

## White Paper: Does Wokeness Explain the Downward Trend in Superhero Movies?

Superhero movies appear to be on a downward trend when it comes to popularity and success in the box office as of late. While there are many opinions by consumers on why this trend is taking place, a few similar ways of thinking emerge. One of the more prominent beliefs is that “wokeness” and pandering to social justice is the reason superhero movies and projects are becoming highly unsuccessful. Upon a cursory glance, there seems to be a high amount of merit in this conjecture, but a deeper dive is necessary to highlight that distinct factors may be at work when it comes to the downward trend.

Before diving deeply into the downward trend of superhero movies, it is important to establish the foundations on this topic. Wokeness in this context refers to being aware and pertaining to social issues. Wokeness encapsulates many ideas, including social justice, representation, diversity, acceptance, and more. Wokeness can be traced all the way back to the 20<sup>th</sup> century with Black individuals and communities pushing for more awareness and change against the discrimination they faced through various forms of mediums, including music, books, and more (Romano, 2020). This showcases how this idea of highlighting injustice is not a novel, contemporary topic but has always existed and has been represented in various forms of media. This also includes comic books, which were the most popular medium for superheroes until the last couple of decades. The X-Men, created in 1963 by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, were heavily inspired by the Civil Rights Movement, and famous figures associated with the movement, such as Martin Luther King and Malcolm X (Ciampaglia, 2023). The X-Men served as a metaphor or allegory for the injustice and oppression minorities faced daily during the time period. Black Panther, created in 1966 by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, is another example of how social changes were impacting comic books, as he was an iconic black superhero. These superheroes continue to

be popular today and have served to reflect various social changes, trends, and issues throughout the past 60 years.

While these two examples are a poignant representation of how diversity and woke ideas have existed in comic books since the 60s, it is important to acknowledge that times have changed, and people may have much different attitudes to the topics at hand. The Legal Defense Fund is one of many sources that note the change of the concept of wokeness from the 1900s to around the 2010s, when the word woke became more of an umbrella term to encapsulate all issues related to social justice and issues (Robinson, 2022). The article further posits that the politicization of wokeness has made it significantly more divisive and caused the polarization behind the concepts it embodies. It is important to consider how pushing diversity in comic books would work in such a politically charged and divisive climate. Luckily, a majorly popular character exists: Miles Morales Spider-Man.

Miles Morales Spider-Man debuted in 2011, who was created by Brian Michael Bendis and Sara Pichelli (Stone, 2023). Miles was announced to replace Peter Parker and would be the new Spider-Man who was also Black and Latino. In the first few years of his publication history, being Latino was not a major facet of his character and was developed further in later years (Mills, 2023). Despite this, the character received great backlash and negative reception. While it is difficult to access exact sales numbers, the website Comichron acts as a database to display comic books sales since 1984, and the sales trends for Miles Morales highlight how him replacing Peter Parker caused sales numbers to plummet. This could initially be used as evidence as to how wokeness ruined a popular character and devastated the sales for said character, however, this is far from reality.

While the sales for Miles Morales comics were underwhelming at the beginning of his debut, he is now one of the most profitable and recognizable Marvel characters. *Into the Spider-Verse* and *Across the Spider-Verse*, earning \$375.5 million and over \$600 million respectively, are some of the highest grossing superhero films in the past 5 years, especially with respect to their lower budgets compared to other superhero movies (Scott, 2023). So how did Miles go from largely unsuccessful to an exceedingly successful and profitable superhero? The initial idea of wokeness and its volatility around the time of Miles's conception may play a part in explaining this trend. Comic book readers might have perceived Miles Morales as Spider-Man but Black and Latino initially, which also coincided with the rise of more pronounced and purposeful social justice in media, whether authentic or not, by many major franchises. Over the years however, Miles Morales proved to be different than Peter Parker Spider-Man in many ways, and he carved out a distinct and unique identity for himself, while also allowing writers to tell stories about that identity which could not be done through Peter Parker. Miles Morales became an authentic character and showed the consumers that he had a reason to exist for reasons other than just being diverse or a quick capitalization on a growing social trend. Authenticity is important and it comes in many shapes and forms to consumers, as creating that genuine sense of authenticity can be highly beneficial for many types of products (Nunes, J. C., et al., 2021). Authenticity communicates legitimacy, sense of intimacy, and standards to the consumer, which allows for greater and better engagement with the product.

With that being said, why do a large number of consumers believe superhero movies are failing due to wokeness? There are a few factors for this, but one reasonable explanation is that the bad movies stick out more than the good ones. When it comes to most facets of life, people tend to focus more on the bad compared to the good (Baumeister, R. F., et al., 2001). The reason

this is most likely applicable to this situation is that an observation of superhero movies that have released in the past couple of decades shows that there are significantly more well-received superhero movies that would be considered woke than badly received ones. The reason wokeness may be taking the forefront of the blame is that movies in general are becoming more transparently diverse and socially aware, so placing heavier blame on it compared to overproduction, budget/quality cuts, and other more concealed issues in the background with the movies may be easier as a knee-jerk reaction or be influenced by biases. This negative focus on wokeness may be tied to previously mentioned political motives where individuals may pin more blame on the wokeness to validate their beliefs or notions rather than actual issues in the movies.

The idea that superhero movies are dropping in quality is further supported by the recent move by DC to put an end to all their current planned superhero movies and create a cohesive, meticulously planned movie universe helmed by James Gunn planned to start in 2025 (Faughnder, 2023). DC seems to have taken a wider lensed approach by not placing unnecessary focus on wokeness, and instead focusing on the consumer's need to experience fresh, high-quality content.

If wokeness is not the underlying issue but the perceived issue, then what can be done with superhero movies to promote diversity while making popular, well-received products? Firstly, it is important to circle back to authenticity and the various components brought up in Nunes, J. C., et al., (2021). In this specific case, the components of authenticity labeled originality, integrity, and proficiency are highly poignant. Developing new and diverse characters as genuine characters, while using them to tell unique and different stories that may otherwise not be possible can show audiences that representation in superhero movies is not diversity for the sake of diversity, but something much greater than that. The recent marketing from Marvel in

general seems to also be creating an inauthentic image. The recent financial failure, *The Marvels*, seems to suffer greatly from this problem. Each trailer or related media seems to be marketing the movie from a different angle and tone, which causes incoherence, creating a lack of faith from the producers and to the consumers (McCoy, 2023). Promoting one identity and sticking to it for a movie, especially when marketing an already more divisive movie such as *The Marvels*, is important in communicating authenticity and honesty to the audience.

Besides authenticity, striving to create the best movies should be a clear goal for Marvel. This fall in quality and rise in quantity has been recently admitted by Disney CEO Bob Iger as well (LaBee, 2023). The article further explains Bob Iger's plans to work towards making and producing better movies. This supports the lack of quality taking place in the superhero movie industry. *The Boys*, *Invincible*, and *Gen V* are all superhero projects by Amazon's Prime Video, that seem to be successful in an oversaturated landscape of a surplus of mediocre superhero movies (Surrey, 2023). The three previously mentioned shows have received praise and good ratings, especially the first two, and they are politically charged and tackle many important social justice issues; these issues even serving as major plot points or focal points of certain episodes or arcs. These three shows, while admittedly divisive certainly due to their subject matter, could be used as evidence that competent and high-quality superhero shows and movies can be popular, well-liked, and include woke themes.

Before concluding, it is highly important to delve into why this diversity in superhero media is important. Good and positive representation of sexual and ethnic minorities can lead to better diversity attitudes in the viewers (Żerebecki, B. G., et al., 2021). Movies can be a great way to introduce and inform people about new cultures, sexual orientations, and more; when it is done in a healthy way that paints the identities truthfully and fairly. Further, the importance of

good representation is valuable as media tends to place people of color into preexisting stereotypes, such as Black and Latino people in media being associated with crime, poverty, etc. in various forms of media (Dixon, T., et al., 2019). These bad representations are not only harmful to the population being unfairly represented but could promote a cycle of negativity as these bad representations can shift real world attitudes to negativity, which could then lead to further stereotyping and further negative representation. Breaking norms and showcasing new, well-thought-out representations can have major beneficial effects in the real world, while promoting forms of thinking that allow different people groups to view each other beyond preexisting stereotypes. Positive and authentic representation of groups in media can greatly boost public consciousness favorably towards minorities as well as provide minorities with a greater sense of identity, especially when considering children (Roxanne L. Schroeder-Arce., 2013). While superhero movies are aimed at all age groups and types of audiences, there is a large catering to children and younger age groups. This only further exacerbates the importance of not only representation, but quality, authentic, and healthy representation. It is highly valuable to promote a strong identity in children from different backgrounds and promote social cohesion and acceptance for all age groups and contexts.

Overall, the wokeness issue in superhero movies does not boil down to the existence of wokeness in superhero media, but the wokeness not being authentic and most superhero movies not being as high quality as they were in the past. The general consensus supports that more good superhero movies with wokeness exist than bad superhero movies with wokeness. Superhero movies need to focus on raising their quality and being more authentic to bridge the disconnect between certain groups of audiences and producers when it comes to wokeness. Wokeness and social justice are not simple issues to represent and discuss, however, thus nuanced, adequate

executions of wokeness are required, especially with how impactful these movies can be to all types of people and societies holistically.

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