

# SUPERPOWERING GIRLS

---

FEMALE REPRESENTATION IN THE  
SCI-FI/SUPERHERO GENRE

OCTOBER 2018



# INTRODUCTION

---

What are the roles for women and girls in science fiction and superhero films and television? Are they visible? Are they powerful? Are they inclusive? What does their representation, voice share, presence—or absence—mean to the stories that shape our imaginations of who we are and what is possible?

These are some of the questions we approached in a series of reports that BBC America and the Women's Media Center will release over the next few months with a goal of expanding both the diversity and representation of women and girls in front of and behind the camera. "SuperPowering Girls: Female Representation in the Sci-Fi/Superhero Genre," our first joint study, looked at how the depictions of women on screen impact young women and girls.

We asked girls and boys about their role models, favorite superheroes, future aspirations and gender representation in media. While *Wonder Woman* and *Black Panther* have made significant strides in increasing representation in the superhero genre, overwhelmingly, girls say there are **#NotEnough #SuperPowerGirls** or other strong, relatable female characters in film and TV.

Our research—and other correlating research—shows that there is a significant underrepresentation of female superhero references for girls as well as frequent underrepresentation and sexualization of these characters when they do appear. Every demographic group we spoke to expressed a strong desire for more female superheroes and greater overall representation of "people who look like me" in the genre.

Media tells us our roles in society. It tells us who we are and what we can be. It frames, interprets and amplifies our policies and politics. It tells us who has power and who matters.

Gloria Steinem, co-founder of the Women's Media Center, like many girls and women, can attest to the profound absence of superheroes in media. "As a little girl, *Wonder Woman* was the only female superhero, so she was irresistible. She was literally the only game in town, the only hero that made you feel good about yourself."

Not much has changed today. That's not good enough, as evidenced by other key findings in this report:

- Teen girls are significantly less likely than teen boys to describe themselves as confident, brave, and heard. And these challenges are even more pronounced for girls of color, who are significantly less likely than their Caucasian counterparts to feel listened to when they speak.
- Despite notable campaigns to boost women in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), we still see a 23-point gender gap between teen boys and girls with regards to interest in STEM careers. And that translates to leadership in STEM industries. For instance, only 20 percent of tech executives are women—80 percent of tech executives are men.
- 1 in 3 teens agree that girls have fewer opportunities than boys to be leaders.
- Female sci-fi/superheroes are more impactful sources of inspiration for girls than male heroes are for boys, empowering girls—and especially girls of color—to believe they can achieve anything they put their mind to.

Sci-fi and superhero characters inhabit a world filled with imagination, opportunity and possibility. In real life, opportunities and role models for women and girls, especially women and girls of color, are limited. They must be able to imagine a future paved with innovative opportunities, particularly in STEM. The severe lack of gender and racial diversity in STEM is well chronicled in the **Women's Media Center's Status of Women in U.S. Media 2017 report**. Girls need to see a powerful role model if they are to imagine themselves as tomorrow's leaders and innovators. We must encourage and empower girls and young women to reach their highest potential in a society that embraces full equality and representation.

Julie Burton, President of the Women's Media Center, stresses, "At this time of enormous, sweeping, social change, it's important that television and film provide an abundance of roles and role models for diverse girls and young women. We know that representation matters, as evidenced by this report."

# BACKGROUND

Our research found that female sci-fi and superhero characters help bridge the confidence gap for girls, making them feel strong, brave, confident, inspired, positive, and motivated.”

“If you can’t see her, you can’t be her,” BBC America President Sarah Barnett implores. “It’s time to expand what gets seen, and we hope this report will contribute to sparking change in the stories we see on screen. With greater representation of female heroes in the sci-fi and superhero genre, we can help superpower the next generation of women.”

---

“In *Wrinkle in Time*, literally this girl of color saves the universe—not just the world, multiple planets and galaxies. I mean, that’s such a radical idea as a woman of color, as anyone who’s outside the industry construct of who’s usually put forth as the hero in cinema.”

—AVA DUVERNAY, *A Wrinkle in Time*

“I wanted to show that women are empowered and strong, and don’t have to be saved by some male hero, but they can take care of themselves using their intelligence and their power.”

—GAL GADOT, *Wonder Woman*

“I want to tell the fans not to be scared by my gender... because this is a really exciting time, and *Doctor Who* represents everything that’s exciting about change.”

—JODIE WHITAKER, *Doctor Who*

For decades, male protagonists have dominated the science-fiction and superhero genres, building rabid fan-bases, enduring franchises, and billion-dollar businesses in their wake. Women, often relegated to roles of damsel-in-distress or plucky side-kick, have been both misrepresented and underrepresented in the genre, comprising only a fraction of characters and frequently hypersexualized, brutalized and objectified.

The conversation around both gender and racial representation in these genres has been elevated in the last few years following the box-office success of *Wonder Woman* and *Black Panther*. Gender-neutral casting in major film and TV franchises is sparking excitement, debate, and new questions about how these portrayals impact those it represents.

Building on the existing literature in this space, this study explores the impact of female representation in the sci-fi and superhero genres on Children and Teens. Through an online quantitative survey, we garnered responses from 2,431 Participants aged 10-19 and Parents of Children aged 5-9, who answered on behalf of their child. The sample included an even gender split and was representative of ethnicity and region in accordance with the U.S. Census Bureau data.

With a particular focus on how young women are affected by these depictions, we sought to address the following questions:

- **How do girls and boys feel about themselves and their opportunities for the future?**
- **Who do young people look to as role models? What role does gender play?**
- **What are the current perceptions around gender representation in film and television?**
- **How are female sci-fi/superheroes perceived? How do they compare to male sci-fi/superheroes?**
- **What impact do female sci-fi/superheroes have on girls’ perceptions of themselves and their abilities?**

# CONFIDENCE GAP THE GREAT GENDER DIVIDE

## Our research confirmed that a confidence gap emerges between Girls and Boys in their teenage years.

Teen Girls are significantly less likely than Teen Boys to describe themselves as **"confident"** (11pt. gender gap), **"brave"** (13pt. gender gap), and **"heard"** (19pt. gender gap).

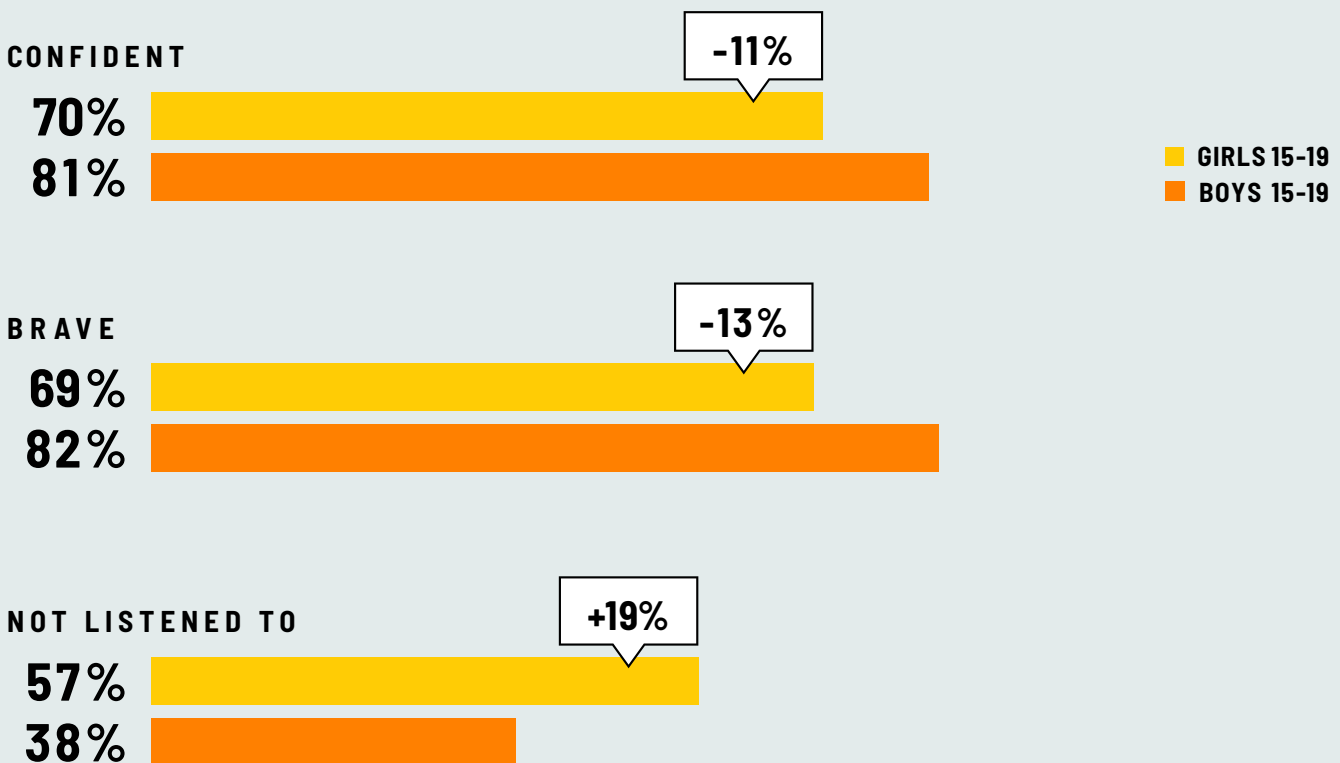
For Girls of Color, the challenges are even greater, with a majority saying they are not listened to when they speak, significantly higher than their Caucasian female counterparts (9pt. ethnicity gap).

Additionally, 1 in 3 Teen Girls (34%) and nearly 1 in 3 Teen Boys (28%) acknowledge that girls have fewer opportunities than boys to be leaders, exasperating and perpetuating the confidence gap during the formative adolescent years.

This gender gap also extends to traditionally male-dominated career fields. While a majority of Teen Boys (57%) express interest in a career in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics), only one-third of Teen Girls want to pursue a STEM career—a stark 23-point difference based on gender.

Despite this confidence gap, nearly 9 in 10 Girls and Boys still feel optimistic about their future (87%) and believe they can achieve anything they put their mind to (88%).

### HOW TEENS 15-19 DESCRIBE THEMSELVES

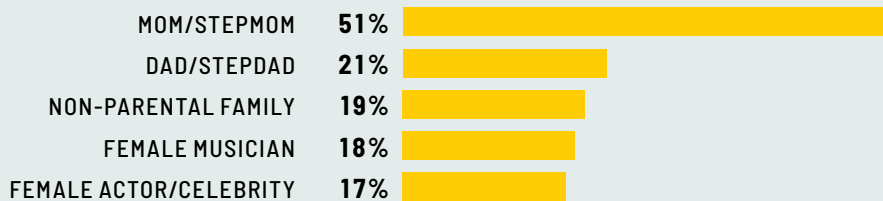


# SOURCES OF INSPIRATION & INFLUENCE

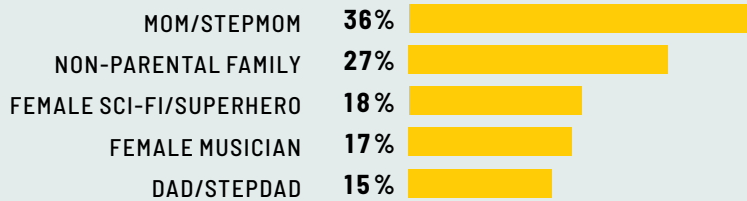
## Both Children and Teens choose role models who are the same gender as themselves.

- 85% of Girls and Parents of Girls name a female when asked who they or their daughter look up to, while 87% of Boys and Parents of Boys name a male.
- Girls say the most inspiring people in their lives are their parents, especially their mothers. Moms are more than twice as likely as Dads to be identified as role models for girls.
- Boys are also most likely to name their parents as role models. However, Dad holds the number one spot, with Mom coming in second for Boys 10-19 and third for Boys 5-9 (behind male superheroes).

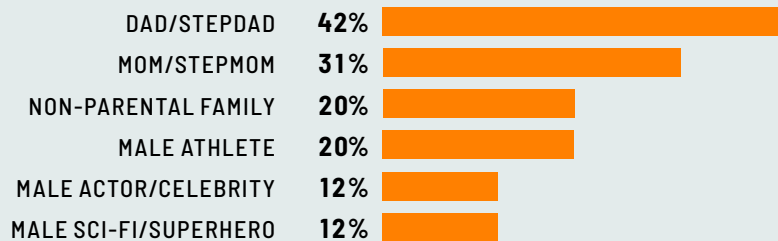
### TOP ROLE MODELS FOR 10-19 YEAR OLD GIRLS



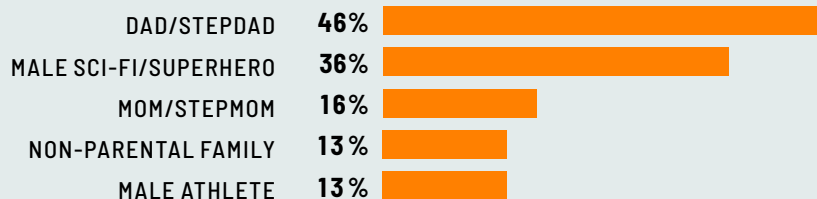
### TOP ROLE MODELS FOR 5-9 YEAR OLD GIRLS



### TOP ROLE MODELS FOR 10-19 YEAR OLD BOYS



### TOP ROLE MODELS FOR 5-9 YEAR OLD BOYS



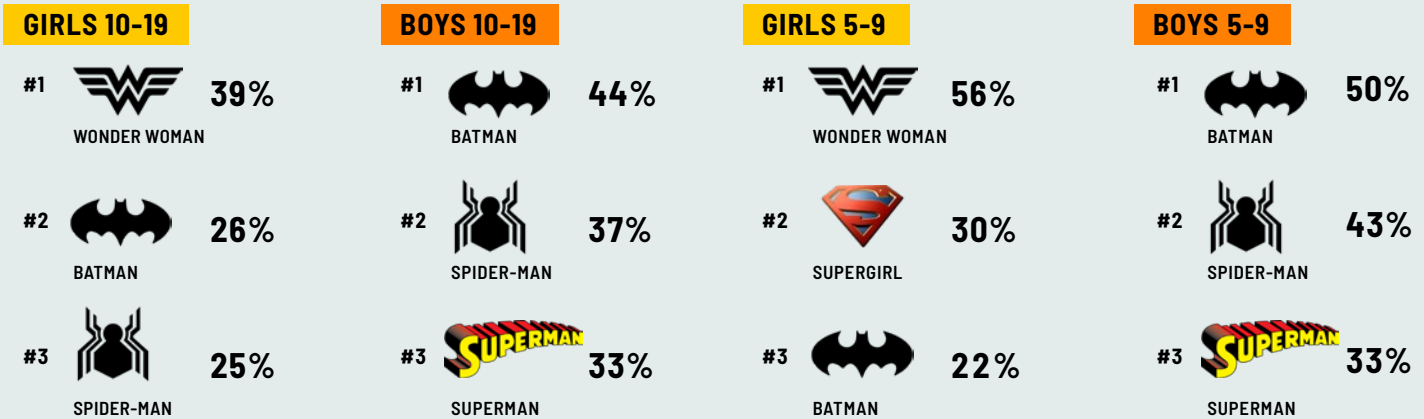
# SCI-FI/SUPERHEROES AS ROLE MODELS

## Outside of family, Parents of 5- to 9-year-olds say their Children are most likely to look to superheroes as role models.

Mirroring the gender preference for role models overall, both Children and Teens demonstrate a clear preference for sci-fi/superheroes who are the same gender as themselves. When asked on an unaided basis to name their favorite sci-fi/superheroes:

- Nearly half of Girls surveyed identified **Wonder Woman** as their favorite hero (45%), while Boys look to **Batman** (46%).
- Wonder Woman** ranks as the #1 hero for both younger Girls 5-9 and older Girls 10-19, with **Supergirl** holding the #2 spot among younger girls.
- Among Boys, **Wonder Woman** fails to make the Top 10 list, ranking #13 among Boys 5-9 and #14 among Boys 10-19.

### FAVORITE SCI-FI/ SUPERHERO



Also speaking to the importance of representation in this space, **Black Panther** ranks as the second-favorite hero among African American Children and Teens, behind only Wonder Woman for Girls and Batman for Boys.

More than one-quarter (28%) of African Americans surveyed named Black Panther as one of their favorite heroes versus just 6% among those of a different ethnicity.



# #NotEnough

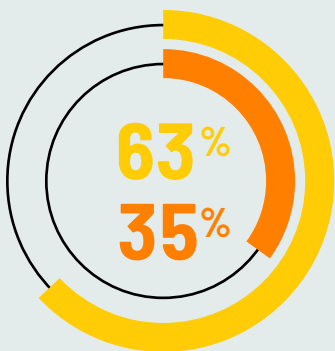
Same-gendered preferences for both role models and sci-fi/superheroes highlight the need for representation in media of powerful male and female characters as well as heroes of color. While *Wonder Woman* and *Black Panther* have made significant strides in increasing representation in this space, it is still **#NotEnough**.

2 in 3 Girls agree there are **not enough** of the following in Film & TV: **Female Role Models (63%)**, **Strong Female Characters (65%)** and **Relatable Female Characters (65%)**.

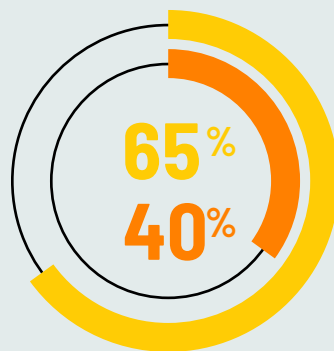
We see a significant 25-31 point gender gap when compared to how Boys responded to the same questions relative to male characters.

**Our research reveals a clear lack of strong, relatable female characters in film and television.**

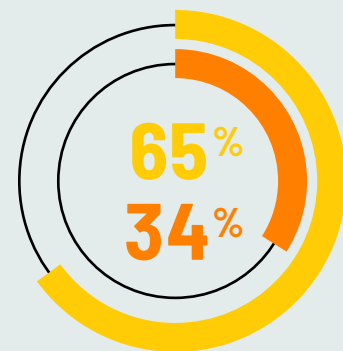
■ GIRLS 10-19  
■ BOYS 10-19



#NotEnough **role models** of their gender



#NotEnough **relatable characters** of their gender



#NotEnough **strong characters** of their gender

**This lack of representation extends to the sci-fi/superhero genre, where we found a notable disparity in superhero references for boys versus girls:**

- Male sci-fi/superheroes serve as role models for more than one-third (36%) of Boys 5-9 and 12% of Boys 10-19.
- However, female sci-fi/superheroes only appear as role models for 18% of Girls 5-9 and just 3% of Girls 10-19.

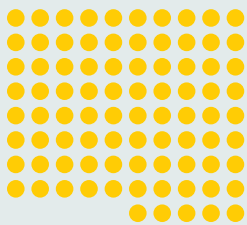
## While the sentiment is strongest among Girls and Parents of Girls, every demographic group surveyed expressed a desire for MORE female heroes in the sci-fi/superhero genre:

- 69% of Boys 10-19 and 75% of Parents of Boys 5-9 want to see **more** female sci-fi/superheroes in media.
- And while Boys' favorite sci-fi/superheroes are predominantly male characters, 2 in 3 Boys say they enjoy watching female sci-fi/superheroes the same as male sci-fi/superheroes.
- Girls 10-19 and People of Color were most likely to want **more** sci-fi/superheroes who **look like them**.

### % WHO WANT TO SEE MORE FEMALE SCI-FI/SUPERHEROES IN MEDIA

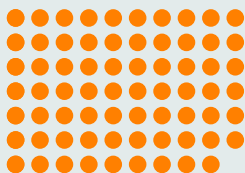
GIRLS 10-19

85%



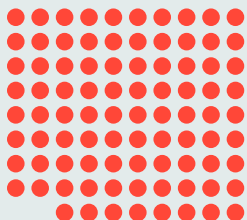
BOYS 10-19

69%



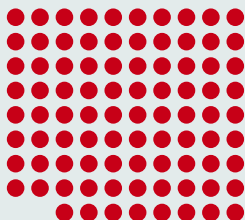
PARENTS OF GIRLS 5-9

88%

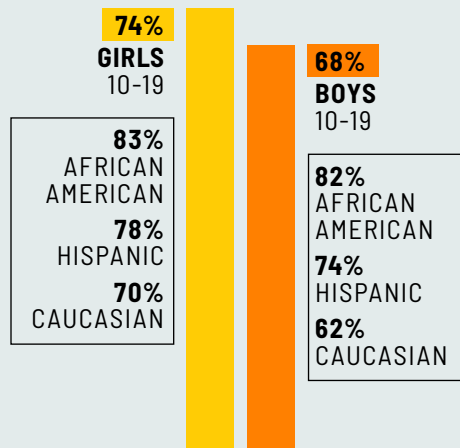


PARENTS OF BOYS 5-9

75%



### % WHO WANT TO SEE MORE SCI-FI/SUPERHEROES WHO LOOK LIKE THEM



Coupled with the lack of representation is the frequent misrepresentation of female characters in the genre.

Of particular concern is the tendency to sexualize women in these roles.

3 in 4 Parents and Teens agree that it has become the norm for female superheroes to be depicted in revealing outfits.



# SUPERPOWERING GIRLS

Despite the underrepresentation of female sci-fi/superheroes, 9 in 10 Girls say that sci-fi/superheroes are positive role models for them.

And representation is empowering.

Girls believe that female sci-fi/ superheroes are smarter and more powerful than male heroes. We see a 10-point spread in perceptions of Power and a significant 28-point advantage in perceived Intelligence.

## SCI-FI/ SUPERHERO DESCRIPTORS AMONG GIRLS 10-19

■ FEMALE SCI-FI/ SUPERHEROES  
■ MALE SCI-FI/ SUPERHEROES

### POWERFUL



### SMART

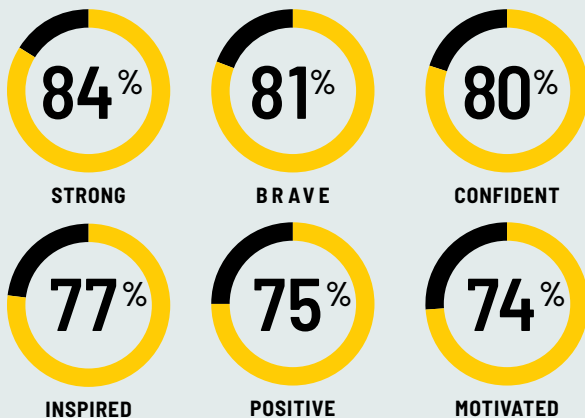


Girls also say their favorite female sci-fi/superheroes make them feel **Strong, Brave, Confident, Inspired, Positive and Motivated**, helping to bridge the confidence gap for young women.

In fact, female sci-fi/superheroes are more impactful sources of inspiration for Girls than male heroes are for Boys.

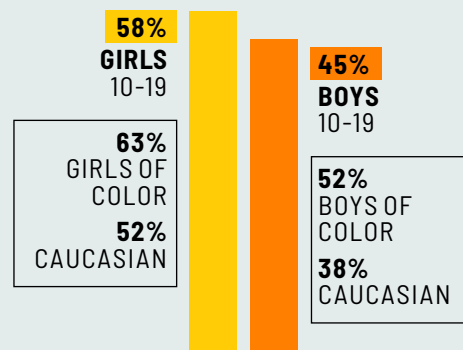
A majority of Girls (58%) strongly agree that female sci-fi/superheroes make them feel like they can achieve anything they put their mind to: an impact 13-points greater than the effect male heroes have on Boys (45%). This is especially true for Girls of Color, where 2 in 3 cited the empowering effects of female superheroes (63%), registering 11-points higher than Caucasian Girls (52%).

## GIRLS SAY THEIR FAVORITE FEMALE SCI-FI/SUPERHEROES MAKE THEM FEEL...



... And strongly agree (especially girls of color) that watching female sci-fi/superheroes makes them feel like they can achieve anything they put their mind to.

## IMPACT OF FEMALE SCI-FI/SUPERHEROES



# DOCTOR WHO A CASE STUDY IN REGENERATION & REPRESENTATION

---

For the first time in the sci-fi franchise's 55 year history, the lead role in *Doctor Who* will be played by a woman. In this study, we were able to measure the impact of this boundary-breaking casting as a real-life example of the power of representation in the sci-fi/superhero genre. Among *Doctor Who* viewers, we found:

- Both Girls (85%) and Boys (71%) say that a female Doctor will be just as exciting to watch as a male Doctor. However, Girls are 3 times more excited than Boys about the new Doctor being a woman.
- 3 in 4 Girls agree that a female Doctor is long overdue (73%) and that they can relate to a female Doctor more (76%).



**81% of girls** agree that seeing a female Doctor on *Doctor Who* makes them feel like they can become anything they want.

# METHODOLOGY

---

The online quantitative survey was administered by Screen Engine/ASI, a research and analytics firm specializing in entertainment and media, from August 3-10, 2018 among a sample size of 2,431 participants.

The sample composition was representative of ethnicity and region in accordance with the U.S. Census Bureau data for Persons 5-19 years old. Half of the sample consisted of

Females 10-19 years old and Parents of Girls 5-9 years old; the other half were Males 10-19 years old and Parents of Boys 5-9 years old. Participants were recruited through a mix of voluntary opt-in and parental consent depending on age. Base screening criteria included non-sensitive industries, multichannel TV households, and genre non-rejecters.

---

**17% FEMALES 10-14**

**N=405**

**17% MALES 10-14**

**N=410**

**17% FEMALES 15-19**

**N=411**

**17% MALES 15-19**

**N=404**

**16% PARENTS OF GIRLS 5-9**

**N=400**

**16% PARENTS OF BOYS 5-9**

**N=401**

All reported statistical differences are significant at the .05 level. The margin of error for the study is less than 3% by gender and less than 5% by age group.

# REFERENCES

---

**Cocca, C. (2016).** *Superwomen: Gender, Power, and Representation*. Bloomsbury Academic.

**Hickey, W. (2014, October 13).** *Comic Books Are Still Made By Men, For Men And About Men*. Retrieved from FiveThirtyEight: <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/women-in-comic-books/>

**Kac-Vergne, M. (2016).** *Sideline Women in Contemporary Science-Fiction Film*. *Miranda*.

**May, C. (2015, June 23).** *The Problem with Female Superheroes*. Retrieved from Scientific American: <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-problem-with-female-superheroes/>

**Shendruk, A. (2017).** *Analyzing the Gender Representation of 34,476 Comic Book Characters*. Retrieved from The Pudding: <https://pudding.cool/2017/07/comics/>

