

Anime: From Cult Following to Pop Culture Phenomenon

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Abstract

This study examined the scope of influence that Japanese anime had on American people born in the '80s and '90s. Relying on secondary research and a survey using a convenience sample of 107 students and young adults, this study found that anime conveys a negative image associated with violence and fringe culture, but people see anime as more of an art form than tasteless violent film. The study also found that piracy, though not overly common, was still practiced in the case of Japanese media, but some major studios are not impeding these fansubbing (fan-made subtitles) movements. They believe that fansubbing promotes their brand and that merchandising can help recover the profits lost on film sales.

I. Introduction

One of the biggest movies to hit the box office this decade was *Toy Story 3*. Its Oscar-winning animation along with its Pixar title made it a huge hit among cinema lovers. Something that makes Pixar films so lovable to audiences is the meticulous animation. Pixar is known for leaving “Easter Eggs,” or references to past and future movies, in its films for guests to find. For example, people will notice that the Pizza Planet truck from the original *Toy Story* is in every Pixar film at least once. While watching *Toy Story 3* and carefully scanning every scene for the “Easter Eggs,” people may be shocked to see a plush Totoro doll. Totoro, a character from the 1988 Hayao Miyazaki movie, *My Neighbor Totoro*, was a surprise because Totoro is a character not at all associated with Pixar Animation (Napier, 2001). In fact, Totoro is not even an American animated character, but a Japanese one.

These references should not come as a surprise. Japanese animation, or anime, is a huge industry nowadays, even in the United States. Hayao Miyazaki is the most famous anime animator of this generation, having won an Oscar for his animated film *Spirited Away* (Lunning, 2006). Studio Ghibli, which Miyazaki co-founded, works with Disney on occasion, and Miyazaki has been nicknamed the Walt Disney of Japan (Mac-Williams, 2008). Even John Lasseter, who directed the *Toy Story* saga, has found inspiration in his Japanese contemporary, Miyazaki (Napier, 2001). Miyazaki, Osamu Tezuka, Isao Takahata, and many other animators are responsible for bringing anime into the mainstream culture of America. Yet, many Americans are either hesitant to accept this switch in cinema pop culture or are oblivious to the pervasiveness of Japanese culture in what they watch. Though many people do not realize it, Japanese animation's influence has become more common in both animated and live-action American cinema since the 1960s, when television shows such as *Astro Boy* and *Speed Racer* made it to the United States (Ladd, 2009). However, it is important to understand the implications of the cultural immersion of anime in order to understand the animation industry as it stands today.

In analysis of how and why Anime is so popular in the United States the diffusion theory can be applied to see how a new idea is disseminated, often through a foreign community (Severin & Tankard, 2001).

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Knowing how anime got into the U.S. and grew from a small cult following to a major popular culture phenomenon is important because anime is highly influential when it comes to what people watch (Borrelli, 2003).

Understanding anime is also important because anime is a huge powerhouse in the cinema industry and carries a lot of weight as far as consumer behavior goes (Lalor, 2002). For example, so-called 'American' popular icons have produced bountiful revenue streams. *Pokémon*, *Dragonball Z*, and the ever-popular live-action show, *Power Rangers*, would not be here if it were not for anime and the Japanese film industry.

Anime, which now has a viable industry in America, was widely distributed through international piracy practices during the '80s and '90s. Despite the presence of anime in current American pop culture, scholars predicted wrongly earlier that anime would not survive in the West long due to cultural and social disparities between Western and Eastern animation. For example, there are certain cultural practices depicted in anime that do not translate over to American viewers; therefore, the references are lost on them, and themes that are socially acceptable to the Japanese are not as acceptable in America. However, others argue that the ability of the human mind to develop an understanding of these cultural differences through exposure is apparent.

Anime is a multi-genre enterprise, unlike the traditional animation industry in the United States (Hall, 2010). American viewers originally thought anime was socially inappropriate because they acted under the impression that all animation was for children. Therefore, when they saw the adult anime that was being produced, they condemned the entire style and did not attempt to understand it and appreciate it for its artistic value.

People who watch anime regularly eventually develop the ability to understand these cultural references and artistic value through repeated exposure (Napier, 2001). These understandings and appreciation of anime result in a form of soft power exercised over American consumers through Japan (Otmazgin, 2008). Through this paper, the author intended to analyze how anime became so popular in America and how it affects the American cinema industry and its consumers.

II. Literature Review

A Brief History of Anime

Anime and manga are terms that are often used interchangeably even though they address two distinctly different art forms. Manga is the graphic novel and comic book cousin of anime. Manga was the foundation upon which anime was built, just as still drawings were the foundation for American animation. Though manga continues to be a somewhat prevalent influence on anime, with many anime titles originating from older manga publications, these two types retain distinct differences from each other just as an American animator would claim independence from a painter or caricaturist (MacWilliams, 2008). Due to these differences, this research focused exclusively on the history of anime's immersion in American culture.

Anime's first major breakthrough into American culture was the notable *Astro Boy*, originally titled *Tetsuan Atom* (Mighty Atom), a story of a heroic robot child created by a scientist who lost his real son. From *Astro Boy*, American companies such as NBC Enterprises began to acquire various titles from Japanese production companies such as *Kimba the White Lion* (*Jungulu Taitei Leo*, which anime fans herald as being the original *The Lion King*, claiming that Disney stole the idea), and *Gigantor* (*Tetsujin 28*).

In order to show these titles on American children's television, production companies would have to cut scenes deemed too violent, change the direct translations for redubbing, and even alter plot lines to make them more socially acceptable to Western audiences. Despite the initial popularity, the anime industry in the West came to a standstill in the late '70s for two main reasons (Ladd, 2009).

First, cult followings of people who also happened to watch violent anime porn (hentai) carried out a series of violent actions that gave the entire anime genre a negative stereotype. The first and most notorious of these crimes was called "The Otaku Killer," Otaku being a slang term for a fanatical anime fan (Bolton, Csicsery-Ronay Jr., Tatsumi, et al, 2008). This crime involved a man who violently murdered four young girls and was found to be in possession of hentai, thus casting the entire anime style in a negative light.

Second, American animation and Japanese anime began to drift in two separate directions when it came to content. Americans, who were wary of the effects of cartoon violence on children, began to censor

more often in animated films. One of the groups that most affected the fate of anime was an overzealous group called Action for Children's Television, or ACT. This censor not only included cartoon violence, but also material containing homoeroticism, gender ambiguity, or anything that suggested the main protagonist was not one hundred percent 'good-guy material' (Ladd, 2009).

Anime, on the other hand, began to expand into other genres and ratings just as live action film in America is not restricted to producing exclusively PG films. The protagonists in anime often had vices, thus making them human (Gorica, 2007). Content that contained androgyny, adult language, and pornography was seen as permissible for adult entertainment, though not necessarily in children's films (Newitz, 1995). Even death was considered to be an appropriate topic in children's anime. The Japanese acknowledged that death was a part of life by occasionally allowing characters to die instead of having the characters stay immortally young as in many American television shows.

In short, anime was not just a children's genre anymore, and adult anime films immortalized anime in history as an inappropriate, lowbrow medium despite the overabundance of appropriate children's anime being produced. This unspoken ban on anime in the United States continued up until the 1980s, when President Ronald Reagan "dismantled agencies created to protect the public, and signaled to broadcasters that the FCC, which had bowed to the demands of ACT, would no longer be so stringent in its oversight" (Ladd, 2009).

According to Dr. Susan J. Napier, a professor of the Japanese Program at Tufts University and acclaimed anime critic, anime did not see its full revival until much later in the 20th century:

"Japanese anime was initially very hard to come by in the West. A few series like *Star Blazers* crossed into American television, but they were almost always Americanized beyond recognition with infelicitous dubs, American names, and sometimes, mangled plot lines. Somehow, however, a few of the viewers began to recognize that they were seeing something different from American television fare and ultimately became aware of the Japanese origins." (2007)

Anime began its recovery and subsequent success in the United States during the 1980s. At the beginning of the new decade, 56% of Japanese television exports were anime. American viewers began to find anime during this time and, since businesses in the United States did not sell these titles, appropriated the videos among themselves through networks of Otaku in fan clubs and, eventually, online communities (Newitz, 1995). Many of these viewers were people who would have seen series such as *Astro Boy* as children and rediscovered these shows in their adult lives.

Fan groups for anime sprang up all over the country, mainly on college campuses, but eventually in high schools and extracurricular clubs (Animation, 1991). By 1995, the Japanese style of animation had a modest-yet-devoted base of fans in the West (Newitz, 1995). This created the foundation upon which hugely popular shows like *Pokémon* were able to thrive, thus cementing anime's presence in American media (Ladd, 2009). Despite anime's newfound success in America, the viewers who started these fan clubs during the '80s and '90s recognized the extent to which anime had been altered by Americanization and were disappointed by it (Napier, 2007).

These fans began the fansubbing phenomenon that has created such a huge market for anime in the United States today. Cartoon segments such as Cartoon Network's popular *Toonami* act as regular anime outlets amidst American shows (Borrelli, 2002). Now, even in American culture, people have produced adult-oriented animation such as *Family Guy* and *Futurama*, thus following the anime model in which animated material is not restricted to solely children (Ladd, 2009). Though anime is popular, the question still remains as to whether or not the negative stereotypes about anime from the 1970s still exist today.

Fansubbing

Fansubbing is the practice of taking the original Japanese anime and translating it word-for-word in fan-made subtitles. This can be time consuming for a person partaking in fansubbing and is generally carried out by amateurs who have to learn the language. But in fansubbing, there is no American studio middleman as there was in the 1960s to cut out any content deemed culturally inappropriate, therefore fans are given access to more accurate content.

Fansubbing has quickly grown into one of the most influential amateur subtitling movements of the modern era, with many of these anime fansubbers receiving little to no compensation for their work except for the personal satisfaction of receiving and distributing authentic translations of content. With fansubbed media,

anime fans get the exact translation every time, provided the person translating them is fluent in Japanese. This can prove difficult, since some words do not have direct English translations, which is why fansubbed versions of anime occasionally have slight variations within the text. Many fansubbers will note this discrepancy in the margins of the subtitles in order to authenticate their works.

With fansubbing, however, there are legal repercussions. Back in the 1990s, the Otaku turned to fansubbing because there was no other way to obtain the material. When American distributors did not sell anime titles during that time, anime fans obtained the Japanese titles for individual translation, and then distributed free copies to other fans (González, 2006).

However, with the digital age now in full swing and the abundance of anime distributors vying for consumers in the United States, the practice of fansubbing is more heavily frowned upon. Fansubbing and distributing free copies of anime works has always been considered a form of piracy, but now that anime is more readily available through legal means in the United States, the practice of fansubbing has less of a purpose for being used.

Many fans who still practice fansubbing and receive fansubbed copies of work argue that American companies still act as a barrier between authentic work and consumers by cutting out important translations in lieu of translations that are easier to understand, but not as true to the original text (Lee, 2011). Cost is also a factor in the fansubbing dilemma, as many people who obtain fansubbed material choose piracy in order to forgo buying pricey anime from American retailers (Sugimoto, 2011).

Overall, there is a split in opinions among Japanese creators and producers of anime. Some feel that international consumers of fansubbed material should pay for intellectual property just as any other consumer would, but others argue that fansubbing is the reason their material experienced international stardom in the first place and that they should be more lenient towards the practice.

Soft Power and the Anime Image

The fansubbing dilemma, to most, seems as though it is irrelevant in the scope of American cinema. Many believe that anime is just a small portion of the cinema industry in America and that fans of anime “tend to be on the edges of society, resolutely nonmainstream” (Lunning, 2007). Others argue that anime has a larger fan base than most people think, since when most people think of anime fans, they only think of the Otaku. In reality, there may be people who enjoy anime who are not rabid fans, but casual consumers of anime, just as there are people who enjoy Alfred Hitchcock films but are not diehard fans of his works.

There is also a lot of speculation about how much power anime wields over the average American consumer. Soft power, or the ability to exercise influence over another individual or community by means of attraction and fascination instead of force and coercion, is commonplace in the 21st century because so many products are of foreign origin and have impacts upon their consumers. Soft power through the dissemination of culture is “seen as a means of public relations and a method of strengthening a country’s influence” (Otmazgin, 2008). American consumers are attracted to products of other countries just as other countries are fascinated by American imports (Ladd, 2009). This same theory can just as easily be applied to film. American film has huge leverage over culture in other countries, so it is just as feasible that Japanese film could impact the cultural values of American viewers.

The hypotheses of this study are

- 1) Even though Americans have been exposed to a lot of television media with heavy Japanese influence, most people are not aware of how anime came to the United States and its influence on them, and
- 2) People are still operating under the dated stereotype that anime is inappropriate as a whole. This study also investigated the use of soft power in media such as anime and how people are subjected to this influence.

III. Methods

To identify the scope of influence that Japanese pop culture, specifically anime, had on Americans born in the '80s and '90s, this study relied on secondary research and a survey.

The researcher reviewed books published between 1990 and present to gain insight into what was occurring during the anime boom of the early '90s and how the Otaku were perceived. The researcher also conducted a survey to gauge the size of the modern anime fandom and its influences on American culture.

Through the survey, data was collected regarding anime, how modern-day American consumers receive the anime film medium, and how anime made its way into the United States. To garner honest responses about the piracy practices of those involved, the survey was implemented anonymously.

In the online survey, a convenience sample of 107 students and young adults was asked a series of 18 questions. These questions contained both multiple choice and short answer types. The survey asked how people obtained their media, whether through fansubbing or other means, legal or illegal. It asked how influenced people felt Japanese animation and media are. It also asked people how much they are aware of specific titles that were prevalent during the '80s and '90s to see how much people actually know about Japanese animation and television. Questions were also asked about piracy, the main way anime made its way into the United States, in order to see if there was a correlation between those watching anime and their preferences for obtaining material.

The survey participants, whose ages ranged between 18 and 32, were selected among those who attended college at one point, since college campuses were where most anime titles were first introduced to the United States. The survey was used to confirm what secondary research suggested in journals and other scholarly materials: the influences of anime on American audiences

IV. Findings and Analysis

The Otaku stereotype was a prevalent theme in almost every literary work from the literature review. However, it seems that the negativity toward Otaku culture progressively lessened as the articles approached modern times. There is still a slight negative stigma to anime, despite attempts to educate people on the nature of anime, and people still believe anime to be a violent art form (Borrelli, 2002). Acceptance of Otaku culture and the anime wave has become more acceptable, however, as more scholarly research is conducted and more libraries stock anime (Halsall, 2010).

Fansubbing was another issue altogether that was addressed in some of the articles. In the earlier articles, fansubbing was touched upon lightly without alluding to the fact that the practice was considered piracy simply because the content was not available in the United States (Animation, 1991). As time progressed, more articles were published regarding the controversies surrounding fansubbing, thus suggesting that it was becoming more of an issue.

A 2006 study of fansubbers conducted by Luis Pérez González of the Centre for Translation and Intercultural Studies at the University of Manchester stated that over 200,000 fans worldwide participated in the fansubbing phenomenon either as translators or as benefactors. González also noted that the illegal nature of fansubbing earned it a negative stigma in professional realms (2006).

More recent articles containing information on fansubbing have even said that this *participatory media fandom* has unsettled the global media landscape by providing an alternate form of content distribution. The motivations for English-speaking fansubbers were indicated as the strong desire to perpetuate the anime culture and provide accessibility in other countries, thus reaffirming that fansubbers generally receive little to no payment for their work.

The reactions from publishers and producers has been mixed (Lee, 2011). Some producers see the perpetuation of anime through fansubbing as a way to access remote markets through merchandising, which would recover some of the profits lost through fansubbing. Other companies are opposed to the idea because of its illegality (Sugimoto, 2009).

Survey participants were asked to answer how familiar they were with anime as a style of animation. Among the five choices of extremely familiar, very familiar, moderately familiar, somewhat familiar, and not

at all familiar, only 19.4 percent of the participants said they were not at all familiar with anime. Most of them acknowledged that they were somewhat familiar with anime at 32 percent. In response to another question, 40.8 percent of them said that they still watched anime as adults.

The participants were asked to check off any of 58 anime or anime-influenced titles that they saw as a child or young adult. All these were at one point aired on television in the United States. The response was that 85.1 percent of those surveyed had seen at least one of the shows on the list, and the rest had never seen any. Of the shows listed, the top shows were *Pokémon*, *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (an American-made show with heavy anime influences), *Sailor Moon*, *YuGiOh!*, *Dragon Ball Z*, *Digimon*, and *Full Metal Alchemist*. What is intriguing is that all of these shows, with perhaps the exception of *Full Metal Alchemist* to some extent, are shows that were initially heavily Americanized when they first appeared on American television screens. One of the most notorious changes made in the films listed above was in *Pokémon*, when the 4Kids and Warner Bros. studios rotoscoped, or traced over, the original film frame by frame to add new elements to, or hide old ones in several *Pokémon* episodes. Most of the rotoscopes involved changing traditionally Japanese food into American foods because the studios worried that American children would not make the connection that items such as a rice ball were food (Lunning, 2007). Another example from *Pokémon* is that all the characters were given American names despite their Japanese origins (Ladd, 2009). Although Japanese animation certainly made an impact on the survey participants, it was mainly through shows that had been filtered and redubbed by American stations.

In order to address the stereotypes about anime, the participants were asked to write as many adjectives that they associated with anime as possible. The researcher chose the seven terms that were mentioned by at least 4 percent of the participants: interesting, colorful, dramatic, artistic, Japanese, weird and violent. All the terms, other than Japanese, indicate people's perceptions of anime in American culture. The two terms 'colorful' and 'artistic' are telling because many people who have never been exposed to anime do comment on the heavy detail and colorful nature of most anime. 'Dramatic' makes sense as a term associated with anime because of anime's origins in Kabuki theatre and because American audiences perceive certain Japanese social cues as over-the-top (Napier, 2007). The two terms that are most interesting are 'weird' and 'violent'. It seems that the negative typecast from the 1970s and hentai have carried on to modern times, but these terms were relatively low on the list of the top terms associated with anime. While these terms still have an association with anime, the other terms in the list appear to have cast a more positive light on anime as a style of animation.

Fansubbing was the next topic to be addressed in the survey. Through a series of questions regarding piracy and distribution as well as the importance of accurate translations, participants in the survey spoke about their participation, if any, in fansubbing and piracy as well as their opinions on subtitled works. The first question in the series asked whether or not accurate translations were important even if the direct translation had a cultural reference that did not translate well into American culture. Among the participants, 79.4 percent said that it was important that the integrity of the direct translation be preserved. Regarding questions about piracy, the overwhelming majority (88.3 and 93.2 percent respectively) stated that they had neither received nor given copyrighted DVD copies. When it came to Internet distribution, only 60.2 percent of people surveyed said that they did not participate in pirating shows online. Of those who had pirated video content from the Internet, 20.8 percent of that content originated from Japan. When asked for justification for pirating, survey participants listed free content as a motivator, followed by the content being unavailable for purchase in the United States.

Anime's soft power as a factor in America was analyzed through questions regarding merchandising of anime shows, as merchandising is one of the key ways in which anime makes its money. Merchandise in this case extends to apparel, trading cards, figurines, action figures, or anything with a logo or design associated with one of the 58 anime or anime-influenced titles mentioned earlier. Of the 107 surveyed, 54.4 percent of people said that they had bought merchandise from an anime series for themselves. Some had purchased anime merchandise, but only as a gift for a friend (8.7%), and others had never bought anime merchandise for themselves but had someone else who had purchased it for them (6.8%). This indicated that, even though fansubbing and piracy does have a strong presence in the international anime industry, merchandising is popular enough to recover some of those costs.

V. Conclusion

For organizational purposes, this section will be broken down into three parts.

Dated Stereotypes

The secondary research and the survey confirmed that anime still conveys a negative image associated with violence and fringe culture, even though many advocates of anime clearly state that “anime wasn’t all blood, guts, and porn” (Borrelli, 2002). However, new terms are being used to describe anime in today’s culture. Terms, such as ‘colorful’ and ‘artistic’ used by the survey participants to describe some shows in the survey, indicate a shift that people see anime as more of an art form than tasteless violent film with no redeeming qualities. The secondary research also portrayed anime as more of a misinterpreted art form, especially when it comes to the misunderstood Otaku culture, which is more prevalent than the average American consumer would think. The majority of news sources cast anime into a favorable light, saying that anime provides entertainment for everyone (Halsall, 2010). Consumer behavior as portrayed in the survey indicates that anime has more of a following than people may have imagined with over 80 percent of people surveyed ages 18 to 32 having watched anime titles. This data matches with news articles published during the time period, which indicated in the past that anime “has a very serious foothold on the edge of American culture” (Borrelli, 2002). This foothold has expanded out beyond the edges of American society. The data reveals that there is a shift in perceptions and stereotypes of anime in America and that people are turning the peripheral culture into a more mainstream popular culture, but that four decades may be too short a period of time for strong negative labels to dissipate completely.

Fansubbing

In the case of fansubbing, both the literature review and the survey showed that, even though many saw the ethical dilemma of fansubbing, it was still practiced without substantial repercussion. The survey showed that piracy, though not overly common, was still practiced in the case of Japanese media. The two main reasons for piracy were cost and lack of material in the United States, though participants also said that accurate translations is a factor as well. While fansubbing and piracy of anime is a substantial issue, most major studios are not taking the time to impede these fansubbing movements because fansubbing perpetuates their brand into places they would otherwise have not been able to reach and because merchandising can help recover the profits lost on film sales.

Anime and Soft Power

Soft power is reflected in a wide variety of consumer behaviors ranging from purchasing items from different countries to adopting the mannerisms and cultural values of foreign countries (Otmazgin, 2008). Anime does carry some soft power because Americans are attracted to the content of these Japanese films, and anime is prevalent in American society. The soft power is, of course, somewhat diminished by the extent to which Japanese films are typically Americanized, but some Japanese ideals have still been preserved even in the Americanized versions of the films. The American Otaku culture is a perfect example of how soft power can greatly influence a group of people in a different country. Otaku generally use mannerisms they picked up from anime and share those same social ideals within other groups of anime fans (Ladd, 2009). The most compelling example was the amount of anime merchandise purchased by participants in the survey. The large percentage of people have spent money on anime merchandise, which indicates clearly how anime wields soft power in the form of economic presence within the American market. Some scholars even implied that while the influence is not yet a financial windfall to American entertainment companies, it could amount to something more impressive in the next few years (Borrelli, 2002). Anime’s journey to America through legal television broadcasts as well as illegal modes of fansubbing and piracy has given anime a strong economic foothold in American culture.

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