The Creation, Sharing, and Promotion of Japanese Popular Culture on Tumblr: Exposure to Internationality in Early Adulthood

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THE CREATION, SHARING, AND PROMOTION OF JAPANESE POPULAR CULTURE ON TUMBLR: EXPOSURE TO INTERNATIONALITY IN EARLY ADULTHOOD

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Abstract

New media technologies enable people all around the globe to be exposed to a larger variety of cultural products. Social media networking and blogging sites like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, WordPress and Tumblr, have offered users easy access to media from different cultures. Images and symbols inspired by Japanese culture is just one example of cultural products that are gaining popularity among the Internet users. This research presents a study of people who regularly create, share, comment or otherwise engage with the cultural products related to Japanese media and entertainment such as anime, manga, and other art on the micro blogging site of Tumblr. Generally, the users who are interested in engaging with such content are young people all around the globe. It can be argued they are part of growing “global youth culture.” The goal of this study is to examine what kinds of Japanese inspired digital texts and symbols are being created and shared by this kind of user and to examine in what ways this kind of media is contributing to constructing a shared sense of belonging to global youth culture and articulating their identities. This research’s findings suggest that regular exposure to content from other cultures may have a positive effect on young people's interest in different cultures and thus form more fluid cultural identities that are open to global collaboration and cooperation.

*Keywords:* Japan, communication, social media, Tumblr, intercultural communication
The Creation, Sharing, and Promotion of Japanese Popular Culture on Tumblr: Exposure to Internationality in Early Adulthood

Thanks to the rise in technology being made available to more people globally, people have the opportunity to be introduced to more information from different countries than ever before. A variety of social networking websites including Facebook, LinkedIn, Tumblr, Pinterest, Instagram, and Twitter have given Internet users a chance to mingle with cultures other than their own, especially in cases where these the users would never have the opportunity for exposure without the help of the Internet. One of the activities users of social media are engaged in is blogging: blogging is a habit used on the Internet to create, write about, and share content that the particular blogger is interested in.

A large number of users on the Internet are adolescents and young adults (Duggan, 2015), who are impressionable and are often open to new ideas and experiences. Therefore, researchers have been interested in studying young users of social media with a goal to understand how their voluntary exposure to global content and interactions with users from different cultures affect their ability to learn about other cultures (Elola & Oskoz, 2008). This study is particularly focusing on blogging as the object of analysis because blogging allows users with common interests to interact more intimately with one another, and sometimes it (blogging) leads to creating a sense of community among users, even in educational settings (Top, 2012).

To contribute to this growing body of research on blogging and how it is instrumental to young adults connecting with others from different cultures, this study examined media content produced and shared by a group of users who are active on Tumblr and who share a common interest in Japanese culture and cultural products. Specifically, this study is a content analysis of blogs and their posted, shared, and created content on Tumblr over a period of time from February 13th, 2016 to February 28th, 2016. The study specifically focused on Tumblr, because it
is an increasingly popular site for blogging multimedia content among millennials (the target demographic for the purpose of this study). It can be accessed on a variety of devices and operating systems: thus, it is accessible to a variety of users. Photos and animated images (gifs) are among some of the most common forms of posts users regularly generate on Tumblr. Because Tumblr is a social media platform which has the capability to host a myriad of multimedia, users can express their interests in cultural products through the means of many different types of posts. The frequent sharing of cultural products allows for an in-depth analysis of what kinds of topics and cultural products are consumed and shared by young bloggers.

Images and cultural symbols (both tangible and metaphorical) originated in Japanese or inspired by Japanese culture is just one example of cultural products available to Internet users across the globe. However, different forms of Japanese popular culture are becoming increasingly popular among young adults. Popular Japanese media and entertainment exist in the form of *anime*, *manga*, or other Japanese culture-inspired art is responsible for captivating users thousands of miles away from the island nation. Scholars suggested the reason why people in other countries have become interested in learning more about Japan is due to its history which is deeply rooted in an ancient culture (Ito & Crutcher, 2014). On the other hand, most contemporary Japanese entertainment has been inspired by western culture and media in one form or another (Bolton, 2014).

To provide a detailed analysis of media content consumed by the users on Tumblr, this research focused on several different types of media related to Japanese culture which people are regularly exposed to online in a social network environment. These media types were chosen based on their popularity among users. Additionally, this research kept in consideration some of
the ways through which each cultural product was influenced by western culture, the other way around (with Japanese content inspiring that of western material).

Part of the importance of this research exists is because this phenomenon has not received much attention from interdisciplinary scholars, even though the phenomenon seems to demonstrate an intricate relationship between disciplines such as: history, media studies, communication, and social psychology. The bloggers who seem to be interested in this topic represent an important youth group who take an interest in continuously being surrounded by global work by blogging and specifically sharing Japanese media to make connections with other youth around the globe. By becoming interested in global products early in life, younger populations may grow up wanting to work within industries related to international business and/or enterprise. More research needs to be done to understand the behaviors of these groups, and perhaps there are lessons to be learned from them that could contribute to a better understanding of cultural issues in global communities.

As such, this research explored some of the important factors when it comes to people’s decisions to share foreign content on the Internet through their blogs, and how they originally become interested in things from other places. In the era of cosmopolitanism and globalization, a rising interest for things from other places is an incredibly positive thing and should not be overlooked simply because the area of research is not understood. Even though this research focused on the sharing habits of people who post and share Japanese content, as mentioned above, it may also be applicable to determine and explain the sharing habits of those who post things outside of Japanese media content. Building off previous research (Ōtsuka & Lamarre, 2013), the project expanded this new frontier of interest which has not yet been thoroughly
explored, due to its relatively new incidence in society. The study detailed throughout this writing specifically addressed the following research questions:

1. How did the people who share this content initially get introduced to Japanese media?
2. What sorts of content do people share on Tumblr?
3. What trends motivate people to share the things they decide to post?
4. Is there any way to tell how people are exposed to the content they share?
5. Are there any observable patterns which can be predicted or hypothesized just by following these blogs for a short time?

These questions are designed to address some of the larger questions related to the growing popularity of Japanese cultural products. What is it about *anime* and *manga* that continuously captivates its enthusiasts thousands of miles away from its land of origin? Is it perhaps the unique patterns, designs, and fantastic colors which make people from everywhere sit in awe in the presence of such media? Might there a deeper, older connection to the foreign media people consume which provokes a sense of distant familiarity? Much of Japanese pop-culture have been influenced by western media and entertainment in one way or another. This study illuminates some of these relationships between the media of different cultures and explores the intricate connection between the role of social media and interaction between users of different cultures in this process.

The paper is organized into several sections. The first section reviews the relevant literature on blogging, the role of social media in creating global communities, and issues related to youth identity and specifically global youth phenomenon. Following the literature review, the second section details the method of the study which transitions into the third section, which reports the results of the study. The next section examines implications of the study and
discussion. The paper ends with concluding remarks about suggested future research on this subject.

**Literature Review**

As a basic introduction to Japanese popular culture for the uninitiated who may require informational descriptions to better understand the context of this paper, the researcher provides a brief cross-sectional analysis and review of some of the most popular cultural products among consumers. Based upon the novel type of research the researcher intended to employ, a selection of studies featuring mixed methodologies including quantitative, qualitative, interpretive, and critical paradigms were chosen for reading. Studies featuring content reviews of digital texts and content were especially valuable in the cultivation of the researcher’s methodology, which concerns the observation and analysis of digital media produced by multiple users (Armantano, Godoy, & Amandi, 2012; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011; Primack, 2016). Because some of the future intended research includes the use of surveys containing questions which mine information dealing with blogging and culture from participants, previous studies which employed this methodology in this context were also found to be helpful in the development process of the questionnaire (Hetz, Dawson, & Cullen, 2015; Mirandilla-Santos, 2011).

**Japanese Culture Products Popular Among Young Adults**

Before delving into deeper detail about the different types of entertainment and pop-culture through media that are offered from Japan, this section will provide a brief overview of the different kinds of media forms are normally shared by the social media users interested in Japanese culture. Japanese cultural products which not only share similarities between many other countries but also have turned international include (but are not limited to): *anime, manga, video games, music, movies, soap operas, fashion, cuisine, and literature*. After the end of WWII,
Japan was required to reconstruct its identity as a country and culture. Because of this, some Japanese today might say that they are not entirely sure what it means to be “Japanese,” and believe that their identities are possibly shaped by how other countries view them through the media and arts (Slaymaker, 2002). For example, musicians such as Sakurai Atsushi of Buck-Tick enjoy writing lyrics which deal with the topics of beauty and existentialism.

*Anime - アニメ*

Perhaps one of the most well-known forms of media, frame-by-frame *anime* encompasses a large body of animated programs which include short serials composed of 30-minute episodes as well as full-length movies. *Anime* was originally inspired by several cartoons produced over in the West, chiefly cartoon animation from the United States. Inspiration was drawn from classic cartoons like Tom and Jerry in addition to cartoons through the Warner Brothers such as Bugs Bunny. As free-lance writer and enthusiast Simon Richmond says, “just as the bubble of Japan’s economy of the 1980s was about to burst, a bomb of a more positive nature detonated, with the premier of *Akira*” (Richmond, 2009, 36). As suggested in the quote, the movie *Akira* served as a major catalyst for modern *anime*, even though several different serials and movies pre-date *Akira* (Bolton, 2014). *Akira* also played a major part in introducing the western world to *anime*, which would later become important for Japanese artists and writers to globalize their brands.

*Manga - 漫画*

Literally meaning “pride imagery” in Japanese (by translating each of the two characters individually), there is no true translation of *manga* from Japanese into English (Brienza, 2009). “Comic” is probably the most accepted definition for manga in English. Instead of dwelling on its meaning, however, its description is far more familiar to the western world: entertainment through the means of comics (whether bound in a book, or found in a newspaper). *Manga* in
Japan was made especially popular by Tezuka Osamu’s works such as that of *Astro Boy* (Power, 2009), but similar to *anime*, its origins of inspiration came from the West through comics, books, and movies made through Disney (Ōtsuka & Lamarre, 2013). Today, several genres within *manga* exist such as: romance, comedy, and fantasy.

Because *manga* serves as a physical form of visual entertainment, certain feelings and sound effects cannot be transmitted very easily through conventional language techniques. Such non-verbal cues like “bang!” “pop!” and “zoom” are used in American comics, but is there a similar form of language used in Japanese *manga*? Yes: through the means of onomatopoetic language, or “sound words” which mimic different sounds and often feelings simply by using the word itself. Examples include: “pika pika” (used for something shining brightly), “doki doki” (imitating the sound of a steady heartbeat, especially when a character is startled or excited), and “goro goro” (to demonstrate the sound of rolling thunder). Using these words and expressions in *manga* can help transmit feeling through non-verbal language that would otherwise go unknown if it was not for their addition.

Onomatopoetic words can also enhance the experience of international readers, by being able to offer them the same experience native Japanese readers have when enjoying a “visual novel,” another way *manga* can be translated (Feng & Halloran, 2014). Throughout the field study (discussed later), the researcher quickly found out that *manga* is, by far, the easiest form of pop-culture media unique to Japan that one can readily purchase in the Northwestern Ohio and Southeast Michigan regions.

**Video Games - テレビ・ゲーム**

Some of the most well-known distributors and creators of the technology used in video games, a ubiquitous form of entertainment around the globe among younger generations, also
have its roots in Japan (Ikuine, 2012). Like manga, video games offer its consumers a visual form of entertainment while adding the element of sound and most importantly: interactivity. However, the topics and types of video games range from interest depending on the regions in which they are sold and played. Genres of video games popular among the Japanese public versus the genres popular among the North American public very greatly, even though there is some common ground between the two cultures: they both love Mario, Pokémon, The Legend of Zelda, and Final Fantasy.

Music (Japanese and Western) - 音楽（和楽と洋楽）

Music has always been an important part of Japanese culture as well as the culture in different countries abroad. In just about every place around the world, music plays an essential role in defining one’s culture through words, song, and dance. People born and raised in post-war Japan were faced with a large question of identity, chiefly after the atrocities which took place throughout the duration of World War II, but also due to the result of the modernization phenomenon. Because of this, many people started to cling to whatever shreds of Japanese “identity” they could, and make traditions anew by creating hybrids of western culture (North American and European) mixed with Japanese aesthetics (Sheppard, 2008). Muse played a huge role in the recovery and perseverance of the Japanese public as well as helping people cope with changing times. Just like how the previous forms of Japanese pop-culture were inspired by Western counterparts, a very large portion of modern Japanese music was inspired by genres made in the West, and transmitted back to the West with a uniquely Japanese vibe (Porzio, 2013). Artists like The Beatles, Pink Floyd, The Clash, Black Sabbath, Prince, and Michael Jackson inspired musicians all throughout Japan with new forms of rock, progressive, punk, metal, and pop genres respectively (Mattar, 2008).
Visual-Kei, the brain child of several bands like X-Japan and Buck-Tick in the early 1980’s, was inspired by each of the aforementioned genres albeit in unique ways. Many of the paramount bands from the 80’s (such as Buck-Tick) are still active today to release new works. Unfortunately, music from Japan was the absolute most difficult form of media for me to find in Northwestern Ohio, with further details mentioned in the next section.

The ubiquitous nature of popular music makes for a somewhat unusual topic in the field of intercultural communication, but it is almost impossible to deny the importance of popular culture (and music) which exists in nearly every country in the world (Avant-Mier, 2014). Despite the lack of literature dedicated to the topic of popular music within communication studies, different fields of academia merit the importance of music as culture, such as the field of ethnomusicology (Calhoun, 2005). In terms of music, culture, and communication, traditional elements of each country cultivate the final product of popular culture, and what the people of each country want to consume in great enough amounts to be considered popular. Learning more about a country’s popular culture (and music) is an effective way to become more interculturally competent in global contexts.

A darker side of the popular media in Japanese culture is that millions of young people in Japan are becoming so obsessed with consuming anime (and manga) that they become part of the hikikomori sub-culture, or recluses who have chosen to withdraw from society (Morton, 2005). A cultural mistranslation occurs here in the case that otaku is a term of endearment in the West, suggesting that a particular person is an enthusiast of manga, anime, and video games. Otaku within the Japanese context, however, represents someone who would be closer to the hikikomori group, or someone who has little to no contact with the outside world and lives in his or her room. Average viewers of anime outnumber the hikikomori, however, and can live a
normal life just like anyone else. Viewers of *anime* can be of all ages and enjoy many genres from mystery to history.

**The Connection between Social Media, International Culture, and Interest**

A general definition of intercultural competence is as follows: the understanding and flexibility required when faced with differences on cultural and societal contexts. In more specific terms, cultural competence is “a set of cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills and characteristics that support effective and appropriate interaction in a variety of cultural contexts” (Bennett, pp. 95-110, 2009). Intercultural blogging arose in a topic of interest in Elola and Oskoz’s study (2008) in an effort to stimulate cultural competence in classroom environments using foreign languages. The study consisted of observing the blogging habits of students within two Spanish language classes and their interactions with one another (with one class in the United States and the other in Spain). Each respective instructor presented the project as a novel idea for practicing students’ foreign language skills while speaking to real-life students online in the social media context. Using this method of instruction resulted in both classes’ students studying effectively with people their age from across the word, but also augmented the students’ cultural knowledge and awareness. Taking advantage of social media technology, in this case, produced favorable results among the students in both the United States and Spain; the researchers suggest that such alternative learning styles should be employed in the future in any academic context.

Additional studies have confirmed the connection between activism and blogging through the means of a survey, when mining information which determined the involvement of college-aged students with regards to political affairs in a blogging context and atmosphere (Mirandilla-Santos, 2011). Connections between social media activity (such as blogging) and global
involvement were further understood through young populations interacting with one another on the grounds of similar interest, and later similar concern. Other research observed that youths who were interested in Japanese anime were more likely to choose Japanese as a second language, or were otherwise inspired to learn more about a culture which produced something which they were interested in (Armour, & Iida, 2016). As such, the phrase “global youth culture” finds a satisfactory place within this research, from youths’ interests to their wider global involvement (Allison, 2006). The following section describes the study design and the process of data collection and analysis.

### Study Design and Methods

The researcher used two main research methods within the research field observation and content analysis (done on a participatory observational level).

#### Field Observation

Before the researcher initiated the study, the primary intent of the study was composed of the following question, before manifesting into a deeper process of research:

1. How did the people who share this content initially get introduced to Japanese media?

To begin research process, the researcher conducted physical field observations (in person) in order to better understand the availability and popularity of Japanese cultural products in and around the local area (Northwestern Ohio and Southeastern Michigan). The researcher has extensive experience with consuming Japanese cultural products (such as products from the categories listed above in the literature review) and has a general understanding of others who are interested in Japanese media. Moreover, the researcher has spent six years studying the Japanese language on a conversational and academic level in order to better understand some of the themes which commonly occur throughout Japanese cultural products (like anime/manga
serials). Because both Japanese language and culture are inseparable on all levels, the researcher simultaneously learned about key elements of language with respect to culture. Additionally, it was due to this interest and dedication to Japanese culture which assisted the researcher to connect with the locations where she conducted the observations and nearby customers; common interest is an integral part of associative identity.

The locations where field observation was performed include the following: Barnes and Noble within the Shops at Fallen Timbers, Mirai Japanese Bookstore and Market, three different Hot Topic retail locations (one in Novi, Michigan, one in Dearborn, and another in Toledo, Ohio), throughout the campus of Bowling Green State University, within various clothing retailers in the aforementioned malls and shopping centers, and on the Internet (in general). Hot Topic was chosen for a suitable location to conduct field observation due to their rise in offering Japanese merchandise such as clothing, shoes, jewelry, socks, stationary, candy, etc. Among the three managers asked during the research, each one (unaffiliated with the others) reported that at least 25% to 30% of their repeat clientele consist of people searching for Japanese cultural products. Because the store has been offering more Japanese cultural products in order to suit the needs of their dedicated customers, their sales have seen a steady rise, even throughout difficult economic times. Merchandise on the retail store’s website (hottopic.com) was also reviewed for consideration of Japanese product availability to interested and target consumers. As such, field observation was primarily used as a method to answer the first research question: how people who share this (type of) content initially get introduced to Japanese media.

**Content Analysis**

Utilizing the interpretive research paradigm, this study used a content analysis method to analyze the media and content which people are sharing through their blogs on Tumbl. This was
the second method utilized in this study. This method is appropriate to use for the study of how Japanese inspired art is utilized by bloggers as it allows for the close examination of each blog post and the visual and written material associated with it which affords flexibility of deconstructing the meaning behind each of the items bloggers choose to share. The researcher of this project has been an active user of Tumblr since May 2012 and has operated four blogs since registration, resulting in them being a credible researcher within the blogging sphere on Tumblr.

With respect to the research questions asked at the beginning of the study, the researcher utilized content analysis (outlined above) in order to answer the research questions 2-5. More specifically, the following questions were answered using content analysis method:

2. What sorts of content do people share on Tumblr?

Because various themes, topics, and media were seen throughout the timeframe of research, content analysis was used by the researcher to organize and review the different types of content shared by bloggers selected for this analysis.

3. What trends motivate people to share the things they decide to post?

Continuing from the previous question, the researcher clearly discovered why certain topics were being shared and when as a result of cause and effect; for example, when a famous actor passed away sometime around the timeframe of research, users were more likely to post content related to the actor’s works.

4. Is there any way to tell how people are exposed to the content they share?

The use of content analysis greatly assisted this section, with both post origin and post circulation among the network of users.
5. Are there any observable patterns which can be predicted or hypothesized just by following these blogs for a short time?

This question utilized themes which appeared throughout the analysis.

**Content Analysis: Study Design**

As mentioned in the introduction of this manuscript, Tumblr was chosen as the selected social media platform for research due to its rising popularity among members of the target demographic, and also because users from different countries are able to access a fully functioning version of the site from around the world. Additionally, Tumblr offers general translations of its interface in 16 different languages including Spanish, Mandarin Chinese, and Arabic, which are among the most-spoken languages worldwide. The site currently hosts over 290 million blogs (some of which are run by the same user who operate more than one blog), is home to nearly 135 billion posts, and supports the posting of thousands of posts per day from various platforms (Android, iPhone, Windows, and Mac devices). Because Tumblr has a dedicated system which encourages its users to follow one another in order to create networks of people with similar interests, Tumblr serves as a perfect tool to conduct research on what kinds of Japanese popular culture college-aged people share, and potential reasons why.

In completing the content analysis, the researcher employed the following steps:

**Step 1:** find a congregate of bloggers interested in Japanese culture who:

- are college-aged, (between the ages of 18 and 30 plus or minus a few years as the rise of non-traditional students should not be ignored),
- post or reblog Japanese popular culture content, and
are active on a somewhat regular basis (posting at least once weekly or a few times per month; the blog must be active enough to post at least one post during the research timeframe).

**Step 2**: follow the blogs and observe posted content. Upon following the blogs, the researcher began to keep a daily journal in order to record how many posts were observed during a 24-hour period of time (illustrated within Table 1 which appears on the following page). The researcher also took time to review each blog and their respective posts from older dates in order to determine whether or not the blog in question would be applicable to the study.

**Step 3**: study themes and trends observed by bloggers. Within the journal described above, the researcher kept track of what sorts of content the blogs were posting and began to code the findings by generalizing the posts’ themes into subjects which were popular among the blogs and networks for that day, which included up to ten different themes per day.

**Step 4**: review findings. Once the data was collected, the researcher determined that the findings were mostly qualitative in nature, since the observed themes were generalized and could not be converted to a numerical format to accurately represent the volume of posts which represented each topic). Even so, the number of themes could be counted, even if each theme could not be ranked on a scale of popularity and occurrence frequency.

**Unit of analysis**

The study uses a blog (or blogs) as a unit of analysis. All content included in a blog was considered for analysis; this included all textual, audial, and visual material provided in the blog by its creator (or sharer). In the specific context of this study, 50 main units of analysis were involved in the analysis with those blogs generating (either creating or sharing) 1,782 posts, or subunits of analysis.
**Time Frame**

After choosing Tumblr as the target social media platform for analysis, the researcher began to follow a variety of blogs whose operators were interested in and were actively posting or sharing content dealing with Japanese culture and popular culture during the timeframe of research. 15 days’ worth of time was set aside strictly for the analysis of the followed blogs and their posts between February 13th, 2016 and February 28th, 2016 and consisted of the researcher following 50 different blogs with the use of a Tumblr (blog) owned and operated by the researcher. Users from 11 different countries operate the blogs, with a large part of the population originating from English and Spanish-speaking countries. The aforementioned timeframe was selected particularly due to its separation from major holidays around the world: Christmas had occurred two months in the past, the Chinese New Year celebrations were dwindling down, Valentine’s Day is not widely accepted as a formal holiday (Close & Zinkhan, 2006), and Easter was still a month away. Because there were no major holidays during the timeframe, the researcher did not have to worry about the potential of posts’ topics about holidays dominating the overall trend of the study, and thus force a major bias over what was and was not posted.

**Data Collection/Data Sample**

During the selected timeframe, the followed blogs’ users posted a total of 1,782 posts with an average of 119 posts occurring on each day of the research. The greatest amount of posts observed on a single day was on February 15th with 189 posts, while the least amount of posts occurred on February 22nd and February 27th with just 88 posts. While some blogs posted much more frequently than others, the daily mean was 2.38 posts per day, per blog. The blogs’ users originate from the following countries (in no order of population concentration in the sample):
The United States of America, Argentina, Russia, France, China, Taiwan, Moldova, Japan, Mexico, Canada, and Italy. In general, most users utilized English as a common language for communication, but many also used their native languages in text posts and tags (which appear at the bottom portion of posts for the purpose of sorting themes). Some of the other languages utilized include: Spanish, Russian, French, Dutch, Italian, Chinese, and Japanese. For the most part, the selected sample included users between the ages of 18 and 31, with most users falling between the ages of 24 and 26.

While the selected sample of users originate from various parts of the world in different time zones (from PST or Pacific Standard Time to JST, or Japan Standard Time) which resulted in a 17-hour time difference between some users, most posts occurred from 9am EST (Eastern Standard Time) to 2am EST. At the end of selected time period, researcher collected information from 50 blogs that fit the parameters of the study (illustrated briefly in Table 1). The next section will explain data analysis process in addition to how the research answered proposed questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blog Name*</th>
<th>Origin</th>
<th>1st/2nd Language</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Student (Y/N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blog #1</td>
<td>Argentina</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>24-25</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog #2</td>
<td>California, U.S.</td>
<td>American English</td>
<td>25-26</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog #3</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>French</td>
<td>25-26</td>
<td>N**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog #4…</td>
<td>Netherlands…</td>
<td>English/Dutch…</td>
<td>24-25…</td>
<td>Y…</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Omitted here to protect the individual privacy of each user
**Recent post-secondary graduate; plans to continue school later

Table 1
Data analysis

Once the data sample was selected, the researcher used qualitative content analysis method to analyze the data. The analysis began with a coding sheet where the researcher recorded the following attributes about each blog: how many posts were observed during a 24-hour period of time for that specific date (one day, in EST, where the researcher resides and conducted the study), and which major themes were post talked about or shared on that date.

While the definition of some themes is relatively subjective (in other words, subject to perception), most themes were very clear: if a user posted an animated gif of a character from an *anime*, it was clear that the post in question was about *anime*. The same goes for other posts which included songs other users could click on to listen to: those posts were primarily about music. Table 2 on the following page serves as an example illustrating how the researcher took record of the conducted research using Microsoft Excel®.

In completing recording of attributes for each blog, the researcher identified the theme of each blog. Overall, more than 65 unique themes emerged throughout the timeframe of the research, with some themes appearing more frequently than others (such as topics dealing with Japanese popular culture, as would be expected).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th># of posts per day</th>
<th>Theme 1</th>
<th>Theme 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>02/13/2016</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>Anime</td>
<td>U.S.A. Politics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02/14/2016</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>Valentine’s Day</td>
<td>LGBTQ+ Rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02/15/2016</td>
<td>189</td>
<td>Science (physics)</td>
<td>Japanese music</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02/16/2016</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>Cats…</td>
<td>Alan Rickman…</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Average daily mean for posts = 119.*

*Ellipses are used to indicate a continuation of data beyond the bounds of this figure.

Table 2
Results

*How did the people who share this content initially get introduced to Japanese media?*

As found through both field observation and content analysis, many people (and users alike) were exposed to Japanese media by others in their network (online, in the follow-and-follow-back environment), friends in real life, family, and television. Another interest of the researcher’s study may also ask not just how people were introduced to Japanese media, but *when* they were introduced (early childhood, middle childhood, late childhood, as a teenager, etc.).

*What sorts of content do people share on Tumblr?*

To answer this research question, researcher tallied up the types of content selected bloggers posted during the time period for the study (as illustrated in Table 2 above). The researcher also paid attention to the themes (exemplified in Table 2 as well) that emerged in the blogs’ posted content. Blogs posted a myriad of different things, but some of the most frequently-seen topics consisted of the following Japanese cultural products (in no particular order, and non-exhaustively): *anime, manga, video games, music, general culture* (facts, photos, and stories), art, fashion, cuisine, and architecture. Other major emerging themes included: cats (pictures, videos, and animated gifs), general humor (like comics, jokes, funny pictures, memes, etc.), current news (presently occurring events happening around the world), stories generated by users, art, scientific findings/facts, food (recipes included), fashion, and movies (like *Deadpool*, which recently released during the timeframe, and *Harry Potter*, which has a major following on the Internet despite being relatively old, with the most recent product being released in July, 2011 with the theatrical premiere of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part II*). A visual
representation of the themes observed (Table 3) can be found on the next page with each theme organized alphabetically by category.
### Organization of themes* observed between February 13th and February 28th, 2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Japan</th>
<th>Arts</th>
<th>Entertainment</th>
<th>News</th>
<th>Positivity</th>
<th>Science/Politics</th>
<th>Time of Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anime</td>
<td>Architecture</td>
<td>ATLA(^2)</td>
<td>Harry Potter</td>
<td>Alan Rickman</td>
<td>Astronomy</td>
<td>Lunar New Year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Architecture</td>
<td>Drawing advice</td>
<td>Bollywood</td>
<td>Leo DiCaprio</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Bernie Sanders</td>
<td>Nature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fashion</td>
<td>Fan art</td>
<td>Cartoons</td>
<td>Movies</td>
<td>Credit</td>
<td>Black holes</td>
<td>Rabbis/Easter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FMA(^1)</td>
<td>Food</td>
<td>Cats</td>
<td>PPG(^3)</td>
<td>David Bowie</td>
<td>Einstein</td>
<td>Snow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music</td>
<td>General</td>
<td>Comics</td>
<td>Rabbits</td>
<td>Facts</td>
<td>Facts</td>
<td>Spring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pokémon</td>
<td>General fashion</td>
<td>Cute pets</td>
<td>Star Wars</td>
<td>Fair usage</td>
<td>Self help</td>
<td>Valentine’s Day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schaft</td>
<td>High fashion</td>
<td>Deadpool</td>
<td></td>
<td>Harper Lee</td>
<td>Selfies(^5)</td>
<td>Weather</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video games</td>
<td>Makeup</td>
<td>Disney</td>
<td></td>
<td>Jesus Barrero</td>
<td>Study tools</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zelda</td>
<td>World fashion</td>
<td>Facts</td>
<td></td>
<td>LGBT+(^4) rights</td>
<td>LGBT+ rights</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>80’s aesthetic</td>
<td>Hannibal</td>
<td></td>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>Weather</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Some themes were repeated in certain columns for organizational purposes, as some themes are not mutually exclusive

1. Abbreviated for "Fullmetal Alchemist," a popular anime and manga series
3. Abbreviated for "Power Puff Girls," a cartoon from the 90’s which recently rebooted on Cartoon Network
4. Non-exhaustive acronym
5. A photo taken of oneself by oneself; real-life photos of blogs’ users taken by themselves

Table 3
What trends motivate people to share the things they decide to post?

For the most part, the topics of Japanese culture which emerged among the bloggers’ posts were relatively predictable: if a certain *anime* series recently debuted in Japan (for example: the third season of *Sailor Moon: Crystal* was about to debut, so fans of the series naturally shared more posted about it). In other cases, bloggers posted older images of some of their favorite *manga* serials (ie: *Fullmetal Alchemist*, *Bleach*, *Naruto*, etc.). A similar theme was pervasive throughout music-related posts: when a band (such as Schaft) released a new album or concert, bloggers interested in that particular band posted information about how to legally acquire the release. In the event a famous figure passed away (such as: Alan Rickman, Harper Lee, David Bowie, and Jesus Barrero), more than half of the followed users posted content in tribute to the actors, artists, and writers.

Is there any way to tell how people are exposed to the content they share?

For the most part, the researcher could tell which blog created the original posts which would eventually be reblogged or shared by the followed bloggers during the timeframe of research. As a result, the researcher found that the follow-and-follow-back behavior among bloggers on Tumblr formed a network within which users would expose one another to common and/or new interests. In some cases, users explicitly explained to their audience (followers) why they were sharing the content; text posts generated by the blogs’ users often explained that the users were exposed to content and media offline through television stations, radio channels, and word-of-mouth. With regards to all other post types (videos, photos, links, or audio), the only information on original exposure relies on comments or tags listed beneath respective posts, or otherwise the source from which the users shared the post(s). This question’s results link to the results found in the following question, with the high likelihood for future research.
Are there any observable patterns which can be predicted or hypothesized just by following these blogs for a short time?

Because the chosen demographic contains college-aged people from around the world who share similar interests in Japanese popular culture and media, the unsurprising finding was that these people, indeed, continue to create, share, and promote posts regarding and containing some form of Japanese popular culture (outlined above briefly in the cross-sectional analysis of Japanese popular culture in the literature review). Other themes within the selected timeframe of research included topics from: the passing of Alan Rickman (who was quite popular for a number of performances in cinema, but most remarkably his performance of Professor Snape in the *Harry Potter* series with regards to the chosen demographic), astronomy, movie premieres, humor, and most popularly: cats.

Surprisingly, the same participants who formed a sort of online community also shared posts containing a variety of information about international global affairs, social activism, and human rights. The finding which best illustrates this phenomenon in action is when a blogger from South America reblogged a post dealing with the United States presidential campaign from another blogger who resides in Western Europe. While these two people, separated by thousands of miles of land and ocean, met one another online due to their shared interest in Japanese music (specifically, a Japanese rock band), both bloggers decided to share a post about an event happening in a country in which neither of them live. Several occurrences of bloggers sharing posts about global news were observed throughout timeframe of the study.

Because this is an area for future research due to its presently hypothetical nature, it is impossible to determine long-term themes from the observational period of 15 days.

Nevertheless, some patterns were found with the content analysis that bloggers in different parts
of the world were reblogging posts from users in another part of the world which referenced events occurring in a country within which neither user resided. This question is highly receptive to future implications and research.

**Discussion**

In general, people like to surround themselves with others who share similar interests for the purpose of shaping their identities and to further identify with other people in their demographic with the same interests. As a result, it should not be surprising that social media participants actively look for others who share the same identity characteristics (attitudes, behaviors, demographics, etc.) in order to cultivate a sense of belonging (Quanzhi & Wu, 2008). Networks are formed in response to a congregate of people connecting with one another who share similar interests. Furthermore, the network of people gains momentum by introducing more people to the social network of participants, inviting new people to become involved with the common interest. Before long, the topic of interest becomes popular enough to be considered a part of popular culture, and maintains enough “status” to remain relevant among the people who use the social media platform. The aforementioned process is a general outline of how people are introduced to popular culture, and also stands as the reason for why many people become involved with social media on the Internet.

On the part of field observation, the researcher found that more Japanese products are offered in Southeastern Michigan than Northwestern Ohio, possibly due to the higher Japanese-American population which resides in the area, and thus higher interest among college-aged students to involve themselves with products and merchandise from Japan. In part with the generally accepted logic of supply and demand, because there is a far greater demand for Japanese items in the Southeastern area of Michigan visited by the researcher, more stores are
willing to carry potentially expensive imported items which would otherwise only be available to customers via online shopping or friendly communication from people who are residing in Japan (and are willing to track down/find items to send to friends in the United States). Even though Japanese products are somewhat difficult to find in this region, employees working at stores which import and sell such products reported to the researcher that there is a steady rise of shoppers interested in Japanese culture who frequent the shop – a finding which is indicative of the cause and effect relationship between interest in Japanese culture, and action of shopping for Japanese goods.

Implications

Because the bloggers who were interested in Japanese culture were sharing so many posts dealing with news events from across the world, one of the major implications of this research is that the exposure to intercultural media in early life may result in heightened global participation in wider contexts later in life among the bloggers of the chosen demographic. As such, it may be from the interest of Japanese cultural products that people decide to stir Japanese culture and language in college, and perhaps travel abroad to study. Furthermore, these bloggers who are sharing this content now may be the same people who are the part of a large company based in Japan creating this content when they get older (Allison, 2006).

Continuing with the discussion on language, several people the researcher spoke to throughout conversations during the field observation reported that watching *anime*, reading *manga*, playing Japanese video games, and listening to Japanese music made a difference in their lives and how they view the world; moreover, it was due to their involvement and interest in Japanese media which resulted in them either studying or planning to study the Japanese language during their secondary or post-secondary education. This important finding thereby
confirms the study mentioned earlier in this paper that the influence of youths’ interests in anime can positively impact decisions made later in life (Armour, & Iida, 2016).

**Limitations**

As a result of the study being conducted on Tumblr with respect to the active users on that social media platform, the results may or may not be generalized to a wider population of the same demographic (college-aged people from around the world). Technology is a large factor in this research; the findings may not be consistent without the element of Internet connectivity and a semi-fluent use of social media platforms. Since the research topic is specifically targeted to college-aged people who have an interest in Japanese popular cultural products and are active on social media for sake of discussing them with others with similar interests, the bloggers may have already had a predisposition for an interest in wider global affairs in different contexts. If this is the case, this detail may place a small bias on whether or not exposure to international cultural products indeed has an impact on global activism. Even so, this circumstance may not be as much of a limitation as it may provide an additional area for further investigation.

**Future Research**

As a result of the surprising findings, the researcher has prepared a preliminary survey to be passed out among potential participants with whom the following conditions apply: are college aged (18-30, give or take a few years as the rise of non-traditional students should not be ignored), are interested in international cultures, have a broadband connection to the Internet, and use social media on an at least somewhat regular basis (once a week, or a few times a month). Ideally and after the distribution of the survey through social media networks (like Tumblr, Twitter, Facebook, and the like), campus networks (Campus Update, a daily email composed of important events and activities, which is sent out to all college members), and word of mouth,
the researcher proposes the possibly for brief field interviews to ask the potential participants more about their interests in the research context.

Continuing with the implied question from the limitations section, it would be beneficial to learn more about how the current bloggers (who are both interested in Japanese cultural products and international affairs) initially were introduced to products from other countries, and how the initial exposure influenced their consumption of international products in addition to future plans. As such, the modified research questions for further research are as follow:

- Do people who have a history of being exposed to international cultural products (chiefly Japanese products) early in life more likely to become interested in global affairs?
- Are people who are interested in international cultural products (chiefly Japanese products) more likely to pursue careers in global contexts later in life?

**Conclusion**

It is clear by the findings of this study that people who are exposed to some form of international cultural product have a higher likelihood of becoming interested in global activism (in one form or another) later in life. Interaction among other users with similar interests online seems to have a relationship with the overall intention to involve oneself with activities and people beyond his or her community. Since the findings were quite surprising and unexpected (in addition to the interpretive findings, which defined which sorts of Japanese popular culture users on Tumblr regularly share), the researcher is happy to report that additional research is currently being planned beyond the submission of this project to the Honors College, in partial fulfillment of graduation with University Honors. Further research in this area, outlined by the revised research questions in the future research section above, will be continued into the researcher’s graduate school career, conducted in the field of international and intercultural communication.
Presentation

The preliminary findings of this study were presented at the Graduate Communication Association (GCA) Conference on April 8\textsuperscript{th}, 2016 in the company of graduate student researchers from a variety of disciplines and instructors. As a supplement to this paper, the PowerPoint\textsuperscript{®} presentation which was presented at the conference will be included within the final submission for the capstone project.

In addition to the conference, the researcher also presented the findings at the Annual BGSU Undergraduate Symposium for Research and Scholarship on Saturday, April 23\textsuperscript{rd}, 2016 in the presence of other student researchers and lecturers.

Acknowledgements

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Glossary of Terms

(To) Blog (or when used present progressively: blogging) is operationally defined by the researcher as a habit or hobby observed by a person who has broadband access to the Internet, and who additionally creates or shares content online via a social media platform on at least a semi-routine basis (or at least a few times during a month’s time). As such, a blogger (used in the form of a noun) is a person who participates in the abovementioned habit or activity. A blog is where the activity takes place. The researcher uses a single blog as a unit of analysis, with the blog’s posted contents as secondary units of analyses.

Content: the researcher operationally defines content as the basis or topic for creating a post, tweet, or status on a social media platform/website which may contain any of the following, and more: photos, videos, text, quotes, links, audio, animated gifs, and emoji. In other words, “content” can be simply understood as “information” in this context, at its most simple.

Contents as a plural noun may be used to describe what is contained in a blog in its entirety.

Meme: a word appearing on the Internet not too long before the present day, a meme represents a joke, phrase, topic, or image which is reused over and over again and renewed by users in different ways, usually for the sake of comic relief or satire. One of the most popular memes which turned into a multi-million-dollar business includes Grumpy Cat (which, just like it sounds, is a photo of a cat looking particularly unhappy, usually accompanied with a large “NO” in white, Impact font with reference to a holiday, occasion, or task. Example: HO HO NO).

Popular culture: this passage, found earlier in this paper, explains that, “in terms of music, culture, and communication, traditional elements of each country cultivate the final product of popular culture, and what the people of each country want to consume in great enough amounts to be considered popular.”
**Reblog** shares the same meaning of blog (v), as explained above, but carries a prefix in front of the main part of the word which is indicative of a person blogging something again (usually in the manner of reposting the original content while retaining all the credit and information linked to the original creator/author/blogger).

**Wider international context**: this phrase is used a few times throughout this paper, and refers to any hobby, action, or activity a person may take which consists of interacting with people from different countries, or the action taken to enable one to interact with those in other lands. Some of these activities may include (but is not limited to): studying abroad, working abroad, travelling, joining the Peace Corps, learning a foreign language, taking a class dedicated to world affairs and/or culture, or befriending people from different countries.
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