

GENDER REPRESENTATION IN COMIC BOOKS

By

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Abstract

This research study is dedicated to analyzing how gender is represented and perceived in the comic book medium, specifically in American superhero comic books and Japanese action-adventure *shonen* manga genre comics.

The comic book medium has cemented itself as a creative cultural cornerstone valued by many fans. Despite this, the comic book industry is predominantly male and female comic book characters are scrutinized. (Roberts, 2016).

In response to occurrences like these, survey and interview questions were created for this research study and given to comic book fans and artists respectively for insight into how comic book fans and creators feel about gender representation. As a result, it has been discovered that both male and female comic book fans have diverse opinions on preferable gender representation but tend to agree on certain kinds of character attire being desirable/impractical and how to detect or trust specific kinds of female characters.

Literature Review

Comic books have given birth to a century's worth of characters, some of which being adapted into some of the highest-grossing movies of all time (Childress, 2019). In spite of this, the comic book industry has frequently been criticized for sexualizing its characters, especially females. For example, there are website articles chronicling how the fictional character Wonder Woman was appointed to a UN honorary ambassador position and then rescinded in a few months as a result from UN female workers protest (Roberts, 2016). They went as far making a petition website outlining their objections that the character's design embodies outdated exaggerated male sex appeal instead of realistic and relatable female likeness:

Although the original creators may have intended Wonder Woman to represent a strong and independent warrior woman with a feminist message, the reality is that the character's current iteration is that of a large breasted, white woman of impossible proportions, scantily clad in a shimmery, thigh-baring body suit with an American flag motif and knee high boots --the epitome of a pin-up girl (Roberts, 2016).

Additionally, female comic book writer Gail Simone compiled an entire website column dedicated to listing every instance of the "women in refrigerators" trope: a trope term coined by Simone that labels female comic book characters who are murdered, crippled, raped, or depowered solely for the sake of creating drama for their male counterparts (Simone, 1999). She states how the trope's name is inspired by a DC Comics story where Green Lantern finds his girlfriend's severed body parts stuffed in a

fridge and is a prime example of how female characters are sexualized and negative portrayed overwhelmingly frequent compared to male characters. Critical discussions like these paved the way to other instances of cultural criticism towards female comic book character portrayals. In the past decade, both *Spider-Woman* and *Batgirl* suffered comic book variant cover controversies. The *Spider-Woman* comic book series had a variant cover announced in 2014 that featured Spider-Woman on all fours atop a building that comic book fans criticized as being overly sexualized (Dockterman, 2014). Then in 2015 there was a *Batgirl* comic book variant cover announcement showing Batgirl being terrorized by the Joker painting a red smile on her face as a reference to *The Killing Joke* comic storyline where Batgirl was shot and paralyzed by the Joker (Cowden, 2018). This was criticized because *The Killing Joke* has long been decried as being part of a frequent sexist trend in comic book history where female characters are injured to different degrees only to fuel drama for their male counterparts. The outrage in-turn prompted other fans to defend these covers posted similar comic book covers, both official and fan-made, featuring similar or different genders to argue that the criticism is a hypocritical double standard. Both comic book variant covers ended up cancelled from negative fan response.

Discourse concerning why comic books are said to be filled with sexualized or dispensable female characters can also be traced to several female comic book creators such as Trina Robbins, Suzanne Scott and Paige Braddock, who have published official journal and forum think piece articles discussing how female comic book authors are obscured and marginalized in the comic book industry (Lowe, 1997). Female comic book author works traditionally revolved around expected to prioritize appealing male fanbases

with female character stereotypes (Braddock, 2004) while female comic book fans have struggled to be seen as a marketable demographic with paradigms only shifting recently to make them more visible and vocal (Scott, 2013). Men as well like Danny Fingeroth, who worked in Marvel Comics' editorial and was a consultant for the 2002 Spider-Man movie, corroborate this in journal articles by breaking down recurring themes/tropes in comic books and how they appeal to target demographics (John, 2005) One section talks about the gradual growth in appeal from popular female-centric hero media that are all scripted by men.

As a result, there is an evident trend for comic book characters embody gender norms and conflicts across the different time periods they were first published. In fact, a superhero history journal article in the *Magazine of History* It analyzes how Captain America and Wonder Woman respectively were crafted to either embrace or combat toxic masculinity compared to Japanese manga featuring gender portrayal ambivalence (Aiken, 2010). Captain America has traditional masculine traits historically admired by American society such as muscular physique, a square-jawed chin, short hair, heterosexual, light unblemished skin, wearing red/white/blue patriotic colors, taking charge, and enlisting in World War II while Wonder Woman established a milestone in female empowerment by constantly being bound by her captors (which originates from her creator being a fan of bondage sexual play) yet always managing to escape and save civilians while wearing feminine attire exposing lots of skin.

In contrast to headlining male superheroes though, male sidekicks such as Robin, Bucky Barnes, and Jimmy Olsen are arguably coded as being gay (Shyminsky, 2011). Their classic appearances embodied stereotypical LGBTQA+ traits by heavily exposing

their skin, lacking muscle, acting submissive, and not being seen with female love interests during their for years if not decades while only hanging out with the masculine male protagonist. Comic book villains are also frequently analyzed to be coded as or revealed to be LGBTQA+ (Hunt, 2015, Chapter 2, Pages 34-35), either as a means of discriminating against people who express those traits or promote queer representation while keeping the heroes appealing to hetero-normative mass appeal. Adding onto this, female villains in particular often depicted as dangerous destructive non-traditional women who need to be punished and normalized as foils for female superheroes appearing more submissive and traditional in their appearance and behavior (Willis, 2016, Abstract). But various website sources have pointed out that both groups of fictional women are nonetheless often sexually objectified in their designs with impractical battle outfits including sexually charged attire like high heels, one-piece swimsuits, and somewhat exposed breasts (Umbarger, 2017). This is why there are dissertations like the one written by Dauw (2017) that break down superhero and supervillain costumes to evaluate how a comic book character's gender can intersect with their costume sexuality, and race.

Because children and teens are typically the target audience for comic books, there are studies conducted to investigate how they are vulnerable to having the media they consume shape their worldviews (Silva, 2018). Their results suggest that comic book character design gender norms may have persisted for so long because fans' and creators' sensibilities to sexualized designs have been normalized. Such designs are so frequent, that they have led to a cycle of creation and consumption in which comic book artists repeatedly create sexualized or hetero-normative characters while the masses accept them

without question. This stems from how comic book fans are hardly exposed to different realistic gender portrayals from a young age, while non-comic book fans and parents may perceive those characters differently and choose to not read those types of books as a result (Glutek, 1986, Chapters 2-8, Pages 3-113). Ironically, these trends being so expected can illustrate why comic books like *X-Men* and *Black Panther* end up achieving mass success and cultural impact by having more heavily prominent and relatable female main characters than usual, which appeals to both male and female readers (Darowski, 2011, Chapters 3-5, Pages 62-192).

So with all of this information accounted for, these findings pose a question: are comic book characters still so sexualized based on traditional gender norms and double standards? Not to mention, can it be justified by appealing to creative intent and context. But there is no way to answer such subjective qualitative question objectively outside of a strict content analysis. This is why this research study settles for investigating the comic book fan base's opinions on various character designs to gauge a general consensus on gender representation

Research Question

How do comic book fans feel about the gender representation of comic book characters and what factors affect those perspectives?

Research Design/Methodology

Sets of survey and interview questions with informative consent forms were created for comic book fans and comic book artists respectively to answer.

For the survey, 22 multiple-choice and short response questions were created. Survey takers can only pick one option for every multiple-choice question, 17 of which are filled with multiple reference images for context and potential first impressions. To start off, Question 1 asks the survey respondent for their gender or if they refuse to say it. Next, Questions 2 and 3 are short-response scale questions asking the survey taker how many comic books they read a month and their favorite comic book/manga character. Responses to Question 2 are grouped into non-readers who don't read any comics monthly, low readers who read one-two comics monthly, medium readers who read three-four comics monthly, and high readers who read five or more comics monthly. These are demographic questions made to record how each respondent of each gender respond to several binary-gendered characters.

Question 4 is a Likert scale question about two side-by-side comic book images that claims there is no significant difference between the ways these two similarly themed characters comic book characters with different genders are presented on their comic book covers. Afterwards, Questions 5-10, 17 and 18 show four or five images per question of a specific superhero's different designs throughout their publication history and asks the survey taker to pick which design they prefer the most.

Proceeding on, Question 11 is a short response question asking the survey taker what their favorite comic book/manga villain is while Questions 12 and 13 are Likert scale questions saying that Superman and Batman look better with their red or black trunks on respectively. Those last two questions are often debated about because they are a holdover from their costumes being based on circus strongmen but are criticized nowadays for looking goofy, impractical and unmanly (Schedeen, 2018). Further,

Questions 14 and 15 are Likert scale questions stating that capes or heels are impractical for superheroes to wear in battle. The same goes for Question 16, which asks a Likert scale question saying that if a character has super-strength, they should look athletic. Then, Questions 19 and 20 ask the survey taker to pick which character they believe to be female or male from a line-up of both American comic book and Japanese manga comic characters aligned next to each other. Lastly, Questions 21 and 22 ask survey takers to pick which female and male characters they find to seem the least trustworthy between comic book and manga characters.

Questions 1, 2, 3, and 11 were demographic questions discerning the respondent's gender, how knowledgeable they are about comic books, and their favorite character/villain's gender. All the other questions were incorporated to detect each gender's comic book character design preferences based on specific visible traits such as skin exposure, body shape, superficial features, and attire.

On October 4th, 2019, 50 copies of the survey's first six questions were given to New York Comic Con cosplayers/attendees. Then on November 6th, 2019, 25 physical copies of the complete 22-question survey were handed out to students on the Saint Peter's University campus through convenience sampling. 21 were handed out at the college's anime club while the remaining 4 were given to students during class. Simultaneously, the complete survey was digitally recreated on Google Forms and linked to 30 different people. 21 digital survey takers were selected through convenience sampling while 9 more were collected through snowball sampling to collect enough survey takers. In total, 55 people answered the survey.

Interviews were also conducted with two unrelated comic book artists at separate points in time and both provided written consent/contact information. The first interview was held with a Feudal Japan-styled pop culture painting parody artist named Jed Henry at the New York Comic Con Javits Center on Saturday, Oct. 5, 2019. A second interview occurred a month later with an independent male comic book artist named Richard Weakley over email on Nov. 24, 2019. Several more interviews were conducted the following year on April 24, 2020, including: Emily Davis (female independent artist), Carrie Prince (female independent artist), Robby Bevard (professional comic book artist and colorist), and Jeff Beck (professional comic book retailer and owner of the comic book store East Side Mags in Montclair, New Jersey).

Their interview questions asked if they think female superhero costumes are designed differently than males and if so why, what are their favorite/least favorite female character designs and why, what are their favorite/least favorite male character designs and why, what kinds of design traits they see more frequently in villains compared to heroes and vice-versa, and what they thought about the *Spider-Woman* and *Batgirl* comic book variant cover controversies if they were aware of them. It only makes sense to get feedback on character design controversies from comic book artists who professionally research and publish their art seeing as how they can be considered authorities on the subject.

Results

From the survey, the independent variables are the survey taker's gender (Question 1), how many comics they read (Question 2), what their favorite comic book characters (Question 3) and favorite villains are (Question 11). All of the other questions are dependent variables. The only antecedent variable possible is whether the survey taker is a Comic Con attendee, a Saint Peter's University student, or someone who answered the survey online.

There were 47 male survey takers, 57 female survey takers, and 1 non-binary survey taker. 0 survey takers who refused to say their gender. Since the total amount of survey takers is 105, that means 44.8% of the survey takers are female which is only slightly less than half of the total. This either supports that the average comic book fan is male (Scott, 2013) or that females are a growing market demographic originally thought to be invisible (Lowe, 1997).

Gender Statistic Frequencies:

Female Survey Respondents = 44.8%

Male Survey Respondents = 54.3%

47 Females, 57 Males, 1 Non-Binary

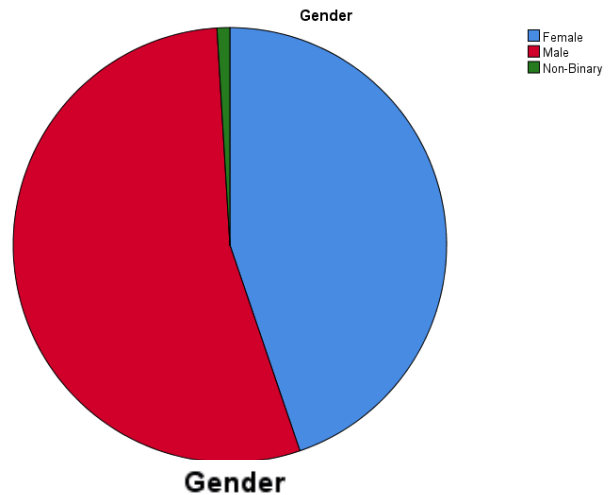
While the survey was given out to as wide a sample as possible, an exact equal binary gender ratio for respondents could not be found.

Significant Difference Statistic

Frequencies:

30 out of 47 females disagreed. 29 out of 57 males disagreed, and the single non-binary disagreed. This means over 50% of the total survey respondents disagreed with Question 4's statement. This indicates that it is more likely for someone of each gender to perceive the *Spider-Woman* variant cover as being sexualized by emphasizing her backside compared to *Spider-Man's* cover being drawn with a similar pose but executed without intended sex appeal.

Pie Chart

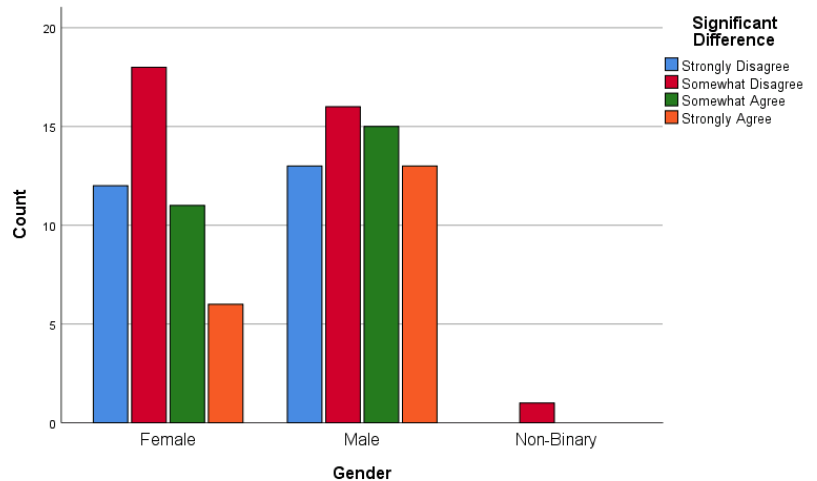


		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Female	47	44.8	44.8	44.8
	Male	57	54.3	54.3	99.0
	Non-Binary	1	1.0	1.0	100.0
	Total	105	100.0	100.0	

Significant Difference

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	25	23.8	23.8	23.8
	Somewhat Disagree	35	33.3	33.3	57.1
	Somewhat Agree	26	24.8	24.8	81.9
	Strongly Agree	19	18.1	18.1	100.0
	Total	105	100.0	100.0	

Bar Chart



Reading Rate Statistic Frequencies:

Non-Readers: 21.9%

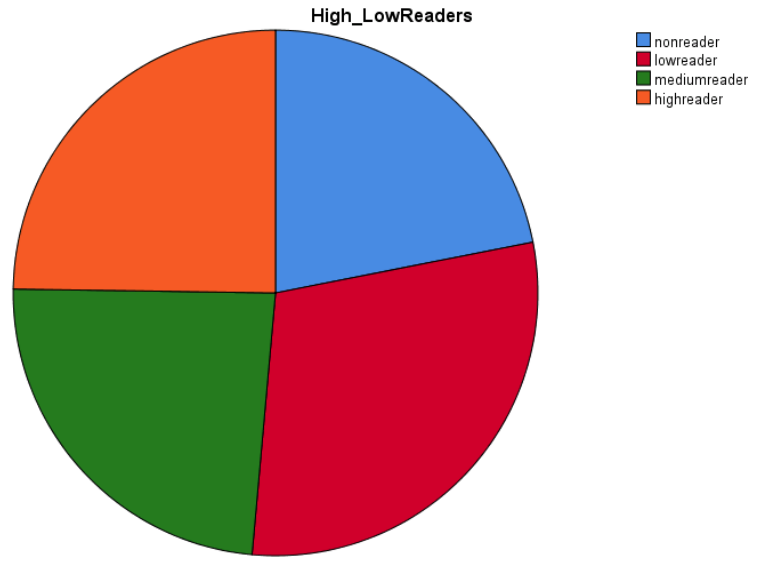
Low-Readers: 29.5%

Medium-Readers: 23.8%

High-Readers: 24.8%

There is approximately a 78.1% chance at most of the survey takers are knowledgeable comic book fans; and thus may know the correct answers to Questions 19-22. Yet only less than 50% of survey takers got Q: 19 correct while 80% got Q: 20 correct, implying female and male characters are designed significantly different.

However, there is a potential response bias because some survey respondents gave estimates for how many comic books they read monthly. Those answers were rounded to the highest specific numbers in their answer.



		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	nonreader	23	21.9	21.9	21.9
	lowreader	31	29.5	29.5	51.4
	mediumreader	25	23.8	23.8	75.2
	highreader	26	24.8	24.8	100.0
	Total	105	100.0	100.0	

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	0	23	21.9	21.9	21.9
	1	10	9.5	9.5	31.4
	2	10	9.5	9.5	41.0
	3	12	11.4	11.4	52.4
	4	7	6.7	6.7	59.0
	5	11	10.5	10.5	69.5
	6	4	3.8	3.8	73.3
	7	2	1.9	1.9	75.2
	8	2	1.9	1.9	77.1
	10	4	3.8	3.8	81.0
	12.00	1	1.0	1.0	81.9
	15.00	3	2.9	2.9	84.8
	16.00	1	1.0	1.0	85.7
	20.00	3	2.9	2.9	88.6
	24.00	1	1.0	1.0	89.5
	25.00	2	1.9	1.9	91.4
	30.00	2	1.9	1.9	93.3
	40.00	3	2.9	2.9	96.2
	50.00	2	1.9	1.9	98.1
	200.00	1	1.0	1.0	99.0
400.00	1	1.0	1.0	100.0	
Total		105	100.0	100.0	

Wonder Woman Response Analysis:

Wonder Woman’s Classic costume exposes the most skin while her other outfits cover up her body. Each design

		Wonder Woman			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Classic	17	16.2	16.2	16.2
	Jim Lee	27	25.7	25.7	41.9
	Post-Convergence	35	33.3	33.3	75.2
	Rebirth	26	24.8	24.8	100.0
	Total	105	100.0	100.0	

got over a dozen votes except for Wonder Woman’s unconventional 60s redesign, which received 0 votes and thus isn’t on the chart. The outfit receiving the most votes, Post-Convergence, is the design that covers up most of her body including her arms, while the Jim Lee, Rebirth, and classic looks are sleeveless. People may prefer more clothed versions of Wonder Woman since she is a feminist icon.

Namor the Sub-Mariner Response

Analysis:

Namor’s Classic look exposes the most skin with him only wearing a speedo. Every other design at least gives him pants.

		Namor the Sub-Mariner			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Classic	3	2.9	2.9	2.9
	Civil War	18	17.1	17.1	20.0
	First Mutant	20	19.0	19.0	39.0
	Savage	25	23.8	23.8	62.9
	Defender of the Deep	39	37.1	37.1	100.0
	Total	105	100.0	100.0	

Unlike Wonder Woman, Namor’s Classic design only got 3 out of 105 votes and his unconventional Savage design won second place. His Defender of the Deep look won the most votes by a landslide. It has Namor wearing pants but exposing most of his chest and arms aside from wearing armored shoulder-pads. Fans seem to prefer fully clothed Namor on average more than clothed Wonder Woman.

Male Robin Response Analysis:

Robin’s Classic design exposes the most skin by being having no sleeves and pants. It ended up second-to-last, atop Red Robin.

		Robin Male			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Classic	5	9.1	9.1	9.1
	Damian Wayne	24	43.6	43.6	52.7
	Tim Drake	23	41.8	41.8	94.5
	Red Robin	3	5.5	5.5	100.0
	Total	55	100.0	100.0	

All of the other Robin designs cover up most of or the whole body and got 90.9% of the votes in total.

Female Robin Response Analysis:

The Carrie Kelley Classic female Robin design showed the most skin but only got 10.9% of the total votes compared to all the other fully clothed female Robin designs.

		Robin Female			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Helena Wayne	18	32.7	32.7	32.7
	Carrie Kelley Classic	6	10.9	10.9	43.6
	Stephanie Brown	21	38.2	38.2	81.8
	Carrie Kelley Redesign	10	18.2	18.2	100.0
	Total	55	100.0	100.0	

Superboy Response Analysis:

The Connor Kent Rebirth and 1990's designs that go for punk Superboy looks got the least votes. The Connor

		Superboy			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Jon Kent	9	16.4	16.4	16.4
	Connor Kent Rebirth	5	9.1	9.1	25.5
	Connor Kent Young Justice	28	50.9	50.9	76.4
	Connor Kent 1990's	2	3.6	3.6	80.0
	Connor Kent New 52	11	20.0	20.0	100.0
Total		55	100.0	100.0	

Kent Young Justice design ended up with the most votes, likely because it is the most popular version of Superboy. Interestingly, it is the only Superboy design with sleeveless forearms though.

Spider-Woman Response Analysis:

Spider-Gwen most likely ended up with the most votes here because it is the most familiarly known thanks to its appearance in the *Spider-Man: Into the*

		Spider-Women			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Spider-Gwen	31	56.4	56.4	56.4
	Silk Refined	16	29.1	29.1	85.5
	Lady Spider	1	1.8	1.8	87.3
	Silk Webbing	3	5.5	5.5	92.7
	Jessica Drew	4	7.3	7.3	100.0
	Total	55	100.0	100.0	

Spider-Verse movie in 2018. Her and the Silk Refined designs are the ones that most resemble Spider-Man's classic design, which might explain their broad appeal. The Silk Webbing option is the only scantily clad design but got the second-least votes above Lady Spider.

Favorite Character/Villain Response Analysis:

Even though these questions are framed as being open-ended, all of the characters survey takers voted for were grouped by gender. As a result, over 50% respondents wrote down male characters for each question. Favorite Character only got 19% female answers while Favorite Villain received 5.7%. This highly indicates that it is much more likely for comic book fans to prefer or think of male characters before female characters.

Favorite Character

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	None	3	2.9	2.9	2.9
	Female	20	19.0	19.0	21.9
	Male	81	77.1	77.1	99.0
	Genderfluid	1	1.0	1.0	100.0
Total		105	100.0	100.0	

Favorite Villain

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	None	3	2.9	5.5	5.5
	Female	6	5.7	10.9	16.4
	Male	45	42.9	81.8	98.2
	Genderfluid	1	1.0	1.8	100.0
Total		55	52.4	100.0	
Missing	System	50	47.6		
Total		105	100.0		

Red Trunks Response Analysis:

67.3% of respondents agree that Superman looks better with his classic red trunks on. This could be because it is a nostalgic costume aspect and/or it adds a more satisfying color balance to his design.

Red Trunks

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	7	12.7	12.7	12.7
	Somewhat Disagree	11	20.0	20.0	32.7
	Somewhat Agree	22	40.0	40.0	72.7
	Strongly Agree	15	27.3	27.3	100.0
Total		55	100.0	100.0	

Black Trunks Response Analysis:

54.5% of respondents disagree by thinking Batman does not look better with black trunks on. This is a more

Black Trunks

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	11	20.0	20.0	20.0
	Somewhat Disagree	19	34.5	34.5	54.5
	Somewhat Agree	14	25.5	25.5	80.0
	Strongly Agree	11	20.0	20.0	100.0
Total		55	100.0	100.0	

even split in opinion compared to the Red Trunks question despite them being practically asking about the same thing. The difference may be how Batman assumed to be more dark and serious than Superman.

No Capes Response Analysis:

70.9% of respondents agree that capes are impractical to wear while fighting crime. Although some of these

No Capes!

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	4	7.3	7.3	7.3
	Somewhat Disagree	12	21.8	21.8	29.1
	Somewhat Agree	22	40.0	40.0	69.1
	Strongly Agree	17	30.9	30.9	100.0
Total		55	100.0	100.0	

answers may have been chosen because survey respondents are familiar with a montage scene from *The Incredibles* showing superhero capes backfiring on them.

No Heels Response Analysis:

An overwhelmingly high 85.5% of respondents agree with Flash’s statement that high heels are

No Heels!

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	3	5.5	5.5	5.5
	Somewhat Disagree	5	9.1	9.1	14.5
	Somewhat Agree	22	40.0	40.0	54.5
	Strongly Agree	25	45.5	45.5	100.0
Total		55	100.0	100.0	

impractical for superheroes to wear. This can qualify as evidence that high heels are unnecessarily added to female superhero designs almost always for the sake of sex appeal. This may have gotten more agreements than the No Capes question because this question has a comic panel reference image acknowledging how ridiculous high heels are for superhero costumes.

Super-Athletic Response Analysis:

54.5% of respondents agree that characters with super-strength should be designed to look athletic. This is an

Super-Athletic?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	7	12.7	12.7	12.7
	Somewhat Disagree	18	32.7	32.7	45.5
	Somewhat Agree	28	50.9	50.9	96.4
	Strongly Agree	2	3.6	3.6	100.0
Total		55	100.0	100.0	

extremely close call that can go either way and likely has to do with gender design preferences. Male superheroes are admired for being muscular, which is the traditionally idealized masculine form. While traditionally idealized feminine forms typically prefer women to look thin rather than muscular. Perhaps this is also an even split because comic book fans nowadays are more open-minded about body shapes.

Poison Ivy Response Analysis:

Poison Ivy’s Classic design showing the most skin on her arms, legs and breasts got the most over half of the votes. That is twice as many votes as

		Poison Ivy			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Classic	28	50.9	50.9	50.9
	Scientist	5	9.1	9.1	60.0
	Venus Fly Trap	2	3.6	3.6	63.6
	Mutant	3	5.5	5.5	69.1
	Spandex	17	30.9	30.9	100.0
	Total	55	100.0	100.0	

Wonder Woman’s Classic design got. The Spandex design came second in place and is the most humanoid alongside Classic, while the other three designs look more sci-fi inspired and monstrous. Ivy’s Classic design being the most familiar definitely played a role in this result, but this may also derive from the context of how in Poison Ivy isn’t as much of a feminist icon but is characterized as a femme fatale seductress. Respondents may prefer a traditionally attractive female body to emphasize that

Loki Response Analysis:

Ikol steamrolled by taking 69.1% of votes, most likely because this design is the most similar to his popular MCU incarnation played by Tom Hiddleston,

		Loki			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Old Loki	7	12.7	12.7	12.7
	Lady Loki	7	12.7	12.7	25.5
	Teen Loki	3	5.5	5.5	30.9
	Ikol	38	69.1	69.1	100.0
	Total	55	100.0	100.0	

and also looks the most mature and conventionally attractive. Those reasons would explain why Kid Loki got zero votes for being both obscure and extremely young.

Female? Response Analysis:

Almost half of the respondents correctly picked Flashpoint Joker.

		Female?			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	DIO	3	5.5	5.5	5.5
	Hisoka	5	9.1	9.1	14.5
	Funny Valentine	13	23.6	23.6	38.2
	Joker Flashpoint	26	47.3	47.3	85.5
	Diavolo	8	14.5	14.5	100.0
	Total	55	100.0	100.0	

This is likely because most of the respondents are comic book fans familiar with the Flashpoint story.

Male? Response Analysis:

80% of respondents correctly picked Robotman. He is a very niche character even for average

		Male?			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Rosie the Robot Maid	2	3.6	3.6	3.6
	Ironheart	4	7.3	7.3	10.9
	Robotman	44	80.0	80.0	90.9
	Red Tornado Lois Lane	1	1.8	1.8	92.7
	Jocasta	4	7.3	7.3	100.0
	Total	55	100.0	100.0	

comic book fans, so respondents most likely guessed correctly because female design semiotic traits emphasizing curved bodies are familiar and predictable. This is in spite of the fact that robots realistically should not have a biological gender as artificial beings and have no functional use for looking like a particular gender unless they're designed for romance or sexual appeal purposes.

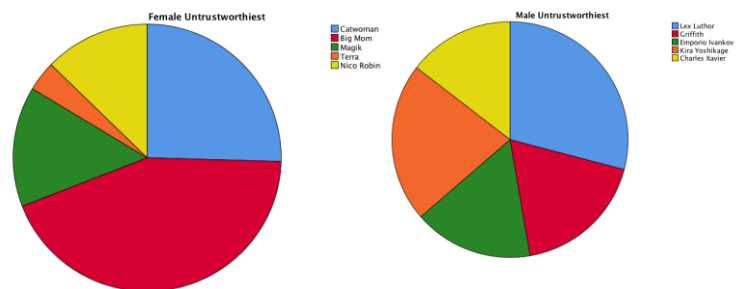
Male and Female Untrustworthiest Response

Analysis:

Out of these lists, the only true villains were Lex Luthor, Griffith, Kira Yoshikage, Big Mom, Catwoman, and Terra. So 65.1% of respondents guessed correctly with somewhat close votes for each choice. In contrast, Big Mom got most of the votes in the female section with a 43.6% take. Both Emporio Ivankov and Big Mom come from have exaggerated freakish designs, but it appears that is a bigger warning sign for females than males. Which means female character attractiveness may correlate with morality.

		Male Untrustworthiest			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Lex Luthor	16	29.1	29.1	29.1
	Griffith	10	18.2	18.2	47.3
	Emporio Ivankov	9	16.4	16.4	63.6
	Kira Yoshikage	12	21.8	21.8	85.5
	Charles Xavier	8	14.5	14.5	100.0
	Total	55	100.0	100.0	

		Female Untrustworthiest			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Catwoman	14	25.5	25.5	25.5
	Big Mom	24	43.6	43.6	69.1
	Magik	8	14.5	14.5	83.6
	Terra	2	3.6	3.6	87.3
	Nico Robin	7	12.7	12.7	100.0
	Total	55	100.0	100.0	



Significant Bivariate Correlations:**Gender x Favorite Character: $r = +.293^{**}$, $p = .002$**

This strongly suggests that the survey respondent's gender plays a significant role in which gender their favorite characters they gave, which is accurate since it the few female favorite characters selected were made mostly by women.

Gender x Robin Male: $r = -.298^*$, $p = .027$

This strongly suggests that the respondent's gender plays a big role in which male Robin design they preferred. As it turns out, only women voted for Red Robin and 4 out of the 5 votes for the Classic design were male.

Gender x High-Low Readers: $r = +.309^*$, $p = .022$

This strongly suggests gender is a factor in monthly comic book reading frequency. When comparing the two variables using crosstabs, it is shown that the amount of male medium readers are two times more than females and male high readers triple times the amount of female high readers. But this is likely biased since there is an uneven gender ratio in the respondent sample.

Monthly Reading Rate x Favorite Villain: $r = +.296^*$, $p = .028$

There is most likely a positive correlation here because the few times that survey respondents did not answer the Favorite Villain question also wrote 0 for their monthly comic book reading rate: meaning they do not read comic books.

Monthly Reading Rate x High-Low Readers: $r = +.343^*$, $p = .010$

This strongly suggests that monthly reading rate is strongly correlated with monthly reading level. But of course it would be since high-low readers are labels made to categorize and simplify the wide array of monthly reading rate results.

Monthly Reading Rate x Comic Con: $r = +.195^*$, $p = .046$

These results indicate that Comic Con attendees are more likely to be monthly comic book readers than those who do not attend Comic Con. That makes complete sense considering that Comic Con attracts dedicated fanbases, especially for comic books.

Favorite Character x Robin Female = $r = +.432^*$, $p = .001$

It seems that there is a very slim chance that choices selected for the “Robin Female” question are influenced by the gender of the respondent’s favorite character.

Favorite Character x Favorite Villain: $r = +.549^{}$, $p = .000$**

There’s only a correlation here because of two reasons. First, survey respondents who answered one of these questions always answered the other. Second, most of the answers for both questions were male characters.

Favorite Characters x Black Trunks: $r = -.286^*$, $p = .035$

Since Batman was one of the most frequent answers for the “Favorite Character” question, these results may indicate that it’s more likely for Batman fans to disagree with Batman wearing black trunks in contrast to Superman’s red trunks.

Favorite Character x Male?: $r = -.386^{}$, $p = .004$**

This might mean that knowledgeable comic book readers who were able to answer who their favorite character was were more likely to circle the correct specific answer for the “Which Robot is Male?” question.

Significant Difference x Favorite Villain: $r = +.270^*$, $p = .047$

Maybe there is a small correlation here since most of the survey takers disagreed with the “Significant Difference” statement comparing the *Spider-Woman* and *Spider-Man* covers, as well as choosing male characters as their favorite villains.

Significant Difference x No Heels: $r = -.389^{}$, $p = .003$**

Apparently people who disagree with that there is no difference between the Spider-Woman and Spider-Man covers are more likely to agree that high heels are impractical for female superheroes to wear. This makes sense because of those opinions are to be expected from people critical towards arguably sexualized and sexist female comic book character portrayals.

Significant Difference x Poison Ivy: $r = -.289^*$, $p = .033$

These results indicate that people who voted for Poison Ivy’s Spandex design also disagree about Spider-Man and Spider-Woman being portrayed the same way on their comic book covers. This is reasonable since Ivy’s Spandex design covers up her skin a lot more than the Classic design made for male sex appeal.

Wonder Woman x Robin Male: $r = +.283^*$, $p = .036$

People that voted for clothed male Robin designs are more likely to pick the clothed Wonder Woman designs.

Robin Female x Poison Ivy: $r = -.306^*$, $p = .023$

Respondents who voted for the Classic and Spandex Poison Ivy designs also voted for the more clothed female Robin designs. That paints an interesting dichotomy for female characters and points to context and characterization being integral to how female character designs are perceived.

Superboy x Poison Ivy: $r = +.277^*$, $p = .041$

Most of the people who voted for Superboy's *Young Justice* design also voted for Poison Ivy's classic design. This makes sense since these are both their most well known DC Comics designs.

Spider Women x Red Trunks: $r = -.349^{}$, $p = .009$**

People who prefer Spider-Gwen's design the most also tend to agree that Superman looks better with red trunks on. They are the most traditional looking costumes for the Superman and Spider-Man brands, so perhaps that is the reason.

Red Trunks x Black Trunks: $r = +.466^{}$, $p = .000$**

More survey respondents are likely to somewhat agree that both Superman and Batman look better with colorful trunks on. That makes perfect sense since both looks are nostalgic classics that appeal to nostalgic fans

Black Trunks x No Heels: $r = -.390^{}$, $p = .003$**

Respondents who disagree that Batman looks good in trunks are also likely to think high heels are impractical for female superheroes. That is an interesting observation and probably makes sense because of how both pieces of attire can be seen as being impractical.

Black Trunks x Super-Athletic: $r = -.313^*$, $p = .020$

Respondents who disagree that Batman looks good in trunks also think that characters with super-strength should look athletic. This might be due to how Batman fans prefer him to look serious and intimidating, which his muscle-toned designs can help emphasize.

Female? x Male?: $r = -.357^{}$, $p = .008$**

People who got one question right most likely got the other question right, which would make sense if they are knowledgeable comic book fans.

Male? x Female Untrustworthy: $r = +.333^*$, $p = .013$

People who correctly chose Robotman as a male character in a robot lineup also think option 3, Big Mom, is the least trustworthy in the female character lineup. This may seem weird on the surface, but this may show emphasize how non-traditional/non-sexualized female designs stand out a lot more uncomfortably to comic book fans than non-traditional/non-sexualized male designs.

Male Untrustworthy x No Capes: $r = -.429^{}$, $p = .001$**

People who correctly discerned the male villains also tend to think capes are impractical for battle. This might be linked to how knowledgeable comic book fans that can answer these questions right have also probably watched *The Incredibles* at least once.

Female Untrustworthy x High-Low Readers: $r = -.437^{}$, $p = .001$**

Medium and high readers most likely chose Big Mom as the least trustworthy female character. This could either be because Big Mom looks the most atypical and monstrous compared to female designs they are used to or they are likely to be knowledgeable about the *One Piece* shonen manga where Big Mom stars as a villain in.

All p values for the above correlations rank as very weak.

Discussion

The p values ranking as weak or low moderate are most likely due to the relatively small sample population. There were 55 people surveyed and it appears that the sample needed to be larger to get stronger results. Other factors at play in creating these results could be the convenience sampling applied by giving surveys to a mix of people already associated with at Saint Peter's University and online. But they still resulted in lots of correlations regardless, even if they are very weak.

Question 2's answers were scaled on four levels from non-reader to low-reader to mid-reader to high-reader depending on how many comic books on a monthly average. It turned out that 10 of the survey takers were non-readers (18.2%), 10 were low-readers (18.2%), 15 were medium readers (27.3%), and 20 were high-readers (36.4%). So this

study managed to end up getting a varied amount of different levels of comic book readers. Since most of them are experienced comic book readers, it means there is a chance they could have answered Questions 19, 20, 21, and 22 with pre-existing knowledge bias rather than based on character appearance.

With Questions 3 and 11, which asked survey takers to write down their favorite comic book characters and villains, the most answers were scored based on the gender of the favorite character/villain (refusal to answer got recorded as 0). In both cases, most of the responses listed male characters instead of female characters. This huge result of male answers is certainly a consequence of most of the survey takers being experienced comic book fans as evidenced in the Question 2 results; combined with comic books often prioritizing male characters over female characters. The characters that received the most specific votes are all some of the most popular American superhero and Japanese *shonen* manga characters of all time, which explains why they were picked so frequently. Spider-Man, Batman, and Joker in particular have starred in many movies and TV shows since the mid-1900s.

When it came to Questions 5-10, 17, and 18, the male comic book characters (Namor, male Robins, Superboy, Loki) received the least amount of circled answers for their classic designs, which either showed lots of skin or had an outdated clothing style. Their most modern designs, especially the ones that are featured in recent cartoon and movie adaptations during the past two decades, were the ones that received the most votes. This may stem from how classic sidekick and villain designs were coded as LGBT (Shyminsky, 2011). Independent comic book artist Richard Weakley even remarked in his interview how “villains are way more often portrayed as queer. It’s common,

everyone knows it. Heroes are the “big bold straight man”... but usually villains get to have much more personality... compared to the standard copy & paste superhero.”

Yet for Questions 5 and 17 (Wonder Woman and Poison Ivy), their most classic designs typically showing lots of skin and modern designs covering up most of their body nearly tied for the most votes. Those classic skin-exposing designs exist as a part of a comic book industry trend to design women that sexually appeal to men (Braddock, 2004), which means they might be preferred by many due to either sex appeal or nostalgia. Meanwhile with Question 8 (female Robins) and Question 10 (Spider-Women), the oldest designs with skin-exposed arms and legs received the least votes compared to the more covered up counterparts. This can probably be traced back to how female characters have gradually gained more appeal over time (John, 2005) and also in part due to getting less skin-exposing attire.

Questions 4, is one of the Likert scale answer questions in the survey. For Question 4, 31 survey takers either strongly or somewhat disagreed with the Spider-Woman and Spider-Man covers having similar character design presentation, making up 56.4% of the total answers. The remaining 43.6% consists of 24 survey takers who strongly or somewhat agreed they were presented similarly. When cross-tabbed with gender, it turns out that 12 females were part of the 31 survey takers who disagreed while 9 out of the 24 agreeing survey takers were female. In contrast, 19 males disagreed while 15 males agreed. This means both the male and female survey takers were roughly split in half between agreeing and disagreeing with Question 4’s statement. Perhaps this means that in modern years both genders have various sensibilities to character designs rather than most of them having universal hive mind opinions.

Question 19 and 20 asked survey takers to choose which character they believe is female or male respectively among a lineup of characters. The results for Question 19 (asking which character is female) were mixed, with only 26 survey takers that make up 47.3% of all survey takers getting the question right (correct answer is Option 4: Flashpoint Joker). It is worth noting that question's four out of five images come from Japanese manga characters, all of who are male. In contrast, Question 20 (asking which character is male) resulted in 44 survey takers picking the correct answer (Option 3: Robotman) out of the lineup of female characters. This originates from how American male and female character designs typically adhere to conventional masculine and feminine traits recognized by many people. But with Japanese manga, male and female character designs are more open to featuring gender bending and androgynous gender portrayals (Aiken, 2010, Page 46).

Interestingly, both of the interviewed comic book artists are male but share similar opinions on female characters being overly sexualized. Jed Henry dislikes Harley Quinn for being a "sex slave" to the Joker and Richard Weakley found the Spider-Woman and Batgirl variant covers criticism to be almost completely agreeable.

Ultimately, much of the evidence taken from surveys and interviews suggest that comic book artists/fans create, value, and criticize fictional female character designs based on primal sex appeal in contrast to perceiving fictional male character designs based around escapist power fantasies.

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Appendix

Richard Weakley (male independent comic book artist) Interview:

INTERVIEW CONSENT

Hello. My name is Mario Viera. I am a fourth year undergraduate student in the Communication and Media Culture major at Saint Peter's University, Jersey City, New Jersey. Thank you for consenting to this interview in connection with my honors thesis concerning the gender representation in comic books. Before we begin, however, I would like to reassure you that as a respondent, you have several very definite rights.

--- Your participation in this interview is entirely voluntary.

--- You are free to refuse any question at any time.

--- You are free to withdraw from the interview at any time.

--- Anything declared off-the-record will be kept so.

--- The contents of this interview will be kept strictly confidential. Excerpts will be used only for academic research purposes.

--- I will not identify you in my dissertation by name, initials, or any other identifying characteristics, unless given permission by you to do so.

Please sign this form on the space provided below to demonstrate you have read its contents. If you have any questions about the study or your participation in it, feel free to contact me at mviera16@saintpeters.edu.

Thank you again for your time, interest, and cooperation.

(signed) *Richard Weakley*

(printed) Richard Weakley

(where you can be reached) megamaniac321@gmail.com

(dated) 11/24/19

- 1) Do you think female superhero costumes are designed differently than males? If so, why?

Yes, I do. Female superhero outfits are usually extremely tight fitting, usually putting an emphasis on curves because female characters in many comics typically don't see much variety in terms of body shapes. Often times I also see a lot more skin being shown. The argument for male character designs showing "a lot of skin" too is easily brushed aside when looking at the framing of it all. A shirtless man and a woman whose outfit has a boob window are definitely not the same thing. And even if it's something as simple as very short shorts, on a man they have a completely different meaning, whereas on a woman they're typically viewed as "sexy".

- 2) What are your favorite and least favorite female character designs and why?

That's an incredibly difficult question and off the top of my head I couldn't really tell you my favorite, though it may come to me by the end of this. Though character designs I loathe are designs like you'd see in old fantasy guides or on action movie posters. Helpless women who are blond, busty, and wearing hardly anything. It gets to a point where you wonder if the artists wanted to even bother with a face, with how specifically exaggerated everything else is. Oda is another example. It's fun to make jokes about One Piece, but it's endlessly frustrating to see a man so clearly capable of making unique and interesting character designs refuse to put an ounce of effort into his female characters, and then brush it off like it's a funny joke in interviews.

- 3) What are your favorite and least favorite male character designs and why?

Again, not sure on favorites, that varies a LOT, and really depends on the context of the series. As for least favorite male character designs, I guess just generic looking dudes. There's a lot more willingness to have variety from male artists, so when I see boring character designs there, too, it's even more underwhelming. I hate that I expect it with female characters at this point, hoping I'll be a part of a big change in terms of that.

- 4) What kinds of design traits do you see more frequently in villains compared to heroes and vice-versa?

Villains are way more often portrayed as queer. It's common, everyone knows it. Heroes are the "big bold straight man" or the "horny punk teen" usually, and are often a knight in shining armor or a complete perv if we're talking main series protagonist tropes. That's of course only true in some cases. But usually villains get to have much more personality. They emote more, express themselves through their actions and body movements, and have more in-world reasoning for their goals fairly often. It's hard not to like some villains just because of how

entertaining they can be when compared to the standard cut & paste cardboard hero.

- 5) What did you think of the *Spider-Woman* and *Batgirl* cover controversies?

The spider girl controversy was stupid, as in, who the hell drew the original image. Like, really? You really think nobody is going to care? Not only is it embarrassing, but it's also just ugly. Like seriously. I've enjoyed all the parodies of it though, the Iron Man one really got to me. The Batgirl controversy was definitely a bigger reaction. It wasn't just standard female objectification, but it's still there. It's using Batgirl as a prop for the Batman story, and the cover is a pretty grim one, too. I will say that, even when the image is reversed with men, it still has a really threatening aura about it, if not more. I think that this whole "women in refrigerators" trope really needs to stop. It seems like that's all comic writers know how to use women in these stories, and honestly this cover just really enforces that ideology more.

Emily Davis (female independent comic book artist) Interview:

INTERVIEW CONSENT

Hello. My name is Mario Viera. I am a fourth year undergraduate student in the Communication and Media Culture major at Saint Peter's University, Jersey City, New Jersey.

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Thank you again for your time, interest, and cooperation.

Emily Davis

(signed)

Emily Davis

(printed)

@birdwatch.discord.com

(where you can be reached)

4/21/20

(dated)

- 1) Do you think female superhero bodies and costumes are designed differently than males? If so, why?

Yes, emphasis in female designs seems to be on sex appeal rather than power. Female superheroes tend to be less muscular and their costumes can be more revealing in a sexualized manner—Power Girl comes to mind. The female figure itself is sexualized so a woman in a skintight suit plays a different role for a straight male audience than a man in a skintight suit does.

- 2) What are your favorite and least favorite female character designs and why?

Not familiar enough with mainstream comics to have a large frame of reference for designs, I'll refrain from answering

- 3) What are your favorite and least favorite male character designs and why?

See previous answer

- 4) What kinds of design traits do you see more frequently in villains compared to heroes and vice-versa?

Villains: dark clothing, less humanoid/beastlike, often conventionally unattractive (hooked nose, exaggerated features, fat—traits associated with “badness”)

Heroes: outfits have broad range of colors leaning toward bright/light colors, tend to have skintight clothing, typical hero proportions (8 to 9 “heads” tall, muscular or lean), conventionally attractive

- 5) What did you think of the *Spider-Woman* and *Batgirl* cover controversies in 2014 and 2015?

People are right to be upset at overt sexualization and victimization of female characters in works that could easily be empowering women instead. The covers reinforce expectations that women are weak and/or sexual objects to whom men are entitled.

Carrie Prince (female independent artist) Interview:

INTERVIEW CONSENT

Hello. My name is Mario Viera. I am a fourth year undergraduate student in the Communication and Media Culture major at Saint Peter's University, Jersey City, New Jersey. Thank you for consenting to this interview in connection with my honors thesis concerning the gender representation in comic books. Before we begin, however, I would like to reassure you that as a respondent, you have several very definite rights.

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Please sign this form on the space provided below to demonstrate you have read its contents. If you have any questions about the study or your participation in it, feel free to contact me at mviera16@saintpeters.edu.

Thank you again for your time, interest, and cooperation.
(signed)

Carrie Prince

(printed)

Carrie Prince

(signature)

cmprince13@gmail.com

(where you can be reached)

04/21/2020

(dated)

- 1) Do you think female superhero bodies and costumes are designed differently than males? If so, why?

Wholeheartedly. There's the base level of idealistic male and female bodies being different from one another (there's a common trope, for example, of short-handing a muscular male character by giving them a large chest and arms but short-handing a muscular female character by giving her a large rear and legs) but I think the issue is more complex than that. Once given the context of a majority of comic writers throughout history being men the issue becomes framed as a product of the male gaze. Men are designed to be idolized, women are designed to be gawked at. That is to say nothing of nonbinary bodies (which are practically nonexistent unless the character is a robot or an alien or somesuch but I digress)

- 2) What are your favorite and least favorite female character designs and why?

Citing specific examples is hard but I tend to dislike female character designs that focus too heavily on sex appeal (unless that's the point of the character, for example I'm generally fine with Boa Hancock from One Piece having a large bust and tiny waist since her gimmick is based on her physical appearance but the same can't be said for the likes of Nami where the similar design doesn't really fit)

There's a neat example of a costume design if we look at the initial run of Captain Marvel (the Carol Danvers comic) from 1977. The original artist designed the outfit rather poorly, in my opinion, with clashing colors, skin showing at odd places (diamonds cut into her suit to reveal her belly and lower back for example) and odd choices like

adding a scarf. When Chris Claremont took up the book, he spent a lot of time correcting the (many) problems the first few issues had, including giving her a new outfit. The new outfit wasn't PERFECT but it was leagues better than the original. The sleek black unitard with a bold yellow lightning bolt emblazoned across it with a red sash to flow in the wind as she flew.

3) What are your favorite and least favorite male character designs and why?

Men tend to have a lot more freedom in their designs so it's a bit easier to pinpoint what I like and dislike. When it comes to comic book heroes (and character design in general) I love a flawed design. Not a bad design. Just flawed. It's why I gravitate towards characters like Jonah Hex or The Thing. Imperfection draws the eye in.

4) What kinds of design traits do you see more frequently in villains compared to heroes and vice-versa?

In a generalized sense, villains are typically drawn more imposing than the hero. Villains tend to take on a more monstrous appearance (I enjoy the subversion of this with stories like the Fantastic Four, where The Thing is the hero despite being a monster and Doctor Doom, while being clad in heavy metal armor, is just an average man underneath (I know some writers have had him have horrible face deformities but the most interesting interpretation is wherein Doom has a single small scar on his cheek yet feels the need to hide)) On the more heinous side of history, villains have often appeared

more... ethnic, let's say, than our true, blue American heroes. I'd like to say this has lessened in recent years but it hasn't dissipated completely.

- 5) What did you think of the *Spider-Woman* and *Batgirl* cover controversies in 2014 and 2015?

The Spider-Woman controversy was fairly cut and dry, I feel. She was posed suggestively on the cover and the artist was called out for this. The Batgirl one is a bit deeper in that a lot of arguments for it I heard cited that the cover depicted a major point of Barbara Gordon's comic book career. HOWEVER, she isn't the hero on the cover of her own superhero story. She's being victimized. The drawing is dead centered on her and Joker's heads. Gordon is openly weeping and gagged. Contrast to if this was a Batman comic cover with the same basic idea. Batman would be depicted as unphased; unamused. The shot might not be a close up. Batman would be dangling upside down over a shark tank or some other kind of comic book shenanigan. Because Batman is a man. Batman is never the victim. Batgirl is a woman. Batgirl therefore must be the victim. To top it all off, I'm not sure that the story had anything to even do with Batgirl's relationship to the Joker? They just drew her being assaulted to commemorate the anniversary of The Killing Joke.

Robby Bevard (male professional comic book artist and colorist) Interview:

INTERVIEW CONSENT

Hello. My name is Mario Viera. I am a fourth year undergraduate student in the Communication and Media Culture major at Saint Peter's University, Jersey City, New Jersey.

Thank you for consenting to this interview in connection with my honors thesis concerning the gender representation in comic books.

Before we begin, however, I would like to reassure you that as a respondent, you have several very definite rights.

--- Your participation in this interview is entirely voluntary.

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Thank you again for your time, interest, and cooperation.

Robert Bevard (signed)

Robert Bevard (printed)

robertbevard@gmail.com (where you can be reached)

4/24/2020 (dated)

- 1) Do you think female superhero bodies and costumes are designed differently than males? If so, why?

Absolutely. They have traditionally been designed towards sex appeal over practicality. American comics have largely been geared towards the male gaze for decades. So while Male heroes will also get form fitting outfits that show off their muscles, that's a power fantasy thing... while female characters will constantly go bare legged or open chest for no practical reason but just to show some skin. Even beyond just the pure design of a character, female characters will VERY consistently be posed in sexy glamour shots, even to the point of breaking anatomy, to be sexier.

I think in recent years creators have gotten a bit better about this, but its still an industry mostly run by male creators, making books for a mostly male audience.

- 2) What are your favorite and least favorite female character designs and why?

That's too broad and across too many genres to have a real answer for. Outfits that make sense for the character, I suppose. It's okay for Wonder Woman to show some skin because she's invincible and that gives her freedom of movement, and Rogue of the X-Men typically has outfits that cover her whole body (her power involves negative side effects with physical touch) so that makes a lot of sense. Costumes that are scanty for the sake of it are generally off-putting, but in some cases like Black Cat or Power Girl's cleavage windows its okay for the specific character. .

Take a character like DC comic's Starfire. She's been around since the 80's, and has had more than a few appearances, including multiple for-kids cartoon shows. She's a near invincible space alien from a different culture, so like Wonder Woman, it's okay and makes sense if she doesn't wear much and is comfortable being almost naked... but you look at the range of designs she's had, and you can see the difference in artist design intent. There's a vast difference between "okay with showing off her body" and "dressed like a stripper."

<https://am21.mediaite.com/tms/cnt/up...e-Costumes.jpg>

Or look at Captain Marvel. She has a long super convoluted history of costumes and you can just look at the designs and know exactly when she got a practical costume versus a sexy one. (I like her black costume though... it shows leg but it's a really strong striking look. It's not **overly** sexy but it looks great. But that same basic design got imported to a new modern character, and with pants, and it still looks good.

<https://i.pining.com/564x/7d/59/11/7...a776e14d77.jpg>

If the outfit looks like its going to fall off without being super-glued to their skin, it's probably a bad choice.

The one odd exception I can get behind? Red Sonja. She wears a silver chainmail battle bikini. It makes zero sense for combat and by all rights it should be terrible, but the actual design of it offset by her long red hair is a striking look... but mostly its in the same world as Conan the Barbarian, and he typically goes around in a loincloth and is fine. It sort of

works for the power fantasy of that specific world and era:

<https://d1466nnw0ex81e.cloudfront.net/600/872335.jpg>

3) What are your favorite and least favorite male character designs and why?

Same basic answer, stuff that makes sense. Though with male characters there tend to be a few more super iconic designs than female heroes get. Superman, Spiderman, Shazam, Captain America, Wolverine (his mask at least) even someone as mocked as Aquaman, are all really iconic and have stood the test of time as strong iconography in terms of design and color. A lot of the 80's X-Men costumes are really strong and keep returning, like Colossus and Nightcrawler, while their 90's costumes didn't fare as well. Most female characters haven't fared as well because... their designs tend to be based around their female-ness and change between skirts and bare shoulders and thigh highs all the time so its harder for them to settle into the truly iconic.

Incidentally, Superman? Needs the red trunks. It breaks up all the blue on his costume, we're used to seeing them there, it makes sense that a farmboy from Kansas would have some modesty for the sake of his mother, and the costume is nearly 80 years old... it doesn't matter that it's outlived circus strongmen, its part of his look.

For bad designs I'll go ahead and toss in basically any design from the mid to late 90's. Giant shoulder pads and pouches and huge guns and way too many lines for everyone! That was an awful decade for fashion in comics.

- 4) What kinds of design traits do you see more frequently in villains compared to heroes and vice-versa?

Villains get cooler helmets and hoods and darker colors. Often a lot of spikes. The big difference is villains are allowed to be "ugly" and have unusual shapes or be monsters. Giant blobs or dinosaurs or vampires or bodies that turn into weapon shapes... heroes tend to have to be clean looking movie stars. That's not universal, but broadly the case. (This also applies to film and television.)

- 5) What did you think of the *Spider-Woman* and *Batgirl* cover controversies in 2014 and 2015?

Does it say something that I don't even have to look at the images to know exactly which covers you're referring to?

The Spider-woman cover was just bad art first and foremost. There have been plenty of sexualized covers over the decades. That one got so much flak because it looked so bad. The perspective, the anatomy, the colors, the composition and choice of camera angle, the background, It was all bad and allowed itself to be openly critiqued and mocked and memed. I even made a few passes at it myself at the time. The artist is actually talented in his own work, (and he does do pornographic material) but that was just a terrible cover.

The Batgirl cover was in poor taste for different reasons. It ignored her decades of history

as a hero, and the context of the Joker and Batgirl relationship, (he once shot and paralyzed her and stripped her naked then tortured her father with those images... in a story that the writer himself says he is not proud of and he never intended for it to be part of the ongoing canon of the comics), and it also made her into a victim. There I think it's her pleading helpless eyes that made it so offensive and off-putting, she was just a victim. I've seen edits of that piece where her eyes were narrowed and defiant, and that small change made all the context difference in the world. The cover itself is actually fine, it's a striking image and its decently drawn, but the decades of *context* make it in very poor taste... especially as it was being put on a relaunch of the Batgirl comic that was well... more heroic and upbeat and trying to get past that exact baggage that had left the character crippled for decades. If it had been an art piece for a reprint of The Killing Joke it would have been fine and appropriate, but it was completely out of place in the relaunch of the ongoing series.

Did these things deserve to be controversies? Probably not. There are literally hundreds of new comic book covers every month; it's absurd that I knew these two specific ones offhand with zero context outside of the title. They were bad covers, but they didn't warrant the countless coverage they got.

Jeff Beck (male comic book retailer and owner of East Side Mags comic store) interview:

INTERVIEW CONSENT

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Thank you again for your time, interest, and cooperation.

Jeff Beck (signed)

Jeff Beck (printed)

jeff@eastsidemags.com (where you can be reached)

4/24/2020 (dated)

- 1) Do you think female superhero bodies and costumes are designed differently than males? If so, why?

Female superhero bodies and costumes, even today, are designed differently than males. In more recent comics, it's been heavily toned down but you can still see that they are drawn and designed much more shapely and curvy than the male counterparts. In the 90s, this was HEAVILY shown as women's bodies were depicted with huge breasts, huge hips and tiny waists – so much so that it is anatomically impossible to survive with that type of body – a person would snap in half they'd be so top heavy.

- 2) What are your favorite and least favorite female character designs and why?

She-Hulk has historically been curvy but she's also depicted as bigger than most characters – taller, more muscular. I'm a fan of hers and also the modern representation of her that is bulky and more Hulk-like than just a female version of the male Hulk. Some of the X-Men unfortunately are still depicted in skimpy outfits or short skirts. Batgirl sometimes seems to be depicted in a leather jacket and leather pants (non-sexualized), which is pretty rad, but then sometimes she's drawn with almost head to toe spandex, which isn't so great. Harley Quinn is almost always depicted sexually in her design without fail. Starfire from Titans is the same way. Almost always looks like she's wearing a bathing suit.

- 3) What are your favorite and least favorite male character designs and why?

Batman is a classic great. Different and interesting variations on the same design for over 80 years! And each variation makes it look completely different without being very different at all. Wolverine is like that too. His brown and yellow or blue and yellow outfits are the same/similar design but different colors and he also is depicted in street clothes – mostly with a cowboy hat – which I don't get but it's his signature thing so it's cool.

- 4) What kinds of design traits do you see more frequently in villains compared to heroes and vice-versa?

Villains tend to have darker colors and more angry/sinister looking facial features. Heroes tend to be wider-eyed and more innocent looking with brighter colored clothing. Even in today's comics.

- 5) What did you think of the *Spider-Woman* and *Batgirl* cover controversies in 2014 and 2015?

Spider-Woman – While I agree that the pose she's holding is very sexualized and an almost impossible position for a person to be in, they did in fact commission an artist to draw that image who is known for his VERY sexual comics so he's got tons of experience drawing a woman's body. If someone who draws sexually explicit comics were asked to draw a female superhero, I would almost expect that picture to be sexual in

nature. That's his niche and probably why they asked him to do it. If they wanted something tamer, they could have asked 1000 other artists who don't primarily make their living on sexually natured comics.

Batgirl – this one is a little more rough. This is a CLEAR reference to the Killing Joke in which there is DEFINITELY an implication that the Joker sexually assaulted Barbara Gordon after shooting her and crippling her. This is an actual part of the story and to have the Joker and Batgirl depicted like this is a clear callback to that. Is it insensitive? Yes. She is clearly in distress as depicted by the tears in her eyes and definitely seems to shine a spotlight on sexual assault but not in a good way. It's a little "too much" in terms of imagery and was better recalled than actually printed and published.