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Comic Book Fandom and Stigma Consciousness

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COMIC BOOK FANDOM AND STIGMA CONSCIOUSNESS

by

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This research project explores the concept of stigma consciousness as applied to the subculture of comic book fandom. Integrating the disciplines of social psychology and cultural studies, this study examines the dynamic and socially constructed nature of the stigma process as applied to the specific cultural form of the American comic book, while identifying and measuring several variables of potential influence on perceptions of the hierarchy of American cultural values. The purpose is to address an existing gap in the academic literature of fan studies in regards to the marginalization and stigmatization of fan cultures as experienced by the members of these groups.

Through the use of a questionnaire modeled on pre-existing studies in the realm of stigma research, members of the comic book fandom subculture communicate aspects of their experiences and perceptions related to their social identity as comic book fans. At its core, this project calls into question many of the claims made in the area of fandom studies and can potentially shape direction in the dialogue on the role of contemporary fandom in the social construction of identity.

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INTRODUCTION

Under the academic discipline of cultural studies, there exists a paradigm of scholarly investigation known as fandom studies. Fandom studies is primarily concerned with the social groups and phenomena that are linked to cultural and social objects, ranging from celebrities and athletes to media texts and material objects. As an academic discipline contributing to society's body of knowledge, it explores how communities of readers and audiences are formed, how these communities construct meaning from media texts, what types of meanings they construct, the practices and activities of fandom, fandom groups as unique subcultures, the concepts of ideology and taste hierarchy as they manifest themselves in popular culture, and fandom groups' positions and functions in the social world. In short, "the academic exploration of fandom explores the role of fandom as a social and cultural institution forming interpretive communities socially contextualizing the power of mass media" (Sandvoss, 2005, p. 10).

A common theme that permeates fandom studies in general, regardless of what the specific avenue of research focus may be, is the idea that dominant social norms marginalize, devalue, or even stigmatize fandom groups and subcultures. The premise being that these fandom groups invert the traditionally dominant ideology of cultural hierarchy by placing high levels of value on cultural objects and practices generally designated as lowbrow and therefore they become the focus of negative social consequences due to this inversion.

Most commonly presented as evidence of this stigmatization are negative mainstream media depictions of fans which, through stereotypical representations or negatively laden language usage, in essence pathologizes the fan as a social identity. In most academic and lay literature, "the fan is characterized as an obsessed loner, suffering from a disease of isolation, or a frenzied crowd member, suffering from a disease of contagion. In either case, the fan is seen as irrational, out of control, and prey to a number of external forces" (Jenson, 1992, p. 13). The "depiction of fandom as a consequence of psychological or cultural dysfunction constitutes the background against which fans first attracted attention from media and cultural studies scholars in the 1980s" (Sandvoss, 2005, p. 2). These stereotypes and representations of fandom in the media act to legitimize the negative attitudes and contribute to what Major (2002) refers to as low relative group status attributed to fandom of a social group.

While examinations of stereotypes in popular culture, content analysis of media coverage, and references to other media scholars' research lends credence to the central argument that fandom is a devalued and marginalized, one area of potential and important exploration is left unfulfilled by fandom studies. That area is the actual experience and perceptions of members of fandom in the social world as it relates to

their potentially stigmatized social identity as fans. After all, if social life must be understood as enacted by real individuals in real situations, then abstract and theoretical ruminations about stigmatized fan identity without empirical examination, is only half of the picture.

In order to fully understand the phenomenon of fandom as a stigmatized social identity, the perspective and experience of the potentially stigmatized must be taken into account and the adult comic book fan in America is perhaps the most marginalized and stigmatized fan identity in all of popular culture. At one point or another in American history, the form, content, producers, and fans of comic books have all been stigmatized by society, ridiculed by other forms of cultural expression, or even persecuted by legal institutions. The comic book is synonymous with lowbrow, junk entertainment and has a unique history of stigmatization and persecution in the American cultural landscape. All of which has made contemporary adult comic book readers the targets for negative stereotypes and connotations and the possessors of a distinctively devalued social identity. Because of this, the comic book fandom subculture presents itself as the ideal fandom group to utilize in order to examine potentially stigmatized fan identity as it manifests itself empirically in the lives and perceptions of group members.

Ultimately, this study seeks to measure the level of awareness among respondents of their potentially stigmatized social identity and how this awareness is mediated or exacerbated by their level of involvement with the fandom subculture. By incorporating concepts related to stigma derived from a social psychology background with ideas about identity construction derived from fandom studies, I seek to illustrate how stigma as a social phenomenon manifests itself within the perspective of the potentially stigmatized and to further bridge the disciplines of sociology and cultural studies.

The primary research question is whether or not members of the comic book fandom subculture have an awareness or consciousness that their social identity as a comic book fan is devalued and stigmatized by the norms of society. There is evidence to suggest that members of stigmatized groups develop awareness that others view them negatively (Harvey 2001). If evidence is found of the existence of a stigma consciousness among members of the comic book fandom, this will be empirical evidence that further validates the application of the concept of stigma to fandom subcultures. It is my hypothesis that there will indeed be evidence of the existence of a stigma consciousness among members of comic book fandom that speaks to their marginalized status.

The secondary question of the study is how this stigma consciousness varies according to the individual's involvement with the subculture. By measuring their involvement with the activities and practices of the subculture, we can hope to control for individual variations in psychological and personality trends that may influence responses to the stigma consciousness questions. Also, we can evaluate if the extent of

subculture involvement, and therefore the salience of the comic book fan identity to the individual, influences perceptions of potential stigmatization. Previous research has shown that stigmas related to identity traits considered to be central to identity construction are associated with higher levels of stigma consciousness (Pinel 1999). My hypothesis is that those highly involved in the practices and rituals of comic book fandom will have an increased awareness of the stereotypes associated with their subculture and would thereby have higher levels of stigma consciousness and would be more likely to interpret their life experiences in light of their group membership.

It is important to note that I am not attempting an ethnography of the comic book subculture. While examining the subculture as a social group and the history of the medium as a cultural form is necessary to provide adequate context for the study and the questions it seeks to examine, I am ultimately concerned with only one aspect of what is in truth a much larger social phenomenon in the form of the comic book fandom and it is not my desire to make any grand statements about comic book fandom as a whole. Additionally, it is not my goal to analyze the psychological processes of stigma consciousness or the mechanisms by which it may develop. I am solely concerned with attempting to validate its existence or expose the lack thereof and to explore the particulars of the concept as it relates to the population under study. Ideas of stereotype threat, negative consequences on self-esteem and psychological well-being, stigma and the looking-glass self, strategies of stigma management and cognitive or affective aspects of stigma are all important facets of social stigma theory and deserve their own due attention in the existing research and literature, but are not of specific concern for the scope of this project.

Fandom as a phenomenon is fundamentally tied to contemporary life in Western industrialized societies. As modern communication technologies enable the dissemination of media products worldwide with unprecedented ease, media use is becoming ubiquitous in conjunction with self-identifying as a fan of one thing or another. The significance and importance of fandom in identity construction and social interaction is only now being examined with the serious scholarly attention it deserves as an integral part of everyday life. Chapter 2 examines the body of literature associated with fandom studies as an academic discipline, the American comic book as a cultural object, and the intersection of the two in the comic book fandom subculture.

Stigma must be “real” for the individuals under study. They must experience it from their perspective before the phenomenon can be analyzed by a sociologist on the outside. A study such as this one acts as the scaffolding that supports the macro level conceptions of stigma under construction by social psychologists and further illustrates the disciplinary connections between social scientists and cultural scholars. Chapter 3 illustrates the theoretical framework that underpins these ideas related to stigma, its application to comic books as a medium and cultural form, and the implications this has for the construction of social identity.

Drawing on Pinel's (1999) conceptualization of stigma consciousness and adapting her stigma consciousness questionnaire originally designed for female and minority respondents to gauge awareness of sexism and racism stigmas, I have generated a stigma consciousness questionnaire of my own that addresses the potential concerns that would characteristically impact a member of the comic book fandom subculture. Chapter 4 describes and discusses in detail the methods employed in the data collection process. Chapter 5 presents the data collected from the surveys and the results of its analysis and the study concludes in Chapter 6, a summary of conclusions drawn from the data presented in Chapter 5 and recommendations for further research directions.

Examining fandom can help lead us to a greater understanding of the pleasures associated with fandom, the values placed on specific objects of fandom, and the motivations that drive fandom. Furthermore, it reveals the kinds of judgments made towards a segment of "others" in society. In essence, fandom can be seen as a microcosm of society at large and the insights revealed by fandom studies can help shed light on the functioning mechanisms of society as a whole.

> "Studies of fan audiences help us to understand and meet challenges far beyond the realm of popular culture because they tell us something about the way in which we relate to those around us. Studying fan audiences allows us to explore some of the key mechanisms through which we interact with the mediated world at the heart of our social, political, and cultural identities. Perhaps the most important contribution of contemporary research into fan audiences thus lies in furthering our understanding of how we form emotional bonds with ourselves and others in a modern, mediated world." (Gray, 2007, p. 10).

Specifically, the study of American comic book readers can illustrate the significance of cultural hierarchies in the everyday life of individuals in society, further illuminate the stereotypes of marginalized subcultures, and throw the spotlight on the dynamic and temporal nature of stigma in general as a socially constructed phenomenon.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural Studies and Fandom Studies

Often, the academic discipline referred to as cultural studies is perceived to be a recent phenomenon only going back a mere couple of decades to the 1980s. In actuality, the academic study of popular culture has its roots in the late 1960s (Ashby 2010). While those initial scholars often chose aspects of society as their subjects of inquiry that have since faded from popular memory, they were laying the groundwork for a paradigm of research that encompasses all concepts of popular entertainment and objects of mass media, along with the external social factors governing their production and the construction of meanings attached to them. It is important to note that "although cultural studies cannot be reduced to the study of popular culture…the study of popular culture is central to the project of cultural studies" (Storey, 2009, p. xvi).

While many critics dismiss much of popular culture as escapist fantasy, they are overlooking the all-important questions of what is being escaped from, why escape is necessary, and what is escaped to. "When confronted by a form of popular culture which is alien to our own experiences and values, our gut impulse is often to dismiss it, but the good analyst instead tries to understand what these cultural practices and artifacts mean in the lives of the people for whom they are meaningful" (Fiske, 1989b, p. xxxii).

In general, the study of popular culture can be broken down into three categories: the production of cultural objects, the content of the object(s), and the reception of the objects and the meanings attached to them (Storey 2009). It is in this third category where we find the genesis for what has become a growing field of study focusing on fans and fan groups. However, this realm of research also contains what is commonly known as audience studies, which is distinct from fan studies and requires a brief discussion.

Although both fan studies and audience theory cover much of the same ground and are often interrelated, audience theory tends to be concerned with a more macro level perspective on media use than fan studies. Incorporating media theory and communication studies, audience studies research concerns itself with generalizable trends that can often be applied to both casual media consumers and fans alike. It is sometimes divided into 3 phases: (1) effects (2) uses and gratifications and (3) encoding/decoding (Abercrombie & Longhurst 1998). Of course, fan studies utilize aspects of these phases also, but the cornerstone of fan studies is always the specific context of the object and the uniqueness of a given individual's relationship with it.

Nonetheless, there are some important contributions made to fan studies by audience theory that are particularly applicable to this study. Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst (1998) exposed the hidden complexities of conceptualizing audiences and present the formulation of a spectrum of audience identities to replace the commonly employed dichotomies of simple or mass and casual or fan. In modern societies, people are media audience at virtually all times and their interactions with different content will range from disinterested to casual to fan to producer depending on the context and content. This is of particular significance when studying fans as it requires the researcher to be fully aware of how they define and delimit their intended subject of research.

Additionally, Steve Bailey (2005), with his utilization of Mead and symbolic interactionism presented important theories and ideas about how identity is constructed through media use. Shaun Moore (1993), championing ethnography as the fundamental method for audience research, highlighted the importance of the context of the media object and its use when it comes to the researcher understanding the meanings attached. All of these ideas feed directly into the research on fans and fan groups.

The first wave of cultural studies that can be considered explicitly fan studies, spearheaded by John Fiske (1989a; 1989b; 1992) and Henry Jenkins (1992), approached popular culture as a site of power struggle and resistance. Fiske in particular embraced a model of reader resistance, linking the cultural to the political. "Popular culture is the culture of the subordinated and disempowered and thus always bears within it signs of power relations, traces of the forces of domination and subordination that are central to our social system and therefore our social experience" (Fiske, 1989a, p. 4). Not necessarily always explicitly in the text or object itself, but potentially in the social relationship with the object and the act of consuming the text. "Fandom is typically associated with the cultural forms that the dominant value system denigrates. It is associated with the cultural tastes of subordinated formations of people" (Jenkins, 1992, p. 30).

Therefore, the early study of fans and fandom groups was political in its approach, focusing on how popular culture was used by fans to resist dominant ideologies either overtly or subconsciously. With cultural studies in general, and the initial fan studies in particular, grounded in Marxism and ideology, the discipline rests primarily on the idea that to understand the meanings of culture we must analyze it in relation to the social structure and its history. For some scholars, the tactics of cultural consumption that are utilized by the popular audience lend this dimension of resistance to the everyday practices of life in general (de Certeau 1984). Furthermore, building on the theme of resistance and power prevalent in the writings that would eventually become the canon of cultural studies, two of the very first ethnographies of fan subcultures embraced groups traditionally denigrated by the dominant society.

In his exploration of fantasy role-playing games, Gary Alan Fine (1983) engaged with adolescent males alienated from the traditional masculine social norms of sports and chasing girls, as they utilized collective fantasy gaming as a means to build a sense of community and construct meaning in their lives. Moreover, examining the leisure activities of housewives, Janice Radway's (1984) work on romance readers is a watershed in media studies ethnography, revealing how the subjects of her study used romance novels and the act of reading as a ways to escape from the patriarchy of society and the pressure placed on them by society to fulfill the roles of wife and mother. The act of reading for the participants transcended mere escapism and was a means of exercising resistance to the demands placed on them by outside forces. Both of these works were written prior to fan studies existing as an organized academic trend and helped lay the foundation for other ethnographies in future waves of fan research.

As fan studies began to coalesce into a distinct academic sub-discipline, a thematic shift took place. Themes of power and resistance made way for a focus on the structural and functional aspects of fan groups. "The second wave of work on fan audiences highlighted the replication of social and cultural hierarchies within fan-and subcultures, as the choice of fan objects and practices of fan consumption are structured through our habitus as a reflection and further manifestation of our social, cultural, and economic capital" (Gray, 2007, p. 6). These explorations of fandoms embedded nature in the larger social structures of taste hierarchies incorporated a perspective derived from Bourdieu that was a direct response to the idea of popular culture production and consumption as a means of emancipation from the cultural hegemony of the dominant group.

It was during this period that the fandom as pathology repudiation became a fixture of academic writings on fandom. In one of the first forays into the second wave of popular culture fandom studies, Jenkins (1992) references a Saturday Night Live skit in which Star Trek fans are lambasted with the "get a life" adage. Jenkins also mentions mainstream magazine articles with derogatory word usage to label fans as "kooks", "misfits", "crazies", and "childish". From the psychopathic to the comedic, fans are portrayed in the media as social misfits and loners, either desexualized or sexually inadequate. They are seen as immature both intellectually and socially, with inappropriate emphasis on "worthless" cultural knowledge. All of this becomes embodied in a mythology about fan identity that then becomes the popular discourse on the subject. "Fandom is seen as excessive, bordering on deranged, behavior…a psychological symptom of a presumed social dysfunction" (Jenson, 1992, p. 9).

Much of the research and writings of this era of fan studies was explicitly motivated by a desire to challenge these mainstream assumptions of fandom by providing alternate explanations grounded in social theory regarding the complexity of uses and meanings invoked by fans. In fact, "early fan studies often turned to the very activities and practices…that had been coded as pathological, and attempted to redeem them as creative, thoughtful, and productive" (Gray, 2007, p.3). There was a melding of

the themes of resistance and empowerment as a reaction to the social construction of the conception of fan as deviant or socially undesirable.

Overall, the writings on fandom in anthologies of this period tend to focus on television programs, and issues of gender and/or sexuality and fandom are taken up from a multitude of perspectives including feminist approaches and, postmodern theory (Cartmell, Kaye, Whelehan, Hunter 1997; Harris & Alexander 1998; Lewis 1992). However, the social psychological aspects of fandom were not ignored either (Grossberg 1992; Jenson 1992) and notions of fan production, performance and interaction with popular texts through means such as fan fiction are also significant presences in the literature (Harris & Alexander 1998; Jenkins 1992). Additionally, science fiction fandom, due in part to its long standing history and easily classifiable members became a popular topic, encompassing fan groups of specific films, television programs, or texts and including several science fiction fandom ethnographies that explored the subculture that developed as a whole (Bacon-Smith 2000 and Sanders 1994).

Finally, the third wave of fan studies is the here and now. Often focusing on trends in technology and globalization, contemporary fan studies can be seen as transitioning back to macro level considerations of social research after years of focusing on the microcosms of specific fan cultures. "Changing communication technologies and media texts contribute to and reflect the increasing entrenchment of fan consumption in the structure of our everyday life. Furthermore, "fandom has emerged as an ever more integral aspect of lifeworlds in global capitalism, and an important interface between the dominant micro and macro forces of modernity " (Gray, 2007, p. 8-9). In other words, the media and everyday life have become so closely interwoven thanks to modern communication technology that the two are virtually inseparable and concepts once easily cordoned off under the idea of fandom are bleeding over into the everyday social life of individuals in ways that have yet to be fully grasped.

Andy Ruddock's (2001) take on fandom is that as a phenomenon it crystallizes the difference between modernism and postmodernism. Modernism pathologizes the excess pleasures of media consumption while postmodernism embraces media usage as active social discourse. Either way, "in its proliferation, its growing importance in the construction of identity and its social and cultural classification, fandom has something to say about the very substance, premises and consequences of contemporary life" (Sandvoss, 2005, p. 4).

And some of the old guards of fandom studies are still actively contributing to its evolution, exploring exactly how developing technologies are impacting culture (Jenkins 2006) and the role of culture industries on the global landscape. "Fandom represents the way media and culture industries are going to operate in the future" (Jenkins, 2007, p. 361). Jenkins goes so far as to claim that as fandom becomes more and more normal and everyday, it may cease to be functional as a category of cultural analysis. However, it is this increased normalcy of fandom that demands its closer examination as a social

phenomenon. In particular, "as cultural judgment has become increasingly detached from the state of being a fan, our attention shifts to the choice of fan object and its surrounding practices" (Gray, 2007, p. 5).

Of course, contemporary academic writing is additionally populated by meta-critical examinations and ruminations, and scholar Matt Hills has fully embraced this niche in fandom studies. As Hills (2007) points out, media academics are also media audiences, and it is impossible to divorce issues of aesthetic judgment and academic ideology from discussions of media and cultural studies. No matter what, the subjectivity of the academic will bleed through in one way or another, from shaping the research questions, establishing the theoretical paradigm, and even as to the choice of media and cultural phenomena to study in the first place. An idea of reflexivity being a necessary part of academic research, one that has become almost commonplace in many sociological disciplines, is also just as applicable to the discipline of cultural studies. After all, even the focus of academic writings on fandom reveal the cultural hierarchy of media texts and taste distinctions. "The scholar-fan must still conform to the regulative ideal of the rational academic subject, being careful not to present too much of their enthusiasm while tailoring their accounts of fan interest and investment to the norms of academic writing" (Hills, 2002, p. 11). Although on the surface, fandom studies may appear to be undemanding or straightforward, the discipline's history and breadth of literature reveal the unique complexities and nuances that are involved in studying this aspect of society.

This study tends to incorporate aspects of both the second and third wave of academic fan studies. By focusing on the stigma and pathology of fandom and integrating aspects of social identity construction, it seeks to take a fundamental theme of the second wave and examine it under the parameters of contemporary fandom research and theory. All the while embracing concepts of self-reflexivity and including an awareness of the modern media presence in everyday social life as enabled by the panorama of developing technology.

American Comic Books

Because the context of a cultural object is the cornerstone of cultural studies, and therefore fandom studies, it is important to present a general overview of the existing literature on the object under study. The serious study and examination of the American comic book as an artistic medium, social phenomenon, and cultural object has a trajectory as unique as the medium itself, reflecting the comic book's often devalued and controversial position in society.

In the initial era of comic book popularity, when the medium was a truly widespread and mass medium whose impact on society was in the early stages of genesis, research, articles and studies were usually driven by emotion, representing an academic or other professional's expert opinion presented as scientific fact. In her

history of comic book censorship, Nyberg (1998) offers an excellent summary of the early research into comic books that occurred in the 1940s and 1950s. From the descriptions given of the methodology employed, very few of these studies would pass the scientific standards that exist today.

This research was not limited to any one branch of academia and was generally concerned with issues of audience effect, the lowering of cultural values and even serious discussion on the harmful effects on the eyesight of readers. One area of particular concern under the audience effect paradigm was the impact of comic books on literacy and learning ability in children. "Stories in pictures were maintained to be innately inferior to those in words, and it was now argued that children's ability to learn to read would be retarded by an over-familiarity with comics" (Sabin, 1996, p. 42). Additionally, "critics viewed comic books as sub-literate and feared they would disrupt children's development of literacy" (Lopes, 2006, p. 401). Social scientists, educators, psychologists, and physicians all presented research both supporting and attacking comic books with various amounts of conflicting evidence (Arndt 2011).

These early trends in examining a cultural medium still in its infancy culminated with the publication of Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* in 1954. Wertham's work explicitly (and unscientifically) linked comic books with juvenile delinquency, exploiting a rising fear in post-war America about the growing population of teenagers with expendable income and increased leisure time and the manner in which they utilized both of these resources (Gilbert 1986). "Wertham dismissed the notion that comic books could inculcate anything but harmful values, and he simply ignored or misrepresented evidence to the contrary. Bewildered by the complex of economic, social, and cultural factors dividing them from their children, parents wanted an easy answer" (Wright, 2001, p. 162-163). "As a Gallup Poll of the period showed, some 70 percent of American adults said they believed that comic books deserved to be blamed for juvenile delinquency" (Hadju, 2008, p. 294).

Such was the power of the *zeitgeist* of the period that the federal government itself became involved. The Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency conducted its investigation of comic books in the spring of 1954 with the intention of forcing the comic book publishers into adopting a self-regulatory code like that of the film industry (Nyberg 1998). The negative publicity of these nationally televised hearings and the strict implementation of censorship of content that resulted are at the heart of the stigma attached to comic books in America and has had a lasting impact on the perception of comic books across the entire strata of American society, including the halls of academia.

The campaign against comics in the 1950s did such a powerful job of discrediting comics that for decades to come, researchers avoided them as unworthy objects of study. After all, "the ivory towers housing the literary canon, sculpting pedagogy, and safeguarding all media do not readily see children's and adolescent literature as complex, sophisticated, or worth critical attention" (Crutcher, 2011, p. 54). However, as

cultural objects of artistic and creative expression, the comic book medium can provide unique complexity not found in prose-based novels or traditional films and is a distinctive twentieth century American phenomenon with all the resulting social complexities to compliment its inherent creative complexities. As such, it was only a matter of time before the comic book as a topic of legitimate study and discussion was recognized by scholars of a variety of disciplines and reintroduced into the academic dialogue.

However, as with many aspects of popular culture, the flow of increased legitimacy often starts from more humble beginnings and eventually rises to the attention of the residents of those so called ivory towers of higher learning. The initial resurgence of publications on comic books was in fact mainstream published histories of the medium by fans turned scholars. Due to the lack of academic texts and treatises on comics until relatively recently, I feel it is necessary to include a brief mention of these works as anyone interested in researching comic books as a social phenomenon will inevitably utilize a portion of them in constructing any kind of comprehensive contextual understanding.

In the first serious attempt at a history of comics, Les Daniels (1971) proclaims that "comics were not created, they evolved. Any mode of imagination that develops this way is always controversial. Arbiters of taste and judgement ascribe value only to that which has already been found worthy by posterity" (p. 1). In the case of comic books, these words would prove prophetic. Daniels' history of comics would languish on the shelves as a single anomaly for almost two decades until it was finally joined by other like-minded works by other fans turned historians and scholars writing about the medium they loved. For example, Gerard Jones, a former comic book writer turned historian and cultural scholar has written two works on the history of the comic book industry and medium. *Men of Tomorrow* (2004) traces the genesis of the comic book industry, part biography of the individuals involved in the comic book's birth and part cultural history, while *The Comic Book Heroes* (1997) is a more straight forward layman history, examining the medium from the 1970s to the late 1990s, showcasing the characters and creators. Additional books focusing on specific publishers (Daniels 1991), exploring the historic progression of different genres (Goulart 1986, 2000, 2001), drawing attention to the artists of an era (Herman 2004), and examining cultural trends (Krensky 2008) have all contributed to a wider understanding of the medium and its impact. These texts communicated many details and trends and included references that would ultimately be used by other fans and scholars who would undertake academic publishing ventures on the topic.

Perhaps the most important work out there that examines the medium of comic books from a critical perspective is Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics,* first published in 1993. McCloud, a comic book writer and artist, critically examines the medium's form, function, emotional appeal, narrative structures, and other unique characteristics all in the very same communicative medium he is critiquing. McCloud followed up this opus with a pair of books titled *Reinventing Comics* (2000) and *Making*

Comics (2006) which further explored the role of technology in artistic creation within the medium and storytelling tools unique to the medium, respectively. However, it is his magnum opus published in the early 1990s that can be construed as a catalyst for igniting many scholars' interest in academic examination of the comic book.

Contemporary academic research into comic books that has spun off from these origins usually falls under the disciplinary umbrellas of English, art history and media or cultural studies. The initial push of comic book research and scholarly literature occurred in the late 1980s and early 1990s when several universities (Michigan State University, Ohio State University, and Bowling Green State University) began to develop collections of comics and comic related literature (Lent 2007). The University Press of Mississippi developed a comic book focused imprint oriented towards cultural and comics criticism and has been instrumental in moving forward comic scholarship. Furthermore, journal articles (primarily published in the *Journal of Popular Culture*) examining the social, cultural and political function of comic books and their characters over the past two decades have steadily increased in frequency.

One of the dominant themes of the early academic works on comic books, and one that still resonates with scholars today, involved a content analysis approach invoking aspects of literary theory and presented by faculty of university English departments. Two of the very first works from the University Press of Mississippi during the renaissance of comic book academics critically examine the medium as a whole before applying narrative and literary theory to specific works and authors exploring themes likely to find a sympathetic audience among academics (Harvey 1996; Witek 1989). While these first texts delivered their analysis objectively with undercurrents of optimism for the potential academic exploration of an untapped medium, later works would be firmly situated in the cultural struggle for legitimation as they used literary theory and narrative structure to frame arguments for the comic book's acceptance as a serious medium of communication and artistic expression. Klock (2002) enthusiastically waves the flag for superhero comics and their often overlooked nuances whereas Douglas Wolk (2007) tends to be critical of the superhero genre and the comic book fandom subculture while placing on a pedestal what he refers to as "art comics". Nonetheless, they both present a very candid and poignant commentary on the medium as it transitions into the early twenty-first century from escapist entertainment to multi-faceted popular culture medium and this dialogue would not even be possible without the pioneering work of the initial scholars. Furthermore, this tactic has been used to explore other literary concepts such as narrative complexity (Crutcher 2011), postmodern deconstruction (Schmitt 1992), and narrative function (Carney 2005).

The second most common thematic device in the academic literature on comic books is to utilize cultural criticism and analysis and apply it to trends in the medium or to specific works. Interestingly, European scholars tend to have a strong presence in this type of discourse on the American comic book, which again speaks to the low status and stigma afforded to the comic book that is uniquely American in origin and longevity. Considerations of ideology and comic books were first put forth into the academic

community by a British scholar (Barker 1989) while it would be over a decade before American counterparts explore this fertile territory (Mcallister, Sewell, and Gordon 2001). French, British, Belgian and Danish scholars organized one of the first international symposiums on comic books that explored topics as varied as cultural legitimation, narrative perspective, superhero propaganda in World War II, and the emerging role of the internet (Magnussen and Christiansen 2000). Even the distinction of the most comprehensive cultural history and analysis of American comic books yet published belongs to a French scholar (Gabilliet 2010). However, American academics are not completely missing, with a cultural analysis of the comic book from the perspective of the evolution of youth culture also gracing the canon of comic book literature (Wright 2001).

The anti-comic book hysteria and catalyst for the stigma attached to the form for all these years, which even goes so far as to influence the distribution of academic texts on the subject, has itself become increasingly recognized as a significant moment in shaping the cultural landscape of American society. As a result, it has been the recipient of increased attention from scholars. Nyberg's (1998) previously mentioned history of comic book censorship and the anti-comic hysteria is a lynchpin of this area, while other works have illuminated the impact this movement has had on Great Britain (Barker 1992), on specific comic book publishers (Geissman 2005), or even on the process of comic book creating and publishing (Arndt 2011). Beaty (2005) boldly tackles the comic book bogeyman of this era, psychologist Fredric Wertham, and examines Wertham's career and body of work both comprehensively and critically, illuminating the complexities of the intellectual issues at hand. Meanwhile, additional explorations of the larger cultural context of the time (Gilbert 1986; Hajdu 2008) and the social issues framing the events are essential reading to construct a full understanding of the comic book and its role in American society.

Additionally, as a cultural phenomenon in and of itself, the concept of the superhero, ubiquitous among any and all discussions of comic books, has captured the imagination of many an academic. "The superhero genre is arguably the most important of the comic book genres. It established the comic book as a commercially viable medium in the United States and it is superheroes who have defined the comic book in public perception" (Duncan & Smith, 2009, p. 242). Often dismissed as adolescent male power fantasies, there are works that take a different approach and explore the connections between modern superheroes and classical mythology (Reynolds 1992) or Judea-Christian themes (Knowles 2007), the idea of the superhero as a distillation of the Jewish immigrant experience (Fingeroth 2007), and even a psychoanalytical deconstruction of superheroes (Fingeroth 2004). The flip side of the mainstream superhero, the underground or alternative comic book, has also received its fair share of dedicated attention.

The alternative or underground comics movement was a significant factor in expanding the boundaries of the medium and, in turn, the demographic of the fan base. By establishing a new artistic paradigm for the field of comic books that emphasized

self-expression and creative self-fulfillment, the alternative comics movement reshaped the comic book as a creative form by centering the artistic vision and voice in the act of creation as opposed to genre formulas of the mainstream publishing ventures. "Underground comics in their majority mirrored the synergy between the New Left ideology and the hippie movement. On a general level, the creativity of underground comics laid the groundwork for a future renewal of the mainstream comic book" (Gabilliet, 2010, p. 66-67). Some texts present a straightforward history of the underground comic (Rosenkranz 2008), while others explore the cultural framework of the movement (Danky & Kitchen 2009). *Below Critical Radar* by Sabin & Triggs(2001) explores the role of fanzines and alternative comics in creating cultural space where ideas and ways of thinking radically different from the mainstream can be explored and developed due to the relatively quick, easy and inexpensive production of the mediums. Hatfield (2005) draws attention to the alternative comics movement that is redefining the position of comics in our culture by applying a literary theory approach. "Comic art is a potentially complex narrative instrument and a potentially challenging reading experience" (p. 152).

Of course, not every work worthy of mention occupies a wider theme with others of similar bent and there are some unique texts that have contributed to the canon of academic work on comic books. These tend to focus on very specific topics within the world of comic book publishing or the application of particular analytical paradigms to aspects of comic books as a medium or industry. Examinations of feminist themes as they relate to comic books ranging from characters (Robbins 1996) to creators (Robbins 1999) exist along with works addressing issues of racial portrayal (Stromberg 2003). There is even a work designed to function as textbook for collegiate level courses on the topic of the American comic book (Duncan & Smith 2009). British comics scholar Roger Sabin (1996) published an in-depth history of comic art that straddles the border between art criticism and cultural history. Other topics include how readers use the act of reading comic book texts in their lives (Botzakis 2009) and comic book collecting as a practice (Serchay 1998).

Finally, while almost every single work references the stigma associated with the comic book in America, there are a handful of works that explicitly address the low status of the comic book. Paul Lopes (2009), in his work *Demanding Respect*, traces the comic books history of cultural and social legitimation from a production of culture perspective concerned with how outside factors shape the development of a creative cultural form. "Official culture until recently remained convinced that the comic book is an art form best for either childish humor or adolescent fantasy. Comic book fans faced the stigma of collecting, cherishing, and taking seriously an art most considered childish and official culture looked with scorn or incomprehension at such cult-like devotion (Lopes, 2009, p. xix). Lopes traces the comic book from an historical materialism angle, delineating different ages in the evolution of the medium.

Moreover, in his history of comic books intended for an adult audience, Roger Sabin (1993) contends that the concept of the comic book originally had no age

connotations and that comics have the same potential to serve adults as children as a means of entertainment. "A recurring theme of this book has been the way in which the general public has traditionally been profoundly unaware of the potential range of the comics medium and has continued to see it essentially as entertainment for children" (p. 248). Sabin extensively explores the diversity and rich history of the usually ignored adult audience for comic books, constantly contrasting perception and reality, highlighting aspects of stigma and marginalization.

One thing all of these mentioned works do at various levels of efficiency and with differing amounts of authority is focus on the comic book as a medium, text, social phenomenon, or cultural object. However, focusing on the comic book solely as these types of scenarios ignores how the comic book functions in the lives of their readers. Let us now shift our focus to a subset of the comic book literature that utilizes as its subject the readers and fans that infuse the comic book with life and meaning by their very consumption and use of the medium in question.

Comic Book Fandom Subculture

"At the dawn of the 1980s, comic books were no longer a mass medium, but were a sector of the cultural industry that was increasingly structured around a fan audience. Comic book reading no longer belonged to the repertory of mass culture activity shared by half the total population, as was the case after the war" (Gabilliet, 2010, p. 204). In short, comic books went from mass culture to subculture and this transition provides a multitude of interesting consequences and results.

At the heart of subcultures are the manifestations of different ways of investing in cultural identities that are usually not in line with dominant norms of identity construction and the means by which these investments are symbolized or articulated in the empirical social world. According to Hebdige (1979), in his keystone work on the subject, subcultures express "a fundamental tension between those in power and those condemned to subordinate positions and second-class lives" (p. 132). For Hebdige, all subcultures represent a challenge to one aspect or another of the hegemony of the dominant group(s) in society. This challenge to hegemony, however, is not usually blatant, but often symbolic, superficial, or subtle. Because of this, the apparent superficial or everyday aspects of a subculture manifest in their style, rituals, or practices are in fact rife with deeper levels of meaning and significance than are apparent at first glance and this is true of the community of comic book readers and collectors organized around the medium under discussion.

As several of the writers mentioned previously state, "comics fandom has its own well-defined culture, making extensive use of slang and shorthand vocabulary" (Griffin, 1998, p. 71). Furthermore, "comics are not prose. Comics are not movies. They are not a text driven medium with added pictures; they're not the visual equivalent of prose narrative or a static version of a film. They are their own thing: a

medium with its own devices, its own innovators, its own clichés, its own genres and traps and liberties. They also have their own subculture and unique social standing." (Wolk, 2007, p. 15). However, in his bibliography of scholarly literature on comic books, Lent (2007) identifies audience studies as a significant area of that has been overlooked by comics scholars.

The first systematic attempt at an ethnography of comic book readers, and one of only two examinations of this community that I am aware of, was Matthew Pustz's (1999) in-depth study of the comic book subculture that presents a descriptive exploration of the values, rituals, structure of the subculture while also focusing on the dynamics and conflict between different types of comic book readers and collectors within the culture that help make it unique among media fandom subcultures. The second significant examination of comic book readers was less an ethnography and more a thorough case study of African American comic book readers situated in the comic book fandom subculture as a whole (Brown 2000). Although primarily concerned with the experiences of a specific group of readers, it necessitated extensive information about the subculture to be provided to the reader in order to give the work context.

Other less intense forays into the comic book subculture have covered topics such as cultural capital (Brown 1997), online fanzines (Smith 1999), and collecting practices (Tankel and Murphy 1998). A comic book fan flirting with academic topics, but coming across as nonscientific feel good propaganda, Kleefeld (2011) presents an anthropological take on the subculture centered on the idea of a prototypical comic book fan which is diametrically opposed to a stereotypical fan and exemplifies the best characteristics and qualities of comic book fans and fandom.

And of course many of the works presented previously include references or brief sections on comic book fans. For instance, although primarily a literary criticism approach towards deconstructing auteur designated comic book works, Wolk (2007) does not refrain from including his observations on the subject. "Over the last half century, comics culture has developed as an insular, self-feeding, self-loathing, self-defeating flytrap. A lot of the people who hit their local comics store every Wednesday think of comics readers as some kind of secret, embattled fellowship" (p. 64). Likewise, "a lot of comics readers are unhealthily attached to the idea that everyone else thinks what they do is kind of trashy and disreputable" (p. 67).

It is impossible to understand the phenomenon of a particular fandom subculture without a proper knowledge and grasp of the social context of their activities as fans. Intentional or not, comic book fans are actively creating an aspect of their social identity rooted in the consumption of devalued cultural objects with a deep history of negative connotations. As social objects and cultural artifacts, comic books embody a whole host of meanings and signifiers beyond the realm of content and text. The pathology of fandom is presented as a given in academia and the marginalization of comic books is accepted as unassailable, but what does this mean for the real

experiences of real people negotiating this cultural landscape in contemporary society? If the literature on the topic is limited to only two studies from over a decade past, unscientific studies masquerading as attempts at serious examinations and opinionated observations interspersed in other works whose real focus is other topics, then this simply highlights the need for additional research in this area. Furthermore, "For most of its history, social psychology has been concerned with the ways in which stigmatized individuals are devalued, stereotyped, and discriminated against. Relatively little theoretical or empirical attention has been paid to the experience of those who are devalued…with the exception of the consequences of having a devalued identity for self-esteem" (Crocker & Quinn, 2000, p. 154). By bridging the theoretical concepts of fandom and stigma, this project can fill a previously ignored niche in the existing body of knowledge.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Introduction

The concept of social stigma provides the cornerstone for this thesis research project. At its heart, the concept of stigma involves negative stereotypes and socially constructed categories of distinctions that divide individuals into contrasting groups. These types of distinctions are also what inform the classification of cultural products into a distinct hierarchy of cultural values along with the resulting consequences in the empirical world.

One manifestation of this process is the critique of mass culture movement which laid the foundation for the anti-comic book crusade of 1950s America and acted as the catalyst for the generation of a long lasting social stigma against the comic book medium and its followers. By building on ideas previously presented in the review of the existing literature and by examining the ideas of social identity construction through the lens of social stereotypes and fandom studies, we can trace a clear path from basic premises of the social psychology of stigma, through the socially constructed cultural hierarchy of America, to the unique stigmatized identity of the comic book fan in contemporary society.

Social Stigma

A social phenomenon first explored scientifically by Emile Durkheim in the late nineteenth century, stigma has since become a popular topic of study for sociology and social psychology. In conducting an examination of the research and articles published on stigma, I came across hundreds of articles spanning multiple decades, and that was only the tip of the iceberg. Major & O'Brien (2005) mention that between the years of 1990-2004, over 2300 articles mentioning stigma were published. However, at the heart of almost all work on stigma lies Goffman's (1963) groundbreaking work on the subject and his conceptualization of the phenomenon.

Goffman refers to a stigma as an attribute that is discrediting. "By definition, the person with a stigma is not quite human. On this assumption we exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively, if often unthinkingly, reduce his life chances" (Goffman, 1963, p. 5). In essence, stigma reduces an individual from a whole person to a tainted one. It is a special relationship between attribute and stereotype and it creates a spoiled social identity, whereby a gap exists between an individual's expected and actual social identity. In particular, Goffman stressed that stigma was a social construction, not an inherent attribute of individuals and he also went on to provide different types (body, character, and tribe) and classifications of stigma: discredited (visible) and discreditable (concealable).

Others have come along and tweaked Goffman's definition of stigma, clarifying the context of potentially stigmatizing attributes, expanding his classification system, or providing an alternative lexicon of terminology. For example, Katz (1981) refers to

stigmatizing characteristics as socially undesirable qualities that violate prevailing moral standards while Jones et al. (1984) use the terms mark, marker, and marked to conceptualize the stigma process. However, no matter how you define stigma, one aspect of particular significance is the sheer range of topics deemed potentially stigmatizing.

"Any condition, conduct or membership can be stigmatizing, insofar as it can be discrediting in some context" (Manzo, 2004, p. 405). Moreover, "stigma and stigmatization can occur whenever and wherever some people find behavior or characteristics of other people offensive and/or reprehensible. Therefore, stigma and stigmatization is everywhere because almost any conduct or any characteristic can be seen as deviant by some audience. Stigma also has a temporal quality. Something stigmatized at one time may not be stigmatized at another time" (Falk, 2001, p. 24-25). Physical deformity, mental disability, mental illness, substance abuse, homelessness, polygamy, homosexuality, tattoos, certain religious preferences and ethnicities, physical illnesses such as AIDs, and all types of lifestyles or characteristics have at one point or another been stigmatized.

To shed light on how such a broad range of topics can all be considered potentially stigmatizing depending on time and place, Falk (2001) developed a conceptualization of stigma based on the context of American cultural values. "The root of stigmatization in America lies in the perceived or assumed discrepancy between that core value [of the Protestant ethic and its concomitant, individualism] and the perceived deviation from that norm. Stigmas in twenty-first-century America are produced by the inability of many of us to live in conformity with the publicly proclaimed norms taught in our schools, through our media, and in informal communication. Hence, members of stigmatized groups are seen as violating traditional American values" (Falk 2001, p. 333-334).

For the context of this study, I would argue that the population being examined, that is adult members of the comic book fandom subculture, are in violation of the norms of acceptable use of leisure time and traditional cultural objects of consumption for adults in American society. The key is the difference between adolescent fandom and adult fandom. Often fandom and adolescence are considered parallel forms of cultural development and fandom is expected to be left behind in the adolescent phase of life. What is considered appropriate in terms of taste and leisure preferences for one stage in life becomes the basis for social exclusion as time progresses.

Of course the act of violating norms is in and of itself really just a sign of deviance and does not necessarily lend itself to possessing a stigmatizing attribute or a stigmatized identity. While there is a close relationship between deviance and stigma, the first being an active agent of causation for the second, we must refer back to Goffman's understanding of stigma being a relationship between attribute and stereotype. The deviant attribute must be attached to a negative stereotype for a stigmatized identity to manifest itself.

While stereotypes and stigma are not interchangeable, they are inherently and fundamentally linked. At its core, "stigmatization involves the depersonalization of others into stereotypic caricatures" (Dovidio, Major, and Crocker, 2000, p. 1). Moreover, "stereotypes are involved in stigmatization to the extent that the response of perceivers is not simply a negative one, but also that a specific set of characteristics is assumed to exist among people sharing the stigma (i.e., the stigma evokes a social identity)" (Biernat & Dovidio, 2000, p. 89). "Stereotypes influence how people think about others, how they feel about them, and how they act and react to others" (p. 96). For example, if people perceive an individual as violating accepted norms of one sort or another, they may experience disgust, which in turn may prompt avoidance or even shunning. "Once a label is applied, further information processing is guided by its connotations" (Jones et al., 1984, p. 6).

At a later point, the specific nature of the stereotypes associated with the comic book subculture and exactly how they contribute to a stigmatized social identity will be explored in full. For now, it is important to understand how the notion of negative stereotypes in general relates to the concept of social stigma, particularly since this relation is at the heart of the theory driving the research questions and instrument.

Research has shown that potentially stigmatized individuals are aware of stereotypes, accusations, and negative connotations associated with their devalued social identity (Crocker & Quinn 2000; Major et al. 2002). Not only is there an awareness of negative stereotypes, there is evidence to indicate that members of stigmatized groups are "attuned to their stigma's potential negative implications for their lives" (Miller & Major, 2000, p. 249). As such, we can assume that if being a member of comic book fandom is in fact a stigmatizing characteristic, then there must be some level of awareness of it as a stigma, even if it is not thought of in those terms by the individuals affected, and an understanding of the potentially undesirable consequences of having such an identity. This level of awareness is what we refer to as stigma consciousness.

Elizabeth Pinel (1999) differentiates stigma consciousness from other concepts utilized in social psychology such as group identity or membership, noting that stigma consciousness is anchored in the expectation of being stereotyped and an awareness of the potential stereotypes, not necessarily an acceptance of the stereotypes or any actual behavior that may correspond with the stereotypes. Pinel went on to develop a stigma-consciousness questionnaire (SCQ) in order to measure the extent to which individuals with a stigmatizing attribute perceive discrimination or expect to be stereotyped by others. "Empirical research corroborates the claim that targets of stereotypes recognize that their group membership plays a role in how people interact with them" (p. 114). If stigma consciousness exists among members of a stigmatized group, it can have important consequences for their lives in terms of social interactions and psychological well-being, and measuring this concept can have significant implications in the realm of stigma research. "The stigma-consciousness levels of targets of stereotypes--the extent to which they expect to be stereotyped--could have

important implications for how they experience their stereotyped status" (Pinel, 1999, p. 115). It is this idea that is the primary fixture of the project.

In short, stigma consciousness is an important and significant conception because it acts as a conduit between the social and the psychological. This relationship between the empirical social world and the internal psychological process is where many of the negative outcomes of a stigmatized identity reside. "The major negative impact of stigmatization normally resides not in the physical consequences of the mark, but rather in its social and psychological consequences" (Dovidio, Major, and Crocker, 2000, p. 5). For an attribute or identity to truly be considered stigmatizing there must be real harmful effects and costs directly or indirectly associated with the potentially stigmatizing trait.

Cultural stereotypes can affect individuals in ways that do not involve obvious or overt forms of discrimination but still lower the person's life chances by limiting opportunities for social interaction, business ventures, and community involvement. Of course, how individuals with these types of traits cope with the possible negative effects is an area of considerable interest in the realm of social stigma.

Stigma management is a task applicable to individuals with concealable stigmas who must weigh the pros and cons of disclosure in their social interactions. While a missing limb is an example of an obvious visible trait that has potential stigmatizing consequences, mental illness, on the other hand, need not be explicitly visible to the view of others and individuals possessing this trait are placed in the position of having to negotiate if and when to communicate this potentially stigmatizing aspect of their identity. Directly linked with Goffman's (1959) ideas of impression management and the presentation of self, strategies of stigma management add a profound depth to the phenomenon of social stigma, differentiating visible stigma from concealable stigma in terms of its consequences on a variety of levels. Being a member of a specific fandom subculture is another example of a potentially stigmatizing trait of a concealable nature, the possession of which makes one discreditable. Because of this, when coupled with an awareness of the negative connotations, stereotypes, and stigmas attached to a possessed trait, negotiating disclosure becomes a very real scenario affecting comic book fans.

Studies have found a correlation between disclosure of certain stigmas and improved psychological well-being along with the corresponding concealment of personal information and poor psychological outcomes (Beals, et al., 2009). Furthermore, Pachankis (2007) highlights the stressors individuals with concealable stigmas are forced to endure as they navigate disclosure decisions. The anxiety of discovery, the ambiguity of social situations, and unknown potential consequences all impact individuals with concealable stigmas negatively before any prejudice or discrimination from others even has an opportunity to manifest itself. Although Pachankis' (2007) model of cognitive-affective-behavior exceeds the complexity of this project, the end result is that "when entering situations in which discovery can lead to

negative consequences, individuals with a concealable stigma may encounter substantial psychological and emotional difficulties" (p. 332). As some scholars have noted, coping with stigma involves trade-offs (Major & O'Brien 2005). For example, concealing a stigma in order to protect against rejection in social interactions can result in behaviors that range from self-monitoring to social isolation and avoidance. "Self-stigmatization can be as effectual as that imposed by other persons" (Manzo, 2004, p. 409-410).

Although we are not overtly concerned with measuring the distinct harmful effects of the stigma attached to comic book fans, Crocker and Major (1989) identify several factors that may function to mitigate the negative impact of stigmatization that are of concern to this study. The length of time of living with the stigmatized characteristic, the concealability of the stigma, and the centrality of the stigma in the individual's self-identity are all important factors of consideration in the construction of the project's survey instrument and will be addressed in full in the method chapter.

Even though a concealable stigmatizing trait may enable an individual to "escape the direct experience of prejudice and discrimination directed toward that stigma, it is unlikely that an individual can escape knowledge that society devalues the stigma" (Pachankis, 2007, p. 337). An important part of measuring levels of stigma consciousness is examining the strategies of stigma management that may occur as a direct result of this awareness. "We must not conclude that if a mark can be successfully concealed it will have no effect on interpersonal relationships. Guilt and shame may be engendered, fear of discovery, or social anxiety may also result" (Jones et al., 1984, p. 30). Stigma consciousness may motivate a potentially stigmatized individual to avoid disclosure of his or her stigmatizing trait despite not experiencing any direct physical or social harm. A comic book fan who is aware of the negative stereotypes associated with this identity may actively avoid revealing this past-time in the work place, to potential romantic partners, or in social settings, keeping it a private, compartmentalized aspect of his or her life. "Even when stigmas no longer continually tug at the individual in daily routines, they linger as memories, reflections of culture that alter behavior and lives" (Ainlay, Becker, & Coleman, 1986, p. 7).

It has been established that a stigma can be any quality or trait that discredits or reduces an individual from consideration as a full human being and that this discrediting manifests itself as the imposition of negative stereotypes that displaces the social identity of the individual possessing the quality or trait in question. These stereotypes are socially constructed pieces of the cultural landscape and members of society are commonly aware of them along with possessing knowledge regarding their application to themselves. Because of this, it is common to take steps to hide socially undesirable traits from others. The question now at hand that needs to be addressed is how being a comic book fan qualifies as a stigmatized identity. Examining the function of concepts related to stigma consciousness is only the first stage. It still remains to demonstrate the formation of the negative stereotypes associated with the specific social identity under study within the parameters of this project and how those stereotypes became

established as stigmatizing. The development of a hierarchy of cultural value, its implications, and its expression in the real world is essential to the process of revealing how all the basic aspects of stigma can be found in the realm of popular culture and how stigma can attach to various social objects or cultural forms.

Cultural Hierarchy, Taste Distinctions and the Critique of Mass Culture

Cultural struggles are an inescapable aspect of diverse and heterogeneous societies saturated with media and communications technology. For many, these cultural struggles are inherently class struggles, especially when organized around the axis of high versus popular culture (Gans 1999). The reality is that both types of culture are socially constructed stereotypes and like all socially constructed aspects of life, depend on context for their meaning and are prone to change. However, in modern societies, other factors beyond class such as age, gender, or race may play more significant roles in culture consumption and contribute to a more general decline in the use of culture as a status indicator. Nonetheless, class distinction remains the foundation for how we conceptualize and talk about cultural distinctions.

The very vocabulary utilized to discuss various cultural objects and practices reveals the dichotomous thinking which privileges one segment of culture over another. The terms highbrow and lowbrow are derived from the mid-Victorian era's outlook towards mental ability derived from cranial capacity (Kammen 1999). The theory exposed that the very formation of the skull was a signifier for levels of intelligence and skull shapes were separated out by ethnic groupings (i.e. highbrow=European, lowbrow=most everyone else). From this initial conceptualization, highbrow eventually came to be used to designate levels of perceived cultural sophistication associated with the rich and lowbrow was applied to the uneducated masses of poor. The basic idea is that highbrow taste is characterized by an emphasis on the consumption experience as helping foster transcendence and is infused with the ideal of the Kantian aesthetic and intellectual or moral elevation, while popular taste is motivated by hedonistic goals of fun, pleasure or escape (Lizardo 2006).

Most famously expressed by Bourdieu (1984), the main argument in terms of taste distinctions is that culture is used as a tool to distinguish among the socio-economic classes and to disguise the artificially socially constructed nature of these distinctions by placing them in the universals of aesthetic values. "Art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 7). This implies that moral judgments towards cultural objects are reflections of class conflicts or at least conflicts between two groups with differing sets of cultural power or capital. "Class positions are articulated through consumption preferences that also constitute the very basis of fandom" (Sandvoss, 2005, p. 34). Effectively, by applying Bourdieu's ideas to the realm of popular culture and fandom, these areas are placed in opposition to notions of proper or high culture based on socially constructed codes of aesthetic

judgments designed to further legitimize social stratification. "The development of the industrial middle classes, with their fear of the equally developing proletariat, has been marked by their consistent attempts to extend their control over the workplace into the leisure of the subordinate. Areas of popular culture that were out of this [sphere of control] were cast as threats to the stability and moral (or physical) health of society. Popular pleasures were thus designated "antisocial", and so it became legitimate to subject them to a whole range of disciplinary and repressive powers" (Fiske, 1989, p. 65). In essence, this creates a popular culture habitus diametrically opposed to a high culture habitus that embodies the values of the dominant group.

Although some cultural studies scholars would claim that there no longer exists a stable, clear-cut hierarchy of cultural value (Frow 1995), the residue of previously entrenched systems of thought still lingers. "It is the fandom of low-status popular culture that is viewed as problematic" (Lopes, 2006, p. 396). Comic books are unique in that the form, content, producers, and fans have been historically stigmatized. Comic book fans are a threat in that they call into question the typifications of what is appropriate leisure activity for adults and what types of cultural goods are to be imbued with value. In essence, the stigma of comic book fans involves the violation of cultural and taste hierarchies and the restructuring of leisure time usage. The value placed on what is perceived as childish junk calls into question the validity of the mainstream's system of shared meanings and ways of ordering the world in regards to these spheres of influence. "The stereotypical conception of the fan amounts to a projection of anxieties about the violation of dominant cultural hierarchies" (Jenkins, 1992, p. 17).

Lopes (2006) goes on to make the important distinction between a stigma attached to popular culture and the low status that may be associated with popular culture. For him, low-status is a precondition for the stigmatization of a cultural form. "While low status certainly has negative social effects, stigma leads to the discrediting of an individual or cultural form in a global sense, and thus has far more negative effects and elicits more direct action from the people Goffman (1963) calls normals" (p. 388). As a form of popular culture, comic books and the subculture devoted to them transcend mere low-status grouping and progress to a fully stigmatized category because fan cultures challenge what the bourgeois have institutionalized as natural and universal standards of good taste. "Because one's taste is so interwoven with all other aspects of social and cultural experience, aesthetic distaste brings with it the full force of moral excommunication and social rejection" (Jenkins, 1992, p. 16). Pursuing a leisure activity that is in bad taste is considered detrimental to one's development and results in a moral backlash. "Comic fandom occupies a disempowered position in Bourdieu's model of culture, primarily because the comic medium does not fit into the institutionalized standards of good taste. It is seen by those with cultural status as a childish medium with sub-literate stories and simple art" ultimately devoid of any real value (Brown, 1997, p. 28). This moral condemnation and its very real consequences is what separates comic books from other popular culture forms that never exceed simple low-status designation.

Previously, we made mention of the first wave of fan studies, citing relatively contemporary thinkers such as Fiske and Jenkins as the primary trailblazers along this path. However, the case could be made that the Frankfurt School and the works of Adorno could be considered the first wave of cultural studies. The ideas presented in the writings of the critical theorists embody Bourdieu's distinctions of taste and are particularly applicable to the examination of comic books, as these ideas laid the foundation for the crusade against the medium, and as a result, the very genesis of the stigma against comic books. Contemporary scholars often dismiss the passive audience view and the critique of the culture industry that characterized the theoretical approach of the Frankfurt school thinkers as overly simplistic and generally inaccurate. "There is no mass culture, there are only alarmist and pessimistic theories of mass culture" (Fiske, 1989, p. 140). However, at the time these ideas were being circulated, they were powerful and popular and had a very real impact.

"Far from episodic, the mass culture debate can be seen as an ongoing background to the intellectual discussions that have characterized American cultural discourse throughout history. Although the specific political objections to the mass media shifted during the course of the twentieth century, the attitude that the mass media should be viewed with alarm remained constant" (Beaty, 2005, p. 7). Furthermore, "mass culture criticism has always been shaped by the critics' social concerns, biases, and presuppositions than by empirical research" (p. 50). It is not my intent to embark on a full discourse of the Frankfurt School's cultural theory, but it is important to highlight its significance to the creation of the comic book stigma and to illustrate certain key points of the approach and ideas attributed to it.

Perhaps the most fundamental theme of the critique of mass culture is the antagonism between art and culture. For Adorno, one of the chief personages of the movement, art is "what is excluded from Enlightenment's instrumental rationality" (1991, p.6). In comparison, culture is simply another commodity produced by a capitalistic society. Furthermore, what the culture ultimately produces as commodities are not merely material goods but rather are alienated needs, ideologies and states of consciousness that derail self-development through regressive fixation on the fetish characteristics of the cultural commodities themselves. Through the process of commodity fetishism and the power of advertisement, the culture industry fetters the purity of artistic expression with the naked functionality of industry which is cause of concern for the intellectuals in line with the critique of mass culture, one of whom was none other than Fredric Wertham, the most well-known crusader against the American comic book.

It has been well documented that Wertham knew Adorno well and shared some of the Frankfurt School's cultural elitism (Nyberg 1998). Because critics tend to come to popular culture with the aesthetic standards of high culture, they are often shocked by what they see, read, or hear and assume that the general media audience shares or should share their standards and reactions (Gans 1999). Part of the outrage directed towards comic books was a manifestation of "contempt for vernacular expression, a

parochial reverence for technique, and obedience to tradition and orthodoxy at the expense of individual expression" and revealed a bias against the idea of a mass media culture (Hadju, 2008, p. 42). In short, the critique of mass culture and the anti-comics crusade is an ideology of defense meant to protect the privileges of high culture. As such it is a legitimizing ideology in that it functions to legitimize the hierarchy of culture and taste, where some aspects are valued while others are devalued. "Aesthetics is an attempt by the bourgeoisie to exert the equivalent control over the cultural economy that it does over the financial. It is naked cultural hegemony." (Fiske, 1989, p. 103). It is also a case study in Bourdieu's taste distinctions made manifest in the empirical social world.

Finally, we must remember that stigma extends beyond distinctions of taste to incorporate the actual experienced negative consequences of discrediting and stereotypes. "The legacy of the Wertham comics scare is still felt by the fan community, as is the stereotype of comics as childish and the readers as immature nerds. The general public regards the acute attention fans pay to comic books as inappropriate for simple, mass-produced, disposable texts" (Brown, 1997, p. 22). Utilizing the critique of mass culture and the anti-comics crusade of 1950s America as a springboard and examining its heritage and impact on the comic book medium and industry, it is possible to trace the evolution of this phenomenon from a generational based clash of cultural values to a full blown stigma with negative stereotypes, devalued social identities, and real life harmful effects.

Comic Book Stigma: Origins, History, and Evolution

The history of comic books as a medium and industry is important and relevant in explaining how the culturally created category of the comic book reader with its negative connotations, stereotypes and stigmatized identity arose and has been maintained. According to Link & Phelan (2001) there are four steps to the existence or formation of stigma: (1) people distinguish and label differences, (2) dominant cultural beliefs link those labels with negative stereotypes, (3) labeled persons are placed in groupings, and (4) these groups experience status loss and discrimination.

Initially, comic books grew out of the pulp publishing business, and both adult and children markets co-existed each represented by a variety of genres (Goulart 1986). As the industry developed past its birthing pangs, the medium quickly gained popularity, eventually edging out the pulp magazines from the available shelf space. "In the mid-1940s, the comic book was the most popular form of entertainment in America. Comics were selling between eighty million and a hundred million copies every week, with a typical issue passed along or traded to six to ten readers, thereby reaching more people than movies, television, radio, or magazines for adults. By 1952, more than twenty publishers were producing nearly 650 comic titles per month" (Hajdu, 2008, p. 5). Nearly all young people of the time read comic books, regardless of social standing, gender, or other leisure interests. "Reading comic books was a cultural practice that

was practically universal among preadolescents and adolescents of both sexes" (Gabilliet, 2010, p. 198). It was this immense and seemingly sudden popularity among the young that was also the predominant catalyst for the initial wave of scrutiny applied to comic books and it was not long before individuals began to distinguish and label comic books as a new but negative form of culture.

The first national attack on comic books came in 1940 from Sterling North, literary critic for the *Chicago Daily News* (Nyberg 1998). His criticism was rooted in the reaction of cultural elites to the emerging mass media popular culture and set the tone for the comic book debate for the next decade and a half. "This elitist criticism was influential in shaping public attitudes towards comics, since it was the opinions of the elite, quoted by journalists as experts that appeared in print. Furthermore, North and other critics were instrumental in helping to shape public perception that comic books were exclusively for children" (Nyberg, 1998, p. 4).

Once comic books were perceived as primarily a medium aimed at children, the stage was set for later stages of criticism that defined the battleground as concerning the welfare of America's children as opposed to a campaign of censorship. This also contributed to the formation of the stigma as opposed to public outcry. Comic books were referred to as the marijuana of the nursery and Fredric Wertham, psychologist and anti-comic book crusader, proclaimed that Hitler was a beginner compared to the comic book industry when it came to indoctrinating children with hate (Nyberg 1998).

Wertham's work, which was instrumental in framing the comic book debate and often over excitedly given credit for single handedly inciting the stigma against comic books, did not employ the scientific method, utilize control groups, or provide any corroborative evidence for his claims. It denied the possibility of comics as creative expression and infantilized the readers. Wertham went on to claim that comic books appealed to readers with "the brain of a child, the sexual drive of a satyr, and the spiritual delicacy of a gorilla" (Hadju, 2008, p. 169). This type of rhetoric rapidly gained momentum in the court of public opinion and in governing bodies. "More than a hundred acts of legislation were introduced on the state and municipal levels to ban or limit the sales of comics" (Hajdu, 2008, p. 7). But this was only a precursor to the main event.

The dominant cultural beliefs detailed in the previous section as the critique of mass culture fully manifested themselves in September 1954 when the comic book industry announced the formation of the Comics Magazine Association of America (CMAA) as a direct result of pressure from outside forces and implemented a Comics Code of self-censorship. The Comics Code articulated the "bourgeois artistic and moral standards of postwar America" (Witek, 1989, p. 50). The charges leveled against comics books can be summarized as: "comics were crude, illiterate, badly printed, salacious, addictive, stunting, fascist, Communist, conductive to wrongdoing of all sorts" (Hadju, 2008, p. 92-93). The debate over comic books eventually coalesced on the issue of juvenile delinquency and "the notion that comics instilled lawlessness was becoming so

ingrained that the evidential process reversed. Acts of juvenile delinquency were becoming proof of comic book consumption" (p. 110). Ultimately though, the issue at stake was not really juvenile crime or mental health or literacy or the effect of comic book printing on the eyes, but the idea of taste.

The CMAA and its code functioned with the primary mandate to transform comics into entertainment material suitable for children and only children, reflecting a bland consensus vision of America and uncontroversial American values. "By stripping away the freedom of writers and artists to depict the varieties of their readers' fantasies and concerns, the code confined comic books to a supervised, puerile level. Comic books now stood to become a strictly preadolescent pastime at best or an outmoded nostalgic curiosity at worst" (Wright, 2001, p. 179). "The code essentially dictated that comic books ought to be produced only for young children" (Wright, 2001, p. 181). It is impossible to overstate the impact of the Comics Code on the comic book industry and medium. It restricted the ability of comic book producers to fully explore potential audience concerns and interests. Not only did it cover the images, text, content, and covers of the comics, it even regulated the words in the titles and the advertisements in the back of the book. Never again would the comic book industry command the level of readership and status it possessed prior to the code, as the perception of the comic book in the public's imagination was altered for decades to come.

Even though in the 1970s, comic books began to reflect the maturing audience of the medium with more sophisticated writing, artwork, and thematic approaches, the general impression of the medium in mainstream society was not significantly altered. By the 1980s, comic book publishers "had an enthusiastic and mature audience, but the mainstream still dismissed their product as cheap juvenile trash" (Wright, 2001, p.255). The mass audience of the form continued to decline while the growth of a fan subculture preserved the medium from oblivion. The third stage of Link & Phelan's manifestation of stigma was at hand.

The Comics Code was revised twice in later decades, but each time the changes did nothing to detour from the idea that comic books were intended for children. "Comic book standards defined the reader as a child, and there was no acknowledgement on the part of the CMAA that the medium should move beyond content suitable for an audience of all ages" (Nyberg, 1998, p. 141). When dealing with the Comics Code, most works focus on the Code's economic impact, but none delve into the impact of the Code on the general public's perception of comic books and the consequences for comic book readers from a social perspective. Gabilliet (2010) states that "it is naïve to affirm that only the Comics Code crisis brought about the lasting marginalization of comic books in the cultural consumption" (p. 49). While the implementation of the Comics Code is only one factor in the decline of the industry as an economic force and cultural entertainment presence, the Code, the national debate that spawned it, and the cascade of effects for which it acted as a catalyst, are without a doubt the primary genesis for the stigmatization of the medium and its fans. "The lasting legacy of the comics code has been…the defining of the comic book as a form of

entertainment solely for children and the reinforcement of that perception in the minds of the public" (Nyberg, 1998, p. 158). This definition of the comic book audience is central to the ongoing debate and cultural conflict over comic books as a medium and is the centerpiece for any discussion involving the harmful effects of the code and the stigma in engineered.

The initial impact of the anti-comic book crusade and hysteria that would eventually lead to the formation of the Comics Code and the genesis of the comic book stigma was the immediate loss of social status for the professionals in the comic book industry. Although they were still making good livings at the time, they felt a very perceptible shift in attitudes towards their field. "In the artistic profession, comic books ranked just above pornography" (Wright, 2001, p. 7). In the 1950s, comic book creators were ashamed to tell people what they did for a living. "Dozens of comic creators who worked during those days have left behind interviews describing how they had to hide what they did for a living at parties, or among passing acquaintances. It was considered simply shameful, regardless of what type of comics one wrote or drew, to admit to being a comic book writer or artist or editor" (Arndt, 2011, p. 52). For example, Spider-man artist John Romita told people he was a commercial illustrator while Marvel Comics' editor in chief and head writer Stan Lee referred to himself as a writer of illustrated children's books (Duncan & Smith 2009).

This loss of status continued well after the Code went into effect and the initial uproar died down. "As almost all of the early art cartoonists emphasize in interviews, in the United States circa 1980, being serious about comics as something other than light entertainment for kids made you a freak" (Wolk, 2007, p. 53). In addition, as recently as the year 2000, an article in the *New York Times Book Review* referred to artists who chose to combine drawing and writing as being historically "punished for having and using two skills and not only one" (Eggers 2000). Versaci (2007) even recounts a backlash against the 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation and the awarding of the Pulitzer Prize for Maus by individuals and national groups who vocalized-through protest letter writing-their disapproval of such weighty topics being addressed in the comic book medium. The decline in social status was quickly followed by economic discrimination and further loss in the form of income and employment opportunities.

"In 1955, the first year of the Code's existence, 1881 comics were submitted to the office of the CCA-and revisions were demanded of 946, or 50%. It wasn't only depictions of violence or crime that were objected to. Changes were also demanded to reflect more of what were considered to be universal American moral values of the time" (Arndt, 2011, p. 7). Publishing comic books became an exercise in frustration that drove many from the field. In addition, the printers would not print the books without the seal, the distributors would not ship the books without the seal, and the newsstands would not stock the books without the seal. Comic books that once sold millions couldn't even get published. "Between 1954 and 1956, more than half the comic books on the newsstands disappeared" (Hadju, 2008, p. 326).

"The stigma attached to the comic book during the anti-comic book crusade would have a devastating effect on the evolution of this popular art field. The ultimate cost in the crusade against comic books was the arrested development of the comic book as a form of popular entertainment. The comic book as a medium was not allowed to evolve into a diverse market of genres and readers" (Lopes, 2009, p. 58). In terms of sales, the industry never recovered. Sixty years after single issues of titles such as *Captain Marvel* or *Action Comics* regularly broke the million copy mark, the best-selling comic books in 2003 struggle to break the 100,000 copies per issue milestone (Wright 2001). But the stigma's impact extended beyond the professionals who created the comic books who saw their social status and economic means diminish. It also tainted the retailers who stocked and sold the cultural objects once known as funny books.

The stigma against comic books also manifested itself in several cases of legal prosecution against comic book retailers and artists for obscenity. The crux of these cases was the entrenched conception of comic books as children's fare and that any adult oriented imagery or themes violated basic tenets of morality. The first major case was the prosecution of comic book retailer Frank Mangiaracina in 1986 (Lopes 2009). Other incidents followed. In the early 1990s, multiple comic book store proprietors in Florida and California were arrested, harassed by police, or had their stores raided under the assumption that comic books were exclusively for children and any material not suitable for children was therefore "obscene" and subject to local obscenity statutes (Slano 1994). Perhaps most significantly, in 1995, Floridian artist Mike Diana became the first cartoonist ever to be imprisoned for obscenity in America. If anything, this "was further proof…that comics were still not accepted by society at large as an art form with the same rights to freedom of expression as other art forms. It was clear that the official limits of creative endeavor did not stretch as far for comics as they did for other media. The fact that the complaints were of the same nature as those made against comics at earlier points in history showed how little had changed [in the public perception of comics]" (Sabin, 1996, p. 215). Harassment by law enforcement officials and legal prosecution are definitive standards for fulfilling the harmful effects requirement in the definition of a stigma.

It should be noted that the stigma against comic books as a medium and the adults who enjoy them, while not limited exclusively in its scope to the United States, is distinctly American in its ideology. In other parts of the world, children form only a part of the comics market and the medium has not been subjected to the same kind of prejudice and dismissal as in the U.S. In France comic books are considered the ninth art and in Japan, comics or manga in every genre for every age group and gender are as ubiquitous a form of entertainment as television and video games. In fact, in 1992, the Japanese comic book industry was by far the largest in the world and accounted for almost 4000 titles with total sales of nearly 2 billion (Sabin 1993).

However, the public perception of comic books in America is still cast in the terms of a debate that occurred over half a century ago and is long forgotten in the

public memory. The residue of stigma remains, as is evident by the maligned social identity associated with the comic book fan, and it is within this arena that the most commonly experienced negative impacts of the stigma occur. After all, "comics' content and their social context are inextricably linked. Reading comics, or not reading them, often presents itself as taking some kind of stand; in picking up something with words and pictures to read, you become the sort of person who reads comics, and that can be a badge of pride or shame or both" (Wolk, 2007, p. 60).

Social Identity

While the loss of occupational status, detrimental economic impact, and legal prosecution and persecution are all important aspects of the harmful effects of the comic book stigma, the most significant effect for the purposes of this study is the devalued social identity associated with being a comic book fan and the consequences it can engender such as social isolation, feelings of victimization, or lower self-esteem. Ultimately, social identity is the nexus of the potential harmful effects of the contemporary comic book stigma. Because of stigma's relation to social identity, it is important to recognize the role that identity plays in the lives of individuals both in terms of the stereotypes associated with the identity in question, and the prevalence of that particular aspect of identity in an individual's overall identity matrix.

The function of stigma as a negative phenomenon is intricately related to the function of identity in everyday social life. "Social control is exercised through producing categories whereby individuals who transgress are regulated to outsider status (Woodward, 1997, p. 33). Furthermore, "culture is the constant process of producing meanings of and from our social experience, and such meanings necessarily produce a social identity for the people involved" (Fiske, 1989b, p. 1). Therefore, cultural consumption is increasingly an important part of identity construction and the social identity that results from intense or invested cultural consumption is a devalued social identity. As fandom studies has as established, "the fan constitutes a scandalous category in contemporary culture, one alternately the target of ridicule and anxiety, of dread and desire…whose interests are fundamentally alien to the realm of normal cultural experience" (Jenkins, 1992, p. 15). However, the specific social identity of the comic book fan transcends the general devalued identity of "fan" in that it is an unique crossroad where two negative stereotypes meet that embody the tradition of cultural distinction, the historic legacy of the anti-comic book campaigns, the media representations of fandom as pathological, and violations of cultural norms. The first stereotype is the previously discussed one of pathological fan, but the second stereotype of equal importance in the social construction of the comic book fan identity is the nerd/geek stereotype. "To be a fan in Western culture is considered to be part of a dubious category of social misfits. And to be a comic book fan, one runs the risk of being stereotyped as an awkward pimply faced geek" (Brown, 2000, p. 63).

In his examination of the nerd stereotype, child psychologist David Anderegg (2007) notes that children learn at an early age that nerds are bad and that it is a negative thing to be labeled a nerd or a geek. "'You're a nerd' translates as 'You are a devalued member of this community or you are no longer in the community'" (p. 222). For Anderegg, nerds are effectively the last to develop the self-consciousness of adolescence and hence tend to obsesses in one area or another and become repositories of knowledge generally considered to violate the norms of acceptable grown up behavior, which directly parallels many of the connotations of fandom. In addition, he asserts that this stereotype is perhaps the only negative stereotype still considered permissible and acceptable in modern society. "People who bear visible stigmas of nerdiness will go out of their way to assert that they are really not nerds rather than to assert that nerd is an unacceptable way to talk about or label people" (p. 235).

Others have also observed the term "geek" as having strong negative connotations of obsessive behavior and social awkwardness. Based in a foundation of Mead and symbolic interactionism, Bailey (2005) saw cultural objects and media texts as powerful resources for symbolic integration of the social self. The media texts became encounters with the generalized other and therefore are important modes of enabling symbolic self-construction and self-understanding. When these media texts are emphasized as negative, or the consumption of them is communicated as being improper, it can have important consequences for individuals and the manner in which they interpret their sense of self. It is also the media that most often expresses this complex interaction between the different social factions through images and representations that become the basis for stereotypes, which in turn are linked to the stigmatization of specific social groups and subcultures. "The media play a crucial role in defining our experience for us. They provide us with the most available categories for classifying out the social world" (Hebdige, 1979, p. 84-85).

For example, the early stigma that resulted from the anti-comic book crusade was evident in even after the Code was implemented. In both movies and TV of the late 1950s, to illustrate how evil or dim-witted a bully or henchmen was, he was shown reading a comic book. "Such images were routinely used to demonstrate both mental retardation and mental depravity" (Arndt, 2011, p. 8). This initial manifestation of the stigma against comic books as being morally corrupt or corrupting would later merge with pathological fan stigmas as illustrated in the character of The Comic Book Guy from *The Simpsons*, who is the epitome of the contemporary comic book fan stereotype merged with the reside of past conceptions. He is overweight, emotionally arrested, obsessive, often driven by greed, condescending, socially inept, and lacking in social graces. Whereas The Comic Bok Guy may be a bigger than life representation of the stereotype, there is in actuality an explicit stereotype representing these qualities with a specific label--the fanboy.

The fanboy stereotype is typically of an asocial young male who pays little attention to his personal appearance and devotes considerable time and devotion to

comic books. On the surface, "to identify oneself as a fanboy is to express one's status as someone who is deeply immersed in comics culture" (Duncan & Smith, 2009, p. 174). However, the implications of the stereotype are far deeper.

> "The basic fanboy's social identity is discredited generally as asocial-poor interpersonal skills, lack of intelligence and lack of self-esteem. This also translates into social roles as fanboys are viewed as poor students, poor partners, or poor workers. "Geek" is a common pejorative used within the subculture of comic books as a self-identification of fans as failures in the eyes of normal. Fanboys are also viewed as suffering from arrested development, particularly as they grow older and remain committed to comic books. Fanboys and fangirls also commonly make self-derogatory or self-effacing comments about themselves that reflect the stigma theory on comic book fans. The comic book becomes a sign of the asocial and obsessive individual, the geek or the dork. The stigmatization of fanboys or fangirls matches an attribute (reading comics as young adults or older) with a stereotype (comic books as a children's medium), and then this arrested development is taken to be symptomatic of a more general asocial or addictive personality. Furthermore, "individuals who identity with a stigmatized interpretive community become susceptible to stigmatization regardless of their actual complex personalities and abilities" (Lopes, 2006, p. 406-407).

So, if a stigmatized social identity can be said to result from the negative stereotypes attached to it and the particular stereotypes and their potential negative consequences have been identified, the question remains as to how salient the particular fan identity is in any single individual's overall identity conception. In general, participating within fandom fundamentally alters one's relationship with the media objects in question from that of a casual consumer and the object of fandom becomes intrinsically interwoven with our sense of self. This is true of comic book fans in particular. "Comic fandom, and the practice of comic-book collecting in particular, is evidence of the complex and structured way in which avid participants of popular culture construct a meaningful sense of self" (Brown, 1997, p. 13). It is also true that their level of engagement with the subculture, or identity salience, tends to be fairly high. "The nature of being a fan, and thus part of fandom, revolves around an individual's sense of self. Comic book fandom will provide their members with an identification of themselves in social terms" (Kleefeld, 2011, p.24).

It is estimated that hardcore comic book fans only make up about 20 percent of the total comic book audience (Brown 2000), but by virtue of its stigmatized identity, most comic book fans are by definition devoutly dedicated to the medium. After all,

comic book fandom is a complex and diverse culture united by a devotion and appreciation of a medium and cultural object that nearly all others typically scorn. Because of the stigma associated with the comic book throughout history, this means that comic book readers are unique among media users in that there is really not much casual use, where the audience are fans only during the act of consumption. "What separates comic books from other media with fan followings is the much smaller number of nonfan consumers. Most Americans are unaware of and thoroughly uninterested in comic books" (Pustz, 1999, p. 112). Moreover, "the reality is that most comic book readers never become comic book fans. Even though the average age at which readers give up comic books has been steadily increasing, there still comes a point at which most comic book readers go cold turkey because comics are considered uncool or childish within their peer group. Fans keep reading anyway" (Duncan & Smith, 2009, p. 177). In fact, the deep levels of interaction that exist among the culture, both with the texts and with other fans, means that being a comic book reader tends to play an important role in the members' identities. "In most cases, being a comic book fan is central to fans' identity" (Pustz, 1999, p. 69).

One cannot begin to understand the experience of stigmatized people unless one understands the collective representations that are attached to these individuals and that follow them into social interactions and situations. "The key to understanding the emotional rewards of fandom, as well as its social and cultural consequences, shifts from the macro questions of power, hegemony and subversion to questions of self and identity in fandom" (Sandvoss, 2005, p. 42). It is in this sphere of self and identity where the contemporary stigma attached to comic books reveals itself within the negative connotations of the fanboy or fangirl stereotype derived from both the nerd and pathological fan paradigms. With comic book fans, this aspect of their identity has the potential to be a highly salient portion of their overall identity matrix at any given point in time, thereby aggravating the consequences of possessing a theoretically concealable stigmatized and devalued social identity.

METHODS

Introduction

As previously stated, the stigmatization of fandom and comic books is generally presented in the literature on the topics as a given fact. Citations of negative media representations and anecdotal evidence from subject interviews tend to exhaust the evidence presented in the discussion. That is not to say that the origins or whys of the stigma are not explored, only that the questions of what this means for the individuals who may be associated with the stigmatizing social identity are left untouched, other than the occasional reference to how they may attempt to manage their stigmatizing characteristic through concealment.

I am attempting to initiate the first steps in an effort to examine these stigmatizing social identities from the perspective of the potentially stigmatized and to determine if there is any credence to the assertion that the social identity of the comic book fan is still considered stigmatized in contemporary society. If members of other traditionally stigmatized social identities due to sex, race, or ethnicity experience levels of stigma consciousness as shown in research by Elizabeth Pinel (1999), then this theoretical concept should be capable of being applied to other potentially stigmatized groups such as comic book fans or members of other fandom groups. Additionally, measuring other factors pertinent to social identity such as the salience of the fan identity in the overall identity matrix of an individual (represented by the level of engagement with the subculture) can aid in developing deeper levels of understanding in regards to this phenomenon.

Many social scientists advocate the survey or the extensive in depth interview as being the most appropriate means of measuring fan behaviors and attitudes (Tankel & Murphy 1998). For the scope of this project, the interview process does not lend itself to efficient means of gathering or analyzing the necessary data. However, the survey (and in particular, the anonymous survey) is a defensible research instrument to address the research questions at the heart of the project. Utilizing an existing survey designed to measure stigma consciousness developed by Pinel (1999), I adapted it for the target population and the specific parameters of this research.

As the chapter will make clear, the selection of the participants to be offered questionnaires, the formation of the instrument, and the questions presented within the survey were all directly related to the theoretical framework established in earlier chapters. The procedures employed and the research questions expressed both speak to the particular nuances of the subculture under investigation and the methods of analysis chosen are well suited for the type of data intended to be collected in this design. Finally, the limitations and delimitations associated with this endeavor express the realistic scope of a master's thesis research project, which necessarily operates with finite resources and specific goals.

Participants

The concepts under study apply only to a very specific group of people. The stigma of comic books that I have been discussing is not really applicable to children or adolescents, only to adults. In addition, casual or occasional readers of comic books are by definition not members of fandom and are unlikely to consider the medium or its subculture to be a significant portion of their social identity. Therefore, the target population for the study is adult comic book fans with a high likelihood to self-identify as comic book fans and to participate with the comic book fandom subculture. Luckily, there is a precise site of activity integral to the subculture of comic book fandom where members of the target population can be located, identified, and recruited--the comic book shop.

The comic book shop is a hub of comic book fandom activity and is a stable and important location for the development and nurturing of the fandom subculture that transcends mere commerce activity. "Regardless of the particulars, and almost regardless of what happens in the rest of the world, a comic book fan can walk into their local comic book shop once a week to purchase their latest favorite stories and take some solace in the familiar patterns they've developed in buying their favorite comics" (Kleefeld, 2011, p. 82). The comic book shop is not only where members of comic book fandom are able to purchase the cultural objects so important to them, but also a hang out where like-minded individuals can and often do socialize and communicate in person with friends and strangers about their hobby and pastime. "Comic shops serve as a kind of cultural clubhouse where fans can spend time being themselves among their friends and other like-minded individuals. Many regulars find that the real reason for patronizing these establishments is interaction with the people there, including other customers and employees. In this way, the comic book shop is a site for culture as well as commerce" (Pustz, 1999, p. xi). It is perhaps the most important physical site for the subculture as a whole.

Now, fandom as a whole is inherently associated with emotion and affective states, but, "for the purpose of empirical investigation and academic analysis, we therefore turn to observable and measurable aspects as defining marks of fandom" and "the clearest indicator of a particular emotional investment in a given popular text lies in its regular, repeated consumption" (Sandvoss, 2005, p. 6). In the comic book industry, titles are published on a monthly basis and product is distributed to retail vendors on a weekly basis. "Pull" or "subscription" customers are customers who have standing orders and requests for various comic book titles and products to be pulled from the store's shipments each week and put aside for them. As this practice is a long standing tradition and ritual of comic book fandom, this means that those who engage in it transcend the definition of a regular or repeat customer and can be certified as a fan in every sense of the word.

The proprietors of a Grand Rapids area comic book shop granted me permission to distribute the questionnaire to their regular "pull list" customers. The owners estimated that there were approximately 80 pull customers who would meet our qualifications of regular adult customers.

Instrument

The research design consisted of subjects voluntarily completing a self-administered questionnaire (Appendix A) intended to calculate levels of stigma consciousness and levels of engagement with the subculture, with the ultimate goal to be able to develop a scale for each concept. There were two sections of ten questions, one section corresponding with stigma consciousness and the second with the level of engagement with the subculture. The possible responses to the questions in these sections were provided in a Likert scale format, with degrees of agreement for the stigma consciousness statements and measures of frequency for the level of engagement measures. These two sections were then followed by a brief series of demographic questions with pre-coded responses within the potential answer ranges.

The stigma consciousness scale was originated by Pinel (1999) in a study examining stigma consciousness in regards to race, gender, and sexuality. Agreement or disagreement with the statements provided in the scale indicated the level of awareness of the general stereotypes associated with the comic book fan, feelings of discrimination experienced by the respondent, the level of occurrence of thought preoccupation, and self-censorship in social interaction. At the core of the statements presented were two themes. One was the idea that "socially produced meanings are constantly reinforced by social rewards or punishment as we interact with other people in our daily lives" (Fiske, 1989a, p. 105). The other was that "a discreditable disclosure in one area of an individual's activity will throw doubt on the many areas of activity in which he may have nothing to conceal" (Goffman, 1959,p. 64). Therefore, "people high in stigma consciousness may avoid situations in which there is a possibility that they will be stereotyped" (Pinel, 1999, p. 124). It is both the perceived possibility of experiencing negative consequences such as prejudice or discrimination and a heightened awareness of the devalued quality of one's identity that form the core of an operational definition of stigmatization and the statements presented in the stigma consciousness scale represent both of these factors.

Consider the following two examples. In reference to one of his interview subjects, a fourteen year-old African American boy from a Chicago suburb, Brown (2000) writes: "Not only does Darnell keep his comic book reading a secret from his girlfriend, but he also has not told anyone on his football or baseball teams about his hobby for fear of ridicule, even though he is the captain of both teams" (p. 103). Furthermore, Pustz (1999) recounts an anecdote from one of his interviews where a female graduate student discusses looking for secret signals that she looks for to discover if it's okay to talk about being a comic book fan and her refusal to bring this

information to light first on her part. "The stereotypes of being a fan--and especially a fan of a thoroughly devalued medium such as comic books--may make one hesitant to admit one's interest or cause the admission to be accompanied by a longer explanation" (Pustz, 1999, p. 70). Although representing two very different individuals in terms of demographics, they both exhibited awareness that the comic book fan was a devalued identity with stereotypes that would violate their respective norms of adolescent masculinity and intellectual sophistication. Most importantly, they took steps to conceal this aspect of their identity from others. If members of the sample population experience similar thoughts and feelings, the stigma consciousness scale will be the means by which to measure this.

The second portion of the survey instrument, the level of engagement scale, was devised for this study based on information provided in the literature regarding the practices of the comic book subculture and from my own experiences as a comic book fan. "The question of whether a potentially stigmatizing attribute will become a focal point of self-concept depends on whether the individual uses the attribute in organizing, interpreting, and evaluating social experiences" (Jones et al., 1984, p. 116). The level of involvement with the comic book fandom subculture is a way of empirically measuring the magnitude of individuals' use of the comic book fan in their everyday life and therefore how strong a role the identity plays in how they order their worldview. The more central the comic book fan identity is in their lives, the more potential the stigma has to generate negative consequences for their social interactions or psychological well-being. Because comic book fandom is a concealable trait, the probability of it taking on a master status identity is more likely to occur internally in the member than as an external mark of a stigmatized identity impacting the individual's life ubiquitously. Measuring the frequency with which respondents engage in the rituals and practices of the subculture is a valid and objective means by which to empirically measure "comic book fan" as a master status identity.

For instance, letter pages, webzines, and publications about comic books work to build a sense of fan community "through timely news items, useful databases, entertaining columns, and recognizable images" while also seeking "to incorporate the audience into the act and build, rather than limits, the size of the community. The implicit rhetoric is of inclusion" (Smith, 1999, p. 93-94). Utilizing these forums acts to strengthen the fan's connection to the medium and to other members of the fan community by engendering a sense of contribution, participation and ownership, and the frequency of their utilization by a fan is a useful tool of measurement of the strength of attachment to the comic book subculture.

Procedures

The questionnaires were distributed at the participating retail location in Grand Rapids, MI during the first week of December, 2012. The questionnaire, instructions, consent cover letter, and incentive coupon were placed in oversized sealable manila

mailing envelopes and then physically inserted into the targeted customers' existing product orders as part of the purposive selection sampling design of the study. The proprietors of the shop aided in the distribution of the survey instruments by identifying customers that meet the minimum age requirement. This location was chosen primarily due to my status as a customer of the establishment for nearly two decades and my previous employment there for several years. Permission and assistance from the store and its staff were readily obtained without difficulty.

Participation was completely voluntary and the questionnaires were self-administered and completely anonymous. To encourage responsiveness, included with the survey was an incentive coupon redeemable for a free comic book when returned with the completed survey. The time necessary to complete the surveys should not have exceeded ten minutes. Furthermore, participants were given roughly four weeks to return the completed questionnaires with the incentive coupon expiring on December 31, 2012.

The completed questionnaires were to be sealed in the envelopes provided and returned to the participating location. The proprietors agreed to act on behalf of the researcher in collecting the returned surveys from the participants. I then made weekly trips to the store in order to retrieve the returned surveys and reimburse the store for any incentive coupons redeemed. My final pickup was on January 3, 2013. Data from the completed questionnaires was entered into the SPSS computer program for future data analysis.

Limitations and Delimitations

First and foremost, it is important to note that I was not attempting an ethnography of the comic book subculture. While examining the subculture as a social group and the history of the medium as a cultural form is necessary to provide adequate context for the study and the questions it seeks to examine, I am ultimately concerned with only one aspect of what is in truth a much larger social phenomenon in the form of the comic book fandom and it was not my desire to make any grand statements about comic book fandom as a whole.

Additionally, it was not my goal to analyze the psychological processes of stigma consciousness or the mechanisms by which it may develop. I was solely concerned with attempting to validate its existence or to expose the lack thereof, and to explore the particulars of the concept as it relates to the population under study. Ideas of stereotype threat, negative consequences on self-esteem and psychological well-being, stigma and the looking-glass self, strategies of stigma management and cognitive or affective aspects of stigma are all important facets of social stigma theory and deserve their own due attention in the existing research and literature, but they were not of specific concern for the scope of this project.

All research conducted by human beings is inherently limited in one way or another due to each researcher's own subjective position in the very social world in which he or she seeks to dissect and analyze. As a comic book fan for nearly two decades and former comic book shop employee, I was able to provide unique insight and understanding into the subculture under study, while possessing a knowledge of the culture's rituals and language that enables me to access the culture's gatekeepers in the form of comic book shop proprietors and to shape my survey approach in a manner that speaks to the *zeitgeist* of the comic book fan. At the same time, I remained conscious of my position in relation to the subject matter and strove to maintain the appropriate balance between subjective fan and objective academic researcher.

Furthermore, each research method that may potentially be employed has certain strengths and weaknesses. In the case of survey research, particularly with closed questions in a scale oriented questionnaire, its efficiency as a method of data collection is balanced by the potential for non-responsiveness and the fact that the static nature of the survey as an instrument of data collection does not allow for much in the way of complex, open, or follow up questions. While the potential exists for respondents to answer dishonestly, exaggerate responses, and interpret questions in ways that do not align with my intentions, it is my experience that comic book fans are generally eager to share their knowledge and experiences in an open and honest manner as it relates to their passion and hobby.

Finally, because we are dealing with such a narrow target population and the scope of the project limits the geographical area of data collection, the ability to generalize the results of this study is questionable. Stigma is a social construction shaped by cultural and historical forces. It is highly situationally specific, dynamic, and complex and by extension so are the aspects of stigma consciousness. Attempting to apply these results to members of other fan groups or even to comic book fans in different parts of the country could be problematic.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data Entry and Coding

A total of 78 surveys were distributed to members of the target population. An additional 3 surveys were never claimed by the targeted respondents. Over a timespan of four weeks, 48 of the 78 surveys were returned, for a response rate of 62%. The responses to the survey questions were coded and entered into the SPSS program for analysis purposes as detailed below.

The stigma consciousness questions A1 through A10 were coded according to the intensity of agreement with (5) strongly agree, (4) agree, (3) neither agree nor disagree, (2) disagree, and (1) strongly disagree. High levels of agreement to the statements indicated the presence of stigma consciousness. The more intense the level of agreement, the larger the numerical value assigned to the response, and the stronger the corresponding amount of stigma consciousness. However, due to the wording of questions A3, A4, A5, and A6, disagreement with these statements indicated the presence of stigma consciousness. Therefore, these four were reverse coded. The subculture engagement questions B1 through B10 were coded according to increasing levels of frequency (0) never, (1) once a year, (2) multiple times a year, (3) once a month, (4) multiple times a month, (5) once a week, (6) multiple times a week, and (7) everyday.

The responses to the demographic questions were coded as follows. For age (variable designated Age), measured in years, (1) was 18-23, (2)24-29, (3) 30-35, (4) 36-41, (5) 42-47, (6) 48-53, and (7) for 54 and older. The length of time as a comic book fan (Years), also measured in years was (1) 1-5, (2) 6-10, (3) 11-15, (4) 16-20, (5) 21 and longer. The highest level of education completed (Education) was (1) less than high school, (2) high school, (3) some college, (4) Bachelor's degree, (5) some post-graduate and (6) post-graduate degree. The monthly expenditure on comic books measured in dollars (DollarsSpent) was coded as (1) $1-30, (2) $31-60, (3) $61-90, (4) $91-120, (5) $121-150, (6) $151-180, and (7) $181 and above. Finally, sex (Sex) was coded (1) male and (0) female. The final frequency distributions of each item on the questionnaire are located in Appendix E.

Factor Analysis and Summated Scales

The primary research question at the heart of the study was whether or not contemporary members of the comic book fandom subculture have an awareness or consciousness that their social identity as a comic book fan is devalued and stigmatized by the norms of society. There is evidence to suggest that members of stigmatized groups develop awareness that others view them negatively (Harvey 2001). If evidence is found of the existence of a stigma consciousness among members of the comic book

fandom, this will be empirical evidence that further validates the application of the concept of stigma to fandom subcultures. It was my hypothesis that there will indeed be evidence of the existence of stigma consciousness among members of comic book fandom that speaks to their marginalized status, but that this stigma consciousness may vary among the participants to a significant degree depending primarily on how salient their identity as a comic book fan is in their everyday life, measured by their level of engagement with the rituals and practices of the subculture. This required that two scales be developed--a scale measuring levels of stigma consciousness and a scale measuring the level of engagement with the subculture. Therefore, the first stage in the data analysis process was to factor analyze the respective items dealing with each conceptual scale. I began with the ten items representing the stigma consciousness portion of the questionnaire.

I initially conducted a principal components analysis with varimax rotation on the items labeled A1 through A10. All items had factor loading communalities of .6 or greater and the KMO measure of sampling adequacy was .697 which shows that the matrix was suitable for factor analysis. In addition, the Bartlett's test of sphericity had a significance level of .000, indicating that the null hypothesis of no correlation among the items could be rejected. However, there were four eigenvalues greater than one, indicating that the set of items contained four distinct conceptual dimensions. The first factor had four items that all loaded at .6 or greater and which were linked thematically and theoretically to the concept of stigma consciousness. Questions A4, A5, A9, and A10 were all specifically concerned with measuring the respondents' personal experiences as comic book fans in regards to their social identity. Because of this link and the initial loadings, the principal components analysis with varimax rotation was run a second time utilizing these four items only.

Table 1: Stigma Consciousness Factor Analysis

Item	Factor Loading
A4: Stereotypes about comic book fans have not affected me personally.	.785
A5: My identity as a comic book fan does not influence how others act towards me.	.724
A9: Because I read comic books, others view me as immature.	.843
A10: Comic book fans are seen as socially unskilled.	.795

With this second principal components analysis, the KMO measure increased to .744, while the Bartlett's test significance held at .000. Most importantly, only one factor emerged with an eigenvalue greater than one (2.48) which accounted for 62% of

the variance. The items and their factor loadings are detailed in Table 1. Next, I ran a reliability test on the four items to determine the appropriateness of combining these items into a single summated scale. The resulting Cronbach's alpha of .792 indicated a high level of reliability and the items were then summed together to create a scale labeled Stigma Consciousness.

The initial research question of the project was whether or not members of comic book fandom experience a level of stigma consciousness consistent with the stigmatized identity commonly attributed to them by both the general media and academic texts. The possible values on the summated scale ranged from 5 (lowest level of stigma consciousness) to 20 (highest level of stigma consciousness). The mean stigma consciousness for the sample was 10.15 with a median of 9. These results indicate that in this sample of comic book fans there is not a high level of stigma awareness or the perception of identity as a comic book fan being socially devalued as hypothesized, but rather a slight tendency to actually lack stigma consciousness.

Table 2: Stigma Consciousness Scale

N	Valid	48
	Missing	0
Mean		10.1458
Std. Error of Mean		.49195
Median		9.0000
Mode		7.00
Std. Deviation		3.40831
Variance		11.617
Range		12.00
Minimum		5.00
Maximum		17.00
Sum		487.00

With a stigma consciousness scale now established, the next step in the data analysis process concerned the creation of a subculture engagement scale. By measuring fans' involvement with the activities and practices of the subculture, we can hope to control for individual variations in psychological and personality trends that may influence responses to the stigma consciousness questions. The secondary research

question was whether or not we can evaluate the extent of subculture involvement, and therefore the salience of the comic book fan identity to the individual, as this may influence perceptions of potential stigmatization. Previous research has shown that types of stigma related to identity traits considered to be central to identity construction are associated with higher levels of stigma consciousness. "Greater in-group identification was associated with greater perceived discrimination among low-status groups" (Major et al., 2002, p. 273). My hypothesis is that those highly involved in the practices and rituals of comic book fandom will have an increased awareness of the stereotypes associated with their subculture, and would thereby have higher levels of stigma consciousness and would be more likely to interpret their life experiences in light of their group membership.

The items measuring the level of engagement with the subculture (B1 through B10) were subjected to the same factor analysis process detailed above, a principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation. As with the stigma consciousness items, the results of the initial factor analysis revealed that the matrix should work well. All but one item had communalities exceeding .5, there was a KMO sampling adequacy of .614, and the Bartlett's test of sphericity had a significance level of .000, indicating that the null hypothesis of no correlation could be rejected. However, as with the initial stigma consciousness principal components analysis, there were multiple eigenvalues exceeding the value of one and the items were spread out over three dimensions.

Once again, the items that loaded the highest on the first factor, and which were linked thematically, were isolated and these five items were used in a second principal components analysis. Items labeled B2, B3, B7, B9, and B10 involved socializing and communicating with other members of the subculture and were submitted to another principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation. The factor loading results are presented in Table 2. Furthermore, this second factor analysis resulted in a KMO measure of adequacy of .726, maintained a Bartlett's test of sphericity significance of .000, and had a single eigenvalue exceeding one (2.667) accounting for 53% of the variance. A reliability test resulted in a Cronbach's alpha of .757, indicating a high level of reliability. The five items were summed to create a scale labeled Subculture Engagement.

Table 3: Subculture Engagement Factor Analysis

Item	Factor Loading
B2: Engage in conversations with others about comic books	.791
B3: Social interactions are organized around comic books and their fans	.739
B7: Write letters or blogs about comic books	.648
B9: Collect comic book related items	.816
B10: Comic book convention attendance	.641

Linear Regression

The second portion of the data analysis was more exploratory in nature, seeking to examine the relationship between the other variables measured by the questionnaire and the dependent variable of stigma consciousness. The additional demographic questions enabled depth to be added to the analysis process by providing additional variables related to the theoretical framework through which to interpret the data and potentially avoid any spurious relationships between the two main variables. In line with the previous hypotheses, I would expect to find that each variable would contribute to a rise in a respondent's level of stigma consciousness. For instance, individuals with higher levels of education will have higher levels of stigma consciousness due to an increased awareness of comic books relative position in the dominant cultural hierarchy. Or, those respondents with a higher number of years as a fan will be more likely to have been exposed to a greater number of expressions or experiences that highlight the devalued social identity, and therefore have higher levels of stigma consciousness. The older a respondent is, the farther away he or she is from the perceived target demographic and the more likely to feel self-conscious about their hobby, and so on.

Consequently, I conducted a multiple linear regression with Stigma Consciousness as the dependent variable and Subculture Engagement, Age, Years, MonthlyExp$, and Education as the independent variables. A univariate analysis of each of these variables did not reveal any outliers or other issues of concern. The responses to Sex on the questionnaire were overwhelmingly male, with only two respondents answering female. For that reason, I did not feel that it was relevant to include this variable in the regression analysis.

To be sure all OLS assumptions were met I first examined the collinearity statistics for each variable (see Table 4). As none of the VIF values exceeding 2.5 and each of the tolerance values were greater than .40, no evidence of excessively high multicollinearity effect was found amongst the variables.

Table 4: Collinearity Statistics

Variable	Tolerance	VIF
SubcultureEngagement	.774	1.292
AGE	.551	1.816
YEARS	.488	2.051
EDUCATION	.831	1.204
MONTHLYEXP$	.794	1.259

Next I ran a normality test on the unstandardized residuals from the regression analysis. The histogram showed an apparently normal distribution of residuals confirmed by a Shapiro-Wilk test significance value of .905, indicating that I could fail to reject the null hypothesis of normality. In regards to the assumption homoskedasticity, the scatterplot of the standardized residuals and predicted values showed a random scatter of points positioned between -2 and +2 on the y-axis. In order to confirm the apparent visual evidence as to the nature of the regression, I then conducted a White's test by regressing the squared residuals on the independent variables. The chi-square statistic of 7.097 resulted in a p-value of .21, allowing me to fail to reject the null hypothesis of homoskedasticity.

The final assumption that I tested was the assumption of linearity. Although the relationship between each independent variable and StigmaConsciousness appeared to be linear based on the bivariate scatterplots, it was necessary to proceed with incremental F-tests in order to say with certainty that the best possible relationship between the variables in question were in fact linear ones.

A curve fit analysis was conducted for each of the variables with linear, quadratic, cubic, logarithmic, and power models requested. For each of the four variables, the model with the highest R^2 was the cubic model. Incremental F-tests were performed for each variable and Excel was used to calculate the p-value. The p-value results are presented in Table 5. Since the p-value for each of the independent variables was greater than .05, I could fail to reject the null hypothesis of linearity.

Table 5: Curve Fit P-Values

Variable	P-value
SubcultureEngagement	.699
AGE	.592
YEARS	.410
EDUCATION	.228
MONTHLYEXP$	.150

Since all the OLS assumptions were met, I was able to interpret the results from the regression. Table 6 shows an adjusted R^2 of .333 that indicates the independent variables in the regression account for 33% of the variance in levels of stigma consciousness among the respondents. While this is not an extremely large amount of variance explained, it is still safe to say that the variables measured by the questionnaire have some impact on the respondents' level of stigma consciousness.

Table 6: Results of Regression of Stigma Consciousness on Independent Variables

	B	Std. Error	Beta	T	Sig.*
(Constant)	2.430	2.805		0.866	.1955
SubcultureEngagement	.452	.089	.696	5.089	.0000
AGE	.404	.314	.209	1.288	.1025
YEARS	-.638	.403	-.273	-1.583	.0605
EDUCATION	1.164	.608	.253	1.914	.0315
MONTHLYEXP$	.010	.285	.005	0.035	.4860

Adjusted R^2=.333
*one-tailed test

The unstandardized slope for the variable SubcultureEngagement was positive (b=.452) and statistically significant (p=.000), while the standardized slope of .696 indicates that this is a strong relationship. The positive relationship indicates that as subcultural engagement increases, so does the level of stigma consciousness. AGE had an unstandardized slope of .404 (p=.1025) with a standardized coefficient of .209. These results indicate that the relationship between age and stigma consciousness is

marginally significant, positive, and weak. Thus, as age increases, stigma consciousness also increases. EDUCATION had an unstandardized slope of 1.164 (p=.0315) and a standardized coefficient of .253. Therefore, the relationship between education and stigma consciousness is statistically significant, positive, and weak. As education increases, so does stigma consciousness. MONTHLYEXP$ had an unstandardized slope of .01 (p=.486) with a standardized coefficient of .005. The relationship between the amount of money spent monthly on comic books and stigma consciousness while positive, it is also extremely weak and not statistically significant. As the amount of money spent on comic books per month increases, there is virtually no impact of stigma consciousness. Finally, YEARS had an unstandardized slope of -.638 (p=.0605) with a standardized coefficient of -.273. These results show that the relationship between the number of years as a comic book fan and stigma consciousness is statistically significant, negative, and moderate. As the number of years as a comic book fan increase, stigma consciousness decreases.

In essence, the respondent's level of subculture engagement, age, and education all contributed to increasing the respondent's level of stigma consciousness, while the length of time in the hobby led to lower levels of stigma consciousness. Furthermore, since SubcultureEngagement had the largest standardized coefficient, it was the variable with the strongest impact on StigmaConsciousness, thus supporting one of the initial hypotheses of this project. Additionally, MONTHLYEXP$ had no impact on StigmaConsciousness, while the remaining variables were almost equal in terms of the amount of impact they had on the dependent variable. The full implications of these results in relation to the original hypotheses, research questions, and theoretical framework will be explored more fully in the next chapter.

CONCLUSION

Interpretations and Implications

The original inspiration for this research project was the encounter of a common topic of discussion woven into the academic discourse in the areas of popular culture and fan studies. This topic was that certain types of popular culture were devalued by the cultural hierarchy of society and explicitly marginalized to the extent of generating a social stigma, attached both to the cultural form itself and to the devotees of the form. In particular, this theme was examined and explored in the area of fan studies as scholars turned their attention to the various subcultures that organized themselves around specific types of popular culture. While these discussions tended to focus on cultural theory frameworks and the media representation of the stigmatized groups as the basis for the stigma symposium, one facet that they generally lacked was the perspective of the actual fans themselves

As a long tenured comic book fan, I was familiar with this type of discourse's presence within the comic book subculture and the role it played in the structure and mythos of the comic book fandom community. My personal history and experiences, in conjunction with a review of the academic literature, placed the American comic book at the bottom of society's cultural hierarchy, leading me to believe that the fundamental idea of a connection between the devaluing of a cultural form and the attachment of a stigma to its followers and practitioners had genuine merit. Therefore, I set out to design a project that would attempt to gather data on the fans' perspectives of themselves in regards to their potential stigmatized identities.

The primary aim of the project was an attempt to gauge the level of stigma consciousness among the sample population of comic book fans, with the initial hypothesis that there would be levels of stigma consciousness amongst the respondents. The results of the data show that contrary to the assumptions previous put forth in the literature, there does not seem to be a significant level of stigma consciousness among the contemporary comic book fans of this particular sample. If anything, these results speak to the temporal nature of social stigma and its dynamic qualities as a social construct. While I firmly believe that even as recently as a decade ago there was ample evidence to support the idea of comic book fandom being stigmatized through the negative portrayals and degrading stereotypes presented in the media, the cultural and social landscape has changed both within comic book fandom and among the mainstream American society. As Sean Kleefeld (2011) takes great care to point out, what it means to be a comic fan now is very different from what it meant to be a comic book fan in the past, even as recently as a decade ago. While the exact nature of any shift in social values or attitudes is often difficult to pinpoint, there are a number of cultural factors that have converged to mitigate and even reverse the one time social stigma attached to the comic book form and its subculture. These are expressed quite succinctly by the French comic book scholar Gabilliet.

For Gabilliet (2010), comic books need to achieve three things before they can acquire cultural legitimation: visibility, recognition, and legitimacy. Visibility refers to references made to comic books outside the social sphere of comic book publishing and the increased presence of comic book motifs and thematic aspects in other forms of mass media. Recognition incorporates acceptance of the cultural object as an aspect of everyday life. Finally, legitimacy designates the connection of positive qualities to the cultural object by traditional institutions. Only when all three of these aspects come into being will comic books achieve a legitimate and non-stigmatized identity. It just so happens that these aspects have been developing in American society over the past several years in a variety of ways.

In terms of visibility, intellectual properties with their roots in comic books are achieving unprecedented success in other mediums such as movies, television, and video games--all cultural forms with higher levels of cultural prestige and larger audiences. For example, Marvel Comics earned 4 billion dollars in licensing agreements alone in 2004 (Lopes 2009). In addition, the top two grossing movies of 2012, *The Avengers* and *The Dark Knight Rises*, were based on comic book characters and exceeded $1 billion dollars in domestic gross (Smith 2013). With those levels of exposure and the popularity of the properties, it would be natural that the stigma attached to the comic book, and by extension its fans, would wane in its severity if not gradually cease to be altogether.

In Jenkins' (2006) conception of convergence culture, we see the seeds for the growth of comic books' cultural prestige in the sphere of recognition. Thanks to technological advances such as high speed internet, smart phones and tablets, and even the technical tools used to manufacture the product itself, there has been an impact on the cultural form of comic books and the industry built up around it. The available paths of delivery have been altered, the bar has been raised in regards to the level of sophistication of the content and the potential audience for the medium and the media products based on its properties have been greatly expanded. An individual no longer is limited to the perceived cultural ghetto of the comic book shop as the sole location or means of acquiring comic books. In addition, the comic books themselves are only one opportunity of exposure to the characters, artwork, themes and storylines that drive the medium. One can now read digital comic books on an e-reader, stream comic book movies or television shows through any internet-ready device, buy or sell the books themselves online, and play video games based on comic book characters on a smart phone or game console. The content and form is no longer segregated, but has merged with the technology and mediums accepted and in use on a daily basis by the general population.

The final part of Gabilliet's trinity is the legitimation of the cultural object. In this case, comic books' legitimation comes in the form of graphic novels. Graphic novels are best defined as collections of individual, previously published, comic book periodicals bound together, or an original long form work published for the first time in a book format. Graphic novels have acted to ease much of the stigma attached to comic books

through their presentation as physical products. "Graphic novels were being celebrated as the new literary sensation and an essential part of library collections. No longer viewed as a sub-literate art form, graphic novels were being held up as literacy builders and wonderful enticements for children and teens to gather in libraries to enjoy the breadth of good literature. What had become a medium dominated by teen and adult males was now discovering new audiences among female and young readers" (Lopes, 2009, p. 177). Published in both hard cover and soft cover, and encompassing a full scope of topics and genres beyond the traditional superhero, graphic novels are the fastest growing publishing market in North America, have a major presence in traditional bookstores and libraries all across the nation and are being regularly reviewed in mainstream publications, literary journals, and art magazines. They have done much to redefine the comic book as a "book" and cartooning as an art, thereby raising the level of esteem for the object for many individuals.

It is this combination of factors that have most likely contributed to the contemporary comic book fan not experiencing heightened levels of stigma consciousness by altering the relationship of society to the comic book in ways that enhance its image and acceptance. As Goffman (1963) and others after him have stressed, stigma is a socially constructed phenomenon that depends on the specific context of relations to exist. As those contexts change and the meanings associated with them evolve over time so must the experiences of those individuals involved. However, it is important to recognize, as Page (1984) states, that "the absence of reports of felt stigma should not necessarily be taken to indicate that the general public has begun to adopt a more favorable attitude towards a particular stigmatized group. It may merely indicate a change in attitude on the part of the stigmatized rather than the stigmatizers" (p. 128). So, while the comic book fans in this sample may not perceive themselves as being stigmatized, it is possible that the dominant social group still views their social identity negatively. In fact, examining how non-comic book fans in contemporary society perceive comic book fans would be a natural follow up to this research project.

Moving beyond the question of the presence of stigma consciousness, I sought to explore what factors influenced levels of stigma consciousness and it what manner. The second research question was concerned with how a respondent's level of subculture engagement impacted levels of stigma consciousness. Based on the idea that the level of subculture engagement could be used as an empirically measured representation for the extent to which being a comic book fan was part of the respondent's overall identity matrix, I hypothesized that higher levels of subculture engagement would contribute to higher levels of stigma consciousness and that this would be the most important variable of influence. Furthermore, Hills (2002) refers to a discursive mantra which is circulated within the fan culture via niche fan media such as fanzines and magazines to project the sense that fandom is not irrational and attempt to rationalize or justify the activities and identity that mainstream media outlets may portray as irrational or pathological. "The culturally devalued in-group of media fandom

is compelled to account for its passions" (p. 68). Other scholars agree that the fandom group tends to perpetuate the idea of a comic book stigma, intentionally or unintentionally. "As much as the subculture of comic books becomes a way to legitimate comic book readers, ironically the stigma theory of fanboys and fangirls seems to arise more from inside the subculture than from outside (Lopes, 2006, p. 410). Because of this, I expected those respondents more involved in the subculture to have greater exposure to this type of discursive mantra as it circulates within the group.

The data analysis shows that out of all the variables measured by the questionnaire, the level of subculture engagement is indeed the variable with the greatest positive impact on the level of stigma consciousness. This corresponds with ideas of identity salience in stigma theory in regards to the potential impact of group associated stereotypes on the individual and adds credence to the theory that ideas of stigmatized social identity are possibly circulated in some manner within the very group stereotyped. In this instance, my hypothesis of stigma consciousness increasing as subculture engagement increases, and that this is the most significant variable of influence measured, is confirmed by the data from this sample.

It was my belief that the other variables measured on the questionnaire would all have positive influencing relationships with the respondents' levels of stigma consciousness. This proved true in the case of the respondents' age and education, but not for the length of time they had been a member of the comic book fandom subculture.

When it came to the variable of age, the idea that older individuals would have higher levels of stigma consciousness is based on two factors. The first is the age component of the social stigma against comic books discussed in the literature review and theoretical framework. Since the cultural object is perceived to be the exclusive domain of children and adolescents, the older the individual then the farther away that individual is from the target demographic and therefore, the greater the level of disconnect between the defined boundaries of age and the appropriate use of leisure time. Secondly, the older the comic book fan, the increased awareness of the historical element of the comic book stigma. Like all stigmas, the comic book stigma is a social construct that has varied throughout history in intensity, with definite peaks in certain time periods in the past. The older the individual, the more likely they are to have had experience with one or more of these spikes in social stigma directed toward the comic book. These two aspects come together to drive the hypothesis of age having a positive influence on levels of stigma consciousness, which is supported by the analysis findings.

Now, one of the cornerstones of the stigma against comic books is the form's origins and popularity as a medium of the poor and the immigrant. This early association helped to cement its reputation as a cultural form without merit as defined by the dominant values of the elite. The more educated an individual, the greater their exposure and indoctrination to these norms of cultural value that shape and direct the institutions of learning in our society. "People concerned about their public intellectual

image avoid comic books" (Pustz, 1999, p. 155). The analysis results of a positive relationship between education and stigma consciousness support this hypothesis based on the framework of cultural hierarchy theory.

Finally, the length of time associated with the subculture and hobby was the only variable that was actually found to decrease levels of stigma consciousness. My initial hypothesis was that the longer an individual was a member of comic book fandom, the more opportunities he or she would have had for negative interactions based on their social identity. As a result, there would be an increase in the number of negative experiences generating higher levels of stigma consciousness. However, the analysis indicates just the opposite. Most likely this is because the increased length of time in the subculture contributes to a greater sense of belonging and an increased confidence in the individual's social identity as being a positive aspect of their overall identity and lifestyle.

Recommendations and Conclusions

Of course it is difficult to say with certainty why these results are the way they are without additional research that explicitly seeks to answer these types of questions. The interpretations presented here are primarily based on the literature reviewed. Ultimately, due to the small sample size and the nature of the data collection instrument, these results cannot be adequately extrapolated to the general population of comic book fans and one might get very different results from a different sample.

Overall, this project served to commence a careful consideration of one aspect of a social phenomenon that I believe will be of increasing relevance in the years to come. While the significance of any of the individual secondary variables measured here may be potentially challenged, the principal objective was to kindle a consideration of a social phenomenon often written off as undeserving of attention or already a closed case. However, examining fandom can help lead us to a greater understanding of the pleasures associated with fandom, the values placed on specific objects, and the motivations that drive fandom as an activity and subculture. Furthermore, it reveals the kinds of judgments made towards a segment of "others" in society. In essence, fandom can be seen as a microcosm of society at large, and the insights revealed by fandom studies can help shed light on the functioning mechanisms of society as a whole. "Fandom reflects the conflicting forces of modern consumption-its importance as a symbolic resource in the formation of identity and in the positioning of one's self in the modern world, on the one hand and the integration of the self into the dominant economic, social and cultural conditions of industrial modernity, on the other" (Sandvoss, 2005, p. 165). With the rapid changes in technology transforming how individuals interact with media and socialize with each other, the conceptions of fandom and the hierarchy of culture will also demand reevaluation. In a world where the producers of media content actively recruit the opinions of the hardcore fan base, old

definitions will be thrown out and new ideas will develop as to what constitutes appropriate culture in terms of form, content, and use.

Some topics that will offer up rich opportunities for increased understanding of our world are how non-fans view fans, how fan groups define their members and relate to each other, and how fans use technology to meet their needs and shape the content of the very cultural products they use and consume, to name just a few. Whatever modes the future avenues of research in fandom may take, it is a topic I believe to be complex and ever changing on one hand, but potentially revealing about our society and our relationship with social identity on the other. "Stigmatization of the outsider is more difficult to attain as almost anyone may be an outsider in American society at the beginning of the twenty-first century. However, despite the weakening of stigma in American society because of [increased] diversity and technology, it is here to stay. Stigmatization is a social fact and will always be with us" (Falk, 2001, p. 338-339). The populations and the characteristics that are stigmatized will ultimately speak loudly to the power relationships between groups and illuminate our true fears and desires often hidden behind the curtain that separates the social facade from the dimly lit areas of the backstage. And as we move forward in a world whose social fabric is characterized more and more by rapid change and increasing complexity, these issues will continue to maintain their relevance and fascination for scholars of many different disciplines.

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Appendix A

Comic Book Fandom and Stigma Consciousness Survey Instrument

The following is a list of ten statements. Please place an X in the response column that indicates the extent to which you agree with the statement. Mark only one response for each statement.

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
A1 People are often judged by their hobbies.					
A2 Individuals labeled as geeks, nerd, or dorks are unfairly treated by society.					
A3 I never worry that my behaviors will be viewed as "geeky".					
A4 Stereotypes about comic book fans have not affected me personally.					
A5 My identity as a comic book fan does not influence how others act towards me.					
A6 I almost never think about the fact that I am a comic book fan when I interact with others.					
A7 I hesitate to reveal the fact that I collect or read comic books to others.					
A8 Most people have a problem taking adult comic book fans seriously.					
A9 Because I read comic books, others often view me as immature.					
A10 Comic book fans are seen as socially unskilled.					

The following is a list of ten activities and practices related to comic book fandom. Please indicate the general frequency in which you engage in the listed activities by placing an X in the corresponding box. Mark only one response for each statement.

B1 I read magazines, fanzines, or webzines related to comic books.

0	Never	[ ]
1	Once a Year	[ ]
2	Several Times a Year	[ ]
3	Once a Month	[ ]
4	Several Times a Month	[ ]
5	Once a Week	[ ]
6	Several Times a Week	[ ]
7	Everyday	[ ]

B2 I engage in conversations with others about comic books and comic book related topics.

0	Never	[ ]
1	Once a Year	[ ]
2	Several Times a Year	[ ]
3	Once a Month	[ ]
4	Several Times a Month	[ ]
5	Once a Week	[ ]
6	Several Times a Week	[ ]
7	Everyday	[ ]

B3 My social interactions are organized around comic books and their fans.

0	Never	[ ]
1	Once a Year	[ ]
2	Several Times a Year	[ ]
3	Once a Month	[ ]
4	Several Times a Month	[ ]

5	Once a Week	[ ]
6	Several Times a Week	[ ]
7	Everyday	[ ]

B4 I participate in online forums discussing comic books and comic book related topics.

0	Never	[ ]
1	Once a Year	[ ]
2	Several Times a Year	[ ]
3	Once a Month	[ ]
4	Several Times a Month	[ ]
5	Once a Week	[ ]
6	Several Times a Week	[ ]
7	Everyday	[ ]

B5 When I visit my local comic book shop, I spend extra time there interacting with others.

0	Never	[ ]
1	Once a Year	[ ]
2	Several Times a Year	[ ]
3	Once a Month	[ ]
4	Several Times a Month	[ ]
5	Once a Week	[ ]
6	Several Times a Week	[ ]
7	Everyday	[ ]

B6 Expendable income for comic books is an issue of concern to me.

0	Never	[ ]
1	Once a Year	[ ]
2	Several Times a Year	[ ]
3	Once a Month	[ ]

4	Several Times a Month	[ ]
5	Once a Week	[ ]
6	Several Times a Week	[ ]
7	Everyday	[ ]

B7 I write letters or blogs about comic books and comic book related topics.

0	Never	[ ]
1	Once a Year	[ ]
2	Several Times a Year	[ ]
3	Once a Month	[ ]
4	Several Times a Month	[ ]
5	Once a Week	[ ]
6	Several Times a Week	[ ]
7	Everyday	[ ]

B8 I concern myself with the careers of specific comic book professionals and this influences my purchasing habits.

0	Never	[ ]
1	Once a Year	[ ]
2	Several Times a Year	[ ]
3	Once a Month	[ ]
4	Several Times a Month	[ ]
5	Once a Week	[ ]
6	Several Times a Week	[ ]
7	Everyday	[ ]

B9 I collect peripheral items related to comic books such as action figures, statues, games, trading cards, etc.

0	Never	[ ]

1	Once a Year	[ ]
2	Several Times a Year	[ ]
3	Once a Month	[ ]
4	Several Times a Month	[ ]
5	Once a Week	[ ]
6	Several Times a Week	[ ]
7	Everyday	[ ]

B10 I attend comic book conventions: local, regional, or national.

0	Never	[ ]
1	Once a Year	[ ]
2	Several Times a Year	[ ]
3	Once a Month	[ ]
4	Several Times a Month	[ ]
5	Once a Week	[ ]
6	Several Times a Week	[ ]
7	Everyday	[ ]

This final section is a brief series of demographic questions.

<u>Age, in years:</u>

(1) 18-23 [ ]

(2) 24-29 [ ]

(3) 30-35 [ ]

(4) 36-41 [ ]

(5) 42-47 [ ]

(6) 48-53 [ ]

(7) 54+ [ ]

Number of Years as a Comic Book Fan:

(1) 1-5 [ ]

(2) 6-10 [ ]

(3) 11-15 [ ]

(4) 16-20 [ ]

(5) 21+ [ ]

Highest Education Level Completed:

(1) Less than high school [ ]

(2) High school/GED [ ]

(3) Some college [ ]

(4) Bachelor's degree [ ]

(5) Some post-graduate [ ]

(6) Post-graduate degree [ ]

Occupation:_____

Average Amount of Money Spent on Comic Books Per Month (in dollars):

(1) $1-30 [ ]

(2) $31-60 [ ]

(3) $61-90 [ ]

(4) $91-120 [ ]

(5) $121-150 [ ]

(6) $151-180 [ ]

(7) $181+ [ ]

Sex:

Male [ ]

Female [ ]

Appendix B

Cover Letter/Informed Consent Document

Dear Comic Book Reader,

You are invited to participate in a research project designed to examine the experiences of comic book fans. The study is being conducted as part of a graduate program thesis project for Western Michigan University and your input is valued and appreciated. The survey consists of two groups of 10 questions and should take approximately ten minutes to complete. Your replies will be completely anonymous, we do not ask for any personally identifying information such as your name, or for any contact information. As such, there should be no risk to you other than possible minimal personal discomfort at answering some of the questions.

If you are over the age of 18 and willing to participate, simply fill out the questionnaire and return it to the comic book shop that distributed it to you in the envelope provided. Please make sure to seal the envelope when returning the questionnaire. If you choose not to participate in the survey, you may simply discard it. If you do complete this questionnaire and return it to the comic book shop where it was distributed by *December 31, 2012,* you can redeem the included coupon for one free comic book. Returning the survey indicates your consent for use of the responses you supply. If you have any questions, you may contact the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (269-387-8293) or the vice president for research (269-387-8298). By participating in the project, you will be advancing the understanding of popular culture audiences in general and comic book fandom in particular. Please allow me to thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

This consent document has been approved for use for one year by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) as indicated by the stamped date and signature of the board chair in the upper right corner. You should not participate if the stamped date is more than one year old.

Gregory Howard

Associate Professor (269) 387-5280

Dennis Gagliardo

Master's Degree Candidate (616) 826-0185

Department of Sociology

Western Michigan University

Appendix C

Participation Incentive Coupon

Survey Participation Coupon for

Comic Book Fandom and Stigma Consciousness

Research Project

Presenting this coupon to the staff at Apparitions Comics & Books entitles the participant to one free comic book, valued no greater than $2.99. No other purchase necessary. Expires Jan 1, 2013.

Appendix D

Notification Letter of HSIRB Approval

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

Human Subjects Institutional Review Board

Date: November 8, 2012

To: Gregory Howard, Principal Investigator
Dennis Gagliardo, Student Investigator

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number 12-11-12

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled "Comic Book Fandom and Stigma Consciousness" has been **approved** under the **exempt** category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note: This research may **only** be conducted exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project (e.g., ***you must request a post approval change to enroll subjects beyond the number stated in your application under "Number of subjects you want to complete the study***)." Failure to obtain approval for changes will result in a protocol deviation. In addition, if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

Reapproval of the project is required if it extends beyond the termination date stated below.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: November 8, 2013

Walwood Hall, Kalamazoo, MI 49008-5456
PHONE: (269) 387-8293 FAX: (269) 387-8276

Appendix E

Frequency Tables for Questionnaire Responses

A1peoplearejudged

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	DISAGREE	1	2.1	2.1	2.1
	NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	2	4.2	4.2	6.3
	AGREE	35	72.9	72.9	79.2
	STRONGLY AGREE	10	20.8	20.8	100.0
	Total	48	100.0	100.0	

A2nerdsareunfairlytreated

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	STRONGLY DISAGREE	2	4.2	4.2	4.2
	DISAGREE	9	18.8	18.8	22.9
	NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	23	47.9	47.9	70.8
	AGREE	10	20.8	20.8	91.7
	STRONGLY AGREE	4	8.3	8.3	100.0
	Total	48	100.0	100.0	

A3mybehaviorsviewedasgeeky

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	STRONGLY AGREE	16	33.3	33.3	33.3
	AGREE	18	37.5	37.5	70.8
	NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	6	12.5	12.5	83.3
	DISAGREE	6	12.5	12.5	95.8
	STRONGLY DISAGREE	2	4.2	4.2	100.0
	Total	48	100.0	100.0	

A4stereotypeshavenotaffectedme

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	STRONGLY AGREE	16	33.3	33.3	33.3
	AGREE	21	43.8	43.8	77.1
	NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	4	8.3	8.3	85.4
	DISAGREE	7	14.6	14.6	100.0
	Total	48	100.0	100.0	

A5myidentityascbfandoesnotinfluenceothers

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	STRONGLY AGREE	7	14.6	14.6	14.6
	AGREE	21	43.8	43.8	58.3
	NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	11	22.9	22.9	81.3
	DISAGREE	8	16.7	16.7	97.9
	STRONGLY DISAGREE	1	2.1	2.1	100.0
	Total	48	100.0	100.0	

A6neverthinkaboutbeingcbfanduringinteraction

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	STRONGLY AGREE	11	22.9	22.9	22.9
	AGREE	18	37.5	37.5	60.4
	NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	9	18.8	18.8	79.2
	DISAGREE	10	20.8	20.8	100.0
	Total	48	100.0	100.0	

A7hesitatetorevealiamcbfan

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	STRONGLY DISAGREE	14	29.2	29.8	29.8
	DISAGREE	18	37.5	38.3	68.1
	NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	9	18.8	19.1	87.2
	AGREE	6	12.5	12.8	100.0
	Total	47	97.9	100.0	
Missing	System	1	2.1		
Total		48	100.0		

A8adultcbfansnottakenseriously

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	STRONGLY DISAGREE	2	4.2	4.2	4.2
	DISAGREE	12	25.0	25.0	29.2
	NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	16	33.3	33.3	62.5
	AGREE	14	29.2	29.2	91.7
	STRONGLY AGREE	4	8.3	8.3	100.0
	Total	48	100.0	100.0	

A9cbfansviewedasimmature

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	STRONGLY DISAGREE	6	12.5	12.5	12.5
	DISAGREE	22	45.8	45.8	58.3
	NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	10	20.8	20.8	79.2
	AGREE	8	16.7	16.7	95.8
	STRONGLY AGREE	2	4.2	4.2	100.0
	Total	48	100.0	100.0	

A10cbfansarepercvdassociallyunskilled

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	STRONGLY DISAGREE	5	10.4	10.4	10.4
	DISAGREE	13	27.1	27.1	37.5
	NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	10	20.8	20.8	58.3
	AGREE	13	27.1	27.1	85.4
	STRONGLY AGREE	7	14.6	14.6	100.0
	Total	48	100.0	100.0	

B1readmags

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	NEVER	8	16.7	16.7	16.7
	ONCE/YEAR	5	10.4	10.4	27.1
	SEVERAL/YEAR	8	16.7	16.7	43.8
	ONCE/MONTH	4	8.3	8.3	52.1
	SEVERAL/MONTH	8	16.7	16.7	68.8
	ONCE/WEEK	3	6.3	6.3	75.0
	SEVERAL/WEEK	6	12.5	12.5	87.5
	EVERYDAY	6	12.5	12.5	100.0
	Total	48	100.0	100.0	

B2coversations

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	SEVERAL/YEAR	2	4.2	4.2	4.2
	ONCE/MONTH	3	6.3	6.3	10.4
	SEVERAL/MONTH	12	25.0	25.0	35.4
	ONCE/WEEK	12	25.0	25.0	60.4
	SEVERAL/WEEK	14	29.2	29.2	89.6
	EVERYDAY	5	10.4	10.4	100.0
	Total	48	100.0	100.0	

B3socialinteractions

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	NEVER	17	35.4	35.4	35.4
	ONCE/YEAR	8	16.7	16.7	52.1
	SEVERAL/YEAR	8	16.7	16.7	68.8
	ONCE/MONTH	4	8.3	8.3	77.1
	SEVERAL/MONTH	2	4.2	4.2	81.3
	ONCE/WEEK	7	14.6	14.6	95.8
	SEVERAL/WEEK	1	2.1	2.1	97.9
	EVERYDAY	1	2.1	2.1	100.0
	Total	48	100.0	100.0	

B4online

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	NEVER	25	52.1	52.1	52.1
	ONCE/YEAR	8	16.7	16.7	68.8
	SEVERAL/YEAR	6	12.5	12.5	81.3
	ONCE/MONTH	2	4.2	4.2	85.4
	SEVERAL/MONTH	2	4.2	4.2	89.6
	ONCE/WEEK	3	6.3	6.3	95.8
	SEVERAL/WEEK	1	2.1	2.1	97.9
	EVERYDAY	1	2.1	2.1	100.0
	Total	48	100.0	100.0	

B5cbshopvisiting

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	NEVER	4	8.3	8.3	8.3
	SEVERAL/YEAR	4	8.3	8.3	16.7
	ONCE/MONTH	9	18.8	18.8	35.4
	SEVERAL/MONTH	13	27.1	27.1	62.5
	ONCE/WEEK	15	31.3	31.3	93.8
	SEVERAL/WEEK	1	2.1	2.1	95.8
	EVERYDAY	2	4.2	4.2	100.0
	Total	48	100.0	100.0	

B6expendableincomeaconcern

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	NEVER	23	47.9	47.9	47.9
	ONCE/YEAR	3	6.3	6.3	54.2
	SEVERAL/YEAR	6	12.5	12.5	66.7
	ONCE/MONTH	9	18.8	18.8	85.4
	SEVERAL/MONTH	1	2.1	2.1	87.5
	ONCE/WEEK	4	8.3	8.3	95.8
	SEVERAL/WEEK	1	2.1	2.1	97.9
	EVERYDAY	1	2.1	2.1	100.0
	Total	48	100.0	100.0	

B7writeletters

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	NEVER	40	83.3	83.3	83.3
	ONCE/YEAR	2	4.2	4.2	87.5
	SEVERAL/YEAR	4	8.3	8.3	95.8
	ONCE/WEEK	1	2.1	2.1	97.9
	SEVERAL/WEEK	1	2.1	2.1	100.0
	Total	48	100.0	100.0	

B8followspecificprof

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	NEVER	15	31.3	31.3	31.3
	ONCE/YEAR	4	8.3	8.3	39.6
	SEVERAL/YEAR	8	16.7	16.7	56.3
	ONCE/MONTH	6	12.5	12.5	68.8
	SEVERAL/MONTH	3	6.3	6.3	75.0
	ONCE/WEEK	8	16.7	16.7	91.7
	SEVERAL/WEEK	1	2.1	2.1	93.8
	EVERYDAY	3	6.3	6.3	100.0
	Total	48	100.0	100.0	

B9collectotheritems

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	NEVER	15	31.3	31.3	31.3
	ONCE/YEAR	6	12.5	12.5	43.8
	SEVERAL/YEAR	11	22.9	22.9	66.7
	ONCE/MONTH	7	14.6	14.6	81.3
	SEVERAL/MONTH	4	8.3	8.3	89.6
	ONCE/WEEK	2	4.2	4.2	93.8
	SEVERAL/WEEK	2	4.2	4.2	97.9
	EVERYDAY	1	2.1	2.1	100.0
	Total	48	100.0	100.0	

B10conventionattendance

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	NEVER	24	50.0	50.0	50.0
	ONCE/YEAR	17	35.4	35.4	85.4
	SEVERAL/YEAR	7	14.6	14.6	100.0
	Total	48	100.0	100.0	

AGE

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	18-23	4	8.3	8.3	8.3
	24-29	9	18.8	18.8	27.1
	30-35	13	27.1	27.1	54.2
	36-41	10	20.8	20.8	75.0
	42-47	2	4.2	4.2	79.2
	48-53	5	10.4	10.4	89.6
	54+	5	10.4	10.4	100.0
	Total	48	100.0	100.0	

YEARS

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1-5	6	12.5	12.5	12.5
	6-10	6	12.5	12.5	25.0
	11-15	5	10.4	10.4	35.4
	16-20	8	16.7	16.7	52.1
	21+	23	47.9	47.9	100.0
	Total	48	100.0	100.0	

EDUCATION

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	HS/GED	3	6.3	6.3	6.3
	SOME COLLEGE	22	45.8	45.8	52.1
	BACHELOR'S	21	43.8	43.8	95.8
	SOME POSTGRAD	1	2.1	2.1	97.9
	GRAD DEGREE	1	2.1	2.1	100.0
	Total	48	100.0	100.0	

MONTHLYEXP$

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	$1-30	6	12.5	12.8	12.8
	$31-60	11	22.9	23.4	36.2
	$61-90	13	27.1	27.7	63.8
	$91-120	8	16.7	17.0	80.9
	$121-150	4	8.3	8.5	89.4
	$151-180	2	4.2	4.3	93.6
	$181+	3	6.3	6.4	100.0
	Total	47	97.9	100.0	
Missing	System	1	2.1		
Total		48	100.0		

SEX

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	FEMALE	2	4.2	4.3	4.3
	MALE	44	91.7	95.7	100.0
	Total	46	95.8	100.0	
Missing	System	2	4.2		
Total		48	100.0		