

Alter/Ego:  
Superhero Comic Book Readers,  
Gender and Identities

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## **Abstract**

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The academic study of comic books - especially superhero comic books - has predominantly focused on the analysis of these books as texts, as teaching and learning resources, or on children as comic book readers. Very little has been written about adult superhero comic fans and their responses to superhero comics. This thesis explores how adult comic book readers in New Zealand engage with superhero comics. Individual interviews and group conversations, both online and face-to-face, provide insights into their responses to the comics and the characters as well as the relationships among fans. Analysis of fans' talk about superhero comics includes their reflections on how masculinities are represented in these comics and the complex ways in which they identify with superheroes, including their alter egos.

The thesis examines how superhero comic book readers present themselves in their interactions with other readers. Comics 'geekdom', fans' interactions with one another and their negotiation of gendered norms of masculinity are discussed. The contrast between the fan body and the superhero body is an important theme. Readers' discursive constitution and management of superheroes' bodies, and their engagement with representations of superheroes are related to analyses of multiplicity in individual identities and current theories of audience reception and identification.

# Chapter 1: Introduction

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It's 8.45 am on a Saturday morning and we're sitting at Starbucks™ when we realise that we're getting funny looks from other customers. Apparently they're not used to seeing superheroes having breakfast. My companion is dressed as Clark Kent, half way through changing into Superman, and I am Lois Lane, dressed in her outfit from their cinematic 'first date'. Today we stand out, but before the weekend is over, this kind of sight will be so commonplace people will hardly notice we're there.

We are at day one of a three-day-weekend popular culture expo and there's a queue from the doors of the Aotea Centre right out to Queen Street. Some of these people have been here since 7 am, waiting in the chilly October air, making last minute adjustments to their costumes and discussing which panels they plan to attend and what they hope to buy. The crowd are excitedly awaiting Q&A sessions with actors from the original *Superman* movie, two *Stargate* shows, the *Ghost Busters* movies, and the *Hellboy* movie. They've also come to meet and talk to superstar comic book artists, anime voice actors, and manga creators.

We don't usually bother with costumes, but for this trip we've got 2 different outfits each. We decide we don't need our backups; we've found our characters on day one. When we finally get into the show my Superman plays his part well. "Hey, is that Superman?" "No, I'm Clark Kent, reporter for the Daily Planet." He even stays in character when Margot Kidder, the Lois Lane I am dressed as, asks for a question from "Clark Kent." Our favourite fan is a little boy, of about 4 years old, who runs up to him to ask:

"Excuse me... are you really Superman?"

"Yes, I am. But you can't tell anyone!" Clark Kent answers.

The boy begins to run off, calling "Daddy! Daddy! It *is* him!"

Clark calls after him "No, no! It's a secret, remember? Shhhh."

The boy stops and looks back, wide eyed ... “o o o o h! Ok,” he whispers conspiratorially, then walks back to his dad, smiling widely but trying hard to look disappointed (and failing), “No, Dad, it wasn’t him.”

This boy isn’t unusual in spotting Clark Kent/ Superman in a crowd. Even wearing his disguise of glasses and suit, with his shirt half open revealing the S emblazoned in his chest, and his cape coming untucked from his trousers, Superman’s true identity is recognisable. He is a cultural icon so solidly entrenched in our collective consciousness that even small children know who he is. Over the weekend ‘Clark’ has his photos taken with other superheroes, with crew members from the Enterprise, Imperial Storm Troopers, trainee ninjas from anime shows, and with hundreds of ‘regular people.’ Everyone knows who he is, and they all want a photo with him.

We wait in line for hours to get an autograph from Jim Lee<sup>1</sup> (he’s something of a god in the world of comics these days) we’re amazed he’s come to our ‘little’ event. The last 15 minutes queuing we spend waiting behind a man who is getting over 300 single issue comics autographed. He says he’s a big fan of Lee’s work. Seeing the 3 backpacks of Jim Lee comics he’s carrying, I decide to take his word for it. When we finally get to the front of the line, he signs my issue of *Hulk*, ‘Clark’s’ three *Batman* books, and two more comics we have brought along for a friend. I’m not a fan of Lee’s art style, but I appreciate the significance of his place in the industry, so I’m still thrilled to meet him.

Between two hour stints waiting in autograph queues, we spend the three day weekend wandering from one panel discussion to another and flipping through boxes of comics, games, memorabilia and DVDs. Like everyone here, we’re looking for that elusive Batman back issue we’re missing, an action figure of our favourite Doctor Who, or a bargain on an anime series someone recommended to us. We chat to people as we wait in line, or as we flip through the boxes, showing off our purchases and sharing tips that may be of interest (“Oh, I saw some issues of that over at the ‘Harley Yee Comics’ stand...that’s the one upstairs by the cafe”).

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<sup>1</sup> Jim Lee is one of the artists behind what was Image Comics. He now works as a co-publisher at DC. His art style has been adopted as the house style and he is arguably one of the most powerful men in the superhero comics industry today.

'Clark' says he loves being free to wear his fandom with pride. This weekend we can openly discuss comics and science fiction shows with the people we meet, but when we go home everything will change. We will no longer feel as free to be 'geeky' – and we certainly won't be having coffee dressed as comic book characters. He refers to the feeling of loss that he expects to feel as the 'post convention blues' and the weekend has been such a high he's dreading the severity of the inevitable crash. Although being a 'superstar' for the weekend has been overwhelming, he doesn't want to have to go back to hiding his love of comics.

We've come from the other end of the country to be here as this is the biggest event of its kind in New Zealand. We don't know any of the thousands of people here, but the building is packed to OSH-bothering capacity with 'our people': Geeks.

## **Why superheroes?**

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Comic books are a highly variable medium: from dark noir crime stories to romance and science fiction; war stories to political and media satire; funny animals to superheroes and adaptations of literary texts. While all of these genres are interesting in their own right, superhero comics are the focus of this study, not only because they hold the greatest market share, but also because of the gendered nature of both the genre and its readers. The superhero genre has been around for over three quarters of a century, and the predominantly male superheroes still offer a very limited range of gendered actions/practices, most of which re-present the (current) dominant ideals of masculinity.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Female superheroes and the representations of femininity in comics and fan engagement with these are very important and interesting areas which also need considerable academic attention. However, because of research constraints, this thesis focuses on masculinity and male heroes. While there are a lot of female superheroes, there are very few 'first tier' female characters. No female superhero titles (including those of Wonder Woman, the most well known female superhero) have featured in the top 100 comics sold each year since before 2000, unless their franchise was relaunched (when a popular title is stopped for a time and restarted afresh, issue 1 always sells more than any other similar issue as these are popular with collectors) (J. J. Miller, 2012).



Throughout their history superhero comics have both reflected and provided critiques of the shifting social and political climates in which they were produced. The comic book superhero character type first appeared in 1938 with Superman's debut in *Action Comics* issue 1 (Benton, 1989; Jones, 2004, p. 23). He was the creation of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, who drew on the pulp fiction heroes Doc Savage and Gladiator as inspiration (Jones, 2004, pp. 63-86). Siegel and Shuster thought there was a need for a hero of superhuman ability to inspire people at a time when dominant discourses of masculinity (strong, hard working men who supported the family) were being challenged by the Depression (Jones, 2004). It was also a time when there was an international interest in defining a "super man." Nietzsche, Shaw, and Hitler for example, all talked about a 'perfect man' who was truly superior, in body and mind, to ordinary people (Jones, 2004, pp. 80-81). Superman is probably still the most well known superhero around today.

Superman's introduction was quickly followed by the launches of Batman in 1939 and Wonder Woman in 1941 (Benton, 1989). After the USA joined WWII, the rapidly expanding register of superheroes was enlisted to assist in the war effort. They broadcast propaganda, and fought Nazi and Japanese villains (Benton, 1989, p. 176), while asking readers to buy war bonds, and providing light entertainment for the troops (Jones, 2004).

Superhero popularity dropped after the war ended and stayed low throughout the 1950s, but with new battles to fight, came new heroes. Spider-Man and the Hulk debuted in 1962 (Benton, 1989, pp. 63-64) in the climate of the Vietnam War and the lead up to the Cuban missile crisis. Spider-Man brought with him the ideology of power and responsibility and explicitly contained the view that if one has power it is one's responsibility to use that power for the greater good (Wolk, 2007). The Hulk's origin was the outcome of a weapons testing accident that turned Dr Bruce Banner into a green, uncontrollably rampaging monster whenever he was angered (Fingerroth, 2004, pp. 119-126). This could be seen as symbolic of both the power of nuclear weaponry and the risks associated with them. The 1960s and 70s also saw the creation and rise of the superhero team, the X-Men, who were a team of mutant superheroes (Benton, 1989). They fought against villains and the society they protected in a constant political battle against bigotry and inequality, echoing the

civil rights and feminist movements of the time (Wolk, 2007, p. 95). President Reagan and the cold war were critiqued in the comic books of the 1980s, the most significant of these being Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* (1987) and Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986). The bodies of the superheroes also changed in the late 1980s, becoming larger and more unrealistically muscular than ever before, reaching their peak in early 1990s (Taylor, 2007). The sudden explosion of superhero muscularity occurred against the background of criticisms of 'new men' as having become too sensitive and feminised, and increasing attention to reinvigoration of the strong, hard man (Kimmel, 1996, pp. 291-328).

The collapse of communism in 1989 and the end of the cold war in the early 1990s coincided with a collapse in the comic book sales, as much of the content of the comics after the second world war had been based on cold war politics (Wolk, 2007). The comics industry leaders, Marvel and DC, attempted to increase comic book sales through the production of collectable issues, which temporarily attracted interest from collectors and speculators, but through the mid 1990s sales continued to plummet and their empires began to crumble (Wolk, 2007). In September 2001 the world gained a new super-villain in Osama Bin Laden, and the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century saw a slow but steady increase in superhero comic book sales (J. J. Miller, 2012).

According to 2011 sales figures released by Diamond Comic Distributors (the only comic book distributor in North America), the main two superhero comic publishers, DC and Marvel, took a total market share (units sold) of over 76% of comics and graphic novel sales (J. J. Miller, 2012). This equates to an approximately 69% dollar share, or US\$448 million of the estimated US\$650 Million US sales<sup>3</sup> (J. J. Miller, 2012). The superhero genre accounted for all but 1 of the top 300 single issue comics sold (number 102 was a Godzilla comic),<sup>4</sup> and 44 of the top 100 trade

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<sup>3</sup> UK sales are estimated by the 'Comics Chronicles' to be approximately 10% of the US figures, with the rest of the world being harder to establish.

<sup>4</sup> Of the 10 highest selling titles for 2011, 7 of them were Justice League, Batman, Action Comics, and Green Lantern issues.

paperback titles sold in 2011 (J. J. Miller, 2012).<sup>5</sup> The industry saw a 300% increase in sales (dollar value), with slight increases in units sold, in the first 8 years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but this has declined slightly since 2008 (J. J. Miller, 2012). Although the significance of these figures in the wider publishing industry and how much of this market is outside of the USA are difficult to ascertain, it is clear that within the comic industry the superhero is the dominant force in comics.

## **Hypermasculine heroes**

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The construction of masculinities<sup>6</sup> and the representations of gendered media images (either through effects or audience reception theories)<sup>7</sup> are both well documented in scholarly texts. The major focus of literature on gender in comics has been on the extreme ways in which it is performed and constructed in the medium.<sup>8</sup> There is, however, little work that attempts to bring comics, gender and fans together within an audience reception approach, to investigate the culturally situated understandings that readers have of superhero comic book masculinities and the performance and management of gender in these specific hyper-masculinised representations of men. The most significant studies in this field are Jeffrey Brown's

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<sup>5</sup> Until 2010 superhero comics have always been the dominant genre in the top 10 graphic novels sold, but in 2011, only 1 of the top 10 was a superhero line (and it could be argued that even that title does not qualify as fitting the genre). Instead 2011 saw 8 of the top 10 graphic novels and trade paperbacks coming from a single zombie/post apocalyptic series. This series also dominated the graphic novel charts in 2010, with 5 of the top 10 titles; an increase of 2 from 2009, when it first appeared. While the top selling comic lines in 2011 were selected titles from DC's 'New 52,' a re-launch of all of their superhero lines, the trend matches that of previous years (J. J. Miller, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> For examples of discussion of the construction of masculinities see: Alsop, Fitzsimons, and Lennon (2002); Coates (2003); Connell (1998); (2000, 2005); Connell and Messerschmidt (2005); Gill, Henwood, and McLean (2005); I. M. Harris (1995); Johansson (2003); Kimmel (1996); Kimmel, Hearn, and Connell (2005); Liepins (2000); Terry and Braun (2009).

<sup>7</sup> For examples of discussions of gender in the media see: Anderson, Gentile, and Buckley (2007); Byerly and Ross (2006); S. Hall, Jhally, and Media Education Foundation (2002); Huntemann and Media Education Foundation. (2002); Jhally, Katz, Ridberg, and Media Education Foundation (2003); Kivel and Johnson (2009); Moreau, Mendick, and Epstein (2010); Tasker (1993); Tebbel (2000).

<sup>8</sup> For examples of discussion of gender in comics see: J. A. Brown (1999); (2001); J. A. Brown (2011); Emad (2006); Gayles (2012); McIlvenny (2003); Nelson (2004); (2004); Taylor (2007); Weltzien (2005).

(1999) research on fan attitudes to (specifically) black masculinities in comic books and Eric Maigret's (1999) *Strange grew up with me*, which discusses sentimentality and masculinity in superhero comic book readers. Another important study is Alan Klein's (1993) investigation of the construction of masculinities presented and discussed by body builders in a prominent Californian gym, in which he explores the relationship of male body builders to superhero bodies.

Brown's (2001; 1999) study of comic readers and masculinity focused on the black masculinities represented by two very different publishers, Milestone Comics and Image Comics. These two companies were noteworthy for their successful publication of multiple black superhero characters, but in very contrasting styles (J. A. Brown, 2001). Image Comics' heroes were disproportionately large bodied men who relied on brute force and aggression, whereas Milestone's characters were generally smaller bodied characters that used intellect and cunning (J. A. Brown, 2001). Brown found that the (mostly teenage) readers he spoke to preferred the Milestone masculinities to those of Image comics because they reverse "the most prevalent contemporary superhero model of hypermasculinity by emphasizing brains *over* brawn" (2001, p. 198 emphasis original). While Image Comics' superheroes were a rather exaggerated form of hypermasculinity,<sup>9</sup> other superheroes have also been limited to force rather than cunning when in hero form – for example, Superman is strong, but Clark Kent is clever - sustaining the concept of a binary between the aspects of the character and ideologically between male/female and mind/body (J. A. Brown, 2001). Brown's study of fans and black superheroes opened up a new area of investigation within academic comic book research, exposing realms of possible research around comic book readers and their understandings of gender, race, class, ability, and other social issues in comics and comic characters.

Maigret (1999) investigated the ways that superhero comic book readers from the 1960s to 1990s used their emotional involvement with superhero comics to negotiate their own gender identities. He analysed letters published in superhero comics in Europe and the USA from that period and interviewed 20 readers "of all

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<sup>9</sup> Most Image heroes have enormous bodies, large enough that if they were real humans they would tower over other people, and have shoulders too broad to fit through standard doorways.

ages” (Maigret, 1999, p. 9) about their readership. Maigret’s focus was on the regular readers who were engaged enough to subscribe or write letters to the editor, but who were not engaged in other fan activities (such as writing fanzines). His analysis focussed on the ways that readers talked about emotionally significant events in the comics they read (such as the deaths of beloved characters). Although the men he interviewed often downplayed their emotional responses to the comics (Maigret, 1999, p. 23), because the letters from readers showed a willingness to admit to being moved by them, he concluded that rather than reinforcing dominant gender ideologies, the readers used these comics to negotiate new forms of masculinity (Maigret, 1999, p. 24).

Klein (1993) investigated gender (specifically masculinity) in a leading gym in California. He interviewed male and female body builders and found that there was a common discourse amongst the men that related masculinity to a built body, but more specifically to superhero comic book style bodies (Klein, 1993, pp. 234-281). Klein found that the men sometimes used superheroes to describe the kinds of bodies that they wanted to have. They also often referenced the Charles Atlas “90 pound weakling” advertising<sup>10</sup> that has been closely connected with superhero comics for decades. This connection between the actively built bodies of this community and the two distinct bodies of the superheroes/alter egos was used to illustrate both the “femiphobia” on the part of the male body builders, while the fantasy aspect of comics was used as a metaphor for the ‘fiction’ that their bodies represented (Klein, 1993, p. 267).<sup>11</sup>

While Klein’s research provides insight into some of the ways that superheroes might be used by readers, like any research, it has its limitations. Because the investigation was limited to members of a particular gym in California

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<sup>10</sup> Charles Atlas’ advertisements for his lifestyle and body building course ran in superhero comics for approximately 50 years. In these advertisements, which took the form of a comic strip, young Mac would be bullied and humiliated in front of a girl by a larger, muscle bound man. By using Charles Atlas’ system, the newly muscular Mac can later return to the beach to win back the girl (Toon & Golden, 2000; Wolf-Meyer, 2003, p. 498)

<sup>11</sup> Klein suggests that the body builders aim to mask their feelings of inadequacy against the hegemonic ideals of masculinity by building their bodies to look strong and powerful, and therefore hyper masculine.

and, within that membership, to those who were participants in the sport of body building, his research did not include discussion with other comic book fans. Also, because the link with superheroes was a finding of the study, rather than something Klein had intentionally investigated, this analysis focussed on the body builders and masculinity. This opens up the possibility for research that investigates this connection between the built body and superhero comics, as well as other discourses of masculinity. The comic book readers interviewed in the study also talked about the hypermasculinity of male superheroes, but their relationships to these bodies were quite different to that of the men in Klein's study. The readers I interviewed were both male and female, and self identified superhero comic book readers. They enjoyed the hypermasculinity of the superhero body as an ironic parody of bodily ideals, but the hypermasculinity of the superheroes' bodies was not the major source of interest in this genre. The readers I spoke to gained more pleasure from the rich, diverse and emotionally sophisticated interpersonal relationships of the superheroes and their supporting casts. This is discussed further in chapter 4.

## **The uncharted world of superhero fandom**

Superhero comic book readers are an under-investigated community. While there has been a lot of academic work done on the superhero genre and the discourses of gender embodied/represented therein,<sup>12</sup> very little has been written about the adult fans and their responses to superhero comics (J. A. Brown, 1999, 2001; Healey, 2008; Maigret, 1999; Pustz, 1999; Wolf-Meyer, 2003). To address this lack of attention to superhero comic book readers this thesis examines how some fans in New Zealand respond to these books. The focus is on what fans had to say about the representations of masculinity in these texts, and how they take pleasure from, and give meaning to, these representations. The contrast between the fans' bodies and the super powered superheroes' bodies is an important theme running

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<sup>12</sup> There are many examples of analyses of superhero texts, both formal and informal, with a variety of different approaches. (For examples see: J. A. Brown, 1999, 2001; Coughlan, 2009; Emad, 2006; Lendrum, 2005; Murray, 2011; Nelson, 2004; Palmer-Mehta & Hay, 2005; Roddy, 2010; Stabile, 2009; Taylor, 2007; Weltzien, 2005; Williamson, 1997)

through this thesis, as is the participants' discursive constitution and management of the superheroes' bodies and their relationship to them. Another important theme is the way in which readers negotiate their identities in relation to comic book characters, to other readers, and to people who do not read comics. Linking the analysis together is the idea of multiplicity in individual identities and gender performances. Readers' uses of comics are considered in relation to current theories of audience reception and identification (Cohen, 2001; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005; Horton & Wohl, 1956; Jauss, Bennett, & Bennett, 1974; Liebes & Katz, 1993), especially current literature on superhero comics (Brewer, 2004; J. A. Brown, 1999, 2001; Fingerroth, 2004; Nyberg, 1998; Pustz, 1999; Reynolds, 1994; Williamson, 1997).

There has been limited research done on the ways that readers understand and negotiate the masculine images in superhero comics. This study contributes significantly to the subject of fan responses to superhero comics, while cutting across the literatures, discourses and research methodologies of audience, gender, popular culture and fandom.

## **The Geek community**

Comics are often considered children's entertainment, or low culture, so adult readers face social judgement as a result of enjoying this form of entertainment (Barker, 1989; Locke, 2009). As there are many negative stereotypes associated with adult comic book fandom (such as the comic book guy on the Fox television show *The Simpsons*, who is overweight, slobbish and socially inept), many adult fans feel embarrassed about, or marginalised by their passion for this form of entertainment, and keep their interest to themselves (Jenkins, 1992; Pustz, 1999, p. 114). This closeting of superhero comic book readership was evident when I attempted to discuss superheroes with people I saw buying these comics at a local popular culture convention, Armageddon, which is discussed in more detail in Chapter 3. This thesis investigates how readers negotiate their relationships with other comic book fans and non-readers, and discusses their responses to feelings of marginalisation. While some participants in this study kept their readership to themselves, many of the comic book

readers who took part in this study utilised a resistant identity, that of the comic book ‘geek.’

This research explores the various intersections of gendered audiences and gendered characters through the talk of readers. Because superheroes and their readers are predominantly male my focus was largely on male superhero characters, men and masculinities. However, female readers and heroes were included in this study, not only in the interests of exploring female readers’ responses to male and female superheroes and the relationship between these texts and their own gendered practices, but also for what their presence, their minority status and their potentially different responses could tell us about audience responses to the phenomenon of comic book superheroes.

## **Identification**

In this study I investigate the ways in which adult superhero comic readers talked about their reading practices and how they utilised various discourses around gender, gender performance, heroism, and everyday life. There are numerous ways that readers may make use of, and produce meanings from, the comics they read, including (but not limited to) escapism, fantasy and identification. These ways of interacting with the text may overlap or remain entirely separate. Escapism, from a sociological perspective, is a way of using a text, not to remove oneself from life, but to critique it (Ruddock, 2007, p. 56). Readers may put themselves in the character’s place in order to explore new discourses and new subject positions within the discourse,<sup>13</sup> or to challenge the discourses that are familiar to them (Gavey, 1989). Fantasy, like escapism, is a way of trying out discourses and subject positions (C. Harris & Alexander, 1998, p. 16). Through fantasy readers can test scenarios and situations from a variety of different positions in order to strengthen their existing position or explore new positions that these fantasies make available to them (C.

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<sup>13</sup> A subject position is the individual’s position within, and in relation to, the discourses, and the power-knowledge to which they have access. It is variable so each subject position may only be available in certain situations and not others, and each position has different levels of power available within that discursive context (S. Hall, 2001, p. 80).



Harris & Alexander, 1998, p. 16). Through identification with situations or characters within a text, the reader may (potentially) acquire imaginative strategies for action in the future (Bird, 2003, p. 6; Fisherkeller, 1997, p. 485). Fantasy, escapism and identification can be solitary or group activities (Ang, 1996; Bird, 2003, p. 6), and allow the reader(s) to try out discourses or subject positions in an imaginary context, experiencing how they operate, without having to utilise them in real life situations.

Most superheroes present a unique form of hero in that they personify, by definition, the unattainable ideals that characterise a particular definition of perfection<sup>14</sup> (Eco & Chilton, 1972, p. 14). Sporting (and other ‘real world’) heroes (arguably) do not represent such unattainable ideals, as they are ‘ordinary’ human beings who have reached a certain physical peak that others could conceivably reach and even surpass (Eco & Chilton, 1972, p. 14). Superheroes such as Superman, possesses traits that no human being could aspire to have, no matter how hard they pushed themselves or how naturally gifted they were. In contrast, other (human) superheroes, like Batman or the Green Lantern, are characters who gained their status through hard work (but never hard work alone), exceptional physical or mental talents, ingenious gadgets, or through enchanted artefacts that imbue the wearer with inexplicable powers (J. A. Brown, 2001, p. 148). These differences prompt the following questions: what meanings do participants give to these different kinds of superheroes? Does the ‘humanness’ of the hero matter to readers’ identification with the hero and to their enjoyment of their reading? These questions are discussed in chapter 4.

Superheroes display a wide range of gendered behaviours throughout their stories, but they do so in a binaristic, oppositional manner. When they are being heroes, superhero characters present a very specific and limited range of masculinities which predominantly privilege displays of courage, aggression and

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<sup>14</sup> This ‘perfect masculinity’ that superheroes present, while being defined by the author and artists, is generally modelled on the hegemonic masculinity of that socio-historic context. The superhero is, by definition, designed in such a way as to include extraordinary abilities that set him apart from ordinary men. In this way the superhero’s masculinity is potentially more ‘perfect’ than the dominant cultural definitions of perfection. While he will have weaknesses and character flaws, these often serve as obstacles that he overcomes, highlighting how strong and otherwise superior he is.

brown over emotion, wit or cunning. However, in their alter-ego state, they may encompass a wide range of human experiences and behaviours which can be in stark contrast to the performances of the hero part of themselves (Brewer, 2004; J. A. Brown, 2001; Feiffer, 1967; Fingeroth, 2004; Jenkins, 2006; Jones, 2004; Kahan & Stewart, 2006; Pustz, 1999; Wolk, 2007). It is in the mundane world of the alter ego that many of the hero's defining traits are lived out, such as their strong moral code, their devotion to justice, loyalty to the law, and their social isolation (Reynolds, 1994). All of these attributes indicate a general set of expectations that the hero, like his reader, must meet (Eco & Chilton, 1972). These mundane activities give the hero a degree of realism that, some theorists assert, allows the reader a way into the superhero world and provides a resource for emotional connection with an otherwise fantastical character, because they are able to feel that they are *like* the hero in some way (J. A. Brown, 1999, pp. 31-32; Eco & Chilton, 1972; Feiffer, 1967, p. 19; Fingeroth, 2004, pp. 113, 131; Klein, 1993, p. 267; Pustz, 1999, p. 29).

The alter egos of superheroes are always 'inferior' to the hero persona in some way (J. A. Brown, 1999; Fingeroth, 2004; Jones, 2004; Pustz, 1999; Reynolds, 1994; Wolk, 2007). This inferiority may be an act, an assumed strategic 'cover' as it is for Clark Kent/Superman, or Matt Murdock/Daredevil<sup>15</sup> or an effect of the contrast itself, as in the case of Bruce Banner/The Hulk or Billy Batson/Captain Marvel. There is nothing inferior about Bruce Banner or Billy Batson if they are considered separately to their hero personae, but when that alternative self appears, their ordinary lives as military scientist and young boy respectively seem even less than ordinary. In many cases, the alter ego is depicted as particularly frail or weak, even beyond the level of the ordinary, such as Thor's alter ego, Donald Blake, who is lame when not in his 'god-form'<sup>16</sup> (Reynolds, 1994).

The effect of creating the contrast is two-fold: making the heroes appear stronger, more competent and all round fantastic, while also making their alter egos

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<sup>15</sup> Although both aspects of Daredevil (Daredevil and Matt Murdock) are blind, the character's 'radar sense' gives him the ability to navigate as if he were sighted. As a result, Daredevil feigns sightedness, while Matt Murdock feigns total 'blindness' so as to avoid suspicion.

<sup>16</sup> The superhero Thor is based on the Norse god of the same name. He was banished by Odin to live on Earth as a human, so that he could learn humility. When he transforms from his human alter ego (the disabled Doctor Donald Blake) into Thor he becomes the god again.

seem weaker than they really are. Comics scholars postulate that this creates a feeling of antipathy towards the alter ego and emphasise the readers' feelings of pleasure in the superiority of the superhero (J. A. Brown, 1999; Feiffer, 1967; Fingeroth, 2004; Klein, 1993; Pustz, 1999). The problem with this argument is that the same scholars also assert that this "feminised" alter ego is the point of connection that allows the reader to identify with the hero (J. A. Brown, 1999; Feiffer, 1967; Fingeroth, 2004; Klein, 1993; Pustz, 1999). If both of these theories hold, then readers are identifying with a character toward whom they harbour disdain in order to feel that they are like a character that is highly improbable. The reader's relationship with the two parts of the hero, the duality itself, and the ways that they understand this duality was a very important area of investigation for this thesis research. While identification with the alter ego has been theorised about and discussed repeatedly (J. A. Brown, 2001; Fingeroth, 2004; Klein, 1993), very little work has been done in this area with comic book readers. Much of the literature in this field involves speculation about what fans think and how they respond to superheroes and their alter egos. This study looks at the ways that readers identify with the superheroes and the relevance of these characters in fans' everyday lives. I argue, that while readers do identify with the superheroes' alter egos, they utilise multiple modes of identification, and do so in more sophisticated ways than theorists have previously suggested.

Many comic book theorists consider superheroes to be the modern versions of mythological heroes, replacing the likes of Gilgamesh, King Arthur, and Zeus (Brewer, 2004; Fingeroth, 2004; Nyberg, 1998; Reynolds, 1994). The mythological hero archetype is a very important figure in the cultural imagery of the West as he represents hegemonic masculinity in action (Connell, 2005, p. 213).<sup>17</sup> Like the heroes they are reported to have usurped, superheroes stand as particularly important symbols of cultural ideals of masculinity. However, Hal Colebatch (2003, p. 63)

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<sup>17</sup> Hegemonic masculinity is the masculinity (or range of masculinities) that are privileged by the dominant group in a society (Connell, 2005). This way of doing masculinity is legitimated by those with the most social power, and policed by citizens themselves (Connell, 2005). Those who do not conform to the set of behaviours deemed legitimate are often marginalised and/or socially disciplined (Connell, 2005; Lucal, 1999). The exact nature of the preferred masculinity varies over time and space as social power shifts and changes (Connell, 2005).

describes the cultural purpose of the hero as one of a guide or teacher, a reference to draw on in times of stress and danger. When stress is high and time is short, there may not be sufficient time to consider all of the options before making decisions on how to act, so heroes provide templates and models, in the form of stories, of behaviour and the consequences of actions in a variety of situations (Colebatch, 2003, p. 63). Through these stories, heroes give people a pattern to work from, an outline for ‘good behaviour’ (Colebatch, 2003, p. 63). As superheroes often have to make decisions, both ordinary and extraordinary, in contemporary situations, they could be seen as filling this role in contemporary society.

The comparison of superheroes to traditional, mythological heroes is problematic, as the characteristics of the hero types do not entirely correspond. The serial nature of superheroes means that there is not some nugget of wisdom to bestow, or bounty to gain on the completion of a story arc, as is the case with traditional, mythological heroes (Campbell, 1993), rather the world is ‘reset’ at the end of each tale, and very little, if any, of the individual story carries through into the continuing story<sup>18</sup> of the superhero (Eco & Chilton, 1972, pp. 16-17). Another difference between the superhero of comic books and the hero of mythology and literature is that the superhero never embarks on a ‘quest.’ Instead he fights foes and tackles problems that encroach on his territory, never seeking them out in the wider world. This quest-less, localised, and serial hero cannot compare directly with the questing, roving heroes of popular mythology, such as Hercules or Gilgamesh. Amy Nyberg (1998) suggests that, rather than trying to compare superheroes to older, mythological or fairy tale heroes, it would be more useful to consider them to be a new and unique model of hero that has appeared to fit the needs unique to contemporary society (although she does not explain what these needs might be or how superheroes fulfil them). In this study I consider the ways that readers said they used superheroes and whether any of these uses might fit the ‘modern mythology’

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<sup>18</sup> This ongoing story is called the ‘continuity.’ Continuity can be restricted to an individual comic line or to the publisher’s ‘universe’ in which they exist (e.g. DC Universe or Marvel Universe). On a universe level, one superhero’s continuity affects story lines happening in other titles. While attempts are made to carry important events through the continuity of the universe, minor events are often forgotten at the end of the story arc.

model and the role of contemporary mythological teachers (Brewer, 2004; Fingerroth, 2004; Nyberg, 1998; Reynolds, 1994). I suggest that one of the many ways that superhero comic book readers used the stories and the superheroes was as teachers and behavioural models. This is consistent with analyses of superheroes that constitute them as similar to traditional mythological heroes.

## **Thesis agenda**

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This thesis initiates a conversation with adult comic book readers in New Zealand through the use of mixed research methods. The research strategies included individual interviews and group conversations which were conducted both online and face-to-face. The analysis includes consideration of the attributes of adult readers of superhero comic books and their relationship with the medium, the characters, and with each other. I examine the ways in which fans of superhero comics respond to superhero comic books, focussing on readers' reflections on the representations of masculinity in these texts, and how they take pleasure from and give meaning to them.

Chapter 2 establishes a context for the thesis, both in terms of the theories, epistemology, and literature that inform it. This leads to the discussion of research strategies in chapter 3, where I outline the methods employed in this thesis and the approach I have used in selecting them and interpreting the results. The discussion of the research strategies includes attention to the uses of online and face-to-face discussions as research strategies and how these different modes of engagement affected the interactions and talk about superheroes. I discuss the ways in which these different contexts influence the group dynamics and the talk produced as well as how the group dynamics impact on the talk produced. As a superhero comic reader, and as a participant of the 'geek' subculture,<sup>19</sup> I embarked on this research as an insider. This was both beneficial and problematic. In this chapter I discuss the influence of my insider status on the research and analysis process. I also reflect on

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<sup>19</sup> Subcultures are groups within a dominant culture that, while being part of the dominant culture, are subordinated or marginalised within it. They are usually at odds with the mainstream, being non-normative and/or resistant in their cultural production (Thornton, 1996; J. P. Williams, 2011).

the differences between the research design and the actual research process, my expectations, and the ways in which the social dynamic (and talk) varied between groups.

Chapter 4: “I am Bruce Wayne”, focuses on the superhero and the fantasy world in which he lives. This chapter analyses the ways in which participants identify with the superhero, and the importance of the alter ego in the identification process. It considers the way fans negotiate the boundaries between the superhero/alter-ego, fantasy/reality, and reader/hero. The kinds of pleasures identified by the participants went beyond those suggested by the literature, showing a more sophisticated engagement with the media than has previously been supposed. Superhero alter egos contributed to participants’ sense of connection to the everyday lives of superheroes, but also to an awareness of shared involvement in constant identity performance.

Chapter 5: “Geek Pride,” investigates readers’ participation in ‘geek’ subculture, and how readers see themselves in relation to the comics, the comic book heroes, other comic book readers, and non-comic-book-readers. The nature of ‘geekdom,’ and specifically comic book geekdom, is discussed. A key focus is on their self definition as geeks and its importance as participants resist what they define as gendered norms of masculinity.

Chapter 6: “Conclusion” brings the discussion together, summarising the analytical chapters and their significance and contribution to comics research and fandom scholarship. This chapter also ties the thesis together through the discussion of performance, bodies, and identity.

The contrast between the fan body and the super body is an important theme running through this thesis. The readers’ discursive constitution and management of the hero’s body, and their relationship to this are important threads throughout. Linking the discussion together is the idea of multiplicity in individual identities and gender performances. An important focus is on the readers’ use of comics in relation to current theories of audience reception and identification, especially in relation to superhero comics.

## Chapter 2: Context

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It is important to understand the social and academic contexts of superhero comics and superhero comic book fandom when researching these fan communities and their engagement with and understandings of the comic book texts. Gender, audience and fandom scholarship, and the historical context of the medium and its fans are important aspects of the ways that the readers' engage with the texts and the way that these engagements are understood by the researcher.

This chapter outlines the context and approach of this thesis and explains the socio-historic environment of New Zealand adult comic book fandom. I outline the theoretical approach to gender and ways that gender is constituted through performativity and language, explaining the importance of variable discourses in gender performance. In addition I explore approaches that have been used to investigate the ways that audiences engage with media texts and how these inform my approach to fandom research. This exposition locates this research project within the existing literature of gender, audience and fandom.

### **A post-structuralist feminist approach**

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In a post-structuralist feminist approach, language enables subjectivity and social organisations to be constructed, defined and contested (Butler, 1999; Gavey, 1989). It is language itself that creates meaning and produces the nature and boundaries of those meanings. Language in action becomes discourse. Discourse can be defined as a “system of statements which adhere around common meanings and values...[that] are a product of social factors of power and practices, rather than an individual set of ideas” (Hollway 1983 in Gavey, 1989, pp. 463-464). However, discourse must also be understood as being more than uttered words. Gee (2010) explains that discourse transcends verbal dialogue and is manifest in the unspoken communications - the actions and contexts - of the speakers: “[p]eople build

identities and activities not just through language, but by using language together with other ‘stuff’ that isn’t language” (p. 28). He explains that the way people dress, the values they draw on, the tools and symbols they employ and the way that they act are all part of the non-verbal manifestations of discourse. Through discourse, language accomplishes something; it is not *just* a symbolic representation of the speaker’s concept of reality. It enables the speaker to execute actions, one of which may be presenting themselves in such a way as to create a particular version of themselves for a specific situation, as occurs in gender performance.

Gender is recognised as a product of discourse; constructed and given meaning through language (Alsop et al., 2002; Butler, 1999). It is not an inherent or fixed trait, but the performative<sup>20</sup> effect of a series of repeated actions and statements that are enacted upon and played out through the body (Butler, 1999, p. 24). Through social rituals and conventions, gender is managed and socially organised to fit the ideals and expectations of the socio-historic context in which it is being performed (Butler, 1999; Connell, 2005; Pringle, 2002, p. 63). How individuals ‘do’ gender (or their gender performance) is therefore, the social production of their *individually negotiated* understandings of their gendered selves within a cultural context, rather than a result of simply ‘having’ a gender (Butler, 1999). In this way, adult gender performance can be, even within an individual, complex and contradictory, as well as variable and situational (Connell, 2000; Davies, 2002). This research explores how both fans and the superheroes actively and continuously ‘do’ gender: the hero characters through comic books and the audience interpretations of these texts, and the readers through their engagement with comic books and each other. Both the texts and the interpretation of them are located in contradictory and multiple discourses about what being a man (or a woman) entails.

R. W. Connell (2000), who has written extensively on masculinities, argues that gender is not only mutable, but multiple. In this regard, masculinity should be considered to be plural, as in *masculinities*. Masculinities, as defined by Connell, are

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<sup>20</sup> To say that gender is performative suggests that the repeated acts of (socially and culturally defined) gendered behaviour or gender defining statements create the illusion of a fixed and static gender, gender identity and gender performance. The continual repetition of gender masks the variability and instability of the performance(s) (Butler, 1999).



a “configuration of gender practices” (Connell, 2000, p. 29) that can be understood as ongoing projects that are managed and negotiated in relation to the gender regimes necessitated by situations and institutions. Masculinities are, therefore, socially constructed ways of being a man (in contrast to being a woman) within the social context of *any given place and time*, rather than some fixed, constant state of being. This means that the ways that the participants’ talked about gender (either their own, or the superhero’s) is understood as shaped by the culturally available resources, within their socio-historic position and the specific situation of the research.

Because discourses “vary in terms of the power they offer individuals” (Gavey, 1989, p. 464) they can serve to legitimise or marginalise individuals through their position within the discourse. Some discourses are more powerful or dominant than others and become normalised, appearing ‘right’ or ‘true’ (for example, a dominant discourse in Western society around gendered behaviour is that men are ideally aggressive and strong, and attracted to women). Through utilising different discourses, individuals can align themselves with, reject and resist, or otherwise challenge dominant discourses of gender.<sup>21</sup>

## **Theorising ‘reception’**

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How the relationship between the audience and media is theorised is important in studying readers’/viewers’ engagement with particular images/texts. If audiences are considered passive absorbers of the media and all of its meanings, then media effects can be viewed as a direct and predictable outcome of the media content. If this were the case, then there would be a significant and unambiguous relationship between media images and audience behaviour (Macnamara, 2006, p. 64). This is clearly not the case, as numerous studies have shown that the ‘effect’ that the media has on audiences, if it has any, is complex, subtle and mediated by the audience members themselves (McQuail, 1997; Traudt, 2005; Turner, 2002; K.

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<sup>21</sup> Whatever position they take or find themselves in, it is always discursively constituted. They can never act, interpret and interact from a position outside of discourse. This means that when comic book readers are reading and negotiating meaning in the texts, they are utilising discourses that create subject positions for both the readers and the characters.

Williams, 2003). However, if audiences are considered to be active in their interpretation and utilisation of the media, then there is no longer a clear case of cause and effect, instead meaning is produced in the contextual intersection between the viewer and the text (Devereux, 2007). An active audience approach to understanding media texts, such as comics, focuses on how readers interpret and produce meanings from texts in particular contexts (Devereux, 2007, p. 245).

Stuart Hall (1980) argues that the interaction between identity and the construction of meaning as being a bi-directional process. The media messages are 'encoded' by those who produce them, and then 'decoded' by those who view them, but the message decoded is not necessarily the same as the one that was encoded (S. Hall, 1980). He asserts that the meaning produced is informed or influenced by the identity and identification of the viewer, and in turn, the meanings that are constructed influence the viewer's identity through the process of identification (S. Hall, 1980, 1997). In the negotiation of the text by the audience, the preferred reading may be rejected in favour of an oppositional or intermediate, partial acceptance of the preferred reading (S. Hall, 1980). However, a problem with Hall's argument is that it does not acknowledge the complexity of the social contexts in which media is consumed, and how this enables readers to generate not only similar/oppositional readings, but entirely different meanings from any given media text.

An approach that utilises the audiences' (or readers') own understandings of themselves and their relationship with the media is that of "Constructionist Audience Research" (Devereux, 2007). This approach not only acknowledges the context of the audiences' experiences, but also the role that the media plays within their lives (Devereux, 2007). As a research approach, it asks the audience to reflect, not only on their readings of the text, but also on what this means to them in their lives (Devereux, 2007). By allowing the audience to reflect on their role in creating meaning and employing different discourses, they become researchers themselves rather than objects to be observed. The emphasis of analysis is on the discourses utilised, the reflexivity of the participants and researcher, subject positions that are available and employed, and the contexts in which all of these things occur (Devereux, 2007). Less significance is given to the specific readings that the

audience produce, in preference for analysing the *ways* that these readings are used (Devereux, 2007). I utilise this approach to examine not only how the superheroes are understood by the readers (in their readings of the media), but how they negotiate these meanings within the context of their everyday lives as ‘Superhero comic book fans/geeks.’

This framework suggests there is the potential for readers to engage in multiple ways with comic book characters. This can include (but is not limited to) ‘identification’ and ‘resistance,’ as the images and language are actively negotiated,<sup>22</sup> interpreted, and made sense of by the reader in particular contexts. Using this approach, I investigate the ways in which superhero comics<sup>23</sup> are read and how these understandings are informed by, and potentially inform, comic book readers’ responses to the superhero texts. Through the use of individual and focus group interviews, and online group discussions, I explore readers’ responses to the heroes in the comics that they read or choose not to read. In these discussions participants talked about the different heroes, villains, interpersonal relationships, bodies and behaviours that this genre re-presents. As it is the interaction between the reader and the text that produces different meanings in different contexts, I used these conversations to investigate the meanings that comic readers produced when talking about superhero comics and the ways that they produced meanings through these interactions.

Comics have conventions and rules that contribute to shared interpretations among readers, both in terms of comic book genres and comics as a whole. Comic readers quickly learn to recognise certain visual clues and narrative techniques as

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<sup>22</sup> That is, meaning is created as an active interplay between all aspects of the person’s experiences, including, but not limited to, socio-historical and cultural background or setting, and their understanding of codes and conventions of the media and genre.

<sup>23</sup> I restricted the study to Western written superhero comics for two reasons. First of all, it is a way to keep the study focused and manageable in size, but most importantly, the ways that men are represented in western superhero comics is very different to the way they are portrayed in other genres. Manga, the Japanese comic medium, has characters that might be considered superheroes, but the gendering in them is so different to Western comics (drawing on Japanese ideals of gender) that, although the comparison would be interesting, it is beyond the scope of a small scale study such as this one. Comparing the gendering and reader interpretations of Western superheroes and their equivalents around the globe and how they intersect with gender discourses would be an interesting topic for future study.

having certain meanings (such as speech balloons and thought bubbles, ‘speed lines’ which indicate movement and direction, and even the order in which to read the panels). There are also elements of character history that are assumed as being a ‘given’ (such as Clark Kent being Superman, and his relationship with Lois Lane) which do not have to be reiterated in every story, but are understood nonetheless. Because of the conventions in the medium, and the history that is generally understood by readers, genre competent audience members can potentially interpret the texts in similar ways. Shared cultural and social understandings will also potentially contribute to common interpretations of the texts that are being read, as representations, such as muscularity as strength, are recognised from similar positions within the cultural discourse.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, the readers’ understandings of these texts, and the way that they negotiate these meanings should be examined in the context of the social and cultural positions from which they are interpreted.

## Fandom

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“Audience” is a contested term as well as being a difficult group to identify and study as it is at once fluid and indefinable (Bird, 2003, p. 4). It is problematic to define the boundaries of this group because the media itself spills over into everyday life through the mass media and cultural interaction (Bird, 2003, p. 4). This is especially true of comic book superheroes, as even pre-literate children in New Zealand will recognise Superman, Spider-Man, and Batman without ever having read the comics. However, in focussing on the self identified adult fans it is possible to gain some insight into the meanings and responses of this specific group of readers (Gray, Sandvoss, & Harrington, 2007).

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<sup>24</sup> The ongoing discussion over whether or not Batman is homosexual is an example of this in action. While comic books have a certain set of conventions, there may be times when the application of these is at odds with cultural conventions. Batman’s close relationship with his ward and side kick, Robin, is situated at the intersection of the superhero realms of close allegiances and child assistance, and Western society’s suspicion of men who have close relationships with young boys who are not their sons.

Fans are a subgroup of the audience of any particular media text. They are defined by the ways that they engage with the texts and with each other. The study of fandom looks at a distinct community, or subculture, of audience members for their unique methods of engagement with texts and the distinct interpretations that they produce (J. A. Brown, 1997; Fiske, 1992; Gray et al., 2007; C. Harris & Alexander, 1998; Healey, 2008; Virnoche, 2007; Warnicke, 2006). Fan engagement with the media object does not end when the show finishes or with the final page of the book (Jenkins, 1992). The viewing/reading is only the beginning of their interaction. Fans instead form “interpretative communities” (Jenkins, 1992, pp. 88-89) that reinterpret media texts through a variety of individual and group activities, such as writing and reading fan fiction, writing, performing, and listening to fan folk (or filk) songs, or taking part in group discussions through internet forums or conventions (J. A. Brown, 1997, 2001; Fiske, 1992; Gray et al., 2007; C. Harris & Alexander, 1998; Healey, 2008; Jenkins, 1992, 2006; Pustz, 1999; Virnoche, 2007). Part of engaging in fandom includes learning the dominant interpretation of that fandom’s understanding of the texts, but it also involves looking for new meanings, making connections, and filling in missing details of the story, characters, or fictional world (Gray et al., 2007; Jenkins, 1992).

The process of creating alternative meanings and re-appropriation of the texts by fans has been called “poaching” (Jenkins, 1992), and can be seen as a site of a power struggle between the dominant media and their fan audience as the fans create new understandings of the text through their fan activities (Gray et al., 2007, p. 2). Therefore, fandom has the potential to be a political or resistant act where dominant discourses are challenged and renegotiated by the participants. However, while fans may produce alternative meanings from the texts, they will not necessarily be contrary to the meanings of other viewers or the producers because:

Fans have chosen these media products from the total range of available texts precisely because they seem to hold special potential as vehicles for expressing the fans’ pre-existing social compliments and cultural interests.

(Jenkins, 1992, p. 34)

Fans selection of the text is influenced by what they already believe and is informed by their knowledge and understanding of the media with which they already engage.

Jenkins suggests that the meanings coming out of fan engagement and the meanings understood by the producers of the text may be similar because ‘pre-existing social compliments and cultural interests’ may be shared by the artists and writers involved in their production. Through their own readings of the texts fans (and writers) have the potential to challenge and renegotiate dominant ideologies (Jenkins, 1992, p. 34).

## **Comics fandom in cultural contexts**

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Activities, such as comic book reading, may be mainstream in one culture and seen as peculiar in another, marginalising the gender performances of those who participate. For example, Japan’s acceptance of the graphic novel medium means that men who read manga in public places are still performing an accepted and ‘official’ form of masculinity (Ishinomori, 1988). However, because of the subordinated position of graphic storytelling in Anglo-American culture, the masculinities of Western men who read comics become suspect and unsanctioned (Pustz, 1999). In this context, men who read comics are being positioned and positioning themselves in a different way to those who do not.

If comic book readership is not considered to be a ‘manly’ pursuit, comic book *fandom* is even less acceptable. It is an abject masculinity, marginalised by the mainstream (J. A. Brown, 2001, pp. 63-65; Ishinomori, 1988; Jenkins, 1992; Pustz, 1999, pp. 208-212). While some readers will hide their ‘shameful’ interest, others may find pleasure in this secretive, marginalised status, with some even claiming this marginal status with pride (Pustz, 1999, pp. 209-212). In doing so they challenge dominant discourses of what it means to be a man. However, even as they do this, it is possible to discern some aspects of hegemonic masculinity (this is illustrated in chapter 5).

Adult comic book readership is common place in Asian<sup>25</sup> (and some European) countries, but is less prevalent in New Zealand, as it is in the USA. It is normal to see business men reading manga (Japanese comic books) on the train in

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<sup>25</sup> While I refer mostly to Japanese comics (Manga) in Japan, these comics are widespread throughout East Asia. There are also small comic book industries producing comics in Honk Kong, Korea, and Taiwan (Lent, 1999).

Tokyo, but not to see Western men reading comics in public (Ishinomori, 1988). This is mostly due to the differing histories of comics as a medium in the East and the West, and the resulting attitudes towards them.

The biggest single reason for the difference in attitude to comics between the East and West results from the concerns in 1950s USA (and New Zealand) that comics were causing harm to their readers. Frederick Wertham's (1954) book *Seduction of the Innocent*, claimed that reading comic books lead to delinquency, immorality, and homosexuality (Nyberg, 1998; Wertham, 1954). The 'moral panic'<sup>26</sup> that resulted from its publication resulted in comic books becoming the focus of the United States Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency, which led to the creation of an industry system of self regulation, the Comics Code (Nyberg, 1998). In New Zealand Wertham's book was used to support legislation that limited the importation and sale of comics in bookshops (Watson & Shuker, 1998).

The Comics Code came about as a response to fears that comics were harming and corrupting children, so it was applied primarily to comics that would be sold to a general audience, or in places where children could read them (Kroopnick, 2003; Nyberg, 1998). Distribution and advertising agreements meant that only comics with the Comics Code Authority (CCA) seal received advertising revenue and were sold in supermarkets, newsstands, and bookshops (Kroopnick, 2003; Nyberg, 1998; Pustz, 1999). The CCA required stories and artwork to be approved before publication, and any references to drugs, sex or other adult themes were removed (Kroopnick, 2003; Nyberg, 1998; Pustz, 1999). Violence was also sanitised (especially violence against law enforcement), had to be shown without blood or gore and all stories had to end with good triumphing over evil (Nyberg, 1998). The two largest publishing houses, DC and Marvel, had every comic book franchise stamped with the CCA seal (Kroopnick, 2003; Nyberg, 1998).

However, not all comics were subject to the US comics industry's self imposed comic code. Underground comics and certain adult lines were able to sidestep the comics code, as they were distributed through alternative channels or in

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<sup>26</sup> The anxiety and panic expressed within a population in response to issues that are perceived to pose a threat to the social order (McRobbie & Thornton, 1995).

a magazine format (*Mad* magazine, for example, avoided CCA restrictions by changing its format) (Kurtzman & Barrier, 1991). In New Zealand, all books in comic format, even magazines like *Mad*, and those targeted at an adult audience, were restricted and controlled under the Indecent Publications Amendment Act (1954). The legislators considered the graphical format to be attractive to children with the potential to be picked up and read accidentally, so any comics that were seen as having content that would be “indecent in children’s hands” (Judge P. J Cartwright cited in Watson & Shuker, 1998, p. 140) were banned or restricted under the act.

Japanese comics, which have a history dating back to the mass produced, sequential art story books of the 18th century, never went through the same period of censorship as the USA comics industry, leaving them free to change with their audience (Schodt, 2007). Manga’s lack of industry wide sanitisation and child-friendliness requirement meant that the industry and medium was able to explore technological developments and move with them (Schodt, 2007). Comic book popularity in Japan has remained consistent enough through the centuries such that, “[i]n today’s Japan, manga magazines are one of the most effective ways to reach a mass audience” (Schodt, 2007, p. 19).

Because of the censorship of the comics code period (and the Indecent Publications Amendment Act (1954 and 1963)), “comics have become stigmatised as a shallow entertainment for children; instead of developing a symbiotic relationship with television and animation – as has happened in Japan – they were eclipsed” (Schodt, 2007, p. 52). USA produced comics, through the extreme censorship of the comic code era, were reduced to simplistic and childish entertainment for decades, while manga became a complement to the electronic media of the twentieth (and early twenty-first) century (Ishinomori, 1988; Schodt, 2007). American comics were left behind, not only in terms of changes in the entertainment industry, but also in terms of censorship, as the comics code (and media censorship and ratings systems in New Zealand) did not adapt at the same rate as television, film and gaming (Schodt, 2007; Watson & Shuker, 1998). While recently the industry has moved quickly to catch up with other media, this had already had a devastating effect on the industry



and the insistence on keeping comic books innocuous had a vast effect on producing the perception that adult readers are peculiar and childish (Pustz, 1999).

Attitudes to any media, and to the people who enjoy it, are not fixed. Even within a single culture these attitudes may vary. Japan has a unique form of fan culture, Otaku (enthusiastic popular culture consumers), who engage in similar but not identical fan activities to Western fans. Otaku are characterised primarily by their consumer behaviour, buying everything that they can find relating to their interest (Stevens, 2010). In addition to this consumption, Otaku may engage in 'cosplay,' which is dressing in costumes from their favourite comics (manga), game, or show (usually anime), and behaving as if they were that character (even though dressing in costume has been popular with fans since the 1960s, until recently, fans who dressed as show characters did not usually behave 'in character' as contemporary cosplayers are expected to) (Winge, 2006). At this level, the local attitudes to fans and otaku can have some similarities, as they are both seen as weird or crazy for their excessive interest in and consumption of media (Gray et al., 2007; Jenkins, 1992; Stevens, 2010).

## **Conclusion**

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Superhero comic book fandom operates within the multiple discourses of gender, appropriate behaviour for adults, and the historical censorship arguments and strategies that have been imposed on the medium. These discourses (and others) serve to limit the available ways that participants can interpret the texts and perform their identities as individuals and as a group. The fans may challenge the limitations of dominant discourses and develop alternative, resistant ways of understanding, being and interacting.

## Chapter 3: Research Strategies

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Fandom and other participatory subcultures are social activities (Gray et al., 2007; C. Harris & Alexander, 1998; Jenkins, 1992; J. P. Williams, 2011), so they are the result of social interactions between members of the group. In order to capture the ways that comic book fans negotiate with the texts and ‘do fandom,’ I chose socially interactive<sup>27</sup> research strategies. I chose research strategies for their ability to capture aspects of doing fandom as an interactive process. Using group discussions between comic book readers provided a space for them to share their thoughts in an interactive manner, ‘doing fandom’ as they talked. By utilising research strategies that used interaction between the participants (and me), I was able to analyse how they did fandom as an interactive process in addition to what they said about the comics.

Participants were able to take part in the research in a variety of ways. They could chose to engage in an online forum discussions, be interviewed alone (online or in person), take part in a focus group (online or in person), or any combination of these as they felt was appropriate and reasonable. I was studying the experiences of the readers, and their experiential understandings, so I was not looking for generalisable or representative results. Instead, I hoped to provide insight into some of the ways that fans of superhero comics negotiate meanings of gender, identity, and human versus super-powered bodies. By bringing fans together in groups (face-to-face or online), I was also able to investigate the ways that group identities are created through interactions by observing the groups during this process of co-construction.

As an insider in the comic book reader/geek subculture, I had certain understandings of the fan experience and therefore expectations of what I might find

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<sup>27</sup> By which I mean strategies that required interaction between comic book readers and the researcher, rather than analysis of fan writings, or strategies that involved the participants answering questions or performing tasks on their own.

in my research. However, I also needed to ensure that my research strategies provided opportunities for the participants, in a variety of ways, to potentially produce unexpected findings. My initial aim of this thesis was to investigate some of the meanings that superhero comic book readers made of the hypermasculine comics that they read. I was interested in their understandings of the characters in relation to participants' own gender identities and life experience, and the ways that they interacted with other fans. As the comic book fan readership has not received a lot of academic interest in the past, and to limit the bias that my insider status could bring, I kept my attention broad. This allowed me to let the participants tell me what mattered to them, rather than focus on what I thought was important at the expense of investigating more significant aspects of their fan experience.

## **Developing research strategies**

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My original research design was for focus groups interviews that would be supplemented with one-to-one interviews as required, however an experience early on in my research process caused me to alter my approach. Before engaging in any formal research I attended a local popular culture expo – Christchurch Armageddon. This expo is held annually in New Zealand's main centres and has a comic book and science fiction focus, but it also includes a variety of other popular culture genres. This environment is very pop culture focussed and fan friendly, so I expected to be able to use it to identify comic book readers who I could invite to take part in this project. During my visit, with University of Canterbury Human Ethic Committee (UCHEC) approval and permission of the organisers, I attempted to promote the research by distributing fliers and talking to potential participants.<sup>28</sup> Rather than handing fliers to every one of the thousands of convention attendees, I approached only those who appeared to be appropriate. While I hunted through boxes of comics at the comic book stands for issues of interest to me, I would observe the other

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<sup>28</sup> This event happened while I was still in the planning stages of my research. Because it is an annual event the next opportunity would have been after the recruitment and interview stages of the research were finished. As a result, I was looking only for potential interest from attendees in later participation.

customers and the comics they were selecting. After they left the stand (so as not to get in the way of potential customers), I would approach anyone I had seen buying superhero comics and introduce myself and the project. On a number of occasions, when I approached a man I had observed buying superhero comics to ask him whether he might be interested in participating in the study, the man would deny reading superhero comics before rushing away without a flier. One man even attempted to hide his brown paper bag of comic books from me. While it is possible that every man I approached had been buying comics for a friend, or had just purchased his first ever superhero book, I consider this unlikely.

This experience suggests that many comic readers may be uncomfortable about being identified as consumers of comic books, even to just one other person. This made me aware that some potential participants would not be comfortable acknowledging their interest, but I did not want this to deter them from contributing to the research. By designing research strategies that involved comic book readers having to identify themselves to me, in a face-to-face interaction, I was ignoring this concern, and potentially excluding this group, and maybe even a significant part of the reader experience. If the need for total anonymity and confidentiality were of particular concern to some members of the cohort I wished to include in the study, then the research strategy needed to include some way for these fans to choose to participate and to be heard, while remaining *completely* anonymous.

Face-to-face focus groups require participants to meet with each other, which cannot be totally anonymous. My experience at Armageddon suggested that planning to use focus group discussions as my primary research strategy would not suit all comic book readers. To address this I chose to use a multi-method approach that utilised different sites for discussion. The research strategies used needed to allow participants to engage in interactive conversation and debate, while providing anonymity to those who wanted it. Internet discussions make participation more readily available to those who do not want to be known to others and to readers outside of the researcher's immediate geographical region. The anonymity that this kind of discussion provided an opportunity for participants who did not want to be identified as superhero readers to participate, but it also allowed participants the opportunity to open up areas of discussion that they may have been uncomfortable

discussing in a 'live' setting, had they wished to (Bowker & Tuffin, 2004; Krueger & Casey, 2008).

I decided to use an online discussion forum so participants could take part in an anonymous conversation. A forum also allows focus group type conversations to begin or continue outside of the restrictive timeframe that face-to-face meetings impose. In addition to the forum, as originally planned, I chose focus groups with any participants who wished to take part, and one-to-one interviews (with those who wished to speak to me in more detail but would not be comfortable being identifiable to a group, or were unable to attend a focus group session). I also did online real-time interviews and focus group discussions. Online one-to-one interviews and online real time focus group discussions allowed participants to remain completely anonymous, and facilitated real-time conversations between participants in different parts of New Zealand.

## **Face-to-face discussions**

Focus groups are facilitated discussions of small groups of research participants in which the focus is a group activity (in the case of this research, the group activity was a discussion of a specific topic) (Kitzinger, 1994). They utilise multiple forms of everyday communication, such as humour, teasing, stories, and even arguments – allowing greater insight by the researcher into the ways that these interactions operate in the production of meaning (Kitzinger, 1994). Focus groups allows participants to investigate their own understandings as a group by challenging or developing on each other's ideas (Kitzinger, 1994; Krueger & Casey, 2008) while allowing different views and positions to be presented and discussed together (Arksey & Knight, 1999). In this sense, focus group participants become more active in the research, as they become collaborative researchers, delving deeper into their own understandings than they might when giving direct responses to specific questions (Kitzinger, 1994).

Through the social interactions of the focus group conversation, participants can explore their views in more complex ways than might be possible in a one-to-one interview (Kitzinger, 1994; Krueger & Casey, 2008; Puchta & Potter). A group

conversation that is allowed to take its own course may open up areas of conversation that the researcher (and the individual participants) may not have considered, so can yield more complex discussions of the ideas than similar individual interviews (Puchta & Potter, 2004). While this can also mean that the conversation can easily go off topic,<sup>29</sup> with careful facilitation this can also provide very diverse and useful data.

Confidentiality can be a concern in focus groups as any participant involved could discuss what happened in the group with others (Tolich, 2009). Unfortunately, it is impossible to guarantee confidentiality in this situation, but all participants were encouraged to respect the privacy of the others in their group (Tolich, 2009). To minimise the risks, where possible, I aimed to have groups who were already acquainted, and allowed participants to use a false name in the group discussions if they did not know the rest of the group. To the best of my knowledge, no participants took up the offer to use a pseudonym.

## Online research

I investigated a number of hosted forum sites, but was unhappy with the kind of security they provided for the forum data and the level of control they offered over the forum features and database. To address these concerns I chose to build my own website and forum specifically for the purpose of the research.<sup>30</sup> I installed and set up free bulletin board software (a program called bbphp3) that allowed me to have complete control over the format and function of the forum, and the data it held. On arriving at the project home page participants were given a description of the research project, the options for participation and contact details for me and my supervisors. If they choose to join the forum they would be asked to complete a registration process where they acknowledged the research consent information,

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<sup>29</sup> Conversational wandering (or interactive discussion among participants) can also provide a wealth of insight that would not have been considered had the conversation stayed 'on topic,' so it is useful to allow the groups the freedom for this to happen. However, from time to time it may also be necessary to direct the focus back to the topic under investigation (Krueger & Casey, 2008).

<sup>30</sup> While the project was running the website could be found at [www.superhero.geek.nz](http://www.superhero.geek.nz), but it is no longer available.

chose a user name and password, and gave basic demographic information. I gave participants the option of selecting either 'male,' 'female' or 'it's complicated,'<sup>31</sup> as their response to the question about gender, to allow for a fairer representation of anyone who did not wish to identify themselves by binary gender labels. No participants chose the third option.<sup>32</sup> They were then asked to acknowledge the project consent form, which was displayed as part of the registration process, and then emailed to them.

The use of internet based methodologies raises certain ethical concerns in relation to security, confidentiality and trust. Websites pose a certain security risk, so in order to prevent identifying information from being accessible to unauthorised parties, such as hackers, the only identifying information I collected in this forum was basic demographic information of age, gender, city, and an email address (for private communication). I also chose to build my own website, rather than using a prebuilt and managed forum, because this would give me sole access to and control of the forum database where the discussion contents would be stored. After the completion of the research the forum was shut down so that the discussions were no longer available for view, and the database was deleted from the server.

I employed (or built) pages with embedded chat and bulletin board software so that participation would be simple for anyone who wanted to take part. Participants did not need any special software to join in online discussion - they could just go to the specified website in any browser and log in. This meant that as long as they had internet access, they could take part in a real time focus group or interview, or join the forum. It was necessary to take the information that the participants provided on the forum at face value. With any internet mediated communication there is concern that the other party may not represent themselves honestly (Hewson, 2003). Without visual markers of age, race and gender,

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<sup>31</sup> I chose 'it's complicated' instead of 'other' as it is offered as a relationship status on Facebook, and at the time was a source of humour for many people. There is even an XKCD comic about the use of the term (See <http://xkcd.com/355/>).

<sup>32</sup> At the beginning of the project, there was a technical issue that meant that the 'male' option was not available. Some male participants joining in this time selected 'it's complicated.' When I was advised of the error, I asked everyone who had chosen that gender to email me if this was because of 'male' being unavailable. Every one of them asked to be identified as male.

participants in a conversation may easily misrepresent themselves, and unfortunately this is not something that can be overcome while allowing the participants privacy, instead the researcher (and other participants) must simply take what they say on trust (Hewson, 2003).

## Recruitment

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My insider status was an advantage when recruiting participants. I did still get some surprises, such as the wariness of the men I encountered buying comics at Armageddon, but otherwise I knew where to look for potential participants and who to talk to. As I am a comic book reader myself, and a member of a number of groups that have comic book reading members (for example science fiction clubs, and role playing groups), I made use of my own social networks, and ‘snowballing’ methods (utilising the networks of participants and my own contacts) for recruitment.<sup>33</sup> I used my Facebook page and LiveJournal blog to ask people on my Facebook and LiveJournal friends lists to share my requests for participants with their own friends (always including a link to the study’s webpage and contact details for me). By placing these requests as blog posts and Facebook status updates, I was able to promote the research and look for participants through friends who I would not have considered asking (because of their lack of interest in comics) and therefore reach a wider group of potential participants than I personally had access to through my own networks.

The project’s internet home page ([www.superhero.geek.nz](http://www.superhero.geek.nz)) had an outline of what the research was about and the ways that interested readers could take part. There were links to a more detailed information sheet, contact information, and the registration page for the forum (see Appendix 3 for a partial screen shot of the home page). Forum participants were asked if they would also be willing to take part in a focus group or interview, and anyone who contacted me by email, telephone, or via a forum or social networking site were offered all options for participation. Some focus

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<sup>33</sup> Snowballing can be a problematic recruitment strategy as the participants are more likely to share the same views as each other. However, the very nature of fandom and subcultures (including the geek subculture) means that the members are already known to share similar viewpoints.



group participants were brought along or invited by other attendees who thought they would be interested in joining them at the discussion.

I recruited participants through a number of sites in Christchurch and online. I was aiming for any superhero comic book reader over the age of 18 years (adult readers). With permission from event organisers and UCHEC, I distributed fliers at the Christchurch Armageddon popular culture expo in March 2009 (as discussed above). I also sent posters and fliers (see Appendix 3 – Posters and fliers) to all of the major comic book shops in New Zealand and advertised through local internet forums (focussed on comics, gaming and other pop culture), mailing lists and social networking websites (Facebook and LiveJournal). In addition, I hung posters on public notice boards at the University of Canterbury, and Christchurch Public Libraries. As Klein's (1993) study indicated an overlap of men who participate in the sport of body building and comic book readers, I also advertised on the notice board and member notices webpage of a local gym. All advertising posters and fliers included the URL for the online discussion and my contact details so that interested parties could choose how they would participate, who would know about their participation, and how much time they were willing to commit.

I did not initially have the levels of success that I had hoped from these recruitment methods so I decided to promote the study (using the same text as I had used on the fliers) on fan and pop-culture communities on LiveJournal (a popular blogging site), Facebook, and other internet forums. In addition to spreading the word within my own networks (many of whom were also members of some of these groups), these methods allowed contact with potential participants who were not part of my existing social networks. Using the internet to recruit allow me to find participants from all over the country for focus groups, but yielded the least reliable contacts (only about 50% of internet recruited participants attended their interview appointments – including online - versus approximately 75% of those who were recruited 'personally' by me or by a friend). While the internet cast a wider net, it did not necessarily bring in more participants.

Those attending the Armageddon expo did not prove to be a significant source of participants, as only four of the focus group participants appear to have been recruited through fliers I distributed at the expo. Some of the forum members

may have spoken to me at Armageddon or heard about the study by receiving one of the distributed fliers with the URL of the discussion forum. Despite Klein's assertions that body builders were interested in comic books and superheroes, the gym did not appear to have yielded any participants (or queries about participating), and no tabs were removed from the notice board posters at the gyms.<sup>34</sup>

## Participants

I had originally planned to run face-to-face focus groups in Christchurch only. However, there was sufficient interest from all over the country to conduct at least one focus group in each of the four main centres. I held two groups in Christchurch, because it was convenient to do so. In total, 17 people participated in five face-to-face focus group discussions (For details on participants, participant demographics and their modes of participation see Appendix 1 - Participants). In addition to this, I also conducted one online group discussion through Internet Relay Chat (IRC). I conducted two individual interviews in person, and two online interviews. This meant that a total of 23 participants took part in real time discussions. Four interviewees also commented on the forum. A further 16 people took part in forum discussions only, with a total of 39 participants engaged in some way in this investigation. I had only expected to find participants for focus group discussions locally, so to find people right across the country who were interested in meeting with me to discuss their superhero comic book reading was unexpected. It allowed a far wider range of experience and opinion than I would have had from talking to people in Christchurch alone.

Prior to beginning this research, I knew 13 of the 39 participants who took part, but I had a high level of success in recruitment through snowballing methods (I know of 9 participants who were recruited by this method, but the actual number could be as high as 17). I did not ask the participants how they had heard about the study, so I do not have complete records for the relative success of different

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<sup>34</sup> It is likely that the gym I used was not the best one in Christchurch for targeting the body building community, as it is not focussed on that sport. I have since found other gyms where the body building focus is far higher.

recruitment methods. I am aware of how some of the participants came to take part, because I recruited them directly, or they told me their referral source when they introduced themselves to me. Based on this, I can estimate that between 22 and 30 of the 39 participants had some connection to my own social networks, being either people I knew or the friends of friends. New Zealand has a very small population, with low ‘degrees of separation’ between each individual. This can be advantageous to researchers because effective snowballing has the potential to reach a high proportion of the target group.

Based on comic book industry statistics (Carlson, 2007) the research cohort should have been skewed toward the 25-35 year old male with a post-high-school education.<sup>35</sup> The men’s ages ranged from 19 to 46, and over half of the men in this study (16 out of 28) were in the age group that industry figures suggested. The median and mean ages of male participants were 29 and (approx) 32 respectively (see Appendix 1 - Participants, for a list of participant demographics). Only 4 of the 11 women were in the 25-35 year old age bracket, with a similar age range to the men of 19-45 years. However, overall the women were younger than the men. The mean age for female participants was a year younger (28 years) while their median age was 25.

Men were not the overwhelming 95% majority that I had expected to see (see Table 3) (Carlson, 2007). If I had opted for a stratified sampling methodology, based on comics’ industry estimates, I would have had only two women among the 39 participants (5%). However, I found myself interacting with 11 women (28%). This may have been a result of the snowballing method of recruitment and my status as an insider in geekdom, as most (at least 8 of the 11) of the women were recruited through networking, while as many as 15 of the 28 men may have been recruited by other methods. The women mostly participated in live discussions (72% of women

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<sup>35</sup> Again, I did not ask participants to reveal their education level, but I know that at least 24 of the 39 participants had a post high school education. Many focus group participants did mention this education during conversation (e.g. through comments like “when I was at university I was introduced to...”), or it was known to me because of prior association with them. Of those whose education level I know, all were post high school. There were 15 participants whose education levels I do not know.

took part in interviews or focus groups), while the men were more evenly distributed between online and live discussions.

## **The dynamics of group discussion**

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While using multiple forms of engagement with the comic book readers in this study, I endeavoured to keep my part of the interaction as consistent as possible so that all participants had the possibility to comment on the same topics and questions. I also facilitated all discussions, whether online or face-to-face. The dynamics of the discussions were very different as the setting, the composition of the group, and the manner of interaction varied.

### **Face-to-face discussions**

I facilitated all focus groups myself and used the same procedures within each group. After participants had read the information sheet (see Appendix 4) and signed their consent form (see Appendix 5), focus groups would begin with the participants making lists describing three superhero attributes that they enjoyed, and three that they found limited their enjoyment of a comic.<sup>36</sup> These lists were intended to act as ice breakers that also focussed the attention of the participants on what they found interesting about superhero comic books. When their lists were completed, I asked each participant to introduce themselves and read out the items on their list, sometimes explaining what they did or did not enjoy about the attributes of superheroes in more detail. They were then asked to name their favourite superhero. In most cases, this was sufficient to get the discussion flowing, as other participants would comment on each attribute or superhero as they were identified (in the second Christchurch group, it took nearly an hour to go around and introduce the 5 people at the table).

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<sup>36</sup> This could be something that made reading a comic less enjoyable or prevent the reader from reading that comic at all.

When the groups had finished introducing themselves and everyone's list had been read and discussed, I would collect the lists to guide me in the next section. I had a list of topics that I wished to discuss (see Appendix 2 – Interview questions) so if these had not been covered in the introduction phase (or if I wanted more clarification on one that had been touched on) I would ask about these. I allowed the conversation to wander as naturally as possible, including straying off topic. In most cases, the conversation flowed in such a way that the majority of the topics on my list were covered spontaneously, without my asking particular questions.

Individual interviews followed the same agenda, except that I did not ask for the 2 lists of likes and dislikes. Instead of using the lists to begin discussion, I simply asked the participant to tell me about the heroes they liked or did not like and what it was they liked/disliked about them. I asked the participant open questions about each topic, probing for clarification as I thought necessary. As with focus groups, if the participant went off topic, I let the conversation wander. As much as possible I allowed the conversation to naturally segue from topic to topic with as little change in direction as possible (for example, using the discussion about Bruce Wayne as an opening for a question on other alter egos).

All of the focus groups would have benefited from having more time set aside for them. I found that the groups who had a chance to chat comfortably before the 'formal start' were far more conversational when we finally got started. Allowing more time for mingling before the discussion, and making sure I introduced the participants properly during this preamble generally encouraged more talk.

My understanding of the characters, plot, genre conventions of comics generally and superhero comics specifically, and of fan interactions, meant that I understood the discussion (even if I did not know the specific reference) so I often failed to ask for elaboration where it may have been helpful. This is because it was clear to me at the time what was meant, but on reading the transcripts I realised that for the purpose of the research, and to non-comic readers, certain statements or popular culture references (for example, the in-jokes discussed in Chapter 5) needed a lot of explanation. This insider familiarity also made it difficult to decide which comic book or popular culture references used specialist knowledge that would need explaining, and what could be considered general knowledge.

Being familiar with the superhero genre and a member of the wider subculture, I also understood the talk and a lot of the group dynamics of the fans. It was this insider status that allowed me to understand certain subcultural references and jokes, and to recognise the significance of many participant interactions. However, I quickly found that I was not as much of an insider as many of the participants were, as I had only been a very casual reader prior to embarking on this research. Despite being an avid comic book reader as a child, my readership had dwindled somewhat until about 1 year before beginning this project and I had not read much for about 15 years. This meant I sometimes lost track if the participants were discussing particular storylines or events that had occurred in that time.

My familiarity with both the comics and the participants meant that during the focus group discussions it was very easy to get carried away by the fun of the discussion and lose focus. However, this also led, at times, to the conversation developing in ways that I had not considered. Some of these tangential discussions gave insight into the interplay of fandoms, which is discussed in Chapter 5. Others, such as discussions of the treatment of death in superhero comics, generated some new understandings of identification with these fantasy worlds.

Most of the focus groups lasted far longer than anticipated (most were around 2 hours long), but ended because of time constraints, not because the conversation had been exhausted. As longer discussions were not entirely practical, it could be necessary to keep the conversation very focussed and on track so that everything is covered in the allotted time, or reduce the areas that are to be discussed. It may have been helpful to have someone who knew the research focus but did not read comics to help to facilitate the focus groups with/for me. This would help overcome some of the insider problems by asking for clarification when a participant's meaning was not clear enough to them.

Christchurch groups 1 and 2 both met in the evening in the postgraduate students' meeting room in the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Canterbury. All of the participants had met me previously at least once, but most did not know each other or were not well acquainted. However, the first group had 2 men who were friends. These two friends dominated the discussion, often speaking over the top of or excluding the other two participants and even me.

Conversations would frequently be between these two men only, and in such a way that others could not join in (e.g. discussing a comic book that one had loaned the other, but not telling the group which book they were talking about). The one woman in the group (also a lot younger than the other group members) was often spoken over or ignored by these men. It was also not uncommon that comments, interjections, or questions from me would be ignored in their conversation.

Because two of the first Christchurch group's participants (Ethan and Robin) had not been able to speak freely, I invited them to take part in the second Christchurch discussion group. That group was very relaxed and chatty, to the point that we talked for three hours (we stopped only because the younger members of the group had to leave).

The Dunedin group took place on the floor of an empty bedroom in a student flat, in the two hours before a big party. All of the participants knew at least one other member of the group, and knew of the other members through a wider social group (I only recall introductions between two of the women). They were all similar in age and education, and all from the same social group (they were all members of a club on campus). I knew two of the participants already - the rest had been recruited through word of mouth. Because the focus group took place before a major party, towards the end of the discussion the participants started drinking alcohol, putting on makeup, and changing their clothes. The atmosphere was very relaxed, despite the minimal preamble. While some members of the group knew each other it was not overly familiar or exclusionary.

The Wellington group was held in the meeting rooms of the Wellington Public Library. All of the participants were strangers to each other and to me. While the two men in the group dominated the discussion, this was more because the one female participant was enjoying listening to and observing their interaction (she said as much) rather than her being actively excluded. They all had similar tastes in reading and other popular culture, so were usually familiar with titles being discussed and understood all the references made by other participants (to the extent that they all said the punch line of a particular internet joke, word for word, at the same time), even if they disagreed about a particular point. The men in the group were

particularly knowledgeable about comics and superheroes. This was a very relaxed group, despite the participants not knowing one another.

The Auckland focus group was held in a meeting room in Lifeline House, in Ponsonby. Both participants were strangers to each other and me. I had expected four people, but two did not arrive (although they had indicated that they would attend). There was a large age difference between the participants (about 20 years) and a considerable difference in reading experience. Overall this focus group was rather awkward, and ended up being more of a dual interview than a group discussion, as they mostly answered the question posed to them but did not comment on what the other had said or talk to each other. While the older man tried to include the younger one, I suspect the age and knowledge gap may have led to the younger man feeling a little intimidated and shy. The room was far too big for a group of this size, being set up as a group counselling space with three couches set well apart, and no coffee table or similar furniture.<sup>37</sup> This was very isolating and may have contributed to the disjointed conversation. If I had known the layout of the rooms before I got there, I would have asked for a smaller space, because even for four participants the space would not have been comfortable.

## **Internet discussions**

On completion of the registration process, participants had access to the forum itself. They could see questions posted by me, and the responses of other participants (see Appendix 2 – Interview questions, Forum Topics). They could start their own discussion thread or respond to any that were already running, but could not see any profile information of the other participants (except that which they chose to reveal within a post). The forum ran for 7 months, from May until December, at which point it was ‘locked’ for comments and viewing.

Online interviews were conducted via browser based Internet Relay Chat (IRC), at [www.mibbit.com/chat](http://www.mibbit.com/chat). Participants who had chosen to be interviewed online were sent an email with the link and the instructions for how to log on. All

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<sup>37</sup> The food I provided and the tape recorders had to be set up on an office chair in the middle of the room.



they had to do was go to the website given, choose a user name (or use the guest name assigned by the network), then enter my channel name (#ankhst)<sup>38</sup> in the channel field. Once logged in we were able to engage in a typed conversation. An information sheet and consent form was sent by email when they logged in. They were allowed time to read these and ask questions, then asked to give a statement of consent and their basic demographic information (age, gender, location) before we continued (returning a signed consent form would have been difficult in this situation). The questions posed were the same as those used in the focus groups and face-to-face interviews (see see Appendix 2 – Interview questions).

### **Online discussion groups**

The dynamics of the online discussions were different to face-to-face conversations, even when they were happening in ‘real time’.<sup>39</sup> The slow nature of online discussion (because typing is slower than speaking) meant that participants often had longer to consider their answers before stating them, but also allowed two people to ‘speak’ at once and both be ‘heard’. The inability to glean social cues from body language and intonation, and participants’ unfamiliarity with each other meant that the interactions could be overly formal or limited at times. There was very little of the relaxed, natural, or flowing banter as happened in face-to-face groups.

To the researcher, the main advantages of this strategy are efficiency with respect to time and effort. All online discussions were already in text form, and the ability to multitask while chatting is convenient for all parties. One participant was able to be interviewed while he was at work, typing his answers in between serving customers in a shop. The time it took for one party to type a question or answer could be used by the other person for other work. This means that even though they take

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<sup>38</sup> I chose this as it is my online nickname and because superhero names would already have public channels dedicated to them. Typing the name of an existing, public channel would result in joining that chat. To ensure that only the users who should have been in the conversation were included, and to keep the conversation private, I used a channel identifier that would not be entered accidentally by a casual IRC user.

<sup>39</sup> A discussion where all sides of the conversation happen concurrently, as with a face-to-face conversation or a telephone call. This is in contrast to conversations that happen with an extended period of time between interactions, such as by email, letter, or online forum discussions.

longer, the actual time commitment required of the participants and researcher being interviewed was reduced.

Online discussions were much easier for me to organise than focus groups, because there was no need to find, book, and pay for a conveniently located venue, I only needed to find a time (or times) that suited everyone. I was also able to interview people from multiple geographical locations at the same time. While not providing food for the online group also made preparation easier, it was missed in the online environment. I noticed that the food was very effective at breaking the ice at most of the live focus groups, which would have been helpful online. Not being able to provide the food 'Koha'<sup>40</sup> to everyone giving me their time was disappointing for me.

## **Online forum**

Using an internet forum as a research strategy provided additional benefits and disadvantages to the participants and to me. The forum was available 24 hours a day, so participants were able to log in and join in the conversation at any time that was convenient for them and spend as little or as much time there as they wished. If they only had time to read and answer a single post per day (or at all), they were able to do that. One forum participant utilised their ability to answer without knowing what others had said (jumping to the reply box without reading), before reading the whole conversation thread and commenting again. She said this was to allow her to give her 'untainted' response first, then one that commented on, and may have been influenced by, the replies of the other participants.

The forum did not run for long enough to get the sort of interactions that live focus groups or established forums achieve. There was some dialogue, but mostly people signed in, answered my questions (the initial post on each topic) and moved on, rather than interacting with the other board members. In general, the threads did not flow like conversations. The "Your favourite hero" thread was the exception as the members had a reasonable debate for and against Superman. It was interesting to

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<sup>40</sup> A small gift, often in the form of food, given as a token of appreciation or reciprocity.

see the two pro-Superman participants on the forum have similar conversations when they participated in focus groups, as they were far less outspoken in person, suggesting that they may be more comfortable voicing their (unpopular in this case) opinions in relative anonymity. Many researchers (Bordia, 1997; Bowker & Tuffin, 2004; Park & Abels, 2010; Parks & Floyd, 1996; Tian, 2011) have found that the relative anonymity and social distance in computer mediated communication can lead to a reduction of social inhibitions during online communication.

To improve the flow of talk on the forum, it would have been useful to have let it run for longer. The focussed nature of the forum discussion was limiting to the participant interactions, so encouraging more ‘free for all’ discussions on the forum, even some off topic threads, may have encouraged more interaction between participants. If I had done this, in addition to starting the forum earlier in the research process and ending it later (it could have gone on a lot longer than the interviewing because it did not need to be transcribed), this would have given it more time to grow and for the conversation to become more relaxed. The forum may have also benefited from having more targeted recruitment. If I had promoted the study on other comic book forums earlier than I did, with a specific focus on the forum as an option, I may have had more people joining, and more discussion, as the participants this brought in would already be used to discussing these kinds of topics in that environment.

## **Analysis**

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I analysed the data using Thematic analysis. This approach is useful for “identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). It allows a rich description of the data set while also making a deeper and critical analysis of these possible (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). The process of Thematic analysis utilises the entire data set, looking for common or significant patterns (because a difference can be as important as a similarity) that recur in multiple data items, such as individual interviews or focus groups (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81). Because this analytic approach does not require the researcher interpret the data based on predefined concepts, it allows the participants to act as

collaborators in the research, directing the researcher to the issues that matter to them (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It also allows the researcher to investigate differences as well as similarities and to generate unexpected themes and insights (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Thematic analysis, like the use of focus groups, positions the participant in a collaborative role (Braun & Clarke, 2006), as they are more able to identify the areas that they feel most need to be discussed. Very importantly, as an insider researcher, thematic analysis also allows the researcher to identify unanticipated themes in the initial coding, as it can be data driven as well as theory driven (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This allows a reduction of the influence that preconceived ideas might have on the coding and analysis.

All live interviews and focus groups were recorded on both a cassette tape recorder and a digital sound recorder. Initially, while the interviews were still fresh in my mind, I listened to all of the audio recordings once, taking detailed notes about the topics discussed and the nature of the conversation to aid in the transcription and analysis process. These notes were very detailed descriptions of what was said (as detailed as I could manage when listening only once) and the nature of the interactions (if someone was angry, or sarcastic, or if I remembered that there was a hand gesture used). These notes later served as 'bookmarks' in the analysis that helped me follow the context of discussion in long sections of conversation, or to narrow down where to look for a specific conversation that I wanted to revisit.

The recorded interviews and focus groups were then fully transcribed for analysis. The transcription did not include conversational markers, such as pauses and inflections as these would not be used for the analysis. Abandoned sentences and 'ums' were included only where the meaning would be altered or lost without it. This was done in order to keep the language and discussion as similar to the conversation recorded during online discussions.

I then read through the interview and focus group transcripts, and the texts of online and forum discussions, identifying key themes. From participating in the research, listening to and transcribing the tapes, and reading the forum, I already had some idea of the underlying ideas that participants had identified as being most

important to them, so I looked primarily for these.<sup>41</sup> The two key themes I finally chose to focus my attention on were what fans said about their identification with the superhero (fans identifying with the hero) and the ways that they talked about themselves, other fans and non-readers (fans identifying with/as geeks/nerds/fans). I chose these because they had not been considered in the literature on superhero fandom and because they often consumed the attention of research participants. Unfortunately, many interesting avenue of discussion had to be put aside at this time given the constraints of a master's thesis.

After identifying the key focus for each chapter, I went back through the printed transcripts and forum pages, manually coding the printouts with multiple coloured highlighters. I used separate printouts for the two themes identified, and then used different colours for different subtopics within each theme (for example: different kinds of superhero bodies, failures in suspension of disbelief, discussions of superheroes' 'bodily functions,' and other media and interests). When conversations of a particular topic diverged and converged repeatedly over a number of pages (which happened often in focus groups), I also attached and coded a copy of my initial notes to the transcript page, to help track the theme's movement within the conversation while retaining its full context. I repeated the coding process for each of the different discussion topics and key themes and subthemes that I had identified. I then collated the highlighted portions and looked at them together to identify and define related ideas and topics that could be discussed. These topics became the subsections of Chapters 4 and 5.

During this process I kept track of potentially useful quotes by flagging the pages with write on sticky notes colour coded to match the coding highlighters, and wrote keywords on them to help locate them more easily. I also highlighted these in their topic colours in an Microsoft® Word copy of the transcript file to make finding them easier.

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<sup>41</sup> Some of the themes that I considered but did not follow up were the body/mind duality (which Brown (2001) had already identified as important in his research), Transhumanist philosophy and superhero bodies, Superheroes and New Zealand masculinities, and the relationships fans saw between comics and pornography.

After identifying the sections of conversation for analysis I looked at how the participants' discussions fitted with (or did not fit with) current literature on each topic. I looked at what these conversations and their relationship to existing scholarship meant for the readers in this study and how they were situated within a wider social context. Quotes from research participants that were used in Chapters 4 and 5 were chosen in a number of ways. Some were identified during coding as being succinct examples of reflection on the key topics, others I searched for when I was looking for a specific example I could remember, while some (specifically those relating to the use of certain words – e.g. Superman, Batman, nerd, geek, alter ego) were identified using the find function on Microsoft® Word.

During the analysis and writing, I also reread the notes I had made from the tapes, coding these to match the transcripts and identifying sections to look at more closely for examples of more subtle interactions, such as competitive language and behaviour.<sup>42</sup> I also re-listened to relevant sections of tape when writing about the group interactions so that I could be sure that the intonations and emotional aspects of the interactions were accurately captured in the transcripts.

## **Conclusion**

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Fandom is a participatory activity, so a participatory research strategy is useful to effectively investigate the meanings that comic book fans make of the stories they read, and the ways that they engage in their fandom. However, the potential for feelings of stigma associated with comics book readership means that some readers may not be comfortable engaging in face-to-face forms of fandom. To recognise both solitary readers and interactive fans, and to allow those who would prefer to remain anonymous, the initial research design was expanded to include online participation. The internet based research strategies I employed allowed participants to comment in a solitary fashion, or to interact with other readers if they

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<sup>42</sup> For example, when a conversation changed direction very quickly for no clear reason, I looked to the transcripts for clues as to whether something had happened to distract the participants (sometimes the snack food I provided caused distraction), or whether another participant had jumped in to abruptly change the subject to something they found more interesting.

wished while remaining completely anonymous. The research approach provided a resource for participants to interact and form a group identity, to consolidate relationships, and provided a site for them to demonstrate knowledge and to negotiate power in these relationships. By bringing groups together for the first time, it was also possible to observe and analyse the ways that fan communities interact to form group identities and social hierarchies without previously established social arrangements.

Multiple research strategies used in this research allowed participants control of their time commitment and over how identifiable they were. The research tools used were face-to-face and online focus group discussions, individual interviews in person or online, and an online forum. The focus group data was analysed using thematic analysis, focussing on themes that were identified as important to the participants, and significant in their absence from the literature on superhero fandom and fan communities.

## Chapter 4: Superheroes, alter egos, and fan identification

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Traversing the space between fantasy and reality is important for readers who wish to immerse themselves in the story and imaginatively experience it as their own (Cohen, 2001; Cohen & Ribak, 2003). The more fantastic the story, the bigger this gap between fantasy and reality becomes. One method of negotiating this distance is identification with the characters in the story. There are a range of definitions of identification and theories proposing how audience members achieve it but all depend on the reader/viewer seeing something familiar in the fantasy character, such as recognising part of themselves (Cohen, 2001). The lives and bodies of the readers are so very different to those of comic book superheroes that, for the readers, this point of similarity can be difficult to find. The readers in this study often used the heroes' alter egos as a point of identification, recognising similarities between themselves and this aspect of the superhero.

This chapter examines how adult superhero comic readers in New Zealand talk about the ways that they identify with the superheroes who feature in comic books they read. Because comic book related research is a small and relatively new area of study, there are significant areas that remain under investigated, especially those around fan readings of the superheroes and their alter egos. Some superhero comic theorists assert that certain aspects of the superhero allow readers to identify with them and to feel that they are like the hero in some way (J. A. Brown, 2001; Fingerioth, 2004), yet very little research has been carried out on the engagement of the comic book readers with the fantasy characters and universes of comic book (J. A. Brown, 2001; Maigret, 1999). This chapter begins to address the specific area of fan identification with the superheroes and their alter egos.

Superhero bodies are all, in different ways, more powerful than ordinary humans' but superhero bodies are also contrasted with 'human' bodies through their alter egos. Through their talk and online discussions, the comic book readers in my



study manage the boundaries of fantasy, reality, and the gendered body, and at times discursively pull the superhero body back to a human level. This chapter analyses how the fans who participated in this research use weaknesses in the human dimensions of superhero bodies and failures in the plausibility of the stories to (re)construct the superhero as more human and therefore more like themselves.

## **Ad/dressing the Alter Ego**

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One boundary that the superhero genre challenges, and that most participants engaged with, is the limitations of the physical world and of the biological body. The comic book readers in this study found pleasure in the transgression of these boundaries by the hero. They used the heroes' bodies as a site to discursively de/construct what it means to be human, with a human body. Elizabeth Grosz (1994, p. 36) suggests that the boundary between the imagined body and the physical/material body (as the inside and outside versions of one's identity) is not that of discrete bodies, but more like a möebius strip,<sup>43</sup> where they are a continuous unit in which the inside is, or *becomes*, the outside. Superheroes challenge the existence of a boundary between the human body and super body through having bodies that are simultaneously both similar and extremely different to those of their readers and fans. The superheroes' super bodies and the human bodies are also not discrete bodies, but are continuous and indivisible entities.

Participants' discussions indicate that they enjoy negotiating the differences and similarities between the superheroes' bodies and their own. These pleasures came not only from the perceived similarity between the superheroes and their audience, but also from the genre's ability to contrast and to parody the 'real' world of the reader.

It could be argued that superhero bodies have exaggerated musculature that is there only for visual display, and therefore, like the bodies of the bodybuilding

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<sup>43</sup> A möebius strip is a loop with a twist in it so the outside and inside surfaces flow into one another. Starting on the inside of a möebius strip and following around the circumference, without leaving the surface will lead to the outside surface. The loop is congruous and unbroken, yet inside and outside are continuous.

industry, can therefore be feminised through the objectification of these bodies by an appraising gaze (Johansson, 2003; Klein, 1993; Obel, 1996).<sup>44</sup> However, while superhero bodies are subject to fashions surrounding visual ideals of masculine bodies (and therefore are influenced by trends in bodybuilding),<sup>45</sup> unlike the hyper-muscular bodies of body building, the muscularity of the superhero body is not there solely for the purpose of being seen. Some of the ‘innately gifted’ heroes, such as Superman, have intrinsic physical strength that would (and does) remain regardless of the musculature of the body. However, human heroes, such as Batman, are strong because of intense physical training. Like the bodies of traditional labourers, superhero physiques may be muscular as a result of the work they do (for example, saving the world, fighting evil, or the intense physical training that some heroes are shown doing) and the physical strength that they possess, not from deliberate body sculpting activities.

The medium of comic books brings about a technical necessity for showing strong bodies as muscular. Because of the static nature of the comic book medium, strength and power can be difficult to demonstrate. When he (or she) is not seen performing feats of strength, such as lifting cars, or bending lamp posts, there is no way for the superhero’s strength to be shown in the action of the comics. Strength in movement can be easily lost when the movement is captured in a single, drawn image. Therefore, the musculature of superhero bodies is a visual signifier of the strength and power that they possess.<sup>46</sup> Some characters (for example, The Hulk) get larger and ‘develop’ muscles when they transform from their normal human being

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<sup>44</sup> The intentional building of muscular bodies in the sport of bodybuilding is a problematic and somewhat contradictory gender display. Critics of the sport suggest that by sculpting their bodies, not for power but for display, these athletes reposition themselves as objects of the Gaze, which has traditionally been associated with feminine objectification. The suggestion is that, despite possessing exaggerated musculature, which is often seen as a signifier of masculinity, body builders are in some ways feminised by constructing themselves as subjects for appraisal by others (Obel, 1996; Richardson, 2004).

<sup>45</sup> See the introduction for discussion of changes in the visual aspects of this genre.

<sup>46</sup> In non-visual mediums, such as the early Superman radio shows, audible cues were used to signify differences in superhero bodies (i.e. Superman’s voice was always lower in timbre than Clark Kent’s). In the radio shows it is indicated that Clark Kent is less muscular than Superman (Freeman & Johnstone, 1949).

identity into their superhero identity, acting as a visual symbol that indicates an increase in strength when changing from the 'human' to 'hero' aspect.

If hegemonic masculinity is the pinnacle of traits for which men are meant to strive, the superhero body challenges this position by doing everything associated with that ideal, but doing it to extremes. The hegemonic male is physically strong, technically capable, unemotional/emotionally detached and driven by reason. He is white, financially secure, heterosexual and able bodied (Connell, 2005; Jefferson, 2002; Maigret, 1999). Every superhero's body is, in some way, stronger, faster, or more powerful than an ordinary human. Those heroes, who have no special powers, still have bodies that are set apart from non-superhero humans. For example, Batman is a playboy millionaire (more recently a billionaire), who has trained his body and mind to a level far beyond that of other people, and the Green Lantern has a special ring that allows him to shape physical matter with his own mind. Even superheroes who do not meet all of the requirements of the ideal masculinity (such as the physically disabled Professor X, or the blind Matt Murdock/Daredevil) surpass other aspects of this ideal by not only overcoming their 'failures of masculinity,' but being more powerful in many ways than those who never failed.

Identification with characters within the narrative is an important part of the audience experience, yet also a contested and controversial concept. Despite being a term commonly used by audience members and media theorists alike, there is no universally accepted definition of what the term 'identification' means, what is or is not identification, or any agreed upon theory of how it happens (Cohen, 2001; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005). Discussions of audience identification range from theories that readers momentarily imagine themselves as the character and internalise aspects of that identity (Cohen, 2001), to suggesting that they wish to become like the character (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005), or that they recognise that they are similar in some way (Cowie, 1997), to suggesting that the viewer/reader is able to imagine the character as a friend (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

Cohen (2001) suggests, in his paper on the difficulties and disparities of defining audience identification with fictional media characters, that the common thread in all theorizing about identification is that identification is seen to have an important function as a means of emotional engagement with the media text.

Through the vicarious experience that identification allows “we extend our emotional horizons and social perspectives” (Cohen, 2001, p. 249). However, in the realm of media studies, Liebes and Katz (1993) define identification differently, as the viewer/reader recognising that that they are *similar* to the character, that they *like* the character, or that they *wish to be like* the character (which may result in changed behaviour or attitudes). Some theorists, approaching identification from a psychoanalytic perspective, define it in terms of understanding and empathy, requiring the audience member to internalise the experience, to the point of temporarily seeing themselves ‘as the character’ for moments at a time (Cohen, 2001). Cowie (1997, p. 140), also looking at media from a psychoanalytic perspective, suggests that sometimes the audience members do not need to imagine themselves to *be* that character, but instead can insert themselves into the *situation* that they recognise or most wish to experience (such as having to juggle work and personal commitments, or fighting against things that they see as wrong, respectively). In other words, even if the reader sees no similarity between themselves and the hero, or even dislikes the character, they may feel an affinity with the relationships or situation being portrayed (Cowie, 1997, p. 140). Horton and Wohl (1956) suggest that in addition to these ways of identifying, the audience may engage with and identify with the characters parasocially, that is, on the level of friends or potential friends. They suggest that audience members do not have to see themselves as the main character, but imaginatively interact ‘as if’ it were a ‘real social encounter’ (Horton & Wohl, 1956). In this chapter I explore the ways in which the readers participating in this study employed multiple modes of engaging with the characters in the comics with a particular focus on the role of the superheroes’ human alter egos in identification.

Most superheroes have a human secret identity which allows them to participate in day to day activities, as non-heroes. The alter ego is always a weaker version of the hero, which comics theorists (J. A. Brown, 2001, p. 174; Fingerroth, 2004; Pustz, 1999, p. 135; Williamson, 1997) suggest plays a dual role. The alter ego’s weaker (and often feminised) nature contrasts with the hypermasculinity of his hero aspect, making that part of him appear stronger and more masculine by comparison. At the same time, the alter ego’s ordinariness means that he is also an

entry point for readers, allowing them to feel that they may have something in common with the superhero. The mechanism of this identification is imagined in various ways. Brown suggests that it is the weaker alter ego that gives readers a point of similarity with which to engage:

While the [male] superhero body represents in vividly graphic detail the muscularity, the confidence, the power that personifies the ideal of phallic masculinity, the alter ego - the identity that must be kept secret - depicts the softness, the powerlessness, the insecurity associated with the feminized man. ... Yet, despite the derisively castrated portrayal of Clark Kent, it is this failure-prone side of the character that facilitates reader identification with the fantasy of Superman.

(2001, p. 174)

Brown (2001) and Klein (1993) suggest that the reader's relationship with the alter ego is an ambivalent one of derision for being weak, while at the same time, sympathy for that same weakness. It is, for example, through the recognition of the similarity between their own lives and Clark Kent's clumsiness, or Peter Parker's relationship problems, that readers insert themselves in the story. For Brown and Klein it is because the reader can imagine himself as the ordinary Clark Kent, Peter Parker, or Dr Banner, that he is also able to see himself as the Superman, Spider-Man, or the Hulk. The readers of this study did identify with the alter ego side of the hero, not through a focus on the 'castrated' or 'failure-prone' characteristics, but through the recognition of similarities between the alter ego's emotional life and their own.

According to other comics scholars (Fingerroth, 2004; Kahan & Stewart, 2006; Reynolds, 1994; Williamson, 1997), the weak, invisible alter ego obscures the powerful superhero identity. These theorists suggest that the readers like to imagine themselves as having a secret superhero identity, thinking "If only they knew how special I am" (Fingerroth, 2004, p. 50; Williamson, 1997). Fingerroth suggests that on some level all superhero comic book readers want to be recognised as special in some way and asks: "Don't we all have secret identities, those sides of ourselves we feel we dare not risk revealing? The secret identity is where our secret ambitions take hold and ferment" (2004, p. 50). He argues that the superhero and alter ego speak to the reader's recognition of the tendency for everyone to have aspects of themselves that they keep hidden. He suggests that readers imagine that this secret could be a

super power, or great heroic potential, and that it is through this imagining that readers identify with the alter ego and therefore the hero.

Brown, Klein, and Fingerroth's theories above are solely based on psychoanalytic theorising or personal reflection.<sup>47</sup> These theorists have not spoken to fans about this specific aspect of their enjoyment. Brown's (2001) research is to date the most significant investigative approach to fan identification.<sup>48</sup> Brown's discussion of the alter egos is theoretical reasoning, not a discussion of his participants' responses to the superhero alter egos. This thesis indicates that, while fans may identify with the superhero alter egos through recognising the similarities between the alter ego's situation and their own lives, their identification can be far more than simply 'he has a job, like I do,' and may instead relate in complex ways to the politics of identity and impression management.

Because superheroes, by definition, exceed the limits of human ability, and must occupy a universe<sup>49</sup> that can accommodate this, they are at constant risk of going 'too far.' Enjoyment of the comics depends on readers maintaining the balance of the super and human sides of the characters, ensuring that the heroes never became so 'super' that they could no longer relate to them. In focus group interactions, whenever the conversation became focused on the power of the superhero, the topic would change to reframe the hero and "bring him back to Earth." In the detailed discussion of fans conversations about superheroes that follows I explore this process. I discuss participants' attention to superhero bodies as

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<sup>47</sup> As the authors cited above, and most other comic studies academics, are also comic book fans, it could be said that each author who has used them has done so as an insider, utilising auto-ethnographic methods. However, there has been no single study done that investigates fan identification.

<sup>48</sup> See discussion of Brown's research in introduction for more details.

<sup>49</sup> Each comic book publishing house has an established 'universe' that the characters occupy. These worlds, usually called by the name of the publisher (the main two are the DC Universe and Marvel Universe), have a self consistent reality that allows characters from one comic book franchise to 'cross over' to and make an appearance in another title or franchise for example, Superman may appear in a Wonder Woman comic. Each universe has an established, shared history (canon), which may include major 'events' (e.g. a war or alien invasion) which have some impact on the storylines throughout all of the titles published by that company at that time (2012). See Pustz (1999, p. 52) for more discussion on the importance of continuity in superhero comics and comic book fandom.

biological entities, vulnerable and as subject to physical limitations. I argue that in these ways fans re-humanise the superhero body whenever it gets ‘too super.’

## **Real life struggles and the fantasy narrative**

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The oldest and most well known superheroes of all, Superman and Batman (both from the DC Universe), are examples of two very different types of superhero bodies. Superman is an alien, inherently powered hero, while Batman is presented as a human who has created his power through hard work. These differences in origin influenced the relationship that the readers in my study had with these heroes. Because Superman’s origin and nature is so far removed from that of the readers, participants often found it difficult to relate to this superhero. On the other hand, they found it was easier to identify with Batman. He was considered more believable, because he is a human, and because of the imagined possibility that they too could become a hero like him.

Superheroes are a subset of a much older group of characters, ‘costumed heroes.’ Costumed heroes have historically been a normal (but heroic) human being who wears a costume or disguise to hide their identity (e.g. Zorro, The Scarlet Pimpernel, The Lone Ranger, even Ned Kelly could be considered a costumed hero) (Coogan, Heer, & Worcester, 2009). The greatest single distinction that can be made between superheroes and other costumed characters is that superheroes (should) have superpowers (Coogan et al., 2009). It is their unique abilities that separate superheroes from other costumed heroes, so tales of costumed heroes may be based, to some degree, on the lives of real people, whereas superhero stories can only be a form of speculative fiction. However, this distinction can create a problem when categorising some heroes.

There is endless discussion and debate within superhero fandom about the exact distinction between costumed heroes and superheroes, as Batman could be seen to fall into either category.<sup>50</sup> For every argument there is a counter argument or

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<sup>50</sup> A Google search for the exact phrase “is Batman a superhero” yields over 8,000 results, while variations (“...or not” and “...or a vigilante”) gave 5,000 additional hits. For examples of these debates see: Debate.org (2008); Ecksmanfan (2012); McKiernan (2011); F. Miller (1986).

example to trouble the definition. Yet there is never any doubt that Batman is a superhero. Coogan, Heer and Worcester (2009) suggest that the distinction lies, not in the powers of superheroes, but in the way they do their alter ego/secret identity. They suggest that costumed heroes “do not firmly externalize either their alter ego’s inner character or biography” (Coogan et al., 2009). Zorro’s costume and behaviour are not fox-like, as his Spanish name suggests. Nor does the Scarlet Pimpernel look or behave like a flower. Batman, on the other hand, comes out at night, swoops down from great heights, and has great black wings, like a bat. Batman’s name and characteristics were chosen as a result of his childhood encounter with a bat, so his costumed persona is an embodiment of part of his biography.<sup>51</sup>

Superman is an alien from the planet Krypton whose body becomes super powered in the presence of Earth’s yellow sun. His abilities are not of this world and are unavailable to any human being. Among his vast collection of powers, Superman has super strength that allows him to defy Earth’s gravity (giving the appearance of flight), to bend steel, and to repel bullets. He is also super fast and has both x-ray and heat vision. Batman, by contrast, has no superpowers. His abilities stem from years of training and focus, from his unmatched creative abilities, and almost limitless resources. Batman’s investigative mind is so powerful that he has earned the title of the ‘world’s greatest detective’ (DC Comics, 2012a). He invents devices for every possible eventuality, and has a contingency plan for almost every situation (for example, in his utility belt he carries a piece of Kryptonite, the one thing that can harm Superman, to use if Superman ever turns evil (D C Comics, 2012)). Batman’s mind, training, and his utility belt are his super powers. He is otherwise entirely human. The differences between these two kinds of super bodies elicit different responses from the fans, as they are so vastly different to the readers and to each other.

Participants often talked about Batman as the ideal superhero because of his ‘humanness’ and lack of super powers. When asked to pick a favourite hero and

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<sup>51</sup> For the purposes of this thesis, I have defined Batman as superhero because of this distinction, and because the participants defined him as a superhero, as does the literature, and because that is what his creators intended him to be.



explain what they liked about that character, Batman's humanness was a common theme:

Cody: I think I liked Batman before I realized that he was a 'superhero' or what superheroes actually were. Nowadays the appeal is just that he is the pinnacle of human conditioning. Some of my favourite Batman stories are the ones where he appears in context with the JLA: He is just a man walking among gods,<sup>52</sup> but he can take every single one of them out *and they all know it*.

*Online forum - "Favourite Heroes" (emphasis original)*

While Cody's initial attraction to Batman was not based on his superhero status, his enjoyment of that character comes from his humanness. Despite his lack of superpowers, Batman is so powerful that even when working with a team of almost omnipotent superheroes, he is not outmatched. Cody enjoys the idea that, even though he is a mere human, Batman can match and potentially beat a 'god' (or a superhero like Superman). Batman's lack of superpower makes him more similar to the comic book reader, while still being powerful enough to fight alongside the most gifted superheroes. These similarities allow the reader to identify with Batman.

The ability of ordinary people to do what Batman does and achieve similarly super feats was important to many participants when they discussed their pleasures in reading Batman comics. The distinction between superness and humanness is not as great as it is between the reader and 'powered' superheroes, like Superman. The ability to imagine that comic book scenarios could come to fruition gave an extra level of enjoyment to many:

Jade: I think I prefer those sorts of characters [skilled humans, like Batman] because of the fact that they're a bit more true to life. We don't have any super powers yet, in the real world. I know there are people that do super human feats occasionally.

*1:1 interview*

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<sup>52</sup> The Justice League of America (JLA) is a superhero team made up of a varying cast of DC superheroes. The core team members are Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, The Flash, Green Lantern, Martian Manhunter, and Hawkman. Green Lantern is a human with a special ring that gives him superpowers, but he is otherwise human. Superman, Wonder Woman, The Flash, Martian Manhunter and Hawkman are all inherently superpowered. Of the core cast, Batman is the only team member who has no special powers. (2012b).

Despite enjoying the fantasy of superheroes with superpowers, the potential that events in the comic book stories could relate to a real life scenario was pleasurable for Jade. She enjoyed the ‘Batman type’ superhero because of the way that the narrative could relate to ordinary people doing extraordinary things. The similarity between Batman and real life heroes blurs the boundary between the comic book fantasy universe and our own. Her statement that “We don’t have super powers *yet*’ suggests that she can imagine a future when humans (maybe even herself) will potentially have super powers, or super power like attributes, which would then break down the distinction between human and superhuman.

Throughout the discussions it became clear that participants appreciate the idea that any person, with the drive and the resources, could (potentially) push themselves to become like Batman. His physical body, being entirely human, was worked and constructed, by him, to be the superhuman tool that it is. Many readers found this notion ‘inspirational,’ because they imagined that they too could, with work, achieve something similar:

Christopher: My favourite hero is a tough one, and different from the books I buy or read... I'd say Batman simply because he represents something inspiring: That strength of will and intellect can be enough for you to go toe-to-toe with the worst the world has to offer. That one man can change the world from a nightmare into a paradise (even if the nature of monthly comics means he never gets there).

*Online forum - “Favourite Heroes”*

To Christopher, Batman’s humanness makes his super powers available to anyone. Any person with the (intellectual) resources and the drive could, according to Christopher and Batman, overcome anything. Christopher, saw him as a symbol of what one person might achieve. Batman shows how any person can make a difference in the world. Through strength of spirit and mind, and by fighting their own supervillains, any person has the capacity to shape the world into something they want it to be. This was a common theme in the discussions about Batman in both face-to-face and online interactions. Readers indicated that they can insert themselves into Batman’s stories because they think about themselves as similar to him (by being human). The readers can more easily utilise the möebial nature of the

boundary between the imagined superhero body and the human body, and see themselves as having the potential to become like Batman.

Some participants also saw Batman as being like them in other ways. In addition to his superhero (work) commitments, Batman has his own personal problems and difficult relationships to negotiate.<sup>53</sup> This imagining works to highlight Batman's similarity to any other person. Most participants described this as a point of identification, something that they can relate to and with which they could empathise. In the following extract Thomas describe why Batman is his favourite superhero:

Thomas: [Batman]'s credible. OK, he has issues, but there is something easier to relate to in what he is and what he does. He is real, and in a way it's easier to identify with who and why he is what he is.

Also, for a big part of it, his stories are crime stories set in a modern city. Once again, it's easier to relate to than the idea of a superhero team fighting off an alien armada

Anna-Maria: Because he's just a well honed human?

Thomas: No, because if I had the resources, drive and mental ability, I could be like that.

[Section removed]

Thomas: I think it is something we look for in stories as humans. How would I react to this situation? If there is no character in the story that you can relate to, it makes it harder to immerse yourself in the story.

*1:1 online interview*

It is not only the setting and storyline choices that make the Batman stories believable and likable for Thomas, it is the characterisation of the hero. Thomas alludes to Batman's past with his comment that he "has issues," that he has had difficulties in his life that have left him with emotional scars. Batman has a painful back story, including the deaths of his parents and of his close friend and side-kick,

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<sup>53</sup> In Batman's origin story, the young Bruce Wayne witnesses the murder of his parents during a mugging. This trauma left him with emotional scars and no close family. Seeing his parents' murders led the young man to seek a kind of revenge against the criminals of Gotham City as Batman.

While there is often a love interest in the stories, the secrecy necessary to maintain the Batman identity, and the emotional scarring caused by the loss of his parents, culminate in Bruce Wayne struggling to maintain these romantic relationships. Bruce Wayne's main close relationships are with his butler, Alfred, who raised him after his parents died, the orphaned Dick Greyson (the first Robin), and Superman. However, even these relationships suffer at times from Bruce Wayne's deep distrust of others, and the emotional distance he puts between himself and others.

Jason Todd.<sup>54</sup> While most superheroes have lost their parents, Batman's back story is darker than most. As with his body, Batman's psychological 'issues' make him an exaggerated version of other, ordinary people. By focussing on Batman's psychological instability as being somehow *like* the (non-super) reader, Thomas brings him back to earth, and back to a body like his own.

As a character, Superman generally received less positive responses from most of the participants than Batman. The unqualified statement of "Superman is boring" came up repeatedly throughout the interviews and forum, obliging Superman fans to justify why they liked to read Superman comics:

Ethan: Superman is a Boy Fantasy Image. Strong as we would like to be if you weren't particularly strong. Moral in a world that isn't. Remember, Supes was originally a protector of the poor and beat up slumlords (before he could fly). I believe his appeal isn't in a particular run of the comic book or how dynamic he looks on a box of cornflakes but a broader idea that the most powerful man on Earth is out there and he's on our side.

*Online forum - "Favourite Heroes"*

It was Superman's fight for truth and justice, and his protection of the disenfranchised that was a common reading of all of those who chose him as their preferred superhero. However, even the most enthusiastic Superman fans admitted that they did not usually read his monthly comics. Instead they preferred to read the graphic novels of single storylines (often compiled from specific monthly issues relating to a particular story arc). To these fans, it is the *idea* of Superman that was most attractive, rather than the majority of his monthly stories.

When asked why they found Superman 'boring,' the reasons given by all participants (even his most supportive fans) focussed on the flawlessness and absolute superpowers of Superman and the resulting lack of narrative tension. For example:

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<sup>54</sup> Jason Todd took over the position of Batman's sidekick, Robin, when Dick Grayson left the Batman series. Grayson left to begin a solo career leading the Teen Titans superhero team, and to become the superhero Nightwing.

Joseph: I do not read the monthly in continuity<sup>55</sup> Superman titles. But I find him boring mostly as a character. He is supposed to be perfect which doesn't make for particularly dramatic character moments.

*Online forum - "Favourite Heroes"*

Superman writers have a difficult job writing a story that can engage and entertain the reader when the character has only two physical weaknesses.<sup>56</sup> While Joseph (and Superman's other critics in this study) may enjoy some Superman stories, the lack of narrative tension allows only limited uses of the text, so it becomes little more than disposable entertainment. This was a common critique made of Superman by participants who would prefer to be more actively engaged in their reading.

Some participants explicitly stated that they like to read stories that showed scenarios that they could recognise and solutions that they could apply to their own lives. By identifying with the characters through similarities in the situations they encounter, and the ways they react to them, the readers are able to overcome the differences between themselves and the superheroes. Reynolds' (1994) argues that superheroes are a version of modern mythology and that by identifying with the characters in this way, instead of imagining themselves to be physically like the hero, the fans can imagine themselves as having the potential (if the need arose) to behave in a heroic manner. For example, while Superman's pure intentions and idealistic approach to problems appealed to some participants, to others his innate powers made his solutions inaccessible to them:

Jade: Often we're reading for enjoyment but also we're reading to emulate what we ...if we were in a stressful situation, what would we do? If we were Superman, or if we got superpowers, it just doesn't work, but people with

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<sup>55</sup> Continuity refers to the existence of a continuous plot that carries through a particular comic book line or 'universe.' This may differ from the concept of the 'official' history of the character, which is known as the 'Canon.' The canon is usually the main, ongoing, (usually) monthly publication for each character or team (this is the 'continuity' to which Joseph is referring). Stories may occur outside of this established 'reality,' but they are considered to be an alternative imagining, or a fiction within the fictional world of the comic book. These stories may be published in serialised form in regularly released chapters, as a complete graphic novel, or both.

<sup>56</sup> Superman's primary weakness is the various coloured rocks, Kryptonite, that are the remains of his home planet, Krypton. The different coloured rocks weaken him in different ways, as the story requires. His powers are also neutralised by the rays of the red Kryptonian sun, while the yellow sun of Earth strengthens his powers.

strengths that they have adapted or developed, the same as everybody else, then we can all be superheroes in our own right.

*1:1 interview*

Jade dislikes the all-powerful nature of Superman, as she cannot identify with him on the level of shared experience and reactions. She prefers the characters that provide a model for ways to overcome difficult situations that might in some way occur in her own life. She listed Wonder Woman as one of her favourite heroes, not because of her superpowers, but because of her diplomacy. Even though Wonder Woman has superpowers, she only uses them when negotiations have failed. This is a strength that anyone, superhero or not, can develop and therefore can be utilized by the fans and comic book readers. To Jade, it is important that the stories have an element of ‘truth’ to them, which could be applied to her own life. By recognising the potential ‘life lesson’ that the superheroes can teach them, common challenges and comparable responses to them can become more important to the reader than the differences between the superheroes’ and their own bodies.

## **Identifying with the alter-ego**

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When asked to list three traits that make a superhero enjoyable,<sup>57</sup> and three that make a hero not enjoyable, almost all participants listed believable secret identities or ordinary lives and relationships somewhere in their three desirable traits. Of all the responses to this question, ordinary lives and relationships were the most consistently identified. As in Brown’s study (2001), which demonstrated that many fans preferred power in intellect over powerful bodies, the readers who participated in this thesis research indicated that they gained more pleasure from the personal and emotional lives of the heroes than they did from the superheroes’ physical abilities.

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<sup>57</sup> This question was used as an icebreaker to start conversation in the focus groups but also provided very interesting insight into the relationships participants in this study have with the characters and comics that they read. This understanding of enjoyable in this context was the traits and characteristics that made reading individual comics (or characters) attractive. ‘Not enjoyable’ traits were things that would either prevented them from reading the comic or limit how much pleasure they got from the reading.

This suggests that a well developed and realistic alter ego in a superhero comic narrative contributes to the participants' reading pleasure.

When asked if it was necessary for a superhero to have an alter ego, participants usually preferred the hero to live a dual life or have a non-heroic aspect to their story. As suggested by comics theorists (such as both Brown (2001) and Fingerth (2004) above), they liked heroes to have an alter ego that they could relate to and with whom they could identify:

Robert: Oddly enough for me [what makes a superhero enjoyable is] how well I can relate to them as a human being.

Anna-Maria: As in realistic characters, or similarity?

Robert: Vulnerability; human flaws; having to deal with complex moral issues. I'd say similarity - they don't have to look human, just act human.

*Online focus group*

Robert's appreciation of superheroes did depend somewhat on his ability to relate to the hero's life, but his identification was not with the alter ego's weaker, human body, but with similarities in their experiences. For Robert, it was the relationships and emotional reactions that make the character realistic and likable, even for non-human heroes. Similarly, Sebastian, in the Auckland focus group, found the interpersonal relationships of the heroes most enjoyable. He preferred superhero teams because the narrative facilitated the exploration of the relationships among the team members instead of focussing on every aspect of an individual character's life. He also described how the Silver Surfer (an aloof alien character), despite the high quality of the art work in the first issue, was unlikable until he discovered the "subtleties and various things about humans that he thinks are precious." For these participants, the enjoyment of the superhero comics was not about the strength, power or hypermasculinity of the superheroes, but their ability as readers to relate to the interpersonal interactions, emotional connections, and the real life scenarios faced by the heroes in either their superhero or alter ego modes. Robert and Sebastian identify with the vulnerability and emotional lives of the superheroes and their alter egos. These are the aspects of the characters that most contrasts with the hypermasculinity, muscularity and aggressive power of the superhero.

In a forum post discussing the importance of alter egos, one participant expressed why the alter ego is important to her. She considers having a ‘normal’ life to be paramount to the authenticity of the character and to her enjoyment of the story:

Robin: Out-of-universe<sup>58</sup> it's just way more interesting for the reader to have some part of the hero to relate to, e.g. Clark Kent being yelled at by his boss for missing a deadline. In-universe I think the secret identity is essential to keep the hero connected to the people he's trying to protect. There's a great Superman comic (can't remember which one) where Clark wants to get rid of his and just be Superman so he can save more people but Lois tells him he can't and makes a point by sending him to go get her a coffee. Outside the shop they run into some nice policemen who they talk to and Clark makes to go in but Lois tells him he has to go in as Superman. When he does he meets the same cops who say hi but quickly leave because they 'don't want to waste his time' even though he's just getting a coffee and actually wanted to have a chat. Lois uses this to prove what everyone else always knew- if the superhero wants any semblance of a normal life they have to have [an alter ego].

*Online forum - "Does a Hero need an Alter Ego?"*

In addition to having a point of similarity, the readers enjoy the complexity of character that the alter ego can give. For Robin, Superman needs to be someone with a life outside of being a superhero. He also has interpersonal relationships that could not function if he were always being Superman. While this allows an extra degree of identification, it also makes the character more three dimensional, and authentic. The interpersonal relationships and interactions that a superhero can have are far more complex and interesting to these readers when there is a sense of familiarity about the character's ‘normal life.’

Participants also took pleasure in the alter ego and his ordinary relationships because it allowed them to imagine a parasocial interaction (Horton & Wohl, 1956) of friendship with the character. If the superhero lacked an ordinary life in which they have a supporting cast of workmates, friends, and family, it might indicate that he is not someone who relates to ordinary (non-super) people:

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<sup>58</sup> In-universe refers to the superhero within the fictional universe of the comic books, while out-of-universe distinguishes this from the way that the readers think about and make use of the superhero out of the context of a comic book storyline.



James: They [readers] can't relate to [superheroes] if they didn't have human dreams. And you might go, oh well, maybe I can't be his friend.

*Auckland focus group*

Being able to imagine himself and the hero as potential friends was part of the pleasure for James. James' ability to relate to and identify with a superhero character is compromised if the character does not show the potential to understand and be part of his life. Many readers used nicknames for their favourite characters (e.g. Superman was often simply called by the nickname 'Supes'), and a few even discussed the heroes in a manner that they might talk about a friend. For example, on the 'Favourite heroes' forum thread Ethan defended Superman against the accusation that he was boring, saying "I don't agree totally with the complaints against *my Boy*" (emphasis added). This suggests that fans may think of their favourite characters in a similar way to people to whom they are close.

One participant discussed her identification with a far more abstract aspect of the superhero secret identity:

Jade: There are some that have alter egos that are interesting to read about *because we can all have alter egos depending on what setting we're in.*

*1:1 interview (emphasis added)*

Jade's reading of the superhero's secret identity takes the concept of identification to a more complex level than current theorising about alter egos suggests. Unlike Fingerhuth's (2004) suggestion that readers' identification is based on their recognition that they too have hidden, secret, or undiscovered parts of themselves, Jade's statement suggests that her identification is with the requirement to reconstruct oneself from one situation to the next. While her description can be read as a form of identification through recognising some similarity of experiences, as Cowie (1997) suggests, it also goes deeper than that, to identification on the more abstract level of the shared processes of identity management in different contexts.

Jade's statement of her own potential to have multiple 'alter egos' resonates with Goffman's (1969) analysis of the multiplicity of performances entailed in social life, including gender identities and gender performance. Goffman describes the processes of identity and impression management as similar to theatrical performance. When people interact with each other, he suggests, they assume certain

roles that they then perform. Sometimes these are a conscious effort, and sometimes they are unconscious. Depending on the requirements of the situation, people will present themselves as knowledgeable about particular subjects, or affect a particular demeanour that they consider appropriate to the situation and to the impression they wish to make. Goffman even suggests that they will employ specific attire (like the superheroes' costumes) and (metaphorical) masks to convincingly achieve the performance (1969, p. 21). Like Bruce Wayne putting on the Bat suit, this suggests that individuals don specific attire and affect certain ways of being for work, for home, and for different parts of their social lives. They alter their personal appearances and their behaviour from one situation to the next. Consciously or unconsciously, people will present themselves in different ways depending on the requirements of the situation.

## **Limiting realism in the fantasy narrative**

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A major source of pleasure in reading superhero comics, for all of the participants in this study, was in renegotiating the boundaries of the body. While they found pleasure in the heroes' humanness, they also found pleasure in the transcendence of the limitations of the human bodies (to a point). Their discussions often focussed on the points at which the superhero went too far in one direction; either by being too human, or being not human enough. While participants indicated the importance of recognising some connection between themselves and the superhero they found it problematic if the hero was deemed *too* similar to them. In a similar way, the hero could not venture too far beyond the participants' experience of the human mind and body. The constant critique and de/re-construction of their understandings of masculinity, humanity and physical reality were an important part of the readers' interactions and pleasure in the comics they read.

The boundary between superhero and human is also managed through the alter ego. The human, non-hero identities of the superheroes allow a distinction to be made between super and human, while also blurring that line between fantasy bodies and real bodies. Some of the work of managing the superhero body is done by the authors (and the characters) within the narrative and art work, but it is the reader who

makes use of the distinction. Through the secret identity, the reader can bring the superhero body across the boundary between unobtainable and superhuman to being “like me.” Pushing and transgressing the boundary between fantasy and reality was an important source of pleasure for many participants. By recognising that they are like the alter ego the readers challenge the validity of the distinction between their own bodies and the superhero bodies. If they are like the alter ego, and the alter ego is part of the superhero, the distinction between themselves and the superhero becomes less marked.

Negotiating the boundary between fantasy and reality was a feature in most group discussions. The ability to find similarities between themselves and the superheroes is part of that pleasure, as are the similarities and differences between the rules of the fantasy universes and their experience of the real world. Participants in the focus groups spent significant portions of their discussion critiquing the ways that the superhero worlds operated. They acknowledged and enjoyed the tension between expecting certain rules to remain constant (such as the laws of physics, and the permanence of death), while others could be flouted (alien invasions, and the existence of superheroes) at will.

The superhero body was a site of many of the fan discussions. The superhero’s transcendence of the limitations of the human body may cause some discomfort to the reader as it makes the human body appear weak, vulnerable, and fragile by comparison. Indicating familiarity with the functions and abilities of the heroes’ bodies was a feature of participants’ talk. When the discussion allowed the superhero to go too far beyond the reaches of the reader’s experience of the body, they would bring him/her back into his/her human body, reasserting the hero’s ‘humanness’ through talk. The conversation in focus groups commonly came back to the day-to-day needs of the superhero’s body, such as bodily functions and the practicalities of the costuming (For example in Christchurch group 2 there was discussion about how superheroes must use very good antiperspirant because they never have armpit sweat). The two Christchurch groups both discussed Superman’s intimate life and the possibilities and limitations of intercourse between the human Lois Lane and Kryptonian Superman. Many discussions included speculation of how a teenage Clark Kent would really have used his X-ray vision. Both Christchurch

groups discussed the impracticalities of female heroes' costumes (particularly footwear) for the job at hand, as did the Dunedin group. The Dunedin group imagined themselves as villains, using the heroes' own costumes against them:

Jasmine: Put [your base] at the bottom of a valley it's going down a hill [that is a problem in heels]. If you put it at the bottom of a valley, then they're going to have issues. Or [you could] just require them to run.

*Dunedin focus group*

The logistics of toileting while wearing the Batsuit was playfully discussed in the Dunedin focus group, while the temperature limitations of different heroes' costumes came up in the second Christchurch group (Batman would not like fighting in a desert, while most female heroes would struggle with Polar temperatures). These tangential discussions were always laced with humour, sometimes only single comments slipped into a more serious discussion, which prompted laughter from all in the group. While they may have joked about these issues, the humour appeared to ease the discomfort created by bodies that are too super, and reminded the participants that those bodies were still human in other ways. Through humour, the readers managed the superhero's body, reasserting what is human and what is superhuman, and reconstructing the boundaries that define their own bodies.

While being able to relate to the superheroes on a human level is important, too much reality seemed to be a bad thing. While readers may want the hero to be available on a human level, there are limits to the humanity of superheroes. Reality is acceptable in comics to a small extent but too much means losing the 'superness' of the hero, and defeats the purpose of reading the comics:

Jeffrey: Superman is an icon. DC won't even let him be pictured drinking a beer.  
However a hero with flaws can just be annoying e.g. the latest version of Supergirl is always making mistakes and always crying about them.

Anna-Maria: So Jeffrey, is it the flaws or her reaction to them that's the problem?

Jeffrey: It's the writing. Her reactions might be realistic and her flaws relatable but I really don't want to read 30 pages about a whining teenage girl.

Anna-Maria: So, too realistic can be a bad thing?

- Robert: I think it's a balancing act, just enough for the reader to relate to but not too much otherwise the reader will think "I get to put up with this crap in my day-to-day life."
- Jeffrey: No it's like cutting together a film. You just have to know what scenes to leave out and what scenes people want to see.
- Robert: Yeah, you never see Bruce Wayne brushing his teeth or trimming his nose hairs because that would just slow the plot down - the reader just assumes that's what Bruce does while the story goes elsewhere.
- Jeffrey: The setting can be realistic but the plot/circumstances have to be interesting and let's face it 90% of real life really isn't that interesting.

*Online focus group*

Jeffrey may not enjoy the 'squeaky clean' perfection of Superman, but he does not enjoy Superman having too many flaws, or having too much reality in his comics either. To Robert and Jeffrey, superhero comics are fantasy, and part of the enjoyment of them comes from being able to inhabit the fantasy universe of the superhero. If that world becomes too mundane, and the edges between it and real life become too blurred, their pleasures are diminished.

Perhaps the most difficult bodily transgression for some readers to accept was that of life and death. Death is not permanent in superhero comics. When a character dies, it is usually not for very long. This creates a tension in the relationship with the reader, as the hero's mortality is no longer a concern. Participants discussing the deaths of characters often used irony and sarcasm to show their contempt for this practice, but subtle enjoyment of how the comics break the taboo. In one focus group, Leon and Callum were discussing one of their favourite comic series, and describing the uneasiness brought on by that the writer's frivolous treatment of death:

- Leon: You know every single major character in *The Preacher* dies and then comes back from the dead, and yet in the end, he's still expecting us to accept the characters dying. And then "Oh they've come back!"  
[Section removed]
- Callum: Tulip died and came back, for inexplicable reasons
- Leon: When did she? Oh, cos of the early arrival.
- Callum: But she was dead for literally A panel, so I mean that was like, oh wow!

*Wellington focus group*

The pointlessness of Tulip's death creates discomfort for the participants. Not only does it make the story less believable, jolting them out of their immersion in the created reality, but it also downplays and undervalues the significance of death itself. When readers have engaged with a text, they may begin care about the characters (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Maigret, 1999). The writers create characters that draw the reader in and enable identification, and the reader works hard to maintain that connection. They therefore expect that the death of a beloved character will have significance in the story.

Maigret (1999) discusses the emotional reactions that superhero comic book readers in his study had to the deaths of characters in the comics they read. He reports that the readers were all affected when beloved characters were killed – many participants admitted to crying along with the surviving characters. However, at the time of Maigret's study, death in superhero comics was quite a new phenomenon, so the deaths were significant events, and the practice of resurrecting the dead was not yet common. The difference in response between these two studies suggests that the dismissive treatment of death in superhero comics has altered the relationship that readers have with the event. While other genres related to superhero comics, such as Science Fiction, Crime, and even Horror, utilise the narrative tool of death, they are able to do so to highlight the importance of life (Hadomi, 1995). However, when superhero comics adopt a 'revolving door' policy for character mortality, it has the opposite effect. The reader no longer has the cathartic pleasure of emerging from a tragic story, nor do they get to mourn for the loss of a beloved character.

In one of the focus group discussions, the subject of death as non-permanent was a recurring theme and eventually became a joke within the group. While talking about the limitations of Superman storylines, Mike tried to think of a story arc in which Superman had not prevailed. The conversation turned to Superman's death(s):

- Anna-Maria: ...and Superman wins at the end?  
 Mike: Exactly. Actually, that's a good point, I can't... no, the latest, the latest Superman thing, he ends up dying at the end of that.  
 Robin: Pfff. How long's that gonna last?  
 Mike: No, no, it's because it was sort of a separate continuity. Ah, what was that called?

Robin: 'The Death of Superman?'

Mike: No, no, no.

*Christchurch focus group 2*

Robin's comment "The Death of Superman" is referring to a major event, Superman story title from 1992. Superman died at the end of the 'event,' but returns from the grave a few issues later (Jurgens & Bogdanove, 1993). Her preceding comment ("Pfff, how long is that going to last?"), and reference to his prior death show her distaste for the disregard shown for death in comics. A few minutes later, the same group discussed the topic of comic book death more specifically:

Robin: Wasn't there even a line in one of the X-Men ones?  
Charles Xavier is like "mutant heaven doesn't have pearly gates it has revolving doors."  
\*laughter\*

Anna-Maria: Yeah, that sounds right.

Mike: They do hang a lantern on that sometimes.

Robin: It's just ridiculous.

Mike: Didn't you die? Yeah, but what does that mean?

Robin: I got better.

Amber: Isn't Batman supposed to be dead at the moment?

Mike: Yeah.

Amber: Yeah, how long's that gonna last?

*Christchurch focus group 2*

Amber echoes Robin's sentiment of "how long will that last?" Each time this phrase is used, it is done with a derisive and sarcastic tone. However, as it became a recurring point in the discussion, it was used more and more with a sense of amusement. At one stage, while discussing a particular Batman storyline, it was suggested that he only needed to turn his back for a few moments to bring the Joker back from the dead. Even the discomfort brought about by the trivialisation of death was overcome by renegotiating the meaning of that boundary within comics, from discomfort to humour.

## **Conclusion**

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This chapter has explored adult superhero comic book readers' online and face-to-face conversations about their identification with the superheroes and their alter egos. It addresses an absence of empirical research in this area and contributed

an initial analysis of the various methods of identification that superhero comic book readers utilise in their reading of these comic books.

At different times, the readers in this study employed multiple modes of identification to connect with the world of the superheroes. They utilised similarities between themselves and the alter ego (J. A. Brown, 2001; Liebes & Katz, 1993) and the recognition that they too have secrets and potentials that they hide from the world (Fingerroth, 2004). They also identified with the superheroes through the desire to be like them (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005; Liebes & Katz, 1993), through feeling an affinity for the situation portrayed (Cowie, 1997), or by being able to imagine the characters as friends (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Analysis of comments from one participant suggested identification can occur on a more subtle and abstract level than suggested in the literature. This examination showed that she identifies with the hero through the similarity between the aspects of the superhero character and the multiplicity of her own identity performances.

The fans' enjoyment of the comics was linked to their ability to identify with the characters or their worlds on some level. When the readers' identification is disrupted so too is their enjoyment of the text. The danger with the fantasy narrative of superhero comics is that the reader will find it difficult to identify with the characters and their world, and therefore struggle to engage with the story. To maintain their pleasure in reading and talking about the comics, the participants managed the bodies of the superheroes through talk; this involved bringing them back to Earth whenever they 'flew too high.' The readers in this study did this through talk of the super bodies as weak, fallible or implausible. Humour was used by participants to ease their discomfort when certain boundaries, such as death, were transgressed.

Despite the hypermasculine representation of the male superheroes in the comics, it was not their muscularity or power that primarily attracted the readers. Instead, they identified with the superheroes through their interpersonal relationships with their supporting cast, the scenarios of the stories, and to some extent, through the politics of impression management. The superhero comics that were the most enjoyable were the ones with which they could connect on an emotional or human level, rather than the hypermasculine traits of stoic strength and hypermuscularity.



Finding a point of similarity, no matter how small, enabled the readers in this study to create a connection between them and the imagined bodies (and worlds) of the superhero. The connection between the physical bodies of the readers and the imaginary bodies of the alter ego can be constructed as a continuous loop, like the möebius strip Grosz has used as a metaphor for the fluid boundary between the representations of bodies and their materiality (Grosz, 1994, p. 36). They are similar yet different, so the point of convergence/divergence cannot be defined. Because they can be connected to the alter ego in this way, the reader can also imaginatively challenge the distinction between themselves and the superhero. However, if the superhero is imagined as being too similar, there is no enjoyment to be gained from negotiating that boundary. The balance between being super enough to be something to imaginatively strive for, while similar enough to allow reader identification, yet not so similar as to render the distinction pointless, was constantly negotiated among the fans in this study as they interacted and reflected on their relationships with superheroes.

## Chapter 5: Superhero comics and ‘geekdom’

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Superhero comic book readership is a fandom that frequently overlaps with other similar interests, such as science fiction shows and movies, role playing gaming, and computer gaming, but this overlap often goes unrecognised in the scholarly literature that discusses these fandoms. While fan studies may acknowledge that there are overlaps in fandoms and interest (Virnoche, 2007; Warnicke, 2006), there has been very little attention paid to the way fans talk about these connections and the personal identities they craft through participation in multiple fandoms. Fans of superheroes and of other comic book genres are very rarely fans of just one title, artist or even genre, nor are their interests limited to comics. For many participants in this study, their wider range of interests included a range of media and technology that was similar to that of other participants. These interplays of interests become part of how they do ‘geekdom’ and how they construct their fan identities.

The audience (or readers) of comic books can vary in the ways they engage with the comics and the context of their readership. All comic book readers (and any other media consumers) negotiate meanings from the texts when they read the comics and in their daily lives (Gray et al., 2007; Jenkins, 1992). The ways that they engage with their media outside of the viewing/reading is important both for the ways that they consume and for the identities they construct in relation to the comics (Bird, 2003). For the most casual reader, a superhero comic may take no more time or energy than is required to pick it up, read the pages and put it down (Gray et al., 2007; Jenkins, 2006). The story can be enjoyed (or not), considered momentarily, and then discarded with the book. However, readers who are also fans bring expertise and intertextuality to their reading of comic book fiction (Gray et al., 2007).

This chapter investigates the ways in which comic book readers constitute themselves as fans in relation to other comic book readers, fans of multiple pop culture franchises, and in relation to non-fans. I examine the ways that participants

‘do geekdom’ and create fan identities in the context of the focus groups and forum posts. This analysis of ‘doing geekdom’ focuses on the use of humour, shared interests, in-jokes, and other cultural resources to create a feeling of connection within the groups and the constitution of a geek identity. Geek communities have a considerable gender imbalance, so I discuss how doing geekdom was a gendered practice. I also explore the place of competition and exclusion in face-to-face and online conversations. Participants’ identification as fans, including their perceptions of marginalisation outside of the fan friendly geek subculture is also analysed.<sup>59</sup>

It is difficult to find any scholarly literature on the subculture of geekdom, as the term geek has subtly changed its meaning over time. In academia the term ‘geek’ is still predominantly used to discuss computer programming and hacking subcultures, but without acknowledgement of the other interests that may go with this. In most academic literature, ‘geek’ refers to people with computer oriented interests, (Kendall, 1999; Newitz & Anders, 2006; Tocci, 2007; Varma, 2007), while for many self identified ‘geeks’ it is the name for someone who is interested in a particular set of media (including comics) and technology (including computers). Little scholarship on geekdom exists within fan studies despite the popularity of this identity within popular culture and fandom (Kocurek, 2011; Mortari, 2012; Newitz & Anders, 2006; Tocci, 2011; Warnicke, 2006).

Some academics have begun to discuss geeks and geekdom outside the world of Information Technology. Like this thesis, Jason Tocci (2007) and Paul Lopes (2006) also use the term ‘geek’ to describe this interconnected world of fandoms and computers. Lopes (2006) discusses comic book fandom as a subculture that sets itself apart from dominant culture through consumption of stigmatised media and through the intentional performance of “geek” identities. He describes fans as adopting certain stereotyped ways of presenting themselves as a way of showing membership in the subculture. His focus is on the roles that stigma theories play in defining the group and in the self identification of its members. Lopes briefly touches on the interconnectivity of fandoms in the way that geekdom is constituted. Similarly, Tocci

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<sup>59</sup> Subcultures are subordinate and resistant groups operating *within* the dominant mainstream culture. They are often based around youth cultures (Thornton, 1996; J. P. Williams, 2011).

(Tocci, 2007) uses ‘geek’ and ‘fan’ interchangeably when discussing the loosely defined media consuming subculture. His discussion is limited to a specific ethnographic group, which he acknowledges is never properly defined because:

The boundaries of geek culture may be even more difficult to demarcate than some other cultural groups not only because members are not identifiable by any physical or innate qualities, but also because the term ‘geek’ itself implies unresolved contradictions and crossovers: geeks are both cool and uncool, interested in any of a variety of media and technologies that may be only loosely related.

(Tocci, 2007, p. 27)

Tocci’s analysis includes the “identity apparel” choices of computer programmers, sci fi fans, comic book readers, gamers, and any other “self-identified geeks and nerds” (Tocci, 2007).

This chapter examines the ways that superhero comic book fans interact to perform and co-construct a subculture (geekdom) that is based around interconnected interests. Through the use of internet research strategies these interactions were able to include fans who may have otherwise felt uncomfortable making their interests known. The participants in this study were brought together in face-to-face and online settings for the purpose of the research, rather than as members of pre-existing fan networks. Therefore their interactions are as members of a wider subculture who do not yet have established group identities and understandings. This allows analysis of, and insight into, how these understandings come into being in the process of performing and constructing a group identity.

## **Comics fandom at the margins**

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Reading superhero comics was considered by many participants to be on the margins of acceptability in New Zealand. Male participants suggested that comic book readership is not seen as an acceptable part of dominant New Zealand masculine culture. The ideal New Zealand man was described as someone who is rugby focused, and does not engage in unnecessarily intellectually oriented pursuits, such as reading (including reading comics). One online forum participant said “you just don’t read comics here... you watch rugby and V8 supercars right?” (Richard – Online forum – “Your origin story”). While participants, for the most part, accepted

(and in some cases took pride in) the marginalisation that they felt their superhero comic book readership entailed, this was not the case for all of the readers in this study.

For some participants, their superhero readership is something they enjoy in secret, or with a small group of sympathetic friends, as a ‘guilty pleasure,’ and a few of the readers in this study suggested that they are not keen for others to know that they read superhero comics. One participant (Kyle), while talking about revealing his readership to others and his perception of negativity in New Zealand to adult comic book reading, used the rarity of comic shops in New Zealand (compared to other countries he has visited), to illustrate the marginal status of comic book readership. Kyle is an avid reader of comics who enjoys introducing people to the medium, yet he is reluctant to make his interest public knowledge, even by being seen at a comic store:

Kyle: I’m not ashamed of it, but I still feel a little bit weird going into comic shops, I don’t know why.

[Section removed]

I’m careful who I rave to obviously, and that’s why having a close friend um...

Anna-Maria: *who’s into them as well?*

Kyle: Yeah, and it’s also cool because my partner, she can talk to his girlfriend about other stuff.

[section removed]

[New Zealand’s attitude to comic book readers is] a little bit worse than some other cultures I think, even in places like Australia. You look at comic stores per capita, and things I guess, as a pretty good sign of it and we don’t have many.

*1:1 interview*

Kyle told me that he is careful who he tells about his interest and how he frames his interest when talking to others (he rarely calls them comics, preferring the term ‘funny books’). Even though he is careful about revealing his interest to others, he likes having someone to talk to about comics (in the form of a trusted friend). He also said that he buys (and sells) his comics online and that although he was not ashamed of his readership, he did not feel comfortable buying comics in a public

space. The relative lack of comic shops in New Zealand<sup>60</sup> suggested to him that other readers felt the same.

Similarly, Thomas, who works at a comic book store, said he had observed something of a mental block to comics from potential customers. Encounters with potential customers made him think that New Zealanders are reluctant to consider the pleasures of comic book reading:

Thomas: I get people in my store who just don't get [why people read comics]. So I talk them through it and it continues to baffle me as to why there is this mental block, almost like they are not allowed to buy comics.

*1:1 online interview*

He went on to describe strategies that he uses to overcome the 'mental block' he has observed, but said that there are always still a few who remain resistant to the idea of reading comics.

Louis talked about trying to recruit his fire fighter workmates for a group discussion online for this research project, only for all of them to deny reading superhero comics. Louis said: "I think people still look at readers as geeks. Look at the response I got from my lot. No one will admit to it, but I'm sure almost all of them have read them." While he is confident that the men he asked were comic book readers (which was why he suggested organising an online group discussion with them), he believed that none of them were willing to be identified as 'that kind of man.'<sup>61</sup>

These participants suggest that comic book readership and fandom is at odds with the dominant masculine culture in New Zealand. For some readers, this left them feeling that they must hide their interest or be marginalised by it. For these readers their comics fandom remains a secret identity - one that they carefully guard - while others claimed their readership with pride.

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<sup>60</sup> At the time of the interview there were only 6 comic book specific shops in the country. Christchurch, Wellington, and Hamilton all had 1 each, while Auckland was home to 3. Melbourne, which has a similar population to New Zealand, at the time, had 22 comic book specialty stores selling superhero comics, and 2 that were Japanese manga specific.

<sup>61</sup> This is similar to my own experience recruiting at the Armageddon expo, when men who I had seen purchasing superhero comics denied an interest in them when I ask them about their interest in participating in this research. See *Face-to-face discussions* on page 32 for more discussion of this.

## Nerds, geeks, and fandom

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Richard: I like Spider-Man because he's still a nerd underneath it all, and so am I, always will be!

*Online forum – “Favourite Heroes”*

A group that is marginalised within the dominant culture, but has a set of shared practices and norms, can be considered a subculture (Thornton, 1996, pp. 8-9; J. P. Williams, 2011, p. 5). These groups operate like a culture within dominant culture, a part of it, yet in many ways apart from it. Comic book fandom, and its related interests, can be seen as parts of a bigger subculture. The name of this subculture, as defined by participants in this study, is ‘geekdom.’

Originally a ‘geek’ was a side show or circus performer, but later the term was used for people with a high level of interest and knowledge in computers (sometimes also called ‘nerds’) (Varma, 2007). Recently the term has come into usage to describe a fan interest in an entire genre or set of genres, rather than a specific fan object (meaning that someone might call themselves a Jazz music geek, but not usually a Louis Armstrong geek). However, these geeks will identify themselves by the area of interest (e.g. Jazz music geek, model train geek or a baseball geek).<sup>62</sup> The more general term ‘geek’ without a qualifier, still refers to the specific set of interests usually associated with computer programmers - maths and science, comic books, science fiction, and role playing games. “Geeks can be found in specific groups and spaces that are classically “geekish,” such as Star Trek and *comic book conventions*, computer-based chat rooms, and Mensa conferences. These sites have been stereotyped as sites for community among intelligent experts” (McArthur, 2009, p. 63 emphasis added). Geekdom is usually associated with the less mainstream (even obscure/cult) media, such as science fiction and comics, while ‘fandom’ also encompasses the most popular and mainstream interests (such as the latest singer/band, a designer, or even a soap opera).

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<sup>62</sup> There is some debate about whether these people are fans who are appropriating the term geek in order to set themselves apart from the mainstream and claim the unconventional or ‘alternative’ status it brings (T. T. Brown, 2012 ; Green, 2011).

‘Nerd’ and ‘Geek’ mean something quite different to the people who self identify as one, other, or both (Tocci, 2007; WikiHow, 2012; XKCD, 2010). While many people with an obsessive interest in an area may claim the name geek, to be part of the geek subculture, or a nerd or geek/nerd, one’s obsession needs to be with certain kinds of knowledge; usually science, computer science and/or maths based. Lori Kendall (1999) describes nerds as “intelligent but socially inept and ... as people overly involved with, and skilled in the use of, computers ...He enjoys school and does well in it, especially math and science courses. He has a high IQ and possesses large amounts of esoteric technical knowledge, but is socially inept” (Kendall, 1999, pp. 262-263). While there are many similarities between geeks and nerds, it is the nature of the obsession that differentiates the two. Esoteric knowledge and analysis of comics is more nerdy than geeky, partly because of the abstract knowledge and application, and partly because it is not deemed socially acceptable to analyse popular culture at that level of detail (WikiHow, 2012; XKCD, 2010). Geekdom may be a marginalised subculture, but the members are not necessarily socially inept.

Superhero fandom occupies a position within a wider subculture: ‘geekdom.’ Within geekdom, comic book fandom (including superhero comics) intersects with a variety of other interests, hobbies and fandoms (including science fiction, fantasy, ‘cult’ media, computer gaming, role playing, computers, mathematics, and science). Certain common understandings, shared knowledge and attitudes within geekdom are expected of members of the subculture, so a conversation about one topic may include tangents related to another. Because of this interconnectivity of geek fandoms, despite the focus of the discussion being on superhero comic books, on numerous occasions during the group conversations *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Firefly*, *Doctor Horrible’s Sing-along-blog*, *Doctor Who*, *Torchwood*, *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* all came up, as did references to a few specific web comics.<sup>63</sup> When these other topics were introduced they were immediately incorporated into the

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<sup>63</sup> The most commonly mentioned webcomics were: *XKCD* - simple stick figure or graph based comics, with the by-line “romance, sarcasm, math, and language;” *Shortpacked* - a webcomic centred around the employees of a toy shop, which includes the occasional superhero joke, but is full of geeky pop culture references; *Saturday Morning Breakfast Cereal (SMBC)* - mostly graph and science based jokes, often political, often ironic sexist/offensive jokes. All of these include the odd superhero comic, but are mostly about other aspects of fandom/geekdom.



conversation, suggesting that it was taken-for-granted that the other participants would understand the references made to other aspects of ‘popular’ culture.

This interconnection of fandoms within the geek subculture has received limited attention in academic literature (Warnicke, 2006). Lopes (2006) touches briefly on the intersection of comics fandom with other interests in popular culture when describing the “self-reflexive” humour of comics that deal with comic fandom. He mentions Kovalic’s *Dork Tower*, but does not discuss the comic itself. *Dork Tower* is a webcomic (which is also regularly published as an archived print version) which parodies geek culture. Much of the humour of this comic is in its references to *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, science fiction and fantasy novels, role playing games, comics, board games, and computer gaming). However, even in this discussion of comic book geeks he does not acknowledge the intertextuality of geekdom. Clair Warnicke (2006) briefly discusses the importance of the use of multiple media texts in doing fandom in her thesis and documentary *Fan Geeks*. The example she shows is a simple conversation between *X-Files* fans about the effects of heating candy in the microwave in which she counted references to 8 different ‘geeky’ (cult/science fiction/fantasy) shows or movies within the 2 minutes of filmed conversation (Warnicke, 2006).

Fans and geeks continue to engage with the text in a variety of ways well after the original book has been read and reread (Jenkins, 1992). In addition to multiple readings of the texts which bring in depth knowledge of storylines and character histories, fans may discuss the stories, characters and art with other fans, collect related merchandise, or create their own fandom based media. This can involve writing articles for fan magazines (fanzines), writing fan fiction (to fill in storyline gaps, indulge an erotic fantasy about the characters or continue an officially ended storyline), writing or drawing their own (fan fiction) comics, drawing or painting comic book style art, making fan videos or writing and performing fan folk (filk) songs. They may engage in these activities online on internet based forums, via physical or electronic mailing lists, or at fan conventions (Fiske, 1992; Healey, 2008; Jenkins, 1992; Pustz, 1999; Virnoche, 2007).

Geek behaviour may include the same activities as other fandoms, but with both an added element of ‘nerdiness,’ and often with references to other ‘geeky’

media. The geek participants' discussions of their fan object(s) included not only discussion of the storylines and character developments, as would be expected with any fan discussion, but often include some cross over with other 'geek' interests in the form of referential humour, analysis of a comic in relation to other media texts, or esoteric discussion of the comics on a *purely intellectual or critically scientific* level (as discussed in Chapter 4). Therefore superhero comic book geeks could be considered to be a subset of superhero comic book fans. Focus group discussions included a variety of these kinds of debates and analyses.<sup>64</sup> Jokes using references to multiple unconnected media texts were a common occurrence (for example the reference to Frank Miller that is discussed below and the cross reference of Batman comics with the *Dallas* TV show on page 93). In Auckland, one participant commented on and criticised the use of nuclear physics (the lack of accuracy in the effects of a nuclear explosion) in a story, while in the second Christchurch group they debated the biological possibility of Superman and Lois Lane having a baby (which they have) as they are different species. The Wellington group debated the definition of patriotism and compared the ways that patriotism was performed in Asterix versus Captain America comics and the first Christchurch group compared the cast and narrative structures of the TV shows, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Torchwood*.

The terms 'fan' and 'geek' were used in different ways when participants acknowledged the differences in the relationship they had with the media. The term 'fan' was used to indicate an interest in a specific object (such as a specific show), while 'geek' indicates a broader interest or collection of fandoms (Warnicke, 2006). Jeffrey describes himself as a "comics geek" because of his broad knowledge of and interest in comics:

Jeffrey: I'm enough of a comics geek that I've usually read the comic before the movie came out -except for 300<sup>65</sup> (which I knew was a comic but never read).

*Online focus group*

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<sup>64</sup> Most of which were too long to include as examples.

<sup>65</sup> The 1988 graphic novel by Frank Miller, is a fictionalised retelling of the story of the 300 Spartans who, lead by Leonidas of Sparta, fought the Persians at the Battle of Thermopylae. It was adapted for film in 2007.

He enjoys all comics and in addition to reading them he consumes all media related to them. He uses the term geek to identify his interest in superhero comics as a genre, rather than a specific comic book series. In contrast, the term “fan” was used when discussing a more specific and focused interest. For example:

Ethan: I was a fan of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles in the early 90s.

*Online forum – “More on movies and reading habits”*

Jade: In my younger days I used to be a great fan of Walt Disney Stuff, you know, Archie and sappy girl things they produce and you just read.

*1:1 interview*

In these examples, Ethan and Jade use ‘fan’ when describing their interest in *specific* comic franchises. Ethan’s teenage interest in the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (TMNT) was not his only fandom, as he was already a fan of a variety of other comics and media. On the other hand, Jade’s teen reading of Walt Disney comics was not engaged, related to, or involved with her other interests. While these readers participate in a range of fandoms, when they use the term fan it is to differentiate between a singular interest in a topic and their contemporary identities as members of geek subculture.

## **Subcultural capital, in-jokes and superhero expertise**

As with any subculture, geekdom has blurry, difficult to define, and contested edges and not all members of the geek subculture will call themselves geeks. Yet those participating in geekdom, even peripherally, will be identifiable to others through their knowledge and behaviour; their subcultural capital (Thornton, 1996).<sup>66</sup> By utilising and displaying cultural resources that are specific to the subculture in

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<sup>66</sup> Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital is one of a set of ‘capitals’ held by individuals, also including economic, social, and symbolic capitals. Cultural capital is the collection of intellectual and educational resources that are valued within dominant culture. They may provide an individual with social mobility in excess of their economic status (Thornton, 1996). Subcultural capital is the cultural capital that is specific to, and valued by a particular subculture, which gains the individual status within the subcultural group. It may have no value as cultural capital within mainstream culture, but is often more important than the dominant culture’s cultural capital when participating in a subculture (Thornton, 1996).

their interactions the groups constitute geekdom through collectively producing a group identity.

In some focus group discussions humour was an important social tool used to test and establish the boundaries of the group's shared knowledge, while at the same time, allowing the group to take pleasure in the experience of doing geekdom. Using humour that draws on multiple texts from a range of different genres creates a sense of shared identity with those who understand and appreciate the joke. In the second Christchurch group, one participant listed what she did not like to see in comics. Amber responded to Leslie's identification of authors criticised for writing misogynistic story lines with a joke. The joke draws on a complex set of prior knowledge to be amusing:

Leslie: I hate it when they're grossly misogynistic, like Watchmen, Alan Moore. Like, as much as that story's great, they're all just such wankers! All they think, you know, yes you've got the complexity and all that kind of stuff and they're flawed and all that.

Anna-Maria: It was the 80s.

Leslie: I know! It was so horrible! And it's just, ah!

Amber: Frank Miller: whoreswhoreswhoreswhoreswhores.  
(Laughter)

(Christchurch 2)

Amber's "whores" comment is a reference to a web comic, which itself references both a common criticism of Frank Miller and a film about computer hackers. The participants in the group laughed because they were familiar with all of the references required to appreciate the comment. Frank Miller has often been criticised for his treatment of women in comics, mostly that he cannot write a female character without turning her into a prostitute. While this is not true of all of his female characters, it is certainly a very common issue with his stories and a valid criticism. Amber is quoting the punch line of a *Shortpacked* webcomic (Willis, 2006) that has Frank Miller held by some kind of villainous gangsters (only seen in silhouette) and he is told to write a comic with a female character who is not a prostitute or he will not leave alive. The comic shows him struggling with the effort, but ends in the final panel with Miller typing "whoreswhoreswhoreswhores whoreswhoreswhoreswhores whoreswhoreswhor [sic]" as a gun is pointed at his head. The comic itself is a reference to a scene from the 2001 movie, *Swordfish*. In this scene the protagonist, a

computer hacker, has been kidnapped and is being forced to undergo a series of tests, including being made to hack the Pentagon computers with a gun pointed at his head, while receiving oral sex. Familiarity with the web comic is necessary to understand the reference, familiarity with the criticisms of Miller are necessary to ‘get’ the joke in the comic, and familiarity with the movie gives the comic context. Almost everyone at the table (at least 5 of the 6 present) appeared to understand at least part of the reference.

Amber could have simply named Miller, as the webcomic reference was not necessary to understand her point, but by including the joke she was able to create a sense of community through the humour. Humour only works if the audience understands the references made and the relationships between them, so if the other members of the group had not understood the relationship between Frank Miller and ‘Whoreswhoreswhores...’ the joke would have fallen flat. Including humour can be a gamble. It may allow the group to bond through shared understanding, or it could set the joking individual apart from the rest through lack of understanding or recognition. Using humour as complex as this example indicates that Amber thought that at least some members of the group would understand the complex references. When they did, they also recognised that others shared their knowledge and this intensified the sense of a group identity.

Doing geekdom is an interactive process in which participants collectively co-construct themselves as geeks. In the Wellington group, the participants in the group all shared an understanding of the stereotypes of fans, the online behaviour of fans compared to their face-to-face behaviour, and of popular webcomics. These shared understandings not only diffused a tense moment, but also gave the group an opportunity to co-construct their geek identity. At one point the discussion became quite impassioned, with Callum speaking about how a particular story in a series had especially touched him. When Leon voiced his disagreement about the value of that story, Callum’s reaction prompted an aside by me and the other group member:

- Francesca: You know you’ve got a good group when you get the polar opposites going.  
 Anna-Maria: I just had the thought that maybe in my info sheet I should’ve actually had little rules of ‘please no fisticuffs.’

- [This aside distracted the men from their discussion and everyone then laughed]
- Anna-Maria: I was just thinking that actually people could get really passionate about this. Maybe focus groups are a dangerous thing.
- Leon: Nerd rage!
- Callum: If you've ever read an internet forum, people can get very passionate about things on forums.  
[Anna-Maria and Francesca - indecipherable]
- Leon: Yeah, but I know that when they get face-to-face they'd be like [head lowered, speaking in a mumbly, little voice] um, er...I don't really like that.
- Anna-Maria: Yeah, I was sort of relying on that stereotype of comic book readers as being socially awkward nerdy people who couldn't punch someone out if they tried.  
\*laughter\*
- Callum: Even if they could they wouldn't want to.
- Leon: Ever read Penny Arcade anybody?
- Anna-Maria: Yeah, a little bit.
- Leon: The theory of the internet?
- Callum: No.
- Leon: Remember that one?
- Anna-Maria: Draw it.  
[Leon gets up and writes an equation on the white board then reads it out for the benefit of the tape recording]
- Leon: Normal person plus anonymity plus audience equals complete asshole.  
\*laughter\*
- Callum: I think I have seen this actually.
- Anna-Maria: There's an XKCD one along those lines. Are you coming to bed? No I can't...
- Everyone: Someone on the internet was wrong!  
\*Laughter\*
- Anna-Maria: I know I have been there.
- Callum: I think we all have.
- Anna-Maria: 4 o'clock in the morning and you get sort of, almost blacking out with rage thinking 'how could you possibly say that?!'
- Callum: I know, I know I've said this a million times, but I'm sure the next time I say it you'll suddenly change your mind.

*Wellington focus group*

The process of performing geekdom, and the creation of a feeling of subcultural connectedness, may be as simple as everyone understanding the same joke, or recognising similarities in experience, as in the example above. The group had all read the same webcomics, and recognised the experiences to which the comics

referred. *XKCD* is a simply but sophisticatedly drawn (usually stick figures and graphs) webcomic that focuses on topics popular in the geek subculture (maths, science, computer and internet, superheroes, and popular culture references) tied together by the themes of romance, sarcasm, politics, and philosophy. The particular comic being referenced, *Duty Calls*, shows a man typing on the computer. From out of the panel someone calls him to come to bed, he replies that he cannot as he is doing something important. He is asked what, and replies “Someone was wrong on the internet”<sup>67</sup> (XKCD, 2008). While Callum was not familiar with the *Penny Arcade* webcomic (Holkins & Krahulik, 2004), he recognised the ‘theory of the internet’ equation and experience. These two jokes, which both came from unrelated online comics, assisted in the creation of a feeling of shared experience and group identity because every member of the group had experienced an online ‘flame war.’<sup>68</sup> They shared the experience and the acknowledgement that these kinds of extreme arguments rarely happen in face-to-face encounters, regardless of the strength of feeling people might have about the issues.

Early in the second Christchurch group, a subtle interaction based on shared assumptions and knowledge caused a tense moment in the group, which later became a running joke, a form of group bonding. Mike listed ‘angst,’ which is often associated with Spider-Man, as an undesirable trait of superheroes. Amber, being a Spider-Man fan, took this as a direct attack on her favourite hero:

- Mike: [reading his list of good and bad traits] ... and ah, under bad, I’ve got angst.  
 Amber: [defensively] there are tons of heroes with angst!  
 Mike: Yeah, I know and it annoys me. I know Spider-Man’s your favourite.  
 Leslie: [chuckling at Amber’s reaction] woah, someone’s taking that as a direct Spider-Man thing.  
 Anna-Maria: A lot of the X-Men as well  
 Mike: I tend to be more DC than Marvel  
 Robin: What about Batman?

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<sup>67</sup> Interestingly, everyone misquoted it in the same way - possibly because the original wording of the comic is a little awkward.

<sup>68</sup> An intense, usually impassioned online argument, often involving offensive language, vulgar insults, and maybe even threats (Willard, 2007, p. 5). Flaming is usually excessively violent in nature, far more so than arguments that the same people would have face-to-face.

Leslie: Yeah, I like DC

Robin: Batman, every single opportunity, ‘my parents died.’ Shut up!

*Christchurch Focus group 2*

Amber interpreted Mike’s negative response to angst as an insult to her favourite superhero – Spider-Man. His preference for DC comics was understood to allude to the opinion that Marvel superheroes may generally be more ‘angsty’ than those written/published by DC. Spider-Man and the X-Men are both produced by Marvel comics, while Batman is DC. Robin and I attempt to diffuse the situation by suggesting that the X-Men and Batman are also examples of angst ridden characters. The death of the parents is one of the defining attributes of most superheroes, so hardly unique to Batman, yet the comics regularly make a point of reminding the reader that young Bruce Wayne’s parents were shot, leaving him orphaned. Robin’s ‘Shut up’ is directed at Batman, as he is seen as constantly complaining about being an orphan. The statement “My parents died” became one of a small collection of running jokes that came up repeatedly throughout the following hours of conversation.

Although the exchange began with group threatening tension, it was effectively turned around by Robin. Through humorous reflections on shared understandings of Batman the group was able to reconnect. This group had a number of ongoing jokes<sup>69</sup> that helped to construct a group identity and make the social exchange enjoyable for them all. Like the Wellington group, this group’s sense of shared experience gave them a sense of connection with the other participants, which enabled them to ‘do geekdom’ more freely, through ongoing in-jokes and ‘multi-textual’ references. The sharing of common understandings, even small ones like these, is important in the formation of any group identity, as they help the members to recognise cohesiveness between themselves and the rest of ‘their people’ (Chwe, 2003).

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<sup>69</sup> There was another ongoing joke about not giving monkeys cigarettes (referring to outdated laws), and one about the non-permanence of comic book death (“How long is that going to last?”). The latter is discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.



## A gendered subculture

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Self identification and the claiming of a marginalised gender performance can be seen as an act of defiance by many of the participants. By choosing to identify themselves as geeks, nerds or fans research participants aligned themselves with non-normative subject positions. Geeks and nerds are often associated with subordinate forms of masculinity,<sup>70</sup> so for the male participants to *choose* such a position can be seen as an act of rebellion, resisting the ideals of traditional New Zealand cultures of masculinity that is associated with sports, beer and ‘mateship’ (Jensen, 1996; Law, 1997; Liepins, 2000; MacLean, Chandler, & Nauright, 1999). The male participants who are proudly claiming these identities are resisting scenarios for masculinity that they think are privileged. They deconstruct and recreate gender and identity within the subcultural world of superhero comic book fans. Even in this resistance these more unconventional ways of doing gender nevertheless exhibit some aspects of dominant gender relations. Through their intellectual sparring and knowledge contests the male participants engage in competition from which female participants are largely excluded.

Geek discussion of comics at times becomes competitive, with the goal of being seen to be the most knowledgeable about the subject or having the most in-depth understanding of the deeper meanings of the text. Connell (2005) describes competitiveness and rivalry as characteristic of hegemonic masculinity. Through talk and verbal sparring, the readers may compete for dominance through demonstrations of cultural capital. Pustz describes this competitiveness:

Like sports fans, comics fans enjoy being experts, even when there is no one with whom to share their knowledge. When both types of fans are fortunate enough to be among the like-minded, an element of competition also exists. ... Comic book fans challenge each other to identify the first appearance of Sabretooth or list all of Luba’s children in *Love and Rockets*

(1999, p. 114).

This competition and ensuing challenge does not necessarily take the form of literal quizzing, but can instead emerge as one-upmanship and attempts to show the gaps in

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<sup>70</sup> Usually, both ‘geek’ and ‘nerd’ are assumed to be masculine terms unless the gender is specified.

the expertise of the other fan. Competition among participants sometimes took place during focus group discussions. One participant (Jeffrey) in an online discussion stood out as asserting authority through his high level of knowledge of the latest storylines. He repeatedly presented his knowledge of comics (and fandom) as more up to date, more in depth, and more worthy than those with whom he was interacting. At the beginning of the online discussion he directed an insult at another participant, calling him a ‘n00b’ (a pejorative term meaning a “newbie” - someone who is new to the internet realm, and therefore lacking in knowledge about basic chat-room terminology and etiquette), attempting to establish himself as dominant in the hierarchy of the group. Later, during a discussion on why the participants liked one particular version of Superman over another, Jeffrey again asserted his knowledge dominance, this time of the latest Batman storylines:

- Jeffrey: Dick Grayson as Batman is an interesting concept but the stories post RIP/Final Crisis have been pretty average.<sup>71</sup>
- Anna-Maria: Have they done that? I'd only heard speculation.
- Jeffrey: Old news - Bruce Wayne is "dead," Dick Grayson is Batman, Damien is Robin, Tim Drake is Red Robin, Jason Todd is (probably) Red Hood, Spoiler is the new Batgirl.
- Anna-Maria: Oh...so no more Nightwing?
- Robert: Bruce isn't dead, Dick's going to wake up and find him in the shower!<sup>72</sup>
- Jeffrey: All the bat titles Nightwing, Robin, Birds of Prey were cancelled (well apart from Batman and Detective).
- Anna-Maria: Ah. Ok.
- Jeffrey: This is old, old, old news BTW.

*Online focus group*

Jeffrey’s “old, old, old news,” it turns out, was less than six months old at the time, in a series that publishes monthly. This time frame also included a three month hiatus

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<sup>71</sup> Dick Greyson was an early Robin who left to go to university and later returned to Gotham and became the superhero Night Wing. Various fan discussions had predicted that at the end of the Batman RIP story arch, when batman died, Dick would take over the role.

<sup>72</sup> This is an example of the ways that intertextual references are used in geek interactions. Robert’s comment about Dick finding Bruce in the shower is a reference to a season finale of *Dallas*, in which the entire preceding year’s shows were shown to be “just a dream.” One character, Pamela, wakes to find her husband, Bobby, in the shower. Bobby had been killed at the end of the previous season, but his death (and everything that came after) was just in Pamela’s nightmares. Roberts reference is to an event that occurred over 25 years ago (before Jeffrey was born), but the scene has been parodied in many popular television shows since then. Jeffrey appears to not know, or to ignore the reference.

in all Batman related comics from the Bruce Wayne's death (R.I.P) issue (December, 2008), so only 3 new issues had been released since. With this statement Jeffrey establishes himself as being the most knowledgeable and up to date participant in the discussion and constructs himself as having a superior knowledge to the other people in the conversation.

Jeffrey is competing to be the geekiest of the geeks. In establishing his expertise, he is potentially positioning himself as the most distant from dominant ideals of masculinity, but also the best at doing the alternative form of masculinity in which he is participating. However, because his position of dominance is specific to the short timeframe of the discussion, he effectively becomes the dominant geek within the non-normative geek discourse. Jeffrey's competitiveness mirrors aspects of hegemonic masculinity while simultaneously crafting an alternative comic book geek identity. This competitive interaction utilised subcultural capital (Thornton, 1996), in the form of superhero comic specific knowledge, while operating within the gendered rules of dominant culture.

Competition in fan interactions can also be described in sporting terms. Fans may comment that another fan is not fun to talk to because they cannot 'keep up' - as if it were a race. One forum participant explicitly compared his interactions with other readers to the relationships within competitive sport. Because knowledge is a source of status within comic book fandom, displaying knowledge is a way of gaining status. Like competing on the field or in the ring, this intellectual sparring serves to exhibit competitive relationships reminiscent of dominant masculinity, but in a new setting:

Cody: In real life, with very few exceptions, the only time I can talk comics with someone is if they've read my books, and then we discuss it, but I'm always the one with the upper hand. I know all the trivia and history of the writers.

If I go online, then I can talk with others on a more level playing field, because comics are much more accessible and affordable, they've read the same comics, and know their own facts about the industry.

*Online forum – "Online vs. Face-to-face"*

Cody has set up an imaginary status competition between him and other fans (who may or may not be aware that they are competing). Cody finds the lack of a

challenge disappointing when discussing comics with his local friends as they are not interested enough, or not well read enough to engage in his competition. Instead he prefers his discussions to engage with international fans online, as these ‘players’ can give him a real challenge.

In the subculture of comics, knowledge of the storylines and understanding of the science, history and relationships in each gives one power. However, in order to gain the position of dominance, the holder of knowledge must share it, potentially undermining his knowledge advantage in that group. In return for this he may gain some information relevant for a future encounter in which he engages in displays of knowledge. Once the knowledge advantage is utilised, that particular piece of information will not be useful in future competitions with those same opponents. It is, effectively, a one-shot per spar/opponent weapon. This means that to maintain their position in the hierarchy, the fans must seek out the most up-to-date, or obscure information, or develop new theories that their opponents will not already possess.

Competition and hierarchy are ongoing projects, which rely on shows of prowess for their existence. Sparring with other geeks allows each participant (and even an observer) to hone his skills and grow his arsenal. It is important to the comic fan to be up to date with the latest development and storylines, as well as having a knowledge base stretching back into the ‘golden age’ of comics. An effective way of gaining this knowledge, and the only way of showing it, is by sharing it with others. Sharing knowledge has a variety of purposes, including creating a sense of connection through their shared interest, and ‘jousting’ for place in the community. The knowledge itself has no value or purpose outside of the subculture; it is the application or use of knowledge that gives it meaning and value. “Knowledge is not something you ‘have’...it is something you participate in” (Säljö (1992) cited in Hultman & Hörberg, 1998). In order for the knowledge to remain meaningful, it must be shared, compared and reconstructed through interactions.

## **Girl geeks - marginalisation and exclusion**

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Heterosexist hierarchies were also evident within the interactions of comic book geeks in this study. While in the groups gendered interactions between male

and female readers were subtle, gender differences played an important part in constituting their geek identities. Many geeks will proudly declare that geekdom is an egalitarian and all inclusive subculture, but it is a claim that is disputed (O'Malley, 2011; Pastabagel, 2011; Restructure!, 2010). As with any community in which a single group is over-represented, others struggle to be acknowledged within that community. Comic book readership is predominantly made up of white, straight, males, as is the broader realm of 'geekdom,' (Eglash, 2002; Mendick & Francis, 2011; Tocci, 2007) which often leads to discrimination, marginalisation, or exclusion of women.<sup>73</sup>

The groups that may have been most left out of the geek identity market, however, are those who have been less welcome or less interested in geek culture more broadly: women and racial minorities.  
(Tocci, 2007, p. 28)

Female comic book readers occupy a different social space to male fans, both within the community and in their wider social interactions as comic book readers, which was visible in the clothing of some of the female participants in this study, and the experiences of discrimination that they described. While it may be less 'transgressive' for these women to make public their comic readership, the women in this study, like many geek women (or, more contentiously, 'Girl geeks') report that they have to work harder than male fans to be accepted as part of the group or to have their opinions taken seriously, that they are excluded, marginalised, fetishised and infantilised within the geek community (Healey, 2008; Kocurek, 2011; Mortari, 2012; NerdLove, 2011; O'Malley, 2011; Tocci, 2011).<sup>74</sup> They also suggested that their opinions were often not taken seriously by other readers, or are ignored entirely, especially if those opinions were concerning the treatment of women in comics.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> This discrimination also occurs in other forms, such as ableism, cisism, racism, homophobia, and religious discrimination, but I am focussing on sexism.

<sup>74</sup> These concerns are not just about superhero comics – it is seen as a widespread problem in geeky media.

<sup>75</sup> Unfortunately, the timing of my research was such that I was not able to ask my participants about the controversies surrounding the sexualisation of female characters and loss of female creators in DC's relaunch in 2011 (Hudson, 2011; Sneddon, 2011). Many female characters were rewritten in such a way that has been criticised as objectified and sexualised. This criticism of the 'new 52' came

In one focus group two female participants, Robin and Leslie, discussed feeling judged for not liking a certain well known graphic novel, *The Watchmen* (Moore et al., 1987). They described how their criticisms of the comic's treatment of the female characters in the story,<sup>76</sup> and the discomfort that this brought were ignored, and how their own opinions of the comic were often dismissed. The novel in question is a long and complex story with heavy political elements to the plot, including critiques of the media and of cold war politics. Its use of multiple visual formats and subplots was ground breaking, but its treatment of female characters, predominantly the female lead, Laurie Juspezyk/Silk Spectre and her mother Sally Jupiter/the original Silk Spectre, has been subjected to significant criticism, and has many elements that Leslie had earlier described as “misogynistic:”

- Robin: I find sometimes that when I read a review of a comic, I like can't really trust other people, like even if they're big comic book readers. I remember someone asked me “Have you read Watchmen?” I went, “I tried and didn't like it” and got ... JUDGING me 'cause Watchmen was like the greatest comic ever. I liked the movie.  
[Everyone talking at once...some laughter]
- Leslie: I didn't like it either, and I got so slammed for it, I went back and I reread it years later and I thought, Nah, I still don't like it.
- Robin: I get “Clearly you just didn't *UN-DER-STAAAND* it.” Oh my god! I didn't like it, get over it.

*Christchurch focus group 2*

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to a head at the 2011 San Diego comic-con (a major comic and pop culture convention) with the head of DC (Dan DiDio) verbally attacking both male and female fans who asked him about gender related issues during a question and answer panel (Sneddon, 2011).

<sup>76</sup> There is only one female character involved in the main plot of the graphic novel, Laurie Juspezyk, the Silk Spectre. She is a second generation hero in the Watchmen universe. Her mother, Sally Jupiter, was the first Silk Spectre, and pushed Laurie to take over the role when she retired. Laurie's biological father is revealed to be another hero, the Comedian. Ms Jupiter was sexually assaulted by the Comedian, but later had an affair with him, during which time Ms Juspezyk was conceived. Juspezyk is presented as a strong feminist character, disliking the objectification and sexualisation of her crime fighting role – including the sheer yellow mini dress that her mother gave her for her costume. Throughout the entire story Juspezyk only reacts to the actions of the male characters, often being manipulated by other characters. Her story and character development are secondary to the male characters (she shows very little growth, and her role in the story is to get the male characters where they need to be physically and mentally). Other female characters are violently killed almost as soon as they are introduced during retrospectives scattered throughout the book.

Leslie did not enjoy the portrayal of the female characters, so her enjoyment of the story was marred. Both Leslie and Robin reject the accusation that they did not understand the text, but felt judged by other readers, none-the-less.<sup>77</sup> Robin says the word ‘understand’ slowly and loudly to illustrate that the people saying it were treating her like a fool, rather than engaging in a discussion of the merits (or otherwise) of the book.

The women’s distaste for sexist or degrading elements in comics is irrelevant in the hierarchy of readers, and was expected to be overshadowed by their appreciation of the complex and politically insightful plot. While many male participants also said that they disliked *Watchmen*, none said that they had ever suffered any kind of exclusion, derision, or dismissal for this. The women’s experiences of their criticisms of the sexism within the medium being dismissed are an unfortunately common occurrence in comic book fandom (NerdLove, 2011; O’Malley, 2011; Seltzer, 2006).

Similarly, Amber said that because she still enjoys Frank Miller’s comics post *Dark Knight Returns* (the era for which he has received so much criticism), she must field comments such as “well you have no taste in comics then do you?” Amber’s appreciation of Frank Miller’s film noir style of comic book writing, despite what she called his “whores obsession,” is denigrated by other fans because liking Miller’s recent works is not a popular position in comics fandom.

Other forms of inter and intra-gender competitive behaviour I observed were far more subtle and difficult to capture by reference to specific quotes. In the first Christchurch focus group, one particular participant repeatedly dominated the conversation by either exclusionary body language (physically positioning himself to exclude another participant), repeatedly speaking over the female participant (and over me), ignoring the input of two participants but actively engaging in discussion with another, or simply giving long ‘soliloquies’ that did not allow other group members to speak.

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<sup>77</sup> Robin openly admitted that she preferred comics to be lighter in tone, and tended to stay away from ‘dark’ or ‘gritty’ storylines.

While a male geek will often be accepted into a geek social group without question, girl geeks spoke about having to fight for acceptance. At the same focus group discussion two female participants, Amber and Robin, were wearing superhero themed clothing. Despite coming directly from work, Amber had worn a T-shirt printed with a picture of a group of female superheroes, because she knew she would be coming to the focus group that evening. Robin had also come from work, and was in uniform, but wearing a Superman ring. She stated that she never leaves the house without at least one Superman insignia on her person. Wendy Seltzer (2006, p. 52) suggests that female geeks may make a point of loudly (pro)claiming their place in geekdom through clothing because they are so often forgotten, or not taken seriously as geeks. On greeting her at the beginning of the night, I had complimented Amber on her t-shirt. She said her choice of clothing was influenced by her plans for the evening (although she also wears the t-shirt at other times); she chose to visibly identify herself as a superhero comic geek. This visual display of superhero fandom, through clothing and other paraphernalia, was a strategy for these women to assert their right to a position within the fan group, regardless of their gender.

Fiske (1992, p. 38) suggests that public displays of fandom, such as wearing a superhero t-shirt or Batman belt buckle, are “socially offensive and deliberately challenge more normal social values and the discipline they exert” which earns the fan social disapproval. This “disapproval is an integral part of this sort of fan pleasure, for its arousal is part of the intention ... of the enunciation [of fan produced meanings]” (Fiske, 1992, p. 38). Male fans have a strong sense of the disapproval of comic book fandom; they may not want to risk the additional disapproval associated with overt fandom via their attire. None of the men I interviewed in person visibly showed their fandom through their clothing, although one man had a tattoo of the Marvel mutant character, Wolverine, on his leg (he showed me the tattoo to illustrate his love of the X-Men franchises before the focus group began, while we were talking casually, but he did not mention it to the others attending). Outside of the



comic reading community, female fans may be in a better position than male fans to publically claim their readership and challenge societal norms.<sup>78</sup>

The context in which geekdom is being performed will present both benefits and challenges to the geeks. The female geeks are in an ambivalent position between the subculture they participate in, and the dominant culture in which that operates. Within wider society they may find pleasure in challenging expectations, as Fiske suggests. However, within the subculture of geekdom, that same challenge may be necessary to be accepted as part of a superhero comic book subculture in which young white men predominate.

## Conclusion

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Some participants utilised collective knowledge of geeky media to create a feeling of solidarity as geeks within their focus group discussion and to co-construct a geek identity. This group identity was performed through the use of humour, both as a point of connection and as a method of relieving social tensions. Humour that relied on prior knowledge of intricate 'geek' memes, or that continued a joke made by someone in the group, was common. When performing a group identity, the knowledges utilised, while often very specific to the subculture (such as popular web comics), were usually well known enough to include most participants in the group. However, specific knowledge was also used by participants to exclude others.

Competition between some members of the groups and exclusion of members in other groups was a reproduction of some gendered interactions that participants said they experienced in geek culture. Jeffrey's very explicit display of rivalry, Cody's intellectual jousting, and the exclusion of the female participant in the first Christchurch group, show that aspects of the dominant form of masculinity may manifest themselves even in groups that in many ways deliberately resists them.

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<sup>78</sup> It could also be argued that their display of comics fandom is more acceptable to society *because* they are women. Because comics are often viewed as childish entertainment, or a masculine pursuit, female fandom could be seen as acceptable because the female fans are seen as either infantilised, and therefore allowed to enjoy 'childish' entertainment, or striving for a social position above theirs (i.e. masculinity).

The participants in this study negotiated their identity performance in relation to the contexts in which they found themselves. In a fan friendly focus group, the performances of geekdom became acceptable, and even required. The performance of geekdom is a negotiation of the tensions between embracing the difference and marginalisation and the pleasures of resisting the dominant culture. In the context of the focus groups there were also gendered expectations at play as participants constructed themselves as knowledgeable within comic book sub-culture. The result of these negotiations and performances was a combination of gender performances that showed resistance to and re-creation of dominant gender practices and understandings.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

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Contemporary superhero comics are a hyper-gendered genre of adult focussed entertainment. The men (and even the women to some extent) in these comics are representations of hegemonic ideals of masculinity. They are tough, they are in control, they are powerful and they are heroic. They are a significant cultural phenomenon, with the characters being so pervasive in Western culture that even very young children recognise Superman, Batman and Spider-Man. As the medium depends on bodies that fit certain gender ideals that even when gender is not explicitly under consideration, it is an important aspect of the understandings and meanings produced by those reading the comics.

In considering this gendered medium, this thesis addresses a gap in the literature on superhero comic book readers by exploring the ways that the participating fans identified with the superhero character through the alter ego. The analysis of this identification revealed a mode of identification that has not been previously addressed. It also contributes to scholarship on fandom through the examination of the ways that fan groups co-construct group identities through their interactions. These insights were gained through the use of research strategies not often used in fan research.

I used a multiple method approach in this research to engage fans in different ways and to enable fans to participate while remaining completely anonymous. Online research strategies were employed initially as a way of allowing complete anonymity for research participants who wanted to remain unidentified. This strategy allowed participation by people who would otherwise be difficult to include and whose views could easily be overlooked. In addition, the multiple method approach also allowed a wider range of interactions to occur and provided opportunities for exploration of the ways that identity was variably performed in these different situations. The face-to-face group interactions were often peppered with moments of group identity formation and with struggles for power or position between members

of the discussion. While real time discussions online also showed elements of this, they were far less pronounced than in the situations where the participants were able to physically interact.

The nature of identification and the means that readers use to achieve it have been theorised in a variety of ways (J. A. Brown, 1999; Cohen, 2001; Cowie, 1997; Fingerioth, 2004; A. Hall, 2009; C. Harris & Alexander, 1998; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005; Jauss et al., 1974; Klein, 2007; Nyberg, 1998; Pustz, 1999). However, a common thread throughout these theories is that the media consumer needs a point at which to enter the story. If the character and storyline are too different from the lived experiences of the readers they have to work harder to relate to or identify with the characters or situations, which makes the story less enjoyable (Cohen, 2001). Three specific theories have been developed by superhero comic book scholars about the way that readers engage with or identify with the superhero: the alter ego as being similarly 'human' to the reader (J. A. Brown, 2001; Klein, 1993); as having secrets like the reader (Fingerioth, 2004), and instructing the reader (Reynolds, 1994). Very little empirical work has been done with comic book fans to investigate how readers identify with comic book characters and the situations they confront.

Like media theory, which Jenkins (1992) criticised for being disconnected from the subject and participants, most existing research written about comic book audiences' identification with superheroes and their supporting casts "lacks even the most rudimentary grounding in empirical reality, drawing its assumptions about spectatorship through a combination of personal introspection and borrowed authority" (1992, p. 285). Through opening a dialogue with adult fans in New Zealand, this study found that these readers employed a variety of different strategies to engage with the stories and find shifting points with which to identify.

Participants in this study engaged with superhero characters through identification and as potential resources for action in their lives. The 'modern mythology' theory of how comic book readers utilise the stories they read, suggests that superheroes are a contemporary version of mythological heroes, who the audiences look to for strategies and examples of how to behave in challenging situations (Nyberg, 1998; Reynolds, 1994). I found that participants do use the comics in these ways, thinking about their own challenges and the approaches that

their favourite heroes might use to overcome them. Fans in this study identify with the superhero through the feeling that their lives are somehow similar to that of the alter ego, as suggested by J. A. Brown (2001) and Klein (1993). They recognise that they too have aspects of themselves that they wish to keep hidden (like a secret identity)(Fingeroth, 2004). They also identified with the superhero in a variety of other ways, including parasocial identification with the character in the manner of friends (Horton & Wohl, 1956), identification with the similarity between their own experiences and that of the heroes'(Cowie, 1997), and through a wish to be or be like the character (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005).

This research demonstrates an additional mode of identification by recognition that both the hero and the reader are situationally performing multiple identities. One of the female participants commented that like the superheroes she reads, she has different versions of herself that she performs in different circumstances. This level of identification could have the potential to be utilised by readers to engage with characters who are otherwise very different to themselves – such as those of a different gender to the reader. Further investigation of this kind of identification and the ways that audience members use it would be an interesting area for future research.

Many participants compared the lives of Superman and Batman, saying that Superman's powers made him too dissimilar to their own experience and that therefore they did not enjoy Superman comic books. While none of the readers I interviewed were millionaire playboys, so could not claim that their lives were entirely comparable to Bruce Wayne's, many of them preferred Batman because they could imagine that with his resources and personal motivations they too could become like him. To become Superman, however, would require having been born on the planet Krypton.

Participants in this study said that they enjoyed the relationships and human failings of the heroes more than the aggressive physicality of these characters. This is similar to the way readers in Brown's (2001) study preferred heroes with brains over brawn. In addition to adding depth to the character and story the contrast between the superhero bodies and the gentler aspects of the characters' personal lives shows the value of the relationships and highlights their significance. In other words, the

superheroes need normal lives to be 'super.' The participants in this study saw the interpersonal relationships and 'ordinary life' aspects of the predominantly male superhero characters as often more important, and more enjoyable than their hypermasculine toughness and muscularity. It was these relationships that made the characters more accessible to many readers and, to some, gave them a sense of having something in common with the hero. While the hypergendered nature of the superhero is one of the distinguishing features of this genre, it is not the one with which the readers in this study most engage.

The identities associated with the different bodies (superhero, alter ego, and human cast) in the stories are important components of superhero comics. Superhero bodies, the bodies of their alter egos, and those of the human supporting cast are defining features of the genre, and the management and maintenance of the superhero and alter ego identities is an ongoing project within most superhero storylines. When the comic book fan reads their comics, he (or she) imaginatively interacts with the superhero, in his (or her) different physical and social forms, and with the other characters in the books. The ways that the readers in this study engaged with the characters in superhero comic books was variable and dependant on the contextual intersection of the comic's characters, the reader and their particular contexts.

In addition to analysing the fans' identification with the comic book characters, this thesis also examines the interactive relationships between the fans. These group interactions, and how they individually and collectively constituted themselves in relation to non-readers, were just as important to participants' enjoyment of their readership as the comic books themselves. Interaction with other comic book fans was important for many participants, even if this interaction only happened online. The relationships that could be built between superhero fans within a community of readers allowed them to play with a wider range of uses of their comic book knowledge. These interactions, like those of the intellect based heroes may have been battles of the wits, as with a hero and villain, or they could be friendly, bonding interactions like those between a hero and his human friends and family. Without the social connections with other fans, readers would not be able to

explore the full range of uses for the superhero comics and the knowledge that they had of them. Collectively they also perform ‘geekdom.’

Superhero comic book fandom is part of an intersecting matrix of related fandoms and interests. These intersecting interests can be collectively called “geekdom.” Geekdom can be considered a resistant subculture because it involves the alternative uses of media texts, group fan practices, and because such obsessive interests are not seen as ‘normal’ (Gray et al., 2007, pp. 3-4; Jenkins, 1992, p. 39; J. P. Williams, 2011, p. 5). Participants in this study constructed alternative identities within the resistant subculture of ‘geekdom.’ When they interacted with each other and with the researcher, the participants of this study performed their geekdom in a variety of ways. At different times they utilised a wide range of cultural resources to create a feeling of connectedness within the group, while at others these resources were used to compete, exclude or marginalise individuals within the groups I had brought together in face-to-face and online environments to talk about comics.

Interactions and identification were a key aspect of the enjoyment that the participants got from reading comics and participating in geekdom. How individuals ‘did’ their gendered identities depended on the nature of the interaction and with whom they were interacting. When they interacted within the same space, the relationships (involving real bodies) were different to those that happen with ‘disembodied identities’ (as happens in online discussions), or with imagined bodies, such as fantasy characters. Perceived differences, such as gender, amount of cultural capital, or having super powers also changed the ways that these identities were performed and the levels and kind of identification that were possible.

## **Areas for future research**

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This thesis has begun to address an area of research that has been largely overlooked by investigating how fans talk about their relationship with superhero characters and the situations they encounter and about their interactions with other fans. Being a new area of research, there is great potential for further investigation from a variety of perspectives. The size and scope of this project was far too limited

to address everything I would have liked to explore had I, Batman like, had access to unlimited time and resources.

This small study was conducted in a New Zealand context and identified a number of areas for discussion of superhero comic book fans and their relationship with the superhero comics that they read. These same discussions would be interesting to pick up in a wider study that investigated these relationships in other cultural contexts, and with more variably identified participants (such as casual, Queer, or disabled readers). This could be widened to include discussion of the heroic types specific to manga and anime, and the different ways that gender is performed by these heroes and understood by their audiences. A larger study, with potential to compare responses cross-culturally, could open this discussion up further and investigate the different ways that social and cultural environments influence the ways that readers engage with comics. A larger study could further investigate the extent to which readers are engaged by the superheroes' capacity to manage different selves in different social environments.

Although women were included as participants, and as superheroes under discussion, this study was primarily focussed on the masculinities of heroes and readers. Therefore a study specifically on female fan uses of superheroes, both male and female, would further develop the academic understanding of superhero comic fandom. Research focussing on both male and female fan engagements with female superheroes would be of particular interest and important as the portrayal of these characters has become controversial in recent times (Hudson, 2011; Pastabagel, 2011; Sneddon, 2011).

There is huge potential for further ethnographic research of geek subculture both from a sociological or anthropological perspective, and as a complex study investigating the interplay of fandoms. Fan studies could be carried out that included observing the face-to-face interactions of fans, doing fandom, in fan communities at conventions and in researcher facilitated groups, and outside these 'safe spaces' with non-fans. This would allow further investigation of the ways that geekdom and fandom are negotiated in these different settings.

The research findings highlighted in the last two chapters demonstrate the complexity of readers' responses and their pleasurable, critical and ironic



engagement with this popular culture genre. The comic book fans in this study enjoyed the ways that comics can be used to challenge their expectations and negotiate new understandings of the world.

There's actually really good stuff out there which would challenge your way of thinking and that, and expand your boundaries of how you see the world.

*Kyle – 1:1 Interview*

# Appendices

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## Appendix 1 - Participants

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**Table 1: Modes of participation**

Type of group	Number of events	Number of participants
Face-to-face focus groups	5	17
Online forum	1	20
1:1 interview (in person)	2	2
Online focus group	1	2
Online 1:1 Interview	2	2
Multiple modes (forum + other)		4

**Table 2:  
Participant Genders**

Participant Genders
11 Female
28 Male
39 Total

**Table 3: Participants  
by Focus Group**

Group location	Participants
Christchurch 1	Ben, David, Robin, Ethan*
Christchurch 2	Leslie, Mike, Amber, Robin, Ethan
Dunedin	Rosie, Leah, Josh, Jasmine, Nathan
Wellington	Francesca, Leon, Callum
Auckland	James, Sebastian
Online	Robert, Jeffrey

\* Robin and Ethan were invited to attend the second Christchurch focus group because they did not get many opportunities to speak in the first focus group. See Chapter 3 for more discussion on this.

**Table 4: The Participants**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Mode of participation</b>
Alex	19	M	Forum
Amber	24	F	Focus Group
Ben	23	M	Focus Group
Callum	28	M	Focus Group
Christopher	28	M	Forum
Cody	28	M	Forum
David	“40ish”	M	Focus Group
Dennis	43	M	Forum
Dillon	25	M	Forum
Donna	25	F	Forum
Ed	27	M	Forum
Ethan	32	M	Focus Group, Forum
Francesca	45	F	Focus Group
Jade	40	F	1:1 Interview
James	25	M	Focus Group
Jasmine	20	F	Focus Group
Jason	34	M	Forum
Jeffrey	26	M	Online Focus Group
Jenny	22	F	Forum
Joseph	35	M	Forum
Josh	23	M	Focus Group
Kelly	33	F	Forum
Kevin	37	M	Forum
Kyle	31	M	1:1 interview, Forum
Leah	25	F	Focus Group
Leon	29	M	Focus Group
Leslie	34	F	Focus Group
Louise	44	M	Online 1:1 interview
Mark	30	M	Forum
Michael	36	M	Forum
Mika	28	M	Forum
Mike	30	M	Focus Group
Nathan	33	M	Focus Group
Richard	29	M	Forum
Robert	‘old’	M	Online Focus Group
Robin	19	F	Focus Group, Forum
Rosie	22	F	Focus Group
Sebastian	46	M	Focus Group, Forum
Thomas	40	M	Online 1:1 interview

## Appendix 2 – Interview questions

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### A) Forum Topics

Topic title	Initial question
Introduce yourself?	(Started by Jason) There isn't a "general crap" forum (why would there be? this is a very focused forum to assist research) So I've taken the liberty of creating this thread.
How do you choose which comic books to read?	What factors influence your decisions to buy/read (or not) any given comic?
Your origin story...	How/why/when did you start reading comics (particularly superhero comics)? What were the influences that got you into them?
Online vs. Face-to-face	In my supervisory meeting today we started wondering about the changing face of fandom and reader communities. It's not really part of my research question, but out of interest... Do you take part in discussions in other comic/superhero forums online? And did you choose to participate online because of convenience, anonymity, or some other reason?
Superheroes in NZ part 1 <sup>79</sup>	If your favourite superhero was to find him/herself in New Zealand, what do you think they'd think of us, and how would we react to and treat them?
Favourite heroes	Do you have a favourite superhero (or villain)? What is it about them that makes them enjoyable? Are there any that you really can't stand? Why not?
What about the alter ego?	Any favourite alter ego? Any you can't stand? What about them appeals/repels you?
Does a hero need and alter ego?	There has been a recent trend in comics to get rid of the alter ego, or not have one at all. What do you think about this?
Origins and powers	Does the nature of the heroes powers or their back

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<sup>79</sup> Part 2 was not required

Topic title	Initial question
	story (including origin story) make a difference to you in your readership/enjoyment of superhero comics?
Design a team	If you could design your own superhero team (5-10 members, mix and match DC, Marvel etc as you like): 1) Who would be in it? 2) Why them? 3) What would the team be called?
Superhero Movies?	(Started by Jason) Any faves? Any hates? I think Batman Begins was great. I liked Hellboy. The Christopher Reeves Superman movies were lame.
Movies and comics	What effect do you think movie adaptations have on comics readership? Obviously the figures show that it increases the popularity of that particular comic, but do you think it changes the demographic or the attitude of current readers to the comics in question?  <i>Followed up with a clarifying question as participants were unclear:</i> Sales figures show an increase in popularity for any franchise that has had a movie released recently...for example, Hulk, Watchmen, Spider-Man, Ironman etc. Is it the already devoted readers who are buying these, maybe adding a title to their collection, or do you think it's new readers, being introduced to comics through the movies based on them?
Quality of adaptation	With so many superhero comics becoming movies lately, what do you think of their translation from static, 2D, ink on paper, to '3D', moving, live action?  Are there any heroes who you think really don't translate well? Or any that are better for it?
More on movies and reading habits...	Have you ever become interested in the comic book version of character or franchise as a result of

Topic title	Initial question
	<p>seeing a TV or movie adaptation of them?            What about being put off a character by movies/TV etc?</p>
<p>Wonder Woman quote for comment</p>	<p>I just came across this quote, attributed to William Moulton Marston (The creator of Wonder Woman).</p> <p>"Women represent love; men represent force. Man's use of force without love brings evil and unhappiness. But Wonder Woman has force bound by love and, with her strength, represents what every woman should be and really is. She corrects evil and brings happiness. "</p> <p>I'd love to hear people's comments on this.</p>

## **B) Focus group and Interview script/topic guide**

Before we start, please make 2 lists for me. On the first list write 3 traits that make a good or enjoyable superhero, and on the second list write down 3 traits that a superhero really shouldn't have (or be).

Please introduce yourself (you don't need to give your real name, just a 'tag' of some kind) and tell us what you have on your lists.

(where does conversation go from here?)

Do you have a favourite hero? Who?

What is it about them that attracted you to them?

Is there anything about them that you really don't like?

What about a favourite villain?

Are there any superheroes, villains, or incarnations of them that you really don't like?

Why?

What about movies, artists and writers?

Imagine for a moment a superhero (your favourite or another of your choosing), arrives in (or arises) in NZ...describe to me what happens.

If he originates here, how is he different?

If arriving, how is he/she received?

What effect does he/she have on the country?

Why do you think there are no ongoing NZ superheroes?

Does this matter to you?

How did you get into reading superhero comics?

Have your reading habits changed over time?

Is superhero comic readership a hobby you keep to yourself, or is it something you're comfortable making public?

Describe the 'Average reader?'

Describe what the general perception of the 'average reader is?

How well do you think superheroes translate to live action on the big or small screen?

Have tv shows and movies influenced your reading at all?

## Appendix 3 – Posters and fliers

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### i) Advertising flier - Armageddon

Only distributed at Armageddon Popular Culture Expo in Christchurch

#### **How does your Hero measure up?**

I am looking for people who read and enjoy Superhero comics to take part in a research project that explores what they enjoy about comic book characters and why.

This study, *On Superheroes and Fans: investigating how fans engage with/make sense of comic book superheroes*, is being conducted as part of the requirements for a Master of Arts degree in Gender Studies, at the University of Canterbury.

If you would be interested in taking part in this exciting study, please contact:

*Anna-Maria Covich*  
*amc129@student.canterbury.ac.nz*  
or 021 211 6124

This information sheet has been reviewed and approved by the Human Ethics Committee of the School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Canterbury. The research project will be reviewed by the Human Ethics Committee in April 2009, before any research commences



## ii) Advertising Flier

### **How does your favourite hero measure up?**

I am looking for people who read Superhero comics to take part in a research project that explores what they enjoy about comic book characters and why.

Participation involves taking part in your choice of internet based discussions about superhero comics and/or focus group discussions with other comic readers, or an individual interview.

This study, ***Comic Book Readers, Superheroes, and Masculinities***, is being conducted as part of the requirements for a Master of Arts degree in Gender Studies, at the University of Canterbury.

If you would be interested in taking part, or want to know more about this study, please contact:

*Anna-Maria Covich*  
*amc129@student.canterbury.ac.nz*  
or 021 211 6124

Or visit the website: [www.superhero.geek.nz](http://www.superhero.geek.nz)

This research project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee.

## iii) Poster

## Do you read Superhero Comics?

I am looking for people who read Superhero comics to take part in a research project that explores what they enjoy about comic book characters and why.

Participation involves taking part in your choice of internet based discussions about superhero comics and/or focus group discussions with other comic readers, or an individual interview.

This study, ***Comic Book Readers, Superheroes, and Masculinities***, is being conducted as part of the requirements for a Master of Arts degree in Gender Studies, at the University of Canterbury.

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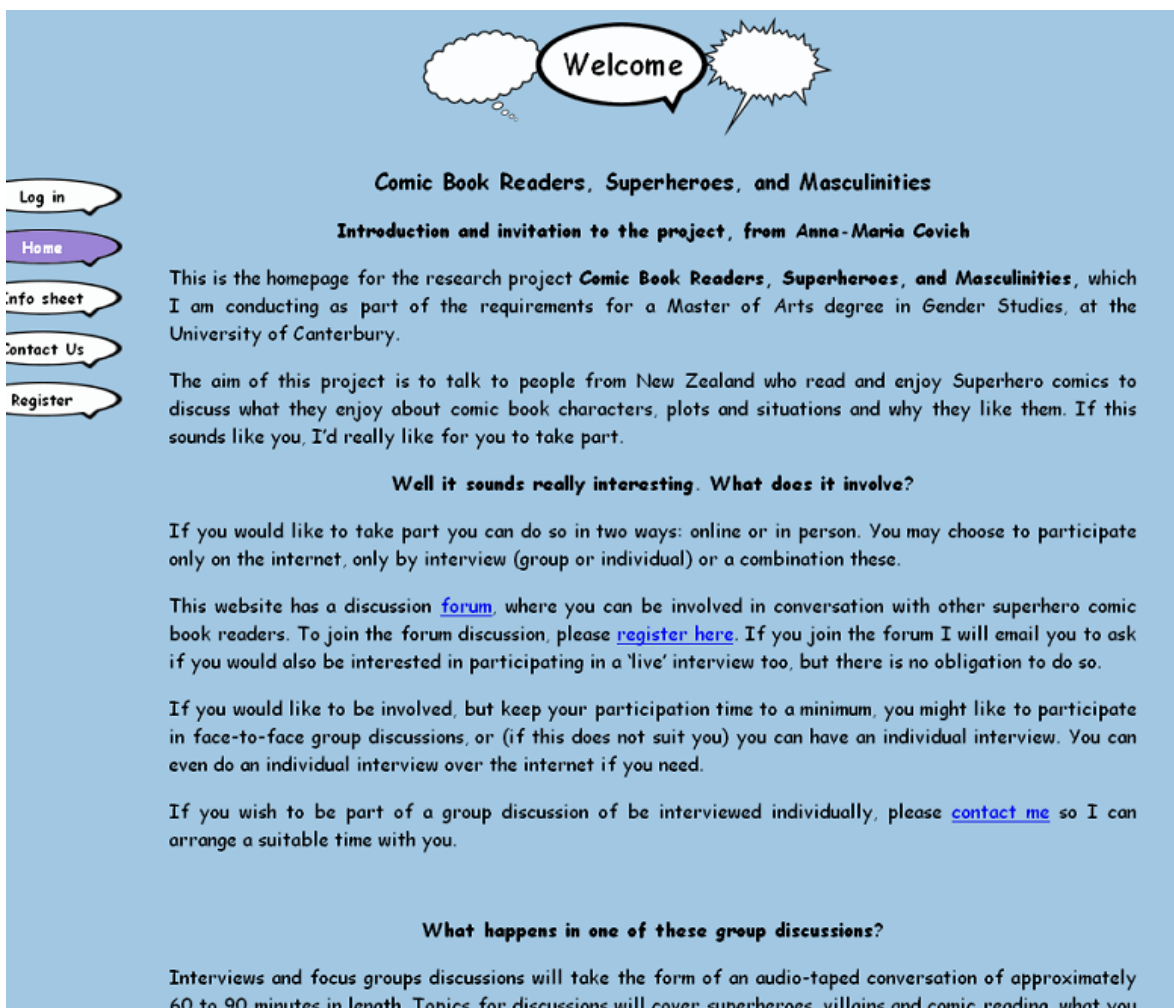
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## iv) Website homepage

Located at [www.superhero.geek.nz](http://www.superhero.geek.nz)



The screenshot shows a website homepage with a light blue background. At the top center, there is a graphic with three speech bubbles; the middle one says "Welcome". Below this is the title "Comic Book Readers, Superheroes, and Masculinities" and a subtitle "Introduction and invitation to the project, from Anna-Maria Covich". On the left side, there is a vertical navigation menu with buttons for "Log in", "Home", "Info sheet", "Contact Us", and "Register". The main content area contains several paragraphs of text, including a welcome message, the project's aim, and information about participation options (online, in-person, or a combination). There are also sections titled "Well it sounds really interesting. What does it involve?" and "What happens in one of these group discussions?".

**Welcome**

**Comic Book Readers, Superheroes, and Masculinities**

**Introduction and invitation to the project, from Anna-Maria Covich**

This is the homepage for the research project **Comic Book Readers, Superheroes, and Masculinities**, which I am conducting as part of the requirements for a Master of Arts degree in Gender Studies, at the University of Canterbury.

The aim of this project is to talk to people from New Zealand who read and enjoy Superhero comics to discuss what they enjoy about comic book characters, plots and situations and why they like them. If this sounds like you, I'd really like for you to take part.

**Well it sounds really interesting. What does it involve?**

If you would like to take part you can do so in two ways: online or in person. You may choose to participate only on the internet, only by interview (group or individual) or a combination these.

This website has a discussion [forum](#), where you can be involved in conversation with other superhero comic book readers. To join the forum discussion, please [register here](#). If you join the forum I will email you to ask if you would also be interested in participating in a 'live' interview too, but there is no obligation to do so.

If you would like to be involved, but keep your participation time to a minimum, you might like to participate in face-to-face group discussions, or (if this does not suit you) you can have an individual interview. You can even do an individual interview over the internet if you need.

If you wish to be part of a group discussion or be interviewed individually, please [contact me](#) so I can arrange a suitable time with you.

**What happens in one of these group discussions?**

Interviews and focus groups discussions will take the form of an audio-taped conversation of approximately 60 to 90 minutes in length. Topics for discussions will cover superheroes, villains and comic reading, what you

## Appendix 4 – Information sheets

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### i) Focus groups (online and face-to-face)

PLEASE RETAIN THIS SHEET FOR YOUR INFORMATION

School of Social and Political Sciences  
University of Canterbury  
Christchurch

#### INFORMATION – Participation in Focus Group

You are invited to participate in the research **Comic Book Readers, Superheroes, and Masculinities**.

The aim of this project is to find out what people who read Superhero comics enjoy about these comic book characters, plots and situations and why.

As a participant in this project you will take part in an audio-taped focus group discussion of approximately 60 to 90 minutes in length. Topics for group discussions will cover superheroes, villains and comic reading, what you like and dislike about these comics, your comic book reading habits, and your opinions of recent adaptations of them. I am also interested in your ideas about what it means to 'be a man' in the contemporary New Zealand context.

Participation is entirely voluntary, so you have the right to withdraw from the project if you decide you no longer want to take part. If you want to withdraw after the focus group conversation, I would like to hear from you within a week of the conversation, before transcription begins. Because you are agreeing to participate in a focus group discussion, where your responses will be collected alongside the responses of other participants, it may not be possible to completely withdraw your data from the project once the conversation has begun, as it may be required during the analysis to explain a response of another participant in this research. Where this is not the case, and you withdraw, your words will not be included in the analysis, and no withdrawn conversation will be included in the final report.

You will be given the opportunity to review the transcript of your discussion to ensure that it is a good record of what you have said.

You will not be identified in the published results or the transcribed discussion. All personal and identifying information will be replaced with a code. Pseudonyms will be used in research reports and publications.

To safeguard your privacy, all information collected will be stored securely and identifying information will be destroyed at the end of the study. Coded data will be securely stored for six years after final publication of the collected data, as prescribed by University regulations. Focus group members are asked to respect the confidentiality and privacy of other members of the group.

The project is being carried out for a Masters Degree in Gender Studies by Anna-Maria Covich, under the supervision of Tiina Vares and Rosemary Du Plessis. For contact details see below.

The final report, in the form of a Masters Thesis, will be available for view at <http://ir.canterbury.ac.nz/> after the completion of the study.

The project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee.

Anna-Maria Covich  
amc129@student.canterbury.ac.nz  
021 211 6124

Rosemary Du Plessis  
rosemary.duplessis@canterbury.ac.nz

Tiina Vares  
tiina.vares@canterbury.ac.nz

## ii) Interview (online)

### PLEASE RETAIN THIS SHEET FOR YOUR INFORMATION

**School of Social and Political Sciences**  
University of Canterbury  
Christchurch

#### INFORMATION – Participation in individual interview

You are invited to participate in the research **Comic Book Readers, Superheroes, and Masculinities**.

The aim of this project is to find out what people who read Superhero comics enjoy about these comic book characters, plots and situations and why.

As a participant in this project you will take part in an audio-taped (or electronically recorded if online) interview of approximately 30 to 60 minutes in length. Topics for discussions will cover superheroes, villains and comic reading, what you like and dislike about these comics, your comic book reading habits, and your opinions of recent adaptations of them. I am also interested in your ideas about what it means to 'be a man' in the contemporary New Zealand context.

Participation is entirely voluntary, so you have the right to withdraw from the project if you decide you no longer want to take part, including withdrawal of any information provided if you decide you no longer want to take part. If you wish to withdraw after you have completed an interview, I would like to hear from you within a week of our meeting, before I begin transcription.

You will be given the opportunity to review the transcript of your interview to ensure that it is a good record of what you have said.

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Tiina Vares  
tiina.vares@canterbury.ac.nz

### iii) Interview (face-to-face)

#### PLEASE RETAIN THIS SHEET FOR YOUR INFORMATION

School of Social and Political Sciences  
University of Canterbury  
Christchurch

#### INFORMATION – Participation in individual interview

You are invited to participate in the research **Comic Book Readers, Superheroes, and Masculinities**.

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## iv) Forum

**School of Social and Political Sciences**  
University of Canterbury  
Christchurch

### INFORMATION – Participation in online discussion

You are invited to participate in the research **Comic Book Readers, Superheroes, and Masculinities**.

The aim of this project is to find out what people who read Superhero comics enjoy about these comic book characters, plots and situations and why.

As a participant in this project you will take part in an online discussion. Topics for group discussions will cover superheroes, villains and comic reading, what you like and dislike about these comics, your comic book reading habits, and your opinions of recent adaptations of them. I am also interested in your ideas about what it means to 'be a man' in the contemporary New Zealand context.

Participation is entirely voluntary, so you have the right to stop participating in the discussion whenever you decide you no longer want to take part. Because you will be participating in a written group discussion, where your responses will be collected alongside the responses of other participants, it will not be possible to remove your contributions to that discussion.

The forum contents will remain online for the duration of the study, so you will have the opportunity to review your input and correct any misunderstandings that might arise.

You will not be identified in the published results or the transcribed discussion. All personal and identifying information will be replaced with a code, including any 'screen name' (your chosen user name) you use. Pseudonyms will be used in research reports and publications.

To safeguard your privacy, all information collected will be stored securely and identifying information will be destroyed at the end of the study. Coded data will be securely stored for six years after final publication of the collected data, as prescribed by University regulations. Please be aware that the confidentiality of group discussions cannot be guaranteed, however, focus group members will be asked to respect the confidentiality of other members of the group, and no identifying information supplied in the registration process will be available to other group participants.

The project is being carried out for a Masters Degree in Gender Studies by Anna-Maria Covich, under the supervision of Tiina Vares and Rosemary Du Plessis. For contact details see below.

The final report, in the form of a Masters Thesis, will be available for view at <http://ir.canterbury.ac.nz/> after the completion of the study.

This information sheet can be viewed online at [www.superhero.geek.nz/information\\_sheet](http://www.superhero.geek.nz/information_sheet), and on registration you will be emailed a copy for your records.

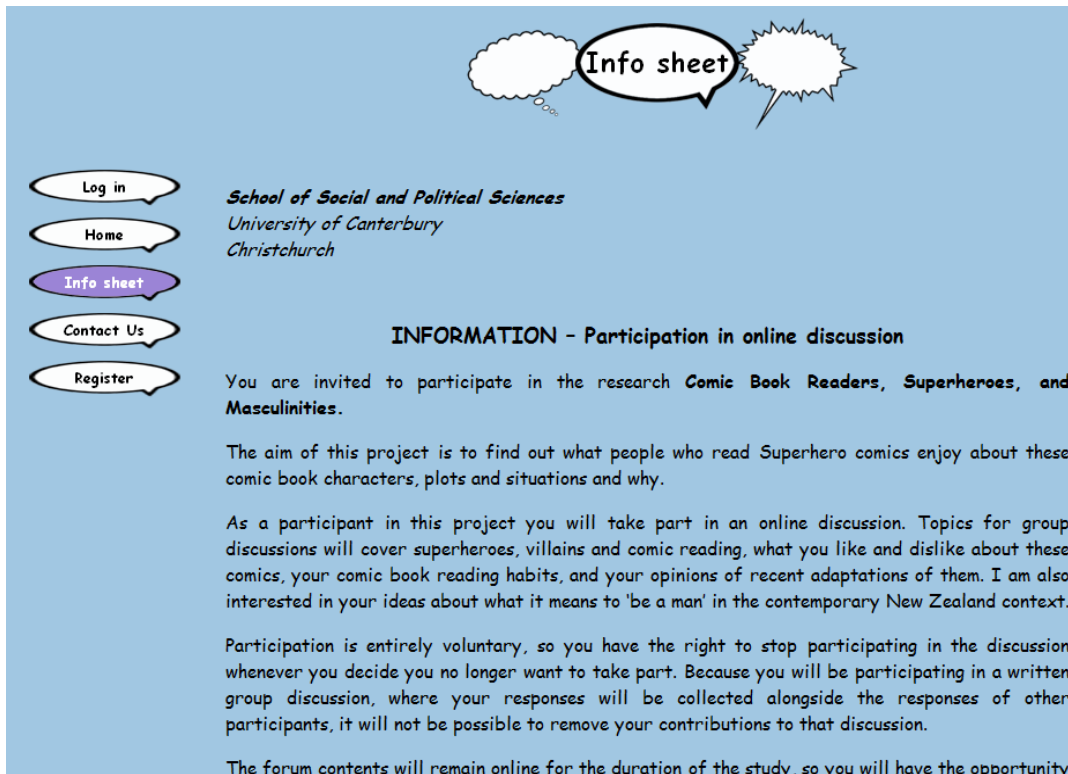
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Tiina Vares  
tiina.vares@canterbury.ac.nz

v) **Forum Info sheet**  
(as displayed at [www.superhero.geek.nz](http://www.superhero.geek.nz))



**Info sheet**

[Log in](#)

[Home](#)

[Info sheet](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Register](#)

*School of Social and Political Sciences*  
*University of Canterbury*  
*Christchurch*

**INFORMATION - Participation in online discussion**

You are invited to participate in the research **Comic Book Readers, Superheroes, and Masculinities**.

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As a participant in this project you will take part in an online discussion. Topics for group discussions will cover superheroes, villains and comic reading, what you like and dislike about these comics, your comic book reading habits, and your opinions of recent adaptations of them. I am also interested in your ideas about what it means to 'be a man' in the contemporary New Zealand context.

Participation is entirely voluntary, so you have the right to stop participating in the discussion whenever you decide you no longer want to take part. Because you will be participating in a written group discussion, where your responses will be collected alongside the responses of other participants, it will not be possible to remove your contributions to that discussion.

The forum contents will remain online for the duration of the study, so you will have the opportunity



## Appendix 5 – Consent forms

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### i) Focus groups (online and face-to-face)

*Anna-Maria Covich  
School of Social and Political Science  
University Of Canterbury  
Christchurch*

Date \_\_\_\_\_

#### **CONSENT FORM – Participation in Focus Group**

**Project name: Comic Book Readers, Superheroes, and Masculinities.**

I have read and understood the description of the above-named project, and have been given a copy of the information sheet to keep. On this basis, I agree to participate in the project, and I consent to publication of the results of the project with the understanding that anonymity will be preserved.

I understand that I will be audio-taped and that I may review the transcript of my interview as to ensure that I am accurately represented.

I understand that I may withdraw from the project at any time, but recognise that, once the conversation has begun, it may not be possible to withdraw every aspect of my contribution to this discussion.

I note that the project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee.

NAME (please print): \_\_\_\_\_

AGE: \_\_\_\_\_ GENDER: \_\_\_\_\_ (for demographic purposes only)

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## ii) Interview (online and face-to-face)

*Anna-Maria Covich  
School of Social and Political Science  
University Of Canterbury  
Christchurch*

Date \_\_\_\_\_

### **CONSENT FORM – Participation in individual interview**

**Project name: Comic Book Readers, Superheroes, and Masculinities**

I have read and understood the description of the above-named project, and have been given a copy of the information sheet to keep. On this basis, I agree to participate in the project, and I consent to publication of the results of the project with the understanding that anonymity will be preserved.

I understand that I will be audio-taped/recorded and that I may review the transcript of my interview to ensure that I am accurately represented.

I understand that I may withdraw from the project at any time.

I note that the project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee.

NAME (please print): \_\_\_\_\_

AGE: \_\_\_\_\_ GENDER: \_\_\_\_\_ (for demographic purposes only)

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### iii) Forum

#### **REGISTRATION AND CONSENT FORM** **Participation in online discussion**

**Project name: Comic Book Readers, Superheroes, and Masculinities.**

I have read and understood the description of this project. On the basis of this information I agree to participate in the project, and I consent to publication of the results of the project with the understanding that my anonymity will be preserved.

I understand that the internet discussion is being cached and that I may review the discussion to ensure that I am accurately represented.

I understand also that I may stop participating at any time.

I note that the project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee.

**All fields are required.**

User Id/Screen Name

Password

Confirm Password

Email address

*If anonymity is important to you, please use an email address that does not contain your name.*

Age (you must be over 18)

Gender

Location

*Information provided will only be available to the researcher and web administrator and will only be used for demographic purposes, or to communicate with you directly for purposes of this research.*

I Accept the conditions and consent to taking part in this study

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