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Visual Rhetoric in Comics: The Rhetoric of Sexual Assault in the Wake of Mattress Girl

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ABSTRACT

VISUAL RHETORIC IN COMICS: THE RHETORIC OF SEXUAL ASSAULT IN THE WAKE OF MATTRESS GIRL

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Northern Illinois University, 2019
Amy Newman, Director

This thesis analyzes the visual rhetoric of sexual assault through the unique medium of web-based comics composed by noncommercial artists. The focus was on features compiled from Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics* and Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen’s *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, as well as one related to representation of those involved in sexual assault: abusers and survivors, art style, act and gaze, size of frame and social distance, horizontal angle, and vertical angle.

This examination reveals four things about the rhetoric of sexual assault and consent in these comics. First, the comics are used as documentary-like, objective teaching tools. Second, they primarily use calls to action that demand behavioral change rather than demand overt physical action. Third, these comics fill the need for the survivor’s perspective. Finally, consent is generally passed over in favor of concentrating on the consequences of sexual assault.
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VISUAL RHETORIC IN COMICS: THE RHETORIC OF SEXUAL ASSAULT
IN THE WAKE OF MATTRESS GIRL

BY

BRIANNA MARIE BURKE
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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
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FOR THE DEGREE
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Amy Newman
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

On August 27, 2012, Emma Sulkowicz was raped in her Columbia University dorm room (Bazelon; Bogler; Fieldstadt; Maycan; Richardson; Schow; Tuttle). When university and NYPD authorities both dismissed her case, she took action into her own hands. She created an endurance performance art piece entitled *Carry That Weight* that she performed in her last semester (August 2014 to May 2015) where she carried a 50-pound Columbia University mattress around campus as a form of protest. The uniquely visual nature of her protest caught enough attention that it eventually made national news.

The performance itself was striking in that it was a visual representation of Sulkowicz’s loss and reclamation of safety (her own mattress; her safe space) and power (the power to consent; the power of autonomy). But moreover, it was a visual experience that depicted the weight of rape that survivors endure every day. Sulkowicz presented a new perspective on sexual assault and consent that invited onlookers into her world. Susan Barnes states, “It is the ability of visual images, generated through the physical eye or the mind’s eye, to communicate directly and instantaneously to the whole mind and, beyond the processes of discourse and reason, to produce the most significant effects on perceptions of reality and behavior” (22). Sulkowicz’s performance piece did exactly that: effect the perceptions of her audience via a striking, visually resonant image.
This resonance was unique to Sulkowicz’s case and has yet to be replicated. However, there are other visually unique mediums that have also been used to bring attention to social justice issues: comics, specifically web-based comics. As both performance art and comics operate similarly, I was curious as to whether or not Sulkowicz’s case became a locus point for similar outcries in a comparable medium—like the ripples produced from a rock tossed into a pond.

As such, I decided to analyze the visual rhetoric of sexual assault and consent through the unique medium of web-based comics composed by noncommercial artists with the locus point being Emma Sulkowicz’s rape and consequent Carry That Weight mattress performance. In the scope of this examination, Emma Sulkowicz’s case is a way to narrow the focus of the examination. The controversy surrounding her case and its media staying power are further reasons why this case is a good locus point for the discussion of the rhetoric of sexual assault and consent. It had enough media attention to have potentially caused an upswing in comics about sexual assault while also limiting my comic set so that I could focus on a smaller number of comics for a deeper examination.

Additionally, I wanted to examine the ways in which people address the issue of sexual assault and consent via a unique format: web-based comics composed by noncommercial artists. This format is unique in two respects. First, the individuals who create these comics are those who have a vested interest in the topic. They have enough of a stake in the conversation that they create these comics on their own time with no commercial company backing them. The only voices in their comics are their own and sometimes the voices of those who have inspired their comic’s creation, typically sexual assault survivors. As such, these individuals composed comics
from the survivor’s perspective in order to deepen their readers’ understanding of sexual assault and consent.

Second, these comics operate firmly in the field of visual rhetoric, which is the way in which images operate persuasively. These comics use visuals to persuade readers to see sexual assault from a new perspective (the survivor’s perspective). Visuals work rhetorically by operating on cultural norms and personal experiences, which means that they are meaningful and easy to understand (Barnes 100-101). Comics, though, use a combination of both images and text in one visual. In this way, they are open to operating with a greater level of rhetorical complexity while still allowing for ease of comprehension. Thus, the symbolic messages being communicated through these comics are more powerful than written rhetoric alone would do.

Due to the nature of the topic, though, I wanted to center my analysis on how these comics relate to the reader specifically and what that says about how we discuss sexual assault and consent. As such, I focus on six features. One is from my own curiosity about the survivor and abuser demographics, one is from Scott McCloud’s Understanding Comics, and the last four are from Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen’s Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design: abusers and survivors, art style, act and gaze, size of frame and social distance, horizontal angle, and vertical angle.

My analysis reveals four things about the rhetoric of sexual assault and consent. First, the comics are used as documentary-like, objective teaching tools. Second, they primarily use calls to action that demand behavioral change rather than demand overt physical action. Third, these comics fill the need for the survivor’s perspective. Fourth, consent is generally passed over in favor of concentrating on the consequences of sexual assault.
CHAPTER 2
VISUAL RHETORIC AND COMICS

To understand rhetoric is to understand the strategies and techniques of persuasion whether in speech, writing, or otherwise. Kristie Fleckenstein states that “essential to all rhetoric is vision, both in terms of a shared way of seeing and shared network of visual images” (11). Vision, thus, is an important aspect of all rhetoric—literally, mentally, and as a community.

Visual rhetoric is not so different. Roland Barthes states, “Thus the rhetoric of the image (that is to say, the classification of its connotators) is specific to the extent that it is subject to the physical constraints of vision (different, for example, from phonatory constraints) but general to the extent that the ‘figures’ are never more than formal relations of elements” (49). In simpler terms, visual rhetoric is constrained by visual limitations, but it is broad in that it uses images that are composed of signs—relations of the familiar. Visual rhetoric, then, can be loosely defined as the ways in which images persuade via visual signs, techniques, and strategies.

There are numerous ways in which images operate to get their meaning across ranging from color to framing to figure poses and much more. However, these aspects do not work on their own without any outside influence; it is, instead, outside influences that make these aspects work rhetorically: “Visual messages are not understood in isolation; instead meanings are understood in relationship to cultural experiences and individual interpretations. Interpreting a visual message involves both a personal reaction to the objects arranged in the design and an
understanding of the symbolic messages being communicated” (Barnes 100-101). In this way, visual rhetoric works based on cultural norms and personal experience.

David Carrier echoes this sentiment in relation to comics, stating that most people can understand comic strips without knowing anything apart from our cultural understanding of day-to-day life (85). This is because comic creators utilize this cultural understanding, this shared visual network, to create meaningful works that are easy to interpret despite their hidden complexity.

Comics, though highly visual, are not composed solely of images. In comics, text and images work together to create one cohesive whole. As Barbara Postema states, “Generally in comics, text and image work to complement each other, one register supplying details or information that the other register does not or cannot provide. As such, the two together tend to smooth over gaps, not create them” (82). This complementary relationship allows for ease of comprehension while also opening the door to a greater level of complexity in the message’s deliverance.

Much like language employs codes in textual creation, comics employ visual codes (Postema xvi). Images in comics can take any number of styles and forms; however, they all share the same language of signs and icons to represent what is present in the real world—places, people, objects, and even ideas. For example, representing the invisible is difficult as there is nothing concrete on which to base the representations. The representation of speed, thoughts, and even heat, however, have standard ways of representation that have been used so often and have worked so well that they are simply part of the lexicon, and the lexicon grows with every new representation that catches on: “Whenever an artist invents a new way to represent the invisible, there is always a chance that it will be picked up by other artists. If enough artists begin using


the symbol, it will enter the language for good—as many have through the years” (McCloud 129). In this way, comics create their own language, their own signs, that have become culturally accepted and understood.
CHAPTER 3
RESEARCH AND METHODS

Parameters of Research

In finding comics for my examination, I limited my search from the start of the *Carry That Weight* performance to the month following Sulkowicz’s graduation and the subsequent end of the performance (August 2012 to June 2015). This span of time was useful in gauging how people who create comics were treating sexual assault in the wake of her performance.

I limited the number of comics by concentrating on those that fall under the category of sexual assault. I searched for comics under the following search terms: “mattress girl,” “mattress girl rape,” “campus rape,” “college rape,” “rape,” “sexual assault,” and “consent.” These search terms were plugged into the social media websites Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and DeviantArt, as well as the search engines Google, Yahoo, and Bing.

I then further narrowed down the comics by selecting only the ones that have more than one panel and are web-based comics composed by noncommercial artists. Due to this selection process, twelve comics (see Table 1) were found to have met the listed criteria.
## Table 1

Summaries of the Twelve Comics (Ordered Chronologically)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Summary</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stevie Wilson</td>
<td>“Dear NY post writer”</td>
<td>The comic opens as a plea to a NY post writer to stop supporting catcalling and encouraging women to accept it. The woman writing this goes onto explain how women from a young age experience unwanted attention from grown men who then tell them it is their fault for being attractive. It does not feel good nor is it desired. Women should not have to feel lucky for not being attacked or harassed. It is about respect and not dismissing other individuals’ pain.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jim C. Hines</td>
<td>Why Sexual Assault Survivors Stay Quiet</td>
<td>The comic depicts a woman in three different scenarios: one where she states who sexually harassed her, one where she admits to being sexually assaulted without naming who did it, and one where she keeps quiet. Each scenario is accompanied by criticisms and dismissal of the problem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barry Deutsch</td>
<td>Rape and Consent—Affirmative Consent Explained</td>
<td>A man and woman are talking. The man asserts that rape is too broadly defined nowadays and questions how he should know he is not raping a woman. The female explains the nature of consent and asks why that is so hard to understand. The man implies that he has committed rape by those standards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina Burrowes</td>
<td>I’m not mad?</td>
<td>The narrator explains that some people who are sexually assaulted feel guilty. Sometimes it is a way to cope and take back control, sometimes it is a form of protection, and sometimes it is perpetuated by victim blaming and stereotypes. Moreover, it is hard to heal from assault, but with support and hard work it can be done.</td>
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<thead>
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<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Summary</th>
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<tr>
<td>Barry Deutsch</td>
<td><em>How Rape Makes Women Poorer</em></td>
<td>It is a diagram that says “start here” where a man invites a person to stay with him for a conference and follows three different scenarios. In one, a woman does not go and her story ends. In another, she goes, is raped and ends up on the streets, and gets blamed. In both scenarios the man who invited her/raped her is dismissive. The last scenario shows a man accepting the offer, going to the conference, succeeding, and finally stating he has never benefited from sexism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria Dan and Lydia Symchych</td>
<td><em>Consent Simulator 2014</em></td>
<td>A man and woman are embracing when the man asks if what they are doing is okay. The woman asserts that it feels fine and he does not have to worry. Suddenly, she exclaims about an injured foot and it is revealed that they are dancing and he has stepped on her foot.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kgbm</td>
<td><em>Sexual Assault Comic</em></td>
<td>An individual advances on a woman in a crowd. The individual slaps the woman’s butt. The woman states to the reader that even if they find her physically appealing, they are not allowed to touch her.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jen Sorenson</td>
<td>“The phone rang. It was my college rapist”</td>
<td>A woman describes how at her college in the ‘70s she met a man who drugged her soda, took her home, and raped her. She explains that due to the drugs and her hazy memories it did not feel like rape. The understanding set in later. Thirty-three years later, she got a call from her rapist who called to harass her by masturbating with her on the phone. She went on to take action by reporting him to his job and she spoke openly to her friends and children about it.</td>
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<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Summary</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Robin Banks</td>
<td><em>April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month</em></td>
<td>It states that Sexual Assault Awareness Month is April and then goes on to state statistics about sexual assault and a few contributing factors to the act. It also encourages people to learn about consent, to not criticize someone’s trauma, and to believe survivors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Walnut Bowl</td>
<td><em>How to Win the War on Sexual Assault</em></td>
<td>The narrator states that our society fails to treat sexual assault as a crime; instead, we enable the behavior. It saturates our media by treating women as objects and dismissing them. Sexual assault is normalized while dismissing the survivors. Instead, we need to support survivors, we need to report sexual assault, and we need to take action by changing our space from one that normalizes sexual assault to one that is supportive of survivors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nivita et al.</td>
<td><em>Gray Spaces</em></td>
<td>The narrator explains how little triangle went to school and met another triangle. Little triangle had too much to drink, so the other triangle offered to take her to her room where something bad happened that she could not stop. Little triangle tried to report what happened and was not believed. So, the little triangle, Emma, in 2014 began carrying a university mattress around her campus until her university expelled her alleged rapist.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma Rust</td>
<td><em>The True Nature of Rape Culture</em></td>
<td>It explains that many people are only aware of rape as a man in a dark alley. They think of the perpetrator as a criminal when perpetrators are just people and sometimes people we know. It explains that rape is about selfishness and power. However, it can be stopped through support for survivors and practicing consent.</td>
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Table 1 (continued)
Methods

After compiling the comics, I examined them for the rhetorical choices the artists made to determine what these choices reveal about the controversial topics of sexual assault and consent. I chose the features to examine based on what I wanted to understand most about the rhetoric of sexual assault: how the comics interact with the reader and what kind of information and/or argument they make. These two things are important in understanding the rhetoric of sexual assault and consent because the comic creator is the one in charge in this situation. They are the ones to determine what kind of relationship their content will have with the reader—what kind of conversation, for lack of a better term, they want to have with the reader. By understanding the reader interaction inherent in the comics, we understand how these individuals speak of the subject to others (is it impersonal or personal, do they state facts or tell stories, are they asking for understanding or action, etc.). Regardless of the type of interaction, these comic creators are sharing their own reality and understanding of rape and sexual assault for a reason. The information provided and/or the arguments they make reveal in which ways the comic creators are trying to be persuasive. For example, the use of statistics can be just as persuasive as a personal story, but they are persuasive in different ways. And a call to action is a different form of persuasion compared to persuading individuals to change their minds.

In examining the comics for visual rhetorical choices, I used Understanding Comics by Scott McCloud, Narrative Structure in Comics: Making Sense of Fragments by Barbara Postema, The Aesthetics of Comics by David Carrier, and Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (with a particular emphasis on chapter 4). These texts explain visual aspects of comics and how they operate rhetorically. They are the
base of comparison for the comics that I examined. From these I created a list of common rhetorical features to be examined:

1. Abusers and Survivors—Who is presented in these comics and how?
2. Art Style—Where does the artistic style (realistic and iconic) fall on the artistic scale?
3. Act and Gaze—Do the represented characters use direct address (demand) or indirect address (offer)?
4. Size of Frame and Social Distance—How are the represented characters interacting (close personal distance, far personal distance, close social distance, far personal distance, or public distance)?
5. Horizontal Angle (Involvement)—What is the depicted relation between image-producer and the represented participants?
6. Vertical Angle (Power)—Are the characters high, low, or eye level in the frame—who has the power?

These features were then compiled into graphs. The common features found reveal how sexual assault and consent are discussed (for example, whether the art style is more iconic or realistic reveals what aspects of the comic the creator wants the readers to concentrate on—the art or the issue).

I further used texts that examine the nuances of image manipulation and interpretation, especially in regards to the media, such as Visual Impact: The Power of Visual Persuasion, Ways of Seeing, Ways of Speaking: The Integration of Rhetoric and Vision in Constructing the Real, Roland Barthes’ Image, Music, Text, and Kiku Adatto’s Picture Perfect: Life in the Age of the Photo Op. These texts illustrate how the rhetorical choices made in the selected comics have been impacted through internal influences as well as other social influences, such as the media.
Through my examinations, I further answer the following research questions:

1. What artistic choices are commonly used in these comics and why?
2. What do the depictions reveal about how sexual assault is discussed?
3. What do these comics reveal about the way these comics interact with the reader?
The discussion of sexual assault and rape first and foremost is about the survivors and their abusers and how both are presented. Regarding such presentation, there are several questions that arise (who is the speaker, who has more representation, etc.) As such, I asked the following questions: 1) Are there any genders presented more or less frequently in the comics? 2) What gender are the abusers and survivors? 3) Is the speaker/narrator a survivor? 4) Are the abusers presented in the comics? 5) Are the survivors presented in the comics?

As evidenced in Figure 1, the gender representation is close to equal in regards to male and female genders (44 males to 41 females) while genders outside of the dichotomy and those non-specified are far less prevalent (15 other). In regards to the male-female dichotomy, the split is equal enough that one would assume survivors and abusers are equally split between the genders. This is not true.
Figure 1: Gender representation overall in each comic.

Women are depicted far more often as the survivors of sexual assault while men are typically depicted as the abusers as shown in Figure 2. This representation indicates the prevalence of female survivors and male abusers, which is indicative of the actual data. According to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, in the United States of America, “One in five women and one in 71 men will be raped at some point in their lives” and “one in three women and one in six men experienced some form of contact sexual violence in their lifetime” (NSVRC). As such, it is not surprising that 73% of the survivors represented in the comics were female and 60% of the abusers were male. Likewise, the male survivors and female abusers were far less prevalent in the comics (both at 20%).
Whether or not the narrator is a survivor can affect a few aspects of the comics as well. If the narrator is a survivor, it establishes authority and credibility. Additionally, the comic gains a personal connection to both the topic and the reader because the narrator is speaking from a place of personal experience. It becomes something shared between individuals. Furthermore, it has the added bonus of utilizing emotion to connect to the reader—sympathy and empathy. If the narrator is not a survivor, it does not lose credibility or authority; rather, it becomes more of a statement of fact—something that is simply presented as is. This also has the effect of making the comic more impersonal due to the established distance between the topic and the reader. Although there are more comics that have the narrator as the survivor, it is only a one comic difference, depicting an almost even split between a personal and impersonal connection (see Figure 3). This indicates that making the narrator a survivor is not a trend in speaking of rape and consent. Instead, there is a situational importance in utilizing the narrator as a survivor.
Finally, the question of whether or not the abusers or survivors are presented is important in representation. Survivors are presented in these comics more often than not at ten out of twelve comics while abusers are presented in eight out of twelve comics (see Figure 4). Although both survivors and abusers are presented in most of the comics, survivors are slightly more prevalent. These numbers display a marginal emphasis on the survivors of sexual assault. The greater emphasis is on the presentation of both survivors and abusers, typically using both to demonstrate the abusive behavior and its effects on survivors.
In summation, these numbers show that when discussing sexual assault and consent, there are specific trends in representation. These trends in representation marginally emphasize the survivors (female more often than male) and how they are affected by rape culture. They emphasize the detriment of rape culture—the victim shaming and blaming, perpetuating rape culture by being complicit in its presence via jokes and media, and the lack of talk about consent among other things. Additionally, the comics use representation to depict the reasons why there needs to be change as a way to instigate change.

Art Style

Comics are a fusion of words and art. As such, the art is equally important as the text. One particular example is the art style. Scott McCloud breaks down the art styles as such: “The area described by these 3 vertices—‘reality,’ language and the picture plane—represents the total pictorial vocabulary of comics or of any of the visual arts” (51). These are sliding categories where art can inhabit more of one style than another. However, I will be using his “clumsier” scale to denote artistic style: realistic and iconic abstraction (27). A realistic style uses art that resembles reality—images are very detailed and depict a very particular thing (almost like a photograph). Comparatively, an iconic style uses art that vaguely resembles reality—images are sparsely detailed and rely on icons/representations (similar to cartoons). An example of this dichotomy would be the Mona Lisa compared to a smiley face. Both images portray faces, but one depicts a very particular, detailed face while the other is vague.

The third category of art style is non-iconic abstraction. It is described as style in which “no attempt is made to cling to resemblance or meaning” (50). It is purely conceptual. For example, consider Wassily Kandinsky’s Composition 8 or Jackson Pollock’s Autumn Rhythm.
As the comics I examined cling to resemblance and meaning, there was no reason to keep that aspect of the scale. Hence, the simplified two style scale.

Seeing as art styles differ, choosing to use Scott McCloud’s “clumsy” art style scale (McCloud 31) was an easy decision. However, examining and rating these comics on the scale was a bit harder for the simple fact that the ranking is subjective and some comics have more realistic aspects or iconic aspects than others. Due to these issues, I chose to use a Likert scale ranging from one to five: 1) Iconic, 2) Iconic with realistic aspects, 3) Neither strictly iconic nor realistic, 4) Realistic with iconic aspects, 5) Realistic. Although my ranking is still subjective, I believe the scale eases some of the issues as it mirrors an example from McCloud’s artistic examination of faces in different styles (see Figure 5).

![Scott McCloud’s “clumsy” art style scale.](image)

Another aspect to the use of iconic or realistic styles is the degree to which the comic creator wants the reader to inhabit the comic’s characters. McCloud explains that each person is
aware of his or her own face in a removed sense where the mind-picture of their face is just a sense of a shape rather than a vivid image, which contrasts the vivid image of those they interact with. This “sense of shape” is what allows us to inhabit cartoonish (iconic) images: “Thus, when you look at a photo or realistic drawing of a face—you see it as the face of another. But when you enter the world of the cartoon—you see yourself” (36). In this way, there is a sense of personal investment in the story being told or the information being presented.

Using the artistic Likert scale, I examined the compiled comics to determine whether or not creators wanted their readers to inhabit their comic to generate an intimate connection between the reader and the information. Predominantly, the comics are iconic with realistic aspects—six out of twelve comics (see Figure 6). Four comics were strictly iconic and the last two were neither strictly iconic nor realistic as it was a mixing of both. There were no comics that were realistic or realistic with iconic aspects.

Figure 6: Art style representation in the twelve comics.
The predominance of iconic style comics overall illustrates that the comics are meant to highlight the information in the text and make the information accessible in an intimate, personal way. The comics creators want their readers to make a deep connection by infusing the reader into the presented situations. It makes the issues personal in comparison to a realistic style where the reader is more of an onlooker than a quasi-participant.

However, six of the comics (50%) are iconic with realistic aspects. The characters are still abstract enough that they are easily inhabited by the reader, but there are just enough aspects that the characters are distinct. For example, Jim Hines’ comic is extremely iconic as it uses a stick figure (see Figure 7). Anyone can inhabit this character because it is the abstract depiction of a human with no defining features. The only way the reader knows that this character is female is through context. In comparison, Nina Burrowes’ comic (see Figure 8) depicts a character with a few identifying features—short hair, female, and a slightly detailed face (something more than two dots and a line indicating eyes and a mouth). It is still easy to inhabit this character, but the identifying features make her distinct enough that she is not universally similar in appearance. This very slightly distances the reader. In this instance, some details are important because the character is based on a real individual’s story; however, the emphasis is still on the subject matter due to the more iconic style.
The iconic style puts more emphasis on what is said rather than the characters themselves. McCloud states that the entire reason he drew himself in a simplistic style in his book is because he wanted the reader to pay more attention to the message rather than the
messenger/character: “But if who I am matters less maybe what I say will matter more” (37). In the case of these comics, the messages that they are sending about rape, consent, and sexual assault are more important than the characters themselves regardless of a few character details. By using the iconic style, they are highlighting the textual information rather than the art.

It should be noted that the outlying comics by Barry Deutsch (Rape and Consent – Affirmative Consent Explained) and Jen Sorensen (“The Phone Rang. It Was My College Rapist.”) are ones that combine iconic and realistic elements. Deutsch’s comic presents two characters in a style to that of caricature—specifically detailed, but also exaggerated (see Figure 9). These characters are harder to inhabit as they are fairly specific. However, the mix of iconic and realistic makes the reader pay attention to the individuals and the content equally. The greater distance between the reader and the characters is important because the characters’ interactions with each other are important in relation to the message. Additionally, it would be somewhat difficult to empathize with both characters simultaneously in this case.

Figure 9: A mix of both iconic and realistic art styles in Deutsch’s comic.
Sorensen’s comic differs in that it presents the details of the creator’s friend’s rape. The comic does not want the reader to completely inhabit the character. Instead, it seems to be more of a case of teaching through example rather than through empathy or an extreme connection to the story as the emphasis is on the character’s experience and how she grew and learned from that experience. Although, the depiction of emotional states throughout the comic seems to be a way to make up for the lack of character inhabitation (see Figure 10). By including things like the wavy purple lines to indicate emotional states, the reader is connected to the character without inhabiting her. This mild degree of removal is what makes the character and her experience important while still giving the reader a sense of empathy and connection.

Figure 10: A mix of both iconic and realistic art styles in Sorensen’s comic.

Overall, the general sense of these comics is that the creators want the readers to make a personal connection with their message rather than with the characters themselves. They achieve
this objective by using a predominantly iconic style that allows the readers to inhabit the role of
the character, thereby giving the message more attention and more weight. The different degrees
of iconic style, however, show how different degrees of character inhabitation are used
depending on the message or presented situation.

Act and Gaze

Act and gaze depict the interaction between the image and the reader. The image’s gaze
deals with whether or not the reader is the subject or object of the image. Whether or not the
reader is subject or object is determined by the characters’ eyelines—whether or not the
character is “looking” at the reader (Kress and van Leeuwen 122). When the image’s gaze is
directed at the reader, it is considered a direct address. When the gaze is not directed at the
reader, it is considered a removed address. Whether the address is direct or removed corresponds
to the image’s act as well—whether or not it is a demand or an offer.

Image acts are separated into categories similar to the four primary speech acts: offers of
information, offers of goods-and-services, demands of information, and demands of goods-and-
services (127-128). However, the term goods-and-services will be replaced by action for the
purposes of this examination because goods-and-services can be misconstrued whereas action
hones in on the underlying concept of the original term especially in relation to visual rhetoric.

These image acts correlate to the image gaze, creating a specific relationship between the
image subject and the reader. If the image’s gaze is a direct address the image is a demand and if
the gaze is a removed address, it is an offer. However, images do not realize all four of the
speech acts. Instead, when an image is an offer, it is primarily an offer of information as images
can only represent an offer of action rather than enacting an action directly. Conversely, when an
image is a demand, it is typically a demand of action as the image cannot demand information directly.

While this is fairly straightforward, comics have several panels so there are several instances of each address. Due to this fact, tallying the number of times each address is used in each comic determined whether or not a comic could be labelled as a comic that primarily demands action or primarily offers information.

Overall, the comics offer information more than they demand action with 90 out of 141 character gazes being removed gazes (64%) (see Figure 11) and 8 out of 12 comics utilizing primarily removed address (see Figure 12). This reveals that several of the creators of these comics are more interested in delivering information than demanding something from the reader. In these comics, the removed address is essentially an offering of contemplation—it is something for the reader to internalize. It is a way of opening the readers’ eyes to the problems inherent to rape and sexual assault in the hopes that those readers will use that new understanding for the better.

![Figure 11: Frequency of acts and gazes overall.](image-url)
In Stevie Wilson’s comic “Dear NY post writer,” only one time is a direct gaze used; all the other gazes throughout the comic are removed. Figure 13, for example has four characters and none of them are addressing the reader. In this panel, Wilson is lecturing the NY post writer by specifically addressing the fact that the writer has been privileged to have never been sexually harassed until being catcalled at twenty, which the writer found flattering. Wilson is teaching by example that the NY post writer’s experience is not a universal experience—many women do not share in the excitement of being catcalled and generally harassed. The characters in this panel are using removed address because they are offering that information (they depict other women’s experiences besides the NY post writer’s). They are the offers of contemplation that are intended to address the problems inherent in sexual harassment, sexual assault, and rape.
Figure 13: Removed gaze in Wilson’s comic.

The direct address/demand of action act, in comparison, is only used 36% of the time (see Figure 11). Out of 141 character gazes, there were only 51 times that the characters look directly at the reader, demanding action. Furthermore, only three of the twelve comics have more direct gazes than removed gazes (see Figure 12).

In kgbm’s *Sexual Assault Comic*, the last panel shows a woman looking at the reader, stating that attraction does not equate to consent (see Figure 14). The character is stating this directly to the reader rather than the individual in the comic that gropes her butt. It is a demand for action from the character, which in this case would be a change of behavior (stop groping individuals because you find them physically appealing). This comic is intending to do more than change opinion and educate—its purpose is explicitly to change the reader’s behavior.
Kgbm’s comic panel is trying to persuade the reader to change their behavior in a demanding way while Wilson’s comic is trying to change the thinking and behaviors of readers through examples, a less aggressive way to persuade the reader to change. The greater use of the removed gaze indicates that the rhetoric of rape and sexual assault is one that is less about forcing a change and one that is more about exposing why there needs to be a change in the first place. Additionally, many of the direct gazes are also about demanding attention as in demanding that the reader not brush off what is being said.

While the images themselves denote offers and demands, the actual content of the comics can differ. For example, while Wilson’s comic is labelled as a comic that primarily offers information, the end of the comic does have a call to action. The character/creator demands that the NY post writer no longer write in a way that dismisses women’s issues and is dismissive of
verbal abuse and survivor experiences. The comic primarily teaches by example until the last panel starts urging for these changes.

Along with Wilson’s comic, Robin Banks, The Walnut Bowl, and Emma Rust are the three other comic creators whose comics primarily offer information, but have explicit calls to action. Similarly, the comics that primarily demand action and do not have explicit calls to action at the end are Nina Burrowes and Nivita et al. It is interesting that the visual gazes make demands and offers while the text can offer instead of demand and vice versa.

This contrast shows that when discussing rape and sexual assault, words and images do not have to echo each other. This dissonance does not mean that the words and images are working against each other. As McCloud states, “As children, we ‘show and tell’ interchangeably, words and images combining to transmit a connected series of ideas. The different ways in which words and pictures can combine in comics is virtually unlimited” (152). Instead, like any comic, the words and images come together to create something meaningful even if they do not both make the exact same arguments (demands or offers in this case). It is in the use of both gazes/acts that many of these comics make complex, intelligent, and emotional arguments for individuals to change their perspectives on rape and sexual assault and to maybe take it a step further and change their outer world as well.

Size of Frame and Social Distance

Much like the interplay between act and gaze, the interplay between size of frame and social distance suggests particular relationships between the image and the reader; however, these two subjects are defined based on vision and touch.
Social distance is “the distance, literally and figuratively, we keep from one another” (Kress and van Leeuwen 130). These invisible boundaries display relationships between individuals ranging from close to far and personal to social. The further the distance between characters, the greater the social distance. For instance, if two characters are depicted close enough to easily hold one another, they have a close personal distance.

Size of frame, similarly, depicts space in a different fashion. Size of frame is actually similar to the size of frame used in film and television, which is based off of face-to-face interactions (131). They are defined by the human body in relation to the frame—the frame in this case acts as the reader, the other human body. For example, closer frames indicate a close social distance while longer shots portray impersonal relationships.

These two features, Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen note, align based on field of vision: “At intimate distance, says Hall (1964), we see the face or head only. At close personal distance we take in the head and shoulders….” (131). They go on to describe how each section aligns with one exception—they neglect to describe any connection for the Medium Shot (see Table 2, which is based on information that Kress and van Leeuwen discuss on pages 130-131). Despite it not being given a concrete social distance alignment, I decided that the Medium Shot would be closest to Far Personal Distance and, as such, have titled it Very Far Personal Distance. I determined that it would be more intimate than the full body shot of the Medium Long Shot, and, instead, closer in intimacy to the Medium Close Shot that depicts the character from above the waist.
Table 2

The Connection Between Social Distance and Size of Frame

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Distance</th>
<th>Size of Frame</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intimate Distance</strong>—The face or head only.</td>
<td><strong>Extreme Close Shot</strong>—Anything closer than the subject’s head and shoulders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Close Personal Distance</strong>—The subject can hold or grasp the other person (intimate space).</td>
<td><strong>Close Shot</strong>—The head and shoulders of the subject are shown.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Far Personal Distance</strong>—The subject is just outside easy touching distance (somewhat intimate; personal business can be discussed).</td>
<td><strong>Medium Close Shot</strong>—The subject is shown from above the waist.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>(Very Far Personal Distance)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Medium Shot</strong>—The subject from the knees up.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Close Social Distance</strong>—The subject is just outside far personal distance (impersonal business occurs).</td>
<td><strong>Medium Long Shot</strong>—The full figure of the subject is shown.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Far Social Distance</strong>—Distance where people move so others can ‘take a good look at you’ (formal and impersonal).</td>
<td><strong>Long Shot</strong>—The subject occupies about half the height of the frame.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Public Distance</strong>—Anything further than far social distance (strangers).</td>
<td><strong>Very Long Shot</strong>—Anything wider than the long shot.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The least used size of frame is the Extreme Close Shot as it was only used twelve times total throughout the comics (see Figure 15). This size of frame is related to the Intimate Distances, which is apt as it is mostly used as a way to emphasize the emotional aspects of the story. Close-ups of facial expressions are quite common for this shot, as are close-ups on specific parts of the body. In Emma Rust’s *The True Nature of Rape Culture*, there are several instances of close-up shots of body parts to emphasize a point and/or add an emotional element. In Figure 16, the lips are especially detailed to add even more emphasis on the fact that sometimes women have trouble saying no because they are too inebriated or they are afraid. Although the Extreme Close Shot is useful for these kinds of persuasive elements, other shots are far more dynamic for a longer comic as evidenced by the range in Nina Burrowes’ comic (see Figures 17 and 18).
Figure 15: Overall frequency of the different sizes of frame and the corresponding social distances.

Figure 16: Extreme close shot in Rust’s comic.
Figure 17: Size of frame: The frequency of different shots in each comic.

Figure 18: Social distance: The frequency of different relationships of individuals in each comic.
In contrast, Close Shot/Close Personal Distance and Medium Close Shot/Far Personal Distance tied for the highest frequency at 33 instances each, which makes up 40% of the total panel shots (see Figure 15). What is interesting is that these two categories fall within the two middle social distance categories of Personal Distance. Despite the fact that almost every comic has a spread of different sizes of frame and social distances (see Figures 17 and 18), the fact is that the two most frequently used shots are those that are equated to inhabiting intimate space with the reader with only some separation. This can be equated to speaking with a close friend or acquaintance: “Edward Hall (e.g. 1966: 110-20) has shown that we carry with us a set of invisible boundaries beyond which we allow only certain kinds of people to come. The location of these invisible boundaries is determined by configurations of sensory potentialities—by whether or not a certain distance allows us to smell or touch the other person, for instance, and by how much of the other person we can see with our peripheral (60) vision” (Kress and van Leeuwen 130). Essentially, these distances create an imaginary relationship with the reader depending on what is presented—what the reader can see. In this case of these two sizes of frame, the reader is participating in a relatively intimate relationship.

For example, in Nina Burrowes’ *I’m not Mad*, the woman sharing her experiences is depicted at a table, speaking to the reader in a Medium Close Shot (see Figure 19). This is an intimate conversation due to the nature of the subject and the setting alone, but the shot of her from the waist up (despite the elongated table perspective) shows her within an easily reachable distance—the reader has the impression of being able to reach out and grasp this woman’s hand. There is still that slight separation between the reader and the character, with some assistance from the table, but there is no mistaking the intimate nature of this shot.
Similarly, the third and fourth most popular sizes of frame, Medium Long Shot and Medium Shot respectively, are also used fairly frequently because they signify a distance between the reader and the character—a greater sense of separation. These two shots are still close enough that something personal can be discussed, but there is enough distance that there is an overall impersonal feel to it (impersonal business discussions rather than intimate personal discussions). For example, in Figure 20 from Stevie Wilson’s “Dear NY post writer”, the characters are depicted in a Medium Shot. Along with the visual distance, the text itself is worded as a statement of fact rather than a personal confession even with the added bold text for emphasis. Wilson is sharing her experience with sexual harassment, but she is stating it as a fact rather than as something personal to her. This panel shows impersonal business being discussed with someone who is an acquaintance at most. Comics that use these sizes of frame more than
others indicate that they discuss sexual assault and rape as more of a statement of fact than an intimate sharing of experiences. This level of separation from the reader and the topic could potentially be due to any number of reasons such as the stigma related to openly discussing the topic or personal issues related to their own trauma.

Overall, these comics primarily approach the topic of rape and consent as somewhat of a mix of intimate with a slight distance and distanced with a slight intimacy. This middle ground between intimacy and distance indicates a dichotomy in the discussion of sexual assault and consent. Some creators discuss the topic intimately, creating a personal relationship with the reader, while others wish to share the facts (which can be personal) without becoming overly intimate with the reader.
The balancing act this creates suggests an increased value of the personal experience in the rhetoric of sexual assault. Rather than keeping the reader at the distance of a stranger, the comic creators bring the reader into their space and confidence. The only difference is in how those personal experiences are shared—fact or story. Either way, the content of the comics becomes more personal to the reader because something personal is now shared between the reader and the creator.

Horizontal Angle (Involvement)

Horizontal angle uses different planes within the images to show relations between the image producer/viewer and the represented participants (Kress and van Leeuwen 141). Specifically, the horizontal angle compares the angle of the image producer/the viewer and those of the presented characters. This relationship can be either parallel or form an angle, a frontal or oblique point of view respectively. Essentially, the horizontal angle encodes the involvement of the viewer—whether or not they are involved or detached in relation to the comic’s world.

The frontal point of view depicts the represented world as the viewer’s own (involved) while the oblique point of view depicts the represented world as something other (detached) (143). But these points of view are not strictly one or the other—there are degrees of obliqueness. So, the character may be at an oblique angle, but the wider the angle, the greater the level of detachment.

Although no less important, the back view is a complex point of view that is more of a gesture than an actual angle (144). It is a point of view that works within the frontal and oblique angles. It is not strictly detachment or involvement; rather, it makes its own unique comment based on context and abstracts like emotion. It is due to the ambiguity of this point of view that I
do not label panels with a back view as involved or detached; instead, I labeled these views as ambivalent. Additionally, this ambiguity is also why I do not examine this angle further than listing its data.

Even though I counted back views as angles, I did not consider any images of just a body part, abstract images, objects, or text because these images do not create a meaningful involvement between the presented characters and the viewer as they do not have a point of view of their own. In contrast, some panels held multiple angles. As such, I counted each character or group of characters’ views in each panel. If characters within a panel had differing angles, they were counted individually; if characters shared the same angle, they were counted as one view.

As a general breakdown, eight comics were more detached from the viewer (held the viewer at a distance), two comics were more involved (bringing the viewer into their own worlds), one comic was evenly detached and involved, and one comic was ambivalent as it was primarily composed of back views (see Figure 21).

Figure 21: Horizontal angle: level of involvement of the reader in each comic.
The overall frequency of the angles is not so different from the general breakdown of the comics: 51% of noted angles were oblique (detached), 38% were frontal (involved), and 11% were back views (ambivalent) (see Figure 22). However, it should be noted that Nina Burrowes’ comic does somewhat skew the data as it accounts for 43 of the 79 frontal/involved angles.

Figure 22: Frequency of reader involvement overall.

That being said, these numbers suggest that a little over half of the comics and angles are oblique/detached, meaning that the characters in the comics are something removed from the viewer half of the time. The viewer in these instances has no place within the characters’ worlds. Much like a documentary, it is an allowance to glimpse into their experiences and world rather than an invitation into it—it is an objective view. Similar to the iconic style of art, the inhabiting of the presented world emphasizes the subject matter while separation from the presented world emphasizes the world itself. The distance created by these oblique panels places an emphasis on the world the characters inhabit and their experiences. The intent is for the reader to take the shared information, internalize it, and use that information to act upon the readers’ own reality—
whether that means changing their own worldviews or physically acting to make a change in the world is up to the reader.

The following panel from Jen Sorensen’s “The phone rang. It was my college rapist.” demonstrates how the oblique angle operates. In Figure 23, the short-haired woman is telling her friend about her experience with rape after years of keeping quiet about it. The oblique angle keeps the reader from making this personal experience their own while still expressing the importance of the act of speaking out and sharing experiences of sexual assault and rape. Rather than outright (and incorrectly) stating that survivors need to speak out, this panel demonstrates a small part of why speaking out was important to this woman in particular—her female friends responding with dismay at what happened to her was cathartic in its own way. This is an example of how the oblique angle works more like a mix of a documentary and a show-and-tell: it demonstrates a particular experience from which the reader can choose to use as an aid in their own future decision-making.

Figure 23: Oblique angle in Sorensen’s comic.
In contrast to the oblique angle is the frontal angle. The 38% of angles that are frontal/involved are those that do invite the reader into the characters’ worlds. This angle is a way to speak directly to the reader and many times it utilizes text and art that invokes empathy or sympathy. The panel depicted in Figure 24, from Deutsch’s *How Rape Makes Women Poorer*, is a perfect example of a frontal/involved angle. The use of a frontal angle brings the reader into the comic’s world in two interesting ways in this panel. One way is that the framing shows two hands pointing accusingly at the characters. This framing makes it appear as though the reader is the one victim blaming the character. The second way is that the first line of text is directly speaking to the reader by stating, “You get blamed.” The text makes the action of victim blaming personal to the reader by directing the text specifically at them. The reader becomes the target of the words while the woman becomes the example of such blaming. This unique use of framing and text in this panel creates an interesting dichotomy of the reader inhabiting both the role of a victim blamer and the role of a survivor being blamed. This is an interesting way of making the experience visceral for the reader—it becomes the reader’s own experience in a sense.

Figure 24: Frontal angle in Deutsch’s comic.
Between the oblique and frontal angle, it is clear that both utilize specific ways to use the characters’ experiences as a way to teach the reader. The oblique angle is a documentary-esque way of teaching by example (the reader is removed from the world/experience) while the frontal angle could be equated to a hands-on style of teaching (the reader is involved in the world/experience to a degree). In either case, both angles are a way to coax the reader into learning something new, changing perspective, and/or taking action about the issues discussed in relation to rape and sexual assault.

The use of the two different horizontal angles indicates that the rhetoric of rape and sexual assault utilizes the experiences of those who have survived rape and sexual assault. The emphasis is on sharing those experiences and using them as a tool for change. The dichotomy between these two angles illustrates how experience is used as either more of a presentation of the world as it is or as more of a story-like, emotional journey. The greater use of the oblique angle puts a slightly heavier emphasis on keeping the reader at a distance so that they may learn from someone else’s experience rather than learning via their own. But, overall, experience is a key tool in how horizontal angles operate in the discussion of rape and sexual assault. Regardless of the angle, the importance is in the invitation to understand the experiences presented and learning from them.

Vertical Angle (Power)

The vertical angle operates on the height of the represented participants in relation to each other and the reader—it shows the relation of power between them (146). If the represented character is seen from a high angle, the reader is “looking down upon” the represented character and is the one who holds more power. Vice versa, the represented character has power over the
viewer if they are seen from a low angle. And if the view is at eye level, the viewer and character are equal—there is no power imbalance.

78.2% of the panels were at equal vertical angles, 13.3% were at high angles (viewer holds power), and 8.5% were at low angles (subject holds power) (see Figure 25). Additionally, all twelve of the comics primarily use equal vertical angles (see Figure 26). Clearly, equal power between reader and character holds a great deal of importance in these comics.

Figure 25: Power held by the reader and subject overall.
When discussing rape and sexual assault, these comics seem to be very careful in when they utilize high and low angles. As power is an extremely important aspect of sexual assault and rape, it is both surprising and unsurprising in how it is visually treated in these comics. It is surprising in the way that many of the creators are using their own or others’ experiences and yet they do not take the opportunity to visually take power back in at least this one way by using more low angles. However, it is also unsurprising that more low and high angles are not used as these comics are not confessions—they are tools for change.

As such, low and high angles are sometimes used in a slightly different way. Many of these angles are used in a way that expresses the level of the power held by the characters within the presented experiences rather than the power the readers and characters hold over each other—the emphasis is on the characters’ power within the presented situations. One example of this is depicted in Figure 27 from Sorensen’s “The phone rang. It was my college rapist.” In this
panel, the reader is viewing the woman from a high angle. Normally, this would indicate that the reader holds power over this woman. In a sense, the reader does hold power based on the angle alone. However, in this case, the angle is more aptly echoing the woman’s situation. She is in a state of muddied confusion brought on by drugs that aided in her rape. She is not in a position of power in this panel. Her power relation to the reader is inherent, but not as important as her situational power.

I REMEMBER NOTHING MORE. WHEN HE WAS GONE AND I CAME TO, I RECALL FEELING VAGINAL SORENESS AND AN AWARENESS THAT SEX HAD HAPPENED.

Figure 27: High angle in Sorensen’s comic.

This is seen again in Figure 28 from Dan & Symchych’s Consent Simulator 2014, though for the low angle. In this panel, the female is confirming consent to what is happening. The low angle presents them as having power over the reader; however, the power is with them within
their presented situation. In this situation, they are placed at a high angle, echoing that they have power in this situation. They are both in a position to affirm or deny consent in their given situation, and, in this case, the woman is affirming it—they are sharing power via consent.

Figure 28: Low angle in Dan & Symchych’s comic.

Although the utilization of equal angles is not utilized in such a unique was as the high and low angles, it is no less important. As previously stated, power is an extremely important aspect of rape, and these comics use mainly equal angles where neither the reader nor the character is in a greater position of power over the other. Rather than speaking down to readers or allowing the readers to speak over them, these characters are relating to the viewers on equal footing in these panels. It is a shared respect between the two because the subject matter is
important and speaking as equals is better than taking a preaching approach or a submissive approach as neither would are helpful in connecting with the reader nor in teaching about the issues in rape and sexual assault.

One of many examples of this angle is in Nivita et al.’s *Gray Spaces*. In Figure 29, the panel depicts a triangle the morning after having been raped. The equal vertical angle is important in this panel because it is placing an importance on the situation at hand rather than on the power dynamics between the reader and the character or the character and her situation. This equal angle is like the iconic artistic style in that by using an equal vertical angle, the importance is on what is said or shown within the panel. In this instance, the importance is on the little triangle and how she feels after her rape.

Figure 29: Equal angle in Nivita et al.’s comic.

Additionally, the use of the equal angle is a conscious choice in how the creator speaks to the reader. These comics address the reader as an equal who can understand and utilize the
presented information. This is the comic equivalent of speaking to the readers face-to-face—it is both a gesture of respect and intimacy. It neither takes away the readers’ autonomy nor the characters’ and creators’ authority on the subject. It allows for the characters to share their story/information as someone would a friend or colleague.

This suggests that sexual assault and consent, to the creators, is something that does not require (should not require) a power play by the readers or the characters/creators. Instead, as evidenced by the unique use of high and low angles and the profuse use of equal angles, the creators want the stories to have all the power. By keeping the characters and the readers at an equal power angle, the story/information itself is allowed to take the forefront. Additionally, considering the subject of rape and sexual assault deals with power imbalances between individuals, it is a statement that these comics meet the readers on equal ground. Rather than forcing readers to see their point of view, the comic creators present their perspectives using a gentle touch to entreat the reader to see how they view the reality of rape and sexual assault. They do not stoop to the same level as the abusers they depict in their comics.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

These comic features reveal a few things about the rhetoric of rape in the unique medium of web-based comics created by noncommercial artists. First is that many of these comics are used as documentary-like teaching tools. Second, the majority of the calls to action from these comics are more calls for behavioral change via a broadened understanding rather than a demand for outright change. Third, it reveals that there is a need for a sharing of the survivor’s perspective that is not found elsewhere. Finally, consent is almost ignored in favor of concentrating on the consequences of sexual assault.

The features overall reveal that these comics operate like documentaries in that they offer an objective viewpoint of what is wrong in regards to sexual assault and consent. They operate in a between state of both personal and slightly impersonal because they invite the reader to understand the survivors’ perspective on sexual assault. These shared perspectives are inherently personal, but they are used in a somewhat clinical approach—they are offered as examples of how sexual assault affects the survivor. In this sense, these perspectives cannot be acted upon because they have already happened. However, these experiences are now learning tools from which readers can learn about the realities of sexual assault and change their own behaviors to reflect more empathy for survivors and to spark a change in how we treat sexual assault as a whole.
This show-and-tell teaching is unique to these comics as well and works in part with their unique style of calls to action: a call for behavioral change. First of all, the comics themselves can be considered calls to action based on the fact that their creation is intended to be impactful—they are inherently rhetorical. They were made to impact society’s views and actions in regards to sexual assault and consent. Second, these comics use calls to action in an unexpected way due to the nature of the topic of sexual assault. Rather than demand specific actions (protests, calls to politicians, etc.), these calls to action are demanding a behavioral change more than anything. It is a subtler way to demand actual change as they are demanding a change in thinking and perspective in order to create an actionable change.

The words “believe,” “support,” and “listen” are common throughout the comics and are even found in the calls to action in comics that do have explicit calls to action. However, these words are not aggressive in nature. They are asking for behavioral changes that affect the larger picture of sexual assault. These are small steps toward actual actionable change as the larger changes cannot take place until the perpetuation and internalization of rape culture is stopped first.

The lack of demand to stop sexually assaulting people because it is wrong is not entirely surprising. The people who commit these acts will not stop because they were asked to. Rather, a look into how the survivor feels about these acts and how it affects their daily lives is a better persuasive tactic than simply making a “because I said so” statement. The medium of comics lends to this as the act of showing someone how they have been affected can create a more visceral understanding of the situation than simply telling how they have been affected. Seeing is believing in this situation. Additionally, it creates a more impactful understanding of the realities of sexual assault and its consequences on the survivor.
The emphasis on personal experience in these comics reveals that there is a deficit in how sexual assault has been discussed. In this case, there is a missing perspective that has not been found elsewhere: the survivor’s perspective. This is not to say that survivors have not come forward and shared their experiences with the world, because they have. Rather, the difference is in the presentation itself. Again, the difference is in showing and telling. Comics are a unique medium for presenting specific perspectives. An interview has survivors tell the viewer/listener/reader how they have been affected by sexual assault. But in comics, there is an opportunity to show these things—to make the abstract real and visceral. The consequences of rape are no longer abstract in the comic medium. Additionally, comics can tell as well, so there are greater opportunities to fully flesh out the complexities of the emotional, physical, and social repercussions of sexual assault that may be escaping people. Survivors have a greater opportunity to fully express what they have been through and continue to go through.

Additionally, there needs to be more talk about affirmative consent. These comics have revealed that sexual assault is discussed more as a consequence or statement of fact than as something preventable. There is definitely a mentality that these readers they are speaking to have already been indoctrinated into a mindset that is okay with sexual assault—potentially blinded by their lack of a broader perspective than their own privileged one. This is echoed in the creators’ calls to action being ones of inward change more than outward change.

However, there are only a handful of comics that outright talk about consent as a preventative. This is not to say that those who have been sexually assaulted could have stopped a determined abuser by suggesting they ask for consent. Rather, I am asserting that there are only a few comics that speak of consent as another way of teaching and clearing away misconceptions about sexual assault. Consent is an important aspect of sexual assault and it is not as frequently
discussed. Perhaps, the creators feel that consent is a concept that needs to come after the broadening of perspectives, or maybe it is simply not as pressing a concern at this point in time, or maybe there is another reason altogether. Whatever reason that may be, it is interesting that many ask for inward change while passing over the concept of consent.

Clearly, there is still a long way to go in the rhetoric of sexual assault and consent. There is a lot that can be taken from these comics that has not been touched upon due to the scope of this particular examination. For example, race in the issue of sexual assault and consent, the reasoning behind the personal and impersonal dissonance (psychoanalysis, sociological reasons, etc.), and the lack of male perspective. The point being, there are many areas that should be further examined in order to further expand our perspectives on the issue.
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