

Investigating Consumer-Brand Relationships and Self-Concept in the Media Industry: Analyzing Brand Perceptions, Attributes, and Relatability

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Abstract

This study explores consumer-brand relationships and self-concept in engagement with high-value media properties, specifically superheroes. Despite their cultural prominence, limited research exists on this connection. Using a mixed-method approach focus groups and survey data from 481 Marvel and DC fans analyzed via regression, Multi-Dimensional Scaling, and perceptual mapping the study identifies relatability, shared values, and transcending limitations as key drivers of brand engagement. Interestingly, consumers often overlook narcissism and the absence of superpowers. The findings offer strategic insights for brand managers and product developers, highlighting the value of adaptable portrayals to reach diverse audiences. This research advances marketing literature by revealing how consumers perceive superhero brands, enhancing strategies for branding, engagement, and product alignment in the entertainment and consumer goods sectors.

Keywords: Self-Concept | Consumer-Brand Relationships | Brand Perceptions | Brand Attributes | Media Managers

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I. INTRODUCTION

Media houses have achieved significant financial success and cultivated fandoms by expanding superhero franchises across various media. For instance, "Batman" films earned \$6.8 billion worldwide from 1966-2022, while the DC Extended Universe grossed \$7.48 billion in 2013 alone from box office, merchandise, and home video sales (Numbers, 2023a). Marvel Cinematic Universe films, owned by Walt Disney Studios, Sony Pictures, and Universal Pictures, have collectively grossed \$31.3 billion since 2008 (Numbers, 2023b). These industry insights highlight and warrant a

broader understanding of audience dynamics and content strategy in the media industry. We postulate that a comprehensive understanding will provide a foundation for academic research and practical frameworks that enhance media management practices, ultimately leading to more successful and sustainable media ventures.

Superheroes generate substantial revenue for their owners, yet are underexplored as brands in marketing literature. Existing research mainly addresses: a) contextual perspectives (Marazi, 2019), b) consumer identification with superheroes as symbols of courage (Berryhill, 2018), and c)

their reflection of mainstream society (Rapp et al., 2015). This study addresses a research gap by positioning superheroes as distinct consumer-held brand assets (Aaker, 1996). Identifying key attributes driving their popularity enables marketers to craft resonant narratives and character arcs. Insights into audience perceptions support content development, foster brand loyalty, and sustain cross-platform engagement. Additionally, such understanding informs merchandising, promotions, and culturally aligned branding strategies. Grounded in self-concept (Sirgy, 1982) and consumer-brand relationship theory (Fournier, 1998), we propose that superheroes aligned with a consumer's identity or aspirations enhance brand loyalty and engagement through self-representation.

Given the above premise in this study we try to address the following research questions (RQs): 1) what makes the audience connect with a superhero; and 2) how a superhero is perceived to be a reflection of self? Consequently, our research ventures to (1) identify the attributes which influence the popularity of superheroes; (2) examine the impact of the above-identified attributes on the overall popularity of superheroes; (3) understand the audience's perceptions about superheroes of the above-identified attributes. We consider superheroes who are/were parts of superhero movie franchises as our stimuli set for the study.

This study addresses a critical gap in marketing literature by investigating the factors underlying superhero brand popularity. It demonstrates how consumer perceptions differentiate superheroes, enabling more effective brand positioning. Insights gained support strategic brand management to enhance consumer attitudes, loyalty, and purchase intentions (Cooper-Martin, 1991). Despite the cultural resonance and commercial success of superhero franchises (Stabile, 2009), branding literature has largely overlooked superheroes as brand entities. This raises key questions: What drives such widespread brand appeal? Which attributes foster strong consumer-brand connections and shape favorable brand perceptions?

The paper is organized as follows: literature review, research methods (exploratory and quantitative studies), discussion, and examination of implications, limitations, and future research directions.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW & CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Superheroes as brands

A superhero is defined as a "heroic character with a selfless, pro-social mission with superpowers – extraordinary abilities, advanced technology, or highly developed physical, mental, or mystical skills; who has a superhero identity embodied in a codename and iconic costume, which typically expresses his biography, character, powers, or origin (transformation from an ordinary person to

superhero) and who is generally distinct i.e. can be distinguished from characters of related genres (fantasy, science fiction, detective etc) by a preponderance of generic interventions. Often superheroes have dual identities, the ordinary one of which is usually a closely guarded secret (Coogan, 2009; pp. 77)."

Like traditional brands, superheroes employ branding strategies to build strong identities and audience connections. A brand is defined as a "name, term, sign, symbol, design, or a combination of these elements intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and differentiate them from competitors" (Kotler, 1991, p. 442) or as "symbols of an organization's efforts and ambition" (Urde, 2003, p. 1022). Brands derive power from their capacity to convey meaning, often functioning as metaphors (Avis et al., 2012). In superhero branding, visual elements such as Superman's "S" and Spider-Man's emblem, alongside costume colors, shape distinct brand identities and influence consumer recognition (Coogan, 2009; Halsem et al., 2018). These identities are further reinforced by compelling brand narratives—e.g., Batman's trauma and Spider-Man's origin—representing core values like hope (Superman), excellence (Batman), and social justice (Black Panther). Characters such as Wonder Woman, Black Widow, and Spider-Man also reflect broader cultural themes, reinforcing superheroes as high-value proprietary brand assets (Aaker, 1996).

2.2 Superheroes and the reflection of the self

The self-concept theory (Sirgy, 1982) posits that individuals connect with objects perceived as similar to their identity. For example, Scarlet (2017) highlights how fictional superheroes help individuals overcome emotional struggles by symbolizing unique interpersonal strength. Experimental studies on the self, including self-esteem, use superhero priming to highlight individual uniqueness and personal "superpowers" (Wong, 2020). Superheroes also facilitate understanding of somatic concepts like self-awareness, autonomy, and self-control by illustrating the dualism between inner and outer identities (Buck-Pavlick, 2020). Likewise, participants who were exposed to superhero images showed increased helping intentions and meaning in life. Thus, superhero stimuli contribute to the prosocial self (Van Tongeren et al., 2018). Those who identify themselves with the "alter egos" or disadvantaged selves of superheroes such as Clark Kent (Superman) or Peter Parker (Spider-man) create resistance. Physically weak, mild alter egos as opposed to powerful and strong superheroes make the audience doubt their "true ideal self" (Halsem et al., 2018). Superhero attributes resonate strongly with Generation Z, who embody many qualities of their favorite heroes. Having witnessed social injustices, they advocate for change through movements like Me Too and Black Lives Matter, using social media to amplify their voices and promote shared worldviews, similar to their superhero counterparts

(Luttrell and McGrath, 2021). Hence, we propose the following research question:

RQ1: How a superhero is perceived to be a reflection of self?

2.3 Consumer and superhero relationships

Consumer-brand relationships (Fournier, 1998) have a multifaceted nature which involves several aspects to keep a relationship alive such as socio-emotive attachments (love/passion and self-connection), behavioural ties (interdependence and commitment), and supportive cognitive beliefs (intimacy and brand partner quality) for strengthening the relationship over time. For instance, Kohli et al. (2014) find that preschool consumers watch a Disney movie at least 17 times. This is the reason for verified storylines with the same characters in different settings (Kohli et al., 2014). The Korean superhero film *Dragon Ball Super* grossed \$32.1 million globally in three days with no marketing, suggesting that superheroes function as 'standalone brands' (Gant, 2022). Besides facets of consumer-brand relationships suggested by Fournier (1998), brand communities are also essential for consumer-brand relationships (Paruthi et al., 2023). Superhero brands through their brand communities foster customer identification and meaning-making (Marazi, 2019). Additionally, advocacy is shown through cosplay by superhero consumers (Mazzoli et al., 2019). "Superhero" themes have been used for consumer-brand relationships to communicate the "brand". For example, 'Versace' uses ads that show a superhero corporate finalising deals with her intellectual abilities and intoxicating men with "clandestine eroticism." (Givhan, 2005). In another instance, (Arefin et al, 2019) lonely individuals may show a less positive attitude towards products with negative elements as compared to a preference for "superhero" products. Therefore, we ask:

RQ2: What are the attributes which influence the popularity of superheroes?

2.4 Superhero and brand perceptions

Walmart collaborated with DC Comics and Marvel for a superhero-themed augmented reality experience in their stores using thematic displays. This superhero-themed AR creates "alternate perceptions of reality" and creates an entertaining, interactive experience for customers. In this manner, brand perceptions are enhanced by collaborating with DC and Marvel Universes (Tan et al., 2022). The findings of Okai's (2021) study suggest that rhetorical appeals such as 'logos' (chevron 'double W' for Wonder Woman, 'stylized green lantern' for Green Lantern, or 'flash' for Flash), 'ethos' (for instance, Superman originated in 1938 due to US recession) and 'pathos' (appeal to human emotions) help in promoting products in movies that influence the audience's brand perceptions. Ad placements alongside related content can guide positive brand perceptions (Han, 2010). Superhero attributes are the cognitive contexts that reinforce attributes of the product placements. Hence, brand

perceptions of the attributes that make superheroes popular should be understood. Therefore:

RQ3: What are the audience's perceptions about superheroes on the identified attributes?

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section includes two parts: First, an exploratory study using focus group discussions and secondary data to examine (a) how superheroes reflect the self and (b) which attributes influence their popularity, following Fern (1983). It also details the selection of the top five superheroes. Second, the quantitative study outlines data collection, hypothesis development, and testing of audience perceptions based on the identified attributes.

3.1 Exploratory study

We reviewed limited literature on superheroes as brands (Buck-Pavlick, 2020; Wong, 2020) and used public sources like IGN India's 2021 voting criteria and character profiles from Marvel and DC. To explore consumer connections with superhero brands, we conducted a 45-minute unstructured focus group discussion with eight PhD students (ages 25–35) from a private Indian university. The group included three females and five males, ensuring diversity while maintaining some homogeneity in affiliation and residence (Axelrod, 1976).

The discussion covered emotional connections with superheroes, identification with characters, loyalty, and engagement across various media. Participants shared personal stories, admired traits, and discussed superheroes' influence on popular culture, their representation of self-concept, and their role in addressing social issues. Visual elements like costumes and powers were also discussed. From this, we identified eight attributes influencing popularity: powers and abilities, fighting skills, intelligence, character development, actor performance, overall contribution to the Marvel/DC Universe, diversity, and the character's "cool factor" (Refer to section 3.2.1).

3.1.1 Findings

The FGD suggested that respondents primarily connect with superheroes for three reasons: a) some superheroes are very relatable as if they operate in the grey areas of morality vs. reality; and b) human values like righteousness and conscientiousness; and c) the ability to rise beyond human limitations to do good.

Respondents connected with superheroes who transcend their limitations, especially those with human frailties, as this relatability makes them more accessible and authentic. Their ability to stand for what is right resonates with audiences, enhancing their appeal. Respondent 7 in this context observed that "We connect with the human flaws of superheroes like Spider-Man, seeing our own dilemmas

reflected in their actions or inactions". Respondent 2 further added "I relate to Batman because he's a real, human hero with relatable traits and story". Moreover, some of their acts are seriously questionable. For example, Respondent 2 suggested that "Captain America fought other heroes to save his brainwashed friend, Bucky Barnes". Similarly, "Aquaman can start a tsunami to protect his kingdom of Atlantis from humans" (Respondent 5). This sense of not being infallible perhaps makes superheroes so endearing to the audience. Respondent 3 observed that "Superman is a boy scout—ethical and righteous. Batman may act harshly but never crosses a line". Similarly, Respondent 4 mentioned that "Spider-Man's emotional side leads him to make many mistakes". The other substantive contribution from the FGD came in the form of making sense of the contribution of specific superheroes to their respective superhero universes. Respondent 3 opined that "Superman and Thor are god-like protectors, while Iron Man, Black Panther, and Batman—being human—rise to godlike status. Their journey from ordinary to extraordinary makes them more relatable, embodying human potential and resilience." Respondent 4 added, "Iron Man and Batman's actions resemble what any typical billionaire might do on a weekend". Thereby we operationalised attribute 3 (intelligence), attribute 4 (character development) and attribute 6 (overall contribution to DC/ Marvel universe) as reasons for the popularity of superheroes.

3.1.2 Superhero selection

We selected the top 10 Marvel and DC characters from IGN India's 2021 list, known for their cultural relevance and popularity, to study consumer-brand relationships. The initial survey featured popular Marvel (e.g., Captain America, Iron Man, Thor, Spider-Man, Black Widow) and DC (e.g., Wonder Woman, Batman, Superman) characters. Using snowball sampling, we surveyed Indian superhero fans (ages 16–35, mean age 27, 60% male) to choose their top five. The final selection was Batman, Wonder Woman, Superman, Aquaman, The Flash, Iron Man, Captain America, Thor, Spider-Man, and Hulk.

3.2 Quantitative study

This section details the quantitative data collection and analysis. Web surveys using a 5-point scale (1 = lowest, 5 = highest) captured audience perceptions of Marvel and DC superheroes from 481 respondents (ages 16–35) across 26 countries. Multiple regression assessed the impact of key attributes on overall popularity, while attribute-based Multi-Dimensional Scaling (MDS) via PERMAP 2.0 inferred consumer perceptions. These methods offered practical and effective solutions aligned with the study's objectives.

3.2.1 Hypotheses development

We hypothesized that attributes from the exploratory study (see sub-section 3.1) strengthen consumer connections with superheroes, influencing consumer-brand relationships and overall popularity. Hypothesis 1 (H1) is tested for Marvel

superheroes, while Hypothesis 2 (H2) is tested for DC superheroes.

Based on the findings of our exploratory studies (please refer sub-section 3.1) that were embedded with 'self-concept' (Sirgy, 1982) and consumer-brand relationships (Fournier, 1998) we developed the following hypotheses in the context of superheroes:

H1: Powers and abilities, fighting skills, intelligence, character development, performance by the actor playing the role, contribution to the Marvel Universe, diversity and the cool factor of the character impact the overall rating of a Marvel superhero.

Hypotheses 1a relate to Iron Man, 1b to Captain America, 1c to Thor, 1d to Spider-man and 1e to Hulk.

H2: Powers and abilities, fighting skills, intelligence, character development, performance by the actor playing the role, contribution to the Marvel Universe, diversity and the cool factor of the character impact the overall rating of DC superhero.

Hypotheses 2a relate to Batman, 2b to Wonder Woman, 2c to Superman, 2d to Aquaman and 2e to The Flash.

Hypothesis 3 is tested for all superheroes in aggregate.

H3: Powers and abilities, fighting skills, intelligence, character development, performance by the actor playing the role, contribution to the Marvel/DC Universe, diversity and the cool factor of the character impact overall rating across all superheroes.

'Powers and abilities' (PA) refer to exaggerated superhero traits, such as Superman's super speed, strength, and invulnerability (Scarlet, 2017; Coogan, 2009). 'Fighting skills' (FS) denote traits like aggressiveness, strength, quick reflexes, effective defense, and high risk tolerance, linked to superior outcomes (Sell et al., 2012). 'Intelligence' (I) reflects personal experience and learning, encompassing sensitivity, optimism, resilience, and purpose (Brody, 2004; Fox et al., 2021). 'Character development' (CD) refers to changes over time in a superhero's appearance, actions, attitudes, thoughts, feelings, and interactions (Weiland, 2015). 'Performance' (PERF) refers to the actor's delivery through dialogue, voice modulation, gestures, and expressions (Worthen, 1984). 'Contribution to DC/Marvel Universe' (UNI) encompasses character arcs, storytelling, revenue generation, consistency, global impact, innovation, legitimacy, and philosophical depth (Bealer, 2014; Sartain, 2021; Curtis, 2013). 'Diversity' (DIV) refers to the representation of unique individual differences—such as race, gender, sexuality, age, ability, religion, and politics—embraced and celebrated by superheroes (Hooper, 2021). Warren (2019) defines 'coolness' (COL) in superheroes as a blend of extraordinariness, energy, authenticity, iconic status, aesthetic appeal, originality, subcultural relevance, rebellion, and popularity.

IV. RESULTS

This section reports the results of our regression models. Table 1 summarizes multiple regression results of Hypotheses H1a to H1e for Marvel superheroes. Followed by Table 2 which reports the findings of hypotheses H2a to H2e

for DC superheroes. Table 3 shows the results from testing hypothesis 3.

Table 1: H1a - H1e results – Marvel

Attributes	Standardized Beta					T Value					Significance				
	IM	CA	T	SM	H	IM	CA	T	SM	H	IM	CA	T	SM	H
PA	.152	.059	.208	.197	.075	4.309	1.721	5.287	5.222	2.205	<.001	.086	<.001	<.001	.028
FS	.106	.064	-.002	.044	.140	3.048	1.413	-.054	1.058	4.090	.002	.158	.957	.290	<.001
INT	.050	.078	.049	.105	.083	1.094	2.281	1.830	2.766	3.025	.274	.023	.068	.006	.003
CD	.145	.200	.014	.051	.063	3.498	5.465	.419	1.231	1.717	<.001	<.001	.675	.219	.087
PERF	.277	.148	.094	.047	.148	5.749	3.567	2.437	1.145	3.749	<.001	<.001	.015	.253	<.001
UNI	.020	.097	.270	.274	.100	.421	2.315	6.562	6.367	2.288	<.001	.021	<.001	<.001	.023
DIV	.026	.176	.185	.135	.169	.796	5.027	5.469	3.353	4.407	.002	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001
COL	.244	.209	.208	.146	.265	6.772	5.597	5.848	3.293	6.938	.274	<.001	<.001	.001	<.001
	IM		CA			T			SM		H				
R²	0.818		0.785			0.838			0.785		0.793				
Adjusted R²	0.815		0.782			0.835			0.781		0.789				
SSE	0.469		0.468			0.432			0.492		0.481				
F Statistic	264.755 (Sig. <.001)		216.052 (Sig. <.001)			304.288 (Sig. <.001)			214.858 (Sig. <.001)		225.645 (Sig. <.001)				

Table 1 (Marvel) shows that fighting skills are insignificant for Captain America, Thor, and Spider-Man; intelligence for Iron Man; character development for Thor and Spider-Man; performance for Spider-Man; and cool factor for Iron Man. R² and adjusted R² values range from 0.79 to 0.84, with all F-statistics significant at <0.001, indicating strong model fit (Malhotra & Dash, 2020). Thus, the hypotheses are supported (Anderson et al., 2016).

For DC superheroes, the hypotheses are supported (see Table 2). Powers and abilities are significant only for Batman; intelligence for Superman and Aquaman. Character development is insignificant for Batman and Wonder Woman; performance for Wonder Woman; and contribution to DC Universe for The Flash. R² and adjusted R² range from 0.77 to 0.84, with all F-statistics significant at <0.001, indicating strong model fit (Malhotra & Dash, 2020).

Table 2: H2a - H2e results – DC

Attribute	Standardized Beta					T Value					Significance				
	B	W	S	A	F	B	W	S	A	F	B	W	S	A	F
PA	.110	.189	-	.029	-.014	3.76	4.578	-	.785	-.339	<.001	<.001	.877	.433	.735
FS	.135	.017	.075	.096	.110	3.26	.419	1.78	2.39	2.94	.001	.675	.075	.017	.003
INT	.046	-	.048	.105	.012	1.17	-.533	1.37	2.93	.293	.243	.594	.170	.003	.769
CD	.060	.116	.056	.062	.193	1.48	3.170	1.48	1.69	4.40	.138	.002	.139	.092	<.001

PERF	.145	.245	.047	.190	.113	3.71 6	6.508	1.07 7	4.72 4	2.68 7	<.00 1	<.001	.282	<.00 1	.007
UNI	.143	.132	.165	.160	.048	3.53 5	3.21 4	4.07 3	4.30 5	1.07 4	<.00 1	.001	<.00 1	<.00 1	.283
DIV	.098	.108	.277	.165	.254	2.62 7	2.922	7.28 3	4.18 7	5.71 9	.009	.004	<.00 1	<.00 1	<.001
COL	.278	.216	.340	.207	.256	6.83 1	5.230	9.54 0	5.01 2	5.54 0	<.00 1	<.00	<.00 1	<.00 1	<.001
	B			W			S			A			F		
R2	0.828			0.843			0.836			0.819			0.766		
Adjusted R²	0.825			0.840			0.833			0.816			0.762		
SSE	0.46			0.423			0.448			0.405			0.453		
F Statistic	283.108 (Sig. <.001)			316.469 (Sig. <.001)			300.854 (Sig. <.001)			267.483 (Sig. <.001)			193.599 (Sig. <.001)		

We ran the regression model considering all superheroes pooled together to get a general viewpoint about them. Results suggest (refer to Table 3) that intelligence and character development are insignificant. Therefore,

Hypothesis 3 is supported. R2 and Adjusted R2 are 0.83 each. F Statistic is significant at <0.001 suggesting the strong explanatory power of the model (Malhotra and Dash, 2020).

Table 3: Hypothesis 3 results – Across all superheroes

Attribute	Standardized Beta	T Value	Significance
Powers and abilities	.110	3.766	<.001
Fighting skills	.135	3.261	.001
Intelligence	.046	1.170	.243
Character development	.060	1.485	.138
Performance by the actor playing the role	.145	3.716	<.001
Contribution to the DC Universe	.143	3.535	<.001
Diversity	.098	2.627	.009
Cool factor of the character	.278	6.831	<.001
R²	0.828		
Adjusted R²	0.825		
SSE	0.461		
F Statistic	283.108 (Sig. <.001)		

3.2.3 Perceptual mapping

We developed a perceptual map using responses on Marvel and DC superheroes, with Euclidean distance as the measurement method. Superheroes were coded as 1–10 and attributes as vectors 1–8 (Malhotra & Dash, 2020). The attribute-based MDS showed a stress level of 0.1, indicating a reliable representation of audience perceptions across superhero attributes.

Points 2, 4, and 7 cluster near the center, with 5 and 6 close by in opposite vertical directions. Points 1, 3, 8, 9, and 10 are more dispersed, with 1, 3, and 8 horizontally opposite to 9 and 10. The points' locations indicate that Dimension 1 (vertical) distinguishes superheroes based on whether they are human or not. Dimension 2 (horizontal) distinguishes superheroes based on whether they have multiple movie titles or not.

We name Dimension 1 as Superhumans Vs. Humans. Superhumans are characters who were not born as humans (Thor, Hulk, Wonder Woman, Superman and Aquaman) except for Hulk. Humans on the other hand are represented by characters who are essentially normal human beings (Iron Man, Captain America, Spider-man, Batman and The Flash). Similarly, we name Dimension 2 as Legacy Franchise Vs. Fledgling Franchise. Legacy franchises are characters that have had three or more primarily solo movies to their credit (Iron Man, Thor, Spider-man, Batman and Superman) though Spider-man may also be considered as a 'betweenner'.

Some of the Eigen vectors throw up interesting insights. It is suggested that the perception of Iron Man as a superhero can be primarily credited to the performance of Robert Downey Jr. (attribute 5) and the coolness of the character (attribute 8). Similarly, the perception of Aquaman is dominantly formed by the performance of Jason Momoa (attribute 5). Superman and The Flash heavily owe to Intelligence (attribute 3) and diversity (attribute 7) for their positioning in the audience's minds. The opinions formed about Spider-man and Wonder Woman are heavily contributed by their respective character development (attribute 4) and the coolness of their respective characters (attribute 8). In contrast to all these superheroes Hulk and Batman seem to have developed perception among the audience about them that primarily do not rely on any specific attribute.

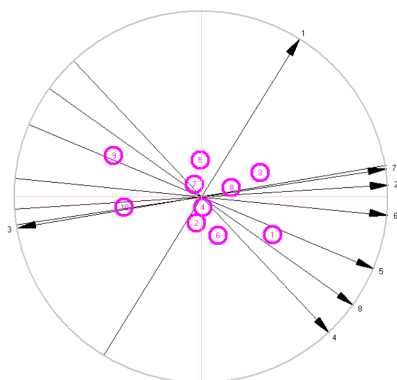


Figure 1: PERMAP results based on 481 observers rating 10 superheroes across 8 parameters

V. DISCUSSION

Based on our three primary research questions, we conducted qualitative and quantitative inquiries. The key observations and inferences are summarized below:

5.1 Exploratory study

The FGD supported the idea that consumers connect with brands reflecting their sense of self (Sirgy, 1982; Fournier, 1998). Audiences seek brands emotionally and contextually similar to themselves, making relatable superheroes like Iron Man, Spider-Man, Batman, and Captain America more favored. Thor and Superman were viewed as gods born to protect Earth, making them less relatable (Respondent 3). The answer to RQ1 is that audiences connect with brands they find emotionally and contextually similar. Thus, superheroes like Iron Man, Spider-Man, Batman, and Captain America are more relatable, while Thor and Superman are seen as gods destined to protect Earth (Respondent 3).

However, an interesting contrary view about the popularity of superheroes came in the form of physical power and superhuman abilities, and intelligence. Respondent 7 observed that "First, physical strength and fitness are crucial for any superhero—without them, they can't defeat villains. Second, intelligence matters—knowing how and when to make the right decisions and use their powers". Respondent 1 also opined that "Powers and fighting abilities are essential—superheroes need them by default. While Batman and Iron Man lack superhuman strength, their intellect far surpasses that of the average person". This reflects the concept of dissonance and coping mechanisms, particularly daydreaming, where consumers immerse themselves in a fantasy world that enacts their desires, potential, and aspirations (Poels et al., 2014). In sum, audiences connect with superheroes because they embody extraordinary qualities while remaining relatable through their shared human limitations.

5.2. Quantitative study

5.2.1 Hypotheses testing

Superhero ratings (H1) indicate that core abilities (e.g., Captain America, Thor, Spider-Man) are often assumed, supporting the notion that such traits are "a given." Iron Man's intelligence showed limited impact, as respondents associated cognitive ability with emotional intelligence, shaped by perceptions of Stark's narcissistic and histrionic traits (Goodfriend, 2017). Consumers form brand relationships that support self-improvement and self-promotion, fostering brand loyalty (Nandy et al., 2023). Spider-Man's lead actor performance held little significance

due to frequent recasting, while Iron Man's perceived arrogance reduced his 'cool factor.'

H2 reflected H1 but offered distinct insights. Batman's appeal lies in his lack of superpowers, as noted by Respondent 1. Similar to Iron Man, intelligence was insignificant for Batman, though linked more to sociopathy (Rosenberg, 2012). His character development was also seen as weak due to fragmented storylines across recent adaptations by Nolan, Snyder, and Reeves. The maiden 'The Flash' movie was recently released, in June 2023 which is a plausible reason for the 'contribution to the DC universe' to be insignificant.

Hypothesis 3 suggests intelligence is insignificant for four of the ten superheroes. As in H1 and H2, this trend likely applies to the pooled data. The overall insignificance of character development may result from fragmented story arcs common among the studied superheroes, complicating the coherent assessment of their development across all superheroes analyzed.

5.2.2 Perceptual mapping

The perceptual map addressed RQ3 by illustrating brand positioning and consumer-brand relationships (Bose & Gupta, 2013). It shows that superhero relatedness centers on being human or superhuman (Dimension 1). The results reveal an 'us vs. them' perception of superhero brands, aligned with social identity and self-categorization theories, often applied in consumer brand choice behaviour research (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Kauppinen-Räsänen et al., 2018). Dimension 2 reflects franchise success, linked to Brand Stature in the Brand Asset Valuator model (Datta et al., 2017). Brand Stature, a function of a brand's 'Esteem' and 'Knowledge, which relates to customer-based brand equity (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 1993). Thus, superhero brands show varying brand equity from the audience's view.

The points (superheroes) and Eigenvectors show varying perceptions, with many clustering near the center. While respondents distinguish superheroes as human or not, they show less overt discrimination between superhumans and others. Attribute 3 (Intelligence) stands out by opposing the general trend. Iron Man and Batman, despite being the smartest in Marvel and DC, are least influenced by intelligence on the map. This supports hypotheses 1a and 2a, suggesting they lack emotional intelligence. Point 9 (Aquaman) reflects its perception as a developing legacy franchise. Similarly, The Flash has lacked a legacy franchise since the 1990s, with a new film released in the US in 2023.

VI. CONCLUSION

6.1. Theoretical implications

Our study's key contribution is positioning superheroes as significant brands in media management, highlighting their status as legally registered intellectual properties uniquely

marketed by publishers and media owners (Goldstein, 1989). Therefore, they must be subjected to academic research like any other product/brand. However, this phenomenon remains largely overlooked in academia. We address this gap by demonstrating how superheroes embody values that cultivate dedicated fan bases, driving engagement through narratives, merchandise, and communities—paralleling brand loyalty in consumer markets (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 1993). Our study, based on data from online fan communities and films, shows that superheroes have distinct attributes essential for brand positioning (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 1993). Perceptual mapping reveals differences in their brand equity. Building on this, we argue that superheroes often become cultural icons—Superman and Batman exemplify broader cultural values. Their capacity to generate revenue via merchandise, licensing, and media rights underscores their financial brand equity. This research thus demonstrates how branding concepts apply to superheroes, highlighting their role in fostering enduring audience connections and commercial success across media and merchandise.

Our second key contribution to marketing theory highlights the dichotomy between self-concept (Sirgy, 1982) and consumer-brand relationships (Fournier, 1998), showing that the same factors driving consumer-brand connection can also cause disconnection when contextual conditions shift. Our study suggests respondents connect more with superhero brands like Batman and Iron Man because, as ordinary humans, they ascend to superhuman status through inherent qualities such as genius-level intelligence. Conversely, respondents dissociate from Batman and Iron Man due to their perceived lack of emotional intelligence and limited emotional connection with others (Rosenberg, 2012; Goodfriend, 2017). From a consumer-brand relationship perspective (Fournier, 1998), such phenomena warrant further investigation, underscoring the need to align brand attributes with consumer values and emotions.

We contribute to marketing, branding, and the broader social sciences by identifying key antecedents driving superhero popularity. To date, limited research—especially in marketing—has objectively examined these antecedents from a behavioral perspective. Our study identifies eight attributes that objectively measure superhero brand popularity. These attributes also advance research on consumption narratives, including superhero narratives (Rahmanian, 2021), thereby broadening the scope of narrative-based brand strategies.

Finally, the dimension 'Legacy Franchise Vs. Fledgling Franchise' from the perceptual map talks about the CBBE (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 1993) aspect of a superhero brand. We contribute to brand equity literature by showing that difference in Brand Stature (BAV) thereby CBBE is a basis for differences in perceptions about superheroes. Our study, therefore, counters the traditional logic of brand positioning,

and brand equity literature that brand positioning creates perceptions and associations thereby brand equity (Heinberg et al, 2019). Our findings suggest that CBBE may affect brand perceptions in consumers' minds through the signalling phenomenon (Erdem and Swait, 1998). Thus, distinguishing between legacy and fledgling franchises offers new insights into how brand stature impacts consumer perceptions, indicating that perceived brand stature can shape brand perceptions and equity through signalling effects (Kim, 2019).

6.2. Managerial implications

Our study offers marketers, producers, media houses, merchandisers, and brand managers strategic insights for specific superhero brands. The identified attributes provide a framework to understand audience perceptions of these brands, aiding targeted marketing efforts. Media managers can leverage these insights to craft narratives that resonate with audiences, enabling tailored marketing strategies for each superhero brand. Marketed across diverse platforms, superheroes build dedicated fan bases and foster brand loyalty akin to traditional products. This research underscores the importance for media managers to apply branding principles to superheroes, acknowledging their capacity for cross-media engagement and sustained audience loyalty. The findings indicate that media managers must account for superheroes' unique attributes and their influence on consumer perceptions when crafting content and marketing strategies. From a merchandising standpoint, the study highlights the significant commercial potential of superhero brands, which, as cultural icons, generate substantial revenue via merchandise, licensing, and media rights. By identifying attributes that drive superhero popularity, our research offers a foundation for effective merchandising strategies. It underscores the need to align merchandise with attributes and narratives that resonate with fans, thereby strengthening brand equity and boosting commercial success. This approach expands opportunities for merchandise development and strategic brand management in the superhero genre.

Media managers must adapt superhero portrayals flexibly across platforms and audience segments. Efforts to highlight the human side of superhuman heroes (e.g., Thor, Superman) may face audience resistance. Contradictorily, successfully tapping into audience psyche, story arcs like Batman versus Superman in *The Dark Knight Returns* (Raghuparan, 2021) and Batman's Justice League contingency plans in *Tower of Babel* (Outlaw, 2022a) demonstrate critical and commercial success for media houses. We advise media managers to carefully consider the desired darkness of a superhero brand, as excessive darkness can limit appeal to younger audiences. For example, Nolan's *Dark Knight* trilogy repositioned Batman as a relatable hero for adults (Marsh, 2020) but alienated children, who found him dark and intimidating. Consequently, Warner Brothers used Batman's brooding image for sarcastic humor in *Lego: The Batman Movie* and

Justice League Action (Fatherly, 2018). The attributes identified in this study can guide brand managers in crafting narrative-based brand strategies, especially within media universes (Rahmanian, 2021).

The perceptual map suggests that most superheroes are clustered together. Therefore, from an overall perspective, audiences do not discriminate too much among superheroes. Therefore, marketers must be able to develop distinct positions for their respective superhero brands. In such a case, leveraging individual superheroes for marketing purposes will become easier. In this context, practitioners must ensure that the core (brand) identities of their superheroes are distinct and more importantly properly communicated.

Leveraging superheroes as symbolic representatives of their media owners offers a strategic opportunity. For instance, Wonder Woman has been embraced as an icon of the feminist movement (NHYS, 2020). Today, Wonder Woman and similar female superheroes can serve as social icons promoting women's empowerment. Likewise, Aquaman and other ocean-themed heroes can represent ocean cleanup and depollution efforts (Salon, 2023). This enables brand managers to demonstrate social responsibility, fostering positive brand attitudes and enhancing purchase intentions toward entertainment media (Arachchi & Samarasinghe, 2023). Moreover, brand managers can enhance value and engagement by making the brand relatable to the consumer's self, facilitating co-creation activities (Füller & Bilgram, 2017). Additionally, our study offers insights for leveraging brands through co-branding and licensing, developing entertainment franchises, building consumer-based brand equity (CBBE) for lesser-known superheroes, and fostering brand communities to maximize marketing potential.

7. Limitations and Research Directions

The limitations of this study can be broadly categorized into two areas: stimuli selection and sampling. First, in terms of stimuli selection, our focus was restricted to superheroes featured in films, excluding those who primarily exist in comic books. Future research might explore these lesser-known comic book superheroes to broaden the scope of consumer-brand relationship analysis. Additionally, although female characters were included in the initial survey, only Wonder Woman made it to the final list, despite 40% of respondents being female. This suggests a potential gender bias in superhero popularity, warranting further investigation into why more female superheroes were not selected and including a more balanced representation in future studies. Regarding sampling, while we obtained 481 responses from participants across 26 countries, the use of additional or paid databases (e.g., Amazon MTurk, Prolific) could have provided a more diverse participant pool, enabling a robust cross-cultural analysis. Achieving a minimum of 30 responses per country (Anderson et al.,

2016) would have allowed for more meaningful cross-cultural insights. The current study's focus is also limited to two major entertainment entities, Marvel and DC films. Future research could expand to include other universes, such as Power Rangers, Valiant Comics, Excel Comics, and Dark Horse Comics, or explore nationally recognized superheroes like Indian or French heroes, and ethnic superheroes like Shang-Chi and Ms. Marvel (fCBR, 2017).

Future research warrants studies relating to the identification of attributes for non-superhero characters and their impact on the character's popularity. Furthermore, researchers can investigate if the attributes identified in the current study apply to non-superhero characters. Speaking of brand equity (Aaker, 1996), the current study can be extended towards understanding if the attributes contribute to the financial performance of superheroes. Additionally, the present study offers an opportunity for researchers in strategy and entertainment, to augment social identity theories, and how they affect customer-brand identification, commitment, authenticity and engagement for enhancing consumer relationships with entertainment brands (Rahmanian, 2021; Paruthi, 2023). Since we have established "superheroes as brands", further research is needed to develop a scale for superheroes (Who/What is a superhero?). CBBE (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 1993) scales can be contextualised for "superheroes as brands".

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