

**Do Mainstream Comics Still Exist?:**

*Searching for the Traditional Mainstream in Popular Contemporary Comics*

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## **ABSTRACT**

The comic book industry once possessed a clear dichotomy between a dominant mainstream and a subversive counterculture. However, with the advent of digital comics such as webcomics and webtoons, and the popularization of alternative comics, it is not entirely clear whether superhero comics still constitute the mainstream. This paper first utilizes pre-existing scholarship to theorize the concept of mainstream, identifying three key features that distinguish traditional mainstream and counterculture media: politically subversive stances, accessibility to large audiences, and perceived positioning in the broader cultural field. Then, the paper then performs a case study analysis of some of the most popular superhero comics, alternative comics, webcomics, and webtoons active in the year 2019. Using the three identified characteristics, this paper analyzes whether these comics clearly fit into traditional definitions of counterculture or mainstream. Finally, this paper concludes that traditional characteristics of both mainstream and counterculture are present in all of the comics explored in this research, with no comic falling neatly into either category. Thus, definitions of mainstream and counterculture must either be updated to account for a wider diversity of media or discarded as a relic of the past.

## INTRODUCTION

Since the 1960s, the American comic book industry has been almost completely monopolized by two companies: Marvel and DC. For decades, if one wanted to read anything *but* superheroes, they would have to seek out the politically-radical, sexually explicit “underground comix,” housed in hippie weed shops. Undisputably, superhero comics had a chokehold on the mainstream comic book industry. Any other comics were by default, relegated to the fringes of culture— counterculture.

But that has since changed. Independently written graphic novels and alternative comics are beginning to compete with, and even outselling superhero comics (Hatfield). While just a few thousand readers tune in for the adventures of Batman each month, millions of comics fans now read webcomics or webtoons (Lamerichs). These new digital comics are massively outstripping the sales figures of even the most popular superhero comics. Still, the first comic book character that a person named is bound to be Spider-man, Superman, or another caped crusader. There is an persisting belief that comics can still be sorted into the same mainstream and counterculture categories of the past. In fact, “mainstream comics” has become a shorthand for talking about superhero comics (Woo). Is this still an accurate interpretation of our current comic industry? Or is there no longer one mainstream at all?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Defining “Mainstream” and “Counterculture”

In order to seek out a mainstream and a counterculture in the comic book industry, one must first define what those terms mean. This is not an easy task, as both terms are ambiguous, and definitions tend to be circular. Many people consider mainstream and counterculture to be diametrically opposed, each group defined by their opposition to the other (Huber). Mainstream culture is seen as mass-produced, profit-driven, and therefore low-brow culture, which shies from controversy, and therefore upholds the dominant political beliefs of its time. Counterculture, on the other hand, is considered the artistically-liberated, avant-garde, politically subversive resistance to the monolith of the mainstream (Dhoest, Malliet, Segaert, and Haers).

This definition of mainstream culture and subculture is not without criticism. It oversimplifies the diversity within both mainstream culture and counterculture— ignoring the mainstream media that push the boundaries, and the countercultural media that fails to say anything new. Additionally, this oversimplification of mainstream and counterculture often romanticizes the themes of dominance and resistance within each, characterizing the mainstream as a big dumb bully, and the counterculture as a scrappy but admirable resistor (Huber; Dhoest, Malliet, Segaert, and Haers; Rebentisch and Trautmann; Woo). While these definitions spur contention, and are certainly not always accurate, associating mainstream culture with cultural dominance and counterculture with resistance proves a useful shorthand. Thus, this paper utilizes the traditional conception of the mainstream and counterculture as opposite extremes, not to argue that mainstream and counterculture are indeed diametric opposites, but rather to evaluate the extent to which these traditional conceptions of mainstream and counterculture still apply to the modern comic book industry. In order to do so, one must have a solid understanding of what traits characterize the traditional mainstream or counterculture work.

Firstly, **traditional counterculture media targets niche audiences, whereas mainstreams appeal to the average consumer.** Because the dominant mainstream media caters to a large target audience, it takes on the characteristics of *mass* culture. Critics of mass culture argue that, in order to attain mass appeal, mass culture has to accommodate a wide array of opinions and is therefore designed to appeal to the average person. Thus, mass culture is inherently stripped of any creative merit or political autonomy (Rebentisch and Trautmann). In accordance with this interpretation, some scholars have defined mainstream comics as “the work produced by for-profit businesses and distributed in routinized publication outlets, (...) often producing messages that especially flow with dominant ideology” (McAllister, Sewell, and Gordon 7-8). Counterculture is reactionary to the uniformity of the mainstream, making a conscious effort to differentiate itself. It is often politically subversive and utilizes artistic styles that are not widely popularized (Dhoest, Malliet, Segaert, and Haers). Counterculture media is designed for an alternative niche. In fact, restricting the market, or reducing the accessibility of countercultural

products is “*necessary* for the emergence of countercultural markets and their longevity” (Hietanen and Rokka, 1581; original emphasis).

Secondly, **the cultural context surrounding a piece of media may establish it as mainstream or countercultural**. However important the commercial context may be to identifying a counterculture or mainstream piece of media, many scholars view the cultural context is also a key factor. The categories of mainstream and counterculture, like genres, are largely social constructions created by artists in order to position themselves in the wider cultural context. The mainstream is not a concrete classification. Rather, the mainstream is “a category that niche cultures and subcultures construct to have something against which to define themselves” (Newman 5). The fabricated dichotomy between mainstream and counterculture constitutes a “‘position-taking’ that enable[s] artists, publishers, critics, and readers to locate themselves in a cultural field” (Woo 33). Because these categories are socially constructed, distinctions between mainstream and counterculture comics are not inherent traits of the comics themselves, but rather, the distinction between mainstream and counterculture lies in the discourse and environment surrounding the comics. Essentially, what establishes a work as mainstream is whether or not the creators and fans conceptualize the work as mainstream.

### **The “Mainstream” and the Comic Book Industry**

The comic book industry has a precarious relationship with the concept of mainstream. There did exist a time when comics of all genres and styles shared a place at the center of popular culture in the US. In the 1930s-1950s, when upwards of 95% of children in the United States were reading comic books (Putsz xi). In the 1950’s, however, the audiences of comic books sharply decreased. The superhero genre came to dominate the market, establishing a clear mainstream *within* the comic book industry (Welsh), though the medium itself was no longer central to American culture (Putz xii). In the past few decades, the existence of a mainstream within the industry has been increasingly challenged as alternative sources and styles of comics have risen in popularity. This introduction will provide greater context into the history of the mainstream and comic books.

### ***The 1950s to the 1970s: An Obvious Dichotomy Between Mainstream and Counterculture***

The establishment of the Comics Code Authority (CCA) in 1954 drew a clear line between mainstream and counterculture comic books by mandating that any comic books aspiring to attain wide audiences obtain a seal of approval from the CCA. This infamous seal allowed comic book producers to sell their comics to the masses, as it served as an assurance to anxious parents that the comic book was deemed appropriate for their children's consumption. However, approval from the CCA came at the cost of significant creative liberties, for all comics had to adhere to rigid guidelines in order to obtain the seal (Hadju). Consequently, the comic book companies who chose to sacrifice creative autonomy in exchange for mass appeal, namely Marvel and DC, formed the mainstream of the comic book industry (Welsh). Due to the obligations that came with their brand-name, and the financial necessity of attaining mass appeal, mainstream comic books could not include much politically provocative content.

The countercultural comic book movement was also clearly defined: artists and publishers who did not sacrifice creative freedoms for mass appeal formed the Underground Comix Movement. While mainstream comics were restricted by the CCA, underground comix were politically radical and frequently included sexually explicit and violent scenes in their work (Gabilliet 67). Many underground satirized common comic book tropes and even put facetious CCA seals on their covers to establish themselves in direct opposition to the mainstream comic books of their time. While mainstream comics were sold in large quantities at every newspaper and corner store, underground comix were distributed in head shops, small countercultural shops that mainly sold drugs, and college campuses. While mainstream comics were distributed primarily by large companies, underground comix were often produced by individual artists without brand support (Rosenkranz).

The CCA's seal created a very clear boundary between mainstream comics, which reached wider audiences and resigned themselves to political timidity, and counterculture comics, which targeted niche communities and were free to explicitly express subversive political opinion.

### ***The 1980s to the 1990s: The Regression of the Mainstream and the Death of the Underground***

After the US cultural revolution of the 1960s, the lines between the underground and mainstream comics industries began to blur. The CCA began to wane in power. Major mainstream publishers like Marvel published issues without CCA approval, and mainstream comics gradually became less restricted in their content (Wright 238). At the same time, underground comix rose in popularity, and began to abandon their unbridled radicalism in order to garner wider appeal. As speciality shops featuring all types of comic books became widespread, mainstream and counterculture comic books became accessible to consumers side-by-side. The move to specialty shops finalized the regression of mainstream comics from cultural prominence into the niche subculture that they still occupy today (Hatfield 20-23). Consequently, “mainstream” superhero comic books took on an increasingly narrow audience of mainly white, heterosexual men (Putsz xii; Cocca 10-13).

Meanwhile, the head shops that were once the primary outlet for underground comix began to close as the hippie movement of the 1960s waned. With new legislation, the legal restrictions on obscenity began to tighten. And the shocking content that attracted audiences to the underground comix movement began to lose its novelty (Hatfield 19). These three changes effectively killed the Underground Comix Movement. However, the underground’s demise allowed space for the alternative comics movement grew in its wake. Alternative, or “Alt” comics were the direct evolution of the Underground Comix Movement, with many of the pioneering alternative works created by underground cartoonists (Hatfield ix). Alternative comics consist of avante garde comics, which span a wide range of genres, unlike the superhero-dominated mainstream (Singsen 2). From their upstart, alt-comics commanded a more diverse, more liberal readership than mainstream comic books (Putsz xii). It is therefore unsurprising that many people consider alt comics to be the new subcultural counterpart to mainstream comics.

### ***The 1990s to Modern Day: Digitalization***

In the modern day, superhero comics, namely those published by Marvel and DC, continue to dominate the market for trade paperbacks, which are the floppy magazine-format comic books that are the traditional format of the US comic book market. Of these, superhero comics maintain 68% of the total

revenue share (Hionis and Ki). With the rise of superhero blockbuster movies, and subsequent resurgence of the superhero genre to the cultural mainstream, superhero comics have attracted the attention of wider, more diverse audiences. Additionally, the digitalization of comic books has made comics more accessible, and social media has provided a platform for more diverse audiences to make themselves visible, as comic book stores have a reputation for being exclusive environments. Finally, mainstream comic book companies now employ more diverse creators. All of this has pushed mainstream comics to broaden their subject matter. Though still constricted to the superhero genre, the diversity in both characters and political stances has expanded (Cocca 2-3).

Alternative comics, too, have grown in cultural relevancy. Following the awarding of a Pulitzer Prize to Art Spiegelman's graphic memoir *Maus* in 1992, the medium of comics gained wide recognition and respect outside of traditional comic book fanbases (Ndalianis). While mainstream comics are still often regarded as adolescent, alternative comics have the reputation of being of substantial literary merit. Though mainstream publishers like Marvel and DC still maintain dominance in comic book stores, publishers which primarily produce non-superhero content like Image Comics have also firmly established themselves as powerful entities in the comic book industry, earning in excess of 59 million dollars in 2016 (Hionis and Ki). Mainstream publishers have caught on to the popularity of the more mature, avant garde alternatives. DC launched the imprint company Vertigo, out of which popular titles such as *Sandman*, *Watchmen*, and *V for Vendetta* have been published. These depart from DC's traditional superhero content, and are more alternative in style (Dony). Alternative comics have even made their way onto the big screen, with alternative comics like *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* seeding a franchise that boasts 7 blockbuster movies and 4 television series, their most recent film grossing over 179 million dollars world wide ("Teenage").

Possibly the most substantial change in the comics industry has been the rise of webcomics. Though first appearing in 1993, soon after the creation of the world wide web, webcomics did not receive wide recognition until 2000 (Kleefeld 21, 30). Still, webcomics introduced a production method which turned the comics industry on its head. Rather than needing the infrastructure and support of an



established publisher, or the financial means to physically print and distribute one's work, anybody can publish comics anonymously on the web with minimal personal risk (Johnston; Kleefeld 77). These comics can cater to niche audiences, developing internet communities dedicated to each individual comic (Kleefeld 79). While these communities are specialized, they can also grow incredibly large. Some of the most popular webcomics such as *Penny Arcade* have readerships upwards of 3 million (Geddes). In 2006, the creator of *xkcd* reported 500,000 unique visitors a day and 80 million page views a month (Cohen).

More recently, the internet has given rise to a new trend in digital comics: the webtoon. Though initially gaining popularity in South Korea, webtoons have since taken on significant American readership and authorship as well (Salkowitz). Webtoons are designed to be read on a phone rather than a computer. Instead of reading these across panels left to right, a webcomic is generally one continuous panel that readers scroll through, top to bottom (Lamerichs). Another key difference between the traditional webcomic and the webtoon is the method of publication. Whereas webcomics are generally published on their own container website, webtoons are usually published on pre-established platforms, operated by large corporations. The most popular of these are Webtoon and Tapas, phone apps which function very similarly to social media platforms. Despite the corporate influence of the companies which run the platforms, most webtoons are produced by independent creators. Anybody can publish a comic on these platforms without financial commitment, and content published on these platforms is free to access, though fans can pay money to read comics in advance (Lynn 161). Webtoons are currently perhaps the most popular form of comic in the US. In 2021, Webtoon attracted 14 million monthly users in the US (Salkowitz).

Considering the fact that the readership of “mainstream” superhero comics has been eclipsed by alternative comics and webcomics in the recent years, does it make sense to still refer to these as the mainstream? If not, what has become the mainstream? And what, if anything, constitutes the new counterculture?

### **Identifying a Mainstream and Counterculture in the Modern Comic Book Industry**

There is no clear consensus on what modern comics qualify as mainstream and counterculture.

However, a review of the current scholarly debate reveals three basic schools of thought:

1. **The traditional dichotomy still persists.** Superhero comics continue to dominate the “mainstream” comics industry, while alternative comics have inherited the designation of “counterculture” from their underground predecessors.
2. **A new mainstream and counterculture has arisen.** While there is still a dominant mainstream and countercultural presence in the comic book industry, new forms of comics now fill those slots.
3. **There is no longer any mainstream or counterculture.** The designations of mainstream and counterculture no longer fit with the modern comic book industry, as it is too splintered to possess any one dominant force.

***Hypothesis 1: The Traditional Dichotomy Still Persists***

The most common assumption surrounding the comic book industry is that superhero comics still dominate the mainstream while alternative comics have inherited the designation of counterculture from their underground predecessors. Matthew Pustz, for example, characterizes mainstream superhero comics as industrial, as opposed to the creativity of alt-comics. Pustz argues that, by passively adhering to whatever trope is popular at a given time and by the impersonal nature of production, mass-produced superhero comics lack creativity. Created in an assembly line process, different people are assigned to the task of writing, drawing, coloring, inking, and editing, all overseen by a separate editor-in-chief. On the other hand, alternative comics are usually produced by a single person and published by smaller companies. “Because of this artistic freedom,” Pustz writes, “alternative comics can be very political” (12). In other words, superhero comics are thoughtless mass culture, while alternative comics are the sites for counterculture resistance.

In his book *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*, Charles Hatfield writes that the “underground ethos” reemerged in alternative comics. Alternative comics are heavily influenced by the underground, as they carry on the spirit of “unchecked artistic freedom,” and continue to respond to new

political concerns (Hatfield xii). But, because alternative comics are tempered “by the publishing practices of the commercial mainstream” (27), they lack the “fervidly romantic counterculture” of the Underground Comix Movement (22). Still, both Putsz and Hatfield see the superhero comics industry and the alternative comics industry as fulfilling the traditional roles of mainstream and counterculture.

***Hypothesis 2: A New Mainstream and Counterculture has Arisen***

Other scholars accept that the comics industry can still be broken up into mainstream and counterculture designations but argue that webcomics now occupy these spaces. For example, Sean Fenty, Trena Houp and Laurie Taylor argue that webcomics, rather than alternative comics, have taken up the mantle of the Underground Comix Movement. Webcomics possess a similar spirit to the Underground Comix Movement, prioritizing creative freedom and artistic originality. Because the internet offers a place for independent creators to publish anything they want with no financial risk, webcomics are completely unrestricted in content. This allows webcomics to incorporate content and themes which are contrary to mainstream societal norms. For example, webcomics can emphasize niche topics that make the comic inaccessible to most audiences, but the online platform allows for a small subculture based around the comic itself, as it only appeals to highly specialized audiences (Kleefeld 64). Much like underground comix in the 1970s, some scholars have argued that webcomics provide a larger platform for diverse voices. For example, webcomics, similar to the Underground Comix Movement, have provided platforms to advocate for feminist beliefs and subvert traditional gender norms (Francis; Abrecht; Koggel; Kleefeld 82-83). In India, for example, the lack of financial barriers to webcomics have made them a viable means of countercultural political resistance (Nayek). Companies like Webtoon provide platforms through which creators from marginalized backgrounds can reach large audiences. These companies provide professional opportunities to amateur writers through competitions that “facilitate an increasing number and range of narratives about minority groups, as well as providing opportunities for authors hailing from underrepresented groups” (Lynn 161). Hence, webcomics “present room for increased (and increasing) democratization” (Hicks 241).

Still, other scholars argue that webcomics, especially those published on branded platforms, have formed a new mainstream. While it may be tantalizing to view digitalization as a force which democratized media industries, large corporations continue to dominate media industries— the only change being that they do this via different platforms (Hesmondhalgh 2019). Mainstream companies Marvel and DC have both partnered with webcomics platform Webtoon to publish superhero comics (Dominguez; DC Publicity), and Webtoon hires comic artists to create comics for the platform (Kim, Ji-Hyeon and Jun Yu). Thus, webcomics are not an exclusively independent medium, as brands continue to exert considerable influence over the content available on webcomics platforms. Even when artists are working independently, they are not free from brand influence. Rather than encouraging a wider range of narratives, platforms such as Webtoon encourage creators to compete for attention, incentivizing them to censor their content and to replicate popular tropes. Platformization has changed the culture of webcomics from a “bottom-up subculture to a data-driven economy” (Lamerichs 211). In other words, where webcomics were once able to exclusively serve a niche audience, now creators are motivated to attract as much attention as possible. Because large platforms treat attention as a form of capital, comic creators are steered “in a direction that aligns with popular demand and trends” (Kim and Yu 9). Even webcomics published independent of large platforms must reach large audiences of 10,000 to 30,000 people in order to make a substantial profit, and are thus, not free from market pressures (Dothwaite 7).

***Hypothesis 3: There is no longer any mainstream or counterculture***

Some scholars altogether dismiss the idea that there is any definitive mainstream or counterculture in the modern comics industry. The lines between “mainstream” superhero comics and “counterculture” alternative comics are hazy at best. For example, alternative comics often center around superheroes; thus, the content of alternative comics are not antithetical to that of mainstream comics. Additionally, the production processes for mainstream and alternative comics do not distinguish the two. Though alternative comic creators tend to have more creative liberty than mainstream creators, this does not necessarily impact the artistic merit of the comics produced. “Many brilliant and idiosyncratic cartoonists, especially newspaper cartoonists, worked under tight commercial constraints, while many

alternative cartoonists with much greater artistic control produce uninspired replicas of others' work" (Singsen 2014:18). Examples such as DC's imprint company Vertigo, which publishes alternative-style comics from a mainstream publisher, defy easy sorting into the "alternative" or "mainstream" categories (Dony).

Benjamin Woo also sees the distinction between mainstream and counterculture as blurred, arguing in his paper "Is There a Comic Book Industry," that the modern comics industry has no dominant mainstream. Both superhero comics and alternative comics can be published by for-profit businesses. The scale of superhero comics is "simply too small to represent 'large-scale production'" as "even its best sellers do not sell all that well" (38). Today, some mainstream comics do not garner the largest audiences in the comic book industry. In fact, alternative hits like *Maus* and *Fun Home* have had significant commercial success. To add, graphic novels and manga routinely outsell superhero comics. If superhero comics were truly driven by profit alone, would they not adopt the more popular manga form? Though superhero comics are no longer a dominant mainstream, they have not been conclusively supplanted by any other form of comics. Rather, the comic book industry has become diversified, with a "range of different models in different formats and channels addressing different audiences that characterize the field of American comic books" (38).

Others argue that there is still value in the distinction between mainstream superhero comics and countercultural alternative comic, even if they no longer fit the traditional definitions of mainstream and counterculture. Doug Singsen, for example, argues that the categories of mainstream and alternative are not based on "any stylistic or other feature of the comics themselves," such as a fixation on superheroes or adherence to stylistic norms, "but rather the discourse in which they participate" (Singsen 2014: 4). Singsen characterizes mainstream and counterculture as "social objects," created by artists and fans, in order to construct an identity for themselves, and position their work in a larger social context (Singsen 2016). Essentially, the comic book industry still has clear categorization, but the distinguishment between those categories lies more in the attitudes of the creators and audiences than in the comics themselves.

## RESEARCH PLAN

This paper samples some of the best-selling superhero comics, webcomics, and alternative comics published in 2019. This year was selected because it is the most recent year before the COVID pandemic, which altered the sales of many entertainment industries. This paper seeks to determine what category of comics, if any, has taken up the counterculture reputation of the Underground Comix Movement, and what category of comics, if any, has become the dominant mainstream. It will consider four categories:

- 1) Superhero (“mainstream”) comics
- 2) Alternative comics
- 3) Platformized webcomics (Webtoons)
- 4) Independent webcomics

While many scholars have considered this question, there is little consensus. Superhero comics, alternative comics, and both platformized and independent webcomics have all been identified by some scholars as dominant forces in the comics industry and identified by other scholars as niche or countercultural platforms. Additionally, few scholars have engaged in a thorough examination spanning across multiple categories. Rather, scholars have analyzed and presented various cases that support their argument. Though still valuable, this is a potentially flawed method through which to validate a hypothesis, as the primary sources were chosen to support a claim rather than being selected through a pre-established methodology. By specifically analyzing comic books that were successful in garnering large audiences, this paper seeks to gain a better understanding of whether the pervasive cultural climate within each category aligns more closely with the traditional concepts of mainstream culture, counterculture, or neither.

### Primary Sources

The comics used in this study were selected because they had either the highest total number of units sold for physical comics, or the highest number of views for webcomics. However, the best-selling trade paperbacks were selected because *one* issue sold particularly well. The series as a whole may not

have been the best-selling series. It is also important to note that being a best-seller does not necessarily correlate with higher exposure. It is possible that these larger numbers are due to people buying more copies of individual issues, rather than the issues reaching more people. Moreover, anyone who may have viewed a comic without purchasing it (i.e. viewing a comic through a subscription platform such as Marvel Unlimited, exchanging comics with a friend, or checking a comic out from the library) is not accounted for. Additionally, there was a lack of accessible data for determining the most popular independent webcomics. Instead, this paper selected independent webcomics with established histories of performing very well. While primary source selection was not perfect, it is safe to say that each comic selected commanded significant attention when it was released.

### ***“Mainstream” Superhero Comics***

During 2019, the two best-selling trade comics (floppy paperback comic books that have long characterized superhero comic books) were published by Marvel and DC and distributed through Diamond Comics, which, at the time, had a virtually unchallenged monopoly on trade comics. The *Detective Comics* series enjoyed massive popularity. In fact, *Detective Comics* issue #1,000 sold over half a million copies (“Comic”). Because of the collectibility of this comic, it is unclear whether the issue was distributed to a greater number of buyers, or whether buyers purchased a greater number of issues. *Detective Comics* #1,000 was an important anniversary issue of an iconic comic series, famous for introducing Batman. Still, the fanfare of issue #1,000 led to increased engagement for the following issues, which were all top selling comics during 2019 (“Comic”). This paper analyzes *Detective Comics* from issue #1,000 to issue #1,020.

Another successful superhero series during this year was Jonathan Hickman’s *X-men*. Its first issue sold 269,000 copies (“Comic”). The series was launched as part of the “Dawn of X” event, which incorporated seven other X-men titles that year. This paper analyzes the first year of Hickman’s *X-men* comics, from issue #1 through issue #13. This series follows Cyclops, the original leader of the X-men, as he leads mutants in a struggle against evil. The plot, similar to *Detective Comics* follows a serialized superhero comic book format, capitalizing on the common “event” structure in which multiple separate

comic series tie in to tell one unified story. Superhero “events” are a reliable method to spike comic book sales used since the 1980s (Hionis and Ki; Guynes).

### *Alternative Comics*

Image Comics is the leading distributor of alternative comics: the best-selling comics not published by Marvel or DC were published by Image. The best-selling Image comic was *Spawn*. However, this comic was dismissed as a potential source because it treads the line between superhero comics and alternative comics. Though some would consider it an alternative comic, its position proves contentious as, in many ways, *Spawn* sought to mimick mainstream superhero comics (Zawlacki). The separation between superhero and alternative comics is by no means a clear binary (Singsen). However, this study is based around binary separations between these categories, which is necessary in order to evaluate the credibility of these separations. This meant overlooking comics that tread the line between categories. Thus, *Spawn* was overlooked in favor of selecting an alternative comic that fits more cleanly into the traditional conception of alternative.

One alternative comic that received significant attention in 2019 was Robert Kirkman and Charlie Adlard’s *The Walking Dead*, which had enjoyed significant popularity for years leading up to its much-anticipated finale issue (“Comic”). This paper analyzes a year of *Walking Dead* comics leading up to its finale, from issue #181 to issue #193. *The Walking Dead* centers around a group of individuals fighting to survive a zombie apocalypse. It does not follow the traditional superhero genre, as its main characters usually fight for self-preservation rather than the salvation of others and do not have superpowers. By 2019, *The Walking Dead* was a popular television series that had accrued mainstream commercial success.

Following *The Walking Dead*, another high-profile alternative comic was Scott Snyder and Charles Soule’s *Undiscovered Country*, which premiered in 2019. Its first issue sold around 85,000 copies (“Comic”). This paper analyzes the first year of *Undiscovered Country* comics, from issue #1 to issue #12. *Undiscovered Country* is specifically set in a fictionalized US following a thirty-year period of isolation from the crumbling outside world. This series, written by Scott Snyder and Charles Soule, did



not build on any pre-established franchise, unlike Marvel's *X-men*. Like *The Walking Dead*, it too depicts a group of non-superpowered people surviving in a post-apocalyptic version of the US. *Undiscovered Country* was initially hailed as Image Comics's "replacement" for the *Walking Dead* series, which ended just before *Undiscovered Country* came out.

### ***Webtoons***

Webtoon, the most popular webcomic platform in the US, published a list compiling its top 30 webcomics in 2019. *Lore Olympus*, the most popular webcomic ever published, is first on Webtoon's list with 299 million views (Macdonald). The comic boasts 1.3 billion views as of 2023 ("Lore"). This paper analyzes all of the *Lore Olympus* episodes published in 2019, from episode 44 to episode 91. Created by Rachel Smythe, *Lore Olympus* is categorized as a romance webcomic that reimagines the classic Greek myth of the abduction of Persephone.

The next most popular webtoon was an action comic, *unOrdinary*, which had 241 million views in 2019 (Macdonald). It was first published in Korean by sole creator Chelsey Han, more commonly known by her internet username uru-chan. Han originally published *unOrdinary* for a superhero contest sponsored by Webtoon, using manga and anime as her inspiration (Ramsburg). This paper analyzes every *unOrdinary* episode published in 2019, from episode 123 to episode 160. *unOrdinary* follows a non-superpowered boy named John as he navigates life in a high school that caters to super-powered teenagers.

### ***Independent Webcomics***

There is no reliable data identifying the most popular independent webcomic (that is, a webcomic published on its own website) in the year 2019 specifically. Still, two webcomics are identified as massively popular. The first of these is *xkcd*, written by Randall Munroe. This webcomic became popular through niche science jokes, but it has expanded to include pop culture commentary as well. There is no data available for 2019 specifically, but the *xkcd* has a long history of being an incredibly successful webcomic. In 2006, Munroe reported that *xkcd* received 80 million page views per month (Cohen), and the webcomic has remained prominent since then. In 2014, Munroe released a print form of a spinoff

comic *What If?: Serious Scientific Answers to Absurd Hypothetical Questions*, which topped *The New York Times* Best Seller list (“Combined” 2014). *xkcd* differs significantly in structure from traditional serialized comic books because it does not tell a cohesive story and resembles a newspaper cartoon strip. This paper analyzes every *xkcd* comic published in 2019, from #2093 to #2248.

The second prominent webcomic, *Penny Arcade*, has been running since 1998. This webcomic has a heavy emphasis on video games and gaming culture. While there is a similar lapse in data for 2019, the webcomic is by all measures extremely popular. In 2010, the webcomic had upwards of 3 million readers (Geddes). *Penny Arcade*’s lead creators, Michael Krahulik and Jerry Holkins, have been living off the profits of the comic for most of that time. *Penny Arcade* has since expanded to become a company in its own right. Krahulik and Holkins have launched a gaming convention called the *Penny Arcade Expo* (PAX), a podcast based on the webcomic called *Downloadable Content*, multiple video games based on the strip, *Penny Arcade: the Series*, and 12 collected editions. *Penny Arcade* is similar in structure to *xkcd*, lacking a cohesive storyline, with chapters of just a few panels, each telling an isolated story. This paper analyzes every *Penny Arcade* comic published from January 2, 2019 through December 30, 2019.

## Methodology

In order to ascertain whether a work qualifies as mainstream or countercultural, this study will look for a few key elements:

1. To what extent does the comic embrace or resist mainstream political norms?

This is difficult to evaluate, because the identification of any “mainstream political norms” has become increasingly tenuous as the political climate in the US has become increasingly splintered. Still, this dimension of analysis remains important. This paper will examine whether the comic takes any potentially contentious political stance, assessing depictions of politicians, government policies, and socioeconomic commentary, as well as portrayals of people of marginalized identities.

2. To what extent does the comic restrict audience appeal or attract wide audiences?

Attempts to restrict appeal can include exceedingly niche references, unusual stylistic choices, and potentially offensive content, which may alienate general audiences. Thus, this study will also note the

presence (or absence) of explicit content, including sex, violence, and drugs, the presence (or absence) of any important elements that require niche knowledge essential for comprehension order to understand, as well as whether the comic deviates or adheres to previously successful formats.

### 3. To what extent is the comic perceived as dominant by the author and audience?

This dimension of analysis is entirely paratextual. This study will sample published interviews and statements from the author. Specifically, this paper will analyze any of the authors' statements on the dominance or subversiveness of the comic. Does the author imagine themselves and their work as opposing a dominant force or do they see themselves adhering to mainstream culture and dominating their industry?

## RESULTS

### Are They Politically Subversive?

#### *Superhero Comics*

Of the popular superhero comics sampled, both *X-men* and *Detective Comics* discuss politics, though these discussions were rarely center stage. Batman tussles with corrupt politicians in *Detective Comics* while the X-men contend with political drama as they seek to establish their own mutant state. However, politics are more often than not utilized as a prop to serve the story, rather than the story being utilized to platform political beliefs. As Batman aptly summarizes it in *Detective Comics* #1,019, “whether it's religion... politics... money... it's an excuse for bad people to do bad things” (Tomasi, *Detective Comics* No. 1,019). Still, both comics did take some strong stances on contemporary issues. For example, as increased national attention was brought to the families being split apart at the US-Mexico border in 2020, Batman goes on a mission to rescue an orphaned boy named Miguel, who had been separated from his parents while crossing the border (Taylor, *Detective Comics* No. 1,017). In *X-men* #4, Magneto goes on a sustained rant about the moral failings of Western society: “Armaments, universal debt, and planned obsolescence-- are these not the three pillars of Western prosperity?” (Hickman, *X-men*

No. 4). Thus, both popular mainstream comic books took overt political stances, even on contentious issues, though politics are not key to the identity of either comic.

### *Alternative Comics*

In contrast, politics are heavily integrated into both alternative comics sampled, *The Walking Dead* and *Undiscovered Country*. The premise of *Undiscovered Country* is highly political in nature: the comic is built around defining the American national identity. Guided by Uncle Sam, a group of characters journey through a splintered United States, which has been walled off from the outside world and split into thirteen zones, each with a unique aspect of American culture that has been taken to the extreme: there is a consumerist zone, a libertarian zone, and a technological innovation zone, among others. The book features obvious references to contemporary political issues. In the wasteland of the libertarian zone, the main characters face off against the villain Destiny Man, who says “don’t tread on me” before rushing into battle, an obvious reference to the growing right-wing movements that adopted the phrase as a symbol (Snyder and Soule, *Undiscovered Country* No. 6). Furthermore, *Undiscovered Country* authors Charles Soule and Scott Snyder say that the entire story was constructed as a vessel for delivering political commentary: “this is deeply personal and very much about some of our real-world fears about not just the dangers of isolationism but sort of trends that we see everywhere that worry us for our kids. But we felt that the whole premise itself is so highly charged, and it's such a sort of divisive environment right now that the best way to approach [was to] make it something that would be kind of (Snyder).

Political discourse was also commonplace in *The Walking Dead*. For example, during its final year, the comic was essentially a political drama with a side of zombies. Characters fight to overturn a brutal police state, as they wrestle with the question of how to rebuild a just society in the wake of the apocalypse. While the stance taken is not particularly contentious—very few people would advocate *for* a brutal police state in the modern US—*The Walking Dead* does confront some tense issues head-on. For example, during 2018, a time in which real-world tensions around police brutality were rising, issues #183 and #184 deal with the repercussions of police brutality, and an ensuing violent protest against

police brutality— coming to the conclusion that the police and civilians should not villainize each other, as they are both products of an unjust system (Kirkman, *The Walking Dead* No. 185). While politics are prevalent in *The Walking Dead*, its author Robert Kirkman never viewed politics as central to his comics, as stated in a 2011 interview: “I’m not really trying to make a statement along those lines in *The Walking Dead*. That stuff cropped up only because it’s logical that it cropped up, not because I had something to say on the matter.”. Regardless of stated authorial intent, both popular alternative comics reviewed feature politics, whether as central aspects of the narrative, or purposes for the narrative.

### ***Webtoons***

Both *Lore Olympus* and *unOriginal* place political commentary at, or near, the center of their narrative. In retelling the classic story of Greek goddess Persephone’s abduction by the god Hades, *Lore Olympus* features sustained discussions around the intricacies of what constitutes consent and abuse. The comic confronts cultural taboos, engaging with themes of sexual assault, male mental health, female sexuality, and reproductive health. Episode 83, for example, features Persephone candidly discuss her period as she goes to a reproductive health clinic to get a pregnancy test after being raped (Smythe, *Lore Olympus* Ep. 83). Author Rachel Smythe views the discussion of issues like these as central to the comic’s purpose. When asked why she chose to feature subjects such as sexual assault, Smythe acknowledged that “some people are going to find it uncomfortable,” but she sees addressing uncomfortable societal realities as important: “I have a platform. I can tell a story that will hopefully educate and help others feel acknowledged and vindicated.” (Smythe). In fact, one scholar argues that it is precisely because of *Lore Olympus*’s unafraid confrontation of political taboos that the webtoon gained popularity (Smith). *unOriginal* is not nearly as confrontational in nature as *Lore Olympus*. Still, the main conflict in the story is that of a boy who has become disillusioned with an unjust, hierarchical society in which the powerful reign over the weak. While in *unOriginal*, the hierarchy is determined by the presence or absence of superpowers, this can be read as a fairly direct commentary on the unjust distribution of power and privilege in our own society. *unOriginal*’s author, uru-chan “wanted to write about themes relating to

discrimination, mental health, and the abuse of power” (uru-chan). Both popular platformized webcomics intentionally address contemporary political issues.

### ***Independent Webcomics***

While the popular webtoons *unOrdinary* and *Lore Olympus* regard politics as important aspects of their content, neither of the independent webcomics sampled shared this attitude. Randall Munroe, writer of *xkcd*, intentionally avoids including politics in his webcomic: “I don’t want *xkcd* to become a place for ongoing political argument, anger, and hurt feelings. The internet has enough political discussion threads” (Munroe “Politics”). He seems to have stuck to this philosophy. *Penny Arcade*, too, largely avoids politics. The webcomic explores gaming and gamer culture, rarely straying from this topic. However, *Penny Arcade* satirizes consumerism and corporate greed in the video game industry. To illustrate, “The Aboxolypse,” a video game corporation mentioned in the comic, is characterized as a fiery demon that claims the right to “install casinos for children in your home” (Krahulik and Holkins, “The Aboxolypse”). *Penny Arcade* very unambiguously positions itself as a subversive counteragent to a dominant force, though this force is a corporate entity. Jerry Holkins, under internet alter-ego Tycho, even characterizes “kicking sponsors directly in the mouth” as a “classic Penny Arcade passtime” (Tycho “Championing Idleness”). Thus, while the popular independent webcomics reviewed are largely disengaged from politics, they do sometimes take subversive political stances and certainly position themselves against politically dominant forces.

### **Are They Accessible to Average Audiences?**

#### ***Superhero Comics***

Due to the decades of content that now make up the superhero comic book canon, even the most popular “mainstream” superhero comics are not accessible to new audiences because it is now almost expected that audiences are familiar with the extensive intricacies of the Marvel and DC universes before they begin reading a comic. There are some efforts to make superhero comics more permeable. For example, every issue of the *X-men* has a dedicated page which functions as a sort of glossary with an

image of the chief character with their name written below. This page also includes a brief explanation detailing the framework of the story and a recap of the previous issue. Nonetheless, these tools are not sufficient to ensure that the comic is intelligible to new readers. Even in *X-men* issue #1, the sheer amount of references to external pieces of information is daunting: the issue mentions the metal vibranium, omega sentinels, the Trask sentinel model, strontian alphas, the organizations S.H.I.E.L.D., A.I.M., A.R.M.O.R., alpha flight, H.A.M.M.E.R., Hydra, and the characters of Tony Stark and Reed Richards (only referred to by their surnames). None of this information is strictly necessary to understanding of the basic plot of the story, but it can nonetheless present a barrier to new readers. Later on in the series, however, when the *X-men* storyline ties into a larger comic event — a popular sales-tactic in superhero comics in which the multiple separate comic book runs converge to tell a unified story — knowledge from other comic books is essential for understanding the plot. Though important external events are summarized at the beginning of every issue, without a working knowledge of the other events like the Kree-Skrull War, the character Hulkling, and Cotati race, the conflict is unintelligible. *Detective Comics* possesses similar barriers to acquiring new audiences. Like *X-men* #1, without previous knowledge of the DC Universe, the issue is understandable but daunting. Because *Detective Comics* #1,000 was an important anniversary issue, it was expected to bring in readers outside of the typical Batman audience. When asked how he would accommodate those audiences, *Detective Comics* writer Peter Tomasi responded, “[I] just hope that the character grabs them (...) hopefully there’s a percentage that stay on board with us and keep reading” (Tomasi Interview by Ledger). In further issues, however, non-obvious information like knowing that the Joker’s alter ego is Jack Napier, or that the Spectre’s alter ego is Jim Corrigan, becomes essential to understanding the plot of the comic. Therefore, even the most popular superhero comics are very much targeted at niche audiences who are already invested in the genre and are familiar with the canon.

### ***Alternative Comics***

The alternative comic books sampled, *Undiscovered Country* and *The Walking Dead*, are much more accessible to new audiences than the superhero comics, though they seem to be restricted to more mature audiences. *Undiscovered Country* does not reference material inaccessible to new readers. While

some allusions may be missed, such as the correlation between Destiny Man and the manifest destiny ideology, these are not necessary in order to understand the comic. Similarly, despite the fact that *The Walking Dead* has a run that lasted 16 years, it is not necessary to have all 16 years worth of context to understand the comic. Each issue begins with a brief, but effective description of the events leading up to the issue. In issue #181, while there are many allusions to characters and names that had not been introduced, there is enough context within the issue to understand the general plot, motivations, and character relationships. Therefore, the only barrier to audience accessibility was the large amount of graphic content, including explicit language and frequent violence. Both *Undiscovered Country* and *The Walking Dead* remain largely accessible to new audiences comfortable with mature content .

### ***Webtoons***

Similar to alternative comics, the webtoons *Lore Olympus* and *unOrdinary* are widely accessible to new readers. To illustrate, both *Lore Olympus* and *unOrdinary* have extra episodes between seasons which thoroughly explain all of the important information necessary to understand the comic. Episodes are short enough that catching up from the start of a season does not present a significant barrier to new audiences. *Lore Olympus* relies heavily on Greek mythology, but the story is fully understandable without any background knowledge. *unOrdinary*, too, is heavily inspired by anime tropes, but no familiarity with anime is required to enjoy the comic itself. *unOrdinary* features brutal violence that can be alienating to potential audiences, but no individual images are particularly graphic. All explicit language is slightly altered — e.g., f\*ck, rather than fuck. *Lore Olympus* does not censor explicit language and very candidly discusses sex, though no graphic images are shown. Thus, both webtoons reviewed were relatively accessible to audiences that could handle more mature content.

### ***Independent Webcomics***

In contrast, neither *xkcd* nor *Penny Arcade* are accessible to the average reader. *xkcd*, which features STEM-based humor, requires that the reader have a preliminary understanding of niche scientific concepts to understand the punchline of the joke. Furthermore, *xkcd* can be stylistically difficult to enjoy for most audiences. While *xkcd* generally follows the standard comic strip format — an image with text



bubbles and/or captions — the comic sometimes publishes strips which are various types of graphs that readers have to puzzle out. Often, readers need prior experience to be able to read that type of graph. For example, in the strip titled “modern OSI model,” the comic is completely unintelligible to any reader who does not already know what Open Systems Interconnection models are, which is knowledge specific to the field of network communications (see fig. 1). *xkcd* creator Randall Munroe says that he does not even attempt to explain his comics: “I had to learn to give up on my urge to explain things to people (...) It’s like, Nope, you had your chance; you got to just do it better next time” (Munroe 2019). In fact, the strip can be so opaque that there is an entire fan site, [explainxkcd.com](http://explainxkcd.com), dedicated to explaining every single strip (Mediawiki). Additionally, *xkcd* hides extra information in each comic, such as additional jokes or comments that only appear when the computer mouse hovers over the image. In this way, the comic reserves a level of special interaction for people who are already familiar with the comic. *Penny Arcade*, too, is highly inaccessible to anybody who is unfamiliar with the gaming industry. A vast majority of strips require specific knowledge, whether it be related to video games, board games, role-playing games, or media companies. Often the comic riffs on recent events, such as presentations at gaming conventions, altercations on reddit threads, or scandals between Twitch streamers. *Penny Arcade* comic writer Jerry Holkins writes brief posts under each strip explaining each event, but these summaries only partially explain the comic, and almost always reference even more obscure external information. Overall, both *xkcd* and *Penny Arcade* feature niche background knowledge and do not adequately attempt to compensate for any audiences who lack of knowledge on the topicality of the comics.

## **Do They Perceive Themselves as Mainstream?**

### ***Superhero Comics***

Jonathan Hickman and Peter Tomasi, authors of *X-men* and *Detective Comics*, respectively, describe feeling the pressure of writing Batman X-men comics, because there is a long history of talented comic creators and legions of dedicated fans writing the same characters. Peter Tomasi explains the excitement he felt to be a lead writer on the 1,000th issue of two important DC comic books, *Action*

*Comics* and *Detective Comics*: “10-year-old Pete Tomasi, would have never imagined he'd be doing it. The fact that the stars aligned and allowed me to be able to do both of those issues, milestones when you're a comic fan; it's pretty special” (Tomasi and Barnhardt). Similarly, Jonathan Hickman describes a sense of honor and responsibility when he was tasked with writing for the X-men, a popular superhero team: “the trick is understanding who the characters are and taking them to a new and exciting place but doing it in a way that evokes the memories of all the stories you read as a kid” (Hickman). Like many writers working for Marvel and DC, both Hickman and Tomasi were fans of the characters they would eventually write before becoming comic book writers. Because of the ongoing cultural relevancy of the superheroes themselves, and their own connections with the characters, both Tomasi and Hickman view their work as contributing to an important, powerful body of work. Superhero comics, steeped in legacy, carry a sense of dominance that is keenly felt by creators.

### ***Alternative Comics***

The authors of the popular alternative comics *The Walking Dead* and *Undiscovered Country* both see their work as subversive forces, though they have large audiences. Robert Kirkman, writer of *The Walking Dead* was acutely aware of the mass popularity of his comic as it began to gain traction. He describes feeling pressure correlated with the huge amount of attention garnered by the comic: “In the early days, it was this fun comic book I did paying tribute to all of the zombie movies I love (...) now it's this thing with hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of fans invested in it and I need to do it justice (...) there's a lot of pressure” (Kirkman 2008). Still, Kirkman views his work on *The Walking Dead* as creating an opposition to a dominant force in the comic book market— namely Marvel and DC: “it's shown comic book creators who may have stayed at Marvel or DC doing work for hire, that there is — for a lack of a better analogy — a pot of gold at the end of that journey. If I create my own thing, it may be as successful as *The Walking Dead*” (Kirkman). When writing *Undiscovered Country*, authors Soule and Snyder claim that mass appeal was irrelevant to their motivations when writing the comic:

“Is it going to be like *The Walking Dead*? Is it going to have that kind of life? Is it going to sell those numbers? We wanted it to do well, we wanted to be able to tell the story we want to tell,

and we didn't want to lose a bunch of money on it. But in terms of are we gonna measure up to other successful Image projects, I don't think that ever really crossed our mind." (Soule)

Soule and Snyder describe *Undiscovered Country* as a purely artistic passion project, unaltered by the pressures of succeeding in a competitive market. Regardless of sales, both alternative comics position themselves, at least in interviews, as working outside of, even in opposition to, dominant market channels.

### ***Webtoons***

Both *unOrdinary* creator uru-chan and *Lore Olympus* creator Rachel Smythe are keenly aware that their webtoons attract large audiences and that they have a responsibility to deliver content to such large audiences. However, they both incongruously picture their work as outside of the popular consciousness. Despite her millions of followers, Smythe sees webtoons as remaining on the fringes of mainstream culture:

"Webtoon is a new industry in the grand scheme of things, so it can be hard to explain to other people what is involved in my career or my various achievements. Having a physical book is a much more tangible marker of my success, which most people can easily understand." (Smythe, Interview by Lucas)

While uru-chan is aware that her audience is in the millions, she says she rarely thinks about the popularity of her work and, in 2023, reflected that she is still surprised when people know it: "I don't really pay attention to the details, like the numbers or the popularity of the series because I'm kind of in my own little world. When brands and people reach out (...) it's such an honor because they know my series exists."

### ***Independent Webcomics***

While creators of popular webcomics are aware of the large audiences, the authors of *Lore Olympus* and *unOrdinary* nevertheless perceive their comics as targeted at relatively niche audiences. For example, Jerry Holkins reflects on how lucky he feels to find an audience that understands the "weirdness" that is *Penny Arcade*: "when we lean into weirdness sometimes it connects with people..." As we have suggested repeatedly our audience consists largely of each other. It's something we guard with

great jealousy” (Tycho “Chapter Three”). At the same time, he recognizes *Penny Arcade*’s wide influence in the gaming community: “Well, we have a lot of readers. There’s something like three million people who read the site” (Gabe). Similarly, Randall Munroe both recognizes his comic’s massive popularity and sees his audience as a niche subset of the population: “I guess only about 2% of the population is going to like the strip in the first place, so I always expected that there are a lot of people who don’t like the strip and aren’t going to read it” (Munroe 2008). Even despite massive popularity, independent webcomics position themselves as occupying niche cultural territories.

## CONCLUSIONS

Though comics do not always fall neatly into the binaries of mainstream and counterculture, the table below attempts to summarize the dispersal of traditionally countercultural and mainstream characteristics across the four types of comics reviewed:

Comic type	Politics	Accessibility to Audiences	Author Perception
Superhero	leans mainstream	counterculture	mainstream
Alternative	counterculture	mainstream	counterculture
Webtoons	counterculture	mainstream	leans counterculture
Independent Webcomics	leans counterculture	counterculture	counterculture

As demonstrated, popular webcomics, webtoons, alternative comics, and superhero comics, all possess various characteristics of traditional mainstream and traditional countercultural media. Overall, of the comics sampled, no form of comics entirely conforms to the traditional definition of mainstream or counterculture. Instead, they have adopted a diverse array of characteristics associated with both mainstream and counterculture. Of the four categories examined, independent webcomics probably have the cleanest claim to the title of counterculture. The webcomics reviewed were rarely politically subversive, a significant divergence from the traditional counterculture of the 1970s, for which political resistance was a key trait. However, when they did take political positions, they positioned themselves as

a resistive force— even taking on their own sponsors, in the case of *Penny Arcade*. Therefore, while the legacies of the traditional mainstream and countercultural comics in the 1950s-1970s have not entirely vacated the comic book industry, they cannot be cleanly applied to the comic book industry of today.

### **Study Limitations**

This study utilized a very small sample size of comics. Though each comic had wide resonance with audiences, they cannot speak for the entire industry. Whether or not the specific comics reviewed align with traditional conceptions of mainstream or counterculture does not indicate whether the rest of the comics within that category also fit these conceptions. It only indicates whether comics that had wide resonances with audience possessed traditionally mainstream or countercultural characteristics. It is entirely possible that less popular comics in each category were more politically subversive than the ones reviewed, for instance.

This study evaluated how various comics fit into the traditional mainstream and traditional counterculture, necessitating the distillation of “mainstream” and “counterculture” into a neat binary. In reality, however, the relationship between these concepts is much more complex. This paper does not claim that the binary interpretation of mainstream and counterculture is correct, nor does it claim that each comic studied perfectly fits that binary, but instead uses disputable definitions of mainstream and counterculture as a basis for analysis, in order to determine whether or not these disputed definitions are still useful.

### **Opportunities for Future Research**

The scope of this research project invites further research. First, there is the opportunity to do a broader study that samples more comic books of each category rather than following a case-study format to study just a couple of the most prominent comic books in each category may provide a more holistic view on the industry. Similarly, both other forms of comic books, such as graphic novels, and other paratextual sources, such as fan discourse, can be utilized to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the broader culture within each sect of the comic book industry.

The findings of this paper, most notably that traditional countercultural and mainstream designations no longer apply to the comic book industry, inspire a logical next question: do we dispose of the mainstream and counterculture binary altogether or modify their definitions to fit our current media climate? Scholars have already undertaken significant work in redefining today's mainstream. Thus, the door is open for a similar study that evaluates the applicability of revised definitions of mainstream and counterculture to the comic book industry.

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