

Perspectives on Japanese and American Fandom Practices and Culture

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Abstract

As the internet has advanced, what were once seen as fringe cultures have become more visible and more socially mainstream. Notably, fan communities and the activities surrounding them have gained widespread acknowledgment. No longer is it seen as “weird” to be a large fan of anime or comic books. The fans as well as culture and activities surrounding something such as a TV show, sports, or an idol group has become known as "fandom", and now more than ever, is being discussed in mainstream media. As such, research into the topic has increased as well as become easier to conduct. We launched a survey to better understand fans' habits, specifically focusing on the variations between Japanese-speaking fans and English-speaking fans. We asked, in what ways fandom spaces vary between Japan and English-speaking countries and why, as well as, in what ways the monetization of fanworks varies between Japan and English-speaking countries and why. Though they overlap in website usage at times, we found that the way fandom spaces are curated online, differs according to key preferences the two groups have. For instance, the ability to search and tag or the language of the website influences which websites they use. Also, how they express themselves and show appreciation for the works of other fans differs, especially in regard to commenting. However, when it comes to in-person fandom spaces, they are largely similar, attending the same types of conventions and fan events for many of the same reasons. When it came to monetization and issues of copyright, we found the greatest differences between the two fan groups. Notably, Japanese fans were more worried about copyright affecting their own fanworks. This was likely the reason they sold their works for a less profit compared to American fans. American fans, however, sold fewer fanworks, likely to avoid Fair Use law violations.

Introduction

For the purposes of this study, it is important to establish what the word “fandom” means. “Fandom”, as described by Oxford Languages, is defined as: the fans of a particular person, team, fictional series, etc. regarded collectively as a community or subculture. (e.g. The Star Wars *fandom* is divided on their opinions on the recent sequel series by Disney)

1. Significance of the Study

Anson :

I have been participating in fandom for well over 10 years now. In 2020 when I first started using Twitter, I noticed that Western fans and Japanese fans were participating in fandom in different ways, and it caught my attention. I started to want to know what other differences there

were between the two in terms of fandom practice and why these differences occurred.

Perez :

In 2022, I was invited into a private rhythm game fandom. The community was made up of western (mostly European) fans of a pre-existing Japanese rhythm game fandom. This made me question the differences between this western fandom I was now a part of and the original Japanese one.

2. Research Questions

1. In what ways do fandom spaces vary between Japan and English-speaking countries and why?
2. In what ways does the monetization of fanworks vary between Japan and English-speaking countries and why?

3. Research Background

3.1. History of Fandom

The history of fandom is somewhat hard to document as it leads to a question of where to begin. So instead a brief abridged history will be given, but before that it would be remiss if the prerequisites for fandom were not first given, for better understanding. The first and most important requisite for fandom was the creation of copyright laws. Without the empirical author voice, there would be no difference between a work created by a fan or by the original author. Consider the Authurian canon. As the legends and large body of the works were created before copyright, all of them are authoritative despite having different creators. But with the creation of copyright, now there is one true work, and all other works created regarding outside of copyright are now fanworks. Other important factors to the rise of fans, was a rise in literacy rates, decline in the cost of printing as well as declines in the cost of transportation. Now works could be spread further and for cheaper so more groups of fans could form (Reagin & Rubenstein, 2011).

These first disorganized fans that started to appear happened in the mid- to late-1800's. These fans were seen forming around a variety of things from music and composers, to the works of Charles Dickens being serialized in magazines. The first organized fans appeared in the 20's

and 30's, creating some of the first fan clubs. However, it was not until the latter half of the 20th century that organized fandom started to appear. Technological changes again were once the driving force. These changes included even easier and cheaper printing methods and science fiction fans in the 60's and 70's started producing zines, or amateur magazines, filled with different forms of fanworks. This generally is considered the first sign of organized fandom, as it was different fans coming together for a fan activity together, and then distributing the zines to other fans (Reagin & Rubenstein, 2011).

3.2. Early Internet Trends

As discussed above, fandom in the 70's, and actually into the 80's as well, was largely focused around zines and the amateur press organizations that formed around producing them (Versaphile, 2011). This also corresponded to the rise of Otaku culture in Japan and the start of Comic Market, which will be discussed below (Nagai, 2002). But in the 90's fans and fan activity really took to the internet ushering in what some call "The Second Wave of Fandom" (Reagin & Rubenstien, 2011). According to Versaphile, the very first signs of fandom online appeared on Usenet in the 80's, but it was not until the mid-90's that the first fanfiction archives started to appear online. These were not the archives that fans are now accustomed to, and so in the late-90's fans moved to email mailing lists. However as mailing lists started to fail, new advances in internet technology allowed the creation of better fanfiction archives, for example GeoCities. The full end of the mailing lists came with the rise of online journaling services, notably LiveJournal. In 2011, at the time Versaphile published their article about fandom internet trends, LiveJournal was still the predominant home for fandom activities and fan creations.

3.3. Conventions

In regards to conventions, an online survey was conducted by author Candie Syphrit Kington in order to study fan interests and participation in online and in-person fandom spaces, and ultimately "elicit a description of fan culture" (Kington, 2015). The aforementioned survey was conducted in North America only, with most of the participants falling under either the 18-25 or 26-35 year old age groups; 84% of them actively attending conventions, while 15% did not. Respondents were asked about their fandom interests/memberships, participation in online activities, convention attendance, and participation in con activities. The results of Kington's

survey showed that visiting the “Dealer’s Room,” a space for convention attendees to purchase goods (both fanmade and official), was the most popular convention activity.

3.4. Monetization

In finding the relationship between fanwork creation and monetization, Takeyasu Ichikohji and Sotaro Katsumata conducted a survey on consumers and whether or not they produce their own manga or music, and whether or not they sold them as well. The results revealed that consumers who create works in one category tend to create in the other category, with the same trend proving true with monetization (Ichikohji & Katsumata, 2015). Similarly, Miho Aida conducted field research on the purchase and sale of fanworks at Comiket: the largest zine market in Japan and in the world for printed material not published by commercial presses (Aida, 2004). Her research showed that most fanwork vendors operate in the red, as they themselves also purchase zines at the event just as the general attendees do.

3.5. Copyright and Fandom

As discussed above, without copyright, the existence of fanworks is not possible. However, fans have a complicated and often contentious relation to copyright law. Since the early days of fandom on the internet, rights holders have often obtained Cease & Desist orders, and the site holders would remove the fanworks, without notice, and regardless of whether or not the works were in fact in violation out of fear of further litigation. Anne Rice was notorious among fan communities for such practices. (Peaslee, 2015). In reaction to what fans perceived as inappropriately broad application of copyright, activist fans, “[M]obilized to develop a communal, nonprofit group to provide fans with an ‘archive of their own’, protecting fan works from deletion by server hosts who believe[d] those works to be in breach of copyright” (Lothian, 2011). This archive became Archive of Our Own (hereinafter referred to as AO3), and the organization that runs it Organization for Transformative Works (hereinafter referred to as OTW), were created. As the OTW states in its mission and vision statements, it believes that “[F]anworks are transformative and that transformative works are legitimate . . . We envision a future in which all fannish works are recognized as legal and transformative and are accepted as a legitimate creative activity. We are proactive and innovative in protecting and defending our work from commercial exploitation and legal challenge.”

As no one has yet challenged the OTW's legal team, it is impossible to say exactly where their defense may fall, but it likely will lie at least in part in American Fair Uses laws, which fans as well as legal scholars such as Peaslee, have cited as protective of fanworks. Fair Use laws look at the purpose of use, the nature of original work, the amount used, and the effect on the potential market. Each of these points must be considered in any case of copyright infringement that claims Fair Use. The last point, the effect on the potential market will likely always be found in favor of the fanworks, especially if the fanwork is free, as it keeps other fans interested in the original work as well as possibly draw new fans to the original. The first point will likely also be found in favor of fans, so long as the purpose of the work is not to turn a profit. If it is for profit however it will likely be found in the original rights holders favor. The other point to consider is that a story is more copyrightable than a character. (Peaslee, 2015). So if the fan is writing say fanfiction, and has chosen to take a character from a fantasy world, and write about them going to high school, with the story elements completely different, it would be harder to argue that the copyright has been violated.

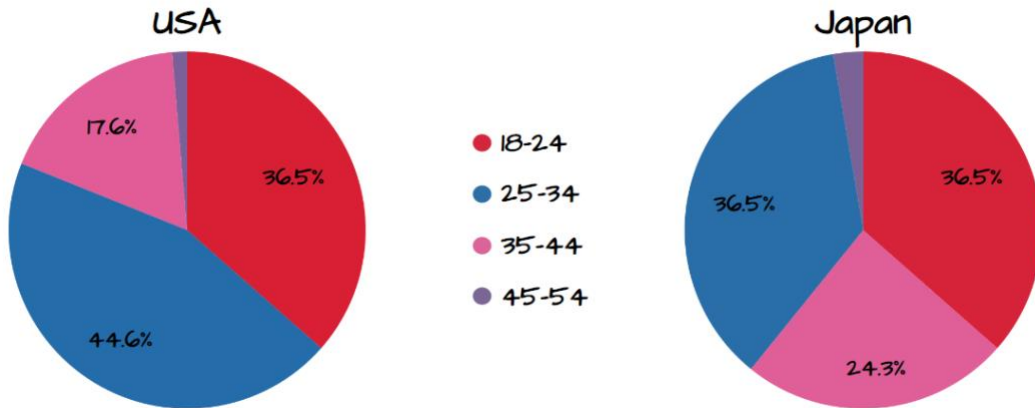
Lastly, as this paper is comparing Japan and America, it would be remiss to ignore Japanese law. Japan is different from America in that it is a civil law country, rather than a common law country like the US. This bears relevance in that it means each issue of copyright that were to come before a court would be ruled on separately as the courts are not beholden to previous court rulings. Japanese law also has no Fair Use laws, however there are many extensive permitted uses underneath their copyright laws. One of those allowed uses is non-profit uses. (Peaslee, 2015)

4. The Research

4.1. Demographics

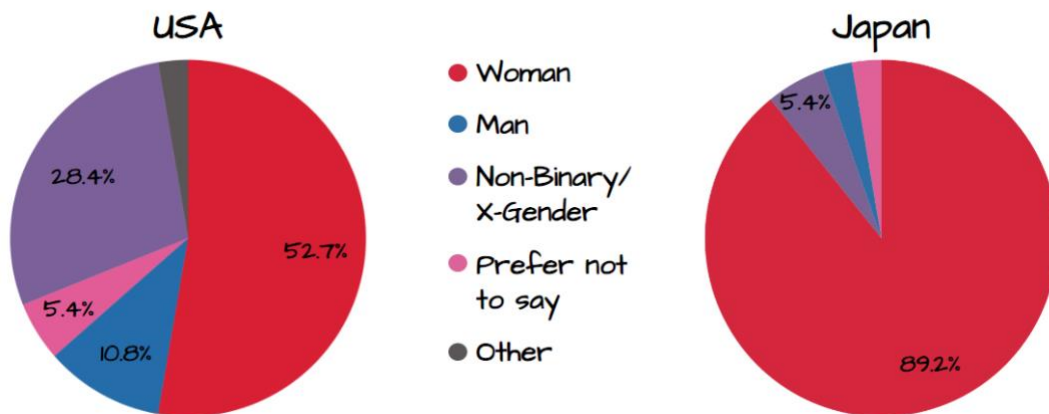
This section will cover the results of the demographic questions from our survey. Age range-wise, the majority of both English and Japanese survey takers fell under either the 18-24 or 24-34 year old age groups as demonstrated by Figure 1, below.

Figure 1: Age Range



In regards to gender, both survey groups were predominantly made up of women, although the American side demonstrated more gender diversity; non-binary/x-gender respondents were over a quarter American responses. (See Figure 2)

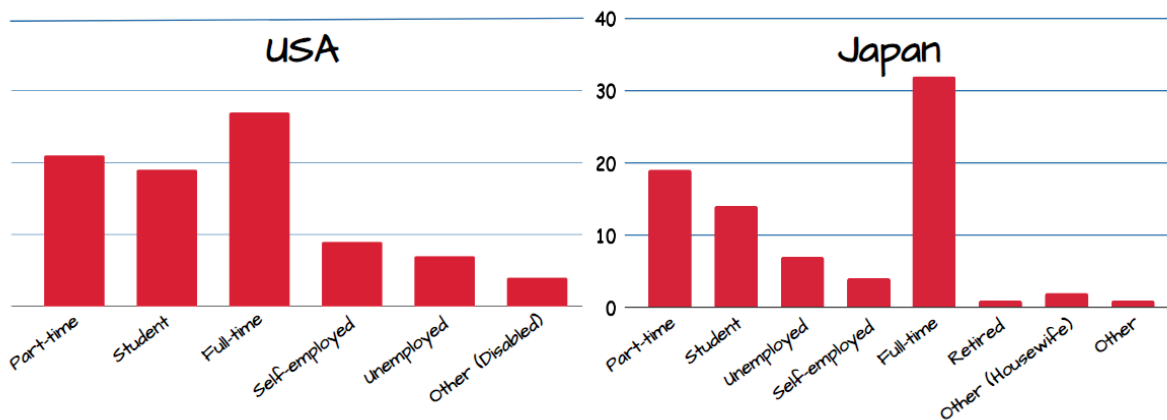
Figure 2: Gender



Next, on the topic of participants' employment statuses, a majority of them said that they were full-time employees. Interestingly, a noticeable portion of Americans specified that they were

on disability, while a portion of Japanese respondents specified that they were housewives. No one responded they were in the military, though it was an option given. (See Chart 1)

Chart 1: Employment



4.2. Research Method

The surveys were conducted through Google Forms, with 74 Japanese responses and 74 American responses being used for a total of 148. As per university rules, participants under 18 years of age were excluded from the results. The surveys were distributed through Discord, Tumblr, and Twitter, with the English survey initially being distributed across these channels more evenly until going mildly viral through Tumblr. Thus, it amassed over 1000 responses, with later responses skewed toward Tumblr usage. Because of this, we decided to take the first 74 usable responses on the English side, to match the 74 Japanese responses, for an even comparison. As we were overwhelmed with responses, we changed our plan from looking at all English-speaking countries to looking at just American responses to complete this paper in the required time limits. The Japanese survey, on the other hand, was largely distributed through Twitter.

5. Research Findings

5.1. Research Question 1 Data

Research Question 1: In what ways do fandom spaces vary between Japan and English-speaking countries and why?

Chart 2: When you see a fanwork you enjoy, what actions do you take most often?

USA Top 5	Japan Top 5
1. Like it/give kudos: 97.3%	Like it/give kudos: 98.6%
2. Share it within that site (e.g. reblog, retweet): 70.3%	Bookmark it: 64.8%
3. Comment/give feedback: 62.1%	Save it/download it: 54%
4. Bookmark it: 59.5%	Share it within that site (e.g. reblog, retweet): 54%
5. Save it/download it: 45.9%	Comment/give feedback: 22.9%

Above are the top five responses we received when we asked participants this question. We found that over 95% of both groups would like it or the equivalent and that almost 40% fewer Japanese fans would comment on the work. (See Chart 2)

Chart 3: What websites do you regularly use to participate in fandom?

USA Top 5	Japan Top 5
1. Tumblr: 91.9%	Twitter: 97.3%
2. Archive of Our Own (AO3): 91.9%	Pixiv: 85.1%
3. YouTube: 47.3%	YouTube: 70.3%
4. Twitter: 44.6%	NicoNico: 47.3%
5. Reddit: 27%	Instagram: 37.8%

Above are the top five responses received in relation to this question. Over 90% of Americans use Tumblr and A03 as their homebase for fandom. For Japan, however, fandom lives on Twitter and Pixiv. Despite a high percentage of respondents on the American side answering Discord when we asked for other websites, we purposely chose to exclude Discord as an answer,

as though Discord may be accessed through a website, it largely functions as a chat app. (See Chart 3)

Chart 4: When considering joining a new website for fandom, what features do you consider important?

USA Top 5	Japan Top 5
1. Ability to Search for Specific Content (e.g. a tagging system): 82.4%	Ease of Use: 86.5%
2. Ability to be Anonymous: 68.9%	Language of Website: 78.4%
3. Pre-established Fandom You are Already in is on the Site: 66.2%	Convenience: 78.4%
4. No Fear of Censorship: 59.5%	Ability to be Anonymous: 68.9%
5. Ability to Block/Mute Specific Content and/or Users: 58.1%	Ability to Search for Specific Content (e.g. a tagging system): 68.9%

The responses above are the top five responses selected for this question. America largely cares about the ability to search and/or tagging systems, while Japan cares about ease of use and website language. Both care equally about the ability to be anonymous. (See Chart 4)

Figure 3: The most socially acceptable way to leave a comment/message about a fanwork on Twitter



The majority of both groups saw replying as the most acceptable way to leave a comment about a fanwork on Twitter. It should be noted, however, that 4.1% of Americans responded in error on this question, and 1.4% of Japanese respondents as well, by either marking that they did use Twitter on this question but saying they did not on the next question, or the reverse mistake. They also have been excluded from the figures. (See Figure 3)

Chart 5: On Twitter what are the best 3 ways to express that you enjoyed a fanwork someone else made?

	1st Best	2nd Best	3rd Best
USA	Retweeting: 48.8%	Replying: 44.2%	Liking: 53.5%
Japan	Liking: 65.8%	Retweeting: 56.2%	Quote Retweeting: 34.2%

For the above question, we asked respondents to first rank what they considered the first best option, then the second best option, and then lastly, the third best option, rather than have them rank the best option, and then looking at what the top three responses were. We did this

because we thought two of the options people were going to choose were going to be the more passive options of liking and sharing, and wanted to see if the best method to comment differed from what was most socially acceptable. And such turned out to be the case with Japan, which responded that replying was the most socially acceptable way to comment, but said the best way to express that you enjoyed something through commenting was to quote retweet it. On a separate note, America was also more divided in opinion about what was the best thing to do, but Japan solidly saw liking as the best option. (See Chart 5)

Figure 4: The most socially acceptable way to leave a comment/message about a fanwork on Tumblr



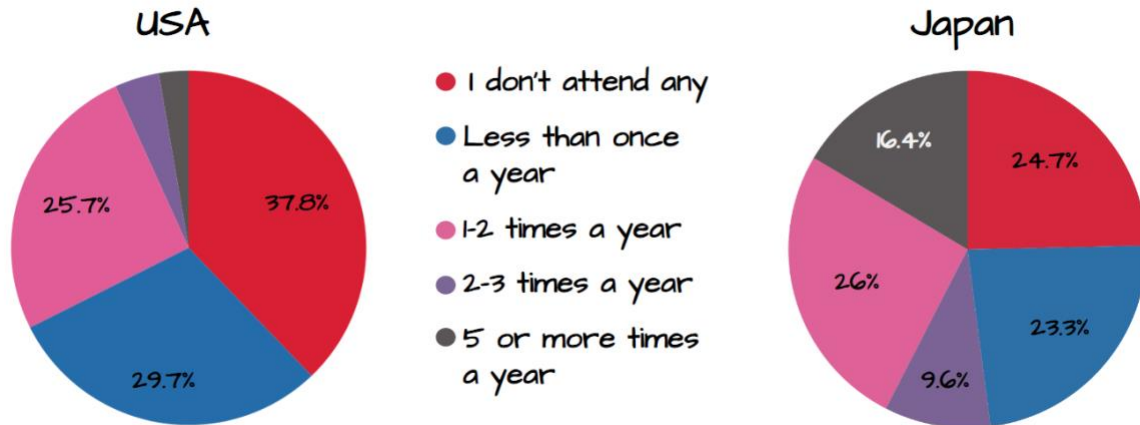
Here we asked the same question as in Figure 3, but this time in regard to Tumblr. The majority of America replied that commenting in the tags was the most socially acceptable, but Japan was split between replying and commenting on the reblog. It should also be noted that similar to the above two questions about Twitter usage we had some respondents answer in error in the same manner, that have been excluded here. For the US side, 1.4% of respondents answered in error, however, on the Japanese side, 39.2% of respondents answered in error. With the amount of respondents that answered that they did not use Tumblr in Japan being 51.4% that means 90.6% of respondents on the Japanese side were excluded, making this data point unfortunately less reliable in their case. (See Figure 4)

Chart 6: On *Tumblr* what are the best 3 ways to express that you enjoyed a fanwork someone else made?

	1st Best	2nd Best	3rd Best
USA	Reblogging: 49.3%	Commenting in the tags: 40.8%	Liking: 23.9%
Japan	Liking: 50%	Reblogging: 33.3%	Commenting in the tags: 33.3%

America follows the same pattern here as it did for Twitter in that the first best was a method to share it, second best was a way to comment on it, and third best was liking it. Japan also follows the same pattern they expressed for Twitter which was first liking, then sharing, and only lastly commenting. Though the last two places appeared to be tied for Japan, however, although we were unable to use minor responses for our data collection, we could use their answers for a tie break, which pushed it into this pattern. Also interestingly, again what was the most socially acceptable to comment versus what was the best way to express enjoyment changed on the Japanese side from commenting on the reblog and replying to commenting in the tags. However, as noted above, less than 10% of respondents on Japan's side for Tumblr usage were usable, so this data should be taken with that under consideration. (See Chart 6)

Figure 5: How often do you attend fan events/conventions?



Now we move out of the online realm and into real world fandom spaces. We found that Japanese fans attend conventions more frequently than American fans. In fact over 15% of Japanese fans attend fan events 5 or more times a year. (See Figure 5)

Chart 7: What types of fan event/conventions do you attend?

USA Top 3	Japan Top 3
1. General Fandom Conventions (e.g. Comiket, San Diego Comic Con): 43.2%	General Fandom Conventions (e.g. Comiket, San Diego Comic Con): 56.8%
2. Anime & Manga Conventions (e.g. Anime Expo, Otacon): 37.8%	Events focused on a specific work or show and/or for a specific fandom: 39.2%
3. Events focused on a specific work or show and/or for a specific fandom: 24.3%	Anime & Manga Conventions (e.g. Anime Expo, Otacon): 23%

The chart above showcases the top three responses to this question that we received from participants. Both groups attend the same top three events, with general fandom events being number one for both of them. (See Chart 7)

Chart 8: If you do attend fan events/conventions, what are your usual reasons for going?

USA Top 5	Japan Top 5
1. To see and/or buy fan merch (e.g. doujinshi, fanart posters, etc): 50%	To see and/or buy fan merch (e.g. doujinshi, fanart posters, etc): 59.5%
2. For the general atmosphere: 48.6%	For the general atmosphere: 51.3%
3. To meet other fans: 36.5%	To see and/or buy official merch: 50%
4. To see and/or buy official merch: 35.1%	Because it is focused on something specific I like: 32.4%
5. To see cosplayers: 29.7%	To meet other fans: 29.7%

According to the chart above, showing the top five reasons for attending conventions that participants gave, the top two reasons for attending were the same for both groups. The other reasons were also mostly the same, but prioritized differently. (See Chart 8)

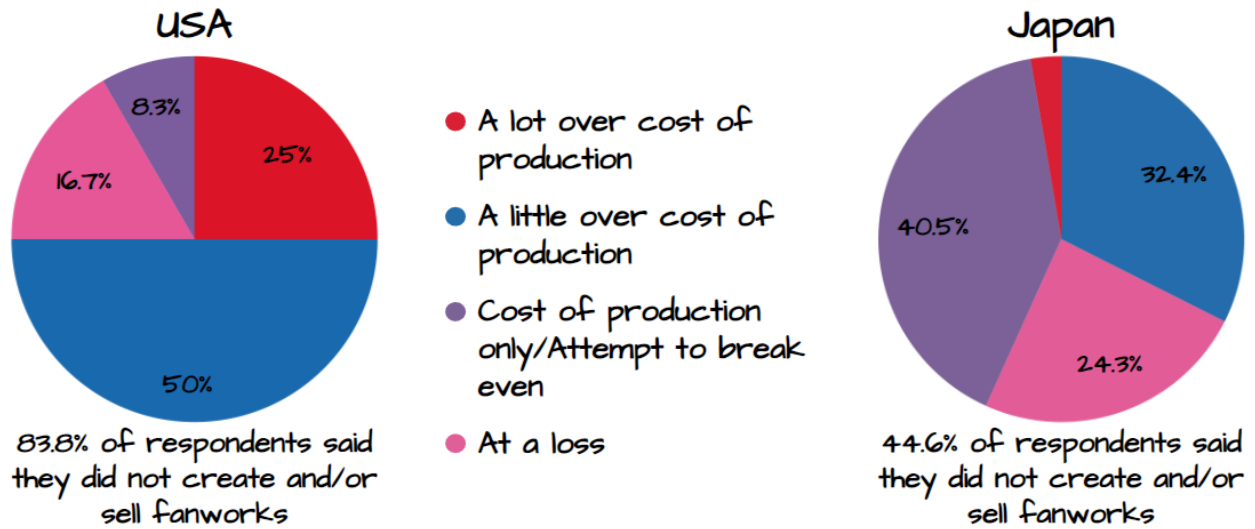
5.2 Summary of Survey Results 1

Japan and America largely use different websites for fandom despite some overlap. The ways they interact on these websites differs as well. Americans when interacting with fanworks that they enjoy prefer to share it, then comment on it, then like it, while Japanese fans prefer to like it, share it, and only lastly comment on it. Both also usually believe the best way to comment is in a way that shares the work as well, for example quote retweeting or commenting in the tags. Commenting as mentioned earlier, is far less common in Japan however. As for in person fandom spaces, Japanese and American fans attend the same types of conventions for the same reasons.

5.3. Research Question 2 Data

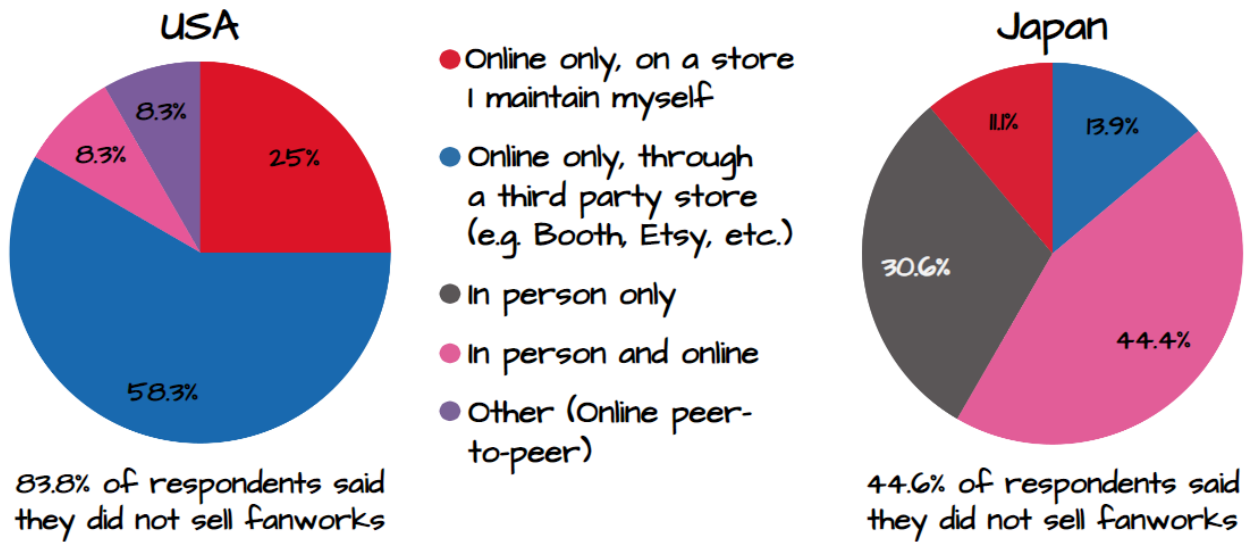
Research Question 2: In what ways does the monetization of fanworks vary between Japan and English-speaking countries and why?

Figure 6: If you do sell fanworks, how much do you sell them for?



We found that 75% of American fans sold their works for profit, while over half of Japanese fans sold their works for no profit. (See Figure 6)

Figure 7: If you sell fanworks, where do you sell them?



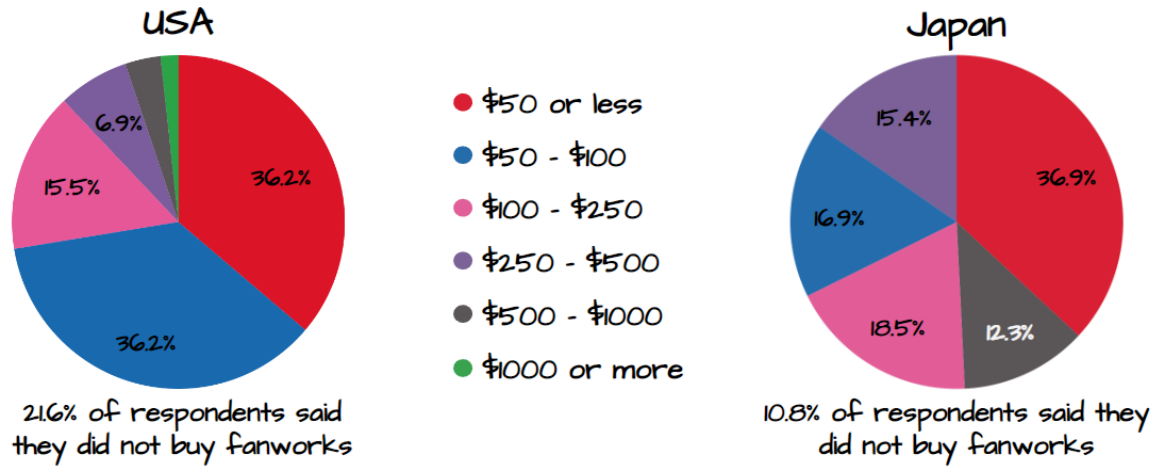
American fans almost exclusively sell their works online. Three quarters of Japanese fans sell their works in-person. American fans generally sold through online means (mostly through 3rd party sites), while conversely, Japanese fans’ sales took place between both online and offline spaces, leaning more towards online. (See Figure 7)

Figure 8: If you buy fanworks, how often do you buy them?



On average, Japanese fans buy fanworks more often than American fans. (See Figure 8)

Figure 9: If you buy fanworks, approximately how much do you spend on fanworks in a year?



Japanese fans tended to spend more on fanworks than American fans. Prices were approximated to round numbers in Yen for the Japanese survey, e.g 100 USD became 10000JPY. (See Figure 9)

Figure 10: How worried are you about copyright affecting fandom in general?



When it comes to copyright affecting fandom in general, over 75% of Americans were worried. In contrast, less than 60% of Japanese fans answered that they were worried. (See Figure 10)

Figure 11: How worried are you about copyright affecting *your own* fanworks?



The previous figure (Figure 10) shows that more than 75% of Americans are concerned about copyright in fandom in general, but nevertheless, as shown here, only about 20% of Americans are concerned about the impact of copyright on their own fan works. On the other hand, more than 60% of Japanese are concerned about copyright in general as well as copyright in particular, about three times as many as Americans. Erroneous responses were excluded from this figure. (See Figure 11)

5.4 Summary of Survey Results 2

Of the fans that make fanworks, over half of the Japanese fans sold them when less than 20% of American fans did. The Japanese fans also buy fanworks more frequently and spend more money on them, though this could possibly be attributed to the fact that they sell them at lower prices. Japanese fans differ significantly on issues of copyright in regards to fandom.

6. Conclusion

The websites both groups are drawn to differ according to their preferences Japan prefers sites that are easy to use and in Japanese (Pixiv, NicoNico, all others can be changed) Americans prefer sites they can search or have a tagging system. In regards to con-going, Japan does attend conventions more frequently, possibly due to the smaller country size. Also, no American fans sold their works only in-person, whereas over half of Japanese respondents sold theirs in-person or both online and in-person. Japanese fans are more worried about copyright affecting their own works which might be why they sell their works at lower prices. This is a reversal of the American fans who, though they were not worried about their own works in regards to copyright, also sold their fanworks far less often.

7. Limitations of the Study and Future Research

Both surveys were distributed through specific channels and the responses they accrued were, therefore, skewed towards usage of the particular websites they were shared through. More specifically, the English survey was largely shared through specific Discord servers and Tumblr, while the Japanese survey was largely spread through Twitter. Additionally, there was confusion

on the participants' end about how to answer some questions on the survey, as could be seen from the responses labeled "in error"; those were the result of unusable contradictory answer choices.

In regards to future research, a closer look at the relationship between fandom and copyright should be undertaken. We could find nothing other than anecdotal evidence of fan's feelings on the subject, and though we attempted to ask why they were worried or not, there was such large confusion about how to answer, that we elected to leave those questions out of our final results entirely. Another point to look at, would be how fans separate their accounts. Do they use different accounts on the same platform for different fandoms or different types of fanworks? How separate do they keep their personal life and fandom life? This would be an interesting future study. It was another point we attempted to look at, but was done poorly and in haste, and unfortunately not well thought out, so we have excluded it from our results. Lastly, it would be interesting to look at different types of media fandoms and see the differences between them. For instance, do anime fandoms produce more cosplay than live-action ones? That would be a fascinating further study.

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