

# Telenovelas: Assessing Intersectionality in Spanish Media

Melek Yildiz Spinel and Professor Irene López, PhD.

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## Abstract

This study analyzed gender and ethnic representations in five of the most viewed Spanish soap operas or *telenovelas* during 2011. Using content analysis, frequency counts and chi squares were obtained on a sample of 114 characters and 142 scenes that were chosen from randomly selected episodes. Results at the character level show that characters' occupation are different for men and women, with most women having unknown occupations. Women were also depicted as more fit than men. Additionally, analysis at the scene level showed that women were more likely to be portrayed as wearing more provocative clothing compared to men. There were also differences in characters' portrayals in relation to their skin color; characters with lighter skin were more likely to belong to higher social class than characters with darker skin. Characters with lighter skin were portrayed as being more fit than darker skin characters. Future research should analyze associations between the content of *telenovelas* and viewers attitudes, such as gender role attitudes and/or racist prejudices.

## Introduction

- Among Latinos, *telenovelas*, or Spanish soap operas, are the most popular type of TV shows (Duran, 1999 as cited Glascock & Ruggiero, 2004).
- There has been very little empirical research on the content of this type of media which is unfortunate given the size of this market and the profitability of this specific type of media (see Barrera & Bielby, 2001, and Rivadeneyra, 2011).
- This study researched the gendered and ethnic depictions in a series of *telenovelas*. A content analysis was done of five of the most viewed *telenovelas* of 2011 in the U.S.
- Previous research shows that *telenovelas*' characters are portrayed differently according to their gender and skin tone (Rivadeneyra, 2011; Glascock & Ruggiero, 2004). Based on previous research different hypotheses were proposed for the current study:

### Gender

- H1: Women will be depicted in traditional gender roles, including women being depicted in more childrearing roles, and having lower status professions compared to men.
- H2: There will be more emphasis on women's appearance compared to men; female characters will use more provocative clothing, and will be more fit than male characters.

### Skin Color

- H3: Characters with lighter skin will have higher status occupations compared to characters with darker skin.
- H4: Characters with lighter skin will belong to higher social class compared to characters with darker skin.
- H5: Characters with lighter skin will be more fit compared to characters with darker skin.

## Methods

A content analysis of five of the most viewed *telenovelas* of 2011 in the U.S. was performed. From this sample, two-thirds of the episodes were randomly selected, and from these episodes 20% of the scenes were randomly selected for analysis. The *telenovelas* were

- *Cuando me Enamoro* (When I fall in love)
- *Soy tu Dueña* (I'm your owner)
- *Eva Luna*
- *Teresa*
- *Triumph of love* (Triumph of love)

For the content analysis there were two levels of analysis: at the character level and at the scene level. At the character level, all speaking characters in the sampled scenes were coded. Demographics included:

- gender
- occupation (Indeterminate, professional, white collar, support, law enforcement, blue collar, service, criminal, or religious)
- skin color (light, medium, dark)
- Social class (upper, middle, lower)
- Body shape (extremely fit, average, overweight).

At the scene level two *telenovelas* were coded, *Cuando me Enamoro*, and *Soy tu Dueña*. Characters were coded for clothing type in each scene (neutral, slightly provocative, and provocative).

The questionnaires were first piloted and discussed by two bilingual coders using a different episodes. Consensus between the coders was reached for all the variables. I did the coding of the five *telenovelas* for the present study.

## Hypothesis 1

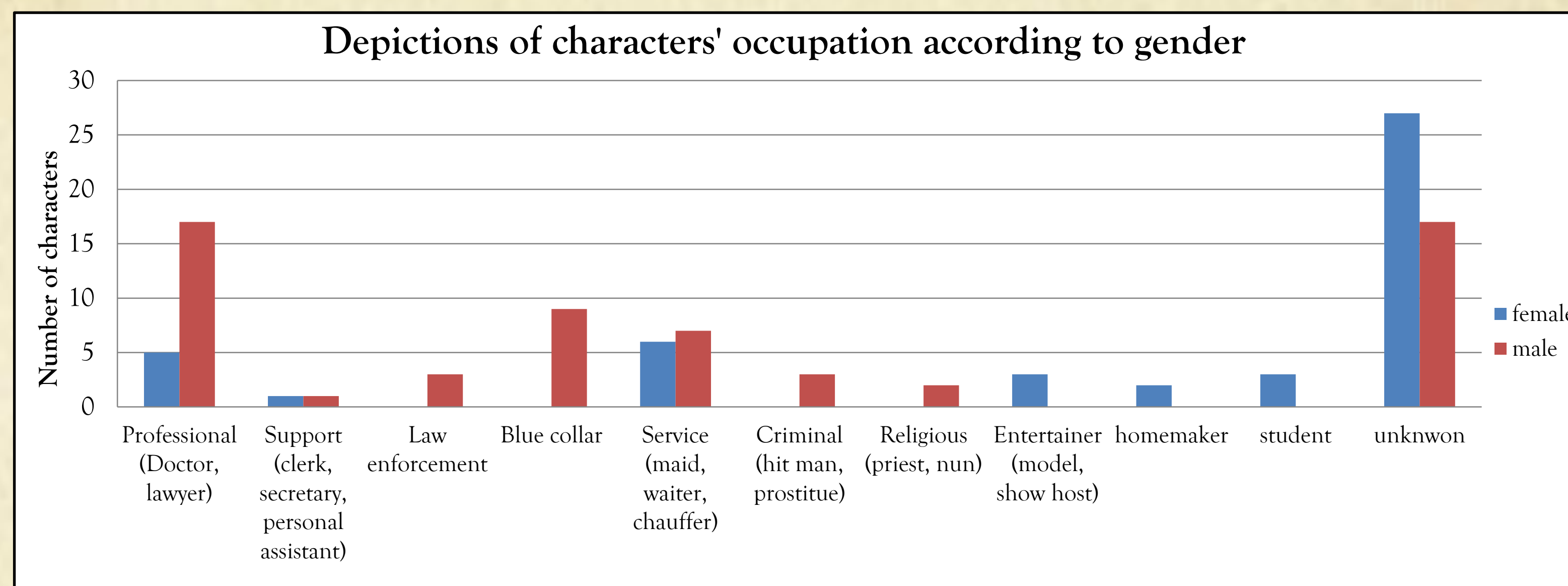


Figure 1.  $X^2 (12, N=113) = 33.97, p < .05$



## Hypothesis 2

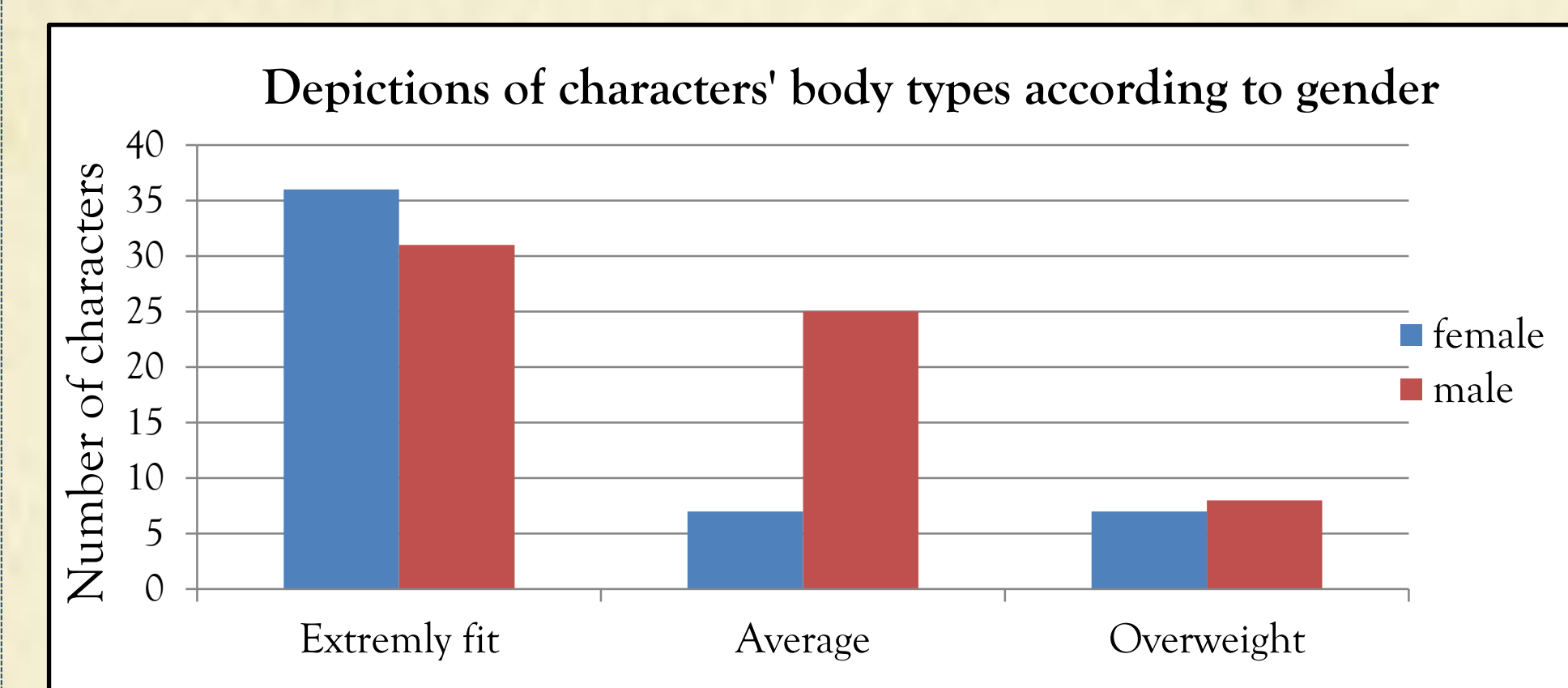


Figure 2.  $X^2 (2, N=114) = 8.98, p < .01$

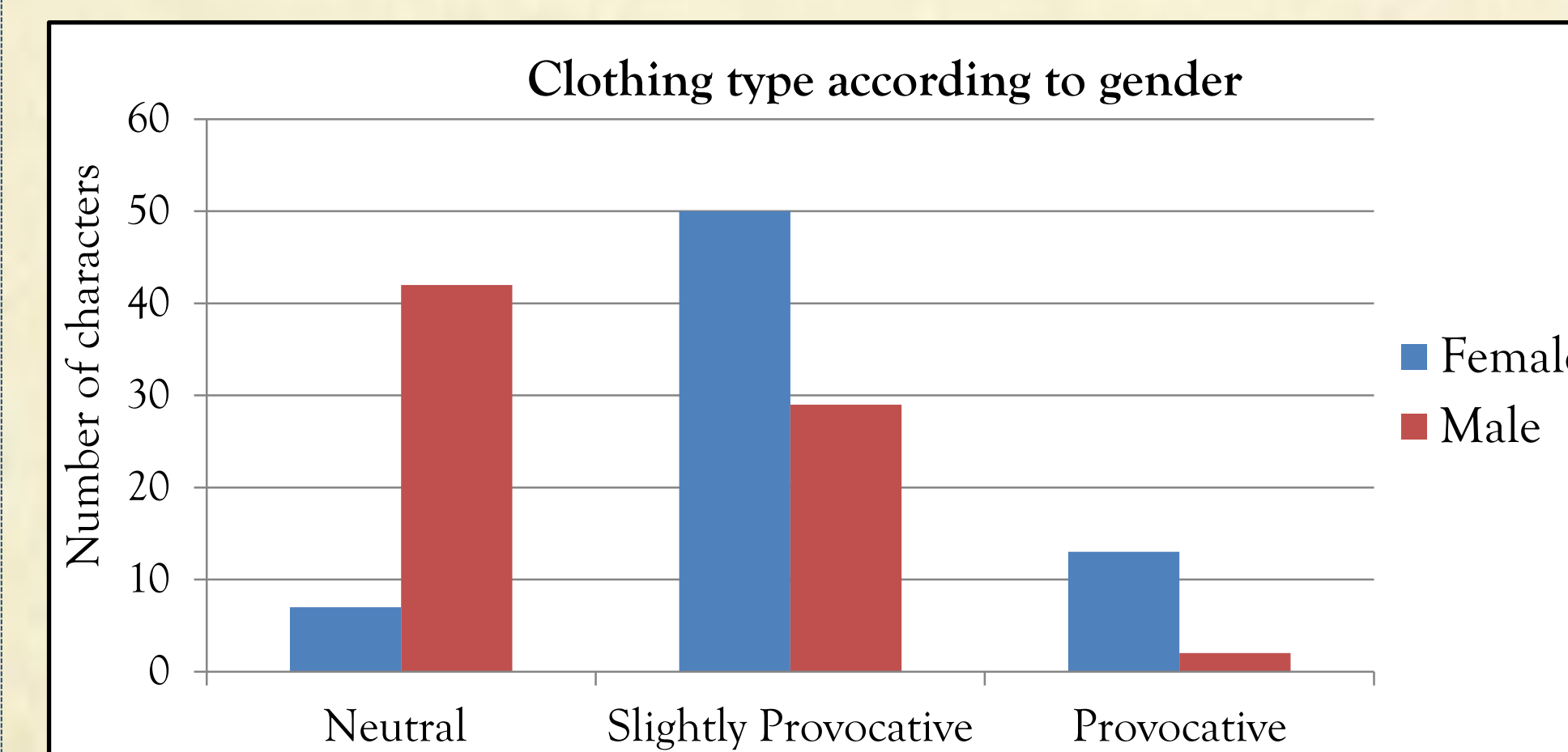
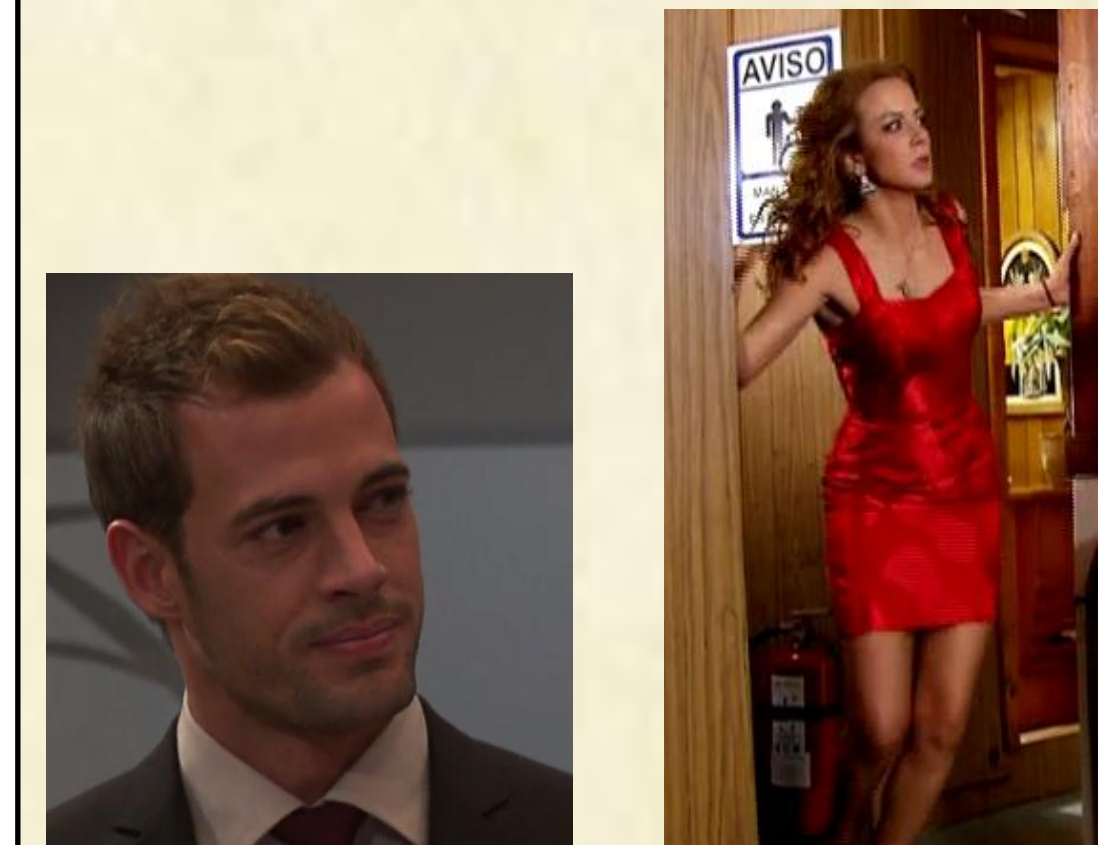


Figure 3.  $X^2 (3, N=147) = 40.29, p > .001$



## Hypothesis 4

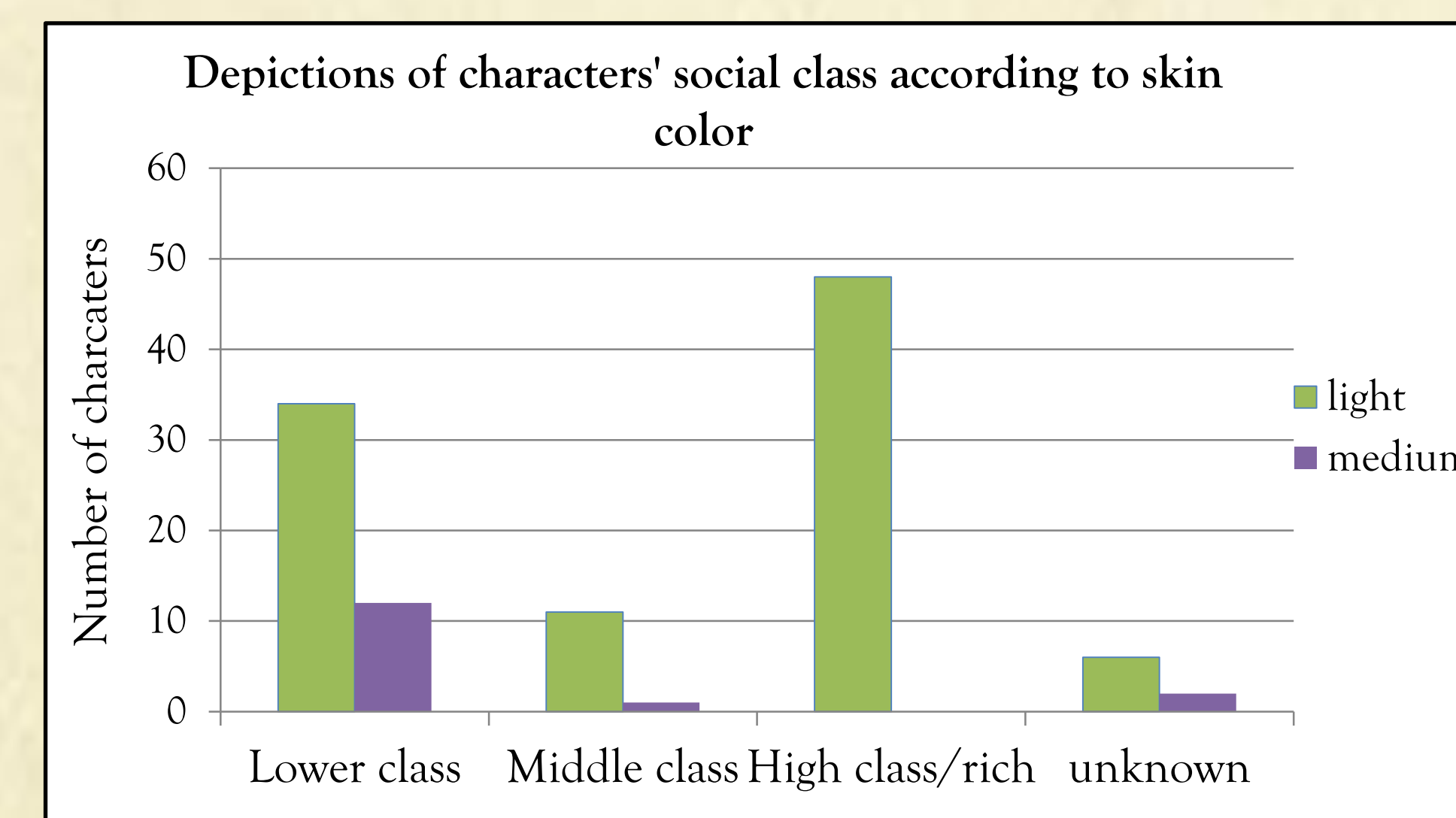


Figure 4.  $X^2 (3, N=114) = 15.23, p > .01$



## Hypothesis 5

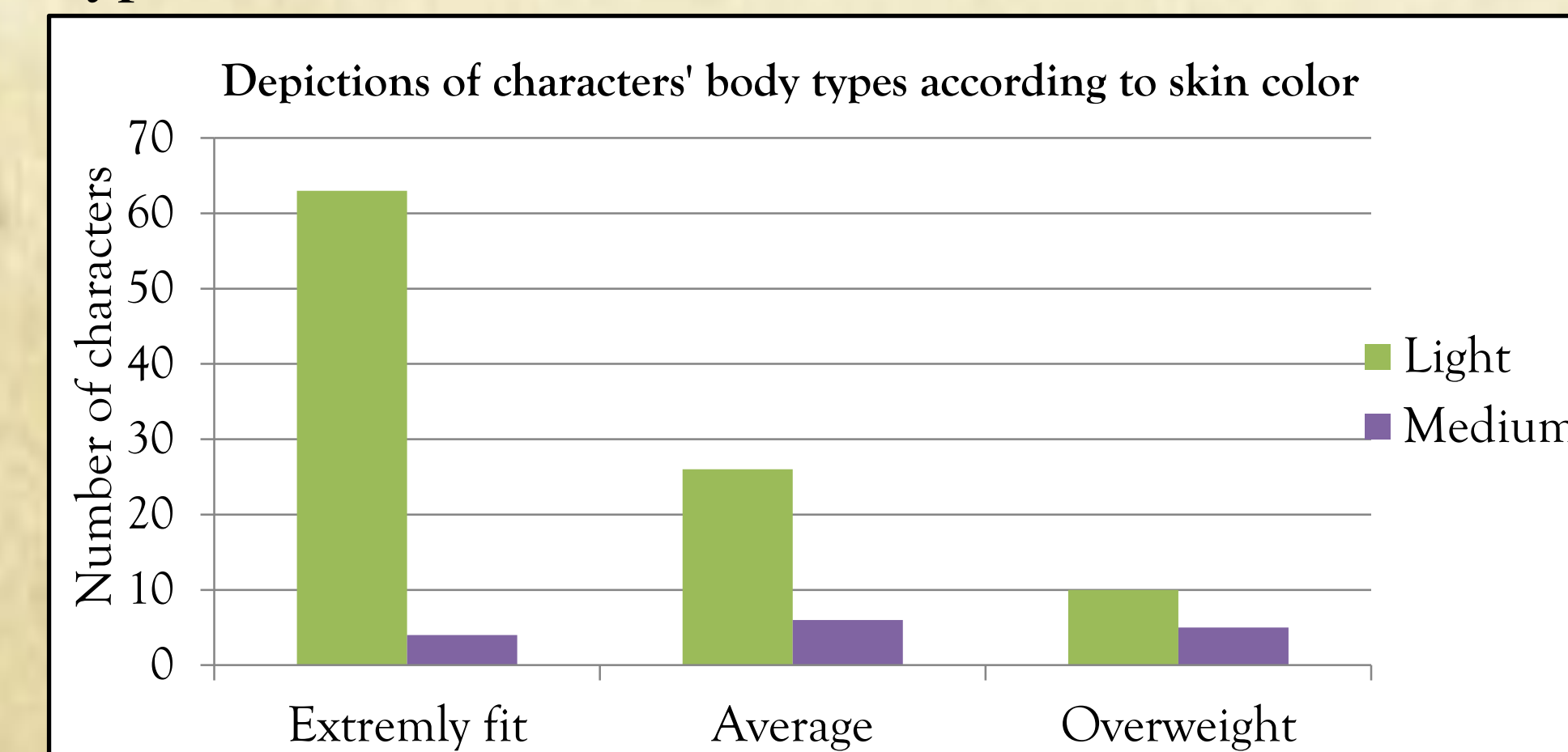


Figure 5.  $X^2 (2, N=114) = 9.25, p < .01$



## Results

In the five *telenovelas* 114 different characters were coded. For clothing a total of 142 different scenes were coded. Chi square of independence tests were used to analyze the data.

### Gender

There were no significant differences for social class and gender,  $X^2 (3, N=114) = 5.08, p = .17$ . However, as stated in our first hypothesis, there were gender differences in terms of occupation; men had more professional roles than women, and women were mostly depicted without a known occupation (figure 1),  $X^2 (12, N=113) = 33.97, p < .05$ . Results, supporting our second hypothesis, show that men and women were portrayed significantly different in terms of body shape; most women were extremely fit, men were extremely fit as well as average (figure 2),  $X^2 (2, N=114) = 8.98, p < .01$ . Furthermore, women were more likely than men to be depicted wearing provocative clothing (figure 3),  $X^2 (3, N=147) = 40.29, p > .001$ .

### Skin Color

Results did not support our third hypothesis; there were no significant differences in characters' occupation and skin color,  $X^2 (12, N=113) = 20.09, p = .07$ . However, there were significant differences for skin color and social class (H4); lighter skin characters were more likely to belong to high social class, while characters with darker skin were more likely to belong to lower class (figure 4),  $X^2 (3, N=114) = 15.23, p > .01$ . Additionally, as stated in hypothesis 5, there were significant differences in terms of skin color and body shape; characters with darker skin were more likely to be overweight than light skin characters (figure 5),  $X^2 (2, N=114) = 9.25, p < .01$ .

## Discussion

Results overwhelmingly supported the hypotheses that *telenovelas* portray characters using stereotypical schemes. It was found that darker skin characters were portrayed as belonging to lower social class, and being more likely to be overweight than characters with lighter skin color (figure 4 and figure 5). Characters were depicted in stereotypical gendered roles with male characters having higher status occupations and female characters being portrayed with unknown occupations, women were also the only characters depicted as homemakers (figure 1). Women's bodies were mostly portrayed as extremely fit (figure 2), and more sexualized with female characters dressed up more provocatively than men (figure 3).

These results are especially important when understood through the lenses of cultivation theory; Latino consumers might be internalizing these depictions of gender and race, reinforcing stereotypes, racism and sexism. In fact, research has found that exposure and viewer engagement with *telenovelas* predicts benevolent sexism and hostile sexism among young Latinas (Yildiz-Spinel, Murnen, López, & Corker). Future content analyses of these *telenovelas* should focus on how other gender and racial stereotypes are portrayed. For example, are there differences in terms of gender and race on how the characters engage in violent behaviors or alcohol/drug use? Additionally, research on *telenovelas* would benefit from qualitative analyses of the plotlines, which might be other ways in which the shows reinforce gender differences and narratives of benevolent and/or hostile sexism.

## References

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