

## The Influence of Fan's Superhero Preference, Superhero's Leadership, and Ethics on Fans' Leadership Imitation

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### Abstract

After superhero comics were reproduced as films, they influenced wide range of people including adolescents. The current study aimed to test if fans' superhero preference, superhero's ethics, and leadership could bring about fans' intention to imitate leadership of superhero characters. Univariate regression was used to analyze data given by 134 participants. The findings reveal that fans' superhero preference and superhero's leadership have a positive effect on fans' intention to imitate leadership of superhero, but superhero's ethic failed to predict it. This suggested that, if media producers need to promote prosocial media effect in media fans, they should increase heroic characters' leadership, so people would imitate leadership from ethical ones.

**Keywords:** Superhero; Leadership; Ethics; Fandom; Prosocial Media Effect; Preference

### 1. Introduction

Leadership is one of the personalities that educators and teachers should develop in students in their early age. Some educational institute has provided a leadership-related class for their students to register and there were also many books published with this title. Superhero, as an object in entertainment media, should be able to educate the audiences as well as the school does, since the audiences consume such the media with their intrinsic motivation. Froiland and Worrell (2016) found that intrinsic motivation in learning could indirectly bring about the improvement of class performance. The current study primarily aimed to explore the positive effect of comic books on their fans. The objective of the present study was to test the influence of superheroes' leadership and fans' preference toward superheroes on the willingness to imitate superheroes' leadership in fans. Although some research studies discussed the negative content in comics (Garland et al., 2016; Nicosia, 2016), many studies pointed out the position light in comics, too. The next section would introduce the role of comics as social leader and the role of comic characters as the leaders of people with various identities.

### 2. Literature Review

The September 11 attacks were the events that comic book industry had proved themselves as a part of the society. Many comic book writers and publishers came together and devoted themselves by writing comics for charities. Moreover, the content of comic in that age was enormously valuable. They portrayed the stories regarding those who dedicated themselves for others such as emergency workers, nurse, and firefighter (Worcester, 2011). Unlike, DC Comics and other smaller publishers, Marvel Comics was not mentioned in Worcester's paper (2011) as those who wrote comics to raise fund for 9-11 event. Spider-Man, a Marvel fictional character, allowed his fans to share their identity with him since the death of Uncle Ben was similar to how people in New York City lost their family members

in 9–11 (Sommers, 2012). The reason for this connection is that Spider-Man has a strong relationship to New York City. In other words, without skyscrapers in New York City, Spider-Man would not be able to perform as a superhero. Americans, in the same way as New Yorkers, perceived that Captain American is an icon and the spiritual object regarding the nation, as seen in the study of Boyer (2012), that Captain American represented patriotism but not nationalism. The difference between patriotism and nationalism is that patriotism is the esteem toward the nation without feeling pessimistic on other countries. According to the change in American value from the liberty to the materialism, Benton (2013) describe Captain America as the representation of “redemptive” anti-Americanism, which is the attempt to bring the original American value back into the present days.

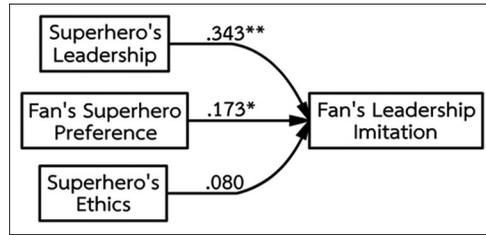
Another lens that scholars have discussed regarding comics is how comics constructed the leaders of minority whether for disabled people, people of colors, or women. Back into the age of the World Wars, while most men fight against the enemies, it was the first era that women held some positions in workplaces. Wonder Woman was created with the belief that women were smarter and able to work faster than men. She is not only the first female superhero who has her own comic title but she is also the voice of women in the second-wave feminism and also other minorities, including adolescents and people of colors (Cocca, 2014). This could be seen in her public speech and the time that her power was taken off that she had to live like an ordinary woman in the unjustified world, which is the age of gender inequality (Matsuuchi, 2012). Other than Wonder Woman, who is the icon of feminism, DC Comics contributed the idea of post-feminism through a story of female superhero team, Birds of Prey. As well as Marvel Divas of Marvel Comics, the friendship among women in Birds of Prey was much stronger than their bond to male companions, especially for Barbara Gordon and Black Canary (Sawyer, 2014). Barbara Gordon is not only as the representation of a post-feminist character she is also the character with disability, paralysis. Moreover, her marriage to Nightwing also broke the myth that disabled people may not be married.

Back to the original creation of female superheroes in both DC Comics and Marvel Comics, most female superheroes in DC Comics had career, but Marvel Comics did not (Dunne, 2006; Pratiwi, 2013). DC female superheroes were more subjective, due to their leadership and ability to make their own decision (Dunne, 2006; Pratiwi, 2013). While DC Comics was viewed by the scholars as the creators of feminist leaders, besides Barbara Gordon, they did not give an appropriate role to disabled people, as seen in villains in Batman comics. On the other hand, Marvel Comics established a fictional school for disabled people as seen in X-Men and also created Daredevil, a hero with a visual impairment and his alter ego as a selfless attorney (Alward, 1982). Currently, X-Men was created as TV serials, named “Gifted.” With this serial title, it shows that disabled people were viewed as gifted not missed. Later, Marvel Comics has also improved the roles of their female characters by creating female superhero team in X-Men (2013) and female Avengers, called A-force (2015). This was read by some online comic reviewers as their responsibility for the cancellation of X-23, the female-led titled comic books, in 2011. For lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT), North star, a gay character in X-men comics, who had earlier died for 4 times, finally got married in Astonishing X-men (2012). Earlier, Green Lantern of DC Comics won the heart of LGBT group when Kyle Rayner punished hate crimes (Palmer-Mehta and Hay, 2005). More recently, after Kyle tried to stop violence against LGBT, gay superheroes were created to be the one with Green Lantern Power Ring and an important member in a young superhero team, Teen Titans.

All of these aforementioned events in comics allow us to recognize the leadership of superheroes either as the icon for minorities or the nation. Hust et al. and his colleagues found that male audiences of crime drama intended to intervene women in sexual assault situation in their real life (Hust et al., 2013). This could be considered as a prosocial media effect caused by exposure to media violence. Moreover, fans’ perceived similarity toward their favorite superhero and the ethics of the particular superhero significantly described fans’ willingness to believe prosocial message presented in comics or superhero films (Arunrangsiwed, 2015). Hence, these could help hypothesize that superhero’s leadership should be able to increase fan’s willingness to improve their leadership and should be predicted by how much fans such as the particular superhero, too.

As presented Figure 1, based on the effect of superhero’s leadership, superhero’s ethics, and fans’ preference on fans’ intention to imitate superhero’s leadership, the following hypotheses are presented:

**Figure 1:** The effect of superhero's leadership, superhero's ethics, and fans' preference on fans' intention to imitate superhero's leadership



- H1: Fans' perceived superhero's leadership can result in fans' willingness to imitate their favorite superhero's leadership.
- H2: Fans' superhero preference can bring about fans' willingness to imitate their favorite superhero's leadership.
- H3: Superhero's ethics positively predicts fans' willingness to imitate their favorite superhero's leadership.

Across several studies, their researchers believed that comics consumption could cause negative effect on young audiences. The body shape of superhero, for instance, might have influence on young fans' dissatisfaction regarding their own weight and muscles (Avery-Natale, 2013). They might have depression symptom when they could not be just as what they need. Comparatively, violence against women in comics was also discussed in an academic work (Phillips and Strobl, 2013) because media have numerous impacts on audiences' psychological traits (Krahé and Möller, 2010) and belief (Hust et al., 2013). However, these papers offered some support that comics should have at least some effect on its reader, even if it might be positive or negative. Although few studies efforted to conduct the positive outcome of comics consumption, comic books were found as an effective learning resource in some existing research (Decker and Castro, 2012; Simon, 2012). According to these aforementioned studies regarding comic readers and fans, comics should be able to bring about positive outcome on their audiences as well as their negative outcome that was earlier suggested. This offers an opportunity for the researchers of the current study to examine if fans of superhero comic book could be positively influenced from their fan objects.

### 3. Method

As students were generally fans of some media object (Chen, 2007), the participants of the current study were 150 students from five universities, which were random from 31 universities in Bangkok Metropolitan Areas. This is based on the output from G\*Power, suggesting that the minimum number of cases should be 119. Thirty participants per each university were asked to complete a questionnaire which consisted three measurements. They needed to answer a question, "Who is your most favorite superhero?" before starting filling in the least of questionnaire. This question allowed them to think of their favorite superhero while they read through the items in questionnaire. Moreover, their answers were also used as a part of analysis. The researchers coded the ethics of their favorite superhero based on their answers (3 = morally good character; 2 = neutral character; and 1 = villainous/anti-hero/anti-villain character). After screening out invalid cases, 134 cases were left for the final analysis. 72 of them were male (54%) and 62 were female (46%). For other three measurements, they were first written for the current data collection, so Cronbach's alpha and factor analysis results were also reported in this part of paper. This helps to test their reliability and validity.

1. Superhero's leadership scale consists of 5 items, and it was a single-component scale. Its Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin-Statistic (KMO) is 0.824 (P = 0.000), determinant value is 0.169, and the correlations between items were ranged from 0.299 to 0.685. These values showed that this scale could be used without deleting any item. Cronbach's alpha of this scale is 0.820.

2. Superhero preference scale is a one-component scale with five items. Its Cronbach's alpha is 0.705. The correlations between items were ranged from 0.165 to 0.549. All other values reveal that this scale can be used for data collection (KMO = 0.681; P = 0.000; determinant = 0.346).
3. Fan's leadership imitation scale is also a one-component scale with five items as well as two previous scales. Cronbach's alpha shows a high reliability (alpha = 0.826). Results of factor analysis show the accepted validity of this scale (KMO = 0.816; P = 0.000; determinant = 0.171). The range of correlations between items is from 0.341 to 0.553.

All scales used in the present study are 4-point Likert scale (1 = disagree; 2 = somewhat disagree; 3 = somewhat agree; and 4 = agree). The detail of the scales is provided in Appendix. After the data collection, all values in questionnaire were typed in a spreadsheet. A statistic package was used to conduct a univariate regression analysis. Univariate regression would help to test the influence of all predictors on the dependent variable and Fan's leadership imitation and help to indicate the amount of variances described by each predictor. Homoscedasticity, which is an important assumption of regression analysis, was found in the data which was shown in a histogram of residual, a normal P-P plot, and a scatterplot of predicted value and residual. This implied that regression analysis was allowed to test the current model.

#### 4. Result

The results from regression analysis in Table 1 supported H1 and H2 but did not support H3. Fans' intention to imitate superhero's leadership was significant predicted by superhero's leadership (Beta = 0.343;  $t = 4.209$ ;  $P = 0.000$ ;  $r_{\text{partial}} = 0.346$ ). Superhero's preference can cause intention to imitate superhero's leadership in fans (Beta = 0.173;  $t = 2.133$ ;  $P = 0.035$ ;  $r_{\text{partial}} = 0.184$ ). However, there is no effect found between superhero's ethics and fan's leadership imitation (Beta = 0.080;  $t = 0.968$ ;  $P = 0.335$ ;  $r_{\text{partial}} = 0.085$ ). Overall model is statistically significant. Three predictors can describe 16% of variances in the dependent variable ( $F = 8.248$ ;  $P = 0.000$ ;  $R = 0.400$ ;  $R^2 = 0.160$ ;  $R^2_{\text{adjusted}} = 0.140$ ; S.E. = 3.162).

#### 5. Discussion

Since comic book publishers have performed as social leaders in national crisis and some superhero characters were good representative of minorities, the current study tested the factors that cause fan's leadership imitation based on superhero characters. Three hypotheses were tested, two of which were supported by the result of univariate regression analysis. Superhero's leadership and fan's superhero preference were found as enabling predictors of fan's leadership imitation. These significant influences supported hypotheses H1 and H2. However, another hypothesis was not supported since there was no effect found from superhero's ethics on fan's leadership imitation. As H1 was supported, it implies that, to heighten leadership in fans, media producers should increase leadership in superhero characters. Since H2 was also supported, people who worked in media industry should consider improve either leadership value in fan-favorite characters or fans' preference in the characters with high leadership. If these suggestions were applied to use in actual media production, the level of leadership should be able to transfer from media to a large number of fans.

In general, audiences were both benefited and threatened by media, especially when they identify with some media characters (Konijn et al., 2007) and earn parasocial interaction during media

**Table 1: Regression analysis with fan's leadership imitation as dependent variable**

Predictors	Beta	t	P-value	r	$r_{\text{partial}}$	$r_{\text{part}}$
Superhero's leadership	0.343	4.209	0.000**	0.357	0.346	0.338
Fan's superhero preference	0.173	2.133	0.035*	0.165	0.184	0.171
Superhero's ethics	0.080	0.968	0.335	0.110	0.085	0.078

consumption (Brown, 2015). At the same time, fans' identification is also associated with their media preference (Hoffner and Buchanan, 2005). These evidences and findings of the current study help to construct a new research model for future studies that media preference has some relationship with audiences' identification and both of which could cause media effect. Media-based imitation is one of the most important media effects. The researchers of the current study encouraged others to conduct the studies regarding this topic, especially for prosocial behavior imitation and prosocial trait, and as well as, it was done in the present study with the variable and leadership imitation.

For another part of findings, superhero's ethics failed to predict fan's leadership imitation. This indicates that if fans like a superhero characters and perceived their high level of leadership, fans would be likely to imitate their leadership even these characters are either hero or villain. Consequently, the researchers of the current study suggested comic book editors and movie producers to increase leadership in heroic characters and decrease it in villainous ones. This finding should be able to be applied in video game production since most video games are narrative based and players are likely to have a high level of character identification during play in the role of selected avatar (Donnerstein, 2011; Konijn et al. 2007). This provides a question about how leadership could be added into the narrative of video game. Although video game players are the one who controls the action of their avatar, many video games provide walkthrough story online for marketing purpose. A walkthrough story can be the place for media producers to include leadership value into heroic characters. Another part of video games that allow leadership value to be added into is the intro dialogues of each game character. Intro dialogues are what each character said before he or she started to fight another character. This could be seen in the video game, *Injustice*.

Since null hypothesis of H3 could not be rejected, it led to another question about villain attractiveness. Media fans generally prefer and identify with characters with attractiveness (Donnerstein, 2011). Attractiveness might be a stronger predictor in fan's media-fictional-character preference compared to character's ethics. Not only for narrative-based media, this is especially true for the area of marketing and advertising, that attractive is one of the dimensions of source credibility scale, which is commonly used for indicating the effectiveness of product endorsement campaign (Ohanian, 1990). If people prefer attractive characters rather than unattractive ones, positive traits and behaviors should be attached with them. However, in the case that attractive and prosocial actions were always in the same characters, this would form the belief regarding beauty and goodness stereotype. Many unattractive and body-disable were mostly found as villainous characters, from media for young audiences as Disney animation (Bazzini, et al., 2010) until Batman stories with full of body-and-metal-disable antagonists. Hence, this research finding suggested that, without considering the relationship between superhero's ethics and fan's leadership imitation, media producers may choose to heighten attractiveness in heroic characters, but at the same time, they should be aware of the fault belief established in fans based on the connection between attractiveness and goodness. Future studies should identify the solution of this problem by having character's attractiveness, ethics, and media effect, either prosocial or anti-social, in the same model.

Another factor that may cause media effect, which in this case is leadership imitation, is character's time of appearance in media. This could be one of the solutions that have never been tested before. Media producer may choose to avoid the stereotype problem by giving both hero and villain the same level of attractiveness. Some heroic characters may be more attractive than villainous ones and vice versa. To control to level of fan's character preference, media producers could portray hero longer than villain in movie length. Thus, time of appearance should be considered useful as control variable in future studies.

## 6. Limitation

The major limitation of this study is that the scales used in data collection were not initially tested, and the result of factor analysis and Cronbach's alpha shown in method part was computed from the same set of data used to test the research model. This is not a good practice, although this procedure was commonly found in several quantitative studies. Fortunately, the result of validity and reliability testing

turned out acceptable. However, if both tests yielded an unacceptable result, the major findings had to be canceled. Hence, future studies should test the instruments before data collection.

Another limitation is that all participants of this study were undergraduate students in Bangkok, Thailand, which might not be representative for overall fans of superhero media. The researchers of future studies should consider use random-sampling method and expand the range of media not to limit only for superhero characters but also other popular narrative-based-media characters. This refers to the fact that superhero's action based on their leadership might not be able to be applied by fans who live in real-world context. Non-super powered characters might be a better role model to test in research studies. This association could be described by similarity identification that media audiences were likely to identify with those characters who have similar attitude and appearance (Van Looy et al., 2010). Hence, the level of identification is most often related with impact of media in audience (Birk et al., 2016; Hoffner and Buchanan, 2005). In addition, most superheroes preferred by the participants of the current study were based on DC and Marvel, which are American companies. Therefore, the result might be affected by the difference between the leadership style of Thai and American. This is because both countries might be very different in individualism and collectivism.

## 7. Conclusion

Since superhero comic book and its other transmedia are well-known and should be able to influence in wide range of audiences, it is worth to test if superhero's leadership and fans' preference could bring about prosocial media effect. The findings of the current study illustrate the significant influence of superhero's leadership on fans' intention to imitate their leadership. However, superhero's ethics was failed to predict fans' leadership imitation. The researchers suggested that media producers should improve leadership in morally good heroes, not the villainous ones, so fans would imitate leadership from hero characters.

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**Appendix**

This part shows all items which are consisted in scales used in the current study.

1. Superhero's leadership scale
  - a. She/he has the potential to be a leader.
  - b. She/he has planning skills.
  - c. She/he has ability to solve problems.
  - d. She/he has consciousness.
  - e. She/he has discreteness.
2. Superhero preference scale
  - a. I wants to watch movies contained this superhero.
  - b. I want to meet this superhero in my real life.
  - c. I like the power of this superhero.
  - d. I like to collect the toy figures of this superhero.
  - e. I like the characteristics of this superhero.
3. Fan's leadership imitation scale
  - a. I want to be able to manage my time as well as this superhero.
  - b. I want to have similar planning skills as this superhero.
  - c. I want to have a similar level of leadership as this superhero.
  - d. I want to have discreteness as well as this superhero.
  - e. I want to have capability to solve the problems as this superhero.