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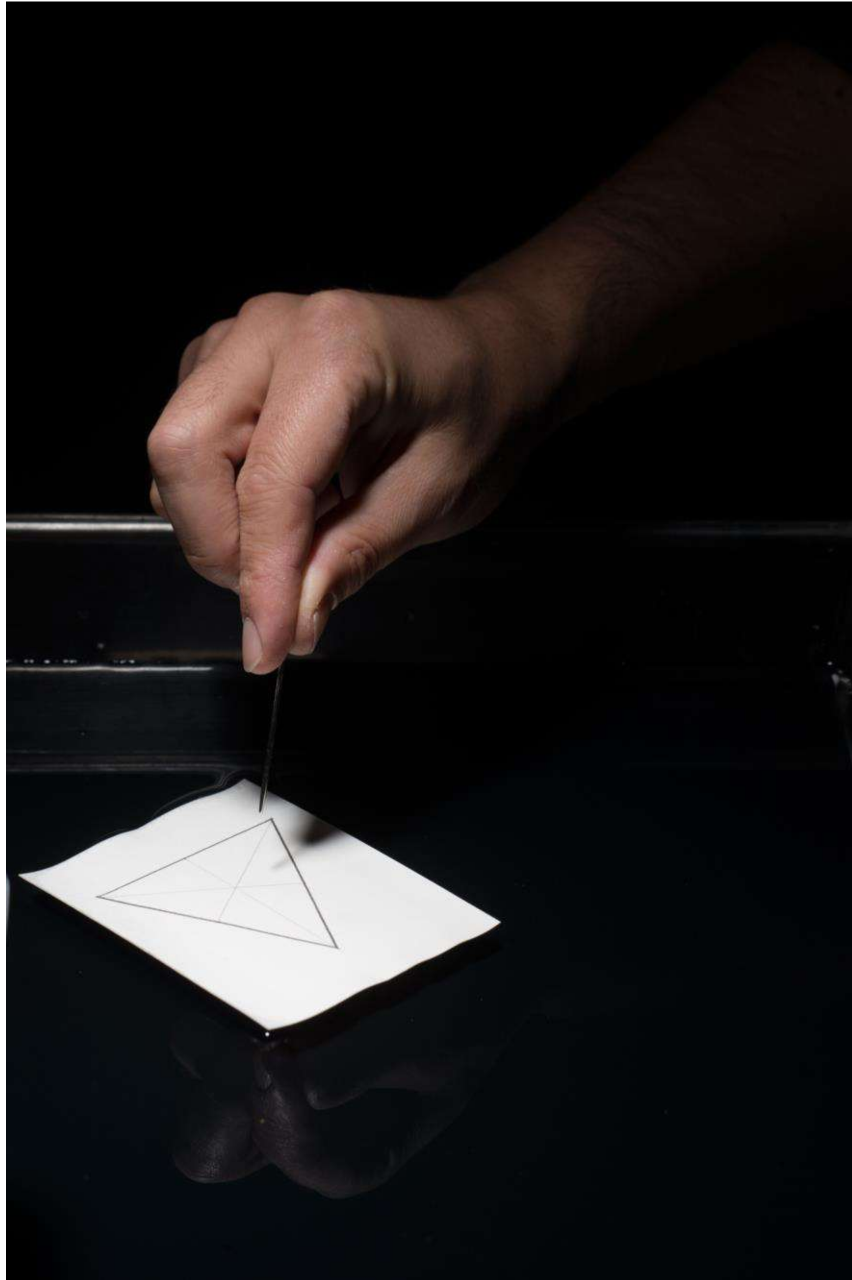

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Social Stratification in Comics: Representations of Status and Class to the Growth of Genre

Stephen Poon

Abstract | This paper offers a critical examination of comics' role in constructing, establishing, and giving meaning to the system of social stratification through status and class representations. Literature presents a spectrum of scholarly critiques on theories related to social class and status, and to align the principles of justice, morality,

and equality to cultural symbolisms in comics. Primary research comprises a textual analysis of social stratification in the study of cultural artefacts and characters from *Spider-Man* and *Batman* comics. Case studies demonstrate how social class, power, wealth, and status are explicitly personified in comics through symbolic elements found such as equipment and technology which embodies the ideals of class and power, and through elements of status conflict such as the structured social relationships between masters and employees. Findings, established the relevance of stratification of status and class in the symbolically constructed social conditions that fictional characters live in. Partly due to popular media, audiences are shown to increasingly identify with comics' symbolic messages and are aware of meaningful visual narratives of justice and social equality in their formation of cultural worldviews. The paper's conclusion urges researchers and educators to undertake further exploration on the sociological function of comics as an accessible discourse tool to encounter cultural differences in global societies.

Keywords | Comics; Social Class; Status; Stratification; Textual Analysis

Introduction

Comics are sites where superheroes and super beings are suggestive portraits of social change, and where scientific and cultural knowledge are applied in equal measure. Comics are sought-after cultural commodities. They are mainstream tools of visual expression as well as a specialty art medium with morphologies of forms and intended audiences (Jenkins 14). At the same time, comics use textual signifiers that are often not pinned down to specific semiotics and cultural systems of meaning; readers must reach their own interpretations, with creatively imagined possible outcomes (Kukkonen 51-86).

In "History and Comics", Paul Buhle (315-323) wrote that problematic interpretations of historic events especially pertaining social movements, have surged among today's digital and web generation, many who increasingly view comics as an aspect of knowledge in their (already) pared-down list of books. Some researchers are concerned that visualising the world through comics boils down to nothing but providing audiences simplified chunk of general understanding on social problems, where readers "see" aspects of the world indulgently using aesthetic illustrations, narratives, and speech bubbles, all at the expense of scholarly prose which could offer a stronger appreciation of the full, yet not always, coherent picture.

Professor Charles Hatfield acknowledges that "comics … play a developmental role in the reading life of children" (360). Comics publishers, searching for new spins on classic 'good versus evil' plots, have noted that comics are a growth market segment for early literacy products. Researching the evolution of children's literature in the early 2000s, Hatfield reports growing recognition for comic art potential and the various informal tactics that attempt to use comics as serious teaching tools. Sales, critical popularity, and marketing have all contributed to the "wordless" genre becoming a lucrative and popular cultural text for children, cult comic art followers, and general readers alike (Smith 131).

However, the rapid evolution of modern comics as a transmedia sector have resulted in differences in perceptions of comics' sociological function among creative industry stakeholders (traditional and digital publishers, comic artists, visual communicators, marketers), and culture scholars.

Graphic novels, anime, and manga increasingly express audiences' desires to debate, dialogue, and share perspectives on issues affecting global societies. Cultural scholars weigh in with their own critical observations about the benefits of comics genre's popularity among youth and adult markets. This has contributed to perceptual differences that contemporary comics have very disparate agendas.

As legitimate artefacts of culture, comics have sustained creative industries, with licensing, distribution, and marketing revenues from mainstreaming of the genre over the last two decades (Lopes 92-97). The superheroes of comics are iconified for their cultural impacts on global societies as they predominate in popular leisure and entertainment franchises today, from films to amusement parks.

The 2000s saw the emergence of big-budget superhero films and action-film franchises based on comics, such as *X-Men* (Dir. Bryan Singer, 2006) the first superhero film of the century; *Iron Man* (Dir. Jon Favreau, 2008), *Superman Returns* (Dir. Bryan Singer, 2006) and *The Dark Knight* (Dir. Christopher Nolan, 2008).

Studies reveal that the Western comic publishing industry has always pandered to more adult consumers' tastes. These have resulted in comic books' resurgence as mainstream cultural products, birthing new media hybridity and the reimagining of Western superheroes for other societies (Jenkins 96). Hybridity is a frequent element in digital convergence trends.

Consequently, among less media-engaged societies, there would often arise a resistance to Western ideologies being incorporated, assimilated, or encroaching into their cultures (Jenkins 112). Nevertheless, comics-based content from films to animations and as character marketing for commercial advertising, represent a genre of highly marketable pop culture, besides being interesting case studies for filmmakers.

Animation works, for instance, are studied and taught for their direction, production design, visual and stunt effects, videography, scripting, and other creative aspects (New York Film Academy). Based on the classic tactical marketing strategy of summertime releases, comics-inspired superhero films occasionally pick up industry awards, such as *The Dark Knight* that won an Oscar for the portrayal of the Joker by Heath Ledger.

Jenkins provocatively suggests in the classic transmedia book *Convergence Culture*, that these visual mediums metaphorically remind audiences of their own social ranks, status, and roles as the fantasies they "insert" themselves into could be inclusive or exclusionary (174).

For instance, Mila Bongco (151-176), in citing the collaboration by comic book writer Grant Morrison and illustrator Dave McKean in the highly acclaimed 1989 *Arkham Asylum*, comments that the convergence of cultural meaning making within comics makes it an ambiguous postmodern "power narrative". In *Arkham Asylum*, Batman's Dark Knight archetype is subsumed with a disturbing passion to satirise the Joker's madness and moral vacuity, which led to tragic outcomes weaved upon the realities of psychiatric madness.

Comics' Visual Design System and Narrative Schemes

Comics have taken decades to be in the commercial spotlight as a visual communication medium. In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud applies the fundamentals of semiotics developed by C.S. Peirce, who argued that human understanding of meaning through images, gestures and signs comes from "juxtaposed pictorial and other images [arranged] in deliberate sequence" (8). Another principal definition of comics attributes the term *sequential art* to experimental cartoonist Will Eisner, where stories are told through a series of strips or panels.

Twentieth-century comics began in the 1930s in Italian magazines, and graphical speech balloons were also introduced (Castaldi 80). Readers were presented

with simplistic articulation of thoughts, plots, and verbalised views to accompany body language and other nonverbal aspects of visual communication (Bramlett 382). David Kunzle produced a double-serial volume of scholarship on comics in a quest to find the thematic “prehistoric” origins of comic as contemporary graphic art. His books were published over the span of two decades (1973 and 1990) to demonstrate the power of timeless comics as cultural artefacts.

While postmodernists lament the purpose of comics genre tracking (Donald Simpson), Kunzle arguably pushed the boundaries of McCloud’s thesis, especially since the latter insisted that comics’ value had been “squandered, ignored and misunderstood for generations” (Boxer). Additionally, comics as a storytelling medium have been called “the invisible art” (Manning 66). This implies that readers expect the genre to carry no more weight than as accessible sites of familiar icons, characters, places, symbols, and imageries that *resemble* real life and real societal issues. Discussing the popularity of costumed superheroes, from “strip funnies” to fledgling post-World War I “action -adventure” graphic novel publications, Petty (4) claims that:

> [At] their height, superhero comics [*Captain Marvel*, *Superman*, *Batman*, *Wonder Woman*, *The Spectre*, *Captain America*, and etc.] were selling up to a million copies per monthly issue. It was a good time to be a hero.

There are numerous challenges to taking comics into constructive realms, from its historical antecedents as ‘alternative literature’ for readers seeking relatable, vernacular art over a century ago, to becoming a more inclusive, increasingly critical subject of art, design, media, pedagogical and literary discussions. Comics’ representations of social situations attempt to temporally remove readers from their own cultural realities, inviting them to look back at history from a distance (Johnson 3).

Crucially, comics resonate with readers as they symbolically construct and illuminate social conditions from discrimination to oppression and poverty, by structuring visual plots that demand audiences to focus on their social reality to interpret narratives for themselves. The social conditions in which comics are conceived, produced and distributed are an intensely studied area of contemporary cultural research (Brienza 105; Palmer 3).

Comics contextualises the relationships and conflicts between protagonists and antagonists to draw audiences to read and appreciate them on aesthetics levels (Iser, cited by Connors: 34), as well as offer educating and enlightening depictions of societal conditions through critiquing structures of class, honour, stigmatisation, law, guilt, and punishment (Fennell 319).

Literacy experts argue comics' debatable nature as a literacy medium; some scholars think comics allow school-age readers to overcome learning reluctance by being a textual interaction tool to attain reading competency and construct meaning (Connors 27). As a medium of neutral communication, comics are subject to constant critical questioning by the comic authors themselves, since superheroes are temporal characters with 'grown-up voices', who attempts to dignify comic book artists' articulation of "else-worlds" comprising their personal ideologies and socio-political interpretations of social issues through visual crafts (Waid and Ross 151).

Morality and law enforcement form another significant theme. Comics examine this invisible thread that upholds societal harmony and progress, providing accessible cultural framing of the codes and duties of citizenry and socio-political relations between authorities, enforcement agencies, society, and reformers. Ideologies of legal change, liberty, civil rights, social equality, and etc challenge audiences' critical thinking (Cedeira Serantes).

Stratification and Conflict Theories

Stratification has been defined variedly, but for the purpose of this paper, it refers to the hierarchical systems of enacted laws, customs and organised economic production which apportions social rewards in accordance to accepted cultural customs for identity politics, wealth, prestige, affiliations, religious positions, and ethnic dominance.

European classical economists Georg Hegel and Max Weber pioneered theories on social class differences and proposed that social stratification play a role in the legitimisation and stabilisation of power structures and systems through imposing the dominant will of specific parties on others of lower ranks. Characteristics of domination are based on three enacted forms of authority: legal, traditional, and charismatic (Weber, cited by Nostwick 35).

Stratification is largely derived from socioeconomic theories which argue that the formal structures and systems of economic classes perpetuate social inequality. Upper classes employ unfair distribution systems to gain privileges, attain economic success, and to sustain their wealth. The wealthy, powerful and educated codify stratification through social hierarchies, offering limited opportunities and quantities of lower classes to rise.

Conflict theories are useful to explain the conditions wherein justice is measured in the fair distribution of economic resource. The theory argues that perpetuating class divisions oppresses lower classes to seek their share of social resources. Evolutionary capitalism shows that resources are distributed for social survival, until a surplus (leftover) exists at a certain point in time and power determines how the surplus is distributed. These may include systems for the division of labour (Haferkamp and Smelser 110).

Various cultural interpretative schemes have emerged in the study of comics as a site of identity and social class discourses, through examining conceptual and narrative themes such as racial discrimination, corruption, and homosexuality. Hillary Chute argues that *discourse value* is one of the ways comics are perceived as a legitimate medium used in discussing stratification in this century.

Studying the development of political awareness through the cartoons of Joe Sacco, Chute examines how Sacco compellingly captures social class discourses through themes such as justice and human rights (821), concluding that comics reflect the cultural diversity of ideologies by raising questions about self-identity which become pertinent for social progress.

Cedeira Serantes pushed this notion further, applying the constructivist method in a multimodal framework to study 21st century comics' reading experience through interviews with comic book fans. He developed four dimensions signifying the concept of status. First, the development of *self-identity*, second, attitudes towards *materiality*; third, perceptions of *institutional power* and *class divisions*; and fourth, *temporality*, since audiences spend short periods engaging with graphic texts.

University of Helsinki researcher Kai Mikkonen applies structuralism theories developed by Roland Barthes, Claude Bremond and Tzvetan Todorov to critique how complex social class narratives are communicated in web-based graphic comics through the sequencing of dialogues and conversations.

These studies and findings from literature suggest that comics can greatly impact the social construction of worldviews, affecting audiences' knowledge about social realities and influencing cultural attitudes towards certain social classes.

Textual Analysis of Comic: An Overview

Textual analysis, according to McKee, is a sensemaking methodology to gather data. This practice is applied to uncover and clarify value judgements and perceptions behind controversial themes. Communications researcher J. P. Williams studied the evolution of popular culture through rhetorical analysis. In her dissertation, Williams critiqued comics' fantasy character portrayals, arguing that close examination of gender identity roles showcases the compatibility of comics with audiences' worldviews, norms, and attitudes towards issues such as sexual equality.

Textual analysis in researching comics has evolved from the traditional examination of sequential and configurative structuration of visual imageries (with units such as panels, pictorial runes, and speech balloons), to the less structured, more ambiguous visual literacy as well as message interpretations of character designs and plots based on class relationships (Dunst et al).

Nuanced expressions of human conditions are seen when comics are analysed through a simple equation: *"cognitive + aesthetics"*. Within the pages of comics and graphic novels are storytelling panels which have the ability to cut through structured social class narratives using relatable fantasy, dialogues, and design elements to develop audience's aesthetic responses (Connors 15-21). These form the basis of readers' immersion into a world of superheroes and supervillains as told through "weaved multimodal" texts.

In "digging deeper to better understand certain kinds of information" (Denisoff 456), researchers need to distinguish between texts with *latent* and *surface* meanings, as audience's interpretations may not align with the comic artists' or authors' intended meanings. This is a crucial factor, as comics have undergone substantial and significant cultural reframing. Being increasingly accessible has resulted in perceptual shifts of their value, as audiences gain awareness and makes inferences about social class divisions and stratification *for themselves* as well as to further understand their meanings *for others* in society.

To sum up, textual analyses enable insights into these shifts by documenting diverse themes and perspectives and shaping answers to the many complex questions related to local and geopolitical ideologies, as well as important economic and social issues which underpin sociological development of social classes in the accumulation of wealth and power.

This in turn contributes to the spread of comics' genre popularity as a fascinating subject of cultural, humanities, and social science scholarship. Hence, the use of textual analysis in understanding social stratification in comics is applied for this paper.

Stratification: A Textual Analysis of *Spider-Man* and *Batman*

The *Spider-Man* series, published by Marvel Comics beginning in 1962 and cemented by positive audience response in 1963 (*Britannica*), tells of orphaned Peter Parker, an introverted high school student turned news reporter, whose job personifies a sense of personal awareness towards social injustice. In school, he deals with rejection and loneliness. Science is the only real solution he turns to. The narrative sees him attempting to fight for justice for commonfolk in an attempt to create an idealised world he desires to live in.

Spider-Man's dual nature reflects Weber's principle of *charismatic* authority, which perceives a legitimate social conflict in the ways individuals in society gain vicarious triumphs over heroic personal struggles against unjust systems and nefarious criminals. Spiderman's alter ego Peter Parker shows an individual's difficulties to balance a stolid, humdrum routine as a journalist and his self-perceived "moral" duty as a crimefighter, while caring for family and community.

This contrasts with Batman, whose alter ego, Bruce Wayne, despite being scion of a wealthy family, is marked for a lifetime role: that of addressing social problems. His fate shifts when he is orphaned during a street robbery, becoming sole heir of the fictitious Wayne Enterprises, Inc., a family corporation modelled after *multinational companies* (MNC), a conglomerate with interests in aerospace, steel manufacturing, chemical, electronics, medical, and shipbuilding. Bruce grows increasingly doubtful of the existence of social justice, even as he rubs shoulders with the elite class in the squalid setting of crime-ridden Gotham City. Perceptions of his charisma comes from

his vigilante methods of crusading to obtain justice for the oppressed, and from the prestige status accorded by peers due to large contributions from Wayne Foundation, the non-profit which helps the community and victims of crime.

In this manner, Batman's creator Bob Kane constructed a character that lived under the system of traditional authority Weber described (Lopes 20). This is an essential psychological reality of the socially conservative 1940s era in which Batman was created (Johnson 4; Smith 134). This reflects Brienza, whose study of Japanese and American comics suggests that social conditions derive from the "social and organisational context of production and dissemination" (105).

Kevin Borg discusses structural duality in examining social systems as both the means and outcomes of stratification (797). Citing technologist Wiebe E. Bijker and structuralist Anthony Giddens, Borg states that resource distribution is an intentional process, where the formal rules governing acceptable divisions of social classes are the product of temporality perceived as legitimate expression of ownership.

The chauffeur, the basis of Borg's article, exemplifies this. Social interactions such as the dialogues and formal verbal exchanges between Bruce Wayne and his chauffeur Alfred are important stratification elements.

The symbolic construction and portrayal of superheroes' dependence on personal assistants, secretarial staff and other necessary workers is relevant to class discourse as the rules and resources in the "master/slave" system are externalised within fictional storytelling frames. Assorted hired hands from servants, butlers, accountants, and digital AI solutions, act as sturdy ramparts for respective "bosses", assuming administrative responsibilities and performing mundane tasks, working unobtrusively in the background in a range of needful "sidekick" roles (Rocher et al 9).

Externalities weave together the cultural reality of the superhero's limitations. Fictional assistants justify the practice of social stratification which dictate acceptable master/slave behaviours. Employers recognise and value henchmen who thrive on hard work, while demonstrating loyalty, dutifulness, street-smart intelligence, and protectiveness. These characteristic traits, albeit often stereotypically portrayed, symbolise the indispensability of skilled or professional employees (Rocher et al 18).

In Spider-Man's case, the master/employee relationship conflict is personified by Peter's nemesis, Dr Otto Gunther Octavius (Doctor Octopus or Doc Ock). Octavius

hires Peter as a laboratory assistant, discovering the latter's alter ego activities as a superhero, but without publicly disclosing his knowledge.

Octavius' mean-spiritedness develops concurrently with his negligence towards work safety protocols. As a case study in neuroticism, Octavius allows a deeper understanding of irredeemable criminal behaviour that stems from personal failures, including parental opposition to his marriage, and rampant obsession with career recognition (Holland, cited by Dudenhoeffer 126-129).

Technology and Status Legitimisation in Comics

Technology empowers masters in the comic universe, being portrayed as incredibly expensive, and therefore, symbolising tools of wealthy classes who can afford to advance socially, in their zeal for domination or recognition of success.

Technological glitches are frequently the central triggers which unnerve the human controllers of the system or machine; the rest of the morality tale falls in place in the grand narrative, albeit from philanthropic or profiteering motives.

Without technological problems, there would hardly be gripping "experiment-gone-wrong" scenarios where antagonists play morally conflicted roles. Imes Chiu states the cultural attitude towards materiality as status symbol indicates the agentic power of technology to produce hierarchical structures which is then exploited by the capitalistic classes (32). **S**ocial hierarchies are also symbolised by everyday objects and technological apparatuses which demonstrate that power is a capacity to create 'sensible order' in society: "you can, you will, and because you did, you can" (Herbuth 469).

Octavius, the Marvel Universe's dual-nature invention of brilliant nuclear physicist-turned-rogue, developed four radiation-resistant mechanical arms to aid in researching the capacities of atomic powers, typifies the real threats of 'science gone wrong'. His formidable tentacle arms, harnessed to engirdle his stocky body, symbolise extraordinary human strength. An accidental radiation leak and explosion fused the laboratory apparatus to Octavius' body. With his brain re-wired to accommodate four mechanical arms and a tarnished reputation, Octavius turns to a life of a crime.

In Batman's Gotham City, advanced technologies are *de rigueur* to its power narrative, signifying its material complicity to conduct (and sometimes, triumph over) crime and vice. To counterbalance this, protagonist Bruce Wayne's indolent playboy

character, from his entrenched position of wealth, shows concern for community welfare, with the non-profit arm Wayne Foundation funding scientific research and philanthropic deeds to reduce global social inequalities (Smith 132).

Batman does not possess superhuman abilities but leverages on the inherently divided social structures and economic systems of Gotham. At the same time, Batman relies on superior technological gadgets to defeat villains. One of these, a utility belt, acts as armour. Designing the belt himself is a unique touch of creative aesthetics, showcasing his intelligence and attention to detail. The belt includes a Bat-Cuff, designed with a sliding mechanism of lock and release, that requires cutting off.

Another signifier of status in Batman comics is the mode of transportation, the Batmobile. Sophisticated, menacing, high speed and high prestige, the Batmobile is a tech icon bearing close resemblance to military weaponry, calculated to instigate fear of law and justice in his perpetual battles to nab or eliminate the baddies (Birkenstein 129-132).

A slew of costume staples, technological equipment and gadgetries enable audiences to appreciate the role of externalities in crimefighting, either owned or amassed by protagonists or their opponents.

Villainy is symbolised through weapons used for self-interests, wickedness, or greed, contrasting with their use for protection, defence, and as empowering agents for change by 'good' superheroes. When self-interests and justice conflicts, the standoffs and fights between lead characters and antagonists legitimises comics as recursive texts which construct and mirror the cultural reality of social class conflicts and morality problems.

What is uncomfortable is when comics' portrayal of justice, morality, and equal rights become open battlegrounds for public clashes. Since individuals' judgements of good and evil are based on social expectations and cultural norms of what constitutes ethical behaviours, audiences' perceptions of comic characters' morality compass, cannot ultimately be resolved with definitive answers but only plausible outcomes.

A final reflection on this dilemma comes from culture critic Jeanne Holland, writing in *Anatomy of the Superhero Film* (Dudenhoeffer 126). In the decade after global terrorism struck New York on September 11, 2001, Holland believes Americans recovering from the shock of suicide bombing post-9/11 should have seen the symbolic connections that 2004's *Spider-Man 2* made with the real-life terror incidence.

This nuanced ability in the “reinscription of good and evil” (289), which happens through comics’ ability to reframe flawed social conditions and political relations, would have helped more audiences to come to terms with the horrors of terrorism and embrace a new vision of a stronger America.

Conclusions

“Humans don’t just survive; they discover, [and] they create.” ~ *Ratatouille*

What lessons may be gathered from textual insights on comics, and how do comics’ fictional schemes influence society’s perceptions of reality? To begin with, themes of morality and ethics of individual choices are socially constructed elements of superhero storytelling. This implies its cultural potential to improve perceptions of equality, justice, and to seek solutions for social change.

Secondly, findings suggest a tremendous potential in social and educational research for comics to be a legitimate platform for learning - the goal being to get children into the habit of reading and thought development.

Research point to varied creative possibilities that educators could leverage on. Comics could play a role to enhance social awareness through visual literacy approaches for younger age and adolescent audiences, and as alternative teaching strategies to conventional textbooks for subjects ranging from political history, psychology, visual communication, technology, and innovation.

If public awareness of issues such as behavioural dysfunctionalities, social class differences and ethnic-based injustices can be increased via comics, manga, or digital mediums such as games and apps, there is untapped potential to garner critical responses among interested stakeholders such as comic graphic designers and digital content producers. This area is ripe for further contextual research.

Thirdly, stratification in comics help audiences consciously *define* class, what class *means*, and encourages conversations on how stratification impact resource distribution. By portraying cultural worldviews through social constructions of fictional realms and superheroes, comics can be a continuum to study class distinctions and to heighten audiences’ acceptance as a legitimate cultural artefact, implying its sociological function as accessible tools to encounter global, socio-political realities. These experiences trigger philosophic questions about class systems, economic

determinism, and social histories, to examine possible policy improvements and find solutions for dysfunctional socioeconomic systems and structures.

Superheroes' ubiquity and relatability through popular media have transformed the comic genre from being merely cultural artefacts created to entertain youth to an empire of veritable social change agents with latent cultural capital to dramatically alter twenty-first century society.

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