

HARLEY QUINN COMICS AND ADOLESCENT FEMALE READERS:
AN ANALYSIS OF GENDER REPRESENTATION AND INTERPRETATION

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DEDICATION

To the matriarch who fought for her right to knowledge and to self as a woman,
Beverly Twilley Else; and to my partner-in-crime and biggest supporter, Trevor R.
Mathis.

ABSTRACT

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With roots that can be traced back to the pulp and dime novels of the past, comics are a uniquely American creation that interconnect word with image and allow for multiple ways of reading and interpreting, which results in multiple ways of knowing and understanding. As comics continue to grow in popularity in mainstream culture, it is important to consider the messages being interpreted from these texts by readers.

This qualitative study explored how female adolescent readers experience and understand their gender through the comics of the popular character Harley Quinn (of DC Comics) and how Quinn is seen as performing gender within her stories. Using the lenses of critical literacy, feminism, and transactional theory, this investigation was conducted using content analysis of texts and language-in-use analysis of transcripts from interviews and a readers response meeting with five adolescent females. The data collected indicated gender to be more influential on Quinn's characterization and storylines than anything else, including her superpowered nature; and participants saw Quinn as enacting the socially recognizable identity of "American Female." Overall, the results showed Quinn to be more in alignment with cultural gender norms than not and, thus, she reinforced existing hegemonic patriarchal narratives seen in comics. It is only through recognition and knowledge of what exists in comic texts that readers can demand changes with these narratives and promote gender equity.

KEY WORDS: Harley Quinn, Comics, Gender, Feminism, Critical literacy, Transactional theory, Adolescent readers, DC Comics

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Comic books and their franchises are a huge industry. The US comics publishing industry was valued around \$1.1 billion in 2018, and 35% of that revenue was said to go to the second-largest publisher DC Comics (Salkowitz, 2019). And just who is buying all these comics? US marketing research company NPD Group, Inc. reported 57% of comics and graphic novels sales are buyers in the age 13-29 group, with 21% of this group being women; and women are “purchasing more than one out of every three comics and graphic novels sold” in the mainstream market (The NPD Group, 2017). Modern comics may have had a tumultuous history in the market since their start in the early twentieth century, but they have been consistently gaining ground in the publishing market in recent years (Ramsey, 2013; Salkowitz, 2019).

As comics become more incorporated into mainstream popular culture, in particular with teens and young adults, the messaging present in these texts is becoming more important than ever. Comics have traditionally been seen as a male-dominated space, and some of this has been informed by past messages about gender in comics culture and in comic texts (Cain, 2017; Rhode, 2017, VelvetRose, 2015;). Some in the field even predict the industry will flip to a female majority in the coming decade (Cavna, 2015). As the readership expands and diversifies, there is more conversation about what these messages have been saying and what needs to change. For example, feminist comic fans naming the notorious Women in Refrigerators (WiR) trope in superhero comics, which refers to how female characters often are “affected by injury, raped, killed, or depowered” as a “plot device to move a male character’s story arc forward” (*Women in*

Refrigerators, 2021). After all, the messages present in these texts hold power and influence in the attitudes and beliefs of their readers. These texts have the power to challenge or surrender to existing social structures and systems. As a writer with the Library of Congress states, “open a comic book, and you can see America in the pages – its people, its values, its culture, [and] how it’s changed” (Hartsell, 2017). Women in comics have often taken a backseat to their male counterparts, used as “voluptuous objects of attention for men,” and/or portrayed as girls “searching for romance while holding jobs that...were traditionally reserved for women,” such as “Millie the Model” or “Nellie the Nurse” (Hartsell, 2017). In fact, DC Comics had an early version of its editorial policy, which was written in response to the Comics Code Authority established in 1954, that explicitly stated, “inclusion of females in stories [was] superficially discouraged,” and “women, when used in plot structure, should be secondary in importance” (Edidin, 2011). Women in these texts have rarely and only recently been given opportunities to be independent agents, to be headliners, to have interests outside of romance, or even to be individuals not defined solely by a male counterpart (e.g., Batgirl as a derivative of Batman). If comics continue to perpetuate messages of disenfranchisement of the female gender, then marginalization is at risk to continue and be further strengthened. This has real-world implications on both the internal and external experiences of readers of any gender.

The goal of this introduction is to establish the need for a critical gender study with comic texts, in particular those involving the popular DC comics character Harley Quinn. This chapter will start with the character’s creation story and how gender played a part in her formation. This will lead into the problem statement for research exploration.

Background to the problem will be reviewed next and will consider looking at comics as literature, the impact of comics, and the modern marketing of comics to all ages. A discussion of the theoretical framework for this study will follow, including a look at critical literacy, feminism within critical literacy, and transactional theory. With a research foundation set, the purpose for this study will be stated and followed with questions for investigation by way of the proposed methodology. Delimitations and assumptions will be communicated. A review of this study's terminology will conclude the chapter.

Defined by Gender

Then the LORD God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.' ...So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept, took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. (Crossway Bible, 2001, Genesis. 2:18, 21-22)

In September 1992, a similar phenomenon occurred in a new television series called *Batman: The Animated Series (BAS)*. Writer Paul Dini was writing a script for an early episode of the TV show featuring the Joker, and he had an idea to add a "one-shot" female character to the Joker's gang as a "change of pace from all the other henchmen" (Couch, 2016). While sick one day, Dini watched an episode of *Days of Our Lives* in which actress and college friend Arleen Sorkin played a medieval court jester in a fantasy sequence. Inspired by Sorkin's performance, Dini sketched out an idea for the female henchwoman for his episode. He brought his rough sketch of the "silly little sidekick" Harley Quinn to *BAS* lead artist, Bruce Timm, who refined the character's ultimate look

(Riesman, 2020). Quinn's name came from a play on the word Harlequin, the trickster character from Italian *commedia dell'arte*, and her costume was inspired by the same source. Her personality came from Sorkin, who was invited to voice the character. With Sorkin's "high-nasal, sing-song-y, and filled with Brooklyn-ish inflections" voice, Harley Quinn appeared in the episode "Joker's Favor," as Mistah J's female henchwoman (Riesman, 2020). Her purpose now fulfilled, Harley Quinn was anticipated to exit the stage and never return.

However, just as Eve became more than a simple helper of Adam, Quinn was destined for more. The *BAS* animators, in particular Dini, were impressed by the completed character and wanted more. Timm was concerned Quinn's continued presence in the series as Joker's girlfriend would humanize him too much, but the team decided to bring her back anyway for another episode titled "The Laughing Fish." After this appearance, it was oh-fish-ial – Harley Quinn was here to stay, and she would become one of the most popular characters in the DC Comics universe (Reisman, 2020).

Harley Quinn may have been created to serve Joker in *BAS*, but she has evolved far beyond this purpose. She is now a staple in many DC Comics universe products and franchises, including movies, television, video games, and comic books. Yes, Quinn may have started as an animated character on a children's television series, but she has become the star of many stories featured in comics produced by DC. Quinn's path from animation to comics (as opposed to the reverse) is highly unusual, but, then again, Harley Quinn is unconventional in many ways. However, despite her individuality, in one particular way Harley Quinn is just like her peers. She has been defined and confined by her gender. With Quinn continuing to make her way into households as a rising star in

mainstream culture, it is important to look at what messages of gender (in addition to her infamous mallet) she may be bashing into people's heads. What are today's comics readers, like the teens her stories are marketed to, learning about what it means to be a female?

Problem Statement

While existing research has explored aspects of the oversexualization of female characters within comic books (Avery-Natale, 2013; Cocca, 2014), there is a gap in the research in analyzing how gender is communicated through a character like Harley Quinn and how these messages may be interpreted by readers of her stories. Specifically, in each of the various texts in which Quinn is depicted, how is she performing her assigned gender? Does this performance align with existing social codes about gender (as viewed from a Western cultural standpoint?) Do we see the performance of gender changing over time or from storyline to storyline? If so, how are these performances changing? And, most importantly, are these changes empowering or disempowering Quinn in her stories?

In addition, there is a need to explore the potential ways these texts impact individual female readers, especially those in their teen years. As noted above, teen readers are a growing proportion of comic book readers, and adolescence is an especially sensitive time in development. How do these female teen readers respond to the messages about gender they experience in these texts? Do they feel empowered or disempowered by them? Do these female comic characters feel like individuals that these female teen readers can relate to in terms of gender?

Background to the Problem

My worldview and philosophy align best with critical theory as I am interested in looking at issues of power between groups within culture. As Creswell and Poth (2018) state, critical theory believes “reality is known through the study of social structures, freedom and oppression, power, and control” and that “reality can be changed through research” (p. 36). It “seeks to understand how cultural dynamics interact to construct social systems” and ultimately “aims to change practices by challenging assumptions and biases that obscure difference and diversity through the development of power relations” (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p. 54). The goal of critical theory is to empower those individuals who have been marginalized and to help rewrite the majority’s narrative about what it means to be them (e.g., white/person of color, male/female, heterosexual/homosexual, etc.)

Comics as Literature. Comics have been embroiled in the fight for legitimacy as literature for a long time. If one considers comics on their most basic level as a text juxtaposing images and words (also called sequential art), then it can be argued comics have existed since the beginning of language (Danziger-Russell, 2013; Wright, 2001). Examples from history of sequential art include ancient Egyptian paintings and the Bayeux Tapestry from 1066 (McCloud, 1994). Manguel (2014) discusses the use of sequential art in early Christianity to help the illiterate public connect with the scriptures and stories of the Old and New Testaments through painted and sculpted images in churches. The paintings and sculptures would evolve into the stained-glass windows of the Gothic era to serve the same purpose. Soon after, the *Bibliae Pauperum* (Bibles of the Poor) would be introduced to collect these images in book form. These “picture books”

would feature scenes and characters from both the Old and New Testaments organized together on a page to help the public “‘read’ in those images a relationship between the stories...simply because of their juxtaposition on the page” (p. 103). In a world where many were “excluded from the realm of the written word,” these images “translated [texts] into a language anyone...could understand,” and this form of literacy “must have induced a feeling of belonging, of sharing with the wise and powerful [of society] the material presence of God’s word” (p. 107). Despite the similarities between these early forms of visual literature and modern comics, there is debate on whether these historical artifacts can truly be considered the ancestors of the comic book.

Regardless of the debate regarding the more ancient roots, there is consensus on the more recent literary history. Chapbooks and penny dreadfuls of Europe and the pulp magazines (pulp) and dime novels of the United States are often seen as the immediate predecessors of the modern comic book as we know it (Danziger-Russell, 2013; Wright, 2001). Chapbooks (a term possibly from the phrase “cheap book”) were “books made cheaply...and were sold for a small sum from the sixteenth to early nineteenth century” that featured stories of romance, famous criminals, fairy tales, ballads, and other popular entertainment (Danziger-Russell, 2013, p. 6). Penny dreadfuls, also known as “bloods” or “shilling shockers,” were also cheap texts (generally sold for one penny) produced for a working-class public that “were serialized into episodes, featuring stories of adventure and horror, often representing anti-heroes” (p. 6). On the other side of the Atlantic, the working-class American public had pulps and dime novels in the nineteenth century. Some dime novels were inspired by the British penny dreadfuls while others were straight rip offs from the publishers Beadle and Adams in the 1860s (Danziger-Russell,

2013). Pulp magazines were popular in the early twentieth century, cheap to purchase, and featured action, fantasy, and adventure/suspense stories. Pulp magazines were often accused of catering to the “lurid, sadistic, and grotesque,” and their “cheap thrills...made few intellectual demands” (Wright, 2001, p. 2). Regardless, the legacy of pulps is hard to dispute as they gave us authors Ray Bradbury and Edgar Rice Burroughs and the stories of Buck Rogers and Tarzan. They also gave us The Shadow, a pulp character who would later inspire the creation of DC’s Batman and some of his earliest stories.

There are multiple commonalities to consider between these predecessors and modern comics. Both were cheaply produced and targeted working-class audiences. Their stories often featured fantasy, action, and/or adventure. These two groups also inspired a variety of moral panics and were blamed for the ills of their society. For example, the 1884 book *Traps for the Young* by Anthony Comstock, which criticized dime novels and helped fuel the “first major controversy in the history of American children’s literature”, can easily be compared to the 1954 book *Seduction of the Innocent* by Fredric Wertham, which did the same with modern comics (Danziger-Russell, 2013).

Danziger-Russell (2013) argues “the prejudice against comics is rooted in history and that it stems from a general distaste on the part of the literary establishment for working-class art and popular culture” (p. 2). But renewed interest in comics, thanks in part to changing perceptions by the public and the growing popularity of graphic novels and manga (Japanese comics), has educators, critics, and society looking at these texts in a more serious light. Both picture books and comics “demand the reader’s interaction with both image and text” as the reader “must negotiate between what the written text is saying and what the picture is showing, as well as grapple with the concept of time and

movement in the visual narrative” (pp. 38-39). Danziger-Russell (2013) also points out “picture books and comics both allow the reader to interact with the text creatively; the combination of pictures and words allows for great variation in interpreting the meaning of these works” (p. 39).

Comics, like picture books, promote visual literacy. But comics additionally “contain complicated narrative structures” and “the joining of visual and textual narrative also often creates polyphony or dialogism as different narratives or voices interact with one another” (Danziger-Russell, 2013, p. 82). Nikolajeva and Scott (2000) describe three different narrative styles that arise from various relationships between word and image in a text: complementary, contrapuntal (or counterpointing), and contradictory.

Complementary narratives are when image supports the word and can be seen as enhancing the text. Contrapuntal (counterpointing) narratives are “where words and images collaborate to communicate meaning beyond the scope of either one alone,” or, in other words, the counterpointing provides a “harmony between word and image” which “[form] a narrative depth that the words or pictures alone could not convey” (Danziger-Russell, 2013, p. 44). Contradictory narrative is when words and pictures seem to oppose each other and “the interaction between the narrative of the text and the narrative of the image encourages the reader to become an accomplice in the creation of meaning: what is actually going on in the story is up to the reader to decide” (p. 52). Comics also can utilize integrated texts, which can vary “from words that are overlaid on the image to text that is inseparable from the art”, and wordless narratives, which require readers to “interpret the full meaning of the ‘text,’ without the aid of words” (p. 42).

Despite having many similar characteristics, picture books have held a legitimate place in the literary canon for decades while comics have not. Comics existence as a medium of popular culture and as an accessible text to the general public have likely contributed to their lack of respect by the literary and educational communities. However, comics require and promote visual literacy skills, and their ability to market to all ages allows for them to engage readers in more complex content and language. There is a place for comics in the literary canon and a need for academia to research their educational potentials.

Impact of Comics. Comics may have had humble origins as periodicals, but, with approximately \$529.66 million in comic texts sales in 2019 alone, the industry has established itself as a vital part of the publishing industry (Miller, n.d.a). During 2019, 14 titles published with Harley Quinn as a headliner sold an estimated 590,573 units alone – this number doesn't even include her countless appearances in other comics or other media (Miller, n.d.a). Estimates from Quarter 1 of 2020 (January 2020 – March 2020; before the impact of COVID-19) reported approximately 257,612 comic text units sold in which Quinn was a headliner (Miller, n.d.b). Needless to say, Harley Quinn is a highly visible character in the DC Comics universe, and her texts are being read at a large scale. Therefore, the messaging present in these texts are being consumed by a number of readers, and the potential impact of this messaging is worth considering.

Marketing to All Ages. DC is no longer in the business of making stories only for the stereotypical comics fan (i.e., the young to middle-aged white male). The company has sought to offer something to fans of all ages in its current marketing. For example, DC Black Label is for mature audiences (18+) while DC Super Hero Girls

targets young girls (ages 6-12 years). In 2019, DC announced at the American Library Association's annual convention their new young adult and middle-grade graphic novel lines. These standalone series would feature well-known DC characters and seek to be "completely accessible to new fans" of the genre (DC Publicity, 2019). The announcement further described the YA line to "feature thought-provoking stories...that focus on everyday aspirations, struggles, and triumphs" while the middle-grade line will "tell stories focused on friends, family, and growing up" (DC Publicity, 2019). As DC continues to expand its content and characters to fans of all ages, it is yet another reason to consider what messages these stories may be saying.

Theoretical Framework

Critical Literacy

Per Giroux (1992), "literacy is not reduced to learning simply how to read, write, or listen" as to truly be literate means to "undertake a dialogue with the multiple languages, discourses, and texts of others who speak from different histories, locations, and experiences" (p. 2). This view of literacy as critical means to analyze texts for languages of difference and power and to use these analyses to challenge and redefine hegemonic narratives (Freire, 2018). In other words, critical literacy theory "considers the relationships between individuals, literacy, and social transformation" (Tracey and Morrow, 2017, p. 172). It seeks to "speak with rather than for others" (Giroux, 1992, p. 4).

Critical literacy tells us texts are not apolitical. They can and often promote ideologies that support a dominant social group at the expense of the marginalized. But it is not enough for a reader to only develop an awareness of identifying inequalities present

in a text. It is equally, if not more, important to then act on these reflections. For Freire and critical literacy theorists, critical literacy is necessary for a participatory democracy as “literacy should give people the tools of emancipation against their oppressors” (Clarke and Whitney, 2009, p. 530). It is about giving readers the ability to “question, explore, or challenge the power relationships that exist between authors and [themselves]” (McLaughlin and DeVogd, 2020, p. 587).

Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) reviewed 30-years’ worth of professional literature on critical literacy, and they recognized four aspects of critical literacy analysis. Those steps included disrupting common understanding by viewing a text from a different perspective; examining multiple perspectives of those included and not included in the text; examining the power relationships between and amongst groups/individuals; and determining “a course of action to bring about change in an inappropriate, unequal power relationship” (McLaughlin and DeVogd, 2020, p. 587).

Critical literacy forces us to confront the reality that the words present in a text have consequences in the real world. Without its use, dominant ideologies will continue to promote the status quo, and power will not be given to disenfranchised groups. Critical literacy seeks to not only give a voice to the oppressed but to make sure it is heard, and change is enacted.

Inequality between groups is at the center of the present study. The world of comics has traditionally been seen and marketed to male readers. Thus, the ideologies of a patriarchal system have been embedded in many comic texts and reflected in the depictions of female comic characters. Male and female comic characters, just like male and female comic readers, have traditionally not shared power in these texts. These types

of hegemonic narratives have consequences in the real world. It is only through change that this narrative can and will be rewritten to distribute power equally amongst groups.

Feminism within Critical Literacy

Critical literacy can be used to analyze systems of power related to a variety of identity markers, such as race, class, and/or sexual orientation. When that analysis focuses on gender power structures, it is called feminism. As Leavy and Harris (2019) describe:

Feminist research...holds explicit social commitments at the forefront. Beginning with the status of girls and women, but not ending there, feminism is an engaged human rights position that seeks to expose and remedy gender inequities. Feminist research suggests ways forward to a better world in which critical scholarship plays an active role in inspiring and enacting social change (p. v).

It is necessary to distinguish that sex and gender are similar but not the same. Sex generally refers to the biological assignment of male or female at birth based on reproductive functioning. Gender is the performance of sets of learned behaviors used by individuals to fit into society according to their assigned sex (Butler, 1990). In other words, gender “refers to the culturally constructed differences between men [males] and women [females]: tastes, roles, activities, and more” (Ott & Mack, 2014, p. 9). Sexism, or the discrimination of individuals based on their sex assignment and/or gender, views the male sex (masculine identity) as superior and discriminates against females (feminine identity). For the purposes of this study, the term gender (i.e., the concept of masculine versus feminine) will be used as this research focuses on issues related to identity rather than anatomy.

A culture assigns a gender (masculine or feminine) to an individual based on the sex they were assigned at birth (male or female). The individual is then expected to do (or perform, in the words of Butler) their gender according to cultural norms. An example of this phenomenon can be seen in how children are instructed by adults to behave in ways considered socially appropriate for their gender. A boy is told he cannot play with dolls while a girl is told she cannot play on the football team. Even texts are often gendered – for instance, adventures stories are for boys while romances are for girls.

In the United States, education was one of the early topics explored through a feminist lens. Puritan education and educational opportunity were based on division of gender both in terms of educator and educated. Early advocates of equal “serious academic training” of the genders did so in arguments related to providing society with sensible wives and mothers (Pinar, 2008, p. 360). When the concept of coeducation (i.e., education of boys and girls together) was being discussed in the first half of the nineteenth century, the argument in favor was based on the idea that “it would make girls better mothers, and boys...would presumably cease acting in an unruly fashion” (p. 360). Even the hiring of female teachers to teach boys in addition to girls came with its own controversy with supporters arguing women teachers would provide “a maternal and moral dimension to teaching” and help “civilize the classrooms” (p. 360). Women in education, whether as student or teacher, have a history of being framed in the context of how to support the men in their communities and the patriarchy at large.

As time progressed, for every perceived step towards equality of the sexes seen in schools, there would be a new way found to counter it. For example, career and technical training classes would have females participate in home economics (i.e., skills related to

homemaking) while males participated in industrial arts (i.e., skills related to the workforce). Organized sports and athletics would be introduced for several reasons, including “the fear that boys were becoming feminized due to the absence of male role models at home and school” (Pinar, 2008, p. 363). Women were allowed access to sports primarily through spectatorship or cheerleading. Female teachers increased in number but were supervised by male administrators. Curriculum texts often promoted gender discrimination and stereotyping with “girls...depicted overall much less frequently than...boys” and “when portrayed, they often appeared as passive, other-directed, manipulative, delicate, dependent, cautious”, as well as “lacking initiative, imagination, and even personhood” (p. 365). Further, when boys and girls did appear together in a text, “females appeared dependent, [while] males [were] independent,” and “females [as] dangerous and manipulative [with] males [as] gullible and childlike” (p. 365). Educational institutions, with their overt and covert messages of sexism, were not the places of equal opportunity often assumed.

As Madeleine Grumet (1988, as cited in Pinar 2008) articulated “if sexism refers to the response of society to a particular sexual identity, gender refers to that sexual identity as it is experienced, acknowledged, and owned by the individual” (p. 358). One of the ways gender can be experienced and acknowledged is through text, especially with characters. Comic books have a history of sexism in their texts, and their female characters have notoriously been seen as perpetuating gender stereotypes. But times have changed for the industry, economically and socially, so readers and fans are starting to see new narratives being written for popular female comic characters. Harley Quinn is one such character, and she is an interesting case study as she has gone through a

significant number of changes in her (relatively) short lifespan in the DC comics universe. Once a throwaway sidekick character and then the abused girlfriend of the Joker, Quinn is now starring as an independent agent in her own texts targeting readers of all ages. This study will explore Quinn's depictions in some of these texts through a feminist lens.

Transactional Theory

As Rosenblatt (1995) wrote in *Literature as Exploration*, “there is no such thing as a generic reader or a generic literary work; there are only the potential millions of individual readers of the potential millions of literary works” (p. 24). To Rosenblatt, a text, a reader, and a reading experience/interaction are not separate entities but, rather, components of a “live circuit” in which each elements needs and plays off the others (p. 24).

Transactional theory defines a text as “the sequence of printed or voiced signs” while the interaction/experience between a reader and text is called “the poem” (Rosenblatt, 1995, p. 27). First, an author “share[s] his [or her] vision” with a reader by “inscrib[ing] verbal signs that he [or she] hopes will enable readers to perceive selected images, personalities, and events in special relation to one another” that will “evoke in the reader’s mind a special emotion, a new or deeper understanding – that enables him [or her] ...to communicate with [the] reader” (p. 34). The reader, on the other hand, is also “creative” as he/she “comes to the book from life” (p. 34). Rosenblatt argues that “meaning emerges as the reader carries on a give-and-take with the signs on the page” (p. 26). This meaning making is informed by what a reader brings to a text, which includes past experiences, personality, mood, memories, expectations, etc. Therefore, each reader

will have a unique and individual experience with a text as each will communicate with it differently. The interaction of each of these elements – the text, the reader, and the literary experience (poem) – are what constitute the transactional theory of reading. In conclusion, reading is “the highly personal process of evoking the literary work [poem] from the text” (p. 31).

There are several outcomes of the transactional experience for readers proposed by Rosenblatt. For one, “we [readers can] participate in imaginary situations, we [can] look on at characters living through crises, [and] we [can] explore ourselves and the world about us” (Rosenblatt, 1995, p. 37). Literature also provides opportunities “to sympathize or to identify with the experiences of others” even if non-human (p. 37). It is through stories and text that students both gain knowledge and experience as “literature provides a *living through*, not simply *knowledge about*” (emphasis in original; p. 38).

For adolescent readers, Rosenblatt (1995) argues “the experience of the [literary] work is further specialized by the fact that he [or she] has probably not yet arrived at a consistent view of life or achieved a fully integrated personality” (p. 31). Beginning readers use their past experiences of both life and language to “elicit meaning from the printed words” and then use these words to “reorganize[e] past experience” and find new understanding (p. 25). Rosenblatt argues adolescent readers do the same thing, and they need to be exposed to text appropriate for their needs and abilities. Literature for the adolescent can help them with their “desire for self-understanding and for knowledge about people” (p. 52). It is the role of the teacher to help facilitate these transactions for her students and not to teach specific meanings or understandings of a text that are outside of the individual.

The other key aspect of this theory is the conceptualization of why one reads. As Rosenblatt (1985) explains all reading “falls somewhere on a continuum between predominantly efferent...and the predominantly aesthetic reading” (p. 101). Where a reader falls on the continuum depends on where they are focusing their attention. Efferent reading is about “public meaning, abstracting what is to be retained after the reading – to be recalled, paraphrased, acted on, analyzed” (p. 101). Aesthetic reading is when a reader focuses attention on “what is being personally lived through, cognitive and affectively, *during* the reading event,” including “the range of ideas, feelings, [and] associations activated in the reservoir of symbolizations” (emphasis in original; pp. 101-102). Rosenblatt is the first to acknowledge that most reading falls somewhere in the middle of this continuum, but a reader can also approach reading a text with an intention of an efferent or aesthetic stance.

Comics are an excellent example to examine this theory in practice. One would traditionally think of comic book readers as using an aesthetic stance in their approach to reading. After all, comic have often been characterized as texts for hobby rather learning. However, as discussed above, reading usually involves aspects of both aesthetic and efferent stances, and comic book reading is no exception. Readers certainly have aesthetic experiences as they engage with these texts, but they also internalize the presented information. Comics have a history of tackling social issues in their pages, including racism and sexism (Madrid, 2016; Wright, 2001). Thus, while readers are being entertained and emotionally engaging with a comic, they are also experiencing an exchange of information about the larger world. For example, when DC depicts the dynamic of an abused Harley Quinn and abusive Joker as comedic rather than harmful,

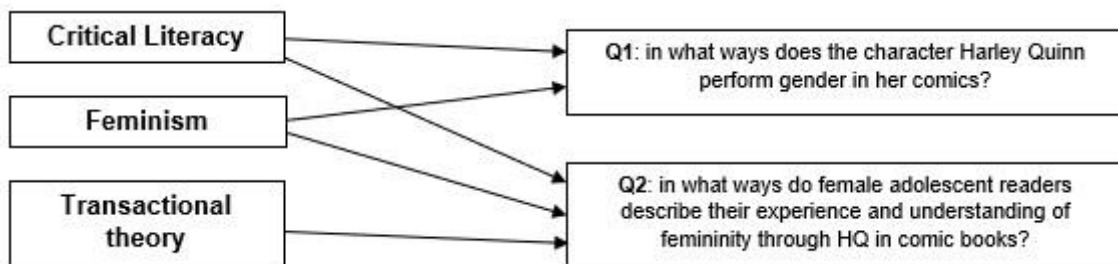
then readers of that text are receiving information that dismisses the harm of domestic violence.

This study explores how adolescent readers transact with comic texts written for their age group by DC. The stories being used are said to address issues relevant to this age group by the publisher, but reading, as noted by Rosenblatt, is much more than interpreting a text presented. This study looks at how adolescent female readers interpret and understand the female characters in these stories in addition to its overall messages and themes. Do the female characters, specifically Harley Quinn, represent a positive form of femininity for readers? Do the adolescent readers resonate with the experiences and depictions of Quinn in these stories?

Putting the Theories Together. This study's approach starts from a critical literacy standpoint and focuses on analysis of power structures associated with gender. The participants and framing of this study use a Western (specifically, American) cultural view of gender. Using a feminist lens, this study first investigates text for gendered messages then investigates the responses of adolescent readers in their understanding and meaning making of the character Harley Quinn and how she performs gender in comic texts.

Figure 1

Theoretical Approach to Research Questions



Purpose Statement

I am interested in researching these questions through the character of Harley Quinn because of her popularity in pop culture, her widespread presence in the DC Comics universe, and her constant evolution and flexibility as a character. The goal of this study is to critically analyze how Quinn performs the female gender in her appearances in comic texts and how this is potentially communicating messages about what it means to be “female” to readers and fans. I also researched how adolescent female readers respond to Quinn’s performances of gender and if these messages appear as empowering or disempowering to them. If they interpret these messages to be supportive of existing cultural norms that seek to assign a lower status in society due to gender, how would they want to see this narrative change?

The consequences of not critically analyzing comic texts and understanding how readers interact with them is real. For example, after decades of (white) male supremacy narratives in comics, it is no surprise when reactionary movements like #Comicsgate occur as male power and dominion are threatened. #Comicsgate refers to a “loose confederation” of men on social media who have sought to “derid[e] female... [comic] characters, creators, and fans – all while claiming to want to return to an imagined past of apolitical comics” (Riesman, 2018). #Comicsgate attacks are heavily misogynistic (and racist) in tone with many supporters being linked to larger socio-political movements, such as men’s rights and the alt-right. Richard C. Meyer, a member of the comics industry and #Comicsgate, has been vocal in his displeasure with changes in the industry, which he sees as part of a larger cultural movement of the ““feminization of men, [and] masculinization of women”” (Elbein, 2018). Meyer has a large online following, and

those targeted by his comments have received death threats and been doxed, meaning their personal (private) information has been shared online without permission (Elbein, 2018). Meyer's supporters feel empowered to threaten and ridicule disenfranchised comic fans because of their desire to return to a status quo that promotes (white) male supremacy. To reiterate an idea stated earlier in this chapter, "open a comic book, and you can see America in the pages – its people, its values, its culture" (Hartsell, 2017). For too long, comics have reflected antiquated ideas about women and their potential in our society. It is through critical reflection and exploration of how texts are interacted with and understood that we can seek to create new and more inclusive narratives.

Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. Through a content analysis, in what ways does the character Harley Quinn perform gender in her comics?
 - a. What attitudes and beliefs about femininity are depicted through Quinn?
 - b. In what ways has Quinn's depiction of femininity in her comics changed over time?
2. Through a language-in-use analysis, in what ways do female adolescent readers describe their experience and understanding of femininity through Harley Quinn in comic books?
 - a. In what ways does a female adolescent identify and/or not identify with Quinn in the text?
 - b. In what ways do female adolescents see Quinn as challenging and/or supporting cultural stereotypes about femininity?

Methods

This study takes a qualitative approach to its research. Content analysis was used to answer the first research question, and the methodological approach, including the direction for the literature review, is detailed in Figure 2. The second research question utilized language-in-use analysis, which its methodology detailed in Figure 3.

Figure 2

Methodological Approach to Research Question 1

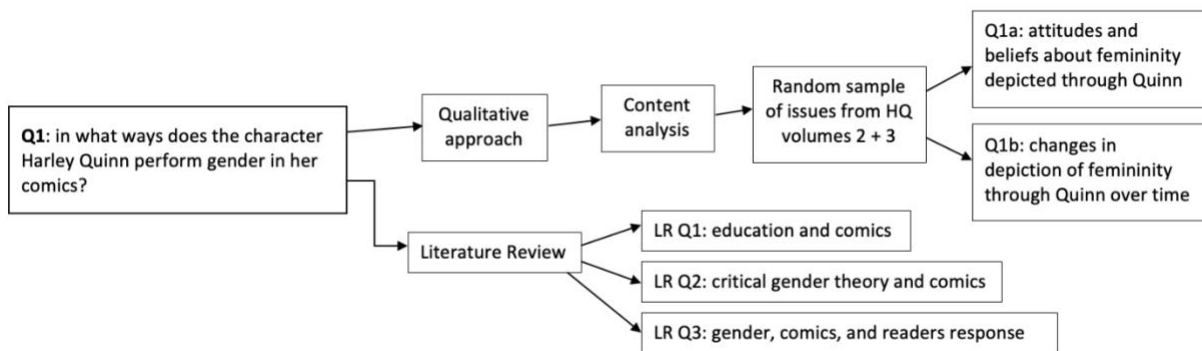
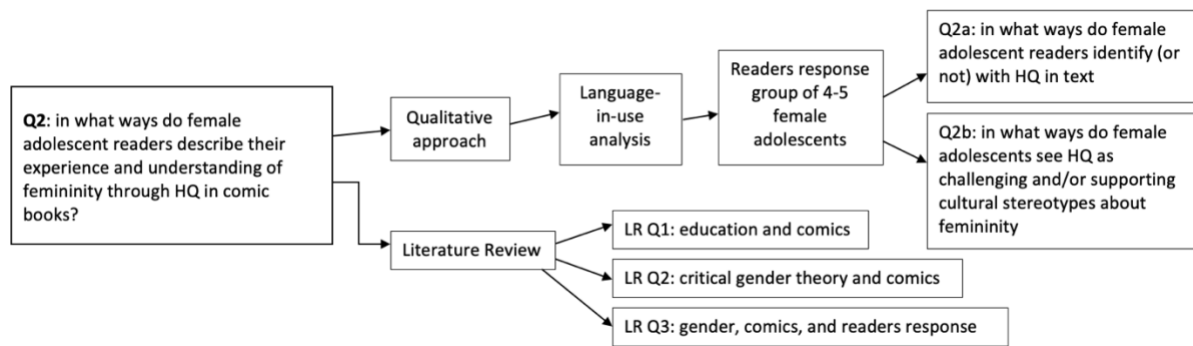


Figure 3

Methodological Approach to Research Question 2



Delimitations

This study is limited to a sample of issues in *Harley Quinn* volumes 2 and 3, which were published during the *New 52* (2013-2016) and *Rebirth* eras (2016-2020) of DC Comics. These texts were selected for their legacy in popularizing Quinn as a character in print. Novelizations and cameo appearances in other titles during these periods were not included in this study. For the research conducted with participants, the sample is limited to a small group of adolescents whose gender identity and sex-assigned-at-birth are female. Because this study focuses on the individual experiences of these study participants, the results cannot be extrapolated to a larger population and are not generalizable.

Assumptions

It is important to acknowledge gender and gender identify exist on a spectrum, but this study uses a gender binary model for purposes of simplicity. Gender binarism assumes classification of gender into two opposite forms (masculine or feminine) and that aspects of gender are linked to one's sex assigned at birth (male or female). Another assumption of this study is that all participants responded to questions openly and honestly and reflected their own personal opinions.

Conclusion

The remainder of this study is organized into four chapters, a bibliography, and appendixes. Chapter Two reviews the existing literature related to transactional theory, feminism, critical literacy, and comics as well as existing studies involving Harley Quinn as a character. Chapter Three discusses the methodologies used for this study and the research design. Chapter Four provides an analysis and discussion of the findings of this

study. Chapter Five closes this paper through a summary, conclusion, and recommendations for further exploration and research. A bibliography of references and appendixes follow Chapter Five.

Terminology

Comic books are texts that “communicate narratives through a unique combination of text and sequential illustration that works within its own aesthetic vocabulary” (Wright, 2001, p. xiii). They differ from their relative the comic strip primarily in terms of production and distribution. Comic strips are “syndicated features in newspapers sold to a mass” while comic books are “created, distributed, and sold on their own merits to a paying” audience (Wright, 2011, pp. xiii-xiv). For the purposes of this study, any use of the shortened term “comics” will only refer to comic books as they are of primary focus. Two additional considerations to be addressed in regard to comic books: cover dates (of publication) and pagination. To extend shelf life, publishers often postdate comic book issues by multiple months. For example, *Harley Quinn Volume 1* issue #4 has a cover date of March 2001 but was published and released in January 2001. In terms of pagination, because issues of comics are often reprinted and collected in various volumes, page numbers will vary widely. For the purposes of this study, pages of individual issues will be independently numbered in order to avoid confusion for the reader. Therefore, every issue will be start with an assigned page 1 and end numbering at the end of its book. It is important to note the researcher accessed all issues through collected volumes, so the page numbers assigned by the researcher will not correlate with page numbers within the volumes used themselves.

Additional terms used throughout this study are defined as follows:

- *Antihero (or antiheroine)*: main character in a story who lacks conventional heroic qualities and attributes, such as idealism and morality; often acting primarily out of self-interest or in ways that defy conventional ethical codes
- *Bisexuality*: romantic (sexual) attraction towards both males and females
- *Canon (or continuity, mythology)*: material accepted as part of the official story within a story universe
- *Comic artist*: person who handles the visuals; umbrella term (can be divided by specific job)
- *Comic writer (or author, scripter, plotter)*: person who scripts the work, which may include plot, dialogue, action
- *Comics (or comic books)*: periodical, normally thin in size and stapled together; have more variety of units of encapsulation than comic strips (including the panel, page, spread, and inset panels)
- *Comic strip*: short work of comics that has one unit of encapsulation (panel)
- *DC Multiverse*: collection of all continuities within DC Comics publications
- *DC Universe (DCU)*: the fictional shared universe where most stories in comic book titles published by DC Comics takes place
- *Fanservice*: material in fiction intentionally added to please the audience, often sexual in nature
- *Female*: the sex of an organism that produces non-mobile ova (egg cells) and have two X chromosomes

- *Femininity*: culturally defined set of attributes, behaviors, and roles generally associated with human females
- *Gender*: range of characteristics pertaining to, and differentiating between, femininity and masculinity; may include biological sex and sex-based social structures (i.e., gender roles)
- *Gender binary model (gender binarism)*: classification of gender into two opposite forms (masculine or feminine) and those aspects of gender are linked to one's sex assigned at birth (biological assignment)
- *Gender discrimination*: discrimination toward people based on gender identity or gender/sex differences
- *Graphic novel*: self-contained, book-length form; some argue it is synonymous with comics while other restrict it to long-form narratives; some define it by the square-bound spine
- *Harlequin*: trickster character from Italian *commedia dell'arte*
- *Identity*: the characteristics by which a thing or person is known
- *Justice*: the quality of being fair, reasonable, or impartial; in alignment with the law
- *Male*: sex of an organism that produces gamete known as sperm and have XY chromosomes
- *Masculinity*: culturally defined set of attributes, behaviors, and roles generally associated with human males

- *Rogue*: a deceitful and unreliable scoundrel
- *Rogues' gallery*: cast of reoccurring characters (usually villains) that battle the protagonist (usually hero) on a regular basis
- *Secret identity*: person's alter ego which is not known by general public
- *Sequential art*: proposed by comic artist Will Eisner, describes art forms that use images deployed in a specific order for the purpose of graphic storytelling (the narration of graphic stories) or conveying information
- *Sex*: two divisions (male or female) of organisms that propagate their species through sexual reproduction; biological assigned at birth
- *Sexism*: prejudice or discrimination based on a person's sex or gender; the belief that one sex or gender is intrinsically superior to another
- *Sidekick*: a close friend who accompanies hero in the hero's activities
- *Splash*: an image that spans more than one page
- *Superhero (or superherione)*: character that possesses abilities beyond those of ordinary people who uses his/her powers to help the world become a better place; dedicated to protecting the public and fighting crime
- *Supervillain (or supervillainess)*: variant of villainous character commonly found in comics; usually possesses superhuman abilities; antithesis of superhero; often used as foils to present a daunting challenge to a superhero
- *Vigilante*: a person who takes the law into his or her own hands

- *Villain*: someone who does evil deliberately
- *Webcomics*: comics published via the Internet

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

...in comics, substance and style are not separate entities. An artist's style shapes our perceptions. In a comic, mood and tone don't emerge slowly over the course of sentences, paragraphs, and chapters, as they do in prose; they're evident at first glance, infused into everything we see: the arrangement of panels, the thickness of lines, the density of detail. We read books, but we *feel* comics. (Weldon, 2016, pp. 111-112)

Chapter two of this dissertation is split into two parts. The first section presents a brief overview of the history of the superheroine character in American comic books before then narrowing focus to the specific comics universe in which Harley Quinn operates – that of Batman. Section one of this chapter will conclude with a detailed introduction to the character known as Harley Quinn. This information is included to provide foundational understanding and context for the study's content analysis. The second section will provide a review of existing scholarly literature surrounding the study of comics in education, critical gender theory and comics, and readers response to depictions of gender in comics. Section two will conclude with a brief review of graduate student work related to this study before discussing themes and gaps in the existing research.

Introduction to Harley Quinn and the Comics Industry

The first part of chapter two will focus on establishing knowledge about Harley Quinn and the world of comic books in American culture. First, Quinn's introduction to the world of print will be reviewed and be followed by an introduction to the publishing

house who owns her intellectual property (IP). A brief synopsis of the history of the modern comic book industry and the character of the superheroine will be discussed next. This first part of chapter two will conclude with a review of the contemporary canon regarding Quinn before moving into part two, which will be a review of existing academic literature.

Meeting Harley Quinn

This study seeks to answer its research questions through the DC character Harley Quinn, so it is necessary to briefly summarize a few concepts and elements relevant to Quinn. There have been many changes in the depiction of the DC character over time. This section will explore Quinn's transition into comics after her start on *Batman: The Animated Series (BAS)* and conclude with her first appearance in DC's *New 52* universe, which debuted in 2011. A more detailed review of Quinn will be included later in the chapter.

Broad Overview of Harley Quinn in Comics

As mentioned in chapter one, Harley Quinn is unique in the world of comic book characters as she actually got her start on an animated television series. She was so well-received that she became a regular feature on the TV show. But her transition to the world of print would take some time.

Quinn debuted on *BAS* in 1992. She would make two appearances in noncanonical Batman comic titles, which were 1993's *The Batman Adventures* (the comic book spinoff of the animated series in which she starred) and 1997's *Batman: Thrillkiller* (it is worth noting this appearance is an offshoot version of her character). Most famously, her creators, Paul Dini and Bruce Timm, would write an issue of *The*

Batman Adventures called *Mad Love* in 1994 that would explore Quinn's origin story. Considered the definitive Quinn story, she is depicted "as a tragic figure and sympathetic villain" as readers see the young psychiatrist Dr. Harleen Quinzel fall in love with her patient (the Joker) and transform into his accomplice and abused lover ("Harley Quinn," 2021). The story would win the prestigious Eisner (i.e., the comic book industry's version of an Academy Award) and Harvey awards for Best Single Issue in 1994, and the story would be adapted into a TV episode for *BAS* in 1999.

Harley Quinn would officially enter DC and Batman canon in 1999 when she starred in the graphic novel *Batman: Harley Quinn*, which was written by Dini. It would introduce Quinn's origin to the Batman universe and bring a darker element to the Quinn/Joker dynamic since the comics version of Joker was far more sadistic than his animated cousin. It would also canonically establish a strong friendship between villainess Poison Ivy and Quinn and add toxin immunity to Quinn's list of superpowers.

DC would give Quinn her first solo series in 2000, which was pitched to editors as "a comic about 'love gone horribly, terribly wrong'" ("Harley Quinn," 2021). The series would feature a now solo Quinn in her criminal exploits while supported by henchmen called the Quinntets. As Reisman (2020) would describe it, "her solo comic series was something of a bomb and veered wildly between forgettable fluff, awkward neo-noir, and larger-than-life nonsense" (Reisman, 2020). Sales were bad and continued to be poor even when DC hired a new creative team to make the comic darker and grittier. It would be cancelled in 2003 after 38 issues. Readers of comics in the mid-aughts would only get rare sightings of Quinn after the cancellation of her series.

One interesting theory for why Harley Quinn struggled in her transition to comics from TV animation was proposed by essayist and Batman historian Chris Sims. Sims argues that the original (animated) Quinn was shown as being in love with the animated version of Joker, who was a far less menacing character than his print counterpart. Print Joker “ha[d] killed a million people” as “a sadistic, torturing murderer,” and it would be hard to “sympathize with [Quinn] when *that’s* the Joker she likes” (emphasis in original; Reisman, 2020). Quinn of TV was in love with a madman who had a flair for the dramatic in his fairly tame crimes. Quinn of print would have to both endorse and support the murder of millions to retain her characterization as the lover and accomplice of Joker – a move that likely made her fans uncomfortable to say the least.

In a theme that would appear to become reoccurring, it would be another outside-of-comics Harley Quinn feature that would boost the character’s popularity again. This time, she would play a major role in the 2009 video game *Batman: Arkham Asylum*. Although intended for a mature (i.e., adult) audience, the game was directly inspired by *BAS* and featured the same voice actors. Quinn would be the only major female character featured throughout the game, and this version would continue her role as lover/accomplice of the Joker as assists in his attempt to destroy Batman. Despite the controversy over her new aesthetic as a murderous sexy nurse, Quinn’s popularity was back.

Back in the world of print, Quinn would have a leading role in DC’s new *Gotham City Sirens* series, which co-starred Poison Ivy and Catwoman. Debuting in 2009, the series featured the three villainesses working together and forming a friendship. Quinn’s backstory would be expanded upon in the series, including establishing her hometown as

Brooklyn, New York, and discussing her childhood in a dysfunctional family with a low-level criminal father. The series would be cancelled in 2011 after 25 issues as part of DC's *New 52* relaunch of their entire publishing line.

The *New 52* debut of Harley Quinn in 2011 was unrecognizable to fans when she was featured on the front cover of *Suicide Squad*. In this new DC universe, Quinn believed Joker to be dead and was now a member of the covert government supervillain team known as Task Force X (also known as the Suicide Squad). But what was most shocking to fans were the extreme changes to the character's aesthetic and personality. No longer donning her red-and-black jester costume, this version of Quinn had bleached skin (like the Joker), wore a costume of a corset and hot pants, and had half-blue, half-red pigtailed hair. She was much more violent than her previous self, and the *Suicide Squad* series showed her "execut[ing] bloody murders and giggling in situations where even her hardened teammates were terrified" (Reisman, 2020).

Quinn's origin story was also revisited and revised during the *New 52* era. This new origin story featured Dr. Harleen Quinzel going to a chemical plant with Joker and him reinventing his own "birth" by pushing Quinzel into a vat of chemicals. The incident would bleach Quinn's skin, drive her insane, and transform her into the supervillain known as Harley Quinn. Fans disliked this new direction DC was taking with the character. It was argued this new origin story took away Quinn's agency as a person. After all, until this revised origin story, Quinn had always chosen to become Joker's accomplice and was never forced into it. *Suicide Squad* would be "critically panned," and cancelled in 2014 after 30 issues (Reisman, 2020).

Despite the continued struggle to work as a character in print, Quinn remained popular during this period thanks to her continued appearances in the Batman Arkham video games. Her next iteration in print would be the only that finally clicked, and it will be explored later in this chapter. It is necessary to establish a rudimentary understanding of DC Comics, the modern comic book industry, and the history of the superheroine in comics, which will be reviewed in the section that follows.

Publishing House of DC

The modern comics publishing industry has seen a number of publications and publishing houses throughout its decades-long existence. For the purposes of this study, it is only necessary to review DC Comics as Harley Quinn has always been their IP.

In 1944, All-American Comics, who published the stories of Wonder Woman, Flash, and Green Lantern, merged with National Comics, who published the adventures of Superman and Batman, to become National Periodical Publications (Madrid, 2016). The logo for this new publishing house was “Superman-DC” and was commonly called DC. The initials DC came from the *Detective Comics* series, which debuted in 1937 and would introduce the hero known as Batman in issue #27 (Luchini, 2019). Eventually, the company would officially adopt the name DC to which is still known today. As of 2020, DC is owned by AT&T’s WarnerMedia.

Birth of the Modern Comics Industry

What modern audiences consider as comics today can be seen as the love child of early twentieth century pulp magazines and comic strips. As early as the 1890s, newspaper comic strips started becoming common in the United States with syndicated strips such as *The Yellow Kid*, *Mutt and Jeff*, and *Katzenjammer Kids* (Wright, 2001). In

1929, heroes from pulp magazines started to star in comic strips, such as *Dick Tracy*, *Flash Gordon*, and *The Phantom*. It was also in 1929 when Dell Publishing began publishing a weekly comics magazine to be sold on newsstands called *The Funnies* (i.e., a colloquial term for comic strips), and the magazine featured “original comic strips, puzzles, and jokes” (p. 3). Prior to this, the only comic “books” sold were the occasional collection of comic strip reprints by newspapers in hardcover format. Dell Publishing would cancel *The Funnies* series in 1930 due to low sales, but the comic book itself was just getting started.

By the late 1930s, a few publishers had started to work in what would become the comics industry. Their earliest work was continuing to publish collections of reprinted newspaper comic strips, but, in 1937, *Detective Comics* debuted with a different approach. Until this moment, the comics industry had focused on humor. But *Detective Comics* brought mystery, adventure, and crime-fighting to the world of comics.

Around this time, two awkward and insecure children of Jewish immigrants known as Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster were avid readers of science fiction magazines. They decided to use their wishes, desires, and fantasies about the American Dream to fuel the creation of a new character they called Superman. The teens desperately wanted Superman to be published in a comic strip, but DC decided to feature this original character in 1938’s *Action Comics #1*. And, just as Helen of Troy is said to have had the face that launched 1,000 ships and changed the world of Ancient Greece forever, Superman’s arrival to Earth (and comics) would revolutionize an industry and establish a whole new genre – that of the superhero.

More superheroes and more genres of comics, such as romance and horror, would come as the century progressed, and the comics industry would experience a roller coaster ride of relevance, popularity, and success (Madrid, 2016; Robbins, 1999; Wright, 2001). But the superhero genre in particular found a way to survive it all and be the prevailing force in comics to this day (no pun intended). In the next section, I will briefly review the history of the superherione in order to provide a basic understanding of how female heroes have operated and changed over time within the superhero genre of comics. This journey through time will also help provide context for the time period in which Harley Quinn would make her debut.

The History of the Superherione: The Briefest of Summaries (1940s-2000s)

Superheriones, the feminized noun of superhero, have existed since the very beginning of modern comics in the first half of the twentieth century. The earliest superheroes in the late 1930s were depicted as “magnificent modern-day gods” who acted “like mighty saviors” and “took the law into their own hands, [by] dishing out a brand of ‘frontier justice’” (Madrid, 2016, pp. 4-5). While a few superheriones operated as independent agents, most were female derivatives and love interests of male counterparts, such as Hawkgirl to Hawkman. Love of their man was the motivation of these superheriones to fight crime rather than making the world a better place. Wonder Woman, as the star of her own comic and with “woman” in her name (rather than “girl”), was the rare exception. When the US entered World War II (WWII) in the early 1940s, comics had their superheriones now fighting for the American cause through both direct (like punching Nazis) and indirect actions (working as war journalists and military nurses).

As the postwar era dawned, stories of war disappeared from comics, and crime noir became the prevailing theme as illustrated by the introduction of characters like DC's Black Canary. But this period was brief as the 1950s also saw a reduction in the popularity (and thus publication) of superhero comics. In their place, comics switched to stories of romance, science fiction, and horror. The superheriones who did manage to survive this period were regulated back to the role of love interests with the traditional roles of pursuer and pursued reversed. But the midcentury would see an increased level of public backlash to comics as parents, educators, and community leaders argued these texts had a negative influence on young readers by promoting violence and illiteracy (Madrid, 2016; Wright, 2001). The industry would establish the Comics Code Authority would be established in 1954 in response to these fears.

The 1960s would breathe life back into the superhero genre. Comic characters were becoming part of mainstream culture with features on television, Broadway, and in major art museums via the Pop Art movement. Superhero comics started to feature science fiction storylines and intentionally stayed away from cultural conversations of the day, such as the antiwar and hippie movements, to avoid controversy. Superheriones during this time continued to be submissive to their male counterparts, such as Supergirl to cousin Superman, or were stripped of their powers completely, such as Wonder Woman who became a mortal spy and shop owner.

The decade of disco would bring real-world issues back to comics and introduce blatant sexuality. Female characters who embraced second-wave feminism, such as Power Girl and Big Barda, were depicted as aggressive, man-hating Superbitches, rather than as enlightened role models. The 1980s would hardly improve the lives of the

superherione with the decade's themes of dark realism and tragedy. Despite all the misfortune happening to characters within the pages of comics, the industry itself was growing as it became more commercialized and expanded merchandising of its original characters.

The decade in which Harley Quinn was born is the same one known as a low point for the comics industry as a whole – the 1990s. Comics at this time became about quantity sold rather than quality of storylines. Gimmicks were used by the industry to sell more titles, including illustrating characters as hypersexualized supermodels that perfected the human aesthetic. Superheriones had less clothes and more curves as they starred in both actual storylines and fanservice swimsuit specials. But sex was not selling enough, and the industry began to implode during the decade. As the dawn of the new millennium approached, the future of comics was uncertain.

Comics would survive Y2K, but storylines for female superheroes continued to leave a lot to be desired. The first decade of the new century would see superheriones depicted either as pop princesses or as mothers. It is important to note the theme of motherhood in comics was much broader than the biological concept. Some superheriones would indeed experience the miracle of life while others would adopt maternal-esque roles of mentor and protector to others. Some characters, like DC's Catwoman, would actually do both.

This chapter will now narrow its focus from a broad overview of the history of comic book superheriones to the specific DC universe in which Quinn operates, which is that of the superhero Batman. A history of the character and the development of his macrocosm are reviewed next.

History of Batman

After the success of Superman's debut in 1938, DC wanted another superhero to add to its roster. Artist Bob Kane and writer Bill Finger collaborated to create a superhero inspired by pulp story heroes The Shadow and Doc Savage, a silent movie called *The Bat*, and adventure movies like *The Mark of Zorro* (Wright, 2001). He was called Batman. Unlike his predecessor Superman, this new superhero had no superpowers and was human. Instead, he would rely on his detective skills and athleticism to fight crime. His secret identity was billionaire playboy Bruce Wayne. Glen Weldon (2016) sums up the difference between Batman and Superman as the following: Superman "represents an ideal [regular people] can never achieve, and we know it" but Batman – well, he is human (Weldon, 2016, p. 3). Even with his vast wealth and unique access to resources, "we [regular people] are doomed to compare ourselves to him, and we cannot help but find ourselves wanting" (p. 3).

A summary of Batman's history and evolution through the eras is reviewed in the section that follows. It is necessary to review these items in order to examine the world-building that would eventually lead to the introduction of Harley Quinn.

Golden Age (1938-1956)

Debuting in the spring of 1939 in *Detective Comics #27*, Batman – or Bat-Man as he was first known – was essentially the antithesis of DC's first superhero. While Superman fought in the day, Batman haunted the shadows of night. Superman was a symbol of hope and the hero of superpowered adventures. Batman was "a mysterious harbinger of death and destruction," who fought gangster and urban violence (Weldon, 2016, p. 21). Batman was motivated to fight a war on criminals because of personal

tragedy. Superman, on the other hand, fought crime for the abstract goals of Truth and Justice.

Early Batman killed and used guns. His aesthetic and many of his first stories were essentially copyright infringement of existing pulps. He would come into his own after a year, and humor would even be introduced to lighten the tone of his stories. In 1940, the sidekick Robin, the Boy Wonder, was introduced to the Batman stories. Inspired in name and aesthetic by the medieval character Robin Hood, the sidekick was written as a youth so readers could identify with him and see themselves in the Batman comics. Golden-age Batman would also introduce readers to the infamous villain Joker and the complicated villainess Catwoman.

Batman would become the second comics character to have his title series when *Batman #1* debuted in 1940. Unlike many of his superhero peers in comics, he would not star in war-themed adventures during WWII. However, because of his popularity, Batman would have a syndicated newspaper strip, a movie serial, and guest appearances on the *Superman* radio serial during the 1940s. But the 1950s would not be as kind to Batman as the existing cultural conversations surrounding the appropriateness of comics and their possible negative influence on children reached a new height. Enter one of the loudest voices in this debate - psychiatrist Dr. Fredric Wertham.

Birth of the Comics Code Authority (1954)

Wertham was not the first to bring serious concern over comics to the public. In the late 1940s, several leaders and groups of the American Catholic community organized the comic book burning in protest of the content of sex and crime. In 1949, the US Army was planning to ban sales of comics on military bases for similar reasons until

leaders realized they would have a public relations nightmare on their hands if they sought to ban soldiers from reading texts with violent content. (Wright, 2001). It is important to note there was not consensus at this time on whether comic books had any actual damaging or negative effects on children. In 1945, the Child Study Association (CSA) conducted a study on the issue and published their findings in the *New York Times Book Review*. The CSA report stated comics “were really just contemporary fairy tales adapted to incorporate elements of current everyday life” (Wright, 2001, p. 89).

Regardless of the history of resentment, Wertham and his book *Seduction of the Innocent* get most of the credit for the damage done to the comics industry during the 1950s. In his book, Wertham blames comics for juvenile delinquency and a host of other social ills threatening American society at the time. He believed comics promoted violent behavior, damaged the emotional health of readers, and harmed the development of literacy since comics “[break] up sentences in word balloons” (Weldon, 2016, p. 47). Comics also provided “unrealistic and lascivious representations of the female body,” and often depicted violence towards women as adjacent with sexual pleasure (p. 47; Wright, 2001).

Wertham named names. Several prominent DC characters, including Batman, Robin, and Catwoman, were all named targets in *Seduction of the Innocent*. Batman and Robin were seen as promoting homosexuality, which was both illegal and seen as a psychiatric disorder at this time. It also did not help that Batman was an adult and Robin a Boy Wonder, which reinforced the idea of linking homosexuality with pedophilia as many contemporary psychologists did (Weldon, 2016). Catwoman’s problem, according to Wertham, was two-fold. Because she was attractive and successful, she was not

decent; and, because the Batman world was anti-feminine (i.e., it promoted homosexuality), then any beautiful woman within it had to be evil (Hanley, 2017). Oh, and Catwoman used a whip as a weapon.

Regardless of whether his proclamations were true or not, Wertham and his supporters had struck a blow that would almost kill the comics industry completely. Comic book publishers realized they would need to do something drastic to save their (book) spines. Thus, they introduced the self-regulating Comics Code Authority (CCA), which would be “an independent body that would regulate comic books based on a strict set of guidelines designed to make comics as inoffensive and unobjectionable as possible” (Hanley, 2017, p. 32). The CCA would dramatically change the industry for decades to come.

Silver Age (1956-1970)

Even though Batman was one of the most prominent targets in Wertham’s book, his comics did not actually change as drastically as others in the new CCA era. His comics had been moving towards a lighter tone for years before publication of *Seduction of the Innocent*, and this trend simply continued as the industry entered the Silver Age in 1956. This would be an era defined by themes of science fiction and space adventures.

Silver Age Batman would fight in science fiction adventures and transform into creatures like Bat-Merman. His stories would feature Batman-themed animal partners, like Ace the Bat-Hound, and international Batman imitators, like the Ranger (Australia) and El Gaucho (South America) (Peters, 2015; Weldon, 2016). But these sci-fi stories were not working for readers, so DC would return Batman to his detective roots in Gotham City.

In 1966, Batman would get his own campy television series, which would give him a boost in popularity and make his comics outsell Superman's for the first time in DC's history. But the *Batman* television show's downfall would be as fast as its rise. The loss in popularity during the second and third seasons would impact sales of the Batman comics. DC would again seek to return Batman to his former glory as the industry entered the Bronze Age – an era that would see the greatest reboot of the character and the first reboot of DC's continuity and entire publishing line.

Bronze Age (1970-1985)

Despite its lesser title, the Bronze Age was an incredibly influential and important era for both DC and the comics industry as a whole. It was during this period that comics stopped being staples at your local grocery store and started being sold in specialty shops known as comic bookstores. Comics would also shift their marketing from the young to the adult. Weldon (2016) would call this industry shift the “Great Inward Turn” – the time when comics started to focus on the devoted adult fan and not the causal youth reader (p. 105). In addition, these new comic specialty shops allowed fans to access back issues for their collections and provided a safe space for fans to congregate and build community.

DC heard the complaints of Silver Age Batman's audience and decided Batman would undergo “the most dramatic and influential reboot of any character in the superhero genre” starting with 1970's *Detective Comics* #395 (Weldon, 2016, p. 105). Unlike other superhero reboots, Batman would not get a new identity, new origin, new power(s), or new costume. He would still be Bruce Wayne, still be Batman, still be powerless, and still be the orphan of murdered parents. What would change was

Robin/Dick Grayson was sent away to college, so Batman could return to being a solo act. He would no longer have fancy gadgets or an elaborate Bat-Cave. He would return to using disguises and detective work. Batman was “once again an avenger of the night, engaged in a ceaseless war on those who would visit violence on the innocent” (p. 107).

But early rebooted Batman still was not quite right, so a new creative team was asked to continue tweaking the character. This creative team had a history of linking existing characters to contemporary social issues (e.g., Wonder Woman and women’s liberation). Thus, when assigned Batman, they decided to do the same. They chose to bring psychology to the Batman universe and focus on a theme of Batman being obsessive. Bronze Age Batman would get feelings and a personality. Even though fans liked this new take on the character, they still asked for a Batman that was willing to “get his hands dirty” and who rejected “conventional notions of heroism – traits like nobility, mercy, [and] doing good,” (Weldon, 2016, p. 114). These attributes would be associated with the antihero archetype popular in later decades. But Batman’s creative team felt a superhero needed compassion to truly be a hero and were uninterested in the request for a grittier, antihero tone.

Outside of comics during this period, Batman (the IP) was appearing in animation and live-action specials on television. Interestingly, the Batman exposed to a television audience of “hundreds of millions” actually “bore no resemblance to the gothic-mystery Caped Crusader of the comics” being sold in specialty shops (Weldon, 2016, p. 120). The comics may have been working to remove the perceived awful stench of the campy 1960s television Batman character, but Batman the IP was capitalizing on it. After all, Batman merchandise was outselling his comics (Weldon, 2016).

As the new decade approached, DC recognized fans wanted “soap opera with face punching” in their comics (Weldon, 2016, p. 124). With a new editor in 1981, Batman became a “darker-than ever Dark Knight” in the pages of his comics (p. 125). Again, fans responded well to the changes, but the sales numbers were not enough. For the first time in the 44-year history of publishing *Batman*, the comic sales fell below 100,000 issues per a month.

Crisis on Infinite Earths (1985). During the 1980s, the editors at DC were realizing their attempts at explaining conflicting storylines in their publications was a confusing for new readers. At the time, DC editors would just create a new Earth for any storyline that conflicted with existing ones. For example, on one Earth, a retired Batman was married to Catwoman, and their daughter took over crimefighting in Gotham as the superheroine Huntress. On another Earth, Batman was evil and ruled the world alongside the Crime Syndicate. But this complicated universe of various and conflicting storylines for any one character was not accessible to new fans, and new fans were something the industry needed. Something had to change.

In 1985, DC debuted a twelve-issue crossover event miniseries called *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, which would collapse “all the disparate parallel Earths...into a single world, with one and only one version of each [DC] character left standing, in a shared, uniform timeline” (Weldon, 2016, p. 127). Some characters, if deemed outdated or inconvenient, would disappear and no longer exist at all. This event would reset DC Comics continuity, and it would allow the publisher to revamp every character and IP on its roster.

Interestingly, Batman was probably the least impacted character from the *Crisis on Infinite Earths* event. His daughter, Huntress, and the various iterations of Batman on parallel Earths no longer existed, but he was still not rebooted in the same way as his peers, such as Superman and Wonder Woman. With a clean slate from complicated storylines, DC was ready to bring its characters into the Modern Age.

Modern Age (1985-present)

Frank Miller was a rising star in the world of comics in the late 1980s, and he had come to DC with ideas for Batman in this new era. He wanted to bring “real stakes” to comics and challenge “the tidy, recursive morality plays superhero comics represented” (Weldon, 2016, p. 131). So, in 1986, Miller’s four-issue *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* was published. The miniseries was revolutionary for more than its content. It was published on higher-quality, heavier paper, which allowed for a broader color spectrum in its pages, and it had a longer page count “with a sturdy, square binding” (p. 133). Paneling and splash pages were also used in unique ways for more dramatic storytelling. *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* would come to be seen as one of the first American graphic novels (Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., n.d.).

Miller’s take on Batman was brutal and unforgiving. His Batman was “a figure of violent opposition, a man isolated and alone, at odds with criminals, the police, and – ultimately – society itself” (Weldon, 2016, p. 137). *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* is “the story of [an elder] Bruce Wayne learning that his old methods are no longer suited to the modern world,” a world in which “those in authority were just as venal and morally bankrupt as the criminals” (p. 136, 137). Miller takes Batman’s obsessive nature to new

proportions, and he emphasizes a sexual tension between Batman and Joker. Miller wanted to update “Batman the Idea, not Batman the Character” (p. 135).

Although *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* is not considered canon, it was and continues to be incredibly influential. When it was published, it attracted the interest of both fans and non-fans. Media outlets, like the *Rolling Stone* and the *Associated Press*, wrote articles about it. The first issue sold out through four print runs, which was surprising to comic bookstore owners who were not sure how customers would respond to the high cover price and unusual format (Weldon, 2016). The book was also sold in national chain bookstores, which gave the book exposure to a wider audience than a typical comic. The *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* in a collected book format would be on the *New York Times* bestseller list for thirty-eight weeks, which was a first for a superhero comic. As Weldon (2016) noted, *The Dark Knight Returns* allowed for a story with an ending, which was appealing to non-comic readers who “had no interest in, and still less patience for, the eternal iteration and dense history that are endemic to the superhero genre” (p. 139). The popularity of Miller’s graphic novel would also spark a Batman merchandising frenzy.

Miller’s next assignment would be to explore Batman’s origins and first year as a superhero. This post-*Crisis* version of the character depicted Bruce Wayne/Batman as a human who made human mistakes. He was the opposite of “the swaggering alpha male” of *The Dark Knight Returns*, and his crimefighting was at the street-level rather than other-worldly like his superhero peers (Weldon, 2016, p. 142). Gotham City was dirty, decaying, and corrupt, and it felt like a real place. Fans loved the direction writers like Moore (*Batman: The Killing Joke*) and Miller were taking the Batman stories. In their

opinion, they “brought [Batman] into the *real* world, a place of bloody violence and stark sexuality” and now “everybody would see [Batman] for the badass the fans had always known him to be” (p. 146).

The end of the 1980s would see the first *Batman* feature film, and the success of the movie would cause a huge increase in Batman comic sales. In fact, sales of all the Batman books would “doubl[e] the size of the American comics industry in the span of a few short months” (Weldon, 2016, P. 170). This success did not extend to DC’s other properties, so the publisher just pushed more Batman content into the market. By the start of the 1990s, Batman had “finally and permanently displaced” Superman as “DC’s flagship character” with sales, merchandizing, and cultural impact (p. 170).

The 1990s would be an odd decade for the comics industry. Superheroes were morphing into hyper-masculine Rambo-esque figures in überviolent storylines, and antiheroes, like Marvel Comic’s Deadpool, were becoming popular. But, most importantly, comics were selling really well at the start of the decade. Thus, the industry decided to push things further in a bid for even more financial gain. Miniseries, crossover events, and variant covers were tricks used to inflate sales, and publishers began to significantly increase the use of them. However, the industry was quickly becoming overrun with content and merchandise. By 1995, a new Batman title was “appear[ing] on store shelves every single week” (Weldon, 2016, p. 218). Publishers were printing so many issues that they couldn’t sell them all, so back-issue bins at comic shops were piling up.

The final decade of the twentieth century would see even more Batman in homes and in movie theaters. Three more Batman films would be released during the decade,

including *Batman Returns* (1992), *Batman Forever* (1995), and *Batman and Robin* (1997). The mixed reactions of the public to the last two *Batman* films would negatively impact Batman comic sales. In September 1992, the all-ages friendly *Batman: The Animated Series* (BAS) would debut on television with an accompanying comic series called the *Batman Adventures*. In the midst of this marketing blitz around Batman, a new character called Harley Quinn would be introduced via BAS.

Comics culture, in particular the one around Batman, looked dramatically different at the dawn of the new millennium from its origins in the early twentieth century. Comics now targeted the adult fan as opposed to kids, and the adult comics market had a “fetishization of narrative” (Weldon, 2016, p. 230). Issues of individual comics started becoming rare collectibles. Comic conventions were seeing their largest audience numbers ever, and fans were showing up to these events as in costume as their favorite characters. Comics were becoming a participatory culture in new and exciting ways for fans of all types and moved away from a world guarded by unwelcoming nerd (and often male) gatekeepers. DC recognized the changing fan landscape, so it continued to publish new storylines and reboots to attract new and more diverse fans.

In 2001, DC published Miller’s *The Dark Knight Strikes Again* as a follow-up to the 1986 miniseries. It became the bestselling comic of 2001, the second best-selling comic of 2002, and helped increase the total number of comic book sales in a year for the first time in a decade (Weldon, 2016). Batman would return to movie theaters in the aughts with 2005’s *Batman Begins*, 2008’s *The Dark Knight*, and 2012’s *The Dark Knight Rises*. The films were financial successes and even nominated for some of

Hollywood's top awards. Batman was back in the cultural mainstream as he continued to star in multiple DC books and properties.

New 52 (2011). In the fall of 2011, DC announced another reboot of their entire publishing line, which they called the *New 52*. The *New 52* was hardly a new move on the part of DC. In 1986, the *Crisis on Infinite Earths* crossover event restarted all its characters and storylines. In 1994, DC published the miniseries *Zero Hour: Crisis in Time* to “[reboot] the established timeline, wiping many characters and previously established events out of existence” (Weldon, 2016, p. 271). The miniseries *Infinite Crisis* in 2006 brought back the Multiverse with its parallel Earths “in a bid to erase the contradictions that arose in the wake of the previous *Crisis*,” and 2008’s *Final Crisis* “threatened to end all of creation, until Superman...saved the day” (p. 272).

Fast-forward DC’s announcement of the *New 52* in 2011. The company said this time would be different as “the changes to the fictional DC Multiverse would be reflected by real-world changes” (Weldon, 2016, p. 272). DC cancelled every title they were publishing, and they relaunched their line with 52 different comic titles that would all start with an issue #1. At the time of the *New 52* launch, *Detective Comics* was “the longest-running comic book in existence” with 883 issues, but it too would start over with an issue #1 (p. 272). The *New 52* was to serve the same purpose the previous reboots and relaunches had – to be a reset button for DC to rid themselves of existing complicated storylines in a bid to welcome new readers.

Unlike previous reboots, the Batman universe would feel the full impact of the *New 52*. Batman stories would return to a “grimmer, grittier, and broodier” tone, and writers would bring a new vulnerability to a character often seen as “a parable of self-

rescue” (Weldon, 2016, p. 273, 275). At the start of the 2010s, Batman titles accounted for “fully one-quarter of [DC’s] comics,” and the books would feature “heightened gore – Joker slicing his own face off, for example – to raise the stakes” (p. 277). The *New 52* universe *Batman* would be a consistent bestseller each month.

Rebirth (2016). In 2016, DC announced the *Rebirth* initiative that would (again) relaunch its titles. *Rebirth* would change the cover prices for all DC comics; shift to a bi-monthly publication schedule for some titles; relaunch many existing titles with issue #1 (and restore the previous numbering of others, like *Detective Comics*); and release several new titles (*DC Rebirth*, 2021). In an unexpected move, DC also said they would streamline and cut back on the use of variant covers as a marketing ploy to boost sales.

Similar to moves seen with previous DC relaunches, *Rebirth* would see the return of characters left out of the most recent reboot, and it would attempt to tie the *New 52* continuity with everything that came before it. Most characters got a redesign, and some, such as Harley Quinn and Wonder Woman, were specifically redesigned to match the recent live-action film-versions of their characters.

Batman would go through several updates and changes as part of *Rebirth*. Catwoman and Batman became an official couple (again) – until Batman put the relationship on hold after the events of *Joker War*. The Joker would steal all of Bruce Wayne/Batman’s money. Most notably, several new characters would be introduced into the Batman universe. Of particular interest is villainess Punchline, who is Joker’s newest sidekick/girlfriend and is depicted as an obvious inverse of her predecessor Harley Quinn (Faraci, 2020).

This section briefly reviewed the history of Batman in order to facilitate understanding of the comics universe in which Quinn exists. The section that follows will provide a foundational understanding of the character Harley Quinn.

Re-Enter Harley Quinn

“How cool would it be to have my own comic book?” -Harley Quinn (Manning et al. 2021, p. 141)

Harley Quinn’s first appearance in DC’s *New 52* universe continued the now decade-long struggle to find a place in print. But, on the eve of her twenty-fifth birthday in 2013, the tide would finally turn in the Maid of Mischief’s favor when she emerged from the sea as an emancipated goddess. It would be this reborn Quinn that would take charge of her own narrative and become a mainstay of popular culture. This section will review an overview of Harley Quinn, including who she is, her life story, and what makes her tick, in current DC canon (i.e., post-*New 52* and *Rebirth*) unless otherwise noted.

In 2013, DC would attempt another solo *Harley Quinn* series, and it would finally be the one in print that clicked. The series would “[take] a cute and experimental new direction for the character, unlike any she’s ever had” as it followed her life after leaving Joker and Gotham City for a new life in Coney Island, New York (Reisman, 2020). She was written with “a lighthearted, cartoonish, and humorous tone” as her storylines explored her adventures as an antihero, landlady, aggressive roller-derby competitor, therapist, and leader of an ensemble of misfits (*Harley Quinn*, 2021b). The *Harley Quinn* creative team debuted another new look for Quinn, but this one felt fun and on brand as it incorporated elements from her previous costumes. Quinn’s relationship with Poison Ivy would be expanded upon, and Quinn’s bisexuality (as well as non-monogamous

relationship with Ivy) would be confirmed. The *New 52* solo *Harley Quinn* series was well-received and become one of DC's top-selling comics (*Harley Quinn*, 2021b; Reisman, 2020). It appeared Quinn had finally made it in the world of print.

DC would relaunch their publishing line (again) in 2016 via the *Rebirth* event. As a result, the *Harley Quinn* series would be “cancelled” in the formal sense after 31 issues, but the *Harley Quinn* series relaunched as part of *Rebirth* was simply a “a direct continuation of the former” and continued to have the same creative team at the helm (*Harley Quinn*, 2021b). It continued to be a bestseller for DC, and the series ended in August 2020 after 75 issues.

The fourth volume of a *Harley Quinn* series debuted in March 2021 as part of DC's latest relaunch of their publication line called *Infinite Frontier*. This series sees Quinn returning to Gotham City “in an attempt to [right] the wrongs of her past” by working with Batman and on the side of good (Calamia, 2021). A year shy of her thirtieth birthday and with yet another new costume, Quinn appears to have fully transition from supervillainess to antiheroine to superherione.

Additional Appearances

The appearances noted above are Quinn's major and most influential occurrences in comics, but they are only a small slice of her presence in DC titles overall. According to Comicvine, as of September 2021, Quinn has appeared in 2,071 comic book issues (*Harley Quinn (character)*, n.d.). In addition to appearances in various Batman titles, she has been a character in the series *Injustice*, *Injustice 2*, *Injustice: Ground Zero* (told from her perspective), *DC Comics Bombshells*, *DCEased*, *Gotham City Garage*, *Dark Nights: Death Metal*, and *Birds of Prey* (to name a few). She has had spin-off miniseries, such as

Batman: White Knight presents Harley Quinn, Old Lady Harley, Harley Quinn/Power Girl, Harley's Little Black Book, Harley Quinn and Her Gang of Harleys, Harley Quinn & Poison Ivy, Harley & Ivy meet Betty & Veronica, and Harley Quinn Black + White + Red.

This list is hardly exhaustive, but it gives an idea of just how popular Harley Quinn is as a character. DC co-publisher Jim Lee considers Quinn to be “the fourth pillar in our publishing line, behind Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman,” even though Quinn has existed for at least 50 years less than these peers (Riesman, 2016). In addition, Quinn’s number of monthly appearances in comics rivals only that of Batman and Superman, “making Harley DC Comics’ most prominent (and bankable) female character” (Riesman, 2016).

The Basics of the Character Harley Quinn

Reisman (2020) summarizes Harley Quinn as “Jewish, queer, morally questionable, deeply imperfect, and beloved by millions” (Reisman, 2020). Originally known as Harleen Frances Quinzel, she is from Brooklyn, New York. Her creators always wrote her as of Jewish ethnicity, which they depicted through her random use of Yiddish. She earned a doctorate of psychiatry while at university and then got a job working as a psychiatrist at Arkham Asylum in Gotham City. It is here where she would fall in love with one of her patients (the Joker) and break him out of the institution while wearing a red-and-black jester costume. The rest, as they say, was history.

Harley Quinn, like other comic characters, often has storylines that feature and follow her sexual exploits with others. After all, she was originally known as the devoted and obsessive girlfriend of the Joker who became a supervillainess in a bid to impress

him. Her storylines tend to be separated in three phases, which are all defined by her relationship with the Clown Prince of Crime: pre-Joker, with Joker, and post-Joker. As part of the post-Joker (current) phase, she was officially confirmed by DC to be bisexual in 2015 when the company confirmed Quinn and Poison Ivy's relationship to be one of both close friendship and romance but "without the jealousy of monogamy" (DC, 2015).

Quinn may have once lived life as the Clown Princess of Crime, but she always had a stricter moral code than most of her supervillain peers. Similar to Catwoman, Quinn has often viewed morality in shades of gray and tends to favor things that will benefit her. However, she is also a champion of the underdog. For these reasons, she has always been somewhat of an antihero character even though she didn't truly adopt that theme until the *New 52*. Now, as DC enters its newest phase of publishing, Quinn is being treated as full superherione as she works on the side of good (and alongside Batman).

A Life in Review (Quinn's Life Overview per New 52/Rebirth eras)

Like other DC characters, the life story of Harley Quinn has changed and evolved over time. The publisher has been known to relaunch their publication line in order to explain the differences and paradoxes between continuities, but they found a loophole for their explanation for the various retellings of Quinn's story. These differences are explained away as the result of "Harley's own retellings and her penchant for exaggeration" (Manning et al., 2021, p. 140). The following summary of her life reflects DC's canon per the *New 52* and *Rebirth* launches of 2011 and 2016 respectively.

Quinn was a mischievous child who grew up in Brooklyn with multiple brothers. Her first love was an unstable troublemaker who pushed Quinn's bully into the path of a

truck to prove his affection, and Quinn accepted. He would be arrested and later killed in juvenile detention. Quinn would remember him by stealing a stuffed beaver from his bedroom that she would keep and later (as an adult) converse with as if it were another human.

She would attend Gotham University on scholarship and graduate at the top of her class with a doctorate degree in psychiatry, a subject she had enjoyed since she was a kid. After college, she would be hired at a Gotham City hospital to work as a psychiatrist before later requesting to transfer to a position at Arkham Asylum. It would be here where she would meet the Joker, Poison Ivy, and a number of other notable characters in the Batman universe.

In an attempt to be better at her job and get patients to open up to her, Quinn asked to be allowed to join Arkham's general population. To help sell her act as a fellow inmate, she would dye her blonde hair into a red and black split, and she would fake insanity. These efforts attracted the attention of Arkham's most infamous inmate, the Joker. Quinn would fall madly in love with the supervillain and ultimately break him out of the hospital.

In a supposed reenactment of his own birth, Joker would push Quinn into a vat of acidic chemicals. The chemicals would bleach her skin (as it did his) and truly drive her criminally insane (as it did he). She adopted the moniker Harley Quinn and became the jester-themed sidekick and lover of Joker. But the violence and toxicity of the relationship would cause the two to eventually break up.

Post-Joker life has seen Quinn doing a number of different things. While incarcerated at Belle Reve penitentiary, she would agree to work for the US government

as a member of Amanda Waller's covert supervillain team the Task Force X/Suicide Squad in order to earn back her freedom. She also would sometimes work with the Birds of Prey superherione team or her fellow Gotham City Sirens Poison Ivy and Catwoman. Her own title series would feature her life in Coney Island, New York, where she worked as a landlady and therapist while also leading various adventures with her friends.

DC announced another reboot of their publishing line in 2021 with the event *Infinite Frontier*. Quinn will continue to have a title series in this relaunch with a new look and costume. As of this writing, the first stories being published in this new continuity depict Quinn as also having a new modus operandi. It appears she has fully converted to the side of good, leaving behind the days of villainy and even antiheroism. It will be interesting to see if, as Harley Quinn is on the cusp of her third decade of existence, if the once-Joker-sidekick will be rechristened as a full-fledge superherione as this universe continues to unfold.

Power/Abilities

Per Manning et al. (2021) and DC's official website, Quinn's list of power and abilities are as follows: unpredictability ("due to insanity"); high level of intelligence, including a "specialist knowledge of psychiatry": enhanced strength; emotional manipulation; "immunity to toxins"; fighting ability; extreme agility; and weapons expertise, with a preference for a "giant mallet and other clown-themed items" (*Harley Quinn*, 2021a; Manning et al., 2021, p. 140). Some of her powers, such as her intelligence and agility, are of her own accord and come from her training as a gymnast and her accomplishment as a doctor of psychiatry. Other powers came with the help of her

friends, such as immunity from toxins and poisons from Poison Ivy and criminal-level insanity via the Joker.

Personality

True to her heritage inspired by the medieval harlequin character, Quinn has always been a character about fun and entertainment – though, she has a history of taking it to a criminal level. Quinn may be a loose cannon, but she never does anything carelessly. She takes her commitments and interests to a level of obsession. She is fiercely loyal to those she cares about, such as Joker (pre-break up) and Ivy. She is a lover of animals and is often seen treating her hyenas Bud and Lou as her own children. She consistently is depicted as energetic, bubbly, and optimistic. She tends to win the affections of others quickly and without much effort. The general idea is it is hard to not love the one and only Harley Quinn, even when she is being mischievous. As DC's official website states, "Harley has become one of the most popular supervillains in the DC Universe, thanks in part to her versatility, charisma, and cheery-but-deranged outlook on life" (*Harley Quinn*, 2021a).

Motivations and Influences

The Joker craves chaos while Batman demands order. Poison Ivy wants a better world for plants, and Catwoman enjoys stealing pretty jewels and cat-themed artifacts. Harley Quinn, on the other hand, is motivated by emotion. She has been seen seeking the love and appreciation of the Joker as his sidekick/girlfriend; and, in more modern storylines, the approval of Batman when working as his ally. She has sought revenge against those who have wronged her and/or her friends. Of course, with a supervillain origin, Quinn has been motivated by greed and thrill-seeking too. And, as any mortal

human would be, she is also motivated to save her own skin and/or better her lot in life. For example, she worked with the Task Force X/Suicide Squad and Amanda Waller to lessen her prison time and earn back her freedom.

In terms of influential figures in her life, Harley Quinn arguably has three that stand ahead of the competition. First, and the one most associated with her, is the Joker. Her relationship with him was unequal in power and negative in influence. He was always the one in control, both in work and love, even when Quinn did not realize it. The next big influence would be another inmate Quinn met at Arkham, who is Poison Ivy. Unlike her dynamic with the Joker, Ivy and Quinn have always been on equal footing in their relationship, and Ivy has arguably been a positive influence in Quinn's life (ignoring the supervillain tendencies). Ivy has always wanted what was best for Quinn and encouraged Quinn in her various endeavors. She has always treated Quinn with kindness and respect, even when Quinn was ditching her for the Joker.

Last – and certainly not least – would be Batman. Being that all these characters exist within his larger universe, it would be hard to not see the Dark Knight's influence on anything and everything. But Batman's influence on Harley Quinn is deeper than that. When working as an Arkham psychiatrist, Batman's treatment of Joker is what originally triggered Quinn to feel an even deeper level of empathy for the madman and eventually commit to a life of crime by his side. However, while functioning as a criminal alongside Joker, Batman and Quinn had their own conversations in which Batman would often lift the veil off Quinn's eyes about Joker's manipulation and lies. He also trusted her enough, even as a criminal, to call on her for help when Joker committed an especially heinous act that Batman needed help in stopping. As Quinn has evolved and moved on from the

Joker, her intersections with Batman have only increased. Storylines for the last few years have depicted the two working together on various adventures, and DC's most recent storylines in the Batman titles have depicted Quinn as a full member of Batman's team of allies. This newest development is a bit unsurprising for long-time followers of the Quinn/Batman relationship. Just as Batman has been a patriarchal figure to members of the Bat-family, he has held a similar role for Quinn since her days on *BAS*. He has always shown an element of compassion and faith in the young woman that he does not normally extend to Gotham supervillains.

Relationships

A character's relationship with Harley Quinn depends on which era of her life one is looking. As Quinn's role in the DC universe has shifted from criminal to antihero to possible superheroine, her relationships have also changed. Those who were once her foes have become her allies and vice versa. However, it is important to note one character's relationship with Quinn has never truly changed, and that would be Poison Ivy. Since their days on *BAS*, the two have always been depicted as having a positive and supportive relationship. They have always been close friends, but it was officially confirmed in 2015 that the two also have a romantic relationship.

Accomplices. Quinn has rarely been depicted as a solo act and is usually seen working alongside someone. Her earliest days were working as Joker's sidekick (and as his girlfriend). She was depicted as being at his beck-and-call and as leading his henchmen to do his bidding. Occasionally, Quinn and Joker would have a (brief) falling out, and she would collaborate with other supervillains, such as Poison Ivy, to commit

crimes. Even rarer still, a criminal Quinn was sometimes seen teaming up with Batman to stop Joker from committing especially heinous crimes.

The modern Harley Quinn continues to work mainly as part of ensembles, but her list of teammates is far longer than it was when working as a criminal with Joker. She has been partnered with Ivy and Catwoman as part of the Gotham City Sirens; been a member of the Task Force X/Suicide Squad alongside supervillains Deadshot and Captain Boomerang; and worked with Black Canary and Huntress of the Bird of Prey. In her own title series, Quinn even has her own posse called the Gang of Harleys. She continues to sometimes work with Batman and his allies on various missions. And, loyal to her whether criminal or antihero, Quinn continues to be accompanied and supported by her beloved pets, such as the spotted hyenas Bud and Lou.

Enemies. When Quinn was operating as a criminal, Batman and members of his Bat-family, such as Batgirl and Robin, were her most obvious and consistent enemies. Additionally, as the girlfriend/sidekick of Joker, whoever was Joker's enemy would also be hers. For example, if the Gotham City patent office was angering Joker over his "Laughing Fish" patent (i.e., Quinn's second appearance ever as seen on *BAS*), then she was also scheming against those government bureaucrats. Although Joker and Quinn were generally together during her criminal days, there were times in which the two fought, and Quinn would seek revenge on her beau.

As Quinn has evolved into a mix of antihero and superheroine, her enemies are now those of her own choosing. For example, while she sometimes teams up with Batman, she also can be his adversary when she feels like doing something illegal. As a member of Task Force X/Suicide Squad, Quinn tends to not be a fan of her supervisor

Amanda Waller. More recent storylines starring Quinn have a variety of notable DC characters who may be her foe-of-the-day, such as crime lord Black Mask or the supervillain Penguin. However, her two consistent enemies in contemporary storylines are Joker and Punchline.

Associated Themes

Harley Quinn is known for several things. For example, her color schemes are usually red and black (like the harlequin costume), but she sometimes spices it up by doing a mix of blue and pink. Her dual coloring is always accompanied by a diamond motif, which is another reference to her harlequin-inspired origin. She usually has blonde hair, and, when it is not concealed by her jester cowl, it is always in pigtails. But, similar to her comic book peers, Quinn has more than a recognizable aesthetic theme. She is also associated with the themes of the jester/harlequin, abuse/trauma, and friendship, which will be explored in the section that follows.

The Jester/Harlequin. As discussed in the introduction to this paper, Harley Quinn was created to be a sidekick of the Joker, also known as the Clown Prince of Crime. Her name, aesthetic, and characteristics are a play off the harlequin character from Italian *commedia dell'arte*. This trickster character of the renaissance was known for their acrobatic agility, carefree nature, cleverness, and loyalty as a servant. Often paired with the “mischievous and brutish” character Clown, the harlequin was depicted as a romantic hero (“Harlequin,” 2021). Harlequins are recognizable by their use of a red-and-black mask, chequered costume, and their *batte*, which was the “magic wand” (i.e., a device of two thin pieces of wood that strike together to make a loud slap sound; also known as a slapstick) used by the character to change scenes (“Harlequin,” 2021).

Abuse/Trauma. Unfortunately, Harley Quinn has never been a character that has only had themes of lighthearted fun. Because she debuted as one of Joker's henchmen, she was hardly immune to the typically violent antics seen in cartoons between angry villains and their crew. However, as she grew in prominence and became Joker's girlfriend, Joker's violence towards her became less cartoonish and more reminiscent of domestic violence. With time, and with more explorations of the Quinn/Joker relationship in comics, the theme of intimate partner violence (IPV) grew darker. As noted by Garland et al. (2019), Quinn "has been threatened, beaten, hanged, blown up, shoved from rooftops, and left to die all in the name of love" (p. 596). For a long time, the couple engaged in a cycle: Joker would violently kick Quinn out; Quinn would become upset and seek revenge; Joker would do some romantic gesture to win Quinn back; and Quinn would return to the relationship, often more loyal and in love with Joker than ever. The first origin story of Harley Quinn, Paul Dini's 1994 *The Batman Adventures: Mad Love*, depicts this in detail as Quinn is emotionally manipulated by Joker; pushed out a window by him; and then hospitalized for severe injuries from the fall. All of this violence is because Joker is jealous that Quinn, on her first try, came closer to killing Batman than he ever had.

The IPV between Joker and Harley Quinn is one of the most common topics associated with Quinn, and it is one of the few topics surrounding her character to be explored by academia (Garland et al., 2019). The conversation about the depiction of IPV in comics, especially with the Quinn/Joker relationship, has been hotly debated by both fandom and culture at large (Garland et al., 2019; Salter, 2020). Even though DC has relaunched and rebooted storylines within their publications several times since Quinn's

debut in 1992, the violence between Quinn and Joker has never changed. What has changed, however, has been Quinn's response to it as a character. Quinn has always fought back and expressed her displeasure at Joker's mistreatment and abuse, but it was not until 2013 that Quinn left her relationship with Joker for good. Since that time, Quinn has been working through her trauma and molding a new identity for herself. DC, thankfully, has not teased or explored reuniting the two as a couple since their final breakup and instead has focused on Quinn developing and exploring relationships (friendly and romantic) with other characters.

Friendship. As noted in the section above about Quinn's accomplices, the character is often depicted in a duo or group setting in her adventures. Unlike Batman or Catwoman or even Poison Ivy, Quinn is rarely seen in a solo adventure. She is most often associated with either the Joker or her fellow Gotham City Sirens Ivy and Catwoman, but her team exploits hardly end there. Quinn is a supportive and prominent member of any team she joins, whether Task Force X/Suicide Squad or the Birds of Prey, and she enjoys the group dynamic. One *New 52* storyline in the *Harley Quinn* series has Quinn manipulate an amnesiac Power Girl (formerly known as Supergirl) into becoming crimefighting partners. The *New 52* Quinn was also seen to be the leader of the Gang of Harleys, a recruited group of crimefighting misfits who dressed like her and adopted Harley-Quinn themed monikers, such as Harlem Harley and Bolly Quinn.

This theme of friendship is an important element of Quinn and unusual for a character operating in the Gotham City universe. Although Batman does have his Bat-family of allies and proteges, he is generally thought of as a solo act who struggles with connecting emotionally to others. Even the villains he faces tend to be solo acts who are

helped by a group of nameless henchmen, with Quinn's creation as the named sidekick of Joker the famous (and notable) exception. But Quinn's need and desire for relationships with others is more than a simple characterization. It is through her relationships with others that readers see Quinn evolve as a character and as a person within her stories. For example, she was inspired into a life-of-crime by her relationship with Joker; and her friendship/romance with Ivy helped Quinn embrace an identity of her own. The most recent storylines being published by DC, such as 2021's *Batman: Fear State Alpha*, depicts Quinn as one of Batman's key allies in his latest fight against evil as she tries to atone for her past crimes. Quinn may not be a solo act character, but she certainly does not allow herself to be subjugated to the sidelines.

History of Quinn's Supporting Cast

As mentioned previously, Quinn operates in an ensemble, and the section above briefly reviewed her relationships with these characters. Next, the individual histories of these supporting cast members will be reviewed, including the Joker, Batgirl (Barbara Gordon), Catwoman, Poison Ivy, and Punchline. This is necessary as these characters, like Quinn, have evolved in their depictions over time; each character's history informs modern storylines; and, most importantly, each character's history intersects with Quinn.

The Joker

The Joker was introduced in 1940 in *Batman #1* and was the creation of Jerry Robinson. From his first appearance, the Joker was depicted as having a chalk-white face, green hair, red lips, "the impossible rictus grin, the Joker venom, the maniacal laughter, and the riverboat-gambler couture: tails, vest, spats, and hat" (Weldon, 2016, p. 38). His Joker venom killed those exposed and left them with an exaggerated smile on their faces.

Writer Bill Finger and artist Bob Kane originally wanted to end the story with the killer clown's death, but their editor would not allow it as he felt this character "was too good to lose" (p. 38). During his first two years in print, the Joker would kill both innocents and criminal peers. It was in 1942, when all Batman stories were told to become more kid-friendly, that Joker stopped being a homicidal maniac and focused on committing jokester-themed crimes.

In the half decade between the Golden and Silver Age of comics, the Joker would have one of his most important and influential storylines published. In 1951's *Detective Comics* #168, a flashback sequence would show the story of a criminal called Red Hood who was fighting a fledgling Batman until "[the criminal] disappeared by diving into chemical waste" (Lapin-Bertone, 2019d). This chemical concoction that would bleach the criminal's skin a ghostly white and turn his hair green. Although multiple origin stories for the Joker have been proposed over the years (and none canonically confirmed), most narratives would borrow elements from this 1951 storyline, in particular the aspect of the villain known as Joker being born after falling (or jumping) into a vat of chemicals and being transformed by them.

Silver Age Joker was no different than his adversary Batman in that his tone become lighter and campier. This era would be the first to lean into the criminally insane characterization of Joker by showing the character in a padded cell rather than traditional prison once apprehended (Lapin-Bertone, 2019d). Joker would meet both Superman and the hero's archnemesis, Lex Luthor, during this period, and it would be the first (of many) team-ups of Joker and Luthor in the years to come. Joker was also a regular and popular villain seen on the 1960s *Batman* television show.

In 1973, the Joker entered the Bronze Age “as a leering creature of homicidal caprice, a serial-killing clown” (Weldon, 2016, p. 117). The Batman creative team wanted Joker to “be unpredictable, [and] a physical manifestation of the kind of random act of violence that had birthed the Batman” (p. 117). In his return to print, Joker killed four people – his first time to kill again since 1942. Joker was “sadistic chaos” to Batman’s “merciless order,” a theme that would continue to “define the two characters’ relationship in the comics and across all media for the next forty years” (p. 117). The Joker was so well-received by fans that he briefly starred in his own title. Starting in 1975, the series ran for nine issues and usually depicted Joker battling his criminal peers. However, the Comics Code Authority (CCA) was still in place, so Joker’s “homicidal tendencies [had] to be toned down a bit,” and he had to receive consequences for his actions at the end of every story (Lapin-Bertone, 2019b). Bronze Age Joker would heavily influence the version of Joker seen in the 1990’s *Batman: The Animated Series*.

Joker would enter the Modern Age with a bang. First, he would appear with Batman in 1986’s *The Dark Knight Returns* by Frank Miller. The story emphasized the codependent relationship between Batman and Joker, even “suggesting that the Joker needs Batman to exist” (Lapin-Bertone, 2019c). In the story, Joker would claim to be “a victim of Batman’s brutality” before ultimately facing off with the caped crusader at a carnival (Lapin-Bertone, 2019c). In the ensuing fight, Batman seriously injures Joker but refuses to kill him. Thus, Joker, in a final attempt to get the upper hand, commits suicide in order to frame Batman for murder.

The next infamous Joker appearance would be as the villain in Alan Moore’s *Batman: The Killing Joke* in 1988. This book would introduce a tragic backstory for the

Joker, which included elements from the 1951 Red Hood storyline noted earlier. *Batman: The Killing Joke* storyline depicts Joker brutally assaulting Barbara Gordon/Batgirl (to the point of disabling her) as part of a larger attempt to mentally break the Gotham City police commissioner and drive him insane. The year of 1988 would also have Joker beating the second Robin (Jason Todd) to death with a crowbar in the “Death in the Family” storyline after comic fans voted in favor of the event via a phone contest.

The end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s would see the Joker making appearances in several Batman media properties in addition to print. He was portrayed by Jack Nicholson in 1989’s *Batman* feature film, and he was voiced by Mark Hamill in *Batman: The Animated Series*. It would be in *BAS* where Joker first manipulates a young Arkham Asylum psychiatrist into becoming his partner-in-crime (Harley Quinn).

The 2000s would feature multiple storylines starring Joker as the main antagonist with appearances from Harley Quinn. In the 2001 miniseries *The Joker’s Last Laugh*, Joker believes he is dying of cancer and then has his “minions...capture Harley Quinn so he can impregnate her and produce an heir” (DC Database, n.d.). Another storyline of the mid-aughts has Joker attempting to kill Quinn in order to prove something to Batman (2007) (“Joker (character),” 2021). As part of 2011’s *New 52*, the Joker would infamously cut off his own face. Most recently, the 2020 crossover event *The Joker War* has Joker attempting to discredit Bruce Wayne (who he now knows is Batman) and steal his fortune. While the storyline featured many famous characters from the Batman universe (including Quinn), it would most notably introduce the character of Punchline as Joker’s new sidekick and girlfriend (i.e., a replacement for Harley Quinn).

One Joker/Quinn storyline of note came in 2017's non-canonical miniseries called *Batman: White Knight*. The story featured a medicated (and sane) Joker trying to reverse the role of hero and villain between him and Batman. Using his real name of Jack Napier, the reformed Joker sues the police department for not intervening in his beating by Batman and begins to work in city politics. There are two Harley Quinns in this story: Harleen Quinzel, the original Harley Quinn who left Joker and tried to help Batman prevent the torture of Robin/Jason Todd; and Marian Drews, a hostage Joker took during a bank robbery and adopted as a new "Harley Quinn." Drews later becomes the Neo Joker and attacks Gotham where Napier/Joker is now serving as a councilman. As the story progresses, Napier/Joker starts to respond less to his medication and has moments of reverting back into the Joker. Eventually, Napier/Joker works with Batman to defeat the Neo Joker, and Napier/Joker surrenders to the police to be arrested for his crimes. He is sent to Arkham, marries Quinzel, and "permanently reverts [back] to the Joker" ("Batman: White Knight," 2021).

Gotham Girls

The world of Gotham City is notorious for both its outlandish superheroes and supervillains. Several of these prominent characters are female, and each has a unique history, purpose, and identity within the Batman universe. These characters include Batgirl (Barbara Gordon), Catwoman, Poison Ivy, and Punchline. Batgirl falls into the category of superheroine. Catwoman has always been a character in grey – oscillating between the sides of good or evil depending on the story. Poison Ivy, like Harley Quinn, started as a villain but has evolved into a mix of hero and villain, or as DC has been known to describe it: "it's complicated." Punchline is one of the newest additions to

Gotham City, and she is unambiguously a supervillain. As these characters are often referenced and/or appear in stories featuring Harley Quinn, a brief history and summary of each Gotham Girl follows.

Batgirl (Barbara Gordon). There have been multiple women who have donned the costume of Batgirl since the concept of the character debuted in 1961. The first (and very brief in existence) was Betty Kane, the niece/sidekick of Batwoman and potential love interest of Robin/Dick Grayson. Next would be Barbara Gordon, who is arguably the most well-known character to hold the role. Helena Bertinilli, Cassandra Cain, and Stephanie Brown are also characters who have spent time as Batgirl. For the purposes of this study, Barbara Gordon will be the Batgirl reviewed and referenced as it is her iteration that most often intersects with Harley Quinn.

Barbara Gordon, the daughter of Police Commissioner Jim Gordon, was the idea of a 1960s *Batman* television series producer who was looking to add another permanent female costar to show's third season. Her purpose was to be a role model for the young female viewers and as eye candy for their fathers when villainess Catwoman was not on air (Weldon, 2016). Batgirl would be given a motorcycle (decked out with ruffles and a bow), a secret lair in her apartment, and even her own theme song. But it was decided the character needed to be debut in the Batman comics before appearing on the television series. Thus, in the fall of 1966, Batgirl/Barbara Gordon was introduced to the world in *Detective Comics* #359.

The early Barbara Gordon/Batgirl stories depicted her “as a spirited, if inexperienced, crime fighter,” and she was given her own backup strip in *Detective Comics* after several guest appearances in various Batman stories (Greenberger, 2018, p.

22). Her own stories would show Barbara Gordon evolving from a “shy, mousy, bookworm” to a “more modern, confident character” (p. 22). She would eventually reveal her secret identity to her father, and she would have a romance with Robin/Dick Grayson.

One of the most infamous stories in the Batman mythos is 1988’s *Batman: The Killing Joke* in which the Joker would visit the now-retired-as-Batgirl Barbara Gordon and shoot her through the spine. The Joker strips her and then photographs her naked, bleeding body. The story implies Joker may have also sexually assaulted Barbara, though this has never been confirmed nor denied. The photographs are used later in the story by the Joker as part of his torture of the police commissioner, Barbara’s father, who he is trying to drive insane. Joker is not successful in mentally breaking the commissioner, and Batman rescues Jim at the end of the story. But Barbara Gordon would not escape this storyline unscathed. The assault causes Barbara to be permanently paralyzed from the waist down. After her recovery, she adopts the codename Oracle and use her skills as a detective and librarian (her literal day job) to contribute to crimefighting. Oracle would debut as an information broker and computer hacker in *Suicide Squad* #23 in 1989. As Oracle, Barbara would spend time as a member of the Justice League, and she would form and lead the all-female Birds of Prey superhero team.

The *New 52* Barbara Gordon would no longer be paralyzed after the events of *Batman: The Killing Joke* thanks to a successful surgery and would return to the role of Batgirl. This change was unpopular with some as Oracle had been seen as one of the few positively depicted disabled characters in comics. In her own title series, Barbara was studying towards her PhD and living in Gotham’s Burnside borough while also fighting crime (Greenberger, 2018). As Batgirl, she continued to team up with the Birds of Prey

and Batman on occasion. As Barbara, she was running her own company to help bring cheap and renewable energy to the public. The 2020 crossover event *Joker War* has Barbara returning to her role as Oracle while also continuing work as Batgirl (“Barbara Gordon,” 2021).

Catwoman. First called the Cat, Catwoman’s first appearance was in 1940’s *Batman #1* when she attempted to steal a priceless necklace off a luxury yacht. Early Catwoman was not given a secret identity nor a notable supervillain costume. She used a variety of aliases and disguises to blend into the settings in which she committed her crimes rather than use her later methods of breaking-and-entering. But Golden Age Catwoman, like her modern version, was “a crafty, independent cat burglar” who was “a constant headache” for Batman (Hanley, 2017, p. 2).

As Hanley (2017) stated, “Catwoman completely enraptured Batman” from the first time they met, and she would be “one of the few villains in the Golden Age of superhero comics who was able to escape Batman and his resolute war on crime” (p. vii). But as a femme fatale who portrayed morality and gender in shades of grey, Catwoman was seen as questionable by the larger culture and would be given her first round of revisions in the early 1940s in response to cultural backlash. These changes resulted in her losing her brand as an independent cat burglar and shifting into a woman more interested in romance with Bruce Wayne/Batman than in crime. To further drive the point of Catwoman’s new submissiveness for readers, Batman started to call her “kitten” and made references to “taming” her with a collar. One storyline even had the character being told she would get a disciplinary spanking from Batman’s butler, Alfred. And despite

being promoted to the status of supervillain in 1946, Catwoman was no longer seen as a fellow adult equal with Batman – she was now a child to be reprimanded.

The early 1950s would introduce Catwoman as former flight attendant Selina Kyle who was suffering from amnesia after a blow to the head, and the amnesia was said to be the cause of her criminal ways. Once cured, Catwoman/Selina Kyle gave up a life of crime to live in quiet domesticity as a pet shop owner. She would briefly return to crime as Catwoman in 1954 before disappearing from comics altogether for twelve years thanks to the book *Seduction of the Innocent* and the start of the Comics Code Authority. She would return to comics in 1967 thanks to her character's popularity on the live-action *Batman* television show.

Catwoman's next few comic appearances showed her either competing for the affections of Batman; or using her own brand of feminism as way to recruit women into a life of crime. In pattern was starting to repeat, she would disappear from comics again but this time for only five years. Her next appearance would be in two 1972 issues of *Wonder Woman*. She would not reenter a Batman title again until 1974, and the Batman creative team of that time clearly had little to no understanding (or respect) for who the character of Catwoman was. This Catwoman appearance would have the character be called by the wrong name, costumed in the wrong colors, and behave in uncharacteristic ways (e.g., she would kill rather than only steal).

The late 1970s would be reminiscent of the Golden Age with the reintroduction of reciprocal affection between Catwoman and Batman. However, their relationship was never on equal footing as Batman always had the upper hand. Her comics appearances during this time were primarily guest roles in Batman titles for when he needed her help.

She would get her first solo feature as a backup in six issues of *Batman*, but the stories were hardly empowering as they consistently featured brutal violence (with accompanying imagery) of women. Catwoman would battle Batman before disappearing from the comics page again until 1985's *Crisis on Infinite Earths*. *Crisis*-Catwoman was mainly treated as a prop to further the character development and plotline of Batman and their Earth-Two daughter, Huntress.

Early Modern Age Catwoman would keep her name and occupation in the post-*Crisis* DC universe but nothing else, including her complicated relationship with Batman (Hanley, 2017). When writer Frank Miller was working on *Batman*, he would change Catwoman from a clever thief to a prostitute/dominatrix and have her assaulted by the Joker. In 1988, she would have a well-received four-issue storyline in *Action Comics* that would lead to a 1989 *Catwoman* four-issue miniseries. But, like the previous *Catwoman* solo feature, the stories were not ones of female power and independence. This miniseries had Selina Kyle raped and beaten by her pimp before being given the leather dominatrix catsuit that would later become her Catwoman costume. She would get revenge on her pimp, but she would also experience intense guilt over her underage friend's assault by a police officer. She would additionally need Batman to rescue her nun sister from death. Unsurprisingly, the series did not sell well, and Catwoman once again disappeared from comics.

The start of the 1990s saw Catwoman returning to television for *Batman: The Animated Series* and making her Hollywood debut in *Batman Returns*. The character was popular with these audiences, so DC published a Catwoman feature in their *Showcase '93* anthology book. The storyline would bring Catwoman closer to her Golden Age origins

as a thief who operated in shades of grey as she “pursued her own interests above all else” (Hanley, 2017, p. 129). Catwoman would be given her own solo series later that same year. Her series would feature the character travelling the world as she participated in various heists. The stories focused on tales of adventure rather than character development.

This *Catwoman* series was progressive in many ways. The stories were often featured female empowerment, and the series was one (of only two) at DC with a writing team that included women. The character was written as intelligent with her often outsmarting and outfighting her foes. True to her history, Catwoman’s morality continued to be in shades of grey. The series would also introduce the idea of Catwoman/Selina Kyle being half-Latina when it featured a story about her childhood. This would be the second time in history Catwoman was depicted as a woman of color (i.e., the first time was when Eartha Kitt, who was black, played Catwoman in the final season of the 1960s *Batman* television series). However, despite its progressive writing, the art of *Catwoman* was regressive. The series was drawn by one male artist, and he drew Catwoman with large breasts, long legs, a tiny waist, and a big butt. Her skintight costume “left little to the imagination, as if Balent [the artist] drew her nude and had her colored purple” (Hanley, 2017, p. 136). It is fair to note that this type of art was hardly unusual in the world of comics in the 1990s as all characters were becoming hyperexaggerated versions of humans in their visual depictions. But, as Hanley (2017) writes, “the art in superhero books [like *Catwoman*] became so brazenly sexy that there were rumors that some artists...were tracing pornography and simply adding a mask and skimpy costume” (p. 138).

The mid-1990s would see Catwoman's origin story be revamped again with Miller's prostitution storyline exchanged for one of a wealthy socialite. The character would also be back to having a complicated romance with Batman. In this era, Selina Kyle and Bruce Wayne were dating, with neither knowing the other's identity as Catwoman and Batman respectively, but the relationship would still be strained. At the start of the 2000s, Catwoman would get a new costume, new character design, and a new (relaunched) series. This new *Catwoman* series would feature a continuous narrative rather than vignettes and "would go down as the most critically and commercially successful era in the history of Catwoman comic books" (Hanley, 2017, p. 149).

Relaunched *Catwoman* had a darker tone than its predecessor. Catwoman/Selina Kyle "wanted to do good, but she was practical about it," so she would cross some lines if needed (Hanley, 2017, p. 151). A notable feature of this series would be when several issues explored "the emotional cost of being a hero in a real, prolonged way that was a rarity in superhero comics" after Catwoman/Selina Kyle experiences a series of traumatic events (p. 152). The series would be nominated for Eisner Awards (the highest achievement in comics) several times and be critically acclaimed. It would also win a Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) award in 2004 for its positive depiction of LGBTQ+ characters.

In 2006, DC forced all their superhero series to jump a year ahead in their timelines as part of the *Infinite Crisis* event. The *Catwoman* series had Catwoman/Selina Kyle be pregnant (not by Batman) during that lost period of time and was now depicting her as "a single mother balancing a baby and her own busy life" (Hanley, 2017, p. 157). She would ultimately ask Batman to help her find a safe and stable home for her daughter

after realizing her lifestyle was too dangerous for parenthood, but the storyline was still revolutionary in exploring a topic rarely depicted positively in comics. However, the aughts were also unkind to Catwoman. Storylines and appearances in other DC titles would again depict the character as not having the agency to make her own choices about heroism and villainy; and use her as a damsel-in-distress (plot device) by another villain in a scheme against Batman.

Catwoman would team up with villainesses Poison Ivy and Harley Quinn for the series *Gotham City Sirens* in 2009. Ivy and Quinn would take in a recovering Catwoman in order to find out Batman's secret identity. Eventually, the three girls would come together as friends while handling other conflicts. The end of the series would reveal Catwoman as Batman's accomplice, and she had been assigned to monitor and protect Ivy and Quinn in exchange for Batman not sending them to Arkham. When Batman wants to end the deal and arrest Ivy and Quinn, Catwoman refuses to turn them over and protects them as they escape.

DC rebooted their publishing line with the *New 52* in 2011, and a solo *Catwoman* series was one of the relaunched titles. Her history and backstory would be completely redone, and the only aspect of her past that would continue into the new universe would be her complicated romance with Batman. But *New 52 Catwoman* debuted with a large focus on Catwoman's sexuality. She was often depicted as barely dressed; and drawn in extremely sexual poses or in sex scenes. Fans and critics were vocal about their disdain for the overt sexualization and objectification in this series, so DC tried to tone it down. But even the revised art was not enough to encourage sales as the dark, violent, and graphic storylines were also unwelcomed by readers.

DC (again) revamped the *Catwoman* series in 2014 in attempt to win back readers. This new direction would shift the genre and tone of her stories from superhero to crime thriller. Catwoman/Selina Kyle was now the head of one of Gotham City's most powerful mafia families. Her storylines featured her fighting external threats, like rival mafia families, while also dealing with the disapproval of Batman. And absolutely everyone in these stories questioned Catwoman/Selina Kyle's authority and abilities due to her gender. As Hanley (2017) summarized, "the new *Catwoman* was an examination of powerful women in traditionally male roles, and the innumerable difficulties therein" (p. 211). The series also featured strong supporting female characters and included quotes from historically important women in each issue. The title would even explore Catwoman as bisexual, which was a progressive move for the traditionally conservative DC. She would leave the mafia and return to her roots as a cat burglar in 2015. The series was cancelled shortly after due to poor sales.

When DC announced the *Rebirth* event in 2016, there was not a Catwoman solo title included in the lineup. Instead, the character would return to being a prominent feature in the *Batman* series. Her origin was rewritten (again). She was back to her role as a master thief. She would (again) have a complicated romance with Batman. And she would (again) fluctuate between the roles of villainess and heroine as the sometimes teammate/partner of Batman. In 2017, the couple would finally solidify their relationship with an official engagement before criminal forces manipulated Catwoman into calling off the wedding in *Batman #50*. *Catwoman #1* would launch the same day as the release of *Batman #50*, and this latest Catwoman solo series follows the character as she pursues

a new life. The series currently focuses on her work in taking back her beloved Gotham neighborhood Alleytown while facing conflict with Gotham supervillains.

Of all the Gotham Girls reviewed in this section, Catwoman is the most important in terms of comparison with Harley Quinn for this study. First, Catwoman is only a few issues younger than Batman in terms of history. Because she has weathered all the same decades as Batman, she is the best female character to use for comparison with cultural and industry shifts over time. Another important aspect of Catwoman has been her balancing act between hero and villain. Although she is generally categorized as a supervillain, the title has never truly described her as she has always been too complex a character. Catwoman could be viewed as the antihero prototype for the Batman universe, long before the arrival of Harley Quinn. For example, even in stories in which she is the antagonist of Batman, Catwoman often saves him or his allies if they are in peril. And, depending on the storyline, she has teamed up with other villains or members of the Bat-family, like Quinn. It would be fair to say the only consistent element to Catwoman's motivation as a character is that she follows a moral code of her own creation. This code does not follow the traditional black-and-white morality present in superhero stories, but it does always prioritize the wants and needs of Catwoman. This kind of morality would also be seen in iterations of Quinn.

Poison Ivy. Dr. Pamela Isley, codename Poison Ivy, debuted during the Silver Age in 1966's *Batman* #181, but her identity and origin story were not revealed until *World's Finest* #252 in 1978. Her origin story has changed multiple times since her introduction. Her current *New 52* origin story describes her as the daughter of an abusive father. Her father murdered her mother and buried her in Ivy's garden (she would later

get her revenge by killing him). While in college, Ivy interned at Wayne Enterprises (the company owned by Bruce Wayne/Batman), where she would be “doused with chemicals that gave her the power to control plants” (DC Infinite Universe, n.d.). In addition to her ability to control plant life, she has resistance to most poisons and toxins; she can administer toxins through her skin (e.g., her lips); and she can use her pheromones to control humans. Ivy has been depicted as a redhead with a skin color ranging from white to green, which is explained as something she can control “by limiting the intensity of poisons in her bloodstream” (DC Infinite Universe, n.d.).

Ivy has been affiliated with the Birds of Prey, Gotham City Sirens, and Task Force X/Suicide Squad in addition to functioning as a solo supervillain. Her crimes are usually plant-themed, and she has consistently been depicted as a temptress who uses flirtations and the attraction of men to get what she wants. Ivy is often featured in stories involving Harley Quinn since the two became close friends in *Batman: The Animated Series*. Ivy, like Quinn, was originally depicted as a supervillain in the Batman universe but is currently depicted more as an antihero. Ivy is described as an ecoterrorist who “uses her scientific genius to champion all plant life” as she feels it has been abused by mankind (DC Infinite Universe, n.d.).

Punchline. Debuting in 2020’s *Batman #89*, Alexis Kaye was a nihilistic college student who was an expert in making poisons and an admirer of the Joker (Manning et al., 2021). To impress her hero and audition for the role of new accomplice, she concocted her own version of Joker venom and then used it to kill her college dean. Joker was impressed, and the two became lovers and partners. Kaye would adopt the codename Punchline and start her work with Joker by creating a toxin that would kill Batman.

It would not be long before Punchline would cross paths with her predecessor Harley Quinn in the events of *Joker War*. Punchline would cut Quinn's throat in an attempt to kill her, but Batman (who Quinn was working with) would save her. Punchline would then try to kill Batman with her specially designed poison, but Quinn would thwart her plans by creating an antidote made from plants in a secret garden gifted to her by Ivy. This storyline would end with Batman and Nightwing arresting Punchline.

Punchline continues to star in current Batman storylines, and her creation is clearly one seeking to be the inverse of her forerunner. Her creators, writer James Tynion IV and artist Jorge Jimenez, have said Punchline is "Harley Quinn's polar opposite" in that she is "a sadist...[who] enjoys killing people" (Johnston, 2020). She uses knives and her fists where Quinn prefers guns and mallets. Where "Harley...is all pep and energy," Punchline is dark and violent (Johnston, 2020). Quinn's blonde hair, blue-eyed, red and black jester aesthetic is exchanged for Punchline's raven-hair, green-eyed, purple and black ripped tights and dress. Tynion IV wrote in his personal newsletter to fans the following description of Punchline: "Like in the f-cked up Archie Comics where the Joker is Archie, and Harley Quinn is Betty, then Punchline is Veronica. If Harley is the angel on the Joker's shoulder, Punchline should be the devil" (Johnston, 2020).

Controversies

As with any popular comic book character, Harley Quinn has been the subject of several controversies over the years. For example, her relationship with Joker and the fandom around it has been accused of promoting IPV as romantic rather than problematic. And, as a female comic book character, there have been complaints about the oversexualization and objectification of her character.

One of the biggest controversies around Harley Quinn occurred in September 2013 during the *New 52* era when DC launched its “Break into comics with Harley Quinn!” contest. In the contest, artists “were [asked] to draw Harley in four different suicide scenarios” (“Harley Quinn,” 2021). One of these scenarios depicted Quinn committing suicide while naked in a bathtub, which received additional controversy for its sexualization of the act. But when it rains it pours – DC also just so happened to announce this contest around the time of National Suicide Prevention Week. Needless to say, the response received from fans and from organizations like the American Psychiatric Association, the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, and the National Alliance on Mental Health was loud and negative. DC would (sort of) apologize by saying their mistake was only in not articulating the suicide was to part of a dream sequence and “not supposed to be taken seriously” (“Harley Quinn,” 2021). The final published version of the scene would depict Quinn riding a rocket into outer space.

Conclusion

Female superhero characters have a storied past in comics. They, more so than their male counterparts, have had to weather significant cultural changes and shifts since their debut in the early twentieth century. It is their legacy that informs their modern successors. But the character known as Harley Quinn was just as influenced in her development and evolution by the patriarch of the comics universe in which she would inhabit – that of the Batman. It is through briefly reviewing these histories of the superheroine and Batman, that one can begin to understand the development, cultivation, and evolution of Quinn as a character. All of this information – the histories, who and where Quinn has been – provides the necessary context for this study’s content analysis.

Review of Academic Literature

This chapter has so far reviewed the history of the comic book superherione, the history of Batman (the DC character universe in which Quinn operates), and provided background knowledge for the character Harley Quinn. This section of chapter two will now present a review of the existing academic literature. As indicated in Figures 2 and 3 presented in chapter one (see p. 23), this literature review will explore the use of comics in secondary education; the use of comics in critical studies of gender; and the exploration of gender with female adolescent readers through use of readers response.

Harley Quinn in the Literature

Despite her mainstream popularity, Harley Quinn does not appear often in academic literature. There are some academic think pieces and commentaries about the character (though not much), and these texts usually discuss several characters rather than focusing only on Quinn. For example, texts looking at Quinn often consider her in terms of her relationships with the Joker, with Batman, or with her fellow Gotham City girls Catwoman and Poison Ivy (Austin, 2015; Roddy, 2011; Salter, 2020; and Taylor, 2016).

In reviewing the literature, one research study was identified in which Harley Quinn was a point of focus. Garland et al. (2019) conducted a mixed methods study to investigate the prevalence of intimate partner violence (IPV) in a convenience sample of issues from popular comic book series, and Quinn was one of several characters analyzed. The authors conducted a content analysis of the text and images in 21 issues and coded for topics of IPV and myths about domestic violence. One finding of the study was that most portrayals of IPV in the texts were physical, but emotional abuse still accounted for 60% of the images analyzed. Sexual IPV was rarely depicted. The authors

also examined specifics of the IPV experienced in the Quinn/Joker relationship. They found Quinn/Joker stories depicted the concept of coercive control, which is when “abusers, primarily men, employ a range of abusive tactics to micromanage and regulate their partner’s lives,” and Joker “is able to manipulate and control Harley at will regardless of whether the manipulation is emotional or violent” (p. 596). Quinn, the authors argued, only engages in violent behavior as a means of self-preservation, and she does not hold power within the relationship. Garland et al. (2019) also stated the dynamic depicted between Quinn/Joker reinforces the domestic violence myth of victim-blaming myth as Quinn is consistently illustrated to still be madly in love with Joker even after violence has been perpetuated. The authors concluded that the Quinn/Joker relationship is problematic with its depiction of co-victimization because Joker is clearly coercive, and Quinn only uses violence as a survival tactic. Additionally, the authors say the Quinn/Joker dynamic reinforces the myth of victim-blaming as Quinn is illustrated as “responsible for providing the violence” and, when violence does occur, she should just “leave or fight back without restraint” (pp. 603-604). In a final note, the authors argue Joker is illustrated as not able to be held responsible for his actions, including IPV, since he is mentally ill and evil. The problem with this concept, say the authors, is this “fails to recognize external factors, namely, cultural norms and beliefs such as those espoused by patriarchal social systems, that may facilitate violence against intimate partners” (p. 604).

Methods for the Review of Academic Literature

Comics and their influence have evolved far past their origins as cheap periodicals of entertainment for kids at the candy shop. History tells us comic books have terrorized parents, educators, clergy, and government officials with their outlandish content,

exaggerated violence, and possible promotion of illiteracy (Corville, n.d.; Robbins, 1999; Wright, 2001). Yet, as we continue into the twenty-first century and approach the centennial of the birth of the modern comics industry, comics continue to proliferate in American society. Superheroes who were once regulated to the printed page now soar the skies and fight crime on our televisions and in movie theaters. Fans see them depicted in both animated and live-action forms. Actors hired to portray and/or voice these characters grace major magazine covers and speak in interviews about their experiences embodying these characters. Costumes and other paraphernalia flood the market as fans, both old and new, flock to purchase items associated their favorite characters. For example, after Harley Quinn's live action debut in the 2016 film *Suicide Squad*, she was the most popular Halloween costume for both kids and adults alike (despite the film's PG-13 rating) that same year (Dockterman, 2016).

The acceptance of comics in schools as legitimate reading material was a battle hard won. However, the idea of using comics as instructional materials is still novel as indicated by the limited academic research on the concept. This review of academic literature will provide the foundation for a study about the ways in which female adolescent readers understand gender through the texts of the character Harley Quinn.

This review includes literature from the following four areas:

1. Literature about the use of comics in education to promote reading/language arts skills in the secondary classroom.
2. Literature about analyzing and understanding gender as a cultural concept in comic texts in the secondary educational setting.

3. Literature about adolescent readers exploring and understanding gender as a cultural concept in comic texts through readers response.
4. Literature that critically reviews the character of Harley Quinn in comic texts.

The purpose of this literature review was to understand where the research landscape currently is in its study of comics in education. Of particular interest was the existence and/or status of research focused on using comics with students to understand the cultural concept of gender. The goal of this review was to identify strengths, weaknesses, and gaps in the existing research. The following questions were asked to determine the relevance of literature to this study:

1. How have comic books been used for educational purposes with students?

Studies were included if they met each of the following criteria:

- a. Students were in a secondary educational setting
- b. Focus on literacy (i.e., reading, writing, listening, speaking)
- c. Comic books had to be in story format; not individual panels (e.g.: political cartoon) or comic strips (e.g.: newspaper)
- d. Study was written in English and completed in an area where English is the first language

2. How have comics been studied in terms of [critical] gender? Studies were included if they met each of the following criteria:

- a. Focus on female gender and traditional [cultural] female gender norms
- b. Studied in the context of a secondary educational setting
- c. Focus on literacy (i.e., reading, writing, listening, speaking)

- d. Comic books had to be in story format; not individual panels (e.g.: political cartoon) or comic strips (e.g.: newspaper)
 - e. Study was written in English and completed in an area where English is the first language
3. In what ways have researchers explored the topic of gender with adolescent readers? Studies were included if they met each of the following criteria:
- a. Students were in a secondary educational setting
 - b. Focus on literacy (i.e., reading, writing, listening, speaking) and literacy approaches such as readers response
 - c. Gender explored through text (not science/health)
 - d. Study was written in English and completed in an area where English is the first language

Breaking Down the Data: Selection and Analysis Procedures

Cycle 1. This review of literature started with searches using the university library's search engine for books, documents, and articles relevant to search terms. Multiple searches with a variety of search terms were used and criteria was further specified to narrow down the results to fit this review. Additional research was conducted through reviews of the bibliographies of selected (relevant) texts and individual academic journals. Reviews of individual academic journals included searching the primary literacy journals and journals specifically focused on graphic novels/comic books, gender theory (feminism), and gender in education. Approximately 250 research articles, books, and select book chapters were collected as part of the first round of research.

This set was then cataloged by the following broad themes: chapters from e-books; critical literacy theory; feminism or critical gender theory; transactional theory; comics in education; comic book history; Harley Quinn or Batman topics; middle school or secondary ELAR; methodology; and readers response. Philosophy-based references that only focused on methodology and/or theory (i.e., not theory or methodology used in application/context) were removed from the literature review sample.

Cycle 2. The second round of research selection had the researcher reviewing each article individually and categorizing it by a narrower theme. The collected literature was now organized by topics such as “comic book superheroes in popular culture”; “graphic novels in ELAR classroom”; “Harley Quinn”; “gender and comics”; “readers response”; and “critical theory in the classroom”. The result of this cycle was approximately 120 items of literature being categorized into about 10-15 narrower categories.

Cycle 3. The third round of reference review required examining each article to determine if it discussed academic research or conducted a study; and was not a discussion (i.e., “think”) piece or about anecdotal experiences within the classroom. Interestingly, this was the round with the most eliminations as many items were disqualified by these parameters. There were quite a few articles featuring reflections from educators of their experiences with informally incorporating comics or graphic novels into their classrooms. After this cycle of analysis, the researcher had narrowed the literature sample to 24 items.

Cycle 4. The final stage of review occurred with each item (n=24) being reviewed in detail for possible inclusion in the final literature review. The result of this evaluation was 12 articles were determined to not respond to the literature review's research questions and were, thus, not included in the final sample. The remaining articles (n=12) did respond to the presented research questions, and they were approximate enough in fitting with the established criteria for inclusion. It is important to note the third research question of this literature review was adjusted slightly to allow for five relevant research articles to be included. The original question focused on female adolescent readers only, but the research studies that were found had included male and female adolescent readers. Thus, the research question was adjusted to include investigations with adolescent readers of both sexes.

Comics and Education

The first question of this literature review sought to explore how comic books have been used for educational purposes with students in a secondary school setting. The investigation of existing academic research found comic books have been used to promote and teach visual literacy skills, but these texts also still continue to struggle for legitimacy and inclusion in educational environments (DeHart, 2021; Moeller, 2011; Pantaleo, 2014; Sun, 2017; Wallner and Barajas, 2020).

Wallner and Barajas (2020) offer an excellent introduction with their integrative research review on existing research looking at the use of comics in K-9 education. The goal of their review was threefold: to look at what approaches have been used in comics-in-education research; what foci did these studies have; and what school subjects and populations have been included and excluded in this research. Data was collected through

database and manual searches with results then cross-referenced to identify common areas of research and possible gaps, which resulted in 55 texts of research articles and doctoral student work. The results of the integrative research review indicated most studies occurred in North America, and most studies (52 of 55) were “staged” studies (i.e., researcher introduced material into the setting and then observed the results). Most of the research also looked at student preferences. The authors concluded more research needs to be conducted on what information students learn through comics; what types of knowledge reading comics enables; and how comics are being used in the classroom by teachers and students. Wallner and Barajas (2020) also recommend more exploratory and inductive research be conducted into general comic book reading rather only their use in interventions.

Pantaleo (2014) conducted a qualitative study on how the visual elements of graphic novels are used in teaching and learning in one seventh grade ELA classroom in Canada. The 23 students (13 girls and 10 boys) participated in a nine-week instructional unit on the topic before then being given two weeks to create their own multimodal text. The researcher conducted individual interviews, participant observation and reflections, and content analyses of student-generated artifacts. The results of the study indicated students to be active perceivers and thinkers as they learned how to think about how semiotic resources are used in a text, what they mean, and how they make meaning. In the conclusion, the author states existing research notes students must be taught visual literacy skills in order for them to develop; and past research also indicates that developing these skills is important because readers use images as a starting point when accessing topics. Pantaleo (2014) further argues “teachers need to provide students with

appropriate pedagogy and learning opportunities to read, comprehend, and interpret the mode of image” just as they do with written language and help students expand their concept of text to be both written and visual (p. 48). Graphic novels should be treated as legitimate and complex texts, and students (and educators) need to understand and value visual literacy.

Sun (2017) conducted a qualitative case study of one middle-grade ELA classroom. The author wanted to investigate the appeal of graphic novels to adolescents and how graphic novel reading can promote their literacy development, including critical literacy. Data collection for this study included semi-structured, small group interviews and analyses of various student-generated artifacts (e.g., online forum posts). The class studied the graphic novel *Persepolis*, which is the nonfiction story of an immigrant and refugee. Sun (2017) found graphic novels could engage previously unmotivated readers. While there was still some initial hesitation with reading a graphic novel due to its association as being for younger readers, it was the complexity of this specific novel’s narrative that changed students’ perspectives. Reading the graphic novel gave students the opportunity to experience multiple perspectives, empathize with characters in context, and engage in critical thoughts and conversations about their own experiences and beliefs. Sun (2017) concluded graphic novels have the potential to alter habits of thinking and influence the lives of students through critical reading.

DeHart (2021) considered how educators might be using graphic novels and comic strips to engage adolescents in literacy instruction in context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the pandemic impacting his original plans for data collection, DeHart ended up gathering data via interviews with three teachers case studies and one virtual

classroom observation. The teachers (two social studies and one ELA) worked in small rural school districts and collectively served 120 students. The social studies teachers both used drawing and doodling in their classrooms to connect with students and communicate information, and one also allowed students to demonstrate their learning through self-generated comic strips. The ELA teacher said he originally believed only the canonical texts had a place in the classroom while comics were reserved for hobby reading at home. However, the teacher now offers both superhero and non-superhero graphic novel texts in his classroom library as he wants students “to see themselves in the books [he] offer[s] them” (p. 49). The teacher stated he is interested in further exploring the use of graphic novels in the classroom and has a goal of having his students create their own comics. The conclusion of the researcher was that there still is resistance from educators in the use of graphic novels in educational settings, and there needs to be more support in using of visual texts as part of literacy instruction.

The final study included in this section combines elements of comics in education with the concept of gender. Moeller (2011) conducted a qualitative study to investigate the attitudes of high school students towards the use of graphic novels in schools and if these attitudes differed along gender lines. Using a group of 15 high school student volunteers (eight females and seven males) in one public high school located in the Midwest (US), students were asked to read three graphic novel texts and participate in one focus group and two one-on-one interviews. The findings indicated the students associated graphic novel readership more with the stereotype of the “nerd” than with gender, but their “nerd” stereotype also usually tended to be male. Male readers preferred the visuals of graphic novel texts while female readers reported a preference for

traditional print texts as it allowed for more imaginative freedom. All students in the study agreed the three graphic novels used in the study should be included in the school library. However, the fairytale-themed book and the historical book (about the Rwanda genocide) were the ones students saw as having the most curriculum potential (i.e., the third text was a Marvel superhero story). All student participants also agreed they did not believe their teachers would ever replace a traditional classroom text with a graphic novel. The researcher concluded graphic novels would receive more educational legitimacy in the classroom setting if schools and educators supported their inclusion in these spaces.

Conclusion

These researchers who studied the use of comics in education agree in each of their findings that comics have a place in academic settings. These texts were shown to promote the development of visual literacy skills and provided new ways of thinking about information in text. However, these research studies also noted the continued hesitation of educators in giving legitimacy to and using graphic texts for academic purposes.

Studying Critical Gender Theory with Comics

There were no academic research articles found to critically explore the concept of gender (i.e., outside of the context of readers response) and meet this study's criteria. Two gender-focused studies on comics were found, but the research focused on analyzing visual depictions of the male versus female body of superhero characters (Avery-Natale, 2013; Cocca, 2014). These studies were included in this review for two reasons: first, to

establish the existing research closest in nature to the purposes of this study; and second, because this research considers unequal and stereotypical gender representations.

Avery-Natale (2013) conducted a qualitative investigation into how six prominent DC superhero characters (i.e., Superman, Batman, Green Lantern, Wonder Woman, Mary Marvel, and Black Canary) have changed in their physical (visual) depictions over time. The author used content analysis as they reviewed 77 comics published between the 1940s and 2008, which was a sample of 257 images (117 of women). Female characters were coded for the following: musculature, body positioning, costume coverage, hairstyle, facial expressions, lips, and breast size. The findings of the study found women in comics showed significant changes over time in that they become more sexualized in the form of larger breasts, less costume coverage, and more sultry illustrations of the face and hair. In addition, bondage of female characters became more graphic and extreme as time progressed. For both genders, modern depictions of superhero bodies were more sexualized and less easily attainable by the average person than those depicted in the illustrations of older comics. Avery-Natale (2013) hypothesized the changes in depictions of female characters were the result of women not being “considered when these characters are developed and drawn,” and that the imagining of male content creators “of hegemonic gender norms dominate the industry’s presentation of both men and women” (p. 100).

Cocca (2014) conducted a mixed method analysis to investigate how often female characters in DC and Marvel superhero texts were sexualized (i.e., visually) and if this trend increased or decreased over time. The author analyzed 14,599 panels within 144 issues of 24 different titles from both publishers. Each title had the first six issues of its

volume examined, and the titles were subdivided into four categories: superhero ensemble titles over time; current ensemble titles; female-headed titles over time (the author noted there were no Marvel female-headed titles over time included as they did not exist); and current female-headed titles. The author found 136 of 144 issues studied had women depicted as sexually objectified but noted the frequency of objectification in the 2010s was half that of the 1990s. Further, female characters were more often in sexualized poses on covers (of both ensemble and female-headed titles) than in the panels within issues. Although female-headed titles tended to feature more female characters and less frequent objectification, sexualization of women was still a prominent feature. Cocca (2014) concluded that “traditional gender norms are simultaneously unsettled (by a woman being portrayed as a strong subject) and reinforced (by a woman being portrayed as sexualized object) at the same time” (p. 421). In addition, the author notes that the findings indicate there has been a decrease in female sexualization in contemporary comics but also an increase in public commentary and attention to this topic due in part to third-wave feminism, technological access to large cultural conversations (and feedback), and understanding that overt sexualization can disrupt a reader’s experience due to its unrealism.

Conclusion

The critical analyses of gender in this research indicates the inequity between male and female superhero characters has been and continues to be presented visually in comic texts. Most female character depictions are ones of sexual objectification, and this trend has only increased with time (although, the last decade finally saw a decline). Even when female characters are portrayed as disrupting traditional gender norms with their

actions and characterizations, this empowerment is contrasted by their sexualized visual depictions.

Looking at Gender with Adolescent Readers Through Readers Response

Moffatt and Norton (2008) used *Archie* comics to conduct a qualitative investigation with middle-grade boys and girls in Canada to study their ideas about gender and sexuality. The students read the text and were then asked to respond to survey questions. The written responses of 47 participants were analyzed, and then 10 boys and 10 girls were asked to expand upon their responses in individual interviews with the researchers. Using discourse analysis, the researchers found most participants engaged in patriarchal discourse in both their written and oral responses (28%) while 13% used a feminist construct of gender relations discourse. Per the authors, the most significant finding was that most participants “did not adhere to patriarchal or feminist discourse in any straight-forward manner” as they, instead, engaged in complex and contradictory constructs of gender relations (p. 114). The conclusion of the researchers was that these varying styles of discourse supported the notion that preteens are actively engaging in and constructing attitudes and beliefs about gender relations, which means ideas and attitudes about gender are not fixed at this age and are able to be “negotiated and renegotiated” (p. 119). These findings support that educators can support preteen students in moving towards attitudes of gender equity if they allow students to engage in such conversations.

Ethnography Study of the Use of Comics in Middle-Grade Education (Dallacqua)

An ethnographic study on the use of comic books in education was conducted at one middle school during the 2014-15 school year and resulted in four separate articles which reviewed the data from different lenses (Dallacqua, 2019; Dallacqua, 2020; Dallacqua and Low, 2019; Dallacqua and Low, 2021). All four articles used the same participants, which was a group of six seventh grade students (two males and four females) in the same ELA and social studies classes. The students all participated in a middle-school curriculum unit on comics, and data was collected through formal (i.e., classroom) and informal (i.e., lunch period) group discussions, one-on-one interviews, fieldnotes, recordings of class lessons, and student work. Dallacqua (2020) reviewed the use of comics in teaching and learning in the social studies classroom; while Dallacqua (2019), Dallacqua and Low (2019), and Dallacqua and Low (2021) looked at student responses to gender representation in graphic novels and comics.

Dallacqua (2020) found the use of comics in the social studies classroom helped engage students both in reading and in content by making the activity more fun. After being taught how to engage and analyze a comic text by teachers, students saw how text and image worked interconnectedly as they read and engaged in history critically. Comics allowed for multiple ways of reading and interpreting, which lead to multiple ways of knowing and understanding. The researcher concluded students should be given access to quality, meaningful multimodal texts in educational settings, and comics should not be excluded from such consideration.

The other three research articles focused on student responses to the depiction of gender in graphic novel texts and superhero comics. In the classroom, students read two

graphic novels, and their responses indicated a range of “enjoyment to frustration about how the characters were portrayed” (Dallacqua, 2019, p. 272). When the characters in the graphic novels engaged in acts of both masculinity and femininity, students felt confused. For example, when a main female character changed from a beginning-of-story “anti-princess” characterization to an end-of-story traditional female characterization, students were upset by the “inconsistencies in [her] characterization” (p. 272). But students also anticipated what would happen since these graphic novels followed the literary convention of a fairy tale (e.g., end-of-story romance). This unit gave students the space to critique, question, and reconsider the messages presented, which lead to students realizing these stories did not have to follow any known formula nor did it have to adhere to cultural gender norms. Dallacqua (2019) argued these students became “literary critics [as they] deeply consider[ed] these texts and the larger issues they presente[ed]” (p. 275).

Outside of the classroom, students requested to engage in informal conversations with each other and the researcher during the lunch period to talk about the depictions of gender in graphic novels and superhero comics (Dallacqua and Low, 2019; Dallacqua and Low, 2021). The informal setting allowed for student-led conversations and learning as they sought to reconsider their cultural understandings and expectations of gender. In addition to discussing the graphic novel texts studied in class, the students also spoke about superhero (Marvel) comics and their personal experiences with gender expectations. The conversations also approached issues related to superhero paraphernalia and marketing (e.g., the visibility of male Marvel superheroes as compared to female). These texts and the conversations surrounding them allowed students to question and reconsider their long-held beliefs around gender as well as allowed them to

engage in complicated conversations around gender identity, expression, and representation. As Dallacqua and Low (2021) stated, educators can use popular culture and such texts to engage students in “organic critical literacies” by using familiar characters and topics (p. 82).

Conclusion

The existing research on exploring gender with adolescent readers through readers response indicates comics are meaningful multimodal texts that can be used by readers to examine ways of knowing and understanding gender. Comics provide adolescents with a discourse to help them actively engage in and negotiate attitudes and beliefs regarding gender and gender relations.

Adult Readers Response to Female Representation in Comics

Although Crawshaw (2019) does not fit the criteria of this literature review since the author used a sample of adult readers (ages 20-41 years) rather than adolescents, the study itself is similar enough in purpose to merit inclusion. Using a qualitative approach, Crawshaw (2019) studied the interpretations of comic book readers on women representation in comics, in particular characters who are depicted as empowered. The data collection for this study included a content analysis of popular comic characters; in-depth interviews with 20 comic book readers; and field notes and participant observations collected during an ethnography conducted while the researcher worked at a comic bookstore. The findings of the study indicated graphic narratives reinforce existing cultural ideas about gender difference, gender stereotypes (“hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity”), and violence against women (p. 89). Further, the content

analysis established three archetypes for popular female comics characters: the love interest, the nag, and the slut.

Unpublished Academic Research Related to This Topic

Existing unpublished research was also reviewed, and the results of this search found four master's theses related to the present study. These theses do not fit the criteria of this literature review, but they are relevant enough to be mentioned. They also offer a perspective on comic book research across multiple disciplines, such as communication studies and anthropology (Bowen, 2017; Sawyer, 2014; Schmidt, 2015; and Volintine, 2016). This section will briefly review of these theses.

Sawyer (2014) researched postfeminism theory in female superhero team comic books using close textual analysis and visual analysis via a communications lens. Three series were analyzed: *Birds of Prey* (DC), *Marvel Divas* (Marvel), and *Gotham City Sirens* (DC). The author argued that although these texts are marketed as liberatory feminist texts, they are ultimately problematic as they all “work to undermine the female characters’ agency” (Sawyer, 2014, p. 120). Through racism, sexual objectification, and/or consumerism, these texts reflect different aspects of postfeminism theory and show a worrying trend in the comics industry and culture. Of the three texts, *Gotham City Sirens* was determined to be the most problematic with its sexist writing and art, but all use the interplay between text and image to devalue their female characters.

Another communications study was Schmidt (2015), who conducted a qualitative analysis to investigate how visual representations of the female leads in the series *Gotham City Sirens* assign meaning to characters and their actions. Schmidt (2015) analyzed the first five issues of the series and used narrative paradigm and visual rhetoric

as organizing principles. The research indicated the three leads (i.e., Catwoman, Harley Quinn, and Poison Ivy) experience tension between socio-cultural expectations of their gender (female) and expectations of their roles as superheroes/villains. Further, the upholding of traditional gender expectations in the text caused IPV to be depicted in harmful ways as female characters who experienced abuse were blamed for it and actively labelled as non-victims. Schmidt (2015) argued the rising popularity of comic characters in mainstream culture means a larger audience (i.e., more than comic book readers) will be exposed to and potentially influenced by such harmful messages regarding gender and IPV.

Bowen (2017) investigated perceptions and identifications of three types of female fans with comic book characters (print version): readers, cosplay (costume play) participants, and convention attendees. Their quantitative research used a methodology common in television, magazine, and advertising research. Through analysis of feedback provided by 368 analytical survey respondents, Bowen (2017) concluded comic book readers and comic convention attendees had more positive perceptions of female comic book superheroes than those who did not read comics or attend conventions. The researcher argued comic book research could be the next big area of media effects research, and its recent proliferation in popular culture indicates the effects of comic media are worthy of study and consideration.

Volintine (2016) used mixed methods as part of their anthropology research into how American superhero comics books represent American concepts of gender. A content analysis of six modern-age comic book issues (i.e., three DC and three Marvel) was conducted, and surveys of 480 comic readers and/or artists at three comic

conventions were collected as data. A demographic analysis of the survey respondents indicated all but two individuals lived in the US. The results found DC female characters were more likely to be hypersexualized and had the most occurrences of emphasized femininity (i.e., described as damsels-in-distress and in need of comfort/rescue). The three most common feminine traits portrayed in comics were physical attractiveness, being emotional and/or showing emotional weakness, and being a sex object. Both Marvel and DC female characters could enact masculine and feminine traits without penalty, but male characters rarely portrayed any femininity. Both publishers visually used the body parts of the butt and thighs to emphasize femininity. Volintine (2016) also found female characters often engaged in interruption during interpersonal conversations as a sign of power, and their linguistic styles were of cooperative language (as opposed to the conflict-causing style of males). The conclusion of this research was female superhero characters can adopt traits, roles, and abilities not traditionally associated with femininity without causing harm to their existing femininity.

Harley Quinn in the Unpublished Research

Interestingly, Harley Quinn appeared more in graduate student research than in academic journals as she was mentioned in each of the four theses presented here. Bowen (2017) included eight single images from comics in her survey for response with Quinn being one of the characters in these images. Volintine (2016) used *Harley Quinn #14* (volume 2) as one of the issues used in their content analysis. The findings from that research indicated Quinn was the most hypersexualized character studied, and she also portrayed the most occurrences of emphasized femininity. Per Volintine (2016), Quinn

was depicted as a sex object, as the character with the highest occurrences of sexual agency, and as the most attractive of the characters analyzed.

Sawyer (2014) wrote Harley Quinn's depiction in *Gotham City Sirens* made her a posterchild of postfeminism ideas. Quinn "was crafted as a figurehead of consumption, obsession, and reliance upon an abusive relationship with a male character" (p. 123). This type of messaging, the researcher argues, can "affect male readers by allowing them to justify abusing women, and it could work for female readers to make them feel like they need to be in a relationship no matter how unhealthy" (p. 125). Although the whole text was deemed problematic, Quinn was determined to be the most problematic of all. Schmidt (2015), who also researched *Gotham City Sirens*, reported Quinn (and Catwoman) were depicted as individuals deserving of their partners' abuse and both were assigned non-victimhood.

Conclusion

The findings of the unpublished academic research indicated Quinn is often depicted as hypersexualized in her texts, and her portrayal as a postfeminist icon is not one of empowerment. Her characterization is also in conflict at times as she is expected to balance the expectations of a super-empowered person and those of a traditional (American) female. Finally, comic book readers and comic convention attendees had more positive attitudes towards female superhero characters like Quinn than those who were not readers or attendees.

Themes in the Research

A theme across several articles reviewed was the continued hesitation of educators in accepting graphic novels and/or comic books as valid and appropriate texts for the educational environment (DeHart, 2021; Moeller, 2011; and Pantaleo, 2014). The research that does exist on the educational use of these kinds of texts favors graphic novels, such as *Persepolis*, over comic books because their historical and/or contemporary content can be tied to existing curriculum (Sun, 2017). But both graphic novels and comic books provide students with multimodal texts that allow for new ways of thinking and development of visual literacy skills (Dallacqua, 2019; Dallacqua, 2020; Dallacqua and Low, 2019; Dallacqua and Low, 2021; DeHart, 2021; Pantaleo, 2014; and Sun, 2017).

The few studies that looked at readers response to gender representation in comics supported preexisting ideas about comics reinforcing traditional ideas around gender and displaying inequity between male and female characters (Avery-Natale, 2013; Cocca, 2014; Crawshaw, 2019; Dallacqua and Low, 2019; Dallacqua and Low, 2021; Sawyer, 2014; and Volintine, 2016). Even when female characters headline a series and/or are depicted as being “empowered,” the message tends to be lost on readers as they are overwhelmed with sexual objectification and gender stereotypes also present in the text (Avery-Natale, 2013; Cocca, 2014; Sawyer, 2014; Schmidt, 2015; Volintine, 2016).

Research regarding Quinn specifically noted the character is often hypersexualized, sexually objectified, and depicted as adhering to traditional feminine gender norms (Sawyer, 2014; Schmidt, 2015; and Volintine, 2016). It even argues attempts at depicting Quinn as empowered fall short as they only support negative

aspects of postfeminism, such as empowerment through consumerism and obsession (Sawyer, 2014).

Gaps in Existing Research

While the use of comic books and graphic novels in the classroom appears to be a more frequent topic included in contemporary academic journals, these articles are overwhelmingly think-pieces and/or personal anecdotes of educators who have experimented with such texts. Formal academic research is limited on the use of comics in both education and critical inquiry.

It appears DC Comics and its intellectual properties (IP) are studied less than those of rival Marvel Comics, which may be attributed to Marvel's larger and more established presence in popular culture during the last two decades. Needless to say, even when DC is referenced in a study, Harley Quinn is not the topic of focus. Only one published study reviewed included Quinn by name (i.e., Garland et al., 2019). She had more luck in the field of graduate student research with four master's theses referring to her by name. But again, she was one of multiple characters analyzed, and the research surrounding her tended to focus on comic book depictions of IPV rather critically analyze her as a character.

Wallner and Barajas (2020), in their review of the existing research in the use of comics in K-9 education, proposed future research pursue learning what information and what types of knowledge students can gain through reading comics. This study will investigate what information and knowledge about gender and gender relations are procured by female adolescents through their reading of *Harley Quinn* comics. It will also seek to expanded upon the findings of Dallacqua (2019), Dallacqua and Low (2019),

Dallacqua and Low (2021), Moffatt and Norton (2008), and Sun (2017) by exploring critical literacy and readers response with female adolescent readers through engaging in messages about gender in *Harley Quinn* comics.

Conclusion

The first part of this chapter provided a foundational understanding of the history of the superherione character, the history of Batman and his character's universe, and the character Harley Quinn. Part two of the chapter reviewed the existing literature of research about comics in education, critical gender theory and comics, and readers response to depictions of gender in comics. In addition, graduate student work related to the present study was reviewed. With the research landscape now thoroughly reviewed and presented, chapter three will now review the methodology and research design of this study.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

Chapter one introduced and discussed the need for critical gender analyses of comic texts and investigation into how messages of gender within these texts are being interpreted and understood by female adolescent readers. It then discussed how the present study uses a theoretical framework of critical literacy, feminism, and transactional theory to examine this through the character of Harley Quinn from DC Comics. Next, the first part of chapter two provided a foundational understanding of the history of the superheroine character in comics, the history of the DC Comics' Batman universe, and a detailed introduction to the character of Harley Quinn. The second part of chapter two provided a review of the existing scholarly literature, including unpublished graduate research, surrounding studies of comics in education, critical gender theory and comics, and readers response with gender depiction in comic texts. With these chapters developing the groundwork for the study, chapter three will now present the methodology for this dissertation.

A review of the research purpose and research questions will be presented before discussing the chosen methodology of qualitative research. The chapter will then be organized into two parts with each part addressing one research question of the study. The first part will address research question one by discussing its research design of content analysis. The second section will focus on research question two by discussing its research design of language-in-use analysis. Chapter three will then conclude with a summarization of the study's methodology.

Purpose for Research

Comic books have been a presence in American culture for more than 80 years, and they have enjoyed a renaissance in the last decade with the proliferation of comics' intellectual property (IP) in mainstream popular culture. The character of Harley Quinn, in particular, has been an entrée into this the world of comics, and texts bearing her name have been some of the most popular (Riesman, 2016). As this IP brings more fans to comics, it is important to consider the messages appearing in these texts in terms of gender. Historically, comics have been notorious in their stereotypical depictions of female characters and their embrace of regressive cultural norms. The purpose of this research is to critically analyze gendered messaging present in Harley Quinn texts and to study how adolescent female readers responded to them.

Research Questions

This study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. Through a content analysis, in what ways does the character Harley Quinn perform gender in her comics?
 - a. What attitudes and beliefs about femininity are depicted through Quinn?
 - b. In what ways has Quinn's depiction of femininity in her comics changed over time?
2. Through a language-in-use analysis, in what ways do female adolescent readers describe their experience and understanding of femininity through Harley Quinn in comic books?

- a. In what ways does a female adolescent identify and/or not identify with Quinn in the text?
- b. In what ways do female adolescents see Quinn as challenging and/or supporting cultural stereotypes about femininity?

Method

This study utilized qualitative research as its methodology. The start of qualitative research can be traced back to Western anthropologists and sociologists who were studying other cultures (Bhattacharya, 2017). It has always been about “asking questions about people’s lives, the social and cultural contexts in which they lived, the ways in which they understood their worlds,” etc. (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 6). As it evolved from its ethnographic origins, qualitative research spread to other disciplines, such as education and law, as researchers in those fields were also interested in understanding phenomena.

Qualitative research focuses on the nature or essence (quality) of a topic. It seeks to understand a topic by “analyz[ing] narratives in the form of words, texts, illustrations, videos, and other non-numerical formats,” (Pago, 2018, p. 10). In other words, research is being conducted in order to gain insight and depth into a topic that will provide an understanding of people and/or events. It is about finding meaning and understanding about a topic through rich description. A qualitative research study can include data in the form of interviews, observations, artifacts (e.g., documents) that are then analyzed by the researcher. It is flexible and evolving in its design as it seeks to contribute to understanding, describing, and/or making meaning with a topic (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Often, qualitative research seeks to understand a culture, which includes the “shared values, beliefs, rituals, language, clothing, [and] other things that membership in a group could be associated with” (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 8). Culture can be broad, such as that of American society, or narrow, such as that of an individual workplace. For the purposes of this study, focus will specifically be on the culture of American comic books (which includes both readers/fans and content creators).

Rationale

The research questions within this study sought to describe and understand how femininity (i.e., the American cultural concept of the female gender) is being performed through the comic book character Harley Quinn within her comics. As the questions sought to describe and understand a phenomenon (i.e., femininity) present in cultural artifacts (i.e., *Harley Quinn* comic books), qualitative research was an appropriate methodology for this study. The next section will review the specific qualitative research design to be used in investigating this study’s first research question and its sub-questions.

Research Question #1

Research Design

Research question one was studied through the use of a content analysis. Content analysis is “a systematic reading of a body of texts, images, and symbolic matter” (Krippendorff, 2019, p. 10). It has a long history that dates back to theological studies of the seventeenth century when the institution of the [Roman Catholic] Church researched nonreligious materials being printed and distributed that could threaten its authority. Content analysis would evolve and expand, and its next big wave of use would be in the

twentieth century study of mass media (e.g., newspaper) materials. Krippendorff (2019) described the next phase of transition to include a replacement of “interest in subject matter categories” to “interest in stereotypes, styles, symbols, values, and propaganda devices” (p. 12).

Lessons learned through time and evolution of content analysis led to a several understandings of its application in research. First, “content is not inherent to communications,” so one must understand that what is intended to be communicated by a sender and what is interpreted by a receiver are not always the same thing (Krippendorff, 2019, p. 16). Social situations, preferred discourses, individual needs and expectations are just a few examples of things that may influence a message’s interpretation. Next, a content analysis attempts to answer questions outside of a text, and because a researcher does not always have access to all desired information (e.g., an author’s attitude or state of mind), there is inference involved in its use. Thus, how one researcher answers a question may differ from another. An additional tenet of content analysis is a text must be analyzed in the context of the cultural system in which that message was communicated.

Krippendorff (2019) summarizes a qualitative approach to content analysis as “a repertoire of [research methods] that promise to yield inferences from all kinds of verbal, pictorial, symbolic, and communication data” (p. 23). Further, he argues all qualitative content analyses share a few common characteristics. First, they all “require a close reading of relatively small amount of textual matter” and “involve the rearticulation (interpretation) of given texts into new (analytical, deconstruction, emancipatory, or critical) narratives accepted within particular scholarly communities” (p. 22). Also, those who work in content analysis acknowledge how their conscious and unconscious biases

(through social or cultural conditioning) play an active role in their interpretations and understandings.

Rationale. Research question one of this study investigated Harley Quinn's portrayal of femininity (i.e., the cultural norms assigned to a female) within her own comic texts. The sub-questions sought to describe the attitudes and beliefs about femininity portrayed in these texts and how these portrayals of femininity have changed over time. A qualitative content analysis was an appropriate approach to answering these questions since a close reading of *Harley Quinn* comics can provide an interpretation of cultural values and possible stereotypes within the text. Content analysis allows for a researcher to consider how a text may be interpreted by a reader (within the same cultural system as the text was written) since content and message are not always cohesive. It also provides an opportunity for a researcher to analyze if these messages may be harmful and support existing stereotypes within the culture. For these reasons, a qualitative content analysis was an appropriate research design for research question one of this study.

Figure 2 displays this methodological approach (p. 23).

Data Collection

The data collected for study of research question one was conducted by obtaining a copy of all 60 issues (issue numbers 0-30; *Harley's Little Black Book* miniseries; *Harley Quinn and Power Girl* miniseries; *Harley Quinn's Gang of Harleys* miniseries; *Secret Origins 4* special; holiday specials; specials) of the *New 52 Harley Quinn* (volume 2) and all 85 issues (issue numbers 1-75; *Old Lady Harley* miniseries; holiday specials) of *Rebirth Harley Quinn* (volume 3). The cover dates of these issues are from January 2014 through October 2020. These issues have been collected into volumes, which was

how this study collected the issues. Although the *New 52* and *Rebirth Harley Quinn* volumes are treated as separate publishing lines, they take place in the same storyline and created universe, so this study treated them as one continuous piece of text.

Sampling Procedures

The population of data sources for research question one was 145 issues. Simple random sampling was chosen for selection of a study sample since the population being investigated was definitively known and complete (Pajo, 2018). An online random number generator through Google was used to select the issues to be included in the sample. The numbers assigned to each issue in the population were assigned in chronological order. For example, Issue #0 (*Harley Quinn*, volume 2) was assigned the number 1 while Issue #75 (*Harley Quinn*, volume 3) was assigned number 145.

The first round of sampling selected 29 issues for analysis, which was 20% of the total population. Although this was ultimately not needed, there was a plan for additional issues to be added to the initial sample set as needed through further random sampling of the remaining population. The sample would be considered sufficient if the coding categories appeared to be exhaustive, and all relevant aspects of gender messaging appeared to be represented (White & Marsh, 2006). Individual issues included in the analysis sample are listed in Appendix A.

Data Analysis

Data analysis for research question one used a directed approach to content analysis. In a directed approach, the goal “is to validate or extend conceptually a theoretical framework or theory” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1281). A feminism within

critical literacy framework served as the initial framework to establish initial coding categories. Each category was given an operational definition based on theory.

Method of Analysis

After identifying the issues to be used for the content analysis, the data was collected for storage. The researcher had a physical copy of every issue within the population, which were collected into volumes by the publisher. The next step was for the researcher to scan each page of every issue used in the analysis to be uploaded into an electronic storage space (i.e., Microsoft OneDrive was used). Within a folder labelled to house all of the data collection for research question one, there was a folder labelled for storage of the individual texts used. Each issue was assigned its own folder and assigned a number which corresponded with its spot in Appendix A. Each issue's folder housed an electronic scan of each page featured in that specific issue. As there were no formal page number assignments from the issue itself, page numbers were assigned by the researcher based on their place within the issue. To prevent confusion, individual image files were named by their issue number and then their assigned page number. For example, the final page of "Love stinks" from *Harley Quinn*, volume 2 had a file title of "3 PG 20" with 3 corresponding to the issue "Love Stinks" and "PG 20" indicating the specific page's place within that text.

After prepping for the analysis, the researcher printed a copy of every file in order to allow for manual coding on physical copies of the text. The researcher-assigned page numbers were noted to help with referencing and then individual panels on each page were numbered. The numbering followed the chronological order of the story presented as panels are not presented in a simple linear fashion. This was done to allow for the

researcher to reference a specific area of the text for analysis later. A panel number assignment included consideration of both the image and text within that panel as these two items work in tandem. All of these documents were organized into large binders with dividers separating individual issues. Again, the numbers assigned to individual issues as part of electronic storage were also used with the paper copies. For example, to locate the final page of “Love Stinks” from *Harley Quinn*, volume 2, the researcher would go to the divider labelled “3” within the first binder and then turn to the researcher-assigned page “20.”

After the data was collected, stored, and organized, the researcher was ready to start coding the texts. Saldaña acknowledges that since “qualitative inquiry demands meticulous attention to language and images, and deep reflection on the emergent patterns and meanings of human experience,” coding will rarely be correct the first time (p. 11). Therefore, coding is a cyclical process as each additional cycle of recoding “further manages, filters, highlights, and focuses the salient features of the qualitative data record for generating categories, themes, and concepts, grasping meaning, and/or building theory” (p. 9).

Saldaña (2016) proposes using a combination of basic coding methods as an initial first step to coding for researchers who are unsure of the exact coding methods appropriate for their study. He recommends the following coding methods to be part of the first cycle:

1. Attribute coding: use for data management by documenting basic descriptive information about participant information, contexts, and data collection for analysis.

2. Structural coding or Holistic coding: use for “grand tour” overview of data.
 - a. Structural coding: coding data as likely relevant to a research question.
 - b. Holistic coding: chunking data into a broad topic/category.
3. Descriptive coding: uses one word or a short phrase to describe the basic topic or idea of a piece of data.
4. In Vivo Coding, Process Coding, and/or Values coding: researcher uses to orient themselves to the perspective of participants.
 - a. In Vivo coding: uses terms from the data itself as a code.
 - b. Process coding: uses gerunds (“-ing” words) to describe action in data.
 - c. Values coding: used to reflect the values, attitudes, and/or beliefs of the data/participant.

For the second cycle of coding (also called recoding), Saldaña (2016) recommends a researcher use the following methods:

1. Eclectic coding: using two or more coding methods (that are compatible) at the same time to help with data analysis
2. Pattern coding and/or Focused coding: used to categorize the coded data.
 - a. Pattern coding: organizing and grouping the summarized segments of data from the first cycle into a smaller number of categories/themes/concepts.
 - b. Focused coding: reviews the most frequent or significant codes to “develop the most salient categories in the data corpus” (p. 240).

A preliminary analysis of a non-sample text within the population was used to establish procedures for the study and to propose an initial coding scheme. These coding categories are reviewed in the following section.

Coding Categories. This study sought to identify and categorize all instances of phenomenon related to gender present in Harley Quinn texts. Therefore, the coding strategy used identified all text that appeared as a gender-themed or gender-related phenomena. Once this material was identified and collected, it was organized into predeterminate categories. Examples of initial coding categories included “female as sex object”; “female as maternal”; “female as dependent”; “female as victim”; “female as unsatisfied”; “female as sexual”; and “female as love/romantic relationship obsessed.” Predeterminate coding categories and subcodes were created from the researcher’s own experience; topics/concepts explored in various feminism theory texts read as part of this study; and from a research article discussing a reevaluation of the Bem Sex-Role Inventory, which is an instrument used to “investigat[e] gender role orientation” as part of “research on psychological androgyny” (Hoffman & Borders, 2001, p. 39). This article provided a table of items on the inventory and noted if they were coded as “feminine”, “masculine”, or “neutral” (pp. 51-52). Any additional material that was identified and determined to not fit into one of the initial predeterminate categories was assigned a new code. All coding was human-directed and human-conducted.

Research Question #2

Research Design

Discourse analysis is a theory derived from critical literacy theory, which itself comes from dialogism. Dialogism views all language as unoriginal and informed by a

history of usage to which it responds and anticipates future responses. Any idea or voice perceived as new is simply the result from a combination of multiple previous voices. Dialogism falls within the larger theoretical category of Post-Structuralism, which emphasizes that language has multiple meanings, with the most important meaning being the one perceived by the reader/listener (Durham, 2019). In summary, discourse analysis considers the multiple meanings of language with Post-Structuralism, the history of how language has been used with dialogism, and the power of language to enfranchise or disenfranchise various groups with critical literacy (Durham, 2019). Each of these elements can be thought of as a puzzle piece in the formation of meaning and how meaning is used to shape understanding of listeners/readers.

Language-in-use analysis is a form of discourse analysis which takes an approach of understanding text as socially situated. Situated literacy gives the listener/reader the responsibility of assigning “specific situated meanings based on a construal of what constitutes the relevant parts of the context, as context exists in the world and as [meaning] is actively created, construed, and constructed in and through language and interaction” (Gee, 2014, p. 21). Gee (2014) further states, “language-in-use has the interesting property of both reflecting the situations in which we use language and [as] helping to create these same situations or what they mean or portend” (p. 22). Language use, then, is viewed as collaborative, multimodal, and within a social context.

Rationale. Research question two of this study explored the ways in which female adolescent readers described their experience(s) and understanding(s) of femininity through the character of Harley Quinn in comic books. Further, the ways in which these female adolescents identified (or not) with Quinn in the text; and the ways in

which these readers saw Quinn as challenging and/or supporting cultural stereotypes about femininity were studied. Thus, a language-in-use analysis was an appropriate approach to researching these questions since an investigation into the language used by participants (i.e., female adolescent readers) could shed light onto how these individuals actively create, understand, and make meaning through language and interaction. Since multiple meanings can be understood by a reader/listener, an analysis of the language used by participants allowed for the researcher to explore how each individual responded and interacted with a text. See Figure 3 for a visual display of this methodological approach (p. 23).

Population and Sampling

The population of study for research question two was female adolescent comic book readers based in the US who had an understanding of the context in which *Harley Quinn* texts were written. Gee (2011) defines context as

the physical setting in which the communication takes place and everything in it; the bodies, eye gaze, gestures, and movements of those present; what has previously been said and done by those involved in the communication; [and] any shared knowledge those involved have, including cultural knowledge (p. 6).

The purpose of this research was to conduct a critical language-in-use analysis with members of this population rather than investigate the population as a whole. Thus, a sample of five female adolescents part of this population was used for the study. This sample size of individuals allowed for diversity of opinions and experiences as well as practicality to allow for more detailed analyses by the researcher.

Sampling Procedures

A mix of convenience and snowball sampling was used to recruit volunteers for the study. Selection of individuals for study participation was originally based on five criteria: identifies as the female gender; is within the age range of 13 to 17 years; is an English speaker; is a reader of *Harley Quinn* comics; and possess knowledge of the context in which *Harley Quinn* comics are written. The recruitment criteria were later revised to welcome female teen adolescent readers who were fans of Harley Quinn and would be interested in reading her comics (i.e., no longer required to have been an existing reader of her comics). Recruitment was conducted through personal and professional networking of the researcher; the use of social media posts as an open call for interested individuals to sign up; and through personal networking of recruited individuals. All interested individuals were given the same recruitment flyer, which included a QR code that linked to a Qualtrics survey. This survey asked for the name and age of the interested individual; and the names and contact information of their parent(s)/guardian(s).

Introductory Meeting. When contact was confirmed and established with the parent/guardian of interested participants, an introductory meeting with the researcher, the parent/guardian, and the participant was scheduled. All introductory meetings were conducted via Zoom and were not recorded.

During the introductory meeting, the researcher reviewed the parental consent and participant assent forms with the parent/guardian and participant. The researcher also answered any questions or concerns presented by either party. Due to most participants and their parent/guardian using Zoom via a mobile application, the researcher was not able to use the screen-share feature to have them complete the consent forms during the

meeting itself. Instead, the researcher sent the parent/guardian electronic copies of the consent and assent forms and an additional digital consent form via Google Forms.

Parent/guardian was asked to complete the Google Form as a back-up digital consent and assent form in addition to completing the electronic copies sent. Three of the four participants and their parent/guardian completed the electronic copies of the consent and assent forms as well as the Google Form. One participant and parent/guardian completed only the Google Form. The final participant completed only the traditional consent and assent forms. Completed copies of all items were then sent back to the participant and their parent/guardian for their records.

Ethics and Human Subject Participation

Protection of the participants was of the highest priority, especially as all participants in this study were minors. All names were changed, and any personally identifiable information that came up during interviews or response groups were omitted from the record to protect the individual's identity. The researcher made it clear to both parents/guardians and the participants how responses were to be used. In addition, both parents/guardians and the participants were provided with detailed information about the intent, purpose, and expectations of the project to ensure full disclosure prior to research being conducted with participants. The researcher reviewed this information again at the start of each research session (i.e., interview or response group) to ensure clarity and to answer any questions that arose. Informed consent was obtained prior to any recorded participant/researcher interaction.

After data collection and analysis, the researcher consulted with each participant individually to review interpretations of the data. This allowed participants to express

agreement or disagreement with the researcher's interpretations and to clarify any misunderstandings or misconceptions related to the data. It was important to the research and researcher to ensure participants felt and understood their voice as important and heard throughout the entire research process.

Data Collection

The data collected to investigate research question two included recordings and transcripts of individual interviews and of the small readers response group meeting. As noted above, an introductory meeting was conducted before interviews and the readers response to allow for the researcher and participants to get to know each other; and to allow for participants (and parents/guardians) to learn more about the study before agreeing to participation. Further information regarding data collection is provided in the sections that follow.

Individual Interviews. Once a participant received their assigned comic book and had the opportunity to read it, the researcher scheduled a remote interview session with the participant on a date and time of their choice. Participants were each sent a private link to the meeting session ahead of the scheduled time. All meeting links were unique to each participant, required a passcode for admittance, and used a "waiting room" feature on the meeting software, which allowed for the researcher to manually allow individual users into the session.

Individual interviews were conducted via Zoom; and the researcher recorded the interview both via Zoom and a backup audio recorder (object separate from the computer). Zoom meetings were conducted in the privacy of the homes of both the researcher and participant. The interview process was semi-structured, with the

researcher using questions from Appendix C as a guide in addition to asking follow-up questions to participant responses. Although an hour was reserved for each interview, all individual interviews were approximately 20 – 40 minutes in length. Recordings and transcripts of interviews were saved to the researcher's private electronic database. Transcripts were edited to change names to pseudonyms and revise any personally identifying information said by the participant (e.g., assign a fictitious name to a named friend or a generic description of a place of work).

Small Readers Response Group. Once all individual interviews were completed, the readers response small group meeting was scheduled. All five participants agreed upon a date and time to participate via Zoom. However, one participant (Bonnie) contacted the researcher later (prior to the meeting) to indicate she was unable to participate in the group meeting due to personal reasons. She provided responses to interview questions via email by her request. Thus, it was only four teens who participated in the readers response meeting.

Participants were sent the private link to the meeting session ahead of the scheduled time. This meeting link was unique, required a passcode for admittance, and used a "waiting room" feature on the meeting software, which allowed for the researcher to manually allow individual users into the session. The researcher recorded the interview both via Zoom and a backup audio recorder (object separate from the computer). The Zoom meeting was conducted in the privacy of the homes of the researcher and participants. The interview process was semi-structured, with the researcher using questions from Appendix B as a guide in addition to asking follow-up questions to participant responses. Although an hour was reserved for the interview, the group

meeting was approximately 40 minutes in length. Recordings and the transcript of the meeting were saved to the researcher's private electronic database. The transcript was edited to change names to pseudonyms and revise any personally identifying information said by participants (e.g., assign a fictitious name to a named friend).

Data Analysis

Analysis of the data collected for research question two followed Gee's (2011) model of 27 tools of discourse (language-in-use) analysis. A discourse analysis tool is "a specific question to ask of data" and it has a researcher "look...closely at the details of language in oral...communication" and "tie these details to what speakers...mean, intend, and seek to do and accomplish in the world by the way in which they have used language" (Gee, 2011, p. x). The following summary of the 27 tools of discourse analysis is taken from Gee (2011, pp. 195-201):

1. *Deixis tool*: Looking at how deictics (e.g., pronouns, articles) are used to make assumptions about what listeners already know/can infer.
2. *Fill-in tool*: What information is not being said aloud but is assumed to be known in order to clearly understand the communication in the way the speaker intended?
3. *Making strange tool*: What communication would be seen as unclear ("strange") if the listener did not share the knowledge and assumptions of the speaker?
4. *Subject tool*: Looking at what/why a speaker chooses a specific subject in their communication and what they are saying about that subject.

5. *Intonation tool*: How does a speaker's intonation (i.e., the rise and fall of their voice) contribute to meaning of an utterance?
6. *Frame problem tool*: If the context in which the data occurred broadened its definition of what is relevant to the meaning of the data, does the discourse analysis change?
7. *Doing-and-not-just-saying tool*: What is a speaker trying to do in addition to what they are saying?
8. *Vocabulary tool*: What word types are being used in communication, and how does the distribution of these word types mark the communication style (e.g., social language, register)? How does this contribute to the purpose of the communication?
9. *Why-this-way-and-not-that-way tool*: Why did the speaker design their communication in the way they did and not in another way? How else could it have been said, and how did the choice made contribute to meaning?
10. *Integration tool*: What perspectives are being taken by how communicated information is organized into main, subordinate, and embedded clauses; or phrases; or optional arguments?
11. *Topics and themes tool*: What is the theme of specific clauses or a cluster of clauses? Why is this the theme? If the theme is not the subject/topic (and has deviated from the usual choice), what is the theme and why was it chosen?

12. *Stanza tool*: Looking for stanzas (group of idea units) and how stanzas can be clustered together into a larger block of information.
13. *Context-is-reflexive tool*: Speech reflects context and context shapes what is said. This can be investigated by asking the following:
 - a. How is what the speaker is saying (and how they are saying it) helping to create or shape what a listener takes as relevant context?
 - b. How is what the speaker is saying (and how they are saying it) helping context to continue to exist through time and space?
 - c. If the speaker consciously thought about the context they are reproducing through their speech, would they still want to reproduce it?
 - d. Is what the speaker is saying (and how they are saying it) repeating existing contexts or are they transforming or challenging them?
14. *Significance building tool*: How are words and grammar being used to increase or decrease importance/relevance of certain things and not others?
15. *Activities building tool*: What practice is this communication building or enacting; and what is asking others to recognize as being accomplished? Is the building by the communication setting norms for activities supported by particular social groups, institutions or cultures?

16. *Identities building tool*: What socially recognizable identity(ies) is the speaker trying to enact or get others to recognize? How is the speaker's language treating the identity of others; and what identities are being recognized by the speaker in relationship to their own?
17. *Relationships building tool*: How is the communication being used to build, sustain, or change relationships among the speaker, other people, cultures, social groups, and/or institutions?
18. *Politics building tool*: How is the communication being used to construct what counts as social goods; and how to distribute (or withhold) these social goods with listeners or within society?
19. *Connections building tool*: How do the words and grammar used in a communication connect (make relevant), or disconnect (make irrelevant), or ignore connections (relevance) between things?
20. *Cohesion tool*: How is cohesion (i.e., grammar used to signal to a reader/listener that pieces of information go together) being used to connect (or failing to connect) pieces of information together?
21. *Sign systems and knowledge building tool*: How are words/grammar being used to privilege (or de-privilege) specific sign systems (e.g., words vs. images; technical vs. everyday language) or different ways of knowing/believing?
22. *Topic-flow or topic-chaining tool*: How are topics being linked together (or not) to create an overall topic about something in a stretch of

speech/writing? What perspective is being created and how is seeking to control the attention of a listener/reader?

23. *Situated meaning tool*: What specific meanings to listeners/readers attribute to the words/phrases used, given the context and how the context is construed?
24. *Social languages tool*: How are words and grammar being used to signal and enact a given social language (or multiple social languages)?
25. *Intertextuality tool*: How are words and grammar being used to refer to, quote, or allude to other “texts” (what has been said/written by others); or to other styles of language (social languages)? Is there a mixing or switching between styles of language (social languages)?
26. *Figured worlds tool*: What typical stories or figured worlds (i.e., a simplified portrait of normalcy or what is typical) the words/phrases being communicated are assuming or inviting the listener to assume? What participants, activities, ways of interacting, forms of language, people, objects, environments, institutions, and values are part of these figured worlds?
27. *Big “D” Discourse tool*: How is the speaker using language (in addition to ways of acting, interacting, believing, valuing, dressing, and using various objects, tools, and technologies in certain environments) to enact a specific socially recognizable identity and engage in one or more socially recognizable activities? What sorts of actions, interactions, values, beliefs,

and objects, tools, technologies, and environments are associated with this language within a particular Discourse?

It is important to note Gee (2011) acknowledges not all 27 questions presented by his tools may be answered by a data set in order to be considered trustworthy. However, analyses of data sets can be more or less trustworthy than others based on their approach. Trustworthiness will be reviewed in detail in a later section of this chapter.

Coding Methods

This study sought to identify and categorize all instances of phenomenon related to gender present in the discourse of the female adolescent readers during the readers response group meeting and individual interviews. This approach followed similar procedures set forth for in the content analysis of this study but introduced language-in-use analysis as well. Using the tools set forth by Gee (2011), a deductive approach to coding was used to identify gender-themed or gender-related phenomena within the transcripts collected during the interviews and group meeting. It is important to note that while all the tools noted above could be studied throughout the analyses, several were of particular focus as they had been identified as the most connected to responding to the second research question. These tools included the identities-building tool; relationships-building tool; politics building tool; figured worlds tool; and the Big “D” Discourse tool. To demonstrate an example, utilizing the identities-building tool allowed the researcher to look at how language was being used by a speaker (e.g., female adolescent comics reader) to recognize a socially recognizable identity (e.g., female in American culture), and how that is recognized their own relationship to that said identity (e.g., is the female adolescent enacting or rejecting this identity?). Once this material had been identified and

collected, it was organized into predetermined categories. Any additional material that was identified and determined to not fit into one of the initial predetermined categories was assigned a new code. Coding was human-directed and human-conducted.

Limitations

Limitations to this study are reviewed next. First, for the content analysis of *Harley Quinn* texts, only a sample of the 145 published issues of *Harley Quinn* volumes 2 and 3 were analyzed. As with use of any sample, there is the possibility of additional findings being present within a population that are missed due to its limited scope. In addition, as noted by Hsieh and Shannon (2005), using theory as a guide in content analysis can lead to bias. Strategies for addressing and limiting bias are addressed in the following section. Directed approaches to content analysis can cause the findings to be more supportive of the guiding theory than not since the researcher is using theory as their framework and approach to analysis. In a similar vein, the coding process within a content analysis is subjective. As Saldaña (2016) states, “[researchers] each most likely perceive the social world differently,” which will inevitably lead to different experiences, interpretations, coding choices, and interpretations (p. 41). However, he further argues coding is only one way (rather than the one only way) to approach qualitative data analysis, and it is simply meant to be a method of discovery that allows for a researcher to “[think] about the data [they] have been given and have collected” (p. 42).

A limitation of a language-in-use (discourse) analysis is any analysis is open to “further discussion and dispute, and their status can go up or down with time as work goes on in the field” (Gee, 2011, p. 185). However, an analysis with higher level of trustworthiness does make an analysis one to be considered seriously in future research.

Another limitation to consider for this study is lack of generalizability of results. This study focused on the individual experiences of study participants, so its results cannot be extrapolated to a larger population.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, the research is the instrument of data collection. Unlike quantitative research, qualitative researchers “do not use instruments with established metrics about validity and reliability” (“What is trustworthiness in qualitative research?”, 2019). Because of this, establishing the trustworthiness of a qualitative research study and its findings can be more difficult as the researcher must establish the quality and authenticity of their findings. However, qualitative researchers have an ability to present their findings as “plausible, credible, trustworthy, and therefore defensible” to readers when they review the issues of credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability in their study (Johnson & Christensen, 2017, p. 298). All of this information together is used to establish the overall trustworthiness of the research study and its findings.

Credibility. Miles et al. (2020) argued credibility is about finding the trust value of a study through the asking of questions, such as “do the findings of the study make sense?” and “do we have an authentic portrait of what we were looking at?” (p. 306). It’s about “how confident the qualitative researcher is in the truth of the research study’s findings” (“What is trustworthiness in qualitative research?”, 2019). Credibility in qualitative research is similar to the concept of internal validity in quantitative research (O’Dwyer & Bernauer, 2014, pp. 135-136). Both ultimately seek “to produce findings that can be understood and defended as reasonable” (p. 143). How this is achieved

qualitatively versus quantitatively is what differs. Qualitative research relies on the use of techniques to achieve this while quantitative research looks at variables, randomization, and control assignments (O'Dwyer & Bernauer, 2014, p. 143; Johnson & Christensen, 2017, p. 299).

Ways to Promote Credibility of a Study. A variety of techniques for use in promoting credibility of research are available for qualitative researchers. Examples of strategies researchers can use for this purpose include triangulation, peer review, and participant feedback/member checking (Johnson & Christensen, 2017, p. 299).

Triangulation is seeking the convergence of the same conclusion through the use of “multiple investigators, methods, data sources, and/or theoretical perspectives” (p. 298-299). Peer review is when the researcher discusses their actions, interpretations, and conclusions of a study with a group of peers (both those involved and not directly involved in the research) (p. 299). Participant feedback/member checking is when the researcher has a conversation with participants and members of the participant community about their interpretations and conclusions “for verification, insight, and deeper understanding” (p. 299). Multiple strategies can be used in a study to help promote credibility.

Researchers seeking to promote credibility of their research should also consider the use of linking the research data to categories of prior or emerging theories, ensuring the findings are “clear, coherent, and systematically related,” and the use of “context-rich, meaningful, and ‘thick’” descriptions (Miles et al., 2020, p. 306). Thick descriptions, or rich data, provide readers with an in-depth picture of who and what is being studied (e.g.,

social interactions, setting, cultural context) (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 253; Pajo, 2018, pp. 245-246).

Promoting Credibility in this Study. This research study used three approaches to promote credibility, including triangulation, participant feedback/member checking, and thick descriptions. Triangulation was approached with data collection from three different sources: content analysis of text, participant (individual) interviews with the researcher, and recording of the discourse between participants in small readers response group session. Member checking was used to verify if conclusions and interpretations drawn by the researcher were accurate reflections of what participants were trying to communicate. Thick descriptions were used to provide context and further understanding for all data collection and analyses.

Addressing Threats to Credibility. Researchers also need to address the threat to credibility in the form of researcher bias. This is addressed when researchers bracket out (also called epoche), which is when researchers “set aside their experiences, as much as possible, to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under examination” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 78). This process can be taxing as it can be difficult to suspend or remove all assumptions a researcher may bring to a topic but bracketing out their experiences with the topic will help readers understand the researcher’s experiences with the topic before describing the experiences of others (p. 78, 81). Bracketing was used in this study to help address potential bias.

Dependability. When qualitative researchers are considering the dependability of their study, they may be asking questions about the consistency of the study’s process and the (reasonable) stability over time and across researchers and methods – that is

issues of “quality and integrity” with the study (Miles et al, 2020, p. 305). Quantitative research uses measurement and instruments for this purpose (sometimes referred to as reliability). Qualitative research, on the other hand, has the researcher herself as the primary instrument used for the study. Thus, data collection and analysis are important parts of establishing dependability with qualitative studies. Dependability is about other researchers being able to “have enough information from your research” in order to replicate the study and to “obtain similar findings as your study” (“What is trustworthiness in qualitative research?”, 2019).

Ways to Promote Dependability of a Study. With data collection, researchers can promote dependability by ensuring data “were collected across a full range of appropriate settings, times, respondents, and so on, as suggested by the research question” (Miles et al., 2020, p. 306). Creswell and Poth (2018) recommend researchers obtain detailed field notes, use quality recording devices (to later transcribe), and computer programs to help with recording and data analysis (p. 264).

Researchers organize their data findings for analysis through coding. Coding is the process in which researchers assign labels of symbolic meaning to data chunks (of varying size) to descriptive or inferential information collected during the study (Miles et al., 2020, p. 62). Because data collection in qualitative studies can involve multiple sources (e.g., interviews, questionnaires, surveys, photographs, statistical records), coding is important to help “condense and order” data to allow for analysis (p. 64). Because coding goes through cycles in which data is reduced (i.e., layers of reduction), the process ultimately ends up being selective and subjective, which can impact dependability if precautions are not taken.

Promoting Dependability in this Study. This study utilized multiple techniques described in the section above to promote dependability. How, where, when, and with whom data was collected was recorded in detail. All interviews and readers response group meeting were audio recorded on two devices (i.e., in case one device malfunctions) to help with transcription of dialogue later. Detailed field notes and analytic memos were collected throughout analyses of content and data. The analytic memos also provided information about cycles of coding and thinking of the researcher within each cycle. An audit trail was used to “transparently describe[e] the research steps taken from the start of [this] research project to the development and reporting of the findings” (Korstjens & Moser, 2018, p. 121) Computer software programs, such as Microsoft’s Office programs and OneDrive, were used for storage of all records, including recordings, transcripts, memos, the audit trail, artifacts, and data.

Addressing Threats to Dependability. Similar to techniques described with promoting credibility of a study, increasing dependability also involves addressing quality checks with the data for potential bias, using multiple accounts to see if the findings converge, and ensuring data saturation (Miles et al, 2020, p. 306). Researchers should also ensure the research question is clear and the features of the study design are in alignment with the question (p. 305). The researcher’s “role and status within the site” should also be “explicitly described” for readers, and the findings of the study should “show meaningful parallelism across data sources (participants, contexts, times)” (p. 305). Miles et al. (2020) also recommends promoting dependability of a study by clearly specifying “basic paradigms and analytic constructs” as dependability (reliability) “depends, in part, on its connectedness to theory” (p. 305). Each of these methods will be

used to address potential threats to this study's dependability throughout the research process.

Transferability. In quantitative research, the terms generalizability or external validity are similar to qualitative research's transferability. In essence, it is the idea that a study's findings are "transferable to other contexts" and "how far can [the findings] be generalized" (Miles et al., 2020, p. 307). Because qualitative research tends to be interested in documenting specifics rather than universals, "the goal [of qualitative research] is to describe richly a certain group of people or a certain event in a specific context rather than to generate findings that are broadly applicable" (Johnson & Christensen, 2017, p. 305). Because of this, "generalizability has *not* been a purpose of qualitative research, and [thus]...external validity [transferability] tends to be a weakness of qualitative research" (p. 304). However, it is reasonable to look at transferability when a study's findings are applied "to other people, settings, times, and treatments to the degree to which they are similar to the people, settings, times, and treatments in the original study" (p. 305).

Ways to Promote Transferability of a Study. In order for a reader of a study to know when the findings can be generalized, the qualitative researcher needs to include the following in the methodology section of their report: "the number and kinds of people in the study, how they were selected to be in the study, contextual information, the nature of the researcher's relationship with the participants, information about any 'informants' who provided information, the methods of data collection used, and the data analysis techniques used" (Johnson & Christensen, 2017, p. 305). Thus, rich (thick) data

descriptions, sampling procedures, and data collection are important elements of the study to detail in the write-up.

Sampling procedures in qualitative research are often purposive rather than random (like in quantitative research), which means researchers develop inclusion criteria for determining research participants (Johnson & Christensen, 2017, p. 273; Miles et al., 2020, p. 27). As O’Dwyer and Bernauer (2014) acknowledged “the capacity for generalization is closely related to how the population is defined, who is in the sample, and how the sample is selected,” which means qualitative researchers will need to include all of these components to promote transferability of their study (pp. 87-88).

Promoting Transferability in this Study. This chapter of the study has included detailed information about the participants selected and used in this study (while also maintaining their confidentiality due to their age) since purposive sampling was used to address the second research question. Random sampling was used in selection of the texts for the content analysis with the first research question, and this population and sample was also described in detail within this chapter. In addition, the exact texts selected to be part of the sample used for analysis are listed in Appendix A for reference. Rich, thick descriptions were also used to detail the various aspects of data, data collection, and data analyses.

Addressing Threats to Transferability. Miles et al. (2020) recommended qualitative researchers not only provide rich data (thick) descriptions of the original samples (including but not limited to: limits on sample selection and diversity within the sample) but to also detail the processes and outcomes of the study in comparable settings. Study findings and their connections with existing or new theories should also be clearly

discussed. The researchers should include recommendations for further research with their findings as well as information about any replications of the current study. Each of these recommendations will be addressed to promote transferability.

Confirmability. The confirmability of a study is “the degree to which the findings of the research study could be confirmed by other researchers” and that these findings are “clearly derived from the data” (Korstjens & Moser, 2017, p. 121). It seeks neutrality in the findings, and that interpretation of the data is not based on the researcher’s beliefs, preferences, and/or viewpoints.

Promoting Confirmability in this Study. Confirmability, like dependability, is promoted in a study through the use of audit trails. An audit trail is “a complete set of notes on decisions made during the research process,” including those regarding sampling, materials used, data management, reflections, and “emergence of the findings” (Korstjens & Moser, 2017, p. 122). This transparency in the research process allows for other researchers to clearly see the research process and path to the findings and conclusions presented. This study included an audit trail (specifics noted in the dependability section of this chapter), which were stored electronically via a cloud (i.e., Microsoft OneDrive software).

Conclusion. Trustworthiness is used by researchers to establish “acceptability and usefulness of their research for a variety of stakeholders,” and it is demonstrated by the “criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability” (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017, p. 3). These criteria were established by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as a “parallel” to the quantitative concepts of validity and reliability (Nowell et al, 2017, p. 3). When researchers ensure each of these criteria are addressed and discussed in

detail in the write-up of their study, they promote the trustworthiness of their study. This section reviewed ways in which this qualitative researcher sought to achieve this.

Conclusion

This chapter reviewed the methodology used in this study to investigate the two research questions presented in chapter one. The first research question was explored through a qualitative content analysis of a sample of issues published as part of the *New 52* and *Rebirth Harley Quinn* lines. Research question two was studied through language-in-use analyses of transcripts collected from individual interviews and a readers response group meeting with study participants. Chapter four will now present the data analyses conducted with this research.

CHAPTER IV

Data Findings

This research study has discussed the need for critical gender content analyses of comic book texts. This was introduced in chapter one and addressed a specific focus on the need to investigate messages about gender being interpreted and understood by female adolescent readers. This study proposed exploring this topic through the character of Harley Quinn from DC Comics. Chapter one then reviewed the three theories that comprise the theoretical framework for this study, including critical literacy, feminism, and transactional theories. This study started from a critical literacy standpoint and focused on analysis of power structures associated with gender from a Western (specifically, American) cultural view. Using a feminist lens, this study investigated text for gendered messages then investigated the responses of adolescent readers in their understanding and meaning making of the character Harley Quinn and how she performs gender in comic texts. The goal of this study has been to critically analyze how Quinn performs the female gender in her appearances in comic texts and how this is potentially communicating messages about what it means to be “female” to readers and fans. By exploring how a group of adolescent readers are interpreting and understanding the concept of femininity in these texts, this study is also seeking to understand what exchanges of information about gender in the greater culture are happening. As noted in chapter one, comics have a reputation for reflecting antiquated ideas about gender, especially with women; and it is only through critical reflection and exploration of these texts that we can create more inclusive narratives.

Chapter two provided the essentials to understanding the history of the superheroine character in comic books, the history of the Batman universe within DC Comics, and the basic of Harley Quinn the character. The second part of chapter two reviewed the existing scholarly literature related to the present study, including studies of comics in education, critical gender theory and comics, unpublished graduate research, and readers response with gender depiction in comics. The results of this review indicated formal academic research on the use of comics in both educational setting and critical inquiries is limited as most existing content were think pieces and/or personal anecdotes from educators who chose to experiment with such texts. In addition, most of these pieces focused more on graphic novels rather than comic books. Additionally, no research included readers response (transactional theory) with female adolescent readers. The literature review also revealed limited research on DC Comics and IP, including Harley Quinn. Wallner and Barajas (2020), in a review of existing research on the use of comics in K-9 education, proposed future research focus on identifying what information and what types of knowledge students can gain through reading comics. The present study aligns with this proposal as it seeks to investigate what information and knowledge about gender and gender relations are being acquired by female adolescent readers in their reading of *Harley Quinn* comics.

Chapter three reviewed the methodology used in this study to investigate the two research questions introduced in chapter one. The first research question explored Harley Quinn's performance of gender within her comics through a qualitative content analysis of a sample of issues published as part of the *New 52* and *Rebirth Harley Quinn* publication eras. Research question two investigated how female adolescent readers

understood and experienced femininity through the character as seen in her comics by using language-in-use analyses of transcripts collected from individual interviews and one readers response group meeting with participants. Chapter four will now review the data collected for this study and will conclude with a composite analysis of all the data.

Research Question 1

Research question one of this study sought to investigate Harley Quinn's portrayal of femininity within her own comic texts. The sub-questions asked for a description of the attitudes and beliefs about femininity portrayed in these texts and how these portrayals of femininity have changed over time. This research question was specifically presented as follows:

1. Through a content analysis, in what ways does the character Harley Quinn perform gender in her comics?
 - a. What attitudes and beliefs about femininity are depicted through Quinn?
 - b. In what ways has Quinn's depiction of femininity in her comics changed over time?

A qualitative content analysis was determined to be an appropriate approach to answering these questions since a close reading of *Harley Quinn* comics can provide an interpretation of cultural values and possible stereotypes within the text. Content analysis also allowed for the researcher to consider how a text may be interpreted by a reader (within the same cultural system as the text was written) since content and message are not always cohesive.

Sample Issues Analyzed

The population of data sources for research question one was 145 issues. Simple random sampling was chosen for selection of a study sample since the population being investigated is definitively known and complete (Pajo, 2018). An online random number generator through Google was used to select the issues to be included in the sample. The numbers assigned to each issue in the population were assigned in chronological order. For example, Issue #0 (*Harley Quinn*, volume 2) was assigned the number 1 while Issue #75 (*Harley Quinn*, volume 3) was assigned number 145.

The sample selected included 29 issues for analysis, which was 20% of the total population. The sample was considered sufficient as the coding categories appeared to be exhaustive, and all relevant aspects of gender messaging appeared to be represented (White & Marsh, 2006). Individual issues included in the analysis sample are listed in Appendix A. In total, the analyzed sample included 664 comic book pages and 3,530 panels. Table 1 presents the distribution of the samples across the issues.

Table 1

Distribution of Samples Across the Issues for RQ1

Publishing Era	Publication Year	n	Percentage
New 52	2014	5	17
New 52	2015	0	0
New 52/Rebirth	2016	8	28
Rebirth	2017	6	21
Rebirth	2018	5	17

(continued)

Publishing Era	Publication Year	n	Percentage
Rebirth	2019	3	10
Rebirth	2020	2	7

Coding Categories

The inductive content analysis of the sample yielded 1,287 notations total, which were organized into 3 coding categories, which were Emotion, Behavior, and Social Positionality. In this study, notations were defined as significant incidents or clusters of meaning; and they could be comprised of text only, image only, or a combination of text and image. The percentage of occurrence for each of these larger coding categories is presented visually in Figure 4.

There were 15 subcodes assigned into these themes. Behavior, which was subdivided into categories Self-Performed Behavior (A) and Behavior Directed at Quinn (B) but is presented in its entirety here, contained 7 subcodes, including: Female as Shallow/Consumerist (A); Female as Defiant/Challenging (A); Female as Domestic (A); Female as Manipulative (A); Female as Sex Object (B); Female as Dependent (B); and Female as Equal/Respected (B). The full coding category of Behavior represented 56% of the sample's data. Social Positionality represented 27% of the data and included 5 subcodes: Female as Maternal; Female as Victim; Theme of Friendship; Female as Underestimated; and Female Acknowledgement of Gender Norms. Emotion contained the subcodes of Female as Sexual; Female as Love/Romantic Relationship Obsessed; and Female as Unsatisfied. It represented 17% of the data collected of the total sample. Each of these categories and subcodes are explored and described further in the sections that

follow. An additional code, Female as Overemotional/Crazy (Mentally Unstable), was eliminated from the study due to subjectivity.

Figure 5 displays the frequency each subcode occurred in the sample. Female as Sex Object was the most frequently occurring code with 301 notations, and Female as Dependent was the second most occurring with 166 notes. In addition to these two subcodes, the subcodes Female as Maternal, Female as Sexual, and Female as Love/Romantic Relationship Obsessed occurred at a frequency of 100 or higher. The least frequently occurring code was Female as Manipulative, which only had 9 notations.

Figure 4

Coding Occurrences by Percentage in Sample for RQ1

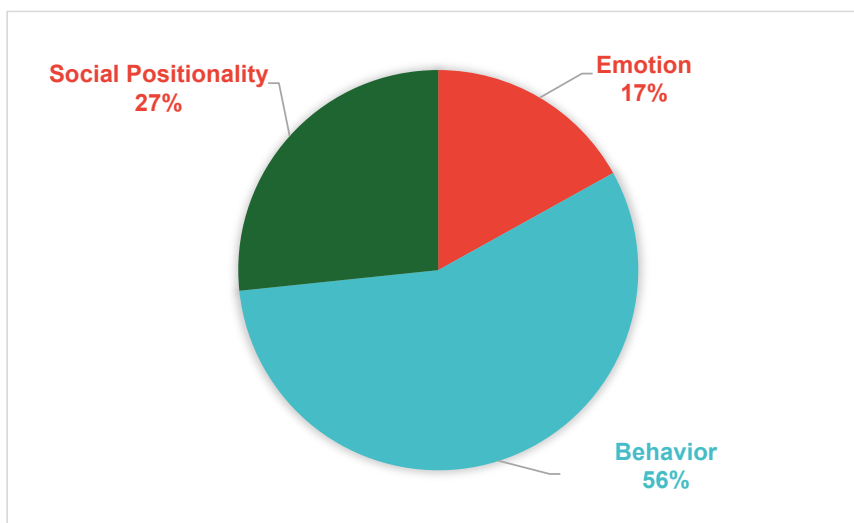
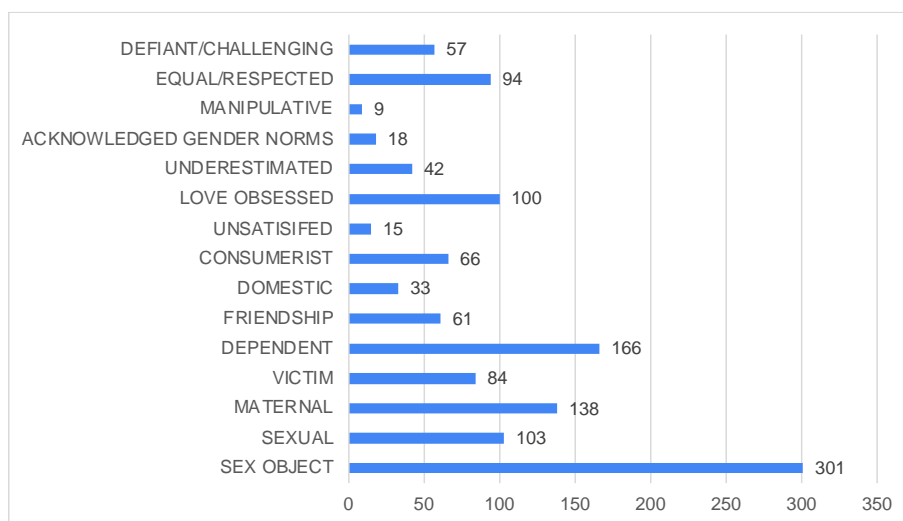


Figure 5

Frequency of Subcodes in Sample for RQ1



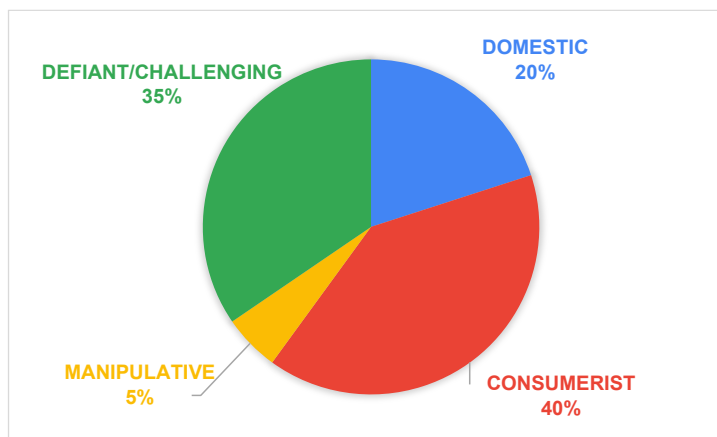
Behavior. The first coding category was Behavior, or the manifestation of externalized behaviors expected of, performed by, or performed towards Harley Quinn in accordance with her gender as assigned by society. This coding category was subdivided into two classifications: Self-Performed Behavior (A), which constitutes behaviors exhibited by Quinn herself; and Behavior Directed at Quinn (B), which represents behaviors exhibited towards Quinn. The Behavior category will be discussed by these two classifications.

Self-Performed Behavior (A). As noted above, Self-Performed Behavior (A) represented the subcodes for behaviors performed by Quinn herself. Self-Performed Behavior (A) was made up of four subcodes: Female as Shallow/Consumerist; Female as Defiant/Challenging; Female as Domestic; and Female as Manipulative. Self-Performed Behavior (A) as a category totaled 165 notations. Female as Shallow/Consumerist was the most frequently occurring subcode and represented 40% of the data within this category. Female as Defiant/Challenging was the next most occurring category with 35%

of the data. Female as Domestic represented 20% of the data, and Female as Manipulative finished the category with 4% of the data recorded. These numbers are presented visually in Figure 6.

Figure 6

Frequency of Subcodes in Self-Performed Behavior (A) for RQ1



Female as Shallow/Consumerist. The most frequently occurring subcode within Self-Performed Behavior (A) was Female as Shallow/Consumerist (40%). This subcode included occurrences within the text in which Quinn overconsumed (e.g., food, products, etc.); themes of obsession with beauty and/or body image were present; Quinn being materialistic; acknowledgement and/or adherence to [American] cultural beauty standards; and a concern with popularity. Many examples of this subcode appeared in the form of beauty makeovers; Quinn overconsuming food, in particular junk food; and outfit changes. For example, Quinn (in multiple scenarios) tells other characters that she must change into a particular outfit in order to perform a behavior or services, such as when she changes into a sexy Ghostbusters-themed costume to fit supernatural forces with Zatanna (Conner & Palmiotti, 2017c; sample issue 9, page 27, panel 1, or 9-27-1) or when she says she cannot help her male tenants board up the building in preparation for a

hurricane due to not having the right clothes (Figure 7; note: she is also wearing her regular costume in this scene which she wears during physical altercations with enemies). Quinn's concerns for popularity ranged from talking about her celebrity status with other characters (note: this usually occurred with Quinn was breaking the fourth wall and acknowledging her status in the real world); or her concern with having a high number of followers on social media. Examples of materialism seen in the text included when Quinn was influenced by others through material goods (e.g., Joker promises her a new fur coat after getting in a fight with her; Dini, 2018; 18-10-6); commenting on the importance of her clothes (e.g., she tells an enemy to let go of her boots because they are new (Humphries, 2021a; 24-4-4); and Quinn getting bored with an all-expenses paid vacation in a Las Vegas hotel and asking for more (Conner et al., 2017; 17-3).

Figure 7

Example of Female as Shallow/Consumerist Subcode



Note. From "The Mourning After," by Amanda Conner and Jimmy Palmiotti. Illustrated By Bret Blevins, in J. Woodard and R. Wildman (Eds), *Harley Quinn, Volume 5: Vote*

Harley (vol. 5, issue 6, panel 40), 2017, Copyright 2018 by DC Comics.

Female as Domestic. The next subcode within Self-Performed Behavior (A) was Female as Domestic, which was recorded for occurrences in the text in which Harley Quinn demonstrated behaviors stereotypically associated with homemakers. This subcode included themes of cooking, cleaning, hosting guests, managing a property/household, and other tasks associated with care of a property/household. Examples of this in the text included Quinn being concerned about the messiness of her home when her parents are on their way for a visit (Figure 8); Quinn's new role as a building landlord (Conner & Palmiotti, 2014a; 1-2 and 1-3); a kidnapped Quinn waking up in a strange bed and immediately commenting on how great the sheets are then later being upset when they are stained (Conner & Palmiotti, 2017h; 14-20); and Quinn's stress with domestic responsibilities being contrasted in conversation to Ivy's worries with activism and research (Conner & Palmiotti, 2017b; 8-2).

Figure 8

Example of Female as Domestic Subcode



Note. From “Right Back at Ya!,” by Amanda Conner and Jimmy Palmiotti. Illustrated by Joseph Michael Linsner, in J. Woodard and R. Wildman (Eds), *Harley Quinn, Volume 3: Red Meat* (vol. 3, issue 8, panel 50), 2017, Copyright 2017 by DC Comics.

Female as Defiant/Challenging. The third subcode within the Self-Performed Behavior (A) category was Female as Defiant/Challenging, which was used for moments when Quinn demonstrated bold disobedience or open resistance. A prime example of this subcode was seen multiple times within issue 6 of the sample when Quinn refused to be silenced or intimidated by the mayor and his staff when she confronted him about his shady criminal behaviors. Additional examples included when Quinn vowed to get revenge on the people who murdered her favorite mailman (Conner & Palmiotti, 2017g; 13-5-7); when Quinn confronts and scolds a male tourist for verbally sexually harassing and objectifying her (Conner & Palmiotti, 2017a; 7-10 and 7-11); when Quinn physically attacks Swamp Thing after she believes he hurt Ivy (Figure 9); and when Quinn

physically challenges the lords of chaos and order (of the universe) because she blames them for the death of her mother (Humphries, 2020; 23-4 and 23-5).

Figure 9

Example of Female as Defiant/Challenging Subcode



Note. From “Somewhere That’s Green!,” [part of “Harley Quinn 25th Anniversary Special #1”] by Daniel Kibblesmith. Illustrated by David Lafuente, in J. Woodard and R. Wildman (Eds), *Harley Quinn, Volume 4: Surprise, Surprise* (vol. 4, issue 7, panels 29-31), 2017, Copyright 2017 by DC Comics.

Female as Manipulative. The least frequently occurring subcode within the Self-Performed Behavior (A) category was Female as Manipulative (5%). This subcode was used for incidents in which Quinn explicitly misdirects another in order to gain something. Examples of this subcode included the following: Quinn calling Alfred [Batman’s butler] to tip Batman off on Joker’s criminal plan in order to sabotage a mission and make her female rival look bad (Dini, 2018; 18-8); Quinn emotionally

appealing to an enemy to help her on her mission to avenge her murdered friend by telling the person to think of the victim's teenage daughter (Humphries, 2021a; 24-14-3); and Quinn having a coworker help her appear too busy at work to entertain her parents for the day so she can have a break (Figure 10).

Figure 10

Example of Female as Manipulative Subcode



Note. From “The Family Circles,” by Jimmy Palmiotti and Amanda Conner. Illustrated by John Timms, in J. Woodard and R. Wildman (Eds), *Harley Quinn, Volume 4: Surprise, Surprise* (vol. 4, issue 2, panel 46), 2017, Copyright 2017 by DC Comics.

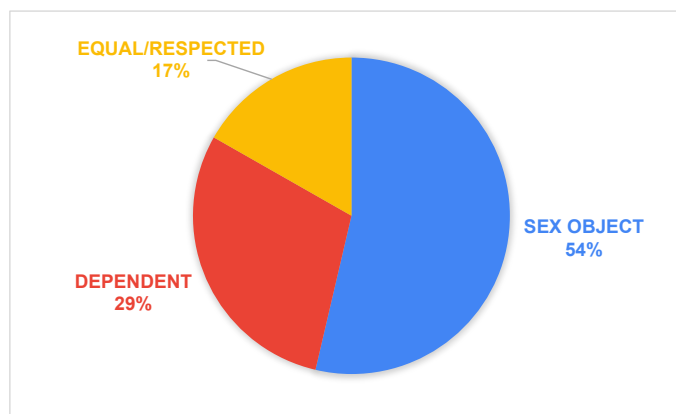
Conclusions for Theme of Self-Performed Behavior (A). Traditional behaviors associated with the female gender, such as consumerism (shallow/consumerist), domesticity (domestic), and manipulation (manipulative), comprised 65% of the collected data with the Self-Performed Behaviors category; while her demonstrating a nontraditional female behavior, such as defiance (defiant/challenging), accounted for the other 35%. Therefore, Quinn was observed to perform traditional feminine behaviors more than not. The message revealed that the character, while often said to be empowered and free from the restrictions of society, performs behaviors more in alignment with cultural expectations/norms for her gender than not.

Behavior Directed at Quinn (B). Behavior Directed at Quinn (B) represented behaviors exhibited towards Quinn by others. Some of these behaviors, such as Female as Dependent, could also be seen as something exhibited towards Quinn so much that she also began to manifest the behavior herself. Behavior Directed at Quinn (B) contained three subcodes: Female as Sex Object; Female as Dependent; and Female as Equal/Respected.

Despite Behavior Directed at Quinn (B) having fewer subcodes assigned to it when compared to Self-Performed Behavior (A), the category was quantitatively larger with a total of 561 notations. As seen in Figure 11, the largest subcode category was Female as Sex Object with 54% of the data. The next most frequently occurring subcode within Behavior Directed at Quinn (B) was Female as Dependent, which made up 29% of the data. The final subcode, Female as Equal/Respected, rounded out Behavior Directed at Quinn (B)'s data with 17% of the total.

Figure 11

Frequency of Subcodes in Behavior Directed at Quinn (B) for RQ1



Female as Sex Object. The subcode of Female as Sex Object would not have been possible without the visual component of the medium as it focused on coding images. It was used to record occurrences of the following: visual emphasis on “sexual”

body parts (e.g., boobs, hips, butt, thighs/legs); disproportionate body sizing (e.g., tiny waist with too large breasts); Quinn being depicted in a state of undress; Quinn's costuming/outfit being inappropriate for the setting (e.g., wearing a bikini while on a snowy mountain); levels of Quinn's costuming/outfit providing coverage of the body (e.g., shorts do not adequately cover the butt so part of the body is revealed); and fanservice images. This subcode was the most frequently occurring in the Behavior Directed at Quinn (B) category but also in the whole content analysis with 301 notations (the second most occurring code – Female as Dependent - in the project would be 166 notations). Many notations within this category were of “camera” angles on Quinn that emphasized parts of her body, such as her breasts, lower abdomen, or legs (especially thighs); or Quinn's body being distorted visually in order to fit a perfect female body image (e.g., very thin waist, large breasts, large hips). Additional examples included a male adversary stuffing a lit cigar in between Quinn's breasts (Figure 12); Quinn parachuting into the snowy European mountains in a corset and booty shorts and telling the reader she isn't cold because of her adrenaline (Conner & Palmiotti, 2017h; 14-2 and 14-3); Quinn fighting a female adversary in the nude (Palmiotti & Conner, 2017b; 27-14-1); Quinn wearing a bikini made of deli meats to lure her pets to a different floor in the building then letting them eat the meat off her body (Conner & Palmiotti, 2018a; 15-8); and several occurrences where Quinn is depicted as naked in bathtub as she does mundane things, like watch TV (Conner & Palmiotti, 2014c; 3-5-5; and Palmiotti & Conner, 2017b; 27-11-1).

Figure 12

Example of Female as Sex Object Subcode



Note. From “Can’t Fight City Hall...Or Can You?,” by Amanda Conner and Jimmy Palmiotti. Illustrated by Chad Hardin, in J. Woodard and R. Wildman (Eds), *Harley Quinn, Volume 5: The Joker’s Last Laugh* (vol. 5, issue 3, panel 16), 2016, Copyright 2016 by DC Comics.

Female as Dependent. As noted above, the Female as Dependent subcode was both the second most frequently occurring subcode within the Behavior Directed at Quinn (B) category and within the whole content analysis of the text with 166 notations.

This category included coding for the following:

- Irresponsibility
- Quinn making mistakes that cause larger problems
- Quinn screwing up and also needing someone to help her fix it (or just fix it for her).
- Quinn being childlike (e.g., immaturity, needing boundaries, flatterable)
- Quinn being uncomfortable with authority/power

- Passivity
- deferring to and/or obeying an authority (non-rebellious)
- Quinn being lost without the guidance of an authority figure
- Quinn being defined by her proximity to a male figure (e.g., Joker, Batman)
- Quinn depicted in a parent/child relationship dynamic with another character
- Quinn not keeping pace with her male counterpart(s)
- Quinn functioning as support or as a sidekick to another character
- Quinn requiring the assistance of another to complete a task (e.g., phone a friend for help)

Examples of this included the following: Quinn not taking a mission with Zatanna seriously and needing Zatanna to continuously rein her in (issue 9); Batman lecturing Quinn about Joker being bad for her (Conner et al., 2017; 17-36-4 and 17-36-5); Quinn destroying the entire DC Comics multiverse and needing to fix it with the help of another character (issue 19); Quinn trying to help Power Girl and an ally save New York City but making the situation worse (issue 10); Quinn agreeing to help Sy with a mission but becomes a sidekick he constantly has to lecture (issue 2); Quinn calling Ivy to help her rescue animals from a shelter and then relying on her to save the day when Quinn screws up (issue 1); Quinn being called the problem child of the military unit by her commander (Figure 13); Quinn submitting to Joker (issue 18); Quinn refusing to call the Justice League for help on a failing mission because she thinks they won't be violent enough in their punishment of the enemy (Humphries, 2021a; 24-17-4); and Quinn, in a Suicide Squad mission flashback, accidentally killing hostages because she did not stop to listen to her teammates or commander's instructions (Humphries, 2021b; 25-14 and 25-17).

Figure 13

Example of Female as Dependent Subcode



Note. From “Where Bombshells Dare!,” by Amanda Conner and Jimmy Palmiotti.

Illustrated by Billy Tucci, in J. Woodard and R. Wildman (Eds), *Harley’s Little Black Book*. (vol. 1, issue 4, panels 25-26), 2017, Copyright 2017 by DC Comics.

The theme of friendship was originally included within this subcode. Due to how frequently it was occurring, it was determined it would be better as its own separate code. Friendship was differentiated from Dependence in terms of how power was being exercised in the relationship dynamic. Dependence focused on Quinn taking a secondary role to another while Friendship looked at Quinn as equally contributing to a dynamic. For example, Quinn submitting to Joker (Conner et al, 2017; 17-14) or relying on Ivy to fix a problem (Conner & Palmiotti, 2014a; 1-10) was coded as Dependence. Quinn working in a team with Ivy (or another) in which she was an equally contributing member was coded as Friendship (Palmiotti & Tieri, 2017; 29-8).

Female as Equal/Respected. The final subcode included in the Behavior Directed at Quinn (B) category was Female as Equal/Respected. This subcode was recorded for occurrences in which Quinn was a leader; in which Quinn was acknowledged (by another character) as having power; and when Quinn was treated as an equal (by another character, usually an adversary). For example, when another character viewed Quinn as an actual threat and/or as having power, they would refer to her or call her by her actual name (e.g., Miss Quinn, Harley Quinn) as opposed to pet or nicknames (e.g., Nutbuckets, kid, sweetie, doll). Additional examples of this subcode included the following: Spoonsdale treating Quinn as a partner in taking down a crime organization and giving her classified information (Figure 14); Bombshell Harley Quinn (i.e., the World War II version of the character) giving orders to the other Bombshells (and a modern Quinn) on next steps to take down the Nazi officers (Conner & Palmiotti, 2017h; 14-17 and 14-24); Quinn leading and motivating a team of characters to defeat Enchantress when trapped in an alternate reality (Humphries, 2019c; 21-6 and 21-10); and Quinn proving herself worthy to fight alongside Ivy and Swamp Thing to save New York City from an incoming hurricane (Conner et al., 2017; 17-25).

Figure 14

Example of Female as Equal/Respected Subcode



Note. From “Undercover Punker Part 1: Eat to This beat,” by Amanda Conner and Jimmy Palmiotti. Illustrated by John Timms, in J. Woodard and R. Wildman (Eds), *Harley Quinn, Volume 1: Die Laughing* (vol. 1, issue 5, panels 29-33), 2017, Copyright 2017 by DC Comics.

Conclusions for Theme of Behavior Directed at Quinn (B). 83% of the data within the Behavior Directed at Quinn category was comprised of categories that reflected Quinn’s lesser or lack of power in interpersonal interactions, including sexualization by others (sex object) and dependence on another (dependence). Quinn was observed to have equal or greater power within a social dynamic in 17% of the collected data. Overall, Quinn was mostly depicted as being part of unequal social contexts in which she was the one with lesser or no power. The message revealed that, regardless of

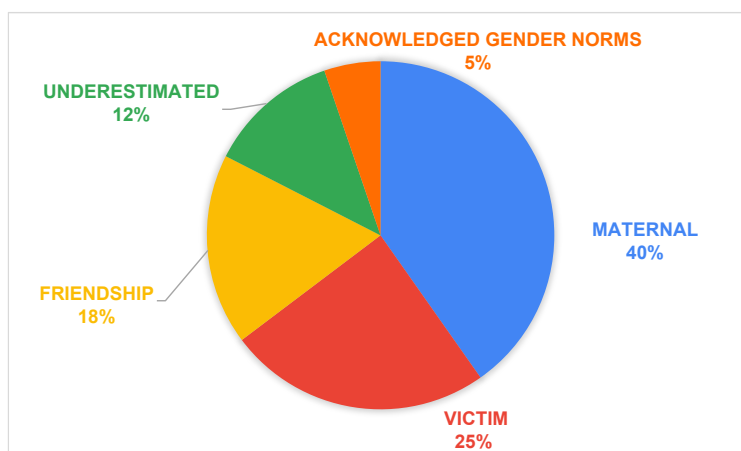
circumstance or her individual qualities/accomplishments, Quinn was still to be assigned a lesser status of power in social contexts because of her female gender.

Social Positionality. The final coding category was Social Positionality, which reviewed Quinn's social positioning within society and culture as prescribed by her gender. Five subcodes were assigned to this category, including Female as Maternal; Female as Victim; Theme of Friendship; Female as Underestimated; and Female Acknowledgement of Gender Norms.

Social Positionality totaled 343 notations. Female as Maternal was the most frequently occurring subcode with 40% of the data collected within this category. The next two most frequently occurring subcodes were Female as Victim and the Theme of Friendship which constituted 25% and 18% of the data respectively. Female as Underestimated represented 12% of the data, and Female Acknowledgement of Gender Norms completed the category with 5%. The frequency of these Social Positionality subcodes are demonstrated visually in Figure 15.

Figure 15

Frequency of Subcodes in Social Positionality for RQ1



Female as Maternal. The largest subcode within the Social Positionality category was Female as Maternal. This category was coded for the following occurrences in the text:

- love and/or protection of children and/or animals (dependents)
- Quinn as yielding
- Quinn eager to soothe the feelings of and/or comfort others
- selflessness (i.e., self-sacrifice for another, especially a dependent)
- Quinn as gentle
- Quinn as sensitive to the needs and/or emotions of others
- Quinn as understanding (i.e., empathetic and/or sympathetic)
- Quinn as kind
- Quinn as advisor and/or counselor (regardless of if positively and/or negatively depicted)
- Quinn as family-oriented
- messages of motherhood (in various forms) being the ultimate goal for a female

Examples of this code were seen as reoccurring themes with Quinn depicted as a huge lover and advocate for animals (e.g., Quinn saving all the animals from bad situations and adopting them as pets; issues 1, 8) and elderly individuals (e.g., Quinn working as a therapist for a senior living facility; multiple issues, including 2, 3, and 29); and with Quinn being willing to sacrifice herself to save her family and/or friends. Additional examples of this subcode included Quinn being upset with Joker when she realizes his mission will cause real harm/risk to people (Conner et al., 2017; 17-35-2);

Quinn making a statement she could kill Batman if he did something as egregious as hurting Ivy or animals (Conner & Palmiotti, 2017e; 11-9-4); Quinn feeling sympathy for the zombies attacking her neighborhood and wanting to find a way to save them (as opposed to killing them) (Figure 16); Quinn, while working as a psychologist at Arkham Asylum, going undercover as an inmate herself in order to better understand her patients (Conner & Palmiotti, 2017b; 8-4-3); Quinn threatening to physically harm a cab driver if he does not get her elderly friend Sy back to the senior living community unharmed (Conner & Palmiotti, 2015; 5-16-4); Quinn becoming a defacto surrogate mother to her murdered friend's teenage daughter (Humphries, 2021a; 24-6); and Quinn, while travelling back in time to WWII, chastising the Adolf Hitler-character so much about his actions that he eventually commits suicide to escape her (Conner & Palmiotti, 2017h; 14-36 and 14-37).

Figure 16

Example of Female as Maternal Subcode



Note. From “Die Laughing Part 1: Afterbirth,” by Amanda Conner and Jimmy Palmiotti. Illustrated by Chad Hardin, in J. Woodard and R. Wildman (Eds), *Harley Quinn, Volume 1: Die Laughing* (vol. 1, issue 1, panel 87), 2017, Copyright 2017 by DC Comics.

Female as Victim. The second most occurring subcode within this category was Female as Victim. This was coded for incidents of the following: Quinn as expendable; Quinn as gullible; Quinn as easily manipulated; Quinn depicted as unintelligent; gendered slurs directed towards Quinn (e.g., “crazy bitch”); intimate partner violence (IPV); Quinn as cautious and/or unsure; and Quinn needing rescue by another, in particular by a male figure in an authority role. Unsurprisingly, many recordings of this subcode were related to Quinn’s relationship with Joker and its IPV (multiple issues, including 7, 8, 14, 17, and 18). Further examples included multiple flashback sequences showing Quinn’s birthday being ruined by various male figures throughout her life (Conner et al., 2017; 17-12 and 17-13); a large group of escaped male convicts

threatening physical and sexual violence at Quinn (Conner & Palmiotti, 2014c; throughout issue 3); Quinn tied up and being held hostage (Palmiotti & Conner, 2018; throughout issue 28); Quinn being called a “one-woman pestilence plague” by a female adversary (Figure 17); and multiple visual depictions of Quinn crying and her makeup running when she has failed to accomplish something (Humphries, 2019b; Humphries, 2021b; seen in issues 20 and 25).

Figure 17

Example of Female as Victim Subcode



Note. From “Surprise, Surprise Part 1,” by Amanda Conner and Jimmy Palmiotti.

Illustrated by Chad Hardin, in J. Woodard and R. Wildman (Eds), *Harley Quinn, Volume 4: Surprise, Surprise* (vol. 4, issue 4, panel 12), 2017, Copyright 2017 by DC Comics.

Theme of Friendship. As noted above in the section on the subcode Female as Dependent, the Theme of Friendship code was originally not its own category. However, due to its frequency as its own theme, it was made into its own subcode. Friendship was differentiated from Dependence in terms of how power was being exercised in the relationship dynamic. Dependence focused on Quinn taking a secondary role to another while Friendship looked at Quinn as equally contributing to a dynamic. Therefore, this subcode was used for times when Quinn was actively helping and/or saving her friends; themes of friendship generally, especially those related to female friendship; themes of

girls helping girls (girl power); and Quinn working in an ensemble. Two common motifs within this category were the relationships of the Gotham City Sirens (i.e., Quinn, Ivy, Catwoman; multiple issues, including 8, 12, 17, and 21); and Quinn vowing and/or seeking vengeance for a friend (multiple issues, including 13, 16, 17, 21, and 24). Additional examples included Quinn, while telling an audience her origin story, then introduces each of her friends as part of a “get to know me” speech (Figure 18); Quinn trying to help her friend Nathan revitalize his business (Palmiotti & Conner, 2017a; 26-3); Quinn winning a large sum of money for her roller derby teammates (before she takes a leave of absence) to make sure they are taken care of (Palmiotti & Conner, 2017a; 26-7); Quinn trying to help console Madame Macabre after her son was murdered (Conner & Palmiotti, 2018a; 15-2); and Quinn telling her friends she will need all of their help in her goals to fix New York City (Palmiotti & Tieri, 2017; 29-8).

Figure 18

Example of Theme of Friendship Subcode



Note. From “Die Laughing Part 1: Afterbirth,” by Amanda Conner and Jimmy Palmiotti. Illustrated by Chad Hardin, in J. Woodard and R. Wildman (Eds), *Harley Quinn, Volume 1: Die Laughing* (vol. 1, issue 1, panels 20-21), 2017, Copyright 2017 by DC Comics.

Female as Underestimated. The Female as Underestimated code was used for events in the text in which Quinn was undervalued; when she was misjudged or misunderstood; and/or rejected as capable due to her gender. Illustrations of this included Quinn being rejected (without cause) by the local animal shelter for pet adoption (Conner & Palmiotti, 2014a; 1-5-3); Robin underestimating Quinn’s ability as an equal opponent (Conner et al. 2017; 17-33-1); Sy not trusting Quinn to lead or take charge in their mission (Conner & Palmiotti, 2014b; 2-18-1); Booster Gold being surprised to learn Quinn is knowledgeable about local politics and social issues (Humphries, 2021a; 24-15-3); Quinn being called a “worthless clown” who is not a worthy adversary by an enemy’s father (Humphries, 2019b; 20-8-1); Quinn’s roller derby friends betting against her in a fight (Conner & Palmiotti, 2015; 5-15-3); and Quinn being visually depicted as the one member of Joker’s team to not have a literal seat at his table – instead, she sits on the floor and away from the group (Figure 19).

Figure 19

Example of Female as Underestimated Subcode



Note. From “Harley Loves Joker: Finale,” by Paul Dini, Illustrated by Bret Blevins, in J. Woodard and R. Wildman (Eds), *Harley Loves Joker* (vol. 1, issue 2, panel 24), 2018, Copyright 2018 by DC Comics.

Female Acknowledgement of Gender Norms. The final subcode included in the Social Positionality category was Female Acknowledgement of Gender Norms. This subcode was used for occurrences in which attitudes or tropes about gender were directly referenced. Examples of this code included when Quinn makes a sarcastic comment about not knowing her own strength (Conner & Palmiotti, 2016; 6-10-3); Quinn lecturing a male tourist about sexually objectifying women when he makes a sexual comment about her body (Conner & Palmiotti, 2017a; 7-10 and 7-11); Quinn making a comment that she will fire her employees if they keep asking her how old she is (Conner & Palmiotti, 2017f; 12-8-5); damsel-in-distress role reversals with Quinn as the rescuer and the male figure as the damsel (issues 11 and 24); Quinn saying the subject of math is actually “cool” (Figure 20); and Quinn (in her narration to the reader) making a comment

that she and the Bombshell team will be successful in a covert mission to bring down Nazis because they would never believe women to be capable of that type of work (Conner & Palmiotti, 2017g; 14-1).

Figure 20

Example of Female Acknowledgement of Gender Norms Subcode



Note. From “The Grand Finale of...The Trials of Harley Quinn,” by Sam Humphries.

Illustrated by Sami Basri, in J. Woodard and R. Wildman (Eds), *Harley Quinn, Volume 4: The Final Trial* (vol. 4, issue 3, panel 19), 2020, Copyright 2020 by DC Comics.

Conclusions for Theme of Social Positionality. The concept of Quinn functioning within a stereotypical female social dynamic, such as caregiver (maternal), as injured person (victim), or as friend (friendship), consisted of 83% of the data within Social Positionality. Only 17% of the data reflected Quinn operating outside of those norms, such as when she was misjudged (underestimated) or when was vocally recognizing gender standards within her culture (acknowledged gender norms). Quinn, therefore, was observed to be more in alignment with established sociodynamics related

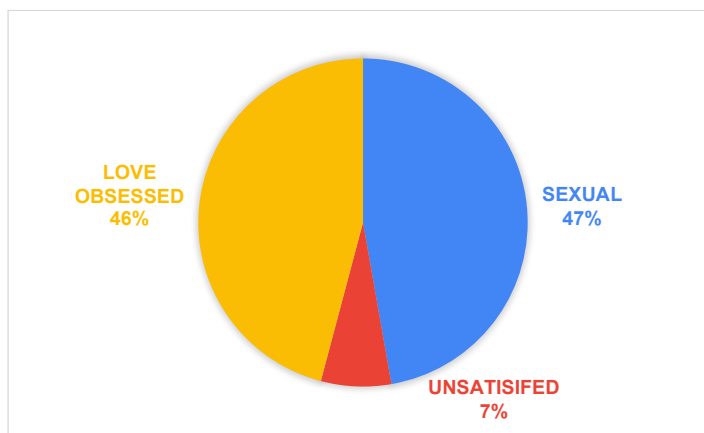
to her gender than not. The message revealed that Quinn's status as a superpowered individual did not change her adherence to gendered sociodynamics.

Emotion. The next coding category was Emotion, or the manifestation of the internalized thoughts and feelings expected of and performed by Harley Quinn in accordance with her gender as assigned by society. These were behaviors (and sometimes thoughts) performed by Quinn that reflected her understanding of how she should act per gender norms. For example, as a female, there is a cultural expectation that she should be in pursuit of a romantic relationship if she is single. Three subcodes fell into this category: Female as Sexual; Female as Love/Romantic Relationship Obsessed; and Female as Unsatisfied.

The Emotion category, when totaling all the occurrences of the subcodes, totaled 218 notations. The most frequently occurring subcode was Female as Sexual, which was 47% of the data collected in the Emotion code category. The second most occurring subcode, Female as Love/Romantic Relationship Obsessed, was almost as frequent with it comprising 46% of the data. See Figure 21.

Figure 21

Frequency of Subcodes in Emotion for RQ1



Female as Sexual. The subcode category of Female as Sexual was used for occurrences in the text in which Quinn engaged in overly sexual behaviors or conversation; engaged in different sexualities (e.g., bisexuality, lesbianism); participated in or initiated sex-themed jokes/humor; used sex or sexuality as a strategy to get something she wants/desires; was depicted as lustful (“horny” in slang terminology); or the text participated in the Madonna/Whore complex concept. Examples of this subcode include when Quinn was depicted as sexually humping a mannequin of her ex-boyfriend Joker (Conner & Palmiotti, 2014a; 1-1-1); when Quinn tells her all-female roller derby team that they will all take a “victory shower together” to celebrate her winning a competition (Conner & Palmiotti, 2017a; 7-21-3); when Quinn tells her captor that it was dumb to tie her up because she’s been tied up by actual professionals and “not just [Poison] Ivy on date night” (Figure 22); and the reoccurring joke of Quinn expressing her innermost thoughts and feelings to her “beaver” named Bernie, which is a damaged stuffed beaver trophy she got from her first boyfriend/love as a teenager (multiple issues throughout the sample).

Figure 22

Example of Female as Sexual Subcode



Note. From “Issue #3,” by Jimmy Palmiotti and Frank Tieri. Illustrated by Mauricet, in J. Woodard and R. Wildman (Eds), *Harley Quinn and Her Gang of Harleys* (vol. 1, issue 3, panel 70), 2017, Copyright 2017 by DC Comics.

Female as Love/Romantic Relationship Obsessed. The third subcode within the Emotion category was Female as Love/Romantic Relationship Obsessed. This was used when the story involved a romance and/or love angle; when love/romance was directed at Quinn; and when love/romance was directed towards another by Quinn. This subcode occurred almost as frequently (46%) as Female as Sexual (47%). Many examples within this category were of Quinn crushing on and/or flirting with other characters in her stories (e.g., Ivy, Power Girl, or Zatanna); were references or flashbacks to Quinn’s relationship with the Joker; or were other characters being obsessed with Quinn (e.g., Red Tool). Additional examples included Quinn participating in reverse hero-saves-damsel scenarios (with Quinn as the hero and her love interest as the damsel); and Quinn navigating the ebbs and flows of relationships with potential (or ongoing) romantic partners (e.g., Ivy, Booster Gold).

Figure 23

Example of Female as Love/Romantic Relationship Obsessed Subcode



Note. From “Love Stinks,” by Amanda Conner and Jimmy Palmiotti. Illustrated by Chad Hardin, in J. Woodard and P. Hamboussi (Eds), *Harley Quinn, Volume 1: Hot in the City* (vol. 1, issue 4, panel 50), 2014, Copyright 2014 by DC Comics.

Female as Unsatisfied. Female as Unsatisfied was the subcode used for when Quinn exhibited feelings of disappointment and/or discontent with a situation or thing. An example of this is shown in Figure 24 when Harley Quinn talks to her friend Tony about how her domestic responsibilities (i.e., as leader of the Gang of Harleys group, as the landlady of a building, with her day job as a therapist in a senior community center, etc.) are no longer enough for her to feel fulfilled in life. Another example was when Quinn vented to Captain Triumph about missing the “good ol’ days” of her life (i.e., when she was a wild criminal) because her current life was too hard and stressful (Humphries, 2019d; 22-13).

Figure 24

Example of Female as Unsatisfied Subcode



Note. From “A New Day, A New Fray,” by Amanda Conner and Jimmy Palmiotti.

Illustrated by John Timms and Chad Hardin, in J. Woodard and R. Wildman (Eds), *Harley Quinn, Volume 6: Black, White and Red All Over* (vol. 6, issue 1, panel 38), 2017, Copyright 2017 by DC Comics.

Conclusions for the Theme of Emotion. 93% of the data within the Emotion category was connected to Harley Quinn’s internal emotionality as related to romance, whether it be physical (sexual) or emotional/mental (love/romantic relationship). The third subcode, Female as Unsatisfied, only appeared in 7% of the data. Overall, when considering the theme of Emotion, there was a concept of romance was consistently seen throughout the analyzed sample. The message revealed that Quinn’s gender was still more influential on the focus of her storylines than her superpowered nature.

Additional Observations

During the coding process, there were observations made by the researcher that were noteworthy but did not fit exactly into coding for the research question. These observations were given their own “OTHER” coding categories and included the following: inconsistent characterization; and the absence of Harley Quinn (physically or in reference) from panels within issues of her own series. Although these categories did

not exactly align with the research question being studied with the sample, they were still related to the idea of analyzing Quinn's performance as a character in her comics to be worth mentioning.

Inconsistent Characterization. Although comics are notorious for having inconsistent and/or incongruous storylines, there are some established characterizations that are consistent. Like other major characters in the DC Comics universe, Quinn has a handful of accepted characterizations. Therefore, when these characterizations were challenged and/or not reflected in the text analyzed as part of the sample, it was conspicuous. For example, Quinn has always been depicted as being of Jewish descent and has even spoken Yiddish on occasion. Yet, on page 1 of issue 2 in the sample, Quinn doesn't recognize Yiddish as the language being spoken to her by another Jewish character. Another example of inconsistent characterization were the instances in which Quinn, a known psychologist and therapist, is depicted as uncaring, indifferent, and/or indelicate with the feelings of others, such as when she is dismissive of the traumatic backstory of several murdered ghosts she meets with Zatanna (Conner & Palmiotti, 2017c; 9-21 and 9-24-4); and when she tells an enemy character to go commit suicide (Palmiotti & Conner, 2018; 28-7-6). There were also incidents in which Quinn, a doctor, is depicted as ditzy. To clarify, Quinn is noted as having "played" ditzy in the past to make herself more appealing to people like the Joker, but she has always been intelligent. However, there were multiple occurrences in the sample in which Quinn was depicted as unironically unintelligent, such as when she cannot pronounce the word for a psychological medical condition (Figure 25); or when she doesn't understand the idiom

“not my first rodeo” when said to her by a taxicab driver (Conner & Palmiotti, 2015; 5-16-4).

Figure 25

Example of Inconsistent Characterization Subcode

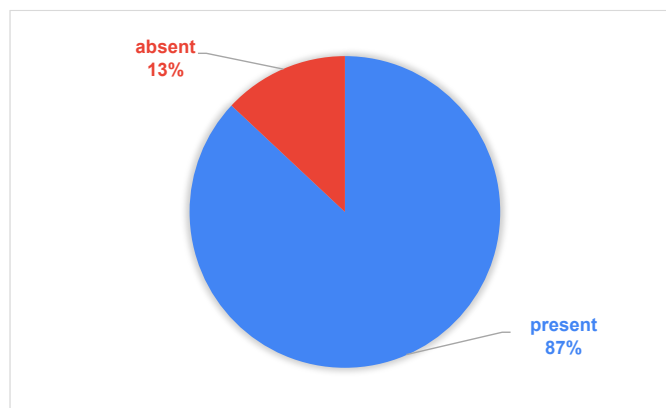


Note. From “Nocturnal Omission,” by Amanda Conner and Jimmy Palmiotti. Illustrated by Chad Hardin, in J. Woodard and P. Hamboussi (Eds), *Harley Quinn, Volume 1: Hot in the City* (vol. 1, issue 8, panels 83-84), 2014, Copyright 2014 by DC Comics.

Absence of Harley Quinn in Story. As the study sample was being reviewed, it was observed that there was a noticeable number of panels in which Harley Quinn was absent and/or not referenced in the story despite her status as the headlining character. Of the 3,530 panels included in the analyzed sample, Quinn was present (and/or referenced) in 3,070 of them (87%) while she was absent (and/or not referenced) in 460 (13%).

Figure 26

Percentage of Panels With and Without Harley Quinn for RQ1



Conclusions for Additional Observations. Additional observations made by the researcher during the coding process were reviewed in this section and included notes on inconsistent characterization of Harley Quinn as well as her absence (physically and/or in reference) from these texts. Overall, Quinn was present or at least referenced in 87% of the panels reviewed as part of the sample. Inconsistent characterization was coded for 23 times. Although these categories were not numerically significant nor were they directly related to the research question, they warranted inclusion in this chapter as they were still tangentially related to the analysis of Quinn’s performance as a character in the sample texts. The message revealed by these findings was Quinn’s presence and existing mythology (i.e., characterization and character history) in her own storylines did not appear to be an important focus of the content creators.

Conclusion for All Findings for Research Question 1

In review of all the data collected, Harley Quinn’s performance of gender appeared to be more supportive of traditional attitudes and beliefs about femininity than not. Within the Self-Performed Behaviors category, Quinn was more often seen as performing stereotypical behaviors associated with the female gender, such as

consumerism, domesticity, and manipulation, (65%) than with performing nontraditional feminine behaviors, such as defiance (35%). This conclusion was also supported by the data when considering the theme of Behavior Directed at Quinn since 83% of the data depicted Quinn as participating in unequal interpersonal interactions where she was the party with the lesser or lack of power. The Social Positionality category was in alignment with this interpretation as the data reflected Quinn usually functioning within a conventional female social dynamic, such as caregiver, injured person, or as friend (83%). The final theme, Emotion, also supported the conclusion of Quinn performing her gender in alignment with cultural expectations as it indicated 93% of the data collected within this category related the character's emotionality to romance, whether it be physical or emotional/mental.

Overall, the messages revealed through this content analysis was Harley Quinn's gender was more influential on the character and her storylines than anything else, including Quinn's superpowered nature. Even when she was said to be empowered and to be operating outside the norms of society, she still was most often performing behaviors in alignment with the cultural norms assigned to her gender. Furthermore, her superpowered nature did not prevent her from still being depicted as having a lesser status of power than her male counterparts (superpowered or not); it did not change Quinn's adherence to gendered sociodynamics; and it did not take storyline focuses away from romance. Additionally, the presence of Quinn in her own comics and her consistency as an established character, with a known mythology and history in the DC universe, did not appear to be important considerations of the content creators.

Due to the sampling procedures used in this study, the content analysis did not produce an inclusive review of the population that would allow for an accurate and complete response to sub-question b of research question 1 (i.e., In what ways has Quinn's depiction of femininity in her comics changed over time?). However, there were observable trends noted by the researcher in the analyzed sample. One trend was how the earlier issues (i.e., *New 52* and early *Rebirth*) had storylines that featured Quinn on carefree adventures with her friends in Coney Island. Thus, the theme of friendship was common in these issues. Later *Rebirth* storylines depicted Quinn as unsatisfied with her current life and seeking fulfillment elsewhere, including away from her friends. Themes of dissatisfaction and consumerism seemed more common in these storylines. It is important to note that the writing team behind *Harley Quinn* comics during the *New 52* and early *Rebirth* eras was the same. The writing team changed with Issue #35 during the *Rebirth* era (late 2017). So, changes in themes or trends seen over time in these comics could also be related to the change in writing staff.

Research Question 2

Research question two of this study explored the ways in which female adolescent readers described their experience(s) and understanding(s) of femininity through the character of Harley Quinn in comic books. Further, the ways in which these female adolescents identified (or did not) with Quinn in the text; and the ways in which these readers saw Quinn as challenging and/or supporting cultural stereotypes about femininity. This research question was specifically presented as follows:

2. Through a language-in-use analysis, in what ways do female adolescent readers describe their experience and understanding of femininity through Harley Quinn in comic books?
 - a. In what ways does a female adolescent identify and/or not identify with Quinn in the text?
 - b. In what ways do female adolescents see Quinn as challenging and/or supporting cultural stereotypes about femininity?

A language-in-use (discourse) analysis was determined as an appropriate approach to researching these questions since an investigation into the language used by participants (i.e., female adolescent readers) would shed light onto how these individuals were actively creating, understanding, and making meaning through language and interaction. Since multiple meanings can be understood by a reader/listener, an analysis of the language used by participants allowed for the researcher to explore how each individual responded and interacted with a text.

Participant Demographics

Two of the participants were age 17 years upon recruitment, and one turned 18 during the project. Both girls had just graduated from a public high school. The other three participants were 15 or 16 years old and currently enrolled a public high school. Four of the participants were from Texas, and one was from Florida. One participant worked a part-time job in the service industry. Three of the participants were actively involved with extracurricular activities, such as clubs/organizations through school and competition-level sports. Three of the participants had existing knowledge of and

experience with comics, comics culture, and Harley Quinn; and all five participants read in their leisure time.

Introductory Meeting

During the introductory meeting, the researcher met with participants and their parent/guardian to discuss the study and answer any questions. Consent was obtained at the meeting, and participants selected a *Harley Quinn* comic to receive and read. There were five different options to select from, and each of these comics were from the sample used by the researcher as part of the content analysis completed for research question 1. Once a participant selected their choice, the researcher then mailed a physical copy of the comic to their address. Originally, five participants were signed up to participate, and all five comics were mailed. One of these participants was unable to participate in the study after receiving her comic. An additional participant (Dolly) was recruited through an existing participant (Iris), and this new participant read the comic assigned to her recruiter. Thus, two of the participants ended up reading the same comic as part of their participation. See Table 2 for comic book assignments for each participant.

Table 2

Participants and Comic Book Assignment

Participant	Comic Book Assignment
Angelica (1)	Dini, P. (2018). Harley loves Joker: Finale.
Eliza (2)	Conner, A. and Palmiotti, J. (2017). Die laughing part 1: Afterbirth.
Bonnie (3)	Humphries, S. (2019). The trials of Harley Quinn: Role players part 2.
Iris (4)	Humphries, S. (2019). Minor disasters! Part two.
Dolly (5)	Humphries, S. (2019). Minor disasters! Part two.

Individual Interviews

Once a participant received their assigned comic book and had the opportunity to read it, she participated in a one-on-one interview with the researcher. The interview was conducted via Zoom and recorded. The interview process was semi-structured, with the researcher using questions from Appendix C as a guide in addition to asking follow-up questions to participant responses. Although an hour was reserved for each interview, all individual interviews were approximately 20 – 40 minutes in length. Transcripts were edited to change names to pseudonyms and revise any personally identifying information said by the participant (e.g., assign a fictitious name to a named friend or a generic description of a place of work).

Readers Response Meeting

Once all individual interviews were completed, the readers response small group meeting was conducted via Zoom. Four of the five participants attended the live virtual meeting, and the fifth participant submitted her responses to the question prompts (see Appendix B) in a follow-up message to the researcher. The interview process was again semi-structured to allow for the researcher to ask questions related to the research and follow-up questions related to participant responses. The group meeting was approximately 40 minutes in length. The transcript was edited to change names to pseudonyms and revise any personally identifying information said by participants (e.g., assign a fictitious name to a named friend).

Findings by Participant

The data collected as part of the investigation of research question 2 will first be presented by individual participant. For research question 2 of this study, notations refer to significant statements said by participants as recorded in interview transcripts. The coding process for each transcript started with the original 15 subcodes found through the content analysis with research question 1, and additional subcodes were added to reflect new findings. Thus, there were ultimately 20 subcodes (17 with occurrences) used during the coding process for this research question. Each participant's section will include a demographic overview of the adolescent; her background with comics and/or Harley Quinn as a character; findings from her individual interview with the researcher; and findings from her responses in the readers response group meeting. Once each adolescent's data has been presented, this chapter will review all of the data collected for research question two as a composite.

Angelica (Participant 1)

Angelica was a recent high school graduate who planned to start her freshman year of college in the fall. She was seventeen when she originally signed on to participate in the study but turned eighteen during the study's implementation. In her free time, Angelica enjoyed hanging out with friends and/or her cousin; reading books (e.g., comics, science fiction, fantasy, young adult); binge watching television shows; playing video games; and "delving into...fandom stuff" (i.e., she would later clarify this as "nerd culture," with noted examples including anime, comics, video games).

Angelica had a history of reading comics, including some *Harley Quinn* comics from the Rebirth era and was familiar with the character. Additional comic titles she had

read included *Teen Titans*, *Nightwing*, and *Starfire* (all DC titles). In her individual interview, Angelica talked about her dad getting into reading comics when she expressed interested in the Teen Titans after watching the characters' early-2000s television show. She reported her dad had been a big fan of comics in his earlier years, and he wanted to rejoin the hobby with Angelica now that she had displayed interest. In addition, Angelica noted she was inspired to start reading comics again, including *Harley Quinn* comics, in 2016 after seeing the film *Suicide Squad*, which featured Quinn as a main character.

Individual Interview. The top three themes uncovered in Angelica's responses during her individual interview included dependence (14 occurrences); acknowledgement of gender norms (12); and love/romantic relationship obsessed (12). Additional themes included practicality (9); independence (7); admiration (6); victimization (5); defiant/challenging (3); sexual objectification (2); equal/respected (2); Quinn as a negative influence (1); manipulative (1); friendship (1); and Angelica resonating with Quinn (1). During her interview, Angelica talked about why she was a fan of Harley Quinn and Terra, a member of the Teen Titans:

I do tend to lean towards characters that are kind of...antihero...where they...make mistakes. So, that's why I've always...liked Harley because [Quinn and Terra] get involved with things that they probably shouldn't get involved with and then having to deal with those consequences... (see Appendix E, lines 72-76)

Participant's Group Response. Angelica's responses in the readers response group meeting included the following subcodes: independence (7); dependence (6); defiant/challenging (6); love/romantic relationship obsessed (5); admiration (3); acknowledgement of gender norms (3); equal/respected (2); practicality (1); Quinn as a

negative influence (1); sexual objectification (1); and Angelica resonating with Quinn (1). When discussing gender discrimination and stereotypes, Angelica talked about two concepts in the culture that bothered her. First, she discussed the concept of women as too emotional and it being abnormal when men are emotional. The second concept was the idea of geek culture (examples noted by Angelica included anime, video games, and comics) and its associated spaces as being unwelcoming for females. Angelica talking about how her interest in these hobbies made her a target for the accusation of “doing it to get guys” (see Appendix J, line 3104) She further elaborated on the idea when she talked about considering getting a job at a popular video game store chain with her cousin:

I’m like, “You really think as a girl I should apply at [VIDEO GAME STORE]?” Like, I would be bombarded 24/7 with people going, “You’re a fake gamer,” and all that. Like, I don’t want to have to sit there and listen to that. (see Appendix J, lines 3106-3108)

Of all the participants in this study, Angelica had the most long-term experience with Quinn, and this is reflected in the themes seen in her comments during the interview and readers response group. Both *dependence* and *love/romantic relationship obsessed* were frequently occurring subcodes in her responses. Angelica also provided a great summation of Quinn’s evolution over time during the readers response group meeting:

I feel like they’ve [the comic and pop culture versions of Harley Quinn] changed over time. Like...the 90s Harley is definitely very different from...nowadays Harley. ...She used to just be...an item for Joker, where it was like, “Guess what? Joker has a crazy girlfriend, and she doesn’t have a mind of her own!” ...At first,

she was just...the crazy one that was there to be crazy with him. And then, slowly over time, she...kind of got better, but she's still crazy at the end of the day. So, I think there's definitely a little bit of a difference. But now we're...in the gray area where they're [DC content creators] are just kind of like, "She's crazy! That's the bottom line." (see Appendix J, lines 3199-3206)

Angelica acknowledged being a fan of the character, but she was more reserved in her judgment of Quinn as a positive representation of girl power/feminism. Because of the length of her experience with the character, she knew where Quinn came from, and she still saw the character as not fully free from her dependent-girlfriend-of-the-Joker origins.

Eliza (Participant 2)

Eliza was a recent high school graduate who was to attend college in the fall to study animation. When she originally signed up to participate in the study, she was seventeen; but she turned eighteen during the study's implementation. When in high school, Eliza shared she participated in art and digital media classes; hung out with friends she made in those courses; and played video games. Eliza was new to *Harley Quinn* comics, but she was familiar with the character. She had a history of reading comics, including some from *Superman*, *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, and the *Legend of Korra*. Most of her comic reading experience was with DC's *The Flash*.

Individual Interview. Acknowledgement of gender norms (17) was the most frequently occurring theme in Eliza's individual interview. The next two categories to occur the most in her statements were independence (14) and admiration (9). Further themes in Eliza's interview included love/romantic relationship obsessed (7); dependence

(7); friendship (7); equal/respected (6); practicality (5); sexual objectification (4); maternal (3); Eliza resonating with Quinn (2); defiant/challenging (1); and unsatisfied (1). An interesting highlight in Eliza's interview was when she discussed how expectations of characters can differ based on gender. Her example was in a comparison between Harley Quinn (in her comics) and Flash (in his). Eliza shared both characters are depicted as silly, but the differences lie in how both are treated when they make a mistake. Per Eliza, "they...laugh at that" for Flash; but, for Quinn, "they...get onto her about it, or they push her to the side." (see Appendix F, lines 1044-1048) Eliza described the difference as female characters (like Quinn) are "always pushed harder" and "if they mess up, it's more...detrimental to them [personally]" (see Appendix F, lines 1060-1061).

Participant's Group Response. During the readers response group meeting, Eliza's responses included the following subcodes: independence (9); admiration (3); sexual objectification (2); dependence (2); acknowledgment of gender norms (1); love/romantic relationship obsessed (1); defiant/challenging (1); and friendship (1). Eliza discussed a personal experience of gender discrimination when the group discussed gender stereotypes. She was enrolled in a robotics class in high school, and she was the only girl in the class. The males in the course responded negatively to her presence. Eliza talked about how the class felt like an unwelcome space due to engineering being seen as a masculine interest. Eliza described her interactions with the boys in the class: "[it was] their job to do that certain type of job [engineering], or [be in] that certain type of...place" (see Appendix J, lines 3078-3079).

Similar to Iris (Participant 4), a frequently occurring theme in Eliza's statements in both the interview and readers response group meeting was independence. But she,

too, observed and discussed traditional feminine themes seen in Harley Quinn and her comic, such as love/romantic relationship obsession; sexual objectification; and acknowledgement of gender norms. While Eliza appeared to have an overall positive response to Quinn, she also frequently acknowledged the existence of traditional gender themes seen in the text and with the character.

Bonnie (Participant 3)

Bonnie was a 15-year-old high school sophomore who lived in Florida. She was recruited to participate in this study by her friend Iris. Bonnie shared she was interested in finding a job (though she noted she was still too young for most employers) and enjoys school. One of her hobbies includes going to the beach. Bonnie was new to *Harley Quinn* comics and had limited knowledge of comics and the character prior to participating in the study.

Individual Interview. The most frequently occurring theme in Bonnie's individual interview was the idea of Harley Quinn as being defiant/challenging (12 occurrences). The themes of admiration (8) and independence (8) were both the next most frequently occurring themes in her statements. Additional themes in Bonnie's interview included friendship (6); dependence (4); practicality (4); maternal (4); acknowledgement of gender norms (3); sexual objectification (2); and Bonnie resonating with Harley Quinn (1). During the interview, comic literacy skills were discussed a few times. Bonnie talked about how the experience of reading a comic could be "a little overwhelming" when someone isn't used to having to read the visuals with the text. (see Appendix G, line 1245).

Participant's Group Response. Bonnie was unable to participate in the small group readers response meeting via Zoom, but she provided responses to the group guide questions in a separate message to the researcher. Bonnie's textual responses to the prompts included: admiration (4); defiant/challenging (3); friendship (2); maternal (2); independence (2); sexual objectification (1); acknowledgment of gender norms (1); and Bonnie resonating with Quinn (1).

Overall, Bonnie appeared to have a positive impression of Harley Quinn and reflected on her as being admirable. Common feminine themes, such as friendship, sexual objectification, maternity, and dependence, were frequently noticed by the participant in the text. However, nontraditional feminine themes, such as independence and defiance, appeared more frequently and were discussed in more detail by Bonnie in her responses.

Iris (Participant 4)

Iris was a 16-year-old high school sophomore who lived in Texas and was recruited for participation through professional connections of the researcher. After agreeing to participate in the study, Iris then recruited her friends Bonnie and Dolly to also participate. Iris shared she enjoys hanging out and studying with friends; playing the guitar; and participating in competition-level dancing. Iris was new to Harley Quinn comics and had limited knowledge of the character prior to participating in the study. She did, however, have some knowledge of comics as she had experience with reading *Star Wars* comics; and she also had knowledge of comics culture as she referenced the two major comics publishers (DC and Marvel) and some of their intellectual property (IP) during her interview.

Individual Interview. The theme seen most often throughout Iris's individual interview was independence (15). Additional themes to occur in her statements included the following: acknowledgement of gender norms (8); sexual objectification (7); admiration (7); love/romantic relationship obsession (5); consumerism (4); Iris resonating with Harley Quinn (3); victimization (2); practicality (2); equal/respected (2); defiant/challenging (1); dependence (1); friendship (1); manipulation (1); and negative influence (1). In her interview, Iris discussed how the storyline of her assigned comic had real-world implications and lessons for readers, and her experience with reading comics generally.

Participant's Group Response. Iris participated in the readers response group, and her contributions to the conversation included the following subcoded themes: independence (4); Iris resonating with Quinn (3); practicality (2); admiration (1); defiant/challenging (1); consumerism (1); sexual objectification (1); and love/romantic relationship obsessed. When discussing gender stereotypes, Iris talked about her annoyance with the concept of men (males) working and generating household income, while women (females) are expected to manage the home and children. She shared that while the idea that men "make the money" is "not as bad as it used to be," it does still have a place in American culture (see Appendix J, lines 3059-3062).

In her interview and her contributions in the readers response group meeting, Iris's most frequently referenced theme was the idea of Quinn illustrating independence. But she also noticed and commented on traditional feminine themes seen in the text, such as victimization, love/romantic relationship obsession, and consumerism. Iris appeared to

have an overall positive takeaway of Quinn as a character and as a representative of the female gender.

Dolly (Participant 5)

Dolly was a sixteen-year-old high school junior who was actively involved in extracurriculars at her school. She was a member of her school's yearbook staff, a member of a young women's leadership club, a member of the school's environmental club, and she was a member of a school spirit club. In addition to her extracurriculars, Dolly also had a part-time job in the food service industry. Dolly was one of the participants in the study who had previous experience with comics, including those that featured Harley Quinn as a character (e.g., DC Black Label's *Harleen* series); and she also had a history of engaging in multiple DC intellectual properties, including films, including 2022's *The Batman*, and television shows, such as *Justice League* and *Teen Titans Go!*

Individual Interview. There were five subcodes with a frequency of 10 or more occurrences in Dolly's individual interview, including: admiration (18); Dolly resonating with Quinn (14); practicality (13); dependance (12); and independence (10). Further themes seen in Dolly's statements included love/romantic relationship obsessed (8); sexual objectification (6); victimization (5); defiant/challenging (5); acknowledgement of gender norms (4); equal/respected (2); consumerism (1); Quinn as a negative influence (1); and friendship (1). In her interview, Dolly talked about how Quinn served as an inspiration for her: "As a young girl, it made me think I could...become a psychologist, which is something I really want to do," (see Appendix I, lines 2491-2493). She further talked about how Quinn served as an alternative role model for her as a young girl:

Young girls usually see...princesses, [and] they're like, "Oh, I want to be a princess! Oh, I want to be..." like something completely...unrealistic. But then, there was like, "Oh, I want to be a psychologist. I want to work with criminals." ...that's how I was a child...it wasn't just like, "Oh, I want to be a princess." No, I wanted to be...what Harley was. (see Appendix I, lines 2505-2511)

Participant's Group Response. In the readers response group meeting, Dolly's statements included the following subcodes: independence (8); defiant/challenging (5); admiration (4); love/romantic relationship obsessed (4); sexual objectification (3); dependence (3); practicality (3); acknowledgement of gender norms (3); consumerism (1); equal/respected (1); and Dolly resonating with Quinn (1). During the discussion around gender stereotypes, Dolly talked about the different expectations in clothing and attire between men and women, especially regarding school dress codes (i.e., what is and is not deemed appropriate or allowed). She seconded Iris's complaint about the stereotype of men as breadwinners and women as homemakers. Dolly also commented on how she thinks Harley Quinn would have responded to Eliza's personal experience of gender discrimination in a high school robotics classroom:

I feel like if Harley was a real person...she would be the type of person to, like – if somebody [were] to tell her, like, "Oh, you can't be in robotics," [then] she'd be [like], "Oh, screw you. I'm going to be in robotics. Like, I'm going to be 10 times better than you. Like, what is your problem?" (see Appendix J, lines 3152-3155)

Dolly as a participant was unique in that she had experience with Quinn in contexts that ranged in rating (i.e., appropriateness for different age groups). Although

Quinn's sexual objectification was not a common theme in Dolly's responses, Dolly still had a strong perspective on the topic and how it related to the real life of women:

You can never change the way a man thinks. And they're probably always going to be sexualizing you or looking at you in a different perspective than you want them to. And, I mean, she's a character, and...I feel for her if men are...doing that – like, sexualizing her. But, for me...I mean everyone has probably been catcalled, sexualized, or harassed in a way; and...it's...something we really cannot change – because men are never going to change. But no matter what we do, what we wear – it's not going away, and it's not gonna go away for any character, person, celebrity, nothing... (see Appendix I, lines 2257-2264)

Dolly saw the question of if Harley Quinn is a feminist as a complex one with many layers. On the one hand, she saw Quinn as “empowering” and a “nontraditional” villainess character (see Appendix I, lines 2652, 2660). But at the same time, she acknowledged Quinn wasn't as independent as other DC leading ladies, such as Catwoman or Wonder Woman, and that Quinn “still...changed herself for a man” (the Joker) (see Appendix I, line 2690). But Dolly still saw Quinn as “a feminist in her own way” and that the character, with “her aspects of femininity,” depicted as “a powerful woman” regardless of her flaws (see Appendix I, lines 2697, 2702-2703).

Conclusion

This section presented data findings for individual interviews and the readers response group meeting by participant. Next, this chapter will review all of the data findings for research question two overall. This composite includes analysis of all data

sources collected during the investigation for research question two (i.e., all individual interviews and the readers response group meeting).

Coding Categories for Composite Findings

The deductive language-in-use analysis of the transcripts collected as part of this study yielded 487 notations. For research question 2 of this study, notations refer to significant statements said by participants as recorded in interview transcripts and readers response group meeting. The coding process with the transcripts started with the original 15 subcodes found through the content analysis with research question 1, and additional subcodes were added to reflect new findings. Thus, there were ultimately 20 subcodes (17 with occurrences) used during the coding process for this research question. These 20 subcodes were organized into 4 coding categories, which included the 3 themes seen in the content analysis for research question 1 (i.e., Emotion, Behavior, and Social Positionality). The additional coding category added was Teen's Reaction to Harley Quinn. The percentage of occurrence for each of these larger coding categories is presented visually in Figure 27. Each of these categories and subcodes are explored and described further in the sections that follow.

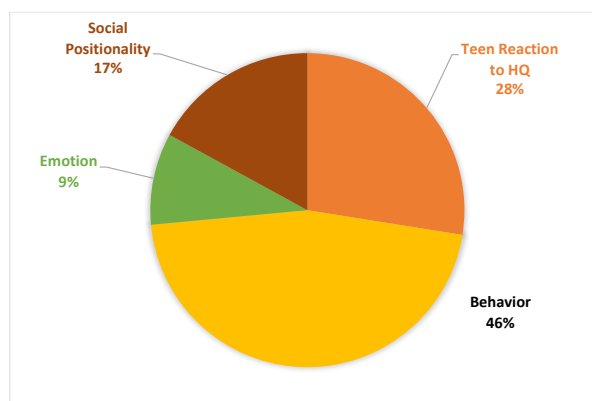
Figure 28 displays the frequency each subcode occurred in the transcripts. Independent was the most frequently occurring subcode with 86 notations, and Admiration was the second most occurring with 63 notes. Six subcodes occurred at a frequency of 10 or less, which included: Female as Victim; Female as Unsatisfied; Female as Maternal; Negative Influence; Female as Shallow/Consumerist; and Female as Manipulative. As noted above, three subcodes had zero occurrences in this data set and

were not included in the final data compilation (i.e., Female as Domestic; Female as Sexual; and Female as Underestimated).

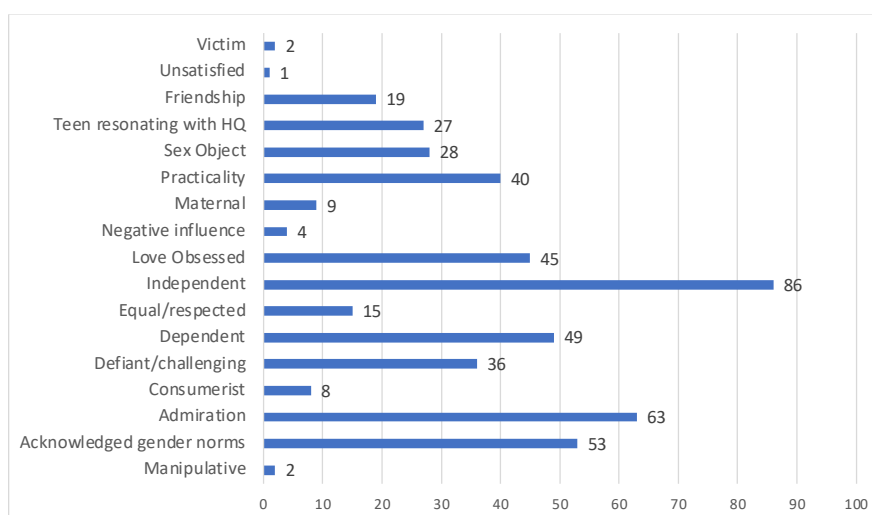
Behavior, which was again subdivided into the categories of Self-Performed Behavior (A) and Behavior Directed at Quinn (B) but is presented in its entirety here, contained 8 subcodes, including: Female as Shallow/Consumerist (A); Female as Defiant/Challenging (A); Female as Domestic (A); Female as Manipulative (A); Independent (A; new subcode); Female as Sex Object (B); Female as Dependent (B); and Female as Equal/Respected (B). The subcode Female as Domestic (A) had zero occurrences in this data set, so it was not included in the final data compilation. The full coding category of Behavior represented 46% of the sample's data. The second largest coding category for research question 2 was Teen's Reaction to Harley Quinn, which represented 28% of the data collected. It included four subcodes, including: Admiration; Negative Influence; Practicality; and Teen Resonating with Harley Quinn. The third theme, Social Positionality, represented 17% of the data and included 5 subcodes: Female as Maternal; Female as Victim; Theme of Friendship; Female as Underestimated; and Female Acknowledgement of Gender Norms. The subcode of Female as Underestimated had zero occurrences in this data set, so it was not included in the final data compilation. Finally, the theme of Emotion represented 9% of the total sample and included 3 subcodes: Female as Sexual; Female as Love/Romantic Relationship Obsessed; and Female as Unsatisfied. The subcode Female as Sexual had zero occurrences in this data set, so it was not included in the final data compilation.

Figure 27

Coding Category Occurrences by Percentage in Sample for RQ2

**Figure 28**

Frequency of Subcodes in Sample for RQ2



Behavior

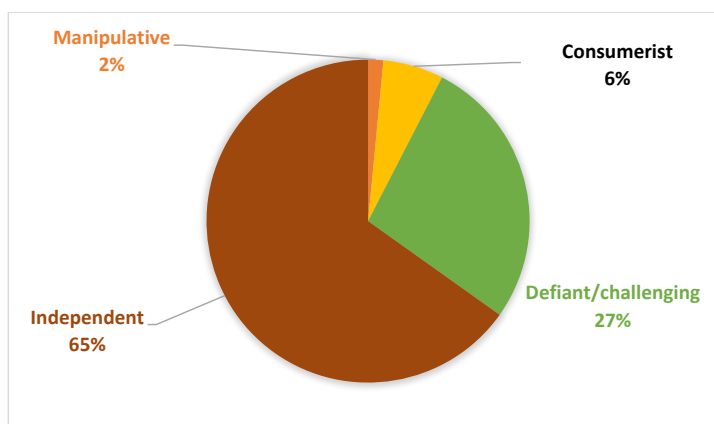
Similar to what was seen with research question one, the most frequently occurring coding category was Behavior, or the manifestation of externalized behaviors expected of, performed by, or performed towards Harley Quinn in accordance with her gender as assigned by society. As a reminder, this coding category was subdivided into two classifications: Self-Performed Behavior (A), which constitutes behaviors exhibited

by Quinn herself; and Behavior Directed at Quinn (B), which represents behaviors exhibited towards Quinn. The Behavior category will be discussed by these two classifications.

Self-Performed Behavior (A). Self-Performed Behavior (A) represented the subcodes for behaviors performed by Quinn herself. Self-Performed Behavior (A) was made up of four subcodes: Independent; Female as Defiant/Challenging; Female as Shallow/Consumerist; and Female as Manipulative. Self-Performed Behavior (A) as a category totaled 132 notations. Independent was the most frequently occurring subcode and represented 65% of the data within this category. Female as Defiant/Challenging was the next most occurring category with 27% of the data. Female as Shallow/Consumerist represented 6% of the data, and Female as Manipulative finished the category with 2% of the data recorded. These numbers are presented visually in Figure 29.

Figure 29

Frequency of Subcodes in Self-Performed Behavior (A) for RQ2



Independent. The most occurring subcode within the Self-Performed Behavior (A) category and within the whole language-in-use analysis for research question 2 was the new subcode of Independent (65% of the data). This code was used for statements about Quinn being free of outside control; Quinn not depending on the authority or

guidance of another; Quinn demonstrating self-confidence; Quinn engaging in self-creation or revision; and Quinn demonstrating strength (inner and/or outer). An example of this subcode can be seen in the following quote from Eliza during the readers response group interview: “she takes control. And I think that’s really cool, how she just does that. And that she could do basically whatever she wants because that’s what she wants to do and that’s who she is” (see Appendix J, lines 3185-3186).

Female as Defiant/Challenging. The second subcode within the Self-Performed Behavior (A) category was Female as Defiant/Challenging (27%), which was used for statements in reference to Quinn demonstrating bold disobedience or open resistance; taking control of her own sexualization; being sassy/bold; functioning as an antihero; and Quinn as uncaring of the opinion of others. One of Angelica’s comments during the readers response group interview illustrated this idea:

She takes the things that aren’t, like, seen in society as a good thing and just, kind of, goes crazy with it – which is why I think at the end of the day they, like, made her a villain almost in a way. Because it’s not socially acceptable, in most cases, the way she acts and dresses; but it’s the way she lives. (see Appendix J, lines 3170-3171)

Female as Shallow/Consumerist. The next most frequently occurring subcode within Self-Performed Behavior (A) was Female as Shallow/Consumerist (6%). This subcode included statements from participants that referred to Quinn being concern with popularity (e.g., on social media); references to Quinn’s fashion choices (i.e., clothing); references to makeovers; and Quinn coping with her emotionality by shopping. Both Iris and Dolly referenced this idea in their individual interviews when discussing how an

individual may resonate with Quinn in terms of behavior after the break-up of a romantic relationship. Iris said readers likely resonate with the idea of “getting yourself back, in, like, glowing up” (see Appendix H, lines 1657-1658); while Dolly commented that the idea of using shopping as a coping mechanism was relatable, except that regular (non-comic book character) individuals “don’t buy a hyena,” (see Appendix I, line 2474).

Female as Manipulative. The least frequently occurring subcode within the Self-Performed Behavior (A) category was Female as Manipulative (2%). This subcode was used for references to Quinn being someone to place blame on another to save herself; and Quinn doing something for the wrong reason(s). In her individual interview, Angelica touched upon this idea when explaining why she probably wouldn’t be friends with Quinn in real life:

I would love to, but I feel like I would be so stressed around her. Cause I’m such a goody-two-shoes, and I, like, I was always that friend that was like, “Oh no, don’t do that,” and she would just commit so many crimes that I feel like she- she would put the blame on me and then be like, “I love you! Later!” because that’s just the kind of person she is. So, it’d be fun, but also kind of stressful. (see Appendix E, lines 205-209)

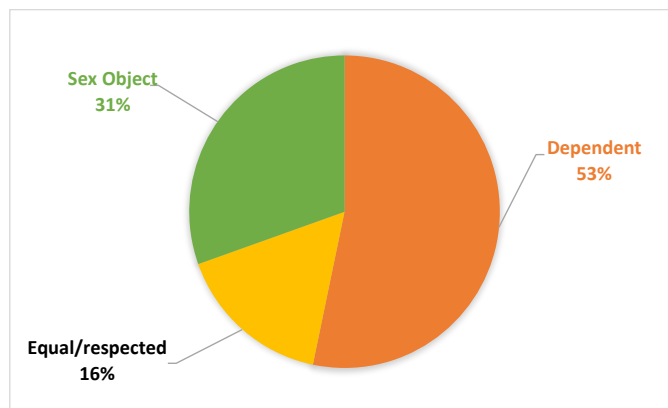
Conclusions for Theme of Self-Performed Behavior (A). Nontraditional female behaviors, such as independence/self-sufficiency (independent) and defiance (defiant/challenging) represented 92% of the data in this category. Traditional female behaviors, such as consumerism (shallow/consumerist) and manipulation (manipulative), comprised only 8% of the data. Therefore, Quinn was seen by the teen participants as performing mostly nontraditional feminine behaviors.

Behavior Directed at Quinn (B). Behavior Directed at Quinn (B) represented behaviors exhibited towards Quinn by others and was a total of 92 notations. Some of these behaviors, such as Female as Dependent, could also be seen as something exhibited towards Quinn so much that she also began to manifest the behavior herself. Behavior Directed at Quinn (B) contained three subcodes: Female as Sex Object; Female as Dependent; and Female as Equal/Respected.

As seen in Figure 30, the largest subcode category was Female as Dependent with 53% of the data. The next most frequently occurring subcode within Behavior Directed at Quinn (B) was Female as Sex Object, which made up 31% of the data. The final subcode, Female as Equal/Respected, rounded out Behavior Directed at Quinn (B)'s data with 16% of the total.

Figure 30

Frequency of Subcodes in Behavior Directed at Quinn (B) for RQ2



Female as Dependent. As noted above, the Female as Dependent subcode was both the second most frequently occurring subcode within the Behavior Directed at Quinn (B) category with 49 notations (53% of the data). This category included coding for the following: Quinn requiring someone or something for support (e.g., emotional, physical); Quinn being defined by her proximity to a male figure (e.g., Joker, Batman);

Quinn being in the shadow of (or “held back” by) another character; Quinn being immature; and Quinn working in a team or ensemble (as opposed to as an independent agent). This subcode was seen in a comment Angelica made during the group interview:

Because she’s so dependent on others and stuff; and, like, her stories really depend on others a lot of the tim[e]. Where it’s like, you’re looking forward to when other people are in there...they just need to find something where it shows her being an independent person, and she can handle stuff herself, and, like, really, like – making a good story of just her alone. (see Appendix J, lines 3293-3297)

Female as Sex Object. Although research question 2 focuses on statements from participants, the subcode of Female as Sex Object was still relevant as it referred to the participant’s reaction(s) and interpretation(s) of the visual components of Harley Quinn in both her comics and popular culture. It represented 31% of the data within this category. It was used to record statements referring to the following: visual sexualization of Quinn not necessary for the storyline; teen’s discomfort with own body image in comparison to Quinn; visual emphasis on “sexual” body parts (e.g., boobs, hips, butt, thighs/legs); Quinn dressing to impress other characters (e.g., in the context of attracting or pleasing a romantic partner); Quinn’s costuming/outfit being inappropriate for a setting or age group (e.g., young girls on Halloween); Quinn being dressed to impress and attract readers (i.e., generally male; fanservice); and Quinn’s clothing providing inadequate coverage. Iris had a great example of this in her individual interview:

I think, like – it’s, you can’t really do anything about it...I think it’s different for men and women. I feel like, if a man saw it [Quinn’s sexualized body in a comic],

he would want to keep reading it – not all men, but, like, some men if they saw it, they'd want to keep reading it. But, if a woman saw it, they just probably be like, “well, that's unnecessary,” and “I'll keep reading it, but, like, I wish, like, they wouldn't [stereotype], like, a woman – like people-people buying the comic just because of her body instead. (see Appendix H, lines 1906-1912)

Female as Equal/Respected. The final subcode included in the Behavior Directed at Quinn (B) category was Female as Equal/Respected (16%). This subcode was recorded for occurrences in which Quinn was acknowledged (by the participant) as having power or authority; when Quinn was treated “normally” (non-gendered); and Quinn exhibiting self-respect. Some excerpts given this code were also coded with the subcode “Admiration.” In her individual interview, Angelica discussed this idea in the following comment: “I feel like, for the most part, the popularity comes with, again the fact that people are just like, ‘Oh, she's like- she's, like, this powerful girl, and all this.’ Especially for girls.” (see Appendix E, lines 165-167).

Conclusions for Theme of Behavior Directed at Quinn (B). For research question 2, 84% of the data within the Behavior Directed at Quinn category represented categories that reflected participants' interpretation of Quinn as having lesser or a lack of power in interpersonal interactions, including sexualization by others (sex object) and dependence on another (dependence). They observed Quinn to have equal or greater power within a social dynamic in 16% of the collected data. Overall, participants saw Quinn as mostly depicted as being part of unequal social contexts in which she was the one with lesser or no power.

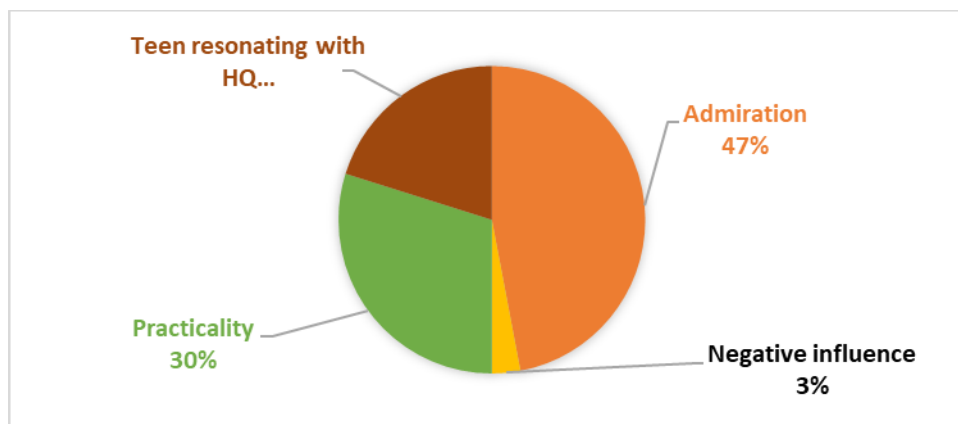
Teen's Reaction to Harley Quinn

The next coding category was Teen's Reaction to Harley Quinn, which considered how the female adolescent participants were responding to Quinn. This category consisted of subcodes that were unique to research question 2. Four subcodes were in this category, including Admiration; Practicality; Teen Resonating with Harley Quinn; and Negative Influence.

Teen's Reaction to Harley Quinn had a total of 134 notations. The most frequently occurring subcode within this category was Admiration, which represented 47% of the data. Practicality and Teen Resonating with Harley Quinn accounted for 30% and 20% of the data respectively. The fourth subcode, Negative Influence, finished the category with 3%. The frequency of subcodes in Teen's Reaction to Harley Quinn are displayed in Figure 31.

Figure 31

Frequency of Subcodes in Teen's Reaction to Harley Quinn for RQ2



Admiration. The most frequently occurring subcode within the Teen's Reaction to Harley Quinn category (47%), and the second most frequently occurring subcode within all the data collected for research question 2 (63 notations), was Admiration. It was coded for the following occurrences in participant's statements: to regard Quinn with

a feeling of wonder, pleasure, or approval; to admire Quinn; to view Quinn as having a positive influence; and positive intimidation/peer pressure from Quinn (i.e., Quinn influencing another to do something that is positive or growth building). There were multiple comments from participants in each of their individual interviews and in the group meeting in which they expressed thinking of Quinn as “cool” or a “boss woman.” When discussing whether or not Quinn could be considered a feminist icon, Dolly said yes and added that Quinn also shows that “women can be flawed and still be...glamorized! And people will still love them, even though they have their own issues.” (see Appendix I, lines 2715-2716).

Practicality. The second most frequently occurring subcode was Practicality with 30% of the data. This was coded for when participant responses discussed Quinn behaving in a way that related to the realities of the world than to ideas or desires. It included discussions around the idea of comfort (i.e., physical); realism within a story; lack of realism; Quinn performing a task because no other real choice (e.g., Quinn must save someone or else they will die); and when the participant acknowledged something felt not “on brand” for Quinn as a character. Multiple participants touched upon the idea of whether or not Quinn’s costuming was realistically comfortable enough for her to function in. For example, Angelica discussed this idea when comparing Quinn’s original jester costuming to her modern outfit:

Looking at Wonder Woman. Like, no one could actually fight in that kind of thing. And it’s like – it needs to be realistic to me. ...I like the, like, jester costumes and stuff – but it just didn’t feel like – how[‘s] she going to run in that? That looks kind of goofy and all that. And, you know, at least the, like, the newer

outfits looked more, like, breathable, and it fit more of her, like, being able to actually do the crazy things that she does. (see Appendix E, lines 328-333).

Teen Resonating with Harley Quinn. The third subcode in this category was Teen Resonating with Harley Quinn, which represented 20% of the data. This was used for occurrences in participant statements that referred to something producing or evoking an appealing feeling of familiarity; something having particular meaning or importance for the participant; or the participant feeling sympathy for Harley Quinn. As Dolly said in her interview:

You can relate to her. Because, I mean, even though she is a villain, sh[e] still has sad days, she still gets heartbroken – like, she’s still, like, a person. But overall...she’s still a person and no matter what, at the end of the day, she has emotions. (see Appendix I, lines 2170-2173).

Negative Influence. The final subcode within the category of Teen’s Reaction to Harley Quinn was Negative Influence. It accounted for 3% of the data set and was used for occurrences when the participants referred to Quinn as not being a positive role model; and/or Quinn sending a negative message about femininity to readers/fans. Angelica talked about the idea of Quinn as negative influence in the portrayals of her relationship with Joker in her interview:

Is it a good message to show that, like – they [Quinn and Jokes in the story], kind of, like, laugh it [intimate partner violence] off at the end. Like, they literally laugh it off at the end, where it’s just them being childish again and “wooo!” [IPV] cycle. And I’m like, “What did we figure out here?” Did Harley – did, even like for a second, she was, like, really thinking about it [breaking it off with

Joker], and then the second he did something good, she's like, "Okay, whatever!" and then that's it. The end. (see Appendix E, lines 455-460).

Conclusions for Theme of Teen's Reaction to Harley Quinn. The female adolescent participants feeling a positive and/or familiar connection with Quinn accounted for 67% of the data within the Teen's Reaction to Harley Quinn category. Teens responding to engagement with Quinn in a practical way appeared in 30% of the data. Only 3% of the data collected supported the idea of Quinn as a negative influence on fans/readers. Overall, Quinn was received by participants in a positive and/or familiar sense.

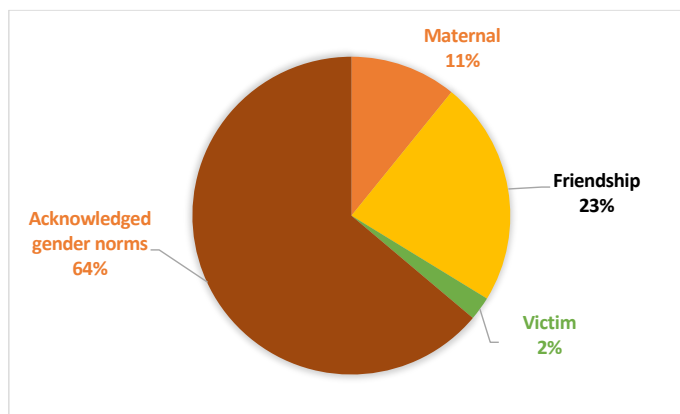
Social Positionality

The next coding category was Social Positionality, which reviewed Quinn's social positioning within society and culture as prescribed by her gender. Four subcodes were assigned to this category, including Acknowledgement of Gender Norms; Theme of Friendship; Female as Maternal; and Female as Victim.

Social Positionality totaled 83 notations. Acknowledgement of Gender Norms was the most frequently occurring subcode with 64% of the data collected within this category. The next two most frequently occurring subcodes were the Theme of Friendship and Female as Maternal, which constituted 23% and 11% of the data respectively. Female as Victim represented only 2% of the data. The frequency of these Social Positionality subcodes are demonstrated visually in Figure 32.

Figure 32

Frequency of Subcodes in Social Positionality for RQ2



Acknowledgement of Gender Norms. The most occurring subcode included in the Social Positionality category was Acknowledgement of Gender Norms (64%). This subcode was used for occurrences in which attitudes or tropes about gender were directly referenced, including the limited female representation seen in comics; different expectations between male and female individuals/characters; females having to prove their worth/place in a space/medium; and the occurrence of silly and/or superficial storylines for female-driven narratives. In her individual interview, Angelica discussed this topic:

I can always tell when it's [a male writer/artist] – like, I think that was why I kind of fell out of comics too. Because, after a while, I was like, “Oh my gosh, this is such a guy thing.” Like, it just- it felt like it was very from the male point of view of, “at the end of the day, they’re just females and they’re supposed to look pretty even if they’re fighting in a war – or, if they’re not, then they’re like these war machines.’ So, it – yeah, it was definitely obvious. (see Appendix E, lines 283-288)

Theme of Friendship. The Theme of Friendship subcode was differentiated from the Dependence subcode in terms of how power was exercised in a relationship dynamic. Dependence focused on Quinn taking a secondary role to another, while Friendship looked at Quinn as equally contributing to a dynamic. Thus, this subcode was used for references to when Quinn was actively helping and/or saving her friends; themes of friendship generally; and Quinn as an outgoing personality. It comprised 23% of the data within this category. Eliza touched on this idea in her discussion around the friendship dynamic between Poison Ivy and Quinn: “they’ve always got each other’s back. ...they seem like they’ve got each other’s back. And they’re always...there for each other. They’re always there to...encourage their choices and their ideas. I think that’s really cool.” (see Appendix F, lines 908-912)

Female as Maternal. Female as Maternal represented 11% of the data within the Social Positionality category. It was coded for the following occurrences in participant’s statements: altruism; and Quinn as caring to the needs of others (e.g., her friends). Bonnie cited in both her individual interview and her responses to the small group interview prompts that a strength of Quinn was how much she cared about her friends. She even cited this as the reason she enjoyed her comic: “it showed [Quinn’s] caring side.” (see Appendix J, line 3395).

Female as Victim. The final subcode within this category was Female as Victim (2%). This was coded for incidents of the following: Quinn as easily manipulated; intimate partner violence (IPV); Quinn as a person harmed by another (e.g., verbal harassment, sexual harassment, embarrassment); and Quinn being unable to function without the intervention or help of something or someone (e.g., abusing alcohol).

Examples of this subcode appeared in the interviews with Angelica and Dolly when they talked about the victimization of Quinn by Joker. Dolly referenced Quinn's victimization at the start of her relationship with Joker: "we got more of a background on like, who-what how she was before the whole...meeting the Joker...whenever she was trying to do research; and then...he manipulates her to fall in love...so he can get out" (see Appendix I, lines 2064-2067). Angelica talked about Quinn being part of IPV cycle:

It just kind of feels like it's just a cycle, where over and over and over again, showing that she gets abused; one little thing [Joker] does kind of nice send her- all her doubts go away; and then it's just a cycle over and over and over again. (see Appendix E, lines 380-383)

Conclusions for Theme of Social Positionality. The female adolescent participants recognized gender standards and stereotypes with Quinn in their responses in 64% of the data collected. They also discussed her functioning within a stereotypical female social dynamic, such as caregiver (maternal), as injured person (victim), or as friend (friendship), in 36% of the data. Overall, the teen participants were actively aware of gender norms surrounding Harley Quinn and her characterization and saw her fulfilling traditional female roles in social dynamics.

Emotion

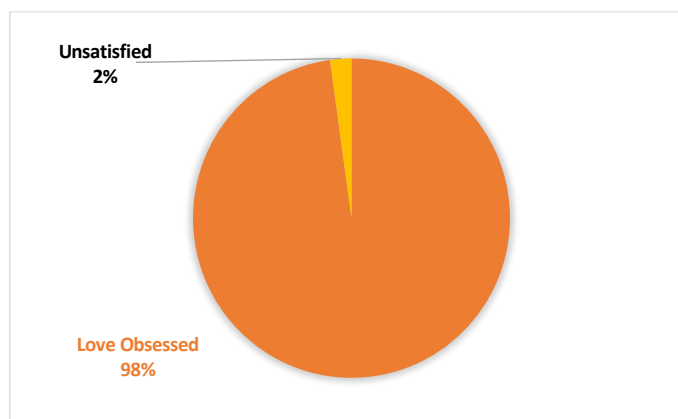
The final coding category was Emotion, or the manifestation of the internalized thoughts and feelings expected of and performed by Harley Quinn in accordance with her gender as assigned by society. These were behaviors (and sometimes thoughts) performed by Quinn that reflected her understanding of how she should act per gender norms. For example, as a female, there is a cultural expectation that she should be in

pursuit of a romantic relationship if she is single. Two subcodes fell into this category: Female as Love/Romantic Relationship Obsessed; and Female as Unsatisfied.

The Emotion category totaled 46 notations. The most frequently occurring subcode was Female as Love/Romantic Relationship Obsessed, which was 98% of the data collected. Female as Unsatisfied accounted for only 2% of the data set. See Figure 33.

Figure 33

Frequency of Subcodes in Emotion for RQ2



Female as Love/Romantic Relationship Obsessed. Female as Love/Romantic Relationship Obsessed accounted for 98% of the data within the Emotion category. This was coded for occurrences when participant responses referred to a romance and/or love angle to a storyline; heartbreak as the result of the break-up of a romantic relationship; and who or what Quinn is as a person/character being closely connected to and/or intertwined with her romantic relationships (e.g., Joker or Ivy). Most participants referenced this subcode at least once in their individual interviews and in the readers response group meeting. For example, Dolly stated: “[Quinn] changed herself for a man, which isn’t- not feminist of her, but we still love her.” Another example is when Angelica described the problem she sees with post-Joker Quinn storylines:

I feel like – because obviously they started out where she was literally just created to be, like, “Oh Joker has a girlfriend – how cool!” in the show. And then now [DC is] trying to figure out “Well, how do we deal with her as a character alone now?” And I feel like, for a while, it was kind of like, “ugh, again? She’s with Joker, again?” (see Appendix E, lines 390-393)

Female as Unsatisfied. Female as Unsatisfied was the subcode used for when Quinn exhibited feelings of disappointment and/or discontent with a situation or thing. An example of this subcode was when Eliza, in her individual interview, referenced the idea of Quinn sending a message about leaving a toxic relationship: “it is okay to let go if [someone is] being mean to you or anything. To, like, kind of let go.” (see Appendix F, lines 834-835)

Conclusions for the Theme of Emotion. The adolescent participants recognized love/romance as a pivotal part of Quinn, her characterization, and in her narratives, which was represented by their references to the subcode in 98% of the data. The Female as Unsatisfied subcode only occurred once during the interviews (2%). Thus, the concept of love/romance was the prevailing theme within the category of Emotion.

Conclusion for All Findings for Research Question 2: Composite Message from both Interviews and Readers Response Meeting

In review of all the data collected as part of the language-in-use analysis, the female adolescent participants responded to Quinn in a positive and/or familiar sense (67% of the Teen’s Reaction to Harley Quinn category data). They saw her as performing mostly nontraditional feminine behaviors (92% of the Self-Performed Behavior [A] category data); but they also acknowledged she was often depicted as being part of

unequal social contexts in which she was the one with lesser or no power (84% of the Behavior Directed at Quinn [B] category data). The participants also were actively aware of gender norms surrounding Harley Quinn and her characterization (67% of the Social Positionality data), and they saw her as participating in traditional female roles in social dynamics (36% of the same data set). In addition, the female adolescent participants most often found the prevailing theme surrounding Quinn and her narratives to be one of love/romance (98% of the Emotion category data).

Language was used by participants in this study in five primary ways when analyzed using Gee's (2011) tools of discourse analysis, including identities building; relationships building; politics building; figured worlds; and Big "D" discourse. The identities building tool was observed in the participants' language around recognizing Quinn's identity as a female in American culture; how they each responded to this identity; and recognizing their own relationships to this cultural identity. For example, the data collected in this study indicated the participants mostly responded to Quinn in a positive or familiar (relatable) way. An additional example of the identities building tool was seen in how cultural gender norms were used to shape and construct Quinn's characterization/identity. The relationships building tool was demonstrated in the language used by participants when they discussed how relationships were built, sustained, and changed amongst groups (e.g., Quinn and other characters in her stories; Quinn in comparison to other female comic characters; American females in comparison to American males). For example, the participants talked about how Quinn was depicted in unequal social contexts (in which she had the lesser power); and how Quinn's behavior often supported (and, thus, sustained) traditional gender roles in social dynamics. The

politics building tool was observed by participants in how social goods (e.g., status, power) were distributed to Quinn in her stories. Again, an example of this was seen with how Quinn was often assigned a lesser status of power in social dynamics. The figured worlds tool was observed in the language used by participants when discussing the prevalence of gender norms and their influence in Quinn's characterization and stories. Another example could be seen in how the participants recognized the prevailing themes of romance/love in Quinn's stories, which is a theme often assumed to be of interest for American females. The final tool, Big "D" discourse, was observed in a majority of the language used by participants. All of the participants recognized the language used in the comics and in larger culture around Quinn (and other female comic characters more generally) to be enacting and engaging in the socially recognizable identity of "American Female." The participants acknowledged gender norms (including traditional female roles in social dynamics and unequal power distribution between males and females) and themes of romance/love as frequent and noticeable elements of Quinn and her stories. Additionally, Quinn's behaviors were either recognized as in alignment with her cultural identity or not – thus, the cultural framing around gender was still at play in their use and understanding of language.

CHAPTER V

Discussion of Findings

The goal of this research study has been to critically analyze how Harley Quinn performs the female gender in her comics and how this is potentially communicating messages about what it means to be “female” to readers and fans. Chapter one introduced a specific focus on the need to investigate messages about gender being interpreted and understood by female adolescent readers; and this study proposed exploring this through the character of Quinn. Three theories comprised the theoretical framework for this study, including critical literacy, feminism, and transactional theories. Using a critical literacy lens, this study started with an analysis of gendered power structures from a Western (specifically, American) cultural view. Next, using a feminist lens, this study discussed investigating text for gendered messages then analyzing the responses of female adolescent readers in their understanding and meaning making of the character Harley Quinn and how she performs gender in her comics. By exploring how a group of adolescent readers are interpreting and understanding the concept of femininity in these texts, this study is seeking to understand what exchanges of information about gender in the greater culture are happening.

Chapter two provided the essentials to understanding the history of the superheroine character in comic books, the history of the Batman universe within DC Comics, and the basic of Harley Quinn the character. The second part of chapter two reviewed the existing scholarly literature related to the present study, including studies of comics in education, critical gender theory and comics, unpublished graduate research, and readers response with gender depiction in comics. The results of this review indicated

formal academic research on the use of comics in both educational setting and critical inquiries is limited as most existing content to non-research texts (e.g., personal anecdotes). Additionally, most of the existing research focused on graphic novels rather than comics; did not include readers response (transactional theory) with female adolescent readers; and was limited in scope on DC Comics and IP, including Harley Quinn. A review of existing research on the use of comics in K-9 education by Wallner and Barajas (2020) proposed future research focus on identifying what information and what types of knowledge students can gain through reading comics. The present study aligned with this proposal as it investigated what information and knowledge about gender and gender relations are being acquired by female adolescent readers in their reading of *Harley Quinn* comics.

Chapter three reviewed the methodology used in this study to investigate the two research questions introduced in chapter one. The first research question explored Harley Quinn's performance of gender within her comics through a qualitative content analysis of a sample of issues published as part of the *New 52* and *Rebirth* Harley Quinn publication eras. Research question two investigated how female adolescent readers understood and experienced femininity through the character as seen in her comics by using language-in-use analyses of transcripts collected from individual interviews and one readers response group meeting.

Chapter four reviewed the data collected and discussed the composite analysis of all data collected for this study. For research question 1, the message revealed was Quinn's gender (female) was more influential on the character and her storylines than anything else, including her superpowered nature. Her performed behaviors were more in

alignment with cultural norms associated with her gender than not; her storylines often had themes of romance; her superpowered status did not prevent her from still being assigned a lesser status of power than her male peers (superpowered or not). For research question 2, the participants used language in ways that indicated they mostly responded to the character in a positive (or familiar) way; observed cultural gender norms shaping and constructing Quinn's identity/characterization and storylines (e.g., romance/love); observed Quinn's behavior as in alignment with cultural gender norms; and saw Quinn as depicted as having a lesser status of power in social dynamics. Overall, the message revealed participants recognized the language used in comics and larger culture to reflect Quinn as enacting and engaging in the socially recognizable identity of "American Female." Chapter five will discuss the findings of this study and conclude with implications and recommendations for future research.

Discussion of Findings to Research Questions of Study

Harley Quinn as a Gendered Superpowered Character

Research question 1 of this study sought to uncover the ways in which Harley Quinn performed gender in her own comics through a content analysis. Additionally, it asked about the attitudes and beliefs about femininity that were depicted through the character and how this depiction changed over time. The messages revealed by this study's content analysis indicated Quinn's gender was more influential on her characterization and her storylines than any other factor, including her superpowered nature. She still most often performed behaviors in alignment with the cultural norms assigned to her female gender; and her superpowered nature did not prevent her from being assigned lesser statuses of power in social dynamics with males (regardless of if the

males were superpowered or not). She still adhered to gendered sociodynamics, and her storylines often had a romance theme or aspect to them. As noted in chapter four, an inclusive review of the population that would allow for an accurate and complete analysis of how gender depiction through Quinn and her texts was not produced due to the sampling procedures used.

No text is immune to politics, and the messages within one can be used to promote hegemonic ideologies at the expense of the marginalized. It is through critical literacy, Freire (2018) argues, that such ideas can be challenged and redefined. Thus, it is both about identifying these messages and then taking action on these reflections. To do otherwise would be to support and promote a status quo that is unfair to marginalized groups. The present study considered the inequality between groups by gender (i.e., male and female) and sought to explore if this inequality was supported or challenged by Harley Quinn and her titular texts. The results indicated that, despite all the marketing around Quinn as an empowered and independent superpowered female character in comics, this is not an accurate representation of her or her texts. Quinn continues to be part of the marginalized in comics rather than as a successful challenger of the status quo.

Comics have long been written with a framework of male superiority. Using the lens of feminism within critical literacy, the data collected in this study indicates traditional power structures associated with gender continue to prevail and be supported through Quinn's characterization and her comics. Quinn is still confined and defined by her gender, regardless of her superpowered nature, her advanced degree, and her accomplishments. Existing research into critical gender theory with comics has been limited to analyses of how comics visually depict the female gender, primarily through

sexual objectification and unrealistic body images (Avery-Natale, 2013; and Cocca, 2014). Thus, there has been a gap in the research on how comics depict gender in ways other than visual, including gender power structures and dynamics. The results of the present study contribute to the field by addressing this gap through research into how hegemonic gender norms are the primary influence in the characterization of female comics character Harley Quinn. It also supports the existing research into how visual depictions of the female gender are limited and reflective of patriarchal narratives (e.g., the female body is for objectification).

For all the perceived steps forward in the comics industry with gender representation and inclusion in their content, the findings of this study indicate there is still work to be done. The changes seen in comics with Harley Quinn, a popular female character often touted as the “fourth pillar of DC” Comics, are still superficial in nature as the messages within her texts still support antiquated ideas about gender (Riesman, 2016). Quinn’s characterization has certainly improved since her start in the last decade of the twentieth century, but this growth has been within the parameters of gender as established by [American] culture. Her popularity and presence in more titles published by DC only continues to grow with time – so, too, will (hopefully) her depiction of gender, especially as more fans engage in her content and comics.

Harley Quinn and Participant as “American Females” in Modern Times

Research question 2 explored the ways female adolescent readers used language to describe their experience(s) and understanding(s) of femininity through Quinn in her comics. Further, it sought to uncover the ways in which female adolescents identified (or not) with Quinn in these texts and how they viewed the character as challenging and/or

supporting cultural stereotypes of femininity. The messages revealed by the language-in-use analyses of transcripts from participant interviews and the readers response group meeting indicated these female adolescents to use language in five ways. Using Gee's (2011) tools of identities building, relationships building, politics building, figured worlds, and Big "D" discourse, the language used by participants indicated they all viewed Quinn's behavior and characterization as in alignment or not with her cultural identity as an "American Female."

Looking at the language used by participants via the identifies building tool proposed by Gee (2011), the results of this study provide evidence that the participants (speakers) recognized the identity of "American Female" and treated the identity as relatable to their own (e.g., when the adolescents used statements recognizing they resonated with Quinn; subcode "Teen Resonating with Harley Quinn.") Overall, the participants mostly responded to Quinn in a positive and/or familiar (relatable) way.

When considering the relationships building tool, the data collected indicated participants saw the depiction of Quinn as sustaining the relationship between gender and culture more than trying to change it. An example of this can be seen with the results from the coding category Social Positionality, which concluded participants saw Quinn as functioning within stereotypical social dynamics and fulfilling traditional female roles seen in American culture.

Gee's (2011) politics building tool was best supported by the data when considering the coding category of Behavior Directed at Quinn (B). The language used by participants showed adolescents saw Quinn as having lesser or a lack of power in interpersonal interactions, including sexualization by others and dependence on another.

Power, as they observed, was most often assigned to the male in interactions with Quinn, regardless of if those men were superpowered or not. Thus, the social good of power was withheld from Quinn because of her gender.

With the figured worlds tool, the participants identified cultural gender norms and discussed how those norms influenced storylines and Quinn as a character, such as the prevalence of romance themes and Quinn's lesser status of power in social dynamics. Similar to the analysis seen with the relationships building and identities building tools, the adolescents saw Quinn as enacting a socially recognizable identity ("American Female") that was in alignment with a portrait of normalcy in American culture. Participants saw the interactions and behaviors directed at or by Quinn in the text as supportive of the cultural status quo.

Gee's (2011) Big "D" discourse tool was observed in most of the language used by participants in this study. As noted above, the participants recognized and were cognizant of Quinn's socially recognizable identity of "American Female," and saw language associated with Discourse around this identity in Quinn and her texts. They saw the values assigned to the [American] female gender as present and supported (e.g., prevalence of romance/love themes/elements in her storylines), and they saw Quinn's behavior as most often in alignment with this identity (i.e., supportive of traditional female roles in society).

Using a transactional theory lens to analyze the findings for research question 2, the data indicates female adolescent readers do respond (mostly) positively to Quinn as a character, but they also are fully aware of the gendered messaging around the character and in her storylines. When asked if Quinn could be seen as a feminist – that is, as

someone who is a role model for equity of the genders – the responses by the participants were mixed. Participants often acknowledged she positively represented the gender and challenged gender stereotypes in some ways, but there was not an overwhelming consensus on the idea of Quinn as a full-fledged feminist who was paving new roads for her fellow female comic characters.

Existing research on readers response with adolescent readers of *Archie* and Marvel comics indicates these students are still actively engaging and constructing their attitudes and beliefs about gender and gender relations (Moffatt and Norton, 2008; Dallacqua and Low, 2019; and Dallacqua and Low, 2021). Thus, engaging students in a discourse about this topic can help students (re)evaluate their knowing and understanding of gender through comics. Rosenblatt (1995) argued adolescents do not yet have an established view of life or their own personage; and their experiences and interactions with literary texts help them collect knowledge about themselves and the people around them. The results of the present study contribute additional evidence in support of these ideas by showing study participants evaluated and negotiated their own views and beliefs about gender through their reading of Harley Quinn in her comics.

Unexpected Findings

The most unexpected finding to evolve from this study was the *Practicality* subcode category from the female adolescent readers. Each of the study participants discussed concerns and thoughts relating to the practicality surrounding Quinn's behaviors as related to the realities of the world. For example, the participants often spoke about the concept of comfort and functionality of Quinn's costuming for her adventures and lifestyle. Could she actually run and fight in these costumes? It was

unanticipated for participants to be more cognizant of feasibility of a costume as opposed to its potential sexual objectification. As noted in the literature review of this study, a lot of the existing research on [adult] readers' responses to female comic characters, including Quinn, indicates readers to focus on the hypersexualization of these characters. For this study, while sexual objectification was noticed by the adolescent participants, it was not a major topic of discussion. Thus, there was a difference between the responses of adult and adolescent female readers with this topic; and it was anticipated these responses would have been in alignment. An additional finding that was surprising was how seldom the subcode *Female as Manipulative* appeared in the data for both the content and discourse analyses. Although it did appear at least once in each data set, its frequency never surpassed 10 occurrences (i.e., it had 9 occurrences for research question 1, and 2 occurrences for research question 2). As both a female and a former supervillain/antihero, it was anticipated this subcode would have occurred at a much higher rate.

Implications for the Female Adolescent Reader

There is a hunger and appreciation for female comics characters, such as Quinn, with female adolescents. As some of the more comics experienced participants in this study noted, they want to be part of this space and engaged in these texts. They want more stories with strong female characters in the comics they consume; but they also want to more welcomed by the comics community. In particular, they want comic publishers and comic content creators to acknowledge the interest and experiences of females in their texts in non-gender driven ways. Because, as of right now, the best way

for them to experience storylines that are more about plot than gender, they have to pick up the issues headlined and primarily starring male characters.

As discussed in chapter one of this dissertation, comics have a history of reflecting antiquated ideas about women and their role/potential in society; and this gendered messaging has had real-world consequences (e.g., #Comicsgate). As the cultural and economic impact of comics is back on the rise, it is important to critically consider the messages within these texts and their potential impact on readers. Comic book publishers, such as DC Comics and Marvel, have worked in recent years to market their products to new audiences, including female adolescents, and it would behoove them to consider how their content is being understood by readers. If female readers engage in this content and see the rehashing of old ideas about gender in the pages, will they truly connect with the text and return for more? Additionally, how will these messages impact their own understanding of themselves and their place in society? Comic book publishers must go beyond the superficial ideas of inclusivity, such as making more female superheroes for the sake of it, to capture this audience.

Female adolescent readers must be cognizant of the messages being shown to them in the texts they consume, including comics, and they must articulate their preferences and discontent. They say money talks, and this is no less true with the comics industry than any other. When female adolescent readers engage in comics that align with positive messages about femininity and girlhood, they must find ways to support and promote these texts. Messages of encouragement and recommendation on social media, in book reviews, in social media, etc. are ways to increase the visibility and attract the

attention of publishers and other readers. Female adolescent readers will need to continue to amplify their voices and make their presence known in comic book spaces.

Implications for the Classroom Teacher

This research study shows comics can be a useful academic tool in engaging adolescent readers and connecting their experiences with a text. As stated previously in this paper, comics are often said to be reflective of the [American] culture. Classroom teachers can use these timely and accessible texts to engage in broader topics with their students. What larger themes and messages do their students see in these stories? How do the images and text work together or in conflict to support these messages and messages? Comics are texts that promote visual literacy and can be used to introduce critical literacy topics, like gender, to adolescents. Their bright colors, outlandish storylines, shorter length, and place in mainstream culture should be viewed positively as these elements can be used as part of recruitment strategies to get students engaging in literacy conversations in the classroom. It is time to stop seeing comics as a lesser form of text and to start utilizing them as the engaging academic tools they have the potential to be.

Comics are unique cultural artifacts. As discussed previously, they are reflections of American culture. Classroom teachers can and should use these features to their advantage. Comics can be used as historical documents to depict cultural shifts and attitudes over time. For example, how was race depicted differently in a comic published during the 1940s versus the 2020s? Additionally, teachers can use comics to connect curriculum to the real-world for students. For example, how is are the politics of the second world war depicted in comics? An additional feature of comics is their broader accessibility as compared to more traditional academic texts. In a lesson about

colonialism, for example, a teacher could examine how the topic is depicted in comics like *Sheena, Queen of the Jungle* with students rather a more traditional text like Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Complex topics like this may seem more approachable for students via a comic text with its use of image and text; shorter length; and informal language.

Limitations

A limitation of this study was the population selected for research. Harley Quinn appears in numerous other DC comics (e.g., *Suicide Squad*, *Batman*, *Catwoman*), has additional volumes of her title series (i.e., volumes 1 and 4), and novelizations. These other texts were not part of the population analyzed for the present study, so investigation into these other titles may have offered different insights. For research with the participants, all of the data collected was limited to personal interviews (both individual and in a group). Thus, the amount of data that was able to be collected was limited to the time durations of these meetings, and the researcher had to assume all responses to be truthful. An additional limitation for the research with participants was not all participants were equally represented in the readers response group for a variety of reasons. For example, influences on each individual's level of participation in the readers response were likely influenced by their age, their existing relationships with other participants, and/or their level of prior knowledge with comics and/or Harley Quinn.

Recommendations for Further Research

Because of the noticeable differences in perceptions of Harley Quinn between female adolescents who had an existing knowledge and experience with the character (before implementation of the study) and those who did not, future research could explore

the experiences of these two groups in isolation. Additionally, future research could do a content analysis review of Quinn's comics with a focus on changes in the character over time through purposeful sampling. For example, a more in-depth analysis of Quinn through the entire publication period of the *New 52* era (volume 2); or a comparison between the various volumes of Quinn's headlining comics (e.g., volume 1 versus volume 3). Another area for research exploration would be a comparison between Quinn's gender performance and characterization in various titles and other media. For example, how does Quinn's gender performance vary between her own titles and others that frequently feature her, such as *Suicide Squad* or *Batman*; or how does it compare between her comics and the *Harley Quinn* television show? Due to the limited research currently on Harley Quinn, her presence in various media, and her mainstream popularity, there are many opportunities for future research to be conducted on this topic.

Conclusion

This research study critically analyzed how Harley Quinn performs the female gender in her comics and how these messages about gender are being interpreted by a group of female adolescent readers. Existing research on the use of comics in education; critical gender theory and comics; and readers response with gender depiction in comics was limited, and a need for further research on the types of knowledge and information students gain through comic readership was indicated. Using a qualitative content analysis of a sample of *Harley Quinn* comics, this research study explored Quinn's performance of gender. Then, using a language-in-use analysis of transcripts from interviews and a readers response group meeting with five female adolescent participants, this study investigated how female adolescent readers understood and experienced

femininity through the character. The data collected indicated Quinn's gender (female) was more influential on her characterization and storylines than anything else, including her superpowered nature; and the female participants saw Quinn as enacting and engaging in the socially recognizable identity of "American Female." Overall, the results from this study indicate Quinn to be more in alignment with cultural gender norms than not.

Comics have become a billion-dollar industry in recent years, and their presence only continues to grow in mainstream popular culture. Because of their long history as a male-dominated medium, the recent shift in a more diverse readership has resulted in comic publishers trying to expand and diversify their offerings to meet the needs and preferences of both their male and female audiences. This has led to increased conversations around the depiction of gender in comics. The existing patriarchal narratives used in comic storylines and with comic book characters will no longer serve this changing and ever-expanding fanbase.

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APPENDIX A

List of Individual *Harley Quinn* Issues used in Content Analysis

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APPENDIX B**Questions for Reader's Response Group Meeting**

1. Tell me each about your first experience with Harley Quinn.
 - a. What made you a fan of the character?
 - b. Have you ever felt like you resonated with her?
 - i. If so, in what way(s)?
2. What are some typical things I would hear from others about my fandom (readership) of Harley Quinn?
 - a. At school
 - b. At comic bookstores/conventions
3. Tell me each about your experience with the character as seen in your comics.
 - a. Did you like this version of the character?
 - i. Why or why not?
4. Switching gears for a moment, tell me about some stereotypes about femininity/being female you know or can think of?
 - a. How do they make you feel?
5. When you think about these stereotypes you just told me, do you see Harley Quinn as challenging or reinforcing them? Or some of both?
 - a. Why or why not?
 - b. Does your opinion of this change when you consider the larger “pop culture” version of the character versus the version you experienced in the comic?
 - i. Do the versions differ? If so, how and why do you think that?

6. Is Harley Quinn a positive or negative representative of femininity (the female gender)?
 - a. What would you say is something that could be done to make Harley Quinn a more positive representative of femininity/being female?
 - i. Why?
 - b. Would you say Harley Quinn is a feminist?
 - ii. Why or why not?

APPENDIX C

Questions for Individual Interviews

1. Describe a typical day in your life for me (e.g., school, work, friends, extracurricular).
2. Tell me about your knowledge of Harley Quinn.
 - a. Where have you experienced or seen her?
 - b. What are your thoughts on the character?
 - i. What do you like or dislike about her?
 - c. Why do you think she resonates as a character with people?
 - d. Is Harley Quinn (as depicted in popular culture) a representative of girl power (or feminism) to you?
 - i. Why or why not?
3. If you could talk to Harley Quinn (the character) directly, what would you say?
 - a. What would you want to talk about/do together?
 - b. Do you think you'd be friends in real life? Why or why not?
4. Do you read/enjoy comic books normally?
 - a. If so, which ones?
 - b. If so, what do you enjoy about reading comics?
5. Tell me about your experience reading the *Harley Quinn* comic.
 - a. Did this version Harley Quinn match your existing picture of her?
 - i. If yes/no, how so?
 - b. Did you enjoy reading the comic?
 - i. Did it make you interested in reading more HQ comics?

6. Did reading the *Harley Quinn* comic make you reflect on your own life as a girl and your experiences as a girl in any way(s)?
 - a. If yes/no, how so?
7. If you could speak with a writer and/or artist of the *Harley Quinn* comics, what would you say to them; or want to talk to them about?
8. If you could change anything about Harley Quinn the character in her comics, what would it be?
 - a. Why?
9. As depicted in her comic book you read, do you think Harley Quinn is representative of girl power (or feminism) to you?
 - a. Why or why not?
10. Would you recommend *Harley Quinn* comics to a friend?
 - a. Why or why not?
 - b. How would you describe (sell them) to your friend?

APPENDIX D

IRB Approval Letter

Date: 3-24-2022

IRB #: IRB-2022-14

Title: Harley Quinn Comics and Adolescent Female Readers: An Analysis of Gender Representation and Interpretation

Creation Date: 1-22-2022

End Date: 3-23-2023

Status: **Approved**

Principal Investigator: Madison Edgar

Review Board: SHSU IRB

Sponsor:

Study History

Submission Type	Initial	Review Type	Full	Decision	Approved
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Key Study Contacts

Member	Patricia Durham	Role	Co-Principal Investigator	Contact	[REDACTED]
Member	Madison Edgar	Role	Principal Investigator	Contact	[REDACTED]
Member	Madison Edgar	Role	Primary Contact	Contact	[REDACTED]

APPENDIX E

Angelica: Individual Interview Transcript

1 **RESEARCHER: Here we go! Okay. So, to start us off, can you tell me, like,**
2 **a typical day in your life for me? So, like school, or work, or any kind of**
3 **extracurriculars, or things you do for fun. Just tell me a little bit about you.**

4

5 ANGELICA: Okay, um. I'm, like, still looking for a job, so I don't really do
6 much at the moment, but I often just, you know - typical day waking up, getting
7 to either- I either go hang out at my cousin's house and, like, play video games at
8 his house or any of that; or we'll watch shows together. Um, I like to read for
9 fun. I mainly watch a lot of shows too. I'm like- I like to binge TV shows. That's
10 really fun for me and just like delving into, like, fandom stuff and all that. That's
11 just the typical kind of hobby stuff, I guess.

12

13 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. You said you like to read - are there, like graphic**
14 **novels- or what are the types of things you like to read for fun?**

15

16 ANGELICA: I used to really be into comics. I'm not as much into it as I used to
17 be, but, um- because I read more just, like, YA novels now and, like that kind of
18 thing. Like Sci-Fi fantasy novels. But I used to like really like- like, um, I still
19 kind of - every now and then - will get into like, if I see something, like a big
20 headline comic or something, read that. But otherwise, I don't, like, collect
21 anymore, I guess.

22

23 **RESEARCHER: Yeah, what are some of the comics that you have**
24 **experience with or that you've really enjoyed?**

25

26 ANGELICA: I read the *Harley* ones. I think, it was the- either *Rebirth* - I, like,
27 got into comics right when, like, *New 52* came out-

28

29 **RESEARCHER: Yeah.**

30

31 ANGELICA: -so I read all those. And then I've always been a big *Teen Titans*
32 fan because of the show and all that - so that was kind of how my dad got me
33 into comics, because he wanted to get in it with me again, because he used to be
34 a big comic fan. So, I read a lot of the *Teen Titans* stuff. Um, I read *Nightwing*, I
35 believe. Um, and I can't- I think it was just a lot of *Titans* stuff [small laugh] if I
36 remember right, I think. Yeah.

37

38 **RESEARCHER: Was it the *Teen Titans* from like the 80s, or the one from,**
39 **like, the 2000s, or, like, the new one?**

40

41 ANGELICA: Yeah, I've read a little bit of everything when it comes to *Titans*.
42 My dad found, like, the old 80s ones for super cheap, so I read those just to, like,
43 kind of see the difference and all that. And then, um... Because, also with
44 comics, I'm very particular on art style, I guess. Because if I don't like the art
45 style, I will not read it. And I was, like, really into *Teen Titans* for a while- and
46 then they change characters up so frequently, to the point that I'm like, "this
47 doesn't feel like them anymore." Like- and I was so- I kind of stopped when that
48 got weird; and then, like, they changed artists too, and I was like, "ehh." But, uh,
49 yeah. I read the *New 52 Titans*. I also- and then I obviously- still my favorite just
50 because it's childhood things, is, like, the original show, like the 2003 show- still
51 hits the hardest for me. Yeah. [small laugh]

52

53 **RESEARCHER: I love that show.**

54

55 ANGELICA: Yeah.

56

57 **RESEARCHER: Who's your- Who's your favorite Titan?**

58

59 ANGELICA: Uh, favorite Titan...? I don't know if you would qualify it, but,
60 you know, Terra. I don't know- I'm, like, that one odd Terra fan, I guess. But,
61 you know, I still qualify her as a Titan. But if not her, then Robin, but yeah.

62

63 **RESEARCHER: What do you like about Terra?**

64

65 ANGELICA: I like that she feels real. Like, she feels, um- I like that she makes,
66 like, mistakes. Like, I feel like I have the protect her at every instant, because
67 she's, like, one of the most hated-on characters. And I'm always like- I connect
68 to her with her, like, mistakes and all that. They make her very realistic, at least
69 in that adaptation of her, in comparison to, like, the comics were, like, she's very
70 one-dimensional in the comics, when she's very fourth-dimensional in that show.
71 So, yeah.

72

73 **RESEARCHER: Yeah, that's a really interesting point. I mean, I know you**
74 **said you've read the *Harley Quinns* and then you read this particular *Harley***
75 ***Quinn* - do you see any similarities with her and Terra?**

76

77 ANGELICA: Yeah, I think it's the- I- I do tend to lean towards characters that
78 are kind of, like, antihero kind of thing, where they, like, make mistakes. So,
79 that's why I've always kind of liked Harley because – yeah, I definitely see the
80 similarities in that - where they get involved with things that they probably
81 shouldn't get involved with and then having to deal with those consequences,
82 and all that so. Yeah.

83

84 **RESEARCHER: Yes, that- that would be an apt description. [small laugh]**

85

86 ANGELICA: [laughing] Yes.

87

88 **RESEARCHER: Well, just kind of piggybacking on that...um. Just, like,**
89 **what is your general experience with *Harley Quinn*? Like, I know you kind**
90 **of said you read her *New 52* comics have you- what are other places you've**
91 **seen her or experienced her?**

92

93 ANGELICA: Um, when I- when my mom showed me that we were going to do
94 this, I finally was like, “I need to go and watch that *Harley Quinn* show,” - the
95 cartoon show because I've been wanting to watch it for so long, and we finally
96 got HBO Max. So, I binged all that, and I **really** liked it. So that was really
97 good. Um, I think I started - I may have just started with *Suicide Squad* when I
98 was a kid, like the movie with Harley. I think- I, like, had heard of her before,
99 because I was familiar with DC before that, but, like - that was, like - 2016 was
100 the year I like **really** got into comics again that, like movie really, like, pushed
101 me into it again so... but yeah.

102

103 **RESEARCHER: Yeah, that's, uh, - I mean you kind of hit her at her sweet**
104 **spot because that's kind of when she exploded into being more-**

105

106 ANGELICA: Popularity. Yeah.

107

108 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. What, I mean so you've experienced her since 2016,**
109 **what have been your different thoughts on the character?**

110

111 ANGELICA: Um, so reading- I used to, like, would buy the, like, weekly
112 comics of her when they would come out, like, for the I think the *New 52* ones.
113 And, over time, I started to lose interest. That was the one thing I always, like,
114 complained about. Because, at first, it was so into like delving into her character
115 and her relationships with people - because it was, like, the main storyline I
116 think at one point was, like, the, you know, the typical her and Joker thing. Her
117 having to get over that and then moving on to better things. And then it just got
118 to a point where they just- it felt like she was just a gimmick at some point.
119 Where they were just like, "She's the crazy toxic one, but she has feelings," and
120 then she was like joining the roller-skating gang and all that. And I was just- it
121 got weird after a while. I'm just like, "Why am I reading this?" so, it's, like, she
122 didn't feel genuine after a while, I guess.

123

124 **RESEARCHER: That's- that's a really interesting point. What...what**
125 **originally made you feel like she was genuine? Because I know that's**
126 **something you've mentioned as being important to you, like with Terra.**

127

128 ANGELICA: Yeah. I- I felt like it's, um, her having to go through what she went
129 through and all that. And then having to slowly- like it's a very slow process,
130 especially for Harley - of trying to, like, come to terms with, like, "This isn't
131 okay. I shouldn't be treated this way. Maybe what I'm doing is not that great,"
132 and coming to terms with it. It's also a thing where, once you get to a certain
133 point in a story - once she reaches that it's, "what do you do after that?" And I
134 think that's what, like, - after that point it kind of got like, "Why does she not,
135 like, do the things she used to do?" It just felt like it was silly. It wasn't that, like,
136 her doing goofy things - even though it's a part of her personality - it just didn't
137 feel like her anymore, I guess.

138

139 **RESEARCHER: So, it sounds like kind of the turning point was once we**
140 **kind of were like, “Okay we've established we've moved on from Joker”**
141 **...but, without that component it- the character kind of felt lost it seems.**

142

143 ANGELICA: Yeah, I think the introduction of, like, the dynamic between her
144 and, um, Ivy really added to her, and I think that was great. And then, it was
145 when she- when she was by herself, it felt like they didn't know what to do with
146 her. So, they constantly stuck her with like Birds of Prey and all that. They never
147 knew what to do with her, like, by herself, I guess. Of, “What does Harley do
148 besides do crazy things? Like, what does she do in her free time? Just go kill
149 people?” Like, they didn't really know, and I think that's what, yeah.

150

151 **RESEARCHER: No, I think that's a fantastic point. Because I feel like,**
152 **when I was reading through the comics, I had a similar thing like, “Can**
153 **Harley ever just be on her own?” Does she always have to be in an**
154 **ensemble?”**

155

156 ANGELICA: Mm hmm.

157

158 **RESEARCHER: Um. So, I mean, I feel like you've kind of touched on it -**
159 **like things that you liked and disliked. But are there more things specific**
160 **about the character that you really enjoy or that you, you know, like, “Eh, I**
161 **don't really care for that part.”**

162

163 ANGELICA: Um, I think to, like, a certain – (sighs) Um, I really - like I said,
164 everything I think of when I think of Harley, it's just relationships with her.
165 Like, it-it's never by herself that I feel like she's strong. I-I like the idea of her
166 being like, she's, like, a female - especially in comics - to have, like, the kind of,
167 like, ‘crazy, just kind of fun, you never know what she's going to do,’ kind of
168 thing. That's- that was her gimmick and kind of cool that way. And you just
169 never knew what to expect with her, and I really like that, but then...umm...hm,
170 I don't know...for sure.

171

172 **RESEARCHER: Yeah, I mean she's, like- we've kind of mentioned - she**
173 **became super popular in the last couple of years. Why do you think people**
174 **like her, or maybe even resonate with her?**

175

176 ANGELICA: I feel like, for the most part, the popularity comes with, again the
177 fact that people are just like, “Oh, she's like- she's, like, this powerful girl, and
178 all this.” Especially for girls. Like, that one year, even I- like me and, uh, my
179 family and friends, we dressed up - like for Halloween - we did, like, the whole
180 *Suicide Squad* gang, and I was Harley, and my cousin was Joker, and another
181 friend was Katana. And, like, everyone at that Halloween party I went to that
182 year was Harley. Because everyone loved to be, like, that cool, spunky, doesn't-
183 take-like-no-for-an-answer kind of girl. And I think that, like, really pushed her
184 because there wasn't really a- just kind of going with the flow. She doesn't take
185 anything from anyone, and people kind of resonated with that. It's like inner
186 emotions people wanted to, like, show, and she showed it, like, fully for
187 everyone. So.

188

189 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. No, actually in my research, I found that the year**
190 ***Suicide Squad* came out, she was, like, the number one Halloween costume**
191 **across the board-**

192

193 ANGELICA: Yes [laughs]. She very much was, yes.

194

195 **RESEARCHER: Well, I think you actually like kind of touched on what I**
196 **was going to ask next. Like, do you think she's a good or bad representation**
197 **of girl power?**

198

199 ANGELICA: I think she- she is to an extent. Like, I love that she, again, shows
200 what people want to show, and, like, she doesn't take anything from anyone.
201 And I think that's great - except for she does take it from Joker, but that also
202 adds to her character and her having to, like, go off of that. So, I think she's a
203 good representation of it, for the most part. Yeah.

204

205 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. I mean, like, you've kind of mentioned, there's so**
206 **few characters like her. So, you know, it's kind of, like, what we get from**
207 **her is almost extra amplified. So, if- let's just say you could have a**
208 **conversation with the character, what's something you would say to her?**

209

210 ANGELICA: Oh man... I don't know, um. Probably just to, like, go off and do
211 her thing. Find what she wants to do first, like the self-thing first – cause, you
212 know. And then, um, become her own person - because that's a big thing she
213 struggles with, of, like, realizing who she is first. I'm like, “Y- just go settle
214 down. Do something.” I know she's not the type to, like, settle and just do
215 something - but just take a second and, like, think about everything around you,
216 and **then** move on from there. So yeah.

217

218 **RESEARCHER: Yeah, what- do you think you'd ever hang out with her?**
219 **Be friends with her in real life?**

220

221 ANGELICA: Ah, man. I would love to, but I feel like I would be so stressed
222 around her. Cause I'm such a goody-two-shoes, and I, like, I was always that
223 friend that was like, “Oh no, don't do that,” and she would just commit so many
224 crimes that I feel like she- she would put the blame on me and then be like, “I
225 love you! Later!” because that's just the kind of person she is. So, it'd be fun, but
226 also kind of stressful.

227

228 **RESEARCHER: No, I think that's a great description. When I watch-**

229

230 ANGELICA: Yes.

231

232 **RESEARCHER: -when I watched the TV show, I'm like, “I'm definitely**
233 **more of an Ivy in this dynamic.” [laughs]**

234

235 ANGELICA: Very much so, yes. I just- I'd be a babysitter at that point. [laughs]
236 Yeah.

237

238 **RESEARCHER: So, I know that you said you don't read comic books as**
239 **much anymore, but you definitely went through a big phase. What is**
240 **something you enjoy about reading comics just generally?**

241

242 ANGELICA: Um, I don't know - I've always just been obsessed with, like, the
243 Sci-Fi fantasy and, like, the powers thing. Like, I always loved the power

244 dynamic. And I think, with *Teen Titans*, I always loved characters when they're
245 in a team. Like, even though I do like that – like, I love the aspect of trying to
246 figure out friendships, relationships, and seeing that, like, evolve, because I like
247 group things and like seeing that kind of thing. So, and then, plus the powers is
248 just, like, an extra thing – like, “ooh they have some cool power I didn't even
249 think about- could be a thing.” So, that's always cool too.

250

251 **RESEARCHER: Do, um... I know you mentioned one of the things that**
252 **was really important to you was the art. So, is there something in particular**
253 **that you are looking for in the art? Like something that you really want or**
254 **really like versus something you're like, “I can't do this”?**

255

256 ANGELICA: There's, like, a medium for me. I don't like it when they go to
257 cartoony. There's like a certain style that this one artist started to do with *Teen*
258 *Titans*, where they had, like, very defined features. And it's really weird, and
259 they just looked kind of, like, cartoonish too much for me. But then I also don't
260 like the side, where it's like the old comic book styles where everyone just has,
261 like, muscles for like no reason at all. Where it's just, like, insanely
262 [accentuated]. I'm like everyone had to be like this really fit like, big buff kind
263 of dude. And I was just like, “Eh-ek, I don't know,” - I was like, “I don't know
264 how that's relatable but-“ [small laugh] -when they're, like, super buff and just a
265 little too much detail for me. Like there's a good medium. Like the cover art for
266 the *Harley Quinn* comic that you gave me is kind of like the good medium I like
267 usually - where it's like cartoonish without being too much and then not, like,
268 insanely detailed.

269

270 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. Is there something like - I know you kind of**
271 **mentioned with the boys, like there's usually, like, really accentuated**
272 **muscles and sometimes there's muscles in places you're like, “is there even**
273 **a muscle?” -**

274

275 ANGELICA: [small laugh] yeah.

276

277 **RESEARCHER: - What do you feel like the reverse of that is for, maybe,**
278 **female characters?**

279

280 ANGELICA: Oh yeah totally - it's always the typical, um, very skinny, big-
281 chested, very-. And then some, every now and then, you have, like, those few,
282 like, big, rough, buff girls who were, like, the exact opposite. They could never
283 be in between - it always had to be either they were insanely, like, feminine and
284 skinny and tall and, like, accentuated everywhere; or they were insanely buff
285 and, like, masculine. Like there was no in between for that. So, for sure.

286

287 **RESEARCHER: Yeah, I think that's a fantastic point. Like I think of Big**
288 **Barda, for example -**

289

290 ANGELICA: Mm hmm.

291

292 **RESEARCHER: - where she's exactly what you're talking about - almost**
293 **masculinized.**

294

295 ANGELICA: Mm hmm.

296

297 **RESEARCHER: Sorry, my cat's jumping up on the desk.**

298

299 ANGELICA: [laughing]

300

301 **RESEARCHER: But what - do you feel like, visually, when they're either**
302 **ultra-feminine or they're almost masculine, do you feel like that's reflected**
303 **in their character at all?**

304

305 ANGELICA: Definitely sometimes. And I can always tell when it's – like, I
306 think that was why I kind of fell out of comics too. Because, after a while, I was
307 like, “Oh my gosh, this is such a guy thing.” Like, it just it felt like it was very
308 from the male point of view of, ‘at the end of the day, they're just females and
309 they're supposed to look pretty even if they're fighting in a war - or if they're not,
310 then they're like these war machines.’ So it – yeah, it was definitely obvious.
311 [small laugh]

312

313 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. I mean, I think you have a good point, because – I**
314 **mean, sometimes, do you ever feel like the art takes you out of it, because it**
315 **is so “whatever”?**

316

317 ANGELICA: Yes. That's why I quit so many series because of the art style.
318 Like, after a while, because that's what - when they would suddenly - there was
319 like one particular artist I liked, like Brett Booth or something, or Jim Lee. And
320 they were, like, **so good** at it. And then they were, like, switch up out of
321 nowhere - and if it, like, didn't look the way I like imagined it in my head, or if it
322 just completely change - it can change a character, like, just by the way they're
323 drawn and I was like, “This isn't what I signed up for. This isn't what I thought
324 they were going to be like.” So, I just would quit them.

325

326 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. I mean, I like how you said that it can change the**
327 **character. Can you elaborate more on that for me?**

328

329 ANGELICA: Um, I feel like because - especially with, um - *Teen Titans* did this
330 weird phase where, um, they changed up - even not just the art style, but they
331 changed the, like, characters outline as a whole. So, like Raven's outfit got
332 completely changed to more of like a bird thing, where she had, like, these
333 feathers on her face and stuff. It just - it changed her up a lot. I don't know. It-it
334 just didn't feel like her anymore because they were just trying to be like, “Look -
335 she's flashy and showy,” when that's **so** not her character at all. And then, even
336 though I do kind of like the new Harley look - I do like the Harley look like
337 compared to the typical, from, like, the 90s show one, because I feel like it does
338 reflect more of her. But at the same time, it does feel a little bit sexualized in a
339 way, because, you know, it's like the ‘daddy's little monster’ thing on the front.
340 Like, it does feel that way, but, at the end of the day, that is just who she is
341 [small laugh]. So.

342

343 **RESEARCHER: Yeah, I was just about to ask – like, when you think of**
344 **Harley's, like... I mean her *Rebirth* outfit and her *New 52* outfit are a little**
345 **similar, unless you compare like the *Suicide Squad* comics outfit which is**
346 **basically a corset...**

347

348 ANGELICA: Yeah.

349

350 **RESEARCHER: Um, what are your thoughts on her different outfits?**
351 **Like, do you feel like they've kind of changed? I know you're saying that**
352 **you like the newer outfit more than, like, the 90s one, which was just a full**
353 **costume ensemble.**

354

355 ANGELICA: Mm hmm. Um, I feel like - I also like the idea of costumes
356 reflecting – like, actually being like, you know, the typical of - like looking at
357 Wonder Woman. Like, no one could actually fight in that, kind of thing. And it's
358 like - it needs to be realistic to me. Like, I don't know. I like the, like, jester
359 costumes and stuff - but it just didn't feel like - how she going to run in that?
360 That looks kind of goofy and all that. And, you know, at least, like the newer
361 outfits looked more, like, breathable, and it fit more of her and, like, being able
362 to actually do the crazy things that she does, and I think that's a big reason why.
363 So, yeah.

364

365 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. So, I know you talked about - you read part two of**
366 ***Harley Loves Joker*, right?**

367

368 ANGELICA: I think so. I believe.

369

370 **RESEARCHER: Yeah.**

371

372 ANGELICA: Oh yes, oh yes. The comic, yes.

373

374 **RESEARCHER: That's my cat, Opal, behind me [laughs].**

375

376 ANGELICA: How cute [small laugh]

377

378 **RESEARCHER: Um, so tell me - what was your experience reading it?**
379 **Like, just kind of give me a little bit of insight into what your thoughts**
380 **were.**

381

382 ANGELICA: Oh. Immediately when I started reading it, I was like, “Oh my
 383 gosh, did they pull this...?” - like they- it-it reminded me of the pilot episode of
 384 the *Harley Quinn* cartoon. I was like, I wonder if they pulled this or - like the
 385 whole therapist scene, I was like, “I’m pretty sure this is in the cartoon, because
 386 I have a very familiar feeling.” And I was like - I like the whole her having to,
 387 like, deal with her inner - like her own self being her therapist was kind of neat.
 388 I like the whole idea of that. And it felt like the typical Harley comic where it's
 389 like, ‘(sighs) well, Joker is not treating me well. What should I do?’ and then
 390 trying to, like, reason with herself. And then she goes, ‘nah, that's fine,’ and then
 391 it just ends how most Harley comics where - where she just goes with him,
 392 despite it all. And he does, like, one decent thing where she's like, ‘Oh Okay!’
 393 and, like, latches on to it because it’s only thing she knows. And I was just like,
 394 “Ugh. Okay, hopefully it goes somewhere else from there, [small laugh] - cause
 395 that's typical Harley.”

396

397 **RESEARCHER: Yeah, I think you have a good point because – yeah, when**
 398 **I read it too, it was, like, one kind gesture! That's all it takes for her to**
 399 **forgive everything! -**

400

401 ANGELICA: Mm hmm. For sure.

402

403 **RESEARCHER: - I mean, what kind of message do you feel like...her**
 404 **dynamic with Joker, or even what you saw in this comic - do you feel like**
 405 **maybe kind of communicates about relationships or even being a girl in**
 406 **that situation?**

407

408 ANGELICA: Yeah. I feel like they...had the right direction with it, where they
 409 were trying to be like, “This is not okay. You need to get yourself out of this
 410 kind of situation. This is never healthy.” And - but then at the end of the day, for
 411 most of the time, they'll realize that: “Oh, this is the only dynamic she knows.
 412 We have to keep her in it, so-” And then, like, I don't know - if there's no
 413 resolution in it, what did it prove, I guess? In a way, like, where it shows - or I
 414 guess that ‘recovery is hard’ could be another message that they were kind of
 415 trying to show? I believe, I guess. Um, but yeah, it just kind of feels like it's just
 416 a cycle, where over and over and over again, showing that she gets abused; one
 417 little thing that he does kind of nice sends her- all her doubts go away; and then
 418 it's just a cycle over and over and over again.

419

420 **RESEARCHER: Do you feel like, at this point, that's kind of, like, Harley's**
421 **biggest characteristic that people recognize with her - is that, well, she was**
422 **with Joker, and she has that weird relationship. Or, I mean, do you feel like**
423 **she's grown past that at this point?**

424

425 ANGELICA: I feel like - because obviously they started out where she was
426 literally just created to be like, "Oh, Joker has a girlfriend - how cool! - in the
427 show." And then now they're trying to figure out "Well, how do we deal with
428 her as a character alone now?" And I feel like, for a while, it was kind of like,
429 "Ugh, again? She's with Joker, again?" After a while - I think she's definitely
430 grown, like the show made me feel like she was slowly growing. Like, I thought
431 that was a good representation of her character and, like her, having to discover
432 self before she could, like, move on to a new relationship with, like, Ivy and
433 stuff. I'm, like, - it showed that she had to actually, like, deal with her own stuff
434 first. So, I think she's definitely grown since then - characteristic wise - but she
435 is still that person that, um, latches on to people - with even, like, it- all doubts
436 in mind. Just, if they have one little nice thing to say to her, she latches on, and I
437 think that's just a characteristic that's like stuck with her since the beginning.

438

439 **RESEARCHER: And you feel like you see that both in her TV/movie**
440 **appearances and in the comics?**

441

442 ANGELICA: Yes, very much so.

443

444 **RESEARCHER: Yeah, I mean - [external noise] Yay, fast drivers. [small**
445 **laugh] Um, when you read the comic, or you know just kind of - because**
446 **your comic in particular had a really good aspect of, like you said, really**
447 **working through internalized feelings, trying to find herself - all while**
448 **dealing with this relationship that's not great. Did any of it when you were**
449 **reading it make you reflect on your own experiences as a girl? Or just made**
450 **you reflect on, "Yeah, you know, I know that's a thing that some of my**
451 **friends that are girls have gone through." Was there any kind of real-life**
452 **connection for you that you saw?**

453

454 ANGELICA: Hmm, I don't know. Umm, I don't know. I don't think I've ever
455 dealt with, like, a, like a relationship like that firsthand - but I've definitely seen
456 people around me where I like - it takes- it's really hard for me to, like, say,
457 "They're not treating you right." And they're, like, - I always feel bad because,

458 you know, they're so happy, and like, - or at least they think they're happy, so
459 you don't want to ruin that for other people. And - but at the end of the day, you
460 can see it. If you can see it, why can't they? It's that kind of thing. But, when
461 you're stuck in that kind of relationship and makes you realize that like, "Oh
462 they're still in that, like, 'love is blind' phase" - where just as long as they're in
463 love, you know, can't really do anything about it, and then it comes to bite them
464 later. So yeah.

465

466 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. Do you think if you – like, if they picked up this**
467 **comic and read it, do you think... they would make a connection like that to**
468 **the story?**

469

470 ANGELICA: Um, yeah - possibly, I think. But again, it's like the whole - that
471 comic doesn't feel like it, like, resolves in the end. It just shows the cycle, I
472 guess. It maybe- it could like help them recognize that cycle if they saw it,
473 maybe. Yeah.

474

475 **RESEARCHER: No, I think that's a good point. I mean, it even gave me an**
476 **idea – like, if you recognize that, I mean, would it be terrible if you put like**
477 **a PSA at the back - that was like, "If you're in a relationship like this,**
478 **here's a phone number you can call"?**

479

480 ANGELICA: Yeah, for sure.

481

482 **RESEARCHER: If you could talk to the writer - because yours also in that**
483 **-that its unique - it was written by the guy who created Harley, so it's very**
484 **much on brand for her. I mean, if you have a conversation with him or even**
485 **the artists, is there anything in particular you'd want to say to them or talk**
486 **about or critique?**

487

488 ANGELICA: Hmm...I feel like there's this, like, weird gimmick with Harley
489 where there's – it's al- it feels like the plots almost always the same when it
490 involves Joker. Where it's like this typical - there's either some other new love
491 interest; or some weird wacky character that gets thrown into the bunch and
492 messes up their dynamic. And then, you know, I-I do like the idea of, like,
493 having Batman kind of just there like – it - and even he's like looking at Harley
494 like, "Why are you still here?" [laughs] Like he, he- I like that he has, like, a soft

495 spot for her, even though he, like, obviously, like, doesn't do it. And I like that
 496 dynamic. But, um...I don't know. I just feel like changing it up every now and
 497 then I guess, would be my biggest critique - where it's, like, I get that it's
 498 supposed to show, like, the cycle thing. But it's just - I don't know. Is it a good
 499 message to show that, like – they, kind of, like, laugh it off at the end. Like, they
 500 literally laugh it off at the end where it's just them being childish again and
 501 “wooo!” cycle. And I'm like, “What did we figure out here?” Did Harley – did,
 502 even like for a second, she was, like, really thinking about it, and then the
 503 second he did something good, she's like, “Okay, whatever!” and then that's it.
 504 [small laugh] The end. So, yeah.

505

506 **RESEARCHER: No, I think you make a fantastic point. I had similar,**
 507 **similar thoughts. And I liked that you brought up -be- the Batman part**
 508 **because I thought that was interesting. Because you've seen that a couple**
 509 **times - like you see it in the comics and sometimes you see it- see it in like**
 510 **the old shows, like the 90s show - where even Batman almost takes, like, a**
 511 **dad-like approach to her and is like, “Come on, girl. Like, you can do**
 512 **better.”**

513

514 ANGELICA: [laughs] Yeah.

515

516 **RESEARCHER: If there's anything you could change about Harley that -**
 517 **the character in the comics, because I know that the TV show's a little bit**
 518 **different because it's kind of expanded on her –**

519

520 ANGELICA: Yeah.

521

522 **RESEARCHER: - but like thinking of her in the comics that you've read,**
 523 **what's something that you would want to change or improve upon?**

524

525 ANGELICA: (sighs) Man, I just - I feel like flushing her out would be better/ I
 526 don't know how exactly I- like to do it. Like, I don't know how to put words to
 527 it. But just the idea of - she's not just this girl that does weird wacky things 24/7,
 528 and that's all she is good for and all that. And, um, where she can have actual
 529 relationships with people where it's not just - you know, like Ivy's the good
 530 example of, like, her slowly, like, being able to open up to people, and it be a
 531 normal relationship. Like, how- let her have one normal relationship! That's all I

532 want. And it's not just some weird character that she meets 'em because it's
 533 funny! And, like, that character is just there for laughs. Like, can she have, like,
 534 her having to figure out those actual kind of things, I guess.

535

536 **RESEARCHER: Do you think it's fair to say that Harley sometimes feels**
 537 **one-dimensional in that sense?**

538

539 ANGELICA: Yes. I will say - that was my biggest problem, like, as the comics
 540 were going on that I read back when. And what made me ended up quitting
 541 reading them - eventually - was that it just it felt childish after a while, where
 542 they just - instead of - when she was going in the right direction, they suddenly
 543 back-pedaled on her and were like, "Oh well, now she's just this wacky goofy
 544 girl." I'm like, "Is that just always what she's going to be?" This wacky girl that
 545 goes and, like, does roller skater derbies; where she like slashes at people and
 546 stuff; and she joined, like, - I think the last one I read she joined a punk rock
 547 band or something. And I was just like, "Why?" [laughing] I was like, "What is
 548 this?" I was like - I don't know. It just - nothing felt like it had purpose anymore
 549 for her. It just felt like, "Oh, because she's Harley, we can do whatever kind of
 550 storyline we want, and people can't complain about it because that's just who
 551 Harley is," and I'm like, "But you can give her stuff, and make her go through
 552 stuff that has consequences, and it's not just, like, a laugh gag," I guess - because
 553 everything feels like a laugh gag with her. Where it's just, like, after a while she
 554 doesn't have consequences for a lot of stuff because she just either kills the
 555 person who does it, or just runs away, and that's it and, like nothing solved.
 556 Woo, another day for Harley.

557

558 **RESEARCHER: No, I think you have a great point. I mean, do you feel like**
 559 **there's even - or is there a male character that you could even compare that**
 560 **to?**

561

562 ANGELICA: Oh, I don't even know. That's a good - I don't know. Huh. In DC
 563 specifically? I have no idea. Like I can't think of anyone that's like close to her.
 564 Hmm.

565

566 **RESEARCHER: Do you think there's, like, any male characters that are as**
 567 **one-dimensional as her - that might be, like, they have no complexity, kind**
 568 **of like what you're describing with her?**

569

570 ANGELICA: I can't think of any off the top of my head, but there probably
 571 definitely is – ‘cause I feel like there's a lot of characters out there. And, you
 572 know, the more- as they add more and more characters, it's just the sake of, are
 573 they a character there for a reason; or are they just there to represent something
 574 and be like, “Oh, look! We have this kind of character, we have this kind of
 575 character - that's all they are!” and so on and so on. So - but yeah, it's definitely
 576 more on the female side I would say, where it's, like - it's just the typical ‘she's
 577 the crazy female, woo!’ and that's that.

578

579 **RESEARCHER: Would you recommend her comics to a friend of yours?**

580

581 ANGELICA: Um, the older ones I would say. Like this one I probably would.
 582 But, like, as *New 52* and *Rebirth* went on, probably not. Like, I would probably
 583 just recommend the ones where it, like, actually shows her, like, going and
 584 doing things - and not just being like, “Hey! You want to see [small laugh]
 585 Harley join a punk rock band? Because that's exciting!” Like, [inaudible]...So, I
 586 think the earlier ones I would. But I'd be like- I'd probably, like, throw in like,
 587 “Stay away from the later ones,” but.

588

589 **RESEARCHER: Well, uh. Do you have any other thoughts you want to**
 590 **share with me today? About like Harley in general, or the comic that you**
 591 **read, or just your opinion as a fan- a girl fan of comic books.**

592

593 ANGELICA: Oh yeah, I - oh, I get heated on some of that kind of stuff. Cause,
 594 like, genuinely - and the sad thing is too, when I first got into Harley, I, like,
 595 really liked Harley and Joker together. Because it was just that whole like, “Oh
 596 it's the too crazy villain couple. Let's go!” and then, like, as you read on, you're
 597 like, “God, this is awful. [laughing] Like, why are they doing this!?” I was, like,
 598 - cause, you know, it was trying to show originally, “Oh, can Joker have
 599 feelings? Like, is he actually human?” And then – no, he's just a menace, so I
 600 don't know. And then Harley's the one that they tried to, like, add on to instead
 601 of him; and I just – ugh, I don't know. And then, especially with, um, girls in
 602 comics - that was another thing that really pushed me away from comics after a
 603 while, because everything felt like it was from a male gaze after a while. Where
 604 I'm just like - in all the, like, stories felt the same. Where it was just the typical
 605 like, “Ooo, big buff superhero saves the day,” – woo, nothing else to it really.
 606 And I was just like, “I need something else; this isn't [small laugh] okay

607 anymore.” I was just like, - ugh, I don't know. I just felt like we moved beyond
 608 that point, but there's so many writers that still write like that. And I was just
 609 kind of like, “ugh,” so that was the thing that always got me kind of upset about
 610 comics. [small grunt]

611

612 **RESEARCHER: Yeah, and from the male gaze - do you mean just visually;**
 613 **or do you also mean, like, the writing and the way the character's depicted?**

614 -

615

616 ANGELICA: Oh yeah, all of it –

617

618 **RESEARCHER: Like which – (stops)**

619

620 ANGELICA: - Oh yes, all of it. I-it stood out big time in a lot of them. I know
 621 more now are trying to open up to, like, new things, and all that. But, some of
 622 them feel forced. It doesn't feel gen- nothing feels genuine really. But, um, male
 623 gaze meaning, like, the- from the way that the characters look, to how they
 624 interact with each other - like some things. And I'm just like, “Why, like”
 625 ...there's always the main villain who has, like, the two girls on his side. I'm just
 626 like, “Are we still kind of doing this?” I'm just like, “Okay, I guess,” because,
 627 you know, that shows power, woo. I'm just like - I don't know. It always just felt
 628 forced. It-you - I hate when you can tell what gender the writer is - that should
 629 never show in a work to me. That's what always makes me upset, because I'm
 630 just like, “Why? Why can't I just enjoy the story?” I was, like, instead I'm sitting
 631 there going, “Oh, that's how you feel about that. Okay, cool.” [small laugh] It's
 632 just, like, yeah.

633

634 **RESEARCHER: Yeah, and do you- can you think of, like, an example**
 635 **when you're like, “That's clearly a girl writer,” versus “That's clearly a boy**
 636 **writer”?**

637

638 ANGELICA: Um, I feel like – mm, there was one story - I do not remember
 639 which one it was. It was a DC comic because I only really read DC ones, but
 640 um. I want to think it was either one of the *Titan* ones and-or *Nightwing*. And it
 641 was a main villain, and one of the guy characters said something that would-
 642 used to be kind of socially accepted, in, like, about what he was saying about a
 643 certain, like, female character, or something. And I'm just like, “We're still

644 talking like that? Are you kidding me?” And I was just kind of like - it was
645 obvious the way the males were talking that like, “Oh, okay;” or the way the
646 female characters would just, like, kind of, like, do their thing - they felt very
647 background. You could always tell that, when female characters were kind of
648 just there ‘to be there,’ but it was more of a male story. And then, when it was a
649 female writer, I read, um, - I think it was a female author, I'm not 100% sure –
650 on one of the *Starfire* comics, the, like, really iconic *Starfire* one - it felt girly.
651 [small laugh] I could tell. That was just like, “Okay she's fine or whatever.”
652 Sometimes the girl ones can kind of get just, like- you can tell it's a girl too,
653 where it's like, “Okay, I’m a girl superhero. Let me go do girly things.” I’m just
654 like, “Okay, cool. I guess, or whatever.” But, you know, you can always tell.
655 You can always tell it- just through the writing, through the art style, through
656 everything.

657

658 **RESEARCHER: If you're talking about - are you talking about the *Starfire***
659 **comic where she's in Miami...or Florida?**

660

661 ANGELICA: Yes, I think so.

662

663 **RESEARCHER: So that, if I remember correctly –**

664

665 ANGELICA: I don’t know if that’s female or male, but...

666

667 **RESEARCHER: If I remember correctly, that- that is the same team that**
668 **made the *Harley Quinn New 52*.**

669

670 ANGELICA: Oh, is it?

671

672 **RESEARCHER: Yeah, Amanda Connor and her husband, Jimmy Pal-**

673

674 ANGELICA: Yeah, okay yeah. I was like, I thought I recognized the art style.
675 Yeah that's - it is the same art style as this. Yeah, that's right.

676

677 **RESEARCHER: I think they switched to *Starfire* when they stopped doing**
678 ***Harley Quinn*.**

679

680 ANGELICA: Oh, I didn't know that. I was like, 'cause I don't pay attention to
681 authors most of the time. I usually just, like, look at, like, the art style and go,
682 "Hm, that looks similar. That looks good," and I just call it a day. But yeah, now
683 that you say that I do recognize art style. [laughs] For sure.

684

685 **RESEARCHER: No, I think that's great, and I think you have a fantastic**
686 **point - because part of the issues with *Harley* was almost like she had**
687 **these... 'no big high stakes adventures.' And then, when you're describing**
688 ***Starfire*'s comic, it's, like, now *Starfire*'s off doing girly stuff -**

689

690 ANGELICA: Mm hmm.

691

692 **RESEARCHER: - which doesn't feel high stakes in the same way.**

693

694 ANGELICA: Yeah, I know. Like, I-I know it was a part of *Starfire*'s character,
695 but you know – it-it's kind of sad when the only times you get excited - for both
696 *Harley* and *Starfire* – it was, like, the only time you got excited was when there
697 would be big event things. And usually, the big event things were them hooking
698 up with someone, like when Dick Grayson and made an appearance for, like,
699 two minutes - you were like, "Oh my God, yes!" and then, you know, that was it
700 - because that's their relationship now. And then same thing with *Harley* - every
701 time there was, like, a *Joker* arc, you're like, "Oo, this is actually cool. Let's go!"
702 And then, after that, you're like, "They don't know what to do with them by
703 themselves," and it's just another day. [small laugh]

704

705 **RESEARCHER: Well, thank you so much for talking with me today -**

706

707 ANGELICA: Yeah!

708

709 **RESEARCHER: - I'm going to go ahead and pause the recording.**

710

711 ANGELICA: All right.

APPENDIX F**Eliza: Individual Interview Transcript**

712 **RESEARCHER: Okay perfect! Soooo, let's get started.**

713 **RESEARCHER: Okay. So. You tell me - as we get started - kind of describe**
714 **a typical day in your life. Like school, if you have a job, friends, do you do**
715 **like extra clubs or anything? Just tell me a little bit about you.**

716

717 ELIZA: Yeah. Um, usually, I would like get up in the morning, get ready to go
718 to school. Uh, I kind of quit band, so I don't really do that anymore. And, um,
719 cause I just graduated – I don't really do much anymore. But, uh, I just go to
720 school, go to my, um, my digital media classes, that I usually have my art
721 classes and usually hang out with some friends in those classes, but nothing
722 really much. I don't really do too much outside of school either. If not, I go
723 home and talk to my friends online or play some video games and here and there
724 - but I don't, don't do too much outside of school and stuff like that.

725

726 **RESEARCHER: Cause you're gonna go to college for art, right?**

727

728 ELIZA: Yeah. Yeah, I am. Yeah.

729

730 **RESEARCHER: Is there, like, a particular art you're interested in doing,**
731 **like animation or illustration?**

732

733 ELIZA: Um, I'm going for animation. That is, uh, one of the things I definitely
734 want to learn and work on more. Uh, I really enjoyed it in high school. I got to
735 take a couple classes there. But, um, yeah. Animation and just art in general is
736 really fun to do.

737

738 **RESEARCHER: That's awesome! I'm so jealous.**

739 ELIZA: [small laugh]

740

741 **RESEARCHER: Well, tell me just generally, what is your knowledge of**
742 **Harley Quinn as a character? Whether it's the comics, or the larger pop**
743 **culture, movies - just where have you experienced her or seen her?**

744

745 ELIZA: Hm. Um, I've mostly seen her, like, on the movies and TV shows. Um,
746 she was, like, a very crazy character that I've-I've seen. I haven't really looked
747 into her story much. Like, I know she has a TV show, I think. Um...

748

749 **RESEARCHER: Mhm.**

750

751 ELIZA: I haven't seen it yet. I've been wanting to but, uh. It seems pretty
752 interesting. It probably goes more in depth with what kind of character she is
753 and why she's like that. Um, but to me she's always seemed like the chaotic, like,
754 person to just, like, run around and do whatever she wants - in the movies, at
755 least, she does that. Like, in *Suicide Squad*, they did that. Um, but yeah. She
756 seems kind of cool, [small laugh] to be honest. She's like -

757

758 [overlapping voices]

759

760 **RESEARCHER: You're not wrong!**

761

762 ELIZA: [small laugh] Yeah.

763

764 **RESEARCHER: Well, you're saying that you think she's kind of cool.**
765 **What are things that you do like about her?**

766

767 ELIZA: Um, she's confident. She's very confident about a lot of things. Uh, she
768 doesn't care what people, likes, think about her. As I've seen her so far, she just
769 does whatever she wants. Um, she creates chaos, [small laugh] sometimes, but
770 yeah. She does.

771

772 **RESEARCHER: Um, when you read the comic, did, like, you discover**
773 **anything new about the character that you liked?**

774

775 ELIZA: Um, I discovered that - cause in this *Rebirth* [*Rebirth* #1] one, I guess
776 it's like after she's, like, done with the Joker in a sense. Like they've broken up -
777 that's what it's said so far. That, um. That she's kind of trying to be her own
778 person and trying to take control of what she wants to do. Um...yeah. So, she,
779 like, talks to some of her friends, and she hangs out with her friends, and she
780 kind of tries to tell them - she's like, "I'm not really a part of Joker. Joker isn't
781 like - I'm not going to be, like, a shadow behind him. I'm going to be my own
782 person." And stuff like that.

783

784 **RESEARCHER: Yeah! Did you feel like you resonated with that idea or**
785 **that concept at all?**

786

787 ELIZA: A little bit. Cause I know I, I'm a pretty quiet person. And so, I would
788 kind of just, like, be behind people sometimes. But, like, certain stuff like I've,
789 in my animations, - I like, um. ...I entered in some animations for stuff, and I
790 got back good-, like, good reports from it. That I'm like, "Okay, maybe I am
791 pretty good at this." And I've shown my talent. That, like, "hey, I don't - I'm not
792 just behind some of the people. I can do it too," and stuff like that.

793

794 **RESEARCHER: Yeah! That's awesome.**

795

796 ELIZA: Yeah.

797

798 **RESEARCHER: Was there something - Is there something about the**
799 **character that you're kind of, like, "uh, that's not my favorite,"?**

800

801 ELIZA: [small laugh] Um...not really. I didn't really find anything there. Um.
802 [pauses] Yeah-no. Not really.

803

804 **RESEARCHER: I know you said, like, you kind of resonated with her in**
805 **terms of, like, wanting to not be in the shadows -**

806

807 ELIZA: Yeah.

808

809 **RESEARCHER: - uh, be her own person. Do you think that other people**
810 **who maybe connect with her in that same way, or in a similar way?**

811

812 ELIZA: Um, probably the confidence. It seems like the confidence would
813 probably show. And how people might, like, act in a sense. Um. But yeah, I- I
814 think, mostly the confidence would probably show more. But yeah.

815

816 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. Do you feel like the version of Harley Quinn that**
817 **was in the comic that you read - did it match your already existing ideas**
818 **about her? Did it change it in any way?**

819

820 ELIZA: Um, it did a little bit. Because usually, like, in the, like, in the shows
821 you don't really go to her backstory - like it just sounds tragic, but you don't
822 really hear much about it. You're, like, oh this happened, and then that's it.
823 There's not really much story to it – but, in this, it kind of goes over like, oh
824 well, she went through a breakup. Then she has some friends, and, like - it talks
825 more about what has happened over those years.

826

827 **RESEARCHER: Yeah! Did you enjoy reading the comic?**

828

829 ELIZA: Yeah, I really did. I'm- I might want to get the second volume. Or the
830 second issue.

831

832 **RESEARCHER: Oh, that's awesome!**

833

834 ELIZA: Yeah [small laugh] - pretty good.

835

836 **RESEARCHER: No, that's great. I was just gonna ask, like, are you**
837 **interested in reading more of her stuff? And yeah, that's great.**

838

839 ELIZA: Yeah. For sure. She seems like a great (?) character.

840

841 **RESEARCHER: So, um. Tell me - if you could talk to Harley Quinn, the**
842 **character, directly what's something you would want to say? Or something**
843 **you'd want to even talk about?**

844

845 ELIZA: Probably. Uh, I don't know. [small laugh] Um. Yes. [pauses]

846

847 **RESEARCHER: Like, would you ever want to hang out with her?**

848

849 ELIZA: Maybe. I- I think she'd be a pretty cool person to kind of, like, bounce
850 off of. Be, like – it'd probably gain more confidence in doing things. I wouldn't
851 be as hesitant to do certain things. She'll just do it right away – [small laugh]
852 that's what it seems like. Yeah.

853

854 **RESEARCHER: Do you think, like, if - let's pretend she was a real person -**
855 **do you think you'd be friends with her in real life?**

856

857 ELIZA: Um - I don't know. Maybe. It depends - on how like I'd meet her and
858 stuff like that, but yeah.

859

860 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. Do you think Harley Quinn – like, yeah in your**
861 **comic, but also just like more broadly, because I know you said you've seen**
862 **her in the movies, like *Suicide Squad* - do you think she's a good**
863 **representation of girl power?**

864

865 ELIZA: Um. Yes and no. Because - I would say yes, because it kind of shows
866 that, like, she doesn't need some person to save her in a sense. Because most,
867 like, girls in, like, or, like, ladies in the show in the show- shows or comics, they
868 are always saved. They're not really the superheroes. Or they're always put in the
869 shadows, like how she is with the Joker. And, um, I think, just, like, seeing her -
870 it's kind of cool to see that she has the confidence to just do that, like, right
871 away. Like she has the willpower to do it right away.

872

873 **RESEARCHER: So, do you think, like, in terms of, like, the concept of**
874 **feminism – like, do you think she would be a good role model for that, or**
875 **not necessarily? Like what are your kind of thoughts on, “Oh, this would be**
876 **a good role model” in terms of, like, because she's for girls?**

877

878 ELIZA: I think. It definitely in the new *Rebirth* one. I think she could be a pretty
879 decent role model from how she's portrayed now and how she acts. Um, she's
880 willing – um, she's not much of evil anymore. Like, further in this c- in this
881 issue, she's not as evil. She kind of wants to help. Like, she's realizing now that,
882 like, maybe helping people, it might be a good thing to do. And, so I guess,
883 seeing that as like a young girl - showing that, like, you could still be, like,
884 pretty cool and, like, pretty confident and stuff. And you could still, like, do
885 some good things here and there.

886

887 **RESEARCHER: Yeah.**

888

889 [overlapping voices]

890

891 **RESEARCHER: Oh sorry. No, I think you have a good point too, because**
892 **she shifts, as a character, from being evil to being good, so kind of -**

893

894 ELIZA: Yeah.

895

896 **RESEARCHER: How did you – or what are your thoughts on that as a**
897 **charac- like just, generally speaking. Like, do you think- for example, like,**
898 **that could be a message to people. That there is the ability to change?**

899

900 ELIZA: Yeah, for sure. I've- like, I've kind of had that in the past. That I've had
901 not so great friends, and I got stuck in that, like, relationship of being friends
902 with them and realizing maybe it's not such the greatest idea. And I guess,
903 seeing a character like this, or reading a character like this, showing that, like,
904 they're kind of like holding you back in a sense. That maybe it is okay to let go
905 if they're, like, being mean to you or anything. To like kind of let go, and be,
906 like, you still have so much time to change. Like, you can always change. You
907 don't have to be stuck like that. Um, I think that definitely shows in this comic.

908

909 **RESEARCHER: Yeah, I think that's a- that's a fantastic point. Um. So, in**
910 **terms of when you read the book - and I know we've kind of touched on it a**
911 **little bit – um, was there anything that really stuck out to you that you were**
912 **like, ‘you know I’ve kind of - as a girl - been through something similar” or**
913 **something that was, like, “that kind of reflects what I feel like it's like to be**
914 **a girl in the real world”?**

915

916 ELIZA: Um, definitely. Not so much of, like, in a relationship. But, like, I had a
917 best friend that he was...decently, like, kind of toxic to me, and I didn't realize
918 that until after. And that - finally - that, like, I broke out of that relationship that
919 I- be like, “Oh, well I can do whatever now, and I can be my own person. And I
920 don't have to be stuck behind him.” Because every time I would be with him,
921 they would be always saying, “Oh, you're his best friend.” Not really, “y’all are
922 just simply best friends.” Like, they would always include me into him - or I’d
923 always be included with him. And, so, I think that definitely shows in the comic.

924

925 **RESEARCHER: Yeah!**

926

927 ELIZA: Yeah.

928

929 **RESEARCHER: No, I think that's a fantastic point...and I think- I mean, I**
930 **personally went through several experiences like that, too, so I kind of feel**
931 **like that's kind of a almost - it could be seen as a universal experience, and**
932 **it is nice to see a character reflect that in an authentic kind of way.**

933

934 ELIZA: Yeah.

935

936 **RESEARCHER: Um, if you could change anything about her as a**
937 **character - I mean, I know you read this first comic - what is something**
938 **that you think, like, - what something you could improve upon for the**
939 **character?**

940

941 ELIZA: Um...[pauses]

942

943 **RESEARCHER: Or even just something you're, like, "I kind of would**
944 **rather she do this thing," whether it improved or doesn't improve her.**

945

946 ELIZA: Yeah, um...I don't really know. I can't really think of anything - change
947 about her...much.

948

949 **RESEARCHER: Would you recommend her comics to a friend of yours?**

950

951 ELIZA: Yeah, probably. [small laugh] I don't know if they'll read it - they're not
952 too big into comics, but I- I think I would try telling 'em to read it and stuff.

953

954 **RESEARCHER: How would you present the comic to them? Like, how**
955 **would you sell it? Like, what would you say to me, if I was your friend, to**
956 **be, like, "this is why you should read it"?**

957

958 ELIZA: Um, I would probably be, like, uh... I would kind of tell them about
959 this experience and be, like, I think it'd be a really cool comic to read. Um,
960 there's pretty good representation of- in the comic as well. Um, I just think they
961 would really enjoy it probably, because it's- it's kind of like girl power in a
962 sense. Um, definitely one of my friends is like that. Uh...yeah, I don't- I don't
963 know. Yeah.

964

965 **RESEARCHER: Tell me more about what do you mean when you say like,**
966 **"there's good representation in the comic."**

967

968 ELIZA: Um, there's good representation of friendship - for sure, friendship. Um,
969 Harley kind of introduces, like, all her friends that she's friends with. She has
970 different groups, right - she doesn't just have, like, one single group. She can- be
971 able to be friends with multiple people from different backgrounds and
972 um...they seem like- they're always there to help her. Like, um, Ivy, at the
973 beginning of the comic, she kind of gets to sit down with Harley and talk to her
974 seriously and talk about what you're doing and like, um...kind of, like, instigate
975 - not instigate. But, like, um, encouraging her into doing stuff that she wants to
976 do. But she's- she's there for her help. Which she's there to help.

977

978 **RESEARCHER: What do you think of the Ivy/Harley Quinn dynamic? I**
979 **mean there's a lot- there's a lot there just in itself.**

980

981 ELIZA: Yeah, I- I think it's pretty, pretty good dynamic. Um, Harley is there for
982 her. Like, they've always got each other's back. Like, it's only at the beginning,
983 just for a little bit, because Ivy then goes away. But, as I've seen it for the first
984 couple, like, pages, they seem like they've got each other's back. And they're
985 always, umm...what's the word? It's, like, they're- they're always there for each
986 other. They're always there to, um, encourage their choices and their ideas. I
987 think that's really cool.

988

989 **RESEARCHER: Yeah, and kind of throwing back to what you were saying**
990 **earlier, it's such a different dynamic than Joker...**

991

992 ELIZA: Yeah.

993

994 **RESEACHER: ...cause Joker's so negative and wants to put her to the**
995 **side.**

996

997 ELIZA: Yeah – yeah, that's true. They're kind of equal there-

998

999 **RESEARCHER: Yeah.**

1000

1001 ELIZA: Her and Ivy.

1002

1003 **RESEACHER: So, um, what did you think of, like, - because you're an**
1004 **artist - what did you think of the artistry and the different illustrations and**
1005 **depictions in the panels?**

1006

1007 ELIZA: I- I thought was pretty cool how they showed some panels. Um, I
1008 definitely love the art style in it, and, um, the different outfits that they have,
1009 like, mashed together. Um, like, there was, like, a party that was going on, and

1010 they had different characters that were, like, similar to Harley, and they were the
1011 type of Harley Quinn, but they were just, like- I think they were, like, from
1012 different universes. I-

1013

1014 **RESERACHER: Yeah.**

1015

1016 ELIZA: -really don't know. Yeah. Um, but it's cool to see, like, the different
1017 versions of what Harley could have been- er, what she could have been. Um, I
1018 like, but, those colors and the art style. It was pretty good.

1019

1020 **RESEARCHER: Did it - when you looked at the comics and especially the**
1021 **art – like, did you ever think anything about the way she's depicted**
1022 **visually? Like, was she, um, depicted in a way that made her look strong, or**
1023 **did she feel overly sexualized? Was there any kind of things like that that**
1024 **you noticed about any of the art?**

1025

1026 ELIZA: Um. They... her outfits definitely has changed over the year. I have
1027 seen that. Definitely from, like, the movies, and some of the comics that I've
1028 seen her in. Um, the way she dresses is definitely different. Um...they do cover
1029 her up a little bit more, like she has a jacket now that she usually wears. Um,
1030 and, like, even though they're Harley Quinns, they have them differently. And,
1031 like, they still are a bit exposed, but it's not to the extent of how it used to be in
1032 the older comics, which is really cool. Because, like, you don't have to look at a
1033 comic and be like, "oh, well, I'm not like that. [small laugh] I don't- I don't feel
1034 like that." But in this comic, I think it's more comfortable – like, it seems
1035 comfortable to read and see.

1036

1037 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. Um, can you give me – like, I'm thinking - so you**
1038 **were talking about, like, old outfits you've seen on other characters. Was**
1039 **that, in reference to Harley Quinn? Or was there a particular other female**
1040 **character, you can think of where you're like, "ew, that outfit"?**

1041

1042 ELIZA: Um. Definitely, like, Wonder Woman. Her character is definitely-
1043 definitely sexualized. Um, which isn't the greatest, but it happens. And, over the
1044 years, they finally, like, changed it here and there. Um, but it's- it's always kind
1045 of going to happen anyways. But there's definitely newer artists that have had
1046 better ideas of how they would design the character and not to make it, like,

1047 super unrealistic. Like, even if she's a God, there's still gonna be flaws in it -
1048 there's never- they're never going to be perfect or anything like that. Yeah.

1049

1050 **RESEARCHER: I think you bring up a good point, especially because it- it**
1051 **can feel weird to look at these characters and be like they're just unrealistic.**
1052 **Like you're pointing out that –**

1053

1054 ELIZA: Yes.

1055

1056 **RESEACHER: - they're completely flawless, a person like Wonder**
1057 **Woman -**

1058

1059 ELIZA: Yeah.

1060

1061 **RESEARCHER: - and I think Harley does a good job of being a bit more**
1062 **flawed versus some of her other character counterparts.**

1063

1064 ELIZA: Mhm.

1065

1066 **RESEARCHER: Um, yeah. I think that- that's a really good point. I mean,**
1067 **when you - because I know you've had experience with comics before –**

1068

1069 ELIZA: Yeah.

1070

1071 **RESEARCHER: I mean, when you read, you know, like a Wonder Woman**
1072 **comic, for example. When you see her outfit, and it is super sexualized or**
1073 **even just, like, her body kind of makes you, “oh wow, like, that is**
1074 **unrealistic.” Do you ever feel like it takes you out of the story, or is it just**
1075 **something that kind of annoys you? Like, what is your usual reaction when**
1076 **you see those things?**

1077

1078 ELIZA: Um, I kind of realized that it's like- a character doesn't seem as real like
1079 it could be, like, in real life. Um, you can't, like - some situations you're like,
1080 "Oh, I can relate to that." But, like, you can relate a little bit to it, but then, at the
1081 same time, not all of it's real. You realize, you're like, "Oh well, it's just a
1082 fictional story. Like it's just- it's not a real story." It's...it's just something that
1083 someone had in their mind - which is true - but it's just the way that they depict
1084 the character, it just doesn't feel real. It doesn't feel like, like "you" - like, it
1085 could be you in that situation.

1086

1087 **RESEARCHER: Do you feel like there's a difference in what you're talking**
1088 **about between male and female characters? Like, do you feel like it**
1089 **happens more with one or the other, or it kind of equally happens with**
1090 **both?**

1091

1092 ELIZA: Um. I-I would say it might happen a little bit more with men sometimes
1093 - because there's a lot more of those comics. They don't usually make too much
1094 of the female-lead comics. Like, they'll be in it, but it's not as common. But the
1095 male are definitely, like... they, for some reason, always have their shirts off
1096 [small laugh] and - which is- can be fine, but it's just too much sometimes. I'm,
1097 like, not all men are like that at the same time as well...

1098

1099 **RESEARCHER: Yeah.**

1100

1101 ELIZA: ...there's definitely (or different?) flaws.

1102

1103 **RESEARCHER: What are some of the other comics that you're kind of**
1104 **drawn to, or that you've read before?**

1105

1106 ELIZA: Uh, I've definitely read a ton of *The Flash* comics. Um...

1107

1108 **RESEARCHER: Ok -**

1109

1110 ELIZA: Uh, some *Avatar* comics - *The Last Airbender* comics. *Legend of*
 1111 *Korra*. Um, and then just some random *Supermen* [note: *Superman* pluralized]
 1112 comics and *Arrow* comics, I think. But-

1113

1114 **RESEARCHER: Yeah.**

1115

1116 ELIZA: Yeah.

1117

1118 **RESEARCHER: Um, when you- do you feel like there's any noticeable**
 1119 **difference between like *The Flash* comic versus like the *Harley Quinn* comic**
 1120 **in terms of ...I mean, I know you have more experience with *The Flash***
 1121 **comics but, like, - is there something that kind of sticks out to you like, "Oh,**
 1122 **I see that more in the *Harley Quinn* comic versus *The Flash* comic"?**

1123

1124 ELIZA: Um. I would say in *The Flash* comic, they... I don't know, it's been a
 1125 while since I read them. Um... I guess they kind of put, like, a more goofier
 1126 sense to him - which he is technically goofy. Like, he's supposed to be- his
 1127 character's supposed to be goofy. But they kind of, like, laugh at that for that,
 1128 like for him, in kind of- in some situations that he does. And, for Harley, they
 1129 take it- they're like, "Oh well, you shouldn't do that. That's not a good thing to
 1130 do - you can't do that." And, if the Flash makes mistakes, they're like, "Okay
 1131 well. You did that, but you're okay," but, for Harley, they kind of get onto her
 1132 about it, or they push her to the side and stuff like that.

1133

1134 **RESEARCHER: That's a really interesting point. So, do you feel like**
 1135 **morally Harley is punished more-**

1136

1137 ELIZA: Yeah.

1138

1139 **RESEACHER: -for her mistakes or for anything that she does, than like a**
 1140 **male character like the Flash?**

1141

1142 ELIZA: Yeah, I would definitely say that. Cause I think-Harley-this comic. Um.
 1143 I have read some *Wonder Woman* comics and then like - kinda like the *Legend*

1144 *of Korra* comics - they're always pushed harder. They always have- like if they
1145 mess up it's more, like, it's more detrimental to them. It's tougher- they're
1146 tougher on them.

1147

1148 **RESEARCHER: Do you feel like it's more like if they make a mistake, it's**
1149 **more harmful to them personally, or is it more harmful also to the group?**

1150

1151 ELIZA: Um, kind of them personally. Because, once they make a mistake, it
1152 kind of, um... They start reading over like, "This is what she did. This is what
1153 happened. Why did- why did she do that?" and stuff like that. And they kind of
1154 make a big deal about it more.

1155

1156 **RESEARCHER: Do you have any theories as to why maybe female**
1157 **characters have to go through that more?**

1158

1159 ELIZA: Um. I guess to kind of prove themselves. Like, it's making people...to
1160 like... I guess, uh, it's mostly just to prove themselves. I think, that might be
1161 what it is. Because they're- they're pretty tough characters for a lot of stuff that
1162 they've been through. Yet, people still push stuff onto them and put more
1163 pressure on them to be like, "Oh well, then do this then." Then they make a
1164 mistake, they push even harder on them and stuff like that.

1165

1166 **RESEARCHER: What do you think that they're telling the girls that they**
1167 **need to prove?**

1168

1169 ELIZA: Um... kind of to prove their strength, and, like, willingness to do stuff.
1170 Because they can just totally, like, sit back and be the background character all
1171 they want. But, if they want to be shown and seen more, they have to do- like,
1172 they have to produce. They have to be doing everything they can and everything
1173 that they're, like, willing to do.

1174

1175 **RESEARCHER: So, it's almost like they have to prove why they should be**
1176 **present, and why they should have a seat at the table more than maybe a**
1177 **male character would?**

1178

1179 ELIZA: Yeah. Yeah.

1180

1181 **RESEARCHER: That's a really interesting point, yeah. Do you think, um-**
1182 **like, if you could have a conversation with one of the artists or even the**
1183 **writer of *Harley Quinn*, what's something you want to talk about or even,**
1184 **you know, say to them?**

1185

1186 ELIZA: Um...[pauses] I don't know [small laugh]. Um...

1187

1188 **RESEARCHER: And it doesn't have to be anything, like, super deep. It**
1189 **could just -**

1190

1191 ELIZA: Yeah.

1192

1193 **RESEARCHER: -be like, you know, "I think your art's cool" or something.**

1194

1195 ELIZA: [small laugh] No, I really like how they portrayed, like, their outfits. I
1196 want to know why they chose those certain outfits and stuff like that. And, um,
1197 why they would change it - like, why did they choose to change outfit? Over the
1198 time.

1199

1200 **RESEARCHER: Like from her previous iterations, like *Suicide Squad* or**
1201 **even the animated series from the 90s?**

1202

1203 ELIZA: Yeah, yeah. I just want to know, like, what- what, like- why was there a
1204 change and stuff? Like, what was their reason, why they changed it.

1205

1206 **RESEARCHER: When you read it, as a reader, do you feel- Is there**
1207 **something that, like, when you consider the costume changes, what sticks**
1208 **out to you? Like, do you think that, on your own, there's a particular**
1209 **theme? Or what would be your theory as to why they've changed?**

1210

1211 ELIZA: Um, I would say more, like, comfortability [small laugh] - to be more
1212 comfortable. [small laugh] Cause I know a lot of the outfits, like, I've seen over
1213 like different superheroes - not a lot of them look comfortable. And the fact that,
1214 like over the years, they've kind of, like, seemed more comfortable for certain
1215 characters. Um, I think that's pretty interesting to see.

1216

1217 **RESEARCHER: No, I mean you have a good point. Cause I think of her**
1218 ***Suicide Squad* - not the movie, like the original comics - she's wearing, like,**
1219 **a barely-there corset. And I'm like, "I don't know how you would be able**
1220 **to-"**

1221

1222 ELIZA: Yeah.

1223

1224 **RESEARCHER: "- fight in that and not be, like, pulling up your corset all**
1225 **the time!" [small laugh]**

1226

1227 ELIZA: Yeah, no I-yeah. Or, like, the situation is like- because sometimes in the
1228 comic, they put them in like different, like um, weather. And I'm like, how- it's
1229 like freezing cold, how are you not, like, cold and stuff like that. But yeah.

1230

1231 **RESEARCHER: Yes, there's actually a comic that, you know, um, Harley,**
1232 **like, travels back in time to World War Two. And they're called the**
1233 **bombshells, and Harley's bombshell outfit is essentially a bikini with shorty**
1234 **shorts. And you're just sitting here while she's, like, parachuting into the**
1235 **mountains of Germany and it's snowing and she-**

1236

1237 [background noise/interaction with Eliza]

1238

1239 ELIZA: Sorry.

1240

1241 **RESEARCHER: No worries. And she even makes a comment to the reader**
1242 **where she's like, "Oh, I'm not cold cause I have a lot of adrenaline going."**
1243 **Like, as if that-**

1244

1245 ELIZA: Yeah.

1246

1247 **RESEARCHER: Keeps you warm.**

1248

1249 ELIZA: Yeah, that's fair. ...Yeah, it's crazy how like certain charc- I'm like,
1250 "how do you" - or it's like super hot out, and they have, like, a full-on, like, suit
1251 of, like, something. And I'm like, that doesn't seem comfortable. [small laugh]

1252

1253 **RESEARCHER: Well, I'm so glad that you enjoyed the comic. Um, do you**
1254 **have any, like, final thoughts or anything that you wanted to share, about**
1255 **just your perspective on the comic, on Harley Quinn, or just anything else**
1256 **you wanted to share about your experience reading it?**

1257

1258 ELIZA: Um. No. I've gone over everything I can think of. Yeah.

1259

1260 **RESEARCHER: Well, I- I super appreciate it. I'm going to go ahead and**
1261 **stop the recording.**

APPENDIX G

Bonnie: Individual Interview Transcript

1262 **RESEARCHER: Okay. So, to start us off, can you just describe a typical**
1263 **day in your life for me? For example, like things you like about school,**
1264 **maybe extra clubs you do, if you have a job, what do you like to do with**
1265 **friends - just a brief overview.**

1266

1267 BONNIE: Um, well at school, um - I enjoy it. I'm very into learning. Um, I
1268 really like going to the beach - I've been going with IRIS too. Um...I've been
1269 trying to find a job, but I'm not really old enough for anywhere. Um...(pauses).
1270 Yeah, I mean, pretty simple. (small laugh)

1271

1272 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. Um, tell me - even before you got the comic book -**
1273 **what is just your general overview knowledge of Harley Quinn as a**
1274 **character? Like, what do you know her from; what do you know about**
1275 **her?**

1276

1277 BONNIE: Not very much to be honest. Uh, I think a while- a long time ago, um,
1278 I may have seen parts of a movie that she was in. But I don't really remember it.
1279 So, I had- I really didn't have any prior knowledge.

1280

1281 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. So, your first experience was - with her - really with**
1282 **this comic book then?**

1283

1284 BONNIE: Yes, I would say so.

1285

1286 **RESEARCHER: Okay yeah. Well, tell me - because you read *Harley Quinn***
1287 **#62, right?**

1288

1289 BONNIE: Mm hmm.

1290

1291 **RESEARCHER: So, tell me what are your impressions of the character?**

1292

1293 BONNIE: I liked her attitude [small laugh]. She was very sassy and, um,
1294 very...go-getter. Um, yeah. I like her - she's bold. [small laugh]

1295

1296 **RESEARCHER: Was there anything about the character that you didn't**
1297 **like so much?**

1298

1299 BONNIE: I wouldn't - I don't think so. No -

1300

1301 **RESERACHER: Yeah.**

1302

1303 BONNIE: - Nothing in particular.

1304

1305 **RESEARCHER: So, um... your story focused - because yours was the one**
1306 **where there was like Catwoman and Enchantress, right? -**

1307

1308 BONNIE: Yes.

1309

1310 **RESERACHER: - They were in the fantasy realm?**

1311

1312 BONNIE: Mm hmm.

1313

1314 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. So, what did you think of her interactions with the**
1315 **other characters? Because your story was unique in that, you had a lot of**
1316 **cameos of well-known other Batman characters and her really interacting**
1317 **with them.**

1318

1319 BONNIE: Mm hmm. Um, she was very, like, playful with them. And, um, she
1320 cared a lot about getting them back to that reality and, like, snapping them out of
1321 that trance that they were in - which was admirable.

1322

1323 **RESEARCHER: Do you feel- how do you feel like the other characters**
1324 **treated her? And I mean, kind of, like, were they- did they respect her? Did**
1325 **they take her seriously? What was your kind of impression of that?**

1326

1327 BONNIE: Um, for my- it was kind of confusing, the actual story. But from my
1328 understanding that, um, I think they did take her seriously once they realized
1329 what was going on. But while they were in the trance, they weren't, um, like
1330 aware of their relationship prior to what had happened.

1331

1332 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. Um, do you normally read comic books or graphic**
1333 **novels?**

1334

1335 BONNIE: I think I've read, um, one comic-style book. Um, but no actual
1336 comics, no.

1337

1338 **RESEARCHER: What was your impression of reading comics versus the**
1339 **books you normally read?**

1340

1341 BONNIE: It was a little overwhelming [small laugh], because it's all in capital
1342 letters - and I'd, like, heard it in my mind as them just all yelling at each other
1343 [laughs]. Um, and also, the actual pictures and graphics are kind of all over the
1344 place.

1345

1346 **RESEARCHER: Do you feel like it was a little harder to kind of**
1347 **understand what was happening and to read it versus like just a traditional**
1348 **text-book?**

1349

1350 BONNIE: Yes, yeah. [small laugh]

1351

1352 **RESEARCHER: I- I have found, when I had to, kind of, learn how to read**
1353 **it, that sometimes I had to read it a couple times to figure out what**
1354 **direction to go –**

1355

1356 BONNIE: Mm hmm.

1357

1358 **RESEACHER: - and the flow -**

1359

1360 BONNIE: Yes.

1361

1362 **RESEARCHER: - did you have a similar experience?**

1363

1364 BONNIE: Yes [laughs]. Um, at one point I realized, I was reading it wrong and
1365 that I need the whole thing open [small laugh] - because I was just looking at
1366 each page, you know, like you would do with a book. Um, and so that was a
1367 little confusing.

1368

1369 **RESEARCHER: Um- I mean this was your first experience with it, do you**
1370 **think you'd ever read a comic book again?**

1371

1372 BONNIE: I think so if I found one that looked interesting.

1373

1374 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. Did this particular story or Harley Quinn as a**
1375 **character intrigue you to learn or read more of her stuff; or just- you're**
1376 **like “neh”?**

1377

1378 BONNIE: Yes, and I've been meaning to watch the movies that she's in with the
1379 other characters anyway. So, it was a good introduction, and I will definitely be
1380 watching those. [small laugh]

1381

1382 **RESEARCHER: Yeah, she has that TV show on HBO now too that has -**

1383

1384 BONNIE: Mm hmm.

1385

1386 **RESEARCHER: - a new season, I think that starts next week.**

1387

1388 BONNIE: Yeah, I think so.

1389

1390 **RESEARCHER: So, um... (pauses) When you were reading the comic -**
1391 **and I know your story was very specific, because it was in a very specific**
1392 **environment and story - but just kind of thinking about it a little more**
1393 **broadly, was there anything in the story that happened that made you**
1394 **reflect on your own life? Like that you've had a similar experience; or**
1395 **you've kind of gone through something similar in terms of interactions with**
1396 **other people. With a focus on like Harley Quinn being a girl, did you feel**
1397 **like there was any kind of gendered experiences or interactions in that**
1398 **comic?**

1399

1400 BONNIE: Um, not necessarily. I mean, you did say it was specific, but nothing
1401 really stood out like that to me.

1402

1403 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. So, I know that you kind of made a comment, how**
1404 **you know everything's in capital letters and there's a lot of visuals**
1405 **happening -**

1406

1407 BONNIE: Mm hmm.

1408

1409 **RESEARCHER: - If you could have a conversation with the writer of that**
1410 **comic or even the artist, what are some things that you would be interested**
1411 **in, you know, talking to them about, or even just like commenting on their**
1412 **work with this particular story?**

1413

1414 BONNIE: Um, I'm looking at it now. Um...

1415

1416 **RESEARCHER: Yeah.**

1417

1418 BONNIE: Um...(pauses). How they decide the layout of each page with the
1419 pictures. And what... um... Because it's very visual - like their emotions are
1420 very visual. Um, how did they decide, like, facial expressions and their emotions
1421 – like, separate from the words.

1422

1423 **RESEARCHER: Yeah, I think that's a good question because they're**
1424 **usually two different people doing those things.**

1425

1426 BONNIE: Yeah. [small laugh]

1427

1428 **RESEARCHER: Um. Do- when you look at the visuals, for example. Did**
1429 **you feel like- som- let me [stops]. For example, sometimes people comment**
1430 **that girls in comics, especially a character like a Catwoman or Harley**
1431 **Quinn, can feel oversexualized; or their clothes are really skimpy. Did you,**
1432 **kind of, get any of that impression?**

1433

1434 BONNIE: I noticed it a bit, yeah [small laugh].

1435

1436 **RESEARCHER: So how- when you noticed it, what were some of your**
1437 **thoughts about that?**

1438

1439 BONNIE: Um, I don't think that it's necessary. But I feel like, in a way, it almost
1440 adds to her character being so bold and-and – not, like, carefree, but just ‘who
1441 cares’ type of attitude.

1442

1443 **RESEARCHER: No, I think you make an interesting point. So, you, kind**
1444 **of, see maybe her outfit as more...a statement of her own empowerment -**
1445 **that she's not afraid to show off her body.**

1446

1447 BONNIE: Yeah.

1448

1449 **RESERACHER: - as opposed to some people see it as...fanservice for boys.**

1450

1451 BONNIE: Yeah. I think it fits well with her character and how she is, just, in
1452 general.

1453

1454 **RESEARCHER: Yeah, I think that's a really good point. Um, if you- if-**
1455 **(blows raspberry) Backup. Okay. Was there anything about the character**
1456 **in that comic, or anything that she did or said in particular, where you were**
1457 **like, "I would probably change that if I was the one writing or drawing that**
1458 **book"?**

1459

1460 BONNIE: Um, not really, no. (pauses)...that I remember.

1461

1462 **RESEARCHER: Yeah, I mean, if it wasn't important enough for you to**
1463 **remember, then it probably didn't resonate.**

1464

1465 BONNIE: Exactly, yeah [laughs].

1466

1467 **RESEARCHER: So, one of the big questions is- is Harley Quinn, a repre- a**
1468 **good or bad representation of girl power? So, when you think about the**
1469 **comic that you just read, because that was an introduction to the character**
1470 **for you, what would you say? Do you feel like she's a good or bad**
1471 **representation of girl power; or did you not really see any of that?**

1472

1473 BONNIE: I think she was a good representation. Um, just because she
1474 was...made the hero -

1475

1476 **RESERACHER: Mm hmm.**

1477

1478 BONNIE: - um, which can inspire other girls, and, you know, um, that kind of
1479 thing. So, I would say she was a good example.

1480

1481 **RESEARCHER: Yeah, so you- what kind of messages about girl power do**
1482 **you think she might communicate to a girl reading her story?**

1483

1484 BONNIE: Um...hmm. That...uh. Hmm [laughs]. Making me think...(extended
1485 pause) I would say, just, that she can, um, serve as a role model - just because of
1486 that boldness. And that she can teach readers that, um, empowerment - and even
1487 with the visuals, I guess. [small laugh] Um, I mean, yeah.

1488

1489 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. And you mean empowerment - are you referencing**
1490 **like the-the comment about, 'yes she's bold, but she's also the hero of the**
1491 **story'?**

1492

1493 BONNIE: Yes, yeah.

1494

1495 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. So, um, I know IRIS has read one too - have you**
1496 **guys talked about the comics together at all?**

1497

1498 BONNIE: Not really. Um, she actually forgot hers when she came here [small
1499 laugh]. So, I don't think she's read very much of it, if at all -

1500

1501 **RESEACHER: Oh!**

1502

1503 BONNIE: -but we didn't- we didn't get to talk about it.

1504

1505 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. Like - kind of just putting IRIS to the side, since**
1506 **she's doing this - but would you recommend these comics, Harley Quinn's**
1507 **comics in particular, to a friend of yours?**

1508

1509 BONNIE: I would – and I've got friends who have probably read some of hers.
1510 Um, so we could talk about it too.

1511

1512 **RESEARCHER: Why would you recommend them?**

1513

1514 BONNIE: Um, well they're into, uh, like, the DC/Marvel type stuff. Um, and
1515 I'm sure they've seen the movies she's in. So, they might enjoy the comic book
1516 side of her.

1517

1518 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. Do you think you would recommend these comics**
1519 **to somebody who maybe doesn't normally read comics?**

1520

1521 BONNIE: I would, yeah.

1522

1523 **RESEARCHER: What would you tell them about why you think they**
1524 **might like this experience, if they're trying it for the first time?**

1525

1526 BONNIE: Um, it's a different type of media. It's not your traditional, like movie,
1527 where there's a whole timeline and plot. It's kind of just a snippet - a 20-page
1528 moment.

1529

1530 **RESEARCHER: Yeah, I mean it is...it is very quick.**

1531

1532 BONNIE: Yeah, [small laugh] it's very fast paced. [laughs]

1533

1534 **RESEARCHER: Do you feel like...you would tell - there was something**
1535 **about comics, in particular - other than that they're short - that they might**
1536 **enjoy? Like, the type of story or the type of characters - like, anything that**
1537 **may be in a traditional book, you might recommend. Is there something you**
1538 **see that in this comic you would recommend to somebody who hasn't**
1539 **experienced it?**

1540

1541 BONNIE: Um...not necessarily, not that I can think of...in the moment.

1542

1543 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. Well, I know that you mentioned towards the**
1544 **beginning that this has made you interested in the character - to look more**
1545 **into her media. Um, and you want to try her movies, you want to try,**
1546 **maybe some of more of her comics. Um, are there any other comic book**

1547 **characters that just intrigued you, generally speaking; or she kind of your**
1548 **total for- foray into this world?**

1549

1550 BONNIE: That-she's the only one so far [laughs].

1551

1552 **RESEARCHER: Well, do you have, um, like any other thoughts about the**
1553 **comic; or what your experience was like that you wanted to share?**

1554

1555 BONNIE: Um, no. That's it.

1556

1557 **RESEARCHER: Do you think you would be friends with Harley in real**
1558 **life?**

1559

1560 BONNIE: I would hope so - she's kind of cool! [laughs]

1561

1562 **RESEARCHER: She is very cool. What do you think you guys would do**
1563 **together, or even talk about?**

1564

1565 BONNIE: Um...I feel like we would... get along, like if we went out, like,
1566 shopping, or like out to hang out somewhere, like a store or the beach.

1567

1568 **RESEARCHER: Why do you think you guys would get along so well?**

1569

1570 BONNIE: Um... she's very funny and- and, like, witty - and I'm that way too, I
1571 feel like. Um, so I feel like we would just joke around. [laughs]

1572

1573 **RESEARCHER: Yeah.**

1574

1575 BONNIE: Yeah.

1576

1577 **RESEARCHER: Let me see... trying- I'm pretty sure we've gone through**
1578 **most of my questions and I'm just double-checking...um...so...Yeah, I**
1579 **think we've gotten through most of it. Um... If you could describe Harley in**
1580 **just a couple of words, what would you say?**

1581

1582 BONNIE: Um, bold. Outgoing. Um, strong. Um, caring. Yeah.

1583

1584 **RESEARCHER: Yeah, I think that's a good description of her. Um, do you**
1585 **think there's any not-so-great qualities about her that you can think of, like**
1586 **'maybe don't do that,' that she does?**

1587

1588 BONNIE: She could- I don't think she did in this comic, but I feel like she could
1589 say the wrong thing to someone and not know. [small laugh] And they would
1590 take it, the wrong way.

1591

1592 **RESEARCHER: Like she's trying to be funny or something and just...?**

1593

1594 BONNIE: Mm hmm.

1595

1596 **RESEARCHER: - it doesn't click?**

1597

1598 BONNIE: Yeah, I think that what happened.

1599

1600 **RESEARCHER: Well, I think we've gotten through everything- oh! Here's-**
1601 **here's one more question. Um, why do you think she might resonate as a**
1602 **character with other people? I mean, she's become very popular in the last**
1603 **couple of years, especially with her movie appearances, but why do you**
1604 **think people liked her so much?**

1605

1606 BONNIE: Um. I think...because going back to the- the boldness and-and all
1607 that. I think...she is, um...just different than your traditional, like, female
1608 superhero, I think - as far as I know. Um, just because of that attitude that she
1609 has. Um, and her strengths as a person.

1610

1611 **RESEARCHER: And her strengths would be like the things you mentioned**
1612 **earlier, like that she's caring and outgoing?**

1613

1614 BONNIE: Mm hmm. Yeah.

1615

1616 **RESEARCHER: I like that you said that you feel like her attitude as a**
1617 **female superhero is a little bit different. Can you tell me a little bit more**
1618 **about, like, what you mean by that?**

1619

1620 BONNIE: Um. Some of, like, for example...some of the female Marvel heroes -
1621 I feel like...are kind of similar to her, but not in the same way. Like, um, they
1622 may be a little more...reserved. Um, or not as, like, willing to go out and, like,
1623 fight these people, or save whoever. Um, just to do it... They're more there to,
1624 like, support the other heroes, and not be THE hero.

1625

1626 **RESEARCHER: No, I think that's a fantastic point. So, you see Harley**
1627 **kind of as more like, 'she's on her- like, she stands on her own,' versus your**
1628 **experience with some of the other female superheroes are more –**

1629

1630 BONNIE: Yes.

1631

1632 **RESERACHER: - they play a supporting role to, usually, a male**
1633 **character?**

1634

1635 BONNIE: Yes [small laugh] Yeah. Exactly.

1636

1637 **RESEARCHER: No, I think that's a really good point; and that is a**
1638 **criticism that people have said about comics - and Harley herself has had**
1639 **that criticism in her earlier stuff. But what you read is, a lot of- kind of,**
1640 **when she really shifted to being her own person. And that's when she was,**
1641 **kind of, at the height of when she was getting really popular is when she**
1642 **made that shift - which was when your book was published.**

1643

1644 BONNIE: Yeah. And it helps also that the people she was saving were in a
1645 trance, and not, like, helping her save other people or in another situation. Like,
1646 she had to be the one to save them.

1647

1648 **RESEARCHER: Yeah - do you feel like if they weren't in a trance, that**
1649 **would have changed her dynamic as being the 'I'm the hero; go getter'?**

1650

1651 BONNIE: Probably, because they- they would help each other, and work with
1652 each other to defeat said villain - instead of what happened in this comic.

1653

1654 **RESEARCHER: So, they would be more like a team, rather than –**

1655

1656 BONNIE: Yes.

1657

1658 **RESERACHER: - she's the leader, and they're almost her sidekicks?**

1659

1660 BONNIE: Yes. Yeah.

1661

1662 **RESEARCHER: Yeah, that's a good point. So, it seems, kind of, from what**
1663 **you're saying, that Harley took a leading role in this comic because of the**
1664 **nature of the circumstance. But, maybe, if it was a more regular**
1665 **circumstance, like a normal crime fighting, 'everybody's kind of with it in**
1666 **the brain' – she might work more as a team, rather than try to steal the**
1667 **spotlight?**

1668

1669 BONNIE: Yeah.

1670

1671 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. Is there any reason, in particular, why you feel like**
1672 **she would be more of a team player in a normal situation versus being like,**
1673 **'I've- it's all here, like I'm the hero'?**

1674

1675 BONNIE: There were a couple lines in this comic where you could tell she was
1676 there to save her friend. And I feel like that means that she has a connection with
1677 them and - because they are also superheroes - if they were in that team setting,
1678 that relationship would come out and they would be a team.

1679

1680 **RESEARCHER: Yeah-no, I think that's a really good point. Well, like I**
1681 **said, I've gotten through all my questions. Did you have anything else you**
1682 **wanted to add?**

1683

1684 BONNIE: Um, just that I, I really enjoyed it. And I can't wait to watch movies,
1685 and shows, and stuff with her.

1686

1687 **RESEARCHER: Yeah, and I hope that you dive more into her comics**
1688 **because they're definitely interesting. It's definitely a - each version of her is**
1689 **different, but yet similar.**

1690

1691 BONNIE: Yeah.

1692

1693 **RESEARCHER: Well, thank you so much. I'm going to pause the**
1694 **recording.**

APPENDIX H

Iris: Individual Interview Transcript

1695 **RESEARCHER: Okay, so to start us off, can you just, kind, of tell me a day**
1696 **in your typical life? Like, what you like about school; do you like school; do**
1697 **you have a job what do you do with friends; any clubs you do, stuff like**
1698 **that.**

1699

1700 IRIS: Um. Okay, so usually for school, um. I have dance, and I have a dance
1701 class with my friends. And then, after school, I usually go to Starbucks with my
1702 friends; and we drink coffee, and we do our homework. And usually in the
1703 summer all I've been doing is just going to the pool with my friends and, like,
1704 just hanging out.

1705

1706 **RESEARCHER: Yeah – are, um, there things you like to do for hobbies, in**
1707 **particular, other than dance?**

1708

1709 IRIS: Um, I- I mostly dance, but I also play the guitar and...uh, I just usually-
1710 it's- it's honestly just dance, like, [small laugh] it's really it.

1711

1712 **RESEARCHER: It takes up a lot of your time.**

1713

1714 IRIS: Yeah.

1715

1716 **RESEARCHER: Sorry, my orange cat's torturing my other cat. I'm trying**
1717 **to...make that stop. Okay, so, tell me, um, just your general knowledge of**
1718 **Harley Quinn as a character. And it can be what you know from her**
1719 **movies, from pop culture - just what is your general idea of the character,**
1720 **what you know about her.**

1721

1722 IRIS: So, I'm really bad with, like, the DC - she's DC, right?

1723

1724 **RESEARCHER: Yeah.**

1725

1726 IRIS: Okay, I'm really bad with, like, her – like, I've never really, like, looked at
1727 her, like, heard of her, but I do know she's, like, a villain, I think...and she, um,
1728 she was with the Joker, and I think he broke her heart or something?

1729

1730 **RESEARCHER: Mm hmm.**

1731

1732 IRIS: And, and, um, and I-I usually know that she, like, wears, like, these outfits
1733 that are like, like, short shorts and, like, crop tops, like- like skater-like the -
1734 what do they call the inline-skater people?

1735

1736 **RESEARCHER: Oh, like roller derby?**

1737

1738 IRIS: Yeah, roller derby.

1739

1740 **RESEARCHER: Yeah, um, where, outside of the comic that you read, have**
1741 **you experienced her?**

1742

1743 IRIS: Um, like, um, ads for the movie that she was in. And just, um, like,
1744 hearing about her from, like, other people talking about, like, comics or, like,
1745 movies, like DC movies.

1746

1747 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. When you, like, just your general- what are your**
1748 **general impressions of her as a character when you were just seeing her**
1749 **casually?**

1750

1751 IRIS: I think she's, like, really - I thought she was, like, really cool. And she
1752 like- she, like, is like a boss woman - like has her own, like, mindset and she just
1753 wants to be, like, bad and like... like, mainly just, like, be, like, a villain and,
1754 like, get back at Joker I think.

1755

1756 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. What - what about her makes you feel like she's a**
1757 **boss woman?**

1758

1759 IRIS: Um, just like the fact that she's, like, solo. And, like, she makes up her-
1760 her, like, own decisions and she does things, like, by herself mainly.

1761

1762 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. So, like, when you just kind of casually into- seeing**
1763 **her did you like her? What was your - were you kind of indifferent?**

1764

1765 IRIS: Um, I really liked her, I thought she was really cool.

1766

1767 **RESEARCHER: Yeah, um. Do you think she kind of -or that people maybe**
1768 **resonate with her?**

1769

1770 IRIS: Um, like, in what way?

1771

1772 **RESEARCHER: Like, do you think when people look at her that they kind**
1773 **of see some of themselves reflected back; or is she to fanciful, or whatever**
1774 **the word, like...?**

1775

1776 IRIS: Uh, yeah. I think she definitely has, like, really high standards, like as a
1777 person. But I think, like, people can also relate to her as in, like, getting, like,
1778 broken up with; and, like, feeling sad about it, but then getting over it; and like-
1779 like, getting yourself back, in like glowing up or something; and also, like, just
1780 trying to, like- like, being independent I guess too.

1781

1782 **RESEARCHER: Yeah, so you kind of see her as people can resonate with**
1783 **the mutual experience of being in a relationship, and it doesn't work out;**
1784 **and then trying to kind of be independent, after that?**

1785

1786 IRIS: Yeah.

1787

1788 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. So just thinking of, like, that Harley Quinn that**
1789 **you're talking about - do you feel like she's a representation of girl power or**
1790 **not so much?**

1791

1792 IRIS: Um, I do think she's a representation of girl power. Yeah.

1793

1794 **RESEARCHER: In what way, do you think?**

1795

1796 IRIS: Um, in the way that, like, she will, um – she just, like, gets things done.
1797 And, like, she, like, takes over and, like, she- I think she's above men
1798 and...yeah.

1799

1800 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. So, when you say she's above men, can you just tell**
1801 **me a little bit more about that?**

1802

1803 IRIS: Like, I just think, like, she just doesn't need men - and, like most women,
1804 like, will probably look up to that because, like, sometimes like, people are, like,
1805 stereotyping, like, women have to have men. But, like, she shows that you don't
1806 have to have men; and, like, you can still be, like, powerful and, like, do things
1807 by yourself.

1808

1809 **RESEARCHER: Yeah - that's really interesting that you have that**
1810 **impression of her, because a criticism of her and her earlier depictions is**
1811 **the exact opposite, so it sounds like –**

1812

1813 IRIS: Really?

1814

1815 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. So, it sounds like your impression of her now is a**
1816 **total 180 from what she- what used to be complaints, that she was just a**
1817 **derivative of Joker essentially.**

1818

1819 Iris: Oh.

1820

1821 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. So, if you could have, like, a conversation with the**
1822 **character directly, what do you think you would say or want to talk about?**

1823

1824 IRIS: Um, I definitely want to talk about, like, how she like- like, how she felt
1825 when, like, the Joker, like, broke up with her something; and, like, how she got
1826 over it. And, also, how she, like...like, what her mindset is on living.

1827

1828 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. Um, do you think, like, you guys would be friends**
1829 **in real life?**

1830

1831 IRIS: Um, no [laughs].

1832

1833 **RESEARCHER: Why not?**

1834

1835 IRIS: I think- I think, like I'm way too shy for her; and I think she would, like,
1836 break me down and like- [laughing] like, she scares me.

1837

1838 **RESEARCHER: Because she's so outgoing?**

1839

1840 IRIS: Yeah.

1841

1842 **RESEARCHER: That's fair, I understand that.**

1843

1844 IRIS: Yeah, yeah.

1845

1846 **RESEARCHER: So, I know that you're normally a reader, but do you- and**
1847 **I think you have experience with graphic novels, right?**

1848

1849 IRIS: Yeah.

1850

1851 **RESEARCHER: Have you ever read comic books before this?**

1852

1853 IRIS: Um, yeah, I have. Just, like, really short ones.

1854

1855 **RESEARCHER: What are some of the comic books you've read?**

1856

1857 IRIS: The, um, the *Star Wars* ones.

1858

1859 **RESEARCHER: Okay, yeah. So, do you like comic books; or are they not**
1860 **really your cup of tea?**

1861

1862 IRIS: Um, they're not really my cup of tea. Like, I-I find them interesting, but,
1863 like, I'd rather read, like - I like poetry more.

1864

1865 **RESEARCHER: Okay, yeah. Is there something particular about comic**
1866 **books that you can pinpoint you don't like them as much?**

1867

1868 IRIS: They're just, like, really all over the place, and, like, it confuses me
1869 sometimes.

1870

1871 **RESEARCHER: That is true. It- when I learned how to read them, I had to**
1872 **read them a couple times to figure out the flow.**

1873

1874 IRIS: Yeah.

1875

1876 **RESEARCHER: So, tell me about your experience reading your *Harley***
1877 ***Quinn* comic - because you read *Harley Quinn* #54.**

1878

1879 IRIS: Yeah.

1880

1881 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. So, what were your impressions of the comic, the**
1882 **story, anything?**

1883

1884 IRIS: Um, I really liked it. It-it, kind of, like, secretly put in, like, an idea of the-
1885 like, what happened, what's happening in the world today, like of, with iPhones
1886 and **stuff**. How, like, so quickly someone's life can be over; or, like, someone's
1887 life can, like, explode. And, like, how social media is, like, taking over and stuff.

1888

1889 **RESEARCHER: Yeah, I think that's a really good point. And Harley in**
1890 **that story is very obsessed with being, like, an influencer and, like, really**
1891 **popular -**

1892

1893 IRIS: Yeah. Yeah.

1894

1895 **RESEARCHER: - do you feel like, as a teenager on social media yourself,**
1896 **did you feel like you saw – like, what she was doing in the comic, have you**
1897 **experienced in your own life or seen with your friends?**

1898

1899 IRIS: I've definitely seen it with my friends - like wanting to, like, be on social
1900 media all the time and, like, show what you're doing and stuff.

1901

1902 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. So, when you looked at - or when you experienced**
1903 **Harley in the comic - did it match the existing picture you have her; or was**
1904 **it different in any way?**

1905

1906 IRIS: Um, it was kind of different, like...um. Well, okay - it was the same in a
1907 way, but, like, it was different. Like, I've never seen- like, I've only seen, like, a
1908 clip of her. And I just saw that, like her own story of, like, actually, like, dealing
1909 with stuff, like in a problem situation. And I've never, like, seen her like that –
1910 so, I guess, like now, I, like, know her more, if that makes sense.

1911

1912 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. How do you feel like she handled when she- the**
1913 **problem she was presented?**

1914

1915 IRIS: I think she handled it, like, like anyone would. Like, she, like, was upset
1916 about it; and, like...I think she handled it - she could have handled it, like,
1917 better. But, like, at first, like, it made sense that she was upset.

1918

1919 **RESEARCHER: Are you talking about like when she's really sad that she**
1920 **kind of gets 'outed' on social media?**

1921

1922 IRIS: Yeah.

1923

1924 **RESEARCHER: Yeah, it was...It was very traumatic, the way it was**
1925 **depicted visually.**

1926

1927 IRIS: Yeah [small laugh]

1928

1929 **RESEARCHER: So, did you enjoy reading the comic?**

1930

1931 IRIS: Yeah, I did enjoy it. It was just confusing at some points.

1932

1933 **RESEARCHER: What parts were confusing? Just how to read it?**

1934

1935 IRIS: Yeah - how to read it; and, like, who is talking sometimes; and, like,
1936 which way to read it; and, like, where to read it, you know.

1937

1938 **RESEARCHER: Yes, that can be- that can be confusing.**

1939

1940 IRIS: Yeah.

1941

1942 **RESEARCHER: Did it make you interested in reading more *Harley Quinn***
1943 **comics at all?**

1944

1945 IRIS: Honestly, yeah. I wanted to read, like- like, more things that she deals with
1946 and, like... It was fun to read it, so I would read another one.

1947

1948 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. So, I know you kind of touched on this a little bit**
1949 **with, like, the social media aspect of the story; and how it kind of resonated**
1950 **with some of the experiences you've had with friends...**

1951

1952 IRIS: Mm hmm.

1953

1954 **RESEARCHER: - Um, when you were reading it, was there anything that**
1955 **you saw that Harley was going through; or the way she reacted; or how**
1956 **other characters maybe interacted with her - anything that made you**
1957 **reflect on your own experiences, as a girl in particular?**

1958

1959 IRIS: Um, it's just, like, how easy it is to, like - I really thought about how, like,
1960 people can, like, show- send videos out on the Internet and then, like...like, you
1961 can really get your life; like, you can get embarrassed; and, like, get your life
1962 ruined and, like...mainly-mainly, like, just the embarrassment; the feeling of,
1963 like, people seeing it; and, like, feeling down about yourself. Like, maybe that.

1964

1965 **RESEARCHER: You feel like that is a universal experience for boys and**
1966 **girls; or do you feel like it's more targeted for girls?**

1967

1968 IRIS: Oh, more targeted for girls.

1969

1970 **RESEARCHER: And- can you just tell me more about why you think that?**

1971

1972 IRIS: Yeah. It- for boys, like, if a funny video or, like, something like that gets
1973 leaked, like, they'll be looked at as, like, cooler, like...um, like, interesting and,
1974 like, funny. But, if a girl does something, like bold or like weird, then, like,
1975 they'll be looked at as, like, weird and, like, um...and not like other people, and,
1976 like, different, in a bad way.

1977

1978 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. Were there any other aspects of the comic that kind**
1979 **of made you reflect on...just, kind of, the experience of being a girl?**

1980

1981 IRIS: Um, definitely, like, wanting to get revenge, but like... That in, that- yeah.
1982 Like, wanting to get revenge, but I can't- like, I want to get revenge sometimes,
1983 like I want to do it. But, like, she got revenge, so I guess...that.

1984

1985 **RESEARCHER: So, um, she got revenge, and do you feel like that was kind**
1986 **of also specific to being a girl; or is that just kind of a universal, like people**
1987 **reacting to problems?**

1988

1989 IRIS: Yeah, I feel like it's, like, a fake reaction to problems.

1990

1991 **RESEARCHER: So, um - tell me about, like visually, what was your**
1992 **experience? Like, how did you feel like-was there anything about how she**
1993 **was depicted visually; or anything about the art in the comic that stood out**
1994 **to you or made you think about stuff?**

1995

1996 IRIS: I definitely thought the way that they, um, made her character look like –
1997 like, you could see, like, her, like, breasts more; and, like-like they really just
1998 put, like, her character, like, in angles, where it's more, like, interesting for the
1999 male gaze. And, like, um, I guess that just made me kind of, like, confused
2000 because, um, at random times, it would just be like her – and, like, I mean,
2001 obviously it's always been like that. But, like, so I'm not that surprised; but it's
2002 just, like, it's-it's still was just, like-like, confusing as to why, like, it was
2003 necessary. And it was kind of, like...stereotyping, like women - like girls, who
2004 are villains, like, dressing like that; and like-like having to look like that to get
2005 stuff done, and like that.

2006

2007 **RESEARCHER: Yeah, no, I think you make a good point, um, because**
2008 **there are criticisms that girls in comics tend to be very scantily clad.**

2009

2010 IRIS: Yeah.

2011

2012 **RESEARCHER: Do you feel like when you, you know, turn the page and**
2013 **there was a particular panel, where, for example, like when I read it, there**
2014 **was a lot of down-the-shirt shots...**

2015

2016 IRIS: Yeah.

2017

2018 **RESEARCHER: Do you feel like when you saw that it took- like, it kind of**
2019 **stopped you and took you out of the story for a second; or do you- were you**
2020 **just kind of more like, 'that's annoying'? Like, what was just kind of your**
2021 **immediate response to that?**

2022

2023 IRIS: I was just like- I was just like, 'that's unnecessary.' Like, I like- um, like I
2024 didn't really like- like, right there [*shows comic panel on camera to researcher*]
2025 [small laugh] -

2026

2027 **RESEARCHER: Yeah.**

2028

2029 IRIS: - Like that. I was just like, 'Oh, [giggles] okay.'

2030

2031 **RESEARCHER: Do you feel like those kind of depictions can almost turn a**
2032 **reader off reading them; or do you think it's just kind of like at this point**
2033 **it's par for the course?**

2034

2035 IRIS: I think, like - it's you can't really do anything about it, like, it's, it's- it's
2036 gonna like - oh my gosh, sorry, my... (pauses) okay. It's probably like - I think
2037 it's different for men and women. I feel like, if a man saw it, he would want to
2038 keep reading it - not all men, but, like, some men, if they saw it, they'd want to
2039 keep reading it. But, if a woman saw it, they just probably be like, 'well that's
2040 unnecessary,' and 'I'll keep reading it, but, like, I wish, like, they wouldn't
2041 stereo-stereo-lize, like, a woman,' - like people-people buying the comic just
2042 because of her body instead.

2043

2044 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. Um, I like that you said that it - visually, it feels like**
2045 **it's from a male gaze. So, when you- when you're reading it, do you kind of**

2046 **feel like it's written with the idea - that its mostly men reading it; or do you**
2047 **feel like it's just, maybe the writer or the artist projecting their own**
2048 **viewpoint on the story?**

2049

2050 IRIS: It's definitely written for men to, like, be into it, like for sure. It's, it's - the
2051 only reason it would be written for women is because of the girl power and, like,
2052 Harley Quinn being a woman and, like, doing things by herself. But the whole,
2053 like, story and, like...like, the-the graphics is, like, for men.

2054

2055 **RESEARCHER: No, I think you have a really good point. Especially... you**
2056 **know, every comic sometimes has, like, an artist who does just a couple**
2057 **pages, or does the whole thing, and you can tell how it changes from artist**
2058 **to artist. And –**

2059

2060 IRIS: Oh!

2061

2062 **RESEARCHER: - the artists in that comic, I feel like really emphasizes**
2063 **[small laugh] –**

2064

2065 IRIS: Yeah [small laugh]

2066

2067 **RESERACHER: - the male gaze part.**

2068

2069 IRIS: Yeah, for sure.

2070

2071 **RESEARCHER: So, like, if you could change anything about the character**
2072 **in that comic, what would it be? It could be her characterization, her**
2073 **visualization, how – like, anything you want. Is there anything you would**
2074 **change about the comic that would make it more enjoyable or relatable for**
2075 **you?**

2076

2077 IRIS: Maybe if she was - well, I honestly loved the whole comic. Like, I feel
2078 like there has to be, like, revenge for it to be interesting, and like. But I do think,

2079 like, it could have been cool if she was, like, more mature about it and, like, she-
2080 maybe, she talked to people online saying, she was sorry or something. And,
2081 like, maybe did the more mature thing instead of, like, getting back at the other
2082 person.

2083

2084 **RESEARCHER: Yeah, I mean, I think - do you think that could be an**
2085 **interesting message to readers because it is directed to teenage readers?**

2086

2087 IRIS: Yeah. Yeah, I definitely think it could be interesting. Like, it could, like,
2088 show people that you don't have to do anything back. Like, you can just be, like,
2089 let it happen, and, like, know that you made a mistake and like – yeah, like, to
2090 grow from it.

2091

2092 **RESEARCHER: And I think one thing with her is she kind of ultimately**
2093 **decides not to pursue revenge more out of...pity.**

2094

2095 IRIS: Yeah, she felt bad.

2096

2097 **RESEARCHER: Yeah, so I feel like...it's not really, like, she just decided to**
2098 **do the right thing. It was just she felt really bad [laughs] -**

2099

2100 IRIS: Yeah [small laugh]

2101

2102 **RESEARCHER: - and so, she's, like, maybe not.**

2103

2104 IRIS: Yeah.

2105

2106 **RESEARCHER: So, like, when you think about how Harley Quinn was just**
2107 **in your particular story – do you feel like she was a representative of girl**
2108 **power? Did you not really see it in this comic; or was she maybe a negative,**
2109 **kind of, representative of girl power? Thinking of her as, like, if she could**
2110 **be a role model for others.**

2111

2112 IRIS: Um... (brief pause) I honestly think like, - she, in this comic, she couldn't
2113 be a role model for others; because she was talking, like, bad and then it got,
2114 like, videotaped and, like, girls can't really look up to that. And then, like, it's
2115 not- it's just not really, like, something, like- it wasn't really like anything that I
2116 was like, 'Oh, like, I want to be like that,' like.

2117

2118 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. It feels like - do you feel like just kind of what she**
2119 **did in that comic made her seem more relatable and more human, because**
2120 **she was flawed?**

2121

2122 IRIS: Oh yeah, like that- that's something that you could look up to. Like, she
2123 made -she made a mistake and, like, she's not perfect.

2124

2125 **RESEARCHER: Yeah, that's true too. Um, would you recommend Harley**
2126 **Quinn comics to a friend of yours?**

2127

2128 IRIS: Um, yeah. My- one of my friends are really into Marvel and DC and...I
2129 would- I'd think she'd really like this comic, in particular.

2130

2131 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. When you're talking to her, like, what would you**
2132 **say about the comic or the character that you think would sell it to your**
2133 **friend?**

2134

2135 IRIS: I would just be like, it's about, like, how social media can, like, ruin
2136 people's lives. And, like, in the DC, like, world and, like, she gets, like... She,
2137 like, has to learn from it, and, like, fight to, like, save her, like, save the-the what
2138 is it called? The...?

2139

2140 **RESEARCHER: Coney Island?**

2141

2142 IRIS: Yeah, Coney Island. And, um, it's, like, really action-packed and, like,
2143 interesting.

2144

2145 **RESEARCHER: Is there anything about, like this comic or this character,**
2146 **that you think is similar or different to other comic book characters that**
2147 **you might be familiar with? Like, for example, maybe you've seen some of**
2148 **the Marvel movies, or like *Wonder Woman*. When you think of Harley**
2149 **Quinn, compared to like other female characters in, like, DC and Marvel,**
2150 **what do you kind of think?**

2151

2152 IRIS: I think of Black Widow because she's also independent. And, like,
2153 obviously they're not the same, like, at all [small laugh] – but, like, I just- she
2154 reminds me of Black Widow.

2155

2156 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. Well, I think we've gotten through most of my**
2157 **questions. Was there anything else about Harley Quinn, or comics, or your**
2158 **experience with this that you wanted to share?**

2159

2160 IRIS: Um, I just I didn't think that I would be so into, like, reading it; but, like,
2161 when I was, started to, like, flip through the pages, like, I just, like, wanted to
2162 know, like, what was happening, and, like, how she was gonna solve it. And I
2163 really liked the way that they, like, wrote it and, like- like ended it and stuff.
2164 Like, I didn't expect it to go that- the way that it did.

2165

2166 **RESEARCHER: Yeah, and I know that you're a big reader. So, did you**
2167 **feel like this story, in terms of like plot and character, was it kind of on the**
2168 **same level as, maybe, the more traditional books you read?**

2169

2170 IRIS: Um, there was, there is the-the climax. And there is, like, the revolution in,
2171 like - resolution - and everything. So, I do feel like it was like any other book,
2172 but it was just shorter and faster. And there wasn't as many, like, details, but,
2173 like, it's still, like, got the whole thing, like, accomplished.

2174

2175 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. Well, I think you made some awesome points. Uh,**
2176 **did you have anything else you wanted to share before I stop the recording?**

2177

2178 IRIS: No, thank you.

2179

2180 **RESEARCHER:** Okay, so let me pause-

APPENDIX I

Dolly: Individual Interview Transcript

2181 **RESEARCHER: Okay. So, to start us off, can you just describe a typical**
2182 **day in your life? Like, do you like school; what do you like in school; do you**
2183 **do any extracurriculars what do you like to do with friends? Just a general**
2184 **overview of you and your hobbies.**

2185

2186 DOLLY: Um, well, um. I am very, like, I - not intuitive, 'into' that's the word -
2187 to like, um, after-school activities, like I'm in yearbook. And I'm a big - I'm,
2188 I'm a huge - I'm a huge part of yearbook. Like I'm a- basically kind of...editor
2189 in a sense, but not. I don't know how to explain it but, um. Then I do Stand
2190 Leaders, which is, like, you're, you're at every game, and you try to get the
2191 crowd like pumped up. So, and then... (pauses) I'm in the, um, young women's
2192 leadership club and the environmental club. And outside of school, I have a job
2193 at [ICE CREAM SHOP], which is...fun.

2194

2195 **RESEARCHER: Nice, nice.**

2196

2197 DOLLY: Yeah.

2198

2199 **RESEARCHER: I do like [ICE CREAM SHOP]. [both laugh] Um, okay, so**
2200 **I know that you were telling me before the recording started that you're a**
2201 **big fan of DC and Harley Quinn. So, tell me what is your just general**
2202 **knowledge of Harley Quinn as a character? Like, what do you know about**
2203 **her? What are your thoughts about her?**

2204

2205 DOLLY: Um, so I like her. She doesn't- okay. Not 'til recently, we got more of a
2206 background on, like, who-what how she was before the whole, um, meeting the
2207 Joker and the Asylum. Yeah - whenever she was trying to do research; and then
2208 slowly, he mani-manipulates her to fall in love and then- so he can get out. But,
2209 um, we didn't get a real backstory 'til recently; and I wish we got more of that,
2210 because I feel like she-she has so much to her. Like, there's so much to unfold.
2211 Because she may seem - okay, like in - mm, I'm trying to think of the
2212 adaptations of, like, the newer...like cartoons, and then the older comics, there's

2213 so much difference between those two Harleys. But the one in the cartoon, is
2214 more, like, I feel the way people want to see her. But the comics is more what
2215 we should be getting, I guess. I don't- I can't really explain that, but I really like
2216 the different-ance - I can't say the, I don't know the word. But um, I like the
2217 difference between them both; but I wish there was a way that they could do,
2218 like, the comic Harley and the new Harley together, because I feel like they take
2219 some of the- her, like, persona from the comics away from the newer stuff.
2220 Especially, because, like, she's supposed to be, like, a clown - she's supposed to
2221 be kind of comical. I wish they would put that more into new stuff.

2222

2223 **RESEARCHER: Yeah.**

2224

2225 DOLLY: And yeah.

2226

2227 **RESEARCHER: No, I think you make a really good point. And, in fact,**
2228 **what you're talking about is kind of what I've been looking at because - I**
2229 **got the idea for this research from what you're talking about. Like, [Dolly:**
2230 **small laugh] I watched the new cartoon, and I was like, 'this is not the same**
2231 **Harley I grew up with in the 90s,' when she came around. So, you're 100%**
2232 **right - there's a lot of differences between the different iterations of her**
2233 **character; and I like that you say that there's aspects of her in the comics**
2234 **that you wish you saw more in, like, the mainstream cartoons. Could you**
2235 **give me some examples of what you're talking about, like what you would**
2236 **like to see?**

2237

2238 DOLLY: Um, so...(sighs) You know, that's a great- that's a great question.
2239 [laughs] I'm trying to think. (pauses) Okay, so with the older comics - I'm
2240 familiar with only a few. I'm more familiar with, like, maybe these, like,
2241 nowadays, maybe 2000s. But, um, I know that the newest, with the Black Label
2242 DC - um, I like how- what, no. I don't like how they made her so like dependent
2243 on other things and made her feel less confident on herself. It was sort of a
2244 backstory, but I get - but I wish they made her feel, like...more independent
2245 towards herself than that she needed, something which- because in that comic,
2246 she always had something coming, like she had to have something so. There is-
2247 she had alcoholism; she had the Joker; and she said- she felt like she needed
2248 those things and, everything else was kind of...not, ooo, hold on. {pauses}I
2249 don't know how to explain that - hold on, I'm really trying! I just...

2250

2251 **RESEARCHER: No! Don't- don't freak out. Are you talking about the**
2252 ***Harleen* comics?**

2253

2254 DOLLY: Yes! *Harleen!* That's what it is.

2255

2256 **RESEARCHER: Yeah.**

2257

2258 DOLLY: Yep, I just recently read those. [small laugh]

2259

2260 **RESEARCHER: Yeah.**

2261

2262 DOLLY: But they're good. I like the- how they ga- they're giving her backstory.
2263 But I feel like they shouldn't be making her so dependent on something, because
2264 it was more, like, alcoholism - she had that. Which is- I like the aspect of it, but I
2265 feel like, it's still like...I feel like she needs something a little more normal.
2266 Well, that is normal - normalizing that, I guess. I don't know how to explain that.

2267

2268 **RESEARCHER: No, I get what you're saying. It-it seems like it feels like...**
2269 **if it's not Joker, it has to be something. She can't just be fully functioning**
2270 **on her own.**

2271

2272 DOLLY: Yes, yes! That's exactly what I'm trying to say. Because they always
2273 try to add something to her that's like - why can't she just be a med-like, a
2274 medical student trying to be, trying to make something of herself. Like, why
2275 does she have to have something piggybacking on her, like another flaw – like,
2276 she doesn't have any family with her; she has– um, what is it? ...but she can't-
2277 she doesn't sleep, because she constantly has nightmares about the Joker. Like,
2278 why does she have to have something so...pinpointing towards her, when she
2279 can just be her own thing? Like kind of.

2280

2281 **RESEARCHER: No, I think that's an interesting observation,**
2282 **because...that's one of the things I felt like I saw in the comics. Like - this**
2283 **study focus is really on the *New 52* and the *Rebirth* of the *Harley Quinn* self-**

2284 **titled. And, even though she doesn't have alcoholism in that particular**
2285 **canon...**

2286

2287 DOLLY: Mm hmm.

2288

2289 **RESEARCHER: - There's still other things. Like she's not with Joker, then**
2290 **she might be dependent on the people around her, she might be dependent**
2291 **on Ivy, or she might be dependent on her mom. So, I get what you're**
2292 **saying. Cause even though - in each different universe, and what's canon**
2293 **and not - even though there's differences like that, where like she's an**
2294 **alcoholic here, but not here - there's still that same underlying issue where**
2295 **Harley is attached to something, and she can't just –**

2296

2297 DOLLY: Mm hmm.

2298

2299 **RESEARCHER: - be on her own.**

2300

2301 DOLLY: And I wish, I wish we could see that, that she can actually be on her
2302 own. Because even, like in *Birds of Prey*, when she did break up with Joker,
2303 she's still, like, had the man that lived underneath her, she had her hyena - and I
2304 like how they put the hyena in there because it's supposed to be her, like
2305 sidekick. I thought that was cute. And then, um...she always had somebody, and
2306 then she had the little girl with the broken wrist - I forgot her name. But, like,
2307 she never is alone. And I don't know if she's just scared to be alone, or she-mm-
2308 possibly...probably is. But, um...yeah. I just wish that she would be more
2309 independent, in a sense.

2310

2311 **RESEARCHER: Yeah, I think...like, you've really- I really like that**
2312 **viewpoint, because that's something I resonated with too. I mean, when you**
2313 **look at the character, what are things you do like about her? Like, why do**
2314 **you think she might resonate with people?**

2315

2316 DOLLY: Well, with... (sighs; pauses) She makes people kind of feel like - if
2317 you are, if you feel like you are crazy, like in a sense, like I don't- not like crazy,
2318 like Harley smashing people with bats. But, like, you kind of feel like she- you
2319 can relate to her. Because, I mean, even though she is a villain, she's still has sad

2320 days, she still gets heartbroken - like she's still like a person. But, overall,
2321 like...yeah, she's still a person and no matter what, at the end of the day, she has
2322 emotions. And she was a regular, like, non-villain before - it's, like, you can see
2323 how- she's has it, she's changed, yeah, in the sense that she now does
2324 everything...against the law. But, like, she still was- she-she got through med-
2325 med, (sighs). Does she have a PhD? What does she have? –

2326

2327 **RESEARCHER: Yeah.**

2328

2329 DOLLY: - because she was trying to be a psychologist. Yeah. So, like...she was
2330 smart. She shows that women can do something -

2331

2332 **RESEARCHER: Yeah.**

2333

2334 DOLLY: Like, I kind of like that - feminism. [small laugh]

2335

2336 **RESERACHER: No, I –**

2337

2338 DOLLY: Cause she – (stops)

2339

2340 **RESEARCHER: Go ahead.**

2341

2342 DOLLY: No, you can go ahead. No, you can go.

2343

2344 **RESEARCHER: No, no, I wanted to hear what you said. Because yeah,**
2345 **you're right - she has a, she has a PhD; and she– it's, like, she went from**
2346 **good, to villain, to 'we're not 100% sure what she is', and now she, kind of,**
2347 **went to antiheroine, and at this point she's, kind of, a full-fledged hero in**
2348 **the *Infinite Frontier* for DC. So, she's, she's gone through quite a few shifts.**

2349

2350 DOLLY: Yeah, and I like, I like how they show that with a woman character.
2351 Because it shows that women can do anything, cause we can. [small laugh]

2352

2353 **RESEARCHER: Yeah!**

2354

2355 DOLLY: And I liked that aspect of it.

2356

2357 **RESEARCHER: No, that was actually gonna be my next question. Like, do**
2358 **you feel like, how Harley Quinn is depicted, like, just generally in popular**
2359 **culture - do you feel like she's a good or a bad representation of feminism**
2360 **and girl power?**

2361

2362 DOLLY: Oh, she- I...she is an icon, like icon- woman icon, girl power, all the
2363 way - especially *Birds of Prey*. Because, even though that, um...they were kind
2364 of hate-they were hating on each other; but, the end, they were like, 'okay we're
2365 gonna defeat the'- Who was it? It was like the... (pauses)

2366

2367 **RESEARCHER: Are you talking about the movie?**

2368

2369 DOLLY: Yes.

2370

2371 **RESEARCHER: It was Black Mask.**

2372

2373 DOLLY: Black Mask – yes, okay. But they still at the end, the girls went
2374 together and defeated him. And it was like - it shows that, even though, like,
2375 they may hate each other in this like – whatever. But they still got together and
2376 did that. And, what else? Um...but...in some aspects, she is, like, really
2377 sexualized, and I hate that for her. Because I mean they - like at, um, my local
2378 mall actually, they have a, um, - for the video game. I can't - the- it starts with-

2379

2380 **RESERACHER: The *Gotham Knights*?**

2381

2382 DOLLY: No, I know it starts with an A...

2383

2384 **RESEARCHER: The *Batman: Arkham Asylum*?**

2385

2386 DOLLY: Yes, I think so... I think that's the game. And, they have a statue of
2387 her; and, one day me and my mom were walking by, and it was, like, her,
2388 wearing, like, basically nothing. And I mean, like, it-she looks cute and all. But,
2389 like, people-people are gonna to see- like, men are gonna to see that and
2390 sexualize her. And it's good- like I don't like- I don't like thinking like that, for
2391 her. I mean, it's-it's cute and all, but I mean, I feel bad. [small laugh] And my
2392 mom was like, 'ugh! oh I don't want my-your little brother to see this when he's
2393 older.' I'm like, 'girl calm down.' [small laugh]

2394

2395 **RESEARCHER: I know exactly which statue you you're talking about and**
2396 **which mall. And I think that one - maybe it's from *Arkham Knight*? There's**
2397 **a couple *Arkham* games that I know- exactly what you're talking about**
2398 **because it's kind of creepy in the face.**

2399

2400 DOLLY: Oh yeah.

2401

2402 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. No, I think you, you also touched on another point**
2403 **that's a really big part of her; and she has always kind of felt like she's been**
2404 **sexualized. I mean, as a fan of hers, is- how does that make you feel? Like, I**
2405 **know you say you kind of feel for her - but like what does it make you feel,**
2406 **like, when you reflect on your own life as a girl and even maybe trying to**
2407 **look up to someone like her?**

2408

2409 DOLLY: Well, I mean... you can never change the way a man thinks. And
2410 they're probably always going to be sexualizing you or looking at you in a
2411 different perspective than you want them to. And, I mean, she's a character, and
2412 I mean, I feel, for her if men are...doing that - like sexualizing her. But, for me,
2413 like the look up to that, I mean everyone has probably been cat-called,
2414 sexualized, or harassed in a way; and I feel- and it's like something we really
2415 cannot change - because men are never going to change. But no matter what we
2416 do, what we wear - it's not going away, and it's not gonna go away for any
2417 character, person, celebrity, nothing; and-but... there's ways we can help
2418 but...(inaudible)

2419

2420 **RESEARCHER: Some have argued that if you had more women writers**
2421 **and women artists behind the scenes that that might change. Would you**
2422 **agree or disagree with that?**

2423

2424 DOLLY: I don't think so. One, because - I mean, it depends, like... (pauses)
2425 There's always going to be, like, a fan art of her. If a woman writer or artist
2426 made her, like, have, like, sort of more conservative, like-like wearing a hoodie
2427 or something, a man can make that hoodie a little more tighter, like fan art of it.
2428 And it's going to get sexualized. There's just, like, no stopping it. But I will- but
2429 it would be really - I really like the ideas of more women artists creating women
2430 characters, because then, like, a man won't be dressing one of our beloved
2431 women characters and making her look...sexy or, um...what they appeal to -

2432

2433 **RESERACHER: Yeah.**

2434

2435 DOLLY: - They'd be more what is conventional for women. A woman, yeah.

2436

2437 **RESEARCHER: Do you feel like Harley's more or less sexualized than**
2438 **other DC female characters?**

2439

2440 DOLLY: Um, well, like her and Poison Ivy. Like, I feel - oh, and even
2441 Catwoman! Is that- yeah, Catwoman?

2442

2443 **RESERACHER: Yeah.**

2444

2445 DOLLY: Yeah. I feel like they're - all three of them are very sexualized. Even,
2446 like, the kid- like Starfire and Raven, they're sexualized. Like they're all...with
2447 their popularity, the popular they get, the more they will be sexualized because
2448 men are disgusting. [both laughing] I mean, I'm not just going to point towards
2449 men, I mean women can be doing that, too - but still, it's just...no matter, like -
2450 the more popular you get, the more you're going to have weird, like, probably
2451 butt pads (?) and weird fan arts. I mean.

2452

2453 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. Some-some people have argued that the men**
2454 **charac- the male characters, like Batman or Superman, are also sexualized**
2455 **in their own way. Do you- do you think that's true; do you think that's**
2456 **equivalent to what you see with these girl characters?**

2457

2458 DOLLY: Okay, so, like, with the recent *Batman* movie, with Robert Pattinson in
2459 it. I-I...a lot of girls probably are sexualizing Robert Pattinson as a vampire- um,
2460 Batman. I mean, I love Robert Pattinson, so I- but I would feel disgusting if,
2461 like, I watched...soft fan art of him and, like the Batman suit, with some, like -
2462 ugh. No, I could never see that, like that - oof. But, I mean, it could be this- it's
2463 like... Yeah, but probably not as worse as what women characters; because I
2464 mean...more- women are more sexualized than men.

2465

2466 **RESERACHER: Yeah.**

2467

2468 DOLLY: Cause there's more features, to us, I guess? I don't know. And there's
2469 more...I don't know how to explain it, but, like, - a man having their shirt off is
2470 different than a woman having their shirt off, you know.

2471

2472 **RESEARCHER: Yes.**

2473

2474 DOLLY: - like it's two different- like balanced. It's not balanced, so I...I feel
2475 like men characters can be sexualized, obviously but...not as much as women.

2476

2477 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. No, I think that's a good point. So, I know that you**
2478 **read comic books normally. What are some of the comics that you've read**
2479 **just generally? The ones that you enjoyed, ones maybe you didn't enjoy.**

2480

2481 DOLLY: Umm... (pauses) With, like, - I like the Black Label –

2482

2483 **RESEARCHER: Mm hmm.**

2484

2485 DOLLY: - ones. I like how they're giving more, like, a darkish more tone to it -
2486 to DC, which they already had. Which, okay - that's what I like about DC - it's
2487 more, like, kind of matured than Marvel.

2488

2489 **RESEACHER: Yeah.**

2490

2491 DOLLY: - because I feel like, like - I like the, um... Nighthawk? Is that his
2492 name?

2493

2494 **RESEARCHER: Oh, uh...Nightwing?**

2495

2496 DOLLY: The guy with the blue. Yeah.

2497

2498 **RESEARCHER: Yeah, the former Robin.**

2499

2500 DOLLY: Yes!

2501

2502 **RESEARCHER: Yeah.**

2503

2504 DOLLY: I like...I like they're co- like, was it? Hold on, I have to think about
2505 this, um... (pauses) I think it was him and somebody else. Um...actually, it
2506 may've been not canon. Um...it was him and Starfire comic. I think someone
2507 wrote that it, but it was... But I like that. But [small laugh] But I like how it's
2508 more, like - I like Shazam and I like...the more sort of, like, kind of matured...

2509

2510 **RESEARCHER: Mm hmm.**

2511

2512 DOLLY: I don't know how to explain that, but it's just... The Black Labels, I
2513 like that; 'cause you don't get to see, like, that, with Marvel. You don't, kind of,
2514 get to see their own backs-like, sort of backstories, or, like, more of them, like,
2515 being villains or heroes. Like, the villains in Marvel - they don't cuss. Like, but
2516 in this aspect, they do. It's, like, you actually get to see them be, like, them- evil

2517 villains, you know. So, I like the- I like the Black Labels and... there's another –
2518 hold on, I think I can look it up... umm. Or maybe not.

2519

2520 RESEARCHER: Yeah. I mean the Black Labels are made for mature readers so
2521 –

2522

2523 **DOLLY: Yeah.**

2524

2525 **RESEARCHER: - there's a lot more of, like, that R-rating type of content**
2526 **and then that...yeah, I can't think of a Marvel equivalent to that.**

2527

2528 DOLLY: No because I don't think there is.

2529

2530 **RESEARCHER: Yeah.**

2531

2532 DOLLY: - and that's what I love about DC; because they're not afraid to shed
2533 the light of, like, them having - they have the children stuff, like the *Teen Titans*
2534 *Go*, but then they have, like, the show *Gotham*, which is, like, more mature, and
2535 I really like that, in the sense. Because, um, I mean, I- when I was younger, I
2536 loved... *Justice League*?

2537

2538 **RESEARCHER: Yeah!**

2539

2540 DOLLY: - was that a cartoon? I think that was, I think that was, um, I don't
2541 know if that was mature or not. But let's pretend it was- it wasn't, but I watched
2542 *Justice League*, and I watched the, like, *Teen Titans Go*; and there was... I
2543 watched the old...like, rendition of Batman and Robin - like, whenever they had
2544 the, um, Scooby-Doo collab. I was like, "oh my gosh!" -

2545

2546 **RESEARCHER: Yeah.**

2547

2548 DOLLY: - but it was, like, the 60s. But it was fine. It was still like one of my
2549 favorite things.

2550

2551 **RESEARCHER: Yeah!**

2552

2553 DOLLY: But I really love that; and I barely talked about comics but... [small
2554 laugh]

2555

2556 **RESEARCHER: No, I mean they're all interconnected at this point.**

2557

2558 DOLLY: Yeah.

2559

2560 **RESEARCHER: Um, I know that you read IRIS's comic that she had - the**
2561 **one where Harley was trying to be, like, social media famous.**

2562

2563 DOLLY: Yes.

2564

2565 **RESEARCHER: Yeah.**

2566

2567 DOLLY: I read half of that at her house.

2568

2569 **RESEARCHER: Yeah.**

2570

2571 DOLLY: That is true.

2572

2573 **RESEARCHER: What was your- tell me your impression of the comic and**
2574 **the character. Like, what was your experience?**

2575

2576 DOLLY: Okay, so the, like, first few pages, I like the sense that, like, she had
2577 emotion. She was, like - after being defeated, she was crying on the - I think it
2578 was a Live or a photo, I'm not really sure.

2579

2580 **RESEARCHER: Yeah.**

2581

2582 DOLLY: I can't remember. But I have the image in my head, and it was her,
2583 like, in like- sort of in tears with, um, the phone; and the other girl was mocking
2584 her and being like, 'So this is the infamous Harley Quinn?' or something like,
2585 'this is the powerful something' - I can't remember exactly. But I really like this,
2586 instead they kind of gave her feelings in it. And, like, made her- made 'em show
2587 yet again, like, she is not just evil - she still has person in her. She's not just
2588 straight up sociopath...yeah.

2589

2590 **RESEARCHER: Yeah, um... When you read that one, did it make you**
2591 **more interested in reading like that comic - which it's rated T for teen, so**
2592 **it's not as explicit as the Black Label, but it's, like, just a level lower.**

2593

2594 DOLLY: Yeah. I probably would read more. 'cause I mean, I want to get back
2595 into comics, because the last time I - was when I was younger.

2596

2597 **RESEARCHER: Mm hmm.**

2598

2599 DOLLY: - but it was very interesting. And it's, like, comics and graphic - I like
2600 (pauses). I don't really like graphic novels, but I like comics.

2601

2602 **RESEARCHER: Yeah.**

2603

2604 DOLLY: - a little. Probably does not make any sense, but it's just the way my
2605 mind works. I don't...I don't...know...

2606

2607 **RESEARCHER: No, it's - it totally makes sense. Do you think it has to do**
2608 **with maybe the length, or maybe the content?**

2609

2610 DOLLY: Probably the length. I like short - like an easy, like, quick 'I can sit and
2611 then read it,' and then get up and do the rest of my day. Like, I don't want to
2612 have to...like, the-the graphic novel *Ghost*. It was, like, a really big thing when I
2613 was younger. Like, I could not read that; I could not get through it. But, like, if
2614 you put a comic - like a DC comic in front of me - I'd be like, 'oh I'll read this
2615 in like 10 minutes.' I'll be fine.

2616

2617 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. They are- they're very... Well, I mean they're**
2618 **published every month or every coup- like, couple weeks. I mean, they're**
2619 **meant to be consumed quickly -**

2620

2621 DOLLY: Yeah.

2622

2623 **RESEARCHER: - so you can get to the next one [small laugh]. So, -**

2624

2625 DOLLY: Yeah.

2626

2627 **RESEARCHER: - like, when you just think of Harley Quinn and her**
2628 **stories - does she ever make you reflect on your own life as a girl in**
2629 **American society? Because that's essentially what she's doing. Like, do you**
2630 **see any parallels to your own life and your own experiences with what she**
2631 **goes through?**

2632

2633 DOLLY: Umm. (pauses) Sorry, my mom's calling but...I (inaudible) Think
2634 about this. Okay, umm. She- like I said, she's been through heartbreak; and I
2635 mean, like every girl's had their heart broken. And, I mean, it shows she- the
2636 way she went through was probably not as...realistic. Well, maybe it was. Well,
2637 I mean, you don't buy a hyena -

2638

2639 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. [small laugh]**

2640

2641 DOLLY: - whenever you have a heart - you're broke, broke, heartbroken; but
2642 you do, like, eat ice cream, maybe cry on your couch for a few days. But... I

2643 mean that- the depiction of that was kind of...relevant to my life as a girl. I
 2644 mean, I probably- I've cried on my couch with ice cream because of a guy
 2645 before. But, um...for an American, like, girl, I don't really know... But go- to
 2646 show that a woman, again, could get their PhD, be successful - because she was
 2647 pretty successful. And, I mean, like, she got to do what she wanted, but then she
 2648 kind of ruined it for herself, getting head over heels for the Joker. Which, I
 2649 mean, that could happen to anyone, not just a woman, so -

2650

2651 **RESEARCHER: Yeah.**

2652

2653 DOLLY: I mean, a man could fell head over heels for a girl, or a man can fall
 2654 head over heels for a man and ruin his own career. It doesn't just have to be a
 2655 woman being manipulated by a man, so. But it shows that a woman can
 2656 probably do – like, as a young girl, it made me think that I could get- um,
 2657 become a psychologist, which is something I really want to do. But me- yeah,
 2658 made me think about it. I can probably do it, but also, she's...fiction, so maybe
 2659 not. You never know.

2660

2661 **RESEARCHER: Well, I mean - do you feel like it's important to see**
 2662 **characters who do things like that to- like, what you're talking about. I'm**
 2663 **thinking of, you know, you said you were a little girl, and you saw that - do**
 2664 **you feel like representation of, like, that kind of thing is important?**

2665

2666 DOLLY: Like for, um, seeing women at that? -

2667

2668 **RESEARCHER: Yeah.**

2669

2670 DOLLY: - um, yes. I do. Because, I mean, whenever - young girls usually see
 2671 like princesses, they're like, 'Oh, I want to be a princess! Oh, I want to be...,'
 2672 like something completely, like, unrealistic. But then, there was like, 'Oh, I want
 2673 to be a psychologist. I want to work with criminals.' Like things like that. Like
 2674 that's how I was as a child - it's like, 'oh my gosh! I want to work with serial
 2675 killers and see what actually goes through their brain.' Like, it wasn't just like,
 2676 'Oh, I want to be a princess.' No, I wanted to be...what I- what Harley was.
 2677 Except I didn't want to jump into a vat of acid or something.

2678

2679 **RESEARCHER: Yeah.**

2680

2681 DOLLY: [laughs]

2682

2683 **RESEARCHER: I'm glad you brought that up. I was just about to ask, like,**
2684 **what is your opinion on the changes to her origin story? Because, originally,**
2685 **when she was developed in the 90s, SHE chose to jump into the vat of acid;**
2686 **and then, -**

2687

2688 DOLLY: Yeah.

2689

2690 **RESEARCHER: - when they revised her origins in the *New 52* - and I think**
2691 **it's still currently canon - it's now that Joker pushed her into it. So, there's**
2692 **complaints that, you know, originally Harley had - I can't think of the**
2693 **word, but she basically, like, made the choice to do that –**

2694

2695 DOLLY: Mm hmm.

2696

2697 **RESEARCHER: - versus she didn't - oh autonomy! That's the word. But**
2698 **then, with this revised origin, you took that away from her; and you said**
2699 **that Joker forced her into this life. What would be – like, what's your**
2700 **opinion on that?**

2701

2702 DOLLY: Okay, um... I, kind of, like the idea- I don't like the idea of her-him
2703 pushing her. I like the idea of her more, like, getting herself - her own choice
2704 jumping into it and changing for herself. Because she wanted that, that's the life
2705 she wanted at the end of the day. Like, and then, no matter what, she knew she
2706 couldn't, she couldn't go back, so she made that life-changing choice. I don't like
2707 the idea that he- because he did manipulate her into...becoming Harley Quinn,
2708 like thinking that he really loved her or something. But she-I like the idea of
2709 her...going into the vat of acid it on her own; 'cause she didn't, she didn't need
2710 him to push her in. She...she wanted to at the end of the day. But just give her a
2711 second.

2712

2713 **RESEARCHER: Yeah.**

2714

2715 DOLLY: [small laugh] Joker, calm down. You didn't need to push her, Man –
2716 like, she was going to do it on her own. Just hold your horses.

2717

2718 **RESEARCHER: And I feel like you've kind of already touched on this - but**
2719 **if there's anything you could change about the Harley Quinn that you know**
2720 **and that you've read about, is-is there anything you would change? What's-**
2721 **what would it be?**

2722

2723 DOLLY: Well, one: to make her more independent in her own sense. And
2724 then...I wish, she was – okay. So, she's, she's, like, supposed to be sort of... like
2725 a clown, like in her own sense. I wish there was more comedy! I feel like she
2726 would be a perfect, like, little funny gal. Like, have some jokes here and there.
2727 But, like, you kind of don't see that, like... but I wish it was more of that. I feel
2728 like she'd be great.

2729

2730 **RESEARCHER: No, I think that that's really appropriate. I feel like in her**
2731 **– ‘cause, you know, she was one of the few characters created on TV before**
2732 **she moved into comics.**

2733

2734 DOLLY: Mm hmm.

2735

2736 **RESEARCHER: In her iterations on the original *Batman: Animated Series*,**
2737 **she was that. She was comic relief. She was very just jester-y. But you're r-**
2738 **I agree with you, I don't, I don't see that as much in her current stuff.**

2739

2740 DOLLY: Mm hmm.

2741

2742 **RESEARCHER: it's just...a play on her name and that's her aesthetic; and**
2743 **we're not really leaning into that actual harlequin character.**

2744

2745 DOLLY: Mm hmm.

2746

2747 **RESEARCHER: So-**

2748

2749 DOLLY: No, but I would put more – sorry! You can go.

2750

2751 **RESEARCHER: No, no, you go!**

2752

2753 DOLLY: Okay. I was just gonna say yeah. I wish they would put more of, like,
2754 jokes into her, like, make her funny - well, I mean she is funny. But, like, more,
2755 like, in the sense she's trying to be - more than, like, just accidentally saying
2756 something so, you know.

2757

2758 **RESEARCHER: Yeah!**

2759

2760 DOLLY: I feel like it fits her.

2761

2762 **RESEARCHER: Do you- if you could talk to, like, the writer or the artist of**
2763 **some of the *Harley Quinn* comics that you've read - what are some things**
2764 **you would say to them; or things you'd want to talk about? Like, it could be**
2765 **critiques; it could be compliments; it could be, maybe, you should**
2766 **think/rethink this particular thing. Like, what are things you think you**
2767 **would want to say to them?**

2768

2769 DOLLY: Give her more of a backstory. I want to see more into her, like before
2770 col-like, before she had to go to the, like, Asylum to test with him. Like, I want
2771 to see more, like, what made her so, like, she had to be with Joker – like, what
2772 made her so attracted to him or attached to him. Like, I just wanna, I just want a
2773 backstory. I think every fan does at this point, just like a better one than we
2774 have.

2775

2776 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. I feel like you get almost oversaturated with back**
2777 **stories for a character like Batman; and then you look at other characters,**
2778 **like Harley or Ivy, and you're like, 'I get, I get a tiny piece.' [small laugh]**

2779

2780 DOLLY: Yeah. And, like Batman- I love Batman; but, like, his story of, like, his
2781 parents died, they were rich, and then he just turned into a...superhero for
2782 Gotham. Like, come on - just maybe spice that up a little more.

2783

2784 **RESEARCHER: [laughs]**

2785

2786 DOLLY: - But it's still, like, we, we have so many heroes and villains who don't
2787 have, like, their own backstory; or, like, have the smallest backstory - which I
2788 wish there was more, because you, you want to see how they became them -

2789

2790 **RESEARCHER: Right.**

2791

2792 DOLLY: - I feel like that's one of the most interesting parts of, like, a hero or
2793 villain. Like...wouldn't you want to know how like...like - which one was it? ...
2794 why ... (pauses) I think it was Heath Ledger's, that, um, Joker that had the,
2795 um... cut, the face...? -

2796

2797 **RESEARCHER: Yeah.**

2798

2799 DOLLY: - Yeah. Like, why he did that. Like, what was going through your
2800 brain, man? What's going on? Like, I just want to know how his, like, home life
2801 was – like, what's going on? To make him like into such a...little menace to
2802 society.

2803

2804 **RESEARCHER: And he's an interesting character just in general,**
2805 **because...Joker been around for an extremely long time. But there's never**
2806 **really been a confirmed backstory, and that's part of like - I guess, some**
2807 **people could call it a cop out – where DC is just like, 'well, we don't really**
2808 **know 'cause, like, he's crazy. So, he says it's this, but then he says it's this**
2809 **other thing; and we don't really know which one's true.'**

2810

2811 DOLLY: And what-y'all are the ones who wrote it! Like, you can make it so,
2812 like, if- I just want, I just want backstories. I feel like it would just explain so
2813 much; and then you can kind of, you can kind of, like, feel more for a character.

2814

2815 **RESEARCHER: Yeah, no - I totally agree with you. So, would you**
2816 **recommend *Harley Quinn* comics to a friend of yours?**

2817

2818 DOLLY: Yeah, I would.

2819

2820 **RESEARCHER: What would you tell them that would- that you think**
2821 **would sell it to them to be like, 'oh yeah no. That sounds interesting'?**

2822

2823 DOLLY: Umm... I would say there are- she's kind of a feminist icon. And
2824 they're interesting to read, I mean... You don't... (pauses; stop) Well, no, hmm,
2825 actually. They're interesting to read, feminist icon, she's very...empowering...
2826 and...yeah. That's kind of all I can think of right now.

2827

2828 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. And, just to clarify, like when you say feminist icon**
2829 **- are you talking about the fact that she's, like, in a nontraditional field and**
2830 **is depicted as, like, a nontraditional villain character? Like, could-could**
2831 **you just elaborate more on that?**

2832

2833 DOLLY: She's in nontraditional, um, villain character. Because, I mean, she
2834 didn't want- I can't [stops]. Oh my god (whisper). I think this was also in the
2835 Black Label; but, like, um, in-Joker was so close to killing Robin -

2836

2837 **RESEARCHER: Yes.**

2838

2839 DOLLY: - in this. Yes, and she didn't want him to kill Robin. Because she is
2840 good, in a sense – like, she still has that mentality, like, she doesn't want to kill
2841 all the time. But she still may will. And, I mean, she loves that man; and she still
2842 didn't want him to do what he wanted to do and...yeah.

2843

2844 **RESEARCHER: Yeah.**

2845

2846 DOLLY: She still has her own morals.

2847

2848 **RESEARCHER: So, it's like, she's kind of a complex character. Like she's**
2849 **not –**

2850

2851 DOLLY: Yeah.

2852

2853 **RESEARCHER: - she loves Joker, but she's not just, like, a willing servant.**
2854 **She does have some...I mean, it kind of sucks that it has to get to the point**
2855 **where Joker almost kills Jason Todd for her to be like, 'Mmm...I don't like**
2856 **that.'**

2857

2858 DOLLY: Yeah.

2859

2860 **RESEARCHER: Do you feel like...so, some people, for example, say that,**
2861 **like Wonder Woman's a feminist icon... Do you feel like Harley would,**
2862 **kind of, be on the same level; or she kind of different? Like...**

2863

2864 DOLLY: Little different; because, yet again, she's not as independent as Wonder
2865 Woman, maybe. And she still, like- she changed herself for a man, which isn't-
2866 not feminist of her, but we still love her. [small laugh]

2867

2868 **RESERACHER: Yes.**

2869

2870 DOLLY: We still care. Like, 'you go, girl - just don't do that again.' [small
2871 laugh] But, also, thank you for doing that; because, if you didn't, we wouldn't
2872 have you. And, um... but there's... She is a feminist in her own way - than, in
2873 the sense, like, she's an independent woman, like creating her own business or
2874 something.

2875

2876 **RESEARCHER: Yeah.**

2877

2878 DOLLY: - Like, she has her aspects of femininity, and that she is power - a
2879 powerful woman.

2880

2881 **RESEARCHER: It kind of sounds almost like - when you put all the pieces**
2882 **together, Harley's kind of more like a flawed character representation;**
2883 **versus, like...Wonder Woman's just so perfect. [small laugh]**

2884

2885 DOLLY: [small laugh] Yeah... Oh! Well, yeah because then like Wond-wond
2886 [stops; makes noise to indicate restarting voice]. Wonder Woman is a superhero;
2887 and she's, like, the perfect girl – like, you know, she saves lives, she... I don't
2888 really know what Wond-Wonder Woman does, I'm not really into her. But, um,
2889 Harley has her flaws, in that she's not as independent as Wonder Woman may
2890 seem, or, like, may be. And then same as, like, even Ivy - I mean, like, she's not
2891 as independent as her either. So, I mean, it's a representation of, like, women can
2892 be flawed and still be glor- um...not glorified – glamorized! And people will
2893 still love them, even though they have their own issues.

2894

2895 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. It's almost like Harley's messy.**

2896

2897 DOLLY: Yes.

2898

2899 **RESEARCHER: Yeah.**

2900

2901 DOLLY: Yeah.

2902

2903 **RESEARCHER: Well, I've gotten through most all of my questions – like,**
2904 **you answered, like, half of them without me asking! Is there anything else**
2905 **you want to add about your thoughts about Harley, or girl depiction in**
2906 **comics - anything like that, before we end today?**

2907

2908 DOLLY: No, actually I think I got all what I wanted to say out [small laugh] in,
2909 like, the first, like, five minutes. But...yeah.

2910

2911 **RESEARCHER: Awesome. Well, I'm going to stop the recording. Where's**
2912 **the pause button? There it is.**

APPENDIX J**Reader's Response Group Meeting**

2913 **RESEARCHER: Here we go - we're recording! So, can each of you tell me**
2914 **about your first experience with Harley Quinn. Um, ELIZA, do you want to**
2915 **start us off?**

2916

2917 ELIZA: Um, sure. Um, I've, kind of, mostly seen her in the, like, the movies and
2918 stuff; and so, I only know her really from that, other than the comic that I read
2919 recently. But yeah.

2920

2921 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. What about you, ANGELICA?**

2922

2923 ANGELICA: Um, I knew of her before again – but, kind of, the same where,
2924 like. really got into it once *Suicide Squad* came out and all that; and then I, um,
2925 read a lot of *Harley Quinn* comics. So.

2926

2927 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. IRIS, do you guys want to go next?**

2928

2929 IRIS: Yeah, um, I've, I've never really, like, known her or heard about her. I
2930 just, like, saw her in, like, ads, and commercials, and stuff.

2931

2932 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. What about you, DOLLY?**

2933

2934 DOLLY: Um, I-I got to know her really whenever my, um, my stepdad gave me,
2935 um, his old comics, and some of them featured her; and then I kind of just fell in
2936 love with her. And watched the, um, the cartoons with her, the, uh- read more
2937 comics about her, and then really just deep dived into it – watched the movies.

2938

2939 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. So, what would you say, like, for each of you - what**
2940 **made you a fan of hers? Like, when you first kind of met her, what**
2941 **intrigued you about the character? IRIS, you want to go first, or DOLLY?**

2942

2943 IRIS: Yeah, I'll go first. I, uh, really liked her independence.

2944

2945 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. What about you, DOLLY?**

2946

2947 DOLLY: Um...I liked her- the aspect of a woman villain. Women can be evil.

2948

2949 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. ANGELICA, what about you?**

2950

2951 ANGELICA: Um, I just like that she was, like, kind of, like, - it was unseen to,
2952 like, see, like, a crazy, kind of, just 'does-her-own-thing' kind of, like, character,
2953 especially in, like, the superhero world. So, I thought that was cool.

2954

2955 **RESEARCHER: What about you, ELIZA?**

2956

2957 ELIZA: Um, she had, like, a type of confidence to it all, so I thought that was
2958 really cool. She, like, did whatever she wanted.

2959

2960 **RESEARCHER: Yeah - and I know that, like, we, kind of, talked about this**
2961 **in our individual interviews, but I'm kind of curious. Have - is there**
2962 **anything about Harley Quinn that you've ever felt like you've resonated**
2963 **with? Like, you felt like you could see some of yourself in the character.**
2964 **ANGELICA, do you want to go first?**

2965

2966 ANGELICA: Um, sure. Um, she, um, trusts people way too easily, I think
2967 [small laugh]. And I was like, I definitely resonate with that - or it's just, kind of,
2968 like, immediately just, kind of, like, gets into someone and then doesn't know
2969 how to back off, or see the signs sometimes. So, yeah [laughs].

2970

2971 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. What about you, ELIZA?**

2972

2973 ELIZA: Um, I don't know. I don't really see too much of myself in her. Yeah.

2974

2975 **RESEARCHER: Hey, that's - [ELIZA: small laugh] That's true too. She's-**

2976

2977 ELIZA: Yeah.

2978

2979 **RESEARCHER: - I always- when I think of like the *Harley Quinn* cartoon,**
2980 **I'm like, 'I'm more of an Ivy than a Harley' [small laugh]**

2981

2982 ELIZA: Yeah [small laugh]

2983

2984 **RESEARCHER: IRIS/DOLLY, what do you guys think?**

2985

2986 IRIS: Um, I agree with, Peyton. I think that she trusts people too easily, and I do
2987 that too. And I, like, let people into my world; and, like, give them all of me,
2988 and-but they treat me so badly. Plus, um, I feel like I resonate with her crazy.
2989 And, like, just wanting, like- doing whatever I want really.

2990

2991 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. I think you guys make a good point because she's**
2992 **always been really trusting and really, like, sees the best in people. That's**
2993 **something that's, kind of, been consistent with her from the beginning. So,**
2994 **give me, what- tell me, like, what are some things I might hear from people**
2995 **around you about Harley Quinn? Like when you think of other people you**
2996 **know, who know the character or maybe are fans of her, what are some**
2997 **typical things you hear about her? Like, I feel like that's really broad – so,**
2998 **like, for example: if you were at school and you were talking about *Suicide***
2999 ***Squad*, what are your friends' impressions, kind of, of the character?**
3000 **ELIZA, did you wanna go first?**

3001

3002 ELIZA: Um, yeah. Uh, that she's crazy. That, like, she does whatever she wants,
3003 umm. Yeah.

3004

3005 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. What about you IRIS and DOLLY?**

3006

3007 IRIS: Um, I feel like they- my friends usually say that she's, like, heartbroken.

3008

3009 **RESEARCHER: Yeah, that's true.**

3010

3011 DOLLY: Depending, like, what we're talking about. Like, if you're talking about
3012 *Suicide Squad*, she's more, like, a crazy, sort of, like - I don't know if I can use
3013 that word but 'bad a-', -

3014

3015 **RESERACHER: Oh yeah.**

3016

3017 DOLLY: - you know? [laughs] That-so, and then, like, what she said for, like, if
3018 they're talking about mainstream - like *Birds of Prey* - she was heartbroken and
3019 still, like, crazy. [small laugh]

3020

3021 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. What about you, ANGELICA?**

3022

3023 ANGELICA: Um, I think it just depends on who I'm talking to as well. And
3024 then - especially because I have, like, friends who are girls who like that kind of
3025 stuff - and when I talk with them, they're like, 'Oh my God, she's such a girl
3026 boss,' and all that. [small laugh] Like, even though she's crazy and all that. But
3027 then when you talk to the guys, it's usually just flat out, 'She's Joker's girlfriend.
3028 She's crazy,' and that kind of thing. That's the broad view on her, I think.

3029

3030 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. And I know that – like, not all of us here have a lot**
3031 **of experience with going to comic bookstores, or comic book conventions,**
3032 **um, or, like, just events and stuff - but for those of us who have, like, what**
3033 **do you feel like you're hearing about the character? Um, like, ANGELICA -**
3034 **I know we talked about, like, you've seen a lot of people dress up as her and**
3035 **stuff like that. So, what are some of the conversations you have with other,**
3036 **like, comic book 'nerds'?**

3037

3038 ANGELICA: Um, I feel like it's always, like, brought up, like, with how, like,
3039 raunchy her outfits can get at times and stuff - and, again, like how we said
3040 before, like, the sexualization of her sometimes. And, especially, like, when

3041 you're dressing up as her - I even remember when I, like - you know, that year
3042 everyone was dressing up for Halloween - it felt weird for me to even dress like
3043 that. Because I was like, 'Wow this is kind of, like, scandalous! We got, like, the
3044 fish nets and everything.' So, it was just, like, it's kind of weird thinking about it
3045 – like, with women in, like, superhero comics and stuff - and the way they dress
3046 and, like, is this really how someone would dress? But, with Harley, it's, like,
3047 yeah, it's plausible. She probably could [small laugh]

3048

3049 **RESEARCHER: Yeah, what do you think, ELIZA? Cause I know you have**
3050 **some comic book experience too.**

3051

3052 ELIZA: Um, yeah - kind of the same. It's just like - it's weird to see sometimes;
3053 and, like, the way that a lot of the characters are dressed in the comics, a lot of
3054 people tend to dress like them as well for, like-like Comic Con and stuff like
3055 that. But it definitely can, like, be a little too much, [small laugh] in a sense.

3056

3057 **RESEARCHER: And DOLLY, I know you have some experience too. What**
3058 **are your thoughts?**

3059

3060 DOLLY: Well, um, bringing up, like, the, um- how ANGELICA was talking
3061 about the costumes. Like, I wanted to say, whenever I was younger, like, um,
3062 when *Suicide Squad* just came out, I want to dress as Harley Quinn, because,
3063 like, there was an actual costume going around and, like- with the blond hair, the
3064 dyed ends, and kind of, like [background noise] the scand-the scandalous, sort
3065 of, outfit. But, like, I was too young, and my mom wouldn't let me. And I-
3066 [inaudible] [RESEARCHER laughs] But now it's like, I could wear that
3067 probably [small laugh]. I probably wouldn't, but – like, it's just school and no
3068 one bat an eye at this point.

3069

3070 **RESEARCHER: Yeah; and, IRIS, I know you're, kind of, new to all this -**
3071 **but do you have any thoughts, you want to add?**

3072

3073 IRIS: Umm, no. [laughs] Not really.

3074

3075 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. So, each of you have experience with her in the**
3076 **comics. And all of you read, like, a particular comic that I sent to you guys;**

3077 **and DOLLY, I know you kind of piggyback on the comic that IRIS had. So,**
3078 **tell me, each of your experiences, like, with your comic. So, keep in mind**
3079 **that, like, everybody in the room - except for me - doesn't know which story**
3080 **you read, so just, kind of, generally explain it and then, like, what your**
3081 **takeaways and, like, thoughts were on the character in the story.**
3082 **ANGELICA, do you want to start?**

3083

3084 ANGELICA: Umm, sure. Um, I read the “Harley Loves Joker” comic, cause I
3085 was like, ‘Yeah [laughs]. It's the typical what you would expect from Harley
3086 kind of thing.’ And, if you've seen the *Harley Quinn* show, it kind of reminded
3087 me of that – like, I felt like they definitely took from that. Because it's just
3088 Harley going through the dilemma of ‘Is Joker right for me?’ and all this. And
3089 she basically has, like, a therapy session with herself inside of her mind of trying
3090 to, like, show it. And it shows, like, her *Suicide Squad* version of herself telling
3091 her, ‘This is what you could be,’ and, like. And then eventually she just gives
3092 back into Joker, because he does one nice, good thing for her, so it just shows
3093 the cycle that she constantly goes through. So, I thought that was really
3094 interesting.

3095

3096 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. What about you, ELIZA?**

3097

3098 ELIZA: Um, so I read the *Rebirth* one, or the first *Rebirth* one. And, um, in this
3099 one, it, kind of, like- she, kind of, does have, like, a therapy session in it as well
3100 in a sense. And she's able to be with her, like, close friends and talk about what's
3101 happened in her past. And, like, it's trying to show, like, her basically rebranding
3102 herself and going on trying to be a good guy, in a sense, in this comic. And.

3103

3104 **RESEARCHER: Yeah - and what was, like, your experience and your**
3105 **thoughts? Like, how did you perceive the character when you read that?**
3106 **Cause yours - just like you said – was, kind of, really the rebranding and**
3107 **reintroduction of the character's newer, like, revised origin story and, kind**
3108 **of, new take on the character.**

3109

3110 ELIZA: It was definitely a different side that I never, like, really saw of her; so,
3111 I thought that was interesting. Cause it kind of, like- she opened up about what
3112 has happened in her past, and she was able to, kind of, talk about it a little more.
3113 And, so, I thought that was really interesting how she did that.

3114

3115 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. And IRIS and DOLLY, do you guys want to, kind**
3116 **of, talk about the comic that you guys read? Cause I know you read, kind**
3117 **of, the same one.**

3118

3119 IRIS: So, we have- I think it's called 'Surf's Up' or -

3120

3121 DOLLY: - It's 'Harley Quinn, um, Surf's Up, Internet.' And it's basically, like,
3122 she tried- yeah, I think it's- she tries to become Internet famous, right? [looking
3123 at IRIS]

3124

3125 IRIS: Yes. It's, like- she gets, like, blackmailed-

3126

3127 DOLLY: Yeah!

3128

3129 IRIS: - and she-she somehow gets, like, more popularity from it. And, at the
3130 end, she tries to get back at the person, and then it just fails; and the person gets
3131 mad and, like, there's a whole fight. And then, like, I mean - and for my opinion
3132 about it, like, I think that it was really, um, relatable because it can show how
3133 fast people can, like, blow up on the Internet and how it can go downhill really
3134 fast.

3135

3136 DOLLY: - and like how much it switches up.

3137

3138 IRIS: Yeah.

3139

3140 DOLLY: - because, one minute, people love you for doing something; but then,
3141 the next minute, you're, like, getting cancelled for no reason. Yeah.

3142

3143 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. So, like, for each of you guys, did you like the**
3144 **version of the character that you saw within your story; or did you prefer,**
3145 **maybe, the version of the character you knew beforehand?**

3146

3147 IRIS: The version beforehand.

3148

3149 **RESEARCHER: And why would you- and why do you say that?**

3150

3151 IRIS: Because, well, Harley in this one - she just, kind of, like, wants to be

3152 Internet famous. And like...so.

3153

3154 DOLLY: I like- okay, so I would want the version beforehand. One – because, I

3155 mean, it's cool putting her into, like, nowa- like, nowadays situations, like, with

3156 the Internet and stuff, like social media. But also, it, kind of, doesn't, like, back

3157 up how Harley would actually be, I don't think.

3158

3159 **RESEARCHER: Yeah, can you-**

3160

3161 DOLLY: Cause, I mean, even though, she was, like, blackmailed into doing this,

3162 um, I feel like she's still, like, wouldn't be as ruthless...

3163

3164 **RESEARCHER: Yeah –**

3165

3166 DOLLY: I feel like she'd be confident.

3167

3168 **RESEARCHER: What do you think, ANGELICA?**

3169

3170 ANGELICA: Um, I'm, like, kind of, like, 50/50 on it. Because, like, before I

3171 knew her - like, well, before I read the comics - I already knew about her, like,

3172 when she was, like, way past the stage of, that I'm, like, reading her in - where

3173 she's already past the Joker stage and all that. So, I do enjoy that, you know, I

3174 don't have to deal with her constantly having to go through that cycle, like in the

3175 comic; but - at the same time - now that she's out of that, they don't know what

3176 to do with her anymore. So, it's, kind of, like, 50/50. I enjoy it, but also like the

3177 other version. So.

3178

3179 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. Cause yours is, like, the most close to the original**
3180 **version of the character in the 90s. Like, yours is, like –**

3181

3182 ANGELICA: Yeah.

3183

3184 **RESEACHER: - the back-to-basics Harley.**

3185

3186 ANGELICA: Mm hmm.

3187

3188 **RESEARCHER: What about you, ELIZA?**

3189

3190 ELIZA: Um...I haven't really, like, seen her as much as before uh, Jok-, uh, like,
3191 after Joker, or, like, even before Joker or, like, when she was with Joker. But I
3192 would also say during the movies, she also, kind of, like...cause even in, like,
3193 *Suicide Squad*, they also go through her breakup, in a sense, through that as
3194 well. And so, I guess, seeing that, it does, like, bring more of, like, a story, like,
3195 of what's happening; and so it just, like - the story constantly keeps on going
3196 with her going back and forth between Joker, if she, if she wants to stay with
3197 Joker or not. Um, but I don't, I don't know.

3198

3199 **RESEARCHER: Yeah, because you guys- each of your comics, kind of, hits**
3200 **her at a different high point. Like, ANGELICA's is, like, very back-to-**
3201 **basics Harley, the OG. ELIZA, yours is, like, right there when we're really**
3202 **rebranding, and we're really talking about the new version of Harley,**
3203 **partially inspired by her popularity with *Suicide Squad*. And then the comic**
3204 **that IRIS and DOLLY read is much further into the *Rebirth* universe, so**
3205 **we've, kind of, established she's not with Joker anymore, and she just kind**
3206 **of doing her own little misadventures. So, we're going to switch gears for**
3207 **just a second, but I promise it'll all connect. So, can each of you just tell me**
3208 **about some stereotypes about being a girl, about femininity, that you know**
3209 **of, that you can think of, and just how do they make you feel. And they can**
3210 **be as basic and as broad as you want; you could give an example, for, you**
3211 **know, like - for example, one time I had this experience, and it really**
3212 **annoyed me or made me mad. Um, IRIS/DOLLY, do you guys want to start**
3213 **us off?**

3214

3215 IRIS: I'm still thinking.

3216

3217 DOLLY: I think I- well, this is more - I don't know if it's more of a stereotype.
3218 But, um, like, with dress code. Like, um, guys are thinking like, 'Oh, it's because
3219 girls just want to show off their bodies. That's why we have, like, such a strict
3220 dress code.' But no, it's not. Like, our sh-if our shoulders are really that
3221 distracting males - sorry about it. But, um, it- they just- it's a stereotype for
3222 men/boys in our grade to think that we just want to be, like, dress, like - I don't
3223 want to use that word - but...

3224

3225 **RESEARCHER: Provocatively?**

3226

3227 IRIS: What?

3228

3229 **RESEARCHER: Provocatively?**

3230

3231 IRIS/DOLLY: Yeah [both at same time]

3232

3233 DOLLY: Provocatively. Of just, like- but no. We just want to be comfortable in
3234 our own bodies and not be judged, and have teachers tell us what to wear. Like,
3235 if y'all are so bothered by it, then just mind your own business. Like, we just
3236 want to dress comfortably - like, if- it's hot in our school! We don't want to be
3237 wearing, like, long sleeves! I want to wear a tank top! Like - and if that's a
3238 problem with you, suck it up. [small laugh]

3239

3240 **RESEARCHER: Yeah - so, like, you're, kind of, talking about like the**
3241 **policing of women's bodies. And cause -**

3242

3243 DOLLY: - Like, we shouldn't be being told what to wear and what not to wear.
3244 And we shouldn't be being judged either. Like...if a guy was wearing a crop top,
3245 I would be totally down with that, like cool. But, if a girl is wearing a crop top,
3246 everyone's going to be like, 'You're just trying to show off your stomach. Oh,
3247 you're trying to show off. Blah blah blah.' Like, shut up. [IRIS: small laugh]

3248

3249 **RESEARCHER: Yeah, no. I think you have a really good point. That's very**
3250 **much a big double standard that is an ongoing conversation [small laugh].**

3251 **IRIS?**

3252

3253 DOLLY: - and that's just really big.

3254

3255 IRIS: Um, I think one of the stereotypes I hate is that men can be more- they can
3256 make the money. They're, they're supposed to make the money in the
3257 relationship and-and in their, like, marriage, whatever. Cause I think now, like –
3258 okay, nowadays, it's not as bad as it used to be. But it's still, like, men should
3259 make the money; and women should just stay home and take care of the kids.
3260 But I think that that is very annoying and should not be.

3261

3262 DOLLY: It's very sexist.

3263

3264 IRIS: It's very sexist, yes.

3265

3266 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. What about you, ELIZA? What do you think?**

3267

3268 ELIZA: Um, I had an experience that, like, um, certain classes, that we would be
3269 able to do. Or, like- 'cause I was in this, like, robotics class. And so, when I
3270 went to the class, there was all men, like, it was all, like, all boys there; and I
3271 was only girl in that class. And I definitely did get picked on because I was the
3272 only girl in that class. And that- they're like, 'This isn't a, like, really a class for
3273 you,' and it did make me really, like, feel left out. But that also made me, like,
3274 challenge them in a sense to, like, 'well if you can do it, then I can do it.' And
3275 that- it gets annoying that they think it's, like, their job to do that certain type of
3276 job, or that certain type of, like, place in a sense. I don't know. But.

3277

3278 **RESEARCHER: Yeah, no I think you're right. I mean, I think of my own**
3279 **experience - I mean, obviously I'm a little bit older than you guys. But, I**
3280 **mean, my whole life, like, going into, like, for example, a video game store,**
3281 **or a comic bookstore, or an anime store, any kind of, I guess, quote-unquote**
3282 **"geek culture" store, it's always, 'Why are you here? Are you here for your**

3283 **boyfriend? Are you shopping for your whatever, whatever, whatever?’ And**
 3284 **that always annoyed me, because I’d be, like, ‘No. Like, I can actually just**
 3285 **exist in this space too. I don’t need your- I don’t need help, I don’t need you**
 3286 **to tell me why I can and cannot be here.’ So, yeah. I do understand that**
 3287 **idea of, like, this is a male space - you're not supposed to be here.**

3288

3289 ELIZA: Yeah.

3290

3291 **RESERACHER: What about you, ANGELICA?**

3292

3293 ANGELICA: Um, yeah. Bouncing off, like, what everyone else – ‘cause I was
 3294 like, first thing about like the whole women are super emotional thing. When
 3295 I’m, like, at the same time, men are too, but they just, like - it's, like, weird for
 3296 them to be emotional. But when, like, women are, it's like, ‘Oh, obviously, they
 3297 are.’ And then the whole, like, geek thing too. I was, like- ‘cause my whole life I
 3298 grew up with a bunch of, like, guy friends and stuff; and I'm, like, into quote-
 3299 unquote “dude” things, like the nerdy stuff. And constantly I get, like, shunned
 3300 for ‘em; be, like, ‘Oh, why are you like that?’ And then- but for guys, it's, like,
 3301 super cool to be into, like, anime and all that. But, for, like, women, it's like,
 3302 ‘You're just doing it to get guys,’ and all that. Like, I hate that. And then, uh, I
 3303 even- my cousin was going to, like, apply to work at [VIDEO GAME STORE],
 3304 and he was like, ‘Why don't you apply there?’ I'm, like, ‘You really think as a
 3305 girl I should apply at [VIDEO GAME STORE]?’ Like, I would be bombarded
 3306 24/7 with people going, ‘You’re a fake gamer,’ and all that. Like, I don't want to
 3307 have to sit there and listen to that. So, yeah.

3308

3309 **RESEARCHER: Yeah, no. I think I think you're totally right - I think**
 3310 **there's...kind of, like, what you're all saying. There's still these unwelcome**
 3311 **spaces for us. Like, as much as we have made progress in culture and stuff -**
 3312 **I mean, there's just still so many restrictions and still so many cultural**
 3313 **expectations. I mean, yeah-no, I totally feel for all of you. So, when you**
 3314 **think about the stereotypes you just told me, do you see Harley Quinn, in**
 3315 **particular – like, whether it's in the specific comic you saw, or just, like,**
 3316 **what you know of her generally depicted in culture - do you feel like she**
 3317 **challenges those stereotypes? Do you feel like she reinforces them? Or do**
 3318 **you think she, kind of, does a mix of both?**

3319

3320 IRIS: Challenges then as in like...?

3321

3322 **RESEARCHER: Like, she's like, 'No, I'm not adhering to that narrative.**
3323 **I'm going to do my own thing.'**

3324

3325 IRIS: I feel like- I'm going to talk before you.

3326

3327 DOLLY: Okay.

3328

3329 IRIS: I feel like, um, she wants to be her own person and, like, dress how she
3330 wants to be - so I don't think she really cares about that. But I also feel, like, on
3331 the cover [holds up comic to camera] it's very, like-

3332

3333 DOLLY (to IRIS): Scandalous.

3334

3335 IRIS: - scandalous. And-and I feel like they had to do that; so that it gets the
3336 male gaze, and, like, it can catch their attention and everything. And I think that-
3337 but I think she's only wearing that because it's what, it's what makes her
3338 confident. I don't think she's wearing it to impress any boys or anything.

3339

3340 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. I think that's a really good point. Like, she wears**
3341 **the outfit for herself and then-**

3342

3343 IRIS: Yeah.

3344

3345 **RESEARCHER: -sometimes, the way she's depicted in the comic itself - it's,**
3346 **like, the camera angles focused on the most provocative angle it could be.**

3347

3348 IRIS: Yeah.

3349

3350 DOLLY: Um, piggybacking off of IRIS – so, like, um, what she was saying
3351 with, like, the wardrobe and stuff. I feel like if Harley was a real person, not
3352 written by somebody but, like, she would be the type of person to, like - if

3353 somebody would to tell her, like, 'Oh, you can't be in robotics,' like, she'd be,
 3354 'Oh screw you. I'm going to be in robotics. Like, I'm going to be 10 times better
 3355 than you. Like, what is your problem?' And then, like, with her clothes, like, she
 3356 already has - well, in most of her, like, storylines - she has somebody that she
 3357 loves. So, she isn't trying to dress for anybody, but herself. Unless she is trying
 3358 to dress for Joker, like with her 'PUDDIN', like, choker - that was for him. But,
 3359 like, the rest of her is herself and what she wants to be. And...yeah. Yeah, that
 3360 makes sense.

3361

3362 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. ANGELICA, do you want to go next?**

3363

3364 ANGELICA: Sure. Um, I feel like it's 50/50 again because I was, like- I feel like
 3365 she, like, reinforces those stereotypes, but, like, takes them and makes them her
 3366 own. Because, like, again with, like, the women being emotional thing, she's
 3367 very open about her emotions – like, most of the time, besides, you know, like,
 3368 the Joker stuff. But she takes that and just says, 'Yeah, I am. So what?' and,
 3369 kind of, like, runs with it. And, like the, like, crazy woman stereotype because
 3370 she has an opinion; she takes that and just, kind of, runs with it. Like, she takes
 3371 the things that aren't, like, seen in society as a good thing and just, kind of, goes
 3372 crazy with it - which is why I think at the end of the day, they, like, made her a
 3373 villain almost in a way. Because it's not socially acceptable, in most cases, the
 3374 way she acts and dresses; but it's the way she lives, so. Yeah.

3375

3376 **RESEARCHER: No, that's really interesting. Because, in some of the**
 3377 **research I did it, it seems like that - what you're talking about - there's**
 3378 **some history and basis for that. Like, a free-thinking woman, or a woman**
 3379 **who dresses for herself, or does things for herself, has to be evil; because a**
 3380 **good woman, a moral woman, would not do such things. What do you**
 3381 **think, ELIZA?**

3382

3383 ELIZA: I, I kind of think the same thing. As, like, the fact that they could take
 3384 care of themselves and, like, do whatever they want - makes them, like, too
 3385 powerful, and so, everyone fears of it. And that, that's why... like... yeah, [small
 3386 laugh] I explained that bad. But basically, it's, like, she takes control. And I
 3387 think that's really cool, how she just does that. And that she could do basically
 3388 whatever she wants because that's what she wants to do and that's who she is.

3389

3390 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. So, I know we were kind of talking about, like,**
3391 **Harley generally. Do you feel like there's a version of her – like, whether it's**
3392 **the comic version or the pop culture version, like thinking of the movies and**
3393 **the cartoons - do you feel like one is more challenging stereotypes than the**
3394 **other? Do you think they're, kind of, the same?**

3395

3396 ELIZA: I think they're probably, definitely the same, in a sense, for certain
3397 aspects of it. But they're mostly the same how I see it.

3398

3399 **RESERACHER: Yeah.**

3400

3401 ANGELICA: Um, I feel like they've changed over time. Like, with the, like, the
3402 90s Harley is definitely very different from, like, nowadays Harley. Because
3403 they very much- she used to just be, like, an item for Joker, where it was like,
3404 'Guess what? Joker has a crazy girlfriend, and she doesn't have a mind of her
3405 own!' Like, at first, she was just kind of, like, the crazy one that was there to be
3406 crazy with him. And then, slowly over time, she, like, kind of got better, but
3407 she's still crazy at the end of the day. So, I think there's definitely a little bit of a
3408 difference. But now we're, like, in the gray area where they're just kind of like,
3409 'She's crazy! That's the bottom line.' [small laugh] So, yeah.

3410

3411 DOLLY: I think that, like, um - what ANGELICA is saying, like, is- course it's
3412 valid. I'm just gonna say that. But, like, I- she was depicted as a crazy girl, like.
3413 But now, like, nowadays, she's becoming more, like, more independent to her
3414 own being, instead of just being crazy. Like, just- that's just the mild aspect of
3415 her now. Now it's, like, more broad. And being, like - what her backstory was to
3416 end up why she's crazy; and also, like, she, um, is becoming more independent
3417 to herself, not needing Joker. And it's just, like, she's becoming her own person.

3418

3419 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. IRIS, what do you think?**

3420

3421 IRIS: I was gonna say basically what DOLLY said. That - basically, what she
3422 said. Yeah.

3423

3424 **RESEARCHER: So, generally speaking - do you feel like Harley is a**
3425 **positive or negative depiction of femininity? Like, do you feel like she is a**

3426 **girl-power role model? Do you feel like she, kind of, embraces the**
3427 **stereotypes that hold the gender back? What are your thoughts on that?**
3428 **Like, is she a feminist or not?**

3429

3430 DOLLY: (inaudible to IRIS) ...I think she is.

3431

3432 IRIS: Yeah, we think she is.

3433

3434 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. Why do you think that?**

3435

3436 IRIS: Um, I just feel like she brings out a lot of- if women are reading the comic
3437 books or watching the movie, I feel like they get inspired to, like, be a 'boss
3438 woman.' [small laugh]

3439

3440 DOLLY: - and be more themselves.

3441

3442 IRIS: - Yeah. Be more of themselves and, like, let their emotions out.

3443

3444 **RESEARCHER: Yeah.**

3445

3446 DOLLY: -and letting, like, what their own opinion be, like- voicing their-selves.
3447 Yeah.

3448

3449 **RESEARCHER: ELIZA, what do you think?**

3450

3451 ELIZA: Um, I, kind of, think the same as well. Like, I agree to what they were
3452 saying that – it, it kind of gives, like, women a confidence; and, like, inspires
3453 them to do certain things; and get out of their shell; and stuff like that.

3454

3455 **RESEARCHER: ANGELICA, you want to round us off?**

3456

3457 ANGELICA: Uh, sure. Yeah, I wouldn't go as far to say role model - because
3458 obviously there's some things that are, like, obviously you shouldn't do that in
3459 real life. But for the most part, I do think it's, like, a great thing that- like the fact
3460 that she was, like, she used to be, like, a doctor and stuff. And showing that she
3461 can be, like- you can be, like, powerful woman and still, like, go to school; and
3462 get a degree; and all that - and still have these emotions and, like, be able to be
3463 free like that. I think that's a good thing for people to see - that they can be more
3464 than one person; that they don't have to conform to anything. I think that's
3465 definitely a good thing that she shows out of her character.

3466

3467 **RESEARCHER: Yeah, I think you make a good point. Because it's, like -**
3468 **and I know we all, kind of, touched on this a little bit in each of our**
3469 **interviews - Harley's messy. Like, she's not- she has all these great aspects;**
3470 **and she, kind of, shows, like, you can be who you want to be, and you don't**
3471 **have to be perfect. Like, I think a character that came up a lot was Wonder**
3472 **Woman. She's very perfect in all senses. But Harley's messy, and Harley**
3473 **has flaws; and that's a little bit more relatable, it seems, for most of us, than**
3474 **the Amazonian half-goddess [small laugh] from Paradise Island,**
3475 **Themyscira. So, if you could change- if you had- look at Harley as a**
3476 **character. Is there something you think that could be done to make her be**
3477 **more of a positive representative, representative of femininity? Do you**
3478 **think there's something that could be adjusted or changed about the**
3479 **character that would make her seem more, like, a girl-power kind of**
3480 **model? Not necessarily a role model, like, 'Go rob a bank tomorrow,' but**
3481 **just like, 'Yeah! I'm proud to be a girl.'**

3482

3483 IRIS: Um, maybe if she's just wore, like, sweatpants and a sweatshirt. Like, she
3484 can do, like, she can do everything that she does while being comfy.

3485

3486 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. Or she doesn't always have to be dressed and 'done**
3487 **up.'**

3488

3489 DOLLY: Um - like I was saying, during our interview - I feel like that she needs
3490 to be more, like, separated from everything and be her. Like, she needs to be
3491 more, like, an independent character. She doesn't need the piggyback off, like,
3492 being Joker's girlfriend. She needs to just be like, 'Oh, Harley Quinzel,' or
3493 Harley Quinn, whatever - like, you know. Just, like...how, um, like, some of the
3494 newer comics are putting her. Because she's not Joker's, um, girlfriend anymore.
3495 She's more just, like, she's doing her own thing. She is fightin' her own battles.

3496

3497 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. What do you think, ANGELICA?**

3498

3499 ANGELICA: Um, I just feel like, um, they just really need to figure out – like,
3500 to change her, that they really need to figure out how to make her work on her
3501 own, like I said in our interview too. Because I was like, although she's crazy, I
3502 feel like some of the stories that they come up with - like, it sounds, like, their
3503 comic sounds like one I've read before where it's, like, those weird gags they do
3504 with her. Where it's, like, she goes and gets blackmailed, and all this stuff - and
3505 just, like, crazy things. Because she's so dependent on others and stuff; and, like,
3506 her stories really depend on others a lot of the times. Where it's, like, you're
3507 looking forward to when other people are in there because sometimes- they just
3508 need to find something where it shows her being an independent person, and she
3509 can handle stuff herself, and, like, really, like - making a good story out of just
3510 her alone I feel like.

3511

3512 **RESEARCHER: Yeah, I think that's an interesting point. Because that was**
3513 **one of the things- when I did my own analysis of a set of comics that I coded**
3514 **for. Like, Harley is dependent on Big Tony; Harley is dependent on Ivy;**
3515 **she's dependent on Joker; she's dependent on something a lot. And we don't**
3516 **often get to see her just functioning as her own, like a leader or like she is**
3517 **just- this is a solo mission. She's always usually in, like, an ensemble, and**
3518 **she's not usually the leader of that ensemble. What do you think, ELIZA?**

3519

3520 ELIZA: Um, kind of what they're all saying - that she definitely needs to have,
3521 like, her own, like, solo adventure in a sense. And that, especially in this new
3522 comic, she seems like more- she has somewhat of a comfortable outfit. But it's
3523 still 'showing.' But she is more comfortable in what she's doing; and in this one,
3524 she does kind of lead people - but she still needs people to come in and, like,
3525 take charge in a sense, for some things. And so, I think definitely being solo
3526 could help.

3527

3528 **RESEARCHER: Yeah; and I-what you said ELIZA made me also think**
3529 **like- I don't think it's inherently bad that she depends on people. I do think**
3530 **that's an important message that you can. But it feels like that's all we're**
3531 **getting with her. We're not really getting that other half of, sometimes, you**
3532 **do have to be able to do things on your own and that's okay too. Yeah, well**
3533 **that, kind of, concludes, like, the questions I had. Does anybody have any**

3534 **final thoughts or anything they want to talk about - about Harley Quinn; or**
 3535 **the comics; or just your opinion on femininity and comics culture that you**
 3536 **want to share? (pauses) Big question.**

3537

3538 ANGELICA: Well, I was just gonna say so, um - they started season three of the
 3539 *Harley Quinn* show, like, a couple weeks ago. I finally got to, like, catch up on,
 3540 like, the first three episodes yesterday. So I was, like, watching them - and it's
 3541 kind of sad 'cause, you know, I was excited. I'm like, 'Oh, Harley's finally with
 3542 Ivy. This may actually be good for her!' And it already seems like it's the same
 3543 cycle as they did with Joker. Where at- she's already depending on Ivy 24/7 and
 3544 gets upset when Ivy wants personal space 24/7 - and she doesn't know how to
 3545 function on her own. I'm like, 'Ugh, here we go again.' And I just-, I-, it makes
 3546 me so upset to see that, like, she still can't- like, she's slowly getting there. And
 3547 then it's, like, 'one step forward, three steps back' every single time she has,
 3548 like, progress in herself, every time. And I'm like, 'ugh.' And I just don't know
 3549 if they're ever going to get to, like, a point where they can, like, make her a
 3550 character that can just function as her own; and then still be able to be with other
 3551 people without relying on them. Which I think is a big thing, so.

3552

3553 **RESEARCHER: Yeah. I think that's a good point. Because, I mean, you**
 3554 **compare her to like the other Sirens - like Catwoman and Ivy - and they**
 3555 **somehow have the ability to kind of go back and forth, between being on**
 3556 **their own and being in a team - and not really having an issue either way.**
 3557 **But Harley's the one who seems to not be able to do that. (pauses) ELIZA,**
 3558 **did you have any thoughts you wanted to share?**

3559

3560 ELIZA: Um, no. None that I can think of.

3561

3562 **RESEARCHER: IRIS/DOLLY, what about you guys?**

3563

3564 DOLLY: Like, we to see more, like, of independent woman characters, like, on
 3565 the supervillain/superheroes - whatever - on the screen. Because it's always, like,
 3566 a- like, Catwoman is with Batman. Like, it's always, like, they're paired with a
 3567 man. Like, we don't need that. I- actually Ivy is pretty good representation; but
 3568 she's also, kind of, like, the, um - it's not epiphany, but, um, like, I don't know
 3569 the word. But she is, like - she does appeal to the male gaze. Like, I'm trying-
 3570 it's not, it's not a Drew Barrymore movie, but, um, she had- there was one
 3571 where, but -

3572

3573 **RESEARCHER: Oh, the Uma Thurman movie from the, like, 1997?**

3574

3575 DOLLY: Yes! Where she- it's that one scene, where she is, like, dressed in the
3576 green, and then she's, like, popping up. And then, like, it is for, like- I feel like
3577 that was made for the male gaze. And I feel like just because she doesn't have,
3578 like, a significant guy other - like Catwoman has Batman and Harley has Joker -
3579 she's still trying to give herself to a man at that point. -

3580

3581 **RESEARCHER: Yeah.**

3582

3583 DOLLY: - But then, it's, like, also now that, um, there, um. I'm not really sure
3584 if- but, like, people are, like, shipping Harley and Ivy, so it probably is going to
3585 be, like, Harley's never going to be alone. She's going to always have another
3586 pair. And then, um, Ivy could always, they could match her with somebody, I
3587 don't know. And then Catwoman has her Batman. But, um, like, there is never- I
3588 don't think there's ever really been, like, a woman villain/superhero who does
3589 not have a, like, man attached to them. Well, maybe Wonder Woman - I'm not
3590 really sure on her.

3591

3592 **RESEARCHER: No, I think that's a good point. Because, I mean, I think**
3593 **Wonder Woman might be the closest to what you're talking about, but even**
3594 **still. I mean, I think of, like, the *Justice League* cartoon that I know some of**
3595 **you guys have watched from, like, the early 2000s. Like, even then, like,**
3596 **they're still trying to attach her to someone. Like, I think in that one, it was**
3597 **implied, sometimes, she was wanting to be with Batman. And then**
3598 **originally, she was with Steve Trevor; and then I know there are storylines**
3599 **where she's with Superman. So, it does sound, like, the experiences any,**
3600 **kind of, female that, kind of, gets close to that independent status - has to**
3601 **have some kind of significant love interest. Well, thank you so much, guys! I**
3602 **super appreciate it. I'm going to stop the recording.**

ADDENDUM – BONNIE’S RESPONSES TO SG QUESTIONS

- 3603 **1-** I’ve seen trailers and such with her in them, but the comic was my first actual
 3604 experience of her as a character. Overall, I really liked her. She had funny lines
 3605 and her will to get her friends back in this comic was admirable. I can’t think of
 3606 anything specific that I felt I resonated with.
 3607
- 3608 **2-** At school I feel like more people have seen her movies she’s in and based on
 3609 what I saw people saying about her, would think she’s more snarky and bad-guy
 3610 than I thought she was in the comic. People at conventions and such would
 3611 definitely know more about all versions of her and little things others may not
 3612 understand or know about. They would probably have a very insightful opinion
 3613 of her character.
 3614
- 3615 **3-** I enjoyed this comic because I felt that it showed her caring side. She had to
 3616 save her friends from this trance they were put in, and she could’ve easily not
 3617 cared to get them back.
 3618
- 3619 **4/5-** Well one that I feel can relate to Harley in this comic is clothing. There’s a
 3620 lot of sexualization and such surrounding what women wear, which I find
 3621 disappointing. I don’t believe that wearing anything in general is "asking for it"
 3622 or should be viewed as a bad thing. There’s just people in the world who feel the
 3623 opposite and have the guts to express that awful ways.
 3624
- 3625 Harley’s outfit in this comic obviously isn’t a long sleeve and jeans, but I don’t
 3626 find the illustrations wrong or a lash at women. It very well could’ve been
 3627 different, but I honestly think it could instead be turned into an empowerment
 3628 thing. Her actual character doesn’t care what she’s wearing and isn’t doing it for
 3629 anyone, and I feel like that is an admirable attitude.
 3630
- 3631 I think part of it is about perspective and how people feel based on personal
 3632 experiences. I don’t know enough about the other versions of her to say
 3633 anything about the differences.
 3634
- 3635 **6-** I think that she can be a positive representation. Based on what what I read, I
 3636 think that her being the hero shows that women are strong too. Typically, you’ll
 3637 see female characters being supportive of a male hero (like Antman and the
 3638 Wasp, or even Pepper Potts and Tony Stark). In this comic Harley was on her
 3639 own, and that gave her the chance to showcase her abilities without anyone
 3640 else. I don’t think she means to be a feminist, but she definitely has that kind of
 3641 attitude.

VITA

Madison E. Edgar

EDUCATION

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ACADEMIC EMPLOYEMENT

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PRESENTATIONS AT PROFESSIONAL MEETINGS

Audas JR., G., Edgar, M., and Pagels, J. Trauma is impacting our learners: What do we do about it? 2020 Texas Association for Literacy Education State Conference, Odessa, Texas, 28 February 2020.

ACADEMIC AWARDS

Outstanding Literacy [Graduate] Student, Department of School of Teaching and Learning, Sam Houston State University, Spring 2022.

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS

Texas Association for Literacy Education (TALE)

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