

*Anime, a Universal Language Defying Boundaries:
An Applied Study on a Sample of Egyptian Youth*

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Abstract:

The Japanese animation, commonly known as Anime, is becoming one of Japan's most distinguished cultural features. While it dates back to the late 1910s, its true beginning was in the postwar period. It survived and evolved from targeting a local market to an international market. Still maintaining strong links with its Japanese heritage and identity, some commentators think that anime is stateless, happening in a world of its own, which contributes to its worldwide popularity. Its unique narration and character design styles gave it a competitive advantage over other types of cartoons, making it unpredictable, entertaining, and distinctive.

This paper aims to understand why Egyptian viewers were motivated to watch anime despite the boundaries of language, distance and culture. It also tries to find how Anime changed their views about Japan and its culture, encouraging them to participate in activities related to anime like attending drawing workshops, taking Japanese language courses, reading about the history of anime, or planning trips to some Japanese cities.

In this paper, two data collection tools will be used: in depth interviews with a sample of elites as well as focus group discussions with a sample of anime viewers in Egypt to understand the anime appeals that drove them to watch it as well as the gratifications met and fulfilled by Anime.

Keywords: Anime, Egyptian audience, Uses and Gratifications, International Communication.

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Introduction

The Japanese animation, commonly known as Anime, is one of Japan's most distinguished cultural features. Since its true debut in the 1960s, its popularity has crossed the Japanese boundaries, creating communities of fan viewers overseas. Its reach has extended to countries like Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, The United Kingdom, France, and USA during the 1990s and the viewers became familiar with characters like Doraemon and Akira (Napier 2005).

Anime (pronounced ah-nee-may) is the abbreviation of the Japanese word *animeshon*, meaning animation in English. It has 2 meanings: 1) in the Japanese language, it refers to all animation regarding to its origin. 2) In English, it means the Japanese animation. In this research, it will refer to the Japanese animation only.

The anime beginning was in the late 1910s. It started as simple short works shown in movie theatres with the main movie. In 1945, an animated feature film has been released under the name *momotaro umi no shinpei* (Momotaro's divine sea warriors), and it was funded by the imperial navy to lift the spirit of Japanese children. The second animated movie *Hakujaden* (the legend of the white serpent) was released in 1958. Anime's true debut was in 1963 when Osamu Tezuka's *Tetsuwan atomu* (Astro boy) was aired on TV, it was based on Tezuka's 1950s manga (Japanese comics) of the same name. Some anime series started out as manga series which explains the strong link between anime and manga. From the 1960s until now, some anime series became globally recognized, like *Mazinger Z*, *Captain Tsubasa*, *space battleship Yamato*, *Pokemon* and *Naruto*.

As for Anime in Egypt, it began to be known during the 1980s and 1990s. Spacetoon contributed to the expansion of Anime in the Arab world.

Spacetoon began airing in the summer of 2000. It was the first Arab space channel targeting children from 4 to 15 years old. Most of the shows were of American and Japanese origins. Among the Japanese anime aired on Spacetoon, there is *Detective Conan*, *Digimon*, *Slam Dunk*, *Dragon Ball*, *Gundam Wings*, *Captain Tsubasa*, *Hunter*. The shows were dubbed in Arabic to make it easier for children to watch and understand without needing subtitles.

In a study conducted about the content that Spacetoon presents and its effects on the Egyptian children, the researcher found that among 51 shows, more than 25% of the children mentioned 5 shows, 3 of them were anime: *Detective Conan* with a percentage of 47%, *Superman* 39.5%, *Beyblade* 33.5%, *Digimon* 33.2%, *Ninja Turtles* 28.2%.

Review of Literature

The review of literature will shed light on some important factors that led to the popularity of anime as well as some studies that explained the relations between the interest in anime and the interest in the Japanese language and culture.

The universal popularity of anime is due to many factors; the first one is the unique and distinctive features of anime:

1) Anime stories are complex; they can be fictional as if there are no boundaries for imagination, yet they deal with mature, realistic and relevant topics (Price 2009); for instance, Space battleship Yamato was a science fiction anime series about a battleship "The Yamato" that was assigned to retrieve a special device from outer space. The anime show dealt with universal themes like duty and sacrifice, love and personal relationships, good and evil (McKevitt 2010). In addition to that, Anime stories are available in different genres (Romance, comedy, drama, action, horror) (Napier 2005) which satisfies the various needs of the audience, adjusting to their age, gender and personal preferences (Bryce et al 2010).

2) Anime is exceptional with its long plotlines that may extend over an entire year or several years (Condry 2009)¹ allowing the characters time to develop and grow through the series (Manion 2005). That growth is appreciated by viewers; they can relate to what the characters are going through, the experiences they are having and the emotions they are feeling (Bryce et al 2010). Price stated: "characters don't live happily ever after, bad things happen to good people, and villains go unpunished. The emotions that arise from such storylines —sorrow, regret, shame, anger, love—are easy to relate to no matter what nationality you are". (Price 2009)

3) The distinctive visual style is one of the reasons that make anime different (Bryce et al 2010); the way the places and the characters are drawn don't reveal where they come from, places can be anywhere in the world and characters can be anyone (Price 2009). Characters have that westernized look that isn't particularly Japanese (Napier 2005), yet they have their own style with the abnormally huge, glistening eyes (designed first by the artist Osamu Tezuka to depict the characters emotions) as well as the vibrant hair colors used mainly to differentiate between characters in manga and later anime (Price 2009).

4) Some scholars like Price think that one of the reasons that make anime uniquely different is the cultural references that can be unfamiliar to the international audience, yet appealing to them. For instance, the kimonos, the chopsticks, wearing surgical masks when one is having cold, are all aspects of the Japanese culture (Price 2009). Chen said: "global fans embrace products of a culture outside their own, yet feel engaged by themes such as perseverance and friendship". (Chen)

The second factor that contributes to the popularity of anime is the fan viewers. Leonard indicated that the enthusiastic fans helped anime become a power house in the global media market (Leonard 2005). Anime was once a local product targeting Japanese audience. It was successful that it crossed the national boundaries and became watched overseas in different countries. Not only fan viewers watch anime, dubbed or subtitled but also they become more interested in Japan and its culture. They get involved with activities related to anime and manga. They create fansubs websites where fans, who are fluent in the Japanese language, would translate the raw untranslated versions of anime episodes and upload them online. They organize and attend cosplays events², dressing up in costumes of their favorite characters. And

¹ The Detective Conan anime series started in 1996 until now. source: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0131179/>

sometimes they create art materials and upload it on websites like DeviantArt³ or write fan fiction stories⁴(Bryce et al 2010).

However, not all viewers are involved in the anime world with the same degree. Studies classify viewers in 3 degrees; the first is viewers who consume anime through mainstream channels like TV or DVD, they aren't interested in participating in anime activities. The second is viewers who watch anime whether aired on TV or downloaded from fansubs websites, they may attend a convention or produce some fan art. Finally, there are viewers otakus (Japanese anime fans), they are very involved with the anime world; they attend events, they create fansubs or may maintain websites where anime is uploaded, they watch the subtitled versions, their knowledge of Japanese culture is really high and they may take Japanese language courses (Manion 2005).

Based upon what Price said regarding the cultural references in anime, the question is: Is anime a representative of the Japanese culture or is it stateless without a national identity "*mukokuseki*".

Some scholars think that anime maintains strong links with its Japanese roots (Napier 2005) and that there is no way to disguise its japaneseness (Price 2009). They argue that Anime contains references to the Japanese culture, folklore, legends, history and lifestyles. They mention some examples of how the elements of the Japanese culture are strongly integrated in anime; for instance the show Space battleship Yamato, which is named after the Yamato, the largest battleship that sank in 1945 near Okinawa in a suicide mission to stop the American forces from taking the island. (Mckevitt 2010). The name Yamato is derived from Prince Yamatotakeru, a legendary prince of the Yamato dynasty and son of Emperor Keiko. The name was used in anime series like Digimon, say I love you and Naruto.

On the other hand, some scholars think that anime is culturally odorless (Iwabuchi 2002) due to the language dubbing and the characters drawing style. They argue that anime loses its cultural identity when it is edited and dubbed in English (Manion 2005), and that the westernized look of the characters don't show where they come from (Bryce et al 2010). That's why sometimes when watching dubbed versions, people don't realize that anime is Japanese.

However once they know about Anime origins, the viewers seek the subtitled versions of anime. Although the dubbed versions contributed to the expansion of Anime (Price 2009), viewers believe that the subbed versions are more original (Fenell et al 2013). As Manion explains: they are looking for a purer form of Japanese culture, they feel that something is lost when anime is dubbed.

That leads to the next point which is the interest in anime may generate an interest in the Japanese language and culture; Anime encourages viewers to take further steps and register in Japanese language courses (Mckevitt 2010). According to the Japan foundation, the number of Japanese learners overseas has increased from 580,000 in

³ DeviantArt: it is a website founded in 2000 where artists create accounts and they upload their own art works online for others to see and comment. www.deviantArt.com

⁴ Fanfiction : it is a website where writers write stories about their favorite characters. www.fanfiction.com

1984 to 3990,000 in 2012. ⁵McWilliams said that fans want to be able to better understand and appreciate the shows they are watching so they tend to study the aspects they are interested in of the Japanese society.

In a study conducted by Manion to understand who is interested in anime and to what extent, she found out that the anime fans are developing an interest to learn more about Japan and the Japanese culture, and may consider visiting Japan. She also found that the Japanese language students are associating learning about Japan with understanding anime.

Another study that aimed at understanding how students anime fans perceive the impact of anime on learning the language, Williams said: "they attributed their success in Japanese in part to their exposure to the language through anime. In addition, they all saw interest in anime as influencing the decision to study Japanese; for some, this was even the primary reason for choosing the language". (Williams 2006). She also mentioned that, according to Suzan Napier, 86.7 % of the students she surveyed believed that they had learned about Japanese culture from watching anime and that 43% of fans had taken a Japanese course.

In the research consuming Anime, Fennell et al found that fans admitted that the shows added to their cultural knowledge; sometimes they would look for information on their own, other times they would help each other interpret the cultural references through discussion boards.

In addition to learning, interest in anime may also generate an interest in visiting Japan. Anime fans dream about going to the Akihabara district of Tokyo, once famous for the electronic shops and now it has become the center of the Japanese otaku and anime culture, with shops selling manga and anime merchandise. ⁶ On the website of the Japan National Tourism Organisation's (JNTO), fans can check the 'Invitation to an "Otaku" Tour' webpages⁷, where they can get information about museums and anime and manga merchandise shops. (Denison 2011).

The Theory

The Egyptian youth have different reasons for watching anime; the unique nature of anime making it enjoyable to watch is one of these reasons, while other reasons are linked with the needs that anime can fulfill. In order to better understand these motivating reasons, the research will depend on the uses and gratifications theory.

One of the early stages of this theory was in 1944 when Herta Herzog conducted a research to understand why people listen to the radio, especially women who were attracted to radio soap operas. After interviewing dozens of women, she found out 3 reasons for the soap operas attraction:

- 1) Emotional release: The listeners felt better when they sympathized with actors who are facing difficulties.

⁵ <http://www.jlpt.jp/e/statistics/>

⁶ <http://www.japan-guide.com/e/e3003.html>

⁷ <http://www.jnto.go.jp/eng/indepth/exotic/animation/index.html>

2) Wishful thinking: The listeners were happy listening to the characters talking about situations the audience didn't experience. They are living the lives they wished to have through the characters.

3) Getting advice: the audience followed the lives of the characters on the show, noticing how the characters were dealing with problems, which helped the listeners handle similar situations in real life.

The Uses and gratifications theory itself was presented by Elihu Katz, Jay G. Blumler and Michael Gurevitch in 1974. It shifted the focus from the purposes of the communicator to the purposes of the receiver. They assumed that the audiences have some needs and are actively using a certain medium or are being exposed to a certain content to generate specific gratifications that could fulfill those needs, therefore these needs and the expected rewards influence people's patterns of attention to media content.

The 5 basic assumptions of the theory are:

- 1) The audience is active and its media use is goal oriented
- 2) The initiative in linking need gratification to a specific medium choice rests with the audience member.
- 3) The media compete with other sources for need satisfaction.
- 4) People who have enough self-awareness of their media use, interests, and motives to be able to provide researchers with accurate picture of that use.
- 5) Value judgments of media content can only be assessed by the audience.

The theory deals with 3 important concepts: needs, gratifications and active audience. As for the needs; in 1973, Katz, Gurevitch and Haas were able to identify 35 needs that can be arranged in 5 categories:

- 1) Cognitive- acquiring information, knowledge and understanding.
- 2) Affective- emotional, pleasurable and aesthetic experiences
- 3) Personal integrative- strengthening credibility, confidence, stability and status.
- 4) Social integrative- contacts with family, friends and others.
- 5) Tension release- escape and diversion.

The gratifications are what the audience perceive to be the fulfillment of needs after watching a certain content.

The active audience: is when the audiences have certain goals and they select to be exposed to the medium or content that can gratify these needs.

Anne Cooper Chen argues that anime and manga powerfully fulfill all 5 needs for overseas fans. She explained that anime can entertain viewers (tension release and pleasure need) and at the same time educate them about Japan and the Japanese language (cognitive need). The affective need can be achieved through the plots, the visuals and the characters of the anime. As for the personal and social integrative, it is enough to attend an anime convention to realize how anime helped viewers become more confident and more social, allowing them to easily interact with other anime viewers.

The Methodology

The research depends on interviews and focus groups discussions in order to understand the reasons that motivate Egyptian viewers to watch anime as well as how anime changed their views about Japan and encouraged them to participate in anime related activities. 2 focus group discussions have been conducted; one with junior students (4 students) in the Japanese language department in faculty of languages, Ain Shams University and another with students (5 students) in mass communication faculty, Cairo University. Interviews have been conducted with University professors teaching Japanese language, The Japan Foundation vice president, Egymanga a group of Egyptian manga artists, and otaku anime fans (2 students). I tried to choose students with different views about anime, some of them are otakus fans, others watch it from time to time, and a few who used to watch it when they were young.

The findings will be divided into 2 groups: findings related to the reasons Egyptians are motivated to watch anime, and findings related to anime.

1) Findings Related to the Reasons

a) Is the Audience Aware and Active?

In order to understand whether the audience have watched anime and are aware of its Japanese origin, I asked them when they started to watch it, most of them said that they watched it Arabic dubbed on Spacetoon and on other channels when they were elementary school students in the 2000's, and that they realized it was Japanese later on (1 student knew it was Japanese from the discussion). Only 2 students mentioned that they watched it since middle school and they have known already about its Japanese origin. Among the anime shows they watched when they were younger: Detective Conan, Digimon, Captain Tsubasa, Let's and go, Yu- Gi-Oh, Pokémon. Their words match with Dr. Karam's answer when I asked him when anime began to air in Egypt, he replied that it happened during the 1990's and 2000's. They also match with Shaymaa's words (the artist from Egymanga) that Egyptians became familiar with Anime when the Egyptian TV began to air Mazinger Z in the 1990's then the 2nd TV channel had an agreement with Spacetoon to air some of its shows for 2 hours in the 2000's. That proves that at one point of their lives, they have indeed watched anime whether on Spacetoon or on local channels but became aware of its origin later on.

The second part of the question is about the activeness of the audience, whether they are still active in seeking anime and watching it or it was just a phase in their lives. I found out that one student stopped watching it because his interests changed, while all of them still watch anime. Their degree of viewership isn't the same; it varies from

movies only, to series only, to both. It also changes according to the amount of free time they have and the availability of anime plots they enjoy. They have different preferences regarding the anime genres they watch; sci-fi, parody themes, romantic comedy, action, adventure, psychological, mystery, drama, supernatural, horror, shonen, seinen, shoujo. The anime they are currently watching varies from anime with expendable plotlines like, Naruto, One piece, Detective Conan, and other short story anime like Kaicho wa Maid Sama, lovely complex, Death note.

I also wanted to know what they liked the most about anime, they stated that Anime is famous for its extraordinary plots, the creative stories, the unexpected twists that the characters go through, the careful attention to small details in the drawings and the perfect choice of voice actors that fit perfectly the assigned role. Dr. Karam explained that anime attracts Egyptians with the supernatural ideas, the human feelings and the emotional topics it deals with, while Dr. Aya said that anime is available in different genres making it suitable for every taste. She also said that the producers understand the minds of the target audience, which help them give the audience what they are looking for. The Egymanga artist thinks that what attracts Egyptians to Anime is how people can relate to anime, it isn't about happy endings only, the hero can go through a lot, may win or lose the fight. She also admires the fact that Anime doesn't spoon-feed you the morals and values but you got it in an indirect way, it is an anime but there are values in it like respect, responsibility, hard work, friendship, commitment.

b) Why Would They Watch Anime?

That question aimed at understanding the needs of the students and the gratifications fulfilled by watching anime. 4 of the 5 basic needs were fulfilled through anime, although they change according to the academic background as well as the interest of the students. The entertainment need was common among them. However, the cognitive need was fulfilled in different ways; the Japanese language students consider anime as a training to improve their listening skills, while the students interested in culture watch anime to get more information about Japan. The affective need was fulfilled among the students interested in art and graphics as well as the egymanga team members; they watch anime because they like the drawings and consider watching anime and reading manga as a mean to help improving their drawing skills. As for the social integrative need, one student mentioned that she attends conventions, posts pictures on facebook groups and discusses anime and manga topics with her friends.

c) Dubbed or Subtitled?

The question of watching the dubbed or subtitled versions of anime is debatable. At one point in their lives, most of the students have watched the Arabic dubbed versions of anime on Spacetoon. What I wanted to know is nowadays when they watch Anime, they prefer to watch it dubbed or subtitled. Again, the answers were different: The Japanese language students prefer to watch the raw versions of anime to improve their listening skills. Sometimes, though, they may watch the subtitled versions in case they aren't familiar with a new term. They agreed on the fact that dubbed versions don't give anime its true value, and that the Japanese voice actors are more capable of expressing the role. To support their point of view, they gave examples from anime shows where the same actor is capable of playing the role of a player romantic guy in one anime and a complex demented character in another anime. On the other hand, some students in mass communication agreed on the fact that the subtitled versions

get them in the mood while others mentioned that the dubbed versions are better because they would rather enjoy the drawings than read the subtitles.

2) Findings Related to Anime

a) Is Anime Stateless or Representative of its Culture?

When asking students their opinions about anime and whether it represents the Japanese culture or it is stateless, students were divided into 2 groups. One group argues that anime portrays life in Japan in terms of the society, the houses, the way the characters are drawn, therefore Anime isn't stateless, but a representative of its culture. Another group (mostly with academic background) thinks that it depends on many factors like the genre of the anime and the vision of the author and the director. They justified their point of view by bringing up evidences from some anime shows that contained Japanese references, for instance, the students changing shoes at entering school grounds. However they also mentioned that sometimes anime shows can be quite fictional because the author/director is trying to express his inner thoughts and imagination, and that characters don't show where they come from like Captain Tsubasa who became famous for his Arabic name Captain Magued. When asking University professors, both Dr. Karam and Dr. Aya agreed on the fact that anime isn't stateless, that it maintains its link with its Japanese heritage.

b) Would Anime Change People Views about Japan and the Culture?

The responses I got for that question were similar in the way that most respondents said that anime helped them know more about Japan and its culture. Japanese language students explained that anime was like a portal to the Japanese culture and language even before joining the department. Anime transmits part of Japan's history. They have more knowledge about Japan, its history, festivals, prayer rituals, temples compared to other students who don't watch anime. Dr. Karam agreed with the previous argument saying that anime became the new keyword that come to the Egyptian minds when asking them about Japan. Although the old keywords like WWII, Kimono, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, are still there but the focus shifted to the new Keyword Anime especially among the youth. Dr. Aya mentioned that anime portrays the real life as it is, that sometimes some content may be different or against our values and customs. Shaymaa, the Egymanga artist, agrees with what Dr. Aya said about the depiction of real life. The otakus fans think that anime shows more sides to the life of the Japanese people, the fun emotional side that is always hidden behind the polite and strict side. As for mass communication students, I didn't ask them that question because those who still watch anime are watching the dubbed versions. Only one student is watching the subtitled version because she believes the language helps the anime transmit the culture.

3) Would Anime Motivate People to Take Japanese Language Courses or Manga Drawing Courses, or Participate in Events?

A) Academics

Dr. Karam and Dr. Aya have both agreed on the fact that some of their students are motivated by anime to join the Japanese language department. They said that students want to be able to understand what is going on without reading the subtitles. And through Anime, they know more about the Japanese culture, language, society,

customs and traditions. That's why sometimes they would use anime and manga as fun learning tool, like asking them to translate one or two pages of manga, or giving them anime scripts with an Arabic translation to learn about the language and especially the common language. However, it is just for fun and not always used as to not let the students consider the common language used in anime as the main language.

In Faculty of languages, the biggest event of the year is the Japan cultural day. Last year, students organized a special corner for anime; like a special contest using anime characters and people have to guess which character. One student was dressed as a ninja and almost 5 or 6 people from outside the faculty in costumes. They also brought Naruto costumes from the Japan foundation so that people can take photos while wearing these costumes. The students did everything; They chose an anime song and they memorized it 2 months prior to the event; sometimes one of them will look for a Japanese dance, learns how to perform it then teaches it to other students. They even have a fund box; each day, each one puts 1 pound and they use that money for advertising purposes related to the event.

In Faculty of Arts, students participate in tea ceremonies events, origami sessions, and when an anime writer is visiting Egypt, they attend his lectures. They are always communicating with the Japan Foundation.

B) Egy Manga

They were motivated to draw their own manga. The idea of drawing an Egyptian manga came to Anas and Fouad when they were attending a lecture at the Japan Foundation in Cairo. Their goal was to provide a good valuable alternative to comics already existing in Egypt, a valuable product that could preserve our values, just like artists did in Japan, France and USA. They wanted to help people self-develop using comics. So they created a group on Facebook to be able to communicate and share the knowledge with writers and artists and to recruit new talented members to join the main team. They began to produce a portfolio of short stories then worked on freelance projects to get the money needed for printing new issues of their manga. And now People asked them to organize workshops and drawing courses. The Japan Foundation helped them by providing a place for the workshops, and invited them to events, where they can draw people instantly manga style.

C) Japanese Language Students

Japanese language students joined the department for many reasons, for some of them one of these reasons is anime. Other reasons include loving the Japanese culture and history, the educational system in the department is better than in other departments, loving the drawings and wanting to study animation in Japan, a desire to work in the technology field in Japan.

They don't usually participate in activities related to anime, like cosplays. However, they participate in the cultural day that the faculty organizes every year and may attend an event. One student mentioned writing and drawing.

D) Mass Communication Students

One student attended the egyptcom event held annually but didn't participate in a cosplay. she used to give drawing lessons and attended comics events and workshops. Right now, she is taking Japanese language courses. However, other students, didn't show any interest in activities.

E) The Japan foundation

According to the Japan foundation, the number of visitors during the months of April, May and June was 290 while during the months of July, August, and September the number became 384. The Japan foundation also organized other events like the Sumu festival in Saqiet el sawy and Japan kingdom of Characters in the Gezirah art center. The Japanese embassy held movie screenings every Thursday, sometimes these movies are anime.

4) Would Anime Motivate People to Visit Japan?

Although most of them have shown interest in visiting Japan, it wasn't because of Anime, they had other reasons. Reasons vary from wanting to know the culture and history, to studying abroad, working in the electronics field. Except one student who mentioned that he had the idea of wanting to visit Japan because of the anime, but it was dismissed later on.

The Conclusion:

- 1) The audience is aware of Anime and active in watching it; they are familiar with different anime genres, they are still actively seeking it and they have reasons for that admiration.
- 2) These findings correspond with Chen's argument about the needs that anime and manga powerfully fulfill for overseas fans. This sample of the audience are goal-oriented; they are aware of their needs and they choose anime among other animation to help them gratify these needs.
- 3) Dubbed or subtitled is a matter of personal preferences; some watch anime for the sake of the art and drawings and don't care about the language, others are absorbed by the whole situation and feel that the Japanese language help them better get in the mood.
- 4) Regarding the status of Anime as stateless or representative, students were divided between both groups, which corresponds with the arguments provided by the scholars in the review of literature.
- 5) Anime doesn't only change people's views about Japan, but also it helps them know more about the country in terms of culture, history and daily life.
- 6) Anime can motivate people to participate in activities but to a certain extent.
- 7) Anime doesn't influence people's choice of visiting Japan. They have other interests and therefore they want to go there.

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