

PRODUCT PLACEMENT IN COMICS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF ATTITUDES OF
COMIC BOOK READERS

By

KRISTOFER MEHAFFEY

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To my parents, Billy and Barbara Mehaffey, and my big sister, Megan, for their support, encouragement and patience throughout all the years of my education and beyond

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>page</u>
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	4
LIST OF FIGURES	7
ABSTRACT	8
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION.....	9
A Channel in Transition	10
Enter Product Placement	12
Point of Difference / Point of Distress.....	14
Organization of Thesis	15
2 LITERATURE REVIEW.....	16
Product Placement	16
Consumer Attitude and Behavior	18
Consumer Attitude and Experience	19
Comics and Comic Books	21
Comics Consumers as Advertising Audience	23
The Sponsored Page	25
Product Placement in Comic Books.....	27
Exploratory Research Questions.....	32
3 METHOD.....	39
Research Design.....	39
Qualitative Research	39
Focus Groups and In-Depth Interviews	40
Source and Selection of Participants	42
Data Collection.....	43
Data Analysis	45
Visual Stimuli	46
Member Checking.....	47
4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION.....	48
General Attitudes Toward Advertising and Product Placement	48
Narrative Reality, Economic Practicality and Artistic Integrity	51
Theme 1: Drawn to Realism	52
Subcategory 1: Appreciation of Realism	52
Subcategory 2: Interruption	54

Theme 2: Cost of Doing Business	56
Subcategory 1: Mitigation of Consumer Cost.....	57
Subcategory 2: Strengthening the Industry	59
Theme 3: Selling Out	60
5 SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	62
Answering the Research Questions and Generating Theory	62
Practical Implications.....	65
Limitations	68
Suggestions for Future Research.....	70
Conclusion.....	73
APPENDIX	
A FOCUS GROUP MODERATOR'S GUIDE.....	74
B INTERVIEWER'S GUIDE.....	78
C IRB and Letters of Consent.....	80
In-depth interview.....	80
Focus group.....	81
D SAMPLE FOCUS GROUP TRANSCRIPT	82
E SAMPLE INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT.....	84
F PRODUCT PLACEMENT THE MARVEL WAY: AN INTERVIEW WITH FORMER MARVEL ADVERTISING DIRECTOR JOE MAIMONE.....	85
LIST OF REFERENCES.....	94
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH	101

LIST OF FIGURES

<u>Figure</u>	<u>page</u>
1 <i>Dashiell Hammett's Adventures of Sam Spade</i>	33
2 "Batman and the Mummy"	34
3 <i>The Irredeemable Ant-Man</i> , No. 10	35
4 <i>X-Men: The 190</i> , No. 4	35
5 Panel of <i>New X-Men</i> provided to <i>Wall Street Journal</i>	36
6 <i>New X-Men</i> , No. 20	36
7 <i>Punisher War Journal</i> , No. 18	37
8 <i>Rush City</i> , No. 1	37
9 <i>Catwoman</i> , No. 73	38
10 <i>Secret Warriors</i> , No. 3	38

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Kristofer Mehaffey

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This thesis provides an understanding of how product placements in comic books are interpreted within the framework of comics consumers' reading experience.

Building on previous qualitative research and the grounded theory perspective of social science, the researcher gathered rich, experiential data through two qualitative methods: focus group discussions and in-depth, individual interviews. Three focus groups and seven interviews of comics readers and consumers were conducted. The participants were all male, ages 19-39.

This study found that comics publishers, writers and illustrators are actively pursuing product placement as a way to create more realistic narratives and as a source of revenue. The practice received predominantly negative initial responses from focus group and interview participants, although participants' attitudes, both negative and positive, became more complex and dynamic as discussion continued. Through constant comparative analysis, two themes of narrative centrality, two themes of economic-specific relevance, and one theme of artistic integrity emerged as compelling factors that helped shape participant attitudes and opinions. The implications of these themes as well as suggestions for future researcher are discussed.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

The year 1982 saw a bulbous, digit-illuminating alien stumble into an American home and into American hearts, while simultaneously ushering in a new era of embedded brand message strategy. Candy manufacturer The Hershey Company publicly attributed a 66% increase in sales of Reese's Pieces (Reed and Dutka 1989) to a prominent and memorable product placement in Universal Studio's *E.T.: The Extraterrestrial* (Kennedy and Spielberg 1982). The implications of *E.T.*'s golden touch were not lost on film producers, executives, brand managers, or anyone else even remotely interested in generating revenue or spreading a brand message. A year after the successful pairing of *E.T.* and Reese's Pieces, 20th Century Fox became the first Hollywood film studio to officially offer manufacturers a standardized process for the placement of products and brands in its films for monetary compensation (Harmetz 1983).

While an extraterrestrial visitor's predilection for candy treats might be the most memorable product placement in cinematic history, the origin of the practice stretches back to the early years of film. Product placement in mass media began in 1895 with the contractual inclusion of two cases of Lever Brothers soap in Alexandre Promio's *Washing Day in Switzerland* (Newell, Salmon and Chang 2006). Although the practice spread across a number of channels over nearly a century of mass media consumption, it was not until 20th Century Fox's 1983 Hollywood entente that product placement became a better managed practice (Harmetz 1983; Karrh 1998; Newell et al. 2006; Steertz 1987). By 2006, the product placement industry, including placement in film, television, and video games, was estimated to be valued at \$4.24 billion (Cohen 2006).

With product placement becoming more pervasive in terms of use and perceived effectiveness (Karrh 1998; Karrh, McKee and Pardun 2003; Nielsen Media Research 2006), the practice, its history, and its effects have been studied in film, television, video games and even, to a degree, novels and music. However, one channel has recently begun aggressively experimenting with product placement, a channel that has been overlooked in research: comic books.

A Channel in Transition

Excluding newspaper serials, the seven-by-ten inch, 22-page monthly comic book has, until recently, been the unrivaled format for comics since the mid-twentieth century (Eisner 1985, 1996). While the printed monthly comic book still dominates the comics industry, collected stories, known as trade paperbacks, and long-form prestige comics, known as graphic novels, have become increasingly popular. However, determining the actual size of the comics industry is problematic. Gordon Hodge, of investment banking firm Thomas Weisel Partners, estimated the comic book market to be about \$400 million to \$450 million in 2006 (Steinberg 2006), while John Miller, of Comics Buyers Guide (CBG), estimated the market to be worth \$575 million to \$640 million that same year (Miller 2009a). Currently, there are only two resources available to those researching sales of comics in the US: Diamond Comics Distributors, Inc revenue reports and Nielsen BookScan USA sales reports.

Diamond Comic Distributors, Inc (DCD), the largest direct market comics distributor in North America, reported 81.34 million units shipped of its top 300 comic books in 2008, for a total of \$263 million in sales (Miller 2009b). Factoring in sales of top trade paperbacks and graphic novels, CBG's Miller (2009b) estimates 2008 overall DCD sales to direct market outlets to be \$327.19 million. Utilizing Nielsen BookScan

USA sales reports, which track actual retail sales at book chains and newsstands that buy directly from publishers instead of through DCD, the total 2008 overall American comics market is estimated to be worth \$680 to \$710 million (Miller 2009b).

However, it is important to qualify DCD sales numbers as sales to direct market outlets, not individual consumers, and not actual retail sales estimates. Unlike chain bookstores and newsstands, most comics specialty stores, which constitute the vast majority of the direct market, do not utilize point-of-sale inventory systems. Because there is no reliable reporting of actual direct market retail sales numbers, many industry reporters, professionals, and consumers are skeptical of market estimates derived from DCD reports (Brown 1997; Hibbs 2009; Rogers 2008).

Even as overall dollar sales have increased over the past decade, the result of increased price per unit and a growing demand for trade paperbacks and graphic novels, overall unit sales of traditional monthly comic books have fluctuated, with DCD reporting 100.32 million units sold in 1997 compared to the 81.34 million units sold in 2008 (Miller 2009). Despite this, advertisers have found monthly comic books to be a viable channel into which to inject their messages, thanks largely to a concerted effort by comics professionals to change the tone of advertising in comic books.

“Half the advertising community thinks the last ad to run in Marvel Comics was Charles Atlas,” lamented Marvel Entertainment Group’s vice president and group advertising sales director David O’Brasky in 1992, referring to the advertisements of Charles Atlas bodybuilding programs that were a staple of mainstream comic books for decades beginning in the 1940s (Elliot 1992).

“We're trying to go after products a little more sophisticated than the stink bombs and whoopee cushions,” commented Tom Ballou, advertising director for DC Comics, that same year (Elliot 1992). Although the concerns of O’Brasky and Ballou might have been partially expressed in jest, their attitudes reflected an overall drive by industry professionals to elevate comic books to a channel worthy of mainstream advertisers attention. As a result, advertising revenue rose from around \$7 million in 1992 to around \$32 million in 2007 (Elliot 1992; Steinberg 2006).

That dramatic increase has been seen by some to be a great boon to an otherwise faltering industry: “AD REVENUE is what keeps comics going,” stated comics creator Tony Harris, “NOT sales. There aren’t enough fans buying books to keep the industry going” (Harris 2006). Accordingly, publishers are eager to generate new avenues of revenue and brand managers are seeking innovative ways to insert their messages into niche markets.

“We are always looking for ways of connecting with our consumers,” said Nike representative Nate Tobecksen, addressing Nike’s increased partnership with comic book publishers (Steinberg 2006).

Enter Product Placement

The first publicized placements within a comic book appeared in Chaos! Comics’ *Evil Ernie* No. 5 (Nutman, Brewer and Arnold 1998). Film distributor Shooting Gallery entered into a partnership with Chaos! Comics to promote its theatrical release *StrangeLand* (Pieplow, Bushell and Snider 1998), with Chaos! Comics integrating signage, plot details, and verbal mentions of the film into the comic book (Matzer 1998). Brian Pulido, founder and publisher of Chaos! Comics, saw integrating a variety of brands into comics as a natural way to increase the reality of the narrative. “Video

games, clothing and music are all naturals,” Pulido asserted. “It wouldn’t be a stretch for Evil Ernie to wear Doc Martens. It would make sense for our characters to listen to a music group like Korn, but it wouldn’t be appropriate to have them using Fab detergent. The main criteria for us will be ‘Is it cool?’” (Matzer 1998)

In time, the two largest comic book publishers would pen product placement deals of their own. In 2006, *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) reported that Marvel Entertainment’s Marvel Comics and Warner Brothers Entertainment’s DC Comics had signed product placement deals with such companies as General Motors, DaimlerChrysler and Nike (Steinberg 2006). As part of payment-for-placement deals tied to larger, more traditional ad buys, Marvel Comics and DC Comics agreed to prominently display products and brand logos throughout their publications, either by placing them into the main narratives as traditional product placements or creating separate product-specific comic books and characters. Before this model of payment emerged, placements were granted as occasional, free-of-charge, added-value incentive to marketing partners.¹

Marvel Comics Editor-in-Chief Joe Quesada responded to the WSJ article in his weekly interview series with Matt Brady of the entertainment website Newsarama:

[P]roduct placement isn’t really a change in the way that we artist do business since for the most part we’re always sticking stuff in the background anyway...the real world is finally looking at comics and considering us a medium that actually reached people and speaks to them. (Brady 2006a, para. 13, 20)

¹ A full account of the genesis of Marvel Comics’ product placement strategy at the time of the WSJ article, as well as a discussion of advertising in comic books in general, can be found in Appendix F- *Product Placement the Marvel Way: An Interview with Former Marvel Advertising Director Joe Maimone*.

While initially skeptical of the integration of branded materials into comics (Matzer 1998), DC Comics president Paul Levitz attributed the growing pervasiveness of the practice to advertisers responding to a change in consumer demographics: “[t]he culture has changed. Advertisers realized that comic books were delivering a significantly older audience: adults and college kids” (Steinberg 2006).

Paul Speaker, president of Shooting Gallery, articulated this realization on the part of advertising partners while discussing his collaboration with Chaos! Comics: “It targets our demographic and creates a point of difference for us at retail. It gets us into a whole new area—comic book shops” (Matzer 1998). However, not everyone has shown the same optimism toward the practice as the publishers themselves.

Point of Difference / Point of Distress

“The comic environment is designed to take you away from reality for a moment,” opined Chuck Rozanski, founder of Denver comics retailer Mile High Comics. “Here we are thrusting offensive marketing products from our world into this fantasy world” (Steinberg 2006).

Online comments accompanying Newsarama’s coverage of WSJ’s 2006 article range from tentatively optimistic to absolutely vitriolic (Brady 2006b). Some expressed an understanding of the practice as a positive business model while others lambasted it as a betrayal of trust between publisher and reader. “How soon until we’re reading Nabisco’s *Action Comics* or *The Amazing Spider-Man* by Coca-Cola?” asked one poster (cncoyles 2006); “As long as it’s unobtrusive, I don’t mind too much,” commented another (MichaelP 2006). These predominantly thin descriptors of consumer attitude raise the questions: what is the consumer attitude and response to product placements in comics and what lies below the surface of these brusque replies?

Product placement in comic books represents a new and exciting field of research, ripe for study by both academics and practitioners. With this developing channel through which to connect with consumers comes many questions regarding consumer reaction, interaction, and evaluation of such placements as well as the effectiveness and ethical understanding of the placements themselves.

Organization of Thesis

Chapter 2 presents definitions of product placement and comics, as well as a review of the current body of knowledge concerning the two. Chapter 3 details the methodology, including the research design and procedures used for recruiting group participants and interviewees, as well as the procedures used to conduct both interviews and group discussions. Chapter 4 reports this study's findings and Chapter 5 presents the conclusions, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Product placement has been discussed, debated, reviewed, and defined by a number of researchers and practitioners, with varying degrees of scholarship, accuracy, and humor. Similarly, the medium of comics has been the subject of much discussion within the arts and communication communities, although rarely studied as a legitimate advertising channel. The following is an examination and qualification of product placements, the medium of comics, and the practice of the former in the latter.

Product Placement

While Karrh (1998) suggested that the term “brand placement” be used in place of the more common “product placement” because of the practice’s emphasis on a brand rather than a particular product category, the terms are interchangeable for academic use (Balasubramanian, Karrh and Patwarhan 2006). Because “product placement” has enjoyed more widespread use in both scholarly and journalistic discussions, “product placement” will be the preferred term in this researcher’s study. Steertz (1987) was the first scholarly study to define product placement properly as “the inclusion of a brand name product, package, signage, or other trademark merchandise within a motion picture, television, show, or music video” (p. 22). This definition has been modified, refined, and adapted by researchers, scholars, and practitioners over the years to complexity of placement appearances and the increasing breadth of channel types, as well as to better reflect the scope of the studies in which the definition finds itself.

Since products may appear in a channel by accident or to simply increase the verisimilitude of a particular scene, not necessarily to influence consumer behavior, it is important when discussing the commercial practice of product placement to include a

dimension of compensation to any definition of the term (Karrh 1998; Newell et al. 2006). Balasubramanian (1994) defined product placement as, “a paid product message aimed at influencing movie (or television) audiences via the planned and unobtrusive entry of a branded product into a movie (or television program)” (p. 31). Product placement is not always unobtrusive, so the Balasubramanian (1994) definition can be too confining (Karrh 1998). Also, because product placement is finding its way into many forms of mass communications, it is important to craft a definition that does not exclude present or possible future product communication channels (Karrh 1998). Therefore, this study will use a modified version of that proposed by Newell et al. (2006), expanding it slightly to include the compensatory dimension: product placement is the compensated insertion of branded products or services into a marketing channel with the intent of influencing consumer attitude or behavior.

Just as with the development of the definition of the practice, much effort has been made to create a placement classification system based on their individual auditory, visual, and plot-integration properties. Shapiro (1993) delineated between visual (a brand or product is seen but not used), spoken (a brand or product is mentioned in dialog), used (a branded product is used by an character), and a placement that integrates all three previous types (a character uses and verbally mentions a particular branded product).

Russell (1998) and d’Astous and Séguin (1999) would further refine Shapiro’s (1993) typology. Russell (1998) proposed a three-dimensional framework based on auditory (script placement) and visual (screen placement) dimension and plot integration (plot placement). d’Astous and Séguin (1999) created a three-category

system based on appearance and demonstration of product benefits (implicit placement/integrated explicit placement), as well as one dubious category of non-integrated program sponsorship (non-integrated explicit), in which no placements appear in the body of the work.

Consumer Attitude and Behavior

Product placement is an attractive alternative to traditional advertising because it allows marketers the opportunity to reach consumers in a more organic and subtle manner and has been shown to actually affect consumer awareness, memory, attitudes, and behavior. Throughout the study and employment of product placements, researchers and practitioners have primarily utilized memory-based quantitative measures to gauge placement effectiveness, although quantitative attitudinal studies have increased in popularity amongst researchers (Balasubramanian, Karrh and Patwardhan 2006; Karrh 1995; Karrh, McKee and Pardun 2003). Empirical research concerning product placement in film, television, and video games suggests that placements can influence recall and recognition (d'Astous and Chartier 2000; Babin and Carder 1996; Brennan, Dubas and Babin 1999; Gupta and Lord 1998; Nelson 2002; Russell 2002; Schneider and Cornwell 2005; Steortz 1987) as well as attitude toward placement, channel, and brand (d'Astous and Chartier 2000; d'Astous and Séguin 1999; Gupta and Gould 1997; Gould, Gupta and Granber-Kräuter 2000; McKechnie and Zhou 2003; Nebenzahl and Secunda 1993; Nelson, Keum and Yaros 2004; Russell 2002).

Consumers have generally positive attitudes toward placed brands and products, especially when they already hold favorable attitudes toward advertising and product placement (Gupta and Gould 1997; Nebenzahl and Secunda 1993). Moreover, attitude

and beliefs seem to have a certain amount of influence over consumer behavior (Gould, et al. 2000; Morton and Friedman 2002; Nelson et al. 2004). Gould, Gupta and Granber-Kräuter (2002) found that film viewers with more favorable attitudes toward product placement in general were more likely to claim that they would purchase a brand that appeared in a film. Similarly, Nelson, Keum and Yaros (2004) reported that video game players who reported higher attitudes toward product placement also reported higher perceived influence of product placement on their purchase intentions. Morton and Freidman (2002) further refined the relationship between consumer attitudes and purchase behavior, supporting the link between positive consumer attitudes and purchase intent while adding that consumer attitudes toward how a brand is used and by whom can also have an impact on purchase behavior.

Product placement, it seems, can have a significant impact on individual consumer attitudes. These attitudes can be mediated by how product placement is implemented within a channel and be influential in influencing individual behavior. While the above empirical studies boast greater acceptability within the practitioner community, they often lack the ability to develop insights into consumer-generated themes and individual consumption decisions and habits (Balasubramanian et al. 2006). Understanding if and how strongly product placement affects consumer attitude, and in turn if and how strongly that attitude affects consumer behavior, is not the same as understanding how consumers came to hold those attitudes; what consumers feel and why they feel it has steadily gained the interest of researchers.

Consumer Attitude and Experience

“The use of qualitative research would be useful to try to understand better how consumers interpret (in a large sense) [product placements] in different contexts...to

explore what consumers get from this form of marketing communication...” (d’Astous and Séguin 1999, p 908). Indeed, an effort has been made to understand how consumers generate their attitudes and beliefs about product placement and how they interact and experience them.

Prior to conducting their quantitative study on consumer evaluations and recall of product placements, d’Astous and Chartier (2000) held in-depth interviews in order to produce a set of consumer-generated themes, terms, and descriptors. The researchers then used those findings to inform their main study research hypotheses. While not a strict qualitative consumer analysis, d’Astous and Chartier (2000) concluded that their preliminary qualitative study not only helped better develop their main study, but also added to the larger body of knowledge and understanding of the relationship between product placement and consumers.

Going further than d’Astous and Chartier’s (2000), DeLorme and Reid (1999) investigated consumers’ experiences and interpretations of product placement in film. The study utilized depth interviews and focus groups to illuminate consumer interpretations of product placement that could affect consumer attitudes and beliefs. The researchers suggested that all too often research focuses on what product placement *does to and* audience, when a more appropriate starting point should be how product placement *interacts with* an audience.

Much of DeLorme and Reid’s (1999) data suggested that attitudes toward product placement relied heavily on the age of the viewer. Older participants seemed to view product placements as a negative and unnatural intrusion into the viewing experience, which they believed should be free of manipulative marketing practices. Younger

participants were more inclined to view placed brands as interactive touchstones within a film, a point of shared experience between viewers that helped increase the reality of the scene, thus increasing the immediacy and enjoyment of the viewing experience. Since product placement is a new and fast growing area in the world of marketing, these findings indicate that general attitudes toward product placements could become more and more positive as each successive generation enters the marketplace.

DeLorme, Reid and Zimmer (1994) articulated three viewer-generated, film-specific dimensions to product placement, dimensions that involve the relationship between the viewer, the placements, and the narrative itself. The three dimensions, which would be bolstered by the findings of DeLorme and Reid (1999), were placements as modifiers of realism, placements as connection to the familiar and placements as character identification aides.

In addition to strengthening the results of DeLorme et al. (1994), DeLorme and Reid (1999) found that viewers can also experience placements through four consumption-specific dimensions: as modifiers of purchase behavior; markers for identity and aspirations; markers of change; and symbols of shared experience and belonging. These dimensions express the relationship between the viewer, the placements, and a larger cultural/consumption world-view; placements act not only as intra-narrative signifiers and narrative aides, but also as extra-narrative cultural cues and behavior modifiers, the meanings of which depend on the consumer's individual experiences and expectations of the channel, brand, and the world around them.

Comics and Comic Books

Comics critics and theorists have debated the definition of the medium of comics since illustrator, writer, instructor, and theorist Will Eisner's seminal work *Comics and*

Sequential Art (1985). Eisner used the terms “comics” and “sequential art” interchangeably, leading to a general agreement among theorists that Eisner’s definition of comics is, simply, “sequential art” (McCloud 1993; Meskin 2007). Although well respected, Eisner’s definition is far too ambiguous for academic discussion in that it subjectively qualifies all comics as art while never proposing a working framework other than the subjective art be sequential. Comics creator and theorist Scott McCloud attempted to remedy both subjectivity and ambiguity by proposing his own definition of comics as, “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (1993, p 9). Hayman and Pratt (2005) excised McCloud’s extra-narrative function of eliciting a subjective aesthetic response by defining comics in a more logic formula manner: “x is a comic iff x is a sequence of discrete, juxtaposed pictures that comprise a narrative, either in their own right or when combined with text” (p. 423).

While Meskin (2007) argues that these definitions are unsatisfactory because of their ahistorical nature and reliance on a false belief that comics are inherently sequential and narrative, they do provide nominal definitions of comics suitable for use in research. Because my study concerns comics as a means to convey intra-narrative and extra-narrative messages to a consumer, a combination of the McCloud (1993) and the Hayman and Pratt (2005) definitions is agreeable. Therefore, comics are a juxtaposed sequence of images, either in their own right or when combined with text, that comprise a narrative, intended to convey information and/or to produce a response in the viewer.

Comics are a low definition, cool medium, meaning that they require a high degree of participation on the part of the reader (McLuhan 1964); acquisition of meaning is less demanding than text because of the inclusion of illustrations, but still requires a high degree of experience on the part of the reader to decipher meaning between images, text, panel arrangement, and page layout. This interaction between reader and medium in order to create temporal and spatial meaning and relationships, called completion (McLuhan 1964) or closure (McCloud 1993), is integral to most forms of mass media, although usually done automatically and unconsciously by participants: black-and-white photographs printed in magazines and in newspapers are composed of a fragmented pattern of tiny black ink splotches that the viewer's mind interprets as a single, cohesive image; film, while seemingly a continuous stream of movement, is closure at 24 frames-a-second, with the viewer's brain compiling the distinct and separate images into a field of continuous motion; CRT televisions ask even more from the viewer, creating a continuous image out of a single dot, which moves across the screen thousands of times a second (McCloud 1993).

Comics, however, ask for much more conscious interaction; readers are invited to participate in the creation of sound, movement, depth, weight and time, controlling these varying dimensions of reality through a willing partnership with the page; the experiences of the characters on the page are shared with the reader, creating a common reality of interaction (Eisner 1985, 1996; McCloud 1993; McLuhan 1964).

Comics Consumers as Advertising Audience

Although comics professionals have asserted that the average comic book readership has skewed older and older over the past twenty years, now ranging from mid-teens to mid-thirties (Appendix F; Bierbaum 1987; Brown 1997; Steinberg 2006),

research of comic book readers and advertising the channel has been limited to consumers eighteen years of age and younger.

Lindquist (1979) reported on the attitudes of third through sixth graders toward advertising on television and radio and in comic books and children's magazines. Lindquist (1979) suggested that although advertisements in comic books were liked more than radio and television advertisements and had more of a persuasive effect on purchase decision than advertisements found in children's magazines, children found advertisements in comic books less truthful than advertising found on/in television, radio and children's magazines.

Lindquist (1979) also suggested that children's overall attitudes toward advertising in all of the four channels decreased with age, with attitudes of advertisements in comic books showing the greatest negative shift. The study speculates that younger children were more likely to have more positive attitudes toward printed channels and hardly discriminated between children's magazines and comic books, giving them both fairly positive attitude rankings compared to advertisements in radio and television. Children in the fourth through six grades, however, might have been increasingly less likely to associate comic books with print magazines and more with television, which was viewed most negatively across grades. While a follow-up study (Lindquist and Belonax 1980) would question the reliability of Lindquist's (1979) method, it remains one of the only widely available examinations of consumer attitudes toward advertising in comic books.

Simmons Market Research Bureau, Inc. conducted a large-scale study of Marvel Comics readers in 1984 on behalf of the publisher. Respondents to a questionnaire,

inserted into three different titles published the same month, received three incentive comic books. The incentive comic books contained test advertisements that were evaluated through telephone interviews. The phone-interviews revealed that unaided recall of advertisements appearing in the incentive comics ranged from 3% for respondents who had not yet been exposed to any of the test advertisements to 11% for respondents who had been exposed to each group of advertisements contained in all three incentive comic books; with aided recall calculated into the results, the average recall rates ranged from 15% for respondents with zero exposures to 32% for respondents with exposure to all three incentive comics (p. 33-34).

Although 32% of questionnaire respondents were nineteen years of age or older, only those six to eighteen years of age, 63% of respondents, were selected to participate in the phone-interview portion of the study (Simmons 1984, p. 5). Just as in Lindquist (1979), the primary subjects of Simmons (1984) are under the age of eighteen, only a subsection of the comics industry's current target market.

The Sponsored Page

During the 1940's, one-page comics featuring Dasheill Hammet's fictional detective Sam Spade appeared in comic books such as *Real Fact Comics*, *Wonder Woman*, and *The Marvel Family* as advertisements for both Wildroot Cream-Oil hair tonic and Spade's own CBS radio show (Dunning 1998; Michigan State University 1998). Each featured the gumshoe foiling an evil deed with a clever and non-recommended use of the branded hair cream (fig. 1). Rather than being simple, full-page spreads endorsing a particular brand, these advertisements utilized the language and conventions of comics to engage the reader. These tie-in comics owed a great deal to the radio soap operas of the time, programs designed by detergent companies

that blended entertainment content and commercial message (Stern 1991), echoing their brand message-as-content strategy.

The 1970s saw a resurgence of these one-page advertisements. Early in the decade, Flash Gordon appeared in a series of one-page comics that ran in comic books, magazines, and newspapers (Schultz 2009). Stylistically similar to the character's own long-running Sunday paper comic strip, Gordon, like Spade and his Wildroot Cream-Oil, would engage in a convoluted plot in which he would emphatically mention and use Union Carbide plastics, which inexplicably found their way to the distant planet of Mongo. The one-page advertisement comic "Batman and the Mummy" (fig. 2), first appearing in 1975, kicked off Continental Baking Company's five-year, tongue-in-cheek campaign for its Twinkie and Hostess Fruit Pie brands. These advertisements appropriated the Spade Wildroot/CBS campaign's format whereby popular DC Comics and Marvel Comics superheroes thwarted imbecilic villains' plans with judicious use of Continental Baking Company pastries (Robare 2008). While the heroes were well known and often the stars of their own comics, the villain of each advertisement was always created specifically for the advertisements, never to be seen again, presumably because neither DC Comics nor Marvel Comics wanted to denigrate the viability of any of their existing villains by having them fall victim to non-perishable confections.

These campaigns were clearly marked as advertisements and functioned primarily as character endorsements, whereby the character contains and transfers a certain cultural relevance and cachet to an associated brand, which is then transferred to the consumer of the brand (McCracken 1989). However, while the advertisements are

separate from the actual narrative of the comic book, they can be viewed as the first tentative toes dipped into the murky waters of embedded brand messages. Within this framework of message-as-content, the lines between entertainment and advertising were beginning to blur; comics characters could exist within the same reality as real-life brands, interacting with them on the printed four-color page in hopes of influencing consumer attitudes or behavior. Mirroring the long-standing comic book tradition of colliding alternate universes, real-life brands had invaded comic books, and would eventually escape their “Advertisement”-labeled confines and find their way into the actual narrative in the form of product placements.

Product Placement in Comic Books

Just as in other channels, brands and products can appear in comic books as props, signage, dialog cues, etc., and can be placed as purely visual background instances or more fully integrated into the plot. They can be can be implicit: a passive display within the narrative whereby the product or brand is not overtly addressed and attributes or benefits are not expressed. Conversely, they can be explicit: a display within the narrative whereby the product or brand is overtly addressed and attributes and benefits are expressed (d’Astous and Séguin 1999).

Both implicit and explicit placements can enter a comic in two ways, either incorporated as creative-placements by the writer and/or illustrator as part of the original dialog and/or artwork or added later in the production process as an editorial-placement, whereby brand elements are inserted into completed work. Following an editorial directive to place Proctor and Gamble’s Old Spice brand into issue No. 10 of Marvel Comics’ *Irredeemable Ant-Man* (2007), writer Robert Kirkman and illustrators Phil

Hester and Ande Parks incorporated implicit placements of Old Spice brand signage and product-props into their story (fig. 3). Explained Hester:

The product placement was required, but we took it upon ourselves to do it on every page as a laugh. And it is on every page... we tried to be funny and semi-subversive about it, so it wasn't so bad. Then I think about the many artists who spend their entire careers working in advertising and thank my lucky stars.

While the placements in *Irredeemable Ant-Man* No. 10 (Kirkman, Hester and Parks 2007) were editorially mandated, they were implemented by the creative team, categorizing them as creative-placements. Editorial-placements, on the other hand, are placed after the primary scripting and artwork is completed, with or without the knowledge of the work's creative team, as demonstrated in a panel from issue No. 4 of Marvel Comics' *X-Men: The 198* (Hine, Muniz and Conrad/Glapion 2006). The action of the panel takes place inside a graffitied bathroom stall; a prominent illustrated version of a logo-decal for Nike's Nike6.0 brand can clearly be seen (fig. 4). "The Nike sticker wasn't there in the inked art that I saw," said writer David Hine, "so it may have been inserted at production stage" (Johnston 2006).

The process by which these implicit editorial-placements can enter a comic book is best illustrated by examining the panel of *New X-Men* No. 20 (Kyle, Yost, Brooks 2006) provided to *Wall Street Journal* by Marvel Comics (Steinberg 2006). Although a Nike branded t-shirt is highly visible in the panel accompanying the article (fig. 5), the particular placement is omitted in the final printed version of the panel. In the printed version of the page, a narrative caption box is placed over the character's chest, eliminating it as a viable placement space (fig. 6). Instead, a character in a subsequent

panel wears a Nike branded shirt, sporting the same Nike6.0 emblem that appeared in issue No.4 of *X-Men: The 198* (Hine et al. 2006). Whether panel given to *Wall Street Journal* was merely a theoretical example of a placement, never meant to represent the final placement, or a preliminary placement that was preempted by a creative layout decision, it stands as an illuminating instance of the adaptability of editorial-placements.

Other such editorial-placements have found their way into various Marvel Comics publications, such as *X-Factor* No. 24 (David, Raimondi, DeLandro and Hennessy 2007), *Fantastic Four* No. 566 (Millar, Hitch and Currie 2008), and *Punisher War Journal* No. 18 (Fraction and Chaykin 2008). While the placements in all three publications act as signage, prominently displaying brand logos, the placement appearing in *Punisher War Journal* No. 18 (Fraction and Chaykin 2008) goes a step further and includes a call-to-action. The placement for the video game Guitar Hero III Mobile prompts readers to text-message the word "SHRED" to a specific number (fig. 7). A reply text is sent to the reader/participant that includes a hyperlink to Hands-On Mobile, an online mobile gaming retail store carrying Guitar Hero III Mobile.

General Motors Corp.'s Pontiac Solstice GXP found its way into the DC Comics publishing universe by way of the comic book *Rush City* (Dixon and Green 2006). *Rush City* and the comic book's protagonist, Diego Zhao, were created specifically to feature the Solstice GXP, which is driven by the main character throughout the 6-issue mini-series (fig. 8). However, an effort was made to differentiate the partnership from simple sponsorship. "They made this character part of their DC universe, not just a custom comic, but this is going to stand next to Batman," said Dino Bernacchi, Pontiac's advertising manager (Stringer 2006). In *Rush City*, not only is the branded product

clearly featured, but so too are its benefits; it is well integrated into the narrative, much like DC Comics' other famous car, the Batmobile. Pontiac is not listed on the cover as the sponsor of the book, or even verbally mentioned throughout the mini-series; instead its product appears only as a clearly branded real-world product within the pages.

However, one must be careful to not list every instance of a real-life brand in a comic book as a compensated placement. Uncompensated placements can appear in comic books because of a writer or artist's affinity toward a brand or product or to increase the realism of the narrative. Brian Wood and Ryan Kelly's series *Local* (2008) relies heavily on its real world locations, going as far as to painstakingly reproduce branded signage and items. *Catwoman* scribe Will Pfeifer included a particular brand of shoe in the plot of *Catwoman* No.73 (Pfeifer, Lopez and Lopez 2008) because of his personal affinity toward the brand. The titular character steals, and later wears, shoes that bear a considerable likeness to Chuck Taylor All Star Flames, a particular style of the famous high-top sneakers (fig. 9). Although Converse, the manufacture of shoes, is listed as one of DC Comics' marketing partners, writer Pfeifer is quick to distance the appearance from a commercial endeavor:

[T]he Converse theft was just something I stuck in the script. As a 20-plus-year wearer of Converse All-Stars, it was something I put in for my own pleasure. I didn't even know DC had that marketing agreement (personal communication, March 11, 2009).

While *Catwoman* artists David Lopez and Alvaro Lopez obscured the Converse logo enough to make its appearance seem less of a direct placement and more an homage to a beloved brand, illustrator Stefano Caselli included software giant Cisco Systems, Inc's corporate and WebEx communications service logos into the final page of *Secret Warriors* No. 3 (Bendis, Hickman and Caselli 2009), prompting writer

Jonathan Hickman to write in a verbal mention of the service on the preceding page (fig. 10); although Cisco is an advertising partner of Marvel Comics, and even employs one of Marvel Comics' artists to illustrate its own Cisco-branded online comic (Swisher 2009), Hickman, who is known to fill his scripts with a great deal of realistic details, insisted that the placement was an artistic decision to add greater realism to the story and not tied to any commercial agreement (personal communication, April 13, 2009).

Product placement also represents a unique opportunity not afforded to other forms of advertisement found within comic books: posterity in popular digital and trade paperback collected volumes. While many comics enthusiasts tend to file away their single-issue comic books, and by extension the traditional advertisements and placements found in their pages, as parts of personal collections, the recent rise in availability of trade paperbacks and digital collections has created a large consumer group who would rather skip monthly purchases of individual issues in favor of collected storylines. This "waiting for the trade", as it is called, presents a dilemma for advertisers and publishers: while advertisers spend a great deal of money to run full-page advertisements in printed monthly comic books, those pages are lost when those monthlies are collected into trades or online collections. Collection editors simply toss out those pages formally dedicated to traditional ads; the advertiser's dollars stop at the monthly printed level. However, embedded marketing material, such as product placements, can remain intact throughout the life of the publication, from monthly comic, to trade paperback, to digital comic. While other, more traditional advertisement, found in *New X-Men* No. 20 (Kyle, Yost and Brooks 2006) are absent in the collected volume

of the multi-issue storyline (Kyle, Yost, Brooks and Pelletier 2006), the Nike6.0 placement (fig. 5) remains intact.

Product placement in comics is just as versatile and varied as in any other channel. It can be subtle and inconsequential to the narrative or an explicit and integral component of the story; placements can be integrated into the art and dialog early in the production stages or added opportunistically in the final stages of publishing by editors and marketers. How consumers experience and interact with such an integrated marketing strategy is the focus of this study.

Exploratory Research Questions

This study seeks to explore the relationships between product placement, comic books, and comic book readers. As such, the exploratory research questions that guided the development of the research method and analysis are as follows:

- R1: What are the general attitudes of readers toward advertisements in comic books?
- R2: What are the semantics used by readers when they encounter, think about or discuss product placement in comic books?
- R3: What are the attitudes of readers toward product placement in comic books?

ADVERTISEMENT

BANDITS BOMBED BY BOTTLES!

DASHIELL HAMMETT'S
Adventures of
SAM SPADE

LISTEN TO: "The Adventures of Sam Spade" every Sunday evening on your Columbia (CBS) station. See radio listing in your local newspaper.

WHERE DO WE GET WITH ALL THIS WILDROOT CREAM-OIL...HEY, LISTEN!

THE BANDITS ARE REPORTED RACING TOWARD THE BORDER POLICE HORN MOTORISTS TO CLEAR HIGHWAY #1 FOR MOTORCYCLES PURSUING THE BANDIT CAR.

THERE'S HIGHWAY #1 AND THERE'S A CAR WITH MOTORCYCLES ABOUT A MILE BEHIND...

NOW IF THEY JUST HAD A BLOWOUT! THAT WOULD STOP 'EM!

WELL, LET'S GIVE 'EM A BLOWOUT! FLY OVER THE ROAD AHEAD OF 'EM, NITCH... LET'S OPEN THESE CASES OF WILDROOT CREAM-OIL

CREAM-OIL AWAY!

WHY SO GLUM, SAM? THOSE GLASS BOTTLES STOPPED 'EM.

FOOR, SAM...

YEAH! BUT THEY WERE FULL OF WILDROOT CREAM-OIL. THINK OF ALL THE GUYS WHO WON'T HAVE HANDSOME, WELL-ORDERED HAIR... JUST BECAUSE OF ME!

SAM SPADE ASKS:
CAN YOUR SCALP PASS THE FINGERNAIL TEST?

TRY IT! SCRATCH YOUR HEAD. IF YOU FIND SIGNS OF DRYNESS AND LOOSE, UGLY DANDRUFF YOU NEED WILDROOT CREAM-OIL HAIR TONIC. NON-ALCOHOLIC...CONTAINS SOOTHING LANKLIN

EFFIE SAYS:
SMART GIRLS USE WILDROOT CREAM-OIL FOR QUICK GROOMING AND FOR RELIEVING DRYNESS BETWEEN PERMANENTS. MOTHERS FIND IT WONDERFUL FOR TRAINING CHILDREN'S HAIR.

WILDROOT CREAM-OIL
Hair Tonic
10-10-10 LABEL

Figure 1- Dashiell Hammett's Adventures of Sam Spade "Bandits Bombed by Bottles" *Wonder Woman*, No. 36 (July/Aug. 1949) and in *Whiz Comics*, No. 115 (Nov. 1949); Wildroot Cream-Oil hair tonic full page ad.



Figure 2- "Batman and the Mummy" 1st Issue Special, No. 1 (Apr. 1975); Hostess Twinkies full page ad.



Figure 3- *The Irredeemable Ant-Man*, No. 10 (Sep. 2007), p. 24, panel 1; featuring Old Spice Hydro Red Zone Body Wash; copyright 2007 Marvel Characters, Inc.



Figure 4- *X-Men: The 190*, No. 4 (June 2006), p. 14, panel 3; Featuring Nike 6.0 brand logo; copyright 2006 Marvel Characters, Inc.



Figure 5- Panel of *New X-Men* provided to *Wall Street Journal* ; featuring Nike Swoosh logo; copyright 2006 Marvel Characters, Inc.



Figure 6- *New X-Men*, No. 20 (Jan. 2006), p. 10, panels 2-5; featuring Nike 6.0 brand logo; copyright 2006 Marvel Characters, Inc.



Figure 7- *Punisher War Journal*, No. 18 (Vol. 2; June 2008), p. 5, panel 1; featuring Guitar Hero III Mobile brand logo; copyright 2008 Marvel Characters, Inc.



Figure 8- *Rush City*, No. 1 (Sep. 2006), p. 26, panel 3-7; featuring General Motors Corp. Pontiac Solstice GXP; copyright 2006 DC Comics



Figure 9- *Catwoman* No. 73 (Vol. 3; Jan. 2008), p. 29, panel 1; featuring Converse Chuck Taylor All Star Flames; copyright 2008 DC Comics

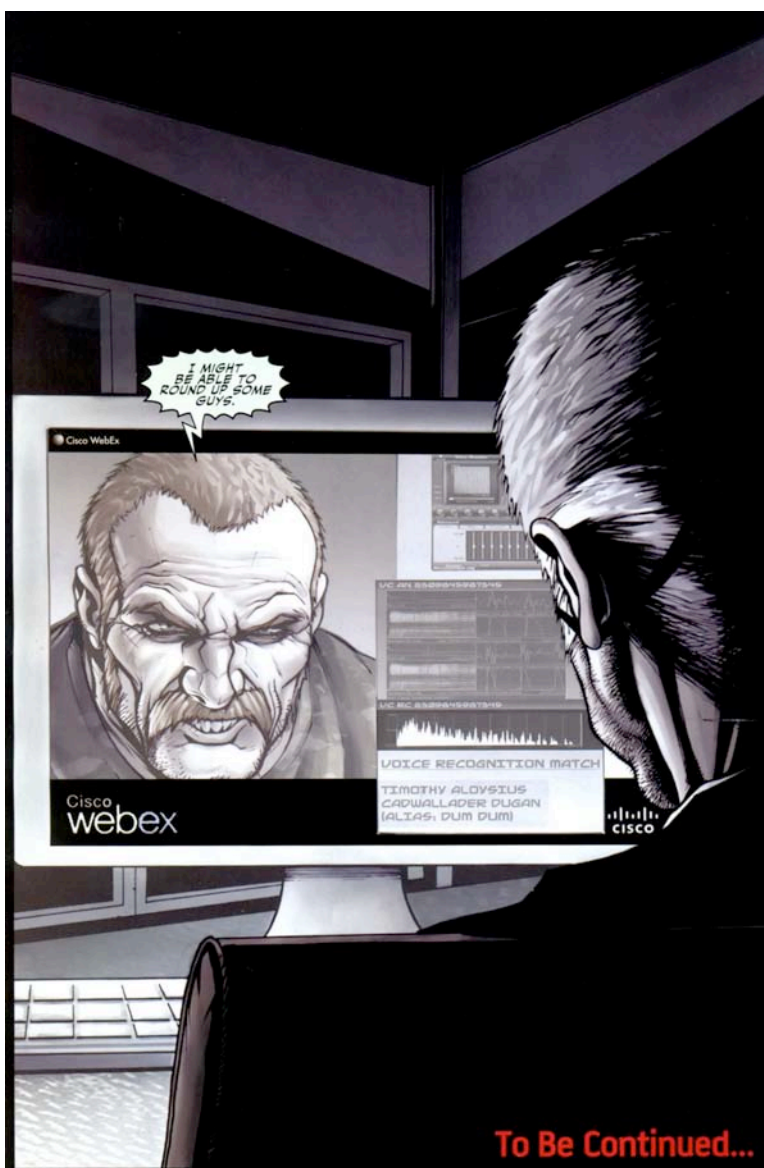


Figure 10- *Secret Warriors* No. 3 (June 2009), p. 32; featuring Cisco Systems, Inc WebEx application; copyright 2009 Marvel Characters, Inc.

CHAPTER 3 METHOD

The study of product placement has increased steadily since Steertz (1987) first put recall results to paper and brought the practice into the realm of serious academic inquiry. Product placement in movies, television programs, video games, books, and music has been studied and discussed, yet the lack of information regarding any advertising strategies, product placement or otherwise, in comics runs like an abyss through the collected body of knowledge.

Research Design

Grounded theory guided the development of this study, from the adoption of an initial theoretical framework to the collection and analysis of data. By combining several self-contained methods, greater credibility was afforded to this study (DeLorme and Reid 1999; Lincoln and Guba 1985). Focus groups allowed a moderator to prompt discussion between participants in a relaxed and conversational atmosphere in order to observe participant interactions and attitudes; in-depth interviews produce detailed, personal first-person accounts of experience; and as an added layer of comparison, member checking allowed participants the opportunity to access data collected and assess the overall interpretations of the researcher and his findings.

Qualitative Research

This study examines and explores consumer attitudes and perceptions in an area where no tangible understanding exists. The goal was to “develop a better understanding of *why* individuals act as they do rather than developing numeric descriptions of *what* people do” (Davis 1997, p. 195, emphasis in original). The highly exploratory nature of this study requires a theoretical framework and method that are

both malleable enough to accommodate previously unknown understandings and credible enough to withstand academic scrutiny. Qualitative methods, utilized within a framework of grounded theory, allow just that.

The grounded theory approach allows the researcher to synthesize new hypotheses and understandings through the data collected and the process of collection rather than through the testing of preconceived theoretical frameworks (Corbin and Strauss 1990). A specific understanding is *developed*, rather than *tested*, through this approach. This process is especially advantageous in cases where little is known or understood about a particular subject, allowing the researcher to develop an understanding based on concepts and categories existing within the data itself. In order for grounded theory to be tenable, the method of data collection must create a robust source of potential information.

The qualitative approach generates a “thick” understanding of the area in question and produces data ripe with specific, deep, and experiential participant-generated insights (Denzin 1989, p. 83). This study provides a contextual understanding of consumers’ attitudes and perceptions of product placement in comics; that is, an understanding developed through, “the [consumer’s] own frame of reference” (Bogdan and Taylor 1975, p. 2).

Focus Groups and In-Depth Interviews

Focus groups are planned group interviews in which a moderator prompts discussion between homogenous participants in order to observe their interactions and attitudes (Davis 1997). Focus groups allow participants the opportunity to “expand on and refine their own opinions” (Davis 1997, p. 198) in a setting that not only elicits active response, but also may present differing viewpoints that allow the participants to

critically analyze their own responses in a positive manner. Participants are given the opportunity to discuss an area of interest in a social and active environment.

In-depth, one-on-one interviews represent another form of planned and open interaction between an interviewer and a respondent. This “free-flowing, yet structured, conversation between the interviewer and the respondent” (Davis 1997, p. 197) is less structured than a group discussion, but focused nonetheless. Where a focus group discussion may allow participants to engage in lively debate over a given topic, sharing ideas and insights, a personal interview allows for a respondent to give spontaneous and unmediated responses.

According to Davis (1997), at least two focus groups are recommended, while Morgan (1988) states that three or four groups are enough for a researcher to reach theoretical saturation. Theoretical saturation is the point at which the responses from group to group become equivalent enough that no new data can be ascertained from additional observation (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Once a researcher can confidently estimate the responses from the current participants using previous focus group responses, theoretical saturation has occurred and no more focus groups are needed. Although the point of theoretical saturation is not fixed at the beginning of the study, it is important to first determine the initial number of groups in order to determine time limits on group sessions, number of participants, and time allocated per area of discussion. This study originally estimated the need for at least three group sessions, although after two sessions, as well as the concurrent depth-interviews, theoretical saturation seemed to be drawing near. After the third group session, it was decided that the study had achieved theoretical saturation and no more groups were added. Analysis of the

concurrent depth-interviews also revealed strong similarities in themes and attitudes across participants.

Because the purpose of the in-depth interviews conducted for this study was to create a pool of individual and personal insights into attitude and behavior, theoretical saturation did not have as large an impact on the planned number of interviews. Following Davis' (1997) recommendation of interview development, six to nine interviews were planned. At the conclusion of the data collection phase, a total of seven depth-interviews were conducted and judged as producing a sufficient quantity of data.

Source and Selection of Participants

The selection of group and interview participants is crucial to obtaining useful and reliable data. Because this method functions to uncover certain aspects and relationships between a specific group of participants and the subject of discussion, generalizability is not an issue (Morgan 1988; Krueger 1988). It is not the aim of this research to make inferences about a large, total population using data collected, but rather to understand the workings of a specific subgroup. Therefore, the selection of participants was based on their relevance to and relationship with the area of study. Regarding focus group participants, the goal is "homogeneity in background" (Morgan 1988, p. 46) and lifestyle, creating an atmosphere where the participants can feel comfortable in a group of like-experienced people.

Focus group and interview participants were recruited from local comic book specialty stores to ensure maximum probability that prospective participants were indeed interested in and consumers of comic books. In order to recruit participants, the researcher approached customers of the comic book store in a casual manner while they browsed the store; after light conversation, during which the researcher

ascertained the customer's interest in comics and general reading and purchasing habits, the customer was invited to participate in the study. Customers who agreed to participate were given approved consent forms (Appendix C) and assigned to a discussion group or interview session based on their availability. Because the purpose of the research is to uncover specific and unrehearsed attitudes toward product placement in comics, participants were told that the purpose of study was "trends in comics and the comics industry" in order to keep prepared responses to the specific research topic to a minimum.

Data Collection

During both focus groups and in-depth interviews, a pre-planned moderator or interview guide was used to elicit responses. These printed guides provide a structured visual map for the moderator or interviewer to ensure a logical flow of discussion and as a way for other key members of the research team to judge the acceptability and clarity of the proposed method (Davis 1997). This study's focus group discussion guide (Appendix A) and the interview guide (Appendix B) were developed in partnership with the researcher's research committee and pre-tested using employees at a local comic book store. Notes and suggestions from both groups were utilized in the revision and completion of both guides.

Focus groups were conducted at a local comic book specialty store, and in-depth interviews were conducted at a time and location convenient to the interviewee, such as a quiet coffee shop or library close to the interviewee's home or work. Each focus group began with ten to fifteen minutes of unmediated interaction during which participants were given food and allowed to freely mingle. After this time, moderator began to follow the script of the moderator's guide with a reiteration of the nature of the

study, a review and collection the signed consent forms (Appendix C) and a review discussion guidelines. While the moderator's guide contained a set order of questioning and prompts, the moderator was allowed to diverge from the guide in order to better facilitate discussion; however, each session did consist of a discussion of what led each participant to reading comics as a form of entertainment, a discussion of each participant's general likes and dislikes in publishers, creative teams, storylines, production values, etc., and how those preferences affected his purchasing decisions, and each participant being given a copy of *The Irredeemable Ant-Man* No. 10 (Kirkman et al. 2007) and time during the session to read the comic book.

Following a brief review of the comic book, during which participants discussed the merits of the story and art, the moderator prompted discussion of non-narrative elements of the book such as editorial content, production quality, and advertising content. The participants were then told that the particular issue of *The Irredeemable Ant-Man* was chosen because it contained product placements on nearly every page and were informed that product placement was main subject of the study and allowed to discuss the comic book in the context of product placement. Participants were then exposed to visual stimuli consisting of varying instances of brand appearances in comic books. After each example was viewed and discussed, participants were encouraged to engage in an open discussion concerning their opinions and attitudes toward the individual examples and product placement in comics as a whole.

Individual depth interviews were similarly structured, with the interviewer consulting an interview guide (Appendix B) in the review and collection of the consent form and review of the general guidelines of the interview. Unlike the focus group

discussions during which the moderator acted as a facilitator to participant discussion and interaction, interviews were conducted in a more conversational manner, with the interview guide serving as reminder of discussion points rather than a structured agenda. Each interview began with a casual discussion about comics and its place in pop culture as well as the place it held in the worldview of the interviewee and interviewer. The interviewee would then be given time to read and discuss *The Irredeemable Ant-Man* No. 10 (Kirkman et al. 2007). Similar to the structure of the focus groups, discussion of narrative and non-narrative elements followed, as well as the review and discussion of brand appearances in various works.

Data Analysis

Focus group and interview sessions were audio recorded and transcribed for review and analysis. Transcripts were compared to notes taken by the researcher during sessions and the original audio recordings in order to produce accurate and detailed participant accounts of personal experience. These accounts were analyzed utilizing a three-step coding system of open, axial, and selective coding (Corbin and Strauss 1990).

During open coding, transcripts were analyzed in order to identify shared experiences and emerging themes. These instances of similar participant expression were coded and grouped together to reflect emerging narrative and non-narrative themes. Next, these theme-specific groupings were axial coded in order to create specific categories and sub-categories. Individual and shared group accounts collected under general theme headings were resorted to reflect their level of relationship to one another; categories and sub-categories were also compared and contrasted across theme and category headings in order to develop insights into cross-category

relationships. Finally, individual responses studied line by line in order to identify specific words and phrases that were deemed relevant to strengthening, refining, and articulating these emerging themes, categories, and sub-categories. This selective coding, as well as the previous axial and open coding techniques, provided the basis of the overall analysis discussed in Chapter 4.

Visual Stimuli

Visual stimuli were used in the form of printed comic books and reproductions of comic book pages containing recognizable brand appearances. Because consumers have no way to distinguish between paid and non-paid product placements and could therefore find the distinction non-existent in the formation of attitudes and understanding, the researcher made no distinction between commercial and non-commercial placements when choosing visual stimuli. However, the researcher did confirm the provenience of each brand or product appearance, through existing interviews or personal correspondence with creative and editorial teams. Comic books containing placements and enlarged reproduction of specific comic book pages containing placements were used throughout focus group sessions and in-depth interviews to spur discussion and debate.

Visual stimuli consisted of the following works: *Secret Warriors* No. 3 (Bendis et al 2009); *X-Factor* No. 24 (David et al. 2007); *Rush City* No. 1 (Dixon and Green 2006); *Punisher War Journal* (Vol. 2) No. 18 (Fraction and Chaykin 2008); *The Irredeemable Ant-Man* No. 10 (Kirkman et al. 2007); *Fantastic Four* No. 566 (Millar et al. 2008); *Catwoman* (Vol. 3) No. 73 (Pfeifer et al. 2008); and *Local* (Wood and Kelly 2008).

Member Checking

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), member checking “is the most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (p. 314). Member checking is the formal or informal process by which participants of a study are allowed to review collected data for the purpose of correcting errors of fact, challenging or supporting researcher interpretations, and allowing for the addition of respondent insights. Participants of the focus group and one-on-one discussions were encouraged to review summarized group and in-depth interview sessions, either in person or through email correspondence, in order to stimulate additional insights and to ascertain the validity of researcher-generated data points; eight participants chose to take part in this process, generally concurring with responses and conclusions. While participants of the member checking process were sympathetic to opinions and attitudes that conflicted with their own, participants primarily gravitated toward transcribed responses that seemed to validate their own original responses and, in the case of group discussion participants, seemed encouraged that their attitudes were shared by participants outside of their own discussion group.

CHAPTER 4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The three focus groups and seven individual interviews consisted of 17 men between the ages of 19-39, each of whom identified himself as an active comics reader and purchaser. Although women were invited to participate in both the focus groups and interviews, and indeed signed up for both, none ultimately participated for reasons unknown to the researcher. During the transcription phase of the study, participants' names were replaced with numbers, 1-17, with 1-10 representing focus group participants in the order that they first spoke and 11-17 representing individual interviewees.

While the main subject of this study is product placement in comic books, participants were extremely vocal in their opinions of traditional advertisements as well. Because of the current lack of research concerning even traditional advertising in comics and the level at which participants were interested in discussing the topic, the first research question gained more importance to the study than was originally predicted. Section I of this chapter addresses the first research question (R1) with an analysis of responses concerning general attitudes toward advertising in comic books, as well as providing semantics used by participants when discussing product placement (R2) and general attitudes toward product placement in comics (R3); Section II provides a more detailed analysis of the themes and subthemes that help shape participants' language (R2) and attitudes (R3) toward product placement.

General Attitudes Toward Advertising and Product Placement

Participants of all the discussion groups, as well as four interviewees, shared the opinion of traditional full-page advertisements in comic books as a nuisance and an

impediment to the reading experience, with only two discussion group participants and one interviewee being able to recall any specific advertisements or brands beyond general categories such as cars, video games, snack foods and collectible toys. Two discussion group participants cited their own inability to recall specific advertisers or advertisements as an example of the ineffectiveness of advertisements in comic books. Participants considered these advertisements just another piece of the “clutter” of everyday marketing material permeating other communications channels, such as television and radio. Advertisements in comic books are to be “skipped,” “ignored,” “power flipped past,” and “passed over” as “filler pages” in the opinions of participants. One focus group participant even cited full-page advertisements as “a reason to buy trades,” referring to trade paperbacks, which omit the full-page traditional advertisements found in the original publications.

Participants expressed their annoyance with the amount of advertisements in comic books. “Sometimes you notice that there are more advertisement pages than comic book pages. I don’t think you want to frustrate the consumer like that,” noted one participant. All participants shared the opinion that narrative content should outweigh advertising content, with each publisher, such as Marvel Comics, being mindful that it “should never become an advertising company. They’re a comic company, that should be first and foremost.”

Advertisements that had a tangible connection to the medium fared slightly better than those that did not: participants in all three focus groups routinely mentioned America’s Milk Processor’s *Got Milk?* advertisements featuring comic characters as being acceptable and memorable; advertisements for Universal Studios theme park

Islands of Adventure, which features Marvel Comics characters and character-based rides, were also thought to be appropriate. Two participants even lamented the decrease in advertisements that featured comic characters. House ads, self-promotional advertisements featuring upcoming works by the publisher, were seen as informational and, on occasion, entertaining. House ads that “broke the fourth wall” by featuring characters that directly address the reader or comment on, rather than simply announce, an upcoming publication or storyline, were said to be more effective in attracting and holding the attention of the reader because they were entertaining and fun. However, these types of advertisements were still seen as somewhat of an interruption if placed within the body of the story rather than the back of the comic book or the inside of the front or back covers.

Participants of one focus group session considered themselves, and consumers in general, immune to the persuasive powers of advertisements, product placements included, in comic books. One interviewee shared his view on the low level of susceptibility of the average comic book reader: “The reader, because they see Nike or something used in a *Spider-Man* issue, it doesn’t mean that they’re going to go out the next day and think about Nike, and then think, ‘You know, I think I need a new pair of Nike shoes.’ It just doesn’t work that way.” Across focus groups and interviews, participants rarely distinguished between compensated placements and non-compensated brand appearances. Although they judged each brand appearance presented during the course of the study individually according to its level of prominence and integration, participants believed that most appearances were financially compensated.

With the exception of participants 11 and 12, initial discussion of product placement in comics was overwhelmingly negative. One focus group participant derisively referred to product placement as a “subliminal” practice, while another continuously used the term “scary” throughout the discussion. Others saw it as a way for advertisers to “sneak” or “slip” their messages into the content of comics, a way to “trick” readers. Participant 4 dismissed the notion that publishers were trying to subliminally influence readers, but called the practice “whorish,” suggesting that publishers were trading artistic integrity for advertiser dollars.

Participants who held negative attitudes toward product placement in comics revealed that their attitudes were based on the assumptions that product placement was intrinsically disruptive to the reading experience and contrary to the artistic spirit of the medium. While participants were generally negative when talking about advertisements and placements in the abstract, further discussion and debate allowed participants to move past their initial assumptions and reflect on the practice in more complex and dynamic ways. Several themes that helped shape participant attitudes, both negatively and positively, developed during the course of the focus groups and interviews.

Narrative Reality, Economic Practicality and Artistic Integrity

Much like DeLorme, Reid and Zimmer (1994) and DeLorme and Reid (1999), several narrative-specific themes emerged during the course of the study, specifically those concerning the impact of placements on narrative reality and cohesion, and those concerning the interplay between placements and economic forces. A third theme emerged that drew from the two previous, yet was distinct enough to be viewed as its own unique factor in attitude formation. Appreciation of realism fostered or hindered by placements and the feeling of interruption caused by placements emerged as the

subcategories of the narrative-specific theme while alleviation of consumer cost and the strengthening of the industry emerged as subcategories of the economic-specific theme.

Theme 1: Drawn to Realism

Again and again, participants brought up the idea of realism when talking about their reading experiences. Participants differed greatly in their preference for the degree to which a comic represents the real, physical world; from favoring comics that acted as “reflections of our world” to those that were viewed as “far-fetched” escapist fantasies, participants appreciated different degrees of narrative and visual representation in their comics. While participants used the term “realism” to describe the fictional world of a particular comic in relationship to our own, the term was also used to describe the strength of the internal logic of the narrative itself. This idea of internal story logic was independent from how representative or our own world a story may be, but instead depended on a consistent and logical interplay of character, narrative, and art—the “world that the artists and the writers create within the comic,” as one participant described it.

Participants judged characters and stories by how closely they followed the established logic of a particular comic book. Likewise, participants judged placements by how seamlessly they are integrated into a narrative, strengthening or undermining the world that is created by the writer or artist.

Subcategory 1: Appreciation of Realism

When discussing Amtrak and Marlboro brand appearances in a train station scene in Wood and Kelly’s *Local* (2008), Participants 3 and 4 appreciated the level of realism that the appearances helped maintain. Because *Local* is ostensibly set in the real

world, not a world of superpowers or parallel universes, the participants believed that the brands “belonged” and were “natural” because they fit the reality created by the narrative and the art. “That’s enhancing the story,” said Participant 1 of the brand appearances in *Local*, “that is making the book more real. The realism here has a purpose.”

When discussing an appearance of Cisco System, Inc.’s WebEx communications program in the pages of *Secret Warriors* No. 3 (Bendis et al. 2009), Participant 8 echoed the appreciation for reflecting the physical world while enforcing the internal reality of the narrative: “I’ve noticed the Cisco thing before, and I like that. I think it fits in the story lines. They’re in my world.” Other participants voiced similar opinions about brand appearances fostering a dual realism: “I like some of it that fits in the story and kind of puts them in the real world”; “when it can meld into the story, mesh well with the story or characters, then it works”; “as long as it’s mentioned in a natural and organic way, I’m fine with it,”

Three participants used the word “organic” to describe placements that fostered a greater sense of reality and internal story logic. Participants were more impressed when brands helped build a more realized and functioning world on the page. Placements that were “blended” into the artwork and the scripted story added to the experience. While discussing a placement for Guitar Hero III Mobile in the pages of *Fantastic Four* No. 566 (Millar et al. 2008), two participants commented on the placements relation to the balance of reality within the comic:

Participant 3: I think if I remember correctly, this is when he’s trying to get his band started, or something like that. So, it wouldn’t be much of a stretch for someone who is hanging out with him or helping him get something musically done to wear a Guitar Hero shirt.

Participant 4: Yeah, that [placement] makes sense.

The visual representation of a brand played a major role in the acceptance of a placement. When placements were drawn in the same style or with the same level of detail as the rest of the artwork, participants found them conducive in fostering internal reality. Placements appearing as props were more appreciated for their level of internal realism because they allowed the artist to draw them in his own style; the consistency of the illustrated placement with the rest of the artwork created a cohesive reality. For example, the appearance of a Pontiac Solstice in Rush City No. 1 (Dixon and Green 2006) was generally well liked because the realistic rendering of the car matched the “technical” and “realistic” style of the artist.

Subcategory 2: Interruption

While appreciation for placements could be increased when those placements contributed to the reality of the story, participants had strong negative attitudes toward placements that seemed “overt,” “blatant” or “excessive.” Each participant expressed a dislike for placements that interrupted his reading experience by undermining the reality of the narrative or clashing with the artwork. Five participants took particular issue with placements in the form of signage, as summed up by Participant 14:

If you see people playing the Wii or something like that integrated into the story, it seems like part of the story. With the Wii or the Solstice, it looks like it belongs, it's organic. The signs look like they're an afterthought, they just don't blend well. When it melds into the story, mesh well with the story or characters, like the Guitar Hero shirt didn't bother me because it looks like it should be there, as opposed to the Army billboard, where it's just “AD! BAM! HOW ARE YOU DOING?”

Participant 13 shared those same concerns for the interruption of internal reality:

It also depends on the style of the art that the artist is doing. When you have something referential or something that directly references something from the real world and then you put it into a comic book world, if the artist has a specific style, and he's more two-

dimensional or he's a bit more stylized, then suddenly you have something from the real world and it's not abstracted or stylized in the same fashion-it's just there-it's a glaring thing, and it really adds to the distraction.

Confusion over the nature of certain placements also led to an interruption of the reading experience when two participants confused the borders of a billboard or poster present within a scene with the boundaries of a new panel. Because of the established conventions of rectangular panels in comics, these participants mistook the rectangular signage for independent advertisement panels inserted into the flow of the page. "I can't believe they gave [Guitar Hero III Mobile] it's own panel, that's ridiculous," commented one participant while reading *Punisher War Journal* (Vol. 2) No. 18 (Fraction and Chaykin 2008). The placement referred to is that of an in-store sign for the game, placed on a stand and directly facing the reader (fig. 8).

Although most participants agreed that placements as signage were not as acceptable as prop placements, there was room for debate:

Moderator: So the kind of [marketing] prompts, like placements as props, are a little bit more conducive to the whole narrative and your whole reading flow than, say, a sign.

Respondent 2: Yeah, with a sign it's like, "Oh, this is clearly an advertisement meant to distract me from the actual book."

Respondent 3: It depends. I think that if the writer and the artist are in on it, I think it comes out really cool, even if it's a sign. If the artist draws the sign, and say you're in NeoTokyo or whatever, and there's a sign for Sprite or something, okay, that's cool. It's in the artist's style. But that just makes me hate Guitar Hero more in the Punisher book, where it's clear that they left a white sign open and some kind in Editing copied it. That not only makes me not like Guitar Hero, but it makes me not like the book because they couldn't even draw it in the same art style. That's just unacceptable.

Participants were quick to recognize and react to placements that seemed artificially "cut and pasted" or "Photoshopped" into a panel. Because the brand elements of these types of placements are not "abstracted or stylized in the same

fashion” as the surrounding artwork, they were viewed as disruptive to the reading experience and undermining to the internal reality of the work.

Theme 2: Cost of Doing Business

Well, comic books, for the most part, have always been a commercial art.

-Participant 13

During the course of both the focus groups and the individual interviews, all participants expressed an acute awareness and understanding of comics as a consumer product. Participants held a sense of entitlement to specific stories and characters not solely rooted in emotional attachment or artistic appreciation, of which there was an abundance, but because they had paid for the physical product as well. Participants held concerns for the rising costs to both consumers and publishers; diminished readership, higher quality paper and coloring processes, high profile film, television, and novel writers crossing over into comics, and the race to keep up with other forms of entertainment, such as the multitude of home and mobile game platforms, were cited as factors contributing to the rising retail and production costs of comics.

As conscious as participants were to the interaction between reader and story, a theme of economic burden permeated each conversation. Whether participants reported purchasing one comic book a month or 15 to 20, each expressed a concern that rising “cost of doing business,” to consumers and to publishers, negatively affected their purchasing decisions and the ability of the publishers to continue to operate. “I’m priced out. At a point I’m priced out. I’ve seen, let’s see, let’s just say I’ve seen every price change since 15 cents,” lamented one participant.

Participants articulated the potential of advertisement strategies, including those utilizing product placements, to mitigate the costs of production, thereby alleviating some of the economic burden to the consumer, as well as a way to strengthen the industry as a whole through increased advertisement revenue. *Mitigation of Consumer Cost and Strengthening the Industry* emerged as categories for how participants discussed product placement and its acceptability within comics in terms of economic value.

Subcategory 1: Mitigation of Consumer Cost

The average retail price of a comic book increased 23.3% between 1998 and 2008 (Miller, 2009c), a rise in price that most participants connected to the increased use of more costly production methods and higher quality paper:

Participant 10: Comics used to be a dollar or something like that, and everything was cheaper. But, as the quality got better, price went up. Oh, the readers were pissed off by it, but we still wanted to buy them.

When asked how they coped with rising retail prices, the participants expressed their reliance on pre-planned shopping lists based on solicits for upcoming comics and discounts offered by local comic specialty stores for pre-ordering of books, succinctly expressed by Participants 1 and 2:

Participant 2: Going to the comic store is becoming like going to the grocery store, you shouldn't go without a plan. So when I go, I'm always checking the solicits to see what's coming out this week, to see what I want to follow...prices are going up and that's a pretty big concern for readers.

Participant 1: He's absolutely right, you have to prioritize now, you have to pick and choose what you get now.

To all focus group and interview participants, product placements were viewed as potentially significant in their ability to generate additional revenue for publishers.

Participants stated that this additional increase in profitability not only could, but *should*, be passed along to the consumer in the form of steady or even lowered retail prices:

Participant 4: If Marvel is getting money to do [product placement], it seems like they could be cheaper. And, if they go ahead and do it in the stuff that I don't read, that's fine with me. I don't know, if I had to choose between every comic being a dollar more than what I already pay, versus a placement here and there, I guess I'd pick the placement, just because, whatever, it's just an ad. But if it keeps them cheaper, that's kind of cool.

Participants of another group discussion mirrored this sentiment of price stabilization:

Participant 7: You know, for me, if it makes my books a little cheaper or keeps them from going up, I don't mind.

Participants 8 & 10: Yeah.

Participant 7: They're \$4.00, they can't go up much higher. It will hit a breaking point, and where people like us might buy a \$7.00 comic one day, there will be no new readers, and when we die, that'll be it, because you can't get a kid- imagine a kid going "Oh, Mom, I want to buy this \$7.00 Spider-Man comic!" and Mom will be like "Put that crap down!" So, if they can do that and they can keep comics at \$4.00 and have new readers reading, that's fine with me.

While participants recognized the *potential* value of placements to the consumer, most were quick to qualify their approval of the practice in terms of actual savings rather than casual speculation. "If" was a constant qualifier when discussing approval based on economic factors, meeting with a skeptical retort during a debate between two participants, with Participant 2 apologetically condoning the use of product placements and Participant 1 questioning the validity of Participant 2's reasoning:

Participant 2: If the placement is going to help them generate more revenue and that's going to help keep the cost of a comic book down, then, I'm sorry, go for it.

Participant 1: Well, the opposite is happening. They must not be [keeping the price down]...because they're going up faster than a heartbeat.

To participants of both the focus groups and the individual interviews, many of who purchased multiple comic books month after month, year after year, product placement was viewed as a way to mitigate the cost to the consumer, although most were quick to qualify their approval and some were skeptical any actual value passed down to the consumer via retail price stabilization or reduction.

Subcategory 2: Strengthening the Industry

Participants were almost unanimous in the belief that the comic book industry seemed to recently be just on the cusp of failure, falling victim to diminished readership, as described by Participant 2:

The comics industry has always been—well, I don't want to say always, but in recent years, it has been booming and busting and it may go one way, it may go another. You know, we talked about the monthly disappearing altogether in favor of something else, and when you have a medium like comics, which is so near and dear to so many people, and when it's competing with video games and the internet and iPods and all those other kinds of things for total dollars of kids these days, if they have to do this to continue to make their product, then I can live with that.

Participants, accustomed to seeing publishers collapse because of economic hardship and the constant cycle of new title launch and subsequent cancellation due to low sales, recognized publishers' need to "butter their own bread" through the inclusion of advertisements. "They fund the actual comic," stated Participant 13. "If it wasn't for the ads, if it wasn't for the investors, there probably wouldn't be any comic books outside of maybe a few, sparse independent publishers."

While Participant 3 viewed advertisements in comic books, especially product placement, as a "necessary evil," he also appreciated the practice's potential benefits: "Everyone can always use more money. That's only going to be able to bring better writers and better artists into the industry." Although participants were cautiously

optimistic about product placement resulting in lowered retail prices, all agreed that an increase in revenue brought on by paid placements would positively benefit the industry and, by extension, the consumer. During each group discussion and individual interview, participants expressed the idea that product placement would bolster publishers financially and offset the costs of higher quality production materials, allow publishers to offer greater financial incentives to its top writers and artists, and allow publishers to make comics a more financially attractive medium to high profile writers of in other mediums.

Theme 3: Selling Out

While all participants agreed that comics are a creative medium, there was a question as to whether the economic concerns of revenue generated through product placement infringed on some higher ideal of artistic integrity. Just as a number of participants viewed product placement as an infringement of the internal reality of a work, others saw it as a betrayal of trust between creators and their work. This theme runs closely alongside *Appreciation of Realism*, dynamically related to the integration of the placement, the perceived intention of the creator and publisher, and how interruptive the placements are to the reading experience, but addresses a separate expectation of the reader. Participants appreciated comics as creative endeavors and accomplishments of artistic expression. When placement strains the integrity of a work, participants view it as an insult to readers as well, which seems to be at the heart of Participant 4's concern of the "whorish" nature of the practice. Placements that are judged as "unacceptable," "irresponsible," "blatant" and "jarring" in terms of interruption of internal realism were also unacceptable in terms of violating artistic integrity.

Participant 9's assertion that placement is acceptable if "the writer and artist are in on it" speaks to the mitigating circumstances of a placement's creation.

It is important to point out that not all participants shared the same level of concern regarding artistic integrity. Participant 3 perceived a violation of artistic integrity only when the artists inserted placements for personal gain, rather than working in collaboration with other creative personnel or a managing authority:

I mean, are they getting paid to do that? That would be the only issue with me. If they're trying to gain favor, or something like that. This is who, Caselli? Yeah, I really like his work, but I don't know, I think it's kind of irresponsible to be throwing it in there just to do it, trying to get some extra money or something. If they come to him and say, "Hey, will you throw this in?" then sure, but if it's the other way around, its kind of betraying the art form.

Participants 11, 12, and 14, who expressed less concern about placements interfering with the internal reality of a work and found placements more acceptable on the grounds that comics are an inherently commercial enterprise, differed greatly from all other participants on this account. They were unconcerned, if not downright dismissive, of any notion of artistic integrity. "Artistic integrity is bullshit," asserted Participant 11. "It's the bullshit reason artists will tell editor or somebody in charge of their creative content that they don't want to do what they're being asked to do."

CHAPTER 5 SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Focus groups and in-depth interviews were conducted in order to explore readers' attitudes toward advertisement strategies employed within the pages of comic books, specifically product placement, although traditional full-page advertisements were discussed as well. Three research questions were formulated in order to develop this study's method, as well as to inform the analysis of participant responses.

Answering the Research Questions and Generating Theory

R1: What are the general attitudes of readers toward advertisements in comic books?

Participants viewed traditional, full-page advertisements in comics as interruptions, part of the everyday bombardment of marketing materials that clutters every communications channel. Individual traditional advertisements encountered in modern comic books were thought to be ineffective and unremarkable, although those that had a connection to comics, whether they borrowed tone, characters or comics' visual and narrative language (panels, word balloons, etc), were thought to be more appropriate to the channel than those with little or no connection.

Participants were acutely aware of the financial realities driving advertisements in comic books; with few exceptions, comic books have always been an advertisement-supported channel, and therefore readers are used to their inclusion, just as they are used to commercial breaks during network television programs. However, readers take issue when advertising content outweighs narrative content; they do not appreciate feeling like they are paying for the right to flip through countless pages of advertisements, especially when those advertisements are unengaging and disposable.

R2: What are the semantics used by readers when they encounter, think about or discuss product placement in comic books?

Participants often spoke of traditional full-page advertisements and product placements at the same time, constantly comparing and contrasting their experiences and expectations of both. Also, they were generally uninterested in speaking about advertising strategies in comics in terms consumer behavior or response, choosing instead to frame the discussions in terms of the impact these strategies had on the reading experience and on the comics industry in general.

Before viewing examples of varying explicitness and prominence, participants spoke of product placement as an intrusive and subversive marketing practice. The idea of product placement in comic books struck participants as “tricky,” “misleading,” “dishonest” and “scary”; some insisted the practice bordered on “subliminal” advertising.

Participants were aware of placement in other channels and even spoke of the practice in comic books as a way to deliver marketing messages to readers who are in the habit of skipping traditional full-page advertisements in the same way they skip televisions commercials by utilizing digital video recorders: product placement was looked at as a way for advertisers and publishers to subvert readers “zipping and zapping” past marketing messages. When given the chance to view examples of individual placements, terms ranged from “corny,” “obvious,” “intrusive” and “out of place” to “natural,” “organic,” “fits in,” “belongs” and “pretty cool.”

During discussions, when the idea of product placement in comic books was first broached, most participants expressed a distain for the practice and spoke of product placement as an underhanded method meant to swindle readers into viewing and participating in marketing campaigns. The finding of this study suggest that negative

language may be the default reaction of comic book readers when introduced to product placement— readers simply do not appreciate that marketing elements have “snuck in” to their entertainment and express their lack of appreciation and acceptance with defensive language. However, as they were exposed to more varied placements, the language softened to reflect more positive opinions concerning placements that they deemed acceptable; language concerning placements that were deemed unacceptable by participants was sharper and more negative, possibly because participants believed that the unacceptable placements vindicated and reinforced their initial reactions.

R3: What are the attitudes of readers toward product placement in comic books?

Participants were wary of placements acting as impediments to their reading experience; they believed that placements could pull them out of the story by brand elements or products standing apart from the artwork of the creative team or by being so prominent as to create a sense that the narrative only existed to serve as a vehicle for the placement.

During the course of discussion, attitudes lightened as participants talked through their concerns and viewed various placements. Although all participants indicated that placements that they would judge as natural or unobtrusive would be preferred over any kind of traditional full-page advertisement, final attitudes were ambivalent, with a few factors acting to improve initial negative opinions. Acceptability rose when participants believed that the advertising revenue generated by the placements helped sustain the publisher during what is believed to be a financially troubling times, lessened publishers' reliance on traditional full-page advertisements, or helped attract more talented, and higher paid, writers and artists.

Participants also believed that, while placements can be interruptive, they also have the ability to create better-realized fictional worlds. This study suggests that readers will favorably interpret placements that increase the narrative reality of a comic book, especially when presented in the same style as the original artist's style or integrated into the script in a believable manner. The more placements *look* like they belong or play believable parts in the plot, the more positive the reaction from the reader will be.

Practical Implications

While publishers have expressed a desire to implement more engaging and profitable advertising strategies within their comic books, the results often seem capricious at best, careless at worst. Very little research exists concerning advertising in comic books, and none exists regarding product placement; those studies that do exist give no insight into the current target audience of the industry, therefore the results of this study offer unique insights into the attitudes of the most attractive consumers.

Comics rely on the reader to participate in a process by which a purely static visual narrative is given sound, motion, and narrative cohesion between panels. Advertisements that run in comic books are often the same that appear in other men's interest publications, a fact that is viewed as a positive by industry professionals (Appendix F). However, participants reported that traditional full-page advertisements generated little interest and so they were ignored and generally treated like impediments to the reading experience— the enemy of the mind as it works to create a fluid narrative. Advertisers should develop traditional advertisements that take into account the reading process and comics' language and avoid testing those advertisements in a vacuum— advertisements that run in comic book should be tested in

comic books first to ensure a proper fit. Instead of arresting the attention of the reader, traditional advertisements should compliment the reading experience and add to the overall enjoyment of the work, while still engaging the reader in the advertised product or brand.

Publishers should take care to balance the number of traditional advertisements with the actual narrative content of each comic book. Participants expressed strong dislike for comic books they considered an advertising channel first and a narrative channel second. This study indicates that readers understand the economic realities of comic books as advertisement-supported content; however, when readers feel that they are paying for advertisements instead of entertainment they may be less inclined to purchase the offending issue and may develop biases against publishers who engage in such practices.

In researching the background of product placement, which consisted of discussions with comics industry professionals and a review of published media reports and interviews, there does not appear to be any standard by which placement is implemented, no controls as to how and where a placement might appear. Publishers should move to integrate the placement process into each appropriate step of the publishing process: editors and in-house advertising personnel should coordinate to determine the most appropriate and effective pairings of titles and placements; creative teams should be consulted on how best to integrate placements; finally, editors should review the placements to ensure that they meet an acceptable level of integration. In short, all pertinent personnel should be fully aware of and integrated into the process to

ensure that each placement meets the expectations of the advertisers while still acting as an organic addition to each narrative.

Placing products and brands in comic books can be both a benefit and a detriment to publishers and advertisers. Placements can add to the advertising revenue without adding to production costs and add to the reality and robustness of a narrative, although care should be taken to visually integrate placements into the narrative. Participants had strong reactions against placements that appeared to be photographic reproductions of existing marketing materials and brand elements; placements that more closely resemble the artwork of the comic book and are seen as filling a need created by the script as either a prop or background visual element are the most natural and unobtrusive placements. Editors and creative teams placing products and brands should take care to make the placements narratively and visually organic. It is not enough to simply ask if a product or brand might exist or seem “cool” or “natural” in a fictional world—placements have to *look* like they belong. Creative teams should always be included in placement strategies to best integrate a reference or appearances.

Props are preferable to signage in most cases, as signs draw attention to themselves as advertisements, especially when only one placement sign appears in a space where many different advertisements would be expected to be seen in a real world setting, such as a mall or a billboard-cluttered city. When placement does take the form of signage, care should be taken to approximate signage that would be seen in everyday life while still appearing in the style of the comic book’s art. Prominent rectangular signage, such as billboards and posters, which directly faces the reader, should be avoided since readers may read these placements as separate panels on the

page. Placements containing calls-to-action, such as the Guitar Hero III Mobile signage found in *Punisher War Journal* No. 18 (Fraction and Chaykin 2008, fig. 7) should be used sparingly, if at all, because of the directness of the appeal to the reader. Because these placements suggest immediate action outside of the reading experience, they can be tremendously disruptive.

Many participants admitted that they had begun to switch from reading and purchasing monthly single issues to cheaper collected trade paperbacks in order to save money, eliminate the wait between monthly issues, and skip traditional advertisements. Product placement is uniquely suited to inclusion in both monthly issues and collected works. Where traditional advertisements are lost, product placements can continue into perpetuity, increasing their value to advertisers and publishers. Inclusion in trade paperbacks and in online comics collections, which also eliminate traditional advertisement pages, should be taken into account when negotiating placement with advertisers.

Because readers have no way of distinguishing between compensated and non-compensated placements, creative teams should be careful when using existing products and brands as non-compensated props to bolster the reality of their work. Non-compensated appearances can be misconstrued as product placements and judged by the same criteria as compensated appearances. If creative teams aren't careful to effectively integrate brand or product appearances, those appearances can be viewed as crass, commercial interruptions to the reading experience.

Limitations

While this study generated many insights regarding advertising and product placements in comics, it is important to note the limitations of the research method used

and of the results themselves. While focus group discussions and in-depth interviews provide detailed, contextual, first-person accounts of behavior and attitudes, the results are not meant to provide a representative framework of comics readers as a whole. Discussions elicited during research sessions are specific to those participating groups and individuals; specific responses are unique to each participant, based on his own experiences with comics, advertisements, and product placement.

Although the dynamic nature of the responses obtained during this study provided the researcher with a great deal of data, many participants' attitudes and opinions evolved during the course of discussion. In most cases, this seemed to indicate that a participant was articulating a particular viewpoint with greater clarity as the discussion advanced, but it is always possible that some participants crafted and adjusted their responses in order to seem more agreeable or argumentative to views of the group, moderator, or interviewer.

The gender make-up of the groups and individual interviews might have been a limiting factor in this study. While research has shown that men and women differ in their attitudes and perceived acceptability only when it comes to controversial products, such as alcohol or tobacco products (Gould et al. 2000; Gupta and Gould 1997), those studies focus on product placement in film and on television. There was some divergence in what the male participants in this study reported in terms of attitude and behavior and what has been reported by male participants in studies concerning other channels; therefore, female comics readers might also differ in their reported attitudes and behaviors as opposed to those in studies of placement in other channels. Female

respondents may even differ in their opinions from male respondents in regards to comics.

The lack of current research concerning comics as a marketing channel presented several obstacles during the course of this study. While grounded theory allowed for the use and modification of research of product placement in other channels, such as film and television, many theoretical frameworks, theories, and ideas do not necessarily transfer across channels.

Finally, because this study relied heavily on direct researcher involvement and interaction with participants during the data collection phase, and subjective interpretation of data during the final phases of the study, the possibility of researcher bias and interference must be considered. Although researcher involvement and interface plays a part in both quantitative and qualitative research methods, it can be especially pronounced in qualitative studies where the researcher is required to interact on a one-to-one basis with the participant.

Suggestions for Future Research

This study set out not only to develop insights into how comics readers discuss advertising and product placement in comics, but also to encourage the nascent discussion of comic books as a legitimate marketing channel, in both the professional and academic worlds. While social and literary theorists have discussed and debated the vast communications possibilities of the medium of comics, only two previous studies have addressed comics as a marketing channel (Lindquist 1979; Simmons 1984); both focused on children, who have become far less a concern for comics publishers as their target demographic has shifted to post-adolescents. The lack of academic research of marketing strategies contained within comics and comic books is

overwhelming when compared to the growing interest and research of the practices in other channels.

By combining the current body of knowledge regarding the relationships of consumer and placement in other channels with the ingenuity of researchers to create new avenues of understanding of these relationships in the context of comics, the full extent of future research possibilities are far too great and rich for this researcher to even attempt to enumerate. However, there is no humility lost in suggesting a few implications raised by this study.

Unlike previous research that suggested consumers hold positive attitudes toward advertising and product placement in film and on television (Gupta and Gould 1997; Nebenzahl and Secunda 1993), participants expressed generally negative attitudes toward both in comic books. Although most gave begrudging acceptance to both after lively discussion and debate, at the end they were still wary of the possible negative impact both traditional advertisements and product placement had on their reading experiences. Further research is needed to fully explore the factors contributing to consumers' attitudes toward different marketing strategies employed by comics publishers, including age, gender, and nationality. Whereas this study focused on the personal accounts of 17 individuals, quantitative research methods should be employed in future research to create generalizable models of consumer attitudes and relationships.

The ethical implications of these practices should also be researched, especially concerning the impact on children and adolescents. Although not the professed core

demographic of American comics publishers, children and adolescents are still counted as comics consumers and are aggressively targeted by publishers.

Additionally, this study showed that participants considered consumers generally immune to any persuasive effects of advertisements and placement in comic books, as well as dismissing the effectiveness of both. Participants claimed a lack of ability to recall most advertisements previously encountered beyond general product categories, and only a few could recall ever having seen product placements of any kind in any comic book. While participants certainly believe this professed inability to be remembered or be persuaded by advertisements and placements found in comic books, quantitative measures should be employed to study the effects on behavior and memory that these strategies may have.

Finally, during the course of background investigation concerning the current topic, it became evident that comics professionals, including editors, writers, artists, marketing professionals, and others hold wide ranging attitudes toward product placement in comics; some were positive toward the practice while others found it completely unacceptable. Knowledge of the practice also varied. Some professionals were aware of the practice and had participated in placing brands, others were vaguely aware that the practice was occurring, and some were completely unaware of the practice, even when placements appeared in comics to which they had contributed. Research focusing on these professionals would be advantageous in creating better understandings of product placement in comics as well as generating better implementation strategies.

Conclusion

Expanded media coverage of product placement in comic books spurred the interest of the researcher, as did the emergence of spirited discussion on online comics message boards. Rather than quietly phase in the practice, publishers were eager to discuss it in the media and address it with their readers; in return, readers were more than more than willing to express their opinions on comics message boards, although these mostly reactionary posts gave little insight into the factors that created such opinions. This study set out to create a better understanding of readers' attitudes toward product placement in comics through in-depth conversation and interaction.

This qualitative study's findings have suggested that comic book readers may prefer product placement to traditional full-page advertisements, although attitudes toward either seem less than positive. Attitudes toward product placement can be attenuated when readers believe that the placed product or brand exists within the fictional world of the comic book, both narratively and visually. The prospect of placement bolstering the financial stability of the comic book industry can also ease attitudes toward the practice. Publisher should be aware of the possible ramifications of each and every placement and take steps to match placements with appropriate comic books, as well as reassuring readers of the financial benefits of the practice when confronted with questions or criticism.

The hope of this study is to motivate practioners to take a closer look at the way they go about implementing product placement in comic books that more positively resonate with readers, as well as to inspire researcher to investigate the marketing strategies utilized by comic book publisher in their publications and how the impact those strategies may have on the attitudes and behaviors of readers.

APPENDIX A
FOCUS GROUP MODERATOR'S GUIDE

[Greet participants as they arrive]

First, let's take 15 minutes to eat. Feel free to socialize with your fellow participants, we will begin recording once everyone has eaten.

Introduction:

Welcome participants, and thank you for agreeing to take part in our discussion today. I am _____, your moderator and this is my assistant, _____, who will be taking notes during the discussion. We are graduate students at the University of Florida.

Again, restrooms are located _____ and exits are _____, please feel free get up and move around as necessary.

[Review consent form, ask if there are any questions, collect consent forms, turn on recording device]

Ground Rules:

We will meet for an hour today during which time we will engage in a discussion centered on some key topics and questions.

We are audio recording the discussion in order to best preserve the integrity of the results of the study and ensure the transcripts fully and accurately reflect the statements you make. Your statements will be kept confidential; please do not repeat any personal information you may hear today to anyone outside of this session. No one besides the assistant moderator and myself will hear the tapes.

Discussion Opening:

Remember, there are no right or wrong answers to any of these questions, only opinions.

We encourage each of you to participate, even if you think your opinion differs from that of another participant or the group, and be respectful of each other's remarks and opinions, even if they differ from yours. Please feel free to take notes with the provided materials.

Please speak one at a time so that everyone can have their thoughts and ideas heard.

Opening Questions:

[Grand Tour question]

Let's go around the room. Starting with _____, tell us your name and how you first got into comics?

Tell us a bit about your typical comic buying experience? Recap your typical trip to buy comics?

Introductory Questions:

So, lets take a few minutes to talk about what appeal comics have for each one of you.

[Give each respondent two to three minutes to briefly describe his or her own attraction to comics]

What is it about the particular comics that you read that makes them so appealing?

- The art?
- The writing?
- The overall structure of the book (solo/team/etc)?

Is there anything that distracts from your overall reading experience?

- What pushes you to not read or buy a certain title?

Now, we're going to take just a few minutes to look through this particular comic. Please, take about 10 minutes to read, feel free to discuss with any other participants but be courteous that you don't interrupt their reading experience.

So, what did you think of the book?

- What did you like about, what did you not like about it?

[try to steer discussion toward advertisements, but without pushing participants directly to that response. Steer discussion away from discussion of storylines or personal preferences for creative teams]

Possible prompts:

Besides the actual narrative of the book, the story and the art, is there anything you remember off the top of your head?

- Paper quality
- Editorial content (recap page, letters page, editorial footnotes)
- "In-house" or "regular" ads

[Probe responses for discussion of advertisements]

Key Questions:

What about ads in the book, do you remember any of them?

- Do any of them stick out in your mind?

- Describe your reactions to the ads.
- Do you remember that particular brand or advertisement appearing in any other comics that you have read?

What about product placements, is everyone familiar with the concept of product placement?

[Spend a few minutes discussing product placement, even if participants all respond as to being familiar with the practice.]

So, with that in mind, did you notice or can you point to placements in the comic you just read?

[Open the floor to discussion on any and all product placements contained within the comic.]

Visual Prompts:

What do you think about this advertisement [reproduction of Hostess Fruit Pie full page advertisement featuring comic character]?

- In the context of a comic book?
- Do you think it would distract from the reading experience?
- Do you think it helps the reading experience?

What do you think about this [reproduction of page containing product placement]?

- How would you compare it to the previous image/advertisement?
- Do you think it detracts from the reading experience?
- Do you think it helps the reading experience?

[Allow for independent discussion, probe or facilitate only when necessary; repeat with each selected page reproduction or full comic containing placements]

Ending Questions:

[ask each participant these questions]

Is there anything that you would like to add?

If you had a chance to talk to the head of a comic book publishing company, what would tell them about the inclusion of advertisements in the company's books and its use of product placement?

What do you think would be helpful to us in understanding your attitude toward product placement in comic books?

After Focus Group:

Thank you all for participating today. Your comments will be summarized and analyzed in order to give us a better understanding of attitudes toward product placements in comic books. We will have a completed study by [date], which will be available through the University of Florida webpage. Before then, we would like to give each of you a chance to review the collected data and give your comments, how accurately the overall data reflects your own views and concerns, how accurately you believe it reflects the views of your peers, etc. If you have elected to review the data, we will contact you when the data is available. Thank you and have a good night.

APPENDIX B INTERVIEWER'S GUIDE

[Greet interviewee, thank for being part of study, review consent agreement, terms of confidentiality, opening small talk, light/conversational, inform interviewee that the interview is about getting interviewee's consumer insights into comic books; there are no right or wrong answers, only personal insights]

1. First, just tell me a little about your first experience with comics?

What got you interested in reading comic books?

2. Describe your usual experience when you go to a comic shop or store that sells comics.

[possible prompts: do you always intend to buy when you go? Is there anything that affects your buying intentions?]

3. Is there anything that detracts from the experience of reading comics?

Is there anything that helps the experience?

[try to steer discussion toward advertisements, but without pushing interviewee directly to that response. Steer discussion away from discussion of storylines or personal preferences for creative teams]

4. Do you often notice advertisements in comics?

Describe your initial feelings about advertising in comics.

[prompt response with visuals of full page advertisements found in comic]

Is this type of advertisement something you would notice?

What do you usually do when you come to an ad in a comic?

5. Do you know what product placement is?

Have you heard about the practice being used in comics?

Can you recall any instances of product placement in comics that you have read?

[allow interviewee to look at samples of placements in comics]

What are your overall feelings about product placements in comics?

What words would you use to describe your overall feelings of product placements?

Describe how you feel about the placements, how they are incorporated into the story or art.

Does it matter how products are placed?

How do you feel about the placements?

How do you feel about the products?

Do you believe that the inclusion of product placements would have an impact on which comics you buy?

Do you believe that the product placements would have an effect on your purchasing of placed products?

Does the inclusion of product placements have an effect on your view of the publishing company? On the

Title(s) that it appears in? On the characters?

[Allow for free-flowing conversation. Refer to notes for reoccurring words and comments, ask interviewee to elaborate]

6. What advice would you give to publishers using product placement?

What makes them effective?

What makes them ineffective?

Does it matter what types of products are shown or how they are shown?

[Thank interviewee for participation; discuss possibility of follow-up for “member checking” (allowing participant to review results of study)]

APPENDIX C
IRB AND LETTERS OF CONSENT

In-depth interview

Dear _____,

I am a graduate student in the University of Florida's Masters of Advertising program. As part of my thesis I am conducting an interview, the purpose of which is to develop a better understanding of the current attitudes of comic buyers toward certain trends in the comic industry. You have been selected to participate based on your familiarity with comics, your involvement in the local comic buying community, and your interest in the industry as a whole.

Interviewees will be asked to participate in an interview lasting no longer than 60 minutes. You will not have to answer any question you do not wish to answer. With your permission I would like to audiotape this interview.

Your interview will not be used by the researcher for any monetary benefit. This is an academic study aimed at producing an investigative body of research that will not only add to the academic knowledge of the comic book industry, but will produce new insights that will foster future research as well.

There is little to no possibility of risk involved in the study, emotionally nor financially. You are free to withdraw your consent to participate and may discontinue your participation in the interview at any time without consequence. You will be given the opportunity to review the overall results of the study and discuss them with me.

If you have any questions about this research protocol, please contact me at (863) 532-9173 or my faculty supervisor, Dr. Debbie Treise, at (352) 392-6557. Questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant may be addressed to the IRB02 office, University of Florida, Box 112250, Gainesville, FL 32611; (352) 392-0433.

Please sign and return this copy of the letter, either to me personally or through the mail in the enclosed envelope. A second copy is provided for your records. By signing this letter, you give me permission to report your responses anonymously in the final manuscript to be submitted to my faculty supervisor as part of my coursework.

Kristofer Mehaffey
Graduate Student, Advertising
College of Journalism and Communication
The University of Florida

I have read the procedure described above for the thesis interview. I voluntarily agree to participate in the interview and I have received a copy of this description.

(Signature of participant) _____, (date) _____

I would like to receive a copy of the final thesis manuscript submitted to the instructor.
__yes/no__

Focus group

Dear _____,

I am a graduate student in the University of Florida's Masters of Advertising program. As part of my thesis I am conducting a series of focus groups, the purpose of which is to develop a better understanding of the current attitudes of comic buyers toward certain trends in the comic industry. You have been selected to participate based on your familiarity with comics, your involvement in the local comic buying community, and your interest in the industry as a whole.

Participants will be asked to participate in a moderated group discussion lasting no longer than 90 minutes. You will not have to answer any question you do not wish to answer. With your permission I would like to audiotape and videotape this interview.

Your participation in a discussion group will not be used by the researcher for any monetary benefit. This is an academic study aimed at producing an investigative body of research that will not only add to the academic knowledge of the comic book industry, but will produce new insights that will foster future research as well.

There is little to no possibility of risk involved in the study, emotionally nor financially. You are free to withdraw your consent to participate and may discontinue your participation in the discussion at any time without consequence. You will be given the opportunity to review results of overall study and discuss them with me.

If you have any questions about this research protocol, please contact me at (863) 532-9173 or my faculty supervisor, Dr. Debbie Treise, at (352) 392-6557. Questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant may be addressed to the IRB02 office, University of Florida, Box 112250, Gainesville, FL 32611; (352) 392-0433.

Please sign and return this copy of the letter, either to me personally or through the mail in the enclosed envelope. A second copy is provided for your records. By signing this letter, you give me permission to report your responses anonymously in the final manuscript to be submitted to my faculty supervisor as part of my coursework.

Kristofer Mehaffey
Graduate Student, Advertising
College of Journalism and Communication
The University of Florida

I have read the procedure described above for the thesis focus group. I voluntarily agree to participate in the group and I have received a copy of this description.

(Signature of participant) _____, (date) _____

I would like to receive a copy of the final thesis manuscript submitted to the instructor.
__yes/no__

APPENDIX D
SAMPLE FOCUS GROUP TRANSCRIPT

Moderator: I'm going to kind of rein everything in. Now I've shown you all these different kinds of examples of product placements in books. Some of them are a product placements, some of them are things that the artists or writers put in, the Cisco and WebEx stuff – I actually talked to Hickman about that and he said that it was something that Casselli did on his own. Casselli sent the artwork back to him and there's all this Cisco/WebEx stuff in there. So Hickman went in and wrote it into the dialog. The Old Spice placements were editorially mandated, meaning they just asked them, "Hey, can you put in Old Spice products somewhere in the book?" And what Phil Hester said was that they decided to have a little more fun with it and tried to see like how many they could possibly put in.

Respondent 1: I've noticed the Cisco things before, and I like that. I think it fits in the story lines. They're in my world. When I'm looking at it, like the Converse one didn't bother me – I didn't even notice it. But then, the goal of advertisement is for you to notice something, so that kind of defeats the purpose. I felt the Army one was annoying, but I noticed that right away. I feel like I would have noticed that in a comic book, so if your goal is to get it noticed, if you're paying, then that's what you need to do. It didn't make me want to join the Army, but is anybody reading a comic book going to see it and really want to get their name out there? So I think that it depends on how it's done. As a fan, I don't like some of it, I like some of it that fits in the story and kind of puts them in the real world, but I don't like the things that are just blatant and just sticking out there. But I feel like if you're an advertiser, then that's what you will want.

Respondent 2: I think there are two ways that they do it: They can either do it blatantly, as an advertisement, or just as a pop culture icon. And they're both advertisements, but as a pop culture icon, you don't really feel offended by it. It's like, "Oh, I recognize this. I know what it is."

Moderator: Like the Converse shoes.

Respondent 2: Without actually saying Converse, it'll tell you, and I know what this is. But the Cisco thing, they will tell you. But it's like, "Oh, he's using it to chat. It makes sense."

Moderator: So the kind of prompts, like placements as props, are a little bit more conducive to the whole narrative and your whole reading flow than, say, a sign.

Respondent 2: Yeah, with a sign it's like, "Oh, this is clearly an advertisement meant to distract me from the actual book."

Respondent 3: It depends. I think that if the writer and the artist are in on it, I think it comes out really cool, even if it's a sign. If the artist draws the sign, and say you're in NeoTokyo or whatever, and there's a sign for Sprite or something, okay, that's cool. It's in the artist's style. But that just makes me hate Guitar Hero more in the Punisher book, where it's clear that they left a white sign open and some kind in Editing copied it. That not only makes me not like Guitar Hero, but it makes me not like the book because they couldn't even draw it in the same art style. That's just unacceptable.

Respondent 1: In Fantastic Four, the guy was wearing a shirt, so it's pretty something that he just woke up wearing, whereas in The Punisher, you're right, it's blatantly pasted on there.

Respondent 4: It was just overlaid over the shirt. It wasn't even wrinkled with the shirt.

Respondent 1: One quick aside: who the hell wants to play Guitar Hero on their cell phone?

APPENDIX E
SAMPLE INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Participant 13: In this case, it makes sense because the car, even though it is something referential from our world, it still fits in with everything else.

Interviewer: Yes. It's very technical art.

Participant 13: It's very detail-oriented art. Like, this is something like the pole and the circuitry is something you could see in the real world. And this car is something you could see in the real world, obviously, but I like the fact that it doesn't directly reference the fact that it's a Pontiac. I like that it doesn't directly try to push an advertising thing on it. It's just sort of there, and it's an element. And it just so happens to be something in the real world instead of the opposite, where it's there for a purpose, to entice or to. It doesn't even add to the story whatsoever. Now granted, this could have any other model of car. It could have been like a coupe or it could have been like a Jaguar or whatever, but, you know. If you showed this to any kid, they would be like, "Oh, that's a car." They wouldn't be able to say, "Oh, that's a 2009 Pontiac Whatever." It's just a car to them, you know. And it's the same with me. I wouldn't know that's a Pontiac unless someone told me that's a Pontiac. So that doesn't distract from the art; it doesn't distract from the narrative at all. So I like the treatment of it.

Interviewer: So you like it, but at the same time, you don't think it would be that effective because you wouldn't know it was a Pontiac.

Participant 13: Right, which is why, you know. I like it not only because of that reason though. Yeah, you couldn't tell that's a Pontiac. I'm sure there's some sort of web site or something that tells details about the character – what he does, what he drives – and "Oh, it's a Pontiac, okay." Finally put 2 and 2 together, but I wouldn't know otherwise. They make no reference that it's a Pontiac?

Interviewer: Not that I've ever seen.

Participant 13: It almost looks like he used the models as a basis for his work more than anything else, which a lot of artists do do. I mean, they do it a lot.

Interviewer: Yeah, looking like a Solstice, and it's only there when he's driving it. It's not like it's *Knight Rider* or anything.

Participant 13: Right. It's not like it has its own splash page.

APPENDIX F
PRODUCT PLACEMENT THE MARVEL WAY: AN INTERVIEW WITH FORMER
MARVEL ADVERTISING DIRECTOR JOE MAIMONE

Your name came to the forefront first in a Wall Street Journal article written by Brian Steinberg about Marvel developing this product placement deal. Looking back, it seems a little inevitable that something like this would arise. First, how did you come to work at Marvel Comics as their advertising director?

I can't remember the exact dates, but I joined Marvel roughly, I would say, about seven years ago. Before there, I worked for the music magazine *Billboard Magazine*, you know, the one-hundred-twenty-eight-year-old trade publication that everybody knows for their charts. I worked there for several years, and the Marvel opportunity just fell in my lap through an employment agency/headhunters/things like that. So because it was in the entertainment field, which I wanted to remain in, I got the job with them as Advertising Director.

What was your part in developing Marvel Comics' product placement program?

Marvel, when I got there, was not the company that it is today. You know, now they're making their own movies; they're doing very, very well. The comic book circulation originally wasn't that great. Marvel Comics now is the fourth largest men's magazine in America. Before I got there, they barely had any ads in the comic books. For the last two or three years I was there, we maxed out every month. In the world of comic books, every comic book has a certain amount of pages and a certain amount of ads to sell. It's not like another magazine, where you could just keep adding pages and make advertising revenue. Comic books are always, if I remember correctly, thirty-two pages, no matter what. Whether there are ads in them or not, they're always the same amount. So when I was there, we really started getting at what they call non-endemic advertising. Back in the day, you would get advertisers who were endemic to comic books.

Like, for instance, for a sports magazine, an endemic advertiser would be an entity like major league baseball. In *Billboard*, an endemic advertiser was Sony Records. Marvel, when I first came on board had nothing but endemic advertisers. Companies that were Marvel licensees; people who made, like Spider-Man sneakers, things like that. They never had ads that catered to their demographic audience, basically, which was guys from 18 to 34.

So when I got there, we started working on capturing non-endemic ads. And we were able to do so by offering what is called value-added programs. In the world of advertising, in an RFP – an RFP is a Request for Proposal – an advertiser will say, "We're interested in advertising in you. What is the price for two pages, four pages, six pages, or even eight pages for the next

twelve months?” So that’s pretty easy, you just give them the rate card. But in order to earn the business, you have to have more than just a good price. You need to offer what is called value-added opportunities. So, back in the day, the only value-added opportunity Marvel had was advertising on their website. So any major advertiser would get the number of pages they wanted and they might get a month free on marvel.com. That was their “value added.” But, you know, everybody was doing it, so it really wasn’t a competitive advantage. So I, because I never had read a comic book in my life – I was in advertising, but I never read a comic book, never was a fan, never grew up reading, never, you know, other than Spider-Man movies, was into a Marvel brand. I certainly knew of it because of the cachet, everyone knows it, but I really didn’t know how comic books read and what they were all about. So I kind of came into it with a fresh mind.

Most comic-book geeks, if you will, people who have been reading them for ten, twenty, thirty years, would be mortified at the thought of product placement in comic books. It was never thought of before, but I think because I came from outside the industry and was looking at these comics where Spider-Man flew through Times Square on paper. You know, they would draw the exact ads that were in Times Square the day that artist drew that scene. So I was like, well, it’s great that we have these ads that are really there, but, you know, why can’t we put whatever we want on those ads? And since they retained the look of ads – and basically, the word we used was *organic* – why can’t we just put whatever we want there as long as they are organic and flowed with the story and didn’t really take away from the story? And I was able to talk the Editorial people into doing it. In any magazine, there’s a huge butting of the heads between Editorial and Advertising. It’s just there – it’s everywhere. I don’t care – any magazine from *Oprah* to *Cosmo* to *Sports Illustrated* to Marvel – Editorial and Ad Sales butt heads. But I was able to convince them to try it. Like I said, there are a ton of scenes -- whether it’s Spider-Man flying through Times Square or just a bunch of kids on a corner wearing T-shirts. Why can’t there be something on the T-shirt? Why can’t we make it a concert T-shirt? Put a Van Halen logo on there or something like that? Or a logo, you know – I’m trying to think of one of the first ones we did – ah, I forget the name of the band. But we actually did as a product placement a record company. Remember, Marvel puts out, if I remember correctly, forty to sixty comic books a month, so there are plenty of opportunities throughout the comics where there are some people wearing T-shirts that could have a logo on it.

Advertising real estate, just sitting there-

Right, exactly. So, as long as it was organic and it didn’t really seem obtrusive to the reader, they agreed for me to do it. It was a big ordeal. Every time I cut a product placement deal, I would have to sit down with the editors, and we together would figure out where to put these placements. The first one we ever did was with Nike. Nike was coming out with a new

skateboarding shoe, the Nike 6.0. And that was the first deal we ever cut where it was actually paid for. In the past we would do something value-added as a favor to one of our movie studio partners. We would put something in there. But nobody ever paid for it until Nike did. And that was, oh, I forget the amount of placements, but maybe over twelve months there were like six or eight placements throughout the comic book. We determined what comic book; they could not choose – “We only want to be in *Spider-Man*” or “We only want to be in *Captain America*” or “We only to be in *Fantastic Four*” – we determined where this was done. Remember, it’s got to be organic.

So the first one we ever did was Nike. Not only did kids wear the Nikes, if they could be drawn in as footwear, but when Spider-Man flew through Times Square or when a bus was in the scene, on the side of the bus, where there was an ad, like all ads are, instead of what was really there, we would put Nike 6.0. And it went well. A lot of business, a lot of print business. We got a lot of ad schedules because of this, because, you know, nobody else could offer it. Nobody could offer product placement in a magazine. But because we were a comic book, it allowed us to do this, and the flow was normal without its being obtrusive.

The next one we did was with Dodge, which is when the article came out. We booked a deal with Dodge where, you know – you can imagine all the cars. Marvel Comics – the good thing about Marvel and why Marvel fans in general loved Marvel versus DC comics: Marvel comic-book heroes and comic-books take place in real cities – real times, real people, real places. None of the characters was born on Mars or Krypton or wherever. You get real people, real problems. So the scenery was real-life New York. So when a bus came by, we had that opportunity; in Times Square, we had that opportunity; when a taxi came by with an ad on top of it like they have, we had that opportunity. Nobody else could do it. So with Dodge, you know, we made the cars in that scene the Caliber, which was the car they were promoting the most when we did it with them. Again, these were in the form of value-added items, but, in the scheme of things, when you look at the entire proposal, they were paying for these placements. We also did it for a music company or two with concert T-shirts, with just, you know, kids wearing T-shirts with bands’ names on them, just like in real life. And quite honestly, until the article came out, the readers didn’t even notice because it was so natural, which was great for me, Editorially, because nobody was complaining, except for some of the purists, who would send me hate mail and things like that. But you’re going to have that with any purists in anything.

Now, I’ve been out of there a good two years, so I don’t know if it’s . . .

They’re actually doing it quite a bit. I mean--

Are you a big fan?

I've actually always been a fan of comics, and Marvel especially, because of one of the points you brought up – you know, the whole real-world experience.

And the great thing is – and why the movies do so well – the Marvel characters are real people with real problems, whether it's girl problems or money problems or whatever problems. You know, the DC characters are from another planet, they're not human, so they can't have the problems like normal people like us have. And that's why they sell a heck of a lot more comic books than their nearest competitor. I mean Marvel's market share is probably a good 45–50%.

I think that last year, out of the top ten comics that were sold, the top ten–selling comics of the year, Marvel had eight.

Yeah, that's the way it was when I was there even before they had dominated. But, you know, I'm trying to think of the other – oh, Army! The last big one we did was with Army. We had a huge deal that the U.S. Army made with us. A lot of advertising online, and they had probably eight product placements in the year's time they advertised with us. They had their campaign "Army Strong" and we did a lot with that, whether it was on T-shirts or on banners in the background, you know – the normal advertising opportunities. That was the last big one I did before I left to do what I'm doing now.

You mentioned talking with Editorial and the push-and-shove you had to go through with them about the whole product placement process, getting them on board, and getting them on board for, I assume, each individual instance of a product placement. Were the writers and illustrators brought in that process also?

Not by me. I would deal with the editors. It's a there are a lot of levels of management. I would deal with the highest level of management and then it would be a trickle-down effect from there. I, with the ad guys, in the next three months, Army or Nike needs four placements. Here's their logo – put it wherever you see fit, or something. Then they would have a meeting with the actual creative people who actually did the drawing and things like that. They were the ones who would figure it out: Let's go through the forty or fifty comics we've got coming out this month – where does this make sense? And they would find it. I actually didn't sit there and go over scene by scene where the opportunities I would just say, "All right, guys, for the next few months we need six for this advertiser and we need four placements for this advertiser. And then, after a month or so, they'd have them. Because remember, the comics are drawn months in advance before they come out, so . . . And they did a good job of getting it done and meeting the advertiser's expectations.

Was there ever any talk of pairing product placements with more traditional full-page ads for the same product?

We wouldn't do that. That was one of the rules. The month a product placement ran couldn't be the same month of an ad. We didn't want it to seem like, in music and in pay-per-play. We didn't want to cross that line where it seemed like we were doing this for the money. You know, in all honesty, we weren't – we didn't have to. But it would look more like you were doing it for the money when there was an ad for a Dodge and then on the next page, there was a Dodge product placement. Again, that's not organic, that's unnatural. And we were shooting for an organic, natural look.

This program, was it something that, after you had formulated it, did you any kind of test research on readers, or did you just go on intuition that it would be good?

No, and you know why? Because the least amount of the comic book readers – again, the advertisers understood that this couldn't be obtrusive because the worst that could happen was that our readers would revolt against us and their product. So they agreed that, you know, we weren't going to promote it a lot. We were going to let it evolve naturally. So we never really did that because the last thing I would want to do is to do a research program like that and then, you know what the answer would be. It would come back, "We hate those ads. We never want to see them again. They shouldn't be in there." So if I ever did something like that, the results would be so skewed that it would be detrimental to our books, to our advertising.

The purists hated it, but, you know, the other people, the other side of the spectrum, thought it was pretty cool, cutting edge in the twenty-first century. I used to tell these haters who used to contact me, "You know, listen, you know all these great writers that we have and all these great characters that are made, who pays their salaries to do all this stuff? It's ad sales." It's not like we make a lot of money in subscription. The money is made in advertising, and the more advertising revenue that we make, the more money we make to pay these great creative people that do what they do best. So it went well. I was happy that Marvel agreed to that, they were open to cool, cutting-edge ideas like this. I don't know if you look at the ads now. When I was there, we broke the car category, we broke many, many categories that they had never gotten from advertisers before. I mean, let's think now, fashion, we broke the fashion category. They wouldn't let me sell to liquor, obviously, but it they would have . . . I could have gotten a lot of tobacco and liquor, but they wouldn't allow me to get those advertisers. But, what I was known for, if you ask anybody who's still there, was that I was responsible for the huge influx of nonendemic advertisers that are now in Marvel. Again, when I started there, there was KB Toy Store, there were video games, E-rated; there were a lot of kid ads in comic books that were read by guys 18-34. I got the advertisers to match the age of the reader.

When you're looking at these product placement programs or when you were looking at the possibility of it, and you said you didn't want to do a lot of promotion for it. You didn't want to put it out there so everyone all of a sudden noticed these really subtle placements. When you talked to, say, Nike or someone about it, were they more concerned about increasing brand awareness? Or recall of a brand?

It was basically brand awareness. They weren't interested – we kind of talked them out of it because we told them -- you know, because they're so organic, it was more subliminal. You wanted them to notice subliminally. If it got noticed too much, we weren't doing what we set out to do. So, yeah. And they were all for it. They were all for it.

I've managed to pick through and just find a lot of examples in Marvel Comics and some other publishers who have developed these product placement programs.

[laughs] They're all copycats. You know who did it first –

Before the Wall Street Journal article, maybe a few years before, DC Comics Executive Editor Dan DiDio wasn't too enthusiastic about product placement in comics, in fact he seemed outright opposed to the idea that it could work.

At DC, I know, but that's between two companies. Time Warner was very old school, and Marvel was very cutting-edge, just like their characters and just like their comics.

When [Marvel Comics Editor-in-Chief] Joe Quesada would do his "Cup O' Joe" columns for Newsarama, there would be a lot of people, like you said, some of the hard-core fans asking, "You know, why are you changing ads? Why are there so many ads?" and so on.

Oh, we got a lot of that. Those were the only times I was told I was doing too good of a job selling ads. Especially, in November and December, we literally . . . I mean, I was allowed . . . most months I was capped; I could only sell so many ads, but in the months of November and December, when these are the huge revenue months for advertising, they would allow me to sell as many ads as I wanted. And we had some comic books with 48 pages. We would double the size of them. We would have comic books with, like, five spread ads, you know, a two-page spread. And, again, it would be hard because, you know, a lot of times the ads in those issues would get in the way of the story. You'd be on the edge of your seat, reading, and then you'd have to flip through three pages to get to the next, you know, whatever-they-call-them, slide or whatever. So, yeah, would get a lot of complaints in the fourth quarter every year; we would really bulk up the magazines. They were double in size in the fourth quarter.

Have you gone to the, have you read the online Marvel press kit?

Oh, yeah, that's been really helpful. Trying to trudge through the quarterly reports is always fun. And the media kit seem to pride itself on extolling the virtues of fact that something like less than 10% of Marvel's total output is returnable by retailers. That kind of a deal – did that help you out as far as selling ads to people? To say, "This stuff's going out, and it's not going to come back?"

Oh, yeah, that was great. That's one thing that we used to promote was that our circulation was 99.9% paid, that there were no returns. They didn't get it at first. They didn't understand it! How could that be? Because no other magazine has that. And we had to educate them on why. People keep these because they're worth things after years and years and years. That was on the long list of features and benefits we had – that was one of them.

As far as what ads go where, is it just that you get ad deals cut with certain companies and then you put the ads where you see fit? Or was there a tiered system where readership comes into play? How much a book is selling?

No, no, not at all. It's all about . . . how Marvel works is, for the most part, there are two, I don't know what you call them, divisions or, networks: the junior network and the senior network. Basically, with the junior network, it was for all advertisers looking to reach boys under eighteen, and the senior network is looking for all boys – all men – over eighteen. The senior network, like I said before, the senior network had a circulation at the time I was there of 2.2 million. Only three men's magazines in America had a hotter circulation than Marvel's senior network. And in the senior network, I think there were forty titles, and your ad placement that you bought was in the same place in every comic book in that network. So if you booked the back cover of the senior network in December, your ad was the back cover of all forty comics in the senior network. If you bought the third right-hand page position, your ad was the third right-hand page position in all forty comics.

So nobody's buying into exclusively *Spider-Man* or *Captain America*. . . .

No, you can't do that. People would ask, people always would say that, and I would say, "By the way, did you know that *Spider-Man* isn't even the largest circulation title we have?" No, *X-Men* was. If you take the circulation of *X-Men* alone -- somebody once told me this -- if you took the circulation of *X-Men* alone over the last thirty years, it would be the third largest comic book company in the world. It would be Marvel, DC, and X-Men.

Again, Marvel . . . Marvel's circulation, if you combine the junior and senior network is approximately 3.7 million, as far as I recall. There are only like twelve magazines in the world with a larger circulation than Marvel. And if you look at just the senior network, the 18-34 comics, only three magazines

have a larger circulation: *Playboy*, *Sports Illustrated*, and *Maxim*. And we used to go back and forth with *Maxim*; we would beat them sometimes for the year. So at one point we would go from number four to number three in the country. But we were consistently in the top four every year. The work of me and my sales team when I was there, the advertising community definitely knows now that Marvel is a force to be reckoned with, both in the kid and tween market, and also in the men's market.

A lot of people brought up in discussions that everybody's nostalgic about how things used to be and that kind of stuff, about old ads in comics – about how they were so iconic. You know, they were Atlas ads or this, that and the other, and it seemed like they kind of belonged in comic books.

Yeah, again, welcome to the club – I know. I know. Like the x-ray vision glasses and stuff like that?

They talked about just the way they were made, and they just seemed like things that lived and breathed inside the pages of the comics. And one thing that I've heard from people is that ads now kind of seem like they're the same ads they'd see in any other kind of magazine.

Well, do you know why? Do you know why? For many years, but the problem was for many, many years, these guys, who are now in their thirties and forties who are still reading comics, they grew up with those same ads. If it wasn't for me and my sales team . . . what happened was, these guys would read comic books, and they would put them in a public place like a commuter train or a bus, they would put them in another magazine and read them because they were ashamed. And I actually had a guy tell me, "I'm not ashamed any more to read my comic book with the Skechers ad on the back cover, the same one that's in *Playboy*, the same one that's in *Maxim* or *FHM*. I actually got e-mails, and they were proud to read them now in public because there wasn't a bee-bee ad on the back cover, there wasn't an ad catering to a five-year-old. You know, in the world of advertising, the ads are supposed to match the age of the reader. For thirty years – well, not for thirty, they've only been accepting ads for the last twenty – yeah, well, now it's like a normal magazine where the target ads that are in there are matching the reader. That never happened before. Now you could read a comic book in public and people won't laugh at you because the ad on the back cover is a cool ad targeting the twenty-nine-year-old or thirty-year-old, not a five-year-old or an eight-year-old.

That seems like a really good strategy to have, that people actually see ads that they kind of expect to see and they're fine with other people seeing. Was there ever any kind of talk about taking those ads from car companies or Nike or anything like that and gearing them more toward the comic that they were in? Not necessarily putting characters in them or anything like that –

Yeah, part of what we started to do later, before I left, is with Dodge, when Dodge came out with the Dodge Caliber, we actually – for a huge, you know, huge premium – our characters . . . we made special ads just for our comics with our characters in their ads. I don't know if you've seen that. Let me think. Three or four years ago, if you go into a comic book, every Dodge Caliber ad had our characters in it, but it could not be used in any other magazine except ours. They couldn't use it in *Playboy* or for stuff or in *S.I.* It was exclusive to our titles. We made those ads. The thing for the car, we would think of – I've forgotten what the saying was, whatever the tag line was – but our characters appeared in the ads. That was huge. That was huge. I think, to date, we had only done that with Dodge. Nobody else had taken advantage of that. You don't want to do it for everybody, either. That was a huge buy that they made, and for the amount of money they were paying, they deserved it – in my eyes, anyway, as a Sales Director.

Well, I really appreciate your taking the time to talk to me

I don't mind. I'm proud of what we did and accomplished. It was a great part of my life, working there. I was able to really make a difference, kind of go down in history with all the stuff that we did – you know, we got car ads in there, we got fashion ads in there, we got so many types of advertising that were never there before. That's a feather in my cap, and that's how I'll be remembered there, you know, forever. And they dominated, and the writers and editorial people did their thing, and while we dominated on the advertising front, we also dominated editorially and the sales numbers showed it. It was great. It was great to be there. It was great to educate people there. You know, at the meeting, they would not know what to expect, but once we got done with the facts, they'd be in awe, like, "I had no idea you guys were so big. I had no idea that the average reader was twenty-nine years old and made \$80 grand a year. I mean, it was great to educate the entire advertising community. Marvel was very frugal with their money, so they wouldn't allow me to advertise in like *Ad Age*, *Adweek* to let the whole industry know, so we had to get the word out once sales call by one sales call, sale one fills up by each salesman, one call at a time, and we were able to do it. And they're a better company for it, that's for sure.

Well, thank you again very much. I greatly appreciate it.

No problem. The only thing you have to do is say "former Advertising Director at Marvel and *FSU graduate*." [laughter]

Well, I'll try to sneak that in.

Yeah, I'm sure.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Kristofer Morgan Mehaffey was born in 1981 and grew up in a small Florida citrus town, dreaming of big city lights and lazy college Saturdays spent with his own dog. That opportunity came in 2000 when he enrolled at the University of Florida as an art major and moved to the sprawling metropolis of Gainesville, Florida. Truly, he had arrived.

During his tenure at the University of Florida, Kristofer had the honor of being inducted as a Brother of Pi Lambda Phi fraternity, serving as the Undergraduate Councilman to the International Executive Council of Pi Lambda Phi fraternity (for which he received a very stylish gavel), and being selected as a member of the University of Florida's Student Judicial Committee (no gavel). The University of Florida recognized Kristofer's artistic talents in 2005 when he was awarded a BA in English.

After working as a technical editor for a Department of Defense subcontractor in Frederick, Maryland, a shiftless layabout in Washington, D.C., and a video editor in Orlando, Florida, Kristofer returned to the University of Florida and received a Master of Advertising in 2010.

Kristofer's interests include brand planning and strategy, graphic design, art and architectural history (a field of study in which Kristofer received a minor as an undergraduate), comics, animation, film, video editing, snowboarding and hard-shelled tacos. Texture, in life and food, is everything. He tends to give wide berth to installation art, instrumental trance and people whom self-identify as "quirky".

As of this writing, he has yet to own a dog.