# Negotiating *otaku*: A social group, its social representations and the changing cultural context

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During the 1980s, a social group of dedicated fans of comics (*manga*) and animation (*anime*) – referred to as *otaku* – emerged within Japanese culture. This paper charts the social representations of this group in Japan over a period of thirty five years, to the present day. During that period, it is shown that the depiction of an otaku has altered from that of a deviant outsider to a representative of modern creative Japanese consumer culture. It is argued here that this development has occurred through the negotiation of the social representations concerning the otaku, within the context of socio-cultural change in Japan. Employing the framework of Moscovici's social representations theory, it is demonstrated that the representation of a social group is not fixed and unchanging, but is subject to transformation, linked to the changing socio-cultural circumstances of the society. It is concluded that the meaning of a social group cannot be isolated from its cultural context.

Earlier this century, in 2007, I visited the International Anime Fair at Tokyo Big Site, a large exhibition centre in Odaiba, close to central Tokyo. During four days, over a hundred thousand people attended the event, a typical number which it continued to attract in subsequent years. The event comprised a large number of stalls selling *manga* (Japanese comics), DVDs of *anime* (Japanese animated movies), games, toys, figurines, books and posters; displays of giant robots and screenings of the latest anime; with many people, both

sales-staff and visitors, dressed in *cosplay* (from 'costume play') as favourite characters from popular manga, anime or games. I was surrounded mostly by rather studious and intense-seeming young Japanese, mostly men in their teens or twenties, with plastic bags full of their purchases. If I were to have asked these young men what they called themselves, or indeed asked ordinary Japanese to describe such people, the most popular term would be *otaku*, identifying a dedicated fan of Japanese popular culture, particularly manga and anime. In twenty-first century Japan, the otaku had entered the mainstream. Around the world, the Japanese word otaku has been co-opted by non-Japanese fans of Japanese popular culture as a term for themselves. Currently, the Japanese government promotes otaku culture throughout the world in a multi-million dollar programme labelled 'Cool Japan'. Yet, this public acceptance of this commercial enterprise is very different to the representation of the otaku presented in the Japanese media of the 1980s and 1990s. At that time, an otaku was viewed as a 'deviant' in mainstream Japanese society, and when reported upon in the West, particularly Britain, the otaku was often presented as a dangerous cultural 'other' (Hinton, 2015).

## Formation and change in the social representations of otoku

Working within the framework of social representations theory (Moscovici, 2000), this paper presents a socio-cultural analysis of the formation and change in the social representations of the otaku and its influence on the social identity of Japanese youth over a thirty five year period in what Moscovici (2000) calls the 'consensual universe' of everyday public communication. Traditionally, in social psychology, group membership is interpreted as a consequence of categorization, with people identifying with, or being identified by, these specific categories as an in-group or out-group member (Tajfel, 1981; Turner, 1991). This presents social groups as fairly inflexible, with a group characterized as having a distinct set of attributes, which, if positive, enhance the self-esteem of the in-group members. This model predicates the idea, in cognitive social psychology, of 'cognitive bias' in social perception, implying that individuals can have an accurate or inaccurate view of a group and its members (e.g. Fiske and Taylor, 2016). However, this view has been challenged. As Gillespie et al. (2012) have argued, traditional methods in social psychology have tended to underestimate the complexity of social groups (and group membership), which are human constructs that depend on one's perspective (such as perceiving a group as terrorists or freedom-fighters).

Social groups are subject to change over time; with people moving in and out of categories in accordance with the social and historical context. Furthermore, Duveen (2001) has argued that social identity is more than a simple categorization (of oneself) to a 'known' category but involves a complex relationship of social representation and identity processes. Also, Hinton (2017) has challenged the cognitive bias model of social perception, which implies that an unbiased or accurate judgement of a group is possible. He argued that knowledge of social groups is constructed within the communication of the social networks to which the person belongs. The perception of a social group therefore reflects the way the group is represented in a particular culture, which is not a fixed or necessarily 'accurate' perception of the group members (which may be impossible to determine, Jussim, 2012) but reflects the socio-cultural context of those groups. This analysis of the Japanese social category of otaku will provide a historical account of the changing representations of the group over time, within Japanese culture, as a examination of these issues.

As Moscovici (2001, p. 28) pointed out, "social representations are generated and patterned in the process of communication", through a process of negotiation across the media and everyday communication that shape the way the past and present is viewed throughout a particular culture (Jovchelovitch, 2012). The choice of the otaku is particularly relevant here as the social representations surrounding the term have shifted from a negative to a positive stance within Japanese culture across a relatively short period of time. By examining this real-life example, outside of the psychology laboratory, it is argued that rather than social groups being 'fixed' with independent sets of attributes, the social representations of a group, in this case the otaku, are interdependent and changeable over time (Marková, 2007).

## Representing the otaku as deviant

It has been suggested that the Japanese polite, formal term for 'you', otaku, was used by a character in the anime *The Super Dimension Fortress Macross*, 1982 (Galbraith, 2010) and was picked up by fans to refer to each other. The popularizing of the term otaku arose from a series of articles in the magazine *Manga Burikko*, a fairly short-lived manga magazine, by journalist Akio Nakamori in 1983 (Nakamori, 1983a, 1983b). Whilst entitled *A Study of Otaku* the articles involved rather tongue-in-cheek 'research' of a journalist's visit to *Komike*

(a regular comic convention in Tokyo). Nakamori's use of the term 'otaku' was to identify and define (satirically) a specific subgroup of young people that we might loosely label by the English word 'dork'- socially inept and mildly contemptible – which he describes in some detail. For example, Nakamori (1983a) writes: "you know that weedy-looking boy, with no friends, who hangs out in the corner of the classroom during recess - well I've just been to *Komike* and seen ten thousand of them!"

Nakamori's study of otaku (1983a) with its evocative descriptions provides the reader with an image of the otaku as the socially inadequate, physically-awkward obsessive manga fan, that anchored its social representation in terms of familiar other representations (Wagoner, 2008). By anchoring the otaku representation in terms of social inadequacy, Nakamuri (1983a) is making the links to known representations, such as geek, nerd or dork, in his description of these comic book fans, which the readers could recognise. As well as the process of anchoring, Moscovici (2001) argues that a social representation gains an independent social reality through a process of objectification, with otaku being distinct from geek or nerd, as a socially inadequate manga and anime fan. Nakamori (1983b) achieved this, in subsequent articles in the series, by setting out specific features that distinguished the otaku from other related groups. One manga subgenre was termed *rorikon*, a corruption of the English phrase 'Lolita complex', which portrayed cute characters (with the appearance of 'young girls') as objects of erotic interest. Also, a popular activity was the fan's own amateur production of comics (called *doujinshi*). Some doujinshi based on mainstream manga series were turned into rorikon. Nakamori (1983b) was highly critical of otaku sexuality, rhetorically asking if they were 'normal' (with the implied answer of 'no'), by citing their particular interest in rorikon, referring to them as having a two-dimensional complex. It was not that the otaku were interested in actual young girls, as the term Lolita complex would be interpreted in the West, but that they were socially unable to engage with real girls or women, with their erotic desire completely focused on fictional manga characters. Thus, he had established a social representation of otaku: an otaku may be geek-like but is socially inadequate with an obsession with very cute fantasy characters in manga, which Nakamori (1983a) rather disdainfully describes.

At the end of his first article, Nakamura (1983a) teases his readers with the question: "*What type of otaku are you*?" Despite his (satirical) criticisms of the otaku, there is also the

awareness that the readers themselves belong to this category of 'outsider' in Japanese society, particularly as they were buying a manga magazine, *Manga Burikko*, itself containing such content. In making the social representation explicit he is constructing a social identity for the readers, which, despite its negative connotations, they can identify with as a manga and anime fan. However, as argued below, he is creating at the same time a cultural out-group (Tajfel, 1981), in terms of mainstream culture. Indeed, the way that an out-group is constructed and represented, particularly in the media, will influence the way the group is perceived with that culture (Markova, 2007; Howarth, 2006). Yet this otaku representation would have remained only known to the readers of *Manga Burikko* and other specialist manga magazines, except for two factors: the major growth in manga and anime sales in the late 20th century – both in Japan and abroad - and the arrest for murder of Tsutomo Miyazaki in 1989, both of which became important topics of discussion in the mainstream media of Japanese society of the 1990s.

There has been a long tradition of manga in Japanese culture, from early 19th century artist Hokusai's 'frivolous pictures' (the original use of the term *manga*), through to publications drawing on American comic traditions in the 1950s and 1960s. Unlike in the West, comics were not exclusively children's entertainment, but during the 19th and 20th centuries included social and political commentary (Schodt, 1983). By the 1980s, there was a manga and anime boom in Japan. Manga included many topics from stories about business and golf (often read by the Japanese salarymen on their long commutes), through to science fiction and fantasy and stories of school life (popular with teenagers and young adults), with 1.75 billion manga in circulation by 1988 (Grassmuck, 1990). The graphic format, often beautifully drawn but also viewed as transient – to be read and discarded - provided an excellent means of easy personal entertainment in the midst of a busy life: during travel, in study breaks. Hence, it was viewed as supporting the dedication to hard work and duty that characterised Japanese social identity of the time. During the 1980s and 1990s, the popularity of manga in Japan also led to an increasing interest in them in the West with authors such as Schodt (1983) providing explanations and examples of the form for a Western audience, and later introducing the term otaku to Western readers (Schodt, 1996).

The wider Japanese public became very aware of the term otaku following the arrest of Tsutomu Miyazaki in 1989 for sexually molesting a 6-year-old girl and charged with the

murder of four young girls (between the ages of 4 and 7). These murders generated huge media coverage, particularly seeking to understand their cause: over 750 articles were published on Miyazaki in just three national newspapers (*Asahi Shimbun*, *Mainichi Shimbun*, and *Yomiuri Shimbun*) in 1989 (Kamm, 2015). The major explanatory focus was on the discovery of over five thousand videos and magazines in his room (which included pornography, anime, horror and rorikon in the collection) combined with his social isolation. The social representations of the otaku now moved from a humorously defined manga fan subgroup to enter the mainstream media in Japanese culture, becoming a discussed representation in the context of deviance within society.

In an article in *Shinbunka* magazine, Eiji Otsuko, a former editor of *Manga Burikko*, sought to distance *otaku-shonen* (otaku boys) from Miyazaki's actions but, ironically, this to some extent highlighted the otaku in the discussions of what caused Miyazaki's crimes (Kamm, 2015)[i]. As Kamm (2015) points out, very few newspapers directly associated Miyazaki with the otaku, yet it was implicit in what he refers to as a 'mode of disclaiming' with psychiatrists and other professionals speculating about the effects of video or anime *mania* (obsession) on the otaku, even though the professional might later reject the association of the otaku and his interests as dangerous and disturbing. Other media outlets were less circumspect, with headlines such as 'The Unparalleled Serial Killings of Young Girls by a Lonely Anime Enthusiast' (Kamm, 2015, p.60). Like the concerns about the 'teenage delinquent' in the media of the United States of America in the 1950s, where the construction of the new social category 'teenager' had led to public anxiety that had been non-existent prior to its construction (Palladino 1996), the otaku became a source of both public opprobrium at the same time as public fascination. Popular media in both Japan and abroad began publishing articles on the 'otaku phenomenon' in an attempt to explain who the otaku were and what they did. As Schodt (1996, p. 46) noted: "It is hard to imagine any single Japanese word that had been so discussed and so mutilated in such a short period of time." The otaku had also become the focus of sociological and cultural academic interest in Japanese society (Adams and Hill, 1991; Kinsella, 2000). It is important to note here how the communication context was a crucial feature in the development of the social representations of the otaku, and its social meaning (Jovchelovitch, 2007). Now the social representations of

the otaku became a significant factor in a widespread public and academic debate about youth in modern Japan.

Traditionally, in Japan, as long as a person accepted their role in society and acted accordingly then they were fairly free to spend their (limited) personal time as they wished. A young man reading manga as a brief respite from dedicated study for his examinations, regardless of its content, was still fulfilling his role in a successful Japanese society (Allison, 1996). Excepting the horror of Miyazaki's actions, the moral anxiety about otaku interests was not a Christian-based concern as in a Western country (White, 1993), but about the failure of the otaku to fit into, and contribute appropriately to, Japanese society, in terms of a traditional path of study, work and marriage. When obsessive interests such as manga and anime were at the expense of study, or an interest in cartoon erotic characters obviated seeking a marriage partner, then otaku became a socially deviant expression. Consequently, with the burgeoning popularity of anime and manga, these social representations of the otaku contributed to the public debate of what it meant to be young and Japanese, as the development of social identities within the group were both constructed and constrained by the social representations of youth and adulthood in the culture (Duveen, 2001)

## Japanese youth and the bursting of the economic bubble

The Japanese media interest in the otaku became particularly pertinent in the context of the bursting of the Japanese economic 'bubble' in 1993. Up to that point, the dedication of the Japanese adult workforce had rebuilt the country after the Pacific War to become a major industrial power, second only to the United States of America, by the 1980s. Issues of personal happiness were subsumed in very long hours of work and the reward had been continuous increasing affluence, which was reflected in the social representations of the hardworking, dutiful Japanese adult that characterised the media representations of national identity (White, 2002).  With stagnation, the motivation for endless striving for economic success was questioned in terms of loss of personal happiness and the potential consequences on young people, such as the breakdown of communication between the young and the older generations. The evidence indicated that the younger generation did not wish to follow their parents into an adult life of work, duty and responsibility at the expense of the relative freedoms of youth (White, 1993). Now that national growth had stalled, there was the

question of whether adults wanted it either, at the expense of personal life satisfaction. Thus, the 1990s became a period of uncertainty and generated much discussion in the media about the nature of Japanese society and national identity. The social representations of the otaku were a key element of that debate.

Author and critic Eiji Otsuko explicitly claimed that being an otaku (i.e. having otaku interests) was an outcome of modern Japanese society, not a deviation from it (Kamm, 2015). Grassmuck (1990) argued that being obsessive in the age of media technology, a characteristic of the otaku, was a consequence of modern Japanese culture. The otaku were Japanese children at a time of affluence, disengaged from their tolerant parents but often with absent fathers (working long hours), and engaging in activities that their parents did not understand. Driven to learn endless facts in a harsh education system, this dedication carried over to their personal interests. As well as the media reports, anime itself included stories about otaku, specifically the popular *Otaku No Video*, in 1991, a documentary-style comedy spoof, released by the anime studio Gainax. It charts the change of a 'normal' college student into an otaku. Whilst there are elements of 'deviance' (he becomes less healthy and his girlfriend leaves him), it also shows his entrepreneurship – selling otaku products, building a factory, and an otaku theme park. The story is interspersed with interviews of different types of otaku about their interests, from cosplay to computer games and pornography, which are presented in a satirically, disparaging way (echoing Nakamori, 1983a). Yet, whilst the video acknowledges the inadequate, unappealing social representation of the otaku in the mainstream media, at the same time it presents the fantasy of an alternative otaku consumer universe – which the entrepreneurial otaku has constructed. It has even been suggested that the otaku characters are based on the successful Gainax team themselves (Shen, 2015). In the situation of economic stagnation, the otaku, as creators of successful consumer products now echoed key elements of traditional Japanese identity. Thus, the social meaning of otaku was developing in the context of other known social representations, demonstrating the dynamic interrelationship of social representations on social identity (Duveen, 2001).

The category of otaku had emerged at a time of youthful discontent with Japanese adult social identity. It was during this time that the term *burikko* (as in the magazine *Manga Burikko*) emerged: meaning 'pretend-child' it referred to a cute young woman acting in a child-like way, typified by the hugely successful pop singer and idol, Matsuda Seiko

(Kinsella, 1995). This aspect of girls' culture was termed *kawaii* (cute). High school girls developed an interest in all things kawaii, from cute handwriting, soft toys such as Hello Kitty, trinkets and fashion (Kinsella, 1995). Whilst, from a Western perspective, this was viewed as a form of infantilism, such as young women dressing in a style traditionally associated with younger girls, in Japan it was explained as a rejection of, and a retreat from, an unappealing adult world. For young women in the 1980s and 1990s, adulthood was typically a limited career in the workplace and marriage by the age of twenty-five. On marriage, resignation from the workplace was expected, followed by motherhood and a lifetime of caring for the home and family (Hinton, 2014). For the teenage boy, the traditional expectation was of endless study, often including cramming school, called *juku*, in attempt to do well in examinations to get into the best universities and join the best companies. Adopting an adult male social identity as a salaryman meant dedicating long days to work, required socialising with colleagues, with little holiday or time for home life. A typical Japanese salaryman woke early to commute to the office and returned very late, hardly seeing his family. Otaku culture could be viewed in this context as Japanese youth challenging the dutiful nature of adult life in their society, which they viewed negatively in contrast to the relative freedom and pleasure of their youth whose end it signalled (White, 1993). Adams and Hill (1991) showed that many of the fantasy themes within manga represented protest and rebellion, a counterpoint to the pressured lives of boys and men in Japanese society of the time. The otaku's obsessive interest in popular culture, and rorikon characters, could be viewed as the young man seeking to avoid entering the undesirable adult world. With the bursting of the economic bubble in the 1990s, this discontent entered the wider public discourse about the nature of Japanese life and the relationship between economic and cultural capital (Hinton, 2014).

This public debate about modern Japanese society meant that there was no longer a rigid distinction between the 'deviant' social group of the otaku and 'normal' Japanese identity, but an awareness and concern about the interrelationship between them (cf. Duveen, 2001). This debate demonstrates the view that these social groups share an 'interdependence of fate', which, crucially, is relational, rather than fixed (Marková, 2007). Now, an otaku was considered a product of Japanese society that had not brought personal happiness or supported family relationships. What the identification of the otaku had done to the social

representations of the hard-working dutiful Japanese was to reveal the personal costs of that dedicated lifestyle. An obsessive dedication to work may have created a generation who transferred their obsessions to the products of popular culture in their attempts to avoid the negative aspects of traditional Japanese life on their personal happiness. Rather than remaining a fixed 'deviant' subgroup within the consensual universe of Japanese media, the debate about the otaku revealed the discontent with the social representations of adulthood, and adult social identity in Japanese society, at the end of the twentieth century.

## The otaku as the new Japanese creative consumer

The stagnation of the Japanese economy brought about an impetus for social change. The consumption of otaku products (anime, manga, computer games and so forth) were forms of consumption for personal pleasure. This offered a route to happiness too for adults. Kawaii culture – and otaku interests - offered access to the joys (and memories) of youth for the weary, hard-working adults and it began to invade many aspects of Japanese (adult) society, even down to 'cute' advertisements for banks (McVeigh, 2000). The traditional jobs-for-life began to be eroded as Western business models began to be introduced in Japanese companies; women remained in the work-force after marriage and began to challenge the promotional structures that often discriminated against them; there was a diminution of the 'examination hell' that plagued the lives of teenagers during their high-school years. The idea of a work-life balance was no longer a taboo in Japanese society (Craig, 2009). As a result, there began to be an appreciation that the issues that were being played out in manga and anime (such as challenging fixed gender roles, finding new innovative solutions to personal and social issues) and other aspects of otaku culture (such as engaging creatively with the technological and virtual worlds) provided opportunities for original and imaginative development of personal and social lives (Kinsella, 2000). This social change was mirrored in the movement of social representations of the otaku from outsider to insider in Japanese society, showing how social representations – rather than being 'fixed' images of a social group - relate to social meaning construction, social practices, and identity construction (Howarth, 2006).

At the beginning of the new millennium, otaku social representations, whilst anchored in an interest in Japanese popular culture, were re-presented through the works of cultural

critic Hiroki Azuma and artist Takahashi Murakami. Azuma's 2001 book *Otaku: Japan's database animals* (Azuma, 2009) contextualized the otaku in terms of post-war (defeated) Japan dealing with American culture and seeking to adapt it to a distinctly Japanese aesthetic in manga and anime. Thus, otaku culture is intimately integrated with Japanese identity construction. Azuma argued that there is no grand narrative in the post-modern world, merely settings (in the 'database') from which fictions are constructed. For example, the popular anime *Neon Genesis Evangelion* 1995-6 generated many interpretations and derivative works, with fans creating their own individual narratives about key characters. Furthermore, there were numerous products that could be bought, from the original manga and anime, to computer games, figures and posters, based on the characters and stories. For Azuma, otaku culture represented a shift from modern narrative consumption to post-modern database consumption (Azuma, 2009).

Artist Takeshi Murakami associated the contemporary objects of otaku interest with Japanese artistic traditions and presented them in his modern commercial art in terms of his aesthetic concept of 'superflat', which focuses on the two-dimension surface of the image. In his own art, which also references Andy Warhol and Pop Art, Murakami creates 'otaku-style' imagery in a range of objects from sculpture to key-fobs and stickers. Exhibited both in Japan and America, Murakami's work attracted substantial press interest. Otaku culture, in Murakami's view, was establishing a new art form that could be seen in manga, anime, computer games and also in areas such as fashion and graphic design which was following aesthetically from the artist works of the Edo period (Darling, 2001). As such, otaku culture was an essentially Japanese cultural movement and strongly associated with Japanese identity. The publicity given to Murakami both in Japan and America led to a much greater interest in otaku culture as an influence on modern commercial art.

Both Azuma and Murakami presented the otaku and otaku culture as something of serious mainstream interest, and of cultural importance, which was then picked up in both the popular media and in academic and artistic communication (Steinberg, 2004). Here was an interpretation of the technological and informational impact of the digital age, and the way it was influencing human psychology and human interaction. Azuma argued that, from the philosopher Hegel, we make the distinction between animals with *needs* that can be readily satisfied, for example, by the sex act, and humans with more complex *desires* that are

intersubjective – desire for a partner continues after the sex act. However, in modern consumer society we become animal-like, as objects of desire can be obtained through consumerism, with diminished intersubjective desire. Indeed, Azuma argued that the content of otaku, rorikon, manga and anime are not representations of otaku sexuality but an opposition to, and a rebellion against conventional society (McNicol, 2004). As such, the otaku represented modern technological Japan.

A further influence on the shift in social representations of the otaku, from social 'deviant' to the outcome of modern Japanese culture, occurred with the success of the extremely popular movie *Densha Otoko* (Train Man) 2005 (after a book and manga from an internet story). In the film, a shy young man rescues a young woman from a drunken attacker in a Tokyo train. The young man is clearly portrayed as an otaku by his interests, friends, and his association with Akihabara (the district of Tokyo known for its technological products and manga and anime shops, the centre of otaku consumption in Japan). Yet the story is about the development of a romantic relationship between the otaku and the young woman he rescued. The film is full of scenes where the otaku seeks help from his online friends about how to act on a date and what to do on an evening out, with charming scenes of the couple getting to know each other. In many ways it is a traditional 'boy meets girl' story from the initial awkwardness through to the finale of a relationship. Yet, the key point here is that the otaku, with his interests in manga, anime, online gaming and so forth, may be a shy geek but he is still just a 'regular guy'.

At the same time the otaku were distinguished from the social category of *hikikomori,* which emerged in the public domain during the early 2000s, identified by their social isolation. The phenomenon was documented by psychiatrist Tamaki Saito in a book on social withdrawal (Horiguchi, 2012), with interest increasing in the media as the new millennium developed. Within Japanese society, the cultural pressure to be independent was not as powerful as traditionally in the West, and dependence did not have a negative connotation. In order to withdraw from society, as these young people did, they relied on being provided with food and other support by caring, but often confused and distressed, parents. High profile violent acts, such as the murder of a parent, by young people identified as socially withdrawn, led to considerable media speculation on the cause and solution to the problem both in Japan and, later abroad. Often presented as a psychiatric response to the pressures of modern life,

the issue generated an 'industry' of rehabilitation and support services (Horiguchi, 2012). What this meant was that, in Japan, perceived deviance – the failure to engage with society – (and the social and political anxiety about it) had shifted from the otaku to the hikikomori. Social representations of the otaku had now become more emancipated (Moscovici, 2000; Gillespie, 2008), that is, open to discussion rather than indicative of a cultural other. The otaku was no longer viewed as isolated from society but as part of modern digital culture with roots in unique aspects of Japanese aesthetic traditions. Japanese manga, anime, computer games, fashion (including cosplay) and (to some extent) music were now popular world-wide, with a youth following in numerous countries. In a commercial environment where traditional Japanese companies were unable to overcome economic stagnation, the manufacturers of otaku consumer products had achieved global success. The otaku, with their specifically Japanese interests, had led the world as consumers of products that had become a multi-billion dollar industry for Japanese companies. Thus, as the first decade of the twenty-first century drew to a close (and when I visited the Anime Fair at Tokyo Big Site) the social representations of the otaku reflected young innovative and dynamic people, engaging in the successful consumerism of modern Japan.

## The otaku as representative of Cool Japan

At the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century, the word 'otaku' is used in the titles of magazines about manga and anime and as a company name by anime and manga sellers internationally. The otaku has become a representative of modern creative Japan. With Japanese popular culture viewed as a source of innovative digital entertainment to young people worldwide, otaku consumer products are big business: indeed, a global commercial enterprise. Establishment acceptability of the otaku was confirmed when the Japanese Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) promoted the 'Cool Japan' project in 2010. Major producers of Japanese popular culture became part of a co-ordinated programme of promoting the products of Japanese popular culture worldwide, under a new Creative Industries Promotion Office of METI. This sought to develop the global success of Japan as the source of exciting anime, manga, video games, fashion, pop music, and toys, an industry that had achieved global sales of over 17 billion US dollars by 2012 (Nagata, 2012). In 2013 a public-private Cool Japan Fund was established, with the government allocating

$500million, to enhance the sale of Japanese products to overseas markets, by supporting companies seeking to commercialize the demand abroad for products related to Japanese culture and lifestyle. In October 2014 Anime Consortium Japan announced a Cool Japan Fund investment of a billion yen (about $10million) for a project on internet streaming and e-commerce business of Japanese anime. In 2018, politicians put forward plans to the Japanese parliament to support the creation of a Media Arts National Center in Tokyo to preserve manga and anime collections (Basseel, 2018). The otaku has become part of the Japanese establishment cultural landscape with substantial government support. Now the risk is that establishment acceptance might be perceived as the opposite of 'cool' in youth culture (Snow, 2015).

## Discussion

This type of socio-cultural analysis is not typical in traditional social psychology, yet it has revealed convincing evidence that social groups and related social identities are not fixed or uncomplicated categorizations, as Gillespie et al. (2012) argued. Social categories are formed and develop within the social history of a society, which is often ignored in traditional experimental social psychology studies (Gergen, 1973). Plotting the history of the otaku in Japanese culture, through a social representation's framework, has demonstrated that social representations reflect a complex cultural portrayal of a social group and its members that cannot be isolated from the communication within which they have been negotiated. Crucially, they are flexible and responsive to the socio-cultural context (Howarth, 2006): in this case, the economic, technological and social relationships of modern Japan. A group, initially identified as socially deviant, has challenged what it means to be Japanese in the 21$^{st}$ century, and it is in the context of other social representations that this has occurred. Whilst the central core of the representation, that of the dedicated fan of Japanese popular culture, has remained for over thirty years the peripheral elements have played "an essential role in the adaptation of the representation to the evolution of the context." (Abric, 2001, p. 44). Issues of social inadequacy, social isolation, social relations, personal responses to the modern technological age, and questions of personal happiness in Japan have all contributed to the interrelationship of these social representations and the socio-cultural context of modern Japan that demonstrates the way in which the peripheral elements represent a

dynamic and fluid process (Philogène, 2001). Also, the attributes of the group are not simply accurate or inaccurate descriptions of the group members, but are attributes employed for a meaning-making purpose (Duveen, 2001; Wagner, 2013) within the communication of a specific culture.

Gillespie et al. (2012) identified four aspects of social categories that may be distorted when analysed by traditional experimental psychological methods. First, categories are constructed to reflect a particular social positioning; second, they are historical and ever changing; third, people can move between social categories and, finally, when identifying human categories, researchers can inadvertently interfere with the very phenomenon under investigation. Each of these points is supported in this study examining the social category of the otaku. Initially, a journalist's satirical representation of a particular group of Japanese comic book fans, it had been employed in discussions of deviance, social isolation, social roles, personal happiness and the nature of youth in modern Japan. At one time it identified a subgroup of 'deviant' Japanese youth, yet now Western fans of Japanese popular culture, both male and female, are happy to be identified as an otaku, and otaku culture has the support of Japanese government. Its meaning has been interrogated and analysed within numerous academic circles, which in turn, has influenced public perception of the group.

It is through this form of historical and socio-cultural analysis of the otaku social category and its changing social representations that the key aspects of the cultural meaning of a particular social group in a particular society can be fully appreciated. Charting the development of social representations of the otaku over time in Japanese culture, as this analysis has shown, demonstrates how stripping away the social and cultural contexts from the category, by presenting it as a set of attributes as in the traditional methodology of social psychology, would ignore fundamental elements of the group. It would also create artificial contradictions, such as which representations are 'true' and which reflect a   stereotypical 'bias'; for example, the otaku as deviant or as a representation of modern Japanese youth? Moscovici (1993, p.9) criticises this reductionist view due to "its indifference toward the deep complexion of the social fabric". The analysis of the otaku has shown how social representations are negotiated within the 'deep complexion of the social fabric' of modern Japanese culture. Whilst certain core elements of the representations have endured over time, other aspects have responded to significant events within the consensual universe of public

communication (Jovchelovitch, 2012). Initially identifying a particular subset of geeky and socially inadequate fans of manga and anime, the developing social representation have been integral to the debate about social identities of modern Japanese youth, particularly in the context of the traditional adult gender roles established in the second half of the twentieth century. It is the inter-relationship between representations, and how they are discussed in communication, that has developed the social representations of the otaku, which in turn, has challenged traditional views of Japanese identity.

## Conclusion

As this detailed socio-cultural analysis of the otaku has demonstrated, and as Moscovici (2000) has argued, social representations of social groups are constructed within the communication of a culture, and their meanings are constantly under negotiation within the framework of cultural change. Over a period of more than thirty years, the social representations of the otaku have been negotiated within Japanese society in the context of what it means to be Japanese in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Anxieties about the future within Japanese society, such as the effect of modern media on youth, the bursting of the economic bubble, and development of creative industries based on popular culture, have engendered significant public debate about the group. New social representations of the otaku have been negotiated within the culture, to the extent that a once deviant group is now part of the government's promotion of Japan to the rest of the world.

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[i] Miyazaki never referred to himself as an otaku. He was sentenced to death in 1997 (and executed in 2006).