

Gender Differences in Clothing Worn in Current Popular Comic Books

Kyle Jossy

Abstract

This study looked at how male and female comic book characters were portrayed, based on the amount of skin shown in the clothing worn. A content analysis was performed on a sample of 20 randomly selected popular comics from the last 3 years. Both male and female characters were rated on how much skin they showed in three clothing categories: neck line, sleeve length, and lower body. Results showed that in all 3 different clothing categories, women consistently wore more revealing clothing. The findings demonstrated that the comic book industry is comparable to other forms of media in the sexualisation of female characters by having them wear more revealing clothing.

Introduction

People in our current society consume media on a daily basis, and ultimately receive messages about the world they live in from this form of entertainment. Some of the current forms of media are television, movies, the internet, video games, magazines, and comic books. In the media, men and women are often portrayed in different ways. Collins (2011) noted that women are found to be under-represented when it comes to their portrayal in the media, and that when they are presented they tend to be dressed in more revealing clothing than men (p. 290). Having women wear less clothing than men tends to emphasize women's sexuality, and in turn make women sexual objects. Most people would agree that in our society it appears as if women are presented more provocatively than men in our various forms of entertainment, and this is often achieved by the choice of clothing worn.

The more skin shown in clothing increases the sexualisation of the person, which is found in the current forms of entertainment that people enjoy. Collins (2011) remarked that a lack of clothing is far more often found for females to the point of hyper sexualizing them (p. 294). Images of women with little clothing can create body image issues for females, and it can also make males view females as mere sexual objects (Collins, 2011, p. 294). Both males and females are bombarded with images in society of idealized forms, which are nearly impossible to live up to. Females are exposed to images of emphasized femininity, which, according to Avery-Natalie (2013), have women wearing little clothing, possessing large breasts, and sultry hair (p. 100). Neuendorf, Gore, Dalessandro, Janstova and Snyder-Suhy (2010) also commented that women are only portrayed as being successful if they are good looking, thin, and sexual, which sends messages to women in our society that these attributes must be possessed in order to be seen as a successful woman (p. 479).

Men can also be presented in exaggerated fashion in the media which represent the ideals found in hegemonic masculinity. Characteristics of hegemonic masculinity are often associated with being powerful, in-charge, and possessing large muscles which should also create an unrealistic expectation for men; yet, Knauss, Paxton & Alsaker (2008) found that, for adults, forty percent of females are dissatisfied with their bodies, compared to only twenty two percent for males (p. 633). This demonstrates that either females are being represented in a more unachievable fashion than males, or there are possibly just far more images in the media focusing on the way that females should look as compared to males.

Bogt, Engels, Bogers & Kloosterman (2010) found that women are valued for the way that they look in the media which can actually increase our acceptance of stereotypical ideas we have for women (p. 847). Graff, Murnen & Krause (2013) describe that images of women showing more skin are being viewed in the media today, more than they used to (p. 571). Women are constantly being presented in "clothing that reveals women's legs, midriffs, and cleavage; stiletto heels that augment the length of women's legs; clothing and surgeries that create larger breasts; and thong underwear and tight shorts and skirts that emphasize rounded buttocks," which increases the emphasis on sexuality (Graff et al., 2013, p. 571). Men may be presented in the media as very masculine, but they are often not found to be as sexualized by their clothing worn, as Graff et al. (2013) showed that in a sample of music videos, thirty seven percent of women were wearing revealing clothing, as compared to only four percent of men (p. 571). This is a big difference in the amount of males and females shown wearing revealing clothing, which can help explain why women are more concerned about the appearance of their bodies (Knauss et al., 2008, p. 633)

Many studies have been conducted which look at the way that men and women are portrayed in the media, and they often show that women are more sexualized than men. Beasley & Standley (2002) found that a large selection of video game characters that wore clothing which was low cut, and revealed cleavage or pecs, eighty six percent were women (p. 288). This shows that there is a huge discrepancy in the amount of skin shown between male and female characters in video games, and many of these are games kids play, whether they are made for them or not. This likely influences the way that children growing up view females, as they are portrayed in a much more sexual manner than the males.

The comic book industry is another media form that has been popular for over eighty years, which can be influential in the ways that youth view males and females. Averie-Natalie (2013) did research on the way that males and females have been portrayed in the comic book industry over the years to see if there was a change in the way that characters are portrayed, and found that "for men, the musculature has become far more defined and exaggerated, and their bodies more rigid. For women, their breasts increased in size tremendously and

their costumes came to cover far less of their bodies” which demonstrates that comic books show their male characters as more hegemonic than before, and their women follow the ideals of emphasized femininity (p. 100).

While there has been plenty of research looking into the way that women are sexualized in the media by wearing little clothing, there has not been much research done to see if this is found in the current comic book industry. Averie-Natalie (2013) showed that both males and females are represented as more stereotypically exaggerated now than they were before, but it is not as widely researched if the clothing worn by characters in comic books sexualizes women or men more, and what areas of clothing are revealing for each gender (p. 100). The purpose of the current study is to find out if, based on the clothing worn by characters in comic books, males or females are presented wearing more revealing clothing that focuses on specific areas of their bodies. The present study predicts that women in comic books wear clothing that shows more skin, and therefore sexualizes their characters more than the male characters because most research looking at the portrayal of males and females in the media have shown that women are sexualized often by wearing more revealing clothing. In addition, this study predicts that male characters will likely show off their arms more to emphasize their masculine qualities while the female characters will show off their legs and reveal more of their chests to emphasize their femininity.

Method: Sample

The Sample consisted of twenty different comic book titles, all released within the last three years. All the comic books are titles that are aimed at readers that are ten and over, and are all American style comics, not anime or newspaper comics. The titles include: Legion of Superheroes, Batman Inc, The X-files Conspiracy, Blue Estate, Static Shock, The Star Wars, Legion Lost, Hawk and Dove, Omac, Mister Terrific, Action Comics, Aquaman, Men of War, The Shadow, Birds of Prey, Teen Titans, Justice League, Uncanny X-men, Voodoo, and Banshee Origins. All selected comics are bestselling titles, listed in previews magazine, and no older than three years old, which ensures that they are comics that are currently being read by readers now. By choosing titles that are intended for at least ten and up, it allows for an analysis of a wide age-range of potential readers. A large percentage of the comics analysed are superhero comics likely because they tend to be ones that sell well, and are currently popular. All comics chosen allow for a current analysis on how males and females are portrayed in current comics based on the clothing worn.

Sample Selection

A wide selection of over 100 different best selling comic book titles was available from the years 2011-2014. Out of the 100 titles, 20 titles were randomly selected, and then issue numbers were randomly selected from the titles chosen

(e.g. Batman Inc. was randomly selected as a title, and then issue number 8 was randomly selected out of the available issue numbers, ranging from #1 to around #30). The issue numbers tend to be low because most comic book titles started renumbering around 2011. After all the random selection was complete this left 20 different bestselling comics to analyse from 2011-2014.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Because this study is interested in how males and females are portrayed in the media, based on clothing worn, it looked only at current comic books. The study only used comics that are aimed for readers over 10. Inside the comics, all males and females were recorded every time they had a new set of clothing on to see all the ways they are being portrayed. No characters that looked like children were included, as the study is looking at how adults are portrayed. The characters must also look human in order to qualify for coding. No advertisements were studied in the comics, or previews of other comics that were included in the issues. Only the art from the actual issue was used. If characters changed clothing in the issue they were coded again, but not if they reappeared back in a previously seen outfit. Only characters that spoke in the issues were coded to look specifically at characters that are more important in the specific comics. If there were background characters, which spoke, that were all wearing the same clothing, they were only coded once (e.g. Stormtroopers from The Star Wars that all look the same).

Units of Analysis

The units of analysis for this study were 231 characters from comic books. Included were adult male characters (n=154) and adult female characters (n=77).

Setting and Materials

Coding occurred at the researcher's residence where some of the comics were located; others were available digitally which were accessed from the researcher's iPad. The materials required were physical copies of specific comics, and the others were accessed digitally. The issues required were: Legion of Superheroes #1, Batman Inc #8, The X-files Conspiracy #2, Blue Estate #1, Static Shock #1, The Star Wars #4, Legion Lost #1, Hawk and Dove #1, Omac #1, Mister Terrific #1, Action Comics #3, Aquaman #5, Men of War #1, The Shadow #4, Birds of Prey #1, Teen Titans #1, Justice League #2, Uncanny X-men #1, Voodoo #2, and Banshee Origins #1. A laptop was used to record the data.

Coding Procedure

Each Comic book was analysed for male and female characters that spoke at least once in the issue. The individual male or female character was then

examined for the clothing, or lack of clothing, they had on. To assess how much skin was being shown on each character, their clothing was analysed on three different categories: neck line, sleeve length, and lower body, which used three of the same categories that the study on video game characters by Beasley and Standley (2002) used (p. 285). Beasley and Standley (2002) found that by using these categories they were able to successfully demonstrate how clothing was used to portray men and women differently (p. 285). With the category of neck line, characters were rated on a scale of 1-4. A score of 1 indicated that the neck was completely covered (e.g. A turtle neck); a score of 2 indicated that the neck was visible, but pecks or cleavage were not visible; a score of 3 indicated that the neck line was low and that pecks or cleavage were visible, and a score of 4 indicated that they had on the equivalent of underwear (bikini style top included) or less. For sleeve length, characters were rated on a scale of 1-4. A score of 1 indicated that the arm was completely covered; a score of 2 indicated that the arm was partially visible, usually around the elbow; a score of 3 indicated that they had on a top that had no sleeves; and a score of 4 indicated, once again, that they had on the equivalent of underwear or less. For the lower body, characters were rated on a scale of 1-4 where in a score of 1 indicated that the characters legs were completely covered above the ankle; a score of 2 indicated that the legs were shown below the knee; a score of 3 indicated that the legs were visible above the knee; and a score of 4 indicated that they had on the equivalent of underwear or less. Each character would only receive one score for each category (e.g. If a character scored 4 on lower body, they would not also score a 3, even though their legs were shown above the knee). The scale of 1-4 was used in order to easily record the data obtained, and analyse it later instead of having a list of descriptions that may have been more challenging to record and interpret. The data obtained was then calculated to come up with totals for the male and female characters in each category, and percentages were also calculated.

Main Variables

The independent variables in the study were whether the character was male or female. This should affect the dependent variables, which were the neck line, sleeve length, and the clothing length on the lower body. The neck line looks at how much of the neck, and the area below the neck is revealed in the clothing worn. The sleeve length looks at how much of the arm is visible in the clothing worn. The lower body looks at how much of the legs are revealed in the clothing worn.

Design

Content analysis was used in order to determine if gender affects how much skin is shown in the clothing worn in current comic books, aimed at ages ten and up.

Results

The twenty comic books that were analysed contained 231 different characters. Of these characters 67% (n=154) were male and 33% (n=77) were female. When looking at the neck line 27% of the male characters had their whole neck covered, 60% showed their neck, 6% wore clothing that revealed their pecks, and 7% didn't wear shirts at all. When analysing the female neck line 16% had their whole neck covered, 38% showed their neck, 36% wore shirts that revealed cleavage, and 10% were only in their underwear, or were topless (see Table 1).

Table 1: Character Neckline by Gender

Neckline	Female	%	Male	%	Total
High	12	16	41	27	53
Mid	29	38	93	60	122
Low	28	36	9	6	37
Underwear	8	10	11	7	19
Total	77	100	154	100	231

In regards to the amount of skin shown on the arms 77% of the male characters had their whole arm covered, 10% had some of their arm showing, 6% had sleeveless shirts, and 7% didn't wear shirts. With the female characters 45% wore clothing that covered their whole arm, 18% had some of their arm showing, 26% wore sleeveless shirts, and 10% wore the equivalent of a bra/bikini top or less (see Table 2).

Table 2: Character Sleeve Length by Gender

Sleeve Length	Female	%	Male	%	Total
Long	35	45	118	77	153
Short	14	18	16	10	30
None	20	26	9	6	29
Underwear	8	10	11	7	19
Total	77	100	154	100	231

When looking at the clothing worn on the lower body, the male characters had 92% that wore clothing that covered their entire legs, 0% that had clothing that was below the knee but showed skin, 4% that wore clothing that revealed skin above the knee, and 4% wore the equivalent of underwear, or were not wearing pants at all (see Figure 1). The female characters had 55% that wore clothing that covered their entire legs, 4% that wore clothing that showed skin below the knee, 25% which wore clothing that was above the knee, and 16% had the equivalent of underwear or less (see Figure 2).

Figure 1: Female Character Lower Body

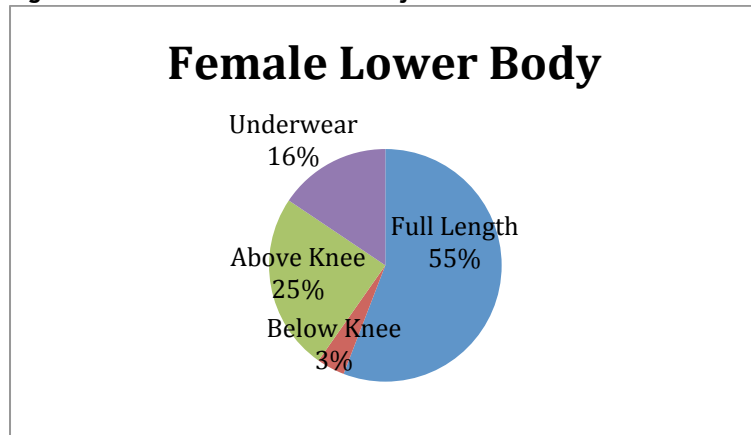
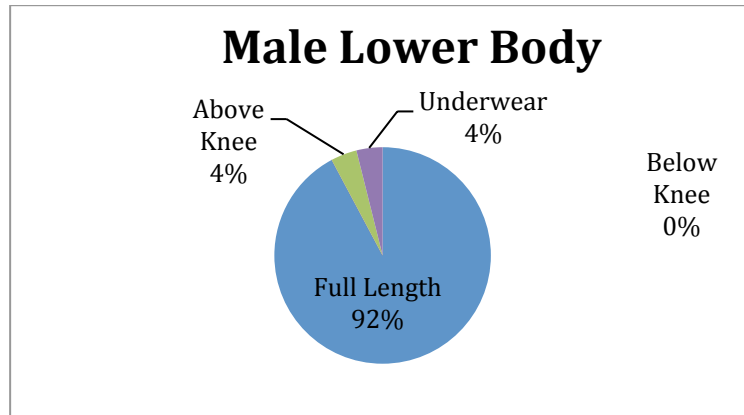


Figure 2: Male Character Lower Body



Discussion

The results found supported the initial hypothesis that female characters in comic books would show more skin in their clothing worn. In the categories of sleeve length and lower body, the male characters had well over 50% of their characters, 77% and 92%, show no skin at all. This was drastically different than the female characters which had almost 50% show skin in both categories.

In regards to neck line, most male characters either showed their neck or had it completely covered, 87%, where as the females had 38% of their characters showing cleavage. The hypothesis predicted that females would show more skin in the areas of neck line and lower body, but it was predicted that the male characters would show more skin on their arms as this is generally thought of as a masculine area of the body, and it would make sense that they would show off this area more. The results however did not show this as 77% of the male characters had their arms completely covered.

The results revealed that, like other forms of media, comic books use clothing as a means to show females in a more sexualized way than males by having their characters wear significantly less clothing than the male characters. It doesn't matter what area of the body is examined, females show more skin than males do in all areas. This does not mean that there is no objectification of the male characters in the comic books examined as there were still instances where the male characters were not even wearing shirts, which exposed their heavily muscled bodies, but there were still more times when females were extremely underdressed. When the male characters had big muscles, they were often underneath clothing which does not objectify them as much as the female characters. The female characters clothing, or lack of clothing, was often used to showcase their emphasized femininity often by showing off their thin bodies and large breasts.

The results demonstrate that comic books are similar to other forms of media that showcase females wearing revealing clothing to promote their sexuality. The study by Beasley and Standley (2002) that looked at video game characters revealed similar results to the current study except their results were even more lopsided. In their study 86% of the female characters showed cleavage, which is significantly higher than the 38% found in the comic books (p. 288). In both studies, the female characters showed more skin than the males, but the discrepancy found in videogames was much higher. The video game study also showed similar results by having far more male characters seen than female characters which is likely because creators believe that they are catering to males with the assumption that males want to see, or read about other males as the heroes, and have the female characters as sexual objects (Beasley & Standley, 2002, p. 286).

While the clothing worn by the characters in the analysed comics showed both hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity, the female characters were the ones that were made to appear sexual by their more revealing clothing. This has the potential to lead readers to see women as sexual objects. Since the comics analysed are ones that are available for people that are over ten, it shows that today's youth, in our society, are exposed to images that portray women as objects. The fact that there are over double the amount of male characters seen in the twenty comics analysed, yet there were more women, in sheer numbers,

than men in the categories that showed the most skin, such as full arm shown, neck line showing cleavage or peck, and legs shown above the knee reveals how much more women are sexualized. This view can lead young boys, and even men, to see women as only sexual objects. It also continues to emphasize to other females that this is how they should dress in society which in conjunction with the unrealistic bodies that these women characters in the comics have leads women to have a higher body dissatisfaction rating (Knauss et al., 2008, p. 633). Knauss et al. (2008) mentions that images in the media of women, as seen in the comics analysed, create a large discrepancy between what women think their body should ideally look like, and what they actually look like (p. 634). Knauss et al. (2008) also mentions that in addition to girls being sexualized in the media, the images of women with ideal bodies wearing little clothing can lead to many negative outcomes such as eating disorders, self-esteem issues, depression, and dissatisfaction with their bodies (p. 641).

Limitations

The study was able to show that the trend seen in other forms of media, of women being sexualized by wearing less clothing, is prevalent in comics, but it doesn't look into the context in which the clothing is worn. It is possible that the lead female characters wore more clothing, and the ones that wore less clothing were characters that were of less importance. This information would show how much power the female characters, which wear little clothing have. The study also did not specifically look at body type to see how exaggerated the characters bodies were. Having this additional information could help us find out if men and women are equal in the category of unrealistic body types as opposed to just the amount of clothing worn.

Another limitation to the study is that it did not have a very wide variety of comics. There were only twenty comics chosen from current popular comics so a larger number would help get more accurate results. Also, it might be interesting to see how comics that are not as popular portray men and women, or how comics that are aimed at children portray the genders.

One more limitation of the study is that the assessment of the clothing levels is somewhat subjective. Even though each number, on the 1-4 scale, indicated a different level of skin shown per category, sometimes it could have been interpreted differently by a different person. For example, if a sleeve went halfway between the shoulder and the elbow, a person could potentially consider it to be sleeveless and give it a score of 3 instead of 2. To achieve better results there could be more judges that rate each category and then ensure that there is a consensus in the number given.

Conclusion

This study shows that women are portrayed, in comics, in a higher sexual manner than men are due to their clothing being more revealing. Women in comics even

show more skin on areas of the body that are thought to be masculine, such as the arm, which shows that women are portrayed wearing less clothing in all areas of the body. Comics are an important area of the media that youth tends to access which affects and can potentially alter the way that young people see and think about women. The artists can choose to draw the characters in the comic books any way that they want, but they are affected by the society that we live in which sexualizes women so they continue to convey the message, in their work, that women are sexual. It would be good for future studies to see if emphasized femininity outnumbers hegemonic masculinity in other areas of comic books as well as this would help demonstrate that more societal pressure is placed on females to try to live up to these impossible standards which are set by the many forms of media found in our current society.

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