

Comic book fans' recommendations ceremony: A look at the inter-personal communication patterns of a unique readers/speakers community.¹

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Abstract

Using unobtrusive observations in comics stores and comics conventions as well as in-depth interviews with comics aficionados and store owners from five different countries this work examines the interpersonal communication patterns of comics aficionados, focusing on situations in which they meet and discuss their mutual interest. A repeating sequence of events had been identified and was subsequently dubbed as a 'recommendation ceremony'. The analysis suggests that the 'recommendations ceremony' helps the people to fulfill their material and psychological needs as well as social functions that are crucial to the creation of the comics readers' sense of community.

Keywords: comics fans' interpersonal communication, ethnographic observations, community building.

Audience research of comic book readers is an emerging interest in comics scholarship. Carried shyly from the works of full-fledged fans such as Scott Saavedra (2003) and journalists as David Hajdu (2008) to fan-scholars and industry professionals as Danny Fingeroth (2004) and all the way through to academic writing (Pustz, 1999 being one of the early and most influential of these), it is accepted more and more as an important aspect of the scholarly interest in the understanding of comics culture as a social phenomenon. While doing so, these scholars had looked into the special arrangement of the comic book store as an institution, the social network of store patrons and other interest groups, as well as the differences in the accounts that people give following visits to such stores. Most of the scholars studying comics audiences also recognize the central role, and importance of the comic-book store and events such as conventions in helping to shape and create this

unique sub-culture (Pustz, 1999; Woo, 2011b; Hammond, 2009; Brown, 2012; Swafford, 2012 to name a few).

Some like Pustz (1999), Hammond (2009) or Pylyser (2012a) even goes into length in identifying and defining the kinds of comics readers who frequent these establishments and events. However, these works lack an important aspect of the ethnographic study of comics readers as a sub-cultural group, which this paper hopes to study - the inter-personal communication, speech conventions, and conversation codes, of the comic book readers. Conclusions drawn from the analysis of these aspects may help future scholarly works, community building and practical commercial outcomes alike.

Frames of reference

Comics readers are a subcultural group that scholars had been trying to define for some time now. Issues such as the scope of comics genres and comics ephemera consumption (Brown, 2012; Woo, this issue), social networks (Woo, 2011a) and demographics (Gibson, 2012) are often mentioned as possible criteria for such a definition. Others take reading habits and content preferences as the base of their inquiry (Pustz, 1999; Hammond, 2009; Beaty, 2012).

Following these later distinctions and borrowing on past works of cultural ethnography and speech analysis, this project looks at comic books readers as a group that is identified by two notions – their shared interest (corresponding with most of the works mentioned earlier), and the way in which they express it (borrowing mostly from speech analysis studies and anthropology).

For the purpose of identifying the shared interest of comics readers, the term ‘Readers’ community’ (Radway, 1984) seems most fitting. Readers’ community is a group of people who are interested in reading the same texts, find them inspiring and entertaining at the same time, and are engaged in discussing them with other readers like them. In that regard, an individual will be identified as part of such a community, if according to their own thoughts they identify themselves as such. In this case, those who would identify themselves as comics readers, aficionados or fans, without any reference to the amount of comics they actually read on regular basis, would be considered as such. However, occasional visitors to comic book stores, who happened to be present while this study was conducted, were not taken into account, as they are considered foreign travelers in this realm and the interaction with them is different on many levels from that of comics fans between themselves (Swafford, 2012; Pustz, 1999)².

Both Pustz (1999) and Hammond (2009) had argued that there are two distinct kinds of comics aficionados who make the ‘readers’ community’: ‘American mainstream’ or ‘superhero comics’ readers and ‘alternative readers’ who are interested in graphic novels and underground commix. Hammond (2009) also added a third group of manga readers to this list (Hammond, 2009, p. 12) and lately, Pylyser (2012a) argued the existence of fourth and fifth groups of readers – classic local traditions’ readers (in Pylyser’s case the Franco-Belgian comics readers, a group that may be substituted with South-American comics

readers, African comics readers, etc.) and the contemporary European comics readers. Contrary to the scholars mentioned earlier, who focus more on segmenting the community to sub-groups, this work hopes to prove the unity of the community and the similarities shared by all these factions in it.

Several notions support the unification stance of the comics readers' community. First, the understanding that the main differentiator between these groups, the content they prefer to read in terms of genre and artistic presentation, is overlapping at times. Second, their interest in the medium puts them in the same sub-cultural group by the rest of society. Last, as this work would prove, comics aficionados behave in a similar way albeit coming from different corners of the world and being interested in different genres, artistic styles and visual traditions.

In that regard, comics aficionados are different than other sub-cultural fandom groups that had been studied in the past such as Goth, Punk or Metal 'head bangers', Role Players or even Sports Fans, for the special identifier that joins them together – while these aforementioned groups are interested in a specific genre of content, no matter its medium of distribution and production, comic book aficionados are first and foremost identified by their medium of choice. In order to illustrate this difference consider the example of two music aficionados, one who likes French Chanson music and another that cherishes American heavy metal as two members of the same group solely because they are both audiophiles who cherish music as their medium of choice for personal expression and consumption. These two hypothetical persons have nothing in common except for their fondness of music; chances are they would not engage each other as 'Readers' of the same medium, should they run into each other in a music store. To be precise, they will not be found at the same space (i.e. sections of the store) unless it happens to be located near each other. To the contrary and as this work wishes to prove, comic book fans, are identified by their medium of preference. Unlike other sub-groups that form around a joint interest, comic book aficionados develop discussions based on a preferred medium. In doing so, they bridge over differences in taste and preferences of genre (be it fantasy, superheroes, horror or slice of life, manga or others). In addition certain genre aficionados among the comic book community members may be seen browsing through other genres' sections of the store, thus acting as a unified readers' community.

In a sense, comics aficionados may be studied (and had been studied in the past) using the same notions that are used in food and wine connoisseurship studies (Hatfield, 2006). This notion is especially relevant to the study of their terminology, jargon and interpersonal communication (Beaty, 2012), which brings this work to consider speech analysis literature as a tool to define comics readers as well.

Regarding the identification of comics aficionados as a distinct group, it seems that the notion of 'speakers community', suggested by the anthropologist Dell Hymes (1974) is the most suitable one. 'Speakers community', according to Hymes is a group of people who speak about the same topics using distinct terms, jargon, grammatical conventions and cultural symbols. A professional guild (such as ones for accountants, lawyers or architects), a

locally distinct community (such as London's Cockney, or French Canadians) and even members of interest groups (stamp collectors, football fans and the likes of it) are all kinds of speakers' communities.

In this instance this work relies not only on identifying comics aficionados as a speakers community, it also borrows on Hymes' own S.S.P.E.A.K.I.N.G model (1974) as a tool to demonstrate how this group functions as a distinct readers/speakers community. This model will help decipher the cultural codes that comics aficionados use, and would demonstrate their ability to bridge over genre differences when discussing their mutual interest; a practice that distinguishes them from other groups of speakers/readers communities such as gamers, music aficionados and other groups³. Hymes' S.S.P.E.A.K.I.N.G. model will be supported by the notions of Basil Bernstein's 'restricted and elaborate code' (1977) and Michael Agar's analysis of cultural 'Rich Points' (1994) as theoretical notions that help operationalize the analysis.

Hymes' S.S.P.E.A.K.I.N.G model (1974) is a nine-points-model heuristic mechanism that aims to identify and ground the relationship between the form of the act and the cultural and lingual meanings of it in an organized way. The letters making the name of the model serves as acronyms for the different aspects that should be taken into account when ethnographically analyzing an event (or what Hymes himself termed as speech act). Those aspects are:

1. Settings – where the action takes place.
2. Scene – the cultural and psychological aspect of having the act at those settings.
3. Participants – who takes part in the ceremony?
4. Ends – to what end does this ceremony take place?
5. Act sequence – what is the order of actions taken and how do they unfold?
6. Key – what is the mood of the conversation, and how is it performed?
7. Instrumentalities – which instruments are being used in the act?
8. Norms of interaction – how do the participants interact with each other? Is it consistent or different than the regular norms of interaction in this culture?
9. Genre – how is this genre of conversation being perceived by the speakers' community? Is it wanted, encouraged, scorned, etc.?

'Rich Point' is a term suggested by the anthropologist Michael Agar (1994) that relates to the coded meaning of certain practices in a culture (or sub-cultural group). It is a form of symbol (often lingual or performative), that that is greater than the sum of its face value components. For those who are not aware of the social context of a certain gesture, word or a quote in a group's behaviour, the full meaning of a rich point situation is lost. However, those who are members of that same group would make far more meaning out of it, than they would have made out of a simple statement or act. The uses of spoken or written rich points in an interpersonal communication situation construct a dense articulation of things that Bernstein (1977) had termed a 'restricted code'. In order for people who are not

members of the group to understand the restricted code, it has to be unpacked and explained – or what Bernstein (1977) had termed as the ‘elaborated code’.

Oftentimes the communication patterns of speakers’ community would rely heavily on the use of restricted codes that carry far more information than their face value meaning would (Agar, 1994). In the case of ethnographic study, these rich points, and the restricted (or at times elaborated) code they use are a major interest as they are the building blocks upon which the whole process of interpersonal communication is based. For that matter, and at the risk of tedious explanations of rich points for those readers who are already aware of it, examples in this work would be presented in both a restricted and elaborated form whenever possible.

Another point which is frequently being made regarding the behaviour of comics readers is that of Bourdieu’s theory of non-monetary social and cultural capital (1986). Comics aficionados’ social or cultural capital had been demonstrated in the past through their comics collections and accumulation of ephemera (Pustz, 1999; Brown, 2012), comics history’s level of knowledge (Brown, 1997; Hammond, 2009), relationship with recognized authority figures (Swafford, 2012; Woo, 2011b) and reading preferences that are considered as ‘good taste’ (Hammond, 2009; Swafford, 2012; Pustz, 1999). This work does not wish to point to other forms of non-monetary capital, but rather point to the way these capital types are being put to use as part of the interaction modes of this group.

Methodology

A mixed data gathering method was used in order to generate this work’s data. Over twenty unobtrusive field observations were conducted in twelve comic book stores from six countries (United States, Canada, United Kingdom, The Netherlands, The Czech Republic and Israel) and in eight comics conventions and festivals⁴ in three countries (United Kingdom, Canada and Israel). Some observations were held on Wednesdays (the day new comics traditionally arrives at the stores) and others on regular weekdays or weekends. The expectation was that fanatic comic fans would come to the stores mostly on Wednesdays to get their comics as fast as possible while other readers frequent the store on other weekdays or weekends. This decision was made to insure that both a look at different segments of the community and different consumer experience contexts was included in the observations process. The observation time in the stores varied between two to eight hours and the conventions’ observations, that were speech act based, took between five minutes to an hour.

Observations were chosen as one of the data gathering methods for their ability to produce faithful information without biasing the fans’ behaviour (either making them feel uncomfortable or make them try to satisfy the observer’s wishes) while still supplying the researcher with a reasonable excuse for further observation of the space/place for an extended period of time. At stores, the official justification was going over the monthly direct orders’ catalogue (known as the ‘previews’ or Diamond’s Previews) which also allowed for notes to be taken. In conventions the official excuse was going over all the long-

boxes (boxes containing up to 120 issues each) and the quarter-bins (boxes and containers stacked with an assortment of discounted comic books without any ordering of titles, publishers or conditions). Both practices are common sights in such circumstances.

Naturally, this method could not have been conducted without a full and complete assimilation of the researcher in the environment in other aspects as well. Indeed both deciphering the true meaning of the things comics aficionados say to each other, and their physical interaction with others, demands more than just a classic observation by any researchers. It also requires prior knowledge and understanding of these speakers' behaviour conventions – or what was earlier referred to as the ability to understand the restricted and elaborated codes (Bernstein, 1977). Not surprisingly, the writer of this work identifies himself as a comics aficionado and collector and had been involved in this hobby for several decades now. This fact also helped opening many doors for the conduction of the second method of the data gathering process – interviews.

In-depth interviews were conducted with comic-book store owners and comics aficionados from four countries (US, Canada., UK and Israel) as a complementary method to the more formal observations. It supplied not only context and reasoning for certain observations, but also revealed new issues and aspects that were not salient enough in the observations alone. A full breakdown of observations, interviews and dates is provided in **Appendix A**.

The data analysis was conducted in three stages: The main thrust of both the observations and the analysis work was conducted between the years 2007-2009. This stage generated several conclusions that were later introduced to some of the store owners and their staff for further considerations. Alongside classic observations, the second phase of work, during the years 2009-2010, included observations in pre-organized meetings of aficionados in two of the stores and a convention in Israel. That round of work generated some more conclusions and dilemmas to consider which prompted the third and last round of work. The third set of observations (2010-2012) focused mostly on trying to rule out multi-cultural differences and help generalize the findings on all the studied groups. At the end of stage three, it was apparent that the findings that follow may be regarded as a truthful reflection of comic book aficionados' behaviour in all the studied countries and under all the studied circumstances.

Identifying the 'Recommendations ceremony'

While observing comics aficionados in their comfort zone and studying their behaviour, a reoccurring interpersonal dynamic of actions emerged and was subsequently termed 'Recommendations ceremony' for its main identifier is a process in which one aficionado makes reading recommendations for another aficionado. Consider for example the following scenario, one of the first recommendation ceremonies that the observer witnessed at the Israeli comics store Comikaza (07.27.2007) and is almost an 'ideal type' of the act⁵.



As this example, and some other tens of observed acts shows, the ceremony takes place when two aficionados meet someplace and start discussing their hobby. Their discussion will usually revolve around the titles they read, the characters or creators they like (or dislike) and their overall opinion about their reading materials. The summation of each speaker's opinion is then transformed into a plea made by one participant to the other to start reading the titles which he/she reads, or to follow the stories of the characters he/she finds interesting. Conversely, should the other side demonstrate disinterest in these recommendations; the speakers recommend other reading materials that, in their opinion and according to their knowledge, would be of interest to the other side.

According to Hymes' theory of speech acts and speech situations (1974) this dynamic was termed as the 'recommendations ceremony' rather than a simple 'ritual' because it is an event with broad social meaning which occurs in accordance with established behavioural conventions by its participants (Hymes, 1974, p. 50). This ceremony is also identified by the use of restricted codes and compounded 'rich points' of textual and cultural meaning that take more than a single set of actions.

Interviewees reported they experienced this dynamic on a bus, in waiting rooms and even with a restaurant waiter once. However comic-book stores and conventions are the most common places for such dynamics to occur. In such 'comfort zones' like comic-book stores or comics conventions, chances are that the 'basic ritual' (as presented in the strip above) would grow and turn into a full length 'ceremony' by evolving to one of three possible directions: the reversal act, the 'educated scholarly debate', or the 'aficionados' sparring'.

Extensions and variations on the 'basic' ceremony

Three common variations and extensions to the basic recommendations ceremony were identified during the observations. These extensions, albeit being somewhat independent in their development, are mere continuation and elaboration of the basic ceremony and at no point were observed to start spontaneously on their own without the basic ceremony preceding them. Let us return now to our original encounter and examine the way these extensions develop.

In a reversal act the recommendee (A) assumes the role of recommender (B) and offers comics in a mirror like act to the basic ceremony.

This discussion includes coherent arguments and supporting evidence and is drawn from the two participants' general knowledge. While discussing the recommendations that were made insofar the participants often mention characters, titles and creators or creative teams. Another common component in such discussions is the citing or referencing of past plot lines and works. This debate may be vocal or calm, but the basic identifier of it is the way the two sides are constructing their responses to each other. Given a supportive environment, such discussions may take more than an hour. Contrary to that are the cases of 'aficionados' sparring'⁶.



In these instances, each side bunkers up in their opinion and express their opinion with emotional notions rather than logical arguments. From time to time, such arguments may include citing sources, creators' name-dropping, mentioning of titles or plot lines, similarly to educated debates. However, in this kind of an argument, these rhetorical devices will be mentioned not for the sake of forming better arguments, but for drawing the lines of personal taste. Oftentimes these sparring events are loud; they include rude insults and attract the attention of surrounding people in a negative way. Arguably, such sparring feeds the public's stereotypes of comics aficionados as being childish and immature. For that reason, and unlike scholarly discussions, several store owners and staffers expressed disdain of these acts and noted they would try to prevent it from happening, and would react harshly if such sparring repeats itself on a regular basis by store patrons.

Decoding the ceremony

Looking at the interaction presented earlier, one might wonder what is so special about it. It seems to be pretty similar to interactions at book stores, music stores or other such places who sell 'content'. Indeed such cultural sub-groups maybe engaged in such discussions at occasions. Some participants of the comics community may be members of these sub-cultural groups as well. However, as argued before, comics aficionados are different than

other sub-groups in that they are able to bridge over taste differences and unite under their interest in a medium, rather than content or aesthetics alone.

Consider for example the Settings in which these recommendations ceremonies take place – the store or the convention. Book stores, music stores and other specialty stores see many discussions of aficionados in their respected business. However, mixing and mingling of different taste cultures are a rare sight in music festivals, and less likely to generate a discussion at music stores. Avid book readers would browse through their section of interest at the bookstore, and would look at other section only in rare occasions. In doing so, comic book aficionados draw a stricter line of difference between themselves and general society. This could also be the reason that comics aficionados may hold ceremonies at any place, but would rather doing it at their comfort zones of conventions and stores.

In terms of the motivation to be engaged in the ceremony at stores and conventions rather than other places, there could be a resemblance between comics aficionados and other sub-cultural groups that are not in consensus, like Goth or Punk communities, as the ceremony seems to be serving the aficionados' need to feel belonging to a group of reference, while not feeling marginalized by the general public. However, these groups do not necessarily prefer music stores as comfort zone, and would practice their interest in open spaces as well. Seeing that for years comics had been considered a childish hobby and those who are interested in it were scorned (Pustz, 1999) it should not come as a surprise that the aficionados would find special comfort zones, away from the prying eyes of the general public, to practice it (Swafford, 2012). Another reason to be engaged in a discussion with other aficionados at such places, rather than at public spaces may be the plethora of products found in stores and conventions that helps stressing points in the discussion (a point that would be further elaborated later). While these explanations may account for the decision to practice the ceremony at comfort zones, there is another aspect that remains unanswered – the psychological motivation to be engaged in the ceremony in the first place.

Several explanations may account for the motivation to participate in recommendation ceremonies, chiefly among these is the desire to make the best out of any interaction and learn new things, as in the words of one interviewee:

'I'd like my reading list to be varied, so I consult with other people, and consult to them back' (Jack, 2008⁷).

This teaches us that some aficionados see this ceremony not just as a one way process, but as something that common courtesy dictates it to be paid back in the form of a dialogue. Another interviewee repeated these same notions of being a wise customer, and a knowledgeable fan:

'Comics is an expensive business. I don't want to spend money on stuff, find out that they suck and that I didn't enjoy it, so I consult with people about it' (Yaniv, 2007).

A third interviewee gave a somewhat different angle to the same economical and psychological issue:

If I read something and I know it sucks I can't shut up about it. I want to warn everybody so they wouldn't waste their money on it. And if I know that something is really good and they H-A-V-E (stressed by interviewee) to buy it, then I will talk about it at any chance I have. (Ben, 2007)

Operationalizing it, there are two ends to the ceremony. The more obvious one, which the interviewees touched upon, is to influence the opinion of the recommendee to try the recommended content. In that regard, accepting the recommendation, and buying the recommended comics is a complete success. The second end to the ceremony is to validate the recommenders' own opinion about the recommended comics. By agreeing with a recommendation, the recommendee acknowledges the recommenders' good taste and knowledge, thus boosting his/her self-esteem and sense of worthiness. Another by-product of that acceptance is the accumulation of cultural (and perhaps social) capital by the recommender. Arguably, one of the motivations for the recommendees to mirror the act of recommendation in the second step of the ceremony may be understood as a way for them not only to be courteous and polite, but as a way for them to claim some social and cultural capital of their own. As noted earlier, mirroring is but the second stage of a series of actions that make the full ceremony. However, before continuing with the next acts in the sequence, let us look at the beginning of the ceremony and its first act in particular.

The opening of a conversation is an important stage because it sets the mood and establishes the power relations between the participants in it (Hymes, 1974). In the case of a sequence that makes a recommendation ceremony, there must be an aficionado that approaches another aficionado in a friendly way. Let us return yet again to the scene described in the first illustrated strip as an example to the way in which the ceremony begins. In that case, as in many other observed instances, the act began as a result of the recommenders 'shoving their noses' to other people's business. If the first recommendation act was not met with agreement or the prospected recommendee ignored the recommender, the ceremony would not have developed, as it relies on inter-personal cooperation to participate in a conversation. However, an alternative beginning to the ceremony had been identified as well. In this variation a recommendee that is looking for recommendations is initiating the ceremony when asking advice from others who are currently present around them and radiate some sort of knowledge, high social status or connoisseurship. The recommendee would then ask the potential recommender for advice and the ceremony would evolve. The extensions of the ceremony, as demonstrated earlier, vary in nature and are far more complex than the basic sequence in terms of their development.

The scholarly debate, for example, was found to contain different discussion elements that appear in an inconsistent manner. The name-dropping element (in which discussants mention titles they read or have read in the past, and creators they consider exceptional) for example, may follow a plot-line, or cross-over (a case where characters appearing in one title, appear as guest stars in another title) review. Art-history like discussion about artistic and creative influences on a certain creator, or stock character element's history, like mad scientists for example, are other elements that were frequently included in such debates without any order to their mentioning or use.

Another characteristic of the scholarly debates is the frequent use of physical aids to stress a point or support an argument regarding the artistic quality of the titles (or characters) in question. Aids that had been seen used included, aside of comic-books or trade-paperbacks (collected editions of several of a title's issues reprinted together and bound in a soft-cover form) of the discussed titles, action figures of relevant characters, T-shirts and posters as well as comic-books' interior art (as examples of the style of different illustrators) and the Diamond Previews Catalog as a source of planned plot lines, narrative changes and new artistic teams assigned to new projects.

However, having a certain comic-book title's issue at hand is not a mandatory part of the ceremony. Aficionados were sighted pulling comics off the shelves to make a stronger point at some cases, but on other cases, full ceremonies developed, even to lengthy scholarly debates and aficionados' sparring, without the need of actual aids to prove a point. Having an actual material form of a product is not a major aspect then; it is the sense of the cultural capital gained while discussing the pros and cons of titles, expressing knowledge and good taste, as well as taking care of the community members' welfare that matters and creates this ceremony.

Interestingly, a shared element that appears to exist in both the scholarly debates and the aficionados' sparring was found and subsequently named the 'Rob Liefeld Law' following the famous on-line discussions' parable of 'Godwin's Law'. The Godwin Law states that: "As a Usenet discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler approaches one." (Godwin, 1995). Likewise with comics aficionados, either passionately discussing and debating or sparring, the longer the interaction lasts, the greater is the probability that one of the sides would compare the artistic work, and or storytelling techniques to that of a controversial comics artist. Several controversial artists were mentioned as examples. However the most common of these was the controversial American illustrator Rob Liefeld. Other than the Rob Liefeld Law, and the name dropping element, scholarly debates and aficionados' sparring shared minimal resemblance.

Aficionados' sparring tended to develop at instances when it was obvious that the recommender and the recommendee cannot reach a common ground regarding their personal preferences and thoughts, and are feeling threatened by the other side's attack on their personal preferences. Some sparring erupted within a mere cycle of recommendations, while others developed only at the end of a long and educated debate. Most sparring instances, as noted earlier, were defined by the different set of reasoning and

logic that informed the arguments in it. While a scholarly debate would hinge on examples of artistic styles, plot development or writing style to support the conclusion that a comic is recommended (or not), the sparring would usually begin and end with an emotional exclamations of one's personal opinion about the comics at hand.

Getting back to the participants in the ceremony, and as all the examples that were given illustrate, the ceremony couldn't have been practiced if it wasn't for several (two or more) participants at the same place in the same time. Indeed, in its basic form, there are two participants in the ceremony; the (active) recommender and the (passive) recommendee. In some cases there was more than one recommendee, as participants reverse the direction of the discussion and others joined in as well. The observations found that the efficiency of the ceremony decreased as there were more than three participants. The reason for that is that pretty soon multi-participants' ceremonies either broke to sub-ceremonies or some participants remained passive listeners throughout the ceremony while others talked.

The observed participants' personal background was most varied and included instances of older collectors (as old as 70+) holding a recommendations ceremonies with younger collectors (early teens), men and women, experienced and newcomers and customers who turned recommenders to their staffers. The reason for that diversification is inherent to the social construction of the ceremony which is based upon the accumulative experiences of a fan as a consumer. As comics aficionados do not read everything that is out there, and at least in American mainstream comics titles' creative team (mostly the writers and illustrators) oftentimes changes, which also changes the quality of the work, a young adolescent may have certain experience about something that neither a well-respected collector, nor a comic-book store staff member has. The young adolescent is then in a dominant position over the supposedly certified older counterpart as someone with more cultural capital. We can then conclude that this ceremony temporarily suspends the culturally established notion of greater social or cultural capital as a result of seniority and replaces it with a system of passivity-activity and accumulation of experience as a form of alternative cultural capital.

Another factor that had immense influence on the character of recommendation ceremonies was the mood of the participants, and especially the recommendees willingness to take part in the ceremony in the first place. On general terms, most of the observed participants' mood was cheerful during the moments prior to the beginning of the ceremony. This high spirit was carried with them to the act of recommendation itself. The mood the participants were in also has some influence on their choice of words and non-lingual communications.

The observations had supported comments made in the past by Pustz (1999) and other researchers regarding the behaviour of comics aficionados as in the thrill of the act, a lot of participants tended to 'revert' to using short acronyms, symbols and 'rich points' (Agar, 1994) that incorporated both a 'restricted code' (Bernstein, 1977) style of phrasing and a loaded cultural meaning in short and precise wording. The aforementioned Liefeld law

is a good example of that. Another good example would be one of the replicas that were recorded during the 07.27.2007 observation at Comikaza⁸:



This replica is filled with terms that are understood to both the recommender and the recommendee. However it will be an obscured sequence of terms to any out-group member that doesn't understand this specific speakers' community. Those people will need elaboration in order to understand what is being said. Yet, an elaborate explanation that recodifies the meaning of terms will be a lengthy and tedious one, and still it might not be fully understood.



IF YOU LIKED THE SERIAL STORY THAT GAIL SIMONE WROTE FOR THE COMICS TITLE 'BIRDS OF PREY' PUBLISHED BY DC COMICS THAN YOU MIGHT FIND THE STORIES SHE WROTE FOR ANOTHER TITLE - 'WELCOME TO TRANQUILITY', PUBLISHED BY DC COMICS' IMPRINT 'WILDSTORM'. I THINK YOU WILL ENJOY IT BECAUSE ALBEIT BEING PUBLISHED BY 'WILDSTORM' IT IS NOT CONNECTED TO THE COMPANY'S OTHER STORIES AND DOESN'T RESEMBLE THEM ARTISTICALLY OR THEMATICALLY

At other times this restricted code, is combined with both non-lingual communication and common patterns of behaviour (such as cynicism) to create an even denser expression:



Yet there are cases in which the ceremony takes a violent turn, the case of ‘aficionados’ sparring’. At two out of the several dozen of observed cases, the sparring got to a volatile point that bordered physical violence, several other cases of ceremonies that evolved to sparring ended with lingual insults and contempt on the side of the patron who argued his taste is ‘better’. Another sparring case ended in stringent tones when one aficionado claimed to have more social and cultural capital than his peer, as he is a veteran collector with many friends in the business, has an extensive knowledge of superhero comics’ history and better track record of attendance in major comics conventions.

In terms of the norms of interactions, some marginal differences between national cultures were found. While the cultures had no direct influence on the norms of interaction itself (meaning, people interacted in a similar fashion in all the studied national cultures), differences were observed in terms of the intensity of the expressions involved in it. European aficionados tended to be quieter and reserved when making recommendations, but still they made them, and interjected into the conversations of others, even though this type of behaviour is considered somewhat rude in general European society. Interjecting to someone else’s conversation or ‘ambushing’ young readers is a situation which was mentioned by several interviewers. Guy, a Leeds based fifteen year old at the time of interview (2009) told of such an occasion:

So ... I’m standing there, alone, in front of the [comic book] rack [with all the new issues] and they showed up... and like asking me... ‘Hi, who are you’ and I’m like ‘Guy’ and they go, ‘I’m Dean, I’m Joe’, and they just started talking to me out of nowhere. Then they took a peek into my pile and asked ‘what have you got there?’... and they saw Ultimate Spider-man and Civil War and then they asked me if I heard of the new special tie-in that Amazing Spider-man had for Civil War and like ‘you’ll love it man’... So we started talking on regular basis every Wednesday and they got me hooked on new titles, and I showed them some awesome stuff they didn’t know. You know...

In other cultures such as the US, Canada and Israel, where interjecting into someone else’s conversation is somewhat more common, there were noticeable instances of ceremonies held using loud voices, extravagant body gestures (including more frequent use of physical

comic books during debates), provocative language and faster discussion pace. The flow of the sequence acts of ceremonies seemed to be faster in these countries as well. Even so, it is estimated that this basic ceremony (and subsequent ceremonies) are desired interaction in the comic-book aficionados' circles in all the studied cultures and countries. This conclusion is drawn mostly from the interviews as interviewees mentioned this as a practice they are actively looking for and certain store owners admitted they encourage their patrons to engage in it. Dan, a staff member of an Israeli store told of such cases:

Sometimes we have customers who read stuff that I don't know. Like alternative commix, or all that Avatar stuff, and I do want to serve them well, but I don't know what to offer to them. If it happens that there's a 'regular' in the store at the moment who knows something about it, I try to get them in on that. Like, I'd say something about this book and that book and then I'd ask him 'Mike, do you agree? You read that stuff right?' if they're in a good mood they usually start giving advice and ideas of their own. Plus, it makes them feel real good that I ask them something. They feel important and knowledgeable. (Dan, 2010)

To the contrary, some store owners reject this practice altogether and try to minimize the development of such ceremonies to the minimum.

I don't like customers stepping on my toes giving advice to other customers what to buy. That's my job. I'm doing it professionally. I can take myself out of the spot of '**the reader**' (stressed by interviewee) and get into their head to make recommendations of things they like. The regular superheroes customers usually can't do that. They're stuck in their own universe. Sometimes they give bad advice. ...I don't want another customer to come complaining that the comics they got were bad. After a couple of times like this, they stop coming to my store, 'cause they'll say 'we get lousy recommendations there'. I don't want that. (Jason, 2011)

However, most of the store owners recognized the importance of identifying reliable 'regulars' who give good advice, and encourage them to engage in more recommendation activities, a notion that gave rise to the ideas that were further explored at the second round of interviews.

Building and strengthening the community

As mentioned earlier, the findings of the first round of work were used as guides that informed the creation of a program to create a recommendations-friendly domain for comics aficionados in stores and conventions. Working under the assumption that recommendations ceremonies are sites where aficionados not only trade information and

demonstrate their knowledge, but also create friendships and relationships, a plan was made to create a structured 'recommendations ceremony' in various comfort-zone locations, for young and veteran aficionados alike. Five such structured 'recommendations meetings' were held at two comic-book stores, one coffee shop and two conventions in Israel during 2009-2010.

The structured setting included two parts. At the first part, the participants went over the Diamond Previews Catalog - a monthly publication that features all the upcoming comic book titles and related merchandise that is due publishing and/or distribution in two months' time - and took notes of things they think are worth paying attention to. At the second part of the event, a known community leader (famous comics critic, local artist, store staff member or respected veteran collector) would host a process in which they go over the catalog and note their recommendation according to the order of the publication's pages. Each participant who had something to contribute or remark to make asked for permission and had a few minutes to introduce the title or series of their liking and the reasons they think attention should be paid to it. Naturally, at times this process stirred discussion, and sometimes it passed swiftly without major comments. It was the host's responsibility to cut discussions if they turned too long or went out of track. These meetings took an average of two hours, and were met with somewhat suspicion at first, but active participation later. It was at this setting, where participants were expected to articulate themselves in a respectable manner, and engage in debates rather than sparring.

The main goal of this activity was to strengthen community ties by introducing aficionados to each other in a friendly setting. Another goal of the activity was to create a situation in which readers can improve their social standing by demonstrating their knowledge or 'connoisseurship', two forms of capital that were discussed extensively in past literature. Other goals were shared by both the readers' community and the business owners. For example when young readers feel liked and respected for their opinions, they become more interested in the hobby and influence their friends to join as well - gaining new members to the dwindling lines of the comics aficionados' community. Naturally, as it all boils down to consumption and purchasing of content, business owners makes more profit out of it as well. As for the staffers of comic-book stores, identifying recommendation ceremonies as they occur, recognizing who are good recommenders and encouraging them to keep on recommending, may play to their benefit as well. An able recommender functions like an unofficial staff member, and can fill as one (for the purpose of recommending) at times of need. A recommender who is considered knowledgeable may be seen as a more respectable figure of authority than a staffer, and some patrons admit they prefer receiving recommendations from other aficionados whom they see as neutral, rather than staffers who may have hidden interests in promoting one comics title or another.

While the structured character of the meeting limited spontaneous ceremonies from evolving to some degree, it served as a good observation ground to further refine the description of the act sequences and understanding of the different components which such ceremonies include as the activities proved a unique setting for independent ceremonies to

evolve as well. Multiple side talks developed all through the meetings, some participants retired from the main discussion and moved aside to have their own debates as well as several cases of sparring. Unfortunately, this initiative didn't last long and was replaced by on-line forum discussions and social media activities, a step that broadened the circle of participants but changed their modes of interaction drastically.

Summary

The study presented in this work was designed to understand the interaction between comic-book aficionados better and argue, contrary to ideas voiced by other scholars in the past, that albeit their interest in totally separate genres, artistic styles and visual traditions, comics aficionados function as one unified community when it comes to modes of interpersonal interaction and communication.

In order to support that argument, an unobtrusive observation of aficionados from various locals, cultures and nationalities was conducted. Observations took place at aficionados' comfort zones – in comic-book stores and conventions, and focused on a specific set of actions and interactions which were subsequently termed 'the recommendation ceremony', following the main speech act component of it, which is to recommend possible reading materials to other aficionados. The recommendation ceremony is initiated by aficionados in these comfort zones for psychological as well as social reasons. A series of interviews supported the observations and helped establish a wider understanding of the social and psychological function that this ceremony serves.

From a social perspective, the ceremony is designed to make them feel better and benevolent as human beings, as one of its main outcomes is to prevent other aficionados from making 'mistakes' when choosing which comics titles to follow. In this case, the idea of 'mistakes' is heavily linked to the participants' notions of good and bad taste. These ceremonies are then enabling aficionados from different cultural sub-groups (i.e. manga fans, American mainstream fans, European comics fans, etc.) to interact on an equal basis albeit their differences. From a social perspective this ceremony is also a rare case because it brings the community to postpone its own traditional hierarchies and replace it with an alternative set of hierarchies. In this instance individuals are awarded with power over their experience as consumers (who read certain comics titles) rather than as a result of the wealth of social and cultural capital they are known to possess as community members. It is also a mechanism with which comics aficionados may gain social capital they did not possess earlier, as a successful suggestion may establish new friendships and ties.

Psychological reasons are also generators of motivation to participate in the recommendation ceremonies. The logic behind this motivation is that aficionados wish to be wise consumers. Participating in ceremonies may prevent them from spending money buying dissatisfying content and guide them towards the wiser decisions. Another reason to participate in these ceremonies, from the side of the recommender, rather than the recommendee, is to boost one's ego by demonstrating their knowledge. Both the observations and the interviews pointed out that the ceremony is being held by aficionados

from all walks of life, age, culture and nationality. This finding is the most important support of the argument that comics aficionados are a unified sub-cultural group that holds basic common traits. Perhaps, this group may be further divided into smaller sub-groups according to aesthetic interest, genre preferences or motivations to be engaged in the community (e.g. see Woo, this issue), but these divisions change the content of the discussions, rather than the form of the interactions.

The implication of this finding is most important to many theoretical and commercial practitioners in the field. From a methodological point of view, this finding validates the use of existing ethnographic tools and theories in the process of studying this cultural group, without the need to discuss each faction of it separately. In the past, when ethnographers of comics culture asked to study this sub-group, they were asked to specifically identify their audience, as it was assumed that consumers of one local (or genre based) sub-group are not similar to the consumers of another sub-group. While this understanding still holds true to studies that focus on connoisseurship or reaction to artistic styles, the work presented in this paper demonstrates that in the social interaction of comics aficionados, there are global cultural similarities that enable scholars to generalize findings from one sub-group to another to some extent. Another reservation might be made, arguing that this mode of interaction is not exclusive to comics aficionados. Indeed, many sub-groups identified by their taste, or interest in specific content, my hold ceremonies that resemble or are similar to the recommendation ceremony of comics aficionados. However, as argued earlier, these groups are identified by their interest in a specific and narrow content, while the findings of this paper demonstrate that in the case of comics, the interest is first and foremost in the medium itself, rather than the content it holds. Another implication resulting from this understanding is the continued relevance, and importance of, comic-book stores and social events (be it festival or conventions) as the two most proper sites for comics audiences' ethnographic research, both from a critical and a comparative point of view.

Following the thoughts described in this paper, regarding the reasons for the disdain that general society sometimes feels towards comics aficionados, role-players and Sci-Fi fans, the findings of this work offer new direction of inquiry for scholars that study the social status of fandom communities. This possible contribution is the result of the understanding that many recommendation ceremonies ends up in a loud and not-so-appealing way and that this course of things can be changed given attention and guidance. In that sense, if store staff and community leaders learn to identify the direction in which recommendation ceremonies develop and how to change it, they can channel these understandings to turn ceremonies to a contributing factor in the rehabilitation of the public opinion about comics aficionados in general society.

Uncovering the sequence of speech acts that makes the recommendation ceremony is an important stage in understanding comics as a social, rather than literary or artistic phenomenon. However, this work is but the beginning of a project, not the end of it. Many questions and tasks are yet to be fully answered. While the basic ceremony is easy to identify and study, the acts of scholarly debate and especially the aficionados' sparring are

yet to be fully studied. These acts are less structured than the basic act to begin with. They involve many elements and include rhetorical and semantic aspects that classic ethnography is not capable of answering on its own. To add to that, different cultures has different argumentative styles and it is more than likely that any work done following the lines of linguistic anthropology will reveal variations in the extended acts of the ceremony that this basic work was unable to identify. The idea of structured recommendation ceremonies is another aspect that was not studied to its fullest. Such a work would have to borrow more on theories of group management than of ethnography. On-line study of recommendation ceremonies is another aspect of the social interaction that was disregarded completely and should be studied in the future. Nonetheless, this works holds several important understandings that should be taken into consideration when conducting future work in the field.

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Appendix A – observations schedule

Comic book stores & Dates of Observation

Comics n' Vegetables. Tel-Aviv, Israel.	08.08.2007*, 04.13.2008, 08.28.2008*, 02.13.2009,
Comikaza. Tel-Aviv, Israel.	07.27.2007*, 07.31.2007*, 02.06.2009*, 10.22.2010**, 08.04.2010*/**
Fantom Comics (Union Station). Washington D.C., United States.	11.07.2008
Forbidden Planet (London Megastore). London, United Kingdom.	05.16.2007*
Forbidden Planet. Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom.	11.19.2009
Lambiek. Amsterdam, The Netherlands.	11.24.2009
Midtown Comics (Times Sq.). New York City, New-York, United	05.15.2010

States.

The Beguiling. Toronto, Ontario, Canada.	05.06.2010
The Fortress Comics & Games. East Lansing, Michigan, United States.	11.12.2008*, 11.15.2008
Traveling Man. Leeds, United Kingdom.	11.23.2009
U Jednorozče (The Unicorn). Prague, Czech Republic.	04.16.2008
Words & Pictures (Centre St.). Calgary, Alberta, Canada.	08.28.2011, 10.12.2011, 11.16.2011*

* Marks an observation in a Wednesday.

** Marks an observation in a structured recommendation ceremony.

Conventions and Festivals

2007 Comics Animation & Cartoon Festival. Tel-Aviv, Israel.	08.26.2007
Calgary Comics Expo 2012. Calgary, Alberta, Canada.	05.29.2012
Fantasy-Con 2007. Tel-Aviv, Israel.	07.26.2007
Olamot (Universal) 2010 Sci-Fi Convention. Tel-Aviv, Israel.	03.31.2010**
The 14 th Icon Sci-Fi Festival. Tel-Aviv, Israel.	10.18.2008
The 15 th Icon Sci-Fi Festival. Tel-Aviv, Israel.	10.07.2009**
Thought Bubble Comics Convention. Leeds, United Kingdom, 2009.	11.22.2009
Toronto Comics Art Festival (TCAF) 2010. Toronto, Ontario, Canada.	05.08.2010

** Marks an observation in a structured recommendation ceremony.

Interviews

Ben @ Comics n' Vegetables. Tel-Aviv, Israel.	08.08.2007
Dan @ Comikaza. Tel-Aviv, Israel.	08.04.2010
Guy @ Thought Bubble Comics Convention. Leeds, United Kingdom.	11.22.2009
Jack @ The 14 th Icon Sci-Fi Festival. Tel-Aviv, Israel.	10.18.2008
Jason @ Words & Pictures (Centre St.). Calgary, Alberta, Canada.	11.16.2011
Yaniv @ Comikaza. Tel-Aviv, Israel.	07.27.2007

Notes:

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² However, this topic deserves further exploring in the future.

³ Albeit one has to recognize the overlapping of these interest communities at some cases. See Woo, 2011a and Woo, 2011b for more information regarding this issue.

⁴ Pylyser (2012b) argues that there is an inherent difference between the dynamics of festivals and fan-conventions. However, they were found to be similar in terms of comics aficionados' inter-personal communication dynamics in this case, thus this distinction had been ignored at this work.

⁵ The scenario presented in this example and the rest of the illustrated examples in this work was chosen for its rare quality as an almost 'ideal type' of the recommendation ceremony. It contained both the scholarly debate and the aficionados' sparring. Some editing was used however, to shorten long monologues into workable replicas. The exception of it from the ideal type of ceremonies, being that its participants were in fact two female readers, while male readers populated most of the other observed ceremonies in the research corpus.

⁶ In this case, the sparring took place after five minutes of basic act and some 10 minutes of scholarly debate. The sparring itself lasted about five more minutes before the participants went to their own way.

⁷ All the interviewees agreed to reveal their private names in the text.

⁸ Unlike other examples that underwent some editing and shortening, this replica is brought word for word in its original form.