

From Panels to Frames: 'Mapping the Literature on Comic-to-Film Adaptations'

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Abstract

In recent years, the growing number of film adaptations based on comic art has highlighted the evolving relationship between these two art forms. This article provides a comprehensive exploration of how comics are adapted into films. While delving into the analysis of the visual and narrative aesthetic of the adaptation from comics to film. The researchers examined the impact of visual styles on storytelling and audience perception using three databases: Scopus, Web of Science, and JSTOR. The paper started with the collection of 141 articles, and after the screening, it was left with 30 studies. After analyzing the corpus, the researchers were left with three main themes: Audience perception, cultural messages, and narrative transformation.

Keywords: Comics, Film, Film Adaptation.

من الكوميكس إلى الشاشة: خريطة بحثية لتحويل القصص المصورة إلى أفلام'

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ملخص

في السنوات الأخيرة، سلط الارتفاع المتزايد في عدد الأفلام المقتبسة من فن القصص المصورة الضوء على تطور العلاقة بين هذين الشكلين الفنيين. تقدم هذه المقالة استكشافاً شاملاً لكيفية تحويل القصص المصورة إلى أفلام، مع تحليل الجوانب الجمالية البصرية والسردية في عملية الاقتباس من القصص المصورة إلى الشاشة. قام الباحثون بدراسة تأثير الأساليب البصرية على السرد وتلقي الجمهور، مستخدمين ثلاث قواعد بيانات Scopus، و Web of Science، و JSTOR. بدأت الدراسة بجمع 141 مقالة، وبعد عملية الفحص والتصنيف، تم اختيار 30 دراسة فقط. ومن خلال تحليل هذا الرصيد البحثي، توصل الباحثون إلى ثلاثة مواضيع رئيسية: تصور الجمهور، والرسائل الثقافية، والتحول السردية.

الكلمات الدالة: القصص المصورة، السينما، اقتباس الأفلام.

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Introduction

Comic books have increasingly been adapted into films largely due to their rich plots. Film-to-comic adaptations surpassed 34 billion US dollars, highlighting the evolution of these artistic adaptations (Numbers, 2025). So, this article aims to look at these visual and narrative aesthetics. Whitney Botton famously suggested that publishing a comic strip is the secret ingredient to a successful story launch. To explain further, Botton said, 'If you want to sell a story to a Hollywood studio, write a comic strip' (Bolton, 2013). According to statistics, that should increase your chances by about thirty percent (Bolton, 2013). This interest in comics is largely due to the rich history of comics. Comics often present to the producers a well-developed plot with well-rounded characters. Furthermore, the reason behind the effective adaptation from comics to films is that these mass media are both visual. Pioneers, such as Will Eisner, introduced cinematic techniques, namely framing, camera angles, and transitions, into comic books (Eisner, 1985).

Visual art forms, films, and comics are more related than other media, novels and theater. The similarities between these visual forms are that while films largely comprise images, comics partially comprise images. Panels and transitions seen in comic books are similar to shots and transitions in films. This formal relationship led the consumers of cinema to become the consumers of comics, and vice versa (Jenkins, 2006). In essence, this research report serves as a comprehensive exploration of the relationship between comics and films. It delves into analyzing the visual and narrative aesthetic of the adaptation from comics to films. Through doing so, the researcher was able to analyze whether the visual styles impact the storytelling. These visuals manifest as elements in the form of color palette, framing, panel transition, and temporal gaps.

Therefore, in this systematic exploration of visual and narrative hybrid aesthetic patterns, the objective was to analyze current research trends comprehensively. These objectives were as follows:

- Offer an overview of the existing analysis of cinematic adaptations of comic books.
- Study the impact of these visual styles on storytelling.

To achieve these objectives, the researcher addressed the following research questions :

- What databases, publishers, and types of references have published research about the topic of comic-to-film adaptation and the aesthetic changes that occur?
- What are the themes that were revealed during the word cloud analysis?
- What was the gap in the research that was identified?

By thoroughly analyzing a carefully selected range of publications within the last few years, the researcher gained insight into the techniques used in comics and the way they adapt to fit into cinematic material. Moreover, this study sought to provide an analysis of the effects that this adaptation has on the viewer's perception.

Overview

The relationship between comics and film is that of deep history (Eisner, 1985). However, before analyzing the history that led to the development of this relationship, it is essential to define the keywords that this comprehensive overview focuses on. Therefore, what are comics, films, and adaptations? McCloud defined comics as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate

sequence” (McCloud, 1993). In other words, comics are a combination of words and pictures. A definition that is similar to the definition of films. However, while comics focus largely on the text, films focus mostly on the image. These similarities ensured an easy adaptation from one form to the other, unlike books and other art forms.

Adaptation can be defined as "the process of transforming a source text from one medium to another, often involving interpretation, transformation, and sometimes significant reimagining to suit the conventions and demands of the new medium" (Hutcheon, 2006). Adaptation from comics to film involves transitions. Panels and transitions are to comics what shots and transitions are to films. In other words, camera angles are the thread that connects these two media. This structural resemblance has made comics a source of inspiration for directors. While novels only focus on text, comics already share the visual aspect of films (McCloud, 1993). In addition to camera angles, framing, and sequencing are also essential parts of filmmaking.

According to data published by the Box Office, the MCU franchise has seen a surge in comic-to-film adaptations since 2017. Before 2017, a maximum of two films per year were released (Peh, 2023). The years 2017 and 2018 marked a significant turning point for the MCU franchise, with the release of Black Panther (2018), Avengers: Infinity War (2018), and Ant-Man and The Wasp (2018). These films marked a significance in the cinematic universe, as they highlighted that these adaptations are not only used for commercial purposes but also convey cultural messages (Grosvenor, 2024). For example, films such as Black Panther convey black theology. The surge of comic-to-film adaptations has triggered scholars’ intrigue in this field of research. The purpose of this critical review of the academic literature is to analyze current research regarding the fidelity of these adaptations, the audience’s perception, and the cultural messages that are transformed through these adaptations. The researcher highlights these through the themes that are found through tools such as VosViewer.

Methodology

A systematic literature review (SLR) is “designed to identify all research related to a specific subject, including the effectiveness of interventions, incidence or risk factors for disease, diagnostic test accuracy, or patient experience” (Nightingale, 2009). SLR differs from a traditional literature review in that it follows a rigorous, structured approach, which ensures that the result is objective. This study uses important SLR methods, such as data gathering; however, it cannot be considered a full SLR. The article adopts key elements from the SLR as they allow for critical analysis of the current literature. Therefore, what databases, publishers, and types of references have published research about the topic of comic-to-film adaptation and the aesthetic changes that occur? Through answering this research question, the researchers will be able to review all the results that have been made by previous scholars in different fields of research. This article follows a comprehensive methodology that analyses findings done by tools such as NVIVO, Zotero, and VOSviewer. Tools such as VOSviewer help answer the question, What are the themes that were revealed during the word cloud analysis? These themes, as later discussed, help organize this field of research and identify the gap in research.



Figure 1 Workflow

From Panels to Frames: 'Mapping the Literature on Comic-to-Film Adaptations'

The researcher followed a structured, scientific, and transparent approach. The critical review encompassed distinct phases: conducting the review process, reporting, and disseminating the outcomes. The initial phase of this article involved planning the review process, which included formulating the right keywords. To guarantee a thorough coverage of the literature, a systematic search approach was developed. Creating keywords such as "comics" AND "film" AND "adaptation" was one way to do this, enabling a targeted retrieval of pertinent research. The search was conducted using two Databases, Scopus and Web of Science. Inclusion criteria encompassed peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, and books. The findings contained the citation information, the bibliographical information, the abstract, funding details, and other information. The progression of this article is depicted in Figure 1, following the PRISMA flow diagram. This search was conducted in March 2025. The search yielded 141 in the initial screening. Before screening the data, the researcher did not find any duplicate records to be removed. Subsequent assessment of abstracts further refined the selection, leading to the exclusion of 84 articles. Furthermore, after the researcher sought the retrieval of the reports provided, 10 of which were not found. Consequently, this left 30 articles for review, after excluding 17 due to being out of scope. The chosen papers offered multidisciplinary perspectives on comic-to-film adaptations by addressing a variety of fields, such as media adaptation theory, visual culture analysis, and film studies.

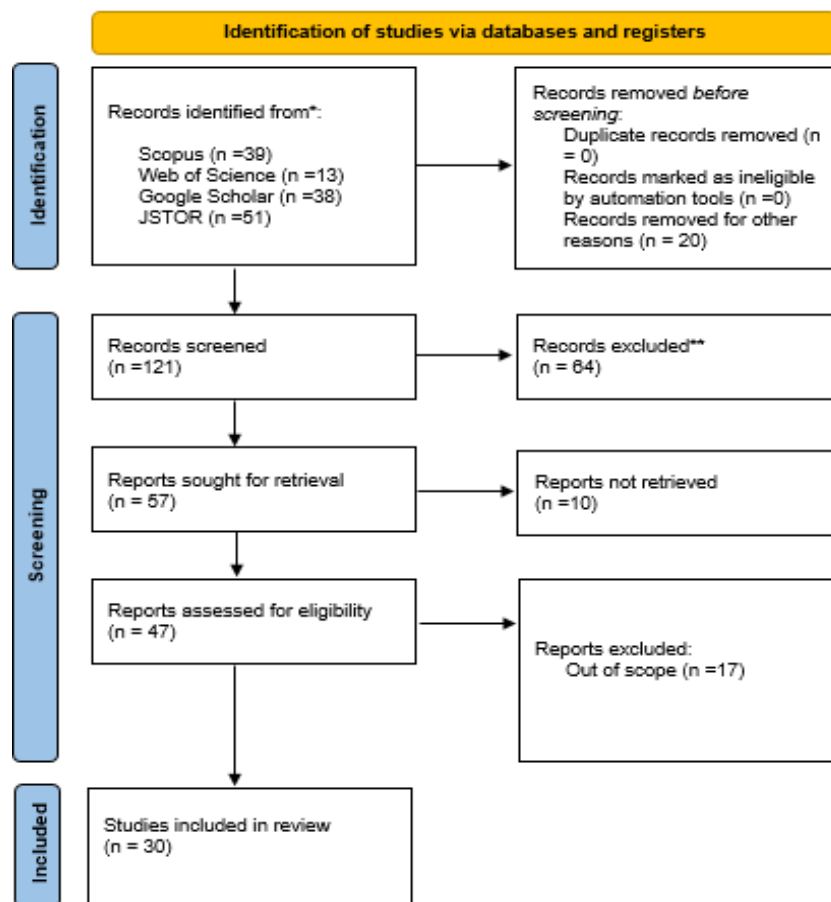


Figure 2: PRISMA flow diagram

Table 1: Keyword Clusters Identified from Thematic Analysis

Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3
Attention	Black theology	Autobiography
Comprehension	Blackness	Comics
Female	Film	Film adaptation
Human	Gender	<u>Narrativity</u>
Human experiment	Graphic novels	Reinterpretation
humans	Popular culture	Repurposing
Language	Post-colonialism	
Male	Science-fiction	
narration	Superheroes	
narrative		
Verbal communication		
Vision		
Visual language		
Visual narrative		
Visual perception		

These clusters are the visual representations of the group of words assembled on a shared theme.

Based on the keywords used during data collection, the researcher found three clusters, as seen in the table :

- The first cluster focused on the perception and cognitive aspects of adaptation from comics to film. To explain further, the main cluster absorbs how the viewer perceives these films and processes how certain groups are presented (male/female representation) (Cohn & Foulsham, 2020). This analysis also highlighted the studies that focus on the difference in the cognitive perception of comic book fans compared to that of non-fans.
- The second cluster explores culture and identity-related themes. It analyzed the presentation of certain racial groups, specifically black culture. Further analysis brought to light the two racial representations, either reinforcing racial stereotypes or challenging them (Faithful, 2018). Research has been done on films such as Black Panther, which illustrate the reinterpretations of racial identity when going through the adaptation phase.
- The third cluster examines the narrative's transformation from comics to film. The two keywords, narrativity and reinterpretation, demonstrate a change in the storyline when adapting comics to films. This cluster focused on the drastic changes that sometimes occur when going through the process of adaptation. While some filmmakers remain faithful to the

core themes of the comic books, others significantly alter the source of the material (Bolton, 2013). To fit the cinematic pacing, it is imperative that the director sometimes alters the development of the characters and condenses the story's plot.

While analyzing these clusters, the researcher ensured that the data aligned with the research questions. These clusters highlighted the importance of not only focusing on the visual adaptation of this transformation but also on the cultural messaging, audience perception, and the structuring of the narrative.

Reference Analyses

Upon analyzing the references that the researcher left, the data can be divided into three categories: Articles in Journals, Books, and Book sections. 26% of the data comes from the Journal Articles, 1% from the books, 2% conference papers, and 12% from book sections. The fact that 26 percent of the data comes from journal articles indicates that this field of study is ever-evolving, and scholars are constantly discussing this topic. On the other hand, the low percentage of book publications suggests that this field of research is still developing.

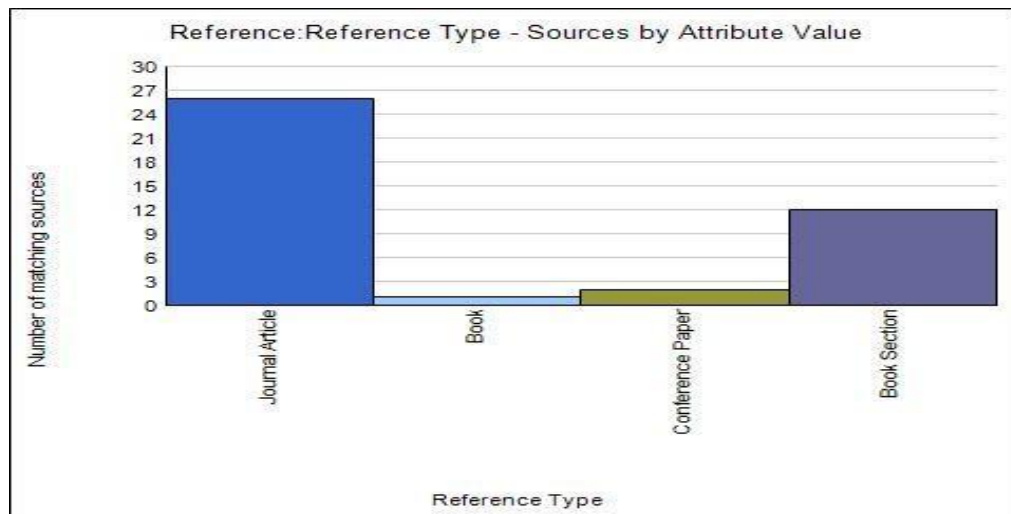


Figure 4: Number of Sources by Reference Type

By delving further into the recent publications in the field of comics, film, and adaptation, the researcher was able to track the evolution of interest in this field of study. According to Figure 3, interest in adaptation from comics to film was nearly nonexistent before 2009. The years with the highest research done were 2017 and 2018. This rise of comics adaptation in recent years is largely due to the two cinematic universes, the DC Universe and Marvel Universe. Both of these franchises have seen a surge of adaptations in recent years (Peh, 2023).

From Panels to Frames: 'Mapping the Literature on Comic-to-Film Adaptations'

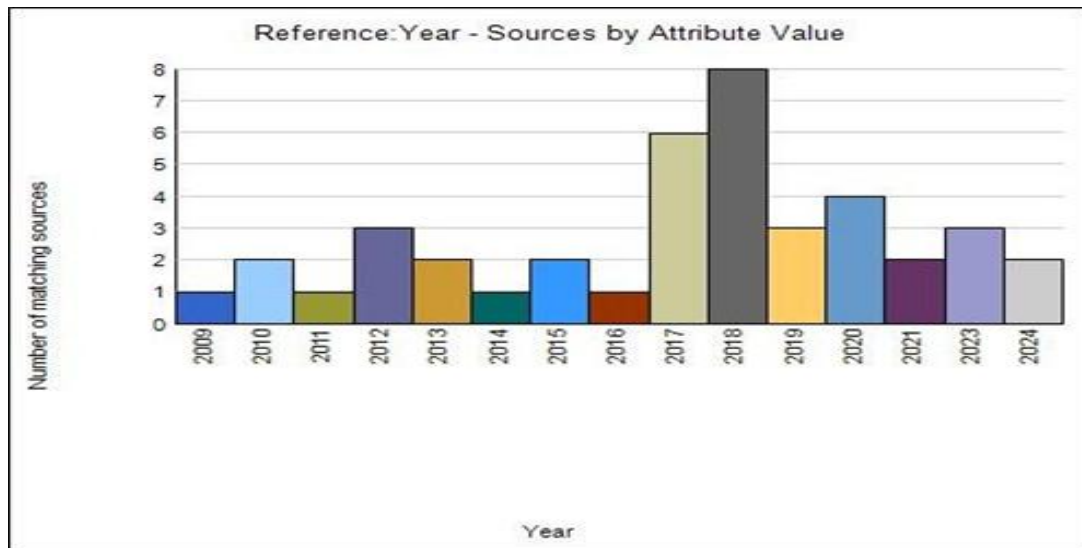


Figure 5: Number of Sources by Reference Year

In conclusion, this article has thoroughly examined the recent publications of articles and books that focused solely on the film adaptation of comic books. Although this research started with four databases and 141 articles, the researcher was left with 30 publications to review. In particular, these publications were obtained using Scopus, Google Scholar, Web of Science, and JSTOR. This ensures the integrity of academic findings.

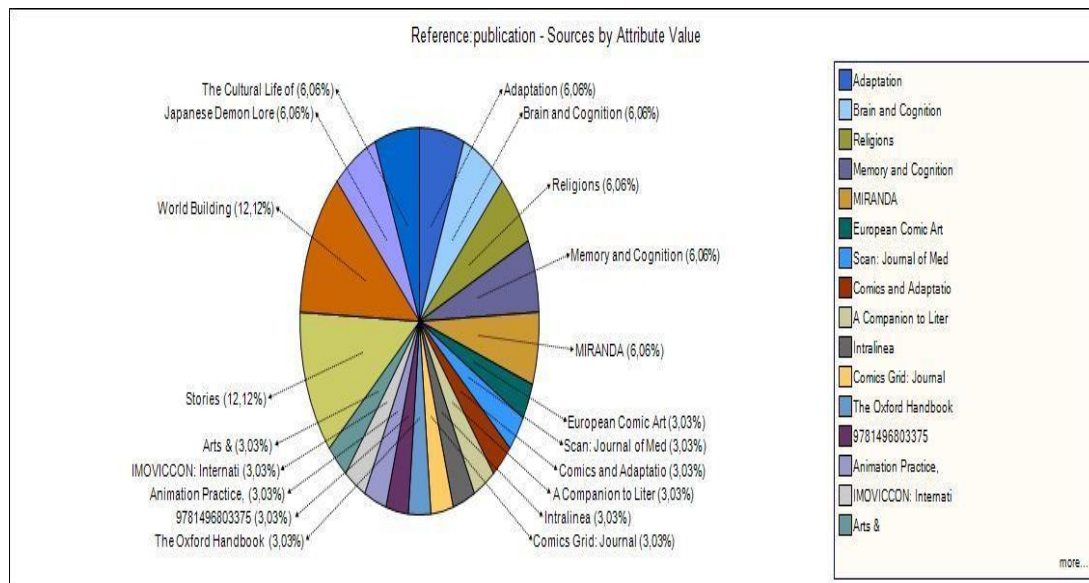


Figure 6: Number of Sources by Reference Publication

In addition, the researcher assembled an extensive grid using NVivo that contains journals that publish on comics and film adaptations. As can be seen in the table, the journal with the highest number of publications is the European Journal of American Studies. Therefore, this offers future researchers information on the top contributions and high-impact journals.

Table 2: Percentage of Sources per Publication

publication	Percentage of sources
Stories	12,12%
World Building	12,12%
Adaptation	6,06%
Brain and Cognition	6,06%
Religions	6,06%
Memory and Cognition	6,06%
MIRANDA	6,06%
Japanese Demon Lore	6,06%
The Cultural Life of James Bond	6,06%
European Comic Art	3,03%
Scan: Journal of Media Arts Culture	3,03%
Comics and Adaptation	3,03%
A Companion to Literature, Film, and Adaptation	3,03%
Intralinea	3,03%
Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship	3,03%
The Oxford Handbook of Comic Book Studies	3,03%
9781496803375	3,03%
Animation Practice, Process & Production	3,03%
IMOVICCON: International Moving Image Cultures Conference	3,03%
Arts &	3,03%

Thematic Analysis

This article has enabled the researchers to identify themes using the NVivo and VOSviewer tools, namely audience perception, cultural messaging, and narrative transformation. Thus, this section will review the literature based on every theme.

Audience Perception:

The process of reading a comic or watching a film involves a cognitive procedure that can affect the viewer's perception. Although the two media differ in their mode of perception, they converge in their ability to affect the audience's perception. Comics require their consumers to engage in active reading, filling in the gaps, and using their imagination. As Cohn and Foulsham (2020) highlighted in their article, "closure is the process by which readers mentally connect panels, filling in the gaps between images to create a continuous narrative." On the other hand, viewers of films are more passive; they depend on the film to provide the image, and there is little to no need for imagination. Baeteon supported this idea in his article "Stories and Storytelling in the Era of Graphic Narrative," as he said that "Film guides the viewer through a continuous sensory experience where pacing, visuals, and sound are controlled, often reducing the need for active interpretation or imagination" (Baeteon, 2018). Although the difference between these two media seems insignificant, scholars such as Endrico Witomo and Irfan Rifai (2023) focused on the fact that adaptation can either "limit or liberate meaning, depending on the degree of interpretive freedom exercised by the adapters." Therefore, the art of adapting

From Panels to Frames: 'Mapping the Literature on Comic-to-Film Adaptations'

requires from the filmmaker more than a translation from panels to the green screen. Adaptation requires an understanding of the cognitive and audience perception (Baeteons, 2018). In other words, filmmakers have to translate the emotional impact.

Cultural messaging:

Art forms such as comics and films are a tool that carries coded cultural messaging. These messages can be notions of cultural and gendered resistance for certain groups. One of the comic-turned films that focuses on black identity is *Black Panther*. According to Ryan Coogler, "Black Panther offers a redemptive vision of blackness, powerful, technological and sovereign, marking a cultural rupture with the colonial representations that have dominated cinema" (Faithful, 2018). Thus, this film serves as a symbolic challenge to the cultural narrative regarding black identity. However, Davis believes that using comics and films as a tool of resistance to gender and cultural inequalities is insufficient (Davis, 2023). As she puts it, "the casting of Iris West as a black woman... gestures toward a cultural shift, but simultaneously reveals the limitations of so-called post-racial representation, where diversity is acknowledged but rarely given depth or narrative centrality" (Davis, 2023). In other words, Davis argues that comics and films, which used as tools of resistance, can be limiting as diverse characters are often existing but lack "narrative centrality" and depth (davis, 2023).

Narrative Transformation:

During the process of adaptation from comics to films, filmmakers must choose between remaining faithful to the original comic's narrative or reinterpreting it for the green screen. To remain faithful is to preserve the plot, the emotional tone, and the character's development. However, reinterpreting the comics risks losing the original audience. As Jan Baetens observes, comics are known for their "target-oriented plots, high-speed action, heroic figures, thematic exaggerations, formulaic style, and all kinds of visual and narrative standardization" (Baetens, 2018). Therefore, the visual and narrative transformation is not easy to translate from the pages to the screen. However, there are scholars such as Bolton who argue that narrative transformation can be achieved through translating the voice, style, or experience. Fidelity depends on whether the filmmaker can translate the unique style and experience of the original work. Bolton notes, "faced with the challenge of transposing the episodic nature and weak narrativity of Pekar's comics onto the screen... the filmmakers also foreground their remediation... inviting viewers to unpack the ways in which their adaptation is also a reinterpretation" (Bolton, 2013). In conclusion, while scholars such as Baetens believe that adaptation means preserving the plot, the character, Bolton argues that adaptation goes beyond adapting the content to adapting the stylistic and narrative texture.

Conclusions

Motion comics have recently become the subject of inspiration for many film directors. This is due to the different and new material that artists create. Using tools such as NVivo and VosViewer, the researcher systematically filtered and examined previous scholarly work. This article highlighted three

themes: the cognitive aspect of adaptation, culture, and identity, and the transformation of narrative from comic to film. Through examining these three themes, the researcher was able to find a gap in the literature. Many scholars focused on the art of adapting comics into films, on how these comics transform into the green screen. However, there is limited scope for research on audience perception. How do these comics and films shape the perception of the viewers? Therefore, more research is needed on the perception of consumers and the effect that narrative and aesthetics have on the viewer. As a direction for future work, the researchers will analyse films adapted from comics, focusing on the visual and narrative aesthetic. Through analyzing the transformation from static to dynamic comics, we will focus on the audience perception and address issues of identity and representation of certain racial groups.

From Panels to Frames: 'Mapping the Literature on Comic-to-Film Adaptations'

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