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Spider-Man Reimagined: Transformations of Spider-Man Across Cinematic Universes.

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Abstract

This research paper explains the differences of the character, Spider-Man, across eight cinematic adaptations - Spider-Man (2002), Spider-Man 2 (2004), Spider-Man 3 (2007), The Amazing Spider-Man (2012), The Amazing Spider-Man 2 (2014), Spider-Man: Homecoming (2017), Spider-Man: Far From Home (2019), and Spider-Man: No Way Home (2021). Using the frameworks of adaptation theory and intertextuality, the study shows how each film portrays the core identity of Spider-Man while considering different cultural contexts, movie trends, and audience expectations. Through comparative analysis, the paper identifies thematic, narrative, and performative differences in the portrayal of Peter Parker, highlighting the unique directorial works of Sam Raimi, Marc Webb, and Jon Watts. Adaptive theory helps trace how source materials like comic texts - are transformed for different cinematic eras, While in intertextuality, when we look at how different versions of Spider-Man are created, we see that each new one changes from the older ones. This creates a larger story about the character's development. Ultimately, Spider-Man isn't just a superhero; he's a symbol whose changing identity shows how society and storytelling have evolved over time, reflecting different generations and beliefs.

Keywords : adaptation, intertextuality, superhero, identity, generations.

Introduction

Spider-Man first appeared in “Amazing Fantasy #15” (1962) and has since become one of the most famous superheroes in the world. What makes Spider-Man so special is his character's mix between the ordinary and extraordinary. Peter Parker is just a regular teenager but Spider-Man is seen as powerful with huge responsibilities. This double life he leads, makes the character easy to adapt for the new generations. We can see this clearly in the movies where three different actors- Tobey Maguire in Sam Raimi's trilogy (2002-2007), Andrew Garfield in Mark Webb's films (2012-2014) and Tom Holland in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) (2016-2021) have each brought their own version of the hero to life, shaped by the time and culture in which their films were made. Adaptation theory discussed by the scholars like Hutcheon (2006) and Stam (2005), helps explain how stories change when they're retold in new forms or time periods. Each Spider-Man movie doesn't only follow the comic, it also reflects the world around it. Raimi's early 2000s films focused on ideas like destiny, morality and sacrifice which matches the values of the time when superhero movies were still finding their place. His choice to give Spider-Man organic web shooters was a creative twist that showed Peter's power as a natural part of him. Marc Webb's “The Amazing Spider-Man”, movies coming after darker superhero films like the Dark Knight, showed a moodier and more emotional version of Spider-Man. Here Peter uses mechanical web shooters emphasizing his cleverness as a scientist. Tom Holland's Spider-Man was designed for the modern tech driven age. He uses Tony Stark's gadgets and fits into a big shared universe through “No Way Home” (2021), he grows into an independent hero. Intertextuality explained by Kristeva (1980) and Genette (1997), explains how stories connect and respond to each other. Every new Spider-Man movie acknowledges the ones that came before. Garfield's movies deliberately set themselves apart from Raimi's by making Peter seem more rebellious and giving him Gwen Stacy instead of Mary Jane as his main love interest. Holland's movies often play with comparisons to the earlier versions, his high tech suit contrasts with Maguire's natural powers and Garfield's homemade gadgets. All this comes together in “Spider-Man No Way Home”, where the three Spider-Men meet on screen, letting fans see and compare these different interpretations within a single story. All of this explains that Spider-Man isn't fixed, he's a character who can change with time. Characters' different movie versions reflect changing audience tastes, filmmaking styles and generational values. By looking at Raimi's noble and self sacrificing hero, Webb's intelligent but tragic Spider-Man and Holland's youthful MCU connected version, we can see why the character stays so popular and that he keeps evolving. Spider-Man's journey throughout the films, proves how a superhero can be reshaped to fit new contexts while still staying true to what makes him beloved.

Methodology

This study looks at eight Spider-Man movies using a **qualitative comparative analysis**. Each film was watched more than once, and important scenes, dialogues, and themes were noted down. The focus was on key aspects like Spider-Man's origin, his powers, relationships, responsibility, use of technology, and connections between different films. A chart was made to compare these points across movies. The study uses **adaptation theory** (how stories change from comics to films) and **intertextuality** (how films refer to each other). Only the main films are studied, not comics or other versions.

Analysis

Spider-Man's cinematic journey explains not only the adaptability of superhero narratives but also the cultural significance of how stories are reshaped through time. Each live-action replication of Spider-Man has readapted the character for a new generation, showcasing broader shifts in expectations of the audience, cinematic styles, and cultural contexts. Tobey Maguire's Spider-Man in Sam Raimi's trilogy emphasized

destiny, morality, and sacrifice, connecting with early-2000s optimism about superhero cinema. Andrew Garfield's portrayal in Marc Webb's films showcased a darker, more emotionally intense version, emphasizing themes of love, loss, and personal identity. Tom Holland's performance in Jon Watts's Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) represents yet another transformation, one mixed with mentorship, technological dependency, and independence.

The problem is in understanding why and how Spider-Man continues to be reimagined in ways that are not only on the surface but profoundly narrative and thematic. This study addresses the gap by examining Spider-Man not just as a superhero but as a cultural text, constantly adapted and reinterpreted to fit shifting eras. Applying adaptation theory and intertextuality, the research investigates how Spider-Man's origin, powers, suits, and defining story arcs change across Raimi's, Webb's, and Watts's films. In doing so, it highlights the larger portrayal of cultural adaptation and textual dialogue in cinema.

Adaptation theory helps explain how Spider-Man has been reimagined in films over time. According to Hutcheon (2006), adaptation is about both "repetition" and "variation," meaning it keeps familiar elements but reshapes them for new settings or audiences. Similarly, Stam (2005) points out that adaptations are not just copies but creative versions shaped by cultural and industry needs. Spider-Man's movie history shows this clearly: every version keeps Peter Parker's modest background and moral struggles, but changes his powers, costumes, and relationships to connect with the audience of that time.

In Sam Raimi's trilogy (2002–2007), the focus was on destiny and sacrifice. Raimi gave Peter Parker organic web-shooters, unlike the comics, making his powers seem like fate rather than invention. This highlighted the idea that great power comes with great responsibility. Raimi also kept the classic red-and-blue suit, which showed both loyalty to the comics and Peter's independence. Since superhero films were just becoming popular in the early 2000s, Raimi's version stressed moral clarity and sincerity, presenting Spider-Man as a symbol of duty and sacrifice (Burke, 2015).

Marc Webb's *The Amazing Spider-Man* series (2012–2014) reflected a darker era of superhero films influenced by *The Dark Knight*. Webb brought back mechanical web-shooters, showing Peter's intelligence and scientific skills. His Spider-Man was more modern, tech-savvy, and emotionally layered. The films also explored Peter's parents' mystery and highlighted his love story with Gwen Stacy. The second movie adapted Gwen's tragic comic book death, shaping Andrew Garfield's Spider-Man as a hero marked by grief and loss (Brooker, 2012). This adaptation gave Spider-Man a deeper, more personal emotional weight for audiences of the time.

Tom Holland's Spider-Man, introduced in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) and later in Jon Watts's trilogy (2017–2021), was adapted into Marvel's shared cinematic universe. His version focused on mentorship, especially with Tony Stark, and relied on high-tech suits and gadgets. This reflected today's world of technology and teamwork. However, by *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021), he loses Stark's help and Aunt May, and decides to stand on his own. His final homemade suit symbolized a return to simplicity, much like Raimi's version, but updated for a modern audience. In this way, adaptation comes full circle: Holland's Spider-Man starts off with the most technology but grows into the most independent (Shaviro, 2022).

While adaptation explains how Spider-Man changes when moving from comics to film, intertextuality looks at how the different films talk to each other. Kristeva (1980) describes intertextuality as texts being like "mosaics of quotations," and Genette (1997) adds that hypertextuality happens when one text reshapes another. Spider-Man movies show this clearly, since every new version is connected to the ones that came before.

Raimi's trilogy laid the groundwork for Spider-Man on screen. The theme of responsibility, summed up in Uncle Ben's famous saying, became a central idea for later films. Webb's movies, however, deliberately set themselves apart. Garfield's Spider-Man was more rebellious, witty, and modern, unlike Maguire's sincere version. His romance with Gwen Stacy also made his story different from Raimi's Mary Jane-focused arc. Webb even left out Uncle Ben's iconic line, which can be seen as a nod to Raimi's influence while avoiding repetition (Cutchins et al., 2018).

This intertextuality became stronger in Spider-Man: No Way Home. Garfield's Spider-Man, who was once defined by failing to save Gwen, gets a second chance when he saves MJ (Zendaya). This scene rewrites his earlier failure and lets audiences see his story in a new light. Holland's Spider-Man works as a bridge between the older versions and the MCU. His reliance on Stark's technology contrasts with Maguire's natural powers and Garfield's mechanical skills, encouraging comparisons among them. When all three Spider-Men come together in *No Way Home*, it perfectly reflects Genette's idea of hypertextuality—the MCU reuses and reshapes the earlier Raimi and Webb films into its own story (Mittell, 2015).

Adaptation and intertextuality are closely tied to culture. Raimi's Spider-Man reflects the early 2000s, a time of post-9/11 optimism, where audiences valued clear ideas of good versus evil, heroism, and sacrifice (Ndalianis, 2009). Webb's films reflect the 2010s, when audiences wanted darker, more emotional stories that focused on personal loss and inner struggles rather than moral certainty. Holland's Spider-Man represents today's global, digital generation, shaped by mentorship, teamwork, and technology. By the end of *No Way Home*, however, his move toward independence shows a cultural craving for authenticity—Spider-Man as a self-made hero in a time dominated by big franchises.

Audiences also play a big role in shaping intertextual meaning. The excitement over Raimi's Spider-Man in *No Way Home* shows how nostalgia enhances audience enjoyment. Garfield's redemption arc, which fans warmly welcomed, reveals how intertextual storytelling can change how earlier, less successful films are remembered. In this way, Spider-Man is created not just by directors and studios but also by fans, becoming a shared cultural story whose meaning evolves across different times and generations (Jenkins, 2006).

Adaptation theory shows Spider-Man's film history as a kind of translation—turning comics into movies, adjusting values for new times, and reshaping stories to fit cultural needs. Intertextuality, on the other hand, views this history as an ongoing conversation, where each version of Spider-Man connects to the ones before it. Raimi's sincere hero of destiny, Webb's smart but tragic figure, and Holland's mentored-yet-independent teen all show how flexible Spider-Man is as a cultural icon. His lasting appeal comes from this ability to constantly reinvent himself, adapting to changing times while engaging with past versions.

Together, these ideas show that Spider-Man is more than just a superhero—he is a living cultural story that reflects the world, responds to it, and even helps reshape it.

Conclusion

The different Spider-Man movies show how the superhero keeps changing to stay fresh and meaningful. In Sam Raimi's trilogy, Marc Webb's two films and Tom Holland's Marvel movies, Spider-Man is always the same at heart, a normal teenager trying to handle big responsibilities but each version changes his story to match the time it was made. This shows Spider-Man isn't just one fixed character but a hero who can grow and connect with new generations. Adaptation theory helps explain this, Raimi gave Spider-Man organic web shooters which made it seem like being a hero was his destiny, this fit the clear moral tone of early 2000s superhero movies. Webb brought back mechanical web shooters and focused on Gwen Stacy's tragic story which matched the darker and more emotional style of the 2010s. The paper explains what Linda Hutcheon says, adaptations keep familiar parts but also change things to fit new audiences. The movies also talk to each other, Webb's films tried something different after Raimi, Garfield's return in *No Way Home* gave his character closure and Holland's version blended ideas from past movies. Gérard Genette calls this "hypertextuality", *No Way Home* combines all three SpiderMans stories into one big shared moment. In the end Spiderman stays popular because he keeps adapting and connecting with past versions. Each movie reflects its own time but also respects what came before. That's why Spider-Man still matters today, his story grows and changes just like the people who love him.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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