

## Otaku History: A Socio-Economic Interpretation

### Otaku Etymology:

Otaku is derived from a Japanese term for another person's house or family (お宅, otaku). A more useful way in which the term is used is as an honorific second person pronoun, you. If you listen closely to certain anime, it may be used this way. The modern form meaning something like "dedicated fan" is written using hiragana instead of kanji. お宅 vs おたく. *“Japanese uses a whole range of pronouns, depending on the speaker, the target, et cetera. These terms aren't fixed, either - for example, Kenshin using "sessha" to refer to himself was a very stilted/formal use of a pronoun even for the 1870s and identified him as humble and a bit stuffy. "Otaku" is another one of these, but this one was a second-person pronoun of more recent (but still not modern) vintage. Literally "your house", in the sense that it indicated that the speaker is not familiar with the target and does not necessarily know the proper relationship between the two.”* (Quote from Reddit User “Avatar\_exADV”)

### Categorizing the Otaku: An Economic Perspective

Calling someone an Otaku, usually, has a connotation of intense anime hobbyist. However, the “Otaku” can be categorized into multiple different hobbyist categories. Nomura Research Institute published a study in 2005 that categorized the “Otaku” based on specific economic interests.<sup>1</sup> These are the 12 categories:

Field	Population (*1)	Market Scale (*2)
Comics	350,000	¥ 83 billion
Animation	110,000	¥ 20 billion
Idols (*3)	280,000	¥ 61 billion
Games	160,000	¥ 21 billion
PC assembly	190,000	¥ 36 billion
Audio-visual equipment	60,000	¥ 12 billion
Mobile IT equipment	70,000	¥ 8 billion
Autos	140,000	¥ 54 billion
Travel	250,000	¥ 81 billion
Fashion	40,000	¥ 13 billion
Cameras	50,000	¥ 18 billion
Railways	20,000	¥ 4 billion
<b>Total</b>	<b>1.72 million</b>	<b>¥ 411 billion</b>

(\*1) Given that there are population overlaps in each field, the total given here is cumulative.

(\*2) Estimated from industry interviews and other research, based on the average per capita monthly consumption that was deduced as a result of the NRI Internet-based questionnaire.

(\*3) Show business personalities or TV Star

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.nri.com/global/news/2005/051006.html>

Estimates concerning the enthusiast consumer group market scale in 12 major domestic fields  
(2004)

Furthermore, the institute broke down each of the consumer otaku into five separate types:<sup>2</sup>

**Type 1: The family-oriented *otaku***

This type is the most numerous among *otaku*. Members are broadly distributed throughout various fields, mainly in mechanical fields such as PC assembly and audio-visual equipment. On the whole this type is relatively more mature and many are married. This type is characterized by relatively low expenditure and time spent on consumer activities related to their hobbies, perhaps because of the strain of household expenditures. This type generally has a stronger tendency than others to be respectful of "harmony with others" although the proportion of members who share their hobbies with family and friends is relatively low, suggesting "closet *otaku*." The archetype is a "father who is immersed in his hobby and spends his allowance on it in secret, without the knowledge of his family."

**Type 2: The "leaving my own mark on the world" *otaku***

Members of this type have their own solid values and actively collect information and post critical comments on the Internet. Of all the five types, this one has the highest proportion of males. They are concentrated in the mechanical field, including PC assembly, audio-visual equipment, IT gadgets, autos, and cameras, as well as the show business personality field. This type is considered to be the successor to previous "mania" or "collector" groups. The archetype for the "takes it seriously *otaku*" is the "single male in his 20s and 30s with an interest in mechanical and idol fields."

**Type 3: The media-sensitive multiple interest *otaku***

This type has a strong tendency to have an interest in multiple fields and is very media-oriented. Members are equally distributed by gender and tend to be from the younger generation. Their use of the Internet is high and consumer time spent on hobbies is also high. Members of this type seek interaction with others and reveal their hobby, showing their carefree attitude about their strong interest in their hobbies. This type has a strong tendency to fixate on acquiring information or material goods, and there are many who respond that "I cannot give up my hobby." On the other hand, they tend to consider it more valuable to be sensitive to trends and fads rather than seeking to develop their own values. The archetype is an "Internet roamer who loves net auctions and community sites and is a light user of 2Channel." (2Channel is the most popular BBS in Japan.)

**Type 4: The outgoing and assertive *otaku***

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.nri.com/global/news/2005/051006.html>

Members of this type have their own values. They actively try to involve other people in their hobbies in an attempt to share the values they develop. Their values are somewhat fixed. They find their way to gain recognition from others only by promoting their hobby. . Males account for 60% of this type and many are in their 30s or 40s. The archetype is "a man in his 30s who experienced a hobby craze in his youth (Gundam, etc.) and who has continued into adulthood still perpetuating, without noticing, values developed through his youthful experiences, while growing up in social aspects."

**Type 5: The fan magazine-obsessed *otaku***

Females account for the overwhelming majority of this type and are mainly in their 20s or 30s (men who are the so-called "Akiba type" or "moe type" also come into this type). Their creative desire is particularly strong and participation in creative activities in fan magazines is high. This type has the highest expenditure on hobbies and tends to engage in them for long periods. The archetype is "a fan magazine-obsessed female who has an obsession with characters in comics or animation and continues her hobby into adulthood, hiding it from her friends."

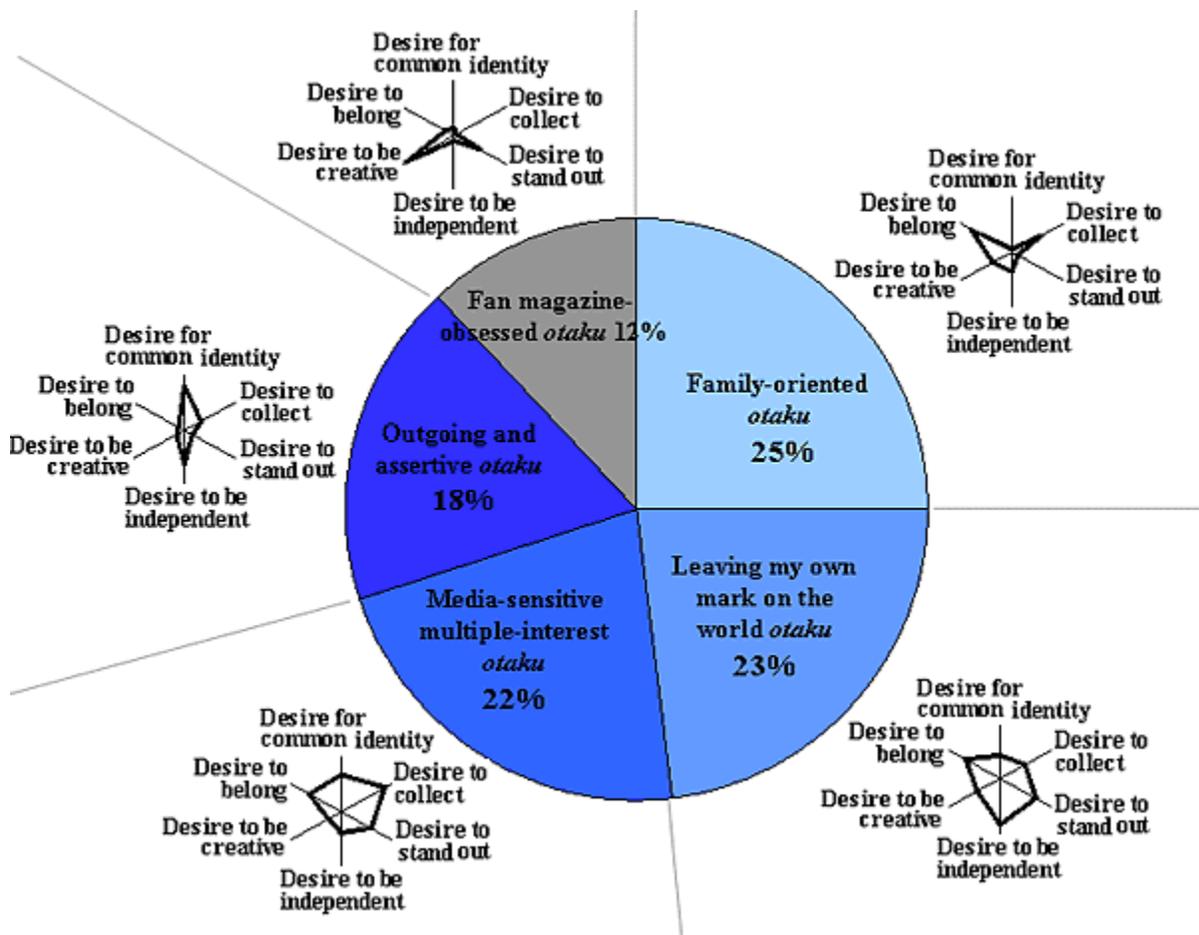


Figure 1: Five types within the otaku group and their proportions (N=363)

The Categorization and Type information above belongs specifically to Nomura Research Institute, Ltd. I do not take credit for the information.

### Otaku History: The Growth of the term “Otaku”

Akio Nakamori, real name Ansaku Shibahara, was a columnist and editor who worked for Manga Burikko a popular lolicon magazine during the 80's. His 1983 series "An Investigation of Otaku" (『おたく』の研究 or Otaku no kenkyuu) applied the term to unpleasant fans in caricature. People began to self-identify as Otaku in the 80's for a variety of reasons, a few of which I will list below.<sup>3</sup>

“Tomohiro Machiyama suggests that the use of “otaku” as a form of address amongst anime fans was mimicked from the Macross anime directly. Machiyama says that the main character, Hikaru Ichijoe, frequently uses the extra-polite “otaku” when talking to other characters.”<sup>4</sup>

“According to Okada Toshio, at science fiction conventions, otaku from various places (i.e. anime clubs from different schools) would meet each other. Out of respect for each other's clubs, they would refer to each other using "otaku", the extra polite form of address.”<sup>5</sup>

“Even though Akio Nakamori would write about the otaku-zoku in a less than positive light, many otaku began using the label for themselves in proud defiance and half-joking self-deprecation. Otaku no Video (1991) provides an excellent example of sincere otaku pride combined with otaku making fun of themselves.”<sup>6</sup>

The proposed origins above are certainly only a few of the many interpretations.

### Otaku History: The 90's

Now the origin of where the term came from inside Japan has been argued but what about here? The international attention given to the “Otaku Murderer” Tsutomu Miyazaki is where Americans first experienced the “Otaku.” Akio Nakamori is also well known for his essay "The Age of M" (Mの時代 M no Jidai) which focused on the serial killer. Tsutomu is important to modern Otaku because he can be credited with putting lolicon in context with creating social disorder. Police investigators found thousands of pornographic materials featuring children in his house after his arrest. Therefore, he helped create more government censorship guidelines in Japan for erotic material. Another interpretation, possibly synchronic, of its origin in America is the 1991 video “Otaku no Video” released in America. American fans at this time didn't have the internet so the connection between お宅 and おたく with their respective meanings wouldn't be

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.cjas.org/~leng/otaku-origin.htm>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.cjas.org/~leng/otaku-origin.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

so clear cut. Furthermore, the diverse categories of Otaku weren't specifically understood. The おたく to an Anime viewer would be simply a dedicated fan of anime or manga.

### Okada Toshio: Self-Identified Otaku King

Okada Toshio was born on July 1, 1958 in Osaka, Japan. He co-founded, and was a former president of, the anime production studio Gainax. The interest to Otaku is that he is considered a foremost voice on the Otaku Culture even teaching at Tokyo University on the subject in the 90's. He is considered the Ota-king by many of his contemporary peers for his contribution to the Otaku cause.

### The Three Otaku "Eyes": Okada Toshio's Interpretation of Otaku Anime Analysis

Okada Toshio in his book *Otaku-gaku nyuumon, Introduction to Otakuology*, describes the three eyes that the Otaku uses to discern the specific aspects of anime.<sup>7</sup> These three eyes are: eye of iki, eye of takumi and the eye of tsuu. These three terms are possibly derived from Edo era town culture. The eye of tsuu is the eye of the connoisseur. This eye encompasses knowledge and expertise behind the production of the anime/manga and other miscellaneous information about the work. The eye of takumi is the clever or skillful eye which can be alluded to as the eye of a scientist who sees through the structure of the work. This eye recognizes things such as animation quality in comparison to other anime/manga. Finally, the eye of iki is your personal chic or style. It is the eye used to find personal beauty in an anime/manga and examine and enjoy the author's growth in their style.

### Grand-Narrative, Small-Narrative, and Non-Narrative: The Otaku Magnets

A Narrative is, put very simply, a story. All pieces of entertainment have some sort of narrative. But when looking at anime we can discern three types of narratives that anime use to appeal to the Otaku.

The Grand-Narrative is the overall understanding of a work's particular goal and clearly defines different genres in this way. The Grand-Narratives are manifested in a viewer's expectation of the shows goals. Such as a person watching a romantic comedy already knows the couple is getting together. The romantic comedy functions WITHIN the Grand-Narrative of all Romantic Comedies. This Grand-Narrative interpretation helps explain exactly why people hated "School Days." The anime presented itself functioning within the romantic anime Grand-Narrative and viewer's expectations lead to a certain understanding of the anime's purpose. The differentiation from that expected Grand-Narrative made some people really dislike it. Which leads us to the next narrative.

The Small-Narrative is the narrative that functions within the Grand-Narrative. The Small-Narrative is the stories that exist in a space that conforms to understandings set by the viewer's toward the Grand-Narrative. It is specifically why people come back to romantic comedies over and over again. The interest is not that the end goal is going to be different but that it functions

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<sup>7</sup> Steinberg, Marc. 2004. "Otaku consumption, superflat art and the return to Edo." *Japan Forum* 16, no. 3: 449-471. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed December 3, 2014).

differently within that Grand-Narrative. People expect the couple to be together but what's important is HOW they get together. The ever-changing small aspects of situations and comedy bring people back. The next narrative isn't a narrative aspect at all.

The Non-Narrative is the aspects about anime that do not tell a specific story but rather allude to a particular "object" that is used across genres and styles. This can include bunny suits, cat ears, animal tails, or extravagantly styled hair. This is called a Non-Narrative because these aspects are specifically telling a story but rather using "objects" people want as part of another narrative. Most anime use non-narrative aspects when telling a story. Even as well written and compelling as Code Geass was, it still used some of these aspects such as the bunny suit with Karen.

### Where is the Otaku Today: Conclusive Statements

#### **Japan**

*For a long time, the term was massively pejorative in Japan, but that sense never really existed in the Western adoption of the term to stand-in for "anime fans". Lots of English-speakers would self-identify as "otaku" but wouldn't necessarily be so by Japanese standards. At the same time, the term isn't as pejorative as it used to be in Japan (Reddit User Avatar\_exADV), recent studies published in 2013 show that the term is garnering less negative connotations.<sup>8</sup> In addition a research study done by the Yano Research Institute in 2011 found 2,581 out of 10,102 self-identified as an Otaku.<sup>9</sup> That's roughly 25% of the total amount. The base that self-identified as Otaku in the 80's did so specifically in contrast to social norms. The absence of the internet made the communication harder. The growth of the internet not only made it easier for communities to interact but allow for more people to join. The growing communities allow for more visibility in the culture. The social visibility of the Otaku eventually leads to some form of social acceptance as we have seen above in the data. The 80's Otaku is not the 2015 Otaku. The progressive loss of negative connotation will eventually lead to social acceptance.*

#### **America**

The Otaku in America still refers specifically to a manga or anime nerd but does not function within the same history as a Japanese Otaku. The perception of the Otaku in America is viewed in the same way as other hobby obsessed individuals. The person who won't stop talking about sports at every instance will be considered in the same vein as someone talking about anime/manga. The individualism/collectivism dynamic aspect in Japan saw the Otaku as disturbing social order. In some ways, this is still true. In America, a person who loves anime may be perceived as "weird" but the idea of them disturbing a greater social body is just not there. This is due to the focus on the individual in America rather than concerns of a greater collective body. Also, America is frankly more culturally diverse than Japan. The value of multi-cultural beliefs create the idea that difference can be good. Of course, that ideal is not always

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Jakusoso (27 April 2013). "自分のことを「オタク」と認識してる人 10代は62%、70代は23%" [62% of Teens identify as "otaku", 70's 23%]. Mynavi. Archived from the original on 3 July 2013. Retrieved 4 February 2014.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.yanoresearch.com/press/pdf/863.pdf>

true in every place in America but as a generalization I believe it's much more the norm. In this way, a person who watches anime and talks about it all the time is just annoying. And that's it.

Thanks for reading you guys

If you want to read up on some other interpretations of the "Otaku" check out the readings below. If you want more analysis of anime related material check out "[Anime Historian](#)" on YouTube. Thanks for reading you guys :)

For further Reading:

<http://www.cjas.org/~leng/otaku-origin.htm>

'A Sociology of Japanese Youth: From Returnees to NEETs' edited by Roger Goodman, Yuki Imoto and Tuukka Toivonen.

'Fandom Unbound: Otaku Culture in a Connected World' edited by Mizuko Ito, Daisuke Okabe, and Izumi Tsuji.