



Representation of Masculinity in Movie Captain America (The First Avenger)

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the representation of masculinity through the character of Steve Rogers in *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), focusing on his physical transformation, leadership, and self-sacrifice. Employing Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory and Janet Saltzman Chafetz's framework of masculinity, the analysis explores how these theoretical perspectives illuminate the portrayal of masculinity in superhero narratives. The film highlights traditional masculine ideals such as physical strength, leadership, and moral integrity, while also presenting a more nuanced portrayal by integrating emotional vulnerability and intellectual capabilities into Rogers' character. The study suggests that Captain America both reflects historical gender norms and provides space for evolving conceptions of masculinity, offering new possibilities for gender representation in superhero films. This research contributes to understanding how superhero narratives shape societal perceptions of masculinity and challenges hegemonic ideals by depicting a more complex, multifaceted model of male identity.

Keywords: *Cultural Narratives; Gender Representation; Masculinity; Semiotics; Superhero Films.*

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INTRODUCTION

Superhero films have long been a dominant force in the modern film industry, shaping cultural narratives and reinforcing societal ideals. *Captain America: The First Avenger* serves as an introduction to recurring patterns in Marvel superhero films, which consistently adhere to unwritten rules: adapting storylines from comics and featuring a male protagonist (Benhamou, 2022; Qiu, 2024 Dittmer, 2005). Chris Evans' portrayal of Captain America has cultivated a loyal fan base, eager to follow his appearances in *The Avengers* franchise. The release of the "First Look" video for *Avengers: Infinity War* in February 2017 sparked widespread speculation about Evans' future in the role, demonstrating the character's significance in both cinematic and cultural landscapes (Dungan, 2023, Scott, 2017).

Cinema, as an artistic medium, integrates literature, music, and performance to craft compelling narratives that resonate with audiences (Jiang, 2024; Wu, 2023). The visual and auditory aspects of film make it an effective communication tool,

influencing public perceptions and cultural discourse (Pardy, 2016; Wulandari & Thoyibi, 2022). Marvel, a dominant franchise in the film industry, employs strategic marketing to expand its influence beyond cinema, leveraging merchandise, apparel, and consumer goods to establish a profound connection with its audience (Lund, 2015). This integrated marketing strategy not only enhances brand visibility but also cultivates a strong sense of fandom and emotional attachment to its superhero characters (Kent, 2021; Maghfiroh, 2023).

Marvel's marketing efforts historically target boys and young men, aligning their narratives with traditional masculine ideals of strength, heroism, and military prowess (Arora, 2023). This approach reflects broader societal norms that celebrate physical power and courage as defining aspects of masculinity (Suwankaewmanee, 2021). Gender discourse further emphasizes the social construction of masculinity, which is shaped by societal norms and expectations (Waling, 2022). Superheroes like Captain America, whose character is deeply embedded in military discipline and nationalistic themes, represent an archetypal masculinity characterized by courage, duty, and strength. These portrayals entertain audiences while simultaneously reinforcing or challenging gender stereotypes depending on their interpretation.

The American conceptualization of gender traditionally adheres to a binary framework, associating masculinity with traits such as strength, competitiveness, and authority while linking femininity with tenderness, emotionality, and purity (Hyde et al., 2019; Manaworapong, 2022; Vescio & Schermerhorn, 2021). However, contemporary superhero narratives have begun to integrate more nuanced gender portrayals, wherein male and female superheroes occasionally exhibit "gender visionary" traits—blending strength, independence, and competitiveness in ways that challenge traditional gender roles.

This study examines the construction of masculinity in *Captain America: The First Avenger* through the portrayal of Steve Rogers. Over time, masculinity has evolved, giving rise to the concept of "New Masculinity" or "Metrosexuality," which emphasizes appearance and self-care. This shift reflects an increasingly image-conscious society influenced by contemporary lifestyles. The analysis focuses on Steve Rogers' character development, particularly his physical transformation, which serves as a symbolic representation of masculinity in the film.

To support this analysis, the study utilizes two theoretical frameworks: Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory of representation and Janet Saltzman Chafetz's theory of masculinity. Peirce's semiotics provides a structural approach to understanding how signs and symbols construct masculinity in film, while Chafetz's framework categorizes different aspects of masculinity, offering a comprehensive analysis of Steve Rogers' character. The integration of these theories allows for a deeper exploration of how the film portrays masculinity and its broader implications for gender roles in superhero narratives.

This research contributes significantly to academic discourse on gender representation in popular media, particularly within the superhero genre. By examining how *Captain America: The First Avenger* constructs masculinity, this study highlights the interplay between cultural narratives and societal norms surrounding gender roles. Additionally, the research explores the intersection of film narratives, marketing strategies, and audience perceptions, illustrating how Marvel employs

traditional and modern masculine ideals to shape its brand and foster fandom. Situated within the broader framework of media studies and gender discourse, this analysis enhances our understanding of the relationship between media and societal values. It also serves as a valuable resource for educators and researchers examining themes of gender, representation, and cultural influence in contemporary cinema.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study applies two complementary theoretical frameworks to analyze the representation of masculinity in *Captain America: The First Avenger*: Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory and Janet Saltzman Chafetz's masculinity framework (2006). Peirce's semiotic approach provides a structural lens for examining how signs and symbols convey masculinity in the film, while Chafetz's framework contextualizes these representations within broader sociocultural constructions of gender. Integrating these theories allows for a more nuanced exploration of how Steve Rogers' character embodies both traditional and evolving masculine ideals.

Peirce's triadic model of semiotics, which consists of the representamen (the sign itself), object (what the sign refers to), and interpretant (the meaning derived from the sign), forms the foundation for analyzing how masculinity is visually and narratively represented in the film. This model categorizes signs into icons, indexes, and symbols, each contributing distinctively to meaning making. In *Captain America: The First Avenger*, Rogers' shield serves as an icon, symbolizing patriotism and heroism, while his physical transformation functions as a symbol, reinforcing hegemonic masculinity by equating strength with capability. His battle scars serve as an index, signifying endurance and bravery. Through Peirce's semiotics, the study examines how these elements construct masculinity and reinforce cultural ideals about male heroism.

The semiotic method in film analysis helps decode visual, auditory, and narrative elements that contribute to meaning making. This includes identifying signs and symbols, analyzing denotation and connotation, examining narrative structures and character representations, and understanding ideological constructs embedded in the film. These approaches reveal how masculinity is visually reinforced and embedded within superhero narratives, often aligning with dominant societal expectations of male identity.

Alongside Peirce's semiotic approach, Chafetz's masculinity framework provides a sociological perspective on how masculinity is constructed and depicted in media. Chafetz (2006) identifies seven dimensions of masculinity, which serve as key analytical categories in this study:

a) Physical Appearance - Masculinity is associated with physical strength, athleticism, and bravery. b) Functional Role - Men are expected to be protectors, providers, and figures of authority. c) Sexuality - Masculinity often includes experiences and relationships with women, reinforcing heteronormativity. d) Emotional Control - Men are expected to regulate or suppress their emotions, particularly in public or high-stress situations. e) Intellectual Attributes - Men are perceived as intelligent, rational, and strategic thinkers. f) Interpersonal Traits - Masculinity includes leadership, dominance, responsibility, and independence. g) Personal Character - Traits such as ambition, competitiveness, morality, and perseverance define masculine identity.

This framework provides insight into how Steve Rogers embodies and challenges these traits throughout the film. Before his transformation, Rogers is physically weak but demonstrates moral integrity, resilience, and strategic intelligence. After becoming Captain America, he assumes a heroic masculine role, reinforcing traditional ideals of strength and leadership while also displaying emotional depth and ethical responsibility. His restrained romance with Peggy Carter reflects conventional masculinity, where honor and self-restraint define male sexuality. However, his emotional openness and strong sense of duty introduce a more modern interpretation of masculinity, moving beyond rigid, hegemonic constructs.

This literature review situates the study within broader gender and media discourse. Gender norms in superhero films often reinforce a binary male/female dichotomy, portraying hypermasculine heroes with idealized "hard bodies" that emphasize dominance, resilience, and heroism. The "Marvel body" exemplifies this standard, shaping audience perceptions of masculinity as both natural and normative (Brown, 2016). However, *Captain America: The First Avenger* also subtly challenges this model by incorporating elements of emotional vulnerability and ethical responsibility into its portrayal of heroism.

Integrating Peirce's semiotics with Chafetz's masculinity framework enables a more comprehensive analysis of how masculinity is constructed, reinforced, and, at times, redefined in superhero cinema. While Peirce's theory deconstructs visual and symbolic elements in the film, Chafetz's framework situates these portrayals within broader social and cultural contexts. This dual approach highlights the intersection between media representation and societal expectations of masculinity, contributing to ongoing discussions on gender representation in contemporary cinema.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research approach (Susanto et al., 2024), employing semiotic and content analysis to examine the representation of masculinity in *Captain America: The First Avenger*. The analysis is structured around Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory and Janet Saltzman Chafetz's masculinity framework. The primary data source consists of key scenes from *Captain America: The First Avenger* that highlight Steve Rogers' transformation and depiction of masculinity. Secondary sources, including academic literature on gender studies and superhero narratives, are used to provide contextual support for the analysis.

Peirce's "Triangle of Meaning" is applied to interpret the film's signs and symbols. Each scene is analyzed based on three components: representamen (the form of the sign), object (the referent, such as masculinity traits), and interpretant (the derived meaning). Elements such as visual imagery, dialogue, and iconic symbols – including Steve Rogers' physical transformation and his shield – are examined for their role in constructing masculinity.

Additionally, Chafetz's seven dimensions of masculinity – physical appearance, functionality, sexuality, emotional control, intellectual attributes, interpersonal traits, and personal character – are used to categorize Steve Rogers' portrayal. For example, his physical strength aligns with masculinity's physical dimension, while his leadership role embodies interpersonal traits.

To ensure research validity, findings are cross-referenced with existing literature and reviewed by experts in gender studies. Ethical considerations are adhered to by properly attributing sources and maintaining objectivity in analysis. The integration of Peirce's semiotics and Chafetz's masculinity framework provides a comprehensive lens for evaluating gender representation in film. Semiotics enables a systematic interpretation of visual and narrative signs, while Chafetz's framework offers a structured categorization of masculinity traits. The combination of these methods enhances the depth of analysis, allowing for a richer understanding of how masculinity is constructed within superhero films.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This part explores the representation of masculinity through the character of Steve Rogers in *Captain America: The First Avenger*. The analysis utilizes semiotic theory by Charles Sanders Peirce and masculinity theory by Janet Saltzman Chafetz to examine how masculine ideals are portrayed in the film.

Captain America: The First Avenger (2011), directed by Joe Johnston, is part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe and explores themes of heroism, sacrifice, and masculinity, particularly during World War II era. The film stars Chris Evans as Steve Rogers, a frail young man who transforms into the iconic superhero Captain America after being injected with a serum that enhances his physical strength. The movie investigates traditional masculine ideals, such as physical power, leadership, and self-sacrifice, aligning Steve Rogers with these norms. The findings reveal how the film combines both traditional and modern masculine ideals in shaping Rogers as a heroic figure.

To analyze the representation of masculinity in *Captain America: The First Avenger*, this study employs Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic framework, which offers a systematic approach to understanding how meaning is constructed through visual and narrative signs. Peirce's semiotics consists of three key components: representamen (the sign itself), object (the concept it refers to), and interpretant (the meaning derived from the sign). This method is particularly useful for analyzing how Steve Rogers' character visually and narratively embodies different aspects of masculinity. For instance, his transformation scene from a frail man to a muscular super-soldier serves as a powerful visual representation of traditional masculine ideals, where physical strength is equated with heroism and capability (Peirce, 1931). Similarly, his role as a wartime leader and his self-sacrificial act in the film reinforce dominant masculine archetypes often associated with military heroism (Connell, 1995; Chafetz, 2006). By applying Peirce's framework, this study examines how the film constructs masculinity through three critical aspects: Steve Rogers' physical transformation, his leadership in wartime, and his ultimate act of self-sacrifice. These elements not only reflect conventional ideals of masculinity but also highlight the intersection between cultural narratives and gender expectations in superhero films.

Exploring the representation of masculinity in *Captain America: The First Avenger* requires a structured analytical approach. Janet Saltzman Chafetz's masculinity framework categorizes male identity into several attributes that define traditional masculine roles. Chafetz (2006) emphasizes that masculinity is not a singular construct but a combination of physical, emotional, intellectual, and interpersonal traits shaped by cultural and historical contexts. Applying this model to Steve Rogers' character

allows for an examination of how his transformation, leadership, and emotional depth both align with and challenge societal norms of masculinity.

Captain America: The First Avenger (2011), directed by Joe Johnston, presents themes of heroism, sacrifice, and masculinity within the historical setting of World War II. Chris Evans portrays Steve Rogers, a frail young man who undergoes a transformation into Captain America after receiving the Super-Soldier Serum. This transformation symbolizes a shift from physical weakness to an idealized masculine archetype, reinforcing hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995). However, the film does not solely emphasize traditional masculine ideals. Elements of modern masculinity emerge through Rogers' moral integrity and emotional vulnerability, offering a broader perspective on male identity (Gill, 2003; Chafetz, 2006).

Analyzing Steve Rogers' masculinity through Chafetz's seven dimensions provides deeper insights into his character portrayal:

- a. Physical Appearance: The transformation from a frail figure to a muscular super-soldier reflects societal ideals of male physical perfection, reinforcing the link between strength and heroism.
- b. Functional Role: Rogers embodies the masculine role of protector and provider as a soldier and leader, ensuring the safety of his team.
- c. Sexuality: His restrained romance with Peggy Carter aligns with traditional masculinity, where honor and emotional restraint define romantic success.
- d. Emotional Control: Although demonstrating stoicism in battle, Rogers exhibits emotional depth in personal moments, such as grieving the presumed loss of Bucky Barnes. This nuanced portrayal challenges rigid emotional suppression in traditional masculinity (Gill, 2003).
- e. Intellectual Traits: Tactical intelligence and problem-solving abilities characterize Rogers' leadership, reinforcing the expectation that masculinity includes both strength and intellect.
- f. Interpersonal Traits: Loyalty, responsibility, and team leadership reflect masculinity as relational rather than purely individualistic (Chafetz, 2006).
- g. Personal Character: A strong moral compass, ambition, and selflessness highlight Rogers as a heroic figure, balancing physical dominance with ethical responsibility.

Findings suggest that *Captain America: The First Avenger* merges traditional and modern masculinity, reinforcing classic heroic attributes while incorporating emotional depth and ethical leadership. Situating these portrayals within Chafetz's masculinity framework highlights how superhero films both reflect and reshape societal expectations of male identity.

Interpretation and Cultural Implications

Using Peirce's semiotic theory, *Captain America: The First Avenger* represents masculinity as a blend of physical strength, intellectual leadership, and emotional restraint. Chafetz's framework further emphasizes traditional masculine traits, while also suggesting evolving gender roles through Rogers' moments of vulnerability and

moral courage. This layered portrayal of masculinity reflects societal norms of the time while also allowing for broader interpretations of male identity in modern media.

The representation of masculinity in the film demonstrates both a reflection of historical ideals and a step toward a more complex, nuanced portrayal of male identity in popular culture. As superhero films continue to shape and challenge societal expectations, Captain America highlights the interplay between traditional and evolving notions of masculinity. This portrayal not only appeals to historical gender norms but also opens space for reinterpretation of what it means to be masculine in contemporary society.

In the context of sex and gender, masculinity is not just a biological fact, but a social construct influenced by cultural narratives. According to the theory of hegemonic masculinity, the culturally idealized form of masculinity is linked to traits such as strength, dominance, and heroism, all of which are depicted through Steve Rogers. His character aligns with these masculine attributes, reinforcing societal expectations, while also providing a platform for questioning and evolving the traditional understanding of gender roles.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study reveal how *Captain America: The First Avenger* constructs masculinity through the character of Steve Rogers, emphasizing his physical transformation, leadership, and self-sacrifice. The application of Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory and Janet Saltzman Chafetz's masculinity framework provides a deeper understanding of how Rogers embodies both traditional and evolving masculine ideals. Physical strength, leadership, and moral integrity remain central to his character, while emotional vulnerability and intellectual capability add complexity to the portrayal of masculinity in superhero narratives.

The dual representation of masculinity in the film reflects broader societal shifts in gender norms. Rogers' transformation from a frail man to a superhero reinforces the conventional association of masculinity with physical power, yet his leadership and self-sacrificial tendencies align with hegemonic masculinity as outlined by Connell & Messerschmidt (2005). However, the film also presents masculinity in a more dynamic and evolving form, particularly through Rogers' emotional expressiveness and strategic thinking, which challenge the rigid expectations of male strength and dominance (Gill, 2003).

These findings suggest significant implications for both media studies and public perceptions of masculinity. Superhero films like *Captain America* shape contemporary understandings of male identity by balancing traditional masculine traits with more inclusive narratives that embrace emotional intelligence and ethical responsibility. Future superhero portrayals may continue this trend by depicting heroes not solely defined by physical dominance but also by intellectual and emotional depth.

The methodological approach using semiotic analysis and Chafetz's masculinity framework proves valuable in examining masculinity in a global media landscape. The flexibility of these frameworks allows for comparative studies across different cultures, providing insights into how masculinity is constructed, contested, and redefined in diverse cinematic traditions.

Despite these contributions, the study acknowledges certain limitations. The analysis is based on a single film, and further research should explore the evolution of masculinity across multiple entries in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) and other superhero franchises. Additionally, audience reception studies would provide a richer understanding of how viewers interpret and internalize these representations. Expanding the scope to different cultural contexts would further enhance the applicability of these findings.

Ultimately, this study contributes to the broader discourse on gender in media, reinforcing the view that masculinity is a socially constructed and evolving concept. The portrayal of Steve Rogers offers both a reflection of historical gender norms and a blueprint for future interpretations of male identity in superhero films. As gender roles continue to shift, film and media will remain crucial in shaping and challenging societal perceptions of masculinity.

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