

Lucia Cedeira Serantes

Faculty of Information and Media Studies. The University of Western Ontario. London, Canada.

“I’m a Marvel girl”: Exploration of the Selection Practices of Comic Book Readers

Abstract: Based on Catherine Ross’ findings about avid readers, this study examines the way four comic book readers choose the graphic novels that they read for pleasure. Three major themes emerged from the analysis of the qualitative interviews: the diverse roles of comic book stores; the connection with other media formats; and the accessibility of the format.

Résumé:

1. Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore the information seeking behaviour (ISB) of comic book readers when selecting the materials they read. I understand this activity as an information process related to the following ISB concepts and frameworks: everyday life information seeking and the mastery of life, and the ecological theory of human information behaviour. As Ross states in her work *Finding without seeking* (1999), one of the main problems that a researcher encounters when studying the ISB of a reader is that it does not match the frameworks established in the past on the basis that the ISB process starts with an articulated question. Ross provides several alternative options to solve this matter, including the frameworks developed by Savolainen (1995) and Dervin (1983).

Savolainen’s theory of everyday life information seeking shifts the lens to non-work contexts and develops the concepts of ‘way of life’ and ‘mastery of life’. This second concept describes a “general preparedness to approach everyday problems in certain ways in accordance with one’s values” (Savolainen 2005, 144). The process of choosing a book can be constructed as an everyday ‘problem’ that needs to be solved; as this project and Ross research proves, selecting a material for reading is a practice where, for example, experience and knowledge play an important role.

The ecological theory of human information behaviour developed by Williamson (2006, 128-132) complements the approach provided by Savolainen. As it will be demonstrated later and has been stated by Ross, readers learn to choose by choosing, a behaviour that can be seen as the “study of a knowledge formation” (Williamson 2006, 130). This process, according to Talja (cited by Williamson 2006, 130) should balance the information about the socio-cultural aspects of information systems and users. About the seeker, Williamson defends a position of the user as “self-creating, but within contexts that involve various kinds of biological and social circumstances and constrains.” (2006, 130) This project emphasizes the importance of some external sources, like the comic store, as well as the influence of personal networks, like friends and family.

After situating this work in the context of the everyday life information seeking, a brief literature review defines the two major influences that support the development of the study, previous research about comic book readers and Catherine Ross’ examinations of avid readers.

The subsequent analysis of the interviews follows the structure developed by Ross (2001, 17-19) and a discussion considers the three factors that revealed themselves as characteristics of this group of readers.

2. Literature review

Two theoretical backgrounds are the major influence of this project in both its structure and content. First, the inspiration and ground of the work is found in the research of Catherine S. Ross; the way she applied reader response theory to real readers, especially to her series of interviews with avid readers. Second, in order to properly analyse and situate the content of the interviews, previous research about comic book readers needed to be taken into consideration.

The heart of the project is situated in the Catherine S. Ross' work with avid readers. The subsequent model that she developed to show the different elements that influence the process of choosing a book are essential in both the construction and analysis of this study. The five factors are the following (1999, 791):

1. Reading experience wanted: the "what mood am I in?" test.
2. Alerting sources that the reader uses to find out about new books (browsing, recommendations from different sources, serendipity).
3. Elements of the book itself that readers take into account in order to match book choices to the reading experience desired.
4. Clues on the book itself used to determine the reading experience being offered.
5. Cost in time, money, or cognitive energy involved in getting access to the book.

Ross focused the attention on the reader and what she had to say about the experience of searching and selecting for books to read. The writings in reader response theory support Ross' return of the agency to the reader (Ross 2005, 303). This agency is analyzed at two different levels: how avid readers chose the books they read and how the readers created meaning and informed themselves in relation to certain books considered important by them. The purpose of this project was connected with the first of these levels; however, it was inevitable the emergence of the deeper level when the readers commented on specific works and their role developing an interest for comic books or discovering new reading materials.

Comic book readers have been often studied as part of a fan community, not as readers of a specific reading material. This factor required to look at the research about comic book fans developed in both Cultural and Media Studies. The works of Pustz (1999), Jenkins (1992), and Brown (1997) provided different point of views to the study of comic book readers. Pustz (1999) explores the culture around a comic store to generate a description and analysis of comic book readers, their variety, and cultural engagement beyond comic book reading. Some similarities can be found in his work with Radway's study of the romance reader. The difference between these two studies is of focus. Pustz's main focus is on the comic culture, being the fans/readers an important part of it. In contrast, Radway dedicates her attention to the reader to discover a new culture around the readership of romance novels. Jenkins applies De Certeau's concept of "reading as poaching" to fans of television shows like *Star Trek* and *The Beauty and the Beast*. Jenkins examines and characterizes these fans, focusing on how these groups are extremely active consumers of media without differentiating among formats. At the same time, these "textual poachers" are becoming producers and owners of new content inspired by the production of established media corporations. Brown's article (1997) brings together some of the concepts introduced by Jenkins and enriches the discussion with arguments of

“disempowerment” of comic book readers because of the consideration of this medium as lowbrow culture.

The combination of these two theoretical gave a solid to this project. Ross’s model provided a rich framework for enquiry and the research of comic book readers as fans established a foundation to compare the results of the interviews with.

3. Methodology and participants

The context of this project is relevant to explain the methodology. As part of the requirements for a seminar in Information Seeking Behavior, I had to interview one person about some significant information practice in her life. Since my future thesis looks at the reading experience of comic book reader, I focused my project on the selection practices of comic book readers and expanded the interview process to four participants in order to enrich the analysis. In research about reading experiences, qualitative interviewing is the appropriate method when the researcher wants to look at the experience of real reader (Ross, McKechnie and Rothbauer 2006)

As a comic book reader myself, my approach to the interview process was beyond a mere facilitator. Rapley supports the idea of qualitative interviewing as “cooperative work” (2007, 20), an approach that enhances the importance of the data you are seeking to gather and the individuality and particularity of the experience that the informant is sharing. To balanced this method, he advocates for a careful analysis of the resulting data, defending a position that takes into consideration “how your interaction produced that trajectory of talk and how specific versions of reality are co-constructed” (2007, p.20)

The participants were recruited in a university course about comic books. The principles of theoretical sampling guided the selection. Researchers that used theoretical sampling “go to places, persons, and situations that will provide information about the concepts they want to learn more about” (Corbin and Strauss 2008, 144). As a result, the idea in this project was creating a small group of participants that represented different types of readers based on gender and familiarity with comic books, allowing the variability of practices and experiences. Among the sample, there are two males, two females, avid and moderate readers, and beginner and experienced readers. The interview schedule was based on the results of Ross’ study of avid readers and it is provided in Appendix A.

About the participants, the main pieces of information provided are two. First, a short description of their history reading comics books that help to define their familiarity with the medium and the sources that connected them with these materials. Also, the last three titles that they had read are listed as an example of their reading tastes; these works are also frequently mentioned in the interview and some participants use them as recurrent examples to explain their searching strategies. These are the main characteristics of the participants:

- 1) Trent Stevens: Trent is 21 years old and a student in the Media, Information and Technology program. He started reading comics because of his father. In 1993 his parents bought him a Batman comic book in a convenience store and that was the starting point of his own collection. Trent kept buying them because he “would rather get that than candy because one you eat candy is gone”. He is the second most avid reader from the group. His last three comics are:
 - a. *Ultimate Spiderman*, Volume 19: Death of the Goblin.
 - b. *The Boys*, by Garth Ennis (writer) and Darick Robertson (artist)
 - c. *Watchmen*, by Alan Moore (writer) and Dave Gibbons (artist)
- 2) Alan Smithee: Alan is 21 years old and he is studying both English Literature and Visual Arts. His relationship with comics started at an early age as a result of one of his brothers’ interest, though it did not become serious until high school. In the school library

he discovered a collection of trade paperback. About finding this resources he said, “all the kind of major stuff was there.” The importance of the canon will be a relevant theme for this reader. He is the most avid reader of the group and actually an important provider of material for another participant. The last three comics he has read are:

- a. *The Tragical Comedy or Comical Tragedy of Mr. Punch: A Romance*, by Neil Gaiman (writer) and Dave McKean (artist)
 - b. *Nextwave*, by Warren Ellis (writer) and Stuart Immonen (artist)
 - c. *Persepolis*, by Marjene Satrapi
- 3) Jean Gray: Jean is 20 years old and studies Kinesiology. Her connection to comic books was established through her two older brothers and television cartoons. She recalled browsing comics when she was eight, but she did not start to define her own taste until she was fourteen. Her taste was always based on her brother’s comic collection. At seventeen she decided to get her own comics. The last three comics she has read are:
- a. Old titles of romance comics that are still in her home
 - b. *X-Men Apocalypse*¹
 - c. *Watchmen*, by Alan Moore (writer) and Dave Gibbons (artist)
- 4) Victoria: she is 20 years old and a student at the Media, Information and Technology program. When asked about the origins of her comic book readings, she recalls X-Men cartoons and the Batman movies, which she watched largely influenced by her brother. Later in the interview, she recalled relying on comic strips, such as *Garfield*, *Calvin & Hobbes* and *The Family Circus* when she was learning to read. Her last three comics are:
- a. *Fray* by Joss Whedon (writer) and Karl Moline (artist)
 - b. *The Dark Tower* by Steven King²
 - c. Compulsory reading for the university course: *Dark Phoenix Saga* by Chris Claremont (writer) and art by Dave Cockrum and John Byrne.

4. Findings

The framework for my interview analysis is going to be based on the categories that emerged from Ross’ article *Making choices: What readers say about choosing books to read for pleasure* (2001). These five categories are:

- Reading experience wanted: the “what mood am I in?” test
- Alerting sources that the reader uses to find out about new books
- Elements of the book that readers take into account in order to match book choices to the reading experience desired
- Clues on the book itself used to determine the reading experience being offered
- Cost in time or money involved for the reader in getting intellectual or physical access to a particular book

These factors were the result of the research done with avid readers. Some of the discrepancies between my analysis and Ross’s conclusions might be caused by the different characteristics of my informants as compared with hers. Also, three readers mentioned books that were part of the compulsory readings for two university courses: *Comic Book Culture* and *Media in Society*. Victoria defended these readings as materials that she would have read even if they were not for the class, and highlights the importance of these classes to increase her knowledge about comic books and works that she should read.

Ross’ research establishes that her readers “learn to choose by choosing”; consequently their experience with reading had a great influence on their ability to choose reading materials.

The participants in this study have different reading trajectories, and this circumstance influences their approach to choosing a comic book in several ways.

4.1. Seeking a particular reading experience

Ross identifies this category as the most important for her participants. In the case of the readers I interviewed there is just one case where this is true. Jean Gray mainly reads Marvel comics, especially X-Men, and she described the experience as a “second life”. When Jean is tired of what she is doing, she “can step back and go into my superhero life” or reads “to take in a new persona”. Wolfgang Iser explains this experience as follows: “[...] if we are absorbed into an image, we are no longer present in a reality—instead we are experiencing what can only be described as an irrealization, in the sense that we are preoccupied with something that takes us out of our own given reality. This is why people often talk of escapism with regard to literature” (Iser 1987, 140).

Trent mentions mood as an important factor when buying comics but not when he chooses materials for reading; in this case, he bases his decision on the person that is recommending the book. Although in some cases the informants clarify and differentiate the works that they might purchase from the ones they actually read, the analysis of these questions requires deepening into the literature related to consumer research and information and decision-making processes. The researcher feels that it is out of the scope of this project.

4.2. Alerting sources

The results of this question suggest contrary and complementary behaviours among the respondents. The analysis of this section will be split into two sub-sections, one dedicated to what I have labelled as search techniques, for example browsing, and a second section dedicated to the enquiry of sources, for instance visiting comic stores or web sites.

4.2.1. Search techniques

In her research Ross mentions the importance of browsing, a behaviour that it is also significant in the participants in this project. This technique has different purposes depending on the reader and the context, therefore Chang’s work (2006, 69-74) about browsing provides a framework to separate and examine the peculiarities of each reader. Browsing is a concept that has gone beyond the limits of Library and Information Science and Chang defines it as “an examination of unknown items of potential interest by scanning or moving through an information space in order to judge the utility of the items, to learn about something of interest in the item, or to satisfy curiosity about something” (2006, 73).

The importance of this procedure is highlighted by Alan Smithee. His only reason to visit the comic store is that its arrangement supports browsing: “I’ll look for an author and then follow what they’ve done, or an artist, in a comic store the arrangement of the actual comics can some times lead me in that direction.” Although he praises the benefits of online shopping in relation to cost, there is one thing that web sites do not support for him: “[...] none of the websites have the ‘here are two comic books on the shelf next to each other that might be similar’, [so] you can maybe draw a connection.” Chang identifies five general themes that comprise a total of nine patterns of browsing. The way Alan employs browsing places him clearly under one theme: *looking for something with common characteristics*, a theme that includes systematic browsing, evaluative browsing, and focus browsing. Victoria does not talk about browsing but she defines it unintentionally when she explains why she prefers shopping at the comic store better than online: “you get to see other titles that are related to it, because that’s the way it’s set up.”

Even though Alan and Victoria are in opposite sides of the reading spectrum –Alan can be defined as a *connoisseur* of the format, while Victoria can be defined as a novice- both use browsing for similar objectives, although with different grades of specificity. Alan has developed already a strategy related to preferred authors and publishers, when Victoria is still exploring and defining her personal taste.

Jean uses browsing to identify possible future readings: “[I] flip through and see what’s around, familiarize myself and then I will go and ask my brother or ask whoever”. This process comprises two browsing behaviours: she is selecting in order to *keep-up-to-date* as well as *learn or find out*; these two themes are related to monitoring browsing and are also indicative and preparatory browsing. In the same exploratory way, Victoria prefers the comic book store to the bookstore because “if you go to the bookstore you are going to see all the graphic novels in one section, but when you go to a whole store just for graphic novels and comic books then you are looking for one you see other fifteen titles nearby that are by the same drawer, the same writer, or the same company. It helps you get to see more stuff like that.”

The ‘hunt’ for new titles based on the author is not a new searching behaviour; however, the way Alan approaches it, an enriched process described as “research”, deserves a closer examination. Pearl growing is a search technique that Bates defines as the process where “one combines and searches on a few specific terms immediately to retrieve citations that are then examined for candidate search terms to be added to the subsequent search formulation.” (1981, 142) Although this behaviour seems directly linked to the scholarly research process, a connection can be made to the way Alan pursues new titles. He generally begins the process with a known item, for example, *Transmetropolitan*. This comic is mentioned as decisive to discover the author Warren Ellis, one of Alan’s favourite writers, and the artist Darick Robertson. The latter, conducted him to *The Boys*, one of the comic books he is currently reading. Thus, a known item provides names to explode the search strategy and affects his decisions to select new comics. He also includes information from other media formats to enrich his strategy. For instance, he started to read *Y: The Last Man* because this title’s writer is also a scriptwriter for *Lost*, one of his favourite television shows.

4.2.2. External sources

Ross identified the following alerting sources: friends, reviews, dramatizations of some authors’ work in plays, television and movies, and lists (prizes, libraries...) as alerting sources (2001, 17). The participants in the study do not use these sources in an uniform way. Alan talks about the “buzz” and how he does not follow it, especially because he does not know what sources deserve their trust. After describing the complex process that he employs to choose a comic book and the important role that the comic store has in this process, an inference could be made about the comic store as an active source for information. However, he denies this role of the comic store: “When I go to a comic shop is more like a [pause] going to any store where you just going to get what you want and then go”.

The role of the comic store has been described as pivotal in comic books culture. Pustz developed a sociological study of this culture having a comic store as the source and main focus of his research. Comic shops, he says, “are gold mines, places to find buried treasure[s], catch up with old friends, make new acquaintances with like-minded souls (1999, 6). Alan might be the exception that confirms this rule.

Trent mentions as a regular source the magazine *Wizard*, available in print and digital format. He frequently uses it and defines it as the “Entertainment Weekly but for comics”. Through this publication he keeps “an eye on what’s going on.” In contrast, Jean, Victoria, and he identify other comic book readers as their major source of information. Trent’s behaviour can be defined with this quote: “I’ll read whatever is recommended to me based on who is

recommending to me”. In comparison, Victoria says that she “[...] kind of have to follow other people’s clues to figure out”. As for Jean, her brother is still the main provider of both reaffirmation of taste and physical materials. Brothers also played a key role on introducing both Jean and Victoria to comic books.

Ross mentions the role of adaptations in other mediums as alerting sources. The readers in my study are part of an audiovisual generation. Osgerby cites, among others, a study developed by the Kaiser Foundation in order to highlight the importance of the media in the life of children and teenagers (2004, 6-7). The distinctive importance of television and movies in relation to how this group of readers choose reading materials deserves special attention and it will be analyzed later in the paper.

4.3. Elements in the comic book

Questioned about the genres or types of comics that they like best to read, the readers offered complex and precise answers. Alan, Trent and Victoria alluded to the construction of the story and the type of story they prefer reading. Alan mentioned the way the story is built as a method to select his readings; he identifies works like *The Sandman* or *Transmetropolitan* as works that he reads because “they do held a long story but they also there are smaller stories within them”. He recurrently described the need of an overarching story, that might or might not be divided into smaller stories, but he did not enjoy cliff-hangers on the last page. Although his approach to searching has been analyzed already in relation to browsing, we can see that this behaviour was also connected to a quest to find the type of story he prefers: “I am only really looking for a story”, he finally declared.

When defining the stories he wishes to read, Trent described them in comparison with the shows produced by a television channel, saying that he prefers “more kind of like a HBO series” and “character drama”. He does not mind fantasy or mystery genres, but he declared a preference for the narration style that he identified with HBO products; for him, there are no different media formats, but one kind of story. He also identifies Manga as a type of comic he would not read. In his opinion, he does not feel prepared, in terms of familiarity with the narrative language and the conventions to enjoy it as much as the work of a North American or British writer.

For Victoria it was somewhat hard to identify a specific type of story, but she stated that what she reads are not necessarily the superheroes comics. She declared that she enjoys adventure stories, insisting again on differentiating them from superheroes comic books. She mentioned the comic book *Bone* as an example of the way she understands the adventure genre. Using the example of *Maus* and its theme, the Holocaust, she declares to appreciate comics because they exemplify a different and new way of telling stories that have been already told in other media before.

The graphic nature of the comic book provides two points of entry for the selective reader: the story and the art. Although both Alan and Trent identify writers and stories as the main factors in their actual reading experience, Trent distinguished between the behaviour he had when he was a child and the one he pursues as an adult reader: when he was a kid, he used to look at the art as a distinctive and crucial factor, but as an adult, he tends to base his decisions on the writer and the story.

4.4. Clues on the comic book

Ross connects the use of these clues directly to the experience of the reader: “the more experienced the reader, the greater his or her ability to use these clues [...]” (2001 18) Both Victoria and Jean confirm this statement with their comments about the benefits that the comic book course has had on the way they choose comics. They appreciate the quality of the comics

they are being exposed to; in some cases it is their first experience with graphic novels considered as part of an unofficial canon, such as *Watchmen*. Later on, she states that she did not pay attention to authors before the course, but following it, she will do it because she has been able to identify some that she particularly enjoy.

From the six points that Ross identified, three are the most important factors employed by these readers: authors, publishers, and genre. In the case of authors and publishers, these two factors were connected to the search for a story that observed the different characteristics the readers were looking for. Alan and Trent enjoy similar authors, Garth Ennis and Warren Ellis, who create similar a particular type of story. Also, Alan identifies Vertigo as a publisher that he can trust.

Jean is one of the richest readers in terms of genre connection. She defined herself as a “Marvel girl”. Although her identification with the Marvel factory could be analyzed similar to the position of Alan as a Vertigo reader, there is one main difference that distinguishes the comics created by Marvel. The success of Marvel in the 1960s comes from a change in the construction of the superhero characters. Stan Lee, editor of Marvel at the time, realized that the god-like and all-mighty superheroes created by DC Comics did not appeal to the teenage audience of the time, so he decided to make his superheroes weaker, more human and with distinctive personalities (Wright, 2001 203-223). Marvel comics also inaugurated a modern mythology that interconnected different stories; for example, the appearance of the Fantastic Four in a Spiderman comic book required from the reader a greater involvement and knowledge.

My question is, can we consider Marvel’s production as a genre? The answer is that, in the context of this study, we can. In the classic work *Genreflecting*, Herald offers several definitions for genre and genre fiction, including “[b]ooks usually described as genre fiction are books that share multiple characteristics and features” (Herald 2006, 31). It is difficult to discern if the characteristics that in the sixties differentiated Marvel comics from other publications are still as unique and prominent as they used to be. However, Jean clearly identifies them and makes them fundamental to her process of choosing comic books to read. This focus on Marvel comics affects what she reads in many ways; for instance, since she is interested in every aspect of the Marvel universe, she owns and reads the *Ultimate Guide* for different Marvel superheroes. These guides are non-fiction books that describe the history of the comic books character, providing historical details, explanations of weapons or powers, enemies, publication dates and so forth. At the same time that she enjoys Marvel comics, she identifies the ‘everyday life’ comic books as the only ones that she would not read. This decision is connected with the feeling that she is seeking when reading comics, disconnecting and escaping. Everyday life comics tend to depict real life situations populated by ‘average’ men and women that tend to have ‘normal’ lives; furthermore, the interest of these creations tends to be in the analysis of these ‘average’ worlds and they often are personal creations from very distinctive authors. She explains that one of the reasons why she reads superheroes comic books is related to experimenting with different personalities: “I feel that I am pretty certain [of] who I am as a actual normal human being, and it’s just like, ok, let’s become Jean Grey now, let’s become whoever, see how they would do, if I would do the same”

4.5. Cost in time, money and intellectual access

Time and money are mentioned as factors that influence the participants in different ways. Alan has detected a connection between time and money, since he usually has time to read in the same moments that he has money to buy new titles. For example, during the Summer his only commitment is to a ‘nine to five’ job that leaves him the evenings available to read. At the same time, his job provides him with the money to spend on comics. In Christmas, combining

purchases and presents, he collected twenty six trade paperbacks to read and he had almost a month of vacation to do it. He summarize it perfectly, “time and money tend to go hand to hand”. Among this group of readers, he is the one that buys the larger amount of titles, and because of that he carefully uses his knowledge to select the places where he buys comics. According to him, online bookstores offer the lowest prices to buy comics; however, comic stores are making an effort to fight this situation and, for example, because of the fluctuation between American and Canadian dollars, comic book stores have adapted their prices through selling the comic books at the American cover price. Another reader that highlights the importance of money is Victoria. Similarly to her book purchasing habits, she tends to buy comic books when they are on sale. Since she frequently visits one of the local comic stores, she was also aware of the reduction of the comic book prices.

A close relation between cognitive energy and intellectual access was detected during the analysis. The first one refers to the emotional or time commitment involved in reading the book, and the second to the previous knowledge or literary conventions needed to ‘decipher’ the text. In relation to the first, Victoria sees comic books as a “break from all the text” she has to read, and she praises the characteristics of the medium to keep her interested, in comparison to plain text.

A strong connection is found between Alan and the second issue, the intellectual access. In different instances of the interview he refers to the concept of canon using it to clarify his interest in comic books and the accessibility of this medium. The canon is “a body of writings recognized by authority”³ and for comic books, the canon is a recent development that is being defined through a mixture of works highlighted by creators and works studied by scholars. Alan describes the comics canon as accessible, mainly because of two factors: it is smaller than the literary and it is more recent. But why does Alan keep highlighting this characteristic of the comic book canon? For Alan talking in a meaningful way about the comic books is part of his leisure time. The Literature canon is too wide and too dense to start a conversation: “I don’t think people can really sit around and talk about like *Wuthering Heights* the way they would talk about the last issue of Batman”; adding to this, he says that most people refers to the same five or six comics when having a “serious discussion” about comic books. Consequently, a novice reader like Victoria or a genre reader like Jean will find it easier to locate and access this major works, facilitating the increase of their knowledge about comic books and their selecting process. For instance, Jean has already decided that the comic books she is going to buy are the ones of a “higher calibre”, “those pieces of work that are more art, they are actually art, you can just sit and look at them and you know you want to look at them again.”

5. Discussion

Based on the analysis of the interviews, it can be concluded that the categories that emerged from Ross study (2001) can be applied to the study of comic book readers. However, some deviations have been detected as compared with her results. For example, mood does not seem as a critical factor as for avid readers since just one of the readers, Jean, referred to it. Another three elements deserve further exploration, since they are common to these readers and can be defined in future research as characteristic.

5.1. The boundaries among media formats

Even though the interview was related to a print format, the presence of audiovisual formats, movies and television, was constant in the conversations. These media took different roles depending on the reader. For instance, television cartoons were a first exposure to comic books characters for both Jean and Victoria. Equally important is the role of movies, especially

for Jean, since she prefers to watch the movie first; afterwards she says to “owe” to herself seeing the original form. Alan also referred to television and movies when explaining the type of stories he likes and why; the singularity of his analysis is found on his way of comparing, based on forms of production and construction of the narrative, comic books with television shows, and books with movies. Furthermore, both Alan and Trent used a television channel, HBO, as a model to describe the stories they prefer to read; it is particularly relevant because this same channel was considering at the time to produce for television one of the stories they both mentioned, *Preacher*.

In his work *Textual Poachers*, Henry Jenkins encounters a similar situation when analyzing a group he identifies as “media fandom” (1992, 1). Based on the word of De Certeau, he renames them as ‘textual poachers’ since “they embrace not a single text or even a single genre but many texts -American and British dramatic series, Hollywood genre films, comic books, Japanese animation, popular fiction [...] and at the same time, it constructs boundaries that generally exclude other types of texts.” (1992, 1) Although the participants in this study do not share the active role that Jenkins’ textual poachers do, more similarities can be found between them than with Ross’ avid readers.

5.2. People: a perpetual source of information

Brothers and friends are main players for introducing these readers to comic books and also for providing information and accessibility to new titles. There was only one reader that did not identify a person with a main role in relation to his experience with comic books, and he happens to be the more avid and expert reader of the four participants. Alan is also an important source of information and material to Trent, his expertise and opinion are praised by Trent and he is declared one of two main sources for him.

People take on a different role in relation to Jean and Victoria. Both participants declared the influential position that their brothers had in their introduction to this reading material. Furthermore, Jean’s brother is still one of her main information sources; she consults him about discoveries that she independently made at the comic book store. In contrast, the male respondents quickly grew out of the family influence and established their own tastes and collections. Although a larger sample would be needed to make any firm conclusion, it would be significant to study the role of gender in defining the role of family members and the experience with the reading material.

5.3. Multiple purposes of the comic book store

The relationship between the participants and the comic store is not a simple one and it cannot be analyzed as a whole. For example, it is noteworthy how the role of the comic store develops during the interview with Alan. He started declaring that he did not like to socialize in the store, but a different view is presented later on when he says that going to the comic store is “part of the leisure time of reading the comic itself, I think, going to the comic store is like going to the movies opposed to buying the movie in DVD and watching it.” I think he is not contradicting himself with this last thought, but providing a recreational and educational view to the action of browsing. Browsing is a searching technique that he prefers and it is supported by the arrangement of the comic store.

Jean likes to go to the comic store to familiarize herself with new titles, but she likes to go to do “people watching”, especially because she is a girl in a male space and declares to be entertained by the reaction of the male buyers. Victoria enjoys the “atmosphere” of the comic store. She prefers it to book stores because of the arrangement and the knowledgeable staff. However, she also pointed out the fact that this same staff assumed her needs because she is a

girl. Both female readers expressed some experiences in relation to the comic store being a male space, but their opinions were not as strongly negative as expected. Definitely, their experience is not as constrained as the one described by Pustz in his work about comic fans: “Most regulars are male (female patrons usually come in to get what they want and leave quickly [...])”. (1999, 5)

6. Conclusion

The analysis of the interviews with a group of four comic book readers revealed some compelling topics: the diverse roles that the comic book store plays for different readers; the importance of other readers’ recommendations; the influence and connection to other narrative discourses and media formats; the relation between the comic book canon and the accessibility of the medium in comparison with other print materials. These issues, although not intended to be generalized, uncover a complex and heterogenic readership. Comic book readers, as any other reader, use different elements in the informational environment and clues in the materials themselves to select their reading choices. However, some of these factors might be unique to comic book readers and break some stereotypes about comic book culture, presenting a wider view of the comic book readership.

Reference list

- Bates, Marcia J. 1981. Search Techniques. *Annual Review of Information Science and Technology* 16: 139-169.
- Brown, Jeffrey A. 1997. Comic book fandom and cultural capital. *Journal of Popular Culture* 30 (4): 13-31
- Chang, Shan-Ju, 2005. Chang’s browsing. In *Theories of information behaviour*, ed. K. E. Fisher, S. Erdelez and L. E. McKechnie, 69-74. Medford, N.J.: Information Today.
- Corbin, Juliet M., and Anselm L. Strauss. 2008. *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.
- Dervin, Brenda. 1983. Information as a user construct: The relevance of perceived information needs to synthesis and interpretation. In *Knowledge structure and use: Implications for synthesis and interpretation*, edited by S.A. Ward and L.J. Reed, 155-183. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

- Herald, Diana T. 2006. *Genreflecting: A guide to popular reading interests*. Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited.
- Iser, Wolfgang. 1980. *The act of reading: A theory of aesthetic response*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Jenkins, Henry. 1992. *Textual poachers: Television fans & participatory culture*. New York: Routledge
- Osgerby, Bill. 2004. *Youth media*. London; New York: Routledge.
- Pustz, Matthew. 1999. *Comic book culture: Fanboys and true believers*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Rapley, Tim. 2007. Interviews. In *Qualitative Research Practice*, edited by C. Seale, G. Gobo, J.F. Gubrium & D. Silverman, 15-33. London; Thousand Oaks; New Delhi: Sage.
- Ross, Catherine S. 1999. Finding without seeking: The information encounter in the context of reading for pleasure. *Information Processing and Management* 35 (6): 783-799.
- . 2001. Making choices: What readers say about choosing books to read for pleasure. *The Acquisitions Librarian* 25: 5-21.
- . 2005. Reader Response Theory. In *Theories of information behaviour*, ed. K. E. Fisher, S. Erdelez and L. E. McKechnie, 303-307. Medford, N.J.: Information Today.
- Ross, Catherine S., Lynne. E. F. McKechnie, and Paulette Rothbauer. 2006. *Reading matters: What the research reveals about reading, libraries, and community*. Westport: Libraries Unlimited.
- Savolainen, Reijo. 1995. Everyday life information seeking: Approaching information seeking in the context of “way of life”. *Library and Information Science Research* 17 (3): 259-294.
- . 2005. Everyday life information seeking. In *Theories of information behaviour*, ed. K. E. Fisher, S. Erdelez and L. E. McKechnie, 143-148. Medford, N.J.: Information Today.

Williamson, Kirsty. 2005. Ecological theory of human information behavior. In *Theories of information behaviour*, ed. K. E. Fisher, S. Erdelez and L. E. McKechnie, 128-132. Medford, N.J.: Information Today.

Wright, Bradford W. 2001. *Comic book nation: The transformation of youth culture in America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Appendix A

1. Do you remember, more or less, when did you start reading comic books or graphic novels?
2. What type of comics are your favourites? And more or less, how many do you read?
3. Would you mind telling me the last three comics, graphic novels or trade paperbacks that you have read?
4. How do you choose a comic book to read for pleasure?
 - a. Probing questions related to:
 1. Importance of the reading experience wanted (mood)
 2. How/where do you find out about new comic books?
 3. Elements of the comic book to consider (genre, story...)
 4. Clues in the comic book itself (authors, publisher...)
 5. Relation between time or money and access
5. Where do you get the comic books that you read?
6. Is there any type of comic books that you do not enjoy or would not choose reading?
7. What do you think is different from reading a comic book, from reading a book or watching a movie? What is special about comic books for you? Why do you read comics?

¹ Age of Apocalypse is not a comic book but a story arc that comprises several different volumes of X-Men.

² This is actually an illustrated novel, not a comic book or graphic novel. The mention of this text exemplifies the problem that readers sometimes experience to place certain works in specific formats.

³ *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Term Online*, s.v. "Canon,"

<http://www.oxfordreference.com.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca:2048/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t56.e134>
(accessed February 3rd, 2009)