

Why Do Americans Like Anime So Damn Much?

Following the American Psychological Association's Guidelines, for
Departmental Honors with a Bachelor's of Communications

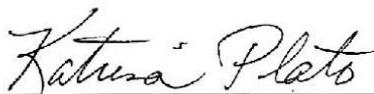
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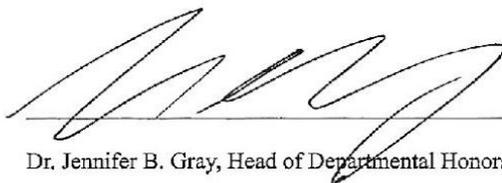
SIGNATURES



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In July 2017 over the course of four days, over one hundred and fifteen thousand people into one of the biggest conventions in the United States. Many were dressed in extravagant, handmade costumes, spent hundreds of dollars on merchandise, attended panels, concerts, and more, all for the celebration of something that sounds oddly niche: Japanese animation.

Japanese animation, more commonly referred to simply as anime, has become an explosive cultural phenomenon. While still widely regarded as a niche or fringe interest, its public presence has grown rapidly over the past two decades. Kim Kardashian's tweet that she's "obsessed" with anime has officially solidified its place in the mainstream, if it wasn't before. (Kardashian, 2018) *Spirited Away* and other Studio Ghibli films are considered essential viewing for fans of film. Some Japanese franchises, such as *Pokemon*, feel as commonplace and intrinsic to American culture as McDonald's.

Our love of anime runs much deeper than a superficial enjoyment. The fandom aspect of anime is easily a lifestyle if one chooses to indulge, similar to the fandoms we see for American superhero comics and Star Trek. It's not unusual to see expensive and labor-intensive cosplays¹, collections of imported figurines, shelves of DVDs, clothing, music, posters, meet-ups and conventions. Unlike these fandoms, however, anime is generally marked less by dedication to one or a few characters or shows, but rather the absorption of as many different works within the medium as possible. American anime fans don't discriminate with their shows, either: any genre and any age target is fair game for adult fans. Some "street cred" is earned within the community

¹ This is the first of many "in-group" words I'll be defining in the footnotes throughout the course of this paper. I decided it would be easier to define them in this way rather than explaining every single one in the body of the work, so that the arguments can go uninterrupted and those familiar with the terms that can continue forward easily. Cosplay is a popular hobby that involves dressing up as a fictional character. This hobby is not exclusive to anime characters, but it has a massive presence within the community. At any given anime convention, it would be hard to throw a stone without hitting a cosplayer.

for knowing a little about a lot of things, though acute interest in one character or story in particular is still perfectly acceptable. Some people make their livelihood off of cosplay, critiquing and reviewing anime, selling their fan art or taking commissions in the traditional Japanese anime art style. YouTube personalities such as *Mother's Basement* make their living talking about the newest, hottest shows. There are legions of people who shape their identity around their dedication to anime, wearing shirts and other merchandise to telegraph their 'alignment' to other fans, where attending conventions and meet-ups begins to hold the same personal significance as a religious pilgrimage. There are several people who claim to be in real, romantic relationships with popular characters. While not everybody on the spectrum of fandom is this extreme, of course, the fact remains that the culture surrounding anime in the United States is alive, dedicated, and seemingly here to stay. At this point, it's pretty undeniable: Americans are *really* into anime.

Any sort of media is going to have its fair share of nerds and geeks, so that in and of itself isn't terribly unique, nor does it automatically create larger issues. However, anything with this type of reach is going to have some interesting effects and ripples. It's also, from the outside looking in, a very niche thing for the culture to have embraced with such dedication. This paper serves as a sort of case study, examining why America responds to anime so positively, and looking at some of the effects this has on the culture at large.

A brief history

Osamu Tezuka is considered the father of modern manga, anime's stylistically similar comic-book sister. He's often credited with coining the style and tone characteristic to anime,

which is still reflected even to this day. In the 1960's, his most famous work, *Astro Boy*, was turned into an anime. Ada Palmer, a history professor from the University of Chicago and authority on the history of anime, notes that Tezuka's father strongly believed that Japan's best future was with a United States partnership. Tezuka's exposure to American media and collaborative ideals bleeds into his work. As Palmer puts it, "There are constantly Westerners appearing in it as peaceful scientific collaborators. That's the future he imagined." About *Astro Boy* specifically, "He designed them from the very beginning to be exported."

Anime wasn't always popular in the United States. In fact, before the 1980's anime was largely viewed as unseemly or taboo. America saw animation as a children's medium, whereas Japan was tackling more mature topics even within the kids shows (Japan's kids shows didn't shy away from death, for example.) Except for a smaller cult following, anime in America was largely associated with violence and hentai.² The name of the game was "fansubs," where English-speaking fans would make unofficial (and illegal) versions of anime with English subtitles to be released online before the anime could be formally distributed in the United States. Seeing the demand (and not wanting to lose more money,) the industry eventually shifted into a focus of merchandise sales, music sales, and legal streaming services such as Netflix and CrunchyRoll. Nowadays, anime typically makes money through its affiliation with these other industries. (Magulick, 2015.)

The Mass Appeal

² *Hentai* translates to "pervert" in Japanese. It's used in English to refer to sexually explicit or pornographic animation, especially with Japanese origin. It's also notorious for getting... very weird.

The USA has trapped itself in a weird dichotomy when it comes to domestic animation. Looking at the animated landscape, there seem to be two major factions that cartoons tend to fall into. There's the made-for-kids side, and what I'm going to call the adult-edge side.

The kid's side is more easily defined, so I'll start with that. This is, of course, cartoons designed and produced for children. They are by nature family-friendly, inoffensive, and educational (either by literally teaching lessons such as in *Word Girl*, or just showing examples of good behavior.) American kids' shows, generally speaking, don't try to challenge the viewer, and few make an effort to appeal the parents who have to sit through them with their children. Compared to children's anime in Japan, American shows are more shy to address subjects such as death, complex relationships, LGBT+ relationships, or moral gray areas. It's rare for an American kid's show to resonate with older audiences; those that do manage often become exceedingly popular, such as *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* and *Steven Universe*. Overall, however, American cartoon culture just doesn't try to mix mature themes with kids shows.

On the other side of the spectrum, we have adult-edge. I want to make a distinction between adult-edge and "cartoons designed for mature audiences" because I believe there is a distinct difference. Spearheaded by the debut of *The Simpsons* in 1989, adult-edge cartoons tend to follow a similar formula, or at least a similar sense of humor. Plotlines are largely episodic, usually satirizing modern adult life. They make a concerted effort to mark themselves as "NOT your kid's cartoon." Themes of alcoholism, cursing, broken family dynamics, sex, and gore are common. (In the case of *South Park*, this may even be combined with intentionally bigoted statements for shock value.) This isn't to say that amazing shows can't be produced with this formula, of course. *The Simpsons* was a innovative genre-starter and Netflix's *Bojack Horseman*

delivers a poignant, brutally honest look at mental illness and disillusionment. However, to someone who may be craving the mental stimulation of a mature cartoon and isn't impressed by shock-value or raunchy humor, the adult-edge genre can feel... lacking, or at least samey.

Family Guy might make you laugh, but it probably won't make you think once the TV is off. You definitely won't cry. As the dominant conversation piece of this genre, it serves as a decent example of what I'm talking about. While *Family Guy* is undeniably geared towards adults, the conflicts, themes, and messages of each episode are generally not very deep. Most of the humor comes from one-offs and quick asides, or shock value. It would seem the punchline is regularly just the idea of sex, drugs, or abuse itself. The plot is an absurd situation with some timely jokes about the outside world. It's an entertaining escape for many people, and that's fine, but it doesn't hit you in the heart the same way adult live-action dramas do. Live action adult shows tend to handle appeal to adults and adult themes without leaning into shock topics. A show can be geared towards a mature mind and never once highlight these themes. If they do handle these themes, it's usually as a crucial plot element rather than a series of one-off jokes.

The general landscape, then, is left with a hole in animated entertainment. Animation opens itself up to a whole new world of creativity, where what can be put on screen is only limited by what you can think to draw. It lends itself naturally to different types of storytelling than live-action, with included opportunities for stylized art and character design. Because of animation's unique flavor, live-action just doesn't cut it for many people. Yet, there's a notable lack of animation designed for adults that shoots for innovative storytelling and genuine emotion the way live-action shows do. Anime succeeds at filling that hole.

This is where we get a large chunk- but not all- of anime viewers today. Many fans will cite anime's comparative willingness to tackle "taboo" topics and feature LGBT relationships. There's also a wide variety of genres within anime (with everything from slice-of-life, to fantasy, to horror) compared to the dominance of American adult-edge cartoons. However, there is still a massive chunk of the anime "fandom" that doesn't seem to fit into this category.

It's time to talk about *moe*³.

Moe and "Waifu" Culture

Any list of the most popular anime will likely be filled with *shounen*⁴ and sci-fi genre productions. For a lot of people, these type of action-packed romps are what gets them into anime, but it's not always what makes them stay. Within the community of anime, there's a massive chunk of the conversation devoted to one of the most wide-reaching genres of anime: cute high school girls doing literally anything.

While the high school slice-of-life genre is alive and well and the certified champion of this trope, it's not the only place it can be seen. The appeal of high school girls seems to transcend genre, with diverse casts of cutesy, lovable characters present in everything from fantasy romance to gruesome horror. Usually they come with a checklist of different tropes to fill, so that there's a girl for just right for everyone. Sometimes, the carefully-crafted appeal of these girls is the entire substance of the anime, which brings us to *moe*. *Moe* is much a genre in itself as it is as much a series of trends and tropes to be used in any genre. These characters are

³ I've mentioned the term *moe* in the footnotes before, so I'm going to press forward with the assumption that the reader has read these and is familiar with the term.

⁴ *Shounen* literally translates to "Boy." It's anime aimed primarily at the male teenage demographic and is usually characterized by frequent fight scenes, increasingly extreme attacks and special moves, and lots of yelling. Popular examples are *Dragon Ball Z*, *Naruto*, and *Bleach*.

treated like performing idols, with everything designed to be happy, innocent, and open to receiving any affection sent their way. They are often poised as potential partners but won't ever enter a relationship on screen, meaning they stay open to any fantasy between them and another character or even the viewer. (The one exception to this rule will be if the girl being in a relationship is a prerequisite to their character type, such as the *yandere*.⁵) If there is a protagonist outside of the girly cast, it's usually a neutral masculine vessel for the audience to look through without him getting in the way. The girls are self-sustaining on their own, though. The term "waifu," a deliberate mispronunciation of the word "wife," is a common in-term for a character that the viewer is declaring they are particularly fond of.

There's partially a reason this is so popular: cute girls sell. Even for the fans who aren't into the idol-worshipping scene, there can be a genuinely enjoyable innocence and lightheartedness to *moe* that serves as a relaxing escapism. Remember how both big and small the world felt at fourteen? Still, even characters that aren't explicitly marketed as idols tend to get swept up by the fandom and turned into one. There are figurines, posters, desktop wallpapers, DVDs, and more to buy officially, plus an endless supply of fan art. Once somebody is in the fandom, championing whichever girl is their favorite and digesting the dozens (if not hundreds) of anime that utilize these tropes, it's an easy community to stay in. It'd be a failure on my part to not admit while not all anime has sexual fantasy elements promoting its success, there's definitely a part that does.

This isn't exclusive to America. In Japan in 2009, a man married fictional Nene

⁵ The *yandere* is another common *-dere* archetype, like the *tsundere*. The *yandere* looks kind and sweet at first, only to reveal an unsettling, all-consuming obsession with her love interest. This obsession reaches levels of insanity, usually turning the *yandere* into a dangerous antagonist. One example is Gasai Yuno from *Mirai Nikki (Future Diary)*.

Anegasaki from the Nintendo DS game “Love Plus.”⁶ (Lah, 2009.) In fact, one of the reasons for the constant production of mediocre *moe* high school slice-of-life is because the model is designed to sell waifu merch, not the show itself. (Magulick, 2015.) The American market isn’t what’s driving the continuous production of *moe* and merch-sales-based anime, but it’s certainly affected by it.

Any type of media, especially entertainment, is selling something besides merch: ideas. When we portray these types of characters and casts over and over again, depicting women and girls as cute, weak, childlike, and ready-for-you, we send a repeated message about what kind of women should be deemed desirable. We then supplement this with “fanservice” shots and angles, turning completely mundane or non-sexual scenes into something sexy to look at, we get an anime universe where women and girls constantly exist to titillate the straight male gaze. Asian women get the brunt of these stereotypes, especially Japanese women.

This doesn’t render anime or even a particularly guilty show unwatchable, nor is this problem exclusive to anime, of course. *Game of Thrones* is wildly successful in the United States even amongst many feminists, even with the way it treats women. If we only ever digested media that was perfectly unproblematic we’d digest almost nothing. The important part, however, is watching with a critical eye and noticing when these themes and messages are being told. Within the many depths of the anime fan community, there’s a resistance to self-critique. There’s some hesitation to admit that the shows have problematic implications, and that championing them (or

⁶ It’s worth noting that this marriage was not legally binding, but rather a more spiritual-type of marriage between the man and Anegasaki. The ceremony was broadcasted for streaming online.

in the case of *moe* and idol culture, playing right into its hands) could be a part of something bigger.

The Community

I've already mentioned it in passing a few times, but the communal aspect of anime (and fandom in general) is worth talking about. According to a study in 2016, fans of science fiction, sports, music, and media reported their sense of community and belonging was significantly greater within the fandom than it was in their local community. (Chadborn, Edwards, Reysen, 2016.) Anime naturally has its genes more in common with the “nerd” side next to science fiction. Science fiction fans showed the highest difference between local community and fandom community. When it comes to anime, this is a strong indicator that anime fans draw their sense of belonging and identity more from this allegiance than they do from the physical environment around them.

The community is generally pretty accessible, too. Much like sports or music fans, it's open to someone of any gender or age group that can keep up with the conversation. Young teenagers and adults are both welcome to enjoy the same shows without it being a competition. Much like general nerd fandoms, there's still a gender divide, even with a large number of women actively participating in the community. The treatment of women in anime and the culture surrounding *moe* feeds this, but for many isn't enough to drive them away. It's still easy to find plenty of women who enjoy anime.

Anime conventions are everywhere. For the dedicated anime fan, these conventions can be magical. They feature mountains of merchandise, workshops, panels and signing-events with

voice actors, exclusive early viewings of that season's biggest hits, and *lots* of cosplay. Many people will go to these conventions to show off their cosplays, purchase merchandise that can be hard to find elsewhere, and be with like-minded people.

Anime as its Own Culture

Many people, fans and outsiders alike, will conflate the messages, themes, and culture within anime as a representation of all of Japan. Many people will claim to “love Japanese media,” knowing almost exclusively anime and manga. (In reality, animated works don't even make the top five of most popular television programs consumed in Japan. That goes to news, sports, dramas, and variety shows) . (BBC, 2017.) They may try to speak authoritatively on Japanese culture or language with anime as their primary (perhaps even only) information source, leading to all sorts of stereotypes and misconceptions being perpetuated. The reality is that anime doesn't even come close to truly representing Japan, the culture, or even the spoken language.

Looking at anime as a markedly different culture from Japan is a weird argument to make, especially when we usually look to American comics and cartoons as a *reflection* of American culture and values. While we can certainly look at anime to learn about Japanese culture, the analysis methods for domestic media produce a measurably different result when applied to anime. Fortunately for us, the desire to operationalize cultural differences is a common one. It's one thing to say “Japan generally has a bigger emphasis on formality than the United States,” and another to make this difference quantifiable. For the purposes of this analysis, I'm going to be utilizing Hofstede's Cultural Differences Model. It's fairly easy to prove the differences between Japan and the United States, but proving that Japan's anime does not reflect

Japan might be more difficult on its own. Therefore, I'm going to analyze anime as its own culture, as if it were its own sovereign nation and then compare that to Japan's scores on the Hofstede model.

Defining a culture within this "anime universe" is difficult, because anime isn't a real genre. It's a medium, just like movies or a stage play, with infinite types of stories within its reach. What does a realistic, gritty horror anime have in common with something from the *moe*⁷ genre? Just like in movies, anime contains different storytelling tropes that the audience knows and expects. You can start to pick out certain character archetypes unique to the medium, like the *tsundere*,⁸ which transcends all genre and helps show us a larger pattern of interpersonal relationships within the world of anime. Certain actions are regularly depicted in a certain way, certain characters tend to resemble each other. A culture consisting exclusively of entertainment media will naturally produce extreme scores in the measurements; there's no time for subtlety. Not every character or even every show will fit into this mold, of course, but neither does every human within a culture. Therefore, I believe analyzing anime in this way is still perfectly fitting. Watching enough anime over enough genres to get a solid feel for the anime universe would take a tremendous amount of time for one person. Fortunately, I'm a massive nerd and probably wouldn't be delving into this if I hadn't already spent years watching a wide variety of anime shows. There are also more than enough community forums, critics, reviewers, and fans to fill out the gaps in my personal viewing list. After a *lot* of shows, these were my conclusions:

⁷ *Moe* is a genre that exists near-exclusively within anime and manga. It is character-driven, focusing largely on stylized, idealized, feminine innocence. It's typically executed through one or several "cutesy" characters who are often sexualized. Popular examples include *Love Live!* and *Lucky Star*.

⁸ A *tsundere* is a common type of character, often a love interest. They are cold, stand-offish, potentially even violent, but inevitably warming up to the protagonist and revealing their soft, gentle "true nature." A prime example is Asuka from *Neon Genesis Evangelion*.

1. **Power Distance:** This is the measure of how much a society's "lower status" population expects there to be an imbalance of power between different classes and status positions, and how normal and acceptable that imbalance is perceived as. For example, a low score on power distance is often marked by casual bosses, whereas a higher score puts more space between employees and their superiors. Anime still shows a higher power distance than the United States, but not quite as high as Japan. A big tell for this one is in the language. While honorifics⁹ are widely used and superior-subordinate relationships feel deeply ingrained, the shift from formal to casual speech is almost nonexistent. People speak to each other, even their superiors, in a manner that is casual to the point of rudeness. Formal, polite speech, the kind taught to new learners, is seldom seen except for when that distance is very plot relevant, (If you want to get in a fight in Japan, learn to speak Japanese off of anime.)
2. **Masculinity/Femininity:** a masculine culture is typically marked by a competitive atmosphere and a social obligation to contribute to society through achievement, whereas a feminine culture cares more for the people around them and enjoying life. The United States, Japan, and anime all reflect a high masculinity score. While Japan has a higher score than the US, anime might have the highest score of all three. With so many stories

⁹ Honorifics are words that imply a certain status or rank. For example, in English we might use *Mr.* and *Ms./Mrs.*, perhaps even *Sir* or *Madam*. Japanese honorifics are more complex, with [name]-*san* as the respectful default. Other honorifics can denote a person's rank in comparison to the person speaking, indicate the level of friendship between them, and more. Giving yourself an honorific, using something too informal, or using something overly close can be big missteps for the Japanese language learner.

about characters pushing to achieve large goals and be the best like no one ever was¹⁰, it's clearly an important factor.

3. **Uncertainty Avoidance:** How much does an individual need to know before they feel comfortable taking a risk? This is perhaps the hardest to define for anime because the common tells don't coincide easily with a universe that exists only to tell a story.

4. **Collectivism vs. Individualism:** Anime characters are very uninterested for working for the whole over themselves. In a world of the heroes, lone wolves, and extreme personalities, there isn't a lot of room to glorify community as well. Even anime that focuses on a team tends to highlight an individual that goes far above and beyond, making a name for themselves beyond that group. Self-serving interests and motivations are definitely the most common.

5. **Long-Term vs. Short-Term Orientation:** Long-term cultures focus on investment in the future, rather than the immediate needs of the present. Japan and anime probably have this the most in common. There is still a reverence for nature reflected in anime that is prevalent in Japanese culture. Stakes in the conflict rarely stay at just the character's personal life. The wider universe is always present, whether that be the entire galaxy or simply the protagonist's homeroom class. Characters seek lasting goals like success or peace, whatever that means to them personally. (Getting to date-- and eventually marry-- that cute girl, or toppling an evil empire.) The United States is much more short-term oriented by comparison.

¹⁰ Lots of people will recognize this nod to *Pokemon*, "I wanna be the very best like no one ever was." The hero's tale of a young boy rising to greatness, especially through some type of fighting, is a common one. *Naruto* is another example.

In fairness, analysis of one type of media in comparison to the country that produced it is always going to be at least mildly different. Storytelling and media simply doesn't have the same nuance as real life; it plays by different rules. These individual stories and worlds are carefully crafted to be viewed by an audience. Some are true artistic brainchildren of their creators, others are cash grabs, all are carefully constructed to please. Still, the differences can be very noticeable when laid overtop of each other. There are some elements of anime such as its power distance rating that show potential pitfalls for anyone whose education about Japan comes mostly from anime. Treating a stranger with harsh words, even if spoken in a polite tone won't just confuse: it will offend.

Positive and Negative Effects

The back-and-forth influence of anime is almost poetic, in a way. Going back to the beginning of modern anime, before the second world war, we find a small collection of black and white, hand-painted cartoons similar to what Disney and Fleischer Studios were producing at around the same time. The stylistic similarities are striking, to say the least.

On the left, are two screen shots from *Danemon's Monster Hunt at Shoji* (translated title,) a Japanese anime short from 1935. (Unknown creator.) On the right are two screenshots from *Popeye the Sailor* (top) (Segar, 1933.) and *Felix the Cat* (bottom.) (Sullivan, 1919.) Side by side, some of the details such as the eye design and character anatomy are near identical. Tezuka drew a lot of influence from American culture as well, with the art style of the anime being noticeably “Disneyfied,” pictured to the right.

With the presence of anime growing more and more ubiquitous in mainstream culture, we're now starting to see a type of horseshoe effect. People who grew up with anime are now reaching the age where they are creators themselves, and they take the influences with them. Even producers who don't have a personal connection to the medium can recognize how much it resonates. Western cartoons are drawing from a new pool of tropes and art styles. One of the most notable recent examples of this is the cartoon *Steven Universe*, one of Cartoon Network's most widely-talked about shows that's tremendously popular amongst both children and adults. *Steven Universe* draws heavily

from the genre of magical girls¹¹, all while slipping in subtle homages to *Sailor Moon*, a magical girl genre definer. *Avatar: The Last Airbender* is an American-made cartoon so loyal to its inspiration that it actually sparks debate to this day about whether it has transcended the label of cartoon into being an anime itself. (While normally I would side with *Avatar* absolutely being an anime, for the sake of this paper it's easier to keep things more compartmentalized and define anime as only being produced in Japan, since we're looking at the cultural elements of it. However, as purely an art style or entertainment medium, *Avatar* fits every single requirement and draws more from anime influences than it does from cartoons.)

The influence doesn't just stop with serialized television shows, however. The tropes associated with anime are distinct and recognizable to an increasingly large audience, meaning they can be used for all sorts of creative storytelling. Popular action films such as *Kill Bill* and *The Matrix* adopt shounen-style fight sequences (*Kill Bill* even has an entirely anime backstory scene.) Anime tropes can even be deconstructed; one notable example just from this past year was the release of *Doki Doki Literature Club*¹², a free game/visual novel that took the internet by storm. The plot is simple: you play as a high school student in a literature club with three more students, each girls with their own distinct personalities. All of them are clearly interested in you, but the choices you make dictate which girl you inch toward a relationship with (sound familiar? It should.) What *Doki Doki Literature Club* does differently from its peers, though, is use these tropes to lull the player into a false sense of safety and comfort. It's a horror game disguised as

¹¹ Magical Girl Anime is a popular subgenre of fantasy anime that features a diverse group of magically-empowered young girls defending the world from supernatural forces. Usually the plot follows one girl in particular as she gains new powers, and learns to use them over the course of the show. Popular examples of this include *Sailor Moon* and *Madoka Magica*.

¹² While visual novels are a common house of anime tropes outside of animation, the word *doki doki* (a Japanese mimetic word that imitates a heartbeat) is a recognisable word to anime fans, hinting that the standard "formula" will be heavily used and expected.

an innocent, cutesy story that we've seen a thousand times. Slowly, it's revealed that something in the game is *terribly wrong* and these tropes get turned on their heads, ripping apart the players' expectations and crafting something truly unanticipated. (Salvato, 2017.) This type of game wouldn't have worked if the structure wasn't already in place, because it hinges on being initially familiar and disarming. As one of the most talked-about new games in 2018, the popularity and familiarity of anime tropes, as well as the strength of the community, is critical to the game's success.

Just as often, though, the influence is more subtle. Michael B. Jordan, an actor most recently known for playing Erik Killmonger in Marvel's *Black Panther*, (Feige, 2018.) modeled his costume after Vegeta from *Dragon Ball Z*. (Shimizu, 1989.) Jordan has displayed his love for anime, especially *shounen*, multiple times on social media. Here's a side-by-side comparison of

the two designs:

As anime becomes increasingly embedded in the mainstream and creators who grew up with anime become increasingly relevant, it's easy to predict that one day modeling after a major anime character will be as

common and accepted as modeling after Batman or Superman.

Of course, not every benefit is inherently positive. As people watch anime and become interested in learning Japanese, they can often learn it incorrectly; people don't speak like people

in TV shows do. Japanese is considered one of the most difficult languages for native English speakers to reach proficiency in. (Culture-ist, 2014.) Japanese has a more formalized structure for polite versus casual speech than English, and the line between them is more strongly enforced. The polite way you'd speak to a stranger (or anyone you aren't *very* casual with) in real life isn't common, and the subtle cultural mores of spoken language can be difficult through exaggerated media alone (especially when it's different enough to be measured as its own culture, as we parsed out earlier.) Learning Japanese through anime, with no study into how it's spoken in Japan, is a great way to offend strangers.

Back to Japan

The international consumption of anime is also having effects back in its mother country. The United States isn't the only nation that loves it, of course. China is also a large consumer of anime, as one example. (Cashen, 2017.) Still, the anime industry is growing at an international level and brought in over 2 trillion yen in 2017. (Hiromichi et al, 2018.) It has also brought benefits to the tourism industry. Coined "otaku¹³ tourism," droves of predominantly male fans travel to Japan to see the real-life sites of their favorite shows. After so many stylized depictions, wouldn't want to see and feel the real culture for themselves? In the eyes of these otakus, Japan becomes a holy site, the journey a religious pilgrimage. Washimiya, a small town in Japan's Saitama district, also happens to be the setting of the outlandishly popular *moe/slice-of-life* anime *Lucky Star*. Using this to their advantage, they embraced the appeal and created programs designed to "foster goodwill and mutual understanding between fans of the show and the local

¹³ *Otaku* is an interesting word when it comes to the anime industry. In the United States, it refers to an anime fan who has crossed a line from casual fandom to some level of dedication. The word is used to embrace the weird, nerdy niche that anime fans typically assume and is used in an endearing sort of way. In Japan, *otaku* is a heavy insult, typically referring to someone who has become an obsessed shut-in.

citizens.” These programs managed to make 1 billion yen in tourism in 2010, or about 91.7 million USD (by today’s conversion rates.) When most tourism focuses on the major cities like Tokyo or Osaka, otaku tourism shows the potential to breathe life into more rural cities with a smaller economy and a dwindling population.

While for many the buck stops at enjoying anime, or their interest in Japanese culture stagnates in the third dimension, some will go the extra mile. As more people are exposed to Japanese media, and Japan is regarded more and more as a media and entertainment hub for Americans, more people will naturally become interested in learning the language; on a personal level there’s more of a reason to learn it. Misa Yamamoto, the Japanese language professor at Appalachian State University, has been teaching Japanese in the United States since 2003. When I asked her if she’d seen an increased interest in the language during her time here, the answer was an immediate and resounding yes. (Yamamoto, 2018.) Those who study in an academic setting don’t only end with proficiency in a new language; they also learn a lot about Japan, Japanese culture, and may even connect with Japanese exchange students. They’re becoming more equipped to be a global citizen in an increasingly interconnected world.

In Conclusion

So, why *do* Americans like anime so damn much? It’s because anime was always, in part, designed to be appealing to an audience outside of Japan. It fills a niche in American media, tackling subjects that domestic entertainment still considers taboo. It gives us visually pleasing animation with content aimed at the mature viewer, without relying on sex, alcohol, and satire to set itself apart from the herd. We’re drawn in by its unique narratives, hooked by adorable

characters designed to be loved, and kept in by the thriving community. It provides compelling stories, a method of fantasy and escapism, a taste of a culture that's different from our own. This love for anime runs the risk of becoming a viewer's only window to Japan if they don't look further, which can lead to the fetishization and exotification of Japanese people and stereotypes. At the same time, however, it could potentially be used as a gateway to learning more, sparking a genuine interest for Japanese culture and language. As the exchange of entertainment media between the United States and Japan becomes more and more prevalent, the big question becomes: What's next?

As much as anime fans may jokingly beg for it to be outlawed in the United States, the fact is anime is here to stay. We're already starting to see live-action, American-made movies based on anime such as *Ghost in the Shell*. What are the next steps? Will we see anime designed more for the American viewer than the Japanese one, such as we see with some Korean pop idols? Can a shrinking Japanese village turn itself into the next Washimiya? Will the next big hit on Cartoon Network be indiscernible from a *shounen* anime? Will the *moe* industry expand, shrink, adapt to please an increasingly socially-conscious audience? How close are we to finally getting a competitive reality show about cosplay?

I can't answer all these questions beyond a disappointing: "We'll just have to wait and see." Trends are hard to predict and even harder to tame from outside the creator's sphere. At least while we're waiting, there's plenty of anime to binge.

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