

How does Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) imply the counseling practice?

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Abstract

The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) is a major franchise in the Hollywood film industry that tells the story of various superheroes in one story continuity. The popularity of the MCU has skyrocketed in society for 14 years ago and has influenced the development of popular culture today. This paper aims to review the potential of the MCU as one of the big trends in the millennial era in the practice of cinema counseling. The review method used is a literature study, the author reviews various related literature to present a comprehensive discussion. The results of the review suggest that the MCU has great potential to be utilized in cinema counseling, especially for millennial children and teenagers. This is because in essence film is a medium that has been tested to be effectively used to shape, reconstruct, and change the mindset of individuals. In addition, the MCU as a group of superhero films also inserts various moral messages and life lessons that can be abstracted, and used as a metaphor by counselors in the practice of cinema counseling. However, more research is still needed regarding the use of MCU in cinema counseling to become a solid foundation for counselors to practice it.

Keywords: *marvel cinematic universe, cinema counseling, creative counseling.*



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Introduction

The world of counseling and psychotherapy has the flexibility to adapt with the times development. In its development, the trends in counseling interventions have undergone many changes since the era of psychodynamics, existential, cognitive-behavior, post-modern, to multicultural, and social justice (Ratts & Pedersen, 2014). The 21st century as the era of technology, media, and access requires the counselors to be more creative in providing services to counselees.

Therefore, the utilization of creative arts in counseling is a potential alternative to encounter the challenges of an increasingly diverse society development as a consequence of the wider accessibility of the world (Gladding, 2021).

Film becomes one of the creative arts that is relevant to nowadays trends. The film world has gone through a long history since the late 20th century and is a development of an older art, namely drama (Gladding, 2021). Where drama only involves characters, stories, roles, and sometimes music, films provide broader elements including special effects, animation, and the art of videotape. When watching a film, the viewer is focused mainly on the pleasure in experiencing the story provided in the film. Films seem to invite the audience to explore the character's adventures, experience the problems encountered by the characters, find the implied meanings, and also enjoy the magic of moving screens (Mytnik-Daniluk, 2019). Experiencing the films stimulates emotions, memories, thoughts, and are able to provoke questions (Harland, Szymczyk, 2018).

The capability of a film to provide a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon and reality is considered strong enough to influence an individual's belief system. Films greatly affect individuals due to the synergistic impact generated from music, dialogue, lighting, camera angles and sound effects. Films are able to engage the audience into every scene, and experience the events within the films as if they were surrounded by the characters (Suwanto & Nisa, 2018). Accordingly, this ability portrays that films are considered an effective tool when it is integrated into counseling, therefore it becomes an intervention technique known as cinema counseling.

Similar with biblio-counseling, cinema counseling is a technique that can be integrated into several major approaches, for example a cognitive-behavioral approach, where cinema counseling can be used by counselors to evaluate counsees' negative thoughts and beliefs (Erford, 2020). Cinema counseling can also be used in conjunction with a behavioristic approach (Manurung et al., 2019). In its implementation, cinema counseling is usually given as homework after the counseling session, then the results will be evaluated jointly between the counselee and the counselor in the next session.

The efficacy of cinema counseling application in practice has been proven by various studies. Cinema counseling has proven to be effectively applied to various populations. Several studies state that cinema counseling can be used to increase self-confidence of broken-home children (Khoiriyati & Amalia, 2019), student self-esteem (Solikhatin & Lubis, 2021), altruistic attitude (Maretha et al., 2020), empathy (Juliantika & Khusumadewi, 2017; Khusumadewi & Juliantika, 2018), student self-confidence (Utomo & Maratus, 2021), learning motivation (Agustina et al., 2022), to develop children's prosocial behavior (Nasri & Satrianta, 2018), to reduce procrastination behavior (Manurung et al., 2019) and anxiety (Dumtrache, 2014). In addition, cinema therapy has also been applied in various formats both individually and in groups (Azlina, 2022; Dumtrache, 2014; Fransisca Recta Permatasari, 2019; Normanita et al., 2018; Sari & Lianawati, 2020), as well as classical (Utomo & Maratus, 2021; Wantu & Ade, 2017).

Previous scientific evidence discussed above confirms that the cinema counseling technique can be a recommendation to be implemented in counseling and psychotherapy practice. Counselors who wish to use cinema counseling as their mainstay technique need to develop extensive knowledge about film, because the principles of selecting films in cinema counseling according to Dollard (in Gladding, 2021) are relevance, positive elements, feasibility, consistency, and attractiveness. Certainly, it requires great effort for counselors to identify which films out of the thousands or even millions of existing films that fulfill these five elements, especially if the counselors need to consider the counselee's characteristics and problems. Therefore this article attempts to help unravel this problem by providing a number of films that have the potential to facilitate counselors to identify films that fulfill these five criteria.

Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) is a major franchise in the Hollywood movie industry centered on a series of superheroes films. The popularity of MCU has been prominent in public society since 14 years ago and influences the development of nowadays popular culture. As a

continuous series of films, the MCU forms a universe that is both complex and interesting, and influences the formation of the quality world of the individuals who watch it (Dantzler, 2015). The films in the MCU don't only narrate stories about superheroes, but also narrate various life problems in the individual to socio-political scope (Novak, 2021). The problems presented in the MCU frequently represent the reality that occurs, but are packaged in an attractive, easy-to-digest, and enjoyable format. To what extent is the potential for the MCU to be used in cinema counseling practice? This article will review the discussion in order to provide an initial basis for further development and research.

Method

This article uses a qualitative research method with a literature research design. In this design, a number of scientific articles and literature related to the keywords cinema counseling, and/or the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) are collected to be analyzed comprehensively to provide useful theoretical conclusions for further research and development. The tools used to collect the literature data in this study are Google Scholar, SINTA, Garuda, Media Neliti, ResearchGate, and Scimagojr. Furthermore, the author also reviews the literature from a number of electronic books that are relevant to the keywords, as well as analyzes related film media. In analyzing the data, the author compares the results of studies from one literature with other literature and examines the theory, then compares it with the results of the analysis on the film media used as a reference. In order to maintain the novelty of the discussion, the researcher limited the literature used in this article only around 2010 to 2022.

Findings and Discussion

The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) is basically a collection of superhero films adapted from the Marvel comic franchise from the United States by Steve Ditko and Stan Lee. All of the film works incorporated in the MCU are conducted by Marvel Studios which is affiliated with Disney (Weiss, 2021). Since its inception in 2010 until now, the MCU has produced 29 films and 8 television series which will continue to produce more films in the future. Even though the basic theme is about superheroes, the MCU also carries various sub-themes in each film. The sub-themes carried out in the MCU are frequently related to social, political, mental health, economic, and cultural issues (Alexander, 2018; Biasini & Wijayanti, 2021; Nangimah, 2021; Olufidipe & Echezabal, 2021; Raw, 2019). Based on the list of films and television series that have been produced by Marvel Studios, the author attempted to analyze life's issues that can be interpreted. Table 1 shows a number of life issues that are carried out in MCU films to date.

Table 1. Life issues mostly represented in film and the MCU series

Film title/ series	Producer, Director (Year)	Life Issues
Iron Man	Arad, Feige, & Favreau (2008)	Politics, technological advances, intellectual intelligence, a better change.
The Incredible Hulk	Arad, Hurd, Feige, & Letierrier (2008)	Politics, <i>emotional intelligence</i> , anger control, love and sacrifice
Iron Man 2	Feige, & Favreau (2010)	Politics, technological advances, innovation and creativity, responsibility.
Thor	Feige, & Branagh (2011)	Family relationship, sibling relationship, honesty, a better change.
Captain America: First Avenger	Feige, & Johnston (2011)	Patriotism, history and impact of war, persistence of principles, honesty, courage, sincerity.
The Avengers	Feige, & Wheedon (2012)	Unity, teamwork, compactness.
Iron Man 3	Feige, & Black (2013)	Anxiety, resistance to terrorism, technological advances, innovation and creativity, <i>problem-solving skill</i> .
Thor: The Dark World	Feige, & Taylor (2013)	Family relationship, sibling relationship, <i>trust-issue</i> , sacrifice.

Captain America: The Winter Soldier	Feige, Russo, & Russo (2014)	Politics, trust-issue, persistence of principles, courage, teamwork, adaptation to new situations.
Guardians of the Galaxy	Feige, & Gunn (2014)	Friendship, love, humor, teamwork, unity, empathy.
Avengers: Age of Ultron	Feige, & Wheedon (2015)	Unity, teamwork, compactness, the impact of technological advances, innovation, altruism, idealism.
Ant-Man	Feige, & Reed (2015)	Innovation, technological advances, father-son relationship, teacher-student relationship, creativity, temperament.
Captain America: Civil War	Feige, Russo, & Russo (2016)	Idealism, decision-making, persistence of principles, kinship, impact of divisions, unfinished business in the past.
Doctor Strange	Feige, & Derrickson (2016)	Depression, self-acceptance, East Asian culture, teacher-student relationship, personal flexibility.
Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2	Feige, & Gunn (2017)	Friendship, love, humor, teamwork, father-son relationship, sibling relationship, family.
Spider-Man: Homecoming	Feige, Pascal, & Watts (2017)	School life, teenage problems, responsibility, honesty, time management.
Thor: Ragnarok	Feige, & Waititi (2017)	Family-issue, self-discovery, teamwork, sincerity, self-acceptance.
Black Panther	Feige, & Coogler (2018)	Racism, power relations, diversity, unfinished business in the past, technological advances, innovation, peace.
Avengers: Infinity War	Feige, Russo, & Russo (2018)	Determination, teamwork, idealism.
Ant-Man and The Wasp	Feige, Broussard, & Reed (2018)	Social relations, creativity, unfinished business in the past, technological innovation, family relations, altruism.
Captain Marvel	Feige, Boden, & Fleck (2019)	Feminism, self-discovery, amnesia disorder, idealism, rising from failure, courage
Avengers: Endgame	Feige, Russo, & Russo (2019)	Rising from failure, unity, teamwork, technological innovation, sacrifice, grief and loss, meaningful end of life.
Spider-Man: Far From Home	Feige, Pascal, & Watts (2019)	Acceptance of identity, awareness of others, fault redemption, rising from grief.
Black Widow	Feige, & Shortland (2021)	Feminism, family, teamwork, unfinished business in the past, courage.
WandaVision	Hayward, & Shakman (2021)	Love, family, grief, depression, self-acceptance.
The Falcon and The Winter Soldier	Blejer, Kamoche, & Skogland (2021)	Friendship, racism, patriotism, idealism, teamwork, acceptance of identity.
Loki	Feige, & Waldron (2021)	Trust-issues, narcissism, fault redemption, a better change, persistence.
What If...?	Wasseenar, & Andrews (2021)	Imagination, alternative realities, diversity of viewpoints, teamwork.
Shang Chi and The Legends of The Ten Rings	Feige, Schwartz, & Cretton (2021)	Minority culture, father-son relationship, family problems, harmony with the nature.
Eternals	Feige, Moore, & Zhao (2021)	Diversity, friendship, kinship, teamwork, morality.
Hawkeye	Feige, & Iglu (2021)	Unfinished business in the past, family, mother-daughter relationship, goals/dreams, guilt, underground life.
Spider-Man: No Way Home	Feige, Pascal, & Watts (2021)	Second chances, altruism, grief and loss, teamwork, sincerity.
Moon Knight	Feige, Cameron, & Diab (2022)	Mental health issues (dissociative identity disorder), past trauma, honesty, relative fairness, loyalty.
Doctor Strange in The Multiverse of Madness	Feige, & Raimi (2022)	Altruism, persistence, happiness, love.
Ms. Marvel	Feige, & Ali (2022)	Minority culture, issues of religion/belief, self-discovery, goals/dreams, family, friendship.
Thor: Love and Thunder	Feige, Winderbaum, & Waititi (2022)	Love, humor, self-discovery, altruism, revenge, children empowerment, unity.

The life issues in table 1 are represented through the characters and lives story of the

superheroes. Through the life journey of the superhero, the audience are invited to explore the mindset, emotions, attitudes, and actions taken by the character to solve the problems they encountered in the film. Eventually, all the experiences of watching and absorbing the values of life embedded in MCU films establish the quality world of individuals. Quality world is an ideal world in which a person wants to live. In this case, the world shown in the MCU is an example of an ideal world that provides the audience a reference to view their lives. Meanwhile, the characters in the film provide a reference for total behavior that can be adopted in the appropriate context (Dantzler, 2015).

The life issues raised by the MCU as presented in table 1 is quite diverse and encompass most of life's problems. This certainly provides a rich reference for counselors who use cinema counseling as their mainstay technique. The counselor can recommend a number of films that are relevant to the counsellee's problems merely from a film universe franchise. In addition, even though they seem to be 'made for children', basically superhero films can be enjoyed by almost all people of all ages. Carl G. Jung stated that every individual basically has an ideal image of themselves which is often represented in the form of a 'hero' (Corey, 2017). Thus, individuals are easily able to identify themselves with the superhero characters featured in the movies.

In the MCU, superheroes are not portrayed as perfect without any weaknesses, they do have more abilities that distinguish them from ordinary humans, but on the other hand they are also quite human because they have personal weaknesses (Taylor, 2021). For example, Tony Stark's character (Iron Man), who is a billionaire with a high level of genius in technology, yet experiences panic and anxiety disorders that continue to haunt him throughout the film (Feige & Black, 2013; Feige, Russo, & Russo, 2018; Feige, Russo, & Russo, 2019). The figure of Thor as a 'God' from Viking mythology who has lived for thousands of years, but he has difficulties in terms of love and in finding self-identity (Feige & Waititi, 2017; Feige, Winderbaum, & Waititi, 2022), or Doctor Strange who are able to do anything with magical abilities equal to Gods, yet he question the meaning of happiness (Feige & Derrickson, 2016; Feige & Raimi, 2022). More than a few superheroes have mental instability issues, such as the Hulk who has problems with his temperament (Arad, Hur, Feige, & Leterrier, 2008), Scarlet Witch who experiences traumatic events and depression (Feige & Weedon, 2015; Hayward & Shakman, 2021), and Moon Knight who has dissociative personality disorder due to past trauma (Feige, Cameron, & Diab, 2022). This proves that the superheroes in the MCU clearly portray reality issues.

A number of superhero films in the MCU also concern sensitive issues in the world that can be relevant to minority populations. For example, the film Captain Marvel carries a story about feminism which can increase a woman's sense of empowerment (Biasini & Wijayanti, 2021). Captain Marvel is the first female superhero to become a main character in the MCU, described as a character who is very strong, independent, and possesses abilities above other superheroes (Feige, Boden, & Fleck, 2019). This represents a message that the position of women can be higher beyond men.

In addition, the Black Panther film has until now become a symbol of strength and a sense of empowerment for the population of black society (Alexander, 2018). In Black Panther, black society is described as an advanced society beyond the white race, furthermore there is a scene where Okoye's character, one of the bodyguards of the King of Wakanda, scorns white people as 'primitive' (Feige & Coogler, 2018). This certainly represents an implied message for the world to eliminate the acts of racism against the black population as it has been happening so far.

An identical formula is also applied to the films Shang-Chi and The Legends of The Ten Rings and the Ms. Marvel, these two films portray a sub-theme about Asian-American and Muslim-American minority communities who maintain noble values and wisdom that so far the world has rarely maintained. In the film Shang-Chi, East Asians are depicted as having great power in controlling the world, furthermore supervising white people (Feige, Schwartz, & Cretton, 2021). Whereas in the Ms. Marvel series, the Muslim community, which has been stereotyped as 'terrorists', is described as a peace-loving community that often becomes victims of the

impoliteness of white people (Feige & Ali, 2022). The messages represented in this film are able to increase self-esteem for minority counselees.

In cinema counseling, counselors are able to use issues portrayed by the main characters in MCU films as a discussions references with counselees in counseling sessions to elaborate new perspectives depicted by the characters in the film, the effective ways the characters shown in overcoming their problems, or regarding the impact of characters' actions on themselves, others, and the environment. The superhero character shown can be a good metaphor for the problems experienced by counselees (Milfayetty, 2018). A number of studies have shown that superheroes can be good learning catalysts in both educational and therapeutic contexts (Brown et al., 2016; Fradkin, 2017; Garza-Chaves et al., 2018; Rosenberg et al., 2013; Tambunan, 2018).

Cinema counseling can be considered as a special auxiliary technique that is integrated into the counseling approach. The MCU is just a collection of films that can be utilized as a catalyst in cinema counseling practice therefore the counselors are able to provide the counselees films recommendation. According to Dollarhide (Gladding, 2021), the MCU is a preference for authors because of its potential to fulfill the 5 basic principles of film selection in cinema counseling. First, the variety of stories and life issues represented in the MCU are very diverse, therefore the counselors are able to associate the relevance of the story to the counselee's needs. Second, the MCU well-portrayed positive elements about life lessons and individual empowerment. Third, the MCU is appropriate for almost all age groups. Fourth, the continuity between films in the MCU story contains consistency of the story that the counselee can learn from. Finally, the MCU presents all stories in an interesting way, carries a 'fun' atmosphere, and the story presented in the films is easily digested by the audience.

Conclusion

As a major film universe franchise in the world, the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) has great potential to become a catalytic medium that can be used in cinema counseling. All films and series in the MCU present a variety of stories and embrace various populations, both majority and minority. In addition, superhero figures are a film genre that is easily accepted by almost all individuals, both children and adults. The sub-themes represented in MCU films generally teach positive aspects of life such as unity, teamwork, altruism, idealism, empowerment, love, happiness, friendship, family, and creativity. The MCU also touches upon various examples of life's problems such as teenage problems, emotional problems, trauma, anxiety, depression, and various other mental health problems that can be used as references for learning.

The MCU has become a trend and has shaped the quality world of people around the world until now. Counselors need to view this as a potential to enrich counseling services, because the guidance and counseling profession is a dynamic profession and carries contemporary principles so that it will always be relevant to the times.

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