

Japanese Anime Fandoms in the UAE: An Exploratory Study on Media

Accessibility, Habits and Cultural Perceptions

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Abstract: The satellite TV revolution in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in the early 1990s precipitated the proliferation of foreign media broadcasts. Japanese anime dubbed into Arabic became the most-watched content in Emirati households, a trend that continues to date because the Japanese entertainment and digital media industry offers youngsters easy access to and diverse options for anime. This paper provides an overview and analysis of the growing popularity of anime fandoms in the UAE to ascertain the level of commitment, involvement and the moral perceptions of Emirati fans vis-à-vis Japanese pop culture. A focus group discussion was conducted in a leading UAE university among the *otaku* or aficionados of Japanese anime (males and females). The participant responses offered comprehensive insights into the fandom trends of the region and articulated interesting opinions on Japanese pop culture and digital media accessibility. Notably, the findings of this study suggested that the enthusiasm of this fan following is often obstructed rather than celebrated and thus cannot achieve its potential. Therefore, the study finally contemplates how Emirati *otaku* and their practices may be better supported in UAE.

Keywords: anime, manga, *otaku*, fandom, Emirati culture.

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Introduction

In 2019, the anime festival Game-Con and the Middle East Film and Comic Con (MEFCC) attracted immense attention from Dubai residents. Over 50,000 youngsters attended and cosplayed (costume roleplayed) at the three-day pop culture extravaganza¹. The event represented an explosion of Eastern and Western pop fusion; however, Emirati youngsters evinced greater interest in Japanese cultural productions².

Comic-Cons and anime festivals are cultural exhibitions for aficionados: they bring together fans, cosplayers, actors, content producers, merchandisers, and artists in stimulating settings. They also offer the Emirati a platform to showcase their creativity and talents by selling their own fan art and manga as merchandise³.

There is a current escalation in Emirati fandoms relating to anime and manga⁴. The previous generations of Emiratis were more fascinated by Japanese traditions (e.g., language, lifestyle, morals and values, education system) and manufactured goods (e.g., beauty, electronics, automobiles). Conversely, young Emiratis are now more drawn to Japanese pop culture⁵. Globalization has also allowed young enthusiasts to venture into digital media in larger numbers, enabled the creation of online groups, and generated unprecedented public exposure to clubs, events, platforms, and fan communities⁶.

Literature Review

The global appeal of cosplay, anime, and manga constitutes an important aspect of Japanese pop culture⁷. 'Manga' refers to Japanese comics serialized in magazines or books. 'Anime' is the Japanese word for animation, and the term is attributed to Japanese-style animated films and television shows adapted from popular manga series. The Japanese term *otaku* refers to fans devoted to manga, anime, and video games⁸. *Otaku* are often characterized as introverted personalities displaying an obsessive and

extreme affiliation to the objects of their attention⁹. Fandom denotes a subculture typified by a feeling of empathy and camaraderie among fans who share a common passion¹⁰ and express it in diverse ways, such as by watching anime, translating or reading manga, creating artwork, networking with fans, and fan dubbing. Cosplay is another means of expressing devotion: fans dress up as fictional characters from anime or manga and join masquerades and act and pose for photographs¹¹. In terms of demography, anime fans tend to comprise of youths¹².

The *otaku* subculture spawned in Japan in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It reached countries such as South Korea, China, Russia and Great Britain, among others, in a very short period, inciting general interest in ordinary people and experts who have since tried to illustrate this phenomenon in multiple ways. Additionally, researchers have highlighted that scattered *otaku* subcultures have grown in different directions, each developing its own characteristics¹³. For instance, Newitz scrutinized the *otaku* in the USA and affirmed that American *otaku* understand and enjoy Japanese pop culture because of its extensive referential connection with the western world. Consequently, Americans can reflect on their own culture as they consume manga and anime, without feeling responsible towards relating to the culture that created the content¹⁴.

The so-called *otaku* subculture has often been socially stigmatized because of its behavioural patterns¹⁵. Approximately two decades ago Jenson's observation on fandoms unveiled social hypocrisy that led him to reconsider the role of fandoms within society. Fandoms were initially described as people attracted to the ordinary, popular, cheap and easily attainable entertainment options, and the 'superior' social classes regarded them with disdain. Subsequently, fandoms were re-conceptualized as emergent forces of self-sustained communities that represented sources of joy and

pleasure to their members¹⁶. Even though the negative connotations of *otaku* have now considerably diminished¹⁷, the culture of fandoms is still regarded as a niche, layered and polycentric phenomenon¹⁸ symbolizing social fragmentation and a resistance to obeying traditional social codes¹⁹. In congruence with this theory, a recent study revealed that Portuguese youth were turning into anime fans primarily for para-social and escapist reasons rather than socio-informational or pastime-related motives²⁰. Another investigation on Italian *otaku* has revealed that on the internet diverse fan groups tend to assemble to focus simultaneously on one subject, even if briefly. As they use English as a lingua franca to communicate among them, they can be distinguished from other online communities by their shared use of Italianised memes, which are used to discuss Italian pop culture and social habits. Morgandi regarded these groups as “a de-globalized, niched, layered, and polycentric culture”²¹.

The abovementioned studies serve as a foundation that can facilitate the definition and comparison of Emirati *otaku* by illuminating how these enthusiasts project a popular culture onto themselves, how they assimilate within their own society and how their fandom patterns relate to other anime and manga fandom communities.

The Roots of Anime in the UAE

Anime was introduced to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in the 1970s when national television channels of the Gulf countries began to broadcast programs originating in non-Arab countries, primarily Japan²². Government-operated channels were tasked with filling slots designated for children with inexpensive and quickly produced content. Animated cartoons were considered juvenile; hence, minimal efforts were expended on the establishment of local animation studios. Japanese animation was favoured for children because it required negligible censorship and matched the

strict moral codes and traditions of the UAE²³. Likewise, most Arab audiences admired Japanese anime series because of their storylines, values, simplicity, and characters²⁴. A 2002 study conducted on viewing patterns of children on UAE television channels revealed the immense popularity of imported programs²⁵. The study reported that Japanese-origin cartoons were preferred and were the most viewed; they attracted the attention of children, were easy to understand and their characters were more interesting than the personae of local cartoons. Parents also felt that anime storylines imparted positive messages on moral values and aligned with their beliefs²⁶.

Japanese anime series were popular because they offered simple narratives about the triumph of good over evil, created a long-lasting impression on their viewers and generated a considerably loyal audience²⁷. Since their introduction to the UAE, Japanese cartoons have remained the staple media content for children in every Emirati household²⁸. Often Emirati children who grew up watching Japanese cartoons tend to follow their parents' habits.²⁹

Factors Contributing to the Growth of Anime *Otaku* in the UAE

Economic, cultural, and technological factors have facilitated the diffusion of anime *otaku* in the UAE. The animation-based industry is often called 'Japan's greatest cultural export'³⁰. The Japanese government noticed an economic opportunity around the 1990s: the anime industry could be utilized as an aspect of Japanese soft power to influence the international public, especially younger generations³¹. It found a fertile market in the Middle East³². Many Emirati youths have gotten addicted to the consumption of manga, anime, and their subproducts, signaling an increased absorption of Japanese culture. The enthusiasm for manga and anime often causes

Emirati youth to seek deeper associations with Japan and manifests as language learning, travel ing, eating Japanese food, etc³³.

From a psychological perspective, anime shows differ from standard cartoons and thus tend to attract broader audiences. Their elaborate and profound narratives, production techniques, and unconventional characters belie the misconception that animations are reserved for children³⁴. Dalil has affirmed that anime storylines are difficult to predict; thus, they elicit the curiosity of viewers who become intensely involved with the narrative³⁵. Emotions are pivotal to this identification process between the audience and the characters of anime; audience members experience the reception and interpretation of the text internally as if the events were happening to them³⁶. The development of characters also appeals to youths because the shifts demonstrate that they can also be strong and face their problems like adults³⁷.

Anime and manga have become easily accessible. The ubiquitous presence of digital content independent of state-controlled media offers youngsters diverse viewing choices³⁸. Young viewers seek high-quality productions that include engaging visual effects and realistic animations because they can consume increasingly immersive content through ultra-high-definition televisions, tablets, smartphones, and virtual reality devices³⁹. Digital media platforms in the UAE provide easy access to a wide range of anime and manga free or at a negligible cost. They also encourage Emirati *otaku*, bloggers and fans to form a community and participate in the development and exchange of fan-made productions⁴⁰ and *scanlations*⁴¹. Digital media facilitate connections between enthusiasts and generate new forms of fandoms; for instance, several online manga and anime clubs are headquartered in high schools and

universities⁴². Fans connect online to participate in Japanese gaming communities, podcasts, Comic-Con conventions, and anime festivals⁴³.

However, extant academic investigations addressing the habits, needs, modes of access and tendencies of Emirati *otaku* remain scant. Therefore, the present paper explores a neglected but crucially important dimension of the history and theory of anime fandoms: the social tendencies, media consumption habits, and cultural perceptions of anime *otaku* in the UAE.

Research Objective

This study analyses the anime phenomenon and its impact on anime fandoms in the UAE. In so doing, it offers valuable insights into the contemporary unfolding of socio-cultural habits in the UAE and contributes to varied ramifications with respect to fandom studies. More specifically, it postulates and examines the following assumption: if the Emirati have been exposed to Japanese popular culture from an early age, local anime fans should evince specific patterns and archetypes conforming to that culture.

Discrete aspects pertaining to Emirati *otaku* must be evaluated to ascertain the validity of the above assumption. The first section of this study tackles the reasons for the strong visual, emotional and contextual appeal of manga and anime for their aficionados to grasp why fans are attracted to this art form. Subsequently, the study explores how enthusiasts in the UAE access manga and anime and interact with these genres. In so doing, it attempts to understand their involvement with other fans and appraise their level of commitment in comparison to other *otaku* communities. Next, the study assesses whether and how fans are culturally affected by anime and manga. Ultimately the present investigation seeks to reveal whether the UAE *otaku* also partake in the hybridization of their own culture.

Hence, the main research questions posed for this study are as follows:

RQ1: What aspects of Japanese anime and manga appeal to Emirati youth?

RQ2: What are the modes of media access and consumption patterns of the Emirati youth with regard to Japanese anime and manga?

RQ3: How do Japanese anime and manga influence Emirati cultural values?

Methodology

A qualitative approach was selected for this exploratory study. The scarcity of literature examining the UAE's animation industry and fandom tendencies prompted the researchers to utilize in-depth focus groups as their primary sources of data collection. This method offered adequate flexibility, was less time-consuming compared to personal interviews, and allowed the researchers to interact directly with the respondents⁴⁴. It also facilitated the exploration of shared beliefs in the expression of views and aided the stimulation of new ideas among the participants, all aspects that were essential to the accomplishment of the study.

All of the targeted respondents were students enrolled in a university in the UAE. Female respondents were selected from the Anime and Japanese Club, whereas male respondents were chosen based on their responses to a poster created and publicized in the male lounge area. All prospective participants were orally questioned before being shortlisted to ascertain their individual knowledge of Japanese animation and the animation industry in the UAE. A total of 24 students aged 17–22 years and enrolled in discrete colleges (12 males and 12 females) were subsequently selected. The respondents were divided into four groups of six males and six females to better handle the large number of participants, and four interviews were conducted (six respondents per interview) in gender-segregated groups because of cultural and privacy constraints.

During the focus group discussions, an assistant helped the main interviewer by taking notes of the participants' responses, and another recorded their voices. The presence of two assistants enhanced the reliability of the findings as the analyses were cross-checked manually to discover similarities and discrepancies. Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes, and the participants were identified by numbers rather than names to preserve confidentiality. The recordings were transcribed and assessed according to the qualitative first and second cycle coding methods⁴⁵. In the first cycle, the answers were categorized into descriptive strings and were specifically grouped under the words 'appeal', 'intrigue', 'habits' and 'difference'. The summarized first cycle strings were inserted into columns and matched with pattern codes of participant's explanations, in relation to the question asked. The data helped explore some common themes which are addressed in the research findings.

Research Findings

Features of Japanese Anime and Manga that Appeal to Emirati Youth

Participants' attraction to anime and manga was reported as a fascination towards the originality of the content, soundtracks, storylines, interesting characters and artwork. Most females thought the Japanese anime storytelling style was unique, balanced and could tackle serious issues with profundity, humour, tragedy, and drama. "Anime are interesting, they go in-depth emotionally and story wise; they reflect Japanese culture and the way they tend to stick to normal routine in their daily life. They [people] find anime to basically vent their feelings and express more bizarre behaviour, that's what attracts us to anime storyline" (Respondent 9).

Some respondents compared Japanese and American animation to explicate the appeal of the Japanese anime storylines: “When American animation wants to be overly creative, it stops making sense, but when Japanese animation want to be more creative, the story itself makes perfect sense” (Respondent 10). Respondent 9 elucidated further, explaining that people do not usually identify themselves with hyper-fictitious stories such as Harry Potter. Japanese culture employs manga and anime narratives as a means of escaping reality and as a mode of expressing emotions that people cannot articulate in their daily lives: “By accepting bizarre ideas, they get more chances to explore imaginary borders” (Respondent 9).

Observations conducted by Dalil and Nagata have also alluded to this craving for the extravagant and fantastic⁴⁶ and other researchers have emphasized that the acceptance and appeal of bizarre ideas are vested in the desire to escape the monotony of reality⁴⁷. Some researchers, however, assert that fantasy literature should not be considered mere escapism. It also facilitates mental stability, improves psychological health, and allows readers to avoid unpleasanties. They suggest that people crave beauty and are inclined towards it⁴⁸. Perhaps the present study’s respondents seemed attracted to the visual aesthetic features of anime and manga for this reason; they used terms such as ‘unique’, ‘great details’, ‘amazing graphics’, ‘attractive artwork’, ‘creative’, and ‘original’ to describe the artwork and the characters. ‘A variety of Japanese and American animation content was also compared: “American animations are more about patriotism; they have subliminal messages that are political or about saving the world and are repetitive and boring” (Respondent 14). Three other respondents agreed that Japanese anime differs from American cartoon films, which present the same styles and plot-types and are “patriotic and political” (Respondents 5, 9 and 23).

Media Access and Consumption Levels of Japanese Anime and Manga

All of the participants confirmed their easy access to anime and manga. They grew up watching anime on Arabic TV channels. However, many respondents shifted to digital platforms after a few years and recounted more than ten streaming sites and apps that held no copyrights. They viewed anime online primarily because the local TV channels censored episodes, dubbed them into Arabic, and broadcast the shows at specific times. They claimed that the dubbed versions or voice-overs often did not suit the anime characters and did not adequately present the storyline (Respondents 12, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 21, and 23). Storylines broadcast on TV were often altered to suit a younger audience (Respondents 3, 4, 5, and 12). One respondent chose to view the original versions because, “The original goes deeper in the Japanese culture and exposes [us] to more similar anime; we need to know more about Japan and how they did the anime and manga” (Respondent 21).

Participants also confessed to a sense of guilt about watching anime for free. They understood that tremendous effort had been expended into the creation of the shows. Thus, female respondents willingly paid for subscriptions online and purchased anime figurines, hardcopy manga and other merchandise to support the artists; males invested in video games and tournaments to support Japanese artists because they favoured the digital experience of playing fictional characters⁴⁹.

Respondents evinced equivalent anime and manga product choices. Almost half of the respondents opted to watch anime rather than to read manga even though they acknowledged that manga was more popular than anime because hardcopies were shared among friends during their school days. They watched anime because it was “much easier” (Respondent 14) and because, “we [Emirati] prefer visualizing things over

reading” (Respondent 18). However, the other half of the respondents, mostly female participants, claimed they still read manga for two reasons. First, anime series are produced in Japan only after the highest ratings and reviews of specific manga or graphic novels are tracked and demand is determined. Nonetheless, anime series are often delayed, left incomplete, or padded with fillers. Hence, an increasing number of viewers read the original manga to understand the rest of the story (Respondents 5, 9, 10, 11, 12, 19, 20, and 21). Second, many participants declared personal leanings towards art and reading and preferred printed manga more because of the artwork and visual appeal. Males evinced no specific consumption habits or timelines for watching anime; however, females allocated specific free time to binge-watching anime shows. Many female respondents often viewed anime with friends and siblings who shared similar interests; conversely, males seemed more prone to solo viewing. Also, female and male respondents revealed spending a daily average anime viewing time of three hours and two hours, respectively. However, some respondents admitted to continuous viewing/reading until the end of the show/book, if the story was exceptionally good (Respondents 1, 3, 9, 21).

How Japanese Anime and Manga Influence Emirati Cultural Values

Most respondents avoided identifying themselves as *otaku* because they felt that this term was associated with an unhealthy addiction to anime and manga. Instead, they preferred the term “anime fan”. According to one respondent, *otakus* are obsessive Japanese followers because they spend so much time on Japanese entertainment such as anime or manga that they forget to even eat and cut off human interaction. “We (Emiratis) have human relationships; we go out, we study and we do other things, but

when we have leisure time or want to, only then we watch it, and that does not mean we are fully immersed in it” (Respondent 1).

Another interviewee asserted that only people of Japanese nationality could truly be *otaku*: Japanese youth were more deeply immersed in manga and anime fandoms because their access to anime- and manga-related merchandise was greater and because they also had the “freedom they want to have a big room, filled with more figurines, posters and these things” (Respondent 13). Respondent 13 also confessed to restrictions imposed by his family because they thought his *otaku* status implied that he had not grown into “a real man”. Another respondent mentioned a story about a candidate who was denied a job offer because he was an *otaku*, evincing negative social attitudes towards *otaku* (Respondent 7).

Many of the participants agreed that the word *otaku* encompassed a diverse range of commitment levels and resisted any general definition. However, they emphasized that Emirati anime fans are balanced and flexible – they interact with others, study, and align their personal and professional lives with their hobbies (Respondents 5, 9, 15, 19, and 21). Finally, a male respondent admitted to being *otaku* “here” (in the UAE) but not in Japan (Respondent 21), probably alluding to the different levels of involvement the word implied in the two countries.

Aspects of engagement with anime- and manga-related activities also arose when respondents were questioned about their participation in Comic-Con, Game-Con and other related events. Parental approval was pivotal to female attendance, as festivals allowed mixed participation. Some females confessed that their parents or relatives attended such events with them because they were not allowed to go alone. Most male respondents admitted they would attempt cosplay if their close friends or siblings did

too. Finally, the respondents were asked whether anime posed any threats to local values, culture, and traditions. The female respondents recognized that the online exposure and the easy availability of anime (in comparison to the 1980s and 1990s) and their consequent exposure to Japanese anime of certain genres could be considered offensive such as *hentai* (adult anime) because they clashed with the region's codes of ethics. Respondents 3, 4, 5, 8 and 9 substantiated this observation and stated that some anime shows explored themes such as sex, unrealistic body standards, and violence. Additionally, Respondent 20 stated that Japanese entertainment could sometimes be insensitive to religious sentiments and recalled a few such instances. Respondent 8 highlighted another important aspect concerning anime selection: most foreign viewers could not read the Japanese disclaimers regarding explicit and unsuitable content. Consequently, exposure to explicit or offensive content was often unanticipated. Even if local channels broadcasting these anime constantly monitor and censor such content, issues still arise when such content is viewed through less regulated digital media⁵⁰.

Overall, participants felt that anime shows are becoming increasingly explicit, and that this phenomenon has become the new normal. "Overexposure to such characters and topics through anime has become normalized to an extent that we don't find it offensive anymore, which is a concern" (Respondent 4). A few respondents acknowledged their individual responsibility to choose: if the content clashes with their ethics, the person should avoid it or simply absorb the "good" and ignore the "bad" (Respondents 2, 4, 5, 6, and 8).

Almost four-fifths of the respondents, however, claimed that exposure to Japanese anime is not generally a big issue. The experience of watching anime or reading manga introduced them to sketching anime and opened the doors of creativity

to them. It also accorded them the opportunity to learn about Japanese traditions and language. Most respondents also believed that the promotion of Japanese culture in the UAE fulfilled objectives of enjoyment and cultural understanding. Others asserted that exposure to the Japanese entertainment industry prompted the fostering of otherwise improbable inclinations in the UAE: entrepreneurial aptitude, artistic skills, and creativity.

Discussion

The study revealed that Emirati youths were most strongly attracted to the visual aesthetics and emotional appeal of anime. Some theorists have commented on the aspect of the visual appeal⁵¹, claiming that Japanese popular culture lacks a national visual identity because all the characters evince non-specific and idealized features⁵², such as ‘superflat’⁵³ and ‘big-eyed’⁵⁴. These characteristics appeal to the young Emirati population that seems to have developed a fine-tuned sense of aesthetics manifesting as a constant search for beauty, the ideal, and the transcendent.

Pressure from a conservative society and family restrictions increase the appeal of anime as an ideal escape from reality. The respondents confirmed explicitly that the bizarreness of anime and manga helps them relieve anxieties. Respondent 9’s comments about how the Japanese simultaneously adhere to daily routines and escape to surreal worlds through digital media and access anime and manga can be seen as parallelism between the two cultures: both share an understanding of the importance of community values⁵⁵ that encompass cultural norms to follow and respect traditions without objection⁵⁶. Thus, the need to carve out some ‘self-space’ is justified⁵⁷. This attitude is also aligned with the findings of Napier’s study, which claims that anime fans interpret their favourite entertainment genre as more than a meaningless pastime: anime makes

them feel exotic and unique because it accords them the freedom to express themselves within fandom communities⁵⁸. It also confirms Jenson's theory that fandoms often comprise misunderstood individuals who seek comfort and joy in activities shared with like-minded people⁵⁹. Resistance becomes part of their identity because very few adults understand their hobby⁶⁰.

It was also interesting to observe how Emirati respondents compared Japanese anime with American cartoons. They clearly articulated their dislike for the American renditions of patriotism, complicated political dialogues and unoriginal cartoon styles, reiterating the outcomes of a recent study on entertainment media in the Middle East that reported the opinions of 6,000 interviewees from countries in the Middle East and North Africa. The study clearly asserted that in spite of enjoying Hollywood films, a substantial proportion (79 per cent) of Middle Eastern respondents perceived American entertainment to be morally harmful⁶¹ and responsible for the promotion of negative Arab stereotypes⁶².

In terms of access to the Japanese entertainment industry, young Emiratis exposed to dubbed anime through television have drastically shifted to digital media⁶³. The respondents stated that they preferred internet-based sites and apps because they could view the undubbed and uncensored versions. Studies on censorship have shown that consumers are often attracted to "uncensored material", especially if it is attractive or relevant to the user, even if it is regulated by an "expert agent"⁶⁴. Emirati youths seek new ways of accessing uncensored material through virtual private networks, and this behaviour was found in a similar study by Hobbs and Roberts⁶⁵. Some of the study's respondents disclosed their discomfort in reading or viewing *haram*⁶⁶ content or feeling "unsensitive" because of their long exposure to diverse content. It would be interesting

to probe whether Emirati youths choose the Internet over the television because they are genuinely curious about watching anime in its original form. The digital medium seemed to help them attain a deeper understanding of the story and language; it can function as an access point to satisfy their attraction to the uncensored parts that offer avenues for evasion and speculation, giving them the privacy, accessibility, variety, and freedom of choice to their content. Generally speaking, Emiratis find it difficult to discuss certain topics⁶⁷ or admit to their “guilty pleasures”⁶⁸ due to their conservative upbringing; therefore, exposure to certain content may help them understand issues that are societally deemed taboo.

A gendered divide was observed among participants vis-à-vis the consumption of cultural products: boys preferred watching anime and playing video games and felt that the visual approach facilitated greater immersion. Girls seemed to be more interested in the storylines and preferred manga because some anime series were left incomplete or ruined by inconsistent fillers.

Further, analysis of the respondents’ access to manga and anime evidenced that the vast number of websites, apps, and podcasts used by the participants allow fans to recommend and promote content, create and host discussion groups, upload videos or files of their creations and create cosplay ideas. These aspects influence their growing consumption habits, as access to digital media has made anime more appealing, popular, and a part of the daily lives of Emirati youths⁶⁹.

The overall evaluation of Emirati *otaku* revealed that young Emiratis can strike a balance between immersion in fantasy and reality despite their heavy consumption of cultural productions enabled by digital technology⁷⁰. Most of the respondents elucidated that their involvement as anime *otaku* was far from qualifying as an obsession because

they generally valued their commitments to their families and communities, and their hobbies evolved around those responsibilities. Enthusiasts, especially female fans, attained a sense of freedom from societal restrictions by connecting with online communities, attending anime conventions, viewing anime, involving themselves in artwork, and delving into the anime fandom.

Concerns

The findings of this study indicate that the dissemination of Japanese popular culture has indeed influenced Emirati youths in a manner similar to other geographical regions. Localized *otaku* fandoms bring together like-minded individuals who need to share their emotions and experiences⁷¹. Their formation corroborates the presence of a new mode of youth interaction and a desire to escape conventional social mandates through digital media⁷².

Are Emirati *otaku* deeply committed to this passion? Could anime and manga become an intrinsic part of their lives (i.e., their line of work)? Or is being an *otaku* a youth trend that Emirati youngsters will eventually outgrow?

The UAE remains a young country; it is possible that this generation is consuming popular trends of foreign cultures, because (a) there is still no long-established popular tendency that places the UAE above other countries and, therefore, (b) the new generation seeks to define its own modern identity. Young Emiratis are broadening their vision, devouring products of other cultures, and learning by example in their efforts to construct a new identity. However, as Japanese culture is not their own, it seems unlikely that they will embrace Japanese culture to an extent that compromises their own collective identity and values. These findings reflect Newitz's thesis that American anime fans do not morally associate Japanese popular culture with

their own, nor do they feel responsible for these overseas creations: “American fans [...] eagerly watch an anime because it comes from *far away*”)73.

Often Japanese manga and anime encompass narratives that discuss issues such as relationships, sexuality, transgender relations, abuse, alcohol, violence, and drug consumption that exist in Japanese and other cultures but are not easily debated in the Arab world74. Thus, Arab fans immediately notice divergences between their traditions and Japanese culture, especially when they are confronted with uncensored scenes or dialogues that embarrass some and desensitize others because they cannot, and perhaps will not entirely relate to such issues. Further, Emiratis may consider Japanese popular culture merely a pastime because the foreign animation industry has generated in them a resistance towards the local animation industry75. The paucity of government support, training, religious sensitivities and restrictions stemming from their traditional society easily discourage Emiratis from embarking on serious careers in animation.

Despite these challenges, Emirati youths were seen to engage with anime because they identify emotionally with the characters of anime stories. Feelings are universal to all humankind; they mesmerize young followers, making them read manga or watch anime for hours to discover how the plot is finally resolved, how human disputes are handled, and how good triumphs over evil. As previous studies have already confirmed this process of identification between fictional characters and audiences76, it is discernible that the immersion of young Emiratis in manga and anime is a way for them to learn about human relations and different people without having to interact with real family members or friends. Could escaping reality to get immersed into a fantastic world be interpreted as a beneficial way to lay the grounding for an inner sense of idealism that helps enhance one’s values and the meaning of one’s existence77?

Recommendations

One way to support and enhance the growth of Emirati *otaku* in the UAE and to make them an asset to the local culture and economy is to turn them from consumers to producers.

While artistically skilled Japanese *otaku* can translate their passion to employment as animators, illustrators, writers, or even producers for Japanese manga and anime studios and editorial houses, such options are scarce for Emiratis. A recent statistic on the entertainment industry in the Middle East suggests that the UAE population wants increased cultural integration into modern society through a ‘re-traditionalization’ wherein traditions and religious conservatism can co exist with modern globalized society⁷⁸.

The government has started to address related issues in the context of potential opportunities the animation industry brings to the economy and to political learning⁷⁹. However, even if the UAE has recently started to operationalize its creative industries, a few pioneers have already made their mark in the entertainment sphere⁸⁰. Self-trained local illustrators have imitated anime prototypes that often lack a local identity. They need direction and training to create their own unique styles that capture their country’s distinctive culture and represent them and their societies.

The Emirati educational system could help feed the local creative industry by creating a new generation of diverse local animators, illustrators, writers and other associated technical occupations. To meet the UAE’s cultural demands, this task would not merely require faculty and courses but would also demand the adequate nurturing of competence in film language and the changing of perceptions about the industry. The

government should encourage students to undertake such careers so that restrictions imposed on them by their families could be minimized.

Conclusion

Previous studies have addressed the issue of globalization instead of attending to the experiences of people and attempting to understand them. This empirical study contributes to globalization debates on a local level by examining the perceptions of Emirati youth and attaining a more comprehensive understanding of how they view and consume anime and how the genre influences their native culture.

Its findings corroborated the theory that Emirati fans exposed to Japanese pop culture since childhood have developed specific patterns and paradigms that align with their culture. Although this study's findings are significant, some limitations must be acknowledged. The investigation was restricted to a focus group comprising a limited number of participants who were gender-segregated; therefore, it is impossible to make valid inferences and generalizations. Further, the study used a single qualitative method. Quantitative analyses may be appropriate for the analysis of anime consumption patterns among Emiratis for the correlation of different factors and testing theories. Triangulation approaches, such as data collection, participant observation, single interviews, and document analysis could also be adopted in future studies.

Overall, this exploratory study encourages other researchers to study such changes occurring in the region: collaborations between several universities, media production houses and Comic-Con convention centres in the UAE could provide rich data on the impact of the animation industry on Emirati youth. Additional research on Emirati animation, hybridized art forms or an exploration of the emerging local anime

industry could offer a window into wider cultural changes occurring in the UAE and create opportunities in the country and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations.

Notes

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