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Powers and Abilities Far Behind Those of Mortal Men: An Examination of the Comic Book Industry and Subculture through a Feminist Sociological Perspective

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Powers and Abilities Far Behind Those of Mortal Men:
An Examination of the Comic Book Industry and Subculture through a
Feminist Sociological Perspective

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The Graduate College of
Marshall University

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Sociology

by
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Abstract

Comic books are a medium which should be able to reach readers, whether male or female. Yet, the overwhelming majority of comic book readers are male. The feminist sociological perspective asks what the role of women is in a given situation, why that had come to be, and how can it be changed for the betterment of society. The realm of comic books is cyclical between fans and the publishing companies. As such, both the content of the comics themselves, and the opinions and reading habits of the fans must be studied to determine where this disparity begins, and how it has been perpetuated for sixty years. Through this study, the roles of women in comics are uncovered, as are the reasons behind them.

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Introduction

The study of popular culture has become one of the newest focuses within sociology, one which places the icons of the modern world under academic scrutiny and seeks to call attention to the numerous and significant ways that popular culture both reflects and influences society. Likewise, media analysis is a growing field of study, and numerous texts have been authored both praising and criticizing various media outlets for their varying degrees of success in creating and perpetuating a fair portrayal of racial, ethnic, gender, and homosexual groups. Television, newspapers, magazines, movies, radio, and less frequently the Internet, are all subject to scrutiny by various media watchdogs, special interest groups, and their own competitors, all of whom recognize the important influence that media exerts on societal perceptions of particular groups and issues. This scrutiny has resulted in increased attention given to the role of women and a presence of women that is significant, at the least. Television, for example has been peppered with programs starring women. Even a show like *The Donna Reed Show* (1958-1966), which showcased the lead character in the stereotypical female role of homemaker, was, nonetheless, a program starring a woman, and therefore drew attention to an important role of women in society. In the following years the portrayal of women on television has improved, as evidenced by more progressive shows such as *Mary Tyler Moore* and *Ally McBeal* in which the lead female took an increasingly independent role. Television represents arguably the most visible case of the changing roles of women in popular culture. On the opposite end of the spectrum, one particular form of print media has escaped significant notice, despite also being a prime example of American popular culture. This phenomenon is known as the comic book. The comic book, unlike other

forms of media, remains largely devoid of positive representations or role models who are not men. Female characters in comic books experienced the same second class treatment as in the early history of television. For example, although Wonder Woman was arguably the most powerful female character, and one of the most powerful characters overall, up until the mid 1950's, her membership to the Justice Society of America was initially limited to a secretarial position. Unlike television, however, the role of women in comic books remains largely secondary to the lead male characters, such a discrepancy in the portrayal of women in media is a social phenomenon that warrants further investigation.

Practically everyone has read a comic book at one time or another, yet the American comics industry has failed to capture a significant female readership, or to publish more than a handful titles centered on a female lead. Why have women failed to achieve the same presence in comic books as they have in television? Such a question is not easily answered because serious academic works analyzing the content of comic books are far fewer in number than those of the more mainstream types of media. People of all types are exposed to the aforementioned forms of media, but comic books are a much more specialized medium in that they are primarily found in specialty shops, cater to a more specialized audience, and engage in a large degree of self censorship than other media. Stan Lee, a seminal figure in the comic industry, and creator of many of Marvel Comics' characters, authored *The Superhero Woman*, which consists primarily of reprinted comic stories starring some of Marvel's more prominent female characters and introduced by Lee's personal reactions toward the characters before each story. In his preface for the volume, Lee pontificates, "We know there are more superheroes than

superheroines in comic books today. We also know that more males than females read superhero comics. Okay then, here's the question – do less females read comics because they seem to be aimed at a male audience, or are they aimed at a male audience because less females read them? If you're expecting an answer, forget it. I've spent years waiting for someone to tell me!" (1977, p. 7) In the absence of scholarly writings on the subject, it is valuable to turn to sociological theory in order to answer Lee's question. According to feminist social theory, there are three pivotal questions. What about the women? Why is this the way it is? How can society be improved to make the situation better for women? Answering these questions as they relate to comic books can lead to greater understanding of the features of society that comic books reflect and influence.

It is important to note that while this examination is general in nature, there are certain qualifiers that must be used to limit the scope of study. The first limit imposed is that only comic books are going to be studied. Comic strips, published in newspapers, or reprinted in a book volume are not included. These tend to originate from newspapers, which automatically exposes them to a larger audience. The term comic book will be defined as any publication consisting of at least 28 pages, with drawn panels accompanied by text and speech balloons, which has continuity among the panels. Furthermore, it does exclude certain segments of the comic book industry. The so-called "funny animal" comics are ignored for the purpose of this study because they were ignored by the anti-comics crusade of the 1940's and 1950's. It was during this time that comic books came under scrutiny from critics, parents groups, and conservative Christian groups. This campaign led to the Senate subcommittee on juvenile delinquency conducting hearings on comic books. Some people contended that comics were a source

of inspiration for deviant behavior to children and adolescents due to the depictions of violence. The content of the funny animal comics was not considered harmful, as it was aimed at the youngest readers and featured little, if any, violence or sexuality. As a result, the Comics Code that is discussed later had no effect on their production or reception. Also, while comics are produced all over the world, the vast majority are produced by Japanese or American companies. This study is limited to the American publications only. These comics are then translated into numerous languages and consumed across the globe. In this way, the portrayal of women in American comics is exposed to readers beyond this country's borders.

Comic book fans are a very specific group. A subculture is a group whose values and behaviors distinguish them from the rest of society. The term subculture can be applied to many different types of fans. While many people can be classified as fans of music or sports, rarely are music fans stigmatized, or sports fans thought of as deviant because of their devotion to a football subculture. While not everyone becomes as deeply involved with the comics scene as the most ravenous fans, these ideas strongly affect the ways in which society perceives comic book readers, and therefore influence the ways that they define their identity as fans. In order to understand the comic book medium's deficiency with regard to the role of women, it is necessary to study the fans in addition to the content of the comics themselves. A survey of fan opinions about women in comics as well as other sociological studies of the comic book subculture will need to be incorporated.

Comic books are a niche within society that has been largely ignored by sociologists. Perhaps this is because their audience is so specific as opposed to the mass

appeal of television and other similar media. Nevertheless, serious sociological study of comics is no less valid and significant than that of other mass media. Texts written about the subject are authored by individuals already heavily involved in the industry, or are written for the layman and underscore the history of the media rather than its social significance. Many of these books are also filled with pictures of issue covers, panels, and comic book related photographs. Although the visual component of comics is important, these illustrations due little to enrich the reader's understanding of the media. Furthermore, the pervasiveness of pictures in these books renders them ineffectual, if not outright unusable, in a serious academic study. Several of the pages are full page pictures, and nearly every other page features some pictorial example, taking up as much as half the space on the page. The heavy use of visual examples leaves little room for serious academic critique.

Despite this sociological oversight, American comic books are an excellent reflection of real world American society. Their depiction and role of women is particularly interesting and relevant in understanding the role of women in contemporary society. Even in a fictional world where beings with powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men fight never-ending battles for truth, justice, and the American way, women find themselves in a second class position. DC Comics' Wonder Woman is perhaps the most easily recognized woman in American comics. Yet, even her premiere status did not prevent her from being the victim of sexism in stories. It is important to consider what this means in terms of the ways that today's society depicts and perceives women.

It is my hypothesis that most of the fans are male because that is the demographic to which comics are generally aimed. This is not a case of chicken vs. egg, but rather a question of a social phenomenon. Even in the earliest days of the comic book industry, the majority of stories published were action, adventure, science fiction, and western stories. Each of these genres has traditionally been favored by male consumers, whether they take form as movies, novels, or comics. Any attempts to draw in female readers with romance or female centered stories only made up a minuscule number of titles, and was done with a minimum of effort. Even more universal concepts, such as funny animal comics still garnered a larger male than female readership. This suggests that the issues of gender relationships have predisposed a mostly male audience to comics from the beginning. Through a review of literature, as well as a historical overview of the American comic book industry, it will become clear that comic book readers are predominantly male due to the specific type of material presented. This is the same type of material, which to a degree, repels female readers.

The theoretical paradigm that is most applicable to this subject is the feminist perspective. Because this is a study of the social role that women have in the realm of comic books, the feminist perspective will address the particular concerns that arise with regard to the content and readership of this particular media. According to Patricia Madoo Lengermann and Jill Niebrugge-Brantley (2000), Feminist theory involves three major factors which center the study of social life on women. The first of these factors is to make women the central object of study. As such, female characters as a reflection of societal views will be the primary focus of this study. To a slightly lesser extent, the prevalence of female creators in the comics industry and the fans will also be discussed.

The second aspect of the feminist theoretical perspective is that women are the subjects of study. While upon first reading, this statement appears to reiterate the first aspect, in reality, it means that the investigation is undertaken from the viewpoint of women.

Finally, the third aspect of this perspective is that feminist theory is critical in nature. As with all variations of critical social theory, the goal is to identify what is amiss with society and how it can be changed to correct the faults. With feminist theory in particular, the goal is to create a more just social world for women. In order to examine the social role of women in comics, there are three questions that must be asked, each addressing one of the theoretical factors. The question “what about the women?” focuses on women as the objects of study. The second question, “why is this situation the way it is?” addresses the investigation from the viewpoint of women. Finally, the question “how can this be improved?” fulfills the critical requirement of feminist theory.

Review of Literature

Mila Bongco's analysis of comic books, deals heavily with the concept of popular culture. In her book *Reading Comics: Language, Culture, and the Concept of the Superhero in Comic Books* (2000), she examines why popular culture has been the subject of so much scorn throughout history. Bongco takes this as a starting point in order to discuss the process of reading comic books as elements of popular culture. The costumed superhero genre was borne out of comic books, and remains the predominant genre within comics. Ultimately, Bongco seeks to discuss the superhero as an element of popular culture.

Her first step is to draw perceived parallels between the concepts of "popular" and "inferior." Sequential art, the very foundation of comics, is stigmatized by the dominant culture because it is simultaneously too simplistic, and too precise. While that may seem to be a paradox at first, Bongco's argument carries a very valid point. Comics are a visual art, and "reading" comics is not considered valid in a culture that places great emphasis on prose. The textual aspect of comics is somewhat crude, being limited to speech balloons and sound effects, and relying on the pictorial accompaniment to complete the narrative. Thus, the written parts of comics are seen as simplistic. Reading is also considered to allow the imagination free reign. By depicting characters or events explicitly in illustrations, the reader's imagination becomes submissive to what the artist has dictated. Thus, the visual dimension of comics is too specific. In addition, Bongco draws attention to the fact that comics go through the publication process, and as such,

the creators become somewhat estranged from creativity. Deadlines, sales constraints, and the editorial process are all considered things that distort creative purity.

The next step Bongco takes in establishing comics as popular culture is discussing their ephemeral nature. “Dominant forms of culture” she says, “are institutionalized in libraries and galleries or in ways that will ensure their preservation.” (Bongco, 2000, p. 23) This, combined with the notion that comic books were conceived as a disposable form of entertainment, places comics further down the cultural ladder. In the early history of comics, they were commonly read, then traded to friends or simply thrown away. More recently, the image of comics has improved due to certain changes in terminology, which create a more refined impression. The newly designed “graphic novels” are now available in many libraries and bookstores. Bongco acknowledges a recent and notable shift in publishing toward more of the book like graphic novels as opposed to the traditional comics. Although she made this observation nearly four years ago, the effects of this shift are only now truly becoming evident, with major bookstores like Borders and Barnes & Noble creating sections specifically for graphic novels and trade paper backs.

Popular culture is in this way placed on an inferior plane than what is considered to be the dominant culture. Comics, as an example of the popular, are lower in cultural value. Bongco asserts that the very aspects that make a medium popular are the same characteristics that make it inferior. She asserts that “Comics, for example, is (sic) seen as ‘popular’ in its general accessibility ... its pandering to mediocrity, and in its broad appeal to a general, acquiescent public which is characterized as unsophisticated and hence, easy to cater to.” (Bongco, 2000, p. 25) By this reasoning, which is readily

apparent in American thought, in order for something to have cultural value, it must be something that only the cultured few may appreciate.

Regardless of the specific topic, any work about comic books or the comic industry that is remotely academic will have to address the Comics Code Authority. For nearly 60 years, the Comics Code Authority has been responsible for screening the comic book industry for potentially offensive content. While submission to the code is voluntary, the political and social atmosphere of the early 1950's made it necessary for survival that comics carry the seal of approval. The Comics Magazine Association of America, an organization of comic book publishers, created a code in 1948 to regulate the content of comic books in response to social pressure. The Code Authority is the autonomous branch of the CMAA, responsible for the enforcement of the code. Comics are submitted to the Code Authority for approval. Any issue that passes may be printed with a seal of approval. At its inception, the seal was approximately the size of a postage stamp, but it has since been reduced to about 25% of its original size. Amy Kiste Nyberg chronicles the birth and evolution of the code in her book, *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code*. (1998) Nyberg asserts that one cannot study the code merely as a post World War II phenomenon, but that it is another example of attempts to control children's entertainment.

Further, Nyberg also addresses the distinction between high culture and popular culture. High culture she says, is that which is "valued for its individuality and aesthetic complexity." Popular culture, on the other hand is dismissed of value due to "its mass distribution and its perceived lack of literary or artistic merit." (1998, p. 4) This assertion supports Mila Bongco's ideas about the perceived value of popular culture versus the

idea of a high art culture. Popular culture, though readily accepted by the masses, does not have the esteem, longevity, and respect that high culture enjoys. This stigma of inferiority has far reaching consequences for popular culture. The equation of inferiority with popular culture has characterized discussions about popular culture. These consequences illustrate the reasons that there has been little academic study of comics. As Nyberg indicates, “Such notions have also led to a rather extended rejection or trivialization of comics and caused a dearth of serious critical attention to it.” (1998, p. 23)

Pivotal to Nyberg’s thesis is the idea that comic books were an entirely new medium in the late 1930’s, a fact that led to misunderstanding and criticism, the effects of which continue to influence comics today. Sterling North, a literary critic for the *Chicago Daily News*, is credited with the first national assault on comics. In his May 1940 editorial “A National Disgrace,” North launched a venomous attack on comic books, criticizing everything from the content of the stories, the artistic aptitude, and even the printing quality. (pp. 3-4) Nyberg asserts that what North and his supporters failed to recognize was that comic books were not simply cheap juvenile literature with more pictures than text. “The comic book was a whole new medium altogether,” she says “a medium that relied on the interaction of words and pictures to tell stories in a unique way, with its own highly developed conventions of interpretation that bore more resemblance to film than to literature or drawing.” (1998, p. 5) This misinterpretation of comic books led to the disparagement which they would receive. In turn, the sense of disdain retarded potential growth of the medium, leaving it stagnant for the subsequent years. Without

being allowed to grow as a medium, the role of women in comics was also prevented from developing.

Will Brooker's discussion of Batman in his book *Batman Unmasked: Analyzing a Cultural Icon* (2000), highlights several important eras in the character's fifty year history. While much of the text is not relevant to the focus of this study, his discussion of Frederick Wertham and *Seduction of the Innocent* (1955) brings forth some valid points concerning the restrictions imposed upon the comics industry. This book, a collection of Wertham's articles on the subject of comic books, included one of his most memorable attacks on comic books: the allegation that Batman was a homosexual, and that his teenage sidekick, Robin, was actually his boy lover. When Brooker attempts to examine Wertham's intent, he says of Wertham, "he understands that in a climate where homosexuality is a great taboo, gay fantasies might be a source of worry for young men." (2000, p. 111) These allegations, or concerns, if Wertham is interpreted as being genuinely concerned for the well being of young men, nonetheless attached the stigma of sexual deviance to comic book readership. In the ensuing years however, Wertham has been discredited for his shoddy methodology, and is often ridiculed for his accusations.

Contemporarily, Wertham has become a scapegoat for any struggles the industry endures. Brooker believes this is taking the situation out of context. He explains that "I am not an apologist for Wertham. It is a worthless exercise, however, to set him up as an Aunt Sally and deride him as an idiot or an ogre by the standards of our own very different culture." (Brooker, 2000, p.110) Wertham was guilty of taking subject matter out of context when he presented his case against comic books, however, many recent authors and critics are guilty of the same practice in their discussions of his intent and

impact on the comic book industry. Brooker does a much better job of placing Wertham in the context of the issue of juvenile delinquency and within the framework of 1950's America.

Trina Robbins, a comic book writer and artist herself (*Go Girl, Wonder Woman*), has authored several books on the subject of women and comics. One such book, *The Great Women Cartoonists*, has some discussion on women working in the comic book industry. Robbins does not limit her discussion to comic books however, choosing to include discussions on comic strip writers and artists, as well as pinup cartoonists. As such, it was necessary to be selective in choosing relevant chapters. Of particular note is her discussion of the women's underground comics movement of the late 1960's and early 1970's. During this period, there was a surge in females doing comic books in the underground scene. Likened to an all boys club, even the underground comics scene until that time had resulted in closed doors for female creators. Robbins, along with other women seeking to publish their comics launched a variety of comic titles showcasing their talents. To answer Lee's question as to whether there were no female readers because comics were produced for males, or vice versa, these comics were produced by women, starring women, for women. As a result, their readership was primarily female. Indeed, Robbins suggests that the entire reason for the poor numbers of female fans is due to the types of action, horror, and sci-fi comics that are published. "Girls, indeed, do not read comics if there are no comics published for them" (Robbins, 2001, p. 117)

It follows that in order to understand why and how comics have been tailored to male readers, it is necessary to understand the group that focuses on comics most, the fans. Matthew Pustz attempts to define the culture of comic books and their readers in

his book, *Comic Book Culture*. Using a local store in Iowa City, Iowa called “Daydreams Comics and Cards” as a platform, Pustz constructs the archetypal comic book store for the reader, and elaborates on ways that Daydreams is superior. “Both female employees and a relative lack of posters featuring women with unbelievable amounts of cleavage help to make Daydreams relatively hospitable to female customers.” (Pustz, 1999, p. 8)

In contrast, about most comic shops, Pustz says:

Unfortunately, most comic shops are different. In most cases, women who enter stores quickly hurry out...Female visitors commonly become uncomfortable or feel unwelcome as a result of the gazes of male patrons who are surprised to see women in that setting or by posters that frequently objectify women and/or glorify violence. (1999, p. 8)

Of particular concern for Pustz are female readers and the gender bias among the comic book subculture. Even females who do read comics find themselves segregated by what they choose to read. In discussing the spectrum of comic readers, Pustz draws a distinction between those who read mainstream comics, and those who read underground or alternative comics. Mainstream comics are those published by the major publishing houses, primarily DC, Marvel, and Image. They can be found in specialty shops as well as on newsstands. Underground comics are typically self-published, and are available only through specialty shops. The mainstream reading community is predominantly male; according to Pustz, most estimates identify 90-95 percent of mainstream readers as being male. The alternative press on the other hand, “is substantially female, with the actual numbers varying according to title.” (Pustz, 1999, p. 83) It can be inferred, then, that the mainstream companies within the comics industry are not catering to female readers. Thus, they must rely on underground comics to provide them with entertaining and fulfilling stories.

The presence of female characters in comics is also a subject Pustz touches upon. In his discussion of historical reading communities, Pustz traces the attempts to create brand loyalty among readers. Marvel Comics was particularly known for pushing the brand loyalty concept, calling its faithful readers “True Believers,” “Marvelites,” or “Marvel Zombies,” and coining the phrase “Make mine Marvel!” “For the first ten to fifteen years of Marvel’s existence, Lee and his company were selling more than just comic books. They were selling a participatory world for their readers.” (Pustz, 1999, p. 56) As part of an attempt to expand their loyal fan base to include female readers, Marvel began publishing a pair of romance titles in 1969. In addition to the romance titles, Marvel introduced some new female superheroes.

While the romance books lasted nearly 40 issues (a little over three years), the female superheroes did not fare nearly as well. The Russian Spy and martial artist character Black Widow lost her co-starring role in the title *Amazing Adventures* (1970) after a mere eight issues, and both the Cat and Shanna the She-Devil had their solo titles cancelled within six issues due to poor sales. Marvel made a second attempt at female leads a few years later by following the Supergirl model, that is to say, a female version of an existing, popular, male character, when they introduced Ms. Marvel, the Savage She-Hulk, and Spider-Woman. These titles also, failed to attain lasting success, despite, or perhaps because of, the fact that they were all based upon preexisting male counterparts and featured numerous preexisting supporting characters. (Pustz, 1999, p. 57)

In his essay about the formation of a “rhetorical community” in the comic book subculture, Ivan Wolfe discusses the interaction of fans and creators, and how that

interaction influences the output of comics. He defines a rhetorical community according to the following criteria:

A rhetorical community, to me, is one that has give and take - where all sides more or less have feedback in what the community does and produces. There still may be a hierarchy and even clear class lines, but in the end everyone in the entire community not only sees themselves as part of a community but as an active, influential member of that community. Everyone has the chance to engage in rhetorical communication rather than always being either the givers or the receivers. (Wolfe, 2002)

Wolfe's thesis hinges on the idea that communication between creators and fans has a significant and profound impact on the direction of future stories, which in this study, can be applied to how the audience has remained dominated by males. There are two primary ways this interaction is accomplished, allusion and letter columns.

The first of Wolfe's methods by which direct communication occurs is allusion to other comic books. He uses the death of the original Supergirl. Supergirl was Kara Zor-El, Superman's cousin, and was killed during the DC Comics company wide housecleaning series *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (1985). *Crisis* was used by DC Comics in the mid 1980's to eradicate redundancies, conflicting stories, and anything else that no longer fit the editorial vision of the DC Universe (DCU). In order to return Superman to his status as the last survivor of his home planet, Krypton, his cousin had to be removed from existence. Despite her popularity, Supergirl was killed, and a moratorium placed on the idea of her resurrection. The popularity of the concept of Supergirl could not be denied, and consequently, a new Supergirl was introduced in the form of a shape-changing alien with an admiration for Superman. Some years later, writer Peter David began integrating aspects of the original Supergirl into the new one. Under David's direction, the new Supergirl visited a town called "Leesburg," a nod to Linda Lee, the

original Supergirl's secret identity. While in this town, the new Supergirl merged body and soul with a dying girl named Linda Davners. This new amalgamation discovers that it has an "inner voice" that acts as a guardian angel and uses the name Kara. Again, here are two references to names of the original character. While this knowledge is not necessary to enjoy the story, it adds something special for the seasoned reader. As Wolfe says, "It also tells the devoted comic book reader that this writer is 'one of them' - creating a sense of camaraderie with someone they may have never met, and it also allows the readers to make predictions on where the storyline may go in the future based on knowledge of past events." (Wolfe, 2002) Allusion then, is a powerful way for the creators to communicate with their devoted readers.

The letter columns that are printed at the end of most comics are how fans can respond to the creators. Wolfe acknowledges that many authors tackling the subject of comic books regard letter columns as merely a way for the fan base to interact and to let the creators know what stories have been well received. In referencing Matthew Pustz, Wolfe notes that Pustz is concerned only with how the fan community is developed by letter pages. Letter columns are how fans can feel as though they are peers of the creators. "Through the letters column, readers were given the chance to become creators alongside the main creators, not just fans who influence the decisions of artists, writers and editors." (Wolfe, 2002) To support this concept, Wolfe uses the Marvel "no-prize." A "no-prize" was an accolade awarded to any Marvel Comics fan who could point out an inconsistency and offer an explanation for it. The best explanation was chosen to be printed in the letters pages, and became canon. Thus, the reader was able to transcend level of fandom to become a creator. By his own admission, Wolfe could offer no

specific example of such an incident occurring, but he claims this does not invalidate his thesis. While his thesis may remain valid, this lack of evidence does make for a less compelling argument for the influence of letter columns.

Michael Pustz supports the influence of letter columns in *Comic Book Culture* (1999). While discussing the spectrum of readers in contemporary society, he touches on Canadian writer/artist Dave Sim and the letter column in his book, *Cerebus the Aardvark* (1977). In reference to letter columns, Pustz argues that “There, readers engage each other and sometimes Sim in conversations about events in the comics or broader topics such as the comics industry or North American sexual politics.” (Pustz, 1999, p. 90) This particular example supports Wolfe’s idea of a rhetorical community by exemplifying the opposite effect. “Many alternative readers simply cannot get past Sim’s misogyny and general egotism to enjoy the political and human stories in *Cerebus*.” (Pustz, 1999, p. 93) Thus a barrier is created to women who may otherwise have been interested in the book. When a rhetorical community is created, consisting predominantly of male readers, any female voice is miniscule in comparison. Even in a case where there were some female readers, if there is a much larger male readership, their influence will be greater, if by sheer volume alone.

The monthly magazine, *Wizard* (1991) covers a variety of comic book related topics, from news, to interviews, articles, and even a price guide. Staff writer Mike Cotton recently wrote an article about the DC Comics character Wonder Woman regarding her historically second rate status and the upcoming creative team that hopes to change that. Cotton traces the often times demeaning history of the seminal female character in comics. “From her earliest days as a nothing more than a bondage queen, to

her tour of duty as JSA (Justice Society of America) secretary” (Cotton, 2003, p. 77)

Through his article, the reader can see that Wonder Woman has progressed over the years, and does not remain in quite as diminutive and demeaning a position. However, she still does not enjoy the same status as some of her male compatriots. “You would think one of DC Comics’ ‘Big Three’ could earn a little more respect. Superman and Batman already headline multiple books, but not so for the leading female character in the DC Universe.” (Cotton, 2003, p. 77) Writer Greg Rucka and artist Drew Johnson have taken the creative reigns of the title, and discuss their upcoming plans to revolutionize Wonder Woman in the article. In the Cotton article, Rucka says “‘He (Dr. William Moulton Marston, creator of Wonder Woman) would want desperately to see the character be an inspiration to woman.’” (Cotton, 2003, p. 80) If nothing else, the name association with the fan favorite creative team will draw readers in, a phenomenon evidenced by the survey of local fans.

Several of the authors discuss fan communities, both real and rhetorical. These communities establish a connection with the comic book creators, which influences the types of stories which are published. Aside from a review of previously published literature, it is necessary to address the fans to see what their opinions and feelings on the subject of women in comics are.

Reader Survey

As part of the process of uncovering perceptions of women in comic books, it was necessary to get information directly from comic book fans. A survey was devised to gauge the perceptions that readers had of women in comic books and the comic book industry. Questions included in the survey asked the respondents about how they feel about female artists and writers, female characters, and what prompts their interest in new comic titles. The survey was given in two local comic shops for their customers to fill out on a voluntary basis. The first was Comic World in Huntington, West Virginia, and the second Cheryl's Comics in Charleston, West Virginia. These two shops were chosen based on a rapport with the owners, and on prior knowledge that they would be interested in contributing to a scholarly study of the comics field, particularly one with a focus on women.

Overwhelmingly, the respondents were male. Of the 42 responses, only four were female, accounting for less than 10% of the sample. These numbers are consistent with many other studies dealing with the discrepancy in the numbers of male and female comic book readers. This, in and of itself, is not surprising since one of the aims of this research is to examine and determine what accounts for the disparity between males and females in the comic book reading population.

In order to understand the buying habits of the fans, and how in turn, that would affect the sales of new titles starring a female character, or featuring a female creator, it was necessary to ask what factors influence the purchase of new titles. The factor most

reported as being the primary reason for choosing to purchase a new title was the presence of a particular character. Nearly twice as many of the respondents are willing to pick up a new series based upon previous knowledge of the specific character involved than they are for any other reason. The second most frequent response was if the new title fell into a group of related titles the with which the reader was already familiar. The collector mentality and the tendency of readers to read several books within a “family” of books has a huge impact on sales. A little over 14% of responses listed this as the number one factor in selecting a new title. The artist and the writer were also frequently reported. The least frequent responses were “word of mouth buzz” and “magazine or internet reviews.” Between the two, they only amounted to three responses, less than 10% of the sample. Clearly then, the fans base more of their decision upon their own experience, knowledge, or perception than they do upon other sources. If that is the case, it is likely that any new title introduced into the market featuring a more realistically drawn and written female lead character will be met with apathy unless it is somehow tied to more established creators or characters. Since apathy does not generate sales, this is in effect, a failed project.

When asked if women played an important role in comic books, readers overwhelmingly responded that they do. Over 90% of the responses to this question were affirmative. The main purpose of this question was to set up the general idea of the concept of women in comics. Did readers consciously shirk titles based upon female characters or creators? At least according to the responses for this question, the bias is not premeditated. Is important to note that while nearly all of the respondents felt women

were an important part of comics, there were still many responses in subsequent questions placing them in lesser roles in comparison to males.

Survey results confirmed that readers recognize the inaccurate depiction of women. Nearly every response came back expressing the belief that women are drawn unrealistically. Unrealistically in this instance implies the use of sexuality exploitative artwork, as described by Matthew Pustz in the review of literature. Clearly then, if women in comics are being depicted in a sexually suggestive manner, they are trying to appeal to male readers. A mere 9.5% of the responses believe that women are drawn realistically. Interestingly, of that group, one was female. Having a female reader respond that she did not think of women in comics as drawn unrealistically was a surprise. It is possible, however, that her opinion was based upon her particular reading choices. This could not be confirmed, as this respondent left the open ended question about what titles she regularly purchased blank. A couple of surveys came back with comments written in about the fact that men were not drawn realistically, either. While it is true that males are also drawn out of proportion, and often shown flexing muscles that would have to be contracted in that given position, it would be difficult to argue that this was also sexually exploitative in nature.

An important aspect of this study is the role women play within the comic book pages. Respondents were asked if they generally associated female characters as heroes, villains, or supporting characters. An open ended choice of other was also provided. While female characters can and do fill a variety of roles within the pages of comic books, the question was not about what they can do, but rather what the respondent generally perceived their role to be. The goal of asking this question was to see if

responses followed with the idea that women were an important part of comics that had been established in an earlier question. “Heroes” would imply that the reader felt they were generally given important, lead role positions. Conversely, “Supporting Characters” would give the impression that the reader feels that female characters are secondary to the male lead. “Villains” was an answer used to gauge female characters on a scale of positive and negative. Results indicated an even split between Heroes and Supporting Characters, each registering 33%. There was an even number between the answers indicating primary and secondary importance, something that was very different from the overwhelmingly positive response to the initial question about the importance of females in comic books. Another 12% marked both Heroes and Supporting Characters. A few of the respondents gave some insightful answers by using the “Other” option. One fan commented that female characters serve as “T&A” for comics. Certainly, the concept of sex sells cannot be ignored, lest of all in a population which is 90% male. Once again, the overt sexuality depicted in some comics is one of the reasons women are repelled from comic books as a medium. The remaining surveys either were marked for all answers, or left blank.

Following the role question was a question about the portrayal of women in comic books. Answers provided included four positive and four negative portrayals. The positive answers were Strong, Independent, Intelligent, and Interesting. Counter to those were Weak, Dependent on male characters, Unintelligent, and Uninteresting. The respondents were instructed to mark any and all that they found to be applicable. Answers tended to lean towards the positive side, and just under 25% of the respondents indicated all of the positive aspects without marking any of the negative aspects.

Interestingly, even when all or most of the positive answers were marked, the negative answer “dependent on male characters” was also indicated several times. There were also several surveys that had all possible responses marked. One such survey included a side comment that it depended on who the writer was. None of the surveys were returned with all of the negative choices marked, but without the positive choices also marked.

Team books, those comic book titles with a group of superheroes working together, are by their very nature, able to showcase a variety of male and female characters. When questioned about the role of female characters in team books, 71% of the responses identified them as being an integral part of the team. It is possible, and quite likely, that women receive more attention in team books because of the nature a team itself. There is an old coaching acronym for the word team: together everyone achieves more. This concept applies in the realm of comic book superheroes as well. The important factor in a superhero team is the mix of powers, not genders. Nearly every superhero team includes a brute, a flyer, an elemental, someone with mental powers, someone who fires projectiles, and someone who uses bladed weapons. This mixture allows them to be flexible in combat with villains of various types. While each member may be formidable, it is the diversity of powers that allow them to triumph time and time again. The exact combination and mixture of men and women has varied from title to title, but the basic concept remains the same. Take for example the most famous and popular superhero team, the X-Men. The original team consisted of the winged Angel, the strong and acrobatic Beast, the ice elemental Iceman, the telekinetic Marvel Girl, Cyclops, who could fire blasts of energy from his eyes, and Professor X, who was telepathic. Of this original lineup, only Marvel Girl was female. While the actual lineup

has changed many times over the past 40 years, the mixture of powers has remained relatively static. Both male and female characters have filled the various power types throughout the years. In this way, the team books are the most egalitarian comic book titles on the market. The sex of the individual is not as important as the abilities that they possess.

Roughly 12% of those surveyed indicated that they felt women served as backup for the male characters in a superhero team. This is in stark contrast to the 33% who thought of women characters primarily as supporting characters. This goes to further the assertion that team comics allow for more equal portrayal of women. While over one third of readers surveyed believe that overall the female characters play supporting roles, when the focus is turned to team comics, female characters enjoy a much higher regard. Over 70% of the respondents indicated that female team members were an integral part of the team. Clearly, the impression that the vast majority of fans have of females in team books is much better than that of the female characters from other titles. A couple of the remaining answers indicated that the female characters were the reason they read team books. Finally, the issue of sex returned to this question, with a single response of “T&A.” To be fair, it was the same individual who responded as such in the previous question.

One of the open ended questions asked which comic book character is most like women that the respondent knows personally. The purpose of this question was to determine if there were female characters that were “realistic.” That is to say, have the writers managed to be consistent in developing the personalities of female characters the in the same depth to which they have the male characters? The expectation was that there

would be a wide range of responses, largely based upon the varied reading tastes of each individual. For the most part, this expectation was fulfilled. Surprisingly however, the most frequent response was Aunt May Parker. What is so surprising is that the number one response was not a friend or confidant archetype, nor was it a love interest for any main character. It was expected that responses would fall within this range, since those would be the type of people with which the respondent would have close associations. Spider-Man's caring, yet often sickly aunt, who dotes on him without knowing about his dual identity, is an altogether different type of character than what was expected. One such response specified the "Ultimate" version. Marvel's "Ultimate" titles are updated, more diversified versions of many of the company's longtime favorite characters. A chance discussion with this individual while in Comic World gave him the chance to explain his answer. In the *Ultimate Spider-Man* (2000) title, Aunt May is a former hippie, and still holds many liberal and progressive views. To illustrate his reasoning, this fan referred to an issue of *Ultimate Spider-Man* where Aunt May commented that she hoped Peter (Parker, the secret identity of Spider-Man) was using protection during intercourse. Regardless of what version each fan had in mind, what remains is the identification of a supportive, matronly character.

The portrayal of female characters by examining their personalities is also necessary. If female characters can be written with the same consistency and strength of character as male characters, this would certainly show some advancement on the part of comic book companies. The survey inquired which character the respondent thought most representative of a strong, resilient personality. The female most associated with having this type of personality was undoubtedly Wonder Woman. An unchallenged 36%

of the responses identified her as the clear favorite. The Fantastic Four's Invisible Woman had two responses, and Avengers mainstay Scarlet Witch had three responses. All other responses were random single responses. Of the top three responses, it should be noted that all are members of a superhero team, but only Wonder Woman also appears in her own solo title. This demonstrates that Wonder Woman has more recently been elevated to the point that fans readily identify her as being a strong, resilient character. The unfortunate dichotomy of the situation is that no other female characters can be identified nearly as strongly with those traits.

The question asking what title the respondent would recommend to a woman interested in getting into comics revealed no discernable pattern. Answers were varied, ranging from team books to solo titles, and from detective stories to superheroes. As expected, Wonder Woman garnered a few replies, as did some of the female Batman spin-off characters and X-men titles. Wonder Woman is an obvious choice, if for no other reason than the favorable responses toward the character in this survey. The Batman franchise, one of the most successful character franchises in comics, supports some ten monthly titles, three of which are female lead books. As for the X-Men, Marvel's most successful franchise has maintained a larger female audience due to its large female cast, especially considering that even the spin-off titles are often team books. For the most part though, fans reported that they would recommend something that they read and enjoy. While it makes sense that no one would recommend something they do not enjoy themselves, this led to an inability to draw any conclusions about a single title or small number of titles which might appeal to a broad range of female readers.

The greatest limitation of this survey was the lack of answers that might gauge whether or not the reader thought of the characters as sexual objects. Initially, it was believed that providing answers indicating an objectification of female characters would cause respondent to be insulted or skew the results. Thus, answers of that nature were removed. In hindsight, it may have been better to let those choices remain. Replying that the individual sees how many women in comics are being depicted as sexual objects does not necessarily mean that person shares that view.

The Role of Women in Comic Books

By this point, a great deal of material and data has been gathered in the study of women and comics. Much of the literature addresses the early formation of the industry, and the survey addresses the opinions of the contemporary comic book subculture. To apply this data sociologically, we must return to the three questions used by Patricia Madoo Lengermann and Jill Niebrugge-Brantley, “what about the women?”, “why is this situation the way it is?”, and “how can this be improved? By addressing these questions, the social impact of comic books can be understood.

What about the women?

The objective of this question is to uncover what the role of women is in a given social situation. To answer this, the historical context of women within the situation must be examined. Are women present, and what role do women play in the social situation? According to Patricia Madoo Lengermann and Jill Niebrugge-Brantley, if women are not present, “it is not because they lack ability or interest, but because there have been deliberate efforts to exclude them.” (Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley, 2000, p. 308)

Are women present in comics and the comic book subculture? Certainly the answer is yes, but they are without a doubt the minority. There is no codified system which prevents their entry, as the case would be with say, major league professional sports. Yet, there are many fewer female professionals in the comic book industry than there are male professionals. Also, there are fewer female fans than there are male fans. The vastly lower numbers of female fans and creators is what draws out the question “what about the women?”

The lower numbers of female professionals in the comic book industry is the easiest mystery to unravel. For the most part, the modern industry is comprised of people who grew up reading comic books. Most of them even had the end goal of being a comic book artist or writer. If the fan population from the early years of comics were predominantly male, and they made up the brunt of the creators from subsequent years, it is clear that a predominantly male fan population will result in a predominantly male creator population for the next generation.

Both of the comic shops that participated in the survey aspect of this study are owned and operated by women. At first glance, it appears that the prevalence of women as retailers is quite common. Since most shops are run by fans that turned their enjoyment of their hobby into a profession, it could inversely be assumed that there are also a large percentage of female fans. It would, however, be an erroneousness step in judgment. Through the years I have been involved in the comic book subculture, I have been to many different shops in several cities, and to date, the only two with female employees, much less owners, which I have visited, are the two local stores that participated in the survey. Thus, I do not believe the fact that both shops are owned by women to invalidate the thesis of this study. Instead, I believe this to be a spurious coincidence. In addition, being members of a minority within the subculture, they had a special interest in the subject. This interest certainly spurred their willingness to participate in the study.

The visual component of comic books is extremely evident in the depiction of women. Traditionally, the female characters are drawn as being attractive unless they are serving some purpose other than a lead character or love interest. Overweight,

unattractive, or elderly women may serve as supporting or bystander characters, but are never shown as the lead. To think of reality as shown in comics, all women would look like fashion models. In contrast, men are less likely to fall into this stereotype. To be fair, many are also drawn as handsome, but not in such a narrow view of what is considered attractive. No better proof exists of the sex bias in comics than the “bad girl” fad of the mid 1990’s. During this time, numerous titles were launched starring “bad girls,” female characters with impossibly large breasts, small waists, and long legs. Revealing and suggestive costumes completed the overall image of these characters. Direct market retailer Cheryl Pauley commented about this trend. “Oh yeah, ’92 through about ’95, it was real big. Not so much now, but there’s always going to be at least a small demand for that kind of thing.” (personal communication, March 5, 2004) The bad girl fad may be an extreme example of the sexual depiction of women in comics, but many other female characters are not too different. Their breasts may not be drawn impossibly large, but improbably large is quite common.

Content aside, the sales data also shows a marked difference in the ability for female centered titles to effectively compete in the marketplace. This is compounded by the fact that many of these books are still closely tied to a central male character. *Batgirl* (2000), *Catwoman* (1993, 2002), and *Birds of Prey* (1999) are all spin-offs of the Batman comics. *Emma Frost* (2004) and *Mystique* (2004) are X-Men related spin-offs. The completist collector mentality that is common among comic book fans certainly would account for a percentage of the sales of these titles.

After examining sales data reported by Diamond Comics Distributors, this phenomenon is even more apparent. Diamond is the sole distributor for comic books to

the specialty shops in America. As such, their sales reports are very accurate in regard to the comic book subculture, which tends to patronize specialty shops as opposed to newsstands. This data is available on the comic book news website, ICv2.com. ICv2 lists the title, issue number, actual sales, and the rank of each issue. The only title starring a female to have cracked the top 100 every month without a connection of a family of titles in the last six months was Wonder Woman. Considering that the average number of titles starring women that made the top 100 over that span of time was eleven, there is a substantial difference in sales when a book is not supported by readers of related titles. To be fair, there were a several other titles that were present in the top 100 on a regular basis, but not monthly. One such title, *Magdalena* (2003), appeared twice. However, the appearance of this title in the top 100 books is not a true indicator of its own ability to draw in and hold a reading population. The series was only slated for three issues. Sales on a new series are frequently highest at the first issue when readers try something new or purchase the title for collectable reasons. When there is a finite run on the book, fewer fans are likely to drop it right away. They can commit to the title for a known period of time, and many will ride out a story, simply because they know when it will end. Another title to note is the series *Sojourn* (2001) by Crossgen Comics. While it did not appear every month, there were six issues that shipped during that time. October 2003 had no issue, but August 2003 showed the shipment of two separate issues, one of which was offered at a special low price to attract new readers.

Each issue also is assigned an index number by Diamond. ICv2 also reports this number. The index number is a number assigned to an issue in relation to that month's issue of *Batman* (1940), a title with consistent sales. This means that any titles selling

more copies than *Batman* would have an index number over 100, *Batman* will always carry the index number 100, and anything selling fewer copies would have an index number under 100. The range of index numbers for the titles mentioned was between 20.00 and 40.00. While *Batman* may be a consistently selling title, sales do change from month to month. If there is some story or event that causes a spike in sales for *Batman*, the index numbers on all books are skewed. September 2003 was one such month, so the index numbers for that month are roughly half of their normal levels.

Kathleen Miller, the owner and proprietor of Comic World in Huntington confirms the survey data about the importance of creators in generating sales. In an interview, she said “There are fans who will pick up anything a particular creator does.” (personal communication, February 18, 2004) Their impact on sales is apparent. She uses writers Mark Millar and Brian Michael Bendis, as examples. Small press or independent comics produced by these individuals will sell better than other small press comics. Likewise, their mainstream work also shows increased sales as compared to the same title under less popular stewardship. Miller can confirm the group sale phenomenon as well. “All of my X-Men readers,” she says, “read both the core titles, *Uncanny X-Men* (1963) and *New X-Men*.(1991)” Most of those actually purchase the entire X-Men group of titles, which numbers about ten. *Mystique* and *Emma Frost*, two titles in that X-Men family, are single character female lead books. Miller could not recall any customers who read either of those, but did not read the main books as well. For Comic World at least, the sales of these two books are fully supported by their association with another title.

Why is this situation the way it is?

Quite simply, comics have always been aimed at boys and men. Girls and women, having never been the target audience, never developed into a fan base of consequence. The modern comic book industry began to emerge in the late 1930's. The beginning of the "golden age" as it is called is often credited to the first appearance of Superman in the first issue of Action Comics in June, 1938. Many of the enduring superheroes made their debut during this era. Aside from superheroes, action-adventure, westerns, war, horror, and science fiction stories dominated the comic book genre. Typically, the readers of these types of stories were males, ranging in age from young boys to men in their mid twenties. War comics in particular were popular among soldiers during World War II. The tales of heroism and bravery depicted in war comics served as morale boosters for the soldiers. Amy Nyberg addresses the sex discrepancy in her history of the comics code, and makes specific mention of the genre content of comics. In reference to a 1938 survey of children who read comics, Nyberg says "They also found girls read fewer comic strips than boys. When questioned about why they liked comics, the children said they were exciting and full of action." (1998, p. 10)

Mila Bongco discusses the shift in the reading population during the post World War II era. Pre-war readership had been roughly the same between boys and girls. After about 1944, things changed. "From this year on, however, there has been a steady decline in comicbook (sic) readership among girls, particularly in the superhero comicbooks. (sic)" (Bongco, 2000, p. 126) Bongco is primarily concerned with the concept of the superhero, and she attributes this change in the sex ratio of comic book readers to the rise in relative popularity. Superheroes fall within the general framework

of the action-adventure genre, one of the predominant genres present in the medium.

This loss of readership can be applied to comic books as a whole, since the superhero titles now begin to make up the lions share of the market.

The effect fans themselves have on the situation, however, is how comic book fandom came to be so male oriented. This is something that Wolfe, Bongco, and Pustz have all touched upon in their writings. Wolfe's discussion of the rhetorical community and the ability for fans to feel as they have contributed to the writing process of their favorite titles conveys the importance of the letters pages in the back of comics. Pustz too, discusses at length the impact of criticism or praise laden letters sent by fans to the editors. These letters, written by the primarily male adolescents who made up the brunt of the fans, were the major voice that spoke to the creators in charge of publishing the comics. Bongco's discourse about letter columns parallels the argument Wolfe made about rhetorical communities when she says:

If a superhero performed out of character, if a change in plotline was unsatisfactory, if there was a small mistake in art work, the fans did not hesitate to express their feelings. In the columns of the comics themselves, fans and artists and editors exchanged views, accepted compliments, justified story lines, and reacted to previous letters. This communication has remained constant to the present as comic book producers receive constant enthusiastic feedback from comicbook readers." (2000, p. 126)

In turn, publishers produced material that would appease and satisfy that population.

From this point a snowball effect occurs in which the fan community maintains a predominantly male population by ensuring that their voice is heard by the publishers.

The economics of the situation demands that publishers maintain a customer base, and therefore the stories published reflect the desires of the male fans. As a result, stories were more action oriented, something that attracted more male fans than female fans.

Since there were more male fans being drawn in by these stories, letters to the creators reflected that, and the cycle repeats.

In addition to the letter columns and rhetorical communities, fans comprise actual communities. With the reorganization of the comic book industry to generate most of its business from a direct market as opposed to newsstands, comic book fans have a physical location to gather and discuss their favorite titles and characters. Pustz discusses the appearance of comic book stores. Daydreams Comics and Cards, his primary focus, is what he thinks of as an ideal comic book shop. The relatively lower number of objectified female posters is perhaps the greatest benefit to the appearance of the store. For a while, some titles were even displayed with a note identifying them as non-offense to female readers. There are significant numbers of female customers, and even a female employee. This differs however, from the other store he describes, Iguana's Comic Book Café. This store, unlike Daydreams, is less inviting to the female reader. Several ads for the "T&A" comics are on display, and the clientele is more cliquish. Unfortunately, this tends to be the more typical of the average comic book shop than Daydreams. The cliquish, sometimes confrontational fans can be one thing that turns female readers off to comics. This is aside from the fact that the relative rarity of a female in a comic shop will illicit stares from some male customers.

When studying the comics industry, it has become very en vogue to blame Frederick Wertham and the Comics Code Authority for the struggles the industry has endured over the past fifty years. Wertham's post World War II efforts to link juvenile delinquency with comic readership resulted in a national campaign against the comic book industry. While it is true that the blame cannot rest solely upon Wertham's

shoulders, it cannot be denied that his work was pivotal in creating a mood of contempt towards comic books. The factor that makes Wertham's indictment of comics relevant to this study is the particular facet of comics which caused him so much concern. The titles he was highlighting in his campaign for regulation and cancellation were horror and science fiction titles. These titles were those thought to invoke the most deviant behavior. Horror comics by their nature feature violence, sometimes graphically so. Science fiction comics sometimes depicted aliens capturing lasciviously dressed women, presumably to rape and torture them. He ignored the humor comics because he considered them benign, as well as the fact that they were much fewer in number. Wertham's campaign highlighted the violent aspects of horror and science fiction comics, as well as the issue of homosexuality and Batman. The attention his efforts garnered toward the comics industry gave a distinctly deviant slant to comics in the public eye. This stigma has persisted to the current era, despite the fact that many of Wertham's ideas and assertions have since been discredited for lack of quantitative evidence and poor methodology.

Likewise, it would be remiss to ignore the effects of self censorship inherent in the Comics Code Authority. In all fairness, the Comics Code Authority standards were no more restrictive than those imposed on radio and television by the Federal Communications Commission. However, the fear of repercussions from testing the limits of the code kept publishers stagnant for much longer than television. As an end result, the only stories which survived the screening process were funny animal and superhero action comics. Since these titles could not sustain a significant female reading population, there were fewer females still involved in the medium.

So the lower numbers of female readers, and consequently, female creators, are a result of three factors. The first of these factors is that comics were initially aimed at a male audience. While this bias may not have been intentional in a malicious way so as to purposely exclude girls and women, the genres of stories that made up the vast majority of those published were titles that male readers were more apt to patronize.

The second factor, and this is the most important, is that once a predominantly male reading population was established, that population perpetuated itself through real and rhetorical communities. The rhetorical communities established by letters pages in the backs of comic books allowed for communication between fans and creators, as well as a place for fans to meet. Comic book conventions and the shift from newsstand sales to a direct market of specialty shops provided a physical location for fans to meet and interact.

The third, and arguably, least important factor, is the impact of Frederick Wertham and the Comics Code Authority. It is true, that Wertham's attacks on comic books stigmatized them, and the censorship imposed by the Code stunted the growth and development of the medium, but these factors are not the leading cause of poor female response. They may have deterred some individuals from exploring the world of comics, but not everyone. If the Code and Wertham had truly been as damaging to the industry as critics claim, it would have collapsed decades ago from lack of readership. The fact that comic books continue to be published today is testament to the fact that the industry can work with and around the standards set by the Code. Its success though, is based on a primarily male population, to whom comics continue to be focused.

How can society be improved to make the situation better for women?

Clearly, the majority of female led books which appear in the top 100 comics on a regular basis are tied to a group of titles. This group can act as a sort of safety net of the books by providing a built in fan base. The association with male oriented titles should not be considered as a crutch, but rather as a springboard. The fan survey that was given revealed that a title most likely to be recommended to a woman was something that the fan himself read and enjoyed. Consequently, if an association with for example Superman, generates higher readership among male readers, this larger group will be more apt to recommend the title to others, especially women. Anything that generates sales for these books, excluding sexual exploitation, should be celebrated. After all, in the end sales are sales. Certainly, no publisher would balk at increased revenue due to an expanded fan base which includes more female readers.

The appearance of women in a superhero team is also a good way to increase the visibility of female characters in comics. The role of women in a team setting is much more equal to their male counterparts. The survey results certainly support this. Most fans think of female characters in team books as integral members of the team. A few responses even indicated that female team members were the reason the reader bought team books. Cheryl Pauley, Owner of Cheryl's Comics noted that several of her female customers were readers of team books, the X-Men titles in particular.

As far as industry professionals, there are some female artists and writers making a name for themselves in the mainstream. Christina Z, Amanda Connor, and Devin K. Grayson are among those. When these women take on high profile projects, they are able to showcase their talents and develop a fan following. Cheryl Pauley noted that Devin K.

Grayson in particular, has developed a small but growing following of fans who will read anything she writes. This is in no small part, due to her assignment to one of the core Batman titles, *Batman: Gotham Knights* (2000). (C. Pauley, personal communication, March 5, 2004) It also should be noted that Grayson was not just assigned to the title, but was the writer given the task of launching the series from the first issue. First issues generate more attention than the average issue, so publishers try to attach top tier creators to new titles.

It is regrettable that the phenomenon exists, but the impact of “bad girl” books cannot be ignored. In order to improve the depiction of women in comics, titles which base their sales on scantily clad female characters should be curbed. The incidence of nude variant covers, and other exploitation based sales techniques will never disappear completely, but these practices should be discouraged. In the interview with Cheryl Pauley, she noted that as long as there is a demand for books of that type, someone will produce them to fill that demand. However, she also acknowledged that the bad girl craze has passed, and is not likely to see a resurgence of that magnitude. (C. Pauley, personal communication, March 5, 2004)

Conclusion

The reason for lower numbers of female comic book readers is twofold. The first is the content of comics. What set the model for the industry is that comic book publishers failed to produce stories in genres that would attract and hold a female audience in the burgeoning days of comic books. Horror, science fiction, and action-adventure titles dominated the early market, and little attention was given to establishing a female reader population. Other genres, such as romance, were given only cursory attention, and were only introduced after the precedent had been set. In addition, female characters in many of the titles were given roles that were secondary to the male characters. Even the most recognizable female character, Wonder Woman, was offered a secretary position instead of full membership to the Justice Society of America. Her early exploits depicted her in bondage, at the mercy of captors. If this is how the most powerful female superhero is treated by the creative staff, it is no wonder why female readers were few and far between.

Secondly, the interaction between fans and creators, and the environment of comic shops that established both real and rhetorical communities perpetuated a status quo in regard to what types of stories were deemed acceptable for publication. The development of this subculture could be cliquish, especially in regard to women. Since so few women read comics, the presence of one in a comic store can cause a stir among the predominantly male patrons. Not only can the physical proximity to cliquish fans deter women readers, but much of the content that is produced can as well. Comics are subject to the forces of supply and demand. With a reading population that is some 90%

male, it is little wonder why some companies will feed the demand for comics featuring females with ample cleavage, but not costumes.

The Comics Code Authority and attempts by the industry to self censor aided in the stagnation of growth of the industry. However, this only aided the problem, it did not create it. Perhaps the Code prevented companies from branching out in later years, but in the decade prior to the first draft of the Code, little was done to recruit female readers. The same should be said for Frederick Wertham. His efforts may have cast an unpleasant air about comic books, but he cannot be held responsible for the failings of an industry that catered to male readers only.

So where does that leave comic books today? With the addition of graphic novel sections to major book sellers like Borders and Barnes & Noble, comics are certainly establishing themselves as a more mainstream medium. This exposure will, with some effort on the part of creators and publishers, hopefully bring in more female readers. The right steps are being taken to increase and diversify readership. If the industry continues on this path, they should experience a new age of popularity.

Appendix I Sample Survey

9. Female artists can draw realistically
 True False
10. Female writers can write good stories
 True False
11. I would be upset or annoyed if a female writer took over my favorite title
 True False

For the following questions please answer with any character or title you think is applicable.

12. What character do you most associate with being realistic (most like women you know) female in comic books?
13. What character do you most associate with being strong (has a resilient personality) female in comic books?
14. What title would you recommend to a woman who was interested in getting into comics?
15. What titles do you currently purchase on a regular basis? (Please list as many as possible)

Appendix II Compiled Survey Results

M/F	#1 Factor	Likely to	Important	Drawn	Associate	Portray	Team	Artists	Writers	Annoyed
F	Character	CIO	False	False	Heroes	1, 4, 6	Integral	True	True	False
M	Artist	CIO	True	False	Heroes	3	Integral	True	True	False
M		CIO	True	False	Hero/Support	1, 3, 5, 7	Integral	True	True	False
M	Writer	IWD	True	False	Support	1, 3, 5, 7	Integral	True	True	False
M	Writer	CIO	True	False	Support	1, 4, 7	Integral	True	True	False
M	Group	CIO	True	False	Heroes	4, 5, 7	Integral	True	True	False
M	Group	IWD	True	False		1, 3, 5, 7	Integral	True	True	False
M	Writer	IWD	True	False		1, 3, 5, 7	Integral	True	True	False
M		IWD	False	False		1, 3	Backup	True	True	False
M	Character	IWD	True	False	Heroes	1, 3	Integral			
F	Artist	CIO	True	True	Heroes	1	Integral	True	True	False
M	Artist	CIO	False	False	Support	7	Integral	True	True	False
M	Group	IWD	False	False		1, 3, 5, 7		True	True	False
M	Character	IWD	True	False	Support	3, 5, 7	Integral	True	True	False
M	Buzz	IWD	True	False	Support	2, 4, 6, 7		True	True	True
M	Group	CIO	True	False		1-8	Integral	True	True	False
M	IntMagRev	IWD	True	False	Heroes	1, 3, 8	Reason		True	False
M	Artist	IWD	True	False	Heroes	1, 3, 5	Backup	True	True	False
M			True	True	Hero/Support	1-8		True	True	False
M	Character	IWD	True	True	Heroes	1, 3, 5	Integral	True	True	False
F	Buzz	CIO	True	False	Heroes	1, 3, 5	Integral	True	True	False
M	Character	IWD	True	False		2, 4	Integral	True	True	False
M			True	True	Hero/Support	1, 3, 5, 7	Integral	True	True	False
M	Character	CIO	True	False	Heroes	3	Backup	True	True	False
M	Character	IWD	True	False	Support	1	Integral	True	True	False
M	Writer	IWD	True	False	Support	4		True	True	False
M	Character	IWD	True	False	Support	5, 8	Integral	True	True	False
M		CIO	True	False	Heroes	1, 4, 5	Integral	True	True	False
M		IWD	True	False	Hero/Support	1, 4	Integral	False	True	False
M	Character	CIO	True	False		1-3, 5, 7	Integral	True	True	False
M	Group	IWD	True	False	Heroes	4	Backup	True	True	False
M		IWD	True	False	Hero/Support	1, 3-5, 7	Integral	True	True	False
M	Writer	IWD	True	False	Support	1, 3, 5		True	True	False
M	Writer	IWD	True	False	Support	4	Backup	True	True	False
M	Group	IWD	True	False	Support	1, 7	Integral	True	True	False
M	Character	CIO	True	False	Support	3, 5, 4	Integral	True	True	True
M	Character	IWD	True	False	Support	6	Integral	True	True	False
F	Writer	IWD	True	False	Heroes	1, 3, 8	Reason			False
M	Writer	IWD	True	False	Support	1-8	Integral	True	True	False
M		CIO	True	False		1, 3, 5, 7	Integral	True	True	False
M	Writer	CIO	True	False	Heroes	1-8	Integral	True	True	False
M	Character	IWD	True	False		1, 3, 5, 7	Integral	True	True	False

Columns A-K are in order corresponding with survey questions 1-11. Questions 12-15 were open ended, and could not be coded. Blank slots represent questions that were not answered on the survey.

For Column C: IWD - It would still depend on one of the factors from question #2. CIO - Check it out.

For Column G: 1- Strong, 2- Weak, 3- Independent, 4- Dependent on male characters, 5- Intelligent, 6- Unintelligent, 7- Interesting, 8- Uninteresting

Appendix III
Sales Numbers for August 2003-Janurary 2004 as reported
on ICv2

<u>August 2003</u>			<u>November 2003</u>		
	Rank	Index Number		Rank	Index Number
Emma Frost	26	31.61	Emma Frost	38	40.84
Mystique	37	26.39	Mystique	48	38.33
Sojurn 25 (\$1.00)	39	25.95	BoP	61	31.79
Trouble	50	22.55	Wonder Woman	69	29.94
Wonder Woman	59	20.09	Aspen	70	29.79
Batgirl Year one	63	19.57	Alias	73	29.06
Batgirl	67	19.03	Batgirl	80	28.07
BoP	69	18.93	Catwoman	82	27.22
Alias	70	18.81	Danger Girl	97	24.21
Elektra	87	16.44	Elektra	98	24.15
Sojurn 26	95	15.66	Sojurn	100	23.87
Spider-Girl	96	15.35			
Magdalena	97	15.29	<u>December 2003</u>		
Witchblade	100	14.76		Rank	Index Number
			Emma Frost	46	41.23
			BoP	63	33.22
			Wonder Woman	67	31.8
			Aspen	71	30.97
			Batgirl	79	28.82
			Catwoman	85	26.77
			Sojurn	90	24.92
			Rose Thorn	92	24.72
			Elektra	94	24.34
			Spider-Girl	97	23.29
			Magdalena	98	22.96
<u>September 2003</u>			<u>January 2003</u>		
	Rank	Index Number		Rank	Index Number
Emma Frost	34	18.56	Emma Frost	39	40.21
Mystique	44	16.52	Mystique	43	38.83
Trouble	61	12.86	Mystique	50	36.34
Wonder Woman	72	11.78	BoP	60	33.38
Batgirl	70	11.89	Wonder Woman	33	42.68
BoP	63	12.53	Batgirl	70	28.88
Alias	71	11.81	Catwoman	76	28.1
Elektra	87	10.16	Sojurn	84	25.32
Catwoman	89	10.04	Elektra	86	23.84
Sojurn 26	90	9.96	Elektra	87	23.78
Catwoman	93	9.75	Spider-Girl	88	23.07
Spider-Girl	95	9.6	Spider-Girl	91	22.89
<u>October 2003</u>					
	Rank	Index Number			
Emma Frost	46	38.75			
Mystique	54	36.88			
BoP	77	28.35			
Wonder Woman	82	26.89			
Alias	84	26.19			
Batgirl	85	26.04			

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