

Anime Convention Attendance in Response to Covid-19

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Abstract:

The following report is meant to be paired with the dataset collected through the “Anime Conventions and COVID-19” survey. Designed by Maria K. Alberto and Billy Tringali, this survey collected participants’ thoughts about their involvement in and perception of anime conventions before, during, and after the Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns. Both the dataset and associated survey questions can be found in the supplemental files paired with this report, or downloaded through the Hive, the University of Utah’s Research Data Repository. See: “Dataset for: Survey of Anime Convention Attendance in Response to Covid-19” at <https://hive.utah.edu/concern/datasets/qj72p722r>

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Introduction

The first few months of 2020 were a period of confusion and turmoil in the US, as health officials and the public alike scrambled to understand the scope of the emerging Covid-19 pandemic. Some of the earliest signs visible to most people, even those not yet keeping up with the medical side of the news, were mass event cancellations and stay-at-home orders. These two factors coincided particularly prominently with the cancellation of entertainment and popular culture events, such as concerts and fan conventions. However, the way that these cancellations were being covered by media outlets – even smaller community ones – also differed significantly from how fans and con attendees themselves were talking about them.

As fans and con-goers ourselves, the authors of this work observed these conversations happening among our own networks. Among anime fans in particular, we observed confusion, trepidation, and a range of other reactions as people expressed their beliefs about whether their favorite cons would be canceled and whether this seemed warranted in the moment of spring 2020. We also thought we might be noticing disjoints between the conversations that fans themselves were having, and then the more fragmented reporting available in larger media outlets, which only cited a handful of fan voices at most. Another important consideration here was that Spring 2020 was the first time in their history that many cons had been cancelled,^{1 2} leading to new expenses and uncertainties about whether cons could continue in the future.³ And while other mixed-methods research projects implemented during the early months of Covid-19 documented travelers' motivations for cancelling destination trips⁴ or how academic

conferences could be moved to virtual modes,⁵ fewer focused on popular culture artifacts and experiences, such as comic cons.⁶

While our dataset is freely available to anyone interested,⁷ and we have already begun drawing from our findings in it,⁸ we also offer the present report as an overview of the work completed and some preliminary conclusions.

The Survey

The “Anime Conventions and COVID-19” survey was created to collect attendees’ thoughts about their involvement in and perception of anime conventions, particularly during and after Covid-19. In order to capture these perceptions as they were occurring, we completed survey design, IRB approval, and survey launch in early spring 2021. The survey was then opened in March 2021 and closed in September 2021, after 5.5 months of data collection. It yielded over 1,100 valid responses on a variety of topics, including why attendees enjoyed cons, what safety measures they felt would be necessary to reopen cons, and how important cons were in their lives.

Ideally, we hope this dataset will provide a snapshot of a significant moment in con history and also that it can be useful to con attendees and organizers as the world moves forward with COVID-19 still very much present. While this survey provides valuable data on con attendees’ feelings concerning the COVID-19 pandemic, it also stands as a useful tool for understanding how anime fans interact with and participate at anime cons more generally. Additionally, based on the data gathered, we argue that the con experience is one that strongly effects the social lives of anime con attendees, and also that it is one that cannot be fully replicated online.

Core Information - Who Answered the Survey

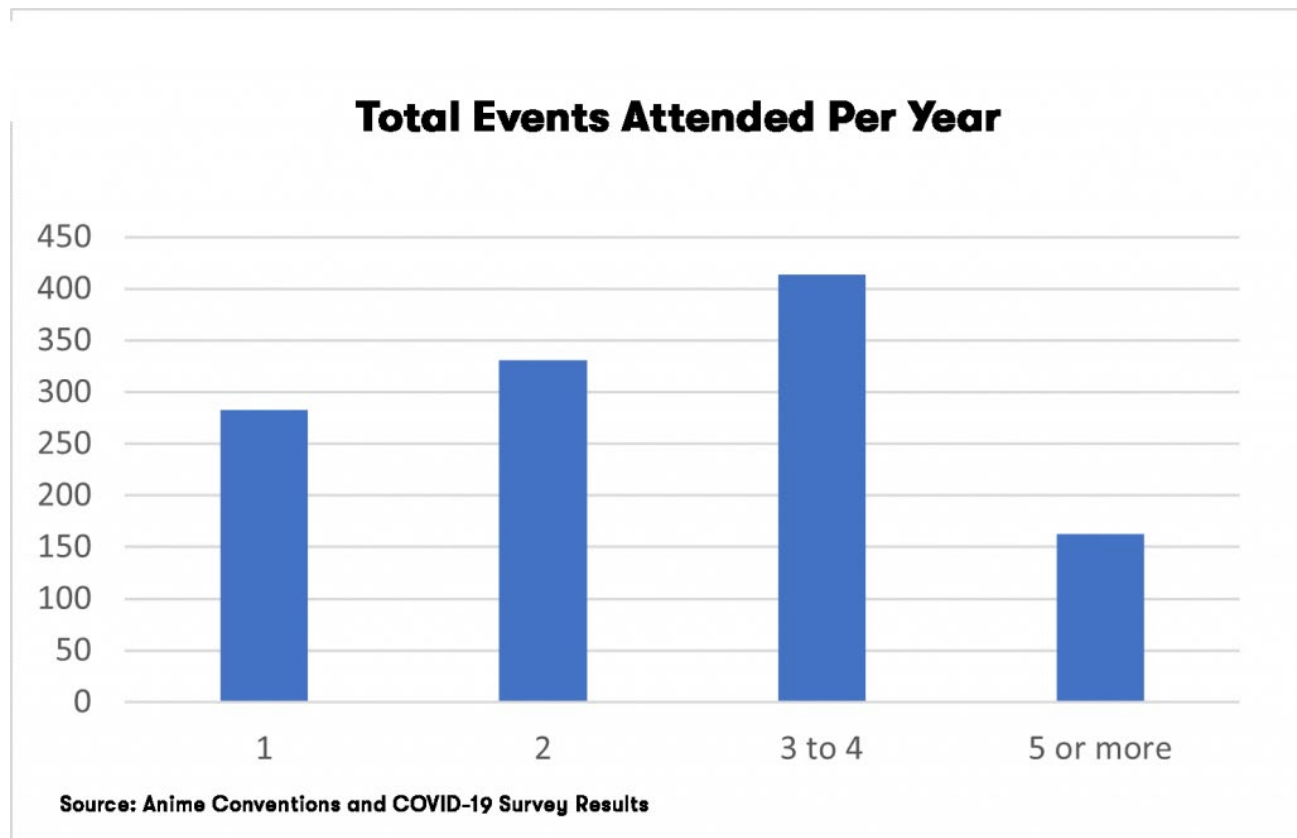


Figure 1

Attending at least 1 con and being 18 years of age or old were the only prerequisites for taking the survey. In terms of attendance, 23% of respondents (*n* 283) reported that they usually attended 1 con per year, while 28% (*n* 331) reported usually attending 2 cons per year, 34% (*n* 414) reported attending 3 or 4 cons a year, and 13% (*n* 113) reported attending 5 or more cons a year (Figure 1).

This survey collected 1,191 valid responses from respondents in the US (*n* 1112) and beyond (*n* 79). The majority of respondents, 53% (*n* 636), reported being 25-34 years of age, while 30% (*n* 361) reported being 18-24 years of age, 13% (*n* 149) reported being 35-44 years of age, 2% (*n* 25) reported being 45-54 years of age, 1.4% (*n* 17) reported being 55-64, and >0.3% (*n* 3) reported being 65 or above. These respondents

reported attending 359 individual cons in 29 countries (primarily the US, Canada, Japan, Ireland, the Philippines, and the UK) and 49 of the 50 US states (all except Wyoming). The greatest representation of respondents came from the United States (n 1141), with the top ten states represented being: California (n 511), Texas (n 221), New York (n 151), Minnesota (n 96), Illinois (n 91), Florida (n 84), Maryland (n 79), Massachusetts (n 79), Wisconsin (n 76), New Jersey (n 65). The top ten conventions most represented were Anime Expo (n 462), San Japan (n 159), Anime Los Angeles (n 90), Anime Detour (n 82), Anime Central (n 81), Otakon (n 73), Anime Boston (n 63), KatsuCon (n 61), Fanime (n 54), and Anime Milwaukee (n 51).

Convention Attendance

When asked about their outlook on returning to cons, most respondents were positive and excited:

- 62% (n 738) reported that “I’m looking forward to attending conventions again”
- 34% (n 413) reported that “I’m conflicted – I am both looking forward to and worried about attending conventions again after COVID-19”
- Just 2% (n 26) reported that “I’m not sure how I feel about attending conventions again after COVID-19”

Findings also suggest that, for the most part, con-goers felt as if virtual cons did not fill the space left open by a lack of in-person cons. 63% of respondents (n 756) reported that they did not attend virtual cons during Covid-19, while fully 87% (n 1032) reported they did not attend in-person cons at this time either. Meanwhile, only 23% (n

233) of respondents reported trying to recreate the anime con experience through cosplaying outside of cons or attending virtual gatherings that weren't either cons or con-organized. In addition, 77% ($n = 958$) indicated that they did not attempt to recreate the con experience in other ways.

Given these responses as well as those we cover more below, we suggest that it seems essentially impossible to recreate the complete con experience virtually, given how con attendees participate at these events.

Participating At Conventions

In an attempt to gauge an understanding of how attendees engaged with in-person con experiences, we asked: “How do you usually participate at the anime cons you normally attend in person?”

Response options included:

“Observing con events and/or attendees and cosplays”, “Attending panels”, “Competing in cosplay events”, “Participating in cosplay games/cosplay gameshows”, “Participating in the masquerade”, “Participating in photoshoots”, “Presenting talks on panels”, “Running own booth or event”, “Volunteering as staff”, “Browsing the 'Artists Alley'”, “Browsing the dealers room”, and “Other” (Figure 2).

This question enabled the selection of as many choices as respondents liked. While many respondents selected options that could easily be replicated in a virtual environment, such as the 75% ($n = 904$) who selected “Attending Panels”, the three most

selected options were activities that couldn't be replicated alone in front of one's computer.

- 87.5% (*n* 1042) of respondents selected “Observing con events and/or attendees and cosplays”, more colloquially known as ‘people watching’
- Nearly 86% (*n* 1020) selected “Browsing the 'Artists Alley'”
- And nearly 82% (*n* 971) selected “Browsing the dealers room”

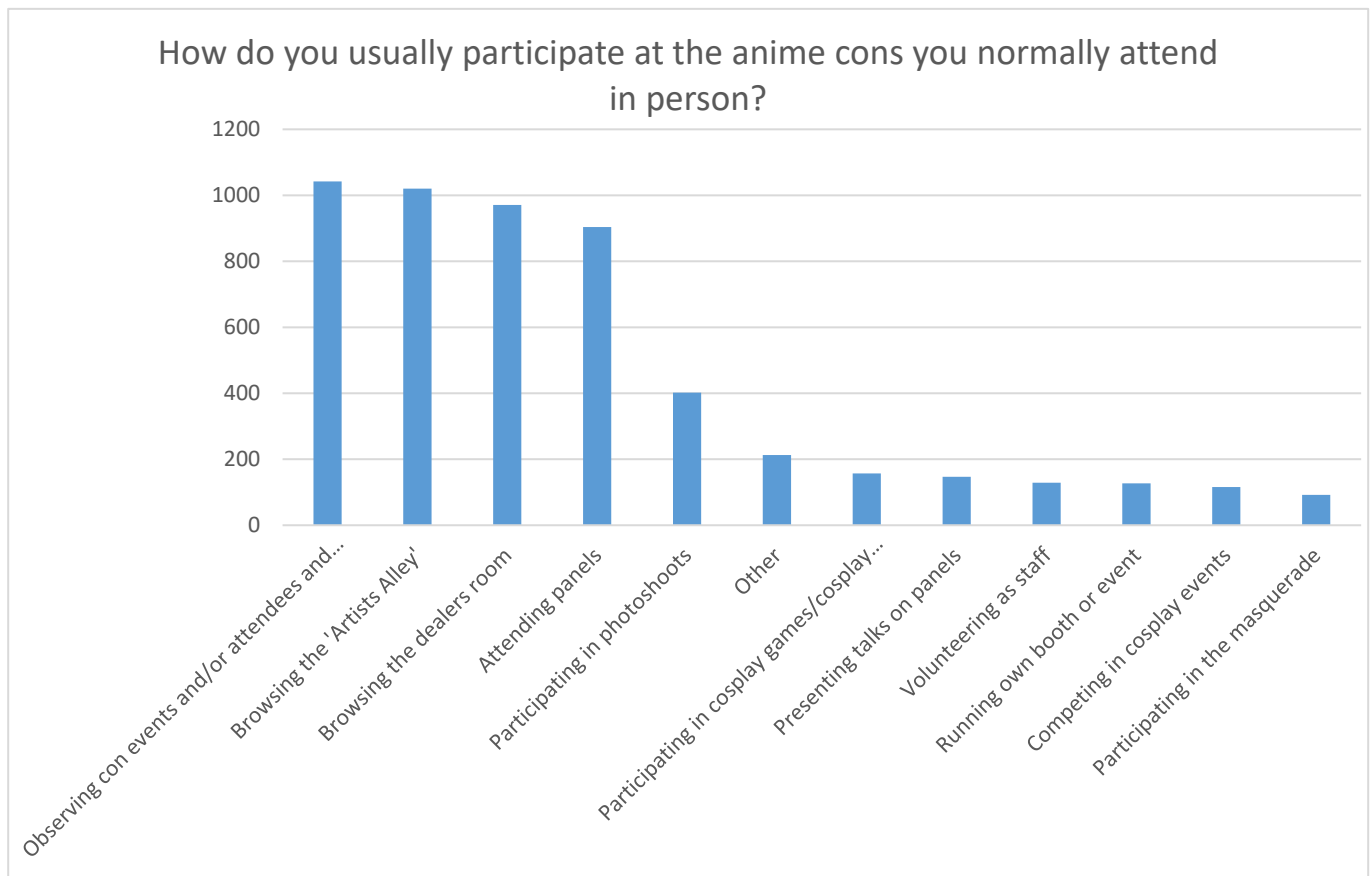


Figure 2

Combined with these questions, we also asked respondents if they cosplayed. 72% answered that they did, either frequently or infrequently. Of those who identified themselves as cosplayers, however, only about 37% stated that they were still cosplaying during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition, 69% of overall respondents reported that the lack of cons in 2020-early 2021 affected their social lives to some degree:

- 34% of respondents (*n* 408) reported that the absence affected them “somewhat”
- 35% of respondents (*n* 418) said that this affected them “noticeably”

Feedback on Event Safety Measures in the Future

As cons reopen, respondents also had the opportunity to provide their thoughts on this reopening process. The survey offered an option for no concerns, a selection of 3 specific safety measures (sanitation requirements, limited attendance, mask requirements), and “Other,” a free space in which respondents had the option to describe any additional safety measures they hoped to see. This question enabled the selection of as many choices as respondents liked.

Following these options, 81% of respondents (*n* 969) reported their support for some form of safety measures, and 62% (*n* 748) indicated interest in a combination of two or more safety measures. More specifically:

- 70% (*n* 842) indicated interest in accessible sanitation measures and sanitation requirements
- 53% (*n* 631) indicated interest in mask requirements
- 43% (*n* 511) indicated interest in limited attendance, i.e. smaller crowds
- 19% (*n* 237) selected “Other” and used this space to describe a range of preferences, including control/reduction of lines, face masks coming with

badges/passes, enforcement of mask mandates, and vaccination requirements, among others

On this portion of the survey, only 18% ($n = 222$) of respondents selected the option indicating that they preferred no safety measures. Then among this number, an even smaller but sometimes very vocal group used the “Other” space and other freeform answers across the survey to voice concerns and even outright anger about vaccine requirements.

Having seen this, we recommend awareness that, while pushback against safety precautions may be vocal, it seems to constitute a fairly small percentage of the total number of those seeking to attend cons as they reopen.

Conclusion

While virtual conventions can replicate some aspects of how anime convention attendees engage with and participate in these events, they ultimately fail to fully recreate the experience of in-person conventions. From observing attendees to browsing the dealers’ room and artists alley, the most selected pieces of convention participation were those that couldn’t be recreated virtually. Overall, attendees are eager to return with in-person convention experiences, but overwhelmingly support conventions enacting safety measures as COVID continues to be a problem for large group gatherings.

We hope that this brief report, and the dataset that pairs with it, will allow convention staff to feel more confident in implementing safety requirements for future conventions, and that implementing such requirements will not keep people from

coming back, as the experiences that anime fans get at anime conventions cannot be fully replicated elsewhere.

Acknowledgment

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Notes

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- ¹ Kelts, Roland. 2020. "Anime cons 'will never be the same' after the coronavirus." *Japan Times*. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2020/04/04/general/anime-cons-will-never-coronavirus/>
- ² Dixon, Kerry. 2020. "San Diego Comic-Con 2020 Cancelled [Update]." SDCC Unofficial Blog. <https://sdccblogger.com/2020/04/san-diego-comic-con-2020-cancelled/>
- ³ PopCultAnimeCon. 2021. "Regarding Covid-19 & PopCult AnimeCon." PopCultAnimeCon.com. <https://popcultanimecon.com/regarding-covid-19-popcult-animecon-an-update/>
- ⁴ Rachmawati, Iin, and Kumiko Shishido. 2020. "Travelers' Motivations To Travel Abroad During Covid 19 Outbreak." *International Journal of Applied Sciences in Tourism and Events* 4, no. 1, pp. 1-11. <http://dx.doi.org/10.31940/ijaste.v4i1.1772>.
- ⁵ Haji-Georgi, Maria, Xinyun Xu, and Oxana Rosca. 2021. "Academic Conferencing in 2020: A Virtual Conference Model." *Human Behavior and Emerging Technologies* 3, no. 1, pp. 176-84.
- ⁶ Woo, Benjamin, Emma Francis, and Kalervo Sinervo. 2022. "Framing the Covid-19 Pandemic's Impacts on Fan Conventions." *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 38. <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2022.2323>.
- ⁷ Alberto, Maria K., and Billy Tringali. 2021. "Dataset for: Survey of Anime Convention Attendance in Response to Covid-19." Hive.utah.edu. <https://hive.utah.edu/concern/datasets/qj72p722r>
- ⁸ Alberto, Maria K., and Billy Tringali. 2022. "Working with Fannish Intermediaries." *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 38. <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2022.2227>.

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