

Pull Lists, Word of Mouth, Guesswork: How Comic Readers Find Content They Enjoy

Authored by:

Mace Allen

Elizabeth Keyes

Rodolfo Loo

Raven Moore

DePaul University

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Executive Summary

Our paper presents findings on how comic readers navigate comic store material and discover new comic books. Our goal is to explore user requirements (goals and needs) for technology-based tools that will help readers choose new comic books to follow and improve comic literature engagement.

Investigating the Problem Space

We observed several interactions among customers and staff at seven comic book stores in Chicago, Illinois and Madison, Wisconsin. We used the AEIOU (Activities, Environments, Interactions, Objects and Users) framework to guide our observations and analysis. We observed staff and customer activities, which included (a) customer browsing and purchasing and (b) staff recommendation.

We found it was difficult for comic readers to discover new content. Word of mouth and/or promotional material from comic stores are currently the primary discovery strategies. Gaining reliable recommendations from comic store staff required significant time investment from customers as well as tremendous knowledge from staff members. Staff members would not only have to know the comic material, but also correctly ascertain what a customer enjoys based on interests they convey.

Discovering Themes

In the second part of our investigation, we performed a combination of over-the-phone, live messaging and in-person interviews with ten comic readers to explore how word of mouth or promotional materials satisfied content discovery.

We used inductive coding to analyze interview information. Through our interview data, we found seven common themes: comic reading introduction, new series discovery, mid-series reading, tracking industry news, comic community participation, comic sharing and common recommendation features. Our findings suggest a gap in finding reliable ways to discover new content that adequately matches comic readers' tastes and preferences.

Measuring Data

We conducted a survey in the final part of our investigation to further explore interview findings and validate participant responses against a larger population. Survey data also helped gather insight on features respondents were interested in for improving content search. Overall, comic readers primarily use word of mouth and their personal networks to find new content and gauge whether or not they will like a new comic. The survey findings suggest that the trustworthiness of a recommendation is an influential component when purchasing new content.

Conclusions

Our data collection is complete after conducting the survey. This exploratory research provided additional insight in how comic readers learn about and discover comics. It also provided clarification on what comic readers want when searching for content. Observations allowed us to learn more about the problem space and interviews explored reader behavior and motivations.

We were also able to validate overarching themes seen in interviews with a survey.

Word of mouth recommendations, collecting and sharing are three major components of comic reading and discovery. Comic readers need a way to share comics they enjoy as well as access content from readers with similar tastes. We learned readers need a tool that selectively filters series titles, story lines, genres, characters, artwork types and other elements useful to a comic reader along with tracking, organizing and recommending comics based on personal tastes.

Our data also revealed comic readers are much more likely to buy and try new comics via promotions like Free Comic Book Day or sales. Since comic readers are open to experimenting with new titles when they are cheaper to purchase, accessing information about sales and promotions should be included when creating this tool.

The next steps we have identified include: additional observations of user interactions when searching for comics online, interviewing more readers on the specific pain points encountered when looking for new comics to read and distributing a survey with a higher focus on comic search strategies and sharing.

Designers can use this research to create a low fidelity prototype of a web-based tool outlining the features described; however, we would like to spend more time reinforcing our knowledge of the research to have a more established (and greater confidence) in our understanding of comic readers.

Introduction

The following sections discuss the cultural and economic influence of comics and the competitive landscape of comic literature.

Our interest in comics stems from personal experiences as comic readers and the tremendous growth the medium has undergone. Comics are becoming more pervasive in the cultural and economic landscape. This pervasiveness has created avenues for comics to develop into teaching tools, vehicles for self-expression (beyond mainstream subject matter) as well as become majorly profitable within the entertainment industry.

Not Just for Kids

Despite its reputation as sub literature and disposable entertainment, comics grapple subject matter beyond the mainstream superhero or action/fantasy genre. Comic literature delves into:

Deeply personal subjects:

Dykes to Watch Out For, Alison Bechdel's long running LGBT comic.

H Day by Renee French, an illustrated diary chronicling battles with migraine headaches.

Cultural exploration:

Shenzhen by Guy DeLisle, a comic chronicling his experiences as an illustrator in China.

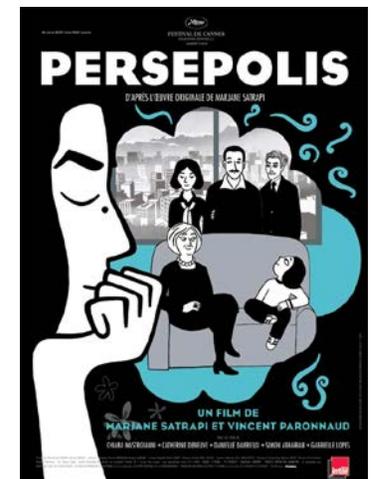
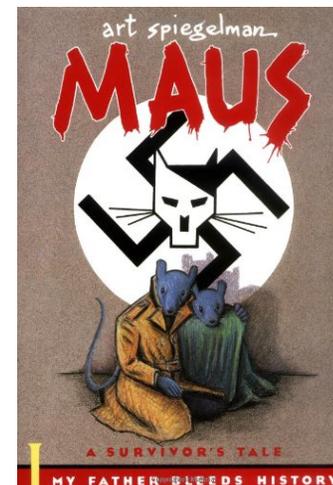
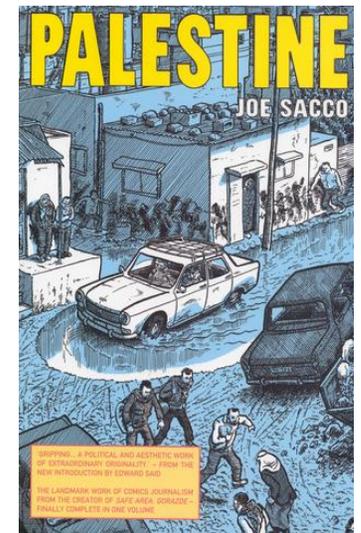
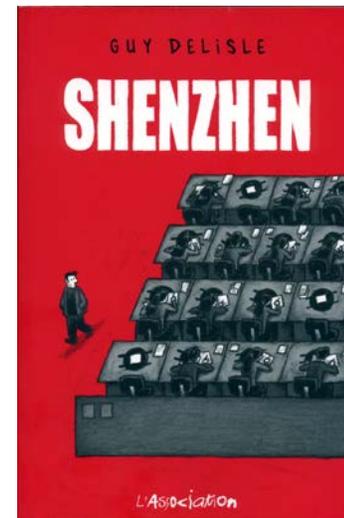
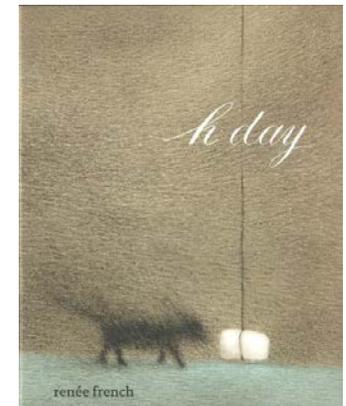
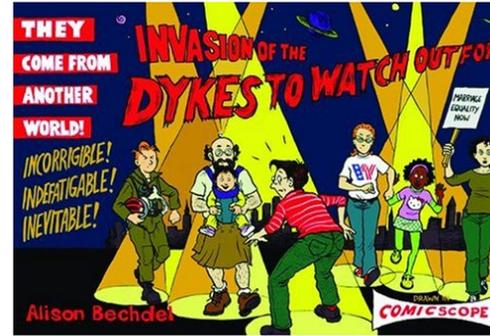
Palestine by Joe Sacco, a graphic novel detailing eyewitness accounts of events in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

And, memoirs from a range of perspectives:

Maus by Art Spiegelman, a graphic memoir about Jewish Holocaust survivors.

Persepolis by Marjane Satrapi, an autobiographical comic describing the author's experience growing up during and after the Islamic revolution.

Overall, comics tackle a range of mature subjects that can appeal to adult readers.

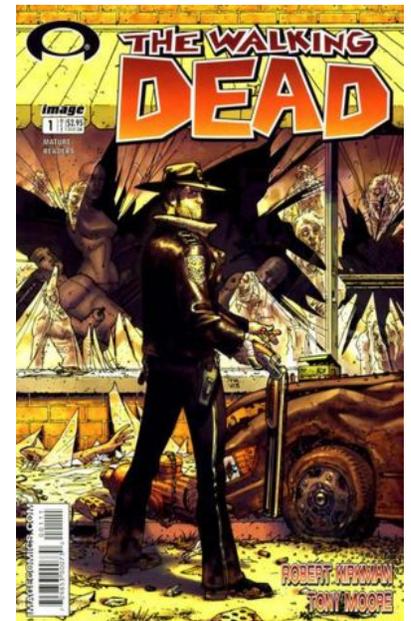
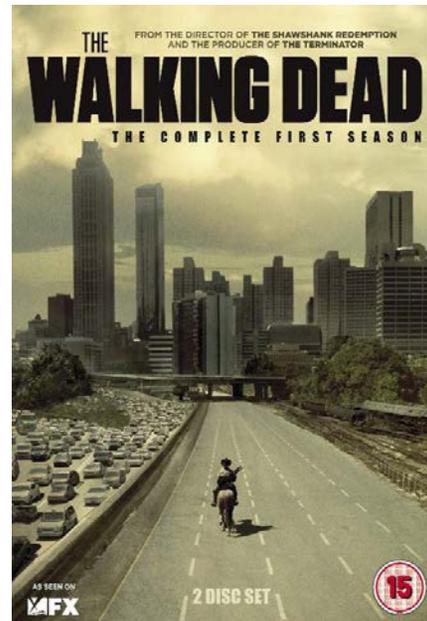
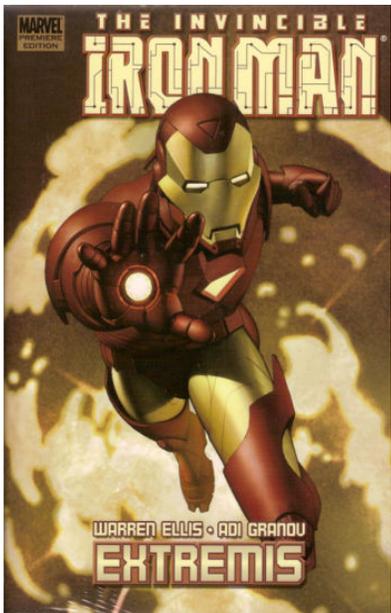


Big Business for Publishing, Television and Film

Print comics are the most profitable publishing business in the world (Rothman, 2012). Last year's comic book sales totaled over \$474 million dollars, which is an increase of over 14% from 2011 (Miller, 2013). Digital comics represent a growth area of the industry where casual or new readers can engage content on their smartphones, tablets or desktops (Allen, 2011). Comixology, a mobile comic app dominates 80% of the digital comic market with sales of over \$19 million in 2011 (Alverson, 2012).

The latest release of Iron Man earned \$174 million opening weekend, which was the second biggest opening weekend so far in 2012. The Avengers, another comic to film installment, opened with \$207 million in May 2012 making it the third biggest opening weekend of all time in North America (Poulisse, 2013).

The Walking Dead, a television series based on Robert Kirkman's comic of the same name currently has over 12 million viewers making it one of cable's highest rated programs (Goldberg, 2013),. Additionally, television networks can extend the entertainment shelf life of broadcast series with comics created after shows cease production. Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Charmed and Firefly have continued storylines beyond the small screen into comic series.

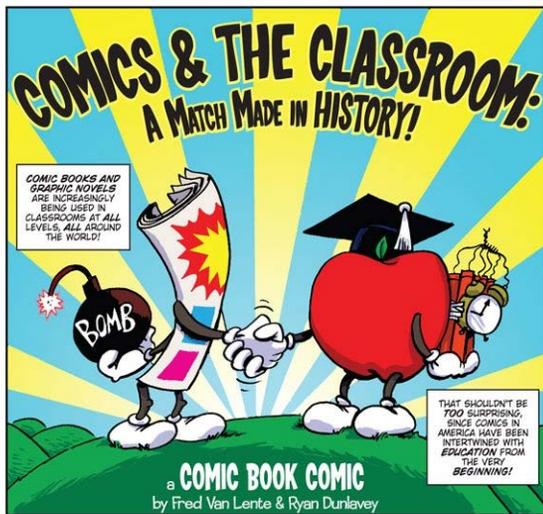


Literacy and Educational Tools

Educators have begun to champion the use of comics in the classroom as opportunities to create enriching reading experiences for students. Boerman-Cornell explains that comics are most effective in creating contextualization for complex subjects ranging from language arts and social studies to math and science (2013).

The National Autistic Society discusses the use of social stories to help autistic children learn social skills. The comics feature short descriptions of situations or events and provide context of what one should expect in that situation and why. Illustrating the conventions of everyday situations for autistic children, helps navigate the more abstract elements of social communication (The National Autistic Society, 2013).

Additionally, integrating comics in the classroom can help bridge the gap in young readers still learning imaging skills while also building up traditional reading skills, which are often used for reading websites or magazines (Boerman-Cornell, 2013). Reading literacy enhances the rich reading experience comics can afford as well as provide bridges to complex ideas and literature.



Accessing comic content

With the diverse spread of comic literature available (across three major platforms), discovering new content can be simultaneously an overwhelming and limiting task. As comic readers ourselves, we have accessed comic literature in three ways:

1. Downloadable comics, web comics, and/or through mobile apps
2. Trade paperbacks ordered via online retailers
3. Graphic novels and comics purchased at a comic store

However, none of these methods adequately support discovery of new material because they lack sufficient platform coverage (print, web comic, digital) or the range of diversity is limited to traditional mainstream titles and publishers. Some technology-based solutions have attempted to fill the gap through: (a) publisher websites, (b) online vendors including those not directly focused on comics, (c) general literature websites and (d) downloadable mobile applications. Despite the technological solutions available, we have explored all competitors that provide information and access to comics:

Comic stores

Strength: word of mouth from store staff can be helpful. There is a wide variety of comic literature and readers can create personalized “pull lists” (essentially, a comic subscription from the store)

Weakness: Random browsing to find new comics or word of mouth from comic store staff. Both requires a significant time investment to be useful or trustworthy

Publisher sites – Dark Horse, Marvel, DC, Image

Strength: Direct access to publisher news about specific titles

Weakness: House published material only

Online vendors – Amazon.com, Ebay.com

Strength: Wide variety of print comic literature. Potential buyers can view ratings and/or reviews from the community

Weakness: No access to digital or web comics

Literature Sites – Goodreads.com

Strength: Provides ratings and/or reviews of comics

Weakness: Limited variety of titles, no way to filter comics by search tags useful to a comic reader (publisher, artwork style, etc.), no information on web comics

Digital applications – Comixology, Dark Horse

Strength: Comixology has an extensive inventory of digital comics searchable by genre, publisher, creator, etc. The Dark Horse app is the mobile platform for the publisher's desktop site

Weakness: Only digital or publisher specific comics available and the search engine doesn't allow for multiple tag searches for content (for example, one cannot a granular search of content that incorporates more than one search parameter)

Despite the competitor landscape, mobile apps, websites, online retailers and comic stores still lack in significant ways when it comes to accessing information about new content. Readers cannot acquire comic literature across platform (digital, print or web comic) or gain robust access to content beyond mainstream genre (superhero/action adventure)

Word of mouth from comic store staff can be useful, but it is not always reliable. It requires significant time investment so staff can become familiar with a reader's tastes and preferences. Otherwise, recommendations morph into a game of guesswork that is time consuming (and ultimately frustrating) for the comic reader.

Content search within online platforms, like the Comixology or Dark Horse app, is limiting in various ways. This is primarily because of the (a) limits of content, i.e. the availability of only digital comics or house published titles (b) range, i.e. limited genre diversity or (c) search engine capabilities, i.e. no multiple tag searches.

Comic readers need more reliable and consistent solutions for discovering content. In this paper, we present findings from our study of how readers primarily discover, engage and share comic content. We identified shortcomings and opportunity gaps within content search activities and suggest tools to improve discovery. In the following sections, we describe our methods, findings and the design implications of our research.

Methods

This section describes our participants, outlines our research methods, which include observations, interviews and surveys and explains our analysis methods

Participants

Observation Participants

We observed customer and staff interactions at seven comic stores in Chicago, Illinois and Madison, Wisconsin. We shadowed three storeowners, two store managers and two staff members as they performed their jobs. We presented consent forms to each participant to approve our observation and shadowing. We witnessed 22 customer interactions during our observations which ranged from procedural (ringing up purchases) to supplying customers with comic information.

Interview Participants

We interviewed 10 comic readers (eight men, two women); ages ranged between 31 and 52. One participant was a new reader, having only 1 year of comic reading experience; the remaining nine participants had been reading comics since they were children. All interviewees, with the exception of one, currently read comics.

Name	Age	Occupation
Sara	31	Catering Manager
Breck	32	Career Counselor
Ben	33	Software Developer
James	33	Project Manager
Nathan	34	Software Developer
Monica	35	Curriculum Designer
Adam	37	Quality Assurance Manager
Dan	38	User Experience Designer
Channing	50	Manager of CSR Development
Hal	52	Director of IT

Survey Participants

A majority of our respondents (96.25%, N = 55) were between the ages of 26 and 45, with a larger percentage of 36 to 45 year old respondents taking part in the survey (58.82%, N = 30). There was a moderately even split between genders, where women (52.49%, N = 27) only slightly outranked men (45.10%, N = 23) as comic readers. Only 1 person chose to not disclose their gender. Parents made up a little over half of respondents (58.86%, N = 29).

Data Collection Procedures

Observation Procedures

Our team used the AEIOU (Activities, Environments, Interactions, Objects, and Users) observation framework to guide our observations. We targeted employees, managers and storeowners. We also observed staff interactions with 22 different customers. Participants signed a consent form before observation began.

We observed staff members, managers and owners to learn how they advised customers on questions regarding comic recommendations and purchasing. We explored store shelf management, organizational structure and if customers purchased staff recommended comics. Additionally, we noted the types of questions customers asked relating to comic searches, for example:

1. Were they looking for staff recommendations on new comics?
2. Did they ask about new comic issue arrivals?
3. Were they only there to retrieve pre-ordered material?

Analysis

Each team member submitted observation notes. We established task categories by using the AEIOU framework to guide breakdown of customer browsing and inquiry activities. Based on the framework, we were able to compile a task analysis grid to categorize findings into goals, tools, subtasks and pain points. These categories helped pinpoint opportunity gaps during comic literature search.

Interview Procedures

We interviewed people who are currently reading or have read comics. Each team member followed the same master script. Interviewers recorded notes for later analysis and relevant quotes. Participants signed a consent form before interviewing began.

We used multiple methods of interaction, including: (a) in-person (b) over the phone and (c) via live messaging. We asked participants about their introduction to comics, purchase habits, comic community participation, things they liked or disliked about comics and their interactions with other comic readers.

Analysis

We inductively coded our interviews for dominant and salient themes. We established a coding system for recurring patterns based on shared attributes. Finally, we created labels for each group and compiled them into a spreadsheet.

Survey Procedures

We created a 23-question online survey using SurveyMonkey.com. Our team conducted a pilot walkthrough to remove structural or question-related errors. Once we were satisfied the survey was ready for distribution, we used the snowball method to distribute the form to our personal network via online social networking sites and email. Our survey launched May 25, 2013 and closed the next day after we received 67 responses.

Survey Categories

1. Comic reading consumption

We asked respondents about what types of comics they read and to rank reasons why they read them in a particular format.

2. Purchase habits

This section included questions about how comics are purchased, ranking factors that influenced comic purchase and how many comics were purchased within the last 6 months.

3. Discovery

Questions about what methods respondents use to find new comics and which ones they find most useful and trustworthy.

4. Technology

We asked respondents about what types of mobile devices they owned (smartphones and tablets).

5. New Features

We asked an open ended question to gather insight on what features respondents would find useful in a technological solution for finding new comics

6. Demographics

We ended the survey with questions about age, gender and whether or not the respondent was a parent

Analysis

We used data from Survey Monkey to analyze participant answers and made comparisons with our interview findings. We prepared a survey question grid that included instructions, list of possible answers and reasoning for asking the questions. We categorized and reordered these questions to create a logical question flow.

Findings

Observation Findings

Task Analysis

Our group found the primary goals related to purchasing new titles and acquiring comic literature suggestions. Subtasks involved inventory browsing, customer inquiry for suggestions and accepting recommendations. Tools used to accomplish these tasks and goals involved comic store staff, comic inventory and cash (used to purchase comics). Specific pain points encountered included no finding desired titles.

Feature	Function Write Up	Source
Search for author or artist or publisher	The function allows the user to search by author/writer, artist, or publisher. In the free form section of the survey, this feature was mentioned most of all the entries received. This indicates that users would most like to see this type of feature in a solution.	Survey
Indie Comic Section	This feature would spotlight indie comics.	Survey
Family Comic Section	This feature would spotlight family-friendly comics.	Interview
Character search and bio	Search for particular characters in the comic book universe, and results would return a bio and key issues related to the character. Of the entries received in the free form section of the survey, this feature was mentioned second most.	Survey
Popularity Indicator (sellout)	This indicator would show if the selected title is selling at a high rate.	Survey
Recommendations with trust indicator	This key feature would return recommendations for comic book titles. Additionally the recommendation would feature a trust indicator. The trust indicator would identify recommendations that are trustworthy such as a well respected reviewer versus recommendations that would come from a publisher or social media.	Survey and Interview
Publish to social media	This feature would allow the user to publish recommendations to social media such as Twitter and Facebook.	Survey
My library	This feature would allow the user to catalog titles that they have read.	Internal
What's coming up (new series, new issues of existing series)	This feature would highlight new issues that will be soon to be released titles. This includes new series or new issues of an existing series.	Survey and Interview
Purchase list	Allows a user to create a list of titles that are coming out soon or are already out so they may purchase them at a store or online	Observation
Rating system by type (writing/story, art)	This feature would allow the user to rate independently the writing, story, or art component of a comic book. Results would be summarized to display an overall score.	Survey
Tags or Theme creation	This feature would allow the user to tag comic book titles. By tagging comic books, the user can create themes based on the tags to help organize titles.	Survey

Figure 1: Task Analysis Grid

AEIOU

In the AEIOU framework, we grouped our observation findings into two categories:

1. Store layout and organization
2. Customer inquiry and browsing activities

Store Layout and Organization (Environments and Objects): physical navigation of comic store

All the stores we observed organized inventory in the same manner. Comic books were displayed in racks, shelves or storage boxes. For example, in shops featuring a children's section, inventory was grouped by age appropriateness. This section typically placed comics on lower shelves to aid young children's access to content. This was also a preventative measure to reduce the risk of young children being exposed to inappropriate material. Additionally, shops separated adult titles for audiences who are 18 and older.

Comic book titles were typically organized by publisher (with the exception of one observed store, which organized all titles alphabetically). For example, DC and Marvel titles (publishers known colloquially in the comic industry as "The Big Two") are grouped separately while independent publishers are grouped together. Then, titles are alphabetized within each group. New (released within the week) titles and graphic novels are primarily displayed on racks and ordered alphabetically by title.

One storeowner noted how the organizational differences between comic stores (materials sorted only by title) and other bookstores (which usually sort by author or genre) could potentially confuse new customers. One store utilized a promotion table to display flyers and postcards of promoted comics and events. Most stores displayed flyers and postcards near the cash registers as well as offer to slip promotional materials inside a customer's bag.

Customer Browsing and Inquiry (Activities, Users and Interactions): finding known titles

Customers entered comic stores to either browse or purchase titles. We observed customers asking for a particular title or come in to pick up a special order (some stores will hold issues of new releases for people who regularly purchase those titles, a process known as having a "pull list"). In both cases, customers specifically knew what they wanted

Customer Inquiry (Activities, Users and Interactions): finding new titles

Customers commonly inquired about recommendations for new titles to read. This resulted in relying on staff that functioned as subject matter experts. In most cases, customers trusted staff for their expert advice. Recommendations were influential if staff were able to connect recommendations with a customer's interests. These recommendations were based on a series of questions regarding a customer's hobbies, favorite books or television shows. Another common way of recommending fresh content for readers is recommending titles written by an author a reader already knows. Furthermore, staff offered suggestions on titles they have not personally read, but choose to recommend based on positive reviews from other sources.

Customer Browsing (Activities, Users and Interactions): secondary searching

Browsing was a secondary activity for customers. We did observe some browsing where customers would pick up titles that interest them, read a few pages and then make a decision to buy or return the title. Usually, a staff member asks the browsing customer if they need help finding anything and assist if needed.

Interview Findings

Based on our findings we found seven repeating and salient themes in our interviews:

1. Initial Exposure to Comics
2. New Series Discovery
3. Mid-Series Reading
4. Tracking Industry News
5. Comic Community Engagement
6. Sharing Comic Literature
7. Recommendation Features

1. Initial exposure to comics

“How did you first learn about comics?”

Nine of ten participants responded that they first read comics as a child. The entry point into comics was quite diverse: some found the books in non-comic related stores, one received old issues from a friend, and two mentioned the comics were already available as they grew up.

“I found some comics at a gas station comic rack while waiting for the bus in fifth grade. I picked up an issue of X-Men because I liked the cover art.” Participant 1

Additionally, participants often mentioned the title *Archie* (a kid-friendly comedy comic) as a first read title.

2. Discovery of New (Comic) Series

“Describe the last time you found a new series. What made you decide to read it?”

Based on participant experiences, people typically used (a) recommendations, (b) promotions or (c) searched for series related to titles they already like. Recommendations came from personal interaction or online content. People typically asked friends or family for advice or discussed new series with comic store clerks. Amazon shopping habits generated virtual recommendations while other suggestions came via comic related podcasts.

“Saw an Amazon recommendation and listening to Totally Rad Show podcast” – Participant 2

Participants also experimented with new comics they learned about through promotions, which allowed them to read new comic series with lower investment costs. Many participants mentioned trying new comic titles on Free Comic Day, an annual comic store event where customers can choose several free issues. Participants also referenced *Previews*, a comic guide that provides synopses of upcoming (new and established series) titles, as another promotional method.

“I find a new series because I pick up Previews. I’m always looking at indie books. I like to pick up new titles.” Participant 3

When we asked about purchase habits, we learned discounts and deals play a large factor into buying choices and ultimately influence if a reader would try something new.

“I discovered a lot new titles the last comic book day event. It was easy to try.” Participant 4

Additionally, participants were more likely to try a new title if they were familiar with the writer, creator or artist. Readers will often search or keep an eye out for new content from their favorite industry figures.

3. Mid-Series Reading

“Have you ever started a series even though it wasn’t the first issue?”

Six participants had experience choosing a comic title that was not the first issue in a series while the remaining four were adamant about not starting a comic mid-series. Participants who did engage a comic mid-series usually purchased previous issues or trade books to read backstory.

“I never get in on a first issue. I jump in and buy the books later to catch up. The individual comics are usually self-contained or I can get what it’s about from the recap page.” Participant 5

Similarly, to the theme on new comic discovery, purchasing one title is low risk; therefore, a reader will likely lose interest if they did not enjoy the title’s art, story or genre. Participants who avoided choosing titles mid-series often purchased books compiling multiple issues (known as trade paperbacks) and expressed concern with finding new series before they came out.

4. Tracking Industry News

“Do you read/keep up with comic industry news?”

Seven participants mentioned reading comic industry news through various avenues like websites, blogs or podcasts, comic applications, entertainment magazines and following specific reviewers. Three participants discussed going to comic conventions and events to gain information about the industry.

5. Comic Community Engagement

“Do you participate in comic or pop culture related communities?”

Seven participants are not engaged in comic/pop culture communities. This is an inverse of the previous theme and implies that participants consume content about comics, but are not interested in comic community participation.

6. Recommendations to Others

“Do you share comics you enjoy with anyone? Why or why not?”

Seven participants expressed that they enjoyed recommending comic series to people they know such as friends, family and coworkers. Comic reading parents said they shared comics with their children and purchased items specifically for them. Participants also commented that they liked talking to others about comics and wanted their friends to pick up the same series they enjoyed. They also shared series they thought friends or family would like, which connects to the first theme of how people find new materials.

Reasons for not sharing comics stemmed from participants not wanting their copies damaged by others, friends already reading the same series or significant others were uninterested in comics overall.

7. Recommendation Features

“Our group is exploring technology solutions for comic fans—do you have any ideas for features?”

Nine out of ten participants expressed an interest in a recommendation feature that could parse out comic titles based on story characters, previously read titles and learning about new titles as they came out.

“If there was a way to sort through Previews and note when trades and graphic novels are expected to be released, that would help me plan my buying.” Participant 6

Survey Findings

We were interested in finding out what methods comic readers currently found useful for content search as well as validating overall themes discovered during our interviews. We wanted a more detailed overview of comic readers, their habits, factors influencing comic purchases and what (if any) additional elements guide discovery of new content.

Demographics

A majority of our respondents (96.25%, N = 55) were between the ages of 26 and 45, with a larger percentage of 36 to 45 year old respondents taking part in the survey (58.82%, N = 30). There was a moderately even split between genders, where women (52.49%, N = 27) only slightly outranked men (45.10%, N = 23) as comic readers. Only 1 person chose to not disclose their gender. Parents made up a little over half of respondents (58.86%, N = 29).

Comic Reading

Of our 67 respondents, 84.21% (N = 48) read print comics, followed by 63.61% (N = 36) reading web comics. Respondents who did read web comics appeared to be indifferent to posting schedules since 59.62% (N = 31) primarily relied on checking the site occasionally for updates, while 30.77% (N = 16) and 13.46% (N = 7) used RSS feeds and creator newsletters for updates. Digital downloads ranked lowest in comic reading consumption with 38.60% (N = 22) of respondents saying they read content in that format.

Purchase Habits

43.25% (N = 22) of survey participants reported buying comics primarily for themselves. 36.54% (N = 19) participants admitted buying mostly for themselves, but sometimes for other people. Only 11.54% (N = 6) bought comics equally for themselves and for other people.

When reporting comic expenditures for the last month, respondents were generally split among spending ranges.

- 29.41% (N = 15) reported spending nothing on comics
- 27.45% (N = 14) reported spending less than \$20
- 23.53% (N = 12) spent between \$21 and \$50
- 9.6 % (N = 10) spent over \$51

A majority of respondents (49.02%, N = 25) purchased between 1 and 4 comics in the last month. A smaller number (15.69%, N = 8) reported purchasing more than 5. Most survey participants (52.94%, N = 27) reported sometimes using discounts to purchase comics while a small number of respondents expressed using comics discounts all the time (27.45%, N = 14) or never at all (21.57%, N = 11).

Discovery

Word of mouth (84.31%, N = 43) was the top choice for respondents to use when learning about new comics. In-store browsing/comic store staff (70.59%, N = 36) and social media (63.63%, N = 35) placed second and third as factors influencing content discovery. Publisher websites ranked last among respondents for content discovery (13.73%, N = 7). Respondents felt word of mouth (86.27%, N = 44) was the trustworthiest source for recommendations followed by their own intuition (72.77%, N = 37) and comic store staff (54.90%, N = 28) as trustworthy factors. However, despite social media being a popular source among respondents for content discovery, it was one of the least trustworthy sources for recommendations (25.53%, N = 12). Once again, publisher websites ranked last among participants as a trustworthy source for recommendations (7.84%, N = 4). Most respondents (47.06%, N = 24) didn't keep up with comic industry news. This was followed by a slightly smaller number of participants (39.22%, N = 20) tracking industry news via websites and comic panels. The remaining respondents were evenly split among attending comics events (17.65%, N = 9) participating in comic communities (17.65%, N = 9) and using promotional materials like Previews or flyers (17.65%, N = 9).

New Features

Our open-ended question regarding features for comic search yielded 26 responses. Respondents reported wanting features that provided (a) provided recommendations and ratings (b) a tag/genre search (c) a way to track story characters or plot lines and (d) recognition and/or boosting of independent (indie) comics and (d) ways to find out when comics are popular or selling out

Personas and Scenarios

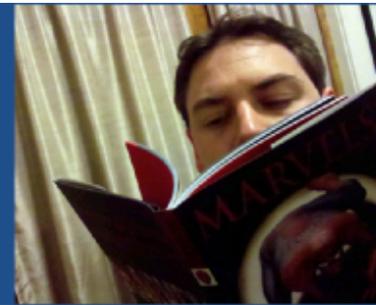
These are representations of target users' behaviors, traits, goals and motivations.

Paperback Patrick

Sex: Male

Age: 39

Been reading comics since he was kid and has amassed a collection of paperback/single issue comic books that he stores in a spare bedroom.



Sharing & Community

- Takes his child with him on comic shop outings
- Goes to comic conventions to see/talk to industry insiders
- Enjoys telling people about comics he likes and finding out what they think of other comics
- Likes discussion on comics and pop culture

Purchase Habits

- Going to the same comic shop for the last 15 years
- Visits the comic store at least once a week
- Buys comics for his son or picks out comics for him when he takes trips to the comic store
- Has a pull list of comic series he's following
- Buys over 20 comics a month from the local comic store

Discovery Methods

- Goes to comic conventions and keeps up with industry news via comic industry websites so he can learn what his favorite writers and artists are doing
- Learns about new comics from comic store staff or from reading Previews
- Browses the sales/promo items to pick up new comics or during free comic book day
- Doesn't mind picking up a comic mid-series if he can jump right into the story line

Likes/dislikes

- Prefers super hero/action comics, but will read a new comic if the story premise catches his interest, especially if it's by an artist or writer he likes
- Prefers paperback comics, doesn't mind buying single issue b/c he has space to store them

Goals

- Share what he likes with the community
- Track latest updates about comics he likes or that his son likes
- Find out what other people think of other comic titles currently out
- Wants to find more age appropriate comics for his son to read

Frustrations

- Wishes there was a way to learn more about favorite writers and artists without having to sort through individual websites
- Doesn't always catch the sales/promos when they're happening at comic stores in his area
- Thinks it's too hard to figure out if he'll like a comic if comic store staff aren't familiar with the title

Trigger Words:

Community

Collection

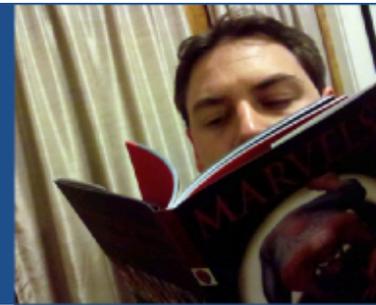
Investment

Paperback Patrick

Sex: Male

Age: 39

Been reading comics since he was kid and has amassed a collection of paperback/single issue comic books that he stores in a spare bedroom.



Scenario

Patrick wants to set up his Comic Recommendation program to be able to find new titles and keep up with industry news for both himself and his younger son. He starts by entering in one of the comic titles he reads right now, Justice League. The program is able to identify the comic from his entry, and adds it to his Library. This comic is one of his favorites, so he rates the artwork and story highly.

Patrick enters additional comic titles, rating them as he goes along. As he's entering his current list of 20 active comics, and some he used to follow, he adds a tag to each in order to separate his collection of superhero comics from his son's children comics.

After entering his titles, he goes into the Family Comic section to get inspiration for comics his son may enjoy. The program recommends that he get Batman Li'l Gotham, since it has some of the same characters he and his son already enjoy, it's family friendly, and it is only on issue #2. To research it further (and to make sure it will be alright for his son), he is presented with additional information about that new title, a couple pages as a preview, and an interview of the artist about his inspiration.

Patrick goes into the general recommendation sections to find some titles for himself. It recommends a Green Lantern trade written by Geoff Johns that he had missed a couple years ago. In addition, a Green Arrow comic is shown as a featured recommendation from the publisher. Patrick adds the Batman and Green Lantern suggestions to his Purchase list so that he remembers to pick them up the next time he goes to the store, and skips the Green Arrow recommendation. After he buys those two titles and reads them, he adds them to his Library, then publishes his purchases on Facebook so his friends can pick them up too.

Features covered:

- Search for author or artist or publisher
- Recommendations with trust indicator (source too?)
- Publish to social media
- My library
- Purchase list
- Rating system by type (writing/story, art)
- Tags or Theme creation
- Family Comic Section

Digital DeeDee

Sex: Female

Age: 31

Read comics as a kid, but only recently got back into reading them as an adult. She limits paperback/single issue purchases because of shelving space constraints. Plus, she reads web comics or downloads digital comics from an application on her iPad



Sharing & Community

- Doesn't go to comic conventions or attend industry events
- Less open to sharing comic reads with her personal network, but will read reviews/recs from social media or various websites

Purchase Habits

- Buys a mix of paper and digital comics, but strongly prefers digital/web comics because of convenience
- Buys an average of 5 to 6 comics a month (mainly digital, sometimes paper)
- Buys comics when she wants, doesn't look out for sales
- Visits a comic store once a month on average

Discovery Methods

- Checks out comics she hears about through Facebook or Twitter
- Will also buy a comic of a tv/movie she's watched (if she liked it)
- Checks the websites occasionally of web comics she reads, but doesn't follow the posting schedule

Likes/Dislikes

- Likes reading a range of comics in different subject matters, prefers to find indie comics or comics that are not super hero/action based
- Likes multi-issue comics or graphic novels, doesn't want to invest time/money in single issue comics
- Likes finding new comics to read provided she can get into the story early enough or know enough about the story overview to help decide if she should read/buy it

Goals

- Reads interesting comics that are not mainstream (action/super hero)
- Find comics worthwhile to purchase (whether digital or paper)
- Read recommendations on comics to help decide if she'll purchase them

Frustrations

- Browsing comic stores is boring and tedious, just wants to find what she likes and purchase
- Hates asking for recommendations from comic store staff, it's always hit or miss
- Wonders if there are indie comics she's missing out on

Trigger Words:

Convenience

Complexity

Variety

Digital DeeDee

Sex: Female

Age: 31

Read comics as a kid, but only recently got back into reading them as an adult. She limits paperback/single issue purchases because of shelving space constraints. Plus, she reads web comics or downloads digital comics from an application on her iPad



Scenario

DeeDee checks the Comic Recommendation program frequently in order to find new titles that others are suggesting. Her favorite area is the Indie Comic section, where she can find a quirky new title that the major publishers aren't featuring.

While she's checking the news, a new title pops up on her Twitter feed called Jupiter's Legacy. In one of the articles under that title, it mentions that the writers are working on a Hit-Girl spinoff. DeeDee is not familiar with that character, and would like to learn more in case she would like the title.

In the program, she is able to search for Hit-Girl and finds that she is a character in the series Kick-Ass. DeeDee wants to purchase the first book to see if she would like it, and is sent to Amazon's page for Kick-Ass volume #1 for her to purchase.

After completing her purchase, she returns to the original article about Jupiter's Legacy, and reads reviews from other Comic Recommendation users. She notices a review from a blogger she recognizes and usually agrees with. After looking at the popularity statistics, she's convinced that it would be a good title. She purchases the first issue through Image's site, and reads it.

Wanting to continue the series, she returns to the Comic Recommendation program to set an alert for when the next issue is available.

Features covered:

- Indie Comic Section
- Character search and bio
- What's coming up (new series, new issues of existing series)
- Popularity Indicator (sellout)

Features Matrix

Findings from our observations, interviews and surveys helped inform the creation of our feature matrix, see the table below. The matrix is a simple list of features with a corresponding function outline. The proposed features developed from interview responses, open-ended answers to survey questions and team brainstorming. Our proposed solution is a web-based desktop application with a corresponding mobile app that includes features we feel are beneficial to helping comic readers find new content.

Feature	Function Write Up	Source
Search for author or artist or publisher	The function allows the user to search by author/writer, artist, or publisher. In the free form section of the survey, this feature was mentioned most of all the entries received. This indicates that users would most like to see this type of feature in a solution.	Survey
Indie Comic Section	This feature would spotlight indie comics.	Survey
Family Comic Section	This feature would spotlight family-friendly comics.	Interview
Character search and bio	Search for particular characters in the comic book universe, and results would return a bio and key issues related to the character. Of the entries received in the free form section of the survey, this feature was mentioned second most.	Survey
Popularity Indicator (sellout)	This indicator would show if the selected title is selling at a high rate.	Survey
Recommendations with trust indicator	This key feature would return recommendations for comic book titles. Additionally the recommendation would feature a trust indicator. The trust indicator would identify recommendations that are trustworthy such as a well respected reviewer versus recommendations that would come from a publisher or social media.	Survey and Interview
Publish to social media	This feature would allow the user to publish recommendations to social media such as Twitter and Facebook.	Survey
My library	This feature would allow the user to catalog titles that they have read.	Internal
What's coming up (new series, new issues of existing series)	This feature would highlight new issues that will be soon to be released titles. This includes new series or new issues of an existing series.	Survey and Interview
Purchase list	Allows a user to create a list of titles that are coming out soon or are already out so they may purchase them at a store or online	Observation
Rating system by type (writing/story, art)	This feature would allow the user to rate independently the writing, story, or art component of a comic book. Results would be summarized to display an overall score.	Survey
Tags or Theme creation	This feature would allow the user to tag comic book titles. By tagging comic books, the user can create themes based on the tags to help organize titles.	Survey

Conclusions & Discussion

As comics become more popular in mainstream media and entertainment, we have discovered that comic stores and online platforms provide inconsistent ways to discover new content and share recommended material. Our research explored the problem space by observing customers and staff in comic stores, interviewing comic readers and finally conducting a survey to validate previous assumptions and ideas.

In our observations, we found that the physical navigation of comic stores revolves around publisher-centric cataloging, which is inherently unintuitive to most customers. Buchanan and McKay (2011) explain how user's mental models for book search does not necessarily stem from bibliographic data, but is linked with cultural and societal references such as media reviews and tie-ins or reading with friends. Because of this, readers can become frustrated and have less fulfilling purchasing (and reading) experiences. We identified key tasks, subtasks and tools readers used to discover content.

- Customer purchase: customer buys content from pull list/found material
- Customer browse: looks for new content on shelves
- Customer inquiry: asks staff for suggestions

Comic searching in stores rely heavily on customer inquiry and browsing. Customer inquiry results in word of mouth recommendations from comic store staff, which requires significant time investment to be trustworthy. This trustworthiness derives from simple relationship building that parses out a readers tastes and reading preferences. Otherwise, comic readers have to rely on the guesswork of strangers to ascertain good recommendations. The task analysis we created confirmed that specific pain points centered on inquiring about new content (and, consequently, not finding matches based on taste and preferences).

From our interviews, salient themes revealed that most readers have a long history with comics and are open to trying new content, especially if it means acquiring free or discounted material through promotions or sales. However, there is a disconnection between comic readers and the larger comic community. Readers discussed consuming comic news in forums and magazines, but admitted to having little to no involvement in comic or pop culture communities. The most important dominant theme that emerged during interviews is the response on technological solutions. Nearly all participants expressed an interest in a recommendation tool that could calculate suggestions based on their interests as well as track upcoming titles, story characters or plot lines.

Our survey data confirmed that word of mouth from personal networks was the most sought after and trustworthy source of comic recommendations. Social media plays a role in discovering content, but is not a trustworthy source. This finding represents an opportunity gap in content search where readers greatly familiar with a series title can share expertise with less familiar readers. Sharing expertise of comics through social media can enhance and improve discovery, especially if there is a way to gauge a reader's recommendation trustworthiness.

Takeaways:

- Take word of mouth to a platform where more people can access
- Readers want a more granular search for content: genres, story lines, characters, publishers, etc.
- Not all readers subscribe to action/super hero – desire exposure to independent comics

Future Work

Our exploratory research indicates that comic readers seek out recommendations and rely on a network of fellow readers (that they trust) to steer them towards new content they will like. We hope to examine more specifically how comic readers reconcile bad recommendations and how they develop systems of trustworthy recommendations.

Appendix

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Observation Consent Form

Observation Informed Consent Form

Study administrator: _____

Participant/Participant Location: _____

This is an observation exercise to learn about the ways stores organize and promote comic books and comic related novelties. Our goal is to create an application where users can find more information about new and existing comic series, and comic store locations. Your participation will help us achieve this goal.

In this session, a design team member will be reviewing the store layout, and asking you some questions about customers and selling patterns. A member of the design team will take notes.

All information collected in this observation belongs to the design team, and will be used for internal academic purposes. We will videotape and/or audiotape the session. We may publish our results from this and other sessions in our reports, but all such reports will be confidential and will not include your name or your business name. The video will be destroyed at the end of class on June 7, 2013.

You may take breaks as needed and stop your participation in the study at any time.

Statement of Informed Consent

I have read the description of the observation and of my rights as a participant. I voluntarily agree to participate in the observation exercise.

Print Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Observation Protocol

1. Introduce user to the project

We are conducting an observation experiment. This observation exercise is to learn about the ways stores organize and promote comic books and comic related novelties. Our goal is to create an application where users can find more information about new and existing comic series, and comic store locations. Your participation will help us achieve this goal.

2. Have participant sign the Observation Informed Consent form

(Please refer to form on page 36.)

3. Preliminary questions regarding their demographics

1. What is your position at the shop?
2. How long have you worked for comic stores?
3. Would you be willing to give an age range?

4. Reminders to User before Observations

- Explain the benign-ness of your presence.

EXAMPLE: "I am here specifically to learn from you expertise. You are like a master, and I you apprentice. I may ask you questions related to an observation."

- Explain that you want them to act as they would if you weren't around.

5. Begin Observations

Things we, as observers, must remember:

- Don't have a discussion with the participant – simply clarify answers and ask brief, short questions as need be.
- Don't interrupt the natural flow of the process. Record questions for a later time.

Things to watch for:

1. The sequences in which actions are happening.
 - Watch how they interact with the customers
 - Watch how the customers search the store
 - Watch how goods are stocked in the store
 - Watch for busy-time activities
2. Methods of organization
 - How do they organize comics in their store?

- Do these organization patterns deviate?

3. What sorts of interactions do the workers have with the customers?

- Is there anyone other than the workers and customers who interact? How do they interact?
- What kind of information is shared between parties?

6. Final Questions

- Was there anything during the observation that could have gone differently?

Interview Consent Form

ADULT CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

CUSTOMER COMIC SEARCH

Principal Investigator: _____

Institution: DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois, USA

Department (School, College): School of Computing and Digital Media, Human-Computer Interaction

Faculty Advisor: Cynthia Putnam

Collaborators: Raven Moore, Rudy Loo, Elizabeth Keyes. Mace Allen

What is the purpose of this research?

We are asking you to be in a research study because we are trying to learn more about how customers conduct searches for comics and graphic novels.

This study is being conducted by graduate students at DePaul University as a requirement to obtain their Masters degree. This research is being supervised by their faculty advisor, Cynthia Putnam. There are other people on the research team assisting with the study.

We hope to include about 10 people in the research.

Why are you being asked to be in the research?

You are invited to participate in the interview research because you have an interest in comic books.

NOTE: You must be age 18 or older to be in this study. This study is not approved for the enrollment of people under the age of 18.

What is involved in being in the research study?

If you agree to be in this study, being in the research involves answering questions based on how you seek out graphic novels and comics.

How much time will this take?

This study will take about one hour of your time.

Are there any risks involved in participating in this study?

Being in this study does not involve any risks other than what you would encounter in daily life. You may feel uncomfortable or embarrassed about answering certain questions. You do not have to answer any question you do not want to.

Are there any benefits to participating in this study?

You will not personally benefit from being in this study. Our hope is to find an efficient, fast way for individuals to find the comics and/or graphic novels they're looking for, and to understand the process involved with that search.

Can you decide not to participate?

Your participation is voluntary, which means you can choose not to participate. There will be no negative consequences, penalties, or loss of benefits if you decide not to participate or change your mind later and withdraw from the research after you begin participating.

Who will see my study information and how will the confidentiality of the information collected for the research be protected?

The research records will be kept and stored securely. Your information will be combined with information from other people taking part in the study. When we write about the study or publish a paper to share the research

with other researchers, we will write about the combined information we have gathered. We will not include your name or any information that will directly identify you. We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information, or what that information is. However, some people might review or copy our records that may identify you in order to make sure we are following the required rules, laws, and regulations. For example, the DePaul University Institutional Review Board, and/or the Data and Safety Monitoring Board] may review your information. If they look at our records, they will keep your information confidential.

You should know that there are some circumstances in which we may have to show your information to other people. For example, the law may require us to show your information to a court or to tell authorities if you report information about a child being abused or neglected or if you pose a danger to yourself or someone else.

Who should be contacted for more information about the research?

Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have questions, suggestions, concerns, or complaints about the study or you want to get additional information or provide input about this research, you can contact the researcher, Mace Allen, at 773-350-6223, or mace@maceallen.com

This research has been reviewed and approved by the DePaul Institutional Review Board (IRB). If you have questions about your rights as a research subject you may contact Susan Loess-Perez, DePaul University's Director of Research Compliance, in the Office of Research Services at 312-362-7593 or by email at sloesspe@depaul.edu.

You may also contact DePaul's Office of Research Services if:

- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
- You cannot reach the research team.
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent from the Subject:

I have read the above information. I have had all my questions and concerns answered. By signing below, I indicate my consent to be in the research.

Signature: _____

Printed name: _____

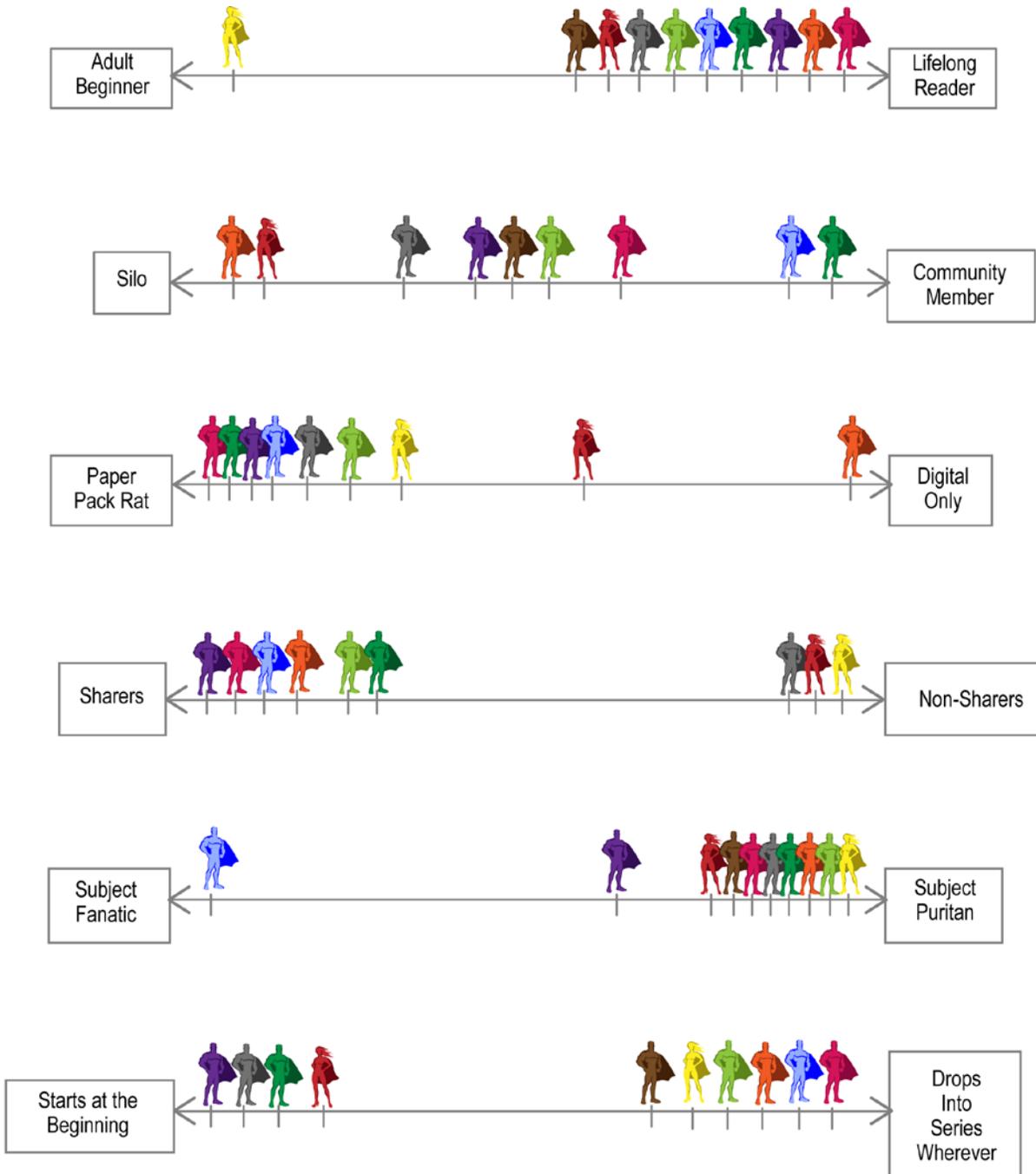
Date: _____

Interview Protocol

Questions asked during the interview:

1. How did you first learn about comics?
2. What draws you to comics?
3. Please name some of the comic titles you like to read.
4. What do you like about the titles you listed.
5. Describe the last time you found a new series. What made you decide to read it?
6. Have you ever been disappointed in a series that you've tried? If you have, please explain why you were disappointed..
7. Have you ever started a series even though it wasn't the first issue?
8. Do you share comics you enjoy with anyone? Why or why not?
9. Do you read/keep up with comic industry news?
10. Do you participate in comic or pop culture related communities?
11. How do you access these communities?
12. Do you visit comic conventions or events? Why or why not?
13. How did you purchase or get the last comic you read? Was that typical?
14. Why do you choose to get it that way?
15. Describe the last time you went to a comic store. Was this a typical visit?
16. Did you purchase anything? If so, what did you get? Was that typically what you get?
17. How do book/issue prices affect your buying habits?
18. Have you ever purchased a comic/graphic novel because of a movie, video game, or television series you viewed? If so, please tell me about that.
19. Our group is exploring a technology solution for comic fans like yourself. Do you have any ideas for features that you would like to see in this type of solution?

Persona Spectrums



Persona Spectrums Key

- Sara 
- Breck 
- Ben 
- James 
- Nathan 
- Monica 
- Adam 
- Dan 
- Channing 
- Hal 

Survey Questions

Comics Readers

General comic info

*** 1. Do you read comics?**

- Yes
- No

Comic Readers

*** 2. What form of comics do you read? (Check all that apply)**

- Paperback trades/print
- Webcomics
- Digital downloads

3. Choose the top 3 reasons that best describe why you prefer to read comics that way?

- Space
- Convenience
- Time
- Money
- Showing off collection
- Enjoy collecting
- Readability
- Ability to share

4. If you read webcomics, which best describes how you learn about updates? (Check all that apply)

- RSS Feeds
- Checking the site occasionally
- Creator Newsletter / Updates
- I do not read web comics

Reasons

Comics Readers

*5. Please give us the reasons you have for purchasing a new comic.

	Crucial	Important	Neutral	Not a big deal	Don't care at all
I like the artwork.	<input type="radio"/>				
I like the story premise.	<input type="radio"/>				
I like the writer.	<input type="radio"/>				
I like the artist.	<input type="radio"/>				
I like the publisher.	<input type="radio"/>				
It was a recommendation from a trustworthy source.	<input type="radio"/>				
It's part of an ongoing series I'm invested in.	<input type="radio"/>				
I saw the tv show / movie / game the comic is based on.	<input type="radio"/>				

*6. Of the choices below, which best describes your comic purchase habits?

- I buy comics for myself only.
- I buy comics mostly for myself, but sometimes for others.
- I buy comics for myself and others equally.
- I buy comics mostly for other people, but sometimes for myself.
- I buy comics for others only.
- I don't buy comics.

New Comics / Recommendations

7. Of the choices below, please choose the top 3 methods you use to learn about new comics?

- Word of mouth
- In-store browsing / Comic store staff
- Publisher websites
- Comic industry news sites
- Social Media

Comics Readers

8. Of the choices below, check the 3 sources you consider the most TRUSTWORTHY for comic recommendations.

- Word of mouth
- Online resources (message boards, forums)
- Publisher websites
- Comic store staff
- Social Media
- My own intuition

Purchase history

***9. About how many comics have you purchased in the past six months?**

- None
- 1 to 3
- 4 to 11
- 12 to 24
- 25 or above

Digital comics

10. Of those purchased, how many were digital?

- All
- Some
- None
- I did not purchase comics

Purchasing with discounts

11. How often do you use discounts to purchase comics? (For example, the store offers 50% off back issues, or they have a \$.25 bin.)

- All the time
- Sometimes
- Never

Comic related news and communities

Comics Readers

12. How do you learn about comic-related news?

- Attending comic events (conventions, meetups)
- Involved in comic communities (in person or online, message boards)
- Keep up with comic industry news (websites, panels)
- Promotional materials (Previews, flyers)
- I don't keep up with news

13. Which events / communities are you involved with?

- Local comic store events
- Comic conventions
- Free comic book day
- Comic podcasts / YouTube videos
- Comic book clubs
- I am not involved

Other (please specify)

14. Which reasons describe why you participate in comic events / communities? (Check all that apply)

- Connect with comic industry professionals
- Purchase / Acquire comics
- Learn about upcoming comic titles
- Connect with fellow readers in the comic community
- I don't participate

Purchase habits

15. How many times during the last month did you visit a comic store?

- None
- 1 to 4
- 5 to 10
- 11 or above

Purchase history

Comics Readers

16. During your visits in the last month to a comic store, did you buy a comic during each visit?

- Yes, I bought a comic during each visit.
- Sometimes I would purchase a comic during those visits.
- No, I never bought a comic during those visits.

17. Approximately how much money have you spent on comics in the last month?

- None
- Less than \$20
- between \$21 and \$50
- Between \$51 and \$100
- \$101 or above

Technology Issues

18. What kind of features to search for and / or learn about comics would you like in a website, program, or app?

***19. Do you own a tablet (iPad, Kindle Fire, Surface, Galaxy, etc.)?**

- Yes
- No

***20. Do you own a smartphone (iPhone, HTC, Samsung S4, etc.)?**

- Yes
- No

Demographics

Comics Readers

***21. Please tell us your age.**

- under 18
- 18 to 25
- 26 to 35
- 36 to 45
- 46 to 55
- 56 or above
- Prefer not to answer

***22. Please tell us your gender.**

- Female
- Male
- Prefer not to say

***23. Are you a parent?**

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to say

Thank you for participating

Thank you for participating in our survey!