



## Comic Art and Gender Resistance in Moroccan Society

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### Abstract

In recent years, the art of comics has emerged as a new form of resistance against gender relations that exist in Moroccan society (Chute, 2010). This study examines the extent to which comic art challenges the status quo of Moroccan society and how it is used to address various social issues, such as the changing roles of women in a male-dominated society. Through a mixed-method approach, the researcher conducted interviews and a questionnaire to examine whether comics resist or reinforce these gender roles. The results demonstrate that while these stereotypes are still being reinforced, some artists are starting to question the status quo and promote equality.

**Keywords:** Comic Art, Gender Relations in Comics, Resistance in Comics.

### فن القصص المصورة ومقاومة النوع الاجتماعي في المجتمع المغربي

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### ملخص

في السنوات الأخيرة، برز فن القصص المصورة كشكل جديد من أشكال المقاومة تجاه العلاقات الجندرية السائدة في المجتمع المغربي (Chute, 2010). من خلال منهجية مختلطة، أجرى الباحث مقابلات واستبيانات لفحص ما إذا كانت القصص المصورة تقاوم أو تعزز هذه الأدوار الجندرية. تبحت هذه الدراسة في مدى تحدي فن القصص المصورة للوضع الراهن في المجتمع المغربي، وكيفية استخدامه لمعالجة قضايا اجتماعية مختلفة، مثل التغيرات في أدوار المرأة داخل مجتمع يهيمن عليه الذكور. تظهر النتائج أنه بينما لا تزال هذه الصور النمطية متواجدة وتعزز، بدأ بعض الفنانين في التشكيك في الوضع الراهن وتعزيز المساواة.

**الكلمات الدالة:** فن القصص المصورة، العلاقات الجندرية في القصص المصورة، المقاومة في القصص المصورة.

## INTRODUCTION

Art has historically been an integral part of the existence of humanity. Art can take different forms and acquire new significance in new environments and contexts ([McCloud, 1993](#)). Comic art is one of the oldest art forms and can be traced back to prehistoric times. The evolution of comics can be seen in different forms as it slowly developed into its present state ([Sabin, 1997](#)). From cave drawings to tomb paintings to hand scrolls to comic books, comic art is an art form that connects with society as a medium that artists use to deliver messages and confront social issues.

This art form also serves as a gateway for exposing and understanding the history of the world. Since the world of comics is huge and varied ([McCloud, 1993](#)), its definition has to vary from one researcher to another. Will Eisner described comics as a consequential art, a definition which McCloud later expanded into “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” ([McCloud, 1993](#)). The common ground that all researchers agree upon is that comics are a staple in the expansion of mass consumer culture ([Robbins, 1999](#)). This culture includes the aspect of gender, which uses comic art as a medium for resisting traditional gender roles ([Heer and Worcester, 2011](#)).

Although many researchers acknowledge the importance of comics in gender resistance, few studies have been done to explore the representation of female characters in comics ([Ratcliff et al., 2015](#)). Due to the gap in the literature on gender in comics, this study focuses on addressing the issue of female misrepresentation in comics as a marketing strategy to make more profit. It has been falsely assumed that the social context used in comics is a way to reinforce female empowerment. In actuality, female comic book characters have been written with inaccurate portrayals of women, characterized to show men’s views on women for a heteronormative male audience (Turberville, 2017).

The Bechdel test was created as a way to measure and highlight this issue in fiction. It follows three criteria: (1) it has to have at least two women in it, who (2) talk to each other about (3) something besides a man (Bechdel, 2008). This test was not the only form of resistance developed against the objectification of women in media; women took a stand using documentaries such as “She Makes Comics” to bring to light the unwritten history of women in comics. Throughout this history, these female artists fought and faced sexism after being limited to certain subjects. Martha Kennedy, curator of popular and applied graphic arts at the Library of Congress, says, “Those able to develop successful strips were restricted to cute children and animals”. To speak against this objectification and to represent a woman’s body from a female perspective, female comic artists joined the underground comix.

Whether it is in the form of comic strips, webcomics, comic books, or manga, the growth of exposure to the comics industry is increasing day by day. According to a Facebook survey done by Brett Schenker, the percentage of female comic consumers is up to 46.67%. Despite this high percentage of female comic consumers, female characters are still being objectified and sexualized for the male gaze through their costumes. In *The Superhero Costume: Identity and Disguise in Fact and Fiction*, Barbara Brownie and Danny Graydon concluded that while the costume is designed to hide the identity of the hero for safety measures, it is also a function of an identity which refers to the hero’s power and ideology (Brownie and Graydon, 2016). Despite the development that the comic industry has undergone to be inclusive and diverse, there still needs to be a reform of comic content to attract the potential market (Nama, 2011).

Thus, this article analyses how comic art is challenging society as a tool that addresses a variety of social issues, such as the changing roles of women in society. It analyses comics to answer a series of questions that guided this research. The first question focuses on investigating whether comic art perpetuates or challenges the status quo of inequality and dependence between the two genders in Moroccan society. The second question revolves around examining the extent to which gender manifests in comics to reflect the gender

attitudes of a targeted audience. The final question explores whether comics can function as an artistic form of resistance for women in a male-dominated society such as Morocco. These questions will be answered through a series of interviews conducted with comic artists to draw insight from their perception of the gender aspect of comics. Furthermore, a questionnaire will be used to seek the weight of numbers to prove these research hypotheses. The data collected will be processed, and its findings will be provided in the analytical part of the article.

Figure 1 An illustration in Zainab Fasiki's comic book "Hshouma," that highlights that 'Controlling People's Freedom is Detrimental to the Health.'

## WOMEN'S IMAGE IN COMICS

Comic artists use the comic industry as a platform to address a variety of social issues, such as gender issues. This article revolves around defining gender as a social construction. Through defining gender, we can acknowledge that gender is not something people are born with but something people perform in their daily routines. Gender roles are enforced from childhood to adulthood. Performing gender often affects the psychology of both males and females, such as underperforming due to the pressure of stereotype threat, as well as pursuing a field of study or profession because of gender expectations. The worldwide spread of mass media provided media institutions with an influence that increased daily in comparison to the old social institutions. Therefore, the first part of this article analyses the image of women in the media. Females are conditioned from birth to conform to the ideal image of a white woman.



### Exploitation and Objectification

The notion that "sex sells" is manifested in the media daily. Artists may manipulate the image of women, rendering them, through the use of the language of visual media, into mere body parts. Objects, by definition, can be bought and sold (Wade and Heldman, 2012). To explain further, women are treated within the media and society as objects to be exploited. Kate Manne defines objectification as "the reduction of a person to their body or body parts, thereby denying them full personhood and agency" (Manne, 2017). The notion of objectification is the result of male dominance, which assumes that viewership only includes men. The latter is also known as the male gaze, which is a theory that was introduced in Laura Mulvey's essay Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema, and was coined in 1975.

Mulvey believed that in media and visual art, the viewer gazes at the character from the perspective of a heterosexual male (Mulvey, 2006). As she states, "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" (Mulvey, 2006). The male gaze portrays women sexually, which empowers men and objectifies women because gazing implies there is a psychological relationship of power. Therefore, a distinguishing attribute of the male gaze is how the heterosexual male represents the female body, whether his representation degrades the status of the woman and treats her as a supporting character. Often, this representation reflects the male's expectations of how the woman is supposed to look, which in turn presents an image to women of what they should aspire to be if they want to be with a man (Mulvey, 2006).

While the comic industry in America submitted to the demands of the readership to embrace diversity, in male-dominated societies such as Morocco, the artists took a stand against the double standards in Moroccan culture. In Morocco, people often comment on the role that women play in contributing to their objectification through behaving or dressing provocatively (Lazreg, 2009). The latter can be explained by applying this theory to men. To explain further, if a man is seen shirtless on social media or in the streets, he is often perceived as confident and proud of his body. The act is deemed normal male behavior; people often

dismiss it with a head shake and a “they’re boys.” Because of the mere fact that they identify as boys, they should be excused from any immature act, despite their age (Abu-Lughod, 2013).

However, when applying this scenario to women, the double standards become obvious when Middle Eastern and North African societies (MENA) are quick to condemn the female and label her with derogatory terms that reflect the societal standards (Ahmed, 1992). The double standards are often dismissed with the excuse that women’s bodies are capable of creating fitna, social chaos. In actuality, regardless of how a woman behaves or dresses, she is going to be judged and objectified based on the traditional gender roles. Therefore, instead of asking whether this woman is contributing to her objectification, it is better to ask, “What is the reason behind. Society’s objectification of these women?” Recognizing the burden that society places on women allows people to strategize steps to stop “victim-blaming.”

As a measurement against the social and political hegemony and the constraints of traditions, privately funded magazines were founded to address subjects that are considered taboo in MENA society. These comic magazines, such as the Moroccan Skefkef, are interested in confronting taboo subjects, namely sex, religion, Politics, and social traditions. Skefkef magazine was founded in 2013 with the intent of providing comic artists with a platform of diversity and unity. This unity is highlighted through the name choice, Skefkef: Khanz o Bnin, the latter is a cheap sandwich that is popular in Casablanca, which highlights its accessibility to Moroccan people. The fact that female artists represent at least a quarter of the Skefkef artists emphasizes the inclusion that exists in this independent platform. Furthermore, Skefkef highlights the cultural and ethnic diversity that exists in Morocco. Its use of different languages that range from Arab, French, Amazigh, and English, as well as the use of different dialects from Tunisian to Moroccan to Iraqi, differentiates this magazine from other magazines such as Egyptian Tok Tok. The diversity in the Skefkef magazine makes it a platform for many artists to share their Perspectives on various topics (L. and Gabrieli, 2018).

Zainab Fasiki is an independent Moroccan comic artist as well as a contributor to Skefkef magazine, who used this platform to demand gender equality in Moroccan society. Fasiki’s activism involves discussing taboo subjects such as sexual freedom, nudity, and gender relations. One of Fasiki’s projects is Hshouma, which is a website and a comic book that aims to break some taboos in Morocco. The Moroccan word ‘Hshouma’ means something that is taboo and should not be spoken of. Thus, the website was made to explain and educate people to break taboos. These taboos are topics that people often cannot discuss, such as sexual education, sexual orientation, and bodies. According to Zainab Fasiki in the comic book Hshouma, “this lack of communication leads to many social problems,” and because of this “some teenagers learn many wrong things on the internet and in the street,” which can cause them to “develop mental and physical diseases” (Fasiki, 2018).

Zainab Fasiki’s experience with sexual harassment initially pushed her into immersing herself in art, which was the beginning of the Hshouma project. Fasiki’s focus on sexuality and nudity stems from the belief that through “focusing on one field,” she can make a change instead of waiting for the change to come” and “nudity and sexual- ity should not be ignored because they are real issues.” Hshouma is a project that focuses on showcasing drawings of nude Moroccan women because, as Fasiki said in an interview with HERstory online platform, “for men, the female body is still seen as a sexual object” (Fasiki, 2018). This perspective is the reason behind sexual harassment. However, as an act of resistance to the objectification and sexualization of the Moroccan woman, Fasiki decided to draw the naked female body as a piece of art instead of a sexual object to normalize it.

Furthermore, Zainab Fasiki organizes activism workshops at universities, runs associations in Morocco and abroad, and publishes articles and comic books. Besides Hshouma, Fasiki has also published a comic book about sexual education. The lack of sexual education is one of the reasons behind the high number of pregnancies out of wedlock. According to a 2011 survey conducted by the non-profit association Insaf, the survey estimated that the number of unwed mothers in Morocco at around 200,000 women, which amounts to 13.46 % of children. The rise in the number of pregnancies out of wedlock goes back to a lack of sex education, a fact that was brought up during the Moroccan activist Aicha Chenna’s appearance on a Moroccan

TV show, *Dayf Al Oula*. Chenna, the founder of the association of feminist solidarity, called out not only to the Ministry of Education to teach sex education in Moroccan schools but also to religious scholars to use their platform to teach the foundations of sex education through the use of religious texts. Zainab Fasiki's meeting with Aicha Chenna during a lecture might have left an impact on her because after that, she took part in raising awareness of sex education.

While Aicha Chenna used her platform to call for change from the government, Zainab Fasiki used the Skefkef platform to publish the comic book *The Essential Guide to Sexual Education*. The title of the comic book means the guideline for sexual education, the use of Arabic is about the primary school books, because Zainab hopes that it would be included in the Moroccan school's curriculum. The short comic book involves a dialogue between a mother and her daughter, which revolves around the topic of sexual protection, and that sex is an innate need that has nothing to do with the word *hshouma*. By bringing awareness to this taboo subject, Zainab can educate teenagers to take measures and help them make safe choices.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Due to the nature of this research, the researcher chose a qualitative approach. The researcher adapted a mixed-method questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. This ensures that the article explores gender dynamics in Moroccan comic art. Therefore, this research hypothesizes that:

1. H: Comic art is a new form of women's resistance in dominantly patriarchal societies like Morocco.
2. H: Comic art carries elements that perpetuate the status quo of inequality and dependence between men and women in Moroccan society.

Beyond these hypotheses, which focus on the role that comic book plays in our society, and in questioning the status quo that has been imposed on us since the beginning of time, another essential element in conducting a useful research study is research questions. The importance of the latter lies in the fact that a research methodology or strategy is determined by the nature of the research question and the subject being investigated (Denzin, 2005). Thus, this study focuses on answering these questions:

1. RQ: Can comics function as an artistic form of resistance for women in a male-dominated society like Morocco?
2. RQ: Does comic art perpetuate the status quo of inequality and dependence between the two genders in Moroccan society?

### **Data Analysis**

#### ***Le Casablancais: From Casa with Love by Mohammed El Bellaoui***

In Morocco, comic books were first introduced as a format to educate as well as a tool to send political messages. However, recently, Moroccan comic artists have been using their platform to highlight the inequality that exists in Morocco and to send the message that a woman's place does not only pertain to the kitchen, as it is seen in the Moroccan media. When asked whether there's a possibility that "men and women can achieve equality through comics," The interviewee Mohammed El Bellaoui, who is the writer of *Le Guide Casablancais*, and *Le Casablancais: From Casa with Love*, highlighted the fact that "Moroccan comics are real, and they talk about real-life issues. Moroccan comic artists tackle issues about minorities." Mohammed further explained that "recently, we have seen that most comic artists talk about women's harassment as a way to highlight the struggle that Moroccan women go through daily."

Due to this, Mohammed El Bellaoui, under the alias Rebel Spirit, published his latest comic book, *Le Casablancais: From Casa with Love*, in 2017. El Bellaoui created this comic book after he was inspired by "couples in Morocco who struggle to find a place to share intimacy, although public affection is frowned upon in public spaces." Thus, *Le Casablancais: From Casa with Love* is a Moroccan love story between two characters, Lmadani Bond, a man influenced by hypermasculine tropes in Indian movies, and Aziza, a Moroccan damsel in distress. This latter is apparent in their first encounter when Lmadani saves Aziza from

being robbed. After recounting her story of escaping the marriage that was forced upon her due to her father's debts, Lmadani invites her to his house out of chivalry. However, Aziza gets kidnapped, and because of Lmadani's continuous attempts to save her, their love convinces her father to give his blessing for them to get married.

Mohammed El Bellaoui used his comic book to highlight the stereotypes and objectification that exist in Moroccan and Indian movies. This is made evident in the first image that Lmadani is represented in, a careless, macho man who changes after meeting Aziza, a woman whose first appearance presents her as a damsel in distress. Throughout the comic book, El Bellaoui intentionally uses scenes and shots that demonstrate the way women and men are misrepresented in Moroccan media. During the first scene, Lmadani wakes up due to the knocking from the house landlord, who uses the picture of a woman who is wearing a revealing top as a way to attract the attention of Lmadani through the door's peephole. El Bellaoui highlights the use of objectification by the Moroccan media to attract the attention of the viewers, specifically male viewers.

Meanwhile, Lmadani was introduced as a macho character, with a puffed-up chest, confident stance, and bold expression. During Aziza and Lmadani's first encounter, El Bellaoui also highlighted the stereotypes that often occur in Moroccan movies and advertisements. Amidst this first encounter, Aziza was being held at knifepoint and needed a man to rescue her, specifically the man who grew up influenced by Indian movies. The fact that Lmadani exclaimed, "rojola mondo tofola" ("manhood since childhood") after he saved Aziza, highlights the importance of hypermasculinity in Moroccan society from a young age. However, El Bellaoui pointed out in the interview that Aziza's character will evolve from a damsel in distress to a strong and assertive woman. "The reason behind the change that happened to Aziza's character is to show that love has no limits," El Bellaoui explained, "when Aziza was alone, she was afraid, but she learned to stand up for herself."

Yet before the development that Aziza's character underwent, she was objectified and controlled by her father. Because Aziza's father was under a lot of debt, the creditor suggested that he could pay off the debts by allowing him to marry his daughter, Aziza. However, Aziza was forced to accept the marriage proposal as her father said, "[she] will marry him," and gave her an ultimatum after abusing her. He explained his behavior by saying that "[he] gave the man my word," in the Moroccan culture, a man's word defines him. This highlights the high position that the word of a man is perceived in comparison to a woman's opinion and life. In response to her father's words, Aziza highlighted the abuse and objectification that women struggle through daily by saying, "Everyone constantly wants a piece of me."

However, Aziza's character changed with this turn of events as she fled to Casablanca during her wedding ceremony. El Bellaoui explained that he wanted to show the image in which women are represented in Moroccan media versus women in real life. "I want to highlight that Moroccan women are strong and capable of doing a lot of things," El Bellaoui explained further, "this image is rarely seen in Moroccan cinema; oftentimes, the woman is shown as a housewife whose sole focus is to cook and clean." Thus, El Bellaoui showed the two representations in the last scenes of the comic book. When Aziza was found by the men that were sent by her father, she was forced easily into submission while Lmadani was being abused by her captors. However, once she was forcibly taken back to her father, and Lmadani was attempting to save her, she fought back and beat her captors to help Lmadani.

This new image that Aziza is represented in is highlighted by the narrative blocks that emphasize the role of Aziza, "It is Super Aziza, who fights for her love with all her strength," a vast contrast to the first representation of Aziza, a woman who was crying for help. Furthermore, El Bellaoui's use of Moroccan Darija, as well as his use of informal language, highlights the fact that El Bellaoui wants both the literate and semi-illiterate Moroccan population to understand his message and be able to connect with it. Thus, El Bellaoui is one of the Moroccan comic artists who are using their platform to highlight the objectification and sexism that Moroccan women struggle through daily. Through using their platform, these artists are utilizing comic books as a new form of resistance to gender relations that exist in patriarchal societies.

### ***Super Khadija by Zainab Fasikis***

Mohammed El Bellaoui is one of the male comic artists who are using their platform to highlight the forms of misrepresentation that occur in Moroccan cinema, in specific, and in Moroccan culture, in general. However, recently, a female comic artist rose to fame due to her controversial drawings. Zainab Fasiki is a Moroccan comic artist who is known for *Hshouma*, a comic book that showcases drawings of nude women in a Moroccan setting.

As Hillary Chute notes, "Graphic narratives allow women to articulate experiences of the body, trauma, and identity in ways that challenge dominant cultural narratives" (Chute, 2010). This was highlighted with Fasiki's choice to present the female body outside of the male gaze. Drawing from Laura Mulvey's work in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, this study examines how the image of women in media is shaped by the male gaze (Mulvey, 1989). Fasiki challenged this belief, as she portrayed the woman's body as it is, excluding the male gaze. She explained in her interview, "I chose to draw naked women because I always wanted to invite the Arab public to accept the female body as a part of this universe and not as a sexual object," Zainab explained in her interview. However, before this comic book, she worked as a mechanical engineer and published her drawing on social media, as she believed that "censorship exists in Moroccan media and social media provides artists with the freedom to share their work." This aligns with Jennifer Howell's observation that "Drawing (in) the Feminine challenges boundaries between public and private spheres in feminist art" (Howell, 2017), as Fasiki uses online platforms to resist these gender norms.

Thus, Zainab Fasiki used social media to resist gender relations that exist in Moroccan society. In response to the fact that her artwork was met with a backlash from Moroccan society, Fasiki said, "People say that I am here because I want to spread Fitna (social chaos) but I never forced my ideas onto other people, what I want to spread is a message of acceptance and tolerance." Fasiki explained that girls have the right to choose and wear whatever they want, just as men do. Due to this fact, she used comic books to spread this message and to resist gender relations that exist in Moroccan society, as she says, "I chose comic books because they can target even the illiterate Moroccan population". This is evident in the comic book that the researcher has chosen to analyze, as Fasiki used common Moroccan Darija that the literate, semi-illiterate Moroccan population can understand.

One of the drawings that was published by Zainab Fasiki on her social media accounts, as well as *Skefkef*, the Moroccan comic magazine, is *Super Khadija*. As an answer to the question "What was the reason behind publishing this comic book?", Fasiki replied, "The comic book is a sarcastic type of comic, as it is a story about the Moroccan dream". According to Fasiki, most Moroccan girls grow up in an environment that teaches them to dream about finding their prince charming and getting married. Despite the girl's professional success, Moroccan society always prioritizes the girl's marital status. Thus, Fasiki created this comic book to highlight the environment that most Moroccan girls grow up in. To explain further, *Super Khadija* is the story of a female superhero who is known for her accomplishments on a national and international level. However, *Super Khadija* is tired of fighting villains, and her solution to her dilemma is to get married. Her friend, another female superhero, supported *Super Khadija's* idea by telling her to "seize the chance, cause God just handed you a man on a silver platter." Most Moroccan girls perceive marriage as their chance to escape the rules and daily scrutiny. As a response to the latter, Fasiki emphasized that "The Arab woman is constantly wrestling for her freedom against all the obstacles that are constructed by men".

When asked whether she believes that women should not perceive marriage as their escape from gendered expectations, Fasiki replied by saying that "the message behind my comic book is not that marriage is bad". Ever since Fasiki started organizing workshops to help Moroccan women, she noticed that many women fall victim to the belief that "a woman should put her husband first". Thus, many women leave their jobs before they get married, which leads to them being financially dependent on their husbands. However, after they get divorced, they end up regretting that decision, which is why Fasiki encourages "girls to stay financially independent because life is unreliable". Due to this fact, Fasiki used a successful character, one who is ready to give up her profession to build a life. Yet, after getting married, the first image that *Super*

Khadija is portrayed in is as a housewife, which highlights the societal expectations that exist in Morocco, although Super Khadija is a powerful superhero.

In conclusion, Mohammed El Bellaoui and Zainab Fasiki are among many Moroccan artists who are using their platform not only to highlight the objectification and sexism that Moroccan women struggle through daily, but also to start a resistance against gender relations that exist in Morocco. While Fasiki confronts objectification through nudity and frontal confrontation, El Bellaoui confronts these social norms through humor and role reversal. Thus, by analyzing these two comic books and interviewing the two comic artists, the researcher was able to prove the hypothesis that claims that comic art is a new form of women's resistance in patriarchal societies.

### ***Mixed-Method Questionnaire***

Research methods are a confusing aspect of research, as scholars are often hesitant about whether to choose one or the other. This hesitation stems from the belief that every method has its strengths and weaknesses. This article adapted a mixed-method questionnaire to allow for an in-depth analysis of the results from the participants. While a qualitative questionnaire enables the researcher to ask participants deep questions without limiting them to choosing from multiple-choice options, its disadvantages include the fact that the data is more rigid and difficult to analyze, as it represents individual perspectives. As for the quantitative questionnaire, its advantages vary from the fact that the answers are easy to analyze, which means that it represents reliable data; however, this latter means that the gathered data is limited and not as in-depth as the qualitative data is. Due to this, the researcher chose to use a mixed-method questionnaire as it allows them to use only the advantages of these different methods.

Thus, the researcher collected data that answers the 'what', 'when', and 'how' questions, the quantitative method, and the 'why' questions, from the qualitative method. The questionnaire consists of ten questions, which consist of seven closed-ended questions (yes/no questions, or multiple-choice questions), and three open-ended questions. The analysis of this mixed-method questionnaire is based on the responses and perspectives of 101 Moroccans, whose ages vary from 18 to 36. The participants consist of 58.4% (58) males, 38.6% (40) females, 2% (2) prefer not to say, and 1% (1) non-binary. This variety of participants allows the researcher to analyze the different perspectives and views of Moroccan society. This questionnaire aims to prove that comic art carries elements that perpetuate the status quo of inequality and dependence between men and women in Moroccan society. The researcher organized the questionnaire into two sections, each of which focused on generating specific information from the participant.

### ***Section One: Preference of Participants***

The first section focused on eliciting information about the preference of the participants concerning the costume that suits a superhero and superheroine, as well as their abilities (superpowers) and the reason behind their choice. Through asking these questions in the first section, the researcher can analyze the perspective of both genders towards the representation of a superhero and its difference from the representation of a superheroine.

- Choose your favorite superhero among these heroes (item one). Participants are asked to justify their answers
- What power best suits a male superhero? (item two)
- What does your ideal superheroine suit look like? (item three)
- Choose your favorite superheroine among these heroes (item four). Participants are asked to justify their answers.
- What power best suits a superheroine? (item five)
- What does your ideal superheroine suit look like? (item six)

### ***Section Two: Participants' Point of View***



The second section consisted of closed-ended questions that revolved around the research questions and focused solely on analyzing the participants' perspectives on comic art as a tool of resistance. This section focused on the following questions:

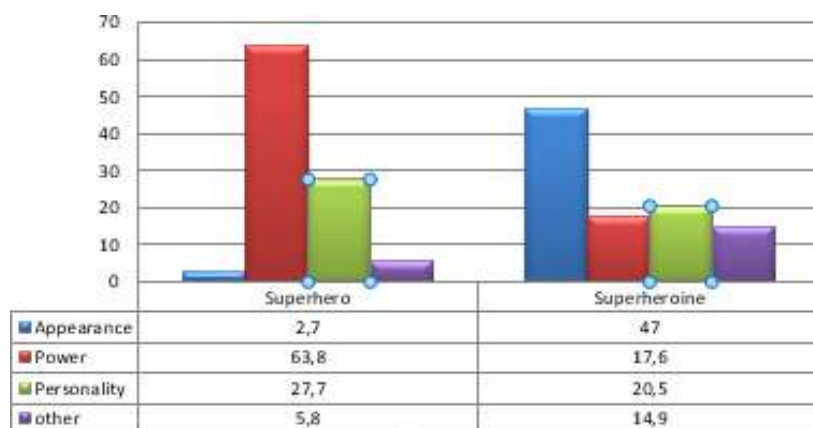
- Do you think that comic books are becoming more inclusive? (item seven)
- The notion that 'sex sells' exists in ads, do you think that it exists in comic books too? (item eight)

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

A comic book hero is defined by his/her appearance, power, and most of all, by their costume. Due to this, the researcher examines whether the appearance of a superheroine plays a role in her objectification. To prove the latter, the researcher asked the participants to:

- Choose your favorite superhero/superheroine among these heroes (multiple-choice question with the ability to choose 'other').
- Why did you choose him/her?

**Figure 2 The number of participants for each theme**



The researcher chose these two questions because the first allows the participant to reveal information about the preference of the participants concerning their favorite superhero/superheroine, and the second gives an in-depth answer to the reason behind the participant's choice of preference. Based on the answers to the second question, the researcher split the responses into themes, namely appearance, power, personality, and others. The researcher gave the participants the ability to choose whether to answer these questions, which resulted in a bias in the research. For the first question, only 60 participants answered, which means that there were 41 who did not answer. As for the second question, 88 participants answered, which means that 13 participants did not answer.

The researcher concluded from the responses that for the male superhero, 63.8% of participants focused mostly on power when it came to choosing their favorite superhero. And, when asked why they chose that specific superhero, most of the responses say it is "because he is the strongest superhero." As for the female superhero, the participants focused on the appearance of the superheroine. The responses varied from "she is sexy" to "she is feminine." And, in the case that the participant chose power, they specified that the superheroine is strong for a woman. Thus, this highlights the fact that female characters are favored because of their appearance, while male characters are favored because of their power.

### **Quantitative Data Analysis**

To examine further whether there is a gender imbalance when it comes to categorizing powers, the researcher asked the participants questions concerning which superpower best suits a male superhero and a female superhero. Both of these separate questions provide the same responses and give the respondent the

ability to add another response. Through using this table, the researcher was able to examine whether Moroccan participants believe that there is a relationship between the gender of the superhero and their power. Strength as power is often linked with male superheroes, as men are often associated with their physical attributes. This latter is the reason why 73.3% of the Moroccan participants chose strength as the power that best suits male superheroes, and only 12.8% of these participants opted for strength as the power that best suits female superheroes. This belief is the result of living in a male-dominated society, such as Morocco, where men are expected to be strong and hide their emotions, and women are viewed as emotional and vulnerable.

|       |          | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------|----------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid | neutral  | 14        | 13,9    | 13,9          | 13,9               |
|       | agree    | 78        | 77,2    | 77,2          | 91,1               |
|       | disagree | 9         | 8,9     | 8,9           | 100,0              |
|       | Total    | 101       | 100,0   | 100,0         |                    |

**Table 1 : the Number of Participants for Each Answer**

While male characters are often given highly physical powers, less physical powers are more characterized among female characters. This highlights the fact that comic artists tend to focus more on thought-induced powers, namely telepathy, mind control, and invisibility. This is represented through the data from Table 1, as selected 58.4%

|                            | Power of Superhero |    |    |      |       | Power of Superheroine |    |   |      |       |
|----------------------------|--------------------|----|----|------|-------|-----------------------|----|---|------|-------|
|                            | F                  | M  | NB | PNTA | P     | F                     | M  | N | PNTA | P     |
| Strength                   | 31                 | 42 | 0  | 1    | 73.3% | 5                     | 7  | 1 | 0    | 12.8% |
| Invisibility               | 3                  | 3  | 1  | 0    | 6.9%  | 6                     | 12 | 0 | 1    | 18.8% |
| Telepathy/<br>Mind Control | 4                  | 11 | 0  | 0    | 14.8% | 25                    | 33 | 0 | 1    | 58.4% |
| Other                      | 1                  | 1  | 0  | 0    | 1.9%  | 3                     | 2  | 0 | 0    | 4.9%  |

telepathy/mind control, and 18.8% selected invisibility as the top preferred powers that best suit female superheroes.

Thus, the researcher concludes that there is an obvious gender imbalance when it comes to categorizing powers and that the power of a superhero is one of the elements that perpetuate the status quo of inequality and dependence between men and women. This latter is highlighted by the fact that the males, females, and non-binary participants all picked the answers that reinforce the gender stereotypes that exist in male-dominated societies, i.e., men are expected to be strong, and women are expected to be attractive and emotional.

### **Preliminary Data Analysis**

To analyze the second part of the quantitative part of the questionnaire, which revolves around proving that costumes are an element that perpetuates the status quo of inequality and dependence between men and

women, the researcher used IBM SPSS and Microsoft Excel to analyze the gathered data. Before proceeding with the statistical analyses, the researcher conducted a data screening. The latter is a process that is used to scan for errors because data has to be screened to ensure correct results.

**Table 1 Do you think that the notion that "sex sells" exists in comic books?**

|       |                                                | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------|------------------------------------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid | Corset and skin-tight leather skirt, and heels | 48        | 47,5    | 47,5          | 47,5               |
|       | Form-fitting flexible jumpsuit                 | 53        | 52,5    | 52,5          | 100,0              |
|       | Total                                          | 101       | 100,0   | 100,0         |                    |

**Table 3 How does your ideal superheroine suit look like?**

Through employing the frequencies procedure, these tables show that there are no missing observations. As for data, by checking whether the percent row equals the valid percent row, the researcher was able to ensure that the data was free of error.

### ***PoPreliminary Data Analysis***

To prove that the superhero costume is one of the elements that perpetuate the status quo of inequality between men and women, the researcher used the technique of linear regression, which is an extension of correlation. This technique allows the researcher to investigate the nature of the relationship between two variables. Thus, the researcher chose to use VAR00007 as the dependent variable and VAR00008 as the independent variable. To explain further, this calculation examines the connection between the dependent and independent variables, and in this case, it examines whether sexualization is what relates to VAR00007 and VAR00008.

- VAR00007: How does your ideal superhero dress?
- VAR00008: Does the notion of "sex sells" exist in comic books?

However, before employing this technique, the researcher had to either accept or reject the null hypothesis. The null hypothesis states that variation X (sex sells) is unrelated to variation Y (superheroine costume); this means that the slope is equal to zero. Therefore, the alternative hypothesis states that variation X (sex sells) is related to variation Y (superheroine costume), which means that the slope is not zero.

- % Ho:  $B_1 = 0$
- % Ha:  $B_1 \neq 0$

| Table 4: | Model | Unstandardized Coefficients |            | Standardized Coefficients | t     | Sig.  | The Coefficients |
|----------|-------|-----------------------------|------------|---------------------------|-------|-------|------------------|
|          |       | B                           | Std. Error | Beta                      |       |       |                  |
| Table    | 1     | (Constant)                  | .376       | .254                      | 1.481 | .142  |                  |
|          |       | VAR00008                    | .496       | .093                      | .474  | 5.363 |                  |

a. Dependent Variable: VAR00007

To reject or accept the null hypothesis, the researcher ran a linear regression test to check whether the Level of Significance was higher or lower than the P-value. The P-value is the probability that the null hypothesis is true. If the p-value is lower than alpha (level of significance), then the researcher concludes that there is a statistically significant difference between the variants. In this research, the researcher chose 1% as the Level of Significance. This means that if:

- $P < 0.01$ : There is a statistically significant difference between the variants.
- $P > 0.01$ : There is no statistically significant difference between the variants.

The P-value of the output is .000, which means that not only is the  $P < 0.05$ , but also means that the results are highly significant, thus the null hypothesis is rejected. Moreover, there is a statistically significant difference between variation X (sex sales) and variation Y superheroine costume).

| Model | R                 | R Square | Adjusted R Square | Std. Error of the Estimate |
|-------|-------------------|----------|-------------------|----------------------------|
| 1     | .474 <sup>a</sup> | .225     | .217              | .64702                     |

a. Predictors: (Constant), VAR00008

**Table 5: Regression between ideal superhero costume and the notion that “sex sells”**

After rejecting the null hypothesis, the researcher analyzed the strength of the relationship between the two variables. Therefore, the researcher concludes that the relationship between variation X (sex sells) and variation Y (superheroine costume) is moderate to relatively strong. This latter is concluded from the fact that the correlation  $r$  equals .4, which is considered moderate to relatively strong. Through investigating the relationship between these two variables, the researcher can link it to the fact that the appearance of the superhero is linked to whether the comic book is accepted by the consumers.

The notion that “sex sells” has been used for centuries to attract the attention of the viewer. For example, during the golden era, comic artists created characters, specifically female characters, based on the needs of white heterosexual male consumers. This strategy is the reason behind the fact that most superheroines are still being oversexualized. Objectification and hypersexualization are especially seen through their costumes because the costumes can be showcased on the front page, which in turn attracts the attention of the male consumers. Thus, through this analysis, the researcher has proven that a superheroine’s costume perpetuates the status quo of inequality as it encourages men to look at women like objects.

Therefore, the researcher concludes that the third hypothesis, which states that comic art carries elements that perpetuate the status quo of inequality and dependence between men and women, is proven to be true. Costumes, powers, and appearances are elements that play a role in perpetuating the status quo of

inequality and dependence between men and women, where women are seen as inferior, subordinate, and a sexual object born to please and fulfill the needs of men, the opposite of men, who are taught to be strong, invulnerable, in a position of power.

## Conclusion

“The visual arts matter because they are about resistance, celebration, and transformation,” Teresa Torres de Eça (Inge,1990). This thesis examined how comic artists have been using this platform as a new tool of resistance against gender relations. The latter was done by answering.

- Can comics function as an artistic form of resistance for women in a male-dominated society like Morocco?
- Does comic art perpetuate the status quo of inequality and dependence between the two genders in Moroccan society?

Moroccan comic artists are using their comic books as a new form of women’s resistance in patriarchal societies. Mohammed El Bellaoui and Zainab Fasiki are among many Moroccan artists who are using their platform not only to highlight the objectification and sexism that Moroccan women struggle through daily, but also to start a resistance against gender relations that exist in Morocco. Through using strong female characters, Super Khadija and Aziza, they are shedding light on the forms of misrepresentation that exist in Moroccan media, which in turn affect the mentality and expectations that Moroccan girls grow accustomed to.

To conclude, future research will require taking note of some of the limits of this thesis. The phrase “comic book industry” for some participants seemed problematic. One opinion was that Moroccan people viewed comic books as a form of entertainment for children. Thus, this research allowed me to legitimize this art form to the participants as not only a book made for the entertainment of children, but as a form of documenting history, and a tool of resistance against the gender relations that exist in Moroccan society.

I, being part of the population that misunderstood the importance of comics, learned through my research that comics have deep roots in the history of the arts. Through this research, I hope to contribute to this thesis by resisting the gender roles that exist in Moroccan society. While these findings are preliminary, there is substantial material for further research. Focusing on unmasking the influence that television animation has on the mentality of children, i.e., the gender imbalance that exists in Moroccan television, presents a potential question to explore in the future.

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