

A Web of Miss-Representation: A Content Analysis of Spider-Man and his Love Interests Regarding Gender-roles, Stereotypes, and Power Dynamics

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Abstract: This study is a mixed-method content analysis of eight Spider-Man live action movies, looking at six female love interests (including Mary Jane Watson, Gwen Stacy, Liz Allan, and MJ Watson) over the course of the movie franchise. To accomplish this task, all incidents where the love-interest was on screen and all incidents where Spider-Man/Peter Parker was on screen with the love-interest were examined. This study indicated that despite an overall increase in contemporary gender roles, decrease in traditional stereotypes, and subordinate depictions of love interests, dominant depictions did not increase over time. Furthermore, when the love interests exhibited more traditional femininity, it made them more appealing to Spider-Man. Taken as a whole, this means that though depictions of women in superhero media may have progressed to the point where women can take on the characteristics of the 'contemporary women,' the media may not have progressed to that same extent for male/female power relationships, with women being equal most of the time, subordinate some of the time, and dominant none of the time. Thus, depictions of women in media still are influenced by patriarchal structures (though lessened) as they have throughout the history of film.

People of all ages, backgrounds, and genders love superhero stories - they admire their favorite crime-fighting champion's strength, intelligence, and courage. However, despite the universal love and positive influence these stories have, traditionally, superhero stories have also perpetuated harmful stereotypes against women. Traditionally, women, especially superhero love-interests, have been stereotyped as 'helpless' and 'damsel's in distress' when in superhero media. As social cognitive theory explains, harmful depictions in media can lead audiences to internalize this messaging, causing them to possibly believe and replicate behaviors seen in media (Bussey, 1999, p. 676). The target audience for these kinds of movies, younger viewers, are especially susceptible to these harmful depictions. However, these stereotypes are changing, especially for newer films. The Spider-Man franchise specifically has been noted to be moving in a more 'contemporary' direction with their depiction of women; but this claim has never been tested before. Thus, this research aims to determine if love interests within the Spider-Man franchise adhere to traditional or contemporary gender roles and stereotypes as well as uncover if love-interests are subordinate, equal, or dominant in their relationship with Peter Parker and how these gender roles and power dynamics change over time.

Literature Review

Frameworks

In order to analyze the power dynamics between Peter Parker and his love interests, as well as their gender roles, this study considers related literature and theoretical frameworks. The theoretical framework for this study comes from feminist scholarship, including studies of women's experiences, gender-associated stereotypes, and gender roles (Patton, 2002). Power is a central feature of feminist scholarship, as women are often treated in an unjust and inequitable manner in society and in their relationships (Babbie, 2001; Patton, 2002). For instance, one study found women to be "under-represented across a range of media and settings" with women being "portrayed . . . often in a circumscribed and negative manner" (Collins, 2011). Such negative depictions of women include women being hyper-sexualized (especially in fictional media), women being subordinated to their male counterparts, and women typically playing traditional feminine roles and stereotypes, especially with respect to their physical appearance and occupation (Collins, 2011).

Stereotypical depictions of idealized women in media often present women's physical appearances in a very particular manner that matches very few women in real life. For example, one study found that the "idealized woman" is "statuesque, very thin, small hiped, and extremely attractive," characteristics that "less than 5%" of the female population has (Neuendorf, 2010, p. 748). The depiction of the "idealized woman" is very widespread, as it is the most common portrayal of women across all forms of media (Neuendorf, 2010). Since this depiction is so ubiquitous and well-known (Neuendorf, 2010), it can lead audiences to have ill-informed and incorrect assumptions about women's bodies in real life, creating harmful stereotypes that go beyond the screen. Therefore, using a critical feminist approach to study popular movies like Spider-Man can shed light on ways that they depict appropriate gender

roles, heterosexual relationships, and gender-based power imbalances for its audience members.

One powerful way to study media, particularly from a feminist perspective, is utilizing content analysis (Babbie, 2001). Content analysis is defined as “searching text for recurring words or themes” (Patton, 2002, p.453). A text can be any form of recorded communication (Babbie, 2001; Patton, 2002). In this study, content analysis is used to consider Spider-Man’s female love interest and her relationship with Spider-Man over the course of the movie franchise, looking at both power dynamics and gender stereotypes. To do this, both manifest and latent meanings are considered. Manifest meaning, or “the visible, surface content,” is utilized to understand Spider-Man and each of his love-interest's surface-level interactions and dialogue to generate a broad level of understanding. Latent meaning, or “[the] underlying meaning” is used to understand the implications of the interactions and dialogue, to identify whether those interactions conform with traditional gender roles and stereotypes (Babbie, 2001, p. 310). Like other forms of data collection, content analysis has its advantages and disadvantages. Because content analysis does not rely on time as a variable to obtain the research, researchers can pick media from any time and analyze it together. This is especially important to note when looking at this specific study. Since each Spider-Man movie has already been published, researchers can bridge the gap in time that separates each movie and observe how the portrayal of Spider-Man's love interests change over time. On the other hand, however, validity can be called into question since most, if not all, of the variables that influence data collection are objective to the researcher. This must be kept in mind when moving forward with the research and can be a limitation.

Research Context

A background review of previous research on similar studies is necessary to understand the context and the gaps in research that this study addresses. The focus of this research is gender representation in Spider-Man films and how these representations have changed over time. Numerous studies have studied gender representation in film over time, such as, “Gender Stereotypes in Hollywood Movies and Their Evolution over Time: Insights from Network Analysis,” which identifies common stereotypes associated with both men and women in Hollywood films from the 1940’s to the early 2000’s. This study found that women’s characters were frequently in romance movies and that their role commonly revolved around romantic relationships, whereas men’s characters were more likely to be seen across all genres of film and had broader roles, beyond their romantic relationships (Kumar, 2022). Another study found that women also are frequently depicted in domestic settings, commonly acting as mothers or doing domestic chores (cleaning, cooking, etc.) and less frequently portrayed in occupational roles (Essig, 2018). Even when women’s characters are depicted in occupational settings, often they are subordinate to men, which mirrors women in romantic roles, who are traditionally subordinate in their relationships (Kumar, 2022). These stereotypes and traditional gender roles demonstrate how film has been used to depict women as subordinate, more fragile, and less capable than men.

Gender roles, stereotypes, and power dynamics have also been studied in the specific context of superhero films and media. The study, “Gender Differences in Movie Superheroes’ Roles, Appearances, and Violence” by Dr. Monica Miller (2021), Professor of Social Psychology at the University of Nevada, performed a content analysis of over 140 superheroes in 80 movies, investigating the depiction of female and male superheroes. The study found that female superheroes were depicted as “more attractive, thin, sexy/seductive, innocent, afraid, and helpless,” whereas their male counterparts were “more powerful, muscular, [and] violent” (Miller, 2021, p. 1). In addition, the clothes worn and weapons used by male superheroes depicted them as muscular, dangerous, and with wide-ranging military skills and weaponry, while female superheroes often wore more revealing clothes and used fewer military skills and weapons than male superheroes (Miller, 2021). Although this study demonstrates how women in superhero media have gone against traditional gender roles to a degree, by acting as superheroes (traditionally a male role), it confirms the belief that women still conform to traditional gender-based stereotypes regarding appearance and character traits.

For side characters in superhero films, the same trend regarding women’s appearance and behavior is prevalent, especially among love interests. In Kent’s (2016) thesis, “Marvel Women: Femininity, Representation and Post- feminism in Films Based on Marvel Comics,” male superheroes’ love interests were very physically and sexually attractive, objectified for the lead male character. The study also noted that love-interests were often victimized and killed to aid the male superhero’s character development as a person and hero, while the love-interest was often one dimensional, not only “[devaluing] female characters but also [sexualizing] their existence and demise” (Kent, 2016, p. 50). However, this study did not consider change over time and did not focus exclusively on Spider-Man movies. In the Spider-Man franchise (*Spider-Man (2002)*, *Spider-Man 2 (2004)*, and *Spider-Man 3 (2007)*), love interests Mary Jane Watson and Gwen Stacy were continuously objectified and victimized to further Peter Parker’s development as a hero (Kent, 2016). In addition, as with many other genres of film, love-interests’ relationship with Spider-Man frequently are depicted as subordinate to the male character (Kent, 2016). Kent’s (2021) study did not consider later movies, change over time, and gender roles more broadly.

Contemporary superhero films may challenge traditional gender stereotypes and gender roles, as well as male-female power dynamics, more than historical films. “The Change in Gender Representation in Superhero Movies of The Last Decade” by Emily W.W.T (2020) demonstrated how over the last decade, regardless of their role, women in superhero films have shown “more leadership and dominance through their character developments” and have gone against traditional gender roles and stereotypes by “[showcasing their] capabilities and knowledge in the field of science, technology, engineering and mathematics” through their more active role in STEM-related positions (W.W.T., 2020, pp. 421-423). These findings show how women in contemporary superhero movies have sometimes gone against the traditional stereotypes, at least with respect to STEM knowledge and occupations.

Although gender depictions of Spider-Man and his love interests in film have been studied, where strong adherence to traditional feminine gender stereotypes and male-female power dynamics have been identified (Kent, 2016), the newer Spider-Man films have not been considered. Given new research illustrating how gender roles and stereotypes have changed in superhero media over the last decade, it is critical to study whether this holds true for newly released movies, such as the Spider-Man franchise's newest saga (*Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017), *Spider-Man: Far From Home* (2019), and *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021)), to identify how the depictions of Peter Parker's love interests have changed over time, a phenomenon that has not been studied. In addition, focusing specifically upon Spider-Man's love interests has also not been covered in as much breadth and depth as this study does. Thus, this study is aimed to bridge these gaps in research, bringing forth new information regarding the gender roles of Spider-Man's love interests, whether they are stereotyped, and what the gender-based power dynamics are between Peter Parker and his love interests, as well as to understand how these depictions have changed over time.

Method

To address this gap in research, the method for this study addressed the following two research questions:

1. *What are the gender roles, including any stereotypes (traditional or contemporary femininity), played by Peter Parker's/Spider-Man's love interests in the Spider-Man movie franchise and how do these roles change over time?*
2. *What are the power dynamics between Peter Parker/Spider-Man and his love-interests (equal, subordinate, or dominant) in the Spider-Man movie franchise and how do they change over time?*

This study used a mixed methods (qualitative and quantitative) content analysis to analyze data collected from the Spider-Man movie franchise to answer these questions. The reason for this choice in method was that a) content analyses involving codebooks are commonplace among gender and film studies (the themes regarding the research) as well as the studies looked at previously, and b) they have been proven to yield accurate and detailed results. The sampling technique was purposive, and the data was collected on an incident table in Microsoft Excel. The notation in the incident table was informed by a code book created by the study author, where study variables took inspiration from previous studies' variables (i.e. the incident table had categories including appearance, occupation, behavior, power dynamics, etc. since these were key variables in other similar studies as outlined in the literature review). Direct quotes were written verbatim from the movie itself, and notations regarding body language and physical appearance of the characters, and the inferred latent content of the scene were described. The code book had two parts: Part A and Part B. Part A identified if Peter Parker/Spider-Man's love-interest(s) adhered to traditional or contemporary gender roles/stereotypes. Part B identified if Peter Parker/Spider-Man's love-interest(s) was subordinate,

equal, or dominant in their relationship with Peter Parker. Once all data was analyzed, movies were compared to determine how gender roles and power dynamics changed over time.

Purposive Sample

It was first necessary to identify which films do and do not qualify for analysis. Live-action Spider-Man films were considered. This study did not look at any movies where Spider-Man was not the main character such as *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), or *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) because very limited conclusions about gender roles or power dynamics between characters could be drawn with Spider-Man's and his love-interests minimal screen time. In addition, this study did not look at Spider-Man affiliated films, like *Venom* (2018) or *Venom: Let There Be Carnage* (2021) or the animated Spider-Man films, *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018) or *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse* (2023), because Spider-Man and his love-interest made limited appearances and the difference in media form (animated vs. live-action) required different forms of analysis. So, for the sake of consistency, only live-action movies where Peter Parker/Spider-Man was the lead character were studied. Eight movies qualified for this study: *Spider-Man* (2002), *Spider-Man 2* (2004), *Spider-Man 3* (2007), *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012), *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* (2014), *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017), *Spider-Man: Far From Home* (2019), and *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021). *These movies were watched via Disney + (time stamps on incidents table correlate to the streaming platform's timing).*

Subjects

In the context of this study, the term “love-interest” was defined as a character within the movie who Peter Parker showed romantic interest in (the subject of the study). Female characters who showed interest in Peter Parker/Spider-Man but who Peter Parker did not show a romantic interest in were not considered love interests in this study. There could be more than one love interest per movie, if the characters met the criteria provided. Both research questions were considered for all love interests that appear. As relationships involve more than one person, Peter Parker was also analyzed with respect to power dynamics. Spider-Man is Peter Parker's alter ego, so Spider-Man and Peter Parker were analyzed as the same character. Therefore, their actions and dialogue were viewed interchangeably throughout this study. Additionally, when more than one Spider-Man was present in the film, only the primary Spider-Man and his love-interest(s) were analyzed.

Code Book

The research conducted in this study was broken into two parts to answer each research question: Part A and Part B. Part A identified whether the subject adhered to traditional or contemporary gender roles/stereotypes. Certain variables were used to identify whether his love-interest(s) adhered to traditional or contemporary gender roles/stereotypes since they are noted to showcase gender roles/stereotypes according to feminist scholarship: appearance, domestic

behavior, occupation, and emotional characteristics. Appearance was defined as the subject’s dress. Domestic behavior was defined as actions the subject did traditionally done within a household. Occupation was defined as the form of work the subject had (implicit or explicit). Emotional Characteristics were the emotional qualities (feelings) the subject seemed to take on, which may involve body language. Qualities were looked at together from the start of the subject’s appearance until she was off screen. Examples for the three categories (traditional, contemporary, or other) of each variable are defined in Table 1 for clarification.

Table 1

Examples of what qualifies as ‘traditional’, ‘contemporary’, or ‘other’ for variables

	Traditional	Contemporary	Other
Appearance	<p>Examples of dress: highly feminine clothing include dresses, skirts, high heels, etc.</p> <p>Examples of makeup: obviously wears feminine makeup</p>	<p>Examples of dress: gender-neutral/masculine dress include pants, loose shirts, boots, etc.</p> <p>Examples of makeup: little to no makeup or excessive non-traditional makeup</p>	Does not meet the criteria for either category or meets criteria for both categories
Domestic Occupation	Examples: Cleaning, cooking, taking care of children or elders, etc.	Examples: pay the bills, make family decisions on behalf of everyone else, fix things, buy things, etc.	Does not meet the criteria for either category or meets criteria for both categories
Occupation	Examples: nurse, teacher, cleaner, waitress, singer, secretary, childcare worker, babysitter, etc.	Examples: Police, firefighter, mayor, CEO, doctor, president, researcher, scientists, etc.	Does not meet the criteria for either category or meets criteria for both categories
Emotional Characteristics	<p>Examples: polite, accommodating, nurturing, naive, soft, flirtatious, sensitive, sweet, supportive, gentle, warm, modest, empathetic, tender, kind, helpful, devoted</p> <p>(Femininity, 2023)</p>	<p>Examples: aggressive, bold, worldly, insensitive, physically imposing, ambitious, demanding, strong, courageous, independent, assertive</p> <p>(Masculinity, 2021)</p>	Does not meet the criteria for either category or meets criteria for both categories

The above variables were used to consider traditional, contemporary, or other gender roles and stereotypes depicted in each film. If it was not clear whether the subject in each incident conformed to traditional or contemporary gender roles/stereotypes or if both traditional and contemporary gender roles/stereotypes were possible, the “other” category was selected. After finishing the movie and collecting the data, the study added up the frequency of each category (traditional, contemporary, or other) of each variable (appearance, domestic behaviors, occupation, or emotional characteristics). These percentages were then graphed to determine if and how gender roles/stereotypes had changed over the course of the live action Spider-Man movie franchise. In the discussion, quotes from the movies were used to reinforce trends uncovered by the data collected to provide more nuance and depth of understanding of these variables. The study also considered any patterns in this qualitative data, and any emergent themes were described as well.

In Part B of the code book, power dynamics between Spider-Man and his love interest(s) were considered. Specifically, whether the love-interest(s) was subordinate, equal, or dominant

in their relationship with Peter Parker/Spider-Man. Two variables, dialogue/tone and body language were considered for this study because they showcase power between the characters most directly. Dialogue/tone was defined as the words characters said to each other or the audience. Whenever Peter Parker/Spider-Man and his love-interest were in the same scene, tone was analyzed to determine the intent behind the dialogue spoken; body language was any body position or facial expression the subject or Peter Parker/Spider-Man made, actions between characters (e.g., hugging, kissing, etc.), and location of characters (one is placed higher in an incident than the other). Both Peter Parker/Spider-Man and his love-interest(s) were analyzed. The love-interest(s) did not need to be in a formal relationship with Peter Parker (boyfriend or girlfriend) to be considered. Unlike Part A where the subject was analyzed anytime they appeared on screen, instances of subordinate, equal, or dominant power dynamics were only looked at if a) Peter Parker/Spider-Man and the subject were in the same scene (regardless of if they are in the same shot) or b) if they were talking about one another to another character or to the audience. This was done to identify how the characters expressed power between each character while together and separate. If two or more love-interests were present in the same scene, then they were looked at separately. Since power dynamics are both implicit and explicit, both latent and manifest meanings were considered, including dialogue/tone and body language (both meanings were considered to provide more nuance to the trends uncovered by the quantitative data). These variables are discussed below. These variables are defined below and examples for the three categories (subordinate, equal, dominant) of each variable are defined in Table 2 for further clarification.

Table 2:

Examples of what qualifies as ‘subordinate’, ‘equal’, or ‘dominant’ for variables

	Subordinate	Equal	Dominant
Dialogue/Tone	Examples: subject is depicted as passive, subject doesn't speak up for themselves, subject uses a gentle tone when talking about important tissues, subject is talked down to, subject is cat called, subject is called endearing but patronizing name (e.g. baby), subject is verbally threatened, subject is talked about in a negative light, Peter Parker/Spider-Man makes a decision for the subject	Examples: subject stands their ground when spoken to, subject is talked about in neutral terms, subject talks about partner in neutral terms, subject speaks up for themselves when in a vulnerable position but does not insight violence (stays neutral), etc.	Examples: subject talks back to partner, subject is depicted as active in any conversation, subject speaks for themselves and others, subject takes control of an uncomfortable situation, etc.
Body Language	Examples: subject is positioned below their partner or positioned in a vulnerable position, subject is hit/abused, subject is hit/abused and does not retaliate, subject is saved, etc.	Examples: subject is placed on equal footing as their partner, subject resists being kidnapped/taken but end up being taken, etc.	Examples: subject gets themselves out of a precarious situation, subject is placed above their partner, subject engages in violent behavior (e.g. punching, kicking), etc.

Once each scene was analyzed to identify both latent and manifest meanings, the information was collected and used to identify whether the subject was subordinate, equal, or dominant in each scene. After finishing the movie and collecting the data, the study took the frequency of each category (subordinate, equal, or dominant) of each variable (dialogue/tone or body language). An Equality Index (incidents were assigned a number, - subordinate (1), equal (2), and dominant (3) - added, and then averaged to find where they fall on a range from subordinate to dominant) was also utilized for each variable to determine how equal love-interests were within their respective movie. These percentages were then graphed to determine if and how power dynamics had changed over the course of the live action Spider-Man movie franchise. In addition, quotes from the movies were pulled to reinforce the data collected by the quantitative research. The study also considered any patterns in this qualitative data, and any emergent themes were described.

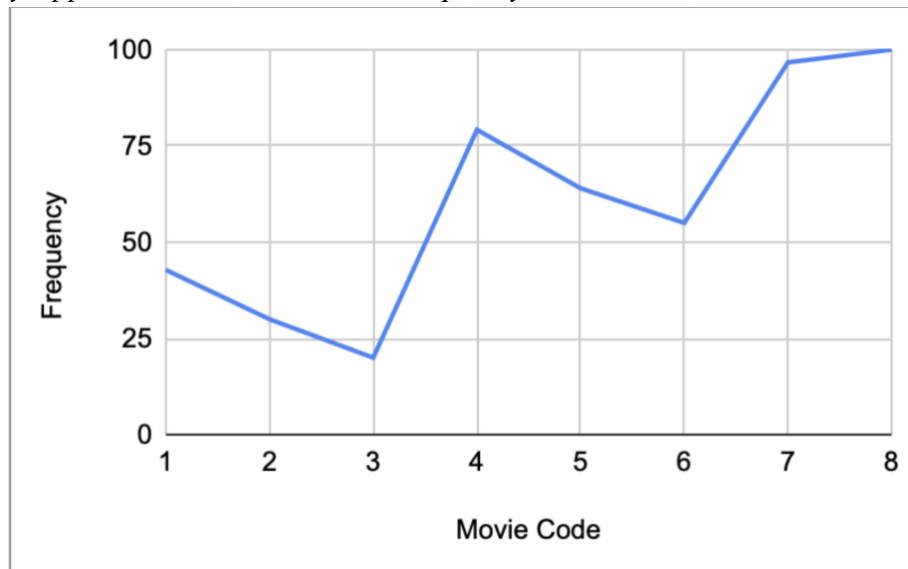
Results

A total of five love-interest characters were coded in 8 Spider-Man films. For Part A of the study, conformation to traditional or contemporary appearance, domestic behavior, occupation, and emotional characteristics was recorded. An 'Other' category was created for both or neither of the other categories. Any incidents in 'Other' were not part of the quantitative analysis (but were considered for qualitative analysis). Overall, the research found that gender roles became less traditional and more contemporary over time, while power dynamics became more equal.

Part A showed that appearance became more contemporary over the movies. In Movie 1, 57.2% of Mary Jane's incidents were coded as traditional, while 42.8% were coded as contemporary. In Movie 2, 70% of incidents were coded as traditional and 30% as contemporary. Movie 3 had two different love-interests. Together, 80% of the incidents were traditional and 20% were contemporary. This decrease in 'contemporariness' could be seen throughout the Andrew Garfield Saga (Movie 4 and 5), with 79.2% of incidents coded as contemporary in Movie 4 while 64% of incidents were coded as contemporary in Movie 5. But in the final Saga (Movie 6, 7, and 8), this trend changed, where in Movie 6, 7, and 8, contemporary incidents all trended upwards, with incidents occurring 55%, 96.7%, and 100% of the time, respectively. When looking at Spider-Man's love interests over time, traditional incidents decreased, and contemporary incidents increased. This is shown in Graph 1, illustrating 'contemporariness' starting at 42.8% (Movie 1) ending with 100% (Movie 3). However, the trend dips in Movie 3 and 6 before increasing dramatically. The most dramatic increase was from 20% to 80% (Movie 3 to 4). The lowest percent is 20% in Movie 3, while the highest percent is 100% in Movie 8.

Graph 1

Contemporary Appearance Characteristic Frequency



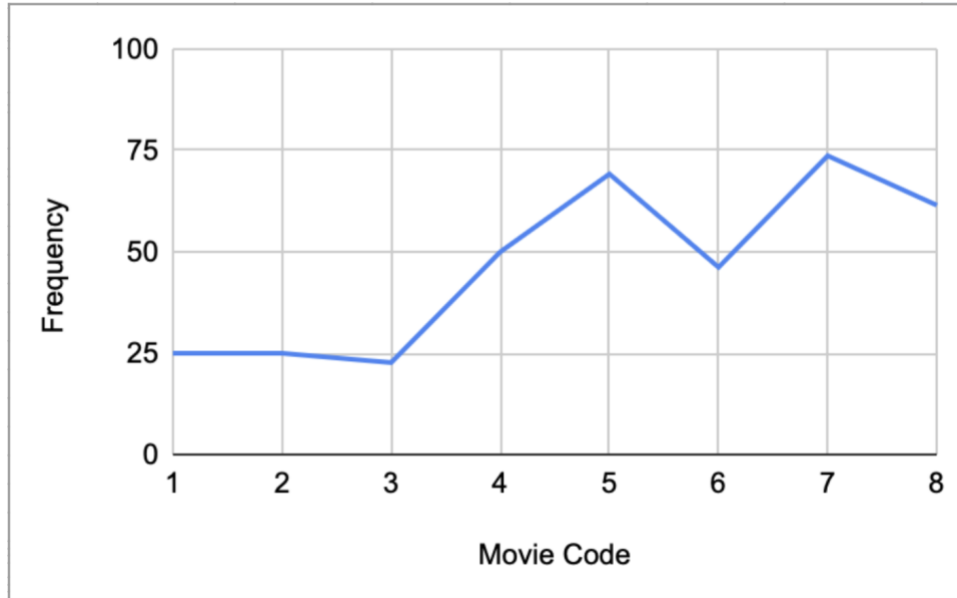
Domestic behaviors which were coded as traditional appeared in 2 movies, Movie 1 and Movie 2. In Movie 1.

With respect to occupation, all love-interests had at least one occupation in each movie. However, because the occupation was only noted when it first appeared, there was no frequency necessary. In Movie 1, Mary Jane had three occupations, two of which were traditional (waitress and actress), while one was 'other' (student). In Movie 2, Mary Jane was an actress/model (traditional). In Movie 3, Mary Jane was an actress and a waitress (traditional) while Gwen Stacy was a student (other) and a model (traditional). In Movies 4 and 5, Gwen Stacy had two occupations, student (other) and scientist (contemporary). In Movie 6, Liz Allan had two occupations: Science Club Captain (contemporary) and student (other). In Movie 7, MJ was a student (other). In Movie 8, MJ has two jobs: student (other) and ice cream worker (other).

Emotional characteristics were coded for frequency, like appearance was. In both Movie 1 and 2, 75% of emotional incidents were traditional and 25% contemporary. In Movie 3, 77.3% were traditional and 22.7% were contemporary. In Movie 4, 50% of incidents were contemporary and 30% were traditional, while in Movie 5, 69.2% of incidents were contemporary and 30.8% were traditional. In Movie 6, 46.2% were contemporary (a drop in frequency) and 53.8% were traditional. In Movie 7, the frequency of contemporary incidents leaped to 73.7% and in Movie 8, it dropped again to 61.5%. When these statistics were graphed as shown in Graph 2, it was evident that little to no change in 'contemporariness' occurred from Movie 1 to 3. However, from Movie 3 to 5 'contemporariness' steadily increased until Movie 6, where it dropped to 42.6%. It increased again to 73.7% in Movie 7 and then finally dipped to 61.5%.

Graph 2

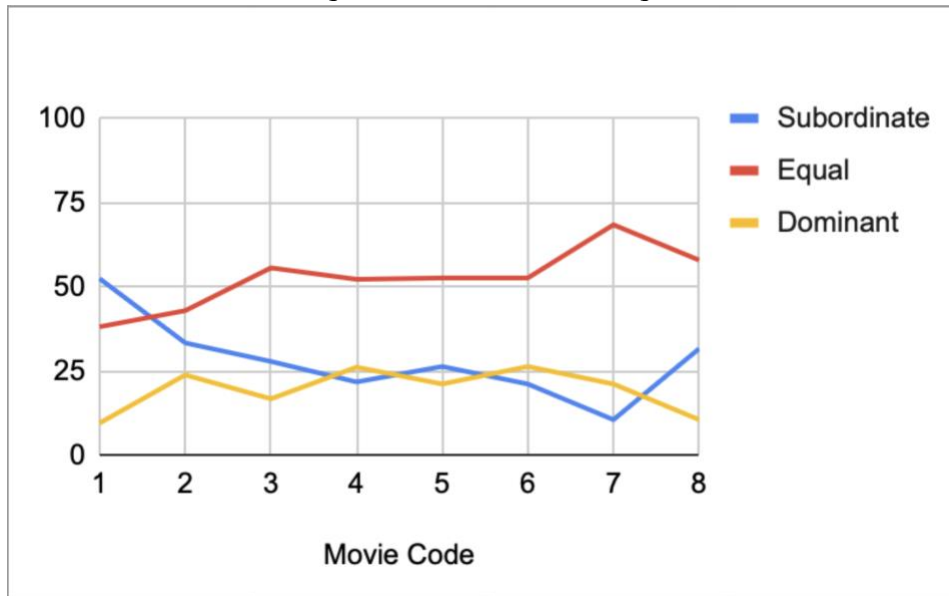
Contemporary Emotional Characteristic Frequency



As for Part B, equal dialogue and tone trended upward over the movies. Graph 3 shows, in Movie 1, 52.4% of the tone of incidents were subordinate, 38.1% were equal, and 9.5% were dominant. In Movie 2, 33.3% were subordinate, 42.9% were equal, and 23.8% were dominant. In Movie 3, with Mary Jane, 32.1% were subordinate, 57.1% were equal, and 10.7% were dominant; whereas with Gwen Stacy 12.5% were subordinate, 50% were equal, and 37.5% were dominant. In Movie 4, 21.7% were subordinate, 52.2% were equal, and 26.1% were dominant. In Movie 5, 26.3% were subordinate, 52% were equal, and 21.1% were dominant. In Movie 6, 21.1% were subordinate, 52.6% were equal, and 21.1% were dominant. In Movie 7 10.5% were subordinate, 68.4% were equal, and 22.1% were dominant, while in Movie 8, 31.6% of incidents were subordinate, 57.9% were equal, and 10.5% were dominant. The frequency of dominant incidents was low throughout the franchise, the highest frequency being 37.7% with Gwen Stacy in Movie 3. Additionally, subordinate and equal incidents mirrored one another.

Graph 3

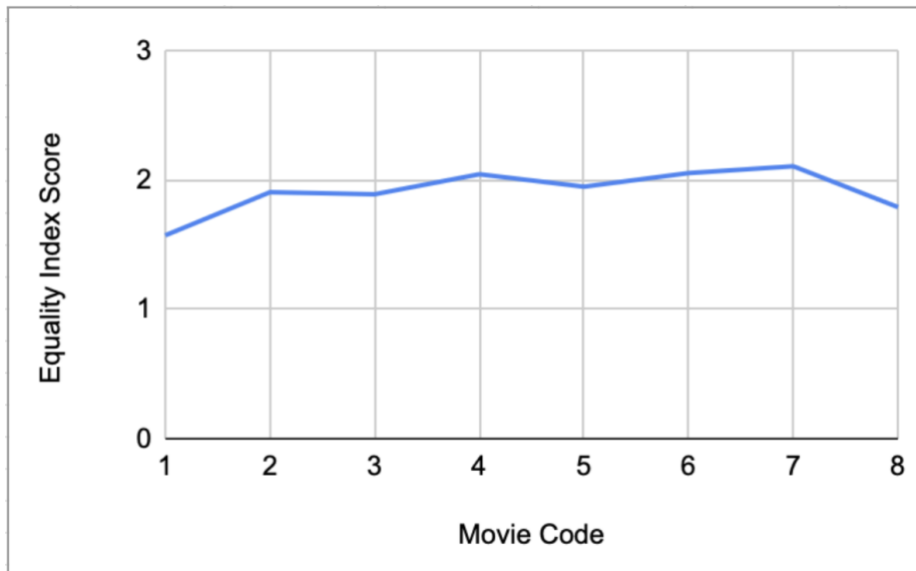
Dialogue and Tone - Subordinate, Equal, and Dominant Frequencies



In Graph 4, incidents were averaged for the Equality Index (EI). There was a general but very slight upward trend. However, this trend dropped in Movie 8. Most of the movies averaged slightly below the value for “equal” (2), meaning that there were more subordinate than dominant incidents in most films.

Graph 4

Dialogue and Tone Equality Index

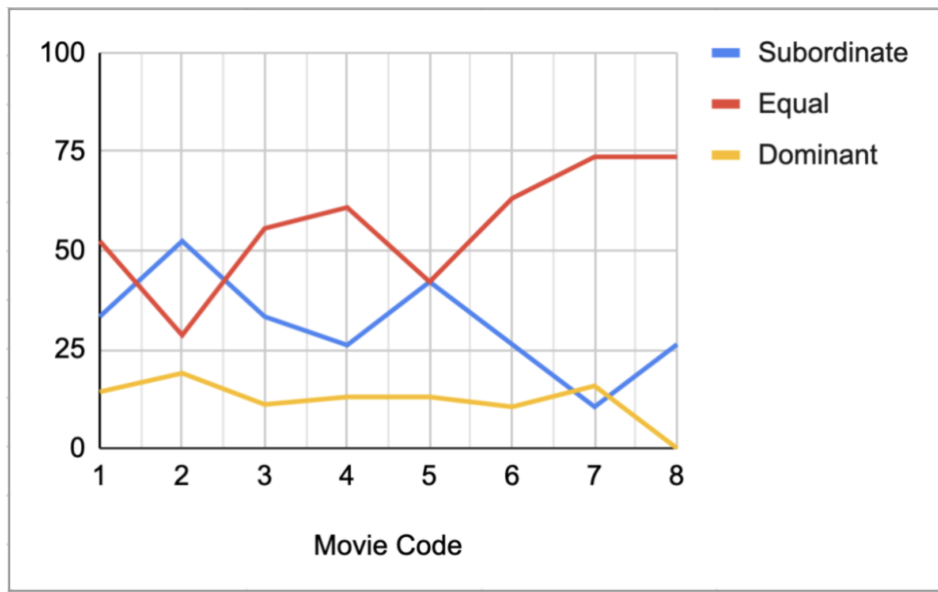


Part B also considered body language. In Movie 1, body language was subordinate in

33.3% of incidents, equal in 52.4%, and dominant in 14.3%. In Movie 2, 52.4% were subordinate, 28.6% equal, and 19% dominant. In Movie 3, 30% were subordinate, 50% equal, and 10% dominant. In Movie 4, 26.1% were subordinate, 60.9% equal, and 13% dominant. In Movie 5, 42.1% were subordinate, 41.2% equal, and 15.8% dominant. In Movies 6, 7, and 8, equal incidents jumped, from 63.2% to 73.7% to 73.7%, while subordinate incidents were 26.3%, 10.5%, and 26.3%, and dominant were 10.5%, 15.8%, and 0%, respectively. As shown in Graph 5, dominant and subordinate body language trended downward, subordinate more substantially. Contrarily, equal body language trended upward; however, Movie 2 and Movie 5 both saw a sudden drop in equal body language.

Graph 5

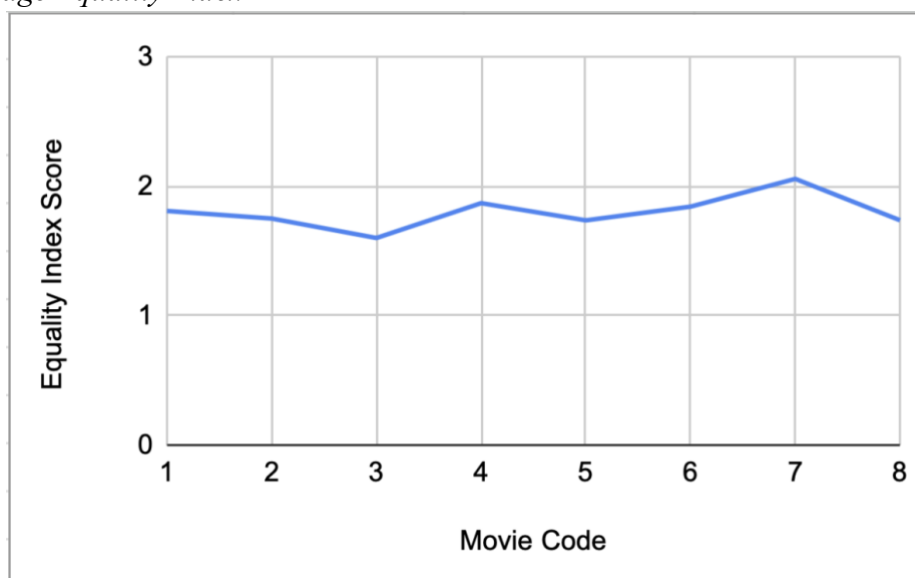
Body Language Subordinate, Equal, and Dominant Frequencies



When looking at Graph 6, there was a very slight upward trend in the Equality Index (EI) for body language. All movies tended to be below the value for equal, meaning incidents were more likely to be subordinate than dominant. This goes for all movies except for Movie 7, which is the only movie to have an EI over 2. The lowest EI values were in Movie 3 and Movie 8.

Graph 6

Body Language Equality Index



Discussion

These results illustrate several interesting patterns. First, over the course of the movie franchise, love-interests became more contemporary (with a few exceptions). The first movie of the first 2 sagas (the first 3 movies are the first saga, the fourth and fifth movies are the second saga, and Movies 6, 7, and 8 are the third saga) had the greatest frequency of contemporary appearance incidents (42.8% and 79.2% respectively); however, over each saga, this number dropped significantly. The only saga to go against this trend was saga 3, which rose continuously to 100%. Saga 1 had the lowest frequency of contemporary incidents, being the only saga to have domestic behaviors and traditional occupations. Emotional incidents hit low points in Movie 3 and 6, with ‘contemporariness’ frequencies of 22.7% and 46.2%, respectively. Because this trend did not align with the other findings, it could be inferred that there was a significant change with respect to love interests in these films.

In Movie 3, this might be because two love-interests are present, vying for Peter Parker’s attention. Since both love-interests adhered to more traditional appearances and emotional characteristics in this movie, it may be that a powerful man (such as Spider-Man) was interested in traditional femininity when choosing a partner (with 2 love interests there was more choice here than in other movies). For example, Gwen Stacy had the following exchange with Peter, “Peter Parker: You are really gonna dig this joint. Gwen Stacy: Do you think I’m dressed all right? Too fancy or... Are you kidding me? Peter Parker: You’re looking fine, babe.” (Raimi, 2007, 01:35:53). Similarly in Movie 6, Peter’s initial love-interest (Liz Allen) showed more traditional femininity, compared to the more contemporary MJ, who became his official love-interest in Movies 7 and 8. Because there was a trend of increasing ‘traditional-ness’ when there were two love-interests present, there seems to be a connection between traditional femininity

and partner appeal: the more traditional, the more appeal you have as a superhero's partner, which is a common female stereotype. Additionally, though all love-interests were students, it should be noted that earlier films depicted the love-interest as incapable students (specifically in male-dominated subjects like science), which is another common female stereotype. For example, in Movie 3, Peter Parker explained how Gwen Stacy is "in [his] science class" and that "[it's] not her best subject" (Raimi, 2007, 1:52:58). However, in later films the love-interests were depicted as Oxford scholarship winners (Movie 5), Decathlon coaches (Movie 6), and aspiring MIT students (Movie 8). This occupational/representational phenomenon is like Emily W.W.T.'s findings, where female characters in newer superhero films are depicted as more capable, especially in science (W.W.T., 2020, pp. 421-423).

Though these representations of love-interests gender roles become more contemporary (except for the relationship between attractiveness and partner appeal), equality does not mirror this pattern. In Part B, the upward trend in the frequency of partner equality only increases slightly over the franchise for both incidents of dialogue and tone, as well as body language. Though depictions of love-interest as subordinate dropped significantly over the franchise, with love-interests becoming less victimized because of Peter's words and actions: "Peter Parker: Harry. Where is she? Where is he keeping her? - He's got M.J" (Raimi, 2004, 01:44:15), this only slightly increased equal but not dominant depictions.

One of the most interesting findings was that throughout the franchise, incidents of Spider-Man's love interests being dominant were rare, even when they may exhibit more equality (as occurred over the course of the franchise). These findings suggest that, although love-interests became more equal over time, they did not become more dominant, even when their gender roles changed, as seen in Part A above. One example of this trend was that, even though love-interests became more involved in Spider-Man's endeavors over time, they were only ever depicted as his sidekicks and could not make decisions for themselves, their relationship, or the world. In Movie 5, Peter stuck Gwen to a car even though she was the only person who could stop the villain, as seen in the following exchange "Gwen Stacy: Really? You web me to a car? What are you, a caveman? Spider-Man: You shouldn't be here. Gwen Stacy: You tie me up to go off to war? I know how to help you!" (Webb, 2014, 1:52:49). Similarly in Movie 8, Peter doesn't honor MJ's wishes, even though she can help him: "Peter Parker: You can't come with me. It's too dangerous... I can't do this if I know that you're in danger... MJ: Fine" (Watts, 2021, 0:58:02). Possibly, this trend may be because love interests are not acceptable nor desirable to Spider-Man or the audience if they are dominant; so, the love interests can only be dominant infrequently to maintain a socially-desirable relationship with Spider-Man (future research should be done in order to further investigate these speculations). Thus, even though love-interests become more contemporary and equal, they cannot be more dominant.

Limitations and Future Research

It is critical to consider the limitations of this study to understand the confines of these

results. First, because the interpretation of film is inherently subjective, the results of this study could be different than another researcher might find, especially someone with more education in gender and film studies. However, these findings still provide much needed insights into how gender and power are depicted in superhero films, regardless of the researcher's point of view. Secondly, as the research unfolded, it was evident that certain variables and instances could have been considered differently, changing the results of the study. However, due to the initial protocols and coding, they were not analyzed. For instance, pictures, posters, and voice-memos of love-interests as well as her interactions with other characters were not considered in this study. Additionally, the research design did not include a comparison between movies with a female superhero and her male love interest, which could have reinforced or weakened these findings. This should be studied in future research to fully understand the extent gender roles, stereotypes, and power-dynamics apply to the heterosexual superhero dynamic. Another area of future research could be screentime. Screentime of each love-interest was not calculated in this study. All these variables should be studied in future research to identify gender roles/stereotypes and power dynamics more accurately between Peter Parker/Spider-Man and his love-interests. For example, future research should consider love-interest screentime, which would uncover the love-interests significance to the plot and identify if female screentime has mirrored the fight by actresses for increased equality in Hollywood and Marvel movies (Heldman, 2017).

Conclusion

Love-interests in the Spider-Man franchise became less traditional and more contemporary over time. These findings can be triangulated. They are true for love-interests appearance and emotional characteristics, for their occupation (where love-interests have more contemporary careers such as becoming a scientist or pursuing higher education), and for their domestic behaviors, where contemporary femininity became more prevalent over the course of the movies. Love interests also became more equal and less subordinate to Peter Parker over the movie franchise. However, love-interests did not become more dominant in their relationship with Peter, showing that while love-interests can be equal to Peter Parker/Spider-Man, they can not be dominant. Additionally, female characters were more valued when they conformed to traditional standards of femininity, at least when they were competing for Peter Parker/Spider Man's attention. The inability of female characters to be dominant in a relationship *and* appealing when conforming to contemporary standards of femininity demonstrates how female characters are still held back by traditional themes in superhero movies. It also suggests that society, or at least the audience members of Spider Man movies, finds these themes appealing, potentially favoring less contemporary and dominant women and girls. As movies and movie ideology reflect the current culture and society they are produced in (Horváth, 2023), these findings suggest that although it is acceptable that women in movies and in real life are more contemporary, they may still be limited in how they show power in their relationships. So, women who align their expression with contemporary femininity may find it harder to be dominant in heterosexual relationships, and less sexually appealing. Thus, movies and society still have a way to go before women and men are truly equal, both regarding gender roles and power dynamics.

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