

# Reaffirming the Critical Role of Transformative Research and Knowledge Production in the Age of Post-Truth



## DEFINE FEMININE, I'M FEMININE: A Comparative Analysis of Female Character Designs Created Through the Male and Female Gaze

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**Abstract:** The study intends to analyze how character designs are affected by their creators, target audience, and intentions in order to further understand the male gaze theory and, consequently, what it looks like in comparison to the female gaze. The researcher intends to use visual semiotic analysis in analyzing 3 characters from a film, animation, and video game that were initially created through the male gaze, and later revisited in the female gaze. These designs are the subject for determining what factors of character designs the gazes affect. The results of this study were then translated into a set of 8 digital mockup designs for a mural art collection, which incorporate both semi-realism and graffiti-style elements in portraying its subjects. Aiming to combat the misrepresentation of female characters in the entertainment industry and the real-life consequences it has on both young men and women, the intended impact of the artwork is to be an opportunity for self reflection to both consumers and creators of media regarding how they perceive and create female characters. The study also aims to bring to light the importance of the female gaze in creating empowering female characters, promoting the demand for female executives in the entertainment industry to surface.

**Keywords:** female gaze; male gaze; character design; mural; feminism

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Background of the Research Project

Sexism is prevalent in many different industries, and the sexism in the entertainment industry roots back to the earliest of productions, where women were not given roles at all, not even for playing female characters (Aravamudan). To this day, the entertainment industry remains greatly male-dominated and, therefore, catered towards men. According to the 2018 USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, out of the 1,223 directors who worked in the industry over 11 years, only 4.3 percent were female (Smith et al.). The video game industry, although with more positive results, has a proportion of women in the workforce standing at 22 percent of the workforce (Women in Games France). The USC Annenberg

Inclusion Initiative also released a study in 2019 regarding inclusion in the animation industry, wherein their findings state that women comprise around half of animation executive roles and other powerful positions in major film animation companies (Smith et al.). Due to these inequalities, however, women are usually misrepresented in the media as female characters are written through the thoughts and experiences of men. These misrepresentations promote objectification and impossible beauty standards, which often affects young women by making them more prone to depression, eating disorders, and rape (Flores). At the same time, young men are fed this unrealistic perception of women serving as beautiful and attractive eye candy, and forget that there is more to them than their physical appearance.

This lack of proper female representation in executive areas of the industry has perpetuated what Laura Mulvey coined as the male gaze in her essay Visual Pleasure

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and Narrative Cinema. Essentially, men writing, making, starring in, and patronizing films are factors that work together in pushing a collective—heterosexual male—view on female characters. The male gaze objectifies women in stories, instead of focusing on their individuality or character development, it minimizes them into eye candy for the male viewer through their visual appearance and their role in the plot. Mulvey's essay, however, gave rise to a term for a perspective wherein women are the ones telling the story through their lens: the female gaze. In the female gaze, all characters are seen as people with depth; they have feelings and intelligence. Furthermore, the entertainment does not focus on the characters' visuals, but on the audience's emotional connection to them.

Although many studies have analyzed different media from the entertainment industry through the framework of Mulvey's male gaze, they traditionally highlight how the male gaze affects female characters as a whole: their personalities, roles, presentation, framing, et cetera. There is a lack of investigations that look in-depth into how the male gaze affects characters' designs specifically. Additionally, the studies that do highlight the designs of female characters created under the female gaze look into how these characters differ from other female characters created through the male gaze. It's possible that the distinctions between these studies' compared characters are brought on by their various backgrounds or personalities rather than by the difference between the male and female gaze. Hence, this present study aims to focus on only the character design element of the female characters being affected by the male gaze. It also analyzes a female character from film, animation, and video games that was originally created through the male gaze, but has been recently updated with the female gaze. This removes the possibility that the difference in the characters' designs are due to personality differences, as the characters being compared are the same person.

## 1.2. Objectives of the Research

To combat this misrepresentation and the real-life consequences it has on both young men and women, the present study compares film, animation, and video game character designs initially created by men versus the redesigns created by women, so that creators and audiences may become more aware of what female representation with a greater degree of authenticity looks like. This shall be done by accomplishing the following objectives:

1. Reveal how the female gaze affects the design of characters designed initially through the male gaze.
2. Categorize elements of character design can be improved by designers to create more accurate and diverse female characters.
3. Determine how public art can contribute to the awareness of the male gaze's distorted visual idea of women.
4. Illustrate character design based on the idea of women without the element of male gaze.
5. Reflect on the difference and similarities of female characters portrayed by men (affected by male gaze) and female character design in the lens of women.
6. Create an artwork that will represent female character designs dissociated from the effects of the male gaze.

## 1.3. Scope and Limitations

The study intends to analyze how character designs are affected by their creators, target audience, and intentions in order to further understand the male gaze theory and, consequently, what it looks like in comparison to the female gaze. Additionally, the negative impacts of the male gaze will also be discussed to show the importance of proper female representation in the entertainment industry. These results will then be translated into a proposed set of 8 digital murals.

The researcher's chosen mode of collecting and analyzing data is visual semiotic analysis, wherein one character's designs will be analyzed from under 3 different types of media: animation, video games, and movies. The designs are the subject for comparing the gazes, as the designs being analyzed are of one character that has been created with the male gaze initially and later revisited using the female gaze. Essentially, the character designs are categorized to be under the male gaze if they were written or directed by a creator assigned male at birth and, conversely, fall under the female gaze if they were later re-written by a creator assigned female at birth. The designs from the chosen media will be viewed through various methods, such as viewing the media through Netflix and analyzing available concept art or character sheets of the chosen media. Through the results presented during the data gathering, the researcher will list a total of eight prominent differences presented when designs created under the male gaze are compared to that of the female gaze. Through semi-realism muralism, these eight themes will each be the central focus of one mural design, for a total of

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eight mural designs. As the mural aims to inspire self reflection in those who consume media on a regular basis, its target audience will mainly be those with access to the internet or are otherwise marketed towards by mainstream media platforms. No other data sources or data collection methods will be used. In terms of limitations, the study will be conducted throughout the course of the academic year 2022-2023, and despite the current protocols regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, the research will not be affected due to its online nature.

## 1.4. Significance of the Study

Generally, the art output provides an opportunity for self-reflection and awareness. For creatives, especially those who create and design characters, this artwork could help them reflect on whether or not the female characters they create are realistic. For the general public, the artwork could help them reflect on their perception of what a woman should be or look like, and bring awareness to the underrepresentation of women in the entertainment industry. In both cases, it is possible that they are consciously or unconsciously perpetuating these harmful ideas or stereotypes brought by the male gaze, as it is a very dominant influence in the media. Overall, the aim of the work draws from the concept of female empowerment, which encourages giving women an equal platform to voice their thoughts and experiences to raise their social and economical status (Purnamawathi, 121). Through its message, the work raises awareness so that as the masses become more knowledgeable about the social struggles women face, in turn, the creative industry will further realize the demand for gender-diverse and accurate representation, as previous research has shown that audiences are much more attracted to shows that represent their identities (Ellithorpe & Bleakley, 1433-1434). Essentially, this awareness of oppression in male-dominated spaces will initiate self-mobilization inside the creative industry and its audiences (Purnamawathi, 122), which is what ultimately creates the empowerment this mural aims to work towards. As for the academic community, this study aims to add to the current knowledge surrounding the male and female gaze by focusing on a relatively unexplored element of media, character design. Although the concept of the male gaze has been established for some time, the female gaze is relatively newer, less explored, and a source of discourse in gender and media studies. This study and artwork can also serve as a basis for future research and discourse regarding the topic, especially for those who wish to explore the male and female gaze outside of film.

## 2. THE PROCESS

### 2.1. Methodology

The study uses a qualitative research design: content analysis. Maier (242) describes content analysis as a method usually used in communication research and is popular amongst studies regarding media and pop culture because of its descriptive nature, specializing in describing phenomena in communication. In the context of this research, this method will be used to interpret the characteristics of the chosen character designs attributed to the male and female gaze. This style of research is apt to the study because it aims to analyze female character designs and what it may be visually communicating to its audiences. The researcher will analyze 6 different collections of character designs from 3 different types of media: animations, movies, and video games. From each of these types, one collection will have been created through the male gaze, while its counterpart is a later version of the design reimaged through the female gaze. This will provide the main opportunity of comparison between the two gazes (See Table 1).

Table 1

Character designs to be analyzed

Media Type	Media Title	Character
Animation	She-Ra: Princess of Power (1985) She-Ra and the Princesses of Power (2018)	Adora/She-Ra
Movies	Suicide Squad (2016) Harley Quinn: Birds of Prey (2020)	Harley Quinn
Video Game	League of Legends (2012) Arcane: League of Legends (2021)	Violet/Vi

Specifically, the methodology for analyzing the data will derive from visual semiotic analysis. Put simply, Rose (69) describes semiotics as the study of signs, wherein its main goal is to analyze and describe meanings being produced through an image. To analyze the chosen character designs, the

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researcher will be utilizing questions that Aiello (374) listed in his book *Visual Semiotics: Key Concepts and New Directions*:

1. What is the representational meaning of an image or set of images?
2. What is the interactive meaning of an image or set of images?
3. What is the compositional meaning of an image or set of images?

## 2.2. The Art Concept

The artist's conceptualized work, *Define Feminine, I'm Feminine* will be a set of 8 digital mockup designs for a mural art collection, which will incorporate both semi-realism and graffiti-style elements in portraying its subjects. Public art was chosen as a medium for its relevance in many activist movements, making it a key tool for advocating for social change (Ratzlaff). Public art encompasses many different forms of art, however, the artist wishes to make use of mural art specifically due to its past. Historically, muralism has been seen as an art form performed by men, as they believed only men could provide the "physical and intellectual prowess" needed to paint walls (Latorre 101). By using a mural as the medium, the art form can be reclaimed as a platform for women to be heard. Furthermore, murals were also used as a way for an artist to publicly express an important message to the masses. The designs will all be based on the findings of the artist after analyzing and comparing the designs of female protagonists in prominent animations, movies, and video games based on whether they were created through the male or female gaze. To cater to the target audience the artist proposes for the artistic work to be displayed on sidewalks and other public buildings in urban areas with considerable foot traffic. Its proportions are proposed to be life-sized, meaning the height of the murals' human subjects will be proportioned similarly to its audience, rooting them into the viewers' reality.

The artist drew inspiration from multiple different visual studies. Firstly, Nate Frizzel's public art series collection titled 'We Are What We Pretend to Be' and standalone public art 'Charlotte' are the core inspirations for the artist's proposed artwork (see Figures 1-4). Its use of hyper-realism mixed with flat spray paint is a technique that the artist wishes to recreate to achieve the same sense of seriousness yet whimsy in the work. Another source of inspiration comes from Agnes Grochulska's painting series titled 'The Outline Series' (see Figures 5-7). The artist wishes

to recreate the same semi-realism style that is not too polished, with visible brush strokes to add texture to the work. Additionally, the aforementioned technique of combining 3D elements (subject) with flat elements (background and outline) is also seen in her works. Tatyana Fazlalizadeh's 'Stop telling women to smile' project, on the other hand, demonstrates the use of bold statements accompanied by drawn portraits of real female subjects to address gender-based harassment (see Figures 8-10). The works' statements directly speak to harassers, almost as if the work had just caught someone in the act, an element that the artist wishes to incorporate into their work to achieve the same jarring effect. Finally, the Guerilla Girls' works use this element of bold statements to caption their public art as well. Specifically, this first poster by the collective called 'Dearest Art Collector' was made in resemblance of a handwritten letter, making use of pink, rounded cursive, and a small flower drawing as an allegory to how society wants women to present themselves and their ideas (see Figure 11). The artist aims to use this handwritten aesthetic while similarly using conventionally 'girly' elements to play on what society has defined as femininity.

The artwork is conceptualized to be digital, meaning no materials or mediums will be necessary in its creation. The illustration of these designs will be created solely in Procreate, using the A3 paper size with 300 dpi.

## 2.3. Related Literature and Works

Visual semiotic analysis has been used for similar purposes in other feminism-based research. One such example is Qiao and Wang (35), who used visual and verbal cues to analyze a prominent cosmetics campaign in China, finding that despite its message of empowering women, many of the visual signs in the campaign further push harmful gender roles and beauty standards on women.

The use of public art as a tool for activism also has extensive history in the feminist movement. One such notable example of this is in the Guerilla Girls' works. Their key works publicly call out specific big names and galleries with the intent to spark change in inclusivity through colorful visuals and hard statistics, with the most iconic one titled 'Do Women Have to Be Naked to Get Into the Met. Museum?' The Guerilla Girls' objective of calling out men in power in the name of inclusivity and diversity in an industry that roots in communication with the masses largely reflects the goal of the artist, who aims to focus on calling out the distorted idea that



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men paint of women in the media. Muralism, by nature, transforms a space by translating its message into action towards change, whether cultural, political, social, economic, or educational (Quest for Identity 69). An example of this in the Philippine context is an article by Guazon (14), proposing that Philippine urban public art is an effective channel for “recentering” cities and the people who live in them. They serve as a way to alternatively view the city in a way that fractures and shifts over time according to the dominant representations of the city at that time, its strength lies in its direct interaction and dialogue with the community.

## 2.4. Ethical Considerations

Following the De La Salle University Operational Guidelines and Code of Research Ethics, the researcher upholds firstly the principle of excellence, as they are dedicated to use the research period as an opportunity to further their skills and understanding in order to ensure the quality of both their research manuscript and their art output. The researcher also upholds beneficence and non-maleficence in the creation of the research, as it is created with the intention of bettering the understanding of the male and female gaze, for the betterment of the media industry’s inclusivity and to add to the discourse surrounding the phenomenon. Furthermore, the researcher upholds the principle of truth, assuring that the research is rooted in real findings, with no fabrication or manipulation of the data collected and presented. As the data collection method of the proposed artwork will be content analysis, the researcher assures the media that will be analyzed are derived from official, verified sources. The researcher will also ensure all of the content that may potentially be in the work are licensed or permitted to be used, including fonts and reference photos. Finally, the researcher also upholds the principle of zeal and growth in their research, as the experiences and knowledge gained throughout the research will aid in the researcher’s professional journey and growth as a Lasallian student and aspiring animator in the media industry.

## 3. THE ARTWORK/ CREATIVE WORK

### 3.1. The Artist’s Worldview

The presence of the skewed portrayal of womanhood and femininity in media is undeniable given the

statistics, research, and other aforementioned data. The artist realized this phenomenon growing up as someone assigned female at birth, finding that it was difficult to resonate with many female protagonists. Commonly, female characters were one-dimensional and fit unrealistic beauty standards. The artist later found that years of consuming media with these portrayals of women contributed to certain insecurities, internally misogynistic beliefs, and low self esteem. Because of this, the artist strongly believes in the importance of changing how the media portrays women, creating empowering characters for young minds to grow with. Additionally, as an aspiring animator there is also a valid reason for the researcher to want awareness and change in the industry, as it unfairly favors the thoughts, stories, and perception of straight men. Furthermore, as a feminist, the artist stands for equality between the sexes. This definitively means the artist believes all genders’ stories must be given the same importance and quality of representation. The researcher acknowledges that their life experiences, career path, and position as a feminist may pose a bias in the research, however, the artist also believes their background offers a more in-depth understanding of the issue at hand.

### 3.2. Details of the Artwork

The digital mural mockup designs consist of 8 artworks each tackling one of 8 themes of female representation in media that is affected by whether the content was created through the male or female gaze. These include: (1) The Sexualization of Women, wherein after analyzing the character designs, the researcher found that female characters created through the male gaze were more sexualized despite the character’s role in the plot. The mural makes use of the real-life phenomenon wherein young school girls are sexualized through their uniforms to demonstrate this in a relatable way, contrasting the visuals of a sexualized uniform in an advertisement versus the “real life” school girls passing by (see Figure 12). (2) Queerness, wherein the analysis of the character designs showed that the female gaze was more inclined to revisiting female characters through a queer lens, promoting characters whose romantic relationships do not revolve around men. To demonstrate this in a mural, the artist pointed out the heteronormativity of the male gaze through an advertisement showcasing “gendered” multivitamins, with one presenting as the “male” and “female” in the “relationship” (see Figure 13). This is contrasted with the more realistic illustration of two students in a relationship. (3) Dependence

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on Men, wherein the analysis of the character designs found that under the male gaze, female characters were much more centered around their male counterparts compared to the female gaze. The mural highlights the idea of women existing for their male counterparts through an advertisement implying that a woman should buy coffee for her husband, contrasted by a woman in smart-casual clothing holding a coffee for herself (see Figure 14). (4) Character Depth, wherein the analysis of how the characters were conceptualized showed most female characters under the male gaze had one-dimensional personalities or personas, instead of being developed into well-rounded characters like in their reimagined female gaze versions. This shallow understanding of womanhood is illustrated in a problematic advertisement for a gym, dictating how women should look in terms of their body (see Figure 15). Contrasting this is a realistic woman whose body, by the advertisement's standards, is not "womanly", however, looking further than her body, one could say she embodies a major facet of womanhood: she is a mother. (5) Body Type Diversity, wherein analyzing the characters designs in terms of body type, the female gaze is much more open to diverse representation of body shapes and sizes, revisiting these characters with more realistic proportions depending on their age, occupation, and other facets of their character. This difference is illustrated in how many clothing advertisements market their trendy clothing with the same slim figure models, when clothes should be both modelled to all, regardless of body type (see Figure 16). (6) Masculinity, wherein media created under the female gaze actively represents traditionally masculine-presenting or masculine traits in their female characters. In designs, these are most seen in the clothing style of the character designs, where female characters under the male gaze appear in skimpy, form fitting outfits despite being in combat, whereas the female gaze takes into consideration the character's situation, if pants would be more fitting to their occupation or needs (see Figure 17). (7) Femininity, wherein, in relation to the topic of dependance on men, and sexualization, the analysis of the character designs showed the male gaze created female characters with very curvy designs, showing their legs and cleavage in traditionally feminine clothing for the pleasure of the male audience, while the female gaze uses femininity as a form of empowerment in characters being able to choose what they wear according to their wants. Similarly to the dependance on men mural, this work also makes use of an advertisement urging women to wear a high waisted skirt because men would like it, contrasted with a woman who wears the skirt who makes it known that she is wearing it for herself, not approval from men (see Figure

18). (8) Female Relationships, wherein, in relation to the topic of dependence on men and queerness in female characters, the male gaze lacks representation of healthy female friendships, with many media following the trope of women competing with one another over, usually, male approval, which is directly referenced in the mural itself (see Figure 19).

Due to the mural mockup's nature as a collection, an eye-catching yet cohesive style is necessary. To achieve the artist's desired message, the work centered heavily on simple symbolism through its central elements. A spray paint style effect was used as an allegory to women taking back the narrative, using the female gaze to correct the male gaze. To add the element of contrast, the flat texture of spray paint will be juxtaposed to the semi-realism technique used on the main subjects: the women in the murals. This technique of mixing flat elements with 3D serves as a way to (1) make the female subject stand out in the work, (2) subtly portray the importance of emphasizing realistic female characters over unrealistic ones, and (3) indirectly root the female subjects in the viewer's reality. In summary, these juxtapositions focus more on connecting and applying these themes to the audience's real life.

### 3.3. Impact of the Artistic Work

In analyzing the chosen character designs, the researcher found 8 main ways that the female gaze affects the design of characters initially created through the male gaze, namely the (1) Sexualization of Women, (2) Queerness, (3) Dependence on Men, (4) Character Depth, (5) Body Type Diversity, (6) Masculinity, (7) Femininity, and (8) Female Relationships. This was done through the analysis of the differences and similarities seen in female characters created by men, and those created by non-men. Through the creation of the artwork, the researcher was able to reveal how character design can be improved by revisiting these with the female gaze, and therefore was able to illustrate what character design could look like without the male gaze. Furthermore, the artist found that using a mural as their medium could efficiently represent the comparison between the two gazes without audiences having any pre-formed knowledge of the topic through relatable symbolism. This is key to being able to raise awareness on the issue of how the male gaze in media has proliferated a distorted view on women through the problematic female characters they create.

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## 6. APPENDIX/ LIST OF IMAGES

**Fig. 1.** *We Are What We Pretend to Be Part 1* from: Frizzel, Nate. 2015. <https://www.bgcartscenter.org/murals/we-are-what-we-pretend-to-be-pt-1>



**Fig. 2.** *We Are What We Pretend to Be Part 3* from: Frizzel, Nate. 2015. <https://www.bgcartscenter.org/murals/we-are-what-we-pretend-to-be-pt-3>



**Fig. 3.** *We Are What We Pretend to Be Part 4* from: Frizzel, Nate. 2015. <https://www.bgcartscenter.org/murals/we-are-what-we-pretend-to-be-pt-4>



**Fig. 4.** *Charlotte* from: Frizzel, Nate. 2016. <https://www.bgcartscenter.org/murals/charlotte>



**Fig. 5.** *The Outline Series - A Quiet Portrait* from: Grochulska, Agnes. 2020. <http://www.agnesgrochulska.com/the-outline-series>



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**Fig. 6.** *The Outline Series - Portrait with Aquamarine Outline* from: Grochulska, Agnes. 2020.  
<http://www.agnesgrochulska.com/the-outline-series>



**Fig. 7.** *The Outline Series - Midday (Portrait with Blue Outline #4)* from: Grochulska, Agnes. 2020.  
<http://www.agnesgrochulska.com/the-outline-series>



**Fig. 8.** *Portrait of Dean, Atlanta* from: Fazlalizadeh, Tatyana. 2014.  
<http://stoptellingwomentosmile.com/Portrait-Subjects>



**Fig. 9.** *Portrait of Nirali, Atlanta* from: Fazlalizadeh, Tatyana. 2013.  
<http://stoptellingwomentosmile.com/Portrait-Subjects>



**Fig. 10.** *Portrait of Nikki, Philadelphia* from: Fazlalizadeh, Tatyana. 2012.  
<http://stoptellingwomentosmile.com/Portrait-Subjects>



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Fig. 11. Dearest Art Collector from: Guerilla Girls. 1986. <https://www.guerrillagirls.com/projects>

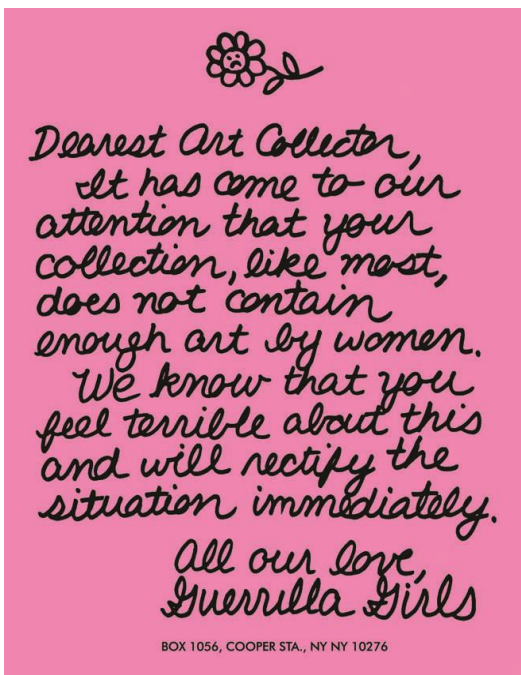
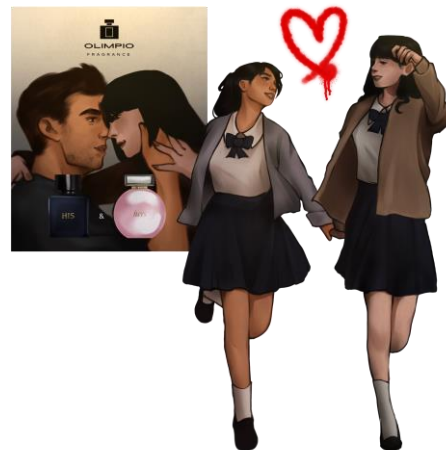


Fig. 12. Mural 1: Sexualization of Women.



Fig. 13. Mural 2: Queerness in Female Characters.



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Fig. 14. Mural 3: Dependence on Men.



Fig. 15. Mural 4: Character Depth.



Fig. 17. Mural 6: Masculinity.



Fig. 16. Mural 5: Body Type Diversity.

Fig. 18. Mural 7: Femininity.



# Reaffirming the Critical Role of Transformative Research and Knowledge Production in the Age of Post-Truth



Fig. 19. Mural 8: Female Relationships.

