

Understanding Teenage BIPOC Readers of Manga: Why do BIPOC Teens Enjoy Japanese Visual Storytelling?

The Queens College Graduate School of Library and Information Studies in partnership with [Manga in Libraries](#) request \$316,053, from the Institute of Museum and Library Services Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program for an applied research project to develop training for the library workforce to support individuals of diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds (IMLS Goal 1, Objective 1.2, LB21 Goal 1 Objective 1.3). The team will 1) conduct focus groups with teen readers of manga (Japanese comics) who identify as Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) to, 2) develop a series of professional development workshops and online resources for school librarians, public librarians, and preservice librarians to meet the needs of BIPOC youth.

Project Justification: Manga represents 76.1% of all comic and graphic novels sales in the United States where manga sales increased 171% from 2020 to 2021 (*NPD BookScan, 2022*). Manga narratives often represent the lived personal experiences of teens and allows them to identify possible solutions for overcoming obstacles and becoming self-empowered (Rudes, 2023). Through manga, teens can learn social-emotional competencies, how to understand and reflect on their lives and the lives of others. Developmental research indicates that effective mastery of social-emotional competencies is associated with greater well-being and better school performance whereas the failure to achieve competence in these areas can lead to a variety of personal, social, and academic difficulties (Eisenberg, 2006; Guerra & Bradshaw, 2008; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Weissberg & Greenberg, 1998). Are BIPOC teens developing social-emotional competencies by reading manga?

The project builds on the PI's prior study "It's not for us, it's for THEM": Mexican-American Experiences with Their School Library (Sanchez, 2019). In the study, Mexican-American youth stated the books they were interested in were not available in their school library and they spent most of their reading time in the manga section at Barnes & Noble. The students said that manga are not "real books" or "real reading" because their libraries do not have manga in their stacks. This demonstrated a needs gap where BIPOC teens are reading manga and school librarians are unfamiliar with or do not see value in the popular graphic format.

This finding led to a second study conducted in Queens, NY in June 2022 of BIPOC teens who read manga. During the focus groups the BIPOC teens said they appreciate the variety of stories that are "slice of life", or everyday type situations described in manga such as *Komi Can't Communicate* that tells the story of a girl with anxiety and her daily challenges of accomplishing ordinary tasks such as buying coffee from a barista. They also mentioned a manga titled *Beastars* where a sensitive wolf is struggling with societies expectation of him to be a violent predator, the BIPOC teens interpreted this as the duality of being a BIPOC teen in a "white world". The teens said they do not like YA novels targeting "urban youth" that focus on trauma such as a family member being killed or going to prison. One student said, "I just want real books about real things, I do not need to be retraumatized when I read". These insights are direct from BIPOC readers who felt comfortable sharing their thoughts with a BIPOC researcher. This LB21 project proposes to expand the study to gather a national data set of BIPOC teens who read manga.

Research Questions: This applied research project is at the intersection of two LIS issues; the need to provide services to BIPOC teens who have been historically underserved and the need to address the knowledge gap of librarians who are undertrained/unfamiliar with manga, the fastest growing print media format in the United States. Agosto (2019), in her article about the future of youth information practices noted the need for youth-centered research from the perspectives of youths themselves. She further states that the need for this work to be conducted by researchers of similar race and class for richer and more authentic data. This project does exactly that, by having a BIPOC researcher conducting focus groups with BIPOC teens about the books they read.

The following research questions are based on a set of two focus groups conducted with twenty-four BIPOC teen readers of manga in June of 2022. These questions are directly related to the affinities (categories) that emerged from the theoretical coding of the focus groups using grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006).

- Which series of manga are BIPOC teens reading, how are they accessing manga (school library, public library, bookstores, illegal download) and in what formats are they reading (eBook or print)?
- What are the visual/textual characteristics of manga, Japanese visual storytelling, that motivate BIPOC teens to read?
- Is manga supporting and/or reinforcing social-emotional development with BIPOC teen readers?

Project Work Plan: This applied research project uses the constructivist method of grounded theory as described by Charmaz (2006). This is the appropriate method for this project because BIPOC teens have been understudied as a population and are underrepresented in the literature of Library and Information Science. While research has been done on teens and comics, these prior studies are potentially incomplete as the data used to derive the results rarely, if ever,

included BIPOC teens. Focus groups will be the primary method of data collection with interviews used to clarify and triangulate data. Radford and Connaway (2021) explained that focus groups are especially effective with hard-to-reach, underserved, or underrepresented groups.

We are proposing a three-year project timeline that allows for continuous opportunities to offer training and professional development to school, public, and preservice librarians. Training will be offered at regional and national conferences and at select MLIS programs with youth librarianship and school media programs. The PI has already received IRB approval and collected preliminary data so the team will be ready to begin research immediately.

Part 1. – Data Collection and Initial Analysis (August 2023 – August 2024): The PI and project manager will conduct focus groups in seven areas throughout the United States with large populations of BIPOC youth. The seven places are Chicago, Atlanta, Memphis, San Diego, Los Angeles, the Texas Rio Grande Valley, and New Orleans. These sites have been selected because they contain large populations of BIPOC teens and represent several distinct areas of the country. Two focus groups will be held at each site with twelve participants, twenty-four teens per site. The focus groups will be transcribed by Rev transcription then coded using the constant comparative technique by the research team to find consistencies and differences with the focus groups, with the aim of continually refining concepts and theoretically relevant categories. **Part 2. – Data Refinement and Workshop Development (August 2024 - August 2025):** The project team will develop workshops and presentations to share the knowledge gained from the fourteen focus groups conducted with BIPOC teens across the nation. These “in our voices” workshops and presentations will be provided at national and regional conferences, and at MLIS programs for preservice librarians. Interviews with select focus group participants will also be conducted during this time to triangulate the themes derived from the data. **Part 3 –Development and Launch of Online Resources (August 2025 - Aug 2026):** The project team will collaborate with a media development company to create high-quality videos, podcast, and slideshows for school librarians, teen librarians, and preservice librarians focused on serving BIPOC youth through manga or other relevant themes that arise from the data set.

Advisory Board: The [Advisory Board](#) includes three categories of experts; school and teen librarians with manga expertise, LIS faculty with expertise in teens and BIPOC youth, and leadership from YALSA, AASL, and the ALA Graphic Novel & Comics Round Table who have agreed to assist us with dissemination of our findings into appropriate conference sessions, workshops, or webinars in their organizations.

Diversity Plan: Diversity and inclusion are at the core of every aspect of this research project. The research team is composed entirely of BIPOC researchers, and the advisory board is 50% BIPOC. The PI is Latinx and the two research assistants are Jarime Chaco a native Hawaiian who studies Pacific Islander youth and Isabella Lopez who is Latinx and studies Spanish speaking youth in the US borderlands. Both are planning to enter doctoral programs in information science in the coming years and will leverage this project to build their research portfolios (Program Goal 1, objective 1.1). The research sites have been chosen to represent both urban and rural areas with high density of BIPOC teens. The Texas Rio Grande Valley is especially underrepresented in LIS literature. The focus groups will open dialogue with BIPOC youth and will identify challenges and opportunities in LIS from their own voices.

Results and Impact: This project has two goals 1) identify and find patterns in the manga series teens are reading, document the visual/textual literacy of BIPOC teens, and compare the data with earlier findings for a connection between social-emotional learning and reading manga, 2) the delivery of twelve workshops and online resources “in their own voices” to school librarians, public librarians, and preservice librarians about how they can support BIPOC youth.

Budget: The proposed budget includes travel, lodging, transportation, and meals for the PI and project manager to seven cities to conduct focus groups (\$21,000), research incentives for participants (\$10,080), research assistants (\$16,800) transcription of focus groups and interviews (\$4,200), Nvivo license for four (\$3,800), advisory board (\$9,000), web development (\$7,000), video and graphic design (\$8,000), travel to conduct workshops (\$18,000), materials for workshops (\$5,000), subaward to [Manga in Libraries](#) for co-facilitating focus groups and workshops and serving as project manager (\$60,000), two months summer salary and fringe for PI (\$95,178), indirect cost at 26% (\$57,995).

PI: Dr. Joe Sanchez is an Associate Professor in the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at Queens College. His research focuses on visual literacies in virtual worlds and underrepresented youth in high schools. He is a cofounder of the iSchool Inclusion Institute (i3), an undergraduate research program that prepares underrepresented students for graduate study in the information sciences. In his current IMLS grant he studies how underrepresented minority students develop a sense of community and belonging within LIS recruitment programs (RE-14-19-0054-19).

Project Manager: [Jillian Rudes](#) is the founder of Manga in Libraries, a certified school librarian, and the Japanese Culture & Manga Cooperative Collection Development librarian for the New York City Department of Education.