

IMAGES OF GIRLS IN EDUCATIONAL COMICS IN THAILAND

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ABSTRACT

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The study on the images of girls in educational comics in Thailand aims to analyze the representations of female gender roles through the lens of sex-role theory, which roles are assigned to individuals on the basis of biological sex. Furthermore, this research seeks to investigate the portrayals of girls within the context of educational comic books by combining content analysis with visual methodology. Altogether 73 comic books of one issue named *It Is Not Hard If You Want to* were collected. These comic books were published by Nanmeebooks Company Limited, targeting at young individuals aged 9–18 years. The research reveals that female gender roles conform to social norms that reflect expectations for girls in both domestic and public spheres which are cooking and taking care of finances respectively. The paradigm of gender roles privileges positive attributes, especially being smart, confident, and successful. Through a textual analysis of female characters, girls are visually depicted and featured as daughters, sisters, students, and friends with negative images as passive, dependent, and incompetent but improvable after putting much effort and having received assistance from males and others. The educational comic books disclose a relationship connecting between content and gender.

Keywords: Girls; educational comics; Thailand

1. INTRODUCTION

Sex is the primary factor in determining differences regarding the expectations, social values, and social practices toward boys and girls. The differences between boys and girls according to social expectations are reflected in their gender roles, which are the behaviors that boys and girls demonstrate in the private and public spheres as biologically based. Gender roles are the learning process continuing from childhood through the characteristics and behaviors which are defined by society and culture and put into practice to suit their sexes (Bern, 1981: 354). Children learn gender role expectations of their culture “through the process of growth” (Best and Foster, 2004: 59).

Studies on comic books have revealed sexism through the representations of female characters (Wright, 2001; McGrath, 2007; Brown, 2011). To be more specific, female characters are depicted as lacking power and being rescued by male protagonists (Stabile, 2009). On the one hand, the representation of characters in the comics in this sense signifies positive aspects of masculinity in terms of strength and power. Femininity, on the other hand, is devalued by connecting female characters to vulnerability. These male and female characters imply stereotyped gender roles and affect children’s perceptions of their own sex roles in childhood. That is to say, the content of the cartoons may affect the development of their sexual behaviors and

roles through the process of presenting gender-related characters. Children have different levels of interpretation and comprehension of substances and that may limit their ability to think critically. Therefore, the images presented by media are perceived as a reflection of reality within a particular group of people. Using the social media context in presenting contents is thus important in terms of interpretation since children have dissimilar levels of understanding of the key messages.

The present study of the images of girls in educational comics in Thailand aims to investigate female gender roles and girls' images displayed in educational comics by using content analysis and visual methodology in order to see how these comics create meanings and convey certain concepts of gender roles to children.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this research, feminist theory and comics studies, are applied to analyze the depiction of girls and the idea of female gender roles in educational comics. Feminist approaches based in a comprehension of gender can be applied to investigate the portrayal of female characters since comics display characters in relation to stereotypes tied to specific sex categories. The gender roles in comics, in this investigation, are recognized as the social construction of the female representations in the comics, which is the outcome of content and visual discourses. My intention is to examine heterosexual current concepts of gender roles in the comics in order to justify what is admired about female roles and how female characters might be represented.

This qualitative study employs two main approaches namely content analysis and visual methodology. The content analysis sought to provide a quantitative evaluation of themes, especially of the keywords that define the concept of "gender roles" and the images that represent "girls," followed by the interpretation of the fundamental texts in comic books. The lists of stories were categorized under meta-themes in order to pursue the thematic analysis. The theme selection was directed by the main titles and data employed. This is consistent with the method of analyzing the frequency of certain images.

Next, visual methodologies were applied to interpret images presented in the comic books. The three sites of production, visual content, and audiencing (Rose, 2012) were examined in order to describe the explanation of the visual images and how these images affect the making of meaning in the comics. Female images were gathered based upon themes and the number of themes that occurred across all stories was counted. A specific visuality, as stated by Rose (2012: 191) "will make certain things visible in particular ways, and other things unseeable." Visual methodologies, in this way, were used to explain the meanings of the admissible and inadmissible images of girls in educational comic books in Thai society.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature associated with the study of the images of girls in educational comics in Thailand can be examined in accordance with two categories which are studies on gender and comics, and studies on educational comics and children in Thailand. Research on gender and comics is composed of diverse topics in both western and Asian countries. The materials on gender and comics that connect to the study on the images of female characters in the comics consist of gender roles in superheroes comic books (Larew, 1997; O'Reilly, 2005; Palmer, 2008; Lavigne, 2015; Murphy, 2016;) and women superheroes in comics (Robbins, 2013; Cocca, 2014; Scott, 2015). The research regarding gender and comics that links to the images of women in comics in Asian cultures includes representations of gender in girls' comics (Fujimoto, 1991; Tsurumi, 1997; Toku, 2007; Choo, 2008; Ito, 2009), and representations of gender in children's comics (Parameswaran and Cardoza, 2009). Although these studies were conducted in Asian cultural contexts and focused on the textual and visual analysis of comic books, none of them has been carried out in relation to educational comics in Thailand.

When it comes to discussing the study of educational comic books in Thai society, buying decisions are a primary focus. This is evidenced by Archathewan (2005)'s study of "Attitudes, Behavior and Needs of Consumers in Education Cartoon Books from Skybook Company in Bangkok and Suburb Areas." However, the research on gender and educational comics that connects to the study on the representation of girls in the educational comics is rarely seen since most of these studies have been conducted in relation to Japanese comics (Watcharapongchai, 2007) and Thai humorous cartoons instead of educational ones. Most studies on the representations of girls in comics employed content analysis. One of the studies in relation to content analysis is for example from Wongsiri (2009) who studied "Sexism in Thai Comic Books" by using content analysis in order to investigate Thai comic books, published from September to December 2009. The findings reveal that there is sexual prejudice against both sexes in Thai comic books, but sexual prejudice against

women is more common. Women are displayed as wives, sex objects, and threats to men. Men, on the other hand, are portrayed in association with violence rather than rationality. Moreover, men with feminine traits are depicted as lustful transsexuals. The outcomes reveal that Thai humorous comic books as well as other media are part of the promotion of sexual prejudice in Thai society. Thus, it brings to the question of how girl's images are in relation to sexual prejudice in the educational comics and to what extent this is still the situation in writing stories in educational comics in Thai society.

After reconsidering all of the above related studies, it can be seen that none of them has been conducted in association with the images of girls in educational comic books engaging the content analysis and visual methodology approaches—most of research examined comic books in relation to content analysis. Furthermore, there are simply a few studies on female characters in comic books. Nevertheless, these studies are from the western concept and no research has examined the representation of girls in educational comics in Thai society. Therefore, the issue of the images of girls in educational comic books in Thai society will assist expanding the understanding of the contemporary female gender roles of female characters depicted in educational comic books in Thailand.

4. DATA COLLECTION

The portrayal of girls in educational comics in Thailand from a gender perspective is the main focus in this study. The intention is to analyze the cultural meanings in the construction of girls' images since female characters in children's pre-and post-1980 cartoons when compared to male characters, as claimed by Thompson and Zerbino (1995: 651), are significantly changed toward "a less stereotypical portrayal of the characters."

There are two main objectives in this study: 1. To examine female gender roles in the educational comics in Thailand, and 2. To investigate girls' images in *It Is Not Hard If You Want to* comic books. Girls are the only focus of this study. Seventy-three comic books are the primary sources for the data collection. Both sets of comics were published by Nanmeebooks Company Limited, aiming at young persons aged 9–18 years. These comics were chosen based on their readership and circulation. They are widely sold in book sections in famous franchised bookstores, such as B2S and SE-ED Book Center, including online platforms (www.shopee.co.th and www.savebook2u.com) and local bookstalls in Thailand. This means that they are easily accessible and can be reached by an expansive group of readers in Thai society.

On the subject of content, these comic books are written by Korean writers. However, in the process of translation into Thai, they are revised and information is added to suit the Thai cultural context, as evidenced by the content related to Thai culture such as "Ancient Beliefs of Thai People" (Kim, 2018b: 153) and "Folk Plays in Significant Thai Festivals" (Kim, 2018b: 47). Additionally, *It Is Not Hard If You Want to* comic books were selected to be on a list of books for the school library development project by the Office of Academic Resources, Prince of Songkla University in fiscal year 2018. Furthermore, *It Is Not Hard If You Want to Be Good at Studying* has set a record for its 32nd edition. This confirms that they are famous and appropriate books for children to read within Thai cultural contexts. These comic books aim to educate children, especially female youth, as evidenced by their slogan: "Tactics which are (not) secret for young people to change themselves in order to become perfect young girls." By emphasizing "young girls" instead of "young boys," it signifies social expectations related to sex. Investigating these comics allows for an understanding of how female characters are constructed in these educational comics. Moreover, it may create an understanding of society's expectations of females and may enhance social awareness of gender equality in cartoons in Thai society.

5. FEMALE GENDER ROLES IN EDUCATIONAL COMICS

This section aims to analyze female gender roles depicted in educational comics. The indicators of female gender roles in comic books can be seen through seven signs, consisting of: 1. Comic book cover art, 2. The Bechdel test, 3. Storyline, 4. Occupation, 5. Balance of power, 6. Female sexualization, and 7. Violence against women (Murphy, 2016). In the comic books investigated, these indicators were clearly shown and will be discussed in the following section.

5.1 Educational comic book covers

The investigation of educational comics in my sample reveals significant differences between the number of girls and boys on their covers, as shown in Figure 1.

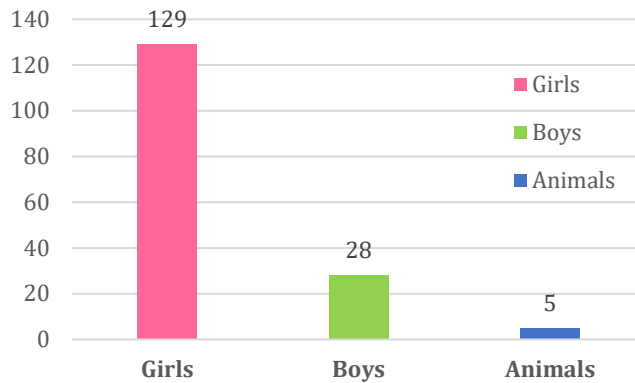


Figure 1: The Number of Females, Males, and Animals Displayed on the Comic Book Covers

Figure 1 discloses the number of girls, boys, and animals shown on the covers in my sample. There were 129 females, 28 males, and 5 animals. The female characters were approximately four times and 26 times more common than the males and animals, while male characters may not appear on the cover, female characters are displayed on every comic book cover. Large numbers of female characters on the front covers can be regarded as indicators of the female gender roles that might appear in the contents of comics. The analysis of comic book covers in relation to these female gender roles can be categorized into two groups: 1. Stories with only girls on the comic book covers, and 2. Stories with girls and boys or animals on comic book covers as will be explained in the following section.

5.1.1 Comic books covers with only girls

The stories with only girls on the covers are related to the improvement of girls’ knowledge, life skills, and appearance and personality. The improvement of girls’ knowledge is directly linked to subjects taught at school. These stories are, for instance, *It Is Not Hard If You Want to Be Good at Social Science* and *It Is Not Hard If You Want to Write English*. Stories associated with life skills are different from stories about the improvement of girls’ knowledge in the sense that these skills are not necessarily taught at school or as part of the academic curriculum but they are valuable for girls’ lives. The life skills in these comic books are linked to girls’ abilities, such as time management, handling money, and cooking. In this regard, girls are tied to both public spheres (taking care of finances) and domestic behaviors (cooking). This can be seen in the following examples: *It Is Not Hard If You Want to Manage Time and Handle Money*, *It Is Not Hard If You Want to Handle Money*, and *It Is Not Hard If You Want to Make Light Meals*.

There are stories with only female characters on the front covers concentrating on appearance and personality. When mentioning physical appearances, female characters are required to change their bodies and improve their appearances for a “positive” outlook in terms of beauty and height. Explicit examples include *It Is Not Hard If You Want to Change Yourself*, *It Is Not Hard If You Want to Dress Properly*, and *It Is Not Hard If You Want to Be Tall*. The notion of beauty standards is reinforced even in content such as “choose what to eat for beauty: fast food dishes and fizzy drinks contain sugar and high fat, which cause obesity” (Lee, 2011: 50).

Stories with only girls on comic book covers with regard to the improvement of their knowledge, life skills, appearance and personality signify female gender roles, especially what girls are expected to become and how they are expected to behave in typically feminine ways. That is to say, female gender roles pertain to intelligence, skills, and physical appearance and these can be obviously seen on the front covers of educational comic books in the present sample.

5.1.2 Comic books covers with both girls and boys

The front covers with both girls and boys also include stories about the improvement of girls’ knowledge, skills, appearance, and personality. However, the stories about the improvement of girls’ knowledge with both girls and boys on the front covers tend to focus on science and math subjects in particular. Explicit examples include *It Is Not Hard If You Want to Be Good at Science* and *It Is Not Hard If You Want to Be Good at Math*. There are only two educational comic books in my sample that depict more male characters than females on their front covers. These comic books concentrate on intelligence in terms of knowledge in mathematics, as shown in *It Is Not Hard If You Want to Have Fun with Math* and *It Is Not Hard If You Want to Be Smart*. There are two male characters and only one female individual that appeared on each front cover of these two stories.

The concept of intelligence is being attached to one's sex and is reinforced in the short introduction of the characters on the back cover. An example reads "a dull little girl vs. a genius vampire: Lemon, a little girl, hates mathematics and Elle, a genius in math, has secrets to hide! Lemon has started to like math after she got help from Elle at math camp" (Kim, 2020, back cover). This suggests sexual prejudice in the sense that a boy (Elle) is more likely to be capable of doing mathematics than a girl (Lemon). The stories about the improvement of girls' knowledge that include both girls and boys are different to those with only female characters in the sense that they frame a particular binary concept of gender by reinforcing the belief that boys are more skillful in science and mathematics than girls.

Next, the stories about the improvement of girls' skills that include both girls and boys on their front covers mainly focus on interpersonal skills or social skills, including verbal and nonverbal actions. These skills aim to teach girls how to interact and build good relationships with friends, such as *It Is Not Hard If You Want to Be a Good Friend* and *It Is Not Hard If You Want to Have Dear Friends*. More specifically, the comic books suggest that girls change themselves in order to make impressions on others, especially to male friends in particular situations, as shown in the following examples: *It Is Not Hard If You Want to Be Liked* and *It Is Not Hard If You Want to Win Your Friend's Heart*. On the one hand, this implies heterosexual relationships since there are male characters on the front covers of these stories. On the other hand, it signifies that a girl is the one who should put effort into the relationship by changing herself in order to be liked and loved.

When it comes to discussing stories about the improvement of a girl's appearance and personality, girls are constructed as "imperfect" but "improvable" in terms of building self-confidence which is very crucial for them. One example of a short introduction on the front cover reads "what should we do to change Fasai, an introverted girl, to be a new person and get along well with others?" (Choi, 2015, front cover). More specifically, female characters have to change themselves for love and affection. Girls are expected to be in the gender role of acting and looking feminine with confidence. This is evidenced by the story of *It Is Not Hard If You Want to Have Good Personality* and its short introduction on the front cover says that "when friends do not want to be friends with Jinny, she has to improve herself." To improve oneself, in this sense, is to change one's personality, for example how to walk and sit beautifully. It is noticeable that the missions to improve oneself are conducted by a male character. A boy acts as a master telling a girl what to do. In short, educational comic book covers signifying gender roles for girls are related to intelligence, skills, and physical appearance. To be precise, girls are imperfect and have to improve themselves in order to conform to gender norms and become successful. Moreover, female characters are in need of assistance from males before achieving their goals.

5.2 The Bechdel test

The Bechdel test is used as a tool for investigating gender inequality in popular culture, especially in films. Although the test was first used to analyze films, it has been widely used with other media since the 2000s, including but not limited to television, books, and fiction.

The Bechdel test is normally used as a sign of the women's presence or gender inequality in the materials analyzed. In this study, the test is used to measure the representation of girls and identify gender inequality in the form of female gender roles in educational comic books since it does not only focus on the relationship between women but also how women are represented in their relation to men. In order to uncover how active and present the girls are in comic books, three main principles in the Bechdel test have to be examined as follows: "1. At least two female characters with names should appear, 2. These two female characters must have a conversation with each other, and 3. The topics discussed must be anything other than a man" (Martindale, 1997: 69).

According to the contents of comic books, the number of female characters is significantly higher than the male characters. This can be seen on the front covers as previously discussed. The number of female characters is obviously shown on the "introductory pages for the characters" before or after the table of contents. There were six out of 73 stories with only female characters on the pages of the characters' introduction. For example, *It Is Not Hard If You Want to Guess Habits from the Zodiac*, *It Is Not Hard If You Want to Handle Money and Manage Time*, and *It Is Not Hard If You Want to Have Dear Friends*. However, there was no story with only male characters. Every book contains at least two female characters in the story.

Besides having at least two female characters with names, the educational comic books conform to the aspects of females having conversations among each other and discussing something other than men. This is clearly presented in issues such as *It Is Not Hard If You Want to Have True Friends* and *It Is Not Hard If You Want to Have Dear Friends*. The content of *It Is Not Hard If You Want to Have True Friends* reveals ten missions that help readers find true friends and none of its content is related to men. Furthermore, all of the female characters have names and are called by their names. This educational comic book aims to teach readers how to make friends with other females. Therefore, it can be said that the educational comic books in the data collection pass the Bechdel test, as they show signs of the presence of women in their contents.

Although the educational comic books in the data collection met the three criteria of the test, there still exists sexist content related to menstrual shame at school, as presented in both *It Is Not Hard If You Want*

to Know About Sex Education and *It Is Not Hard If You Want to Magically Reshape Yourself*. Although menstruation is a natural sign of becoming an adolescent, it is considered a cultural taboo to reveal or discuss it (Kissling, 1996a; Roberts, 2004). This notion is shown in conversations that “What is menstruation? Are you crazy? Don’t you know about menstruation? *Disgusting Bah!*” (Kim, 2018a: 43). Moreover, menstruation can be the cause of some female teenagers’ embarrassment (Lee and Sasser-Coen, 1996; Kissling, 1996b).

To put it briefly, the educational comic books show the presence of girls or female characters and pass the Bechdel test. However, they contain sexist content. This implies female gender roles in relation to heteronormative attitudes associated with negative opinions toward menstruation resulting from biological differences. This can lead to negative attitudes about the female body and menstruation in particular.

5.3 Storyline

The storyline is the third sign of female gender roles. The storyline or the plot of the stories in the educational comic books is triumphal. The female characters had to face difficulties and obstacles at the beginning and gradually developed themselves to overcome the obstacles and achieve success in the end. The obstacles for the female characters mainly concern self-doubt or lack of confidence, especially a lack of confidence regarding academics and physical appearance. These storylines are found in stories such as *It Is Not Hard If You Want to Be Good at Science* and *It Is Not Hard If You Want to Dress Well*. The male characters were created as helpers who could solve the girls’ problems and gave them solutions. An obvious example is in a chapter of “a sad story of a mini-sized girl” (Kim, 2019: 8). By using the word “sad” to describe the story of a small girl, the comic book emphasizes that being short is undesirable. Moreover, the book portrays the female protagonist with this unattractive trait and as being helped by a male character, as shown in the following example: “Matmee was worried about her height because of being misunderstood by others that she was in Grade 1” (Kim, 2019: 6). This problem was solved by Gene, a doctor who owns a clinic helped Matmee grow taller (Kim, 2019: 6). The female character in this way has to rely on the male character in order to achieve her goal.

The stories with only female protagonists were presented in relation to friendships, skills, time and money management, and success. On the one hand, the stories imply social values for girls—that they are expected to be successful and maintain good relationships with friends. On the other hand, the stories shape the gender roles of females. Therefore, the storylines that include females in the comic books are considered prominent since female characters are normally presented as the main protagonists, not “window dressing.” However, they were not constructed as female superheroes. In fact, the female characters were depicted as “imperfect” but improvable. They were assisted by the male characters before achieving success. The implication here is that a woman cannot be successful without a man in her life.

5.4 Occupation

In the comic books examined, the female characters are displayed in relation to specific occupations, which aim to introduce job-specific skills to the readers. With these skills, the readers can understand future career paths more clearly. There are 30 occupations presented under the title of “30 Big-Hit Occupations” (Kim, 2015: 190), as explained in Table 1.

Table 1: The Types of Jobs Covered in *It Is Not Hard If You Want to Know Big-Hit Occupations*

“30 Big-Hit Occupations”						
Types of jobs	Fashion and beauty industry jobs	Food industry jobs	Sport industry jobs	News and entertainment industry jobs	Service industry jobs	Organizer jobs
No.						
1.	Fashion designer	Cook	Ballerina	Reporter	Waitress	Party planner
2.	Jewelry designer	Bakery maker	Figure skater	Singer	Flight attendant	Wedding planner
3.	Stylist	Food stylist	Gymnast	Weather forecaster	Tour guide	Florist
4.	Hair designer	Chocolate maker	Fitness trainer	Actress	Nurse	Museum curator
5.	Makeup artist	Chef	Yoga teacher	Sale representative	Image consultant	Event planner

Table 1 shows a broad range of thirty occupations in total. These jobs are “sexless,” as confirmed by the comic that “in the past, most people thought that fashion belonged to women only. Nowadays, men tend to

take very good care of themselves. Therefore, fashion belongs to both women and men. Let’s have a look at what occupations are relevant to fashion” (Kim, 2015: 190). Only female characters are depicted on that page—male characters are excluded. Each occupation is presented with one girl wearing an outfit in relation to the job and standing beside a short description of the job. This implies that these “30 Big-Hit Occupations” are more suitable for girls. Moreover, it suggests that women’s position in the society is no longer restricted to the domestic area. It is noticeable that jobs across the fields of science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM), such as physicians, scientists, computer engineers, technicians, and mathematicians, are not included in Table 1. On the one hand, the educational comic books inspire young girls to pursue careers in the humanities and social sciences. On the other hand, this indicates gender barriers along the way of their future careers.

5.5 The balance of power between male and female characters

The balance of power between male and female characters is the fifth indicator of female gender roles. Male characters have more power to control female characters to do things by using “legitimate power.” The male characters, in this sense, have a position of power related to status in the family and school, such as being a father, an elder brother, and a teacher. Specifically, the father has power and authority to tell family members what to do. “A power-user of the family” is a specific word used to refer to the father in a comic book, as can be seen in the following example: “From now on, you must take good care of your mother. Washing dishes, cleaning, doing laundry, you all have to do these for your mother, said a power-user of the family” (Kim, 2018a: 197). The “power-user of the family” suggests power relations in the family and connotes superiority, which belongs to the male character or the father. By contrast, the power relations between the male and female characters as friends at school are dissimilar. The male characters gain power over females because of their physical strength. Power, in this sense, is “the ability to employ force” (Bierstedt, 1950: 733). Force here refers to an attempt to physically affect a girl’s body or interests in opposition to her intentions. This concept of female gender roles is a parallel to that of Ito’s (1994) findings related to the images of women in male comic magazines—that they were “almost invisible and certainly not in any position to make decisions” (Ito, 1994: 87). The male characters have the power to control them, rescue them, or even make decisions for them. Therefore, the comic books in the present sample allow the male characters to maintain and legitimize their power positions.

5.6 Female sexualization

Sexualization happens to children and youth in particular when “sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person” (Zurbriggen et al., 2007: 1). The sexualization of girls in the comics is presented through girls’ relationships with both their female and male friends. Female peers contribute to the sexualization in terms of controlling each other to conform to beauty standards, especially slimness and sexiness (Eder et al., 1995; Nichter, 2000). Male peers, on the other hand, use another form of sexualization by “sexually objectifying and harassing girls” (Zurbriggen et al., 2007: 2). This is also the case in the comic books investigated. More precisely, girls are objects of desire and sexually objectified by their male peers at school, for example, being peeked at through the window while changing clothes (Kim, 2018a: 48) and lifting their skirts (Kim, 2018a: 51). Although sexual harassment at school can occur to both males and females, in these comic books, only girls are victimized; the inappropriate imposition of sexuality has never been imposed upon boys. Moreover, girls more often than boys are depicted in a sexual manner. While girls wearing only brassieres or being topless (Kim, 2018a: 48) are depicted, no picture of male characters wearing only underpants or being naked is portrayed in the comics. When girls are sexually abused by males, they cannot protect themselves but are saved by another man. In this regard, girls are constructed as submissive and in need of male protection. Female sexualization concentrates on an attractive physical appearance, such as shiny hair, long slim legs, clear skin, a slim figure, and especially large breasts as presented in Figures 2 and 3.



Figure 2: A Flat-Chested Teenager Is Worried About Her Breast Growth (Kim, 2018a: 43)



Figure 3: A Blonde Girl with Large Breasts in a Sexy Pose (Kim, 2018a: 101)

Figures 2 and 3 reinforce the sexualization of female characters by connecting it to large breasts. Two fried eggs are used as metaphors to compare them to a woman's breast size—the smallest size. Two fried eggs and the tears of the girl on the floor appear together with the word “to lose” in Figure 2, emphasizing the undesirable attribute of being flat-chested. By contrast, the blonde girl with large breasts in Figure 3 is portrayed with the word “hot.” This implies that large breasts are constructed as preferable and desirable to young women. Therefore, the comic books locate physical appearance and sexual attraction at the point of the value of a girl.

5.7 Violence against women

Violence against women, as proposed by Katherine J. Murphy (2016), can define gender roles. Girls are generally examined as victims of gender violence within a heterosexual context (Leach and Humphreys, 2007). In the context of the educational comic books, violence against girls normally occurs in schools in both heterosexual and girl-on-girl contexts. Female characters received both verbal abuse and physical violence from boys. An example of verbal abuse is “Hey lionhead! Shut up and let go of my jacket” (Jeon, 2020: 16). The word “lionhead” here was used to refer to a girl with pink curly hair instead of her real name. The boy degraded and humiliated this girl by linking her appearance to an animal's trait (lionhead). The physical violence from the boys that emerged in the comic books included splashing water on a girl (Jeon, 2020: 19), hitting, pushing, and punching (Kim, 2018a: 53).

Once in a while, gender violence outside the school happens on the street by a stranger. An obvious example is when Bell got lost and was tricked by a male stranger to go to an abandoned building at night. Luckily, she was rescued by her male cousin from a sexual assault (Kim, 2018a: 170). Females as victims were normally saved by other males. This reinforces the recognition of girls' inability to protect themselves from gender violence. Girls as victims and that are dependent are also underlined in tips and suggestions about self-protection from sex crimes. For instance, “what should you do if you have to visit a stranger's house? Ask your friend to accompany you. Although you are familiar with this house, you should not go into the house alone, especially the house where a guy lives; you must be extremely careful” (Kim, 2018a: 175).

When it comes to gender violence conducted by girls in a girl-on-girl context, female students can be physically brutal towards other girls. Nevertheless, violence by girls is often less easily noticed since it is less physical than that of male students. Such violence involves gossiping (Oh, 2018: 50), spreading rumors (Ahn, 2017: 93), and putting your leg in front of a girl's legs to make her fall (Jeon, 2020: 26). This suggests that the comic books include “girl-as-victim” discourse but this is not limited to the “girls-on-girl” context.

6. THE PORTRAYAL OF GIRLS IN EDUCATIONAL COMIC BOOKS

Since the 1960s, studies on gender stereotypes in books for children have shown that female characters have been depicted as “passive, dependent and generally incapable,” whereas male characters have been displayed as “active, independent, and generally competent” (Peterson and Lach, 1990: 185). These characteristics were also associated with the depiction of girls as daughters, students, and friends in the educational comic books in the present sample. However, there are also positive attributes of girls, as will be discussed according to their gender roles below.

6.1 Daughters

The daughters in the comic books were expected to follow their parents' instructions and obey them regardless of their real desire. Most instructions and teachings from the parents, especially the mothers, focus on “knowledge,” as shown in the following teaching: “Mom always says that girls must have knowledge and books are the way to seek knowledge” (Lee, 2011: 64). Parental expectations can be influenced by the child's gender (Jacobs et al., 2005). Being a daughter entails family expectations in terms of academic success. This can be seen from the following example: “Mum told me to get tutored in English. But I am not good at English. I do not know why I must study English. Today I have to take an extra English tutorial class” (Choi, 2018: 11). Daughters were portrayed as incapable in all subjects but improvable after putting very much effort into them. English is the most concerned subject for girls in the data collection. There were four stories related to studying English, as demonstrated in *It Is Not Hard If You Want to Be Good at Grammar x 2*, *It Is Not Hard If You Want to Be Good at Grammar*, *It Is Not Hard If You Want to Be Good at English Vocabulary*, and *It Is Not Hard If You Want to Write English*. Other subjects such as science and social studies, on the contrary, comprise only one issue for each subject as illustrated by *It Is Not Hard If You Want to Be Good at Science* and *It Is Not Hard If You Want to Be Good at Social Studies*. This implies parental involvement, especially from mothers and parental expectations regarding academic success in English for the girls.

It is undeniable that parental expectations are the most powerful variable for academic achievement (Fan and Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2007) and the academic achievement of students at all levels of education is

affected by parents (Lindberg et al., 2019). In the comic books in the sample, the mothers are more likely to express their academic expectations regarding the girls and judge their success from their school grades as evidenced by the stories entitled *It Is Not Hard If You Want to Get A* and *It Is Not Hard If You Want to Get Good Scores*. The depictions of girls as passive, dependent, and incapable are thus associated with attachment to the family.

6.2 Sisters

In the context of family roles, the girls were presented as twins and as sisters. It is noticeable that the twins were depicted with different traits including positive and negative ones. With reference to the twins, there were both same-sex and opposite-sex twins. The first-born male twin was normally portrayed with positive attributes, such as intelligence, skills, and a good appearance, while the last-born female twin was more likely to be illustrated with (at least) one negative attribute, as evidenced in the introduction of the last-born female twin and her first-born twin brother: “Jejie, a little girl, polite, lovely. She is always at home, really likes to read books but does not like to do exercise” (Kim, 2014: 6) and “the first-born twin brother, Pete, calm, silent, a hotshot, smart, mature, and supportive” (Kim, 2014: 6). The girl’s characteristic, without a preference for exercise, together with the depiction of her as the second-born twin, suggests a position of inferiority as compared with her brother. This is also the case for the same-sex twins and sisters—that the girls were normally introduced with undesirable traits. An example is “Blue, a young girl aged 12, has a younger twin sister named Belle. Blue is tearful and is worried that she is small and slightly chubby. She is always envious of Belle, who is slimmer and taller” (Kim, 2018a: 8). Moreover, the girl’s incompetency is degraded and she is shamed by the opposite sex, as displayed in the following instance: “Nampoon is a girl who is not good at studying but wants to change herself in order to get rid of an insult from her brother and make Pirin get impressed” (No, 2010: 6). By placing positive attributes on boys instead of girls, it indicates that characters are highly gendered and stereotyped. Gender in this way is an obstacle to achievement. More specifically, “gender, family structure, and peculiarities of intra-pair relationships” are important to academic achievement, especially for schoolchildren (Chertkova et al., 2014: 209).

6.3 Students

The depiction of girls as students can be categorized into two groups: incompetent and competent students. Incompetent female students were presented as unqualified in particular subjects such as math and English. Obvious instances include “Lemon, attended a math camp in order to eliminate her detestability in math” (Kim, 2020: 6) and “Daisy, a girl who is not good at English, has to be a moderator instead of Rosie” (Ahn, 2019: 6). The portrayals of the male characters, on the other hand, were connected to ability and competency in studying. For instance, “Elle is a young boy who falls in love with math” (Kim, 2020: 7) and “Pup, a brother of Nampoon, is a genius” (No, 2010: 7). The portrayals of female characters as incapable reinforce the concept of male superiority and the inferiority of women. This is evidenced in the depiction of male characters as superior, as demonstrated in the example: “Until now, I have never done anything successfully. I am not smart, and not talented at all. So, I do not have anything to show off. How can I compare myself with a guy standing right there?” (Park, 2018: 10). Male characters, in this way, were constructed as superior to female characters in terms of intelligence and competency.

When it comes to discussing the depiction of competent female students, the competence is not only linked to academic achievement but also to future careers. Examples include “Pink is an outstanding student who got first position in class on the final exam. She is intelligent, active, careful, and likes to take notes. She dreams to be a news presenter” (Oh, 2014: 7) and “Joy is a smart sensitive girl and is always economical. She dreams to be an artist” (Hong, 2015: 7). It is interesting to see that achievement in a future career is more important than academic achievement for girls from their own perspectives, as stated by a female protagonist, that “a goal in life is a dream. A desire to get the first position is not a true dream. I study intently because I dream to be a new presenter” (Oh, 2014: 50). This positive portrayal is consistent with a recent study of gender differences in academic performance—that girls are less likely to misbehave and are more likely to receive higher points than boys (Marcenaro-Gutierrez et al., 2017).

6.4 Friends

The relationships with friends are relatively common topics in the comic books. There were specific issues related to friendships, such as *It Is Not Hard If You Want to Build Friendships*, *It Is Not Hard If You Want to Have Good Friends*, and *It Is Not Hard If You Want to Have True Friends*. Friends are constructed as being as precious as gold, the lights of a girl’s life, and treasures, as shown in the following examples: “Friends are like golds. The longer you keep them, the more valuable they are” (Yang, 2017: 140) and “Having one respectful teacher or a true friend is similar to getting the guiding light of life” (Lee, 2011: 134). Therefore, having true friends is important to girls as stated by Kate, a female character, that “finding a close friend is one of my biggest goals before finishing primary school” (Lee, 2011: 135).

Friendship is important to women's selves since it induces "the best part of ourselves" (Rubin, 1985: 41) and brings about the chance of gaining "many selves" (Rubin, 1985: 34). Adolescents seek out new identities and roles from friends (Crosnoe, 2000). The girls in the comics gain new identities through the process of building friendships. They have to change themselves to be good looking, extroverted, confident, humorous, generous, and self-controlled. To be more specific, physical appearance and being an extrovert are important for creating a good first impression to new friends, whereas the later personalities are crucial for retaining good relationships. The female characters were constructed as lacking these significant characteristics in the first place. However, they could develop valuable attributes in the end after following the instructions in the comic books, such as "Three ways to control your anger wisely" and "Five tips to keep friendships smoothly" (Yang, 2017: 50, 66). This indicates that girls and their "selves" are constructed as imperfect but improvable.

Although friendship is normally portrayed in a positive way (Crosnoe, 2000), female friends occasionally are depicted as "frenemies." This can be seen from the following instances: "Amy is a normal girl who wants to be beautiful like a model. One day she was invited to be a model so she started contesting against Pinky in order to make Pete like her" (Jeon, 2009: 6) and "Matmee 2 is the tallest girl in the classroom. That is why Matmee 1 hates her despite wanting to be close with Matmee 2" (Kim, 2019: 7). The representations of frenemies reinforce the significance of heterosexual love and physical appearance, making girls turn their female friends into frenemies (Gardiner, 2016).

7. CONCLUSION

The images of girls in Thai educational comic books were analyzed in order to answer primary research questions about how female gender roles and girls are portrayed in these books. The analysis of female gender roles through educational comic book covers, the Bechdel test, storylines, occupation, balance of power, female sexualization, and violence against women indicates that one's social roles are influenced by one's biological sex. Female gender roles are dominated by social norms that reflect the expectations of girls in both domestic and public spheres; girls are expected to know how to cook and be responsible for housework as well as study. With regard to studying, the portrayal of female characters supports the notion of inferiority. While the prototype of gender roles privilege specific attributes, such as being smart, confident, and successful, girls are usually depicted in the comic books as incompetent but improvable. Female characters normally lack these desirable characteristics in the first place and gain them only after having received assistance from males and others. Furthermore, girlhood in the comic books I examined is tied to femininity in the sense that girls are still valued for their appearance, beauty, and manners. The portrayals of girls in the comic books as daughters, sisters, students, and friends place the focus on gender-role socialization; girls are expected to obey their parents, be as good as their siblings, be as smart as other students, and be kind to their friends. Besides these expectations, girls have to put much effort in studying in order to improve their academic performance, to become successful, and to conform to social norms. In conclusion, the educational comic books in the present sample illustrate a relationship existing between content and gender and may form gender perceptions, especially for girls.

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