

The Globalization of Comic-Con and the Sacralization of Popular Culture

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Abstract

In 1970, the Golden State Comic-Con was held in San Diego, California, with about 300 people in attendance. At the time, it was a relatively small convention of writers, artists and enthusiasts of comic books as well as science fiction and fantasy. Today, Comic-Con International: San Diego (as it is now called) is attended by over 130,000 people every July and is widely known as the premiere convention for fans celebrating comics and related popular arts. This chapter seeks to explore why Comic-Con has become such a popular event, particularly for fans, and why it has globalized in recent years. The chapter proposes a Durkheimian hypothesis: Comic-Con is a sacred ritual for devout fans, and it has globalized because key aspects of this event (e.g., the superhero) represent mythical archetypes that transcend national boundaries.

Keywords

Comic-con; Fandom; Superheroes; Popular culture; Durkheim; Leisure

Introduction

In 1970, the Golden State Comic-Con was held in San Diego, California, with about 300 people in attendance. At the time, it was a small convention of writers, artists and enthusiasts of comic books as well as science fiction and fantasy. Hence, the word ‘comic-con’ is an abbreviation for ‘comic convention’. A comic, of course, is a story told through a sequence of drawings in boxes and tends to appear in newspapers (i.e., a comic strip) or in comic books (New Oxford American Dictionary 2017).

While the precise origins of comics are the subject of ongoing debate, in the United States they are strongly linked to short story and pulp fiction narratives that were popularized in American magazines in the early twentieth century, though other countries such as Japan, France and Belgium have unique traditions as well (Bramlett et al. 2017; Duncan et al. 2015, Chap. 5). Newspaper or comic ‘strips’ are shorter, graphical narratives that also became popular around the same time and appeared as color supplements once a week (usually on Sundays) or as daily, black-and-white strips (or single tiers) (Lefevre 2017). In the late 1930s and early ‘40s, illustrated comic books in the United States began to feature ‘superhero’ characters such as Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman; the genre was an instant success. It is this form of illustration—superhero-based comic books—that the word ‘comic’ tends to be associated with today. And while ‘conventions’ exist for all types of occupations and special interests, those that feature elements of popular

culture, such as comic books, have become immensely popular expressions of leisure interest and fan devotion.

Today, the San Diego Comic-Con (SDCC) is attended by over 130,000 people every July and is widely known as the premiere convention for fans celebrating comic-related art forms. Indeed, the comic-con ‘model’ popularized in San Diego has become a global cultural phenomenon, spawning similar events across America and around the world. These events and their associated activities have generated an intensely devoted following (Spurlock 2012). This chapter seeks to explore why comic-cons have become such popular events, particularly for fans, and why they have globalized in recent years. To this end, I begin by tracing the history and expansion of San Diego Comic-Con, as well as the development of particular activities that constitute the comic-con model. Second, I describe how this model has spread around the world, leading to the creation of new comic-cons in Europe, North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, Asia, Australia and South America. Third, I consider several prominent theories related to the globalization of popular culture—cultural imperialism, neo-Marxism and functionalism/contagion—as potential explanations for this phenomenon. Finally, after briefly critiquing these theories, I offer a different explanation that borrows from the sociology of religion to argue (a) that comic-cons have successfully globalized because key aspects of comic culture (e.g., superhero stories) embody mythical archetypes that transcend national boundaries, and (b) that comic-cons are important rituals for devoted fans that embody elements of the sacred.

The Phenomenon of Comic-Con

Though it is neither the first nor the largest comic convention, the San Diego Comic-Con is arguably the most famous and has become a model for how to organize similar events around the world. For the record, other ‘fan’ conventions existed before the original SDCC in 1970. Science fiction fan conventions, for example, began in the late 1930s and one of the largest—the World Science Fiction Convention, or ‘Worldcon’—dates back to 1939 (Comic-Con International 2009, p. 40). In addition, the one-day New York Comicon was held in the city in 1964, and the Detroit Triple Fan Fair, which featured fantasy literature, films and comic art, was organized in 1965. Nonetheless, the San Diego convention was the first on the West Coast of the United States and is now “the longest-running, continuously held comic convention” (Comic-Con International 2009, p. 41).ⁱ

Interestingly, the original SDCC was never exclusively about comics. Billed as “San Diego’s Golden State Comic-Con” in 1970, it was a relatively small event that took place in the basement of the U.S. Grant Hotel in downtown San Diego. The inaugural event charged an admission fee of \$5 (5 USD) at the door (or \$3.50 in advance) and was attended by roughly 300 fans and professionals who wanted to express their appreciation for and bring greater attention to comic books and comic art, as well as animation, science fiction and fantasy literature and related films (Comic-Con International 2009, p. 20; Comic-Con International n.d.). Thus, from the beginning, this convention was both a fan-based and a professional gathering that revolved around a particular range of interests including, but not limited to, comics.ⁱⁱ

This was reflected in the activities that took place at the inaugural SDCC, which have now become standard attractions at this event and others like it. In 1970 these included: a dealers’ room with comic books and memorabilia for sale, program rooms featuring discussion panels and celebrity guests, an art show with cartoon and comic art, a promotional booth for the official Marvel fan club (Marvelmania) and several fan-favorite film screenings (Comic-Con International 2009, p. 20). In the coming decades, other notable attractions would follow, further expanding the comic-con ‘model’ and contributing to the increasing

popularity of this convention. During the 1970s, SDCC added a masquerade (i.e., a costume and theatrical contest featuring life-like costumes and a short theatrical portrayal of particular characters), an award recognizing the professional achievements of special guests, Japanese animation ('anime') screenings, and advanced promotion for upcoming films, such as the original Star Wars (Comic-Con International 2009, pp. 23–24).

In the 1980s, other notable attractions were added, such as 'Artists' Alley', where comic book artists could sign autographs and sell their works, a dedicated room for games and gaming, and additional professional awards. Japanese anime and comic (or manga) artists began to consistently attend SDCC during this decade as well (Comic-Con International 2009, pp. 60–63). During the 1990s, the practice of 'cosplay' (short for 'costumed play') became a more widespread and routinized activity, following the lead of manga fans who would faithfully recreate and wear their favorite characters' costumes.

Hollywood movies and television shows also developed a more consistent presence during this decade, now sending famous actors and directors in addition to studio executives (Comic-Con International 2009, pp. 96–100). SDCC even became a hub for finding jobs, with official portfolio review sessions for aspiring comic artists as well as those seeking employment in movies and animation, or video- and role-playing games (Comic-Con International 2009, p. 46; see also, Spurlock 2012).

By the end of the 2000s, the size and scope of SDCC began to reach the physical limits of its permanent home at the San Diego Convention Center. Today, the Exhibit Hall (formerly the dealer's room) takes up nearly 43,000 square meters and includes comic and art book publishers, manga and anime producers, toy companies, video game and role-playing game dealers, movie and television studios, movie memorabilia and jewelry and apparel retailers (Comic-Con International 2009, p. 45). Hollywood also has a massive presence at SDCC, especially for comic-, sci-fi- and fantasy-oriented movies and television shows. Fans wait in line all day to get into the famous Hall H, which hosts the most popular Hollywood panels and promotional events, and seats 6500 people (see Spurlock 2012). Gaming companies also have a major presence. Indeed, some attendees come to SDCC solely for this aspect, where they can participate in gaming tournaments as well as live-action role-playing (LARP) experiences (Comic-Con International 2009, p. 45). Not surprisingly, media coverage in mainstream U.S. newspapers, magazines, and television has followed suit (Comic-Con International 2009, pp. 152–56). Over the decades, increases in attendance also highlight the skyrocketing popularity of this event. The first convention in 1970 drew 300 people; in 1989, it drew 11,000 people; in 1999, it drew 48,000 people; and by 2008 the entire four-day event sold out weeks in advance and drew over 125,000 people (Comic-Con International 2009).

Though SDCC has grown and expanded beyond the world of comic books per se, they are still a foundational component of this event. This is reinforced by the organization's mission statement, which reads: "San Diego Comic-Con International is a nonprofit educational corporation dedicated to creating awareness of, and appreciation for, comics and related popular art forms, primarily through the presentation of conventions and events that celebrate the historic and ongoing contribution of comics to art and culture" (Comic-Con International n.d.). As such, this remains a central theme as comic-cons have spread worldwide.

The Globalization of Comic-Con

To some degree, SDCC has always had a global presence. From the beginning, international artists and writers came to participate in this event—Filipino artists in the 1970s, Japanese anime and manga creators in the 1980s, European artists and writers (especially British) in the 1980s and 1990s, as well as press

representatives from around the world who come to San Diego every July (Comic-Con International 2009, pp. 106–107). But the original comic-con model itself—a multi-day convention featuring the participation of fans, vendors, celebrities and industry professionals in various programs and activities about comic-related popular art forms—has become an immensely popular phenomenon and spawned many imitators across the United States and around the world. Today, there are roughly 40 comic-cons in major cities across the United States: San Jose, Portland and Seattle on the West Coast; Boston, New York, Baltimore and Atlanta on the East Coast; and many others in between, including Chicago, Nashville, Dallas and Salt Lake City. Worldwide, there are roughly 50 more comic-cons across six continents, from Europe to Africa, South America to North America, as well as Asia, the Middle East, Australia and New Zealand (Wikipedia n.d.).

Not surprisingly, Europe has a growing number of comic-cons modeled after SDCC. However, not all comic conventions emphasize the pop-cultural aspects (i.e., movies, television, games) common to the San Diego model; some are dedicated exclusively to the professional art of comics. For example, the Komikazen International Reality Comics Festival in Ravenna, Italy, celebrates non-fiction and ‘reality-based’ comics as a politically and socially conscious art form (Komikazen International Reality Comics Festival 2015). The Angoulême International Comics Festival in France was founded by the French Ministry of Culture in 1974 and is considered to be one of the most prestigious awards ceremonies in the comic book industry, including awards for local student artists and creators with disabilities (Angoulême International Comics Festival 2017; Schofield 2008; Shiach 2016). And, the Caption Comics Festival in England, which was discontinued in 2015, specialized only in ‘small press’ and ‘independent’ comic creators (Caption Comics Festival 2015).

Nonetheless, there are U.S.-style comic-cons across the European continent. The United Kingdom, for example, is home to a large number of them, such as the London Super Comic Con, Edinburgh Comic Con and Wales Comic Con. Many appear to be centrally organized by event-management companies. For example, Showmasters hosts “Film & Comic Con” events in London, Sheffield, Glasgow, Bournemouth, Cardiff and Exeter (Showmasters 2016). Likewise, MCM Central hosts comic-cons in Midlands, Liverpool, Birmingham, Northern Ireland, London, Manchester, Ireland and Scotland, as well as Belgium and Hanover (MCM Central 2017a). Interestingly, MCM began as a memorabilia collectors’ show in 2001, but its organizers made a deliberate effort to alter it a few years later. “In 2005, we took the first steps that would transform it from a collectors’ and autograph event into a US- style comic con, with the addition of dedicated comics, anime and videogame areas plus film and TV content.” (MCM Central 2017b) A similar approach has taken root in Australia and New Zealand. The Supanova Comic Con & Gaming Expo organizes events in Melbourne, Sydney, Perth, Brisbane, Adelaide and Gold Coast, while the Armageddon Expo describes itself as “THE New Zealand sci-fi, gaming, anime and comic family entertainment event” and hosts events in Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch, Dunedin and Tauranga (Armageddon Expo 2017). The Oz Comic Con, on the other hand, is part of a global conglomerate of conventions and expositions under the management of ReedPOP, which oversees comic-cons in cities around the world, including the United States (New York, Chicago and Seattle), Europe (Paris and Vienna) and Australia (Melbourne, Sydney, Perth, Brisbane and Adelaide), as well as other parts of the world (mentioned below) (ReedPOP 2017).

Italy hosts several prominent events in Rome, Mantua and Ravenna, as well as the largest comic festival in Europe—Lucca Comics & Games—with nearly 500,000 visitors annually (Lucca Comics & Games 2017). In Finland, the Helsinki Comics Festival claims to be the largest comics event in Northern Europe, dating back to 1979 (Helsinki Comics Festival 2017), while the International Festival of Comics and Games in Lodz, Poland, claims to be the biggest comics event in Central- Eastern Europe, drawing nearly 20,000

people in 2016 (International Festival of Comics and Games in Lodz 2017). In Bucharest, Romania, attendance at the East European Comic Con more than doubled from its first annual event in 2013 (9400 attendees) to its second in 2014 (22,000) (Davies 2014). Interestingly, while they proudly express their connection to SDCC, organizers also proclaim the event's potential as an important tourist attraction for the country of Romania, overall:

East European Comic Con (EECC) is an event based on pop culture...[aiming] to bring together all those who love comic books, movies, TV series, Sci-Fi and fantasy, Japanese culture, anime, manga, board games, trading card games and last but not least, technology. The idea for this convention came from the famous Comic Con San Diego International. East European Comic Con is one of the most important events of its kind in Europe and the most important one in Eastern Europe...EECC intends to become one of the most important pop culture based events in the world. As it addresses geeks from all over the world, EECC will play a key role in increasing the number of tourists that visit Romania. (East European Comic Con 2017)

As discussed below, this kind of acknowledgment may lead some to claim that the globalization of Comic-Con is yet another form of Americanization or cultural imperialism, but some attendees at the first "Comic Con Russia", in Moscow in 2014, explicitly disagreed, noting the universality of this culture. "'I've wanted to come for years,' says 31-year-old Elena Formina. 'There have always been geeks and fans here, it's just now they call it Comic-Con. American, Russian—all fans are the same. They love their heroes. It's about sharing that love.'" (quoted in The Guardian 2014). Said 23-year-old Dmitri Makyorov, "'A lot of the films may be American, but it's an international culture and it is becoming more and more global.'" (quoted in The Guardian 2014).

Recently, comic-cons have proliferated rapidly throughout Asia and the Middle East. IGN Entertainment, an Internet media company that caters to fans of comic con-related activities, has managed multiple conventions on the Arabian Peninsula, including events in Abu Dhabi, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (IGN Convention 2017). Comic Con India (under the management of ReedPOP) had its inaugural event in Delhi in 2011 and has now expanded to four other cities—Mumbai, Bengaluru, Hyderabad and Pune. Once again, their self-description is noteworthy for declaring the importance of this particular form of pop culture fandom.

From inception, we have steadily expanded the scope of our events by involving the various industries that can help expand popular culture. We plan to continue reaching many more communities of dedicated fans as well as bringing our unique events to many more cities in India. We provide a platform for brands to not only be part of our mission to expand popular culture, but to also engage with passionate fans across the country. We are dedicated to creating unique events and giving our fans, exhibitors and partners a platform to celebrate their undying love and passion for comics and pop culture. (Comic Con India 2017)

Likewise, AsiaPop Comicon in Manila, Philippines, also describes their event as organized around "the various genres of geek and pop culture". However, they have also used the comic-con model as a foundation to expand into a multi-genre event with even broader appeal by incorporating "lifestyle elements of beauty, sports and technology to create an all-inclusive experience for fans, families and visitors of all ages and interests" (AsiaPOP Comicon 2017). Meanwhile, Comic Fiesta in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, claims to be "one of Southeast Asia's largest and longest-running animation, comics and games (ACG) events" (Comic Fiesta 2016). In addition, ReedPop now manages events in Seoul, Beijing, Shanghai, Jakarta, and Singapore (ReedPOP 2017). However, the largest comic convention in Asia is Comiket in Tokyo, Japan. Launched in 1975, it is now held twice a year to accommodate over 500,000 attendees, which also makes it the largest comic convention in the world. From the beginning, Comiket has celebrated its own domestic history of

manga, anime and cosplay, and therefore is not directly connected to SDCC per se. The event revolves around the sale (largely non-profit) of doujinshi, which are self-published comics focusing on manga, anime, video games and other related genres (Comic Market Committee 2014).

Finally, Africa and South America also boast several comic-cons. The International Festival of Comics in Algiers, Algeria, was established by the Ministry of Culture in 2008 and includes activities with local schools and hospitals, much like the artsy Angoulême Festival in France (Adair 2015; Algerie Presse Service 2016). However, like other comic-cons, their program also includes exhibitions, conference panel discussions, autographs, film screenings and an awards ceremony for the best African comic artists (Marasligil 2011). Brazil has two comic festivals—Comic Con Experience (CCXP) in São Paulo, and Festival Internacional de Quadrinhos in Belo Horizonte. Amazingly, even though the Belo Horizonte event focuses solely on comics, rather than games, television or Hollywood movies, it boasts a higher attendance than the San Diego Comic-Con, drawing 148,000 attendees at the 2011 event (Johnston 2011). And to the north, Comic Con Ecuador hosted its inaugural event in Guayaquil in 2016, with plans for a three-day event in 2017 (Comic Con Ecuador 2017; Guayaquil es mi Destino 2015).

Explaining Comic-Con

Why has Comic-Con become such a popular, global phenomenon? While there are many different ways to express a passionate interest in the realm of popular culture and entertainment (e.g., as a music, sports or celebrity fan), the growing passion in recent years for this particular form (i.e., comic-related fandom) is worthy of additional investigation. To address this question, I will briefly explore several mainstream approaches to the globalization of popular culture as potential explanations: cultural imperialism, neo-Marxism and functionalism/contagion. Next, after a brief critique of these approaches I will offer an alternative explanation that incorporates insights from the sociology of religion and related approaches that emphasize the mythological aspects of comic culture.

Mainstream Approaches

One of the most popular critiques of globalization is the cultural imperialism thesis (Mattelart 1979; Schiller 1976; Smith 1980; for a critique, see Tomlinson 1991). Proponents of this thesis argue that after World War II the West could no longer impose its way of life over the rest of the world via military imperialism and colonization; these forms of domination were effectively outlawed under the United Nations system that enshrined the virtue of national self-determination in global doctrines such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples (1960). Instead, Western nations and corporations, particularly those from the United States, have used their monopoly over the media and the diffusion of popular culture to impose their values, preferences and other ways of life around the world. The result is a ‘Westernization’ or ‘Americanization’ of the globe. Today, despite the popularity of regional variations such as Bollywood movies from India, telenovas from Latin America and Korean pop music (‘K-pop’), less developed countries struggle to push back against the onslaught of English-speaking media and information and the cultural values they carry (Thussu 2007). Thus, from this perspective, one could argue that the globalization of Comic-Con, especially with its celebration of superheroes, is part of this process; the United States exalts its power and superiority via nationalistic heroes like Captain America and Superman (Dittmer 2013), promotes core virtues of capitalist wealth and technological advancement via Batman and Iron Man (White 2010), and depicts ideals of feminine beauty via Wonder Woman (Aizenman 2016). What is more, the increasing popularity of video

games at Comic-Con could be seen as a way to promote American preferences for games that are hyper-competitive, individualistic and violent.

Related to the cultural imperialism thesis are neo-Marxist approaches to globalization that emphasize the economic domination of Western countries, multinational corporations and other capitalist entrepreneurs who continually seek out market advantages and profit opportunities around the world, especially in developing countries (McMichael 1996; Sklair 2001; Wallerstein 1979). In the process, a culture of consumerism has spread worldwide, where individuals are transformed into rabid consumers constantly bombarded by capitalist marketing and promotion strategies (Jameson 1991; Klein 2002; Sklair 2001, Chap. 8). From this perspective, the globalization of Comic-Con could represent a new market opportunity driven by management companies like ReedPop and IGN that have found new markets for the promotion of American comic culture in Asia, Australia and the Arabian Peninsula. Indeed, the event itself could be seen as a commodity of sorts that is marketed in big cities around the world, generating profit from admission fees for the organizers, but also for vendors and industry professionals who profit from the sale of merchandise, memorabilia and autograph signings. In addition, Hollywood has for decades used SDCC as a platform to promote, and thereby profit from, its latest comic-related movies and television shows (Comic-Con International 2009, pp. 96–100).

Finally, functionalist theories tend to view modern societies as complex organisms that naturally evolve and develop differentiated institutions in response to changing environmental conditions (i.e., different institutions serve different functions to maintain social stability) (see Coser 1956; Luhmann 1982; Parsons 1971). Thus, from a functionalist point of view, the creation of new comic conventions around the world could be seen as a natural response to the rapid diffusion and popularity of comic culture, especially via new technologies like the Internet that enable ready access to comic-related movies, television, books and video games. Indeed, if Western societies have created comic conventions in response to popular enthusiasm for comic culture, it is natural that the same thing would happen in other modernizing societies that have generated similar enthusiasm. Data by the International Telecommunications Union (2016), for example, support the timing of this relationship. According to their latest global and regional statistics, the percentage of individuals using the Internet worldwide has increased dramatically, from 8% in 2001 to 47% in 2016. And while the average for developing countries in 2016 (40%) was slightly lower than the global average, the percentage of individuals using the Internet in Arab states (42%) and in Asia and the Pacific (42%) was slightly higher, precisely where the most comic-cons are now appearing. Indeed, the increase in the total number of individuals using the Internet in developing countries compared to developed countries is also worth noting in this regard. In 2008, the comparison was very close: 808,000 individuals were using the Internet in developing countries vs. 753,000 in developed countries. However, by 2016, the gap widened significantly: 2,465,000,000 individuals were using the Internet in developing countries vs. 1,023,000,000 in developed countries. Using a similar logic, some scholars in media studies explain how trends in popular culture spread through a process of mass contagion, where new fans are created as they are exposed to or ‘infected’ by other fans and the cultural products they carry (see Duffett 2013, Chap. 5 for a summary). Thus, from this perspective the globalizing process is similarly automatic and natural.

A Brief Critique

While these approaches offer some well-known and widely accepted observations about globalization that are potentially applicable here, they have similar flaws that raise serious issues. Regarding the cultural imperialism thesis, Tomlinson (1991) has insightfully exposed several fundamental problems. To begin, this thesis assumes there is, in fact, an imperialist message present in a cultural product, such as a song, movie or television program. Second, it assumes this imperialist message is received and understood by the

target audience. Third, it assumes different members of the target audience understand this imperialist message in an identical way, otherwise it would not be an effective weapon. Thus, cultural imperialism arguments assume a direct intent to construct, embed and deliver an imperialist message, which is more or less successful at significantly influencing (perhaps brainwashing) other people in different parts of the world. Likewise, neo-Marxist and functionalist/contagion approaches assume whatever is heavily marketed or widely trending will be automatically or naturally adopted by others. Indeed, as Tomlinson and others have long argued (see Ang 1985, for example), audiences are not ‘blank slates’, mindlessly consuming cultural products. Audiences have different cultural preferences and apply different perspectives to the interpretation of popular culture. Thus, their responses can be varied and complex, not only from country to country but from person to person. As the Russian convention-goers explain above, they are well aware that comic-related products (books, movies, television shows) are American, but the passion for comic-related culture is more universal—they (and others around the world) love comic culture for its own sake, not because Americans do or because they have been brainwashed to like it.

Thus, a central issue that these approaches have difficulty explaining is why comic culture is popular to begin with, beyond the fact that it originates from America or receives some form of capitalist marketing. Indeed, to further complicate the logic of cultural imperialism, one could ask why Americans themselves have become so passionate about comic culture, assuming that American audiences are not the target of American cultural imperialism. In addition, the logic of neo-Marxist and functionalist/contagion arguments has a glaring empirical problem—if every cultural product that is mass marketed is automatically consumed, or if every cultural trend that disseminates has the potential to naturally ‘infect’ others, we would all be consumers and fans of everything! Ultimately, in order for a particular product or genre of pop culture to have a passionate following, it needs to resonate and connect with an audience. This raises fundamental questions that mainstream approaches cannot adequately answer: why does comic culture, in particular, resonate and connect with so many people around the world; why do some fans react so fervently to it?

Insights from the Sociology of Religion

There have been numerous descriptions of comic culture, and similar genres, as a form of modern mythology (Kantor and Maslon 2013; Knowles 2007; Levitz 2010; Maslon and Kantor 2013; Morrison 2012; Reynolds 1994; Teampau 2015). Mary Henderson (1997), for example, explains the mythological aspects of the Star Wars movies and how they intentionally employ archetypes common to ancient myths of many kinds—good vs. evil, the hero’s journey, temptation and redemption, the importance of heroism, compassion, wisdom, etc. (see also, Wagner 2000). This is not to imply that ancient myths are all the same; they tell different stories that reflect different cultures and time periods. Nonetheless, in general thematic ways, they tend to dramatize common experiences that we all share as human beings (Campbell 1949); most of us, regardless of culture, valorize heroic acts, experience love, rely on mentors to guide us, and face trials and tribulations as we grow up and mature. As Cowen (2002) argues, the dominance and popularity of Hollywood movies around the world does not reflect a pure case of American cultural imperialism; this would not be a viable financial strategy:

For better or worse, Hollywood strives to present the universal to global audiences. As Hollywood markets its films to more non-English speakers, those films become more general. Action films are favored over movies with subtle dialogue. Comedy revolves around slapstick rather than verbal puns. The larger the audience, of course, the more universal the product or celebrity must be. ...Greater universality means that the movies are relevant to general features of the human condition. ...Critics allege that American culture is driving the world, but in reality the two are determined simultaneously, and by the same set of forces. (Cowen 2002, p. 93) And to be sure, the highest grossing movies worldwide over the past decade tend to

be those with clear archetypal elements and therefore broad appeal: action/adventure films, animated children's films and (of course) superhero films (Box Office Mojo 2017; The Numbers 2017).

Thus, one explanation for why comic culture has become so popular around the world is its tendency to be defined by characters and stories that are mythological and universal, yet also modern and entertaining. Indeed, as Henderson (1997) explains, the original Star Wars movies not only embodied mythical archetypes; they also reflected social issues and events that were part of popular consciousness at the time (e.g., the Space Age, the threat of nuclear weapons, our relationship to technology and machines), further bolstering their resonance. Famed comic book author, Grant Morrison, comes to a similar conclusion in his analysis of superheroes:

Batman, Spider-Man, X-Men, Green Lantern, Iron Man. Why have superheroes become so popular? Why now? On one level, it's simple: Someone somewhere, figured out that, like chimpanzees, superheroes make everything more entertaining. ...Superheroes can spice up any dish. But there's even more going on beneath the surface of our appetite for the antics of outlandishly dressed characters who will never let us down. ...In a secular, scientific rational culture lacking any convincing spiritual leadership, superhero stories speak loudly and boldly to our greatest fears, deepest longings, and highest aspirations. ...They're about as far from social realism as you can get, but the best superhero stories deal directly with mythic elements of human experience that we can all relate to, in ways that are imaginative, profound, funny, and provocative. (Morrison 2012, pp. xvi– xvii)

For devoted fans in particular, comic culture may be more than just a form of entertainment; it may be deeply meaningful. Here, Emile Durkheim's sociology of religion offers potential insight. One of the most enduring and controversial legacies of Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912) is how he conceptualized religion as revolving around beliefs and practices about 'the sacred' rather than 'gods' or 'the supernatural' specifically. The sacred, he explained, is set apart by society as something powerful, transcendent and holy, and is clearly distinguished from the mundane world of everyday affairs. The primary means of distinguishing and experiencing the sacred is through collective rituals, which are central to Durkheim's theory. This conception of religion obviously includes beliefs and practices about gods or the supernatural, which is the typical focus of sociologists of religion. But it is not exclusive to them—other beliefs and practices can be sacred. While his theory challenges us to expand our understanding of what is traditionally considered 'religious', it represents an underexplored legacy that has enjoyed only limited application to non-religious or secular activities (see Bailey 1997; Bellah 1967; Boli et al. 2003; Ellul 1975; Luckmann 1967), despite pleas in the sociology of religion literature to further explore the varieties of sacred experiences today (Demerath 1999).

I hypothesize that for fans who are noticeably passionate and devoted, comic culture may involve beliefs and practices that are sacred. To be fair, some scholars have described fandoms as actual religions (Bickerdike 2016; Jindra 1994; Melero 2010; Porter 2009; see also, Lyden 2003). This has generated some controversy, as critics claim that this comparison is empirically inaccurate and portrays fans as fanatics (Duffett 2013; McCloud 2003). Indeed, fandoms are not religions in the traditional sense, à la world religions that have developed a wide-ranging theological belief system and a congregation with longstanding social and cultural bonds over many centuries. Nonetheless, in a more modest and general sense, comic fandom and religious devotion may share some fundamental similarities as sacred, ritualistic experiences. While not a 'god' in the traditional sense, the superhero represents idealized human virtues and aspirations that fans may find meaningful, inspiring and worth celebrating. As a result, while not a

‘church’ in the traditional sense, comic-cons may serve as a powerful ritual by which to experience and celebrate sacred aspects of comic culture and to bond with like-minded fans. What is more, key features of the comic-con model could be compared to ceremonial rites whose performance is crucial in making the ritual proper and complete: a proper comic-con should have cosplay or a masquerade where fans can enact the look and mannerisms of their favorite characters; it should have celebrity autographs and panel discussions where fans can physically see, hear and talk to the creators and purveyors of comic culture; it should have merchandise for sale so fans can purchase and collect particular objects or totems of their devotion; and, at larger events like SDCC, a comic-con will have lengthy periods of ‘queuing’ where fans stake-out their place in line (waiting for autographs, panels, etc.) and commune with fellow fans in various ways (Bolling and Smith 2014; Spurlock 2012). Ultimately, to suggest that fan experiences are powerful, transcendent or holy is not to imply that they are fanatical or irrational. My approach stems from sociological curiosity first and foremost and does not seek to pass judgment upon fans, either positively or negatively.

Conclusion

Popular culture occupies a prominent place in modern life. With increasing access to technology around the world, many people can routinely engage with popular television shows, movies, music, video games, books, and the internet in their leisure time. No doubt, this has become an easily accessible means of diversion, relaxation, and entertainment for many. But for others, such as devoted ‘fans’, popular culture may represent something more meaningful, perhaps even sacred. In this chapter, I have explored the growing popularity of comic book conventions worldwide, specifically those based on the famous San Diego Comic-Con in California that began in 1970. I have also sought to explain why this particular form of popular culture—comic book (or comic) culture—has successfully globalized and developed such a passionate following. Common theories about the globalization of popular culture such as cultural imperialism, neo-Marxism and functionalism offer overly simplistic mechanisms that cannot adequately explain the particular appeal of comic culture over any other cultural genre that is mass marketed, currently fashionable or comes from America.

Borrowing insights from the sociology of religion and other comic book scholars, I contend that comic culture has globalized because it embodies aspects of mythology that are universally relatable. Comic book heroes and adventures tell entertaining stories of heroism, sacrifice, compassion, coming of age and so on that appeal to all cultures because every human being experiences these things, albeit in less dramatic and entertaining ways. I also suggest that comic fandom may involve beliefs that are sacred to devoted fans, and that comic-cons represent a powerful ritual for celebrating and experiencing sacred beliefs via common practices such as cosplay, panel discussions, autograph signings and merchandise collecting. Overall, there is little systematic information about different fan beliefs and practices. To further explore this, new research is needed to assess not only the presence (or absence) of sacred experiences within fan communities but also to examine how these experiences vary among individual fans; just as religious commitment and devotion vary from person to person, there are certainly variations of commitment and devotion among fans that make their experiences more or less sacred. Given the increasing proliferation of comic-cons around the world, this is an ideal environment to survey fan beliefs and practices and to learn about the potentially sacred role of comic culture in the everyday lives of fans.

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ⁱ Overall, there are other special interest conventions in the realm of popular culture and entertainment that may involve a model similar to SDCC and have equally large followings. For example, there are conventions dedicated to sports, board games and video games, Japanese pop culture, Star Wars, Star Trek and other genres. While these are worthy of social scientific study in their own right, I restrict my analysis in this chapter to those events that (a) identify as ‘comic’ conventions and (b) closely resemble the model of San Diego Comic-Con.

ⁱⁱ See the original SDCC logo from 1970 at <https://secure.comic-con.org/about>, which reflects these particular interests.