The Research on the Gender Stereotype Elimination of Women Figures in Superhero Movies

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Abstract. This research is about the gender stereotype elimination in female film characters, the paper is mainly focus on those women characters in superhero movies. This type of movie is originally created from American comics then started to being played in the cinema years after. The paper mainly researches on audience's impressions on female superhero movie characters and their feelings after watching those type of movies, whether being encouraged or impressed. This paper is using methods of questionnaires to collect the data from audiences in China from Wechat and Weibo about their impression of view after watching movies and their opinions on those type of female characters. The key results this research found is that this type of movies become increasing popular among the audiences, and majority of the audience will have a better impression of female characters and willing to help as much as possible raising female sautés in society. To conclude, the new evolution of female superhero characters in the film industry has affected audiences around the world. By maintaining these innovative and new looks in film, fewer people will suffer from the pressure of stereotyping. There will be less discrimination and greater awareness of gender equality and women's rights.

Keywords: Female; Gender Stereotype; Superhero movies.

1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the 20th century, the American film industry, known as Hollywood, has created a large number of classic films and exerted a great influence on the global film industry. It is considered to be the earliest film industry as it was the place where the first film studios and production companies appeared even though now Hollywood has already been seen as synonymous with trends and fashions. It has been one of the dominant forces in the emerging industry throughout the century and till now Hollywood's major film studios are the world's most successful major sources of commercial films due to novel sensitivities and audience interest. In addition, many Hollywood films make more money outside the US than elsewhere. In the 21st century, American studios collectively produce hundreds of films each year, making the United States one of the most prolific filmmakers in the world.

Meanwhile, superhero comics gained in popularity in the late 1980s due to the sensitivity of people's tastes. Almost immediately after the rising trend of superheroes in comic books before 1978, they were adapted into Saturday animations aimed at children. However, In the following decades, the decline of Saturday serials and turmoil in the comic book industry put an end to superhero motion pictures. But with the success of Richard Donner's "Superman" (1978) and "Star Wars", which was DC's first big-budget feature film, a new interest in fantasy and science fiction films was spreading among the audience. The rising popularity of this genre made Hollywood began to think about making more comic-book superhero movies, combining comic-book characters with action movies to form a new movie genre, the superhero movie. Superhero movies drew so many people into theaters that ticket sales peaked at an estimated $329.73 million in the U.S. and Canada in 2018. In December 2018, Warner Bros released Aquaman, a film about the DC Comics superhero of the same name, which became DCEU's most successful film, grossing $1.148 billion at the global box office. Superhero movies have also received many awards and nominations. For example, The Batman

sequel, "The Dark Knight" (2008), was nominated for eight Academy Awards, including two for sound editing and supporting actor for "The Joker," starring Heath Ledger.

However, these superhero movies rarely feature any major female characters. In those action movies, most women just play a foil role. They are just the girlfriend or wife of these superheroes or some minor character. They were always saved by the powerful man. Like Lois Lane in the Superman series. Even in other types of Hollywood movies, women are underrepresented and stuck in gender stereotype. In 2018, women made up just 36 percent of leading acting roles, and the New York Times said only 15 percent of the top movies of 2013 featured female leads. But with the rising popularity of feminism, more and more people became feminists and wanted to eliminate gender stereotypes, a new wave of female-centric movies emerged, and more and more female superheroes gradually moved from comics to movies, winning countless praise from audiences. Not only are there more female superhero movies like Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel, but superhero movies are also seeing a shift in classic female characters. For example, Mary Jane in the Spider-Man series went from being a stereotypical character to a more independent and helpful character. As the image of female characters in superhero movies switches on and off, this research paper will investigate how much those switches affect audiences and what it contributes to feminism with literature review and methods of questionnaire.

2. Literature Review

Johnston raised a term called counter cinema, that is the relationship between ideology and filmmaking with its tools and techniques is “an expression of the prevailing ideology”, thus, never neutral [1]. Furthermore, Covey argued that film is an "ideological practice" that is thought to produce "ideological effects" that are reinforced by the author as definitions are created in the film [2]. Smith, Choueiti and Pieper found that only about one-fifths of the speaking characters were women in popular action genre from 11 countries and women are more likely than men to be shown in sexy outfits [3]. Some of the characters use their sex attractiveness to obtain information from male characters as well as distract the male opponents [4]. One reason of this may be the theory of ‘the male gaze’ by Laura Mulvey [5], which is an overwhelming and influential concept in feminist film theory. Mulvey argued that women signify the male desire, bearing the look of the male viewer [6] and another scholar, Kaplan said that screen images of women are sexualized regardless of what the women literally do or what kind of plot may be involved [7]. Apart from these, women are usually seemed like objects [4]. Stoltzfus claimed that women are presented as expendable, people who can be held captive, tortured, and killed without serious consequences [8]. However, through films or other mediums like documentaries, producers can still show and start discussions on current events and social issues and for women, this can be a platform to deal with women issues which means women can try to tear down the label of women in society and further challenge the stereotype of women [1]. Noticeably, Kinnunen found that there has been an evolution in the way the female characters are represented through the analysis part in the essay about five distinct female characters regarding the damsel in distress stereotype in more recent films [8]. Hendricks proposed that they are not necessarily portrayed as damsels in need of saving in the same capacity anymore, and instead they are given opportunities to save themselves and others [9].

Emily, focused on the contrast between the portrayal of female characters in superhero movies released in the past and the latest ones, found out that, most of the previous images of women were not excel in science and technology; this phenomenon is called "Underrepresentation of women in science and higher education employment," like Lois Lane in Superman Returns in 2006 and Pepper Potts in Iron Man in 2008 [10]. Although one of them is a reporter who worked years in Daily planet but nothing in the movie depicted her involved in any technological work and warfare intelligence. However, the portrayal of women's roles in superhero films released over the past decade has not only broken-down stereotypes regarding the low participation of women in the fields of science and technology, but they also show their ability to play essential roles in many other areas. More female

characters were no longer playing supporting roles but also showing their leadership capabilities and dominance. Their knowledge and abilities have impacts on other male roles. Emily also discusses the changes in gender representation over the past decade to meet the needs of society [10]. Over the past decade, changes in gender representation have shifted from the need to rebuild national confidence and demonstrate American exceptionalism through the introduction of more female superhero roles and the breaking of traditional stereotypes of women to address society's perceptions and expectations of gender equality and representation [10]. To meet the needs and demands of society for the recognition of gender equality and gender stereotypes, the film industry has undergone major changes in the past decade, changing the gender representation of female superhero roles. Female characters are no longer portrayed as mere victims or romantic characters. Therefore, by breaking down all kinds of stereotypes, Emily concluded that more and more new female characters will lead the world into a place with less prejudice, less sexism, but more gender equality and more awareness of feminism [10].

These papers all mainly talk about the current situation of female characters in superhero movies and their possible causes, however, few scholars' study whether the evolution of women figures in superhero movies eliminates gender stereotype and contributes to feminism, while this is rather important as a vehicle that can liberate women and achieve gender equality to some extent, it is necessary to understand its true impact. This paper is going to discover the effects of female characters towards young female audience after watching evolved superhero movies of through data collected from questionnaire and interviews.

3. Methodology

Questionnaires were sent to WeChat and Weibo, the two large social media platforms in China. The distribution period was 2 days, and 104 questionnaires were collected. The first section of the survey, using matrix slider that full mark is 10, asked participants to grade the general impressions in different dimensions of female characters from superhero movies which includes the IQ of the female characters, degree of independence, ability, combat effectiveness, degree of rationality before and after watching the film. The second section of the questionnaire was about the inspiration from female characters. Firstly, there was a single choice question for participants to choose whether they are inspired by the female characters after watching the movie. If yes, two sets of matrix scale questions (strongly agree to strongly disagree) asked participants to indicate their personal inspirations. The first one was about the primary stimulation included "Will you think of the female characters in superhero movies when facing difficulties to encourage yourself?", "Do you want to learn from the positive qualities of characters?" and "Have you dispelled stereotypes about female characters?" Furthermore, the other set of matrix scale question was deeper that was about feminism such as asking the extent of aroused awareness of gender equality and women rights, as well as the degree of willingness to take part in campaigns promoting gender equality and women's rights, also whether is eager to pursue a career that breaks stereotypes in the future after watching the film. If the respondent was not inspired, there was a multiple-choice question about the reason of not being inspired, for example, when talking about the production of the whole film through different aspects, the characters themselves may not be likeable, or may always act as a foil to the male character, furthermore, may be too mediocre and have rather small improvements. Still, there is an option for choosing that is said the film itself is not pleasant. The participants could also tick "others" box and state specific reasons. Participants were asked to indicate their sex and age, also superhero movies they have seen and admired female characters in these movies.

4. Results

By using methods of questionnaire, the questionnaires received a total of 104 responses within two days. There were 24 male and 80 female participants. So, the male respondents only took 23.3% of

the total. For the second question the participants were divided into eight age groups, and nearly half of the respondents were teenagers from 14-18 years old, with people in the age between 19 and 25 becoming the second largest group of people for about 26.21% of the total. For other 6 age groups there were no one above 10% with no participants above age 60. For the third question, the movie that most participants watched before is The Amazing Spider-Man, taking 69.9% of the total, followed by Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel, with Man of Steel the least. There were also 23.3% of participants chose other superhero movies. Then, the questionnaire asked the participants to give their general impression of female characters in superhero movies before and after watching women-centric superhero movies, then making a comparison, the results showed that people generally have a better impression of female characters and believe they are showing much more qualities than before. The questionnaire divided female superhero character qualities into five dimensions——IQ, Independence, Ability, Combat effectiveness and Degree of rationality. All five of them showed an increasing trend by comparing people's opinion before and after watching the movie with combat effectiveness becoming the quality that make audiences improves their opinion most. The next question asked the participants which female characters in superhero movie series impressed people most. Just as the results shown that Wonder Woman——Diana Prince taken more than half of the total, followed by Captain Marvel——Carol and Gwen Stacy, and only 7.77% of respondents chose Lois Lane in Superman Series. There were also 10.68% of participants chose other characters. Finally, the participants were asked about whether they'd been inspired by those female superhero characters, the majority of respondents chose Yes and for about 12.6% of participants said No. For those chose Yes, the questionnaire started to collect further datas about their opinions on after watching those movies, will they thinking of them and encourage yourself when facing difficulties, learn positive qualities from them and dispel stereotypes of female characters. For those three questions, the majority of respondents chose agree and strongly agree, there are very few participants choose strongly disagree and with 0 percent of strongly disagreement when the question comes to learning qualities. The result became nearly the same when the authors switch the question to how the movies impact them in their real life, with all these three questions shown on the slide, majority of people chose agree and strongly agree. For those participants who chose No. The questionnaire collected the further information of them like reasons of not being inspired by those female characters in superhero movies, nearly half of the respondents chose they still think the female characters are always acting as a foil of the male character for about 40%, followed by 29.4% of people think it is because the character image is too mediocre, can hardly change any impression. 11.8% of respondents think the characters are not likable, with last 17 percent of participants chose other reasons.

5. Discussion

According to the questionnaire results, it indicates that majority of audiences after watching women-centric superhero movies will have a different impression of female characters as it used to be. The questionnaire shows that people generally gave higher estimation on female characters' abilities, independence, IQ, degree of rationality…etc. These results may show that it is because of the wave of gender equality all around the world which leads to a revolution of movie industry. More and more film directors start to use more eye-catching topics as the central idea of their works. So, loads of women-centric film appeared as well as women superhero movies. They gave those women characters very strong and identical personality, with ability to fight, to be the scientist or to immerse in the technology which are characteristics that used to be nearly impossible to set on a woman. Those innovation cater to the audience taste and receive lots of good reputation and returns. But most importantly, it makes people think right. Women can achieve the same if men can do.

It brings lots of benefits if audiences have a better impression of female characters. It raises people's awareness of gender equality, especially for women, the empathy between characters and female audiences are huge, those films will make female audiences think deeply about their status in

the society and raise their awareness to fight for their rights. It may end some discrimination against women in both life and work…

Indicated from the result of questionnaire shown before, most people are inspired in different ways after watching the film. A possible reason for this is the effect of role models. Ramasubramanian, Srividya, and Sarah Kornfield proposed the effect of role models that audience often identifies with media characters and forms cognitive bonds with these characters [11]. The process of identification is understood as a natural "fusion of the self with the character of the media", which is raised by Cohen, and this idea claiming that thereby, audience can share the character's point of view and internalize their worldview, furthermore, there are emotions, maintenance behaviors and direct imitation effects on the audience [12]. Nevertheless, the same thing can happen to the audience that watches superhero movies. People maybe subconsciously yearning for some of the character's qualities and after watching the films, the innermost thoughts will probably be awakened, therefore people are successfully inspired in the future to have further thoughts, developments as well as attempts, which is good for the individuals, especially the teenagers that are still building up their value systems, also the society, for the case of inspirations about women power. After seeing the achievements made by female characters, the empowered teenagers may be braver to step forward and to embrace the possibilities they have.

Another result assumed in the questionnaire is that, after watching and seeing these female characters, most people thought of doing jobs that would break down stereotypes in the future. The result happened for a reason. Simply put, stereotypes are rooted in the culture and created during people's interpersonal interactions. When these stereotypes apply to people, especially when they are negative, this toxic stereotype will stress people more. They will worry about the consequences when interviewing for a job where they might get underestimated. For instance, this kind of stereotype would make people feel self-denial. When people are in the middle of a stereotype, they perform poorly if they do what the stereotype says. People deny themselves when the results are alarming. And they will react to self-denial and have no faith in doing the things again. These influences of stereotypes are adverse and need to be eliminated. These female characters also get underestimated on some occasions in the movie. They suffer from stereotypes but fight back bravely and prove themselves with powerful skills and excellence in their particular area. This kind of fightback strongly breaks stereotypes and eliminates adverse side effects. Therefore, people are not only inspired but also realize the importance of saving everyone from the stress of stereotypes by breaking down the stereotypes themselves first. This is the reason why the result happened.

6. Conclusion

The evolution of female characters in superhero movies has influenced the audience's ideology in many ways. The impacts have already been shown to conclude the questionnaire results and the discussion. These new changes in the movie industry and the power of changing people's minds can help society, especially the rising awareness of young women, realize the importance of feminism and learn how to do the right things. From summing up the questionnaire results, after watching the movies, most people thought the female characters were more independent, more clever, more powerful, and more capable of fighting villains than their former stereo impressions before watching the movies. Additionally, most people agreed and strongly agreed on the positive effects they got from the characters. Also, the things they would like to do in the future to help eliminate stereotypes and improve awareness of feminism and gender equality. This result has shown the significant influence of the new female superhero characters and how strong the power to change people's minds. Furthermore, by forming cognitive ties with these female characters, people would learn and imitate the excellent qualities and moral standards of the characters. This can mainly help teenagers to build up essential value systems. The new image of female superhero characters also breaks old stereotypes and changes people's opinions. More and more people understand the critical part of breaking down stereotypes is to eliminate their pressure and miseries. In conclusion, the new evolution of female

superhero characters in the movie industry has influenced the audience globe-wide. By keeping these innovations and the new images in the cinema, fewer people will suffer from the pressure of stereotypes. There will be less discrimination and more awareness of gender equality and feminism.

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