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Loneliness, Superheroes & the Uses and Gratifications Theory

In Liu Weiyan's 2015 research paper "A Historical Overview of Uses and Gratifications Theory," she analyzes the evolution of the uses and gratifications theory throughout the decades and how the application of this theory changes over time. The author takes a look at how Uses and Gratifications (U&G) main purpose is to understand the way that people choose and engage in media. The theory focuses on finding out how and why people choose certain media and what they get out of it for themselves. In the early stages of communication research U&G was developed as a way to study how audiences choose content that can satisfy their own social or psychological wants and desires.

Research in the 1950s through the 1970s was already focusing on how the same piece of media can be used by audiences in several different ways. For example, the radio was used for companionship, relaxing, the changing of moods, learning and increasing social interaction. Each type of interaction yields a different take away point for the listener; someone engaging in the radio for entertaining will take away different meanings from the broadcast than one listening for education. During the 1980s and 1990s, research was more aggressive in proving itself and Windahl stated that media-effect researchers typically tended to study mass communication with their perspective coming from the media itself, whereas U&G studies mass communication but with the perspective coming from the audience instead. Weiyan believes that this focus on the audience would become important as the media would continue to demassify and users could have more control over what type of content they consume. Demassification is a concept defined as the control that the individual has on their media choices. Unlike the traditional mass

media consumer, the internet allows the audience to select media based on their own needs.

Kuehn (1994) used the *New York Times*' as an excellent example of this. Before the internet, people needed to purchase the whole paper. Today, if people read the electronic version, they only need to pay for the article they want to read. This meant that a piece of media could try and appeal to only a certain type of demographic and still garner a good audience from it, as people would be searching that type of content out. Asynchroneity refers to the way that messages can be received and understood with time differences. Users are able to send, receive and save messages at their own convenience. Today people can go back and watch a show that was never airing when they were alive, and are able to experience all of those moments like they could in real time. People no longer have to travel to be able to talk with a friend, or wait for a response in the mail. This type of consumption not only affects time periods, but also regions. Content that would usually only be seen by one country, or one area that speaks the same language, is able to be spread across the world. English-only speakers are able to watch anime or telenovelas with subtitles, and still understand what they are watching. Digitized messages give the user more control now than ever before. Weiyan then talks about how media consumption is becoming more of an active engagement between the audience and the media that it has become more apt to refer to the audience as "users' with the development of video games, internal / social media, and mobile devices. Media has also morphed from only meaning handheld tools like magazines or television shows into devices and channels. Users now consume media and help create and interact with them. This type of interaction can be seen from the job of subtitling a show into a new language, or the new type of online discussion of shows. The idea of what people consider media is changing with platforms like YouTube. Any person with internet access and a way to record themselves is able to upload something to the website, but that content is considered media.

"Adolescents without television: A study in media deprivation" by Windahl et al. is a study that shows that media influence is determined by a combination of the audience, society and the

media itself. That is to say that the audience depends more on the media when the goal of that media is to cause satisfaction in the audience. The Dependency Theory argues that there is a close relationship between social systems, media systems, and the audience. The media relies on the political system in the nation for protection and facilitation while some governments support the media through money whether that is tax incentives or paying the studios outright. The political system relies on the media to spread their messages and values. Both sides of the economy benefit, as the advertisers pay the media and the media advertises to the audience who pay the advertisers. The media and the audience's relationship is key as the audience pays for the media. The audience, however, also needs the media. Individuals rely on the media to receive important information, and the more people are becoming reliant on these needs the stronger the dependency that people have with their media will grow and being to affect their feelings and actions. For the final relationship in that triangle, there is society and the audience. Society uses the media to influence the audience; it uses the media to present norms and values that we need to uphold. The political system relies on the audience to believe in the law and vote, while the economic system relies on the audience as consumers to buy products. Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1976) argued that people were at their most dependent on the media during times of societal change and conflict. When an event is surrounded by conflict, interest in that event increases and the more interest you have in this event the more likely you are to seek out information from the media. This, in turn, makes audience members depend on the media as a source of information, making them more likely to return back to it. This can be seen with politics, as interest in a candidate rises, the more often the audience member finds themselves trying to learn more about that person or policy and the need to stay up to date on information increases. Windahl believes that dependency on media can be related to how you use it, like those who use media in a more instrumental way to meet their needs (like social interaction) or the way the consumption of media is consumed. Ritualization of media also plays a part in it, needing to set aside a specific time on a day consistently to keep up with the

program. Both of these are ways that a person will become more dependent on the media. They found that high exposure to a media, affinity with a media, lack of other resources, and even interaction with a media are all variables that may lead to an increased dependency.

Deprivation theory found that people tend to feel more socially deprived when their media consumption is cut off, even when it comes to talking with friends and family. The study into the deprivation of people's media is important in a few ways; one is finding out the ways in which people use media, another is a way to study just how people value and depend on the media, and lastly it serves to find out the ways that people satisfy their needs without media. Taking U&G into consideration, people are using media as a way to satisfy their needs, that watching television can be a replacement for face to face interaction. Miyazaki (1981) argues that media consumption is often more rewarding than the alternatives, so it makes sense that so many people would rely on mass media. People who were deprived of media that they used for fiction and entertainment purposes are more likely to turn to other types of media (television, books, or newspapers) than those who use media for information. This means that the more media is missing for someone who relies on it for entertainment, the more likely it is that that person will seek out other types of media but not necessarily other forms of entertainment. Those who are more information-oriented consumers are more likely to accept the absence of television than those who use it as a leisure activity. After the deprivation was over, the more deprived the individual felt, the more likely they were to watch more television as a way to "make up" for their lost time. The sense of deprivation also hit harder to individuals who were exposed to more television and interacted more with the media, such as those who used it as a replacement for face to face interaction. The people who missed television media the most preferred to replace television with other forms of media instead of leisure or peer activities.

U&G research also focuses on the different levels of involvement and activity in the audience. Armstrong and Rubin (1989) found that the group of people that are more actively engaging with media are the ones who relied a lot more on that type of media. Rubin (1984)

talks about the different viewing patterns between audiences, those who are ritualistic viewers or instrumental use. Ritualistic viewers tend to be an audience that are attracted by the content in the media, and are used for relaxation or companionship. Meanwhile instrumental media attracts a more engaged audience as that group is more focused on satisfying needs such as seeking information. These two types are not separated from each other wholly, and are often interlinked and heavily depend on the person's background, time, environment around them, and personal demands.

Thanks to the rapid advances in technology and the creation of new media the audience is presented with more and more media choices than ever with motivation and gratification becoming crucial factors in audience analysis. Interactivity between media and audiences is at an all time high. Five different types of interactivity were discussed such as: playfulness, choice, connectedness, information collection, and reciprocal communication (Ha and James (1998)). Playfulness and choice are the types to satisfy self-communication and entertainment needs. Connectedness is for goal-oriented audiences and is usually for seeking information and understanding. Information Collection and Reciprocal communication are convenient for communication and discussing with others. With the current boom of the internet this usually refers to talking to others online about the media. The later two, information collection and reciprocal communication, have been found to have higher levels of interactivity within the audience. Whereas the former three, playfulness, choice, and connectedness, has lower interactivity.

Loneliness and a lack of social interaction leads to people consuming media as a way to fill in that gap. "Of Amazons, Humans, and Batmen: Superheroes and the Affectual Dynamics of Loneliness" is an analysis on loneliness represented and perpetuated by superheroes written by Emily Scherzinger. Scherzinger takes a look at how loneliness is a trait built into most superheroes. This is a result of various factors, like the hero forgoing their personal life in order to be a hero or some unjust hardship and trauma that makes them experience an overwhelming

amount of loneliness that usually drives the person to become the hero. But these hardships are not unique to superheroes, nor are the types of loneliness they harbor. Scherzinger also connects how society affects and influences the media that is being produced at that time. Batman was the witness to his parents' murder due to impoverished crime, and Wonder Woman experiences rampant sexism both in and out of costume. She argues that superheroes are reflective of public sentiment and society as a whole, and the more people experience loneliness the more superheroes are going to have that trait of loneliness. Two key examples of the idolized lonely superhero in western society are Bruce Wayne (Batman) in Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins (2005)* and Diana Prince (Wonder Woman) in Patty Jenkins' *Wonder Woman (2017.)*

Jean-Paul Gabilliet, in his chronicle of the history of comic books, briefly mentions how the individualist paradigm is being elevated in comic books. The individualist paradigm is a social theory of individualism that promotes the idea of being self-construal and emotionally independent. This type of thinking is often associated with "creativity, economic development, and freedom," while the type of person it encourages is competitive, and achievement focused. The type of ideas that the individualist paradigm devalues are interpersonal relatedness, which in turn makes people lonely. It is an idea that propagates self independence and competitiveness, which makes people more likely to isolate themselves from other people. Scherzinger argues that we can see the shift to a more individualistic society directly through the change in direction from Batman's character. A once campy, fun comic character to rival Superman was turned into a dark noir that portrayed a tortured, flawed man. In *Batman Begins* not only does Batman the character showcase this type of social change, but so too does Gotham City. She connects how Cvetkovich describes depression as how capitalism feels in *Depression: A Public Feeling* to the way the characters describe Gotham City as "depressed" and "rotting." The death of Bruce Wayne's parents at the hands of Joe Chill is a focused look on Gotham City as a whole. Joe Chill claims that the crime he committed was due to the poverty he

faced and nothing more, and on the stand the prosecutor said that his crime was done not out of greed, but desperation. Bruce Wayne's trauma is one tied to larger societal issues.

Batman is also a character that uses his own alter-ego as a stand alone entity, Scherzinger calls it "body-as-symbol." Bruce Wayne's mortality has to be pushed away in order for Batman to operate efficiently. Wayne even views Batman as a symbol in the movie, "As a man, I'm flesh and blood. I can be ignored, destroyed. But as a symbol, I can be incorruptible. I can be everlasting." Wayne doing all of this to prop Batman up as the savior of Gotham, he loses the girl that he loves because he is Batman. Wayne Manor, the last standing tie to his parent's influence on Gotham City, gets burned down. Every part of Bruce Wayne gets punished, meanwhile Bruce's pain only enables Batman even more.

The loneliness that Wonder Woman experiences is a societal loneliness and tied to her femininity and being a woman. At first Patty Jenkins', in *Wonder Woman (2017)* disguises Diana's loneliness as her feeling out of place time wise, as during modern times she looks at a photo of Wonder Woman from WW2. Going back in time to Diana's time with Steve Trevor in WW2, it becomes clear to us that feeling out of place timewise is not the only isolation Diana had to endure. Steve ends up perpetuating a lot of sexist ideas onto Diana, an Amazon from Themyscira that only has a population of women. Steve constantly overtakes her body language, making Diana seem smaller and less confident, grabbing her arm, or holding her back as she walks. Steve even explains to his friends that Diana is his "blind sister" when she walks with him into his work room. Diana's loneliness is due to the fact that everyone around her treats her like an object and not an equal. All of the men around her think less of her in battle despite her being stronger, faster, and more durable. Scherzinger notes that the resolution of the film, Diana being treated like an equal to the other soldiers, is only accomplished when Diana does something masculine and takes back No Man's Land by defeating the enemies. Her merits were still judged on being able to do something "boys should do."

Superhero media tends to reflect societal values which can greatly impact not only the

media but how the audience responds to that media. Scherzinger brings up that as long as superheroes are showcased as exceptional beings sticking to Western hegemonic values and show messages that are 'positive' like hope, excitement, and trust they are never going to break out of the societal structures in which they operate and comply with, thus reinforcing their own loneliness.

Scherzinger noticed, along with the dependency theory, that society often affects the media that is being created and she drew a connection to the increase of loneliness being represented in superheroes. Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur noted that people tend to rely even more on media during times of big societal change, and one of the biggest change that a large part of the world had to adapt to was the COVID-19 Pandemic with everyone needing to stay inside for longer periods of time. And as such, media consumption skyrocketed and so did media dependency. People began seeking media to solve their problems even more so especially when it comes to social interaction. Superheroes are an interesting representation of our society and the values that we hold. To me there is no better example or showcase of how prevalent this idea is than in the Spider-Man movies that have been produced for decades. Throughout the many iterations of the same character and character type they all manage to portray a different type of loneliness that the audience can attach onto and relate to. The benefit of having so much variety is that there is always a character for someone to use in order to feel less alone.

One of the noticeable drawbacks in having such a wide array showcasing these experiences is that people often get too reliant on that piece of media. This representation of relatability is often a big draw in for the people feeling lonely that traps them in engaging with the media. People

relying on the media to fill the need of social interaction are more likely to seek out even more media than those who just use it for entertainment.

Analyzing Loneliness in Spider-Man

Peter Parker, in Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man (2002)*, is an interesting character to take a look at through the perspective of loneliness. Peter gets bullied and made fun of, even by the bus driver. He is seen as a nerd, as someone you would not even give a second glance . Yet MJ, the girl Peter has a crush on, still talks to him. She doesn't ignore or make fun of him like everyone else does. She is not his friend, but she doesn't dislike him. Peter even has a best friend that he hangs out with in Harry Osborn. This is a very realistic portrayal of feeling alone because it shows how someone can have good interactions with people, yet still feel completely alone and disconnected from the world. This is heightened by the bullying Peter has to endure. The rollercoaster really happens when he gets bitten by a radioactive spider and gains his powers. Almost instantly his change in behavior causes a rift to grow between him and his Aunt May and Uncle Ben. After his powers develop, Peter's appearance and personality changes as he ditches the glasses, his physique becomes more defined, and he becomes more full of himself. While not many of us can relate to gaining superpowers this parallels puberty as Peter is only 17 in the story. It really is a change in hormones throughout his body that leads to a change in the way he carries himself, and the expression of his identity which is something many teens can relate to. This rift becomes a fight between him and Uncle Ben, right before Peter's inaction and pettiness causes a thief to get away who then kills Uncle Ben for his car to get away from the crime scene. After having lost his Uncle, Peter commits himself to being Spider-Man, refusing to let the same mistake that took Uncle Ben happen again to anyone else. While he becomes a hero, MJ and Harry start dating. That, added onto Peter's confidence since becoming Spider-Man, means that he and MJ become friends. The trio doesn't stay close for

long as Harry says some rude things to MJ, MJ starts falling for Spider-Man without knowing it's Peter, and Peter's activity as Spider-Man starts to put a target on all the people he cares about as Aunt May gets targeted by the Green Goblin. At the end of the film Peter kills Green Goblin, who we know is Norman Osborn (Harry's father), Harry then declares his hatred for Spider-Man and MJ confesses to Peter that she has a crush on him.

Spider-Man's journey in this movie is a parallel to the feelings that a lot of teenagers have during puberty, and going through highschool. This movie serves as a demonstration to the audience that there are other people that are feeling that same way. Peter struggling with his identity, being bullied and being alone makes the audience feel seen. Peter feeling alone is a comforting thought because it means you're not the only one. Parents and guardians can also leave this movie with an understanding of some of the problems the person they are caring for might be going through. Another source of parallel between Peter and the audience is the shared interests between the two. Fans of the comics that this movie is adapted from have a certain "nerd" or "uncool" stereotype labeled onto them. Peter Parker; highschool student, genius, into science, socially awkward with little to no friends. He ends up embodying the stereotype of fans, only he ends up being a hero. It allows for the audience to see themselves in a similar kind of success story. This level of mirroring, I believe, is why so many people were able to gravitate towards Spider-Man in the first place. His heroism aided people to not feel so alone, and acknowledged the struggle of being a good person and being bullied.

In the sequel movie *Spider-Man 2* has Peter setback in his relationship with MJ as Peter Parker's life is falling apart around him, struggling to maintain a job, failing to keep up with his studies, and unable to commit himself to his friends. This is all due to his responsibilities as Spider-Man. Peter is unable to be there for MJ as a friend, and struggles to be friends with Harry since Harry has become obsessed with hunting down Spider-Man. As the story progresses the responsibility starts to crush Peter and he gives up being Spider-Man, committing himself to living a normal life and restoring what he lost. He starts doing well in

college again, he gets himself a job, appears happier, and is there for MJ. When the two finally get to talk, after Peter quit being Spider-Man, she even remarks that he "looks different." Eventually he does have to suit up again, leaving Peter and Harry's friendship forever fractured while MJ sees Spider-Man's true identity, and the two end the movie being together. *Spider-Man 2* emphasizes the part of loneliness that is spreading yourself so thin that everything falls through the cracks. Things only start turning around for him when he finally lets someone in on his life. He talks to Aunt May about the truth behind Uncle Ben's death, which leads to clarity and understanding between the two that gives Peter hope. The final touch that Peter needed was having someone in his life that understands his struggle of being Spider-Man, and at the end that's MJ. Not many of us have to live a double life to save the city, but plenty of people can relate to having to juggle so many parts of your own life so much so that other parts start to suffer.

It's the secret of Spider-Man and being a hero that pushes Peter closer towards feeling alone. His powers are his burden to bear as he feels obligated to prioritize being a hero, but is unable to confide in anyone since the last time someone knew Aunt May and MJ were almost killed. Gaining his powers gave him the confidence that gave him a shot with the girl of his dreams, MJ, who is still unaware that he is Spider-Man. Meanwhile the secret of being Spider-Man jeopardizes his friendship with his closest friend Harry. Peter's life is spread thin as everything he cares about starts to crumble, he can't hold a job to support himself or Aunt May, he starts failing school, and he can't support his friends. Being Spider-Man becomes the only thing he values, and that leads to him isolating himself. He only begins to heal when he opens himself up and is vulnerable to the people he cares about, it doesn't fix all his problems as his friendship with Harry is shattered but it does allow for him to finally be present in MJ's life and allows for him to fix his relationship with Aunt May. Peter's journey with loneliness is the kind that was forced onto him, that he did not know how to break. He was constantly punished for the

things he was good at, and eventually he lost a lot of the things he cared about in pursuit of another venture. He neglected the people that truly cared about him, because he felt obligated to not take care of himself. Peter is only finally able to take a step in the right direction when he is finally open, when Peter Parker and Spider-Man are one. This however doesn't fix all of his problems, his best friend still hates him. He still has to face the consequences of his actions, but allowing someone else in means that he does not have to do it alone like how he was treated or how he convinced himself he should be. The audience is able to use this film and understand the ways in which Peter was able to improve his life, as he worked on building himself back up from his lowest point. The first movie brought in loneliness and tied the audience to Peter Parker, making them attached to the character and helping the audience feel heard. The second movie capitalizes on this relationship with the previous one and shows the audience solutions to these problems. The reason I believe that this movie is able to suggest solutions and have it be heard by the audience is due to Windhal's dependency theory. He discusses how ritualistic viewing strengthens the bond the audience has with the media, and this is a sequel movie. It builds upon the trust and relationship that the first movie had making it all that more impactful for the audience.

Miles Morales, in *Into The Spider-Verse (2018)*, goes from being a friendly kid who knows everyone in his community to a total outsider dealing with transfering to a new school, Visions Academy. Visions is a school for smart and gifted kids which puts Miles on an equal footing with the other students. He now feels intellectually inferior as he is actually struggling with his classwork now, and to make it even worse for him he doesn't know any of the other students. The thing that keeps Miles going is his individuality and expression through his artwork, that his Uncle Aaron fully supports more than his own parents. They, Miles' parents, recognize how smart their son is and want him to utilize it. They love him but they see the school for the gifted as a step up for him and a way that he can go further in life. Miles can be

seen putting tags throughout the city, wears his shoes untied as a choice, and spray paints a mural that says "no expectations" in an abandoned subway station. Art is the one thing keeping miles afloat after being thrown into the deep end. This is until he gets bit by a radioactive spider and undergoes developing super powers and becoming Spider-Man after the death of Peter Parker. When this earth's Peter Parker met Miles Peter said "I didn't think there was anyone else like me." This kinship sparks his journey to avenge the late Spider-Man is another thing that gives him purpose, but due to his inexperience since he just got his powers he is constantly struggling. Miles for the audience is a great representation of no one understanding you, and how isolating individualism can be.

The one friend that Miles began to make at Visions Academy is Gwen Stacy, who we later find out is a spider-person from another universe. Gwen is not the only spider hero Miles meets and befriends, most notably an out of shape, rugged Peter B Parker also from a different universe. He meets a few other people, Spider-Ham, Spider-Noir, and Peni. All 5 of the other Spider-People have been heroes for a while and are very familiar with what this job entails. His Uncle Aaron, the one person encouraging Miles to follow his passion, is revealed to have been a villain called The Prowler and gets shot dead in front of him. Throughout the course of the movie Miles is interacting with all these Spider-People with far more experience than him, capable of handling their own abilities meanwhile Miles still doesn't know how to use most of his. Even in his group of Spider-People, the one group that you would think he should fit in with, Miles still feels alone. Every one of these Spider-People are evidence that Miles is not the only Spider-Man, the only one with these burdens, and yet even they don't understand him. He doesn't even fit in with the other people who don't fit in. Eventually Miles learns to embrace his uniqueness and to stand out from the previous Spider-Man of his earth, and he does this by spray painting over one of Peter's old suits. He takes the leap of faith and begins wearing his art, his personality, on his sleeve and with this newfound confidence comes a better

understanding of his abilities. This confidence is exactly what Miles needed in order to feel like he has a place with all of the other accomplished Spider-People, in this moment Miles is a crucial part of the team, and affirms how close he feels to Gwen and solidifies the student/teacher relationship with Peter B. Miles has friends he can relate to, talk to, who he can be his true self around. Everyone else can finally see Miles as the smart and capable person that he always was deep down. But that can't last, all of his friends have to go back to their own universe. Miles is left alone, his uncle that supported his art gone, his parents unaware of his Spider persona, and all his Spider friends went back home. However he did learn a valuable lesson and earned some confidence in himself which is immediately shown as he finally puts in the effort to befriend his roommate at Visions Academy, Ganke Lee. The audience is able to take a few things from this movie, one of which being comfort in Miles' character. Miles is an extremely relatable "burnt out gifted kid" struggling to live up to the expectations of those around him. Secondly being the importance of self improvement and self confidence. The combination of Miles' responsibilities with his passion is the turning point for him, the sign that he is ready. Miles is also a lot like Sam Raimi's Peter Parker in the sense that he can only feel truly connected to someone the more open he is, which we see as he only becomes closer to Ganke by revealing the fact that he is Spider-Man.

In the sequel movie, *Across the Spider-Verse (2023)*, Miles is struggling to deal with the loss of his newfound friends after they return home. His sketchbook and graffiti art have drawings of the people that he has lost all over them. His relationship with Ganke is okay, however he still misses Peter and Gwen as those are the two that really built him up and are the people that would better understand the struggle he is facing. Miles, despite getting an A in AP Studio Art and art being his passion, decides to put in the effort to get into Princeton University to study quantum physics under the chance that he will be able to cross dimensions and finally see his friends again. Miles is stuck in this rut until Gwen Stacy comes to visit him, however she

has made new friends which makes Miles feel like he is replaceable. He becomes insecure and defensive with the new friends she has made. As the story progresses, it becomes clear that although Gwen's new friends are nice people the bigger group that she has fallen in line with do not like Miles. Gwen is stuck between a rock and a hard place as both sides are trying to pull her over. As much as she likes Miles, this group also gives her a sense of belonging and that is a hard feeling to shake. Miles has to overcome the challenge of the world being against him, as he struggles to escape. Miles' character perfectly encapsulates the feeling of everything falling apart.

Miles' relationship to loneliness is a determining factor to the choices that he makes. His parents moved him from his environment, leaving him feeling lost and alone. He sought refuge in his passion, art, but after he begins developing powers he tries to seek asylum and comfort in being a hero. Surrounded by other Spider-People makes Miles feel even more inadequate, despite having a seemingly good relationship with them, yet his inexperience means that his presence in the mission could become a liability. Miles grows more confident in being Spider-Man, fully taking over the mantle and making it his own by designing his own suit, finally becoming integral to the group being the one to ultimately send everyone back home. But that's just it, he finally fits in and does the right thing, yet he is back to square one. The only person at school he knew was Gwen. His only friends were the other Spider-People, and they're gone now. Miles does make a friend at Visions in Ganke, however there is a distinct divide between his relationship with Ganke and the Spider-people, Miles spends a lot of his time dwelling on trying to reconnect with them and in doing so he gives up his passion for art in order to pursue a scientific career that could lead him closer to his friends again. When he finally meets up with Gwen and Peter he learns that they have formed a dependence on different groups, the group that ultimately turns on Miles. Miles forges his own path despite the loneliness, he has to learn

about his own strength and decide for himself what he wants to do regardless of other people. He desperately misses the friendships he had, but when they reconnect they're not the same people and Miles has to make peace with the time that has passed. I believe that Miles' journey with loneliness is one of the more hard hitting ones, we see that people care for him. His parents and Ganke are still in his dimension and really do care about him. Even still Gwen and Peter do still care about Miles, a third party involvement just made things complicated and muddy. And yet Miles still feels isolated and distant from everyone he interacts with. They don't know him like we do, the secrets he keeps or the things he's had to give up just for a chance at a connection, and that level of almost desperation is why Miles still standing tall and paving his own path is all that more impactful and admirable as a viewer. Miles is set up to be an inspiration for the audience. Miles' success makes the audience want to act to imitate it, the movie wants the audience to gain the same level of self confidence that Miles does. A more cynical understanding could also be that the movie is imitating this feeling so that the audience can live vicariously through it rather than seeking it out on their own. I would be remiss to mention that, however, I believe that the former hits a lot harder.

Gwen Stacy is another character that in the previous two movies also struggles with loneliness herself. In the first one, she can be a little standoff-ish and averse to friends, but eventually warms up to being friends with Miles until she has to go back to her own dimension. In the sequel, we really understand how alone she truly is. She is Spider-Woman, with her own powers, costume, secret identity and all the baggage that comes along with it. She held her best friend as he died in her arms, while her police officer father assumed that she was the one that murdered him. This immediately causes a rift, because even though her father doesn't know that she is Spider-Woman, she is still on guard because she knows how her dad feels about her hero persona. During a battle, Spider-Woman gets really injured and runs out of webs just in time for Captain Stacy to find her and place her under arrest at gunpoint. Panicking, Gwen pulls

off the mask and reveals herself begging and pleading for her father to understand and if he really wants to help he needs to listen to her. As her dad still tries to arrest her, the other Spider-Society people help her out, and let her come with them. They take her in at her lowest and introduce her to plenty of new people that she is able to get along with, like Hobie and Pavitr. Starting to find her footing again, she visits Miles against the directions of the Spider-Society. During this visit, they talk and Gwen notes that her friendship with Miles is special. Doing so leads Miles to the Spider-Society, and a fight breaks out. Gwen gets stuck in the middle of Miles, the only person she could truly call a friend since Peter, and the Spider-Society that took her in at her lowest and offered her a chance to get back on her feet. When Miles escapes from the Spider-Society he leaves alone. Gwen, broken and afraid, returns home for the first time in months to talk to her dad. Things are tense as they both struggle to understand what the other is going through or how to talk to each other now, but eventually Gwen finds out that her dad quit being an officer. Which prompts her to talk about how all she wanted to do was to help people, like him, and how alienated she felt as the people she loves could only know half of her. Her dad ends up accepting her, his love for her outweighs the need for being a cop and supports her trying to do the right thing and trying to rescue her friend. Gwen being a woman, although not central like Wonder Woman, is important to the story and the audience. Having more clear and visual representation, like Miles being black, draws in a bigger audience. Anyone can experience loneliness, anyone can experience any type of loneliness, and having a more diverse cast of Spider-People showcases that rather than endless types of Peter Parker.

Gwen Stacy's adventure through loneliness is a really personal one. Her father goes on rants about how much he hates Spider-Woman, unknowing that she is in the room, the only person she could connect with is worlds away from her and eventually her father finds out her secret and acts out against her. This leads Gwen down the wrong path, she takes the first

chance to meet new people and puts her trust in them. Sometimes it works out, like meeting Hobie and visiting Miles, but ultimately this group tried to keep Gwen and Miles apart and drove Miles out while she couldn't even see through the facade of the group. She trusted it because they helped her. She was hurt and damaged for who she was and then taken advantage of. Gwen's reconciliation with her dad is framed as a coming out scene, she talks about how hard it was to keep this part of her identity from him, how worried she was about his reaction, and how much it hurt that people could only know half of her. It's only when she realizes how valuable Miles is for accepting every part of her and having her dad finally understand how she feels that she is seen. This gives her the courage to reach out to people, to try and stand up to the group that is chasing down her best friends. What Gwen needed was support and acceptance for who she really was.

These three examples of Peter Parker, Miles Morales, and Gwen Stacy are all important looks into loneliness as the source and solution to it are all varied and different despite all of them being Spider-People. Each character is able to capture the feeling of being alone for different people and that draws the audience into a further connection and understanding of the character. These movies are showcasing loneliness, and how the protagonist overcomes that loneliness to a lonely audience, giving them hope of becoming less lonely. The thing with loneliness is that it is a really easy emotion to feel and a hard one to shake and the media can prey upon that feeling as being lonely causes a higher dependency on media. The viewers are confronted with this difficult feeling that they are grappling with and are seeing characters, that the movie says you should look up to, overcome these challenges. Superheroes in general are popular at dealing with the struggles of loneliness due the common use of a secret identity and their usage of being a commentary of the real word. They are often depicted as having to hide half of themselves and not able to show their true nature, and are constantly misjudged. Superhero identities are commonly used as metaphors, symbols, and ideals that mean

something not only to the character, but to the audience. Spider-Man specifically hits home for a large audience, Peter Parker was a direct representation of the types of fans that were consuming Spider-Man content which meant the connection between the media was very strong. Spider-Man in particular has a strong messaging of "anyone can wear the mask" meaning that anyone of the viewers can be the hero, can be Spider-Man, and this is represented through the various different characters that we see being Spider-Man. Spider-Man as a character, as a mantle, encompasses so many groups that it makes it easy to relate to him which is why the audience relies on him.

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