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Otaku: Images and Identity in Flux

Abstract

An analysis of the changing stereotypical image of the Otaku, primarily as the subculture is viewed in Japan with parallels to Otaku subculture in the United States. Also included are an examination of the subculture, the formation of its identity, and its interactions with the mainstream culture.

Keywords

Popular Culture, Japan, Identity, Subculture, Otaku, Anime, Manga, E Asian Lit & Civs, Ayako Kano, Ayako, Kano

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Otaku: Images and Identity in Flux

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A young man leaves his home to go shopping one Sunday. He takes the train to a shopping district, where he spends the better part of the day browsing, bargaining and buying. Nearing the early evening, he stops his shopping for a drink in a café, perhaps meeting some of his friends who, similarly, have chosen today to go out shopping. Perhaps the group of friends takes a few pictures, mingling a bit with the crowds filling the busy streets, before all of them head back to the main train station and catch the train to their respective homes.

Now most would find little unusual about such a description. It would seem to be a rather routine day spent shopping. But let's say that the shopping district was called Akihabara, that the café featured waitresses that wore rather particular uniforms. Let's say that in that bag there's a collection of cd's, DVD's, picture books, and figurines of characters of Japanese animation. He would have a name, be a part of a very specific Japanese subculture. He is an *otaku*. And to many Japanese, meeting one of these young men is an experience they would want to avoid. They would recoil from them, finding them weird, disgusting, perhaps even dangerous. Even today there exists still a feeling of uneasiness about *otaku*. In my own experiences, when talking to one of my Japanese acquaintances, when he related that he had visited the *otaku* 'Mecca' of Akihabara, vehemently denied to myself and his own Japanese friends that he was *otaku*. Is that it, though? Is being *otaku* simply 'bad?' More and more the old stereotypical view of *otaku* is changing, in no small part due to the fact that *otaku* culture keeps growing and growing.

What is an *otaku*? At its very basic, the *otaku* is a subculture born from the popular culture of post-war Japan. It is interesting not only as a vehicle of studying the social circumstances from which it developed but also in comparing two differing

societies. Because *otaku* is distinctive in that it has been transmitted and translated across the Pacific Ocean, existing both in word and meaning in the United States. What completed the journey and what was left behind in comparing the American and Japanese meaning and view of *otaku* go a long way in analyzing how and what things are transmitted in a cultural exchange. Not to mention the fact that this cultural exchange is a two-way street. There are elements, perhaps, of the American cultural meaning of *otaku* which have been retransmitted back to the Japan. And these have influenced the constantly changing cultural definition of the *otaku*.

Otaku is a product of popular culture, study of which raises quite a few eyebrows. Critics of the study of popular culture¹ would say that its analysis is fruitless, that the cultural products and ideals that compose popular culture of are typically short term fads, appearing quickly and disappearing just as fast. Not to mention that popular culture is rife with stereotypes and images, studies of which should take into account the general nature of such images into each and every analysis. At the same time, however, there is possibly no better tool in learning just what a society is concerned with. Popular culture is a collection of stories, narratives. “To understand the way in which these stories are told—and even more importantly, to understand the meaning of these stories—is to understand how culture, society and the individual interact.”² The nature of popular culture is one of production and consumption. Whatever is popular will be produced. That which is produced will be consumed. Capitalistic and consumerist, perhaps, but

¹ The school of thought concerning criticism of the study of mass culture typically centers around its creation as ‘mass produced by profit-minded entrepreneurs,’ its negative effects on ‘high culture,’ and its effects on its audience and the rest of society. For more information see Bernard Rosenberg and David M. White, eds., Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America and Norman Jacobs, ed., Culture for the Millions. As noted in Herbert J. Gans, Popular Culture and High Culture, (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1975): 19, 162.

² Gary Hoppenstand, “The Story of Popular Culture,” Journal of Popular Culture 37 (2003): 151.

what is popular is dependent on what a lot of what people consider important. That is why a study of *otaku* is not a wasted effort. In studying such a component of the popular culture one gets a better understanding of the society as it exists, what it concerns itself with, what it deems as necessary and important.

Otaku as a term seems to have many different layers of meanings, even limiting it just to the Japanese definition. Literal translation into English is difficult, the word having many different meanings in and of itself. The ‘o’ in *otaku* generally places the world in a kind of honorary form, and the ‘taku’ character means home. So literally *otaku* can mean a number of things, including an honorable reference to ‘home,’ ‘family,’ or ‘group’ or even ‘you.’ Its use in everyday language is rare among the younger generation of Japanese (especially the twenty-something year olds that make up most of the *otaku*), the term relating to a very formal and impersonal reference to the other speaker in the conversation.

As for its cultural meaning, this too is many-layered. Translations of the term vary, but most seem to agree that *otaku* is “exclusively male and usually in his late teens or early twenties,”³ “an obsessive enthusiast who’ll shell out for anything and everything related to his beloved hobby.”⁴ *Otaku* deals very much with obsession, a “mania...for elements that belong to a fictitious world.”⁵

The “fictitious world” in which the *otaku* choose to dwell is historically one that has been drawn or animated. That is, historically, the object of the *otaku* obsession is the fantasies of *manga*, the serialized ‘comic books’ and ‘comic strips’ that are an essential part of Japanese *masukomi* or ‘mass communication,’ and anime, the animated versions

³ “The tomorrow people: The shock of the new in Japan,” *Youth Studies Australia* 3 (1994): 53-55.

⁴ “About: Otaku,” *Xbox Nation* Jan 2005: 30.

⁵ Koji Hirano, “Ani-mania,” *Women’s Wear Daily* 2005: 60.

of manga story lines (and original works as well). As such anime and manga have very strong links with *otaku* culture, responsible not only for its creation, but for its perpetuation and characterization. For example, the studio that created the popular *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, Studio Gainax, produced a short animated OVA (original video animation) called *Otaku no Video*, which was a portrayal and manual for would-be *otaku*. It included not only an animated section, but parodies of confidential interviews with *otaku*.⁶

Anime and manga themselves have a rather rich history, born from a long standing ‘comic’ tradition, spanning from the early caricatures in the 6th and 7th centuries,⁷ to comics in the modern sense; specifically visual and textual works meant to be humorous or as social criticism, and accessible to a large number of readers, such as the Edo period *kibyōshi*.⁸ The popular explanation of the origin of the word *manga* is from a Japanese woodblock-print artist *Hokusai*(1760-1849) in 1814. The characters of the word ‘man’ and ‘ga’ refer to ‘involuntary’ and ‘picture’ respectively. The rough translation of the word then was something along the lines of “whimsical sketching.”⁹ From its advent in the late Edo and early Meiji periods, manga would develop from influences both within and without the newly opening borders. Some of manga’s most prominent characteristics, such as motion lines and word balloons, can be attributed to Western influences on manga.¹⁰ Foreigners who created comics for foreigners in Japan, such as Charles Wirgman’s (1832-1891) *The Japan Punch* in 1862 and Frenchman

⁶ *Otaku no Video*, dir. Takeshi Mori, Gainax, 2000.

⁷ Frederik Schodt, *Manga! Manga!* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1986) 28.

⁸ Adam Kern, “Manga from the Floating World,” Center of East Asian Studies, U of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 4 Nov 2005.

⁹ Schodt *Manga!* 18.

¹⁰ Kern, 4 Nov 2005.

George Bigot's (1860-1927) *Tobae* would be the foundations for traditions such as using balloons to encapsulate words and thoughts, and using empty space and lines to create narrative pattern in Japanese manga.¹¹ It is interesting that historically manga has been influenced by the West, especially since a lot of contemporary animated cartoons and even a few comic books borrow from manga, as well as particularly demonstrative of the multi-layered nature of international cultural exchange.

Another major characteristic of manga is that it is highly consumable. Weeklies are organized into thick paperback booklets with some 200-350 pages, usually running fifteen or so series all at once. Printed on light paper, with glossy covers, usually monochrome or with a few inlaid colors, manga is very, very cheap.¹² Moreover, manga is designed to be read quickly, some estimates being close to 3.75 seconds of reading per page. This is often managed by having little to no text in some frames, instead narrating the story with flowing frames of action and techniques such as cinematic 'camera angle' shots and close ups.¹³ Quickly consumable, cheap and easy to purchase; manga is meant to be disposed of, read and then discarded, a one time use diversion. It is the perfect consumer item. From here it is not a great leap that some consider the *otaku* as embodying this same sense of consumerism. And this isn't far from the truth as during the economic downturn of the early nineties, "as other industries grew sluggish, only the otaku market kept booming."¹⁴ The image of the *otaku* as a super-consumer, buying all the latest electronics, is quite prevalent, leading some to even believe that the "otaku

¹¹ Schodt Manga! 38-41.

¹² Schodt Manga! 13.

¹³ Schodt Manga! 20.

¹⁴ Macias 15.

somehow hold the key to ending the recession.”¹⁵ Though somewhat farfetched, it is apparent that *otaku* culture is a major domestic market for the Japanese. In 1995, manga accounted for \$6-7 billion dollars in sales, and comprised around 40% of all books/magazines sold in Japan, approximately 1.89 billion units.¹⁶ Of course, that is not to say that every single member of the manga readership is *otaku*, but *otaku* as an image becomes central to the market of *manga* in that the *otaku* community are the market’s spokespeople. The *otaku* are the “excessive consumers...in disposition and behavior, they exceed the mass of ordinary spectators, viewers, and readers of mass culture in a number of ways: in focus, time, and energy and in the intensity of meaning they make and intimacy that they establish with their objects of attention.”¹⁷ And in this status of manga’s excessive consumer, they inevitably become one of the main symbols of its market. As it is impossible to think of the *otaku* without manga, so too, in a way, it is impossible to imagine manga without the *otaku*. Can it be denied then that the *otaku* are a subculture with enormous economic clout? Not only do they consume in the extensive market, but they are participants in other consumer markets, including the market for animated series, called Japanimation or anime.

The history of anime, interestingly enough, starts with one of the fathers of modern manga, Osamu Tezuka (1928-1989). Tezuka “[awakened] Tokyo companies to a new potential of the comic medium”¹⁸ in the late 1940’s with his ‘*Shintakarajima*’ (“New Treasure Island”), which read “almost like watching a movie.”¹⁹ Previously, manga had been only works of comedy or political satire. Tezuka introduced the idea of using

¹⁵ Macias 15.

¹⁶ Frederik Schodt, *Dreamland Japan* (Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 1996) 19-20.

¹⁷ William W. Kelly, Intro., *Fanning the Flames*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004) 7.

¹⁸ Schodt, *Manga!* 62.

¹⁹ Schodt, *Manga!* 62.

manga to relate a story visually, with words, illustration, and narrative. He would encapsulate even religion within his manga with his version of the life of Buddha.²⁰ It is only appropriate that some of the very first anime were animated versions of Tezuka's manga works. In the 60's and 70's Tezuka would create for TV animated versions of his *Tetsuwan Atomu* ("The Mighty Atom"), known in the United States as "Astro Boy," in 1963 and *Junguru Taitei* ("Jungle Emperor"), known as 'Kimba, the White Lion' in 1964.²¹ These first works were highly exploratory, evidenced by the fact that Tezuka had to create his own publishing studio, "*Mushi Productions*," to release them. No other publishing company was willing to take the risk.²² Anime would only grow from these beginnings; more and more studios were willing to produce these animated manga works as their popularity increased. Anime would move from the television to stand-alone video productions called OVA (original video animations) and even to big-screen cinema films. In 1997, internationally popular director Miyazaki Hayao's *Mononoke Hime* ("Princess Mononoke") shattered all previous records and would become the highest grossing film in Japan. In fact half of the movie tickets sold in Japan that year had been for anime films.²³

With such large economic numbers it cannot be denied that anime and manga are huge parts of Japanese culture. Just the fact that the Japanese people spend so much on these two markets is a measure of how often they appear in the forefront of Japanese consciousness. As cultural products, they span beyond simple age barriers and gender distinctions. A Japanese business man on his way to work is likely to be reading manga

²⁰ Schodt, *Manga!* 15.

²¹ Susan Napier, *Anime: From Akira to Princess Mononoke*, (New York: Palgrave, 2001)16.

²² Antonia Levi, *Samurai from Outer Space*, (Chicago: Open Court, 1996) 20.

²³ Napier 7.

on the train, and in some cases the same manga as any young Japanese boy would buy and read himself.²⁴ A man reading *shôjo* manga, manga meant for girls, is not unheard of. There are even *shôjo* manga written by men for men. Usually this *chô kawaii* (“ultra cute”) manga form features heroines with large, wet eyes and adult, fully formed bodies. This manga form garners a lot of criticism for the “overt exploitation of ‘prepubescent girls as sex objects.’”²⁵ This representation of young, child-like faces with highly sexualized bodies has been labeled *rorikon*, a slang term for ‘Lolita Complex,’²⁶ and is a highly controversial issue for Japanese culture. *Rorikon* manga has been cited as a cause of many *otaku* related incidents, including the various rape and murder cases that have been paraded as evidence of the “dangerous otaku” image.²⁷ It is also deeply connected with yet another piece of the *otaku* culture, the ‘*moe*’ market.

The *moe* market is one that deals with characters from anime and manga. *Moe* is exclusively an *otaku* activity: passion for their favorite characters’ pictures, cd’s, dvd’s and figurines.²⁸ Typically written in katakana (モエ), ‘*moe*’ echoes in the streets of Akihabara, as throngs of *otaku* uncover miscellaneous paraphernalia for their respective obsessions.²⁹ But simple mania for a favorite anime or manga character is an insufficient definition for *moe*. *Moe* has to do with something more, relating back to the idea of *rorikon* manga: the images and characters these *otaku* obsess about are more than likely characters that many would criticize as perpetuating this *rorikon* ideal. These images leave nothing to the imagination, not merely hinting at the idea of a young, sexualized

²⁴ Schodt, *Manga!* 17.

²⁵ Yumiko Iida, “Between the Technique of Living an Endless Routine and the Madness of Absolute Degree Zero,” *Positions* 8 (2000):427.

²⁶ Iida 427.

²⁷ Michael Hoffman, “Otaku harassed as sex-crime fears mount,” *Spa!* 28 1 Feb 2005, 28 Nov. 2005 <<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/getarticle.pl5?fd20050206tc.htm>>.

²⁸ Koji Hirano, “Moe Money,” *Women’s Wear Daily* Oct 2005:42.

²⁹ Macias 50.

girl. They are young girls with large eyes, short skirts, and are just ‘*chô-kawaii*.’³⁰ But supporters of *otaku* culture, especially producers and distributors who rely on the booming *moe* market, in an effort to possibly disconnect from the negative connotation of these sexualized *rorikon* manga, claim that *moe* is radically different from *rorikon*, and specifically *ero-manga* or pornographic manga. *Rorikon* would have the reader wanting to consume the female lead as a sexual partner: Lolita requires sex. *Moe*, they claim, is more of a need to protect their beloved character. If *rorikon* images emphasize the sexual nature of young girls, *moe* emphasizes instead their innocence and virginity. For *otaku* who are *moe* for their favorite characters, “once actual sex is portrayed, the fantasy is destroyed.”³¹ Hence the term, *moe*, which probably stems from the word *moeru* (萌える), meaning “a plant sprouting.”³² Given this image of an innocent bud which needs to be nurtured and protected, *moe* does seem to fit more readily with the image of the insecure, shy, and socially inept *otaku*. And this bud is growing. In 2003, *moe* accounted for \$810 million in sales.³³ Ironically, the *moe* market is *moeru* (燃える), meaning “to burn,” or in a cultural context, “to be fired up or excited.” One need only look at a throng of *otaku* taking pictures of their favorite idol or voice actor/actress from an animated series³⁴ (to which they will likely yell “moeeeeeeh!”) to realize that *otaku* are very much fired up.

It has been stressed that anime and manga have been integral in the creation and realization of the cultural meaning and stereotypical images of the *otaku* culture. But it should be noted that anime and manga are a large part of Japanese culture as a whole.

There are representations and influences that spread far beyond the printed page or the

³⁰ Iida 427.

³¹ Macias 50.

³² Macias 50.

³³ Hirano, “Moe” 42.

³⁴ “Densha Otoko,” Fuji TV, 7 July 2005.

television screen. The influence of manga has appeared in literature, cinema, even art. Yoshimoto Banana's *Kitchen*, a novel, is written in a very short, succinct style, as if mimicking the narrative pace of *manga*. Takashi Murakami and Yoshitomo Nara's artistic works also seem to closely resemble or appear to be influenced by manga and anime.³⁵ Examples such as Kitamura Ryûhei's super-violent action films, and the smash hit "Battle Royale" show popular cinema's strong ties with manga and anime culture, with fantastic plots, out of this world actions sequences, and manga-like camera shots.

With anime and manga having been integrated into Japanese culture, it is not illogical to claim that the *otaku* culture is similarly integrated. Though *otaku* are not the only people to consume these products, they are necessarily its spokespeople, the symbols of these three respective cultural items: anime, manga and *moe*. Because it is one thing to buy a 300 yen issue of *Shônen Jump* manga magazine and then throw it away when one is done reading it, and quite another to amass a collection of every single issue of *Tetsuwan Atomu*, in mint condition, still in its shiny plastic vacuum wrap. Their excessive consumption lends an image of stewardship. In other words, it would seem the case that the *otaku* guide the development of the market of these products just as much as these products develop the *otaku* identity. So how do the Japanese view these *otaku*, these figureheads of anime and manga culture?

From where and when did the term originate? Allegedly, the term was used by amateur manga artists and fans to refer to themselves. Why exactly seems unclear. One account is that the *otaku* is too meek to use the usual slang term of *omae* to refer to others: their friends, group members, etc. The *otaku* "reluctant to use such overpowering masculine words, finds the housewife word 'otaku' more suited to his and his colleagues

³⁵ Hirano, "Ani-mania," 60.

sensibilities.”³⁶ Others would cite the anti-social behavior of these obsessed ‘maniacs,’ using the slang term as “a witty reference both to someone who is not accustomed to close friendships and therefore tries to communicate with his peers using this distant and over-formal address, and to someone who spends most of [his] time on [his] own at home.”³⁷ From there the definition becomes much less rigid. The commissioner of the Japanese pavilion at the Venetian Biennale 2004, which featured an exhibition of Japanese *otaku* culture, believes “that *otaku* developed from a patriotic Japanese youth culture that fantasized about the future of science, but escaped into a fictitious world when faced with tragedies such as the Vietnam War.”³⁸ This idea of disconnecting from society in exchange for a fantasy world is a central theme of the *otaku* identity.

A rough cultural translation into English has led many to translate the word *otaku* into the English words “geek”³⁹ and “nerd.”⁴⁰ Similar to these English translations, the term *otaku* in Japan carries a negative connotation. One does not wish to be considered an *otaku*, nor does he appreciate being labeled as one, as evident from my Japanese associate’s rather staunch denial that he was *otaku*. Yet it remains difficult to concretely define the *otaku*. The identity of *otaku* seems always in flux, in the course of some two decades, going from being ignored to being scrutinized, written off as harmless non-persons and then becoming feared outright. But recently, a fundamental change has been going on in the stereotypical image of *otaku*. The *otaku*, the socially inept, obsessed maniac, is slowly but surely becoming ‘cool.’ *Otaku* culture supporters claim that the

³⁶ Patrick Macias and Tomohiro Machiyama, *Cruising the Anime City* (Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 2004) 13-4.

³⁷ Sharon Kinsella, *Adult Manga* (Honolulu: U of Hawai’i Press, 2000) 128.

³⁸ Hirano, “Ani-mania,” 60.

³⁹ Joseph Tobin, “Save the geeks,” *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 44 (2001):504-8.

⁴⁰ Hoffman, “Otaku.”

new image *otaku* has a much more positive connotation. Supporters, mainly the producers of the products in anime, manga and *otaku* markets, even go on to claim that *otaku* has acquired the meaning of “a person [that] has his or her own sense of values, is not a snob, has a child’s purity and passion, and possesses in-depth knowledge and an uncompromising opinion on his own likes and dislikes.”⁴¹ A person who is in no part *otaku* is boring, unoriginal, and has no creativity.⁴²

But what exactly does the *otaku* look like? A Japanese friend of mine, who admitted to once having dated an *otaku*, describes them as distinctive, easy to spot in a crowd. Their hair is long or not styled, their clothes are out of fashion, they sport large backpacks bringing them whenever they go shopping. My friend tells me that since their obsession is all-encompassing, they have no time for fashion or grooming. Yet contrasted with this image is that of the *otaku* ‘cosplayer,’ wearing a bright, and typically intricate and well-made costume of his or her favorite character from anime and manga. These outfits tend to be handmade, representing weeks if not months of concentrated efforts by these ‘obsessive maniacs.’ These two very different images demonstrate the fluid identity of the *otaku*. ‘Who’ and ‘what’ they are is not so easily pinned down.

A very interesting portrayal of the *otaku* image comes in the form of a Japanese television drama, broadcast from July of 2005. Titled *Densha Otoko*, which translates into “Train Man,” this drama relates the supposedly real-life tale of an *otaku* trying to fit into proper society.⁴³ Seeing a beautiful woman being harassed by a drunk while on the train home from Akihabara, the *otaku* stands up and manages to save her. He then finds himself in a position to date this beautiful woman, a woman that typically he wouldn’t

⁴¹ Macias 15.

⁴² Macias 15.

⁴³ “Densha Otoko,” Fuji TV, 7 July 2005.

have the courage to approach. But being *otaku*, he lacked the necessary skills and knowledge on how to date this woman, and so he tapped his resources as an *otaku*, getting help in the form of a dating tips internet message board.⁴⁴

The characterization of an *otaku* as it appears in this television show is quite interesting. The *otaku* character Yamada is part of a very uncharacteristic family, one chock full of rather negative Japanese stereotypes. Yamada's father doesn't work. Instead he takes care of the household chores such as cooking and cleaning. His mother is the provider of the family, always referred to but never appearing until the very last episode.⁴⁵ This interesting gender role switch of the father and the mother is perhaps in reference to the changing view of the male role in the family unit, what with the shaky identity of the Japanese male as being the 'money maker' in the household as well as the growing roles of women in the workforce. Yamada also has a younger sister, one who routinely bullies him for his lack of fashion sense and overt 'otaku-ness.' She has adopted the popular *kogyaru* fashion: long, loose socks, short skirts, short hair, and make-up. *Kogyaru* refers to a fashion style adopted by young school girls, meant to present the commodified image of innocent sexuality, the Japanese *rorikon* or 'Lolita Complex.'⁴⁶ Yamada himself works as a junior underling in a temp agency, his only client an OL (office lady) who jumps from job to job by sleeping with her boss at the time.⁴⁷

Ironically this slew of social stereotypes as it is presented in *Densha Otoko* is quite characteristic of *Otaku* culture in general. Because of the strong ties of *otaku* identity to popular culture, it is intimately connected with these social phenomena. The

⁴⁴ "Densha Otoko," Fuji TV, 7 July 2005.

⁴⁵ "Densha Otoko," Fuji TV, 7 July 2005.

⁴⁶ Iida 427, 431.

⁴⁷ "Densha Otoko," Fuji TV, 7 July 2005.

indistinct gender roles, the instability of the Japanese economy, the changing ideas of sexuality, all these contribute to the identity of the *otaku*. It is only appropriate that all of these are part and parcel, existing in the family and in-group of the stereotyped *otaku* protagonist of *Densha Otoko*. His portrayal is deliberate. These social issues are presented in the discourse of popular culture, this popular culture defines the *otaku*, and hence the image presented as the ‘proto-typical’ *otaku* is one emerging from a family of stereotypical images. The identity of the *otaku* is never far removed from the social issues affecting the mainstream culture.

Besides this portrayal of *otaku* as intimately connected of Japanese popular culture, *Densha Otoko* also highlights the idea of *otaku* as an identity, like a costume to be put on and off. In one episode, the protagonist Yamada, having been encouraged by his friends on the message board, decides to devote himself fully to having a relationship with the beautiful woman he saved. As such, he is forced to cover up his *otaku* identity, hiding it behind designer clothing, a new haircut, and cologne; a disguise humorously referred to by his *otaku* friends as “*Shinjuku Môdo*” (“Shinjuku Mode”). Yamada will even go as far as to attempt to ‘graduate’ from his *otaku* identity. Fearing that his horrible secret, that he is *otaku*, will be revealed, Yamada decides to get rid of his treasure trove of pictures, figurines, and games. His friends even hold a mock graduation ceremony, where Yamada hands over his *otaku* vestiges in exchange for a certificate proclaiming him ‘a proper man,’⁴⁸ an entrant into the mainstream society from which the *otaku* identity is disconnected. But it is a failed enterprise. Yamada eventually returns to his *otaku* identity, for it is truly an identity. The *Shinjuku Môdo* that he forced himself to wear was simply a mask, a disguise, and one that had to be taken off. It is not the other

⁴⁸ “Densha Otoko,” Fuji TV, 7 July 2005.

way around, no matter how much ‘proper’ Japanese, the traditionalists, the critics of popular culture and subculture, would want you to believe that the *otaku* culture is a phase, occurring for only a brief period of time in a young Japanese man’s life. Like the non-*shakaijin* youths that go crazy over James Dean and Levi’s jeans, but will eventually don the slacks of the typical Japanese businessman,⁴⁹ these critics argue the *otaku* must eventually ‘graduate’ and become the proper Japanese man. Unfortunately, identity or not, for the most part, the critics seem to be right. There are few *otaku* who are of any considerable age, and the portrayals of them are few and far between. Yamada himself is in his 20’s, very much the age bracket of *otaku*. Why is this age so important? The surrounding social circumstances have crafted the late teens and early twenties as critical moments in the life of the Japanese. It is when they will take their college entrance exams, when they start their first jobs, when they are no longer considered ‘children’ of the family. It is also a precarious period of identity-building, when Japanese youths take up their individual adult identities within the society.

Examining the social circumstances facing the potential ‘*otaku*’ is difficult. Young adult Japanese men, in their late teens and early twenties, face a bevy of social pressures. There is an overwhelming pressure to succeed academically, “high expectations, high emphasis on competition, and the rote memorization of facts and figures for the purpose of passing entrance exams into the next tier of education in what could be termed a rigid pass-or-fail ideology, induce a high level of stress.”⁵⁰ And then there’s also the fact that the “1990’s witnessed a multiple breakdown of political, economic, and socio-cultural orders and induced a visible shift in the mood of society

⁴⁹ George Fields, *From Bonsai to Levis* (New York: Macmillan, 1983) 215.

⁵⁰ “[Hikikomori](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/hikikomori)” [Wikipedia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/hikikomori), 28 Nov 2005 <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/hikikomori>>.

reflecting an end to the glorious age of Japanese economic success on the global stage.”⁵¹ These two conditions are rather important in the analysis of the conditions that give birth to the ‘new’ *otaku* identity. Young Japanese have extreme pressure to succeed in their education, and this pressure is perpetuated, not relieved by the youth’s family and society in general. Even toddlers sometimes compete through an entrance exam for “the privilege of attending one of the best pre-schools.”⁵² Failure at any point imperils the developing identity of the young man. He wonders about his place in society, what to do when it seems that he will be unable to fit cleanly into the mold that Japanese society has created for him. This is only made more difficult with the changes and shifts going on in Japanese society in general. How much harder is it to define oneself within a society when society’s own identity is in a period of transition? It is very easy for these disillusioned Japanese youth to lose or discard their previous attempts at fitting into this ‘socially optimal’ identity and seeking a new one. This is well evidenced by the testimonial of an *Aum Shinrikyo* member, quoted by Iida:

I sometimes feel at a loss, not knowing what to do with my feelings of anxiety and emptiness, something that nobody could possibly understand when I try to explain it, sometimes even I do not understand the reason for. *Aum* accepted me as I was. There was nowhere else other than *Aum* that would have accepted me, I thought.⁵³

It seems clear that for this youth, entrance into what can be considered ‘normal’ Japanese society is impossible and unacceptable. And after the disconnect, identity was found in the *Aum Shinrikyo* cult.

This is very much comparable to the process of adopting the *otaku* identity, as the cult of *Aum Shinrikyo* shares many characteristics with the *otaku*. The basic premise of

⁵¹ Iida 424.

⁵² “Hikikomori,” [Wikipedia](#).

⁵³ Iida 441.

Aum was achieving ‘Armageddon,’ something the cult attempted in March of 1995 with a number of deadly Sarin gas attacks.⁵⁴ This Armageddon was the first step in establishing a new society over “the worldwide state of spiritual decay.”⁵⁵ The cult borrowed many of its images and ideas from manga and anime, such as the apocalyptic “Akira.”⁵⁶ *Aum*, like *otaku*, realized that a place for them in ‘proper’ society was unachievable, and grasped a different reality, one of fantasy, apocalyptic fantasy as portrayed by manga and anime. It should be no surprise then that when the disturbing events of *Aum Shinrikyo*’s ‘Armageddon’ came about, there was a negative effect on the public view of the *otaku*. After all, they shared the same basic principles of social disconnect, and adopted the same images (and from the same sources) for construction of their new identity. But unlike most *otaku*, *Aum* went a step further. Unwilling to simply exist in this virtual reality world as *otaku* tend to, *Aum* sought to erase the boundary between fantasy and reality, reshaping reality to match the fantasy it adopted as its ideal. This is similar to yet another socially disconnected group, the *hikikomori*. For this group, when the line between fantasy and reality is crossed, there are sometimes horrific and tragic results.

To call the *hikikomori* a distinct group is perhaps a mistake. *Hikikomori* is what some consider a social problem, a disease affecting the mainstream society. As Tim Larimer presents in an interview of a Japanese mother who comments after a *hikikomori* attack, “Our society must be out of order.”⁵⁷ As such it is very much a social identity, even if that identity is as a ‘disease.’ The term means “pulling away” or “being

⁵⁴ Iida 437.

⁵⁵ Iida 437.

⁵⁶ Iida 437.

⁵⁷ Tim Larimer, “Natural-Born Killers?” Time South Pacific 28 Aug 2000: 49.

confined.” In this context, the definition of *hikikomori* is acute social withdrawal,⁵⁸ the previously alluded to social disconnect, but to a much greater degree. The Japanese Health ministry defines *hikikomori* as “an individual who refuses to leave their parent’s house, and isolates themselves way from society and family in a single room for a period exceeding six months.”⁵⁹ Many of them confine themselves for years or even decades. Most *hikikomori* “start out as school refusals,” where the youth decides to no longer attend school.⁶⁰ It may continue to worsen until the *hikikomori* refuses to leave his room at all. Failure in some aspect of becoming a proper member of the society may be the cause of such behavior, as the social pressures of conformity overwhelm the young person, typically a male, and he refuses to attend school or leave his room so as not to face that social pressure. This withdrawal becomes a way to escape, and for *hikikomori*, an integral part of the identity.

Unlike *otaku* and even membership in *Aum Shinrikyo*, for the *hikikomori* establishing a new identity by means of adopting a ‘fantasy world’ is not emphasized or even necessary. The most important component is the social disconnect, though most of these socially withdrawn youths spend their isolated time watching television, using the computer, or playing video/computer games.⁶¹ And in the most extreme cases, this disconnect can occur for decades. This is significant. The *hikikomori* simply do not admit that they are unable to fit into the roles that society dictates. Instead they choose to exist outside society completely, ‘pulled away’ or ‘confined.’ And without the necessary adoption of a new identity, it can be said that *hikikomori* are non-existent or at least non-

⁵⁸ Larimer 49.

⁵⁹ “Hikikomori,” [Wikipedia](#).

⁶⁰ “Hikikomori,” [Wikipedia](#).

⁶¹ “Hikikomori,” [Wikipedia](#).

persons within a society. This is only reinforced by the fact that for most Japanese, the way to deal with *hikikomori* is not to deal with it at all, trusting that eventually the *hikikomori* will emerge and rejoin proper society. In fact most consider it embarrassing to have *hikikomori* in the family.⁶² Some, like Yuichi Hattori, M.A., a psychologist treating 18 *hikikomori* patients, believe that *hikikomori* is encouraged by neglectful parenting. He states, “Patients tell me their mothers have no emotions...Six patients have called their parents zombies.”⁶³ So even within their own families *hikikomori* are non-existent, not to be spoken of, confronted, or even seen. They receive no emotional support from their parents, who are ‘zombies’ to them. It is solely up to the withdrawn individuals to develop their new identity, to prove their own existence, sometimes with horrible, unthinkable results.

In May of 1997 an 11-year-old boy and a 10-year-old girl were murdered in a grisly manner. The head of the boy was found outside the gates of his elementary school, decapitated and mutilated with a note stuffed into his mouth. The note identified the killer as “Sakakibara,” while taunting the police to stop him if they could, and promising “a bloody judgment” for “[his] years of great bitterness.”⁶⁴ The killer was discovered to be a 14-year-old junior high student.⁶⁵ But beyond the identity of the murderer, beyond the heinous nature of the crime, arguably the worst part of the Sakakibara incident was that no one could figure out why and how such a crime could happen.⁶⁶ Sakakibara was a classic case of violent *hikikomori*,⁶⁷ where when attempting to establish his own identity,

⁶² “Hikikomori,” [Wikipedia](#).

⁶³ Tiffany Kary, “Total eclipse of the son,” [Psychology Today](#) Feb 2003: 20.

⁶⁴ “Sakakibara,” [Wikipedia](#), 28 Nov 2005 <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sakakibara>>.

⁶⁵ “Sakakibara,” [Wikipedia](#).

⁶⁶ Iida 443.

⁶⁷ “Sakakibara,” [Wikipedia](#).

the *hikikomori* strikes out violently at the society from which he found no refuge. It is evident in his poem-prose, titled “13 years’ sentence,” that was found in his diary, that he was searching for proof of his own existence. He is socially disconnected, isolated and confined, feeling out of control of his own person. In his own words as quoted by Iida “...I am being cornered into the ‘inside myself.’”⁶⁸ Furthermore, he believes his existence is dependent upon killing, “It’s only when I kill that I am liberated from the constant hatred that I suffer and that I am able to attain peace.”⁶⁹ In defining himself in relation to the mainstream society he both loathes and desires, the Sakakibara murderer found his identity only in the ruthless slaughter of others.

The *Sakakibara* incident, its nature, the publicity, and public outcry is without doubt one of the causes of the negative view of *otaku* in Japanese society, and definitely fosters the image of *otaku* being dangerous. It is an excellent example of the peril in assuming a new identity, as is necessary in light of an abrupt social disconnect. No doubt most fear that the *otaku* will take steps toward this violent *hikikomori* identity. The *otaku* sit at the crossroads of the choice. They feed their fantasy from the same sources. A number of *ero*-manga and pornographic videos and anime were found in *Sakakibara*’s room.⁷⁰ Parallels to the incident have been drawn with another ‘*Otaku* killer,’ Tsutomu Miyazaki, who in 1989 was involved with a string of serial rape-murders of young girls, evidently in order to fulfill fantasies from *rorikon* manga.⁷¹

But these are examples that have a very distinctive difference in comparison with a ‘normal’ *otaku*. Much like the acts of the *Aum Shinrikyo* cult, the line between fantasy

⁶⁸ Iida 444.

⁶⁹ “Sakakibara,” [Wikipedia](#).

⁷⁰ “Sakakibara,” [Wikipedia](#).

⁷¹ Iida 428.

and reality for these violent *hikikomori* has been crossed, and the fantasies have been attempted to be realized in the real world. For the *otaku*, the process is seemingly reversed. Instead of bringing fantasy into the world of reality, *otaku* tend to bring reality into the realm of fantasy, creating a ‘virtual world’ where they can exist without having to deal with the social pressures of the real. In this virtual fantasy world they can be appreciated, praised, and even loved. To pander to this need of the *otaku*, a genre of video/computer game called ‘simulation’ was created. As the name implies, this genre simulates social interactions, usually social interactions with women or girls, in ‘normal’ social situations where *otaku* would probably feel out of place, such as in a school environment, casual dating, and family situations. It allows for a simulacrum of reality while still leaving absolute control of the situation in the *otaku*’s hands. If things don’t work out, there is always the ‘reset’ button, and he can start over without worry.

Another excellent example of the *otaku* creating a virtual reality instead of participating in the society they had disconnected from is the portrayal of the message board community in the television drama *Densha Otoko*. When the protagonist Yamada is unsure of how to contact the woman he saved, and how to eventually date her, he doesn’t turn to his real friends, who are also *otaku*. Instead, he lists his situation on an internet message board, outlining the circumstances and asking for help.⁷² This is interesting in and of itself. *Otaku*, by nature of their disconnect and isolation, are usually private individuals. Save for romps through *Akihabara*, *otaku* tend to keep quiet about themselves, the stereotypical shy, meek, inept *otaku*. So posting his problem for everyone to see seems out of character for Yamada, even considering that his identity would have remained anonymous. Perhaps it is the case that Yamada’s virtual self,

⁷² “Densha Otoko,” Fuji TV, 7 July 2005.

named on the message board as “Densha Otoko,” is able to express himself in ways the real Yamada cannot. One immediately notices the contrast of Yamada’s halting, unsteady speech versus his smooth, articulation on the message board.⁷³ His virtual self seems to be the more capable of the two, and it is through this virtual self that Yamada is able to develop his ‘real’ self; the development of his virtual persona, the one that he presents to his virtual community, precedes that of his ‘real’ persona, the one that faces the rest of the world. Both personae, however, remain *otaku*.

When Yamada receives help from the members of the message board, he doesn’t simply receive advice, he also enters into a community. But once again, the community doesn’t exist in reality, but in the virtual world of the *otaku*. His friends and advisors on the message board never meet each other, and never actually acknowledge each other, as portrayed in a scene where the group has congregated in Akihabara. Each drops hints that they know the protagonist, “Densha,” yet none actually come out and identify themselves as a member of “Densha otoko’s” support group.⁷⁴ It seems clear that in this case, the only true bond between the group members is their virtual one, and in the real world they can’t claim such a sense of community. They are strangers to each other. Even worse, they risk potentially being labeled as *otaku*, with all the stigma that goes with it. This is perhaps a demonstration of concrete boundaries: the virtual fantasy world never becoming a part of reality, not the case for the *hikikomori* and *Aum Shinrikyo* cult.

The *otaku*’s necessity for the fantasy world from which he draws his identity has always been troublesome. In some extreme cases this leads to incidents such as the violent *hikikomori*, or the *Aum Shinrikyo* cult. Some critics claim that because of this

⁷³ “Densha Otoko,” Fuji TV, 7 July 2005.

⁷⁴ “Densha Otoko,” Fuji TV, 7 July 2005.

ability to exist in a virtual world, facilitated by technological progress, that *otaku* has “a legitimate place in society,”⁷⁵ albeit a virtual one. No doubt this immersion in the virtual is considerably more appealing than the *hikikomori* alternative. There is a certain safety in the idea that the excursions into the virtual space dispel the perceived need for *otaku* to cross the border from their fantasies to reality. But at the same time, it would be erroneous to claim that because the *otaku* can now exist in a virtual world and not encroach upon reality, that they are limited to that space. Especially since there is so much evidence of *otaku* culture not submerged in the virtual, but existing for the world to see. And the world has seen it. Because *otaku* has spread, beyond the virtual, beyond even the borders of Japan and the Pacific. *Otaku* is international.

Otaku culture has been transmitted to the west, appropriately enough, via the cultural products from which it draws a part of its identity: anime and manga. And again appropriately, one of the first in the works of anime to hit American shores was Osamu Tezuka’s *Tetsuwan Atomu*.⁷⁶ It appeared on American television titled “Astro Boy” in 1964 and had some success as children’s programming.⁷⁷ “Astro Boy” marked the beginning of an influx of Japanese animation, typically dubbed into English at first, with certain changes to the content, and screening order.⁷⁸ From there, the popularity of both anime and manga in the United States continued to grow, seeing such great successes as “Speed Racer,” “Sailor Moon” and even the absurdly popular “Pokémon.” However, the popularity of these cultural products aside, it is in the analysis of both identities of the *otaku*, Japanese and American/Western, where significant interest lies.

⁷⁵ Iida 428.

⁷⁶ Levi 6.

⁷⁷ Levi 6.

⁷⁸ Levi 6

While both the Japanese *otaku* identity and its American counterpart both bear very similar characteristics, anti-social/socially disconnected behavior and a love of anime and manga, the reasons for adoption of the *otaku* identity are wholly different. Where the typical Japanese *otaku* will seek the fantasy world provided by anime and manga after the reality of a social disconnect, the American *otaku* deals with a very different situation. They embrace the fantasy outright, but because such a hobby seems very ‘childish,’ and appears ‘improper,’ American *otaku* find themselves disconnecting so as to allow actual consumption of the images of anime and manga. This deals with the fact that in America many non-*otaku* and many *otaku* themselves consider anime and manga ‘cartoons,’ and cartoons carry a connotation of childishness and whimsy. Instead of a twenty year old disconnecting and finding a haven in the virtual world, the American proto-typical *otaku* “prefer to remain in the closet” because they are “embarrassed at age twenty to admit a liking for cartoons.”⁷⁹ With such a view of anime as ‘for kids’⁸⁰ it is no surprise that one of the first pioneers to bring anime to mainstream television was Cartoon Network, and its block of anime was typically aimed towards younger audiences. Most of the works that popularized anime and manga as mainstream popular culture were typically rather ‘childish,’ such as ‘Pokémon,’ ‘Sailor Moon,’ and ‘Dragonball Z.’ Very simply, the networks believed that anime was for children, and so marketed it as such. So for the American *otaku*, it is not “I leave society because I feel I am not accepted, I find anime and manga, I am *otaku*,” but rather “I find anime and manga, I am *otaku*, so I leave society because I feel I am not accepted.”

⁷⁹ Levi 2.

⁸⁰ There is even an anime licensing/distribution company with the name, 4 Kids Entertainment, Inc.

This demonstrates a rather fundamental difference in the basic idea of the *otaku* subculture, as it allows for facilitation in the creation of a community identity for the American *otaku*. Because the stereotypical American *otaku* feels isolated because of his tastes, and not because of his individual identity, he is more likely, in principle, to seek out those with whom he shares different characteristics and form a community. That is to say that American *otaku* can band together, a marked difference in comparison with their Japanese counterpart. And though this is a generalization, and on top of that, a generalization of stereotypes, it does seem a somewhat plausible explanation for the fact that even though American *otaku* are ‘closeted,’ they come together and form groups much more often. The sheer number of major anime/manga and *otaku* related events⁸¹ in the United States is staggering in comparison with the Japanese. A brief list of anime conventions found on the web reveals ten to twenty major Japanese conventions every year,⁸² while listing at least 80 in the United States alone.⁸³ And though such a large number may be attributed to the huge popularity of anime and manga in the U.S. today, as well as the large population of *otaku* spread out across the nation, this does not explain the comparatively smaller number of Japanese conventions, and the persisting image of Japanese *otaku* as ‘loners.’

How does the existence of this international counterpart effect the image of the *otaku*? With today’s connected and globalized world, it is foolish to believe that the two identities, though separated by thousands of miles of ocean, do not interact with each

⁸¹ Mostly conventions as the promotion events for newly released anime, manga and the like are relatively unknown in America. The importance of a major event is the availability for fans to meet, congregate, and participate in interaction and cultural/social exchange. See Macias 22.

⁸² “Anime! Anime! Sukejyûru,” *Anime! Anime!*, 3 May 2006 <<http://animeanime.jp/schedule/index.html>>.

⁸³ “A Fan’s View – Anime Convention Schedule,” *A Fan’s View*, 20 April 2006 <<http://www.fansview.com/consked.htm>>.

other, influencing and redefining themselves in relation to one another. In the nature of the cultural products themselves, if Japanese producers of manga and anime take into account eventual translation and transmission of their product to foreign shores, certain considerations would have to be taken, either in the nature of the cultural product, its discursive properties and meanings, or in the understanding of the prospective audience of the works. In a transcript where Douglas McGray, a commentator on various social and political issues interviews Dai Satô, a screenwriter for acclaimed anime titles *Samurai Champloo* and *Cowboy Beebop*, to the question of whether or not his works are designed strategically to appeal to the larger global audience, Satô answers “Strategically?...If you see things from the business point of view, yes. It is true that many producers demand those things...”⁸⁴ Satô notes that as anime becomes more and more a product for the global market, the developers became increasingly conscious of how their work would be accepted.⁸⁵ Very simply, the two *otaku* identities, whether on the western or eastern half of the world, are never truly disconnected from one another. In this world of globalization and mass communication, they will undoubtedly affect one another.

Another interesting extension of the identity difference of the two types of *otaku* is the idea of merging/aggregating group identity. That is to say, an interesting factor of the American *otaku* identity, one that becomes blatantly apparent when attending Anime conventions in the United States, is how many other distinctive subcultures mix in with the entrants. It has become characteristic of American anime conventions to host not only *otaku* and anime/manga-philes, but also ‘Goths’ and ‘Ravers.’ At most major

⁸⁴ “Otaku Unmasked: The Life, Death and Rebirth of Japan’s Pop Culture,” *Japan Society* 30 Nov 2005, Transcript, 3 May 2006 <http://www.japansociety.org/web_docs/051130_otaku_transcript.pdf>.

⁸⁵ “Otaku Unmasked.” *Japan Society*

conventions, such as Otakon, which had an attendance of 22,000 in 2005⁸⁶, and Anime Expo, which had approximately 33,000 is attendance in 2005,⁸⁷ one of the featured events is a late-night ‘rave,’ complete with characteristic dark, rumbling industrial music and the eerie neon of glow-sticks. There is a strong ‘Goth’ presence at most conventions, demonstrated by the large number of ‘Gothic Lolita’ cosplayers, attendees who dress in costumes which can be described as “a stygian version of Alice in Wonderland,”⁸⁸ replete with black leather corsets, white petticoats, and dark flowers and lace. The fact that both these subcultures are separate from *otaku* and yet appear quite strongly connected, both in sharing membership, (a not-unlikely proposition considering the prevalence and popularity of the ‘Gothic Lolita’ image in anime and manga) as well as congregating as a similar community, in the real and virtual worlds. And this should not be unexpected, especially when reflecting on the process of identity building in the American *otaku*. Because it is not the individual who is necessarily flawed and unable to integrate into a society, but rather that the current society does not accept the individual as they are, the American *otaku* freely and frequently congregates with those of similar tastes and interests, forming separate communities, or subcultures. This seemingly flies in the face of the Japanese model, whose agent cannot easily integrate into a community in the real, even if they share the similar ‘taint’ of the *otaku* label. However, as was illustrated by the protagonist of *Densha Otoko*, a Japanese *otaku* typically seeks out his community not in the real, but instead in the virtual, the fantasy world that the *otaku* cling to in place of

⁸⁶ “History: Stats,” Otakon, 2 May 2006 <http://www.otakon.com/history_stats.asp>.

⁸⁷ “General Profile,” Anime [AX] Expo 2006 2 May 2006 <<http://www.anime-expo.org/?a=general&b=profile>>.

⁸⁸ Derek R. Sweet, “More than Goth: The Rhetorical Reclamation of the Subcultural Self,” Popular Communication 3 (2005): 253.

the damaging real. And this idea of virtual community has only come about in the past few decades, with the advent of the Internet.

The recent advances in telecommunication and information-technology have allowed for a facilitation of computer-mediated communication, or CMC. This communication can take the form of ‘customized advertising,’⁸⁹ interactive interpersonal communication via message boards, email, and discussion forums,⁹⁰ and even the necessary cultural discourse to sustain a subcultural community, “argot,” the “subculture’s discursive vernacular ‘and how it is delivered,’”⁹¹ one of the three elements of subcultural style and identity.⁹² When CMC is available and facilitated, communities centering on certain characteristics are inevitably constructed,⁹³ especially if said communities feature available and interactive cultural discourse. This is the staging point for construction of *otaku* virtual identity, as it allows for both individual characterization, as well as characterization against the backdrop of a living, breathing, yet anonymous virtual community.

Community through CMC also provides a kind of panacea to the isolated *otaku*. He can find a kind of solace in these virtual communities, a “response to loneliness and a lack of connectivity and meaning in the exterior world.”⁹⁴ In these virtual spaces, he is both allowed a measure of expression of himself that was unacceptable in the real world, due to his failing to achieve certain levels of social status and educational/social success,

⁸⁹ Quentin Jones and Sheizaf Rafaeli, “Time to Split, Virtually: ‘Discourse Architecture’ and ‘Community Building’ Create Vibrant Virtual Publics,” Electronic Markets 10 (2000): 215.

⁹⁰ Jones 217.

⁹¹ M. Brake, Comparative youth culture: The sociology of youth culture and youth subcultures in America, Britain, and Canada, (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1999) qtd. in Derek R. Sweet, “More than Goth: The Rhetorical Reclamation of the Subcultural Self,” Popular Communication 3 (2005): 243.

⁹² Brake qtd in Sweet 243.

⁹³ Jones 215.

⁹⁴ Heather Bromberg, “Are MUD’s Communities? Identity, Belonging and Consciousness in Virtual Worlds,” Cultures of Internet (London: Sage Publications, 1996): 147.

as well as build for himself an identity free of the constraints and failures, both imagined and real, of his own identity. For in a virtual community,

those who are shy and introverted in real life, have an outlet to explore more powerful personae, and because users are unencumbered by the material determinants of social value of 'real life' ...those more powerful identities may be explored more fully in this medium.⁹⁵

And these jaunts into identity-building are a necessary part of development of the subculture and its identity, virtual or otherwise, in that the fluid nature of a virtual identity, as well as an undefined and pseudo-anonymous group identity as presented by the unconstrained and unstructured nature of CMC discourse, allows the *otaku* to interact in a mock-existence, as he wishes himself to be, and with those that cannot, by the definition of anonymity, damage his already scarred real social identity.

This subcultural self is in a constant state of self-determination, managing a "malleable self, continually being remade or renegotiated in communicative praxis," while balancing "collective and individual subjectivities," the definition of self as part of the group and self as an individual.⁹⁶ This goes a long way in explaining the fluid nature of the *otaku* identity, and its ability to constantly redefine its own image as presented to the social other: from weird and dangerous, to committed and creative. As such, the *otaku* identity distinguishes itself as an "affective identity," one that is "flexible, fluid, constantly reshaping and defining [itself], and continually in motion."⁹⁷ This is the necessary bridge between the self-identity, which allows for individual changes in response to outside stimuli, and the identity of the *otaku* as a group, the image distributed and performed for the members of the community and the 'other,' the mainstream culture

⁹⁵ Bromberg 149.

⁹⁶ Sweet 249.

⁹⁷ Sweet 240.

from which the *otaku* is born.⁹⁸ As the nature of the society from which *otaku* reflects its own identity changes, as it has with the advent of virtual communities, *otaku*'s malleable subcultural identity has also changed to counteract and interact with this changed society. As a child of popular culture and mass communication, this is almost inevitable. With the disposable nature of manga, the continual process of upgrading and progress of technology and the instability of fads and fashions, *Otaku* cannot help but redefine themselves at each and every moment. The allure of the virtual community, its anonymity and freedom to create an avatar based on an ideal identity, makes it a most appropriate stage for *otaku* interaction and discourse. The sheer number of *otaku* online, communicating on message boards, through email, and via online communities should be no surprise.

And this idea of an online/virtual community is not limited to Japanese *otaku*. The advent of the Internet has facilitated the distribution of the *otaku* cultural products. Virtual communities such as IRC (internet relay chat) allow users not only interaction between members of the community, but access to files, mainly anime and manga, for others in the community to consume. A miniature of the mass-communication society of the *otaku* in the real, IRC perpetuates the *otaku* identity in both the distribution of cultural products as well as interaction/definition of one's individual self confronted with the community identity.

One last item of note is the perceived performance of the *otaku* identity, to be viewed, consumed, and redefined not just in the virtual space but also in reality. This appears to be a component of the previously mentioned trespass of the *otaku*'s identity from the fantasy world to the real world, the potentially dangerous situation that *otaku*

⁹⁸ Sweet 240.

and the mainstream society would like to avoid. But instead of the direct transformation of that fantasy into reality, as was the case with the *Aum Shinrikyo* cult and the *hikikomori* identity, performers of the *otaku* identity distinguish themselves through use of a ‘performative mask.’ One example is the “gothic lolita,” a type of cosplay common within anime conventions, both in Japan and in the United States.

‘Gothic Lolita’ is distinctive in that it is seemingly a merging of the *otaku* subculture (the idea of the ‘lolita’ image) as well as the western “goth” culture that arose from British punk rock. This is not quite the case, however. “Gothic lolita” has very little to do with the “goth” subculture, save sharing a similar taste in fashion. The agent participating in the display of “gothic lolita” is typically female, but there are instances of ‘crossplay,’ cross-dressing cosplay, where men wear the female costumes of the ‘gothic lolita,’ dress and behave in a distinctive, playful and fantastic way. Innocent ruffles, lace and petticoats are contrasted with leather bustiers and corsets. The description of a “stygian Alice in Wonderland” fits very well; an embodiment of child-like fashion and dark, almost sexualized tastes. And these tastes are not without their own sense of ‘fantasy.’ Gothic literature, as it is interpreted, hint at ‘mystery’ in the darkness, a realm of the uncanny, the marvelous, the supernatural.⁹⁹ But unlike the more structured and substantive identity of the “Goth” in the U.S. and elsewhere, “gothic lolita” is not a true subculture. The “goth” subculture distinguishes itself in its identity and meaning beyond its appearance or fashion. It exists as an “expression of difference,”¹⁰⁰ with an “ideological resistance” toward the mainstream culture.¹⁰¹ This distinction is necessary.

⁹⁹ Rei Chiba, “Kao to iu rôgoku,” *Jyôsei gakunenbô* (The annual report of the Women’s Studies) 25 (2004) 38-39.

¹⁰⁰ Sweet 239.

¹⁰¹ Sweet 244.

Without constant redefinition against the dominant culture, the subculture has no meaning. “Goth” subculture embodies difference, but without knowing from what it attempts to differentiate itself from, the ‘normal people,’ the subculture cannot exist. It is only in constant comparison to this culture that the subculture’s members can exist. One such example is the penchant for “goths” to call non-“goths” “normals,” and this usually with significant scorn.¹⁰² Such vernacular both exults in difference; ‘You are normal, I am not’ as well as identifies the idea of resistance; ‘I am not like you.’

The typical “gothic lolita,” however, shares no such ‘ideological resistance.’ Instead, it is regarded as a kind of fashion, or in some cases simply “playing ‘make-believe’” (ごっこ遊び).¹⁰³ Interviews of wearers of “gothic lolita” reveal little concern with ideas of cultural resistance. Stereotypical “gothic lolita” in Japan seems to come from a desire to emulate the clothes and costumes of various popular music bands and performers, specifically “visual-kei” or visual-type bands.¹⁰⁴ Japanese pop and rock stars such as ‘Malice Mizer’ and ‘L’arc en Ciel’ wear distinctive costumes and outfits. For visual-kei bands creating a ‘spectacle’ is as important as the music. Some of these outfits borrow from the rich “goth” culture of punk bands in both the United States and Great Britain. Hence the beginnings of “gothic lolita” can be attributed to the fans of visual-kei bands, that don similar attire.¹⁰⁵ But at their best, this fashion is simply emulative. Most wearers of “gothic lolita,” when interviewed, had no real reason why they dressed in the “gothic lolita” fashion. The usual response is simply “because it’s

¹⁰² Sweet 240.

¹⁰³ Rei Mizuno, “‘Onna no ko rashisa’ to ‘kawaii’ no itsudatsu” *Jyôsei gakunenbô* (The annual report of Women’s Studies) 25 (2004): 107.

¹⁰⁴ Mizuno 108.

¹⁰⁵ Mizuno 108.

cute” (「かわいい」),¹⁰⁶ a standard that is only perpetuated by the images of “gothic-lolita” in anime and manga, an important vehicle of the mass-communication culture in Japan. Portrayals of young, innocent girl characters contrasted with dark clothing, corsets, and an innocent/sexual attitude are common in both anime and manga.

Participants of “gothic lolita’s” ‘make-believe’ are not expressing cultural difference and resistance to the mainstream, but are instead donning a kind of performative mask. This mask is not in and of itself a separate and distinct cultural identity but instead a means of bridging certain cultural spaces, in this case, the fantasy or ‘make-believe’ and the real. The wearer of “gothic lolita” acknowledges the fantastic world from which the fashion is born, the world of corsets, ruffles, petticoats, and flowers, a dark world portrayed through the costumes of visual-kei bands, continued through images in manga and anime. But in its definition, a mask is something that also must be taken off. Wearing “gothic lolita” makes no fundamental changes to the self-identity of the agent. Much like the protagonist of *Densha Otoko*, when he disguises himself as a ‘normal person,’ the ‘*Shinjuku Moodo*’ he does not yet deny his *otaku* identity. Vesting himself in ‘cool clothes’ doesn’t make him any less of an *otaku* or any more of a proper member of society. ‘*Shinjuku Moodo*’ is a disguise that can be discarded when it is necessary, much like the fashion of “gothic lolita.” Those that wear “gothic lolita” routinely change styles whenever it suits them, or when some fashions are no longer ‘cute.’

This practice of “gothic lolita” and the performative mask bears a striking resemblance to “cosplay” or “costume play,” an aspect of the *otaku* culture where the

¹⁰⁶ Mizuno 115.

otaku dons the costume of their favorite anime and manga characters, effectively playing their role for the consumption of the real world. Again, these masks are only temporary. The agent is not assuming a new identity or a redefinition of his old one. Instead he dons a disguise, a kind of buffer between himself and the real world, between the fantasy in which he exists and the reality that has no place for him.

The performative mask allows for a degree of identity-disconnect, of anonymity, and yet allows for an immediate realization and definition of the agent as a member of the subculture. From my own experience in ‘cosplay,’ when one participates in ‘cosplay,’ one is immediately recognized not as his or her own identity, but instead as the character which he or she portrays. The audience of our performance does not see the actor, but instead only the character. This is almost exactly the same panacea as offered by the virtual communities in which *otaku* engage, an opportunity for both self-identity and group identity. The many gatherings of *otaku*, conventions both in Japan and the United States, provide the stage upon which these agents, donning their performative masks, participate in this definition of subcultural identity. These conventions are transformed into a kind of hybrid world, grounded in the real, yet populated by demonstrations of the fantasy.

The importance of these observations of difference and similarity of the American and Japanese versions of the *otaku* identity seem clear. In its translation to western shores, some aspects of the subculture have changed, the fundamental reason for the social disconnect for one. But there are other factors that have continued through the transmission, of great relevance and importance to the *otaku* identity. The idea of social disconnect, the choice of existing in the fantasy or virtual world, the performative mask,

the necessity of community, even if it is only in said virtual world—these are the core values that have shown through, the necessary components of the creation of *otaku* identity, and ones that are unlikely to change even considering the malleable nature of the *otaku* identity. No matter how *otaku* are viewed, be they hated, feared, tolerated, or accepted, these are the pieces that make up the fundamental *otaku* identity, in any country. And the existence of these values demonstrates a very important fact: that there is nothing inherently wrong with the core values of the *otaku* identity, they are not necessarily “bad.” Instead, what concerns opponents and even proponents to *otaku* culture are the outer layers of the identity, the circumstances in which it has interacted with mainstream society. These circumstances will undoubtedly change, as time passes and popular culture progresses. There may be new scandals that demonstrate the danger of crossing from the fantasy/virtual into reality. The images of the ‘performative mask’ may change as the cultural products which perpetuate and create the *otaku* identity, anime and manga, evolve in the melting pot of mass communication and popular culture. Technology may expand the realm of the virtual fantasy in which the *otaku* exists, allowing to methods of communication, new communities with which to interact. But the *otaku*, this being existing in the fantasy, disconnected from reality, he will continue to exist, as long as mass communication and the popular imagination allow the cultural products and circumstances that define him to continue.

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