

# A Superhero's Guide

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Potential Topics	Research Questions	Artifacts/Inspiration
Imbalance in the Workforce	How has the imbalance in certain industries been affected by systemic practices and societal pressures?	Society's perception of certain genders in an industry
Portrayal of Power	Why does masculine clothing, mannerisms, and physical characteristics exude a more powerful appearance/person?	Formal Wear Study
Creating a Superhero	How are superheroes created in order to appeal the most to the audience? Is there a gendered trend in outfits, plotlines, etc?	Superhero TV shows and movies (DC/Marvel/Comics)

**Website:** <https://elaineliuwang.github.io/mgp-superhero/>

**Code:** <https://github.com/elaineliuwang/mgp-superhero>

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## Prologue

By utilizing evidence in the entertainment industry with a focus on the depiction of superheroes, I want to explore the causes and effects of how power is portrayed through gender roles. Most, if not all of the time, superheroes are simply just heightened versions of societal stereotypes. The most exaggerated characteristics that are accentuated range from physical looks to behaviors, but ultimately represent their superpower capabilities. This further translates to other parts of their lives, reinforcing the doctrine of separate spheres. Though superheroes are merely fictional, real-world parallels of the gender imbalance are often seen in the workforce, which is the final connection I hope to prove.

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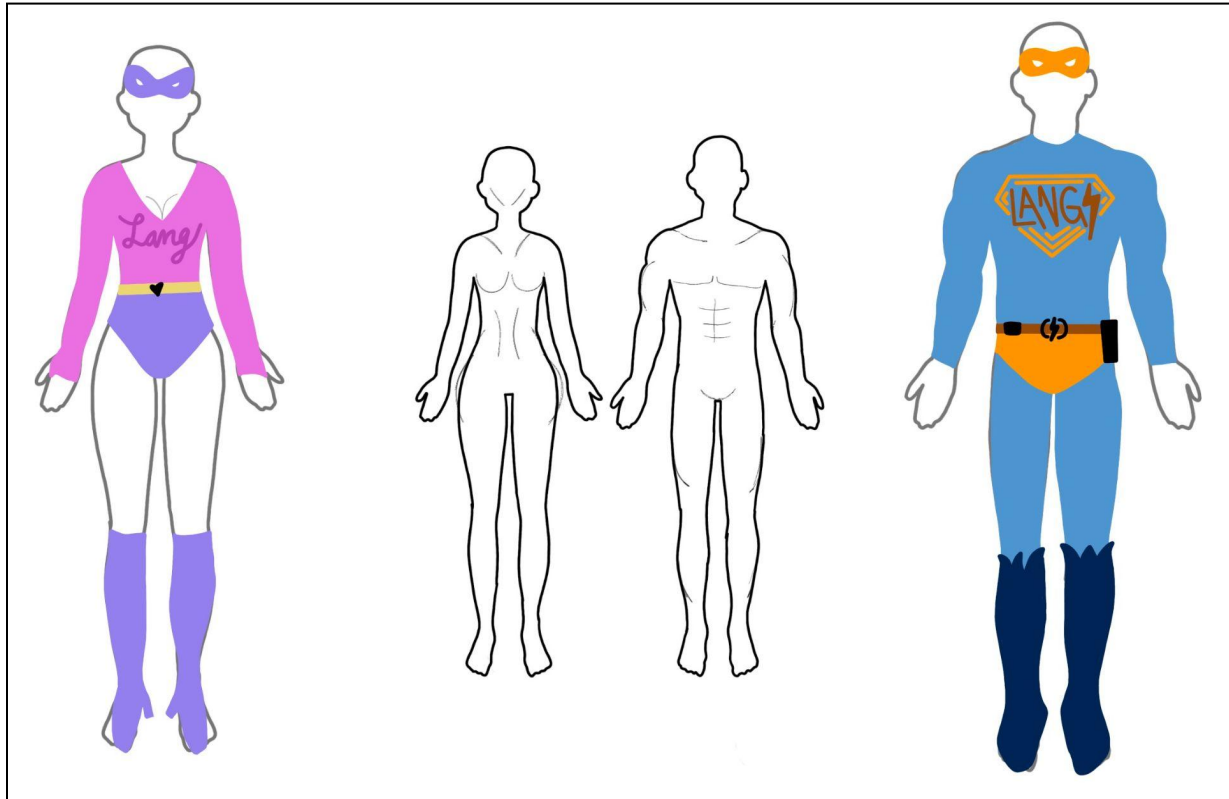
## Created Artifacts

### Superhero Dress Code Policy Superhero Dress Code Policy

Notes: I have watched many superhero movies and TV shows as well as read many superhero comics. From the mid-1900s to now, one thing remains constant—the costuming. The costume design for superheroes most definitely stemmed from the sexualization of physical attributes, whether it be a woman's bust or a man's pectoral muscles. Similarly to how workplaces have dress code policies, I wanted to create a policy specifically for superheroes. Under the made up

organization called WSA (World Superhero Association), I created a realistic dress code policy for the WSA. Though it's seemingly quite satirical, all of the policies were based on my extensive knowledge of how superheroes are depicted in the entertainment industry.

### Costume Design Examples



Notes: Continuing off of the previous artifact where I listed the guidelines to a superhero's dress code, this is a visual representation of what costumes look like. The inner body diagrams represent the physical attributes that should be accentuated according to superhero standards. The outer drawings are example costumes for men and women; each one focuses on different physical attributes that attract the viewer. In movies, TV, and comic books—*especially* comic books, the template for a superhero's costume remains relatively constant. I wanted to depict that trend in this drawing.

### Avengers Endgame 2048

<http://create2048.com/game.php/?game=endgame-most-important-heroes>

Notes: I am a known DC fan, so anytime I have the chance to clown Marvel movies, I take that opportunity. In this case, I created a 2048 game so as the number increases, so does the power level of the new character. For example, Gamora is the number 2 while Iron-Man is 2048; the goal of the game is to get to 2048 aka Iron-Man. In the movie Avengers Endgame, it is so painfully clear that every woman's storyline is reduced to a lack of power or control; on the other hand, the men are the heroes or get their happy ending. That is what this game represents, the

exponential power structure of what it takes to get on a man's level both as a superhero and in the workforce.

### TV Show Review - Supergirl Supergirl Review

Notes: Supergirl was the show that got me interested in TV in general, fueling my interest in the superhero-genre as well as allowing me to find connections with characters on my screen. As a show that aimed to be progressive in a genre that often strays from anything political, I appreciated its integration into the plot. However, as I dove deeper and deeper into the Supergirl fandom, I realized some of the harmful flaws the show had in depicting female empowerment. In my Supergirl Review, I take a satirical approach in addressing these flaws, hoping to emphasize the irony of the show.

### Grad Party Invite Wally West Graduation Invite

Notes: I have been designing my own personal graduation invite, so it seemed fitting to make one for Wally West aka Kid Flash. Graduation is a turning point in people's lives because it represents the start of a new beginning. I wanted to represent Wally's new beginning as a professional superhero, but also acknowledge the privileges he already has as a superhero. He is Barry Allen (The Flash)'s nephew, so Wally, as a man, already has a direct link to a leadership position—a scenario all too common in today's society. Furthermore, Wally's quote shows the ease to which he can think about starting a family, not really worrying about his responsibilities but rather the support he'll receive.

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### Curated Artifacts

#### “The Man” Lyrics - Taylor Swift

*They'd say I hustled, Put in the work, They wouldn't shake their heads and question how much of this I deserve. What I was wearing, If I was rude, Could all be separated from my good ideas and power moves?*

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Notes: As an avid Taylor Swift fan, I commonly see her clever lyric writing to point out systemic gender inequalities. In her Lover album, the song “The Man” very explicitly lays out how women are treated unfairly—especially women in power. It takes a significantly greater amount of work for women to be seen at the same level as men. It isn't just in superheroes where female superheroes have a physical disadvantage and have to overcome that, but as Taylor references in the song, celebrity culture too. The line that stands out to me is “Could all be separated from my good ideas and power moves?” because a so-called ‘good idea’ from a woman seems too implausible, therefore the media has to call it a ‘power move’. First, this line addresses the notion that women can't produce thoughts without causing a bit of drama. Secondly, it points out

the negative connotation 'power' has when it comes from a woman because it isn't "natural" or whatever misogynistic justifications some people have.

### **"The Boys" S1E3 Scene**

*Ashley (assistant): This is Seth and Evan from marketing. They have some brilliant ideas on how to capitalize on all the buzz. Gentlemen.*

*Seth: Now, small-town Iowa girl, unexpected child prodigy, is chosen for The Seven.*

*Evan: Destiny knocks on the girl next door's door, and she answers, to fight for truth and justice side by side with her heroes.*

*Seth: The Big Apple is rough, tumble. It's got worms. Muggers and rapists and thieves, oh, my. Dorothy is not in Kansas anymore.*

*Evan: Or Iowa. Poor girl gets knocked around, something fierce. Kicked while she's down.*

*Seth: So what does she do? Does she cry in her milk? Does she quit?*

*Evan: No way!*

*Seth: She adapts! She transforms!*

*Evan: Embraces her feminine strengths.*

*Seth: Good-bye, Yellow Brick Road...*

*Evan: And hello, Starlight.*

*Starlight: I can't wear that.*

*Ashley: What? Why not? It's beautiful.*

*Starlight: Seriously? I-It's just... It's not me.*

*Designer: I designed Homelander's suit. This isn't my first rodeo.*

*Seth: You're wrong. It's totally you. It's bold, it's brave, it's feminist.*

*Starlight: How is that feminist?*

*Evan: Empowering. It says you're confident in your own skin, and you're not afraid to show it.*

*Seth: Most importantly, it tells the story. Of your transformation, of... of what you're going through.*

*Starlight: How exactly do you know what I'm going through, exactly? I'm sorry. I-I appreciate the effort, I really do, but I'm fine with my old outfit.*

*Madelyn (boss): We're not.*

*Starlight: Excuse me?*

*Madelyn: Starlight, like I said before, this is a partnership. In a partnership, there is give and there is take.*

*Starlight: It's my body. I have the right to choose how much of it I show.*

*Madelyn: That is true. You do. You just won't be doing it in The Seven, unless it is wrapped in that.*

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Notes: The Boys is a television show that depicts superheroes as a business in a modern-day United States, truly taking *realistic* fiction to the next level. In this particular scene, Starlight is given a new suit due to her increasing popularity. However, this new suit is much more revealing

and basically sexualizes Starlight. Despite her complaints and spoken opposition to the new suit, she is defeated by her boss, another woman. Not to mention the marketing guys who are telling a woman what a comfortable suit is to her. This transcript is riddled with how female superheroes and other powerful women, such as models or celebrities, are purely used to attract the [mostly] male gaze without their consent (usually as a business tactic).

### Batman Silver Age #122 (1959)



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Notes: Batman/Bruce Wayne is the male superhero everyone wants to be—he’s extremely wealthy, driven, brooding, strong, and quite the inventor. Furthermore, Batman started out as a vengeful boy, violent in his actions and had no remorse, which is the stereotypical ‘bad boy’ image. In this particular comic, Kathy Kane aspires to be a hero like her cousin Bruce, but is shut down of her own desires because she’s a woman. While it’s no surprise that these sexist ideas were prominent in the mid-1900s, the development of women as superheroes are still affected by these sexist upbringings. In this panel, Bruce says, “Now look, Kathy—one crime-fighter in the family is enough! A wife’s place is in the home!”, which explicitly lays out that men are the only ones that can be the ‘heroes’ of the family.

### **“Quirky Girl, Quirky Tux” Description - TV Tropes**

*Some of your female characters can be varying levels of quirky. Beyond using erratic behavior and strange, sometimes childlike, interests, the best way to show this is the outfits that she wears.*

*One of the most popular variations is to subvert gender expectations in dressing her in a full tuxedo, but then to re-emphasise her femininity in some way. Maybe it's the color or the cut or the trimmings. It could also be replacing dress pants with a skirt (for the innocent), or with fishnets (for the daring).*

*Unless it's being lampshaded, this is Always Female. The outfit demonstrates the girl's uniqueness and individuality.*

*The girl is likely to be young, but not necessarily. Because of what it demonstrates of her personality, she need only wear a tuxedo at formal events, rather than more regularly, as she is dressing up but not conforming to the expected dress.*

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Notes: TV Tropes is one of my favorite websites to find the perfect television show I am looking for, down to the specifics. Each listed trope comes with a description as well as numerous examples seen in the entertainment industry. The “Quirky Girl, Quirky Tux” trope stood out to me because instead of a plotline driving the character, this description has the plotline driving the clothing choice (or vice versa). There’s always been a sense of increased power when wearing a tux—no matter which gender—due to the ‘masculinity’ it portrays. In this trope’s case, wearing a tux re-invents a female character as rebellious, independent, and quirky. What stands out to me is the fact that the tux is used to categorize the girl as ‘other’ or ‘weird’, so the clothing piece is doing more harm than good. This approach to ‘girl in tux’ seems to differentiate from the common conception that women wear tuxedos to feel more masculine.

### **How the Power Suit Lost its Power - Mark Dent, Vox**

*Although the suit is historically associated with projecting elegance, authority, and mastery of a profession, those qualities harken back to the days when suits were prevalent, worn by the Atticus Finches and Don Drapers of the world. How long until we realize the suit — while still used for special occasions and by a shrinking number of traditionalists — has become associated with the opposite? The suit has become a uniform for the powerless.*

*There are exceptions. Women celebrities have recently donned suits in glitter and velvet and purple, modernizing a Marlene Dietrich staple, and the suit is an important component of non-binary clothing trends. Those choices are made to subvert expectations of the suit. But most people who wear suits are men. And they wear them because they have to please someone else, whether it's an employer or Congress. Unless you live on Park Avenue, the suit brings to mind*



*job interviews, junior salespeople, young employees behind the counter at Enterprise Rent-A-Car, hotel clerks, and court appearances.*

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Notes: Now, I may not know the author's thoughts while he wrote this article, but from what I interpret, it seems as if Dent is implying that the power of the suit has rendered powerless due to its diffusion beyond men's clothing. This perspective is interesting because it reminds me of economic inflation—as more people wear tuxedos, the value of actual power decreases. However, the approach Dent takes is just condescending because of the connection he makes between non-men and their lack of power/inability to fulfill the power a suit requires.

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### **Artifacts from Class Readings**

#### **The Miseducation of the American Boy - Peggy Orenstein**

*Smiler attributes further distortions in masculinity to a century-long backlash against women's rights. During World War I, women proved that they could keep the economy humming on their own, and soon afterward they secured the vote. Instead of embracing gender equality, he says, the country's leaders "doubled down" on the inalienable male right to power, emphasizing men's supposedly more logical and less emotional nature as a prerequisite for leadership. (Orenstein 2)*

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Notes: Bringing in Smiler's perspective in Orenstein's piece provides historical evidence of how women are capable of so-called "man" jobs, yet still aren't trusted or given the chance to prove themselves. Ever since... well, the beginning of time, men were the ones with the god-given right to power in the form of leadership, intelligence, and physical prowess. Sure, one can definitely argue the genetics or science of it all, but limiting the potential of women is purely a man thing. Without giving women a chance at proving their worth, and even more, *recognizing* their achievements, societal progress is unattainable.

#### **Between the Sexes, a Great Divide - Anna Quindlen**

*I've spent a lot of time telling myself that men and women are fundamentally alike, mainly in the service of arguing that women should not only be permitted but be welcomed into a variety of positions and roles that only men occupied. (Quindlen 1)*

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Notes: Quindlen's quote is reminiscent of every fight for women's rights throughout history. Not only the equal rights of men and women, but the fair treatment, opportunities, and unbiased perceptions. This can easily be applied to any power imbalance fueled by gender roles—superheroes, athletics, work. To illustrate, the addition of female superheroes wasn't to empower them, but rather act as a sidekick, plot device, damsel in distress, and other demeaning roles. So like Quindlen says, though these characters are permitted, they aren't welcome.

### **Why I Want a Wife - Judy Brady**

*If, by chance, I find another person more suitable as a wife than the wife I already have, I want the liberty to replace my present wife with another one. Naturally, I will expect a fresh, new life; my wife will take the children and be solely responsible for them so that I am left free. (Brady 2)*

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Notes: I chose this specific Brady quote because it truly represents the control men have over other women. It's not just the comparison of a man's power versus a woman's power, but how they intersect with each other. The presence of a man will reduce the validity of any woman in relation to him, such as in the case of Brady's case where a husband can simply "replace my present wife with another one". Furthermore, if we were to not even suggest Brady's piece wasn't from a man's perspective, there's still the idea that a woman's job is to carry the burden of another's needs.

### **The Story of My Body - Judith Ortiz Cofer #1**

*Wonder Woman was stacked. She had a cleavage framed by the spread wings of a golden eagle and a muscular body that had become fashionable in PE, hers was my ideal. The breasts were an indulgence I allowed myself. Perhaps the daydreams of bigger girls were more glamorous, since our ambitions are filtered through our needs, but I wanted first a powerful body. (Cofer 541)*

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Notes: Superheroes almost always portray the ideal body type, creating both inspiration and unrealistic expectations. Cofer ties in her physical insecurities by comparing herself to Wonder Woman—a literal creation from the Greek gods. This shows the impossible physical attributes that superheroes can portray. Furthermore, these physical characteristics are what make the hero powerful. Cofer wanting a "powerful body" is purely based on the appearance of Wonder Woman, which doesn't necessarily equate to emotional, mental, or working power.

### **The Story of My Body - Judith Ortiz Cofer #2**

*That is when I decided I was a "brain". (Cofer 543)*

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Notes: This short line stuck out to me because in many superhero shows, characters are reduced to either 'brain power' or 'muscle power'. The dilemma is actually pretty empowering to those who may not align themselves with one category, but it also can be harmful in defining 'power' into such strict boxes. It's the typical mathletes vs. athletes situation in stereotypical high schools where these are the only two paths to take in order to be successful.

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