

Research Report

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Title of Research: Intellectual Property and the Creative Industries: The Impact of New Media Technologies on Perception and Distribution of Japanese Cultural Entertainment Media

Purpose of Research:

This project analyzes how the processes of translation and localization impact American perceptions of Japan and Japanese culture. Unlike “old” media such as literature and cinema, wherein representations of Japan—for good or bad—were relatively stable due to the fact that mass distribution was difficult, the Internet and other “new” media technologies allow anyone, anywhere, to distribute their own representations of Japan. Fans of Japanese anime and manga, in particular, utilize these technologies to distribute their own translations of visual media, and at times redistribute visual media under license. What this project pursues, then, are the implications for American perceptions of Japan when fans can become distributors and consumers of its culture, leaving actual producers of the creative media industry with lessened control over their products.

The answers to this problem will be pursued through a combination of qualitative and archival research in Japan. The fans who engage in these practices typically shun American events and distributors of Japanese creative media; many are also residents of Japan so that they can more easily acquire the texts in which they are interested, and many attend Japanese conventions such as the Comiket and the Anime Fair. Meiji and Tokyo Universities both house archives related to fans and American perceptions of Japan; this research, in addition to being unique to those archives, has also not been explored by American scholars.

As stated earlier, the social significance of this project points to the role new media technologies play in shaping American perceptions of Japanese culture. With multiple versions of a media text existing simultaneously, one major issue becomes how Americans decide which version most completely represents Japanese culture. The motivations behind this selection have implications for how Americans understand and interact with Japan, but also present a way to gauge how they currently view the country.

Academically, this project contributes to my field of media studies by grappling with the role and function of the Internet and other new media technologies cross-culturally. Integrating archival research with Japanese language scholarship on intercultural perception and fan research into these conversations also broadens the field and speaks specifically to role international scholarship should play in intercultural and cross-cultural analyses.

Content/Methodology of Research:

The research was divided into two complementary phases: archival research and interviews with fans. The archival dimension aimed at understanding, from a theoretical perspective based informed by Japanese scholarship, the motivations of American fans and their position to Japanese cultural media. While this archival aspect of the program emphasized gathering and translating Japanese scholarship on fan studies and fandom, as well as theorizations on American-Japanese intercultural communications, another purpose to this phase was to provide a foothold for comparative examinations of Japanese and American scholarship on the issues of fandom and media. Archival research from Tokyo University’s Center for Pacific and American Studies (CPAS) informed the majority of this project and a large amount of time was (and still is

being) spent examining the documents and translating them. It is hoped that they will supplement future American theoretical research by offering a more balanced, international, and intercultural understanding of media structures and organizations.

The theoretical research, while still in progress, was combined with interviews from American consumers and fans of Japanese cultural media in order to provide a practical platform by which to judge the efficacy of the propositions of the archival materials. In essence, it sought counterbalance by probing actual motivations of these fans. To accurately and more completely understand the complexities that inform American intercultural perceptions of Japan and Japanese media, a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies were employed.

The qualitative portion of the project was initially conducted at Tokyo's 2010 Winter Comic Market, or Comiket. A supplemental visit occurred for the Summer Comiket in August 2011. Respondents were asked a series of questions regarding their motivations for attending, their perspectives on intellectual property, and their preferred methods of consuming Japanese cultural media. Most importantly, the qualitative interview emphasized why they preferred one kind of media or translation over another. The interviews were short, approximately 10-15 minutes, and were conducted individually and on some occasions collectively. Selection of respondents lay heavily with what American scholarship notes as dedicated fans—in this case those who participated in Comiket through cosplay—as their involvement suggested a familiarity with the areas in which this research was concerned. Additional qualitative interviews in this vein were conducted with Japanese fans of American cultural media in order to understand how the two fan bases approach the cultural media in which they are interested.

Quantitative research was also conducted via the online survey tool Survey Monkey. The URL for the survey was printed on business cards and distributed at Comiket and other locations. Data collected for this survey was more generic and concerned largely with understanding the fan trends. Three areas were of specific importance: gauging how many fans get their Japanese cultural media from online sources, how many admit to accessing these media from illegitimate sources, and why they choose these venues. The questions themselves were generated from research from American and Japanese scholarship, as well as informal conversations (both online and face-to-face) with fans prior to the start of the research project.

The choice to adopt an online survey was motivated by three methodological considerations related to respondents: first, it enabled respondents to access the survey at their convenience and hopefully increase the number of responses; second, it potentially opened a wider pool of respondents as survey takers could tell friends who did not attend the event about the survey; third, questions could be tailored to respondents experiences and opinions through skip logic, a process that chooses questions based on how respondents answered previous items.

Because the online nature of the survey prevented strict control over who accessed the questionnaire and submitted responses, a series of initial demographic questions were designed to cull the data pool. Since the study focused on American fans, the key questions by which respondents were sorted rested on nationality and current country of residence. Additional questions utilized the skip logic feature of Survey Monkey to further whittle the data pool by tailoring the survey specifically to fans who watch or have watched fan subtitled anime. Additional questions by which data was sorted included how fans integrate the Internet into their consumption strategies (stream versus download), and means of downloading (torrent, direct download, Usenet, or other).

Conclusion/Observation

While the data is still being analyzed, a number of initial observations can be made regarding how American fans of anime consume their anime, their positions towards translations, and their perceptions of Japanese culture. All of these items appear to be linked and mutually reinforcing.

With respect to fan consumption strategies, initial analysis of the qualitative and quantitative aspects of the project suggest that fans prefer to utilize the Internet for their anime viewing. At the same time, however, there appears to be a division between whether fans prefer to view anime streamed online or download it. The major factor appears to be time: fans prefer to watch their favorite shows shortly after their release on Japanese television. At the same time, though, some fans—particularly those who have some Japanese language training—prefer to download anime and are willing to wait slightly longer for fan subs from groups

whose translations they respect.

The preference for fan translations by those who have some Japanese language training supports other research on American anime fans, particularly the observation that such fans utilize anime as a means of learning about Japanese culture and facilitate their language development. However, the results from this study suggest that fans gravitate to specific fan translations based on their demographic factors (mainly age) and linguistic prowess. Older fans are more likely than younger ones to prefer to download anime, and those with more language proficiency are generally more likely to prefer downloading over streaming.

This is a key point in fan consumption strategies: those with some familiarity with Japanese cultural trends and linguistic exposure tend to be more critical of corporate translations as they find them to be inauthentic with respect to “true” Japanese culture and what they perceive anime to be. Many of them noted that official translations are made for profit, which sometimes necessitates significant localization in order to make the product profitable in the American market. As a result, they feel the such anime loses something, but there was no agreement as to what that something was.