

Anime, Consume, and Participation: Iranian Instagram Users Participation in Anime Fandom Activities

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Abstract

Anime is a popular media in Iran nowadays, and some anime Instagram fan pages have over 400 hundred followers. Iranian anime audiences use the Instagram platform to gain news about anime, access anime broadcast and download resources and share and audit unofficial fans' content creations. Due to the lack of news websites' coverage about anime and lack of anime news websites in Persian, Iranian anime fan-pages admins volunteer to translate anime news, usually from English and share the contents on an Instagram platform for the rest of the audiences. Applying Henry Jenkins' participatory culture and convergence culture concepts, we prepared a questionnaire. We asked 387 anime audiences who were Instagram users about how often they watch anime, how often they read and watch anime fan-pages content, how often they participate in fandom chats and discussions. We saw an evident association for watching anime and reading and watching anime fan-pages content, while we saw a moderate association for watching anime and participating in fandom chats and discussions.

Keywords: anime, fandom, participatory culture, social media.

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Introduction

*Anime*¹ is a popular moving picture among people nowadays. In the year 2020, the anime *Kimetsu no Yaiba the Movie: Mugen Train* had the box office of 386.1 million US dollars before its release in some big markets such as *England* and the *USA* by time; *The Seven Deadly Sins the Movie: Prisoners of the Sky* in the year 2018 sold 5.003 billion US dollars, after screening worldwide. In the first half of the year 2021, around ten short video clips about anime on *TikTok*² crossed 1 billion views and became the first trend of this platform.

Anime is an influencer media. Watching anime and reading *manga*³ may influence audiences' careers. Anime found its way to the international market after World War II with *Tezuka Osamu's Astro Boy*⁴ in 1963. In the 1960s and 1970s, the translation of manga and anime in the *USA* started; after translated manga became popular in the *USA*, it influenced American students who were anime audiences. American undergraduates were writing papers about manga and anime around the 1990s; not too long after that, candidates for master's degrees also began writing about them; now we may find doctoral candidates writing about manga and tenured professors who specialize in either manga, anime, or both (MacWilliams, 2008: VIII & XI).

Nowadays, many fans interact in online spaces, and there is no exception for anime audiences. The vector of fandom, popular culture, and digital media are both individually and collectively entry points into how we form our identities digitally, bring those identities into communication, and practically engage online (Ito et al., 2018: 18-22). Social media is our entry point to our fandom's participatory culture, where we engage us in the interplays of memory and identity to represent the self.

Considering what we previously described as a fan, being present in social media and socially isolated may seem contradictory, but the name *otaku* usually comes with the referrer socially isolated. This study questions how anime *otaku* and *nit* as socially isolated fans interact with other fans and collects information about how people who consume anime more frequently are likely to communicate with other fans; we will consider the participatory culture concept while studying the phenomena. We also discuss fan-subbing as a form of indirect communication with other fans.

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1. アニメ
 2. Chinese social media
 3. マンガ
 4. 鉄腕アトム

In Participatory culture, fans are considered “producers and manipulators of meanings” who transform their fan experience to a reach and complex participatory culture (Jenkins, 1992: 23). In this point of view, fans are not only consumers but also producers. We can see how anime fans are producers in their specific words and terms they use in their fandom, and, to be honest, no one told them to use these words, but those words are simply given birth by fans interaction within the fan community. For instance, the word anime itself is a creation of fans. Inside Japan, anime refers to any type of anime production, including Disney animation, but international fans know anime as Japanese animation only; if someone uses the words anime and animation interchangeably, it seems rude, improper and even abusive among international anime fans.

In *Jenkins* (1992, 2006) writings, participatory culture is the sense that we mutually engage in the process of identity formation and collective representation; it is in a way our memory of beloved contents and our representation of our self comes together in the space of fandom, so we are engaged in the process of production and consumption all the time. Nowadays, the role of productive fans is considerable as what they produce is accessible for all because digital media is accessible to all (Jenkins, 2006: 2). Fan-fictions are accessible on platforms such as *Wattpad* and *AO3*; fans can rate and determine a product’s success or failure using rating websites, and some websites and forums let audiences criticize media productions for the public.

Participatory culture itself is in relation with what *Henry Jenkins* calls convergence culture. Convergence culture is “the flow of content across multiple media platforms, cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences” (Jenkins, 2008: 2). In anime audiences, for instance, they watch anime from cable television or IPTV; gather news from websites; talk with other fans in messengers and forums; share and watch fan arts in visual content sharing social media; write, share, and read web novels, digital manga, and fan fictions in textual content sharing social media. They migrate from *Tiktok* to *Wattpad* to *Instagram*, *Pinterest* to *Twitter*, etc. This migration is temporary and fast because they need convergence content not to lose a single thing about their interest topic. In this stage, fans, especially transformative fans, can present various creations regarding their talents and potential.

In this study, we regard that anime fans live in the convergence media era, and we also regard that Iranian anime audiences’ access is somehow limited due to local and international barriers, which leads them to use

few limited sources. In Iran, we lack anime news websites, which drives audiences to use social media to get fan-translated news. By saying fan-translated, we mean that fans volunteer to translate news, usually from English websites; they usually use a convenient graphic for the Instagram platform to create and share swiping picture posts. Also, *Tiktok*, regarding USA sanctions, banned Iranian users from creating accounts, so some Iranian fans, usually from outside Iran, volunteer to repost what anime fan *Tiktokers* videos on Instagram for Iranian anime audiences.

Anime

Clements and McCarthy (2006), in their book *The Anime Encyclopedia: A Guide to Japanese Animation Since 1917*, define anime as “animation from Japan”. Hu and Yokota (2013) defines anime as a popular form of Japanese animation which comprises manga and video game characteristics. Anime in Brenner’s definition of anime is an “Animated film produced in Japan for a Japanese audience. The word itself comes from the word animēshon, a translation of the English word animation. This term encompasses all animated titles including feature films, television shows, and original video animation (OVA) released to the home entertainment market” (Brenner, 2007: 29). Anime is the popular Japanese form of animation (Hu, 2010: 1)

Anime origins may trace back to the twelfth-century hand scrolls *Ban daïagon ekotoba* (The picture book of Ban daïagon) and *Chōjū jinbutsu giga* (Comic sketches of bird and animal characters) (Miyao, 2002: 194); which used a comedy attitude to describe stories with more details and a comedy attitude (Yiengpruksawan, 2000: 74; Kenji, 2001: 104). First-generation of Japanese called *senga* (‘line art’), *kuga* (‘flip pictures’), *dekobō shin gachō* (‘mischievous new pictures’), *chamebōzu* (‘playful pictures’), *manga-eiga* (‘cartoon films’), and *dōga* (‘moving pictures’) (Clements, 2013: 1) and the world anime for referring to Japanese animation used in the second half of the twenty century.

In 1909 first generations of animation were imported from western countries to Japan, mostly from France. These animations showed in Imperial Theater in Asakusa, and the target audiences for these animations were kids (Miyao, 2002: 195). Later, in the second half of the 1910s, we see three first animations produced in Japan. We cannot say which one produced first; according to their release time, we say that the first animation was *Imokawa Mukuzo, Genkanban no Maki*, also known as *Imokawa Keizō genkan ban no maki*, (1917) (Tsugata, 2003: 15), the second one was *The Dull Sword (Hanawa Hekonai meitō no maki, or Hanawa Hekonai’s Sword)*, also known as *Namakura Katana*, (1917)

(Novielli, 2018: 5), and the last one was *Saru Kani Gassen* (The monkey-crab war, 1917) (Miyao, 2002: 199). The latter one was produced by Kitayama Seitarō, who found Nihon Yoga Kyōkai (The Japan Association of Western Art), and the first independent animation company *Kitayama Eiga Seisaku-sho* (Bendazzi, 2015: 82). Later the two big historical stages for the formation of what we know as anime was producing the first science fiction anime entitled as *Ō-Atari Sora no Entaku* (*The Plane Cabby's Lucky Day*, 1932), directed by *Teizō Katō* (Clements, 2013: 53-54) and broadcasting the anime series *Tetsuwan Atom* (*Astro Boy*, 1963), directed by *Tezuka Osamu* (Macwilliams, 2008: 50-51). *Tetsuwan Atom* is especially important as a science fiction series about a hero fighting with new weapons in the hands of antagonists, which was one of the biggest concerns after the war period.

The source of major anime productions is *manga*¹ (Macwilliams, 2008: 61), but there are anime that does not originate from manga or novels; these anime are called original anime. Anime includes manga originate symbols and sketches representing feelings and mood (Brenner, 2007: 27). These symbols may not be understandable for international fans, but they can use free online educative articles older fans write on websites and forums to learn the meaning of symbols. Anime comparing western animation has more details, for example, shadows of people and objects; noticeable hair movement; small movements at the right dramatic moment; un-natural hair color to differ characters (Macwilliams, 2008: 61); and anime productions after 2000 also includes detailed picturing of actual places in Japan, for example, drawing of actual places of *Tokyo* in the animation *Koto no Ha no Niwa* (*The Garden of Words*, 2013), a *CoMix Wave Films* production directed by *Makoto Shinkai*².

Another anime feature is *kyara-moe*; it refers to a reception of anime focusing exclusively on characters (Ishida, 2019: 35). In Japanese popular media studies, the term *kyara-moe* refers to the portrayal of characters with childish and animal features (usually cat and dog features); the word *moe* means budding, and *kyara* means the child-like or feminine appearance and behavior (Suter, 2020: 158). Sometimes *kyara-moe* characters may be *Yōkai* like Tomoe in *Kami-sama Kiss* (2015) and Neko in *K* (2012). *kyara-moe* is different from the *chibi*. *Chibi* characters may seem young and cute, but *chibi* means “characters with cartoonishly large heads and much smaller bodies, often focusing on representational facial animations” (Cho et al., 2018: 495).

1. Japanese comic

2. His anime productions are famous for picturing real places in Japan.

Fandom

The fan is a debated term in cultural studies. Some scholars see fans as typical cultural consumers who seek pleasure reading books and journals or watching a kind media production; others see fans as an atypical audience who seek out more work by their favorite authors and build strong emotional relationships with it. According to Merriam Webster, fandom is the state or attitude of being a fan or all the fans; based on this definition, fandom can be defined in two ways:

- a) The state or condition of being a fan;
- b) A group of people who are fans of something, someone, etc.

Fandom is an expression of a collective self without sacrificing the collective nor the self. It is about how we think about our identity, frames our digital and actual presence, and harmonizes our individual interests with the desire for collective belonging. Being a fan is personal and social. It is being affected and effective. It is the state of being in a shape influenced by a sub-culture and shaping a sub-culture for the next generation. When we talk about fandom, we mean any fandom. It may be *BTS Army*, *Anime Otaku*, or a *Political Studies Research Institute*. Everyone in this world belongs to a fandom.

According to Peyron (2018), Fandoms are one of the first ways for fans as a group to express their taste. We share our tastes in fandom through participatory culture in online and face-to-face environments; a participatory culture is “a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed to novices” (Jenkins et al., 2006: 3). Our personal experiences and relationships to fandom, popular culture, and digital media shape our presence in social, political, and cultural spaces. Fandoms in the online age place their engagements within their fandom in a shared space among fandom atmosphere, popular culture stream, and the digital media as land for shaping their society.

Fandom is of two kinds, curative fandom and transformative fandom. Derivative or transformative fans create and share works considering their fandom topic; on the other hand, curative fans consume and curate media without the creative element (Dym et al., 2018: 122). A transformative fan in anime context creates *dōjinshi*¹, does cosplay, creates fan-sub for anime, translates manga, and makes a fan blog or fan page. On the other hand, a curative fan-like collection holder gathers figures, cards, accessories, fan art created by others, and anime files.

1. A manga fiction

Some fans are both transformative and curative.

Otaku is the most wired fandom on the planet, with its characteristics called otaku culture. Otaku word first mentioned to male train lovers who were members of train clubs (Ito, et al., 2012: 4) and later used for anime fans. The term *otaku*, becoming a postmodern ideograph for Japan, refers to shy and socially inept enthusiastic consumers with an obsessive interest in anime, figures, computer games, manga, live-action films, etc. (Broinowski, 2010: 3). By the late 1990s, the otaku habit of introverted saturation in Japanese pop-cultural media products was being formulated into a globally distributed apolitical industry known as J-Pop which later K-pop formed out of its legacy (Ibid: 5). Nowadays, both K-pop and otaku fandom are globally distributed and have fans almost all around the world.

Anime fandom -people who are fans of anime- can be ordinary fans or otaku fans; Otaku is the label given to “someone with an obsessive interest in something. One can be a computer otaku, a fashion otaku or an anime otaku” (Hu, 2010: 194). When the otaku word comes with anime, it means anime-influenced people in a way anime involves all aspects of their lives. They may end up being nit; people who stay at home most of their time and spend almost all of their time watching anime and playing video games. Anime audiences use anime not only for entertainment but, according to Ray et al. (2017), watching it, they fulfill their self-esteem and the need to have friends; seek meaning in life; distinctiveness, uncertainty reduction, and belongingness.

Anime fans express their interest in anime in various ways, including watching anime, reading manga, creating their artwork, costuming (cosplay), and other fan-produced content (Ray et al., 2017: 58), including fan-dubbing, fan-produced AMV (anime music video), edits, fan-sub, etc. Anime helps its fandom to moderate their life pressure; female anime fans, in particular, are motivated to interact with other anime fans as a means of escaping social oppression gender discrimination (Ibid: 58). Within anime fandom, it does not matter whether the audiences are young or old, as long as all of them can enjoy the production; the anime fans are beyond sexuality and age (Kordi, 2017: 32).

The first Iranian anime talking forum, Anime Heaven, was created in 1385; since then, various anime forums and group chats have been made in Iran (Ibid: 4). The mean age for anime audiences in Iran is 20 to 50 who are first attracted to anime watching it on IRIB (Ibid). AnimWorld is the biggest anime forum in Iran; this forum is a place for talking about anime, reflecting the feelings and ideas after watching anime, or the new understanding of a phenomenon after watching anime, and it

is a community for fan-subbing anime into the Persian language. Some members cover anime songs; draw fan-arts; share original and fan-fiction manga and stories with other users.

Types of Anime Watchers

Anime audiences, based on the level of their activity and consumption, may be categorized as anime watchers, otaku, and nit.

Anime watchers. They usually watch a few anime every year in their free time, and anime may or maybe not be their main media diet, but they consider watching, especially famous and debating, anime series. They may or may not collect anime accessories and participate in fandom activities.

Otaku. *Otaku* are generally shy and socially inept enthusiastic anime consumers (Broinowski, 2010: 3) who collects anime products and merch; otaku spend most of their free time watching anime and discussing anime content in online forums; they may do cosplay, write fan fiction, and make subtitles for anime in their free time. Among the three groups of anime watchers, otaku, and nit, otaku audiences are more likely to participate in fandom activities.

Nit. *Nit* is a devoted and somehow addicted anime audience; they sacrifice their career and social life for watching anime, playing games, gathering information about anime and games; they are the most socially isolated anime audiences, and their intense interest in anime has disrupted their lives. *Nit* audiences watch anime regularly. They are less likely to communicate with others and prefer to spend their whole time watching anime and playing games, and they usually check news about anime and anime production regularly, so they do not lose any information about upcoming anime and anime productions. There are some common memes in social media about *nit* people even devoting their sleep time to watching anime.

Method

We shared a questionnaire with 387 anime audiences who were Instagram users in 4 Instagram anime fan pages to see how often they watch anime and how often they participate in fandom activities such as participating in chat rooms and forums discussion and how often they check fan pages. Anime audience's consumption degrees are categorized as watching one or few anime in a year, watching one or a few anime each season, and regularly watching anime. This categorization was based on anime publishing policies in Japan; it is common for anime producers to produce a series in 12 episodes and broadcast one episode

per week, so the anime broadcast duration becomes equal to a season duration. Anime news websites and anime fan pages also prepare a chart for fans which is called this season's anime and includes, for example, all anime scheduled to broadcast in a specific season (spring's anime list; summer's anime list; this winter will be warm Attack in Titan season 4 part 2).

Result

As mentioned above, 387 anime audiences responded to our questionnaire advertised on 4 Instagram anime fan pages in November and December 2021. 54% of the anime audience's group responders identified themselves as male, 45% female, and 1% other sexual identities. The mean age of responders was 19 years old. We may see the frequency of gender with more details in Table 1.

Table 1. Gender frequency

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	207	54%
Female	175	45%
Other	5	1%
Total	387	100%

Anime audience's consumption degrees are categorized as watching one or few anime in a year, watching one or a few anime each season, and regularly watching anime. 7% of respondents watched one or few anime in a year, 28% watched one or few anime each season, and 65% watched anime regularly (Table 2).

Table 2. Frequency of consumption

	N	Percentage
One or few in a year	27	7%
One or few in a season	109	28%
Regularly	251	65%
Total	387	100%

Anime fan page consumption frequency degrees are categorized as no consumption, less than once a week, at least once in a week, a few times a week, and every day. 4.4% of respondents said that they did not follow anime fan pages, 2.8% followed the anime fan pages and used to

check them less than once a week, 6.7% used to check them at least once a week, 17.1% used to check the contents a few time in a week, and 69% use to check them every day (Table 3).

Table 3. Fan page's contents consume frequency

	N	Percentage
No	17	4.4%
Less than once a week	11	2.8%
At least once a week	26	6.7%
Few times in a week	66	17.1%
Every day	267	69%
Total	387	100%

Participation in anime fan group chats and forums frequency degrees are categorized as no participation, less than once a week, at least once in a week, a few times a week, and every day. 42.4% of respondents said they were not a member of anime fan group chats and forums. 20.7% of respondents said that they used to participate in chats and discussions less than once a week, 11.6% used to participate in chats and discussions at least once a week, 10.9% used to participate in chats and discussions a few times a week, and 14.5% use to participate in chats and discussions every day (Table 4).

Table 4. Chat and Forum discussion participation frequency

	N	Percentage
No	164	42.4%
Less than once a week	80	20.7%
At least once a week	45	11.6%
Few times in a week	42	10.9%
Every day	56	14.5%
Total	387	100%

As the variables are ordinal, we used the Gamma association test between variables and could see a positive and evident association between anime consume and fan page's content consume frequency $\gamma=.32$, $n=387$, $p<.000$; we saw a positive and moderate association between anime consumption and participation in chat and forum discussion frequency $\gamma=.12$, $n=387$, $p<.000$.

Conclusion

Due to legal barriers against Iranian anime audiences, their access to anime productions and official fan bases is limited. Since 1979, USA sanctions against Iran were started by President Jimmy Carter (Torbat, 2005: 407), and sanctions are persistent by 2022. It influenced Iranian anime fans and the rest of the Iranian society; Iranian anime fans due to their lack of access to official events and fan clubs. The first Iranian local anime forum was established in 2006, entitled *Behesht e Anime*¹ (Anime Heaven), and nowadays, *AnimWorld* is the biggest anime discussion forum in Iran (Kordi, 2017: 7). Though these Persian forums were established, Iranian otaku found it hard to find a place for interaction and their inter-personal real communication is limited to Japan Embassy Cultural Month event, which is not anime focused.

Iranian anime audience's major tools for communication are *Instagram*, *WhatsApp*, and *Discord*. Previously, *Telegram* was also popular, but since its ban on May 1, 2018, its popularity decreased as using it as a messenger is internet traffic consuming. On the other hand, as a major communication platform for anime audiences, Instagram does not focus on chat and discussion but more on making content for mass users and auditing and commenting on a content creator user.

Among Iranian anime audiences who chose to use the *Instagram* platform, we can see that the more they consume anime, the more frequently they use Instagram; it shows us that the more they consume anime, they want more to produce and/or audit unofficial fan-produced visual contents. In other words, the more they consume anime, the more they are likely to participate in fandom as curative fans. On the other hand, we can see that the association between audiences' consumption degree and participation in chat and discussions is moderate, showing that they are less likely to be transformative fans. It is interesting for me that at the same time, I personally never saw Persian *dōjinshi* in fan fiction sharing platforms used before as someone who has been a member of this fandom for over ten years, but this may be the subject of another paper.

Regarding what we described earlier, Instagram is not only a place for sharing and auditing unofficial content produced by fans, only, but also a place for reading official news. In Iran, we lack an anime news website so anime audiences, regardless of their interest in communicating with other fans and becoming a part of the fandom, need to follow these Persian anime fan pages to get news. For example, if Iranian anime audiences want to know when and in which accessible resource the last

season of *Attack in Titan* anime series broadcasts, they need to follow Instagram fan-pages and trust those fan-translated news.

We also need to regard that two of four anime fan pages that shared my questions have their own unofficial and, out of necessity, illegal blogs for downloading anime. So, their followers may seek to download and access anime content from following their Instagram pages because they share the download link of each new episode of on-air anime series products on their stories. Regarding this fact, the moderate association between anime consumption and chat and discussion participation for those Iranian anime audiences who use the Instagram platform may seem reasonable.

Lastly, we need to talk about nit audiences. Understanding this group is really hard. Though I talked with some of them in my experience of being an otaku for over ten years, understanding their reasons for highly limiting their social interactions and watching anime most of the time needs research focusing only on this matter. Regardless of their reasons and according to what common behavior we observed in nit society in my master thesis, we observed that they prefer not to communicate directly by talking, chatting, and discussing topics. They consume anime regularly, but they do not regularly participate in chats and discussions. Considering what we explained about the Instagram platform usage for Iranian anime audiences and the algorithm of answers to our questions in the result part, maybe nit audiences also answered our questions and followed those Instagram pages.

Ethical considerations

The authors have completely considered ethical issues, including informed consent, plagiarism, data fabrication, misconduct, and/or falsification, double publication and/or redundancy, submission, etc.

Conflicts of interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interests.

Data availability

The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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