

The Masculinity of American Superheroes

Comics often have an explicitly progressive message about equality. *The X-Men*, for instance, have often been used as an analogy for race and homosexuality. **Esther De Dauw** investigates how, despite this message, comics fail to present a narrative that is anti-sexist and anti-racist when examined beneath the surface. The looks, actions, and design of the characters can inadvertently reinforce toxic ideas surrounding gender and race, especially when it comes to white masculinity.

Gender in Comics

Gender Studies carried out within comics mostly focuses on the female characters and how these comics and characters engage with or negate sexist stereotypes. There is a lack of significant engagement with the issue of masculinity in comics that is only recently becoming the focus of research. When examining male characters, it is clear that male superheroes have always been designed to conform to the dominant masculine ideal of the time, an ideal that is becoming increasingly hypermasculine.

First described in the social sciences by Donald L. Mosher and Mark Sirkin in 1984, hypermasculinity is defined as a set of behaviours and beliefs that exaggerate traits which are popularly considered to be masculine, especially “toughness as emotional self-control, violence as manly, danger as exciting and calloused attitudes toward women and sex”.¹ While these behaviours have mainly

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been regarded as quintessentially masculine, since the 1980s, Western audiences have become obsessed with hypermasculinity, especially regarding how artists represent it in images of the male body. In a similar way that the global media has obsessed over women’s bodies, the ever-critical public eye has now been cast onto male bodies. There is increased pressure on men to conform to the supercut hypermasculine ideal glorified in American superhero comic books.

Following narratives on masculinity throughout American history, it becomes clear that American men are haunted by a panic about how manly they are, while the media produces compensatory images for them to aspire to. The 1930s had the physically formidable



The inverted triangle-shaped torso

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A contrast of body types the stereotypical representation of the male form as seen in comics with over-developed muscles (left).

labourer, even while many men suffered from malnourishment, which resulted in low eligibility for the draft. The 1940s had the powerful soldier, while mass media worried about the cowardice of conscientious objectors and shell-shock sufferers. In the 1950s and 1960s, the media was downright hysterical about mothers babying their children, and hippies and men protesting the Vietnam War. The 1980s and 1990s saw masculinity under siege by angry

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feminists and the rise of bodybuilding as a compensatory technique for the perceived cultural take-over by women.

A brief glance online today reveals that many men worry they are living in a time where white men are oppressed by Safe Spaces and equal rights for minorities. ‘If only we could go back to the good old days when men were men and women were women?’ But there were no good old days, and the toxic ideas and constraints of patriarchal hegemonic masculinity have always forced men into a state of panic for which they had to compensate. Superheroes offer a power fantasy in the face of that panic, as a way to purge anxiety about the state of masculinity.

Superheroes and Body Building

The superhero who really fits the narrative of bodily (re)construction is Tony Stark, first appearing as Iron Man in 1963. Stark relies on his intellect to construct a robotic suit as a stand-in for the grotesquely muscular and masculine bodies most male superheroes possess, such as Superman and Captain America. Whilst the initial versions of his suit were bulky, from the 1980s onwards, the Iron Man suits became increasingly detailed in both musculature and technological detail. These suits became more and more similar to the bodies that are increasingly encountered in American media following the popularity of bodybuilding action heroes in the 1980s, including Sylvester Stallone in *Rambo: First Blood* (1982) and Arnold Schwarzenegger in *The Terminator* (1985).

It seems ridiculous that a robotic suit of armour would require muscles, however during the 1980s especially, the Iron Man suit had oblique muscles, abs, and large pectorals. According to Harrison G. Pope, Katherine A. Phillips, and Roberto Olivardia in their book, *The Adonis Complex*, the hyper muscular body cannot be achieved by bodybuilding alone, but relies on the use of steroids. This is because “the male body simply cannot exceed a certain level of muscularity without the help of steroids or other chemicals”.² The combination of bodybuilding and steroid use leads to the creation of the highly desired body shape with an inverted triangle shaped torso and exaggerated musculature. This body type is the most common style seen for male superheroes and it is pervasive in comic books.

Looking at recent comic books, such as *Superman Unchained* (2005) and *Captain America Reborn* (2011), there is something odd about the male bodies being depicted. Most superheroes seem to possess muscle groups that do not exist within the human body and their abdominal muscles are so pronounced that they cover the bellybutton. Their biceps are bigger than their heads, making it impossible for them to touch their own armpits. These kinds of bodies are blatantly ridiculous and unrealistic, yet they put enormous pressure on young men to emulate this kind of musculature. According to The Adonis Complex, young American men increasingly struggle with poor body image, eating disorders, addictions to steroids, and bodybuilding.

“Perhaps Superman, who is not human, possesses an alien physique that allows for the growth of additional muscle groups, but Captain America is fundamentally human”

Perhaps Superman, who is a humanoid alien, possesses a unique physique that allows the growth of unusual muscle groups, but Captain America is still fundamentally human. The super-soldier serum is meant to transform its recipients into the perfect human, the peak of physical health, but it would not add completely new muscle groups to the human body. Whilst Iron Man does not require a pronounced physique, he continually builds himself one, constructing a powerful body that allows him to physically participate in combat, even though his intellect is his most defining characteristic, his super power.

Toxic Masculinity in Crisis

Comics reflect the way that the American media has reacted to the perceived crisis of masculinity by promoting the hypermasculine physique, especially in terms of the human body. Superheroes are a power fantasy attempting to purge anxiety about the state of masculinity. Focus on the overly muscled male body as a foundation for masculinity is toxic because it does not allow alternative masculinities to exist. It exaggerates what Western society considers to be dominant masculine traits as the only traits men should possess, supporting dangerous stereotypes that impact the health and wellbeing of young men.



Men dressed as Superhero characters at a comic book event in America

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1 Vokey et al., “An Analysis of Hyper-Masculinity in Magazine Advertisements,” *Sex Roles* 68:9 (2013), 562.

2 Harrison G. Pope Jr., Katherine A. Phillips and Roberto Olivardia, *The Adonis Complex: How to Identify, Treat, and Prevent Body Obsession in Men and Boys* (New York et al: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 125.

