

NOT JUST SUPERHERO STORIES: AN EXPLORATION OF COMIC BOOKS AS A
CULTURAL OBJECT WITH THE ABILITY TO TRANSCEND SPACE

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department

of Sociology

University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

By

Adriana Estrada

May 2013

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Adriana Estrada

APPROVED:

Tracy Xavia Karner, Ph.D.
Committee Chair

Shayne Lee, Ph.D.

Mat Johnson, M.F.A.
Department of English

John W. Roberts, Ph.D.
Dean, College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences
Department of English

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ABSTRACT

As of late comic books are again becoming a significant aspect of popular culture. With this rejuvenation of comic books in popular culture has also come a revived interest in them academically. There are many studies that focus on various aspects of comic books such as culture, content, historical value, use as learning aids, etc. (Beaty, 2004; Bitz, 2004; Belk, 1987; Lopes, 2006; Smoodin, 1992; Wright, 2001). Unfortunately there has been an lack of attention paid to the individuals involved with comic books, both as creators and receivers. I address this oversight by focusing on one of these groups, the receivers, or comic book fans. Utilizing Griswold's (2008) cultural diamond model as a framework I gain insight into the complex bonds that comic book readers form with this cultural object and the cultural world surrounding it. Using data collected from interviews and participant observation I employ Swidler's (1986; 2001) theory of culture in action to explore the ways that social actors utilize their cultural toolkit. Five strong themes were identified: fans as community, sense of comfort, proselytizing, insider identification and professionalization. Each of these themes exemplifies the ways in which comic book readers engage with comics and use them in their everyday lives.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
II. Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	3
a. Why Consider Culture?	3
b. The Cultural Diamond.....	4
c. Culture in Action.....	5
d. Why Study Comic Books?	7
e. Who Reads Comic Books?	9
f. Readers as Fans	10
g. The Comic Book Store.....	13
h. The Fan Perspective	15
III. Chapter 3: Methodology.....	19
a. Sampling Procedures.....	20
b. Sample Characteristics.....	20
c. Data Collection.....	21
d. Human Subjects Issues.....	22
e. Analysis Strategy.....	22
IV. Chapter 4: Findings.....	24
a. Fans as Community.....	25
b. Sense of Comfort.....	28
c. Proselytizing.....	33
d. Insider Identification.....	38

e. Professionalization.....	41
f. Discussion.....	46
V. Chapter 5: Conclusion.....	49
a. Study Limitations.....	50
b. Future Research.....	51
VI. Appendix A-Interview Questions.....	53
VII. Appendix B-Face Sheet.....	55
VIII. Appendix C-Recruitment Letter.....	56
IX. References.....	57

Chapter 1:

INTRODUCTION

“The people who grew up reading comics are now in charge of pop culture and they’re not going to suddenly stop reading comics. Get used to it: We’re here to stay.”

-Ed Brubaker (interview with Truitt for USA TODAY 2010)

One of the most recognizable characterizations of a comic book fan in popular culture is Comic Book Guy from the TV series, *The Simpsons*. Comic Book Guy is portrayed as an overweight slob, markedly obsessed with various components of nerd culture, crude, abrasive towards his customers, and often inept or awkward in social situations. Comic Book Guy has become the iconic stereotype afforded to comic book fans. Like all stereotypes, Comic Book Guy represents a narrow selection of fans who continue to support their medium, creating and engaging in a thriving subculture based around a unique and understudied cultural object.

The subculture surrounding comic books ascribes special meanings, beliefs and uses to this object, transforming it into a unique cultural object. Sociologists have long been interested in how cultural context influences individual interests and behavior (Bourdieu 1984; Csikszentmihay and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Dittmar 1992; Featherstone 1987). Thus, it is important to study both comic books and the individuals who read them. Using a sociological perspective allows for a better understanding of the ways in which people interact with cultural objects and how objects can influence the broader culture. Culture, and the objects and messages that it is comprised of, are not just surroundings that we take in, they are something we interact and engage with everyday. People are not passive consumers in a marketplace, but active participants in a thriving social world. By gaining a better understanding of the individual connection that people

create with objects, we have the opportunity to explore the ways in which objects are gaining influence in the broader culture.

In line with Griswold's (2008) cultural diamond model, when studying a cultural object is it important to consider not only the object itself, but also the creators, receivers and social world that surrounds the object. Unfortunately there has been an unmistakable lack of attention paid to the individuals involved with comic books, both as creators and receivers. I address this oversight by focusing on one of these groups, the receivers, or comic book fans. Following Griswold's model, I explore the connections that fans make with both the cultural object of comic books and the cultural world surrounding this object. In order to do this I employ Swidler's (1986; 2001) theory of culture in action and explore ways in which social actors utilize their cultural toolkit with regard to comics and comic culture. My intention with this study is to examine how comic book readers use cultural tools in their everyday lives. More specifically I am interested in how social actors draw from their cultural resources to aid in identity construction. My focus however is not on identity formation, but rather on the use of cultural objects in this process. By making this the focus I will be able to use the construction of self as a lens for interpreting the some of ways that social actors draw meaning from their culture. For this study I utilized ethnographic methods to gain a better understanding of comic book fans and the connections that they build with comic books and other readers of comics.

Chapter 2:

LITERATURE REVIEW

Why Consider Culture?

Culture presents individuals with a means of understanding and interpreting their social world. It provides an approach by which people are able to navigate their way through daily life. Culture aids in unifying communities by providing commonality and can act as a type of social cohesion. Referencing the work of McCracken (1986; 1990), Holland and Quinn (1987), and Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981), Rosenbaum (1999:321) explains,

we cannot experience our social environment other than through the beliefs, concepts and assumptions that make up culture. Culture thus structures the attention that individuals invest in their environment... It is a device through which one sees but which is seldom perceived itself and which, therefore remains essentially tacit and unquestioned.

Without some sort of common culture the social world would be a chaotic place in which individuals would not know how to act or how to interpret the actions of others. It is through the scope of culture that the social world becomes meaningful and comprehensible.

While culture provides general understandings of the social world to individuals, not everyone in a society understands or experiences culture in the same way. Culture is a mass of beliefs, concepts and assumptions about the social world, however these notions are not inherent, they must be learned and reinforced as cultural norms. A great deal of this is done through normal socialization within a culture, but increasingly in Western capitalist cultures objects are becoming an important part of this process. The significance of objects in the creation of cultural norms is something that needs to be

considered by scholars. Cultural objects become the visual representation of a culture's beliefs and a symbol of an individual's place within that belief system. Cultural objects are often commodities, but they also exist in many other forms. Griswold defines a cultural object as a "socially meaningful expression that is audible, visible or tangible or that can be articulated" (2008:12). By this definition it is not the object itself that is important, but rather the ascribed meaning and beliefs surrounding an object that make it culturally significant. Given that cultural objects have symbolic meanings outside of their utilitarian uses it is important to consider the reasons why and how individuals chose and place value on certain objects.

The Cultural Diamond

Wendy Griswold (2008) provides a useful framework for investigating cultural objects known as the cultural diamond. Griswold describes the cultural diamond as "an accounting device intended to encourage a fuller understanding of any cultural object's relationship to the social world" (2008:15-16). This is important because in order to gain a complete understanding of a cultural object one must also explore all the aspects that contribute to its existence as a cultural object. The cultural diamond is comprised of four components: cultural objects, creators, receivers and the social world. As cultural objects gain their significance from applied meanings all cultural objects are made by humans and therefore have a creator. All cultural objects must also have receivers who acknowledge and contribute to the ascribed meanings; otherwise they would merely be potential cultural objects. Cultural objects, creators and receivers all exist together in a social world that may or may not be based around the cultural object. It is not enough to merely consider the four points of the cultural diamond; one must also consider how all

the points are linked. Once we understand all the points and links between them we can gain a better sociological understanding of the cultural object. As stated by Griswold, once we “identify the characteristics of the object and how it is like some other objects in the culture and unlike others...we are on our way to understanding the culture as a whole” (2008:17).

I will argue that comic books are unique cultural objects in need of further investigation. In line with the cultural diamond, in order to gain a complete understanding of this cultural object one must understand not only the object itself, but also the people and social world surrounding it and the connections between all these agents. There has been some scholarly work on comic books and the culture that surrounds them, but there is a surprising lack of discussion about the people who give this cultural object meaning. One of my intentions with this study is to address this gap by contributing to the breadth of knowledge available about the receivers of this cultural object and how they make use of this object and culture in their daily lives.

Culture in Action

Early understandings of cultural analysis as outlined by Weber (1946) and Parsons (1937) assumed that culture influenced action by providing values and end goals that directed action. According to this view, the values learned through culture were the main causal element of social action. Consider for example the culture of poverty argument. According to the culture of poverty argument those raised in poverty do not learn the same values and aspirations as those from the working or middle-class. People from a poverty of culture are believed to have no motivation to live a different type of life because their culture has not instilled these values in them. The culture of poverty

argument may be outdated, but provides a perfect example of how values are seen as directing action in cultural analysis.

Swidler (1986) believes the values paradigm to be too one-dimensional and therefore provides an alternative method of analysis for the causal significance of culture. In order to reinvigorate the study of how culture effects social life, Swidler (1986) suggests a stronger focus on the ways culture is used by social actors. Swidler explains that action is not a solidarity act with one end goal in mind, but rather composed of larger assemblages she refers to as “strategies of action.” As people have various end goals each one action is not chosen to meet a singular given end. Thus, people construct chains of actions with various different links. It is through the organization of these links, through strategies of action, that culture influences action. Since real cultures often have conflicting symbols, rituals, stories and guides to action there is no constant direction for action. Therefore culture becomes a “tool kit” or repertoire that actors can use to construct lines of action. This being the case, social actors are not mere “‘cultural dupes’ (Garfinkel 1967; Wrong 1961), but rather active, sometimes skilled users of culture” (Swidler 1986:277). In her book, *Talk of Love*, Swidler (2001:71) explains why a deeper look at culture use is necessary,

If cultures provide diverse tools or repertoires of meaning that people use in varying ways, and if people differ in how seriously they take their culture and how richly they deploy it, to understand how (and when) culture shapes action, we need to analyze how people actually make use of culture- what they use it for.

In line with this theory I examine the ways in which comic book readers use their cultural resources as a tool in identity construction. Again I emphasize that while I am exploring how readers construct an identity or a certain kind of self what I am interested in is how

they use cultural tools to do so, not the motives of identity formation. As I have explained the reason and theoretical basis for this study I will spend the remainder of this literature review exploring the information that is available about comic book fans demonstrating that the fan's perspective is absent in the current literature.

Why Study Comic Books?

It can be argued that comic books are again becoming a significant aspect of popular culture. In 2011 Comic-Con International the world's largest comic convention held annually in San Diego, California again reached capacity with an attendance of nearly 130,000 people. In 2010 Disney purchased Marvel Comics, one of the leading and most iconic comic book publishers in the industry. In recent years there have been many movies featuring not only well-known comic book heroes, but also movies based on less-known comic book series. Comic book heroes can now be seen on t-shirts in trendy shops and on characters on TV. There is even a reality show that is based in a comic book store. None of these examples prove that comic books are gaining any actual popularity; they do however provide evidence that comic books are becoming more prevalent in mainstream popular culture. With this rejuvenation of comic books in popular culture has also come a revived interest in them academically.

Comic books are not a new topic of interest within academia. First introduced to America in the 1930s, comic books quickly gained popularity as a rising new medium. During the 1940s and 1950s comic books hit their peak selling over 10 million comic books a month and comprising 1/3 of all magazine sales (Duncan and Smith 2009). During this time there grew a rising concern that comic books may have harmful effects on the development of children, who were believed to be the main audience of comic

books. Naturally out of this concern emerged an academic interest in the potential effects of comics (Bender and Lourie 1941; Carr 1951; Brumbaugh 1939; Thorndike 1941; Witty 1941). The majority of research showed that in most cases critics exaggerated the effects of comics. In line with the findings of the research many academics adopted a position of tolerance or support for comic books. In an attempt to counteract criticism some comic book publishers hired educators and academics to form advisory boards. This strategy was unsuccessful however as critics viewed these boards as mere “paid apologist” (Nyberg 1998).

As with many topics, academic interest in comic books has had much fluctuation over the years. For a long while it seemed the only academic interest in comics was based around effects on the reader, mainly with regards to education. Now however, as comic books are becoming more pervasive in popular culture academic interest in the topic is again rising and even broadening.

Rather than just focusing on negative or positive effects of comic books on readers, studies relating to comics have come from an array of disciplines such as literature, communications, sociology, anthropology, gender studies, philosophy, education and even business (Adkinson 2008; Beaty 2004; Gray 2010; Peterson and Gerstein 2005; Singer 2002; Taylor 2007). These studies have explored topics such as cultural criminology and the development of the comics code, influences of comics on art and art on comics, business structure in the comic community, comics as a means of cultural resistance and content issues of race, gender, inequality, authority and body image. Even with all this interest there is still little information available about the people who engage with comic books. Some have questioned comic book fans on

reasons or benefits to reading, nevertheless there is still an absence of the fan's perspective present in the current literature.

Who Reads Comic Books?

According to existing literature on comic book fans it has been somewhat difficult to gain a true perception of the comic book fan demographic in North America (Brown 2001; Duncan and Smith 2009; Gabilliet 2010; Woo 2011). High competition among major publishers such as Marvel and DC has caused these companies to be hesitant about releasing sales statistics or any research about their consumers (Brown 2001). The nature of comic book fandom also makes estimation about the amount of consumers by sales difficult for several reasons: some fans buy several copies of an issue for collecting purposes, there is a large secondary market meaning fans often trade amongst other fans rather than purchasing themselves, some fans are purchasing issues while others are purchasing trade paperbacks (bound collections of issues), some fans are reading online versions of comics, and distribution practices of the industry cause stores to buy in bulk rather than buy what they sell (Brown 2001). Despite these challenges there is some demographic information available, all of which should be approached with caution and used mainly as a general guideline.

According to Brown, industry professionals and trade papers commonly claim that the American comic book audience is anywhere from 4 to 6 million at any given time (2001:61). What this number is based on is unfortunately not discussed. In 1999 SmartGirl.com and the American Library Association conducted a study on the habits of adolescent readers. During this study they found that 33% of adolescents aged 11-18 read comic books or graphic novels (Gabilliet 2010). Among that 33%, 42% were male

and 27% were female. Another study of adolescent reading patterns was conducted by the same agency in 2001 and found that only 2% of girls and 4% of boys admitted to reading comics (Gabilliet 2010). These numbers suggest that in just 3 years there seems to be a drop in adolescent readers. Unfortunately this is no indicator of how the total audience size may have been affected, as adult statistics are not included. What can be drawn from these studies is that readers tend to more frequently be male, at least among adolescent readers.

Gabilliet (2010) suggests that the most reliable information available on the comic book audience comes from data pertaining to the clientele of comic book stores. A study conducted by Comics Retailer in 1997 collected data through a questionnaire made available to store patrons. This study found the American comic book audience to be 1,250,000 people with around 20% of that audience being core consumers spending an average of at least twenty dollars a week on new comic books. This sample was composed of 94% men and 6% women with an average age of 26 (Comics Retailer 1998). All of these studies on the demographics of the comic book audience are now a bit outdated, but newer studies are difficult to come by. As the distribution practices of comic books have changed and graphic novels have gained popularity, measuring readers has become much more difficult. Previous studies have lead us to believe that comic book fans are mainly post-adolescent males, but there is a great possibility that this has changed in the last ten years.

Readers as Fans

Comic book readers that have been studied academically are almost always categorized as fans. According to Duncan and Smith, a fan is more than a mere reader

they are “someone who wants to take part in dialogue about the medium” (2009:173).

The concept of fandom often carries along with it the idea of mania or fanaticism (Duncan and Smith 2009). Jensen points out that, “fandom is seen as excessive, boarding on deranged behavior” (1992:9). This is especially the case when the object of ones fandom is mass-produced, inexpensive and popular among the lower or middle class (Duncan and Smith 2009; Jensen 1992). Brown explains, “To be a ‘fan’ in Western Culture is considered by some to be part of a dubious category of social misfits. And to be a comic book fan, one seems to run the risk of being stereotyped as an awkward, pimply faced geek” (2001:63). Being categorized as a fan of popular culture comes with a notion of abnormality, but being a comic book fan also ascribes one the label of awkward nerd. This being the case there must be some reason that people choose to be comic book fans despite the negative reputation it often comes with.

The most common explanation for comic book fandom that is presented is the social nature that surrounds comic book reading. As pointed out by Brown, “for many comic book fans reading is primarily a social act, not a solitary one. ... it is clear that fans can and do use the texts as a bridge to social contact” (2001:128). Jenkins describes fan reading as a different type of reading that entails “a distinctive mode of reception” (1992:209). Fans are required to hold extensive knowledge of texts, which often involves rereading and the ability to translate texts into other cultural and social activities. This may seem a bit excessive, but the benefits of being a fan can be great. Fandom can offer, “a community not defined in traditional terms of race, religion, gender, region, politics or profession, but rather a community of consumers defined through their common relationship with shared text” (Jenkins 1992:213). In a society where we are seeing a

breakdown of the traditional community, the ability to find a community based around leisure or consumerism becomes more and more important, especially since fans in general are often ostracized by society.

Another explanation for fandom that has been offered is the attainment of social capital through alternative types of cultural capital. As explained by Fiske (1992:30),

Fandom is typically associated with cultural forms that the dominant value system denigrated- pop music, romance novels, comics, Hollywood mass-appeal stars (sport, probably because of its appeal to masculinity, is an exception). It is thus associated with the cultural tastes of subordinated formations of the people, particularly with those disempowered by any combination of gender, age, class and race.

Fandom tends to be associated with those that are subordinated by the socioeconomic system and have a lower status in the general community. Fiske (1992) argues that these subordinated groups use fandom as a means for bolstering their self worth. As explained by Bourdieu (1984) there exists a cultural system which works similar to the capitalist economy. The cultural system ascribes value to certain “tastes.” Those with knowledge of these valued cultural objects or beliefs are able to gain cultural capital within the cultural system. The problem with this is that the cultural system echoes the economic system, valuing tastes that are associated with higher classes. Bourdieu (1984) argued that reinforcement of these tastes is learned through social institutions such as the school system, museums and private institutions that are often funded by the higher classes. Expanding on Bourdieu’s (1984) theory, Fiske (1992) claims that popular culture creates a shadow cultural economy that mimics the rules for gaining prestige within the general culture (Brown 2001). Within their subculture fans are able to gain cultural capital through collecting and acquisition of knowledge. Along with this cultural capital comes

social status and self-esteem within the subculture, compensating for the lack of status that many associated with fandom have in the general community.

The Comic Book Store

The comic book store is one of the places where comic book fans gather and form a subculture. As described by Pustz, “The comic book shop is a meeting place like the club house at a country club or a small-town barbershop. It is a place for commerce, but, more importantly, it is a place for culture” (1999:9). For fans the comic book store offers a place where they not only find their coveted comics, but also like-minded people with which they can discuss their passion freely. Using the work of Giddens (1984), Woo (2011) describes comic book stores as “locales.” A locale provides the setting for interaction and is constituted by the interaction that takes place within it (Giddens 1984). As “the experience of shopping for comics is itself understood as a social event,” (Woo 2001:128) the comic book store becomes a locale of social interaction for its patrons rather than merely a retail store.

The comic book store may be mainly a locale for comic book culture, but it can also act as a node with other groups and communities that hold interests similar or compatible with those of comic book fans such as science fiction, gaming and other facets of popular culture. For most stores the sale of comic books alone is not profitable enough to keep the business afloat. This causes most comic book stores to also sell other items such as toys, board games, t-shirts and other related merchandise (Woo 2011). Comic book stores also commonly sponsor events unrelated to comics, but popular in the “nerd-culture” scene. Flyers advertising events for comic book, science fiction, media, and other community events can often be found within the stores (Woo 2011). The

comic book store therefore aims to be both a thriving locale of a subculture and also a public space open to those looking to use the store as merely a place of commerce.

Woo (2011) explains that this dichotomy is achieved by the utilization of internal regionalization (Giddens 1984). Stores are designed in such a way that reinforces in-group/out-group oppositions, but still allows both groups to feel comfortable in the space. Objects that appeal to the mainstream public are often located near the front of the store while more exclusive or subcultural products tend to be towards the back of the store (Woo 2011). Regionalization within the store takes place not only in space, but also in time. Wednesday is known in the comic book community as the day when new comics go on sale so it is on this day the most hardcore enthusiasts commonly visit the store. Weekends and other days are when outsiders and those curious about the store visit and so on most occasions visitors are not likely to be exposed to full comic book culture (Woo 2011). This use of regionalization allows for subcultural practices to continue in a special environment that is both open to the public and still somewhat segregated from it.

Woo (2011) also references Goffman's concept of regions (1959) to argue that the comic book store acts as both a sanctuary and an arena. In America comic book reading is often viewed as a childish activity and is often scrutinized by mainstream society (Brown 2001; Pustz 1999; Wright 2001). The comic book store offers a supportive environment "where fans can truly be themselves" (Pustz 1999:6). In this way the comic book store can be viewed as a sanctuary or back region (Goffman 1959 in Woo 2011). In the comic book store fans can openly discuss comics free of the ridicule or judgment that they may encounter in the outside world.

The store is a sanctuary for this subculture from outsiders, but it also provides an arena or front region in which individuals can showcase their knowledge. As discussed earlier the attainment of social capital by means of cultural capital is often associated with fandom. In order to gain social capital one must not only possess knowledge and/or an extensive collection of comics, they must also display and share such things. The comic book store provides an arena where comic book fans can gain social capital within their subculture by exhibiting their cultural capital to an audience who will understand and appreciate it. Woo (2011) observes this happening in two ways. The first is by associating oneself with store staff who typically hold a large amount of social capital within the store. The second way is to engage in conversation with staff and patrons exhibiting knowledge and good taste. Regardless of which method is used both utilize the store as a place of gaining and displaying social capital.

The Fan Perspective

As of yet this literature review has covered views of comic book culture and fandom as interpreted and viewed by others. While some of the research that has been discussed has basis in fan interviews none of it really provides a fan's perspective of comic book culture. While it is scarce there is some research that actually does provide the viewpoint of the fan.

There is currently an initiative by many educators and those who study comics to increase the use of comics for educational purposes. As part of this initiative there have been studies conducted that ask comic book readers what they get out of reading. A study conducted by Norton (2003) interviewed thirty-four grade school age readers of Archie comics in order to determine the educational benefits that children may be getting

from reading comics. Using quotation from the interviews Norton (2003) describes how the children view Archie comics and their uses. What she found was that children enjoyed reading Archie comics because it was something they could read for fun with no expectations of how to interpret or read the text. Children also liked the visual component of Archie as it helped them to construct meaning when they did not fully comprehend the text. Some children also expressed that comics could be used as a social bonding agent with other children they would not otherwise have anything in common with. While this article does provide a fan perspective it is very limited in that it only looks at Archie comic book fans and it mainly discusses content only associated with the benefits of reading in an educational frame.

Another study looking to endorse comics for educational purposes investigates how adults use the reading of comic books in their lives. Botzakis (2009) interviewed twelve adult comic book readers, but his write up of the study only focuses on four. Each of the four main participants expressed very different uses of comics in their lives. Aaron an undergraduate aspiring to continue his education in anthropology stated reading for research purposes, using comics and other means of mass media to analyze and study culture. Kyle liked to read comics because the storylines brought him joy and entertainment. He also enjoyed being able to own the stories he enjoyed so he could read them over and over. Peter rediscovered comics during a time when his life was in complete turmoil. The consistency and regularity of characters from his childhood reading offered him a dependable friendship when none was available in the real world. He used comics as a coping mechanism to help him escape when his life was in chaos. Roger expressed using comics to find existential answers and derive meaning about life.

This article provides an interesting look at fans and a starting point for more exploration, however is very limited because of the small sample size and gender limitations. The sample used in this study coensides with outdated assumptions that adult readers are exclusively male. It also ignores how women may use comics for different reasons then men.

In his book, *Black Superheros, Milestone Comics and Their Fans* (2001), Brown offers a comparatively extensive fan perspective with an entire chapter discussing in-depth the content of his interviews with ten of his many informants. The focus of this book is around Milestone Comics a company that produces comics with African Americans as main characters. This being the case most of the interviews he discusses in the book are with adolescent boys who are fans of Milestone. Some of the reasons for reading provided in interviews were that comics provide: role-models and values to aspire to, goals for the future, friendship, both with other readers and with characters, connection to African American culture, and models of masculinity. This analysis of the data is reflective of a Weberian/Parsonian understanding of culture as value driven. Almost all the reasons here for reading comics relate exclusively to young readers that are in the process of forming and exploring their own personal identity. The fan perspective that is being offered here is limited to a very particular demographic.

This review of the literature has shown that existing work on this unique subculture lacks generalizable information available about the people who read comic books. Literature on this topic from the last ten years has focused mainly on comic books as cultural objects or the social world that surround them, but very few have looked at the people who give this cultural object meaning and how that meaning is constructed. My

study focuses on gaining information about the receivers of this cultural object-- comic book fans. In order to do this I explore the question: How do comic book readers use cultural tools and locales in their everyday lives?

Chapter 3:

METHODOLOGY

This was a qualitative study employing ethnographic methods in a comic book store “Metropolis”¹ located in a large urban city. Consent of the storeowner was obtained and employees were informed of the study. As discussed earlier the comic book store is a hub of this subculture (Pustz 1999; Woo 2011). The comic book store not only provides comic books and related merchandise, but also a unique environment that is conducive to the developing culture that surrounds comic books (Pustz 1999; Woo 2010).

Metropolis first opened its doors in early 1990. The success of Metropolis over the years has allowed “Reed,” the storeowner, to open three other stores in various parts of the same city. Reed states confidently that once people make it to his store they usually stick around. Metropolis’ emphasis on customer service makes customers feel welcome and important. This focus on customer service is not common in other comic book stores. Originally Metropolis sold comic books and baseball cards. Soon after opening the owner decided to stop the sale of baseball cards feeling that the small profit gained was not worth the hassle. As an effect of the comic book boom of the early 1990s much more comic related merchandise began to be produced. Now, as well as comic books, the store offers a variety of comic book related merchandise such as t-shirts, posters, action figures, statues, stickers, glassware, etc. Originally the main selling product in the store was comic books, but this is changing. As of now about 30% of sales are new monthly comics, 15-20% are trade paperback comics (bound books of comics), 5-10% vintage

¹ All subjects have been given fictitious names to ensure confidentiality

comics, and the rest is comic related merchandise. The store also offers an in-store subscription service for monthly comics with around 400 to 500 subscribers.

Sampling Procedures

The population for this study is comprised of employees and frequent visitors of Metropolis who are over the age of 18. I sampled from this population using a combination of convenience and snowball sampling. For the past two years I have been gaining entry by frequently visiting the store, attending special events and becoming a member of the store's reader's club. Subjects were recruited from patrons I have met, those they introduce me to and those I met in the store. I also placed a recruitment letter (Appendix C) near the store's cash register in an attempt to attract additional patrons.

I was able to conduct 18 formal interviews and approximately 27 hours of participant observation. Based on the amount of subscriptions it is estimated that the store has 400 (+/-) regular customers. Of subscribers not all participate in the cultural world that is hosted within the store. Using this estimate 20 subjects would be 5% of the regular clientele. It is impossible to know the true size of the regular clientele. I am confident that this is a conservative number as there are most likely much less than 400 consistent regulars of the store. Given the limitations of this study and the information that is currently available I felt that 18 interviews were enough to offer some insight about this understudied social group.

Sample Characteristics

The interviewee sample for this study was comprised of 18 subjects. The mean age of respondents was 32.2 years and ranged from 20 to 56 years. Only two races were represented with 27.8% (N=5) reporting themselves as being from Hispanic decent and

the remaining 72.2% (N=13) reporting their race as White. During field observation people of diverse races were viewed in the setting however most visitors to the site did appear to be either White or Hispanic. The majority (83.3%, N=15) of respondents for interviews were male and 16.7% (N=3) were female. This gender division seems to also be reflective of what was observed in the field. There was a detectable amount of women who visited the store and two female clerks on staff, yet most patrons in the store were either male or accompanied by a male. One third of respondents (N=6) were married with the remaining two thirds (N=12) reporting as single. Nearly all respondents had attended some form of higher education with 38.9% (N=7) having completed some graduate work, 22.2% (N=4) completing a Bachelors degree, 27.8% (N=5) completing some college work and 11.1% (N=2) having completed high school.

Data Collection

Fieldwork will took place over the course of two months. During that time I conducted formal interviews with patrons of the comic book store, engaged in participant observation and participated in activities based around the store. These activities included comic book readers club meetings, game nights, author signings and other events sponsored by the store.

Qualitative interviews (Warren and Karner 2010) were the main source of data collection. Interviews lasted between 20 and 60 minutes depending on the depth of answers provided and available time of interviewees. All interviewees provided demographic and background information on an information sheet (Appendix B). Information sheets contain no identifying information and were cataloged by subject number only. All interviews were audio recorded for accuracy and then transcribed for

in-depth analysis. During transcription any names mentioned during the interview were changed in order to ensure confidentiality.

Interviews followed a semi-structured format. The ten broad questions listed in Appendix A were used to guide conversational topics and the flow of the interview. Additional probes were also used when appropriate to encourage the respondent to provide greater detail on the topic at hand.

Human Subjects Issues

During the course of this study several steps were taken to ensure that the rights of subjects were protected. I ensure confidentiality of all subjects by using aliases and keep any personal identifiers separate from all data. All interviewees signed an informed consent form signifying they understand their rights as a participant. To avoid any possible participant discomfort the consent form stressed that participation was voluntary and that subjects could withdrawal without consequence at any time. Also I made sure respondents understood they did not have to answer any questions they did not wish to answer.

Analysis Strategy

Data was analyzed using established coding procedures and techniques as outlined by Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (1995) in *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. This analysis strategy of processing fieldnotes was developed from methods used in the grounded theory approach presented by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Several stages to coding that were utilized. I began with *open coding*, reading through the data set with the intention of identifying themes, patterns and variations in the fieldnotes and transcripts.

During this step I used the following questions provided by Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (1995:146) as a beginning frame for open coding:

- What are people doing? What are they trying to accomplish?
- How, exactly do they do this? What specific means and/or strategies do they use?
- How do members talk about, characterize, and understand what is going on?
- What assumptions are they making?
- What do I see going on here? What did I learn from these notes?
- Why did I include them?

Emerson, Fretz and Shaw explain that these questions focus the analysis on processes instead of causes and motives. This is imperative as I was interested in processes of crafting an identity and uses of culture. While there is a broad focus to this study, the initial coding stage ignored that focus so as not to miss any other categories or themes that may present themselves in the data. After open coding a significant amount of the data I selected the 5 core themes to focus on. I then coded the remainder of the data and recoded previously coded data using *focused coding*. During focused coding I coded for data that was relevant to the core themes I decided to pursue.

Chapter 4:

FINDINGS

The data provided that there are a number of ways in which social actors can build a connection with a cultural object or the cultural world surrounding that object. In line with Swidler's (1986) conceptualization of culture as a toolkit I explore some of the ways that social actors utilize their cultural toolkit by focusing on a unique cultural object-- comic books. A classic Swidler analysis would have considered the ways in which readers draw from existing cultural narratives as the cultural toolkit to create value for their fandom. Take for example the professionalization of comics. The social actor uses comics in their work, which helps them to be a good worker. In explanation the social actor then uses the ideology of being a good worker to give value to their fandom. The approach I take still follows that social actors use culture as a toolkit to create strategies of action, but in a different way than Swidler suggests. What I argue is that rather than drawing from existing social narratives, comic book readers use comic books and their interest in them to create a cultural repertoire that they draw from to create strategies of action. In this interpretation social actors draw from their personal cultural toolkit to create narratives that fit their personal needs. Looking again at the professionalization of comics we see that social actors use comics themselves as a tool for building a worldview that aligns with the kind of self they are constructing. (This is explained further in the professionalization section.) My intent is not to argue against Swidler's method, but rather to reveal the versatility of her theory. During analysis five strong themes were identified: fans as community, sense of comfort, proselytizing, insider identification and professionalization. In the investigation of these themes I

explore how this group uses comics and their interest in them as a cultural resource for navigating through the social world.

Fans as Community

The obvious reason for one to go to the comic book store is to purchase comic books and other related paraphernalia. For many patrons there seemed to be multiple motivations for making a visit to the store. The ability to have a social encounter with others that have similar interests was a clear motivator that was evident during both observation and interviews. Many regulars of the store are on a first name basis with clerks who work there and often engage in conversations as lengthy as the time of the employees will allow. Even when employees were short for time, regulars would find talk time while they or other patrons were being helped at the register. Conversations often begin with general greetings and questions referencing a previous conversation such as “How did your presentation go last week?” or “Did your daughter enjoy her visit?” and things of that nature. While many conversations started off concerning things of a personal nature this portion of the conversation was generally very limited. After general greetings and pleasantries were exchanged almost every conversation became focused on some aspect of popular culture. Common topics included movies, television, video games, table top games, and of course comics.

Many interview respondents also commented on this trend mentioning that while at the store they would often chat with employees. When asked how much time he spends in the store James replied:

I used to spend *a lot* of time because I got really cool with two of the employees, Jackson and Samantha, but then Samantha left to another location and Jackson left for a bit, but now he’s back. And we’d just sit there and chat for a very long time and just have conversations because we

have a lot of similar interests, wither it's anime or comics or movies. I mean its weird to say that, I feel like I have that High Fidelity (a movie set in and around a record store) thing going on ya know, but with comics, its pretty cool.

James explained that between work and school his schedule does not allow for him to frequent the store as often as he would like. This quote also makes it seem as though he no longer needs as much time in the store because *his* employees of choice are not around as much. James' sense of community was focused on a few choice employees rather than the group as a whole. While James may not currently visit the store as often as he used to, he still portrays a strong social attraction to the store.

The social attraction of the store is also communicated by the frequency of a number of the patrons. New comics come out once a week on Wednesdays, however, several respondents admitted to visiting the store more than once a week. When asked how often he visits the store Tim describes his reasons for making multiple visits each week.

The guys at Metropolis will tell you I'm there at least twice a week. I'm there Wednesday morning to pick up the new comics and then I usually go Fridays after work just to chat with the guys there and talk about comics and stories and everything, which can get pretty entertaining sometimes. I go over there and they all know me by name which is great, I know them by name...it's fun.

For Tim his Friday visits are almost entirely socially driven. On Wednesday it's a quick in and out purely for buying comics, but on Fridays he is there often for an hour or longer talking to clerks and occasionally other regulars that he may know. Like Tim many patrons of the store do not view it purely as a place of commerce where one goes solely

to buy products. Unlike other retail stores the comic book store is also viewed as a social environment with a ready supply of enthusiasts with similar interests.

In the review of the literature it was established that the comic book store often operates as a “locale” for the social interaction that takes place within this subculture. Woo (2011) suggests that this locale acts as sanctuary from outsiders and as an arena to showcase knowledge. The findings presented here reinforce these ideas to a degree, but also present another less complex explanation. The comic book store is a locale that offers a ready-made community with a stockpile of people who hold common interests. Modern American society is becoming increasingly individualistic causing a general decline in the strength of traditional communities that one is born into such as ethnicity, religion, class, ect. Some argue that this is a detriment to society causing a general break down of the concept of community (Putnam 2001). Another argument that has gained much popularity is that this phenomenon has created a situation where individuals are more free to pick and choose which communities they want to be a part of. Locales such as the comic book store make the search for a desired community much easier.

In the examples above comic book readers draw from their cultural toolkit and use their interest in comics as a means for connecting with a like-minded community. The building of this connection can be viewed as one of the links between receivers and the social world in the cultural diamond model. During routine visits to the store to buy comics both James and Tim were able to establish personal connections with store employees, exemplified through the use of the phrases, “got really cool with,” and “they all know me by name, I know them by name.” James explains that as the connections with those employees with which he had “a lot of similar interests” grew so did his time

at the store. When his employees left his time at the store diminished, reinforcing the idea that he had learned to use the store as a site for connecting with like-minded people. Tim shows his use of the store as a connection site by distinguishing between visits that are for buying comics and visits that are for socializing. Describing his engagements during social visits as “entertaining” and “fun” Tim showcases that this is a group that he enjoys being a part of. Dick, a fairly new comic book fan, describes a similar connection to the community at the store, “It’s fun to find a bunch of people that have similar interests. It seems like people that are into comics generally like music and like films and stuff like that too. It’s a nice subset of people and it’s something I’m glad I’m a part of now.”

Comic book readers are social actors in search of a community that fits their needs and aligns with their sense of self. By accessing their cultural toolkit, in this case their interest in comics, the search for a desired community becomes much easier. Comic book fans were able use their fandom to locate and connect with a group that not only shared their interest in comics, but also was generally like-minded. Being able to connect with a group that is like-minded and shares a similar worldview enables the individual to fortify their personal worldview and sense of self through the support of others.

Sense of Comfort

For several respondents the mere act of being in the store was enough to entice them to visit. These respondents were among those who often visit the store more than once a week. When asked what they do at the store these respondents often mention conversing with others, but also describe another motivation for visiting the store, the feeling of happiness that comes from being in the store.

Allison a 36-year-old graduate student read comics a child but lost interest in them during high school. She explains that sometime in her late twenties she wandered into the comic book store out of curiosity and was able to reignite her interest in comics. At that point in her life Allison had become tired of the redundancy of life. Her job was boring and most of her leisure time with friends was spent in bars or clubs which were beginning to lose their appeal. In her response to how she got back into reading comics Allison describes how the store makes her feel:

R: ...I realized I feel a little bit better when I hang out at the comic book store. I realized that no matter how bad of a day that I am having, no matter how depressed, or sad, or angry I might be, I go to the comic book store and I feel so much better. It's a little bit of an escape. I spend \$25 bucks in one day, but I figured ok it is better to spend \$25 in one day than to spend \$2500 in therapy, or running up a bar tab, or going to a liquor store.

I: What do you do at the comic book store that makes you feel better?

R: Just trying to discover new stories, trying to get whatever the current issue is of whatever I've been reading...I kind of get the thrill of discovering, it's like looking for treasure in a way. You can discover a new series or new story.

Comic books and the comic book store provided Allison with a unique outlet that she could be excited about. It is a hobby that provides countless opportunities for the discovery of something new to help break up the monotony of a habitual lifestyle.

Mark is a regular that goes to the store at least once a week to purchase books and then visits the store once or twice more during the week just to hang out. Like Allison, Mark took a break from reading comics for about ten years. While struggling with depression, a therapist suggested that Mark do something to escape his troubles and he went through and reread his old comics. He found the activity of reading and cataloging his comics to be very comforting and has since become an avid fan once again. When asked about how often he visits the store and what he does there Mark responded:

I generally go a lot. I'm there at least once a week. I will be there on Wednesdays when the new issues come out. Then I will typically stop back in just because the comic shop makes me happy. Not so much the buying things truthfully...I really enjoy walking through the shop and looking at numerous toys and t-shirts and posters and stuff.

For patrons like Mark visiting the store is about more than just buying comic books and engaging with interesting people. There is a connection to the comics and the store itself. For these patrons being able to walk into a physical environment that is built entirely of comics is in and of itself enough to stimulate feelings of happiness.

Comics are often discussed as being a tool to escape from the world through the act of reading and engaging in an imaginary world (Botzakis 2009; Brown 2001; Wright 2001). Here we see how comics can also be used indirectly for escape in an entirely different facet. While Allison was in the store it was not necessarily the comic book or story itself that was important at the moment, it was the act of searching and the “thrill of discovery.” Going to the comic book store allowed Allison to momentarily escape her day-to-day life and focus on something that provided thrills, surprises and rewards. Mark also used the comic book store as an escape from the world. Visiting the store allowed Mark to literally step into a world that is wondrous and engaging. Even though he has been there many times Mark describes how he is still enchanted by the items in the store. Here comic books offer an escape, but not through the venture into a story or direct use of the medium itself. The escape that is offered by the experience of visiting the store is one that brings peace and comfort. At first this appears to be a link between the receivers and the social world because fans are making a visit to the store. Upon further exploration however it becomes evident that this is a link between receivers and the cultural object since receivers use their connection to the cultural object as a means of gaining control.

By seeking this escape both Allison and Mark are engaging in active cultural work by using their culture as something that has the ability to change their mood. In visiting the store and engaging with comics these social actors are using their cultural toolkit to change their mood to one that better aligns with the kind of self they wish to construct. Allison and Mark both confront their personal problems by introducing a mood changing stimulant that changes their focus from the problem at hand to something that brings them joy and induces feelings of comfort. Engaging with comics in the store setting provides the fan with the capacity to assert their ideal self when faced with an emotional state that is counter to the kind of self they wish to construct.

Escape was not the only way that respondents found comfort from visiting the store. Blake is an established comic book artist that does freelance work for various companies, but is in the process of signing a contract to draw for DC. As a connected member of the industry Blake is able to get all of his comics and related merchandise for free, often before they are released. Because of this Blake has no commercial reason to visit the comic book store, but he still enjoys going to the store. Blake admits to being familiar with the staff at the store, but social interaction is not his main motivation for visiting as he has plenty of people in his life to talk to about comics. Below Blake explains the reason he still makes time to visit the store.

I love going to comic shops because of the people I see. There's nothing like seeing a kid pick up a book and open it and their face lights up... It's because of moments like that when kids react like that...it makes it all worthwhile and that's why I go to see. To make sure we still have an audience. I don't tell anybody, "Hey I want appraisal." I don't tell anybody. When I go to the shop I don't tell anybody I draw comics. I don't. I like the anonymity of being an artist and seeing this industry develop, the industry that I help create. I love being able to be so private that I can sit right next to someone reading my title and they'll never know it. It's great, it's the reason why I go to comic shops. They make me feel

good. I love seeing everything on the selves. I love watching the industry thrive... it's amazing to watch something that I loved as a kid and became it as an adult and still love it as an adult, to watch it just blossoming into something that's gonna take over the world.

Like Mark and Allison visiting the store makes Blake “feel good,” but for a different reason. Blake visits the store as a means of affirmation for the kind of self he is constructing. For Blake it is not his own personal engagement with comics that give him feelings of comfort, it is the ability to watch others enjoy the medium that is key. Unlike with Mark and Allison the link in the cultural diamond that is exemplified here is between the receiver and the social world because it is the status of the industry that influences Blake rather than his engagement with it.

Going to the store allows Blake to see the status of the industry that he loves and also helps to create. When he witnesses others getting joy out of engaging with the medium it signals to him that what he does is “worthwhile” and he gains affirmation of the kind of self that he is constructing. This reference is made to his work, the creation of comics, being worthwhile, but it could be argued that he is also attaining affirmation of his personal interest in comics. Blake notes that he takes joy in seeing the industry that he loves thrive and blossom into something that is going to take over the world. Seeing the status of the industry as thriving and positive Blake is given the capacity to view his own fandom with positivity. This may also be the case for Mark and other fans who gain comfort from merely being in the store. While some of that comfort is provided through escape from the world it is possible that some of that comfort also comes from being able to see that the culture that these people choose to adhere to is thriving and has a positive effect on other people. Being able to view their fandom in a positive light allows fans to

feel open to utilizing this part of their cultural repertoire during the construction of a kind of self.

Proselytizing

Often times it was observed that couples or small groups of people would come into the store. In many of these groups all patrons were familiar with the store, maybe stopping in while out doing other things or meeting at the store to enjoy a joint shopping experience, discuss comics and hang around the shop. On several occasions it was observed that in a group of people only one person was familiar with the store. For some these group visits to the store appeared to have the intention of proselytizing outsiders.

For example one afternoon a group of three people came into the store together. The group was comprised of a white male with red hair in his late twenties/early thirties walking with a cane, an older white woman with long grey hair and a teenaged boy of darker completion. The group did not have similar features and did not appear to be related. When they first entered the store the man on the cane engaged in an in-depth conversation with one of the clerks. They discussed his surgery and comics that they were both reading. The other two wandered around the store looking at the walls adorned with books, shelves of statues, and racks of t-shirts. They didn't really touch anything and appeared to be unfamiliar with the store. After a short while the man on the cane joined the other two and walked them around the store bringing to attention points of interest such as the back-issues, the silver-age comics on the wall and the statue case. He then headed back to the register to continue his conversation with the clerk. The other two continued to explore the store only now they were engaging with the merchandise. The older woman even asked another clerk about a comic she read as a child and was

amazed when he was able to produce several issues from the back-issue case. Later, the two visitors joined in the conversation between the clerk and the man with the cane. At this point they all started discussing anime (Japanese cartoons) and it became apparent that the visitors had other interests that are often common among comic book readers. Before they left the man with the cane decided to buy a new issue, but did not have any money and had to borrow some from the older woman. The fact that he had to borrow money to pay for the comic indicates that he probably did not intend on making a purchase while at the store. It is possible that he came to the store for a purely social visit, but then why bring the other two along and why leave them be for so long? The fact that he took the time to tour the other two around the store indicates that he felt they may be interested in what the store had to offer.

This touring of the store was observed in groups on several occasions. In some cases the “guide” would appear to have the intention of introducing others to the medium as something they may enjoy, using phrases like “you may like this” or “this is a good story, you should read it.” In other cases the tour seems to focus on showcasing the store as a place that the guide enjoys and wants to showcase to the others. For this type of tour the guide uses phrases such as “so this is where I get my comics.” While there may be a different emphasis, both tours seem to have the intention of introducing an outsider to a world that is important to guide, a world that the guide would like the outsider to either become a part of or at least feel comfortable with.

Tours are not the only way that proselytizing occurs. Many respondents declared that they often lend out comics to others who are not readers. Some describe it as a very natural occurrence, where they lend comics to their friends because they feel it is

something the other person will really enjoy. Here Javier, a fairly new comic book fan, talks about sharing with friends:

I: Do you loan a lot?

R: Yes, I loan a lot to my friends who don't really read comics but are really getting into it.

I: So you getting into comics has introduced your friends into comics and now they're starting to...?

R: It's introduced a lot of my friends to comics and it's kinda made me the comic book guy in the group.

Here because Javier was so enthusiastic about comics his friends also gained an interest. Javier explained that one of the things he enjoys most about his collection is being able to lend them out to friends. He prefers to buy trade paperbacks rather than monthly issues because they are easier to lend out. Also he is not concerned with the preservation of his books, just that they are in good enough condition to read. Few respondents were as passionate about sharing books as Javier, but many did state that they would lend books to friends who they felt would be receptive to the medium.

Close friends are not the only outsiders who are offered books to read. Several respondents talked about sharing books with outsiders who they felt had misguided conceptions of what comic books are or whom they are written for. James works at a bank and often engages with coworkers about his outside hobbies, one of them being comic books. He states that often others will overhear these conversations about comic books and become engaged in the conversation often leading to a discussion of the maturity of comics.

Obviously the first thing they say is they feel like comics are for like kids or geeks. I can't really argue the geek thing cause I guess I fall into the category (he chuckles), but the kids one I can actually have a conversation

about and I would then try to introduce them to one (a comic book), “alright then check this out” ya know try and change their mind. Even if they don’t become fans of it just expose them to the fact that comics aren’t exactly just for kids.

This way of exposing outsiders to what comics are today was something many respondents commented on. In most of these cases respondents did not hold expectations of creating a new fan, they were more interested in merely exposing outsiders to something new so they would gain a better understanding of what comics are and what they have to offer. Here Andrew, an avid fan open to reading all genres, explains this a bit:

Comics are awesome, they are overlooked, they are, I think, every bit as valid and legitimate as other forms of literature, but they’re not given their due and their credit. They have affected my life in positive ways in that they completely enriched my imagination and given me countless hours of entertainment... I think people are missing out on a great form of entertainment that lies somewhere between a book and a movie. You can read it, but it’s also very visual.

For many of these older readers comic books have changed drastically since they were children. Respondents expressed feeling that the broad range of topics and genres, rising complexity of themes and storylines, and changes in distribution and printing practices had changed the face of comics entirely. By sharing comics with those who have either never read them or not read them since they were a child, fans hope to proselytize outsiders to a more updated representation of what comics are today.

In the process of proselytization insiders draw from their cultural toolkit as a means of helping others to accept or tolerate the kind of self that the insider is constructing. The link in the cultural diamond being explored here is the link between receivers and the social world. The term outsiders may seem to imply that these are

people that exist outside of the cultural diamond. While outsiders are not a part of the culture themselves they still comprise a facet of the social world that surrounds the cultural object. In conversion comics become a device for bonding with other individuals or deepening existing relationships. By converting others, fans confirm that others accept the portion of their self that is constructed using their fandom to the degree that they are willing to acclimate to fandom as well. This also fortifies the self being constructed by adding the support and understanding of those who are already close to the fan.

When insiders feel that outsiders have misguided conceptions of what comics and comic culture are they use comics as a tool of enlightenment to procure a better understanding of both the culture and themselves as members of that culture. Here when insiders feel that the self they are constructing is being rejected due to ignorance or misunderstanding they use comics as a way of gaining tolerance from outsiders. Andrew explained that he felt comics were “overlooked” as a legitimate art form and “not given their due and credit.” James stated that outsiders frequently express the feeling that comics are for kids or geeks. For insiders these are indicators that their fandom and a portion of the self they are constructing is automatically being dismissed because it is misunderstood. Rather than seeing this as counter to the kind of self they are constructing insiders use their cultural toolkit to enlighten outsiders and try to persuade them to change their view. Insiders introduce comics to outsiders as a meaning changing stimulant in order to try and gain control over a situation that opposes the type of self they are trying to construct.

Insider Identification

Outside of the comic book store the identification of insiders can be quite a taxing venture. As comics have such a large array of genres they have the ability to attract a very diverse audience. Nearly anyone can be a reader of comics, but since reading is an act that is commonly done in solitude the identification of those who are actually comic book readers becomes a challenge. Here we again explore a link between receivers and the social world.

During observation it appeared that clothing would be a strong indicator of fandom as the store walls were covered with a wide variety of t-shirts and many patrons were viewed wearing them. When asked how he knows that someone else is a fan Steve points out how shirts can be misleading.

You wouldn't really know somebody else is a fan unless you talk with them and see what their conversation is or maybe if they wear certain merch or if they wear certain shirts or if they wear certain... I don't know, I don't want to say symbols, but obviously if somebody is wearing a red lantern, you know exactly that's an indicator that he reads Green Lantern. Now somebody who necessarily wears Batman or Superman they may be a fan or they might not be a fan. Superman is more along mainstream culture and society. Superman is more mainstream American culture than it would be certain comic culture so...

Many respondents admitted to owning and wearing comic book related t-shirts on a regular basis. When asked if a t-shirt had ever sparked a significant comic related conversation with a stranger the response was nearly unanimously no. Only one respondent could recall being approached by a stranger with the intention of engaging in a serious conversation based around the obscure character that was on his t-shirt. Aside from general comments in passing respondents stated that they were never approached or never felt inclined to approach others based on a t-shirt. Like Steve many respondents

explained this was because the marketplace was now flooded with comic book apparel due to the popularity of comic book movies. Since comic book t-shirts were now widely available insiders did not feel that they were an indication that the wearer was actually a comic book reader.

The only true identifier indicated by respondents was language. Many respondents stated that while comics were an important part of their life they did not consider them key to their base identity. Among these respondents were those who wore t-shirts and even decorated personal space such as their office or homes with comic related materials. While they were not ashamed of reading comics it was not necessarily one of the first things they talked about when meeting a person. Many respondents made sure to clarify that the reason they did not commonly discuss comics is that experience had warranted that only people who read comics would be interested in talking about comics. In the following passage Grant explains how to identify those who do not want to discuss comics.

You can tell after a few minutes of conversation who's going to be receptive to what you're talking about versus those who aren't. Most of the time it's not where you're bullied out of talking about what you're interested in, it's a glazed, glossed look. I read something by Warren Ellis where he was connecting all these different ideas together and he's known for being a futurist... I was trying to tell my cousin's wife about it. Not a dumb woman by any stretch of the imagination and she didn't want to hear it. I knew that, I was just excited about it and I couldn't keep my mouth shut at the time. That was where that mechanism failed, in that particular instance, but generally I can go, "Yeah, I can have a good conversation with this person about what I just read," versus, "Eh, they're not going to care."

While fans do not always attempt to engage others in comic related conversation, comic material often finds its way into their lexicon. Because of this for many respondents the

discovery of other fans was often an unsuspected surprise. As described here by Stephanie sometimes a random quote or obscure reference would catch the fan off guard. “I’ve had some friends who I knew for years and then in conversation they make some off hand reference to Preacher or something and it’s like whoa back up a second I didn’t know about this hobby of yours.” Once another is identified as a comic insider an entire other language is available to the social actors, which allows for enhanced communication and understanding between them.

For many fans the use of comic reference in their language is quite frequent so the discovery of other fans was a natural occurrence when engaged in casual conversation.

Here Luke offers his explanation of this phenomenon:

It’s just part of my vocabulary. You’re cultural references are your language and so you can’t really think about the world unless you think about it through some kind of cultural lens. Two hundred years ago or one thousand years ago it was the stories of your tribe and today it’s in part your pop culture references. It’s how you talk to people and find common ground.

Vocabulary and comic reference become a code that cues to others that they are comic insiders. By imputing this code into their everyday exchanges insiders are able to intentionally and unintentionally search for and identify other insiders. Vocabulary therefore becomes important for the identification of insiders when outside the social realm of the subculture. Once another insider is identified a door is opened for a whole other dialogue to be engaged.

In this case fans again draw from their cultural toolkit as a means for finding like-minded people, but in a different way than before. In the first example fans utilize the store as a social setting that is stocked with a ready supply of like-minded others. Here

however the cultural toolkit provides insiders with a style of language that gives them the capacity to identify others that are like-minded when navigating through the broader social world. This style of language is used in the store setting as well, but not as a means of identification since insider status is automatically ascribed to those who work in the store. In this instance fans use their cultural toolkit in the construction of a kind of self by developing a vocabulary that they use as cultural lens for interpreting and talking about the social world. When others acknowledge and engage in this language the kind of self the fan is portraying is affirmed and deemed as useful in locating others with a similar way of interpreting the world.

Professionalization

Entertainment may be the main purpose for comics, but many fans have found them useful in other aspects of their life. A common use that emerged among respondents was the use of comics on the job. Comics were used for several things varying from inspiration and motivation to the direct use of comic books in the workplace. Inspiration was one of the most common uses for comics on the job. The way that respondents drew inspiration from comics however was different for many respondents.

Harold a 35-year-old aspiring musician has been reading comics since he was a teenager. He stated that comics don't play a large role in his life. He has a few stories that he's been reading for years that he still follows. He only visits the store about once a month and usually only stays there for around 10 to 15 minutes; a length he says for most comic book people isn't very long. Harold approaches comics the same way he approaches any other form of entertainment, if it looks interesting he will read it, but he

claimed that is the extent of his relationship with comics. When asked if comics had any impact on his life I was surprised when Harold responded yes. He explained that the artistic ability and craft of storytelling that goes into creating comics inspired him to create things on his own. Harold enjoys a number of artistic hobbies such as photography, silk screening and music. He admits that while he is no good at drawing and is not a writer he is still able to draw inspiration from comics.

I think in that way maybe it influences me cause, just that, respect for being able to do something so long and being, and do a good job at it, and to be above a mediocre storyteller but be a really good storyteller. Again I don't write, but its just that respect of life like where wow, cause I do do things like artwork and music and photography just to say well if I'm gonna do it let me do it well. This guy can do it well for 20 years and this guy can do it well, why can't I do what I do well. But you know I think that would apply to, if I were a fisherman, well this guy can write comic books well, why can't I be a good fisherman.

Here Harold is discussing his favorite comic book writer who has been able to produce quality work for over 20 years. For Harold being able to create something that well for that amount of time is itself an inspirational act. Comic books provided Harold with an example to strive for. He may not be creating comic books, but having comics in his life has given him the attitude that he too can be good at what he does and has the ability to create beautiful things.

Many respondents admitted that the inspiration from comics was much more direct leaving them with the artistic desire to create comic related material. For most respondents this was merely a childhood dream and eventually became more of a hobby to work on in there spare time. For some however the dream never died and finding a way to incorporate the fascination with comics into their work was a challenge. Brandon, now an art student who creates pop culture related figurines, tells how finding the right

profession was a challenge. He explains that he always had a strong interest in comics and the desire to create artistically. As he grew older he felt that others perceived this interest as being unusual. Here Brandon discusses how he found himself working in graphic design.

I think professionally in my 20s I was trying to do graphic design as a way to legitimize what I was interested in. It's like this is what I have to do cause it's the only way to, like a respectable way to tack that on and I just wasn't happy with it. I just ended up working in photography studios doing a lot of Photoshop work. Even as a production manager where you're totally producing everything in house, but it really wasn't creative work.

At the time Brandon felt that this is what he had to do because it was the only respectable way to approach his interests professionally. It was when Brandon changed his viewpoint that he was able to make a change in this line of action. When discussing his decision to leave his job and go back to school Brandon states: "For me it was making a decision of this is important to me in a way that's not just a hobby, that I want to use it as a vocabulary to do work." Once Brandon saw comics as having the potential to be something other than just a hobby he was able to use them as a tool to help him figure out what he *wanted* to do. Viewing comics or any hobby as something that is only used as a form of entertainment greatly limits its potential for other uses. Changing his personal definition of comics changed his interest from one with limiting job possibilities into one with vast opportunities for the picking. Now Brandon was able to create a job that utilized his cultural resources rather than feeling he needed to find a job that justified a hobby.

The creation of original material was not the only way that comics were used on the job. Several respondents found comics to be a useful tool that could be utilized at

work. Tim is an aspiring screenplay writer who works for the public library system. He has a job that allows him to use and share his knowledge of comics. He states that comics “impact how I approach my job, they influence some of the things I do within my job.” Rather than leaving his interest for comics at home he found a way to make use of his knowledge at work, making himself an asset with insight to offer on a reading medium that is rising in popularity. Last year he was able to organize a panel discussion with local comic book writers and artists hosted by the public library. The event was a success and he is now planning other similar events with the approval and enthusiasm of his supervisors. His knowledge of comics provided him with a specialized skill set that he was able to use at work to set himself apart and gain esteem of his superiors.

Among the respondents who used comics at work were two youth pastors who both found the use of comics helpful in their jobs. The two did not know each other but both described their use of comics in very similar ways. Both had read comics from a young age and when they began to study and become deeply invested in their religion they found comics to be a very useful tool. For each of the pastors comics provided a relatable format that translated many of the themes and morals present in their religion. Using the stories in their comic books they were able to cultivate within themselves a deeper understanding of how they interpret religion and how others in the world view and understand it. Mainly comics provided a platform that showed that the battle between good and evil is not always black and white. Religious text often ignores the grey area between good and evil, but that grey area is often explored in comic stories. These stories humanized concepts of religion into a more understandable and relatable format. For the pastors comics became a useful tool not only in their own personal understanding of

religion, but also for teaching it to others. Working with kids the pastors found that comics provide a relatable story that children can understand much easier than complex religious abstractions. Here one of the pastors describes why he uses comics in his work:

It's easier for a child to relate to a superhero and our need for somebody to save us than it is for some to try and help them to relate to a prophet. A prophet is something that's a language that they can grasp but for them to understand, a superhero is a lot easier for them to understand. Somebody who comes in and saves them from whatever evil villain or something like that versus if you say a prophet who is trying to lead you back to God. It's easy for a kid to understand superheroes so using that as the language I'd have to say is very helpful.

In this example the pastors were able to take their personal use of comics and apply it to their work. Comics were a helpful tool to each of the pastors when they were developing their personal views of religion. Having that personal experience they were able to incorporate comics into their teachings in a ways that were beneficial to the learning process rather than distracting from it.

In the workplace fans utilize their cultural toolkit in ways that become useful not only on the job, but also in the construction of a kind of self. Harold, Brandon and the pastors all drew from their cultural toolkit to build a worldview that aligned with the kind of self that they wanted to construct. They do this not by drawing on content but rather by changing the way they view their relation to comics. Brandon, Tim and the pastors all also referenced their cultural toolkit in the development of skills that assisted them in the process of doing their job. This aided in the construction of a kind of self by providing them with helpful tools that gave them the capacity to portray a certain kind of self to those they work with. Professionalization explores the link between receivers and the cultural object. In both all cases described above the receivers utilize the cultural object

in the construction of a certain kind of self either through the creation of a worldview or the development of a skill set.

Discussion

The data has shown that comic books provide readers with a cultural resource that has many uses and applications. The comic book store provides a locale where social actors are able to locate other like-minded people and adhere themselves to a community of their choosing. Visiting the comic book store enables insiders to seek moments of comfort in two ways: by providing a stimulate that can be used to manipulate their mood and by showcasing the rising status of the comic book industry. By proselytizing their culture social actors are able to deepen bonds and relationships and help others procure a better understanding of the individual. Members use language as a code cueing that they are comic insiders allowing them to locate others that hold common interests. In the workplace this resource becomes professionalized and can be used as motivation, inspiration, teaching aids, or to craft a specialized skill set.

Initially I set out to examine how social actors draw from their cultural resources to construct a subculture identity. This assumed that social actors were using their cultural toolkit mainly to establish themselves as insiders. While this may have been happening, according to the respondents the construction of a subcultural identity was neither the most important nor the most beneficial use of comics as a cultural object. Through exploring different links in the cultural diamond between receivers, the social world and the cultural object I found that the cultural toolkit afforded by comic books was being applied in ways that stretched beyond the social boundaries of comic book culture. Rather than limiting themselves to the construction of a subculture identity, fans

were finding ways to utilize their fandom in the construction of their overall identity and the kind of self that they were attempting to portray in the broader social world. My misconception was that the capacity of this cultural toolkit was only beneficial within the social world directly based around this cultural object. What I observed however was not just the cultural practices of a subculture, but rather how this group uses comics and their interest in them as a cultural resource for navigating through the broader social world. For some this task was simple, for instance in the case of professionalization using skills acquired from fandom to construct a self that is desired in the workplace. In other instances however, such as proselytization, the use of culture is much more complex, as a device for manipulating others into a better understanding of the self the social actor is portraying. These are very different examples, but each showcases a way that social actors are able to transcend fan culture and apply their cultural toolkit in ways that is beneficial to their everyday lives.

Findings support Swidler's (1986) culture in action theory of how culture influences action. Here culture does not dictate action by providing values and end goals, but rather influences action by providing social actors with resources to construct lines of action. I explored this influence by focusing on a particular line of action, the construction of an identity or certain kind of self. For this group, comics motivate action in the construction of self not by providing an identity that they adhere to, but instead by providing a cultural repertoire that is useful in the construction of a desired kind of self. For example Allison and Mark both use comics as a mood changing stimulant that allows them to take control of a self that was counter to the kind of self they wished to construct.

In her work Swidler (2001) explores symbolic culture and the ways social actors draw on social narratives that align with their various ideologies surrounding the concept of love. I show that Swidler's theory can also be applied to material culture and concrete cultural objects. Using Swidler's theory I have been able to show that the objects that make up material culture have the ability to influence action in the same way that symbolic culture does. When social actors draw on the utilitarian uses of material culture and incorporate them into the cultural toolkit they use to influence social action they make the cultural object part of the social world. In this way cultural objects are no longer just symbolic manifestations of the ideals and beliefs of a culture they now carry their own meaning and place in the role of influencing social action.

During this course of this study I have gained insight into the complex bonds that the comic book readers form with this cultural object. Comics are created as a consumer product for entertainment purposes. While readers do engage with comics as a form of entertainment what I have found it that they also create ways for comics to be useful in many aspects of their everyday lives.

Chapter 5:

CONCLUSION

Previous studies of comic books and comic book fans have focused on the concrete uses of comics within the subculture and meaning that is derived from comic book content. In this study I have learned that comic books can also be a valuable resource for readers and fans that can influence action in everyday life. Insiders have learned to transcend the social barriers of the subculture and utilize comics in ways that allow them to meet like-minded people, find comfort through escapism, educate others about their interests, and strengthen their position in the workplace. One of the ways comic book fans give meaning to this cultural object is by using it in the construction of a certain kind of self. These social actors do not use their fandom as an identifier of who they are. Instead they use comic books and their fandom as a cultural toolkit, which they draw from while constructing the person they wish to be. The kind of self they are constructing may vary from fan to fan, but the utilization of the cultural repertoire acquired from their fandom seems to be universal in the process.

This study supports Swidler's theory of culture in action. In her work *Talk of Love* (2001), Swidler focuses on the culture of love to explore the various ways culture is "appropriated, mobilized and linked to experience (5)." Here I do something very similar, by examining variations in the ways that people use a particular cultural object, comic books. By utilizing Swidler's (1986) culture in action theory in collaboration with Griswold's (2008) cultural diamond framework I have been able to explore how objects that may seem one-dimensional (in this case as a means of entertainment) can actually contribute to the daily experience in various ways. I expand on Swidler's work by

looking at how social actors draw from uncommon cultural resources that are unique to a small population and make various uses for them in the broader social world. By applying Swidler's theory to a concrete cultural object with its own unique subculture I have been able to showcase the versatility of Swidler's theory.

In order to gain a better understanding of how culture can shape action, this study explores the ways in which cultural actors utilize their cultural toolkit. By focusing on the unique cultural object of comic books, I was able to conclude that social actors are able to utilize the cultural resources they gain from being a fan both inside and outside of that subculture community. This being the case we can no longer approach practices of fans, audiences and subcultures as relevant only to their subculture.

This study also contributes to the literature on comic book culture by adding to the fan perspective available in the literature. I explore comic book culture through the eyes of the fans. In analysis I draw from fans' own descriptions and interpretations of their fandom to gain a better understanding of how fans apply meaning to the culture. I also investigate the varying ways that comic book readers engage with comics and make use of them in their everyday lives; an avenue that Woo (2012) notes is missing in the study of comic audiences.

Study Limitations

Sampling methods are the most prominent limitation of the study. The use of convenience and snowball sampling may have produced a sample comprised of individuals similar to the initial informants. If this is the case, the findings of this study may only pertain to a certain type of comic book fan. The store used as a site for fieldwork was often described as being different from other stores on many levels

varying from layout, lighting and cleanliness to friendliness and welcoming attitudes. Whether or not this is true, it indicates that the store may attract a particular type of clientele and potentially be creating a unique sub-set of the subculture. The majority of the sample (89%) had attended some form of higher education. It is possible that these people were more prone to respond because they respect the research process. Without more research it is impossible to determine whether this is a common characteristic among comic book fans.

Future Research

This study provides several implications for further research of comic book fans. In order to discern whether the uses presented here are common among comic book fans it would be beneficial to categorize fans and determine if different types of fans use their cultural resources in different ways. The exploration of different stores and different field sites such as conventions would also be beneficial to gaining a deeper understanding of the broader issues of fan behavior.

This study yields findings that have been hinted at in previous fan research. Jenkins (1992) explains participation in fan subcultures often requires extensive knowledge of texts and the ability to translate those texts into other cultural and social activities. Several comic fan studies have looked at the ways that fans use their cultural resources within the subculture as a way of gaining acceptance and cultural capital (Brown 2001; Pustz 1999; Woo 2011; Wright 2001). Few however have ventured to explore how insiders are utilizing these unique cultural resources in their everyday lives. Future research on comic book fans and subcultures in general would benefit by not limiting investigations to how culture and cultural objects influence action within a

specific social institution or subculture. It is also important to investigate whether the utilization of subculture resources in the broader social world is something that is unique to certain fan bases and subcultures or if it is a common practice. By considering how social actors transform the cultural resources gained from subcultures or personal interests into universal resources in their cultural toolkit we can gain a better understanding of the significance of cultural objects in the socialization process.

Appendix A

Interviews followed a semi-structured format. The ten main questions listed below were be used to guide general topics and flow of the interview. The sub-questions listed below each main question are probing questions that were used to encourage the respondent to provide greater detail on the topic at hand.

Interview Questions

1. Tell me about how you first became interested in comics.
 - When/age?
 - Why were they interesting?
 - Consistent reader since then?
2. What type/genre of comics do you read?
 - Why, what is the appeal?
 - Always read this genre?
3. Do you keep all of your comics?
 - Where?
 - Why/why not?
 - For how long?
4. Do you have someone you discuss comics with?
 - Close friends, family, etc?
 - How did you meet?
 - What activities do you do together?
 - Do you engage in non comic book activities?
5. How often do you go to the comic book store?
 - When?
 - How long are visits?
 - Why?
 - What do you do there?
 - What do you buy there?
 - Do you shop at more than one store?
 - Why/why not?
6. Do you participate in other forms of comic book culture?
 - Conventions, fan clubs?
 - Do your friends participate too?
 - Create comic book art?
 - Ever interested in working in the industry?

7. How do you know someone else is a comic book fan?
 - Is there a “typical” reader?
 - What is a “fanboy”?
 - How do you feel about that term?
 - What kind of fan do you consider yourself?
8. Are you conscious about who you tell that you read comics?
 - Why or why not?
 - Who do/don’t you tell?
 - How long before you tell someone?
 - Does your family know?
 - How do they feel about it?
9. How do you think the general population views comic book fans?
 - How did you come up with this idea?
 - Why do you think this is the case?
 - Have you had any personal experience with this?
10. What role do comics play in your life?
 - Why important?
 - How important?
 - What impact, if any?
 - Who you are?
 - How you see the world?

Appendix B

Adriana Estrada
University of Houston

Interviewee # _____

Face Sheet

Age: _____

Gender: M F

Marital Status: _____

Race/Ethnicity: _____

Highest Level of Education: _____ Area of Study: _____

Occupational Status and Current or Most Recent Job Title:

How much do you spend on comics or related items in a typical week: _____

How much do you spend on comic related activities (fan clubs, contests, etc.) in a typical week: _____

Do you attend comic conventions: Yes No

Do you travel for comic related activities: Yes No

If yes how often: _____

How much time do you spend reading comics in a typical week: _____

How much time do you spend participating in comic related activities in a typical week: _____

Do you have a file or subscription through a store: Yes No

If yes about how many titles do you subscribe to: _____

What are your other interests or hobbies: _____

Appendix C

Recruitment Letter

Are comics an important part of your life?

Would you like a chance to share what comics mean to you?

Then consider taking part in my academic study and help others to appreciate the significance of comic books.

My name is Adriana Estrada. I am a graduate student at the University of Houston in the Department of Sociology. I am conducting a research project examining the underlying significance of comic books and comic book culture to comic book fans. I am looking for comic book fans that frequent this store to partake in a one-time interview. The interview will take approximately one hour. During the interview you will be asked questions about yourself and your involvement with comic books. Your involvement in this study is completely voluntary and your identity will be kept confidential. To participate in this study you must be over 18 years of age, frequent [REDACTED] location and have some interest in comics. If you are interested in participating in this study please contact me at aestrad3@mail.uh.edu for more information.

Any questions or problems in connection with this study can be addressed by Adriana Estrada at aestrad3@mail.uh.edu, the faculty sponsor for this study, Dr. Xavia Karner at txkarner@uh.edu, or the Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects at the University of Houston at 713-743-9204.

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