Gender Politics and *The Walking Dead*: Gendered Violence and the Reestablishment of Patriarchy

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Abstract
Given that the acclaimed comic book series *The Walking Dead* allows readers to confront our greatest fears, as civilization has collapsed and zombies proliferate and prey upon the living, the paucity of literature addressing the gender dynamics in such a lawless society is disconcerting. In our analysis of 96 issues of the series, we explore the social construction of gender roles and the context of gendered violence and victimization in this post-apocalyptic world. Moving beyond a narrative analysis, we consider how comic art conveys that even in the zombie apocalypse, the patriarchal structure remains, the realities of sexism and gendered violence endure, and, sometimes, women literally pay with their flesh for trying to break out of stereotypical gendered constructs.

Keywords
crime and victimization in popular culture, victimization, sexual assault, media issues, qualitative research

Feminists have long criticized popular culture for frequently perpetuating narratives and images that reinforce structural inequalities and implicitly or explicitly promote violence against women. (Belknap, 2007; Bonomi, Altenburger, & Walton, 2013; Buchwalk, Fletcher, & Roth, 2005). Historically, best-selling mainstream comic books

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have been particularly targeted for such critiques. According to Phillips and Strobl (2013), “comic books are cultural artifacts that contribute to the cultural construction of hegemonic masculinities” (p. 148). In essence, mainstream comic books derive from a socially constructed world in which White males, both consumers and producers, create, promote, and reinforce a world in which men are placed in positions of power. Thus, in many mainstream comic worlds, female characters are often relegated to subservient roles in which they are depicted as sexual objects, as needing protection, or are presented as secondary characters used to enhance the story line of their male counterparts (Garland, Branch, & Grimes, 2016; Lavin, 1998; Phillips & Strobl, 2013).

Although it is generally agreed that popular culture, including comic books, affects attitudes and perceptions, there is no consensus on the degree and significance of that impact. Some researchers suggest that real-world beliefs are affected by fiction and that exposure to violent themes in popular culture, such as comic books, may result in an aggressive bias toward social information processing (Bonomi et al., 2013; Kirsh & Olczak, 2002). Other researchers more broadly suggest that mainstream comic books both reflect and shape our cultural imaginations about heroism, villainy, crime, justice, and retribution (Phillips & Strobl, 2013). The purpose of this research is not to address the impact on society, instead it aims to extend the line of inquiry to the roles and behaviors in which female characters are relegated in the comic world, specifically, in the context of the acclaimed comic book series, *The Walking Dead.*

Our focus is on exploring how the comic reinforces structural inequalities with an eye toward the way the book constructs patriarchy and how women inadvertently become prey to a system that characterizes women’s abilities as biologically, not culturally, determined (Belknap, 2007). It is this essentialist nature that characterizes gender dynamics in this post-apocalyptic landscape in which society is (re)structured along the lines of pre-existing patriarchy and as a result, both male and female characters (re)define and adhere to traditional gender roles and obligations (Bowlby, Gregory, & McKie, 1997; Jost & Kay, 2005).

The modern era has witnessed rapid sociological and legal advancements in gender equality, especially in the United States. By the end of the 1900s, socio-structural advances allowed women to enter into the public realm both in terms of employment and fuller participation in public discourse. However, while there is the perception of social equality, gender inequality persists and ideas associated with traditional gender roles have remained relatively consistent. For example, in the labor force, women remain underpaid relative to men and they ultimately continue to shoulder the primary responsibility for domestic services—inequalities that are magnified when race/ethnicity is considered (Bowlby et al., 1997; West & Zimmerman, 1987). It is in this context in which *The Walking Dead* emerges—a near future post-apocalyptic world in which zombies prey and proliferate upon the living. The social order has been eliminated and humankind has seemingly been returned to a state of nature. Thus, this research examines how gender roles are (re)constructed during a time of lawlessness, how women are relegated to roles and behaviors conforming to traditional gender norms, and the consequences of defying or transcending these roles. We examine these factors in the context of the violence and victimization that is endemic to the social
world represented in *The Walking Dead*. Finally, we consider the gendered implications of returning characters to a more seemingly primitive and thus “natural” state.

The Zombie Obsession

The zombie obsession in American culture is a relatively recent phenomenon, appearing in the 20th century and experiencing a resurgence in the post-9/11 era. English scholar Kyle Bishop describes this trend as a “zombie renaissance” (Bishop, 2010, p. 12). While horror themes in film and comics can be traced to classic literature, it is the film industry that propelled zombies into American popular consciousness (Bishop, 2010). The earliest zombie films appeared in the 1930s and 1940s (*White Zombie*, *I Walked With the Zombie*) and zombies continued to periodically show up on the screen throughout the 1940s and 1950s. However, it was George Romero in the 1960s and 1970s who revolutionized the zombie genre with his *Living Dead* films. He introduced what would become the prototype for zombies for decades to come and blazed the trail for a ubiquitous phenomenon in contemporary popular culture.

In the zombie movie genre since the 1990s, we have seen remakes of classics such as Romero’s “Dead” films, as well as *The Crazies*, a contemporary take on the classic *I Am Legend*, and a popular wave of zombies in *28 Days Later* and *Resident Evil* series. There has also been a recent surge of zombie-themed novels, including *World War Z*, *Zone One*, *The Angels Are the Reapers*, and Stephen King’s *Cell*. If you add to this the plethora of post-apocalyptic themed literature, television shows, and video games currently on the market, one can only surmise that the notions of cataclysm and catastrophe have become increasingly salient concerns in our culture.

Given the metaphorical nature of zombies as representative of our deep-seated fears and anxieties in the modern world, it is no surprise that there has been a corresponding surge of survival resources . . . *just in case*. Resources for surviving the post-apocalyptic living dead range from zombie survival guides and field manuals such as Max Brooks’ *The Zombie Survival Guide* to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s *Zombie Preparedness Guide*, a self-described “tongue in cheek campaign to engage new audiences with preparedness messages” (Brooks, 2003; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.; Department of the Army, 2009; Kielpinski & Gleisberg, 2011; Ma, 2010; Newton, 2014). *Guns & Ammo*, a magazine devoted to firearms and ammunition, “went as far to use” *The Walking Dead* to promote “emergency preparedness” among its readers (Sweeney, 2011; Tarr, 2013).

Advertising has also been used to market zombie-related items. Hornaday released the “Zombie Max” ammo “just in case” the zombie apocalypse was to become a reality. Companies such as Honda, Fed Ex, and Toyota have also capitalized on the zombie phenomenon to sell products. Although one may not equate fantasy as a real-world issue, consumers have to look no further than media reports to see the interconnectedness between fiction and reality. In recent years, several instances of zombie attacks have been reported by the media. For instance, Rudy Eugene was labeled the “Miami Zombie” when reports emerged that he ate the face of a homeless man. One week later, several reports emerged of men mutilating themselves and eating body parts of others
leading some to declare the “zombie apocalypse” was at hand (Linnemann, Wall, & Green, 2014). While these reports are not typical, the willingness to associate drugs, violence, and mental illness with the living dead are clear illustrations of how fictionalized depictions affect how society constructs reality.

The Walking Dead
One of the most significant contributions to zombie literature is the comic book series, *The Walking Dead*.² The book was first published in 2003 and represents one of the deepest and most complex treatments of post-apocalyptic survival in this format (or any other format for that matter). It continues to be one of the most popular and acclaimed comic book series of all time, often found among the top selling monthly comic and quarterly trade-paperback collections (Comics Chronicles: A Resource for Comics Research, 2012). In July 2012, for example, *The Walking Dead* was the top selling monthly comic book with 335,082 copies sold. To put this in perspective, the next highest selling comic book sold 179,208 copies and the vast majority of titles never even approach 100,000 copies sold (Comics Chronicles: A Resource for Comics Research, 2012). Historically, as comic books and graphic novels have increasingly transitioned to the big/small screen, comic book culture has seen a surge in popularity. Although critics have argued that the popularity of *The Walking Dead* comic is directly linked to the creation of the spin-off television series, which undoubtedly spurred interest in the original format, it must be noted that the comic had experienced an upward trend in both ranking and sales over the past decade (Mayo, 2015). While the popularity of both the comic and television show is linked to the commercialization of the zombie culture, we would argue that it is Kirkman’s (the creator of *The Walking Dead* comic book) work that has popularized zombie culture and brought it to the mainstream.

*The Walking Dead* imagines the near future as one in which zombies prey on the living. Civilization has collapsed and the only way of life is survival. It is in this context that we are interested in exploring how gender roles are reimagined. In the first issue, the protagonist, Sheriff Deputy Rick Grimes, awakens from a coma and finds himself in the midst of a zombie apocalypse. Rick must find his son (Carl) and wife (Lori), and in the process emerges as a leader for a contingent of survivors. We chose *The Walking Dead* because the premise of the book provides the opportunity for a reimagining of human relationships and because mainstream comic books, unfortunately, have a tendency to objectify women and too often portray them as victims in need of saving by a White, male hero. We were sensitive to the idea that a post-apocalyptic narrative published outside of the “big two” comic book publishers (DC and Marvel) might provide a more progressive portrayal of gender roles and provide alternative ways of imagining women not merely as victims, but as human survivors.

Comic Books and the Comics Code
Horror comics have a rich history and reached massive popularity in the 1940s and 1950s. Some titles such as *Tales From the Crypt* and *Vault of Horror* included stories
featuring zombies. However, the comic book industry has a history of self-regulating their content in ways that ultimately affected what types of stories were told and how they were illustrated, including prohibitions on ghoulish tales of the walking dead. Most notably, the development of the Comics Code, first in 1948 and then in 1954, resulted in self-imposed restricted portrayals of women, sexuality, nudity, marriage, romance, government officials, religion, crime, horror, and gruesome illustrations (Nyberg, 1998).3

The Comics Code Authority (CCA; 1954), in essence, banned all images of excessive violence and horror including “scenes dealing with, or instruments associated with walking dead, torture, vampires, vampirism, ghouls, cannibalism, and werewolfism” in the comic industry. Although these restrictions essentially contributed to a decline in the popularity of horror comics, the genre did survive albeit in a limited fashion. Some of the CCA provisions against the use of vampires, ghouls, and werewolves were relaxed in the 1970s; however, the term zombie remained prohibited. Marvel and other comic producers were able to circumvent the rules by publishing in black and white magazines (e.g., Tales of the Zombie) not regulated by the CCA or using uncommon terms to refer to the undead; the term, zuvembie, was utilized by Marvel until 1989. Changes to the code saw a return to the production of the horror comic, but it was not until the mid 1980s/early 1990s that a resurgence in the genre’s popularity occurred and more recently, the creation of The Walking Dead series ushered in a new era of zombie comics (e.g., Marvel Zombies, Zombie Tales, iZombie, and XXXombies). As for the Comics Code, it was eventually abandoned altogether by the industry (Wolk, 2011).

We note that the self-imposed restrictions by the CCA are generally reflected on with disdain and that there is a general understanding that consumption of mass media, do not directly contribute to violent behavior (Barker & Petley, 2001; Ferguson, 2010; Ferrell, Hayward, & Young, 2008; Hajdu, 2008; Phillips & Strobl, 2013; Savage & Yancey, 2008; Thrasher, 1949. We would like to emphasize, however, that in contemporary mainstream comic books, ideas about heroism and villainy continue to be primarily constructed in a White, patriarchal world that influences our ideas about what type of person is heroic, what type of person is criminal, and what types of actions are appropriate in achieving justice (Phillips & Strobl, 2013). In this light, the notion that comic books may, at times, promote stereotypical representations warrants some consideration.

In terms of portrayals of females and sexuality, following an era of hypersexualization of mainstream female characters in the 1980s and 1990s, by the 2010s there were more progressive portrayals of women as heroes and crime fighters—as opposed to victims of violence—although many of the gendered stereotypes remain. For example, among best-selling comics, women continue to be marginalized and are predominantly portrayed as more passive, insecure, and sexualized in ways that do not apply to their male counterparts (Lavin, 1998; Madrid, 2009; Phillips & Strobl, 2013).

**Gender and Women in Horror**

It is not the comic book industry, however, but the horror film genre that has seemingly had the most influence on the development of the modern zombie comic and the representations of gender and women therein. By the 1950s, the mainstream image of the
independent woman in Hollywood films had been displaced by the idea of the “good
girl.” Women were relegated to the roles of domesticity, and it is these images that
were used to reinforce traditional ideas of femininity to ensure women would return to
the domestic image of the pre–World War II era (Faludi, 1991; Meyerowitz, 1994).
While the media constructed passive images of women who remain dependent on
men, in reality, many women had entered the workforce and left the “private sphere”
behind; the submissive notion of femininity was being challenged (Wood, 1994). For
some, this was viewed as a threatening challenge to the prevailing social structure, and
much like Communism, had to be stamped out. While women could not be controlled
in the real world, popular culture mediums ensured that stereotypical representations
of women would endure.

Prior to the 1950s, female characters in horror films were cast as “damsels in dis-
tress,” who, unless protected by a male counterpart, would meet a tragic fate. As
women began to break free from their domestic space, films became a metaphor for
threats to masculinity (e.g., The Incredible Shrinking Man that featured a male charac-
ter’s loss of power as a result of some unknown agent causing him to shrink until he
finally disappears into oblivion; Grant, 1996). In contrast, Attack of the 50 Foot Woman
features a female character who encounters aliens and as a result suffers from radiation
exposure causing her to grow. Once she grows to the height of 50 ft, she is able to
confront her cheating husband. While this results in both of their deaths, she is able to
reclaim some of her power that had been taken from her in a loveless marriage.

As a result of perceived female empowerment, both on the screen and in life, a
backlash in popular culture and media representations occurred against women. Those
who did not conform to the traditional role of women were dealt with in a violent man-
ner. Thus, women were recast primarily as victims during the 1960s (Jung, 2009). It is
during this period in which women were entering the workforce, going to college,
taking control of their own reproductive rights, and casting aside what was considered
the “ideal” woman (Holt, 2011). Media, including the horror film, established women
in a binary role in which they were either portrayed as “good” or “bad,” the Madonna
or the Whore. Good women are portrayed as submissive, obedient, and adhere to their
traditional roles as wife, mother, and homemaker; Bad women are portrayed as aggres-
sive, promiscuous, and detached. It is the differences in this binary categorization that
are often juxtaposed against one another to establish the consequences that occur when
one steps outside of their assigned albeit stereotypical role (Wood, 1994). Indeed,
 attempts to step outside the realm of domesticity are often punished, sometimes bru-
tally. For example, Marion Crane steps outside of her socially constructed image and
embraces the role of a “sexual transgressor,” in Alfred Hitchcock’s Psycho. Her indis-
cretions ultimately result in her brutal death (Clover, 1992). However, it is the nature
of her death that resonates the horror of this violent act; she is killed in the shower,
naked, alone, and most importantly, she is penetrated by the phallic symbol of the
knife reinforcing man’s dominance over woman. As noted by Badley (1995), “horror
is the cultural apparatus for keeping the sexually active woman in her place” (p. 102).

As a result of the changing times and the influence of second-wave feminism, by the
late 1970s, the major female characters in horror films have taken on characteristics of
the traditionally male hero (Clover, 1992). For example, the film *Halloween*, reinvented the hero as a non-sexual female survivor (the “final girl”), a far cry from many of horror films’ more recent hypersexualized survivors. Arguably, Laurie Stroud ( *Halloween*’s “final girl”) is allowed to survive due to her innocence and willingness to take on a masculine role, thus shifting the allegiance of the viewer from the killer to the survivor. However, the other female characters maintain the stereotypical images of the helpless female or “whore” and as a result must be eliminated. Rather than being helpless, Carol Clover explains that the “‘final girl’ . . . is abject terror personified . . . She alone looks death in the face, but she alone finds strength either to stay the killer long enough to be rescued or to kill him herself” (Clover, 1992, p. 35). Although this restructured examination may appear to represent the powerful female, according to Clover, these pseudo-feminine characters are only able to achieve empowerment by assuming masculine attributes. Ultimately, “the final girl” is intelligent and unwilling to be inhibited by aloofness, girlishness, or debilitating fear associated with being female (Clover, 1992; Connelly, 2007; Grant, 1996).

Although it appears as if the female has overcome her oppressor by embracing masculinity, they are “never entirely victorious . . . nor are they devoid of the recuperation into a male order of things that they are supposedly free of” (Williams, 1996, p. 170). The “final girl” is a common trope in zombie films. The “final girl” may have survived, but it is she who has, in essence, restored society to its original patriarchal state (England, 2006; Pye & O’Sullivan, 2012). For instance, while the remake of *Return of the Living Dead* reinvents Barbra as the heroine capable of saving herself from the onslaught of zombie predators, her freedom is short-lived as any attempt at emancipation is quashed upon her realization that she remains constrained by the patriarchal structure (Harper, 2003); society’s liberators are more monstrous than the actual monsters. In Grant’s analysis of *Day of the Dead*, he contends that men are consistently just as much of a threat as the zombies. Thus, the real enemy is patriarchy, not the monsters. It is this patriarchal, post-apocalyptic landscape that is the focus of our analysis of *The Walking Dead*.

**Method**

Two approaches were used to examine the reconstruction of gender roles and the violence and victimization inherent in the zombie-apocalyptic comic book series, *The Walking Dead*. First, a content analysis was conducted on the images presented on the covers spanning a decade of *The Walking Dead*. Content analysis has been found to be a useful tool in social analysis as it is an unobtrusive measure that allows for the systematic identification, organization, description, and quantification of text and images (Berg, 2004; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006; Kraska & Neuman, 2011). While content analysis requires careful consideration of textual information as a means to explore overarching themes, it may also be used to examine images that also reflect these themes. Second, the narratives of various story arcs of the comic books were examined qualitatively to inductively identify key recurring themes associated with the depiction of women. The current study analyzed both manifest and latent content using both
images and narratives. According to Berg (2004), “Manifest content refers to those elements that are physically present and countable while latent content refers to an interpretive reading of the symbolism underlying the physically presented data” (p. 229). Although latent content is considered to be less reliable than manifest content, it allows for more depth and greater validity in assessing information and is particularly helpful in examining social issues such as gender representation (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006; Kraska & Neuman, 2011).

Data were gathered from the first 96 issues of the comic book *The Walking Dead* spanning nearly a decade (2003-2012). The analysis consisted of two parts. First, the authors analyzed 101 comic book covers. Covers were categorized into the following based on manifest content: Type of Cover, Female on Cover, Number of Females on Cover, Weapons, Who possessed weapons, Depiction of Violence, and Perpetrator of Violence. Four latent content areas were constructed based on both previous literature (see, for example, Chesney-Lind, 2006; Daly & Chesney-Lind, 1988; Messerschmidt, 1986; Renzetti, 2013; Simpson, 1989) and the process of open coding in which themes were inductively identified: traditional (e.g., family or domestic), submissive (e.g., protected or shielded behind someone), sexualized (e.g., in a sexualized or objectified position), and masculine (e.g., traditional male characteristics such as verbally and physically aggressive behaviors). Part 2 of the analysis relied on a qualitative textual analysis of all 96 issues to supplement and add depth to the latent themes established in Part 1 of the analysis.

For the primary level of coding, using an iterative open coding process, two coders independently analyzed the covers to determine key constructs that were to be used in the analysis. Each image was first examined to identify the manifest content on the covers. Noting key constructs that were present in the literature, the coders were then able to identify four latent gendered concepts that were present throughout the comic covers. Data were entered into an Excel Spreadsheet to categorize manifest and latent content information and document individual perceptions of the covers. Any issues that arose were discussed between the coders to eliminate inconsistencies. Once a unified coding scheme was agreed upon, the researchers proceeded to independently code the 101 covers to be used in analysis. Once the constructs were established, the coders analyzed the entire comic series to determine examples relevant to the previously identified themes.

Results

From our analysis of the covers, the post-apocalyptic landscape in *The Walking Dead* is essentially male-dominated (see Table 1). Over half (51.1%) of the covers depicted only males (among humans), whereas less than 10% included women not in the company of men. Females were featured on only 36.6% of the covers and they were far more likely to be pictured alongside men than alone. In fact, a woman does not appear solo on the cover until Issue 19—the iconic image of Michonne emerging from the wild with a sword and two chained zombies in tow. Instead, women were more likely depicted as part of a group, family, or male–female dyad. Moreover, females were far less likely than males to be depicted in a position of strength.
Rick Grimes, the designated patriarch, is typically portrayed confidently holding a gun or shielding someone with his body. Even in instances where he is not ready for combat, he is portrayed as the protector. For example, on the cover of Issue 11 (Figure 1), a sleeping Rick is positioned over his wife and child, protecting them from the zombies lurking in the background. In contrast, women are not necessarily portrayed as strong even when they are capable of defending themselves. For example, on the cover of Issue 31, a very capable Michonne is backed against a fence, bloodstained sword drawn, and ready to defend herself from zombies. However, one possible interpretation of the image is that the positioning of Michonne places her in a disadvantaged position in which she is being gazed down upon by the zombies (and the viewer) giving the perception that she is weak and is about to become the latest victim of the zombie apocalypse.

Table 1. The Walking Dead Cover Content.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cover composition (n = 101)</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male only</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>51.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female only</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male–female dyad</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zombie only</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female on cover? (n = 101)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>36.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>63.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weapon on cover? (n = 101)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>58.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>41.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who possesses weapon? (n = 59)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male(s)</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>55.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female(s)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Both</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence? (n = 101)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>36.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>63.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violent actor (n = 37)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male(s)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>40.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female(s)</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
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<td>18.9</td>
</tr>
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</table>
In spite of the necessity of weapons in the zombie-infested world of *The Walking Dead*, of the cases in which weapons are depicted, women possess a weapon in 30.5%, compared with 69.5% for men. And in cases in which violence is explicitly depicted, males vastly outnumber females as the violent actor with guns drawn, blood splatter dripping as a result of violence, or the depiction of having or about to complete an act of violence (40.5% of covers depicting violence show males as the violent actors; only 8.1% include females as violent actors. Compare Rick’s first depiction as a truly violent actor (Issue 17) alongside

**Figure 1.** Issue 31 cover.
that of Michonne on Issue 31. On Issue 17, Rick is covered in blood while towering over and assaulting an out-of-frame enemy. Issue 31, however, features Michonne backed up against the fence in a pose that might be read as strong and defiant or, alternatively, as Michonne in a position of weakness who is ultimately in need of saving.

Not only are females underrepresented on the covers of *The Walking Dead*, but when they are depicted it is predominantly in a comparatively weak and subordinated role. The key themes that emerged from the cover images of females are presented in Table 2. The first three themes are representative of traditional, patriarchal portrayals of women. Of the 37 cases in which women are depicted on an issue’s cover, a majority (62.2%) portrayed women as either submissive, traditional/domestic, or sexualized. For instance, Lori Grimes is overwhelmingly portrayed as needing protection, pregnant, or as the stereotypical female. On 27% of the covers depicting females, women are portrayed as aggressive, strong, or acting in other ways stereotypically associated with men (virtually the sole portrayal that defied traditional or stereotypical female role expectations). Contrary to the depictions of Lori, Michonne’s first cover (Issue 19) has her dragging two zombie “bodyguards” with her sword drawn; she is the epitome of the strong, Black female. In addition, Andrea is often portrayed as masculine as can be seen on the cover of Issue 44 that portrays her holding a high powered rifle and being grazed by a bullet. In only a small proportion of cases were women depicted in a manner devoid of any of these thematic categories (18.9%). For example, some covers depict off-screen violence designed to show how pervasive fear is for the survivors. Issue 35 depicts a blood-drenched zombie that shows a reflection of the horror-stricken faces of a group of survivors.

Overall, the following themes were common throughout the series:

- Traditional and/or domestic gender roles;
- Women as submissive, irrational, and/or needing protection;
- Women’s intimacy and vulnerability;
- Women and the gendered nature of violence.

In addition, when women are depicted as defying patriarchal or traditional gender roles (e.g., challenging male authority, acting aggressively, refusing to submit to a male), there are consequences that may include violence perpetrated against the “offending” woman.
Traditional and/or Domestic Gender Roles

The premise of *The Walking Dead* offers the potential for a reimaging of gender roles. Modern day social structures have broken down and society was presented the opportunity to rebuild itself irrespective of prior socially constructed gender roles. However, the gender roles in *The Walking Dead* quickly conformed to prior patriarchal hierarchies (Pye & O’Sullivan, 2012). One of the first explicit portrayals of gender roles depicted in the wake of the zombie apocalypse is a stark division of labor in which women are relegated primarily to domestic duties. The following exchange occurs early in the series and establishes how women will be portrayed throughout the comic.

Carol: I can’t wait to see how these things smell with the new detergent Glenn got from the city!

Lori: That stuff Dale had in the RV just wasn’t working. It made the clothes smell better . . . but not by much.

Donna: Jesus Christ, will you listen to yourselves?! You’re excited about trying out a new detergent?! This is such bullshit.

Lori: Damn, Donna we’re not throwing a party. I’m just looking forward to the possibility of clean smelling clothes. That’d be a welcome change at this point.

Donna: I just don’t understand why we’re the ones doing laundry while they go off and hunt. When things get back to normal I wonder if we’ll still be allowed to vote.8 (Kirkman (2009), *The Walking Dead*, Vol. 1, *Days Gone By*)

As Jackman (1994) notes, “the division of labor between the sexes is the most visible symptom of gender inequality” (p. 211) and in this exchange, we see that an abrupt return to a “primal” reality does not create a path that differs from the previous socially constructed gender roles. Most remarkably, it is the women themselves who voluntarily embrace these domestic duties “for the greater good.” For example, Rick’s wife, Lori readily embraces her domestic duties.

Lori: Are you serious? I don’t know about you but I can’t shoot a gun . . . I’ve never even tried. To be honest . . . I wouldn’t trust any of those guys to wash my clothes. Rick couldn’t do it with a washing machine . . . he’d be lost out here. It isn’t about women’s rights . . . it’s about being realistic and doing what needs to be done. (*The Walking Dead*, Vol. 1, *Days Gone By*)

As illustrated, the discussion begins with a discourse on detergent and laundry and then proceeds to an examination of the division of labor based on gender. Domestic duties continue to remain a constant concern for the women within the group. Household labor is not only designated as “women’s work,” but accepting that a woman should inherently engage in it and a man should not, becomes the essential nature of “doing gender”; what is acceptable and what role will be deemed appropriate
for women has been determined by the patriarchal system (West & Zimmerman, 1987). As Barkman notes, “Women do work for which they receive little to no gratitude while men are given roles of leadership and authority just because they are men even if they are not taking their roles seriously” (Barkman, 2012, p. 100). In essence, taking care of the “home” ensures that women remain in their place and that their identities are established within the realm of domesticity. And, in turn, their sacrifice allows men to be “Men.”

Carol (speaking to Tyreese): So, I’m helping Lori in the kitchen prepare food for everyone. Hershel is farming. Andrea’s going to be making clothes all day. What are you going to be doing?

Tyreese: A little basketball . . . maybe a nap, I’ll probably practice with a gun if we find more bullets just so I’m not so bad at it. (The Walking Dead, Vol. 4, The Heart’s Desire)

Ironic in this exchange is the notion that the character, Andrea, has self-proclaimed herself as the group seamstress even though it is she, not Tyreese, who is the designated “sharpshooter” within the group. It is, however, the undertaking of these “feminine” tasks that leave her vulnerable, which almost results in her death at the hands of a man.

While Andrea may have domestic gifts, it may more immediately benefit the group’s survival to utilize her “male-oriented” skills rather than tailoring old prison uniforms. The cover of Issue 38 illustrates this by depicting Andrea in a position of power as she instructs Tyreese how to fire a rifle (Figure 2).

A great emphasis is also placed on women and their relationship with children as maternal caregivers. It is the women who continuously look after the children, prepare their meals, and provide continued emotional support regardless of whether they serve as the actual or surrogate parent. Women are not inclined to allow the responsibility for children to pass to men as it is this relinquishing of power that undermines their security within the domestic sphere (Bowlby et al., 1997). When they are challenged on the means in which they bring up the children and become offended, they are portrayed as being “irrational.” It is this exchange that reifies how little power the women in the series actually have. Moreover, even though domestic duties are considered women’s responsibility, males can seemingly intervene and override maternal authority.

Lori (responding to Rick’s proclamation that Carl is safer now that he carries a gun): Is he? How can you be so sure? He’s SEVEN YEARS OLD for Christ’s sake! This is NOT a good idea. But I guess the end of the world means I’ve no longer got a say in parenting my own son. (The Walking Dead, Vol. 1, Days Gone By)

The relegation of women to non-essential roles is also reinforced by the depiction of women as uneducated. There are few instances in which the professions and/or education of the female characters are discussed; however, when they are, they are often referenced as housewives (e.g., Lori, Carol, and Donna) and/or college dropouts (Lori and Maggie). Perpetuating the idea that women are unskilled and uneducated
enables the male characters to approach them with dismissive and stereotypical attitudes.

Rick (speaking to Dale and Shane): Donna’s just an old housewife who doesn’t have soap operas to keep her small mind occupied. Don’t let her get to you. (*The Walking Dead*, Vol. 1, *Days Gone By*)

It is only those who exhibit strength and defy traditional gender roles who are portrayed as educated and exceptions to the rule. Andrea, a law clerk, and Michonne, a

**Figure 2.** Issue 38 cover.
lawyer, are portrayed as strong women, who transcend their gendered expectations. Only these women remain un-relegated to the domestic domain; however, as will be discussed, female inclusion in the masculine world comes at a price.

**Women as Submissive, Irrational, and/or Needing Protection**

Although paternalism has been equated with benevolent acts in which one (the male) considers what is best for another (the female), it is, frequently, a pejorative concept. In *The Walking Dead*, paternalistic actions reinforce power differentials between men and women, where women are viewed as childlike and defenseless while men are the decision makers and maintain authority (Jackman, 1994; Kruttschnitt & Savolainen, 2009; Moya, Glick, Exposito, de Lemus, & Hart, 2007). Throughout the series, women are portrayed as submissive and needing protection. The majority of the female characters are depicted as weak and men continuously have to intervene for their protection. Early in the story, Dale comes to Rick to talk about his leadership. While he considers other, less qualified men who might be considered a leader, he never mentions any of the women as possible candidates.

Dale: We need someone to look up to . . . to make us feel safe, especially the women. I talked to everyone earlier . . . we think that someone is you. (*The Walking Dead, Vol. 2, Miles Behind Us*)

Throughout the comic series, males, especially Rick, are depicted in leadership roles, where decisions are made in the best interest of the group. Although it may appear that these actions are benevolent, they may also be viewed as paternalistic acts to promote the good of those in power (Jackman, 1994). As noted by VanDeVeer (1986), paternalism shrouded in benevolence allows one group to intervene on the behalf of another due to their superior knowledge (Jackman, 1994); it is this moral authority or “father knows best” presumption that allows for one group to hold power over another. Although, initially, it makes sense for Rick to be in charge, a power shift could have occurred when Michonne emerged as a dominant character within the series. Not only was Michonne a highly educated and successful woman in the pre-apocalyptic society, but in this new reality, she is the only individual who has been able to successfully navigate a zombie-filled world. Instead of Michonne rising as a leader when Rick is no longer able to provide adequate protection for the group, the males maintain power, and the females seemingly allow this without dissension.

Dale: . . . we formed a committee.

Rick: A committee?

Dale: Instead of having one person making the decisions. Get it?

Rick: Who’s on this committee?
Dale: You, me, Hershel, & Tyreese.

Rick: The four of us? Really? No women?

Dale: I know. If Donna were here . . . It wouldn’t be pretty, that’s for sure.

Rick: To say the least.

Dale: It was put up to a vote, really. We were busy yesterday. We could get a new guy in your seat. And Rick, we’re only doing this because the pressure seems to be getting to you. Understand?

Dale: We picked something more democratic. Four guys with equal votes.

Rick: No women?

Dale: No. That’s how they wanted it. Patricia said something. She wanted Lori on the committee instead of you. Of course as soon as she realized no one else, including Lori, agreed with her—she shut up. I don’t know how Michonne really feels about it. She’s just happy to be here. She went through hell out there a lot longer than any of us. Lori, Carol, Andrea, Maggie—They all said they wanted us in charge. They figure the four of us have pretty much been making the decisions anyway—but making it official would lift some of the burden off you. But yeah, they’re fine with us making the decisions . . . I think they just want to be protected. (The Walking Dead, Vol. 4, The Heart’s Desire)

Through this exchange, it appears as if the female characters are not simply complacent, but require men for protection, as they are unable to defend themselves. As women are perceived as needing male protection, this grants the male characters a sense of privilege (Pye & O’Sullivan, 2012). While the weakness of women is the prevailing theme, it seems the men perceive themselves to be doing what is best for the group as the women are not simply weak, but irrational. For example, Patricia, who is ultimately killed in the Governor’s invasion, repeatedly places the group at risk. The narrative assumes it is simply in “a woman’s nature” to be irrational especially when they start speaking up against the power structure. Lori is repeatedly portrayed as “hormonal” due to her pregnancy, and although her protests and fears become justified, she is ultimately dismissed similar to a whimpering child or characterized as “psycho.” When benevolent and protective paternalism no longer works as a means to keep women in their designated place, they are met with hostile sexism used to demean women’s competence (Moya et al., 2007). Here, Hershel, one of the older, father-figures in the series, demonstrates that submission is not a choice, rather it is demanded,

Hershel: You’ve run your mouth enough, woman!

Benevolent paternalism exists only when women are willing to embrace the patriarchal notions of power. Lori, who was once so accepting of her assigned gender roles,
begins to challenge the male-dominated power structure. While her voice is repeatedly suppressed by the male members of the group, it is her husband, Rick, who ultimately exemplifies the hostile sexism inherent in paternalistic discrimination.

Lori: Listen to yourself. You’re my husband, you prick—not my father!

Rick: Lori—Shut the fuck up.

Women’s Intimacy and Vulnerability

Along with survival, one of the primary concerns throughout The Walking Dead is the drive on the part of men and women to be coupled. Whether it is simply the necessity of repopulating the human race, or the product of cultural baggage each character brought from their former lives, the need to be coupled remains ever present. At the onset of the comic, Rick is presumed to be dead. Lori, technically a married woman, pairs up with Shane in a romantic relationship that creates later tension between Rick and Shane. Central to the coupling is Lori’s need for companionship, as well as protection. The need among women for companionship occurs with numerous characters and is explicitly expressed in a conversation between Maggie and Glenn as she solicits him to engage in a sexual relationship with her.

Maggie: We’ve gotta be proactive . . . or we’re going to end up alone.

It appears that while the value of a person is often judged in his or her ability to strengthen the group, the desire to couple is also taken into consideration. While the men size up Tyreese, Carol examines his other attributes,

Carol (flirting): You’re not too hard on the eyes, either.

Tyreese: Right back at you Carol.

The need to couple is so profound that even Sophia (a child) seems driven to couple with the only young boy, Carl, in the group. In striking contrast, the images of Sophia trying to “seduce” Carl appear on the page after Carol and Tyreese have a sexual encounter. However, sexual relationships may result in dire consequences. When Carol catches Tyreese and Michonne (Issue 22) having sex, she attempts to commit suicide leading to Rick and Tyreese having an all-out brawl as a result. Later, Carol, seeing Rick as her savior, propositions the couple to engage in a three-way marriage to avoid being alone. Her inability to be single in the apocalyptic world is too much for her to bear.

Carol (referring to Tyreese): I knew that no matter what happened, he’d be there for me . . . I needed him, maybe I still need him. Who knows? I’m such a basket case now I don’t even know.
Some like Carol will do anything to be partnered. Prior to her death, she seduces young Billy, Hershel’s son, and not long afterward proceeds to allow a zombie to bite her neck to escape the harsh realities of the world. In addition, Patricia attempts to have a relationship with almost all the available men, and is so desperate to please that she betrays the group. Most notable are the sexual appetites of Andrea. Andrea engages in relationships with her pseudo-father, Dale, and when he dies, she becomes involved with other characters including Rick. Unlike most of the female characters, Michonne is not chosen by males, but rather she is the pursuer. Initially, she seduces Tyreese in the prison gym even though he is in a “relationship” with Carol. After Tyreese, she becomes involved with the only other Black male in the group, Morgan. Although the females may, at times, be portrayed as strong and skilled, they still have a need to be partnered and in some way “protected” by a man.

Beyond the desire to partner, one would expect the sexualization of characters to be ever present within *The Walking Dead* as bondage, domination, and hypersexualization are often prevalent throughout mainstream comic books (Lavin, 1998). While there are scenes in the comics that are sexually suggestive such as Patricia engaging in sexual intercourse with Axel or images of women showering inside the prison walls, the stereotypical depictions common in the comic industry are not ubiquitous. Sexualized images are more reflective of the need to reproduce and the desire to be coupled than the hypersexualization of the female characters. The only image reflective of the stereotypical female within the series appears on Eric Larsen’s wraparound variant cover (No. 50) in which Michonne is depicted in glove-fitting clothing, knee-high boots, enhanced breasts, and an impossible-to-achieve positioned body. The closest the comic comes to oversexualizing the female characters is through the use of “the male gaze” (see Mulvey, 1975) to illustrate the danger women often face in this primitive society. For instance, the cover of Issue 62 has a midriff-bearing Andrea being stalked by a shadowy male figure; the image not only sexualizes her but may also be read as implying that the male wants to devour her very essence. Similarly, an unsuspecting Maggie (Issue 77) becomes victim to the male gaze as she is spied upon while doing laundry (Figure 3). In this image, a half-dressed Maggie is under the watch of both the reader as well as a male “peeping tom” peering through the window. Regardless, one would assume that returning to a primitive society would ensure the oversexualization of women; however, it does not appear to be the case in this series.

**Women and the Gendered Nature of Violence**

While being a victim of violence is a stark reality in *The Walking Dead*, it is not only the zombies from which the women need protection. Throughout the series, though violence is perpetrated against both men and women, the women are frequently victimized by their male counterparts. Paternalism provides the larger landscape through which violence occurs, and although violence is a ubiquitous threat to all characters, the threat of sexual violence against women is ever present. For example, Julie, a
Black teenager, was a victim of attempted rape by “the nicest old man.” Without the disruption of the crime by her father, Tyreese, she would have been further victimized. As noted by Barkman (2012), “the temptation of a man to rape a woman is a popular motif in any zombie tale” (p. 102). When Rick and his fellow survivors first enter the prison, Hershel’s young daughters, Rachel and Suzie, are decapitated by an unknown assailant. It becomes apparent that Thomas is the killer when he tries to kill and perhaps rape Andrea while she is doing laundry. His hatred of women and desire to harm and kill them is evident.

Figure 3. Issue 77.
Thomas (running after Andrea with a knife): Come back here you slut! It’s time to get your medicine you fucking whore.

While Thomas is eventually killed for his actions, this does not occur before he almost strangles Patricia, who was trying to help him escape. In what many fans have called the most chilling scene in the entire series (Burlingame, 2014), The Governor brutally rapes Michonne (Issue 28, Figure 4). While the rape occurs out-of-frame, The Governor’s intent and actions are clear.

Governor: Bruce—Do me a favor. Take her pants off and tie her leg to that wall over there. And tie her other leg to that wall over there. Don’t struggle too much just yet, girl. You’re going to want to save your energy . . . Tell me girl—how long do you think it would take for me to ruin your life—shatter your sense of security—really fuck you up? I think a half an hour could probably do it—but really, I plan on doing this every day as often as I can until you figure out some way to kill yourself.

One might argue that the brutal rape of Michonne was a consequence of stepping outside of her assigned gender role by challenging the authority of The Governor. As a result, she had to be “put in her place” to establish that she was not all-powerful and that a man needed to be in charge to protect her. Similar to others who stepped outside

Figure 4. Issue 28, The rape of Michonne.
of their designated role (e.g., Donna by failing to listen to the men and to perform domesticated tasks and Lori by speaking up against Rick and the other males), Michonne was targeted. Michonne’s “mistakes” are further exposed when she seeks her revenge against her assailant. When she tortures The Governor, but does not kill him, this failure ultimately leads to the death of her partner, Tyreese, and many others in her group as well as jeopardizes the safe haven that the group had established at the prison.

Discussion and Conclusion

Robert Kirkman’s *The Walking Dead* series reimagines the near future as a world in which social order and the rule of law has collapsed. As a result of this return to a “natural” or “primitive” society, the rules and social structures of modern society would seemingly no longer apply and new constructs of order would emerge. However, similar to other social contexts in which women remain relatively powerless and are relegated to the traditional roles of domesticity, Kirkman’s dystopian reality reinforces patriarchy as the dominant social structure. Overall, our analysis of the cover images and the narratives of *The Walking Dead* support Pye and O’Sullivan’s (2012) conclusions that even though the zombie genre presents the opportunity for a “fresh start” consisting of a society that virtually wipes away patriarchy, that is not what *The Walking Dead* presents to readers. Instead, as the authors remarked,

> The survivors, for the most part, embrace the patriarchal assumptions of their pre-apocalypse lives, not because of any qualities inherent in such a system, not because of any qualities inherent in the different sexes but because a rebooting in the world neither reboots the people left in the world. (Pye & O’Sullivan, 2012, p. 116)

Thus, men continue to be the leaders and dominant class while women remain in subordinate roles.

While avoiding many of the pitfalls of mainstream comic books such as the over-sexualization of female characters and their objectification through provocative clothing and sexualized poses, *The Walking Dead* provides a more subtle treatment of gender dynamics. As a result, many of the traditional feminist criticisms fall short when applied to the series (see Garland, Branch, & Grimes, 2016; Phillips & Strobl, 2013). While threats of sexual violence are present throughout the series, the book avoids using it as a trope simply to advance the plot of men. In this way, the book stands out from traditional, mainstream superhero comic books. With that being said, the series is only marginally progressive in that, with few exceptions, the comic creates a world where women consistently embody traditional and stereotypical female roles. Importantly, the division of labor presented in the book appears as a natural consequence of the social order. For example, washing clothes and serving as the primary caregivers of the children is not only demanded by the males but is also willingly accepted by the majority of the females as these tasks are considered highly valued. Furthermore, maternal instincts, vulnerability, and irrationality are frequently imposed
on women in a way that proscribes them from being viewed as leaders. In other words, breaking free of traditional gender roles comes at a price and the consequences are dire. For example, one of the most beloved characters, Michonne, is considered strong, independent, and skilled, yet it is a violent rape that nearly breaks her—and sets her on a path of vengeance designed to fulfill the rape-revenge fantasy of the reader. Whether it is necessary, or desirable, that Michonne gains inner strength and empowerment through sexual violence is left to the reader to contemplate. Kirsh and Olczak (2002) have noted that the story lines of comic books are constructed through partially connected frames, and as a result, the reader must use his or her imagination to fill in the missing information. As the producers and consumers of comics are primarily middle-aged men (Phillips & Strobl, 2013), the likelihood of Michonne being viewed as empowered due to her violent victimization is unlikely.

Our findings correspond to Pye and O’Sullivan’s observation that in this post-apocalyptic world, male characters are able to reclaim their roles of authority, whereas the female characters are relegated to the domestic sphere regardless of their former social position. Notably, it is the willingness by women to participate in traditional gendered roles that enable patriarchal structures to be maintained (Jackman, 1995). The series shows that women not only actively cooperate with the patriarchal system, but they are also likely to accept benevolent sexism as they “trade independence for the promise of men’s protection” (Jackman, 1994; Jost & Kay, 2005; Moya et al., 2007, p. 1422).

In some ways, The Walking Dead implies that the advances in gender equality that were in place in the pre-apocalyptic society were unnatural, and that given the opportunity, both men and women are destined to reproduce pre-apocalyptic patriarchy. In the series, regression to a primitive state ultimately reconstitutes patriarchy in a way that subtly implies that women’s abilities are biologically, not culturally, determined (Belknap, 2007; Bowlby et al., 1997; Jost & Kay, 2005). These portrayals lend weight to Barkman’s (2012) assertion that men and women are essentially different and that such differences are magnified when survival is at stake. Barkman states, “gender is beyond social construction as can be observed in The Walking Dead: women and men are different in how they solve problems and assert authority” (p. 104). In fact, in a 2008 interview with The Comics Journal, when asked about the primary depiction of women as peripheral characters lacking the physical capacity necessary to emerge as leaders in a post-apocalyptic landscape, Kirkman asserted that women are simply biologically weaker than men (Johnston, 2013). Based on this biological perspective, men and women are essentially different, and as a result, women are viewed as most suitable for domesticity while men are more suited for leadership and combat.

This seeming biological reliance on women to serve domestic roles, particularly maternal expectations, is in part due to the (very real) need to procreate. Unlike Clover’s finding that female promiscuity in horror films is fatally punished, in this case, coupling may be viewed as simply necessary for repopulating society. The biological reliance on women for reproduction becomes a necessity; however, it is in this necessity that women are placed in a position in which they “need” to be protected. Pregnancy itself places women in a position of vulnerability and although this state may not be long term, the need to flee from flesh-eating zombies, or worse, to be
protected from the things that “go bump in the night” has become reality. Even after childbirth, women are tasked with taking care of and ultimately being the primary caregivers of children, which places them at a direct disadvantage for leadership especially in a patriarchal world. While throughout the series there are hints of women being placed in powerful situations, what is more impactful on our understandings of gender is the way that the series reifies traditional gender roles in a way that constrains the possibilities for the female characters, particularly in regard to leadership; even the toughest and most resourceful women are unable to become successful leaders.

In reality, reembracing traditional social structures in a time of catastrophic change may be inevitable as survivors attempt to reestablish a sense of “normalcy.” Regardless of our current station, we consistently bring the cultural baggage of our past lives with us. Thus, in a world that is forced to rebuild, the structure that we establish is likely to be one that is all too familiar: patriarchy (Pye & O’Sullivan, 2012). Still, would it be too much to imagine that women are more than traditionally defined stereotypes and grant them the ability to take on leadership roles?

Although authors of fictional works have no problem imagining zombies or other fantastical characters, they are seemingly unable to break free from traditional gendered constructions and continue to characterize women as subservient. This is generally true in mainstream comics—particularly the superhero genre—regardless of the gender of the creators, although admittedly the past few years have seen more progressive portrayals in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation (Hickey, 2014; Phillips & Strobl, 2013). Part of the resistance to fully integrate female characters into roles traditionally inhabited by male characters is that such efforts are often met with vigorous resistance by fans (Hanley, 2011, 2014a, 2014b; Hickey, 2014; Mejia, 2014; Tracey, 2014). Overall, we recognize that comic books simultaneously contribute to our cultural understandings of gender dynamics as well as reflect those understandings. As such, we suggest that once liberated from essentialist assumptions about the nature of women’s roles in society, more progressive portrayals are possible.

Limitations and Future Research

The current study sheds light onto the portrayal of gender roles in non-traditional comic books in a social context shaped by violence and victimization. As noted by Garland and colleagues (2016), data collected using content analysis are often subjective and left to the interpretation of the researchers. While studies have shown manifest content to be reliable, the use of latent analysis as a data collection method is more subjective and can produce varied results (Garland, Branch, & Grimes, 2016; Kraska & Neuman, 2011). To avoid individual biases, the authors attempted to control for this using intercoder reliability measures. In addition, the study is an examination of one comic series. As with all content analyses, causal relationships are unable to be determined between variables; therefore, the impact of these images and story lines on readers is unknown (Berg, 2004). While The Walking Dead is extremely popular, it is not necessarily representative of other best-selling comics. Thus, generalizing the results to other comics
should be used with caution. Future research in this area should include a variety of mainstream and alternative comics to determine if similar results are found. In addition, surveys or interviews should be conducted to determine how readers, both male and female, view the portrayal of gender within the series and how these views might affect gender stereotypes and attitudes about violence toward women.

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Notes

1. The comic book inspired a very popular and critically acclaimed television series airing on AMC. The Walking Dead TV show is one of the most watched original dramas on basic cable with the Season 5 premiere declared by Forbes as “the most watched cable show of all time” (Allen, 2014; Andreeva, 2011; Gorman, 2012; Hibberd, 2012; Metacritic, 2012a, 2012b; Reiher, 2010). However, in this article, we focus on the comic book.

2. Comic books and graphic novels are often used as interchangeable terms; however, there are some noted differences. Comic books are periodicals that are usually produced monthly while graphic novels are single published materials often produced in a book format with a more developed story line. While comics such as The Walking Dead are reissued into volumes and compendiums, they remain comics. Clear examples of graphic novels are Maus, Sin City, and 300 (see Kelly, 2014).

3. For a history of the Comics Code, see Amy Nyberg’s Seal of approval: The History of the Comics Code and David Hajdu’s Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic Book Scare and How It Changed America.

4. Issues 50 and 75 were published as special editions for which multiple covers were released and therefore brought our cover analysis to a total of 101.

5. See Table 1 for the associated content categories.

6. In terms of interrater reliability, percentage of agreement across coders ranged from 93% to 99% on major content categories (i.e., on those in which any potential variation in interpretation was likely).

7. References to gender, unless noted, addressed the human characters in this analysis.

8. Citations for quotes from The Walking Dead graphic novels refer to volume (or chapter) numbers and names. Each graphic novel volume contains six issues of the original comic book publication.

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