Otaku: Representations of Fandom in Japanese Popular Culture

Nicolle Lamerichs

Fans of Japanese popular culture or "otaku" are often stereotyped as obsessive adult fans who are unable to connect with reality. First used in 1983 in a journalistic article by Nakamori Akio in a soft-porno magazine *Manga Burriko* (Neojaponism 2008), the term "otaku" was not widely popularized until the late 1980s. Its widespread use and negative connotation stems from the media's reporting on Tsutomu Miyazaki's "The Otaku Murder" in 1989. Between August 1988 and June 1989, Miyazaki had abducted, sexually molested, and killed four young girls in Tokyo.

This national incident alarmed the media. The killer had been a fan of anime and horror films. Mass media played into this image, desperately trying to explain what went wrong. Gailbraith and Christodoulou (2012) contextualize this negative media response:

> Commentators and experts explained that Miyazaki was alienated from human contact and common sense. He was dependent on media and technology. He was a sociopath and sexual deviant. Miyzaki Tsutomu was an "otaku." (p. 16)

The discourse on otaku in the 1990s continued along these lines and often reflected concerns in Japanese culture. Individualism had been pressed too far and young people were failing to assume adult responsibilities (Kinsella 1998).

In the new millennium, the discourse on otaku became less negative. Japan was in state of economic stagnation and otaku were spending money, thereby spurring innovation of technology and media. In his book *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*, Hiroki Azuma (2009) describes several key moments that influenced the millennial discourse, such as Miyazaki Hayao winning the Academy Award for *Spirited Away*; Murakami Takashi achieving recognition for otaku-like designs and the Japanese pavilion in the International Architecture exhibition of the Venice Biennale which was themed "otaku" (p. xi). While otaku culture is often portrayed as a youth culture, Azuma explains that its core consumers are mature and knowledgeable fans who have social freedom and are economically able (p. 3).

The terminology of otaku also helps shed light on this changing discourse. Otaku is an honorific second-person pronoun that literally means "your home" (Gailbraith and Christodoulou 2012, 20). This word is often used metaphorically, its literal translation being "you." In subcultures of science fiction, the word has been used sporadically in the 1970s and 1980s (ibid.). Examining the use of the word in different historical essays and accounts, Gailbraith and Christodoulou write: "We gather from a review of the discourse that the term 'otaku' is consistently associated with the private space of the home and difficulties communicating with others in public" (p. 21). Many language traditions adopted the word "otaku," but foreign fans tend to use it as a more positive term to emphasize their engagement with Japanese popular culture.

While foreign fans connote otaku with fans of anime and manga, the verb has broader connotations in Japan. Otaku is not solely reserved for media fans, but can mean any type of fandom or even hobby. Izumi Tsuji (2012), for instance, wrote in detail about the history of train otaku who enjoy train spotting and model-building. "Otaku," then, is a general term which describes being a fan of something. There are many types of otaku, but one that I will often refer to is *Fujoshi*, which is often equated with female fans of manga and anime. This term literally means "rotten girl" and is a self-mocking pejorative. Specifically, Fujoshi refers to fans of "boys' love": a genre of Japanese popular culture that includes homosexual themes (see also Hampton, in this volume).

While this study focuses on Japanese fiction, it positions itself as a fan study. This means that I actively engage with the theories and concepts that Anglo-American and European fan studies have developed. There are many lessons to be learned from Japanese culture that run parallel to phenomena in Western countries. Like other fan cultures, otaku are subjected to stereotyping both in journalism and politics, and in popular culture itself. Similar to Western fans, the otaku are characterized as overly invested or emotional. Such fans are considered escapists, who seek to flee from everyday life by indulging in fiction. From the study of otaku, we can gain more insights in how fandom is seen, represented, and subverted in mass media.

Drawing from studies on fans of Japanese popular culture (Galbraith 2012; Ito et al. 2012; Tamagawa 2012), I explore the cultural context and representations of otaku in Japanese fiction. I argue that while the political and journalistic discourse on otaku became more positive in Japan in the new millennium, popular culture itself still affirms some of the negative and gendered connotations that are associated with otaku culture.

Otaku in popular culture

Representations of fandom in popular and journalistic discourses are often far from positive or realistic. Fandom itself has a long and stigmatic history. The word "fan," after all, is an abbreviation of *fanaticus* or "fanatic," which has connotations of religious zeal and overactive engagement (Bailey 2005, 48–9). Fans have often been understood as overly invested, and representations of fan culture often emphasize this stigmatic history. Examples include the murderous fangirl from Stephen King's *Misery* (1987),

who kidnaps the writer whose work she admires; the nerdy antagonists in *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer* (Larbalestier 2002); or the obsessive Mel in *Flight of the Conchords* (2007–2008). The different chapters in this book make visible that fan representations are still highly diverse and often contested.

In his article on *Inspector Spacetime* fandom, Paul Booth (2013a) argues that the "representation of fans as active components of the media economy has increased, popularized, and valorized fandom across the media landscape" (p. 147). For example, a show such as *The Big Bang Theory* (2007–) may carry negative and gendered portrayals of geek culture, but the show also communicates this culture to outsiders. While largely shot at the character's apartments, the show also includes spaces such as comic shops, conventions, and universities, thereby demonstrating that fans are smart and able consumers. The sitcom is self-aware and exaggerates its fan characters in such a way that a geek audience can still identify with them.

The representation of Japanese fans has a different cultural context, but similar patterns emerge when compared to Western fandom. Historically, media fandom emerged almost simultaneously in the 1970s in rich, industrial countries such as North America and Japan (Ito et al. 2012). Japanese fans resemble Western fans in that they can be understood as an organized fandom and engage in creative practices together. On several levels, the representation of Japanese fans displays similar themes as its Western counterparts, such as social isolation, aggression, and sexual deviance. While there was a positive revaluation of otaku in the 2000s, the image of an otaku in Japan is still partly constructed as that of an inept fanboy (Galbraith 2012, 24–5).

Studying otaku, however, also means turning away from Japan. The popular culture of Japan is an exemplary nexus to study the construction of fan culture through the East Asian capital. Manga is a transmedial phenomenon that originates in comics but has spread to animation, games, and consumer articles (Steinberg 2012). This visual language has hailed consumers all over the world. Japan's global influence has also been described as a soft, transnational power. This influence of Japanese pop culture has been amply theorized as "cultural globalism" (Burn 2006), "transculturalism" (Hills 2002b; Jenkins 2006b, 156; Chin and Morimoto 2013; Noppe 2014), or even a "global space" (McLelland 2001). Though anime fandom is a global phenomenon, it is innately tied to local identity. All over the world, non-Japanese fans celebrate manga culture and contribute with their own fan practices, such as creating fan comics and costumes (Lamerichs 2013). In many countries outside Japan, "otaku" therefore carries more positive connotations, and signposts a creative cult-fan.

To understand how this increasingly global fan identity is captured within Japanese media, I will close-read various manga and anime.

Methodology

This research relies on ten titles published in the period 2001–2014. The sampling was based on a wide variety of manga and anime. I chose titles by reading synopses, watching snippets, and familiarizing myself with the content. Furthermore, the

sampling was based on availability. For the purpose of this study, titles needed to be translated in English officially. In one case (*Princess Jellyfish*), an English fan translation by Hachimitsu Scans was used, alongside the official French translation of the manga.

Many of the selected titles do not consist of one source text or primary text. The different texts belong to larger franchises and may consist of an anime, television series, or game. For the purpose of this chapter, I have analyzed the original text when it was available. In some cases, however, the source text was not translated or available. *Light novels* (popular young adult literature) especially are seldom published abroad, but inspire many manga and anime adaptations.

While I draw my primary material from one version of the text, I have also acquainted myself with the other versions by selectively analyzing other installments. In this process, I was guided by secondary texts, such as synopses by fans. This helped me to contextualize the fiction better and be aware of obvious differences in the plot and characterization among different media installments (Table 24.1).

Table 24.1 Selection of anime and manga titles.

Manga	Anime
Genshiken (Kyo, 2002–2006)	Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya (Kyoto Animation, 2006)
Comic Party (Inui, 2001–2005)	Welcome to N.H.K. (Gonzo, 2006)
Princess Jellyfish (Higashimura, 2008–)	Lucky Star (Kyoto Animation, 2007)
Spotted Flower (Kyo, 2009–)	Ouran High School Host Club (TBS, 2011)
Durarara!! (Nariga & Satorigi, 2009–)	Monthly Girls' Nozaki-kun (Dogakobo, 2014)

My selection consists of the manga *Genshiken* (Kyo, 2002–2006), *Princess Jellyfish* (Higashimura, 2008–), *Comic Party* (Inui, 2001–2005), *Spotted Flower* (Kyo, 2009–), *Durarara!!* (Nariga and Satorigi, 2009–), and the anime *Monthly Girls' Nozaki-kun* (Dogakobo, 2014), *Welcome to N.H.K.* (Gonzo, 2006), *The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya* (Kyoto Animation, 2006), *Lucky Star* (Kyoto Animation, 2007), and *Ouran High School Host Club* (TBS, 2011).

In my analysis of these series, I have paid attention to how otaku culture itself is represented: its spaces of consumption, common fan practices, and fan values. Moreover, I have examined how otaku characters are portrayed in terms of gender and sexuality, and in terms of social and creative activity. For the purpose of this chapter, I have divided the analysis into four sections that broadly cover the stereotypes and themes, namely the representation of otaku culture, gender and sexuality, social isolation, and violence.

Otaku culture

The sampled stories emphasize the social aspects of otaku culture and its spaces of consumption. Such sites may include maid cafes, manga libraries, and doujinshi shops

where fans come together to enjoy and buy fiction. Particular districts that function as cultural centers for otaku are also well represented, such as Akihabara, a shopping district in Tokyo for games, anime, manga, and computer technology.

Genshiken, for instance, follows the everyday lives of a college club for otaku, the "Gendai Shikaku Bunka Kenkyūkai" ("Society for the Study of Modern Visual Culture"), abbreviated to "Genshiken." The series starts when main character Kanji enrolls in college and becomes interested in otaku culture. His friends at the genshiken club bring him into this lifestyle slowly. Being a closeted otaku, his fellow-students give him tours of doujinshi shops, recommend erotic games, and eventually take him to Comiket, the largest fan event in Japan. Hardcore otaku Madarame warns Kanji: "Stay in line even if it kills you" (chapter 5, 6). They hunt for fanzines and regularly meet up.

Genshiken features new fans, such as Kanji, and also nonfans. The girlfriend of one of characters, Saki, has no interest in otaku culture but hangs out at the club frequently so she can see her boyfriend. She befriends the otaku, and while she adamantly insists on not being an otaku herself, becomes more interested in their culture. Saki often ends up at Comiket, and even engages in cosplay to amuse the others. She is a member of the community, even if she does not identify as otaku.

Being an otaku, then, means participating in this culture and self-identifying as a member of it. It means shopping at the right places, going to the right festivals, and expressing knowledge about Japanese pop culture. Comiket is framed as a core event in the sampled fiction. *Comic Party* was originally a "dating sim" (a video game genre that simulates romance) and is set in Tokyo Big Sight where Comiket is held. The characters attend a large comic festival, "Comic Party," which is clearly inspired by Comiket. The anime stars many female doujinshi artists, but focuses on a male main character that interacts with them. While female fans are actively represented and voiced in *Comic Party*, the otaku that we are supposed to identify with is male. Similar to *Genshiken*, then, *Comic Party* also genders its fans, but even goes a step further. Female fans are sexualized as the ideal romance candidates for heterosexual fanboys.

Intertextual connections between these shows also support a shared otaku culture and canon. *The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya* focuses on the members of the school club "SOS Brigade," who are interested in discovering supernatural entities and phenomena. The eccentric titular character Haruhi especially strikes as an otaku at points, obsessed with the supernatural. Early on in the show, it becomes clear that something is not quite right with Haruhi and finally she is revealed to be a Goddess. She has the power to alter reality, but her fantasies are kept in check by her friends. The character and the anime have become very popular in actual otaku culture. Fans started a mock religion in honor of the show, "Haruhiism," with its own rites and festivals. Popular in Japan and abroad, this phenomenon is similar to other mock religions that originated in popular shows, such as *Seinfeld*'s Festivus and dudism from *The Big Lebowski*.

Several anime follow up on the massive fandom of "Haruhi," most particularly *Lucky Star*, whose anime has been produced by the same studio as *The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya*. The character Konata Izumi especially appears to be a Haruhi fan, who has many figurines of the show, and attends live concerts of it.

That is to say, otaku have a large participatory culture that is represented in these stories. What is striking is that the stories are self-aware about this culture and parody fan practices and events frequently to draw attention to fandom itself. Through humor, exaggeration, and positive accounts of fandom, these stories validate their fan audience.

Social isolation

The different series play with themes such as reclusion from society, social awkwardness, and unemployment. The otaku characters are portrayed as people who have a lot of time to spend on fiction. Since they are often students (e.g., *Genshiken*) or unemployed adolescents (e.g., *Princess Jellyfish*, *Welcome to N.H.K.*), they are not well-off and have to save money to buy figurines, comics, and anime.

In the fiction that I examined, otaku are still stereotyped as loners who may be involved in otaku subculture to some degree, but generally stick to themselves. These representations may be carried out further to the degree that otaku are depicted as having phobias or mental illness. Fear to go outside, for instance, is a theme in many of the stories. In the first shots of *Princess Jellyfish*, main character Tsukimi walks through the crowded district Shibuya, in Tokyo. She is on her way to an exhibition of jellyfish, which she loves, but the busy streets of Shibuya are too much for her. Defeated, she goes home before she has seen it.

The rise of mental illness in Japan among young people and the phenomenon of "hikikomori" have led otaku to become even more stereotyped. Hikikomori (literally "being pulled inwards") refers to acute social withdrawal of adolescents or adults from social life, seeking extreme degrees of isolation. *Welcome to N.H.K.* particularly addresses these issues, because its main character Tatsuhiro Sato is a hikikimori. He has withdrawn from social life since he could not cope with the pressure of college. Now he lives in his student room and hardly ever goes outside. The first episode depicts him slowly going paranoid in his small room. One day, as he watched the network N.H.K., he comes to believe that this was all a conspiracy. N.H.K., he reasons, does not stand for Japanese Broadcasting Society (*Nippon Hoso Kyokai*) but for the Japanese Society for Hikikomori (*Nihon Hikikomori Kyokai*).

Tatsuhiro, however, gets support from his neighbor and high school friend Kaoru as well. Kaoru is a hardcore otaku, who gradually introduces Tatsuhiro into Japanese pop culture. Together, they aspire to produce a game that is easy to make, but profitable: a dating sim. For inspiration, they play a large amount of games, go to Akihabara, buy erotic figurines, and visit maid cafes.

Tatsuhiro slowly starts to become an otaku himself, immersed into the pornographic culture of manga and anime. Still, he cannot shake his fear of a conspiracy. This mass culture of excessive consumerism both fascinates and haunts him. These sentiments bring to mind Azuma's (2009) theory on otaku as postmodern animals. Inspired by Hegel's philosophy, he argues that modern Japanese subjects, characterized best by otaku, are constantly looking for meaning in Japanese society. Otaku find this meaning in the flat worlds of anime and manga. For Azuma, otaku represent a "virtual, emptied-

out" humanity, in which subjects navigate as if through a database (p. 95). The grand narratives of modernity are lost, and it becomes harder to connect to others.

Welcome to N.H.K. portrays these cultural fears. When Japanese youth cannot live up to the country's strict cultural expectations, they isolate themselves. Throughout the series, fandom becomes a way to escape the hardships of life. Ironically, the anime is also wary of the consumer practices and emotional attachment that define the otaku by phrasing it as a conspiracy. While the strongly visual and erotic culture of mass media seems enjoyable at first, it is not a remedy for social isolation. In fact, fiction encourages isolation throughout the show. The otaku become so emerged in entertainment and fiction that they only leave their apartments to go on a shopping spree in Akihabara.

The large participatory culture of otaku is well known and represented in fiction. Although otaku can enjoy many events together, pop culture still tends to portray them as introverted, and even isolated.

Gender

The stories represent female fans as different from male in terms of interest in practices. The depiction of female otaku often relies on fan practices that are associated with women. Cosplay and doujinshi in particular are hobbies that female otaku engage in. For instance, *Ouran High School Host Club* stars Renge who is depicted as a Fujoshi. Renge enjoys cosplay and often fantasizes about the other characters. She is also the editor of a fanzine of the host club (*Moe Moe Ouran Nikki*). These are fan practices commonly associated with women in Japan. Similarly, *Genshiken* has female characters that cosplay or draw doujinshi, while the men are more interested in collecting statues, building model kits, and playing video games. A male cosplayer is also part of the club, but his representation is clearly gendered. He creates costumes to make women look pretty and enjoys taking pictures of them in his outfits.

In line with these gendered fan practices, the series also depict female otaku as having other interests than male otaku. Fujoshi, for instance, are considered to be more obsessed with romance. They favor pairings and couples, and are frequently fans of boy's love. By contrast, the male fans adore different versions of one cute character. They may buy statues of their favorite character or *dakimakura* ("hug pillows"). Examples of these practices are found in *Welcome to N.H.K.* and *Genshiken*, among others.

A deconstruction of these gendered fan practices can be found in *Monthly Girls' Nozaki-kun*. This anime focuses on a student who is secretly the author of a popular romance manga under a female pen name. When a girl falls in love with him, he believes her to be his fan, and recruits her to help him produce the manga. *Monthly Girls' Nozaki-kun* portrays a male author of romance manga, who believes that all women admire his work, while in actuality they hardly care about it.

Princess Jellyfish most clearly discusses femininity and sexuality of otaku. The story depicts how a cross-dresser, Kurasoke, befriends a Fujoshi woman, Tsukimi, and her roommates. Tsukimi writes: "Happily, all of the residents are, like me…fujoshi!!" (chapter 1, 15). The women have different objects of devotions: trains, dolls, historical

drama series, and Korean pop culture. Since no men are allowed in the building, Tsukimi insists that Kurasoke always shows up in drag and pretends to be an actual woman for her roommates.

Being a comedy, *Princess Jellyfish* often uses fandom as the butt of its jokes. The women are portrayed as socially awkward, afraid of public places, single and unfeminine. Believing herself to be an unattractive otaku girl, Tsukimi often contemplates the femininity of herself and others. She is passionate about jellyfish, we found out, because her mother loved them and took her to see them at the aquarium. After her mother's passing, Tsukimi learned to cope with her grief by visiting the jellyfish at the pet store or aquarium. While jellyfish symbolize the mother–daughter relationship in this manga, they also tie into womanhood on another level. Ever since she was young, Tsukimi saw a resemblance between jellyfish and princesses. Jellyfish are like "lace from a princess dress," she reminisces.

When she first meets Kurasoke, Tsukimi fondly compares him to a princess, and a jellyfish. The cross-dressing Kurasoke is arguably the most feminine character in the manga, even though he does not identify as female: "I just have a taste in women's clothing. I'm normal" (chapter 2, 13). Kurasoke's femininity is important, but not linked to a specific subcultural or sexual identity. He often emphasizes that he is not a drag queen or queer, but a man who enjoys wearing female clothing. In drag, he uses a male vocabulary in Japanese by referring to himself as "ore," much to the confusion of Tsukimi's roommates who code him as female. *Princess Jellyfish*, then, is clearly not just a story about female fans, but about what it means to perform femininity.

While female fans are adequately visible in Japanese fan culture, the stories show a gendered account of fandom. Female fans are often cast in the roles of side-characters, and when they are main characters, they are partly coded as unfeminine and unsocial.

Sexuality

In mass media, being an otaku has been aligned with sexual deviance and inexperience. Being a sexual deviant is often seen as inherent to being an otaku. This has a gendered component. While female otaku may be coded as asexual, and swooning over homosexual content, male otaku are often seen as masturbating to erotic games. Sexual inexperience is often the starting point of the stories. *Princess Jellyfish*, for instance, is a romantic comedy, rife with assumptions about otaku sexuality. They all live in one apartment building, "amamitzukan." They call themselves "amar" as an abbreviation, but "ama" is written in the kanji for "nun." Being a Fujoshi, then, is explicitly aligned to discourses of asexuality and celibacy in this story.

The Fujoshi in this manga are virgins, which is quickly joked to be the most sensitive topic that you can ever discuss with a female otaku. In chapter 2, Tsukimi lists the "best 5 ranking questions you must not ask a Fujoshi," which is ranked by: "Are you a virgin?" It also includes: "Have you ever gone out with a guy? What kind of make-up do you use? Want to go to a sale at 109? Why don't you try contact lenses?" (p. 15). This

list is filled with gendered stereotypes about female fans, who are framed as improper women and sexually inexperienced.

The idea that otaku find fictional characters more attractive than actual people—either on a visual, physical, or emotional level—is common in the stories that I investigated. In Japanese, this is called *nijikon*, which is often translated as a 2D complex. For example, in *Genshiken*'s fourth chapter, the guys get excited over a manga character. This confuses nonfan Saki: "I don't get it. How could you get excited over a picture like this?" (p. 98). Hardcore otaku Madarame explains to her that they are "guys with a 2D complex," who are interested in fictional female characters. The 2D complex emerges in other series as well. In the sixth episode of *Welcome to N.H.K.*, Tatsuhiro refers to this complex when he hears that his otaku best friend is dating. Envisioning Kaoru with his many figurines, hugging pillows and manga, Tatsuhiro believes that he could not possibly be dating a real girl: "After he dragged me into the world of 2D, he himself gets a flesh-and-blood chick? Unforgivable!"

While most of the cases stigmatize otaku sexuality, the manga *Spotted Flower*, by Shimoko Kio of *Genshiken*, focuses on the everyday life of a newly wed otaku and his pregnant, ordinary wife. Like any couple, they face the challenge of parenthood and see their life change. This also affects their fan behavior. They quarrel about how to redecorate their spare room—stocked with collections of doujinshi and figurines—into a baby room.

Becoming a parent, then, creates insecurities for the otaku character. In the fifth chapter, he admits his fears of having a son: "I'm just fully aware of how hopeless I am as a role model, that's all." His wife reassures him: "You say you don't think you can raise your son right, but you're not going to be raising him alone. I'm here too. You used to be a hopeless otaku, but now you're married, you've had sex, and you've even gotten your wife pregnant with your kid. How you explain this incredible turn of events?" Being an otaku, and a father, is still presented as an anomaly in this scene, as if a "hopeless otaku" is not entitled to be a spouse.

For otaku, sexual deviance appears to be the norm. *Spotted Flower* stands out as a manga that features a mature otaku that has settled down, but at points returns to similar problematic imagery as the other titles. Fans are believed to be either desperate, single fanboys, or virgin fangirls. While they are interested in erotic fiction, otaku are believed to shy away from intimacy and sex.

Violence

In a popular discourse, otaku are also perceived to be violent. Several incidents, particularly the before-mentioned Otaku Murder, heavily influenced how otaku are seen and understood. The selected cases differ from the discourses in journalism and mainstream media. In manga and anime themselves, otaku are seldomly represented as violent. There are some exceptions that play with this theme, though, such as *Durarara!!*

Originally a light novel, the anime and manga of *Durarara!!* tells the story of an underworld courier in Tokyo's Ikebukuro neighborhood. The main characters are

involved in an Internet-based gang called The Dollars and involved with some of the most dangerous people in Ikebukuro. *Durarara!!* features some fantasy elements, but primarily focuses on the underworld in Tokyo. The show has a large cast, but most relevant for this research are the otaku Erika and Walker, who are both members of The Dollars gang.

Erika and Walker are first introduced when they are walking across the street with a life-size carton plait cut-up of a manga character. They are trying to force the cut-up into their van and take it home. The two of them are clearly geeks, who make references to their favorite stories continuously, and regardless of who they are with.

While Erika and Walker both come across as bright and enthusiastic people, they have a darker side, though, which has been toned down for the anime. In the manga, they like to perform torture by letting their victims choose a light novel or manga to inspire their methods. For example, in the seventh chapter of the *Durarara!!* manga, Erika and Walker torture a business man in their van. They let him choose from a selection of manga: "My recommendation is *Darker than Black*!" Erika smiles (p. 20). The victim chooses the seemingly innocent *Black Butler* manga, which amuses the otaku. In the story, main character Ciel has a demonic eye, and they choose to re-enact this. During the graphic torture scene, the otaku threaten to carve a pentagram into the man's eye. While they approach the eyeball, they explain their sadism. They emphasize that "ames, manga, and anime are not to blame" (p. 23). They could have taken inspiration elsewhere, be it period drama or educational text books. "It's us that are twisted" (p. 24).

While *Durarara!!* portrays its otaku in violent scenes, their acts serve a purpose. Even during the torture scenes, it is made explicit that popular culture itself is not to blame. Erika and Walker are sadists and gang members. They are not violent otaku, but professionals. While their methods are inspired by manga and anime, they emphasize that fiction did not trigger their aggression. Through these scenes, the author also provides an image that counters the moral panic around otaku in Japanese culture. Violence is not triggered by media content, but has more complex social and psychological causes.

Conclusion

Otaku have long been stigmatized. Mass media have represented members of this community as sexual deviants, loners, and aggressors. What these manga and anime show is that being otaku means adopting a very social and unique lifestyle too. Otaku perform their fan identity by demonstrating specific knowledge, but also by sharing spaces such as the stores in Akihabara or Comiket's Tokyo Big Sight. By foregrounding the participatory culture of manga fandom, the cases do show that being a fan means more than being isolated or lonely. Through inside jokes and references, the stories validate otaku culture and show its diversity.

Considering that the audience of this fiction partly consists of otaku, and that its creators have often been fans or fan artists themselves, it is striking that the stories do

not correct certain stereotypes more. The representation of otaku in terms of gender and sexuality especially has hardly enabled new readings and understandings about these fans. Sex-positive imagery of otaku, for instance, is difficult to find. Still, there are also counterexamples, such as *Spotted Flower*, that show otaku as aging fans with a family life. While Japanese popular culture partly reproduces negative imagery of otaku, many of the stories that I examined also show corrective traits. By framing the subculture and spaces of otaku, these representations serve as a helpful introduction for new fans and outsiders.