Article

“Life Savers”: Technology and White Masculinities in Twitter-Based Superhero Film Promotion

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Abstract

Drawing from social media studies and the literature on American economic decline and conceptualizations of gender and sexuality, this article asks how Twitter’s medium-specific features can be understood through an examination of its representational qualities in the context of the promotion of two contemporary superhero films. The accounts @BatmanvSuperman and @SpiderManMovie provide case studies of film promotion that uses Twitter’s particularities as a platform in order to advance distinct narratives about the films being promoted, via original tweets and retweets that, respectively, represent differing approaches to advertisement. Through this study, the article advances the arguments, first, that cultural representations are reflective of Twitter’s specificities as a social media platform, and second, that these representations work in conjunction with cultural norms of the contemporary US. One form of idealized White masculinity advanced by the latter is reliant on technology and its merging with the White man’s body. As a result, the technologies of superheroes’ suits as well as Twitter itself become representative of the present sociopolitical climate and its various aspirations and anxieties.

Keywords

film promotion, gender, post-recession, promotion, Twitter

Representations of masculinity in relation to technology have been studied for some time, and were particularly characteristic of recession-era American culture, which prominently began with the 2007–2009 recession, but which has had significant economic and cultural ramifications into the present (see Negra & Tasker, 2014; Schreiber, 2016). As I discuss in greater detail below, post-recession culture is defined in large part by its normalization of economic austerity well beyond the global struggles of 2007–2009. Masculinity as it manifests in popular culture of the 2010s remains notable for its continued reliance on the standard defining feature of idealized identity. In particular, the use of social media to promote male superheroes consistently relies on such characters’ expertise in and bodily merging with machinery. This article explores reasoning behind the contemporary moment’s ongoing technology-centric depictions of masculinity in the context of the superhero genre. The masculinity of characters such as Batman and Spider-Man, multifaceted as it may be in source material, is often made specifically legible in the context of social media promotion, over the course of which targeted posts convey particular ideas about the gendered and technological nature of the superheroes being depicted.

In this article, I use official Twitter posts of filmic male superhero properties as case studies in order to discuss how representations of technology in relation to masculinities are evolving post-recession. Focusing on tweets that were posted by the films’ verified promotion accounts, @BatmanvSuperman (Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice) and @SpiderManMovie (Spider-Man: Homecoming), I apply theories of social media and masculinity studies to a reading of the tweets’ representations of technology and gender identity. The verified nature of the accounts under discussion is important to note, as the blue checkmark that appears next to their names on the platform distinguishes them as prominent accounts of general public interest that are not to be confused with impersonators or fan accounts. I situate the official Twitter accounts within the broader matrix of the films’ promotional strategies and activities below.

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Depictions of the superheroes under discussion serve ideological functions that simultaneously expand on and diverge from those of recession-era media. The goal of this research is to contribute to the field of social media studies through an examination of the medium-specific effects that Twitter’s platform has on the (re)production of popular ideologies related to masculinities and technology. These particular films are especially useful to consider in relation to one another because they were both reboots of established film franchises, starring new actors, and thus had similar work to do in their promotion. The films also used similar promotion strategies—in these adaptations, Spider-Man was aged down where Batman was aged up, and the promotion accounts under discussion placed particular emphasis on the gendered components of these age-based changes in order to advertise the films. Overall, the post-recessionary period sees the sub-genre of superhero films as a site of both changes to and continuities with idealized White masculinities. These films reflect an attempt to assuage anxieties around the relationship between White masculinities and technology in the contemporary context. This article’s intervention suggests the need to understand the case studies under discussion as means by which gendered dialogues manifest in specifically corporate contexts as a result of the promotional nature of the Twitter platform.

**Twitter, Historical Contexts, and Competing Masculinities**

In the contemporary moment, Twitter is a significant site of anxiety for its political effects and engagements. From its function as the central platform of choice for Donald Trump to the abuse and harassment that are commonly perpetrated by and against its users, Twitter is commonly perceived as a critical actor with multiple, complicated, and competing stakes in contemporary sociopolitical conflict (see Enil, 2017; Ott, 2017). As a result, much popular discourse, in addition to scholarship, has centered on the role of content moderation and similar platform management tools in Twitter’s development, as well as its cultural uses and implications (see Kosoff, 2017; Macdonald, 2017). In addition to understanding Twitter within these contexts, it is important to situate a critical comprehension of Twitter within the context of its inherently promotional functions. Daren C. Brabham (2015) emphasizes the importance of acknowledging the critical role that corporate “strategic communication” plays in contemporary social media, and this article addresses Brabham’s call by focusing on the use of Twitter as a promotional platform.

Nancy Baym’s (2014) discussion of musicians’ conceptions of Twitter as a broadcasting medium highlights the similarities between such celebrities’ use of the platform and its uses in the context of blockbuster film promotion. As Baym (2014) notes, though the “broadcasting” approach generally undermines the interactive functions of Twitter’s platform, it nevertheless has proven successful in certain case studies not only for its “one-to-many” communicative value, but also for the advantage that it takes of fans as sources of free marketing and promotion (pp. 226–227). More recent examples of film promotion on Twitter have made greater use of interaction with fans to increase fan-driven promotion, as, for example, when the verified @CaptainAmerica account replied directly to over 200 users with prerecorded videos of Captain America: Civil War’s (2016) cast members reacting to fans’ stated support for either #TeamCap or #TeamIronMan (see CaptainAmerica, 2016). As corporations have begun to use the interactive qualities of Twitter to greater effect, promotion has increasingly taken the form of Anders Olof Larsson’s (2015) “Interacting” mode of user engagement (involving solicitations of individuated user responses to social media posts), in addition to that of “Broadcasting” (involving the simple promotion of a media product without solicitations of response from users being advertised to).

The use of interactive engagement is important to note in relation to contemporary promotion because it reflects increasing corporate investment in the individuated user experience; promotion is more effective when users see it as another form of engagement that is virtually indistinguishable from their interpersonal interactions with other users. Examples of interactive engagement include @thorofficial’s tweet, “Tag a friend who knows how to make an entrance. #NationalBestFriendsDay” (thorofficial, 2017) and @WonderWomanFilm’s “Show us your warrior pose with the #WonderWoman Gauntlet Creator: showyourwarrior.wonderwomanfilm.com ✹⚔” (WonderWomanFilm, 2017). These engagements with already-trending hashtags such as #NationalBestFriendsDay and interactive features such as the “Gauntlet Creator” allow film properties to encourage fan engagement as a central means of promotion. Given that blockbuster film itself remains a more traditional broadcasting medium, despite efforts to translate it to formats such as the app (Benson-Allott, 2011), more broadcasting-based uses of Twitter by corporations make sense as a means by which to translate film promotion to social media contexts. Nevertheless, given the influence of the “Twitter effect” on box office performance (Hennig-Thurau, Wiertz, & Feldhaus, 2015), Hollywood has significant investment in making use of the platform’s interactive mandates to the advantage of films being promoted. The official accounts that I discuss, @BatmanvSuperman and @SpiderManMovie, are situated within a matrix of promotional activities that include the traditional circulation of trailers, posters, and promotional images via theaters, television, and other social media platforms (particularly YouTube). These Twitter accounts simultaneously exist to circulate existing media objects (via, for example, the promotion of not only a trailer, but also the lead up to the release of certain trailers), and to supply interactive modes of engagement for user-consumers. Within this context, Twitter-based approaches to the framing of desirable
masculinities not only mirror those of other platforms, but also manifest as uniquely technology-preoccupied because of the ways in which they emphasize the preeminent importance of new media-enabled interactive engagement.

Popular US-based narratives around the “Great Recession” of 2007–2009 often identified it as an economic downturn that disproportionately affected men due to their overrepresentation in manufacturing and construction industries, resulting in the monikers “Man-cession” and “He-cession” (Peterson, 2012; see also Thompson, 2009; White, 2010). Although the argument that the gender patterns under discussion were unique to the Great Recession was contested by a number of scholars (see Christensen, 2015; Peterson, 2012), it remained a significant narrative in the national imagination, and particularly manifested in popular culture and Hollywood film (see Donnar, 2016; Negra & Tasker, 2014; Schreiber, 2016). Anxieties around “the death of macho” (Salam, 2009) likely contributed to Hollywood’s turn to narratives about the decline of physicality and the rise of technological prowess as a central determiner of masculinity. Beyond the initial recession’s “end” in 2009, austerity has continued to characterize economic and cultural anxieties alike, defining “post-recession” culture by the indefinite expansion of the decline that characterized the global recession in its original years. As Michele Schreiber (2016) notes, this shift coincided with the rise of digital film and Hollywood’s use of increasingly sophisticated computer-generated imagery (CGI) technologies (p. 3). This pattern has not only been present in award-winning Hollywood films (such as *The Social Network*, *The Imitation Game*, and *Steve Jobs*), but also in superhero blockbusters (such as the *Dark Knight* trilogy, the *Iron Man* franchise, and *Ant-Man*).

In such genre films, though the male hero may have physical strength and musculature that he often hones on screen, his central successful attribute is his ability to create and/or wield the technology that comprises his super-suit and its weapons. As the titular hero of *Iron Man* 2 says, “The suit and I are one.” The “hard bodies” of 1980s films (Jeffords, 1994) and the contested “sensitive” masculinities of the 1990s (Malin, 2005) have segued into what might be characterized as masculine cyborgs beginning in the late 2000s. (Notably, the “cyborg” designation is literal in the case of DC’s forthcoming *Cyborg*). The two case studies that I consider in this article are *White*, but there is much to be said about, for example, Black masculinities in relation to technology in the context of the superhero genre. Chadwick Boseman’s titular hero of *Black Panther* receives more advanced updates to his vibranium-based suit from his sister Shuri (Letitia Wright) near the beginning of the film, and the technological superiority of Wakanda is a major plot point, as characters debate whether to make such technology accessible to the outside world. In addition, Deadshot, Will Smith’s character from *Suicide Squad*, has similar breadwinner-based anxieties to those I discuss below in conjunction with his own relationships to technology. Because depictions of White men in the Western context have been granted humanity and intelligence consistently denied to representations of men of color, I emphasize a reading of White masculinities in this article in order to consider how their imaginings are affected by and conveyed in the context of Twitter’s platform. A dominant form of idealized masculinity following the recession era is determined and defined by the merging of the White man’s physical body with technology, rather than by his body’s natural musculature alone, and by the White man’s technological expertise, rather than his affective capabilities. This imagining draws from long-standing, preexisting histories of White masculinity; as Klaus Theweleit (1989) writes of fascist German idealizations, “The new man is a man whose physique has been machinized, his psyche eliminated—or in part displaced into his body armor, his ‘predatory’ suppleness. [...] This, I believe, is the ideal man of the conservative utopia: a man with machinelike periphery, whose interior has lost its meaning (the technocrat is his contemporary manifestation)” (p. 162). Although Theweleit rejects the notion that there is a connection between literal technology and the mechanization of the ideal White male body in the historical context he discusses, his reading is critical to an understanding of how such mechanization in the contemporary moment involves not only the integration of technology as armor into the body itself, but also the treatment of the body as technology.

The honing of the contemporary superhero’s physical strength via training works in inherent conjunction with the merging of his body with technology; they necessitate one another, and are both reflective of the aspirations embodied by the case studies under discussion. As Scott Bukatman writes, “Superhero comics present body narratives, bodily fantasies, that incorporate (incarnate) aggrandizement and anxiety, mastery, and trauma. Comics narrate the body in stories and envision the body in drawings. The body is obsessively centered upon. It is contained and delineated; it becomes irresistible force and unmovable object. [...] The superhero body is everything—a corporeal, rather than a cognitive, mapping of the subject into a cultural system” (Bukatman, 1994, p. 49). In this sense, the strengthening of the body through both physical exertion and its merging with technology is indicative of anxieties surrounding subjectivity that are often driven by sociopolitical circumstances of the national contexts and time periods in which they are situated. Of particular note is the increasing mortality of middle-aged White Americans without a college degree, which is both source and reflection of perceptions by White Americans that they/we are beleaguered or otherwise threatened in the contemporary context (Case & Deaton, 2017). The fantasies of the films that I discuss, which empower the White male subject through bodily technologizing and also express age-related preoccupations through the aging up or down of the superhero in question, demonstrate the increasing desire of popular media to assuage preoccupations particular to White masculinities. Twitter marketing in particular provides a
central means by which the film promotions under discussion engage with technologized masculinities, because its interactive engagement methods result in more direct communications with the anxieties and aspirations of post-recession culture.

That this form of technology-centric masculinity is presented in simultaneity with competing forms affirms the contradictory nature of popular mandates regarding White masculinity as an ideal state of being. Iron Man competes with the stronger and more affectively occupied Captain America in *Captain America: Civil War* in much the same way that Batman fights against the more physically powerful and emotionally charged Superman in *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*. That the Twitter accounts of these films promoted the conflicts themselves, making the choosing of a side by audiences via social media a central mode of user engagement (as mentioned, Twitter-specific prompts included #TeamCap/#TeamIronMan and #WhoWillWin respectively) emphasizes that promotion for films such as these fundamentally relies on competing modes of White masculinity. As a result, the tweets under discussion evoke preexisting dichotomies outlined by scholars such as Stephen Meyer (2001), who identifies competing “rough” cultures (involving physical associations) and “respectable” cultures (involving craft-based or “skilled” associations) in mid-20th century American working-class men (p. 15).

Importantly, the distinct masculinities of the examples of film promotion under discussion are presented as equally matched despite their differences, such that technological knowledge is equivalent in power to physical strength and emotional acuity. Stereotypical conceptualizations of masculinity as intellectual and femininity as physical and affective have interesting implications for our understanding of the framing of superhero conflicts such as these, though characters such as Captain America and Superman are nevertheless clearly presented as being emblematic of particular modes of White masculinity. I make note of these examples of film promotion at this point in order to clarify that my discussion of technology-centric masculinity does not involve an argument that it is the dominant mode of idealized masculinity in the contemporary US, but rather that it is a central mode that has come to greater prominence and visibility due to the cultural effects of the recession, a pattern that mirrors those present in other historical examples of the gendered ramifications of economic downturns in the United States.

Overall, I draw from existing literature to conceive of post-recession gender frameworks as multifaceted imperatives within which competing masculinities are situated against one another. The function of these competitions is to drive male subjects to frame their own identities in relation to their functions on behalf of the contemporary, austerity-characterized neoliberal moment. Masculinities are situated within broader conceptualizations of gender to service late capitalism, not only by encouraging subjects to determine their gendered worth (in these cases, their masculinity) based on the labor that they contribute to corporate interests, but also by using gender frameworks to motivate the ongoing development of social media marketing as a central method through which platforms prioritize those same corporate interests. Ultimately, the idea that different masculinities are in competition with one another (e.g., blue-collar physicality against white-collar intellectualism, or affective priorities against technological priorities) masks the ways in which these seemingly differential masculinities all exist to service late capitalism.

**“Suit up”: Attainment of Idealized Masculinities in @BatmanvSuperman**

Original tweets from the @BatmanvSuperman account comprise original content, which generally comes directly from the film or its other sources of promotion. What is notable about the promotion approaches in the account’s retweets, as opposed to its original tweets, is that retweets of publicity about Ben Affleck’s casting as Batman emphasized the newness of the change and his departure in characterization (Batman as an older and more worldly character). In doing so, retweets explicitly addressed fan interest in and controversy about the casting of Affleck, where original tweets about Batman, and especially about the mech suit, implicitly emphasized fidelity to the comics and the narrative itself, using direct quotations from the film. This is significant because it indicates the ways in which the verified account’s original tweets are rhetorically distinct from the outside-of-film-canon tones of retweeted material.

Promotion of the *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* Blu-Ray and DVD included an original tweet that previewed a short clip from one of the film’s special features, “The Might and the Power of a Punch” (BatmanvSuperman, 2016c). The tweet garnered 469 retweets, 1,265 likes, and 17 replies as of 11 November 2017, and its text read, “Discover the true strength of Batman #BatmanvSuperman #UltimateEdition” (BatmanvSuperman, 2016a). In the attached video, a scene from the film depicting Batman repeatedly punching, kicking, and then jumping on top of the prone body of Superman is narrated over by a deep, masculine voice that highlights the idealized abilities of the character, made possible by his technological ingenuity: “The strength of one of Batman’s punches is equal to 1,420 pounds of force. With his metal mech gloves, this is like getting hit in the face with a battering ram. That kick just sent Superman flying 12 feet, and he’s about to have 480 pounds of man and metal land on top of him” (BatmanvSuperman, 2016a). The narrator’s quantification of every facet of Batman’s suit and engagement with Superman (aligned as it is with conceptions of masculinity as being associated with logic and mathematics), along with the statement, “he’s about to have 480 pounds of man and metal land on top of him,” highlight the centrality of technology and the cyborg-like qualities of Batman’s mech suit to his desirability as a masculine subject (BatmanvSuperman, 2016a). In addition, the narrator’s tone and lowering of his voice evoke...
masculinist commentaries on football and similar professional sports, reiterating the importance of the conflict to the film’s promotion (see Cucco, 2009, p. 219 on “high concept” blockbusters). This particular tweet is reflective of long-standing cultural values associated with Batman, as his technological ingenuity and the extreme wealth with which he implements it stand in for the superpowers that he lacks. As a result, it affirms the importance and desirability of Batman’s form of masculinity to the post-recession era, idealizing Batman as an emblem of technology-centric masculinity. Here, Batman is much like the armored knights and soldiers that Theweleit discusses in his historicizing of German fascist esthetics; Batman’s engagement in combat reflects his body’s function as a militarized and mechanized force, through which masculine idealization is achieved and enforced.

Batman’s status as an upper class hero makes his brand of masculinity distinct from that evoked in the context of working-class gender dynamics, in that upper class masculinities are generally presented as aspirational for working-class men (occasional cultural disdain for the perceived femininity of white-collar jobs notwithstanding; see Banet-Weiser, 2014). As I discuss in greater detail below, an American man’s ability to be independent and subsequently to serve as breadwinner for the assumed family unit is a central determinant of his masculine identity, making a man’s wealth inherently linked to his masculinity. As Sarah Banet-Weiser (2014) writes of post-recession advertising targeted at working-class men, “Rhetorics of hope, meritocracy, and new frontiers […] maintain a narrative of American liberal masculinity exceptionalism as well as a neoliberal mandate for individuals to ‘take care of themselves’” (p. 83). Banet-Weiser (2014) goes on to argue that recession era and post-recession advertising present American men as destined and mandated to rescue the nation from its embroilment in economic decline: “In the contemporary moment, recentering the individual masculine citizen’s role in the nation via a brand narrative is one way to reassert cultural control over an otherwise destabilizing crisis” (p. 87).

Batman’s characterization emphasis in the Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice reboot, which focused on his being older and world-wearier, makes him an ideal vessel for post-recession White masculinity. His failure in the breadwinner role (the Joker’s murder of Robin, referenced in a scene where Robin’s costume is shown on display in the Batcave with the message “Hahaha joke’s on you Batman” written across its chest) makes Batman accessible to audiences even as he continues to represent aspirational masculinity. When the @BatmanvSuperman account tweeted its own original material (including behind the scenes features and other promotional materials), it often emphasized fidelity to the comics (as in the film’s reference to Robin’s popular, reader-mandated murder in the original 1988–1989 comic storyline “A Death in the Family”) and an idealized masculinity through its focus on Batman and the mech suit. One tweet reads, “‘It’s time you learn what it means to be a man.’ #BatmanvSuperman” and depicts a GIF of Batman in the mech suit throwing a punch at the camera (BatmanvSuperman, 2016b). Here, the Twitter user’s positioning as the subject of Batman’s wrath emphasizes White male audiences’ engagements with Batman as a figure that provides aspirational mentorship; original tweets in this context affirm the centrality of “be[ing] a man” to Batman’s characterization. Beyond engaging with Superman as an alien (often framed as a god in Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice), Batman’s statement, “It’s time you learn what it means to be a man” addresses his audience as well, and in a fundamentally different way. Where “learn[ing] what it means to be a man” suggests the experiencing of human, physical pain and suffering in the case of Superman, it alternately suggests the assumed strength and resilience that emerges from such suffering for male audiences. Batman addresses such audiences as their assumed icon and teacher, promising them to demonstrate how “to be a man.” Disavowing the campy associations of Batman’s 1960s era television iteration, imaginings of the character from the 1980s to the present frame him as, at his best, always having been masculine—working alone, violently, and with advanced technology. As the command of one tweet depicting a dark vision of Batman’s cowl reads, “Suit up. #Batman #BatmanvSuperman” (BatmanvSuperman 2016d). Batman is thus not only an idealized representation of a post-recession masculinity, but an imperative that demands imitation by male users and audiences. If they, too, use technological prowess to figuratively “suit up,” they, too, will be able to embody Batman’s form of idealized White masculinity.

In contrast with the original content-based focus of original tweets, retweets from the @BatmanvSuperman account often focused on Affleck’s casting as Batman in order to emphasize the newness of the reboot’s approach via a departure in characterization. One such tweet from @IMAX (2016) reads, “How does Ben Affleck’s #Batman differ from past iterations? The man himself weighs in: https://t.co/YmB5ZV9YyZ.” Retweets break out of the film’s continuity in order to market it with explicit references to its casting and similar production choices, and this approach applies equally to characters beyond Batman. Retweets about Jesse Eisenberg’s performance as Lex Luthor emphasized white-collar emasculation, describing him as “exhausted and apologetic” (THR, 2016). Similarly, both retweets and original Tweets about Superman’s characterization in the film and its predecessor, Man of Steel, emphasized a more defiant version of departure in characterization; as one tweet depicting a photo of Henry Cavill as Superman posited, “Is it really surprising that the most powerful man in the world should be a figure of controversy?” #Superman” (BatmanvSuperman, 2016c). Where retweets reproduce and amplify preexisting content from outside users (causing them to be thematically appropriate to the assertion of fidelity), original tweets thematically highlight masculinities through their emphasis on singularity and originality (the canon’s masculinist nature in contrast with the mandated “loyalty” or fidelity of feminized recreations).
One of the central characteristics of Batman’s presentation in the @BatmanvSuperman account is stability, partly because the film’s new version of Batman as he was played by Affleck required the maintenance of assurances that the film’s interpretation would be faithful to the character. This presentation was also likely driven by the controversial departure from Superman’s traditional characterization in both Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice and Man of Steel. One @BatmanvSuperman retweet of a Wall Street Journal article read, “How the creators of ‘Batman v Superman’ are making [Superman] darker and edgier—carefully” (WSJ, 2016). The @BatmanvSuperman account’s use of Twitter’s specificities, in the form of retweets, for example, allowed for its emphasis on the ways in which Batman represents a technology-based mode of White masculinity put in contrast to and inherent competition with those of the film’s other central White men. Class positioning as it is presented in the context of these tweets involves the promotion of Batman as a symbol of more traditionally masculine values in contrast with Superman and Lex Luthor as symbols of, respectively, the unpredictable physicality of the blue-collar man and the failure (feminization) of the nonphysical white-collar man. Batman is the site of idealized masculinist identification because he aligns wealth and its implied, perceived intelligence with successful physicality, made possible by technological aptitude.

Within the broader context of Batman v Superman’s marketing, the official Twitter account is important to consider in conjunction with other central developments that characterized the film’s promotion. Official marketing for the film had to shift in order to account for audience reception of the film’s trailers and promotional materials. For example, when director Zack Snyder tweeted an early black-and-white image of a morose-looking Affleck as Batman, the “Sad Batman” meme that audiences produced in response became a central point of social media-based discussion regarding the film’s casting and the film itself (Malone, 2014). Similarly, the popularity of Wonder Woman (Gal Gadot) in the context of the film and audience anticipation of her then-forthcoming solo film (2017) resulted in the character’s significantly more prominent emphasis in Batman v Superman’s final trailers (Berman, 2016). These examples of promotional response to and engagement with audience reception demonstrate the central importance of platforms like Twitter to studios’ measurement and comprehension of which facets of promotion are most effective in interactive contexts.

Twitter promotion of the rebooted version of Batman uses existing expectations of the idealized relationship between White masculinities and technological advancement in order to advertise the Batman of Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice as an archetype that White male users can emulate. Long-standing representations of the character, reliant on his valorization as a man for whom superpowers are not necessary due to his ingenuity and strength, work in conjunction with post-recession gender frameworks in order to outline the means by which masculinities should be attained and enforced in the contemporary American context. An understanding of the representational qualities of the @BatmanvSuperman account is necessary to an understanding of Twitter’s promotional functions more broadly speaking, particularly as they relate to Hollywood film. Accounts like @BatmanvSuperman use original tweets and retweets to emphasize sometimes diverging narratives, and these engagements are emblematic of the associational qualities of Twitter and its functions. Original tweets are masculinist in their promotion of the character’s strength and the advanced technological abilities of his weapons, where retweets explicitly address users’ potential concerns regarding the fidelity of the reboot to popular conceptualizations of the character. Thus, promotion in the context of Twitter is afforded relatively nuanced capabilities, such that varying narratives can be conveyed through the use of functions specific to Twitter as a platform (from original tweets and retweets to attached videos, hashtags with purchased accompanying emojis, and purchased promotion of individual tweets).

“**But you are a kid**”: Boyhood, Technology, and @SpiderManMovie

One of the primary drivers of the post-recession idealization of technology-dependent masculinity is its contrast not with popular conceptions of femininity, but with those of boyhood. Manhood is achieved via technological ability in the context of the United States because technology and the ability to wield it is determinative of one’s passing from boyish dependence on others to a man’s self-sufficiency. As Jeffrey Ryan Suzik writes of gender culture during the Great Depression, “Without gainful employment, a boy coming of age could never truly be self-sufficient and economically independent. And without that self-sufficiency and independence, very possibly, he would remain a mere boy in the eyes of society. Even worse yet, he would be in danger of being labeled a ‘sissy’” (Suzik, 2001, p. 114). Suzik goes on to note that the depression era “sissy” was unacceptably reliant on others, failing to meet American cultural standards of independence. In American economic decline, Suzik writes that young men and boys experience heightened anxieties surrounding their self-sufficiency and its necessity as the determiner of their manhood. Barbara Ehrenreich (2016) affirms the applicability of this reading across various historical contexts, as she writes of mid-20th century American culture, “If adult masculinity was indistinguishable from the breadwinner role, then it followed that the man who failed to achieve this role was either not fully adult or not fully masculine” (p. 102).

Promotion for Spider-Man: Homecoming necessitated consistent and meaningful differentiations of the film from its two franchise predecessors (the Spider-Man trilogy [2002–2007] and the Amazing Spider-Man films [2012–2014]), and one of the primary means by which this was achieved was an
emphasis on the youth of actor Tom Holland and his iteration of the titular hero. Simultaneously, Spider-Man’s new suit was highlighted as a technologically sophisticated weapon with innumerable functions, a significant departure from earlier filmic depictions, which showed Spider-Man creating his own suit from simple Spandex. One @SpiderManMovie tweet, posted several months before the film’s release, took advantage of publicity around the popular Consumer Electronics Show (with the use of already-trending hashtags to increase user engagement being a popular approach in the context of Twitter promotion); its caption read, “The most important upgrade out of #CES2017. #SpiderManHomecoming” (2017). It included a video detailing some of the capabilities of Spider-Man’s new suit, and garnered 6,178 retweets, 15,391 likes, and 199 replies as of 11 November 2017. In the tweet’s video, an image of Tom Holland as Spider-Man is accompanied by a heroic score, and the camera zooms in on various components of the Spider-Man suit to describe their capabilities. These descriptions include, “Upgraded Web Shooter:— Selectable Web Types— Laser Targeting System,” “Web Wings,” “GPS Tracking System: Holographic Wrap Dress,” and “Eyes Are Expressive” (SpiderManMovie, 2017). The capabilities of the new suit highlight the departures characteristic of the reboot; now that Spider-Man is a part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, this tweet implicitly asserts, audiences can anticipate the character’s stronger association with advanced technology. Importantly, the integration of Spider-Man with Marvel’s other film properties involves an accompanying integration of its marketing into the broader context of Marvel’s promotions of its entire cinematic universe. This manifests, for example, in Spider-Man’s prominent positioning in advertisements for Avengers: Infinity War. As a result, marketing of Spider-Man: Homecoming anticipated the various connections that would be used to integrate the property into Marvel’s more general marketing moving forward.

That the #CES2017 video’s first zoom-in on the suit reveals a caption reading, “Designed by Tony Stark for Peter Parker” highlights the intersection of the promotion’s emphasis on Spider-Man’s youth and the technological power behind his suit. His inexperience manifests as reliance on Iron Man for a suit characterized by advanced technological capabilities, and his association with such a suit affirms the centrality of technology and its anxieties to the transition from boyhood to manhood. As a result, Spider-Man represents a counter to Batman, since his traditional character associations must be more extremely modified for relevance to the post-recession era. Spider-Man’s youth makes him audience surrogate to men and boys for whom post-recession culture mandates aspirations toward the technological superiority and subsequent independence of icons such as Iron Man and Batman. Cultural objects such as superhero films present technological superiority as a necessary characteristic of masculinity by depicting certain desirable masculine subjects as driven by their abilities to build and improve on the machines (weapons and armor combined) that comprise their superhero identities. The reasoning behind this choice is twofold: first, it reasserts the conceptualization of one form of competing masculinity as tied up in the subject’s technological capability, contrasted with their physicality and/or affect. Second, this aspiration provides an overt connection between the fantasies embodied by the male superhero and the practical conditions that characterize post-recession austerity, in which anxieties around the replacing of human labor with artificial labor drive not only public discourse, but also the choices made by subjects who are attempting to position themselves as survivors of contemporary economic conditions. In the context of Spider-Man’s character, audiences are given a stand-in that demonstrates the means by which technological superiority can be achieved, even as they are simultaneously offered competing visions of desirable masculinity. The audience can choose which vision of masculinity they want to aspire to, because, as noted above, any of the seemingly competing masculinities presented will always serve the interests of neoliberalism. In a Spider-Man: Homecoming preview, when Peter tells his friend Ned (Jacob Batalon), “I’m sick of [Stark] treating me like a kid all the time,” Ned replies, “But you are a kid,” standing in for the film’s investment in the necessity of Spider-Man’s youth and reliance on Iron Man (and, in the context of the Spider-Man brand, the character’s reliance on the Marvel Cinematic Universe and Sony).

Both original tweets and retweets from the @SpiderManMovie account emphasize the new suit, but in contradictory ways. On one hand, a narrative of desirability is consistently associated with the new suit (as in retweets such as “9 Cool Things Spider-Man’s New Suit Will Be Able To Do” [CinemaBlend, 2017]) but alternately, much publicity for the film emphasized do it yourself (DIY) culture, including a contest presented with Goodwill that encouraged fans to create their own Spider-Man costumes using products bought at Goodwill. This promotion took the form of tweets such as “Time to suit up and do some good. Create your own #SpiderManHomecoming suit for a chance to go to the premiere! spidermandiy.com” (SpiderManMovie, 2017). Notably, the linked contest site advances the language of “do[ing] some good,” encouraging users to “become a community hero by shopping for your materials at Goodwill® where you will help create new jobs, training programs, education assistance, and support services for people in your community” (Sony Pictures Digital Productions Inc., 2017).

Though the implicit messaging of the contest evokes Spider-Man’s working class roots and the post-recession necessity of inexpensive DIY culture, it masks this approach with explicit framing of the user as a benign upper class figure, who performs charity and community-building, rather than personal money-saving, through their act of shopping at Goodwill. Matthew P. McAllister and Anna Uppele write of post-recession advertising that “[t]he rich are framed or explicitly described as attractive, successful, and responsible...
for their success. Conversely, the ads engage in a kind of ‘class shaming,’ portraying lower-class people as less happy, less sexy/sexually fulfilled, incompetent, uncaring (or even taking pleasure in their customer/employees’ discomfort), and finally, blame worthy; these ads do so by directly comparing them to those in a higher class” (McAllister, 2017, pp. 152–153). In the post-recession context, class becomes more visible through marketing and advertising, but in sometimes contradictory ways. The @SpiderManMovie account’s engagements with the Goodwill contest use post-recession framings of DIY culture as a neoliberal choice, rather than an economic necessity, in order to bypass the fact that DIY culture characterizes many users’ everyday lives (and was depicted as characterizing Spider-Man’s own working-class identity in Captain America: Civil War, when Iron Man mocked Spider-Man’s original homemade costume before declaring him to be “in dire need of an upgrade. Systemic, top to bottom. 100-point restoration”). Within Spider-Man: Homecoming itself, anxieties about the suit play a central role, as Iron Man’s taking away of the advanced suit results in Spider-Man having to revert back to his original DIY suit for the film’s climactic battle (proving his worth as a superhero independent of Stark’s technology). The contradictions between excited focuses on Spider-Man’s new suit and valorization of the original notion of a DIY suit, emblematic not only of the character’s comics-based characterization, but also of the original recession era emphasize that post-recession culture is characterized by simultaneous desire for the unattainable (the extreme wealth represented by Spider-Man’s new suit) and glamorization of the DIY culture that is made necessary in economic decline and that was originally more heavily associated with Spider-Man’s famously poor character.

Retweets of original content from the film’s cast, and particularly from star Tom Holland, reaffirmed the promotion of Spider-Man’s youth and inexperience. After Holland tweeted, “I’m back [on Twitter] baby!!! Figured out my password. Thank you @sony. Life savers 🍬” the Spider-Man account retweeted it, implicitly connecting the actor’s youth and reliance on Sony to the character’s youth and reliance on Iron Man (TomHolland1996a, 2017). Additional retweets by @SpiderManMovie of Holland’s material affirm his own promotions of the film as desirable, demonstrating the ways in which the @SpiderManMovie account invests in its own and, more broadly, the studio’s mentorship of Holland. One such retweet, of “Homework can wait, New York can’t. #SpiderManHomecoming” (TomHolland1996b, 2017) affirms the role of Holland as a promotional meete of the studio, as Holland’s tweet reproduces @SpiderManMovie’s own “Homework can wait. The city can’t. #SpiderManHomecoming” (SpiderManMovie, 2017). @SpiderManMovie’s original tweets, such as this one, particularly emphasize youth in connection to its implicit reliance, as the attached promotional image depicts Avengers Tower standing in the backdrop of Spider-Man’s lounging figure, evoking the Marvel Cinematic Universe as overseer of the Spider-Man reboot. As with @BatmanvSuperman, @SpiderManMovie additionally engages in more overt discussions of masculinity, as in the tweet, “Does the suit make the man? Watch the all-new #SpiderManHomecoming trailer now and make sure to see it in theaters July 7.” (2017). Promoting the film is inherently connected to promoting its depiction of Spider-Man as an embodiment of the hopes and fears characteristic of post-recession boyhood. When, in the trailer that this tweet promotes, Spider-Man tells Iron Man, “I’m nothing without the suit!” he speaks to the recurring anxieties of White masculinities that characterize the film itself as well as post-recession American masculinity broadly speaking.

Conclusion

Platforms such as Twitter have much to tell us about cultural standards of technology and gender, but equally, representations of the latter can have important ramifications for an understanding of social media and the corporate promotion for which it is often used. My analysis has emphasized the ways in which promotional accounts for two case studies of post-recession superhero films evoke conceptions of and anxieties surrounding masculinity in the contemporary U.S. context. Batman, a character whose masculinity has longstanding, pre-recession era associations with technology, is reiterated in film promotion as a cyborg-like pinnacle of White masculine technological knowledge and capability. Spider-Man, who has traditionally been associated with extraordinary superpowers and scrappy self-sufficiency, becomes more defined by his youthful inexperience, reliance on the weaponry of a more technologically superior man, and association with science and technology generally speaking. As a result, representations of these characters in the promotional Twitter accounts for their films reflect the aspirations and anxieties characteristic of American White masculinity during the course of and in the period following economic decline.

In the context of social media studies, an understanding of the role of promotion is critical to the ongoing development of our comprehension of platforms such as Twitter and their economic, political, and cultural effects. By examining the medium specificity of Twitter, and the ways in which it determines representational politics alongside economic trends of film promotion, this article has advanced an argument on the effects of such promotion to Twitter as a platform. Although the case studies I have examined here placed greater emphasis on the broadcasting features of Twitter, rather than its interactive features, they have nevertheless been reflective of the means by which corporate promotion on the platform is continuing to evolve. Moving forward, blockbuster film promotion via Twitter will be an important reflection of the site’s specificity in the realm of social media, as well as its cultural implications broadly speaking. Through a critical engagement with case studies of the important
intersection of promotion and cultural representation in the contemporary Twitter context, this article contributes to social media studies through a reading of the ways in which the platform’s capabilities are used by corporations to advance not only their own promotional work, but also representation idealizations that reflect and help shape broad social norms.

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