ABSTRACT

THE X-MEN AND STEREOTYPES OF DOMINANT AND SUBORDINATE GROUPS

This study examined the use of stereotypes in the graphic novel *X-Men: Messiah Complex*. Taking both quantitative and qualitative approaches to analyzing content, the author found that the X-Men characters that appeared most frequently and most often in positions of leadership were White heterosexual males. Female and racial minority X-Men characters appeared least frequently and most often as followers. Sexual minorities did not appear at all. These patterns of representation are reflective of patterns found in other media, which tend to focus on and emphasize the positive qualities of members of dominant groups while ignoring or negatively portraying members of subordinate ones. This research discovered that racial and religious themes often strengthened or provided a backdrop for these stereotypes.

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THE X-MEN AND STEREOTYPES OF DOMINANT AND
SUBORDINATE GROUPS

by
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APPROVED

For the Department of Mass Communication and Journalism:

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Stereotypes have been defined as fixed mental images that are frequently applied to all members of a group (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 1987, as cited in Cooke-Jackson & Hansen, 2008). They are created at the cultural level and maintained by several factors, including family, friends, classmates and co-workers (Schaff, 1984). Stereotypes help us to understand the world by simplifying it (McGraty, Spears, & Yzerbyt, 2003, as cited in Brandt & Carstens, 2005). They do this primarily by reducing people to a few, easily understood traits or characteristics (Dates & Barlow, 1990, as cited in Paek & Shah, 2003; Hall, 2007, as cited in Paek & Shah, 2003).

The media play a crucial role in the perpetuation of stereotypes. Individuals often turn to media for information about people, places and issues with which they have little or no direct experience (Lee, Bichard, Irey, Walt, & Carlson, 2009). Stereotypes present in media can thus encourage audiences to perceive things in certain ways. This is especially problematic concerning issues of race and gender – two areas in which both news and entertainment media have come under criticism for doing a poor job.

Historically, media have tended to portray dominant groups more positively than subordinate groups. Dixon (2006) cited a number of studies (e.g., Entman, 1992, Oliver, 1994, Entman & Rojecki, 2000), which show that Whites have typically been represented as either police officers or victims in the news, whereas African Americans have been represented mostly as criminals. These representations contradict actual crime reports (Dixon & Linz, 2000a, 2000b, as cited in Dixon, 2006). Meanwhile, research on children’s educational programming has found that male characters tend to be portrayed as “more active,
constructive, dominant, aggressive, and attention seeking (i.e., calling attention to oneself and one’s achievements)” whereas female characters are shown as “more deferent, dependent, and [nurturing]” (Barner, 1999, as cited in Calvert, Kotler, Zehnder, & Shockey, 2003, p.141). Male characters also outnumber female characters 3:1. This is an inaccurate reflection of their numbers in the larger culture, where there is an almost equal number of males and females (Calvert & Huston, 1987, as cited in Calvert et al., 2003).

These portrayals are not without effect. Studies have shown that, when Blacks are overwhelmingly portrayed as criminals, audiences tend to believe African Americans have certain attributes that lead to criminal behavior. These same studies have found an increase in support for the death penalty and three-strikes legislation (Gilliam, Iyengar, Simon, & Wright 1996, as cited in Dixon, 2006; Gilliam & Iyengar, 1998, 2000, as cited in Dixon, 2006). Other researchers have discovered that the nature of children’s programming tends to encourage young audience members of both sexes to regard masculine characteristics as more desirable than feminine ones. It also appears to send specific messages regarding gender roles – telling females that it is possible for them to adopt traditionally male roles, while telling males that it is unacceptable for them to adopt traditionally feminine ones (Ruble & Martin, 1998, as cited in Calvert et al., 2003).

Purpose, Scope, and Significance of the Study

With the aforementioned as a backdrop, this study will examine to what extent, if at all, one of the most popular superhero franchises in United States history relies on stereotypes in its stories. The X-Men is a worthwhile focus of study for a few key reasons. First, researchers have seldom explored stereotypes in
comic books and graphic novels (McGrath, 2007). At the same time, the X-Men has a large fan base composed of members who are drawn to the superheroes’ adventures as told in comic books, graphic novels and films. The popularity of the franchise suggests that it has the potential to influence a wide swath of individuals. Finally, Marvel has positioned the X-Men as a uniquely diverse group in the world of superheroes, made up of individuals of color, gays and lesbians, and religious minorities. Research could reveal how frequently and in what context members of historically marginalized groups appear in contrast to members of historically dominant groups. More to the point, it could tell us whether the X-Men is breaking new ground or following patterns observed in other media.

Research Questions and Organization of the Study

In light of the issues raised, this study examines the presence and nature of stereotypes in the X-Men franchise, with a focus on the representation of dominant and subordinate groups.

Five research questions guide this research:

(RQ1) Which X-Men characters appear most frequently?
(RQ2) Which X-Men characters appear least frequently?
(RQ3) Which X-Men characters appear most frequently as leaders?
(RQ4) Which X-Men characters appear most frequently as followers?
(RQ5) What underlying themes related to race, sexual orientation and religion appear in X-Men stories?

This study comprises five chapters. This chapter introduced the nature of the problem and summarized the purpose and scope of the research. The next chapter presents the relevant literature in the field, the third chapter provides an overview of the methodology used to perform the study, and the fourth chapter
reports the findings gathered in response to the research questions. A discussion of
the findings is presented in the final chapter, along with the limitations of the
study and suggestions for future research on the subject.
CHAPTER 2: CULTURAL AND MEDIA STEREOTYPES OF DOMINANT AND SUBORDINATE GROUPS

Stereotypes are formed when people “use their direct or indirect experience with a group member to make schematic generalizations for the entire group” (Herek, 1986, as cited in Christian & Lapinski, 2003, p. 248). It is common to rely on stereotypes “when one has limited knowledge [of] or personal experience with another group of people” (Lowry, Hardin, & Sinclair, 2001, as cited in Christian & Lapinski, 2003, p. 248). Generally speaking, the more personal experience someone has with an individual who is different from him, the more likely he is to have a positive attitude about that person. In contrast, fewer interactions tend to result in a more negative attitude (Christian & Lapinski, 2003). Among the many categories of stereotypes and areas of difference between people that researchers have examined are race, gender, sexual orientation, and religion.

Race

The most positive racial stereotypes in this culture are associated with Whites. Whites are commonly regarded as smart and kind (Niemann, Jennings, Rozelle, Baxter, & Sullivan, 1994, as cited in Lee et al., 2009). White males are believed to be rich and wealthy, and White females are considered desirable (Lee et al., 2009).1

African Americans have been stereotyped as polar opposites of Whites. They are considered “inferior, lazy, dumb, dishonest, comical, unethical, and

---

1 Poor Whites from the South seem to be the only group of Caucasians to be negatively stereotyped. In their study focusing on Appalachians, Cooke-Jackson and Hansen found that members of this group are typically represented and regarded as “ignorant, lazy, uneducated, and incestuous.” In reality, the researchers said, Appalachians “live in poor, depressed regions far from access to quality resources such as grocery stores, employment opportunities, or quality health care” (2008, p. 187).
crooked” (United States Commission for the Study of Civil Rights, 1977, as cited in Lee et al., 2009, p. 97). A survey of Whites and Blacks found that members of both groups believe that African Americans are more likely to commit a crime than any other ethnic group (McAneny, 1993, as cited in Lee et al., 2009)

Latinos and Native Americans have also been stereotyped in largely negative terms. Latinos are commonly stereotyped as “dark skinned and lower class,” while Native Americans are typically stereotyped as alcoholics that live on reservations and receive government-issued checks (Tan, Fujioka, & Lucht, 1997, as cited in Lee et al., 2009, p. 97). Asians are the only racial group to have seemingly positive attributes ascribed to it. Asians are most often stereotyped as highly-educated and career-oriented (Fisher, 1994, as cited in Lee et al., 2009). In addition, Asian males are believed to be hard-workers, while Asian women are viewed as kind (Niemann, et al., 1994, as cited in Lee et al., 2009).

**Gender**

At the cultural level, men are stereotyped as strong and aggressive (Metheny, 1965, as cited in Schmalz & Kerstetter, 2006). It is implied that men should strive to be muscular (McCabe & Ricardelli, 2001, as cited in Sohn, 2010; Stanford & McCabe 2002, as cited in Sohn, 2010) and work toward creating bodies that emphasize mass and bulk (Mishkind, Silberstein, & Moore, 1986, as cited in McCready & Sasse, 2000; McCready & Sasse, 2000, as cited in Morrison & Halton, 2009). Women, on the other hand, are stereotyped as gentle and passive (Metheny, 1965, as cited in Schmalz & Kerstetter, 2006). Social messages strongly suggest that women should strive to have body types that complement the ideal male physique (McCabe & Ricardelli, 2001, as cited in Sohn, 2010; Stanford & McCabe 2002, as cited in Sohn, 2010) – bodies with small waists and
Sexual Orientation

The most common cultural stereotypes about sexual orientation are that men who demonstrate traditionally female characteristics are gay, while women who show traditionally masculine traits are lesbian (Rees-Turyn, Doyle, Holland, & Root, 2008). At the same time, there is a double standard; men who display traditionally female qualities are judged far more harshly than women who display traditionally male ones (Rees-Turyn et al., 2008).

Religion

Research on culturally held religious stereotypes has found that followers of the three major Western religions – Christianity, Judaism, and Islam – are represented in distinct, often oppositional ways. Christianity, for example, has tended to be associated with white skin, which has itself been regarded as symbolic of “purity and innocence” (Snyman, 2008, p. 405). In contrast, individuals with black skin have tended to be stereotyped as non-Christian and as impure and sinful (Snyman, 2008). More recently, followers of Christianity have been stereotyped as right wing extremists, homophobes, oppressors of women, and doubters of reason (Barshinger, 2007).

Just as white skin color has been associated with Christians, a large nose has been considered a defining feature of Jews (Schrank, 2007). Jews have been stereotyped as “greedy, power-hungry, and shady” (Berinsky & Mendelberg, 2005, pp. 847-8).

Islam has been similarly reduced to simplistic imagery and terms. It tends to be considered “a religion of violence, extremism, and terrorism” (Meacham,
2009, p. 13). Muslims are often regarded as violent and un-American (Meacham, 2009) and as oppressors of women (Said, 1994, as cited in Miladi, 2010). Words associated with Islam have been stereotyped as well. For example, in Arabic, the word *jihad* means “struggle to be good,” but most Americans define it as “bloodshed, tyranny, or holy war” (Abdullah, 2005, p.1, as cited in Trevino, Kanso, & Nelson, 2010, p. 6).

**Media Stereotypes**

The media give traction to larger cultural stereotypes (Christian & Lapinski, 2003). Ramasubramanian (2007) described this dynamic, saying, “exposure to media stereotypes can serve as cognitive shortcuts to immediately and easily activate the cultural stereotypes associated with [a] group” (p. 251).

Research has shown that media stereotypes, similar to stereotypes in general, can be misleading and have potentially negative consequences. For example, in a study of heterosexual and homosexual couples on scripted television programs, researchers found that traditional gender roles are typically assigned to characters in both types of relationships (Holz-Ivory, Gibson, & Ivory, 2009). Specifically, heterosexual males typically display dominant characteristics while heterosexual females demonstrate submissive ones. Similarly, in gay relationships, one of the males performs the traditional masculine role while the other performs the more traditional feminine one. The researchers noted that these types of gender roles were not present in “real-life” homosexual couples. Using cultivation theory as a framework, they argued that such representations were particularly problematic for heavy television viewers, who were more likely to believe the world was how it appeared onscreen (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999, as cited in Holz-
Ivory et al., 2009; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002, as cited in Holz-Ivory et al., 2009).

The potential of media stereotypes to impact audience perceptions has been the focus of other studies, as well. Researchers looking at the possible influence of films targeted to high school-age girls found that, after watching them, adolescent females tended to believe that friendship and social status were achieved through deceptive measures – just as they had been by the characters in the movies that were viewed (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2008). The researchers suggested that “exposure to this imagery is associated with negative stereotypic beliefs about female friendships as well as unfavorable attitudes toward women in general” (p. 141).

Research has also discovered a correlation between media content and eating disorders. Teenage girls that view content that emphasizes thin female bodies tend to be dissatisfied with their bodies and engage in unhealthy practices to achieve that body image (Lopez-Guimera, Levine, Sanchez-Carracedo, & Fauquet, 2010). Other studies have found that television and magazines are the most destructive mediums of communication when it comes to influencing teenagers and women to lose weight (Harrison & Hefner, 2008, as cited in Lopez-Guimera et al., 2010; Levine & Murnen, 2009, as cited in Lopez-Guimera et al., 2010).

The Rise of the Graphic Novel in Popular Culture

Comic books were first introduced in the United States in the late 1930s. Graphic novels appeared in 1978 with Will Eisner’s A Contract with God (Arnold, 2003). Although graphic novels attract fans of all ages and sexes, they are most popular among 20-year-olds (Eichenwald, 1987). The most obvious difference...
between comic books and graphic novels is formatting; comic books are slim and thin, and graphic novels are bounded as hardcovers or paperbacks. More important is the difference in content. Comic books consist of characters who have ongoing, multiple plotlines, while graphic novels are more complex and have an end to the story (Short & Reeves, 2009).

During the past decade, comic book and graphic novel characters have been featured in films that have made millions of dollars at the domestic box office. *Batman: The Dark Knight* has earned $533,345,358 thus far, followed by *Spider-Man* ($403,706,375), *Iron Man* ($318,412,101), *X-Men: The Last Stand* ($234,362,462), and *300* ($210,614,939) (*Box Office Mojo*, 2011). A-list actors have been cast to play the roles of these characters, including the late Heath Ledger as Joker in *Batman: The Dark Knight*; Robert Downey Jr. as Iron Man, and Halle Berry as Storm in *X-Men: The Last Stand*. The X-Men, with its proven success at the box office and ability to attract major Hollywood talent, appears poised to enjoy continued success in films to come. This past summer, another X-Men film was released. *X-Men: First Class* has thus far generated $146,396,804 in the box office (*Box Office Mojo*, 2011).

**The X-Men**

Founded by Marvel Comics in the 1960s, the X-Men are composed of a group of heroes with super-human powers and a desire to fight against injustice. In contrast to most graphic novel characters, the X-Men did not receive their powers from a scientific accident or magical source. They were born with special abilities. They are thus considered mutants in their universe. The original cast of X-Men consisted of five teenage mutants—Cyclops, Marvel Girl, Iceman, Beast, and Angel—and their leader, fellow mutant Professor Charles Xavier. Each character
appeared to be White. In the late 1970s, the cast of X-Men was expanded to include characters of different nationalities: Wolverine (Canadian), Storm (Egyptian), Nightcrawler (German), Colossus (Russian), Banshee (Scot) and Thunderbird (Apache) (Zingsheim, 2009). The diversity of these characters has been cited as helping to increase the popularity of X-Men and leading to the development of other related titles and characters (Ching, 2011). In the early 2000s, X-Men welcomed its first gay character, Northstar. Northstar’s sexual orientation was referred to or otherwise made evident in several X-Men stories (Hudson, 2009).

**Characters of X-Men**

Eight X-Men characters played major or minor roles in the graphic novel central to this study. These characters are Cyclops, Emma Frost, Colossus, Wolverine, Storm, Nightcrawler, Beast, and Angel (see Appendix A).

**Cyclops**

Cyclops is one of the original members of the X-Men. He currently serves as the team leader along with Emma Frost, a woman to whom he is linked romantically. His powers include the ability to project optical blasts from his eyes.

**Emma Frost**

Emma Frost was initially an enemy of the X-Men. She later joined them and serves with Cyclops as one of the team leaders. Her powers include telepathy and the ability to transform her body into diamond.
**Colossus**

Born and raised on a collective farm in Soviet Russia, Colossus has the ability to turn his skin into indestructible metal. He is considered to be the strongest member of the X-Men.

**Wolverine**

Arguably the most popular character of the X-Men, Wolverine has the ability to heal. He is able to recover from most injuries and stop his body from aging. He also possesses keen senses of hearing, smell, and taste and is able to project claws from his fists that are bonded with a fictional, destructive substance known as adamantium.

**Storm**

Storm’s powers include flight and the ability to control the weather. She was born in Cairo and raised as a thief before being recruited by the X-Men. Although she is not the current leader of the X-Men, she has served in various leadership roles in the past.

**Nightcrawler**

Nightcrawler has a demon-like appearance and possesses the ability to teleport from one location to another. He is also acrobatic and can climb walls. Of the eight characters central to this study, Nightcrawler is the only one with clearly identified religious beliefs (he is a practicing Catholic.)

**Beast**

Beast is an original member of the X-Men. His appearance was initially human, but as his mutation progressed, he turned into a creature resembling a large, blue cat. His abilities are reflective of his appearance. He has feline-like
strength, speed, and stamina. He is also regarded as a genius and serves as the team’s physician.

**Angel**

Another original member of the X-Men, Angel was born and raised into wealth and is heir to a family fortune. His powers include the ability of flight; indeed, he has feathered wings attached to his back.

The creators of X-Men have developed rich and meaningful stories that often incorporate themes relating to race, sexual orientation, and religion. The next section provides a summary of the ways in which these themes have appeared in X-Men stories.

**Popular X-Men Themes**

Terminology and imagery of race, sexual orientation, and religion have appeared in many X-Men stories. In fact, as illustrated below, these issues are in some ways at the heart of the entire franchise.

**Race**

Mutants are a minority group whose members are born with supernatural powers and are loathed and feared by humans. In some ways, the hatred and fear with which they are regarded is warranted; there are some mutants who are willing to resort to violence against humans in their effort to attain world dominance (Shugart, 2009). The X-Men act as buffer between these two conflicting groups. Their goal is to attain mutant equality through peaceful measures. However, they are willing to fight if necessary (Shugart, 2009). The determination of one group to attain dominance and of another group to maintain it is reflective of a similar struggle between races in the larger culture. The peaceful efforts of a minority
group to achieve equality also mirror historical race-related events in the United States.

Other ways in which the issue of race appears in X-Men is through depictions of discrimination. For example, in *Uncanny X-Men* #181, Senator Robert Kelley proposes passage of a law called the Mutant Affairs Control Act that would require all mutants to identify themselves to the government (Claremont, 1984). In *Uncanny X-Men* #235, an island nation reminiscent of South Africa, Genosha, is created, in which the government treats mutants as property of the state (Claremont, 1988).

**Sexual Orientation**

As noted previously, mutants are born with incredible abilities that allow them to read minds or shoot laser blasts. Occasionally, these powers do not manifest until a person reaches adolescence. Once the powers of an individual manifest, that person is identified as a mutant. This process is similar to how some gays or lesbians don’t “come out” until their teens (Earnest, 2007). Once they make this discovery and their abilities become known, mutants—similar to young gays and lesbians—are regarded with fear and suspicion and face discrimination if not worse. To avoid others’ reactions, most mutants conceal their abilities—another similarity they share with gays and lesbians (Earnest, 2007).

The most widely represented LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered/transsexual) character in the X-Men franchise is Northstar. Other, minor X-Men characters that are sexual minorities include Mystique and Anole.

**Religion**

Nightcrawler, identified as a Catholic earlier, is not the only character in the X-Men universe to be associated with a religion (although he is the only one in the
graphic novel that is the focus of this study). Other characters include Magneto, who is Jewish, and Dust, who is Muslim. Dust is not only identified by writers as Muslim; with her black burqua—and, arguably, even her ability to turn into sand—she appears to be a Muslim from the Mideast.

In addition to having characters who are followers of specific religious traditions, the X-Men franchise has relied on terminology and imagery with religious connotations. For example, some humans believe that all mutants are an abomination of God and that only God deserves to have the powers or abilities that mutants possess. The X-Men have also faced opponents who believe they are doing “God’s work” by committing acts of violence against them. Noteworthy examples are Rev. William Stryker and the Purifiers. Much like the Ku Klux Klan, they believe that all mutants, including the X-Men, are an abomination and must be killed (Johnson, 2006).

This chapter presented an overview of the literature pertaining to cultural stereotypes and how they are shaped and reflected by media. A discussion of the popularity of graphic novels was also provided, followed by descriptions of the characters and themes that dominate X-Men stories. The next chapter delineates the two approaches that were taken to answer the research questions posed in chapter 1.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

In an effort to discover which characters, roles, and themes dominate X-Men stories, the author conducted a content analysis of the graphic novel X-Men: Messiah Complex. This graphic novel was selected for analysis because it serves as the foundation for future X-Men stories. More to the point, it introduces the characters and themes that all subsequent comic books, graphic novels, and films build upon.

A total of 1,354 frames constituted the sample of this study. “Frames” were operationalized in this study as outlined, individual sequences of events that took place within the story of X-Men: Messiah Complex, which were present throughout each page(s) of the selected graphic novel.

The analysis of material was conducted on two levels. The author first conducted a quantitative analysis of content, focusing on the frequency and roles in which X-Men characters appeared. He separately noted their race and sexual orientation. The author then took a more qualitative approach, focusing on the themes that emerged in the graphic novel regarding religion, discrimination, and sexual orientation. By combining these two methods of analysis, the author was able to gain a more definitive picture of how members of dominant groups were portrayed in relation to members of historically subordinate ones.

Quantitative Content Analysis

Content analysis is a method for viewing and evaluating material based on select words or images to determine if certain patterns and/or themes emerge (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 2000, as cited in Kreps, 2008). For the quantitative part of the study, X-Men characters appearing in the graphic novel were coded in two categories: character and role. “Character” was operationalized as the individual
superhero—for example, Wolverine (see Appendix B). “Role” was operationalized as the capacity in which characters functioned in relation to each other, specifically, as followers or leaders. Characters who performed in neither role of leader or follower were coded as neutral (see Appendix B).

Coding decisions were based on the roles played and actions performed by X-Men characters in each frame. For example, if Storm was shown rescuing others from possible harm or telling them, “follow me,” her presence would be noted and her role would be coded as leader. If Nightcrawler was portrayed taking directions or needing the assistance of others, his presence would be noted and his role would be coded as follower. If Colossus appeared in a frame but demonstrated the behavior of neither a leader nor follower, his presence would be noted and his role would be coded as neutral (see Appendix C).

The author used the frequencies and crosstabs subprograms of SPSS to perform the quantitative part of this study. Cohen’s Kappa was used to test intercoder reliability. For the variable “character,” Cohen’s Kappa revealed that coders were in agreement only half the time (50%). The level of agreement between coders for the variable “role” was even lower, 0%. Because these percentages are unacceptable, the coders reexamined the study’s procedures, identified the reasons for the discrepancies, and came to a 100% consensus for both variables.

Qualitative Analysis

For the qualitative part of this study, the author examined to what extent, if at all, themes related to race, sexual orientation, and religion appeared in X-Men: Messiah Complex. These themes, as stated earlier, are common in X-Men
storylines and the author was interested in seeing what purpose, if any, they served in this foundational graphic novel.

The first step in the qualitative analysis of material required the author to review the 1,354 frames in the sample and make note of all references to race, sexual orientation, and religion. The references were then written down and placed into one of three categories: the Portrayal of Race, the Portrayal of Sexual Orientation, and the Portrayal of Religion. Each category contained two subcategories: Imagery and Language. Encompassing both verbal and nonverbal language, these subcategories allowed the author to have a fuller picture of how the graphic novel’s writers represented race, sexual orientation and religion. Next, the author attempted to determine the nature of the references in each of the categories. For example, what types of images were associated with religion? How was race portrayed in relation to the issues of success and failure - which race was shown winning and which race was shown losing? Finally, the author attempted to identify what thematic undercurrents were created by these images and words.

The results of the quantitative and qualitative analyses of X-Men: Messiah are presented in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

A total of 1,354 comic frames of X-Men: Messiah Complex were examined to see what stereotypes emerged. Specifically, the author coded how frequently and in what capacity each member of X-Men appeared through crosstabs evaluation. Thematic undercurrents related to race, sexual orientation and religion were also assessed.

The results of this study are discussed in the sequence of the research questions posed in chapter 1.

RQ1: Which X-Men Characters Appear Most Frequently?

X-Men characters appeared a total of 1,256 times in X-Men: Messiah Complex. The characters who appeared most frequently were Cyclops, Wolverine, and Emma Frost. Cyclops appeared 236 times (19%); Wolverine appeared 175 times (14%), and Emma Frost appeared 127 times (10%). Other characters who appeared often were Cable (n=117, 9%), Professor X (n=101, 8%), and Warpath (n=84, 7%).

All of the characters who appear most frequently are White heterosexuals, except Warpath. He is a Native American male. Five are male and one is female, Emma Frost (see Table 1).

RQ 2: Which X-Men Characters Appear Least Frequently?

Cannonball appeared least frequently in X-Men: Messiah Complex (n=3, 0.0%), followed by Armor (n=9, 1.0%), Bishop (n=16, 1.0%). Storm (n=32, 3.0%), Rogue (n=37, 3.0%), and Colossus (n=40, 3.0%).
Armor is an Asian female, Bishop is a Black male, Storm is a Black female, and Rogue is a White female. In other words, X-Men who are female and racial/ethnic minorities appear least frequently as a group, except Cannonball and Colossus. Both are White male heterosexuals. Also, there were no characters who are gay or lesbian that appeared (see Table 1).

Table 1. Character Appearance

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<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cyclops (WM)</td>
<td>236</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wolverine (WM)</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma Frost (WF)</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cable (WM)</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professor X (WM)</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warpath (NM)</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nightcrawler (WM)</td>
<td>73</td>
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<td>Beast (WM)</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iceman (WM)</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hepzibah (IGF)</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angel (WM)</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colossus (WM)</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rogue (WF)</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storm (BF)</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bishop (BM)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armor (AF)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cannonball (WM)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,256</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

WM = White male  BF = Black female
WF = White female BM = Black male
IGF = intergalactic female AF = Asian female

RQ 3: Which X-Men Characters Appear Most Frequently as Leaders?

X-Men characters demonstrated qualities of leadership 288 times. Characters who appeared as leaders most frequently were Cyclops (n=75, 26%), Cable (n=73, 25%), and Wolverine (n=40, 14%). The group of characters who appeared as leaders the next most frequently were Professor X, Nightcrawler, and
Beast. Professor X was portrayed as a leader 18 times (6%), Nightcrawler appeared as a leader 16 times (6%), and Beast appeared as a leader 14 times (5%).

All of these characters are White male heterosexuals. In contrast, female and racial/ethnic minority characters appeared as leaders only 3% of the time or less, except Cannonball. He is a White male heterosexual. Once again, there were no characters who are gay or lesbian that appeared (see Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cyclops (WM)</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cable (WM)</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wolverine (WM)</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professor X (WM)</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nightcrawler (WM)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beast (WM)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warpath (NM)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storm (BF)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma Frost (WF)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iceman (WM)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hepzibah IGF)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bishop (BM)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colossus (WM)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angel (WM)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armor (AF)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cannonball (WM)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rogue (WF)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>288</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

WM = White male  BF = Black female
WF= White female  BM = Black male
IGF = intergalactic female AF = Asian female

**RQ 4: Which X-Men Characters Appear Most Frequently as Followers?**

X-Men characters demonstrated qualities of follower 170 times. Characters who appeared most frequently as followers were Warpath (n=28, 16%), Hepzibah (n=20, 12%), and Angel (n=17,10%). The group of characters who appeared as
followers the next most frequently were Emma Frost, Professor X, and Rogue. Both Emma Frost and Professor X were portrayed as a follower 15 times (9%), and Rogue appeared as a follower 14 times (8%).

Warpath is a Native American male. Hepzibah is a female, Angel is a White male, Emma Frost is White female, Professor X is White male, and Rogue is a White female. Thus, X-Men characters who appear most frequently as followers are female. As expected, there were no characters who are gay or lesbian that appeared (see Table 3).

Table 3. Character Role: Follower

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Warpath (NM)</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hepzibah (IGF)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angel (WM)</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma Frost (WF)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professor X (WM)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rogue (WF)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wolverine (WM)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nightcrawler (WM)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Colossus (WM)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cable (WM)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iceman (WM)</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cyclops (WM)</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Beast (WM)</td>
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<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storm (BF)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cannonball (WM)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bishop (BM)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armor (AF)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>170</strong></td>
<td><strong>101</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

WM = White male         BF = Black female
WF = White female       BM = Black male
IGF = intergalactic female  AF = Asian female

A crosstab test was calculated to determine if there was a difference in character roles among various X-Men characters. A significant difference was
found $\chi^2 = (34, N = 1914) = 740.09, p < .000$. There were significantly more White males in leadership roles than racial or gendered minorities. Native American males and white females were shown in follower roles.

Quantitative results show that the X-Men characters who appeared most frequently and most often as leaders were White heterosexual males. In contrast, X-Men characters who appeared least frequently and most often as followers were female and racial/ethnic minorities. No gay or lesbian X-Men characters appeared. The dominance of demographic groups that traditionally hold power in society is striking given that the X-Men franchise is known in part for the value it places on the diversity of its characters. A fuller description of the findings follows.

**X-Men Leaders**

X-Men characters displayed acts of leadership physically and verbally. Cyclops and Wolverine—both White, heterosexual males—gave the most verbal commands to others on the team. This is not necessarily surprising; Cyclops is one of the co-leaders of the X-Men, and Wolverine is the leader of X-Force, which is a black-ops branch of X-Men. What is surprising is that Cyclops’ co-leader, Emma Frost, was portrayed as a leader so rarely, despite appearing in more than 100 frames. With her blonde hair, blue eyes, and fitting, all-white costume that emphasizes her shoulders, breasts, and stomach, she seemed to be treated more as a sexual object. This image is reinforced by the fact that she tended to act passively. Emma Frost was thus depicted in a manner consistent with traditional cultural stereotypes of gender.

X-Men characters who are White, heterosexual, and male committed most of the violence in *X-Men: Messiah Complex*. While this depiction goes against the traditional cultural stereotype of violence being perpetrated mostly by men of
color, it is important to note that the violent acts in this case were heroic. More specifically, they were portrayed as necessary to fighting the forces of evil or accomplishing the goals of equality and justice.

**X-Men Followers**

Women and characters of color accounted for most of the X-Men characters coded as followers. Women were not shown engaging in physical activity as frequently as men. However, they were portrayed as weak and as dependent on them for protection—a common traditional gender stereotype.

One of the more interesting representations of race involved the lone Black heterosexual male character, Bishop. It initially seemed that *X-Men: Messiah Complex* was going to deviate from traditional stereotypes of African Americans with Bishop. Although he was shown mostly as a follower rather than a leader, he was not portrayed as stupid or ignorant. Moreover, he carried himself with confidence and behaved assertively. Later in the graphic novel, however, Bishop was revealed to be a traitor. Because he was the only Black character in the graphic novel, the implications of this betrayal had racial implications that would not exist were the perpetrator White.

In addition to these findings, the author noted broader themes related to race, religion, and sexual orientation.

**RQ 5: What Underlying Themes Related to Race, Sexual Orientation, and Religion Appear in X-Men Stories?**

The author took another, more qualitative approach to the same content of *X-Men: Messiah Complex*. This second approach focused on themes that emerged regarding race, sexual orientation, and religion—common topics in X-Men
storylines. Interestingly enough, the issue of sexual orientation did not appear in this graphic novel. The issues of race and religion were present.

**Race**

Two themes related to race appeared in *X-Men: Messiah Complex*. One focused on racial structures, with humans at the top and mutants at the bottom. The other focused on the violence and discrimination resulting from this hierarchy.

**Racial structures.** The existence of a racial hierarchy in the world of the X-Men was made clear in series of frames involving the characters Multiple Man and Layla Miller. Upon visiting the future, the characters discover a concentration camp for mutants. Hearkening back to images of the Jewish concentration camps and Japanese internment camps of World War II, this camp is heavily guarded and patrolled by human forces. High walls and chain fences separate the mutant and human populations. Further, mutants are physically branded, just as the Jews were when the Nazis tattooed serial numbers on their forearms. Multiple Man is shown with the letter “M” —for “mutant”—tattooed over his right eye.

The underlying theme of this series of frames is that mutants are regarded as an inferior race. Based on that assessment, they are also victims of violence and discrimination.

**Violence and discrimination.** Several frames contained images and/or language that underscored the price mutants paid for their perceived inferiority. Humans commonly refer to mutants using derogatory terms such as “gene joke,” “mutie,” and “gene freak”—slurs that can be considered akin to “nigger,” “chink,” and “wetback.” In some instances, the name-calling deteriorates to violence, such
as when a mutant is struck by the nightstick or rifle of a soldier or shot by a human terrorist.

Mutants also face discrimination, which this author defines as being denied the rights and privileges enjoyed by other groups. Large robots known as the Sentinels are one of the most obvious examples of the discrimination endured by mutants. The human-run government has assigned these robots to the X-Men’s headquarters, the Xavier Institute, ostensibly to serve as guards and protect the mutants from possible harm. In fact, the Sentinels infringe upon the mutant’s civil liberties by spying on them, specifically, by observing every act that takes place at the institute and reporting those activities back to the government.

Another scene underscores how far the government will go to weed out and suppress mutants. In this series of frames, a soldier reveals to Multiple Man that the government secretly taps into and observes all communications, verbal and nonverbal, engaged in by humans and individuals who might not be human in an effort to discover who is a mutant. The utterance of certain words such as “mutant” immediately raises the suspicion of the human-run government, which begins to trail the individuals who said them, much like the United States government does when a suspected terrorist who is being wiretapped is overheard saying “jihad.” Individuals revealed to be mutants are sent to concentration camps.

**Religion**

Images and words related to religion were typically used to strengthen the racial structures and justify the race-based acts of violence and discrimination described above. For example, one series of frames focused on a crowd of anti-mutant terrorists known as Purifiers. At one point, one of them remarks, “Our highest priority is finding and executing the infant antichrist. We have Purifiers in
every town and city in a hundred-mile radius outside Cooperstown.” In another scene, another character points a rifle at Warpath and says, “All mutants burn!” The underlying theme of these frames is that, similar to the belief held by some in the larger culture about religious traditions other than their own, mutants are “demons” or “wicked” and deserve to go to hell.

Religion overall was presented as a challenge to the X-Men and their fellow mutants. Specifically, humans were shown as perceiving mutants as “agents of Satan” and mutants were depicted as being forced to live in a society where they were treated in accordance with this perspective.

This chapter presented the results from the quantitative and qualitative analyses of *X-Men: Messiah*. The next chapter will provide a discussion of the findings, identify the limitations of the study, and suggest directions for future research on the subject.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Previous studies have found that producers of media content tend to focus on dominant groups and emphasize their positive qualities while ignoring or negatively portraying subordinate groups. Stereotypes of race and gender have been especially problematic. Representations of sexual orientation and religion have also been causes for concern.

With the aforementioned as points of departure, the present study looked at the use of stereotypes in the graphic novel, *X-Men: Messiah Complex*. The author took quantitative and qualitative approaches to determine how characters were portrayed and which themes were present in the text. Specifically, he looked at which X-Men appeared most frequently and what roles they performed in relation to each other, leader or follower. He considered what the results revealed about race, gender, and sexual orientation. He also examined the text to see to what extent, if at all, popular X-Men themes—race, sexual orientation and religion—appeared.

A total of 1,354 frames were analyzed during a 2-week period. X-Men characters were present in 1,256 of those frames. Seventeen X-Men characters—12 males and 5 females—appeared in the text. Four of the characters were racial minorities. No sexual minorities appeared as X-Men. White male heterosexuals appeared most often and most frequently as leaders. Members of other demographic groups appeared less frequently and most often as followers. Emma Frost was somewhat of an exception. She showed up in more than 100 frames; however, she was typically depicted as passive and was highly sexualized. There was one Black male on the X-Men team, Bishop, and he was later revealed to be a traitor.
These patterns are reflective of existing cultural and media stereotypes of race, gender, and, to a lesser extent, sexual orientation. On the one hand, the findings are startling, given that the X-Men franchise has established a reputation for being progressive, with a diverse group of superheroes composed of women, racial minorities, and sexual minorities. On the other hand, the characters who appear most frequently and most often as leaders in *X-Men: Messiah Complex* first appeared almost 50 years ago, before minority characters were introduced. Writers have had a longer period of time to cast them and present them in positive roles. Audiences have, in turn, had a longer period of time to establish a relationship with these characters and subsequently want to read about them as opposed to other characters. The danger is that, when characters who are members of minority groups show up so rarely and in ways that do not break new ground, audiences may be encouraged to perceive the groups that these characters represent—women, people of color, and gays, lesbians, and bisexuals—in highly stereotypical terms.

Despite the lack of racial diversity among the characters appearing in *X-Men: Messiah Complex*, two important racial themes emerged in this study. One theme concerned the presence of a racial hierarchy with humans at the top and mutants at the bottom. The second theme focused on the acts of violence and discrimination that resulted from this structure. Both themes served to strengthen the overall depiction of the mutants, including the X-Men, as minorities struggling at best to attain the same rights and privileges as humans—and at worst, to merely survive. Both themes also were strengthened by the use of religious imagery and terminology.
Significance of the Findings

This study contributes to existing literature on media stereotypes of race and gender in general and to studies of such stereotypes in comic books and graphic novels in particular. Most notably, this research found that the writers of the X-Men rely on the same stereotypes of race and gender found in other media and the larger culture. They also rely heavily on racial and religious themes to strengthen their storylines, primarily, by underscoring the conditions under which the X-Men live and against which they struggle.

Limitations of the Study

A major limitation of this study is that it cannot reveal the intentions of the source or the interpretations of the receiver. Like all research focusing on media content, it allows for only limited inferences about the factors that helped shape the imagery and words in X-Men: Messiah Complex as well as their influence on readers.

Another limitation of the study is that it is centered one graphic novel comprising comic book issues that were published in 2007-2008. There have since been new characters introduced to the X-Men franchise, some of which are female, racial minorities, and gay and lesbian. While focusing on X-Men: Messiah Complex is certainly useful in that it forms the basis of future stories, such a narrow emphasis cannot shed light on what characters appear in texts now, and in what capacity.

Suggestions for Further Research

As already stated, although X Men: Messiah Complex plays a foundational role for future X-men storylines, it is not known to what extent and how comic books and graphic novels that were published later differ from this text. An
examination of more recent publications could reveal whether, over time, there has been a change in the use of certain characters and presence of specific themes. Other potential studies include analyzing X-Men films to see exactly how X-Men who are members of dominant groups are portrayed compared to X-Men characters who are female or racial or sexual minorities, and looking at superhero teams such the Avengers and Justice League of America (JLA), to see if they follow patterns of representation similar to those found in the X-Men franchise.

Finally, researchers who are interested in stereotypes in X-Men stories can combine content analysis with other research techniques. Interviews with writers and audience analyses would provide insight into the factors that influence content and of how that content, in turn, impacts audiences.
REFERENCES
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A: WEBSITE
The following website was used to determine a character’s background:

www.marvel.com/characters/

*It would seem difficult to identify a character’s racial/ethnic origin due to their physical, mutant appearance: however, it can be assured that all of these variables can be determined through Marvel Comics online database – the company that publishes X-Men and other stories. These files provide information on all characters that Marvel Comics creators have developed over the past 70 years of existence. Plus, this same database was used to determine who is an X-Man.
APPENDIX B: VARIABLES
**Character**

The following characters of X-Men were coded and analyzed:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bishop</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iceman</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma Frost</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cannonball</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hepzibah</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wolverine</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armor</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rogue</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beast</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storm</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warpath</td>
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<td>Colossus</td>
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<td>Cable</td>
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<td>Cyclops</td>
<td>14</td>
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<td>Nightcrawler</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angel</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professor X</td>
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<tr>
<td>N/A</td>
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</tr>
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</table>

**Role**

The following characteristics were coded and analyzed:

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Role</th>
<th>Code</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follower</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX C: CHARACTER ANALYSIS SCHEME
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Image</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>someone on the X-Men that displays known acts of bravery and courage through the risk of his/her life to rescue another from possible harm and/or death, and provides verbal and physical guidance to others as well.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Example**

A member of X-Men that uses his/her mutant ability to prohibit an enemy from causing possible harm and/or death to others; helps those that have been hurt and/or wounded; leads and protects others during mission(s); gives instructions and suggestions to help achieve the initiative(s).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Image</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Follower</td>
<td>someone that follows commands and/or orders, and requires rescuing and/or medical treatment by other teammates to prevent possible harm and/or death.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Example**

An X-Man is about to face harm and/or death from an opponent; follows directions given to him/her; seeks medical attention and/or assistance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Image</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>when neither the characteristics of leadership or follower can be determined.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Example**

An X-Man is conversing in dialogue amongst others; combat between the X-Men and their opponents; images that do not consist of the X-Men.
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grant George Bedrosian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Type full name as it appears on submission

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>October 27, 2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Date