

The Japanese Amateur Textual Production Scene: Activities and Participation in *Dōjin* Cultures

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Abstract

This paper focuses on Japanese amateur text producers—often addressed as *dōjin*—who have been frequently described in contrasting terms: either as isolated, insular individuals who lack social skills or interest in intersubjective interaction, or as communities built on shared mutual interest and emotive bonds. In this paper I argue that a focus on the different orientations of *dōjin* cultures towards the value of media texts allows us to build a bridge between both of these stances. Along with analysis of texts and appropriative practices, this perspective advocates for the analysis of institutions as a different empirical field in the study of contemporary popular culture. In this paper my goal is to propose a distinction within *dōjin* cultures between *activities* and *participation*, described as two different forms of social action shaped by different orientations towards the value of texts. Both orientations share however an acknowledgment of a certain value in specific texts, which becomes the driving force behind textual production. As I will suggest, the word *activities* is useful to represent a vertical orientation towards value. This is a kind of orientation that lies at the foundation of individualistic attitudes within the practices of *dōjin* cultures. In contrast, the word *participation* helps to characterize a horizontal orientation towards value. This is a kind of orientation that supports collective participation and links individuals into wider groups and networks. Activities and participation are constitutive elements of amateur *dōjin* culture.

Keywords

media texts, amateur, subculture, activities, participation, otaku, doujin culture.

1. Introduction

The Japanese culture of amateur manga (Japanese comic books), Japanese animation or other derivative texts is often called *dōjin* culture. This is a culture closely related to the anime fan culture, the *otaku*—a social category that emerged in the 1980s from discourses on the tension between different groups immersed in cultural consumption¹—and to the field of cultural consumption addressed in Japan as *subculture*. *Dōjin* cultures, as in the case of the *otaku*, have been depicted as either insular or individualistic, or in sharp contrast, as deeply relying on intersubjective ties, collective participation, or communality. Yet, it

is possible to regard these contrasting features as different orientations that shape the same social institution. Previous research and my own observation of *dōjin* cultures² reveal two different orientations towards action within *dōjin* culture: one that centers on individual activities, and another that is oriented towards collective participation. These orientations shape the empirical ground that informs the common discourses that regard amateur *dōjin* and *otaku* culture as individualistic or, in contrast, as rooted in commonality.

However, individual drive and commonality are both constitutive elements of *dōjin* amateur cultures, which are institutions of textual appropriation.

Thus, through a focus on institutions, my aim is to draw attention to how individual motivations and commonality within such institutions shape two different orientations towards value. The former, built on a subjective base, is the foundation for what is usually described as *activities* (*katsudō*). The latter, based on social interaction, provides the starting point of what is usually described as *participation* (*sanka*). To regard *dōjin* cultures as institutions shaped by activities and participation is to draw attention to how different approaches to value can link individuals into larger meaningful social structures.

2. *Dōjin* Culture

The word *dōjin* is widely used in Japan to refer to amateur and derivative works such as fanzines, amateur manga or amateur music. It can be traced back to the Meiji period (1868-1912), a period of significant transformation in Japan and of great stimulus for its literary world. At its origin, *dōjin* referred to a group of peers with similar literary interests, and *dōjinshi* (or *dōjin* magazines) referred to the material published by that group. Nowadays, in the context of Japanese contemporary popular and media culture, *dōjinshi* refers mainly to comic books created and published by fans. As the format is in its essence free for the creator, there is a great diversity of types of *dōjinshi*, such as criticism, novels, travel guides and research (although these categories are minor in quantity compared to the comic book format).

Thus, *dōjin* cultures in this contemporary context can be mostly characterised by the amateur production of different kinds of texts. Besides *dōjinshi*, there are several other associated activities, including amateur music and software production. In most cases, a particular work or genre is borrowed from mainstream popular culture, and is then used as a framework for the new text or as raw material to produce new texts. As such, most of the fan work produced in correspondence with these activities is considered a secondary or derivative creation (*niji sōsaku*).

From Science Fiction Fan Clubs to Contemporary Dōjin Cultures

For Yoshimoto Taimatsu, the large variety of activities and hobbies included in the category of otaku culture can be encompassed by what he calls the 'otaku genre' and a 'particular way of enjoying' hobbies (2009)³. Yoshimoto focuses on science fiction (SF) fan groups and their initial activities in the mid-1950s as the departure point for his approach to the origins

of the otaku. For example, the Japan Flying Saucer Research Association (JFSA) was founded in 1956 by Arai Kinichi, an enthusiast of UFOs and mysterious beings, space development and science fiction. Mishima Yukio and Mayuzumi Toshiro were among the members of this association. In 1957, JFSA published the magazine *Cosmic Dust*, which is considered the first SF fan magazine or *dōjinshi* in Japan. JFSA held regular meetings, and, with the help of *Cosmic Dust*, it created many circles of fans. In 1961, the 'Meg-Con' was held in Meguro, Tokyo; it was the first SF convention in Japan. Thereafter, by 1965, there were fan circles from Kyushu to Hokkaido, and the Japan SF Fan Groups Confederation Congress was created to connect the many fan groups spread all over the country (Yoshimoto, 2009). Within the broad genre of science fiction, there were many groups interested in different topics, like detective and mystery novels, or fans of manga artists like Tezuka Osamu or Ishinomori Shōtarō. In this context, as Yoshimoto remarks, *dōjin* events developed into local and national large-scale gatherings for the SF community, replacing small informal meetings. Actual *dōjin* events, such as the Comic Market initiated in 1972, have their origin in these SF gatherings.

What does *dōjin* culture look like today? Besides amateur textual production, organisation of and participation in *dōjin* events are some of the essential practices that shape *dōjin* cultures in Japan. These events, usually called *dōjinshi sokubaikai* and frequently referred to as 'places for play' (*asobiba*) or 'festivals' by their participants, are a major structural force in *dōjin* institutions. Indeed Tamagawa Hiroaki (2007) describes Comic Market and the staff that make the event possible as the infrastructure that supports this Japanese fan culture. This particular event, held twice a year in Tokyo, is the biggest *dōjin* gathering in Japan and participant numbers are increasing (for Comic Market 88 in the summer of 2015, there were approximately 550,000 participants across the span of three days).

The main purpose of these events is to buy and sell *dōjin* magazines. Most of these magazines are focused on anime, manga or games, but, as the results of the Comic Market 66 30th anniversary questionnaire show, there is a large number of genres that mix particular works, topics or genre orientations (Sugiyama, 2008)⁴. For example, Sugiyama's research provides a list that categorizes the magazines sold at the event into 43 different genres like science fiction, animation, amateur music, or derivative works of popular manga or anime titles.

The participants in *dōjin* events are usually

classified into three basic categories. General participants (*ippan*) comprise one category; for example people who assist with buying or that do not trade or have a particular role at the venue. Circles comprise the second category, and these can be an individual (a one-person circle) or a collective. The word circle is the 'easiest way' (ibid: 15-8), as Sugiyama stresses, to classify the individuals or groups who register for the event in order to have a space to trade a *dōjin* work. Cosplayers, participants who assist dressed in most cases as animation characters, also usually register for the event as circles. The third category consists of staff, that is, volunteers who help with organisation, and they may have experience as circle participants.

3. Fans' Textual Appropriation, Pleasure, Productivity, and Commonality

Dōjin cultures can be understood by focusing on what John Fiske (1992) called productivity in the context of the popular appropriation of mass culture. The focal point here is the use of media texts as raw materials to engage in some activity, where the amateur production of derivative texts can be regarded as textual productivity. The texts at the base of these activities are significant in an emotive way for the practitioner and are regarded as valuable by the delimited collectivity in which the practices are carried out. Following the widely cited observations of Fiske and Henry Jenkins in the field of fan studies (Fiske, 1992, 1989/2011; Jenkins, 1992a, 1992b), these activities can be understood as the main constitutive element of both fan textual appropriation and the groups that engage in such activities as fan communities.

Fiske, and in a broader sense, many approaches close to the Cultural Studies frame, are indebted to Roland Barthes' semiology and his analysis of texts. For instance, Barthes acknowledges the reader rather than the author as the center that unifies the 'multi-dimensional space' (Barthes 1977: 146) of the text, which allows a shift in focus to the role of the audience in the construction of meanings. Closer to Fiske's agenda—that is, to understand the appeal of popular culture in its creativity and resistance—is the work of Michel de Certeau (1980/2000), which centers on appropriation and the negotiation of meanings in everyday life. De Certeau's understanding of appropriation is a perspective that goes from a focus on readings to a focus on practices. Fiske also observes concrete practices, and with an emphasis on 'parole' rather than on the abstract system of 'language'—in reference to the distinction established by Ferdinand de Saussure—finds two kinds of pleasure in popular

culture: the pleasure of avoiding social discipline and the pleasure of producing meaning (Fiske 1989/2011: 39). The former, similar to Barthes' *jouissance* (Barthes 1975), produces energy rooted in the body.

In Fiske's model, the pleasure in the act of reading popular culture empowers the pleasure of producing meanings and textual productivity. Roughly, an emphasis on reading and production as practices that shape the 'text-reader interaction' (Fiske 1989/2011: 37) lies at the base of popular culture. This is a category of consumption (Jenkins 2011: xxvii) where subjective discrimination, appropriation and resistance leads to a productive process that transforms the raw material provided by consumer society into new meanings and experiences.

Through his characterisation of textual production as based on pleasure, Fiske links the character of fan cultures—usually criticized as subjective, 'irrational' and 'excessive' (Jenson 1992)⁵—to a productive orientation which can be regarded in a positive light as 'rational' (ibid). In the dialectic of evasive and productive pleasures, Fiske finds agency and resistance to power structures in popular culture. Moreover, the subjective drive behind 'fan discrimination' (Fiske 1992: 34) in popular culture becomes, when discrimination is carried out by groups, an intersubjective element important for asserting a community-like nature, as in the case of fan collectivities.

Early criticism—for example Theodor W. Adorno's criticism of the culture industry (1972/2005), or Dwight Macdonald's writings on 'masscult' and 'midcult' (1962/1983)—saw in mass society and mass culture the destruction of the individual as a member of a community, and the substitution of culture for impersonal and standardized products in the market. Criticism of consumer culture usually focuses on individualism, consumerism, narcissism, irrationality, and lack of authenticity (in the commodification of art or in the mediatization of social relationships). And, as Jenson (1992) points out, narratives about fans as obsessed crowds or alienated individuals are part of the modern nostalgic and romantic discourse on the loss of community. Against this backdrop, authors like Jenkins viewed fan communities as opposite to the negative image of mass culture. Through a focus on the derivative works or secondary creations (or Fiske's productivity) that fans produce, Jenkins argues that fan groups are 'interpretative' communities, and regards fandom as 'a specific institution of interpretation' (1992b: 211). He also gives special attention to issues concerning the management of texts and meaning as resources.

When *dōjin* cultures are framed as built upon

amateur practices, it is common for a similar argument on the relation between textual productivity and commonality to appear. However, as Matt Hills has pointed out (2002), this emphasis on production provides too rational a picture of fans. We will see how a similar issue concerning the opposition of irrationality and rationality has appeared in the Japanese discourse regarding consumer culture, although with a different emphasis. These two contrasting features, which are regarded as lying behind the characterization of social ties, highlight what in a broad sense can be seen as a contrast between open and closed orientations towards the value of cultural texts.

4. Subculture and the Otaku: Two Orientations towards Value

Subculture and otaku are two words that commonly arise in Japan when discussing the scene of cultural production and consumption that encompasses media texts like anime, manga or videogames, as well as the development of various media franchises based on popular anime-like fictional characters or their narrative worlds.

Both words, subculture and otaku, are highly evaluative categories that depend on the social dynamics of classification and the social differentiation upon which consumer culture rests. The term subculture entails the struggle for achieving cultural capital and the associated cultural dynamics of distinction as described by Pierre Bourdieu (1984), and the notion of strategic resistance to mainstream culture that Fiske refers to with the term 'popular' cultural capital (1992). In the case of otaku, the word may be understood as referring to a similar social category to that of anime, manga or videogame fan. In many cases, this word has a pejorative connotation, and may be used in a broader sense to refer to someone who uses an excessive amount of time and resources to pursue a hobby which may be considered unworthy of such attention and use of resources.

Based on the perspectives of some Japanese researchers, I will examine in the following two sections the ways in which subculture and otaku culture are shaped by two different orientations towards value—in this case the value of cultural texts. As we will see, from some perspectives the category of subculture represents a 'horizontal' orientation towards relative values in Japan, while the otaku represents a 'vertical' orientation towards absolute values. Both orientations share a sceptical stance towards social ties that reflects a cynical view on mass culture. Thus, for them authenticity can only be sought through personal values and hobbies. These different orientations frame

my distinction between activities and participation in *dōjin* cultures and also guide my approach to analysis of the ways in which these cultures use media texts as cultural resources.

5. Oppositions between Otaku, Sabukaru, and Shinjinrui

As Kanose and Barubora (2005) detail, the distinction between subculture and otaku appeared in the scene of Japanese consumption, in particular around the 1990s when the contraction *sabukaru* emerges (ibid: 95). In a broad sense, the word subculture in Japan can be understood as fundamentally equivalent to the term low culture, but from the 1960s it developed additional nuances, based on its connection to counterculture and the search for new values in opposition to the established main culture. Then, in the 1990s the word *sabukaru* was increasingly used in Japan to address different or eccentric 'cool' people who like equally different or eccentric 'cool' things. The 1990s saw a game of distinction and differentiation in cultural consumption—of magazines, videogames, fashion, and so on—played out between the people whose hobbies were perceived as *sabukaru* and those perceived as otaku. The word otaku, popularized in the late 1980s, referred to the 'un-cool' side, built around the figure of the obsessed fan of anime, idol singers or figurines. However, regardless of the differences, there were many points of connection between *sabukaru* and the otaku. In the case of cultural consumption, the television anime series *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995) and the anime film *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) are some famous examples of media texts where the hobbies of *sabukaru* and otaku mixed (ibid).

The word otaku was also formerly differentiated against what was popularized as the *shinjinrui* (lit. new humanity) in the 1980s. The sociologist Miyadai Shinji, in his famous book with Ishihara Hideki and Ōtsuka Meiko, *The Dismantling of the Myth of Subculture* (2007)⁶, introduces a model to understand post-war Japanese media culture, focusing on the transformation of media communication. This model is divided into four stages, and of the last two stages, the first (commencing in 1973) frames the birth of *shinjinrui*, and the second (commencing in 1983), the birth of the otaku. *Shinjinrui* is the generation after those involved in the student movements, and reflects a shift from a focus on 'we', to a focus on 'I' and the rise of a cynical gaze towards the beliefs of earlier generations, including countercultures. Miyadai asserts that young people's search for a unique 'me' was reflected in media culture like manga, illustrated by a shift from the depiction of protagonists who struggle against the world to protagonists who search for their true selves

(ibid: 31-2).

For Miyadai, this generation is also characterized by an increasingly complex model of social relationships. In contrast, the otaku represents the response of those left behind by the *shinjinrui*. Accordingly, for otaku the focus on social relationships is substituted by a focus on narratives or what Miyadai describes as circular temporalities (ibid: 34-7). For him, what both *shinjinrui* and otaku have in common is an anxiety generated by a loss of normativity that leaves the relationship between the self and society up to the individual.

The connection between the consumption of narratives and the anxiety of the individual about his or her relationship with society is also the focus of studies by other influential authors on otaku and Japanese subculture. For instance, like Miyadai, Ōtsuka Eiji focuses on the cocooning and protective role of narratives for youths that he sees as 'half modern' (2004). Azuma Hiroki stresses, in contrast, the transformation of narratives into databases (that is, information lacking any transcendental meaning) and defines the otaku as 'postmodern animals' who pursue pleasure in consumption and disregard intersubjective connections with others (2001). Furthermore, Ōsawa Masachi (2008) redefines Azuma's database as a metanarrative which has lost its narrative linkages (ibid: 98), but still represents a desire for a repository of universal narratives (ibid: 99).

6. Embedded Totality and Radical Relativism

Ōsawa finds in the otaku—as part of contemporary consumer culture—a desire for finding universality in the particular, mixed with a relativistic and ironical gaze over the world. He avers that the contemporary world is increasingly defined by the desire to 'escape to reality' (ibid: 3), or the search for something more real than reality. This is a desire for extremely violent and intense experiences, which are at the same time framed by the anxiety and uncertainty that defines today's risk society. This contemporary world is for Ōsawa preceded by an 'era of fiction' (1975-1990), characterized by the presentation of reality as fragmented into symbols and language. Here, as reality is side by side with fiction, its value is determined as relative to these other fictions. What is of interest to us here is Ōsawa's characterization of otaku through a focus on the disproportion between the 'low meanings' of their hobbies and the high amount of information they recover from them (ibid: 87-8). For Ōsawa, 'low meaning' refers to the lack of reference of a particular topic to a broader context. He describes, in other words, a self-enclosed world with no external

references, which is therefore continuously tied to the particular. The metaphor of a closed room is useful as well as descriptive here⁷.

However, Ōsawa suggests that this narrow interest in the particular is an attempt to recover the totality of a fragmented reality. For example, an interest in railroads or trains constitutes a miniature-sized image of the totality of the train's network and therefore, a tangible picture of the totality of the national territory. Thus, a focus on the concrete and particular (the train) is here a way to grasp an abstract totality—in this case, the nation itself. Something similar may be said about the relation between otaku and the internet networks that allow us to reach the rest of the world without leaving our closed rooms.

Therefore, for Ōsawa the otaku is characterized by a search for a totality embedded in the particular. This search for the totality is closely related to radical relativism and the weight that otaku give to fiction. Ōsawa, following Slavoj Žižek's metaphor on decaffeinated coffee, argues that fiction enables a search for pleasure excluding risk. That is, as in the case of coffee without caffeine and cigarettes without nicotine, the focus on pornography or eroticized fictional characters in otaku media signals a search for 'sex without sex' (ibid: 82). Similarly, social interaction through internet networks can be characterized as a relationship with the 'other without the other'. Ōsawa applies this stance towards fiction in his analysis of the contemporary period—which, as mentioned above, he characterizes as an 'escape to reality'—where he focuses on the ironical notion of faith without faith. The escape from fantasy to reality signifies the desire to escape from radical relativism, and at the same time, to elude the risks that reality entails. That is why Ōsawa regards this search for reality as the 'greatest fiction' or the 'greatest concealment of reality' (ibid: 163-4).

7. Relativistic Values and Absolute Values

The perspectives on subculture and otaku briefly outlined above provide a means to illustrate the dynamic between two different orientations that exist in the consumer cultures defined as otaku and as *sabukaru* in Japan. Barubora (2005) synthesizes the opposing images of otaku and *sabukaru* as two different ways of approaching cultural consumption: the '*sabukaru way*', defined as based on finding value in something different, and the '*otaku way*', defined as gathering information about something and going deeper than anybody else (ibid: 10). Of interest to my discussion here is the way in which Barubora regards the stereotypes of the *sabukaru* and the otaku as opposed to each other; that is, he understands the

'*sabukaru way*' as a 'horizontal' way to approach media and hobbies, in contrast to the 'otaku way', which he characterises as 'vertical' (ibid: 14). Within this context, it is also worth noting Barubora's references, although rather sporadic, to the value of media texts. He argues that the *sabukaru* horizontal approach looks for value in new things; that is, the goal is eccentric cultural consumption. However the otaku vertical approach, rather than expanding horizontally in the search for something new, goes deep into a particular hobby or media text.

With relation to *sabukaru* and otaku culture orientations towards cultural texts, we can find in the former a horizontal orientation that is based on a relativistic understanding of values. This orientation is committed to a logic of distinction as the basis for finding value in difference. It is close to what Miyadai regards as the orientation of *shinjinrui* and the way in which this generation conceptualises social relationships. It is broad and in principle has an open nature. A second orientation towards cultural texts can be found in otaku culture, an orientation that can be characterized as vertical, and based on the search for absolute and total value embedded in concrete. This is a narrower orientation with a relatively closed nature.

8. *Dōjin* Cultures: Individual Activities and Collective Participation

The distinction in *dōjin* cultures between activities and participation is connected to the two different approaches to value summarized above; activities can be considered to involve a vertical orientation towards the value of the appropriative activity, while participation entails a horizontal orientation, because it enables access to networks.

However, in contrast to otaku and *sabukaru*, *dōjin* as a set of practices of amateur production has a focus on action. Thus, in *dōjin* cultures this distinction renders two different understandings of social interaction. The use of common spaces, management of common resources, regulation of activities, and above all, the construction and management of standards for evaluating activities as well as the primary or secondary texts, are main elements that entail a horizontal network of interaction on the basis of values made relative. Hamano's analysis of the architecture of the video sharing website niconico (Hamano 2008) is a good example of how standards are built and negotiated.

However, *dōjin* cultures are built on the premise of a vertical orientation to values, which is rendered as an individualistic and narcissistic drive. The expression in Japanese '*katte ni suru*' (lit. do [something] in a self-

servicing way), often used by the participants of *dōjin* cultures to describe their motivations⁸, is symptomatic of this. What interests me here is that while a vertical orientation to values may be understood as the basis of authenticity (for example, going your own way), a horizontal orientation towards social interaction built upon individualistic motivations can be a way to naturalize relative values, that is, to see them as authentic, and therefore, to regard the network as a kind of community.

The following sections present some examples of the way in which *dōjin* cultures emphasise communality while acknowledging individual motivations. Then, based on an interview with a *dōjin* writer, we will see an example of the way in which the meaning of community can become ambiguous.

9. The Stress on Community in Networks of Participation

Tamagawa's study of Comic Market staff emphasises the role of fandom in shaping a community focused on the same genre of a hobby (2007). The noticeable popularity of derivative works in contrast to the relatively small number of original works at Comic Market illustrates this point. For example, as Tamagawa notes, the genre of original works (*sōsaku*) represented only 10% of the total amount of productions registered for Comic Market 71 (December 2006), which demonstrates the limited popularity of this genre. Moreover, the proliferation of derivative works based on a particular commercial manga, anime, or character, emphasises the existence of a shared interest in the same media text. Therefore for Tamagawa, as for a large amount of studies that consider *dōjin* culture from the perspective of fan studies, the focus on derivative works indicates that events like Comic Market are a place where people with similar interests can meet and socialise (2007).

Likewise Natō Takako (2007) examines the ways in which networks shaped by *dōjin* activities around secondary creations like *dōjin* magazines are constituted by a community with shared hobbies (ibid: 89). Using studies on fan cultures as a reference, she focuses particularly on female producers of *dōjin* magazines, emphasizing networks of social interaction, communication and connections between, for example, *dōjin* magazine creators and buyers. Elements like the existence of a special shared language and specialized symbols only understandable to the group are examples she provides to illustrate her point that the *dōjin* world is a world supported by human connections (ibid: 91). She also highlights that emphasis on the importance of *hobbies* rather

than *work* in *dōjin* cultures reflects a world—the *dōjin* world—where values are inverted, and signals new values connected with a rejection of capitalism (ibid: 98-9). Her focus on anti-commercialism leads her to also analyze examples such as YouTube, where the distance between producers and consumers stretches.

Perspectives like Natō's, which stress community and communication, can be regarded as a reaction against a widespread stereotype that regards the otaku and *dōjin* worlds as composed of individuals lacking communication skills. This is a view that, as we have seen, is also shared by some of the academic discourse on subculture and otaku in Japan, although with several important nuances. For instance, Hichibe Nobushige (2005) accepts this stance in part but also stresses that the group dynamic in 'otaku phenomena' can build a 'shared culture' (Hichibe 2005) even when there is an individualistic orientation. He focuses on what he describes as groups that create culture, and emphasizes how even when there is an individualistic drive and the lack of a shared culture, the need for acceptance and belonging, or self-categorization as a member of a group, can lead to the formation of groups which can later develop a 'shared culture' (ibid).

As in the case of Tamagawa and Natō, Hichibe focuses on *dōjin* events—with specific reference to Sugiyama's questionnaire research—and their networks of interaction. These perspectives, which stress the formation of groups or communities in *dōjin* cultures, regard the media texts as shared elements that make social interaction possible. Through these kinds of studies we can thus understand how media texts become shared common resources that take on the central role of enabling the practices of *dōjin* cultures.

The different ways in which media texts are perceived as valuable cultural resources within the *dōjin* networks of interaction reflects the horizontal orientation towards participation suggested earlier. Accordingly, we can characterize *dōjin* events as networks where small groups or individuals interact. However, it is worth noting that this is a highly mediated form of interaction between participants. The mediation of texts is a fundamental premise for this interaction. Here, the example of the category of circle—the smallest unit within *dōjin* culture—is helpful. A circle is an impersonal category that allows participants to address each other in an indirect way. Likewise, the widespread use of handle names, and the strong tendency to avoid talking about personal issues or to share information that may lead to the disclosure of personal identity, are characteristic among the participants of *dōjin* culture in Japan, revealing strong

individualistic motivations.

10. The Ambiguous Meaning of Commonality and Individuality in *Dōjin* Cultures

As we saw at the beginning of this paper, analysis from various perspectives—including scholarship focusing on Japan—has noted the rejection of commonality or community among participants in consumer culture. In the case of *dōjin* culture, we can find that many of its participants in Japan hold a similar stance. There is a strong tendency to neglect or reject commonality based on what can be read as a widespread mistrust of the nature of social ties (for example, ties to family, friends, community or nation). I have already examined some examples of the characterization of fans or otaku as individualistic. Here, before moving toward my conclusions, I will present excerpts from an interview undertaken in June 2010 as part of my fieldwork at a *dōjin* event, the 80th Comic City, in order to give an example of one way in which commonality is seen within *dōjin* cultures.

Ms. 'A', a 25-year-old female *dōjin* magazine writer, answered several questions by email in correspondence that continued until August of 2011. Her opinions on the nature of her activities provide a good example of a stance that I have found several times in my research on *dōjin* activities.

In the interview, she noted that the 'content' of the hobby and the nature of *dōjin* activities are so vastly different from each other that they should not be 'tied up in the same collectivity'. In her view, the expressions 'collective action' and 'fandom' or 'fan community' are very inappropriate descriptions of *dōjin* cultures. For instance, after I explained to her the aim of my research for the first time, her answer was as follows:

I think you are using the expression 'anime fandom', but I would prefer for you to use [the expression] '*dōjin* activities' as in the Japanese style, because we do not have the concept of doing activities in a 'group' [...]⁹

Ms. A also commented, 'We only engage in activities that pertain to the things we like and that please us personally.' She then stated that 'the consciousness of a crowd or the forming of groups is weak [...] rather, there is a tendency to hate to be regarded as "a gathering of something" or as a group, as the current mass media usually portrays us'. However she also added, 'in any case, if there is a consciousness of a community, I think that it would be an awareness of being a minority.' Then she

went on to comment about how a former generation of *dōjin* circles was the target of discrimination and criticism, and how such a situation can become in some cases the basis for a strong feeling of solidarity when, ‘despite not knowing his or her name or face, a fellow participant (*dōshi*) engaged in *dōjin* activities, a colleague (*nakama*) who has been oppressed as a minority, is in trouble.’ She then stressed, ‘the truth is, that perhaps is the only thing we have in common.’

Then, she shared the following comments when I asked about the atmosphere at *dōjin* events.

I don’t have the consciousness of belonging to a big group (collectivity) that includes anime and manga fans, but I think I feel a consciousness of a group in relation to the people in front of me (if it is an event, in relation to all its participants).

She added that ‘each time I leave the event hall, if anyone were to ask me, I think there is a sad feeling somewhere inside me’.

Then, when commenting on her internet activities and the way she makes friends online based on her hobbies or *dōjin* activities, she stressed that

[...] it is not that we don’t have any interest in establishing relationships with other people. However, if you ask me if the ties of those communities are strong, [I would say that] they are fragile to the extent that they are completely forgotten when the genre of activity changes.

She then added the following:

I feel that it is about people coming together only when they want to and when they can focus only on what they like. Basically, I feel that this is a world of horizontal, weak ties. As a result, even if a community is formed, there is a strong feeling that the people included are only acting as individuals.

There are two¹⁰ major types of commonality that Ms. A identifies in the excerpts quoted above: 1) communality through concrete interaction, and 2) commonality through a feeling of stigmatisation. Besides these two points, Ms. A regards the social ties produced between the participants in *dōjin* activities as weak, or even as hostile (for example, the tensions amongst different interpretations of the coupling of male characters in female *dōjin*).

In reference to the first type of commonality, Ms. A emphasises the different activities and orientations within the groups and a tendency towards

differentiation. However, she acknowledges a feeling of being in a group in terms of face-to-face interaction at *dōjin* events. Similarly, with relation to her internet activities, she acknowledges social interaction and the shaping of ties from a focus on a similar hobby, but she emphasises the weakness of such ties and the ephemeral nature of the groups shaped. This kind of commonality based on interaction can be understood as a means for enabling action focused on individual motivations. The expression ‘as one pleases’ (*katte ni*) stresses this individual orientation in activities. However, it is important to note that the strong differentiation she points out within the group is only possible through the mutual understanding of the meaning of such differentiation.

The commonality and solidarity built from a feeling of oppression are interesting elements associated not with interaction between concrete subjects but within an imagined, abstract group of peers. This characteristic creates a borderline not between particular groups but between abstract categories: the ‘*dōjin* world’ and the ‘others’. Here it is interesting to note Ms. A’s use of the words ‘fellow participant’ (*dōshi*) and ‘colleague’ (*nakama*) in the context of an oppressed minority¹¹, while in general she rejects this kind of identification of other participants. The category of subculture may be understood within this same logic of distinction from what is regarded as the outside world.

11. Conclusions: Institutions of Textual Appropriation, Activities, and Participation

At the beginning of this paper we saw how in representative studies on popular and fan cultures, commonality is regarded as the basis of practices of appropriation. Here, fans’ subjectivity is the basis for their productivity, building an image of fans as, at best, subjects whose agency and discrimination in the field of cultural consumption sit in contrast to mass culture, regarded as alienating and exploitative of subjective, irrational motivations. In this perspective, the image of community as a romantic utopia is preserved, built in this case upon the management of shared symbolic resources poached from mass culture.

In Japan’s consumer culture, however, a sceptical stance towards such a romantic image of commonality can be observed. The question concerning irrationality and rationality in cultural consumption can instead be considered in terms of a tension between an insular, individualistic attitude and an open attitude towards shaping social relationships through cultural consumption. While the former attitude is related to a sense of authenticity rooted in subjective standards, the

latter entails standards of evaluation relative to the logic of distinction and discrimination in social interaction. When we consider the notion of a community built from shared tastes, cultural discrimination, and mutual engagement in symbolic production in Japan's *dōjin* cultures, both orientations blend.

Furthermore, the interview with Ms. A illustrates a strong individualism shaping the networks that constitute *dōjin* activities, while revealing an elusive and fragile feeling of commonality that is expressed in one case towards concrete groups in face-to-face interaction, and in another, towards an abstract collectivity of peers who are targets of discrimination or criticism. The first type of group consciousness derives from the practices of *dōjin* culture, while the second one is external to it. The topic of how the idea of community is perceived in *dōjin* cultures must be discussed in detail in another place, but it is enough for now to identify the importance of asserting individualistic motivations within *dōjin* practices. That is, insular orientations form the main drive in social interaction.

In conclusion, the colloquial use of the words activities (*katsudō*) and participation (*sanka*) shows in empirical terms the coexistence in the same institution of two different stances towards cultural consumption, usually understood in opposing terms—that is, individualistic or community-oriented. My suggestion is to reformulate these seemingly opposed stances in order to consider them as two different orientations towards the value of the cultural texts that are at the core of *dōjin* institutions. Individuality and commonality here are not in opposition or contradiction, but rather, are shaped through the interaction of different orientations towards value, giving rise to abstract social structures shaped by concrete individual motivations.

Notes

1. The word otaku as a social category was first used by the columnist Nakamori Akio in 1983 in the lolicon magazine 'Manga Burikko' to mock the assistants at the *dōjin* event Comic Market, among others. A contextualized account on the origin of this 'subculture within the subculture' can be found in Kinsella (1992).

2. The author has conducted research in Japan about *dōjin* cultures and similar activities since 2010.

3. All quotations and sources originally in Japanese have been translated by the author.

4. This research, headed by Sugiyama Akashi, was carried out between 27 December 2003 and 10 February 2004 among all the participants registered

as circles in Comic Market 66 (37,620 persons from 52,000 [72.3%] recovery percentage) (Sugiyama, 2008).

5. See for example Jenson's analysis on the discourses of fandom as pathology (1992: 9-29).

6. Ishihara, Ōtsuka, and Miyadai's research was first published between 1991 and 1993.

7. Morikawa offers an analogy between the opacity of Akihabara (a city representative of the otaku) and private space, in contrast to the cosmopolitan tendency towards transparency in Shibuya (2003).

8. This observation is based on fieldwork carried out by the author.

9. Interview conducted originally in Japanese and translated by the author. Due to space limitations, only a few representative fragments of the interview are reproduced here, maintaining as much as possible the original intention of Ms. A's words. I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to Ms. A for patiently sharing her thoughts with me.

10. Ms. A also commented in the interview on the role of fictional characters. Despite the relevance of this topic, I have omitted this part of the analysis from this paper because it exceeds the scope of the present argument.

11. In her words, "hakugai saretekita nakama".

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