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The role of Fandom, Comic-Con and Films in soft-power diplomacy of the UAE: An exploratory study

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TITLE: THE ROLE OF FANDOM, COMIC-CON AND FILMS IN SOFT POWER DIPLOMACY OF THE UAE:AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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Abstract: This is an exploratory study of the symbiotic relationship of fandom, comic-con and the rising film culture in the UAE. Fan culture, a growing global phenomenon has flourished in the UAE's entertainment scene too. The UAE hosted the first Middle East Comic-con in 2012 attracting fans from across the Middle East. The manifold increase in participation in recent years testifies to the growth in fan population. Science-fiction and adventure films are the most popular film genres with UAE audiences. The UAE has also been the shooting location for many Hollywood movies in these genres. The interest in science-fiction and adventure films could explain the active participation of fans in Comic-con. The symbiotic relationship among Comic-con, sci-fi films and fandom is of benefit to the UAE both directly in terms of revenue and indirectly through soft-power.

Key words: Fandom, Comic-con, Science fiction, soft-power, revenue, United Arab Emirates

Introduction

Fandom is a growing phenomenon that is expanding beyond cultural and generational borders. If Star Trek fans belonged to the 1960s - the Trekkies are today joined by the Potterheads (fans of Harry Potter). Younger fans and their burgeoning numbers have attracted the attention of social media platforms which are helping to facilitate fan culture. Wikia has 700 volunteers reporting on games, movies and TV content and experiences for their Fandom hub (Mendes 2016). Tumblr has created Fandometrics to scientifically measure the popularity of TV shows, movies, celebrities etc. The data are compiled by charting the number of Tumblr users who are writing about the shows on their own blogs (McNally 2015). Fans have increasing monetary value both directly as they consume content and indirectly as they consume merchandise. "Most fans want to do more than just talk about their favorite show, film, or band; participating quickly develops into an amalgamation of consuming and producing: usually in the form of fan art, fan fiction, creation of their own costumes inspired by the film or TV show, role playing and a lot more (Cochran 2008, p. 240). These are displayed at events like Comic-con which have become fan hubs. Conservative societies in the Middle East and Asia are turning out to be hot spots for fan hubs. This is an exploratory study on the symbiotic relationship among fandom, Comic-con and films in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The current study is to be followed by a large scale mixed method study that will help confirm the preliminary findings.

Fandom defined

Fandom was first studied academically in the 1990's. Henry Jenkins' *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture* published in 1992 is a monumental foundational study which refers to fandom as a sub culture. Jenkins (1992, p.23) defined fans as "readers who appropriate popular texts and reread them in a fashion that serves different interests, as spectators who transform the experience of watching television into a rich and complex participatory culture". Audiences for any film or TV show are of two types - the passive audience who merely watch and the active audience who become fans in varying degrees. When an individual's passion and involvement in a particular media product is augmented so much so that it influences his life style the person could be called a fan. A fan is part of a fan culture, also known as fandom - a group of like-minded people congregated around the media product. Comic-cons have been providing a venue for fans to meet thereby nurturing fan culture for almost half a century.

Fandom studies

Though a young discipline, the corpus of fandom studies is growing and embraces diverse thoughts. Bacon-Smith's *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth* published in 1992 studied female fan culture. In 2000 she studied male fans in *Science Fiction Culture*. Jenkins also studied male fans in *Science Fiction Audience* (2005). Another theme pursued by scholars is that of fan communities and practices. Booth (2010), Hills (2002), Sandvoss (2005), and Staiger (2005) discussed the concept of fan community versus individual. Continuing the narrative of the individual fan Malcolm Gladwell coined the

term ‘stickiness factor’ in *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (2000). In 2006 Jenkins added to the debate with *Convergence Culture: Where New and Old media Collide* by introducing the individual as an important entity. Sandvoss’ *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption* (2005) also studies individual fans. Hellekson and Busse’s *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays* (2006) and Gray, Sandvoss and Herrington’s *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World* (2007) study the subject from an ITC perspective. Another important theme is how interests of producers do not always reflect the interests of consumers (the audience). Erik Qualman in *Socialnomics: How Social Media Transforms the Way We Live and Do Business* (2009), raises the issue. Regional studies include Hills (2002) on Japanese fans; Yasumoto (2014), Choi and Maliagkay (2014) on east Asia including Japan and Korea; Kaplan (2012), Zhang (2014), Kong (2014) on China; Chen (2003) on Taiwan; Woo and King (2013) on (Thailand); Martinez (2011) Punathambekar (2007) and Sharma (2013) on India; Velayuthan (2008) on Tamil, Osalle and Osalle (2006) on South India. Studies from the Arab region are necessary to explore the effects on and contributions from the Arab world.

Fandom in the UAE

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) with its enhanced buying power has been attracting the attention of marketers and merchandisers spawning a number of retail outlets selling fandom merchandise. Fan culture growth is also promoted by the UAE’s commitment to develop as a hub to produce and shoot Hollywood blockbuster films and host events centering on the entertainment industry. The UAE is currently being chosen to shoot cult movies like *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*.

In the year 2012, Dubai hosted its first ever Middle East Film and Comic Con (MEFCC) bringing comic con to the Middle East. MEFCC has grown more than 3 folds in the last 4 years beginning with a considerably small foot fall of just 15,000 in 2012 to a staggering 50,000 plus attendance in 2015 (Dwtc 2015). Comic con attracts almost all demographic segments of the country being the most popular avenue for both comic world fans as well as popular movie enthusiasts. In addition, the UAE hosts IGN Convention, Games Convention and special events such as Walking Dead Zombie walk held during Halloween.

The Growth of Comic-con

Comic-con is an educative cultural festival which brings together fans (mostly dressed as their favorite comic characters), actors, content producers and merchandisers in an exciting setting. A one day event started in 1970 attended by 100 people in San Diego, California has grown to host 130,000 fans in recent years. Shel Dorf, Ken Krueger, Mike Towry and Richard Alf introduced the world to the San-Diego Comic Con. Comic-Con International’s mission statement throws light on their raison de etre: “San Diego 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 2016).” The popular art forms represented include comic books, films, anime, games, science fiction and fantasy literature.

The Comic-con Sci-Fi connection

Since most of today’s big budget feature films fall under the sci-fi adventure and action genre, Comic-con becomes the prime venue for fans to interact with celebrities and merchandise. The observed trend in the last 2 decades of sci-fi movies is that they are all based on popular comic characters and stories such as The Avengers, The Transformers, Teenage Mutant Ninja

Turtles, The Guardians of the Galaxy and so on. The collaboration between acclaimed directors and huge production houses with organizations such as The Marvel Universe, DC Comics and Walt Disney has given birth to a new platform for the comic world. Comic enthusiasts are no longer reading about their favourite superhero but also watching them on 3D played by Hollywood's biggest names.

Soft power

Soft power is a term coined by Joseph Nye in his book *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (1990). He explains it as a nation's "ability to attract and co-opt rather than coerce, use force or give money as a means of persuasion." The currency of soft power is culture, political values, and foreign policies. Culture including food, arts and movies has been used to enhance the influence of countries. Though Arab countries have used hard power to solve their many political challenges some countries have been "working hard to counter the negative perceptions that blanket the region" especially Jordan and Dubai (Nejem 2016). Turkish soaps dubbed into Arabic have caused an influx of tourists to the country from the Arab world. Similarly shooting sites of films – mainly from Hollywood and Bollywood and the comic-con events are sure to act as soft power for the UAE. China's acceptance globally can be attributed to concerted efforts by its government to enhance cultural power through media including film. Development of massive studios and provision for co-productions are some of the efforts taken (Peng 2015).

Film industry in the UAE, MEFCC and Fandom

The UAE despite being a global leader in terms of facilitating arts, sports and the entertainment industry does not have a strong indigenous film industry. Dubai Media City has more than 1,800 companies engaged in the production of media content but they are often limited to TV shows and commercials. The Dubai and Abu Dhabi Film festivals have helped bring local talents to the limelight and boost interest in serious films.

The Abu Dhabi Film Commission (ADFC) offers a 30% cash rebate on film production expenditure for films shot in Abu Dhabi. Additional services offered include free scouting assistance, professional crew, first class studios and post-production facilities (ADFC 2016). The country is becoming a regular shooting location for high budget international feature films like Star Wars Episode 7, Fast and Furious 7, Deliver us From Evil and the upcoming War Machine featuring Brad Pitt. A study by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) in 2013 commissioned by ADFC "estimates that for every AED 1 invested in the production rebate program, AED 4.5 of GDP will be generated within the Emirate of Abu Dhabi. Because of this so called 'multiplier effect', PwC expects the total economic impact of the rebate program in 2014 to be AED 82 million" (twofour54 2013).

The Government of Dubai also offers financial incentives and since 2005 has seen the production of over 6,000 films, TV series, commercials and corporate videos. The impressive list includes Mission Impossible 4: Ghost Protocol, Syriana, Amazing Race and X Factor.

Both emirates have witnessed positive returns from shooting movies.

A non-monetary return that film shooting and Comic-con brings to the country is soft-power. Just like the Chinese government has used films extensively to change China's image (Kin 2013) pop-culture festivals like Comic-con and the canvass provided by the country to shoot films and the meticulously run film festivals have added to its image, popularity and reputation abroad. What hard power cannot bring is attracted by soft power.

The constant presence of acclaimed movie producers in the country and the annual film festivals and the interaction it affords gives exposure to local talents and fans to the world cinema industry. MEFCC's yearly growth will also be beneficial with increased

exposure of local artists to internationally acclaimed movie personalities.

The prolificacy of theatres in the UAE also nurtures fan culture. The table below shows the number of cinema theatres in the UAE in comparison with other countries in the Middle East in the year 2014.

Country	Iran	Israel	Kuwait	Lebanon	Qatar	UAE
Population (million)	78.0	8.0	4.0	4.5	2.2	9.3
Gross Box Office (million USD)	17.7	122.3	51.7	33.8	29.7	145.4
Admissions (million)	6.0	12.0	4.5	3.7	2.7	12.9
Screens	383	398	62	127	~	356
Digital screens	383	398	~	~	~	356

“~” – statistics not available

Table I
(Dubai Film Market, 2015)

It can be observed that majority of the highest grossing movies are all sci-fi or adventure movies that are featured at Comic-con events all over the world. Unlike other feature films, movies featured at Comic-con allows its viewers to interact with the actors, purchase collectibles, pose with their favourite superhero or be the superhero thanks to the cosplay culture encouraged by the comic con events. The below table contains the list of the highest grossing movies in the UAE until 2011.

Movie	UAE Box Office earnings (AED million)
Avatar	26.9
Transformers Dark of the Moon	14.8
Pirates of the Caribbean	13.6
2012	13.5
Fast Five	12.6
Kung Fu Panda	12.1
Titanic	11
Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2	10.24
Shrek Forever After	10.22
The Dark Knight	9.3

Table 2 (TimeOut Dubai, 2011)

Furious 7 broke box office records grossing the all-time highest opening weekend revenue in the UAE with 338,462 admissions and Dh13,759,766 at the box office (Long 2015). 'Star Wars: The Force Awakens' was shown in 144 screen across the UAE earning it AED10,281,456 in its first week (McGinley 2016). There has always been a huge market for sci-fi, action and adventure movies even before the MEFCC began. 60% of respondents (n=40) surveyed for this study responded that the genre of films they preferred to be made in the UAE was sci-fi films.

Max Landis, Hollywood screenwriter and host of MEFCC 2015 commented that Dubai is a futuristic city and that inspires futuristic movies to be shot in the UAE (Landis pers comm, 2015). Landis added that Dubai resembled the command centre from the comic series Power Rangers (Adams 2015). In June 2016, the UAE's first sci-fi feature film produced in the country - Aerials an alien-invasion film - was released in theatres. Its director S A Zaidi said: "There's such an appetite for sci-fi and horror films in this region – before we went on this project, I did heavy research into this genre within the GCC, and the hunger is there, it always has been – from huge events like Comic Con, to Sci-Fi fans, and here, it's always sci-fi and horror films topping the box office – and has been for years (Davey 2016)."

State of the art infrastructure and availability of modern day gizmos makes the UAE an international hub for innovation and futuristic investments. The transformation towards being a Smart Government and introduction of e-governance to benefit citizens also helps create a state of mind fertile enough to generate a pro-technology attitude.

The upcoming multi-theme park establishment, Dubai Parks and Resorts (DPR) plans to be the largest and the only facility of its kind to house multiple theme parks such as LEGOLAND, Motiongate, Bollywood Parks and Riverland. This clearly indicates that multinational production houses are keen to invest in the country. Although this is not a film studio, it does bring in elements of it and with cutting edge technology. DPR will be a world marvel situated right between Dubai and Abu Dhabi. Huge investments such as the DPR have been encouraged by the popularity of MEFCC. Today the UAE or Dubai to be specific is the Middle East hub for comic entertainment. Popular Marvel characters such as "Moon Knight" are in line for production here and the plots set in the desert gives all the more reason for film makers to opt for talents from the UAE.

Comic-con can positively impact fandom and the movie culture as well. From its earliest stages, Comic-con has dedicated much space and time to movies which have occupied a great share of the convention to the extent where audience were worried if movies would overpower the presence of comics. The tie ups with Avengers, Walking Dead and Lego ensure that there is greater integration. Segments within Comic-con such as the Artists Alley are a platform dedicated to new artists to showcase their illustrations and other works. Although they may not be able to make an appearance other than at the publisher's table, it still helps build a fan base and thus a lot of reputation and name required to build networks. The New York Comic-con for example dedicated a huge and more prominent hall for new artists to make more fans (Comics Alliance, 2015).

Findings/Conclusion

MEFCC, the local film industry and fandom have a symbiotic relationship in the UAE. MEFCC participation is growing every year drawing fans from all over the Middle East. It also aids in promoting the UAE as a location for sci-fi movies thereby opening doors for film related careers in the future. Local interest in sci-fi and adventure movies could facilitate shooting and production in the UAE. MEFCC has proved to be a platform for exposing local

talents to industry veterans thus filling the need for mentors. MEFCC also provides a platform to give local talents international exposure and also to offer their talents to world cinema. The symbiotic relationship between fandom, Comic-con and films is beneficial to the UAE as it boosts the film industry, adds to revenues and becomes a source of soft-power. Further research especially of a primary nature will throw more light on this relationship.

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