

From Pronoun to Identity: Tracing the History of the Word Otaku

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Abstract—Words are vessels of power; the power to convey meaning. Words can give shape to the identity of a group, and the same word can stereotype one for generations. This research paper is about one such word – ‘Otaku’.

The dictionary definition of ‘Otaku’ refers to a person who obsesses over anime, manga or other forms of entertainment that comes from Japan. Otaku are stereotyped as a group of people with poor social skills. They are considered to be antisocial; always living in a fantasy world.

The aim of this research paper is to trace the history of the term ‘otaku’, and understand how it evolved from a second person pronoun to a term that identifies an entire subculture. Moreover, this ‘otaku subculture’ is becoming increasingly global due to Japan’s influence as a cultural power [15]. Sci-Fi author William Gibson once said, “Japan is the global imagination’s default setting for the future” [7]. Thus, it is becoming increasingly important for scholars to study Otaku culture, and I believe that my research paper can contribute by providing a timeline of the origin and evolution of the term ‘Otaku’.

1. INTRODUCTION

Otakus are obsessive nerds [10] who are extremely passionate about their hobbies to the point of obsession [13]. Thus, the word Otaku can be understood as a synonym to the English word ‘Nerd’ [17]. They are introverts that escape reality to the virtual world of technology [12]. They appear disinterested in interacting with others and enjoy indulging in media and technology [8]. Thus they are considered socially inept but brilliant technological shut-ins [9]. They are also loyal customers who zealously buy merchandise associated with their passions [11].

2. METHODOLOGY

I have conducted a systematic review, in which I studied research papers, blog posts, interview transcripts, electronic books, Japanese animation and films. I used keywords such as ‘Otaku’, ‘meaning’, ‘origin’, ‘definition’, ‘culture’ and so on.

3. MAIN TEXT

Originally, ‘Otaku’ was used as a formal pronoun to address a stranger, and frequently appeared in language used by women [8,18]. Otaku literally means ‘your home’ in Japanese, and can be understood as ‘you’ in formal speech [8,4,18,16]. Some accredit the first usage of the term Otaku to Arai Motoko (a famous Japanese science fiction author) in an essay she published in the June 1981 issue of *Variety* [1]. Otaku is also used by the protagonists of ‘Super Dimensional Fortress Macross’ (1982); by Hikaru Ichijoe to address Lynn Minmay [5]. However, it was Akio Nakamoro and his influential essay ‘an investigation of Otaku’ published in *Manga Burriko* that led the term to limelight [8,4,19,16]. His article was the first to stereotype the Otaku as being anti-social, unkempt and unpopular [5]. Then in 1989 came an incident that shook Japan; the grotesque murder and cannibalization of four under aged girls. When the perpetrator, Tsutomu Miyazaki, was finally apprehended the police found a number of anime and slasher films from his apartment. Whether anime had a significant influence on Miyazaki’s deviance is unknown. However, the media blew this out of proportions and termed him ‘the Otaku Murderer’. Thus, Otaku gained a serious negative connotation that would last decades.

In 1991, Studio Gainax produced an animated film commenting on Otaku culture, aptly dubbed ‘Otaku no Video’. This video became a pop culture phenomenon and generated profound interest in Otaku culture [20]. The film is divided into two parts. The first documents the fictional journey of Ken Kubo to become the ‘Otaku King’. The second is a documentary titled ‘Portrait of an Otaku’ which records interviews with real life Otakus. The film is good example of Otaku poking fun at each other [4], while also providing valuable data for future analysis. The film is believed to popularize the term in USA [5].

Fast forward eleven years, Douglas McGray wrote the influential article ‘Japan’s National Gross Cool’, that changed the Japanese government policies toward Otaku forever [15]. In this article, McGray talks about Japan’s dominating cultural influence across the globe from instant ramen to Nintendo, J-

Pop to anime and manga. He further adds that Japan can benefit from this new found role culturally and economically. This led the Japanese government to pay more attention to the Otaku community, creating initiatives to reduce negative connotations related to the term Otaku and perhaps even influenced the execution of 'the Strategic Program for Intellectual Property' to protect the rights of Japanese content creators [19]. The following year, Hayato Miyazaki released his masterpiece 'Spirited Away' which won an Oscar for 'Best Animation Film' in 2003. The film is considered a gem because of its unique blend of the spiritual, the realistic, the fantastical and the humane [6]. The film further propagated Japanese animation and Otaku culture as an extension throughout the world. Another boost came from the exhibition on Otaku culture at the Japanese Pavilion during the Venice Biennale, 2004. The Japanese Pavilion exhibited a depiction of the inner space of a shop that trades Otaku merchandise filled with posters, figurines, gadgets, and a studio home of an Otaku [19]. In the same year, Nomura Research Institute published an influential paper that analyzed the economic consumption of the Otaku [13]. The institute found that Otaku are a valuable market that contributes significantly to the nation's Gross Domestic Product. Naturally, the government started taking an active interest, with prime minister Taro Aso going as far as to say that "manga can be the bridge that can bridge the gap between Japan and foreign countries" [3]. In 2005, the Japanese word 'moe', commonly associated with anime and manga characters, was chosen as the top ten buzzwords of the year [2]. The same year saw the release of *Densha Otoko* or *Train man* in June. The film's plot is a love story between an Otaku and a woman. The film, and other reproductions of the story have been influential in combating the negative connotations associated with Otaku [18] though it has not erased those negative connotations completely [21].

A couple years later, a cultural phenomenon was taking over the Otaku community; 'Waifu' culture. Waifu is the Japanese corruption of the English word 'wife'. Anime fans would often, either in jest or to show appreciation would denote a particular female anime protagonist as their 'Waifu'. But a Japanese man who goes by the pseudonym Sal9000 took it a step further, and married Nene Anegasaki, a character from the video game 'Love Plus' [14]. According to an article authored by Lah from CNN, Sal9000 and Nene tied the knot in November of 2009. While Waifu culture grew popular in the Otaku community, it became an object of reprehension in mainstream society both in Japan and abroad. Interestingly, Waifu culture might be the culprit behind the rise of negative connotations associated with the word Otaku. The existence of negative connotations is highlighted in a survey conducted by Welin (2013), in which out of 33 participants, 19 believed that Otaku are viewed negatively in society [21]. Research conducted by the Japanese think tank, Yano Research Institute may further support this. The institute conducts research on the Otaku community's economic behavior i.e. 'The Otaku Market'. On analyzing their reports over three years from

2014-2016, I found that the percentage of people who identified as Otaku has dropped [22-24]. This is depicted in the table below.

Table 1

Year	Percentage of people who identify as Otaku
2014	23%
2015	21.1%
2016	19.1%

Analysis of reports from Yano Research Institute

4. CONCLUSION

As evident from the above discussion, the word Otaku initially started out as a formal second person pronoun. Akio Nakamoro popularized the term, being the first to portray Otaku in a negative light. The Otaku Murderer incident further fanned the flames, making Otaku a negative term in the Japanese society. Things started to change around the early 2000s, through the actions of the Japanese government as well as certain actors outside the state like Douglas McGray. Despite all this, the negative connotations surrounding the word Otaku still persist, possibly due to the emergence of Waifu culture.

On the next page is a table which highlights all the major events in a chronological order.

Table 2

Year	Event
1983	Akio Nakamura publishes his essay.
1989	Tsutomo Miyazaki, 'The Otaku Murderer'
1991	Otaku no Video is released by Studio Gainax
2002	Douglas Mcgray publishes 'Japan's Gross National Cool'
2003	Miyazaki's masterpiece 'Spirited Away' gets an Oscar
2004	Japanese Pavilion at Venice Biennale showcases Otaku culture
2005	<i>Densha Otoko (Train Man)</i> is released
2007	Prime Minister Taro Aso comments that Manga will act as a bridge between countries
2009	Birth of Waifu culture

A summary of important events

5. LIMITATIONS

"Correlation is not causation", just because the emergence of Waifu culture is around the same time as Andreas Welin's study or the studies conducted by Yano Research Institute, does not mean that the former necessarily cause the other. Moreover, due to financial limitations, I could not access Yano Research Institute for the year 2017 and the year 2018. Those reports could hold crucial information that could possibly change the direction of this study.

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