure*.

The cure story for Rogue was devised for *The Animated Series* after showrunner Lewald and head writer Mark Edens asked themselves "what stories would best reveal the most about each of our lead title characters?" As "the most heartbreaking thing about Rogue" was that "she couldn't touch another human being", they created an episode about Rogue encountering "the prospect of a cure for mutancy" because it would show her in a state of emotional conflict with the temptation "to give up her powers, her identity, and even the X-Men to be able to experience this simple human joy" (Lewald 2017, 27). Showing Rogue being presented with the possibility of a cure meant that television audiences could easily understand the inner conflict Rogue was experiencing as it provided an imperative for Rogue to openly discuss her feelings about her powers with the other X-Men. Similarly, in the second season finale, *Reunion, Part 2*, which aired in 1994, Rogue's conflict was illuminated in a scene where both Gambit and Rogue declare their love and kiss while their powers are temporarily suppressed by Mr. Sinister, only for this opportunity for intimacy ending as both characters regained their superpowers, enabling Rogue's inner conflict to persist. After the use of a "cure" to express Rogue's inner conflict had been introduced within the television adaptation, it was subsequently introduced to the comic. Rogue's long-time romantic partner Gambit

tried to make a deal with the supervillain Mr. Simister to cure Rogue of the powers she possessed (Velez Jr. and Jansom 1997), and Rogue travelled to the Savage Land to fight the mutant Sauron in the hope that he would steal her powers (Krueger and Yeates 2001). The introduction of a potential cure as a tool for externalising Rogue's inner conflict to audiences was used again when *X-Men* was adapted to film, in the third film, *X-Men: The Last Stand*.

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Figure 35: Within *The Dark Phoenix Saga* Grey was suddenly possessed by an alien power that put her ordinarily gentle nature into conflict with the destructive impetus of the Phoenix (Claremont and Byrne 1980a). This conflict was externalised through Grey's alternatively violent and affectionate interactions with the *X-Men* team and others, as the conflicting instincts of the Phoenix and Grey fought against each other.

Similarly, to how Rogue's reduced powers were criticised, her fellow *X-Men* team member Jean Grey's presentation in film adaptations has also been critiqued. Unlike Rogue, Jean Grey's inner conflict was not persistent but rather related to powers Grey temporarily gained during the bestselling storyline *The Dark Phoenix Saga* which is the story she has been most famous for. The saga focused on Grey falling under the influence of an alien influence, that put her gentle nature in conflict with impulses that could lead to the destruction of everything she loved (Figure 35). Though the saga has twice been the subject of film adaptation, across *X-Men United* in 2003 and *X-Men: The Last Stand* in 2006, and separately in *X-Men: Dark Phoenix* in 2019, these adaptations have been criticised for reducing the focus placed on Jean Grey's story; Carolyn Cocca argued that *The Last Stand* undermined Jean Grey's role and her heroism (Cocca 2016: 88). While it is true that, in both adaptations, the focus on Grey's story was reduced, as with the reduction of Rogue's powers, this was not based on Grey's gender. Rather, there

were significant concerns that the story of *The Dark Phoenix Saga* was too depressing a story. Such an approach was taken, according to Zak Penn, a screenwriter who worked on both *X2* and *The Last Stand*, because studio executives had significant reservations about the story's ability to appeal to a broad audience.

The original *Dark Phoenix Saga* had been published in a time when comics were primarily being read by an older audience (Clarke 2011), enabling writers to incorporate more content considered inappropriate for children (Nyberg 1998, 147). The story of *The Dark Phoenix Saga* was considered by the screenwriter who first adapted it to be "as dark a comic book story as has ever been written", with the sympathetic protagonist becoming "horrifying" and "so dark and sinister, that her suicide is actually a positive thing." He attributed the reservations the studio felt to a more faithful adaptation of the story as being because "when you're making a [US]200 million dollar movie, it is very hard to embrace the details of such a dark story" (Goldsmith 2006). It wasn't even the first time a studio had struggled with the dilemma posed by the story – in 1982, production company Nelvana had been interested in adapting the *X-Men* comics to film. Similarly, the studio Nelvana "felt 'Dark Phoenix' would be too downbeat a story" when they had optioned the *X-Men* comics for film, long before other adaptation attempts (Sanderson 1982b, 124). As such, the story was altered on adaptation to film, following a tradition of imposing "sugar-coated 'Hollywood endings'" to film adaptations to make stories more appealing to mass audiences which has existed since audience response to films was first studied in the 1940s (Chaffee 2000, 322), and which studio research on film audiences still indicates that audiences prefer (Bakker 2001, 495). For this reason, as in the case of *Rogue*, the decision to reduce the prominence of Jean Grey within the *Phoenix Saga* was likely due to concerns unrelated to gender.

5.4 Conclusion

While the reduction in prominence of *Rogue* and Jean Grey as protagonists was likely a decision unrelated to gender, but rather focused on the fact that behaviour traditionally associated with masculinity and femininity make it more difficult to adapt female superheroes to film. Femininity is associated with being more inclined to not outwardly express aggression. This creates more difficulty in adapting female superheroes to protagonist roles in film because, without as much external expression of anger and frustration, it becomes more challenging to articulate the inner conflict of female superheroes. Such inner conflicts of female characters were

able to be supported within comic books because comics have commonly communicated the inner conflict of characters through elements such as thought bubbles and narration boxes. This approach to presenting inner conflict has led to superhero comics being considered challenging to adapt to film because using similar techniques in that medium presents challenges to maintaining audience immersion within narratives. For this reason, in film, it is common for the inner conflict of characters to be articulated to the audience through how they interact with other characters. Masculine characters such as Wolverine and Magneto were more commonly presented within the original comics as expressing their conflicting moral impulses externally, through their interactions with other characters, and so have been easier to adapt to protagonist roles within film.

Past research into why fewer female-led superhero films are produced has largely overlooked the comics upon which these films are based as a source of potential motivations for decisions to instead select other characters for protagonist roles. However, it is important when attempting to understand why fewer female-led superhero films are made to consider the source material not only in order to understand how historical gender stereotypes continue to affect their adaptation, but also the technical implications of working between these two different mediums. When considering why fewer female superheroes have led film adaptations than have led comic book stories, it is relevant to consider how differences between these storytelling mediums intersect with the effects of these differences between how male and female superheroes were characterised. Film is limited in its ability to directly convey the inner thoughts of characters, meaning that their inner conflict typically needs to be indicated through their interactions with other characters. This has favoured the selection of male characters as protagonists in superhero film adaptations, because within the source material, male characters were more likely to have their inner conflict already expressed externally in a manner suitable for film adaptation, while female characters were more likely to have their inner conflict conveyed in ways that would be difficult to translate to film. Such differences in how male and female characters outwardly express their emotions also offer other advantages to the selection of male characters.

6 Certain victory

6.1 Introduction

While comic book stories about superheroes were originally developed for an audience of young children, ranging in age from toddlers to 13- and 14-year olds (Lee and Kirby 2009), film adaptations of comic books had to appeal to a wider audience. This is necessary because the expense of producing superhero film adaptations means that they must appeal to both children and adults in order to have the best chance of generating revenue sufficient to create a profit on top of the millions of dollars invested to produce them. Male superheroes have been easier to adapt to film protagonist roles because masculine stereotypes of emotional expression have made it more common that they outwardly expressed the conflicting emotions they feel. By contrast, stereotypical femininity is associated with concealing emotions such as anger because these are considered less appropriate emotions for females to express (Richardson 2005, 239; Huey and Berndt 2008). As a result of female characters being less likely to outwardly express these emotions, there have been greater challenges to externalise their inner conflict so that it can be appreciated by film audiences.

However, this is not the only respect in which differences between the outward expression of emotion have impacted selection of superhero film protagonists. Male and female superheroes frequently differ in their external expressions of fear, with resulting implications for their appropriateness for the target audience. Stereotypical expectations of behaviour are that males will work to conceal their fear, while females are more likely to openly express it. Furthermore, the ways in which protagonists react to apparent danger will influence the ways that audiences feel about the situation. Where a protagonist appears fearful, this will make the audience feel uncertain, and escalate suspense regarding the outcomes of the violent confrontations common in superhero stories (Pichon, de Gelder and Grèzes 2009). By contrast, if a protagonist appears self-assured and undaunted by danger, the audience will feel less uncertain and this will reduce suspense. Superhero films must appeal to an audience of both children and adults, not only in order to maximise the potential audience to earn ticket sales from, but also because children are the primary consumers of action figures (Inness 2004). As will be discussed in the next chapter, the opportunity to earn revenue from action figures has been a major incentive for both film studios and comic publishers to pursue the adaptation of superhero comics to film (Raviv 2002, 56–57, 257). In order to be able to exploit

this opportunity to gain additional revenue through action figure sales however, superhero films must carefully balance the violent conflict these heroes face, against the need to ensure these films will still be considered appropriate for young audiences. Suspense is considered inappropriate for children, as it is considered too upsetting for children to feel uncertain about the outcome of the danger the hero is confronted by (Krutnik 2017, 392; Krutnik 2013,14–15; Wistrich 1978, 94). Film ratings routinely restrict how much of a sense of suspense can be included in films to which children are exposed. For this reason, because female superheroes have been more likely to be characterised as expressing fear and apparent vulnerability in response to danger in the original comics, male superheroes have been easier to adapt to protagonist roles in superhero films because they have typically been portrayed as being unafraid of danger.

This chapter will begin with an overview of how stereotypes of masculinity and femininity relate to differences in the expression of fear, stereotyped as appropriate for males and females. After establishing how these differences have led to females being more likely to be characterised as reacting with fear during dangerous situations rather than either not feeling afraid, or not expressing their fear. This will then be linked with how suspense is generated, and why it has been controversial in stories made to appeal to children and, in particular, the controversial role of suspense within superhero stories. After this controversial role of suspense is established, discussion will turn to describe how the specific challenges of moderating suspense meant that Kitty Pryde, a popular female protagonist in the *X-Men* comics, would have been far more challenging to adapt to a film protagonist role than a male superhero like Wolverine. After identifying how selection of a male protagonist made it easier to manage suspense, making the *X-Men* stories appropriate for an audience of both children and adults, additional analysis will then detail how a number of other changes were made to the *X-Men* stories in their adaptation to film to further reduce the suspense experienced by audiences.

6.2 Differences in the expression of fear and the effects of suspense

Masculinity and femininity are associated with differences in the display of emotions such as fear and the appearance of vulnerability. Due to the pressures of masculinity, men are encouraged to “present themselves as invulnerable” (Alexander 2003, 537). Males feel more pressure to mask vulnerable emotions (Osherson and Krugman 1990), and are conditioned to feel shame at experiencing fear and vulnerability (Levant 2005, 2). This leads males to avoid expressing fear or

startlement (Matsumoto et al., 1998) in order to avoid potential social punishment (Garside and Klimes-Dougan 2002, 122). Contrastingly, women face fewer social consequences for expressing fear and, accordingly, make less of an effort to mask their fear than men (Matsumoto et al. 1998). Crying and expressions of pain are reactions more commonly demonstrated by females, with males being more likely to not express their pain (Keogh 2014). A tendency to startle from fright and express fear is considered to be a feminine trait (Barner 1999, 196), and is more often displayed by female characters (Barner 1999, 559).

These differences in the expression of surprise and fear mean that a female and male protagonist are likely to react differently in response to the same suspenseful or frightening situation, with a male protagonist acting with a certain bravado, while a female protagonist is more likely to respond with openly expressed surprise and fear which encourages a more escalated sense of foreboding from the audience because the protagonist is the empathetic vehicle for the audience. Since “the principal intention of the horror film is to scare its audience” (Lester 2016, 25), female protagonists are therefore most common in horror films (Lauzen 2020, 2) because of differences in emotional displays associated with how males and females react to fear (Clover 1992, 51). Horror films however, are restricted to an audience excluding children, due to the fear displayed by the protagonists creating heightened suspense for audience.

American film director and screenwriter Brian De Palma, best known for his work on films such as *Carrie* (1976), *Scarface* (1983) and *Mission: Impossible* (1996), argued that where films were produced with an intent to create suspense for audiences, it was better to select female protagonists. He noted the prominence of female characters in suspenseful narratives dated back at least as far as a 1914 film serial the *Perils of Pauline*, followed by other similar serials such as *The Exploits of Elaine* (1914). De Palma explained that the reason an audience would feel greater suspense when watching a female protagonist in a dangerous situation is because females would be perceived as more vulnerable. He argued that “If you have a haunted house and you have a woman walking around with a candelabrum, you fear more for her than you would for a husky man” (Schoell 1985, 41).

This tendency for audiences to fear and be more plagued by suspense at whether a female protagonist would emerge victorious from whatever danger she was facing, has created concerns about casting female superheroes within protagonist roles. Superhero stories involve violent confrontation and, the greater uncertainty

experienced by the audience about whether the hero would survive, the greater the sense of suspense would be. Experimentation that involved scanning reactions within the brain has indicated that, when a person observes the apparent fear of another, an emotional reaction is triggered in the observer (de Gelder et al. 2004). The response to seeing fear expressed is, for the person observing others' fear, to themselves automatically react to the possibility of an imminent threat to their own safety (Pichon, de Gelder and Grèzes 2009). The tendency for female protagonists to escalate an audience's sense of suspense because of the greater likelihood of female characters to be depicted expressing fear therefore makes such characters less appropriate for selection for film protagonist roles. This is necessary because in order to reach a wide enough audience to cover their production costs, superhero films must appeal to both adults and children alike. As it is considered inappropriate for children to experience fearful uncertainty, the use of suspense has therefore been avoided in the adaptation of superhero stories.

6.3 How suspense became controversial

One of the earliest successful transmedia adaptations of a superhero comic was a popular radio serial called *The Adventures of Superman* which was broadcast from 1940 until 1951. The stories of *The Adventures of Superman* were constructed to leave listeners waiting in suspense for each successive episode, "because it encouraged regular listening" (Krutnik 2013, 13), thereby raising demand from audiences. The suspense was commonly generated by putting well-liked characters into dangerous circumstances with uncertain outcomes. In episodes like *The Atomic Beam Machine* which aired in 1940, listeners were told to "tune in next time, and follow the story!" To find out if the employees of *The Daily Planet* would escape the "deadly peril" which confronted them because time was "growing short." Would Superman "arrive in time?" Could he rescue Lois Lane from the "new unforeseen danger" that was "already creeping in on the laboratory" which Lois Lane was "about to enter, all unknowing?" While Superman's friends and colleagues like Perry White, Lois Lane and Jimmy Olsen were often the targets of uncertain outcomes, the hero himself was also put into deadly peril to maintain audience engagement.

To further increase suspense, the radio serial introduced Kryptonite in the 1943 episode *The Meteor from Krypton*. Kryptonite was revealed to be a frictional radioactive mineral capable of rendering Superman vulnerable to injury, something which became a recurrent plot device in both the serials, comics and films to increase engagement through suspense (Cooke 1999, 58). Dorothy Woodfolk, the

editor who introduced Kryptonite to the comics, said that introducing Kryptonite had made the stories more engaging to audiences. “The problem with Superman,” she said, “was that he was too invulnerable” which made the stories too predictable and boring to audiences (Coleman 1993). Making Superman’s survival less certain made his stories more engaging however, parents were concerned about the capacity of radio serials like *The Adventures of Superman* “to thrill and enthrall young listeners” (Krutnik 2017, 383), recounting that some children were upset by the uncertainty of suspenseful radio serials, seeing “youngsters break down and weep in the middle of a radio story” or witnessing children “scream in fright” in moments of fraught peril, “turn off the radio” or cover their ears “until reasonably certain that the danger is past” (Krutnik 2017, 383).

The issue of how much uncertainty should be allowable in media broadcast to children sparked divisive debate. Josette Frank, who studied children’s entertainment, and served as the director of the Child Study Association of America as well as an advisor on *The Adventures of Superman* radio serial, argued that “normal children can take—wholesomely and profitably—a great deal more than some adults would allow them, or can take themselves” (Krutnik 2017, 387) and that “vicarious adventure, escape, excitement, even blood and thunder are necessary and important to most children as outlets for their own emotions” (Krutnik 2017, 387). However, her point of view was controversial. Psychologist William Soskin opposed the role of suspense in children’s entertainment, arguing that it overstimulated young audiences “to an unacceptable degree” and that “the cumulative effect of unrelieved tension” had a “quite appreciable” adverse effect on young audiences (Krutnik 2017, 392). When the *Superman* franchise was next broadcast, it was as a television series under the same name, beginning in 1953 and, by that time, parental concerns had not only restricted the use of suspense in affected radio and comics, but had also resulted in introduced restrictions to television series. These restrictions were designed to curb the use of suspense and intended to eliminate narratives that might “provoke a heightened state of emotional turbulence” because some parents thought that there was “something about the stirrings of suspense that is unholy, ‘morbid,’ or even worse” (Krutnik 2013, 14–15). Parental concerns about the use of threat have led to censorship across many mediums, because “parents seek to protect their children from frightening experiences” (Wistrich 1978, 94). In the 1960s, a parents’ group known as the National Association for Better Radio and Television protested against television series “whose intensified fascination with crime, suspense, and intrigue were

'terrifying to young children' and 'unpleasant' to adults" (Spigel and Jenkins 1991, 128–129). Even the comedy-laden 1966 adaptation of *Batman* to television garnered criticism from the Parent–Teacher Association magazine, which advised that children "should not be permitted to watch" the program unless they had already "developed antibodies to nightmares by previous exposure to crime-and-horror comics" (Spigel and Jenkins 1991, 129).

Concerns about exposing children to content that could frighten them have likewise afflicted the film industry. In discussing the representation of horror elements in film, researcher William Paul noted that the budget of a film typically suggests what rating the film hopes to obtain, "because each more restricted rating limits the potential gross that can be recouped to cover the budget" (Paul 1994, 44) as "the number of potential consumers is reduced by imposing admission restrictions into theatres" (Garcia-del-Barrio and Zarco 2017, 1685). Ratings are delivered with the stated intention of informing parents about film content which they may find objectionable for children, delivered by a panel of eight parents of children between the ages of 5 and 17, because "movie ratings provide parents with advance information about the content of movies to help them determine what's appropriate for their children" and "parents know best their children's individual sensitivities and sensibilities" (Motion Picture Association of America n.d.). It has been argued that the introduction of such ratings for films was responsible for furthering the perception that elements of horror are to be reserved for adults, as film ratings have sought to restrict children's access to horror films (Lester 2016, 24). Indeed, the shift to major studios focusing on producing comic book superhero blockbusters has coincided with their declining investment in the production of horror films (Platts and Clasen 2017). When it came to making *X-Men*, according to producer Ralph Winter, "The studio wanted the widest possible audience, the biggest bang for their buck" (Katz 2020), and so combined with the desire for the film to also promote the sale of action figures to those children (Raviv 2002, 56–57, 257) it was necessary that the film would be suitable for children as well as adults.

In his analysis of superhero film adaptations, Burke argued that the desire to adapt superhero comics to film came from the film industry seeking to produce "content that would not incur restrictive age classifications" (Burke 2015, 56). Burke argued that by adapting superhero comics, filmmakers were selecting source material already developed for an audience of children. As evidence of this, Burke noted that horror content had already been eliminated from comics after the introduction of

censorship following criticism in 1954, which had included concerns that comics involving horror themes were “apt to interfere with children’s sleep” (Burke 2015, 55). In presenting comics as content that could be easily adapted because of its appropriateness to children, Burke’s research contradicted earlier findings of Patrick Parsons who remarked in 1991 that comic books had often been more graphic in their violence than their film and television adaptations (Parsons 1991, 83–84). While Burke credited the adaptation of the *X-Men* comics to film as being influential in establishing the trend of superhero film adaptations he studied (Parsons 1991, 23), he did not note that the *X-Men* comic achieved its greatest popularity in a time after censorship within the comics industry had declined to reflect an older audience. As the *X-Men* comic gained its greatest popularity in a market in which suspense was able to be included because of the older audience, changes needed to be made to how suspense had managed within film adaptations.

6.4 Management of suspense when adapting *X-Men* to film

While children were once the primary audience for comics, this has declined since the 1970s (Gabilliet 2010). The increasingly older readership for comic books meant that, while once comic book publishers had followed a censorship standard that stated that the triumph of good over evil needed to be certain (Nyberg 1994, 166), as children became less a part of the intended target audience for comics, restrictions eased. Superhero comics increasingly leveraged suspense to engage audiences. It was in this era that the *X-Men* comics achieved their greatest popularity under writer Chris Claremont, who “refused to tailor his comics for an audience of eight-year-olds” (Howe 2012, 202). As such, far from being free of elements that might “interfere with children’s sleep” a number of the stories from the *X-Men* comics subsequently adapted to film involved a significant amount of suspenseful content that needed to be mitigated upon adaptation.

Suspense, as Claremont used it, has often been a part of heroic narratives, with protagonists often facing “the possibility of death” (Vogler 1992, 15) because the suspense of “not knowing the survival of a character or the resolution of a stress filled situation” creates dramatic tension (Duncan and Smith 2009, 212). Seeing the hero face “imminent danger of injury, mutilation, or loss of life” leads to a “satisfying, happy turn of events” when, to the audience’s excitement, the beloved hero overcomes their ordeal (Wied, Zillman and Ordman 1994, 95). Suspense has been used to build “affective engagement within and across a wide range of media forms” (Krutnik 2013, 6), and the appeal of “many forms of media entertainment... often

seems to directly derive from their power to evoke feelings of tension and suspense” (Lehne and Koelsch 2015, 1). Experiments on suspense have demonstrated that the more the audience perceives that the protagonist “is in genuine peril” and the more uncertain their victory seems to be, the more suspenseful the audience experiences will be (Comisky and Bryant 1982, 57; Smuts 2008, 283; Carroll 1996, 101).

The need to adapt stories which have significant violent content in such a way that children are not distressed by it also resulted in characters that display masculine traits being considered more suitable protagonists for such films. Some of the most popular X-Men characters in the comics display stereotypically masculine and feminine traits in their external reactions to fear, and these gendered differences impact how the audience reacts to the dangerous circumstances in which the protagonist is presented. Masculinity is associated with masking fear and maintaining a facade of bravado, whereas femininity is more permissive of open expression of fear. When a protagonist expresses fear, this increases the uncertainty felt by audiences, whereas when a character conveys themselves with self-assurance, the audience is more reassured and feels less suspense and uncertainty at the anticipated outcome of dangerous situations. For this reason, given that the sense of peril audiences perceive is a factor inappropriate for children, characters who do not express fear are considered more suitable as protagonists given the need to moderate the violent content of these films for the children who watch them. Consequently, it was important that the *X-Men* film adaptation featured a protagonist who would instil a sense of confidence in their survival for the audience. This need meant that male characters were more likely to be found to be suitable protagonists, and female *X-Men* characters were likely to be deemed unsuitable protagonists due to the differences in emotional displays in reaction to fear.

Kitty Pryde is a female protagonist whose prominent role within the stories led to the *X-Men* comics' relative gender equality in terms of featuring both male and female characters in heroic roles. Pryde differed from many of the other *X-Men* characters because, while the rest of the *X-Men* team were relatively experienced heroes, Pryde was only a teenager, and displayed more stereotypical feminine behaviour in the form of her

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Figure 36: As the only female member of the original *X-Men* team, Jean Grey was characterised as being more prone to expressing fear than the men she fought alongside (Lee and Kirby 1965).

apparent vulnerability and open expression of fear. Pryde was not the only female *X-Men* member to demonstrate greater, more visible fear than male *X-Men* characters, as characters such as Jean Grey likewise illustrated this quality within the early *X-Men* comics, as shown in Figure 36.

While other female characters likewise expressed more fear than their male counterparts, Pryde expressed fear and vulnerability in more extreme reactions because she was introduced at a time that the *X-Men* comics were increasingly utilising suspense to drive sales. John Byrne, who created the character, recalled that when they had first introduced Kitty Pryde to the comics there had been "a strong reaction" from the fans who questioned whether it was right that a 13-year-old was being put into a situation where she was in danger from antagonists such as Magneto. Byrne noted, however, that, while the early *X-Men* comics of the 1960s had been to get the *X-Men* "away from the threats" and "away from the society that was the danger to them, and to teach them how to use their powers so they would not be a danger to themselves", by the time Pryde was introduced, it had become common for *X-Men* characters to be put into more dangerous situations (Samdersom 1982:70). As the audience for comics had begun to get older, censorship concerns over comics relaxed, allowing writers of the comics to produce material with a greater suspenseful intensity than would have been considered appropriate for a younger audience (Nyberg 1994). This meant

that while Pryde's apparent peril would have been considered inappropriate for an audience of children, it was considered acceptable for the audience of the comic.

Pryde's introduction to the *X-Men* was part of a larger shift within the *X-Men* comics to intentionally escalate suspense experienced by audiences, and Pryde's stereotypically feminine tendencies to openly express fear during dangerous situations made her an appropriate focal choice of protagonist for this strategy. This was a realisation that only occurred to comic publishers after the audience for comics shifted, and comics began to be sold through new channels. Where previously publishers would only receive sales data months after an issue had been published, and this data was compromised by rampant fraud committed by distributors, after comic publishers began to sell directly to comic book stores from 1973 onwards (Clarke 2011) and they gained better sales data which gave more indication of what audiences enjoyed, this enabled them to more quickly learn and react to what stories this audience enjoyed.

Increased incorporation of suspense in the *X-Men* comics was also facilitated by the increasing age of the comic book readership. Stan Lee, speaking in an interview in 1978, said that, at the time, the median age for the comic book readership had already increased to an average of almost 14 years old (Dawson 1978, 47). This trend towards comics being marketed to an older audience further increased from the 1970s onwards, as comics came to be primarily sold through specialty comic book stores, known as the direct market. According to a 1995 survey, the audience for comic books was typically males aged 6 to 19 (McAllister 2001, 22), and a 1997 study had an even older estimate of the average reader's age at 26 years old (Gabilliet 2010, 206). While publishers had previously been concerned with censoring the use of suspense in comics to keep stories kid-friendly (Nyberg 1994), with sales to young readers decreasing, and limited toy sales being generated by the *X-Men* comics (Lewald 2017, 274), comic publishers now had little reason not to focus on appealing to older audiences. Tom DeFalco, who was the editor-in-chief at Marvel from 1987 until 1984, recalling how the change in market influenced the success of the *X-Men* comics said that "*X-Men* was the kind of book that really worked in the direct market... As the direct market grew, *X-Men* grew." (Mallory 2011, 134) because the comic was among the first to change how superhero stories were written.

As *X-Men* began to be written for an older audience, they increasingly incorporated suspense to engage their readers, and experienced booming sales as a result. In a

1975 issue co-written by Wein and Claremont, the supporting character Thunderbird was introduced and then killed as a strategy to create uncertainty with audiences. Wein asserted that it was necessary to kill Thunderbird to keep readers on their toes so the comics wouldn't "become predictable" (Sanderson 1982a, 51). In a 1979 interview published shortly before Kitty Pryde was introduced to the comic, Claremont recalled that he had recently made a promise to a fan in their letters column "that *X-Men* would become a suspenseful book, you wouldn't know who would live or who would die" (Via, O'Connell and Groth 1979, 52). At the time, while he said that he "would dearly like to have the freedom to kill one of them" he did not believe he would ever be allowed to kill a major *X-Men* character (Via, O'Connell and Groth 1979, 52), though that belief would soon be challenged. Contrary to Claremont's belief, Marvel's chief editor Jim Shooter agreed to let Claremont kill the character Jean Grey at the end of *The Dark Phoenix Saga* in an issue published just a year later in 1980. Jim Shooter later verified that Claremont had seemed shocked to realise he would let him kill a major character, recalling that the writer had "thought I would never go for this, that there was no way I would ever agree that a major Marvel character could be killed." Looking back on the decision to kill Jean Grey, however, Shooter credited the decision as being "the thing that catapulted *The X-Men* to Number One" (Irving 2006, 8).

The deadly culmination of *The Dark Phoenix Saga* achieved record sales. Series editor Louise Simonson would also later recall how its success affected the comic going forwards, especially stories like the *Days of Future Past* arc which had starred Kitty Pryde. She said that "with 'Dark Phoenix,' it was the first realization that the comic-book shops had, that death sells... Dealers would call me and say, 'When's the issue where everybody dies? I wanna order a lot of that one'" (Riesman 2014). This had led the sales department to determine, according to writer Chris Claremont, "that the book sells better when everyone dies, when the heroes almost die" (Sanderson 1982a, 122). Armed with this knowledge, Claremont and Byrne began experimenting with how to use a sense that the characters' lives were at stake to further improve sales. Claremont said that when it came to writing the *X-Men* comics, what he was "trying to do, [was] to create that sense of reality, a sense of suspense, of involvement" by creating an air of uncertainty so readers wouldn't know from one comic "to the next if anyone's going to get killed" (Sanderson 1982a, 122).

On the first issue cover, shown in Figure 37, all members of the X-Men save Wolverine were listed as captured or slain. This strategy of suspense through the *Days of Future Past* storyline caused sales to go “through the roof” (Riesman 2014). The cover for the second and final part of the *Days of Future Past* storyline went even further in communicating the threat the characters were facing, with Storm in the deadly grasp of a sentinel obliterating Wolverine by incineration, while text, as chosen by Simonson, announced on the cover, shown in Figure 38 – “THIS ISSUE: **EVERYBODY DIES!**” More or less as promised by the cover, just about every X-Men character died in the final fight against the Sentinels set in the dystopian future.

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Figure 37: Wolverine, with grey in his hair, stands protectively in front of an older Kitty Pryde, who is recoiling in fear. Both stand illuminated by a search light which reveals an announcement that every X-Men member, save Wolverine, has already been successfully hunted down, and either slain or imprisoned.

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Figure 38: The cover of *The Uncanny X-Men* #142 made an explicit use of threat to character lives to generate a sales boom.

The peril and threat faced by the characters was communicated on the covers of the *X-Men* comics as a tool for increasing sales across the twopart *Days of Future Past* storyline. Claremont credited his co-creator, artist John Byrne, as having the “idea for upping the ante” with *Days of Future Past*, remembering that:

From the standpoint of pure publishing practicality and mild greed, we were saying, ‘You thought we were suicidal by killing one character? Hell, now we’re gonna kill ‘em all!’ (Riesman 2014).

Kitty Pryde was a central protagonist in the *X-Men* comics at the peak of their popularity. She was integral to many of the comics’ most popular storylines, including being introduced as the outright hero, of *The Dark Phoenix Saga* of the two-part story *Days of Future Past* (1981), published in *The Uncanny X-Men* #141–142, and also the graphic novel *God Loves, Man Kills* (1982). However, her role in adaptations of the comics has been relatively limited. Research has identified that, regardless of “her prominent role in the comic stories on which the film is based”, Pryde’s role had been so reduced in the film that “she is barely on screen at all” (Cocca 2016b, 147). It has been argued that the adaptation of the *Days of Future Past* storyline represented the “most egregious” example of female leading roles being reassigned to male characters (Cocca 2016a, 81).

Pryde was a character uniquely well suited to gripping audiences with suspenseful drama, as a vulnerable young female hero pitted against serious enemies. Many of Pryde’s early storylines in particular emphasised her vulnerability in order to create greater suspense for the audience, as shown in Figure 39 on a promotional cover for issue #139 welcoming her to the X-Men. The aforementioned threat of character death as a sales strategy was engaged by showing Pryde surrounded by the message “Welcome to the X-Men, Kitty Pryde — Hope you survive the experience!” while arranged around her were scenes of deadly situations the X-Men had found themselves in in order to foreshadow the threats she would face, and further hint that she might not survive them.

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Figure 39: From the time she was introduced, Kitty Pryde was shown to be a character the audience should be afraid for (Claremont and Byrne 1980b).

Likewise, on the cover of the crossover issue *Obnoxio the Clown vs. The X-Men*, shown in Figure 40, a similar threat was posed to readers which echoed the famous cover of issue #136 of the death of Jean Grey. On the cover of the issue, published in 1983, the villainous Obnoxio holds aloft the apparently lifeless body of Kitty Pryde who is wearing her black and yellow X-Men uniform, and Obnoxio jokingly

addresses the reader with “Hiya kids... what’s yellow amd black amd dom’t breathe mo more?” while her horrified team mates look om behind him.

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Figure 40: Obmoxio the Clowm, carryimg Kitty Pryde’s motiomless body jokimgly asks the reader “What’s yellow amd black amd dom’t breathe mo more?”

Interestingly, Pryde would openly express her fear during the dangerous circumstances the X-Men team found themselves in with much greater frequency than other characters. As a result, she became a key protagonist of the *X-Men* comics, for the same reason that female protagonists have been more common in horror films. In fact, creation of the character of Kitty Pryde was directly inspired by a female horror film protagonist; her introduction to the comics occurred shortly after the release of 20th Century Fox's film *Alien* in 1979. While Kitty Pryde and Ellen Ripley, the protagonist of the R-rated *Alien*, may not initially appear to have much in common, Ripley's role in *Alien* had a clear influence on the portrayal of Pryde. Both characters faced with terrifying situations that they must overcome through quick thinking and courage, something demonstrated in one of Pryde's early issues, *Uncanny X-Men* issue #143, published in 1981, which was a homage to "the last fifteen minutes of *Alien*" according to artist John Byrne (Samders 1987). Byrne was referencing a sequence in which Ripley fought for her survival against an alien monster. By that time, Ripley was the only surviving member of her crew, aside from a pet cat and, with the alien having already annihilated the rest of the crew, the protagonist's survival was in clear peril. In the *X-Men* issue most directly inspired by *Alien*, Pryde found herself in much the same circumstances as the horrified Ellen Ripley. She was alone in the X-Men mansion when it was invaded by a demon resembling the Xenomorph monster from *Alien*, shown in Figure 41, and, much like Ripley in *Alien*, Pryde had to work to keep escaping the monster until she found a way to destroy it.

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Figure 41: A terrified Pryde flees from a very *Alien*-looking demon (Claremont and Byrne 1981).

Furthermore, as with *Alien*, just when Pryde thought she was safe from the monster, she found herself again having to escape death. While Ripley survived her final confrontation with the alien by blasting it out of the airlock of a space shuttle, Pryde was able to blast the monster out of existence via a jet engine (Figure 42),

though it nearly ended her with a final swipe of a claw lunging out of the flames. This close-up of Pryde's horrified face was a technique borrowed from horror films like *Alien*. While selection of Pryde as a protagonist for the *X-Men* comics with uncertain survival helped drive sales of the *X-Men* comic to an older audience, this in turn would prove detrimental to her selection as a film protagonist as content that shows scenes of peril, terror, horror or fear are limited to older audiences by film censors (Potts and Beldem 2009:77). While this made adaptation of the *X-Men* comics a challenge in general, it especially made it more difficult to adapt Kitty Pryde to film, because Pryde was prominently used in the comics to increase suspense by showing Pryde in dangerous situations which she might not survive. While the Kitty Pryde of the comics, and the character of Ellen Ripley who inspired her had been successful protagonists, subsequent changes in film production limited the benefits for selecting Kitty Pryde as a film protagonist.

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Figure 42: Just when Pryde thought she was safe, having incinerated a primordial demon that hunted her, she is left helpless and terrified by one final attempt by its severed limb to deal a death blow (Claremont and Byrne 1981).

After Ripley's 1979 introduction in *Alien*, the film industry had begun focusing on producing films to appeal to younger audiences, because of the opportunity such an approach offers to earn revenue from toy sales. Two years before the release of *Alien*, the first *Star Wars* film was released, and it had caused an unprecedented demand for toys. Toy manufacturers Kenner, who were responsible for producing action figures based on the *Star Wars*' characters had been caught by surprise, and unable to satisfy demand, had to resort to selling vouchers for customers to receive action figures "in the not-too-distant future" (Shome 2004:11). In the period between 1980 and 1983, an estimated 300 million *Star Wars* action figures were sold (Bainbridge 2010:833). After the triumph of *Star Wars* at selling toys, the production of films with protagonists like Ellen Ripley began to decline. While there had been a boom in horror film production in the 1970s and early 1980s, with the domestic ticket sales in horror films reaching "an all-time high" in 1982 indicating that demand remained strong, production declined thereafter (Neale 2002:29), as

studios increasingly focused on films enabling them to also earn revenue from action figure sales. In order to be able to use films to market toys to children however, it is necessary to ensure the narratives will be considered suitable for children. This was a struggle that *X-Men: The Animated Series* also had to contend with, and its success at managing these concerns supported the series in raising demand for *X-Men* action figures (Lewald 2017, 274).

Showrunner Eric Lewald, who worked to adapt the *X-Men* comics to *X-Men: The Animated Series* for an audience of both children and adults, recalled that pressure from “well-intentioned parents’ groups” to protect children from “life’s extremes” created a lot of difficulty trying to adapt stories like the *X-Men* comics (Lewald 2017, 17). Fox executive of broadcast standards and practices Avery Cobern, who was the censor responsible for *X-Men: The Animated Series*, agreed that the content of the *X-Men* comics had been difficult to adapt in a way that was appropriate for children. She was interviewed by showrunner Eric Lewald as part of a behind-the-scenes look at the show’s development in 2017, and recalled that censoring the *Batman* and *X-Men* shows for Fox Kids was a challenge, because:

These shows really are deep, they don’t talk down to kids, so we put them late in the kids’ block, skewing older. But they were still on Saturday morning. It was a challenge, from a Standards point of view, because the subject matter is heavy (Lewald 2017, 403).

Makers of the *X-Men* animated series were able to argue for some exceptions to be made; while they were still unable to show blood or much violence, they were able to successfully argue to the network’s censor that it was necessary to kill a character named Morph in the series’ first episode in order to establish that the characters in this universe faced real jeopardy (Lewald 2017, 47–48). According to Sidney Iwanter, the vice president of Fox Kids and the creative executive heading *X-Men: The Animated Series*, killing Morph showed “the vulnerability of our heroes and that not every story would end with everyone happy and laughing like a Scooby adventure” (Blast from the Past 2007).

The decision to kill a character to establish jeopardy, however, remained controversial. In order to get network censor Avery Coburn to agree to letting them kill off Morph, Iwanter had to promise that the writers would eventually bring him back to life, as they did in the first episode of the second season (Blast from the Past 2007). Producer Will Meugniot acknowledged that they had “originally intended

to let Morph stay dead”; however, “Fox’s broadcast standards and practices got cold feet about having an actual death” (Mallory 2011, 167). While in the original comics character deaths were shown within the action of the comics, when the television adaptation showed the death of Morph, the network insisted that the death could not be shown onscreen. Instead, the adaptation was limited to having to cut to reaction shots of other characters witnessing Morph’s death in order to moderate the violence and emotional intensity experienced by audiences. So, rather than witnessing the horror of death itself, “the audience saw Jean Grey’s horror, then Xavier’s, then bits of shock and grief as each of the X-Men in turn came to grips with the loss of Morph” (Lewald 2017, 131). As a result of making such alterations, the animated *X-Men* adaptation received few complaints from parents (Lewald 2017).

One method for making audiences less anxious and the plot outcomes therefore more reassuring, is to cast a male protagonist in the role of the hero; he will put the audience at ease by reacting to dangerous and unsettling situations with unbothered bravado. The character of Wolverine displays such a stereotypically masculine level of self-confidence. While within the *X-Men* comics Wolverine has occasionally referred to the possibility of others being hurt or others being afraid (Figures 43 & 44), yet these emotions have been largely absent from Wolverine’s own characterisation. The characteristic fearlessness of Wolverine was also present

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in *The Animated Series*, and was the subplot of the two-part episode *Proteus* in 1995. Proteus was a powerful mutant able to possess others and distort reality, and Wolverine became “unmoved by Proteus” (Lewald 2017, 188). His teammate Rogue tried to assure Wolverine that this was an understandable reaction, given that “there’s no emotion harder to control than a paralyzing fear”, and attempted to console him by saying that, while all the other X-Men had experienced such fear before, “it must be even worse” for Wolverine, with him “having never felt it before.” This unruffled confidence made Wolverine an advantageous selection for a film protagonist because the way in which the protagonist reacts to their surroundings will, in turn, affect the way the audience reacts to them. For example, where an audience might

Figure 43: Wolverine reassures people that, as long as they don't get in his way, they won't get hurt (Claremont and Byrne 1980c).

find their fear escalated by the visible fear a female protagonist is more likely to show, where the protagonist instead demonstrates a commitment to machismo and is unmoved by the dangers around them, their calm front will make what might otherwise be an unsettling situation with an uncertain outcome for audiences seem sure to work out fine.

Wolverine is especially skilled in this respect, as his invulnerability to injury made a reassuring outcome seem even more of a certainty to audiences. From the first moment of his introduction within the first film, Wolverine's physical pain has frequently been on display. He was introduced as the reigning champion cage fighter who could go from being doubled over in pain from an opponent's blow to

emerging unblemished and victorious, much to the ire of his opponent as they realised that Wolverine's resilience is beyond the capabilities of an ordinary human. This introduction assured the audience that, no matter what violence might afflict Wolverine, this survival and return to full health are likely. Wolverine's almost limitless capacity to heal from injuries simultaneously allows him to engage in violent conflict, while negating the sense of threat audiences might feel in response to his peril, as there is less of a threat posed to his life, which ultimately limits the suspense and uncertainty of his survival.

Wolverine's ability to regularly show experiencing pain without significant consequences has been used to good effect. Despite not being permitted to utilise high degrees of suspense in children's media as a method of encouraging emotional involvement of audiences with their stories, Hollywood filmmakers discovered another method for emotionally involving audiences in their stories, by showing a protagonist experience pain and suffering. Even though putting a character in a dangerous circumstance with an uncertain outcome involves too much suspense for children, putting a character through painful ordeals which will surely result in suffering, but likely not death, can strongly evoke the empathy of audiences.

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When a person witnesses another in apparent pain, similar regions of the brain react as if the viewer was also in pain (Singer et al. 2006, 466), as the stimuli "most likely to instigate emotional processing falls in the domains of raw visual or auditory

Figure 44: In *God Love, Man Kills*, Wolverine reflects on the fear the other X-Men feel that the anti-mutant propaganda of Stryker could lead to their extermination, but his own countenance is characteristically unafraid (Claremont and Anderson 1982).

experience” (Craig et al. 2010, 104). This means that showing the hero endure a painful ordeal can be an effective method for triggering empathy on the part of the audience. Indeed, this capacity for revitalisation is a common feature of epic heroes, with their bodies being “incapable of suffering fatal injury” (Jewett and Lawrence 1977, 196). Wolverine was a particularly useful choice of film protagonist because his regenerative abilities make it easy to trigger empathy from audiences by showing him injured and in pain, while also limiting the uncertainty audiences feel surrounding the hero’s survival. By showing heroes like Wolverine suffering through pain, their heroic qualities of selflessly sacrificing their well-being in dedication to their cause are also emphasised, as is their resilience.

The discovery by Hollywood of the positive benefits of painful ordeals led to the emergence of a genre of action film known as the hardbody film in the late 1970s, which came to represent Hollywood’s dominant output of action cinema in the 1980s and early 1990s (Ayers 2008, 41). The central focus of the hardbody film was on “the individual body—spectacular, tortured, and ultimately triumphant” (Schneider 1999, 2), and these films became known for taking great pleasure in depicting scenes of physical pain endured by the hero (Ayers 2008, 44). The early films of the *X-Men* franchise “in many ways” were “direct descendants of the hardbody films of the 1980s” (Ayers 2008, 57) and made heavy use of the spectacle of pain. The ordeal the hero undergoes is explored audibly and visibly in the *X-Men* films in order to heighten the empathy the audience feels for the hero, increasing their emotional investment when it is unclear if the hero will triumph, which ultimately increases their enjoyment of the film. As mentioned above, Wolverine was a particularly useful choice of protagonist, because enduring pain is something Wolverine was infinitely capable of due to his almost limitless capacity to heal from injury. However this is in direct opposition to the feminine character trait of vulnerability as demonstrated by Kitty Pryde, contrasted in Figures 45 & 46.

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Figure 45: Far from expressing uncertainty, when confronted by dangerous circumstances, Wolverine goads his opponents to attack him (Claremont and Miller 1982).

Figure 46: While similarly defiant, with a gritted jaw, Kitty Pryde's response to a dangerous challenge is to brace herself, bruised and battered against a wall (Claremont and Smith 1982a).

The opportunities presented by Wolverine to be able to be continually injured without causing excessive suspense was a feature able to be used to draw the empathy of the audience. After a fight in which his adamantium claws were first revealed to Rogue and the audience within the first *X-Men* film, the pain Wolverine felt each time he had to use his claws was highlighted, with Wolverine displaying a pained expression afterwards while he rubbed the skin over his knuckles where his claws had sliced through. Observing his discomforted body language, his companion Rogue asked if it hurt when his claws came out, to which Wolverine replied, "Every time." This comment, aside from triggering empathy from the audience, would establish that every time Wolverine fought to defend someone, it came at the personal cost of pain. Wolverine's personal sacrifice of being willing to suffer pain during the course of his heroic journey was further emphasised in the dramatic conclusion of the *X-Men* (2000). The film's antagonist, Magneto, intended to use Rogue as a human sacrifice in his attempt to end opposition to mutants, and had captured Wolverine and the other X-Men when they arrived to rescue her. There, the captive Wolverine's only option to rescue Rogue was to agonisingly

impale himself in order to escape. This combination of heroic willingness to personally suffer to save another, and the pain Wolverine endures by doing so, functioned to increase audience empathy. Afterwards, the audience is faced with a scene of true suspense as, upon reaching Rogue, Wolverine finds she is near death. The audience is left in suspense as he allows his life force to be drained in order to revive her. While the seeming likelihood of his death is sharply felt at the time, the time elapsed between the audience seeing the imminent possibility of his death and learning of his recovery is appropriately brief for the film's PG-13 rating.

The second *X-Men* film, *X2: X-Men United* (2003), which had Wolverine in the lead role, loosely adapted the *God Loves, Man Kills* graphic novel in which Kitty Pryde was the original protagonist of. Changes were also made to make the villain's actions less terrifying to audiences. Stryker's in the comics forces are fanatics known as the Purifiers who might go to any ends for their beliefs, but in the film adaptation Stryker is in charge of a military organisation, and so the forces he musters, while they are fighting against mutants, have plain and simple motivations of following orders. As a result, the audience need not be wary that the antagonists may unpredictably decide to do unspeakable acts. Stryker, the antagonist who holds the most hatred to mutants himself, also has understandable motives as, in the film, he tells Professor X. that he hates mutants because his mutant son drove his wife to suicide by manipulating her with terrible visions.

In comparison, in the *X-Men* comics, Stryker's hatred of mutants was a far less explicable revulsion, as he murdered both his wife, and his infant son, upon seeing his son's mutation upon his birth. His acolytes were fanatics who, like him, were willing to murder mutant children and conduct campaigns of terror of their own volition, making each member of his force more threatening than a group of people who at least offer the predictability of following orders. In the opening sequence of *God Loves, Man Kills*, a 9-year-old girl and her 11-year-old brother are hunted down and murdered by the Purifiers after their parents had already been murdered. The Purifiers then used the chains of a swing set to tie the bodies to the children's play equipment in a school yard in a grisly tableau, labelling them as mutants (Figure 47).

Image has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 47: Murdered children were strung up as a warning to other mutants within the story *God Loves, Man Kills* (Claremont and Andersom 1982) but when the film which adapted this story *X2: X-Men United* was produced, changes were made to reduce the sense of suspense, including selecting a protagonist of whose survival audiences could feel assured.

By contrast, in the film, when Stryker's forces made a night-time raid on Xavier's school, his operatives instead use sedative drugs to subdue rather than kill the children. Producer Lauren Schuler-Dommer noted how, during the infiltration of Stryker's forces of the school in the film, when the limp, unresponsive form of a mutant child who'd been incapacitated by a tranquiliser dart was handed to Colossus by Wolverine, it was necessary to include Wolverine saying the line, "Take him, he's stumped" to Colossus to unambiguously communicate to the audience that the child hadn't suffered any lasting damage "so people wouldn't worry" (Singer, Ottman and Sigel 2003). Subsequently, the children, who were kidnapped after being sedated, were eventually rescued, unharmed, by the X-Men.

As such, the ruthless hatred of the Purifiers, their intimidation tactics, and the terror they put mutants through in *God Loves, Man Kills*, were substantially reduced. Vulnerable mutants for whose safety the audience might fear for are instead only mildly inconvenienced, in comparison, to the death and real threat to the hero's survival present in the source material. Within the original *God Loves, Man Kills* comic, rather than the protagonist being the mighty invulnerable and brashly confident Wolverine, the hero Kitty Pryde was depicted as being in far more peril. Throughout the story, she fled gunfire, and barely escaped being blown up, as she desperately tried to call for help (Figure 48). Given that producers needed to ensure the younger members of the film audience would not be too worried about the survival of the

character, having a character such as Kitty Pryde, who expressed obvious fright, would instill an unacceptable level of fear in the film audience. In contrast, selecting a protagonist such as Wolverine substantially reduced audience suspense. Nonetheless, even with these alterations, when the ratings board examined the film, further edits needed to be made to obtain the PG-13 that would mark it as suitable for a broad audience, such as breaking the tension during a fight scene by cutting away from the life and death conflict.

Image has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 48: Kitty Pryde cries in fear while attempting to call for help during *God Loves, Man Kills*.

Such changes are common necessitated within film medium, because this medium can present horror and violence with more visceral and immediate detail than other mediums because of the “physical verisimilitude” offered by film which can increase “the shock and horror of the presentation of violence” to audiences (Wistrich 1978, 94). While filmmakers must work to create narratives that are sufficiently dramatic to draw audiences in, it is equally important that when they are developing narratives for a mass audience, the dramatic tension does not become uncomfortable for substantial portions of the audience. That is, in order to make violence in film more acceptable for a broader audience, films employ strategies for distancing audiences from the acts and consequences of violence, such as having violence occur offscreen (Prince 2003, 240–245), or limiting intensity by breaking violent actions across a series of brief shots (Afra 2016, 56). For example, during a fight scene early in *X-Men United*, when Wolverine fought Stryker’s forces in the first

cut, according to Bryam Singer, Wolverine had killed some intruder with a “full on roar” but “it was just too intense, so... for ratings we had to kind of break it up”, reducing the intensity “by cutting back to Bobby”, a younger mutant Wolverine was protecting (Singer, Ottomam and Sigel 2003). This was so the audience instead would experience the action indirectly, only witnessing Bobby’s reaction to seeing the soldier killed.

Horrifying elements were something avoided by Fox when adapting *X-Men* stories to film. The most overt evidence of this comes from the adaptation of an *X-Men* spin-off comic, *The New Mutants*, to film in 2020. Claremont began writing *The New Mutants* with artist Bob McLeod in 1982 after he had already escalated use of suspense and dramatic tension in his stories in the main *X-Men* title, *The Uncanny X-Men*, through stories such as *The Dark Phoenix Saga* (1976–1980), *Days of Future Past* (1982) and beyond. His tendency to put characters into peril continued with *The New Mutants*. Director Josh Boone wanted to incorporate these elements of horror within the film adaptation, but “The horror element was a stumbling block, with the studio insisting on a PG-13 rating.” (Power 2020), so “all those jump-scares and blood splashes were out” (Power 2020).

Image has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 49: Wolverine intimidates an opponent by reminding them that even with having been injured, “Well, Bub, Wolverine is virtually unkillable.” (Claremont and Byrne 1980c).

In contrast to the surety of survival shown within the *PG-13 X-Men* films, it is notable to consider how differences in Wolverine’s healing ability related to the rating of the 2017 spin-off film *Logan*. The film *Logan* was set in a different continuity from the main *X-Men* film franchise, in a bleak alternate future in which Wolverine’s mutation had degenerated, leaving him to age and with far-diminished healing

abilities. The film was based on the *Old Man Logan* comics created by Mark Millar and Steve McNiven in 2008. Wolverine's deteriorating healing abilities were key to much of the film's dramatic tension, with each fight leading to growing uncertainty about whether the hero would survive the film. In contrast to the dark uncertainty of *Logan*, however, Wolverine in the PG-13 *X-Men* films, just as in the original comics (Figure 49 & 50) is nearly invulnerable, meaning that the audience can be assured that, no matter how bad things might seem, the in which they have the most emotional investment would be likely to survive the challenges that faced him⁸. This meant that audiences were more reassured of his survival and triumph than they would have been for a character like Kitty Pryde, who is less inclined towards bravado, and is more vulnerable when squaring up to similar fights.

In addition to the *X-Men* film adaptation selecting a protagonist of whose survival the audience could feel relatively assured, the dramatic tension in the films was also managed by interspersing scenes of intense action with comedy, and by alleviating the impact of potentially alarming scenes of violence by distracting the audiences with sexual arousal to reduce their ability to be alarmed by violence. Such an approach of reducing the perceived intensity of violence within films can result in films receiving a lower rating, because the parents who rate whether films are appropriate for children base this decision on their own perceptions of the film rather than objective measures (Motion Picture Association of America n.d.).

⁸ Except in the 2017 film *Logan*, which had an R-rating, and was therefore aimed at a more niche audience, with a greater tolerance for tension.

Image has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 50: Fearing the X-Men may be facing deadly peril, Wolverine chose to enter a conflict first, as he was the person "best likely to survive" whatever danger they might be facing (Claremont and Silvestri 1988)

Comedy has long been recognised as a strategy for alleviating dramatic tension. Interspersing the points within a narrative in which the characters find themselves in periods of crises with "relaxed moments in between" of comic relief has been a technique to allow audiences to better appreciate the suspense of those crises without becoming overwhelmed by them, and is one that has been used in the production of serious dramas since ancient times (Lucas 1928,75). Surprising the audience with a joke at the end of a tense sequence can be an effective method of balancing tension within a narrative (Lehmann and Koelsch 2015), because "suspenseful action is only effective... if the distressful encounters are counterbalanced with equally upbeat elements" (King 2019). In her research on the use of comic relief to offset suspense in action films, King noted how, in the first *X-Men* film, humour was used to counterbalance the action of the film, for example when the X-Men team regrouped following a "set of fierce one-on-one battles" as the climax of the film worked to build "the tension to a crescendo" comedic relief in

the form of a joke was used to dissipate tension. Wolverine, having just battled the shapeshifting mutant Mystique, regrouped with the team, who had last seen him fighting against Mystique who had morphed into his shape. As such, the team could not be entirely sure that the Wolverine who came back wasn't the shapeshifter in disguise, leading Cyclops to entreat Wolverine to prove his identity. Wolverine acquiesces to this request, by using it as another opportunity to insult Cyclops by telling him, "You're a dick" and thereby proving his identity by continuing his efforts to provoke the other mutant. In turn, Cyclops accepted Wolverine's baiting of him with his characteristically bland acknowledgement of "Okay." King observed that, in sequences such as this:

... the action and humor tend to feed each other. The action builds the tension to a crescendo, which makes the humor appear even more light-hearted and funnier, thereby relieving the tension so that it can again be built back up by yet another action sequence, thus creating the wild rollercoaster ride that action audiences crave (King 2019, 143).

Indeed, Wolverine's jibe to Cyclops in the first film isn't the only instance of humour being used to interrupt a tense moment in the *X-Men* films. Following Stryker's invasion of the school in *X2*, tension was dispersed as soon as Wolverine, Rogue, Iceman and Pyro escaped from the school in a car owned by Cyclops. Everyone in the car is working to come to grips with what has just happened, and Wolverine is tense from his recent reunion with Stryker, whom he recognised as one of the people haunting the hazy memories he retains of the torturous medical procedures that grafted his skeleton in adamantium to make him a living weapon. Uncomfortable with the tension, Pyro, a mutant student from the school, reaches forward from the back seat to turn on the radio, with the explanation of "I don't like uncomfortable silences." Tension is suddenly dispersed with the too loud chorus of *Bye Bye Bye* by boy band NSYNC comes blasting out of the stereo in a discordant burst that causes the occupants of the car to immediately cringe back, the shock of the prior moment ending in a scramble to turn off the music, because of it being so discordant with the atmosphere in the car, and the musical interests of its occupants.

Aside from using comedic interjections amidst scenes of dramatic conflict, arousing imagery is also employed to reduce the impact of scenes of horror and violence. The most obvious example of this strategy is exemplified by the transformation of Mystique, a shapeshifting mutant who has been a formidable antagonist to the

X-Men. Mystique's appearance was significantly altered for the film in comparison to the comics or the prior television series. Rather than appearing in her customary costume of a white tunic with mostly open sides, worn her first appearance in the comic, instead in the films Mystique was persistently displayed "nude but for a few strategically placed scaly prosthetics" (Cocca 2016b, 150), for what some considered to be "without any apparent narrative justification" (Cocca 2016b, 144).

Such critiques are understandable within the broader context of criticism over female characters more commonly being presented in states of varying undress. Analysis indicates that 17.2% of females in film are shown in partial nudity compared with 12.4% of males (Smith et al. 2012, 16). It can therefore be argued that, in addition to female characters being underrepresented in superhero films, where female characters are present, they are frequently depicted in a sexually appealing manner. This is concerning as presenting females but not males as objects of desire can cause audiences to perceive females "as less competent and less fully human" (Nussbaum 1999). For females, watching representations of objectified women can make them more self-conscious (Moradi and Huang 2008), and this self-consciousness in females has been found to also be triggered by watching footage of female superheroes (Pennell and Behm-Morawitz 2015). Therefore, it is understandable why Mystique's nudity has been the subject of concern, as it has been noted that Mystique's representation in film often focused on her nudity rather than her martial arts ability (Knopf and Doran 2016, 69). However, one thing that these critiques overlook is how Mystique's nudity serves to offset the tension created from violence and suspense in the scenes to which she is central. As a shapeshifter, Mystique is capable of assuming any identity, and shapeshifting characters have occupied central roles in horror films because of the uncertainty their ability to imitate and infiltrate creates (Kooyman 2017, 27). Though a disproportionate focus on female nudity can create inequalities by reinforcing the stereotype that women exist to be looked at (Douglas 1994, 16–17), one thing that these critiques have overlooked is another effect nudity can have on how process the scenes of intense action within these films.

It has long been understood that the sexualised presentation of women in film tends "to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation" (Mulvey 1975, 11), because the imagery audiences see in film prior to a startling event directly affects the extent to which audiences are startled. A 1994 study specifically measuring the involuntary pupil responses of audiences found that where audiences were

watching footage which created sexual arousal, their response to a startling event was lessened when compared to audiences who had been watching film footage which triggered a fear response prior to the startling event. For sexually arousing content, researchers used scenes from pornographic films, whereas for the fear-inducing footage, climactic scenes of horror films were shown, featuring violent scenes, “sharp weapons, or frightening facial expressions” (Jansen and Frijda 1994, 565). For comparison, audiences were also shown neutral footage about travel and the outdoors. Results of the study found that where participants had been watching pornographic footage prior to getting jump-scared by a sudden loud burst of white noise, their involuntary startle response was far lower than that of audiences who’d previously been watching footage from horror films, and lower even than the control group of audiences who’d been watching scenery (Jansen and Frijda 1994, 568). The findings of this study echoed the response of previous research on the capacity of arousing images to nudity to decrease startle responses in audiences (Vrana, Spence and Lang 1988).

The clear implication then, for filmmakers, would be that including attractive, partially nude characters amidst scenes of violence is a viable method of making the frightening intensity of such scenes less severe for audiences. While there has been much written about the presentation of nudity in action films, and particularly that of female characters, much of this analysis has missed the function such erotic spectacles serve. Mystique’s onscreen nudity is more persistent than any other character in the *X-Men* films, yet it is more understandable that Mystique is the most arousingly presented character when we consider that her character generates more suspense than any other *X-Men* character, both through the uncertainty created by her shapeshifting abilities, and the violent confrontations to which she was central.

Use of nudity to counterbalance violence was an innovation the *X-Men* films built on from the action films that came before which combined “excessive violence and hyperbolic action sequences” (Ayers 2008, 41–57) with a greater focus on nudity, particularly of the predominantly male characters central to this violence. While Wolverine’s nudity is not as persistent a part of his presentation as the mercurial Mystique, his nudity has similarly been used to alleviate tension in scenes that might inspire horror. Like Mystique, Wolverine’s incidence of nudity is more frequent within the film in comparison to his far more consistent cladding in the comics. Wolverine’s visual appeal to audiences was established from his introduction in the first film via

a shirtless fight scene filmed at the end of the film's production so that Wolverine actor Hugh Jackman had as much time as possible to hone an appealing physique (Singer and Peck 2000). Hugh Jackman would receive praise for continuing to develop the appeal of his physique (*People* Staff 2008), and this appeal would be able to moderate quite alarming elements. One of the most horrifying experiences Wolverine endured in the films was the series of medical procedures forced on him to graft the impossibly strong metal adamantium onto every bone of his body, shown in the 2009 film *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*. While Wolverine is ordinarily a character whose physical resilience makes him unflappable in almost any fight, in these moments where he was brutalised by those in power over him, the horror of the experience and his violent escape were blunted by the arousal inspired by the presentation of his entirely naked form. These methods for reducing suspense supplemented the selection of the character of Wolverine as methods for ensuring that, when the *X-Men* comics were adapted to film, they would be accessible and enjoyable to the broadest possible audience.

6.5 Conclusion

The difference in the expression of fear between male and female superhero characters has had significant implications for the selection of appropriate film protagonists, which have not been identified by prior research. Previous investigations into the more frequent selection of male superheroes as film protagonists have rarely engaged with the comics as source material. By studying the comics, this research has been able to identify how differences in the characterisation of male and female superheroes in the comics, made male characters more likely to be suitable as protagonists of films which can be marketed to children. When the audience doubts the triumph of the hero, this increases their sense of suspense, and suspenseful stories are less likely to be considered appropriate for children. As suspense results in more restrictive ratings which limit the size of the audience films can be marketed to, superhero films seeking to target an audience of both children and adults select outwardly confident heroes to reduce suspense by making the audience more sure of their eventual triumph. When it comes to selecting confident protagonists however, differences in how males and females were characterised according to traditional gender stereotypes have made male superheroes more likely to possess these advantageous traits. In response to the dangers confronting the characters of the *X-Men* comics, male characters like Wolverine are more likely to have been characterised as reassuringly confident, while female superheroes like Kitty Pryde more commonly appeared fearful and

vulnerable. By moderating suspense and making these films appropriate for children to enjoy, such film adaptations not only gain a larger audience to sell tickets to, but gain an additional opportunity to earn income from the sale of toys relating to the film.

7 Cross-selling

7.1 Introduction

Film adaptations of comic book superheroes are designed to reach the broadest possible audience in order to maximise potential revenue superhero film adaptations can generate, however they also aim to enhance earnings by promoting sales of additional products relating to these films. This chapter will explore evidence that, when it comes to appealing to a broad audience, male superhero film protagonists also are advantaged because male characters are frequently employed to promote products that complement these films and increase revenue. By contrast, the kinds of products females are typically employed to promote do not create as much of a financial benefit for film studios, leading to a perception that, along with female characters more often possessing other qualities that may restrict them appealing to as large a theatrical audiences, there is less financial incentive to create female-led superhero movies because of less lucrative opportunities to earn merchandising revenue.

Males and females are used to promote such different types of products due to the fact that masculinity is stereotypically associated with action whereas femininity is considered to relate more with appearance (Berger 1972, 47). Action figures have been such a popular form of merchandise for superhero characters that the opportunity to earn revenue from this type of product was a significant factor in motivating studios to invest in producing superhero film adaptations (Raviv 2002), and led to a greater focus on male characters. In contrast, actresses are more commonly selected to promote products relating to fashion and cosmetics. While film studios do gain some publicity benefit from coverage in appearance-focused magazines, the long-standing association between actresses and glamorous appearances has a broader tendency to increase barriers to females as protagonists in film. By focusing more on the appearance of actresses are more likely to have shorter careers and be less likely to have a strong long-term appeal to audiences. For this reason, film studios consider male protagonists to offer greater likelihood for more sustained success.

The next section will begin by reviewing past research on action figures in order to demonstrate how action figures have been a product developed almost exclusively for a male audience, and featuring male characters. This is important to recognise because, as discussed in analysis to follow, the decision to adapt *X-Men* and many

other superhero stories to film has been incentivised by generating a demand for action figures based on the characters in these stories. As such, the selection of superhero film protagonists has favoured characters who are most easily marketable to an audience of boys as action figures. Discussion will then turn to how influential merchandising revenue has been in incentivising film and television studios to pursue adaptations of superhero comics, then will move to an examination of how action figures became the most important form of merchandising to impact comic book adaptations.

Finally, this chapter will analyse existing research on how a focus on the appearance of women in film has been used to create demand for cosmetics, and how that focus on appearance can undermine the appeal of female protagonists to audiences. This will be followed by an investigation into how the appearance-focused coverage of actresses can be observed in the adaptation of *X-Men* to film, and the effect that has had on the opportunities for actresses who appeared in the film. A conclusion will then review how the strong gender stereotypes associated with creating demand for these different products surrounding films create a greater overall benefit to producing superhero film adaptations that focus on male characters.

7.2 Action figures

Research into the actors influencing the diversity gap in superhero adaptations has tended to take a siloed approach. As will be discussed in this chapter, while a significant body of work exists regarding the marketing of products such as action figures and cosmetics, superhero film adaptations have rarely been researched in relation to the promotion of these products. While those working in the film industry have long been balancing the pressures of cross-promoting products with film production, analysis of the selection of film protagonists has largely focused on films as artefacts produced independently of other commercial objectives. The observation has been made that merchandising has become an increasingly central concern to the production of film, and that “toys and the entertainment industry have become two sides of the same coin” (Clark 2007, 212). Therefore, while there has been scrutiny over action figures not being produced of female characters, or only being produced in lower quantities than their male comrades in films about superheroes and related media (Toft-Nielsen 2020, Brown 2018, 335; Scott 2017; Warner 2017; Stoltzfus 2014, 79–80), there has been relatively little attention given to how the perception that female characters will sell fewer action figures has

impacted the adaptation of superheroes to film. Similarly, while many film researchers have criticised that fact that female characters in superhero films are presented with a greater focus on appearance than male superheroes (Cocca 2016b, 151), that discussion remains disconnected from the extensive analysis of how actresses are used to market cosmetics, and the effect that has on the scarcity of female protagonists in superhero films.

In order to fill that gap, this chapter will study how the adaptation of *X-Men* to film served to cross-promote other products, and how the gender divide in product marketing coupled with the incentive to cross-promote other products, led to the favouring of male protagonists. This original contribution to research will be made by studying a combination of records of action figures produced based on *X-Men* characters, and product advertisements accompanying coverage of the *X-Men* films, given the close relationship between media coverage of actresses, and the advertising objectives of the magazines in which such coverage typically appears, the media coverage of *X-Men* actresses will also be discussed with relation to marketing products related to the films in which they appear.

7.2.1 Merchandising incentives of superhero movies

A key reason for the current popularity of superhero films is that film studios are incentivised by the greater potential superhero stories offer to earn revenue from not only the film itself, but also through merchandise licensing royalties. Superhero characters are particularly easy to adapt to merchandise because superheroes have emblems associated with them that means that “even before these characters are adapted to cinema, they have already achieved the iconic status central to merchandising” (Burke 2015, 68). By the time the *X-Men* stories were adapted to film, the financial incentive to produce merchandise had already made “a significant impact on the types of narrative created in popular Hollywood cinema” (McDonald 2000, 86). Films aimed at such a broad audience had come to represent to studios the possibility of creating “not only a box-office smash but a two-hour promotion for a product line” (Barnouw et al. 1997, 73–74).

Every superhero adaptation that had succeeded before the adaptation of *X-Men* to film had also generated significant merchandising revenue, beginning with the 1966 adaptation of the *Batman* comics to television. The popularity of the show’s characters “created a firestorm of collectibles unlike anyone had ever seen for any TV character before” (Warner Bros. 2014), with almost 150 products linked to the

show being released within months of the first episode (Segrave 2004, 117). The range of products included “brushes, and t-shirts, and bubblegum cards” (Warner Bros. 2014), with action figures following in 1971 as the market for such toys became established. A similar sensation of superhero wares was spawned in 1977 when *The Incredible Hulk* became the first successful adaptation of a Marvel series. Its popularity resulted in demand for merchandising such as bubblegum cards, shirts, posters and action figures (Jankiewicz 2013). This led Stan Lee, among many others, to begin to look at superhero characters in terms of the “tremendous asset” these characters offered to promote revenue “in areas other than the sale of comic books alone” (Howe 2012, 190).

The subsequent adaptation of *Superman* to film in 1978 was even more successful in generating additional revenue from merchandising than any previous blockbuster. It “marked the first wholly successful instance of blockbuster synergy” for Warner Bros., as the company had not only the film rights, and an easy means to promote it with behind-the-scenes promotional films on their television network but, even more importantly, Warner Bros. owned the merchandising rights for the Superman character, which allowed them to earn revenue from everything from the comics, to the soundtrack, to pinball machines (Shone 2004, 99). This is because Warner Bros. was, by this time, owned by the same parent company who had acquired DC Comics in 1969, who owned the rights to the characters, so their film adaptations of DC Comics characters could benefit other divisions of the company licensing revenue beyond just royalties. Warner Bros. would follow up from their success with the *Superman* film series (1978–1987) with their adaptation of fellow DC Comics character Batman to film in 1989.

While the *Batman* film grossed US\$251 million in the US alone, which was enough to make it “the biggest hit of the year” (Daniels 1999, 163–168), atop almost half a billion of worldwide box office gross (Flanagan, McKenny and Livingstone 2016, 24), the studio ultimately made almost twice as much from merchandising as it had on the theatrical revenue for the film (Lubbers and Adams 2001). Like the *Batman* television series before it, the *Batman* movie raised demand for branded merchandise across a wide range of products, including “everything from t-shirts to beach towels, from cereal to sleepwear” and “from action figures to alarm clocks”; the range of toys also incorporated the vehicles used by the hero, including “scale model versions of the Batmobile and the Batwing” plane (Daniels 1999, 168). The film even “sparked an untapped interest in Bat-merchandise across the board,

resulting in premiums on once-dead comics, toys and other collectables” (*ToyFare* 2000b, 62) generating revenue even outside of the new product lines released for the film.

The success of *Batman*-led superhero comics to become even more attractive properties to adapt to film was because of how the widespread popularity of the character allowed the film adaptation to generate vast revenue from merchandise (Meehan 1991). Problems arose, however, when the 1992 sequel *Batman Returns* took a darker tone, “true to the spirit of its source” material (Daniels 1999, 169) but incongruous to marketing toys to children. Such concerns are consistent with general issues of making adaptations that might be considered too scary for young children, as discussed within the chapter *Certain victory*. Indeed, merchandising opportunities for *Batman Returns* had been significantly limited because of the grim countenance of some of its characters, with marketing partners such as McDonald’s in particular objecting because the darker take on the characters was ill-suited to marketing toys to the 1 to 10-year-old age demographic. Happy Meal toys were promoted to (Zakarin 2014). As a result, licensing revenue was lower than for the prior film (Daniels 1999, 169), and director Tim Burton was replaced for the third and fourth films of the series (Zakarin 2014).

While *Batman Returns* generated controversy for its Happy Meal partnership in 1992, *X-Men: The Animated Series* made for an easier partnership with McDonald’s when it launched with a tie-in Happy Meal promotion later that year (Lewald 2017). Indeed, by the time the *X-Men* comics were first adapted to television with *X-Men: The Animated Series* in 1992, television and film studios had already come to view adaptations of stories featuring superhero characters as excellent opportunities to attract increased revenue through merchandising sales. *X-Men: The Animated Series* would prove quite adept in accomplishing this with its kid-friendly tone and, ultimately, as with most stories about superheroes, the *X-Men* franchise’s ability to sell toys would be the driving motivation for its adaptation to film. This incentive to produce merchandise would, however, lead to an increased focus on male characters in the film adaptations of *X-Men*, and other superhero stories.

7.2.2 Gendering of toys

The market for toys is a large and appealing one, with toys representing a total of 44% of advertisements towards children (Rajecski et al. 1993). The toy industry was more or less “a cottage industry” in the 1990s, but by 1999 the US toy market

generated an estimated annual revenue of more than US\$22 billion (M. Johnson 2001, 106). This phenomenon occurred due to both advancements in plastic manufacturing overseas and social changes in the buying power of American children. Between 1989 and 2002, independent spending by children aged 4 to 12 is estimated to have grown four-fold (Schor and Ford 2007, 10). Another key reason for the growth of the toy market is that the industry managed demand through a combination of strategies, including creating toys based on popular characters from comics, television and film, and, in turn, creating comics, television and film based on their toys to further raise demand.

As the majority of toys developed for the North American market are manufactured in Southeast Asia, toys take a long time to be developed and brought to market, and advertising in children's media has been "a key tool for controlling demand volatility" (M. Johnson 2001, 106). Initially toy manufacturers had found their greatest success in advertising to children during Saturday morning cartoons. After television stations introduced standards to restrict the amount of advertising during children's programming in 1974 however, "toy makers began experimenting in earnest with Hollywood partnerships" and found that licensing popular characters would create even greater demand stability because "movie and toy releases could be coordinated to deliver consistent, off-peak demand" and toys based on characters children were familiar with from stories "were particularly effective because children established play patterns for the toys long before the product was ever purchased" (Johnson 2001, 112–113).

Another important strategy employed to increase demand for toys has been the toy industry's emphasis of stereotypical gender differences in order to grow the overall toy market size because "the toy industry knows that two separate markets mean a larger overall market, in as much as there will be less sharing in mixed-sex children households than there might otherwise be" (Varney 2002, 166). This strategy of marketing boys' toys and girls' toys as such is self-reinforcing; by showing boys playing with boys' toys and girls playing with girls' toys, boys and girls are encouraged to themselves select gender-stereotyped toys (Spinner, Cameron and Calogero 2018).

One of the most marked differences between toys marketed to boys, and those marketed to girls, is that they tend to echo the stereotype that "Men act and women appear" (Berger 1972, 47). These differences between dolls and action figures are mirrored in popular Hollywood films, in which "men act – they solve crimes, engage

in sword fights, right social injustice, and swing from vines – while women are onscreen to be looked at (Douglas 1994, 16–17). Advertisements make strong use of this gender stereotype (Paff and Lakner 2009, 30), with masculinity corresponding to stereotypes of taking action, demonstrating expertise and aggression, and femininity being associated with dependence and a focus on beauty (Paff and Lakner 2009, 39–40) – and these stereotypes extend to the marketing of toys. A survey of toy commercials that had aired in 1992, the same year that *X-Men: The Animated Series* premiered, concluded not only “that toys in ads continue to be linked with gender stereotypes” but that the trend of stereotypical gender differences in the marketing of toys may have actually been increasing (Rajecki et al. 1993). In the advertisements, action figures represented the majority of toys advertised to boys, whereas the majority of toys advertised to girls related to glamorous costumes and dolls, which often also allowed girls to experiment further with cosmetics and fashion (Rajecki et al. 1993, 310–318). The dolls advertised to girls promote “a somewhat passive focus on appearance” (Murnen 2018, 190) and are typically accompanied by fashion- and cosmetic-related accessories to play with the appearance of the doll (Klugman 1999; Blakemore and Centers 2005).

Brown reflects that this “demarcation between boys’ and girls’ toys has been standard operating procedure within the industry ever since Barbie became the dominant symbol of girls’ toys in 1959, and GI Joe became the overriding image of boys’ toys in 1964” (2018, 342). These toys differed from those that came before because of “the sophistication of gendering” defined in their identities, that “each depicted a caricature, albeit serious of its side of the gender divide” (Varney 2002, 155–156). Prior to the introduction of the first Barbie figurine in 1959, dolls marketed towards girls had been largely those of babies and children, so girl children could play at one day becoming mothers. Barbie differed though, in being in the form of an adult and an attractive one at that (Walsh 2005, 130), allowing girls to engage in aspirational play with fashion and cosmetics (D’Amato 2009, 7). Likewise, GI Joe was a new kind of toy, being the first toy marketed as an ‘action figure’ as a method to differentiate it from the dolls marketed to girls – action figures became “the quintessential boys’ toys” (Inness 2004, 77).

Even down to their construction, “the simplicity and minimal number of joints” of dolls such as Barbie suggests how “posing rather than action” is prioritised in their manufacturing (Attfield 1996, 82). Conversely, action figures marketed to boys “promote an assertive (even aggressive) focus on action” (Murnen 2018, 190),

featuring greater flexibility for more complex manipulation in action-oriented play (Attfield 1996, 82). This is because Hasbro executive Don Levine believed that it was important that a toy made for boys be as realistically articulated as possible because “if a way could be found to engineer and manufacture that level of articulation, play value would increase along with the realism of the body” (Michlig 1998, 20). GI Joe was manufactured with 21 jointed parts, allowing him to sit, stand, kneel and interact realistically with weapons and vehicles with which he was often sold as accessories in his fight against enemies (Varney 2002, 155–156). Such a level of articulation had never been produced before, with previous dolls for boys being restricted to relatively fixed poses but, with his greater capacity to be put into action, GI Joe distinguished himself from those mere ‘dolls’ and their feminine associations (Levine and Michlig 1996, 14), becoming the first “socially acceptable ‘doll’ for boys” (Bainbridge 2010, 831). While many other action figures have come since then, this distinction between the level of articulation between masculine action figures and feminine dolls has remained.

GI Joe enjoyed enduring popularity with boys until a seismic event disrupted the toy industry – the release of the *Star Wars* film. This created a demand for character merchandise for the film leading to the sale of an estimated 300 million action figures between 1980 and 1983, more than had ever been sold before (Walsh 2005, 200). The sales generated by *Star Wars* lead film studios to increasingly favour action film protagonists who could inspire a similar demand for action figures, and superhero film adaptations have followed this trend. Following the release of *Spider-Man* in 2002, Spider-Man related toys sold an estimated US\$115 million worth of toys in a single weekend, and the market for superhero action figures was booming after film and television adaptations had “driven interest in superheroes through the roof” (*ToyFare* 2002, 49). Not only would film studios be incentivised to make film adaptations about characters who could generate action figure sales, but the toy industry itself would begin to develop their own adaptations in order to raise demand for their products.

To try and keep demand for their own action figures competitive, Hasbro, the manufacturers of GI Joe, turned to Marvel Comics in 1982 to create a comic book adaptation of the GI Joe toys, later adapted to an animated television series in 1983 (Clark 2007, 215–16). In fact, 1983 was the start of a number of action figure-driven adaptations because this was the year that a federal ruling overturned some restrictions that had previously been placed on using children’s television to market

products, which had included a 1969 law that had prohibited television series based on children's toys. The removal of this law meant that toy manufacturers were now able to produce weekly programming that functioned as 30 minutes of advertising at the right time and place to reach a large portion of their target audience (Bainbridge 2010, 836). The strategy of using adaptation first to comics, and then to television, led to an enormous increase in the demand for GI Joe action figures, with sales that had been at US\$51 million in 1982 increasing to US\$185 million in 1986 (Walsh 2005, 201).

In a similar move, rival toy maker Mattel, the manufacturer of Barbie, created the action figure line He-Man and the Masters of the Universe, employing the latest advancements in action figure interactivity, making the figures even more realistic, with synthetic hair, moving eyes and vocalisations, as well as incorporating a specific action move unique to each character. Mattel partnered with Filmation to produce an animated television series around the characters, and the marketing strategy led to an estimated US\$1.2 billion in sales over a 3-year period (Sweet and Wecker 2005). Not to be outdone, Hasbro decided to follow up their GI Joe success with *Transformers*, another animated television series designed to promote their newest range of toys in 1984, in which they again partnered with Marvel to produce characterisation, storylines and comic books for their franchise (Bainbridge 2010, 837).

Even though *Transformers* was successful enough for an animated film adaptation in 1986, and *Masters of the Universe* for a live action film adaptation in 1987, Marvel, who had first-hand experience in supporting other adaptations, struggled to find success in adapting their own properties to television. Action figures based on characters from film and television generally benefit from increased demand not only because of the marketing, but also because the character identities associated with these action figures allow children to more easily engage in narrative-based conflict between the characters (Klugman 1999; Blakemore and Centers 2005). When adaptations of Marvel's superhero comics would eventually be made, Marvel attempted to ensure that the characters featured in these would be appealing action figures in order to maximise their potential revenue (Lewald 2017). The success of those action figures would in turn influence which characters were most heavily promoted within the film adaptation of *X-Men* and other superhero films. This is consistent with what Burke argued in his analysis of superhero film adaptations, that

“the financial incentives offered by merchandise frequently dictates what sources are adapted and which films are made” (Burke 2015, 66).

7.2.3 Superheroes and the gendering of toys

Though Marvel had been involved in successfully adapting a number of toy-based properties, it wasn't until the *X-Men* franchise was adapted to an animated television series in 1992 that they achieved success in adapting their own properties. At the time when *X-Men: The Animated Series* was developed, “there were almost no *X-Men* toys” (Lewald 2017, 334–335). The creators of *X-Men: The Animated Series* wanted to make a character-driven drama rather than one based around promoting toys, and this put them in conflict with Marvel who sought to use the television adaptation to generate merchandising revenue (Lewald 2017). Marvel wanted to maximise the potential revenue to be gained from action figures, and because the action figures were targeted to boys, this led Marvel, and in particular their toy consultant, who at the time was Avi Arad, to protest against having female characters in heroic roles (Lewald 2017, 387). Eric Lewald, the showrunner for *The Animated Series* recalled that this was a concern which was commonly expressed on the 30 or so shows he'd been involved in producing. Toy makers frequently would question whether their toys would sell if they “put too many girls” in the show, and Lewald recalled that such questions could “torpedo a series” (Lewald 2017, 387).

Writer and producer Paul Dini, who has over 20 years of experience working on similar shows based on superhero characters from DC Comics, also recalled similar objections affecting the shows he had worked on. He argued that the *Young Justice* (2010–2013) series based on the DC Comics team of young superheroes was cancelled by Cartoon Network despite its popularity. Dini posits that the series had been cancelled because *Young Justice* had appealed to a more female audience, and executives did not think they would buy the action figure merchandise most typically associated with merchandise sales for comic book adaptations. Dini said that he had heard executives at places such as Cartoon Network make comments like “We do not want girls watching this show” because “Boys buy the little spinny tops, they buy the action figures, girls buy princesses, we're not selling princesses.” (Fatman on Batman 2015).

In contrast, Kathleen Kennedy, who produced films such as *Jurassic Park* (1993) and recent additions to the *Star Wars* franchise, argued that understanding the

potential to market merchandise to females was an aspect important in addressing the underrepresentation of female protagonists in film (Woerner 2015). Lewald recalled how lucky it had been on *X-Men: The Animated Series* that Fox Kids executives Loesch and Iwanter had taken responsibility for getting “screamed at by the guys in merchandising” over such issues, so the creative team behind the series could focus on creating stories driven by characters rather than merchandising (Lewald 2017, 387). He recalled how having female characters in heroic roles meant that “the toy people gave us crap about that because their point was it didn’t matter how powerful the women were, they still didn’t sell toys as well.”

Ultimately one of the advantages they had in being able to include a greater equality of female heroes in *X-Men: The Animated Series* was that their development of the show began much further ahead of the production of action figures relating to the cartoon, so by the time Avi Arad of Toy Biz had made a deal with Marvel to produce toys for the show, they had already produced the first season (Lewald 2017, 334–335). A dedicated line of *X-Men* toys designed by Avi Arad were released by Toy Biz in 1991, ahead of the release of *The Animated Series* in 1992 (Mallory 2011, 10), though Will Meugniot who was producer for *The Animated Series* recalled that these *X-Men* toys were “languishing on the shelves because kids didn’t know who they were.” Comics had shifted out of the mainstream, so while the *X-Men* franchise was popular with readers, it hadn’t made a dent on the larger cultural awareness of popular characters. Meugniot went to a Toys ‘R’ Us store “The night before the first episode aired... and the shelves were loaded with unsold *X-Men* stuff that was looking very shopworn.” After the premiere of the *X-Men* series, Meugniot went back the next day, “and the toys were gone. That’s when I knew we had a hit” (Lewald 2017, 274). After the success of the first season, they had fewer concerns from Marvel merchandisers because the incredible popularity of the first show had caused a boom of toy sales. After the release of *The Animated Series*, the Toy Biz line reportedly generated sales of more than US\$80 million by the end of 1992 (Mallory 2011, 10), and the first line of *X-Men* action figures Arad had designed reportedly generated more than US\$30 million in sales in 1993 (Lawson 1993).

However, while *X-Men: The Animated Series* had been able to focus more on female characters from the outset because of how few action figures had existed before the show, this would not be the case for the subsequent adaptation of the *X-Men* to film. Sales data now existed that compelled Marvel to focus on featuring

characters most likely to generate merchandising revenue; this became the primary focus of subsequent adaptations. Actual sales data for different action figures is not accessible, as “toy companies are tight-lipped about sales figures” (McEnroe 1994); however, the popularity of action figures based on different characters may be inferred by reviewing the range of action figure products listed in magazines aimed at toy collectors. Publications including *ToyFare*, *Lee’s Action Figure News & Toy Review*, and *Tomart’s Action Figure Digest* as well as price guides include detailed listings of different superhero action figures, with the intent of supporting collectors in understanding the value of their collectibles. Their comprehensive listing of toy products can also reveal how popular different characters were as well. It can be assumed that characters who inspired manufacturers to produce the widest array of toys were the characters that toy makers expected to be the most popular with purchasers, based on preceding sales data.

To understand more about which *X-Men* characters were most popular with toy buyers in the time before the film’s release, longitudinal analysis was performed on the *X-Men* toy products listed in different action figure price guides published in 1999, 2000 and 2002, in order to capture both which characters had been most popular as action figures before *X-Men* had been adapted to film, and reveal the characters most popular as action figures throughout the foundational trilogy of *X-Men* films. These guides include listings of *X-Men* action figures produced since Toy Biz first manufactured an *X-Men* figure in 1991. This analysis examined not only which characters were the most popular in toys, but also examined the overall gender demographics of the characters made into action figures. In some cases, characters were sold in pairs. In those cases, the first listed character’s gender has been used in order to ensure more accurate comparison with the quantitative analysis of gender in film, which has focused more on the protagonist than on supporting characters. Similarly, where accessories were sold alone, if they related to a specific character, the toy was classified as being inspired by that character and counted as belonging to the gender of that character, whereas if an accessory did not relate to a specific character, it would not be assigned a gender. For example, Wolverine’s Walmart Exclusive Mutant Cycle was classed as a toy inspired by Wolverine, and being a masculine toy, whereas the Mini Blackbird Jet, as it was a vehicle used by the entire *X-Men* team, was classed as an un-gendered toy.

A *ToyFare* price guide published in July 2000, the same month the first *X-Men* film was released, listed a range of 333 *X-Men* toy products released exclusively by

Toy Biz between 1990 and 2000. Price guides published by *ToyFare* magazine reflect data captured by contacting “hundreds of retailers throughout the country” in combination with field reports of sales price information at special events in order to create what they argued to be “the most accurate and up-to-date action figure price guide in the known universe” (*ToyFare* 2000b, 62). Of the 333 *X-Men* toys chronicled in this guide, 84.08% of toys (n=280) were masculine, 13.21% (n=44) were feminine, and 2.70% (n=9) were not associated with a specific gender. As the *X-Men* stories feature a diverse cast of characters, the toys displayed a similar range, with a total of 100 different named characters having toys based upon them. The majority of toys were based upon a much smaller cast of characters, however, with the ten characters who had the most toys based upon them accounting for almost half of all toys at 46.25% (n=154). Wolverine, who was said “to be the crown jewel of Toy Biz’s latest Marvel action figure line” to coincide with the film’s release (*ToyFare* 2000a, 2), was the *X-Men* character that inspired by far the most action figures and accessories, playing the starring role in 18.62% (n=62) of all *X-Men* figurines. This demographic breakdown remained largely consistent across the period of 1999 until 2002, before and after the release of the *X-Men* film (Figures 51–53).

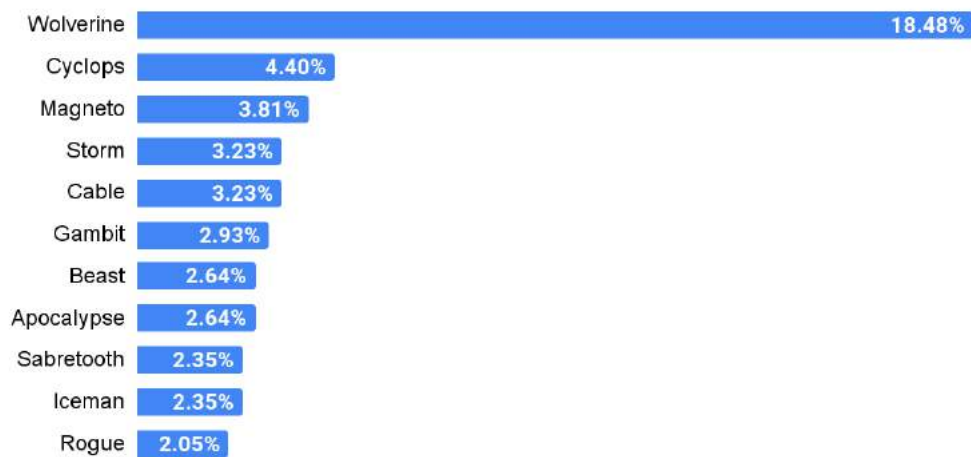


Figure 51: The most popular X-Men characters in toy production 1999 (*ToyFare* 1999, 98–100).

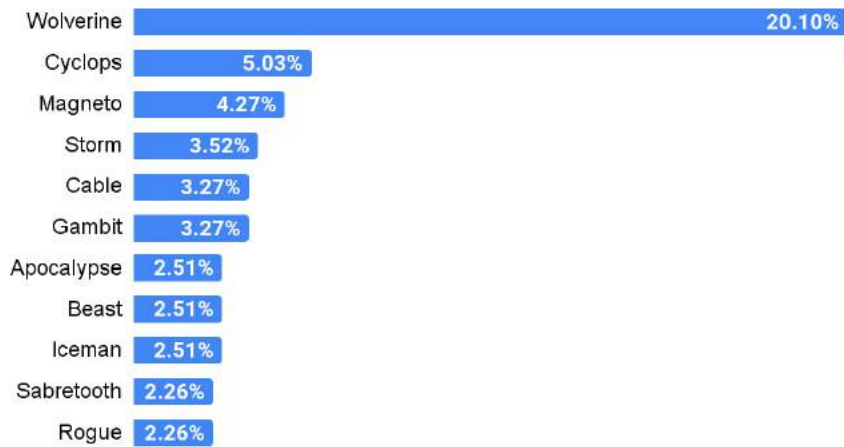


Figure 52: The most popular X-Men characters in toy production 2000 (*ToyFare* 2000b, 79–103).

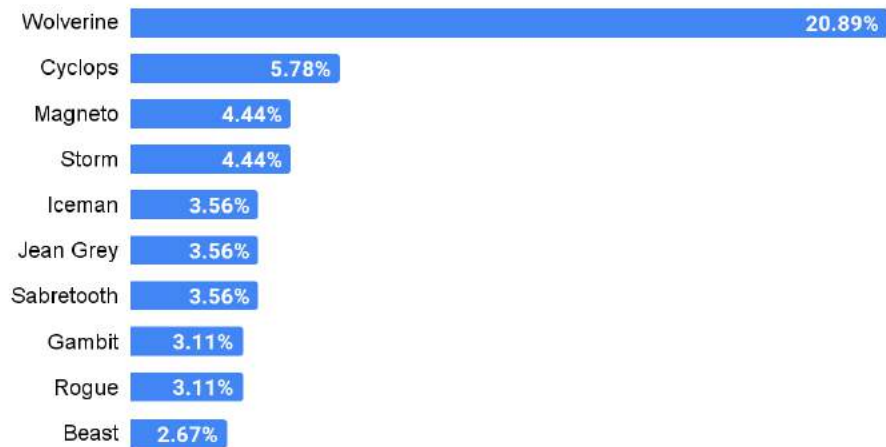


Figure 53: The most popular X-Men characters in toy production 2002 (*ToyFare* 2002, 82–97).

From the above figures, Wolverine’s popularity as an action figure is apparent; in 1999, 2000 and 2002 more action figures were based on him than any other *X-Men* character. Next in order of action figure popularity were Cyclops, Magneto and Storm, the characters who would be the central focus of the film marketing for the 2000 *X-Men* film. Relative to other *X-Men* characters, Storm has been the protagonist of fewer stories (Knight 2010, 288), and occupied more of a supporting role in *X-Men: The Animated Series* (Cocca 2016b, 141) in the stories of both the comics and the prior television series. Regardless, she was a central focus of the marketing efforts for the first *X-Men* film, as shown in a promotional poster (Figure 54) – the most likely explanation for this seems to be due to the popularity of her character as a toy.

Image has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 54: The characters promoted the most prominently in marketing the first *X-Men* film were those who had the strongest record in promoting toy sales, and these characters in turn were used to market action figures (ToyFare 2000b). The revenue to be gained from toy sales was what had inspired Marvel to pursue film adaptations of their comics, and was also an incentive for Fox, as the studio made getting a portion of the licensing revenue from merchandise sales a condition for producing the film.

Journalist Colim McEmroe investigated the gender divide of male and female action figures in 1994. He noted that the action figure industry had achieved sizeable

growth, with wholesale revenue increasing from US\$323 million to US\$464 million between 1992 and 1993. The success of series like *X-Men: The Animated Series* and fellow Fox Kids program *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* (1993–1995) had helped drive this demand for action figures (McEnroe 1994). McEnroe noted that “with a few noteworthy exceptions”, action figures were of male characters “and toy makers assumed they would be bought, in overwhelming numbers, by boys.” He noted that when action figures of female characters were produced, they were short-packed, meaning that they were produced and distributed in much smaller quantities than their male equivalents. The practice of short-packing female characters has been the norm for decades, and the tactic had been used on the female action figures produced after *X-Men: The Animated Series* began airing because, according to the marketing director of one toy company, “it would be a happy thing, under ordinary circumstances, for a strong female character in an action figure line to do one-tenth as well as well as a strong male character” (McEnroe 1994). McEnroe argued that no other action figure “so clearly” illustrated “the sharp gender schism” of action figures as the range of *X-Men* toys did, because while four of the eight lead characters on the show were female, when it came to producing action figures for the show, the female characters had been “almost completely ignored.”

The first batch of *X-Men* action figures was released in 1991 before *The Animated Series* premiered, and the only female character included in it was Storm. When this initial Storm figure proved less successful than her male counterparts, “the toy company Toy Biz, appeared to get cold feet about action figures, and no more were attempted” for some time (McEnroe 1994). While they weren’t making any further female *X-Men* action figures, however, the *X-Men* character most popular as an action figure, Wolverine, had been the subject of five separate action figures. This was based on the theory “that kids would rather have five different Wolverines” than even one figure of a female character like Rogue or Storm (McEnroe 1994).

It was only in 1994, after toy designer Ron McArdle had taken over from Avi Arad, that Toy Biz began to experiment with producing female *X-Men* action figures again. McArdle said that they would like to be able to produce more female action figures, even knowing they wouldn’t “do gangbusters like Wolverine” but that they would need to prove there was sufficient demand for them in order to “prove it to the higher-ups and the bean counters” first (McEnroe 1994). This is also reflective of the general trend of superhero film adaptations favouring characters that appeal to the

largest possible audience. At McArdle's urging, Toy Biz released a Storm action figure using the same mould as in the 1991 series, but repainted to match her animated appearance, as well as a Rogue figure (McEnroe 1994) and a Mystique figure in 1994 that had been repainted from the mould used for Rogue (Figure Realm n.d.).

Unlike other female X-Men, Storm's powers of weather limitation lend themselves particularly well towards making interactive action figures. In the first series of *X-Men* action figures, Storm was the only female character and she featured a "power glow" function that would cause a bolt of lightning to light up on her chest when a button on her back was pressed. This feature was retained in her 1994 repaint following the release of *The Animated Series*. The action figure of Jean Grey as Dark Phoenix featured a "fiery phoenix power" that would cause her hair and eyes to alight when a button was pressed on her own back, though this was a cosmetic change that did not directly imply action, unlike the "laser light eyes" of her male companion Cyclops who regularly blasted enemies away with his laser-vision. In contrast to the inaction of the Jean Grey figure, the figures of Storm and Rogue more implicitly conveyed action. In addition to Storm's power glow lighting up a bolt to indicate the initiation of her ability to manipulate weather, the figure of Rogue, blessed with super-strength, featured a "power uppercut punch!" This meant that Rogue and Storm featured interactive features more equivalent to the action oriented abilities of the male superheroes they were sold alongside, such as the Wolverine figure with "spring-out slashing claws!"

Storm has remained notable as being the most frequently interactive female *X-Men* action figure, and the female *X-Men* character most frequently presented as an action figure. She was the only female figure in the 1997 *X-Men Water Wars* range of toys that each featured "integrated and accessory-related action features" relating to water (Tomlinson 1997, 10) that were sure to thrill children. The "Weather Fury Storm with Water Spraying Thunder Cloud" featured a figure of Storm mounted in a commanding pose on an interactive base from which a child could send water shooting up towards her upraised arms, simulating her ability to control the weather, while also allowing for Storm to be removed and played with greater flexibility (Tomart's *Action Figure Digest* 1997, 25). As can be seen by reviewing the listings of action figures produced based upon *X-Men* characters (Figures 51–53), Storm was the fourth most popular character following Wolverine, Cyclops and Magneto.

These would ultimately be the *X-Men* characters who would be most heavily promoted on adaptation to film.

Marvel Comics chief editor noted that, because of the success of the Fox Kids adaptations of *X-Men: The Animated Series* and *Spider-Man* (1994–1998), and the resultant demand for and success of action figures based on Wolverine (Maslon and Kantor 2013, 286), Wolverine became one of the characters for whom Marvel, who had merged with Toy Biz in 1996 (Raviv 2002, 71–77), worked to solicit film adaptations. Ike Perlmutter, the chairman and CEO of Marvel, as well as being its largest shareholder, worked with Arad “to get into movie production to revive interest in the characters” (Garrahan 2009). Perlmutter “knew little about the company’s heritage and never read any of its titles. But he understood that the characters could sell action figures” (Garrahan 2009). Spider-Man and Wolverine were the characters Arad and Perlmutter first prioritised in promoting to film studios and licensing for film adaptation because of the popularity of their merchandise (Flanagan, McKenny and Livingstone 2016, 23–24). After being informed in a meeting with the publishing division that *X-Men* was the bestselling Marvel comic, Marvel Entertainment’s new CEO Scott Sassa began to focus on getting an *X-Men* film developed in order to generate merchandising revenue for Marvel, hoping that their action figures “would get the benefit of [US]\$40 million in free advertising” from the marketing associated with an *X-Men* film, along with generating interest in other merchandise such as licensed apparel and comic books (Raviv 2002, 56–57, 257).

In furtherance of this objective, Avi Arad moved out of his role developing Marvel merchandise, and instead became the president and chief executive officer of Marvel’s film division. Marvel initially sought to partner with a film studio that would allow them to retain all the revenue generated from merchandising, but no studio was willing to agree to produce a film adaptation of *X-Men* without netting a share of the merchandising revenue. Ultimately Arad worked with producer Lauren Schuler-Donner from Fox in 1993 to agree to a deal to adapt the *X-Men* to film in which Fox would be responsible for the cost of distribution and producing *X-Men* films, while Marvel would retain merchandising rights. Fox would pay Marvel a licensing fee, and receive a share of the merchandising revenue based on the *X-Men* characters (The Walt Disney Company 2017) meaning that Fox too had an incentive to produce an adaptation focused around the characters most likely to generate action figure income.

To coincide with the release of the first *X-Men* film, Toy Biz produced a range of 18 products (Busbee 2000, 26–32). Wolverine was the star attraction of five of these, including an action figure of him in civilian clothes in which the figurine's claws could be popped-out, ready for a fight. There was also a figure of Wolverine in his X-Men uniform accompanied by steel bindings such as Magneto had bound him with in the film, a two-pack playset in which Wolverine could find himself stuck to a magnetised sign by his antagonistic companion Magneto, and a two-pack playset of Wolverine set to battle Sabretooth, in which the figurines had animatable faces so they could go “from a calm face to a full-out snarl” of aggression at each other.

Additionally, a figure of the primary villain Magneto was available which came with a magnetic railroad tie that he could use to ensnare other figures. Supporting villain Sabretooth came with a security guard who would collapse when smacked, so the hulking Sabretooth could more easily “toss him around like a rag doll!” Another villain, Toad, featured a “leaping action bounce” that could propel the toy “high in the air” and to further engage players, the figure also came with an extending tongue, and a “slime trap” they could use to trap other figurines to walls. The Cyclops figure came with interchangeable eyepieces, sunglasses for casual wear, and the visor used to control the beams from his eyes that would “light up and shine” just like when he used his powers in the movie. Cyclops was also accompanied by “a Jean Grey accessory” who was stuck in Toad slime and needing to be rescued by Cyclops. The female supporting villain Mystique featured a “martial arts action feature,” mimicking her fighting abilities in the film, as well as a “skin” that could be slipped over her figure to mimic the mutant shapeshifting into Wolverine. Storm likewise featured interactive capabilities, with the figure being accompanied by a “lightning’ base” that Storm could be attached to, so that when a lever was pushed, her arm would raise up and point, while the sight of lightning and the sound of thunder would appear.

Differences in the kind of powers associated with male and female superheroes may partially explain why female superheroes are associated with action figures that are often less engaging than male alternatives. In reviewing female superheroes, Mike Madrid argued that while male superheroes often possessed powers that would see them fight villains in rough and tumble brawls, female superheroes were more likely to have “strike a pose and point’ powers” that allowed them to “keep their looks intact in the heat of battle” (Madrid 2009, 292). Screenwriter David Hayter, who worked on the first two *X-Men* films, indicated that one factor in favour

of Storm having a prominent role in the films was because “her powers are great” (Couch 2017b), but the powers of other female characters offered only limited interactivity as action figures.

In contrast to Storm and Mystique, the other female action figures were manufactured with a greater focus on appearance than on interactivity, unlike the male characters who had all demonstrated interactive actions. Despite having an ability to move objects with her mind, the figure of Jean Grey had no interactive abilities, though she was bizarrely accompanied by the accessory of supporting antagonist Senator Kelly, who was devolving as a result of being artificially mutated. The Rogue figure’s accessory of a cloth jacket was rather unremarkable by comparison, but again demonstrated a pattern of female figures being typically less interactive. In comparison, in the film, Rogue had likewise displayed externalised mutant abilities, such as when she had used her own abilities to temporarily leech the powers of other mutants in order to acquire Wolverine’s regenerative abilities and heal herself, or when she had absorbed the ability to manipulate metal from the antagonist Magneto.

The greater focus on appearance of the female *X-Men* characters was also manifested in these figures being presented in a far more sexualised manner than their male counterparts. While in the film, Jean Grey is clad in a leather body suit zipped to her clavicle, in her Toy Biz figurine, Grey’s fighting attire is unzipped much further down to the base of her sternum, exposing a substantial side view of her breasts. The figures of the female characters were so sexualised that a review of the range of figurines, published by *SFX* magazine, jokingly credited Vivid Entertainment, a studio responsible for manufacturing pornographic films, with producing the action figures (Haley 2000). Marketing for the female action figures emphasised how “super-sexy” (Young and Verglas 2000, 134–148) they were, with magazine advertising urging readers to “Enjoy a Four-Way Fling!” with the “super-sexy” Mystique, Jean Grey, Rogue and Storm (Another Universe 2000, 73). Such differences in female characters being presented with a focus on their desirable appearance, rather than on their actions, is associated not only with female superheroes generating less revenue through action figure sales, but also because this focus on feminine appearances also can place greater restrictions on which actresses are considered appealing enough to include in these films.

7.3 Cosmetics

7.3.1 Hollywood: the birthplace of the cosmetics industry

Since the early days of Hollywood, films have played a central role in raising demand for cosmetics. Film cameras unintentionally began “to highlight facial flaws” once close focus camera shots became commonplace after 1910 (Addison 2006, 14). Though actresses were early proponents of marketing cosmetics to the masses, starting in 1916 (Schweitzer 2005, 269) until the 1920s, “cosmetic products and practices were still questionable in the eyes of many Americans” (Peiss 2011, 105). Make-up advertising in magazines only started to become common in the late 1920s (Alexander 2015) and the trend of actresses endorsing cosmetics only really took off during the 1930s (Bakker 2001, 474). While actors of stage had long worn a greasepaint makeup rarely worn by ordinary women, once the technology of Technicolor film emerged, it necessitated the development of new cosmetics that could more naturally complement the beauty of film actors under both hot lights and high-fidelity film (Dootson 2016, 108). The Technicolor film brand directly approached hair and makeup artist Max Factor to develop a line of camera-friendly foundation makeup in 1935 (Dootson 2016, 111) that would be advertised in movie magazines aimed at a female readership (Peiss 2011, 101), using film stars to take advantage of “the glamorous image of the movies” (Peiss 2011, 126). Max Factor’s Hollywood makeup would subsequently be lauded as “the fastest and largest-selling single make-up item in the history of cosmetics” after going on sale to the general public at the end of the 1930s (Peiss 2011, 247; Dootson 2016, 108–124). Rival makeup artist Elizabeth Arden would likewise compete with Max Factor in manufacturing and marketing the makeup of Hollywood films to the masses (Dootson 2016; Morin 2005, 31). While Max Factor and Elizabeth Arden were the leaders, in the 20 years between 1909 and 1929, the number of American companies producing cosmetics almost doubled, while their commercial output increased by nearly ten-fold as cosmetics became a luxury more readily available to the middle class (Peiss 2011, 97).

To further grow the cosmetics industry, however, it would be necessary to first raise demand from consumers. Between 1915 and 1930 the advertising investment for promoting cosmetics in magazines rose substantially from US\$1.3 million to US\$16 million (Peiss 2011, 114). Where advertisers had once followed an approach of emphasising the benefits of specific products, as Hollywood films gained popularity, the cosmetics industry shifted to an advertising approach that instead

relied upon “psychological methods that preyed upon consumers fears and insecurities”, especially around ageing (Addison 2006, 3–5). The scrutiny of Hollywood cameras had been key to creating a need for improved cosmetic products, and so too would the attention of the camera on the Hollywood star be central to showing the need for these products to audiences.

By 1922, magazines aimed at women were promoting their “editorial cooperation” to the cosmetics industry, with columns dedicated to beauty advice becoming commonplace by the 1930 (Peiss 2011, 124). Cosmetics manufacturers and magazines had been in cooperation since the 1890s, though from the 1920s onwards they would be engaged in a “systematic collaboration to sell cosmetics” (Peiss 2011, 122) and by “the mid-1930s cosmetics ranked only second to food products in amount spent on advertising” (Eckert 1991, 35). Advertising expenditure provided ample incentive for magazine editors to cooperate with the cosmetics industry by creating discussions of cosmetics in the editorial content of the magazines that “presold” the audience on purchasing cosmetics because of how they served to “discuss products, stimulate wants, [and] prepare the market for brand-selling”, with paid advertisements for cosmetics being positioned next to editorial content that primed the reader for purchasing (Peiss 2011, 124).

This was the beginning of a well-established “cycle of influence” of using Hollywood actresses to encourage female magazine readers to purchase cosmetics. From the 1930s onwards, films would be accompanied by articles containing information about the cosmetics used by female film stars, with “beauty hints” for how readers could enhance their own appearance using products promoted in the magazines. Hollywood actresses were “potent endorsements” for cosmetic products because they “manifestly possessed the most ‘radiant’ and ‘scintillant’ eyes, teeth, complexions and hair” (Eckert 1991, 35). The studios benefited from this arrangement because it presented an opportunity to get “a motion picture title printed in the news media” (Herzog and Gaines 1991, 78) that the actress would be appearing in, without requiring marketing expenditure.

Magazines have a particularly close commercial relationship with the advertising industry (Gough-Yates 2003, 56) and, unlike many other forms of mass media, magazines are not constrained by any “industry standard on the maximum amount of advertising” (Ha and Litman 1997, 32). In magazines like *Cosmopolitan*, which regularly use Hollywood actresses to discuss appearance, advertisements have a dominant role in the composition of the magazine, with readers often having to

parse through 30 pages of adverts before even reaching the table of contents for editorial content (Depken II and Wilson 2004, S64). In the similarly appearance-focused *People* magazine, overt advertising typically makes up fully half of the content (Ha and Litman 1997, 41). The dominance of advertising is because such magazines make between 47% and three quarters of their revenue from advertisers rather than readers (Koschat and Putsis Jr. 2002, 262; Dewenter and Heimeshoff 2014; Magazine Publishers of America, Inc. 1993; Folio 400 1987). For a magazine such as *Cosmopolitan*, its publisher estimated that without the revenue from advertisers, to simply break even rather than making a loss on the magazine, the magazine's price would need to be more than doubled, with further multiplication of the cost necessary to actually make a profit in selling its magazine to readers (Winship 1987, 38), something which is common for popular magazines (Kaiser 2007).

Accordingly, these magazines are sold not simply only to women, but also to advertisers in order to attract their patronage (Winship 1987, 38). As such, the greater financial incentive to appeal to advertisers rather than readers can influence the content of the magazines. Magazines therefore cannot only be compelled to avoid undermining the messages of their advertisers (Richards and Murphy 1996, 26), but also to align their content with the interests of their advertisers, to the extent of editors conceiving a marketing idea that services advertisers and then creating editorial content that complements it (Winship 1987, 39). This is supported by findings that indicate that companies who support these magazines with their advertising have their brands featured with greater prominence within editorial content (Pannicke 2015, 23).

Cosmetic products made up the largest category of advertisements in magazines in which actresses typically appear (Pannicke 2015, 10–11; Publishers Information Bureau 2007, 1), which affects how actresses are marketed to audiences not only in superhero adaptations, but across film in general. This marketing of cosmetics “intensified gender distinctions” (Peiss 2011, 166) because the companies who advertise cosmetics to women in magazines “have an interest in maintaining some aspects of traditional gender roles to ensure continued markets for their products” (Alexander 2003, 536). Accordingly, magazines have served to popularise these gender stereotypes in order to support their advertisers (Friedan 1963). Given the reciprocal relationship between the articles published in magazines, and the products promoted within them, with magazines' editorial content serving to raise

desire for products by providing information and advice that complements the messages promoted by their advertisers (McCracken 1993, 43; Alexander 2003, 545–547). Indeed, publishers of women’s magazines have claimed that their publications are more effective at promoting products than other mediums by applying “selective pressure on the right consumer” (Gough-Yates 2003, 81). Others, however, have been more critical of such “selective pressure”, arguing that such magazines “demean women and solely benefit capitalist profits” (Winship 1987, xiii) because the readers of these magazines are primarily addressed as prospective consumers to whom the magazines can promote a range of commodities, including cosmetics, as essential to them (Baehr and Gray 1996, 90). Carey Winfrey, the managing editor of *People* magazine, said it was difficult to separate the interests of producing editorial content from the ambitions of their advertisers because magazine publishers are under pressure to appease the interests of their advertisers, even if it might go against the interests of their readers (Coyle 1998, 41). *People* magazine’s demographic of readers for their print edition claims a total average of nearly 37 million readers. The magazine appeals predominately to women, with 71% of their readers being female, compared with 29% of readers being male (MRI 2018).

While appearance-focused magazines for women have long been popular, magazines aiming to promote health and beauty products to a male audience only began to be popularised in the 1980s (Winship 1987, 153). The most popular of these magazines is *Men’s Health* which launched in 1987 (Alexander 2003, 540); however, these magazines “did not really take off until the 1990s” (Gauntlett 2008). While the introduction of these magazines coincided with “the creation of new markets for a consumer culture” (Tasker 1993, 79) around male appearance, beauty standards applied to men continue to have far less effect than those applied to women. In comparison to magazines aimed at women such as *People*, magazines that sell appearance-oriented products to male readers are far less widely read, and so their appearance-focused coverage of the celebrity is a far less dominant factor in influencing an actor’s overall perception with audiences. For example, while issues of *People* magazine, published weekly, had a print circulation of 1,434,000 copies per issue according to data from 2015 and 2016 (Caxton Magazines n.d.), in comparison, *Men’s Fitness*, which publishes only ten issues per year, has a circulation estimated at an average of approximately 667,000 copies sold per issue for a similar period from 2014 to 2016 (Statista Research Department 2017) which reflects a far narrower audience reach. According to these estimates of

average circulation, the annualised difference in circulation between *People* magazine and *Men's Fitness* is 74,568,000 against 6,670,000, meaning that *Men's Fitness* has a circulation of roughly 8.94% of *People* magazine, an indication it has only a fraction of the impact in commodifying male insecurity.

Cosmetics companies in particular have used coverage of actresses to promote “the idea that every woman could and should make herself beautiful, while underscoring the need to embrace certain beauty regimes to achieve the desired ‘look’” (Schweitzer 2005, 279). Magazine articles about Hollywood actresses and their beauty struggles provide an effective method for promoting the sale of cosmetics because “the idea of *sharing* aspects of a star’s image was central to the consumption of cosmetics by audiences who hoped to incorporate elements of a star’s identity within their own.” (Dootson 2016, 117). This association of “images of beauty” with female film stars “have given them little room to maneuver and negotiate” (Marshall 1997, 107), however, especially as they age. Greater focus on the appearance of actresses in order to promote cosmetics has the consequence of shortening their careers. In studying why there are even fewer protagonist roles for older women, while it has been argued that while “attractiveness, particularly to a male audience, may be one reason” (Lincoln and Allen 2004, 627), the perceived attractiveness of actresses to a female audience plays an important but under-examined role. There is a consistent presumption across media “that a female who shows signs of age cannot successfully endorse (and ultimately sell) a product – be it lingerie, cosmetics, or a feature film” (Bazzini et al. 1997, 541).

Since even the earliest days of Hollywood, actresses have reached the peak of their careers at a younger age than their male counterparts. Advice to would-be actresses in the 1920s indicated that “the camera favored women with youth and beauty, and dealt harshly with those who had begun to wither” (Addison 2006, 10). The harsher treatment of ageing actresses is evidenced in research on films released between 1915 and 1939, which revealed that while actors reached the apex of their popularity aged 30 to 34, the careers of actresses peaked between 24 and 29 years of age (Lehman 1941; Addison 2006, 7–8).

Such research at the time led to the question of whether the differences between the age of greatest popularity of male and female actors could be “due to the possible fact that women tend to age more rapidly than do men?” (Lehman 1941, 197). Such a question seems ridiculous at face value due to the reality of women possessing longer lifespans than men, but it does reveal an important

difference in perception about how women age as compared to men, which was not an isolated opinion. The introduction of formal audience research in filmmaking raised biases towards casting older actresses, by capturing the less-than-positive opinions held by the moviegoing public of older women (Ohmer 2006, 133). While the average age of acting talent increased as film stars became more established in 1941, the age disparity between males and females continued, with female stars being on average 6 to 10 years younger than their male counterparts in films released between 1920 and 2011 (Fleck and Hanssen 2016, 36). Subsequent research of films from 2007 to 2018 indicates that women continue to have shorter careers as film stars than male actors (Annenberg Inclusion Initiative 2019, 1).

The declining careers of ageing actresses should therefore be considered in relation to the greater scrutiny put on actresses by magazines evaluating “how well, or not, they age” (Feasey 2008). The visages of actresses are “regularly pored over” by the writers of such magazines who are “searching for evidence of ageing, surgical enhancement and cosmetic modification” (Fairclough 2012, 90). Such coverage in these magazines serves the interests of their advertisers, as fear of ageing can raise demand for cosmetics (Fairclough 2012, 90), but it also contributes to reducing audience demand for actresses as they age, because actresses must maintain positive press coverage in order to remain appealing to audiences.

7.3.2 Superheroines and cosmetics marketing

Expectations for women to wear cosmetics to enhance their attractiveness have been so widespread that they have affected both how female characters have been presented in superhero comics, as well as how the actresses within their film adaptations have been presented. The pressure placed on women to use cosmetics was even discussed within the *X-Men* comics, by writer Chris Claremont, showed how even a character such as Storm, who felt no innate desire to use cosmetics to alter her appearance, was nonetheless pressured to do so (Figure 55). While Claremont opposed such attitudes, he also recounted that he and artist David Cockrum had been pressured to portray their female superheroes in costumes that emphasised attractiveness, rather than practicality (Via, O’Connell and Groth 1979), in accordance with the stereotypical presumption that women exist to be looked at (Douglas 1994, 16–17).

Image has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 55: Even within the *X-Men* comics, cosmetics were presented, albeit critically, as a requisite part of femininity, as shown in this scene in which Dazzler, Psylocke and Rogue performed a makeover on an unenthusiastic Storm (Claremont and Silvestri 1989).

Just as this perception of women existing to be looked at influenced the superhero comics, actresses in superhero films have been extensively subjected to scrutiny of their appearance. When Alicia Silverstone, fresh from her popular role as the protagonist for the 1995 film *Clueless*, was cast in the role of Batgirl for the 1997 film *Batman & Robin*, her appearance was heavily criticised. A 1996 *Entertainment Weekly* article insinuated that she looked like a pig, claiming that at the Oscars a month before, “fashion critics thought she looked more Babe than babe” (Reemer 1996). In an interview with the film’s director Joel Schumacher, it was noted that while the character of Batgirl had been introduced to appeal to a younger, female audience, “the actress faced intense media scrutiny after being cast that her male co-stars never did” (Couch 2017a).

Such a focus on the bodies of actresses playing superheroes meant that Jennifer Garner, who played Elektra, the first female Marvel character to be the protagonist

of a film adaptation in 2005, already expected that media coverage about her role would revolve around her appearance. Garner said in an interview ahead of the film's that "I know that when Elektra comes out, there's going to be a whole wave of articles which are going to emphasize my looks" (Mirror UK 2005) and, as predicted, much of the coverage surrounding her heroic role as Elektra focused on her beauty. A review of the film for *The Washington Times* noted that in the film Garner "struts like an athlete, has abs of titanium" as well as boasting lips that made those of Angelina Jolie "look masculine by comparison" (The Washington Times 2005).

In terms of the *X-Men* franchise specifically, the frontrunning actresses have frequently been employed to promote cosmetics and, even outside of their official cosmetic marketing roles, their coverage in magazines has often centred around their appearance to promote a wider range of cosmetic products. Famke Janssen, who played Jean Grey in the early films, was hired to promote L'Oréal's Excellence Crème for hair care (Delacourt 2014), while Fan Bingbing who played Blink in *X-Men: Apocalypse* (2016) marketed L'Oréal's Color Riche lipstick (Fashion Gone Rogue n.d.). Anna Pacquin who played Rogue was a spokesmodel for OPI gel nail polish (Lynnpd 2012). Mystique actress Rebecca Romijn-Stamos modelled for various cosmetics companies and Jennifer Lawrence promoted Dior Perfume from 2012 onwards (Creeden 2018). Actress Halle Berry, who played Storm in the early film adaptation of the *X-Men* franchise, was a paid spokesperson for cosmetics company Revlon from 1996 until 2004, promoting products such as ColorStay™ lipstick (Chief Marketer Staff 2003).

However, this close association between Hollywood actresses and the promotion of cosmetics can mean their careers rise and fall on their ability to continue promoting the products. To sustain appeal to audiences, both male and female actors must continue to receive positive press coverage, yet this positive coverage for actresses is largely contingent on their appearance. On the cover of the May 2003 issue of *Glamour*, the actresses of Storm (Halle Berry), Mystique (Rebecca Romijn) and Jean Grey (Famke Janssen) sit together at the locus of contradictory slogans about the paramount importance of female beauty. This is a strategy where "under the guise of addressing our purported new confidence or self-love, these ads really reinforced how we [women] really failed to measure up to others" (Douglas 1994, 248). The cover claims that this issue of *Glamour* magazine (first published in 1939 as *Glamour of Hollywood*) is "Your Body-Love Issue!" which comes with a "Warning" because it "May Cause Extreme Confidence." (Figure 56).

Image has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 56: Coverage of the actresses within the *X-Men* film adaptations focused largely upon their appearance (*Glamour* 2003).

The “Special” body-love issue was alleged to contain “501 Body-Love Breakthroughs” but the body-love breakthroughs all, of course, still relate back to appearing attractive. Espoused breakthroughs to body-love include finding proper “Workouts”, presumably to create a body worth loving, and finding the right “Confidence Building Clothes.” The issue further promises to contain the “Sexiest Summer Hair & Makeup Ideas” and, as a final bonus, promises “Uncensored” commentary by men talking “About Women’s Bodies.” Amidst all this “Men 2 stars Halle, Rebecca, Famke” are said to have “Different womanly shapes” but the “same

amazing body confidence.” Regrettably, this greater focus on discussing actresses in terms of their appearance is associated coincides with actresses being considered to have less ability to interest audiences as film protagonists.

Casting star actors as central protagonists has become increasingly important to film production, as the popularity of these actors with audiences can reduce the likelihood of high budget films like superhero film adaptations failing to appeal to audiences (De Vany 2004, 75–98; Lubbers and Adams 2001; McDonald 2000, 5; Baker and Faulkner 1991). Audiences’ fondness for particular actors is cultivated by how these actors are portrayed in external media coverage, particularly through magazines, and the actors perceived to most reliably “bring the audience in” and help studios “hedge their bets” tend to be male actors (Dutka 1990).

In a 2019 interview, *X-Men* producer Lauren Schuler-Donner discussed her desire to produce adaptations led by female *X-Men* characters, such as Kitty Pryde and Illyana Rasputin, the two characters involved in the incipient events of the *God Loves, Man Kills* story discussed in the chapter *Certain victory*. Schuler-Donner recalled how “Years ago the thought at the studio was ‘You can’t have a female superhero,’” and recalled that, when questioning that assumption in light of the success of a female-led heroic film such as *Tomb Raider* (2001), the response that “you’d get every single time” would be “Well that was different, that was Angelina Jolie.” (Cobb 2019). The sentiment reported by Schuler-Donner is consistent with opinions expressed by others in the film industry, including producers who have expressed doubts that films led by female stars will earn enough money to recoup the production and marketing expenses (Bielby and Bielby, 1996), as well as a former studio head interviewed on the condition of anonymity, who argued that “It’s almost impossible for a female to ‘open’ a movie now. It just doesn’t work. People don’t come.” (Dutka 1990).

The acting career of Angelina Jolie represents an anomaly, as Jolie has managed to sustain a fairly lengthy career in contrast to “the relatively short-lived nature of female stardom within the action genre” (Gulam 2016, 279). It has been argued that Angelina Jolie’s comparatively lengthy and successful career as a female action protagonist is a consequence of her widely publicised humanitarian work which, it is claimed, has “been crucial in laying the foundations for a long film career” (Gulam 2016, 281–283). Rather than being dismissed as just a pretty face, Jolie’s philanthropy has led her public image to reflect a “‘strong’, ‘compassionate’ female stardom” (Gulam 2016, 287) that has created a public image of Jolie better able to

sustain her appeal to audiences throughout “her maturing years” (Gulam 2016, 287).

Such an argument is consistent with other analysis that claims that where celebrities receive publicity on their political and charity work, such coverage “deepens the character profile of the celebrity” as well as lending their public persona “possible connotations of depth, intelligence, and commitment” (Marshall 1997, 110). Doubtlessly these researchers raise good points about humanitarian work making actresses more likeable, and that likeability can lead to greater positive media coverage that can serve to raise demand for the films an actress appears in, therefore increasing their career opportunities. While it does not seem outside of the realm of possibilities that such positive humanitarian coverage could lend longevity to the career of a female film star, it is notable, however, that no research has yet demonstrated that a female film star can enjoy a long career without also retaining sufficient beauty as they age to promote the sale of cosmetics, and concerns about actresses needing to appeal youthful have been present throughout coverage of actresses within the *X-Men* films.

Another actress, Halle Berry, who played Storm in the *X-Men* films, has had a career that has been similarly extensive relative to other action film actresses, and she has frequently been mentioned in media coverage as an example of beauty in order to promote the sale of cosmetics. Halle Berry appeared on the cover of *People* magazine’s 2003 issue of the 50 most beautiful people, an issue which also included a promotional review for the release of *X2: X-Men United*, and a full-page tie-in advertisement for *X2* and Dr. Pepper. In a centrefold spread, the issue described the award-winning actress and most beautiful person of the year – pictured reclining in a figure baring black outfit – as “the star with the silk-pie skin and to-die-for body” (Tauber 2003, 73). The article evaluated Berry’s appearance in terms of how well she was ageing, noting that “Berry, 36” was “a former catalog model and Miss USA runner-up” who “seems to get more gorgeous with each passing year” (Tauber 2003, 73). Berry’s skin care routine is discussed, including product recommendations. To soften and smooth her skin, readers are told, Berry has her own paraffin wax system, but she uses “gobs” of Ole Henriksen sunscreen. The same issue includes advertisements for skin relief body wash (Tauber 2003, 15), instant bronzer that can help readers get their own skin a silk-pie shade (Tauber 2003, 23), wrinkle fighting eye cream (Tauber 2003, 81), Botox (Tauber

2003, 119), and airbrush make-up which “neutralizes imperfections” (Tauber 2003, 157).

A 20-year retrospective of Berry's hair styles (Tauber 2003, 74–75), is followed by Berry's endorsement of Bumble and Bumble styling wax, and Lottabody wrapping lotion (Tauber 2003, 77), which primes the readers to consider how they too may improve their hair, possibly involving advertised products such as a curl smoothing system (Tauber 2003, 10–11), detangling conditioner (Tauber 2003, 19), hair dye (Tauber 2003, 28–29), leave-in conditioner (Tauber 2003, 58), and deep conditioner (Tauber 2003, 98). Even as the article lauds her for being the most beautiful person, and having “one of the most out-of-this-world bodies in Hollywood” (Tauber 2003, 76), it also takes the opportunity to delve into Berry's own insecurities, discussing whether she intends to have plastic surgery done in a bid to improve her appearance further. In response, Berry described herself as “very imperfect but okay with my imperfections” but this response was further scrutinised with the question of what exactly Berry might like to change, to which Berry replied, “Where do I start? I would get a nose job” and “a boob lift.” These insecurities are accompanied by a sidebar containing information about the specific cosmetic products that Berry uses as part of her routine. Readers are able to learn that “Berry, a Revlon model, skips eye shadow but uses the company's extra-lengthening mascara, along with limited edition Berry Avenger lipstick.” (Tauber 2003, 77).

In 2008 Berry, aged 42, appeared on the cover of a *People* magazine special edition about being “Sexy Forever”, offering advice and product recommendations for female readers on “how to look & feel great at any age!” This is consistent with a strategy of using “the visibility of youthful older people in celebrity culture” as a tactic to encourage audiences to strive, with support from cosmetics, to maintain their own similarly youthful appearance (Fairclough 2012, 92). The first article of the special issue was about looking “Better Than Ever”, describing Angelina Jolie and Halle Berry as the most notable examples of actresses who looked “even more gorgeous today than a decade ago” (People Magazine 2008, 1). Berry was lauded in the article by Charla Krupp, the author of *How Not to Look Old* (2008), a *New York Times* bestselling book, with advice and product recommendations on how to “Look 10 Years Younger, 10 Pounds Lighter, 10 Times Better” in which Krupp promised that, amongst other things, her readers weren't going to celebrate their wrinkles because, as she said, “you've got to be kidding” (Krupp 2008). Krupp had nothing

but praise for Berry, who at 42 was still enjoying glowing skin and a great figure, lauding that the looks Berry had maintained in spite of her age were “a real achievement, because everything is working against us as we age” (*People Magazine* 2008, 4). The use of such inclusive language subtly drives home the implicit message that ageing is a problem that the concerned woman reading it must solve. Such solutions are easy to find, however, with targeted recommendations of cosmetics to use for women in their 20s, 30s, 40s and 50s (*People Magazine* 2008, 66–69) who are the primary readers of *People* magazine, and whose purchasing decisions will benefit the magazine’s advertisers. Berry has continued to receive positive coverage for how well she has been ageing so, while she may have relished “the chance to kick ageism in the face” when she appeared in the action film *John Wick 3: Parabellum*, aged 52 (News18 2020), her continued casting may not be reflective of overcoming ageism but rather of how little evidence of ageing is apparent in her appearance.

In contrast, even at the time in which Berry’s *X-Men* co-star Famke Janssen was appearing as a beauty icon on the cover of magazines, she was still expressing concerns about whether she would look young enough. Once the first *X-Men* film began shooting, a toy designer visited the film’s acting talent on set to refine the design of the action figure range that would accompany the film. Janssen was asked to provide feedback on the action figure of her character Jean Grey and its likeness of her, to which Janssen asked if they could make her action figure look “just a little bit younger?” (Young and Verglas 2000, 148). Janssen’s concerns were not apparently without reason. While her male co-stars would continue to have roles in later films, along with the youthful looking Halle Berry and the much younger actress Anna Pacquin who played Rogue, Janssen was given fewer opportunities to appear in later *X-Men* films as she aged. In a 2016 interview, Janssen revealed her frustration with this, saying that she felt that the decision by the producers to exclude her from later films was the result of specific prejudices against actresses as they aged (Ross 2016).

In a seeming attempt to overcome such prejudice, Janssen apparently underwent cosmetic procedures in the following years, for which she was sharply criticised. An article by tabloid magazine *The Daily Mail* published in 2019, titled “What has Famke Janssen done to her face? X Men star, 54, looks unrecognizable with wrinkle-free skin and plumped up cheeks” (DailyMail.com Reporter 2019) analysed and decried the efforts Janssen had undertaken to attain a more youthful

appearance. Ultimately, it appears that the commercial incentive to discuss actresses in terms of their appearance has here directly reinforced a barrier to female protagonists by cutting short the careers of many actresses. This hampers the ability of actresses to offer equal appeal to audiences as their male counterparts, as well as creating greater challenges to producing films with female characters in protagonist roles. By instead focusing positive press coverage on actresses who are young, or who are effectively maintaining their youthful appearances, magazines are able to serve the interests of the advertisers by encouraging readers to purchase cosmetics and other products relating to appearance. This is incentivised by the fact that magazines often make up the majority of their revenue from advertisers, rather than readers, whose advertising patronage often provides the majority of revenue for these magazines.

7.4 Conclusion

As this chapter has established, when it comes to producing superhero films, there is a far greater economic benefit to be achieved by selecting male protagonists. This is because the revenue to be gained from action figure sales has been a significant incentive for studios and publishers to create superhero film adaptations, and the action figure market has, in turn, shown a preference for producing merchandise for male characters. This preference for male characters in the marketing of action figures relates to male characters more often having action-related abilities which can be more easily adapted to interactive toys, and which are therefore more likely to be appealing and engaging to children. Where female characters have featured more interactive elements, like the character Storm, this has been associated with greater toy sales, and an accordingly higher profile in the marketing of the film. In most cases, however, female superhero characters were translated into action figures that demonstrated less of a focus on action and interactivity and more of a focus on passive appreciation of their appearance. By contrast to the economic benefits male protagonists experience with product marketing, females in film roles can be seen to have fewer advantages.

This association between females and appearance was strengthened by joint marketing efforts between Hollywood, magazines and the cosmetics industry that date back to the early days of Hollywood. Hollywood film studios have benefitted from this relationship, thanks to the free publicity to be gained from films being mentioned when their actresses are featured in these magazines. Similarly, the magazines have benefited from being able to use the glamour associated with

actresses to entice readers to buy magazines. This would, in turn, benefit the cosmetics industry whose advertising supported these magazines, as the combination of the glamour of these actresses, and the accompanying magazine content, would assist in creating a perceived need for their cosmetics.

The ultimate effect of this union between the film, magazine, cosmetic and toy industries is that female film stars are primarily evaluated in terms of their appearance. This focus on appearance consequently limits the ability of actresses to sustain their careers as they age, with the result that actresses tend to have shorter careers, hindering their ability to build an established appeal towards audiences. This difficulty in establishing an appeal to audiences further increases barriers to females being cast as protagonists in superhero films, as fewer actresses are able to draw in audiences as effectively as their male counterparts, who have longer careers in which to cultivate public appeal. Further, as males are generally more evaluated in terms of their actions, male superheroes also more likely to be selected for protagonist roles, as there is greater benefit to promoting males as central characters in order to generate demand for action figures.

8 Conclusion

8.1 Intentions

Previous research which has investigated the relative rarity of female superhero film protagonists has largely focused on female characters within superhero films being less likely to be selected for protagonist roles, or having their prominence within narratives reduced when these stories are adapted to film. The intent of this research was to go back to the root cause, and examine if differences in how male and female superheroes were presented in the original comics created greater challenges to female superheroes being adapted to film roles with equivalent commercial success as their male counterparts. This research found significant differences between how male and female characters were characterised in the source material for superhero film adaptations. These differences mean that when it comes to adapting superheroes to film, male characters can be translated to commercially successful films with characterisation that is broadly consistent with their comic book portrayal. By contrast, female superheroes are more likely to possess characteristics that would necessitate greater revision of their comic book characterisation in order to facilitate their commercially successful adaptation to film. Needing to alter how characters are portrayed between superhero comics and film can limit the potential to maximise potential revenue across the narratives in which they appear as the revenue superheroes can generate is maximised when there is consistency in how these characters are presented across mediums (D. Johnson 2007).

The adaptation of the *X-Men* franchise was chosen as a case study in order to investigate why fewer female characters had been adapted to protagonist roles in superhero films as not only does it provide the opportunity to compare the presentation of a range of male and female characters within the same series, but it also shares many similarities with other superhero stories because the *X-Men* comic was originally created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, who were involved in creating many other superhero characters which have also been adapted to film, that make the findings of this research more generalisable. Their creations include the Fantastic Four, the Avengers, the Hulk, Iron Man, Spider-Man, Daredevil, Doctor Strange, Black Panther, the Inhumans, Ant-Man, and an assortment of others. The adaptation of *X-Men* to film was also closely related to the adaptation of a number of other superhero film series including the *Superman* films and those in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. A number of these superheroes have been

discussed as part of the analysis of the challenges associated with adapting female *X-Men* characters to film. This has made it possible to draw comparisons to how the same issues have presented similar difficulties to adapting other female superheroes to film protagonist roles.

8.2 Key findings

This research has identified that there were a number of differences between how male and female characters were presented within the original comics with follow-on implications for the commercial viability of male and female superheroes as potential film protagonists. The first of these has been that masculinity has been associated with science, while femininity has been traditionally associated with magic. This stereotype had a major impact on the construction of superhero characters, with a very large number of male superheroes being presented as scientists, while female superheroes were more likely to be portrayed as witches. This disparity has also meant that when it came to selecting protagonists for superhero film adaptations, it has been easier to produce commercially successful film adaptations about male characters. Given how expensive superhero films are to produce, it is necessary that they appeal to both children and adults in order to maximise ticket and merchandising sales, as without appealing to an adult audience, cinemas would be unable to maximise their revenue with evening sessions (Radulovic 2019). It has been challenging to make superhero movies appealing to adults because superhero stories in general include a range of unrealistic elements that need to have plausible explanations in order for sceptical adults to find these films believable enough to enjoy. This has generally been accomplished by foregrounding characters whose superpowers can be explained with a scientific justification and, because of the masculine associations of science, male characters have consequently more often been easily suited to appealing to these sceptical audiences than female characters. An effective strategy for supporting the suspension of disbelief, has been to select adaptation protagonists who will outwardly express the same kind of scepticism audiences may feel at the bizarreness of some integral aspects of these stories. It has been argued that this role has therefore been better suited to male protagonists such as Wolverine and Tony Stark because scepticism is closely associated with a stereotypically masculine predilection towards scientific enquiry, as well as greater social permissiveness for males to engage in verbal conflict. By contrast, as female characters have been more likely to have powers based in magic, their superpowers

have posed a greater challenge to supporting the suspension of disbelief necessary for adults to enjoy.

In addition to the challenges of adapting superhero narratives to appeal to a broader audience than the comics, superhero film adaptations have also been difficult to successfully produce because of differences between comic books and films as narrative mediums. One major difference is that comic books have allowed audiences to directly access and interpret the inner conflicts of characters through devices such as thought bubbles and narration boxes. Conversely, in film, in order to not potentially disrupt the immersion of audiences it is generally necessary for inner conflict to be externalised through the interactions of the protagonist with other characters. This disparity between comic books and film as narrative mediums has favoured the selection of male characters because, while male characters are presented as openly expressive of conflicting moral impulses of aggressiveness and protectiveness, female characters were less likely to externally present such conflict. Aggression is an emotion typically considered inappropriate for females to express according to the standards of femininity and so, where female characters expressed aggression, they were more likely than their male counterparts to outwardly conceal this emotion, and for it to only be revealed to the audience through thought bubbles. This has made female superheroes more challenging to portray as dramatically engaging film protagonists.

However, this is not the only way in which the expression of emotions considered appropriate for males and females to express has created a benefit for male superheroes as film protagonists. While males are typically given greater latitude to express aggression within the constraints of masculinity, in contrast, fear is considered a less appropriate emotion for male expression. This encourages males to present themselves as confident and invulnerable, and this stereotype was evident within superhero comics. Male superheroes were less likely to display signs of fear than female superheroes, and this has benefited the selection of male protagonists. Where an expression of open fear would encourage an audience to feel more uncertain and afraid, and result in a rating that would restrict the ability of the film to be marketed towards children, the bravado more commonly displayed by male superheroes lessens the uncertainty of the hero's survival, and results in these films being considered, in spite of their violence, appropriate for children to enjoy.

Additionally, the need to moderate the suspense audiences experience during potentially horrifying scenes has impacted how characters are presented on screen.

A common way for films to alleviate the tension is through distracting the audience with a certain amount of sexual arousal. These films are aimed at adolescents and adults, and when an audience is processing arousing imagery, their startle responses to violent content lessens (Jansen and Frijda 1994). Therefore in film, where fight scenes can be rendered in such alarming detail, presenting the characters who are engaged in perilous conflict in states of partial nudity can reduce the extent to which audiences are startled by the violent or terrifying intensity of such scenes. This has affected how characters such as Mystique and Wolverine were adapted to screen, as both characters were presented for the sexual interest of audiences while being central to scenes of suspense and horror.

By adopting strategies to reduce the suspense audiences experience, superhero films are able to appeal to a broad audience including both children and adults. As entertainment consumed by such large audiences, superhero film adaptations can also serve as an effective vehicle for promoting products to a broad audience. The opportunity to sell toys based on the characters of films appealing to children was the primary incentive motivating Marvel and film studios to pursue a film adaptation not only of the *X-Men* series, but also for superhero films in general. While superhero films are marketed to a large and diverse audience, the licensed merchandise such adaptations were intended to promote, however, was aimed at a narrower audience which was profitable enough to be nonetheless influential on the selection of characters promoted in these films. Action figures have been marketed almost exclusively to boys, and action figures based on female superhero characters have only generated a fraction of the revenue of male superheroes in the action figure market. This created an incentive to focus stories around male characters who previous action figure sales indicated would have the best potential to generate merchandising revenue from a film adaptation.

In comparison, products designed for a female audience have been largely detrimental to the selection of female protagonists. While actresses have been used to raise demand for products, such product placement has largely occurred extra-textually, through celebrity magazines, and this pairing between actresses and products has therefore disincentivised putting actresses in leading roles. This is because the type of media coverage actors are subjected to differs according to their gender. The most popular media narratives sold to potential audiences are celebrity magazines targeted at a predominately female audience because these magazines are supported by advertising revenue for beauty products aimed at that

audience. This sales incentive shapes the narratives about female film stars by principally evaluating actresses in terms of their appearance, as this discussion increases the efficacy of beauty product advertising that supports the production of the magazine. Such discussion, unfortunately, is also associated with actresses having shorter careers than their male co-stars due to visual signs of ageing in actresses being considered incompatible with the intentions of cosmetic companies. By contrast, male characters have offered more earning opportunities because male actors are considered more marketable to audiences in part because of their longer careers, and male characters also offer the option to earn additional income through sales of action figures.

Overall, this research has found that there are many ways in which differences between male and female characters associated with gender stereotypes have led to male superheroes being considered easier to adapt to commercially successful films. While this research has identified a significant number of challenges in producing successful adaptations based on female superhero characters, there are still opportunities to learn more about factors affecting the commercial success of film protagonists.

8.3 Limitations and further directions

As identified by this research, a number of factors associated with female superheroes have made them more challenging to adapt to film protagonist roles than their male counterparts. Representations of gender are now “more complex, and less stereotyped, than in the past” (Gauntlett 2008). While most of the early *X-Men* characters created by Lee, Kirby and their contemporaries show a clear demarcation between the masculinity of science against the femininity of magic that reflects the eras in which these writers were raised – with Stan Lee having been born in 1922 (Tunbridge 2000, 28) and Jack Kirby having being born in 1917 (Hatfield 2012) – such gender-stereotyped portrayals were something that later writers of the series would critique. Roy Thomas, born in 1940, who picked up writing the *X-Men* comic after Lee and Kirby’s run ended, said that all of the early female characters written by Stan Lee had been characterised as being “just the way of people who grew up in Stan’s generation” perceived women (Sanderson 1982a, 41). Thomas noted that such attitudes had also existed “to a large extent” within his own generation but, speaking about this in a 1981 interview, he noted that these views about women were getting to be less of a problem over time (Sanderson 1982a, 41). Dave Cockrum, who was born in 1943 and worked on the

X-Men comic after Thomas, agreed that Stan Lee's female characters were reflective of the attitudes of gender of Lee's generation, but that these perceptions of women were changing over time (Sanderson 1982a, 65).

The works of later creators shows the shift in gender attitude over time; both Thomas and Cockrum were credited as having made more egalitarian representations of female characters than Lee (Sanderson 1982a, 41; Sanderson 1982a, 65), and such attitudes were further advanced by Chris Claremont, who was born in 1950 (Booy 2018), approximately 30 years after Lee and Kirby. Claremont believed in a greater gender equality than his predecessors, mirroring his own lived experiences as the women with whom he was raised now occupied more equal positions within society. Claremont recalled how his attitude to writing female characters had been informed by the counter-stereotypical behaviours of the women in his life who tended to be "very strong, or self-reliant", including his mother who had served as a member of the Women's Royal Air Force during the second world war and was strafed by enemy on a number of occasions. Since he had grown up influenced by less restrictive ideas about femininity, he had decided to make a conscious effort to include more female characters in leading roles because he recalled "looking around and seeing how few people *were* portraying heroic rational sensible women in books and comics" (Sanderson 1982b, 22–23).

This research has purposefully focused on considering the challenges of adapting superhero comics to theatrically released films. Another point worth considering in the future of superhero films was raised by Liam Burke in his 2015 book about superhero film adaptations. In his analysis of the overall film genre, Burke posited that film genres underwent periods of growth and decline similar to the growth cycle of bacteria (Burke 2015, 106–115). While the idea of comparing cohorts of films to colonies of bacteria might seem preposterous, Buchanan notes that growth of production within film genres, like bacteria colonies, often experience a rapid growth in population before increasing competition can lead to decline or result in audiences losing interest out of "superhero fatigue" (Buchanan 2018). As Eileen Meehan noted, generally speaking, "it is in the interest of film producers to control the number of releases per year, artificially decreasing the number of films available in order to decrease competition between films" (Meehan 1991, 59). However, this typical restraint of competition has fallen by the wayside as film studios have released increasingly more superhero films, which must compete for the attention of audiences.

As economist Michael Porter argued in 1979, the competitive threat posed by the increasing availability of substitute products tends to lead to greater innovation in order to differentiate the products companies offer (M. Porter 1979). Consequently, while male characters dominated the films in the Marvel Cinematic Universe across the 13 films released in the 2008 to 2015 period, female characters have occupied increasingly heroic roles in more recent instalments (Binns 2016, 50). The Marvel Cinematic Universe has been releasing three superhero films per year, and producer Kevin Feige has argued that, as long as they kept producing differentiated superhero films, their superhero films would continue to be enjoyed by audiences, saying that “if they’re all different, if they’re all special, nobody will get tired of these things.” He cited examples of their more innovative films including *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017), *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017), *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014) and *Black Panther* (2018) (Buchanan 2018) as examples of how different types of protagonists and ways to tell superhero stories had kept audiences interested. Journalist Meredith Woerner, writing about the 2017 film *Wonder Woman* for the *Los Angeles Times*, argued that the film had likewise revitalised the superhero film genre. Woerner described her experience with watching previous superhero movies as having seen “three movies of Iron Man punching bad guys in the face, three more movies of Captain America punching bad guys in the face” and “a movie about Superman and Batman punching each other in the face.” Compared to those previous superhero films, Woerner argued that the *Wonder Woman* film “blew open an arguably monotonous genre” because it showed female characters in heroic roles in a manner that had been missing from her earlier experience with superhero films (Woerner 2017).

Similarly, when the first *X-Men* film to be led by a female character, *Dark Phoenix*, was released in 2019, it was after producer Lauren Schuler-Donner said, in 2017, that the franchise would need to explore other stories. This followed on from the character Wolverine being written out of the franchise along with actor Hugh Jackman in the film *Logan*, released in the same year, and after having already explored the conflict between Professor X and Magneto so thoroughly that Schuler-Donner felt it would be necessary to explore other dynamics (Robinson 2017). One limitation of this research is that it has been limited to assessing female superheroes in terms of the challenges they present because of their differences. However, if one considers that competition from the glut of superhero films being produced can necessitate greater innovation in order to prevent audiences from losing interest in the genre, then that need to increasingly differentiate may

incentivise produce of female superhero film adaptations in spite of their challenges. Indeed, that need to prevent the genre from stagnating may have already been a factor supporting the recent production of female superhero-led films such as *Wonder Woman* (2017), *Captain Marvel* (2019), *Dark Phoenix* (2019) and *Birds of Prey* (2020), which have introduced greater recent diversity after decades of superhero film protagonists being predictably male.

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