



ISSN: 1500-0713

Essay Title: The Rise in Popularity of Japanese Culture with American Youth: Causes of the ‘Cool Japan’ Phenomenon

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Source: *Japanese Studies Review*, Vol. XVII (2013), pp. 121 - 141

Stable URL: <https://asian.fiu.edu/projects-and-grants/japan-studies-review/journal-archive/volume-xvii-2013/garcia-cool-japan.pdf>

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**THE RISE IN POPULARITY OF JAPANESE CULTURE
WITH AMERICAN YOUTH:
CAUSES OF THE “COOL JAPAN” PHENOMENON**

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Introduction

Anime, manga, and video games from Japan have blazed a trail in the American youth entertainment market and have undergone an evolution from exoticized orientalism to complete integration in the everyday lives of substantial segments of the global community.¹ This essay aims to answer the question, what have been the causes of the “cool Japan” phenomenon among the youth, specifically in the United States? Studies so far have included the history of anime and manga, the effects of Japan’s soft power, and what this cultural phenomenon has done for Japan economically.² My study contributes to an emerging area of research on this phenomenon that looks at its causes, effects, and evolution.³

The causes that propelled the three biggest mediums of Japanese pop culture – anime, manga, and video games – can be seen as related to the

¹ Jim Frederick, “What’s Right about Japan,” Time Magazine Online, August 2003 (accessed December 20, 2010, http://www.time.com/time/asia/2003/cool_japan/story.html).

² As made apparent in the article by Michal Daliot-Bul, “Japan Brand Strategy: The Taming of ‘Cool Japan’ and the Challenges of Cultural Planning in a Postmodern Age,” *Social Science Japan Journal* 12 (2009), p. 2: “Euphoric intellectual discourses on the global success of Japanese popular culture have prompted Japanese scholars to connect popular culture with economic, political and diplomatic power.” This means Japan has already realized the potential of this cultural market and intends to continue to capitalize on this Intellectual Property.

³ See Anne Allison, *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Hiroki Azuma, *Otaku: Japan’s Database Animals*, trans. Jonathan E. Abel and Shion Kono (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); and Susan J. Napier, *From Impressionism to Anime: Japan as Fantasy and Fan Cult in the Mind of the West* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

media, industries, and shifts in postmodern consumption practices. Along with these causes are elements that I observed as a participant in this movement that exemplify the overall explosion in popularity and worldwide attention that this phenomenon has achieved: advancements in technology, music, fashion, *otaku* culture and their relation to Japanese pop culture in the United States. These factors were selected because they exist independently from this phenomenon but altogether helped generate the adoration that keeps this movement going. I will most commonly refer to anime, but this usually encompasses the accompanying manga and video games of the same titles.

Methodology

The methodology used in doing this research will draw from personal observations and experiences I have among youth influenced by Japanese pop culture in the United States. This method is thus essentially a literature review with secondary sources that are used as examples. Methodologically, my personal experiences help me understand and interpret the secondary sources. I have collected and analyzed a combination of articles from scholarly journals, newsletters, magazines and online sources as well as a variety of recently published books on the topic as well as media sources from Japan and the United States. By applying all these resources, I have a well-rounded analysis and basis upon which to explore the elements in my topic in terms of media appeal, institutional factors, and postmodern consumption practices and the effect thereof.

Sources

Scholarly and academic sources on the “Cool Japan” phenomena are becoming more available as more interest and data accumulate. The works of Napier, Azuma, and Allison⁴ were akin to re-watching scenes of my childhood through the eyes of someone else. Napier’s immersion of herself into the “fan world” at conventions was an accurate portrayal and interesting at times because of the metaphors she would use to describe what she was seeing, which I never thought of at the time when I was in the midst of “con-goers.” She says, “The atmosphere at a typical anime convention, therefore, is fundamentally different from a professional

⁴ Allison, *Millennial Monsters*; Azuma, *Otaku: Japan’s Database Animals*; and Napier, *From Impressionism to Anime*.

conference where participants are always to some degree or another aware that their participation is related to improving their career possibilities.”⁵

Azuma’s use of terms such as “database,” “simulacra,” “narratives,”⁶ and the like, as well as his reworking of ideas gives an interesting analysis of “*otakudom*” that explains the origins, the inner-workings, and the appeal anime has over fans. I was able to use this analysis to reflect on my own life as an *otaku* and measure up the similarities, which were many, and better understand other types of *otaku* that he describes. In simplified definitions, “database” is the network of one specific anime title or genre and all of its merchandise that is ready for consumption. Database consumption of “simulacra,” as compared to the originals, is the desire of *otaku* to collect or create data that coincides within the original storyline’s settings while not minding whether they accumulate this sort of data from the author’s original source or derivative works. Thus, “database animals” are these *otaku* who live to consume as much of the database as possible, whatever their network⁷ (from *moe* girls⁸ to *Gundam* model kits). The “narratives,” whether grand (having worldviews behind them) or small (a specific title or work), give broader meaning to anime stories.⁹ Therefore the database consumption as it is known today is a result of the loss of the grand narrative and even of fabrications of the grand narrative.¹⁰ The breakdown of the narratives means there now lacks a broader meaning for the fans of anime, but still a database to consume. For example, Hello Kitty was created as a company mascot first and then her popularity brought about the animated series. In this example, the only important aspect is the database, which is provided to consume with a meaningless story for background information (meaningless in the grand narrative sense). In Azuma’s words:

⁵ Napier, *From Impressionism to Anime*, p. 153.

⁶ Azuma, *Otaku: Japan’s Database Animals*, p. 96.

⁷ A lengthy description of the term “animals” was given in Azuma’s text, but it in contrast to “humans,” “animal” means those who are in harmony with their environment, as opposed to “humans” who constantly force nature to conform to their own needs.

⁸ These are stereotypically “cute” anime girls, who possess certain characteristics such as cat ears and maid costumes.

⁹ Azuma, *Otaku*, p. 54.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Amid this change, the Japanese *otaku* lost the grand narrative in the 1970s, learned to fabricate the lost grand narrative in the 1980s (narrative consumption), and in the 1990s, abandoned the necessity for even such fabrication and learned simply to desire the database (database consumption).¹¹

Even at my most obsessed with Japanese culture, I never collected toys or played the *Pokémon* games. This being said, Anne Allison's *Millennial Monsters* was an informative read that gave reasons for the American youth's infatuation:

Japanese anime have three qualities that make them in particular appealing: one an attractive way for kids to deal with the rapidly changing world, where nothing is certain, and the old guarantees of the previous generations no longer exist in this globalized world; two, the shows and figures constantly change, which keeps giving new value to the product; and three, the goods have a sense of techno-animalism—in essence, the goods, the Japanese franchises become legit friends for the consumer, who is increasingly becoming more alone even as the world grows smaller.¹²

Also, note her views on “techno-animism,” a quality that gives emotional value to inanimate objects by imbuing them with a soul.

Journalistic/Pop Culture Sources

Less academic and more investigative, the journalistic and pop culture sources used have been both entertaining and edifying in bringing this topic into clearer focus. Other sources turned up unexpectedly in places such as fashion magazines. This seems that it would be the farthest removed from the Japanese pop culture world, but reflecting upon their presence there struck me as evidence of the inroads that have taken place which will soon be commented upon again. In *Vanity Fair* and *Marie Claire*

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Allison, *Millennial Monsters*, p. xv–xviii.

magazines, respectively, two articles expose the reader to the influence and abundance of Japanese pop culture in their daily lives. Haworth's article in *Marie Claire* introduces readers to the first foreign geisha in Japan and tells her struggles when entering this exclusive world as well as her continued struggle in possessing dual identities as one of the most traditional and the most foreign symbols in Japan. In reading this article, one learns about the fusion of traditional culture in modern day Japanese society, something that is a norm in the Japanese animation world.¹³

Causes with Key Examples: Media Influence

Media influence is one of the main causes that made even the most Japanese pop culture novice aware that *Pokémon*, owned by Nintendo, came from Japan. A glaring example is that the franchise made the cover of *Time* magazine.¹⁴ The introduction of *Sailor Moon* onto U.S. airways in 1995 by DiC Entertainment was the beginning of the notoriety of *shōjo* (girl-targeted) anime that eventually proved to be a huge success. Despite a rocky start, fans would petition to keep the show on the air and managed to get all but the exceedingly controversial fifth season to be licensed and broadcast in the States.¹⁵ In 1997, manga distributor Tokyopop exported the series to the U.S. and in 2001 the graphic novel sold at least a million copies in North America.¹⁶ Napier agrees that although *Sailor Moon* was not as popular with the majority as hoped, it certainly caught the attention of enough girls to get the *shōjo* market off the ground and paved the way for the girl-targeted anime market.¹⁷

¹³ Abigail Haworth, "Meet Japan's First Western Geisha," *Marie Claire Magazine*, December 2009, pp. 104–108.

¹⁴ Douglas McGray, "Japan's Gross National Cool," *Foreign Policy* 130 (2002), p. 46.

¹⁵ This season was controversial due to the fact that newly introduced characters would transform from men into women when becoming their super heroine selves. Also, the finale would have been difficult to edit considering the main character fights while nude for the majority of the last episode, a subject that is more taboo in America compared with Japan, especially in children's programming.

¹⁶ Kelts, *Japanamerica*, p. 165.

¹⁷ Napier, *From Impressionism to Anime*, p. 139.

Cartoon Network's *Toonami* block would highly advertise anime during its run on the air. It would frequently play the most variety of anime on television at the time, peaking in 2001.¹⁸ Whether marathons, movies, or late-night exclusives, *Toonami* introduced many fans to anime series such as *Dragonball Z*, *Trigun*, *Cowboy Bebop*, *Tenchi Muyō*, *FuriKuri* (also known as *FLCL*), and others. This introduction hinted at the scope of anime available, which gives anime such a wide breadth in its fan base atypical of other popular fan communities already in existence. Although *Toonami* has gone off the air, other network for kids such as *Nicktoons* have started airing some anime titles, the re-mastered *Dragonball* series called *Dragonball Kai*, for example.

A media phenomenon in its own right, the expansion of the Internet was crucial in making this grassroots movement into the full-fledged phenomenon that it is now. Napier goes as far as to say that without the growth of the Internet, anime may have remained nothing more than a niche in America's animation market.¹⁹ The gradual growth of the Internet garnered an appreciation for what was available and increased the demand for more. I remember these times very vividly, from collecting JPEGs of my favorite anime's to downloading AMVs (Anime Music Video) on the painfully slow 56k dial-up internet connection, the initial scarcity fueled the phenomenon at its onset. For this reason, conventions were highly anticipated. At conventions, merchandise imported from Japan that was not sold anywhere else was bountifully found, such as limited edition action figures, cosplay accessories, and *dōjinshi*.²⁰ Developments on the Internet, such as the debut of the online marketplace eBay in 1995, cranked up the exposure that gave fans more access to the database they wished to consume. This perfect timing between the progression of technology and availability of merchandise tantalized the American *otaku*; like a truism parents tell their kids, one appreciates something the more one had to wait to acquire it. Napier states:

¹⁸ Kelts, *Japanamerica*, p. 190.

¹⁹ Napier, *From Impressionism to Anime*, p. 136.

²⁰ *Dōjinshi* (同人誌) are fan-made books or novels that are usually high-quality and fully colored by independent artists without permission from the artist. Tolerance of this copyright infringement is accepted because of the interest that is generated in the original work as a result.

There is no question that anime's popularity was helped by fortuitous timing- both in terms of the VCR and then the DVD revolution, and perhaps even more so by the rise of the Internet. The improvements in telecommunications and the ability to broadcast over many channels [media outlets] also undoubtedly helped to feed the appetite for all kinds of entertainment. The stage was set for a revolution in transcultural flows around the globe.²¹

As time went on, anime was made available everywhere. Barnes and Noble and Borders have an entire section devoted to manga. Best Buy has an extensive collection of DVD box sets, and Toys R Us has plenty of action figures and trading cards from the most popular series. The media's influence (especially the widespread use of the Internet) helped the *otaku* community go from a fringe position in society to a movement on a global scale. Many Japanese people are confused by the attention that anime has received abroad. Some, as Takeuchi states below, realize the significance of this attention and others, like in the next section, make it their own:

Today, Japan is a dynamic force in the world of comics, and many manga are now read overseas. Japanese animated films also continue to make waves overseas. The anime sub-culture took off in Japan in the mid-1960s, drawing energy from the growing popularity of manga stories. Many of those stories were given new life as anime, with some being exported abroad. This actually led to manga gaining a wider audience outside of Japan. Therefore, manga and anime have played off each other's strengths, developing into a media phenomenon that will surely continue to evolve.²²

Causes with Key Examples: Industry Intervention

Following the section on the different uses of media by fans, industries that have capitalized on the Japanese pop culture phenomenon

²¹ Napier, *From Impressionism to Anime*, pp. 136–137.

²² Osamu Takeuchi, "Manga Evolution," *Nippon* [にっぽん] 4 (2010), p. 11.

have done so based on the demand of fans and incorporation of this trend into their own venue. Industries can tell what is in demand by monitoring the number of raw²³ anime episodes and scanlations²⁴ downloaded from Japan per week. In speaking of internet and *otaku* activities, Azuma says, “In such an environment, the producers, like it or not, must have been conscious of their position relative to the whole of otaku culture.”²⁵ However, at some point, Japanese pop culture’s influence seeped so deep into American conscious that it was being accepted as our own culture produced by our own population.

In the movie industry, big Hollywood films including *The Matrix* and *Kill Bill*, for example, have used the Japanese “Coolness” factor in both movies by having an animated sequence and a spin-off that are done in the purely anime style.²⁶ Figures 1 and 2 below are examples of the animation that are influenced by Japanese anime style in *The Matrix* and *Kill Bill*.



Figure 1. *The Matrix* (left)

Figure 2. *Kill Bill* (right)

In the broadcast television industry, shows such as *Teen Titans*, *Powerpuff Girls*, and *Hi Hi Puffy AmiYumi* are more examples of American-made media that have Japanese pop culture influence. The animation industry in the U.S. made these shows with anime’s “coolness” in mind, driving the popularity of both industries up at the same time. *The Powerpuff Girls* often

²³ The word “raw” here means the unedited and untranslated version of the show.

²⁴ “Scanlation” is a term that refers to a manga page that has been scanned, translated, and made available for upload on the internet. Whole volumes and series can be found like this on various internet sites.

²⁵ Azuma, *Otaku*, pp. 46–47.

²⁶ Ibid.

features the girls fighting giant *Godzilla*-like monsters in humorous fashion. *Hi Hi Puffy AmiYumi*, inspired by the real Japanese pop group Puffy AmiYumi, is very successful in Japan and now also enjoys success in the West since the airing of the animated series. The American-made DC comics animated series *Teen Titans*, are also drawn and emote in an anime style. William Tsutsui's book, *Japanese Popular Culture and Globalization*, explores how Japanese pop culture has become globalized. Napier and Tsutsui are consistent on the point that these shows demonstrate on the removing of "Japaneseness." He says, "The remaking of Japanese pop products may be the ultimate form of localization, a wholesale appropriation of Japanese styles, stories, and innovations that removes any apparent 'Japaneseness' from a pop culture artifact."²⁷

In the music industry, pop music artist Gwen Stefani is followed around by "Harajuku girls" dressed in Tokyo street fashion (Figure 4) and features them in her music videos as a kind of posse she hangs out and identifies with. The rock band Linkin Park won the MTV Viewer's Choice Award for their video "Breaking the Habit," which was recorded in Japan and produced by a Japanese animator.²⁸ The band has also used the Japanese flute, the *shakuhachi*, in their music and has a song that incorporates Japanese lyrics.²⁹ In Figure 3, Linkin Park's popular anime-style video was made into manga format and distributed by Tokyopop, the same distributors as *Sailor Moon*, furthermore blurring the lines of what is actual Japanese imported pop culture and what is Japanese pop culture influence, an example of the inroads this phenomenon has had on American culture. This also reverberates with Azuma's description of database consumption amongst database animals, the *otaku*.³⁰ This manga is American made but looks similar to anime since the video was produced by Japanese animators. It is not a simulacra but it is mimicry of something else. To fans of anime, does it matter? No, it just makes Linkin Park appealing now as a "cool" band. To fans of the band does it matter? No, because

²⁷ William M. Tsutsui, *Japanese Popular Culture and Globalization* (Michigan: Association for Asian Studies, 2010), p. 56.

²⁸ Napier, *From Impressionism to Anime*, p. 127.

²⁹ Mike Shinoda, "Jornado del Muerto," *A Thousand Suns* (Linkin Park, 2011).

³⁰ Azuma, *Otaku*, p. 53.

anything the band makes is automatically “cool” thus making anime “cool” and thus further integrating it into the American youth psyche.



**Figure 3. Linkin Park’s “Breaking the Habit” Music Video Poster (left)
Figure 4. Gwen Stefani and the Harajuku Girls (right)**

In the fashion industry, artists like Gwen Stefani and hip-hop/rap music artist Kanye West not only sing about their appreciation for Japanese pop culture, but they also endorse and spread it. Kanye West is featured in the Bape Spring 2010 collection, a street wear fashion line by well-known Japanese designer, Nigo. Gwen Stefani is the designer of the Harajuku Lovers line with its slogan being, “Your look is so distinctive like DNA, like nothing I have ever seen in the USA—a ping-pong match between Eastern and Western—did you see your inspiration in my latest collection?”³¹ Similarly, Tokidoki and Kid Robot are designer labels whose creator designs not only clothes but also baggage, toys, and other commodities that have Japanese stylistic influence and could be confused for Japanese pop culture, but is actually just based off it. The Tokidoki designer imbues such a positive image of Japan to the world and expresses it on the merchandise tags:

Tokidoki means “sometimes” in Japanese. I chose a Japanese word because I love Japan. I love everything from the ultra modern happy face to Shibuya to the serious magic silence of Kyoto. I chose “sometimes” because everyone waits for moments that change one’s

³¹ This slogan is featured on the accompanying tags of Harajuku Lovers products.

destiny. By simple chance or meeting a new person, Tokidoki is the hope, the hidden energy everyone has inside that gives us the strength to face a new day and dream something positive, that something magical will happen to us. Ciao, my name is Simone Legno.³²



Figure 5. “Tokidoki” fashion line advertisement (left)

Figure 6. “Kid Robot” advertisement (right)

In this way, the day-to-day life of American youth, who are fans of music, movies, and fashion are consistently exposed to elements of Japanese pop culture that they grow accustomed to and affectionate for. This consistent exposure to Japanese pop culture is what I argue to be one of the rationales as to why the phenomenon has made inroads and assimilated. This exposure also helps the development of the post modern consumption practices in the next section.

Causes with Key Examples: Postmodern Consumption Practices

Postmodern consumption practices work highly in favor of this phenomenon and have been a major component of what keeps the momentum going forward within Japan and America (both being in the top ten of the most leisure spending economies).³³ Understanding Azuma’s previously discussed terms, including “grand narrative” (background worldview), “small narrative” (title or work), “database” (related materials

³² This quote is featured on the accompanying tags of Tokidoki products.

³³ Statistic courtesy of NationMaster website (accessed March 1, 2011, http://www.nationmaster.com/graph/hea_spe_per_per-health-spending-per-person).

to the narratives), “database animals” (the *otaku*), and “simulacra” (materials that are created or unrelated to the narrative) are necessary to grasp in terms of the process and world these consumers live in.

Exploring the practice behind postmodern consumption, Kawamura’s article, “Japanese Teens as Producers of Street Fashion,” states that:

Fashion expressed the prevailing ideology of society, and these teens see the assertion of individual identity as more important and meaningful than that of group identity, which used to be the key concept in Japanese culture. Such attitudes are reflected in their norm-breaking and outrageous, yet commercially successful, attention-grabbing styles.³⁴

The United States has been seen as a highly individualistic nation for a long time now. Thus, this postmodern trend in Japan of Japanese youth developing their brand of individuality is part of what makes the pop culture appealing to American youth. It is relatable and inspirational. “Tokyo fashion is about young people...It’s the young people strolling in the streets who decide what appeals to them, and this trend then spreads among their like-minded peers.”³⁵ It has been said over and over again that Japanese teenage girls are running Tokyo fashion: Kawamura thoroughly examines the different sub-cultures and sub-genres that exist and are only distinguishable to these girls.³⁶ She explains that the typical part-time job of a salesgirl becomes a highly coveted prize in Tokyo’s Shibuya district, as these girls become arbiters of fashion to their peers.³⁷

This culture of fashion is also made apparent in anime as characters will be wearing gothic Lolita dresses, maid outfits, school

³⁴ Yuniya Kawamura, “Japanese Teens as Producers of Street Fashion,” *Current Sociology* 54 (2006), p. 787.

³⁵ “Fashion,” Creative Japan, Embassy of Japan in the UK and the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2007 (accessed February 10, 2011, <http://www.uk.emb-japan.go.jp/en/creativejapan/fashion/index.html>).

³⁶ Kawamura, “Japanese Teens as Producers of Street Fashion,” p. 788.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 790.

uniforms, and the like.³⁸ This development in consumption practices is noticeable and significant in Japan where the collapse of the group identity “performs an increasingly important role in the construction of personal identity.”³⁹ To seasoned individualistic Americans, this trend is a natural progression of the postmodern society and, combined with the data consumption tendency of the *otaku* culture, makes for the high demand of Japanese pop culture that has fueled the phenomenon.

Despite any of the causes, at the heart of this phenomenon is the fan base that supports it. In this context about the rise of Japanese pop culture in the U.S., they can be called the *otaku* community. A negative connotation of the term *otaku* is in relation to unfortunate events that tied it to anti-social and perverted behavior.⁴⁰ The use of the term, within my research, is in a positive light to meaning, “enthralled with their hobby.” I have intentionally associated the word *otaku* to refer to an obsessive nature I had with my own fandom consumption but do not intend any negative connotations. The purpose in pointing out those nuances is to avoid any confusion or mistakenly contribute any degradation to the term.

In Sugimoto’s book about modern Japanese culture, the section called “Manga Industry” shows how fans have come together in online communities to share scanlations, *dōjinshi*, and AMVs, which in turn promote the sales of the actual merchandise. Database animals will buy the original, and perhaps, again when a collector’s edition or an extended version is released.⁴¹ In the case of *dōjinshi*, made by fans for fans, bound copies are sold for the replicators profit; the result of an unspoken, implicit agreement known as *anmoku no ryōkai* that exists between the publishers and *dōjinshi* artists because of the mutual benefits that emerge from this agreement.⁴² This is another example of simulacra and its consumption by the *otaku* community. Although these causes all feed off of one another, the “behavioral pattern of the *otaku* precisely reflects this characteristic of post

³⁸ Ibid, p. 785.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Azuma, *Otaku: Japan’s Database Animals*, p. 4.

⁴¹ Yoshio Sugimoto, *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Japanese Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁴² Sugimoto, *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Japanese Culture*, p. 254.

modernity”⁴³ and is reflected in their spending habits. Considering the database is a result of the collapse of the grand narrative and the acceptance of simulacra, Azuma states that “otaku culture beautifully reflects the social structure of post modernity on two points – the omnipresence of simulacra and the dysfunctionality of the grand narrative.”⁴⁴

Anthropologist Carolyn Stevens defends the *otaku*’s postmodern consumption practices by defining them and by putting them in perspective with the consumption habits of other “class-based” examples.⁴⁵ She defines “fandom,” which is the activity of *otakus*, as a “mirror to conditions of popular culture [that] fulfills a double function...as communication,” in that our consumption choices articulate our complex class position, and as identity building, in that this communication is as much directed inwards as outwards, forming a sense of who we are and believe ourselves to be.⁴⁶

This statement is in agreement with Kawamura’s view on how consumption is a reflection of the ongoing quest to define one’s identity. Stevens further argues that this consumption is a positive and beneficial practice that engenders personal freedom and individualism:⁴⁷ “While mass media in Japan has for many years engaged in mockery, trivialization, and banalization of fan activities in Japan, with the spread of Japanese pop culture this trivialization is now a global phenomenon.”⁴⁸



Figure 7. A young *otaku*’s room

⁴³ Azuma, *Otaku: Japan’s Database Animals*, p. 28.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁴⁵ Carolyn Stevens, “You Are What You Buy,” *Japanese Studies* 30 (2010), p. 207.

⁴⁶ Stevens, “You Are What You Buy,” p. 204.

⁴⁷ Stevens, “You Are What You Buy,” p. 201.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

Figure 7 is part of the *Otacool* book series.⁴⁹ It is found in the first book in the series that features *otaku* rooms from around the world. This young girl is from the United States, and proudly shows off her various collections of figurines, manga, posters, and UFO plushies. She is a perfect example of the pride and joy that the youth take in their consumption practices, how it relates to the sense of identity, and the borders it has crossed.⁵⁰

The “Cool Japan” Campaign

Michal Daliot-Bul’s article, “Japan Brand Strategy: The Taming of ‘Cool Japan’ and the Challenges of Cultural Planning in a Postmodern Age” looks at the Intellectual Property Strategic Programs of Japan from 2004–2008 and analyzes what Japan has done in these years to promote itself in this postmodern society.⁵¹ He argues that these programs were part of the government’s efforts to maintain ownership of the Japanese image that was slowly becoming part of a global culture.

As far as administering a ‘Japan Brand’ that capitalizes on a consumer trend, the situation is even more complex since the contemporary global imagery of Japan is, to a large extent, produced by non-Japanese media, entrepreneurs and fans who engage in the reproduction of “things Japanese” and the flaming of the new global postmodern Japonism hype.⁵²

It has worked to a degree with their “Cool Japan” campaign that fuses, albeit forcefully, the traditional with the modern. Figure 8 is dissected in Laura Miller’s article, which deals with the contrived image of Japanese females that she believes this campaign portrays. In reference to this image she says:

⁴⁹ The *Otacool* book series was started by Danny Choo when he started requesting pictures of *otaku* rooms worldwide on his website. He was approached by the Japanese publishing company Kotobukiya to make it a book. This series has now spawned two more books, one on worldwide cosplayers and worldwide work spaces. A fourth book on worldwide illustrators is forthcoming.

⁵⁰ Tachikawa, *Otacool: Worldwide Otaku Room* (Tokyo: Kotobukiya, 2009); Kotobukiya, *Otacool 2: Worldwide Cosplayers* (Tokyo: Kotobukiya, 2010); and Kenyukai, *Otacool 3: Worldwide Workspaces* (Tokyo: Kotobukiya, 2010).

⁵¹ Daliot-Bul, “Japan Brand Strategy.”

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 257.

One poster in the campaign featured a campy shot of Onuki Ami and Yoshimura Yumi from the J-Pop group Puffy [AmiYumi]. The Puffy girls are wearing tacky kimonos with black boots and trendy hairstyles. The carefully planned posing combines the “modern” and “traditional.” In the background is a woodblock style Mt. Fuji, and Ami and Yumi are holding an eggplant and a hawk. These icons refer to the folk belief that it is highly auspicious for the first dream of a new year (*hatsuyume*) to contain one of these elements.⁵³

She highlights the blending of traditional and modern, which is what Daliot-Bul points out as being the government’s strategy for taking back the image of ‘Cool’ Japan and selling it through a Japanese perspective. On the bottom left of the image a reference to *Hi Hi Puffy AmiYumi* popular series on American’s Cartoon Network reflects the platform of success on which this campaign debuted on in 2006.⁵⁴ The characters of the animated series were even featured in the Macy’s Day Parade⁵⁵ in the same company of other Japanese cultural export giants, Pikachu and Hello Kitty.



Figure 8. “Cool Japan” campaign poster

⁵³ Laura Miller, “Taking Girls Seriously in ‘Cool Japan’ Ideology,” *Japan Studies Review* 13 (2011), pp. 2–3.

⁵⁴ Miller, “Taking Girls Seriously in ‘Cool Japan’ Ideology,” p. 2.

⁵⁵ Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade Balloon Lineup (accessed February 10, 2011, http://social.macys.com/parade2012_kaws/#/lineup/balloons).

However, this effort to retain what is essentially Japanese about their “cool empire” could be detrimental to the “cool” factor in years to come. On a global scale, what is the possible adverse effect? Miller states that “there are other interesting problems associated with the Cool Japan initiative...one issue is government shaping of what is supposed to be free-wheeling creative output.”⁵⁶ In 2009, the Foreign Affairs Ministry selected “Ambassadors of Cute” composed of three young girls dressed in the latest and most popular fashion. To Miller, this violates “the first rule of cool—don’t let your marketing show.”⁵⁷

Conclusion: Status of the Phenomenon Today

Overall, the popularity is still high among the American youth, but not as readily noticeable due to the sustained visibility of Japanese pop culture in everyday situations. In the States, as alluded to in the essay, this phenomenon has maintained its popularity while making significant inroads in American pop culture. The causes that I have been arguing show how the phenomenon is still evident today. In media, the redistribution of the *Sailor Moon* manga by Kodansha was announced in March 2011. In an article featured on Tokyohive, a popular website that reports in English about new developments in Japanese pop culture, the series is being brought back by popular demand with the goal of reintroducing the series to a new generation.

Kodansha USA Publishing, a subsidiary of Kodansha, announced today the exciting return of Takeuchi Naoko’s *Sailor Moon*, one of the most significant names in comics and manga, to U.S. publishing. One of the most recognized manga and anime properties in the world, *Sailor Moon* took American pop culture by storm, with mentions in music (“One Week” by Barenaked Ladies), bestselling books (*The Princess Diaries* by Meg Cabot), and more.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Miller, “Taking Girls Seriously in ‘Cool Japan’ Ideology,” p. 4.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 5.

⁵⁸ Kanki, “Kodansha USA announces the return of Sailor Moon and Codename: Sailor V,” Tokyohive, March 2011 (accessed March 19, 2011,

In 2009, the *New York Times* “introduced three separate lists of the best-selling graphic books in the country: hardcover, soft cover, and manga” further demonstrating the foray of Japanese pop culture exports (such as anime) have made in the U.S.⁵⁹ Post modern consumption practices also continue to be a staple of the *otaku* community: over the past fifteen years, Anime Expo, held in California, is the largest anime convention in North America and has maintained an increase in fan attendance each year.⁶⁰ Starting in 1992 with only 1,750 people, the convention has increased to number 15,250 people a decade later. The numbers have continued to increase at an average of 3,500 attendees per year.⁶¹

The Future of Japanese Pop Culture in America

As far as the future of this phenomenon is concerned, Daliot-Bul predicts that “Ironically, the more widespread the institutional imagery of cool Japan becomes, the faster the market hype dubbed “Cool Japan” is likely to fade away.”⁶² He insists that it is the private sector of Japan that should continue to be the driving force and producers of the images of Japanese culture, as they do not have ulterior motives for doing so except as a means to express themselves through their respective mediums.⁶³

As important as media influence, industry intervention and postmodern consumption practices have been inundating our American society with Japanese pop culture, the future lies in the reinvention of these causes. Already, with the onset of social media such as Facebook and Twitter, industries have developed new marketing strategies that

<http://www.tokyohive.com/2011/03/kodansha-usa-announces-the-return-of-sailor-moon-codename-sailor-v/>).

⁵⁹ George G. Gustines, “Introducing the New York Times Graphic Books Best Seller Lists,” *New York Times*, March 2009 (accessed April 9, 2011, <http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/03/05/introducing-the-new-york-times-graphic-books-best-seller-lists/>).

⁶⁰ “Anime Expo 2011 Convention Information,” AnimeCons.com, (accessed April 9, 2011, http://animecons.com/events/info.shtml/2293/Anime_Expo_2011).

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Daliot-Bul, “Japan Brand Strategy,” p. 262.

⁶³ Ibid.

effortlessly weave together to make postmodern consumption even easier to practice and display.

With no end in sight, the long-term effects of this rise in popularity of Japanese pop culture among American youth will continue to manifest themselves in all those who can remember the start of the phenomenon.

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