

**SWALLOWTAIL BUTLER CAFÉ:  
COOL JAPAN, COSPLAY, OTAKUS, AND INTERACTION  
RITUALS IN CONTEMPORARY JAPAN**

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**Introduction**

This study is a sociological analysis of the Swallowtail Butler Café (“Swallowtail”), a popular themed café in Tokyo favored among Japanese and foreign visitors. Special attention is paid to cosplay (costume role-playing) and interactive rituals that appeal to the fantasies of the customers, especially those female *otakus* who are avid fans of manga (Japanese comics), anime (animation), food, and handsome men.<sup>1</sup>

During the Covid-19 outbreak, the Japanese government restricted travel to and from Japan, and the Metropolitan Tokyo Government mandated certain measures to protect citizens from the virus in 2020 and 2021. Swallowtail, like many other restaurants and bars, must strictly follow the national and local ordinances. The unprecedented pandemic affected social life in many ways, and research is no exception. The authors were forced to be creative and use less conventional, alternative ways to gather data. Content analysis is one of the qualitative methods of sociology that provides the researchers with a way to understand human behavior by analyzing recorded communication. We watched more than 70 YouTube videos, analyzed their contents, and reviewed various web pages about the themed cafés such as maid and butler cafés. An ethnomethodological conversational analysis was also conducted as part of this research project.

***Cool Japan***

It has been more than 76 years since Japan lost World War II and the Allied Forces occupied the nation for the first time in its long history. As Japan rose from the ashes, an unprecedentedly rapid economic development

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<sup>1</sup> The word *otaku* is generally used for enthusiastic fans of Japanese popular culture such as anime, manga, video games, etc. In contemporary Japan, it is also used for any fandom. For example, there are otakus who are really interested in trains, cameras, castles, foods, books, music, science fiction, or history. We use the term *otaku* to focus on its various subcultural aspects in this study.

occurred in the 1960s. The “Income Doubling Plan” of Prime Minister Hayato Ikeda, for example, was accomplished within seven years, and Japanese GNP grew at an average of 10 percent per year in real terms. The Japanese economy became the third largest in the world.<sup>2</sup> The government encouraged exports of several material products through tax deductions. After 1965, it also promoted mergers of large corporations to become more competitive internationally. The term *Japan Inc.* refers to the intimate and cozy relationship between the Japanese government and corporations.<sup>3</sup>

Exports are still significant in the twenty-first century. Some of the most important exports contributing to the Japanese economy nowadays are products of popular culture, which are marketed with great success globally and in Japan for inbound tourists. The term *Cool Japan* (which sounds narcissistic and outdated to some) refers to the branding and tourism of Japanese pop culture. According to the Cabinet Office of the Japanese government, *Cool Japan* includes manga, anime, video games, broadcasting, cosplay, J-Pop, and diverse industries such as food (i.e., sushi, ramen noodles, cafés, and restaurants), tourism, manufacturing, and merchandising. The formal *Cool Japan* platform was established by the government and the private sector. Vigorous promotion of the concept, owing to its role as the nation’s soft power in international relations and diplomacy and as a source of national income, began in the 2010s.<sup>4</sup>

So-called “concept cafés” are a good part of *Cool Japan*. Many are found in modern Tokyo and other metropolitan cities, including cafés where the customers can enjoy spending time with cats, dogs, hedgehogs, owls, and other animals as they eat and drink.<sup>5</sup> In a maid café, the staff members and

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<sup>2</sup> Edwin O. Reischauer, *Japan: The Story of a Nation* (New York: McGraw-Hill Publishing Company, 1990), 244–245.

<sup>3</sup> Johannes Hirschmeier and Yui Tsunehiko, *The Development of Japanese Business 1600–1973* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975).

<sup>4</sup> Ito Kinko and Paul A. Crutcher, “Popular Mass Entertainment in Japan: Manga, Pachinko, and Cosplay,” *Society* 55/1 (2013), 44–48, “Cool Japan Strategy Public-Private Collaboration Initiative Summary,” Cabinet Office, (accessed April 30, 2021, [https://cao.go.jp/cool\\_japan/english/pdfs/published-document1.pdf](https://cao.go.jp/cool_japan/english/pdfs/published-document1.pdf)).

<sup>5</sup> Laura Reid, “Top Craziest Themed Cafes in Tokyo 2019 (Monster, Hedgehog, Owls),” March 8, 2019 (accessed April 18, 2021, <https://www.youtube.be/5CcDniFNNF0>).

clients enjoy cosplay, games, food, and drinks together. Other themes include *kawaii* (cute), vampires, robots, ninjas, and monsters that cater to the fantasies of children and adults alike. In maid cafés, the young and pretty waitresses dressed in French maid uniforms (a dress with frills, a petticoat, a pinafore, hair accessories, and stockings) welcome men by greeting them, “Welcome home, Master” with a smile. This service gives the male customer, young or old, a valuable sense of pure joy and fulfillment. There are also cross-dressing maid cafés where all the wait staff members are young men dressed in women’s outfits and hairstyles.<sup>6</sup> Gender seems to be more fluid in these types of cafés.

### Swallowtail Butler Café (“Swallowtail”)

Swallowtail Butler Café is categorized as a “concept restaurant” or a “theme restaurant” where both the wait staff members and their customers enjoy cosplay and role-playing. There are themed restaurants in the United States, such as Hollywood Café, Rainforest Café, and Hard Rock Café, but they do not entail cosplay elements or role-playing.<sup>7</sup> Swallowtail is nationally and internationally renowned in certain circles. It is located on *Otome Dōri* (a street the locals call “Maiden Road”) in Ikebukuro, one of the downtown centers of Tokyo. Maiden Road has many shops and cafés that cater to female otakus, especially those who love anime. In addition, they sell cheap household goods, cosmetics, and fashionable styles of clothing.<sup>8</sup>

Since opening in March 2005, Swallowtail has welcomed customers from multiple age groups ranging from 20 to 50 years old,<sup>9</sup> yet 80% of those who patronize the café are women in their 20s and 30s.<sup>10</sup> The prices for the food, service, and overall experience with the handsome, clean-cut, and professional butlers are quite reasonable. For example, the afternoon tea set

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<sup>6</sup> ZeSSIV, “The Cutest She-Men in Japan. We Sneaked into a Dragged-Up Café in Akihabara,” February 6, 2013 (accessed April 18, 2021, <https://www.youtube.be/rGfFv1GwOCc>).

<sup>7</sup> An exception might be the Medieval Castle Café in Texas.

<sup>8</sup> Yumiko Sugiura, *A Study of Otaku Girls: Survey of Yaoi Ideology* (Tokyo: Hara shobo, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> The Uwaga Pies, “I Paid a Japanese Man to Serve Me,” June 14, 2018 (accessed April 17, 2021, <https://www.youtube.be/WFHqzIII3Rg>).

<sup>10</sup> Akemi Nakamura, “Turning the Tables on ‘Maid Cafés: For Female ‘Otaku,’ a Coffee House All Their Own,” *The Japan Times*, April 24, 2006.

is 3,300 yen (about US \$32). Course menu dinners, which change every month, are around US \$60. Thus, the café is within the means of ordinary college students and young working women, not to mention rich bar hostesses and middle-aged women.

Over the years, Swallowtail has evolved into a multi-business enterprise that includes the following:

(1) The Butlers' Café offers various kinds of tea (British tea, herb tea, flavored tea, iced tea, etc.), exquisite desserts, an afternoon tea set, and dinners. The afternoon tea sets change from season to season and have three tiers of plates with sandwiches, scones of butter/jam, and cakes. According to Iori, a second steward, it "is a tea salon for all the busy ladies to spend some relaxing moments," and "At dinner time, course menus are served."<sup>11</sup>

(2) The Gift Shop, located across the café, sells 40 kinds of baked goods for teatime and loose-leaf tea in cans and refill bags. These tea infusions are blended by the butlers, certified or licensed as tea instructors, coordinators, masters, sommeliers, and advisors by specific organizations such as the Japan Tea Association, the Japan Ability Development Promotion Association, and the Japan Safe Food Cooking Association.<sup>12</sup>

(3) BAR BLUE MOON is located near the café, and it caters to more mature adult women who would like to drink alcohol after dinner.<sup>13</sup>

(4) Butler Café Opera Troupe has musicians, singers, and dancers who also serve in the café as butlers. The group has numerous YouTube videos of mixed content: original music videos, operettas, concerts, promotional videos, and even instructional videos on how to make delicious tea drinks and special meals offered at the café. In all these videos, the audience is addressed as *ojōsama* (My Lady).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Play Tokyo, "Swallowtail-Butler's Café," July 10, 2019 (accessed November 5, 2020, <https://www.youtu.be/I9eKUTybId8s>).

<sup>12</sup> Swallowtail 執事喫茶, "Oyashikinosusume gifutoshoppuhen #1," March 6, 2018 (accessed May 4, 2021, [//www.youtu.be/WxjrKrqmQ6o](https://www.youtu.be/WxjrKrqmQ6o)); and Swallowtail 執事喫茶, "Oyashikinosusume gifutoshoppuhen #7," February 6, 2019 (accessed May 4, 2021, <https://www.youtu.be/Ip6CuR1TKWA>).

<sup>13</sup> Swallowtail 執事喫茶, "Shitsujiga ookurisuru Bar Blue Moon," September 20, 2018 (accessed May 5, 2021, <https://www.youtu.be/7PvKMqF8hOg>).

<sup>14</sup> Swallowtail 執事喫茶, "2020.11.26 Butlers Opera Troupe, 10th Anniversary Concert" J-LOD Live, December 24, 2020 (accessed April 31, 2021, <https://www.youtu.be/gkaxc8nD22Y>).

(5) Several staff members have regularly been making public appearances as butlers at conventions such as Houston's Anime Matsuri (festival) since 2017.<sup>15</sup> They also attended the Anaheim Convention Center for Japan Park Los Angeles on November 10th and 11th, 2018.<sup>16</sup>

(6) There is a very popular anime and manga titled *Kuroshitsuji* (Black Butler) by Yana Toboso, serialized since 2006 in *Monthly G Fantasy*, a manga magazine for boys published by the company Square Enix in Tokyo. The protagonist is a demon disguised as a marvelous butler who works for an aristocratic family in Great Britain at the end of the nineteenth century. The comic has been adapted to animation, theater, live-action films, and even video games.<sup>17</sup> Many *Kuroshitsuji* fans dream of being served by the butlers who dress like the anime's protagonist, Sebastian.

(7) As for tourism, the café offers its fans trips to various places. On March 2nd, 2019, for example, 98 women and 19 butlers took a special train called *Nagomi* from Ueno Station in Tokyo to Nikko, one of the most attractive sightseeing spots in Japan. A luncheon was provided at a famous hotel, and the fans' favorite butlers served them drinks and meals, played games, and talked with them. They also stopped at a strawberry farm and picked fruits together.<sup>18</sup>

Swallowtail Butler Café is in the basement of a commercial building in Tokyo. The environment and ambiance of the café are to remind the

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<sup>15</sup> Anime Matsuri, "Swallowtail Café Experience at Anime Matsuri 2017," November 30, 2016 (accessed April 28, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CNQOHc-xjFE>); Anime Matsuri, "Experience Swallowtail Butler Café at Anime Matsuri 2018," October 30, 2017 (accessed April 28, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a7k1v8vnAyg>); and Anime Matsuri, "Swallowtail Butler Café at Anime Matsuri 2019," December 27, 2018 (accessed April 28, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0etByleh9k>).

<sup>16</sup> "Welcome to the Swallowtail Butler Café, a Popular Butler Café Based in Ikebukuro, Tokyo," Japan Park Los Angeles, Facebook, September 26, 2018 (accessed April 17, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/japanparkLA/posts/welcome-to-the-wallowtail-butler-café-based-in-ikebukuro-1952477301439632/>).

<sup>17</sup> Sawamura Shuji, *Nihon Manga Zenshi* (Tokyo: Heibonsha shinsho, 2020), 335–336.

<sup>18</sup> Swallowtail 執事喫茶, "Butlers Tour 2019," March 2, 2019 (accessed April 24, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vanJIzQS3V8>).

customers of a British mansion, considering that domestic service as an occupation is said to have reached its height in Victorian England. The furniture and decoration in the café are also quite elegant – tables, chairs, cushions, cupboards, curtains, mirrors, clocks, candleholders, paintings, portraits, and roses – as all these items appear in the popular manga and anime series *Black Butler*. Upon entering the tearoom, a first-time customer from abroad said, “Oh, my goodness. This is like...something like an architectural digest... something like a movie set.”<sup>19</sup>

On the ceiling of the café are gorgeous and glitzy chandeliers of various sizes made of Swarovski crystals. A woman from Las Vegas was impressed with the décor and lost track of time because she was “too busy enjoying the atmosphere.”<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Pamela Drobig, a German translator who lives in Tokyo, wrote, “I couldn’t help but feel both mesmerized and overwhelmed.”<sup>21</sup>

Shiina,<sup>22</sup> a senior butler, explains that the “Mansion” where the café is located is in a large compound with several buildings, gardens (including a rose garden), a dormitory for footmen, a gym, a horse stable, a riding platform, and a field for growing vegetables and herbs. These settings exist in an imaginary realm since the café itself, as mentioned previously, is in the basement of a building in Ikebukuro. The “main building” of the “Mansion” is the residence of the Master and his family, and Swallowtail is a salon located in one of the annexed buildings and used by the ladies as a place to have a wonderful time with delicious tea and sweets. The elegant and

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<sup>19</sup> OtakuVerseZero, “Otaku-Verse Zero S2 Ep02,” April 16, 2011 (accessed April 27, 2021, [https://www.youtu.be/Otld\\_NAotNU](https://www.youtu.be/Otld_NAotNU)).

<sup>20</sup> Miranda L., “Swallowtail,” Yelp, July 14, 2018 (accessed April 26, 2021, <http://www.yelp.com/biz/swallowtail-豊島区>).

<sup>21</sup> “Like Maid Cafés, for Ladies: Dining at Tokyo's Swallowtail Butler Café!” Live Japan Perfect Guide, July 20, 2020 (accessed April 27, 2021, <https://www.livejapan.com/en/in-tokyo/in-pref-tokyo/in-ikebukuro/article-a0000531>).

<sup>22</sup> Just like in Victorian England, all butlers in the café are addressed by their last names only. Interestingly, at a hostess bar, the hostesses are addressed by their first names, which are usually pseudonyms.

romantic atmosphere of the café offers a spacious and relaxing place for women to escape from everyday reality.<sup>23</sup>

Japan is 1/25th the size of the United States, but it is not the smallest country in the world. However, the European Union (EU) ridiculed the island nation in its internal 1979 report on economic strategies against Japan, which said that people there live in “rabbit hutches,” using a derogatory phrase to refer to the size of Japanese housing.<sup>24</sup> Like many societies, Japanese people enjoy entertaining guests at home if they have a spacious house but prefer going to cafés and restaurants if their home is small or not presentable. Japanese apartments and houses constructed in recent years seem to be growing larger, but the Japanese still dream of having bigger homes and gardens.

Swallowtail’s “huge compound with several buildings” is part of the world of make-belief, so customers need to be familiar with this concept to carry an appropriate conversation with the butlers, who are fully in character. Customers walk downstairs to the café from the outside entrance at street-level access. Once at the basement, a footman waits for customers to arrive and opens the door for them while a senior butler politely greets each person. As an example of a presentational ritual, the butler then “makes specific attestations to recipients concerning how he regards them and how he will treat them in the on-coming interaction.”<sup>25</sup>

Here is when the cosplay begins between the butlers and their customers. The former are servants, and the latter are family members of the mansion. A senior butler dressed in a traditional cutaway coat<sup>26</sup> greets the female guest saying, “*Okaerinasai Ojōsama* (Welcome home, My Lady),” or as “My Princess.” Then, behind him the second steward in his tailcoat will

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<sup>23</sup> Swallowtail 執事喫茶, “Shitsujikissa Swallowtail Goannai & Shitsujikagekidan,” November 9, 2011 (accessed May 8, 2021, <https://www.youtube.be/32vPj23X09A>).

<sup>24</sup> “兎小屋 (usagigoya),” Goo 辞書 Dictionary (accessed April 30, 2021, <https://www.dictionary.goo.ne.jp/word/兎小屋>).

<sup>25</sup> Erving Goffman, *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1967), 71.

<sup>26</sup> In Japan cutaway coats are called *mōningu* (morning coat), and they are worn by men for formal ceremonies and occasions. The fathers of the bride and bridegroom, the bridegroom, and the male *nakōdo* (go-between) usually wear the coat at Japanese weddings.

warmly say, “Welcome back.” Finally, he escorts her to her table in the salon, where she gets seated.<sup>27</sup> When the customer is male, he is addressed as “*Botchan* (Young Lord)” or “*Dannasama* (Master).”<sup>28</sup>

### Understanding Cosplay

At Swallowtail, the butlers’ uniform consists of a white shirt, a black cutaway coat or tailcoat, a bow tie or long and narrow “necktie,” black pants, and black leather shoes. Although the café mainly caters to women, men are also regular customers who enjoy the atmosphere, great tea and food, and royal hospitality.<sup>29</sup>

*Kosupure* (cosplay) is a Japanese portmanteau combining the English terms costume and play. Broadly understood to have originated as an amalgam of American role-playing and masquerade and Japanese anime and manga fandoms, the contemporary term and practice are often attributed to Takahashi Nobuyuki. Takahashi and several authors, creators, and fans have participated in cosplay cultures, many of which flourish online and at the San Diego Comic-Con, anime conventions, and similar events. Comic-Con began in 1970 and has become the largest and most prolific comic convention in the United States, attracting tens of thousands of manga, anime, and cosplay fans today.<sup>30</sup>

The origins of cosplay are contentious. Some scholars and experts trace contemporary cosplay through a lineage of theatrical and imaginative performance in human history, including masquerades, costume balls, and the Japanese *Noh* and *kabuki* theaters. For example, the “Gothic Lolita” girls in 2020 Harajuku, Tokyo, are continuing traditions from an 1820 street masquerade in Venice, Italy. Others locate cosplay’s inception in late twentieth-century fandoms, such as people going to the theater in proxy dresses (as a character) to see *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, *Star Wars*, or

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<sup>27</sup> ZeSSIV, “The Quality of Butlers’ Café’s Royalty Service is Just Impressing,” May 15, 2013 (accessed April 30, 2021, <https://youtu.be/b8YNgvMki0>).

<sup>28</sup> All the YouTube videos show female customers only, and the authors do not know what kind of men frequent the café. Any customer can enjoy interacting with the witty, elegant, and gentlemanly butlers.

<sup>29</sup> “Like Maid Cafés, for Ladies,” Live Japan Perfect Guide, July 20, 2020.

<sup>30</sup> Sawamura, *Nihon Manga Zenshi*, 351.



*Frozen*, or in groups donning handmade costumes to represent their favorite characters in popular manga or anime such as Sailor Moon or Naruto.

Cosplay involves the creative tasks of costume design and other artistry, performance, group engagement, and source content knowledge. The 501st Legion, for instance, is an international cosplay community focusing on *Star Wars* and includes a wide range of dedicated fans. As a fan, you are embraced with world-specific features; for example, rather than colloquial and general terms for membership in a social group, you are instructed to understand your “local Garrison” or “Outpost” and to contact your “Detachment.” Live Action Role Playing (LARP) offers its fans deep psychological and social association with their preferred animated characters, like those fans we see in cosplay performances at Swallowtail or in troop formations at a pop culture convention such as the legendary 501st Garrison. Cosplay is thus a shared, embodied activity that promotes community.<sup>31</sup>

The word cosplay is also used for any type of costume play, such as occupational and situational uniforms or the butlers’ attire at Swallowtail. The female otakus who frequent the café also dress up in their kimonos, like a traditional *miko* (shrine maiden), or in dresses with themes such as *rorikon*<sup>32</sup> (girls’ clothes for adult women) and *kawaii* (cute).<sup>33</sup> Hence, the term cosplay covers not only the cosplay of manga and anime characters but also various other themes in contemporary Japan.

### **Role-Playing, Role-Taking, and Role-Making in a Hierarchical Society**

At Swallowtail Butler Café, both the customers and the handsome butlers enjoy interacting with one another. A customer may go to the café solo or with a few friends as the salon offers seating options for single customers or small groups.

The customers need to be familiar with the “stage” or setting where they engage in role-playing and its ambiance. The elegant environment with fancy furniture, curtains, cutlery, and chandeliers is quite different from everyday Japanese homes and offices. Pamela Drobig wrote, “I was a bit nervous before my visit, not knowing what exactly to expect...The relaxed,

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<sup>31</sup> S. J. Napier, “The World of Anime Fandom in America” in F. Lunning, ed, *Mechademia 1* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 47–63.

<sup>32</sup> The term is an abbreviation of the so-called “Lolita Complex” in Japanese, but it usually means an attraction to underage girls.

<sup>33</sup> The Uwaga Pies, “I Paid a Japanese Man,” June 14, 2018.

confident professionalism (of her butlers)...immediately brushed aside any sort of tension that I might have brought into the café.”<sup>34</sup> Shiina advises, “We remind the ladies visiting the salon for the first time that this is their home and tell them to relax. We are servants after all, and we want them to enjoy their teatime.”<sup>35</sup> The customers usually start to feel more comfortable with the setting and the role they are supposed to play within a short time as they immerse in this unique experience. Drobig writes that the butlers “strive to make everyone feel welcome, valued, and yes, royal.”<sup>36</sup> With more comfort comes a transformation of one’s concept of self.

George H. Mead (1863–1931) was a US philosopher and founding father of a sociological paradigm called symbolic interactionism. He states that our initial selfhood process entails the acquisition of language, which enables us to engage in role-taking and role-making. Children develop their self, a conception one has of oneself, as they go through several stages: the play stage, the game stage, and the generalized other stage. An example of the play stage is children playing house, where each child takes the role of their “significant other,” such as a parent. They understand the world from the perspective of their significant other, who influences the child’s self-evaluation and acceptance of norms to a substantial degree.<sup>37</sup>

Mead used the example of a baseball game to explain the game stage, where the child assumes numerous roles at a time to acquire “the generalized other,” the attitude of the group, community, and society. Society is internalized in one’s self by adopting the generalized other, and humans eventually reach the stage where they have self-control.<sup>38</sup> For instance, TV dramas and movies about Victorian aristocracy might help people learn proper manners regarding interactions with the butlers.

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<sup>34</sup> “Like Maid Cafés, for Ladies,” Live Japan Perfect Guide, July 20, 2020.

<sup>35</sup> Swallowtail 執事喫茶, “Swallowtail Butler Café,” May 2, 2015 (accessed April 17, 2021, <https://www.youtu.be/8DF0uyGwOUU>).

<sup>36</sup> “Like Maid Cafés, for Ladies,” Live Japan Perfect Guide, July 20, 2020.

<sup>37</sup> George H. Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society: From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*, ed. Charles W. Morris (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934), reprinted in Craig Calhoun et al., eds., *Classical Sociological Theory* (Chichester, UK: John Wiley and Sons, 2012).

<sup>38</sup> Lewis A. Coser, *Masters of Sociological Thought: Ideas in Historical Social Context* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), 337.

In this realm, the novice butlers must learn their roles from others, especially from senior butlers who act as their “significant other,” teaching them the correct etiquette, proper manners, and language. In several YouTube videos, the butlers serve customers and carry witty conversations with ease and professionalism. Yet, when it comes to new butlers, they must first go through a rigorous two-month training.<sup>39</sup> Professional trainers of hotel and restaurant staff members teach them lessons on how to stand, wait, bow, walk, bring food, serve tea, and talk. They also teach customs and manners, responsibilities, and professionalism.<sup>40</sup> Butlers must master the art of tea making and learn the names of different teas, flavors, and teacups. Iori, the tea manager, understands that “tea is made with various considerations – the lady’s mood, weather, season, etc.”<sup>41</sup>

A rookie butler needs to take the role of “the generalized other” to fit in the community where he now belongs. He needs to learn the way of Swallowtail by character training and socialization. The generalized other of the café “consists of the commonly shared and presumably deeply felt expectations, sentiments, values, and ideas of which members of the social unit are aware and in relation to which they judge themselves and one another.”<sup>42</sup>

First-time customers to Swallowtail need to pay attention to the role they are playing to behave properly. The new and adventurous experience with handsome and proper butlers may make some customers uncomfortable at first. However, once seated at a table, the butler becomes their significant other. He is an agent of socialization who reveals information about the “Mansion,” explains the process to make tea and the various foods served, and occasionally gives instructions on how to be a proper “lady.” For example, when she wants more tea, she should use the bell to call his attention, and her butler comes to her table and pours the beverage. When she wants to

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<sup>39</sup> “Like Maid Cafés, for Ladies,” Live Japan Perfect Guide, July 20, 2020.

<sup>40</sup> Suzuneiro すずねちゃんねる, “Shitsujikissade hataraitara omino hoka taihendadda hanashi 1 kenshūhen,” April 28, 2020 (accessed April 17, 2021, <https://www.youtu.be/xVqEpu2OEYY>); CDawgVa, “I Joined Japan’s #1 Butler Café,” August 3, 2020, (accessed October 25, 2020, [https://www.youtu.be/qqVHHTQco\\_A](https://www.youtu.be/qqVHHTQco_A)).

<sup>41</sup> Swallowtail 執事喫茶, “Swallowtail Butler Café,” May 2, 2015.

<sup>42</sup> John P. Hewitt, *Self and Society: A Symbolic Interactionist Social Psychology* (Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1988), 130.

use the restroom, she rings the bell, and he will escort her there. Veteran butlers with more life experience give suggestions and life advice to younger customers as needed. They also “discipline” them by saying, “Our Master told us not to spoil you!”<sup>43</sup> When customers ask a private question about the butlers’ age, marital status, or where they live, they gracefully dismiss these details to let them ponder and leave it to their imagination. Often, customers enjoy playing the role of a “spoiled” rich woman who can command the well-mannered butlers.<sup>44</sup> The roles give both employees and customers an organizing framework that they “can use to make a performance that will meet the needs of a particular situation,” and as for their role-making, they are self-consciously and “creatively engaged in making an appropriate role performance.”<sup>45</sup>

A butler and his “lady” are mutually oriented toward each other. Their co-presence entails verbal and non-verbal cues such as silence, glances, postures, gestures, use of space, body movement, and other contextual understandings. US anthropologist Edward Hall observed that Japan has a high-context culture, where this context “determines everything about the nature of communication and is the foundation on which all subsequent behavior rests.”<sup>46</sup> Thus, Japanese people need to know the explicit messages and the hidden dimensions within contextual meanings to interact appropriately. This ability is required to *kūkiwo yomu* (to “read” the air/atmosphere/situation and to read between the lines) in Japanese.

Erving Goffman, a Canadian-born sociologist, known for his dramaturgical analysis, states that an individual needs to rely on others “to complete the picture of him of which he himself is allowed to paint only certain parts. Each individual is responsible for the demeanor image of himself and the deference image of others.”<sup>47</sup> The individual self is the product of a joint interaction ceremony, and it applies to all the cosplayers at

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<sup>43</sup> Emirin Channeru, “Arasājoshiga ohimesamani narikitte shitsujikissani ittara jikkanikaetta kimochininatta,” October 16, 2019 (accessed April 17, 2021, <http://www.youtu.be/ER4BTEb2eck>).

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Hewitt, *Self and Society*, 83.

<sup>46</sup> Edward T. Hall, *Beyond Culture* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1977), 92.

<sup>47</sup> Erving Goffman, *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1967), 84.

Swallowtail: the butlers and the customers. Each individual needs to interpret how others handle themselves and observe their demeanor and deference during their social interactions in the salon. Goffman summarizes that “the self is in part a ceremonial thing, a sacred object which must be treated with proper ritual care and in turn must be presented in a proper light to others.”<sup>48</sup> The butlers’ royal treatment of their customers makes them feel special, noble, and important. This is especially meaningful for contemporary Japanese women’s psyche. Japanese women are expected to be polite and attentive to their men, be it their boss, father, husband, or son, and they are generally asked to serve others’ needs more often than men. Many women (whether Japanese or not) willingly do these things because they want to do so. The desirability of service to others still symbolizes an ideal womanhood and motherhood.

Nevertheless, women tend to suffer from overwork in their careers and at home, especially those who need to take care of the very young, sick, disabled, or elderly without much help from other family members. The Japanese word *karōshi* (death from overwork) appeared in the 1980s, and more than 10,000 “workaholics” die annually in recent years. More Japanese women employees die from overwork and suicide attributed to work-related fatigue. It can happen to housewives, too.<sup>49</sup> Unfortunately, women who have advanced in their careers face a tremendous amount of stress at work as their responsibilities and accountabilities increase. Appropriateness in speech and behavior is very important in Japanese corporations, yet sexual and moral harassment by men abound, and they usually can get away with it. It is tough to be a woman in Japan. Many desire to be respected and pampered at least once in a while. No wonder they become repeating customers at the Swallowtail café!

Traditionally, Japanese society is considered a hierarchical one where rank and order are indispensable for proper interaction rituals.<sup>50</sup> Japanese people are never equal to one another, and respect is shown in many ways, such as language (e.g., greetings, titles, forms of address, and verb stems), bowing, the space one occupies, and seating arrangements. Ruth

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<sup>48</sup> Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*, 91.

<sup>49</sup> Tara John, “Japan’s Deadly Culture of Overwork.” *Time*, October 23, 2017.

<sup>50</sup> Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture* (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1947); Nakane Chie, *Japanese Society* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1972).

Benedict remarked that the notion of hierarchy is as natural as breathing to the Japanese. One must know one's proper station in society and behave accordingly.<sup>51</sup>

In role-play, one can enjoy more freedom by escaping from everyday reality and routines. It is fun and liberating, and it offers psychological satisfaction to deep-seated longings or certain fetishes. It also makes our unrealistic hopes and extravagant dreams “come true” at the café, if only for a short time. At Swallowtail, the butlers are always pleasant and deferential. They use polite and respectful language to elevate the status of their customers or humble language to bring themselves down to do the same. They also use different degrees of bowing to show respect and sincerity. Their “ladies” speak as they like and can indulge themselves in the passive affection of the butler and embrace complete relaxation while being accommodated in this kind of interaction. It relieves the stress of many young women working in corporations where it is typical for their male bosses and colleagues to force them into submissive and demure behavior, demanding they make errands or even tea or coffee in the office.<sup>52</sup> At the café, the housewives can temporarily forget about their household chores and daily routines to serve their family members. They can genuinely enjoy a quiet teatime with handsome butlers who pamper their self-esteem. There is much psychological satisfaction in this type of social interaction, so it is understandable how often women seek it, given how rarely it occurs in everyday reality.

The butlers are always required to be professional. They have information and general knowledge, and they pay attention to events and trends in the world to talk with their “ladies.” The conversations at the café also entail make-believe stories about their life situations, and the butlers and stewards try to answer any questions from their customers. For example, a young Chinese woman asked Iori, the second steward, “What is my schedule today?” He immediately takes out the planner from his suit pocket and says, “After the meal, at 10 o'clock, you are supposed to do a painting outside while the weather is good.” He then mentions a dance party that she will attend later that day.<sup>53</sup> Mizusawa, one of the youngest and novice butlers, receives a request from his “lady” to cut down a tree in the garden. He says,

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<sup>51</sup> Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, 47–49.

<sup>52</sup> Channeru, “Arasājoshiga,” October 16, 2019.

<sup>53</sup> ZeSSIV, “The Quality of Butlers’ Café’s Royalty Service,” May 15, 2013.

“I was asked (to do the job), but I was worried about the squirrels who live there (in the tree).” Furuya, another butler also in charge of BAR BLUE MOON, was asked about his recent activities. He says, “I went to see cherry blossoms. I thought about the transient nature of our lives when the blossoms were falling down from the tree.” He continues, “I just don’t understand this feeling about missing you...I have never experienced it before,” while his “lady” customer assures him that this feeling is love. In this conversation, Furuya talks about the Japanese notion of *wabi sabi*, the transient nature of life itself, which can also be observed in Lady Murasaki’s *The Tale of Genji* or Matsuo Bashō’s famous haikus. When he describes his feelings for his “lady,” Furuya’s words remind one of speech bubbles from typical Japanese girls’ comics from the Showa Era.<sup>54</sup> The conversations in the café are based on role-playing, blending fiction, and each butler’s personal experiences. Emirin, a thirty-something Japanese YouTube personality, remarks: “I love the café so much because I can talk about any topic (with the butlers).”<sup>55</sup>

### Cosplay and Otaku

The cosplay and otaku phenomena overlap and interact in notable ways. At the most fundamental, cosplayers are likely to be otaku themselves and are patronized by otaku, as seen in the case of Swallowtail. Given that the term and the identity otaku are colloquially applied to avid fans of Japanese popular culture, one might argue that the economic interests of *Cool Japan* are rooted in promoting an affirmative otaku perspective. Thus, the otaku as a consumer supports the Japanese popular culture industry, while the social otaku contributes to an increased fandom.

In this respect, native Japanese otaku or foreign otaku receive a mostly positive reception within Japanese culture. The term has been used for several decades since 1970s Japan to reflect this reality, both as a proud “nerd” label and as a social moniker to identify membership to a subculture like in the magazine *Otaku USA*.

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<sup>54</sup> Emirin Channeru, “Shitsujikissatoiunanojikkani kiseishitara shiawaseni michiafureteita,” April 11, 2020 (accessed May 4, 2021, <https://www.youtube.be/w5xZj-8i5So>); Channeru, “Arasājoshiga,” October 16, 2019.

<sup>55</sup> Emirin Channeru, “Hisashiburino shitsujikissade daijikenga okoteshimatta,” August 31, 2020 (accessed April 2, 2021, <https://www.youtube.be/wANzZ1OO81A>).

Like cosplay, the otaku term is not always positive. In Japan and the United States, the word has often been used pejoratively and associated with social stigmas. For example, the 1989 case of Tsutomu Miyazaki led to the smearing of anime otakus. Miyazaki kidnapped, raped, and killed four small girls aged four to seven in Tokyo and Saitama. He also engaged in cannibalism, vampirism, and sending the deceased girls' body parts to their families with postcards using a woman's pseudonym. When the police investigated his house, many pornographic videotapes were found. The Japanese mass media reported that they were anime-related, and Miyazaki came to be dubbed "an otaku murderer." As a result, the mass media and the Japanese political parties tried to ban manga and anime.<sup>56</sup>

For instance, Saturday Night Live's 37th season (2011–2012) featured the recurring skit "J-Pop America Fun Time Now." The skit satirized the foremost stigmas about non-Japanese otaku – naïveté, social ineptitude, Japanese cultural ignorance, cultural insensitivity, and obsession. Two university students hosted the show, presenting a poor approximation of Japanese variety TV while being chided by their embarrassed Japanese Studies professor. Also, the 2000s import of anime to Cartoon Network, Funimation, and other cable and distribution networks in the US (which produced the current cohort of university student and 20-something otaku), in addition to the release of heralded classics like Otomo's *Akira*, was preceded by the now-iconic "Comic Book Guy" on the long-running show *The Simpsons*, a blunt caricature of the stigmas associated (particularly with adult) pop culture fandom. Similarly, before that demographic cohort was reading *Naruto*, *One Piece*, *Dragonball Z*, and other Japanese manga that were then newly available in bookstores and libraries, the comics industry in the US witnessed a boom in the early 80s, including the dark turn (i.e., *Watchmen* and *Dark Knight Returns*) and parody in the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (and Moore's denial of the serious value of *Watchmen*) towards the mid-80s, along with the broad social critique of the adult comics reader or fan.

Undeniably, cosplay and the otaku are non-normative, subculture practices and identities. Cosplay itself contributes to broader otaku stigmas, as neither most Japanese nor most Americans find avid fandom and proxy costuming and acting normal. Contentiousness reveals how much the otaku

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<sup>56</sup> Sharon Kinsella, "Amateur Manga Subculture and the Otaku Panic," *Journal of Japanese Studies* 24/2 (1998), 308–309.



investment in pop culture and associated technologies are socially vacuous, to what degree conventional popularity abhors otakuness (and all “nerdiness”), and how this creates a collection of subcultures to both actively shun and allow freedom to flourish. As noted above, research shows how the cosplayer, the otaku, can find a range of prosocial benefits.

### **Conclusion**

Swallowtail is a themed restaurant where both the butlers and their “ladies” enjoy cosplay role-playing. About a dozen butlers are the opera troupe members who engage in various kinds of performances in music videos and concerts and make public appearances at anime conventions. They also often take group trips with their fans. The café is a perfect example of a multi-faceted entertainment industry based on otaku fandom, café, music videos, and tourism in twenty-first-century Japan. Many YouTubers are currently uploading videos that feature their extraordinary experiences with the butlers.

Cosplay entails demeanors with appropriate clothing, posture, gesture, and language. There is also an interaction ceremony where the players present their proper self-images temporarily in the eyes of others. At the end of the customer’s visit, a butler announces something like, “My Lady, it is time for your horse-riding lesson. There is a horse waiting for you outside.” He escorts her to the door and sends her off with a deep bow saying, “Farewell, My Lady. Please have a lovely day!”<sup>57</sup> Cosplay at Swallowtail Butler Café ends when the door is closed by the butlers and the customers leave the building. The experience, just like in any other concept café, is characterized by an entertaining and interactive setting with delicious food and tea. In a sense, it is like visiting an amusement park. However, in this case, customers can experience a fantasy world where women’s status is elevated; for an hour or so, they are pampered and cared for by handsome butlers that make them feel special, relaxed, and free to forget about reality outside the salon. Role-playing that includes both role-taking and role-making contributes to one’s status, fun, and good mood, as well as the reduction of everyday life stress in a hierarchical Japanese society.

After exiting the café, the lady customer returns to reality and to a society where she is still expected to cater to men’s needs by playing the role of an ideal woman who speaks politely, helps without complaining, and acts

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<sup>57</sup> ZeSSIV, “The Quality of Butlers’ Café’s Royalty Service,” May 15, 2013.

just like a traditional *yamato nadeshiko* (an ideal Japanese woman who is beautiful, pure, demure, elegant, gentle, and humble). Overall, the café provides otaku and non-otaku customers with delightful and positive social experiences that contribute to their well-being and happiness.