Examining the Discovery Behaviors of Comics Consumers

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May 16, 2023

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Research Question

How are comics readers discovering comics and how do these habits vary by reader demographics (age, gender, race), comic characteristic (genre), and comic format (comic book, graphic novel, digital comic, webcomics, manga)?

Abstract

The comics consumer base is big and it's only getting bigger. And yet, very little research has been done on the consumer behavior of comics reads. In order to broaden the accessibility to comics consumer research, this paper examined the discovery behavior of 56 survey participants. The survey included questions pertaining to demographics, frequency of comics consumed, genres of comics consumed, formats used to consume comics, and methods used to discover comics. Due to limited scope, this paper focused solely on format preferences, discovery preferences, and the most-popular genre preferences.

Based on this research, graphic novels remained the preferred format of comics readers overall, but webcomics, a relatively new format to U.S. readers, were the second most-preferred format among survey participants. The values comics readers of different formats held were notable. Similarly, it was significant to see the different values readers held based on their preferred discovery method. Interesting correlations between format preference and genre preference were discovered. For instance, the majority of participants who selected romance/BL/GL as their preferred genre selected webcomics as their preferred format. Across formats and genres, recommendations from friends and family and browsing in a comic book store remained popular choices for discovery. Other methods of discovery varied by genre and by format. Implications and recommendations for comics publishers, comics marketers, and comics creators are discussed.

Introduction

The global webcomics market is expected to grow from \$7.36 billion in 2021 to \$11.12 billion in 2028.[1] Comics and graphic novels sales grew over 60% in 2021[2], and a recent report by NPD Bookscan found that manga is one of the fastest-growing areas of U.S. specialty publishing.[3] Over the last decade, worldwide, a number of traditional publishers have been stepping into the growing field of comics by launching comics imprints.[4] In the United States, *Dog Man: Mothering Heights* by Dave Pilkey, a middle-grade comic published by Scholastic's comics imprint Graphix, dominated the bestsellers lists in 2021.[5] In the United Kingdom, Alice Oseman's webcomic *Heartstopper* has sold over a million copies since being published in print by Hachette Children's Group.[6] Bottom line: the comics consumer base is big and it's only getting bigger.

Why, then, has so little research been done on the consumer behavior of comics readers? Often, the research that *is* done on the consumer behavior of comics readers is proprietary and therefore can only be accessed by and be a benefit to the stakeholders and insiders. The question this research paper set out to examine was how this multitude of comics consumers are discovering comics and how these habits are varying by reader demographics (age, gender, race), comic characteristic (genre), and comic format (comic book, graphic novel, digital comic, webcomics, manga).

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[1] Spector, "How Mobile Webcomics Are Working to Save Reading."
[2] "Comichron: Industry-Wide Comics and Graphic Novel Sales for 2021."
[3] Chojnacki, "Manga Surges in the U.S. Market."
[4] Anderson, "Frankfurt."
[5] Maher, "Dav Pilkey Dominated the 2021 Bestseller List."
[6] Oseman, "The History."

This research should be of interest to comics publishers, comics marketers, and comics creators. Knowing who comics readers are, what they're reading, how they're reading it, and how they're discovering it can help publishers better understand these many and varied comics consumers. This knowledge can help comics marketers and comics creators know where they should be investing their time and money and how that might vary by genre and format. For comics creators, knowing the format(s) the readers of their chosen genre(s) are using to read comics can help them decide whether they should approach a traditional publisher or whether it would be more beneficial to self-publish on a webcomics platform.

Background

The U.S. comics market has come a long way from its beginnings, but to talk about the entire history of comics would take many more pages than this paper has space to cover. So, for the purpose of this research, the following sections will briefly outline the history of each format of comics in the United States, their distribution, and their current state in the comics market. A table has been included to clarify the terminology that will be used throughout this paper.

Terms

Table 1. Comics Terms

Comics
Comics, as defined in *A Concise Dictionary of Comics*, are "a **narrative medium** in which stories are told by combining images in a deliberate, meaningful way."[7] The term comics will be used to refer to the broad category to which comic books, graphic novels, digital comics, webcomics, and manga belong.
Comic Books
A comic book, also known as a periodical or floppy, is "a magazine-style work or **volume** in the comics **medium** usually printed on magazine or newsprint paper [. . .] with a standard length of thirty-two pages."[8] The term comic book will be used to refer to comic books/floppies/periodicals.
Graphic Novels
A graphic novel (also known as long-form comics) is "a highly contested term used to designate a stand-alone, self-contained comic-book-length story or set of stories sold as a trade **volume**."[9] The term graphic novel will be used to define trade volume-bound comics.
Manga
Manga, as defined by *A Concise Dictionary of Comics*, are "Japanese comics or comics in the Japanese tradition."[10] Because manga is sold in a variety of long- and short-form formats, is read right-to-left rather than left-to-right, and is considered as a separate category to U.S. comics, in this study manga will be used to referred to the separate format of Japanese comics.
Digital Comics
Digital comics (also known as e-comics) will be used to refer to digitized versions of comic books, graphic novels, and manga.
Webcomics
Although webcomics could also be considered digital comics, for the purpose of this study webcomics will be used to refer to comics originally published via the internet on platforms such as Webtoon and Tapas.

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[7] Pedri and Howitt, *A Concise Dictionary of Comics*.
[8] Pedri and Howitt.
[9] Pedri and Howitt.
[10] Pedri and Howitt.

Comic Books

U.S. comic books were once a "truly mass medium."[11] One of the cheapest and broadest forms of entertainment comics were incredibly popular from the 1930s through the 1950s, peaking at an estimated total annual circulation of more than a billion copies.[12] Comic books were purchased at newsstands across the country before the introduction of the direct-market in the 1970s.[13]

Before the direct-market, retailers could return unsold comic books to the publishers and be reimbursed, as prose books and graphic novels still are today. According to the comics researcher Benjamin Woo, the introduction of the direct-market eliminated the returns policy to benefit the publishers but offered a wholesaler discount to benefit the retailers.[14] "And," as Woo states, "the system was firmly entrenched by the 1980s."[15]

As Woo elucidates in his article, "The Android's Dungeon: Comic-Bookstores, Cultural Spaces, and the Social Practices of Audiences," the economic structure of the direct-market has contributed to the narrowing genre focus and consumer base of the comic book format. "In the context of a precarious niche market, maintaining a base of dedicated and predictable consumers is a rational strategy, hence the industry's emphasis on a narrow range of genres and formats [and] overuse of popular characters . . . Its unintended consequence is the reproduction of comic-

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[11] Woo, "The Android's Dungeon."

[12] Woo.

[13] Hionis and Ki, "The Economics of the Modern American Comic Book Market."

[14] Woo, "The Android's Dungeon."

[15] Woo.

book fandom as an ever more insular subculture."[16] Comic book sales, in essence, have remained dominated by the superhero genre.[17]

Another key to the importance of comic books sales is their basis for a very lucrative licensing and branding market.[18] In addition to stressing that the popularity and economic power of Marvel and DC are dependent on this licensing and branding market, Jerry Hionis and YoungHa Ki's study in the *Journal of Cultural Economics* examines the effects of special events, reboots, and comic-book-based movies on comic book sales. Despite the fact that their study found no significant increase in comic book sales due to cross-media adaptations, the authors attributed the emergence of Image Comics as a contender for Marvel and DC to the popularity of the TV show *The Walking Dead*.[19]

New issues of comic books, as has been the standard for the last 25 years, are released every Wednesday in comic book stores and online across the United States.[20] As of 2020, new comics are also released on Tuesday, due to the fact that Diamond Distributions is no longer the sole-distributor of comic books in the U.S. as they were before the pandemic.[21] Digital comic books are distributed through publisher websites, online retailers, and through libraries online.

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[16] Woo, "The Androids Dungeon."

[17] Clark, "Comic-Book Sales Had Their Best Year Ever in 2021 — and This Year Is on Pace to Be Even Better. Here's What's behind the Surge, from Manga to 'Dog Man.'"

[18] Hionis and Ki, "The Economics of the Modern American Comic Book Market."

[19] Hionis and Ki.

[20] Arrant, "New Comic Book Day Is Now Tuesday... and Wednesday?"

[21] MacDonald, "Diamond Retailer Summit Surveys Changing Comics Industry."

Graphic Novels

Comic books began being trade bound into graphic novels in the late 1970s—one of the most influential of which was Will Eisner's *A Contract with God* in 1978. "Eisner wanted to make the content and the style of his comics not just original but also accessible to a broad readership, and—more important to Eisner—to literary audiences," says Michael A. Chaney in *The Cambridge History of The Graphic Novel*. "In order to effectuate that broadening of the comics reading audience, Eisner adopted the term 'graphic novel' to describe *A Contract*."[22] The graphic novel market has only grown since the 1970s and has seen particularly significant gains in recent years.

International rights agent Stephanie Barrouillet discussed the rise in popularity and sales in the comics market in an October 2022 article in *Publishing Perspectives*. She indicates that comics are no longer marginalized in the publishing industry and have garnered attention through well-respected creators and through industry-based accolades.[23] The literary clout and recognition that Barrouillet espouses as being integral to the traditional publishing worlds' attention on comics might never have been possible without the advent of the graphic novel. Graphic novels are more widely distributed than comic books and can be found in comic book stores, general bookstores, libraries, and other online retailers. Digital graphic novels are distributed through publisher websites, online retailers, and through libraries online.

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[22] Baetens, Frey, and Tabachnick, *The Cambridge History of the Graphic Novel*, 191.
[23] Anderson, "Frankfurt."

Manga

Manga struggled to find its footing when it first came to the American market in the 1980s and 1990s, and this was, in part, due to a lack of understanding of the potential audience for manga. "It took several critical successes in American comics," Wendy Goldberg explains in *Manga: An Anthology of Global and Cultural Perspectives*, "to show that the format did not have to be for a narrow market, that of teenage boys."[24] A 2004 article in *Publishers Weekly* on the popularity of manga at the time elucidated that, "American comics have traditionally been action-adventure series aimed at boys. Manga offers adventure, romance, fantasy, erotica, even sports comics— there's something for readers of all ages and [all genders]."[25] Since 2004, manga has only become more popular.

Manga accounted for the majority of U.S. graphic novel sales in 2021,[26] and the spotlight on manga is only increasing, both in the comics field and in the publishing field in general. "One of the big publishing success stories—and perhaps one of the industry's biggest surprises—of the past two years is how well manga is selling in North America," Deb Aoki said in a *Publishers Weekly* article from April 2022. "Words like 'explosive growth' and 'unprecedented' are now commonly used to describe the manga marketplace."[27] The general consensus from the 2022 New York Comic Con (NYCC) was that "manga won," as manga and webcomics both figuratively and literally dominated through booths, displays, and programming.[28] Some have credited the current popularity of manga to increased visibility through streaming services. With

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[24] Goldberg, "The Manga Phenomenon in America."

[25] Staff, "Manga Bonanza."

[26] "Manga Made Up 76% Of Overall Comics & Graphic Novel Sales in The US In 2021 - Animehunch."

[27] Aoki, "Manga Is Booming."

[28] Aoki, "Manga Wins New York Comic Con 2022."

streaming services featuring anime adaptations, consumers are seeking out the source material, much as they have done with the superhero genre.[29] According to Kevin Hamric, VP of publishing sales at Viz Media, the market for manga is only growing—from distribution in bookstores, to comic book stores, to online retailers, to libraries, to accounts that have never sold manga before.[30] Digital manga comics are distributed through publisher websites, online retailers, and through libraries online.

Webcomics

The newest addition to the field of comics has been webcomics, although online comics have been around since as early as the late 1980s, as Sean Kleefeld explains in his book *Webcomics*. "Almost as soon as the web became broadly available," Kleefeld says, "people started looking for new content to publish online; hence, the rise of webcomics is essentially synonymous with the rise of the web."[31] Although online comics have been around for some time, the current form of webcomics has recently seen explosive growth and has reached newer and broader audiences.

A major factor in the increased popularity of webcomics is the increased access to mobile internet. In 2018, the number of people with access to the internet became higher than the number of people without access to the internet.[32] Webcomics, in their current form, have long been popular in Korea, with TV series and movies often based on popular webcomics. But over the last few years, webcomics have been hitting the United States like a tidal wave.[33]

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[29] Clark, "Comic-Book Sales Had Their Best Year Ever in 2021 — and This Year Is on Pace to Be Even Better. Here's What's behind the Surge, from Manga to 'Dog Man.'"

[30] Aoki, "Manga Is Booming."

[31] Kleefeld, *Webcomics*, 30.

[32] Kleefeld, *Webcomics*, 37.

[33] Aoki, "Manga Wins New York Comic Con 2022."

"Twenty years ago, the comics industry market was kind of stagnant," Webtoon America's CEO Kim Ken said to *Publishers Weekly*, "By making comics consumable in a native mobile form, we've made comics more accessible. You can read them anywhere."[34] The convenience and immediacy of the webcomics format has quickly attracted the attention of the younger generations. "Around 75% of our readership are millennials and Gen Z," Kim said to *Publishers Weekly*, "They live on their phones."[35] Popular genres for webcomics include romance, drama, and slice-of-life stories. Action, adventure, and superhero stories have occasional hits, but these genres still do best in the comic book store.[36] Webcomics are available on various platforms online, the most popular of which are Webtoon and Tapas.

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[34] Spector, "How Mobile Webcomics Are Working to Save Reading."
[35] Spector.
[36] Spector.

Methodology

In order to examine the discovery behaviors of comics consumers, a survey was developed using Qualtrics. In accordance with Portland State University's Human Research Protection Program, my research question, survey, and recruitment materials were submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the study was determined to be exempt from IRB review and approval.[37] The survey was distributed via the Portland State University graduate program in Book Publishing email list, the Portland State University Comics Studies Discord channel, and through the head of Comics Plus, a comics aggregator for public and school libraries. For participating in the study, respondents were offered the opportunity to enter a drawing to win one of two $10 gift cards to either Powell's Books or Rose City Comics. Participants who had not read or purchased a comic in the last 12 months and comics readers under the age of 18 were eliminated from the study.

The survey included questions pertaining to demographics, frequency of comics consumed, genres of comics consumed, formats used to consume comics, and methods used to discover comics. Genre categories were determined based on a combination of categories used on comics retailers' websites, comics BISAC codes, and webcomics categories. Because manga has its own style of categorization, manga consumers were directed to pick the genre that most closely followed the category they read. Methods of discovery were developed using the survey questions from Dr. Rachel Noorda and Dr. Kathi Inman Berens's *Immersive Media Report*[38] and were expanded on through research into the field of comics and through consultation with comics field experts.

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[37] "Research Administration - Human Research Protection Program."
[38] Noorda and Berens, "Immersive Media and Books 2020."

Findings

Survey Respondents

The survey collected data from 56 participants. Of the survey participants, 45% answered that they were 25–35 years old, 18% answered that they were 45–54 years old, 16% answered that they were 18–24 years old, 16% answered that they were 35–44 years old, and 5% answered that they were 55–64 years old. Of the survey participants, 46% described themselves as male, 38% as female, 14% as non-binary/third gender, and 2% preferred to self-describe. The racial composition of participants was 73% white or Caucasian, 11% other, 10% Asian, 5% Black or African American, and 2% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. In answer to the question "How often do you read comics?" 50% of survey respondents said weekly, 37% said monthly, 9% said yearly, and 4% said rarely.

Scope

Due to the limited scope of this paper, I decided to focus solely on format preferences, discovery preferences, and the most-popular genre preferences. Other genre preferences and demographic preferences could potentially be addressed in a longer journal article in the future.

Overall Genre Preference

In answer to the question "What is your number-one preferred genre of comics?" (**Figure 1**) participants answered primarily superhero (23%), underground/alternative/indie (14%), fantasy (14%) and romance/BL/GL (14%). Not listed as number-one preferred genres were drama, sports, literary fiction, autobiographical/memoir/nonfiction, and other.
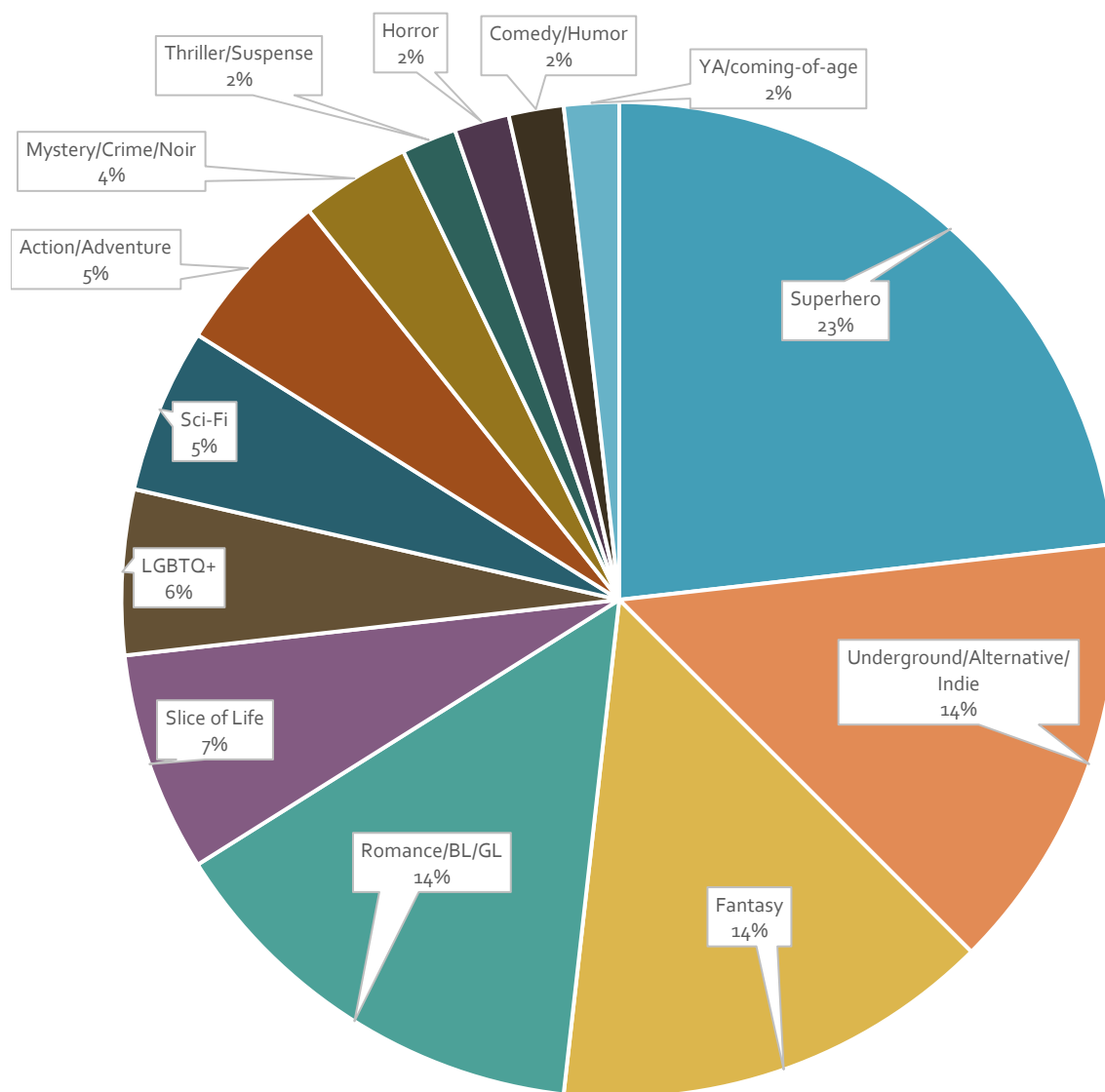

Figure 1. Overall genre preference

Overall Format Preference

The overall format preferences of participants (**Figure 2**) were 46% graphic novels, 18% webcomics, 13% manga, 12% digital comics, and 11% comic books. The format categories were separated into comic books, graphic novels, digital comics, webcomics, manga comic books, manga graphic novels, and manga digital comics. For the purpose of this study, the participants that selected any of the manga formats as their preferred format were combined under a general manga category.
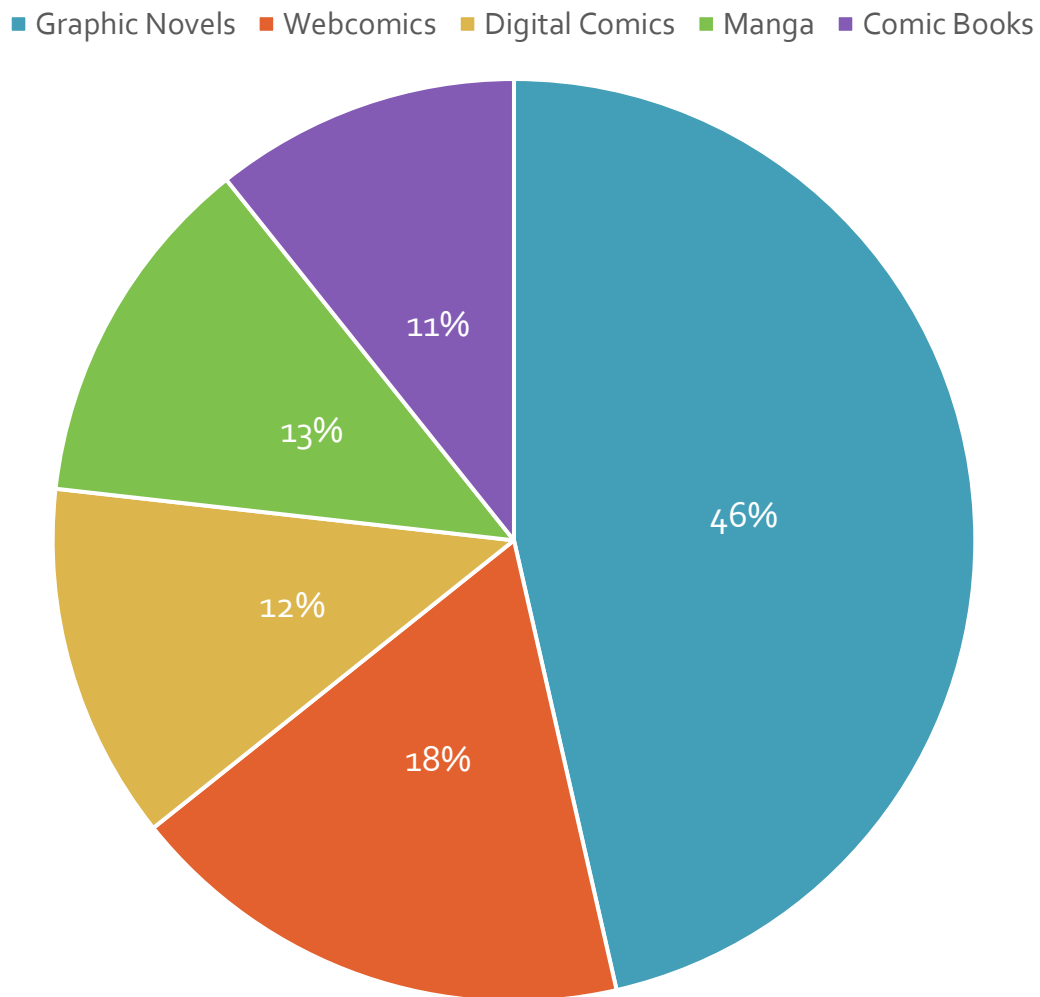
Figure 2. Overall format preference

Explanations for Format Preferences

In answer to the question "Why is that your preferred way to read comics?" participants who preferred to read graphic novels emphasized art quality, a preference for physical over digital when reading, aesthetic appeal, ease of storage, sturdiness, lack of ads, and the ability to read a whole story arc at once.

Participants who preferred to read comic books emphasized sentimentality, habit, and collecting. As opposed to participants who preferred graphic novels, those who preferred comic books enjoyed waiting for the next monthly installment of a story—indicating an appreciation for serialized storytelling.

The participants who preferred to read digital comics emphasized affordability and the fact that digital comics don't take up space.

Those who preferred webcomics, similar to comic book readers, also indicated an appreciation for serialized storytelling. Other important factors for participants who preferred webcomics were convenience, accessibility, and affordability.

Format Preference by Genre

There were some interesting distributions between genre preference and format preference (**Figure 3**). For instance, of participants who selected romance/BL/GL (Boys' Love, Girls' Love) as their preferred genre, 88% selected webcomics as their preferred format. Of participants who selected superhero as their number-one preferred genre, 46% selected digital comics as their preferred format. Although the data is interesting, it is important to keep in mind that the data is based on a small number of survey participants. Another factor to keep in mind—particularly in regard to the participants who selected digital comics as their preferred format—is that many of the participants were recruited via Comics Plus and were therefore predisposed to reading comics online.
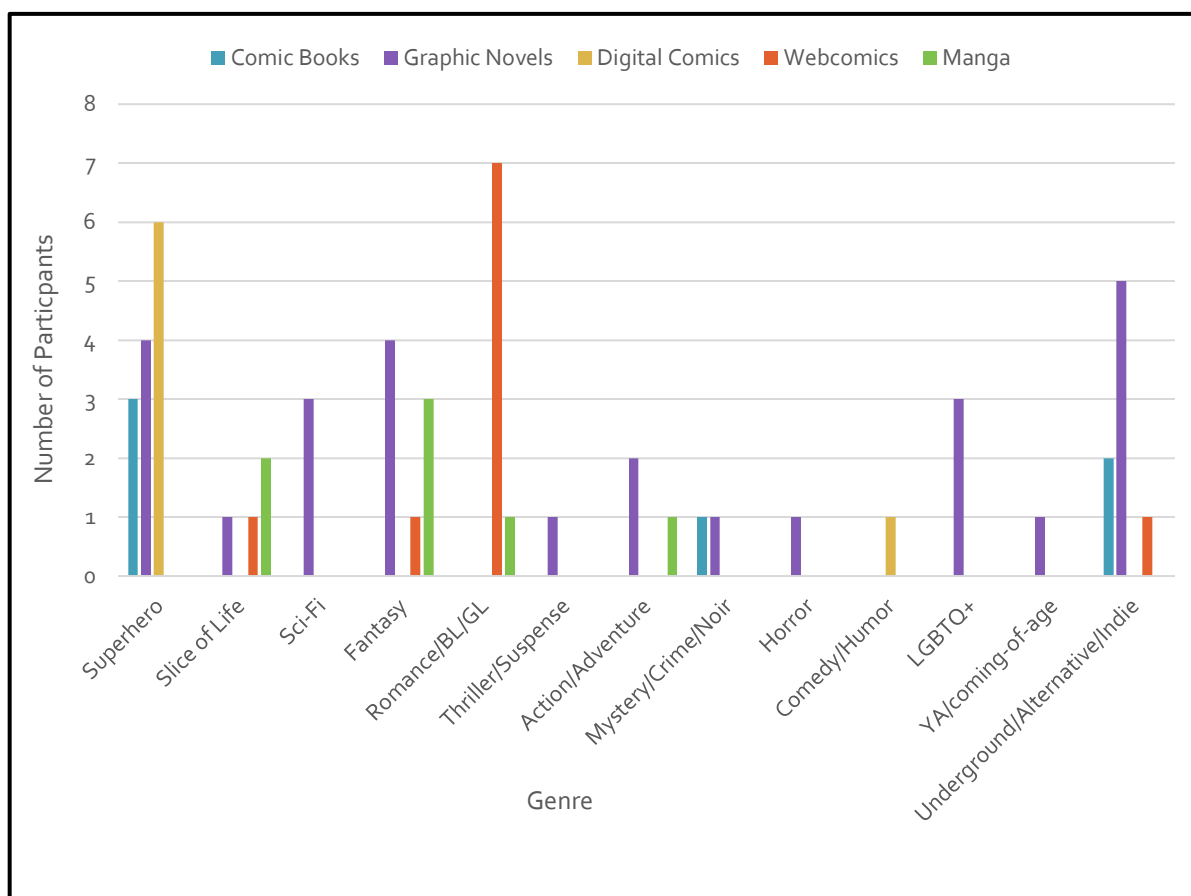
Figure 3. Format preference by genre

Overall Comics Discovery Distribution

The discovery method most frequently selected by participants was recommendations from friends or family members (**Figure 4**). This was followed by browsing in a comic book store, browsing in a bookstore, comics creator social media, and comics fandom related social media. All listed methods of discovery were selected at least once by participants.
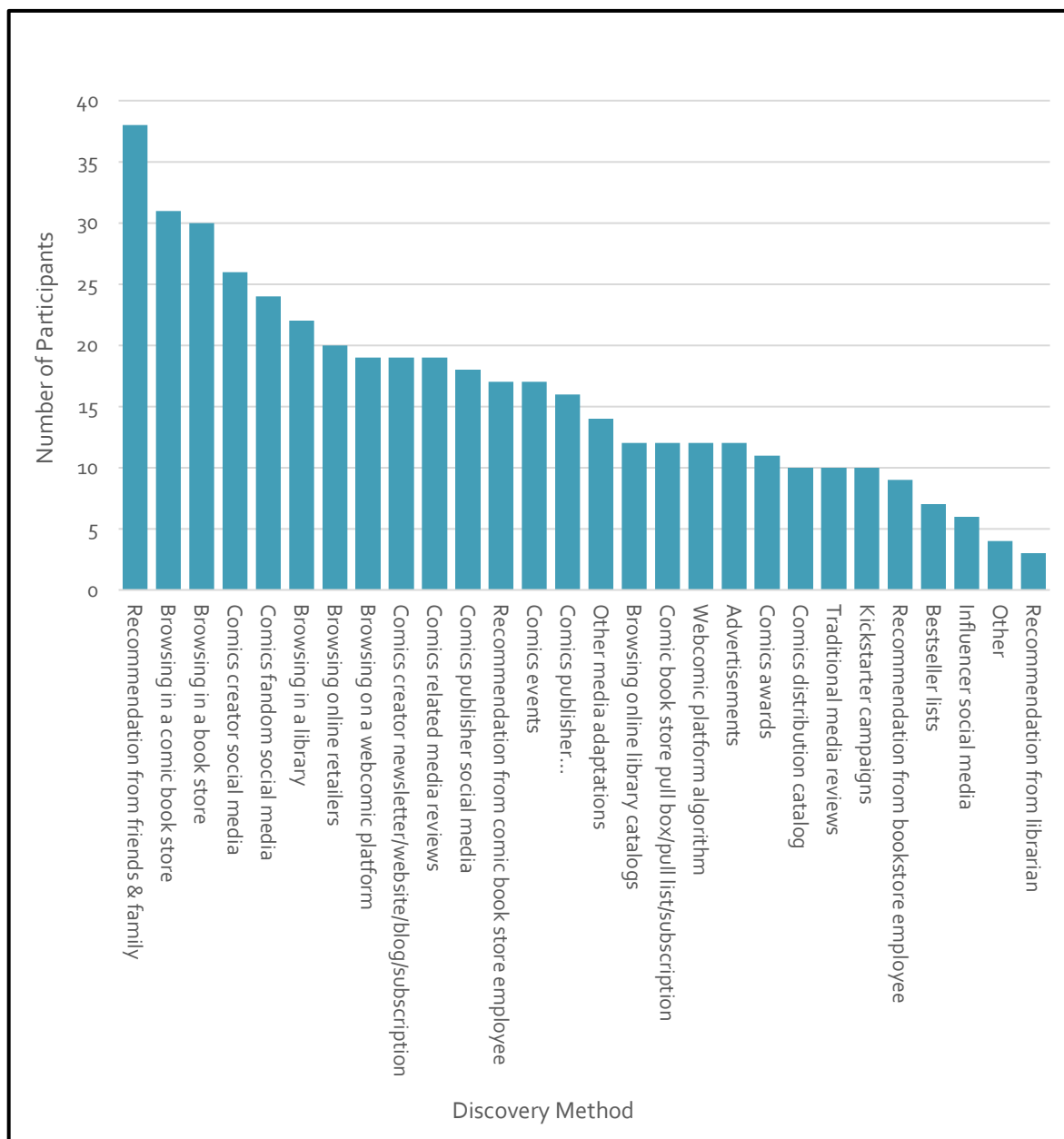

Figure 4. Overall comics discovery distribution

Overall Discovery Preference

The number-one preferred method of discovery most often chosen by participants was recommendations from friends or family members (**Figure 5**). This was followed by browsing in a comic book store, comics fandom related social media, browsing in a bookstore, comics creator social media, browsing in a library, browsing on a webcomics platform, recommendations from a comic book store employee, comics creator newsletter/website/blog/subscription, and webcomics platform algorithm.
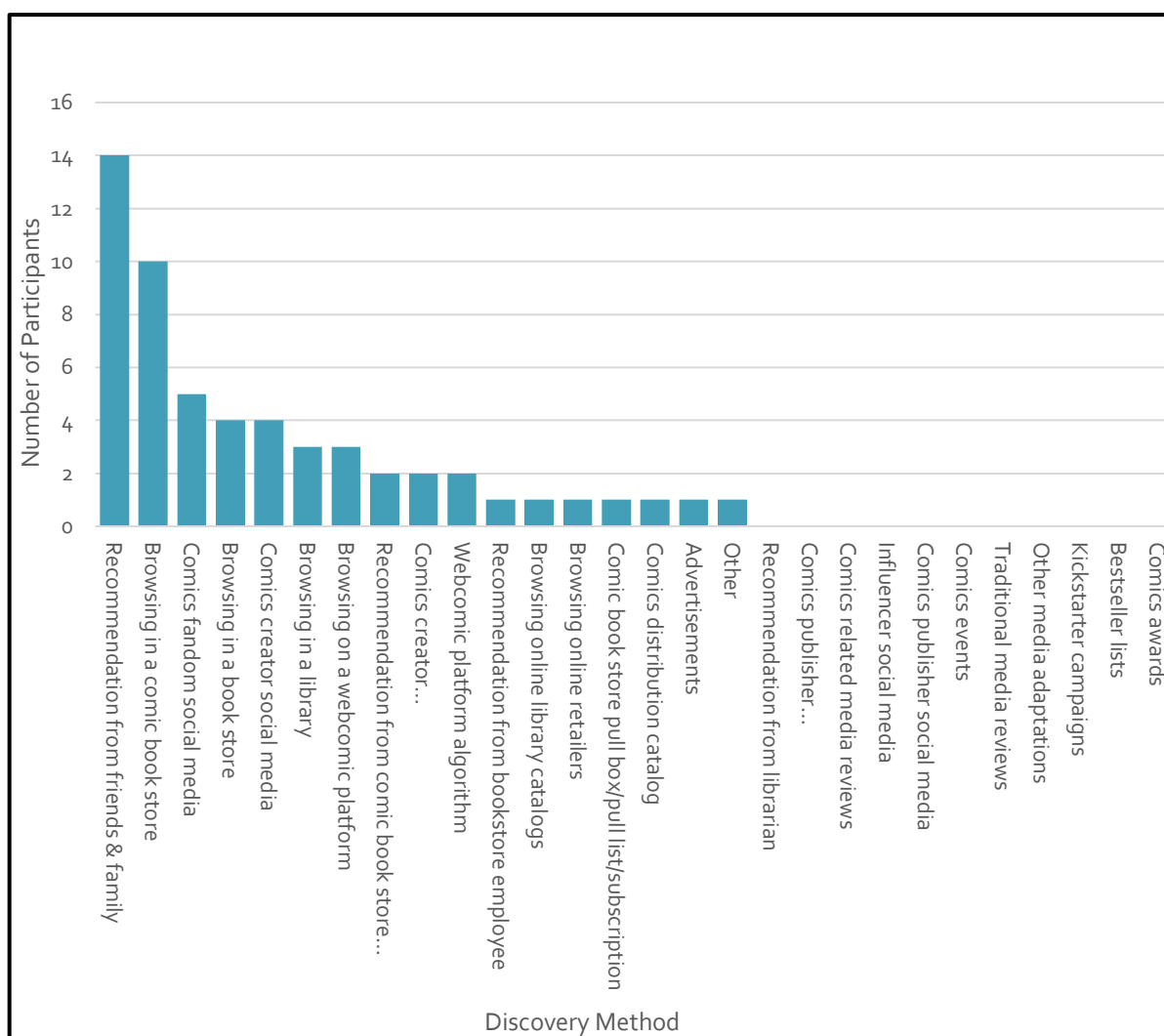
Figure 5. Overall discovery preference

Explanations for Discovery Preferences

When asked "Why is that your preferred way to discover comics?" participants who selected recommendations from friends or family as their number-one preferred method of discovery tended to place emphasis on trust and kinship. Their answers included "My friends know what I like to read so it's more likely that I'll like it. They're also someone I can talk about it with"; "Because if it is recommended by someone I trust, I know it is worth the time to read"; and "My friends and family know what I enjoy [. . .] and usually the comic has been 'vetted' by my friends."

Participants who selected browsing in a comic book store as their number-one preferred method of discovery tended to place emphasis on fun, visuals, and variety. Their answers included "Fun to see all the options"; "The art and design of comics is very important to the reading experience for me, so being able to see them helps me discover new books"; and "Nothing like just taking a chance on a book, judging it by a cursory flip through or in some cases literally by its cover. Sometimes you get burned but once in a while you discover gold dust."

Participants who selected comics fandom related social media as their number-one preferred method of discovery tended to stress the importance of expertise and specificity. Their answers included "Some fans provide reliable mini-reviews of fav work along themes they have some expertise about (say, black super-heroes or LGBT protags)"; "I look up 'Top 10' type lists within Reddit, searching for the best-written graphic novels and trade paperbacks"; and "I often use Reddit to find more comics that have similar plots to my favorites."

Discovery by Format

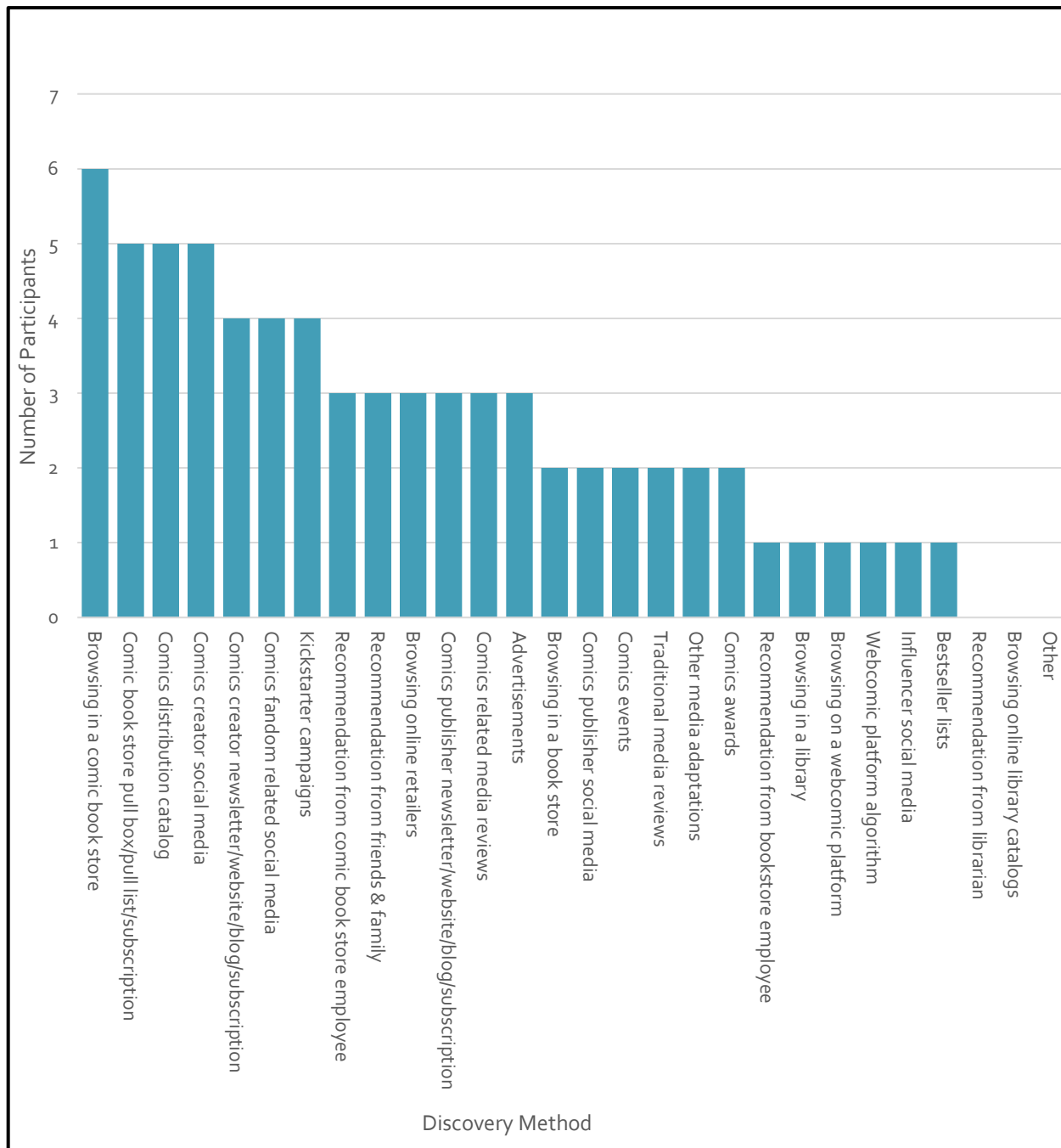*Comic Book Preference Discovery Distribution*

Figure 6. Comic book preference discovery distribution

Comic Book Preference Discovery Preference

Participants who preferred to read comic books primarily preferred to discover comics via browsing in a comic book store (**Figure 7**). This was followed by recommendations from friends or family members and comics distribution catalogs.
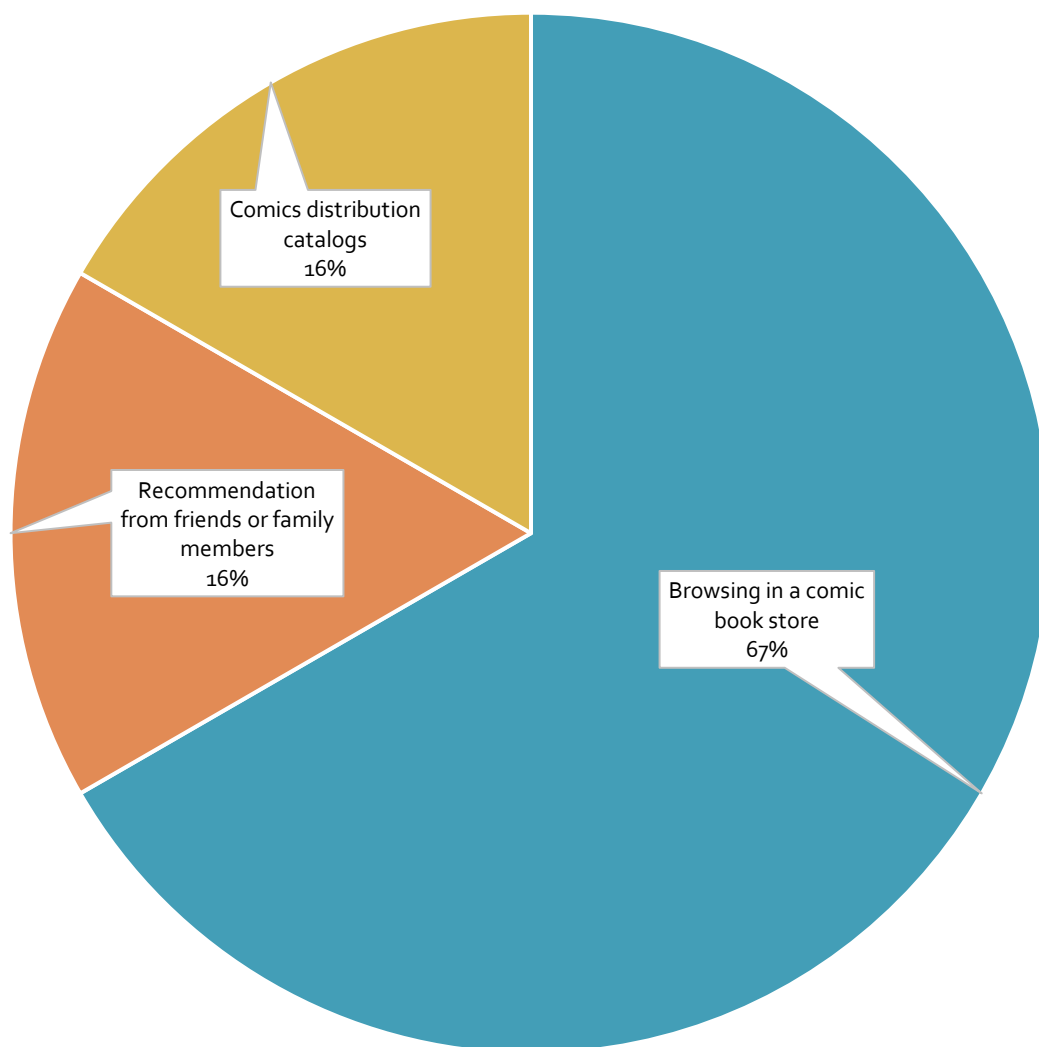

Figure 7. Discovery preference: comic books

Graphic Novel Preference Discovery Distribution
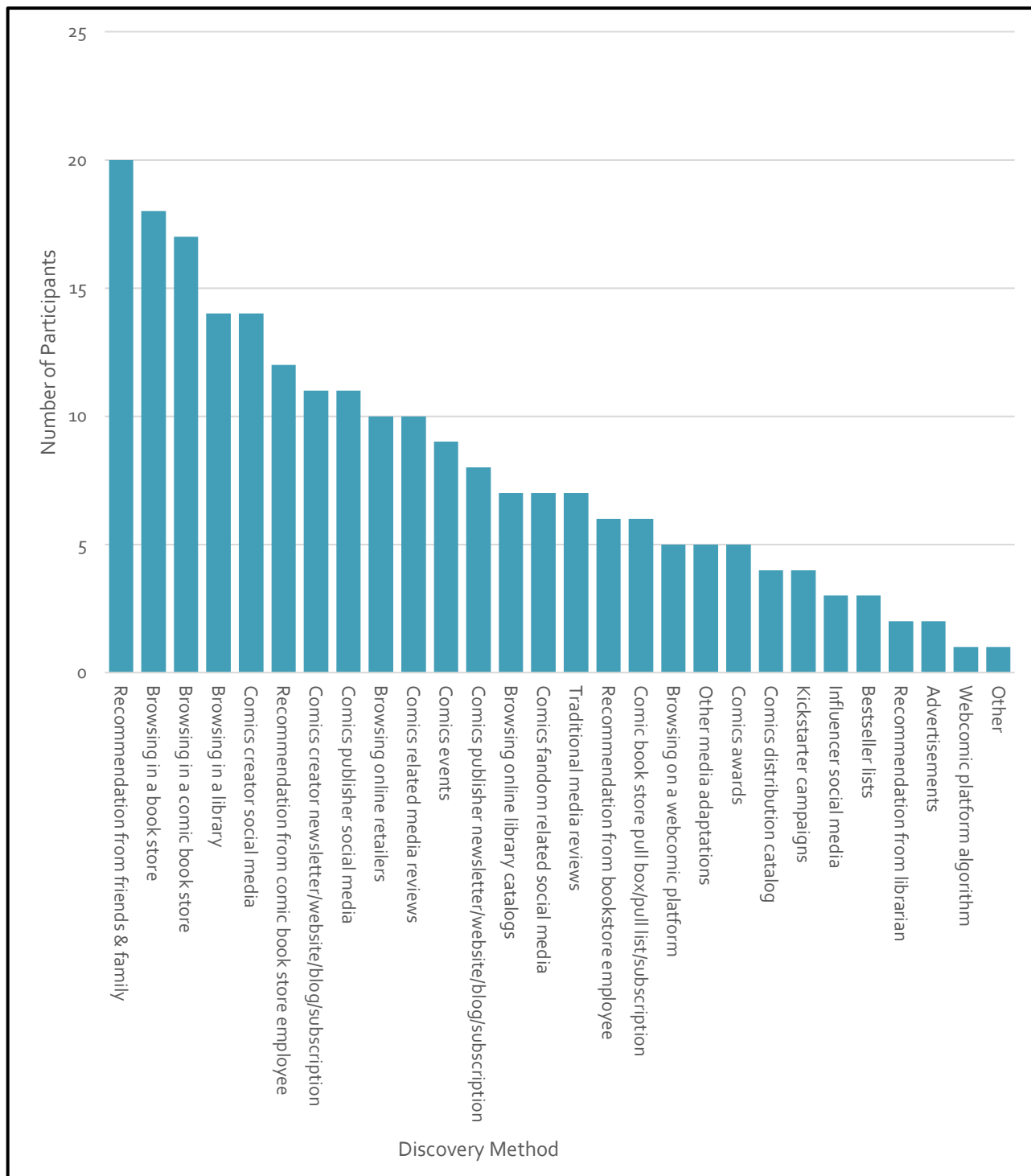
Figure 8. Graphic novel preference discovery distribution

Graphic Novel Preference Discovery Preference

Participants who preferred to read graphic novels primarily preferred to discover comics via recommendations from friends or family members (**Figure 9**). This was followed by browsing in a comic book store, browsing in a library, comics creator social media, comics creator newsletter/website/blog/subscription, recommendations from a comic book store employee, recommendations from a bookstore employee, comics fandom related social media, browsing on a webcomics platform, browsing online library catalogs, and browsing in a bookstore.
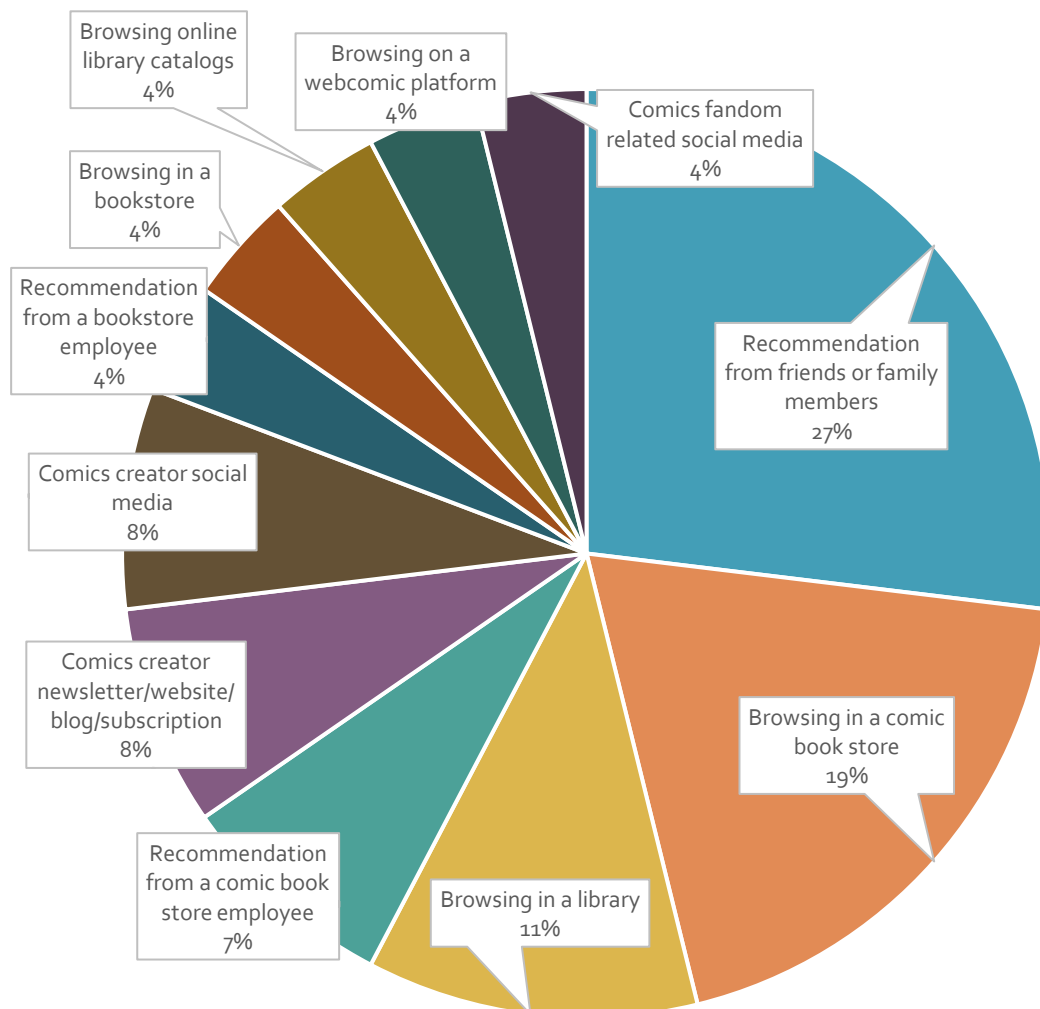
Figure 9. Discovery preference: graphic novel

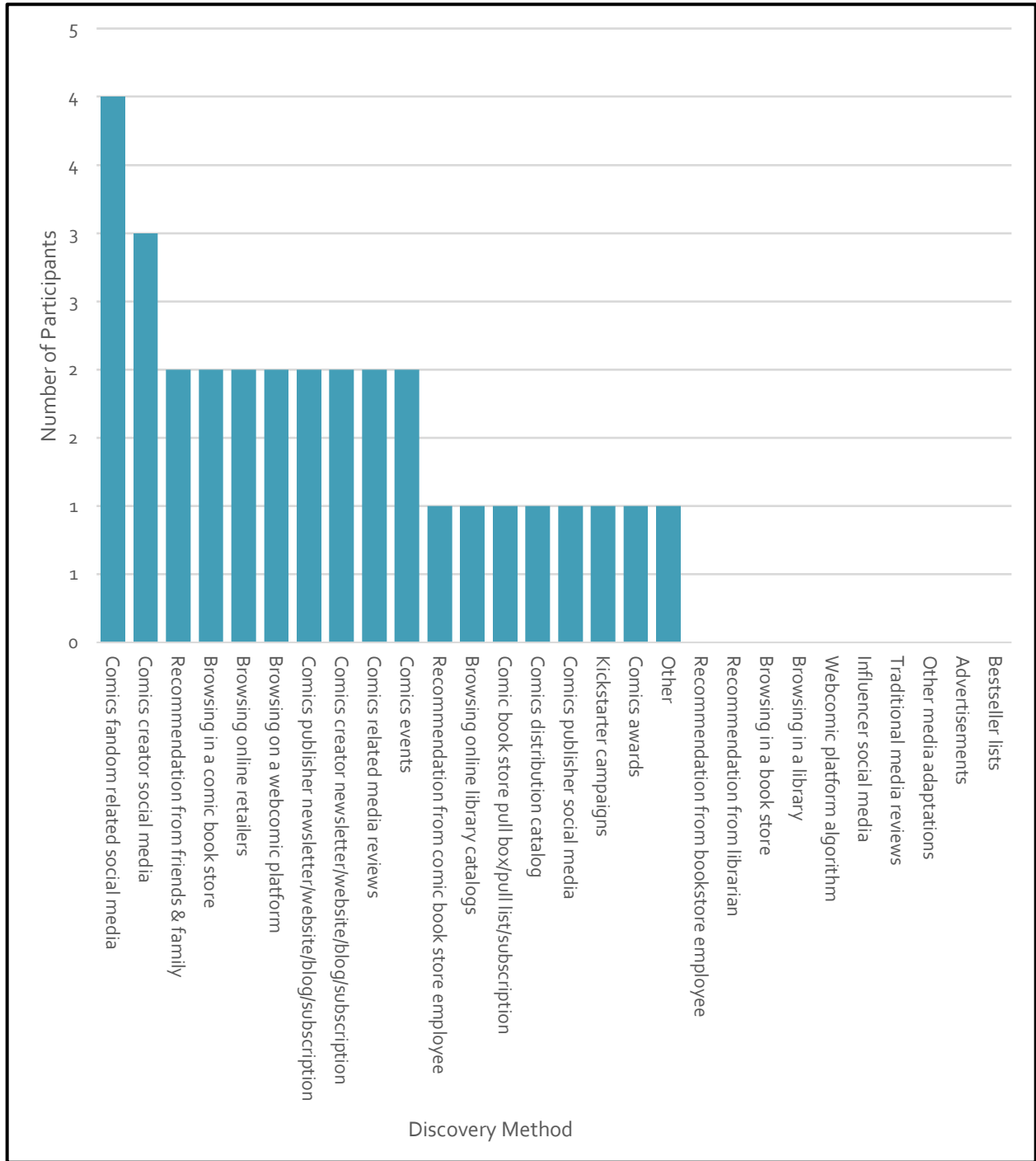*Digital Comics Preference Discovery Distribution*

Figure 10. Digital comics preference discovery distribution

Digital Comics Preference Discovery Preference

Participants who preferred to read digital comics primarily preferred to discover comics via comics fandom related social media (**Figure 11**). This was followed by browsing in a comic book store, browsing online comics or bookstore retailers, comic book store pull box/pull list/subscription, comics creator social media, and other.
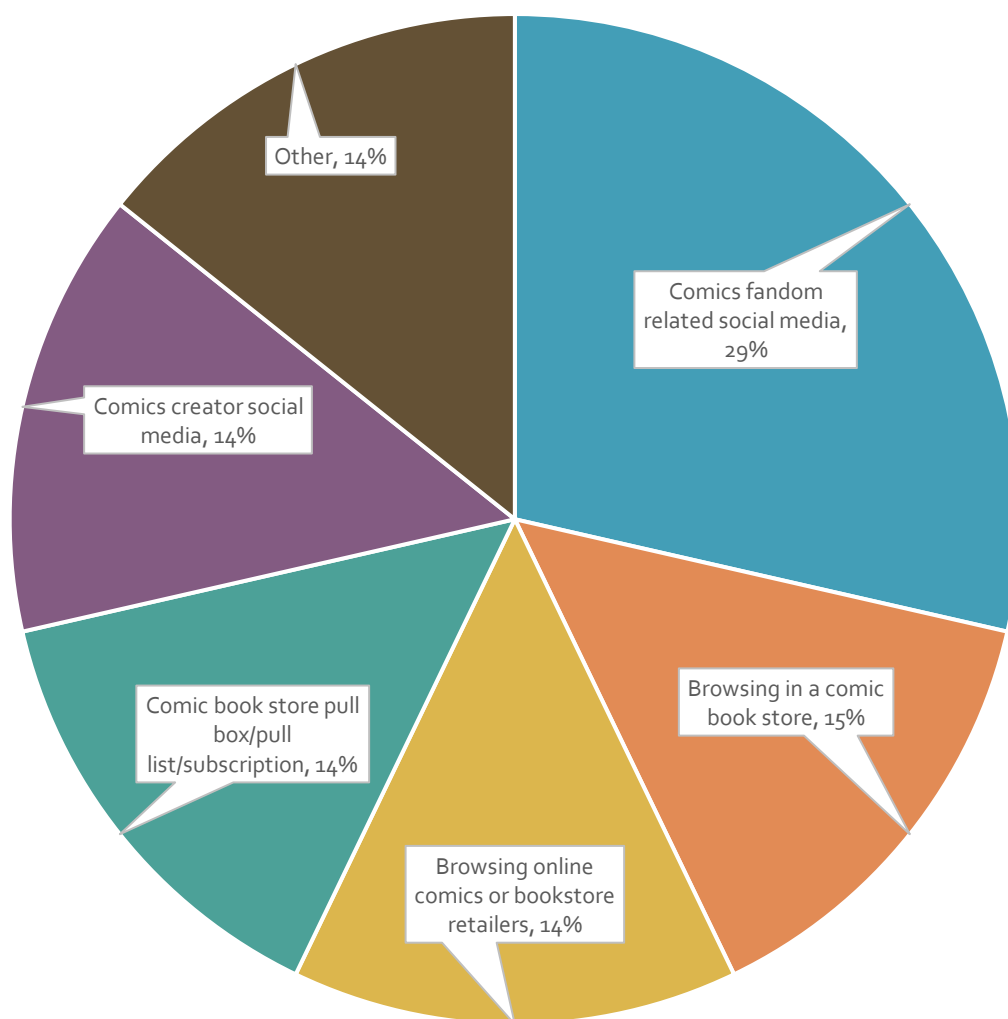

Figure 11. Discovery preference: digital comics

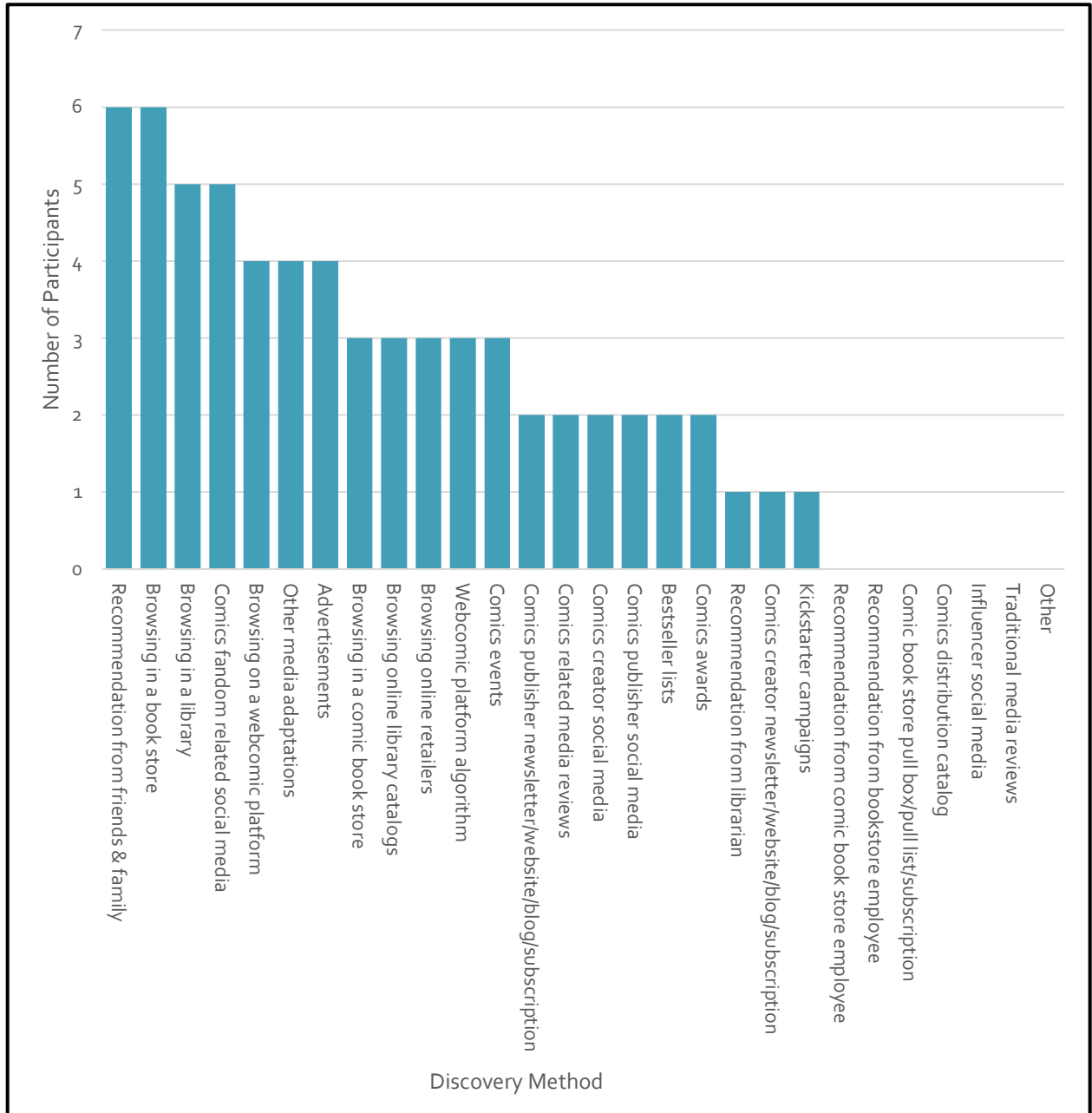*Manga Preference Discovery Distribution*

Figure 12. Manga preference discovery distribution

Manga Preference Discovery Preference

Participants who preferred to read manga primarily preferred to discover comics via

recommendations from friends or family members and browsing in a bookstore (**Figure 13**).

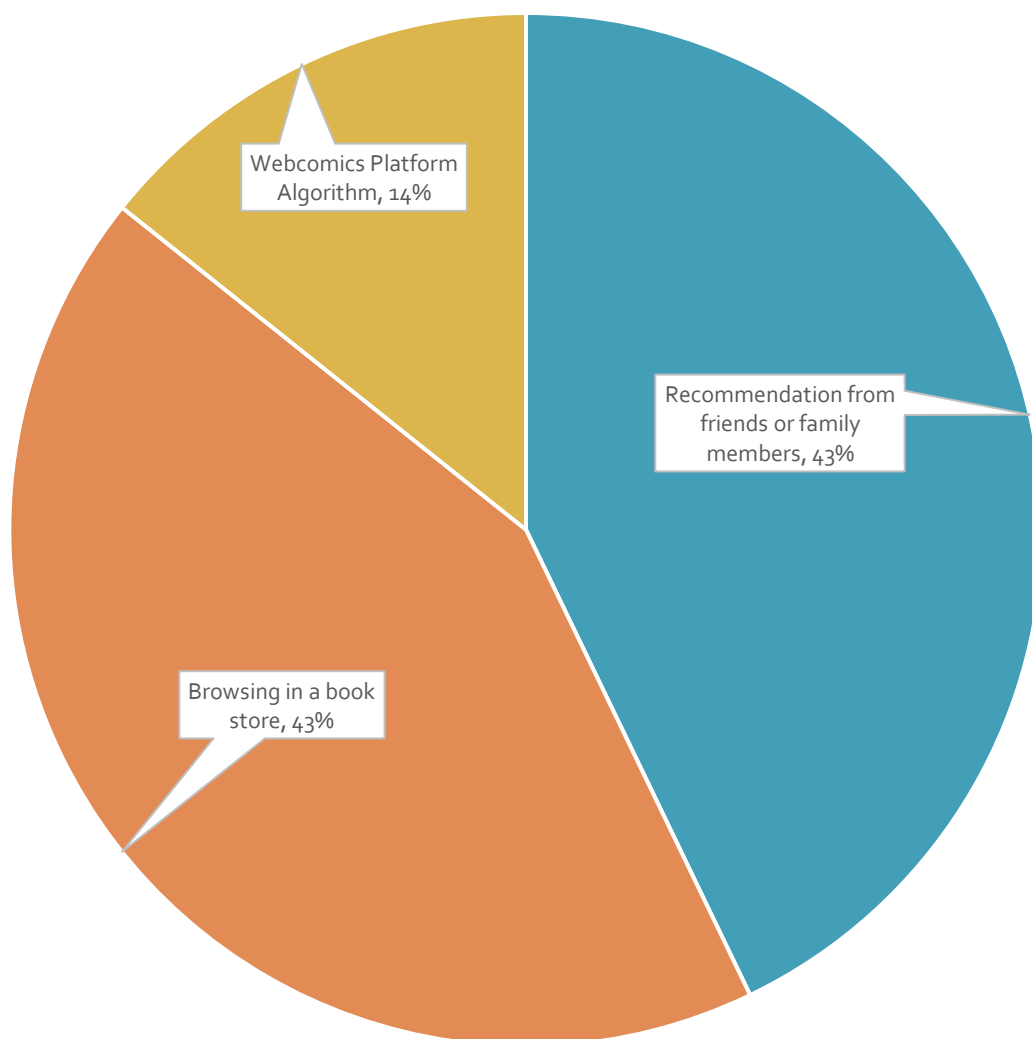This was followed by webcomics platform algorithm.

Webcomics Platform Algorithm, 14%

Recommendation from friends or family members, 43%

Browsing in a book store, 43%

Figure 13. Discovery preference: manga

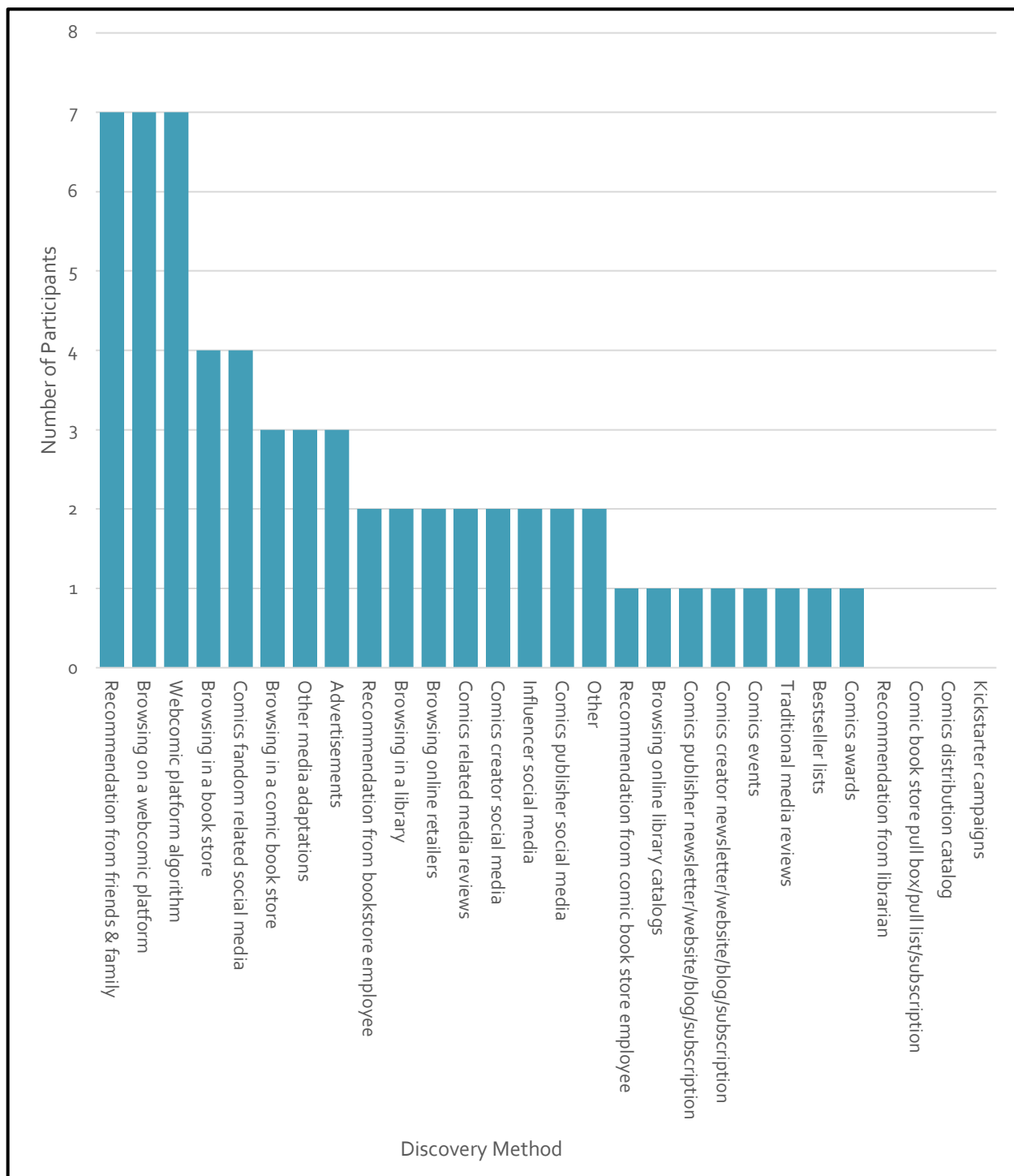*Webcomics Preference Discovery Distribution*

Figure 14. Webcomics preference discovery distribution

Webcomics Preference Discovery Preference

Participants who preferred to read webcomics primarily preferred to discover comics via

recommendations from friends or family members (**Figure 15**). This was followed by browsing

on a webcomics platform, comics fandom related social media, webcomics platform algorithm,

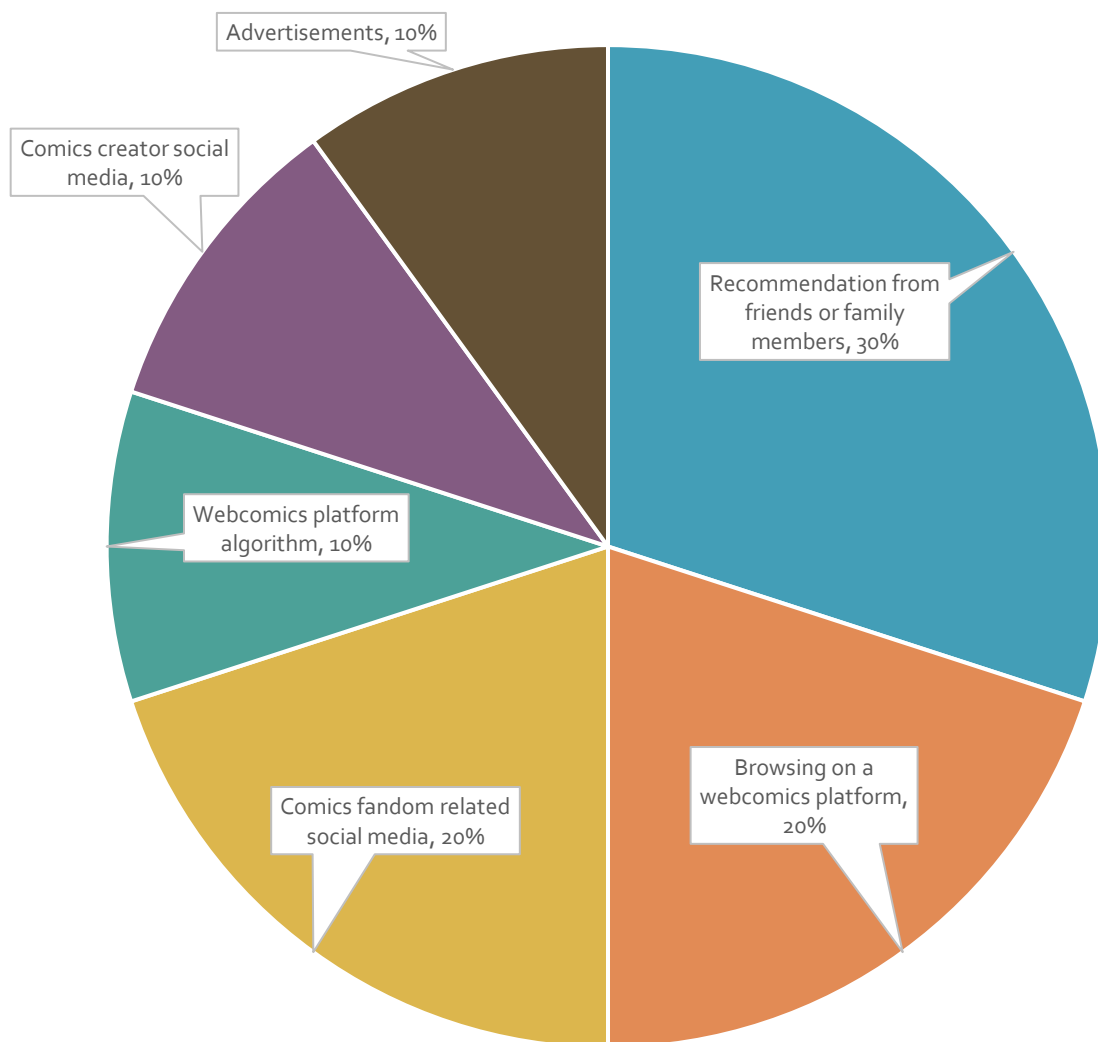comics creator social media, and advertisements.

Figure 15. Discovery preference: webcomics

Discovery by Genre

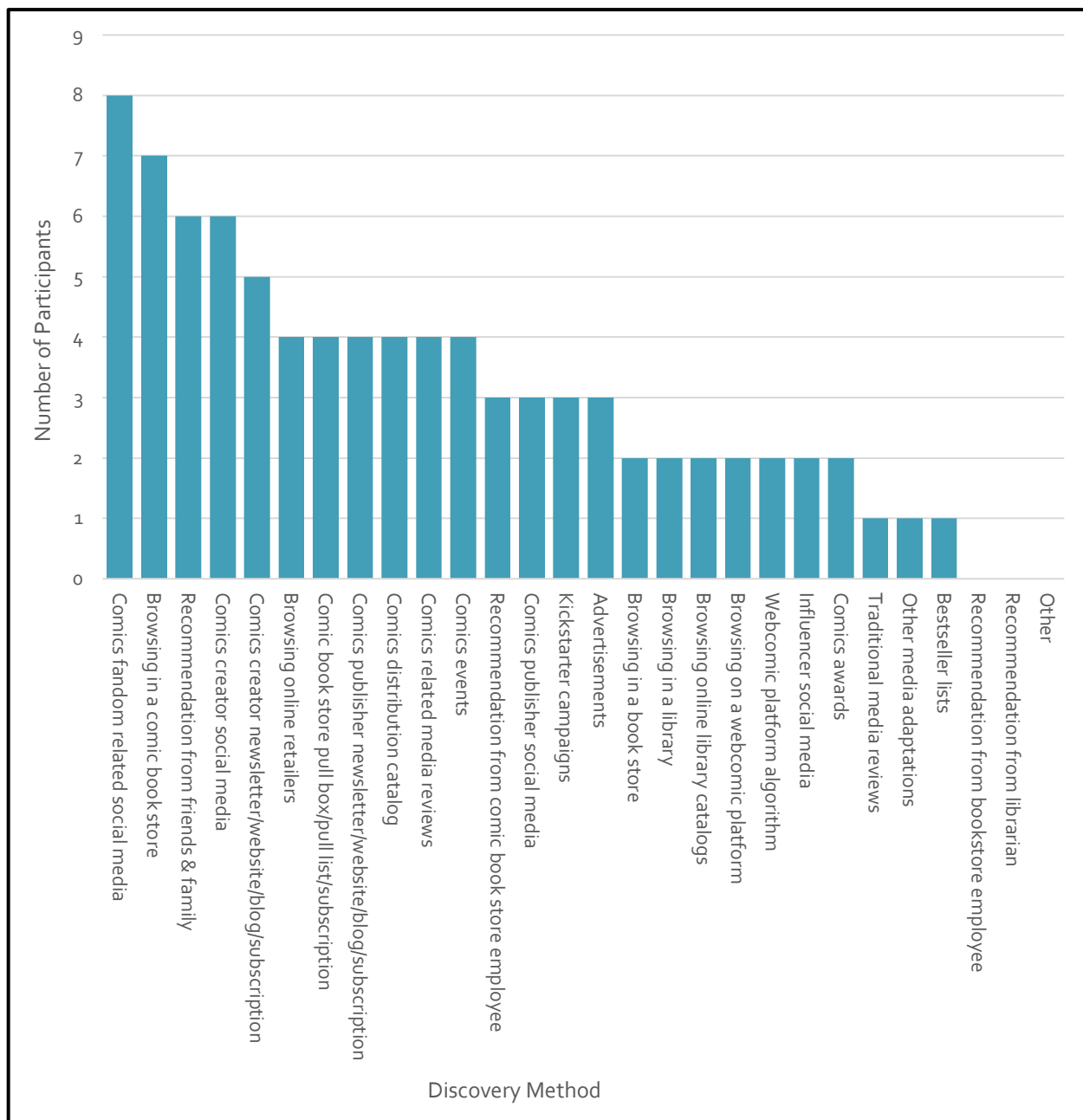*Superhero Preference Discovery Distribution*

Figure 16. Superhero preference discovery distribution

Superhero Preference Discovery Preference

Participants who selected superhero as their number-one preferred genre primarily preferred to discover comics via browsing in a comic book store (**Figure 17**). This was followed by comics fandom related social media, recommendations from friends or family members, comics creator social media, comic book store pull box/pull list/subscription, and browsing online comics or bookstore retailers.
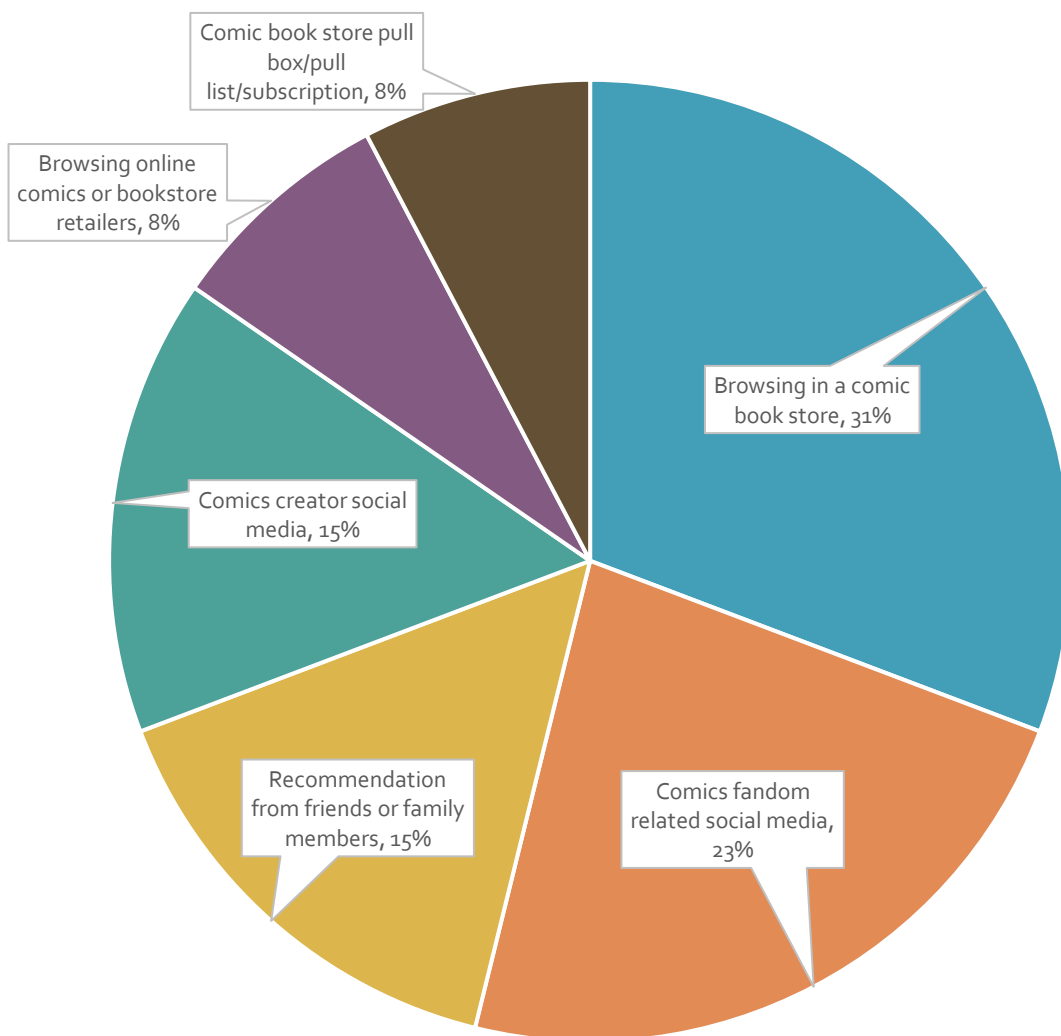

Figure 17. Discovery preference: superhero

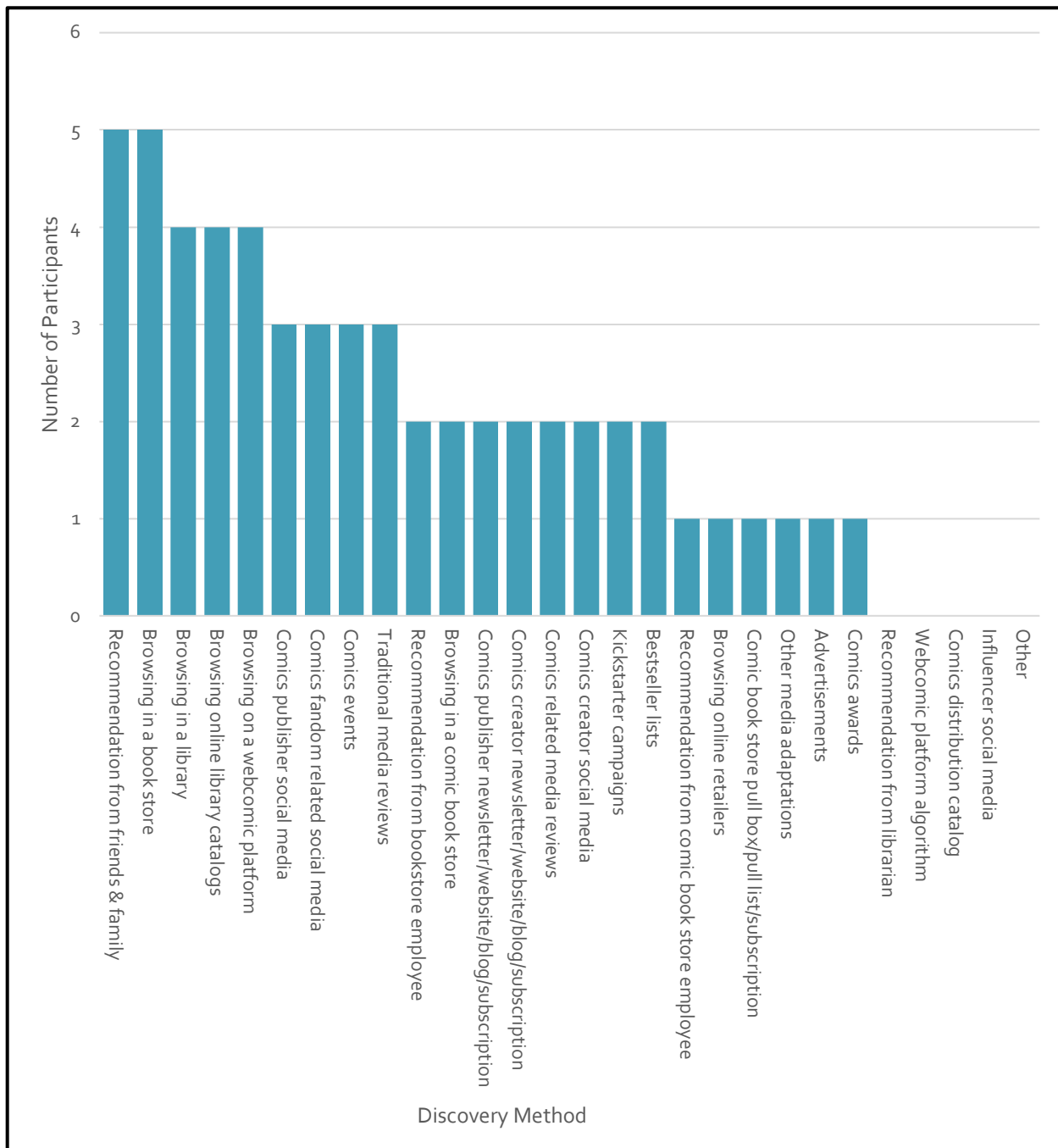*Fantasy Preference Discovery Distribution*

Figure 18. Fantasy preference discovery distribution

Fantasy Preference Discovery Preference

Participants who selected fantasy as their number-one preferred genre primarily preferred to discover comics via recommendations from friends or family members (**Figure 19**). This was followed by browsing in a comic book store, browsing in a bookstore, browsing online library catalogs, and recommendations from a bookstore employee.
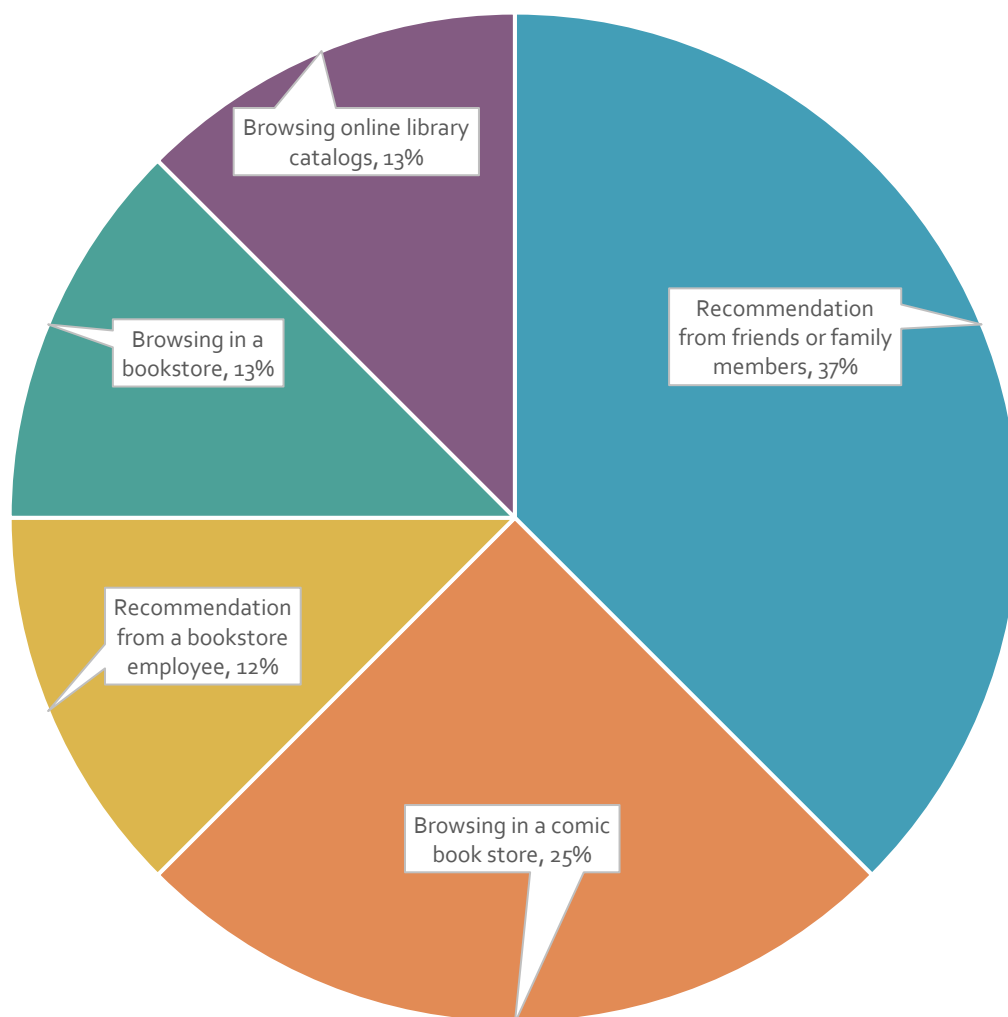

Figure 19. Discovery preference: fantasy

Romance/BL/GL Preference Discovery Distribution
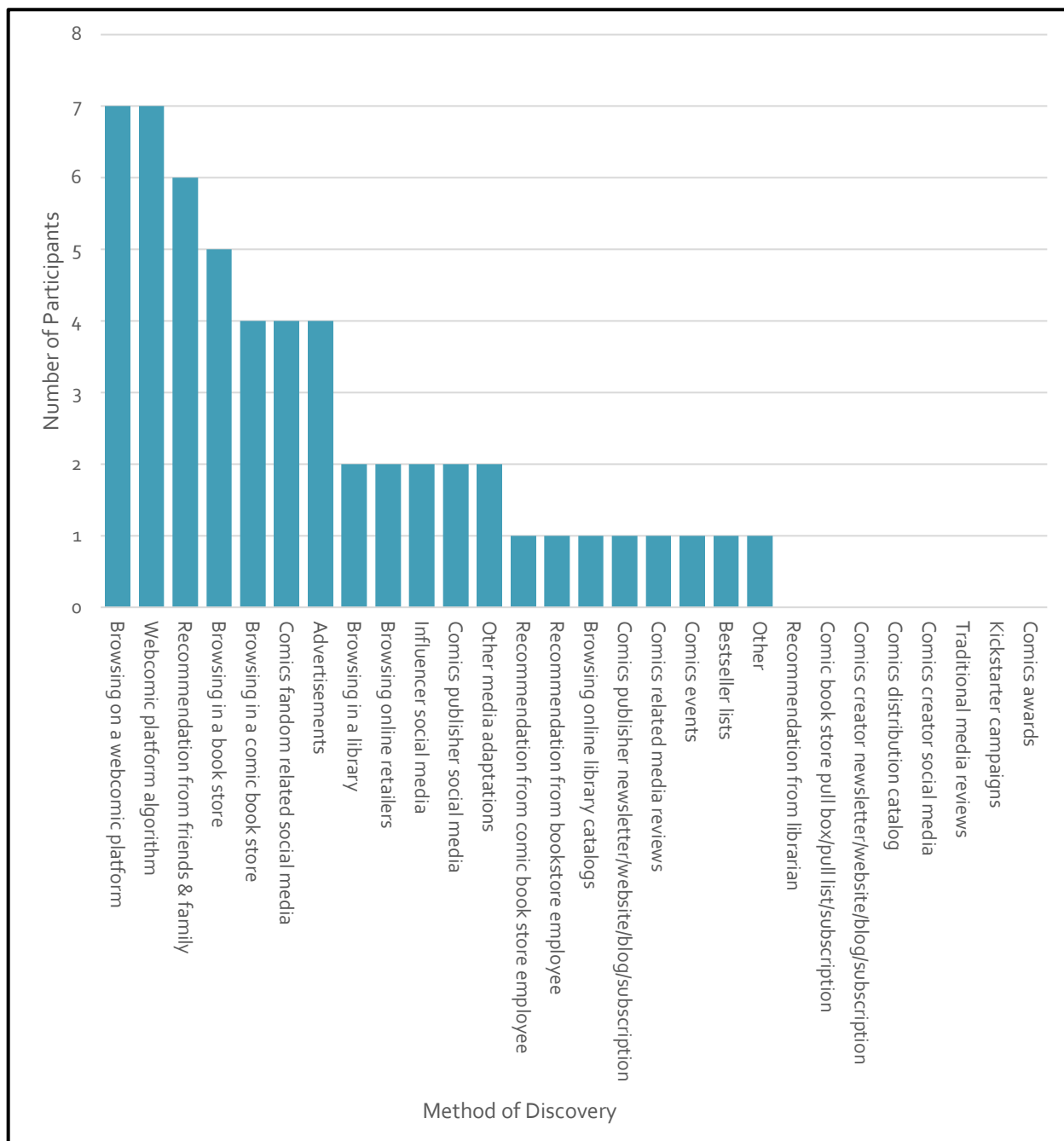
Figure 20. Romance/BL/GL preference discovery distribution

Romance/BL/GL Preference Discovery Preference

Participants who selected romance/BL/GL as their number-one preferred genre primarily preferred to discover comics via webcomics platform algorithm, browsing on a webcomics platform, and comics fandom related social media (**Figure 21**). This was followed by recommendations from friends or family members and advertisements.
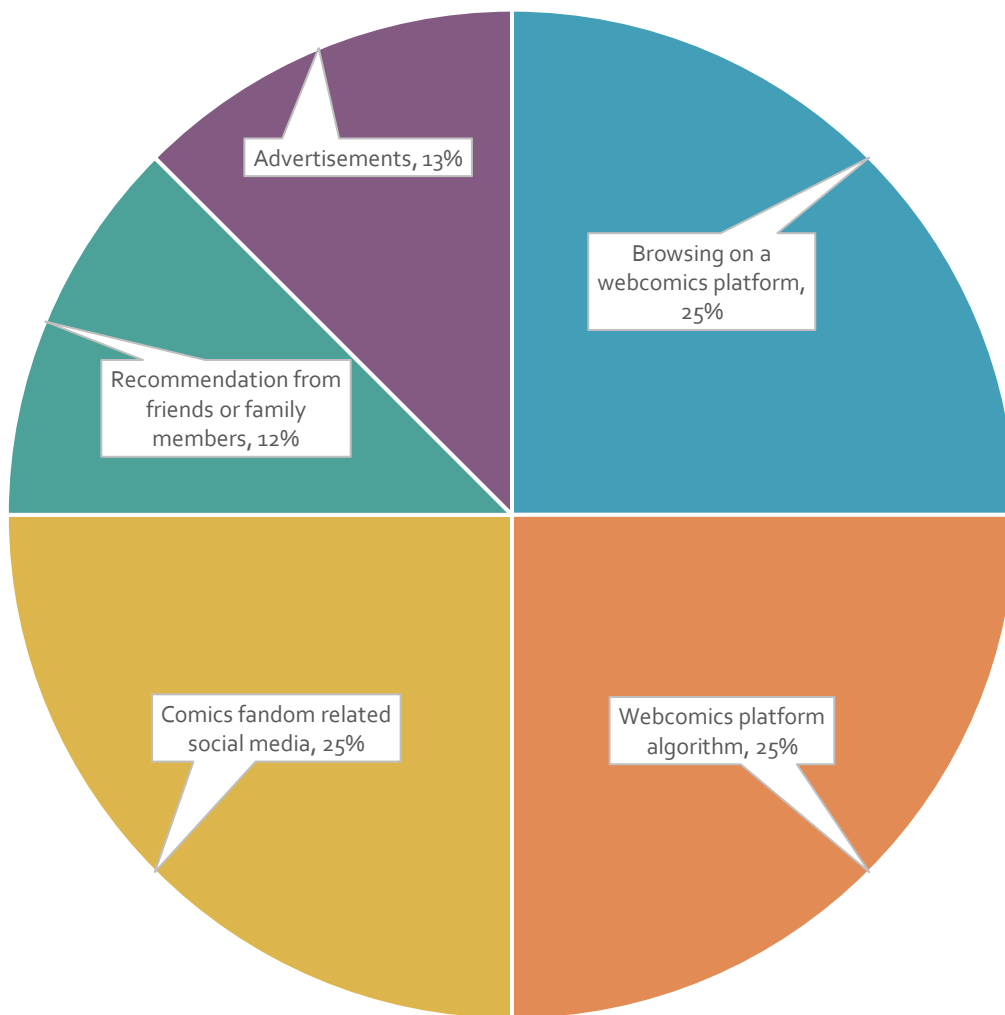
Figure 21. Discovery preference: romance/BL/GL

Underground/Alternative/Indie Preference Discovery Distribution
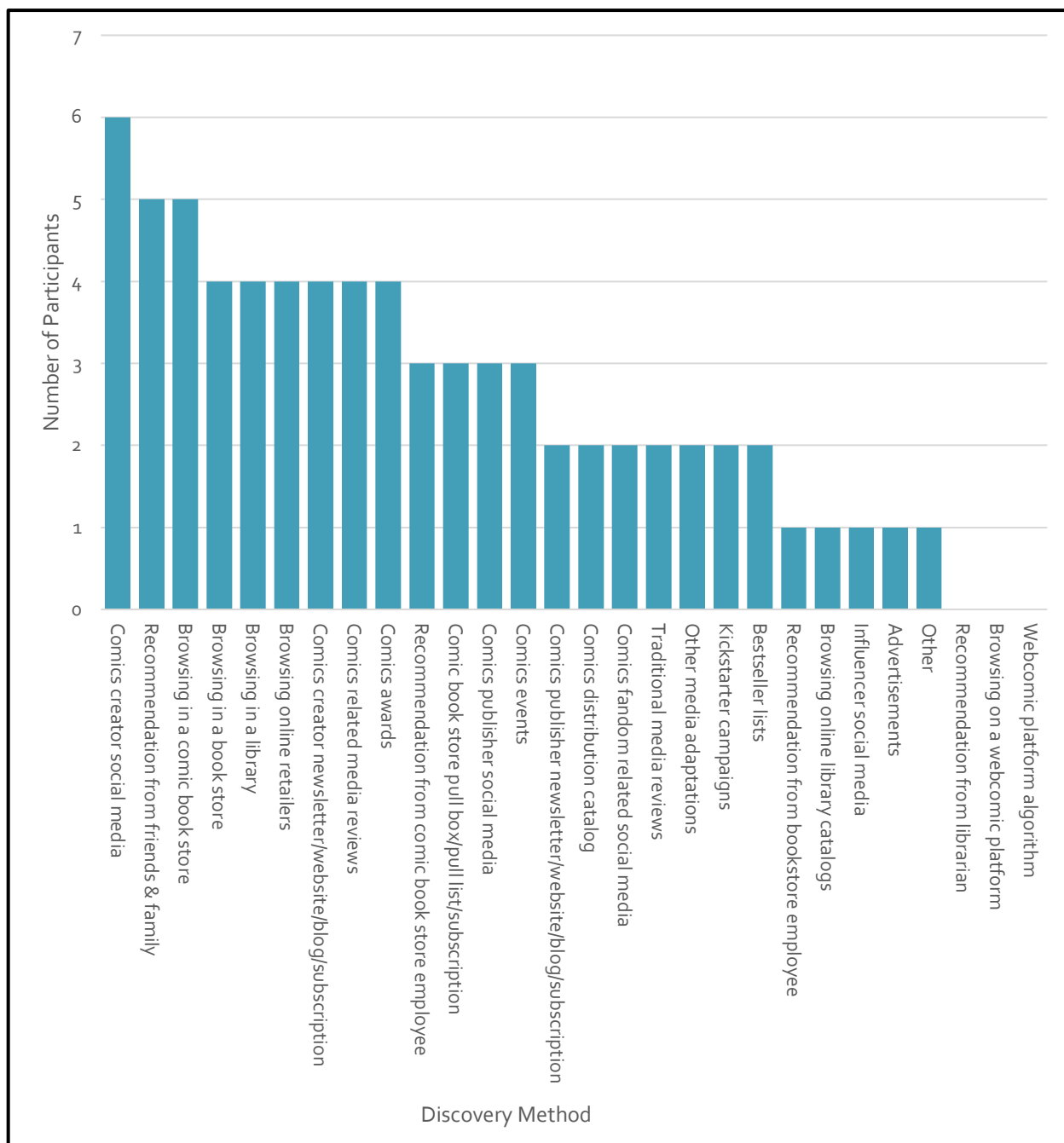
Figure 22. Underground/alternative/indie preference discovery distribution

Underground/Alternative/Indie Preference Discovery Preference

Participants who selected underground/alternative/indie as their number-one preferred genre primarily preferred to discover comics via recommendations from friends or family members (**Figure 23**). This was followed by comics creator social media, browsing in a library, and comics distribution catalogs.

Figure 23. Discovery preference: underground/alternative/indie

Analysis and Conclusion

Based on this research, graphic novels remain the preferred format of comics readers overall. It is interesting to see that webcomics, a relatively new format to U.S. readers (in its current iteration), were the second most-preferred format among survey participants. Although with a growing webcomics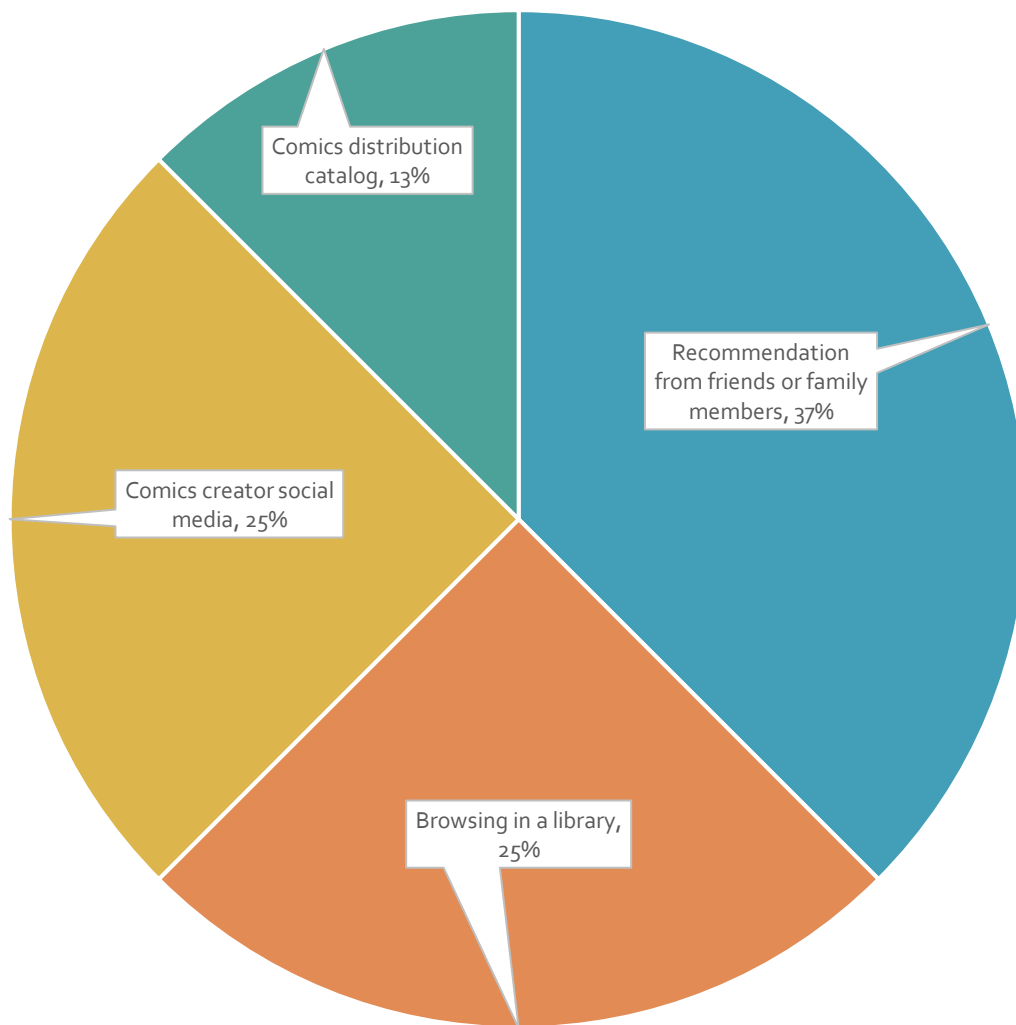 market, particularly among the younger generations (61% of participants were under the age of 35), this is unsurprising. These preferences were followed by manga, digital comics, and then comic books. The ranking of these formats would appear to follow recent trends in the comics market—although it's slightly surprising that digital comics outrank comic books. However, this preference for digital comics over comic books could be explained by the large number of participants recruited via Comics Plus.

The values comics readers of different formats held were notable. Whether it was reading the whole story arc and the aesthetic appeal for graphic novel readers; the collecting habits and appreciation of serialized storytelling for comic book readers; the lack of clutter and affordability for digital comic readers; or the appreciation of serialized storytelling, affordability, and accessibility for webcomics readers—they all had strong convictions for their preferences. Similarly, it was significant to see the different values readers held based on their preferred discovery method. Those who preferred to discover comics via friends and family emphasized trust and kinship; those who preferred to discover comics via browsing emphasized fun, visuals, and variety; and those who preferred to discover comics via comics fandom related social media emphasized expertise and specificity.

There were interesting correlations between format preference and genre preference. Although the sample size was small, the majority of participants who selected romance/BL/GL as their preferred genre selected webcomics as their preferred format. This indicates that comics

creators interested in creating romance comics may find it more beneficial to self-publish their

comics on webcomics platforms rather than to seek out traditional publishers. For traditional

publishers who publish romance comics, they may want to expand the accessibility and

promotion of their digitized comics for these audiences, who tend to prefer the convenience of

the digital format.

The readers of romance/BL/GL comics tended to prefer to discover comics via

webcomics platforms (either through browsing or through algorithm-based recommendations).

However, these readers also discovered comics via advertisements, social media, and in-person

browsing. It is possible, therefore, for creators and publishers to reach romance comics

consumers through advertisements, social media, and comics retailers. These preferences were

(unsurprisingly) similar to participants who preferred to read webcomics. From this research we

can conclude that webcomics' platform algorithms matter to readers. For comics creators

publishing on webcomics platforms, focusing on developing a presence on social media in order

to drive readers to their webcomics—and thus increasing views and increasing the algorithmic

attention—is advised. Further research into factors that drive webcomics to the top of the

algorithm could be of benefit to webcomics creators.

The majority of participants who selected superhero as their preferred genre selected

digital comics as their preferred format. Although the sample size was small, and skewed toward

a digital comics readership, it could indicate that comics publishers could spend more time

promoting and focusing on their digital comics presence. Superhero comics readers preferred to

discover comics via browsing in a comic book store but they were also highly distributed toward

(frequently selected as a discover method) discovery via comics fandom related social media

(**Figure 16**). Readers of digital comics preferred to discover comics via comics fandom related

social media but were also highly distributed toward comic creator content, publisher content, and other comics related media (e.g., reviews and events) (**Figure 10**). The message for superhero publishers here would be to seek comics reviews and to continue to promote comics through newsletters and at events. For superhero comics creators, building a presence through social media and/or a website, newsletter, etc. is advised.

In addition to social media, recommendations, and browsing, readers who preferred underground/alternative/indie comics distributed highly toward discovery via awards compared with other genres examined (**Figure 22**). Focusing on awards submissions, therefore, could be of benefit to underground/alternative/indie publishers. These readers—along with readers who preferred fantasy comics and readers who preferred the formats of manga and graphic novels—also distributed highly toward discovery via libraries (**Figure 22**, **Figure 18**, **Figure 12**, and **Figure 8**). Perhaps, particularly for publishers of these genres and categories, increasing collaboration with libraries would be of benefit.

The question I had initially intended to examine was "What is the impact of influencers on comics discovery?" This question proved rather difficult to examine, so I instead examined discovery in general. Therefore, it was noteworthy that the third most-preferred method of discovery overall was comics fandom related social media. One could ascertain that the people who prefer to discover comics "on their own" via browsing or social media are the people who provide those initial recommendations to their friends and family members; this would increase the importance of discovery through these methods. Creators and publishers alike may want to focus their marketing efforts on social media channels such as Reddit. It would particularly be advised to focus on Redditors who have some expertise or following for certain genre and category subsets—as participants indicated that they often refer to Reddit based on their specific

interests. Further research into comics communities on Reddit could also be of benefit to publishers and creators.

Comic book readers preferred to discover comics via browsing in a comic book store—as do many graphic novel, manga, and digital comics readers—which indicates that publishers may be wise to spend time focusing on the publisher-retailer relationship. The lack of returns is a burden to the direct market. Implementing a returns policy for comic books could alleviate much of the financial cost for comic book stores, however, this could be a hard sell for publishers. Aside from a returns policy, publishers could benefit from listening to the thoughts and concerns of direct-market retailers. For instance, in a recent *Publishers Weekly* article, "Comics Retailers Navigate a New Normal," some retailers expressed frustration with the complication that variant covers add to their ordering process.[39] Perhaps publishers could work with retailers to create a more conducive ordering system for variant covers or even reduce the number of variant covers being produced. It's important that publishers collaborate with retailers as the important mode of discovery—and partners—that they are.

Across formats and genres, browsing in a comic book store remains a popular choice for discovery. In Portland, we are lucky to have so many comic book stores and particularly so many that are welcoming to people of all interests. It seems the insular nature of comic book stores of the past—as was discussed by Benjamin Woo in his research—perhaps, thankfully, is seeing a shift.

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[39] Harper, "Comics Retailers Navigate a New Normal."

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