

THE COMIC BOOK AGENDA: ALTERING PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES
TOWARDS LGBTQIA+ PEOPLE THROUGH GRAPHIC NARRATIVES

by

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my family—both by nature and by choice—without whom none of this would be possible.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation	Description
1. LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, and other Non-Heterosexual People
2. ATLG	Attitudes Towards Lesbians and Gays (survey)

ABSTRACT

Sexual minorities in America face a multitude of struggles in an intolerant and prejudiced society. From micro-aggressions and bullying in school to the denial of basic civil rights and mass-shootings targeting gay spaces, acts of sexual prejudice against members of the queer community continue to be an issue. The need for tolerance education and ways to create empathy and connection between the dominant society and sexual minorities is quite literally a matter of life and death.

This thesis examines how graphic narratives, such as comic books, can and have been used as catalysts for social change. The goal of this research was to determine what effect, if any, a comic book about real queer people might have on improving sexually prejudiced people's attitudes and perceptions towards sexual minorities.

A prototype of the comic book was created and tested with six students that had shown mid- to high-levels of prejudice (based off of responses to the *Attitudes Towards Lesbians and Gays Scale* test). The results of these tests showed reduced levels of prejudice in all but one of the participants, with the levels of difference varying significantly.

I. INTRODUCTION

There have been some major civil rights victories for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and other non-heterosexual (LGBTQIA+) people in recent years: the Supreme Court's decision in favor of marriage equality, the repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" within the US military, and the upholding of non-discrimination protections for LGBT workers under the 1964 Civil Rights Law. Despite these accomplishments in the realm of American liberty, the queer community (an umbrella term for the LGBTQIA+ spectrum) is still victim to high levels of intolerance, discrimination, and prejudice.¹ The effect of such discrimination and prejudice on the LGBTQIA+ community is devastating, leading to higher rates of suicide attempts, alcohol abuse, and depression.²

There are currently several methods being used to combat *sexual prejudice*—defined by Herek as "negative attitudes based on sexual orientation, whether their target is homosexual, bisexual, or heterosexual."³ Tolerance programs and educational materials about various communities are popular techniques, while individual relationships with, and representations in mass media of sexual minorities are more passive, but no less powerful methods. In particular, representation in mass media is viewed by many LGBTQIA+ Americans as being an invaluable aide in fostering acceptance towards their

¹ Joseph G. Kosciw, et al., "The 2013 National School Climate Survey," *GLSEN* (New York, NY: GLSEN Inc., 2013).

² Stephen T. Russell and Kara Joyner, "Adolescent Sexual Orientation and Suicide Risk: Evidence From a National Study," *American Journal of Public Health* 91(8) (2001): 1276–1281.

³ Gregory M. Herek, "Beyond 'Homophobia': Thinking About Sexual Prejudice and Stigma in the Twenty-First Century," *Journal of NSRC Vol. 1, No. 2* (2004): 16.

community.⁴

One category of mass media that has seen a resurgence of popularity, as well as a push for inclusion and diversity, is that of graphic narratives like comic books and graphic novels. Thanks to the success of Hollywood blockbusters like *The Avengers* and *The Dark Knight*, sales of graphic narratives have soared to highs not seen in nearly two decades.⁵ These movies have drawn a wide swath of demographics beyond the traditional young white male readership to comics, increasing the demand for and production of more diverse characters and storylines. Because of this surge in representation, and the accessibility of the comic book form, graphic narratives have become a powerful tool in promoting tolerance and acceptance of diversity.

Promoting tolerance and acceptance is a good start, but can a graphic narrative actually create tangible change in someone's attitudes toward or perception of an entire group of people? The purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate how graphic narratives of LGBTQIA+ characters could be used to help improve perceptions and attitudes towards sexual minorities among prejudiced individuals.

Storytelling and Design

Stories have been used to teach, entertain, and bring people together since humanity's earliest days. Creation myths helped explain how the world came to be and

⁴ Bruce Drake, "How LGBT adults see society and how the public sees them," *Pew Research Center*, June 25, 2013, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/06/25/how-lgbt-adults-see-society-and-how-the-public-sees-them/>.

⁵ Travis M. Andrews, "The resurgence of comic books: The industry has its best-selling month in nearly two decades," *Washington Post*, July 12, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2016/07/12/the-resurgence-of-comic-books-the-industry-has-its-best-selling-month-in-nearly-two-decades/>.

man's place within it, while fairytales taught valuable lessons about kindness, trust, and why one should not talk to strangers—even if their house is made of candy. Stories bind society by highlighting and reinforcing commonalities in shared values and culture.⁶ Stories are also useful in practicing the skills and nuances of human social life,⁷ and can therefore serve as a training ground for how to navigate the difficult and often confusing world of social interaction. Since humans currently lack the ability to transfer experiences from one to another through osmosis or telepathy, only through stories can people even begin to understand what someone else has been through. Luckily, a story can serve as a substitute for experience, allowing the recipient to comprehend or perceive an event without the need to physically be there—indicating that stories can span the barriers of time and distance.⁸ It is this power that makes storytelling such an integral part of how people understand and react to the world around them.

Some of the most powerful storytellers today are communication designers—those that visually craft information to communicate with various audiences—and comics creators. According to design professor and author Lucinda Hitchcock, designers can be seen as *cultural curators*—condensing society's stories visually by “choosing, framing, and presenting what gets seen, reproduced, and disseminated.”⁹ Through these means,

⁶ Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (New York, NY: First Mariner Books, 2013), 137.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁸ Lucinda Hitchcock, “Graphic Design, Storytelling, and the Making of Meaning,” in *The Art of Critical Making: Rhode Island School of Design on Creative Practice*, ed. by Rosanne Somerson and Mara Hermano (John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 172.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 165.

designers visually communicate to the audience specific narratives and serve as middlemen between source and audience. For instance, a logo is a story about its company: Its history, personality, and purpose. The design of an infographic can visually tell a story about rising student debt via data visualizations, water conservation in third world countries via advertising, or the most popular baby names of 2016 (Sophia and Jackson) via online media.¹⁰ Designers can augment stories by using visual hierarchy techniques in order to focus the consumer's attention on certain pieces of information, simplifying difficult concepts, and adding other layers of meaning.

In many of the same ways, comics creators choose, frame (quite literally, in the form of panels), and present information in a visual narrative in order to communicate a story to an audience. Both designers and comics creators must condense large amounts of information into economical and efficient arrangements, emphasizing key information and communicating specific narratives, all the while leading the reader/audience through the piece in a simple and fluid way. The ability to manipulate and shape the message of a story through a visual medium is what gives designers and comics creators so much power; and if comics have taught us anything, it is that “with great power there must also come—great responsibility.”¹¹

Thesis Organization

This thesis will first present the context of the problem—sexual prejudice and discrimination towards LGBTQIA+ people—as well as current solutions. Chapter Three

¹⁰ “Most Popular Baby Names of 2016,” Baby Center, Accessed December 06, 2016, <http://www.babycenter.com/top-baby-names-2016.htm>.

¹¹ Stan Lee and Steve Ditko, *Amazing Fantasy* #15 (Marvel Comics, 1962), 11.

will explain the reasoning behind the use of graphic narratives as a design solution and the precedence of similar efforts in other areas. Chapter Four will then explain the methodology behind creating and testing a prototype of those narratives, followed by the results from the test in Chapter Five, and concluding in Chapter Six with a discussion of the findings and options for future research.

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Prejudice

In order to understand prejudice against the LGBTQIA+ community, one must first understand the nature of prejudice itself. Merriam-Webster defines prejudice as “injury or damage resulting from some judgment or action of another in disregard of one’s rights,” with a second definition explaining it as “an irrational attitude of hostility directed against an individual, a group, a race, or their supposed characteristics.”¹² Both definitions require the creation and subsequent rejection of a category of person—an “other”—for prejudice to occur.

Categorizing people and information into groups (e.g., familiar versus unfamiliar) is a primal and natural phenomenon. Psychologist Gordon W. Allport discusses how, in order to get through the day, humans have to filter the overwhelming amount of sensory data received through external sensors into pre-constructed concepts of understanding through internal processes of Selection, Accentuation, and Interpretation.¹³ By focusing on certain stimuli from the vast amount of incoming data (Selection), exaggerating certain details while dismissing others (Accentuation), and utilizing previously acquired information to explain the new data in a way that is meaningful to them (Interpretation), people can create categories and groups of information that allow them to continue to function without being completely overcome by their senses. This process also applies to

¹² “Prejudice,” Merriam-Webster.com. Accessed December 13, 2016. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/prejudice>.

¹³ Gordon W. Allport, *The nature of prejudice* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1954), 166.

the creation of groups of people to which information and generalizations are attributed, providing the basis for many social interactions.

The formation of these groups is not inherently negative, as familiarity is a positive force for survival; but even when the categorization is benign—like the creation of a group of peers through the convenience of proximity or interest—differences between separate groups become outlined in greater detail and misconceptions and misunderstandings are more easily generated. One consequence of the categorization of people into groups is a belief in *group essence*: the idea that belonging to a certain group means that everyone in that group shares certain characteristics with each other.¹⁴ This belief solidifies the concept of “other” and creates the dichotomy of in-groups/out-groups: groups to which one belongs, versus groups which one does not. How one group treats or thinks about another group can affect the attitudes held by other members of the original group,¹⁵ creating a breeding ground of potentially negative stereotypes and hostility. *Group essence* also makes it easier to hate groups of people rather than individuals, because groups are abstract concepts full of generalizations that do not need to be tested against reality to be believed. Even when an individual challenges the generalizations or stereotypes of a group to which they belong, that individual can be dismissed as an exception rather than a representative sample. It is easier for one’s brain to process that an individual is different or unique than to redefine and overhaul the

¹⁴ Ibid., 173–174.

¹⁵ Jeni Loftus, “America’s Liberalization in Attitudes toward Homosexuality, 1973 to 1998” in *American Sociological Review* 66, no. 5 (2001), 763.

interpretation and understanding of an entire group.

Though the creation of groups is an important first step to creating prejudice,

Allport explains just how many factors go into making a prejudiced individual:

A person acts with prejudice in the first instance because he perceives the object of prejudice in a certain way. But he perceives it in a certain way partly because his personality is what it is. And his personality is what it is chiefly because of the way he was socialized (training in family, school, neighborhood). The existing social situation is also a factor in his socialization and may also be a determinant of his perceptions. Behind those forces lie other valid but more remote causal influences. They involve the structure of society in which one lives, long-standing economic and cultural traditions, as well as national and historical influences of long duration.¹⁶

In regards to prejudice against members of the LGBTQIA+ community (sexual prejudice), several of these sources play significant roles. Though this thesis does not attempt to answer each in totality, certain aspects can be addressed in search of an overall solution.

Sexual Prejudice

Sexual prejudice began with the creation of the marginalized group: non-heterosexuals. Homosexuality as a concept, or even a word, did not exist until the mid-19th century.¹⁷ Prior to that, sexual acts between people of the same sex were understood solely as acts perpetrated by individuals and not as a defining characteristic of a group of people (homosexuals). The ancient Greeks considered sexual activity between men (and to some extent, women) as a natural and established practice with its own role and importance within society.¹⁸ The Catholic Church did not associate the sexual/deviant act

¹⁶ Allport, *The nature of prejudice*, 208.

¹⁷ Francis Mark Mondimore, *A Natural History of Homosexuality* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 3.

¹⁸ Brent Pickett, "Homosexuality," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* Fall 2015 edition, edited by Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2015), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2015/entries/homosexuality/>.

with being inherent to a category of person when it began condemning sodomy in the ecumenical of Lateran III in 1179 AD. All acts of sodomy, whether they were with someone of the same sex or someone of the opposite sex, were condemned by the church—though some vocal members of the church singled out same-sex acts as “the worst type of sexual crime.”¹⁹

A major shift came in the 18th and 19th centuries when scientists began classifying sexual acts in terms of what was innate or biologically driven, instead of a choice on the part of the individual. This classification precipitated the idea that same-sex acts were unnatural, and that homosexuality was a “deep, unchosen characteristic of persons, regardless of whether they act upon that orientation,” and was seen as a “defective or pathological disease.”²⁰ Thus labeled, a binary of heterosexuality versus homosexuality was created, with heterosexuality being seen as positive and natural, and homosexuality as being negative and abhorrent. The creation of the homosexual category led to a belief in *group essence*—which in this context was almost entirely negative—serving as the basis for what this thesis refers to as sexual prejudice.

It is important to note that this thesis does not use the word “homophobia” to describe prejudice towards sexual minorities. Homophobia, though recognized as a psychological and sociological term in the literature, has its roots in *fear* and does not address the root source of prejudice, nor does it explain any reason for violence and

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

hatred.²¹ Racism and sexism are not considered based on fear, so it stands to reason that prejudice towards sexual minorities should be treated the same.

Thought to Action

With a centuries-long history of anti-sodomy laws across the Western world, negative feelings towards individuals that committed those crimes were easily transferred to the newly created group of people (homosexuals) to whom those acts were now seen as an integral part, or disease. Homosexuals, or any person that did not fully conform to the established gender and sexual norms of society (non-heterosexuals), were seen to be challenging the “natural” state of the world and were therefore met with confusion, suspicion, disgust, fear, and in all too many cases, violence. Separation between in-group members (heterosexuals) and out-group members (homosexuals) was the result, which in turn created more mistrust and misunderstandings between the two. Any deviation from what was considered “natural” sexual acts became a scarlet letter, marking the acting individual as part of the out-group, regardless of whether or not they were actually homosexual.

Metaphorical scarlet letters turned into physical pink triangles during the Nazi Holocaust. Homosexuals (mostly gay men) on whom the Gestapo had been keeping records in their “pink lists” were rounded up, charged with criminal activity under Paragraph 175—which criminalized homosexuality under the rule of Wilhelm I in 1871²²—forced to wear pink triangles to identify them as homosexuals, and sent to

²¹ Christopher Fox, “IT'S HATRED AND INTOLERANCE NOT FEAR,” *Gay and Lesbian Issues and Psychology Review* 5, no. 3 (2009), 161.

²² Craig Kaczorowski, “Paragraph 175,” *GLBTQ Archive* (gltbq, Inc., 2004), Accessed December 21, 2016. http://www.glbqtarchive.com/ssh/paragraph_175_S.pdf.

concentration camps.²³ Even after the liberation of the camps, the imprisoned homosexuals were still considered criminals by the liberating forces—since Paragraph 175 was written before Nazi rule—until the law stopped being enforced in 1969.²⁴ Survivors who did finally make it back home after liberation were stigmatized for being “outed” as not just homosexuals, but criminals. Paragraph 175 was not repealed until 1994, and homosexual victims of the Holocaust were denied compensation for their treatment in the camps until as recently as 2006, even after finally being officially pardoned of all crimes in 2002 (most of which were exonerated posthumously).²⁵ The Holocaust was one of the most extreme examples of prejudice in all its forms, but the treatment of homosexuals after liberation is an all-too-common story in queer history. As recently as April 2017, homosexual men in Chechnya have been rounded up, interrogated, tortured, and in some cases killed—all on account of the zealotry and intolerance promoted by the head of the Chechen Republic, Ramzan Kadyrov.²⁶

The silencing of LGBTQIA+ voices, discrediting of their experiences, and even criminalization of non-heterosexual lives is not solely a European phenomenon. America has its own tumultuous relationship with people who did not fit “traditional” gender norms—a relationship that continues today. From antiquated laws outlawing same-sex

²³ “Holocaust Encyclopedia,” Accessed December 21, 2016, <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005261>.

²⁴ Jennifer Rokakis. “The Persecution of Homosexuals During the Holocaust.” Senior Honors Theses. Eastern Michigan University (2013), 31.

²⁵ “Germany To Compensate Gay Men Convicted Under Nazi-Era Ban On Homosexuality.” October 16, 2016. http://www.thenewcivilrights_movement.com/claude_summers/germany_announces_compensation_plan_for_those_convicted_under_paragraph_175.

²⁶ Tanya Lokshina, “Anti-LGBT Violence in Chechnya,” *Human Rights Watch*, April 4, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/04/04/anti-lgbt-violence-chechnya>.

relations (overturned by the Supreme Court in *Lawrence v. Texas* in 2003), police brutality and discrimination towards the LGBTQIA+ community (first brought to the nation's attention with the Stonewall Riots in 1969, and which recent studies on law enforcement²⁷ show is an ongoing and pervasive problem still today), and outright murder of LGBTQIA+ individuals (e.g., the gruesome homicide of Matthew Shepard in 1998 and, most recently, the largest mass-shooting in American history at Orlando's *Pulse* nightclub in 2016), LGBTQIA+ Americans have been, and continue to be victims of sexual prejudice.

The historical precedence of government-sanctioned prejudice towards sexual minorities feeds into the general psyche of the populace, lending credibility and legitimacy to feelings and actions of hate and discrimination, which in turn, ushers in more prejudiced legislation and action. A devastating example of this vicious cycle is the Reagan Administration's complete disregard of the seriousness of the AIDS crisis of the 1980s until it was far too late. From their outright disregard and laughter at the concept of the disease as a serious threat after it had killed over 21,000 people in the US, to dismissal of the problem because it was a states' rights issue—sexual acts between same-sex partners were still illegal in certain parts of the country at the time—President Ronald Reagan, his wife Nancy, and their staff perpetuated the sentiment of their Republican constituents of the time that gay lives were immoral, unworthy of saving, and that the homosexuals had brought it upon themselves.²⁸ These attitudes were prevalent all over

²⁷ Christy Mallory, et al, "Discrimination and Harassment by Law Enforcement Officers in the LGBT Community" (The Williams Institute, UCLA, 2015), 1.

²⁸ Maria L La Ganga, "The first lady who looked away: Nancy and the Reagans' troubling Aids legacy," *The Guardian*, March 11, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/mar/11/nancy-ronald-reagan->

the United States and perpetuated by so-called informational pamphlets (see Figure 1) that renamed AIDS as “The Gay Plague.” These pamphlets spread false information about the cause of homosexuality—saying that homosexuality was “learned”—that the “average gay has had more than 500 (usually anonymous) sexual partners,” and that “several homosexual organizations promote anal sex with children,” all based on “scientific” papers that were summarily debunked by the rest of the scientific community.²⁹ The effect of such propaganda being echoed within the highest levels of government cast LGBTQIA+ Americans as second-class citizens for decades, which has a wide variety of implications at both personal and public levels for sexual minorities.

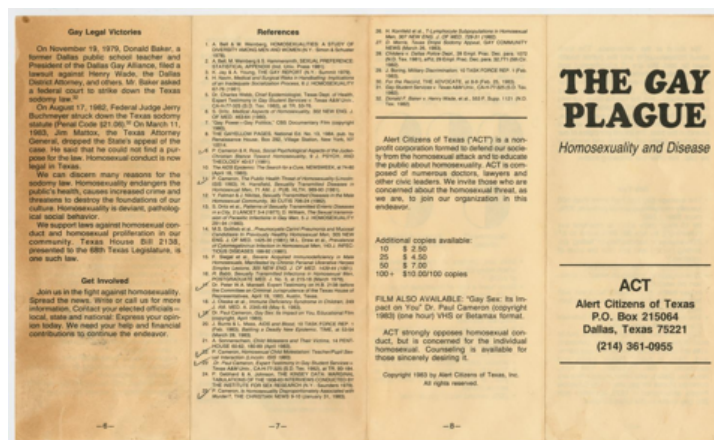


Fig. 1: Alert Citizens of Texas. *The Gay Plague: Homosexuality and Disease*. 1983. Pamphlet. An “informational” pamphlet spread widely around the South of the United States, originating in Dallas, Texas.

Impact on LGBTQIA+ People

Decades of oppression and discrimination have taken their toll on the LGBTQIA+ community. Because of the tumultuous and often dangerous climate

aids-crisis-first-lady-legacy.

²⁹ “The Gay Plague: Homosexuality and Disease,” University of North Texas Libraries, The Portal to Texas History, crediting UNT Libraries Special Collections, accessed June 20, 2017, <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc276217/m1/2/>.

surrounding identification as LGBTQIA+, non-heterosexuals live in a confusing world where they must practice *strategic outness*, defined by Dr. Jason Orne as “the continual contextual management of sexual identity.”³⁰ Coming out, instead of being a one-time event, becomes a lifelong process in which the individual must choose whether or not their audience should know about their sexual identity, what that audience’s response might be, and what the implications of being out might be in each and every situation. The results can vary drastically.

According to a 2013 survey of 1,197 lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) adults by The Pew Research Center, almost 40% said they were rejected by a family member or close friend because of their sexuality, 30% were physically attacked, threatened, or made to feel unwelcome (including in places of worship), and nearly a quarter were treated unfairly by employers.³¹ Even though same-sex couples can now legally get married in all 50 states, in 32 states those legally married couples can be fired if their employer discovers they are gay.³² This discrimination of adults also trickles down to the treatment of children. Even though LGBT children make up only 10% of the youth population, they make up 40% of all homeless youth.³³ Youth that identify as

³⁰ Jason Orne, ““You will always have to “out” yourself”: Reconsidering coming out through strategic outness,” *Sexualities* 14(6) (2011), 682.

³¹ Bruce Drake, “How LGBT adults see society and how the public sees them,” *Pew Research Center*. June 25, 2013, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/06/25/how-lgbt-adults-see-society-and-how-the-public-sees-them/>.

³² Brandon Lorenz, “Map: How Many States Still Lack Clear Non-Discrimination Protections,” *Human Rights Campaign*, July 10, 2015, <http://www.hrc.org/blog/map-how-many-states-still-lack-clear-non-discrimination-protections>.

³³ “America’s shame: 40% of homeless youth are LGBT kids,” *San Diego Gay & Lesbian News*, July 13th, 2012, <http://sdgln.com/news/2012/07/13/americas-shame-40-percent-lgbt-youth-homeless>.

sexual minorities in grades 7–12 were also found to be at much higher risk of attempted suicide when compared to their heterosexual peers.³⁴ In a national survey of LGBT students in America, 55.5% felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation.³⁵ This pervasive negative treatment from the dominant culture creates even more problems within the community itself.

Even with some improvements in representation and recognition of gays and lesbians in recent years, if one does not fit the “socially acceptable” forms of homosexuality or non-heterosexuality, that person can be ostracized and denigrated by heterosexuals and, perhaps more shockingly, by members of their own community. The creation of these “socially acceptable” forms are discussed in the literature as “homonormativity,” which refers to “the ways that gays and lesbians reinforce heteronormative institutions and norms (e.g., marriage, monogamy, gender conformity, etc.) when they argue that they are just like heterosexuals, with the exception of same-sex sexual object choice.”³⁶ Homonormativity leads stigmatized individuals to have the same prejudices against those who do not follow arbitrary and socially-constructed norms, leaving non-assimilationists, non-conformists, and those who act in stereotypical fashion even further on the fringe, creating more stigmatized and ostracized groups within the LGBTQIA+ community (e.g., bisexuals, asexuals, transgendered people, drag

³⁴ Stephen T Russell and Kara Joyner, “Adolescent Sexual Orientation and Suicide Risk: Evidence From a National Study” *American Journal of Public Health* 91(8) (2001), 1242.

³⁵ Kosciw et al, xvi.

³⁶ Brandon Andrew Robinson, “Is this what Equality Looks Like?” (*Sexuality Research and Social Policy* 9, no. 4, 12, 2012), 329.

kings/queens, etc.).³⁷ These “others” within the LGBTQIA+ community have their own struggles with representation, mistreatment, and discrimination that go beyond those of “mainstream” gay culture. Transgender women of color are particularly vulnerable to discrimination and sexual prejudice. In 2016 alone, there were 24 documented deaths of transgendered women due to fatal violence.³⁸ True acceptance can only come for all members of the LGBTQIA+ community if the underlying issue of sexual prejudice is addressed and dismantled.

Current Solutions to the Problem

Because of the continued need for change, several methods are currently being utilized to eradicate or lessen the severity of sexual prejudice. A large percentage of LGBTQIA+ adults (92%) say that society has become more accepting of them and attribute the changes to a variety of factors, from “people knowing and interacting with someone who is LGBT, advocacy on their behalf by high-profile public figures, to LGBT adults raising families.”³⁹ The first factor mentioned, interaction with LGBT people, is a demonstration of Allport’s *Social Contact Theory*, which suggests that interpersonal contact among various in-groups and out-groups helps to reduce prejudice for those out-groups.⁴⁰ Though there are studies that question the power of social contact to change

³⁷ Ibid., 329.

³⁸ “Violence Against the Transgender Community in 2016,” Human Rights Campaign, accessed December 27, 2016, <http://www.hrc.org/resources/violence-against-the-transgender-community-in-2016>.

³⁹ “A Survey of LGBT Americans,” Pew Research Center, June 13, 2013, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/06/13/a-survey-of-lgbt-americans/>.

⁴⁰ Robert Postic and Elizabeth Prough, “That’s Gay! Gay as a Slur among College Students,” *SAGE Open* (November 2014): 2.

implicit prejudice as well as explicit prejudice,⁴¹ many within and outside of the LGBTQIA+ community see it as a powerful first step to acceptance and tolerance between groups. A national survey found that seven in ten LGBT adults believe that heterosexuals' knowing someone who is LGBT helps a lot in making society more accepting, with another 24% believing it helps a little.⁴²

Another method of reducing sexual prejudice is tolerance education programs like sensitivity trainings in schools, businesses, and communities. Many of these programs aim to educate a variety of populations about LGBTQIA+ people and their struggles, and techniques to mitigate sexual prejudice towards them. Often times, these programs call upon members of the LGBTQIA+ community to talk about and answer questions about their lives to audiences that range in their acceptance of LGBTQIA+ people from open hostility to ambivalence to receptivity. These lived experiences provide an entry point for heterosexuals to inspect the conditions of their knowledge of non-heterosexuals, as well as a focus on the local and everyday aspects of queer life, instead of as an abstract and distant concept.⁴³ Though this approach can be rather enlightening for the audience, there are several issues with it. The first is that bringing in someone as part of a training seminar can be interpreted as a forced viewpoint, which can delegitimize the source in the eyes of those hostile to change. This creates opportunities for denial of the testimony as biased and inflated, and dismissal of the story as a unique experience and not

⁴¹ P. J. Henry and Curtis D. Hardin, "The Contact Hypothesis Revisited: Status Bias in the Reduction of Implicit Prejudice in the United States and Lebanon." *Psychological Science* 17, no. 10 (10, 2006).

⁴² "A Survey of LGBT Americans."

⁴³ Sarita Srivastava and Margot Francis, "The Problem of 'Authentic Experience': Storytelling in Anti-Racist and Anti-Homophobic Education." *Critical Sociology* 32, no. 2-3 (0, 2006), 282–283.

generalizable. The second is that the in-person setting in which an LGBTQIA+ person divulges details about their life puts a lot of pressure on that individual. Many of these testimonials can turn into interviews and cross-examinations reminiscent of being put on trial as the majority group struggles to reshape their internal understanding and viewpoint of the world with potentially contradicting evidence from the minority group. Recalling Allport's process of filtering information, the audience is also given the opportunity to select parts of the story to accentuate as proof of a pre-existing viewpoint. A third failing is that any contradictions or alterations on the part of the LGBTQIA+ individual in the telling of their story can be basis for rejection of the entire discussion from a biased audience. This kind of pressure can be upsetting or frustrating for the speaker, even when the result of telling their story may be positive. In addition, the reach of these programs is extremely limited and resource- and time-intensive. Sociologists Sarita Srivastava and Margot Francois argue that focusing on *how* one knows, versus *what* one knows, could potentially open up other resources for testimonial and storytelling that do not require the physical presence of individuals.⁴⁴ Allport also expanded the scope of intergroup interactions to include films, novels, and dramas, "presumably because they induce identification with minority group members."⁴⁵ To this point, representations of LGBTQIA+ people in mass media channels and visibility of LGBTQIA+ celebrities become vitally important to the reduction of sexual prejudice.

As mentioned in Chapter One, a story can stand as a substitute for a lived

⁴⁴ Ibid., 304.

⁴⁵ Allport, 488.

experience, which is why representations of LGBTQIA+ individuals in mass media are so powerful. Over the past few decades, the amount of “out” characters and celebrities on TV and in other media has grown exponentially. Having highly visible representation at such a large scale can challenge stigmas and stereotypes of non-heterosexuals and offer opportunities for diversification and redefining what it means to be LGBTQIA+.

There are two main categories into which LGBTQIA+ characters appear in mainstream entertainment media today: the *Token Gays*, and the *Full Alphabet*. Stories that reinforce stereotypes and homonormative ideals through supporting or main characters fall into the *Token Gays* category: stories like *The Real O’Neals*, *Modern Family*, and even *Queer as Folk* on TV. While all of the characters in these series promote slightly different interpretations of what it is to be a non-heterosexual, the crux of most of these characters is based on the same homonormative stereotypical concept of what a “normal” gay person is: primarily white homosexuals (gays or lesbians) who are somewhat flamboyant and usually seeking or currently in some sort of monogamous relationship. The *Token Gays* also tend to be surrounded by people in the dominant culture (heterosexuals), with very little interaction with the rest of the queer community, which stands in direct contrast to the experiences of many LGBTQIA+ individuals. Media channels that champion the *Token Gays* tend to focus solely on the concept of diversity rather than true representation. Lindsay King-Miller, editor at *Vice.com*, has this to say about this form of diversity:

Diversity treats people like check boxes: one pair of lesbian moms, one family of color, one person with a disability. Not only does this tend to erase intersectionality—queer disabled parents of color exist, but you’d be hard pressed to find one on the small screen—but it flattens the reality

of our lives and communities to make them more approachable to mainstream audiences.⁴⁶

According to King-Miller, this “tokenization” of non-heterosexual characters allows the dominant group to accept these characters into *their* world, but ignores or dismisses the existence of separate LGBT-centered worlds. This dismissal contributes to “normalizing” the queer community instead of celebrating its differences.

In contrast, stories that feature a range of diverse LGBTQIA+ characters demonstrating the variety and nuance of the queer community are part of the *Full Alphabet* category: stories like *Sense8*, *Orange is the New Black*, and *RuPaul’s Drag Race* on TV, and the Web comic *Sunstone* by Stjepan Šejić. Stories in this category break down traditional gender and sexual norms by showing a range of sexual orientations and practices that are not normally displayed in mass media. In *Sunstone*, the main characters are bisexual women heavily involved in the BDSM (Bondage/Discipline Domination/Submission, Sadism and Masochism) community. Instead of the story being solely about sex and the practice of BDSM, the comic focuses heavily on the stigma of BDSM, same-sex relationships among bisexual women, acceptance in both the dominant society and the sexual minority community, as well as traditional arcs of friendship, relationship struggles, and balancing work and life. Both *Sense8* and *Orange is the New Black* portray various sexual minorities like bisexuals and transgender people (many of which are people of color) while also challenging ideas of heteronormativity and traditional gender roles. *Sense8* also shows a wider representation of queer communities and the creation of families of choice, introducing the dominant culture to the queer

⁴⁶ Lindsay King-Miller, “As a Queer Parent, I Still Don’t See Myself on Television,” *Vice.com*, February 15, 2017, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/as-a-queer-parent-i-still-dont-see-myself-on-television.

world that runs parallel to theirs. *RuPaul's Drag Race* introduces a wider section of the world to the drag subculture within the gay community through one of America's favorite pass-times: reality-TV competition. This more diverse and accurate representation in mass media storytelling is crucial to promoting tolerance and acceptance of not just one style of queer life, but all versions of LGBTQIA+ lives, helping to reduce prejudice within the majority group, and importantly, within the minority group as well.

The results of all of the aforementioned solutions—interaction with LGBT+ people, tolerance education programs, and representation in mass-media— seem to be positive. According to a study conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2013, only about one-in-five adults (19%) say they would be very upset if they learned their child was gay or lesbian, which is down from 64% in 1985.⁴⁷ The same study also showed that the number of those in the general public who think homosexuality should be accepted by society went up from 47% to 60% over the last decade.⁴⁸ While the surveys show promise, there is still much room for improvement. As mentioned before, the problem of prejudice is multi-faceted and thus requires an equally multi-faceted system of progressive and tolerance-focused initiatives at all levels—from diverse and accurate representations in mass media, to tolerance education programs, and real interactions with actual LGBTQIA+ people—to effectively create change. This thesis offers yet another piece of the larger puzzle of tolerance promotion by harnessing the power of social contact, personal storytelling, and representation through the visual medium of

⁴⁷ “How LGBT adults see society and how the public sees them,” June 25, 2013.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

graphic narratives—more precisely, comics.

Thesis Statement

Stories are powerful. They are also empowering to those who read them. Through mirror neurons and good storytelling, the reader transforms, for a short while, into the characters in the story and feels what they feel. This thesis focuses on this connection as a method for creating a bond between two disparate groups—heterosexuals and non-heterosexuals—much like those created with Social Contact Theory. By allowing the reader to walk in the shoes of the character, to experience the story as the character does, a shared experience is created between the character and the reader. When that shared experience is between members of different groups, like heterosexuals and non-heterosexuals, there is an opportunity for empathy and understanding. That opportunity can be utilized to inspire change in those most resistant to it; namely, that comics can be used to alter the attitudes and perceptions of sexually prejudiced people towards LGBTQIA+ people. To test this hypothesis, a prototype of graphic narratives about queer people was produced as a comic book and tested with people who have a medium to high level of intolerance, as determined by Herek's *Attitudes Towards Lesbians and Gays Scale* (ATLG)⁴⁹—discussed in more detail in Chapter Four. The users then took the ATLG before and after reading the comic book prototype, with projected results being a decrease in the levels of intolerance post-reading (determined by a lower ATLG score).

The strengths and strategies of comics, detailed in the next chapter, will be used to inform the creation of the narratives, with special attention paid to Groensteen's

⁴⁹ "The Attitudes Towards Lesbians and Gays Scale," Accessed April 06, 2017, <http://lgbpsychology.com/html/atlgfile.pdf>.

hyperframe, his concept of *braiding*, and the use of text bubbles, McCloud and Postema's concept of *closure/gaps*, Cohn's *graphic schemas* and *fluency* of visual language, the creation of *atmosphere* and compositional strategies as detailed by Eisner, and the universality of *cartooning* explained by McCloud.

III. PRELIMINARY RESEARCH

Graphic Narratives and Comics

As discussed in Chapter One, graphic narratives like comic books have seen a resurgence in the past few decades. But what is a graphic narrative, or even more specifically, a comic? Will Eisner—one of the earliest American comic book creators who is often regarded as the father of the graphic novel—defines *graphic narratives* as “a generic description of any story that employs image to transmit an idea.”⁵⁰ He goes on to define *comics* as “a form of sequential art, often in the form of a strip or a book, in which images and text are arranged to tell a story.”⁵¹ Eisner, like many other cartoonists and comic creators, attempts to classify comics by what is in them—the structure, or grammar of comics: speech bubbles, panels, illustrations/images, etc. While this definition may suffice for what many see comics as today, others have attempted to expand how society views comics in order to legitimize them as a larger part of art and culture. Scott McCloud—renowned comics creator and author of *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*—offers one of these more expansive definition of comics: “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer.”⁵² According to McCloud, this definition of comics could encompass some of man’s earliest attempts at visual communication: early Egyptian paintings circa 3000BC (Figure 2), the Roman’s Trajan’s Column built around

⁵⁰ Will Eisner, *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2008), xvii.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, xvii.

⁵² Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1993), 9.

107~113AD (Figure 3), and the French Bayeux Tapestry in 1077 (Figure 4).⁵³ Each of these examples incorporates sequential artwork in order to communicate a message through a variety of styles and media, adhering to McCloud's more broad interpretation.



Fig. 2: Posted by Kingn8link. *Egyptian Farmers*. Wall painting. June 16, 2016. Source: Wikimedia. Accessed April 18, 2017.
Egyptian painting of a story of the farming process.



Fig. 3: Posted by Wknight94. *Trajan's Column Reliefs 2*. April 21, 2008. Relief. Source: Wikimedia. Accessed April 18, 2017.
A sequential narrative wrapped around a stone column in Rome.



Fig. 4: Posted by Myrabella. *Bayeux Tapestry*. March 07, 2013. Tapestry. Source: Wikimedia. Accessed April 18, 2017.
Scenes 29–30–31 of the Coronation of Harold woven into a tapestry.

Both definitions apply directly to the field of communication design, in which designers use visuals to communicate with, or inspire some sort of response in the

⁵³ Ibid., 10–15.

viewer. Either definition could potentially be used to describe the design of a company's website, or a poster series promoting an event. There are two key factors to comics' popularity and uniqueness as a method of communication though: how comics are read and understood, and how the reader interacts with the comic. In this thesis, Eisner's definition will aid in the discussion of the grammar and creation of comics as it applies to literacy, while McCloud's definition will show itself in discussing interaction and the expansions and growth of the medium.

Reading and Literacy

Reading and literacy are not simply the understanding of letters and words; letters and words, after all, are only abstract visual forms (signs) that represent various concepts or sounds of speech. Semioticians—those who study signs as they relate to communication—offer a variety of uses and definition of signs and their relation to comprehension. Linguist Umberto Eco argues that a sign is “*everything* that, on the grounds of a previously established social convention, can be taken as *something standing for something else*.”⁵⁴ Ferdinand de Saussure, another renowned linguist, broke signs down into two parts: the *signifier* (the form the sign takes), and the *signified* (the concept it represents).⁵⁵ Before the invention of the written word, humanity “read” visual stimuli through processing such signs consecutively, as shape, color, and content—a

⁵⁴ Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1976), 16.

⁵⁵ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* translated by Wade Baskin, ed by Perry Meisel and Haun Saussy (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 67.

process referred to as the Sequence of Cognition.⁵⁶ The act of reading expanded when pictorial representation attempted to capture those ideas in a static form—the genesis of a visual language system. McCloud defines these pictorial representations as “icons,” or “any image used to represent a person, place, thing or idea,”⁵⁷ which is reminiscent of Eco’s definition of a sign, though narrower in scope. Iconographic images come in three major varieties: *pictorial icons* (images that reference actual objects), *indexes* (images that reference something associated to a concept—e.g., a sweat drop for heat), and *symbols* (images that represent specific concepts—e.g., a logo for a company).⁵⁸ Pictorial icons are of particular interest to literacy and comics because of their nature as images that are designed to actually resemble their subjects (e.g., a drawing of a chair to represent a chair). The perception of these pictorial icons continues to utilize the Sequence of Cognition to aid in comprehension. For instance, in the example of the chair, the visual shape of the chair can be reproduced pictorially, which activates the same neural pathways used to recognize a chair in physical space, allowing a reader to “read” the image as “chair” without ever seeing the word. As seen with indexes and symbols though, not all visuals are representative or true to the original form of the reference—one cannot recreate in a drawing the shape of a concept like happiness, for example. To that point, indexes and symbols are incredibly useful in capturing abstractions, but their creation and usefulness in comprehension depends entirely upon cultural acceptance and

⁵⁶ Brian Lischer, “Sequence of Cognition: How to Leverage the Subconscious Language of Design,” *ignite*, accessed February 02, 2017, <http://www.ignitebrands.com/sequence-of-cognition-how-to-leverage-the-subconscious-language-of-design/>.

⁵⁷ McCloud, 27.

⁵⁸ Neil Cohn, *The Visual Language of Comics* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), 19.

repeated use. In comics, like the one created for this thesis, varied use of each of these types of icons aid the reader in determining context, action, and meaning beyond typical written literature.

Psychologist and artist Neil Cohn argues that the comprehension of visual language requires a level of *fluency*—the proficiency a person has with “producing or comprehending a particular system”—within the reader.⁵⁹ Repetition of signs within a culture creates *graphic schemas*, or visual cues that people perceive in pictures/drawings (e.g., stick figures are understood as people, squares or rectangles with triangles on top are understood as houses, etc.). In order to understand how these cultural signs are created, Cohn focuses on breaking down visual language into its smallest parts, what he calls *graphemes*—basic graphics like lines, dots, and shapes—which can be combined in an infinite number of ways. New concepts or ideas can be communicated by combining the elements of language—*graphemes* in visual language, or *morphemes* in spoken/written language—together in new and different ways. In speech or written language, nouns can be turned into verbs to capture new concepts (e.g., “I just can’t *adult* today,” or “She *googled* herself”). In visual language, novel use of graphemes can communicate a variety of complicated ideas (e.g., using dashed lines or transparency to communicate invisibility, or birds flying above one’s head to convey dizziness). Cohn explains this flexibility through the discussion of “open-class” and “closed-class” items within language.⁶⁰ Open-class items allow the addition of new schemas to the lexicon

⁵⁹ Ibid., 134.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 24.

(e.g., “email” or “blog” as words, or variations of visual style in the representations of people, animals, items, etc.), while closed-class items are more symbolic and have less interpretation (e.g., proper nouns like names, or symbolic icons like speech bubbles, motion lines, and logos, etc.). This classification of open-class items resembles McCloud’s definition of indexes, while closed-class items more closely resemble his definition of symbols.

The receptiveness of visual language to new adaptations and variations on these graphic schemas allows a wide variety of interpretations of style to be understood within the overall lexicon of the language, which is especially important to this thesis. Instead of forcing a distinct style upon a comic, creative license can be used as long as the representations of objects follow some established rules of comics and visual language, as well as more universal references. This fluidity, unlike in spoken or written language, allows easier crossing of cultural boundaries because of its relationship to perception and iconic representation, with many schemas being appropriated and repeated by artists from all over. Through a process McCloud describes as *cartooning*, or the act of “amplification through simplification,” comic artists can focus the reader’s attention on certain aspects of a pictorial icon or elicit a certain feeling or response from the reader.⁶¹ Just as different facial expressions connote different emotions or concepts, so too does the style of a pictorial icon connote different meanings or concepts. By manipulating these schemas via style or detail, along with the addition of “atmosphere”—compositional elements like lighting/shading, or background details—and other visual cues (text, layout, color, etc.),

⁶¹ Ibid., 30.

the artist can create stories that evoke deeper readings and can cover the complexities and nuances of the human experience (see Figure 5).⁶²



Fig. 5. Will Eisner. *Comics and Sequential Art*. 2008. Book, p 9.
Series of panels utilizing the same pose to show the change of meaning through atmosphere and text.

The addition of text to the visual language presented above creates yet another layer of depth to storytelling in comics. The use of speech bubbles and other forms of text in addition to comics' visual narrative is a heavily covered topic in analysis of comics, with contributions from semioticians, comics creators, psychologists, literary critics, and designers. Almost more important than the content within such speech bubbles, is their placement on the page and within the narrative. Graphic designer and comic creator Nick

⁶² Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, 10.

Sousanis argues that “while image *is*, text is always *about*.”⁶³ Placement of text within comics is paramount to provide context—either for the text itself, or for the image that it references—often changing the entire interpretation of the message (see Figure 5). The interplay between text and image in comics also allows the creation of sub-narratives or leitmotifs that run concurrently with the overall story arch. Impressive examples of this can be seen in Art Spiegelman’s *MAUS* as well as the graphic adaptation of Paul Auster’s *City of Glass* by Paul Karasik and David Mazzucchelli (see Figure 6). Strategic planning in the use and placement of text on the page allows the comics creator to manipulate time, emphasis, meaning, and flow. This layering of signs to convey meaning creates a multi-modal form of reading that casts a wider net of communication than just using one mode (visuals or text) alone. The manipulation of text and image in relation to this thesis will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Four.

⁶³ Nick Sousanis, *Unflattening* (London: Harvard University Press, 2015), 58.

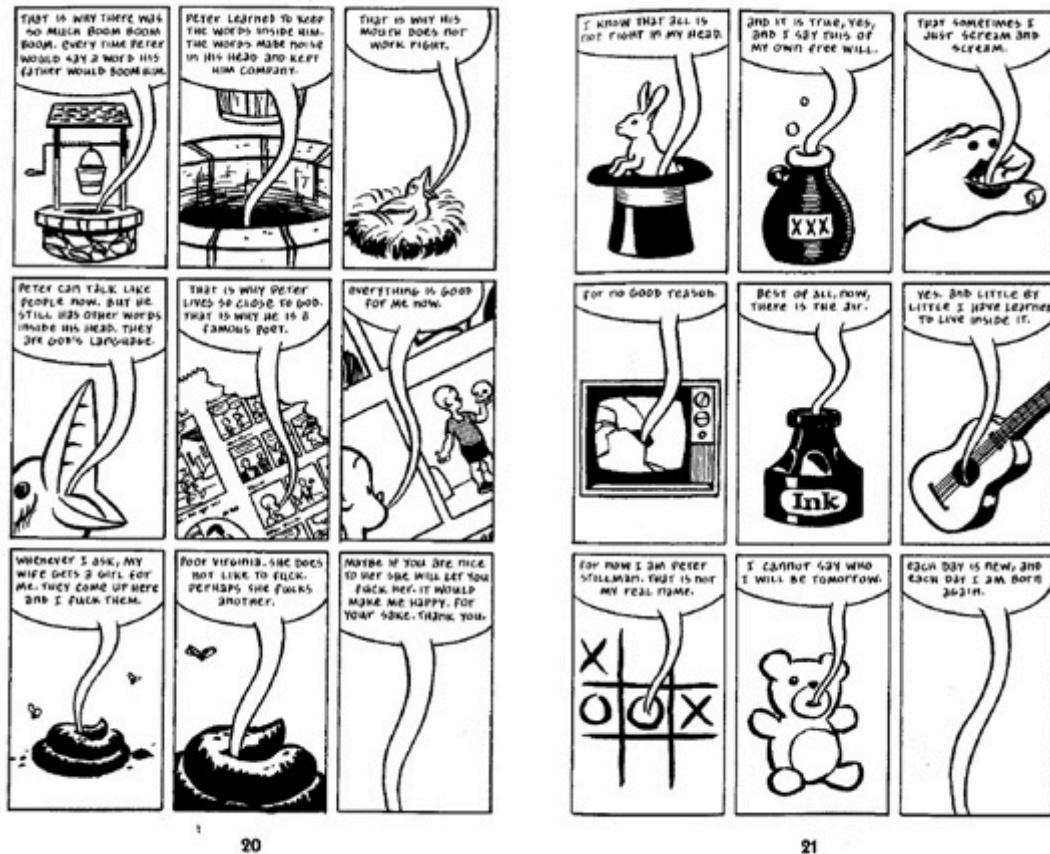


Fig. 6. Nick Jones. *City of Glass*. 1994. Graphic Novel, pp 20–21
The repetition of the speech bubble attached to various types of circles, or openings, reinforces the ambiguity and confusion surrounding the actual source of the text (revealed later in the novel).

Recalling Eisner’s definition of comics as “a form of sequential art, often in the form of a strip or a book, in which images and text are arranged to tell a story,” it is important to note that the previous arguments outlined in this thesis have yet to mention a key part of comics language: sequence. Cohn argues, in an addendum to his discussion of *fluency*, that “fluency with *sequential* images requires yet another layer of proficiency.”⁶⁴ It is in this challenge that comics transcend static images or posters to offer a more powerful form of communication.

⁶⁴ Cohn, 134.

Interactivity

According to Eisner, there is a contract between the storyteller and the audience: “the storyteller expects the audience will comprehend, while the audience expects the author will deliver something that is comprehensible.”⁶⁵ The comics storyteller expects the audience to have a basic knowledge of visual cues like time, space, and expression based on real life visual experience and graphic schemas. “It’s a participatory dance,” says Sousanis, “an act of the imagination in which the reader animates and transforms the static into the kinetic and brings it to life.”⁶⁶ As previously mentioned, graphic schemas help the reader comprehend these concepts in 2D space, though extreme experimentation with style and presentation can slow down or even actively combat comprehension. Since comic books require synthesis of various types of visual information—text, image, context, color, etc.—the format is inherently interactive, rather than passive, by forcing the reader to put the story together from clues given in the visuals. This interactivity in storytelling adds yet another layer of comprehension and intimacy between the reader and the subject matter, making the reader an active participant—an “actor,” according to Eisner—in the story. What makes this connection even more powerful are the individual differences of experience and cultural perspective that each reader brings to the comic. That personal interaction, as well as the trust put into the reader to be able to input those additional story elements, creates a bond between reader and author that fulfills Eisner’s contract and leaves a lasting impression on the reader. It is that lasting impression and

⁶⁵ Eisner, *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative*, 49.

⁶⁶ Sousanis, 61.

personal interaction with the story that this thesis seeks to capitalize on in its attempt to alter the reader's perceptions and attitudes.

Eisner's concept of the reader as actor goes far beyond merely participation in the story creation though. A successful comics creator weaves the story in a way that maintains reader attention and retention, discouraging the reader from venturing ahead of the story (by merely flipping a few pages, or "skimming" the content for the big reveal). One of the methods of capturing and keeping the reader's interest is to treat the reader as if they are a character in the comic themselves; revealing information to the character in turn reveals information to the reader (e.g., the reader learns about the identity of a masked villain only when the hero discovers it). Though an imperfect system, neurological science backs up the connection a reader makes with characters in a story. Psychologist and researcher Marco Iacoboni, quoted in Gottschall's *The Storytelling Animal*, explains that "we have empathy for the fictional characters—we know how they're feeling—because we literally experience the same feelings ourselves."⁶⁷ This phenomenon works through mirror neurons—neural networks that activate when one performs an action or experiences an emotion, as well as when one observes someone else performing an action or experiencing an emotion. Seeing someone smiling, even an iconic representation of a person, tends to make the viewer smile. This is a holdover from early infancy, where imitation is imperative for learning to communicate. McCloud shows how style and level of abstraction can serve to distance a reader from a character, or bring them closer together (see Figure 7).

⁶⁷ Gottschall, 59.

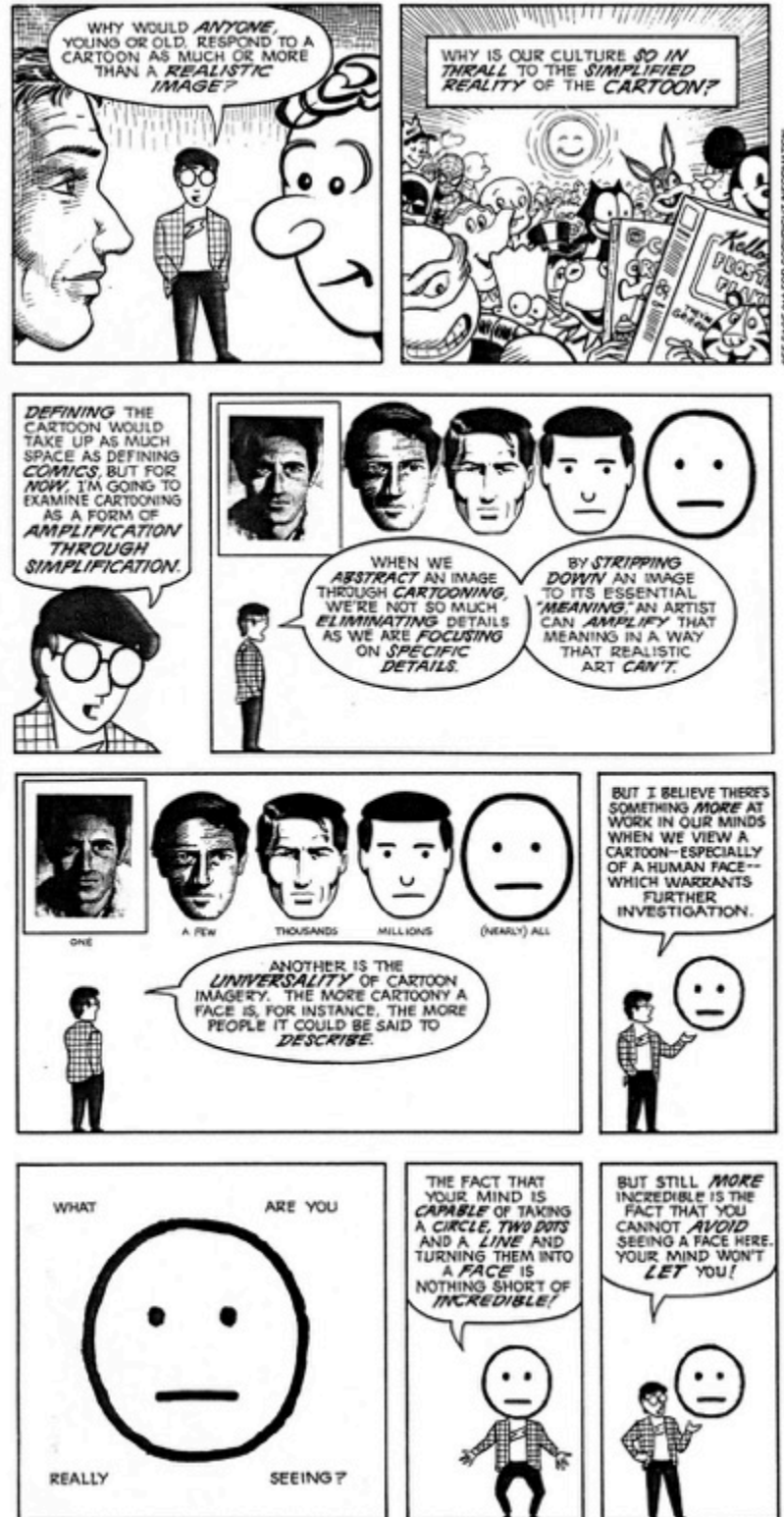


Fig. 7. Scott McCloud. *Understanding Comics*. 1993. Graphic Novel, pp 30–31
Through abstraction, the reader is able to see a more universal representation of a face rather than focusing on the differences between themselves and the character.

The more abstract the character, the more representative they are of a wider population and thus more relatable. More detailed characters, in contrast, are more individualized and less representational. Regardless of the style, Gottschall encourages that “we learn by association that if we are more like the protagonists, we will be more apt to reap the typical rewards of protagonists (e.g., love, social advancement, and other happy endings) and less likely to reap the rewards of antagonists (e.g., death and disastrous lack of social standing).”⁶⁸

Many have attempted to break down the interactivity and structure of comics into its inherent components in an attempt to understand this deeper-reading of comics. Some, like Cohn and other semioticians, have looked at the minutiae and base elements of visual language to explain the communicative act between creator and reader (discussed previously). Others, like McCloud and comics scholar Barbara Postema, argue that the interactivity of comics happens in the “spaces between,” sometimes called gutters or gaps. McCloud argues that gutters are where his concept of *closure* happens—the process by which the reader implants change, time, and motion to static comic panels.⁶⁹ Dr. Ralph Duncan identifies McCloud’s concept of closure as the Gestalt principle of the same name—which explains the tendency for incomplete structures to be completed through perception.⁷⁰ Postema reiterates this idea through her discussion of *gaps*: spaces that

⁶⁸ Ibid., 134.

⁶⁹ McCloud, 60–73.

⁷⁰ Ralph R. Duncan II, “Panel Analysis: A Critical Method for Analyzing the Rhetoric of Comic Book Form.” PhD diss. (Louisiana State University and Agricultural & Mechanical College, 1990), 66.

allow for the creation of sequence and the passage of time.⁷¹ Her definition of gaps encompasses both the literal gutter (the physical space between panels on the page) that McCloud focuses on, as well as figurative spaces in time or events that “call for interpretation of action.” These gaps allow the reader to input their experience and understanding of context clues to supply seemingly absent portions of the story. By supplying a portion of the story themselves, the readers become part-time narrator in addition to their aforementioned roles as audience and actor, creating an even stronger and deeper connection to the content. These gaps also allow readers to input themselves into the story by personalizing the content to their own understanding of the world.

Comics theorist Thierry Groensteen takes the idea of closure a step further, downplaying the minutiae of comics as a major factor in comprehension and instead focusing on a *spatio-topical* understanding of comics. Spatio-topia, which refers to concepts of space (*espace*) and place (*lieu*), attempts to understand the structure and power of comics as an entity, not merely as a collection of parts.⁷² Though he does discuss the gutter as “the interior screen on which every reader projects the missing image (or images),” Groensteen looks beyond the relationship between consecutive panels to the overall relationship of the totality of the book, arguing that the gutter becomes “the site of a semantic articulation, a logical conversion, that of a series of

⁷¹ Barbara Postema, “Mind the Gap: Absence as Signifying Function in Comics,” Order No. 3435224 (Michigan State University, 2010), Abstract.

⁷² Thierry Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, Translated by Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 21.

utterables (the panels) in a statement that is unique and coherent (the story).”⁷³ Looking at the “global economy of sequence,” Groensteen offers a theory of *braiding*: the operation that programs and carries out the bridging of the *network* of panels throughout the *multipage* format of comics (bringing together the aspects or fragments of panels with other aspects or fragments of other panels). This theory resembles Postema’s *gaps* and expands the participatory act of the reader by forcing them to piece together clues from previous and future visuals and panels/pages in order to grasp at the grander scene, or story, taking place. Characters shown in one panel may not appear in the next, but are nonetheless still present in the mind of the reader. Much like literature, in which sentences compound on each other to build a scene, comics utilize the dual languages of text and image to create a more complete story, with the panels and frames focusing the reader’s attention on specific and important pieces of information. Unlike literature, though, the reader still has surrounding visuals to aid in retention and comprehension of the general story and to give context to the minutiae of the narrative.

Groensteen’s concept of speech bubbles and the *hyperframe*—which allows the reader to, at a glance, comprehend the general structure, flow, and action of the page—as ways to break up and interpret the story sync up with Andrews’ argument that, “comics can visualize abstraction levels within interactive stories and encourage users to explore stories at different levels in a non-linear fashion.”⁷⁴ By forcing the reader to move around the page in potentially unconventional ways—many comics artists experiment with

⁷³ Ibid., 112–114

⁷⁴ Daniel E.W. Andrews, “Employing Branching Comics to Design, Visualize and Evaluate Interactive Stories,” PhD diss. (University of Birmingham, 2014), 7.

layouts to achieve specific narrative goals—the reader must pay closer attention and work to piece together the narrative, creating a stronger level of involvement with the content. Though this may be seen as a barrier to entry for new comics readers, visual cues like frames and speech bubbles can help bring attention to specific pieces of information while dismissing unimportant visual details, giving the reader a roadmap of clues with which to create the story in their mind. As designer and comics creator Kevin Cheng says, “wherever possible, you should try to show the reader the subject rather than talking about it,”⁷⁵ reinforcing the visual narrative elements as the core component of storytelling and allowing the reader to use their own knowledge to connect the dots.

Beyond the layout of the frames and speech bubbles affecting the message, the style of each adds another layer to communication. Whether a speech bubble is round, jagged, or affected in some other way can help the reader determine not only the source of the text, but also whether that text is accessible to other characters, or to just the source and the reader (e.g., thought bubbles are not usually “heard” by other characters). The layout and style of each element placed in the hyperframe adds layer upon layer of meaning, which the reader must sift through to fully understand.

Each decision by the comics creator can affect the communication of the story, the emotions evoked through the storytelling, and the reader’s level of comprehension and interaction with the piece. As discussed previously, graphic schemas aid in the creator’s decision making by offering up a plethora of previously established strategies to utilize or manipulate the visuals, amplifying the message through repeating those

⁷⁵ Kevin Cheng, *See What I Mean: How to Use Comics to Communicate Ideas* (New York: Rosenfeld Media, 2012), 98.

schemas or diverging from them. Use of gaps and strategic exclusion of information allow the readers to involve themselves in piecing together the story, much like a detective solving a mystery. Even the layout and style of the panels and speech bubbles is a tool in the creation of meaning. The high level of interactivity and involvement may seem daunting to those who are not avid readers of comics, but that has not stopped comics from continuing to be a popular medium and even expanding their reach to new demographics.

Popularity

When Superman first hit the stands in *Action Comics #1* (1938), the comic cost 10¢—the equivalent of a box of Bran Flakes.⁷⁶ In 2017, the newest issue of *Superman* costs, on average, \$3.99, which is just a little higher than a box of cereal (depending on brand, anywhere from \$1.87–\$3.78).⁷⁷ The low price of comic books has established them as an inexpensive source of entertainment for decades and allowed access to them by most age groups. The format of printed comics also allows easy access to a wide populace, with sizes smaller than a standard newspaper, larger than a book, but lighter than both. The low costs and compact size of the original comic books made them an easy impulse-buy on the way to or from work or school when first introduced.

The Internet has made comics even more accessible by giving consumers direct access to a plethora of titles for purchase, in either printed or digital formats. According to an article in the *New York Times*, digital sales of comic books went from \$70 million in

⁷⁶ The People History, Accessed February 12, 2017, <http://www.thepeoplehistory.com/30sfood.html>.

⁷⁷ HEB, accessed February 12, 2017, <https://www.heb.com/category/shop/food-and-drinks/grocery/cereal-and-breakfast/cereal/3089/3583>.

2012 to \$90 million in 2013.⁷⁸ Though digital comics and, subsequently, digital reading differ from traditional comic book publications, the increased accessibility to comics overall has allowed the medium to adapt and evolve along with its readers. Even with a flush of digital reproductions, the original printed comics continue to sell. Eisner argues that the printed comic is still viable and even necessary “as a portable source of ideas in depth,” responding to the challenge presented by electronic media by merging the strengths of both.⁷⁹ According to Eisner, readers have become accustomed to acquiring stories, ideas, and information quickly and easily through media like film and mobile devices. Since complex concepts can be understood through their reduction to imagery—as discussed above with graphic schemas and iconography—comics maintain the same strength of breaking stories down into quick and easily accessible information that film and mobile achieve.

Literacy, as discussed earlier in the chapter, was not a major barrier for initial comic readers as the bright colors and expressive layouts of influential comics artists like Jack Kirby and Frank Miller kept readers enticed and engaged with the content. The visual language of comics, an extension of various visual expressions throughout history, has helped extend the reach of comics to audiences passed-over by other sources like newspapers and books by communicating beyond words. One didn’t have to be able to read the words to follow the action. The interactivity inherent to comics also allowed those with low literacy skills to supply their own dialogue, much like silent movies.

⁷⁸ George Gene Gustines, “Comics Sales Rise, in Paper and Pixels,” *The New York Times*, July 20, 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/21/business/media/comics-sales-rise-in-paper-and-pixels.html?_r=0.

⁷⁹ Eisner, *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative*, xvii.

The graphic schemas utilized in comic books have also bled over into other disciplines, reinforcing their usefulness and extending their reach to even wider audiences. Designer Jenni Chasteen uses a spread from an issue of *The Amazing Spider-Man* to show how comic book layout has been utilized in the design of the Fredericks of Hollywood website as a way to lead the user through a site's content in a fluid and useful manner (see Figure 8). The use of panels, alternating compositions of images and text, and diversification of each panel's size, in addition to the flow-lines created by the imagery and color mirror the dynamic layouts of the *Spider-Man* comic. The ubiquity of comic book-style design in other media and disciplines provides training and fluency of panel structure to a much broader audience, lowering the barrier to entry for all.



Fig. 8. Jenni Chasteen. Web Design Screenshot. April 27, 2010. Source: *Inspired Mag*. Accessed April 27, 2017.

Example of how the flow lines of comic book panels can be mirrored in web design.

Text bubbles, a staple of the comic book medium, have been used in film to expand the knowledge of the viewer beyond what is seen and spoken—or in the case of VH1's *Pop-Up Video*, sung (see Figures 9 and 10).



Fig. 9. VH1's *Pop-Up Video*. October 16, 2007. Source: Mr. Media. Accessed April 18, 2017.
Text bubbles show up as informative tidbits about the music industry during music videos.



Fig. 10. *How the West Was Won*. Source: "How the West Was Won" Deleted Scenes. Accessed May 19, 2017. http://www.daveswarbirds.com/HTWWW/deleted_scene_s.htm.
Text descriptions are used to introduce information to a scene (e.g., location, passage of time, etc.), as seen in the rectangular yellow box at the top of panel one.

The accessibility of comics extends beyond the ability to purchase or read them in various formats. The comics genre of entertainment also boasts an incredibly large and diverse community of fans and creators. Many of these fans gather at comic conventions ("comic cons") to share their love for the medium, meet creators and artists, participate in panel discussions, and shop for new and old titles and other merchandise. *Forbes.com* reported that more than 167,000 people attended the New York Comic Con (NYCC) in 2015,⁸⁰ while *Publishers Weekly* reported a record-breaking 187,000 attendees at the NYCC in 2016.⁸¹ At the time of this writing, the website *PopCultHQ* lists 744 upcoming conventions for 2017 worldwide, with many more not yet accounted for.⁸² Though comic

⁸⁰ Rob Salkowitz, "How Many Fans??!! New York Comic Con Sets Attendance Record," *Forbes*, October 15, 2015, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/robsalkowitz/2015/10/15/how-many-fans-new-york-comic-con-sets-attendance-record/#9b51dd8386ab>.

⁸¹ Heidi MacDonald and Calvin Reid, "New York Comic Con Hits Record Attendance," *Publishers Weekly*, October 12, 2016, <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/trade-shows-events/article/71733-new-york-comic-con-hits-record-attendance-of-180-000.html>.

⁸² April Carvelli, "The 2017 List of Cosplay Conventions is Here," *PopCultHQ*, Updated on January 31, 2017, <http://www.popcalthq.com/2016/11/09/the-2017-list-of-cosplay-conventions-is-here/>.

book buyers are a notoriously difficult demographic to quantify (with many consumers purchasing at independent retailers), attendees to these comic cons are consistently split nearly in half between men and women.⁸³ Data accessed via Facebook by the website *Graphic Policy* shows similar gender splits in comic book fans (determined by using key terms and “likes” in Facebook user profiles).⁸⁴ They also break down the demographics by age (around 60% Millennials, 30% Generation X, and 10% Baby Boomers) and race (14.44% African American, 5.65% Asian American, 18.33% Hispanic, and around 61.58% Caucasian). With such a young and diverse fan base, the audience for socially progressive comic books like the one proposed in this thesis represents a prime market for defining more positive attitudes and perceptions towards the LGBTQIA+ community in the future.

Beyond the big conventions and diverse consumer base, comic creators are also looking to diversifying their ranks. With breakout comic creators like Noelle Stevenson (*Nimora*, *Lumberjanes*), Sana Amanat (*Ms. Marvel*, *Ultimate Comics: Spider-Man*) and Ta-Nehisi Coates (*Black Panther*, *The Crew*), major publishers and indie creators alike are breaking the classic mold of white male characters for white male audiences. The shifts in demographics of both audience and content creators is cyclical: more diverse audiences demand more diverse stories, which leads to publishers hiring diverse talent (or, in the case of indie publishing, diverse creators receiving funding for their work),

⁸³ Walt Hickey, “Comic Books Are Still Made By Men, For Men And About Men,” *FiveThirtyEight*, October 13, 2014, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/women-in-comic-books/>.

⁸⁴ *Graphic Policy*, “Demo-Graphics: Comic Fandom on Facebook – US Edition,” February 1, 2017, <https://graphicpolicy.com/tag/facebook-fandom/>.

which brings in even more diverse audiences looking for that kind of content, and so on. As the stories and characters grow, so too does the appeal of comics to vast, mostly untapped markets.

Comics as Catalyst

As mentioned in Chapter One, stories are one of the most powerful tools of communication between people, and as such can be used as catalysts for change. Quesenbery and Brooks, in their book *Storytelling for User Experience*, proclaim, “history is full of examples of people who have told good stories, in the right way, at the right time, to the right audience, and moved them to radical change.”⁸⁵ In the world of comics, a variety of tactics have been used to promote ideological agendas or progressive viewpoints through comic book stories going back decades.

Even though political discourse in comics can be traced back to some of the original print productions utilizing woodcuts to discuss religion and current events,⁸⁶ some of the most inspiring and influential ideological stories came about in the realm of fiction—most notably in the form of superhero comics. The concept of superheroes is nothing new; mythology, folklore, and religion from various cultures have lauded the adventures of such extra-human figures as Hercules, Rama, Gilgamesh, Hua Mulan, and Anansi. What comic creators did was take the idea of these heroes and contemporize them into socially relevant characters.

Jerry Siegel created *Superman* as a response to the atrocities happening to Jews in

⁸⁵ Whitney Quesenbery and Kevin Brooks, *Storytelling for User Experience* (New York: Rosenfeld Media, 2011), 81.

⁸⁶ Roger Sabin, *Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels: A History of Comic Art* (New York: Phaidon, 1996), 11.

Nazi Germany. As an adopted illegal alien—quite literally—raised by farmers, and whose alter ego was a mild-mannered and slightly bumbling news journalist, Clark Kent/Superman resonated with many readers looking to be and do more. The same formula worked for Joe Simon and Jack Kirby (born Jacob Kurtzberg to Austrian Jewish immigrants) in the creation of Steve Rogers as Captain America. In an unambiguously clear statement against the Nazi regime, the cover of *Captain America Issue #1* showed the brave new hero—a wimpy, but scrappy young man made impossibly strong by medical experimentation—decked out in a spandex re-envisioning of the American flag, punching Adolf Hitler directly in the face while dodging bullets from various Nazi underlings (see Figure 11).

Recognizing the power of the medium, the government put comics such as the *JSA (Justice Society of America)* and *Captain America* to work, helping boost sales of war bonds in a rather blatant fashion (see Figure 12).



Fig. 11. Posted by Lawren, *Captain America* #1. September 30, 2014. Source: Flickr. Accessed April 18, 2017.

The very first issue of *Captain America* made it very clear the patriotic superhero's stance on Nazi Germany.

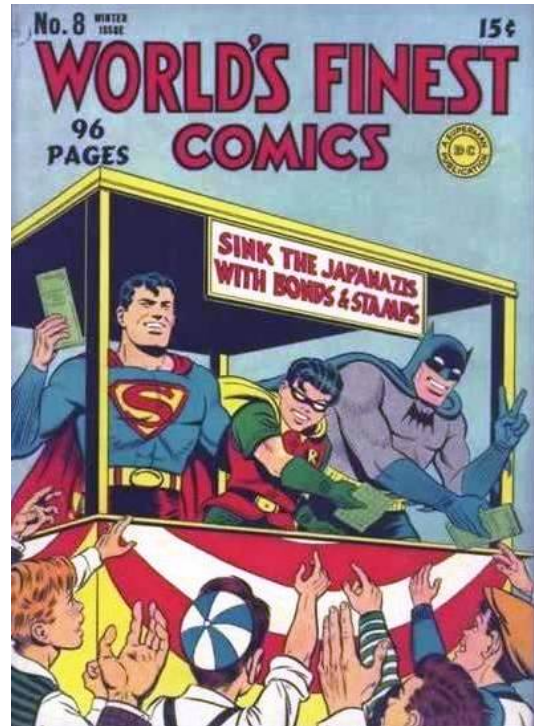


Fig. 12. *World's Finest Comics*. 1942. Source: The Education Collection, The National WWII Museum. Accessed April 18, 2017.

Superman, Robin (the Boy Wonder), and Batman sell war bonds on the cover of this issue of *World's Finest Comics*.

According to comics scholar Valerie Pensky, both *Superman* and *Captain America* also served to inspire the American public during World War II by bringing “hope, innovation, and empathy to almost every demographic.”⁸⁷ Issues of *Captain America* were even sent overseas to soldiers to boost morale and remind them for what they fought. These characters were used to discuss topics of patriotism, the role of everyday people in the fight against evil and intolerance, and even the corruption of politicians and

⁸⁷ Valerie Ilyse Pensky, “Comic Book Art is a Visual Language that Continues to Influence Societal Change and Heighten Creative Innovation within Other Entertainment Medias,” Thesis (Order No. 1522137, California State University, Dominguez Hills, 2012), 38.

businessmen, becoming champions of American values and social activism.

Pensky also discusses how “superheroes and activists could work together like a marketing team. As a result, fantasy and reality could co-exist to promote and influence social change.”⁸⁸ One such change was the creation of *Wonder Woman* and its effect on the feminist movement in the early ‘40s. As many of America’s male citizens were being drafted into the war and women started entering the workforce to compensate for labor shortages, creator William Moulton Marston saw a need for a female role model to help them navigate the variety of challenges that accompanied their new responsibilities. Though written by a man, *Wonder Woman* dealt with pressing issues of sexism, gender expression, and women’s abilities and struggles with a sensitivity and authenticity that resonated with women of the time. Marston himself said, “Not even girls want to be girls...so long as our feminine archetype lacks force, strength, and power.”⁸⁹ In a particularly patriotic scene, *Wonder Woman* responds to a woman’s cry of “What can a weak girl do” with, “Get Strong! Earn your own living—join the [Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps] or [Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service] and fight for your country!”⁹⁰ The blending of fiction and reality within comic books provided escapist fantasy storylines with correlating real-life calls to action.

Unfortunately, the comics witch-hunt of the 1950s—in which comics (especially those in the crime and horror genres) were placed under national scrutiny through several

⁸⁸ Ibid., 40.

⁸⁹ Sabin, 88.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 88.

Congressional hearings regarding the “potentially dangerous” and harmful content that was “corrupting the youth of America”⁹¹—forced many comics creators underground. In response to the creative restrictions placed on them, many creators started their own genre of *Comix*: alternative publications aimed at challenging and pushing the boundaries of freedom of expression. Many of these Comix were outlandish, experimental, overtly sexual, and incredibly crude, but the movement also opened the door to a wider range of indie-publishers that included a much more diverse set of under-represented minority groups: non-whites, atheists, women, and the LGBT community. Notable among these alternative comics are publications like *MAD Magazine* (first published in 1952) by Harvey Kurtzman, *Come Out Comix* (first published in 1973) by Mary Wings, and *Raw* (first published in 1980) by Art Spiegelman. Each of these publications challenged every boundary placed on comics content, as well as employed and highlighted some of the first works of many budding minority artists telling stories ranging from pure fantasy and nonsense, to non-fiction and autobiographical works.

The popularity of autobiographical works by minorities exploded in the 1980s when Art Spiegelman’s *MAUS* was published. First published as a series of chapters in *Raw*, *MAUS* was one of the first graphic novels that dealt with real events in an incredibly personal and visceral way. Though the characters portrayed were anthropomorphized cats and mice, each was based on real humans during the time of the Holocaust. Instead of being a traditional historical account of the Holocaust, Spiegelman’s *MAUS* is framed as a conversation, an interview, with Spiegelman’s father

⁹¹ Andrew Aydin, “The Comic Book that Changed the World” (Georgetown University, Washington D.C., 2012), Chapter 4.

Vladek who survived the death camp Auschwitz. The first graphic story to ever win a Pulitzer Prize, *MAUS* has been used to teach everything from comic creation and storytelling to literary theory, visual literacy, and even historical lessons on the Holocaust in high schools and colleges around the globe. *MAUS* helped pave the way for other popular and influential graphic novels like *Persepolis* (2000) by Iranian comic creator Marjane Satrapi—which dealt with issues of feminism, sexism, terrorism, immigration, politics, religion, and international relations—and *Fun Home* (2006) by Alison Bechdel (author of acclaimed comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*), which was the first graphic novel to ever be given the top spot in *Time* magazine’s “10 Best Books of the Year,” and which has since been adapted into a Tony Award-winning musical. *Fun Home* explored Bechdel’s coming to grips with her sexuality, her relationship with her father, his own internal struggle with his sexuality, and his unfortunate and sudden death. Both of these examples show the diversity and popularity of the visual narrative, as well as acceptance of the legitimacy of visual storytelling by some of the harshest literary critics. The personal and oft times controversial subject matter of these graphic novels owes its positive reception by the public today to the subversive Comix that came out of the 1950s’ crackdown and the influential movements they inspired.

One of the most influential and important examples of the power of comic books as a catalyst for social change is *Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story*, published in 1957 (see Figure 13). An advertisement for the comic at the time of its production promoted the book as such: “*The Montgomery Story* is more than the account of what happened in one city to one group of people. It is a signpost, a book of directions for others who would work for freedom and brotherhood without adding to the world’s

store of hatred and bitterness.”



Fig. 13. Alfred Hassler, Benton Resnik. *Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story*. 1957. Comic book cover. Source: Amazon.com. Accessed May 3, 2017.

Though Martin Luther King Jr. did not write the comic himself, his image and his teachings were used to create this incredibly influential comic in order to spread his message of nonviolent protest.

Inside, the fourteen-page book told the story of Rosa Parks' brave act of resistance against racism and segregation and the subsequent (and highly successful) Montgomery Bus Boycott, with the express purpose of teaching the principles of non-violent protest to

the exploited and disenfranchised African American population of the United States. The use of the comic book format was strategic in its ability to reach a wider audience among African Americans, especially in the South where literacy rates were low. Andrew Aydin, in a detailed look at the history of the comic book,⁹² explained the rationale behind using a comic book as “an economical and effective means of reaching a semiliterate population.” The effect of this book was so powerful that 200,000 copies were sold in the US, a Spanish edition was later produced and widely used in Latin America, and another version was used in South Africa during apartheid. The book has even been credited as a major contributor to the four college students that conducted the first ever sit-in of the Civil Rights Movement in Greensboro, Alabama.⁹³

Recent books have attempted to recreate the magic of the previous examples for a variety of audiences. Representative John Lewis, in collaboration with Andrew Aydin, created Lewis’ autobiographical graphic novel entitled *March* (2013)—a three-volume set which provides a robust and awe-inspiring perspective on the Civil Rights Movement, picking up where *Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story* left off.

Kutemukan Makna Jihad (“*I Found the Meaning of Jihad*,” 2011) is an Indonesian graphic retelling of a former Islamic terrorist’s cautionary tale of radicalization and religious extremism in an attempt to educate Muslim youth in the country about the

⁹² Ibid., 52.

⁹³ Ibid., 72–76.

teachings of the Quran and how religious extremists go against those teachings.⁹⁴

Chainmail Bikini (2016), a crowd-funded graphic anthology, explores the experiences of female “gamers” in the wide-ranging worlds of video games, tabletop games, live action role-playing games, and other forms of gaming. Most recently, and most applicable to this thesis, is the publication of *Love is Love* (2016), a visceral response by comics authors, producers, writers, and artists to the murder of 49 LGBTQIA+ people and their family members at Orlando’s *Pulse* nightclub in the summer of 2016, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Four.

⁹⁴ Caleb Goellner, “Former Islamic Militant Preaches Peace in Indonesian Graphic Novel,” *Comics Alliance*, September 12, 2011, <http://comicsalliance.com/former-islamic-militant-jihad-peace-graphic-novel/>.

IV. METHODOLOGY

Process

In order to produce a comic book, one must first have content. With the goal of creating a connection between prejudiced individuals and the queer community in order to reduce prejudice, it became important for the stories to be as authentic as possible. To this end, a questionnaire was created and sent out to members of the LGBTQIA+ community in order to collect their experiences. Answers to the questionnaire were used to create rough outlines of stories, which were then translated for a graphic medium—a prototype of a comic book. An initial Attitudes Towards Lesbians and Gays (ATLG) survey was sent out to a convenience sample of university students. Respondents who scored in the mid- to high-prejudice range were then contacted for a follow-up study in which they were given the prototype to read, asked to re-take the ATLG, and then participated in a brief interview. Each stage of the process is detailed below, with results following in Chapter Five.

Story Collection and Creation

It is not enough to read the literature detailing statistics of hate crimes, hate speech, or bullying in schools; in order to fully comprehend what LGBTQIA+ people go through when facing acts of sexual prejudice, one must go to the source. To better grasp the experiences of LGBTQIA+ people, a questionnaire was created using the online platform *Typeform* and sent out to members of the LGBTQIA+ community through various channels. The questionnaire (see Appendix A) included questions about demographics (age, gender, sexual orientation, race, etc.), as well as several open-ended questions/prompts about the respondents' experiences in regards to coming out (if they

had or not), dealing with intolerant behavior, and their thoughts about the nature of intolerance and what might be done to mitigate it. Expectations were relatively low for the amount and depth of responses, understanding that not everyone would want to divulge personal information about potentially traumatic or harrowing experiences, but optimistic for a few responses that would enlighten and guide the content of the comic.

Initially, the questionnaire was sent out to an LGBT non-profit organization in Austin, Texas with a diverse membership that included men and women of various backgrounds, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and ages. Texas has a long history of sexual prejudice against members of the queer community, even in a city as progressive as the state capitol, making it a reasonable place to start. After the initial call yielded few results (13), the questionnaire was shared via the social media platform Twitter (see Figure 14) with some respondents also sharing the survey on Facebook.



Fig. 14. Zachary Vernon. Twitter Screenshot. March 13, 2017. Source: Twitter.

The total number of responses after sharing on social media was 62. With each completed questionnaire, the researcher donated \$5 to a local LGBT-youth non-profit organization, Out Youth (up to a total of \$150). The responses from the questionnaire identified a few common threads that could be woven into stories based on the responses. The initial stories chosen for the prototype were pulled from early responses, with subsequent responses validating or expanding the topics chosen. Each story featured a different character and different topics, though touched on more universal or common experiences.

These stories will be discussed in detail in the next section.

Initial Questionnaire Results

The initial questionnaire sent to the LGBTQIA+ community resulted in 62 responses. 56% (34) were 25–35 years old, 33% (20) were 18–25, 7% (4) were 36–45, 3% (2) were 46–55, 2% (1) were over 56, and one respondent declined to answer. Over three quarters (78% or 46 respondents) were White/Caucasian, 10% (6) were Latinx/Hispanic, 5% (3) were Asian, 5% (3) were Mixed, and one respondent was African American. Three respondents declined to answer. 52% of respondents (32) identified as Male (cis-gender),⁹⁵ 31% (19) as Female (cis-gender), 8% (5) identified as Other, 5% (3) as Male (transgender), and 3% (2) as Female (transgender). One person declined to answer. 66% (41) identified as Gay/Lesbian/Homosexual, 16% (10) as Bisexual, 10% (6) as Other, 5% (3) as Asexual, and 3% (2) as Heterosexual. 39% (24) said they lived near the city, 35% (22) in the city center, 23% (14) in the suburbs, and 3% (2) in rural areas.

Table 1 offers a glimpse into some of the themes discovered in the questionnaire. In addition to the themes presented in the table, many respondents discussed their confusion surrounding topics of identity, religion, and relationships. Many described the coming out process as just that—a process of continually identifying and labeling oneself. While there were several responses that showed wonderful relationships with and responses from the heterosexual community, there were an equal amount of responses that dealt with issues of rejection and hate. Education and exposure to members of the

⁹⁵ Cis-gender means denoting or relating to a person whose sense of personal identity and gender corresponds with their birth sex.

LGBTQIA+ community were seen as some of the most powerful solutions to eradicating intolerance and prejudice, which aligns rather well with the purpose of this thesis.

Table 1. Themes from Initial Questionnaire

Theme	Mentions	Example Quote
Fear of Coming Out	45%	“Fear kept me from coming out: fear of change, fear of ridicule, fear of being shunned or disowned by friends or family. Also I think that straight people have a very clear map for adulthood: graduate from high school, go to college, get married, have babies, etc. But I feel like the map hasn't been drawn for gay adulthood until more recently and even then it's still unclear. You worry that coming out may mean that you will never have kids, that you'll die alone, that you'll get AIDS. There is so much stigma associated with being gay that has to be overcome in order to come out.”
Fear for Safety	19%	“Streets and parks after dark are the worst. Especially lately with so much political talk about queer couples. When politicians talk about us, that makes everywhere feel less safe.”
Family Issues	30%	“My best friend was sent to a conversion camp by his parents. Even worse, it ‘worked’ meaning it scared him so much that he is living an unhappy heterosexual lifestyle now.”
Sexual Assault/Harassment	15%	“I am fortunate enough to have had few instances where I have felt unsafe for my attraction; however, I have been sexually assaulted by several partners due to my asexuality. This includes coercion by force and emotional manipulation by people who said they loved me but felt entitled to my body.”
Education as Solution	50%	“Education to those who have those feelings. Education about race, religions, sexuality, etc. I think people are afraid of what they do not know! Teaching people about the ‘unknown’ and acceptance of people that are ‘different’ than themselves.”

Prototype Creation

As discussed in Chapter Two, there are benefits and risks to using real people's lived experiences as a method of altering prejudiced people's perceptions of other groups. On the one hand, when stories are individualized, they are vulnerable to dismissal as an uncommon occurrence and not worthy of completely altering one's understanding. It is that critique that prompted the direction for the comic book concept presented in this thesis. Much like graphic schemas, it is repetition and consistency that erodes layers of doubt and confusion until full acceptance is achieved. Instead of focusing on one narrative for a comic book, an anthology of stories—all related under a common theme—was used to challenge deeply held beliefs about the LGBTQIA+ community and their struggle for acceptance and equality. The structure of these narratives was heavily inspired by the book *Love is Love*,⁹⁶ which collected over 40 visceral responses by celebrities, writers, and comics artists to the 2016 Pulse Nightclub shooting in Orlando, and presented them in one-to-two page vignettes. Each page, or spread, harbored emotional and powerful messages of love, loss, confusion, fear, hope, and determination (see Figures 15–16). Some stories were fictional, while others were autobiographical, but the impact of so many stories surrounding one subject was an unavoidable and united sense of community and support, with little room for doubt or skepticism. It was with that in mind that the structure of this thesis' comic took shape. Each story was given a minimum of one page and a maximum of four pages to convey the narrative—a constraint a little broader than that of *Love is Love*, but similar to the stories in *Chainmail*

⁹⁶ Sarah Gaydos and Jamie S. Rich, editors, *Love is Love* (IDW Publishing, 2016).

*Bikini*⁹⁷ (which ranged from one page to eight). The purpose of this approach was to confront the reader with the reality of many experiences as a whole instead of having them get invested too deeply into any one story. As mentioned previously, mirror neurons allow people to feel what another person feels via visual stimuli. An extension of this phenomenon is the concept of *parallel empathy*, which is defined as “the recognition of the plight of another person or group, coupled with the realization that the individual or group has been treated unjustly.”⁹⁸ The multi-story approach allows for a range of topics and perspectives to be discussed, potentially tapping into one or more topics that are more personal to different readers, giving multiple opportunities for parallel empathy. For instance, one reader may be more family-oriented and thus be swayed by a story about siblings or parents, while another may be more familiar with discrimination for other reasons (e.g., race, religion, etc.) and relate better to stories that focus on identity and community.

⁹⁷ Newlevant, Hazel, editor, *Chainmail Bikini : The Anthology of Women Gaymers*, (Alternative Comics, 2016).

⁹⁸ Alice S. Kitchel, “Eliciting Open-Mindedness: A Phenomenological Study of Acceptance of Same-Gender Marriage by Vermont Residents,” Order No. AAI3541841, <http://libproxy.txstate.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.libproxy.txstate.edu/docview/1520334200?accountid=5683>.



Fig. 15. *Love is Love*. 2017. Scan of *Love is Love* 1. Source: Comixology.com. Accessed May 3, 2017. Each artist was given one to two pages, or 200 words, to express their reactions to the *Pulse* Nightclub shootings in Orland in 2016.



Fig. 16. *Love is Love*. Scan of *Love is Love* 2. Source: SDGLN.com. Accessed May 3, 2017. Artists of major superhero comic series occasionally used those characters to express their emotions.

The process of creating the comic started with identifying potential stories from the questionnaire responses (see Table 1). After identifying specific themes in the responses—namely, the coming out process, fear of harm, family issues, searching for validation, and sexual assault—certain stories were selected that best represented those themes. Common elements were highlighted and, with some creative license, altered slightly to be more universal (based on the other responses to the survey and examples and discussions pulled from other media sources). With these themes in mind, five experiences were chosen out of the initial responses to craft stories, each highlighting one

or more of the themes. Each experience was designated a certain number of pages within which to tell the story—based on amount of information given and what pacing would be useful for maximum effect as determined by Groensteen’s *spatio-topia* (see Chapter Three). The responses were then checked for key information vital for an accurate representation (i.e., age, sex, race/ethnicity, etc.). Once the main characterizations were set, an initial script was written to amplify the power of the response and direct it into a narrative (see Appendix B). The scripts took into account the hyperframe and metanarrative, with directions about panel usage and general directorial notes (e.g., setting, time, actions, characters, etc.) to aid with the flow and pacing of the story. Whenever possible, the actual text of the respondent was used for increased truthfulness and representation, whether through narration or dialogue. Creative license was used for the rest of the dialogue/narration based on other responses and general knowledge pulled from various media sources and personal experience (where appropriate).

The style of illustration used in the prototype was based on McCloud’s “cartooning” principle, distilling each character into relatively basic shapes and general features rather than more nuanced and specific designs. Also, as the respondents to the questionnaire provided no descriptions or pictures for reference (and none were requested by the researcher), the style was necessarily vague. Some distinctions were made to differentiate characters from each other, but were mainly arbitrary and non-representative beyond specifying gender, age, and race/ethnicity. This choice of styling also allowed a wider variety of people to potentially see themselves in the characters, rather than being so specific to a certain person as to negate a more empathetic connection, representing the universality of representation detailed by McCloud. Backgrounds and scenery were

kept minimal to focus the reader's eye on the actions of the main characters and the dialogue/narration, with just enough visual information to provide a sense of place and passage of time. Certain key panels included a much more nuanced use of space and dynamic lighting, creating specific atmospheres to increase comprehension of the emotional state of the characters. Likewise, the prototype was designed in grayscale as to not distract from the content. The size of the prototype was built at 6.625" x 10.125", a standard comic book size, in order to better replicate the comic book experience.

The first story created was based on the response of a young (age 18–25) Latino gay man discussing a time when he felt uncomfortable because of his sexuality. In his response, he said:

There happened to be a string of hate crimes going on in the Houston Montrose area. I was walking at a different bar a little far away when a car started following me slowly. Just the current events, the nighttime, etc. really freaked me out.

Similar sentiments about being attacked or victimized just for being in a particularly LGBT-friendly area, or being noticed or “outed” as non-heterosexual, showed up in several responses to the questionnaire. Those fears stemmed from multiple sources (e.g., employers, clients, friends, family, strangers, etc.), but the underlying theme was one of concern for one's safety and comfort. This young man's response pointed out yet another source—actual incidents of violence presented in the media and among the community (which, thanks to the young man's age and given location, could be pinpointed for more accuracy in the story). As mentioned in Chapter Two, these incidents and representations of the community in the media have a negative impact on both the queer community and the dominant group—the queer community sees the violence and is afraid, while the dominant group (heterosexuals) see the violence and are potentially encouraged to see this as a norm. A first-person narration was used for this story to fully place the reader in

the mind of the main character for a stronger empathic connection—emphasized through the use of rectangular text boxes instead of speech bubbles. Utilizing McCloud and Postema’s concept of closure, the last panel leaves the reader with the distinct impression that something bad might happen to the main character, but as there is no follow-up page or panel that continues the story, the reader is left questioning that interpretation (see Figure 17). The story’s ending was intentionally vague in order to recreate feelings of tension and uncertainty within the reader. As the uncertainty of violence is a daily occurrence for many members of the LGBTQIA+ community, this story places the reader squarely in the mindset of many of those people.



Fig. 17. Zachary Vernon. Screenshot of Prototype 1. May 2, 2017.
 Panel structure and composition help create a sense of impending doom for the main character of this page. As the car gets closer, the panels get smaller and tighter, until nothing is left but an abstraction of the boy and the car, leading the reader to believe in an imminent crash.

The second story was based on the response of another gay man (age 26–35) who detailed a personal experience with intolerant or bigoted behavior:

My brother, whom I have had a close relationship with through adulthood including 10 years of me being openly gay, recently told me that my partner and I could no longer be around his daughter (8) and son (5) because it stood in direct conflict with their evangelical beliefs. There was no malice in his decision and this was not an attempt to change me of my homosexuality. Instead, it was because they wanted to raise their children to believe that homosexuality was sexual impurity and improper but could not do so since I was an overwhelmingly positive influence in his children's lives. At which point his children were old enough to understand their concept of "love the sinner, hate the sin", my partner and I could be re-introduced. This action exemplifies bigoted behavior.

Several of the responses from the questionnaire echoed similar experiences of rejection from family members. Those stories ranged from outright dismissal and rejection to more insidious discrimination like the above, many of which involved religion as a catalyst for the intolerant behavior/actions. This response was chosen to show that “acceptance” and “tolerance” are not black and white concepts, and that there is a wide spectrum of discrimination that affects LGBTQIA+ people and their families. In addition, family acceptance or rejection is a more universal experience than just within the LGBTQIA+ community, allowing a wide range of audiences to understand within their own frames of reference. The ending to this particular story was altered—based on various stories from both the questionnaire and the media—to represent the impact that such intolerance can have on families of LGBTQIA+ individuals and to prompt the reader to experience the heartbreak of a family torn apart by that intolerance (see Figure 17). The third-person perspective was utilized to give the reader the sense of intruding upon an emotional family scene, making the reader slightly uncomfortable as a silent witness powerless to affect the narrative. The darkening atmosphere throughout the comic also foreshadows the growing despondency and sadness within the main characters.



Fig. 18. Zachary Vernon. Screenshot of Prototype 2. May 2, 2017.
The third person perspective was used in this story in order to emphasize the helplessness of the reader.

A response from a pansexual woman (age 26–35) was chosen as the third story to provide a vastly different experience and perspective. This woman’s search for understanding presented a common theme to many of the responses: a desire to find one’s place in a very confusing world. Her response to how she initially came out was:

I have only begun the process of finding the right label to help people understand my sexuality. I have tried to find the right words over the years and fallen short. When trying to explain the way I feel to people, it has often been met with confusion or lack of understanding. The more words I am able to find to help explain, the better the results have been. Also, as I have found those words, friends that are members of the LGBTQ+ community have been able to better support me and validate my experiences.

The concept of sexuality as a spectrum rather than a set of segmented boxes within which people fit goes back to Alfred Kinsey and his Heterosexual-Homosexual Rating Scale,⁹⁹ and has since been expanded to include other forms of sexual attraction (asexuality, pansexuality, aromantic, etc.) Identifying one’s place on the sexual spectrum can be a complicated and confusing process, as this woman’s response highlights. That journey of self-discovery, as well as attempting to find validation from others, was inherent in many of the responses to the questionnaire, with several ending positively. This story was included in the prototype to offer a positive reinforcement of acceptance and validation for different sexualities, while also emphasizing the isolation and frustration non-conforming sexual minorities face. Once again, the first-person narrative perspective was used to put the reader into the mindset of the main character, following the character through the process of self-discovery. This story also offered a counterpoint that not all experiences within the LGBTQIA+ community are harrowing or negative, and to reinforce the positive feelings that support and community can create.

⁹⁹ Kinsey Institute, Accessed April 06, 2017, <https://www.kinseyinstitute.org/research/publications/kinsey-scale.php>.

The fourth story chosen was that of a lesbian woman (age 26–35) whose coming out experience was indicative of many LGBTQIA+ people. This woman explained that after she was unintentionally “outed” to her family, the process of acceptance was a long and hard-fought battle that included “lots of counseling, lots of fighting & lots of determination...” In the end, her parents and family became her “biggest supporters,” a happier ending than many. That happy ending is sullied in the comic representation though by a shift in scope from the insular family unit to the country at large, with a parallel being drawn between the struggle for acceptance within her family and her newly created family’s struggle for acceptance from the government. This jarring disconnect between past and present is emphasized through Groensteen’s *braiding*, which argues that the previous pages and panels inform how one sees and understands the overall story. The journey over four pages gives the reader enough time to relate to the struggle of the main character, only to be confronted with even more hardship at the end.

Many of the responses from the questionnaire reiterated feelings of a never-ending battle for acceptance, even when personal victories were achieved (like marriage, acceptance from family or friends, or other positive experiences with the dominant culture). This story was chosen in particular to not only tackle those feelings, but to reinforce certain themes in the other stories—namely the difficult process of seeking validation for your sexuality and the spectrum of tolerance/acceptance within family structures. As previously mentioned, the point of using multiple stories in the prototype is to offer differing perspectives on similar topics in an effort to negate the dismissal of the stories as individual or unique circumstances. Each repetition aids in eroding doubt in the mind of the reader.

The final story created for the prototype was an amalgamation of several responses from different members of the community dealing with the same issue: sexual assault/harassment. The majority of these stories were from asexual individuals, both men and women, with a couple from bisexual/biromantic and lesbian women. Though institutions like the Center for Disease Control have reported high rates of sexual assault on LGBT people,¹⁰⁰ rates of sexual assault among other sexual minorities, like asexuals, are woefully lacking. While this may seem like an in-group issue, the lack of understanding of what asexuality and bisexuality are and the dismissal of consent as a result is a wider problem. This story focuses on a young white asexual man's introduction to the community as a proxy for the dominant culture's own tentative foray into a queer-dominated space. Other characters, all based on respondents from the survey, are introduced with a feeling of community and trust. Even these purported safe-spaces are not safe from the pervasive issues that plague the LGBTQIA+ community though. As the story develops, the revelation of each character's experiences with sexual assault and harassment not only feels like a personal violation, but a desecration of the safe space itself (see Figure 19). The story ends with one of the main characters pondering the inevitability of something worse happening to him. That question harkens back to the first story's theme of fear, reinforcing the uncertainty that many LGBTQIA+ members face each day.

¹⁰⁰ "NISVS: An Overview of 2010 Findings on Victimization by Sexual Orientation," Accessed April 06, 2017, https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/cdc_nisvs_victimization_final-a.pdf.



Fig. 19. Zachary Vernon. Screenshot of Prototype 3. May 2, 2017.
A night of introductions and camaraderie quickly devolves into awkwardness as the stigmas and experiences of outside world interrupt their seemingly innocent game.

Once the stories were written out, each script was laid out within the parameters of the comic book's dimensions. Special attention was paid to the hyperframe and the movement and flow of the text (see Figure 20–22) in order to aid the reader in the flow of information. How the text was broken up in speech bubbles (or narration bubbles, depending on the story) was of first importance, as well as the layout and visual flow of the panels. The panels themselves were kept simple and straightforward in their arrangement to aid literacy for readers who many not be familiar with comic book layouts and thus less fluent in experimental formatting (referencing Cohn's concept of *fluency*). Composition within the panels was then utilized to aid the flow as well as create dynamic tension and emotional resonance. Key visual moments were identified and given prominence through use of space, value (amount of black) in order to increase the atmospheric resonance of emotion, while graphic schemas like facial expressions, body language, and action lines, served to provide visual cues to reinforce the text, as well as provide a more nuanced and layered understanding of content. Each story was created separately in Photoshop before being combined into one InDesign document.



Fig. 20. Zachary Vernon. Screenshot of Prototype 4. May 2, 2017.
Initially, general panel layout was produced to understand the flow of the page.

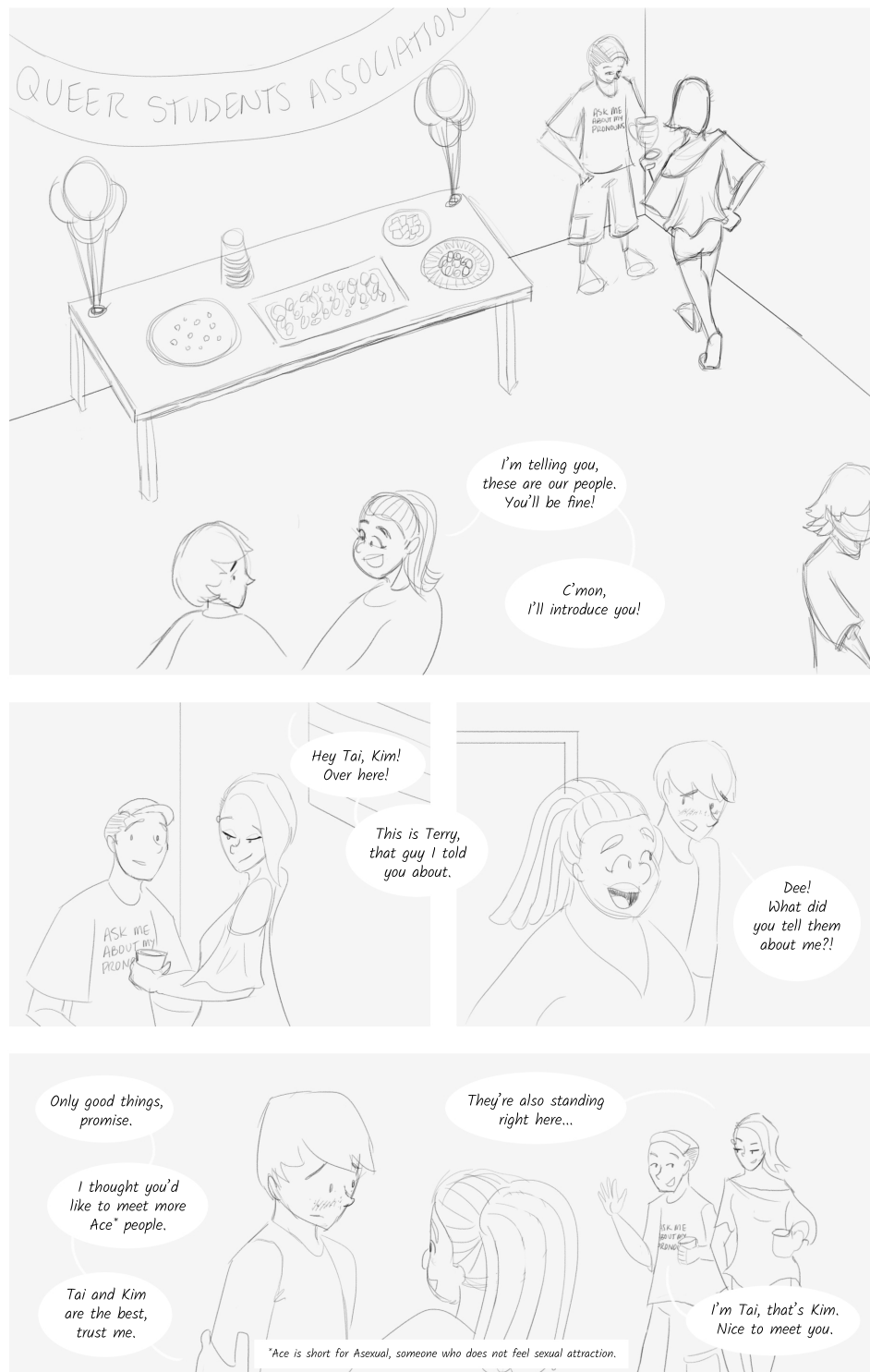


Fig. 21. Zachary Vernon. Screenshot of Prototype 5. May 2, 2017.
Second, text was added to the panels to test flow and composition, creating better flow lines and focusing on pertinent details.



Fig. 22. Zachary Vernon. Screenshot of Prototype 6. May 2, 2017.
Lastly, greyscale coloring was added to aid in differentiation and scenery.

The initial order of the stories was determined by identifying a metanarrative and desired effect of the prototype on the reader: that all members of the LGBTQIA+ community are searching for something. Whether it's the lesbian woman who is searching for acceptance from her family and her government, or the asexual boy who is searching for a safe space with people like him, the characters in these stories are all seeking much the same things: safety, acceptance, and validation. The use of the sexual assault story at the end, with the cliffhanger line of "Is something worse **always** going to happen," was purposeful in that it leaves the question in the air for the reader to contemplate and take with them, utilizing McCloud's concept of closure. The final revelation, that each of the stories in the collection is based on the lived experiences of a real person, dissuades the reader from dismissing the stories as a work of fiction and reframes the context of the narratives to the real world instead of a fictional setting. See the full comic in the appendix.

Testing the Prototype

In order to understand if the prototype had any effect on the reader's perception of LGBTQIA+ persons, a baseline of feelings towards the queer community had to be tested. A shortened version of Herek's *Attitudes Towards Lesbians and Gays Scale*¹⁰¹ (ATLG) was used as a basis for feelings towards the community at large. The original ATLG provides 20 statements—10 about gay men, and 10 about lesbian women—to which the subject agrees or disagrees using a Likert scale. The shortened version (five statements about gay men and five statements about lesbian women) highly correlates

¹⁰¹ "The Attitudes Towards Lesbians and Gays Scale," Accessed April 06, 2017, <http://lgbpsychology.com/html/atlgfile.pdf>.

with the original subscales (e.g., $r_s > .95$ between 5-item versions of the ATG and ATL and their 10-item counterparts), with its use now being recommended over the original. Though the ATLG does not encompass the entire spectrum of sexualities, the study itself has been shown to correlate highly with other factors of intolerance (e.g., high religiosity, lack of interpersonal contact with gay men and lesbians, adherence to traditional gender-role attitudes, belief in a traditional family ideology, and endorsement of policies that discriminate against sexual minorities).¹⁰² The shortened survey was formatted online with a 5-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5) for each statement. Four questions were reverse coded, creating a range of potential scores from a minimum of -14 (very positive attitudes towards lesbians and gays) to a maximum of 26 (very negative attitudes towards lesbians and gays). See Appendix C for the full survey.

The survey was sent out to a convenience sample of 3,881 randomly selected students of Texas State University (10% of the total student population), ranging from freshmen to doctoral level. Out of those 3,881 students, 97 (2.5%) completed the survey. Three categories of prejudice were created to identify potential users: low-prejudice (scores of -14 to 0), medium-prejudice (scores of 1 to 14), and high-prejudice (scores of 15 to 26). For the purpose of this study, only those who scored in the medium and high-prejudice categories were chosen to test the prototype, which yielded a potential testing group of 20 students (21%).

Those 20 students were contacted via email for a follow-up user test of the

¹⁰² The Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gays Scale, Accessed April 17, 2017, <http://psychology.ucdavis.edu/rainbow/html/atlg.html>.

prototype of the comic (see the email recruitment letter in Appendix D) and offered compensation in the form of a \$25 gift card to *Amazon.com*, as well as entry into a raffle to win a \$60 Bluetooth Wireless Speaker. Out of the 20 students, six (30%) participated in the user test. Five of the six (83%) were female, with one being male. The user test consisted of the respondent reading the prototype of the comic book, re-taking the ATLG survey directly afterwards, and then participating in a short nine-question interview (see Appendix E for user test script). Each user-test was recorded via audio and later transcribed.

V. RESULTS

Attitudes Towards Lesbians and Gays Initial Survey

As mentioned previously, 97 respondents filled out the initial ATLG survey from a group of 3,881. 79% (77) of respondents scored in the low-prejudice range (from -14 to 0), 18% (17) scored in the mid-range (from 1 to 14), and 3% (3) scored in the high-prejudice range (from 15 to 26). The mean of the initial results was -6.37113, the median was -10, the mode was -14 (the lowest possible score), and the range was 40.

User Test Results

The six respondents that agreed to participate in the user tests had scores ranging from 13 to 2, all within the mid-range for sexual prejudice. Table 2 shows the pre- and post-user test scores of the users.

Table 2. Pre- and Post-User Test Scores

User Test	Pre-Test Score	Post-Test Score	Differentiation
1	6	-14	-20
2	2	-2	-4
3	6	-2	-8
4	7	0	-7
5	13	14	+1
6	4	2	-2

Out of the six participants, 83% (5) had a reduced ATLG score after viewing the prototype. 17% (1) of the users' scores increased after reading the prototype (from a score of 13 to a score of 14). The mean difference between initial ATLG scores and post-prototype scores was -6.67, the range was 21, and the median was -5.5. Statistical significance was not achieved due to the small sample size.

Many participants, during the interview portion of the user test, stated their support for and lack of prejudice towards the LGBTQIA+ community. Two participants (40%) mentioned having previous educational experiences regarding sexuality (User 1 took a sexuality class at a community college, while User 2 had participated in Ally Training—an LGBT+ educational training seminar offered at Texas State University). Four of the six users (67%) directly mentioned having gay/lesbian friends, coworkers, or relatives. None of the respondents mentioned knowing anyone who was bisexual, transgender, or any of the other labels in the sexual spectrum. Five participants (83%) identified with a character in the stories, for varying reasons. The one user that did not relate to any character in the story gave her faith as a reason for not relating, claiming, "I don't discriminate against this community, but I don't—as a Christian, I don't believe that it's right." Four (67%) said that reading the comic book had little to no effect on their perceptions or attitudes towards the LGBTQIA+ community, however three out of those four (75%) had lower ATLG scores after reading the prototype, requiring further investigation to understand the discrepancy.

100% of the participants stated that they do not currently read graphic narratives in any format, but did believe that comics are an effective way of learning about a subject and that other people might benefit from reading the prototype. One of those did qualify

that certain people may not be affected—claiming that comics may not work for people who can’t empathize as well. The main reason given for not reading comics was a lack of access or exposure to it. One participant said that, “I like to read, but I don’t necessarily, like, go searching for them, or whatever. If they’re around, then cool.” One user felt comics were overpowering with so much going on at one time, but mentioned that the prototype was easy to read.

Several of the participants mentioned the power of comics to engage the readers. From the expressions and emotions displayed via the images, to the concise format of the narrative, as well as the personal storytelling element of the comics, each participant offered up various arguments for comics as a method of learning about a subject. “I don’t think it would have taken the message home if it had just been plain letters on a piece of paper, without the drawings,” one user responded. “I guess it allows more of an insider view. And you can also see more of the emotion instead of just reading into emotion through words, you can put them together,” said another participant. Learning that the stories were true also seemed to affect the users. One participant said, “Even though I kinda knew what the community was, I was just shocked to read some of this stuff. At the end, that it’s true—true stories—it was crazy.”

Two of the users self-identified as Christians and referenced their religious beliefs when discussing their answers—especially in the context of who they did or did not relate to within the stories. Those two users remained in the mid-range of prejudice after reading the prototype. One of those users, in a particularly vulnerable moment, started to tear up when discussing the struggle she felt between her faith and a friend who is gay. While explaining which characters she related to, she said,

This one [pointing to the Uncle Charlie story] really touched me because I'm Christian and so, that—it's really hard because I can understand why the brother felt he needed to do that [keep his kids away from his gay brother], but then at the same time my heart goes out to the couple.

Later, when clarifying why that story stood out to her, she said,

Because I feel like it's something I'm going to have to address. One of my best friends is gay and, um, my faith is really important to me and like, the main thing in my life. Um, so, it's something that I'll have to, like, figure out what I'm gonna do for that situation.

Though further research is needed, there may be potential for graphic narratives to help those in the religious communities navigate conflicts between their beliefs and their relationships with those in the LGBTQIA+ community. At the very least, the prototype gave that user an opportunity to see how religion and other factors affect the community from a different perspective. In the words of that same user,

I would say (the purpose of the comic) is to inform people about, like, what people in this community are feeling because a lot of people don't know that perspective, or want to know that perspective, or feel empathy for them. And so, this is a way to show that side and like, these are relatable stories, and so, I think it's a way for people on the other side to better understand what they're going through.

VI. CONCLUSION

Discussion

The results of the user test indicate that the prototype was successful in altering some of the users' attitudes and perceptions towards the LGBTQIA+ community.

Though the lack of scores over 14 in the user test does not fully answer whether or not people with high levels of prejudice shift their perceptions as a result of reading a graphic narrative, the study does show that those who score in the mid-range on the ATLG might be swayed to more positive attitudes towards LGBTQIA+ people. This alone is promising in offering yet another tool for tolerance/acceptance teaching programs or other educational efforts. Further testing is required to achieve statistical significance.

The limitations of this research begin with the source material for the initial scripts. Time restraints forced the creation of stories based on a limited pool of responses to the initial questionnaire, though each story was subsequently backed up by later responses. Likewise, a broader range of demographics among the community must be accessed to create more diverse and authentic stories that resonate across the spectrum of sexuality, race, and age. Each story in the prototype revolved around younger people, and though the sex and race of the characters was representative of the initial survey respondents, it is important not to dismiss the experiences of older members of the community. Another limitation was the amount of stories able to be produced. Ideally, the anthology of stories would be more robust, further decreasing the chances of dismissal and increasing the opportunities for readers to relate to different stories. Due to the limited initial responses, only five stories could be produced for the prototype.

Some of the limitations of the user test were small sample size, researcher bias,

and potential skewed results based on the observer effect. With five out of the six participants being women, the sample was also not representative of sex or gender identity. Demographics were not taken as part of the user test, leaving a wide area of research to be done in terms of understanding potentially different responses between race, age, and religious background. As the researcher conducting the user test was a homosexual man, it is possible that the users may have altered their answers or behavior based on the observer effect. In order to combat that possibility, the researcher's sexual identity was never mentioned in any of the user tests, nor did the researcher offer any personal opinions on the participants' answers. Regardless of the precautions taken, further study would either utilize a neutral observer, or potentially move to a digital format in which the researcher is not present at the time of testing.

One of the reasons for having an interview after taking the survey was to discuss the content in more detail and to talk through any possible shifts in attitude. As previously mentioned, though most of the users claimed that reading the prototype had no effect on their attitudes or perceptions towards the LGBTQIA+ community, many of their scores reflected a different story. This contradiction would need further investigation in order to understand fully the disparity between the numbers and the statements.

Future Research

With the knowledge gained from the user tests, future research will include several key components: the addition of more stories, higher production value, further testing, distribution of a final product, and potential impact of other types of narratives. The limitations of the study, mentioned above, must also be addressed to test the true efficacy of the comic book in altering perceptions and attitudes toward LGBTQIA+

people. Further testing of the comic must include a wider audience than a student population and include more people within the high-prejudice range of the ATLG. Though younger, more educated people may be more amenable to change and a confrontation of their beliefs (backed up by the user tests in this study), the purpose of this comic book is to be accessible to a broad spectrum of potentially intolerant individuals: parents and teachers of LGBTQIA+ youth, authority figures like the police and government officials, and anti-LGBT business people. Other options for testing levels of prejudice, like Dr. Jill Chonody's Sexual Prejudice Survey,¹⁰³ may offer a more specific and nuanced understanding of the basis for prejudice as well as potential effects of different stories. Likewise, testing individual stories versus the collection may also reveal more powerful narratives that can then be used to target specific audiences. Further study should also include how religion factors into sexual prejudice and whether stories surrounding the topic of religion and sexuality might be more effective for more religious individuals.

Several options are available in extending the amount of stories within the narrative. One option would be to extend the initial questionnaire to a wider audience through targeted social media ads or large LGBTQIA+ organizations in an effort to generate more nuanced and diverse stories. There could also be a call for user-generated content via an online portal. Hazel Newlevant, creator of *Chainmail Bikini*, believes that

¹⁰³ Jill M. Chonody, "Exploring Sexual Prejudice in Context: History, Theory, and Measurement," Order No. 3385241, The Florida State University, 2009, <http://libproxy.txstate.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.libproxy.txstate.edu/docview/304881897?accountid=5683>.

“representation gets better the more people can do it themselves.”¹⁰⁴ Offering a vehicle to queer artists and creators allows for increased authenticity and more nuanced storytelling.

Distribution of stories fits hand-in-hand with production value and the collection of more stories. In agreement with Eisner, the printed publication medium for comics still has a place in today’s mobile- and digital-obsessed society. The freedom of movement that a printed comic gives to a reader, especially in regards to an anthology or collection of stories, allows greater opportunity for individual stories to shine and be remembered. Self-publishing companies abound, while crowd-funding sites like *Kickstarter.com* and *IndieGoGo.com* create resources and a willing audience. Success stories like *Chainmail Bikini* and *Love is Love* prove that there is a market for such content. Traditional publishing houses may also be interested in content geared towards social good in an atmosphere of socially charged work coming from major brands like *Marvel*, *DC*, *Image* and *DarkHorse*. Alternatively, digital publishing should not be overlooked as a potential market and resource for dissemination. The Internet and the “sharability” of social media allow broad access to content. With the potential of user-generated content, a blog or website devoted to LGBTQIA+ stories in comic format would not be adverse to the purpose of this thesis. Testing would need to occur to understand the effects that such a change of media might have on users.

As this study has proven graphic narratives to be an effective means of altering perceptions toward the LGBTQIA+ community, future research would also expand the use of graphic narratives as a means of promoting tolerance and acceptance for other

¹⁰⁴ Hans Rollman, “The ‘Chainmail Bikini’ Success Story: Challenging Sexism in Gaming and Comics,” *PopMatters.com*, July 27, 2016, <http://www.popmatters.com/column/the-chainmail-bikini-success-story-challenging-sexism-in-gaming-and-comics/>.

minority groups: religious minorities, racial minorities, the differently abled, refugees, immigrants, etc. *Chainmail Bikini* would be an excellent test subject for attitudes towards the “girl gamer” population, for instance—a population that is consistently harassed by the larger male-dominated gaming community. Understanding the greater implications of graphic narratives on different populations could reveal a simple and accessible alternative to, or additional material for tolerance-promoting programs and methods. With a firm foot in both reality and creativity, graphic narratives can help rewrite the script of social progress.

APPENDIX SECTION

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APPENDIX A: INITIAL QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Select the age that best describes you:
A.) 18 – 25 B.) 26 – 35 C.) 36 – 45 D.) 46 – 55 E.) 55 +
2. Select the gender identity that best represents you:
A.) Male (cisgender) B.) Female (cisgender) C.) Male (transgender) D.) Female (transgender) E. Other (Please specify):
3. Select the sexual identity that best represents you:
A.) Straight/Heterosexual B.) Gay/Homosexual C.) Bisexual D.) Asexual E.) Other (Please specify):
4. Select the statement that best represents your living situation:
A.) I live in the city center, B.) I live near the city, C.) I live in the suburbs, or D.) I live in a rural area.
5. How did you first become aware of your sexuality?
6. If you are “out” about your sexuality, at what age did you come out?
7. If you are out about your sexuality, describe how you initially came out and the reaction you received.
8. Before you came out, or if you are not currently out, what kept/keeps you from doing so?
9. Describe a time when you felt uncomfortable because of your sexuality.
10. Describe a time when you felt unsafe because of your sexuality.
11. How would you define intolerant or bigoted behavior?
12. Describe an example of intolerant or bigoted behavior that you have personally experienced.

13. Describe an example of intolerant or bigoted behavior that you have personally witnessed.
14. How does intolerant or bigoted behavior make you feel?
15. What do you think can help prevent intolerant or bigoted behavior?
16. Describe a positive relationship you have with someone not within the LGBTQIA+ community.

If it is alright to contact you for a follow-up interview, please leave your email address in the field below.

APPENDIX B: INITIAL PROTOTYPE SCRIPTS

Fear

18–25, male, cisgender, latino, gay, near city

Narration (?): Montrose is the gayborhood of Houston, Texas. A safe haven for people like us.

He says bye to his friends and walks down the street alone, still smiling and humming to himself.

People like me.

A car's lights turn on and starts to follow him slowly.

(But lately..) There's been a string of hate crimes. People getting beat up, mugged...

The boy notices the car.

...one guy was killed.

The boy turns down a street, looking back to see the car make the same turn, still moving slowly.

(And for the first time, in a) place that's supposed to be a safe haven, I don't feel all that safe anymore...

Scene ends ambiguously with car still approaching. Boy is no longer in scene. (probably a 2 page spread)

Brotherly Love

26–35, male, cisgender, white, gay, near city

Maybe 4-page (2 spreads)?

Exterior, playground: Young man ("Charlie") and his partner ("Brett") playing with a little girl and boy, pushing them on the swings. Everyone is smiling and laughing and having a good time.

Girl: "Higher, Uncle Charlie!!!"

Boy: "Uncle Brett, I wanna go high too!"

Brett: "Oh, I think we can do better than your sister, don't you?"

Epic panel with lots of pent-up motion (think anime).

Brett: "PREPARE FOR LIFTOFF!!!!!"

Brother (off-screen): "Kids, time to go!"

Brett + Boy: "Awww!!!"

Brett: "Next time, champ." *They pinky-promise.*

Kids run over to a van where their dad (Brother) is. Brother meets Charlie and Brett outside the car, looking a little uncomfortable.

Charlie: "Hey bro, everything alright?"

Brett is making faces at the kids in the van as they do the same to him.

Brother: "Yeah...Charlie, look...Lauren and I have been talking and we think it's best if we...we don't think it's a good idea for you to be around the kids for a while."

Charlie: "What?! Why?"

Brother: "We just...we're trying to raise them *right*. Y'know, good Christians. We can't teach them about sin if you and your...

Charlie: "Husband."

Brother: "...your husband are around. It'll just confuse them."

Brett: "You've got to be kidding."

Brother: "It's not like we don't love you, we do! Both of you. It's just...we're trying to do what's best for the kids."

Charlie: "I see."

Brett: "Well *I* don't! This is ridiculous!"

Charles: "Babe..."

Brother: "It's only temporary! Once they're old enough to understand, you can be a part of their lives again."

Brett: "That's a load of bullsh-"

Kids (from inside the van): "Daaaad!"

Brother: "Coming, sweetheart! Charlie, Brett, I...I'm sorry."

Brother and kids drive off, leaving the couple in the parking lot. Brett looks pissed off, but Charlie is just devastated.

What is Love (baby don't hurt me)?

26–35, female, cisgender, white, pansexual, suburbs

Narration: In high school, I realized I had feelings for both men and women. Not all men, and not all women, just some of them.

Narration: Confusing, right?

Narration: When I tried to explain the way I felt to others, I was met with confusion, or dismissal.

Friend: "So...you're bi?"

Woman: "No...I mean, I like some guys and some girls, but..."

Friend: "...sounds like you're confused. Maybe it's a phase?"

Woman: *facepalms*

Narration: I thought I was weird. That I was crazy, or defective. I felt alone.

(page break)

Narration: Recently though, a couple of friends told me about Pansexuality. (both women)

Friend 1: "Pan means that you love people regardless of sex or gender."

Friend 2: "It means you love people for who they are, not what they are."

Woman: "...Exactly."

Narration: I finally had a word for it. Something to start with and, y'know, Google.

(page break?)

Narration: The more words I've been able to find to help explain, the better the results

have been.

Woman: “No, no, not bisexual. I don’t care about gender or biological sex. It’s more about the actual person...”

Friend: “Oh, well that sounds really sweet, actually.”

Narration: It helps to know there are other people out there like me. That I’m not crazy, or defective.

Narration: That I’m not alone.

The Journey

26–35, female, cisgender, white, lesbian, suburbs

Each page of this story starts with a panel of a living room. The first and last pages are the narrator’s living room, the second and third are her parents’ living room. That can help show passage of time and establish an easy pattern.

PAGE 1

Pregnant woman (Sarah—for lack of a better name) with her wife watching TV on the living room couch, cuddling together and maybe eating popcorn. Very cozy and warm. There’s a picture of her parents on the side table.

Sarah: “If you had shown me a picture of my life looking like this when I was in high school, I would have said you were crazy.”

Bedroom: Sarah and another girl, both in their teens, are kissing on the bed (clothes are on, everything’s PG).

Narration: “I never got the chance to officially come out to my parents. It just sort of...happened.”

Mom walks into the room unannounced and catches them in the act.

Narration: “It didn’t go well.”

PAGE 2

A different living room: Sarah is incredibly embarrassed and scared. Her father seems to be stewing, trying to contain his anger. Her mother is animatedly upset, hands raised, yelling.

Narration: “In the beginning, there were a lot of fights.”

Sarah and her father arguing. Her father and mother arguing. Sarah and her mother arguing. (1 panel each)

Narration: “But with counseling...”

Sarah and her parents in a therapist’s office with therapist listening and having supportive/receptive body language. Sarah is talking while her parents have very defensive body language (crossed arms, looking away from Sarah, stern expressions).

Narration: “And a healthy dose of determination...”

Several panels (4–5) of Sarah repeating variations of the same line, “Girlfriend, not ‘friend,’” wearing different clothes, different styles of hair, and aging slightly as the panels progress.

PAGE 3

Narration: “Things eventually got better.”

Sarah introduces her new girlfriend (current wife) to her parents. They are welcoming and warm and all smiles. Sarah looks a little sheepish, but is smiling.

Narration: “With our little girl on the way, I’m very happy to have the support of my family.”

PAGE 4

Narration: “But what kind of world are you coming into?”

Same setup as the very first panel, but seen from behind with a focus on the TV as a newscaster talks about the Orlando Pulse Nightclub shooting, or the high number of homeless LGBT youth, or suicide rates, or anti-LGBT legislation, or some politician or Focus on the Family spokesperson railing about gays being a plague on the Earth or whatever. Sarah might be seen talking to her belly—to her daughter.

Group Therapy / Never Have I Ever

18–25, male, transgender, white, asexual, near the city &

26–35, female, cisgender, white, bi-romantic/asexual, suburbs

INT. NIGHT. A HOUSE PARTY

Many people mill about inside a house. It's a big gay mixer on campus complete with LGBT+ decorations, a big banner that reads WELCOME LGBT+ STUDENTS! and several people sport rainbow flags and various other pride colors (Trans, bi, ace, etc). At least one person has a shirt that says DON'T MIND ME I'M JUST AN ALLY.

TERRY, a young asexual boy, is brought into a group by DEE (can be female or male) a homosexual. KIM, TAI, and are in this group.

DEE: Hey guys, this is Terry, that guy I told you about.

TAI: Oh hey!

KIM: Howdy.

TAI waves pleasantly. TERRY looks somewhat taken aback.

TERRY: What'd you tell them about me?

DEE: Only good things. I thought you'd like to meet more Ace people on campus. I met Tai and Kim at the last party. They're good people.

TAI: They're also standing right here.

Good-natured laughter ensues.

SOME TIME LATER. INT. NIGHT. A HOUSE PARTY. **PAGE BREAK**

THE GROUP has moved to a couch in the living room. ERINA joins.

ERINA: God this is lame. Let's play a game.

DEE: Erina, this is Terry. Terry, this is Erina, resident bisexual.

ERINA lifts their drink in cheers.

ERINA: I have to pick my successor when my residency ends next year. There can only be one at a time.

TAI: What game did you want to play, Erina?

ERINA: (Grins) Never have I ever.

Several people groan.

TERRY looks confused.

TERRY: How do you play?

KIM: (Opening her palm) You hold up ten fingers, someone says "Never have I ever... uh... we'll say... eaten a fig" and if you have, you have to put down a finger. You win if you're the last person with fingers still up.

TERRY: Sounds easy. Let's go!

ERINA: (Wedges onto the couch) I'll start. Never have I ever... gone a full week without a shower.

Only TAI lowers a finger.

ALL: Ok gross.

TAI: Whatever.

SOME TIME LATER. INT. NIGHT. A HOUSE PARTY/COUCH **PAGE BREAK**

Several of THE GROUP have various fingers down. TERRY is on the lower end. He looks surreptitiously at the other players.

ERINA: Ok this is a snooze-fest. Let's spice it up. (indicating Terry) Your turn.

TERRY: (wanting to win) Ok fine, never have I ever... had sex.

TERRY looks smug until everyone but him lowers a finger. KIM and TAI do so slowly, reluctantly. TERRY looks to KIM and TAI.

TERRY: Wait what? I thought you were ace. You've had sex?

KIM: I... well... it wasn't...

TAI: (Knowing look. Lays a hand on KIM'S shoulder.) It wasn't consensual?

KIM: (Visibly upset) You... it happened to you?

TAI: Last partner. Said some bullshit about how "If you really loved me..." That old line.

KIM: I was... It's complicated.

TAI: Doesn't make it right.

DEE: What the fuck? **PAGE BREAK**

ERINA: (Visibly shaken) [Partner pronoun] used to wait til I was too drunk to say no.

DEE: Erina, you never told me that.

ERINA: Not something you bring up over coffee.

TERRY: So... all of you?

DEE looks away.

DEE: Yeah... I guess all of us.

TERRY places a hand on DEE'S knee. He holds her hand.

TERRY: You don't have to--

DEE: And I'm not. I'm not going to talk about it.

TERRY looks at his extended fingers. Tightens them into fists.

TERRY: I was at a school dance. These boys started dancing with me. I asked them to stop, but they just kept grinding... It was... I didn't... Is something worse going to happen? Is something worse always going to happen?

THE GROUP look at each other.

END.

APPENDIX C: ATTITUDES TOWARD LESBIANS AND GAYS SURVEY

User Test:

On a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being **Strongly Disagree** and 5 being **Strongly Agree**),
please rate the following statements.

1. I think male homosexuals are disgusting.

1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---

2. Male homosexuality is a perversion.

1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---

3. Male homosexuality is a natural expression of sexuality in men.

1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---

4. Sex between two men is just plain wrong.

1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---

5. Male homosexuality is merely a different kind of lifestyle that should not be condemned.

1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---

6. I think lesbians are disgusting.

1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---

7. Female homosexuality is a perversion.

1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---

8. Female homosexuality is a natural expression of sexuality in women.

1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---

9. Sex between two women is just plain wrong.

1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---

10. Female homosexuality is merely a different kind of lifestyle that should not be condemned.

1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---

APPENDIX D: EMAIL RECRUITMENT LETTER

This email message is an approved request for participation in research that has been approved or declared exempt by the Texas State Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Participants in this study will receive a \$25 gift card to Amazon.com and enter into a raffle for a \$60 Bluetooth Wireless Speaker (a one in twenty chance).

The information that you provide has the potential to benefit people by helping us understand how graphic narratives (like comic books) alter perception.

Participants in this study will take part in a user test in which they will read a short comic book, fill out a 10-question survey, then answer some follow-up questions. The study will take anywhere from 30 minutes to 1 hour. The user test will be recorded (audio only) with confidentiality and anonymity being of utmost importance.

If you would like to participate in this study, please respond to this email to set up a time and date for the user test.

If you have any questions about this research, please contact Zachary Vernon at 469.585.3309, or zdv2@txstate.edu, or his advisor Grayson Lawrence at gl16@txstate.edu.

This project (2017211) was approved by the Texas State IRB on 12/20/16. Pertinent questions or concerns about the research, research participants' rights, and/or research-related injuries to participants should be directed to the IRB chair, Dr. Jon Lasser 512-245-3413 – (lasser@txstate.edu) or to Monica Gonzales, IRB administrator 512-245-2334 - (meg201@txstate.edu).

APPENDIX E: USER TEST SCRIPT

Introduction

Hello, my name is Zachary Vernon and I'll be conducting this study. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. Before we begin, please read through this consent form and, once finished, sign here if you'd like to continue the study. Feel free to ask any questions about the consent form if anything seems confusing.

Thank you.

Today you will be asked to read a collection of stories in comic book form, take a quick 10-question survey, and then answer a few questions about the prototype. The entire interview should take no more than 45 minutes and will be recorded for transcription. If at any point you would like to take a break, just let me know. Also, if you have a question about anything, please do not hesitate to ask.

Read the Prototype

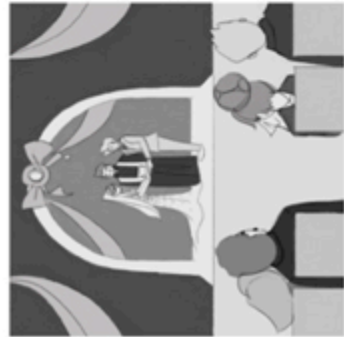
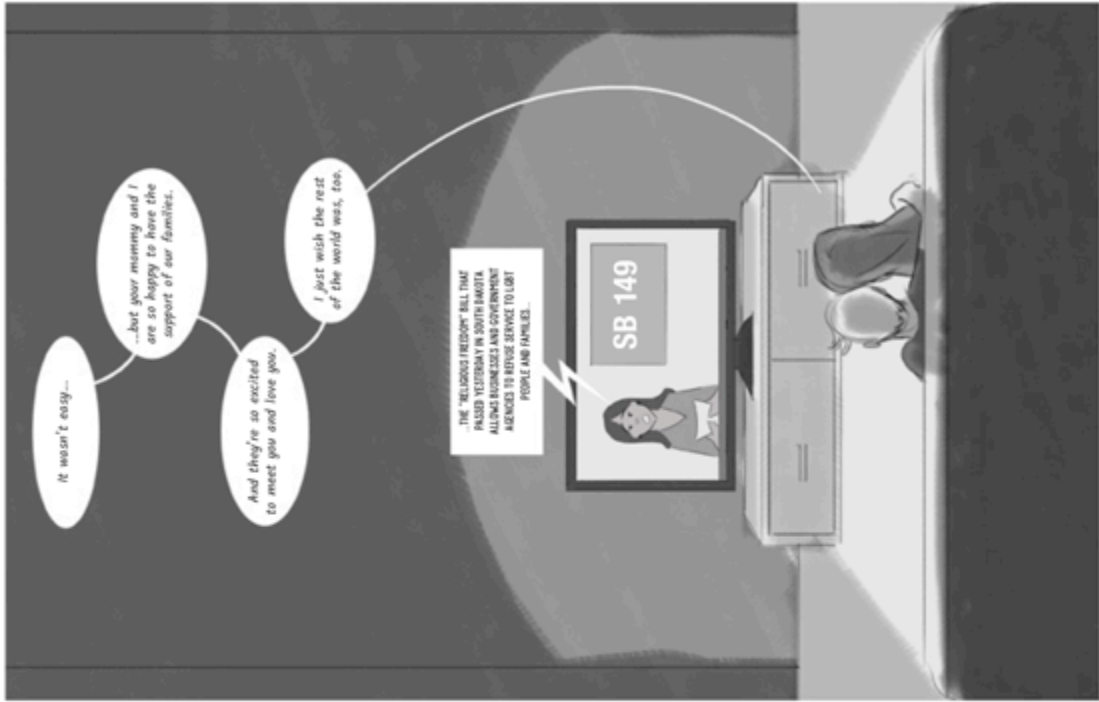
Take the ATLG

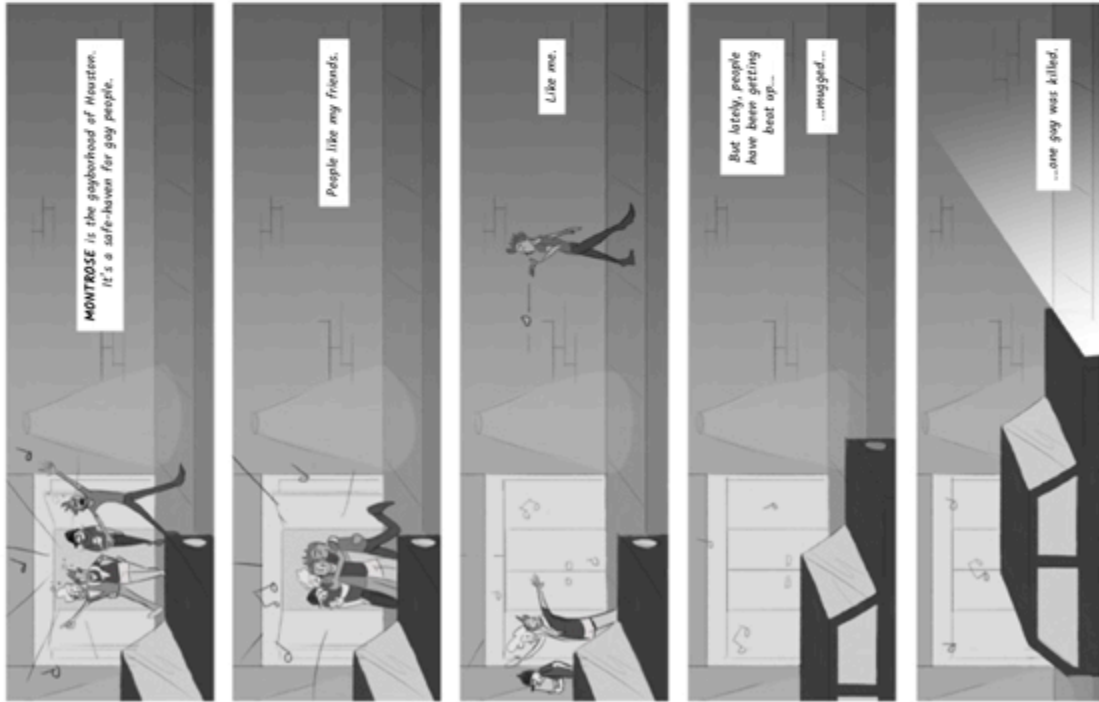
Questions (post-reading)

1. What do you think the main takeaway of each story is?
2. What character(s) do you relate to, if any, and why?
3. Was there any story that stood out to you? If so, why?
4. What, if anything, did you learn from reading these stories?
5. What would you say the purpose of the collection is?
6. In what order do you think these stories should read?
7. Do you currently read graphic stories (comic books, graphic novels, comic strips, web comics, etc.)? If yes, in what format do you read them (print, digital, other)? If no, why not?
8. Would you say comic books are an effective way of learning about a subject?

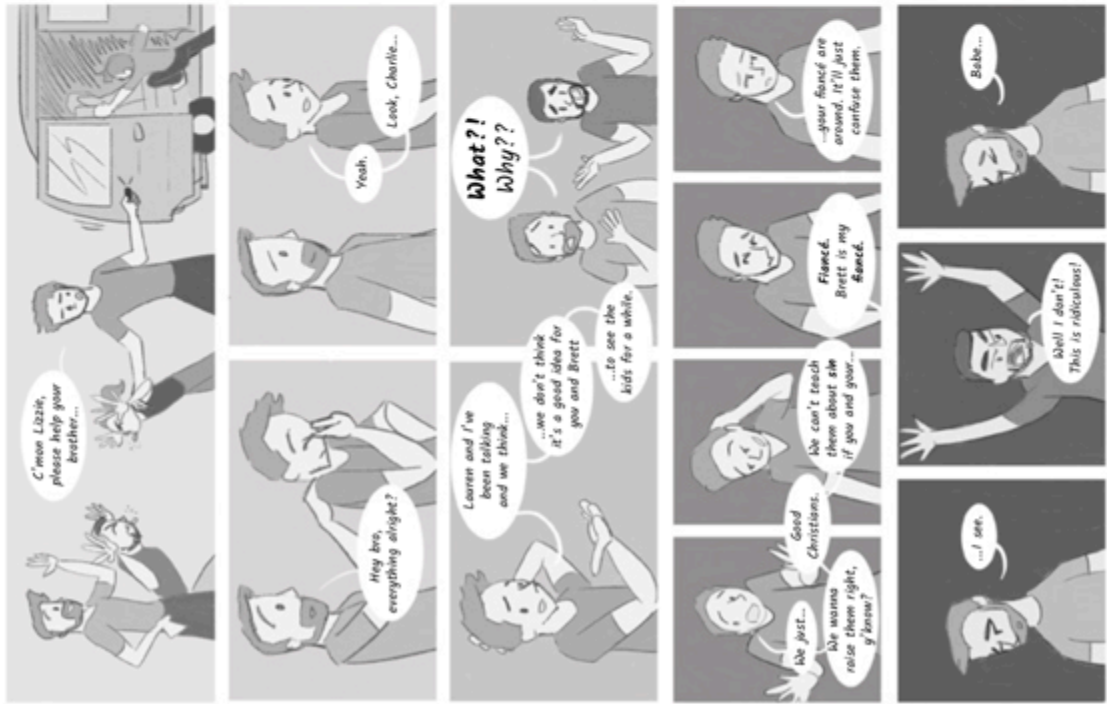
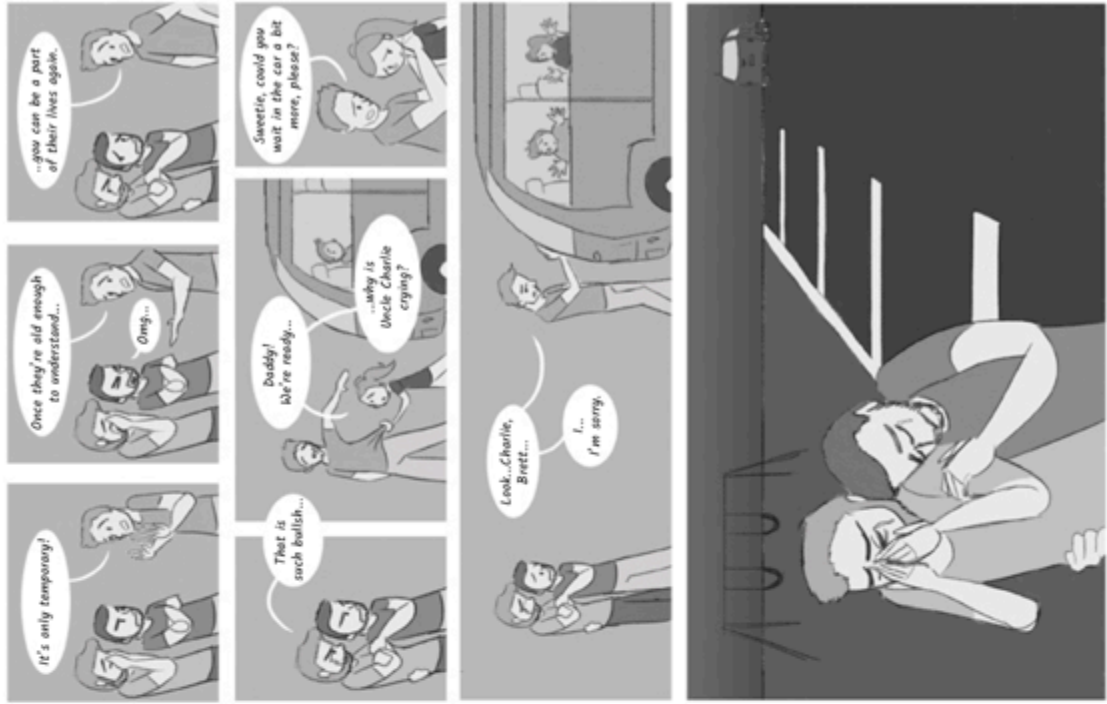
APPENDIX F: FULL PROTOTYPE





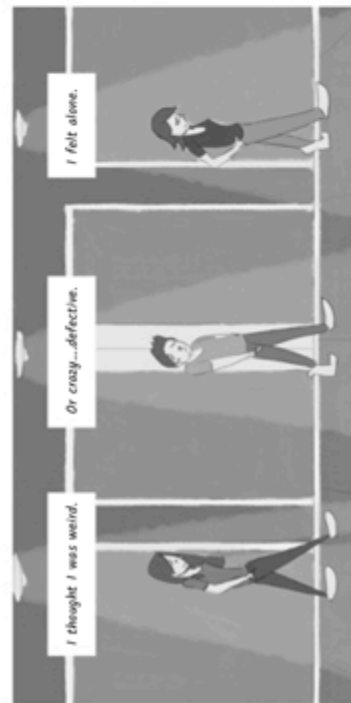




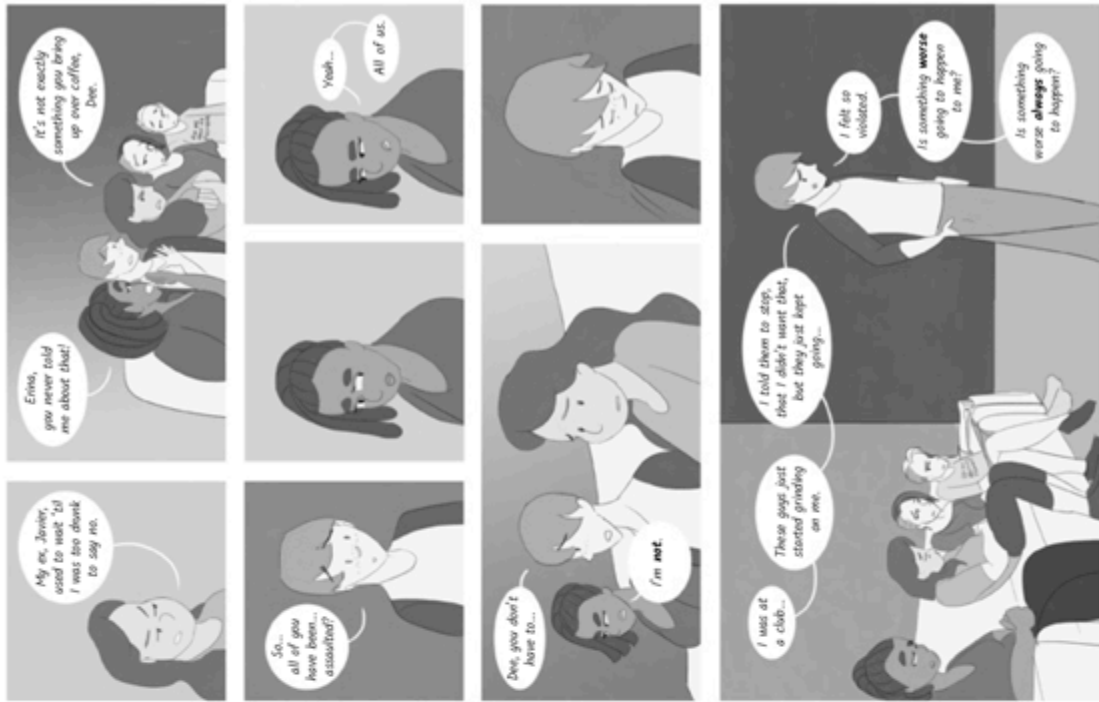




When I tried to explain the way I felt to others, I was usually met with confusion or dismissal.







*The stories you are about to
read are all based on the lived
experiences of real people.*

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