
The Female Justice League: The Misrepresentations of Women in Comic Books

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In The Beginning

Men are dominant in the comic book industry, both as creators and consumers, and have been since the beginning of mainstream comics such as DC and Marvel. For years, female comic book characters have been written with inaccurate portrayals of women, characterized to show men's views on women and ultimately drawn as sex objects for a heteronormative male audience. However, women and girls are starting to pickup comic books more over the last few years and they have started to raise questions as to whether or not female characters in comic books are portrayed as authentic representations of real women and whether or not hypersexualized images of these characters are controversial.

These questions are starting to drive industries to expand and accurately represent a larger group of people as their audience diversifies and one faction of this audience is the growing number of female consumers. In order to help these industries progress, I would like to educate readers and raise awareness to the objectification and misrepresentations of women in superhero comics.

History of Heroines: How Culture Has Shaped Women in Comics

Female characters in comics have long been a reflection on how society has viewed women. To see how comic book heroines have been molded throughout the decades, we will take a look at the first iconic female superhero: Wonder Woman. Wonder Woman was created by William Moulton Marston in 1942 "in order to create an alternative to what he called the 'bloodcurdling masculinity' of contemporary comics" (Emad 957) and he "hoped that Wonder Woman would help to inspire needed sociopolitical change" (Matsuuchi122). In the 1940s, during World War II, Wonder Woman's character encouraged women to join the war efforts by both physically getting involved and economically supporting the troops and their own families through the labor force. Around this time, the status of women in these comics rose from pre- World War II era to World War II, probably due to the rise of female artists, writers and editors in the comic book industry, with the number tripling in 1942 (Larew 591).

After the war came a rise in conservative efforts and a desire for women to stay at home while the men tried to reclaim their jobs, Wonder Woman takes on a more domestic role and becomes her assumed identity Diana Prince, owning a flower shop and being proposed to by her love interest, Steve Trevor, who she used to be saving from danger (Emad 966). During the 1970s, owner of *Ms. Magazine* and feminist leader, Gloria Steinem, criticized the watered down version of Wonder Woman for not being powerful enough.

Steinem wrote in her magazine, “She had become a kind of female James Bond, though much more boring because she was denied his sexual freedom” (Matsuuchi 128), thus earning Wonder Woman a costume reboot that capitalized on her ability to express her sexual liberation. However, later in the 1970s feminist movement Wonder Woman was portrayed as a menace, reflecting society’s view on the female activists. In the 1990s, John Byrne created a new way of drawing Wonder Woman: one whose femininity is noted by large breasts and long flowing hair, thus beginning the era where hyper-sexuality allegedly represents strength of female characters (Emad 975).

Wonder Woman is not the only heroine whose character reflects male views on women in society. Many female characters were often used to reflect these values. Female villains expressed

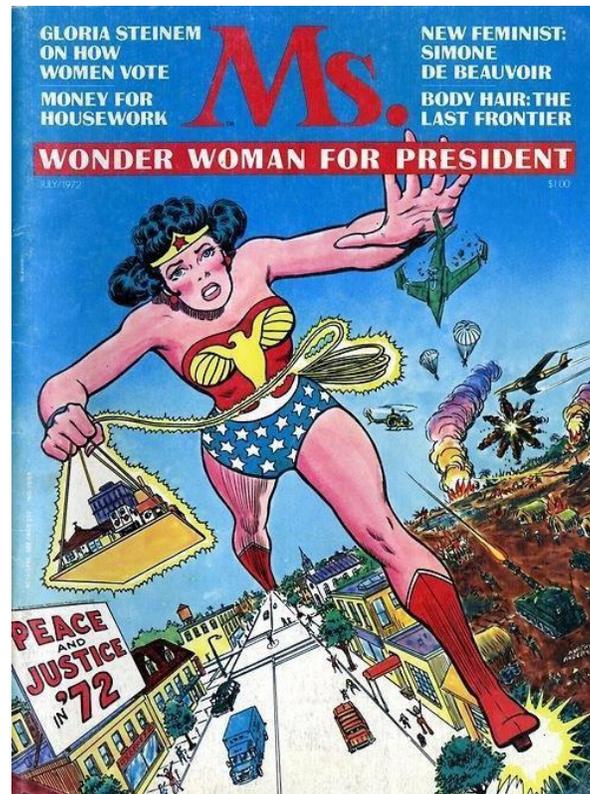


Figure 1: *Ms. Magazine*, July 1972.

the sentiments of “tricksters” or females that rise to power and exhibit autonomy usually through sexual expression, deception and manipulation. Meanwhile, the heroines properly contain their power by separating their hero work and their everyday lives, thus showing men’s views on women as they reflect the perspectives of women within a society: “Whether by coincidence or by design, these superheroines played a part in establishing a precedent of the superhero as a cultural metaphor” (Wyk 49).

Power vs. Empowered: Hypersexualized Heroines

In many comics, women are shown being sexually objectified with unrealistic feminine features, uncomfortable or impossible poses, and unreasonably inefficient uniforms. In “The ‘Broke Back Test’: a quantitative and qualitative analysis of portrayals of women in mainstream superhero comics, 1993–2013,” the author, Carolyn Cocca, analyzes how women are portrayed in Marvel and DC comic books from the 1990s to 2010s. This paper is written to show a quantitative study on how

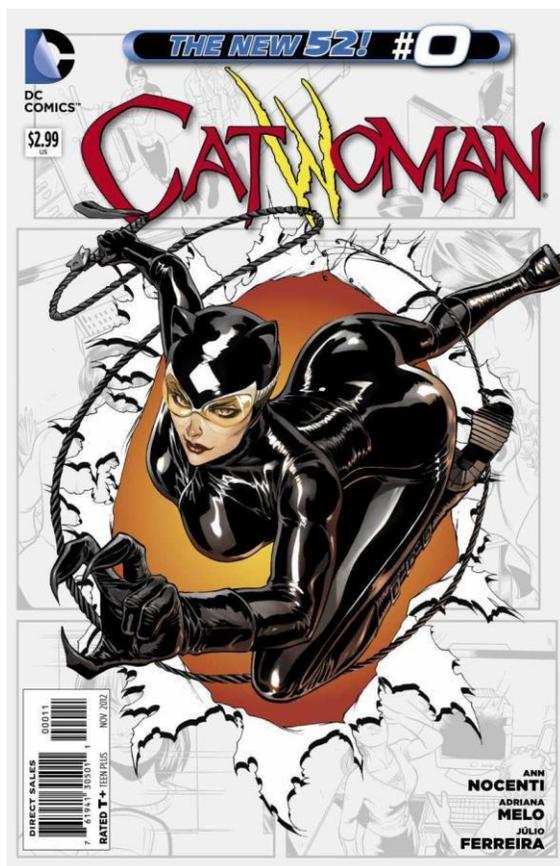


Figure 2: *Catwoman* #0, 2012

women are objectified in comic books over a course of three decades. Cocca writes about the differences of how men and women are depicted, “The males are generally drawn facing front with a focus on their musculature, but the females are often drawn from the back or from the side, large-breasted and small-waisted, long-haired and long-legged, sometimes without their faces shown at all” (411). This leads into how females are drawn in ways that men are not, what she describes to be the “broke back pose”, a pose in which the character is so impossibly twisted, to show certain bodily aspects, that it would be physically impossible for a human to do without breaking their back.

Cocca conducts a study where she takes six comics from Marvel and six from DC from the 2010s, four from each being female-titled. She counts panels of six issues for specific qualities: the number of female and male characters, the number of panels depicting speaking women, the number of panels depicting women’s bodies, women shown in the broke back and arched back pose (an uncomfortable position close to, but not quite as impossible as the broke back pose), and images where it seems as if the women’s clothes were threatening to come off. She also analyzes six issues of each comic book’s previous incarnations from the 1990s and 2000s in the same way, and

compares them throughout the time periods.

Her results show that in 136 out of 144 sample issues, women are shown being objectified, and the only title showing no objectifying covers is the New 52 *Wonder Woman* (2011-2012). Female characters are in about a quarter of the ensemble, or team, titled panels and in half of the female-titled panels. Females are shown in various broke back, and arched back poses or with their clothes falling off for about two thirds of the time in the ensemble titled books, and half of the time in female-titled books; both Marvel and DC keep a similar trend on all accounts. On the other hand, the objectification in the 2010 issues was about half of what it was in the 1990 issues. Overall, Cocca's results demonstrate a trend of overly sexualized women in comics.

Her study shows no analysis on the way men are portrayed, but those familiar with comics can see that there is an imbalance between the sexual natures in which either gender is illustrated. These portrayals of women are both defying and reinforcing traditional gender roles, as they are shown as strong and powerful but simultaneously oppressed as sex objects (Cocca 421). A study by Thomas Young demonstrates sexism in the comic universe. He analyzed 45 "Marvel Universe Trading Cards" from 1991 that gave statistics on different Marvel heroes. His analysis shows that only 10 out of the 45 cards were female superheroes who have fought in fewer battles, but the percentage of female wins and losses showed no different than the males: "The fact that women super-heroes are less frequently called upon to restore Cosmic order, despite their equal effectiveness, might be an indication of sexism in the 'Marvel Universe'" (218). Although their equal effectiveness may add to the power of the few superheroines there are, this lower number demonstrates that not all superheroes were created equal as men take up the dominant role in saving the day.

These numbers reveal that there is a significant lack of women in comic books, which is why each appearance of a female character in comic books counts much more as a crucial representation for all women. In the 1940s, many comic book heroines were drawn young and attractive and comic book artists would use pin-up girls as their models. This "Good Girl Art" was a popular comic art style in the 1940s, most superheroines of the time fit under this "idea that a woman's value is derived by one type of look" (Wyk 44). This idea of women being drawn in one type of way had not changed much; most heroines today fit the image of a thin, yet busty, and muscular power woman, which highly underrepresents the diversity of women. With an obvious design for a male-centric audience, this powerful physique in not one meant to empower women.

Girls Read Comics Too!

There has been a rise in the amount of girls and women reading comics in the past few years and they have started to speak out against these male-centric designs. Caryn Neumann and Lori Parks argue that, "A restructuring of comic content is needed to broaden the appeal of comics to the other half of the potential market" (299). Despite the growing numbers of fangirls, comic books seem dedicated to entertaining their audience of fanboys. They argue that, even though superheroines look feminine by their physical features, they do not actually act as females and they do not share life experiences or behave as real women do. Despite their skimpy outfits and their ostensibly feminist values, female characters act more like men than women; "they attack chauvinists with a punch instead of forming a battle plan against the structures of oppression" (Neumann and Parks 292). Neumann and Parks conclude that fangirls are invisible to the comic book industry and women who are drawn into comic shops by mainstream movies will most likely turn away from comic books.

The theory behind why women in comics are drawn in the way they are is because sex sells and that the comic book readers are predominantly heterosexual males. It's obvious to see who artists are directing their comics towards: "A heavily muscled male character is not the equivalent of a busty, barely clad superheroine as these muscles are aimed at male fans" (Neumann and Parks 292). To give an example, we can compare Hulk and his female counterpart She-Hulk, whose power stems from Hulk's own radioactive DNA. Hulk is an enormous, bulky, green skinned power fantasy, and while She-Hulk shares the same green skin and power, she is also drawn as a busty pin-up typical for the ideal women of male desire. Trina Robbins, a female comic book artist, eloquently presents this paradox between comic book writers and female readers by saying, "Using a circular kind of logic, editors at the major comic companies continue to produce sex object-heroines which appeal to a male audience. Their excuse for not adding strong female characters who might appeal



Figure 3: Lady Huntress from *Birds of Prey*, submitted by Lildormy for *The Hawkeye Initiative*

to women is that 'women don't read comics.' Of course, as long as female comic characters are insulting to the average woman, she won't read comics" (166). This was a quote from 1996 and over the last few years more women and girls have been reading more and more comic books. A Facebook study done in April 2016 showed that 43 percent of comic book fans are women, so the comic book creators are finding fewer reasons to create comic books solely for male consumers.

From Cocca's research, we see that there has been a significant decrease in the objectification of women today than there was thirty years ago, however there is more attention on these portrayals now than ever. Cocca relates that to "the sensibility of the 'third wave' of feminism, encouraging analysis, critique and production of pop culture through humour and irony" (421). The way that modern technology allows parodies and critiques of pop culture to be made and shown quickly to a large group of people contributes to this mass scrutiny of such women in comics.

The role female fans play in comic book culture through the use of modern technology is examined by Suzanne Scott. Scott explores a rising trend from comic book fans that parodies the obscene way comic women are drawn called *The Hawkeye Initiative*. This trend arose a few months after *The Avengers* movie by Joss Whedon in 2012, where fans drew one of the characters, Hawkeye, portrayed by Jeremy Renner, in the same sexual positions as females on comic covers. "*The Hawkeye Initiative* represents a more organized, thematically cohesive iteration of a long tradition within superhero fandom of calling attention to sexist costuming and posing practices" (Scott 153). The point of this initiative is to flip the tables on men and show them that this is what women are seeing, this is who we have to look up to and being powerful is not the same as being empowered.

“For some readers, seeing one image from *The Hawkeye Initiative* is more eye-opening than a book’s worth of analysis about the objectification of women” (Cocca 421). This is one of the ways the rising female comic book consumers are turning the tide and driving comic book franchises to take steps in diversifying their audience.

Discussion: To Be Continued...

Despite the growing number of female comic books readers, we are still seeing issues pertaining to misrepresentation of superheroines within comic books. The sexual objectification of these women, and their reflection of predominant male-centric views of women in society, along with the lack of superheroines going into battle, demonstrates how women in comic books are not portrayed justly. Many people who are part of the comic book culture are familiar with these issues. However, how much of the general public is aware of these problems? Comic-related media is becoming a larger part of current popular culture, as demonstrated in recent years where superhero movies and television shows have been gaining more popularity. As more women are being drawn into the hero franchise, they begin to raise questions such as, “How are these outfits suited for battle?” or “Why don’t we have a Wonder Woman movie yet?” I would like to explore deeper into how such depictions of females affect women within our culture, and how women view these inaccuracies of superheroines. I would also like to educate more people on this matter through my work. It is important for the populace to gain awareness of such issues because comic-book industries seem to adhere to popular opinion. So, if a significant amount of the consumer population is aware of such discrepancies, then the comic book industries may reflect these concerns. In this way, the industries can begin to create more diverse comic books that accurately represent women.

Research: What I Did

The study I conducted was to reach out to different women and see how they feel about the objectification and misrepresentations of women in various comic media. I included comic media, such as television and movies, in my study because I assumed that many of my participants would not be not familiar with, or do not read many comics. I studied and surveyed ten college women who were willing to participate in a photo shoot and survey. I chose these participants because by the time they entered college, they most likely have been exposed to other women being objectified through various media (e.g. magazines, television etc.) and have already formulated an opinion on the way women are seen through this media. I would like to show them, if they have not already seen this problem within comic media, and I would like to see where they stand on this issue.

During this study I had my participants pose as superheroines on covers of various comics while I photographed them, each participant was aware they were not required to pose for every comic cover I prepared. I conducted my study this way because I wanted to show them the ways women are being portrayed through comics. In my study I asked questions regarding the nature of these portrayals and how they affect the audience. For example, I asked questions like, “How do you feel about a cover like this being sold?”; “What type of audience do you think the authors were catering to?”; “How do you think girls who are seeing comics like this on shelves feel about it? Do you think they would buy it?” because I would like to see if others view this as an issue and discuss the reasons.

I also added a bonus question to the survey in which I asked participants to draw themselves as a superhero in order to see how they would represent themselves. (See Appendix A for a list of all survey questions). By conducting this study, I wanted to find out if women view portrayals of females in comic book media as a problem and if they are unfamiliar with comic books, I would like to educate them on how this is an issue. I believe my survey is important

because if the consumer population becomes aware of such issues and we are able to talk about it, the conversation turns to how we can better portray women in comics, rather than how they currently are not.

The Results Are In; Let's Talk About It

What I found in my study is that many women, even those who do not read comics, were able to see the objectification within them. In the survey, eight out of the ten participants said they felt "strange" and/or "uncomfortable" doing at least some of the poses, the other two mentioned that these poses felt "awkward" or "demeaning", and one of the participants said that these poses also made her feel "sensual." The overwhelming use of the phrases "strange" and "uncomfortable" in the results was probably due to a flaw within the survey where I used those phrases as example answers; however I also used "powerful", and "symbolic" as example answers and only one of the participants said that they felt "powerful" for some of the poses, and another said they felt "fierce" at times. However, despite their awkward feeling toward doing these poses, many of the participants could see some appeal to such pictures. They seemed to feel as though the covers were meant to convey power along with sex appeal. Lily said "the images were made to look powerful but doing them in person seems more uncomfortable". This is interesting because it shows a tendency for women to feel more powerful the less sexual they are. If I had prepared more conservative covers along with hypersexualized ones and ranked them, I wonder if I would see a trend where the less erotic the cover was, the more mighty the woman posing felt, or if there would be a bell curve in the middle where the more powerful women felt was when they were both sexy and refined.

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All ten participants agreed that such images were "geared toward male readers." Some of the women felt "weird" and "objectified" that covers like these were even being sold because they "depict women in unrealistic ways." Many of the women participating in my study said the photo portion was amusing even if it was a little awkward, "It's almost funny to try and shape yourself into these impossible images of woman." It is as if to say that these images can be seen as downright comedic, rather than

powerful. This ties in with the online parody, *The Hawkeye Initiative*, in which a male character is drawn in absurd female poses for humorous intentions (Scott 152). These poses may be designed in order to peak the male audience's sexual interests, but the ridiculousness of such poses is so prevalent that it has sparked a comedic retaliation within the online community.

When I asked if they thought girls would buy comic books if they saw covers like these on shelves, the most of the participants said no because they would feel "insecure," "demoraliz[ed]," "intimidated," or "inferior". Ellen said that she wouldn't know if she would buy them "because [she]'d want a relatable hero", and Hazel thought that girls would be "hesitant on buying it" because "it's a constant reminder of what they don't look like." It's clear from this conversation that there is the factor of a lack of female representation connected to images such as these, not only are women suggesting that these depictions are objectifying, but they are disconnected from real women. The participants who said that girls would buy comic books with these covers on it said, "most girls wouldn't know because they've grown up accepting it" and they "have only ever been exposed to this kind of content." Girls buying these comics are being taught that "sex sells" and if that is the case, then the consumption of these images "may internalize the effects" that "they have to be sexual in order to be powerful." In some ways, these images are powerful in more ways than one: Not only do they show strong women, but the way these women are portrayed seem to have the power to influence young girls.

Out of the ten participants I surveyed, three have not read any comics, three have read superhero comics and four have read other types of comics including Japanese manga and *The Walking Dead* comics. However, all of the participants have seen some sort of comic book adaptation, such as a movie or television show, the most popular being *The Avengers*, *Spider-Man*, and *Batman*. All of the participants could agree that “there is not enough female representation.” They seem to have a clear understanding about the lack of women in comic book related media. Prudence said the “many of the *Marvel* films and *Spider-Man* films leave out female characters unless they are an elderly loved one, or a love interest,” and Patty spoke about how “there is always



Figure 4: Participant Drawing

an uneven ratio of men to women and their screen time,” and Jessica wrote that women in comic books and movies are “only seen as a female counterpart to the males.” Jessica also makes a fair point when she says that “men are also unfairly objectified to seem as handsome, strong, powerful, and smart, even if it’s hidden under a ‘dorky’ image (i.e. *Spider-Man* and *Superman*).” She then goes on to say, “Women are never given a ‘normal’ or even ‘dorky’ image; in each character, they’re over sexualized.” What can we say about this lack of representation, and the fact that the majority of superhero media revolves around a male hero or heroes? I think it means that we need more female heroes, but it also means that it is important that we see better representation for the female heroes that we do have.

The participants agree that much of the female representation is inaccurate, or their character is seen as more menial than the male hero. Alice wrote in her survey that comics “often follow gender roles, leaving women submissive and passive, and forcing them to have a sexy appeal at all times.” And Lily commented that “most superhero movies/shows I’ve seen mostly portray the man as the strong, idealistic superhero. The woman is almost always the one who needs saving.” With such little representation we would hope that the female characters that we do have would be more empowered but we see that there are “not enough fully dressed female heroines” and a trend of “an abundance of female victims.” In this context, we can see that many women are objectified and used as plot devices for the male hero in many cases. Rochelle eloquently writes in her survey that female characters are “constantly reduced to their body or what they can provide for the male character.” The general consensus with all of the participants was about the same, all of the women

in the study seemed to agree that we could “use more female representation” and “definitely more relatable female heroes.”

When asked to compare older works with newer works, most participants, besides a few who couldn't remember older works well enough to compare, agreed that newer heroines seemed more “independent,” “self-empowered,” and with “better careers.” There is still the “damsel in distress” characteristic that lingers in today's comic book culture, but within all of them it seems we are moving away from the type of female character who “barely got any sort of character development besides being a love interest. Even though women are starting to become more powerful and better represented in newer works, half of the participants still saw that women were “sleazy” and they are “still drawn with obnoxious assets.” Alice agreed that she was starting to see “more complex characters who are more independent and powerful,” but she also said that the newer works “were definitely more sexualized with submissive personalities.” So even as we see progress in comic media with female character development, the use of sexualized female images still demonstrates the problem of misrepresentation of women in comic books.

The last question in the survey was a bonus question; it was mostly for fun but also because I wanted to see how women view themselves as superheroines. The images I saw were basic drawings that showed my participants in power poses like the iconic Wonder Woman pose, running, or flying and one participant drew herself flexing with really pronounced muscles. The ones that weren't stick people, and had clothes on, showed fully clothed women in tights or running shorts and a shirt, one participant drew themselves in a cute skirt and tank top. Despite the crudeness of these drawings, these images showed a glimpse of how real women would dress if they were superheroes and that the way comic books portray their female characters does not represent this at all. It's unfortunate how we can see the stark differences in how women feel they should be portrayed versus how they are actually portrayed.

And In The End, The Day Is Saved....

According to my survey, many women are aware of how poorly women are portrayed in comic media; they see the objectification of these female heroes and their tendency to be underrepresented or secondary characters. Despite this general knowledge, we still constantly see this issue of our heroines being on the back burner within the superhero universe, used for sex appeal and misleading roles of female representation. There is a problem with comic books today: the men are dominating the culture and creating women in the image that they want.

These superheroes are seen as hypersexualized icons that objectify women, they are portrayed as less powerful or plot devices to the male hero, and they are underrepresented with less popular characters. However, there is hope for the future: if we address these issues and keep this conversation going then we can be heard.

It's no secret that the popularity is coming out in new ways. Currently, the television age is progressing along with the comic book industry as superhero movies and shows are becoming some of the most popular among audiences and with a larger female fan base. We are starting to see more women on screen representing heroes, such as the Wonder Woman movie that is coming out in 2017, CBS's Supergirl and ABC's Agent Carter, a spinoff of the Captain America movie series. New comics are coming out that are challenging the norm, as in the case of the new Ms. Marvel comic centering around Kamala Khan, a Muslim-American teenage girl. The *Washington Post* describes it as an “aim to defy the ‘scantily clad’ cliché” (Tahir). The audience is changing and the comic book culture is learning how to adapt, but there are still a few steps we need to take in order to embody a more complete and diversified role of women in comic books.



Figure 5: *Ms. Marvel* #1, 2008 (left) and *Ms. Marvel* #13, 2014 (right)

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Appendix A: Survey Questions

1. How did you feel posing like these superheroines? (Powerful, uncomfortable, symbolic, strange, etc.)
2. How do you feel about a cover like this being sold? What type of audience do you think the authors were catering to? How do you think girls who are seeing comics like this on shelves feel about it? Do you think they would buy it?
3. Do you or have you ever read comic books? Which type? (superhero or other)
4. Do you watch or have you seen movies or show adaptations of comic books? Which ones? (e.g. The Avengers, X-Men, Spider-Man, Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D, Gotham, Arrow, Young Justice, etc.)
5. If you answered yes to questions 3 and/or 4 how do you feel about the female representation in them? Is there not enough? Do feel they accurately represent women? Do you see any unfair objectification of women vs. the men in them?
6. If you can compare any older comic book works (including shows/movies) to the newer works could you point out any differences between female representations?
7. Bonus: Draw yourself as a superhero below.