AN EXAMINATION OF PORTRAYALS OF SMOKING IN NOIR GRAPHIC/ COMIC NOVELS

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Abstract

Global mortality from tobacco related diseases continues to rise. Most smokers start smoking in adolescence and early adulthood. Graphic novels have a particular appeal to this age group, and are increasingly read by females and males. Prior research examining a range of graphic novels had noted high rates of portrayals of smoking in noir and cyber-punk novels. This research focussed on a random sample of noir graphic novels to explore this finding in more depth. A quantitative content analysis of ten noir graphic novels was conducted. Although there was substantial variability in the number of portrayals of smoking, smoking imagery was prevalent throughout all of the novels examined. Of particular note was the high rate of portrayals of women smoking. This is an issue given the rise in smoking rates in young women and girls in some Western countries. Some examples of substitution and relegation of tobacco products was noted, and tobacco control advocates should seek to work with artists to promote omission, substitution and relegation of such imagery. Further research is suggested to explore in more depth the characterisation of smokers in such graphic novels, and the ongoing recurrence of such imagery in contemporary graphic noir novels.

Keywords: smoking, graphic novel, comic book, adolescents, young adults, noir

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Introduction

Smoking remains the world's leading cause of preventable mortality and morbidity, resulting in up to 8 million deaths per annum [1-3]. The financial burden of smoking is also a significant factor that should not be under-estimated [4]. Although smoking rates have decreased in many countries they remain unacceptably high, despite widespread adoption internationally of key elements of the World Health Organization's (WHO) Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) [5,6]. This includes the widespread adoption by many countries of bans on sponsorship and advertising of tobacco products.

Given the continued adoption of smoking by a significant minority of adolescents and young adults it is important to explore the provenance of pro-smoking influences in this cohort. It must be remembered that the majority of smokers start smoking in their teens or early twenties [7,8]. This period is also critical for identity formation. As such it is opportune to explore media representations of smoking, especially given aspects of performativity, social representation/ group identity and modelling in smoking behaviours.

An established literature already exists detailing malignant links between Big Tobacco and the media dating back to the 1920s [9,10]. Significant payments have been noted by the tobacco industry to ensure the placement of their products in popular films with particular appeal to teenagers and young adults including Superman II (Marlboro cigarettes by Philip Morris) and Supergirl (Eve cigarettes by Liggett) [9]. A significant body of research has already identified the impact of smoking portrayals in movies and TV on tobacco use among young people [11-14].

To date little research has examined the portrayal of smoking in graphic/ comic novels, despite an extensive literature focussing on tobacco adverts in magazines [15-18]. This is perhaps odd given the appeal of such graphic novels to young adults [19-21], including 'reluctant readers' [22], at a time of crucial behavioural choices, including smoking initiation. Historically such publications may have been located firmly on the margins [23], however in recent years they have moved increasingly into the mainstream [24]. The appeal of graphic novels has also increased beyond their traditionally male dominated audience [25].

Perhaps one of the most high profile uses of a modern graphic novel in the field of Public Health was developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to promote emergency preparedness among students and young adults: Preparedness 101: Zombie Pandemic [26]. Such was the success of this initiative that the CDC's website crashed under the number of hits it received as the campaign went viral [27]. Despite this literature examining this and similar interventions has noted only limited success [28,29], and unanticipated outcomes [27,30,31].

It should be acknowledged that a developing academic literature exists about graphic novels in the fields of education, media studies and health/ medicine. In the health domain graphic novels have been examined around such topics as: healthy eating [32-34]; cancer screening [35]; HIV/STD prevention [36,37]; and thanatology [38]. Other research on graphic novels in health has examined issues such as: the portrayal of disability/ impairment [39,40]; depictions of violence [41] and self-harm [42]; physician education [43,44]; healthy decision making [45]; and the treatment of subthreshold depressive symptomatology [46].

Of most relevance to this research are four studies that have examined portrayals of smoking in graphic novels. The first two of these involved an examination of portrayals of smoking in contemporary Japanese Manga graphic novels [47,48]. Both of these studies noted high levels of depictions of smoking. A more recent examination found that although there had been a decline in such portrayals over time, they still remained routine in Manga [49]. Given the now

almost global popularity of Manga, such examinations are vital as Bouissou has identified that 'to export comics is also to export ideology and values system' [50]. Graphic novels, similar to any media perform the three 'Rs' of cultural transmission, in that they can reflect, reinforce and reproduce specific cultural patterns and behaviours such as smoking.

Manga represents a very different breed of comics and graphic novels to what many of the older generation may traditionally associate with this format. Traditionally 'safe' products associated with this genre, such as Disney's Mickey Mouse and products from the Ecole Franco-Belge such as Tintin and Asterix, have little or nothing in common with contemporary Manga [51-53]. Manga is designed to be shocking and has purposefully opposed societal and cultural norms across a wide range of topics [50,54]. The appeal of such depictions in Manga, it has been suggested, is a direct result of the sterility imposed by censorship: 'the American cartoons, after struggling with the stringent constraints of the Comics Code for half-a-century, gradually became emasculated. The readers were tired of no violence, no sex, no police-bashing, no smoking and no-nothing' [50].

The fourth study of smoking portrayals in graphic novels was based on a random selection of ten graphic novels available in the main library of a provincial Irish city [55]. This research noted three key findings. Firstly, that there was a significant volume of portrayals of smoking in such graphic novels. Secondly, it identified that there was significant variation in the sample chosen, with several having none or very few such images, compared to others that included in excess of 250. Third, this research noted a dramatic gender imbalance in smoking portrayals. This research noted that for every panel that showed a woman smoking there were almost 17 panels showing men smoking. This research also identified two distinct genres of graphic novel that appeared to depict smoking on a significant scale. These were the cyber-punk and noir genres of graphic novel [55].

In light of the ongoing popularity of the noir setting [56], troublesome global rates of smoking among women [57], and the growing appeal of graphic novels to female audiences [23], this research therefore focussed on the noir genre of graphic novel. In Houghton & Houghton's research outlined above, the most frequent depiction of female smoking was in a noir graphic novel featuring the trope of the femme fatal [55]. Critics often view literary noir as a specifically hardboiled American art form produced by archetypal writers such as Hammett [58-61], Chandler [62-66], and Cain [67-69] during the 1930s to the 1950s [70]. These authors produced iconic characters such as Chandler's Philip Marlowe, and Hammett's Sam Spade that had, and continue to have, a significant influence on media forms. Film noirs, also perceived as a typically American art form, are usually thought to have been produced in Hollywood during a two decade period beginning with John Huston's The Maltese Falcon in 1941, starring Humphrey Bogart, and concluding with Orson Welles's Touch of Evil in 1958, which starred Marlene Dietrich [71].

Noir graphic novels usually follow this time period, routinely portraying the dark, gritty and seedy underworld of a corrupt society . Typical tropes include the femme fatale, private investigators, disgruntled and alienated police officers, vigilantes, and host of villains with malign intent. In response to the controversy they caused noir comics were suppressed during the 1950s and beyond and the fate of this genre seemed certain to be extinction. However, there has been a notable current resurgence in crime and noir comics/ graphic novels, that has in turn spawned its own literature [71,72].

Method

A random selection of ten noir graphic novels was selected chosen from an amalgamated

list created from four leading online web sites listing popular crime noir graphic novels [73-76]. A quantitative content analysis of examples of smoking and smoking paraphernalia was then conducted on these 10 novels [77-79]. A coding schedule was developed to record the gender of smokers (male, female, mixed). Analysis was conducted on the novels on a panel by panel basis. Details of the texts selected and the results can be seen in Table 1.

Results

Examination of the ten noir graphic novels identified 534 panels containing examples of smoking. 60.3% (322) of these smoking images featured just males, while 38.5% (205) only related to women (see Table One). There was substantial variation in the average number of panels portraying smoking per page, which varied from a high of one smoking related panel every 2.1 pages in Sleeper [80], to a low of an average of one smoking related panel every 8.5 pages in Hawaiian Dick: Byrd of Paradise [81]. Examples of such smoking imagery may be seen in Figure One.

Tab.1. Analysis of Portrayals of Smoking By Gender in a Random Selection of Ten Noir Graphic Novels

Title	Pages (including cover)	Male/s Smoking Panels	Female/s Smoking Panels	Male/s & Female/s Smoking Panels	Total Smoking Panels
Batman: Year One [82]	132	18	2	5	25
Sleeper [80]	292	28	113	0	141
Gotham Central Book One [83]	244	80	0	0	80
Sin City- A Dame To Kill For [84]	212	27	17	1	45
Hawaiian Dick: Byrd of Paradise [81]	136	12	3	1	16
Criminal: Coward [85]	152	15	39	0	54
Criminal: The Sinners [86]	148	26	0	0	26
Batman: Broken City [87]	146	20	10	0	30
Batman: The Long Halloween [88]	389	48	17	0	65
100 Bullets: First Shot, Last Call [89]	132	48	4	0	52
Total	1983	322	205	7	534

Discussion

Noir graphic novels contain a substantial number of portrayals of smoking. Given that a significant proportion of readers of graphic novels are routinely youths and young adults this is particularly problematic. As noted above, this age is a crucial stage in social identity formation and as such these representations are important. It should be noted that none of the representations of smoking portrayed it negatively in terms of its adverse impacts on health, or on the basis of any other factors such as finances, or environmental impacts.

Prior research examining portrayals of smoking by gender in a mixed genre selection of graphic novels noted a ratio of almost 1:17 in female to male portrayals of smoking [55]. The ratio of such female to male portrayals in this research was dramatically different at approximately 2:3. Given the increase in girls and young women reading graphic novels, this preponderance of smoking imagery associated with women in the noir graphic is potentially highly problematic.
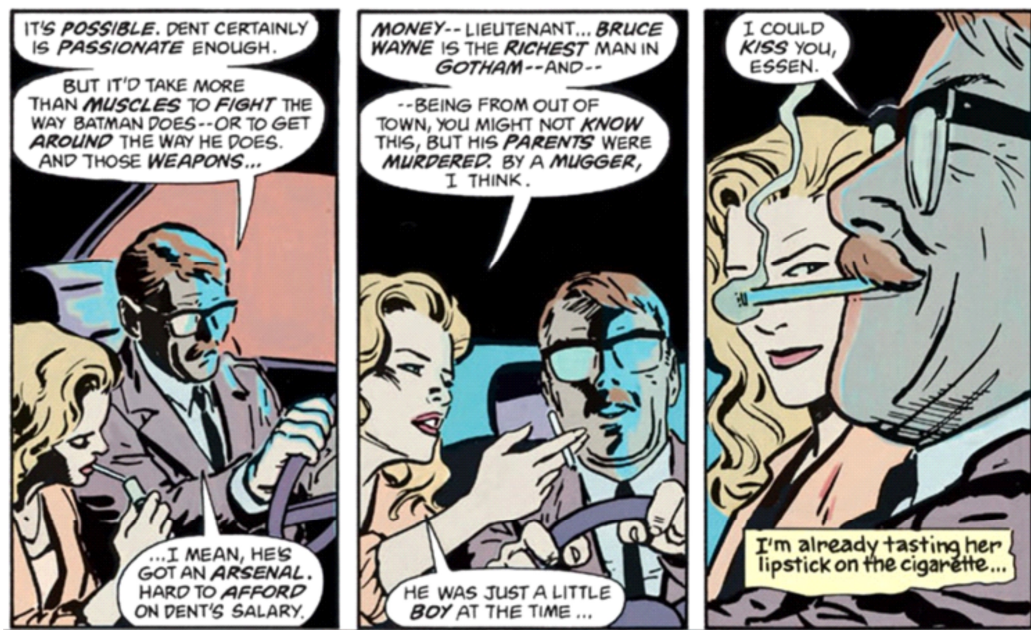

Fig.1. Examples of Panels Containing Smoking From Batman: Year One [82]

The sensual undertones in Figure One, and the more overtly sexualised smoking imagery in Figure Two, clearly demonstrate the link portrayed between sex and smoking in some noir graphic novels. Perhaps of more concern is the portrayal of such smoking in attractive, self-confident, assertive women. Such depictions must serve to increase the appeal of smoking to girls and young women.

Fig.2. Examples of the Femme Fatal & More Sexualised Smoking Imagery [84,80]

It is interesting to note that the noir novel Hawaiian Dick Vol. 1: Byrd of Paradise featured examples of what may be termed substitution and relegation [81]. Figure Three clearly demonstrates how a cigarette, cigar, or pipe can be substituted for another object, in this case a drinking straw. This panel filled the entire page, a rare event in graphic novels, and as such the replacement is significant. Figure Three also features what may be termed relegation. Many graphic novels contain a selection of extra material after the main story which routinely feature scripts, initial drafts of pictures, and unused art. The picture showing the figure smoking in a do-orway, although completed, was never used. Although still included in the extra material section, it may be significant that this image was relegated to subsidiary material in the novel which included the least number of smoking related panels per page [81]. Tobacco control advocates might usefully strive to develop links with those working in the arts and graphics fields to disseminate their messages on how such portrayals may serve to not only reflect smoking use, but may also reinforce and reproduce such use. Omission of such imagery is the primary aim, however, substitution and relegation may be useful tactics to minimise harm.

Substitution

Relegation

Fig.3. Examples of Substitution & Relegation From Hawaiian Dick Vol. 1: Byrd of Paradise [81]

Conclusion

Noir graphic novels are highly problematic in terms of their consistent portrayal of smoking. This research indicates that this genre of novels also routinely include a far higher proportion of women smoking than graphic novels generally [55]. In terms of wo-men's health this is an important issue, particularly given the positive portrayal of such female smokers. Further research may usefully explore both how the noir genre continues to be linked so substantively to smoking. Further research should also explore the characters associated with smoking to move beyond quantitative content analysis, and facilitate a more nuanced ana-

lysis. Further research might also explore related issues, including: possible changes over time; association between depictions of the consumption of both alcohol and tobacco; character type shown smoking; cigarettes v's cigars and other forms of tobacco consumption.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest: Ms Daisy Houghton declares that she has no conflict of interest. Dr Frank Houghton declares that he has no conflict of interest.

Ethical approval: This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

Resumo

Tutmonda morteco de tabakrilataj malsanoj daŭre altiĝas. Plej multaj fumantoj komencas fumi en adoleskeco kaj frua plenaĝeco. Grafikaj romanoj havas specialan allogon al tiu aĝoklaso, kaj estas ĉiam pli legitaj fare de inoj kaj maskloj. Antaŭa esplorado ekzamenanta gamon da grafikaj romanoj notis altajn tarifojn de portretadoj de fumado en noir- kaj ciber-punkaj romanoj. Ĉi tiu esplorado temigis hazardan specimenon de noir-grafikaj romanoj por esplori ĉi tiun trovon pli profunde. Kvanta enhavanalizo de dek noir-grafikaj romanoj estis farita. Kvankam ekzistis granda ŝanĝebleco en la nombro da portretadoj de fumado, fuma figuraĵo estis ĝenerala ĉie en ĉiuj la romanoj ekzamenitaj. Aparte rimarkis la altan indicon de portretadoj de virinoj fumantaj. Ĉi tio estas problemo pro la pliiĝo de fumado de junaj virinoj kaj knabinoj en iuj okcidentaj landoj. Kelkaj ekzemploj de anstataŭigo kaj malavanco de tabakvaroj notiĝis, kaj tabakkontrolaktivuloj devus serĉi labori kun artistoj por antaŭenigi preterlason, anstataŭigon kaj malavancon de tia figuraĵo. Plia esplorado estas proponita esplori en pli profunde la karakterizadon de fumantoj en tiaj grafikaj romanoj, kaj la daŭranta ripetiĝo de tia figuraĵo en nuntempaj grafikaj noir-romanoj.

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