

Reader mobilization and the courting of fannish consumption practices in 1970s Marvel superhero comic books

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Abstract:

This article examines Marvel superhero comic books of the 1970s and their mobilization of fannish consumption practices. It argues that the 1970s Marvel comic book is best understood as a multi-purpose medium that, in addition to carrying narrative content, served as a mail-order catalog for comics and novelty products, as a forum for the moderated exchange between producers and consumers, and as a starting point for an ongoing engagement with comics fandom and a larger commodity culture that clustered around superhero comics. To make this case, the article considers the non-human agency of comics, takes stock of period comic books' references to other issues and media, surveys different types of advertisements, discusses the role of letters pages and editorials, and addresses parallels between the practices of 1970s comic books and the intentional courting of fan audiences in the digital era.

Keywords: Superhero Comics, Comic Books, Marvel, Fan Studies, Periodical Studies, Popular Seriality

Introduction

In the mid-1970s, Marvel Comics invited readers to cut holes into their favorite comics magazines. Starting in February 1974, select issues of the company's ongoing titles began to feature one of about a hundred small rectangular images called Marvel Value Stamps, each of which depicted one (more or less well-known) Marvel character.¹ Usually featured on the letters page and meant to be collected in a dedicated stamp book that could be requested via mail order, each stamp included a number that identified it as part of a larger set (termed 'Series A') and appeared in three to four different issues released until the summer

of 1975. Starting in December of the same year, Marvel followed up on this first series with a second set of an additional hundred stamps (the ‘Series B’), which repeated the exercise with different motifs.² Promoted through the company’s “Bullpen Bulletin” editorial sections before, during, and after their runs, the two Value Stamp series constituted a powerful tool to drive the sales of lesser-known Marvel titles. After all, stamps could appear in any magazine that featured a letters page – and some only showed up in select issues of second- and third-tier titles like *Marvel Team-Up* (1972–85), *Ka-Zar*, *Lord of the Hidden Jungle* (1974–77) or *Omega the Unknown* (1976–77) (Anderson 2013, 95; Anderson n.d.). To complete both sets, interested readers thus had to leaf through much of the company’s monthly output, ponder the purchase of titles they would not read otherwise, and take



Figures 1 & 2: During the mid-1970s, the Marvel Stamp campaign asked readers to cut collectible stamps from the letters pages of the company’s regular-size comic books. Photos by the author.

scissors to at least two hundred individual issues of now-classic comic books from the Bronze Age of Marvel Comics, a practice that significantly reduced magazines’ subsequent value for resellers and collectors (see **Figs. 1 & 2**). As Rob Anderson (2013) notes, readers who managed to complete the first set could claim rewards that included ‘discounts on admission’ (93) to the 1974 New York Comic Art Convention and San Diego Comic Convention (SDCC), invitations to a special event with authors and artists at the 1975 SDCC, and a ten percent discount on ‘Marvel mail-order merchandise’ (95). Designed as an attempt to mobilize young, highly engaged readers with enough means

to buy plenty of comics, the value stamp campaign thus culminated in an invitation to purchase even more Marvel products at a slightly reduced

price. Importantly, however, the campaign also encouraged the completist consumption practices typical of fans (such as collecting interconnected titles, buying sought-after back issues from third-party vendors, or trading doubles with like-minded peers) and connected to some of the most prominent fan-cultural events that existed at the time. Fans and fan practices, in other words, here became an explicit target of one of the biggest comic book publishers in the US.

This article suggests that the stamp campaign's combination of canny marketing strategy and an intentional courting of fans was both typical for 1970s Marvel Comics magazines in general and symptomatic for a broader transformation that turned the superhero comic book from a mass-cultural product with broad appeal into a more narrowly fan-oriented medium. In this regard, Marvel superhero comic magazines from the 1970s present themselves as important forerunners to the more explicitly fan-oriented comic book culture of the 21st century. Matthew Pustz (2016) notes that the American comic book industry today 'tend[s] to ignore the broad base of potential (but less committed) readers and instead focus[es] on a strong niche of established fans,' who have emerged as the primary buyers of superhero comic books (267). Contemporary comic books thus address an audience of well-informed and emotionally involved readers with highly selective tastes – readers who not only consume comics on a regular basis, but are willing to 'seek out additional information' through specialized media and publications, collect comics paraphernalia and participate in fan events and, in the case of 'hard-core fans,' themselves become small-scale cultural producers who actively contribute to fan discourses and create narrative content inspired by their favorite titles (Pustz 2016, 268).³ While Pustz (2016) acknowledges that American comic books have always inspired activity of this sort, he locates the historical origin of Marvel's overt fan orientation in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the company's titles started to tell 'longer and more complex stories' and the shift to a direct sales system and the emergence of specialty comic book stores instituted a new infrastructure for fannish engagement (270; see also Kelleter and Stein 2012, 274–77).⁴ This article adopts a similar perspective, but argues that changes in the internal make-up of 1970s Marvel comic books played a key role in the reorientation towards fan audiences as well.

More precisely, this article suggests that, during the 1970s, Marvel's superhero comics magazines were reconfigured into more effective tools for the solicitation of fannish consumption practices – and that this transformation involved not just the narrative content of comic books, but also became manifest in an increased presence of advertisements, editorial announcements and letters pages. While ads, editorials, and reader mail had been staples of American comic books during preceding decades, in the 1970s, Marvel's superhero magazines significantly reduced the page count of their narrative contents and gave more space to these paratextual elements. As a result, the company's titles now foregrounded their secondary functions as mail-order catalogs for all kinds of products and as forums for the moderated exchange between producers and consumers more strongly than before. Contemporaneously, the stories told within the pages of 1970s Marvel comics magazines embraced complex modes of serial narration that emphasized ongoing storylines and interconnections between the company's various going series. I suggest that the combination of these narrative, formal, and medial shifts endowed the company's superhero comic books with a newly fragmented and internally heterogeneous form, but also increased their agency to encourage a new range of economically productive practices on the part of readers – such as collecting entire runs of specific titles and reading across the

company's oeuvre, purchasing superhero merchandise and paraphernalia, participating in sales programs, writing letters to the company, or organizing in fan clubs, for example. During the 1970s, Marvel's superhero comic books thus transformed into multi-purpose media that, in addition to carrying narrative contents, also presented themselves as launching pads for readers' ongoing engagement with both comic fandom and the larger commodity culture that clustered around superhero comics. Reconfigured in this way, Marvel comics magazines re-imagined the ideal reader as a highly engaged, well-informed, and passionate fan and established fannish consumption practices as a new norm – at the expense of other, less involved ways of reading. In doing so, the company's magazines prefigured the logics of the digital and networked popular culture of the early 21st century, which, as scholars such as Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green (2013) have argued, has more generally recognized the potential economic productivity of fan practices (116; on the economic productivity on fan practices, see also De Kosnik 2013; Stanfill 2019).

To make this argument, this article examines the mobilizing power – or agency – of Marvel comics magazines from the 1970s in greater detail. To begin, the article opens up a dialogue between recent work on the non-human agency of popular serial forms and theories of comics that stress readers' participation in the meaning-making practices of the art form. Here, I suggest that the agency of comics is best understood as an ability to pre-structure and orient reception practices. I then turn to the specificity of 1970s Marvel comic books as particularly configured periodical media that are characterized by ergodicity, seriality, and sociability. Afterwards, the article takes stock of the diverse contents included in Marvel comics magazines published between the beginning of 1970 and the end of 1979 and considers their role for the mobilization and promotion of fannish consumption practices.⁵ Focusing on a corpus of nineteen issues of the company's regular-size superhero comic books, I here examine the practices of serial storytelling typical for the period, discuss their interplay with the discourse on letters pages and in editorial columns, and interrogate how advertising content contributed to or resonated with the promotion of fannish consumption practices. Finally, article's conclusion returns to the idea that the fan-orientation of 1970s Marvel comics prefigured aspects of digital-era popular culture.

Comics Agency and 1970s Marvel Comic Books

In considering the agency of comic books to interact with, encourage, and direct particular modes of reading and media consumption practices, I follow in the footsteps of recent actor-network theory-inspired research on the dynamic, interactional, and evolutionary character of popular serial forms (see Kelleter 2012; Kelleter 2017; Kelleter and Stein 2012; Mayer 2014; Stein 2014). Informed by Bruno Latour's (2007) assertion that 'objects too have agency' (63; see also 63–86), this research holds that serial narratives (such as television series, serialized superhero comics, or film series) actively shape the world around them. Serial narratives do so by conjoining a variety of different actors and agencies over the course of their unfolding and by forging social connections between them – a circumstance that comes to the fore in the feedback loop that exists between audience responses and the

creative practices of producers and artists, for example (see Kelleter 2012, 22–25; Kelleter and Stein 2012, 259). Put differently, popular serial forms acquire a potential to mediate between and interfere with the practices of other actors. As a result, they can themselves be understood as non-human actors that possess a capacity to, as Kelleter and Stein (2012) put it, ‘make us do things’ and ‘create courses of action, intentional possibilities, and identities for all participants’ (260; translation mine). Comic books’ ability to encourage particular reception practices over others can be understood as agency in this sense – an agency that is non-human, non-intentional, distributed, and tied up with the practices of advertisers, editors, writers, artists, and readers, with the institutional frameworks and medial infrastructures that govern the production, distribution, and consumption of superhero comics, and with the affordances of their carrier media.⁶

Comics’ ability to ‘make us do things’ has also been a recurring concern of scholarly attempts to pin down the defining qualities of the art form.⁷ One prominent theme in such attempts is the idea that comics, as Charles Hatfield (2009) puts it, ‘call upon different reading strategies or interpretive schema’ than ‘conventional written text’ (132). This idea already informs Will Eisner’s (1985) classic definition of comics as ‘sequential art,’ which considers the purposeful arrangement of panels into narrative sequences and the multi-modality of ‘word and image’ as essential and stresses the need for ‘both visual and verbal interpretive skills’ (8). Building on Eisner’s work, Scott McCloud (1994) has famously argued that comics reading involves the production of ‘closure,’ i.e. the supplementation of additional narrative information by readers who infer causal relations between panels (60–93). Extending this argument, Hatfield (2009) has suggested that comics ask readers to negotiate between the multiple tensions that unfold between codes of textual and pictorial signification, between the single panel and panels-in-sequence, between ‘narrative sequence[s] and the page surface,’ as well as between comic narratives and the physical carrier media that contain them (132, see also 144). Writing from a media-phenomenological perspective, Shane Denson (2013) has similarly described the practice of comics reading as a navigation of the multi-stable and reversible relationships that exist between different kinds of frames and framing elements that, together, constitute comics as a distinct medium – elements which include everything from speech bubbles, panels, and sequences to pages, issues, and series, to ‘higher-level serial and plurimedial formations’ (279) such as multiverses and franchises, as well as the ‘macro-scale borders between nations and national traditions’ (271). Scholars such as Christian Bachmann (2016), in turn, have emphasized the importance of historically and culturally specific ‘processes of production’ (22; translation mine) that pertain to carrier media such as the newspaper, the comic book, or the book-length graphic novel and suggested that the material properties of such formats are closely intertwined with the aesthetic and semiotic dimensions of their narrative contents (see also 52–56).⁸

In different ways, all of the scholars cited above frame the practice of comics reading as a complex activity that involves the navigation of different codes, formal elements, material substrates, and medial contexts. Implicitly or explicitly, they also ascribe a

modicum of agency to the specific configurations of elements that we call comics. This agency comes to the fore in the ways in which comics modulate and direct our attention, suggest preferred reading paths, prompt us to construct meaning out of disparate parts, and point us from one part of the narrative to the next, for example. On a very general and abstract level, we can thus understand the agency of comics as a capacity to direct our engagement and pre-structure our responses – a capacity that results partly from the purposeful arrangement of images, words, panels, and sequences on the page, and partly from the material properties of carrier media, from modes of distribution, and from cultural practices that tie otherwise separate comics together.

To come to terms with the more specific agency of 1970s Marvel comics magazines, however, we need to account for their character as periodically published, serialized, and mass addressed carrier media. In a recent essay, Lukas Wilde (2021) defines carrier media as standardized physical carriers that – like ‘the newspaper, the serially produced comic book, and the book in form of the codex’ – combine distinct material properties with ‘specific formats and modes of distribution’ (n.p., translation mine). The agency of 1970s Marvel comics is, in other words, inextricably tied up with the comic book format, which, as noted above, is best understood as a particular configuration of the magazine. $6\frac{5}{8}$ by $10\frac{1}{4}$ inches (or 170 by 260 mm) in size, printed on newsprint paper, encompassing thirty-six pages including cover and back cover, and published on a regular (usually monthly or bi-monthly) basis, 1970s Marvel comics adhere to the standard formatting practices that were at work in American comic books during much of the post-war period. As a type of magazine, they furthermore exhibit three key characteristics that Debra Rae Cohen (2015), in sketching research perspectives for an intermedial periodical studies, has identified as central to periodical media more generally: 1) they are ‘ergodic’ media that encompass heterogeneous contents in contiguous arrangements, 2) they arrange these contents in an ongoing serial ‘flow,’ and 3) they present themselves as an occasion for mediated ‘sociability,’ which is to say that they provide fulcra for social interaction (94).

I will discuss the dimensions of seriality and sociability in greater detail below – but the ergodic nature of comic books is arguably what sets them most obviously apart from other carrier media for graphic narratives. In adopting the term, Cohen draws on the work of Espen Aarseth (1997), who uses it to refer to the non-linear character of interactive texts that (like choose-your-own-adventure books, text-based digital adventure games, or hypertext literature) can be traversed in a number of different ways and ask the reader to choose between different reading paths (Aarseth 1997, 1–24). For Cohen (2015), the heterogeneous contents of periodical media – which almost always combine a variety of formally and thematically distinct articles – similarly ‘require decision-making and “non-trivial effort” [...] for the reader to traverse’ (97).

Cohen’s ideas can easily be extended to Marvel comics magazines of the 1970s – which clearly presented superhero comic narratives as the central attraction, but also included editorials, letters pages and advertisements as prominent non-narrative contents. Advertisements, in particular, were omnipresent and more extensively featured than during

preceding decades. Jean-Paul Gabilliet (2010) notes that during the 1970s publishers confronted a steady decline in sales that was tied to the gradual disappearance of the ‘neighborhood and retail outlets that had been the suppliers of comic books’ since the second world war (71). Publishers were also faced with the changing cultural climate of the post-68 era and new competition from other media – including children’s television, the rejuvenated blockbuster cinema of *Jaws* (1975) and *Star Wars* (1977), and home video game consoles such the Magnavox Odyssey (1972) or the Atari 2600 (1977) (Gabilliet 2010, 71–74, 79–80). Struggling to adapt to a changing marketplace, Marvel and its main competitor DC ‘engaged in a mutual war of market saturation by launching a hundred new titles, two thirds of which folded within two years of their debut issues’ (Gabilliet 2010, 74).⁹ Despite these efforts, the business of publishing comic books became less and less profitable as the decade progressed. To counter this trend, Marvel progressively raised the cover price of its magazines – which rose from fifteen to twenty cents in 1971, then to twenty-five cents in 1974, to thirty cents in 1976, to thirty-five cents in 1977, and to forty cents in 1979 – and significantly increased the presence of advertisements. While issues from the sixties already included up to ten pages of ads (see Drechsel, Funhoff, and Hoffmann 1975, 110), titles published after 1970 pushed this number to sixteen pages or more.¹⁰ Next to letters pages and editorials, this meant that narrative content often occupied less than half of the pages in a regular-size comic book.



Figures 3, 4, 5, & 6: In *Daredevil* #142, advertisements in comics form and editorial announcements interrupt the flow of the issue’s narrative content, a phenomenon typical for 1970s Marvel comic books. The double pages pictured are in sequential order, from the image on the upper left to the lower right. Photos by the author.

Due to the placement of ads throughout the magazine, non-narrative contents interrupted the narrative content on a regular basis. In issues from the period, two, three, or four pages of narrative typically alternated with double pages of ads, editorials, or letters pages. As a result, 1970s Marvel comics told their stories through repeated starts and stops, and frequently prompted readers to decide whether they would like to suspend their investment in the narrative and engage with other contents instead. To complicate matters further, many advertisements also included brief comics narratives that echoed superhero comics in both form and content – narratives that occasionally even starred the company’s iconic superheroes. The last few pages of *Daredevil* #142 (February 1977), for instance, feature a transition from the comics narrative to the editorial page, which is, in turn, followed by an advertisement for Hostess Fruitpies titled “The Incredible Hulk and the Green Thumb” that features the eponymous green hero in a brief six-panel comic (*Daredevil* #142, n.p.; see **Figs. 3 to 6**). One page over, the *Daredevil* story continues for two more pages before it ends on a cliffhanger – and afterwards, the next two pages feature yet another full-page advertisement in comics form (a brief strip starring Spider-Man and Captain America that promotes a Marvel-branded novelty toy) and an ad for Monogram model cars that also features a hand-drawn (albeit non-sequential) illustration. Such transitions between different kinds of visually similar content make it difficult for the untrained reader to ignore advertisements completely – especially in this case, as the drawing styles of both the Hostess ad and the Marvel toy ad echo the look of the *Daredevil* story featured in the rest of the issue.

While ads in comic form – and those for the Hostess’ family of fruitpie and Twinkies products in particular – appeared in virtually every Marvel magazine from the period, not all issues featured similarly tricky page transitions as the *Daredevil* example discussed above. The example nonetheless illustrates how 1970s Marvel comics demanded reading strategies that corresponded to the potentially confusing fragmentation of the core text into shorter bits and pieces. While the boundaries between narrative and non-narrative contents did not disappear, they still became noticeably fluid, so that readers’ engagement with the story easily bled over into the browsing of ads (and vice versa). Experienced readers could compensate by skipping across the pages with ads, editorials, and letters pages, or by reading the various sections of the magazine in separate sittings – practices that were, in fact, encouraged by small-print ‘continued after the next page’ notices at the bottom of the pages that preceded non-narrative contents.¹¹ Overall, however, 1970s Marvel comics presented themselves as complex bundles of disparate reading material that relegated the task of untangling to the reader. Due to the strong presence of ads and other paratexts, 1970s Marvel magazines thus foregrounded ‘the radically fragmented and unstable’ character of comics – which Hatfield (2009) attributes to the art form in general – more strongly than other carrier media (132). At the same time, advertisements and other paratextual contents were, as Richard Landon (2007) notes, ‘part of [...] the reading experience’ and ‘not merely an interruption or distraction from it’ (204–5).¹² Accordingly, if comics reading always involved the construction of meaning out of disparate parts, and if

the ergodic nature of 1970s comic books blurred the line between different kinds of content, then non-narrative materials like advertisements and editorials actively participated the readers' processes of meaning-making as well.

I discuss the more specific contributions that period advertisements made to such meaning-making toward the end of this paper. But before doing so, I turn to the interplay between the era's practices of serial storytelling and the discourses that unfolded across editorial sections and letters pages. In doing so, I will address the two other dimensions of periodical media mentioned by Cohen, which are crucial for the courting of fan-cultural practices: serial flow and sociability.

Comic Books between Serial Media and Serial Narration

Comic books, like other periodical formats, are serial media – which is to say that they are regularly published and mass-addressed carrier media whose making involves a highly specialized division of labor.¹³ Produced and put into circulation by a profit-oriented industry, comic books furthermore present themselves as, to borrow a formulation from Frank Kelleter (2017), '*undisguised commodities*, that is, as commodities, which, unlike traditional artworks, do not usually try to cover up their economic conditions and only rarely claim to have transcended them' (10; emphasis in the original).¹⁴ The commercial orientation of 1970s Marvel comic books is saliently on display in the serialized superhero narratives that were their primary contents. Anthology titles aside, individual issues of 1970s superhero comic books rarely contained a complete story from start to finish; instead, each issue featured part of an ongoing story and sought to engage readers across the 'narrative break' between installments (Hagedorn 1988, 7). Storylines thus unfolded across several installments and usually tied directly into the next narrative arc. As a result, almost all installments opened in medias res with the central characters already embroiled in dramatic situations – and concluded in high-tension cliffhanger endings that would be resolved in the next issue (with the final panel reliably stoking the readers' anticipation with a narrative box that foreshadowed things to come).¹⁵ Accordingly, readers interested in getting the whole story had to pick up subsequent issues and purchase missing back-issues as well – a situation that Ulrike Drechsel, Jörg Funhoff, and Michael Hoffmann (1975) have characterized as an 'obligation to buy' and identified as typical for superhero comic books from the period (16; translation mine).

However, print serialization is never just an exclusively linear or entirely monomedial affair. Periodical media, as Cohen (2015) notes, often 'invoke [...] not just the previous issue and the next issue, and the potential infinities of issues to come,' but also 'reach outside of [themselves]' to other, closely related serial proliferations (99).¹⁶ In fact, such references to past, parallel, and upcoming installments was part and parcel of the dominant mode of 'multi-linear' serial narration that was at work in 1970s Marvel comics magazines (Kelleter and Stein 2012, 274). This type of serial storytelling, as Frank Kelleter and Daniel Stein (2012) have discussed, worked towards the creation of a shared narrative 'universe that encompassed several ongoing, synchronized series and allowed figures to cross-over

between titles' (274–75; translation mine). During the preceding decade, titles such as *The Avengers* (since 1963) had already brought the protagonists of different series together. Occasionally, other series also featured guest appearances of characters whose adventures usually took place elsewhere – *The Amazing Spider-Man* #1 (March 1963), for example, famously staged a meeting between the titular hero and the Fantastic Four. Overall, however such crossovers remained an exception to the rule of more self-contained serial narratives – until the 1970s, when the company began to 'connect all series [...] more or less explicitly to each other' (Kelleter and Stein 2012, 275; translation mine). This tying together of serial narratives proceeded through the launch of additional titles that brought heroes and villains of various stripes together (*The Defenders*, since 1972; *Marvel Team-Up*, 1972–85, starring Spider-Man and rotating roster of other protagonists; *Super-Villain Team-Up*, 1975–80), through frequent guest appearances of heroes in other ongoing titles (see, for example, the appearance of *Hero for Hire's* Luke Cage/Power Man in *The Defenders* #17 [November 1974] to #19 [January 1975]), as well as through the launch of parallel series for popular characters like Spider-Man (*The Amazing Spider-Man* and *Marvel Team-Up* are joined by *Peter Parker, The Spectacular Spider-Man* in 1976). As a result, all titles of the company now constituted what Ruth Mayer (2014) calls a 'serial cluster,' i.e. a narrative unit or set with 'a fictional logic and continuity of its own' (9). This interlinking of titles encouraged readers to read issues from across a variety of Marvel titles – after all, as Kelleter and Stein (2012) note, 'to follow the overall development of a specific series character, one now also needed to buy issues of titles starring other series characters or teams' (274; translation mine).

As a consequence, the notion of a coherent narrative continuity across titles now became a pressing concern – both for informed fans (who could now police the narrative consistency not just of individual series, but of the Marvel universe as a whole) and for the company's authors (who now had to avoid contradicting not only the established backstory of their specific series, but also needed be aware of events and characters depicted in other Marvel titles) (Hoppeler and Rippl 2012, 372–73). Writing about the notion of continuity in American comic books in general, Stephanie Hoppeler and Gabriele Rippl (2012) note that such an interlinking of titles significantly impacts on how readers can engage with superhero comics. On the one hand, a strong emphasis on continuity 'potentially complicates a new entry' into ongoing series (373; translation mine; see also Pustz 2016, 270). On the other, 'the discovery and comprehension of inter- and intratextual references' now accounts for much of the pleasure that informed readers can derive from comic books (Hoppeler and Rippl, 2012, 370; translation mine). Overall, the new emphasis on multi-linear serial narration and continuity across titles rewarded those who could invest considerable amounts of time, money, and attention into comic consumption.

Notably, however, not all Marvel titles were similarly suffused with intertextual references – even though most titles referred to previous issues on a regular basis, usually through dialogue-level references and corresponding explanatory boxes that indexed the issue in question within the same panel. As an extreme example, *The Defenders* #7 (August

1973) wove a dense intertextual web across a variety of issues published during the preceding years, including *The Incredible Hulk* issues #164 to 166 (June, July, and August 1973), *The Avengers* issues #83 (December 1970), #109 (March 1973), and #110 (April 1973), *Daredevil* # 99 (May 1973), *Marvel Premiere* #9 (July 1973), *Sub-Mariner* #37 (May 1971), and *Iron Man* #16 (August 1969). On the other end of the spectrum, a series like *Ka-Zar*, *Lord of the Hidden Jungle* (1974–77) eschewed references to previous storylines and other series almost completely. More commonly, however, installments referenced one or two earlier issues of the same series and/or other issues that provided context for the appearance of guest characters (for typical examples, see the stories featured in *The Incredible Hulk* #195 [January 1976] and *Daredevil* #155 [November 1978]). In addition, readers were generally expected to be familiar with the company’s iconic superheroes, colorful rogue’s gallery, and recurring supporting characters, who could turn up in any given title.



Figure 7: The July 1974 ‘Bullpen Bulletin’ editorial page features a column by Stan Lee that praises the company’s recent output, teases upcoming projects, and promotes “FOOM,” Marvel’s official fan club. The two columns to the right list magazines and issues currently on sale. Photo by the author.

Significantly, however, references to other series and titles not only occurred within the narrative contents of specific issues, but also appeared on the ‘Bullpen Bulletin’ editorial pages that were featured, usually with identical formatting and content, in all of the company’s regular-sized titles published during the same month. Encompassing one or two pages, these bulletins included a monthly column by long-time editor Stan Lee (‘Stan Lee’s Soapbox,’ since 1967, later shortened to ‘Stan’s Soapbox’), additional columns of news items about new Marvel titles and changes in the company’s staff of writers and artists, as well as an irregularly occurring checklist of issues currently on sale (compare Kelleter and Stein 2012, 268).¹⁷

Altogether, the ‘Bullpen Bulletin’ section thus presented itself both as a forum for the articulation of company policy and as an advertising column for the unceasing flow of new issues, series, magazines, products and adaptations produced and licensed by Marvel – all of which were promoted in the company’s trademark tone of hyperbolic, tongue-in-cheek enthusiasm. The July 1974 ‘Soapbox’ (see **Fig. 7**), for instance, opens with a brief mention of recently launched series of ‘Giant-Sized’ and ‘Super-Sized’ magazines, lauds the quality of company’s recent output, then teases unspecified but ‘sensational TV and movie projects’ to come, and eventually goes on to celebrate FOOM (‘Friends of Old Marvel,’ Marvel’s officially sanctioned fan club) as the most ‘blockbusting fan club in the history of comicdom’ (*The Defenders* #14, n.p.). Afterwards, Lee’s column ends with call for fannish participation and asks readers to send in ‘awesome inspirations and idiotic ideas’ for how to improve FOOM (*The Defenders* #14 [July 1974], n.p.). Next to the “Soapbox,” two columns of news items list newly released and upcoming titles (such as *Giant-Size Spider-Man* #1 [July 1974], *Giant-Size Creatures* #1 [July 1974], *Astonishing Tales* #25 [August 1974], and others) by name; towards the back of the issue, a second bulletin page furthermore introduces readers to the mechanics and rewards of the then-ongoing value stamp campaign (*The Defenders* #14 [July 1974], n.p.). In collecting such announcements and listings in one page, the editorial bulletins effectively positioned themselves as potential starting points for an expansive engagement with a larger oeuvre of Marvel products – and thus as launching pads for readers’ careers as fans.

Marvel also relied on the bulletin page specifically to mobilize fan support and stoke anticipation for future projects and upcoming releases. Stan Lee’s books *The Origins of Marvel Comics* (1974), *Son of Origins of Marvel Comics* (1975), and *How to Draw Comics the Marvel Way* (with Steve Buscema, 1977), for example, were announced and advertised via editorial announcements before and after their release (see the bulletins included in *Captain America* #176 [August 1974], *The Incredible Hulk* #196 [February 1976], and *Daredevil* #150 [January 1978], respectively). Likewise, the bulletin page included in *The Incredible Hulk* #195 (January 1976) announced the start of production for live-action *Spider-Man* and *Hulk* television films (released in 1977, both the films eventually became pilot episodes for the CBS television series *The Amazing Spider-Man* [1978–79] and *The Incredible Hulk* [1978–82]). The same bulletin page furthermore promoted the 1975 *Fantastic Four* radio drama series with a listing of local stations that aired the show. As the

decade drew to a close, the editorial pages' promotion of Marvel TV productions (including Saturday morning cartoons such as NBC's animated *Fantastic Four* series [1978]) became more frequent, a development that reflects the company's increased attempts to license the production of content in other media (for examples, see *Daredevil* #155, and *Marvel Premiere* issues #47 and #48). In May 1979, Lee's 'Soapbox' column even called on readers to 'write a letter or postcard with your comments, criticisms, or congratulations about our live-action shows to CBS-TV' and provided a contact address for the network – an effort tailored to alert CBS to the significant fan interest in its superhero programming (see *Super-Villain Team-Up* #16 [May 1979], n.p.; CBS nonetheless cancelled *The Amazing Spider-Man* in 1979). Lee's column furthermore suggested that the 1978 *Dr. Strange* television pilot for CBS failed to go to series due to a lack of public fan support (*Super-Villain Team-Up* #16 [May 1979], n.p.). In calling on readers to 'let the network know' about their opinions, the column implicitly characterized the relationship between producers and readers as one of mutual collaboration and support – and, in the process, outlined a way in which fannish dedication could be meaningfully translated into practice. Fittingly, Lee concluded this "Soapbox" with an announcement of his appearance at the 'famous' 1979 Miamicon 2 comics convention (*Super-Villain Team-Up* #16 [May 1979], n.p.). Remarkably, the company's editorials, both in this instance and more generally, address the average reader as a fan – and, in doing so, the 'Bullpen Bulletins' associate the notion of fandom both with the idea of mutual support and with time-consuming media consumption practices.

Periodical Sociability and the Imagination of Fannish Community

Lee's calls for reader support point us to the third keyword that Cohen (2015) has identified as a key dimension of periodical media: their inherent sociability. Cohen (2015) defines the former as the ability 'to create an imagined community' that encompasses the both consumers and producers and 'self-reproduces' over time (101; see also Kelleter and Stein 2012, 269–73).¹⁸ Making a similar case for superhero comics, Kelleter and Stein (2012) have pointed out that such community-building practices manifested themselves prominently on letters pages, which had been a staple of American comic books since the fifties and continued to be an important feature two decades later (269). Typically containing between two and six missives of varying length as well as brief replies by unnamed representatives of the company, the letters sections styled themselves as forums for the articulation of readers' opinions. Curated by Marvel's editorial staff, the discussions on these were, for the most part, narrowly focused on the narrative content and artwork featured in preceding issues, and ranged from praise and criticism of specific storylines, artists and writers, to complaints about inconsistencies, discussions about the representation minority characters, and debates about changes in the creative direction of specific series (compare Drechsel, Funhoff, and Hoffmann 1975, 111; Kelleter and Stein 2012, 269). '[H]ardly comprehensible without the kind of detailed knowledge that can be acquired and maintained only through an uninterrupted purchase of monthly issues,' the letters printed give testament to readers' strong investments in Marvel comics from the period (Drechsel, Funhoff, and Hoffmann

1975, 114; translation mine) – but also to the company’s willingness to foster such engagements. They are thus emblematic for the company’s carefully cultivated ‘intensified contact with consumers,’ which Drechsel, Hoffmann, and Funhoff (1975) have identified as a central appeal of Marvel comics (110; translation mine).

While the fan opinions represented on these pages cover a diversity of topics, almost all of the letters printed identify their authors as highly informed, passionate, and articulate fans. The letters page thus constituted a space where fandom as an ideal mode of consumption was put performatively on display – and then celebrated and cheered on by the company itself. As a typical example, a long letter by reader Joseph Pilla included in *Daredevil* #150 (January 1978) (Fig. 8) praises the ‘honest emotional intensity’ of an earlier

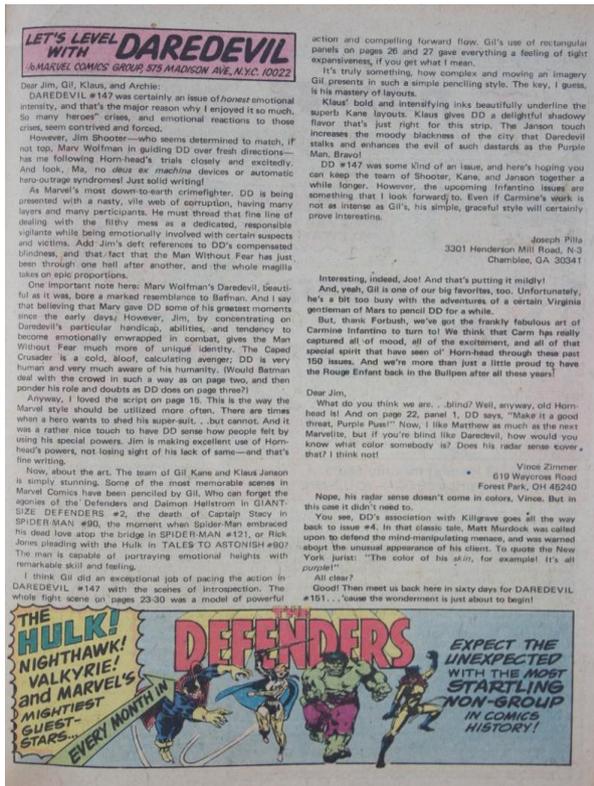


Figure 8: The fan mail included on the letters page puts fan consumption practices performatively on display – as in this example from *Daredevil* #150 (January 1978). Photo by the author.

story, the writing by Jim Shooter, and the ‘stunning’ art by penciller Gil Kane and colorist Klaus Janson. Pilla’s letter ends with the hope that the company ‘can keep the team [...] together for a while longer’ despite a recent change in the title’s creative line-up. Marvel’s reply to Pilla echoes his sentiment by lauding the ‘mood, [...] excitement, and [...] special spirit that have seen ol’ Horn-head through these past 150 issues,’ and subsequently reassures readers of the title’s continuing quality by praising the ‘fabulous art’ of new penciller Carmine Infantino (who took over Kane’s position in late 1977). A second, shorter letter on the same page, by contrast, points out an apparent mistake an earlier issue – where *Daredevil*, although blind, seemed to be able to identify the skin color of recurring villain Kilgrave (a.k.a. the Purple Man) by sight. Marvel’s response, in turn, points to the history of the title, notes *Daredevil*’s ‘long association with Kilgrave [which] goes all the way back to issue #4,’

and quotes dialogue from the aforementioned issue (published in 1964) to demonstrate the eponymous hero was already familiar with his opponent’s looks more than a decade earlier (*Daredevil* #150, January 1978, n.p.). Replies like these acknowledge readers’ input and concerns as valid, re-affirm the importance of (narrative and artistic) continuity, and encourage a continued engagement with the series. Not coincidentally, Marvel’s reply to the second letter ends with the invitation to ‘meet us back here in sixty days for *Daredevil* #151... ‘cause the wonderment is just about to begin!’ (*Daredevil* #150, January 1978, n.p.).

Drechsel, Funhoff, and Hoffmann (1975) note that much of discourse on Marvel's letters pages appear to express a spirit of 'direct democracy' and the suggestion that readers can actively participate in the future direction of the company's titles – an impression that the authors, writing within the tradition of the Frankfurt school, immediately dismiss as a sham and fig-leaf for the company's commercial orientation (116). Adopting a more nuanced view, Kelleter and Stein (2012) point out that the public dialogue between readers and company representatives nonetheless amounts to an 'aggressive blurring of the boundaries – between producers, consumers, and [even] fictional characters – that participates in the performance of an inclusive community. This community is, in principle, open to all, but it also assigns a specific role to each participant' (269; translation mine). More specifically, the roles of company staff and readers within this imagined community corresponded to distinct spheres of responsibility – with Marvel maintaining authority and control over all creative and artistic decisions and the readers acting as enthusiastic (if potentially critical) supporters that provided important feedback on their favorite magazines.

On occasion, this discursive constellation also allowed for the articulation of quite outspoken criticism by readers. *Captain America* #176 (August 1974), for instance, features a letter by reader Arlene Lo, who complains about the 'ghastly coloring' of Chinese characters:

I am Chinese and all the Chinese people I've ever known have a skin coloring which would be best approximated by the closely-spaced red dots you use for Caucasians. [...] I don't find this yellow coloring offensive because I sense it some kind of slur; I only have aesthetic objections to it. It is sick-looking. It's ugly! [...] It is also unnecessary. How many clues do you think we readers need to know a character is supposed to be Oriental? (*Captain America* #176, August 1974, n.p.)¹⁹

The company's response noted that Lo's letter was one of 'many other missives [...] received on this question,' acknowledged that the coloring of recent issues followed the 'sometimes questionable' – i.e. racist – 'precedent' of earlier decades, and announced that the criticism had been 'passed [...] along to our coloring department' (*Captain America* #176, August 1974, n.p.). In providing a space for the airing of such grievances, the company's letter pages thus signaled a potential responsiveness to reader feedback. Marvel's response is furthermore representative for a vaguely defined 'pluralist ideology' that, as Drechsel et al. (1975) have pointed out, is articulated in many of the company's official announcements from the period (122; translation mine). Expressed in responses to fan mail and in Lee's columns, the company's rhetoric generally avoided taking clear stances on divisive political issues – but instead, it offered commonplace declarations about the need to treat everyone, regardless of 'race, creed, or skin color' with 'tolerance and respect' (Drechsel, Funhoff, and Hoffmann 1975, 122; translation mine; see also Gabilliet 2010, 74–76).²⁰ In espousing such

values and by printing the criticism of readers like Lo, Marvel presented itself as a company that valued even critical input and, at least superficially, sought to appeal to readers with a variety of demographic backgrounds – even though the narrative content of many issues from the period continued to deal in problematic ethnic stereotypes and criticisms rarely resulted in immediate course corrections by the company.²¹

Together, the letters pages, superhero narratives, and editorial columns featured in the company's comic books from the 1970s articulated a comprehensive sketch of the type of consumer preferred by Marvel. Per these officially sanctioned contents, the ideal reader of 1970s Marvel comics self-identified as a fan, followed several ongoing series on a regular basis, readily sought out new titles and publications, possessed detailed background knowledge about Marvel's past output, and actively supported the company's efforts in other media if called upon. Marvel, in turn, rewarded such engagement with a steady stream of new materials, with access the cumulative pleasures of a constantly expanding body of interconnected works, by publicly performing its responsiveness to readers' demands, and by actively participating in the imagination of a shared community of comics enthusiasts. It is significant that this championing of a fannish mode of consumption occurred against a backdrop of declining sales – arguably, Marvel here tried to compensate for the decreasing profitability of comics books by intensifying the ongoing engagement of a smaller group of die-hard fans. To that effect, Marvel capitalized on the comic book's status as an ergodic, serial, and sociable periodical medium and reconfigured its contents to more effectively support fannish engagements. These efforts, however, did not play out within a medial vacuum, but right next to a variety of omnipresent advertising contents that also sought to capture the readers' attention.

Comic Book Advertising and Reader Mobilization

Advertisements featured in 1970s comic books were diverse in form and content, ranging from tiny small-print ads in rectangular boxes with little or no illustration to full-page advertisements with colorful artwork. The range of products advertised in magazines was equally diverse and included everything from candy to toys, novelty products, and superhero paraphernalia, to self-improvement literature of various types and promotions for sales programs aimed at young readers. Since the advertisements featured in 1970s comic books are too numerous covered comprehensively here, what follows discusses a selection of representative ads whose offers and/or messaging echoed or complemented the officially sanctioned contents discussed above (for an entertaining overview on of the variety of products advertised, see Kirk Demarais' coffee-table book *Mail-Order Mysteries* [2011]). In particular, I will be focusing on ads that either explicitly promoted fannish reception practices or encouraged a type of active consumption that was compatible with the image of the ideal reader outlined in editorials and on letters pages.

As print artifacts of a pre-digital media environment, most ads sought to encourage one type of activity in particular: that of requesting products and/or additional information via mail order. To that effect, ads listed a return addresses and frequently included coupons

or order forms that could be cut from the page. To convince readers to spend their time, postage, and money on products of uncertain quality, all advertisements relied on colorful rhetoric and often included exaggerations about the usefulness of the commodities advertised. Often addressing the reader directly, these ads also made implicit or explicit claims about the ideal lifestyles and desirable personal qualities that could be acquired through the right consumption choices. Promising, as Demarais (2011) puts it, ‘better living through mail order’ (83), these advertisements thus relied on rhetoric and illustrations that sought to justify and legitimate readers’ consumption practices. In the process, some ads also articulated a vision of the reader as an active consumer that resonated with the ideal of the reader-as-fan encouraged by the magazines’ other contents. At their most basic, however, most of the ads featured in 1970s Marvel comics simply attempted to initiate follow-up communications via mail that would lead to purchases by the recipient.

Among the variety of ads featured in comic books from the period, the numerous advertisements for mail-order comics catalogs most obviously encouraged (and, to an extent, also enabled) fannish modes of consumption. Most of these ads appeared on the

one or two pages of miscellaneous small-print ads which were featured in every issue. The small-print ad section in *X-Men* #105 (June 1977), for example, included no less than nine of such ads, each of which promised readers an opportunity to engage with the history of comics and access to a wealth of material. Placed by specialty comic book stores and resellers, these ads promoted their wares with a few lines of text, often touting large stocks of back-issues (‘OVER 100,000 COMICS [...]’; ‘Over 500,000 copies in stock,’ ‘More than ONE MILLION comics from all publishers’), current and historical titles in a variety of genres and formats (‘Marvels, DC’s, Dell, Classics, Blb’s, etc.’; ‘The complete Marvel & DC Groups from 1935–1977’), as well as ‘low, low prices’ and ‘[f]ast, dependable service’ by ‘specialists’ (*X-Men* #105, June 1977, n. p.). Catering specifically to the collectors’ market, many ads of this

THE INSULT THAT MADE A MAN OUT OF "MAC"

HEY! QUIT KICKING THAT SAND IN OUR FACES! THAT MAN IS THE WORST NUISANCE ON THE BEACH!

LISTEN HERE, I'D SMASH YOUR FACE... ONLY YOU'RE SO SKINNY YOU MIGHT DRY UP AND BLOW AWAY!

THE BIG BULLY! I'LL GET EVEN SOME DAY!

OH DON'T LET IT BOTHER YOU LITTLE BOY!

Awarded the title of "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

Charles Atlas

DARN IT! I'M SICK AND TIRED OF BEING A SCARECROW! CHARLES ATLAS SAYS HE CAN GIVE ME A REAL BODY. ALL RIGHT! I'LL GAMBLE A STAMP AND GET HIS FREE BOOK!

BOY! IT DIDN'T TAKE ATLAS LONG TO DO THIS FOR ME! WHAT MUSCLES! THAT BULLY WON'T SHOVE ME AROUND AGAIN!

WHAT! YOU HERE AGAIN? HERE'S SOMETHING I OWE YOU!

OH, MAC! YOU ARE A REAL MAN AFTER ALL!

HERO OF THE BEACH! HE'S ALREADY FAMOUS FOR IT!

Let Me PROVE I Can Make YOU a NEW MAN!

ARE you "fed up" with seeing the huskies walk off with the best of everything? Sick and tired of being soft, frail, skinny or flabby — only HALF ALIVE? I know just how you feel. Because I myself was once a puny 97-pound "runt." And I was so ashamed of my scrawny frame that I drowned being seen in a swim suit.

The Secret of How I Got My Build

Then I discovered a wonderful way to develop my body fast. It worked wonders for me — changed me from the scrawny "runt" I was at 17 into "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man." And I can build up YOUR body the very same natural way — without weights, springs or pulleys. Only 15 minutes a day of pleasant practice — in the privacy of your room.

My "Dynamic-Tension" method has already helped thousands of other fellows become real he-men in double-

quick time. Let it help YOU. Not next month or next year — but RIGHT NOW!

"Dynamic-Tension" Builds Muscles FAST!

If you're like I was, you want a powerful, muscular, well-proportioned build you can be proud of any time, anywhere. You want the "Greek-God" type of physique that women rave about at the beach — the kind that makes other fellows green with envy.

Mail Coupon Now for My 32-Page Illustrated Book

Mailing the coupon can be the turning point in your life. I'll send you a copy of my 32-page illustrated book, "How Dynamic-Tension Makes You a NEW MAN." Tell how and why my method works! Show me pictures from what I've done for others. Don't delay. Mail coupon NOW. CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 50 115 E. 23rd St., New York, N.Y. 10010.

CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 50 U
115 East 23rd St., New York, N. Y. 10010

Once Charles Atlas, Here's the Kind of Body I Want

(Check as many as you like)

Greater Chest and Shoulders More Energy and Stamina
 Greater Strength and Durability More Magnetic Personality
 Trierest Legs More Weight—Solid—In the Right Place
 Slimmer Waist and Legs

I enclose 15c. Please send me a copy of your famous book showing how "Dynamic-Tension" can make me a new man. 32 Pages crammed with pleasurable answers to vital health questions, and valuable advice. This does not obligate me in any way.

Print Name: _____ Age: _____
 Address: _____
 City & State: _____ Zip: _____
 In England: Charles Atlas, 81 Poland St., London, W.1

Figure 9: Charles Atlas' iconic "Insult" ad was featured in comic books during the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. This version of the ad was featured in *Captain America* #176 (Aug 1974). Photo by the author.

type furthermore promoted check- and price lists for Marvel and DC comics titles, storage materials such as protective bags, and the possibility to sell readers' own stocks to commercial resellers. The high number of such ads – which featured in virtually every regular-sized Marvel comic from the period – indicates a professionalization of comic book fan culture which, by the mid-1970s, was well under way. This professionalization included the appearance of dedicated comic book stores, which, unlike newsstands and Mom-and-Pop stores, opened up a secondary market for unsold back-issues (see Kelleter and Stein 2012, 275). With the above ads, the same stores (and mail-order only resellers) offered their services through the pages of Marvel comic books – and thereby positioned themselves as potential starting points for readers' careers as fans and collectors.

However, due to their status as easily overlooked elements of the small-print section, the ads placed by comic book stores could only do so much to attract attention – other types of ads appealed more visibly to readers' imagined desires and, in the process, often echoed the themes and concerns of the superhero narratives that framed them. This is particularly true for the many ads for bodybuilding regimens and self-defense instructional materials that had already been a feature during preceding decades. The perhaps best-known example for this type of ad is titled 'The Insult that Made a Man out of Mac' and promotes Charles Atlas' 'Dynamic Tension' bodybuilding program (**Fig. 9**). First appearing in the 1950s and reprinted, with slight variations, at least until the mid-1970s, this full-page advertisement is built around a short seven panel comic story in which the '97-pound "runt" Mac becomes a muscle-clad 'he-man' after trying out Atlas' bodybuilding system via mail order (for this ad, see *Captain America* #176, August 1974; for a version in color, see *The Mighty Thor* #194, August 1971).²² In the strip, Mac's miraculous transformation – which, conspicuously enough, takes place off-panel – not only empowers him to publicly confront (and punch-out) a vicious bully who had accosted him on the beach before, but also wins him the affection of several bikini-clad women ('Oh Mac! You *are* a real man after all!'). Richard Landon (2007) has noted that the Atlas ad embodies and celebrates a problematic 'comic book masculinity' that is also on display in the superhero narratives that accompany it (200) – after all, almost all of Marvel's titles from the period offer similar fantasies about manly assertiveness and agility as well as depictions of heroes who gain their powers through sudden bodily transformations. The Atlas ad thus speaks to the masculine anxieties of an intended target audience of adolescent boys, teenagers, and young men (Landon 2007, 200–201).

Interestingly, Atlas's ad is hardly alone in connecting an appeal to readers' insecurities to the hawking of instructional materials. In fact, promotions for bodybuilding programs constituted a prominent genre of comic book advertising at the time. A variety of other companies also ran full-page ads that promised achievable ways to "carve" your body into muscular shape' (as a Joe Weider ad included *Thor* #194, December 1971, put it) or to make 'muscles [...] appear ... almost like magic' (Universal Bodybuilding ad in *X-Men* #105, June 1977). Similar promises were also made by the equally numerous ads that promoted self-defense instructional materials based on a variety of martial arts (see Demarais 2011,

18–19, 28–29). An advertisement for Universal’s ‘Total Self-Defense System,’ for instance, confidently proclaims that

In less than 24 hours you can learn the fantastic secrets of self-defense and you’ll never be afraid again! [...] YOU CAN BECOME MORE POWERFUL THAN ANY MAN! [...] Learn the Secrets of the Ancient Oriental Masters! [...] Destroy any attacker in seconds, even two or three attackers at once! (*Captain America* #176, August 1974, n.p.).

Promising the easy acquisition of superhero-like skills and physical attributes, ads like these suggested that the simple act of reading a comic book could be a first step towards a more exciting and fulfilling life – all one needed to do was to mail back the order form and wait for further instructions. Significantly, promises of self-improvement through consumption were also made in the numerous ads that promoted instructional materials for a variety of other (more or less exciting) skills. Appearing both in the small-print section and as full-page messages, these ads promoted home-study materials for the easy acquisition of skills such as hypnosis, stage magic, or playing the guitar, as well as instruction for professional careers as draftsmen, electronics experts, police officers, motorcycle mechanics, locksmiths, veterinary assistants, or game wardens (to mention the most prominent examples).

Yet another group of ads touted sales programs for teenagers as sure-fire ways to increase readers’ pocket money. Placed by numerous companies, ads of this type encouraged readers to purchase print publications, postcards, seeds, or household goods in order to promote and re-sell them within a circle of family members, friends, and other acquaintances. One such scheme involved the purchase and resale of the self-styled ‘family newspaper’ *Grit*. A 1978 ad, for example, promotes the sale of *Grit* as a way to earn some ‘extra cash’ and promises a share of the returns, as well as number of prizes, to readers who manage to sell a given number of papers per month (see *Daredevil* #150, January 1978, n.p.). Other schemes, such as the ones promoted in ads by the Sales Leadership Club and its competitor Olympic Sales Club, offered a number of prizes and cash rewards for the sale of novelty postcards (for ads by both companies, see *Super-Villain Team-Up* #16, May 1979). While these programs connected their rewards to sales goals that were difficult to achieve for even the most intrepid teenage salespeople, the companies behind them generally remunerated participating readers for their efforts (see Demarais 2011 75, 78–80). More openly than other parts of 1970s comic books, these sales ads addressed readers as independent and economically productive subjects who could be mobilized and put into the service of corporate endeavors. Readers, in other words, here figured not only as consumers, but as economic agents who could increase their income by expanding the distribution networks for select products.

In summary, all of the ads discussed above engaged in projects of consumer mobilization that sought to trigger a range of economically productive follow-up practices – such the ordering of catalogs, instructional materials, and other material via mail or the

participation in sales programs. Since they asked readers to pay for postage, send in cash, purchase products of questionable quality, or take on financial risks, these ads employed hyperbolic sales talk, suggestive illustrations, and the touting of spectacular rewards and benefits to mobilize their audience. Implicitly rather than explicitly, many of the ads featured in 1970s Marvel comics thus addressed readers as interested, yet skeptical consumers whose participation could not be taken for granted. The ads' overall efficacy is difficult to determine – although their obvious sales rhetoric and often dubious claims make it tempting to argue that most readers disregarded these messages altogether. Arguably, however, the enduring presence of the above ads throughout the 1970s indicates that enough readers responded to at least warrant the expenditure of Marvel's advertising fees. In any case, their effectiveness was tied up with the ergodicity of the comic book, which more generally demanded an attentive navigation of pages and contents and trusted in readers' ability to construct meaning out of disparate parts. Readers who parsed the fantastic metamorphoses of the Hulk, the martial arts prowess of Shang-Chi and Iron Fist, or the athletic bodies of the late 1970s X-Men across the fragmented core texts of Marvel comics magazines might thus have been particularly responsive to the promises of spectacular personal transformation made by advertisements. Moreover, the acts of browsing the advertising pages, studying individual ads, and cutting out order forms were substantially similar to the practices of readers who participated in the value stamp campaign discussed at the beginning of this article – a parallel which indicates that readers were accustomed to materially engage with their comic books and ready to engage in follow-up communications.

More crucial for my argument here, however, is the circumstance that the officially sanctioned contents of 1970s Marvel comic books performed a similar work of audience mobilization as the ads discussed above. Where advertisements relied on a flowery rhetoric of persuasion to get readers to send back order forms, Marvel's superhero narratives employed strategies of multi-linear serial storytelling to engage recipients across issues and series. Where ads for comic mail-orders touted their stocks, Marvel's bulletins indexed the magazines currently on sale. Where promotions for bodybuilding programs held up the physiques of professional athletes as models to be aspired to, letters pages articulated an ideal of the fan as a highly engaged consumer. Finally, where sales programs sought to recruit readers as cheap laborers, Lee's editorials tried to solicit a range of practical activities in support of Marvel (such as calling into television networks, participating in fan clubs, writing letters, etc.). In different ways, and for slightly different ends, the editorialized, narrative, and advertising contents thus pursued similar goals of reader mobilization – and, in doing to, they capitalized on the agency of the comic book as an ergodic, serial, and sociable carrier medium.

Conclusion

What then, is to be learned from my inquiry into the agency of 1970s Marvel comic books? To answer this question, it might be useful to reflect on the status of comic book fandom in

contemporary popular culture – and on the fact that the category of the fan has in recent decades moved from the margins of American popular culture to its very center. In 1992, Henry Jenkins' *Textual Poachers*, one of the foundational texts of fan studies as an academic discipline, still noted the predominantly negative media representations of fans as 'social misfits' (10) and assessed that media fandom generally 'operates from a position of cultural marginality and social weakness' (26). Twenty years later, in the preface to the most recent edition of the same book, Jenkins and Suzanne Scott (2013) note a significant change: While the stereotype of the awkward geek has not disappeared, 21st-century fan culture has undergone a process of 'mainstreaming' that produced more nuanced representations, significant attention by traditional news media, and wide-spread professionalization (xvii; see also xvi–xviii). Addressing another facet of the same phenomenon, Robert Kozinets (2014) has noted that recent 'business school literature on consumer behavior, marketing, and "Consumer Culture Theory"' has embraced the figure of the fan as an ideal type of customer (169). According to this management discourse, today's media producers should attempt to tailor their products to the needs of the socially networked and emotionally engaged 'consumer-as-fan,' who, in addition to buying products, might also act as 'an advertiser, entrepreneur, marketer, and producer' on behalf of her favorite brands (Kozinets 2014, 169–70). All of these developments attest to the centrality of fan audiences in contemporary popular culture – fans, in other words, no longer are marginal figures whose needs and interests can safely be ignored by producers but are now conceptualized as important gatekeepers who need to be courted and catered to.

1970s Marvel comics, however, complicate the above narrative of an entertainment industry that has only recently become responsive to the activities and demands of media fans. As I have shown, Marvel comic books from the 1970s were heavily invested in the encouragement of fannish consumption practices; in fact, many of their narrative contents required high levels of reader engagement and were difficult comprehend for non-fans. Likewise, editorials and letters pages sought to foster the imagination of a broader Marvel community and routinely performed the company's responsiveness to reader feedback. Prefiguring the management literature reviewed by Kozinets, 1970s Marvel comics also addressed readers as culturally productive subjects whose activities could benefit the publisher's bottom-line. Nonetheless, the predominantly young readers of Marvel comics arguably still constituted a culturally marginal and socially weak group of consumers – albeit one that was actively courted and encouraged by one of the biggest publishers of comic books in the US. During the 1970s, readers of Marvel comics thus could pick up almost any title and expect to have their own self-identification as fans affirmed and celebrated. Importantly, however, this courting of fan audiences did not stand in conflict with the blatant commercialism that informed Marvel's marketing practices and narrative output – rather, the appeal to fan audiences was what kept the company in business during the crisis-ridden 1970s. Marvel's turn towards fan audiences and the company's more proactive attempts at reader mobilization were not simply the outcome of shrewd management decisions and editorial strategy either. Instead, the transformation of 1970s comic books into fan-oriented

media is better understood as a multi-layered ad-hoc process that exceeded any kind of easily identifiable and singular authorial control or planning. Rather than as an intended product of deliberate editorial policy, the reconfigured agency of 1970s Marvel comics sprang from a productive tension between more strongly serialized superhero narratives, newly omnipresent ads, editorial contents, and printed reader mail – i.e. from an interaction of diverse contents whose mobilizing powers aligned in unforeseen ways.

Overall, 1970s Marvel comics thus present themselves as an interesting precursor to contemporary entertainment franchises that put the appeal to fan audiences front and center. Not coincidentally, the entries of Disney’s Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) – arguably the most prominent examples for this type of entertainment – rely on practices of multi-linear serial narration that echo those of 1970s Marvel comics (see Brinker 2017). As products of a digitized and networked 21st-century media environment, the films of the MCU take the accessibility of specialized fan-cultural knowledge for granted and tell stories that demand a more than superficial familiarity with the plots, characters, and motifs of earlier installments. In light of fan backlash over questions of authenticity to source materials or matters of casting (in particular when it comes to the whitewashing of characters, for instance), the producers of contemporary superhero movies are furthermore increasingly faced with the need to perform a responsiveness to audience discourse – another aspect that echoes 1970s Marvel comics’ intensified contact with readers. In more than one way, the contemporary successes of superhero film franchises thus build on practices that were already at work in the superhero comics of earlier decades.

The contemporary version of the Marvel comic book is strongly indebted to the 1970s predecessor as well – although the company’s recent print magazines present themselves as less ergodic and more linear carrier media for superhero narratives that are now also available in digital formats. Read by a much smaller audience than Marvel comic books of the 1970s, the company’s print magazines today feature less advertising, only rarely include editorial announcements outside of the letters page, and generally dedicate a bigger share of their pages to narrative content than the comic books discussed above. Letters pages and promotions for other Marvel comics and closely related content in other media – such as animated and live-action television series starring the company’s iconic characters – nonetheless continue to be a staple of current titles. In addition, contemporary Marvel comic books such as the most recent iteration of *Black Panther* (since 2016, with Ta-Nehisi Coates as head writer) continue to rely on strategies of multi-linear serial narration that are similar to those of their 1970s counterparts. The storylines



Figure 10: *Black Panther* #166 (December 2017) features one of 53 Marvel value stamps on a separate inlay whose design evokes the original 1974/75 stamp campaign. Photo by the author.

told in the pages of today's superhero comic books also foreground their fan orientation by including many references to often decades-old Marvel lore. Occasionally, such call-backs even include nostalgic nods to the marketing strategies of earlier decades. In 2017, for instance, Marvel launched the most recent iteration of its value stamp campaign which, this time around, encompassed 53 stamps (**Fig. 10**). In contrast to the Bronze-age version of the campaign, stamps were now featured on a separate inlay that could be removed without damaging the issues' other contents, a change meant to preemptively placate fannish collectors. Simultaneously, the design of this inlay and the stamps themselves paid obvious homage to the first stamp campaign. The legacy of 1970s Marvel comic book thus continues to inform the company's print output – even though the superhero comic book is now even more of a niche product than before.

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Notes:

¹ For an overview on the Marvel Value Stamp campaign, see Anderson 2013 and Anderson's website *Marvel Value Stamps. The Unofficial Index*, which features a complete listing of stamps and issues as well as an examination of relevant editorial announcements, rewards, and events. While remarkable in scope, the value stamp campaign is neither unprecedented nor the last of its kind in American comic book culture. Anderson (2013) points to campaigns by Fawcett during the 1940s and 50s and notes that stamp programs were a popular staple of post-WWII American consumer culture more generally (92). Marvel itself ran a third series of stamps in 2006 and fourth in 2017 (see the conclusion of this article).

² This time, each stamp featured one piece of a ten-piece puzzle that resulted in a bigger picture, so that the second series comprised ten puzzle images overall. Series B ran until August 1976, was less strongly promoted than the first series, and offered no rewards for readers who completed the set (see Anderson 2013, 95).

³ Like Pustz (2016), I also understand fan engagement as a particular mode of informed, time-intensive media consumption that connects to an array of cultural and social activities that are closely related to said consumption. Fans, in other words, are best understood as highly engaged media audiences who invest considerable amounts of time, money, and attention, as well as cognitive and creative work into the consumption of specific media objects and related activities (for a discussion of the concept of engagement in the sense used here, see Askwith 2007; Evans 2020). Fannish engagement in this sense does not necessarily coincide with readers' self-identification as fans of a specific title, series, property, or genre. Jonathan Gray (2003) notes that recipients with strong engagements might also identify as 'anti-fans' or 'non-fans' who dislike specific properties but nonetheless participate in fan-cultural practices and discourses (70–76).

⁴ The role of early comic book stores for the promotion of comic book fan culture and fannish consumption practices should not be overstated. As Jean-Paul Gabilliet (2010) notes, 'there were less than twenty-five' comic book stores in North America 'at the end of the 1960s and less than a hundred in the mid-1970s' (152). While this number increases to 'less than one thousand at the start of the 1980s', most of the comic book sales during the 1970s still occurred through other venues (such as newsstands, mom-and-pop stores, supermarkets, mail-orders, or subscription services, for example) (Gabilliet 2010, 152). Earlier efforts to court fan audiences proceeded through the discourse on letters pages or through officially sanctioned fan-clubs (on EC's letters pages, see Pustz 1999, 26–65; Pustz 2016, 269; Gardner 2012, 68–106; on Timely Comics/Marvel's official fan clubs, see Pustz 2016, 268; Yockey 2016, 8, 26). The publishing practices and marketing strategies of 1970s Marvel comics follow in the footsteps of these earlier practices.

⁵ The magazines referred to in this article were selected from a research corpus of thirty issues with cover dates ranging from January 1970 to December 1979. These thirty issues were selected based on availability in archives and pricing on the collectors' market. Arguably, a more systematic study of Marvel's output during the period is needed. At the same time, the overall homogeneity of the material suggests that most of my observations can be generalized; the issues considered here thus appear to be representative for regular-sized Marvel comics magazines from the period.

⁶ For a discussion of non-human agency as distributed and non-intentional, see Felski 2011, 582–83. The above list of actors and agencies that impact on the agency of superhero comic books could be extended; I am merely listing the most obvious classes of actors here.

⁷ Addressing the many attempts to arrive at a sufficiently precise definition, Stephan Packard (2016) has noted the 'variety of cultural usages' that attach to the term comics and suggested that any attempt to identify its defining properties can only provide 'answers that are highly culturally, historically, and contextually specific and thus unsatisfying' (56; translation mine). Comics, in other words, are a moving target whose essential characteristics – should there be any – remain elusive and tied up with a diversity of artistic traditions, material and formal properties, as well as themes and contents that, depending on one's viewpoint, could be taken as either central or marginal. What follows sidesteps these definitional problems by focusing on 1970s superhero comic book as a historically and culturally specific configuration of comics. On the idea of specific types of comics as 'single media configurations' that encompass carrier media and contents as well as corresponding 'communicative situations,' reading protocols and cultural practices, see Wilde 2021.

⁸ Bachmann (2016) here points to the impact of technical limitations for length, page layout, and color scheme, as well as specific looks produced by particular types of printing technology and the quality of the paper (23).

⁹ At Marvel, this strategy included a diversification of protagonists and subject matters, as its roster of titles now began to include a more diverse array of superheroes (including African-American heroes such as Luke Cage, female superheroes such as Spider-Woman, and a multi-cultural version of the *X-Men*) and new genres (such as martial arts and horror/monster comics, for example) (Gabilliet 75–79). Ramzi Fawaz (2011) has argued that 1970s Marvel Comics express a new sensitivity to ‘cultural and social difference’ that attests to a ‘productive link between the seemingly disparate worlds of superhero comic books and left political world-making projects’ during the post-68 period (357).

¹⁰ The number of advertising pages within Marvel magazines gradually increased as the decade progressed. *Captain America* #124 (April 1970) still features eleven pages of ads; *The Mighty Thor* #194 (December 1971) already includes fourteen. Beginning in 1975, issues typically feature 16 pages of ads.

¹¹ The company’s magazines would eventually drop such notices in the 1980s, making attempts to skip advertisements more difficult.

¹² Landon here discusses Charles Atlas’ bodybuilding ads in particular.

¹³ This definition of serial media riffs on Kelleter’s (2012) definition of serial narratives as ‘aesthetic artifacts that are mass-addressed, dominantly commercial, produced with a division of labor, and dependent on technological media of communication’ (6). For a discussion of comic books as serial media, see also Mayer 2014, 122–26.

¹⁴ Kelleter’s observation pertains to serial narratives but also applies to serial media like the comic book.

¹⁵ In such moments, the line between narrative, advertising, and editorial content begins to blur – after all, the teasing of future plot developments here operates as a micro-advertisement for the next installment, but also echoes the promotional announcements on the ‘Bullpen Bulletin’ pages (see my discussion below). Teasers for upcoming issues furthermore worked in conjunction with prominent advertisements for other Marvel titles that appeared in most issues. Between 1974 and 1976, the bottom of every other double-page furthermore featured lines of text in small print that promoted other Marvel titles currently on sale.

¹⁶ Cohen here discusses the British magazine *The Listener* (1929–91) published by the BBC, which served as a vehicle for the print reproduction of select on-air radio contents and also offered previews and schedules of upcoming programming. Arguably, however, the observations cited above can be applied to any serial print publication that makes frequent reference to other media.

¹⁷ The checklist was gradually phased out and does not seem to appear in titles published after the summer of 1976.

¹⁸ Per Benedict Anderson (2006) ‘all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined’ in the sense that they are the product of collectively shared ideas of community that arise on the basis of culturally specific material practices, institutions, and artifacts (6). The repeated performance of such practices and the persistence of institutions and artifacts lets the ‘fiction’ of community ‘seep [...] quietly and continuously into reality’ (Anderson 2006, 36).

¹⁹ For a discussion of pointed reader criticism of black characters and Marvel comics’ perceived lack of an authentic black voice, see Drechsel, Funhoff, and Hoffmann 1975, 116–118.

²⁰ Drechsel et al. (1975) here quote Lee’s editorial column from October 1968.

²¹ As Ruth Mayer (2014) has pointed out, Orientalist stereotypes and yellow peril ideology continued to feature prominently in titles such as *The Hands of Shang-Chi: Master of Kung Fu* (1974–83) (119–54).

²² Landon (2007) notes that the Atlas ad ran through the 1950s and 1960s as well (200; see also Demarais 22–23). The seven-panel “Insult” ad described above appeared less frequently during the 1970s and was eventually replaced by smaller format ads in the miscellaneous small-print ad section (see, for example, June 1977’s *X-Men* #105).