

services to disadvantaged groups in public libraries, outreach services to international students and internationalization of academic libraries.

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interests of the school community, but also attract an untapped audience, namely reluctant readers.

This study has also raised a number of differences among the librarians' perceptions of comics within their respective school libraries. As mentioned before, compared to the western countries in this study, the Asian countries faced more resistance in including comics in the school library collections from teachers. Even further, librarians from Asian countries – especially in Hong Kong and Taiwan – felt that comics had no real educational value. Japanese librarians also appeared to be less sure of comics' abilities in encouraging students to become more avid readers as well. However, because of the smaller sample sizes of Hong Kong and Japan (96 and 51, respectively), the results may be inconclusive. On the other hand, librarians in Oceania had little to no resistance from teachers and parents. Another curious point was the unexpected result from New Zealand librarians, who indicated that cataloguing was a major challenge for them – that is, it would require more manpower and time to catalogue the collection. This was not the case for librarians in the other four countries. Further research would be needed to understand the potential sociocultural and educational reasons behind these differences.

The findings of this study have conveyed the value of comic books as large a number of school librarians surveyed indicated they are gradually accepting them as a legitimate literary form. It appears the most compelling reason for including comic books in its collection is their ability to attract more students to use the school library.

Libraries have a mission to provide resources that inspire and enrich the lives of the communities they serve. In other words, a good portion of a librarian's job is anticipation – that is, discovering users' needs and their learning trends a step ahead. Since many school librarians in this study believed that comic books would bring more students into their libraries, the popularity of the comic book format will continue to grow amongst school libraries for the foreseeable future; the need to evaluate and enhance these collections will become increasingly important. Given the general and growing acceptance amongst the school libraries across different regions, comic books are here to stay. For this reason, it is hoped that the findings of this study will enable other practising school librarians to develop a clearer understanding of the educational values of comic books. Doing so would not only allow school librarians and other educators to improve their current practices, it would also facilitate us to plan for the future role of comic books in school library collections. The results of this study can provide valuable context and support for new librarians who are looking to maintain a comic book collection or attempting to legitimise this form of literature. Furthermore, for librarians who are new to this literary format, and are overwhelmed by the choices and genres, this study might provide them with useful reference, in terms of the potentials for maintaining an extensive collection of comic books in their libraries.

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love to read them (so they will never sit on your shelves), and with the right promotion (from you, the media specialist or librarian) these books can be utilised in the classroom for curricular connections.

### *Comics as an effective educational tool*

In short, the findings of this study reveal that although there are no guarantees that students would engage in more independent reading or become more information literate because of having comics in the school library collection, a majority of respondents in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Australia and New Zealand agreed that this medium has the potential to bring young people into the library, motivate them to read while keeping them in the school library to linger in both traditional and non-traditional ways. However, the school librarians of this study believed that increasing student engagement through the use of comic books could eventually motivate struggling readers to learn to read and resultant readers to enjoy reading – thereby fostering students' overall visual and critical literacy competencies.

Because the limited amount of comic book text is suited to students with lower reading levels, graphic novels appeal to readers who struggle with grade-level texts. Investing time, manpower and resources into these materials, with the hope that a positive reading culture could be fostered around them in return, will encourage more students to use the school library. As pointed out by Miller (2005), the advantages of using comic books in libraries and other educational settings could be summarised as follows:

1. can help students develop literacy and language skills by reinforcing vocabulary;
2. can offer students a chance to explore visual literacy and develop critical thinking skills;
3. can inspire challenged students who lack reading confidence, reading ability, or motivation for selfguided reading.

One of the intentions of this study was to identify the effectiveness of comic books in easing reluctant readers into more advanced level of reading. 'The educational potential of comics has yet to be fully realised. While other media such as film, theatre and music have found their place within the American education establishment, comic has not' (Yang, 2003: 1). Perhaps, if comic books are used more in the classroom, it will nullify the stigma attached to them.

### **Conclusion**

School libraries have come a long way in recognising comic books, both in terms of their literary values and artistic merit. In this study, a cross-national and cross-cultural comparison of school librarians reported the actual availability of comic books, and different levels of adoption across five different regions in Asia and Oceania. Despite many educators (including school librarians) still being critical of comic books, and the value of this genre as a proper literary format is still being debated, the findings of this study reveal that the arguments in support of the educational value of comic books is gradually gaining ground. In addition, they show that comic books in libraries are no longer a novelty, and also reflect the general and growing acceptance amongst school librarians. School librarians develop their collections not only to meet readership needs, but also to seek to introduce new ways of teaching and learning. Comic books do not only reflect the reading needs and



encourage students to consider the contextual appropriateness of such representation (Lapp et al., 2012).

This study has compared the availability of comic books in the school libraries in five different regions and considered the basic curricular elements that might or might not be perceived as appropriate to including comic books as an important component of instruction, and other related educational purposes. In summary, findings of this study reveal that a majority of school librarians from all five regions recognised the educational values of comic books, and students appreciated their entertainment/recreational nature. The findings of this study uncover additional contrasts and disparities between the reported use of graphic novels, as well as the perceived value of comic books. This is supported by the fact that the comic book format is available in a majority of the school libraries surveyed.

It is the role of the school librarians to purchase and promote different types of resources in different ways, regardless of their formats.

The marriage of art and literature is one of the most effective ways of communicating ideas and sharing dreams. It is the responsibility of the school librarian to make sure comic books are able to reach the full potential the media can achieve. It is up to librarians to harness this power within their libraries and their communities. (Boyer, 2010: 142)

Boyer (2010: 141) also pointed out that comic books not only reflect the reading interests and needs of a ready audience, but also inspire creativity, introduce art and literature in a new format, and connect generations in the timeless art of storytelling. Comic books, however, still face certain technical and administrative challenges in some school communities, for the reason that this format dwells in its popular culture status and is attractive to many reluctant readers. There is a lack of consensus amongst principals, teachers and parents in particular over what constitutes a child's comic book, or what kinds of comic books are considered appropriate for a school library's collection.

There is concern that children might stumble upon troubling items and see the violence, gore and/or sex/nudity/ language, which comic books can contain. All these 'just-in-case' worries might have directly prevented many school librarians from giving comic books their place in the school library. It must be remembered that 'every community and every school has individual standards' (Lyga, 2004: 31), and 'no two school library collections are alike...'. As a result, librarians must understand the common conceptions or misconceptions, views concerning this format and, most importantly, why this often deters many educators from accepting comic books in the school library.

Though many librarians and educators concede the legitimacy of comic books due to their high circulation statistics and popularity amongst reluctant readers, school librarians cannot augment their collections based on high circulation statistics alone. It is hoped that this study will shed light on these school librarians' practical experiences, which could eventually contribute to existing research studies that might encourage non-adopters to include comic books in their professional practices. It is also the researchers' aim that the findings of this study could help convince educational authorities to consider how classroom teachers and school librarians using comics as an educational tool could be best supported. As pointed out by Lyga (2004: 11):

One of the most compelling reasons to include graphic novels in a library collection is that they have so many curricular applications. Students will

Either absence would leave holes in the storyline and make it impossible to understand and appreciate subsequent installments. According to Zabriskie (2010: 168):

due to the high turnover of books and the relative frequency with which they go missing, it has been difficult to keep track of the true size of the collection. The manga (comic book) collection alone has at least some representation in over 140 series in with multiple volumes in each, and often multiple copies of individual volumes. In an attempt to minimise constantly replacing gaps in the series, typically two copies of each graphic are initially purchased although this practice is flexible depending on the title. Maintaining the collection is a constant labor. Typically, returned graphic materials needing to be shelved typically fill a book truck every day, and hours of work by paraprofessionals and librarians goes into keeping them tidy and up-to-date.

As a result, libraries must first decide whether they wish to commit to following a serial, and purchasing all volumes within the series, including back issues or replacement issues.

#### *Reactions from principals, classroom teachers and parents*

Interestingly, only a small percentage of school librarians across all five regions reported lack of support from principals, other classroom teachers and parents for maintaining comic book collections in their school libraries. It is therefore safe to assume that comic books were perceived by a vast majority of other classroom teachers and parents as appropriate for inclusion in the school library collections. According to the researcher in Australia, often there is no real issue with having comic books or graphic novels in library collections (or in classrooms for that matter), as the publications are regarded by many school leaders as being legitimate forms of literature, art and communication. It would be the mission of all schools to broaden the knowledge experience of their students. Providing students with free and ready access to a variety of different text types (including comic books) would encourage young learners to extend themselves, their reading interests and their interactions with the world around them.

#### *Implications of research findings*

The new forms of literacy (e.g. information or media literacy) also require increased attention to emerging or nontraditional forms of text or online media. The nature and format of literacy education are always advancing and evolving. It is the researchers' goal that this study could provoke school librarians, classroom teachers and parents to expand their traditional concept of literacy beyond the regular educational resources in the printed format. At the same time, school librarians constantly need to find ways to occupy the hearts and minds of those young students walking into the library. If librarians truly wish to utilise the full potential of the format, they must seek out the untapped audience, while maintaining the loyalty and reading interests of the current patron-base.

Comic books alone might not be enough to support students' learning, literary and literacy development but they could be a useful supplement to existing reading materials already in use. This may include, for example, textual analysis alongside a film, print novel or poem, thereby helping students recognise the various ways in which narratives can be represented, and to



equate for students who routinely exceed literacy expectations or who are otherwise in need of literary or academic enrichment.

#### *Comic books as a reading motivational tool for reluctant readers*

Crawford (2003) noted that comic books and graphic novels have the potential to foster student enthusiasm for reading. As results of the current study reveal, many school librarians have begun to embrace comic books as a tool to attract reluctant readers and students into their libraries.

Some educators are even incorporating comic books into their regular curricula. Having said that, despite the growing acceptance of comic books in different school communities worldwide, their true potential is yet to be fully realised (Boyer, 2010). With the increase in visual stimuli in everyday surroundings, single focus information sources, such as text-only books, do not have a wide appeal that multimedia information sources do (Holston, 2010). Based on this reason, Barron (2002) has pointed out that this format can serve as a 'bridge' or 'stepping stone' to more serious reading. Barron (2002: 34) also writes that graphic novels are a 'bridge to sustained reading', adding that those not ready to read become discouraged in a textbased learning environment, and 'grabbing them with comics could help pull them out of the mire'. Krashen (2004) also notes that this format could serve as an effective conduit to traditional text reading, and to bridging a gap that separates reading in school, as well as outside the school.

As explained by Kan (2003) and Cary (2004), owing to their powerful storytelling nature, combined with a visual aspect of the form and its more limited amount of text, comic books do attract readers who may feel intimidated by a regular novel (Kan, 2003: 15). At the same time, comics fulfil reading interests and demands of students with 'low readability level', reluctant readers and ESL learners – for the reason that visual images reduce the amount of written text, and provide comprehensive clues, thereby making reading easier 'for the less proficient readers' (Snowball, 2005: 43).

#### *Challenges faced by school librarians*

In addition to having to overcome initial rejections of books written in comic format, survey results also reveal that purchasing and promoting the comic book collection at the expense of other literary collections in school libraries could induce negative reactions from other classroom teachers, and even parents. In terms of technical challenges, although libraries routinely deal with materials of serial nature in form of magazines and journals, librarians must constantly think about the possible ramifications their collection patterns might have on their users (Weiner, 2010) mainly owing to the unique and complex characteristics of comic book serials. The decision to carry a serial undeniably carries much burden (both resources and manpower) because serials are on-going, and as such they pose long-term budgetary and space commitments, as they slowly expand across the library's shelves (Evans, 2001; Evans and Saponaro, 2005). Some librarians would even describe comic books as 'growing pains' in the school library collection (Tarulli, 2010). As Miller (2004: 2) describes, comic books 'are stories told in a comic format that express a continuous tale', the availability of complete comic book serials therefore contributes to the readers' overall experience of comics. Maintaining the complete series is essential to serials that have on-going storylines, in order for the readers to make sense of the overall story.

to their distinctive educational systems, which are not always reflected in the western-style school library practices. For these reasons, despite a large body of research relating to comics having been conducted in North America, many of these studies cannot adequately explain the situation in Asia and other related issues. In short, various concerns and problems related to the use of this format in the context of the school library have not been well discussed as regional issues in Asia, and/or not reported in English. Hence, findings of this cross-national and cross-cultural comparative study have the potential to fill the gap between theory and actual practice in such situations. It is the aim of the researchers that this study could lead to new discovery and discussions of common issues amongst school libraries in Asia – thereby establishing a new Asian model of school librarianship.

This cross-national and cross-cultural comparative study set out to examine school librarians across five different regions – the differences and similarities between their attitudes towards comic books, as well as to what level this format was actually being used as an educational tool in their respective regions. The findings of this study indicate that the majority of school librarians across all five regions had comic books in their library collections, but, when queried about their use of comic books, the majority did not use comic books directly in their teaching or for other educational purposes. Additionally, the surveyed school librarians appeared to think less of comic books as an ‘enrichment’, or an effective tool with the potential to motivate students to become voluntary or avid readers. On the other hand, because of the perceived ‘supplemental’ or ‘entertainment’ value of comic books, school librarians seemed to have positioned this text type mostly as an instrument to ‘lure’ students to enter the school library – a notion that is paralleled to findings by Lapp et al. (2012). The findings of this study are supportive to what Nyberg (2012) noted earlier, that there has been a growing acceptance of the educational ‘place’ comic books now have in school libraries. Furthermore, there has been a major shift in attitudes amongst school librarians across all five regions, from ‘how to get rid of comic books’ to ‘how to purchase and shelve’ them – making comic books part of the school library’s regular collection.

In responding to the efficacy questions, findings of this study also reveal that some classroom teachers (particularly in Japan, Hong Kong and Taiwan) may still harbour certain levels of prejudices against comics, perhaps due to the belief that this format does not carry any real educational value. Or maybe librarians in Hong Kong and Taiwan believe that comic books are only a fad in school libraries (used as a ‘marketing’ tool) that would soon pass.

As highlighted by Welch (2005), even with ‘clean’ content, many people still struggle with seeing graphic novels and comics as legitimately literary enough for a library to purchase. Perhaps elitism over populism is still a fundamental influence on many school librarians’ attitudes towards this format. As explained by Collins (2010: 237), many educators are still working under the assumption that the average comic book reader is a ‘semiliterate juvenile delinquent who isn’t smart enough to read a “real book”’. Lapp et al. (2012: 31) also highlight that:

the value of texts that rely on visuals as a substantive part of the narrative or other information may be perceived as valuable for readers who struggle for any of a variety of reasons or for students whose teachers need to find appealing genre as a motivational device.

For this reason, comic books may be perceived as inappropriate or inad-

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populating the Language Arts classrooms, it is important to identify different approaches to engage students in captivating strategies that will help develop their literacy skills in the long run. Although we do not know to what extent comic books are being incorporated into the curricula, findings of this study reveal that many of the librarians surveyed embrace comic books as a way to attract reluctant readers and students into their libraries.

With the ever-growing acceptance of comic books in different regions, their true potential is yet to be fully realised. In the following section, we will further discuss the comic book situation in different regions, and hopefully provide other practising librarians with more contextual clues regarding where and how they should position comic books in their school library collections.

**Table 9. What are the main difficulties for maintaining a comic book collection in the school libraries?**

Answer options	Hong Kong (n=96)	Taiwan (n=390)	Japan (n=51)	Australia (n=65)	New Zealand (n=75)
I don't face any difficulties	29 (30.2%)	142 (36.4%)	3 (5.9%)	6 (9.2%)	40 (53.3%)
Requires too much manpower & time for cataloguing the comic book collection	1 (1.0%)	22 (5.6%)	1 (2.0%)	41 (63.1%)	0 (0.0%)
End-processing for comic books is too costly	2 (2.1%)	14 (3.6%)	6 (11.8%)	1 (1.5%)	1 (1.3%)
Comic books take up too much shelf space	9 (9.4%)	38 (9.7%)	17 (33.3%)	1 (1.5%)	0 (0.0%)
Comic books get lost, stolen & damaged easily – too costly to replace the missing issues	25 (26.0%)	130 (33.3%)	28 (54.9%)	10 (15.4%)	15 (20.0%)
School principal is against having comic books in the school library	9 (9.4%)	34 (8.7%)	1 (2.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Other classroom teachers are against having comic books in the school library	23 (24.0%)	49 (12.6%)	22 (43.1%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (2.7%)
Parents are against having comic books in the school library	11 (11.5%)	46 (11.8%)	1 (2.0%)	2 (3.1%)	1 (1.3%)
Students can easily find comic books online	13 (13.5%)	12 (3.1%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (4.6%)	1 (1.3%)
Comic books have no real educational values	9 (9.4%)	29 (7.4%)	2 (3.9%)	1 (1.5%)	0 (0.0%)
Students are not interested in the comic books provided by the school libraries	6 (6.3%)	18 (4.6%)	2 (3.9%)	5 (7.7%)	1 (1.3%)
Comic books get out-dated easily	11 (11.5%)	57 (14.6%)	7 (13.7%)	5 (7.7%)	2 (2.7%)
Other reasons	7 (7.3%)	46 (11.8%)	18 (35.3%)	6 (9.2%)	22 (29.3%)

## Discussion

According to Maughan (2016), comic books and graphic novels have recently gained a stronger foothold in school libraries. This movement has largely been pushed forward by creative, and often courageous, educators and librarians, and it is encouraged in language from the American Association of School Librarians' Standards for the 21st Century Learner, as well as Common Core State Standards.

Despite the fact that comic books have been gaining general acceptance in school libraries and classrooms over the past decades, there is still lack of common consent in the educational values behind this format amongst education communities in many Asian regions. The educational initiative via the use of comic books could be regarded as a new and ambitious attempt for many school library professionals, particularly amongst Asian regions. The reasons can be explained by the fact that the roles of school libraries and their professionals have not been firmly established in many Asian countries (Lo and Chiu, 2015; Lo et al., 2013, 2014, 2018; Nakamura, 2000). Furthermore, many Asian countries have their own social and cultural values, in addition

teachers oppose having comic books in the school library (see Table 9).

**Table 7. Is having comic books effective for attracting students to come use the school library? (1–5 Likert scale).**

Countries	Median	Notional Mean	p-value
Hong Kong (n=96)	4	3.35	0.012
Taiwan (n=125)	4	3.91	< 0.001
Japan (n=51)	2	1.69	< 0.001
Australia (n=69)	4	3.77	< 0.001
New Zealand (n=75)	4	4.00	< 0.001
Overall (n=416)	4	3.50	< 0.001

Notes:

1. The p-values are computed using one-sample Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test by comparing the median values with the mid-point of the scale, i.e. 3 for the 5-point Likert scale used.

2. Kruskal-Wallis Test shows that the median values are statistically different from each other, with Chi-Square=116.1 (df=4) and  $p<0.001$ . We also conducted the Mann-Whitney U-Test as a post hoc test, which confirms that ranking of the median values are New Zealand = Taiwan = Australia = Hong Kong > Japan (with  $p<0.05$ ).

**Table 8. Do you agree comic books are effective for motivating students to become avid readers? (1–5 Likert scale).**

Countries	Median	Notional Mean	p-value
Hong Kong (n=96)	3	3.20	0.059
Taiwan (n=125)	4	3.56	< 0.001
Japan (n=51)	2	2.16	< 0.001
Australia (n=69)	4	3.86	< 0.001
New Zealand (n=75)	3	3.37	< 0.006
Total (n=416)	3	3.32	< 0.001

Notes:

1. The p-values are computed using one-sample Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test by comparing the median values with the mid-point of the scale, i.e. 3 for the 5-point Likert scale used.

2. Kruskal-Wallis Test shows that the median values are statistically different from each other, with Chi-Square=72.59 (df=4) and  $p<0.001$ . We also conducted the Mann-Whitney U-Test as a post hoc test, which confirms that ranking of the median values are Australia > Taiwan = New Zealand = Hong Kong > Japan (with  $p<0.10$  for the comparison between Australia and Taiwan and  $p<0.05$  for the comparison between Hong Kong and Japan).

School librarians are no strangers to evaluating materials for the purpose of adding them to a library collection but, whenever the topic of comic books and libraries is discussed, the inevitable first question seems to be, 'Why comic books?'. Discovering what comic books are popular with the clientele of an elementary school library is simple, but determining which titles are suitable or which comic book series carry educational merit is indeed difficult as well as subjective. Furthermore, balancing the demands for these materials with the sensitivity of the minds of other classroom teachers and parents continues to challenge school librarians. With struggling readers and writers

median values of these five regions were different, and the Mann-Whitney U-Test showed that the result from Japan is statistically smaller than the other four countries.

In other words, the school librarians from New Zealand, Taiwan, Australian and Hong Kong agreed that comic books as a medium can attract students, whereas Japanese school librarians felt otherwise. The school librarians were also asked whether they thought comics could motivate students to become avid readers (see Table 8). The findings are similar to their views of the previous question – that is, all school librarians thought that comic books have the potential to motivate young students to become avid readers, except for the school librarians in Japan. Further research would be needed to identify reasons behind school librarians in Japan failed to see comic books being effective for motivating students to become avid readers.

#### *Challenges and technical constraints posed by comics*

In the past, most librarians had struggled with their comic book collections, and today, some school librarians still have to address a variety of issues surrounding this format.

In addition to exploring school librarians' attitudes and the actual school library use, this survey study also sought to identify the different challenges (both technical and administrative) faced by the survey respondents. This was to determine whether their colleagues (other classroom teachers and principals) were also open or supportive to having comic books in the school libraries. The reason behind such survey items was to highlight variables including: differences between actual practices and perceived values from the principals, classroom teachers and parents.

Findings in Table 9 indicate to what extent other teachers and principals (across regions) recognised the values of comics as a legitimate literary format inside the school library. Findings reveal that over 50% of the school librarians in New Zealand did not face any difficulties in having comic books in their libraries. The common and major challenge faced by many school librarians across all five regions was that 'comic books get lost, stolen and damaged easily, and it is often too costly to replace the missing issues'. The researchers originally anticipated that the manpower and time required for cataloguing the comic book collections would be seen as a major difficulty and could accelerate a stream of complaints and frustrations amongst the school librarians. Surprisingly, respondents across most regions did not see cataloguing as a major management issue, except for the group of Australian school librarians, as 41 (63.1%) of them reported that cataloguing the comic books collections was thought to be time-consuming and labour-intensive (see Table 9).

Interestingly, there were relatively larger numbers of classroom teachers (in Japan, Hong Kong and Taiwan) who were against comic books as a legitimate literary format in the school library (see Table 9). Researchers believe that, perhaps under this highly exam-oriented Confucian education model (practised in Japan, Hong Kong and Taiwan), school libraries are expected to invest more resources in supporting the formal learning of the school community as a whole. Having comic books in the collection could confuse the school library as a place merely for entertainment or recreational purposes – an act that could be regarded as deviant from the school library's mission.

Further research would be needed to determine real reasons why classroom

### *Types of comic books available in school libraries in different countries*

The survey did not include any questionnaire items for parsing the potential differences between fiction and nonfiction comics. However, the survey results indicate that the bestseller titles or most popular comic book titles differ from school to school, and from region to region. According to the researcher in Australia, from an 'all boys school' perspective, of great interest to readers are action/adventure novels that appear in a series. Japan is regarded by many as one of the 'founding nations' of comic books, owing to their original structure and contents, and these comics have gained popularity worldwide. Perhaps this is the reason why Japanese comics could be found in a large number of school libraries in each region surveyed (see Table 6).

According to statistics, as of 1995, 91.9% of elementary schools, 97.5% of junior high schools and 87.5% of senior high schools were reported to have comics in their school library collections (Japan School Library Association, 1998). In terms of popularity, American comics are reported to be second to Japanese comics and could be found in a large percentage of school libraries' collections in Hong Kong, Australia and New Zealand. American-based comic books are also popular, perhaps due to the advent of the worldwide distributions of superhero-based movies in the recent decades, thereby encouraging young students to read the source materials of these films. Meanwhile, some school libraries reported facing a higher demand for comic books, especially those with a focus on history, as well as science and technology (see Table 6).

### *Effectiveness of comic books as a reading motivational tool*

In order to find out how comics as a format actually contributed to students' overall learning process (reading motivation in particular), survey items number 24 and 25 were paired with a Likert scale response. Both questions sought school librarians' views towards (1) the efficacy of comics as an instructional tool for attracting students to use the school library, and (2) their effectiveness for motivating students to become avid readers. The comparison of overall rating reveals that, given this format is above average in terms of attracting more students to use the school library, the result of the one-sample Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test by comparing the median value (median=4, notional mean=3.50) with the mid-point of the scale, that is 3 for the 5-point Likert scale, provided a positive significant result. However, it is relatively less effective in encouraging students to become more interested in voluntary reading ( $p < 0.001$ , median=3, and a notional mean value 3.32). (See Tables 7 and 8.) According to the researcher in Australia, the importance of the comic book format is still yet to be realised by many educators. In addition, some parents do not think reading a graphic novel or comic book is regarded as 'quality' reading. Many school librarians and even classroom teachers are working hard with the attempt to remove the barriers and prejudice surrounding graphic novels and comic books by reinforcing the visual literacy components of these texts, and the skill set required to interpret/read the contents.

We checked whether the school librarians agreed that the inclusion of comic books in their library collection would attract students to use the school library (see Table 7). We noted that all school librarians, except those from Japan, agreed that the inclusion of comic books in the school libraries would attract more students to use the library (with median value=4 for all regions except Japan, which is 2). The result of Kruskal-Wallis Test showed that the



the school libraries' missions. Survey responses revealed that, in addition to 'Supporting students' formal learning', the other two main purposes were to 'Encourage students to read more books that are not necessarily related to their studies' and to 'Provide materials for leisure/recreational readings'. Such notions are commonly found amongst the surveyed school libraries across all five regions (see Table 4). Additionally, the main purposes for keeping comics in the school libraries were (1) 'Satisfying students' interests/demands' and (2) 'Attracting students to come to the library more often' (see Table 5). Such responses indicate that comics are considered by many school librarians to be important resources for fostering good reading habits and reading for enjoyment. In other words, comic books serve as an instructional reading material/tool in the school-library context, particularly as a reading motivational tool.

**Table 5. For which purpose(s) are these comic books being kept in your school library?**

Answer options	Hong Kong (n=90)	Taiwan (n=378)	Japan (n=51)	Australia (n=55)	New Zealand (n=75)
Attract students to come to the library more often	<b>73</b> <b>(81.1%)</b>	<b>283</b> <b>(74.9%)</b>	<b>20</b> <b>(39.2%)</b>	<b>23</b> <b>(41.8%)</b>	<b>46</b> <b>(61.3%)</b>
Help students understand the plots or story lines & thereby developing their textual reading skills	42 (46.7%)	168 (44.4%)	18 (35.3%)	21 (38.2%)	34 (45.3%)
Support teaching and help student to study	29 (32.2%)	137 (36.2%)	<b>30</b> <b>(58.8%)</b>	14 (25.5%)	13 (17.3%)
Satisfying students' interests/demands	<b>71</b> <b>(78.9%)</b>	<b>311</b> <b>(82.3%)</b>	<b>26</b> <b>(51.0%)</b>	<b>42</b> <b>(76.4%)</b>	<b>63</b> <b>(84.0%)</b>
Leisure reading (entertainment purposes)	<b>65</b> <b>(72.2%)</b>	<b>286</b> <b>(75.7%)</b>	11 (21.6%)	2 (3.6%)	<b>70</b> <b>(93.3%)</b>
Others	4 (4.4%)	10 (2.6%)	10 (19.6%)	3 (5.5%)	7 (9.3%)

Multiple answers accepted.

**Table 6. Types of comic books available in school libraries in different countries. What types of comic books are available for students to borrow from your library?**

Types of comic books	Hong Kong (n=96)	Taiwan (n=380)	Japan (n=51)	Australia (n=56)	New Zealand (n=74)
American comic books (e.g. <i>Superman</i> , <i>Spiderman</i> , <i>Batman</i> , etc.)	<b>61</b> <b>(66.3%)</b>	28 (7.4%)	3 (5.9%)	<b>44</b> <b>(78.6%)</b>	<b>58</b> <b>(78.4%)</b>
Japanese comic books (e.g. <i>Doraemon</i> )	<b>55</b> <b>(59.8%)</b>	<b>226</b> <b>(59.5%)</b>	<b>41</b> <b>(80.4%)</b>	<b>45</b> <b>(80.4%)</b>	<b>41</b> <b>(55.4%)</b>
Famous fairy tale comic books	43 (46.7%)	73 (19.2%)	1 (2.0%)	29 (51.8%)	54 (73%)
Famous fable comic books	28 (30.4%)	61 (16.1%)	0 (0.0%)	10 (17.9%)	25 (33.8%)
Classic literature comic books	40 (43.5%)	88 (23.2%)	31 (60.8%)	43 (76.8%)	<b>63</b> <b>(85.1%)</b>
Hong Kong comic books (e.g. <i>Master Q</i> )	38 (41.3%)	72 (18.9%)	1 (2.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Taiwan comic books	18 (19.6%)	182 (47.9%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Australian comic books	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	19 (33.9%)	0 (0.0%)
Comic books about history	67 (72.8%)	<b>295</b> <b>(77.6%)</b>	<b>47</b> <b>(92.2%)</b>	20 (35.7%)	<b>56</b> <b>(75.7%)</b>
Comic books about science	<b>70</b> <b>(76.1%)</b>	<b>290</b> <b>(76.3%)</b>	<b>35</b> <b>(68.6%)</b>	11 (19.6%)	44 (59.5%)
Others	12 (13.0%)	41 (10.8%)	23 (45.1%)	5 (8.9%)	30 (40.5%)
Total	92 (100%)	380 (100%)	51 (100%)	56 (100%)	74 (100%)

**Table 2. Situations of comic book collection in each region.**

Question		Hong Kong (n=96)	Taiwan (n=390)	Japan (n=51)	Australia (n=68)	New Zealand (n=75)
Do you have comic books in your school library?	Yes	92 (95.8%)	378 (96.9%)	51 (100.0)	56 (82.4%)	74 (98.7)
	No	4 (4.2%)	12 (3.1%)	0 (0.0%)	12 (17.6%)	1 (1.3%)
	Total	96 (100%)	390 (100%)	51 (100%)	68 (100%)	75 (100%)

**Table 3. Students' reading preferences in different countries. What kind of books do the students read most in the library?**

Types of Books	Hong Kong (n=96)	Taiwan (n=390)	Japan (n=51)	Australia (n=69)	New Zealand (n=75)
Best-sellers	38 (39.6%)	198 (50.8%)	24 (47.1%)	61 (88.4%)	39 (52.0%)
Comic books	22 (22.9%)	129 (33.1%)	8 (15.7%)	2 (2.9%)	6 (8.0%)
Classic literature	6 (6.3%)	23 (5.9%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (1.3%)
Study books & textbooks	13 (13.5%)	3 (0.8%)	1 (2.0%)	1 (1.4%)	3 (4.0%)
Magazines & newspapers	3 (3.1%)	13 (3.3%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	5 (6.7%)
Multi-media resources	0 (0.0)	3 (0.8%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Others	14 (14.6%)	21 (5.4%)	18 (35.3%)	5 (7.2%)	21 (28.0%)
Total (%)	96 (100%)	390 (100%)	51 (100%)	69 (100%)	75 (100%)

**Table 4. What are the missions and main goals of your school library?**

Answer Options	Hong Kong (n=96)	Taiwan (n=390)	Japan (n=51)	Australia (n=71)	New Zealand (n=75)
Support individual students' formal learning	72 (75.0%)	185 (47.4%)	39 (76.5%)	63 (88.7%)	61 (81.3%)
Teach IT/library information literacy skills	42 (43.8%)	212 (54.4%)	35 (68.6%)	51 (71.8%)	48 (64.0%)
Encourage students to read more books that are not necessarily related to their studies	86 (89.6%)	371 (95.1%)	44 (86.3%)	66 (93.0%)	67 (89.3%)
Provide the space for computer use, multimedia resources & Internet access	42 (43.8%)	208 (53.3%)	11 (21.6%)	32 (45.1%)	42 (56.0%)
Support group study & discussions	30 (31.3%)	180 (46.2%)	17 (33.3%)	30 (42.3%)	29 (38.7%)
Provide latest reading materials from magazines to newspapers	71 (74.0%)	238 (61.0%)	21 (41.2%)	28 (39.4%)	44 (58.7%)
Provide materials for leisure/recreational readings	76 (79.2%)	285 (73.1%)	26 (51.0%)	63 (88.7%)	74 (98.7%)
Provide social space for the students	22 (22.9%)	73 (18.7%)	26 (51.0%)	47 (66.2%)	53 (70.7%)
Support enquiry-based learning	Question item not included	Question item not included	Question item not included	Question item not included	68 (90.7%)
Others	5 (5.2%)	13 (3.3%)	10 (19.6%)	4 (5.6%)	5 (6.7%)

Multiple answers accepted.

Librarians' perceptions of educational values of comic books:  
A comparative study between Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, Australia and New Zealand

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**Media  
management**

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*Missions of school libraries versus purposes of having comic books*

In addition to asking school librarians to respond to the query about the intentions of having comic books in their school library collections, they were also asked to explain the missions and goals behind their school libraries, with the aim of clarifying whether comics have any role to play in fulfilling

invited to take part in this survey on a voluntary basis. For example, a total number of 390 responses were collected from Taiwan alone.

On the other hand, very small numbers of responses were collected from Japan (51), Australia (71), and New Zealand (75). Furthermore, a lack of clear definitions between 'comic book' as opposed to 'graphic novel' on the questionnaire might have confused the survey respondents – as in some cases, the line differentiating these two formats is often blurred. The lack of clear definitions between the two media might have been the reason behind a high number of respondents in Australia stating that they did not include any comic books in their collections. This limitation was not identified in the pilot-test stage for the reason that pilot-testing was carried out on a small number of school librarians in Hong Kong and Taiwan only. Meanwhile, the terms 'comic book' and 'graphic novel' in Chinese are identical in meaning. Finally, another limitation was that the survey was sent through different school librarian associations located in different regions. This channel of questionnaire distribution would have a tendency to attract school librarians who were already more involved with the profession, rather than covering a range of librarians as a whole. In other words, school librarians who were already members of such associations tended to be more involved, dedicated and determined towards their own profession, and would be more likely to respond than those 'wishy-washy' librarians. Conversely, in regard to school librarians who were not members of such professional associations, their views and attitudes might not have been reflected in the current study. A combination of such factors might have affected the validity and reliability of the overall comparison amongst the five regions.

### **Analysis of survey results**

**Availability of comic books in school libraries** The current study did not include any questionnaire items for parsing the different responses from school librarians from private versus public schools. However, based on researchers' previous studies (Lo and Chiu, 2015; Lo et al., 2013, 2014, 2018), irrespective of the issues concerning how poorly funded many school libraries may be, school librarians regularly have to make difficult decisions about what to purchase for their collections. The survey results in Table 2 indicate that a majority of the school libraries in all five regions keep comic books in their library collections. Table 3 indicates students' reading preferences in different countries. Only small percentages of school librarians in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Australia and New Zealand reported that they did not have comic books in their school libraries. In fact, Australia was the region with most school libraries that did not include any comic books in their collections. On the other hand, despite its low response rate, all 51 school librarians surveyed in Japan reported they held comic books in their library collections (see Table 2).

According to the researcher in Australia, for many years there has been some confusion over the actual definition of 'comic book' as opposed to 'graphic novel'. In some cases, the line differentiating these two formats is somewhat blurred.

Respondents could have been easily confused as to the difference between comics and graphic novels, and so responded that they did not have comic books in their collection. Furthermore, graphic novels have become incredibly popular in Australian schools in recent years – quite possibly to the detriment of comic books. It has taken quite a while to encourage educators to change their attitudes towards this genre, but in recent years, an increasing number of educators are seeing the implicit literary value in the comic book genre (see Table 2).

the school librarians in all five regions.

For the current study, the survey questions were developed based on concerns raised by the school librarian respondents in our previous studies (Lo and Chiu, 2015; Lo et al., 2013, 2014, 2018), suggesting both advantages and technical challenges that come with the use of comics in the context of the school library. The draft questionnaire was also sent to selective school librarians in each region for pilot-testing, with the aim of identifying questions that did not make sense to participants, or problems with the questionnaire items that could lead to biased answers. Finally, the questionnaire survey was distributed via the school librarian associations located in each respective region, with the aim of collecting as many responses as possible. Finally, both Australian and New Zealand education systems are based on their British counterpart. The researchers purposely included both respondents from both Australia and New Zealand, with the aim of highlighting the unique perspectives and practices of the school librarians in East Asia, who are working under this Confucian, extremely examination-based education system, compared and contrasted with a more western system of learning. It is also worth mentioning that because of Hong Kong's colonial past, its school education system is largely modelled on its British counterpart. Despite this, the situation in Hong Kong is very similar to that of Taiwan and Japan, which is known for its examination-dominated culture, and the entire curriculum of the local school is geared towards public examinations. Finally, a total number of 683 responses were collected from all five regions via this cross-national and cross-cultural study. As shown by the results, a majority of the survey respondents were school librarians working at secondary school level (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Total number of respondents (school librarians) in each region.**

School Grades / Levels	Hong Kong (n=96)	Taiwan (n=390)	Japan (n=51)	Australia (n=71)	New Zealand (n=75)	Total (%)
Primary (%)	40 (41.7%)	148 (37.9%)	18 (35.3%)	22 (30.9%)	19 (25.3%)	247 (36.2%)
Secondary (%)	53 (55.2%)	237 (60.8%)	25 (49.0%)	26 (36.6%)	43 (57.3%)	384 (56.2%)
Both (%)	3 (3.10%)	5 (1.3%)	8 (15.7%)	21 (29.6%)	3 (4.0%)	40 (5.9%)
Other (%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (2.8%)	10 (13.3%)	12 (1.8%)
Total (%)	96 (100%)	390 (100%)	51 (100%)	71 (100%)	75 (100%)	683 (100%)

Limitations of the study. This study was based solely on quantitative analyses of questionnaire survey results – comparing school librarians' responses collected across five different regions. However, no qualitative studies were conducted to reflect on the survey results. The lack of qualitative research for the current study has prevented us from gaining a more insightful understanding of the various sociocultural and curricular-related factors that have contributed to the current comic-book situation in each region. For example, for school librarians who were supporters of comics, we could not find out to what extent they were using this format for various teaching and learning purposes. Furthermore, there was a drastic difference in the amount of responses collected in each region, for the reason that school librarians were

ians in East Asia have begun to recognise the values behind school-based recreational reading. Comic books have therefore become a tool that was frequently mentioned by the respondents from our previous studies for promoting free voluntary reading, as well as for supporting the teaching of different curriculum subjects via their school libraries.

According to Collins (2010: 226), although comic books are by no means a new medium, library comic book collections, and their collection management practices, are still in their infancy; yet, only until recently, libraries (particularly school libraries) have developed an interest and general acceptance of comics. In addition to identifying the 'untapped' user groups, school librarians are responsible for the appropriateness of the educational contents they make available in their school libraries, and this includes measuring the collection's serviceability, and relevance to teaching and learning to the school community as a whole.

In order to engage the untapped user groups, school librarians also need to collect a broad spectrum of materials to appeal to diverse user groups. As pointed out by Kitmann (2010: 67):

because a book has pictures, does not mean it should be discounted from being used as a resource. If advocacy for literature in any form is to be one of the profession's primary concerns ... then it is the library profession's duty to understand and promote new types of graphic novels.

Via a comparative approach, this study aims to present an overview of how school librarians in five different regions in Asia view comic books as an educational tool, as well as to discuss the 'comic-book situation' in their respective regions. The research questions guiding this study are as follows:

1. What are school librarians' attitudes towards comic books?
2. Do school librarians attempt to provide students with comics as a form of appealing leisure-reading materials?
3. To what extent are comic books being used by the school librarians to support the curricula, or the teaching and learning of the school community as a whole?
4. To what level are comic books actually being used as an educational tool amongst the school libraries across these five different regions?
5. Do school libraries see comic books an appropriate complement to a school library's regular collection?
6. What are the common challenges and technical restraints facing school library collection management practices, particularly when it comes to comic book selection?

## Research methods

**Research participation and data collection** The survey participants were school librarians working in different elementary and secondary schools in five different regions in Asia, namely Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, Australia and New Zealand. The original survey questionnaire was in English and was developed by the researchers in all five regions as a team effort. The survey included questions on major demographic characteristics of school librarians, library collections (including comic books as a genre), and school librarians' attitudes towards the potential of comic books being used as a legitimate educational tool. The finalised English language survey was then translated into respective languages (Chinese and Japanese), before it was administered to

(2013), in another study of pre-service teachers, found that although a majority of these educators found value in the teaching of graphic novels, some expressed concern about how they would be viewed by their peers if they had their curricula associated with comics. In sum, it seems that from previous studies, educators have a fairly positive view of comics themselves, but have not fully implemented them in the classroom. Further, as of yet, there appears to be little scholarship that focuses solely on the perceptions of comics of school librarians in contemporary times. This article will attempt to address this gap.

Studies on librarians' views of comics have mostly focused on historical disapproval of the medium. This was especially true in the 1930s and 1940s in the USA. Ellis and Highsmith (2000) point out that the majority of professional library literature from that time period indicated strong negativity towards the comics medium as a whole – especially due to arguments blaming comics for juvenile delinquency and other societal ills. Tilley (2014) notes that librarians were especially fearful of the consequences of allowing children to read comic books due to their content, and they rarely collected comics at all. However, according to Graham (2016: 400), librarians' distaste for comics began to wane in the 1960s with the advent of television. Furthermore, comics began to be studied as a more serious medium by academics, and thus, librarians began advocacy for comic books in library collections. Outside of historical studies on librarians' attitudes towards comics, however, there appears to be few contemporary qualitative studies examining librarians' views towards the medium and their educational value.

There is an abundance of literature on the subject of comic book collections in libraries in western countries. However, studies on Asian countries are relatively few. Inoue (2011) discussed school library collections of 'study manga' in Japan. Many works of this genre have been made for the purpose of study, and popular genres of study manga range from biographies of famous historical figures, to introductions to topics such as science and history, to manga that have more didactic themes for the purpose of teaching morals or peace education. In this way, manga can be used as a supplement to the regular school lessons.

Other studies on Japan have emphasised collection development of manga in school libraries. Hopkins (2010) noted that school libraries in Japan were much more open to collecting manga compared to public and academic libraries, and the local School Library Association developed 14 criteria for manga selection. Inoue (2013), continuing this discussion, notes that school libraries tend to collect manga with more educational material rather than popular series.

However, there appears to be few studies available in English regarding comic book collections in school libraries in other Asian countries besides Japan.

### **Aims of the study**

The current study could be regarded as a continuation of the previous quantitative studies carried out by the lead researcher (Lo and Chiu, 2015; Lo et al., 2013, 2014, 2018). In the previous studies, the researchers examined the enhanced and yet changing roles of the school librarians and their respective libraries amongst the local schools in East Asia (namely Hong Kong, Shanghai, South Korea, Taipei and Japan). One of the rising issues identified in our previous studies was that despite the heavy emphasis on the Confucian rote-memorisation style of learning, an increasing number of school librarians' perceptions of educational values of comic books:

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cesses: reading, writing, speaking, listening and viewing, while being visually literate means young students possessing the skills necessary for interpreting and reflecting upon images as well as words.

Students of the digital age live in the increasingly visual world – a world where visual images are becoming increasingly important, as most information is presented as a combination of both words and images. Such an environment has undoubtedly revolutionised the way these young students receive and process information in and beyond our classrooms (Burns, 2006). Meanwhile, as pointed out by McTaggart (2008: 32):

Many struggling readers are unable to visualise pictures in their heads.

They cannot 'see' in their minds what is happening in the text, and consequently, they do not comprehend the text's message. For these kids, reading is a mandated task of decoding letters – avoiding of meaning, without pleasure, and something to avoid.

In other words, 'visual learners' need pictures to form understanding and comprehension. For these reasons, using differentiated instructional techniques with comic books could be a key to reaching children who are reluctant readers or visual learners.

Some of the literature also emphasises the importance of graphic novels in attracting reluctant readers and teenagers into reading. Snowball (2005) notes that many teenagers are raised in a more visual environment with television, video games and the Internet. As such, expectations for visual entertainment are high amongst teenagers.

Graphic novels can be one important medium for promoting visual literacy in this regard. Schwarz (2002) explains that in their fast-paced lives teenagers, even if they are high academic achievers, may not have the time for pleasure reading. Comics can be effective in addressing this issue, as they can be short, accessible works that are not quite as intimidating for reluctant readers. Edwards (2009), in a study of middle school readers, found that after reading graphic novels and having access to free voluntary reading times, students ended up enjoying reading more so than before. Jennings et al. (2014) similarly found that not only did reading comics improve interest and enjoyment in reading compared to traditional novels, but they also stimulated more discussion among students and increased reading comprehension. Stephens (2014), in a sample of high school students, even found that readers who engaged with comics in their school libraries had a more positive view of the school library compared to those whose libraries did not provide many comics. With this in mind, comics can be seen as an effective medium for improving the enjoyment of reading – with the ideal of encouraging students into becoming lifelong readers.

Other studies have focused on the perceptions of the use of comics from the perspective of educators. Lapp et al. (2012) surveyed a group of primary, middle and high school teachers to determine their views of comic books in the curriculum, and their potential value. Although many of the respondents felt that comic books were useful as supplemental material and a way to help struggling readers, they were not used as much in the classrooms. Mathews (2011), in a survey of pre-service social studies educators, found that although a vast majority agreed that comic books would be excellent resources for resistant readers, many objected to controversial images and topics in the content of the comics. It seems that comic books relating to controversial aspects of history would be less likely used as curriculum supplements. Clark

defined in the existing body of library literature.

### Literature review

Comics and comic art often have fluctuating terminology, having been interchangeably referred to as comics, comic books, graphic novels and graphic fiction among others. This has also led to varying definitions over the years. Eisner (2008: 2) originally defined comics as 'sequential art' that 'presents a montage of both word and image, and the reader is thus required to exercise visual and verbal interpretive skills'. McCloud (1994: 9), building on this definition, interprets comics as being 'juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer'. However, more recent analyses of comics have problematised this definition. Hatfield (2009), for instance, feels that McCloud's definition makes the field of comics to be more insular than they really are. Rather, comics should not be easily defined because of their inter-disciplinarity and anti-disciplinarity. Other works like Baetens and Frey (2015) distinguish the term 'graphic novel' from comics and comic books by analysing its form, content, publication format and distribution. Specifically, the graphic novel differs from traditional comics in the sense that it is not serialised like many superhero comics are – rather, they are published in single volumes. Furthermore, graphic novels' contents are often seen as being more adult and serious in nature (Baetens and Frey, 2015: 10–11). In a way, this term can be seen as an attempt to shed the so-called 'juvenile' image often associated with comics.

In the Japanese context, manga is the most popular comic form. Manga has its origins in the 12th century as animal scrolls by the Buddhist priest Toba, and these images were widely published through mass woodblock printing. In contrast to American comics, aside from being read in the opposite direction due to the structure of the Japanese language, manga are often serialised in monthly chapters in omnibus-like magazines such as *Shonen Jump* (Schodt, 2011). Although originally promoted to children in the early 20th century, manga continues to be a major business (both in Japan and globally) to readers of all ages (Brienza, 2016). Although the term manga, outside of Japan, specifically refers to Japanese comics, the term in Japanese reflects comics from all regions.

Graphic novel collections are an increasingly popular topic of discussion amongst the literature on school librarianship. They are an especially popular medium, and they can lead to increased circulation rates. In a study of a selection of middle school libraries, Gavigan (2014) found that although the graphic novel collections themselves were relatively small, circulation rates were often much higher than the amount of holdings would suggest. Heaney (2007) calls comics a 'sure bet' for school libraries and outlines comics' importance in connections with visual literacy, and potential to supplement school curricula. With this popularity, there is an increased need to understand how to evaluate comics for selection into a school library collection. Lavin (1998) identified 10 areas that librarians should take into account when evaluating comics – including popularity, art style and quality, suitability and age level. Griffith (2010) offers similar evaluation criteria and also suggests that teachers use selections of graphic novels to complement their lessons.

As highlighted by Frey and Fisher (2009), literacy involves at least five pro-

## Introduction

Comic books are by no means a new medium and, as a genre, have always had an 'unusual' relation with libraries in general. This is predominantly owing to the belief that comic books have had a reputation as being a debased, second-class literature (Jacobs, 2007). Furthermore, in the past, comics were often believed to be meant merely for children, reluctant readers, or adults who were still clinging onto their adolescence – for the reason that these publications consisted mostly of pictures or did not deal with any in-depth topics. For such reasons, there was a tendency amongst many educators and parents to believe that comics are created merely for sheer entertainment and recreational purposes, and carry little or no real educational and literary values. In recent years, however, there has been an apparent increase in popularity in comic books, comic book films, and television series worldwide, thus introducing this genre into everyday life. Owing to such interesting sociocultural phenomena, recent scholarship has begun to re-examine the influence of comic books on popular culture and reassess their educational merit. In fact, with the growing number and popularity of films that are adaptations of comic book stories, comic books are receiving a significant amount of attention from all areas of the education sector – that is, including the school library community.

Although comic books may not be perceived as 'traditional' library materials, research studies have shown that they are incredibly effective as a way to instil traditional library behaviours (e.g. circulation materials, programme participation, engaged and voluntary reading, etc.) – in particular, with the teaching of ESL students and promoting the value of visual literacy skills. In fact, comic books have recently appeared on many educators' and school librarians' radars as a literary format that could serve as an effective tool to motivate young students (particularly struggling or reluctant readers) to read, or even to help them overcome their reluctance to put their feet inside the school library.

Furthermore, despite prior perceptions of comics as not being 'real' literature or having the same effects as reading a print book, the reading process of comics is, in reality, rather complex. Tilley (2008), for example, highlights the construction of comics such as the structure of the panels and the gutters between them, where readers must fill in the flow of action with their imaginations. Despite their increasing popularity and raising in acceptance in the educational community, comic books still presage many debates around school libraries, in terms of sponsorship of literacy development.

Comic books continue to face challenges in libraries across the world, especially when the costs for processing library materials (e.g. cataloguing, classification, covering, labelling and shelving, etc.) continue to rise.

Furthermore, although comic books tend to transcend age groupings (Pawuk, 2007), not all comic books are suitable for all ages and readers. For such obvious reasons, many school librarians are also concerned how school principals, other classroom teachers, as well as parents may react if comic books are found in their library collections.

In summary, despite the rise in popularity of comic books amongst readers of all ages, as well as the growing acceptance amongst the public and school libraries, there are still many debates regarding the 'true' educational values behind this medium. In other words, the roles and benefits of comics in education community (school libraries in particular) still have not been well

# Librarians' perceptions of educational values of comic books: A comparative study between Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, Australia and New Zealand

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## abstract

Comic books are becoming increasingly popular in the field of education. In the past, comic books were excluded from school libraries and classrooms. However, with the resurgence in the popularity of comic books and students' increased demands for them, they are now considered as recreational reading with educational value. In response to this, school libraries have begun collecting comic books and including them as part of their regular collections. This research paper reflects on the current situation of comic books in primary and middle school library collections and examines school librarians' perceptions towards educational values of comics. The investigation was launched in Hong Kong, Taiwan, New Zealand, Australia and Japan – making comparisons amongst different levels (primary school and secondary school), and different types (public school and private school) of schools in five different countries. Questionnaire surveys were sent to selected school librarians and were the main method of data collection. A total number of 683 responses were collected for this study. Research results include librarians' attitudes towards comic books in school libraries, adolescent readers' use of school libraries, their reading and borrowing practices, as well as other problems encountered with the on-going maintenance of comic books as part of the school libraries' regular collections.

## Keywords

Comic books, comparative librarianship, reading motivation, school librarianship, voluntary reading

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