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Digital Comics Subscription Service Usage and Its Impact on Printed Comic Buying

Habits: The Digital Comics Subscription Loop

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Abstract

This study developed a digital comics subscription loop that borrows from consumer loyalty research done in publishing and marketing studies. The proposed loop uses comic publisher's proprietary subscription platforms as a "book showroom" to allow consumers to sample titles, driving physical sales. Original survey data was then gathered about comic book consumers' usage of digital subscription platforms and what drives them to make physical purchases. The data was then compared to the proposed model, finding significant cross-medium consumption, as well as many reported completions of the Digital Comics Subscription Loop. The survey data found that over 80 percent of respondents had completed the digital sampling to physical purchase sales funnel within the last year.

Research Question

How do digital subscription comics services affect the discovery of physical media?

Introduction

The last few years have been a period of unprecedented growth for the comic book industry. While other industries such as airlines or the entertainment industry struggled during the COVID-19 pandemic, comic book publishers found themselves in a very good place. The pandemic created an ideal environment for comic book publishing companies. The periods of social isolation allowed consumers to have an increased allotment of leisure time, giving consumers ample opportunity to foster their hobbies, especially comic book collecting. According to the 2024 IBISWorld report on the state of comic book publishing in the United States, over the years of 2018 to 2023, comic book publishing revenue increased 11.5 percent. However, the IBISWorld report goes on to predict that as consumer behaviors return to their pre-pandemic status, the comic book publishing market will go into a decline. How then, can comic

book publishers hold onto the gains they made with audiences during pandemic lockdowns? Many believe that the answer lies with digital comics.

While the idea of digital media seems like old hat to modern consumers, early critics claimed that digital media would negate any demand for physical media entirely. E-books prompted fears of the “death of the book” (Ballatore and Natale, 2016), with industry leaders claiming that they would kill the publishing industry as we know it. As we can see, this has not come to pass. Digital comics, like their e-book counterparts, had many doomsayers prophesying the apocalypse for brick-and-mortar comic bookstores. While it is true that physical comic shops are struggling to grow their audience beyond Gen X, research indicates that digital comics are seen as a lesser or inferior method of comics consumption (Hardy, 2021). Berens and Noorda corroborate these claims of perceived inferiority of digital media, noting that while the Gen Z and Millennial generations have grown up in a digital environment, “Print books are Gen Zers’ #1 preferred book format. Young people visit bookstores. Despite all the digital options, browsing library shelves continues to be relevant to their discovery of new books.” In fact, according to the IBISWorld report, digital comics sales only make up 8.2 percent of total revenue. If comic shops hope to capture these younger generations, what market trends do they need to master?

My research proposes an improved sales funnel for physical comics by using digital comics subscription services as a “book showroom,” a term coined by Berens and Noorda in their study “Gen Z and Millennials: How They Use Public Libraries and Identify Through Media Use.” A book showroom refers to a place or platform where consumers can sample titles with little or no risk involved. Berens and Noorda first applied this term to libraries, the ultimate risk-free showrooms. Co-opting this term will allow comics publishers to capitalize on the latest

research on the market habits of Gen Z and Millennial consumers and think about their digital comics subscription services as more than just a repository for their backlist. This study has developed a sales funnel known as the Digital Comics Subscription Loop, which starts with digital comics sampling on subscription platforms and ends with the purchase of a printed product. This proposed sales funnel will borrow aspects of Ray Murray and Squires' revised communications circuit of digital publishing (2013), as well as Edelman and Singer's Consumer Decision Journey (2015). I also gather original survey data that will then be applied to the proposed Digital Comics Subscription Loop.

The results of the survey found:

- 88.3 percent of respondents read both printed **and** digital comics.
- 80 percent of respondents reported that they had participated in cross-medium consumption (the Digital Comics Subscription Loop) in at least the last year.
- “Art,” “writing,” “filling a collection,” and “personal meaning” were all selected elements that led to respondents completing the Loop. There were also many write-in responses including “sharing with friends,” “gifts,” and “directly supporting creators.”
- Respondents also supplied additional comments about their subscription service usage that directly indicated the low risk associated with digital sampling is a primary consideration.

Digital comics subscription services offer consumers a robust sampling of titles for the low risk of a monthly fee. By thinking about these digital comics subscription services as a showroom for titles—either for publisher's extensive backlists, new titles, or even digital-first books—comic book publishers will be able to create a better sales funnel for consumers. The survey data

gathered in my research provides evidence of an existing, informal sales funnel as well as testimonies for why consumers make use of this model. Publishers can use this information to make better use of their already existing services, formalizing the Digital Comics Subscription Loop. Learning to use market trends in this way will allow publishers to strengthen the existing sales funnel and create a better **sell-through** environment for consumers.

Literature Review

The realm of digital comics subscription services is something that has not been widely researched, but there is academic literature that can be applied to an analysis of these services. The validity and significance of the Digital Comics Subscription Loop can be proved by applying studies of consumer habits of essential market demographics—Gen Z and Millennials—to the proposed model.

Berens' and Noorda's study, "Gen Z and Millennials: How They Use Public Libraries and Identify Through Media Use," provides the key term, book showroom, for this study. This term is important because it is descriptive of one of the most important discovery habits of these demographics, robust sampling. Berens and Noorda write, "Digital subscription models through which Gen Z and millennials consume other media (such as Netflix, Kindle Unlimited, Xbox Game Pass, Spotify, Audible, etc.) allow them to try new media products risk-free." This risk-free sampling of content has become engrained in the buying habits of modern consumers. The usage of robust sampling in consumers is important to this study because although these demographics are routinely online, the printed word is still the number one preferred format. Fortunately, Berens and Noorda also found that Gen Z and Millennials are "context agnostic" when it comes to their buying habits. This idea of being context agnostic refers to the way in which these age groups often purchase a title irrespective of the place they discovered it. Context

agnosticism is important for the usage of digital comics subscription services because it allows consumers to have a place of low or risk-free sampling (the only risk being the associated monthly subscription fee), where they will be able to use this discovery method to purchase a printed work in another location.

While there has been little research done directly on digital comics subscription models, the discovery habits of comics readers have been outlined in Tara McCarron's research project, "Examining the Discovery Behaviors of Comics Consumers." McCarron's study found that physical graphic novels (46 percent) were the highest ranked format among comics readers, however, webcomics came in second (18 percent). Digital comics were the preferred format for 12 percent of respondents to McCarron's survey, closely aligning with the IBISWorld report. Digital comics may not be a common preference for consumers; however, I believe there to be strong evidence of cross-format consumption, McCarron found that, overall, browsing digital comics platforms was only the seventh most popular method of discovery, behind more common avenues such as word of mouth and browsing in physical stores. McCarron goes on to say that respondents who reported the superhero genre as their preference, also commonly preferred digital comics subscription services. This seems to be notable since two out of the three biggest digital comics subscription services are primarily publishers of the superhero genre (DC Comics and Marvel Comics). McCarron continues that although this respondent sample was small, "it could indicate that comics publishers could spend more time promoting and focusing on their digital comics presence."

Modeling the Digital Comics Subscription Loop

An analysis of two consumer decision journey models will provide the basis for the proposed Digital Comics Subscription Loop. Examining the Digital Publishing Communications Circuit in

tandem with Edelman and Singer's loyalty loop, allows us to have a holistic view of the publishing industry. The two models drawn from different fields, publishing studies' "Digital Publishing Communication Circuit" and marketing studies "Consumer Decision Journey." From the communication circuit we can examine how books end up in the hands or on the devices of consumers. From Edelman and Singer, we can see how publishers can fuel consumer retention and engage with their audiences.

The Digital Comics Subscription Loop will follow Ray Murray and Squires' model, but the loop will highlight publishers having their own proprietary digital platforms. The Digital Comics Subscription Loop will also more closely resemble a sales funnel or discovery model in which the usage of publisher services ultimately leads to a physical sale. In 2013, Padmini Ray Murray and Claire Squires published their article, "The Digital Publishing Communications Circuit," in which they detailed four distinct models by which the book publishing industry operates¹.

¹ These models are based on Darnton's Communications Circuit from 1982.

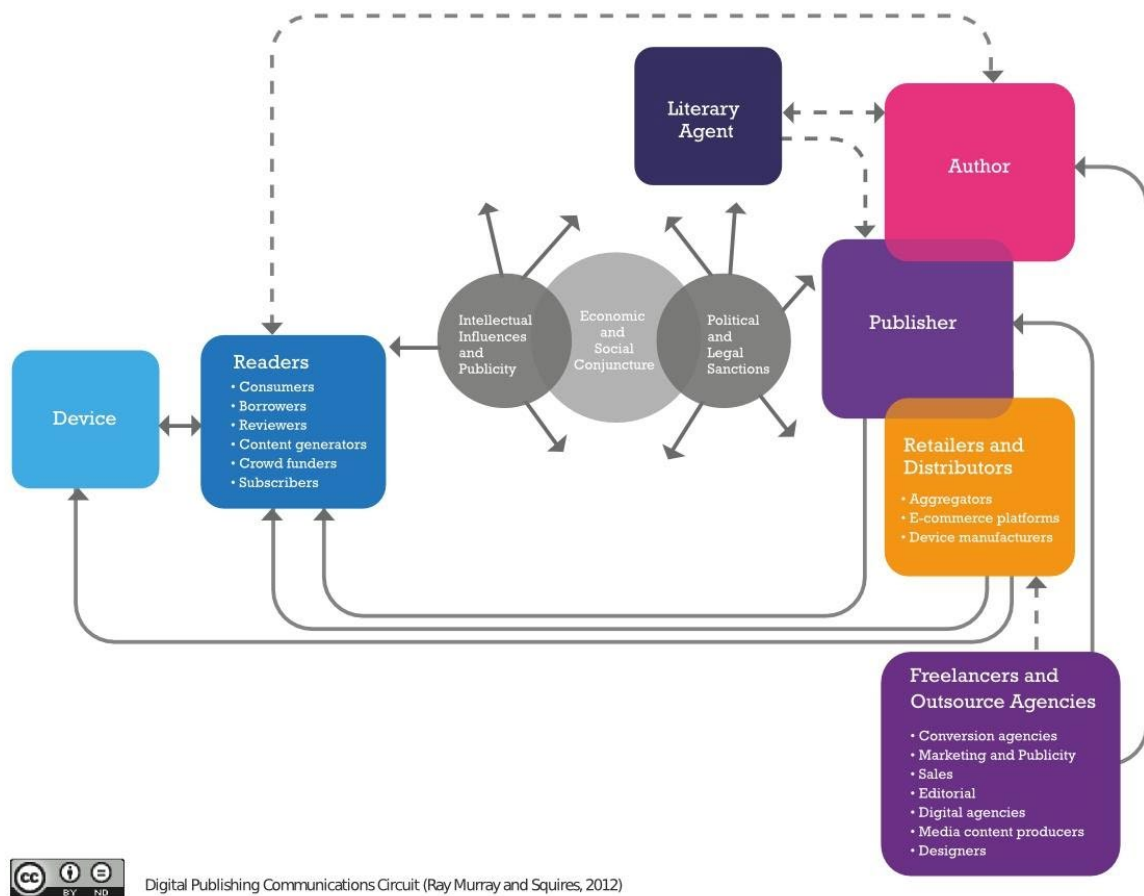


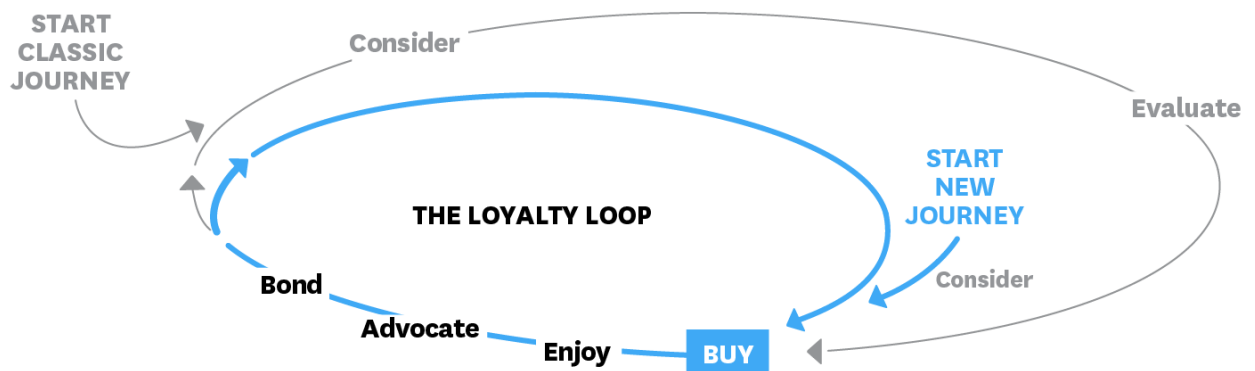
Figure 1: Digital Publishing Communications Circuit (Ray Murray and Squires, 2013)

The most important elements of Ray Murray and Squires' model are readers and their devices. Digital devices such as smart phones, tablets, and e-readers provide publishers with direct access to their consumers. In their model, readers are defined as consumers, borrowers, reviewers, content generators, crowd funders, or subscribers. This study focuses on consumers as subscribers to a digital comics platform.

The other consumer journey decision model borrowed from is Edelman and Singer's Consumer Decision Journey (Figure 2). In their own words Edelman and Singer outline their consumer decision journey as, "shoppers taking advantage of technology to evaluate products and services more actively, adding and removing choices over time. [. . .] pressuring products to

perform and brands to deliver a superior experience on an ongoing basis.” The pair believe companies must fight for consumer loyalty at every decision, but their updated loyalty loop allows companies to “actively shape those journeys.” By understanding the loyalty loop, companies may then be able to modify the consideration and evaluation phases of purchasing. For the Digital Comics Subscription Loop, the consideration and evaluation periods are the same as sampling periods. The consumer has the opportunity to sample the work and consider what it means to them. If the bond has been established, the Loop has the potential to be fulfilled.

Streamlining the Decision Journey



CLASSIC JOURNEY

In the classic journey, consumers engage in an extended consideration and evaluation phase before either entering into the loyalty loop or proceeding into a new round of consideration and evaluation that may lead to the subsequent purchase of a different brand.

NEW JOURNEY

The new journey compresses the consider step and shortens or entirely eliminates the evaluate step, delivering customers directly into the loyalty loop and locking them within it.

SOURCE DAVID C. EDELMAN AND MARC SINGER
FROM "COMPETING ON CUSTOMER JOURNEYS," NOVEMBER 2015

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Figure 2: Edelman, David C., and Marc Singer. "Competing on Customer Journeys." *Harvard Business Review*, 9 Sept. 2020, hbr.org/2015/11/competing-on-customer-journeys.

The Digital Comics Subscription Loop

The Digital Comics Subscription Loop (or the DCSL) follows the same production path as the Digital Publishing Communication Circuit. Comics are developed and pitched to either agents or direct to publishers then follow the path to retailers and distributors. From there, the book is out

in the world, ripe for discovery. Thanks to Tara McCarron's examination of the discovery habits of comics consumers, we know that readers discover new comics through word-of-mouth recommendations, browsing in physical stores, social media, libraries, online retailers, and perusing digital comic platforms. Like the library, digital comics subscription services have the potential to be a platform of robust sampling for consumers within the demographics that Berens and Noorda reported on. In the DCSL, once the comic book is available and readers begin to discover it, they can either make the physical purchase or sample the title on the subscription platform. If we follow the Loop down the sampling path, we begin to borrow from Edelman and Singer's model. Sampling a title allows readers to experience the title risk-free. From there, the reader begins the process of evaluating the title. There are many things that can be evaluated during this step, the art, the writing, attached personal meaning, each aspect of the title that resonates with the reader builds the desired bond. Comics are a longform storytelling medium and the sampling process requires time to build the bond that leads to a physical purchase. Once the reader has sampled, evaluated, and then bonded with the title, they are much more likely to complete the sales funnel and purchase the physical product.

As a hypothetical, let us consider how the DCSL would work on a title such as Chris Claremont's tenure on *X-Men*. Claremont's *X-Men* series began with *Giant-Size X-Men* (1975) #1, which lays the foundation for the next 20 years of *X-Men* comics. A careful reader would find this to be an ideal starting point to begin their *X-Men* journey. While this single issue is an important milestone in comic book history, there are few options to read it physically. There is the *Uncanny X-Men Omnibus Volume 1* which collects the first 39 issues of the series and boasts a MSRP of \$100, the Epic Collection, *Second Genesis*, for \$39.99, an out-of-print trade paperback, or the Marvel Unlimited app for \$9.99 a month. Each of the physical releases for this

issue hold a high price tag which translates to high risk for consumers. The consumer may read this single issue and realize that Silver Age *X-Men* comics are not their preference, which may lead to a return of the book or the loss of possible future sales.

However, if this consumer is allowed to sample the title on a digital comics subscription service like Marvel Unlimited, there is a higher chance for consumers to bond with a title. The bond may not be immediate; it may take many issues for the bond to take hold; but as the consumer continues to sample the title and subsequent series, they are considering and evaluating what it means to them. According to the results of the survey the most common reasonings for completing the Digital Comics Subscription Loop were “art,” “writing,” “filling a collection,” and “personal meaning.” “Personal meaning” was the most common response, indicating that while sampling titles on these platforms, readers are evaluating the bond they feel with the work, determining whether or not it is worth the investment. One respondent wrote, “When it comes to older stuff, I like reading it digitally. The digital subscriptions or purchases aren't owning something and some older stuff that has an impact on me is stuff I'd like to own.” This is an example of a successful journey through the Digital Comics Subscription Loop, when cross-medium consumption has taken place.

The best, big picture avenue to prove the validity of the Digital Comics Subscription Loop is by looking to the comic book industry's greatest disruptor, webcomics. Companies like Webtoons and Tapas have found incredible success in recent years with their digital, vertical scrolling comics. Consumers are clamoring for these stories, so much so that publishers have recently taken a dive into publishing these digital-first stories as physical books. Rob Salkowitz in a June 2023 article with ICv2 reports that, “WEBTOON Unscrolled (Webtoon's physical media imprint) has sold more than 200,000 copies into the channel since launching in November,

2022, and has turned several of its digital-first hits into best sellers.” These platforms are mostly free services but there are paid benefits such as earlier access to chapters. Access to these free chapters allows their growing audiences to sample titles risk-free. According to Shaenon K. Garrity of *Publishers Weekly*, acquiring these new web-to-print titles allows publishers some unique advantages. “For publishers evaluating the risk and reward potential of new titles, online comics have some built-in advantages. Editors can review a complete story arc rather than relying on a pitch packet—and count how many fans have already tapped in.” Publishers that have taken this chance have been greatly rewarded. For instance, according to Circana Bookscan data, Rachel Smythe’s *Lore Olympus: Volume 1* has a recorded RTD sales number of 208,667 for the hardcover and 172,938 for the trade paperback.

How can an analysis of *Lore Olympus*’s success—where consumers read the title digitally then purchase printed copies—apply to other digital comics services? In the case of *Lore Olympus*, the Webtoons platform was able to act as the title’s “showroom,” cultivating an audience. From there PRH was able to make an informed decision to acquire print rights, based on readership data, to print a physical copy for distribution. The idea of the book showroom is crucial to *Lore Olympus*’s success.

Webtoons and *Lore Olympus* are not the only digital-first title offerings taking advantage of the book showroom. In a Polygon article by Susana Polo, Marvel Comics editor Jordan White, touches on the advantages they have found using digital comics subscription services as a book showroom. “‘X-Men Green is a great example. [...] A print series starring Nature Girl — even with Wolverine as a guest star! — would be a hard sell. But because we are part of the Marvel Unlimited service, we’ve found readers are willing to take a chance on some more unconventional tales.’” White indicates that one of the most important aspects of using digital

comics subscription services is that it is a useful avenue for consumers to take a chance on a title they typically would not. Consumers were thus able to sample the title in a low or no-risk environment. Comic book publishers are just beginning to see the underlying potential in their already existing digital comics subscription services. These digital comics subscription services offer consumers a robust sampling of titles for the low risk of a monthly subscription fee. By applying the proposed Digital Comics Subscription Loop to these platforms, comic book publishers will be able to better understand current market trends.

Methodology: Reconciling the DCSL With Survey Data

To test the feasibility of the DCSL, a survey was distributed consisting of 14 questions about digital comics usage and printed comics buying habits². This survey was hosted on Google Forms and distributed on platforms such as Reddit, Bluesky, Twitter (or X), and Facebook. These platforms were chosen due to the vibrant comic book communities that exist on them. These expansive digital communities are the primary platforms comic book readers congregate. I am also a part of these communities and actively engage with creators and influencers. This survey was concluded with 180 respondents and the full data can be seen in Appendix B through Appendix O.

Findings

My survey found that respondents preferred printed comics to digital comics, 55.9 percent to 44.1 percent (Figure 3). This figure supports the claims made by researchers like Hardy who report that digital is often the less-preferred format. While this remains in line with accepted research, my study found that 88.3 percent of respondents read both printed **and** digital comics

² 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.

(Figure 4), providing evidence of the cross-format consumption practices of modern consumers. As stated in the literature review, digital comics subscription services are under researched in comics studies. Researchers find that printed comics are viewed as the superior format, but the data suggests that a significant amount of cross-medium consumption is taking place.

Complete this sentence: I prefer to read ____ comics.

179 responses

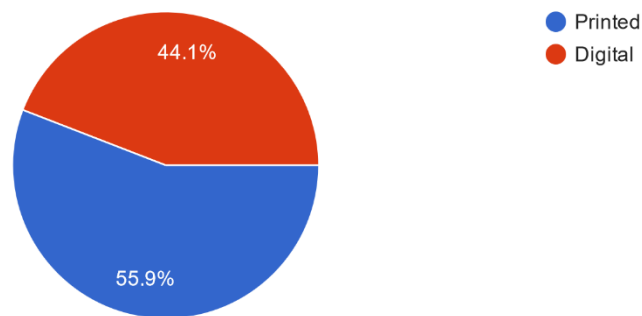


Figure 3

Do you read both printed AND digital comics?

180 responses

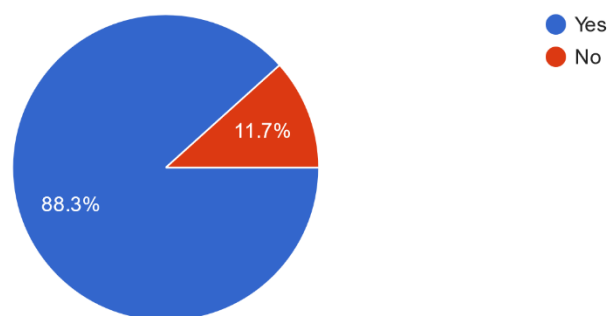


Figure 4

78.2 percent of respondents reported that they use a digital comics subscription service such as DC Universe Infinite, Marvel Unlimited, or Kindle/ComiXology Unlimited (Figure 5). When

asked what other digital comics platforms were used by respondents, results included Webtoons, GlobalComix, Viz Manga, Shonen Jump, Crunchyroll, digital library services like Hoopla, or piracy. While some of the services fall outside the scope of this study, it is important to note the wide range of services available to consumers.

Do you use a digital comics subscription service? (Such as Marvel Unlimited, DC Universe Infinite, Kindle Unlimited/ComiXology Unlimited)

179 responses

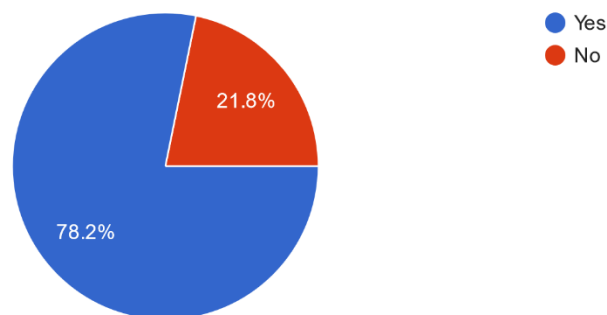


Figure 5

When responding to the question, "Which digital comic subscription service is your #1 preferred platform," DC Universe Infinite had 16 votes, ComiXology Unlimited (now Kindle Unlimited) had 13, Marvel Unlimited had 12, Viz Manga had 2 responses, Shonen Jump had 2 responses, and 12 respondents reported that they had no preference or subscription. There were also other votes for platforms that do not meet the definition of a subscription service even if they are digital comics platforms.

When asked when respondents last spent money on a digital comics subscription service, 126 (or 70% of respondents) stated that they were currently subscribed, 4 (2.2 percent) were subscribed within the last three months, 5 (2.8 percent) were subscribed within the last six

months, 8 (4.4 percent) were subscribed within the last year, 19 (10.6 percent) were subscribed over a year ago, and 18 (10 percent) have never subscribed (Figure 6).

When was the last time you spent money on a digital comic subscription service?
180 responses

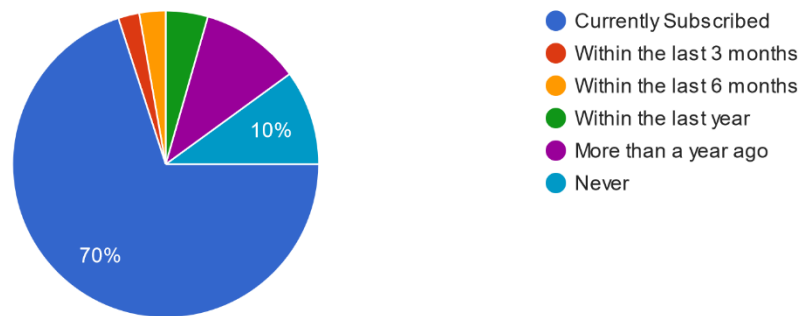


Figure 6

Respondents were then asked when the last time they had purchased a physical comic book that they had previously read digitally. 36.1 percent indicated that they had completed this sales funnel within the last 3 months, 25.6 percent made this type of purchase within the last year, 20 percent had never made this purchase, 12.2 percent had in the last 6 months, and then 6.1 percent had in the last week (Figure 7). This finding punctuates the entire hypothesis of the Digital Comics Subscription Loop. Nearly 80 percent of respondents indicated that they had completed this sales loop within the last year. These respondents had participated in sampling on one of the digital comics subscription platforms and then felt a bond with the material. The study also inquired about the conditions for deciding whether or not to make a physical purchase. When asked to select all elements that would make consumers purchase a printed copy of an already read comic 87 respondents selected “art,” 81 selected “writing,” 119 selected “personal meaning,” 70 selected “to fill a collection,” and then there were 32 write-in responses from “sharing with friends,” “gifts,” or “directly supporting creators.” “Personal meaning” had the

highest rate of response indicating that cross-medium consumption is led by the bond that Edelman and Singer write about.

When was the last time you purchased a printed comic that you had already read digitally?
180 responses

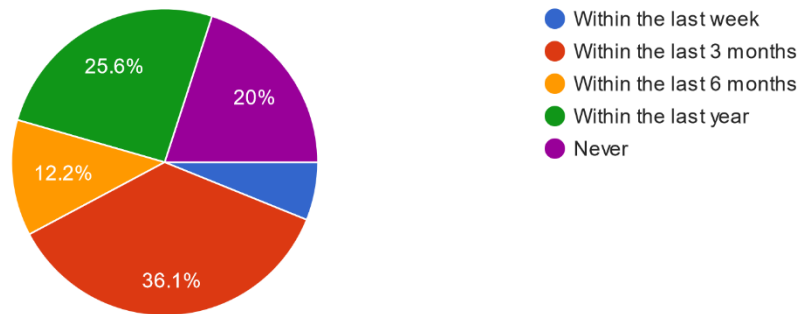


Figure 7

When purchasing a physical copy of a previously consumed digital title, trade paperbacks were the most common purchase with 120 votes, omnibuses with 108 votes, single issues with 53 votes, 9 votes for other types of prestige editions of physical comics. Further examination of the where and in what formats comics consumers make physical purchases is outside of the scope of this paper. It is interesting to note that single issues, the most common format for comics, was the least popular format for purchase after completing the Digital Comics Subscription Loop. This is most likely due to the fact that most digital comics subscription services have a delayed release structure that encourages consumers to focus on the physical release before allowing access through their subscription. This delayed release has a typical buffer of six months (or one month for DC Universe Infinite's higher tier plan). This is significant because it may imply that after completing the Digital Comics Subscription Loop, consumers may be more likely to purchase a more expensive, prestige edition of a book like an omnibus. Comic bookstores were the most preferred physical location for comic book purchases with 128 responses, online

retailers with 90, traditional bookstores with 44, directly from creators with 35, and then at comic conventions or other in-person events had 30 responses (Figure 8).

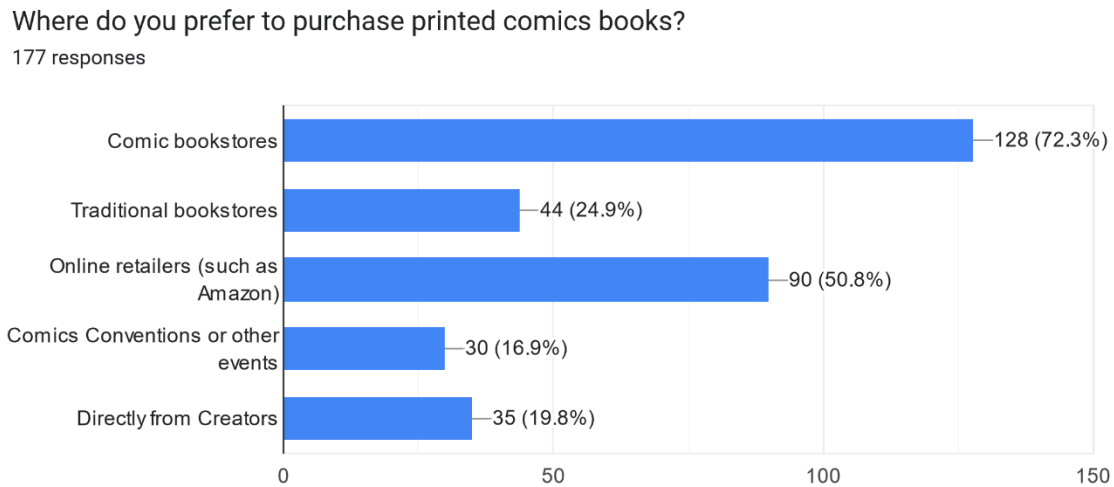


Figure 8

When asked to check all that apply, there were many answers to the question, “Why do you use digital comic subscription services?” Price was the most common answer with 108 responses, the catalog or selection of the service had 107, the ability to discover or sample new series had 104 responses, and then storage had 102 responses. There was also a plethora of write-in responses. 20 respondents emphasized the high level of convenience brought by the usage of these platforms. Other responses included sustainability, accessibility, platform-specific titles (such as Marvel Unlimited’s Infinity Comic initiative), access to out-of-print titles, or that these platforms allow them to sample titles before purchase.

The final question of the survey asked respondents if they had anything else to say about digital comics subscription services. Out of the 180 respondents, 96 had additional comments

about content, usage, motivation, or about the platforms themselves. Some comments directly confirm the usage of the Digital Comics Subscription Loop.

- “My DC U subscription allows me to sample many more titles than I could commit to buying them individually.”
- “No risk if I don’t like a series. Can quickly jump around in time to backfill my knowledge of a character or plot line.”
- “For people who care more about reading lots of comics rather than collecting (or who only buy for certain characters or creators), it's a wonderful option. Also, the Infinity Comics on Marvel Unlimited is a great added value. Reading digitally got me to purchase printed material, which was far from my original intention when I subscribed.”

Respondents mentioned convenience and price are a driving motivator for subscription service usage. There were several comments on the ease of use of these services—which certainly maintains the low-risk aspect of sampling—as well as the benefits to the “all you can eat” aspect of the platforms. However, there were also many responses voicing frustration with these services. The most common frustrations were due to the delay between physical release and subscription access, the user interface, and the user experience of these platforms. Remedies for these issues are outside the scope of this study but thinking of these platforms as a tool for publishers to market their content would make them a more effective sales funnel. Responses indicated that better title curation or built-in reading guides for crossovers would greatly add value.

Limitations

The limitations for my hypothesis have the potential to be strong. According to the IBISWorld report on the American Comic Book industry, digital comics sales only make up 8.2 percent of total sales. So why should publishers bother with investing in these services? The success of Webtoons and Marvel's Infinity Comics initiative proves that this is fertile ground for sales initiatives. According to Susana Polo at Polygon, Marvel's recent push into the vertical-scrolling comic scene has led to a significant increase in audience. Polo writes, "Marvel tells Polygon that the company has seen a 30% increase in Unlimited subscribers in 2022 compared to 2021, with over 300 Infinity Comics issues being read over 2 million times." This level of success with a digital comics initiative is too high to be ignored. Additionally, I could not find any indication in the IBISWorld report that this percentage also accounts for money spent on these digital subscription services.

Conclusion

The most important takeaway from the findings of this study is that the phenomenon of cross-medium consumption exists in the buying habits of modern comic book purchasers. Comic book readers consume comics both in physical and digital format at 88.3 percent. This is a high percentage which is further emphasized by the nearly 80 percent who use a digital comics subscription service. Modern comic consumers are using these digital comics subscription services as book showrooms to sample titles at low financial risk. This finding is significant because it illustrates a built-in avenue for marketing, publicity, and reader engagement.

The rise of Webtoons and Marvel's recent success with their Infinity Comics initiative prove that digital comics subscription services are poised to make substantial changes to the ways comic book publishers operate. Applying Berens' and Noorda's concept of the book

showroom to something other than libraries allows publishers to understand the untapped benefits of their proprietary platforms. When modern, price sensitive consumers are allowed the opportunity to sample titles they wouldn't otherwise purchase, there is potential for future sales after the consumer-product bond is established. Understanding this aspect of Edelman and Singer's loyalty loop in conjunction with this paper's Digital Comics Subscription Loop model allows publishers to make informed decisions when choosing comics for reprints or testing new digital-first initiatives. Digital comics subscription services offer consumers high sampling for low risk. The data gathered during this study proves that the validity of the Loop will create a more effective sell-through environment for consumers. By creating a better sales funnel for consumers, publishers are also benefitting from the potential cross-format consumption of digital and printed comics.

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