



UNDERSTANDING MASCULINE PERCEPTIONS THROUGH SUPERHERO ICONOGRAPHY: IMPLICATIONS FOR ART EDUCATORS

GARY JOHNSON

Abstract

Lives are shaped and identities formed through the consumption of visual imagery. In the United States, superhero comics are part of the visual culture of male gender identification (Cooper, 2006). In this mixed methods study, I examined cultural perceptions of masculine identity by 169 study participants who completed a superhero/masculinity survey, and who drew and discussed superheroes. From a content analysis of participants' artwork and their reflective writing, issues related to masculine identity, such as male masochism, misogyny, disability, intelligence, and homophobia were key themes in the data analysis. This study shows the omnipresent nature of graphic novels in male identity formation and conformation to a hegemonic perspective or expectation of masculinity. I conclude the study with implications for art educators and provide specific resources and art lesson ideas to critique hegemonic masculinity.

*Keywords: superheroes, media portrayals, masculinity, ethnicity,
content-analysis*

Hegemonic Masculinity

Masculinity serves as a social construct dictating the expectations of male action. Humans receive and conform to expectations through visual consumption of artifacts (Stern, 1998); therefore, a primary source of cultural consumption is within the realm of media arts. The dominant concept of masculinity, "hegemonic masculinity," shows men conforming to this "universal perception" who are white, heterosexual, and protective, have wealth, and are sexual with a muscular physique (Connell, 1987). Hegemonic masculinity dictates what is considered normal and sets up a rubric in which all men see themselves in relation to this hegemonic perception (Kimmel, 1999). Within the art education classroom, there are opportunities for paradigm shifts beyond the hegemonic version of masculine identity. Through art, one can develop an understanding of and empathy for diverse masculine identities, widened beyond a narrow societal and educational scope of hegemonic masculinity (Check, 1996).

Research Design

In this study, I investigated perceptions of masculinity among 169 first-year undergraduate college students, ages 17-25. Gender breakdown was comprised of 64 male and 105 female students. All participants matriculated in the Midwestern region of the U.S. and were attending either community college or a four-year university. The data was collected during select class periods.

The following research questions guided the study:

1. How much of a role do media representations play in symbolic perceptions of first-year male and female college students?
2. Are there differences in perceptions of male masculinity based on gender?
3. Are there differences in perceptions of male masculinity reported by college freshmen of various racial backgrounds?

This mixed-methods study included a superhero/masculinity survey, a content analysis of participants' artwork, and participants' reflective writing. The participants completed a survey which asked them about physical and emotional perceptions of masculinity and superheroes. The survey also included demographic information related to sexual identity, racial/cultural makeup, socioeconomic status, and number of years of art education. Participants then drew an image of a superhero performing an act. Finally, participants wrote reflections on their perceptions of masculinity.

I performed a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) to examine potential differences between the independent variables (ethnicity, gender, and artistic experience) and the dependent variables, which are the results drawn from the superhero survey, masculine survey, and drawing analysis. Demographic characteristics of participants, as well as mean and standard deviation scores, masculinity survey, superhero survey, drawing, and reflective writing results were represented in the form of descriptive statistics. I analyzed all data using the program SPSS.

The survey consisted of 40 questions on preferred traits of superheroes and masculine men. Each question was to be rated 1, 2, 3, or 4, with 1 being "strongly disagree" and 4 being "strongly agree." The questionnaire was based on the following literature-based constructs or philosophical variables used to identify masculinity traits within the survey: Construct 1—Success (5 items); Construct 2—Wealth, power (5 items); Construct 3—Restrictive emotionality (4 items); Construct 4—Mental and physical superiority (5 items); Construct 5—Media portrayals (4 items); Construct 6—Violence (4 items); Construct 7—Sexual organs and promiscuity (4 items); Construct 8—Protectiveness and support (3 items); Construct 9—Patriarchal beliefs (3 items); Construct 10—Intolerance of same-sex intimacy (3 items).

Scale reliability diagnostics were completed to test the reliability of study surveys. As a measure of internal consistency, Cronbach's Alpha was calculated. A value above .70 is commonly noted as adequate consistency (Nunnally, 1994). In measuring traditional outlets of masculinity, the survey constructs produced the following values: Construct 1—.86; Construct 2—.90; Construct 3—.91; Construct 4—.86; Construct 5—.86; Construct 6—.90; Construct 7—.86; Construct 8—.86; Construct 9—.86;

and Construct 10—.86. The values signified strong reliability among the constructs of the 40-question survey.

Art educator Kerry Freedman (2003) argues that the creation of fantasy images is based on visualization, which requires the cognitive activity of accessing prior knowledge and representing this knowledge in a symbolic form. In order to access schematic representation, the study participants were asked at the conclusion of the survey to draw and name their version of a male superhero.

Rose (2001) described content analysis as "counting the frequency of certain visual elements in a clearly defined sample of images, and then analyzing those frequencies" (p. 56). In this manner, this study applied content analysis in the examination of visual images. Each drawing was analyzed on the following constructs: superhero powers, protectiveness, media representation, action, and physique. In the same manner as the surveys, the rubric options ranged from 1 ("strongly against hegemonic perception of masculinity") to 5 ("strongly identifies with hegemonic perception of masculinity"). For example, for the construct of action, 1 represented "no evidence of aggressive action in drawing," and 5 reflected "exaggerated evidence of action." The rubric was used to evaluate and score all participant drawings.

Three judges provided drawing analyses in the following categories: superhero physique, exhibition of aggressive actions; protectiveness; exhibition of superpowers; media correlations; and general evidence of hegemonic perspectives. A Cohen's kappa test was performed to determine inter-rater reliability among judges. The following results were found: physique—95.5%, action—97%, protectiveness—98.5%, superpowers—95.5%, and media portrayal—97.9%. Ninety-five percent agreement of judges' ratings was needed to show inter-rater reliability (Creswell, 2009). All categories proved to exceed the level of reliability.

The act of reflecting on thoughts, ideas, feelings, and their own learning encourages the development of metacognitive skills by helping students self-evaluate and sort what they know from what they do not know (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002). In addition, reflection on experience is considered to be a primary means to deepen learning (Kolb, 1984).

I used conceptual content analysis on the participants' reflective writing samples, examining their text by focusing on a word, set of

words, phrases, or patterns that were indicative of themes within this study. To limit validity and reliability issues in coding, I employed the use of the *Lasswell Dictionary* to ensure word meaning within a contextual arena (Stone & Hurwitz, 2002).

Research Question One: Media Representations of Masculinity

Research question one asked, “How much of a role do media representations play in symbolic perceptions of first-year male and female college students?” Participants were questioned on the manner in which they learned about male masculinity or perceptions of the ideal man. Participants were able to select two choices from the following: male role models, peers, media, church, culture and society, school, fine art, female role models, and other. The “other” option provided participants with the opportunity to indicate their personal choice. Table 1 identifies the data regarding acquisition of male masculinity identity.

Table 1. How Masculinity Was Learned

Trait	1st Choice	2nd Choice	Total	Percent
Male role model	39	39	78	46%
Peers	12	19	31	18%
Media	103	40	143	85%
Church	3	10	13	8%
Culture, society	9	38	47	28%
School	0	14	14	8%
Fine art	0	0	0	0%
Female role model	3	9	12	7%

As shown in Table 1, 85% of the respondents chose media as a source of learned masculinity. Demographic information indicated 96% (n = 163) of the participants reported watching superhero movies during their lifetime. When asked about reading superhero comics during their lifetime, 54% (n = 91) reported having read comics. Male role models accounted for 46% of the respondents’ choices, followed by 28% choosing culture and society. In examining written reflections, five participants

made reference to the importance of media in masculine identity perception. One female respondent articulated, “No matter how hard I try to separate myself from media perceptions [of masculinity], I just can’t. It’s ingrained in me.”

Fourteen participants selected school as a source of male masculinity influence. In all 14 responses (nine participants with extensive art education), all participants stated that the person responsible within the school context was a coach. There were no responses indicating teachers, counselors, or administrators as having an impact on perceptions of male masculinity. No participants chose fine arts as a source of male masculinity identity formation.



Perceptions of Masculinity

In order to analyze symbolic perceptions of male masculinity, this study analyzed participant drawings of superheroes performing a task completed by the 169 participants. Among all participants, the masculinity survey had a mean of 2.95. The standard deviation for each population fell between .70 and 1.18, so the homogeneity of variance assumption was met.

In analyzing the color palette of participants’ superhero costumes, 37% (n = 64) of participants’ superheroes consisted of red and blue costumes, correlating with colors of the four most popular superheroes: Wonder Woman, Spiderman, Captain America, and Superman. Figure 1 (participant with no extensive art) and Figure 2 (participant with extensive art) are examples demonstrating that content and colors are quite similar, with a high probability of media influence in drawings.



Figure 1. This drawing of a superhero by a Caucasian female student who had minimal art education was coded as conveying perceptions of superheroes such as a White male body, the ability to fly, and similar attire and pose to popular culture representations of Superman.

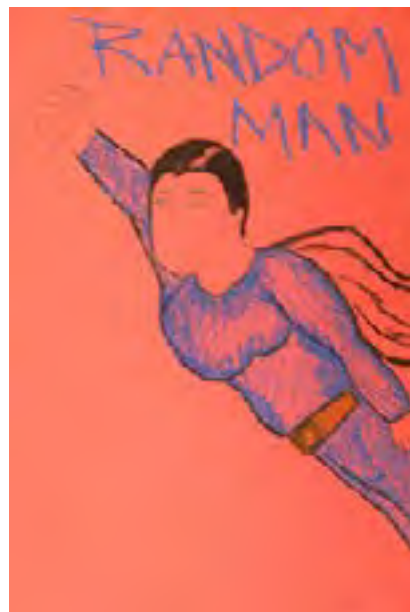


Figure 2. This drawing is another example of a superhero drawing conforming to traditional representations of Superman in terms of pose, attire, and ethnicity. A Caucasian male student with an extensive art background did this drawing.

Of participant drawings showing a high rate of protectiveness, 26% ($n = 27$) portrayed superheroes saving small animals. Animals articulate the essence of a key superhero trait, that of saving the weak. Although Figure 3 shows extreme strength, high physique, and lack of emotion, the elements of humanity and protectiveness derive from the action displayed in the saving of a little cat (symbolic of helping the weak).



Figure 3. Drawing by a Caucasian male student with an extensive art background showing masculine superhero characteristics of extreme muscles, lack of overt expressiveness, and protectiveness of those weaker.

Nine participants showed extreme deviation from hegemonic perceptions of male masculinity. Figures 4 and 5 are examples of extreme deviation from hegemonic male masculine perceptions. Figure 4 shows extreme deviation in the areas of physique, action, media portrayals, protectiveness, and strength. Figure 5 articulates no value on physique, action, strength, superpower, or media portrayal. The participant chose to focus on attributes of sensitivity, kindness, and vulnerability, which are significant deviations from hegemonic perspectives of male masculinity.



Figure 4. Drawing by a Black female student with an extensive art background showing extreme deviation in all aspects of hegemonic masculinity perceptions in superheroes.



Figure 5. Drawing by a Caucasian female student showing extreme deviation from most masculine characteristics. Drawing does show protective characteristics found in superheroes.

Research Question Two: Gender Differences in Perceptions of Masculinity

Research question two asked, “Are there any differences in perceptions of male masculinity based on gender?” In examining differences in perspectives across genders, general perceptions were shown to be homogenous in visual modalities. Differences are in the specific areas of hegemonic masculinity. Table 2 shows, in the analysis of participant drawings, that female participants placed higher value on protectiveness (+.27) and were much more likely to conform to media portrayals of superheroes (+.49). Males placed more value on physique (+.16) and superpowers (+.10). Overall, females scored slightly higher (+.07) in perceptions through visual modalities.

Table 2. Visual Modality by Gender

Visual Modalities	Male	Female
Physique	3.14	2.98
Action	2.45	2.57
Protectiveness	2.46	2.73
Superpowers	3.03	2.93
Media portrayal	2.66	3.15
Total visuals	2.77	2.84

In analyzing scoring (see Table 3), results were in concordance with visual perceptions. Scores based on gender were homogenous, with females scoring slightly higher in conforming to hegemonic masculine perceptions (+.03). Differences arose in the specific constructs valued. Females placed value on mental strength (+.27), protectiveness (+.07), and patriarchal expectations (+.31). Males placed more value on areas of wealth (+.10) and physical strength (+.15). Males and females placed equally high value in the areas of heterosexual adherence, sexual promiscuity, and emotional avoidance. In regard to total hegemonic perspective through nonvisual modalities, females scored slightly higher (3.04-3.01).

Table 3. Nonvisual Modality by Gender

Nonvisual Modalities	Male	Female
Construct 1: Superiority and success	2.83	2.84
Construct 2: Wealth, power	2.81	2.62
Construct 3: Restrictive emotionality	2.92	2.99
Construct 4: Mental and physical strength	3.38	3.41
Construct 5: Media portrayal	3.18	3.29
Construct 6: Violence	2.73	2.71
Construct 7: Sexual promiscuity	3.81	3.23
Construct 8: Protectiveness	3.65	3.72
Construct 9: Patriarchal tendencies	2.81	3.12
Construct 10: Same-sex intimacy	2.78	2.78
Total survey	3.02	3.05

Values of masculinity articulated in the survey and participant drawings were also present in the written reflections. Participants were cued to write about their perceptions of male masculinity or “the ideal man.” Sixty-one percent of females ($n = 64$) stated that the ideal masculine man is one who protects and financially supports his family. “Taking care of responsibilities” was a major factor attributed to the ideal man. Fifty percent ($n = 53$) of the female participants also expected masculine men to be highly desirable and sexual. One participant stated, “Someone masculine is someone I find desirable. If nobody else wanted him, I probably wouldn’t either.” Twenty-eight percent of the female participants ($n = 25$) stated that physical strength and toughness were requirements. Thirty-one percent ($n = 28$) of the female participants mentioned physical characteristics such as being tall, good-looking, or well built. Nineteen percent of the female participants ($n = 18$) described masculine men as “fearless,” “aggressive,” and “willing to fight.” Two female participants claimed a masculine man was “a man who doesn’t chicken out of situations” and “someone who has a pair.” Thirty-six percent ($n = 33$) of the female participants characterized male masculinity in terms of intelligence, emotional availability, caring, and respect.

Males were less likely to place value on patriarchal tendencies as a masculine male characteristic. Only 17% ($n = 11$) of males identified the ideal man as protective or responsible for his family. Seventy-five percent ($n = 48$) of the males stated physical strength, muscles, having no fear, and not backing down as characteristics. Forty-four percent ($n = 28$) of the males specified wealth and success as characteristics.

The concept of masculine ambiguity appeared in this study as well. Twenty-one percent ($n = 13$) of the males admitted to not having a true awareness of what the ideal masculine male may be. One participant stated, “I’m not really sure. I have always made assumptions based on my surroundings, but to actually think about it now is difficult. I’m not sure the answer I give would be my own or one given to me by society.” Another participant stated, “That’s a tricky question. I can say they [masculine people] are aggressive and strong, protecting those they care about, but I’m not sure where that answer really comes from. I’m glad you don’t require citations!”

Research Question Three: Race Differences in Perceptions of Masculinity

Research question three asked, “Are there any differences in conceptions of male masculinity reported by college freshmen of various racial backgrounds?” Table 2 shows the breakdown of visual construct scores for male masculine perceptions through visual modality across all independent variables (gender, race, and art background). The largest deviation among participants from drawings and the survey arose among Black participants without Black Studies courses. Black male students without cultural studies or art courses scored in the area of symbolic modalities: physique, 1.10 above the mean of 2.75; action, .12 above the mean of 2.31; superpower, .17 above the mean of 3.0; and media, .78 above the mean of 3.04. Participants in this sample placed much lower value on protection and support, scoring .79 below the mean of 2.68.

Table 2. Visual Modality by Ethnicity/ Gender

Race/Gender/Art Experience	Physique	Action	Protection	Power	Media	Total
White male, no art	1.83	3.00	3.41	3.50	3.25	2.81
White male, art	2.17	2.14	2.50	2.90	3.01	2.50
White female, no art	2.33	1.98	3.13	3.07	3.02	2.63
White female, art	2.70	2.14	2.67	3.22	3.51	2.68
Black male, BS, no art	2.80	2.16	3.70	3.45	2.58	3.03
Black male, BS, art	2.50	2.50	2.44	2.91	1.41	2.59
Black female, BS, no art	2.80	1.80	2.86	2.33	2.06	2.45
Black female, BS, art	2.27	2.19	2.90	3.15	2.29	2.63
Hispanic male, no art	4.00	2.66	2.00	2.00	2.66	2.91
Hispanic male, art	2.67	2.53	2.93	3.33	2.06	3.11
Hispanic female, no art	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	1.50
Asian female, no art	3.78	3.77	3.66	3.00	3.00	3.55
Asian female, art	3.50	2.66	3.00	2.83	3.50	3.42
Hispanic female, art	2.00	2.00	2.66	4.83	4.33	2.87
Mixed female, no art	3.00	3.66	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.41
Mixed female, art	3.67	2.00	3.50	3.50	4.00	3.16
Black male, no art	3.85	2.43	1.89	3.17	3.82	2.83
Black male, art	3.83	1.91	1.58	3.25	2.41	2.64

Black female, no art	3.67	2.54	2.41	2.58	4.20	2.80
Black female, art	3.23	2.42	1.85	2.85	3.67	2.59
Total participants	2.75	2.31	2.68	3.00	3.04	2.70

Note: BS = Black Studies courses

Black populations without cultural studies or art courses scored highest on conforming to hegemonic perspectives of masculinity, scoring .13 above the mean of 2.70. Black females without cultural studies and art courses also scored high in masculine perceptions, with a mean score .10 above the total participant score of 2.70. When compared with Black participants with art and cultural studies courses, those without Black Studies and art courses scored significantly higher in conforming to hegemonic perspectives of masculinity, particularly in the areas of physique (2.50-3.85) and media representation (1.41-3.82).

Figures 6 and 7 are from participants who were enrolled in at least one Black Studies class. In creating drawings to symbolize a more African American representation, participants deviated from traditional symbolic perceptions of superheroes. Among participants not in art or cultural studies courses, drawings such as Figure 8 were much more likely to conform to traditional media perceptions of superheroes and deviate from an African American representation.

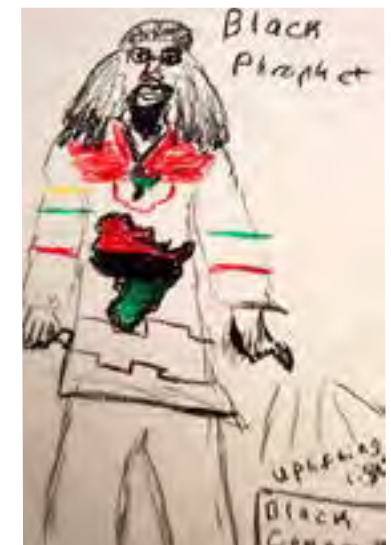


Figure 6. Drawing by a Black male student with a Black Studies background showing extreme deviation from a traditional superhero persona, particularly in the areas of attire and ethnicity.



Figure 7. Drawing by a Black male student with a Black Studies background showing deviation from a traditional superhero persona, particularly in the areas of attire and ethnicity. The drawing does articulate strength through superhero action.



Figure 8. Drawing by a Black male student without a Black Studies course background conforming to traditional superhero attire. Drawing does not articulate ethnicity markers or stereotypical ethnic representations of the participant.

Thirty-one percent ($n = 52$) of participants' drawings showed superheroes in roles associated with police and fire departments, such as saving people and animals from fires or arresting bank robbers. Caucasians illustrated 49 of the 52 participant drawings (94%). Figures 9 and 10 show a high correlation between superheroes and police.



Figure 9. Drawing by a Caucasian male student without an extensive art background showing traditional aspects of superheroes with regard to costume. Drawing makes correlations between superheroes and a police officer through the actions of fighting crime.

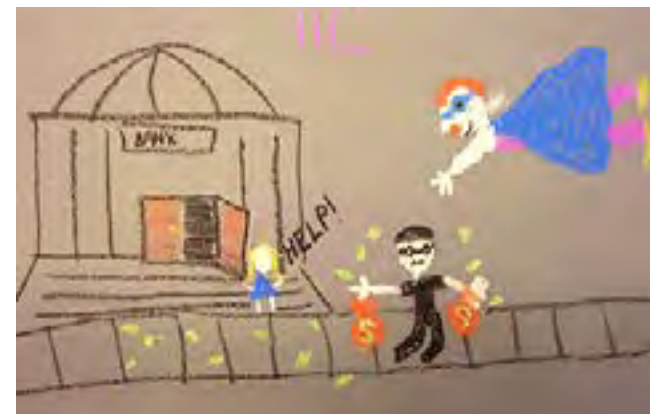


Figure 10. Drawing by a Caucasian female student without an extensive art background shows continued connections to Superman in attire type and flying ability. Participant, through superhero crime fighting actions, makes correlations with police officers.

Figures 11 and 12 are examples of a correlation between fire department duties and superheroes.



Figure 11. A Caucasian female student without an extensive art background makes a correlation between superheroes and firefighters in terms of attire and choice of vehicle within her drawing.



Figure 12. A Caucasian male student without an extensive art background shows connections to firefighters in his drawing. Drawing articulates helping those that are in need. The superhero in his drawing shows connections to common popular cultural portrayals of superheroes through caped attire.

Participants of African American, Hispanic, Asian, and mixed ethnicities were less likely to make visual connections between police/fire departments and male masculinity in superhero drawings. Only three images from diverse populations showed an influence of fire and police departments.

In written reflections, 29% ($n = 11$) of the Black males (8 not in Black Studies or art programs) described the ideal man as being sexualized in terms of phallic stature or the ability to be desired and have many women sexually. One participant stated, "Growing up, I always wanted to be like my uncle. He didn't need to have a job. Women always paid his bills. He was a player! Even now, a part of me still idolizes him and what he continues to do."

Discussion of Perceptions of Masculinity

Although there is an academic acknowledgement of diverse masculinity (Connell, 2005; Kimmel, 2005), this study showed little variance in the subscription and application of a "normative" state of masculinity. As the data shows, participants were in agreement and placed high value on hegemonic constructs of masculinity.

Patriarchal Philosophies

In analyzing gender perceptions of male masculinity, this study shows high value on the patriarchal construct of masculinity. Females placed higher value on patriarchal constructs of masculinity than did males. The written reflections, surveys, and participant drawings were all in concurrence, with females subscribing to and ultimately placing high value on male patriarchal constructs.

Patriarchy (rule by fathers) is a social system in which males are privileged and demand authority within the familial, community, and governance structures. Patriarchy implies male privilege and subordination of females (Robinson, 2009). Because hegemonic masculinity involves autonomy over those who are weaker, patriarchy plays a central role in the establishment of a rigid nature of masculinity (Robinson, 2009). This study demonstrates that females place high value on males

who protect and take care of the family. In the females' desire for males to take the role of sole protector and main provider, they take a back seat and claim the role of someone weaker. It is not enough to focus on gender equity within society. One must also focus on male masculine expectations by women and men in order to dissuade the notion of needing patriarchal structures in the household.

Males scored lower in valuing a patriarchal regime. It is problematic for males to live up to this perception constantly of being the ultimate protector, provider, lover, and leader (hooks, 2006). This pressure to conform not only to social hegemonic perceptions of masculinity but also to female expectations presents a pressure that can manifest itself in violence (Strozier, 2002). When men are represented as continuously in charge and omnipotent, this patriarchal privilege is at times only achieved through blind obedience (Traister, 2000), which in turn compels men to attempt to fulfill this perception of male masculinity by any means.

Patriarchal control can manifest itself in hypersexuality as well. Participants in this study (both male and female) placed value on male sexual performance and attraction. Hegemonic masculinity informs men that they must be powerful and manly to gain the desired love and respect (Traister, 2000). As this sentiment permeates through culture, man reverts to sex as a form of control.

In this study, the women were actually more likely to embrace patriarchal philosophies, particularly the roles of "breadwinner," "excellent lover," and "family protector." Because women, like men, have preconceived notions of hegemonic male masculinity, women expect men to fulfill patriarchal roles in order to meet rigid cultural standards of masculinity. Women, as well as men, must renegotiate the definition of masculinity beyond the ever-present hegemonic expectations of male masculinity. The art classroom serves as a platform from which to educate women as well as men on the dangers of hegemonic male masculinity and to allow for the diversity of masculinity across gender lines.

This study shows that the application of male masculine identity extends to females as well as males. Female participants as well as male participants placed high value on hegemonic perspectives of masculinity. If men are to consistently be expected to act as the breadwinner,

provider, protector, great lover, and decision-maker, how can there be gender equality? Everyone must work to remove these patriarchal expectations of men, held by both men and women, in order to have a level gender playing field.

Culture and Masculinity

In this study, there was clear correlations between ethnic knowledge and pride and perceptions of male masculinity. African American participants who had not taken cultural Black Studies courses consistently had higher levels of adherence to hegemonic masculinity compared with White and African American participants who had previously enrolled in cultural studies programs. African American participants who had taken Black Studies courses made symbolic images much more representative of themselves, which deviated from hegemonic masculinity perceptions. Black participants without cultural studies courses were much more likely to subscribe to hegemonic perceptions of violence, physical strength, and media perception. Other ethnicities did not acknowledge if cultural studies courses representing their cultures were taken.

Black males without cultural studies education were also most likely to value hypersexuality and sexual dominance. As Black males find themselves lacking in certain constructs of hegemonic male masculinity such as wealth, provider, and superiority (Alexander, 2006), they utilize compensation to enhance other constructs that make up the masculine perspective such as sex, acceptance of violent tendencies, and physique. The preoccupation with sexual prowess is magnified when an individual fails to measure up to male masculine perceptions in other categories (Kamla, 1993). As this study shows, 29% (n = 11) of the Black males stated the ideal man as being sexualized—either being large in sexual stature or in the ability to be desired and have many women sexually. The participants placed extreme value on this particular construct. Violence and sexuality converge in measuring up to the hegemonic masculine ideal, i.e., to be a good lover and please a woman involves having power over her and superiority over other males. The preoccupation with

phallic size comes to the forefront in hegemonic masculinity (Traister, 2000).

The participants demonstrated through verbal as well as visual means that culture is a factor in the socially constructed phenomenon of perceptions of masculinity. Ultimately, as this study concludes, one's masculinity ideology is developed, maintained, and restructured according to one's social and environmental contexts. Cultural context or connection with ethnicity can be a predictor in the acceptance and adherence to hegemonic perspectives of masculinity (Connell, 2005). The art classroom provides an arena where authentic multicultural education can be introduced to assist in challenging hegemonic masculinity and, ultimately, self-identity.

Masculine Identity Formation in Art Education

Consumption of visual iconography plays a major role in the construction, maintenance, and representation of masculinity, primarily from stereotypes of hegemonic masculinity and the impact of the consumption of images (Connell, 1987). The understanding of image consumption leads to a better understanding of how these media artforms operate in developing perceptions of masculinity through systems of representation. Representations play a central role in forming conceptions of masculinity, and acceptance of a universal version of masculinity comes, in part, from ambiguous definitions of masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Is there a specific model that represents all aspects of masculinity? Several participants (all male) in this study articulated a lack of a clear definition of masculinity. With this ambiguity, full adaptation to the "male masculine" image is impossible. Even though there is a lack of fixed definition, hegemonic masculinity is presented as a fixed, trans-historical model (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). But there is no fixed definition of masculinity. The defining of masculinity comes through the absorption and adherence to messages that visual images perpetuate. Children internalize these images.

Visual consumption also defines cultural perspectives, which ultimately dictate male masculinity. This study showed participants of African American descent, with little cultural exploration, are most likely

to conform to hegemonic perceptions of masculinity. In addressing visual application and consumption of images, art educators must incorporate culturally authentic representation. To develop a truly multicultural art classroom, educators need to incorporate and analyze authentic, culturally diverse images. Through a multicultural incorporation of the art classroom, those of marginalized ethnicity can have greater diversity of role models to look toward for their masculine identity formation.

Implications and Resources for Art Educators

Masculinity is a perception that is taken for granted and needs to be analyzed (Connell, 1998). Participants of the study identified media as the primary source of masculine perception formation. As such, it is imperative that art education incorporates a discussion of masculinity within a media context as well as within traditional fine art. The art classroom serves as prime real estate for facilitation of visual education. Art education can dissect visuals in multiple ways. Superheroes serve as a resource to fully critique and engage in a dialog of masculine perception. Superhero masculinity can be examined at all ages, particularly at an age when children are first exposed to visual perceptions of hegemonic masculinity.

To facilitate true new learning, there must be a connection with experience (Freedman, 1989). Experiences (schema) are produced through visual consumption (Stern, 1998). Ultimately if art educators are to remove students from the shadows of masculinity into the light, they must educate on visual consumption. Who is better positioned to focus on child identity development using visual imagery? Art educators must use the art classroom to redefine masculinity perceptions as well as identity formation in the mode consumed: visually.

Art educators can teach students to analyze, critique, and rewrite the visual rubric of masculinity. As visual consumers of all ages identify with superheroes, comics, animations, and films can be useful to address hegemonic and broader notions of masculinity. The hyperlinks to resources and lesson plans in Figure 13 offer educators some strategies for working with superhero images in classrooms.

Figure 13. Videos and Lesson Plans

Video: *Sexism, Strength and Dominance: Masculinity in Disney Films*
Lesson Plan: [Comic Book Characters Lesson for 5th-8th grade](#)
Study gender representations in media through the examination of comics

Video: *Masculinity and Gender Roles*
Lesson Plan: [Superhero Comic Strip Lesson](#) for 3rd-12th grades
Analysis of hero vs. superheroes in the creation of a comic strip

Video: *Masculinity and Music in Disney*
Superhero Unit: [Comics in the classroom for 6th-12 grades](#)
An entire unit complete with PowerPoint presentations, a test, handouts, and assignments on superheroes

Video: *Tough Guise: Violence, Media & the Crisis in Masculinity*
[Class activities on Wonder Woman](#)

Video: *Masculinity and Femininity in the Comicbook Universe*
Lesson Plans: [Using Comicbooks and Superheroes with various ages](#)
Many superhero lesson plans addressing reading, morals, masculinity, science, and media portrayals

Video: *Sexism in Disney Movies*
[Superhero Self Portrait Lesson Plan](#) for elementary grades

Video: *Masculinity and Femininity: Women in the Media Survey*
Lesson: [Creating 21st Century Superheroes for 6th-12th grades](#)
Analyzing superhero characteristics and creating a modern day superhero

Video: *Gender Stereotypes in the Media*
[Superhero lesson plans](#) for all ages
A variety of lesson plans addressing superheroes in diverse contexts

Conclusion

To facilitate true new learning, there must be a connection with experience (Freedman, 1989). Experiences (schema) are produced through visual consumption (Stern, 1998). If art educators are to remove students from the shadows of masculinity into the light, they must educate on visual consumption. This study critiques visual perspectives of masculinity and analyzes stigmas experienced by those who do not adhere to hegemonic perceptions. Through masculine identity examination and the experience of creating popular culture art, study participants were able to openly navigate self-exploration into gender identity and locate their understanding of male masculinity on a gender continuum. By visually examining masculinity, this study provides an increased understanding of diverse masculinities in order to foster discussion about diverse perceptions of masculinity. In acknowledging the importance and analyzing visual imagery, who is better positioned to focus on child identity development using visual means? Art educators must use the art classroom to redefine masculinity perceptions as well as identity formation in the mode consumed: visually.

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About the Author

Gary Johnson is an assistant professor in the Visual Studies Department at Texas Tech University. He earned his Ph.D. in art education with an emphasis in visual culture and technology at Northern Illinois University. As a teacher educator with experience in assessment of educational programs, particularly those focused on diverse populations, he strives to align teacher preparation with current educational reform movements and emphasizes culturally relevant pedagogy. His research explores the intersection of race and masculinity, media iconography, educational assessment, and educational policy related to the fine arts.

Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to the author at gjjazz2003@yahoo.com.