

Otak-who? Technoculture, youth, consumption, and resistance. American representations of a Japanese youth subculture.

Abstract

The *otaku* are a youth subculture first characterized in Japan, but beyond that basic definition of the term, there have been numerous, often contradictory and routinely contested, ways the otaku have been represented by various segments of Japanese society over the course of the last 2 decades. The otaku in Japan (and abroad) have attracted non-Japanese attention as well, and the otaku have been studied, mimicked, ridiculed, romanticized, etc. by Americans who have become interested in this apparently fascinating Japanese (sub)cultural export. Influenced by Japanese conceptions of otaku as obsessed fans, technological fetishists, avid collectors, antisocial outcasts, and/or borderline psychopaths, but informed by American attitudes toward geek culture, hackers, cyberpunks, individualism, and lay expertise, representations of otaku by American observers of the culture have been equally varied (and contested) over the last decade. This paper will examine the various and changing representations of otaku culture by Americans, and attempt to unpack the context behind and the implications of those representations. Drawing upon themes uncovered in this critical discourse analysis, I will suggest a new way of defining otaku as 'reluctant insiders' engaged in the appropriation of technology and science as a means of cultural resistance. I will argue that their activities are informed by a particular *otaku ethic* that distinguishes them from other subcultures with similar motivations.

Introduction

My paper is divided into three parts. In Part 1, I ask: Why do we care about otaku, and how will we study them? In Part 2, I will critically analyze the various ways otaku have been represented since they were first characterized as a subculture in the early 80s. And in Part 3, drawing upon what I uncovered in Part 2, I will propose my own definition of the otaku subculture.

Part 1: The emergence of a globally diffuse subculture of consumption

What does a subculture consisting primarily of middle-class non-minority male youth in their teens and twenties, first characterized in Japan, have to do with how we live and understand our day to day lives here in North America, not to mention our

theoretical understandings of science and technology? As globalization, for better or for worse, extends its influence, entire cultures are constantly being defined, redefined, deconstructed (and reconstructed) not merely from the cultural capital--the cultural raw material--that is specific to any given geographic locale, but from *multicultural* capital that is not specific nor affixed to any single location. Manuel Castells characterizes our borderless information society as a “space of flows”¹. Those who have access to the flow of global conversation at any level are inherently multicultural. Various youth subcultures in Japan are as much the products of American culture as they are the products of their own culture. Likewise, certain youth cultures in America are the products of Japanese culture as much as or more than American culture. The cycles of cultural export, import, re-export, and re-import between nations are so complex, the borders (especially the cultural ones) have continued to blur. Perhaps it is appropriate that we look towards the young to find these blurry cultural intersections, to examine what they mean, and to discover why we cared enough to look in the first place.

In a paper that will attempt to examine the multiplicity of ways *otaku* have been defined, it is difficult and may be misguided to give a core definition that will serve as the center of discussion. Instead, I will provide transient definitions that are local to particular times and spaces. These definitions will allow us various starting points for discussion, and the analysis presented here will be one in motion, never lingering overlong within any given framework of understanding, but remaining cognizant of recurring themes.

I will provisionally begin with the definition of *otaku* that I first became aware of, which will also allow me to explain how I became interested in that subculture in the first place.

I was first exposed to Japanese culture through its mass media products, in particular, the medium of *anime*², the Japanese word for (and contracted form of) animation. From my early youth to the present, like many others, I have been a consumer

¹ Castells, Manuel. 1996. *The Rise of the Network Society (The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture, Volume 1)*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, Inc.

² Anime as a medium contains a broad range of genres, including but not limited to fantasy, science fiction, romance, comedy, drama, horror, and erotica. While a majority of anime is made for children, there is also a large market for anime made specifically for other demographics as well, the over-30 audience being one example.

of Japan's anime, *manga*³ (comics), movie, music, and other mass media products. As such, I have been part of Japanese consumer culture for much of my life, despite the fact I have never lived in Japan and do not have any Japanese ancestry. Of course, any Westerner who has ever bought Japanese electronics or eaten at a Japanese restaurant can claim to be a consumer of Japanese culture, but I consider myself to be a *heavy consumer*, who is also *self-aware* and *reflexive* (hopefully) regarding my consumption, some of that reflexivity arising due to the fact that I view myself as conspicuously participating in a market where I am *not part of the intended target audience*.

The relative heaviness of my consumption might be considered suspect in comparison to most Japanese citizens, but I would claim that my consumption of specific media goods (anime goods, for example) distinguishes me from the majority and places me alongside the subcategory of Japanese consumers who also have specialized tastes and buying patterns, and are self-aware of those patterns. As I discovered, some of these people in Japan were called *otaku*.

From this perspective, an anime otaku, for example, would know the name of every animator who worked on his favorite cartoon (which is marketed towards a demographic he is not part of, of course), maintains a database cataloging every piece of merchandise associated with that cartoon, tends to buy only the rarer items to add to his already impressive collection of goods, or avoids cash transactions completely--his most prized possession being a rare unused animation cel smuggled out of a production studio (acquired via a trade with another otaku). He is part of a consumer subculture that exists parallel to the mainstream consumer culture and exists just beneath the radar.

In the *otaku*, as I understood them, I saw something of myself. Here were people (fellow anime fans, for example) who were often described as heavy and specialized consumers of specific media products--people who did not shop on impulse, but inhabited the opposite extreme of the spectrum, obsessive and completely self-conscious in their consumption. The *otaku* were more than just that, as will be revealed in the body of this paper, but that was how I first became aware of them, and why they resonated strongly with me.

³ Manga is a nearly ubiquitous medium in Japan, produced for and read by almost every demographic. Manga accounts for over 40% of all books and magazines sold in Japan. (Schodt, 1996)

The otaku are both foreign and familiar to me at the same time. At the familiar side of things, I used to clearly belong to what some people call otaku culture, and I've been identified as an otaku by others (and haven't felt the need to contest that label). Sometimes, I've even thought of myself as an otaku, and maybe I've even called myself an otaku in public depending on who I was talking to. In general, due to the unclear meaning of the term, I've been very careful to avoid calling myself an otaku, yet I have also frequently described my own personality as having certain otaku aspects that I consider positive. I've been part of the discourse in which the word's meaning has been contested. I was personally invested in what people had to say about otaku and had my own preferred meanings that I promoted publicly.

Having moved away from the centers of the subculture, however, I have developed yet another perspective. Even as an insider, I appreciated and was apprehensive regarding the flexibility of the word *otaku*, which explains some of the hesitation I had regarding the use of the term, but as an outsider looking in, the term's flexibility and analytical imprecision became even more visible to me, and suggested broader possibilities than those I had previously considered.

Stepping outside of the subculture has allowed me to recognize the cultural work being done by the interplay of contested meanings, revealing much about cultural attitudes towards youth, technology, hegemonic culture, and resistant subculture. My analysis of the contradictory discourse suggests yet another way of looking at otaku--not to exclude competing perspectives, but to draw upon all of the perspectives available to provide a definition of otaku that will allow us to study the appropriation of technology and scientific culture by youth who have been mostly underrepresented in studies of science and technology. The purpose of this paper is to add to the body of discourse it seeks to critically analyze

Methods

The otaku subculture might be said to be self-generating, in that it creates its own representations of itself and has its own internal norms, but all subcultures exist within and in reference to larger cultures. It would be a mistake to ignore the broader cultural contexts which play a significant role in generating the otaku, both by providing

something the otaku subculture can react to (or resist against) and by providing mainstream definitions of the subculture that can be selectively mirrored, appropriated, and/or resisted by members or would-be members of that subculture.⁴

My experience as an otaku insider has given me personal experience with otaku-generated self-representations, and I have contributed to some of those internal debates. Likewise, as an insider, I have reacted to, positively or negatively, various non-otaku representations of otaku. The goal of this paper is to examine the same representations, but from an outsider perspective, thereby allowing me to critically and more broadly reflect on both insider and outsider perspectives with larger social and theoretical contexts in mind.

I performed a critical discourse analysis of a large number of sources that have one aspect in common: they discuss otaku in way or another. The end goal was not to have merely reiterated isolated perspectives, but to have drawn parallels between them while noting their differences, creating a map of discourse and then finding ways to improve the richness of that map.

As linguist Alfred Korzybski⁵ reminds us, however, the map is not the territory. It is important to note that this is not a study of the otaku themselves, only the discourse about them. At best, it is the study of idealized and abstracted otaku. The discourse is both 1) a product of how the otaku (intentionally or otherwise) have made their mark on society and 2) a product of society using the otaku, real or idealized, for its own ends. This is *not* an ethnographic study of otaku in Japan or elsewhere, and although I have previously been amongst otaku, I will not explicitly be drawing upon my experiences as a “native” for the purposes of this paper. From this research, however, I *will* suggest future directions of ethnographic work related to otaku, where I will take on the role of participant-observer as opposed to merely being a participant, and instead of chasing after undefined entities, I will have a clear idea of who I am looking for specifically.

⁴ Douglas Rushkoff, for example, in the PBS Video *The Merchants of Cool* (2001) depicts media megacorporations appropriating youth subcultures and selling manufactured representations of those cultures back to the youth who then mirror or resist them to create new subcultures, which are then reappropriated by the megacorporations in a positive feedback loop.

⁵ Korzybski is most well known for having invented “General Semantics”, introduced in *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics* (1933)

At this point, we need to make some distinctions between ‘description’ and ‘definition’. This work is not seeking to describe the otaku subculture as much as it is attempting to define it⁶, much as the discourse surrounding otaku is also defining as much as it is describing. Furthermore, second-hand description is weak and no substitute for actual ethnography. A thick ethnographic description (as endorsed by Clifford Geertz⁷) is not possible, however, until the culture to be studied has been defined. We can’t describe what the otaku are like until we’ve decided who counts as otaku.

For those scholars in science studies, this issue harkens back to old debates within the philosophy of science regarding the demarcation of science (seeking to define what counts as science before studying the scientists and related social phenomena) by Karl Popper versus Thomas Kuhn’s more descriptive work⁸ (looking at what scientists do...to decide what science is). This paper and the ethnographic research that will follow, will favor the Popperian approach. For the purposes of discourse analysis, it makes sense to study everything that calls anyone otaku, but to study the otaku themselves as a distinct subculture (as opposed to a diffuse cultural metaphor), we have to move beyond the linguistic flexibility and analytical imprecision of the discourse and more rigorously define and locate our object of study. Definition at some level must preclude description. For us to devise the most compelling and culturally relevant definition of otaku, we must take into account the vast work already done to define them in order to capture the subtle nuances of the co-making processes by which culture and subculture are made.

It should be noted that when I use the word “culture”, I am referring to the cultural studies work of Dick Hebdige⁹ who also cites such authors as Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, and Roland Barthes in describing culture as a society’s “whole way of life” characterized by an invisible and dominant ideology that is ubiquitous, creating a uniform state of hegemony. Subcultures, as defined by Hebdige, are defined as

⁶ Again, I am creating a new definition without explicitly invalidating other competing definitions.

⁷ Geertz, Clifford. 1973. "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture." In *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.

⁸ For a good deconstruction of Kuhn’s role in the early history of science studies, see *Kuhn: A Philosophical History of Our Times* (2000) by Steve Fuller and *Thomas Kuhn and the Science Wars* (2000) by Ziauddin Sardar. My own paper “The accidental rebel: Thomas Kuhn and *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*” (2001) details further thoughts on the Kuhn vs. Popper debate. See <http://www.rpi.edu/~engl/kuhn.pdf>

⁹ *Subculture: the meaning of style*. (1979) pp. 5-19

pockets of resistance (against hegemony) within society. While everyday usage might consider community service organizations such as the Boy Scouts of America subcultures, I am using Hebdige's definition that equates subcultures with resistant modes of being. What counts as resistance is difficult to pin down, of course, but Hebdige focuses on the notion of style--such as modes of dress, speech, and consumption, which are not necessarily revolutionary in nature, but serve to make invisible ideology visible, thereby exposing the underbelly of dominant discourse and, perhaps, making it open to attack and change. In discussing otaku as a subculture, I am discussing them from the perspective of resistance, but not necessarily quantifying that resistance, which may be the subject of future work once some sort of comparative framework has been established.

For the discourse analysis, I gathered as much material as I could find in the English language that referenced otaku, focusing my analysis on those that provided explicit *representations* of the subculture. As the term *otaku* still remains specialized jargon, the number of relevant sources to be collected was of a manageable number. For this paper, I archived and analyzed over 100 websites, books, magazine articles, and videos.

As I have mentioned, I have focused on American (and therefore cross-cultural) representations of otaku, but I have also used some Japanese and European sources that have been translated in English, as many of those have been important contributors to the American discourse on otaku. The Japanese sources are of particular relevance because the American representations of otaku have often fed back into the Japanese culture and then back again dialogically.

Part 2: Analysis

The early history of *otaku*

We should begin with a discussion the etymology of "otaku", drawing upon the work of Volker Grassmuck in his seminal otaku-studies article "*I'm alone, but not lonely*": *Japanese Otaku-Kids colonize the Realm of Information and Media, A Tale of*

Sex and Crime from a faraway Place (1990)¹⁰. Grassmuck is a German-born sociologist who became a guest researcher at Tokyo University's Socio-Technological Research Department in 1989, living in Japan until 1995, his essays on otaku available on the web since at least the mid 90s. Literally and originally, the word *otaku* means "your house", and more generally it is also a very polite (distancing and non-imposing, as opposed to familiar) way of saying "you". Perhaps the closest English equivalent would be my calling you "Ma'am" or "Sir". In *Otaku no Video*, a fictional anime story about otaku that has been translated for American consumption, Animeigo (the translation company) uses "thou" instead of "you" to translate "otaku" to indicate the term's archaic formality.

Grassmuck explains:

Otaku is a polite way to address someone whose social position towards you you do not yet know, and it appears with a higher frequency in the women's language. It keeps distance. Used between equals it can sound quite ironic or sarcastic, but is mostly meant in the sense of 'Stay away from me'. Imagine a teenager addressing another as "Sir!" (Grassmuck, 1990)

The historical reasons why otaku are called "otaku" is itself a point of contention. According to Grassmuck's version of the story, and that given by Frederick Schodt (one of the premier American scholars of manga) in his book *Dreamland Japan: Writings on Modern Manga, Japanese Comics for Otaku* (1996), "otaku" was something the members of fan subcultures called themselves.

Some informants convey that it was in the advertising world, others say it was in the circles of animation-picture collectors: "please, show me your (otaku) collection." The most trustworthy rumor has it that it first came up among people working in TV and video animation companies. From there it spread to the viewers of animes and the closely related worlds of manga (comic-books) and computer games. (Grassmuck, 1990)

Grassmuck theorizes that the distancing effect of using the pronoun "otaku" reflects the nature of the otaku themselves as being distanced from the mainstream culture and even their own peer group. The basic idea, as I have tried to understand and develop it, is that the word is used to explicitly indicate detachedness from who you are

¹⁰ Grassmuck, Volker. 1990. "I'm alone, but not lonely": Japanese Otaku-Kids colonize the Realm of Information and Media, *A Tale of Sex and Crime from a faraway Place*. <http://waste.informatik.hu-berlin.de/Grassmuck/Texts/otaku.e.html>

speaking to. For example, a dedicated and experienced collector of animation cels will have a vast network of connections to aid in his or her search for rare cels. Many of these contacts will only be peripheral acquaintances (as opposed to members of one's in-group). The relationships are business-like and not at all intimate. Although it might be considered a bit strange, it is not wholly unreasonable that someone in this type of social setting to call his or her acquaintances "otaku".

Amongst Americans trying to explain the usage of "otaku", several have hypothesized or asserted that the otaku have been called that because they tend to be isolated homebodies, socially inept and never going out (this usage having a direct relationship with the "your house" etymology of the word). For example, in a student paper on the web by Krissy Naudus, for a New York University course called "Language, Thought, and Culture", she wrote:

The exact reason for the usage is unclear, but such appropriation might be in reference to the apparent isolation of these fans, as outsiders who must find more solitary forms of entertainment and build a life in and around it. They are for the most part socially inept, using passive forms of entertainment to replace the often-difficult task of making friends and interacting successfully with them.¹¹

While we may never know exactly why certain youth began referring to themselves as otaku, how the term was first introduced into popular discourse in Japan is more clear. In 1983, the first published report appeared which described the usage of "otaku" amongst fans¹². Akio Nakamori wrote a series of articles called "Otaku no Kenkyu" (Studies of Otaku) in *Manga Burikko*, a manga magazine. He called those hard core fans who called each other "otaku" the *otaku-zoku* ("zoku" meaning tribe). His was perhaps the first article widely characterizing otaku as being anti-social, unkempt, and unpopular. In addition to those traits, Nakamori also described otaku as being obsessively interested in the details of a single field of interest, most commonly anime and manga, but anything else that was generally considered useless from a professional perspective, such as computer games or television stars.

¹¹ Naudas, Krissy. 2000. *Speaking Without Subtitles: The Universal Language of Otaku*. <http://members.aol.com/Lampbane/geeksspeak/otaku.html>

¹² It was the first report according to Volker Grassmuck, anyway. Karl Taro Greenfeld gives yet another story, citing an article that appeared in 1986 (Greenfeld, 1994: pp. 271-286).

Although the members of the otaku subculture called each other otaku, presumably as part of everyday interaction without seeking to insult each other, the popular understanding of the term was a distinctly derogatory one, not dissimilar to disparaging stereotypes of nerds and geeks¹³ in America. Perhaps the “homebody” etymology (or description) of “otaku” espoused by some Americans is an example of that derogatory attitude being reproduced.

The information elites

After the subculture was initially defined in Japan, details of its mode of existence began to be fleshed out. Some considered the otaku to be simply the Japanese version of nerd and geek cultures. Regarding geeks, Susan Leigh Star writes:

Geek is slang for a person who is very deeply involved in the technical aspects of a particular endeavour, somewhat akin to a ‘nerd’. A computer geek is someone who spends a great deal of time on computing and is often involved in related activities such as reading science fiction.¹⁴

However, the otaku have also been portrayed as a special or more extreme kind of geek¹⁵, as information elites who pore over vast amounts of detailed and seemingly trivial information regarding less-than-serious things, committing that information to memory and using it as capital for their underground trades--online or in person. Furthermore, otaku seek to develop reputations for themselves; to become ‘more of an otaku’ than the next guy is a serious concern that is not implicit to ‘geekdom’ in general. In reference to a ‘less elite’ otaku, artist Takashi Murakami (who we will revisit later) writes:

There is a deadly competition among otaku. I guess Miyazaki was a loser because he lacked the critical ability of accumulating enormous information in order to survive and win at a debate among otaku. His collection of otaku goods was not so great, either.¹⁶

¹³ “Nerds” and “geeks”, however, have made a comeback in recent years as computing cultures have become affluent and increasingly influential in American culture.

¹⁴ Star, Susan Leigh. ed. 1995. *The Cultures of Computing*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers. p. 10

¹⁵ In this definition, ‘geek’ would be the more general category of which otaku are a subset. Otaku are geeks, but not all geeks are otaku.

¹⁶ Journal of Contemporary Art, Inc., Takashi Murakami, and Mako Wakasa. “takashi murakami” <http://www.jca-online.com/murakami.html>

In *Man, Nation & Machine: The Otaku Answer to Pressing Problems of the Media Society*¹⁷ (2000), Volker Grassmuck makes a distinction between the otaku and the internet users portrayed by Sherry Turkle in *Life on the Screen*¹⁸ (1995). Turkle depicts users who take on multiple personalities, operating with multiple windows open simultaneously--exemplifying his or her approach to information and identity management. Otaku, on the other hand, take the opposite approach, and emphasize monomaniacal focus.

Whereas the multiple dives into the stream and wants to know as much as possible about a lot of things, the otaku seeks out a tiny area about which he wants to know everything. (Grassmuck 2000)

In attempting the origins of the otaku lifestyle/strategy, Grassmuck (1990) refers back to the educational system of Japan:

The education system, in which the famous 'industrial warriors' are trained, is a generally acknowledged back-ground factor for the emergence of the otaku-generation. "In school", says Yamazaki, "children are taught to take in the world as data and information, in a fragmentary way, not systematically. The system is designed for cramming them with dates, names, and multiple-choice answers for exams. The scraps of information are never combined into a total view of the world. They don't have a knowledge value, but the character of a fetish."

He continues:

'Information-fetishism' is a central term for Yamazaki. The Otaku continue the same pattern of information acquisition and reproduction they have learned at school. Only the subject matter has changed: idols, cameras, or rock 'n' roll.

The text seems to imply that the otaku have become masters of handling and dealing with meaningless and valueless information. "Fetish" is used in this sense to describe that which is (shallowly) symbolic more than (deeply) real. Continuing this line of thought, leather and lace, for example, are an imaginary and poor substitute for real and natural men and women as objects of desire. Yet, should we separate value and desire? It would seem strange to think that the otaku are obsessed with objects and subject matters they consider meaningless, unimportant, and merely bits of neutral data to be collected and

¹⁷ Grassmuck, Volker. 2000. In *Man, Nation & Machine: The Otaku Answer to Pressing Problems of the Media Society*. http://waste.informatik.hu-berlin.de/Grassmuck/Texts/otaku00_e.html

¹⁸ Turkle, Sherry. 1995. *Life on the Screen*. New York: Simon and Schuster

deployed. Such a portrayal of otaku casts them as maladjusted victims of an ineffective educational system that needs to be changed, as opposed to being resourceful survivors of that same (ineffective) system. Instead of being hailed as a possible strategy of positive resistance, otaku-ism has been presented by some as a dire warning of things gone wrong.

Whether we wish to see fetishism as 1) being full of promise or 2) a dead end, Grassmuck ultimately portrays otaku as being very much interested in the ‘value’ of things and information, at least relative to their own social sphere. This emphasis on information value comes across in his descriptions of the consumption practices of otaku that I mentioned in Part 1, where the otaku refuse to be normal consumers who buy into media hype and advertising, but are instead hyper-consumers who are often more informed about products than their creators. The value of an object is not defined by mainstream interests, but by their own subcultural community’s secret knowledge, norms, and underground economy, where traditional channels of consumption can even be bypassed completely¹⁹, and the modes of consumption are completely different from what was intended (such as when information about a product becomes more valued than the product itself²⁰). Beyond mere consumption, the otaku are said to “change, manipulate, and subvert ready-made products” (Grassmuck, 1990). They also produce their own products to be enjoyed and traded as well, another way of becoming more independent of mainstream producers of culture.

Karl Taro Greenfeld, in his 1993 *Wired* magazine article entitled *The Incredibly Strange Mutant Creatures who Rule the Universe of Alienated Japanese Zombie Computer Nerds (Otaku to You)* and his 1994 book *Speed Tribes: Days and Nights with Japan’s Next Generation*, continued and drew upon the work of Volker Grassmuck to bring the story of the otaku to a wider English-speaking audience. His work, in particular, emphasized that the otaku were not dabbling with vast amounts of random context-less information for its own sake, but engaging that mass of information in hopes of finding and/or producing high value information that could be traded for power and influence.

¹⁹ Such black-market economies often deal in the trade of illicitly copied, pirated, unlicensed, and other goods not intended for sale on the mass market or at all.

²⁰ Greenfeld, Karl Taro. 1993. *The Incredibly Strange Mutant Creatures who Rule the Universe of Alienated Japanese Zombie Computer Nerds (Otaku to You)*
http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/1.01/otaku_pr.html

Greenfeld's description of a self-proclaimed otaku named Zero gives us some hints at how the otaku prioritize information:

He warns other otaku on the Eye Net computer network to be on the lookout for some poser named Batman pushing stale info. For those few moments - as Zero's invisible brethren attentively scan and store his transmitted data - he is no longer a wimp. He's a big gun, a macho man in the world of the otaku...Information is the fuel that feeds the otaku's worshiped dissemination systems... Anything qualifies, as long as it was not previously known. (1993)

Greenfeld also emphasizes it is the otaku's attitude towards information that distinguishes him or her from non-otaku, not his or her object of desire²¹.

Dial "O" for Otaku

In addition to depictions of otaku as being uber-geeks, unconventional experts, and information fetishists, an incident occurred in the late 80s that would change perceptions of otaku forever. Most historical accounts point to what Yale sociology professor Sharon Kinsella calls the "otaku panic"²², which was triggered by the infamous Tsutomu Miyazaki incident in 1989. Miyazaki (a 26 year old printer's assistant) kidnapped, molested, and murdered 4 little girls. When he was arrested, the police found a huge collection of various anime and manga, some of it pornographic, in his apartment. Being a hardcore fan of comics and animation, as well as being socially isolated, it was easy to consider Miyazaki an otaku, at least superficially.

The Japanese media picked up on this and repeatedly referred to Miyazaki as an otaku, thereby exposing the term to the public at large. As such, "otaku" became associated with sociopaths like Miyazaki, and in the panic, many in the media tried to blame Miyazaki's deviant behavior on anime and manga. Otaku had gone from being merely weird to genuinely scary.

Not wholly unlike American adult society, but perhaps taken to greater extremes, the postwar Japanese adult society has long had anxieties about its youth culture becoming more individualistic and isolated and less interested in fulfilling mainstream social duty. Sharon Kinsella writes:

²¹ As such, one can be an otaku of goldfish, carpentry, protocol, tennis, etc.

²² Kinsella, Sharon. 1998. *Amateur Manga Subculture and the Otaku Panic*
<http://www.kinsellaresearch.com/nerd.html>

(White) youth cultures in the UK and the USA have, increasingly, been humorously indulged and wishfully interpreted as contemporary expressions of the irrepressible creative genius and spirit of individualism which made Britain a great industrial nation, and America a great democracy. But individualism (kojinshugi) has, as we know, been rejected as a formal political ideal in Japan. Institutional democracy notwithstanding, individualism has continued to be widely perceived as a kind of a social problem or modern disease throughout the postwar period.²³

The Miyazaki incident was both a cause for further anxiety and an outlet for the media to deal with preexisting anxiety via a scapegoat, perhaps, in the form of anime and manga subculture. As a result, otaku in Japan have been regarded with varying amounts of fear and loathing over the last decade, and those attitudes have found their way into American otaku discourse as well, tempered perhaps by American attitudes toward individualism.

Who wants to be an otaku, anyway?

The word “otaku” was first imported into America when manga and anime became widely available (in English) in the late 80s and early 90s. One important artifact of otaku culture imported for American consumption is a two-part anime called *Otaku no Video* which translates to “otaku’s video” or “your video.” It is often described as a video made by otaku for otaku. Created in 1992 by Gainax, a studio formed by self-proclaimed anime otaku turned professionals, *Otaku no Video* is a thinly-disguised version of their own ascension into the animation industry, a pseudo-documentary about otaku, and depending on who you talk to, a celebration of the otaku lifestyle, a tongue-in-cheek self-parody regarding the excesses of fandom, or a dire warning of what can happen when one takes comics and animation too seriously. If indeed *Otaku no Video* contains an anti-otaku message, the pervasive humor of the piece masks any serious commentary. Any otaku-culture criticisms, if present, are subdued considering that the video was released just two years after the Miyazaki incident. *Otaku no Video* contains no references to child abduction and murder, nor any other abusive behavior on the part of otaku.

²³ ibid

Enough American fans latched onto the term, and “otaku” became part of the specialized jargon that frequently develops within fan communities. Some fans who considered themselves obsessive and extremely knowledgeable about their object of interest called themselves otaku to positively categorize themselves as being similar to those information elites portrayed in *Otaku no Video*. Perhaps they identified themselves as otaku because the English language lacks any better terms to describe them. However, debates about how the term should be used, if at all, broke out amongst fans.

Several camps within the American manga/anime fan community emerged from the otaku debates. On one hand, there were those who pointed out that “otaku” has a dark history behind it due to the Miyazaki incident, and that mainstream usage of the term in Japan was negative and derogatory, so American fans should not use the term to describe themselves, lest they consider themselves social incompetents with no lives and/or potential serial killers. Those who held this position often asserted that Americans who called themselves “otaku” were ignorant of its true meaning. Others fans claimed that the Japanese meanings of the term, known or not, were unimportant, and that “otaku” had been suitably appropriated to mean whatever they wanted it to mean; most fans meant it to mean, generically, “anime fan”. And finally, there were those who claimed that knowing and respecting the original subcultural (non-mainstream) Japanese definition of the term was useful, and that accepting mainstream stereotypically negative definitions of otaku as being socially inept and/or potential murderers was unnecessary or even discriminatory. Ignoring the superficial negative stereotypes, but wanting a more potent definition than simply “fan”, the otaku became defined by this last camp as elite fans, hardcore and obsessive fanatics with vast amounts of knowledge who could be looked up to by aspiring newbie fans. Like those who wanted “otaku” to simply mean “fan”, this last group appropriated the term, not to eliminate all of the Japanese cultural baggage associated with it, but choosing which connotations were the most appealing to promote (often in the name of fairness and anti-discrimination).

Examples of anti-otaku sentiment are not uncommon on the internet, and most of those examples come from the fan communities themselves struggling with and contesting their identity amongst themselves in an attempt to present a respectable face to each other and the on-looking public. Some fans have been looking for a label to

categorize unappealing members of their own community, and found that “otaku” fits the bill nicely²⁴.

One online essay entitled "What is Otaku?"²⁵ nicely encapsulates some American fans' strong negative attitudes towards otaku. The essay is presented as an informational piece, intended to dispel common American ignorance about mainstream Japanese culture.

I think that American "otakus" should know exactly what the history is behind what they label themselves. (I mean, I hardly want "otakus" going over to Japan and getting laughed at when they label themselves "otakus", I want them to be laughed at because they're gaijin devils and ignorant of Japanese tradition, hahaha.

The etymology of the word is described, and the essay mentions the “home body” origin of the word’s usage. The essay’s main emphasis is to point out the various negative perceptions of otaku in Japan as a reason not to adopt the term in America.

otaku is a person who is completely obsessed on one thing. So much so that this obsession interferes with the person's ability to function in a "normal" life...I doubt many people would fit the Japanese definition of a "true otaku", because those people have to be really out of it..."smelly, obsessive, fat, and ugly".

The author goes on to tell the story of the Miyazaki incident in detail as further evidence of the word’s dark history. The author even has a section called “The Stereotype” reiterating the negative attributes associated with otaku, but her response is not to challenge the stereotype, but to accept it, closing the essay with an explanation of how she lives a normal life with friends, is busy at college, plays with her dogs...in short, she is a normal fan, but not an otaku, and only people with “no life” are to be considered otaku.

Such an opinion is not an uncommon one amongst American anime fans and other forms of geek culture where the term has crossed over, such as the video game community. Those American fans who have invested time to study Japanese language and culture are often the ones most against the casual use of “otaku” to mean “fan”, but

²⁴ For an example, see: Barlow, Elaine. 1997. “What’s An Otaku”.

<http://cronus.comp.utas.edu.au/manga/animeotaku.html>

²⁵ On the website: “Cruel Angel’s Revolution”. “What is Otaku?”

<http://www.geocities.com/kenyuen1/articles/otaku.htm>

also against more specific meanings that have any positive connotations. In arguing their position, they privilege the mainstream Japanese perspectives (as they perceive it) over the fringe perspectives of those in Japan and elsewhere which assert that otaku have been and continue to be a positive subculture.

As I just mentioned, “otaku” has crossed over into the video gaming community as well, but not without controversy. In an article entitled “Don’t Call Me Otaku” by Walt Wyman for CoreMagazine.com, an online video gaming magazine, the author again seeks to dispel myths about otaku and remind readers that stereotypically mainstream Japanese perceptions of otaku must be respected and unchallenged, leaving little or no room for appropriation, and certainly not appropriation to make the term have any positive connotations. An interesting aspect of the article, however, is the way it seeks to dispel the notion of otaku as cultural connoisseurs, as William Gibson describes them (which will be discussed later). Wyman describes and perpetuates the otaku stereotypes in order to claim that his culture, the gaming culture which indeed has its “true connoisseurs”, is not the same as the dark otaku culture full of people who are:

seen as miserable, occasionally comical social outcasts (i.e. the guy who is single, 27 and still living with his parents or the girl who says a total of 5 words all through high school). At worst they are stereotyped as dark, obsessive and unstable, like the 28 year-old flight-sim addict who in 1999 high-jacked an ANA jet, killing the pilot, because he wanted to fly a real plane.²⁶

One might expect that gaming culture, which is generally considered one subset of geek culture, would be more sympathetic to the plight of the otaku as a marginalized group being negatively stereotyped. However, as we have seen, it is the fan communities themselves who are exceptionally hesitant regarding the adoption of this term for fear of being stereotyped in the same way. I find myself wondering: when is *not* appropriating a contested term more dangerous than appropriating it?

A similar situation can be found in the hacker/cracker debates that began in the 80s and continue to this day. When the American mass media latched onto the notion of the hacker as a computer criminal who broke into systems to steal data or wreak havoc, those within the original hacker culture (which had nothing to do with criminal activity), were

²⁶ Wyman, Walt. 2000. “Don’t Call Me Otaku”. <http://xengamers.com/sections/columns/5892/>

adamant that the word “hacker” was misappropriated. Some have tried, with varying degrees of success or failure, to reappropriate the word back to its original meaning, insisting that computer criminals be called “crackers” instead of “hackers” or perhaps “black hat hackers” at least. If “hacker” was not reappropriated, it was feared, then anyone who enjoyed working with computers or was deeply immersed in the computer culture risked being stereotyped as a potential criminal. Proponents of “otaku” are also concerned that letting the mainstream media appropriate the term would result in the negative stereotyping of anyone with more than a casual interest in any subject, especially fringe hobbies such as collecting anime.

Towards the “Planet of the Otaku!”²⁷

There are innumerable instances of “otaku” being used instead of “fan” in a positive manner, either to signify generic fans or elite fans, but there are more interesting positive uses of the term as well. Gainax’s *Otaku no Video* (1992) was already mentioned, but it is worth noting that the founder of Gainax, Toshio Okada, left the studio to become one of the biggest proponents of otaku culture in Japan. Okada, affectionately known as the Otaking, has written books about otaku culture and lectured on the subject at Tokyo University (Japan's most prestigious school), thereby educating the next generation of Japan's leaders on otaku-ism. He has a website in 4 different languages called the International University of Otaku²⁸, and he has spoken about otaku at anime conventions²⁹ in the United States. Volker describes Okada’s purpose as such:

he attributed to the otaku a pioneering role in the information society, also at international level. His concern is to establish otaku as a new type of expert who focuses on the style, special effects and signature of individual comic artists. Where Gutenberg-schooled readers detect a story, writes Okada, the otaku first of all refer to the syntactic levels. Their judgement is based on an extensive knowledge of the particular genre allowing them to decode quotations, grasp references, and appreciate nuances.

²⁷ a phrase borrowed from Youmex/Gainax (1992)

²⁸ Okada, Toshio. 1996. “International University of Otaku”.

<http://www.netcity.or.jp/OTAKU/univ/aisatsu.html#e>

²⁹ Viz Communications, Inc. 1996. “Return of the Otaking: Toshio Okada at Anime America ‘96”.

http://www.j-pop.com/anime/archive/feature/04_gal_999/otaking.html

Due to work by people like Okada, the eventual glamorization of computer cultures in Japan, the mainstreaming of parts of anime culture, and the identification of new youth subcultures for the Japanese adult culture to be afraid of³⁰, otaku in 2002 has lost some of its potency in Japan as a dangerous subculture. In some circles, being otaku has even become hip³¹. It is not wholly unlikely that non-Japanese acceptance and promotion of the otaku lifestyle influenced the change of heart with Japan itself. In 2000, for the first time, the Japanese government's Educational White Paper highly praised anime and manga as important Japanese art forms achieving popularity and recognition abroad³². Toshio Okada once claimed that he was able to convince high ranking Japanese officials to watch anime (which is considered somewhat low-brow amongst the mainstream adult Japanese population) by exaggerating how influential and popular it was in the United States.

The art world is another arena where otaku have garnered attention in Japan and America. Takashi Murakami, a classically trained Japanese artist with otaku roots, decided to return to those roots and produce popular modern art utilizing and subverting (or perhaps "playing with" is the best phrase to use here) the mass media culture to produce (otaku-esque) subcultural representations of (post)modern day Japan. Referring back to the otaku culture and sometimes in conversation with it³³, Murakami hopes to elevate the status of otaku culture in Japan or at least alleviate discrimination against them³⁴, proclaiming that the otaku subculture has evolved into a powerful mainstream force ("Poku"= Pop + Otaku) that will produce Japan's most original cultural products³⁵. He has also been ambivalent about otaku, sometimes proclaiming he is an otaku, at other times denying it, but he does not deny that he draws upon his otaku past, and his work has allowed otaku to re-enter the conversation in Japan as a contested subculture as

³⁰ see the "hikikomori", "jibetarians", "kogals", "ogals", "gothic lolita" etc

³¹ Larimer, Tim. 2001. "Staying In and Tuning Out."

<http://www.time.com/time/asia/features/ontheroad/japan.otaku.html>

³² On website: "AnimeBoost.Network". 2000. "Anime and Manga Ranked as Art"

<http://www.aboost.net/home/industry/archives/arc9-2000.shtml>

³³ Murakami has collaborated with Toshio Okada on some his studio's sculpture pieces, and displayed them at otaku events.

³⁴ Journal of Contemporary Art, Inc., Takashi Murakami, and Mako Wakasa. "takashi murakami"

<http://www.jca-online.com/murakami.html>

³⁵ Cruz, Amanda, Midori Matsui, and Dana Friis-Hansen. 1999. *takashi murakami: the meaning of the nonsense of the meaning*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers.

opposed to a pre-crystallized one. On American soil, Murakami has achieved recognition from various gallery exhibits he has displayed over the last several years, most notably the “Superflat” exhibit which was displayed at The Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, California, The Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and The Henry Art Gallery in Seattle, Washington from May, 2001 through March, 2002. I had the opportunity to visit the exhibit when it was in Seattle. In viewing the exhibit, whose pieces were not altogether that different from otaku products not generally considered “high art”, I got the sense about otaku that Volker Grassmuck noted when he said:

They are an underground, but they are not opposed to the system. (1990)

Or perhaps, it makes more sense to say that the otaku resist without resorting to outright revolution. In the “Superflat” artworks, revolution themes were noticeably absent, but there were hints of tongue-in-cheek subversion, appropriation, and parody. The atmosphere was light hearted and fun, with no scathing portrayals of oppressors nor sympathetic appeals from the victimized. These were the expressions of a subculture who more or less *liked* the mainstream culture they were part of, even as they sought to reshape it for their own, sometimes “deviant”, purposes.

Some of the first mentions of otaku in the mainstream American press appeared in reviews of Murakami’s exhibits. The depictions were mostly brief; some of them reiterated the fringe aspects of the otaku, while others described them as being youth who were conversant with technology.³⁶

In April of 2001, William Gibson, the science-fiction author who coined the term “cyberspace” who has also been known for his speculative observations about Japan³⁷, published an article in the Guardian Unlimited called “Modern boys and mobile girls” reflecting on otaku culture and its relationship to British culture:

The otaku, the passionate obsessive, the information age's embodiment of the connoisseur, more concerned with the accumulation of data than of objects, seems a natural crossover figure in today's interface of British and Japanese cultures. I see it in the eyes of the Portobello dealers, and in the eyes of the Japanese

³⁶ Drohojowska-Philp, Hunter. 2001. “Pop Go the Usual Boundaries”.

<http://www.calendarlive.com/top/1,1419,L-LATimes-Art-X!ArticleDetail-17117,00.html>

³⁷ For examples, see: Gibson, William. “My Own Private Tokyo”. *Wired*. September, 2001. pp. 117-119 and Gibson, William. 1996. *Idoru*. New York: Berkley Publishing Group.

collectors: a perfectly calm train-spotter frenzy, murderous and sublime. Understanding otaku-hood, I think, is one of the keys to understanding the culture of the web. There is something profoundly post-national about it, extra-geographic. We are all curators, in the post-modern world, whether we want to be or not.³⁸

Gibson's portrayal of otaku as a special kind of post-industrial trans-geographic cyber-citizen (that we are all becoming) opens up multiple possibilities for inquiry. In July 2001, an article appeared in the business section of CNN.com Asia, and was entitled "Otaku: Japan's gadget geeks dictate tech future". The article, by Kristie Lu Stout, builds upon Gibson's vision. In addition to portraying the otaku as being high tech connoisseurs, the article emphasizes their power as a consumer force:

"The otaku are constantly seeking new functionality, new ways of using devices," says Tim Clark, a Tokyo-based analyst at Ion Global. "They are the ones that are the bell weather for each sector. They are the first buyers, the leading edge, the driving force behind the product development."

In early 2002, otaku have appeared in unlikely venues, such as a New York Times Magazine article on the burgeoning Japanese fashion world. Fashion otaku have garnered a certain amount of respect, perhaps because the fashion industry has found a way to milk profits out of the subculture that was previously considered too frightening to even talk about publicly.

"Every hipster who goes to Tokyo comes back learning two words: kwaii (sic), which means 'cute' and otaku, which means 'obsessive,'"...John Jay, who, as the creative director of Wieden & Kennedy advertising in Tokyo, has helped create otaku for Nikes in a generation, explains that "young sneakerologists can tell you the history of any brand, shoe by shoe. And the Levis freaks know their Levis by the color of the thread and the year of the launch."³⁹

Another recent New Yorker article also cites John Jay and gives its own definition of otaku:

³⁸ Gibson, William. 2001. "Modern boys and mobile girls".
<http://www.observer.co.uk/life/story/0,6903,466391,00.html>

³⁹ Spindler, Amy M. 2002. "Do You Otaku?"
<http://www.nytimes.com/2002/02/24/magazine/magazinespecial/24OTAKU.html?ex=1015847839&ei=1&en=1cd514fd353b2558>

Otaku originally referred to a category of young Japanese men who were fixated on manga—the distinctive cartoon art that is popular reading material for adults in Japan. The word is now used to describe someone with a fanatical interest in computers or fashion.⁴⁰

The fashion otaku in this article are presented as a new breed of consumers whose obsessive tendencies can be capitalized upon by those who control the means of production. This depiction of otaku as ultra-trendy heavy spenders is a far cry from those depictions that portray them as potential killers, and even those that portray them as information elites who eschew mainstream channels of consumption and monetary transactions whenever possible, preferring to trade in more esoteric forms of information.

The otaku have become respectable and somewhat hip in the mainstream American press, but from the way they have been described, the fashion otaku actually seem to be less of a potent consumer force driving trends and more of a customer pool *following* trends. Pulp magazine, published for American followers of Japanese comics and (sub)culture, had an article on the Japanese fashion scene in its May 2002 issue, praising those youth who are involved as fashion consumers:

But these are only few samples of current young people's trends in Japan. The majority of kids (mostly outside of main city) are perhaps not doing or not getting into anything. Otaku (which means folks who get into their hobbies heavily) used to be on the dark side of Japan. Nowadays otaku actually look healthier than non-otakus in Japan. Maybe because it's because it's always better to have some energy than none.⁴¹

Instead of being viewed as scary obsessive outsiders, otaku in Japan are now considered healthy citizens engaged with their culture. Does this mean that the otaku can no longer be considered a subculture, and are really just another expression of hegemony? We should not necessarily privilege mainstream definitions, however, and it is likely that “otaku” will remain contested term for a long time to come, doing different cultural work for different people who have their own values and priorities.

As scholars of science, technology, and society, where do we go from here? How are we to appropriate the discourse, not to obliterate all that has come before, but to add

⁴⁰ Mead, Rebecca. 2002. “Letter from Tokyo: Shopping Rebellion”. http://www.newyorker.com/fact/content/?020318fa_FACT

⁴¹ Evers, Izumi. 2002. “Mondo Tokyo Guide: fashion scene: Shibuya”. http://www.pulp-mag.com/archives/6.05/mondo_02.shtml

our own unique perspectives to the mix? What can we contribute methodologically and theoretically to improve our understanding of this under-studied and complicated youth culture, and how will this improved understanding enrich our theories of science and technology?

Part 3: Reconfiguring otaku

Neither the most negative stereotyping conceptions of otaku nor the most positive but superficial depictions of otaku is very useful for the purposes of studying the youth subculture's relationship to technology and science, and its role as a community of resistance. Otaku have superficially been compared to well-known American subcultures such as the geeks, hackers, and cyberpunks, and parallels between those subcultures have been drawn. If the otaku are a truly worthy object of study (on a trans-geographic level, especially), they must be distinguished as being unique from those other subcultures. The discourse has revealed a complex and often contradictory picture of who counts as an otaku, but certain themes stand out as being particularly unique and worth further consideration.

As Steven Levy described the old school hacker culture from MIT in the 60s by laying out what he called "The Hacker Ethic"⁴², it may be fruitful for me to lay out "The Otaku Ethic" in order to discuss the various features of the subculture that can be used to define them, thereby providing significant avenues of further research.

The otaku ethic:

1. Information is the most important thing, but information does not have fixed intrinsic value. The essence of information is secrecy; the utility of information comes from its movement.

2. Appropriation is a valid strategy for information management, identity reconstruction, and resistance not only for marginalized groups, but "reluctant insiders" as well.

3. Networks can be utilized for personal (and collective) gain.

⁴² Levy, Steven. 1984. *Hackers*. New York: Penguin Books. pp. 39-49

1. Information is the most important thing, but information does not have fixed intrinsic value. The essence of information is secrecy; the utility of information comes from its movement.

While hackers and otaku alike have particular attitudes towards the importance of information, their philosophies differ significantly. Where the hacker community believes that “information wants to be free” (or rather ‘information should be free’), the otaku culture believes that information should not be free. The otaku are concerned with having *valuable* information, and the value of information depreciates as more people know it.

The otaku conception of information is similar to the formal (if somewhat non-intuitive) definition of information value described by computer scientist Claude Shannon⁴³, who states that information value is defined as the statistically based difference between that which is uncertain and that which is already known or widely available. According to Shannon’s definition, that which is similar to what is already known or is predictable has low information value. When information is freed and widely distributed, therefore, information value is necessarily lost--less elite if you will.

Sharing information indiscriminately serves no purpose for the otaku who instead hoard information and keep it private. However, hoarded information cannot yield more information (in the form of monetary rewards or increased reputation for example) until it is shared, which is what I mean by the utility of information coming from its *movement*. Information is only shared by otaku when *the net change of information value is likely to be positive*. Hence, we saw representations of otaku not giving things away, but trading and bartering for personal gain. Dogma is not valued in otaku culture, because dogma always refers back to a known truth and is therefore never novel nor high in information value. Other subcultures, including hacker and cyberpunk cultures, treat information guardedly at times, but not as tightly nor as regularly as otaku, and they still say, paradoxically, that they follow the cyber-libertarian doctrine that information must be free.

Grassmuck and Greenfeld’s otaku origin stories are somewhat disappointing in that they point to the otaku’s subversive activities, but claim that they are merely replicating the information strategies learned from formal schooling--which emphasized

⁴³ For a summary, see: Goonatilake, Susantha. 1991. *The Evolution of Information: Lineages in Gene, Culture and Artefact*. London: Pinter Publishers.

the memorization of context-less data over the analysis of meanings (historical, philosophical, ethical, etc.). For otaku who are wholly concerned with having valuable data with which they can achieve status and influence, it makes little sense to say they are not concerned with the value of the data they deal with. I would like to define otaku as being those who are reacting against the alienating and context-less information deluge of our information society⁴⁴, not by running away from the data or by treating it as valueless trivia to be memorized completely out of context, but by engaging it and *creating* meaning, context, and value.

Otaku draw connections between mundane products that others would not bother examining. Otaku frequently debate the significance of media products in ways that even the creators would never have imagined or expected-- yet another example of meaning being created where none was necessarily intended. The otaku achieve information mastery through depth, knowing the deep details of a few things instead of focusing on the surface details of many things, the latter strategy encouraged by an educational system based on the received knowledge of facts.

2. Appropriation is a valid strategy for information management, identity reconstruction, and resistance not only for marginalized groups, but ‘reluctant insiders’ as well.

Otaku can be defined as appropriators of technology, whether they are media technologies and products, or information technologies. Studies of appropriation⁴⁵ have much to offer otaku studies, but the otaku underscore a need for studying appropriation from yet another angle. Most studies of appropriated technologies have focused on the appropriation of dominant technologies by marginalized groups seeking to establish an identity and voice, and therefore power, at the centers of society. The youth who become otaku, on the other hand, are not generally from marginalized segments of society. On the contrary, they come from rather privileged segments of society. Much has been written on the effects of marginalization and its role in stripping away identity, but identity-loss issues of those who are at the centers of society have not been examined as thoroughly,

⁴⁴ not to mention the adverse conditions of *The Technological Society* (1954) as described by Jacques Ellul.

⁴⁵ See Eglash *et al.* *Appropriating Technology: Vernacular Science and Social Power*.
<http://www.rpi.edu/~eglash/eglash.dir/at/intro.htm>

partly because the subcultures of resistance spawned from within the centers of society eventually tend to become marginalized, masking the fact that they were *initially* insiders who *made a choice* to leave the insider's game.

Hegemony can be alienating in the way it excludes some peoples, but it can also be alienating in the way it seeks to assimilate others. It might be described as a colonization, not of exotic others, but of our own so-called "privileged" youth. For those youth who do not recognize a problem, maybe there is none for them, but for those who feel alienated by an educational system that breeds conformity, discourages original and critical thought⁴⁶, and encourages the memorization of vast amounts of context-less information, there is a pathologization occurring that marginalization theory often forgets to consider. These youth are not excluded. Instead they are included in a regime they would rather not belong to, and as such, I refer to them as 'reluctant insiders'⁴⁷.

Otaku-ism is just one strategy that reluctant insiders can take. Reluctant insiders can also appropriate technologies to become hackers and otaku or even reject technologies altogether, or drop out of society completely. The 'reluctant insider' metaphor allows us to consider more deeply *why* people become hackers and otaku, etc, and to consider how being part of the target audience can be just as alienating and identity fragmenting as being excluded. Such studies are particularly relevant in both Japan and America in the midst of rising concerns regarding school violence perpetrated by middle class youth, violence being yet another face-saving strategy adopted by reluctant insiders⁴⁸.

It is not the purpose of this paper to claim that any single form of resistance is the most effective one. However, otaku-ism is a significant alternative to other forms of resistance engaged by reluctant insiders. This resistance is less outwardly political and

⁴⁶ For a discussion of the potentially impairing effects of certain educational policies, see: Lindblom, Charles E. and Edward J. Woodhouse. 1993. *The Policy-Making Process: Third Edition*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall. 1st ed. 1968. p. 115-116

⁴⁷ This can be contrasted with the term "outsider-within", coined by Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Feminist Thought* (1990) p. 11, which describes individuals from marginalized groups moving from marginal positions into more central positions of power, but who are never fully able to discard his or her outsider status to become a legitimate insider. Just as Collins suggests that "an outsider-within stance functions to create a new angle of vision on the process of suppression", the "reluctant insider" also offers a unique perspective regarding oppression.

⁴⁸ See "Social perspectives on school anti-violence policies" (2001) for my perspectives on youth violence, educational policies, and the concept of face as defined by Erving Goffman: <http://www.rpi.edu/~engl/violence.pdf>

rebellious compared to the cyberpunk agenda that seeks to overthrow the system, and more insular like the old school hacker culture described by Steven Levy. Although the otaku are not a free-information sharing culture, they are not just a shopping culture either. They're not bound to mainstream markets and channels of consumption. As hyperconsumers, the otaku do not rely on authorized sources of product information and distribution, but have established their own networks of information and trade which also places value on products independently of "suggested retail price". Furthermore, ready-made products are subverted to their own ends, or avoided altogether when the subculture creates its own products which it can trade for other products, money, or other forms of information both within their community and outside of it.

3. Networks can be utilized for personal (and collective) gain.

In addition to the appropriation of technology, I see otaku as being appropriators of scientific culture, which they may have learned from their schooling experiences. Where science is generally a heavily controlled and government-sanctioned activity, the otaku adopt the social practices of scientific culture in their everyday lives and as participants in an information economy (or ecology, drawing upon the work of Charles Rosenberg⁴⁹). Taking seriously the notion that otaku are implicated in huge social networks of associations (much of that made possible by the development of communications network infrastructures such as the internet), as opposed to the notion that they do not communicate with others at all, I would like to draw parallels between otaku culture and scientific culture through a Latourian⁵⁰ lens of actor-network analysis.

Like scientists, otaku communicate via networks and use complex forms of rhetoric to establish information value and therefore prestige (which distinguishes them from the old school hacker ethic which does not believe in information elitism). Bruno Latour makes the case that scientists cannot be successful without a network within which they can win over audiences and gain allies; likewise, I would assert otaku are also dependent on networks.

⁴⁹ Rosenberg, Charles. 1997. "Toward an Ecology of Knowledge: On Discipline, Context, and History" in *No Other Gods*. 2nd ed. Johns Hopkins University Press. pp. 225-239.

⁵⁰ I am drawing upon Bruno Latour's description of how scientific rhetoric works. See Latour, Bruno. 1987. *Science in action*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

An actor-network theory approach would allow one to follow the interactions between the varied human actors within otaku networks, and to analyze the complex and intense relationships between the otaku and the non-human artifacts that are their objects of desire. Such an analysis could provide insights both to those engaging in the cultural studies of otaku, and those in science studies interested in examples of science being done outside the “citadel”. Just as the institutional aspect of science gives it authority, the community structures of otaku allow their subculture to engender large scale (and possibly resistant) changes that would be impossible for isolated individuals.

Like scientists, otaku are often in search of factual truths, but otaku are concerned with other forms of information as well. Some information that otaku deal with is judged valuable due to its accuracy, but other information might be considered valuable due its novelty alone. An otaku who produces a new work of art now has information that is valuable *independent of truth or falsity*, as art is not generally associated with objective truth. It would be a mistake, however, to overemphasize that science is only concerned with accuracy and not information in a broader sense. Science studies has long acknowledged that while scientists may seek the truth of something, the choices they make regarding which objects of study they find interesting cannot be decided based on determinations of truth/falsity alone, but depend more on considerations of such things as novelty, “where the funding is”, aesthetics, etc. In the end, the parallels between scientific culture and otaku culture may turn out to be more significant than the differences.

Where to next?

Referring to the otaku ethic, I should reiterate that I am defining otaku prior to describing them. While I have chosen to emphasize certain attributes over others in my definition, my choices were not wholly random either, as I have had experience observing these cultures from within prior to my officially conducting research for this paper. These people (according to the criteria I have chosen) actually exist and can be studied. The naming is not arbitrary either; the people described by my otaku ethic are often called and/or call themselves “otaku”.

However, the otaku ethic will most likely *not* apply to many youth in Japan (and elsewhere) who are called or call themselves “otaku”, and that is okay. Ultimately, I am not seeking to contest other people’s claims of what makes an “authentic otaku”. I might argue, however, that the meaning of the word is a heavily contested domain (even within “otaku” communities), and that otaku “authenticity” could not exist prior to people’s arbitrary definitions of “otaku”.

I proudly offer my own definition, not in hopes that it will trump all other definitions of “otaku” and become widely adopted by youth cultures everywhere, but for the sake of being able to pinpoint for study a specific group of youth who are engaging in specific activities with a specific set of attitudes, and also to respectfully allow/encourage them to continue using the “otaku” moniker should they choose to do so. For now, the meaning of “otaku” is up for grabs. If the situation changes, however, I have confidence that the subculture I am describing will continue to exist, even if the word “otaku” is lost to them forever.

The fanciful ponderings of American observers of otaku subculture have uncovered tremendous possibility, and otaku communities have been born in America as a result, even if they are mirroring a potentially non-existent referent (as befitting a subculture with a predilection towards hyperreality over realism, which I will address in future work). In analyzing interpretations of Japanese culture, whether or not those interpretations are totally accurate, we've uncovered *and helped create* a subcultural strategy that is not implicitly Japanese nor even American, but global in its application, as the conditions that create otaku are not restricted to Japan and America.

Otaku subcultures, as we have conceptualized them from thinking about Japan, should be able to exist anywhere. We can and should find these people in America (and elsewhere) and then study them to see what we can learn about technoculture, youth, consumption, and resistance.

This work has been an attempt to create a framework of analysis by which otaku can be studied ethnographically from a science and technology studies perspective, while acknowledging and drawing upon previous frameworks of understanding otaku (as revealed through the critical discourse analysis). Future directions of study will involve finding a suitable otaku population to study, and then planning and engaging in

ethnographic fieldwork (both in person and using internet research methods) in hopes of creating a thick description of the subculture at work. Some questions to be addressed by the ethnographic research might include:

1. As a strategy of information and identity management, appropriation, and resistance, how successful is otaku-ism from the perspective of the otaku themselves?
2. How reflexive are the otaku regarding the nature of their strategies in comparison to other strategies?
3. Are the otaku only a youth culture? Are the strategies employed only useful for a specific age range? Do otaku “burn out” after awhile?
4. While otaku subcultures tend to include mostly men, what is the role of women in such cultures?
5. In what other ways do otaku subcultures manifest resistance against dominant ideologies, such as those regarding realism, dogmatic authority, and sexual norms⁵¹?

I hope to carry out this work as part of my long term studies, and my understanding of the subject matter would probably benefit from any number of methodological and theoretical approaches I hope to discover along the way and as other researchers join in. There is no telling exactly where this will go, but otaku studies offer numerous directions that look promising. Although a community of connected otaku scholars does not yet exist, I hope that we will eventually form one, such that it will be possible for us to at least try our hand at being otaku of otaku.

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⁵¹ For an analogous study of the sexual norms within the free-software/hacker community, see: Newtitz, Annalee. 2000. “If code is free, why not me”.
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