

# TRUTH, JUSTICE, BOOBS:

Gender in Comic Book Culture

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ABSTRACT

Women's representation is widely debated within the comic book cannon. Many comic and cultural scholars argue that women characters are overly sexualized, objectified, or excluded from this literary genre (Child 2013; Danziger-Russell 2012; Fesak 2014; Lepore 2014; Simone 1999). However, few scholars have adequately addressed how comic book readers make sense of women's representation within graphic storytelling. My research addresses the issue of women's representation in comics with special attention to how audiences interpret these supposed images of women's empowerment. Capitalizing from my time spent working at a local comic book store and a series of twenty in-depth interviews that I conducted with comic book readers; I draw from a series of personal field notes, participant observation, and transcribed interviews to understand how gendered relationships in comic books manifest in real-life experiences. Ultimately, I argue that static comic book stereotypes about hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity shape consumers' gendered realities. More specifically, this study demonstrates how popular character archetypes like the love interest, the nag, and the slut are redefining readers' relationship to women both within and outside of comic book culture. By examining comic culture, and its audience at large, this research advances a more nuanced understanding of how graphic narratives contribute to ideas surrounding gender difference, violence against women, and situate women's empowerment within popular culture.

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## KEYWORDS

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Faster than a speeding bullet! More powerful than a locomotive! Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound! Fictional superheroes protect our social world. After all, they swoop into action, catch the bad guy, and save the day—all while sporting spandex. Super human, indeed! These superheroes are usually men who fight crime and kick butt in an impressive demonstration of acrobatics and mixed martial arts. Of course, they aren't *all* men. We have had Wonder Women and Cat Woman, and despite the paternalistic name, Bat Girl first appeared in 1961. But more recently, we have seen a surge in the representation of women superheroes, with characters like Iron Heart, a 15-year-old Black superheroine; X-23, Wolverine's cloned daughter in the X-Men's franchise; and, Kamala Khan, the first Muslim-American character to headline her own comic book series in 2013.

At first blush, the mere presence of these characters suggests shifts toward equality in representation in comic books, a popular industry with an annual market worth of \$1.09 billion (Reid 2017). But numerical representation doesn't tell us anything about *how* women are represented and how audiences interpret these supposed images of women's empowerment. Wrestling with these representations, I embark on a study that investigates what these images might mean for women characters. Furthermore, what do these depictions imply for the men and women who participate in comic book culture? How are superhero stories shaping real-life discourse around gender, sexuality, and women's empowerment?

To answer these questions, I turn to the tattered pages of comic books and gaming store backrooms. Interviewing twenty self-proclaimed "comic book geeks," I ask questions about women's representation within the comic book industry. What do these characters look like? What roles do they embody? What do these messages tell us about women in our own lives? Supplementing interview data with participant observation, I logged fifty hours as a paid

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employee at a local comic book store. Here, I engaged first-hand with comic book culture. Spending time in this space, I recorded how men and women interact within this integrated community. Pulling from my personal experiences in this location, I reinforce interview findings with field notes and research journal entries. By examining comic book culture, and its audience at large, this research advances a more nuanced understanding of how graphic narratives contribute ideas about gender difference, violence against women, and situate women's empowerment within popular culture.

### **Situating the Splashpage: Comics and Theory**

Comics may be considered “throwaway” to most people—except for those who are passionately (and somewhat obsessively) invested in graphic storytelling. And while they are often associated with a subculture of weirdo cosplayers, a growing body of scholarly literature shows that comic books provide fascinating insights into social phenomenon (Barker 1989; Hajdu 2008; Johnson 2012; Knowles 2007; Morris and Morris 2005; Morrison 2011). Cultural historian, Matthew Pustz (2012), reinforces this claim when he discusses the broader implications of comic narratives as a space for cultural expression. Based on his work with comics and American culture, Pustz suggests that comic books provide rich insight into our historical and contemporary identities. Not only do comic books shape the ways in which we see ourselves, but they also influence how we imagine the world around us. Social constructions of race, gender, power, and expectations are all present within these texts (Brown 2000; Danziger-Russell 2012; Morris and Morris 2005; Nama 2011; Singer 2002). By taking a closer look at this “expendable” pop culture medium, we are allowed critical insight into social messages surrounding strength, ability, status, and desirability.

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In fact, fictional superheroes are positioned as the personification of hegemonic social (and body) standards. Gender expression, racial identity, and ableist assumptions are all modeled—and policed—within these graphic narratives. Creating the perfect “superhuman” man, or woman, gives a tremendous amount of power to those wielding the ink pen. Comic book creators reproduce social constructions of desirability and power when developing these characters. In fact, social scholars note that these superheroes have the power to influence kids’ early perceptions of gender. Modeling the “appropriate” expressions of gender, comic books provide visual templates for emphasized femininity and hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987, 1995, 2000; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Schippers 2007). Men superheroes are supposed to be strong, muscular, and able-bodied. Women superheroes are also supposed to be strong—albeit, leaner than the men—and able-bodied, with hourglass figures, and long, impossibly voluminous hair. Jacqueline Danziger-Russell (2012) points to mass media’s influence when she states that comics have historically “mirrored the sociopolitical climate of their times” (p. 30). Since comic books show young girls and women the “correct” way to embody femininity, Danziger-Russell asserts that the comic industry teaches young girls and boys how to conceptualize and enact gender in real life.

Comic book illustrators are tasked to create the ultimate man or woman—strong, powerful, and nice to ogle in a spandex super suit. These characters, however, are painted in broad stereotypical strokes. Lacking a deeper complexity, many superheroes are two-dimensional models of idealized social standards. Furthermore, comic book creators tend to produce (and reproduce) problematic cultural messages surrounding gender inequality, violence against women, and women’s empowerment in popular culture. Capitalizing on the assumed dependency of women characters, comic book writers reinscribe the notion that women are

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helpless without men. This stereotype creates an unfair archetype that women characters (and real-life consumers) have to challenge in their social worlds.

Even Wonder Woman, the most iconic superheroine, is the by-product of an intentionally narrow gender script. Created by Harvard psychologist, William Moulton Marston, Wonder Woman was supposed to be the ultimate representation of womanhood (Lepore 2014). Fashioned in a star-spangled skirt and red bustier, Wonder Woman is a heterofeminine icon. Her long dark hair falls over full breasts and her narrow midsection flares into voluptuous hips. She also sports invaluable accessories like a lasso of truth, knee-high boots, thick banded bracelets, and a golden tiara to boot! Pop culture historian, Jill Lepore (2014), notes that “Marston liked to say that Wonder Woman was meant to be ‘psychological propaganda for the new type of woman who should, I believe, rule the world’” (p. 191). And while she surely represents his own latent biases that a woman should be heterofeminine and alluring, he also wanted her to be socially appealing for young girls. Indeed, Marston asserted that Wonder Woman was supposed to offer women and girls alternative models to weak and docile femininity. In an article he wrote for *The American Scholar* in 1943, Marston lamented that:

Not even girls want to be girls so long as our feminine archetype lacks force, strength, and power. Not wanting to be girls, they don't want to be tender, submissive, peace-loving as good women are. Women's strong qualities have become despised because of their weakness. The obvious remedy is to create a feminine character with all the strength of Superman plus all the allure of a good and beautiful woman (as quoted in Williams and Lyons 2010).

Marston believed that women were fundamentally different from men. He cites “tenderness, submissiveness, and peace-loving” as traits that are inherently feminine. In order to



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be a “good and beautiful woman,” he explicitly says that girls must embrace, and exhibit, the gendered scripts that are prescribed to them. Marston’s agenda works to placate, and segregate, women in the social places they occupy. After all, Wonder Woman was inducted into the Justice League in 1942 as their secretary—not as a titular character. Supplementing submission with conditional strength, Wonder Woman was Marston’s ideal compromise for the next generation of women who presumably wanted to be empowered—by a socially appropriate standard.

Although she is positioned (and sold) as a strong and capable superheroine, Wonder Woman never achieves equal status with her male counterparts, and this is key. Women characters are excluded from androcentric action in comic books. This absence is also apparent in comic book culture. Creating naturalized difference in space and interest is a hegemonic tool that reinforces gender norms and expectations (West and Fenstermaker 1995). Separated from the “boy’s club,” women readers are excluded from these male-dominated locations. Jacqueline Danziger-Russell (2012) notes this separation when she discusses female exclusion from comic book stores. According to her findings, these homogeneous spaces still cater to predominantly male clientele. By informally excluding women readers from these spaces, comic culture manifests the separation of men and women audience members. Kept out and isolated, women comic book readers have a difficult time finding relatable representation within these narratives. Women’s empowerment, as devised and delivered by a male-dominated industry, has specific objectives. In order to be strong, women must look, act, and perform in socially appropriate ways. Their bodies, gender expressions, and sexuality are constantly scrutinized by the very industry that purportedly supports feminist messages of ability and empowerment.

Grappling with these contradictions, comic readers must reconcile what it means to be a strong and empowered woman within comic book culture. Specifically, how do gendered

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stereotypes influence what it means to be a man or woman in this genre? And, how do these messages manifest in their everyday experiences? As my research shows, static comic book stereotypes about hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity shape consumers' gendered realities. More specifically, this study demonstrates how popular character archetypes like the love interest, the nag, and the slut are redefining readers' relationship to women both within and outside of comic book culture.

### **The Study**

As an avid comic reader, I know the ins and outs of comic book literature. In fact, I consider myself a fan. However, how are we supposed to make sense of women's narrow representation within comic book culture? And, furthermore, how do stereotypical images about superhuman femininity influence life for women beyond the splashpage? To answer these questions, I employ qualitative research methods. Specifically, I conducted content analysis on popular comic book characters, I interviewed twenty comic book readers, and I was a paid worker and participant observer in a local comic book store.

Hanging out at the comic book store was important to my study. I was able to stock and organize comics, socialize with customers, and observe many of their interactions on a day to day basis. I eventually clocked fifty hours of ethnographic research and incorporated much of that data into my preliminary findings. In exchange for site access, I agreed to clean and organize the space. I spent Wednesday afternoons cleaning, dusting, re-organizing, and shelving at the comic book store. I strategically chose to work during this time because new comic books are released on this day. This schedule gave me the opportunity to actively engage with comic book readers and to discover new trends and representations within the medium.

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In order to supplement my fieldwork, I also conducted twenty in-depth interviews with self-identified comic book readers. All of my participants actively engaged in comic book culture and, at my request, spoke to ideas concerning the representation of women within the comics they read. In total, eleven of my respondents identified as women and nine identified as men. Respondents' ages ranged from 20 – 41 years. The average age was 27 years. Eighteen of my respondents identified as white, one respondent identified as African-American, and one respondent identified as "White/Jewish." The average interview lasted between one and two hours and covered topics like participants' personal backgrounds, what comics they had read, and what popular women characters looked like within comic book culture.

Because the comic book community is so interconnected, I started to use a snowball sampling technique. Many participants were more than willing to suggest a few friends who might be happy to sit down and chat about their favorite comic book heroines. In fact, many of the participants were enthusiastic to speak with me. Showing passion and interest, men and women spoke in great detail about comic books and the characters therein. I recorded all of the interviews with a digital audio recorder and transcribed them at a later date. I changed all of my participants' names in this study to protect their own super-secret identities.

### **The Site**

The comic book store was only about 1,200 square feet, but the space was teeming with toys, games, and comic books. Smudged display counters were crammed with Magic: The Gathering cards and Dungeons and Dragons dice. Long bookshelves lined the walls and were packed with cellophane wrapped comics and graphic novels. Games, books, cards, dice, and magazines littered mismatched displays all over the store. I noticed wooden shelves, wire racks, and Tupperware bins that were full of various plush toys and Warhammer paint sets. My Little

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Pony t-shirts were suspended from the ceiling right next to the Dr. Who backpacks. The store was absolutely plastered with creatures, comics, and fantasy memorabilia. Once, Tony, a male employee, told me that merchandise was organized based on comic genre, type of game, promotions, and themes, but other than that, I could “stick stuff wherever it would fit.”

The merchandise variation was impressive. In fact, I rarely saw the same product twice. There were, however, some central themes. After passing the third visible poster of Princess Leia in her infamous “slave costume,” I concluded that someone had a thing for Carrie Fisher circa 1983. There were other troubling things in the comic book store. Between the board game, Apples to Apples, and Alan Moore’s *The Killing Joke*, there was a card game called, “Wenches.” Scantly-clad women are traded in this go-fish style game. On another display, tiny plastic “Zombie Babe” figurines were sold in packages of a hundred. These tiny undead “babes” stood scantily clad in their bikinis, boobs prominent, shaking the decapitated heads of their victims. Cosplay pamphlets were crammed in a wire-rack spinner. There, at eye level, was a fashion magazine dedicated to creating your very own Japanese school girl costume. The cover model winked coyly as she raised the hem of her pleated plaid skirt. If sex sells, I silently scoffed, then it sells very well at this establishment.

In the middle of the store was a small entertainment enclosure with a public couch, television, and comfy chairs. This is where customers could hang out, watch movies, and browse Netflix. Despite numerous options, re-runs of the animated Justice League show ran on a consistent loop for most of my time in this space. There were also larger back rooms available for clientele. This is where Pokémon and Yu-Gi-Oh tournaments took place on the weekends. This was also a popular spot for regulars to congregate and discuss upcoming social events and shared fandoms. Even though I was technically allowed to venture into this space, I never felt

comfortable enough to go. Whenever I did, my presence was often accompanied by stares, theatrical “in-crowd” laughter, or, on the too-frequent-occasion, a request for my personal phone number. No, thank you.

Including the store owner, there were six other employees at the site. All of the employees identified as men; and while one was African-American, the other men were white. I was the only woman worker at the comic book store. I frequently busied myself with cleaning shelves and organizing the comic books—after all, this seemed like a never-ending Herculean task. I did notice, however, that I was the only one who routinely cleaned the space. Other co-workers were allowed to socialize with customers, talk with one another, or browse the new releases on Netflix. No one else had to “prove” their presence or knowledge in the store. My experiences, however personal, were not novel. Scholars who study comic book culture note that women have a difficult time “legitimizing” their interest in comics to men readers (Danziger-Russell 2012). After all, women are informally excluded from the all-boys’ comic club. This exclusion, as my research suggests, is reflected in comic storytelling. Women superheroines and other comic characters are routinely cast within three stereotypical roles: the love interest, the nag, or the slut. These images, as consumed by both men and women readers, are shaping relationships in and out of comic book culture.

### **Love Interests, Nags, and Sluts**

*Love Interests.* Lois Lane. Mary Jane. Pepper Potts. What do all of these women characters have in common? You guessed it—they are superhero sweethearts. The love interest is one of the most common archetypes in the comic book world. I mean, even X-Men leader, Jean Grey, had her share of mutant love triangles.

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Both men and women readers note that the romantic love interest is a staple character in comic book storylines. This is especially true for women characters. Women comic book characters are almost always cast as the caring wife, girlfriend, or mother. These characters work to reproduce heterofeminine imaginings of what a woman should be: in short, domestic and docile. Staying at home while their significant-superhero-other saves the day, these women characters are stock images that reinscribe messages of “natural” domesticity. Steve, a 35-year-old retail manager, was one of the first people to note that, no matter what else the story entails, the love interest is always present. He captures this idea when he says:

I'd say the most prevalent female character in comic books is almost always the love interest. That's just part of the... To most any comic book superhero. You've got Peter Parker, and you've got Mary Jane. You've got Clark Kent, and you've got Lois Lane. Most, and even if it's not the girl who's always there there's usually someone.

Women cast as lovers and caregivers are positioned as secondary characters. They are the companions to titular men protagonists. And even while we are seeing more and more women on comic book covers, scholars note that the opportunities for women protagonists are dwindling (Danziger-Russell 2012). After all, women characters are seen as supplementary plot devices instead of active, autonomous agents. Marie, a 25-year-old restaurant server said that she noticed this in the comics she read too:

They [women in comics] are kind of more accessories, I guess. You know, it's not that there aren't any. I would say that there are less generally female characters that are driving stories than there are male characters.

Noting that women are present within comics, Marie suggests that there isn't a problem with numerical representation. Instead, these characters are used as “accessories” for androcentric

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action plots. Blocked from substantial roles, these women are sidelined by their sweetheart status. In short, women characters are seen as objects instead of subjects in comic book culture.

This phenomenon is not contained within tattered copies of comic books. Women consumers are also pigeon-holed within these stereotypical roles. Women as caregivers, kin-keepers, and girlfriends also translate into consumers' understanding of real-life relationships. While talking with my co-worker, Hal, a 24-year-old college student, he mentioned that women customers at the comic book store are only seen as moms and girlfriends. He makes this assertion when he states:

Usually, when you see a girl walk in you either assume that she's a mom or some kind of teen from the university, because stereotypically they don't know what they're looking for. I'm not trying to bash on females in anyway. But, stereotypically when a female walks into a place you are going to ask, "Do you need help?" Because, they don't come into the store regularly, and I don't normally see females here...Usually I see them in board games. Things like that. Or, they're doing something for their family, or their boyfriend, or someone's birthday. "Hey, it's my kid's birthday and he needs Pokémon cards. Can you help me?" It's usually a female catering for someone else normally if it's not for themselves.

Hal's experiences tell him that women are rarely customers for themselves. His observation speaks to the idea that women who financially support the comic book industry also reproduce one of its most popular tenets: women serve as helpers, mothers, and love interests within their gendered relationships. Designated as kin-keepers, women are expected to enact specific roles within these communities. Operating within the larger social context of gender expectations and stereotypes, women are framed as passive participants within this all-boys' club.

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This theme was all too common during my time at the comic book store. While alphabetizing the comic book series, I noticed a teen couple come into the store. Instantly, I was interested in the girl's presence. Hal was right—you didn't see too many girls come into the shop. Noting their interaction, I captured this moment later in my field notes:

The door opens, and the first woman customer in two hours enters the store. My eyes fixate on her as she enters the site. She is with a male companion, and he wanders aimlessly around the store, from display to display. She follows him quietly, hands in pockets. She doesn't speak much to him, or to anyone in the store. She gets excited at one fixture—the small open bin of plush viruses and bacteria. “Come look at this!” she exclaims. Compared to the booming male voices [of my male co-workers] encouraging on-screen Batman to get his “fuck” on with Selina Kyle, I have to strain to hear her enthusiasm. Her partner comes up beside her, nods absently, and continues to wander about the store. Her excitement is short lived as she abandons the display. She roams to other areas of the store, keeps to herself, and doesn't speak again. (field note)

Women's silent presence is a larger theme in comics, with most women characters playing second fiddle to their superhero counterparts. And this woman's secondary presence reflects women superheroes' attachment to men as companions and love interests. We can see this in numerous comic book story arcs—Superman, Batman, Iron Man, and Captain America. However, this is especially significant at the comic book store. These stories (and the relationships therein) are now transcending fiction. Gendered stereotypes about women's relationship to men are shaping interactions at a micro-level. Women are silent, secondary citizens in the comic book store. They are there to buy Pokémon cards for their sons, to pick out family friendly board games, or to follow their boyfriends around the shop. Their own interests



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are not acknowledged or legitimized within these spaces. These interactions demonstrate a larger trend where women are taken for granted in the comic book community. After all, women characters in this genre model relationships that focus on men and families. Heteroromantic relationships are the only visible—and acceptable—platforms for the “good girls” in comics.

*Nags.* The Ant-Man beat his wife. Large block letters spell out the word, “WHAK!” right after he backhands Janet van Dyne, aka the Wasp, in *The Avengers* #213. Many comic book fans try to explain the “incident” away—it was a misunderstanding, she was going to foil his plans to re-join The Avengers, he told her to “shut up” *before* he did it. Ant-Man’s relationship with the Wasp is notorious in the comic book community. In fact, when Marvel decided to release the movie, Ant-Man, in 2015, there was a tremendous amount of outrage (Child 2013). After all, under what circumstances is violence against women permissible in comic book culture? The answer: when the woman is a nag.

The depiction of a badgering woman character is another stereotypical staple within the comic book canon. Bossy, annoying, or useless, the nag is an impediment to the protagonist’s main mission. Graphic depictions of these women characters show them in menial roles harassing male characters (Danziger-Russell 2012). This incessant pestering is a source of irritation and annoyance for the main character—and, oftentimes, for the reader.

While discussing old Superman comics that he used to read as a kid, Steve remembered that one of the most persistent antagonists in the series was none other than Lois Lane, Superman’s comic book girlfriend. According to Steve:

Like, Lois Lane is written terribly—as a terrible person—in the early Superman comics. I mean in the very earliest, she was just sort of a heroine in distress, right? Er, not heroine, a, uh, damsel in distress. But, uh, as it started developing, she became, like, a--supposed--

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it-it was supposed to be humorous, but, like, it--another--um, almost another villain for Superman to defeat. In that, for a while there, it was all about Lois Lane trying to get Superman to marry her. And that's all she was interested in. And, like, he would always have to come up with these, uh, comical--but inventive ways to get out of it, or, uh, or-or to get out of her questioning him about marriage. Um, and him never wanting to be tied down. And, like, that was all the character was about. (chuckle) Which, is super demeaning.

Steve chuckles at this “demeaning” depiction. After all, Lois’s attempts to get-her-man are positioned as comic relief in the series. Superman must dodge his girlfriend’s desperate attention-seeking antics at every turn. After all, persistent nag characters will not take “no” for an answer. Inventing ways to escape the matrimonial knot, Superman writes off Lois’s concerns as trivial and non-consequential. This sets a precedent for gendered relationships in comic books. Demanding women are to be ignored—or worse, ushered out of the conversation entirely.

Aggravation with nags, however, was not only reserved for characters within the genre. Throughout the course of my research, men’s frustration with the “nag” character became relatable to their own lives. Seeing their wives or girlfriends as surrogate “nags,” men respondents would sympathize with annoyed comic book protagonists. Barry, a 27-year-old barista, vented some of his own frustration with his wife when he disclosed:

You know, the wife is gonna be always nagging. “Why-why aren't you...going after a better job?” “Why aren't you cleaning the kitchen?” “Why aren't you doing this? And why aren't you doing that?” And...in comic books you get the same thing, like, “Whoa, why didn't you shoot him with your laser eyes?” You know?

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According to Barry, the nag trope is relatable to his own encounters with women. Barry, subscribing to the comic industry's gendered stereotype about women, believes that they are always going to be nagging the men in their lives. This ideology sets women up as annoying antagonists. Furthermore, their concerns are not considered important—or valid—within this context. Without “reason” to nag, most readers thought that these characters deserved to be quieted, by any means necessary. After all, not only does the nag character type silence women in comics, it serves as an excuse to inflict violence against them. Again, Barry had a lot to say on this topic:

I kind of feel like, “Oh, she thinks she's a strong woman, let's put her in her place.” You know? Man is the real powerful creature. And I-I feel like that's-that's the way a lot of...media goes now. You know? Like, you can't...you can't have a strong female character without her being perceived as annoying.

Barry's statement echoes the sentiment that violence is permissible against nags in order to keep them in their “place.” Women characters who counter men superheroes are “justifiably” hurt or punished within comic book discourse. Violence against women is seen as understandable, if not entirely necessary. Becoming the voice of opposition—especially when the voice belongs to a woman—is dangerous for dissenting characters. In fact, these actions target assertive women for violence in the comic book genre. Barry makes this observation when he notes that women's strength is met with male aggression. Thus, violence against women is a hegemonic tool used to punish a character for her strength, ability, or resistance to male superiority. Interactions at the comic book store also support this finding. On more than one occasion, I overheard conversations that condoned violence against unpopular women characters. I captured one such conversation in my field notes. According to my data:

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Hal, male employee: “Personally, I think M[ary]J[ane] can die. Their terrible relationship just reflects on how much he [Spiderman] loved Gwen Stacey. He just can’t get over her, ya know? He snapped Gwen Stacey’s neck with his bare hands.”

Tony, male employee: “It didn’t really matter. She’s not special.” (field note)

Justifying Gwen Stacey’s violent death, Tony assumes that her life did not matter because she was not “special” enough to exist in the comic book series. Women characters, especially nags and love interests, are treated as disposable objects in comic book literature (Simone 1999). In her 1999 blog entry, “Women in Refrigerators,” professional comic book writer, Gail Simone (1999), elaborates:

It occurred to me that it's not that healthy to be a female character in comics... These are superheroines who have been either depowered, raped, or cut up and stuck in the refrigerator. I know I missed a bunch. Some have been revived, even improved— although the question remains as to why they were thrown in the wood chipper in the first place (Simone 1999).

The original “Women in Refrigerators” list had 111 women characters who had been knocked-off in their stories (Simone 1999). Since then, feminist fans and comic writers have created a running list that updates every time a woman character is killed, raped, or maimed in order to advance men’s storylines. The most recent compilation, found on Comicvine.com, lists over 178 women characters who have kicked the metaphorical bucket (Fesak 2014). Women characters are routinely killed to negotiate relationships between men. Fueling the tension between men superheroes and their archenemies, violence against women characters serves as a cheap plot twist. This finding is significant because it underlies larger social trends. United Nations data shows that 1 in 3 women will experience physical and/or sexual violence at some point in their

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lives (United Nations Statistics Division 2015). Women's representation within popular culture and media is important. Normalizing—and justifying—violence against women for the sake of a story arc contributes to a misogynistic culture. This creates a hostile and dangerous world for women everywhere. Specifically, in comic culture, women characters are killed for being too annoying, too powerful, or even too important to a man superhero lead. Stereotypes about hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity shape consumers' gendered realities. Specifically, gendered stereotypes about who has a right to safety do not stop once the superhero saves the day and the story ends. These cast types, as enacted by fictional characters, actively shape the ways in which consumers relate to women both within and outside of comic book culture.

*Sluts.* She-Hulk is in bed with Tony Stark. Five seconds into the afterglow she brazenly asks the infamous playboy, “Tony, how do you get away with sleeping around? When you do it, everyone calls you a player. When I do it, they call me a skank. Isn't that a double standard” (Sclott, Burchett, and Rathburn 2007)? She-Hulk might be onto something. There is, indeed, a double standard when it comes to superhero sexuality. After all, conversations surrounding Power Girl and Poison Ivy are more likely about these characters' sexual prowess and busty bods rather than their superpower abilities.

Women's sexuality is positioned as a mixed bag within comic book culture. Sure, we like to see beautiful bodies in tight clothes—but at what cost? Drawn to attract a heteromale gaze, women superheroes are hyperbolic sex symbols. Large breasts, slender waists, and shapely hips are normalized body types. There is little to no variation from this model. This representation (or, lack thereof) was cause for concern for most readers. Men and women brought up the “slut” stereotype during in-depth interviews. Six of the men expressed some sort

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of discomfort with the sexualized nature of women characters. Nine women—all but two—also mentioned the troubling “slut” persona. Specifically, this concern centered around sending the “wrong” message to young girls. In fact, many of the respondents, men and women, were critical of the images that are being sold to young fans. Diana, a 21-year-old student, was worried about girls when she said:

Umm... well, see, it's kind of backwards cause the message that they are trying, I think, to give us is that they are trying to build stronger female characters and ones who can be plot-driven, and I don't know. They definitely stepped up their game with their writing. But because they look, I don't know, they look like bimbos, no one's going to take it seriously. Ummm... I don't know, there's a lot that could be taught to younger girls growing up if they do read comics, uhhhh... there's a lot, I don't know, be taught to everyone if we moved past that and got to what was actually going on in that storyline and how that character actually is able to deal with it, and I don't know, give them more of a voice, instead of just an appearance.

Diana is concerned that women's representation in comics is not suitable for young girls today. Since all the women characters she sees look like “bimbos,” Diana is nervous that girls won't be able to find appropriate role models. Even though women characters might be strong, or even well-written, their sexualized appearance overshadows other positive qualities. This was similar to another complaint lodged by Chris, a 26-year-old landscape technician. During his interview, Chris said he was frustrated by women's representation in comics:

Again, we don't need token female superheroes, but we've got to have someone. We've got to have someone out there who can be represented. Which is also why it frustrated me that the characters are drawn the way they are. Because, some of the superheroes you

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see looks like Miley Cyrus got some of her costumes from them. I see feminism as necessary in that regard. As far as where it fits in storytelling. Yeah, write strong characters. Write strong female characters who girls can look at and say, “Oh, I don’t have to be the slut to get popular?” You know? “I can be this person. I can be strong. I can be who I am.” Which, for some people requires strength.

Specifically using the word, “slut,” Chris reproduces a hard, moral dichotomy: there are only two kinds of women—the virgin and the whore. This characterization suggests that readers are still invested in a sexual binary. Not only does the “slut” stereotype uphold a heterosexist system that polices women’s bodies and sexuality within comic literature, but it also shapes real women’s experiences within the comic book community at large.

Citing the slut stereotype as “unrealistic,” many of the women that I interviewed were annoyed or agitated by this hypersexualized character. Not only was this a point of frustration in their readership, but it also caused distress in their everyday lives. Many women spoke about the hegemonic beauty standards that made their lives difficult. Seeing these images—tiny waists, big boobs, thigh gaps—reproduced by overtly sexualized comic book characters was a point of contention for women respondents. “Slut” archetypes quickly became the enemy. Sue, a 30-year-old freelance artist, was frustrated that popular representations of women’s sexuality and appearance had permeated into other areas of her life. Sue talked about how real-life women are expected to be thin, heterofeminine, and aesthetically pleasing no matter what they are doing.

Sue shared this idea when she said:

And, the comic books. I don’t know how much, but it does definitely sustain this idea of, you know, there is a type and we all have to conform to that or we’re not to be viewed I guess. Or, put in the newswoman. The newswoman has to be pretty. You know, like, that

kind of stuff. Anyone that is put before everyone to deliver any sort of information, or to perform, or to talk, you know, just anyone that is in the position to be viewed by the masses has to have that thing and its... One more thing. One more drop in the bucket. Sue's experience highlights a growing concern for many women readers. Who, by virtue of representation, is allowed to be seen? Dressed in sexually provocative costumes, women characters, trivialized as sluts, are only visible if they are considered sexy. In order to exist in these spaces, women characters must be attractive by heteronormative beauty standards. This sends the message that women are to be seen, and then—maybe—we might get around to reading her word bubble. Many readers were concerned that there is too much focus on a superheroine's body at the expense of her voice or potential agency. During an in-depth interview, Wade, a 30-year-old retail worker, admitted that he, too, is typically focused on how a woman looks in comic strips. Wade was transparent when he said:

Sex sells. It's something to put more eye balls on your product. It's cheap and easier to do it that way, than to have a compelling storyline. Because, just based on the visual style of comics you look down and you have to read the words, but if there's a busty woman in a leather bustier your eyes automatically go to that. You're not even going to know if she's saying anything... I'm trying to read what's being said. If it doesn't silence [women characters], it certainly cheapens.

Distracted by the character's hypersexualized body, Wade readily admits that he doesn't pay much attention to her words. Encouraged to look at these women as sexy bodies, readers are trained to merit a woman for the figure she has and not for what she has to say. Ironically, slut characters are silenced by the super-bodies they possess; they are reduced—and muted—in the wake of their hypersexuality.



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Representation is an important and growing need for all women—and yet, only the ones who meet heterofeminine beauty standards are being served. If sexy women are seen and not heard, what happens to everyone else? Well, they aren't there. Symbolic annihilation, or the absence of representation, tells us that unattractive women should not occupy public spaces—real or imagined (Gerbner and Gross 1976). Social theorist, Pierre Bourdieu (1979), builds upon this idea with his concept of symbolic violence. According to Bourdieu (1979), representational absence denies people of their social existence. Specifically, if readers do not see regular people and body types in comic books, they are making implicitly political decisions about who is fit for public platforms. This phenomenon shapes who we want to see and in what capacity. These expectations—that women are supposed to be heterofemininely attractive—have real-life consequences beyond the comic book covers.

During my interview with Kate, a 23-year-old service worker, I asked about the kinds of women who are represented in comic books. Kate, like many other readers, said that visible women must be attractive and appropriately feminine. According to her, a strong woman character has to embody numerous traits in order to be “empowered.” Out of all of these qualities, however, only one *really* matters. Kate shared her take on this topic when she said:

She [the superheroine] has to be all about this woman empowerment, but still maintaining femininity and being strong and independent. Otherwise, you have a Hillary Clinton character who is also strong, intelligent, independent—yes, but...nobody's gonna read a comic book about Hillary Clinton!

Although Hillary Clinton is “strong, intelligent, and independent,” she would, according to Kate, make a lousy comic book character. Kate, speaking to the importance of femininity, claims that Hillary Clinton does not make the cut. Policing a woman politician's gender expression, Kate

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reinforces popular interest in heterofeminine personalities. This finding suggests that comic book companies are able to promote and normalize notions of desired womanhood. After all, comic book characters must model “appropriate” gender conformity. These spandex crusaders are pawns in a hyper-political arena. It is not enough to be strong and independent. A woman must also be physically feminine and desirable in order to be seen—and appreciated—by the public. This is significant because it builds on the assumption that women must be attractive in order to be powerful. Our superheroines, women newscasters, and even our women politicians must be “pretty” in order to be seen. This reduces women to their physical appearance. Emphasized femininity becomes the stick by which to measure one’s worth. Slut stereotypes and objectified bodies within comic books contribute to the idea that only sexy women, by virtue of their heterofeminine allure, are powerful. This is consequential for women everywhere—both in and out of comic book culture.

### **Conclusion**

Representation is important in comic book culture. Watching women characters embody powerful roles is exhilarating. It disrupts conventional gender narratives that suggest women should stay on the sidelines—watching, but never participating in the action. I believe that comics have the potential to change these static gender scripts. In order to accomplish this, however, they must do more. Superheroes are supposed to “save the world as we know it.” But, perhaps, they should push it farther—past a status quo that champions gendered stereotypes and tired clichés. Looking at comic books and the people who read them, I show that common stereotypes about hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity shape consumers’ gendered realities. More specifically, this study demonstrates how popular character archetypes like the love interest, the nag, and the slut are redefining readers’ relationship to women both within and

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outside of comic book culture. By examining comic culture, and its audience at large, this research advances a more nuanced understanding of how graphic narratives contribute to ideas surrounding gender difference, violence against women, and situate women's empowerment within popular culture.

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