

# *On the Development of Japanese Otaku Culture from the Perspective of Subcultural Output*

**Shuxuan Wang**

*School of Labor Economics, China University of Labor Relations, Beijing, China  
100084sgxy@culr.edu.cn*

**Abstract.** Under the background of global culture, the intercultural communication of Japanese otaku culture gets a lot of attention. Although existing studies have pointed out its output characteristics and value, there are gaps such as weak regional analysis, insufficient discussion on cultural adaptation and broken circle mechanism. This study uses the text analysis method, combined with the post subculture theory, to sort out the three-stage evolution of its output, analyze the role of digital platform algorithm and transmedia storytelling in breaking the circle, and explore the meaning negotiation mechanism in cultural output. The study found that the cultural output went through three stages: product export, symbol communication and ecological output. The “mobility” and “anti rationality” characteristics in the post subculture achieved cross context adaptation. The algorithm and storytelling transmedia were driven by breaking the circle. The meaning negotiation mechanism realizes the balance between regional cultural adaptation and value transmission through symbol translation and audience co creation. This study enriches the post subculture intercultural communication research and provides a practical framework for the output of subculture industry.

**Keywords:** Japanese otaku culture, culture output, storytelling transmedia, meaning negotiation mechanism.

## **1. Introduction**

This study focuses on the increasingly in-depth and extensive intercultural communication in the context of cultural globalization, Taking the ACG industry as the core carrier, Japanese otaku culture has grown from a local subculture to a cultural form with global influence by virtue of its unique narrative, visual symbols and emotional resonance. Its output has both cultural value transmission and commercial benefits. It is a typical sample of subculture intercultural communication. This research is of great significance to the development of intercultural communication and the cultural industry. Existing studies have sorted out the cultural output stage, post subculture characteristics and driving factors, and revealed the logic of symbolic consumption and industrial development. However, there are still gaps in the analysis of regional cultural adaptation, the lack of systematic analysis of digital media breaking mechanism, and the lack of discussion on the path of meaning negotiation. Based on this, this study, from the perspective of Japanese otaku cultural output, combs its output stages and characteristics evolution, explores the role of algorithm and transmedia

storytelling in breaking the circle, analyzes the meaning negotiation mechanism, and provides theoretical reference and practical enlightenment for subculture intercultural communication and cultural industry output. This study will use the text analysis method, take Japanese otaku culture related ACG works, industry reports, policy documents and intercultural communication cases as the text, combined with the post subculture theory, focus on the evolution of the characteristics of the three stages of output, explore the role of digital platform algorithm and cross-media narrative, analyze the meaning negotiation mechanism in cultural output, and provide empirical support for the discussion of cultural adaptation, regional differences and the balance of value transmission.

## 2. Literature review

There are many achievements in the study of otaku culture originated from Japan. Xu Lihan pointed out that under the general trend of world cultural exchanges, the youth groups have widely accepted the cultural boom led by Japan. In recent years, the research on otaku culture has been vigorously carried out in Japan, Britain and America, China, Latin America, East Asia and other places [1]. In the process of otaku culture output, Xu Lihan divided it into three stages, while Okamoto focused on the phenomenon of Japan's local animation holy land tour, and proposed that this form marked the transformation of otaku culture from content output to ecological output of content plus experience and industry combination, which became an important part of Japan's "cool Japan" strategy and supported the three processes of otaku culture output [1,2]. Zhou Shuqiu pointed out the characteristics of "mobility" and "anti rationality" in the post subculture characteristics of otaku culture and the commercial value it drives [3]. From the perspective of campus community in animation, Lamarre found that cultural community, as an important carrier of otaku culture among young people, pursues "equality in difference", and its participatory and co creative characteristics are the specific expression of "mobility" [4].

At present, Yu Tao's research has put forward the future trend of the cultural pluralism of otaku, which has been echoed in the empirical research in different regions [5]. Rodrigues & Santos' research on Brazilian youth shows that otaku culture has crossed the economic class and national boundaries in Latin America and has become the core carrier of youth identity construction [6]. Asano et al. focused on East Asia and pointed out that Japanese animation, as a shared cultural carrier, broke through national boundaries and formed a localized consumption model, confirming the development trend of multiple symbiosis [7]. The existing achievements are in the form of literature study and ethnography interview. Rodrigues & Santos' snowball sampling method and Okamoto's fieldwork method enrich the dimension of empirical research [2,6].

Theoretically, Kam, T. proposed that otaku is a social label that violates the implicit rules [8]. Zhou Shuqiu defined the symbolic consumption of otaku as that consumers transfer the symbolic value of commodities to the object of communication through the emotional function and communication function carried by commodity symbols [3]. This theory has been embodied in regional communication: for example, Brazilian youth prefer the theme of juvenile romance and fantasy, and internalize the symbolic value through role identification [6]. East Asian fans have integrated animation symbols into social and even social participation, expanding the application scenarios of symbol consumption [7]. The existing achievements have used the forms of literature study, ethnography interview, snowball sampling and field survey, with diverse research perspectives and rich content. The existing research has clarified the output stage, post subculture characteristics and multiple driving factors of otaku culture, revealed its economic, cultural and identity values, and also discussed the current situation and influence of the dissemination of otaku culture in some regions. However, there are still obvious deficiencies: the analysis of regional

cultural adaptation is still weak. Although some studies have focused on Brazil, East Asia and other regions, there is a lack of research on the localization adaptation of other different cultural circles; The research on the relationship between otaku culture and local social conditions and industrial integration is not deep enough. The above research gaps need to be filled. Based on ACG's cultural core and post subculture characteristics, this study tries to fill the research gap from the perspective of "output", systematically sort out the output mechanism, deepen cross-cultural communication research, analyze the meaning negotiation mechanism in cultural output, and explore cultural adaptation, regional differences and value transmission balance, so as to provide Enlightenment for cultural industry output and help cross-cultural integration.

### 3. Analysis

#### 3.1. Three stages of progressive evolution of Japanese otaku cultural output

The cross-cultural output of otaku culture in Japan takes the three stages of "product export - symbol communication - ecological output" as the progressive logic, and each stage presents different characteristics in terms of communication form, group characteristics and industrial scale.

##### 3.1.1. Product export stage

In the embryonic stage of export, the export form is mainly the cross-border circulation of ACG physical products, with limited communication channels. Most of them are exported through TV broadcast, physical DVDs and comic books, and the scope is concentrated in East Asia, Europe and the United States. Classic works include *Astro Boy* by Osamu Tezuka and *The City of the Sky* by Hayao Miyazaki. As the carrier of communication, they open the international market with high-quality narrative content and realize the initial cross-border exposure of otaku cultural symbols. At this stage, the characteristics of subcultures present a small-scale flow and irrationality: "mobility" is mostly reflected in the cross regional transfer of physical products, with clear group boundaries and relatively closed interactions, which is seen by the public as a self carnival belonging to marginalized groups. The manifestation of "anti rationality" is the emotional exclusive consumption of physical products by niche fans, which constructs circles and self-identity through collection and collecting, and has not yet formed a large-scale group effect. At this time, otaku are closer to closed communities and have limited cultural influence.

##### 3.1.2. Symbol propagation stage

Under the mutual influence of Japan's "a nation built on country" policy and Internet technology, the output form has gradually upgraded from physical products to cross regional communication of cultural symbols. The character images, worldview settings, and core values in anime no longer exist only in specific works, but have become independent cultural symbols, rapidly spreading through the prosperous development of the early internet era and fan communities.

In her research, Huang Ruiling cited Michel Maffesoli's "New Tribe" theory and defined otaku as "a 'new tribe' that emerged through new media as an important carrier, and is a 'nomadic tribe' on the internet". The core feature is a "loose group formed by a combination of online and offline activities based on a common way of life and 'fun', without rigid organizational forms, and more reflected as an atmosphere or spiritual state" [9]. This stage is a critical period for the formation of the "new tribe". It is manifested as the otaku community breaking through the limitations of offline scenes, loosely connected by interests, and forming a spiritual resonance and interest community. The "anti

rationality" feature has been upgraded to a fanatical pursuit and secondary creation of symbols. Fans reconstruct the meaning of symbols through fan comics and role-playing, strengthening the group cohesion of the "new tribe", and expanding cultural influence from niche circles to a wider youth group.

### 3.1.3. Ecological output stage

After the 21st century, the export of otaku culture entered a mature stage, forming an ecological system of "content + experience + industry", which was included in Japan's "Cool Japan" strategy, achieving a deep integration of cultural value and economic value. The phenomenon of anime pilgrimage studied by Okamoto has become a typical representative, where fans pursue offline experiences of anime filming locations, driving the development of related industries such as tourism and derivative areas, and building a virtuous loop of "content creation- fan participation- industry revenue- re creation."

After the formation of the "new tribe", it further expanded at this stage [9]: The rise of digital media such as short videos has intensified efforts to break down regional and circle barriers. Global otaku have formed cross regional interest communities through social platforms and digital content platforms, with diverse member identities and freedom of movement. The same person can participate in multiple segmented circles at the same time, presenting a "part-time" characteristic. In terms of "mobility" characteristics, it not only breaks the inherent circle, but also achieves cross contextual adaptation with other circles, dual openness of scenes and groups, and activity scenes extend from online content consumption and offline comic exhibitions to theme tourism and cross-border IP co branding. The characteristic of "anti rationality" is manifested in the emotional resonance, value identification, and self-awareness shaping of cultural symbols by the global fan community. Consumer behavior is both personalized and universal, and otaku culture has gradually moved from subculture to mainstream, becoming a prominent and important business card in Japanese cultural exports.

## 3.2. Breakthrough driven and meaning negotiation mechanism

The otaku culture can achieve global breakthroughs, relying on precise push through digital platform algorithms and transmedia storytelling "database construction". The two work together to break down regional and circle barriers. Taking the Japanese ACG work "Gintama" as an example, this mechanism's practical approach can be clearly presented, while achieving a balance between regional cultural adaptation and core value transmission through meaning negotiation.

### 3.2.1. Symbol dissemination based on "Database consumption"

Nie Xinru pointed out that the core of Hiroki Azuma Haoji's "Database consumption" is that the essence of otaku cultural texts is a "symbol database", which includes fragmented elements such as characters, scenes, and emotional symbols. The audience completes consumption and creation by calling and combining these elements. The cross media communication of Gintama is a typical practice of this theory: based on the Edo era background and the science fiction roast style as the basic symbol, it builds a complete database of role symbols including Sakata Gintoki, Kagula, etc., "Yorozuya" scene symbols, and "Stick to Faith" value symbols. Through multi media forms such as comics, animation, live action movies, mobile games, offline theme exhibitions, it does not need to rely on traditional symbol narration, but relies on symbol combinations to achieve coverage and

continuous communication from multiple angles. Different media are developed around the core elements of the database to meet the needs of different audiences and achieve cross media and cross circle meaning sharing.

### **3.2.2. Accurate push of digital platform algorithms**

The digital platform algorithms that emerged in the internet age provide a dissemination path and platform for "Database Consumption". By accurately capturing user interests and preferences, efficient allocation of symbol databases can be achieved. In the global dissemination of "Gintama", domestic platforms such as Bilibili and Tencent Video analyze user viewing, search, and interaction data to accurately push content such as dramas, clips, and slices to potential audiences. International platforms leverage the diverse cultural contexts of different regions to adapt their push logic and promote the cross regional diffusion of symbols. Algorithms not only improve dissemination efficiency, but also promote the formation of a "new tribe" of otaku worldwide. Fans from different countries gather and interact through algorithms, forming a truly global interest community.

### **3.2.3. Balance between symbol translation and audience co creation**

The success of intercultural communication among otaku is the process by which the mechanism of meaning negotiation plays a role. Gintama transforms Japanese local symbols into universal values and weakens cultural barriers by shaping Chinese style character designs and incorporating elements from European and American films for symbol translation. Audiences also participate in the output. The roast culture and classic lines of the works stimulate the enthusiasm of global fans for secondary creation, and form expression packs, peer works and other communication content. Audiences change from receivers to co creators. At the same time, Gintama always sticks to the Japanese roast culture, deconstructs the "anti rationality" of the mainstream narrative and other core characteristics, and achieves the balance of core unchanged and form adaptation, which is also the key to its successful cross-cultural communication.

## **4. Influence**

### **4.1. Theoretical significance**

The theoretical contributions of this study are mainly reflected in three aspects. Firstly, enriching the intercultural communication research of post subculture theory, by sorting out the three stages of progressive evolution of otaku cultural communication, and combining Huang Ruiling's "New Tribe" theory, clarifying the evolutionary logic of otaku groups from niche marginal communities to global interest communities, providing empirical support for the non Western application of post subculture theory [9]. Secondly, deepen the research on the mechanism of digital media helping to break boundaries. Based on Nie Xinru's "Database Consumption", construct a framework for breaking boundaries by accurately pushing algorithms and constructing cross media databases, filling the gap in existing research on the joint role of the two [10]. Thirdly, improve the meaning negotiation theory of cultural output, and through case analysis of the path of symbol translation and audience co creation, reveal the balance mechanism between regional cultural adaptation and core value transmission, providing a new perspective for cross-cultural communication theory.

## 4.2. Practical significance

This study provides a complete framework for the internationalization of subcultural industries, from symbol database construction to meaning negotiation. The dissemination of symbols requires the exploration of useful elements that are both unique and universal, and the construction of cross media reusable databases. It is necessary to adopt multiple media perspectives for dissemination and to build a cross-media ecosystem spanning comic series, peripheral products, and offline themed activities, while achieving precise audience reach through algorithmic platforms. By translating symbols and transforming the audience from mere recipients to creators, regional adaptation of cultural core dissemination can be achieved. This framework has a direct reference value for the international development of China's anime culture and national style culture, helps to tap the core symbols of local subculture, builds a cross-cultural communication system with Chinese characteristics, and improves the country's cultural soft power.

## 5. Conclusion

This study only focuses on mainstream ACG works such as "Gintama" and does not cover niche types of otaku such as model homes and technology homes, and the exploration of the diverse forms of "new tribes" is not comprehensive enough. The empirical analysis of "Database Consumption" mainly relies on text observation, lacking systematic research on audience symbol reception behavior, making it difficult to accurately verify the dissemination effect; The dissemination of culture has two sides, and this study did not explore the negative effects of otaku culture output, such as the risk of cultural invasion and excessive addiction among young people. The research perspective is relatively single. In the future, the scope of research can be expanded to include niche types of otaku, classify different otaku, and conduct targeted research and analysis on the dissemination characteristics and adaptation logic of different types of otaku groups. Using other research methods, collecting audience data through questionnaire surveys and in-depth interviews, verifying the actual effects of "Database Consumption" and algorithm dissemination, and exploring the differences in symbol reception among regional audiences. It is also possible to supplement research on the negative impact of cultural output, analyze its potential impact on the cultural ecology and youth values of the importing country, and propose targeted guidance strategies. In addition, attention can be paid to the impact of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and the metaverse, and new pathways for technology-driven subcultural expression can be explored.

## References

- [1] Xu, L.H. (2022) Subcultures Going Global: A Brief Discussion on the Development of Japanese Otaku Culture. Proceedings of the International Academic Forum on Cultural and Artistic Innovation (III), 26-29.
- [2] Okamoto, T. (2015) Otaku tourism and the anime pilgrimage phenomenon in Japan. Japan Forum, 27(1), 12–36.
- [3] Zhou, S.Q. (2024) A Study on the Subcultural Characteristics of Japanese Otaku. Harbin Institute of Technology.
- [4] Lamarre, T. (2025) Paratopia: anime, school clubs, and the aims of education. Japan Forum, 37(5), 642–665.
- [5] Yu, T. (2017) The generation, characteristics, and development trends of contemporary subcultures. Academic Exchange, (10), 89-94.
- [6] Rodrigues Ortiz Redes, I.M. and Borges dos Santos, D. (2025) Identification of young adults with otaku culture. Connection Line, 33, 19–47.
- [7] Asano, T., Sasajima, H. and Takahashi, K. (2025) Introduction: Youth culture in East Asia. Japanese Journal of Sociology, 34(1), 3–5.
- [8] Kam, T. (2013) The common sense that makes the 'otaku': rules for consuming popular culture in contemporary Japan. Japan Forum, 25(2), 151–173.

- [9] Huang, R.L. (2022) Research on Several Subcultural Phenomena of Youth in the New Era: Based on the Perspective of Cultural Sociology. *International Public Relations*, (04), 20-27.
- [10] Nie, X.R. (2023) Summary of Otaku Culture and Japanese Animation. *Art Hundred*, 39(02), 114-123.