



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL
OF HERITAGE, ART
AND MULTIMEDIA
(IJHAM)

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EXPLORING COMIC GENRE PREFERENCES AMONG UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS: A QUANTITATIVE CROSS-SECTIONAL STUDY

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Article Info:

Article history:

Received date: 27.04.2026

Revised date: 12.05.2026

Accepted date: 31.05.2026

Published date: 08.06.2026

To cite this document:

Hashim, A. F. M. (2026). Exploring Comic Genre Preferences Among Undergraduate Students: A Quantitative Cross-Sectional Study. *International Journal of Heritage, Art and Multimedia*, 9(29), 01-22.

DOI:10.35631/IJHAM.929001

Abstract:

This study explores undergraduate students' preferences for comic genres, focusing on the influence of gender, age, year of study, and socio-economic status (SES) on genre selection. The objective was to examine how these demographic factors shape engagement with comic narratives, with particular emphasis on gender-based trends and SES-related media consumption patterns. A total of 260 students participated in a structured survey, which collected data on genre preferences and demographic background. Descriptive and comparative analyses revealed notable gender differences: male respondents favoured action-oriented genres, such as superhero and manga, while female respondents preferred narrative-driven genres, including romance, fantasy, and drama. SES also influenced genre choices, with higher-income students showing greater interest in complex and niche genres, and lower-income students gravitating toward mainstream genres such as humour and romance. These findings suggest that comic genre preferences are shaped by intersecting cultural, social, and economic factors, with gender emerging as a central determinant. The study highlights the evolving nature of media engagement across developmental stages and proposes future longitudinal research to investigate these trends further.

Keyword:

Academic Year, Comic, Gender, Preferences, Genre, Socio-Economic Status, Demographic



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Introduction

Comics, once regarded as a niche entertainment medium, are now widely acknowledged as a legitimate form of communication with significant educational, cultural, and emotional value (McCloud, 1993). Within higher education contexts, undergraduate students represent a prominent consumer group due to their extensive exposure to digital media environments and the easy accessibility of comics via mobile devices and computers (Alzubi, 2023; Zulkifli et al., 2023). The multimodal structure of comics, which combines visual and textual components, corresponds with contemporary students' preference for concise, visually oriented narratives that align with their fast-paced academic and social lifestyles (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Moreover, comics serve as a coping and recreational resource in university settings, supporting psychological regulation amid academic pressure, time constraints, and stress-related challenges, with evidence suggesting their effectiveness in promoting emotional recovery and stress reduction (Araya, Peña, & Leiner, 2021; Yustisia et al., 2023). Genres such as humour, fantasy, and slice-of-life are particularly associated with positive emotional responses, mood enhancement, and temporary disengagement from stressors (Dionigi, Duradoni, & Vagnoli, 2023; Yusof et al., 2022), while the integration of narrative and visual elements further enhances emotional engagement and facilitates affective connections with characters and storylines (McFarlane, 2019). Beyond entertainment, comics also contribute to emotional and cognitive development by addressing themes such as mental health, identity formation, and personal adversity, thereby offering emotional validation and reducing feelings of social isolation among readers (Jean-Berluche, 2024). This reflective engagement is particularly relevant for undergraduates undergoing identity exploration and psychological adjustment, with sustained exposure to comics being linked to improved emotional resilience, adaptive coping strategies, and enhanced overall psychological well-being (East et al., 2010; Nguyen-Thi et al., 2024).

Background of the Study

Genre comprehension is a fundamental component in appreciating the diversity of creative works, including comics, which are typically classified based on thematic content, narrative structure, and visual style. Similar to literature and music—where genres such as fiction, mystery, rock, and jazz function as organising frameworks—genre categorisation in comics enables audiences to navigate cultural products more effectively and select content that aligns with their preferences and interpretive expectations (Cerati, 2021). Beyond its classificatory function, genre plays a significant role in shaping reader interpretation, as it influences the emotional tone and cognitive engagement of the reading experience.

Comics and graphic novels encompass a wide range of genres, including superhero, fantasy, science fiction, and slice-of-life, each characterised by distinct narrative conventions and thematic emphases (Serantes, 2014). For example, superhero comics often focus on themes of morality, justice, and identity through action-oriented storytelling, whereas slice-of-life narratives emphasise everyday experiences and social realities in a more reflective manner. An understanding of these genre conventions enhances readers' ability to interpret narrative and visual techniques, such as panel composition, pacing, dialogue structure, and stylistic motifs, thereby enriching the overall reading experience (McCloud, 1993). Consequently, genre awareness contributes to more critical and meaningful engagement with comics as a multimodal form of storytelling.

Despite the increasing popularity of comics among university students, limited empirical attention has been given to their understanding of comic genres and subgenres such as superhero, fantasy, romance, and horror. Existing literature has largely focused on comics as tools for literacy development and youth engagement; however, fewer studies have examined students' ability to differentiate and critically interpret genre-specific conventions (Krashen, 2004). This gap is particularly significant as genre awareness is closely associated with media literacy and critical reading skills, which are essential competencies in contemporary digital and multimedia environments. Addressing this gap may provide insights into how genre knowledge influences reading preferences, interpretive strategies, and engagement patterns among students. Furthermore, such understanding may inform educators and content creators in integrating genre-based approaches within educational contexts, thereby enhancing cultural literacy and fostering a more critically informed readership of comics as a complex cultural and artistic medium.

Purpose of the Study

This study aims to examine comic genre preferences among undergraduate students and to analyse the influence of demographic factors, namely gender, age, year of study, and socio-economic status (SES), on these preferences. Although previous studies have explored comics as a form of entertainment and digital leisure, limited empirical research has specifically investigated how demographic differences shape genre preferences among university students. Existing literature has also tended to treat comics as a general medium without differentiating the influence of specific genres or adequately considering the role of demographic identity in shaping readership patterns. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates whether gender is associated with preferences for genres such as action, superhero, manga, romance, and humour; whether age influences students' inclination toward mainstream or more complex narrative forms; whether comic preferences vary across different academic years; and whether socio-economic status affects students' access to and engagement with particular comic genres. By examining these dimensions, the study seeks to provide a clearer understanding of how demographic and social factors shape comic readership and media engagement within higher education contexts. Furthermore, it contributes to the existing literature by offering empirical evidence on the relationship between demographic identity and genre-based media consumption among undergraduate students in contemporary digital reading environments.

Literature Review

The concept of genre, derived from the French term meaning "type" or "category," has long served as a foundational framework in literary and cultural studies for classifying artistic and

communicative expressions (Zhou, 2024). Originating from classical literary traditions, genre has evolved into an analytical construct used to organise texts and media based on recurring thematic, structural, and stylistic conventions. Within literary scholarship, genre provides a system of interpretive expectations that guides the relationship between creators and audiences in terms of narrative structure, thematic focus, and communicative intent (Cuddon, 2013). For example, genres such as science fiction, fantasy, and historical fiction are distinguished by their settings, narrative motifs, and thematic concerns, while forms such as poetry, drama, and non-fiction are defined by specific rhetorical and structural conventions.

Beyond literature, the concept of genre has been widely extended to other cultural and media domains, including film, television, music, video games, fashion, art, and linguistics (Al-Zadjali, 2024; O'Connor, 2010). In film and television, genres such as horror, romance, and action establish audience expectations through recognisable narrative structures, tonal patterns, and visual styles. Similarly, video game genres shape modes of interaction and player engagement, while linguistic genres differentiate communicative contexts such as academic writing and everyday conversation. In this sense, genre functions not only as a classificatory system but also as a cultural framework that shapes how audiences interpret meaning and engage with diverse media forms.

Within comics studies, genre plays a central role in structuring narrative experience and shaping audience reception. Comic genres such as superhero, fantasy, science fiction, romance, horror, adventure, and slice-of-life are characterised by distinctive thematic concerns, visual aesthetics, and narrative conventions that influence reader expectations and interpretive processes (McCloud, 1993; O'Connor, 2010). For instance, superhero comics typically emphasise themes of justice, morality, and identity through action-driven narratives, whereas slice-of-life comics focus on everyday experiences, interpersonal relationships, and reflective storytelling. These genre-specific conventions shape narrative pacing, emotional tone, and reader engagement, resulting in differentiated reading experiences across genres.

Furthermore, genre awareness enables readers to engage with comics in a more critical and interpretive manner by recognising narrative structures, symbolic representations, and underlying ideological messages. As noted by Cohn (2019), genre analysis situates comics within broader sociocultural contexts by revealing how narratives reflect, reinforce, or challenge dominant social values and assumptions. This interpretive function is particularly relevant in relation to themes such as identity, morality, emotional struggle, and personal development, which are commonly explored in comics. Accordingly, genre should be understood not only as a structural classification but also as an analytical lens through which the cultural and psychological dimensions of comics can be examined.

Despite the growing body of research on comics and genre theory, existing studies have primarily focused on narrative structures, visual semiotics, and cultural representation, with limited attention given to the psychological implications of genre consumption among undergraduate students. Moreover, comics are often treated as a homogeneous medium, with insufficient consideration of how different genres may produce varied emotional and cognitive effects. While prior research acknowledges comics as tools for leisure engagement and emotional expression, there remains a lack of empirical investigation into how genre preferences relate to emotional coping, stress management, and psychological well-being in higher education contexts. Given the increasing prevalence of digital comic consumption among university students, particularly within academically demanding environments, further

research is needed to examine how specific comic genres influence students' emotional experiences and well-being. Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by investigating the relationship between comic genre preferences and the emotional well-being of undergraduate students in contemporary digital reading environments.

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to examine undergraduate students' preferences for comic genres. A quantitative approach was adopted as it enables systematic collection and statistical analysis of numerical data to identify patterns, relationships, and differences among variables in a structured and objective manner (Creswell, 2014). The cross-sectional design involves data collection at a single point in time, providing a snapshot of respondents' current comic genre preferences and demographic characteristics without longitudinal follow-up. This design is particularly appropriate for examining associations between demographic variables—namely gender, age, year of study, and socio-economic status (SES)—and comic genre preferences without manipulating any variables. It also facilitates efficient data collection from a relatively large sample and supports comparative statistical analysis across demographic groups, thereby offering empirical insights into media consumption behaviour among undergraduate students in higher education contexts (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The target population comprised undergraduate students aged 20 to 24 years from a single university, representing a developmental stage characterised by identity exploration and heightened engagement with diverse media forms (Arnett, 2000). A purposive sampling technique was employed to recruit 260 out of 345 students enrolled in a student development programme who voluntarily participated in the study. The remaining 85 students were excluded from the sampling frame as they did not meet the study's inclusion criteria. The final sample was considered adequate in size and heterogeneity to support robust statistical analysis and enhance the validity of inferences within the study context.

Data were collected using a structured online questionnaire developed via Google Forms and distributed through WhatsApp to student groups. The instrument consisted of two sections: Section A captured demographic information, including gender, age, year of study, and socio-economic status (SES), while Section B assessed respondents' familiarity with and preferences for selected comic genres, namely superhero, manga, humour, fantasy, romance, drama, and action. A five-point Likert scale was used to measure levels of recognition and preference, enabling quantifiable analysis of respondents' attitudes and interests (Likert, 1932). Ethical considerations were strictly observed, including informed consent, voluntary participation, anonymity, and data confidentiality. To ensure data integrity, single-response restrictions were implemented and follow-up reminders were issued to improve response completeness and accuracy.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using descriptive statistical techniques, including frequencies, percentages, and mean scores. This approach was adopted as it enables systematic summarisation and presentation of numerical data without examining causal relationships (Creswell, 2014). It is particularly appropriate for exploratory research aimed at identifying general patterns and distributions within a dataset. In this study, frequencies and percentages were used to describe

respondents' demographic characteristics and the distribution of comic genre preferences, while mean scores were employed to determine the overall level of preference for each genre. Comparative analysis across demographic variables, namely gender, age, year of study, and socio-economic status (SES), was also conducted to identify observable differences in media consumption patterns. Although descriptive analysis does not infer causality, it provides a clear and structured overview of behavioural trends, thereby supporting the interpretation of variations in comic genre engagement among undergraduate students (Babbie, 2010; Field, 2013; Dawson, 2019).

Result

This section analyses the findings in relation to the respondents' demographic characteristics—namely, gender, age, year of study, and socioeconomic status—and how these factors influence their preferences for various comic genres.

Demographic Profile of Respondents

The demographic profile of respondents, as presented in Table 1, provides a detailed overview of the sample characteristics in terms of gender, age, year of study, and socio-economic status (SES). This profile illustrates the distribution of participants across key demographic variables, thereby reflecting the composition and heterogeneity of the study sample. Such information is essential for contextualising the findings, as it enables a clearer interpretation of variations in comic genre preferences across different demographic groups.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents

		Frequency	%
a) Gender	Male	110	42.3
	Female	150	57.7
	Total	260	100
b) Age	19	68	26.2
	20	46	17.7
	21	62	23.8
	22	55	21.2
	23	29	11.1
	Total	260	100
c) Year of Study	Year 1	32	12.3
	Year 2	100	38.5
	Year 3	88	33.8
	Year 4	40	15.4
	Total	260	100
d) SES	<2000	58	22.3
	2001-4000	11	4.2
	4001-6000	103	39.6
	6001-8000	36	13.8

>80001	52	20
Total	260	100

The descriptive statistical analysis indicates that the study sample comprised 260 undergraduate students. In terms of gender distribution, 110 respondents were male (42.3%), while 150 were female (57.7%), reflecting a higher proportion of female participants and providing a robust basis for examining potential gender-related differences in media engagement and comic genre preferences.

Regarding age distribution, the majority of respondents were young adults aged between 19 and 23 years, with the largest proportion aged 19 years (26.2%), followed by 21 (23.8%), 22 (21.2%), 20 (17.7%), and 23 (11.2%). Overall, 88.8% of respondents were within the 19–22 age range, indicating a sample predominantly composed of individuals in early adulthood, a developmental stage commonly associated with identity exploration, autonomy development, and active engagement with diverse media forms.

In terms of academic level and socio-economic status (SES), most respondents were in Year 2 (38.5%) and Year 3 (33.8%), followed by Year 4 (15.4%) and Year 1 (12.3%), with more than 70% positioned in the intermediate stages of their undergraduate studies. This suggests a relatively stable academic progression, which may be associated with more consistent patterns of media consumption. With regard to SES, the largest proportion of respondents reported a household income between RM4,001 and RM6,000 (39.6%), followed by below RM2,000 (22.3%), above RM8,000 (20.0%), RM6,001 to RM8,000 (13.8%), and RM2,001 to RM4,000 (4.2%), indicating a predominantly middle-income sample while still reflecting moderate socio-economic diversity among respondents.

Gender and Comic Genre Preferences

This section examines the relationship between gender and comic genre preferences among respondents. The analysis focuses on the distribution of genre selections between male and female participants, providing insight into potential differences in interests and consumption patterns across genders. Understanding these variations is essential for identifying underlying trends in comic readership and for informing the development of content that caters to diverse audience preferences. The detailed breakdown of findings is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Gender and Comic Genre Preferences

Genre	Male		Female		Total	
	%	n	%	n	%	n
Superhero	13.5	35	10.4	27	23.8	62
Manga	5.4	14	0	0	5.4	14
Humour	8.8	23	17.7	46	26.5	69
Fantasy	3.8	10	13.1	34	16.9	44
Action	2.3	6	0	0	2.3	6
Drama	5.4	14	10.8	28	16.2	42
Romantic	3.1	8	5.8	15	8.9	23

The analysis of comic genre preferences by gender reveals distinct patterns of media engagement among undergraduate respondents, with humour emerging as the most preferred genre overall (26.5%, $n = 69$), particularly among female respondents (17.7%, $n = 46$) compared to males (8.8%, $n = 23$), indicating a stronger inclination towards light-hearted and relatable narrative content. Superhero comics rank second (23.8%, $n = 62$), with higher preference among males (13.5%, $n = 35$) than females (10.4%, $n = 27$), reflecting a tendency towards action-oriented and hero-centric narratives among male participants. Fantasy (16.9%, $n = 44$) and drama (16.2%, $n = 42$) are also more strongly preferred by female respondents (13.1%, $n = 34$ and 10.8%, $n = 28$ respectively), suggesting a greater engagement with narrative-driven genres characterised by emotional depth and character development.

Manga is exclusively preferred by male respondents (5.4%, $n = 14$), indicating a gender-specific inclination towards stylised and hybrid narrative forms, while romance accounts for 8.9% ($n = 23$) of total responses, with slightly higher engagement among females (5.8%, $n = 15$) than males (3.1%, $n = 8$), further reinforcing the preference for emotionally and relationally oriented storytelling among female participants. In contrast, action is the least preferred genre overall (2.3%, $n = 6$), exclusively reported by male respondents.

Overall, the findings indicate that female respondents exhibit a broader and more diverse range of genre preferences, particularly across humour, fantasy, and drama, whereas male respondents demonstrate more concentrated preferences centred on superhero, manga, and action genres. This suggests that gender-related psychological and socio-cultural factors play a significant role in shaping comic genre engagement among undergraduate students.

Gender and Age-based Comic Reading Preferences

This section examines variations in comic genre preferences across different age groups among respondents. The analysis focuses on identifying patterns in genre selection according to age, with the aim of determining how preferences for specific comic narrative types may differ during young adulthood. Such an examination provides empirical insight into the relationship between age and genre engagement, highlighting potential shifts in media preferences across developmental stages. These findings may also inform content development and audience targeting strategies within the comic industry. The detailed distribution of results is presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Gender and Age-based Comic Reading Preferences

	Respondent Age										Total	
	19		20		21		22		23		%	n
Male	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n
Superhero	8.2	9	3.6	4	13.6	15	4.5	5	1.8	2	31.8	35
Manga	3.6	4	0.9	1	4.5	5	1.8	2	1.8	2	12.7	14
Humour	7.3	8	5.5	6	2.7	3	3.6	4	1.8	2	20.9	23
Fantasy	2.7	3	0	0	1.8	2	2.7	3	1.8	2	9.1	10
Action	0.9	1	1.8	2	1.8	2	0	0	0.9	1	5.5	6
Drama	4.5	5	2.7	3	3.6	4	1.8	2	0	0	12.7	14
Romantic	0.9	1	3.6	4	1.8	2	0	0	0.9	1	7.3	8

Female												
Superhero	1.3	2	6	9	3.3	5	3.3	5	4	6	18	27
Manga	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Humour	8	12	4.7	7	4	6	10	15	4	6	30.7	46
Fantasy	6.7	10	1.3	2	5.3	8	7.3	11	2	3	22.7	34
Action	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Drama	6	9	4	6	5.3	8	2	3	1.3	2	18.7	28
Romantic	2.7	4	1.3	2	1.3	2	3.3	5	1.3	2	10	15

The age-based analysis reveals dynamic patterns in comic genre preferences influenced by developmental stage and gender among respondents aged 19 to 23 years. Among male respondents aged 19, preferences are primarily concentrated in Superhero (8.2%) and Humour (7.3%) genres, indicating a stronger inclination towards action-oriented and comedic narratives associated with mainstream popular culture. This pattern may reflect late adolescent identity formation, where themes of heroism, power, and humour function as both entertainment and mechanisms for peer socialisation. In contrast, female respondents aged 19 demonstrate higher preferences for Humour (8.0%) and Fantasy (6.7%), suggesting a greater inclination towards imaginative and emotionally engaging narratives that provide escapism and affective connection during late adolescence.

Manga emerges as a particularly dominant genre among younger male respondents, peaking at age 21 (13.6%), which may be attributed to its diverse thematic scope, serialised narrative structure, and distinctive visual style that enhance reader immersion. This trend is further supported by the globalisation of Japanese popular culture through anime and digital platforms, which has increased exposure among young adult audiences. In contrast, respondents aged 22 to 23 demonstrate gradual shifts in genre preferences, with male respondents showing a marked decline in Superhero comics from 13.6% at age 21 to 4.5% at age 22 and 1.8% at age 23, suggesting a maturation of reading interests towards more realistic or thematically complex content in line with increasing academic demands and evolving cognitive and emotional priorities.

Conversely, female respondents in the same age range show increased engagement with Drama, Romance, and Fantasy genres, with Fantasy peaking at age 22 (7.3%) and moderate increases in Drama and Romance, reflecting heightened interest in interpersonal relationships, emotional complexity, and identity exploration during early adulthood. Despite these variations, Humour remains consistently preferred across all female age groups, ranging from 4.0% to 10.0%, underscoring its role as a stable, cross-cutting genre that provides emotional relief and accessible entertainment across developmental stages. Overall, the findings demonstrate that comic genre preferences are shaped by the interaction of age and gender, reflecting evolving psychological and social influences across stages of undergraduate development.

Gender and Year of Study: Comic Reading Preferences

This section examines variations in comic genre preferences across different years of study among respondents. The analysis aims to determine whether genre selection is influenced by academic progression or whether specific genres demonstrate stronger appeal at particular stages of the undergraduate experience. By comparing preferences across cohorts, the study

seeks to identify potential shifts in reading behaviour associated with increasing academic exposure, cognitive development, and evolving social experiences within the higher education context. The distribution of comic genre preferences across each year of study is presented in Table 4, providing a comprehensive overview of emerging patterns and trends.

Table 4: Gender and Year of Study: Comic Reading Preferences

	Year of Study								Total	
	1		2		3		4		%	n
Male	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n
Superhero	5.5	6	11.8	13	11.8	13	2.7	3	31.8	35
Manga	0.9	1	2.7	3	2.7	3	6.4	7	12.7	14
Humour	1.8	2	9.1	10	5.5	6	4.5	5	20.9	23
Fantasy	0.9	1	4.5	5	2.7	3	0.9	1	9.1	10
Action	0	0	2.7	3	1.8	2	0.9	1	5.50	6
Drama	3.6	4	5.5	6	3.6	4	0	0	12.7	14
Romantic	0.9	1	0.9	1	2.7	3	2.7	3	7.3	8
Female										
Superhero	2	3	6	9	9.3	14	0.7	1	18	27
Manga	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Humour	2.7	4	14	21	10	15	4	6	30.7	46
Fantasy	1.3	2	8	12	9.3	14	4	6	22.7	34
Action	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Drama	4	6	6.7	10	6	9	2	3	18.7	28
Romantic	1.3	2	4.7	7	1.3	2	2.7	4	10	15

The distribution of comic genre preferences across academic years demonstrates clear variations shaped by both gender and stage of study, indicating that students' engagement with comic narratives evolves alongside academic progression. Among male respondents, the Superhero genre consistently emerges as the most preferred category across all academic years, with the highest levels recorded in Year 2 and Year 3 (each at 11.8%, n = 13), before declining sharply in Year 4 (2.7%), suggesting sustained engagement with action-oriented and heroic narratives during the intermediate stages of study, followed by a gradual shift towards more realistic or cognitively complex content as students approach graduation and focus on future career pathways. In contrast, Manga shows a modest increase among Year 4 male respondents (6.4%), while Humour remains particularly prominent in Year 2 (9.1%), reflecting its continued function as a mechanism for stress relief and social engagement, whereas Fantasy and Drama maintain relatively stable levels across Year 2 and Year 3, indicating a gradual diversification of genre preferences with academic progression.

Among female respondents, Humour and Fantasy consistently dominate across all academic years, with Year 2 showing the highest engagement, particularly for Humour (14%) and Fantasy (8%), suggesting sustained preference for emotionally engaging and imaginative narratives throughout undergraduate study. Although Superhero comics are less dominant overall, they show a notable increase among Year 3 female respondents (9.3%), while Manga records no preference among female respondents across all academic years, reinforcing a

persistent gendered divide in genre engagement. Romantic genres, although not dominant, demonstrate a consistent and moderate presence among both genders across academic years, indicating stable secondary interest in relational narratives.

Overall, students in Year 2 and Year 3 exhibit the greatest diversity in genre engagement, particularly in Humour and Fantasy, reflecting a period of expanded media exploration associated with academic maturity, broader social exposure, and evolving cognitive and emotional needs. Collectively, these findings indicate that comic genre preferences are dynamic rather than static, evolving in response to developmental, social, and academic influences across the undergraduate experience.

Gender and Year of Study: Comic Reading Preferences

This section examines variations in comic genre preferences across different years of study among respondents. The analysis aims to determine whether students' genre selections are influenced by academic progression or whether certain genres demonstrate stronger appeal at specific stages of their educational journey. By comparing preferences across cohorts, the study seeks to identify potential shifts in reading behaviour associated with increasing academic exposure, cognitive development, and changing social experiences within the higher education context. The distribution of comic genre preferences across each year of study is presented in Table 5, providing a detailed overview of emerging patterns and trends.

Table 5: Gender and Year of Study: Comic Reading Preferences

	Year of Study								Total	
	1		2		3		4		%	n
Male	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n
Superhero	5.5	6	11.8	13	11.8	13	2.7	3	31.8	35
Manga	0.9	1	2.7	3	2.7	3	6.4	7	12.7	14
Humour	1.8	2	9.1	10	5.5	6	4.5	5	20.9	23
Fantasy	0.9	1	4.5	5	2.7	3	0.9	1	9.1	10
Action	0	0	2.7	3	1.8	2	0.9	1	5.50	6
Drama	3.6	4	5.5	6	3.6	4	0	0	12.7	14
Romantic	0.9	1	0.9	1	2.7	3	2.7	3	7.3	8
Female										
Superhero	2	3	6	9	9.3	14	0.7	1	18	27
Manga	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Humour	2.7	4	14	21	10	15	4	6	30.7	46
Fantasy	1.3	2	8	12	9.3	14	4	6	22.7	34
Action	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Drama	4	6	6.7	10	6	9	2	3	18.7	28
Romantic	1.3	2	4.7	7	1.3	2	2.7	4	10	15

The distribution of comic genre preferences across academic years reveals notable variations shaped by both gender and stage of study, indicating that students' engagement with comic narratives evolves alongside academic progression. Among male respondents, the Superhero

genre consistently emerges as the most preferred category across all academic years, with the highest levels recorded in Year 2 and Year 3 (each at 11.8%, n = 13), before declining in Year 4 (2.7%), suggesting sustained interest in action-oriented and hero-centric narratives during the intermediate stages of study, followed by a gradual shift towards more realistic or intellectually complex content as students approach graduation. In contrast, Manga shows a modest increase among Year 4 male respondents (6.4%), while Humour remains particularly prominent in Year 2 (9.1%), reflecting its role as a coping and social engagement mechanism, whereas Fantasy and Drama maintain relatively stable levels across Year 2 and Year 3, indicating a gradual diversification of genre interests.

Among female respondents, Humour and Fantasy consistently dominate across all academic years, with Year 2 recording the highest engagement for Humour (14%) and Fantasy (8%), indicating a sustained preference for emotionally engaging and imaginative narratives throughout undergraduate study. Although Superhero comics are less dominant overall, they show a noticeable increase in Year 3 females (9.3%), while Manga receives no recorded preference among female respondents across all years, reinforcing a persistent gendered divide in genre engagement. Romantic genres, while not dominant, exhibit a stable presence among both genders across academic years, suggesting consistent secondary interest in emotionally grounded storytelling.

Overall, Year 2 and Year 3 students demonstrate the greatest diversity in genre preferences, particularly in Humour and Fantasy, reflecting a period of expanded media exploration associated with academic maturity, social exposure, and evolving cognitive and emotional needs. Collectively, these findings indicate that comic genre preferences are dynamic rather than static, evolving in response to developmental, social, and academic influences among undergraduate students.

SES and Comic Reading Preferences

Socioeconomic status (SES) is widely recognised as a key determinant influencing individuals' lifestyle patterns, including participation in leisure activities such as comic reading. In the Malaysian context, SES is commonly classified into three income groups, namely B40 (Bottom 40%), M40 (Middle 40%), and T20 (Top 20%), which represent varying levels of household income and access to cultural and material resources. These socioeconomic distinctions may influence exposure to reading materials, purchasing power, and overall media consumption behaviour, thereby contributing to differences in comic genre preferences among respondents. Accordingly, Table 6 presents the distribution of comic reading preferences across these socioeconomic groups, providing a basis for examining the extent to which economic background is associated with variations in genre selection and engagement patterns.

Table 6: SES and Comic Reading Preferences

Socio Status Economic		B40		M40		T20		Total	
		%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n
Genre									
Superhero		14.2	37	8.1	21	1.5	4	23.8	62
Manga		0.0	0	2.3	6	3.1	8	5.4	14
Humour		11.5	30	11.5	30	3.5	9	26.5	69

fantasy	8.8	23	4.2	11	3.8	10	16.9	44
Action	0.0	0	2.3	6	0.0	0	2.3	6
Drama	8.1	21	5.0	13	3.1	8	16.2	42
Romantic	6.5	17	1.5	4	0.8	2	8.8	23
Total	49.2	128	35.0	91	15.8	41	100.0	260

The analysis of comic genre preferences across socioeconomic categories—B40 (lower-income), M40 (middle-income), and T20 (upper-income)—reveals notable variations in readership patterns, highlighting the influence of economic background on media engagement and cultural consumption. Overall, the B40 group represents the largest proportion of comic readers (49.2%, $n = 128$), followed by M40 (35.0%, $n = 91$) and T20 (15.8%, $n = 41$), indicating that comic reading is most prevalent among lower- and middle-income groups and continues to function as an accessible and affordable form of entertainment across socioeconomic strata. Superhero comics emerge as the most preferred genre overall (23.8%, $n = 62$), with particularly strong engagement among B40 respondents (14.2%, $n = 37$), suggesting a stronger inclination towards aspirational and action-oriented narratives within lower-income groups, while interest declines markedly among T20 respondents (1.5%, $n = 4$), reflecting more diversified media preferences among higher-income readers.

Similarly, Humour demonstrates consistently high appeal among B40 and M40 respondents (11.5% each, $n = 30$), but lower engagement among T20 respondents (3.5%, $n = 9$), underscoring its role as an accessible genre that may function as a coping mechanism for daily stress, particularly among lower-income groups. Fantasy and Drama show moderate and relatively stable engagement across all socioeconomic categories, with slightly higher preference among B40 respondents, indicating sustained interest in emotionally rich and imaginative narratives regardless of income level. In contrast, Manga and Romance display more differentiated patterns, with Manga showing slightly higher engagement among T20 (3.1%, $n = 8$) and M40 (2.3%, $n = 6$) respondents, likely reflecting greater exposure to global media and higher cultural capital, while Romance is more prominent among B40 respondents (6.5%, $n = 17$), suggesting a stronger preference for emotionally grounded storytelling within this group.

Notably, the Action genre is exclusively represented among M40 respondents (2.3%, $n = 6$), indicating a more selective consumption pattern within the middle-income category. Overall, these findings demonstrate that while comic readership is widespread across all socioeconomic groups, genre preferences are subtly but meaningfully shaped by income level, reflecting differences in access, cultural exposure, and interpretive engagement with media content.

Discussion

This section discusses variations in comic genre preferences among university students based on key demographic factors, namely gender, age, year of study, and socioeconomic status (SES). It highlights that genre preferences are shaped not only by individual interests but also by socialisation processes, psychological development, and differential access to media resources. Accordingly, each research objective is systematically addressed to elucidate the relationship between demographic factors and patterns of comic genre selection among respondents.

Gender-Based Differences in Comic Genre Preferences

This study reveals clear gender-based differences in comic genre preferences among undergraduate students, where female respondents tend to favour humour, fantasy, and drama, while male respondents show stronger preferences for superhero, manga, and action-oriented narratives (Parham, 2021). These differences can be explained through the interaction of sociocultural, psychological, and media representation factors that collectively shape media consumption behaviour. From a sociocultural perspective, early gender socialisation significantly influences later media preferences, as females are often encouraged to develop emotional expressiveness and relational awareness, leading to stronger engagement with emotionally rich and character-driven genres, whereas males are more frequently socialised toward independence and competitiveness, which aligns with action-based and hero-centric narratives (McLeod, 2008). Psychologically, variations in empathic orientation and cognitive engagement styles further reinforce these patterns, where individuals with higher empathy are more drawn to relational and emotionally complex narratives such as drama and humour, while those with greater sensation-seeking tendencies may prefer action and superhero genres due to their emphasis on conflict and achievement (Choyke, 2019; Vinney, 2024).

In addition, media representations also play a reinforcing role, as long-standing portrayals of gendered character archetypes—such as dominant male heroes and emotionally expressive female characters—encourage familiarity bias and sustain gendered viewing preferences over time (Parham, 2021). This cyclical relationship between production and consumption further stabilises genre segmentation along gender lines (Choyke, 2019). Overall, these interacting influences demonstrate that gendered comic preferences are not biologically determined but are instead socially and culturally constructed through continuous exposure, identity formation, and institutional media practices (McLeod, 2008; Vinney, 2024). These findings therefore highlight comic genre preference as a dynamic and context-dependent phenomenon shaped by broader social and cultural influences rather than as a fixed or biologically determined trait.

Age-Based Trends in Comic Reading Preferences

This study demonstrates that comic genre preferences among undergraduate students are shaped by the interaction of gender, age, and socioeconomic status (SES), reflecting the combined influence of sociocultural norms, psychological development, and media structural factors (Arnett, 2000; Katz et al., 1974; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). Gender differences show that female students consistently prefer humour, fantasy, and drama, while male students are more inclined toward superhero, manga, and action-oriented genres, which can be explained through gender schema development and early socialisation processes that encourage emotional expressiveness in females and independence and competitiveness in males (Coyne et al., 2016; Steinke, 2017). These patterns are further reinforced by psychological differences in empathic orientation and sensation-seeking tendencies, where individuals with higher empathic capacity tend to favour relational and character-driven narratives, while those with stronger sensation-seeking traits prefer action-based and stimulation-rich content (Davis, 1983; Zuckerman, 1994). In addition, media representation contributes to the persistence of these differences through repeated exposure to gendered archetypes in which male characters are predominantly portrayed as active agents of power and conflict, while female characters are more often associated with relational and emotional roles, thereby reinforcing familiarity bias and stabilising long-term genre preferences (Goffman, 1979; Smith et al., 2015).

Age-related trends indicate that younger male respondents (19–21 years) prefer superhero and humour genres due to identity exploration, peer affiliation, and emotional coping functions characteristic of emerging adulthood, while increasing preference for manga reflects growing cognitive complexity and narrative sophistication (Arnett, 2000; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). Female respondents, meanwhile, maintain consistent engagement with humour but gradually shift toward fantasy, drama, and romance as emotional depth, relational understanding, and identity consolidation become more prominent in later stages of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2015; Davis, 1983). These findings suggest that comic preferences evolve alongside psychological maturation and changing emotional needs, with younger audiences often prioritising entertainment and escapism, whereas older students increasingly seek narratives that provide emotional resonance, identity reinforcement, and interpretive depth.

In terms of SES, lower-income groups (B40 and M40) tend to favour mainstream genres such as superhero and humour due to greater accessibility, media exposure, and their function as emotional escapism, while higher-income (T20) respondents demonstrate more selective and culturally differentiated preferences, reflecting greater cultural capital and broader interpretive frameworks (Bourdieu, 1984; Livingstone & Helsper, 2007). Manga remains relatively niche across all groups, suggesting uneven cultural diffusion and varying levels of exposure rather than purely economic constraints. Overall, these findings align with Uses and Gratifications Theory, which explains that media consumption evolves according to changing psychological and social needs across the life course, with younger audiences prioritising escapism and entertainment, while older and more socioeconomically advantaged groups increasingly seek emotional complexity, identity reinforcement, and meaning-making in narrative content (Katz et al., 1974; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013).

Comic Reading Preferences by Gender and Year of Study

Comic genre preferences among undergraduate students vary meaningfully across academic years, reflecting a dynamic interaction between developmental progression, social adaptation, and shifting academic demands. These patterns suggest that comic consumption is not static, but evolves in response to changes in identity formation, cognitive maturity, and available leisure time throughout university life (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Erikson, 1968). Year 2 appears to represent the peak of comic engagement for both male and female students. This stage can be interpreted as a period of relative psychological and social stabilisation following the transition into university life, where students are actively engaged in identity exploration, peer-group consolidation, and social participation with greater discretionary time and reduced adjustment stress (Arnett, 2000). In this context, comics serve multiple functions, including emotional regulation, social bonding, and identity construction through narrative identification, which aligns with Uses and Gratifications Theory as a framework explaining media engagement based on psychological needs (Rubin, 2009).

Gender differences remain stable across academic years, indicating that underlying sociocultural and psychological influences continue to shape preferences despite changes in educational stage. Male students consistently show stronger preferences for action-oriented genres such as superhero, action, and manga, which emphasise agency, competition, and mastery aligned with socially reinforced masculine identity constructs (Bem, 1981; Wood & Eagly, 2012). This stability is reinforced by early cognitive schema formation and repeated exposure to gendered media patterns that strengthen long-term preference structures (Bandura, 2001). In contrast, female students consistently favour humour, fantasy, and drama genres,

which foreground emotional expression, relational complexity, and imaginative engagement, reflecting stronger orientation toward empathic processing and interpersonal meaning-making (Hoffman, 2000). These genres also provide safe symbolic spaces for exploring identity and emotional experiences, particularly during transitional academic stages.

An interesting deviation occurs in Year 3, where female engagement with superhero comics shows a moderate increase, which may be explained by evolving media ecosystems and increasing diversification of female representation in popular media, reducing traditional gender constraints in genre identification (Gill, 2007). By Year 4, a noticeable decline in comic readership is observed across both genders, likely due to intensified academic workloads, career preparation, and reduced cognitive resources for leisure media, reflecting shifting life priorities during late adolescence to early adulthood transitions (Eccles, 2005). Overall, these findings indicate that comic genre preferences evolve in line with developmental psychology, academic lifecycle pressures, and shifting social roles, reinforcing the view that media consumption is context-dependent and shaped by the interaction of individual development and structural life-stage constraints (Arnett, 2000; Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Socioeconomic Status (SES) and Comic Reading Preferences

Socioeconomic status (SES) plays a significant and structured role in shaping comic genre preferences, as income differences are closely linked to variations in access to media, cultural exposure, and interpretive engagement, indicating that comic consumption is embedded within broader structural inequalities rather than being purely a matter of individual taste (Bourdieu, 1984; Livingstone & Helsper, 2007). Respondents from lower-income groups (B40 and M40) show stronger preferences for mainstream genres such as superhero and humour, which can be explained by their higher accessibility, widespread promotion through mass media platforms, and availability via low-cost or free digital channels, making them more easily consumable and cognitively less demanding. These genres also provide emotional escapism and symbolic reinforcement, where narratives of resilience, justice, and success function as coping mechanisms for individuals facing socioeconomic constraints, consistent with the idea that media serves psychological and emotional regulation needs (Katz et al., 1974).

In contrast, higher-income (T20) respondents demonstrate more selective engagement with comics, favouring intellectually complex and aesthetically diverse content, which reflects greater cultural capital, higher educational exposure, and broader familiarity with global media systems that encourage critical and differentiated consumption practices (Bourdieu, 1984). Meanwhile, manga remains relatively niche across all income groups, suggesting that its adoption is shaped more by cultural diffusion and familiarity than by economic status alone, despite its increasing global availability through digital platforms (Jenkins, 2006). These findings suggest that economic resources influence not only access to media but also the development of interpretive preferences and cultural literacy in media consumption.

Overall, these findings show that SES not only determines access to comic genres but also shapes how narratives are interpreted and valued, with lower-income groups prioritising accessible and emotionally rewarding content, while higher-income groups engage in more selective and culturally stratified consumption patterns. This reinforces the understanding that media use is a socially structured practice influenced by unequal access to cultural and economic resources, where differences in consumption patterns reflect broader forms of social inequality and cultural distinction (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007).

Implications of the Study

The findings of this study have important implications for comic creators, educators, digital media platforms, and policymakers. Gender-based differences in genre preferences highlight the need for more inclusive and multidimensional storytelling that integrates emotionally rich and character-driven narratives across both action-oriented and narrative-focused genres to appeal to diverse audiences. Age-related patterns further suggest that comic content should evolve in thematic depth and cognitive complexity, catering to younger readers who favour visually dynamic and escapist narratives, while also engaging older readers who prefer more introspective and relational storytelling. From an educational perspective, comics hold strong pedagogical value as supplementary learning tools, particularly in genres such as drama and fantasy, which can foster empathy, critical thinking, and emotional development among learners. For media platforms, incorporating demographic-informed recommendation systems may enhance user engagement by aligning content delivery with variations in genre preferences across different social groups. At the policy level, support mechanisms are needed to ensure equitable access to diverse comic content, especially for lower-income communities, through targeted cultural and creative industry initiatives. Overall, these findings emphasise the importance of developing inclusive and socially responsive comic narratives that reflect the diversity of reader experiences while enhancing cultural relevance and industry impact.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be acknowledged in interpreting the findings of this study. First, the sample was drawn from a single academic institution, which may restrict the generalisability of the results to the wider undergraduate population and introduce potential bias related to institutional, cultural, and demographic homogeneity. Second, the reliance on self-reported data may be affected by response bias, including social desirability effects and subjective interpretation of individual comic-reading behaviours, which could influence the accuracy of reported genre preferences. Third, the study focused primarily on gender, age, and socioeconomic status (SES) as explanatory variables, without incorporating other potentially influential determinants such as personality traits, peer influence, and broader cultural contexts, which may also play a significant role in shaping media consumption patterns. In addition, the study did not fully account for the dynamic influence of digital media ecosystems, where algorithm-driven platforms and social media exposure increasingly shape access to comics and may contribute to evolving genre preferences over time. Finally, the cross-sectional research design limits the ability to capture longitudinal changes in reading behaviour, thereby constraining insights into how comic preferences develop across different academic and life stages. Future research should address these limitations by employing more diverse and representative samples, adopting longitudinal methodologies, and integrating additional psychological, social, and digital contextual factors to provide a more comprehensive understanding of comic readership dynamics.

Conclusion

This study provides important empirical insights into how demographic factors—namely gender, age, and socioeconomic status (SES)—shape comic genre preferences among university students. The findings indicate that genre engagement is not determined by a single factor but is better understood through an intersectionality framework, where multiple social categories interact to influence cultural consumption. Gendered patterns are evident, with male

students showing stronger preferences for action-oriented superhero narratives, while female students favour narrative-driven genres such as manga, romance, and fantasy, reflecting the influence of gender socialisation and media representation. SES further differentiates these preferences, where higher-income students (T20) demonstrate greater engagement with niche and globally diversified genres, while lower-income students (B40) tend to prefer more accessible mainstream genres such as humour and romance, suggesting the role of cultural capital and media accessibility in shaping reading habits. Age and academic progression also contribute to shifting preferences, as students gradually diversify their genre interests with increasing exposure and maturity. Overall, these findings underscore that comic genre preferences emerge from the intersection of gender, SES, and age as interlocking social structures rather than isolated determinants. However, the study is limited by its sample size, self-reported data, and the absence of additional psychological and contextual variables. Future research should adopt a more comprehensive intersectional and longitudinal approach, incorporating factors such as personality traits, peer influence, and digital media consumption to further refine understanding of how comic engagement evolves among young adults.

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- Acknowledgements:** The author would like to express sincere gratitude to all individuals who contributed to the completion of this study. Special appreciation is extended to the undergraduate students who participated in the survey for their cooperation and valuable responses. The author also acknowledges the support of the Faculty of Business & Communication, Universiti Malaysia Perlis (UniMAP), as well as friends and family for their continuous encouragement and support throughout the research process. Finally, appreciation is extended to all scholars and researchers whose works were cited, as they provided the theoretical and empirical foundation for this study.
- Funding Statement:** This research did not receive any external funding from governmental, institutional, or private funding bodies. The study was conducted independently by the author as part of academic requirements, with all related expenses being self-funded. No financial support or sponsorship was provided for the design, data collection, analysis, interpretation, or preparation of this manuscript.
- Conflict of Interest Statement:** The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this study. The research was conducted in an objective and independent manner, and no financial, personal, or professional relationships have influenced the design, analysis, interpretation of data, or presentation of the findings.
- Ethics Statement:** This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical research guidelines. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and all respondents provided informed consent prior to data collection. The confidentiality and anonymity of participants were strictly maintained throughout the research process, with all data being used solely for academic purposes. No personal identifiers were collected, and participants were assured that their responses would not be disclosed individually or used for any purposes beyond this study.
- Author Contribution Statement:** The author is solely responsible for all aspects of this study, including the conceptualisation of the research, design of the methodology, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of findings, and the writing and revision of the manuscript. No other authors were involved in any stage of the research process.
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