

Exploration of Gender Portrayals in Marvel Comics

by

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Abstract

Comic books have been a major part of American pop culture since around the 1930s. These comic books depicted ordinary people who, through some sort of accident or happenstance, gained superpowers. People who could lift cars over their heads or leap over buildings in a single bound. Comic books have a long history. The history of comics is divided into six ages: the Golden Age, the Silver Age, the Bronze Age, the Plastic Age, the Revival Age, and the present. There have been many different comic book companies over the years, but at the forefront of comic book culture, there have been the two major companies: DC Comics and Marvel Comics. Marvel Comics introduced characters like Spider-Man, Ironman, Captain America, the Human Torch, the Incredible Hulk, etc. Over the years, comic book artists have inadvertently fed readers myths about the male and female physique.

The purpose of the following research is to analyze the evolution of male and female portrayals and roles in comics over the years. I will be looking at 10 different characters randomly selected from two different lists of male and female characters. I will look at 3 comic book covers for each character. I will be looking at a comic from one of their first appearances, middle appearances, and latest appearances. I will use the covers to write a content analysis based on a certain criterion I will choose. The criteria I will be looking for is the way the human body is drawn. I will be looking at how the human form of men are drawn and the human form of women are drawn. By choosing comics from 3 different times in the character's history, I can analyze the evolution of the character's physical form throughout the history of the character.

Before I started my research, I hypothesized that the form of the female characters starts out as regular women who reflected women in society to overly sexualized women with big breasts and tiny waists. I also hypothesized that the male characters would start out as regular looking men

to overly muscular, behemoth looking men. I expected these hypotheses to be true throughout the history of the characters. Through my research, I found that the male characters have gotten increasingly big and muscular over the years and it has not changed. I found that the female characters have gotten overly sexualized and some are still being sexualized a lot. I also found that some of the sexualizing have been dialed back for some characters.

Introduction

Comic books have been a major part of American pop culture since around the 1930s. These comic books depicted ordinary people who, through some sort of accident or happenstance, gained superpowers. People who could lift cars over their heads or leap over buildings in a single bound. Comic books have a long history. The history of comics is divided into six ages: the Golden Age, the Silver Age, the Bronze Age, the Plastic Age, the Revival Age, and the present. There have been many different comic book companies over the years, but at the forefront of comic book culture, there have been the two major companies: DC Comics and Marvel Comics. Marvel Comics introduced characters like Spider-Man, Ironman, Captain America, the Human Torch, the Incredible Hulk, etc, and superhero teams such as the Avengers, the X-Men, and the Fantastic Four. DC Comics introduced characters such as Batman, Wonder Woman, Superman, The Flash, Green Lantern, Martian Manhunter, etc, and teams such as the Justice League, the Teen Titans, and Young Justice. As the years went by and superheroes increased in popularity, these companies began expanding to cinematic motion pictures. Thus the superhero movie genre was born. People got to see some of their favorite and most iconic superheroes come to life on the big screen. Those who did not read comics began to see heroes onscreen and made them want to read the comics or

see more of them on screen. The popularity of superheroes has grown significantly over the years and will keep increasing exponentially.

The following research is an exploration of the gender portrayals for men and women in Marvel comics. Over the years, comic book artists have inadvertently fed readers myths about the male and female physique. In early comics, the physical form of the male and female characters was very normal, proportional, and natural. After a while, the forms of characters began to be drawn out of proportion and mythological even. Female characters began to be drawn overly sexual with their costumes covering less and less skin with their breasts increasing in size and their waist decreasing in size. Male characters began to be drawn overly masculine with their muscles being impossibly huge and having bulging bodies. This research is important because there can be a negative impact on the self-image of both women and men due to the fact that women being oversexualized leads to men being hypermasculinized. This research can examine how some characters' physical traits have changed over the course of the character's history to see how bad the problem has become.

The following research aims to answer the following questions: How have the physical forms of some characters from Marvel comics been exaggerated over the years? Has the oversexualization and hypermasculinization problem gotten better or worse?

Background

Concepts that helped me take my research in the direction I wanted to were derived in part from the teachings of Jean Kilbourne. Her movie, entitled *Still Killing Us Softly: Advertising's Image of Women*, was about how advertisements for women negatively affects all of us. I took some of her concepts and applied them to comics. In a way, comics are a form of advertisement.

In the same way as regular advertisements, women are dehumanized and objectified in comics. Kilbourne talks about how women are dissected and made out to be sex objects. Advertisements basically tell women to conform to impossible standards or they are not good enough. It is basically the same way in the comics. The female heroes and characters are almost always drawn as curvy, sexy, women with large breasts and a tiny waist, which has a very negative effect on women's body image. At the same time, advertisement of women also negatively affect men. According to Kilbourne, "the distorted image of women affects not only how men feel about women, but how men feel about everything that gets labeled feminine in themselves. Femininity is consistently devalued and men grow contempt for women and all things considered feminine. These facts are why men are constantly drawn as big men with huge muscles in the comics. They are drawn that way because masculinity is now linked with ruthlessness and brutality. The way men are shown or drawn tell men that they should strive to be invulnerable, which also has a negative effect on the body image of men.

Methodology

This section addresses the methods I used for my research. I started out by looking at a list of every character that Marvel Comics had ever created in the history of the company. I found the list on wikipedia.com. From that list, I compiled my own list of thirty male and thirty female characters. The thirty male characters I selected were Captain America, Bucky Barnes, Thor, Hulk, Wolverine, Daredevil, Black Panther, Falcon, Spider-Man, Iron Man, Beast, Deadpool, Black Bolt, Colossus, Vision, Adam Warlock, Silver Surfer, Drax, Iron Fist, Blade, Luke Cage, Iceman, Cyclops, Cable, Gambit, The Thing, Nova, Agent Venom, Red Hulk, and Ghost Rider. The thirty female characters I selected were Hellcat, Black Widow, Invisible Woman, Wasp, Jean Grey,

Scarlet Witch, Carol Danvers, Storm, She-Hulk, Mantis, Gamora, White Tiger, Spider-Woman, Kitty Pryde, Emma Frost, Elektra, Rogue, Psylocke, Jessica Jones, Daisy Johnson aka Quake, Medusa, Miss Marvel (Kamala Khan), Silk, Spider-Gwen, Maria Hill, Misty Knight, Squirrel Girl, Jubilee, Thor (Jane Foster), and Dagger. I then assigned each character a number from one to thirty on both lists. Using a random number generator from online, I randomly selected five numbers from both lists and consequently selected the corresponding characters. The female characters chosen were Elektra, Hellcat, Invisible Woman, Black Widow, and Wasp. The male characters chosen were Beast, Red Hulk, Gambit, The Thing, and Deadpool. Before I looked for the comic book covers, I searched google for the dates of first appearances of each character. I then went to the website marvel.fandom.com to look for the comic book covers. Case by case, I selected a comic from one of the first appearances of the character, one from the middle years of the character's history, and one from one of the latest appearances. For each cover, I selected one that featured the body of the characters prominently. When selecting a comic cover for the middle years, I used a calculator to subtract the year of the character's first appearance from 2019, divided that number by two, and then added that number to the year of the first appearance. I then selected a comic cover that was as close to the middle year as possible. When selecting a comic cover for the latest appearances, I selected a comic cover with a release year as close as possible to 2019. I then analyzed both the male and female comics using certain criteria. For the female characters, I looked at the following attributes: breast size, waist size, and uniform. For the male characters, I looked at the following attributes: muscle size and body size.

Data

The following data is my observations about each of the characters I used in my research. For the female characters, I looked at the following attributes: breast size, waist size, and uniform. For the male characters, I looked at the following attributes: muscle size and body size.

Elektra



In her first appearance in Elektra Assassin Vol 1 #1, Elektra's breast size is big. Her waist size was incredibly small. Elektra's uniform was very tight and incredibly revealing.

In one of her middle appearances in Elektra Vol 2 #13, Elektra's breast size had been increased exponentially. Her waist size remained relatively small. Her uniform is barely covering her chest at all. The fabric of the uniform is barely clinging together.

In one of her latest appearances in Elektra Vol 4 #5, Elektra's breast size was reduced. Elektra's waist size was increased to be more proportional to her body. Her uniform is now more conservative and covering most of her body.

Hellcat



In her first appearance in Avengers Vol 1 #144, Hellcat's breast size was big. Hellcat's waist also started out very small compared to the rest of her body. Her uniform was very form-fitting and very tight.

In one of her middle appearances, Hellcat Vol 1 #144, her breast size was increased. Hellcat's waist size remained around the same size, yet still pretty small compared to the rest of her body. Her uniform was still very tight but it looked even tighter because there was more detail drawn.

In one of her more recent appearances in Patsy Walker, A.K.A. Hellcat! Vol 1 #11, Hellcat's breast size was reduced. Her waist size increased and became more proportional to her body. Hellcat's uniform is now drawn with less detail. Her uniform now appears to be more loose fitting.

Invisible Woman



In one of her first appearances in *Fantastic Four* Vol 1 #1, Invisible Woman's breast size was average. Her waist size was also average and proportional to her body. Invisible Woman's uniform was just regular clothing that covered everything.

In one of her middle appearances in *Fantastic Four* Vol 1 #375, Invisible Woman's breast size was greatly increased. Her waist was also greatly reduced. Invisible Woman's uniform was very tight and incredibly revealing.

In one of her latest appearances in *Fantastic Four* Vol 6 #1, Invisible Woman's breast size remained big. Her waist size became more proportional to her body. Invisible Woman's uniform was still tight but covering more of her body.

Black Widow



_____ In her first appearance in Tales of Suspense Vol 1 #52, Black Widow's breast size was big. Her waist size was incredibly small and almost the size of her neck. Black Widow's uniform was only a tight dress.

In one of her middle appearances in Journey into Mystery Vol 1#517, Black Widow's breast size increased exponentially. Her waist size remained very small but more proportional to her body. Her uniform became a very tight leather suit.

In one of her latest appearances in Black Widow Vol 7 #3, Black Widow's breast size remained very big. Her waist size was still very small. Black Widow's uniform is still very tight and made of leather.

The Wasp



_____ In her first appearance in Tales to Astonish Vol 1 #44, the Wasp's breast size was average. Her waist size is really small. The Wasp's uniform is form fitting and very conservative.

In one of her middle appearances in Avengers Vol 3 #71, the Wasp's breast size was still average. Her waist size was still small but more proportional to her body. The Wasp's uniform was very tight but still covering her body.

In one of her latest appearances in The Unstoppable Wasp Vol 2 #2, the Wasp's breast size was still average. Her waist size was still small but it is more natural. The Wasp's uniform is still tight but it is now more practical and armor-like.

Beast



_____ In his first appearance in X-Men Vol 1 #1, Beast's muscle size is big but it is proportional to his body. His body is very bulky but it looks natural.

_____ In one of his middle appearances in Beast Vol 1 #1, Beast's muscle size is gigantic. He has muscles on top of muscles. Beast's body size is huge.

_____ In one of his latest appearances in Secret Avengers Vol 1 #22, Beast's muscle size is still very huge. His body size is not only still huge, but he looks more like an animal than a man.

Red Hulk



In his first appearance in Hulk Vol 2 #1, Red Hulk's muscles are huge and not natural looking at all. His body size is absolutely gigantic.

In one of his middle appearances in Hulk Vol 2 #22, Red Hulk's muscles are still very huge with muscles on top of muscles. His body size is still very gigantic.

In one of his latest appearances in U.S. Avengers Vol 1 #10, Red Hulk's muscles are still incredibly big. His body size is still very big.

Gambit



_____ In his first appearance in Uncanny X-Men Vol 1 #266, Gambit has muscles but they are average. Gambit's body size is fairly normal and a more sharp facial and bodily structure.

In one of his middle appearances in X-Men Legacy Vol 1 #213, Gambit has more abs than before. Gambit's body size is normal and more muscular and more bloated.

In one of his latest appearances in Rogue & Gambit Vol 1 #2, Gambit possesses average sized muscles. His body size is normal.

The Thing



In one of his first appearances in Fantastic Four Vol 1 #1, the Thing's muscles are big but proportional to his body. His body size is big but bulky.

In one of his middle appearances in Fantastic Four Vol #367, the Thing's muscles have gotten bigger. His body size is more defined but still big.

In one of his latest appearances in Fantastic Four Vol 6 #1, the Thing's muscles have gotten even bigger. His body size is even more defined and even bigger.

Deadpool



In his first appearance in New Mutants Vol 1 #98, Deadpool has very big muscles. His body is still average size with huge muscles.

In one of his middle appearances in Cable & Deadpool Vol 1 #15, Deadpool's muscles look even bigger with more muscles on top of muscles. His body looks even bigger.

In one of his latest appearances in Deadpool: Assassin Vol 1 #6, Deadpool still has big muscles but it is dialed back to look more normal. His body size is also dialed back to look more proportional.

Discussion

This section contains the discussion of the entirety of my research. At the beginning of my research, I hypothesized that the male characters would keep getting more muscular and their bodies would get bigger. I also hypothesized that the female characters would keep getting oversexualized. In my research, I found that some of the male characters I looked at, namely Deadpool and Gambit, were starting to revert to looking almost like regular humans would look. The other male characters, like Beast, Red Hulk, and the Thing are still getting bigger and more muscular. I also found that some female characters, namely Elektra, Hellcat, and the Wasp, are starting to be drawn less sexual than before. There are still some characters like Black Widow and the Invisible Woman are still being very sexualized. I have concluded that as the years go by, many Marvel characters that are being sexualized or hypermasculinized will start to be drawn more like normal humans as people start to realize that drawing characters in unrealistic ways messes with the self image of men and women. Other areas that can be further researched are how the gender portrayal of characters are in other comics from the same company, or from other companies like DC Comics. One could even look at the movies to see how the movies deal with gender portrayal compared to the comics; whether or not it is better or worse.

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