User Engagement with the Comic Arts Collection

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**Introduction**

This paper summarizes our process to research people’s experiences with the Comic Arts Collection at Michigan State University. During a month-long time period, we used various methods, such as touring the collection and interviewing stakeholders, to gather information about how participants interacted with the collection. In addition, we discussed which users our client was interested in attracting and how we could encourage more to come. We used our data to find areas to help enhance people’s academic engagement with the collection. Below we discuss three main areas to help encourage more user engagement: adding to the existing website, creating physical guides to the special collections space, and increasing participation from academic departments in MSU.

**Results**

We discovered users easily located the comic collections website through a google search. Once in the website, users experienced difficulty finding their comic of interest. Some believed that the alphabetical index was by title, and not author, while others were confused with the information describing each comic in the genre section. Users did not know exactly what information was needed to acquire the comic once they were in the reading room.

In asking users to find the special collections’ reading room, we found that users often spent a considerable amount of time locating it. In regards to academic participation, we found that the special collections is often lesser known by students. Those who did know, were introduced through a classroom setting by professor who instructed assignments using the collection.
Discussion

With the knowledge that most disruptions lie within the Comic Arts Collection’s website, physical location and academic participation, our group believes the next logical step would be to approach these disruptions. In regards to the website and physical location, both those experiences could be improved through relatively simple processes. Approaching and appealing to more academic audiences, however, will take a more thorough discussion.

Most disruptions involving the physical location can be addressed through the library itself. Suggestions to complete this involve the addition of more explicit signs (i.e. larger signs and clearer markings of the location) throughout the library. By implementing these signs/markings, academics will be able to more easily and quickly find/use the collection and potentially improve their studies.

With the website, a face-lift of the surface aesthetics could potentially result in more efficient browsing and searching of graphic novels for academics. Consequently, better efficiency would also increase reliability and value of the collection’s website as an online academic resource. Several suggestions for the website can include a more attractive layout and display of relevant information to users, a varied system of categorization for scholars to narrow down browsing/search results to their intended interests, and clear separation and display of results once users have completed their search. We suggest looking to existing comic arts collections to create a user-friendly layout.

In regards to approaching and attracting more academic audiences, a thorough discussion involving stakeholders and audiences of interest will be necessary. With the current marketing/promotional strategies of the Comic Arts Collection, the audience that currently uses the collection are mostly those whose studies relate closely to the design and humanities industries. Through our group’s research, the results also uncovered that a
majority of users discovered the collection only through their individual classes. In hopes of discovering what spaces the collection could reach out to as a viable resource, our group suggests several questions whose answers may help address the situation:

- What courses have previously used the collection as a resource?
- How can the collection present graphic novels as mediums for research?
- How can the collection present graphic novels as inspiration for art?

For the first question, we suggest approaching courses and departments that previously used the collection, to discuss creating a project each term where students would be required to utilize the collection in their research. In addition, previous users could recommend other professors or academic institutions that might also be interested in using the collection in their classrooms. In answer to the second question, we believe by promoting the collection in environments, other than the classroom, the collection would attract more attention, and potentially more users. If advertised solely as an academic resource, this would limit the amount of non-academic users. Finally, for the third question, there are many students in the Art, Art History, and Design department that enjoy creating their own graphic novels. By involving these students with the collection (through promotions and in-class assignments involving the collection), they would have the advantage of thousands of international authors and art styles to gather inspiration from. This would allow them to develop their own artistic style from experts around the globe.

Conclusion

The Comic Arts collection is the largest comic arts collection in North America, with over 200,000 comics. With the magnitude of history and marvels that exist within it, we believe that the way the collection is represented should reflect how special this collection actually is. It deserves to be used at many venues so that others are able to tap into the vast
amount of knowledge it holds. With the observations found and the suggestions discussed above, we believe that the comic arts collection will have a positive impact for its users and open a process of continual improvement.