

What It Means to Be Super: Diversity and the Prevailing Discourses  
in Superhero Comic Books

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## **Abstract**

This study examined how themes of diversity influence the superhero genre of comic books and sought to identify the broader societal discourses that shape the representation of diversity in these narratives. The study's review of related literature encompassed works exploring comic books as a genre, their history, and their relationship with discourse and popular culture, and revealed 5 significant themes related to diversity: race, gender, sexuality, age, and ability. The study employed a qualitative methodology and was designed as a thematic discourse analysis. Nine superhero comics under the Marvel and DC umbrella were accessed online and then narrowed down as the study's data set. Each comic was coded by taking note of the main plot points and larger findings and the information was grouped into larger themes that became the basis of the data. Results of this study showed that although some elements of diversity existed in the data set, it did not play a significant role in shaping the narratives' respective stories. Results also indicated that the primary feature in the data set comprised a Caucasian, male, straight, European, or American discourse; however, there is evidence that diversity is beginning to become more of a priority in the creation of these superhero comics. Lastly, the study considered educational implications of bringing superhero comics into the classroom including improved reading engagement, diversified text selection within classrooms, and getting students to think about diversity through a new lens by challenging what a superhero should look like or is supposed to be.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

This study completed a thematic analysis involving discourse to explore diversity in superhero comic narratives concerning the themes of race, gender, sexuality, ability, and age. The data analysis examined Marvel and DC Comics and analyzed the way diversity is represented through both texts and the images within these comics. This study also involved a discussion of why superhero comics could be useful in the domain of education. This research explored their educational value in connection to issues of diversity and how their integration in the classroom could help facilitate more meaningful conversations and insights around these issues. Comic books and graphic novels have continued to become more relevant within the classroom due to their ability to foster heightened levels of engagement and comprehension, and to cater to different learning styles (Yildirim, 2013). Therefore, it was important to also recognize the potential these narratives had to engage deeply with issues of diversity in the educational context.

### **Background of Study**

Comic books have been a fascination and interest of mine since I was young. The world of comic books allowed the imagination and creative centres of my brain to run free. Comics are such a fascinating medium due to their visual elements that allow the stories to pop off the page. The integration of the visual and text-based elements that define the structure of comic books allowed me to explore the themes and ideas in these stories in new and exciting ways. Superhero comic books as a genre connected with me deeply as a young reader because the stories and the characters were so fantastical and beyond the norms and conventions of how we see and understand our world. This fantastical nature allowed me as a young reader to escape into an alternate world in which

superpowers, secret identities, evil villains, and gigantic battles that decided the fate of the earth were normal.

In addition to a childhood interest in these stories, superheroes have also become a talking point in popular culture due to the financial success of the movie adaptations of these characters. Reinhard and Olson (2018) explored the growth of comic book movies since they arrived on the scene in the 1940s. They highlighted how there have been many comic book movie adaptations prior to the 2000s that were commercially unsuccessful. This trend changed in the 2000s with the release of the *X-Men* movie which took superheroes more seriously and put the emphasis back on some of the defining traits of the genre. This growth has only furthered since the creation of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) which launched in 2008 with the release of *Iron Man*. The MCU has taken comic book culture and brought it into the mainstream for casual audiences that are not as familiar with the source material.

### **Statement of Problem**

The main issue that was explored in this research are the themes and discourses of diversity that are present within comic books. Diversity and issues of inclusion are an important cultural talking point and this push for diversity has become increasingly apparent within the superhero genre. O'Rourke (2017) delved into this correlation between superhero comic books and issues of diversity. There has been a string of new characters and the creation of newer versions of iconic characters that break the White male stereotype that was prevalent in superhero comics. This trend is reflective of increasing diversity amongst the fan base and the growing popularity of these characters which has correlated to heightened financial success. Superhero comic books have

featured many characters over the years, although not all of these characters have been positive representations of diversity. Some of these problematic characters over the years include Egg Fu, Hate Monger, Big Bertha, Witchblade, and Tyroc (Lynch, 2016). These characters perpetuate negative images and stereotypes relating to issues of race, size, gender, age, and ability. Seeing these kinds of characters featured in mainstream comics reinforced the need to confront potential barriers to diverse representation within the superhero comic books.

I analyzed comic books within the superhero genre to explore the dominant themes and discourses surrounding issues of diversity. Comic book characters have the potential to serve as role models for young students; however, if these characters and stories are not allowing for diverse representation it could have detrimental effects on the attitudes and beliefs these students carry with them in their education. The representation of superhero characters can influence young readers' morality, physical appearance, and self-esteem (Watson, 2019). The influence of these stories and their characters demonstrated the importance of exploring how superhero comics are or are not representing people from diverse backgrounds and the impact they are or are not having on diverse readers.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to explore the role diversity plays within superhero comic books. The categories that were used to analyze diversity were race, gender, sexuality, age, and ability and the research focused on the themes that were present surrounding these diverse categories. These categories have becoming increasingly relevant in today's educational climate where there is growing diversity within

classrooms and the superhero genre of comic books provides a new avenue for these discussions to evolve and grow. This study was also designed to look at the sociocultural factors and the larger discourses that shape the types of characters and stories that are present, as well as the role diversity has played in the creation of these stories. These comics are situated within different social and cultural contexts that change over time, and this study sought to analyze how these contexts have shaped the literature. Lastly, this study addressed the application of the findings to the educational context. The results of this study were used to address the implications superhero comic books can have in teaching students about diversity.

### **Rationale**

There were two main rationales for pursuing this research involving superhero comic books. The first rationale was that through university, I have learned to become more critical of different forms of media and different texts and have become more aware of representation within these mediums and whose voices are represented and whose are silenced. I spent two weeks at a museum placement where I was developing an educational program the museum could use in the future. The program focused on diversity in superhero comic books and how the genre has evolved over the years. This study will allow me to further that research with more depth and complexity, and analyze themes of diversity through the unique lens of superhero comic books.

The second rationale for conducting this research was that comic books can have a lot of potential within the educational context if they are utilized in a meaningful way. Comic books are not always seen with the same sense of legitimacy as other forms of literacy despite the benefits for students if they are implemented effectively. Lo et al.

(2018) demonstrated the positive implications that comic books have for students when they are introduced in schools. These positive implications included improved literacy and language skills, critical thinking, and heightened self-esteem and motivation to read. Through this study, the goal was to expand upon these benefits and also look at the potential comics have in engaging in dialogue about diversity and inclusion.

### **Research Questions**

There were two main research questions that guided this study focused on superhero comic books:

1. In what ways do themes of diversity influence superhero comic book narratives?
2. What broader societal discourses shape the themes of diversity in superhero comic book narratives?

These two research questions addressed the core issues that were explored in this study.

The first question was relevant because it addressed the way diversity came through in these narratives and whether diversity was represented it was a meaningful way.

Diversity was looked at in connection to five specific themes: race, gender, sexuality, ability, and age. Diversity is a broad term and the goal of this study was to look specifically at how comic books represent people who fall into different areas of the spectrum within those five themes of diversity.

The second question was relevant because it worked to contextualize these narratives within a particular point in time and how they were created by people with diverse backgrounds and worldviews. These stories covered many different settings and characters, and in addition they were also driven by the author's unique motivations and ideas, and this research worked to deconstruct those motivations. These narratives were created with a specific purpose and for a specific audience. In order to analyze the themes

and discourses of diversity within these narratives, these narratives must be framed within the larger sociocultural contexts that are responsible for shaping the construction of these discourses (Boldyrev & Dubrovskaya, 2015).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework that guided this study is based on James Paul Gee's (2004, 2007) and Michael Foucault's (as cited in Adams, 2017) idea of discourse. Diversity was an important issue to analyze when looking at superhero comics, but the themes that emerge in the data around diversity are rooted in the concept of discourse.

One of the most influential people in the field of discourse is James Paul Gee. In 2004, Gee focused heavily on the connection between language and discourse, emphasizing how language is value laden, and is connected with particular social practices that are relevant within a particular context. In order to understand language and discourse, there has to be a focus on the contexts in which these discourses are situated. This article distinguished between little d and big D discourse. Little d discourse was defined as the use of language in parts of written or oral text; this only looks at the linguistic aspect of discourse and big D Discourse looks beyond this. Gee (2004) defined big D Discourse as being composed of distinctive ways of speaking/listening and often, too, writing/reading coupled with distinctive ways of acting, interacting, valuing, feeling, dressing, thinking, believing, with other people and with various objects, tools, and technologies, so as to enact specific socially recognizable identities. (p. 37)

Gee's (2004) definition was relevant because it highlights how discourse represents the culture, beliefs, and identities of the people who use these discourses, and language is only a part of it. Discourses represent particular social and cultural identities and are a way of getting recognized for these identities. This research was mostly

connected to big D Discourse because the focus was in what identities, values, and beliefs are being represented, how they are being represented, and what explicit and implicit messages are being sent to the reader as a result of these big D Discourses. There was also a focus on little d discourse because the written language that was used in the comics was also analyzed (Gee, 2004).

Gee (2004) also highlighted the difference between primary discourses and secondary discourses. Primary discourses are the main discourses that people are socialized into from an early age that shape much of their identity and understanding of the world. As they get older, they are exposed to diverse identities and cultures and are exposed to secondary discourses that can shape their primary discourse (Gee, 2004). School can be a potential location where youths can learn and internalize some of these primary and secondary discourses. Adger (2001) commented on how schools reproduce discourses and many of the discourses that are dominant within academic settings produce an inequity that benefits some students over others. This research which looked at diversity in comics and its implications for education was relevant because it could lead to issues of diversity becoming a regular part of school dialogue and reform these pre-existing discourses in positive ways.

In addition to looking at discourse, Gee also focused a lot of his work on the concept of ideology and its relationship with discourse. Gee (2007) looked at the nature of discourses and the role ideology and context play in shaping discourse in our language. He defined discourse as a particular way of knowing, seeing, understanding, and doing that helps shape a person's identity. Gee's (2007) *Social Linguistics and Literacies* connects to themes of diversity because he explored how the ideological underpinnings of

language and discourse are typically representative of the dominant group, and are used to reinforce the values, beliefs, and culture of those in power. This leads to people from minority and less privileged backgrounds feeling marginalized because of these ideological underpinnings that serve to position them as outsiders or subordinate in a hegemonic system. Those categorized in less privileged positions based on categories of race, gender, ability, et cetera are more likely to be excluded from these discourses, and as a result are unable to acquire any form of social or economic capital. Gee's (2007) work connected to broader societal discourses because one of his key arguments was the importance of context when looking at discourse and literacy. He argued that literacy changes based on the context and the individual meanings people derive from literacy is a direct result of their own context, worldviews, and experiences. Discourses are situated within larger cultures and often reinforce particular identities, values, and power structures. Analyzing these discourses within literature like comics, and taking a critical look at the identities and values they are reinforcing, can have a liberating effect for audiences that become drawn to these narratives.

Gee's work was valuable to this research because it situated literacy within a larger context where certain discourses have hegemonic control over others. All comic book stories and characters are created through a different cultural lens, and this shapes the kinds of messages and themes that are interpreted by the reader. The question Gee (2004, 2007) forced me to confront in relation to this research is how the larger sociocultural contexts and discourses predominant in these contexts influence the kinds of stories, characters, and identities that are being created in superhero comics. Gee's work reinforced the need to look at sociocultural factors because the context in which

these stories are created, and the social positioning of the creators in those context, will shape the discourses that emerge around diversity. Gee's (2007) book was also relevant because he provided examples of how discourse can impact students differently. He discussed how students are subject to inequality and their experiences and identities are devalued as a result of what is considered appropriate discourse in schools. (Gee, 2007) In addition to Gee, Foucault also provided some great contributions to the field of discourse.

Adams (2017) highlights how Foucault, similar to Gee, looked at the connection between discourse and context and also the connection between discourse and ways of thinking or knowing about a particular subject or issue. Adams's (2017) article connected to themes of diversity and broader societal discourses because it discusses the relationship discourse has with power. This relationship is what allows discourse to have such significant political and sociocultural implications. Foucault discussed how discourses are a result of what is considered legitimate knowledge and truth within a particular social context, and these discourses serve to reinforce these truths and power relations. Adams (2017) also discussed Foucault's theory on how discourses operate in a way that they are able to mask the political intentions that underlie these discourses. By masking the political intentions, these discourses are able to perpetuate the marginalization and subjugation of particular groups, identities, and ways of knowledge to serve the dominant groups. These discourses serve to position certain groups, identities, and ways of knowledge as the norm and those who do not fall into these discourses are excluded and positioned at the bottom of certain social hierarchies and power relations.

This was relevant to this research because it provided another lens that was used in the understanding of discourse and its implications. Discourses serve a linguistic purpose, yet they also serve a larger role on the social positioning, level of autonomy, and power that different social and cultural groups have. The notion of discourses working to perpetuate the marginalization of minority groups was relevant to this study because there were characters in the data who represented these social or cultural groups that are marginalized, and I wanted to look at how much power and presence these characters have in relation to the normative and dominant discourses that are present in these stories and the larger culture. I also wanted to look at how the positioning of these characters in connection with these discourses is influenced by themes of race, gender/sexuality, ability, and age. Literature such as comic books also have political and sociocultural implications, and these texts can serve to reinforce or challenge dominant identities and power relations, and help empower marginalized groups that are oppressed by prevailing discourses (Adams, 2017).

Both Foucault and Gee provided a theoretical framework that was used to look at the way discourses in superhero comics represented diversity based upon themes of race, gender, sexuality, age, and ability and whether they reflected or challenged prevailing discourses.

### **Definition of Terms**

One of the key distinctions that was important to this research was the difference between the terms hero, villain, and antihero. Superheroes are characters that possess superhuman powers or abilities and often fight against some form of crime or evil. The way our culture identifies the modern-day superhero with costumes, secret identities, and

superhuman abilities started with the launch of DC's iconic character Superman in 1938. These larger-than-life characters also have antagonists that they need to combat—known as villains (Eury, Sanderson, & Misiroglu, 2020).

Supervillains often also have superhuman abilities, although they use these powers for their own evil motives. They sometimes also will have secret identities and wear costumes. Many of the early villains were either mobsters, mad scientists, or monsters. Over the decades, villains have evolved to become more dark and violent (Sanderson & Eury, 2017). Antihero is the final distinction and they are characters that are not conventional heroes or villains. Antiheroes can do good; however, it often is in their own self-interests and these characters usually lack heroic attributes like idealism or morality. Antiheroes also operate on their own moral boundaries and principles (Ehlers, 2013).

In addition to the concepts of heroes and villains, another important distinction for this research was the difference between comics and graphic novels. Manga was not included in this discussion as this research was rooted in a Western understanding of comics. Comic books are often mistaken with comic strips. Comics are usually distinguished from graphic novels by outlining how comics are monthly periodicals aimed at a younger audience whereas graphic novels are more mature and longer narratives focused on telling complex stories. This is a false distinction as comics can range in style, genre, and demographic (Murray, 2017). The biggest distinction between the two is length. Both use sequential art where there is a blending of texts and images, but graphic novels are identified as typically being longer than comic books. We have

seen an evolution in comic books however, in which their length is becoming equivalent to graphic novels (Brenner, 2011).

### **Scope**

The scope of the research for the purposes of this study was to look specifically at comic books. I selected comics that fall within the superhero genre and they were comics that are published by the two main comic distributors: Marvel Comics and DC Comics. I chose to look at the superhero genre because it has become a topical subject in pop culture given how well these films are performing at the box office, making billions of dollars (Goldberg, 2019). This research looked at comic books that were published under the Marvel and DC label because they are the two mainstream superhero comic companies in North America. The superhero characters and stories that are having the biggest mainstream impact on popular culture stem from Marvel and DC, including characters like Batman, Superman, Spiderman, and Captain America. Due to their mainstream success and popularity, they provided relevant data when analysing themes of diversity.

### **Outline of Chapters**

Chapter One discussed the background of the study, statement of problem, the purpose and rationale, research questions, theoretical framework, defining the terms, and the scope of this research. Chapter Two presented a detailed review of the literature that was used to help guide and frame this research. Chapter Three described the study's methodology as well as the research design, selection process, data collection, and analytical framework. Chapter Four looked at the data analysis process and also the main

findings from the data. Chapter Five went more in depth on the main findings, the educational implications, and also the limitations and directions for future research.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

The previous chapter outlined the background to this research, the problem, and the research questions that would be addressed in the data, and also outlined the theoretical framework that helps form the basis for some of the key concepts that were relevant to the study. It also addressed the scope of this study to help contextualize it within the boundaries of this research.

### **Understanding and Defining Comic Books**

Comic books are shaped by their histories, defining traits, and the situated contexts in which they were created. Comic books are a unique hybrid of text and pictures, where stories are visually framed within page spreads. Scott McCloud (1993) defined, identified, and explained the main processes that are a part of writing and reading comic books. He defined comics as juxtaposed pictorial and other images in a deliberate sequence that conveys information and also produces an aesthetic response in the viewer. Some of the defining traits that he identified in this book include panels, frames, gutters, lines, colour, icons/symbols, and time, and the way these elements are presented and utilized in comics shapes the meaning and response for the reader. McCloud's (1993) book has a unique visual style where it creates the feeling that rather than reading his work, you are experiencing his work. Specifically, presented in the narrative style of a comic book, his book connects to broader societal discourses in a couple unique ways. The first way was that he looked at how these defining traits of comics differ across cultures. He primarily differentiated between Western and Japanese comics and the way the visual and narrative style is different across the globe. The second way that his book connected to discourse is that he provides a brief timeline of

earlier forms of comic style art throughout history. These earlier forms of comic art included hieroglyphics and manuscripts and evolved into cartoons and picture stories. He also discussed how many modern works employ the elements of comics, but are not recognized as comics because of the stigma around comics as a literary art form. Comics are very context specific, and the style and content of comic books change over time as the discourses that are present within these comics also change. The different cultural perspectives that McCloud addressed when looking at comics reinforces the need to look at themes of diversity in comics, because comics are diverse as a genre.

Mario Saraceni's (2003) ideas were similar to McCloud's work, but he also outlined some of the main elements that help make up the composition of comic books. He further explained the ideas of panel, gutters, balloons, fames, and symbols and also introduced some new terms including position, perspective, semantic field, and point of view. Saraceni explored the kinds of language that are used in comics and also the way language is structured in comics. He emphasized the relationship between text and images and how these two forms of language interact to help make comic books their own unique medium, and help to construct meaning for the reader. This connected to themes of diversity because the way diversity is represented in the comics and the meaning the reader interprets might change based on their understanding of this relationship. The text and the images on their own might give contradictory messages, but paired together can create a new meaning involving issues of diversity.

Saraceni (2003) also discussed how technology has influenced the creation and consumption of comic books. Technology has led to significant changes in the visual presentation of comic books and readers are now able to access these stories through

different technological mediums. This connects to broader societal discourses because technology is not evenly accessible across the globe, so places where there is more access to technology will also have more access to comics and the discourses present in these comics, which makes them more likely to be reproduced. Saraceni's (2003) book is unique in that it featured a lot of visual examples of the different comic elements, and includes activities that could be used in the educational context. These activities help to challenge the discourse that comic books lack educational value. In addition to looking at the defining traits of comics, it was also important to study the history of comics and how they have changed and grown as a literary genre.

### **Superhero Comics and Their History**

An important step in analyzing comic books as data was first understanding their history and how they have evolved and gone through ups and downs in terms of popularity. Coville (1996) tackled the history of superhero comics dating back to the 1920s. Here, he highlighted the shifts in tone, characters, and types of stories that occurred within superhero comics, and these historical changes would also represent changes in the types of discourse that were prominent in these narratives. Coville also focused on early comic issues that helped inspire the superhero genre like Popeye and The Phantom. The superhero genre started in the 1930s with Action Comics releasing the first issue of Superman—the first character to have superhuman abilities. The genre continued to grow with characters like Batman, Captain America, and Wonder Woman, until after World War II when the genre lost its popularity. The genre went through a lot of censorship until the 1950s when the Silver Age and the Marvel Age reignited the genre with characters like the Fantastic Four. Comic books started to feature characters that were relatable, complex, and flawed. In the 1970s and 1980s, Marvel and DC started to

experiment with new kinds of genres, characters, and stories. They also started to feature more dark and gritty storylines. In the 1990s, comics saw a decline in popularity due to being overhyped but new comic companies were emerging. Today the genre has reached mainstream popularity which is shown by the success of the superhero movies at the box office. The presentation and content of these stories shifted over the years and the way diversity is addressed in these stories has also shifted. There is a growing diversity in terms of who reads superhero comics and this has shaped the way the genre tackles these diverse issues. The era in which these comics were created will shape the discourses that emerge because of this push for diversity that is currently taking place in the superhero genre (Drum, 2017). When looking at comics it is important to look at their history, but it was also relevant to examine their impact on popular culture.

### **Comics in Pop Culture**

Brenner (2011) discussed the growing popularity of comic books with young readers and the influence comic books have had on the literary culture in North America. He highlighted how in the mid-20th century there was the rise of the superhero genre in comics which were being targeted to children and teenage demographics. He also discussed how throughout the 2000s there has been a continued growth of comic books for young readers which has led to comic companies not being able to match their production with the growing demand of young audiences. Superheroes are one of many genres that have saturated the market, however despite their popularity they have also faced challenges in the past of being rejected or removed from school settings (Brenner, 2011).

Due to this influence on today's youths, it was important to analyze the messages around diversity and the kinds of representations that young audiences are being exposed to with these stories. Thus, the messages that these characters and stories send to young

audiences needed to be examined because they can have a significant influence in shaping young readers. Participants interviewed in Shaw's (2017) study of the psychological effects that superhero comic books had on their readers noted that superhero comics shaped both their sense of morality and how they made sense of their own experiences. The participants highlighted how they used comics as the baseline for how they should act and treat others and how these superhero characters became role models for them at an early age. They also highlighted how they gravitated toward characters they could relate with and who represented their experiences and identity. Some of the examples outlined by the participants included connecting with characters who were LGBTQ, had experienced loss, or who experienced some form of discrimination. When superhero comics allow readers to form these meaningful connections with the characters, it allowed them to make sense of and feel empowered in their own experiences (Shaw, 2017).

Superhero comic books are relevant because of their popularity and moral influence with younger audiences and also because these comics can provide a platform to represent people from all backgrounds and walks of life. Historically, these comics have played a powerful role in perpetuating specific images and labels about minority groups that helps normalize the discrimination they experience. Cruz (2018) discusses how superhero comics have often had White writers depicting characters from diverse backgrounds. This leads to stereotypes becoming very prominent in these narratives and leads to these stereotypical images of minority groups becoming normalized.

In addition to Cruz, Steward (2018) also explored the topic of diversity in the superhero genre and highlighted an issue with mainstream comic companies like Marvel or DC that do not always portray diverse characters with a sense of authenticity. It is

okay to have authors who do not come from diverse backgrounds creating stories featuring these characters, but there needs to be an emphasis on making sure that all creators are doing the proper research and representing these characters accurately and in a way that is respectful to different backgrounds. It is also important that these mainstream companies are bringing in diverse storytellers who will bring new perspectives and worldviews to the creative process. Steward is the head of a comic company Lion Forge where the mission statement is to create comics that appeal to readers from all backgrounds. He wanted to create characters that are inspiring and are relatable to all people regardless of their identity.

Five themes of diversity that were often used to categorize people based on experiences interacting with friends, colleagues, strangers, et cetera are race, gender, sexuality, ability, and age. These themes were chosen because they were highly applicable to the characters and stories within superhero comic books. One of the goals of this research was to determine whether mainstream characters like Black Panther or Wonder Woman were the norm or the exception regarding diversity in comic books. In addition to the connection between comic books and pop culture, the connection between comic books and diversity was also important.

### **Comic Books and Diversity**

Eliana Dockterman (2015) touched on the recent push for diversity within Marvel Comics. This push came as a result of a new editor in chief named Axel Alonso. He had a team of top creative people and one of the driving forces behind this diverse push in their comics was their director of content and character development Sana Amanat. Dockterman's article connected to themes of diversity because Alonso was of Mexican

background and many of the members of his team brought in the female perspective, and they brought in different cultural perspectives that had not been introduced a lot in the comics previously. They brought in a Muslim writer and created a new version of the Ms. Marvel character who is a Muslim teenager who has shapeshifting powers. This group also created a female incarnation of Thor and brought in a Black and Latino version of Spiderman named Miles Morales. This push was inspired because Alonso wanted to see superheroes that all families and groups could identify with, and that were representative of people like him. Their push for diverse representation in comics was met with criticism; however, their efforts have been highly profitable and have also brought in new fans that were alienated from previous issues. This article connects to broader societal discourses because the changing identities, cultures, and voices that are starting to be represented in the comics are changing the meaning of what it is to be a superhero. This push to broaden the visual representation of superheroes in comics could allow readers who never felt like they could be a superhero because of their race or gender to feel like they are capable of being a hero too (Dockterman, 2015).

Cook and Frey (2017) looked at a project that was done in order to get students to engage with social issues around diversity in superhero comic books. They analyzed different frames, text, and images in superhero comics and also focused on issues of diversity and made connections between the literature and their own society and experiences, observing themes of gender, race, and sexuality and also tackling the connections to larger society and the kinds of stereotypes that were present in the text. The students in the study were able to identify gaps in the comics and where there was a lack of empowerment or positive representation for these different groups. The students

also had to look at these stories and characters in relation to the context in which the stories are taking place, and also in relation to their own society. By doing this they were able to understand why these characters were portrayed the way they were, and whether these portrayals were representative of the diversity that is present within the larger society. They also had to ask questions about what defines a hero and whether these characters were relatable to a larger audience. Cook and Frey's (2017) article provides great benefits for educators by implementing comic books in the larger curriculum including increased engagement and also getting them to think critically about social issues and the influence of larger cultural discourses through the medium of superhero comic books. The article also provided a basis for how to break down comic books, look for themes, and analyze their social and cultural significance. In order to understand the relationship between comic books and diversity, it was essential to first understand diversity and some of the different themes of diversity.

### **The Difference Between Diversity and Inclusion?**

Roberson (2004) connected themes of diversity and inclusion, and helped to differentiate the meanings between the two terms. These two terms are often used interchangeably but they carry very distinct meanings. Although Roberson's article addressed these concepts within the workplace setting, the definitions of diversity and inclusion that are mentioned are transferable across all areas including when looking at literature such as comic books. Roberson defined diversity as differences in behaviours, and perspectives within cultural groups and between members of different cultural groups. These differences within and between groups could take the form of observable and non-observable differences. Specifically, they encompass categories such as race,

age, sexuality, ability, and gender. Characteristics of diversity, including factors such as socioeconomic status and educational background, at times appear less apparent. Inclusion, on the other hand, was defined as an individual's ability to access information, resources, and influence/power within a given space. It also refers to the ability of an individual to contribute fully and meaningfully within a given space. In addition to Roberson, Dove (2019) also helps to differentiate these terms, defining diversity as the factors that distinguish people and appreciate people for their differences. Dove sees inclusion as an organizational, group, or individual effort to accept people from all backgrounds and treat them equally. These two authors helped to illuminate that the terms diversity and inclusion not only look at recognizing and acknowledging difference, but also place the focus on the level of autonomy and influence these diverse characters have in their own stories. The focus of this research was on the presence of diversity in superhero comics but inclusion was also a relevant concept because this research looked at the influence that characters of different backgrounds had in these stories and also looked at who had access creatively in the creation of these stories. Roberson (2004) and Dove (2019) introduced some of the themes of diversity including race that are expanded upon by Kolbert (2018).

### **Race**

Kolbert's (2018) article connected to themes of diversity and introduced a broader background to one of the most significant themes of diversity in race. Specifically, the purpose of her article was to challenge some of the long-standing assumptions surrounding issues of race. Taking a historical perspective when looking at race, Kolbert highlighted the way scientific theory around race has evolved over the years. The scientific theory behind race originally suggested that there was a scientific basis to

justify the inferiority of some racial groups compared to others. Evolutionary theories and ideas of Social Darwinism were used as a justification to perpetuate the discrimination faced by racial minority groups. Kolbert (2018) addressed how this approach to race was false; she used modern science to support this claim by talking about how racial differences were actually a result of slight genetic mutations and latitudinal locations of people. The key insight from this article was that race operates as a social construct and many people only see race through the prism of skin colour. This article reinforced that the representation of race in mediums like comic books can have powerful social and political implications and can shape the reader's perspectives and experiences. This connected to the idea of broader societal discourses because the types of racial discourse that are present socially and culturally will help construct the perspectives around race that are present in comic books. Furthermore, Kolbert explained how race can have powerful social and political implications.

Grosfoguel (2016) suggested that these racial implications play out on a global scale. Connecting to themes of diversity, he focused specifically on race and how it operates to categorize and position people among a racial hierarchy through the processes of racism and racialization. Grosfoguel (2016) defined racism as “a global hierarchy of superiority and inferiority along the line of the human that have been politically, culturally and economically produced and reproduced for centuries by the institutions of the ‘capitalist/patriarchal western-centric/Christian-centric modern/colonial world-system’” (p. 10). Here, Grosfoguel highlighted how colonial and Western conceptions of race have created a “racist system” in which certain groups of people are given more recognition and value as humans based on their racial identity compared to others who are seen as less human. Those who are recognized as superior in this hierarchy have

access to certain rights, resources, and social recognition that those on the other end of the hierarchy are denied.

Christian (2019) also supported these claims as he addressed how White power structures and racist discourses have been maintained from a historical, global, and discourse perspective. He highlighted how the European colonial mentality historically dominated much of the discussion and power relations around race as White people were often the settlers and this came at the expense of the Indigenous peoples whose land and culture were not valued. Globally, neoliberal economic policies have helped to position people and their level of social and economic capital based on geographic and racial factors and often racial minorities were used as cheap labour to support the global North. Discourses around Whiteness and colour blindness have worked to both silence and perpetuate racial inequality

Grosfoguel (2016) described racialization as the way certain bodies are assigned a racial identity and value based on different racial markers. This connected to broader societal discourses because the way racial identities are positioned is based on dominant conceptions of race—stereotypes that are often rooted in patriarchal, Westernized, and colonial discourses. These discourses helped to perpetuate racist power structures and racial relations on a global scale. Different mediums including comic books are also influenced by these patriarchal, Westernized, and colonial discourses.

Gavaler's (2017) book analyzed the influence of discourse in comic books by breaking down the history of Black superheroes. He highlighted how from the 1930s to the 1950s there was minimal Black representation due to the segregation laws that were still in place. In the 1960s and 1970s, characters like Black Panther were introduced but they were represented stereotypically and their race was highlighted in problematic ways.

In the 1990s and 2000s, there became growing Black representation and these diverse stories are now selling to Caucasian audiences. Gavalier demonstrated that the correlation between race and the superhero genre is largely determined by the larger cultural dialogue and attitudes about race at that particular time. Race is a significant category of diversity, but there are also dominant discourses in superhero comics around issues of gender and sexuality.

### **Gender and Sexuality**

Maia Sheppard and J. B. Mayo Jr. (2013) connected themes of diversity to transferable definitions of both gender and sexuality, and also tackled the notion of heteronormativity. Gender, in this article, was identified as separate from biological sex, which is male or female based on birth. Rather, gender was defined by these authors as the social construction of masculine or feminine, including the ways people assume and are assigned gendered roles. In contrast, Sheppard and Mayo defined sexuality or sexual-orientation as the preference of an individual's sexual desires. Heteronormativity, as defined by Sheppard and Mayo, was also a relevant term when looking at gender and sexuality, describing the underlying assumption that heterosexuality is the norm and this gets reinforced through different policies and structures that marginalize other identities.

Sheppard and Mayo's (2013) article connected to broader societal discourses because it adopted a lens through which gender and sexuality is explored through an Indigenous perspective, offering a different philosophy around gender and sexuality from the more commonly discussed Western perspective. Here, Sheppard and Mayo showed the Indigenous perspective as being more inclusive and they addressed broader complexities in regards to gender and sexuality when compared to the Western perspective.

Superhero comics have also approached issues of gender and sexuality from different perspectives throughout different eras. Gavalier (2017) addressed the implicit assumption of able bodied and heterosexual that is attached to many superhero characters. He addressed how male characters are hypermasculine and female characters are hypersexualized and that in the earlier years of comics many characters were represented as straight. In recent years, there has been a growing number of LGBTQ authors in the superhero genre, including Marguerite Bennett and James Tynion IV (Vendetti, 2017). Heteronormativity was one of the themes discussed by Sheppard and Mayo (2013) and by Gavalier (2017), but the influence of heteronormativity was also discussed by Prock, Berlin, Harold, and Groden (2019).

Prock et al. (2019) illustrated the powerful influence of heteronormativity by looking at the experiences of social work students and faculty members within the context of higher education, who were also self-identifying members of the LGBTQ community. Prock et al. outlined three main themes in relation to the participants being “out” in academia, including the risks, rewards, and responsibilities associated with being out: risks include lack of safety, termination, exclusion, tokenism, and lack of opportunities; rewards include increased connections, promoted advocacy, and feelings of authenticity in how they presented themselves and in their teaching; and responsibilities included promoting diversity, making a political statement, providing a support system, and expanding the views of their students and the school culture. These results were significant because they highlighted the complex ramifications for students and faculty members alike who decided to be open about their gender and sexuality in the context of higher education. They identified benefits to being out including building

connections and positive identity affirmation but there was still the fear of losing their job or being outcasted because of the strong heteronormative culture in higher education. Prock et al.'s article connected to broader societal discourses because the experiences these LGBTQ students and faculty members had in the educational context was heavily dependent on factors like location, age, school culture, and their position within the educational context. Sheppard and Mayo's (2013) and Prock et al.'s (2019) articles brought attention to the negative implications that heteronormative binaries can have in marginalizing LGBTQ youths.

While Sheppard and Mayo's article (2013) provided an expanded definition for gender and sexuality, the American Psychological Association (APA, 2015) document expanded upon these definitions and introduced some other key concepts related to gender and sexuality that were introduced in four prior APA documents. Specifically, the APA (2015) article connected to themes of diversity because it offered a comprehensive list of terms that were associated with gender and sexual orientation, providing important subcategories under the umbrellas of gender and sexual orientation that often go unexplored. The article used definitions from four different APA documents to tackle terminology such as cisgender, gender, gender expression, gender identity, sexual orientation, and transgender. Though expanded, the definitions for gender and sexual orientation are fairly consistent with the definitions provided by Sheppard and Mayo (2013).

The terms gender identity and gender expression that were touched on in the APA (2015) article are significant when exploring gender representation in different mediums. Gender identity refers to the internalized feelings of what gender people believe they belong to and does not always match the assigned sex at birth. Gender expression relates

to how individuals choose to present their gender to other people and this may or may not align with the gender identity. The APA article connected to broader societal discourses because each of the four documents that were used to define these terms were situated within a unique social and cultural context which would influence the slight variations in the definitions provided. The way gender was understood and expressed in comic books would also be influenced by the unique context in which they were created. The dialogue around gender and sexuality is influenced by context, but another category of diversity that is influenced by context is ability.

### **Ability**

Campbell (2009) connected to themes of diversity, specifically tackling some important terms relating to the category of ability: ableism and disablism. These two terms are connected with the process of “abledness,” which defines what it means to be abled and what it means to be disabled, and describes how they both manifest in society. Ableism was defined as “a network of beliefs, processes and practices that produced a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human” (Campbell, 2009, p. 5). Contrastingly, disablism was defined as “a set of assumptions (conscious or unconscious) and practices that promote the differential or unequal treatment of people because of actual or presumed disabilities” (Campbell, 2009, p. 4). The concepts of ableism and disablism connected to broader societal discourses because the practices and assumptions that help to categorize those who are abled or disabled are very context specific.

People will define and respond to disability differently based on their own experience and understanding of disability issues. Friedman and Owen (2017), for

example, placed more emphasis on the idea of experience in relation to ableism and disability, connecting to themes of diversity because they looked at people's experiences with or around disability, and also worked to deconstruct people's biases in relation to ability level. Their study used surveys and different tests to analyze people's preference regarding ability level, and the way they defined disability. The participants in Friedman and Owen's study were siblings of people who had some form of disability or they experienced some form of disability themselves. The findings demonstrated that the participants showed some implicit preference for non-disabled people and that there were five main definitions that were given by the participants to explain disability. Three of these definitions reinforced ableist ideas where they defined it as slowing action, atypical function, and lack of independence. These definitions positioned disabled people as less capable than others. The other two definitions were socially constructed and general difference, in which the negative deficits toward disability were viewed as a social construct. Friedman and Owen also highlighted the negative attitudes that people subconsciously hold around disability, and these same biases and attitudes need to be analyzed in different forms of literature like comic books. Friedman and Owen's article connected to broader societal discourses because there was a recognition in the article that disability, like other themes of diversity, also operates as a social construct. Disability is treated differently across different cultures, and there as be differences in the way disability is represented across the comic book data. Ability is one theme of diversity that does not get the proper attention, and another category facing the same issue is age.

## Age

Krekula, Nikander, and Wilińska (2018) discussed current understandings of ageism and how it negatively impacts older people, defining ageism as “the complex, often negative construction of old age, which takes place at the individual and the societal levels” (p. 3). Krekula et al. described the process of ageism as implicit, subconscious, and pervasive in all public domains and also self-fulfilling because people will feel compelled to act based on the stereotypes assigned to them. Ageism can also have an impact on the younger demographics of the population. Bratt, Abrams, and Swift (2020) discussed how in societies where older people are well supported, there are heightened feelings of age discrimination by younger people. Bratt et al. also addressed the lack of research associated with ageism and its impacts on younger people and suggested the need for more policies that represent the experiences of young people such as changing policies in the workplace. Ageism is a subliminal process, and as a result, the way age was represented in the comic book data was also subliminal, and it needs to be brought to the forefront of discussion.

The aforementioned articles connected to broader societal discourses because they acknowledged the social dimension of ageing. The social dimension of ageing was best captured by Krekula et al. (2018): “Human ageing is not solely the biological process of senescence—the gradual deterioration of bodily functions that increases the risk for morbidity and mortality after maturation. Human ageing is embedded in social contexts and is shaped by social factors” (p. 1). Ageism works to marginalize and divide people within different spaces and settings, and this divide was evident within the comic data.

Diversity is such a relevant theme within the context of education, and comic books can also have significant educational implications.

### **Comics and Their Educational Implications**

This research focused on the elementary and secondary levels of education. Comic books can be a great tool to improve the learning experiences for students at different grade levels and stages in their education. I addressed how this research can benefit students and how they learn about diversity at the primary, junior/intermediate, and secondary levels. Matuk, Hurwich, Spiegel, and Diamond (2019) conducted a study that analyzed the benefits of comic books on both elementary and high school students. Their study focused specifically on how comic books could be used to promote equity in science education although the results were relevant in connection to this research. The main findings from Matuk et al.'s article were that comic books were a valuable tool to help boost student engagement, connect to students' interests/prior experiences, integrate cross-curricular learning, and generate discussions about larger societal themes. These findings were significant to this research because they highlighted how if comic books were used to teach students about diversity, it would be a great medium to get them engaged with what can be difficult and complex subject matter. They also presented an opportunity to have students engage in meaningful discussions and analysis concerning how diversity is addressed both in the comics and by extension in their everyday lives. The use of superhero comics specifically will only help further engage students who have an interest in superheroes and their stories. Matuk et al. also addressed how some teachers still perceive comics as lacking academic rigour; however, there is a growing trend of integrating comic books within the curriculum. This highlight the need to

educate teachers on why comic books can be useful to improve student learning and the need to continue this educational trend.

### **In the Next Chapter**

The next chapter focused on the methodological framework of this study. It outlined the research design, selection process, data sources and collection, analytical framework, and also identified the criteria that were used to critically analyze the themes around diversity in the comics.

### **CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND METHOD**

In the previous chapter, I analyzed some of the literature looking at the topics of discourse, diversity, comic books, and the educational implications of this research. I also highlighted the potential findings for this research based on what was found in the literature, which is that there will be both progressive and problematic representation of diversity, and that broader societal discourses will play a meaningful role in shaping these narratives. In this chapter, I discussed the thematic discourse analysis that was used to better understand how diversity, discourse, and comic books intertwine and to determine the benefits that this research can have within the educational context.

#### **Qualitative Methodology**

I chose a qualitative methodology as the guiding framework because it best fit the nature and purpose of this research. Yilmaz (2013) compared the purpose and the key characteristics of both qualitative and quantitative research. On the one hand, she explained how quantitative research draws on numerical data and statistics in order to objectively explain some sort of issue or phenomenon. On the other hand, qualitative research is more value laden and is focused on the context and explaining the phenomenon through observation. Yilmaz also highlighted some of the key characteristics of both approaches. The key characteristics of quantitative research is that it is objective, generalizable, and relies on numbers and experimentation. The key characteristics of qualitative research is that it focuses on how knowledge is socially constructed, highlights context, and looks for patterns and complexities in the data. A qualitative approach best suited this research because it explored the phenomenon of diversity in comic books and analyzing the context in which these comic books were created. I was not seeking to explain or conduct an experiment surrounding this issue;

rather, I sought to discover the patterns and themes that emerged in the data, and show the complexity surrounding issues of diversity and how they were represented in the data.

### **Thematic Discourse Analysis**

Originally I had chosen a discourse analysis as the methodological framework. This research still tackled discourse and the influence it had on the themes of diversity in the comics, although instead it was integrated into a thematic analysis. Additionally, a thematic analysis is the main form of qualitative data analysis that was used while completing my undergraduate courses. Nowell, Norris, White, and Moules (2017) highlighted the benefits of a thematic analysis including its flexibility, accessibility for novice researchers, and its ability to provide detailed findings for a large data set. As a novice researcher, I understood the steps that were needed to complete a thematic analysis and it was easier for understanding how to perform this form of data analysis in a way that would still provide rich and detailed findings. I looked at both the images and text within these superhero comics, in order to examine the themes around diversity that emerge from these comics. I aimed to contextualize these comic books socio-culturally, determining what outside factors helped construct the themes that emerged. Moreover, I connected this to the concept of discourse and looked at the larger societal discourses that influenced these narratives.

Based on these findings, themes were created that were representative of all the data and these themes were used to comment on how this research can transfer to education. This form of analysis was used to answer the following two research questions:

1. In what ways do themes of diversity play a role in superhero comic book narratives?

2. What broader societal discourses are shaping these themes of diversity within these superhero comic book narratives?

A thematic analysis that integrated the concept of discourse was the form of data analysis for this research, but far before the data analysis stage, there had to be a recognition of why this research topic was chosen and also researcher bias.

### **Positionality**

There were a couple relevant reasons behind pursuing the research topic of comic books. The main reason for selecting comic books as a research topic was because it was an area of interest that did not seem like a common research focus for many Master's students. In addition to writing something that felt different, this topic also seemed to provide a lot of educational value. Comic books were not a prominent aspect of literacy education when I was growing up. As an adult, there was a realization that these stories can be a great tool to boost student engagement and also allow students to analyze and comprehend literacy in new ways because of the integration of both texts and images in these stories. The focus on diversity would also allow students to engage with meaningful social issues that are relevant in their everyday lives, and these comic books could serve as the platform to create those discussions.

There was a bias as the researcher when it comes to the level of interest in this topic. I grew up loving superhero comic books and have always been fascinated by these stories and their characters. Characters like Batman, Spiderman, Ironman, and Daredevil have always been favourites of mine. The fantastical, superhuman, larger-than-life elements of these stories appealed to my active brain, and presented an escape from the world I was already a part of. I did not have as many friends growing up so these

characters acted as a way for me to feel like a part of this larger world in a small way. I needed to approach these stories objectively and put the love of the genre to the side because this research mandated that a critical lens be used to explore whether diversity was playing a significant role in these narratives. Prior to the data analysis, there was a lot of self-questioning into my preconceived notions and feelings surrounding the characters in these comics, and there was a concerted effort to acknowledge and separate these biases from the analysis. After the data were analyzed, the findings were examined to make sure that no biases were present that would influence the main themes that emerged. Reflexivity was important in this process because in order to approach the data objectively, it was important to be aware of how these biases and experiences might influence the analysis at all stages of the research (Tilley, 2016).

### **Selection of Diversity Themes**

The topic of diversity within comic books was the focus of this research from the start. The challenge was figuring out how to narrow down the broad topic of diversity into more specific themes. After looking online and consulting with the supervisor and second reader, I narrowed it down to five themes: race, gender, sexuality, ability, and age. The main reason for selecting these five themes was that they are all highly relevant within the context of education. Students continue to deal with bullying and discrimination within schools based on these themes, so it was relevant to address them in this research. The reason for only looking at these five themes and not looking at others was because of a concern that focusing on too many themes of diversity would be overwhelming during the data analysis process and that the research would have felt less focused. Originally I had chosen to look at culture as a theme of diversity instead of sexuality, though after further research a switch was made because culture seemed too

broad and was hard to define. Spencer-Oatey (2012) looked at how culture is interwoven within other categories of diversity (e.g., race) which complicated my understanding, and the subtleties sometimes were not explicit or even apparent to me in the comics (and I didn't want to make incorrect assumptions). The reason sexuality was chosen to replace culture was that after looking at some articles on gender, I realized that sexuality is strongly connected to the topic of gender (and comic books in general) and it seemed incomplete to only focus on one instead of looking at both themes.

### **Selection of Comic Books**

The reason I chose to focus on superhero comic books as opposed to looking at other genres is because they play a significant role on young audiences and how they view what a role model or hero is. Many kids use superheroes as characters they can relate to and as a basis for morality (Shaw, 2017). It was due to this influence that superhero characters have on young audiences that it was important to analyze whether readers could feel represented and if these narratives were promoting diversity in a positive way. Another reason superhero comic books were chosen is because of a passion for superheroes and a fascination with them, including their powers and all the things that make them unique characters. To restate the point in Chapter One, superheroes refer to characters that possess superhuman powers or abilities such as flight, strength, and invisibility and they often fight against some form of crime or evil. Modern superheroes are identified through common superhero traits like costumes, secret identities, and superhuman abilities. Superheroes are different from villains who are the antagonists fighting against the heroes, and antiheroes who fall in the middle between heroes and villains and have their own sense of morality.

The method used to help narrow down the long list of superhero comic books to the ones used for this research was an online search of the top one-hundred superhero comic books. This method was chosen because it better guaranteed that the comics chosen for the data set were of high quality and notable within the genre. I clicked one of the links that came up on a website called *NPR*—an online news site that had created a list of the top one-hundred comic books featuring texts of different genres including manga, graphic novels, and fantasy/sci-fi (Weldon & Mayer, 2017). I scrolled through until I found the section that listed superhero comics. The list featured individual comics as opposed to looking at the entire collection of comics devoted to a particular character. Out of the one-hundred comic books featured on the list, fifteen pertained to superheroes. There were a few reasons I chose to use this list as the pool of comics to choose from for this research. The first is that there was a mix of both Marvel and DC comics on the list. The second reason was that the comics on the list tackled most or all of the themes of diversity that were being explored by showcasing characters of different races, genders, and so on. A third reason this list was chosen was that it seemed credible because the list was decided upon by a panel of five individuals who were all closely connected with the comic book genre in different ways, including working as comic book writers, drawers, publishers, and reviewers (Weldon & Mayer, 2017). They also read through an extensive list of over seven-thousand comic books and managed to narrow it down to a list of one-hundred. This gave their list more credibility for me because they were drawing from a large pool of comic book data which they read and ranked accordingly.

There were fifteen comics on this list and that list was narrowed down to nine superhero comics that were chosen for the data. The list was narrowed down from fifteen

to nine after discussions with my supervisor about what is reasonable for a project (MRP) of this sort. In addition, looking at all fifteen comics would have made it difficult to do a rigorous analysis of the data given the timeline for this research to be completed. Cost was also an important factor; however, I was able to locate all the comics except one online for free on a website called *Read Comic Online* (ReadComicOnline, 2015).

The method in which the list of fifteen was narrowed down to nine was by using a random item generator found online (Randomresult.com, n.d.). I put the list of fifteen comic books into the generator and it randomly selected nine comics from that list. I wanted the way the list was narrowed to be objective and free of bias as much as possible. This seemed like the fairest way to narrow down the list without allowing a preference for certain characters or stories to play a role. The nine comics that were used as the data for this research are: *Ms. Marvel* (Wilson & Alphona, 2014); *Squirrel Girl* (North, Henderson, Zdarsky, & Chabot, 2015); *Astro City* (Busiek & Anderson, 1995); *Hellboy* (Mignola & Byrne, 1994); *Gotham Central* (Brubaker, Rucka, & Lark, 2002); *Nextwave* (Ellis & Immonen, 2007); *Hawkeye* (Fraction & Aja, 2012); *X-Men* (Claremont & Anderson, 1982); and *Batman the Dark Knight Returns* (Miller, Varley, Janson, Kane & Costanza, 1986). The nine comics randomly chosen from the item generator suited the purpose of this research because they covered a wide variety of characters, and tackled multiple themes of diversity. Originally Wonder Woman (Simone, 2015) was also going to be included in the data, which would have meant ten comics were in my data set. It was the only comic I was unable to access online so I removed it from the data set.

## Data Collection

I used the first issue for each of these comic books. The first issues provided the origin and the background needed to understand these characters and their story arcs. Also, many of these comics had more than one issue so in order to keep the amount of data at a controlled amount, looking only at the first issue made sense. For each of the nine comics that were used for the data analysis, the middle five pages and the last five pages were the pages within each comic that were coded. I chose the middle and last five pages because both these sections were likely to contain a lot of important events and themes that were relevant to the stories. If the comic had an odd number of pages it was easy to identify the middle five pages; if there was an even number of pages, it forced me to approximate what the middle five pages were. There were an extensive number of issues for some of these comics that would have created too much data to sift through and analyze without doing a more comprehensive study. I took bullet-point notes for each page that were coded and summarized the main plot points, issues, findings that were discovered on each of these pages that were relevant when creating themes. After the pages for each comic had been read and coded, I wrote a couple paragraphs that looked at the elements of diversity and discourse that were present in each of the comic books chosen for the data analysis. The content of the findings for each comic was based on the two initial research questions and their corresponding follow-up questions.

For the first research question, the following questions were used to help code the data:

1. Who is represented?
2. What is the state of their physical/mental health?

3. What is the age of the character?
4. What is their role/importance to the story?

For the second research question, the following questions were used to help code the data:

1. Where does the story take place?
2. Is the story reflective of the time period?
3. Who is the author(s)?
4. What points of view does the author/society/hero hold?

These questions and guidelines helped to set the parameters for how the data would be broken down to answer the two research questions. The next important question to ask was how would the data be analyzed?

### **Data Analysis**

In order to analyze the data, a thematic analysis was conducted. I read through the comic book data and jotted down notes/codes that emerged as I analyzed the images and written text in the data. I took notes on all the events, characters, and themes that seemed relevant in each of the nine superhero comics. These notes were sorted and summarized into key findings. The first half of the findings looked at the way each of the five themes of diversity was addressed or integrated into the text; the second half of the findings focused on important details behind the creation of these comic book narratives, including the author's background, when the comic was written, and the author's point of view. This information was relevant in order to look at the societal discourses that were prevalent in these stories. These findings were applied to all nine of the comic books in the data selection and these findings were used in order to develop a list of themes that became the basis of chapter four. These themes were divided into two groups based on the two initial research questions as some themes looked at diversity within the texts and

others addressed societal discourses in connection to how diversity was addressed in the data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

A thematic analysis provided a great form of data analysis in which to look at issues of diversity in superhero comics. A thematic analysis was designed to discover unique and interesting themes from the data that were connected to the central research questions. A thematic analysis was also a form of data analysis that could be done using a variety of qualitative data. Maguire and Delahunt (2017) outlined the six steps associated with conducting a thematic analysis. These six steps helped shape the process used to analyze the themes of diversity within the superhero comic narratives. The six steps outlined in the article are: (a) become familiar with the data, (b) generate initial codes, (c) search for themes, (d) review themes, (e) define themes, and (e) complete the write up. Becoming familiar with the data is making sure that the researcher reads and rereads the data multiple times to have a firm grasp of it. Generating codes involves breaking the data into chunks and creating and modifying codes that are representative of these chunks of data. Creating and reviewing themes involves grouping the codes into larger themes and then making sure all the themes are distinct and representative of the data as a whole. Defining themes outlines the meaning and significance of each theme to the research questions. The write up is the final product that is created to present the main findings. The superhero comics also included larger themes across the data that emerged based on all the codes that were created surrounding the different themes of diversity. Thematic analysis, like any other form of data analysis, comes with both advantages and disadvantages.

When looking at themes of diversity in the data, these benefits and drawbacks were important to consider to make sure the findings were rich and matched the purpose

of the study. Javadi and Zarea (2016) described themes and how they differentiate from codes, different types of thematic analysis, and also the sample size that is needed for a thematic analysis. The main finding from Javadi and Zarea's article was that a thematic analysis is flexible based on the purpose of the research being conducted. The advantages of a thematic analysis that were outlined in the article include the simplicity, flexibility, and tangibility of this method and the results are more accessible for a wider public audience whose members are not familiar with the research process or the terminology used in qualitative research. Braun and Clarke's (2006) article similarly addressed the benefits for researchers when conducting a thematic analysis. They touched on some of the benefits brought up in Javadi and Zarea's (2016) study, including flexibility, simplicity of the method, and that the results are more accessible to the general public. Braun and Clarke also highlighted some additional benefits, including how this method allows for a thick description of the data and to highlight similarities and differences across the data. Some of the disadvantages of a thematic analysis that were outlined by Javadi and Zarea include the potential for researcher bias, the results not reflecting the extent of what is revealed in the data, or the analysis itself being weak. By being more aware of these drawbacks that could have occurred during the data analysis, the themes and findings that emerged from the comic data were more grounded and provided a rich analysis.

### **Positive and Negative Aspects of the Coding Experience**

The coding experience provided a lot of rich information and there were some key benefits that were gained from this process. The first benefit that was gained from this process was it helped to reignite a childhood passion for comic books. I have not always

created the time to pursue that passion for comic books and this research allowed me the opportunity to rediscover it. As I read through the data and worked through the coding, I became fascinated by the characters, stories, and most importantly the influence that diversity was or was not having on the comics themselves. After looking through the data, it made me want to read further issues of some of these comic books as well as to look beyond the scope of the data to see whether diversity is more or less present in other superhero comics. Comic books were a fascinating medium to explore when looking at diversity because they could be analyzed in two ways: textually and visually. A second benefit from this process was that it allowed me to position myself as a researcher who was objectively looking at this source material. My positioning as a researcher required me to look past a long-standing connection with the characters and stories, and take a critical approach to the data and whether it was truly reflective of the growing diversity taking place in our larger society. The coding process also allowed me to apply a sociocultural perspective to a medium like comic books that is so influential on today's popular culture.

This experience provided many benefits to this research, however there were also a couple drawbacks that came along with the coding process during the analysis. The first negative aspect is that this process could have been approached in a way that was more efficient. The challenge was that I did not begin coding until after I finished reading all nine of the comic books that were looked at for the data. As a result of this, there were instances where I forgot what the key events were in the narrative that provided important context for the particular pages that were coded. Had I read, and coded each comic individually, it would have been far more efficient and easier since the information in the

data would have been more current on my mind. Another challenge during the coding process was trying to decipher which information in the data were important to code. Some of the panels in the comics seemed inconsequential or repetitive in the context of the story, so deciding how, and if to code this information, was a challenge. A final challenge was that because I chose to only code the middle and last five pages from each comic, there were pages that would have provided more rich data that had to be excluded from this analysis. This was the best approach as it ensured the findings were as objective as possible yet it was also limiting in the sense that certain data could not make it into the analysis under these parameters.

### **Triangulation**

I used triangulation to ensure the findings and data analysis had more validity. Triangulation offered the benefit of bringing in multiple perspectives and converging information from different data sources to develop a stronger understanding of the research area (Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, DiCenso, Blythe, & Neville, 2014). Specifically, I looked at the superhero comic books as the main source of data from which most of the findings and conclusions were drawn. I drew from the literature to help inform and frame how I analyzed the comics, and to help contextualize them within a certain point in time and location. Lastly, I drew on the data analysis, and the codes and themes that emerged from the comic data and how the analysis represented what was seen in the comics themselves, and how it connected to the concepts and processes that were touched on in the literature review. Synthesizing the literature, comic data, and the analysis of the data allowed me to compare different perspectives and discover any connections or discrepancies across these different sources of data.

### **In the Next Chapter**

In the next chapter I further explained the process that was used when analyzing the data. All of the themes that emerged from the data analysis were listed and these themes were grouped accordingly based on the two initial research questions. I explained in depth the meaning and relevance of each of these themes in connection to the data and came up with overall findings to answer the two initial research questions.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

In the previous chapter I explored the type of methodology used for this research (which was a qualitative methodology) and also outlined how the data was selected that was used for the thematic analysis involving discourse. I explained what a thematic analysis involving discourse was and which parts of the data were the focus to make the findings more concise and the data analysis more efficient and practical given the time frame. I touched on how the data analysis looked at gender, sexuality, race, ability, and age as the five themes of diversity to focus on and broke down these five themes into subthemes to help analyze the representation for each theme individually.

### **Coding Criteria**

The two research questions that guided this study were the basis for how the data was coded. The two research questions were the following:

1. In what ways do themes of diversity influence superhero comic book narratives?
2. What broader societal discourses shape the themes of diversity in superhero comic book narratives?

Based on the data that was gathered, these codes were grouped into themes that explained the influence of diversity and discourse within these comic book narratives. Based on these themes came the findings on the nature of diverse representation within these narratives.

### **Themes From the Data**

The themes that emerged from coding were the core of the findings and I discovered nine themes based on the two initial research questions. These themes were grouped based on the two initial research questions and each theme addressed some

aspect of each of the two research questions. The themes that emerged from the data in relation to the first research question on the influence of themes of diversity in superhero comics were the following:

### **Diversity Themes**

- **Sexuality:** There was no representation for LGBTQ issues within this pool of comic data.
- **Gender:** A fair balance between male and female characters in these stories, but a majority of the main characters/heroes in the data were male.
- **Race:** Many of the stories had elements of racial diversity but still a majority of the characters/heroes in the data were Caucasian.
- **Ability:** Little to no representation for ability in the conventional sense. There was representation for ability in the sense that a lot of these characters had superhuman abilities that made them feel different, and led to them being targeted or discriminated against in some ways and this is a representation of how disability can manifest in society.
- **Age:** There was balanced age representation in the data between youths and adults. There were a few notable characters/heroes who fall into the youth category (0–19). The majority of characters/heroes fell into the adult category (20–59). There was no significant representation for the elderly category (60+) in the comic book data in terms of the main characters/heroes. The closest was Batman, who is not quite in this age bracket (however he falls close).

The themes that emerged from the data in relation to the second research question on how societal discourses are influencing these themes of diversity in superhero comic books were the following:

### **Discourse Themes**

- **Setting:** A majority of the comic book stories were set in New York City or in fictional settings in New York State. Only two comics had their own setting (e.g., Gotham City or Astro City).
- **Time Period:** Half of the stories were set in modern time and the other half were presumably set in the 1980s or 1990s when they were written. The data felt reflective of the time periods in most cases both visually and thematically; however, given the fantastical elements of the data it is hard to differentiate.
- **Author Background:** A majority of the authors were Caucasian, straight, American/European males. There was only one female author in the data so there was not much diversity in terms of the creators of these stories.
- **Importance of Diversity to the Plot:** Most of the authors did not make diversity a major theme of the story, however it still was present in most of the data. There was only a couple cases where the ideas of diversity and empowerment were major or underlying themes of the story.

### **Ways That Themes of Diversity Influence Superhero Comic Book Narratives**

In the following section I discussed the themes that emerged connecting to how diversity was represented in the data. These themes all connected back to the first research question and look at race, gender, sexuality, age, and ability's impact on the comic narratives in the data set.

### **Sexuality: No Representation for LGBTQ Issues in the Comic Book Data**

One of the main areas of focus when looking through the data was the ways in which sexuality was addressed and whether it was represented in a meaningful way. After looking through the data, there was not one character in any of the comic books who identified as LGBTQ. None of the central protagonists identified as LGBTQ and there were no identifiable secondary or tertiary characters who were LGBTQ. This is not to say that there was no LGBTQ representation in other issues of these comics or in Marvel or DC comics devoted to other characters, however within the data pool for this research there was no LGBTQ representation.

Some of these comics were a little dated (e.g., 1980s and 1990s), specifically when LGBTQ rights were less vocalized and in some cases less accepted such as the AIDS crisis. Pierceson (2020) explored the history of the AIDS crisis in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s and how due to the growing number of cases of HIV, there was a heightened level of discrimination toward LGBTQ people. There was also a high number of casualties as a result of HIV due to the lack of government/public response and the lack of proper intervention/treatment methods. This also connected to Prock et al.'s (2019) article that discussed the potential social and professional implications for people who are open about their sexuality which creates a fear to be open about sexuality in certain public spheres.

### **Gender: Majority of Primary Characters/Heroes in Data Are Male**

Sexuality was an important category to explore, however gender was also extremely relevant when looking at the data. I wanted to explore what the gender dynamics were in these stories and whether the heroes in these stories covered a broad spectrum of gender identities. In connection to the findings about LGBTQ characters, the

data showed no gender representation outside normative gender binaries of male and female. Within the binary of male and female, there was a fair balance between the number of male and female characters that were included in these stories. An issue that emerged was that in most cases the female representation was in the form of secondary or tertiary characters and the primary protagonists and heroes in these stories were primarily male.

An example of a primary male protagonist from the data was *Hellboy*, which focused primarily on the fate of the titular character Hellboy. His origin and conflict were the focal point of the plot (Mignola & Byrne, 1994). The main exceptions were stories that focused on a group such as *Nextwave* in which case there seemed to be a gender balance within the group dynamic (Ellis & Immonen, 2007). *Ms. Marvel* (Wilson & Alphonso, 2014) and *Squirrel Girl* (North et al., 2015) were the two exceptions where the main protagonist/hero was female so there was a feminine lens to the story. This connected to Ostroff's (2016) article because it addressed the growing effort within the genre to appeal to the female demographic and this has led to a rising number of female superheroes in recent years. *Ms. Marvel* and *Squirrel Girl* are newer characters and are reflective of this growing trend that was not occurring when some of the older comics in the data pool were written.

### **Race: Some Elements of Racial Diversity but Majority of Central Characters/Heroes in the Data Are Caucasian**

The findings that emerged for the way gender was represented were similar to the way race was represented in the data. Most of the comics in the data included characters from diverse racial backgrounds yet there were only five or six central characters or

heroes of different racial backgrounds. The racial representation in the data largely came in the form of secondary characters, or there were some examples of racial representation within the comics centred on a group of heroes. Many of these non-Caucasian characters did not have a significant focus in these narratives or were not the central protagonist or hero.

One example of racial representation coming in the form of secondary characters was in *Squirrel Girl* where the main character's roommate was a Black female (North et al., 2015). A second example of racial representation in the form of secondary characters was some of the superheroes that Samaritan works with in *Astro City* come from different racial backgrounds (Busiek & Anderson, 1995). The only exception was *Ms. Marvel* (Wilson & Alphona, 2014) in which the main hero of the story was a Pakistani female, but in all the other comics many of the central heroes were Caucasian and of an American background. This connected back to Christian's (2019) article which discussed how racial discourses and the power of Whiteness has prevailed socially, economically, and politically, and this was evident in the data.

### **Ability: Little to No Representation for Ability in the Conventional Sense**

Ability was the most difficult of the diversity categories to analyze in this study because the way ability is normally understood changes when looking at superhero characters. This research looked at both physical and mental health in terms of ability and seeing how the lived experiences that go along with physical and mental health were highlighted in these comics. There was some representation for both mental and physical health in these comics. The main representation for physical ability was Professor X in the *X-Men* comic (Claremont & Anderson, 1982). His character was in a wheelchair

because he was left partially paralyzed from an encounter with a powerful villain. Mental health was also represented in *Batman* (Miller et al., 1986) because Harvey Dent, a villain, struggled to find his identity and overcome the way he saw himself as this deformed criminal. The image Harvey saw of himself was creating an inner turmoil that made it difficult for him to step away from a life of crime and villainy. Outside of these two characters, there was no notable representation for physical or mental health in the data in the context of how it is seen in modern society.

Moreover, this research forced me to challenge preconceptions of what ability means when looking at superhero characters because they possessed powers and abilities that were different from normal human beings in both a mental and physical sense. While many of the characters in these comics did not deal with any challenges to their physical or mental health, they were all treated differently, and in some cases discriminated against, because of their superhuman powers and abilities. A great example of this from the data was Batman was being criticized and labeled a menace by many of the media and law enforcement in Gotham. As a result of this negative image attached to Batman, he always had to hide his identity from everyone in Gotham except for those closest to him (Miller et al., 1986). Superhero characters are a great metaphor for the way disability can manifest in our society because of the discriminatory way these characters can be treated and the fact that they have to hide their identities from the public (Smith & Alaniz, 2019).

### **Age: Equal Representation Between Youths and Adults but No Significant Representation for Elderly People**

In order to break down the way age was represented in the data, this theme of diversity was broken into a few subcategories. Age was broken into the following three subcategories: youth, adult, and elderly. Within each of these subcategories there was an age bracket: youth was (0–19), adult was (20–59), and elderly was (60+). After looking through the data, I found that both the youth and adult subcategories were represented quite proportionately. The central protagonists in each narrative tended to fall into one particular subcategory based on age.

There were a few notable examples of superheroes who would be categorized as youth. Squirrel Girl (North et al., 2015), who was just starting her first semester at college, and Ms. Marvel (Wilson & Aplhona, 2014), a high school teenager who gained superpowers, were prime examples of protagonists who fell into the youth category. *Gotham Central* (Brubaker et al., 2002), which focused on the men and women working in the Gotham City Police Department, and *Astro City* (Busiek & Anderson, 1995), which focused on a hard working superhero named Samaritan, were both prime examples of comics with adult protagonists.

Another important point to note is that while the first issue of a couple of these comics did not feature any heroes who fell into the youth category, their later issues did highlight younger characters who stepped into those hero roles. This included the Batman comic (Miller et al., 1986) where a young girl stepped into the Robin role, and Hawkeye also trained a young girl to be the next Hawkeye in the *Hawkeye* comic (Fraction & Aja,

2012). The rest of the data centred on adult protagonists who presumably were in their thirties or forties although this was not confirmed in the data.

The elderly subcategory got very little representation in the data since elderly characters served primarily as secondary or tertiary characters if they were in the story at all. The closest example of a central character that fell into the elderly category was Batman in *The Dark Knight Returns* (Miller et al., 1986). The Bruce Wayne character was much older in this version of Batman although he did not quite fall in the elderly bracket. His character, however, was dealing with challenges associated with being older in the comic, which helped highlight some of the physical barriers associated with aging. However, there was no social stigma facing Batman's character because of his age, so this comic did not capture the social barriers associated with aging. The only other examples were Professor X and Magneto who were older in the *X-Men* comic (Claremont & Anderson, 1982). The Professor X character was confined to a wheelchair but neither characters seemed to demonstrate physical or social barriers associated with aging. This connected to the literature as Krekula et al. (2018) talked about the meaning that gets attached to young and old as young people can be seen as having strength and vitality but older people possess weakness. These labels and stereotypes attached to elderly people can explain why there is limited representation within the data as these characters might not be perceived as superheroes based solely on age-based stereotypes.

### **Broader Societal Discourses That Shape Themes of Diversity in Superhero Comic Book Narratives**

In the following section I discussed the themes that emerged connecting to how broader societal discourses shape the themes of diversity in these comic narratives. These

themes all connected back to the second research question and looked at factors such as setting, time period, author background, and importance of diversity to the plot.

### **Setting: New York as Main Setting for Most Narratives in Data Set**

The first set of themes looked primarily at how each theme of diversity was represented in the data. The next set of themes was focused on the larger context in terms of both the context within the comics, and the context of the creators behind the comics. One aspect of context was the setting in which these stories were taking place. Almost half of the comics within this data set took place in New York State. Some were set in New York City itself, yet others were set in fictional places within the state of New York. An example within the data where New York was the primary setting was *Ms. Marvel* (Wilson & Alphonso, 2014) which, although not set directly in New York, was set in New Jersey which is close geographically to the New York area. A second example is *X-Men* (Claremont & Anderson, 1982) in which the academy that Professor X housed mutants was located in New York. The cases where these stories were not set in New York were primarily when the comics were taking place in a setting which was unique to those stories, such as Gotham City or Astro City. Even despite these examples, these settings still came across as metropolitan cities and many people argue that Gotham City is inspired by New York City. This suggested that within the context of these stories, the discourses that were prominent are ones reflective of everyday life in these big cities. The experiences, cultures, and values of people within smaller cities or towns in the United States, or even the experiences of those on a more global scale, were not captured within the context of these comic narratives.

### **Time Period: Stories Presumably Set in Modern Times or 1980s/1990s but Difficult to Determine Given Fantastical Elements of the Data**

In addition to looking at the setting of each of these comic books, there was also a focus on the time period in which each story was set. Unlike the setting (which was primarily New York), the time period of these stories had a little more variance. The data suggested the time period in which these stories was set was largely contingent on when the comic books were actually written. The exact time in which these stories is set was not specifically outlined in many of these stories, so it required a lot of deduction and assumption as the researcher. About half of the stories seemed like they were set in modern times in which they were written. Examples of these comics that felt reflective of a modern time period included *Squirrel Girl* (North et al., 2015) and *Nextwave* (Ellis & Immonen, 2007), since they were both written in the last ten years or so. The other half of the data seemed reflective of the 1980's and 1990's since some of the comics were originally published in those decades, including *Batman* (Miller et al., 1986) and *Astro City* (Busiek & Anderson, 1995). Both visually and thematically, these stories seemed reflective of the respective time period in which they were initially written and captured the feel a comic from each of these decades would have. The thing that made identifying time difficult is the fantastical nature that defines these kind of stories. Many superhero comic books are “over the top” in terms of the types of characters, powers, and settings that are often featured in these stories. Since this genre is often so reliant on fictional elements, it made identifying time and place difficult in some circumstances.

### **Author Background: Majority of Authors Caucasian, Straight, American/European Males**

The context within these stories was equally as important as the context and background of the creators of these narratives. Ironically, there was more diversity within these stories than there was in terms of who was creating them. Almost all of the authors of these comics were Caucasian, straight, European and American males. Six of the authors were from the United States, two were from the U.K., and one was from Canada. This is still an issue since there were only creators of a European or American background so these stories did not have a wide cultural lens. Most of the authors were also straight, which would explain the lack of LGBTQ representation within these stories. The most glaring disparity was that out of the nine comics, there was only one female creator. *Ms. Marvel* (Wilson & Alphona, 2014) was the only story to feature a female creator and it was the only major example of racial diversity amongst the creators as well. *Ms. Marvel* was focused on a teenage Pakistani female growing up in New York that was dealing with all the social barriers that came along with it. This connected back to Wilson (“G. Willow Wilson,” 2020) because the author of this comic drew inspiration from her own cultural upbringing and dealing with the social and racial barriers that would have come along with her experiences. She wanted to create a character that appeared to be reflective of the teenage Muslim experience. The other authors would not necessarily have shared this goal because they all came from similar backgrounds.

## **Importance of Diversity to the Plot: Not a Major Theme of Story but Still Present in Most of the Data**

The last theme focused on the extent to which diversity was significant thematically to the plot and also how much diversity was present within the data as a whole. It was important to look at the extent to which diversity played a role in the story; however, this research also sought to analyze if the diversity within these stories had a meaningful role from a narrative standpoint. After looking through the data, I found that while diversity was present in many cases it did not serve as a major theme in most of the data. Almost all the comics had some elements of diversity within the story, which showed that the effort to integrate diversity within these narratives was somewhat of a priority during the creative process. The counter argument to this is that while diversity was present, it did not serve as a major theme within these stories. Many of the characters who helped to create some level of representation served mainly as secondary or tertiary characters and were not extremely relevant to the overall story. In addition, these stories did not place emphasis on their different experiences and worldviews based on their age, gender, race, ability, or sexuality. As a result, in many cases these characters seemed to blend in as opposed to standing out in a meaningful and poignant way. There were a couple examples where diversity served as a main theme of the story, including the *X-Men* (Claremont & Anderson, 1982) and *Ms. Marvel* (Wilson & Alphonso, 2014) because the protagonists in these stories were facing barriers based on their race or abilities and they had to overcome and confront this in their journey. These examples were exceptions as opposed to the norm. This connected to the literature as Drum (2017) looked at an interview with a Marvel Comics editor who talked about the need for continued progress

in including more diverse characters, perspectives, and creators in order to create more empowering stories for all readers.

### **In the Next Chapter**

In the next chapter, I presented the findings from the data to answer the two initial research questions, discussed the overall findings and also looked at the implications this research could have in the educational sphere in terms of building awareness and knowledge around diversity. The next chapter also addressed some of the limitations of this research and the future directions this research could be taken. Lastly, the chapter presented a brief conclusion summarizing the process of this research as a whole.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS AND EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS**

In the previous chapter, I outlined the coding criterion and the themes that emerged from the data after going through the coding process. I delved into each theme individually and provided rich descriptions, examples, and explanations for each theme. These themes were connected to the two initial research questions and the corresponding analysis of these themes was connected back to the graphic texts and the literature.

### **Discussion**

In the following section, the themes and their subsequent findings from the data analysis are used to answer the two initial research questions in more depth. I explain the role that themes of diversity play in superhero comics and also highlight the types of discourses that appear to be prevalent within the data set.

#### **Ways That Themes of Diversity Play a Role in Superhero Comic Book Narratives**

The first main finding is that while there is some representation based on the five themes of diversity that were chosen—gender, sexuality, race, ability, and age—the majority of the characters and perspectives that were showcased in the data still reproduce the straight, Caucasian, male perspective. Many of the protagonists and heroes featured in these stories are not meaningful examples of diversity within the superhero genre and there are only a few notable exceptions. These exceptions include Ms. Marvel (Wilson & Alphonso, 2014) in terms of an individual protagonist and Nextwave (Ellis & Immonen, 2007) because of the balanced representation given the group dynamic. The data show that while there are some examples of diversity within these comics, there still needs to be a continued push for diversity in terms of expanding the superhero genre and also comic companies and their readership need to reconceptualize how they understand and define a superhero.

The data highlight how these narratives fail to capture the barriers associated with aging or the experiences and identities of LGBTQ people. The ongoing cultural stigma and stereotypes aimed toward LGBTQ and elderly people can help explain their lack of representation in the data (Pierceson, 2020; Prock et al., 2019; Krekula et al., 2018). The data challenges initial assumptions that the youth subcategory would not be represented proportionately. There is a balance in gender representation between male and female in the data but many of the primary protagonists in the story are male. This was in correlation with my expectations going into the data because the superhero genre has traditionally been male-dominated. There is representation for race and ability in the data but this primarily comes in the form of secondary characters and feels minimal in comparison to the overwhelming number of Caucasian able-bodied characters in these narratives. Given that the prevailing discourses around race still promote the ideas of Whiteness it is not shocking that many of the central protagonists/heroes in these narratives were also White (Christian, 2019).

Connecting back to the first research question, themes of diversity do not play a significant role in these superhero comic narratives yet there is evidence that there is a growing push for diversity from fans and also from major comic-book companies to continue to create and promote characters and stories that showcase a diverse set of backgrounds and identities. Ostroff (2016) discusses how in the last decade there has been a growing number of diverse superheroes based on themes of race, gender, and LGBTQ. He also points out how these new kinds of characters are bringing in new demographics and superhero comics are no longer only marketed and bought by a Caucasian readership. Most importantly, more people are now able to identify and

connect with these characters, and there is a push from both Marvel and DC to bring in more diverse creators and reach new audiences (Ostroff, 2016). It is important to note that diversity does seem to be a little more prevalent in the more recent comic narratives and less prevalent in the comic books that were written in the 1980's or 1990's. If this research is revisited ten years from now and a new pool of data is selected to sift through, there will likely be completely different results.

### **Broader Societal Discourses That Shape Themes of Diversity in Superhero Comic Book Narratives**

The second main finding is the lack of diversity in terms of who is creating these stories and by extension whose perspectives are being shown and whose are missing. There are authors who are White, straight, and able-bodied who can create compelling and inclusive stories that help to promote representation for people of different identities and backgrounds. This needs to continue to be the case as it will help push diversity forward in this genre. In addition, there should also be a growing number of creators with diverse backgrounds along lines of race, gender, and ability to help bring in new perspectives that may not be represented otherwise. In an interview with Marvel editor Sana Amanat, she discusses how *Ms. Marvel* (Wilson & Alphona, 2014) is part of the initiative to bring in minority characters and to create heroes that all people can relate to. This story creates both a compelling superhero tale and also representation for people that historically have been silenced within this genre. *Ms. Marvel* is created by a diverse author, which helps facilitate this representation, and this article also highlights how there is an initiative to bring in more diverse creators to expand the types of stories and characters within the genre such as writing about trans or disabled superheroes

(Drum, 2017). Drum (2017) goes against the findings in the data in which the aforementioned *Ms. Marvel* is the only example of a comic that is not written by someone who identifies as a straight, Caucasian, American or European male. This would explain why the majority of the protagonists in these stories are Caucasian males and why there is little LGBTQ representation because it is emblematic of the authors' own backgrounds.

*Squirrel Girl* (North et al., 2015) is another example of a comic that creates a character who feels real and relatable. The author still falls into the straight Caucasian male stereotype, however he creates a character that breaks traditional gender stereotypes and conventions. Polo (2019) features an interview with the author Ryan North in which the latter talks about wanting to create a superhero that feels real, relatable, and a fully fleshed-out character. His progressive attitude toward creating the hero known as Squirrel Girl allows the story to thrive while also featuring a straight Caucasian male author at the helm. These examples highlight the need for a commitment from all creators to prioritize diversity and tell authentic and socially relevant stories in order to push the genre forward on a social and cultural level. If more creators with different backgrounds and identities are brought in, the possibilities are endless both creatively and culturally for the types of stories that can be told. It also makes it more likely that we continue to get characters like the X-Men and Ms. Marvel where diversity plays a significant role thematically to the plot.

Connecting back to the second research question, the broader societal discourses that shape these comic narratives are primarily a Caucasian American male discourse. This is evidenced by the fact that a majority of the protagonists/heroes and the comic book creators are Caucasian American males, so as a result the data are reflective of this

culture and its prevailing discourses. The data in many ways, due to the lack of diverse representation, reproduce the notion that the Caucasian male discourse is the norm and that this discourse is emblematic of what a superhero character is supposed to be. This connects back to Adams's (2017) article which discusses Foucault's idea on discourse. Foucault states how discourses are relevant because they generate truth, shape how people understand the world, and are a product of power relations and who has control over the spreading of these discourses. This ties in with the findings because given the Caucasian American male perspective that underlies most of the data, it could mean that people who read comics are only going to understand the world and superheroes through that limiting point of view. It also reinforces that this discourse could continue to be reproduced within this genre as long as these same people are occupying positions of power and are the ones writing these superhero stories. By bringing in more creators with different backgrounds and identities, it begins to shift the types of discourses around what a superhero looks like and represents. It also shifts the power in who controls the knowledge, perspectives, and identities that go along with these discourses that get reproduced in these superhero narratives. This will change not only how people understand superheroes, but also how they understand themselves.

### **Educational Implications**

One of the most difficult parts about choosing this topic as the focus of this research is trying to understand how this will connect to the sphere of education. Melilli, Covintree, and Abdul (2019) discuss how comic books can provide many benefits for students including improved fluency, comprehension, critical thinking, and also they can be a more engaging and approachable read for struggling readers. Comic books can have

many positive benefits for students in both raising awareness around issues of diversity and getting them to think critically about the way diversity is represented in the literature and the ways they look at the characters in these narratives more broadly. Matuk et al. (2019) talk about how comic books, specifically in the science curriculum, can facilitate more students identifying as science learners, and provide visual representation for groups that often get ignored within the educational sphere. Comics can also prove valuable in areas like language or social studies by generating discussion around issues of diversity.

The first key implication for education this research can have is that it helps to demonstrate how superhero comic books can serve as a platform for students to engage with issues of diversity and raise awareness around these issues for students who may not be as familiar or comfortable with these topics based on their upbringing or experiences. Previous experiences in the classroom have shown me it can be difficult for students to engage with issues of diversity and the other problem is that it is not always something that students actively think about on a daily basis. Since comic books are a visual medium, they can be a great tool to help students visualize and understand what diversity looks like in a way that is both approachable and engaging. Egleton (2018) discusses how comic books allow students to make better sense of their own identities and also the identities of others. They also enable students to better understand the experiences of marginalized students and visualize other cultures when they are represented.

Race, gender, sexuality, age, and ability are all categories of diversity that are critical to address within education at all levels yet the challenge many teachers face is how to best address these issues in a responsible and age appropriate way. Comic books

can serve as a great medium to start these conversations since they are accessible and they are designed to appeal to a wide variety of ages, interests, and reading levels.

Students can use comic books and their visual elements to help them make sense of how they understand and conceptualize diversity, and to take a critical look at why diversity is or is not present within the comic books they are reading. After they can identify whether diversity is present, they can begin to think critically about why diversity is important and how the comic books they are reading could be made more diverse. This can work with all comic books beyond those that fall within the superhero genre and this will also allow teachers to appeal to students broad interests as there may be students who do not connect with superheroes and the themes and stories that go along with this genre.

A second key educational implication that can come from this research is that because superhero characters are generally labeled as role models, this study presents a groundwork that if utilized in the classroom might encourage students to ask some pivotal questions to help them think of diversity through a whole new lens. It is important for students to begin to ask questions such as: What defines a superhero? What does a superhero look like? Whose voices/identities are being included and whose are being left out in the way superheroes are being represented currently? These questions all connect back to the theme of diversity and it gets students to think about diversity through the lens of superheroes who often are seen as cool and powerful by those who read about them. By encouraging students to apply that critical lens to characters like superheroes that are often seen as role models, it can mean that students are beginning to remove their own personal biases and are beginning to think more objectively and applying that analytical lens in order to address the underlying issues that may be present in these comics concerning diversity.

Yildirim (2013) explains how comic books and graphic novels can be a great resource to foster critical thinking and encourage thought-provoking discussion. Getting students to have critical discussions about what a superhero looks like and whose identities are being represented encourages them to expand their perspective on what a superhero is and realize the importance of allowing all voices/identities to be given a platform and that anyone can be a superhero. If students can begin to ask these questions about superheroes (generally fictional characters), then they can begin to ask these important questions about people with whom they interact and are exposed to in their everyday lives. Superhero comics can be a great foundation to build up students' understanding of larger social themes and stereotypes around issues of gender, race, sexuality, age, and ability (Cook & Frey, 2017). Understanding these issues may allow students to challenge injustices they or those around them are experiencing, and better prepare them to become socially conscious and engaged citizens in an increasingly diverse and changing society. This may even allow the larger school climate and culture to become more accepting of diversity because students are being encouraged to critically engage with issues of diversity in the classroom on a daily basis.

One final implication for education that can be drawn from this research is the need to continue to expand the types of literature that are being introduced into the classroom. Comic books and graphic novels can be a rich source of knowledge and understanding for students and can be a great way to engage students with curriculum content that they may generally lack the interest or comfort to invest their time and energy into. Melilli et al. (2019) list how comics and graphic novels are useful for students for reasons such as improving comprehension, motivating reluctant readers or students with disabilities, fostering different forms of literacy, and covering a wide

variety of subject matter. Comics and graphic novels provide students with a new way to read, interpret, and engage with texts and this needs to be explored more in the classroom.

Comic books can also provide a great medium to address ideas from different curriculum areas such as history, literacy, and social studies depending on the comic. As superheroes become increasingly more profitable and mainstream (Carle, 2017), it is necessary that teachers bring these characters and stories into the classroom in a way that helps develop student's critical literacy and also their understanding of diverse issues that are relevant both within and beyond the classroom walls. Comic books should not dominate the types of texts that students are being exposed to, but might be equally accessible for students in addition to the other types of texts that are being brought into schools.

When looking at bringing comic books into schools in order to teach about diversity, an important question becomes at what age and stage of development should these ideas be brought into the classroom. As previously mentioned, these ideas can be introduced at all grade levels, and they can be scaffolded to continue to build on students' understanding as they move forward in their education. At the primary and junior level, there could be a focus on getting students to identify some of the defining traits that are associated with comic books and the superhero genre.

Saraceni (2003) features some great activities in his book that allows students to learn about the different textual elements of comics and also apply their understanding. This is also the stage where the concept of diversity could be introduced, and students can begin to recognize who they see and don't see when reading these comic narratives. At the junior and intermediate level, students could think more critically about diversity and why it is an important concept to understand both in the classroom and in their everyday

lives. They can also begin to look at why certain voices/identities may be represented more than others and how they can help to push for more representation in this genre. At the high school level, these ideas could be taken a step further to have students build on the application portion of the learning process.

Students could be asked to create their own comic books featuring a diverse character, and create a character backstory that goes along with their comic book. This project can build on those ideas and conversations they would have had in their prior learning and also allow them to demonstrate they understand the importance of diversity and can think through a diverse lens and consider experiences and perspectives that may be different from their own. Egleton (2018) explores the benefits for students who were creating their own comic books and found that it is a great tool to explore their identity development and share with others how they perceive themselves within this diverse climate. Comic book creation can allow students to both better understand themselves and also begin to better understand the experiences of others. In future practice, I hope to apply some of the key ideas that were learned while completing this research.

### **Limitations**

While this research was a great learning experience, there are a couple limitations to this study that are important to note. One of the limitations is that due to the nature and guidelines for this study, the data pool was not able to be expanded to look at more comic books within the superhero genre. Only nine comic books were selected for the purposes of this study but looking at additional data would allow for a more comprehensive look at how diversity is represented. It also would allow me to further explore the contrast between the older comics and newer comics being created by Marvel and DC and the way they represent diversity. Only including nine comics in the data set also means that

the findings are not necessarily generalizable to the entire superhero genre, which continues to expand. Due to the time constraints for completing this research, nine comics seemed like the most efficient and pragmatic amount of data to analyze. A second limitation to this study, which is in correlation with the first, is that this research only looks at the first issue for each of these comic narratives. Many of these comics have multiple issues that span hundreds of pages. Given the time constraints, other issues of these comics were unable to be analyzed in terms of how they represent diversity, and this may have changed some of the key findings and themes that emerged from the data. One last limitation is that the themes of diversity were being analyzed through the lens of someone who is a straight, White, able-bodied male. Given my privilege as a result of this identity, I have never personally encountered injustice or inequality based on these categories and have never been the subject of negative treatment based on this identity. Someone from a minority background might have a different level of insight based on their own unique worldview or experiences around these issues.

### **Directions for Future Research**

This research can be expanded upon and taken in a couple different directions for future studies. One direction this research can be taken in would be looking at more issues of each of these comics or looking at a wider selection of superhero comic books in order to have a more extensive source of data. Another direction this research could be taken in would be looking at comic books that fall outside the superhero genre. There are so many comic books that cover so many different genres and subject matter that the choice of genre might drastically change the results of the data. One final direction that this research could be taken in would be incorporating these materials into the classroom and doing a study on how the use of comic books can improve students' learning of the

literacy curriculum. This would be a great study to truly evaluate the educational potential this research could have for students in the classroom.

### **Conclusion**

This research looking at diversity in comic books presents a few challenges yet overall this is a rewarding and informative experience. The focus of this research is on themes of diversity and the types of discourses that are present in superhero comic narratives. The data analysis suggests that while diversity is included in these narratives, it does not play a major role in the plot of these stories and many of the primary characters/heroes in these stories do not fall into diverse categories. This impacts the types of discourses that are present and predominant in these stories because these stories in many ways are reflective of a Caucasian, male, heterosexual lens which is the background of many of the authors who wrote these narratives. Superhero comics are continuing to push for diversity and there is a growing demand and presence of diverse characters in these stories; however, more strides need to continue to be made to ensure that diversity is thriving in this genre.

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