

# “When the Switch Happened”: The Comics Reading Histories of Emerging Adults in the United States

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*The popularity of comics with children and teens in the United States has been extensively documented, both in terms of market sales and circulation in libraries. What is not as well chronicled are readers' experiences with comics reading in their childhood and teenage years, the insights from which might prove useful for school librarians who are interested in helping create positive and meaningful reading experiences for their students. The purpose of this study is to examine the comics reading histories of emerging adults who read comics as children or teens to understand how this format fit into their broader development as a reader. Using both survey and semi-structured interview data, the comics reading histories of 34 emerging adult participants from the Southeastern United States were analyzed. Results of this study suggest that school librarians and literacy educators need to take steps to make comics reading more accessible and considered educationally legitimate for their students and to consider the emotional development of students as readers.*

## Introduction

It's difficult to deny the popularity of today's comics for youth. The sale of comics (including graphic novels and comic books) in the United States has steadily risen in the past decade “led by the ultra-hot ‘juvenile fiction’ comics, which now accounts for 37% of all graphic novels sold through bookstores, followed by manga at 31%” (Salkowitz, 2020). Indeed, Abate and Tarbox (2017) suggested that one of the most significant transformations that took place at the end of the Twentieth Century and the beginning of the new millennium in literature for children and young adults, was the “resurgence of comics geared toward a youth readership” (p. 3). Comics aren't just moving quickly on the market either – research on school library circulation has also reported that comics are amongst the most circulated item in most library collections polled (Becnel & Moeller, 2020; Gavigan, 2014; Moeller & Becnel, 2020).

Despite this bright outlook for youth comics, some school librarians have still shown resistance to comics reading as a worthwhile reading experience. Researchers (Lo, et al., 2019; Moeller & Becnel, 2021; Moodie & Calvert, 2018) from various countries found school librarians and other educators have labeled comics reading as a fun, frivolous activity rather than the complex reading experience that it is. The popularity of comics amongst students and the resistance on the part of librarians to promote them as legitimate reading material has created a tension that is at odds

with many school librarians' objective of developing positive and meaningful reading experiences for students.

The purpose of this study is to examine the reading histories of emerging adults who identified as childhood and/or teenage comics readers to better understand how their comics reading fit into their broader development as a reader. Examining ways in which students experienced comics reading may help school librarians better understand how to develop positive and meaningful experiences with comics in their own libraries. Here, "childhood" refers to children's lives from birth to 11 years old and "teenage" represents individuals aged 12-18 years old. For the purposes of this paper, the term "comics" is used broadly to describe more specific individual visual mediums such as comic books, graphic novels, and manga. Wherever participants used one of these specific terms, that term is represented in their comments.

## Review of Literature

The American Association of School Librarians (AASL) released a position statement in 2020 regarding the school librarian's role in reading in which it states that librarians are in the position to help students develop both academic reading proficiency and a love of reading for personal enjoyment. Specifically, the organization takes the position that "reading is the core of personal and academic competency" (AASL, 2018, 11). AASL's position statement goes on to describe the key elements of the librarian's role in literacy development, including the importance of providing students with reading-level-free choices, access to reading material, and offering a variety of texts in libraries' collections.

Comics are one of the types of multimodal texts that could be offered in library collections, and they have the potential to change how educators approach literacy education in schools as literacy demands on students change. As new media theorist, James Gee (2014) noted, "This new world is a multimodal world....Today, students need to know how to make and get meaning from all these modes alone and integrated together. In the 21st century anyone who cannot handle multimodality is illiterate" (p. xi). Pagliaro's (2014) finding illustrates Gee's claim by suggesting that comics can better support the type of literacy students engage with day-to-day on their devices. The combination of text and visuals, which make comics "multimodal," challenges readers to make meaning differently from traditional text readings by requiring readers to develop new skills to learn how to read comics (Dallacqua, 2020), engage with the conventions specific to the comics format (Low, 2012; Ripley, 2012), and decode the ways in which the text and visuals work together to understand the story and learn new content (Brugar, et al., 2018; Jimenez and Meyer, Ripley, 2012). Dallacqua (2020) also notes that collaborative readings of comics work to open-up the texts for wider interpretation. The high degree to which Western communication today relies on the use of images suggests that the utilization of comics in education seems like a natural antidote to Gee's concern about multimodal "illiteracy." In addition to studies about the use of comics as multimodal texts for literacy education, research has also have shown that comics have the potential to motivate students to read (Gavigan, 2011; Moeller, 2016; Richardson, 2017), and are able to support learners with strong visual learning styles (Garrison & Gavigan, 2019).

While these are significant findings for literacy education and librarianship, comics reading continues to be of questionable value. In an analysis of library and information science literature

about comics readers, Cedeira Serantes (2013) found that researchers' descriptions of comics readers were mostly situated as kinds of deficit readers, including reluctant readers, visual readers, or English as second language students (p. 124). Moeller (2016) found that while sixth grade participants expressed great enjoyment in graphic novel reading, they felt that their teachers wouldn't allow that type of reading in the classroom and that graphic novel reading is "kids" reading, not something adults do. In a similar vein, Cedeira Serantes (2019) described elsewhere how the combination of text and images found in comics is often associated by some as being characteristic of children's picture books and therefore youth are often encouraged to move away from those texts as they get older. The author added, "The experience of comics reading can occur through different formats, at different moments in life, and for different purposes; however, this rich and chameleonic practice has long been *invisible* [original italics] because the experience itself was neglected or undervalued" (2019, p. 83).

Despite the significance that comics seem to have in the reading lives of youth, few researchers (e.g. Cedeira Serantes 2013; Cedeira Serantes, 2019; Gavigan, 2011; Moeller, 2011; Moeller, 2016; Sabeti, 2011; Sabeti, 2012) have actually engaged youth in discussions about their comics reading experiences and those that have do not account for their participants' historical relationship with comics. Engaging with children and teens about their reading as they're experiencing it provides valuable insights into the visceral feelings and decisions youth have and make about their reading. Equally, asking those same individuals about those reading experiences when they've gotten older, through a reading history, can offer more refined understandings and perspectives. Spiro (2014) illustrates this kind of refinement in reporting their experience in researching the reading histories of teachers participating in continuing education sessions. The author noted that the participants were able to make connections between their past reading experiences and the roles those experiences played in "the shaping of values and beliefs internalized and translated...into their everyday lives" (Spiro, 2014, 107).

Similarly, Delfi, et al. (2019) also focused on readers' personal reading histories with their college students, but more on the participants' visceral responses to those experiences, considering that those experiences "involve them personally and holistically" (304) and thus their intuitive responses possibly provided greater depth than if they had given planned responses. As Moss (1993) identified in her seminal work with British girls, romance novel reading reflected some of the same types of educational concerns about comics addressed in this paper. Moss utilized reading histories with her participants in part because she felt it allowed her to "differentiate between levels of engagement and to build that into any analysis without prejudging the nature of the relationship with the text" (Moss, 1993, 120). These researchers have demonstrated the potential that reading histories have for uncovering nuances in the reading lives of participants.

Relying on the participant to develop representations of their reading experiences through memories suggests a helpful kind of distancing, which allows the participant to put those experiences into wider perspective. Essentially, "...reading histories offer valuable evidence of the trajectories of individual readers in the past as well as the broader historical development of reading as a pastime" (Hodges, 2012, p. 15). Dali (2016) noted that "Readers' personal stories are crucial to the study that focuses on real readers rather than the universal, abstract or imaginary readers" (p. 521).

Although scholars have determined that comics reading is a complex practice, and that studying personal reading histories can provide valuable insight into practices that can be used to encourage reading engagement in school libraries, scholars have yet to specifically examine how comics reading plays a role in the broader development of a reader. Inspired in part by Moss' research about teenage girls' relationship with the romance genre, the following research questions guides this study:

- 1) How do these readers understand the place of comics within their reading histories?
- 2) How have readers perceived their comics reading in relation to other types of texts?

## Methodology

This research focused on the reading histories of emerging adults, or individuals aged 18-30. This population was chosen to reflect Abate and Tarbox's (2017) assertion that the beginning of the new millennium brought with it a surge of comics for youth. Most participants who took part in this study were recruited through convenience sampling. A call for participants was placed on a virtual student announcement site and at a university in the Southeastern United States, to recruit undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral students for this research. Specifically, the recruitment call asked for individuals aged between 18-30, who read graphic novels, manga, or comic books as children or teens, to take a survey about their childhood and teenage reading and engage in a semi-structured interview that would last up to 30 minutes (although many participants chose to continue speaking beyond the initial 30 minutes). Snowball sampling was also used, as participants were encouraged to identify friends or family members outside of the university that might have been interested in serving as participants for this study. This sampling allowed for the recruitment of seven additional participants from outside of the original sampling site. Interviews were conducted and recorded using the teleconferencing technology, Zoom during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Thirty-four individuals between the ages of 18-30 participated in this study. Of those 34 participants, one identified as gender non-binary, six identified as men, and 27 identified as women. One participant identified as Asian/Caucasian, two identified as African American or Black, five identified as Latino or Hispanic, and 26 identified as White. Each participant was given the option to choose a pseudonym that would be used in place of their identity for this research.

Participants were first sent a survey to complete before their interview. The purpose of this survey (Appendix A) was to gather demographic information and to encourage participants to mentally situate themselves back into their comics reading experiences as children or teens. I was also able to build upon some of the survey's questions in my semi-structured interview guide (Appendix B). The questions included in the interview guide were developed to initially get participants thinking about their general reading practices and preferences as children and teens, but to also help uncover aspects of reading they may not yet have considered. For example, Hodges (2010) suggested asking participants about critical incidents in their personal reading histories, which could be special moments or key reading experiences through which they felt their readership may have been shaped. The questions included in the interview guide were asked of each participant, but I also asked follow-up questions of participants when I felt it would clarify their responses or if their initial responses hinted at something potentially relevant to this research.

Participants were also invited to add any of their own relevant additional thoughts after the interview, as well as ask any questions of me.

Once the participants had been interviewed, I transcribed their interviews from the recordings and conducted a thematic analysis of the data to answer the research questions, but I also left my analysis open for themes that emerged organically. I did this by reading through the transcripts once, noting themes that both addressed the research questions and emerged organically from the data. I read through the transcripts again to continually refine my codes, all the while looking for themes that may bridge certain codes. A third and fourth reading allowed me to arrange the codes into the following themes: reconceptualizing “reading;” differentiating comics reading from other types of reading; not identifying as a “reader;” and the role that libraries had in the development of comics readers. These themes are discussed in the following section and were used to develop a discussion about the research questions.

## Findings

### *Survey results*

As shown in Table 1, most of the participants in this study were currently attending a two- or four-year college, while others were graduates of the same.

**Table 1. Levels of participant education**

Answer	%	Count
Currently attending a 2- or 4-year college or university	85.29%	29
Graduate of a 2- or 4-year college or university	14.71%	5
Total	100%	34

**Table 2. Number of participants who read comics, manga, or graphic novels for a school assignment**

Answer	%	Count
Yes	55.88%	19
No	44.12%	15
Total	100%	34

There were a variety of responses from participants when they were asked at what age they were when they had read their first comic, manga, or graphic novel (Table 3). The highest percentages of participants fell into the ages of 10 - 11 and 7 - 8, respectively, which suggest that most of the participants were in elementary school at the time of their introduction to comics.

**Table 3. Age of participants when they read their first comic/manga/graphic novel**

Answer	%	Count
5	5.88%	2
6	5.88%	2
7	14.71%	5
8	14.71%	5
9	5.88%	2
10	26.47%	9
11	11.77%	4
12	2.94%	1
13	5.88%	2
14	2.94%	1
Invalid response	2.94%	1
Total	100%	34

Most of the participants indicated that they had family members who read comics (Table 4), which may have been another point of introduction to and/or encouragement of comics reading.

**Table 4. Participants with friends or family members who read comics/manga/graphic novels**

Answer	%	Count
Yes	82.35%	28
No	17.65%	6
Total	100%	34

When asked if they had a specific memory of certain comics or creators, nearly all participants indicated that they enjoyed a particular comic (Table 5) and just over half had a favorite comics author or illustrator (Table 6).

**Table 5. Participants who especially enjoyed a particular comic/manga/graphic novel**

Answer	%	Count
Yes	97.06%	33
No	2.94%	1
Total	100%	34

**Table 6. Participants who had a favorite comic/manga/graphic novel author or illustrator**

Answer	%	Count
Yes	55.88%	19
No	44.12%	15
Total	100%	34

When asked where they obtained their comics, respondents indicated that the school and public libraries were their most visited places, followed by home and the local bookstore (Table 7).

**Table 7. Places where participants obtained comic/manga/graphic novel**

Answer	%	Count
Home	14.58%	14
School library	19.79%	19
Public library	19.79%	19
Friends	11.46%	11
Online retailer	11.46%	11
Local bookstore	12.50%	12
Other, please specify:	10.42%	10
Total	100%	

Regarding the “Other” places from where participants obtained comics, those included comics as gifts from relatives, comic book shops, comicons, flea markets and online sources. Most participants indicated that they read comics in both physical and digital formats, with very few respondents indicating that they read only in digital format (Table 8).

**Table 8. Format of comics read**

Answer	%	Count
Physical only	41.18%	14
Digital only	5.88%	2
Both	52.94%	18
Total	100%	34

Finally, when asked if they still read for enjoyment, 76.47% of participants indicated that they did (Table 9), and 67.65% still read comics (Table 10).

**Table 9. Participants who currently read for enjoyment**

Answer	%	Count
Yes	76.47%	26
No	23.53%	8
Total	100%	34

**Table 10. Participants who still read comic/manga/graphic novels**

Answer	%	Count
Yes	67.65%	23
No	32.35%	11
Total	100%	34

The findings from the survey results suggest that most of these participants who identified themselves as comics readers were introduced to comics during their elementary school years. This introduction may have come from school and/or public libraries, both of which were identified as being a primary source for comics reading material. Influence to read comics may have also come from family members who read comics. Participants' responses also indicate that both print and digital comics play a significant role in readers' choices. Crucially, the high percentage of participants who currently read for pleasure and continue to read comics is important to note.

### ***Individual interview results***

**Reconceptualizing “reading”.** For some participants, the place of comics reading was quite significant in their individual histories. For example, Sam explained that she “hated reading” when



she was in elementary school, but when she started sixth grade, a new friend introduced her to the graphic novel, *Maximum Ride*, and that's "when the switch happened" between not enjoying reading and becoming a voracious reader of comics. Reese described how she "was a crazy reader, I read everything" but when she got to high school, she stopped reading. During her freshman year Reese became very interested in graphic novels and said, "it was a huge relief to read them." She described graphic novel reading as "this nice medium to bridge, like, I didn't have to read something heavy. I could read something light that still had a good story. I really enjoyed it." Another example of comics providing a profound reading experience was for four participants who described how reading comics helped them to become confident readers while they grappled with dyslexia. One of these participants, Sarah, described her relationship with reading as a younger child: "when I was younger, I despised it [reading]. I would read as little as possible of book projects and stuff because I *hated* it and then, I don't know what happened...once I got into reading it was like a snap [she physically snaps her fingers] and I started reading more. It totally drew me in."

For these participants, comics reading meant a reconceptualized notion of what it meant to be a "reader." For a variety of reasons, traditional print text reading failed to prove engaging or meaningful to these participants, while comics reading was transformational to their notion of "reading." The significance of this finding for school librarians and other educators cannot be emphasized strongly enough: if reading promotion for student literacy learning and enjoyment is an important goal, the role that comics can play in helping students engage in reading, instead of positioning themselves in opposition to reading, is crucial.

**Differentiating comics reading from other types of reading.** For many participants who read mostly manga and superhero comics, comics reading served as an extension of the anime, movies, and tv shows with which those participants engaged. For example, Edgar described seeing a *Guardians of the Galaxy* movie and then feeling inspired to find and purchase comic books and graphic novels about this story. Similarly, Amaris explained that she started to become interested in comics through her interest in Pokémon cards and that she found a Pokémon manga at the library, which became her first comics read. Kaitlyn described what she considered to be the relationship between anime and manga reading: "I found that a lot of the anime I like that only had a couple of seasons usually had more seasons [volumes] in manga. Like they had further [sic] of the story."

Most participants noted that comic reading was often easier, more efficient, and more fulfilling reading experience than reading other types of texts. For example, Amaris indicated that she would have liked to have read more traditional books, but she had a very busy schedule at the time and could more easily fit comics reading into her schedule because they were faster to read. Jenny described how comics were easy to immediately "plug-into" and easy to resituate characters and worlds when she was returning to a story after some time, whereas trying to do the same thing with traditional print books was much more challenging for her. Several participants' responses reflected their understanding that the visual nature of comics reading appealed to them more than other types of reading. Jacob described,

I relate things more on a visual level. I didn't know this then, but I look at myself and I can tell that I have a difficult time visualizing things even though I feel like I'm a very

creative person...I think having that picture there really helped make the story come to life for me.

While many participants commented on their attraction to the visual nature of comic reading, several participants expanded on that notion and discussed their appreciation of the way that illustrators used art to tell stories in a way that they didn't find in other texts. Amaris noted, "I really did enjoy the art and the expressiveness you can get in a graphic novel that may not come across as well in a [traditional print] novel." Edgar reported that he read the graphic novel, *Maus* in seventh grade and "I was like, this is awesome. I couldn't imagine a story like that being told in such a way. And I was like, wow!" Hunter described, "I liked them [comics] because they were a departure from same lines of text, and also I really liked seeing the personification and representation of the figures, visually and the characters felt really good."

The sense that reading comics is a more immersive experience than other texts emerged from conversations with participants as well. Summer described how she was able to use her imagination more while reading comics than with traditional books, as if comics reading is fundamentally different. She explained,

I can definitely identify with that - imagining something on the paper and then putting yourself in that same mind and experiencing it in a different way than reading because reading I feel like you come up with the pictures and the images in your own mind versus looking comics as something that's already there and projected on you but you can also just build off of that and your own imagination so it's incorporating like two modes, what's given to you and what you take from it.

Jacob's description of comics reading as an immersive reading experience touched more how the structural elements of comics helped him to tap into his imagination:

When you have this really good in-between where it's like, it gives you visuals to guide you but there's this sense of like imagination where one panel goes to the other panel and what this person sounds like, how this motion here translates to that motion and that's really important. It could be anywhere from a dull drab movement to quirky snappy movement and in that instance, you get to really decide things on your own and I think that's really important. For that reason, it's important for kids to have that in their life and that's why I liked it so much.

From Jacob's quote, it seems as if he is not only immersed in the comics as he reads, but he's co-creating his comics reading experience as well. Like Jacob, many of these participants directly or indirectly spoke about the multimodal nature of comics and how that format helped create for them a different reading experience than the experiences they had had reading traditional print novels. Not only was the multimodality of comics reading attractive to these participants, but several wanted to immerse themselves more in a particular fictional world that had already established in other formats of popular culture. Both themes suggest that the participants realize that comics give them ways to engage with reading that other modes cannot.

**Not identifying as a “reader”.** Another theme that came from participants’ discussions was the notion that comics reading didn’t qualify them as readers. For example, Hannah commented that in choosing books she “always went for the ones with pictures. Not the biggest reader.” After listing a variety of series that she read as a child, Amber said she didn’t consider herself as a reader. Both Juan and Milly, avid comics readers as children and adults, described how being required to take quizzes for reading programs, like Accelerated Reader (AR) and Reading Counts, in school made them feel as if they weren’t readers. Juan described,

I was never a big reader. I think the reason why was because a lot of time in K-12 they forced you to read in the sense of you gotta get the most AR points and the most AR points come in the big [he physically mimes “big”] Harry Potter books, they come in Percy Jackson books. And I wasn’t really about that. The thing I liked about comics was that there’s a lot of pictures, a lot of action because I could see the action going on and I didn’t have to go through 5-600 pages.

Milly noted that “it was a pain” that more comics weren’t included in her school’s reading program. She explained,

For school, there was a lot of pressure to read regular chapter books...there was a lot of competition with all those points, or all those book clubs where they had those competitions where however many books you read you’d get a certain prize or something, there was always a lot of competition with that. And I could never, no, I don’t know how these kids do it. They’re so smart...I never considered myself a reader...

Similarly, some participants described their own struggle with the idea that reading comics didn’t have the same value as reading other texts. Sam said, “I think as I got older, I prevented myself from reading those [comics] because I was like, I’m about to go to college. I should probably start back to reading chapter books.” Aaron similarly indicated that he felt internal pressure to start reading “academic works” during his senior year of high school before going to college but acknowledged that if he was going to read anything for enjoyment, it would be “something with pictures.” Kaitlyn described,

When I wasn’t reading a lot of books and I was just reading manga, I felt kinda like, am I furthering myself, mentally, like am I stimulating my mind as much as I could be if I was reading a series or a novel right now? It’s reading still but it didn’t always feel like it...

Louise described her experience with two book report assignments, for which she chose to read *Twilight* for one of them. She said, “My teacher didn’t know that *Twilight* has a graphic novel version and I read the graphic novel version of *Twilight* instead of reading the actual *Twilight* book and I aced [the assignment].” I asked Louise if she thought her teacher would have had a problem with her reading a graphic novel for a book report and she said,

um, I don’t think so. I think I was just playing if off kind of thing because it was when I had gotten a little bit older and I didn’t want my teacher to think ‘she’s taking the easy way out and doing the graphic novel...

Although Louise was able to cognitively defend the idea of reading a graphic novel as being a legitimate educational experience, her quote suggests that she felt viscerally that openly doing so might have negative academic consequences or that her teacher would have thought less of her as a student. This sense that comics reading isn't academically "good enough," imposed either internally or externally, poses significant consequences for these participants who seem to enjoy reading comics but do so while feeling shame, guilt, and/or a lack of support from their educational communities.

**The role libraries and librarians had in the development of comic readers.** Through interviews, it became clear that the act of browsing both school and public libraries' collections helped several participants become more familiar with comics. While none of the participants remembered interactions with public librarians about their comics reading or choices, some participants did describe how the school library or librarian positively impacted their introduction to comics. Jenny recounted, "The librarian when I was in elementary school talked about different genres and that [comics] was one of them..." Both Jacob's elementary and high school librarians impacted his interest in comics. Of his elementary library experience he said,

There was a graphic novel corner in the library, and they said, 'those are graphic novels. You're not allowed to get those. Those are for fifth graders.' And I said OK, but that just made me want to get them more.

Jacob remembered a positive exchange with school library staff that was significant in his developing sense as a reader:

I remember I was checking out all these books and there was this teacher aid who was sitting at the counter, and they were all like, 'uh, hey, are you sure you want to rent [check-out] all these books? You can only take them home for two weeks.' And the librarian put a hand on her shoulder and was like, 'oh, he'll get through them. Don't worry.' That was a moment of pride for me. I felt like someone was like...I felt it wasn't so bad to like graphic novels and that maybe I was good at reading them or something like that.

Additionally, several participants also remembered discovering comics through the Scholastic Book Fair that was either sponsored by or held in the library.

A few participants described the ways in which their school librarians approached comics reading and circulation and how that impacted the way in which they developed as comics readers. Kaitlyn remembered having an elementary school librarian who "made it a little bit harder for me to read a couple different times" because Kaitlyn's reading level was high and she was discouraged from reading texts she would have preferred to have read. Katherine also had a strong impression of her elementary school librarian. She said,

In elementary school we had a pretty big rule, where they strongly discouraged reading comics. I really didn't read it a whole lot in elementary school anyways so it wasn't a big deal but for some of my friends and classmates who loved things like...*Bone*...they would be strongly discouraged from reading it and they were like, 'yeah, you can only check

out one at a time, but if you want to check out any other library book, you can check out two or three.' So, it was kind of a discouragement point...I definitely felt it at school by the librarian there.

When asked to describe why she didn't read more comics, Lauren's response suggested a missed opportunity by her school librarian:

...there's so many more comics and graphic novels out there and stuff like that that you never really heard about. I would have thought my teachers would have maybe, like, introduced that as a genre, or talked about it, maybe given examples. I never remember reading those and I feel like they almost, in a way, frowned upon it, maybe...now I realize that there's so much more to them and they're actually, like, they are good reading material so I'm a little surprised that it was never discussed by my teachers to students...I don't know if it was curriculum or they're like a newer thing, I don't know.

Lauren's response suggests that her lack of introduction to comics in school prevented her from developing into more of a comics reader. It's clear from these participants' responses that their experiences with comics reading and the ways in which their libraries or school librarians fostered (or did not) that kind of reading was meaningful in their development as comics readers. School librarians are gatekeepers of the types of information, stories, and formats that students get to access, and that gatekeeping was very much felt and remembered by these participants, either for their positive or negative effects

## Discussion and Implications

Examining the comics reading histories of emerging adults has produced important findings for school librarians who want to encourage positive and meaningful literacy experiences in their own libraries. While many of these findings confirm those of other studies that have examined comics reading in school, the findings here also expand that discourse by providing insights from readers who were able to reflect on their engagement with comics reading and situate that engagement within their broader relationships with reading. In answer to the research question, "How do these readers understand the place of comics within their reading histories?" libraries and librarians played pivotal roles. Despite some school librarians' perception that comics readers are "preformed" readers who they might support by purchasing more comics to supplement their current reading interest, these findings suggest that libraries and librarians had a key role in introducing comics to students, thus helping them find a place to begin with and continue comics reading.

Through displays, discussions of genres, individual reader's advisory, and book fairs, librarians and libraries helped introduce and/or foster the notion that students could read comics and that they could get those comics from the library. Conversely, some participants found their interactions with their school librarians regarding comics reading to be discouraging, with the librarians making it more difficult for students to access comics. Indeed, many of the participants expressed a sense of internalized shame or guilt about reading comics, which may be in part due to their educators' perspectives on comics reading. Having placed importance on reading program scores (which often feature many more print-only titles than multimodal texts), traditional literacy

instructional materials, and student check-outs of traditional print books, educators have likely communicated to students that the comics reading they were doing (or wanted to do) wasn't valuable or appropriate for their age and reading level. "Literacy shaming" (Tetreault, 2019) students seems to be in direct opposition to one of the primary roles of the school librarian, which is to "empower students to become...enthusiastic readers" (American Association of School Librarians, 2009, 18).

Similarly, several participants spoke about how they failed to consider themselves as readers despite being avid comics readers and individuals who continue to read for pleasure today. Although educators, especially school librarians and literacy instructors, place a high value on reading, these participants felt that their preferred kind of reading didn't count, that it wasn't "real" reading. The ways in which individuals de-legitimize comics reading as valid, valuable reading experience has been found in other research (Cedeira Serantes, 2013; Moeller, 2016; Cedeira Serantes, 2019), but the implications are no less important: the way in which teachers and school librarians talk (or don't) about comics reading has a real impact on how comics readers see themselves (Cedeira Serantes, 2013).

Impressively, several of the participants described how they essentially redefined what it meant for them to "read" when they began to engage with comics, which for many of the participants, occurred when they were elementary school students. For a child to suddenly consider themselves to be a "reader," to flip that "switch," is a transformational experience, one that most educators work to instill in their students, especially at a young age. The necessity of offering and using a variety of types of texts in instruction and in library collections is an important implication for educators. If they are unwilling to consider "reading" as being more than traditional textual reading, educators are doing a significant disservice to those students who wish to read outside of that format.

The ways in which participants expressed various emotions during our interviews belied a passion for the comics they read, how they read, and how their reading was perceived by themselves and others. As Pekrun (2021) noted, "emotions impact processes of reading as well as resulting outcomes, including knowledge acquisition, conceptual change, and attitude change." This research demonstrates that the emotional development of readers is of great significance for school librarians and educators interested in literacy development. How students feel about what they are reading, how they are reading, and how their reading is considered by others have crucial implications for reading achievement and development.

In answer to the second research question, "How have readers perceived their comics reading in relation to other types of texts?" many of the participants spoke about how comics reading allowed them to have a more immersive reading experience. For some participants, this meant that they used their imaginations in combination with the comic they were reading in a kind of symbiotic fashion to further develop the world in which they were immersed. These opportunities for readers to develop and further their own interpretations of the stories they read reflects Dallacqua's (2020) finding that comics reading allows for more diverse interpretations of a text. While these participants were required to use different skills to read, they embraced those skills, which allowed participants to use them beyond engaging with the book in their hands.

These participants' responses suggest that they feel comics reading is fundamentally different from reading traditional texts, which as a multimodal text, it is. Their subtle acknowledgement of the potential that comics as multimodal texts have to their literacy development is a finding of which school librarians and other educators need to take notice. As Dallacqua (2020) stated, "The time for needing to make a case for comics is coming to an end. These texts need to count in classrooms as academic texts that support learning" (p. 187). This research demonstrates the need for school librarians to acknowledge that comics reading is a valid, important kind of engagement that can help create positive and meaningful literacy experiences for their students. To do this, librarians can no longer simply provide comics for students to read; rather, they must focus on specific behaviors that have traditionally prevented students from feeling comfortable reading comics. This might include introducing comics to all students, not just those who appear to be interested in them, boosting students' confidence about their reading identifies, teaching students how to read comics, talking to and teaching teachers about comics reading and multimodalities, and addressing popular stigmas about comics reading and the feelings of shame some students may have about reading comics.

## Future Research

School librarians have a vital role in helping students, teachers, and other stakeholders understand what comics have to offer in terms of variety and potential for learning and enjoyment. Many students like those participants in this study *want* to read, which is a great starting point in helping them learn to develop a lifelong love of reading: lining students' paths with a variety of comics reading opportunities may help to keep them from stumbling along the way.

One of the inherent limitations of working with individuals' reading histories is also one of its strengths, which is that the participant interprets their own experiences through memory, which may alter as they continue to move throughout life. Additionally, the small participant population and geographic focus does not lend this research to generalization; rather, it may provide researchers and practitioners a sense of how some children and teens might engage with comics. Replications of this study in other geographic locations may produce different results.

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## Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

1. What were your favorite things to read, either as a child or as a teenager?
2. What was your main source of reading material?
3. Who impacted your early and adolescent reading experiences?
4. Did you have any special moments or reading experiences which you feel like helped shape you as a reader?
5. Did you read mostly comics? Or did you read other things as well?
6. How did you come to find out about comics?
7. Did you ever read comics or comics for a school assignment? If so, tell me about it.
8. Where did you get ideas as to what you wanted to read?
9. How old were you when you read your first comic? What was it?
10. Did you have friends or family members who read comics? Who were they?
11. Did you share comics or recommendations with anyone?
12. Did you talk about your comics reading with anyone?
13. When you were younger, did you consider yourself to be a comics reader?
14. Describe where, physical space, did you read comics?
15. Did you ever feel any pressure to read something other than comics?
16. Was there a series or title you really liked?
17. Why did you read comics?
18. Do you want to add anything to help me better understand your reading history?