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Curating the Transcultural Fandom through the Otaku Craze: Case of Japanese Manga and Anime

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ABSTRACT: *Transculturalism originates from the desire to identify mutual interests and universal values transcending cultural and geographical boundaries. Fandoms serve as spaces fostering camaraderie and interaction among individuals sharing common interests, often facilitating connections with people one might not encounter otherwise. Hence, considerable research in transcultural fan studies explores the junctures of different national cultures and their respective customs. These worldwide shifts are significantly impacting local communities. Research on fan communities that cross borders is as varied as the subjects they investigate, stemming from various academic interests. This diversity makes it challenging to define precisely what falls under the umbrella of "transcultural fandom studies." This research aims to investigate this enigma and examine how fans' specific cultural backgrounds influence their selection of cross-border fan objects. It focuses on examining the culture surrounding anime enthusiasts, commonly referred to as "otaku." Several factors contribute to the selection of this particular cultural group for analysis, including the increasing popularity of Japanese anime and manga in recent times, and the limited existing research on this specific fanbase, and its personal relevance to the life experiences. As a result, fandoms that cross borders are pushed to the margins of fandom studies, along with the valuable perspectives they provide on how fans understand and engage with both media and each other in an increasingly globalized media environment. This suggests that a passionate interest in fandom can sometimes transcend national, regional, and geographical boundaries.*

KEYWORDS: Japanese Anime/Manga, Otaku, Transculturalism, Transcultural Fandom

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1. Introduction

The methods and procedures by which ideas and establishments of transcultural occurrences gather and maintain momentum.In contemporary times, the term "transcultural" likely stands out as a crucial and extensively debated conceptual term within the humanities and social sciences. In the meanwhile, transculturalism suggests that cultures evolve through ongoing interactions, and within media fandom, there's a notable encouragement for creative expression and artistic output among its members. Engaging with media as fans becomes a communal endeavor, fostering the formation of communities where individuals can freely express themselves.

There's limited consensus on the exact definition of 'transcultural' fandom. Sandra Annett (2011) suggests that 'transculturalism' is essentially the cultural aspect of transnationalism, where 'nation' and 'culture' often overlap (p.164-188). This ambiguity is what makes the term useful, allowing it to serve as a tool for exploring various fan practices across borders, from local communities to global scales. This phenomenon demonstrates how online fandom, empowered by social media, enriches cultural exchange and influences the dynamics of cross-cultural popularity circulation. This topic offers rich grounds for academic exploration and investigation due to its departure from another influential cultural medium, Japanese comics or manga. It constructs intricate narrative realms and possesses a widespread appeal that transcends national, racial, and age boundaries.

Once niche, manga and anime, Japan's comics and animation, are now global superstars, with their fame ever-growing. This paper dives into these superstars, exploring how their unique visuals travel the world. More than just fun, manga and anime act as cultural ambassadors, showcasing Japan to a captivated international audience. This study argues that they can be bridges to understanding Japanese culture as an art form, loved by a diverse fanbase, including the hardcore "otaku" fans.

2. Transcultural Fandom Dynamics :

Fan culture, also known as fandom, refers to the formation of communities united by their mutual appreciation for various elements of popular culture, including literature, cinema, television, music groups, sports, and more. These communities epitomize participatory cultures. Fans also acknowledge fanchants as a crucial aspect of the song and actively strive to memorize them, whether through intentional practice or casual listening. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the realms of art and popular culture, showcasing the interconnectedness of cultures in our globalized era. These communities exemplify participatory cultures, where fans engage with media as a social endeavor, facilitating the creation of their own expressive communities.

Additionally, various fan communities have marginalized those who adhere to traditional capitalist norms, labeling them as "others." Those who excessively consume products are seen as forfeiting their authenticity by reinforcing capitalist structures, thus distancing themselves from dedicated fans. Tasha Turk (2014) has explored fandom as a "gift economy," where transactions aren't driven by money but by giving, receiving, and reciprocating. She suggests that this system facilitates the experience and study of fandom as a community, or rather a network of interconnected communities, rather than merely a vast and fluctuating group sharing a common interest (pp.1-8).

Over and above that, enthusiasts of manga and anime engage with and personify the characters and storylines depicted in these forms of media. Similar to fans of other genres such as comics, films, or television shows, manga and anime enthusiasts craft costumes resembling characters from these mediums and participate in conventions or contests. Both Napier (2007) and Iwabuchi (2001) emphasize the significance of technology in enhancing the accessibility of global media such as manga and anime for consumers (Hernández-Pérez, 2019). Previously, fans had to endure the arduous and time-consuming task

of dubbing anime onto videotapes and then sharing them at clubs or conventions. However, advancements in technology now provide fans with quicker and more affordable access to manga and anime, enabling them to effectively compete with other forms of media available to consumers (Lee, 2011). Thus, a transcultural fan community is a group where individuals from various national, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds connect through a shared interest in animation. These members build relationships despite their diverse social and historical contexts, addressing and navigating any conflicts that arise from their differences.

From this viewpoint, manga and anime offer consumers an intriguing blend of familiarity and novelty. They stand out due to their unique incorporation of visual style, narrative structures, and character development, setting them apart from other forms of comic art or animation. When these products are disseminated, the lines between foreign and local become blurred through processes like translation, adaptation, and re-presentation. As asserted by Iwabuchi (2002), consumers of manga and anime aren't necessarily engaging with Japanese culture specifically; rather, they connect with the medium itself, irrespective of its origins. Analyzing the reception of manga and anime beyond Japan underscores the complex negotiation of cultural and national identities that unfolds when these texts are shared globally (Iwabuchi,2002) In this exchange, modifications inevitably occur, reflecting the dynamics of today's interconnected media landscape.

The field of fan studies has been acclaimed for its focus on the distinctive activities of users, gamers, crafters, and artists. Although fans can be characterized as active audiences, this characterization fails to capture the unique aspects of their cultures. There are significant distinctions in the ways audiences engage and in how their participation manifests critically, creatively, or socially in different regions, such as Japan (Takahashi, 2010). Moreover, thus far, numerous investigations into fan culture have prioritized the digital sphere, neglecting offline fan communities. Fandom underscores the inadequacy of conventional notions of ownership in contemporary media, highlighting the complexities of audience engagement.

Notably, Transcultural fandom focuses more on cross-cultural communication and identification rather than on mobility, extending into cultural values and virtues even though it remains a subculture on a global scale. Fandom scholars Chin and Morimoto (2013) propose a new theory in fandom studies that shifts away from a nation-centric approach. This theory aims to explore the intricacies of transcultural fandom, which emerges from an "affective affinity" that attracts fans to transcultural objects, transcending linguistic, cultural, and geographical barriers and enhancing transcultural identification (pp.92-108).

Thus, Hills (2002b) argues that in his study of transcultural otaku fandom in the United States and the United Kingdom, fans from both countries share a sense of devaluation associated with the otaku identity, fostering a sense of transcultural identification. The fascination with Japanese culture among international manga enthusiasts has challenged their sense of national identity, as they often prioritize the unique aspects of manga culture over their own. He also observes that Western fans tend to downplay their national identity while cultivating a broader interest in Japan and Japanese culture through their engagement with manga and anime. This process legitimizes manga/anime fan culture as transcultural (cited in Hills, 2017, pp.856-883). Fans uphold the cultural values of this fandom by highlighting national differences, or elements of 'otherness,' thereby blending 'self' and 'otherness' into a new identity of otaku.

Consequently, Hills (2002) contended that the term otaku, in its transcultural usage, acts as a "shifter": a dynamic symbol that simultaneously eroticizes and legitimizes the self as the other and the other as the self (p.13). As previously stated, a fan is an ardent admirer of something or someone, such as films, books, games, celebrities, anime, and manga. Fans now have the ability to connect and converse in virtual spaces like Twitter, Facebook, and blogs.They can engage with thousands of other fans simultaneously and receive instant feedback.

3. Identifying Otaku Culture

It is a Japanese term that refers to individuals with intense interests, especially in areas like anime, manga, video games, or computers. This subculture is a significant focus of various anime, manga, documentaries, and academic studies. It emerged during the anime boom following the release of series such as *Mobile Suit Gundam*, eventually expanding into events like Comic Market. Interestingly, Otaku culture has also been viewed as an escape from the nanpa culture, though , this term "otaku" can carry a negative connotation, influenced by stereotypes of otaku as social misfits and media coverage of Tsutomu Miyazaki, the "Otaku Murderer," in 1989. This discrimination was particularly strong from 1989 to 1996. However, studies from 2013 indicate that the term has become less derogatory, with more people in Japan and globally now identifying as otaku. Even, its usage has evolved to encompass a broader spectrum, celebrating passionate enthusiasts across various hobbies and interests. The vibrant Otaku culture offers important insights into Japanese aesthetics, societal norms, and economic dynamics. Some scholars attribute the rise of otaku culture to the 'media mix' approach used by Japanese animation studios and manga publishers.

Anime companies like Bandai and Toei started making cartoons, movies, toys, and comics all based on the same characters. This helped make anime hugely popular, with shows like *Dragon Ball*, *Naruto* and *Pokémon* becoming international hits. Today, although some people still see anime fans namely ‘the Otaku’ as weird, it's a respected part of worldwide culture. There's even a new kind of anime fan, the "light otaku," who enjoys anime casually rather than being super obsessed. Many famous anime series, like Attack on Titan, and ‘One Piece wouldn't be as big without this giant fanbase.

The economic benefits of otaku culture have also been a significant topic of discussion. Academics have used the concept of otaku to identify Japanese fans who invest considerable effort in gaining knowledge, seeking closeness, and engaging in enjoyable consumption related to cultural phenomena (Ikeguchi,2018,246-259).Impressively ,Otaku connect with fellow enthusiasts both online and in person, through chat rooms and at conventions. They create a variety of content including fan art, fan sites, fanfiction, doujinshi, music videos, cosplay costumes, models, and set replicas. Additionally, they gather, share, and distribute information and items related to their interests, sometimes generating enough influence to affect the industries producing the original content.

In Japanese scholarship, Hiroki Azuma controversially argued that otaku are engrossed in databases, a mindset reflected in the structures and circulation of the Japanese media mix. By focusing on specific elements (such as trains, robots, and anime characters), exchanging information about these elements, and influencing the creation of new media with various database combinations, Azuma’s perspective on otaku highlights their dedicated pursuit of knowledge and enjoyment in assemblage. Otaku are frequently seen as a youth crisis and a sign of societal issues that demand careful analysis and remedy. Simultaneously, they are celebrated as trendsetting consumers who are attuned to Cool Japan.

Furthermore, it's crucial to recognize that otaku activities operate under a distinct copyright framework compared to other fan behaviors, adding another layer of complexity to their study. Many self-identified otaku in the West participate in activities such as fansubbing, which helps make content more accessible across cultures. As to argues, "Fansubbers are filling a unique void in transnational connection by providing a high value function of translation and localization," thereby integrating Japanese content into local contexts, increasing the popularity of certain franchises, and fostering further otaku networks of creation, circulation, and distribution (Jenkins ,2012, p. 3). Just as the term "fan" has evolved in the English language, "otaku" has similarly transformed within Japanese. This blending of terminology complicates the task of navigating identity politics. However, recognizing that "otaku" is a highly versatile term, potentially even more so than "fan," allows us to appreciate the significance of context, particularly in transcultural interactions. Additionally, there is a

concern that Otaku culture overly sexualizes female characters, perpetuating harmful gender stereotypes. Moreover, there is criticism about cultural appropriation and the absence of cultural context in the international consumption and production of Otaku-related media.

Even, globalization has made the term "otaku" well-known in both popular culture and English language scholarship. Addressing otaku, much like many issues in fan studies, demands careful consideration of lifestyle, the influence of media in daily life, and the worldwide movement of capital and culture. It is essential to understand that otaku, along with any study of them, is intrinsically complex, interrelated, and global in nature.

4. Global Manga & Anime:

In recent years, the global media landscape has witnessed a swift expansion of manga and anime, sparking considerable curiosity about the mechanisms driving this phenomenon. Manga and anime blend elements of both novelty and familiarity, bridging foreign and domestic cultures as well as traditional and contemporary influences across various dimensions. Over time, they've showcased their ingenuity and adaptability, from their unique artistic styles to the development of engaging and meaningful storylines. These forms of media represent a fusion of Japanese artistic traditions and Western comic art, evolving into distinct hybrid creations.

The analysis utilizes theories from media anthropology, fan studies, and consumption subcultures to comprehend the success of Japanese animation in a country where most foreign media have not gained traction. Many enthusiasts began watching anime to express their identities. Anime's allure stemmed from the supportive digital community available even in isolated areas and its distinction from mainstream entertainment. Anime and manga became popular in the US not just because they are cool, but because they create a strong sense of belonging for fans. This is especially surprising because foreign entertainment wasn't always such a hit. The significance of the anime fan community lies in its demonstration of how a Japanese subculture of consumption was embraced and adapted by American fans. What sets Japanese pop culture apart is its remarkable capacity to cross cultural boundaries. People from diverse backgrounds and nationalities can enjoy the appeal of *Hello Kitty*, the fascination of *Mario*, and the enchanting universe of *Pokémon.*

Notably, scholars have observed that manga employs a composite, cinematic narrative style, utilizing integrated frames to convey the storyline. Unlike US comics, which often rely on captions or descriptions, manga employs speech bubbles of various sizes and shapes, alongside auditory onomatopoeia in different fonts, to evoke atmosphere and emotional intensity. Additionally, character depictions seamlessly transition from realistic to 'super-deformed' or cartoony, reflecting shifts in emotional states. These conventions serve as versatile tools to introduce various dimensions, perspectives, and states of being into the narrative. The widespread love for manga in Japan has spurred numerous manga series to be transformed into anime, contributing to the solidification of its distinctive art style as a key characteristic of the genre. The incorporation of vivid hues and elaborate designs has rendered anime visually captivating to global audiences.

Anime, unlike manga, has the potential to appeal to broader demographics, particularly when supported by prominent production studios or distributors. Over the years, there has been a noticeable surge in both critical recognition and promotional efforts surrounding anime movies and TV shows. Initially, foreign audiences were introduced to anime primarily through television broadcasts, primarily due to the relatively low licensing costs compared to the high artistic value (Hernández-Pérez, 2019). Osamu Tezuka, revered as the "godfather of anime," is acknowledged for transforming the genre by elevating storytelling complexity and character depth. His renowned creations like *Astro Boy* and *Black Jack* laid the groundwork for contemporary anime.

Anime is currently widely acclaimed around the world, captivating audiences everywhere. Advancements in technology accelerated animation techniques and styles, fostering a burst of creativity within the medium. From exciting adventures to touching love stories, anime offers something for everyone thanks to

its many styles. Its popularity stems from the unique combination of artistic expression, compelling narratives, and diverse themes it offers. The captivating narratives found in anime captivate audiences, keeping them engaged in the storyline and leaving them eagerly anticipating the next installment.

Significantly, anime's passionate fans aren't just watching, they're fueling its growth! Big anime gatherings, tons of fan art, and online communities all show this love for animation. Anime's influence goes beyond fun too; it's even used in teaching and selling things. Imagine all the *Sailor Moon* shirts, *Naruto* toys, or *Pokémon* games that's anime branching out and making even more fans! This mix of entertainment and marketing helps spread the word about anime and keeps the fanbase growing.

Recently, anime's growing popularity has ignited a firestorm of debate. While some hail its positive influence, others slam it for perpetuating negative stereotypes and degrading women. As anime goes global, some worry about cultural appropriation, but others stress its integration into worldwide culture. Not all anime is stereotypical, with shows like "*Cowboy Bebop*" showcasing a rich cast. Remarkably, anime fans often face misunderstanding and even prejudice. Many people view them as nerds or weirdos, which is unfortunate for two main reasons. First, it is an unfair misperception of these fans. Second, with their growing numbers, this expanding community offers significant opportunities for businesses. However, biased views toward these fans could impede marketers' ability to effectively serve them.

Anime has been deeply shaped by Japanese culture and history, blending traditional and contemporary elements. Its distinct art style features influences from Japanese graphic design, including bold lines and vibrant colors. Anime's cultural impact extends beyond the realm of art, reaching into broader societal implications. This genre has significantly influenced how international audiences perceive Japan, offering a distinctive portrayal of Japanese culture and its people. Moreover, the widespread popularity of anime has created a booming global market. Fans eagerly buy merchandise, attend conventions, and travel to Japan to immerse themselves in the genre’s origins. This high demand has also fostered partnerships between Japanese and international production companies.

In essence, manga created the foundation for major comic and animation genres in Japan (shojo, shonen, gekiga), shaping the entire pop culture landscape. While some criticize manga and anime for promoting unconventional or "mature" themes, others defend them, highlighting the existence of content for all ages. More importantly, these mediums often reflect real-world values and concerns. Additionally, anime offers a window into Japanese culture, providing a more genuine representation.

Anime fans come from all over the world, with different backgrounds and cultures. This makes it hard for researchers who study Japanese animation to understand these fan communities. These communities are like bridges between cultures, because people connect despite their differences through their love of anime. Anime fan communities offer valuable insights for scholars studying the relationships between media, texts, and audiences throughout the 20th and 21st centuries (Annett ,2011,pp.164-188). An important thing to note is that anime and manga are often shared by fans translating them unofficially (fansubs and scanlations) before official translations are available. These fan translations are usually done into English, French, and Chinese first, and then used to translate into other languages.

Typically, Anime and manga enthusiasts are highly engaged across various online platforms, including numerous news and information websites, fan communities, forums, manga and anime-themed online games, chat rooms, mailing lists, and interactive chat sites featuring manga and anime-inspired avatars, such as Gaia Online. Large events such as Anime Expo and Otakon attract thousands of attendees each year, highlighting the latest anime releases, organizing panels and workshops, and featuring cosplayers dressed as popular anime characters. Anime is booming thanks to streaming platforms and new technology. This makes it easier than ever for people to enjoy this unique style of animation, paving the way for an exciting future. The increased accessibility of anime has contributed significantly to its global popularity.

Admirers no longer have to import DVDs or rely on low-quality fan-made subtitles. They can now watch their favorite shows legally, with high-quality subtitles or dubbing available in their preferred language. Leading streaming platforms, including Crunchyroll, Netflix, Hulu, and Funimation, have made it easier to

access a diverse range of anime, from classic series to the most recent simulcast. Anime is a giant entertainment industry in Japan, raking in millions for some shows. But it's more than just money - anime has become a big part of Japanese culture, affecting everything from clothes to music to how people talk. Studios like Studio Ghibli, famous for movies like *Spirited Away* and *My Neighbor Totoro*, show how amazing animation can be. Their cartoons, drawn by hand in incredible detail and bursting with color, have won over fans and critics alike.

5. Understanding Anime/Manga's Influence beyond Japan's Borders

The global spread of anime subcultures highlights its significant impact. Anime/manga conventions, cosplay events, and fan clubs worldwide are vibrant communities where fans come together to celebrate their love of anime/manga. These gatherings foster cultural exchange and help form a distinctive identity centered around a shared love for this art. Moreover, Western animation studios and filmmakers frequently take cues from anime, incorporating its visual styles, storytelling methods, and character types into their work. This cross-cultural impact is noticeable in numerous Western works that honor classic anime by incorporating references or stylistic features. Noticeably, *Dragon Ball*, for instance, conceived by Akira Toriyama and introduced to readers in 1984, tracks the adventures of Goku and his companion Bulma as they traverse a fantastical world, honing their martial arts skills and questing for mystical "dragon balls" capable of summoning a benevolent dragon to aid them in moments of peril.

Nonetheless, manga isn't the sole wellspring of inspiration for anime. Take *Pokémon*, for instance, which achieved global success as a Nintendo video game prior to its adaptation into manga and an anime series. The series were popular among children, but faced severe criticism from some adults who condemned the violence, mediocrity, silliness, eroticism, and overall 'harmfulness' of the programs. Everything was adapted and translated to appeal to its young audience, yet distrust of foreign content, poor programming choices by broadcasters, and subpar translations led to a moral panic about manga imports for many years (Sabre, 2013,pp.95-122).

Nowadays, animation primarily airs on specialized channels, though major hits like *Naruto* were once shown on public television. Fans in their twenties to forties nostalgically recall the golden age of Japanese animation. Through this shared nostalgia, fans around the globe develop common understandings and judgments about their beloved content, creating a set of shared references accessible to all community members. These works aimed to provide a comprehensive perspective on Japanese content industries and largely achieved this goal. However, a significant issue is that they often treat anime and manga as uniform entities, encompassing a wide range of other values.

Manga and anime are also subjects of academic discussion in various non-Japanese fields. Western Businesses often capitalize on anime and manga fandom in various ways. As subcultures, they are incorporated into numerous products or services. Unlike standard products, anime and manga transcend mere commodities; they represent cultural imagery. Interestingly, the scope of anime and manga fan businesses is rapidly expanding, ranging from small themed restaurants to entire cities dedicated to anime and manga fans. The most prominent example is Akihabara, a Tokyo district known as an anime and manga hotspot. With increasing demand, companies have a prime chance to meet the needs of fans and enhance their profits, even in Europe especially France where you find a numerous places dedicated to this art included in the fashion shows.

Furthermore, anime has been featured on major American television networks since the 1960s, with shows such as *Speed Racer*, *Astro Boy*, and *Kimba the White Lion*. However, its popularity skyrocketed in the early 1980s, when a new generation of Americans discovered anime's artistic and entertainment value. The relationship between anime and American distribution companies has been inconsistent, to say the least. From Japan to the United States, and everywhere in between, anime has become a significant part of popular culture, with a large fanbase. Whether or not you are a fan, there is no denying that anime has had a significant and long-lasting impact that will continue for years to come.

Conclusion

As anime/manga continues to gain popularity in Japan and around the world, it is critical to investigate the industry's trajectory and the implications for anime's future as a cultural phenomenon. Additionally, the future of anime is significantly shaped by its dedicated fan culture. Enthusiastic fan communities have been pivotal in promoting anime/manga worldwide and have greatly influenced the industry's direction. Studying fandom in contemporary popular culture has revealed itself to be a bold and inventive subject worth exploring; the transcultural aspects of fandom are too complex to be easily summarized with generalizations.

As a result, attention in academic and popular circles tends to swing between two extremes: admiration for otaku's intense dedication to their passions and analysis of their behavior as uniquely significant. This emphasis on transcultural aspects seeks to move beyond debates about anime's Japanese nature, providing a platform for exploring its significance outside of its home country. By illustrating a series of contemporary case studies, it is suggested that manga and anime appeal to readers and viewers of all ages and genders by providing a diverse range of content to suit various interests and tastes, as well as facilitating a variety of transcultural creative practices that cross borders, blend content, and even necessitate the development of new forms of text and distribution. Whether you enjoy action-packed adventures, emotionally intense dramas, or lighthearted comedies, there is an anime/manga genre for the otaku community that will suit your tastes.

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