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Background

In most forms of electronic media, the content is censored to some degree. There are two primary types of censorship described in the literature: moral and economic censorship. Moral censorship deals with suppression of material deemed inappropriate for public viewing, such as the concerns with morality and anti-communism in the mid-20th century (Cohen 1997). Economic censorship is primarily concerned with suppression of material which could cause financial supporters to withdraw funds. With webcomics, economic censorship has been almost entirely removed, but the potential for moral censorship by the comic's readership, or by the artist's own moral feelings, is still possible.

This research investigates whether or not amateur artists who publish comics online are taking advantage of the internet's relative freedom from censorship to include content in their work which might be unacceptable in other media.

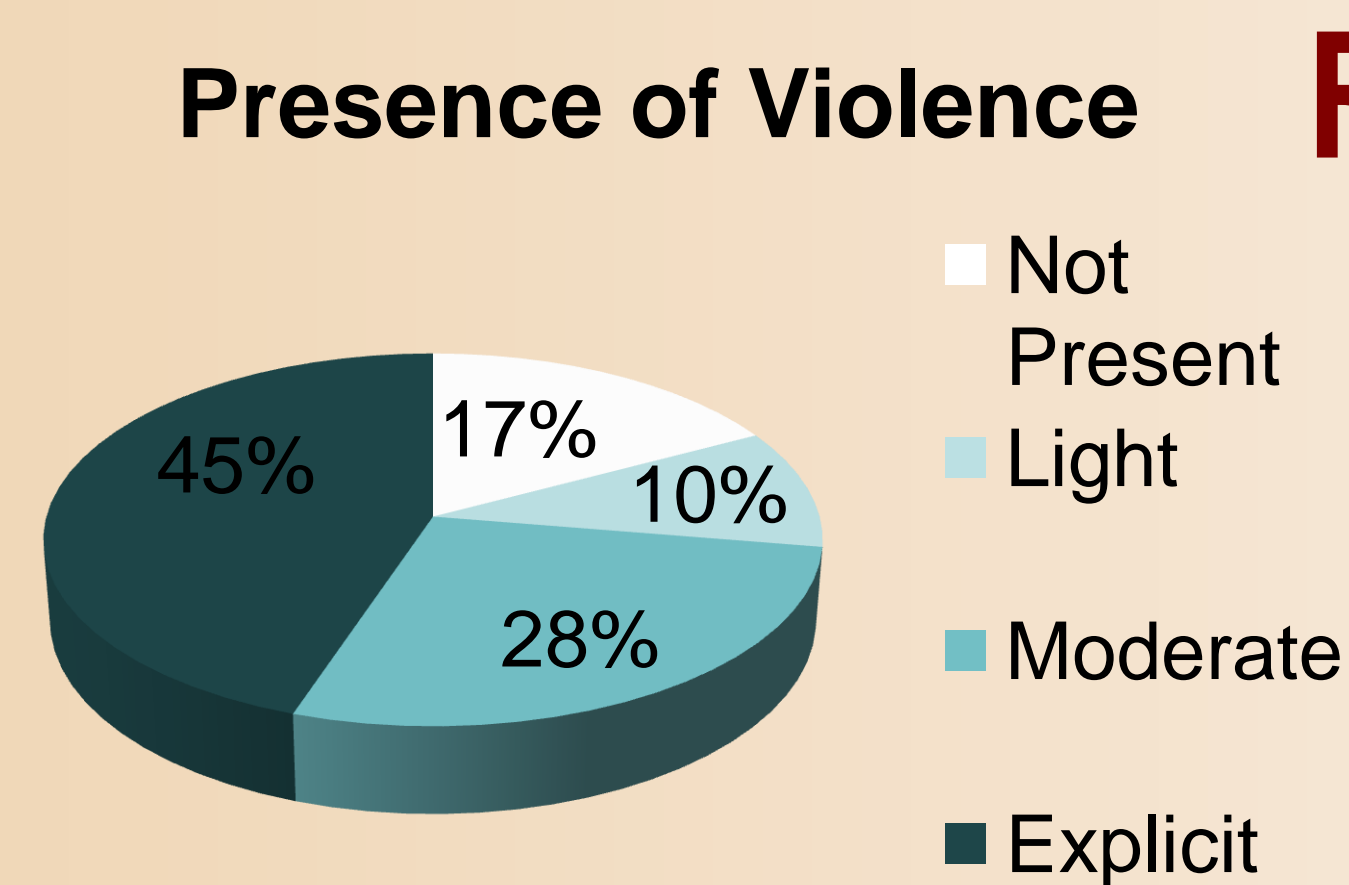
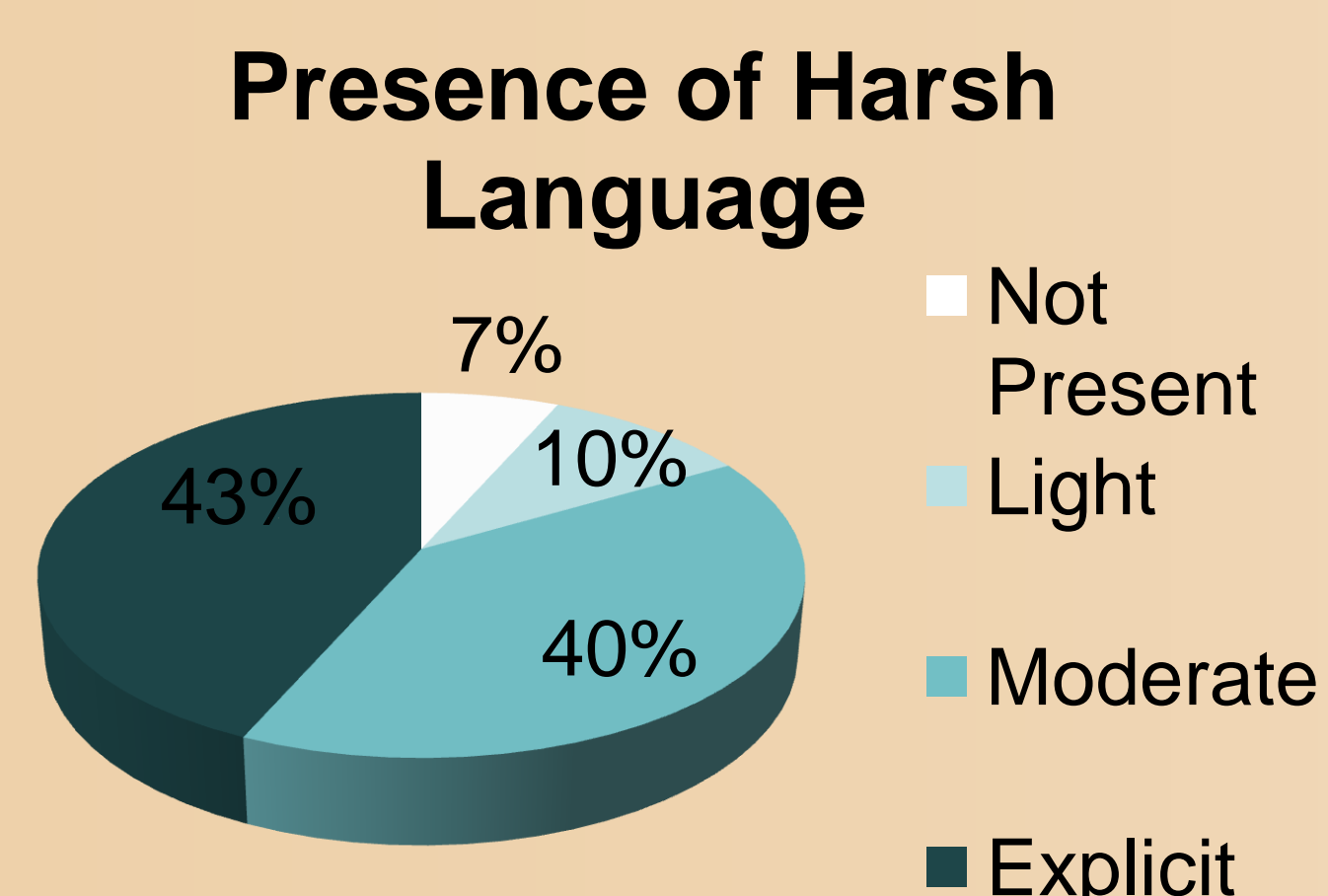
Method

A random sample of webcomics (N = 30) was collected from OnlineComics.net, a website directory which provides links to just over 4500 comics. Sampling was limited to those comics which 50 or more members of the site had listed as a favourite. The response rate to the subsequent survey was 26%, leaving the final sample size at 30 webcomics. On average, the webcomics were 73.67 pages long at the time of sampling.

The sample of webcomic artists was 66% female; 77.4% had been producing their comic for a year or more; and ages ranged from 17-35. Most artists (83.9%) had never received a complaint from viewers about their content, and those who had received complaints did not change their comic as a result.

The webcomics were content analyzed for both the frequency and intensity of harsh language, violence, sex and drugs using the following criteria:

Variable	Light	Moderate	Explicit
Language	Obviously censored (#\$%)	"hell"; "damn", "bastard", "ass"	"fuck", "shit"
Sexuality	Censored nudity; mentions of sex	Nudity	Sexual activity
Violence	Comedic / harmless violence	Injuries with blood; breaking of limbs	Graphic depictions of injuries; murder
Drug Use	Presence of "light" drugs (alcohol, etc.)	Use of "light" drugs	Use of "heavy" drugs (heroin, etc.)



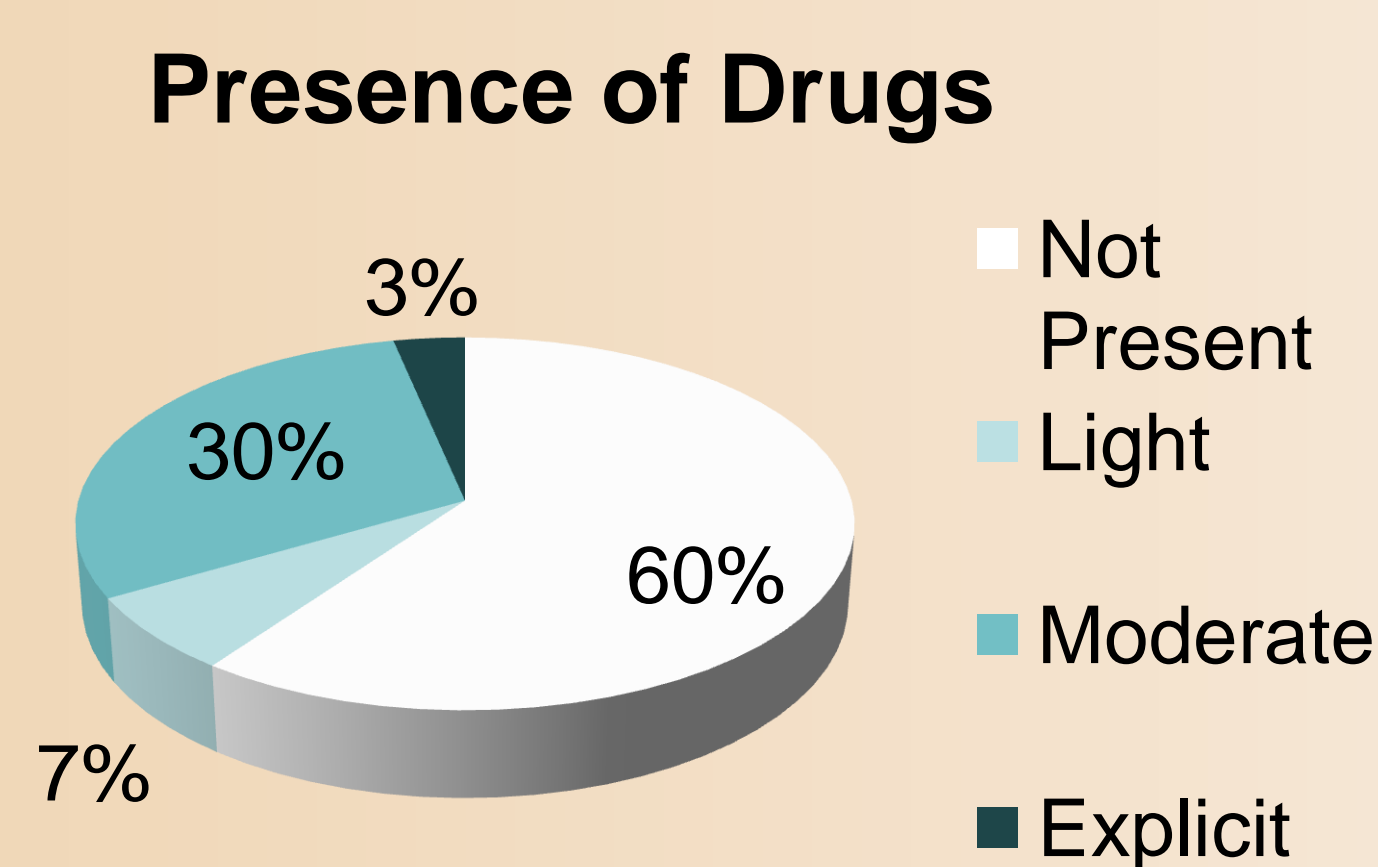
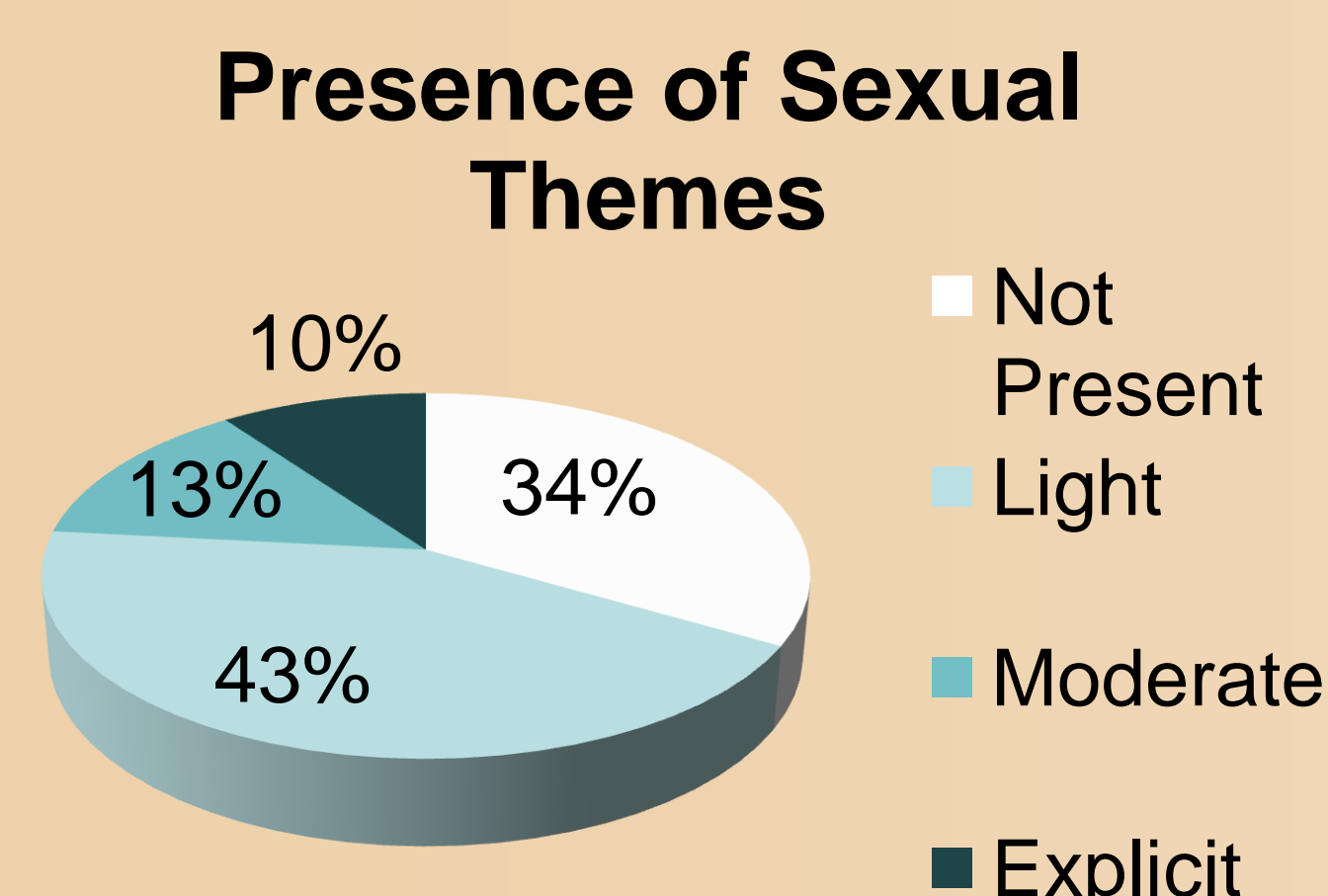
Results

*Charts represent the percentage of webcomics in the sample (N = 30) with at least one instance of a given intensity level.

1. Harsh language was extremely common
2. Violence was highly prevalent and relatively uncensored
3. Sexual themes were present in most comics, but instances of nudity or on-screen sex were rare
4. Portrayal of drugs tended to be relatively uncommon

Some sex differences in webcomic content were also observed. Generally speaking, webcomics authored by men tended to have:

- More frequent and intense amounts of sex, $t(10.7) = 2.87, p = .016$
- More frequent and intense amounts violence, $t(9.87) = 2.79, p = .019$
- Marginally more harsh language, $t(9.35) = 2.13, p = .061$



Take home message: Overall, it appears that artists do feel able to exercise their freedom of expression, but largely refrain from including extremely offensive content involving sexual themes and drugs simply because they have the freedom to do so. In addition, men tend to author webcomics with more offensive content than women.