

Mutual
Images

ISSUE 1

SUMMER 2016

BETWEEN TEXTS AND IMAGES:
MUTUAL IMAGES OF JAPAN AND EUROPE

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ISSUE 1 – SUMMER 2016

MUTUAL IMAGES

A TRANSCULTURAL RESEARCH JOURNAL

FOUNDED BY

AUORE YAMAGATA-MONTOYA, MAXIME DANESIN & MARCO PELLITTERI

BETWEEN TEXTS AND IMAGES:
MUTUAL IMAGES OF JAPAN AND EUROPE

EDITED BY
MARCO PELLITTERI

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MUTUAL IMAGES RESEARCH ASSOCIATION

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A TRANSCULTURAL RESEARCH JOURNAL

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Mutual Images is registered under the ISSN 2496-1868. This issue's Digital Object Identifier is: [HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.32926/1](https://doi.org/10.32926/1).

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Making friends the Japanese way: Exploring *yaoi* manga fans' online practices

Simon TURNER | Chulalongkorn University, Thailand

DOI: 10.32926/2016.1.TUR.MAKIN

Abstract

Yaoi fans are unified by a common interest in Japan as a country and its culture. This paper suggests that yaoi acts as an available cultural model representing Japaneseness. By attending to yaoi manga fan activities this paper contributes to the relatively new debate regarding the relationships and activities of yaoi fans rather than an exclusive reader-text approach. Gender and sexuality have been a major focus of yaoi manga research but online discussions do not always focus on fans' identifications with sexuality, either the characters' or their own. This paper proposes that Japanese culture is a key element to yaoi fans' community participation. The fans' understanding and interpretation of Japan is presented in a five stage process. Japan and Japanese culture have come into existence through the fans' interpretations and discussions of yaoi manga content as well as wider Japanese culture. As a result, fans filter what they know and trust through stereotypes, their own beliefs, and the information given by others. The fandom's interpretation is on the whole distinct from a reading of Japan as a complex identity or place without any single authentic narrative. Rather Japan is found in a process of interaction and explanation amongst fans. By showing how Japan and Japaneseness can be articulated and understood online this work provides an alternative to the binaries of particularism and universalism when considering broader issues such as community in fandom studies. It demonstrates that there can be a theoretical model situated between the real Japan and the virtual thus successfully transgressing essentialism.

KEYWORDS

Yaoi; Manga; Online fandom; Community; Performativity; Affect; Japaneseness.

Date of submission: 1 June 2015

Date of acceptance: 22 July 2016

Date of publication: 30 August 2016

In recent years *yaoi* studies are increasing both within Japan (Nagaike 2003; Suzuki 2013) and outside of Japan (Levi, McHarry, and Pagliassotti 2010; McHarry 2003; McLelland 2001, 2005, McLelland, Nagaike, Sukanuma, and Welker 2015). In this article I highlight a hitherto neglected activity of the *yaoi* fans that instigated a current aspect of my research whilst a doctoral student. Examinations of 'what' *yaoi* fans do are often overshadowed by those focusing on 'who' fans are, particularly

in terms of their gender and sexuality. This focus is a result of the nature of *yaoi* manga as a genre of Japanese manga that feature male homoerotic relationships. It is widely commented (McHarry 2003; McLelland 2006; Mizoguchi 2008; Nagaike 2003; Suzuki 1998) that this genre is created by heterosexual females for a heterosexual female audience and as such has raised many questions seeking to understand why heterosexual women would consume texts about homosexual men. In this essay I offer an extra layer of analysis by presenting a brief insight into another aspect of the fandom. In particular, I wish to highlight a part of the international *yaoi* manga fandom that engages with 'Japanese' culture and process of learning about it. Today *yaoi* manga is consumed around the world with fan communities both online and offline emerging in a wide range of different countries. This belongs to a new avenue of *yaoi* research which was recently opened up by key *yaoi* studies scholars Nagaike Kazumi and Aoyama Tomoko in their chapter as part of the edited book *Boys Love Manga and Beyond* (2015).

My own research has focused on an international fan community online, *AarinFantasy*, the largest online English language fan site (<http://aarinfantasy.com>). This has been a fascinating part of my research as it has involved examining the fans' process of constructing their knowledge of Japan. Often this relies on fans' personal contacts and experiences, as well as one another in a collaborative fan community. I intend for this essay to act as an investigatory piece highlighting the fans' experience of Japanese culture through community participation. By paying attention to how much fans see *yaoi* manga as a Japanese text I wish to bring fan experiences to the forefront of analysis. It is by no

means a conclusive piece and is a topic I continue to work on in relation to transcultural flows of East Asian popular culture throughout the world. However, it does offer new potential gateways into future *yaoi* manga research.

What Is Yaoi?

In Japan, the market for manga is highly compartmentalized with different genres segregated by age and sex (Schodt 2014). *Shōjo* [girls'] manga tends to focus on romance and is targeted at young girls, *shōnen* [boys'] manga, on the other hand, details adventure and action targeted at young boys. *Seinen* [adult] manga caters for a mature market and its storylines are more serious, they might include themes of office politics or the average working life of adult men and women. *Yaoi* has been considered part of the *shōjo* genre due to the target audience being young women. The first *shōjo* manga with a narrative that was specifically written with a female audience in mind is believed to be *Princess Knight* published in 1953 by Osamu Tezuka (Welker 2014). The narrative surrounds a cross-dressing princess who, as the only child of the king and queen, must present herself as the prince; she hides her sex from others because, as a female, she cannot inherit the throne. In the end, she marries a 'real' prince and "reclaims her femininity" as her husband becomes the King (Schodt and Tezuka 1983, pp.95-6). It was men who wrote early *shōjo* manga such as *Princess Knight*, but the entrance of female manga artists in the 1960-70s led to changes in themes and characters (Prough 2011). Female artists such as Hagio Moto and Takemiya Keiko fundamentally changed *shōjo* manga by introducing *shōnen-ai* known in English as Boys' Love (abbreviated 'BL')

(McLelland, Nagaike, Suganuma, and Welker 2015). Boys' Love manga may range from romantic to sexually explicit and, like other manga genres, is sold openly and widely in Japan.

The term *Yaoi* is an acronym stands for *Yama nashi*, *ochi nashi*, *imi nashi* [no climax, no end, no meaning] (Galbraith 2011). According to John Ingulsrud and Kate Allen (2009) in their book *Reading Japan Cool*, the term was used as a euphemism to distinguish it from more complex narratives found in other genres. It is difficult to give a comprehensive description of *yaoi* manga, such as the types of stories that are popular. However, the focus of the relationship is almost exclusively on that between two male youths who are often referred to as *bishōnen* [beautiful boys]. The relationship is depicted via one of the genres most well-known tropes, that of the *seme* and *uke* relationship. The *seme* ('attacker') is the dominant insertive partner in the relationship whilst the *uke* ('receiver') is, as the title would suggest, the passive receptive partner. These terms have their roots in martial arts and have, according to Mark McLelland, who examines the appeal of *yaoi* manga both within and without Japan (2006), often been applied to intimate relationships in Japan.

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that *yaoi* is a rich area of study which goes far beyond issues of gender and sexuality. The genre is now a vast media enterprise with original anime and manga surrounded by their supplementary products. *Yaoi* has its own fan conventions that take place worldwide and is thus part of Japanese culture that should not be relegated to the shadows as simply 'porn for girls' (Suzuki 1998).

Yaoi is now consumed on a massive scale, not only by female but also male fans. Hence, questions on female gender and sexuality concerning *yaoi*, whilst still relevant, are no longer the only questions to be asked. By not examining what *yaoi* fans do in an online community we risk cutting off research from understanding the values and meanings that *yaoi* fans create and share in their fandom. If studies on *yaoi* fandom solely continue with the dominant gendered and sexual perspectives, then we block further understanding of how fans engage with one another. This paper is one of only few (Galbraith 2011, 2015) that utilizes fan voices in its approach and therefore acts as an important medium for fans to give their views and opinions on their activities.

I describe a process of the fans learning about Japan and Japanese culture in *AarinFantasy*. First, the examples in this paper describe a specific process in which individuals become fans of *yaoi* then go on to learn about Japan. Their arising interest in Japan is followed by fans exchanging information. Finally, fans judge the accuracy of information. I suggest that fans do not learn a static or objective sense of Japanese identity but are part of an interactional process, ultimately cementing friendship and community. Indeed, by the end of the process, it appears that learning about an 'authentic' Japan is secondary to a goal of fan interaction and community building.

Data Collection

I conducted my research in the before mentioned online *yaoi* fan community, *AarinFantasy*ⁱ. It is the largest English language *yaoi* fan community online and was founded in November 2004. In the first years

of its existence it supported no community features but has since developed them, which has fostered frequent communication between the fans. The creator of the site, Aarin, is a 30-year-old Malaysian female and the name of the site is a combination of the founder's name and the word 'fantasy', taken from her favourite game series title *Final Fantasy*.

I contacted participants by posting four introductory threads in the 'Community Café'ⁱⁱ, a discussion board of the site's forum, which described who I was, what I was doing, and my hope to find participants for the study. I collected 79 individual responses of which 25 were willing to conduct in-depth semi-structured interviews with me. The participant responses included in this paper are taken from interviews I conducted textually online via the online messaging service Skype. All fan names reported in this study are the fans' usernames on *AarinFantasy*. I have gained permission to use their usernames and collected information from publicly accessible threads on the website. It is important to notice in this context that simply because online communication is sometimes readily available for the public to access, this does not mean that all members of such online communities see their communication as public. In their own work on conducting ethnographic research, particularly interviews, Nalita James and Hugh Busher (2009) advocate a position of full disclosure and stress how important it is that participants know when and what data will be stored and disseminated, and how their identities will be protected if they wish them to be. Therefore, before using the data in this paper I have contacted the original poster and requested permission to use their

comments in this paper, if permission was refused or if the poster did not reply to my request, data has not been used.

Finally, before I participated officially as a researcher on the website, I contacted the administrator of the group and explained my position and intentions of research in order to gain approval. I then asked if they would take the time to write a short explanatory posting introducing me to the users of the websites. Gaining access through these 'gatekeepers' has been identified as one of the best ways to facilitate ethical access and trusted membership on the sites (López-Rocha, 2010: 295). Also, by making my intentions clear to both administrators and users through forum postings, my method of access to the participants is clear and those who wish to take part in my study will be able to do so in an informed way.

The *AarinFantasy* forum is split into eight different areas: (i) 'Important Updates and News', (ii) 'AF files and Forum Support Center', (iii) 'General', (iv) 'AF Miscellaneous', (v) 'Yaoi Mania', (vi) 'Exhibition Hall', (vii) 'Download Central' (Yaoi/BL), and (viii) 'General Download Central' (Non Yaoi/BL). The existence of these different boards, particularly the 'General', 'AF Miscellaneous', 'Exhibition Hall', and 'General Download Central' demonstrate that *AarinFantasy* is a place where any types of discussions or activities may take place and that these discussions do not necessarily need to be related to *yaoi* manga. This chapter focusses on the 'General' section of the site within which there is a variety of sub-threads. One of these is the 'Fans' Non-Yaoi/BL Interest' which is further divided into: 'General Anime', 'Manga', 'Music

Chat', 'General Drama and Movie', 'General Games', and 'Asian Culture' which is the sub-board that is the focus of this chapter.

Processes of Learning about Japan in *AarinFantasy*

Learning more about *yaoi* and Japan is a recurrent theme that emerged during my time spent on *AarinFantasy* and the fans engage with Japan and Japanese in a variety of ways. As a result, *AarinFantasy* becomes much more than a simple means for fans to find, and discuss *yaoi* manga, but becomes a site for mediated discussions of Japanese culture that extend beyond a simple interest in *yaoi* manga. Exactly how fans learn more about Japan appears to be a straight forward process of fans asking a question or opening a topic of discussion in a new thread in the forum board thread 'Asian Culture'ⁱⁱⁱ and then proceeding to communicate with other members of the site.

Some fans I interviewed had an interest in Japanese culture that existed before their *yaoi* fandom developed. For example, in a sub-thread of the 'Asian Culture' board titled 'Been to Japan?', the fan Gloomy Gloo states she is interested in various facets of Japanese culture including architecture:

"I've always been interested in Japan...even the architecture...and one day I stumbled upon *yaoi*" (Gloomy Gloo)

For other fans, an interest in Japanese culture is born out of *yaoi* rather than being a precursor to it. This raises the question, how do fans who do not have a prior affiliation to Japan come to have an interest in *yaoi*? In some cases, it is their friends and family whilst for others it was their friends:

“If I remember well, it was my siblings that introduced me to yaoi” (Solene)

“I thank my friend for the rough introduction. He always reminds me of the first yaoi every time we go out for coffee” (Namsoon)

For these fans their interest in *yaoi* did not occur from a prior interest in Japanese culture but rather through friends and family. Overall, there appears to be two avenues into *yaoi* fandom for these fans. One is via an interest in Japanese culture. They search for more information about their interests and through sites such as Google or YouTube and their fandom starts. Others are introduced to it by friends and family, highlighting the social aspect of *yaoi* fandom that I will further develop in the subsequent parts of the essay. However, these comments led me to question why fans who take either route make a connection between *yaoi* and Japan or Japanese culture at all. Simply, what is the connection between *yaoi* manga and Japanese culture? It may seem natural that those fans with a prior interest in Japanese culture make a connection to *yaoi* manga but before making generalisations, I would like to pay more attention to how fans establish and maintain the connection.

From my discussions with fans on the sites I wish to introduce three connections: definition, content and art style. Fans often cite that *yaoi* is Japanese by the very definition of the term. For example, some argue that the genre is obviously Japanese because of its origins and that the artists are Japanese:

“Most of [*yaoi manga*] are by artists who live in Japan who write about...Japan” (Gloomy Gloom)

Connected with this is that other fans reference the fact that the term *yaoi* is an acronym based on a Japanese phrase:

“[I]n order to be called yaoi, a story, picture or whatever needs to be influenced from where the word yaoi comes from, aka, Japan” (Solene)

Fans also compare *yaoi* texts from Japan to *yaoi* texts that are produced in different countries by non-Japanese artists. These are often known as Original English Language (OEL) sometimes known as ‘GloBL, a play on the words ‘global’ and ‘BL’, made popular amongst fans by Tina Anderson on her blog *Gus, Guys, and Yaoi*^{iv}. Fans emphasise the transnational reach of *yaoi* manga, should not be considered *yaoi* or even manga but Western comics that copied *yaoi* manga:

“These works [OEL *manga*] are fake yaoi, as in not really yaoi at all. The term yaoi refers to Japanese anime and Japanese *manga*. Anything with the ‘yaoi’ description must first be Japanese in origin” (Adjani)

“If it has nothing to do with yaoi then why use the title?” (LadyPhantomHive)

Fans also mention that the printed presentation of *yaoi* makes an explicit connection to Japanese culture. For the fans, a major aspect of this Japanese style is the reading direction. Some feel strongly about keeping the original reading direction:

“Right to left is more natural for *manga*. I think left to right is more good [sic] for OEL *manga* and *manwha* [Korean *manga*] for example” (CactusMaid)

“The thought of flipped art makes me want to die. It should always be right to left” (Sleeplesstown)

Fans have such strong opinions on keeping the original reading direction that attempts to change it can and has been an issue for some manga publishers. Indeed, an American distributor and licensor of anime and manga, TokyoPop originally ‘flipped’ Japanese manga to read left to right for its English-speaking customers. However, sales immediately dropped and fans complained until the original right to left

reading direction was reinstated at which point sales began to increase, albeit slowly (Goldberg 2010).

For other fans, *yaoi* is Japanese because of what they can see. In particular, the members of *AarinFantasy* talk about the cultural content of *yaoi* such as the setting. For example, in the thread ‘Been to Japan’ fans discussed whether or not manga is obviously set in Japan^v:

“[T]hey might start with a scene where Japan is everywhere such as the signs, or the schools. They’re obviously growing up in Japan” (Pweedie)

“I think the characters are Japanese because they have Japanese names and their daily customs” (Lokeira1).

The question that must be asked is: how, and why, do fans learn, and believe, that what they read in *yaoi* manga is Japanese based on architecture and customs as shown in the aforementioned thread? By citing narrative content, art style, or definitions fans appear to establish their own subjective definition of Japan and Japanese culture. Therefore, it is important to draw attention to the reasons how fans establish what they know to be Japanese. Fans wish to know more about Japan and to learn about *yaoi* manga, to check the validity of what they read, and to learn about wider Japanese culture extern to *yaoi*. Indeed, learning about *yaoi* and Japan is a recurrent theme that came up in interviews but how the fans come to understand Japan is a more complex process.

Firstly, in the ‘Been to Japan?’ thread on *AarinFantasy*, fans often look to validate narratives and scenes in *yaoi* manga that they read:

“I have seen in some series that vending machines are everywhere in japan [sic]...is there any validity to this?” (Ziv)

“Why is there so many *yaoi manga* with high school settings? Also in high-school *yaoi*, I often see stuff going on at the roof-top, is this just the mangaka’s attempt to advance the characters’ interaction, or do they have a lot of rooftops in Japan’s high-schools?” (Trifoilum)

“I’m here to ask for your input on Yakuza culture whatever else you want to add to it. Anything you could probably find in Wikipedia, I know them as well...unless you have more to add?” (Applette)

As fans ask whether or not something seen in *yaoi* holds true in Japan, many ask why *yaoi* employs certain techniques or common tropes. They want to know if something that they read holds true, suggesting a motivation to know about Japanese culture on a general level that is not related to any *yaoi* series in particular. Such motivation indicates the types of things that fans are looking for in their information seeking pursuits and indicate that they do have an interest in Japanese culture. They will often come across something that they have seen in a *yaoi* series and then question whether or not something like this actually happens.

This raises a question of expertise: who has control over validations and what do fans’ do once they receive an answer? Is it accepted at face value, or must it be further validated? When a fan asks a question on *AarinFantasy* they invariably get an answer from other fans. Rather than focusing on individual answers to individual questions I would like to put emphasis on the sources. The sources of information that I will explore in this section are academic sources (e.g. classes), citations of personal experiences, and referrals to manga and anime as sources of information. The most common examples of formal educational sources are references to learning Japanese in an educational institution such as high school or university (including teachers). In an interview with the fan Shattered, he discusses what they learn from schools and university courses:

“After taking 2 semesters of Japanese in college, we learned A LOT about how very formal and full of rules Japan is...I was totally not forced to read 3 academic articles on it this year ;)” (Shattered)

By referring to these sources of information Shattered indicates that formal institutions or scholarly works will give, what he believes to be, correct information about Japan. Another instances where this occurs is when fans mention education professionals who teach them:

“Our teacher... is also a fan of yaoi...[she] explained in our classes...various kinds of *hentai* ...from normal *hentai*'s laws ...to yaoi” (KarumA)

By creating this sense of connection between information provider and fan, KarumA indicates a belief on the fans' part that others in the community can be trusted. When fans discuss Japanese culture, and when they want to give their opinion, they will at times use personal experiences. Some members of *AarinFantasy* have visited Japan themselves as tourists, foreign exchange students, or because their family moved there. Often, fans would cite this experience to support their opinions:

“I noticed several "template A1 school buildings" just on the way from home to Tōkyō...On the other hand, schools that don't fit the template won't be identified as such by me, so I'm fairly sure your average fan will only notice the school architecture of *yaoi manga* fame, thus reinforcing the "all schools look the same" idea” (Ato)

What I find most interesting about this statement is that because this fan recognizes himself as not very knowledgeable about Japanese schools. Hence the only buildings he will identify as such will be those that look similar to the ones depicted in *yaoi*. The fan Ato acknowledges his own narrow understanding of an aspect of Japanese culture which, potentially, reveals an awareness that some cultural aspects cannot be

so readily reduced to what can be seen in *yaoi*. Nonetheless, a second common fan experience is related to fans knowing or having contact with Japanese people, suggesting a reliance on Japan as an authenticating source. Knowing a Japanese person gives a sense of authority to their posts. In one example in the ‘Been to Japan?’ thread a fan had asked about Japanese houses central heating. The reply to this was:

“Speaking generally, yes. During the summer they don’t tend to stay very cool either, I spent a few weeks with my uncle in Tōkyō...and in the summer it becomes ungodly hot. My aunt is Japanese, and believes in many of the Japanese housewife superstitions such as: Air-conditioning is bad for you. She would leave the air conditioning off all day in more than 100-degree heat and only turn it on when my uncle or I got home” (Mit7059)

Mit7059 includes information about Japan’s weather and one of the “many...Japanese housewife superstitions” about air-conditioning and adds valuable cultural information about Japan to support his answer. As a result, Mit7059 appears to have legitimized his knowledge of Japan through reliance on his experiences of living in Japan. This suggests that knowledge regarding Japan and Japanese culture does not need to come from Japanese nationals themselves, but can also be acquired from non-Japanese fans who have spent time in Japan.

The last information source fans use is *yaoi* manga itself. Fans will guide others to a particular *yaoi* series to find out further information. For example, in the thread ‘Japanese Festivals’^{vi} one fan was looking for manga that feature traditional Japanese festivals and in response, the fan Konakaga suggested that they look to a specific type of manga:

“I’d say you should just look into some Slice of Life series that take place in japan [sic] and interest you somewhat as it’s almost inevitable for them to

feature some Japanese holiday and/or festive sooner or later because the authors are Japanese themselves” (Konakaga)

In this situation Konakaga refers to what fans call ‘slice of life’ manga which focuses heavily on everyday experiences as opposed to narratives that could be considered unrealistic. This subgenre of *yaoi* manga is presented as an adequate source of information on Japanese culture that fans may use for their own information pursuits or use to inform others based on a belief that this subgenre represents a more accurate representation of daily life in Japan and therefore is likely to be more believable.

The matter of credibility is in fact important and it is at this point that I would like to consider information verification and how fans assess the validity of the information they receive. Do fans question what others tell them in the community or do they trust their fellow members of the fan community? Not all fans have been to Japan nor have they all had contact with Japanese people or experiences of learning about Japan in universities or schools and so their judgments are sometimes based solely on information provided by others. Therefore, when receiving information from other fans in the discussions boards and posts, fans often have to make a judgment on how they are going to trust that other user.

On *AarinFantasy*, there is a system called the *Aarin Buddy System*. In this system fans are paired together: a new inexperienced member introduced to a more experienced member of the site. In this relationship the more experienced member is referred to as the *senpai* whilst the inexperienced member is called the *kōhai*. This is based on Japanese the Japanese words for senior/superior/elder (*senpai*) and

junior, subordinate (*kōhai*). Two fans involved in my study are in one such *senpai-kōhai* relationship, they are Jaiden and Gloomy Gloom. Jaiden is the *kōhai* and Gloomy Gloom is the *senpai*. Coincidentally, Gloomy Gloom was the creator and instigator of this particular system on the site. Speaking of their relationship Gloomy Gloom mentions:

“[I] have no trouble taking care of new members and questions they have about thing. I’m just one of the members that...others turn to when they have questions” (Gloomy Gloom)

Jaiden mentions:

“I can ask Gloomy about anything I don’t understand.... I really learnt a lot from her and I trust her completely” (Jaiden)

The existence of this ‘buddy’ system suggests the possibility that fans, at times, trust other fans regardless of potential inaccuracies in information. This also suggests a system of hierarchy where the *senpai* controls meaning resulting in a group of members, who have been on the site longer, acting as ‘gatekeepers’ to knowledge and directing any understanding of Japan and Japanese culture. There are also instances where fans judge authenticity of *yaoi* using the manga itself. In some instances, the extent to which *yaoi* is adapted contributes to how fans see it as an accurate source. Fans mention that they prefer texts that are as close to the Japanese original as possible or instances when manga is translated into other languages:

“Sometimes I have the urge to kill the publishers when the *manga* is wrongly translated” (Jiyutenshi)

“Often bad translation loses the cultural meanings of most of the jokes... Japanese have a very unique way of expressing themselves and I think it’s better expressed in scanlations instead of official translations” (Jaiden)

For fans, the adapted texts no longer contain the original Japanese culture that they desire. This observation critically questions authenticity and who controls it. Fans prefer *manga* that have been translated by other fans often known as a 'scanlation'. This term combines the words 'scan' and 'translate'. It is a reference to the process of fans scanning original manga and using computer software to digitally remove original Japanese text and replacing it with a target language. This trust into other fans, over external companies, is shared by others who believe the stories are "overblown". Indeed, when fans look towards *yaoi* manga for authenticity or accuracy they have a choice in the type of manga they read, either fan produced or officially licensed versions. It is often the case that fans opt for fan, rather than commercial, translations because they believe they are more authentic and trustworthy at explaining Japanese culture. However, another clear possibility of this preference for scanlations of commercially licensed material is that former can be accessed for free online whereas the latter must be purchased. In discussing the popularity of fan produced texts, the ease and relative lack of cost of the materials must be considered. On the other hand, some fans express a sense of caution regarding how much Japanese culture they could understand from manga. Sometimes they discuss objective learning. For example, Milwaen explained to me the benefits and limitations of *yaoi* in terms of learning about Japanese politeness:

"While *yaoi* doesn't exactly explain all, it does offer the most important thing of all about Japanese culture, which is the way in which people act every day. All *manga* features some things about which make it wackier than real life. If you can take the craziest stuff with a grain of salt you can learn a lot. For instance, reading *yaoi* gives you a general idea of just how polite Japanese people can really be" (Milwaen)

Milwaen is apprehensive in developing a complex understanding of Japanese culture but she does believe some aspects are likely to be true, such as Japanese daily customs. During my interview with Milwaen, we discussed whether or not the information or citations of Japaneseness she found online were authentic:

I think everybody decides it though his/her own "filters". I mean, for example, let's take our little *yaoi manga* community. We accept authentic what we judge that belongs to our vision...it'd be "my Japanese culture" (Milwaen)

Milwaen touches upon two important areas. Firstly, she mentions that information about Japan are part of the community's activities, she further explains that the users of *AarinFantasy* "interpret and acquire everything through [their] own lenses made of [their] own basic community" and that it would be "[her] Japanese culture". She disassociates this Japanese culture with that of a "real Japanese person" and she isn't sure what a Japanese person would think but crucially this is not important as it is "[her] Japanese culture". It is not to be compared to Japan for validation. It is something that she, as well as other fans, has interpreted for the community's benefit. This is also picked up by Alex Dekibo:

"I usually go into suspended disbelief mode because it's probably not all true but that shouldn't be bad because it's fun for us, you know?" (Alex Dekibo)

Therefore, I suggest that it is better to think of their experiences and understanding as not necessarily authentic, but also, to not let this bear down on their *yaoi* fan community experience as it is not the most important aspect. This is expressed clearly in Sapir Be's comment below:

“I am aware of all the inaccuracies and idealizations that *yaoi manga* has, but it is perhaps the idealizations that allow me to like *yaoi* and the community to begin with” (Sapir Be)

For fans the community is more important than the accuracy of the representations of Japan. I would encourage fans to remain engaged with *yaoi* manga and the community despite any inaccuracies. Trusting other fans and maintaining objectivity relate to the fan’s relationship with both the *yaoi* manga and one another. There are potentially limitless fan interpretations but part of the process of being a fan is negotiating these interpretations with others, thus showing preference for the community over accuracy.

Conclusion

There is a process through which fans learn about Japan and this is what I have attempted to plot out, albeit briefly, in this essay. Fans first enter the fandom either through a prior interest in Japanese culture or through friends and family. They make a link between *yaoi* and Japanese culture due to their interest in Japan and desire to learn about it. Fans express the things they want to learn and other fans answer citing their experiences. Finally, in this process of learning about Japan fans judge the accuracy of their information. However, potential inaccuracy does not deter the fans from their community. It emerges that community for the fans may be more important than accuracy. I have been able to discover the fans’ interest in Japan and the process of how fans extract Japan and Japanese culture from the texts. Community participation is a major part of the fans’ activities in this online fan site and it is evident that the fans’ consumption of *yaoi* manga does not occur in isolation. Indeed, the fans

involve themselves deeply in communication with one another and draw on each other's knowledge to enhance their *yaoi* fan activities.

Overall, by investigating the aspects that fans like about *yaoi* and what they see when they read *yaoi* in terms of Japan and Japanese culture and paying particular attention to the fan voices, we are now implicated to explore the wider issue of what fans do when they are online in their community in terms of interaction amongst fans, their relationships, and the corresponding fans' interpretations of these relations.

This essay is a condensed, and cursory, glance at an alternative avenue for future *yaoi* research. Gender and sexuality have naturally comprised the primary feature of *yaoi* manga research which is something I also consider largely in my own examinations. However, I am acutely aware that this is not the only aspect of *yaoi* fandom that can be examined. In this essay I have presented a preliminary examination into the transcultural consumption of *yaoi* manga abroad because the issue of Japan and Japanese culture is, in many instances, a part of the fans' attraction to the genre and it is important that we not lose focus of this. In thinking about meaning making, Stuart Hall (1997) refers to the media institutions and those who control them. While he does not refer to fandom, perhaps we can take this into this field and consider how encoding and (re)decoding (Gray 2006) can be applied to fan communities and how meaning also implicates power and hierarchies within them. Therefore, future research in *yaoi* fan communities could, and perhaps should, ask questions regarding the preferred way of reading texts that may be policed within and across communities. For

example, do interpretations differ amongst age, sex, race, or class variables? Do they differ amongst fan types such as length of membership, posting activity, and so on? Therefore, I believe that *yaoi* studies can benefit from the application of wider theories and studies of fandom and I hope this essay can act as inspiration for such future studies.

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ENDNOTES

- ⁱ <http://aarinfantasy.com/forum/> [Last Accessed 6th July 2016]
- ⁱⁱ <http://aarinfantasy.com/forum/f18/> [Last Accessed 6th July 2016]
- ⁱⁱⁱ <http://aarinfantasy.com/forum/f305/> [Last Accessed 6th July 2016]
- ^{iv} <http://web.archive.org/web/20120425235639/http://ggymeta.wordpress.com/2007/09/17/global-previews-and-other-stuff/> [Last Accessed 6th July 2016]
- ^v <http://aarinfantasy.com/forum/f305/t138760-been-to-japan.html> [Last Accessed 6th July 2016]
- ^{vi} <http://aarinfantasy.com/forum/f305/t138849-japanese-festivals.html> [Last Accessed 6th July 2016]

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