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Consuming and Maintaining Difference: American Fans Resisting the Globalization of Japanese Popular Culture

I'm really beginning to dislike Japanese stuff on a whole... it's constantly in my face... everywhere I go. I have committed thousands of dollars to Japanese stuff and now I feel a bit stupid for doing so. So many people are into anime it's unreal... and now the same is going to happen with rock, it's sickening. What saddens me the most is that I've been into this for well over eight years and now everyone will do it, and do it better than I ever could. (American fan of Japanese popular culture, 2006)

Monthly, massive convention halls in the United States fill with middle-class tweens, teens and young adults, who congregate to spend their weekend socializing, cosplaying (costume play)², and consuming imported Japanese goods from numerous vendors. Over the last decade, attendance at the increasing number of nationwide conventions devoted to Japanese animation has grown exponentially. The numbers reflect the steady increase of sales in anime and manga (Japanese comics) in the United States that coincides with the heightened global exchange and interest in Japan's contemporary popular culture, specifically in the sectors of animation, fashion, music and art.³ More and more anime is being broadcast on American television, whole sections devoted to manga have appeared in mega bookstores, devotees of gothic Lolita fashion are donning their Japanese imported ruffles on American boulevards, and Japanese music is slowly starting to gain an audience outside of the anime fan community as more musicians release albums abroad and embark on U.S. headlining tours. This has resulted in a growing number of subcultural groups whose adopted style, interests, and collected paraphernalia propel their identity. The anthropological examination of youth consumption and specifically its relevance to globalization and cultural identity has the potential to advance social theory. It also positions American youth, who are traditionally seen as provincial and inward looking, alongside a growing network of urban youth who are "drawn into the circle of 'global popular culture' in search of their identity and a different future for their generation" (Siriyuvasak 1).

Japanese popular culture's appropriation by and popularization in the American mass media has made its products more readily accessible and culturally readable, thus contributing to the growth in consumers. However, this blanching of the exotic has tested fan loyalty and effectively changed the dynamics and demographic landscape of fan communities. Fans' ability to construct an identity as different is being challenged by popularized notions of Japanese "cool" and negative connotations of Japanese "otaku" (fanatic connoisseur)⁴ that have infiltrated the American media. Internet forum boards and online journals, both places where fans openly express their opinions and make connections based on their interests, have become sites for fans to network resistance against the globalization of Japanese popular culture. Many fans are now boycotting the same items that form the basis of their identity. This paper seeks to examine resistance to the globalization or "Americanization" of Japanese popular culture within the United States anime and Japanese rock music fandoms. While these movements express a constant struggle between fans and industrialized official culture (Fiske 47), the global dimensions and cultural implications offer insight into the social imagination of youth in a changing global consumer landscape.

THE VERY FAR EAST

Today, the global landscape is littered with images and information that overlap and disconnect from producer to consumer and the mass media's symbolic, political and ideological dimensions allows the messages it conveys to mean diverse things to different people at different times and to be shaped, re-worked, and re-formulated over time. Furthermore, traditional thinking about "areas," driven by certain conceptions of geography, civilization, and cultural coherence, are becoming obsolete as cultural expressions are predominantly mediated by electronic communication networks (Appadurai; Castells; Gupta and Ferguson; Gille and Riain; Martinez). When consumption is "one of the chief ways through which identity is established and maintained and through which it is represented to others" (Clammer 6), how is space and identification defined when studying cultural flows? Fan consumption of foreign popular culture and knowledge has the potential to highlight the social construction of global space and its influence on local identity making. Fans differ from general consumers in the sense that fans consume to intensify their identity, utilizing the appropriated information to network and define themselves against others (Fiske). In the case of foreign product consumption, fans are acquiring foreign cultural knowledge that can be used to construct an identity different from mainstream society. Space becomes a socially constructed object of the imagination, and, by understanding how social actors engage in place-making by conflating definitions
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of local, national, and global scales, researchers can then begin to understand these constructed identities.

Japanese media offers American youth a chance to explore a “parallel modernity,” while providing an outlet to reflect on their own culture. While Arjun Appadurai (1996) uses the term “alternate modernities” to link media flows with the movement of people, the experience of parallel modernities is not linked with the needs of relocated populations. Instead, the term was constructed by Brian Larkin (1997) to describe a populace who participates in the imagined realities of other cultures as part of their daily lives. The concept of imagination offers insight into the “complicated identifications of audiences and cultural forms that cross expected racial, cultural and national lines” (Larkin 410). For American fans, the recognition of Japanese cultural products as “Japanese” is paramount because the connection of place, linking them to a real Japan, is a necessary means of identity construction. According to Anne Allison (2006), “the j-craze is both ‘Eastern’ and not, a globalized fantasy whose intermixture of the foreign and familiar is not localizable in/to any one place” (16). However, she goes on to say that “equally important is knowing that this all comes from a real place: from a Japan that actually exists” (16). While youth are constructing their identities by appropriating products of Japanese popular culture, they are also consciously envisioning an imaginary landscape of Japan. It is this “Japan,” a complex, imagined “parallel modernity” formed through centuries of East-West discourse (Moeran 1-2) that empowers fan identification. However, the concepts surrounding Japanese popular culture are not exclusively owned by fans and must constantly be redefined. Fan resistance movements display youth’s social engagement in place-making through consumption practices and the malleability of global imaginaries for the purposes of identity construction.

THE ANIME PURIST

Resistance movements that argue against the globalization of Japanese popular culture can define this socially constructed space as fans try to maintain the product’s relevance to their identity as it is mass produced, popularized and Americanized into mainstream culture. The “constant struggle between fans and the industry, in which the industry attempts to incorporate the tastes of the fans, and the fans to ‘excorporate’ the products of the industry” (Fiske 47) takes on new cultural dimensions in global exchange. Japanese animation and other foreign media products are susceptible to processes of “global localization” or “glocalization,” which refers to the process of adapting a global product for a specific market. This is a global market strategy employed by such corporations as Sony, which does not seek to impose a standard image, but instead tailors to the demands of local markets. Before anime series are released on American television, their scripts need to be translated from Japanese to English, dialogue has to be adjusted to fit accepted cultural norms, scenes are censored or cut accordingly, and background music and sound effects are altered to appeal to the local audience. Translations of these products are influenced by sociolinguistic and cultural differences between Japan and the United States, as well as by political, economic and historical discourses that circulate between Japan and the West. For example, cartoons are often delegated as children’s entertainment in the United States (Napier 245), thus many anime series which may appeal to a broader Japanese audience are heavily censored for America’s young. Conscious of these changes and marketing strategies, many fans are concerned with anime being misunderstood and devalued; thus they fight to uphold the media’s “authenticity.” Authenticity and the argument of “complexity” and “subtlety” of fan objects are often used as criteria for discrimination by fans (Fiske 36). American fans of Japanese popular culture, however, quantify this with a belief that Japanese media captures an aesthetic, expressive, or spiritual sensibility deeply linked to what is believed to be culturally unique about Japan and its people (Allison 20). It is this ideologically defined difference from American media and culture through which fans can legitimate their personal investment (Grossberg 60); an investment which many feel is threatened by globalization.

According to a self-defined “grassroots organization” called Animation Liberation, “United States Imperialism” is polluting the intent of anime and manga by censoring, dubbing and over selling it. Members believe Japanese media is an art form and not a commodity. Through forum discussion boards, member-written essays, and organized convention panels, members ask fans to boycott large corporations that are monopolizing its distribution. Their hopes of initiating a countercultural movement where individuals, not corporations, have representational influence, symbolizes the lack of control fans feel over how their interests are marketed. Animation Liberation’s vocalized discontent with American consumer culture echoes the opinions of larger segments of the fandom that view their consumption of Japanese popular culture as a better alternative. According to those surveyed on two popular online anime forums (Anime Nation and Anime Boards), “the quality and content of anime is better, more diverse, and more mature than that of typical American cartoons,” they prefer “the originality, the deep and complex plots and animation detail compared to American cartoons and Hollywood movies,” and argue that “anime covers a lot of genres and subject matter not found elsewhere.” This celebrated “otherness” of anime often expands, however, into a belief that American media has become so saturated by mediocre talent that it can no longer stand up to Japanese forms. The unique quality and variation of Japanese media is beyond acceptance or understanding, making the Japanese creators more innovative and open to the unusual. Those who prefer their anime subtitled instead of dubbed, heavily criticize English voice actors for lacking the skills of Japanese voice actors who, according to fans, are more emotionally connected and aware of the media’s value. According to one male anime fan at the 2006 Anime Expo in Southern California, “Japanese seiyuu (voice actors) do a better job of being the characters they portray, while American voice actors always sound like they are just reading a script; Japanese seiyuu put far more emotion and pride into their work.” Moreover, it is a lack of a relationship with “mass-produced” American popular culture that factors into the belief of having discovered something more “real” or “authentic” in Japanese popular culture. Fans are rejecting a heavily commercialized media in favor of what they see as a purer expression of culture.

THE SPECIALIZED FAN

As a “parallel modernity,” Japanese media must embody a natural, untainted ideal, opposite an American corporate-run, capitalist-driven media industry. It is this given difference between the two industries and cultures that is necessary for fan disassociation from others. But as anime attracts more fans, internally the fandom is dividing. While some wear “Otaku pride” on their t-shirts, others are feeling anxious about a negative stereotype of otaku circulating in the American press and want to distance themselves from new fans. Even Animation Liberation suggests supporting smaller, local anime conventions over
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large-scale, established ones. Many fans have broadened their interests outside of anime and manga by studying Japanese and seeking more knowledge of Japanese society. They factor this into future life endeavors as they dream of living in Japan, aspiring to become manga artists, video game designers, rock musicians, and even stand-up comedians. For them, Japan has become the land of opportunity outside of the broken American dream. Fans embrace Japanese media’s “cultural odor,” that for them has become a “cultural fragrance” or a symbolic image of the country of origin (Iwabuchi 27). These fans not only establish an identity against mainstream American society, but also against other fans as they filter their interests and relate their identity to less globally-recognized forms of Japanese media.

One such media to gain attention by many American fans is Japanese popular music, which rode on the coattails of anime soundtracks and fan’s already inherent interest in Japanese language. Fans immediately connected Lo music by studying Japanese and seeking more knowledge of Japanese society. They filter energy on their appearance as well as music by utilizing outrageous costumes, makeup, stylized hair, and androgynous stage play to stimulate their audience. While, in the United States, the trend for glam rock and associated new wave artists shifted in the early 1990s due to the advent of grunge, in Japan, visual bands continued to evolve, garnering mainstream appeal and reflecting the growing trends in male beauty aesthetics. Bijuuru kei musicians appear to have stepped out of the pages of girls’ manga onto the music stage, explaining the initial attraction of many female anime fans. Though no longer in Japan’s limelight, many underground bands are being invited to perform at anime conventions in the United States and accepting offers from American record labels to officially release their albums overseas.

Similar to anime fans who promote the difference and preferred style of anime over American media. Fans surveyed online (Busta Jrock Forum) describe it as “innovative,” “original,” “diverse,” and superior to current American or Western music. The nature of the genre, with staged androgyny and beautiful men, also appears to rebel against traditional Western conventions. Many fans interchange the fantasy of stage performance and what Laura Miller calls “Japanese masculine beauty” (152), for a construed reality of freer Japanese social practice, identifying it as an ideal alternative to American homophobic society. Like their anime brethren, many Jrock fans also lack a relationship with their country’s mainstream popular culture. One female teen describes her preference for Jrock as follows:

I hate what’s popular in our country right now. I can’t stand it. Rap: partying, getting women, drugs, cars, money...Rock: everyone is just the same, yeah, sometimes catchy, but the lyrics are completely shallow...With jrock, I know they’re not singing about stupid stuff like that.

Access to official and unofficial material circulated and translated by an extensive digital network allows fans to acquire special information that goes beyond knowing the stage names of each musician to identifying their blood type, favorite food, favorite brand of cigarettes, as well as their personality. While the “authenticity myth” allows fans to identify with artists who are physically and culturally distant (Fiske 36; Stevens 61-2), it has also factored into the belief that Japanese musicians are more personally invested in producing their own material, as Japanese voice actors are to anime. One fan said she feels “a genuine connection with each band member. They’re so human and their personalities are so believable and completely unmanufactured like many popular English speaking bands.” Josephine Yun, a Jrock fan and author of the first English language report on rock acts in Japan, Jrock, Inc. (2005), explains in an interview for the San Francisco Chronicle that “with Japanese musicians, you see them goofing around in their off-hours, kicking each other in the butt. If you ask them their favorite food, they’ll tell you, and it’ll be hamburgers, or whatever. Something normal... In Japan, they recognize that entertainers are normal people who just happen to have an extraordinary job” (as quoted by Yang). This commodification of the human persona provides a real emotional connection for fans. It fills a cultural lack, provides social prestige, self-esteem (Fiske 33), and offers a sense of knowing and belonging to another, albeit imagined, culture. Many fans are using this connection as an outlet to express grievances with American capitalist society.

While Jrock has yet to reach the same mainstream recognition as anime, it has not stopped many fans from worrying about its future distribution. In 2006, a small group of American Jrock fans named Visual Kaisen put together an online petition “to keep jrock out of America.” Developed in response to negative press surrounding the Japanese rock band Dir en grey’s headlining tour of the United States, Visual Kaisen petitioned to protect Japanese musicians and their music from the American mainstream. Their concern was how the press related the band’s surprising underground support to the same trend factory that made anime popular; calling it a passing fad or flavor of the month without much praise for the band’s music [Burke; Stingley; Titus]. Part of Visual Kaisen’s petition to the American Media reads as follows:

Jrock is not meant for the American masses, who will only destroy the delicate art of the music. The population of America is one who, time and time again, has taken original, beautiful things and literally destroyed them, to make a watered-down, disgusting, mass-produced imitation of original inspiration. They create stereotypes, identity problems, and a shallow, unoriginal youth that is so used to following trends that they forget how to think for themselves.15

While the petition was short-lived as fans questioned its effectiveness, the emotions echo a larger undercurrent of fan opinions. What surfaces is an uncomfortable relationship with “Westernization,” and a desire to be situated above it by consuming against it.

For the fan who is quoted at the beginning of this paper, her greatest fear was realized when Dir en grey t-shirts started being sold at the trendy alternative mall store Hot Topic, which already carries anime related goods. “Somehow, I don’t feel special anymore,” she remarked while waiting in line to see Dir en grey’s first U.S. live at the Wiltern Theater in Los Angeles. At the core of this identity crisis is a fear of being mistaken as “one of those faceless fangirl anime kids because I’m sporting something Japanese.” Japanese popular culture’s accessibility has changed the experience of buying merchandise from being an exotic “adventure” of going to a Japanese ethnic enclave in large cities, to walking down the demarcated aisle in the local Sam Goodie or Best Buy. For her, the nostalgia of the days
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when Japanese popular culture "used to be an expression of who a person is" has changed into something "petty," thus losing its relevance for youth trying to differentiate themselves from mainstream society.

NEW YOUTH COSMOPOLITANISM

Products carry with them cultural codes and today "culture" and especially "cultural difference" have become acceptable products for consumption in contemporary society (Goldstein-Gidon 161). While the globalization of Japanese cultural products confers upon Japan a new "soft power" to inspire the dreams and desires of others by projecting images about its culture that are broadly appealing (Allison 17), these images compact with those already present in the West's imagination. Japanese popular culture is produced in Japan, globally distributed, locally marketed, and personally consumed by foreign fans. As social actors, fans are "living the global" while being grounded in the local (Gille and Rain 271), and it is this dialogue between flows of ideas, products and imagination that constructs the global world.

While many youth are initially drawn to the product by Japanese "cool" marketing, it is by connecting their identity to the culture of origin, an imagined "parallel modernity," that signifies their status as fans. For fans that regret and try to resist the globalization of Japanese popular culture, the heightened marketing of Japanese "cool" is threatening and has resulted in the "Americanization" and devaluation of the products as culturally Japanese. The object’s potency as a unique expression of identity is lost to mass culture. Fan opinions and viewpoints, such as the idealization of Japan and Japanese popular culture, highlight youth’s discontent with American capitalism and a continued Western imagining of "Japan" and its people. As fans seek to control their identity by resisting globalization, they are also ironically participating in its process. Agency remains, however, in the form of imagination as fans interpret and rework "Japan" into their social landscape.

The everyday practices of youth offer insight into future consumption as American youth may be forming the basis of a new type of cosmopolitanism that requires searching beyond the boundaries of the nation-state for alternative elements to redefine in order to define themselves. Fantasy is a global social practice and the United States is only one node of a complex transnational construction of imaginary landscapes (Appadurai 31). It is questionable whether American marketing can adjust to this new global outreach of its young consumers who continually long for something different. Cultural difference also remains a potent factor in consuming desires. Rather than contributing to the dismantling of problematic geographical or geocultural categories of East and West, these new transnational networks of popular culture reinforce their hold over our ability to imagine a global space (Yoshimoto 54), and notions of the "Other," in opposition to a "Self," are maintained in an increasingly globalized world.

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Notes

1. The fan quotations throughout this paper are from interviews and surveys conducted in 2006; See Laura B. Beltz, "Consuming & Creating Difference: The Underground Anime and Jrock Movement among American Youth” (MA thesis, California State University, Northridge, 2007).
2. Cosplay is short for "costume play;" many fans dress up as their favorite character while attending conventions.
3. Tsustomo Sugita, the director of the Marubihi Research Institute, figured that Japan’s cultural exports which include music, books, magazines, films, handicrafts, collectibles, patent royalties, and performances amounted to $15 billion in 2002, which is up from $5 billion in 1992.
4. An otaku, a Japanese type of social misfit, translates roughly into "nerd" or "fanatic connoisseur" of items including, but not limited to, anime and manga. In Japan, otakus exhibit anti-social behavior that centers on consumption. The import of anime in the United States has garnered otaku attention in the media. According to Koichi Iwabuchi, "How "Japanese" is Pokemon?" in Pikachu’s Global Adventure: The Rise and Fall of Pokemon, ed. Joseph Tobin (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2004), 53-79, the media’s commentary is coupled with anti-Japan sentiment showing that "the fear in the West is of contamination and contagion; importing Japanese anime and computer games will turn Western youth into otakus" (59). Many American fans are often unaware of the negative connotations of otaku in Japan and adopt the term with a sense of pride in their community.
6. Read more about Animation Liberation’s fight at their Web page: http://www.animationliberation.com/.
7. According to Laura Miller (Beauty Up: Exploring Contemporary Japanese Body Aesthetics [Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2006], 152), male beauty trends among young Japanese men, such as eyebrow shaping, skin care, and a heightened concern of their status as aesthetic objects for women, represents a "shift to beautification as a component of masculinity;" it also symbolizes a consumption-driven identity that rejects their father’s mode of masculinity: a masculinity that was de-eroticized in the corporate culture of the post-war period (2006, 126-127). Bijuuur kei can be seen as a heightened display of this consumption driven beauty interest, having identical roots in cultural production as girls’ culture, especially shonen manga (comics featuring beautiful young men). Several Japanese male musicians appear to have stepped out of the pages of girls’ manga onto the music stage, which Miller dubs as "living manifestations of readers’ fantasy men" (2006, 152).
8. In my 2006 study, female anime fans accounted for half of my respondents; while Jrock fans were 85% female.
9. Dir en grey has had an auspicious career since their formation in 1997; their style and music has gone through many stages of evolution and while having influenced bijuuur kei, they no longer consider themselves under that genre. They have been one of the few Jrock bands to respond to a growing interest worldwide. In 2004, the band created a "Special Offer" program for overseas fans to set up travel to Japan while providing tickets for them to go to a live. Also in 2004, Dir en grey’s official website became bilingual, with an English section allowing access to news, events, fanmail, and forum rights unlike before. Dir en grey’s first overseas endeavor was in Europe, playing at several rock festivals in Berlin (Rock Am Ring and Rock im Park) in May and June of 2005. They continued with a show in Paris and later Belgium. Since their first headlining tour of the United States in 2006, they have toured with the American hard rock band Korn, as a featured band at the second incarnation of the Family Values Tour, and then returned the states adding numerous cities to their ticket. They are one of the few Jrock bands to focus on promoting to a mainstream American audience outside the anime convention arena.
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Although only garnering 87 signatures, the petition sparked fan discussion across the internet database from large forums to individual blogs, as fans questioned the fate of Dir en Grey and Jrock in America: To view Visual Kalsen’s Online Petition, go to http://www.PetitionOnline.com/vkalsen/petition.html. Their Web page can also be viewed here, http://www.visualkalsen.2truth.com/.

Works Cited


