

PLCY 365

MEDIA REPRESENTATION IN COMICS

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In 2013, Andrew Garfield was starring in the Amazing Spider-Man franchise. He was also **openly campaigning for a bisexual Spider-Man** and even had actor Michael B. Jordan in mind for the role of MJ, a traditional Spider-Man love interest (Vilkomerson, 2013). In 2014, Andrew Garfield was **fired** from playing Spider-Man. In 2015, leaked emails showed that **media executives required** Peter Parker, the alter ego of Spider-Man, to be **"Caucasian and heterosexual"** when in film (McNary, 2015).

In a later interview, Garfield said that he was "heartbroken" at the compromises made to the character he portrayed and that he had been naive at the time to think that an actor's opinion about the character they're portraying mattered to filmmakers (Thorne, 2016).



WHAT IS REPRESENTATION?

Media representation is how aspects of society like race and gender are portrayed to audiences through the media. This matters because what we **see** and **hear** directly affect what we **believe**.

Studies show that the media consumed directly affects beliefs of the audience and that media can actually change what an audience believes (Yuen, 2019). A study done by the writers of #PopJustice showed that pop culture could positively and negatively influence what people believe about other racial groups (Godsil et al., 2016)

For example, negative racial stereotypes can lead to negative viewpoints of that racial group.

WHERE HAS REPRESENTATION GONE WRONG?

DC's First Openly Gay Superhero

In 1988, DC Comics created their first openly gay superhero, **Extraño**. He was a Peruvian magician who had surgery to enhance his magic from stage tricks to sorcery, prompting him to pick the name **Extraño**, or **"strange" in Spanish** as his hero name. In this first incarnation, Extraño was dressed in **extremely flamboyant clothing and had his teammates refer to him as "auntie."** He was also introduced alongside a villain that got his powers through snorting cocaine and **another villain who spread HIV**. Although Extraño's debut was DC Comics' first step into LGBT representation, those first steps were clear examples of **bad representation** (Jaffe, 2019).



Whitewashing

According to Merriam-Webster, whitewashing is an old term that holds a new meaning of casting white actors in non-white roles or of preferring white actors, directors, producers, etc., over equally qualified people of color (Whitewashing, 2019). Whitewashing pushes actors of color to the side while parts that they could have played are given to white actors, while producers claim that this is the only way to turn a profit (Wu, 2017).



Tilda Swinton portrays the Ancient One in the Marvel movie *Doctor Strange (2016)*. In the film, The Ancient One is Celtic rather than Tibetan. This was justified by the Director, Scott Derrickson, saying the original character was based of of East Asian stereotypes, and a wish to avoid that. (Desta, 2016).

Wanda Maximoff and Quicksilver in the Marvel movie *Age of Ultron (2015)*. Both characters are of Romani descent and are Jewish and the actors playing them are not.



Scarlett Johansson as Major in *Ghost in the Shell (2017)*, a movie based on a Japanese comic. with a Japanese main character.

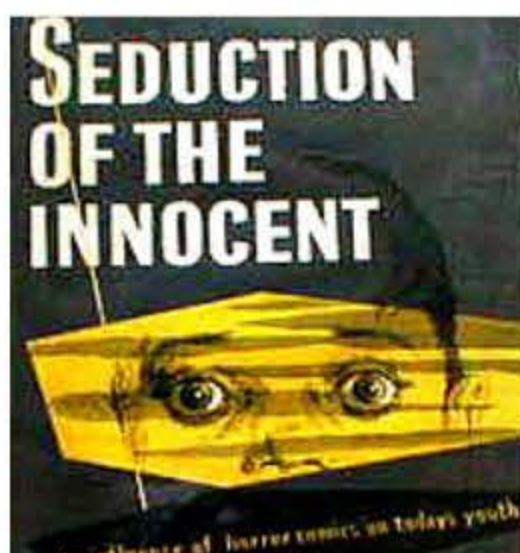
REPRESENTATION IN COMICS - HISTORY

Fredric Wertham and the Comics Code Authority

Fredric Wertham was a psychiatrist that wrote a book called Seduction of the Innocent (1954) in which he condemned comic books as the downfall of modern society, linking Superman with fascism among other negative depictions of comics. The evidence Wertham provided was **outdated** and **misrepresented**/taken out of context, however, it was powerful enough to cause a Senate subcommittee to begin examining comic book material more closely. This led to the creation of the **Comics Code Authority** which enforced highly restrictive rules on comic book writers in exchange for the wide distribution of those comics (Kistler, 2014).



FACE-LIFTING: Calif. Administrator Charles F. Murphy indicates how the comics magazine code operates. "Dobbs distortion in face" resulted in a change. No. Murphy reported on progress under the industry's self-imposed rules.



"The Code"

The Comics Code Authority was formed in 1954 by the Comics Magazine Association of America as an alternative to government regulation. The CCA allowed the comic publishers to self-regulate the content of comic books in the United States. It was self-regulated and therefore not mandatory, but in order to gain large audiences, publishing, and advertising opportunities, a lot of comic publishers adhered to it.

The negative effect of not having CCA approval was lack of distribution by the comic book wholesalers, who, as one historian observed, "served as the enforcement arm of the Comics Code Authority by agreeing to handle only those comics with the seal." (Nyberg 2011).



The Code enforced strict rules on what could be portrayed in comics. Putting limits on "sexual deviance", horror, mental illness, alcoholism, treatment of authority and figures of justice like the police, and restricting depictions of women.

CURRENT REPRESENTATION IN COMIC BOOKS

Female vs. Male Superheroes

A breakdown of 34,476 comic book characters by gender showed that **female superheroes are more likely to have emotion based powers**, less likely to have **leadership** qualities, less likely to have a **gadget** of some sort, more likely to have "girl" included in their name rather than "woman," and less likely to be on a team with other people of their gender (Shendruk, 2017)



Wonder Woman and Sexuality

Wonder Woman was always intended by her creator to be associated with **kink** and **sexuality** (Berlatsky, 2016). This association was intended to emphasize **female sexual independence**, however later writers turned Wonder Woman's sexuality into **objectification for the male gaze**.



Wonder Woman being shown to enjoy being tied up by other women. This is an example of how creator William Marston initially created Wonder Woman to be a superhero associated with kink/bondage, but of her own volition and enjoyment.

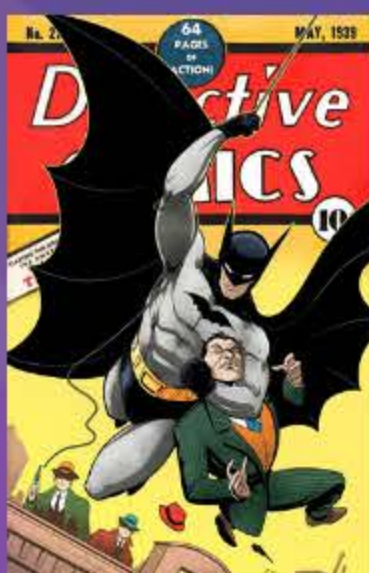


On the left is the first cover that Wonder Woman appeared on and on the right is a cover by artist Frank Cho who is notorious for drawing a highly sexualized version of Wonder Woman. The pose that Cho draws her in originally showed a clear view of Wonder Woman's butt. Writer Greg Rucka insisted that the cover be censored. This cover is one of many examples of Wonder Woman being sexualized explicitly for the male audience.



Batman and Masculinity

Over the years, Batman has symbolized **ideal masculinity** of each era, leading to different characterizations and physical attributes congruent with changing ideas of masculinity. Making Batman a symbol of masculinity has led to his **dominance over various relationships** in his life as well as a presentation of **exaggerated ideal masculine qualities** like muscularity. This in turn leads to a more exaggerated idea of masculinity for the culture ingesting comic book/comic book adaptation material of Batman (Medrano, 2019).



The original Batman design - the musculature is quite normal, Batman does not appear to be much larger than the person he's fighting.

Batman issue #996 - Batman's physical body is clearly more muscular, his chest, arms, and abs are all much more defined than the first iteration.



Batman is also the **dominant** partner in most of his canon relationships. Here are two of the main relationships that Batman is involved in:

1. Batman and Robin

- Batman adopts Robin, becoming a **father** figure in their relationship. This is a clear expression of **traditionally masculine dominance**, especially when factoring in the authority of a hero versus their sidekick. The only times we see Robin defy this dominance are when the first Robin, Dick Grayson, **physically leaves Batman** and Gotham City to become his own hero with a new name. The writing makes it clear that there can only be one dominant male figure in a Batman relationship before problems arise.

2. Batman and Alfred

- Alfred is Batman's longtime butler. As he is in a servant role, Alfred is subservient to Batman. Alfred is written as having more traditionally feminine qualities such as nurturing and gentleness. He is also drawn as physically smaller than Batman, emphasizing Batman's physical dominance.



Batman and Nightwing fighting



Nightwing leaving



Alfred waiting on Batman's return - a depiction of Alfred's gentleness, a contrast to the emotional repression associated with Batman

Iron Fist and Racial Stereotyping

In 2016, Netflix and Marvel collaborated to create the TV show Iron Fist, a story about a rich white man named Danny Rand going to the mystical Asian land of K'un-L'un where he trains in martial arts and becomes the best martial artist that K'un-L'un has ever produced (Abad-Santos, 2016). **Although fans and members of the Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) community petitioned Marvel to cast the Iron Fist as an Asian American actor, creators actively chose to ignore these requests**, saying "the importance of Danny as an outsider is something that is a theme that runs throughout the entire show, so I think once they see it, they'll understand why the story is told the way it's told" (Abad-Santos, 2016 and Bennett & Mallikarjuna, 2016).

Danny Rand, or Iron Fist, is inherently problematic as an incarnation of the **white savior complex**, a cinematic trope where a white character rescues characters of color from a problem they were unable to deal with themselves (Hughey, 2014). Additionally, the story of Danny Rand plays on the idea of **the white man obtaining the Asian girl as a prize**, as shown by his romantic companion Colleen Wing (Lee, 2018).



"The irony of this situation is that Iron Fist's story is, at its core, a story about an outsider who feels isolated and lost.

And fans of the original comic who insist that the character can't be Asian can't seem to understand **the real-life frustration felt by Asian and Asian-American comic book fans who feel like outsiders because they believe their culture is being borrowed and taken away** (Abad-Santos, 2016)



Here, three of the five leaders of The Hand.

Adding to the problematic story of Iron Fist, members of the show's villainous organization, The Hand, are mostly people of color doing Asian martial arts (Lee, 2018).



DISABILITY IN MAINSTREAM COMICS

While most people can name at least one disabled character in comics, there have been a lot of issues with ableist tropes playing out in comics storylines: specifically "curing" disabled characters, or even erasing their disabilities in other stories and adaptations. That being said, there are also plenty of examples of portrayal being done right, and plenty with mixed success too.

Being a form of art that switches writers and artists many times over the years, often times, disabled characters have seen their disabled status fluctuate in ways that don't accurately reflect the disabled community.

Professor X throughout the years.

Being one of the most famous disabled superheroes, Professor X, or Charles Francis Xavier, is the founder and leader of Marvel Comic's X-Men, and is also paraplegic. His depiction in comics portrays his disability as much of a part of him as his powers.



However, as with many characters, his portrayal of disability is not perfect. Critics have cited Professor X as having "TV Paraplegia", a form of nerve damage that completely paralyzes the legs of people on television without causing chronic pain, muscle spasms, or incontinence (Lee, 2017).



Another issue in most portrayals of Professor X is the issue of agency. Villains continuously exploit his disability as a "weakness", and he is treated like a rag doll without the use of his wheelchair. (Lee, 2017).

Unlike the most popular portrayals of people who use wheelchairs in media, the overwhelming majority of real people who use wheelchairs aren't paralyzed at all, and the people with paralysis exist on a spectrum of motor function. This portrayal, complete with overrepresentation and misrepresentation of complete paralysis often contributes to the idea that disability exists in only two forms: those that are completely paralyzed, or those who are just "faking it" (Lee, 2017).



Portrayal and Erasure of Disabilities

A prominent and very recent example of erasing disability is the film adaptation of Marvel's Avengers, with the character Clint Barton as Hawkeye, a sharp-shooting non-super-powered human. In his comics, Hawkeye is most frequently depicted as anywhere between hard-of-hearing to completely deaf, usually using a hearing aid, lip reading, or sign language to communicate. In the recent Marvel blockbuster films, Clint Barton is portrayed as a completely able-bodied character, thus erasing the representation of a disabled character from mainstream Hollywood for seemingly no reason.

Clint Barton (Hawkeye) communicating with his brother in American Sign Language. In the top center panel, his brother is signing the word "stupid", and in the bottom panels, finger spelling the name "Clint".



Matt Murdock (Daredevil), a blind superhero depicted with his sight temporarily restored. The fluctuation of depictions of disability can often be offensive, robbing disabled people of characters like them by magical healing or other fantastical plot justifications.

Barbara Gordon, (Batgirl) is a paraplegic superhero who becomes The Oracle in DC comics. However, depending on the writer, sometimes her disability is magically cured in the comics.



Bucky Barnes, or the Winter Soldier, is a superhero originally created as a sidekick to Captain America. He goes on to lose his arm in an accident. He is brainwashed and used as a living weapon by the criminal organization HYDRA, where he was outfitted with a bionic arm turned into a weapon. This is an example of a disabled character becoming weaponized. His disability is used as a tool to further control him.

Neurodivergence in Comics

Similarly, most people can probably name at least one comic character with a mental illness. However, frequently, neurodivergence has been used in media as a lazy way to villainize a character - making mental illness a direct cause of a character's evil or negative traits. This alienates a lot of the audiences that exist with mental illnesses in day-to-day life.

Perhaps the most famous examples of this happening is DC's the Joker, the super-villain antithesis of Batman. The Joker is typically portrayed as having psychosis, induced by falling into waste that gave him his physical disfigurement- the white face and green hair. This origin story changes in different iterations, but the heart of it is a "crazy" man who murders people. He is also the one that caused Barbara Gordon's paralysis.



The alienation and villainization of people with mental disorders, especially those such as psychosis and schizophrenia, is unfortunately an all-too-common trope when writing villains.



Black Manta (Aquaman series) is an autistic character in a mainstream comic, and the first character in Marvel comics with a mental illness, but he was abused for being autistic and is also a supervillain. Not to mention, in one issue, Aquaman ends up "curing" his autism with magic. Making him suddenly a hero - not implying, but outright saying his autism made him evil.

David Haller (Legion) is a character with Dissociative Identity Disorder, and is an antihero in Marvel comics' X-Men. He is a mutant, and each of his personalities manifests with different mutant powers. His disability lends itself to his strength as much as it causes conflicts.



Jessica Jones is a private investigator in Marvel comics who has PTSD and depression. The recent series adaptation of her comic explores these themes of trauma in depth within her character. She is also one of very few women in comics portrayed with neurodivergence and actual realistic symptoms- and the show outright states she has PTSD, where her comics never did.

LGBT+ CHARACTERS IN MAINSTREAM COMICS

While the Comics Code Authority suppressed portrayals of LGBT characters in comics, there is still a wealth of queer characters in comics. Since the 2000s, more queer comic characters have been featured in major roles and having their own series.

However, even today, representation of queer characters can be erased or done wrong, Especially in the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

Tessa Thompson's Valkrie in the Thor movies is all but confirmed to be bisexual. However, a scene depicting this was cut from **Thor Ragnarok**.

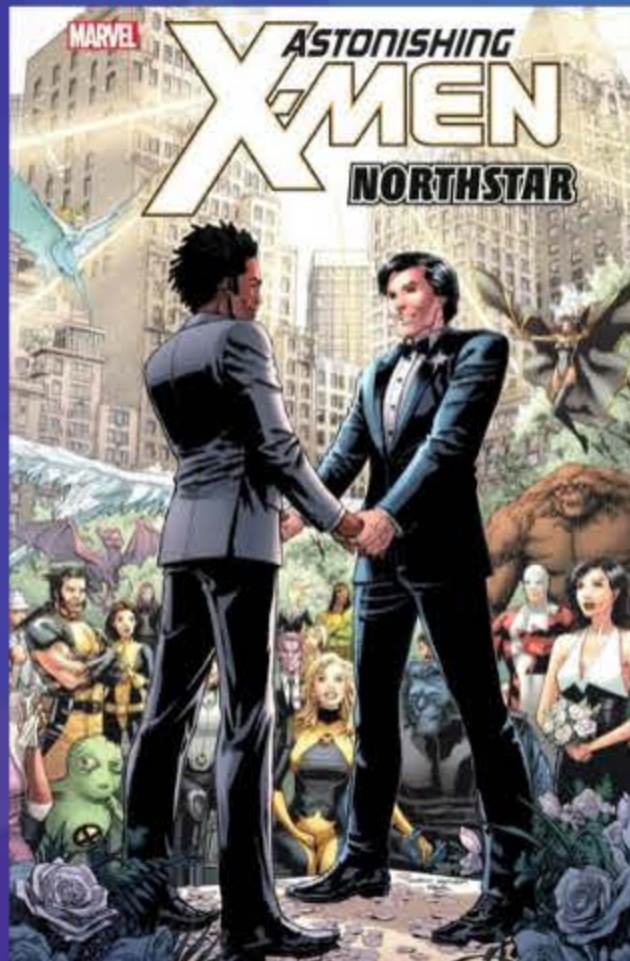


Not unlike the scene confirming a lesbian character cut from Marvel's **Black Panther**.

Or Marvel's "first gay character" in the movies promised in **Avengers: Endgame**, which turned out to be an unnamed background character with a single line, played by one of the directors himself.



Loki, in more recent series featuring them, particularly the Young Avengers, is portrayed as genderfluid and bisexual. However, the character has sparked some debate amongst fans - nonbinary characters who are aliens or shapeshifters are often an overdone trope that can be considered alienating. However, Loki's genderfluidness is often handled as a preference to be seen as male or female - regardless of whatever physical traits they decide to take on.



Northstar (right), is a Marvel hero in the X-Men series that debuted in 1979, and was one of the first openly-gay super heroes in comics. In 2012, married his husband, Kyle Jinadu (left), in Astonishing X-Men #51, the first depiction of a same-sex marriage in mainstream comics



Kate Kane (Batwoman) is one of few queer characters that headlines her own title published by DC.

RECENT IMPROVEMENTS

Kamala Khan

Kamala Khan is a Pakistani female superhero. Her comic is written by women of color that directly relate to Kamala's unique story as a Muslim in America, and it reflects the struggle of both being Muslim in America and a female superhero (Phi, 2018)



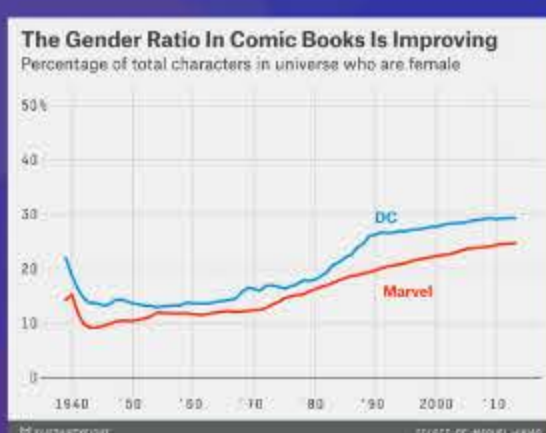
After anti-Islamic ads equating Islamic leaders to Hitler were put on San Francisco buses, street artists painted over the ads with pictures of Kamala Khan and new messages such as "Calling all Bigotry Busters" (Wang 2015). Representation here empowered a marginalized community to fight back against oppression and bigotry.



Part of what makes Kamala Khan important is the fact that her comics do well commercially. Comics have transitioned from mainly being sold in grocery stores, to specialized comic book shops, to digital sales (Hickey, 2014). Employees at comic book shops tend to make women feel unwelcome, even when those women are comic book writers themselves (Gingerhaze, 2014). Kamala Khan's online success showed writers that there was in fact, room for new, female, nonwhite heroes (Hickey, 2014). Hopefully, writers will see the success of characters like Kamala Khan and invest in more female and people of color writers.



A portion of a comic strip depicting online user Gingerhaze's experience at many comic book shops.



Although the gender ratio in comic books is improving, there is still a significant disparity in the number of female characters and male characters.

POLICY AND REPRESENTATION

Luckily, even with just time, representation is improving in both the comic sphere and overall.

However, there are a lot of ways we can continue to foster the portrayal and representation of minorities in an accurate and respectful way.

The active hiring and supporting of minority writers

Oftentimes, minority characters end up getting written by the same able-bodied, white, cis, straight men, who write based off of what they have learned from other white male writers. Supporting and uplifting the voices of minority creators adds new angles and new media to the world.

Holding large companies like Marvel and DC accountable

There has already been an uptick in social media response to harmful tropes such as whitewashing and queerbaiting. With hundreds of voices responding to and calling out harmful portrayals, this puts pressure on the companies to improve their portrayals of minorities.

Hiring consultants from marginalized groups

Supporting the voices of minority groups doesn't just stop with the creators. Getting to know different perspectives on characters- such as why someone with a disability doesn't like Professor X, can help broaden perspectives, and recognize the problematic elements of media while still being able to enjoy it.

Funding initiatives to support minority creators

Marginalized creators tend to put their content on accessible platforms such as the Internet rather than in comic book format, where the majority of content is created by big publishing agencies. Webcomics have a plethora of LGBT and racial minority representation, largely because creators tend to be a part of those communities (Kuenning, 2019). While it remains important to elevate minority writers, increasing the visibility of the platforms they choose to engage with is also important.

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