

SEARCHING FOR SUPERWOMEN:
FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ii

LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES..... iv

Chapter

1. INTRODUCTION1

 Research Questions2

2. LITERATURE REVIEW.....5

3. METHODOLOGY.....19

 Part One19

 Part Two22

4. FINDINGS25

 Part One25

 Part Two38

5. DISCUSSION47

6. CONCLUSION57

REFERENCES60

APPENDIX.....63

LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES

Figure	Page
1. <i>Rat Queens</i> Covers	26
2. Types of Account Followed.....	38
3. Perceived Targets of Messaging.....	41
4. Type of Fan Activities	43
5. Reasons for Fan Activities.....	44
6. Opinions on Change	44
7. Beliefs on Readership Demographics	45

Table	Page
1. Negative Experiences	39
2. Likelihood of Picking Up Based on Cover	41
3. Perceived Audience Based on Cover.....	42

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

SEARCHING FOR WONDER WOMEN: FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

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ABSTRACT

In the last decade, comic books and comic book fan culture have become more popular in mainstream culture, with TV shows and movies depicting both comic book characters and comic book fans. However, very little has been mentioned, let alone researched, about the female comic book fan and her perceptions of the industry. Using focus groups and online surveys, this research examines the perceptions of female comic book fans about the comic book industry, the messaging of the comic book industry and the target markets of those messages. It also examines how these perceptions may or may not affect female fan behavior. This thesis found that female fans believe that the comic book industry targets male fans over female fans, and listens and values their preferences more. In regard to behavior, it found that female fans believe that their fandom is a type of community building and by creating large groups they can have a stronger voice and affect change within the comic book industry.

Chapter 1: Introduction

In the year 2017, three different studios will have released at least six major superhero films globally. Only one will feature a female hero as the lead. In the same year, the two largest comic book publishers, Marvel and DC will publish more than a hundred different titles. It is not a stretch to say that comics appear to be a flourishing industry, and one that is becoming increasingly prevalent in mainstream popular culture. To be part of the comic book fandom is no longer to be scorned or bullied. However, comic book fandom has for much of its academic lifetime, been considered a “boys only club,” which overlooks female readers and female fans and ignores their contributions. Just because academicians ignore them did not, and does not, mean that female fans do not exist. In fact, they have become a force that, through fan activity, pushes for change within the comic book industry. Female readers have demanded more realistic depictions of female bodies as well as greater representation of female comic book creators.

Statement of the Problem

Research into how female fans interact with the comic book industry is an underappreciated area of study. This type of research is important for both academia and for large and small companies involved in the production of comic books. Any examination of how female fans interact with the medium and how those interactions affect their behavior not only works to fill in gaps in literature on female fans but also provides new avenues for fan study. Previous fan studies have looked at affirmational fan behavior, fan behavior that confirms the status quo. Research into female fan behavior expands into transformational fan behavior which lobbies for change.

On a practical level, it is also important for comic book producers to understand how their female fans interact with and react to the comics they do read. Female readers comprise a

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

much larger demographic of comic book readers than was ever previously reported. In fact, in the United States about 40% of comic book readers are women, and because this data is self-reported on Facebook, it may be higher (Demo-Graphics: Comic Fandom on Facebook - US Edition, 2016). This proposed thesis examines female fan behavior within the framework of third person effects theory. Applied to this research, third person effects theory explains how fan behavior may be a reaction to perceived assumptions about female characters and female readers

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore, through qualitative data, how female fans' experience with the marketing strategies of comic book producers may be reflected in their personal fan activities. This is an important area of study because it examines the effects marketing strategies may have on a female audience as well as the perceptions of the effects marketing strategies have through a female fan's eyes.

Research Questions

This thesis proposes four main research questions, drawn from both previous literature and from third person effect theory. The purpose of these research questions is to explore how female fans perceive their relationships between themselves and producers, how they perceive the effects of comic book marketing strategies, and how those perceptions may or may not affect their fan behavior. A more detailed explanation of variables can be found in the next paragraph.

RQ 1: How do female fans perceive the relationship between their fan-group and comic book producers?

RQ 2: How do female fans believe comic book marketing strategies affect others?

RQ 3: What activities do female fans participate in to showcase their fandom?

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

RQ 4: How are these activities influenced by the female fan's perceptions of

- (a) comic book producers?
- (b) male fans and non-fans?

Definition of Terms

Comic Book Producers

For the purposes of this study, the term comic book producers refers to publishing companies that publish comic books and graphic novels, including the executive side which oversees overall marketing strategies and publication decisions, and the creative side – the authors, illustrators, and inkers involved in creating the comic book. It is important to make the distinction that while the individuals on the creative side are often active on social media, they are not responsible for their employer's messaging. In the same vein, their messaging is independent of the company for whom they are working.

Comic Book Marketing Strategies

The term comic book marketing strategies refers to (a) the social media content published by comic book producers and comic book creators and (b) the covers used for an issue of a comic book. A comic book issue can have one or many covers depending on the publisher and title. Multiple covers for the same single issue are called variants. In addition to single issues, comics are also collected into trade paperbacks which encompass five to six single issues.

Theoretical Framework

This proposed thesis is built on the framework of third person effect theory. Third person effect theory predicts (a) that an individual overestimates the degree to which media messages persuade others and (b) an individual may act because of this perceived persuasion (Davison,

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

1983). This thesis looks at whether female fans' behavior may result from an assumption that others are persuaded, perhaps negatively against women, by comic book producers' messages.

Literature Review

Why Study Comics?

Early literature on comics worked on positioning the medium as an avenue worthy of academic study. Comics' history as a medium for children has long damaged its reputation for academic merit. However, between the rise of Cultural Studies in the United States at the end of the 1970s and the rise of alternative comics of the 1980s and 1990s, such as Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, comics became an academic interest. This literature fell into two broad categories: how comic book fandom can be thought of as a legitimate subculture and how comics exist as a unique mixture of literary and visual media.

To prove the academic worth of studying comic books and their fans, academicians first had to prove that the comic book community was more than just low-brow consumption of mass culture. Drawing on Fiske's theories of fandom and Bourdieu's theories of cultural and economic capital, Jeffrey Brown proposes that comic book fandom's internal rules for worth make it a legitimate subculture (1997). Rather than children and socially inept adults still living at their parents' house, the readers of comic books have created a mirror image of official culture, using the texts of their choice. In his article, *Comic Book Fandom and Cultural Capital*, Brown applies Bourdieu's rules for the structure of culture and for determining position within culture to the community of comic book fans (1997, p. 15). For Bourdieu, cultural capital is made up of three forms: the embodied, the objectified, and the institutionalized (Bourdieu, 1986). In mainstream culture, cultural capital focuses on what is deemed to be high-brow art. Accumulated cultural capital is an expression of high power and status (Barker, 2004, p. 37). While Bourdieu's work focused on mainstream culture, the rules of cultural capital apply to subcultures in the same manner, so that a person can gather subcultural capital. Despite their existence as an affront to

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

what is considered high culture, comic book fans have created complex rules about what has worth to their community. Just as culture has public and private spheres, comic book culture takes place in two venues: the local comic bookstore and the comic book convention, also known as the “con.” Both the local comic bookstore and the con are physical spaces in which the act of displaying cultural capital is performed (Brown, 1997, p. 17). Unlike other fandoms, comic book capital is exclusively centered on collections – the physical possession of the text (Brown, 1997, p. 22). Cultural capital is determined by a reader’s ability to gain knowledge and possession of those texts deemed important by the community at large (Brown, 1997, p. 26). Comic book fandom also emphasizes the economic capital that collecting comic books can bring, and in doing so, justify its subculture’s existence to official culture (Brown, 1997, p. 27). This economic capital may matter to the mainstream out-group but we shall see later that it is the in-group cultural capital that determines the boundaries of comic book fandom.

The other half of academic literature focused on moving past the historical devaluation of comic books as books for children. The majority of this literature made this distinction by concentrating on the unique way that comic book art utilizes both words and pictures. Scott McCloud in his seminal text *Understanding Comics: the Invisible Art*, highlights how comic books and their creators have a unique ability to combine both words and pictures allowing creators to explore more ideas than words or pictures are able to do alone (McCloud, 1993, p. 155). Other writers have made that distinction between comics and literature and comics and art even more clearly: Wolk classifies comics not as text with pictures, or pictures with text, but as a wholly unique medium (Wolk, 2007, p. 15). Both McCloud and Wolk are interested in the ability of comics to not only tell a story but their ability to draw the reader into the perception of reality that the comic book writer and artist have created through the use of cartoons. McCloud defines

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

a cartoon here as a highly simplified icon, one that allows readers to associate with it in a way that they cannot with more realistic images (1993, p. 36). Wolk continues with this position by arguing that comics allow readers to see a version of reality that is specifically and deliberately constructed by a writer and artists that due to its combination of visual and text is believable (Wolk, 2007, p. 20). Framing comics as a unique medium sets them up to be studied for academic purposes rather than relegated to the pile of unworthy children's entertainment.

Defining Comic Book Fandom

Much of the current literature on comic book fandom examines how the boundaries of the fan in-group and the mainstream out-group are formed. To understand how comic book culture forms these in-groups we must first review the literature on fandom and fan practices. Once a conceptualization of fandom has been reached, this literature review focuses on the specific fan groups, including the subculture of comic book fandom. We will see how cultural capital is created and how it creates the boundary between the fan in-group and the mainstream out-group. The physical spaces that make up comic book fandom will also be addressed.

The foundational text on fandom is Henry Jenkins' *Textual Poachers*. Almost all further literature discussed here draws on Jenkins' definition of fan, which, in turn, drew from Bourdieu and Michel de Certeau's theories of popular culture. It is Jenkins who defines a fan as someone who moves beyond simply consuming the media of choice to actively seeking and creating meaning in their chosen text (Jenkins, 1992). While many of the later academic works shy away from Jenkins' need for active creation to define the limits of fan and spectator, they acknowledge the importance of the distinction Jenkins makes between a fan community and an audience. Many of these academicians are fans themselves and explain fandom not only in terms of scholarly theories but in the terms of their own fannish experiences. Both Pustz and Wolk admit

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

to being fans of comics and acknowledge that their fandom predated their academic interest in the community. It is Pustz, in his book *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers*, who digs deepest into the history of comic book culture and its boundaries and structures. Pustz accepts Jenkins' definition of the involved fan as well as acknowledges the uninvolved fan, who consumes but does not necessarily create in the specific ways that Jenkins deems necessary for fandom (1999, p. 68). Although Pustz does not require this active production for fandom, the process of becoming a comic book fan has its own barriers. Comic book culture does not define itself on what Jenkins would deem as textual poaching but through a body of common knowledge (Pustz, 1999, p. 112).

Fandom is determined by what Bourdieu calls cultural capital, the accumulated body of knowledge of how comics are supposed to be read as well as the long running stories that exist for each character (Pustz 1999, p. 114). While literacy deals with the visual structure and grammar of comics – the rules of which McCloud laid out in *Understanding Comics* – continuity deals with the long running stories of various teams, characters, and titles. This history can be decades long, extremely complex, and is not made easier by the fact that many current creators joined the industry first as fans (Pustz, 1999, p. 108). Mainstream attitudes towards comics and their readers only adds to the insular nature of comic book culture, driving it to be more literacy dependent and even more unwelcoming to new entrants (Pustz, 1999, p. 155). The official culture's patronizing attitude towards adults who read a medium considered childish only adds to the comic book culture's reflexive tightening of in-group/out-group boundaries (Wolk, 2007, p. 64). This is particularly the case for women, as we will see later, who feel unwelcome in the physical spaces of comic book fandom and, thus, are unable to gain the common body of knowledge required to participate in fandom.

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

These physical spaces in which comic book fandom takes place include the comic convention and the local comic bookstore. The local comic bookstore is the most common spot of fandom practice – the arena in which the cultural capital of comics is displayed. Drawing from three connected theories of social structuration by Giddens, Bourdieu and Goffman, Woo argues that the local comic bookstore is the physical location in which the individual's rituals become the culture's norms (2011). For comic book fandom, the local comic bookstore plays a crucial role in creating the fan community. A comic bookstore's first function is as a locale, a term from Giddens' theory of structuration, a place in which certain practices are accepted as correct by the unspoken rules of the society. This is where comic book fans can share information and feelings about the medium. The second function of comic bookstores is to create a space that is both welcoming to the public and to the specific cultural subset of comic book fans. They do this through physical organization, putting more conventionally popular items at the front and the more specialized comics at the back. Comic bookstores also do this by creating spaces in time: they sponsor culturally nerdy events and they regionalize the comic bookstore itself by time. Hard-core fans visit comic bookstores on New Comic Wednesday and leave the weekends for more casual consumers. Comic bookstores' final function is to act as both front and back stage, according to Goffman's theory of presentation of the self. The comic bookstore is a stage, or an arena, where fans present themselves as experts in the field by showing off their collections and their knowledge. At the same time, the comic bookstore acts as a back stage or sanctuary in which comic book fans are allowed to be nerdy without fear of reprisal from those with more mainstream tastes. However, these roles are for those who have already been deemed worthy of admittance. New entrants, including many women, must first prove themselves through starting their own comic book collection, which is complicated by confusion over where to start (Wolk,

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

2007). Many comics have multiple #1 issues, sometimes even in the same year. A fan who saw the Wonder Woman movie and wishes to begin reading the comics must navigate over 75 years of publication history with multiple artists, authors, and story arcs.

Just as literature has dealt with the boundaries between mainstream culture and comic book culture, it has dealt with the structure of the comic book subculture. Pustz describes this structure as a core group of longtime readers, both male and female, who have read comics since childhood, flanked by the creators who have transitioned from fan to writer or artist. At the very edge are the casual readers of comics who see them as entertainment (Pustz, 1999, p. 204). Traditionally, the divide that academicians studying comic book culture were most interested in was the one between mainstream comics and alternative or art comics (Pustz, Wolk). However, this divide has lessened dramatically in the last few years, and focus has turned to defining the comic book fan by their practices. Utilizing Couldry's theories on media as practice, Woo highlights the divide between comic book consumers who buy to collect and those who buy comics for the act of reading (2012). These internal boundaries define how a comic book fan acts towards their comics, but almost all comic book fans are united in their reaction to mainstream culture's derision of what they love. Despite the fact that their subculture is often disparaged by others, many comic book fans have no desire to be accepted by mainstream culture and actively work at making the culture even more insular and less welcoming to new fans (Pustz, 1999, p. 211).

Although these works have laid out the boundaries of comic book culture through both theory and experience, they suffer from a lack of both ethnic and gender diversity in their sample groups. In other words, those consumers who do not fall into the stereotype of the comic book nerd – young, white males – are routinely disregarded by both scholarly works and the industry

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

itself. In addition to being homogenous, these ethnographies are limited in size which attributes to their lack of generalizability. We shall see later in this review that women are active consumers and participants of comic book culture despite their invisibility.

Female Characters in Comics

In discussing female fans of comic books and the comic books that they read, it is important to address the content of comics, and the storylines and appearance of female characters within comics. The literature focuses on female characters in mainstream comics, most commonly within the superhero genre, as this is the most prevalent of the mainstream comic genres. Much of the literature subsequently focuses on female characters' struggle between their femininity and their power and how they differ from their male counterparts. This review will also touch upon how the female comic book character can be compared to other media representations of women, specifically of female athletes.

Discussions of power within the literature focus on the equality or lack thereof between female and male superheroes. Pamela Boker argues that mainstream comics have move past the imbalances of the past, and that female characters exist as empowered and equal with male superheroes in terms of strength and sexuality (1993). Boker draws upon a long tradition of female heroines being subordinated to their male counterparts within comics, as well as the assumption that female characters are only included in the story to appease the desires of the overwhelmingly male fans. This concern with the transgression of gender binaries appears in Jeffrey Brown's *Dangerous Curves* as well, though he does not agree with Boker's assertion of equality (2011). Female heroines stand apart from both men and women because they take inhabit both feminine traits and masculine traits (Brown, 2011). Despite their physical power and their sometimes unrestrained sexuality, these female heroes share a common affiliation with

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

the greater good as defined by patriarchal society (Brown, 2011). Even Wonder Woman, who grew up in the feminist utopia of Paradise Island, submits to and enforces the laws of American society. Women who attempt to have both sexuality and power are deemed villains and must receive the punishment of breaking this unwritten law.

The other avenue of study into female characters looks at their history and their often familial connection to stronger male heroes. The majority of female characters in mainstream comics are in either spin-offs of older male heroes – Batgirl and Supergirl – or they are somehow related to their male compatriots – Sue Storm and the Wasp (Robinson, 2004). Unlike their male counterparts who almost immediately jump into fighting crime with their newfound powers, female heroes waver between the domestic and the public sphere (Robinson, 2004). Wonder Woman's original role in the Justice League was as secretary, despite her great strength. Sue Storm of the Fantastic Four oversaw creating the team's costumes (Robinson, 2004). It is important to note that much of this criticism centers on older comics; the new wave of female characters such as Kamala Khan, the Muslim teenaged Ms. Marvel, or the most recent iteration of Squirrel Girl (Doreen Green) have not yet been studied quite so academically. Another facet that has not been explored academically is the dearth of female creators and editors within comic books. As of May 2017, only 15.1% of credited creators at DC were women, 15.9% of credited creators at Marvel were women, and the largest female employer – Boom! Studios – still only employed 39% women (Hanley, 2017). This problematic representation of women, perhaps bolstered by a lack of female creators and executives, is not only an issue for comics.

As mentioned above, it is possible to compare the female comic book character with other media representations of women, especially that of the female athlete. Both female athletes and female superheroes are considered interlopers in a primarily male sphere and suffer from the

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

same types of comparisons to their male counterparts as well as objectified portrayals, especially on the covers of magazines and comic books, respectively. A number of studies have found that female athletes have continually been sexualized and objectified on the cover of sports magazines across the last thirty years (Fink and Kensicki, 2002; Weber and Carini, 2012; Frisby, 2017). This includes being minimized to sharing covers with male counterparts as well as an emphasis on gender neutral or feminine sports. While at first glance the trends of female athletes on magazine covers may be dissimilar to female comic book characters, both covers are being used to sell the product within. The messages coded into the poses of women, both photographed and drawn, shape the audiences drawn to them. Even more importantly, the lack of women on covers, both in comic books and on sports magazines, is a message to women that these spaces and fandoms are primarily for men and a female fan will be treated as an interloper.

Female Fans of Comics

Addressing the female fan's role in comic book fandom overall must be preceded by a look at why women are consistently made invisible in both academic and industry work on comic books. As we have seen above, literature on comic book culture focuses solely on male consumers. There are two camps of thought on why this may be. Some academicians believe that the very nature of a masculine subculture lends itself to the invisibility of its female participants. Others believe that when a woman is a comic book fan that "either she's performing womanhood wrong or she's performing comics wrong" (Wolk, 1999, p. 70). These rules of "correct" fandom being produced, of course, by male fans.

Comic book fandom is not the first place in which female participants were shut out of academic work on subculture. This is due to two factors: the subculture in question has an image of masculinity in some way that precludes female participants and there is a difference in the

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

physical spaces allowed to each gender (McRobbie and Garber, 1991). Comic book culture most definitely fits both of these factors; its cultural image is one of a “no girls allowed clubhouse,” and Woo’s work on the local comic bookstore has shown that it is an unwelcoming place to new entrants, especially women (2011). Scott expands upon the barriers presented to women by focusing on issues with previous sampling in academic comic book literature, including the works discussed here. The first issue is that academicians rely on inconsistent and inaccurate numbers from the industry and from self-reported data. Because the industry ignores the economic power of their female readers, they are not represented accurately in these numbers (Scott, 2013, p. 4). The second issue is that scholars assume that female readers conform to the gendered genres allowed to them, which precludes the fans, who as we will see, are avid mainstream comic book fans (Scott, 2013, p. 4). We have already discussed how cultural capital through accumulated knowledge is paramount for participation within comic book fandom (Brown, 1997). Women are discouraged from gaining this cultural capital though the gendered comics marketed towards women, which do not fit into the long running continuity that makes up much of the cultural capital of comics (Scott, 2013, p. 6). Historically, comics’ genres have been split by gender, with superhero comics for boys and so called romance or teen comics for girls. Some of these titles are still running today, such as *Archie* and *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*. These teen comics do not feature characters with special powers, focus more on the characters’ relationships, and feature real world stories and settings (Nyberg, 1995, p. 207). Not only does the medium itself discourage female readers, but the physical spaces so necessary for the comic book community are also often unwelcoming to women customers (Scott, 2013). It is important to note that this unwelcoming barrier is not always one of rude and unfriendly comic bookstore

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

employees but most often the fact that new entrants are kept “isolated from core social activities” because they do not come to the store when the hard-core comic book fans do (Woo, 2011).

The second camp of thought is that female fans are trespassers who ignore the gender rules created by both the industry and community (Nyberg, 1995). Drawing from Jenkins’ theory of fans as poachers ignoring the rules of official culture and taking what they want or need from their medium of choice, Nyberg positions female comic book fans as trespassers who ignore the gender boundaries of comic book fandom (1995). This framing of women as unwelcome is echoed in the previously discussed literature – female fans are deemed interlopers or unwelcome (Wolk, 2007; Woo, 2011). The question I am interested in for my research is why women are interested in reading comics despite this unwelcoming atmosphere.

For women, the act of reading itself is often the reward. Radway’s ethnographic work with romance novel readers in the late 1980s showed that women use reading as both relaxation and escape (1991). The actual act of reading is providing something unique in the life of the reader, an opportunity to be alone and centered on her own wants and needs (Radway, 1991, pp. 61). Despite the differences in the medium, comics also provide this opportunity for women to relax and escape, and they sometimes include the nostalgic feeling of participating in a childhood activity (Nyberg, 1995, p. 222). Comics, due to their abstract cartoon nature, are easy to affiliate with and allow readers, especially girl readers, to escape regardless of their content or the gendered lines in which genres are marketed (McCloud, 1993). It is important to recognize that though comics are written and marketed across gendered and ageist lines, with superheroes for boys and romance comics for girls, girls and women frequently ignore these divides to read what interests them (Danziger-Russell, 2013). As comics have matured, female creators have expanded the range of books for girls, writing not only about the quotidian high school life that

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

one can find in comics such as *Archie*, but stories of marginalized girls finding their voice such as *Persepolis* (Danziger-Russell, 2013).

We have addressed the invisibility of female fans in the industry and in academic work as well as the reasons why female fans consume comics. We have not however, looked at how the female fan contributes to the comic book fandom as a whole. The relationship between female and male fans can, at times, be fraught with tension as male fans see female fans as interlopers and feminine behavior as wrong behavior (Reagle, 2015; Busse, 2013). We shall start by addressing how the backlash against female fans by male fans arises out of a fear of erotic capital overwhelming cultural capital (Reagle, 2015). It has already been established in this review that Bourdieu's conceptualization of cultural capital applies to the body of knowledge of comic book fans, both male and female (Brown, 1997). However, male fans often accuse female fans of being "Fake Geek Girls" a charge that carries with it the accusation that female fans use their erotic capital to tease male fans that they would not otherwise engage with in mainstream culture (Reagle, 2015). This is a charge not only from fans but from actual male creators within the comic book industry (Reagle, 2015). Cultural capital gains its worth through attention and many male fans fear that these Fake Geek Girls take away the attention that male fans should be receiving for their knowledge by flaunting their physical appearance (Reagle, 2015). Not only are female fans accused of betraying comic book culture by simply being present, their fan contributions are also devalued in the hierarchy of fan behavior (Busse, 2013). Just as female fans are seen as trespassers in daring to read comics, their fan behavior must either fall into the gendered boundaries of female fandom or male fandom or be judged as deviant (Busse, 2013). In either situation, female fan activities are consistently valued as lesser than male activities. The most feminine of these activities is fan fiction, which is described in detail by Jenkins' *Textual*

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

Poachers and seen as a confirmation that female fans are too heavily and emotionally invested in their fandoms (Busse, 2013). At the heart of the issue is that men are affirmational fans – the industry caters to their needs and so they have an interest in it continuing as it is. Meanwhile, women are often transformational fans – they are ignored and devalued by the very industry that they are consuming and so much of their fan activities center around recreating the medium in order to change the existing media narratives (Busse, 2013). This transformational activity can be seen in websites such as Escher Girls and the Hawkeye Initiative. Both websites critique the male gaze of comic book culture by focusing on the non-realistic ways of drawing female bodies and costumes. Suzanne Scott positions the websites as part of a larger trend in modern female fan contributions that push back against the overwhelming male gaze of the comic book industry and the dearth of female creators (2015). The fans who submit to these websites with examples of broken spine positions and thong armor are hoping to deconstruct the ways in which comics are currently created and re-create them with a more equal empowerment for female characters (Scott, 2015).

Third Person Effect Theory

As mentioned above, this thesis plans to utilize third person effect theory as its theoretical framework. Third person effect theory first appeared in 1983 as a hypothesis on how individuals may react to persuasive messaging. Individuals believe that though they are not significantly persuaded by messaging, the same message persuades others. In light of this, individuals may act based on the assumed perceptions of others (Davinson, 1983). Such actions often include censorship of messaging or materials that an individual believes to be offensive or harmful, like TV violence or pornography (Xu & Gonzenbach, 2008). There is some evidence of a gender difference in the third person effect theory; female participants believed more strongly in the

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

third person perception than male participants in a study examining sexually oriented advertising (Pan, Meng & Zhou, 2012). This held not only for sexually oriented advertising but for generic advertising as well (Pan et al, 2012). This is of interest to this thesis because the subjects of this study will be female.

While many of the studies on third person effect theory have been quantitative, this thesis will be a qualitative study. The goal is not to prove that persuasive messages exist within comic book marketing, but to discover how female fans receive those messages. Some of that reception may be a belief that male fans are persuaded negatively against female characters and female fans. It is the goal of this thesis to further explore this idea.

Chapter 2: Methodology

Research Design for Part One

The first part of this thesis utilized focus groups to explore how female comic book fans conceptualize their fandom and the reasons why they may or may not perform fan behaviors.

Due to the social nature of fandom, meaning is often created within social interaction. Social interaction is often captured through the focus group method, which provides access to the social contexts in which meaning is constructed in a way that one-on-one interviews do not (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996). This may be due to the fact that focus groups are concentrated on a single issue, rather than the more circuitous semi-structured interview (Fallon & Brown, 2002). Focus groups may also put participants more at ease and make them more likely to talk about their fan behavior which while more accepted by the mainstream is still often considered “geeky” (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996). Finally, focus groups provide not only discussion that reveals meaning, but the processes in which the individuals involved negotiate that meaning in a social setting (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996).

For this study, focus groups captured the social needs that fan behavior may or may not meet. Jenkins defined the fan as the individual who actively creates meaning in the chosen text, but that meaning is also shared with the group (1992). Fan behavior does not exist in a vacuum; it serves a purpose in creating a larger community. Using focus groups to study fan behavior allows for a closer examination of the social processes that determine the worth of certain fan behaviors and the ways in which they create community bonds (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996). The group context better illuminated the several questions: The first is how certain feminine fan behavior is judged by the women who may or may not participate in said behavior. The second is how women believe the perceptions of others are formed, and the relationship between their

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

behavior and those assumed perceptions. Finally, focus groups help explore how community ties are strengthened, or not, by certain fan practices.

Focus groups have been used in several other studies that look at how social meaning is created, especially in regards to the meaning of a chosen text. Although on the surface romance novels and comic books seem quite different, they share a number of similarities, including the role they may play in the overall social and emotional lives of their consumers. Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* used focus groups to examine the uses of romance novels in the lives of women, both as a group and as individuals (1991). Because this proposed thesis also seeks to find the ways in which female fan behavior plays a role in the lives of women, it is logical to use focus groups to study how fan behavior fulfills needs. Comic book fandom is a social activity, and fan behavior often takes place in group settings or in partnership. To understand the purposes it may serve, it is important to examine how the group thinks of fan behavior and how it may or may not fulfill needs that gendered comics do not provide.

Focus group questions centered on female fans' experiences as both readers and as fan-creators. It was assumed that not every participant will have taken part in fan behaviors as described by Jenkins in *Textual Poachers*, but even passive fans have attitudes worthy of exploration (1992). Emphasis was placed on interactions female fans have had, or are perceived to have had, with the producers and creators of comic books, as well as with male fans.

Sampling

Part one of this study recruited through Facebook posts on various pages, including the page of Superheroines Etc. and Star Clipper, through email blasts sent by Superheroines Etc. and Star Clipper, and through physical flyers placed in comic bookstores in St. Louis. The sample

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

was homogenous in terms of gender and of self-identification as a comic book fan. Money was not provided as an incentive; however, food was provided at the focus groups.

Four focus groups were held; this number being the consensus for the minimum amount required to reach theoretical saturation (Onwuebuozie, Dickinson, Leech, & Zoran, 2009). This smaller number of focus groups is due to limited funds, resources, and time. While the researcher hoped that focus groups would include six to eight participants, actual turnout was much lower. In total, only 11 female fans participated in the focus group sessions – though these qualitative sessions did run for the full hour and a half and generated interesting finds, as discussed below. To compensate for the small number of participants, a second phase of the study was added in September.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

The qualitative sessions took place at Star Clipper, a local St. Louis comic bookstore. By having the focus groups take place in the local comic bookstore, it provided a known space in which discussing fan behavior is the norm. Placing participants in a familiar location also served to make them feel comfortable and, therefore, more talkative. Star Clipper has a backroom dedicated for meetings, such as book clubs and Dungeons & Dragons. It is important to note that Star Clipper is somewhat unusual in regards to set up and atmosphere. Unlike many older comic bookstores, Star Clipper focuses on the sale of more than just current or older single issues, and offers a large number of trade paperbacks from both traditional and independent publishers, apparel, and toys encompassing all of nerd culture. Their staff is made up equally of men and women, and the store is part of the Valkyries – an online community of female comic book employees dedicated to making comic book fandom and comic bookstores welcoming to female

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

fans. It is very bright, very large, and dedicated to community events that welcome all sorts of fans.

The focus group interviews were video recorded to capture both verbal and non-verbal communication from the group. Consent to be recorded was gathered prior to the beginning of each focus group. Participants were free to leave at any time if they found themselves no longer wanting to take part. There were two moderators present for all four qualitative sessions. The main moderator was not the researcher, though she was a self-identified female comic book fan. The researcher was instead the assistant moderator and observed the verbal and non-verbal communication of the group. This prevented the biases of the researcher from polluting the discussion of the focus group.

Instrumentation

Focus Group Discussion Guide

The full discussion guide can be found in Appendix A. The focus group discussion focused on three main themes. The first was the perceptions of the relationship between female fans and comic book producers. In other words, what does the female fan believe is the producer's judgement of her? The second theme was the behaviors in which female fans engage. The third theme was how others view those fan behaviors, including producers, male fans, and non-fans.

Research Design for Part Two

This study utilized an ad-hoc mixed methodology due to the limited number of participants in the first section of the study. It was decided by the researcher that because theoretical saturation was arguably, but not definitively, reached during the four focus groups that

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

an online survey would be created and distributed to self-identifying female fans to provide support for the findings from the focus group sessions. This online survey is more qualitative in nature than quantitative, despite its use of Likert scales, and was designed to see if fellow female fans had similar reactions and beliefs as the participants of the focus group sessions. It can be argued that this step was not necessary, however, it provided interesting findings as discussed later.

Sampling

The survey was distributed through Facebook, using posts on the page of Superheroines Etc., as well as personal posts shared by friends. Because the posts were shared through the pages of fellow comic book fans, this is not a random sample, but rather a self-selected sample. The only criteria for the study was that respondents self-identified as female; age and diversity were not a factor. Of 92 responses, 55 respondents finished the full survey.

Instrumentation, Data Collection, and Analysis Procedures

The survey was created using Qualtrics, as Qualtrics allowed for the number of questions required for the study. Following the same pattern as the qualitative sessions, the survey focused first on online behavior and perceptions of the industry, then on reactions to various comic book covers, and finally on fan behavior and whether fans believed change was necessary. Based on the qualitative sessions, the survey also asked about the apprehensions fans anticipated and experienced in stores and when interacting online with the industry and fans. The survey can be found in Appendix B. Data was collected over a twenty-day period, from September 1st until September 20th. Data was analyzed through Qualtrics and can be found in Appendix B.

Chapter 3: Findings

Part 1: Focus Groups and Interview

The first part of research collection comprised of three focus groups and one interview. Each of the four sessions were transcribed and coded, and then the codes from each session were compared to create one final codebook. This codebook can be found in Appendix C. From the final codebook, three distinct patterns emerged: what female fans want, what female fans believe, and finally, what female fans do.

The first session comprised of two participants, referred to here as 1A and 1B. Both participants were college graduates, one of whom had graduated the month before. Both were somewhat familiar with comics as children, but had not seriously began reading or participating in fan activities until college. They primarily read trade paperbacks rather than single issues. The second session comprised of one participant, referred to here as 2A. She had been introduced to comics in college by her friends. Her identity as a queer woman of color influenced both her comic reading and her fan behavior as it drove her to be more critical both of comic book content and the strategies utilized to attract niche audiences, including “queer-baiting.” The third session comprised of five participants, ranging in age from their mid-twenties to their mid-thirties. They will be referred to as 3A – 3E. As with session one and two, these participants had begun reading and participating in comic book fandom as young adults rather than as children. They also primarily read trade paperbacks rather than single issues. Unlike the first session, they were much more favorable to non-superhero genres of comic books. The fourth and final session comprised of three participants, ranging in age from mid-thirties to mid-forties. As before, they will be referred to as 4A, 4B, and 4C. Unlike the previous sessions, all three had been introduced to comics as children, though they did not begin fan activities until after they had left

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

home and begun attending college. The three participants were already friends and the conversation at times focused on the importance of family support for reading comics, whether it was being introduced to comics or introducing others to comics.

Participants found out about the study through posts on the Facebook page of the local comic bookstore Star Clipper and through flyers posted in comic bookstores throughout St. Louis. Each session, regardless of the number of participants, ran for an hour and a half. Present were a moderator and the researcher. Each session was recorded on video and on audio. The first two sessions were held on Monday afternoons and the second two sessions were held on Saturday mornings.

All sessions were transcribed by the researcher using the video and audio recordings made. In addition to conversation, non-verbal body language was noted when appropriate. After the sessions had all been transcribed, each was analyzed for patterns or links to previous research. After each session had been coded, the four codebooks were compared, and a final codebook was synthesized. From the fifteen categories that emerged, three major themes became apparent. An overview of the codes follows.

What Female Fans Want

What Do They Want to See?

From the four sessions, it became quite clear that female fans knew what they did and did not like. These opinions focused not only on comic book content – the art and the story – but also on what they hoped to hear from the comic book creators and publishers.

Art and Aesthetics

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

When it came to the art, female fans desired to see realistic bodies, as well as diversity in body shape. Participants almost universally praised the comic book *Rat Queens* for its covers that displayed body type and racial diversity.



Figure 1: Rat Queens Covers

Tied to this desire to see more realistic art, including non-slim bodies, was the finding that oversexualization of both male and female characters was a turn off for female readers. In the words of 3D, “I don’t really go for the sexualization of characters, in my head if I’m reading through a comic book I always put myself in the place of these characters and it’s just like, I wouldn’t be wearing that to fight somebody.” Readers were also put off by over-muscled male characters, as well as anatomically improbable female characters. Finally, the female fans within this study preferred a realism adjacent artistic style that matched the genre’s content. In other words, a science fiction comic should not be drawn in the same style as a superhero comic and when the aesthetic did not match the genre, the female fan was turned off.

Plot

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

When it came to the story of the comics, regardless of genre, the female fans in the study wanted to see an emphasis on character and a psychological complexity within the plot. A story solved with punching was not enough to entertain readers. This desire for psychological complexity and emphasis on real relationships corresponds with the findings of Nyberg (1995). Participants were also tired of the industry's reliance on the same storyline repeatedly, especially within the superhero comic. Female fans also wanted to see original female characters rather than female characters taking the place of established male heroes, such as the current SpiderGwen, Thor, and Ironheart, all of whom were originally (and more famously) male superheroes. This trend to connect female superheroes to more established male counterparts is not a new one in the comics industry; it has existed for the majority of the history of the superhero genre, as evidenced in Robinson's *Wonder Women: Feminism and Superheroes* (2004.) Finally, female fans were drawn to and wanted to see more of relatable female characters. A short exchange between the participants in the fourth sessions illustrates this desire well.

4C: "We like it when women have jobs."

4B: "Yeah we like when women are not ridiculous."

4C: "It's almost like they are relatable to us, women with jobs."

4A: "Or just when their advanced degrees are actually you know, part of what's going on rather than superfluous."

Creators

The female fans who participated in these sessions wanted to see the creators they read promote diversity within the industry and directly address issues relating to diversity when they emerge. For 3A, the perfect response to an issue of LGBT inclusion within an independent crowd-funded anthology of female fairytales was when the creators came forward online and stated that they had not put out warnings regarding LGBT content because they felt that it did not

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

require a content warning. Participants also expressed displeasure when creators or publishers remained silent on issues, such as Image's silence on a contested cover by Howard Chaykin or Nick Miller's attempt to defend his decision to make Captain America into a Hydra leader.

Covers

As covers are the entry point to a comic, female fans had separate requirements for their desired covers. They wanted to be given a sense of plot, as they find those covers to be the most interesting and therefore more likely to draw them in. They also wanted female characters on covers and for those characters to be posed in manners that show off their confidence and power, rather than their sexual attributes. Covers that showcased anatomically impossible female characters, such as Catwoman's extremely small waist on the cover of *Batman #24*, were a turn off as female readers worried that the art inside would continue to portray the female characters unrealistically and/or that the story would treat the female character as simply a plot tool for male characters (Miki & Finch, *Batman #24*, 2017).

Online Behavior

Female fans within the study followed creators and others within the comic book industry for a number of reasons, such as: to keep up with information or news within the industry, to gain tips on how to become part of the industry, to enhance their experience with behind the scenes information, to create a community, and to create direct connections and conversations with comic book creators. Fans followed comic book creators and others often for more than one of these reasons, and followed specific accounts for specific reasons. For example, 3B followed independent presses to gain tips on how to break into webcomics, but she also followed creators to create direct connections.

What Female Fans Believe

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

Perceptions of Publishers

Publishers listen to most vocal male fans

Across the sessions, participants believed that the comic book industry, both the executives and the creators, listened primarily to straight, white, male fans. These male fans were characterized by participants as being the most vocal despite not necessarily being the most prevalent or most financially powerful group of fans in comic book fandom. In the words of 4A, these fans are:

the neckbeard Rob Lefield loving ones who want to go back to the glory days before girl cooties got into the comics. Cause they are very loud and they are very local and they're very online because you know neckbeard tends to go with the Internet. And because they are so vocal, and they are the groups that organize themselves to be like 'we like this, we're going to be very loud about this' but they're not the people spending the money.

Publishers fail to address issues

Participants also felt that the executive side of comic book production often failed to adequately address issues of diversity within the comics they produced. This was brought to head in a number of incidents including the VP of Marvel's Sales saying that "diversity doesn't sell" and Image Comic's failure to condemn a graphic depiction of a hate crime on a cover by Howard Chaykin. These incidents often turned the participants off from the publishers, though the distinguished creators from publishers. Their issue was with the executive rather than the creative.

Producers are not responding to female fans

While participants believed that the comic book industry was beginning to respond to a newly visible female audience, they also perceived comics companies as being too large to make a companywide culture shift that would include marketing towards women in a successful way. At the very least, companywide shifts were too slow to make a difference.

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

Industry is not welcoming to new readers

Participants saw the movies as a gateway for new readers to enter comic book readership and fandom, but found that the industry has not yet realized how to make comics accessible to newcomers. For 2A, the problem was that the comic industry does not appeal to minority and diverse audiences because either marketing or content fails to feature minority and/or diverse leads. For 3C, the issue lies in the high comic book cultural capital necessary for understanding a comic book; the “many back issues and the storylines” make it hard for a reader to simply pick a book and start reading.

Barriers to Entry

Lack of Cultural Capital

The nature of comic books, as discussed in the literature review, requires a reader to be well versed in histories and storylines that may go back years, if not decades. This potential lack of comic book cultural capital affected not only reading behavior but planned fan activity and apprehension about interactions with other fans. The sheer number of back issues and the question of how one accesses those back issues presented a major barrier of entry to comic book readerships and fan participation that came up again and again in this study. For 3B, despite wanting to participate in cosplay, she felt that without reading the character’s series beforehand she would not have the right to dress up like them. Participants were also worried that they would be judged or “mansplained” to by male fans due to their lack of comic book cultural capital. In the words of 3B, “That kind of stuff can weigh on you and keep you from wanting to project that out a little bit, because...there is a fear that you might get quizzed.”

High Cost

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

The high cost of the single issue, ranging from \$3.99 to \$4.99 for a twenty-page comic, is also a barrier to entry for the female comic book fans in the study. Rather than “pull” an issue – asking the comic bookstore to hold a single issue when it is released on Wednesday – these readers saved money to buy trade paperbacks which collect six issues at a time. They also used the library or friends to read comic books for free.

Unwelcoming Spaces

Another large barrier to the female fan’s entry into comic book readership and fandom, as perceived by the participants in the study, was the perception that the comics industry and the local comic bookstores that make up the physical spaces of comic book fandom are not welcoming to potential female fans. 2A remarked on the perception of comics as a “boy thing” and how that perception “shapes who ends up going to the stores, who stays in the stores, who works in the stores, who spends a lot of time there.” 3E, who entered fandom as a teenager, remembered that she “hated going into comic stores to find things I wanted, ’cause I didn’t really feel like I belonged there. I was a new face, everybody in those comic stores, at least the ones I went to, knew each other and were also guys and white and all of these things that I am not.” These findings echo those of Woo (2011) who remarked on the closed off nature of the comic bookstore to new entrants, and especially to women.

Stereotypes about Comics and Comics Fandom

More mainstream, but still not “cool”

While the participants of the study saw that comics had become much more accepted by the mainstream, especially through success of superhero movies, they still believed that the stereotypes surrounding reading comic were still negative. These stereotypes were believed to be held by older generations who still considered comics a low brow material, and a less valid story

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

telling form. Comics were not considered the equal of a novel, and to read comics showed a certain laziness or lack of skill. This stereotype has existed within mainstream culture since the inception of comics and despite the rise of high art comics like *Maus*, it persists to this day.

Lack of awareness about genre diversity

Another stereotype that participants believed non-fans held about comics was that comic book content consists only of superheroes. Even participants of the study even held this stereotype, such as 3A, who confessed that until a few years ago she believed that the only genre of comics that printed serialized individual comics was the superhero genre. Only once a fan has entered comic book fandom does she realize the breadth of content available. Once fans realized that there was more than just capes and tights, they were more likely to begin reading. For instance, 4B helped introduce her son's girlfriend to comics by explaining that in fact, comics cover a much wider field of content than the superhero genre.

Still perceived as mostly male

Another stereotype that participants believed others held was that fans of comics were primarily male, primarily white, and primarily straight. This stereotype of the white heterosexual teen, reading superhero comics was not necessarily what the fan saw in their own experience however, it is what is shown in popular culture in shows like *The Big Bang Theory* and in images online.

Stereotypes on Fan Behavior

As mentioned in Busse (2013), certain fan activities, especially those considered more feminine are often considered as lesser behavior. For the fans in the study, this proved true as they found that while they were not ashamed of their own status as fans, they often did not disclose that they read fan-fiction or did cosplay to non-fans as they believed there were many

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

negative stereotypes about those behaviors based on extreme stories rather than the actual truth of conventions and fan activity.

Current Marketing Strategies

Others affected by marketing strategies

Fans in the study believed that marketing strategies on the cover, such as including the character Deadpool on a cover for the Great Lakes Avengers, a comic in which Deadpool does not regularly appear, was a marketing strategy by the executive side of the comics industry to appeal to a popular trend. They also believed that others, especially newcomers, were attracted to comics by cover design and by familiar characters and titles rather than background knowledge about characters and story arcs. This belief was based in their own histories – when 1B began reading comics she started out with what was familiar to her rather than choosing something entirely new.

Marketing is general rather than targeted

The participants believed that the marketing strategies of the comic book industry, especially the two largest companies, Marvel and DC, were designed to target general rather than specific audiences. This resulted in generic covers, such as the Batgirl and the Birds of Prey #12 which failed to grasp the interest of the female fans within the study (Paquette, *Batgirl and the Birds of Prey #12*, 2017). Participants believed that the covers they saw were often not drawn for them, even when the covers depicted female characters. This was because the participants read the way the covers were drawn as the signifier of the intended audience – for example, a sexualized Emma Frost was a sign that this was a comic targeted to a general or male audience rather than a primarily female one.

Money as a Message

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

In all four sessions, participants believed that ultimately, companies listened to money and money alone when it came to decisions on what to market. Therefore, they believed that to support the type of comics they wanted to read, whether they were superhero comics with female led creative teams, or female characters, or independent works, their support must be financial. As 1B states, “I hope that everything that I purchase, somehow, money is power, money is the only power that I have. So, I hope that if I purchase the things that I want in the right ways that somehow that tiny drop will get back and show them that someone out here is reading and purchasing.”

Change through Group Efforts

The female fans in the study believed that change could occur in the industry but that change could not be enacted by the individual alone. Instead, change must occur through large groups of women reaching out to creators. As 3C puts it, “I think collective fandom more so [can prompt change]. Like recently several instances of fans demanding things and then creators saying well ok, let's do that.” Through group activity, especially online, female fans believed that they could create enough power to sway comic book creators and publishers to support more diverse content and art,

What Male Fans Believe

The participants across the four sessions held the perception that male fans don't see or acknowledge the existence of female fans. When asked if they thought male fans would believe that female fans make up 40% of comic book readership, the answer was almost immediately no. They believed that this occurred because, as 4A puts it “comics are, with most women I know have that more solo experience, but comics are sort of a social experience for guys, they go to a store, they talk to the guys, they don't see the girls, so they assume they're not there as with many

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

things.” Because male fans did not see or acknowledge female fans, they were less likely to consider change necessary within the comic book industry to make it more welcoming to female fans.

Apprehension about Negative Experiences

Female fans in the first part of the study talked at various points about their apprehensions regarding comic book fandom. This included fear of negativity on the internet, as well as negative interactions within comic bookstores. The ease of the internet comment section to become negative very quickly and the anonymity of the internet which according to 3C “allows people to turn off whatever filter they have in regular life” led participants to avoid comment sections and refrain from posting about comic books and comic book fandom. This fear that interactions may become negative even spilled out into physical interactions within the comic bookstore. 4C confessed that “Even though I've never had a bad experience...every time I go into a new comic bookstore I go through some apprehension that I will. Even though I've got twenty years of experience that says otherwise.” Despite these fears, female fans felt that the comics industry and fandom have been recognizing female fans more and more, and that overall, things were getting better. Over their time as fans, things had improved, and they believed that things would continue to improve.

What Female Fans Do

The Importance of Word of Mouth

For the female fans in the study, the most important indicator of whether a comic is worth purchasing is word of mouth in the online community. For some participants, such as 2A, knowing what to buy is a requirement before entering a store. Rather than browsing, and potentially being influenced by comic book covers, she enters the store with a goal in mind that

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

allows her to purchase and leave with relatively little interaction with the store. For others, such as 4A, word of mouth is necessary to know if a storyline is terrible or not. 4A would rather have the broad arc of a comic explained to her by the online community. Female fans relied so heavily on word of mouth, including spoilers, because they feared that they would be surprised by a storyline that disrespected their beliefs (such as the decision by Marvel to turn Captain America into a fascist Hydra villain) or treated female or other minority characters in abominable ways.

Online Behavior

The female fans in the study followed primarily creators of comics and fellow fans. As 2A puts it, she follows “other fans who I have things in common with or that I already know that we both like similar stuff. And as a queer woman, I’m frequently following other queer women type fans.” Through who they followed, the fans in the study created a community of fans with similar interests and relied on this community for their opinions on comic books and events within the industry.

Gateways to Fandom

For many of the participants in part one of the study, they entered fandom more seriously, even if they had read comics at a younger age, while they were in college. One of the facilitating factors to entering fandom was having a friend or group of friends who were already interested in comics and comic book fandom. As 1A said, “I think for me, going to university and meeting so many other people who were just as nerdy as me and you know, going to more events and just learning it’s not just a fringe thing. It not everyone who likes comics and nerdy stuff is a weirdo.”

Fandom as a Community

Shape experience by curating follows

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

The female fans in the study almost all mentioned being selective in who they did and did not follow online. As 3B says it, female fans use the block button to create an online space that they perceive as more diverse and made up of people with similar desires and tastes. As mentioned earlier, they relied on this online community for word of mouth references, for news about the industry, and for opinions and perspectives on various comic book related issues.

Fan activities as community building

For the women in part one of the study, participating in fan activities allowed them to feel like they were part of a larger group. As 1B said, “It's easy to feel shame about the things that you like when you're in a space where there aren't a lot of people that like them or there aren't a lot of people like you who like them. But if you got to [a] comic con, everyone there likes it and so it eliminates all the shame. And it's incredible. It feels like home.”

Apparel as a signaling device

For female fans, the purchase of toys and apparel serves not only as a physical manifestation of fandom but as a way to create interactions with others who might also be fans. While it may be impossible to show what comic a fan is reading when in public without her physically reading the comic in public, apparel – including shirts, pins and buttons – are all signaling devices that tell others that she likes comics, and a specific comic. Fans in the study deemed it more acceptable to buy merchandise for a comic that they did not necessarily read, such as 3A's Wonder Woman pajamas, than to participate in any other fan activities revolving around comics. This might be because wearing apparel does not require as much cultural capital and fans fear being questioned by male fans less.

Money as a Message

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

Just as the participants believed that money was the only message that companies heard, they acted through their financial purchases. This financial message came in two ways: support of traditional comics through purchase of physical or online copies or support of non-publisher affiliated comics via crowdfunding online. In regard to diverse content and creators, crowdfunding was seen as the most expedient way to support their creation since it delivered the money directly to the creator and allowed for stories that would otherwise not exist to be told.

Part 2: Online Surveys

To supplement the findings from the four focus group sessions, an online survey was created and distributed through Facebook. Of 91 total respondents, 55 completed the full survey, the results of which are as follows.

Online Behavior

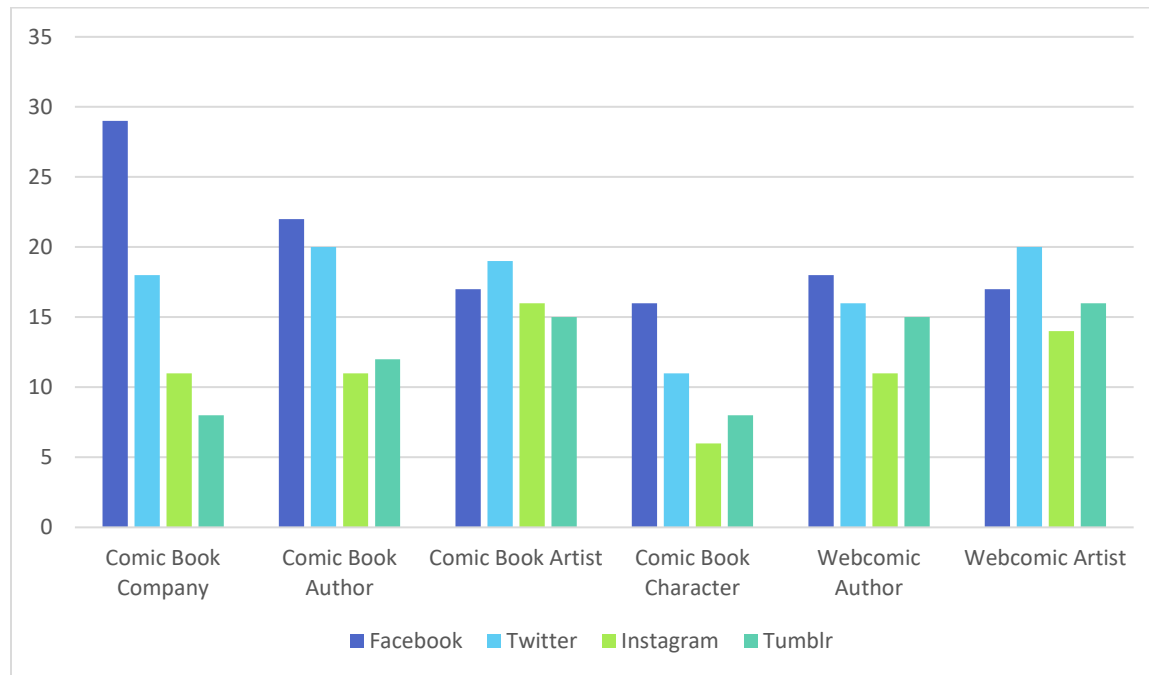


Figure 2: Types of accounts followed by female fans across social media platforms

Across the four social media platforms – Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr – participants followed both publishers and creators of traditional and internet only comics. For

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

most participants, the top benefit for following these accounts was receiving news or updates on comic book projects (51.72%). The participants in the online study were least concerned with creating a visible personal identity online through the accounts that they liked or followed. It is important to note that the majority of the participants were primarily active (5-7 days a week) on Facebook, rather than Twitter or Tumblr which were popular platforms within the qualitative sessions.

Negative Experiences

Question	Definitely Yes	Probably Yes	Might or Might Not	Probably Not	Definitely Not
Anticipated a NE with comic book companies or creators online?	8.93%	17.86%	26.79%	37.50%	8.93%
Had a NE with comic book companies or creators online?	7.14%	3.57%	3.57%	51.79%	33.93%
Anticipated a NE with comic book fans online?	23.21%	41.07%	26.79%	7.14%	1.79%
Had a NE with comic book fans online?	17.86%	23.21%	26.79%	21.43%	10.71%
Anticipated a NE when you enter a comic bookstore?	8.77%	19.30%	29.82%	28.07%	14.04%
Had a NE when you enter a comic bookstore?	15.79%	14.04%	7.02%	40.35%	22.81%

Table 1: Negative Experiences (NE), both anticipated and experienced by female fans across various situations.

In general, participants did not anticipate negative experiences when interacting with comic book companies or creators online, nor did they anticipate negative experiences when entering their local comic bookstore. However, 36 out of 55 (65%) respondents answered that they definitely or probably anticipated a negative experience with male fans online. Despite anticipated negative interactions, the majority of the female fans have not had a negative experience either online or in person. Those that did reported being questioned on their status as a true fan, due to their knowledge or lack thereof. They also reported being dismissed or treated as if they were “second class citizens.” These dismissals of female fans may be linked to the male fan’s fear that a female fan’s erotic capital may overwhelm their own cultural capital

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

(Reagle, 2015). It is important to note a caveat to this finding; due to wording, it is possible that fans were focused more on negative impressions of the comic bookstore itself rather than a negative interaction that occurred in that store. Unlike Star Clipper, which was described earlier in this paper, many comic bookstores were described as displaying overtly sexualized figurines and posters which made female customers feel unwelcome and uncomfortable.

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

Beliefs about the Power of Marketing

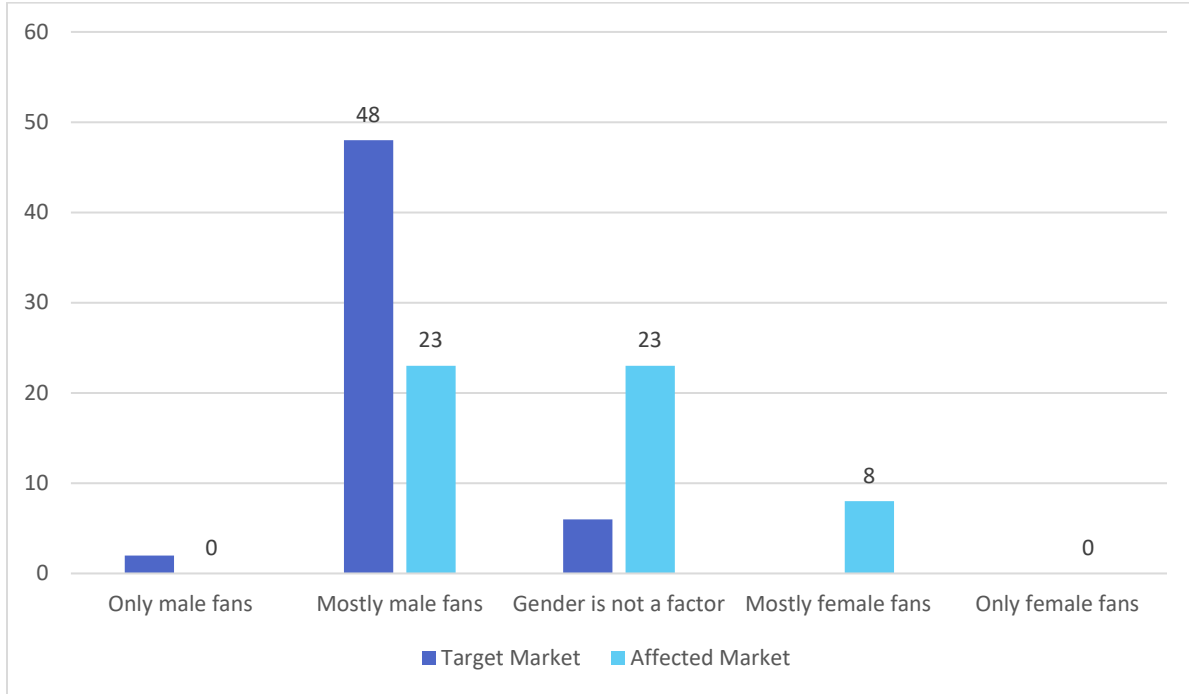


Figure 3: The target of comic book media messages and the groups most affected by them.

Of the 55 respondents, 48 believed that a mostly male audience was the target for comic book media messages. 23 believed that mostly male fans were also the ones most affected by comic book messaging, while 23 believed that gender was not a factor in the effectiveness of marketing strategy.

Reaction to Various Covers

Participants were asked to rate various actual comic book covers, which can be found in Appendix C. Each respondent was asked how likely they were to pick up a comic book based on its cover, which was then followed up with why they had chosen, or not chosen, that cover.

How likely are you to pick up:	Extremely Likely	Moderately Likely	Slightly Likely	Neither Likely nor Unlikely	Slightly Unlikely	Moderately Unlikely	Extremely Unlikely
Rat Queens #2	44.64%	26.79%	8.93%	5.36%	8.93%	0.00%	5.36%
Batgirl and the Birds of Prey #12	23.64%	21.82%	27.27%	10.91%	3.64%	9.09%	3.64%
Hulk #8	18.1%	18.18%	30.91%	10.91%	9.09%	10.91%	1.82%

Table 2: Likelihood of picking up a comic based on its cover

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

The majority of respondents, 80% were likely to pick up Rat Queens #2. Of those 48 respondents, 25 found the cover interesting, 11 recognized the title, one recognized the characters and 11 were currently reading the comic. Batgirl and the Birds of Prey #12 was likely to be picked up by 72% of respondents, but of those 46 only 8 respondents found the cover interesting. However, 35 recognized either the title or the characters. Hulk #8 was the least likely to be picked up, with only 37 of 55 participants reacting positively. Of the 18 respondents who were unwilling to pick up the cover, 7 turned it down because they were not attracted to the superhero genre of comics, while 6 were simply unattracted to the cover.

To whom is this cover targeted towards?	Only Male Readers	Mostly Male Readers	Gender Neutral	Mostly Female Readers	Only Female Readers
Rat Queens #2	0.00%	3.64%	32.73%	63.64%	0.00%
Batgirl and the Birds of Prey #12	0.00%	50.91%	27.27%	21.82%	0.00%
Hulk #8	0.00%	7.27%	54.55%	34.55%	3.64%

Table 3: Perceived target audience based on cover

When asked about the perceived target audiences of the covers, participants believed that Rat Queens #2 was targeted towards primarily women, while Batgirl and the Birds of Prey were targeted towards primarily men. The Hulk comic was seen as gender neutral.

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

Fan Activities



Figure 4: Fan activities female fans participate in

When asked to select all activities in which they had participated, female fans responded similarly to the participants in the qualitative session. 25% had bought toys or apparel, 21% had attended an event at a comic bookstore, 20% had attended a comic book convention, 15% had cosplayed or participated in what Jenkins would call textual poaching, and 10% had participated in an online group or donated money to a comic book specific Kickstarter campaign. When asked why they participated in fan activities, 35% of the respondents wanted to express their identity as a comic book fan, 33% wanted to feel part of a comic book fandom, and 21% participated as part of a larger group. The 11 “Other” answers were all strikingly similar and noted that participating in fan activities is about fun.

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

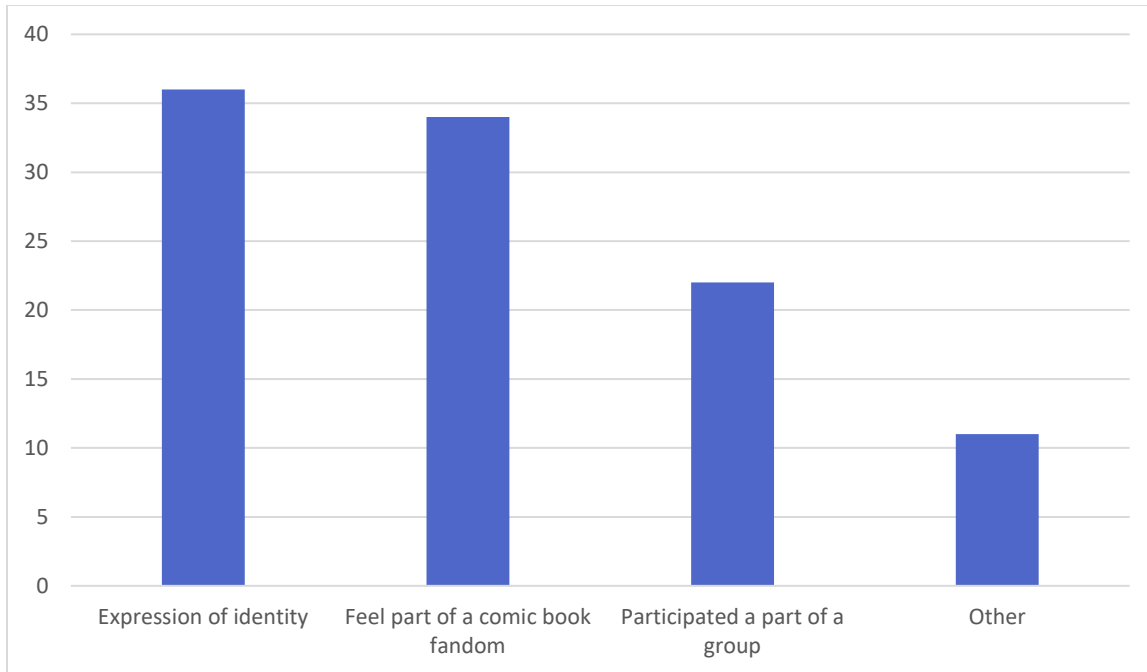


Figure 5: Reasons why the female fan participates in fan activities

Change in the Comic Book Industry

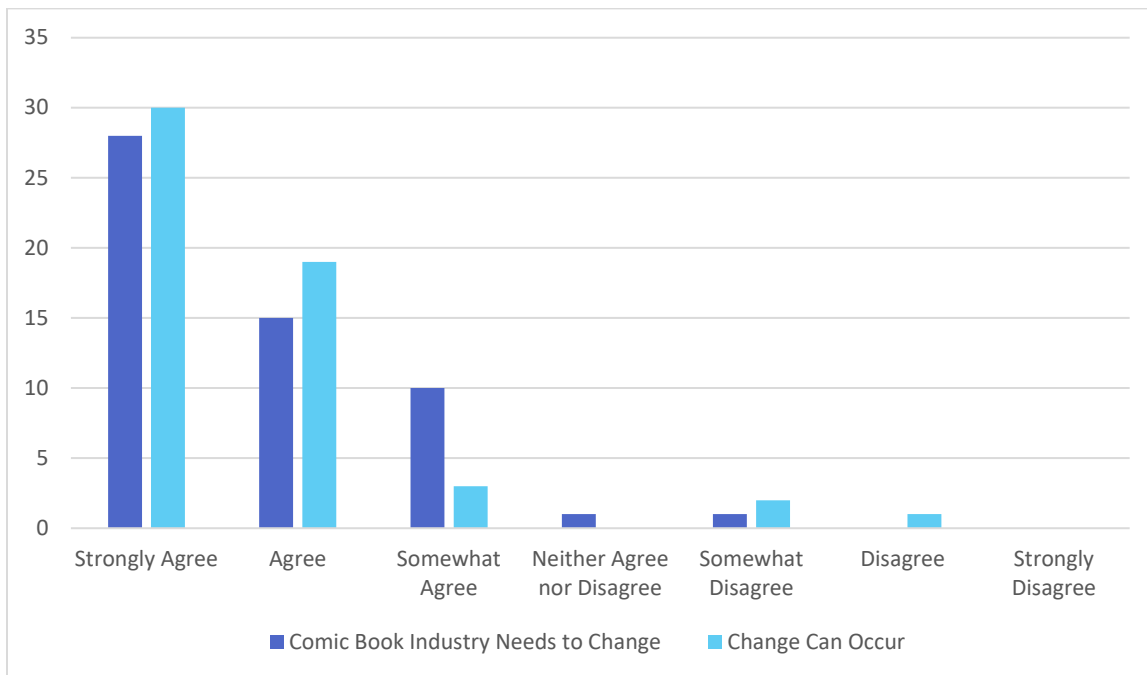


Figure 6: Opinions on change within the comic book industry in regard to diversity in content and readership

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

When asked if they believed that change needed to occur within the comic book industry, specifically regarding diversity in content and readership, 53 of 55 respondents answered that they agreed to some level, with 28 strongly agreeing. The respondents also believed that this change can occur through the prompting of fans. They also believed that this desire for change comes overwhelmingly from mostly female fans, with 45 of 55 respondents answering mostly female fans, and the other 10 answering gender neutral. 65%, or 36 of 55, respondents believed that fans can prompt change within the comic book industry through large group effort targeted at creators, while 33% believed that individual efforts targeted at the comic book companies would result in change. Only 1 respondent believed that fans cannot prompt any change.

Beliefs on the demographics of readership

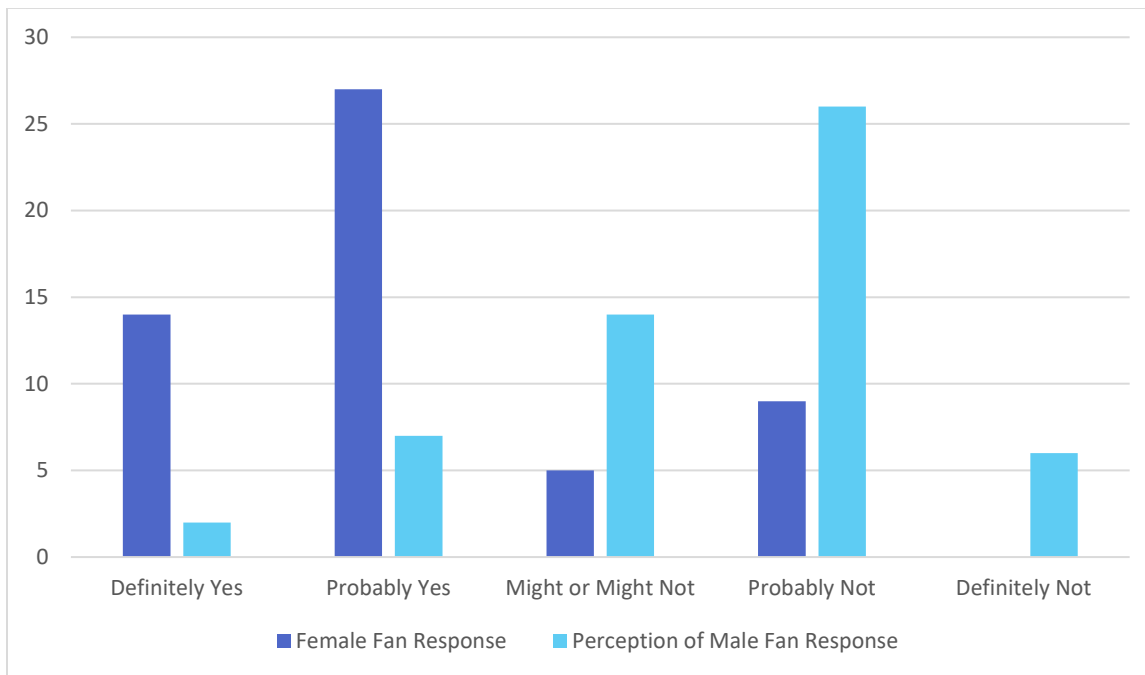


Figure 7: Response to question of a 40:60 female to male fan ratio

When asked if female fans believed a statement that the current ratio of female to male readership was now 40 to 60, 41 respondents answered definitely or probably yes. When asked if

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

male fans would believe the same statement the answer was rather dramatically different, with 25% answering might or might not and 57% answering probably or definitely not.

Discussion

Relationship Between Female Fans and the Comic Book Industry

Research Question 1 examined the relationship between female fans and the comic book industry, looking at both the executive and the creative sides of the industry. Four key findings emerged: that female fans had specific desires that were not being met regarding issues of diversity; that female fans wanted to see champions for the inclusion of diversity within comic books; that female fans believed that comic book publishers ignored the female demographic; and finally, that there was a larger crisis within the comic book industry that was preventing new readership.

From the four focus group sessions, it soon became clear that the female fans were somewhat unimpressed with the comics presented to them. They expressed a desire to see more diversity in both story and art, to see realistic bodies, both male and female, and to see characters with complex psychological backgrounds and stories. This desire for diversity in content and art was primarily but not entirely directed towards the superhero genre – this was something they wished for in all the comics they read. In the words of one participant, “[the most important part is] definitely the personality being more realistic, having real flaws, real challenges to overcome.”

Female fans also wanted to know that the executives behind both mainstream and independent comics were direct in their communication regarding issues of diversity and minority readers. When companies stayed silent on social media regarding controversies, they were considered as giving their tacit support, such as 1B and 4B’s disgust with Marvel allowing a writer to turn Captain America, the creation of two Jews, into the leader of a historically Nazi organization. This was also true of 3B who was angered by Image Comic’s support of a cover

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

depicting a graphic hate crime and considered a boycott of the publisher. What changed her mind was that authors working with Image made clear statements that they considered diversity important and necessary for the comics industry. This desire to see creators champion diverse work online – primarily through social media – was another finding that showcased female fans' perception of the gap between the fan/creator relationship and the fan/executive relationship. They considered the creators to, for the most part, be on their side, whereas the executive side of the comic book industry was perceived as a hindrance to a comic book fandom that was truly welcoming and supportive of its female fans.

Female fans believed that male publishers listened to, and were persuaded to act, not by the majority, but by a vocal male minority. In two different qualitative sessions, this minority was described as “yelling the loudest, and yelling the longest.” Because female fans perceived the publishers as listening to this vocal male minority, one that was stereotyped as very much against a female readership, they saw publishers as adopting to some degree the prejudices of this male minority as their own. These prejudices were explored in Reagle's (2015) article on Fake Geek Girls, an attack on the supposed true plans of women entering comic book fandom. Male fans were afraid that the erotic capital of female fans would be perceived as more powerful than their cultural capital – the accumulated knowledge and possession of comic books – by the mainstream public. This fear may prompt male fans into acting in misogynistic ways, both online in and person. This prejudice against female fans as being in comics for the wrong reason is perhaps one reason why female fans perceive the comic book industry as being slow, if not unwilling, to shift their marketing to target more women. Comic books that are published for women often are not found by women in time, and are summarily canceled leading to a continuation of white heterosexual male heroes and a persistent desire for diversity among the

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

female fans within this study. Many were quick to alleviate some of the blame on the executive for failing to target to women by focusing on the large size of companies like DC and Marvel, and acknowledging that a company that large cannot make cultural shifts quickly enough despite demands for change.

In addition to a belief that the comic book industry was not doing service to its existing female fans, they found that it was also creating and perpetuating barriers of entry to new readership, both male and female. This failure to welcome new fans led participants in the focus groups to deem the comic industry as a whole in crisis. While comic books are continuing to be sold, the audience is not growing at a rate that will sustain the market unless new readers begin to read and, more importantly, to buy. However, many participants believed that the only people buying comic books were those who already considered themselves fan and had the requisite comic book cultural capital to understand the landscape of modern day comics.

As discussed in the literature review, comic book cultural capital is founded both on the actual physical possession of comics, but also with a knowledge of the long history of comic book characters and stories. For the participants in the focus groups, the problem of comic book cultural capital came up as a reference to “too many back issues.” Participants felt that they were unable to start certain comic books or acknowledge themselves as fans of those comic books or characters because they had not read the previous years (and decades) of prior publications. If that was a problem for an existing fan, they reasoned, it would be worse for someone who was trying to break into comics. A female fan who saw the Wonder Woman film and hoped to read more would have no idea where to start, and end up giving up on comics before she could realize how good they could be. The other large barrier to entry was the high cost of single issues. Comics are either sold as 20-page single issues, which are published on a monthly or biweekly

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

basis depending on the company and title, or in trade paperbacks which collect 6 single issues together. Many women reported that they preferred to wait to buy the trade as it is a better value and easier to read and share with friends. They also reported using libraries or friends to read comics without spending money. The fact that many women either buy trades or borrow comics makes them invisible within the comic book industry, which relies on “pull” numbers to show how a comic book is doing. The failure of many female led titles, such as *Mockingbird*, may be due to this alternative form of buying and reading.

Marketing Strategies and Their Effect

Research Question 2 examined what female fans believed about the marketing strategies of the comic book companies and how they affected themselves and others. According to the third person effect theory, non-fans and fans who know less about the issues within the comic book industry will be more affected by comic book media messages than female fans. Three key findings emerged from the focus groups and surveys. The first was that female fans believe that non-fans still hold stereotypes about comic book fans that correspond to a much older version of comic book fandom. The second was that male fans are more influenced by media messages because the comic book industry targets their messages to male fans. Finally, female fans reported that they were less influenced by the comic book industry’s messages, and instead relied on word of mouth.

When asked about what nonfans believed about the comic book industry and comic book fans, female fans believed that many of the old stereotypes about comic books and comic book fans persisted. They believed that nonfans saw the comic book industry as having little to no content featuring female characters or creators, and that the typical fan was a teenage boy. In this stereotyped male-dominated comic book industry there was no room for female fans. They also

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

believed that nonfans were unaware of the genre diversity in the comics industry, such as the Science Fiction, Western and Horror genres. This belief came from their personal experiences before they were introduced to comics, where they found that comic books encompasses a much broader range of content than is perceived from the window created by mainstream popular culture.

Within the industry, female fans believed that the marketing created by the comic book industry was targeted towards primarily male fans, and male fans were more likely to be affected by those comic book media messages. Female fans felt that both social media messages and comic book covers could not be targeted to a female only audience, but had to be targeted in some way to the male audience. They believed that this was due to the executive side's fear that a comic book with only a female audience would not be financially successful. Male fans were also believed to be more affected by those messages than female fans. Finally, female fans believed that other fans, especially newcomers, were attracted to comic books by characters or titles they found familiar, a cover with Deadpool on it would sell a title like Great Lakes Avengers because since the movie, Deadpool is now a household name.

Female fans believed themselves to be less affected by comic book media messages, both from covers and from social media. They did report on relying heavily on word of mouth recommendation from other female fans, including recommendations with spoilers. They found this type of spoiler-filled recommendation important for two reasons. Some fans were worried that they would be judged while browsing, and preferred to enter the store with a specific purchase in mind. Other fans were worried that they would spend money on a story they did not like, perhaps because of art, perhaps because of story, and so relied on a community of fans that had similar tastes to vet comics before they purchased or read them.

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

Female Fan Activities

Research Question 3 examined the activities of female fans, both online and in real life. Three key findings emerged from this question; the online behavior of female fans including who they follow and why; the importance of money as a message to comic book producers; and finally, the idea of fandom as a carefully selected community.

Female fans reported that they followed a wide array of social media accounts connected to the comic book industry. These included the accounts of the comic book publishers themselves, comic book writers, authors who wrote both traditional novels and comic books such as Neil Gaiman, comic book artists, webcomic writers and artists, as well as fellow female fans and accounts dedicated to exploring new perspectives on comic book fandom such as Black Nerd Problems. Female fans reported following these accounts to keep up with news in the industry, such as a comic book creator's new project or an ongoing storyline, but also to create a feeling of connection to the comic book creators and a feeling of community. It was important to female fans in the study to have this feeling of connection because it led to a belief that they were being viewed as an important readership and that their desires for content would be seen and validated. Some also felt that following these accounts enhanced their reading experience, as they gained insight into what creators were thinking when they wrote or drew a particular scene.

When asked about their fan behaviors, female fans also reported that the deceptively simple act of buying comics was in their minds, a fan activity. Within the focus groups, female fans reported believing that money was the only message that the comic book companies heard. By supporting their preferred comics financially, they were able to continue their publication and create new opportunities for female readers to find comic books that would appeal to them and in turn create new female fans. This claim is somewhat contradicted by their actual behavior, many

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

of the female fans in this study reported that they bought trade paperbacks rather than single issues if they actually bought comics at all. This contradiction means that their avowed support of the comic books of their choice may not be as strong as they believe it to be, since their dollar is being saved or spent in such a way that is not seen by the comic book industry.

Finally, female fans saw their activities as the creation of a particular fan community. This female fan community did not encompass all of comic book fandom, but was curated through selective participation. This included female fans using social media to only follow artists and writers that were known to be diversity friendly, and blocking accounts that tried to attack female fans for their fandom. By creating a primarily female-friendly community online, female fans had a space within comic book fandom where they were not afraid of judgement from male fans regarding their gender or their lack of comic book cultural capital. It was from this female fan community that female fans generated the word-of-mouth recommendations for what to read and purchase. Female fans also reported using apparel and toys as a signaling device of their fandom in order to create and foster this comic book community in real life. While ascertaining exactly what comic book a person is reading while they walk down the street is impossible, a female fan wearing a shirt or a pin is broadcasting her fandom for others.

Why Do Female Fans Act?

Research Question 4 examined the connection between the female fan's activities and her perception of the industry. Four key findings emerged: that female fans believe that change in the industry can only come through large group effort; that male fans do not see or acknowledge female fans; that female fans are apprehensive about certain fan on fan interactions; and finally, a willingness to go outside the industry to support content that they want.

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

Female fans reported that they believed change needed to occur within the comic book industry specifically in regard to diversity in content and readership. As talked about in the discussion earlier, female readers want to see content that reflects a more realistic and diverse reality rather than homogenous white males with superpowers and female characters as romantic support. However, there was some disagreement about how that change would come about – some fans believed that an individual could make a change within the industry, while the majority believed that change would result from large scale pressure upon both creators and executives. They cited the importance of the internet as a way to create communities and power movements that could then ask for specific things – for example, a third season of the show *Young Justice* – and keep asking until they achieved their goals. Far fewer female fans believed that a single fan could bring about such change. When female fans spoke of the power of the individual, it was to create small scale change within their personal connections, and the ability of the individual to act as a guide for others into the larger female fans of comic books community.

Another finding from both parts of the study was that female fans believe that male fans do not acknowledge the increased female readership in comics, and that this invisibility of female fans is permeating throughout the entire comic book industry. Female fans were quick to respond that they did not believe that male fans, especially the vocal minority mentioned earlier, would not believe that female readers make up 40% of the readership. They also mentioned that if male fans did believe this they may be aggressive towards what they saw as “women ruining comic books.” This finding is consistent with Reagle’s paper on male response to the “Fake Geek Girl” (2015). Female fan behavior, especially the creation of visible communities, may have the goal of counteracting this male blind spot both in fans and in the executive side of the

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

comic book industry. It is important to note that while female fans believe that a more visible community, in combination with more support from producers and creators, will help change the comic book industry their tendency to create female only spaces online may be hurting rather than helping their cause. By not engaging with male fans they perpetuate their own invisibility and contribute to the current state of comic book fandom.

A somewhat surprising finding from this study was that female fans carry apprehensions about negative experiences with male fans, even if their own personal histories- in one case ranging nearly twenty years – does not support those apprehensions. There was some contradiction between the focus groups and the surveys regarding how common these apprehensions are; while there were reports of fear of negative interactions with male fans from both the focus groups and the survey participants, in general the survey participants were less apprehensive. This may be due to multiple factors; the wording of the question, the fact that the survey respondents were not in a comic book at the time and therefore further removed from those feelings, or the fact that many of the focus group participants did admit that they were overall socially anxious already. Despite this contradiction, it is important to realize and focus on the fact that these apprehensions exist even when female fans have years of positive experience. This fear makes comics less accessible not only to established female fans, but also to female readers who may want to be fans but are too afraid of these negative experiences to enter the physical spaces of comic book fandom.

Finally, this study found that female fans are turning away from traditional comic book publishing in order to satisfy their desires. This alternative comic book publishing are known as webcomics, and are often digital, self-published comics funded through online means such as Kickstarter campaigns or Patreon. Webcomics are, for the most part, digital in nature however

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

they are sometimes available as large printed books when creators self-publish using crowdfunding to pay for printing costs. What is important to note about female fan support of webcomics is that webcomics are known as being much friendlier to female creators, as the barriers of entry into the profession of comic artist are simply not there. The webcomics mentioned by participants in this study are overwhelmingly created by women in striking opposition to the traditional comics.

Conclusion

This thesis on the perceptions and behaviors of female comic book fans is not intended to answer any and all questions about the current female fan. In fact, this research has raised some questions especially regarding the contradictions between desires and actual behaviors that female fans report. Female fans say they spend money to support the books of their choice yet also report not purchasing single issues which are the key data points comic book companies use to gauge the success of a title. Females fan say that they want to be more visible, that visibility will lead to the change they want to see within the market, yet often act in ways that perpetuate their own invisibility including refusing to interact with male fans in spaces that executives may be watching. It is the role of future studies to work past the limitations of this thesis and to further explore the contradictions of the female comic book fan.

Limitations

As with any student researched study, the main limitation for this work is its limited scope. It would have been preferable that the focus groups had closer to 30 participants, rather than 11. It may also have benefitted from focus groups in more than one city as the local comic bookstore can make a huge difference in the experiences of a female fan.

There are also the limitations inherent in creating the ad-hoc online survey; it is crucial to note that this survey is not quantitative because it is not random, nor did it calculate significance. Therefore, the thesis is limited in its reliance on only qualitative data. However, due to the issues of scope within the focus groups, the survey was deemed necessary to provide more information on the beliefs and behaviors of female fans. It is also possible that wording within the survey did not adequately capture the answer this thesis sought, specifically in questions regarding experiences. It is highly possible that participants responded with impressions of comic

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

bookstores and other fans rather than memories of actual interactions. This thesis is also limited by what it did not focus on, specifically the demographics of its participants. Neither age nor race were captured in a meaningful way either in the focus groups or the online surveys.

Future Directions

As comic book fandom is a relatively young field, and female comic book fandom even more so there are many possibilities for future studies. One possible study could be an in-depth analysis of the ways male and female fans buy comic books to determine if there is a significant difference in their purchasing behavior. As discussed within this thesis, the fact that female fans report purchasing trade paperbacks rather than single issues may add to their invisibility within both the consumer and fan landscape for the comic book industry. Another could look at the social media messaging, specifically that on Twitter, to determine how gendered messaging is rather than how gendered it is perceived. Understanding the difference between what is happening in the industry and what is perceived about the industry is important step to take in comprehending all facets of comic book fandom, especially female fandom. It would also be beneficial to look at diversity – in age, race, and political leanings – and its impacts on fan perceptions and behaviors both for male and female fans.

Final Thoughts

As the researcher's brother asked her over dinner, why do female comic book fans and marketing strategies matter in the scheme of things? For one, comic book companies, especially those who are owned by large entertainment companies, such as Warner Brother's ownership of DC and Disney's of Marvel, make money. And female fans are often the ones who are spending that money. As an increasingly financially powerful and increasingly vocal part of the comic book industry, female fans are crucial for the comic book industry to survive. It is no coincidence

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

that the Golden Age of comics is not when superhero comics cornered the market, but when female readers were the majority. The problem with the comic book industry now, as the findings of this study show, is that they have unwittingly created an atmosphere that is remarkably unwelcoming to new entrants. This thesis does not and cannot provide sure ways that the comic book industry can fix this issue. It is a problem that rests at all levels of comic book fandom, from an executive side of the industry that female fans perceive as being only about the financial viability of a comic, to creators that are known for bluntly, creating bland and misogynistic comics, to male fans that make both the internet and the local comic bookstore an apprehensive experience for female readers. However, that is not to say there is no hope. Many of the female participants in this study reported that they believed that comic book fandom is getting better. It is also possible that female fans will do what they said they wanted to do in this study: be part of a larger community that lobbies for change. It is important to remember that despite their critiques, and the researcher's critiques, of the comic book industry, these women really love comics. They want things to change because they want comics to stick around and they see that current strategies aren't working. Comic book sales are down, and the comics being produced have some very obvious problems. If female fans could successfully lobby creators for more diverse stories and characters, and if those comics could be marketed in a targeted way to women, than this researcher believes that the comic book industry could see a change it hasn't seen in decades. The audience is there – it is up to the comic book industry to figure out how to reach her.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Fan Discussion Guide for Focus Group

Consent Process

Thank you for agreeing to participate. Before we begin I want to let you know the following.

- *The purpose of this study is to learn what female fans think about comic book marketing strategies.*
- *The information you give us is completely confidential, and we will not associate your name within anything you say in the focus group.*
- *We would like to record the focus groups that we can make sure to capture the thoughts, opinions, and ideas we hear from the group. These video recordings are only for the researcher and will not be shared.*
- *You may refuse to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time.*
- *Please fill out the consent form if you agree to participate in this focus group.*

Introduction

1. Explanation of the process
 - a. This is about gathering information, not reaching a consensus. I want to hear your thoughts. There are no wrong answers.
 - b. Focus group will last about an hour and a half.
 - c. Feel free to move around. We will take a short break half way through to stretch.
 - d. Please help yourself to refreshments.
2. Ground Rules
 - a. Everyone should participate
 - b. Information provided in the focus group must be kept confidential.
 - c. Stay with the group and please don't have side conversations.
 - d. Turn off cell phones or put them on silent.
 - e. Have fun!
3. Begin recording.
4. Ask the group if there are any questions, and answer if necessary.
5. Introductions
 - a. Go around the group and say what comic you are currently reading.

Social Media Marketing

1. Raise your hands if you follow any comic book companies, authors, or characters on social media.

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

- a. If you do, why?

Listen for: reasons why fans follow social media accounts, emotions associated with following these accounts.

Probe for: Do you perceive a benefit to being connected to comic producers on social media?

Have you ever been in a situation where a message made you feel positively? Feel negatively?

Did this message come from a fan or from a creator?

2. What do you think **the stereotypes are of the people who follow comic book accounts? What do you think they are actually like?**

Listen for: thoughts on other fans, what other fans say or do

Probe for: Do you think social media messages matter more to other people? Why do you think other people follow these accounts?

Comic Book Content

3. I have here three comic books, I would like to hear from each of you which of these you would chose based on the cover art. Why that issue and not the others?

Listen for: how the cover art makes the participant feel, how/if they consider this part of the comic book experience

Probe for: Do you find yourself drawn to characters who are more realistic – both in terms of actual design (such as body shape and costuming) and in terms of their personalities and storylines? Who do you think makes final decisions on cover art – editorial or a marketing team? Who do you think they consider when designing cover art for issues?

4. Of the three comic books we are looking at, which do you think a stranger would pick?

Listen for: thoughts on other fans, reasons why they think fans would chose a comic book

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

Probe for: How much do other comic book fans care about the comic book content? What do you think they consider when they chose a comic book?

Do you think comics succeed because people buy them, or do you think that corporations decide what is succeeding based on data that the audience might not get to see? How does this tie into issues of gender and diversity?

Fan Activities

5. Raise your hand if you have done any of the following:
 - a. Followed or contributed to an online group
 - b. Attended an event here at StarClipper or at another comic bookstore
 - c. Attended a book club for comics
 - d. Bought toys or apparel
 - e. Attended a comic book convention
 - f. **Done cosplay or written fanfiction/drawn fanart**

6. Why did you decide to do any of the following?

Listen for: specific activities, specific experiences, feelings

7. When you engage in fan behavior, do you ever consider what others might think of you?

Are they thinking of you in particular, or more you as a female fan?

Listen for: specific encounters, feelings

Probe for: Have you ever had an encounter with another fan on social media? In real life?

8. Do you ever hope that your fan activities might change the comic book industry? **Do you think your fan activities might impact other fans?**

Listen for: specific examples, feelings

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

*Probe for: the diversity of titles, change in comic book content, **changes in perceptions about female fandom***

9. **If I told you that the demographics of comic readership was now 40% women to 60% men would you believe that? Do you think a male fan would believe that?**

Comic Books Shown

Focus Group 1

Inhumans vs X-Men #6, Batman Rebirth #24, Batgirl and the Birds of Prey #11, The Great Lakes Avengers #7, Invincible #136

Interview



Bombshells #29, The Great Lakes Avengers #7, Inhumans vs X-Men #6, Batgirl and the Birds of Prey #11

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

Focus Group 3



Batgirl and the Birds of Prey #12, Hulk #8 (2017)

Focus Group 4



Batgirl and the Birds of Prey #12, Hulk #8 (2017)

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

Appendix B

Q1 - Please choose which gender you identify as:

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Female	86.81%	79
2	Male	13.19%	12
	Total	100%	91

Q2 - Please select your age range.

#	Answer	%	Count
1	18-24	29.03%	18
2	25-35	62.90%	39
3	36-55	8.06%	5
4	56-65	0.00%	0
5	65 or older	0.00%	0
	Total	100%	62

Q3 – What was the last comic book you read?

Q4- Which most accurately describes your buying behavior for comic books?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Single issues	32.26%	20
2	Trade Paperbacks	38.71%	24
3	Do not buy comic books	29.03%	18
	Total	100%	62

Do not buy comic books

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

Do not buy comic books

I read them in the store or rent them through the library.

Volumes

I check out trade paperbacks from my local library system

Library and friends

I check them out or find online

Check them out of the library

Both single issue and TPB

Check out at library, subscribe to Marvel Unlimited

I buy them by the volume (paperback)

Both single issues and TPB

Q5 - How frequently do you use the following social media?

#	Question	5-7 days per week		3-4 days per week		2 or fewer days per week		Never		Total
1	Facebook	93.22%	55	3.39%	2	1.69%	1	1.69%	1	59
2	Twitter	31.58%	18	17.54%	10	14.04%	8	36.84%	21	57
3	Instagram	27.12%	16	13.56%	8	28.81%	17	30.51%	18	59
4	Tumblr	20.69%	12	8.62%	5	15.52%	9	55.17%	32	58
5	Snapchat	17.24%	10	20.69%	12	13.79%	8	48.28%	28	58

Q6 - Please select any type of comic book account you follow on the listed social media platforms.

#	Question	Facebook		Twitter		Instagram		Tumblr		Snapchat		Total
1	Comic book company	42.65%	29	26.47%	18	16.18%	11	11.76%	8	2.94%	2	68
2	Comic book author	33.85%	22	30.77%	20	16.92%	11	18.46%	12	0.00%	0	65
3	Comic book artist	25.37%	17	28.36%	19	23.88%	16	22.39%	15	0.00%	0	67

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

4	Comic book character	39.02%	16	26.83%	11	14.63%	6	19.51%	8	0.00%	0	41
5	Webcomic author	30.00%	18	26.67%	16	18.33%	11	25.00%	15	0.00%	0	60
6	Webcomic artist	25.37%	17	29.85%	20	20.90%	14	23.88%	16	0.00%	0	67

Q7 - Please rank the benefits for following social media accounts from most to least important.

#	Question	1		2		3		4		5		Total
1	News or updates on comic book projects	51.72%	30	12.07%	7	12.07%	7	20.69%	12	3.45%	2	58
2	Feeling of being part of a comic book community	17.24%	10	13.79%	8	24.14%	14	22.41%	13	22.41%	13	58
3	Feeling of connection to authors/illustrators	12.07%	7	34.48%	20	31.03%	18	18.97%	11	3.45%	2	58
4	New perspectives on issues of diversity or representation	12.07%	7	31.03%	18	24.14%	14	20.69%	12	12.07%	7	58
5	Creates a visible personal identity online	6.90%	4	8.62%	5	8.62%	5	17.24%	10	58.62%	34	58

Q8 - Do you ever anticipate a possible negative experience when you interact with comic book companies or creators online?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Definitely yes	8.93%	5
2	Probably yes	17.86%	10
3	Might or might not	26.79%	15
4	Probably not	37.50%	21
5	Definitely not	8.93%	5

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

Q9 - Have you ever experienced a negative experience when you interacted with comic book companies or creators online?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Definitely yes	7.14%	4
2	Probably yes	3.57%	2
3	Might or might not	3.57%	2
4	Probably not	51.79%	29
5	Definitely not	33.93%	19
	Total	100%	56

Q9A - Please describe this negative experience and how it made you feel.

Please describe this negative experience and how it made you feel.

I got attacked by nick spencers Twitter assholes and it made me feel like nothing I said mattered and also that a comic disagreement somehow merited a rape threat

I routinely get questioned if the comics I buy are for my son. I'm over 40 so there is both the double standard that I'm a woman and I'm older so the comics aren't meant for me. My son does love comics, but so does my daughter. It makes me defensive to be questioned about my purchases.

Right now a lot of companies are so excited about the success of the wonder woman movie that they make whatever product they can using wonder woman. However it's very obvious that many of these companies don't understand why people love wonder woman, so they make tasteless products that no one who actually likes wonder woman would actually buy

I was called names and told my opinions didn't count/matter and that I didn't know what I was talking about. It made me feel like I wasn't allowed to be a "real" fan.

It made me feel like I wasn't a real fan. Like my readership wasn't wanted as I wasn't the target audience

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

Q10 - Do you ever anticipate a possible negative experience when you interact with other comic book fans online?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Definitely yes	23.21%	13
2	Probably yes	41.07%	23
3	Might or might not	26.79%	15
4	Probably not	7.14%	4
5	Definitely not	1.79%	1
	Total	100%	56

Q11 - Have you ever experienced a negative experience when you interacted with other comic book fans online?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Definitely yes	17.86%	10
2	Probably yes	23.21%	13
3	Might or might not	26.79%	15
4	Probably not	21.43%	12
5	Definitely not	10.71%	6
	Total	100%	56

Q11A - Please describe this negative experience and how it made you feel.

Please describe this negative experience and how it made you feel.

A particular commenter on a fan page questioned my knowledge. When I was able to hold my own and prove my prowess, they proceeded to attack me personally

Cyber bullying. Makes me feel like the thugs I like to read are not valued or "correct"

A million negative experiences, insults and rape threats and death threats. It's extremely alienating

There is a good portion of the comic book community involved in 4Chan and trolling. They tend to cross lines of what's appropriate and can become bullies. While not the subject of it, when I see ppl in

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

my community posting memes that mock someone or intentionally say things to hurt someone, it angers me. There was a time that I would argue back, but in the age of internet trolls, it's impossible to argue as that is what they are trying to accomplish. Instead I acknowledge that it's distasteful and I don't respond when they start badgering. It makes me lose faith in humanity.

Ridiculed over a different opinion on comic characters such as not well written female characters. I felt like there was no place for myself in the community.

I filled this out wrong- that last essay answer should have been here. No comic book (creator? company? I must have misread the question) has directly called me names or anything like that.

It made me never go back to that shop. I wasn't treated like a valued customer. I felt like a second class citizen for being a woman.

Some other people in the D.C. fandom on Tumblr like to ship Harlequin and joker, which is something that I am not cool with because of the physical, emotional, and even implied sexual abuse in the ship. This made me feel invalidated because I was also in an abusive relationship, and it made me feel like the fandom and maybe even the company was condoning/romanticizing abuse.

I dressed up a Dark Phoenix for Halloween and looked the part but some commenters joked that I was pretty good as a "yellow" Jean Grey, due to my being part Asian and Jean Grey is white.

There's a stigma against women being 'fake' in enjoying nerdy activities. It definitely makes me feel unwelcome.

Q12 - Do you anticipate a possible negative experience when you enter a comic bookstore?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Definitely yes	8.77%	5
2	Probably yes	19.30%	11
3	Might or might not	29.82%	17
4	Probably not	28.07%	16
5	Definitely not	14.04%	8
	Total	100%	57

Q13 - Have you ever had a negative experience within a comic bookstore?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Definitely yes	15.79%	9
2	Probably yes	14.04%	8
3	Might or might not	7.02%	4

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

4	Probably not	40.35%	23
5	Definitely not	22.81%	13
	Total	100%	57

Q13A - Please describe this negative experience and how it made you feel.

I have found myself uncomfortable in shops that don't appear welcoming (poorly lit or furnished, old longboxes, store resembles a basement) whose shopkeepers often seem patronizing or leering, greeting me in a way that makes me feel conscious I'm a single woman on my own. I have consciously resolved not to return to these shops.

store with posters of overtly sexual uses characters all over the walls and naturally the retailer and a customer were talking about how the like certain characters "hotter" than they were currently being drawn. It was gross.

Idiots harassing me.

Creepy men hitting on me because I am somehow "made" for them because we share a single interest

Around the time Lumberjanes came out I went into a local store asking if they carried it. The man behind the counter said "I've never heard of that one. Are you sure you aren't thinking of a movie or TV show?" I was pissed and haven't been in that store since.

Judging me on my appearance. Thinking I was only there with my friend and not interested in the comics myself. It made me feel very uncomfortable.

Dismissive, slightly. Some shops are overtly... Sexualized collectors figurines and posters. The chains on particular.

Get treated differently because I am an attractive female. I do not feel welcomed.

Mostly just felt like my tastes were being judged.

I was in a comic store and one of the guys who worked at the store did not believe I was there to buy comics for myself. When I told him the comics (it was Batman) were for me, he began quizzing me on my Batman knowledge, like he was trying to catch me in a lie.

-overhearing sexist conversations about female comic book characters -shopkeepers expecting that I don't know anything about comics because I'm a girl -shopkeepers knowing nothing about women's comics, like wonder woman or Supergirl, because they don't care about women's representation

Frustrated. The interaction was based purely on me being female.

It made me feel seen as just my gender and I felt slightly condescended to and given suggestions that were seen as "for girls."

I feel like comic book employees think female costumers need more help, they are looking for a present or just ignored entirely.

I felt creeped out, although I felt better the next time I was in the store, when the manager apologized to me.

Ignored and scoffed at by all male staff.

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

Q14 - What types of fans do you anticipate having a possible negative interaction with?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Only male fans	24.56%	14
2	Mostly male fans	68.42%	39
3	Gender is not a factor	1.75%	1
4	Mostly female fans	3.51%	2
5	Only female fans	1.75%	1
	Total	100%	57

Q15 - In your opinion, the target market for most comic books are:

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Only male fans	3.57%	2
2	Mostly male fans	85.71%	48
3	Gender is not a factor	10.71%	6
4	Mostly female fans	0.00%	0
5	Only female fans	0.00%	0
	Total	100%	56

Q16 - Which group do you believe is most affected by comic book companies' social media messages?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Only male fans	0.00%	0
2	Mostly male fans	42.59%	23
3	Gender is not a factor	42.59%	23
4	Mostly female fans	14.81%	8
5	Only female fans	0.00%	0

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

Q17 - How likely are you to pick up this comic book based on its cover?



#	Answer	%	Count
1	Extremely likely	44.64%	25
2	Moderately likely	26.79%	15
3	Slightly likely	8.93%	5
4	Neither likely nor unlikely	5.36%	3
5	Slightly unlikely	8.93%	5
6	Moderately unlikely	0.00%	0
7	Extremely unlikely	5.36%	3
	Total	100%	56

Q17A - Why would you pick up this comic book?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Looks interesting	52.08%	25
2	Recognized title	22.92%	11
3	Recognized characters	2.08%	1
4	Currently reading this	22.92%	11
	Total	100%	48

Q17B - Why would you not pick up this comic book?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Not my preferred genre of comic book	45.45%	5
2	Don't know or recognize title or characters	18.18%	2
3	Feel that I wouldn't understand what was going on without having read back issues	9.09%	1
4	Did not like the cover	27.27%	3
	Total	100%	11

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

Q18 - How likely are you to pick up this comic book (Batgirl and the Birds of Prey #12) based on its cover?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Extremely likely	23.64%	13
2	Moderately likely	21.82%	12
3	Slightly likely	27.27%	15
4	Neither likely nor unlikely	10.91%	6
5	Slightly unlikely	3.64%	2
6	Moderately unlikely	9.09%	5
7	Extremely unlikely	3.64%	2
	Total	100%	55

Q18A - Why would you pick up this comic book?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Looks interesting	17.39%	8
2	Recognized title	19.57%	9
3	Recognized characters	56.52%	26
4	Currently reading this	6.52%	3
	Total	100%	46

Q18B - Why would you not pick up this comic book?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Not my preferred genre of comic book	60.00%	9
2	Don't know or recognize title or characters	0.00%	0
3	Feel that I wouldn't understand what was going on without having read back issues	20.00%	3
4	Did not like the cover	20.00%	3
	Total	100%	15

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

Q19 - How likely are you to pick up this comic book (Hulk #8) based on its cover?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Extremely likely	18.18%	10
2	Moderately likely	18.18%	10
3	Slightly likely	30.91%	17
4	Neither likely nor unlikely	10.91%	6
5	Slightly unlikely	9.09%	5
6	Moderately unlikely	10.91%	6
7	Extremely unlikely	1.82%	1
	Total	100%	55

Q19A - Why would you pick up this comic book?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Looks interesting	27.91%	12
2	Recognized title	16.28%	7
3	Recognized characters	53.49%	23
4	Currently reading this	2.33%	1
	Total	100%	43

Q19B - Why would you not pick up this comic book?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Not my preferred genre of comic book	38.89%	7
2	Don't know or recognize title or characters	5.56%	1
3	Feel that I wouldn't understand what was going on without having read back issues	22.22%	4
4	Did not like the cover	33.33%	6
	Total	100%	18

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

Q20 - To whom do you think this cover is targeted towards?



#	Answer	%	Count
1	Only male readers	0.00%	0
2	Mostly male readers	3.64%	2
3	Gender neutral	32.73%	18
4	Mostly female readers	63.64%	35
5	Only female readers	0.00%	0
	Total	100%	55

Q21- To whom do you think this cover is targeted towards (Batgirl and the Birds of Prey)?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Only male readers	0.00%	0
2	Mostly male readers	50.91%	28
3	Gender neutral	27.27%	15
4	Mostly female readers	21.82%	12
5	Only female readers	0.00%	0
	Total	100%	55

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

Q22 - To whom do you think this cover (Hulk #8) is targeted towards?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Only male readers	0.00%	0
2	Mostly male readers	7.27%	4
3	Gender neutral	54.55%	30
4	Mostly female readers	34.55%	19
5	Only female readers	3.64%	2
	Total	100%	55

Q23 - Please check the box if you have done or do any of the following fan activities.

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Followed or contributed to an online group or Kickstarter campaign specifically devoted to comics	10.64%	20
2	Attended an event at a comic bookstore	21.28%	40
3	Attended a book club for comics	6.38%	12
4	Bought toys or apparel	25.53%	48
5	Attended a comic book convention	20.21%	38
6	Done cosplay or written fanfiction/drawn fanart	15.96%	30
	Total	100%	188

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

Q24 - Why did you decide to participate in fan activities? Please choose all that apply.

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Wanted to express my identity as a comic book fan	34.95%	36
2	Wanted to feel part of a comic book fandom	33.01%	34
3	Participated as part of a group	21.36%	22
4	Other	10.68%	11
	Total	100%	103

Other

Enjoyed the comics and the experience

Enjoy the experience, my whole family attends conventions

Enjoyment: it's fun.

fun

Wanted to meet a specific author and illustrator

They sounded fun

Fun

Felt inspired by characters or story

Wanted to help bring an idea to life

Wanted to have fun appreciating the comic, interacting outside of the comic

Simply for fun

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

Q25 - I believe that the comic book industry needs to change in regards to diversity of content and readership.

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Strongly agree	50.91%	28
2	Agree	27.27%	15
3	Somewhat agree	18.18%	10
4	Neither agree nor disagree	1.82%	1
5	Somewhat disagree	1.82%	1
6	Disagree	0.00%	0
7	Strongly disagree	0.00%	0
	Total	100%	55

Q26 - I believe that fans can prompt change within the comic book industry

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Strongly agree	54.55%	30
2	Agree	34.55%	19
3	Somewhat agree	5.45%	3
4	Neither agree nor disagree	0.00%	0
5	Somewhat disagree	3.64%	2
6	Disagree	1.82%	1
7	Strongly disagree	0.00%	0
	Total	100%	55

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

Q27 - I believe that the following group of fans wants change within the comic book industry:

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Only male fans	0.00%	0
2	Mostly male fans	0.00%	0
3	Gender neutral	18.18%	10
4	Mostly female fans	81.82%	45
5	Only female fans	0.00%	0
	Total	100%	55

Q28 - How can fans prompt change within the comic book industry?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Through large group effort targeted at the creators	65.45%	36
2	Through individual effort targeted at the comic book companies	32.73%	18
3	Fans cannot prompt change within the comic book industry	1.82%	1
	Total	100%	55

Q29 - If I told you that the demographics of comic book readership was now 40% women and 60% men would you believe that?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Definitely yes	25.45%	14
2	Probably yes	49.09%	27
3	Might or might not	9.09%	5
4	Probably not	16.36%	9
5	Definitely not	0.00%	0
	Total	100%	55

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

Q30 - If I told you that the demographics of comic book readership was now 40% women and 60% men would a male fan believe that?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Definitely yes	3.64%	2
2	Probably yes	12.73%	7
3	Might or might not	25.45%	14
4	Probably not	47.27%	26
5	Definitely not	10.91%	6
	Total	100%	55

Q34 - If you have any comments or thoughts about comic books and fandom please leave them here!

If you have any comments or thoughts about comic books and fandom please le...

In my year of regularly reading comics I have largely had far more positive experiences than negative ones. It has made me grow closer to the male comics fans in my life who are kind individuals always willing to answer my questions, make recommendations, and not look down on me for being a new fan and a woman. I have also had extremely positive interactions with male clerks who were eager to talk to me about my purchases and what I like to read. However, I do still find myself anticipating being accused of being a "fake geek girl" or otherwise having hostile interactions with male fans I don't know. I sometimes hesitate to read comics in public for this reason.

My least favorite male fan is the one who complains about his favorite character getting "ruined" by a woman. Whether it is Chelsea Cain writing Mockingbird or Iron Man bring a WOC.

I feel like some comics have such a backlog of content (mostly Marvel and DC series) that there is no good jumping in point so those series are always going to be more for male audiences. Not necessarily because of the nature of the content but it feels like these are the comics that have gatekeepers and those gatekeepers tend to be guys who don't want girls in "their" hobbies.

Being involved in the comic fandom community, creators have definitely recognized that half of their readers are females (at one point, we were hearing 60% females in both comics and video games). While there are still a lot of female characters posing in unreal contortions, the male characters are still equally unrealistic in their muscle mass. There's been a huge surge in female characters taking leads, even in kids' books like Intersellar Cinderella.

I do less social media, fandom stuff in general, not comic specific. But I may have withdrawn after years of deciding it's just not my thing, fully, to endorse the biz in general. The imagery gets exhausting after a while. And the community, male-centric, feels like there is arrested development (women and men both participate in it). I follow a few comics, typically when an artist and writer align to my tastes. And I chose them based on one or two trusted opinions.

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

I follow a lot of webcomic/comic artists and writers on Twitter, but mostly the inclusive/diversity-promoting ones. Tess Fowler and Kelly Sue DeConnick are some of my favorites.

One thing that sticks out in my memory related to comic books is that infamous cover on an issue of Spider Gwen. I really liked how much discussion that sparked. Since then, looking at panels, it's so easy to see how dominated they are by the male gaze. As a female fan, it can be very frustrating, even if the male characters are in unnaturally contorted poses sometimes too since the male characters aren't being sexualized. I also do not really trust most male fans. I haven't been to the comic bookstores near where I live. I am too anxious about being approached by male fans or having my tastes or knowledge questioned, so I don't go in. I haven't had a negative experience like that, but I have heard about so many negative experiences from others that I am anxious about it. I don't know if I'm welcome there. I have found a place online where I can discuss comics a bit with mostly other female fans.

I like stories. It bugs me that people feel like there HAVE to be girls or certain types of girls or that there HAVE be certain kinds of guys. A story is a story. Let the author write what he/she sees in their heads.

I think it's important to note that the past few years have seen ENORMOUS amounts of change in the industry. We went from boob-acious Carol Danvers in 2008 to Kamala Khan in 2013. As such, the demographics of comic books have changed along with it. I have more girlfriends who read comics than guy friends, though it's still obvi that the industry still needs reform, and it's still really toxic to female creators (the Mockingbird cover fiasco, for example, which drove a best-selling author off Twitter). Ultimately, I believe it's the companies that will cause change. Boom! Studios and Image have much more female-friendly offices, and as such they have much more female-friendly products. DC and Marvel on the other hand.... Well. For more stats, there's a monthly count of female creators at a blog called "Straightened Circumstances." But you probably knew all this already. LOVE that you're working on this!

I think your study needs to include more than 2 genders Also I think your study may require more write-in answers. For example, re: rat queens and birds of prey, one reason why I might not pick up the next issue of rat queens is because the quality of the story has declined in my opinion since the second compilation. And re: birds of prey, there are at least three different origin storylines and following issues. One of them maintains Oracle in wheelchair, meaning more visibility for people with disabilities, however the cover you showed is from the controversial storyline where Batgirl is "healed" and it has been considered a not-so-evil good choice in terms of disability representation. One other thing is that cover art is often drawn by someone who is not the artist for the whole comic book, so if someone cares a lot about the art style, they will never make their decision to read the book based on the cover. This is because inside art, often drawn by male artists, can be very sexist even if the storyline is not sexist (why must they contort the bodies so you must see boobs and butts at the same time?) I generally never choose to read the book based on the cover, but go through the first few pages to see if the art is good and if the storyline is good to decide if I want to buy the comic book. Also, on another question, the reason why I reported that I don't have negative interactions with other comic book fans online is because I refuse to interact with other comic book fans online, the propensity for verbal abuse is too high.

What an interesting study! Excited to see the results. I definitely feel that things have become way more inclusive since I started reading comics. Finding other women online with similar interests is a huge help (I love the MarySue).

Thank you for having me in your project :) I hope this data helps you with your thesis paper!

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

The gender binary is convenient but I feel like it's an extreme simplification in these modern times and especially when discussing demographics and what people like. When people cry for diversity in comics, I feel they are crying for *all kinds* not just more visible women, although that is a logical beginning.

The reason I said it only needs to slightly change is that right now there is a lot of new books and creators and ideas that have come up from a recent past change. I believe we are in the middle of a change to more female characters, female authors, and female artists. So while more would always be better, I didn't want to say totally change because that would get rid of the change that is happening now.

Although change is slow, I believe both the large comic companies and the independent books are slowly embracing diversity.

Comics like books and movies, have characters, settings, writing, themes, artwork that are appreciated for whatever reason (e.g. escapism, realism, inspiration), that stick with people. We fall in love with those things and get to enjoy carrying the impressions with us, outside of strictly the time spent reading.

I believe things are changing in regards to representation within comic books. This may be because my personal experiences are positive whenever I speak with others (in person) about comics or visit the comic bookstore (that an old friend from school owns). I may simply be removed from most of the negativity, especially since I only follow, not participate, when using social media. I do believe nasty, nasty things happen constantly online, but I am, at this moment, hopeful for the future of females and other underrepresented groups within the community. I would also like to add that, in addition to buying single issues and TPBs, I borrow most of my comics from the library (where I work and am always happy to make purchasing and borrowing recommendations).

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

Appendix C

Themes	Domain	Subdomain	Details	Quotes	Notes
Want	What Do Female Fans Want to See?	Art	Desire for "Realistic" Bodies/Diversity in Bodies	1A: "You could look at two different people who do the same workout every day, who eat the same thing and they could look totally different. So yeah, it's a wasted opportunity I think to show off, just different builds." / 1A: "She looks more formidable and powerful than so many other like skinny superheroes. [Great Lakes Avengers]" / 2A: "I've seen a lot of people who are so excited about Wonder Woman and then I also people who are like <i>ok, I am also excited but we should stop and take stock and be critical of these certain things. We need to be aware of the role of disabled women and disabled persons and what take they take in comic book media</i> and that sort of thing."	<i>Rat Queens was always praised for its diversity in body shape and racial diversity</i>
			Attracted to art that both fits the content's genre and is "realism adjacent"	2A: "I prefer when it's [the art style] like reasonable, when they look, not everyone has to look like they're a real human and you can map them out directly and they'd fit perfectly in this world but where it feels realism adjacent. Or it	

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

				<p>feels like, you know, I'm still looking at a drawing but I'm looking at something that feels very like almost tangible. That this could almost be real."</p>	
			<p>Oversexualization is a turn off in both male and female characters</p>	<p>1B: "Oh wow, look at [Catwoman] her waist. She have all the organs in there? Or does she like take some out for this moment?" / 3E: "Catwoman can be Catwoman without that much cleavage, It's happened in the past and it can happen in the future, it'll be fine." / 3A: "I'm not going to pick something up if I look at the cover and I'm like oh this is oversexualized." / 3D: "Yeah, I don't really go for the sexualization of characters, like in my head if I'm reading through a comic book or wherever it's at, it's just I always put myself in the place of these characters and it's just like, I wouldn't be wearing that to fight somebody." / 4A: I'm enjoying the fact that she's [She-Hulk] wearing an actual outfit although the tearing is a little must we?...Her bosoms, her boobs are not, they're in proportion which is always nice and she is</p>	

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

				posed straight on. I've become super sensitive to that which is hilarious. I read a lot of the Hawkeye Project....You're not attempting to show me her ass and her boobs simultaneously."	
		Plot	Emphasis on Character and Psychological Complexity in Plot	3B: [The important part is] "definitely the personality being more realistic, having real flaws, real challenges to overcome." / 3C: "I'm interested in the relationship between superheroes and superhero fandom and just what that persona does to the character." / 4C: "one of the things I particularly like about comics is when they, if it is a superhero comic, that is shows interaction with the real world, with normal people."	
			Tired of overused tropes and recycled storylines	2A: "There is a lot of people who are really excited about things. I also there there is a lot of people who are like, great, we are doing the same thing all over again." / 4B: "I mean you go back to Marvel and the first time they brought in the Hellfire Club and	

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

				the Dark Phoenix stuff, and it's fun. The fiftieth time you're like, really?"	
			Desire to see original female characters rather than genderbent male heroes	3C: "It's kind of a cop-out though. Like creating new and inventing new things for these female superheroes instead of just saying well, we've already established that this character does and kind of how they do it, we'll just tweak it a little bit and make it a female protagonist and hopefully we'll be able to draw in some more readership."	
			Desire for relatable characters	4C: "So what I'm seeing is we like it when women have jobs." 4B: "Yeah, we like when women are not ridiculous" 4C: "It's almost like they're more relatable to us, people with jobs." 4A: or just when their advanced degrees are actually you know part of what's going on rather than superfluous."	
		Creators	Desire to see creators promote diversity	3A: "The creators came forward, and said we didn't put any warnings out because we don't think that that needs a content warning. And so their response to that I felt was a very positive response, The fact	3A is talking about a kerfuffle over LGBT content in Valor, a fairytale anthology by the creators of Namesake

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

				that they addressed directly."	
		Covers	Cover art should give sense of plot	2A: "This has like an inherent sense of plot [Rat Queens cover]. I always find those a little more interesting, they're a little more, oh ok, there is something going on here.	<i>The Rat Queens were almost always preferred because it had a sense of action without confusing the potential reader.</i>
			Attracted to powerful poses for women	3B: "I like how strong she is and that she is big and like also not afraid of being like, she's not timid or put back by her size. And all that, She's, yeah, she just looks very confident."	3B is talking about the Hulk #8 cover with She-Hulk.
Want	Online Behavior	Why Do They Follow	Follow for information or news or entertainment	1A: "Just to keep up to date with things that might be, or new products that might interest me." 4C: "It's useful to keep up with new projects...a lot of [creators] have sort of cross media projects that they do so [social media] is really the only way that you'd find out about them like that's something that wouldn't necessarily hit the comics blog."	

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

			Follow for tips on how to become part of the industry	3B: "I follow Lion Forge and Oni Press and a couple others, partially because I am trying to create my own comic....I interact with a lot of other comic creators on social media and it's very community friendship building. A lot of the people who have bigger readerships that may not interact with you directly give out a lot of tips if you want to get started in the industry."	
			Follow to enhance experience with behind the scenes information	4A: "It enhances the experience a lot more because you hear a lot of what they were thinking when they do certain things or when they wrote certain things and that adds sort of dimensions to it that maybe I wouldn't have gotten on a first read through so maybe I'll go back and read it again."	
			Follow for community	3B: "And we're more vocal. And I think thanks to things like crowdfunding and that, it's probably contributed to a lot of more of us coming out of the woodwork or establishing ourselves. Like inviting, it makes things more inviting to other women." / 4C: "A lot of it [this positive fan experience] was there	

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

				<p>were so many people who also feel the same way about this creative product that I do. Right, that it's worthy and these people who create it are worthy of support....For me, enjoying comics has always been a solitary thing but that's the time I felt most like wow, I'm part of an entire community of people who enjoy this."</p>	
			<p>Follow for direct conversation/connection with creators</p>	<p>1A: "It's cool to feel a little bit connected to the people who work or you know make these [comics]." / 3A: "I think it gives fans a voice, particularly fans that are underrepresented or underappreciated. I'm thinking about LGBT fans, women of course, to really connect with creators, especially those smaller, independent creators. They can really make that connection and feel heard and feel wanted in a way. Like they are a valued readership." / 4A: We can as the consumers directly to the artists say you know, <i>that's terrible that's not working or that was fantastic please do more of that</i>. And I think that it's, we're no longer a t</p>	

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

				a time when we can blindly whatever he puts out is fine."	
Believe	Perception of Publishers/Creators	What Publishers Do (or Do Not Do)	Publishers only listen to the vocal male fans	2A: "I feel like they [creators] are more in tune with the white male spheres over there just because, I don't know, I feel like those type of people tend to yell louder and have been yelling longer I guess." / 3B: It's a whole bunch of dudes still. And that's part of the whole issue with like image problem that happened. There's not enough diversity in their marketing in their publishing and I think it winds up making a negative impact on how they end up seeing the fandom at the same time." / 4A: The neckbeard Rob Lefield loving, the ones who want to back to the glory days before girl cooties go into the comics. Cause they are very loud and they are very local and they're very online because you know neckbeard tends to go with the Internet. And because they are so vocal, and	

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

				they are the groups that organize themselves to be like we like this, we're going to be very loud about this but they're not the people spending the money."	
			Publishers do not address issues (or address them poorly)	1B: "The people at the top say these things [reference to "diversity doesn't sell"] and then books get canceled and so I think there is a divide between the people who are more the creator side and then the executive side." / 3B: "I feel like there is a lot more silence on the creator producer side. ...some people from the community that I follow have like stepped up to Image and said hey we work with you, you need to work with us to make this better, but yeah they [Image Comics] didn't come out, these creators came out and said we're working together. Which is still kind of a turn off from the publishing company for me."	3B is talking about the graphic depiction of a hate crime on a cover by Howard Chaykin and Image's silence over the controversy

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

			Producers are not responding in their marketing to newly visible female audiences	3B: "Large sized publishing in barely responding [to female audiences]"/ 3E: "They're probably not adjusting as quickly as they should if they want to keep making as much money as they can. At the same time I don't find it surprising, they're very large. Large things are slow."	
		Pessimism Towards the Industry	Comics industry does not know how to draw in new readers	2A: "Comics if they really want to retain and take advantage of the fact that comic book movies are currently the biggest thing in pop culture they need to find ways to make that accessible." / 2A: "Right now, one of the ways to mix things up and to also draw in new people who haven't been buying comics who maybe could be persuaded to buy comics are by appealing to audiences that haven't previously been appealed to. People who are like racial and ethnic minorities, you know, different gender and sexuality appeal." / 3C: "The problem for, at least for me, and I know for other people in terms of new readership is you feel like there are so many back issues and the	

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

				storylines...and it becomes incredibly hard to pick something up."	
Believe	Barriers to Entry	Lack of Cultural Capital	Cultural Capital Barrier	3C: "The problem for, at least for me, and I know for other people in terms of new readership is you feel like there are so many back issues and the storylines ...it becomes incredibly hard to pick something up and be like, I'm a real fan of this and say you haven't read six hundred issues of this." / 3B: That kind of stuff can weigh on you and keep you from wanting to project that out a little bit, because somebody might be like, there is a fear that you might get quizzed. Like I've wanted to do some cosplay stuff but I feel like I need to have at least watch enough or read enough of the series to get a feel for them before I would even go and make a costume about them even if I'm like that character looks really cool and I just want to dress up like them."	

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

			Mansplaining/Displays of Cultural Capital	1B: "You get mansplained a lot. Which is sometimes fine and sometimes not fine.....Characters bios, history, and sometimes I want to know and sometimes I don't want to know. Or I already know."	
		Cost	High Cost of Single Issues / Buy Trades	2A: "Especially because this [single issue] is like five bucks. Like why would I spend five bucks on this very flimsy paper thing that I may not know what's going on when I could take that five bucks a couple times over, wait for the trade and pick it up cheaper?" / 4C: "I never get pulls. I bought, and even after saying I spent more money on comics than I do on these other two major categories of purchase, I bought one single issue comic this entire year and it was a stand alone Locke and Key. I wait until they come out as graphic novels."	
		Non-welcoming space	Perception that comic bookstores are male spaces	2A: "A much as women have been in comics throughout its entire history, there is this perception that it's a kind of a boy thing and that shapes who ends up going to the stores, who stays in the stores, who works in the stores, who spends a lot of	

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

			<p>time there....No one ever roped me into [going to a comic bookstore] when I was thirteen or fourteen. So I wasn't really aware of [comics]." / 3E: "I hated going into comic stores to find things that I wanted, cause you know I didn't really feel like I belonged there. I was a new face, everybody in those comic stores, at least the ones I went to knew each other and were also guys and white and like all of these things that I am not." / 4C: " I would say that if and maybe for women particularly just because there's been this perception of there being comics not being something that is created for you that if you haven't gotten into a comic, not comics in general but A comic of some type or another by the time that you're, I don't know, in your early twenties then you probably not, you're less likely to give it a chance and less likely to see it as a legit art form and storytelling form." /</p>	
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FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

Believe	Stereotypes	Comics as Lesser	Comics more mainstream but still uncool	3A: "I think there is still a perception though, especially in my parents' generation and older, that the people who actually read comic books are like teenage boys you know, they go to the comic bookstore after school and they get their comic books and they go back to their dark bedroom with the blinds drawn." / 3B: "A lot of parents of like younger kids don't see it as a like a medium for their kids."	
		Only Superheroes	Outside members not aware of genre diversity	3E: "It's possible that people who are not into comics, or don't understand that just think that there is like one kind of comic, like your DC and Marvel." / 3A: "I used to do only graphic novels, I came to individualized serial comics only a couple of years ago and my perception was that the serial comics were all superheroes." / 4B: "Once I started explaining to her all the different ranges of	

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

				comic books she was like this is so much cooler than I ever knew, I thought it was just all superheroes."	
		Mostly if not only male	Still perceived as mostly male	1B: "I think [the stereotype of who's on social media following comic book accounts] it's largely male." / 2A: "If I had to paint an average stereotype, the fan is probably male, probably white and probably straight. But that's not my personal experience, but I know when I look into the comic bookstore and I look around, ok, that's who I see."	
		Fanfic and Cosplay as "bad"	Stereotypes about certain fan activities	4A: "I tend to not tell non-fan types that I read fan-fiction cause there are all sorts of stereotypes about it, especially about female fans who read fan fiction and what they're doing and what they're getting out of it and stuff like that....I tend not to tell people who are already not into it [cosplay and conventions] because again there are a lot of stereotypes about conventions and fan conventions in general and what goes on and	

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

				what kind of people show up. And it's like no, we're pretty normal actually. It's like yeah, you hear about all the terrible stuff but that's because it's remarkable in that it's terrible."	
Believe	Current Marketing in the Comic Book Industry	Commercial Ploys Attract Rather than Content	Others are affected by this more	1B: "Like they were worried it wouldn't sell without Deadpool. Which like, I mean honestly if the content was good I would go to great lengths to get them to sell it. But like I wish it weren't necessary." 1A: "Yeah, I feel like that doesn't have a lot to do with the artistic side of things. It's the commercial side of things."	
		Marketing is general rather than targeted		1A: "It's too much [referring to Emma Frost]. A lot of men see powerful women as sexy so it's, that's not just for us [women] for sure." / 3C: "I could see people who like Batman reading [Batgirl and the Birds of Prey], I can see people reading it specifically because it's Batgirl and it's got female characters in it. But I mean that's kind of what's interesting about the superhero genre, I think that as long as the superhero is intriguing to people	

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

				they'll read anything that goes with it." /	
				3C: "I think maybe not pretending that what's appealing to one person is appealing to every person, so acknowledging that people do participate differently and sort of tapping into different markets that way instead of going with sort of a blanket strategy."	
			The way characters are drawn signify the intended audience	1B: "Like this is clearly, she's not meant for my eyes...Full disclosure I will look at her that way but that's not, she's there for the men. And I don't. I want her to be there for me too"	
		A newcomer is attracted to familiar symbols and poses		1B: "[When I started reading comics] I looked for what was familiar to me....I think something familiar and something easy. Because you can't just pick up Captain America like, not anymore you can't. It's so much. Though I think they would try cause the name carries a lot of weight. And I also think a lot	

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

				of decisions are made based on the cover."	
Believe	Money as a Message	Companies Only Hear Money	Support comics through money	1B: "I hope that everything that I purchase, somehow, money is power, money is the only power that I have. So I hope that if I purchase the things that I want in the right ways that somehow that tiny drop will get back and show them that someone out here is reading and purchasing." / 2A: "If we keep buying the Captain America Hydra comics then that sends a money message and as much as money is what talks, money is what really matters at the end of the day at the bottom line of different publishers."	
Believe	Power of the Group	How to Change the Industry	Change occurs through the group reaching out to creators	1B: "I hope that if I scream loud enough on social media, and if everyone else screams loud enough that they will start to listen. And I think that the divide between creator and fan is breaking down pretty rapidly." / 3C: "I think collective fandom more so. Like	

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

				recently several instances of fans demanding things and then creators saying well ok, let's do that."	
Believe	What Male Fans believe	Invisibility of Female Fans	Perception that male fans don't see or acknowledge female fans	3C: "The kind [of male fan] that likes to quiz you [doesn't believe female fans exist]." / 4A: "Because [male fans] don't see [female fans]. The comics are, with most women I know have that more solo experience but comics are sort of a social experience for guys, they go to a store, they talk to the guys, they don't see the girls so they assume they're not there As with many things." 4A: "Or they would think that it is very recent. I would say that is somebody said ok I can believe that but that's probably happened in the past five years because of the Marvel films." 4C: "Weirdly, no."	

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

Believe	Apprehension about Negative Experiences	Worry over possible negative experiences	Internet allows for more negative behavior	3C: "I don't really tend to lead in conversations online because they tend to go pretty negative pretty quickly." / 3C: "I feel like the anonymity that the Internet gives people sort of lets them turn off whatever filter that they have in regular life."	
			Even in a friendly comic bookstore, always a fear of a bad experience	4C: "Even though I've never had a bad experience...every time I go into a new comic bookstore I go through some apprehension that I will. Even though I've got twenty years of experience that says otherwise."	
			It's getting better - hope	1A: "In some ways I feel like we are finally being recognized as a significant portion of comic readers which is awesome, which I think has changed a lot."	
Do	Importance of Word of Mouth within Female Fan Community	Word of Mouth Drives Purchasing	Female fans choose what to read from community suggestions before browsing	2A: "When I walk in I'm sort of well, I don't want to ask for directions because I don't want to be that person. So I like knowing in advance what I am looking for. So if I come in and say hey, so my friend was talking about this one particular title and I'm specifically looking for the Damian Wayne	

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

				<p>one where blah blah blah. I can at least know what I'm looking for." / 4A: "I've been getting sort of the storylines summarized through other fans who are reading them and some of them are very loudly unhappy and some of them are just like this is what's going on. So I get sort of the broad arc and the broad strokes and the high points and there are people whose tastes are similar to mine so I know if they think it's terrible I'll avoid it. I won't go there. And if they think it's awesome then I'll at least look at it."</p>	
Do	Online Behavior	Who Do Female Fans Follow	Follow creators	<p>1B: "I follow Kelly Sue Deconnick on Twitter and Tumblr, I follow Matt Fraction."</p>	
			Follow fellow fans	<p>2A: "What draws me in is in word of mouth more than anything. Seeing other fans who I have things in common with or that I already know that we both like similar stuff. And as a queer woman, I'm frequently following other queer women type fans."</p>	

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

		<p>The Importance of Friends</p>	<p>Entering fandom easier with a friend/group of friends</p>	<p>1A: "I think for me, going to university and meeting so many other people who were just as nerdy as me and you know, going to more events and just learning it's not just a fringe thing. It not everyone who likes comics and nerdy stuff is a weirdo." / 2A: "I had a couple friends who were really into comics, and then my ex, she was more into comics and so they were the ones who kinda got me into it." / 3A: "I need something where this is an established group and food, free food! But where I know that there is something about the event where I know that I'll be welcomed whether it's who's organizing it or what it's about or something that makes me feel welcome." / 3B: "I'd rather take the drive down here to Star Clipper because...there is a much more engaging community here that I might run into somebody I know, I might run into somebody that I can actually talk to even if I don't know them. It's like, knowing that there will be somebody there that I</p>	
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FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

				might be able to engage with is important."	
Do	Fandom as a Community	Create Like-Minded Communities	Shape experience by curating follows	1B: "I try to exist in spaces....that are more diverse." / 2A: "Online it's easier to comb together people who may have a lot in common but may not be geographically concentrated." / 3B: "I think if you find the right community it can be a lot better. I've spent a lot of time more recently curating who I follow and why and using that block button a lot."	
			Fan activities make one part of a larger group	1B: "Ladies Night was great. I, it wasn't social, because I don't know why I just wasn't, I was like scared to talk to people but just being around other people who are interested in the stuff and browsing with them and especially women. It was great. I love to be in good company." / 1B: "It's easy to feel shame about the things that you like when you're in a space where there aren't a lot of people that like them or there aren't a	

FEMALE FANS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

				lot of people like you who like them. But if you got to [a] comic con, everyone there likes it and so it eliminates all the shame. And it's incredible. It feels like home."	
			Apparel as a signaling device for fandom	3C: "You don't go around on the street, oh hey I'm reading this, I'm reading this let's have a conversation. But like you're wearing a shirt and that's an interaction you can have. It's not like you're wearing a comic book on your chest or something - "I read this comic book."	
Do	Money as a Message	Kickstarters and Webcomics	Crowdfunding allows for support of diverse content	3A: "I feel like I've seen a lot of interesting ideas on Kickstarter that I wouldn't necessarily see elsewhere and so if by contributing I can help those come into being in the world, I mean that's important."	