

Ethics of Internet-based Research on Japanese Subcultures

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1. Introduction

In this paper I want to highlight a number of tensions, such as the relationship between research subjects and social scientific representations of these subjects, and similar ethical issues as they pertain to Internet-based research. The focus lies on research on Japanese media-related fan and user communities, often referred to as “subcultures”¹. These media subcultures are of interest to the mass media for various reasons, one of which is the global economic success of Japanese entertainment media. Research concerning these subcultures similarly draws mass media attention as events such as “The Futures of Cool Japanology: An International Symposium 2010” and its live broadcast on national television demonstrate. In this sense, it is my aim to raise awareness of ethical implications of research that bridges the private and the public as it has become increasingly easy to use the Internet for data collection. Today any Internet-savvy student could conduct an online ethnography of his or her favorite manga community. Many such investigations by laymen as well as professional researchers, however, indicate a deficient understanding of methodological as well as ethical issues when it comes to research on/of/with the Internet.

Even though many studies focus on Internet interactions, the web remains not just the object of inquiry but has opened up many possibilities to be used as a tool for research, whether for the collaboration between scholars or for data collection itself. A methodological canon, however, is still beyond the horizon and the use of the Internet for research also often retains an explorative character (Fielding, Lee, and Blank 2008). Social scientific methodologists remain skeptical due to their long-standing, almost institutionalized concern about the problems of any method, such as its reliability (ibid, p. 4). Because sampling is extremely difficult in Internet research (Fricker 2008), quantitative sociology still relies mostly on offline data collection instruments.

Contrastingly, the easy access to online data collection tools, such as SurveyMonkey, has encouraged students as well as young and established researchers in many fields to make use of online questionnaires and collect large amounts of data. Yet, the size of a sample has less significance than how it was conceived. Even though concessions are made that probability sampling was not possible and thus, it would be wrong to aim for general conclusions about a population larger than the actual sample, these general accounts still creep into the interpretations. The widely-repeated assumption that 70% or 2/3 of Germany’s manga readers are female is such a case (cf. Dolle-Weinkauff 2008). One basis for this assumption is a recurrently evidenced female

participation rate of 70% in online surveys on Germany's manga fans – which might equal the percentage of females within the national manga reading population or might not. The possible sampling methods available for research on the Internet do not allow for either conclusion (Fricker 2008, 206). Combining the participation rate with other circumstantial evidence, such as female participation in manga contests or import rates – more *shōjo* (girls') than *shōnen* (boys') manga imports could be found in German bookstores (JETRO 2006, 13) – and through citing the same number continually in journalistic and scholarly texts as well as publisher interviews (cf. Böckem and Dallach 2002; Knümann 2006; Bouissou et al. 2010; Eckstein 2012; Schwarz 2012), the 2/3-proportion has been transformed into a fact by convenience (*black-boxed*, in Latourian terms; 1988, 3; cf. availability cascade²). Yet, inferring from an intended target audience to the actual readership is as problematic as judging from the participation rate because the readership's agency is ignored – readers may not follow the producers' intentions, males may read manga intended for girls³. There is an undeniable but disregarded bias between interpretations and what certain methods can actually deliver.

Moreover, the problems and difficulties related to research of/on/with the Internet are not limited to a statisticians' discourse on the relationship between sample and target population⁴. Still connected to the interpretation of results, the relationship between researcher and research subjects is of relevance in this context and in the focus of this paper. I will not concentrate so much on the methods of data collection but on its effects and the tension between private statements and public representations. Sociological and ethnographic research in general is characterized by a long history of difficult negotiations between research subjects and depictions of research results, as many feel wrongly represented through social scientific accounts (Becker 1973, 191; Murphy and Dingwall 2010, 341). This issue has also not been rare within the field of subculture studies, in Japan and elsewhere, and becomes even more pronounced as the ease of access to media subcultures, such as *fujoshi* (female fans of male homoeroticism) or cosplayers (who dress up as media characters) increases with the help of the Internet and Social Networking Software (SNS). For my ongoing research project on transcultural and networked imagined communities, I conducted 25 qualitative narrative interviews with Japanese roleplayers⁵ and business representatives from relevant industries⁶. These interviews were made possible to no small extent due to the quick access to communities on SNS sites. A significant number of my interviewees, however, expressed disappointment regarding mass media and scholarly representations of subcultural groups within the discourse on Japanese pop-cultural media. One interviewee felt the urge to stand up and demand that I did not read any academic treatises on *otaku*⁷ as he perceived the authors to be liars.

Clifford (1986) and Wolf (1996) among others have discussed the complex issues surrounding the power relations between researchers and their subjects as well as the tensions arising from speaking for others through ethnography. Because the Internet's general pseudonymity allows for a

degree of covert ethnography previously unheard of, it also increases the power imbalance between those doing the research and those being researched. If we consider how research subjects already perceive harm done to them through classical ethnographies, the possibilities offered by the Internet aggravate the ethical dimensions of social scientific representations. Ethics in these research contexts refers either to the aim of doing no harm to the research subjects, a consequentialist approach, or to violate no rights through the research process, which would be a deontological perspective. Both views can be subsumed as a fair treatment of research subjects, their beliefs, thoughts and outlooks.

Unfair treatment of subjects and data collection without consent can not only lead to legal repercussions but also “harm” the field in general, violating the most basic tenet of good practice in ethnographic research which is to “leave the field in a state which permits future access by other researchers” (ASA 1999, 1). As members of media subcultures in Japan display unwillingness to participate in research, the importance of this issue cannot be stressed enough.

Although the focus lies on these ethical dimensions, this paper will also cover a number of technological obstacles to Internet-based research endeavors (e.g., identification verification, websites hidden from search engines) as well as methodological concerns (e.g., response errors, already mentioned above, or social desirability). I begin with a number of general remarks on methodology, concentrating on a school of Internet related research called “cyber-ethnography.” Choosing the term “cyber” instead of “virtual” ethnography itself is based on ontological and epistemological considerations and already points to a number of basic ethical questions and responsibilities. The subsequent main part deals with the above outlined challenges of ethnographic research in general, and Internet-based, transcultural ethnography on Japan in particular, illustrating these points with examples from my research. My answers to ethical questions I encountered in the field are meant as suggestions or guidelines and are surely not the final word but may encourage further discussions concerning an ethical, and thus sustainable use of the Internet in research.

2. Ethical Challenges of Cyber-Ethnography

There are a number of other terms for ethnographic research that takes place on and with the Internet. *Virtual ethnography* (Hine 2000) is the best known, *netnography* (Kozinets 2009) one of the later designations for this kind of methodology. Even though the school of “virtual” ethnography today acknowledges that a conceptual separation of “virtual spaces” and a so-called “real world” does not mirror human experience, the label “virtual” implicitly has this connotation. Historically, the focus on virtual events, on virtual communities was necessary in the 1990s to establish the importance of studying interactions on the Internet in the first place (Hine 2008). Interactions on the Internet had to be framed as “new” or “different” compared to offline interactions to warrant their investigation.

The research methodology I employ, however, follows the ideas of *cyber-ethnography* instead,

which distances itself from prior approaches by not limiting itself to the Internet alone. Referring to thinkers such as Donna Haraway (1991), a cyber-ethnographic approach understands cyberspace as contexts that are “hybrid”: Mediated by computers⁸ but also fundamentally linked to supposed-to-be “real” sites. From this perspective, the ethnography of online groups is not only ethnography of groups online, but “the ethnography of online and related off-line situations, the ethnography of humans and non-human actors in these related fields” (Teli, Pisanu, and Hakken 2007). This hybrid, semiotic-material perspective corresponds to the image of humanity as cyborgs, as it was developed in the works of John Law, Bruno Latour and other proponents of Actor-Network Theory (Law 1991; Law and Hassard 1999; Latour 2005), or Actant-Rhizome-Ontology as Latour prefers to call it (Latour 1999). An example for humans-as-cyborgs would be us, researchers: Who would we be without our books, computers, field notes or translations, without *denshi-jisho* (electronic dictionaries) or recently smartphones? What happens if one or more of these non-humans fails or would be taken from us? We would no longer be researchers who could write articles and produce knowledge (Law 1992, 381). The network we form with these non-humans – our “identity” so to speak – would be disturbed, we would be something other.

As a methodological consequence a researcher should not restrict the investigation to one location – in this case, the Internet – but follow the human and non-human actors to different places, on- and offline. This approach is similar to and also based on current developments in a trans-local anthropology (Hannerz 2003; Rescher 2010; Brosius 2012).

To regard humans as hybrids also has ethical implications for Internet-based research, implications that would not arise if one followed the rigorous a priori distinction between the virtual and the real. If people were completely separated from their “virtual” personas then harm done to the persona (e.g. ridicule) would have no effect to the “real” person behind it. As cyberbullying shows, this is not the case. The ethical issues resulting from a cyber-perspective as well as other challenges are in some aspects comparable to the difficulties of classic, face-to-face ethnography. The Internet, however, gives them in many ways an additional twist.

In particular, five problematic areas arose during my research but have also lead to discussions in the field of online ethnography in general. Especially trust is a major concern for my field of research, subcultures of fans of popular media, and a complex matter, since a number of Japanese as well as non-Japanese researchers did not take into account the possible harm done to their subjects and even displayed a depreciative attitude towards them (e.g., Azuma 2005; Ishikawa 2007) – disregarding the basic tenet of ethnographic research cited above. Although national laws may constitute the primary basis for many answers to ethical questions, I put this point to the end – the trans- or international characteristics of Internet-based research provide some pitfalls, of course. I would rather start with the key method of ethnography, which can have an extremely altered outlook during Internet-based research: Participant observation, to be part of a group for a certain period of

time and to gain insights through interactions and an evolving understanding of these interactions (Hine 2008, 258).

2-1. Participant Observation and Involvement

In any ethnographic study, the question of involvement arises: How much should you become involved in the interactions of those who you wish to study? The possible spectrum of involvement ranges from full participation to a completely distanced observation. For the latter, the Internet offers the previously barely viable option to not engage at all and to simply watch, or to just download the interaction data on your own computer. In Internet slang, such a non-participant observation is called “lurking,” community members who only read are known as “lurkers” – *romu* or *rīdo-onrī-membā* in Japanese.

At first glance, a corresponding, covert ethnography offers great benefits, because the researcher does not interfere with the “naturalness” of the situation – an idealized aim of many ethnographers (Paccagnella 1997). You can also rest assured that you are in good company if you believe in the 90-9-1 rule of Internet participation inequality. 90% of the members of online communities and forums are said to mostly lurk, 9% post from time to time and just 1% of participants are responsible for the bulk of the generated content (Nielsen 2006; see also the Pareto principle, Newman 2005; but cf. availability cascade again). Lurking and using the data collected in this manner raises some legal, but especially ethical issues, which I will go into detail when discussing the points of publicity, privacy and copyright. So much beforehand: Although the Internet is a public space, many enter it in a more personal or private context.

It is certainly not objectionable to lurk at the beginning of a study – many new members to online communities do just that to become familiar with the customs and the netiquette of the group in question. During my current research I also began with lurking in relevant communities of roleplayers on the Social Network *mixi.jp*, for example. My aim was to roughly categorize the different threads in openly accessible communities and furthermore, to get an idea of who is involved in the interactions, where the posters say they come from and the contexts in which their origin plays a role. At this point, I deemed it appropriate to not yet come out as a researcher because I did not make use of personal information in my analysis but aimed at statements about larger trends, such as the observation that open communities hardly see any discussions but are usually nothing more than platforms for announcements. Later, when I became more involved, I also stated my research intentions in a *jikoshōkai-bun*, a self-introduction.

Contrastingly, exclusive lurking should rather not be equated with ethnography, as ethnographic studies aim to develop an understanding from the “inside out,” which can hardly be achieved if you do not interact with the other participants (Beaulieu 2004). This interaction is, however, linked to issues of trust and understanding between the parties. My *jikoshōkai* represented

a risk for my access to closed communities. Speaking for myself, I would be adversarial towards a covert investigation but rather know if researchers are about. Since many members of Japanese subcultures felt misrepresented in critical or scientific studies, I assumed fairness and honesty to be more fruitful.

2-2. Trust and Authenticity

There are hardly across-the-board answers to the question, how much emphasis should be placed on announcing research intentions when entering the field. This is true for classical as well as cyber-ethnography. Proclaiming your intentions too early may equally leave you stranded in front of closed doors as too late an announcement may cause the removal of your account by the moderators of the Internet community in question. However, some issues arise already before one actually enters the field.

One example is technical obstacles, such as the identity verification protocols of the platform mixi. On Facebook you can simply register with a valid e-mail address. In contrast, you have to identify yourself by phone after registering with mixi (see Figure 1). But this works only with postpaid, contract mobile phones, neither with prepaid ones nor from abroad – which I interpret as one reason for me encountering only a very limited amount of transnational interactions on mixi.

[Figure 1: Identity Verification via Phone after Registration on mixi.jp]

Although a number of studies have stated (e.g., Orito and Murata 2005) that the Japanese had no concept of privacy and therefore would not understand the meaning of data protection laws, such protective measures rather suggest the opposite. Real names were only common during mixi's dawn. Today, all profiles make use of pseudonyms or nicknames only. Unlike on Facebook, users have always placed emphasis on making themselves unrecognizable on photos. It appears sound to interpret such activities as a high level of media literacy.

It is even more difficult when the group under investigation is not present on mixi but uses an independent forum. This is the case with a number of *fujoshi*-circles, for example. These are amateur artists and writers who jointly produce homoerotic media. Some hide their pages from search engines like Google or Yahoo! and are therefore hard to reach if you do not already know the address of their website or other means to obtain it. Whether the circle members are pleased to be contacted, is another story.

In such a case, a foreigner like myself can be lucky and have the advantage of a *gaijin* bonus in the sense that people are more willing to participate in research endeavors. In my studies on *fujoshi* (Kamm 2010; Kamm 2013) as well as currently on roleplayers (Kamm 2011), I encountered almost exclusively positive reactions when I searched for interviewees. This was largely because people were curious about me and probably because I've always offered to give answers to questions about fan groups in Germany if so desired. Generally, the face-to-face contact was crucial, though. The first persons I encountered offline were later willing to vouch for me online and invite me to participate in closed communities. In this regard, the Internet has not changed social protocol much, and the entangled relationship between the "virtual" and the "real" becomes apparent. As a side note I should mention that Germany does not differ from Japan in this respect.

During my interviews I also encountered a downside of being an "outsider." As I conduct my interviews in Japanese there are times when I have to ask for clarifications of terms, such as unusual technical concepts, abbreviations, people's names or slang expressions. Particularly some male contacts, however, felt subsequently the need to explain not only these terms but Japan and the Japanese in general. Still, another *gaijin* bonus might be the fact that I can ask these and other, at times intimate questions outside the usual social protocol. Had I presented myself as Japanese online, I might have never reached this stage in the first place. Many are hesitant to participate in research as they would fear misrepresentations and, thus, do not trust researchers or journalists. This mistrust is reflected not only by my interviewees' statements, but also in comments on community forums.

This tension concerning trust arises from the interdependence of research results and the awareness for the effects of how research is conducted. Instead of taking the time to build trust some scholars apparently want quick results. Ishikawa (2007) seems to be an example for this approach to ethnography when she expects exhibitors at Tokyo's Comic Market, the *komike*⁹, to participate in ad-hoc interviews during her one and only two-hour-long visit to the convention. She describes the

convention participants as reclusive and anti-social because they did not want to answer her questions. Contrastingly, the exhibitors might favor an engagement with their customers and fans instead of being interviewed. A trade fair might just be the wrong setting for lengthy interviews. She also did not ask if they were available for interviews afterwards.

The issue of answering questions truthfully, the explanations of Japan during my interviews, and also my “intervention” as a foreigner itself, conjure up the monster of authenticity. With its pseudonymity, the Internet is regarded as a space of appearances, of incredibility, of identity games and thus of the non-authentic (Baym 2005). Without dwelling on this complex problem, it can be stated that in this regard online ethnography differs only marginally from face-to-face ethnography. Both always involve the possibility of deliberate deception – people can lie or stress the truth offline as well as online. There still is the chance in both situations, however, to compare statements and to build trust over time. As a form of “reality-check,” some ethnographers feel the need to combine online and offline situations (cf. Hine 2008, 264). Still, the data base for any ethnographic analysis is never direct but always doubly mediated (Rabinow 1977): One mediator is the researcher him-/herself whose presence triggers the production of accounts in the first place. The other is the attempt of those examined to deliver the desired data. In my analysis I can therefore neither ignore the factor of being a foreigner nor the performative character of the statements of my interviewees. Thus, I do not aim for authentic, deep, hidden meanings, but try to analyze the effect of my presence and the attempts of my interviewees to “narratively” order their world in light of my questions.

Nevertheless, the counterpart of authenticity on the examinees’ side is the trustworthiness of the researcher, the necessity to make clear who you are, what you do, and what purpose the investigation serves.

2-3. Informed Consent

A mandatory declaration of consent by the interviewees is the means to establish such a relationship in the Anglo-Saxon world and in the field of medicine. Ethnographic studies in the United States fall under the “Human Subject Model” and have to be approved by an ethics committee. Each study is checked for benevolence and has to provide all examinees with information for them to be aware of all aims of the study. Their agreement to participate is thus called “informed consent.” These are obligatory steps missing in Germany, or at least in the field of Japanese Studies. The “informed consent” model is, of course, not perfect and foolproof as the mandatory steps also tempt to be simply checked off at the beginning of a study, without taking into account possible changes in the research project, such as new aims that may arise from first data (cf. Murphy and Dingwall 2010, 340). Precisely because of the evolving understanding and how ethnographic studies aim at achieving it, studies that do not experience change in their objectives are rather rare.

Guidelines for Internet research, as for example presented by Charles Ess and the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR; 2002), highlight “best practices,” such as to keep the research subjects up to date of all these changes. The Internet offers previously impossible opportunities in this regard: You can publish updates to your research on a blog, for example, and can also seek further feedback and comments in this way.

I ask everyone with whom I have interviews, whether they are on-or offline, for their consent, either in writing or recorded audibly, and offer them the option to withdraw at any time. I am still in e-mail contact with the majority of my interviewees or meet them in forums, where I will answer inquiries about my research. For the time being I refrain from releasing a research blog, mainly due to time constraints. Still, a blog seems one of the best solutions to document research and to provide those you investigate with information to track the development of a project and, if appropriate, a chance to revoke their consent. This way consent is actually *informed* and the probability is increased that the participants do not feel misrepresented later. If you prefer to hide your results from those you are writing about, however, then it is also questionable if the research was benevolent and violated no rights in the first place – which would be unethical from a consequentialist as well as a deontological perspective. The questions of rights violation and “public recording” lead to problems of contexts in Internet interactions.

2-4. Contexts and Expectations

Fair treatment of those who one wishes to study means in the Kantian sense, to not treat them as a means to an end, not as data production machines that deliver information for the researcher by the push of a button. Data mining and other so-called “non-reactive” forms of data collection seldom fit that image. It is paramount to pay attention to the contexts in which statements are made and to the expectations people have. One of the best allegories to interactions and conversations on the Internet that I know of is the café. A café may be a public space, the conversations that take place there, however, are not necessarily meant to be equally public (cf. Eynon, Fry, and Schroeder 2008, 30). To download a private conversation in a closed forum on your computer is thus equivalent to overhearing and recording a private conversation in a coffee shop.

If a conversation is private or not, is a question that has to be answered case by case but the degree of openness of a community is a guidepost I usually try to follow. If I do not have to register first, to follow conversations in a forum for example, I classify the context of the interaction as rather public. On mixi, however, I'm rather cautious from the outset, as all interactions are only accessible after registration and logging in. But even within mixi, there are open and closed communities. For the former, I do not need permission from the administrator to join. Approval is necessary for joining closed communities, though. Hidden websites and the communities behind them I also rather treat as private spaces. Here the consent of all parties is indispensable. In open

communities, it is also just fair to come out as a researcher at least. At that moment, everyone else has the opportunity to opt-out if they do not want to be part of the research.

2-5. Data Protection and Copyright

The Internet crosses borders and research on or with the Internet often does so, too, research on Japan conducted by Non-Japanese inevitably so. Adequate risk management in research therefore actually also requires knowledge of the national legislation in all countries concerned. To be guided by the relevant laws, is a sensible approach to avert damage from oneself, but does not correspond undoubtedly with ethical research. Legislation is often slower than current socio-technical developments. And in many cases certain laws or regulations do not apply to research, in the first place.

Both the German and the Japanese data protection laws explicitly leave scientific research out of their regulations. Article 50 of the *Koujinhō hōgo-no-ni-kansuru hōritsu* (Act No. 57 of 2003) excludes “academic studies,” as well as inquiries for literary purposes from its preceding articles. It still suggests to researchers a data handling which more or less should correspond with its guidelines. That is, you should obtain consent and treat the data in a secure manner.

The minimum, for example, is to store collected data with an encryption, to password-protect your computers – instead of uploading your data without anonymization into your Dropbox. Still, concerning anonymity there are points to consider, such as the searchability of the Internet. Even if I change the pseudonym of the poster, verbatim quotes are always discoverable by search engines. Therefore, I usually paraphrase everything and forgo direct quotations or stick to translations only, if possible.

In returning to issues of “public-ness,” the consultation of copyright laws might also offer ideas for dealing with online texts and statements. Neither the Japanese nor the German copyright laws, however, explicitly refer to texts on the Internet or to forum posts. Both laws are to protect “literary works, such as writings, speeches, and computer programs.” In opposition to both laws, researchers have to obtain a license from informants for their part of an interview following UK copyright legislation. Transferred to comments, posts, and other statements on the Internet, an ethical researcher would actually ask everyone concerned for their permission to use their posts for a study (cf. Charlesworth 2008). Such a “best practice” would vehemently limit many non-reactive data collection procedures, though.

If I make use of forum posts directly in my work, I always get the permission of the persons concerned. Provided that an overview analysis is related to open communities, however, I limit myself to announce my research intention in a *jikoshōkai*. This means I choose rather an “opt-out” model regarding ethics in this case. Individuals in question have to let me know if they do not want to be part of the analysis or the analysis of their community in general. Informed consent on the

other hand would be an “opt-in” model.

3. Concluding Remarks

What is the difference between Google or Facebook collecting private data to sell it and researchers collecting and interpreting private data for a living? Both profit from it, do they not? Why do we have to think about esoteric ethical dilemmas when conducting research? We should think about these questions because our answers directly relate to methods and research designs, to our interpretations of results. Because researchers do not only profit from other people’s personal information but also claim to be speaking for these same people. Because researchers are thus in a position of power, especially when they are speaking for marginalized groups or subcultures that draw media attention, it is also their place to be aware of legal and ethical issues pertaining their research – and the research of possible others who enter the same field.

As mentioned in the beginning, there are two schools of thought existing in research ethics: Consequentialists focus on the result of research and stress that examinees should not come to harm, but rather experience an improvement. Herein, we also recognize the origins of the “Human Subject Model” in medical research. This perspective is pursued primarily in the United States. In Europe a deontological perspective dominates in the evaluation of research projects, the focus is therefore on the protection of rights of those affected.

In a sense, both share an image of the research subjects: They are not data boxes, which provide the desired results at your fingertips, but individuals. To take up on the cyborg again, data and information on the Internet are part of the network, the “identity” of individuals and should not be considered in isolation from their “real” world elements.

On a practical side, the consideration of rights and legal issues is also part of a good risk management. This is especially the case for internationally operating researchers, as some countries may allow for charges against data collection without consent.

For many of the points raised, there are guidelines such as the one proposed by the AoIR. Essentially, researchers are left to their own conscience, though. Within Japanese Studies, or Japan-related subculture research, I have not come across relevant standards or “best practices.” Contrastingly, a number of Japanese and Non-Japanese scholars have displayed a severe lack of awareness when it comes to a fair treating of their sources. From a professional perspective, journalists would probably think twice about how they treat their sources if they wanted to contact their informants again.

I did not have to submit my project to an ethics committee. The practice of an ethics committee and informed consent can degenerate into pure mechanics on the one hand. On the other, their absence can also favor situations that can easily go out of hand, if we look at Internet-versed students who now have easy access to other people’s personal data but are never made aware of

ethical or legal consequences.

For a more sustainable and consequence-aware use of the Internet in research, especially when it comes to minorities or social groups in the focus of mass media, it is thus my opinion that research communities, such as Japanologists, should engage with these ethical issues and also incorporate them into the education of students.

Notes

¹ The term “subculture” derives from the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies, referring to emergent forms of culture in resistance to the surrounding, dominant culture (cf. Hall and Jefferson 1976). They understood culture as a set of shared meanings and practices, focusing their research program on the tension between “high” (canonized) and “low” culture (such as working class culture). Like so many other terms, “subculture” has been appropriated to designate a number of different forms of a social collective, often losing the aspect of resistance. The degree or absence of resistance is debatable in the case of collectives forming around practices related to entertainment media, such as amateur manga producers for example. I use this term as a matter of convenience because it is commonly used in research on pop-cultural communities of practice in Japan, a field called *sabukaruchā kenkyū*, subculture studies, which is also the name of a research network founded in 2010 (www.japan-subculture.com).

² “An availability cascade is a self-reinforcing process of collective belief formation by which an expressed perception triggers a chain reaction that gives the perception of increasing plausibility through its rising availability in public discourse” (Kuran and Sunstein 1999, 683).

³ The best example for this agency is fan practices, such as the appropriation of protagonists from mainstream boys’ manga for new narratives by female amateur artists. Without in-depth knowledge of the manga they could not produce new stories in the first place.

⁴ For a detailed discussion of the relationship between the population of inference (the population to draw conclusions about), the target population, the frame population and sampling, as well as errors of sampling, see Wright 1983, Kromrey 2002.

⁵ In this context, roleplayer refers to someone who engages in narrative fantasy games, so called roleplaying games (RPG). The most popular or mainstream form of RPGs are computer games in which the player controls an avatar through a programmed, maybe adaptive narrative or fights with/alongside other players’ avatars. Offline variants include games played sitting at a table and based on talking as well as life action roleplays in which participants dress-up as their characters and try to enact their fictional personalities.

⁶ The interviews were conducted between July and October 2010 in the Kantō, Kansai and Chūbu areas. The interviewees were between 18 and 42 years-old, mostly male and included students, employees, freelancers, and unemployed. The interviewees were contacted via mixi.jp or referred to me by other informants. The interviews were semi-structured (following a guide of questions but not a strict order and allowing for input by the informants) and featured a network chart to represent personal relationships. With these charts and the interviews, structure and meaning of a person’s relations can be evaluated, which is not limited to the given

Asato, Wako and Yoko Sakai. 2013. *Social Innovation and Sustainability for the Future. Recreating the Intimate and the Public Spheres*. Kyoto, Nakanishi.

individual but includes related persons as well. Each interview lasted for about two hours.

⁷ Stereotypical label applied to supposed-to-be reclusive users of pop-cultural media. Similar to other “human kinds” (Hacking 1999) the relationship between the label and those so signified is continuously changing and it has become increasingly unclear who or what an *otaku* is.

⁸ The term computer also includes smartphones in this context.

⁹ Tokyo’s largest, biannual convention for amateur-produced media, including manga, novels and games.

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