MEN IN TIGHTS, WOMEN IN TIGHTER TIGHTS: HOW SUPERHEROES
INFLUENCE AND INFORM THE PERCEPTIONS OF GENDER AND MORALITY
IN CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

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ABSTRACT

Different types of media are widespread in today’s world. This litany of media can have a variety of influences, some positive and some negative. This is an especially important consideration in regards to children and adolescents, as they are experiencing media while they are still developing. One of the more controversial types of media that children and adolescents experience is that based around superheroes. Appearing in a wide variation (e.g., comic books, films, television shows, video games), superhero-based media can have varying influences. First, this paper uses the DC Comics superheroes Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman as evidence of some of the gender issues facing this type of media, examining how Superman and Batman are viewed as stronger and more agentic and how Wonder Woman is viewed as simultaneously feminist and oppressive. Second, this paper examines research reflecting the negative influences superhero-based media can have on gender ideas and perceptions, such as promoting stereotyped beliefs about gender, along with the positive influences it can have on morals, largely encouraging a healthy morality. Finally, this paper concludes with taking the discussed issues and applying them to the recent Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice, as it is the first live-action film to feature the three aforementioned superheroes and it largely reinforces the issues discussed thus far.

Keywords: media, gender, morality, superheroes, children and adolescents, Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman.
Background

Before diving directly into the thesis, some background is required. This thesis was born out of a simple thing: A love of Batman. I knew that the content of the thesis is something I would be spending over a year with, which necessitated a topic about which I was passionate. Because of this, I did some research with Batman in mind and found a litany of articles written about gender. Research involving Wonder Woman and gender also appeared. From there, including Superman made sense, as he is often paired with Batman and Wonder Woman in comics and other media. Beyond that, Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman were chosen as there is already a wide swath of material focusing on those three characters. Having said that, most of the research is focused exclusively on one or all of those characters and largely does not acknowledge their significant supporting cast of characters or how that supporting cast influences the forthcoming issues of each superhero – essentially, the research has, barring a few exceptions, paid much more attention to the single heroes (Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman) than it has to the characters with whom these superheroes interact. As such, this thesis largely assumes that same dynamic. Moreover, the focus on these three superheroes does not negate the potential influence of other superheroes that are depicted in the media.

From this, discussing gender issues in media, specifically media involving that trio of superheroes, became the basis of the thesis. It was not until incorporating research from the thesis into a presentation for a class focusing on the psychological disorders of childhood and adolescence that the thesis’s final form would arise, because doing so
forced me to marry childhood and adolescence with gender and superheroes. It was here where what became my thesis was fully developed; what started as a love of Batman has turned into a treatise about gender, superheroes, how those interact, and how that interaction influences children’s and adolescents’ perception of gender and morality. It must also be noted that this thesis generally takes children and adolescents as one group; though the two groups are occasionally separated based on a few studies, this thesis often combines children and adolescents into a single group. This reflects more traditional research, though recent trends suggest that children and adolescents will be studied more primarily as separately individual groups. The research was anticipated to be less than optimistic, but there is research that suggests, despite the negative influences superhero-based media has on gender, it can have a positive influence in teaching morals.
Introduction

“Batman. They’re giving the credit to Batman. Aces” (Miller & Mazzucchelli, 1987, p. 83). Selina Kyle delivers this line in the seminal comic storyline Batman: Year One (Miller & Mazzucchelli, 1987). Designed as a darker, grittier reboot set in the early days of Batman’s tenure, the story reimagines his first meetings with famous characters like Jim Gordon, now a lieutenant instead of a commissioner. Batman also meets Selina Kyle before she becomes Catwoman, Gotham’s resident cat burglar and occasional antihero. In the story, Selina is reinterpreted as a street-tough woman with a teenage roommate and a pet cat who works as prostitute. Upon seeing Batman’s antics, however, Selina is inspired to chart a different course for her life, donning a skintight, cat-based costume as part of a plan to escape her downtrodden life via thievery. Unfortunately for Selina, Gotham news assumes her actions to be those of “the Batman” instead of her own, causing her to smash her own television in anger at not receiving credit for her own actions. She attempts a more brazen theft later in the story, robbing a prominent mob boss of a prized statuette and leaving a scratch on said mob boss’s face. This results in Catwoman being labelled Batman’s “assistant” (p. 88). This additionally angers Selina, with her promising an act even worse than before, though the story ends before readers see Catwoman commit this supposed crime that would indelibly separate her from Batman in the eyes of Gotham. Selina saw what Batman was doing, attempted her own version of it by becoming Catwoman, and, despite her efforts to the contrary, was
repeatedly defined by others to be in the realm of Batman. In essence, a woman was forcibly and begrudgingly defined within the confines of her male counterpart. This scenario is a microcosm of the larger, more complicated relationship between superhero stories and gender and their messages about real life. Though generally played comically in *Batman: Year One* (Miller & Mazzucchelli, 1987), Selina’s struggle for legitimacy, even if it is legitimacy as a cat burglar, is representative of some of the issues facing women in superhero stories. This issue is all the more reinforced when Selina’s quest for validity is left unresolved at the end of the story and the quests of the male characters, such as Batman and Jim Gordon, are neatly resolved. It is safe to refer to this treatment as unequal.

However, this unequal treatment is not limited exclusively to a single Batman comic from the 80s, as various superhero comics present sometimes unflattering depictions of gender for both men and women, though women holistically receive the more unflattering depictions (Lavigne, 2015). When Wonder Woman first joins the Justice Society in 1942, she does so as the team’s honorary secretary and says “I don’t think I’ve ever been so thrilled in my life!” (as cited in Jackson, 2013) while surrounded by her smiling colleagues. This treatment has spread beyond comics to superhero movies, television shows, and video games, with the less-than-stellar depictions of gender being dragged along with the myriad superhero adaptations across innumerable media. While Batman is one of the superheroes most frequently adapted outside of comic books, his contemporaries, Superman and Wonder Woman, are trailing not too far behind. Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman have all retained their relevance. Despite first
appearing in 1938, 1939, and 1941, respectively, the three characters, affectionately known as “the Trinity” by comics fans, just recently appeared in *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice* (Roven, Snyder, & Snyder, 2016), the first live-action film to feature all three characters. Before it, Superman had his own film, *Man of Steel* (Roven, Nolan, Thomas, Snyder, & Snyder, 2013). Beyond it, Wonder Woman will have her own self-titled standalone film coming out in June, 2017, with a Batman standalone and Superman sequel coming sometime after that and two additional *Justice League* films reuniting all three characters being thrown in the mix (Cecchini, 2016). Having said that, all of this goes without mentioning the still-upcoming or already-produced comic books and television shows featuring all three characters in some combination or another.

The point is this: Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman are not going anywhere, meaning that the gender issues associated with those characters are not either. If these issues were depicted in a vacuum, the already preexisting and plentiful research involving the Trinity would not be as necessary; however, because superhero-based media is being consumed, it deserves an examination. In fact, this media is not just being consumed, but it is being consumed by a more impressionable group: children and adolescents. In general, media is currently considered an inescapable facet of a child’s or adolescent’s upbringing (Huk, 2013). Beyond that, media of all kinds is found to have an influence on children and adolescents in today’s world and has shown to have an influence on children and adolescents (Robinson, 2014). From this, it is fair to argue that Superman’s, Batman’s, and Wonder Woman’s respective gender issues have an influence on the children and adolescents who consume the various media in which they appear.
This paper will address that influence, first by providing a background of each of the Trinity as individual characters along with their associated gender issues, and then by examining the influences, both negative and positive, this can exert on children and adolescents. Finally, the ramifications of this research will be discussed.
Overview of Superheroes and Respective Gender Issues

Before the influences of superhero media on children and adolescents can be discussed, the actual gender issues present within Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman must first be discussed. In order to do so, a brief explanation of how the superheroes were born is necessary, along with some reference made to the circumstances surrounding their creation and discussion of characters in their universe pertinent to the discussion of gender. The characters are discussed in order of their first appearance in comics. Doing so presents an increasingly complicated portrayal of gender issues with each new member of the Trinity discussed.

Superman: The Man of Steel

First appearing in 1938, Superman’s origin story is arguably as famous as he is: Infant Kal-El is sent to Earth from his dying home planet, Krypton, by his birth parents. Upon landing in the fictional town of Smallville, Kansas, Kal-El is adopted by Jonathan and Martha Kent. Naming him Clark, Jonathan and Martha raise their adopted son and attempt to imbue within him a sense of compassion, tolerance, justice, and altruism. As Clark grew older, however, he and his adopted parents discover that being on an alien planet has granted him extraordinary powers such as flight, superhuman strength, and visions both heat and x-ray. Clark also eventually discovers his Kryptonian heritage. Additionally, Clark’s human father occasionally dies: for example, Superman:
The Movie (Spengler & Donner, 1978) and the reboot Man of Steel (Roven et al., 2013) featured Jonathan’s death as critical plot points in developing Clark’s character. However, Superman: The Animated Series (Timm, Dini, Burnett, Murakami, & MacCurdy, 1996) did not feature this death. Regardless, Clark Kent is given a sense of purpose and motivated by the teachings of his parents and becomes Superman, the Man of Steel, an indestructible superhero stationed in Metropolis.

Outside of his origins, it is important to note that Superman is considered to be the first superhero, the one from whom all future superheroes take inspiration (M., 2016). Superman is also especially noteworthy in regard to gender because he can be seen as “a dream come true to the male world, in which they could live their fantasies . . . [and] the ultimate symbol of a model male figure” (M., 2016, p. 36). Superman is also a chivalric savior of both humankind and women; often flying around and saving the day, he is the epitomization of the ultimate caretaker and is someone whom men aspire to be (M., 2016).

Beyond this, Superman is also the epitomized agentic character. The sense of agency is defined as an individual being completely cognizant of their own role in the decision making process – in essence, having agency is the individual recognizing they are capable of controlling their own volitional destiny. O’Reilly (2005) described how agency is more often attributed to male characters in fiction and specifically describes Superman’s agency, saying he “self-proclaim[ed] his own heroism” (p. 281). This concept has been reflected throughout Superman’s seventy-year-plus existence, though one especially prominent example comes from the aforementioned Man of Steel (Roven
et al., 2013). The film was designed to reintroduce Superman to a modern audience, spending a significant period of its runtime focusing on Clark Kent’s understanding of his heritage and struggling to find his place in the world before becoming Superman. After one especially difficult day, Clark speaks to his father, who says to his son:

You were sent here for a reason . . . One day you’re gonna think of [these changes you’re going through] as a blessing; and when that day comes, you’re gonna have to make a choice, a choice of whether to stand proud in front of the human race or not . . . You have another father, too, who gave you another name, and he sent you here for a reason, Clark; and even if it takes you the rest of your life, you owe it to yourself to find out what that reason is. (Roven et al., 2013)

Here, Superman’s agency is most clearly on display: While Clark may struggle with his eventual life choices, he is not only automatically expected to, but is explicitly told that he is capable of making his own volitional decisions.

**Batman: The Dark Knight**

First appearing in 1939, Batman’s origin story is incredibly recognizable and famous: On their way home from the cinema in fictional Gotham City, Thomas and Martha Wayne are murdered in front of their young son, Bruce, in a robbery gone wrong. Forever traumatized by this event, Bruce Wayne uses the fortune left to him by his parents and dedicates himself to ridding Gotham of the crime that killed his parents. He spends years training in skills such as psychology, criminology, various forms of physical combat, chemistry, and detective work. After finishing his training, Bruce feels he is not quite ready to become the hero he believes Gotham needs. In a moment of serendipity, a bat crashes into his study, and Bruce decides that he will craft an outfit in the guise of a bat, designed to scare criminals, and take the mantle of Batman, the Dark Knight.
Batman has been reinvented likely more times than any of the superheroes discussed in this paper and is almost certainly the most commercially successful of the Trinity (Stuart JA, 2016). Despite this, the above remains generally true across versions of the character. The only real deviation occurs in Bruce’s personal encounter with the bat; sometimes he has a childhood fear of bats that carries into his adulthood and inspires him to become Batman. One such example is the previously-discussed *Batman: Year One* (Miller & Mazzucchelli, 1987), a landmark comic that has influenced virtually every piece of Batman media since its publication.

Given the previously-discussed idea of agency in regards to Superman, it is easy to see how Batman has the same agentic qualities Superman possesses. Like Clark Kent, Bruce Wayne makes his own decision to don a cape and cowl to fight bad guys. Neither is required to prove to anyone that they are capable of making such a decision, as they simply make the decision (O’Reilly, 2005). Batman is also seen as equally masculine to Superman (M., 2016). Having said that, Batman has been described as “violent and stoic, a muscle-bound tough guy with a flowing cape” (Lavigne, 2015, p. 135). Lavigne (2015) looked at two video games from the *Batman: Arkham* series. *Batman: Arkham Asylum* (Bailie & Burlow, 2009) and *Batman: Arkham City* (Bailie & Burlow, 2011) are not singular depictions of specific Batman stories but are instead amalgamations of the various elements of the character and his lore from throughout his decades of existence coupled with an original story and references to a variety of different adaptations of the character. Frankly put, if there is a definitive version of Batman that is an accurate epitomization of his myriad adaptations, the *Batman: Arkham* series is it. Lavigne also
notes that both games advance “heteronormative, hypergendered stereotypes” in emphasizing Batman’s overly muscular physique and disproportionately rescuing more women than men, furthering the problematic idea of women being damsels in distress.

In the games, one of the women frequently mentioned is Catwoman, a character who has a complex, usually romantic role in Batman’s history. Catwoman appears as a playable character *Arkham City* (Bailie & Burlow, 2011), and many of the less-than-positive elements of gender appear with her. Catwoman is regularly referred to sexually and physically along with frequently being called words like “bitch.” She is also on the receiving end of threats of sexual assault by other criminals, none of which happens in reference to Batman. Lavigne (2015) established that Catwoman is not treated equally by the game. Lavigne presented a microcosmic anecdote of the aforementioned issue from *Arkham City* (Bailie & Burlow, 2011): Early in the game, the player, as Batman, glides into a building and rescues Catwoman from a villain by fighting a room full of thugs. Later in the game, the player, as Catwoman, rescues Batman from being buried alive. The difference is that the rescue occurs off-screen; the decision to rescue Batman being made, and the game suddenly cuts to Catwoman lifting rubble off Batman. Unfortunately, this is not limited to *Arkham City* (Bailie & Burlow, 2011). The third game in the trilogy, *Arkham Knight* (Bailie & Burlow, 2015), features Catwoman as a hostage. Batman must work to free Catwoman via a variety of puzzles, some of which involve working with Catwoman. When the puzzles are completed, Catwoman is released, but she does return to aid Batman later in the game. It should be noted that Catwoman’s aiding of Batman is only one mission whereas rescuing Catwoman takes ten. This unequal treatment is
indicative of larger issues within Catwoman’s role in Batman stories, often being relegated to an independent woman who still operates within the realm of an overwhelmingly patriarchal society (Austin, 2015). This was evidenced earlier in this paper with the opening anecdote about Catwoman’s struggle for legitimacy in Gotham as told in *Batman: Year One* (Miller & Mazzucchelli, 1987).

Any discussion of Batman and gender would be remiss if it did not address Batman’s supposed homosexuality. This, too, is complicated. The issue was first proposed by psychiatrist Wertham (1954) in his book *Seduction of the Innocent*. Written as a condemnation of the corruptive role comic books have in children’s lives, Wertham identified that crime and horror comics have a negative impact on juvenile delinquents (Langley, 2012, p. 208). Wertham touched only briefly on superheroes, but it still served to ignite public interest for decades to come. Its most infamous tidbit is mentioning that Batman and his young sidekick, Robin, were like “a wish dream of two homosexuals living together . . . the Batman type of story helps to fixate homoerotic tendencies” (as cited in Langley, 2012, p. 208-209). Wertham’s book rocked the nation, climaxing in his participation in a Senate hearing on the nature of comic books. While future review would reveal Wertham’s studies had methodological issues (for example, he did not include a control group when presenting delinquents with comic books so had no non-delinquents for comparison), the accusations about Batman’s sexuality have been associated with the character ever since (Langley, 2012, p. 208). Representative that this stereotype persists to this day, I gave a speech about Batman recently, and, at the end, the professor genuinely said “Okay, but aren’t Batman and Robin gay?” A myriad of Batman
writers, however, have since said they wrote Batman as a heteronormative character (Langley, 2012, p. 206).

**Wonder Woman: The Amazonian Princess**

First appearing in 1941, Wonder Woman’s origin story is frequently less famous than those of Superman and Batman. Queen Hippolyta is leader of the secret and hidden Paradise Island, later known as Themyscira. The island contains only strong, powerful, independent Amazonian women who have intentionally sequestered themselves from the outside world because of dissatisfaction with the hostilities and temptations of Man’s World, going so far as to forbid Man from setting foot on the island. The Amazonians are also unhappy with how the Gods, the Greek ones in this instance, behave. Hippolyta, desiring a daughter, crafted one out of clay and named her Diana. Princess Diana was the pride of the Amazonians, perhaps most strongly evincing their core traits of compassion and love, along with being the strongest physical fighter on the island. The generally beatific life led on Themyscira is turned on its head when a soldier, a man named Steve Trevor, crashes on the island and brings news of a terrible war. Desiring to help this gentleman in distress, Diana bests all the Amazonians in a competition to return the man to his world in order to fight crime and Nazis. Taking the mantle of Wonder Woman and equipped with her famous lasso and bracelets, Diana sets off on her journey.

The above is generally Wonder Woman’s origin story, but throughout our time there have been some adjustments. Instead of the Amazonians rallying behind helping a man, occasionally they are depicted as being more isolationist and simply wanting to get
Trevor off Themyscira without aiding his cause. Diana finds this hypocritical, steals what will become her Wonder Woman garb, returns Steve to *Man’s World*, and remains there to fight evil in all its forms.

Unlike both Superman and Batman before her, the story of Wonder Woman’s creator is as important as her own fictional origins when it comes to understanding her influence on gender. First appearing in 1941, Wonder Woman was created by psychologist William Moulton Marston. Marston believed women were superior to men and comics were hyperviolent and overly masculine, devaluing important feminine traits like a desire for peace and love (Ingalls, 2012). Marston himself said:

Wonder Woman is psychological propaganda for the new type of woman who should, I believe, rule the world. There isn’t love enough in the male organism to run this planet peacefully. Woman’s body contains twice as many love generating organs and endocrine mechanisms as the male. What woman lacks is the dominance or self assertive [*sic*] power to put over and enforce her love desires. I have given Wonder Woman this dominant force but have kept her loving, tender, maternal and feminine in every other way. Her bracelets, with which she repels bullets and other murderous weapons, represent the Amazon Princess’ submission to Aphrodite, Goddess of Love and Beauty. Her magic lasso, which compels anyone bound by it to obey Aphrodite herself, represents woman’s love charm and allure by which she compels men and women to do her bidding. (as cited in Averett, 2009, p. 362)
Marston would continue to push this self-described psychological propaganda of his, hoping to use Wonder Woman to bring about social change in regards to gender. Matsuuchi (2012) describes the various ways Marstons’s philosophies influences his stories. For example, women would often be seen in occupations such as police officers, professors, or presidents, male characters often in peril instead of women. Marston’s villains were often one-dimensional misogynists, with one notable example being called “Professor Manly.” His stories were also designed to champion the expression of emotion and the power of love. Marston included biographies of real-life “wonder women” such as Susan B. Anthony to further communicate his message to readers. There is also evidence that Marston, his wife, and his mistress worked together in creating Wonder Woman, so much so that the two women have been credited as co-creators of the character (Matsuuchi, 2012).

Because of this ostensible and ardent pro-women message, Wonder Woman has become, in essence, a feminist icon. The first 1972 issue of Ms. magazine debuted with Wonder Woman on the cover and featured an essay in which Gloria Steinem declared Wonder Woman as a feminist icon (Matsuuchi, 2012). Wonder Woman has also been used as a jumping-off point for future feminists, reaffirming ideologies along with inspiring further research (Averett, 2009; Little, 2015). For example, Little (2015) cited several essays from social workers who discussed how Wonder Woman inspired them to help and care about others. Beyond this, later Wonder Woman stories starting in the late 80s and early 90s, coinciding with the rise of third-wave feminism, have continued the
While it is apparent that there is a strong feminist undercurrent with regards to Wonder Woman, there have been less flattering, alternative interpretations to her character. In Marston’s tenure, bondage tended to be an oft-reoccurring element, specifically female’s mental and physical domination of men (Matsuuchi, 2012). Wertham was also cognizant of the reoccurring bondage imagery in Wonder Woman (Langley, 2012, p. 210). While he agreed with Marston’s notion that popular culture had an obligation to promote progressive social change, Wertham took umbrage with the bondage (Matsuuchi, 2012). The bondage imagery has additionally been suggested as appealing more to male dominance fantasies than anything else (O’Reilly, 2005). O’Reilly (2005) also takes issues with Wonder Woman’s presumed lack of agency, citing some versions of the character’s origins that involve her having to fight to prove her ability to return Steve Trevor to Man’s World. This is especially bothersome, as that neither Batman nor Superman were asked to prove they could fight crime, whereas Wonder Woman was.

Beyond this, Wonder Woman was not always the feminist icon she was intended to be. During the 50s, a changing social climate and Martson’s death contributed to Wonder Woman’s stories growing less progressive and more conservative. This climaxed in writers forgoing Wonder Woman’s secret identity and superpowers. In place of that, she learned martial arts in order to fight crime and, by day, ran a women’s boutique (Matsuuchi, 2012). This period in the comics was poorly received (Matsuuchi, 2012).
There is, however, one paramount issue involving Wonder Woman and gender: Her body. Simply put, it is regularly sexualized, perhaps more apparent because Wonder Woman is the longest-published female superhero, being in continual print since her first appearance in 1941 (Emad, 2006). This is also not something unique to a certain time period, as Cocca (2014) discovered in conducting an analysis examining the body postures of female characters in comics books published from 1993 through 2013. Cocca spoke of a pose known as the “broke back” pose in which a female character is seen from behind but turns so that her face, breasts, and buttocks are all simultaneously visible. This was found in comics featuring Wonder Woman from all the time periods examined in the study. This is especially critical given that scholars have argued the sexualization of women, especially when done to a female character considered to be empowered, was found to have negative consequences on the women who viewed said sexualization (Brinkman & Jedinak, 2014). Cocca also found that this sexualization appeared to be independent of the content of the story. That is, regardless of how empowered, feminist, or egalitarian the story was, the sexualization still occurred, saying “Traditional gender norms are simultaneously unsettled (by a woman being portrayed as a strong subject) and reinforced (by a woman being portrayed as a sexualized object)” (Cocca, 2014, p. 421). It is also worth noting that, while Wonder Woman’s outfit is a glorified one-piece bathing suit, these preexisting issues were not examined, so there is no precedent for how that impacts perceptions.
Influences on Children and Adolescents

Now that the context of various gender issues associated with the Trinity has been established, their influence on children and adolescents can be examined. First, however, a discussion involving the media habits of children and adolescents must occur that helps frame the research. Lemish (2007) reviewed the general status of the types of media in which boys and girls partake, revealing that, in essence, both genders are attracted to what is expected of them. The divergence appears around 2- or 3-years old when boys and girls develop distinct interests and preferences. According to Lemish, boys show more interest in adventurous, exciting media involving action, superheroes, sports, soldiers, experience with television shows, movies, video games, and books, whereas girls show more interest in calmer, more realistic media centered around relationships and characters that feature performers, animals, and fairy-tale characters. This divide generally extends upon entering adolescence and is also affected by the influence of parents, peers, schools, surrounding environments, and other socializing factors. The media available to children and adolescents has also been found to cater more toward boys than it does toward girls, featuring stronger male characters worthier of role modeling along with operating under the assumption that girls will interact with boys’ media yet boys will not do the same for girls. Despite this, Lemish notes that “as perceptions of gender differences in society change, so does the consumption of media [and] the role of media in the construction of gender differences remains fluid,
complicated, and ever-changing" (2007, p. 362). Taking this and applying it to superhero-based media suggests that, while boys are generally more likely to watch television shows with Batman, read books with Wonder Woman, or watch movies with Superman, the assumption that girls do not participate in superhero-based media is erroneous (Lemish, 2007).

**Negative Influences**

Generally speaking, studies have found that superhero-based media has a negative influence on children’s and adolescents’ perceptions of gender-related issues. Coyne, Ruh Linder, Rasmussen, Nelson, and Collier (2014) conducted a study seeking to examine the role viewing animated superhero programs has on male-stereotyped play in preschool children. Coyne et al. (2014) looked specifically at stereotypical male play and weapon play (e.g., using a sword while playing). Coyne et al.’s study featured questionnaires completed by parents once when the study initially occurred and another a year after the study. The questionnaires focused on how frequently the child viewed animated superhero programs and how said child played. Results of the study suggested that, while boys were generally more likely to view superhero programs, more frequently viewing superhero programs not only increased male-stereotyped play and weapon play in both genders but also that it increased gender stereotypes within both genders. Coyne et al. also examined the data from the social cognitive theory of gender development. Doing so supported the efficacy of the theory, which postulates that children learn based upon observing others, imitating them, and learning the behaviors that are rewarded by the
models. Applying the theory to the results of Coyne et al.’s study suggests that both genders continued in male-stereotyped and weapon play because this type of behavior was successful for their models (superheroes, in this case). Something else Coyne et al. examined was how parent mediation (a parent expresses their feelings, be they positive or negative about the media to their child) influenced the child’s play. While previous research has found that parental mediation influences gender development in children, Coyne et al. found that parental mediation had little effect, either positive or negative. Coyne et al. explain that the general ineffectiveness of parental mediation is possibly responsible to younger children may be more resistant to mediation about gender because they are still developing their own perceptions and ideas of it along with younger children simply not responding to this specific type of mediation.

Beyond influencing play, participating in superhero-based media may have negative consequences for body image, which causes a unique set of issues. Cocca (2014) and the “broke back” test were referenced earlier in this paper; however, that analysis was done only in regards to comics featuring female characters. Taylor (2007) conducted an earlier analysis of the bodies of both male and female superheroes and found their bodies to be over-idealized and hypersexualized, saying:

Superhero comics continue to capitalize on the eroticization of the body and increasingly violent sexuality. The superbody currently functions quite near to a pornographic polemic. Interestingly, both the female and male comic figure continue to be a site of spectacle, if not outright fetishism. (2007, p. 345)

Taylor also mentions the physiques of the Trinity and spends significant time dissecting them, most notably describing Batman’s biceps as “bigger than his head” (p. 351) in a particular Justice League comic.
Taking Taylor’s (2007) findings and applying them to how children and adolescents perceive body image through media is enlightening. Dakanalis et al. (2015) conducted a study focusing on 658 adolescents ages 14 to 15. At yearly intervals for three years, participants completed a questionnaire pertaining to media-ideal internalization, self-objectification, shame and anxiety surrounding the body and appearance, dietary restraint, and binge eating. The sample was nearly equal across socioeconomic classes. The results of the questionnaires were found to support the idea of media-ideal internalization negatively impacting the adolescents, though the results were more strongly supported in females than in males. Girls were more likely to suffer from media-ideal internalization’s negative impact in the form of developing negative body-feelings and subsequent disordered eating. Beyond this, the results suggested that this internalization results in additional discomfort, potentially leading to binge eating and shame and anxiety due to the discrepancy between their idealized body and their actual body. Taken together, Taylor’s analysis of the superhero body and Dakanalis et al.’s study detailing the dangers of media-ideal internalization suggest that viewing superhero-based media could have a disastrous effect. Essentially, seeing the incredibly sexual superhero bodies could cause adolescents to internalize what they are interpreting as idealized physiques that should be pursued despite their unattainability.

Perhaps most damning of all, however, is Steyer’s (2014) literature review of studies pertaining to gender in children’s media. Steyer does not specifically address superhero-based media but does address broader concerns pertaining to representation of women in children’s media along with the negative influence of that. Steyer found that
female characters, on average, appear less frequently than males, especially as protagonists. Steyer also found that when female characters do appear, they are generally stereotypical. This is “seen as a reflection of the importance attributed to women in society” (Steyer, 2014, p. 172). In reference to children’s literature, most research has been done on picture books, of which comics could be considered a part. Steyer’s literature review also found that female characters tend to be more passive than male characters. It is also suggested that children internalize these gender stereotypes, and that this internalization has negative impacts on self-esteem and children’s expectations of themselves, peers, and parents. Moving to children’s television programs, Steyer found similar information about the underrepresentation of female characters as opposed to male characters, though the schism was not as deep in television as it was for film. Steyer also found that more emphasis is placed on female attractiveness than on male attractiveness but that females tend to be portrayed as more intelligent than males. Women were also more frequently portrayed as mothers and in relationships, whereas men were found to more often be bachelors and lacking children, something Steyer claimed could contribute negatively to boys’ views on fatherhood and parenting. Finally, Steyer found that internet activities, educational software, and video games directed at children had similar results as both literature and television in addition to there being a higher emphasis on female sexualization in video games than in the previously-discussed mediums. Beyond this, a positive correlation was found between boys who play video games and boys who hold sexual stereotypes. Conversely, a negative correlation was found in reference to girls who use the internet and their gender role stereotypes. That is,
girls who spend more time on the Internet were not more likely to hold gender stereotypes, the reasons for which are left unexplored by Steyer.

**Positive Influences**

Superhero-based media can clearly have a negative influence on children and adolescents in regards to gender issues but are capable of positive influences. While Steyer (2014) did discuss the significantly negative influences of media on children, her literature review was not without optimism, citing studies that found media with non-traditional gender roles were capable of reducing gender-based stereotyping. This can present a new set of problems, the largest being a greater need to present more nurturing, caring male characters and less emphasis on romantic relationships. Despite this, there are only a handful of studies examining the positive influences superhero-based media has on children and adolescents.

Having said that, there is evidence that viewing superhero-based media does in fact have positive influences not pertaining to gender on children and adolescents. In essence, superhero-based media generally has a negative influence on children and adolescents but can have positive influences in other areas. Ohannessian (2009) conducted a study examining 328 adolescents 14- to 16-years old and how their media use influenced their psychological adjustment. Participants of various ethnicities were given surveys about their experiences with depression, anxiety, and media use at two one-year intervals. Ohannessian found that boys who reported higher levels of television and video game use actually reported the lowest levels of anxiety and depression,
whereas girls who spent more time playing video games reported the highest levels of anxiety. This was consistent across myriad media platforms, suggesting that more media consumption is healthier for boys and less media consumption is healthier for girls. Despite this, Ohannessian acknowledges that this conflicts with most research and encourages further study. Ohannessian suggests that the cause of this conflict is that the content of the media is more disparaging to girls than it is to boys, something reflected earlier in the discussion of superhero-based media in regards to how males are more generally portrayed positively than females.

Beyond this, Robinson (2014) conducted a study involving 108 fifth grade students from an elementary school in upstate New York. Participants took several questionnaires pertaining to their superhero-based media knowledge and use. An additional questionnaire was the Sociomoral Reflection Measure – Short Form (Gibbs, Basinger, & Fuller, 1992) that has been proven to efficaciously assess a child’s level of moral judgment. Robinson’s study found that, while superhero knowledge and use is more common in boys than it is in girls, superhero-based media was found to positively influence moral development in children. As an extension of that, some children even identified the positive moralistic attributes of superheroes (e.g., helping others, doing the right thing, fighting crime) as reasons for liking certain superheroes. It should also be noted that some children listed more superficial traits (e.g., costume, attractiveness, gadgets) for liking certain superheroes.

Building on this, Happ, Melzer, and Steffgen (2013) conducted a study involving undergraduate students playing a video game as either Superman or the Joker (a frequent
antagonist of Batman’s) and the role of empathy in media perception. Half the participants in the study read a fake Wikipedia article describing Superman’s compassionate upbringing and the Joker’s troubled past, whereas the other half read a neutral article describing both Superman and the Joker. All participants then played a violent video game in which they fought another character as either Superman or the Joker. Afterward, participants then took part in a face perception task and were asked to identify their perceptions of hostility in these faces. Finally, participants completed a questionnaire before encountering the “lost letter technique,” in which an unmentioned letter that is fully stamped and addressed is left behind for participants; picking up the letter and returning it to the experimenter or addressee was considered a prosocial behavior. Happ et al. (2013) found that reading the fake article and playing as Superman positively correlated with the prosocial behavior. Reading the fake article and playing as the Joker positively correlated with increased hostile perception. Beyond this, empathy for Superman encouraged prosocial behavior, whereas empathy for the Joker encouraged more hostile perceptions.
Discussion in Regards to *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice*

At this point, consider the recent film *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice* (Roven, Snyder, & Snyder, 2016). As was mentioned in this thesis’s introduction, it is the first live-action film to feature Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman and contains many of the ideas discussed in this essay. The film has four primary male characters:

Aside from Batman and Superman, it features Lex Luthor, a megalomaniacal businessman, and Alfred Pennyworth, Batman’s trusted ally and parental figure. In terms of gender, Batman and Superman are fairly straightforward: They are both agentic and incredibly masculine. Moralistcally, the influences are far more complicated. The film spends significant time pitting Batman and Superman into a philosophical argument about their respective ideologies of being superheroes. This eventually escalates into an all-out death match between the two, though both characters have been manipulated into doing so by Lex Luthor. Superman struggles with his identity, wanting to find a home in his adopted world but is bound by his endless altruism and desire to do good coupled with the difficult realization that he is incapable of saving everyone. Conversely, Batman is old, angry, and bitter, now literally branding criminals with a bat-symbol and leaving them for dead after having spent decades fighting crime in Gotham and having lost several close allies. Essentially, the film presents a young Superman who tries to do good but occasionally fails and an angry, world-weary Batman who thinks less altruistically and more vengefully. Despite this, the film features Batman and Superman overcoming
their differences. During their colossal fight, they discover that their mothers share the same name, Martha (Batman’s Martha Wayne and Superman’s Martha Kent, respectively), and this realization humanizes each in the other’s perspective. Afterward, Superman ultimately sacrifices his life while defeating an alien creature, Doomsday, brought into existence by Lex Luthor, which proves to Batman the former’s endless altruism and decency. The film moralistically falls more in favor of Superman’s altruism and compassion than Batman’s broody vengeance, with Batman explaining at Superman’s funeral that he has a renewed faith in humanity and will work to honor the former’s death. This siding with Superman suggests that children and adolescents viewing the film may be positively influenced; because one character (Superman) is essentially identified as *right*, it rewards those more moralistic behaviors and punishes the angrier, more vengeful character (Batman).

Beyond Batman and Superman, however, is Lex Luthor. The version of Lex Luthor presented in the film is erratic, emotional, and driven by childhood abuse suffered at the hands of his now-deceased father, which is a drastic divergence from the comics and other iterations of the character. Lex Luthor also spends the entire film murdering innocents and manipulating events, other characters, the media, and even Batman and Superman themselves in order to pit the two titular characters against one another. A supervillain who spends their story murdering and manipulating is not uncommon, nor is it uncommon for their supervillainy to be explained via some trauma. However, given Happ Melzer, and Steffgen’s (2013) study involving empathy for supervillain characters increasing perceptions of hostility, this unique characterization of Lex Luthor could
negatively influence children and adolescents, despite the fact that he is clearly a supervillain and ends the film in jail. Finally, Alfred Pennyworth’s nurturing tendencies twists the gender stereotype of women being the only gender capable of nurturing qualities, making Alfred Pennyworth’s depiction in the film potentially a positive influence. Beyond that, Alfred Pennyworth angrily scolds Batman for his darker, more vengeful tactics and his participation in the almost-death match with Superman; this may also be an additional positive influence of Alfred Pennyworth’s morality.

Women in *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice* (Roven, Snyder, & Snyder, 2016) are depicted differently than their male counterparts. Of the five primary women in the film, two are killed in a suicide bombing at roughly the halfway point and leave little impression. The three remaining are Superman’s human love interest Lois Lane, Martha Kent, and Wonder Woman. Lois Lane vacillates between two roles in the film. One is the inquisitive, relentless investigative reporter seeking truth – for example, after she confronts a high-ranking general in the men’s restroom, the aforementioned general says “With balls like yours, you belong in here” (Roven et al., 2016). She also plays the role of Superman’s confidant and emotional support. Given the research discussed in this paper, Lois Lane’s unrelenting search for the truth might have a positive influence on the children and adolescents who watch the film, but her constant emotional counsel for Superman may inadvertently promote negative stereotypes about women and their relationship to men. Like Lois Lane, Martha Kent is additional emotional support to Superman. Unlike Lois Lane, however, Martha does not have an agentic, positively moralistic subplot; instead, Martha’s other role in the film is to get kidnapped by Lex
Luthor, using Martha as impetus for Superman to kill Batman as a part of his villainous masterplan. While it is possible that Martha’s nurturing tendencies may have a positive influence, it is more likely that her role being relegated to loving mother and frightened hostage would encourage stereotypes about women, motherhood, and women lacking agency.

Finally, Wonder Woman proves the most difficult female character in the film. She spends most of the story as an unknown, mystery civilian before donning her famous Wonder Woman garb when Doomsday proves too challenging for Batman and Superman to defeat on their own. She shows herself to be a dangerously awesome warrior and combatant, saving the lives of both Superman and Batman. Basically, if Wonder Woman sat the fight out, Batman and Superman would likely be dead. Theoretically, this would present a positive influence, for not only does Wonder Woman fight villainy but she also does so in a way the men are incapable. Despite this, there is a minor moment in the film that prevents Wonder Woman’s role from being entirely positive. Upon appearing to fight Doomsday, Superman, having no knowledge of who Wonder Woman is, turns to Batman and says, “Is she with you?” (Roven, Snyder, & Snyder, 2016). Batman, looking somewhat befuddled, says, “I thought she was with you” (Roven et al., 2016). From there, the film’s score swells dramatically and epically as the Trinity poses heroically before leaping off to fight Doomsday. Though the moment is played comically, it presents a minute problem: Because Batman and Superman are concerned with who Wonder Woman is with, it may suggest that Wonder Woman needs to be with someone instead of being an independent individual. Recall how, at the introduction to this thesis,
Catwoman tried to define herself as an independent entity yet the media of Gotham City insisted on defining her within the realm of Batman. Though the respective moments with Wonder Woman and Catwoman are played comically, and can be adequately explained with plot reasons, they may inadvertently promote negative stereotypes about females’ lack of independence.
Conclusion

There is one major limitation of this thesis: Barring one brief mention of Batman’s rumored homosexuality, this paper assumes a largely heteronormative view of gender. The primary reason for this is that the chosen superheroes for analysis and research—Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman—themselves largely assume a heteronormative view of gender. Having said that, there is recent evidence that adherence may be changing. In a recent interview with Santori-Griffith (2016), current Wonder Woman comic book writer Greg Rucka suggested that his iteration of the character is written as queer (which means, in their self-identified context, involving sexual interest in the same gender) character, saying:

It’s a thorny question. And I understand as best as I can the desire to see representation on the page. I don’t object to that at all. But my job first and foremost is always to serve the characters as best I can . . . The answer first and foremost must be yes [Wonder Woman is queer], because otherwise it takes away from Diana’s heroism.

This interview was published in September, 2016, and evidence of Diana’s lack of heteronormativity has already appeared in Rucka’s run on the character, which started in June of the same year (Santori-Griffith, 2016). The effects of this shift are yet to be determined, but it seems that, at least in the comics, gender diversity is on the rise.

There is an additional issue. As was mentioned in the background section at the front of this thesis, most research has looked exclusively at Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman, despite the myriad characters that support them. Superman has sidekicks in the form of boy Supergirl and Superboy. Wonder Woman has Wonder Girl. Batman has perhaps the most superhero allies, having so many, in fact, that they are
nicknamed the Batman Family, containing, among a proliferation of others, Robin, Batgirl, Nightwing, Red Hood, Red Robin, Batwoman, and Bluebird; beyond this, there have been numerous characters behind both the Robin and Batgirl superhero identities, sometimes even swapping genders. Research has not adequately addressed the gender issues associated with many of these characters or at least only addresses them through the lens of their primary superhero (for example, examining Robin as a vehicle through which to examine Batman instead of examining Robin as his own entity). Of course, addressing, for instance, the various Robins becomes more complicated because there are so many more (five in the main continuity, not to mention the various Robins who exist in parallel continuities) than the one, primary Batman. Beyond that difficulty, the various superhero allies of the Trinity are less likely to appear in media as frequently the Trinity themselves—Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman are generally considered the big draw, and not Supergirl, Batgirl, and Wonder Girl. However, it is still important for research to address the supporting superheroes as they can have different messages about both gender and morality, on top of having additional influences on the gender perceptions and morality of children and adolescents. Researching how these characters influence children and adolescents is especially paramount as the Trinity’s superhero allies tend to be closer in age to children and adolescents, suggesting that they may be more influential because of the proximinty in age.

On top of this lack of research focusing on the Trinity’s superhero allies, little research exists on their ancillary non-superhero characters. Superman, for example, has his adopted parents, the aforementioned Lois Lane, and various characters with whom he
regularly interacts as Clark Kent. Batman also has non-superhero allies, such as various police officers with whom he cooperates in the Gotham City Police Department along with additionally mingling with myriad characters as Bruce Wayne. Wonder Woman has her own supporting characters who are not superheroes. The swath of relationships the Trinity has with these myriad non-superhero characters is, as is the case with most of the superhero allies, not addressed by research. Having said that, addressing these relationships is also imperative, as they too are likely to influence the perceptions children and adolescents have of gender and morality.

In conclusion, this paper demonstrated that superhero-based media can have a negative influence on children’s and adolescents’ perceptions of gender, but this same type of media can have positive influences on moral perspectives. The prominent characters of Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman were used as examples of the types of gender issues present within superhero-based media. Various studies were also cited that spoke to how superhero-based media specifically and also more general media influences children and adolescents. Despite this negativity, there are some studies that suggest superhero-based media can have a positive influence in children’s and adolescent’s morality.

I came into this thesis with an interest in superheroes, gender, and how the two interacted; involving children, adolescents, and morality were gradual inclusions that became necessary based upon further research and additional classwork. As is likely obvious by now, I have spent much of my life consuming superhero-based media in its myriad forms, but I have also been attuned to the complicated gender issues apparent
with superhero-based media. I approached this thesis expecting to find research that would likely be critical of these characters and worlds that I love, and I was proven correct; however, I did not know the scope of the issues. It was, in many ways, worse than I anticipated.

The quintessential example of this is the aforementioned “Is she with you?” dialogue from *Batman v. Superman* (Roven, Snyder, and Snyder, 2016). When I first viewed the scene in a trailer for the movie, which was released before most of my research was conducted, I appreciated the humor it contributed and was also happy to see my three favorite superheroes united in a Hollywood movie. After doing the research, I still appreciate that exchange for what it is, but now I am aware of its potentially damaging side effects of inadvertently promoting the idea that a woman is required to be with a man. Much of the research is fairly negative in regards to gender, but I still see two pieces of hope. The first appears in the positive influences superhero-based media evinces via morality. I knew most superhero stories promoted positive morals, but I did not anticipate the messages to be as widely accepted and internalized by children and adolescents as the research indicated. To me, this shows that superhero-based media does have merit. The second piece of hope appears in purely being armed with the research. Ultimately, because it has already been determined that superhero-based media generally has negative influences on the ideas and perceptions of gender in children and adolescents, it is now known that something can be done. There is certainly room for improvement in superhero-based media depictions of gender, but, because we know what ails this type of media in regards to gender, we can work to improve it so that all the boys
and girls who love Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman as much or more than I do not view this media and develop stereotyped views of gender but are instead empowered by both the morals and the depictions of gender.
References


