

THE IMPACT OF THE FILM WONDER WOMAN'S PRODUCTION ON CHANGING LGBT PERCEPTIONS IN INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY: A QUALITATIVE STUDY BASED ON CULTIVATION THEORY

Abdul Mufti Al Fariz, Dwi Amanda Firdaus, Laksamana Juanda Prabuningtyas, Maulia Nabila Wahyu Nur Buana, Muhamad Dzaky Abdillah Ibrahim, Rizky Amelia Putri

Program Studi Ilmu Komunikasi, UNESA 5 Magetan

Email: 24111774095@mhs.unesa.id., 24111774150@mhs.unesa.id., 241117740121@mhs.unesa.id., 24111774038@mhs.unesa.ac.id., 24111774036@mhs.unesa.ac.id., 24111774008@mhs.unesa.id.

ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the influence of the Wonder Woman film productions on changing public perceptions of the LGBT community abroad. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, the research applies George Gerbner's Cultivation theory as the analytical framework to understand how media, especially films can shape social constructions of reality, including representations of gender and sexual orientation. Data were collected through direct observation of the films Wonder Woman (2017) and Wonder Woman 1984 (2020), as well as literature reviews from scholarly journals published within the last five years. The findings indicate that character portrayals and visual symbolism in the films provide interpretive spaces that reinforce representations of gender diversity and sexual orientation, impacting public perceptions of LGBT issues. Additionally, the study highlights the role of LGBT communities as agents of social change in advocating for human rights and equality, and emphasizes the importance of media in promoting diversity and fostering inclusivity in society.

Keywords : Wonder Woman, LGBT Community, Cultivation theory, Gender Representation, Media.

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis pengaruh produksi film Wonder Woman terhadap perubahan pandangan masyarakat Internasional terhadap komunitas LGBT. Dengan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif, penelitian ini memanfaatkan teori Kultivasi dari George Gerbner sebagai kerangka analisis untuk memahami bagaimana media khususnya film dapat membentuk konstruksi sosial terhadap realitas, termasuk representasi gender dan orientasi seksual. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi langsung terhadap film Wonder Woman (2017) dan Wonder Woman 1984 (2020), serta studi pustaka dari berbagai jurnal ilmiah dalam lima tahun terakhir. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa representasi karakter dan simbol visual dalam film memberikan ruang interpretasi yang memperkuat citra keberagaman gender dan orientasi seksual, serta berdampak pada persepsi publik terhadap isu LGBT. Selain itu, penelitian ini menyoroti peran komunitas LGBT sebagai agen perubahan sosial yang aktif dalam memperjuangkan hak asasi manusia dan kesetaraan, serta pentingnya media dalam menyuarakan keberagaman dan mendorong inklusivitas dalam masyarakat.

Kata Kunci : Wonder Woman, Komunitas LGBT, Teori Kultivasi, Representasi Gender, Media.

Introduction

Media plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions of various social issues, including sensitive topics such as gender and sexual orientation. One communication theory that comprehensively explains the long-term influence of media is Cultivation Theory, developed by George Gerbner. This theory posits that continuous exposure to media can affect audiences' perceptions of social reality, whereby media not only reflects reality but also actively constructs it (Gerbner et al., 2002). Through repeated consumption of content such as films, television series, and news, media constructs a collective narrative about what is considered normal, acceptable, or deviant.

In this context, the film *Wonder Woman* (2017) emerges as a noteworthy cultural product for analysis, as it both explicitly and implicitly challenges traditional stereotypes regarding women and sexual orientation. The main character, Diana—also known as Wonder Woman—is portrayed as a strong, independent woman from Themyscira, an island inhabited entirely by women. This representation opens up broad interpretive possibilities regarding the character's sexual orientation, suggesting a departure from conventional heterosexual norms. Greg Rucka, one of the writers of the *Wonder Woman* comics, has openly stated that Diana is queer and that romantic relationships among women in Themyscira are logical and natural (Milligan, 2016).

Both international and Indonesian media have covered this issue, affirming that Wonder Woman is a fictional character who exhibits same-sex attraction, as confirmed by her original author. This revelation sparked significant discussion, given that Wonder Woman has long been seen as a symbol of feminism and female empowerment, and is now also considered a representation of gender and sexual diversity. It is frequently emphasized that in the *Wonder Woman: Rebirth* comic series, Diana is portrayed as a character open to same-sex relationships. Rucka highlights that in the all-female Amazonian culture, love is not confined by heteronormative expectations as found in patriarchal societies.

This study focuses on the *Wonder Woman* (2017) film directed by Patty Jenkins. The film was commercially successful, attracting 91.3 million viewers globally and earning approximately 822 million USD. However, it also raised substantial questions regarding Wonder Woman's identity as a superhero figure aligned with queer representation. Earlier comics often depicted Wonder Woman in emotional and sometimes sexual relationships with women, consistent with her origins from an all-female society. In her thesis *They Called Me Wonder Woman* (2017), Rosa Cohen observed that Wonder Woman has a strong emotional resonance with the queer community, particularly women, not only because of her superpowers but also due to her embodiment of feminist values. Cohen emphasized that many queer individuals identify with Wonder Woman.

A study by Retno Indriyanti and Yuliana Rakhmawari (2018) analyzed the gender representation of Wonder Woman using Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis, revealing that the character exhibits both feminine and masculine traits, or mono-androgyny.

However, in *Wonder Woman* (2017), Diana's sexual orientation is not explicitly portrayed and is almost entirely absent, in accordance with the vision of director Patty Jenkins. A notable scene depicts Wonder Woman in a heteronormative relationship with Steve Trevor, raising critical questions—particularly among queer audiences—regarding whether the film intentionally "censored" the character's non-heteronormative aspects to align with dominant

global cultural norms. There is a growing suspicion among queer communities that the film industry remains reluctant to provide representation for LGBTQ+ groups.

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach, allowing for a thorough exploration of media texts through observation and symbolic interpretation, as well as literature review. The qualitative data consists of scene excerpts, visual narratives, character dialogue, and interactions that imply queer identity and LGBT sexual orientation. In addition to media observation, this study draws from various theoretical references, including Cohen's (2024) research.

Furthermore, this research also utilizes the scholarly work of Prasenjit Panda and Rajeshwary Bandyopadhyay titled *Flouting Norms, Forging Identities: Queering of Hypermasculinity in Marvel Cinematic Universe's Posthuman Superhero Pantheon* (2024). Although this study does not examine Wonder Woman directly, it provides relevant insights and a complementary perspective. Panda and Bandyopadhyay analyzed identity transformations among Marvel superheroes—such as Iron Man, Hulk, Vision, and Captain America—arguing that the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) deliberately presents superheroes in ways that defy conservative norms, contributing significantly to shifting global perceptions of masculinity and identity.

Although their research focuses on the MCU, it is methodologically and thematically relevant to this study, especially concerning how superhero characters are utilized as tools of ideological propagation. Similarly, Wonder Woman can be seen as a vehicle for promoting LGBT awareness, a phenomenon increasingly prevalent in contemporary society. Their study offers a conceptual framework applicable to the current research, despite not directly analyzing Wonder Woman.

From a conservative perspective, the inclusion of LGBT elements in media—such as queering traditionally hypermasculine characters or introducing non-heterosexual dimensions to superheroes—is viewed as an ideological agenda that could reshape public perceptions, thoughts, and social norms. Such approaches are perceived as potentially disruptive to established social orders, leading to confusion about gender identity and roles. The incorporation of non-heterosexual elements into characters like Wonder Woman is seen as misaligned with the traditional symbols of strength and feminine identity.

In conclusion, this research adopts a conservative viewpoint by critically examining the controversy surrounding non-heterosexual elements in the characterization of Wonder Woman.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach, focusing on content and discourse analysis within media, specifically the film *Wonder Woman*. The research is framed using George Gerbner's Cultivation Theory, which emphasizes that long-term media exposure can shape public perceptions of social reality.

The data collected in this study are non-numerical in nature, consisting of film scenes, dialogues, narratives, and visual symbols. These elements are interpreted through the lens of Cultivation Theory. Data collection was conducted through direct observation of audiovisual media and supported by a literature review of scholarly sources from reputable databases.

The literature review primarily concentrates on the following areas:

LGBT representation in popular films,

Media analysis through the framework of Cultivation Theory,

The role of media in shaping public opinion regarding gender diversity.

The literature search was conducted using databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, and Sinta, employing relevant keywords and limiting results to publications from the past eight years to ensure contextual and up-to-date findings. The selected references were filtered to maintain focus on the central topics of LGBT representation and the media's construction of social reality.

In addition to the literature review, film analysis was carried out by directly viewing *Wonder Woman* (2017) and *Wonder Woman 1984* (2020). The analysis focused on several aspects, including:

The characterization of the main protagonist and her social relationships, particularly female interactions on Themyscira.

Dialogues and narratives related to gender, identity, and emotional relationships.

Visual symbols and cinematographic elements that subtly allude to LGBT themes.

Media and public reactions, gathered through online articles, film reviews, and viewer commentary referencing LGBT elements.

The primary audiovisual sources analyzed include:

Wonder Woman (2017) – Directed by Patty Jenkins

Wonder Woman 1984 (2020) – Directed by Patty Jenkins

These films were selected due to their position within a globally influential superhero franchise. Their portrayal of powerful female characters and the absence of male figures in the central setting makes them particularly compelling for analysis from a gender and sexual orientation perspective in mainstream media.

FINDINGS

1. Characters and Social Relationships on Themyscira

Wonder Woman (2017) portrays Themyscira as an all-female society inhabited by the Amazons. Diana Prince is raised in this environment without the presence of men and develops strong emotional bonds with fellow Amazons, such as Hippolyta and Antiope. These interactions among female characters reflect a level of intimacy that can be interpreted as queer-coded relationships, although such representations are not explicitly depicted in the film.

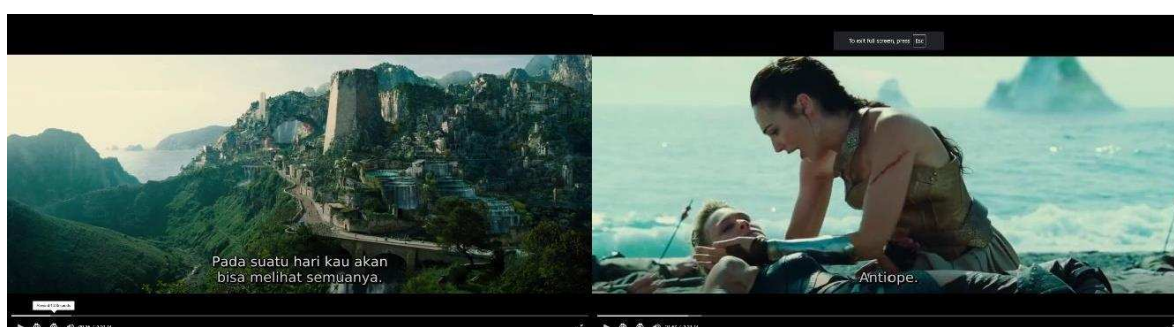


Figure 1. Wonder Woman (2017)

Preliminary Conclusion:

The fictional world constructed in the film presents a model of life free from male dominance, offering space for a broader interpretation of gender.

Dialogue and Narrative on Gender and Identity
Diana's dialogue with Steve Trevor reveals her alternative perspective on male-female relationships. She remarks that men are not essential for pleasure, based on literature she has read. This indicates a mindset that is not confined to the norms of heterosexual relationships.

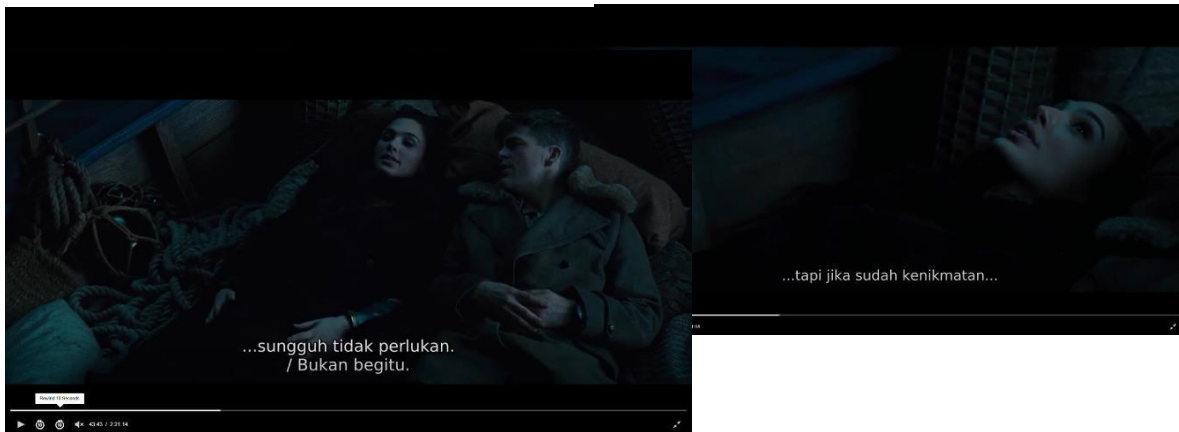


Figure 2. Wonder Woman (2017)

This reflects the following ideas:

Women can be autonomous and possess full agency over their bodies and minds,

Gender roles do not have to conform to traditional societal expectations,

Themyscira serves as an alternative symbol for a more egalitarian world.

2. Symbols and Visual Style in the Film

The film employs visual symbolism and cinematic techniques to reinforce messages of feminism and diversity.

The costumes of the Amazons emphasize strength and functionality, rather than merely serving as visual appeal.

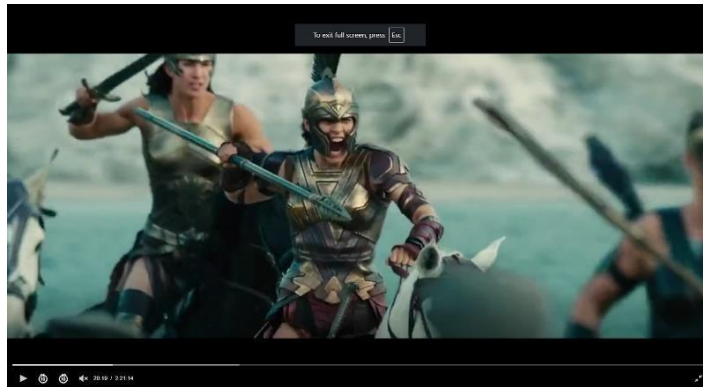


Figure 3. Wonder Woman (2017)

The use of color and lighting conveys a sense of peace and emotional strength.



Figure 4. Wonder Woman (2017)

The camera frames Diana's body as a symbol of strength rather than as a sexual object, resisting the male gaze.



Figure 5. Wonder Woman (2017)

4. Cultivation Theory and Its Impact on Social Perception

According to George Gerbner's Cultivation Theory, repeated and prolonged exposure to specific media content can shape societal perceptions of social reality. In this context:

Wonder Woman exerts a positive influence by broadening the perception of women as heroic figures,

Audiences may become more open to diverse identities and sexual orientations,

The film contributes to the creation of new narratives about collective female strength—narratives that are rarely portrayed in mainstream cinema.

5. The Role of Media in Shaping Public Opinion

Mass media—particularly through film reviews, online articles, and social media—plays a significant role in shaping public perception of Wonder Woman. Key findings include:

Film reviews frequently highlight feminist themes and female empowerment, positioning the film as a symbol of progress in gender representation,

Viewer comments on platforms such as Twitter show a range of responses; the majority praise the film as progressive, particularly in its portrayal of women,

Some media outlets have described the film as a form of “subtle revolution” within the superhero genre for its bold engagement with gender and inclusivity issues, even if presented indirectly.

The media does more than disseminate information about the film—it also provides interpretive frameworks that help audiences understand the deeper meanings behind it. Through media discourse, topics such as women’s representation and the potential for queer representation become subjects of broad and open discussion.

Additional Conclusion:

Media serves as a crucial bridge between film and audience in shaping social perception. This role is increasingly vital in fostering a more inclusive and critically engaged public discourse on representation in cinema.

DISCUSSION

The film *Wonder Woman* (2017) provides a rich fictional narrative that can be analyzed through the lenses of gender studies, identity representation, and media theory. Findings from this study demonstrate that the film goes beyond conventional superhero storytelling by introducing progressive ideas concerning gender diversity and female empowerment, evident in its narrative structure and storyline. Through the analysis of Themyscira, character dialogue, visual symbolism, and the role of mass media in shaping public perception, the film opens space for broader interpretations of gender representation.

First, the depiction of Themyscira as an all-female society offers an alternative social model free from male dominance. As noted in Cohen (2024), *Wonder Woman* has formed a strong emotional connection with queer communities and serves as an identity symbol for them. Emotional relationships among women characters—such as Diana’s interactions with Hippolyta and Antiope—can be interpreted as forms of potential queer representation, even though they are not made explicit. This supports the argument that *Wonder Woman*’s fictional world enables non-heteronormative interpretations. This finding aligns with Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990), in which she argues that gender identity is performative and can be understood beyond the traditional binary framework.

Second, Diana's dialogue with Steve Trevor reveals a critical stance on heteronormative relational norms. When she states that "men are not necessary for pleasure," Diana asserts women's autonomy over their bodies and minds, independent of the opposite sex. This challenges traditional gender narratives in which women are often constructed as 'the Other' in relation to men. Thus, Themyscira may be read as a symbol of resistance to patriarchal constructions, reinforcing the thesis that alternative, more egalitarian societies are conceivable—even potentially matriarchal. According to Morgan, Shanahan, and Signorielli (2015), heavy viewers are influenced by positive or negative portrayals of homosexuality in media. They are more likely to normalize and accept gender and sexual diversity when regularly exposed to inclusive representations.

Third, in terms of visual symbols and style, the film successfully avoids the traps of the male gaze as critiqued by Laura Mulvey (1975) in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. The camera presents Diana's body as a source of power rather than a sexual object. The Amazons' costumes are functional and strength-oriented, while lighting and color schemes evoke strong emotional and peaceful atmospheres, rather than superficial aesthetics. This suggests that the film consciously utilizes visual media to reinforce feminist messages and female empowerment.

Fourth, George Gerbner's Cultivation Theory strengthens the understanding that films like *Wonder Woman* can shape societal perceptions of women as empowered and autonomous figures. This is consistent with the view of Abd. Rahman & Mifda Hilmiyah (2024), who argue that "media messages can implant new perceptions that shape long-term understanding of social realities." Repeated exposure to positive representations can lead audiences to adopt more open views regarding diverse gender identities and sexual orientations. In this sense, the film functions as a social agent that shifts dominant narratives surrounding women in popular culture—an increasingly prominent discourse.

Lastly, mass media plays a significant role in shaping public opinion about *Wonder Woman*. Film reviews, articles, and social media discussions demonstrate that media not only reports on cultural products but also provides interpretive frameworks. As noted by Abd. Rahman & Mifda Hilmiyah (2024), social media today serves as a strategic space for shaping collective perceptions on social issues such as gender and identity. Many reviews highlight feminist and female empowerment themes in the film, with some referring to it as a "subtle revolution" within the superhero genre. This affirms the role of mass media in strengthening discourse on gender representation and building public awareness of the importance of inclusivity in popular culture.

Based on this discussion, it can be concluded that *Wonder Woman* offers more than entertainment. According to Panda & Bandyopadhyay (2024), the phenomenon of "queering" superhero characters reflects a shift in the cultural identity of popular media, often sparking controversy. It also serves as a site of ideological representation and struggle. The film illustrates how popular culture can become a space for negotiating meaning, expanding the understanding of gender identity, and promoting social perception change toward non-heteronormative perspectives.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to examine the influence of the character *Wonder Woman* in shaping global perspectives on the LGBT community. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach and George Gerbner's Cultivation Theory, the research involved observational analysis of the films *Wonder Woman* (2017) and *Wonder Woman 1984* (2020), supported by relevant literature.

Key findings indicate that:

The character Wonder Woman is effectively used as a medium to communicate aspects of LGBT understanding through character representation, narrative, and filmic messages—ultimately working to disseminate inclusive values to a wider audience.

The influence of mass media, especially through popular films like Wonder Woman, is crucial in shaping perceptions and expanding awareness of gender and LGBT issues. Character representation helps audiences understand sexual orientation and gender identity, fostering emotional connections. Repeated exposure to these representations can normalize LGBT identities and reduce societal stigma—although individual audience interpretations may still vary.

This study has limitations, as it only focused on two films. Future research should consider a more comprehensive analysis involving a wider range of films. Involving members of the LGBT community in further studies and integrating both qualitative and quantitative methods would provide a more holistic understanding.

Analyzing audience perceptions of LGBT representation on screen is a form of social impact research. Applying an interdisciplinary approach—incorporating sociology, psychology, and media studies—offers an effective framework for shaping perspective. It can be concluded that mainstream media, particularly popular films like Wonder Woman, plays a pivotal role in forming public opinion and perspectives regarding social issues such as gender diversity and non-heteronormative sexual orientations.

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